

SPECULATIVE FICTION 2012

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“Are you coming to bed?”
“I can’t. This is important.”
“What?”
“Someone is wrong on the Internet.”

xkcd.com

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FOREWORD

FOREWORD

Mur Lafferty

When I was a kid, I'd take my blow-up raft into the ocean on a South Carolina beach and try to ride waves in. This was before boogie boards, and I never got sophisticated enough to try surfing, so my glorious tales of water acrobatics peak with me holding onto my raft (red on one side, blue on the other) for dear life as I caught the perfect wave and rode the crest of it into the shore. I'm sure surfers can describe it better, but the perfect wave isn't just the wave, it's you being in the right place at the right time and letting the vast ocean overtake you and then you just hold on.

Only 12 or so years ago, when I started taking my writing career seriously, we were still in the time of paper submissions. I remember having my office floor covered with agent submissions, each agent wanting something a little bit different. Oh the trees I killed and the stamps I licked! At this point, I honestly planned my career to go:

1. story submissions
2. collect rejections
3. cry
4. drink wine
5. more story submissions
6. more rejections
7. see steps 3-4
8. eventually sell something (W00T!)
9. more rejections
10. level up to the point of writing a novel
11. see steps 2-7
12. sell the novel (double W00T!)
13. **ACHIEVEMENT: WRITING CAREER**

I would be a short story writer for a couple of years until I got the nerve to write **A Novel** (note the caps.) That was *How Things Were Done*.

But somewhere in there, in the time between 2001-2005, the easily-navigated river of publishing emptied out into the unpredictable ocean of The Internet. We had blogs, then podcasting. There were new ways to publish, without the taint of vanity presses. I started podcasting in 2004 because it seemed like a fun idea at the time. I hesitated to podcast my own fiction, because **OMG RIGHTS LOSS**, but followed in the wake of pioneers like Scott Sigler and Tee Morris. After seeing their success at audience-building, I decided to stop trying to send short stories to magazines and just write something

specific for my podcast audience. That became a five novella series, and then I wrote my first novel. Again, I tried to go traditional, with the agent hunt and then the publisher hunt, but nothing came of it, so screw it, I podcasted it. I had over 40,000 listeners, and a small press publisher contacted me for publishing the book in print.

Nothing - nothing - has happened the way I anticipated. I built the audience first - and this goes beyond just putting stories out and having people consume. They cared about my work, they cared about me, they wanted to see me succeed. And then in 2010, by complete accident, I achieved my first pro book deal by meeting a publisher when I had a book in one hand and an audience in the other. (*The Shambling Guide to New York City* comes out in May 2013! Tell your friends! </commercial>)

Since I managed to get into publishing right when the changes started to happen, I've felt like I just needed to hang on tight as the waves took me. I couldn't be sure where I was going, but my goal was to not fall off. In short, I got lucky. I have no illusion about that. Persistence is key, improving your craft is vital, but there is a factor of luck, or "right place, right time" syndrome.

But just as the Internet has changed how writers build their careers, it's changed how writers communicate with their audience. We're no longer just our stories; we are the opinions and passions discussed on our blogs, in our podcasts, and on social media online. We can spread news in an instant, get people passionate about things (for better or worse) and work up a lively discussion. Our readers know that Paul Cornell and N.K. Jemisin are powerfully talented, many-award-nominated authors, but they also know Paul's stance on gender and conventions, and they know Nora's stance on race in fantasy. Does this lose them readers who may disagree with them? Probably. Does it also gain them readers who are pulled into the discussion and stay to check out the books? Probably. Does it take existing readers and make them hardcore fans because they see the person behind the author, and see the passion that goes beyond fantasy and science fiction? Most definitely.

You have here a collection of some of the finest recent discussion on science fiction and fantasy, thoughts and critical essays from the people who are seeing the ocean of change in front of them, and choosing to ride the waves instead of fight against the inevitable currents. And you know how I mentioned I was just holding onto my raft and praying I don't fall off? The people you're about to read are the ones who are surfing, standing up and riding the waves with

no looking back.

Mur Lafferty
March 13, 2013

Mur Lafferty is a podcaster and author. Her book *The Shambling Guide to New York City* will be out May 2013, from Orbit books. Read more at www.murverse.com.

INTRODUCTION

2012

Justin Landon and Jared Shurin

By way of introducing this collection of reviews and essays, we think it's important to introduce ourselves. Because, let's be honest, our bias is on this thing like objectivism on Terry Goodkind.

Our names are Justin Landon and Jared Shurin. We write blogs on science fiction and fantasy, or, if we're being pretentious (and who isn't pretentious when their name is on the front of the book), speculative fiction. You may or may not have heard of us. For the sake of this witty introduction, let's assume not.

To begin, we're both American, but Jared has been living in the United Kingdom for so long that he now uses 'u' in all kinds of places it doesn't belong. And, we're fans. Big ones. Not those fans that lose bowel control at the sight of their favorite authors (except that one time), but fans so invested in the success of what we love that we actively advocate for its improvement.

We offer these details in hopes of communicating the impetus behind the book you're reading now, *Speculative Fiction 2012: The Year's Best Online Reviews, Essays, and Commentary*. This is a labour of love, from two fans in the hopes of creating something that will help move speculative fiction, or at least the discussion of it, somewhere new.



When *Speculative Fiction* began as an idea, we asked for recommendations. We invited 'the community' to send in their favourite reviews, essays, articles, and ramblings from 2012. In the space of a few weeks, we received hundreds of suggestions, many of which we had never laid eyes on ourselves. Narrowing it all down to the mere fifty(ish) included in this volume took months (really enjoyable, eye-opening months).

In that time, we came to realize that bloggers reach the entire (online) world. Amazing, isn't it? In *Pump Up The Volume*, Christian Slater hit about two square miles from his basement. We're way past that. And you know what? Our work lingers. It doesn't go anywhere. It hangs out, findable for the better part of eternity, something Hugh Howey will likely lament for some time. That 'long tail' is awesome. It has allowed Jared's disturbing penchant for 1950s pulp fiction to

find a dedicated audience of six or seven pageviews a month.

But, it isn't all roses. Let's be honest, no one takes us seriously. 'Blogging' is barely reviewing and certainly never 'criticism'. We're not paid, so we're amateurs. We're doing it for love, so we're fans. Our opinions are merely our own, and not on behalf of a higher authority, like a newspaper or magazine. While our work sticks around, you're only as good as your last post. And once something is off the front page, it might as well be gone forever...

Speculative Fiction 2012 is meant to showcase the best of that passion. We're not journalist, scholars or authors. Or, even if we are (we're not), we're contributing to the discussion because we love it. From our perspective, this kind of work deserves to be collected, immortalised, and substantiated. Literally.

It's also important. By our estimation, very important. Not just to collect and legitimize what is becoming the predominant medium of criticism for the thing we love, but to provide a record of what was important Then.

See, fiction has great records. What were the most important books of 1975? According to the Hugo shortlist:

- *The Forever War* by Joe Haldeman
- *Doorways in the Sand* by Roger Zelazny
- *Inferno* by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle
- *The Computer Connection* by Alfred Bester
- *The Stochastic Man* by Robert Silverberg

Or the Nebula ballot (to name a few):

- *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ
- *The Exile Waiting* by Vonda N. McIntyre
- *The Birthgrave* by Tanith Lee

Looking at those two lists, we might imply that there was some divide between the popular novels and the best novels, considering no women were represented in the Hugo shortlist. From that we might also be able to guess that the reasons behind those choices may have been present in the non-fiction piece of the time. But, the reality is: we have no idea. Furthermore, if this year's Hugo ballot is any indication, we feel pretty confident that this short list doesn't even scratch the surface of what was important at the time. We don't really have a good way to look back either. We can't find what the issues of the day were, much less what was being said about them -- especially by ordinary fans. Fans like us. That feels like a real loss to two fans who wish very much to understand how speculative fiction

has changed and evolved over the last four decades.

Early on, one of our future contributors asked, “Why only online?” Our first response was because we’re bloggers. We want to recognize the best work of our peers. It’s what we care about. As we thought more about it, we realized there was something else at play.

Somewhere along the way readers stopped going to bookstores to solicit a salesperson’s advice. Hell, readers have mostly stopped going to bookstores to solicit a salesperson’s sale. Instead, they go online. We buy our books there, but more and more we also participate in the word of mouth that’s sold books since Gutenberg got froggy.

We don’t just read reviews either. Now, we’re writing them – no longer reliant on magazines and newspapers to tell us what’s worthwhile. It’s not that print reviews and essays don’t continue to have value. Print is like a really sexy vampire, skating through the ages with its siren song echoing in the halls of the Library of Congress. When it comes down to it, everyone likes to see their name in print. Even if the distribution is tiny (say, pinned to the fridge door). Or the only reader is our mom (*Hi mom!*). Regardless, it’s a thing. A tangible, holdable object that you can put on a shelf and boast: “Yo, I made this.” But, we would argue that its value is becoming, if not limited by, increasingly overshadowed by its online rival.

Some of these articles could have been printed in the *Los Angeles Times*. They are substantial, academic and by published writers. But not all of them. What about Aishwarya Subramanian’s ‘What is it like to be a dragon?’ and her exploration of the thematic personhood of the *My Little Pony* episode “Over a Barrel”? How would the *Times*’ subscribers have responded to that? Would they have thought it frivolous? Disconnected from the kinds of things they care about? Even for the few who grokked it, could they have found someone to talk about it with? Could they have responded to it? The nature of the online community has made all that possible. It’s provided Subramanian and so many of us a forum to express ourselves, and be expressed at, that hasn’t existed at other time in human history.

There are also two reviews in the book written by us. Justin thought Jared’s review of *The Blinding Knife* was one of the funniest things he read last year, and Jared thought Justin’s review of *The Sword of Shannara* was the review equivalent of *Among Others*, nostalgic, backward-looking, and somehow strangely appealing. Are they two of the best fifty-some-odd non-fiction pieces written online in 2012? Oh, we doubt it, but we’re biased and what’s the point of making a book like this if the editors can’t have a little self congratulatory fun?

The final collection, we think, showcases the range of the online community. We have reviews that praise books in heartfelt

and incisive ways. We have reviews that damn books with just as much conviction. There are essays that challenge the status quo, provocative posts that raise some well-deserved hell. Serious essays that demonstrate all the research and vigour of an academic journal. Frivolous articles that make us laugh. All of these revolve around a central point: a love of speculative fiction, and a heartfelt desire to push it forward.

We think the result, *Speculative Fiction*, is pretty impressive. We bring you big names and little ones, contributors from all over the world and all walks of (geeky) life. But we also know that it is still just one teeny, tiny slice of the online world. Thus, we insist that everyone who reads it asks, why *this* and not *that*? Because that question, in many ways, is as important as the ones asked in each of the pieces we collected. And we can't wait for all of you to tell us how wrong we are.

REVIEWS

A FACE LIKE GLASS (2012) BY FRANCES HARDINGE

Abigail Nussbaum

It sometimes seems that Frances Hardinge is the best-kept secret in YA. People who have read her seem unanimous in the view that Hardinge ought to be a major superstar, whose books are greeted with fanfare and exhilaration. But though she's always well reviewed, Hardinge remains under the radar, particularly among the adult readership of YA fiction who should be embracing the sophistication and complexity of her worlds. Part of the problem, of course, is that Hardinge doesn't write the kind of dystopias that have been the dominant and popular flavor in YA since at least *The Hunger Games* (and that her novels skew a bit younger than those books, with pre-adolescent protagonists who rarely have romance on their minds). Or at least not blatantly, since nearly all of Hardinge's novels take place in restrictive societies and focus on the lone voice (usually that of a young girl) that dares to challenge them. It's just that Hardinge's dystopias are more detailed and a great deal more thought out than the "cheerleaders have been banned and the government controls pets" variety, to the extent that their restrictiveness is often not obvious on a first glance, and her protagonists are not thinly disguised modern teens, but products of their society, steeped in its culture and conventions, and often warped by it in ways that the reader might find alienating.

In my favorite of Hardinge's novels, *Gullstruck Island*, the restrictive society of the titular island is shaped by nature and history, most obviously by the island's overactive volcanoes and the different attitudes that its native and colonizing inhabitants have towards them. Her latest novel, *A Face Like Glass*, takes the opposite approach – its setting, the underground city of Caverna, is manufactured and rooted in artifice, in the various mechanisms that Caverna's citizens have devised in order to make a sealed underground cave system liveable for hundreds of years, and the customs that ensure their continued survival in such an unnatural environment. I confess that I prefer the former approach. The emphasis on natural environment and on the pressures that nature brings to bear on human settlements in *Gullstruck Island* imposed a degree of realism on the way that Hardinge imagined and built the island's society that to my mind only enriched the novel, whereas a sealed, artificial environment gives her the freedom to create outlandish customs and policies simply because that's the way they do it here – as she did in her previous novel, *Twilight Robbery*, whose heroine visits a city in which

people are categorized as good or evil according to which hour of the day they were born in. Happily, *A Face Like Glass* seems cognizant of this pitfall, and instead of using Caverna's artifice as a crutch it plays it up and makes it the focus of the novel. Caverna's society not only survives through artifice, but has made it the foundation of its culture, a highly stratified society whose upper echelons, the great families who curry for favor and advantage in the court of the Grand Steward, are locked in a subtle dance of manners, etiquette, and subtle insults (behind these fixed smiles and feigned politeness, of course, vicious rumor mills and assassination plots run rampant). But the most profound and dominant expression of Caverna's artificiality are its Faces.

"In the overground world, babies that stared up at their mother's faces gradually started to work out that the two bright stars they could see above them were eyes like their own, and that the broad curve was a mouth like theirs. Without even thinking about it, they would curve their mouths the same way, mirroring their mothers' smiles in miniature. When they were frightened or unhappy, they would know at once how to screw up their faces and bawl. Caverna babies never did this, and nobody knew why. They looked solemnly at the face above them, and saw eyes, nose, mouth, but they did not copy its expressions. There was nothing wrong with their features, but somehow one of the tiny silver links in the chain of their souls was missing. They had to be forced to learn expressions one at a time, slowly and painfully, otherwise they remained blank as eggs."

These learned expressions, numbered and named – "Face 41, the Badger in Hibernation"; "No. 29 – Uncomprehending Fawn Before Hound" – are a brilliant way of literalizing the fundamental falseness that lies at the core of the kind of royal court that runs Caverna. Caverna's aristocrats wear masks made of their own flesh, schooling their expressions to suit the prevailing mood, the political climate, the day's fashion, or simply their personal goals. But Hardinge doesn't leave it at that. She works out the implications of a society in which facial expression is artificial in several fascinating ways, from the personal – a character who muses of her lover that "Every one of [his] small, dark smiles she had carefully designed for him at one time or another, to suit his face and his character. And now these smiles had more power over her than anything else in the world."; another who is told that "There is a feeling deep down inside you ... You don't really know what it is, or how to describe it. You do not

have the Face for it. And so you scan all the Face catalogues, and ask for Faces every birthday because perhaps, just perhaps, if you had the right Face, you might understand what you are feeling” – to the political.

In Caverna, Faces are a hallmark of privilege. The rich and aristocratic can afford the fine schooling in which they are taught a wide variety of Faces, and will even hire Facesmiths to create custom expressions for them, but the poor are raised in crèches where they are taught a minimal range of expression which reflects their place in society – “Erstwhile did not have any angry or annoyed expressions. Worker and drudge-class families were never taught such Faces, for it was assumed they did not need them.” The limit to their expressiveness also serves as a way of keeping the poor in their place, as a character muses when she observes the crushing, oppressive conditions they live in.

*“How could the drudges rise up against bullies like the foreman?
Rebels needed to look at each other and see their own anger
reflected, and know that their feeling was part of a greater tide.
But any drudge who glanced at his fellows would see only calm,
tame Faces waiting for orders.”*

The speaker here is our heroine, Neverfell, a classic outsider-insider figure who crashes into Caverna’s conventions and mores and leaves them in shambles. Found wandering the caves of the cheesemaker hermit Grandible (one of Caverna’s unique qualities, and the source of its wealth, is that among its inhabitants are craftsmen who know how to make True delicacies – “wines that rewrote the subtle book of memory, cheeses that brought visions, spices that sharpened the senses, perfumes that ensnared the mind and balms that slowed ageing to a crawl”); Hardinge therefore has a lot of fun going into the details of Grandible’s arcane and often quite dangerous cheesemaking – his cheeses explode, or give off noxious gasses, when improperly treated – and the hallucinatory, mindblowing effects of his wares), a former courtier whose rejection of corrupting society is signaled by his having only one permanent expression, Neverfell is raised in isolation until the age of thirteen. When a runaway rabbit shows her a passageway out of Grandible’s tunnels (a reference that Hardinge doesn’t belabor but which is nevertheless obviously on her mind), the curious, impulsive, emotionally volatile Neverfell takes the opportunity to explore a world that she has been desperately aching to see, and immediately finds herself becoming a pawn in Caverna’s political games. As Grandible has concealed from

Neverfell, but as we could easily have guessed (even without reading the book's back cover), Neverfell has the titular face like glass, on which her uncontrollable emotions are immediately apparent. This makes her the object of curiosity and attention. Facesmiths want to study her; the secret police believe that she is a spy from the outside; Caverna's five hundred year old Grand Steward, whose pleasures have desiccated after such a long life, wants to live vicariously through her naked emotional responses; and powerful courtier Maxim Childersin wants her for some unspecified purpose whose darkness the naïve Neverfell, won over by Childersin's kindness, won't consider.

Hardinge has threaded the needle of Neverfell's mingled innocence and knowingness, making her both an outsider to Caverna (quite literally, as her expressive face attests) and someone who is of Caverna, a little too precisely to be entirely believable. Raised in isolation, Neverfell knows virtually nothing about Caverna's running – the better for the characters she meets to explain it to her, and us – but her emotional investment in Caverna's values, and especially its class system – her awe at the Grand Steward and his court, or her thoughtless acceptance of the conditions of the drudges – seem more fitting for a character who has grown up steeped in its society, not locked outside of it, and their purpose is clearly to intensify Neverfell's anger and disillusionment when she gains a fuller understanding of how Caverna works. For a novel that works hard to tell a story about artifice without calling attention to its own artificiality, this is a rare misstep, but it is lessened by the more interesting, and more prominent, aspect of Neverfell's personality, the fact that she is emotionally damaged. It's common for YA protagonists to be unrealistically immune to trauma – consider Harry Potter's mostly sunny personality after years of abuse – but Hardinge quite refreshingly avoids this trope. A lifetime of living underground and in near-isolation has taken its toll on Neverfell, and in ways that we might consider off-putting and unattractive--she's prone to sleepwalking, to the malaise that Cavernans call being "out of clock," when their natural cycle and Caverna's artificial one fall out of sync, and to panic attacks from which she recovers "shuddering and sick, devastation around her and her fingernails broken from clawing at the rock walls and ceilings." And, even when judged against normal standards rather than Cavernan ones, her lack of emotional control, her tendency to say and do exactly what she's thinking as she thinks it, are jarring.

A Face Like Glass is a novel about Neverfell's emotional healing, but gratifyingly, that healing doesn't take the form of her becoming more normal or conventional. Several characters try to teach Neverfell emotional control – by which they mean, try to teach her to restrain

her impulses and not to show her every emotion on her face. What they mean by this is that Neverfell should feel less – when her friends are concerned that the Grand Steward will see Neverfell’s rage over the state of the drudges in her face, they take her to a Facesmith, who tries to reason those feelings away by reassuring her that drudges prefer hard work to luxuries and are incapable of feeling true pain and sadness – but Neverfell, and Hardinge, repeatedly stress the legitimacy of her anger and sadness. The control Neverfell needs to learn isn’t of her feelings, but of her environment – how to best express her rage in a way that is productive and helps to alleviate that rage’s cause. That control is achieved, in large part, by Neverfell learning to understand herself—to uncover the trauma of her past and the effects that that trauma has had on her—but that understanding doesn’t equal complete healing. At the end of the novel, Neverfell still bears the scars of her experiences, but she’s learned to live with them, and taken control of her life.

If I’m slightly less enamored of *A Face Like Glass* than I was of *Gullstruck Island*, it’s because I value Hardinge’s world-building skills so highly, and the deliberately constructed world of Caverna – constructed both within the story and without it, as an illustration of Hardinge’s arguments about class – shows them off less impressively than *Gullstruck*. But Hardinge is more than just a world-builder, and in *Neverfell* and her journey she shows off her tendency towards nuance and complexity as well as in any of her worlds. That same nuance may be what’s keeping Hardinge from becoming a superstar – her novels lack an obvious hook and don’t lend themselves to a simple selling pitch – but hopefully the work of her ardent fans will help to spread her name, and make her a slightly less well-kept secret.

Abigail Nussbaum works as a computer programmer in Tel Aviv. She is the reviews editor for the speculative magazine *Strange Horizons* (www.strangehorizons.com) and blogs at *Asking the Wrong Questions* (<http://wrongquestions.blogspot.com>).

This article first appeared on *Asking the Wrong Questions* on July 7, 2012.

<http://wrongquestions.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/face-like-glass-by-frances-hardinge.html>

ATLAS SHRUGGED (1957) BY AYN RAND

Adam Roberts

I decided, on the principle that one should not condemn an enemy from a position of ignorance of their work, actually to read Ayn Rand's sumo-size Objectivist novel *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). This I did, over the Easter break. And what an interesting experience it turned out to be.

I was surprised, for one thing, how readable the book was. I'll confess that somewhere around page 300 the relentlessness of the novel's combination of gnashing, effortful intensity of outrage and the sheer pressure of industrial-economic pseudo-detail was starting to wear me out. But I pushed through, and the last eight hundred pages just slid by. Which is to say, eventually they slid by. Which is to say, what with the fact that there was nothing on the telly, and nothing much else to do, eventually I read it. Actually the novel elaborates a narrative version of society rather like *Dynasty*: a few brilliant, beautiful members of the super-rich, a few powerful villains, and lots of spear-carriers. *Dynasty* was always crap but watchable, not unlike this book. Indeed, had *Dynasty* had the courage of its convictions and spent a series tracing the decline of its America into a dystopian economic collapse, brought about by the *ressentiment* and incompetence of the masses manipulated by evil politicians via spurious slogans of 'social equality', and thereafter the resurrection of a cleaner, better, grander enterprise society, then it might have very much resembled *Atlas Shrugged*.

One of the things that surprised me was how very redolent of a particular era of American science fiction the novel is: in tone it reminded me of Robert Heinlein – the long declarative sections in which characters debate the best way to get a misfiring country working again, the stress on engineering competence as the touchstone of human value, the vigorous simplification. There's also something of Philip K Dick, in the first half at least, in the sense of a flattened, rather greying representation of social disintegration; although Dick was too canny to invest his hopes in the Wellsian utopian idealism of a society planned and run by geniuses in the way Rand does.

In obvious ways, of course, the book is science fiction. For instance it posits the creation of certain technological nova for instance: a superstrong variety of steel, a motor engine that draws its power from 'static electricity in the air' as it drives along; a weapon that destroys using only sound waves. More to the point, its world-building is of the sub-Orwellian, or sub-sub-Orwellian, variety, where everywhere

in the world has been swallowed by malign ‘people’s republics’ (the whole of Europe, for instance, is a place of mass slavery, death camps and wicked pseudo-Communist tyranny). America seems to be the last place in which Capitalism still operates, but it’s under threat at the beginning and succumbs about halfway through. Our main characters are: brilliant and beautiful Dagny Taggart, of the Taggart Transcontinental Railroad (keeping the entire company operating through sheer force of her will and genius, and in the teeth of the company’s nominal director, her venal brother James); brilliant and handsome Hank Rearden, owner of Rearden Metal and inventor of the new sort of steel, trapped in a loveless marriage; and the handsome and brilliant Francisco D’Anconia. These three have a few loyal and worthwhile friends and deputies, but otherwise all the other characters manifest the physical ugliness of the self-evidently corrupt (“*the pendulous face of Orren Boyle with the small slits of pig’s eyes. The doughy face of Mr Mowen with the eyes that scurried away from any speaker and any fact*”, [p560]).

For about two thirds of this 1100-page novel Dagny Taggart and Hank Rearden undertake heroic struggles to keep their respective companies afloat in the face of the tide of public hostility, governmental tyranny and greed. D’Anconia on the other hand, though posing as a skittish international playboy, is actually working for a hidden cabal of geniuses, organised by one John Galt. In the world at large the question with which the novel opens (“Who is John Galt?”) has become a meaningless slogan, uttered by people when they mean to say “who knows?” But John Galt is real. He has a plan to save the world.

The world he is trying to save is sketched by Rand via emblematic figures. For example, the Arts are represented by a wholly meretricious novelist called Balph Eubank who writes novels with titles like *The Heart is a Milkman* and *The Vulture is Moulting*. It might be considered, shall we say, *brave* of a writer who called her magnum opus *Atlas Shrugged* to crack wise at the expense of pretentious novel titles. But never mind that for the time being. There’s also an evil Relativist philosopher called Pritchett who preaches the fluidity of all meaning and the absence of absolute values, and who, in the rigorously pared down logic of the novel, has replaced the only other philosopher in the world – a virtuous quasi-Objectivist called Hugh Akston – in public affection and influence. Akston is working as a fry-chef in a café in the middle of nowhere, but he’s perfectly happy. Indeed, as the “looters and moochers” grasp more and more power into their greedy, incompetent hands, the people of real talent (almost all such people, according to Rand, are businessmen and factory owners) are silently vanishing, whither none know. Corrupt

Washington politicians enact more and more oppressive legislation, until the country grinds to an absolute standstill. Then, when Rand has squeezed every last dribble of outrage from her polemical spleen, she reverses the movement; the novel ends as the disappeared geniuses and great wo/men return, poised to set the world to rights, and get their proper reward: healthy profits, lots of money, and a world fit for rugged individualists to build railways across.

Most of the novel is written in a declarative, rather grey prose, in which characters discuss various practical matters at length.

“All right Hank,” she said, “we’re going ahead with the new Rearden Metal bridge. This is the official order of the official owner of the John Galt line.”

He smiled, looking down at the drawings of the bridge spread in the light on his desk. “Have you had a chance to examine the scheme we submitted?”

“Yes. You don’t need my comments or compliments. The order says it.”

“Very well. Thank you. I’ll start rolling the metal.”

“Don’t you want to ask whether the John Galt Line is in a position to place orders or to function?”

“I don’t need to. Your coming here says it.”

She smiled. “True. It’s all set, Hank. I came to tell you that and to discuss the details of the bridge in person.”

...

He was not looking at her; he was looking at a sheet of figures on his desk. “I’ve had my engineers prepare a breakdown of the cost of the bridge,” he said, “and an approximate schedule of the construction time required. That is what I wanted to discuss with you.” He extended the papers. She settled back to read them. [pg. 204]

There’s an awful lot like this. From time to time Rand puts the declarative mode on one side in order to purple-up her style. The result is not what literary critics call “good”. Here is Dagny riding a train:

The green-blue rails ran to meet them, like two jets shot out of a single point beyond the curve of the earth. The crossties melted, as they approached, into a smooth stream running down underneath the wheels ... Trees and telegraph poles sprang into sight abruptly, and went by as if jerked back. ... The glass sheets of the cab’s windows made the spread of the fields seem vaster: the earth looked

as open to movement as it was to sight. Yet nothing was distant and nothing was out of reach. She had barely grasped the sparkle of a lake ahead, and in the next instant she was beside it, and past.

Rand is fatally drawn to over-emphatic expression. At moments of intensity (and this novel is prodigiously over-supplied with such moments) she turns the prose-style dial all the way up to 11, and, in some cases, to 12. This is how something occurs to one character: “it was not a thought, it was like the punch of a fist inside his skull” [pg. 224]. Nothing moves; everything whirls, or thunders, or convulses. Characters are not afraid, the fear “goes through them in spasms”. Instead of “speaking” people cry and scream. Here, from a few pages in the middle of the novel:

“Dagny,” he screamed. “Don’t go ...!”

The screaming of the telephones went on through the silence.

...

He flung the glass door open and from the threshold, in the sight and hearing of the room, he screamed: “where is she!”

...

“I won’t tell you.”

Taggart’s scream rose to the shrill impotent sound that confesses a miscalculation. [pg. 624-5]

You’ve probably had that experience yourself, of hearing somebody screaming at the top of their lungs in a way that betrays miscalculation. The point is that when intensity has no other mode, it palls. There are times – and actually, the times are *all the time without exception* – when it is simply more effective to write “he got to his feet and spoke” than it is to write “he shot to his feet with the stored abruptness of a spring uncoiling, his voice driving on in merciless triumph” [p620]. But the idea that less could ever be more was clearly one alien to Rand’s aesthetic. The back of my Penguin edition of the novel carries this endorsement, presumably from a 1957 review: “she writes brilliantly, beautifully, bitterly. - *The New York Times*”. The bitterness comes through on every page that isn’t given over to improbable ecstasy, but the brilliance and beauty ...*not* so much. Often the writing is really heroically bad, impossible simile following impossible simile. Here we read of “an announcer, with a voice like a machine-gun spitting smiles ...” [pg. 826]. There we read:

A gray cotton, which was neither quite fog nor clouds, hung in sloppy wads between sky and mountains, making the sky look an old

mattress spilling its stuffing down the sides of the peaks. [pg. 518]

If Objectivist philosophy called for people to sleep on mattresses stuffed with sloppy wads then no wonder it didn't catch on.

But, wait, what am I saying? Objectivism not catching on? Objectivism has become, via indirect routes, the *dominant ethos* of the world today. Alan Greenspan may not individually have been the world's most powerful figure, but his long period of prominence and influence reflected a half century in which the principles of profit, individualism, greed and selfishness achieved unchallenged dominance across most of the Western world. It has conquered even China and Russia now. The paradise-on-earth Rand prophesied: we're pretty much living in it. *Atlas Shrugged* is about as timely a book as is imaginable.

What's wrong with this picture? Well, there's an obvious answer and a less obvious one. The obvious one is that *Atlas Shrugged* is a polemical Objectivist novel, designed on every page to advance Ayn Rand's philosophical world-view. It's not that her authorial thumb is in the balance; it's that she has jammed her whole arm in there – that she's clambered her entire body into the balance and is jumping up and down to get it to register the quantity she wants. It seems to me that the flaws in Objectivist thinking are such as to render the novel inert as polemic, and without that there is only the rather empty Soapy pleasures of the narrative. But a Randian would complain, with some justice, that I'm only voicing my own ideological preconceptions.

But there is another problem here, and it has to do with *dramatic* conception. *Atlas Shrugged* is a one-dimensional novel, despite Rand's very strenuous efforts to breathe life and depth into it. It is one dimensional because Objectivist philosophy holds to a strictly non-dialectical, one-dimensional metaphysic. Whether this is a valuable philosophical position or not is a matter about which interesting discussions, perhaps, can be had; but in a purely *dramatic* sense it is a fatal limitation.

Characters in the novel repeat, not once but many times, that there is no such thing as contradiction. "If you find a contradiction," says D'Anconia, time and again, "then examine your premises. You'll find one or other of them to be mistaken." This is the caricature image of Objectivism as a whole: a hectoring insistence that one "examine one's premises!" But, to put the matter in artistic terms, it robs narrative of dramatic tension. For Rand there is nothing tragic in *Antigone*; there cannot be a clash between Creon and Antigone. All there can be is one party (I'm guessing she'd side with the latter) in

the right and one in the wrong.

But this would be to misread *Antigone*; or to put it another way, the reason why aesthetic theoreticians have over many generations kept banging on about the play, is that it embodies with attractive clarity precisely the motor of the greatest art: not only tragedy, but all properly engaging or moving dramatic representation. Conflict. Without conflict there isn't drama. And for all the pop-eyed cod-intensities and enormity of scale of Rand's novel, there isn't really conflict, or drama, to be found anywhere in the text. Her politicians don't really believe in social equality and justice; they're all venal self-serving villains. It would have made a more interesting novel if they did really believe in social equality and justice, or if Rand had been able to think herself convincingly into the mindset that did. Her heroes are in the right on page 1, and in the right on 1168, and the reader is never allowed on any page to doubt that they are right.

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<http://sfmistressworks.wordpress.com/2012/02/28/atlas-shrugged-ayn-rand/>

A DANCE WITH DRAGONS (2010)

BY GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

Aidan Moher

When *A Dance with Dragons* was released, I didn't write a review of it, in fact, I barely discussed within my community of fellow fantasy fans. I wrote a piece or two about it, debated a bit with friends, but otherwise, I let one of fantasy's most impactful and anticipated releases slip me by. This is odd given that I run a fairly well trafficked fantasy and science fiction publication, *A Dribble of Ink*, and a lot of my readers were interested in hearing my take on the fifth volume of Martin's mega-successful *A Song of Ice and Fire*. But, I let them down, and, a year later, I've thought a lot of why I never wrote about the book, never formally reviewed it, despite enjoying it a fair bit more than the average fan seems to have, and it's all because of expectations. Mine, and those of the fans around the world.

At first, as an entrenched fan, I felt special. Because, you see, I'd discovered Martin years earlier. He was my little secret. But, then it became clear that Martin wasn't just a fad, wasn't just a passing ghost of geekdom on the mainstream, he was a real thing. Maybe it was seeing Martin spoofed on *Saturday Night Live*, or when he was sitting there in the crowd at the Emmys, but finally it clicked with me. He's not my secret anymore. Hell, he's not even our secret anymore. Fantasy has a new ringleader, he wears a Greek sailor's hat, thick glasses, and rides a wave of popularity the likes the genre hasn't seen since *The Lord of the Rings*.

Expectation is something that Martin is familiar with. He openly struggled with the demons it raises, and it was a force that nearly crushed *A Song of Ice and Fire* as he struggled for nearly 11 years to rein in the chaos surfaced at the end of *A Storm of Swords*, producing during that time the two most criticized volumes in the series. This expectation doesn't come simply from his ravenous fans, but from, among others, his publishers, the execs at HBO, the cable providers, and Martin himself. *A Dance with Dragons* came at a time in Martin's career as a writer when his career as a pop-culture icon, or at least the creator of pop culture icons, was about to explode beyond the walls of fantasy geekdom, where he'd been a darling for years, and, with shocking speed, become a factor with mainstream audiences. All of a sudden, it was cool to like George R.R. Martin, to discuss dragons and dwarfs around the water cooler. Everywhere you turned, whether they were old or young, socially ill-equipped

or popular socialites, Martin's books were rarely far from sight. Your mom was reading them. That kid behind the counter at the 7-11 was reading them. Martin's rise to fame isn't unprecedented, but it's not hard to imagine how difficult it would be to stay afloat in the ocean of new fans, detractors, and critics. Fantasy fans are often a forgiving bunch (just look at the middle and later volumes of Jordan's still-successful *Wheel of Time* series, for instance), but this wasn't the average group of fantasy fans anymore. I'm not sure that anyone, Martin, his publishers, his family and friends, were prepared to weather the storm.

So how can any novel live up to such expectations?

In a sense, it didn't. It couldn't. In the intervening years between *A Feast for Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons*, Martin's audience grew so large and ravenous that anticipation levels were so dangerously high that, no matter what Martin did, he was bound to disappoint. *A Storm of Swords* was a climax novel, bringing many events from the first two volumes to a head and all the tension building over the first two novels unleashed itself in a bloody fury. Martin had a delightfully chaotic playground to play in, full of villainous soldiers, virtuous (and not so virtuous) women, and righteous fools. Every storyline hit a climax at once... and *A Feast for Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons*, which are essentially one long novel split over two volumes, were left to pick up the pieces. Act Two, if you will, in the longer work of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Now, all stories need an act two (arguably), and Fantasy series are often plagued with 'middle-book syndrome,' in which the authors must move the pieces together, preparing for the third act and the climax. But, could there be a less compelling time for ravenous new fans to be anticipating a new volume in the series? They gobbled up the first four books, and then were met with the second half of the second act of a loooooong series. From the perspective, it's no surprise that the novel failed to meet the expectations of its fans, new or old.

Martin was free to write the first three volumes (and, it could be argued, the fourth as well) of his series in relative obscurity, without the weight of his legion breathing down his neck. How that affected the eventual quality of the release, if at all, will probably never be known. I was among those fans with heady expectations, and that same anticipation kept me from talking about the book, not trusting my own opinions after finally reading the novel after so long. Were my disappointments a reflection of the novel's innate qualities and failures? Or because I wanted one thing, and was served another.

A year removed, I would argue that *A Dance with Dragons* is a good-to-great novel, and a poor-to-okay addition to *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Some of Martin's best writing happens in *A Dance with*

Dragons, from his improved prose, to Reek's chilling character arc. Equally, some of Martin's weakest writing happens here, like Dany's insipid behaviour as she treads water, waiting for the rest of the world to catch up to her, or bloated descriptions of attire and banquets. Thirty years from now, however, a new reader will discover Martin's series in a bookshop (or whatever passes for a bookshop, should they no longer exist) and she will devour the series, gobbling up all the goodness found in Martin's seven (or eight) volumes. During the middle portions, she'll hit something of a bit blip, her enthusiasm might wane, but she will push on, and reflect on that period as a necessary evil for the series, the first tip of the boulder that sets off the avalanche that happens in the following volumes. Or so I like to think. Hope.

Was *A Dance with Dragons* the best novel last year? No, it wasn't. Is it the best on the Hugo shortlist? No, it isn't. Will I vote for it? No, my vote will go to Walton's wonderful *Among Others*. But I think there's an argument made, one that might be unfair to Grant, Corey, Walton and Miéville, that *A Dance with Dragons* is to George R.R. Martin as *The Departed* is to Martin Scorsese – it's flawed and fascinating, overlong, but dense with riveting relationships and a labyrinthine plot – and, for an author robbed of a Hugo in 2001, when *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, one of the weaker volumes in J.K. Rowling's equally enormous Harry Potter series, won 'Best Novel,' would it not seem just for Martin to finally get his hands on the Hugo he deserves by taking home the prize with one of his weaker volumes. Or maybe I am just too fond of irony.

Early in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Tyrion Lannister says, "I have a tender spot in my heart for cripples and bastards and broken things." And that so succinctly sums up my thoughts on this hulking mess of a book. As Tyrion is compared to Jaime, *A Dance with Dragons* appears broken against its older siblings, struggling to find its place in the series proper, but, when all is said and done, I think we will look back on it as a volume of transition, change and, most importantly, an ugly duckling that one day proves an important piece to Martin's magnificent swan.

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<http://aidanmoher.com/blog/2012/07/articles/a-dance-with-dragons-a-year-later/>

BONELAND (2012) BY ALAN GARNER

Aishwarya Subramanian

2010 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Alan Garner's first novel, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*. This and its 1963 sequel, *The Moon of Gomerath*, followed the adventures of two siblings, Colin and Susan, and their encounters with the legends around Alderly Edge in Cheshire. It's in the atmospheric writing and descriptions of the Edge that most of the power of these books lies. Garner would later experiment with the form of the children's fantasy novel (most notably in 1965's *Elidor*); but in most respects *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomerath* are ordinary, if high-quality, adventure stories.

One of the ways in which Garner deviates from the usual is in providing no easy resolution. *The Moon of Gomerath* ends on an uncomfortable note as the Daughters of the Moon whom Susan so desperately wants to join disappear, leaving her alone and desolate. Children's fantasy rarely deals with the question of return; can it ever really be so easy to come back to ordinary life?

Almost half a century later, Garner has written a sequel to the earlier two novels. *Boneland* is set in or around the present and focuses on Colin, now an adult and an astronomer, with no memory of his childhood before the age of thirteen. Susan has disappeared; Colin can't be sure that she ever existed, yet he is haunted by the spectre of his sister. At the beginning of the book he is slowly unravelling, and seeks the help of Meg, a rather unorthodox psychoanalyst. Interwoven with Colin's story is that of a prehistoric man whose own arcane rituals (connected to his own search for a particular woman) appear crucial to keep the world going.

What is one to make then, of an oblique, allusive book for adults that is meant to follow two reasonably straightforward books for children; a sequel separated from its predecessors by not just time and audience, but by genre as well? If we understand a sequel to be a continuation of the original story, *Boneland* functions only partly as one. Even at the end the details of Susan's disappearance (her name is never mentioned in this book) and of Colin's loss of memory are tenuous. Yet through its allusions to the earlier books – Colin's fear of crows and fascination with the Pleiades, Meg's house shrouded in rhododendrons – it not only draws on their significance to deepen its own, but acts as a sort of meditation upon those books as well.

Garner has hinted that *Boneland* is likely to be his last book. It's possible to read this not just as the final volume of a trilogy but

as the culmination of his career. References to his earlier works are scattered through this one; including the sacred axe-head and flashes of “blue silver” of *Red Shift* and the “Who-whoop! Wo-whoop! Wo-o-o-o!” refrain of The Stone Book Quartet.

Over and over in his writing Garner has returned to the history and myths of this part of England. The legend of the sleeping knights under Alderley Edge forms a significant part of his first book. *Red Shift* moved in time between Roman and Civil War Britain but in place stayed firmly in Cheshire. The Stone Book Quartet was a collection of interlinked stories spread over four generations of a family, possibly Garner’s own. In *Boneland* this concern with history is stretched to the geological. Colin, who is something of a savant, is able to give erudite lectures on Permo-Triassic rock even as he refuses to leave the Edge at night because he believes that he must watch it. The mythic and the scientific sit together in uneasy companionship here.

Questions of myth versus science are frequently raised. In a sense this difference between the truth of science and the truth of myth is roughly analogous to the difference between *Boneland* and its prequels. Colin admits that his mistake all along has been to mix the two, “using the telescope to find a myth, an object to trace a metaphor”, while Meg compares this endeavour to “chasing love with a scalpel”. There’s the suggestion that the truth, whatever it is, may be as a metaphor here and narrative an object, so that we are doomed to frustration. But the book’s cryptic first lines, in which someone is reassuring Colin that it is “just a scratch” also suggest that he has been unconscious in a hospital throughout, and the whole of the narrative is only a metaphor for the processes of his brain. And the book’s use of psychology occasionally serves as a reminder that this is a discipline in which science is arrived at in part through metaphor.

Boneland shows all the lyricism (“*He cut the veil of the rock; the hooves clattered the bellowing waters below him in the dark. The lamp brought the moon from the blade, and the blade the bull from the rock. The ice rang*”) of which Garner is capable, and is resonant with echoes of his own and other works. It is by parts frustrating, emotionally exhausting and beautiful. And it is a resolution of sorts to Colin and Susan’s story, if not quite the one we might have expected.

Aishwarya Subramanian blogs at *Practically Marzipan*. The blog’s title comes from Mervyn Peake’s “I Cannot Give the Reasons” and it focuses on science fiction and fantasy, children’s books (particularly mid-twentieth century British children’s books) and Indian writing.

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<http://www.practicallymarzipan.com/2012/11/alan-garner-boneland.html>

THE WATERS RISING (2012) BY SHERI S. TEPPER

Dan Hartland

What is a reviewer to do with Sherri S. Tepper's *The Waters Rising*? It is part of the function of shortlists like the [Arthur C.] Clarke's to shine a light on books which have been overlooked by reviewers and readers, but in the case of this novel it is hard not to assume that it has been passed over for want of anything nice to say. When Maureen Kincaid Speller (whose review of the novel is sensible and inhumanly alert to Tepper's endlessly shapeless plot) tweeted, "Have finished reading #watersrising. Er ...", it occurred to me that in a way that was all that needed to be said about a novel which loses itself well before its hundredth page. The hashtag Maureen uses began as a joint reading project – within a few hundred pages it had fallen silent, the assembled tweeters presumably struck dumb by a book which defies reasoned analysis.

First and foremost, Tepper's style is so discursive as to erase entirely all possible intimations of whatever structure she might have intended. In large part, the novel is the story of Abasio and Xulai, lovers who are in Adam Roberts's polite terminology "problematic". (Roberts is more admiring – although still dismissive – of the book than many, and this must be related to his long-term admiration for Tepper – to call *The Waters Rising* "pleasantly immersive" is like describing the experience of being drowned as 'getting a bit wet'.) The pair of lovers are problematic because, you understand, Xulai appears to be a child when we first meet her – a 'soul-carrier' for the wife of the Duke of Wold. When the princess inevitably dies, Abasio must join the fellowship which is tasked with returning her soul to the place of its making, Tingawan. It is on this quest that endless subplots are opened and tediously explored, and on which we learn that Xulai is really twenty years old, so it's fine for Abasio to have the hots for her – it just means he is unusually perceptive.

If *The Waters Rising* has a theme, it is this: secret knowledge. Tepper's world is not the slowly flooding realm of core fantasy it at first appears to be – indeed, so necessary is it to read the novel as sf that I disagree even with David Hebblethwaite's view that, so thin is the book's science, it should be read otherwise. Rather, its technological past – our own climate change-threatened present – is literally submerged beneath the waters of time. Information scarcity comes to characterise the whole novel: Abasio can see past the immediately apparent to the supposed truth beneath; his wise-cracking talking horse possesses a wit which can cast new light on

human problems; and even Xulai's tutor, Precious Wind, has frankly compendious knowledge of the past, which she reveals in one great gout when it is necessary for Tepper to have her do so (that Precious Wind is even in a position to have this kind of knowledge is also kept secret for a large chunk of the novel). "People don't always tell everything, you know," one character informs us – the interminable dialogue in *The Waters Rising* is never between characters, but amongst them for our benefit. "Mostly they don't." [pg. 31]

The Waters Rising paints this truism gauchely large: we are never drip-fed clues, but left to blunder ignorantly through huge reams of text before an absurdly bald expository lecture enlightens us.

The very narrative voice is part of this bland project: though ostensibly in the third person limited mode, in practice the prose reminded me of a tone-deaf George Eliot, since it offers constant judgement on its own story in an ironic, although bathetic, sort of way. The following is typical of the approach (where 'typical' means 'deliberately selected for its unusual brevity'): "I have just learned..." said Alicia, going on to quote what she had, in fact, just learned." [pg. 227]

As the novel continues, however, the judgements of this distanced, incompetent narrator – who seems to know everything and yet share nothing – turn from irony to cruelty. Alicia is one of the novel's villains – responsible, for instance, for the death of the princess – and there is no mercy for her, even when we learn she is in a real way not at all responsible for her actions. ("Magic," sneers one character named Bear in both a moment of significance for the novel and an instance of characters suddenly attaining language the cod-medieval setting pretends to deny them: "From what I know, more likely genetics." [pg. 57])

Alicia is in fact the plaything of the Old Dark Man, a survival from the Before Time when humans were nasty and made nasty gadgets, creating in his case a killing-machine with a murderous hatred of any being he is programmed to target – that is, anyone at all different to those who programmed him. This selfishness, this will to power, is the position against which the novel primarily sets itself. "Land is merely land," another villain cackles; "trees are trees; rivers are rivers, all of them ours to do with as we will!" [pg. 108] Yet ultimately, and in perhaps the most unhinged of all its many expository lectures, the solution to the rising waters and the otherwise inevitable extinction of humanity is offered, at the end of the fellowship's journey, by the Sea King, a kraken with a curiously similar logic: "There must be no odds at all! Xulai must be sure each fertile sea egg is given to a person like herself. Otherwise, we will have wars beneath the sea, hatred, species-ism, territoriality – who

knows what horrors we would have.” [pg. 412] The future is safe, because in the future everyone will be like you.

Here we come to the crux of this bizarre novel. The Sea King’s solution, simply, is to use incredibly unlikely genetic science – not for the first time, Clarke’s Third Law has a lot to answer for – to create new generations of humans who are also, well, fish. The way this jonbar-point evolution is achieved is for someone to eat a ‘sea egg’ – they will then, if mating with another consumer, produce spliced offspring equipped to survive in the pending aquatic future. Xulai, like the “chess piece” Alicia [pg. 362], has no real choice in becoming the brood mother for this absurd new race – “You can give them [the eggs] to others and let your own grandchildren drown,” the Sea King suggests helpfully when she first appears reluctant to take him up on his offer [pg. 413] – but nor is the option presented as troubling in the slightest. “Let us drink to the next generation,” Abasio huzzahs near the end of the novel [pg. 494], and presumably the reader is meant also to raise her cup.

The novel’s uninterrogated focus on determinist destiny – early on, the canny talking horse sings, “*Hey-oh, the wagon pulls the horse / Or else the horse the wagon / And no one really knows what force / By which the which is draggin*” [pg. 2] – is of a piece with its understandable horror (and terror) at the present world (“Truly, they did marvels then, but none of these marvels profited the human race,” sighs Precious Wind [pg. 382]). But Tepper’s response is to retreat into the insane vision of the Sea King – to retreat, that is, into fantasy. *The Waters Rising*’s genre is so tricky to identify because it presents as science fiction but is in fact an attempt to escape from, rather than honestly deal with, the flood. At one point, Xulai daydreams: “How wonderful to be someone other than oneself! Someone who couldn’t be hurt, or killed, or lost in some terrible spasm of obliteration that she knew existed, that she had always known existed though she could not remember being told.” [pg. 47] *The Waters Rising* is Xulai’s impossible hope in novel form.

All of which leaves me to wonder if there isn’t a cleverer book under the frankly pathological accretions of *The Waters Rising*. This could be a knowing novel about the dangers of both science and fantasy, a wry exploration of how knowledge can be simultaneously withheld and misused. There are hints this is what Tepper was attempting – when we first meet Abasio, in the opening pages of the novel, he smirks, “In order to allay suspicion, I am about to sing something pastoral and suggestive of bucolic innocence.” [pg. 2] Likewise, when the fellowship passes through the villages of the Becomers, people convinced by Alicia that to win the favour of the Duke they must act in certain artificial ways, Xulai observes of one

that, “One could play pretend with total conviction, but one could not pretend play in the same way. His every movement spoke of mockery.” [pg. 120] It is tempting to see intent in this, but such are the failings of the book that this is a reading that cannot take us very far.

In his review this week of Philip Palmer’s *Artemis*, Martin Lewis writes of feeling forced to read a text as satire. I recognise this feeling from both my own reading of *Artemis* and from *The Waters Rising* itself:

“*Falyrion, Duke of Kamfels, had a wife, Naila; a daughter, Genieve; and a son, Falredi. Naila died. Not long thereafter, Falyrion married Mirami, who bore him a daughter, Alicia, and a son, Hulix. Then Falyrion died and Falredi succeeded to the ducal throne of Makfels. Then Falredi died. Mirami’s son Hulix succeeded him as duke.*” (pg. 184)

This can easily be read as a satire of the fetish for detail found in epic fantasy of the Tolkein mode. So, too, can the parallels I have oh-so-archly referred to above. The novel’s tedious coda, in which the fellowship return to Norland to resolve unfinished business with the Old Dark Man, can be read similarly. As with *Artemis*, however, the incoherence of the final text precludes this kind of reading. By the close of the novel’s first third, when Tepper’s questing band of adventurers reaches an abbey in which not everyone is as they seem (“Wilderbrook abbey was deceptive at first appearance,” she shouts at us [pg. 154]), it has simply lost control: its plotlines proliferate, its backstory metastasises, and the characters struggle – and fail – to retain anything like individual identities. *The Waters Rising* is neither clever comment nor ripping yarn; it is, alas, a dim-witted slog suitable primarily for readers who revel not in story but in detail and ill-considered concepts (we know they’re out there – publishing figures tell us). One wonders which of those it was who won through on the Clarke’s judging panel.

Dan Hartland’s reviews appear regularly in *Strange Horizons*, *Vector* and *Foundation*.

He blogs on matters science fictional and otherwise at <http://thestoryandthetruth.wordpress.com>. He is currently in the market for a new talking horse.

This article first appeared on the author’s website on April 29, 2012.

<http://thestoryandthetruth.wordpress.com/2012/04/29/a-proof-of-sincerity-sherri-s-teppers-the-waters-rising/>

THE LIGHTBRINGER SERIES (2010 - 2011)

BY BRENT WEEKS

Jared Shurin

No one is more surprised than I am that I returned to Brent Weeks. *The Way of Shadows* (2008) was such a stunning example of LOLFANTASY that I vowed to keep my further Weeks-related reading at arm's length.

Still, promises, promises (that, and time heals all wounds) –and, much to my surprise, bloggers who I respect are all really rating *The Blinding Knife*, book two in Mr. Weeks' new AWSUM COLORZ series. The library turned up a copy of *The Black Prism*, the first in the series, so I took it as a sign and got stuck in.

Generally speaking, I do agree with the collective enthusiasm – Brent Weeks' recent books are a lot of fun. But are they great fantasy? Eh. I hope not. [There's also a widely held view that *The Blinding Knife* is "the next level up" from *The Black Prism*. Although I'd happily agree that this new series is a vast improvement on the NITEANGELDARKAVENGERSTABFACE trilogy, I'm not sure there was a pronounced difference between its component books. In my mind, the AWSUM COLORZ series has already fused into a single polychromatic volume. Possibly because there's no actual plot.]

First, let's just clear the air: the AWSUM COLORZ series is compulsively readable – in the sort of mass-market, just-off-the-trope, I'm--sure-I-know-what-is-going-to-happen-but-just-one-more-chapter way that I haven't really experienced since the first Peter Brett novel. There's nothing new here, but the presentation is addictive. Short, spicy chapters, generally with just enough action or world-building to tease you into the next scene. There are several viewpoint characters who all serve as a cliff-hanger Lazy Susan, revolving one after the other in perpetual peril. If a book's function is to be read, AWSUM COLORZ has it nailed: I read the books at night, in the morning, while cooking, while waiting for Avengers Alliance to load...

Second, the books are fun. Part of the reason the NITE ANGEL series of ASSASSINBOYKILLA books rubbed me the wrong way is that each. moment. was. presented. like. it. was. the. most. important. in. the. universe. Which is a bit ridiculous when you know that DEATHKILLERSTABFACE is just going to sprout

POWERARMOR and SWORDBLAST everything. Granted, the AWSUM COLORZ series has its own fair share of POWERARMOR and SWORDBLASTIN, but it also has self-deprecating characters that sit at enough of a remove to be secretly amazed by themselves. No one in AWSUM COLORZ takes their AWSUM for granted, which is a big part of the appeal. The characters are as astounded by their AWSUM as we are. Which makes the sheer ridiculousness of it all a shared experience between character, author and reader. That's pulpy, and I like it.

Mr. Weeks also avoids getting all up in yr philosophee as well, which is much appreciated. There are several factions, all with their own viewpoint characters. Despite their fundamental differences, they all agree to disagree and then get to the KABLOOIE with a minimum of fuss. They all know why they're here, and it certainly isn't to expound at length about the nature of evil.

Third, the characters are clearly designed with empathy in mind - at least, for a particular type of reader. Gavin the Prism is the most powerful 'drafter' (someone that uses COLORKABLOOIE) in the realm. But he's got his own secrets and his own agenda. Etc. Etc. He's also a fairly nice guy, an impression that's reinforced when he wanders into other characters' points of view. He also has a HOTTIE slave for ROOMSEX and a sekrit twoo luv. (Also? A six-pack.) Gavin is who our twelve-year-old selves wanted to be when we grew up. He's our idealised version of masculine adulthood, with a rippling physique, sex on tap, perpetual rebellion against the system (despite being the system) and the added spice of forbidden love.

Kip, Gavin's bastard (kind of) and the mandatory teen prophecy-monkey, is crafted with equal care. Kip gets the best adventures. Kip's also overweight, shy, snarky, surrounded by HOTTIES and UBERPOWERFUL at COLORKABLOOIE. If Gavin is who we wanted to be, Kip was us. It is hard not to admire audience targeting this utterly shameless. He does everything except obsessively compete in collectible card games... and... no, wait, he actually does that too.

There are also Liv (who is hot), Karris (who is hot) and another female character (whose name I can't remember two days after finishing the book), who is hot. Pretty much all you need to know about them is in the Wikipedia plot summary to The Blinding Knife (SPOILER: they're not mentioned at all).

Fourth, ZOMG COLORKABLOOIE! So basically, some people are born more specialer and they can 'draft' colors into stuff. Red stuff is explodey. Green stuff is stabby. Blue stuff is thumpy. Orange stuff is slimy. Black stuff summons the Lord of the Pit, but make sure you have plenty of cannon fodder handy. [Raise your hand if you got that joke. Congratulations, this book was written for you!]

Some people can draft multiple colors. Other people, like Gavin are SUPERAWSUM and can draft all of them. The magic system is kind of explained - at one point Kip goes to Battle School, but, fortunately, the lecturing (borrrrring) is quickly replaced by perpetual dueling (yay!). But mostly there's light and some people can make stuff out of it and then they fight.

I say the following with no sarcasm: Mr. Weeks has his priorities straight. The world-building (be it political or magical) exists purely to set the stage for COLORKABLOOIE. A quick sentence of "this person does bluekablooie" and then, more importantly, "YES BUT WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU HIT THEM WITH A STICK?". Or "this person does violetkablooie" and "AND NOW THEY WILL FIGHT PIRATES AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA". It is half Magic the Gathering, half Star Wars prequel and all "Could Mighty Mouse beat Superman?".

The plot only reinforces this peculiar structure. Kip and Gavin colorsplode minions until they get to the boss fight. It gets tense, then they team up to form the MEGAPRIZMZORD and AWSUMSMACK everything in sight. Kip receives two achievement badges and a new nickname.

There are a few exceptions, wherein the backstory is "important". Gavin and his brother fought a civil war in the yet-unpublished-but-inevitable prequel trilogy. A lot of characters from that series pop up in the AWSUM COLORZ series, but, since we don't know (or particularly care) about them, the author occasionally resorts to a bit of blatant tell-not-show. "Look over there, that's Sporkbanger the Obtruse, a legendary hero and the best of his kind. Now you understand how important the next scene will be..." and "... but the secret enemy turned out to be Dalinkybonk Wormtongue! Who was important in the last war! And if you haven't heard of him, well, you should've! Gosh! Have you been hiding under a rock?!" This is a little annoying but, fortunately, only happens a few times.

So...

Anyone here play Yahoo Fantasy Football?

They've introduced a new feature this year where you can get 'recaps' of your fantasy matches. Which, if you know anything about fantasy football, is ridiculous. Yahoo generates a series of Turing-failing automated statements that try to compress a dozen different football games into one cohesive narrative. "[Your kicker] had a stunning week and made 11.24 points. Hooray." "[Your quarterback] had the worst game of his career; -56% off his average points per game. Ow." Sportswriting à la Harriet Klausner.

In a way, that's the AWSUM COLORZ series - a paper bag containing an infinite permutations of head-to-head battles.

Fortunately, Mr. Weeks circa 2012 is a great deal more readable than the YahooBot (which, in turn, is more readable than Mr. Weeks circa 2008). There are characters we identify with (d00d! they're us!), a vaguely coherent plot (eh) and COLORKABLOOIE.

I genuinely can't wait to read the third book in this series, but not because I care about Kip or Gavin or whatshername the female POV. Nor do I care about the war-thing or the prophecy-thing or the politics-stuff. I assume it'll all get resolved to someone's satisfaction. The romantic subplots are non-starters: Kip's fallen in love at least twice and gets a Blinding Knife every time a woman looks his way. Eventually [insert female POV here] will hook up with him, and he'll unlock that achievement too.

No, what I care about? Orange.

Seriously, we haven't seen orange drafters in a proper fight yet, and I really want to know what happens when orange fights red. Or blue. Or pirates, or monsters or... So many fights, so few pages.

The AWSUM COLORZ series is trashy, pulpy, utterly mind-absorbing fun; fanboy fantasies all glued together with rampant enthusiasm and shellacked in way more charisma than it deserves. Color me amazed, but I kind of loved it.

Jared Shurin is a certified BBQ judge.

This article first appeared on *Pornokitsch* on October 31, 2012.

<http://www.pornokitsch.com/2012/10/brent-weeks-black-prism-blinding-knife.html>

THE BLADE ITSELF (2006) BY JOE ABERCROMBIE

Joe Abercrombie

Over the last few days I've been reading Joe Abercrombie's seminal work of modern fantasy, *The Blade Itself*. Alright, I confess, I have read it before. About 90 times. In fact there's probably no significant body of text that I've read more times. In a week this book will have been published six years ago. Which means I was making the first (probably now unrecognisable) efforts at writing the first scenes maybe nine or ten years ago. Although I had made the very first (utterly unrecognisable apart from some of the names) abortive efforts at writing those scenes about seventeen years ago. Which means I very much wouldn't do things quite the same way now in all kinds of ways. Which means it almost feels at times as if it was written by someone else. Sometimes that's a bad thing, sometimes a good – there were a couple of nice lines and gags I'd actually entirely forgotten. At other times I knew the text so well I'd expect to read a line that had been taken out late in the editing and be shocked that it wasn't there. The notional purpose of rereading was to check whether there was anything I'd forgotten about that should find its way into the current book, particularly from the point of view of any returning characters (obviously I can't say who but the sharp among you have probably already got your theories). I've leafed through it now and again to check some detail or other but I haven't actually sat down and read the entire thing for a good two or three years, I don't think. It was an interesting experience. Occasionally a little wincy and frustrating but by and large a good deal better than I'd feared. Some thoughts...

The writing's a little lumpy, sometimes trying a bit too hard – why use one adjective when five are available? Then you can repeat a couple of them later in the paragraph! Hmmm. A tendency towards providing pairs of nouns or adjectives when one, or perhaps none, would do. A bit of dead-horse beating, you could say. Sometimes it's a bit foursquare, dwelling on who did what when, some unnecessary repetition and too much focus on technical aspects of positioning in a scene that really don't matter at all. He turned, then he turned back, then he turned again. He could probably have turned less. Or indeed simply looked forwards and delivered his dialogue. But actually the writing was generally less embarrassing than I'd feared it might be. Some of the descriptive bits are a little, I don't know, lacking in sparkle, prone to become a bit listy and unimaginative, and

sometimes there's a slightly trying, breathless, 'Ooh, I can't wait to tell you how ace this is,' sense to things, but the dialogue is largely there, there are some really nice exchanges I'd forgotten about. If there's one relative strength that I'd identify it is the dialogue. The different 'voices' for the different points of view generally work but haven't totally settled down at this stage. I actually found the prose-style with Ferro's chapters worked really well although I was trying a bit hard for an emotional payoff there, and the Dogman just always worked right off, but Glokta's internal voice I actually found rather surprisingly disappointing – works in some of the more reflective sequences where he's just thinking, but comes across as trying too hard when it's working as a commentary on action and conversation – sometimes a bit obvious and lacking in subtlety, I'd say. It improved as things went on, though and undoubtedly had its moments. Perhaps overused?

I'd say probably the biggest problem is with content and pacing. The different threads don't necessarily interact all that smoothly. There are some really nice sequences at the Contest, in the House of the Maker, when the Bloody-Nine appears, but they tend not to coincide, coming as blips out of a flatline of occasionally rather dull hanging around rather than building together to a crescendo. In general the first part works fine – although I think a slightly meandering sense remains from when the early chapters were first written more as test samples than as part of a larger, planned out whole – but in the second part you're waiting for an increase in intensity and if anything there's a relaxation, a bit of a dispersement and dilution as Ferro and the Dogman appear in their unrelated stories, there's a little too much fencing with Jezal, though some of that works well, Logen is treading water and Glokta's investigations into Bayaz, though necessary to fill out the back story, aren't always thrilling. There are interesting and exciting moments in there, and the characters and world are definitely laid out and built up in a largely entertaining and involving way, things do intensify as we come towards the end, but there's no denouement to this book, if you like. If you look at the trilogy as a single story that's not necessarily a major problem, but I think it would have helped to have a rather more decisive structure to this volume – certainly it's a criticism I often see and probably one that I'd largely agree with. At one time I'd have said something like, 'well, *Fellowship of the Ring* sets things up and then trails away at the end without at all standing alone,' but *Fellowship of the Ring* is basically one thread, so that sequences like the flight from the Nazgul and Moria have huge impact. I don't know that *The Blade Itself* has anything on that sort of scale, and big events for one character tend to be slightly traded off against flatter

stuff for others. The second part in particular could definitely have been condensed considerably without costing much, I feel.

That said, despite the issues, I still like it. A lot, at times. Probably that's unsurprising, since I like it in the way that you like that sandwich you make for yourself, on just the kind of bread you like, with just the right amount of sauce and the lettuce cut just bloody so. I like the way it kicks off hard, I like the tone and the sense of humour, and I think the characters are pretty arresting, vivid and original right off and do pull you (or at least me) through the flatter sections. Although nothing much pays off there is some reasonably cunning set up of various plot points, partly thanks I'm sure to the luxury of publishing the first book when I was already well underway in the writing of the third. There are some really nice scenes, often when the characters suddenly encounter one another for the first time and the way others see them is contrasted with the way they see themselves. And although the pacing overall is uneven a lot of the sequences have a nice internal rhythm. There's a good sense of timing, you might say. Some rough edges, then, some things I wouldn't do the same way now at all, but I nonetheless award myself high marks. Unsurprisingly, some might say. But it is handy, since the chances are large that your first book will remain in many ways your most important.

In conclusion, *The Blade Itself* is incontestably the finest fantasy debut that will ever be made... by me.

Joe Abercrombie is the author of The First Law trilogy and the standalone fantasies, *Best Served Cold*, *The Heroes* and *Red Country*.

This article first appeared on the author's website on May 28, 2012.

<http://www.joeabercrombie.com/2012/05/28/the-blade-itself-reread/>

THE SWORD OF SHANNARA (1977) BY TERRY BROOKS

Justin Landon

1/17/94

Not a date the world recognizes. It's not 5/8/45 or 11/22/63 or 7/20/69 or 9/11/01. But, January 17, 1994, just outside Los Angeles, California, an earthquake struck. Fifty-seven people lost their lives and nearly nine thousand were injured. Twenty billion in property damage, it remains one of the most devastating natural disasters in history.

It was a seminal moment in my life for wholly different reasons.



An earthquake woke up the twelve year old boy, jiggling like a chubby preteen is want to do when the ground moves. He jumped out of bed and ran to the relative safety of the backyard (it should be noted he did so in opposition to all recommend safety teachings pounded into his skull for the past eight years). Like anyone living near the San Andreas Fault, the boy figured school would be cancelled as they waited out the assured aftershock. He also suspected his mother was unlikely to let him back in the house. This being the fourth earthquake in the previous two years, it should come as no surprise he knew these things intuitively.

Several hours outside the home in the California desert can be pretty rough. Not from exposure mind you, a landscaped yard is as comfortable there as it is anywhere (it just costs more), but extreme boredom was his primary foe. Temperature and high winds discourage outdoor activities. Thus, most of the boy's hobbies were indoor focused, unrelated of course to his penchant for solitude and social awkwardness. Thankfully, he'd fallen asleep the night before clutching a book of prodigious size, a diversion to carry him through the long morning. Some might credit his quick thinking in grabbing the book. Truth be told it was easier to run out with it, than cast it aside to risk further damage of the home's interior.

He was safe. And while his family would find some broken memories inside the home later that day, for the moment he was at peace. On the lawn, he read well into the late morning. Through a serious aftershock and a smaller shiver, he sat, lost in a world far from there. The book told of a diminutive half-elf named Shea Ohmsford and his adoptive brother, Flick, spirited away by the druid Allanon to

save the world from the evil Warlock Lord.

The impact this story would have on the boy's mind was as significant as the moving earth was to California's landscape.



Everyone grows up. The man I became saw *The Sword of Shannara's* flaws all too well. Inherently derivative of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, an understatement akin to the Black Knight's flesh wounds, Lin Carter called it, "the single most cold-blooded, complete rip-off of another book that I have ever read". I know he's right, but I adore it still.

Shannara was the first new book from a fledgling Ballantine imprint in 1977. Spun off from a few years previous, Del Rey Books was the brain child of Lester and Judy-Lynn del Rey who called Terry Brooks' debut novel, "the first long epic fantasy adventure which had any chance of meeting the demands of Tolkien readers for similar pleasures."

Similar pleasures. A pregnant choice of works if I've ever heard one. There are the obvious analogues in *Shannara* to the Tolkien classic: Brona as Sauron, Allanon as Gandalf, Shea and Flick as the Hobbits, Menion and Balinor as Aragorn and Boromir, Hendel and Durin/Dayel as Gimli and Legolas, Orl Fane as Gollum. The list goes on. Many of the plot elements are likewise reflected. For years I've heard arguments naming Brooks a hack – a bad young adult writer masquerading in adult fiction. His plots are always the same, they said, his character always going through the same trials, to come out the other end better and stronger. He stole it all from the Progenitor and doesn't apologize for it.

I've heard it and don't dismiss it, but I can't help the way I felt that January day. I hadn't read Tolkien and wouldn't for a dozen more years. I lost myself in the story, imaging myself as Shea, Menion, and Balinor – even Panamon Creel and Keltset – for weeks after. Why, despite being able to take an elevated view, do I insist on its greatness? Is it merely nostalgia? It has to be something more.

Looking for a way to reconcile the man to the boy, I came across a Frank Herbert remark, "Brooks demonstrates that it doesn't matter where you get the idea; what matters is that you tell a rousing story." If nothing else, Brooks is a great storyteller. *Shannara* moves with such pace, urged onward by violence and unlikely heroism. It's not unique that regard, being rather descriptive of the epic fantasy genre at large. A genre, I might point out, that appeals to youth by nature. To quote Brooks himself, "my protagonists are cut from

the same bolt of cloth as Bilbo and Frodo Baggins. It was Tolkien's genius to reinvent the traditional epic fantasy by making the central character neither God nor hero, but a simple man in search of a way to do the right thing."

Tolkien, Brooks, and even Robert Jordan, George R.R. Martin, and Robin Hobb, create tales in which anyone can change their stars (thanks, *A Knight's Tale*). In so doing, epic fantasy addresses a power vacuum that's inimical to youth. Whether it's a put upon scullery maid or a hobbit from the Shire, it encourages the notion that even the most insignificant person possesses control. If that's not a theme that resonates with youth, I don't know what does.

Maybe that's why I love it so much.



The boy knew that missed the point – he's never really left you see. He's always there, lurking behind the man's eyes. At twelve, he was just struggling to fit in, to find a place for himself. Power was the least of his concern, he just wanted out. The notion that someday, out of the blue, a big fucking druid was going to show up at the door and carry him away was transportive. That quality above all else ensorcelled him. When would someone come to carry him away from girls he would never understand, from algebra which he never figured out, and from his parents who never stopped asking questions?

Because it sucked to be twelve. Maybe people can't understand that *The Sword of Shannara* made it suck less. With the world shaking apart, Terry Brooks took him away.



Apparently, I was an introspective twelve year old. Maybe I should listen to him more often. Regardless, as a man or as a boy, the themes the novel elicits are simple, as common in the epic fantasy sandbox as dragons and elves. If it isn't a Druid doing the whisking away, it's a Warder and an Aes Sedai or a disguised wizard named Mister Wolf. Yet, flying in the face of its banality, I'm writing about its importance.

I wonder if formative literature is such not because of its quality, or even its content, but the time in which it's read. When, as important as what – like falling in love. I don't believe there's one person for everyone. Rather there are opportunities that come along between two people who find a moment of mutual receptiveness in

allowing something amazing to happen.

The Sword of Shannara came to me when I ready to listen. I read it as an insecure child, years before I would begin to understand my place in it all. Locked out of my home by Mother Nature, with nowhere else to turn and no distractions, Terry Brooks gave me magic and I fell in love.

Who can fault a man in love?

Justin Landon is the voice behind *Staffer's Book Review*. He's a regular contributor at *A Dribble of Ink*, and has had his work featured at *SF Signal*. His claim to fame is co-editing this book.

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<http://www.pornokitsch.com/2012/05/terry-brooks-the-sword-of-shannara-by-justin-landon.html>

FAITH (2012) BY JOHN LOVE

Katherine Farmar

Faith begins with the kind of opening sentence that grabs readers by the throat and demands their attention: "His pregnancy convulsions dragged him out of unconsciousness." It becomes clear shortly afterwards that we are in the future, in a period that is never exactly specified, and that humans have expanded beyond Earth to form an interplanetary Commonwealth. The Commonwealth has absorbed several non-human civilizations, including the asexual, monogender Sakhrens, who were once an interplanetary empire in their own right. It is a Sakhren named Sarabt we follow through the novel's tense and gripping opening section, as he attempts to survive a crash landing, a dangerous solitary journey through a desert strewn with predators, and a premature childbirth, in order to deliver a message to the nearest Commonwealth outpost – a message about Faith.

What, then, is Faith? That very question drives most of the novel's action. In simple terms, Faith is a mysterious ship, always referred to as "She" with a capital S. Faith is unaffiliated and vastly powerful; She visits interplanetary civilizations at unpredictable intervals, attacks their ships and colonies, destroys them, and leaves the civilizations to die slowly. The decline is not due merely to the physical damage She causes, but something more subtle and harder to fight. There is something about Faith that destroys civilizations from within:

Three hundred years ago the same unidentified ship had visited Sakhra, and left it devastated. One Sakhren recognised what the ship was, and wrote the Book of Srahr, and when they read it they turned away from each other. The Sakhren Empire went into a slow but irreversible decline, and was later absorbed by the Commonwealth. Sakhrens were mostly agnostic, and they called the ship Faith out of self-mockery. Faith was something they didn't understand and didn't want; it had come to them suddenly and without invitation; it would not be denied; and when it left them, which it did as suddenly as it came, they were ruined. They would never recover.

On balance, Faith seemed a good name. [pg. 4]

Knowing what he knows about Faith, Sarabt wishes to prevent her from doing to the Commonwealth what she did to Sakhra, though he has little hope of succeeding. For Faith's devastating effects are not solely due to her superior weapons and engines,

but stem as much or more from her ability to predict, mirror, and counter all her opponents' actions, as well as acting herself in a way that no Commonwealth ship can predict, mirror, or counter. A battle with Faith is always more psychological than physical, and reveals weaknesses her opponents didn't even realize they had. That revelation alone can be deadly. Thus there are echoes in *Faith* of Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*, or the Total Perspective Vortex from the *Hitchhiker's Guide* series. Love's story suggests that there is a kind of knowledge that can be dangerous to the people who learn it – a kind of knowledge that can rewrite a person's view of the universe in such a way as to make life intolerable.

The bulk of the novel concerns a single prolonged battle between Faith and a Commonwealth ship, the *Charles Manson*. The *Charles Manson* is a peculiar ship in several respects. It is a member of the Outsider class, so called because they are not formally part of the Commonwealth military but report directly to the euphemistically named "Department of Administrative Affairs" (a sly tip of the hat to *Yes, Minister*), but also because they are crewed exclusively by outsiders. Just as the *Charles Manson* is named after a famous murderer, its crew are (with two exceptions) murderers themselves.

The commander of the ship is Aaron Foord, orphaned in childhood and raised in a bleak, authoritarian orphanage—not that this trauma is presented as an excuse or even an explanation for his cold, implacable personality, or the crimes in his past. His second in command is a Sakhran named Thahl, who has committed no crimes, and whose presence on the *Charles Manson* – and his loyalty and friendship with Foord – is never fully explained, if he even knows the reason for it himself. Foord's weapons officer is a coldly brilliant woman named Susanna Cyr, a serial rapist with a taste for inflicting pain; where Cyr is concerned, Foord alternates between disgust and attraction, and the interplay between them is one part courtship to two parts dominance battle. The ensemble is rounded out by the engineer Smithson, a multi-limbed alien with a sharp mind and a sharper tongue, and Kaang, a freakishly gifted pilot with no other characteristics whatsoever.

Kaang's lack of characteristics is, oddly, not a failure of characterization on Love's part: it is explicitly stated, many times, both by Kaang and by Foord, that there is nothing to Kaang, apart from her skill as a pilot. Both Kaang's blankness and her skill are clues to the ultimate nature of Faith, and key elements in Foord's plan to defeat her – though that plan must constantly shift and mutate, as Faith herself counters every action Foord and his crew can devise, always finding new and unexpected ways to shift the ground under their feet and turn the game they are playing into something

altogether different.

The back and forth exchange of tactics takes up more than half of the novel, and in a less skillful author's hands, it would quickly become dull – but Love makes the battle consistently gripping and thrilling, even in the stretches between engagements when very little is happening. The philosophical issues raised by Faith's abilities infuse every moment in which the characters have a chance to draw breath, lending significance to all their actions and a kind of desperate poignancy to their bafflement, especially since the only character who ultimately comes to understand Faith is Foord, who is adamant throughout that he does not care what Faith is so long as he can defeat her.

This is one of many ironies in the novel, which returns and returns to the Sakhran symbol known as the *srahr* – a sign that means both zero and infinity. Nothing is straightforward in this universe; nothing is as it seems. Over and over again, the established narrative of how things are "supposed" to work turns out to be false or incomplete. The expected outcome does not occur, and the characters are left scrambling to react in a useful way, struggling to understand what has happened and what might happen next. In order to defeat Faith, it is necessary not so much to rethink as to unthink: to detach from old ideas, and think the unthinkable. I am hesitant to discuss the ultimate truth of Faith's nature in detail, since it comes so late in the novel and is very far from obvious when it does come. It must suffice to say that it manages both to be unexpected and, if not precisely the only logical consequence of what has come before, it is in harmony with everything we have already seen and learned. There is space for multiple interpretations – Foord may not be absolutely correct in his view – and the ending is the kind that invites the reader to go back and re-read earlier chapters in the light of the final revelation.

Faith is by no means flawless. The characters are, by design, neither sympathetic nor likeable, and although this is not in itself a flaw, it does lend the novel a certain coldness that may put some readers off. Further, Love has a penchant for scatological imagery, both literal and metaphorical; one of Faith's attacks involves sucking up the contents of a city's sewage system and spraying it evenly all over the city, which is only the most blatant example. The motif is startling and vivid in its first few appearances, but it quickly grows stale. Another stylistic quirk that Love seems dependent on (and is definitely prone to overuse) is the Significant Emphatic Capitalization of Selected Words. If this were a quirk of Foord's diction it might be forgivable, but all the characters fall into it sooner or later, and the narration is littered with it, so that at times the novel feels like one of those 1960s superhero comic books where every other word is bold

and every sentence ends with an exclamation mark. More seriously, there are times when the novel trumpets its ideas a little too loudly, using dialogue to telegraph themes that are already embedded in the story, as if Love doesn't always trust his readers to see what he's driving at without explicit instructions.

Despite these problems, on the whole, *Faith* succeeds both as a purely visceral, exciting story and as a meditation on the place of humanity in the universe. For all the coldness of its characters, there is a kind of passionate wonder on display here that makes *Faith* exhilarating to read, a novel that demands and rewards the reader's attention from the first sentence to the last.

Katherine Farmer was born in Dublin and has lived there all her life, apart from a year spent in Edinburgh studying philosophy. Her reviews have appeared in *The Irish Times*, the *TLS*, and *Strange Horizons*. Her first novel, the young adult fantasy *Wormwood Gate*, was published by Little Island in March 2013.

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http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2012/08/faith_by_john_1.shtml

ALIF THE UNSEEN (2012) BY G. WILLOW WILSON

Larry Nolen

Reza carefully laid out the pages he had transcribed during the creature's last visit. He wrote in Arabic, not Persian, hoping that this precaution would prevent his work from being misused should it fall into the hands of the uneducated and uninitiated. The manuscript was thus a double translation: first into Persian from the voiceless language in which the creature spoke, which fell on Reza's ears like the night echoes of childhood, when sleep was preceded by that solitary, fearful journey between waking and dreaming. Then from Persian into Arabic, the language of Reza's education, as mathematical and efficient as the creature's speech was diffuse.

The result was perplexing. The stories were there, rendered as well as Reza could manage, but something had been lost. When the creature spoke, Reza would drift into a kind of trance, watching strange shapes amplify themselves again and again, until they resembled mountains, coastlines, the pattern of frost on glass. In these moments he felt sure he had accomplished his desire, and the sum of knowledge was within his reach. But as soon as the stories were fixed on paper, they shifted. It was as if the characters themselves – the princess, the nurse, the bird king, and all the rest – had grown sly and slipped past Reza as he attempted to render them in human proportions. (p. 4)



Aleph. Alif. The letter that is not, the marker of short vowels that are unseen. The beginning of semantics, of our language for the world around us. There is a sort of mysticism about this Semitic vowel marker, both in its Hebrew and Arabic scripts. Borges entitled one of his most famous collections (and stories), *El Aleph*, as a sort of reference to the occult knowledge some over the centuries have attributed to it. Its symbolism persists even into today as a metaphor for that which is present and yet not. It is therefore fitting that it is the pseudonym for the protagonist of G. Willow's *Alif the Unseen*.

Alif is a young Arab-Indian hacker operating in an unnamed Persian Gulf city. He runs a clandestine business that allows his clients to bypass the stringent internet security system established

by the local government, but after a lover of his leaves him for the "Hand of God," the head of the state's internet security apparatus, his career and possibly his life are in danger. Fleeing underground, Alif stumbles upon a copy of *The Thousand and One Days*, a book created by the jinn that is the "true original" of the human-translated *The Arabian Nights* and which apparently contains an encoding of data that could unlock more than a very sophisticated information technology.

Alif the Unseen can be read on multiple levels. At the base is a technological thriller, as Alif and the "Hand of God" compete to possess the secret book and to decode it. The action certainly is quick and the revelations that spur developments move at a brisk pace, with very few lulls in the action. However, *Alif the Unseen* is also a commentary on faith and the belief systems in which we have encoded our own fears, superstitions, hopes, and desires. Wilson draws upon nearly 1400 years of Muslim theology and philosophy in the dialogues that Alif has with the jinn and others. Yet these references are, for the most part, not oblique to non-Muslims, as they contain references that people of other faiths (or non-faiths) can understand, such as referencing the piety of the suffering:

Alif heard the sheikh chuckle.

"I have had much experience with the unclean and uncivilized in the recent past. Shall I tell you what I discovered? I am not the state of my feet. I am not the dirt on my hands or the hygiene of my private parts. If I were these things, I would not have been at liberty to pray at any time since my arrest. But I did pray, because I am not these things. In the end, I am not even myself. I am a string of bones speaking the word God." [pg. 294]

This little passage finds resonance in other scenes in the novel, including the plight of the state's citizens, their attempts to find that precarious balance between the exigencies of life and of their faith in something greater than their oppressed state, and in the belief that the world contains things beyond human ken. Wilson references these beliefs and the seemingly contradictory ways in which people may act on them (e.g. the conflict between the emphasis on peace and the often-violent means of protest that the subjugated people employ to voice their dissent). Too easily such socio-religious commentaries could be construed as being mawkish or cynical, yet with few exceptions Wilson manages to avoid both. Her characters are not cartoons; they contain their own frailties and rocks of strength upon which they sustain themselves.

The prose is deceptively simple. It is relatively sparse, focusing more on developing the action than on the situations, although at key

moments, there are revelatory passages that further the plot without bogging down the action. The characterizations are understated yet rarely is

there the sense that any of them are underdeveloped. Alif in particular is a mixture of knowledge and ignorance whose quest to decode the jinn's book works because we see his progression without feeling that he is a Dan Brown-like simpleton who has to explain every single point in laborious detail as if everything were truly a divine revelation.

If there were a flaw to *Alif the Unseen*, it might be that Wilson could have explored the underpinnings of Alif's society and their belief system just a bit more. However, this is more a matter of personal preference, a desire to see the semantics of the meta-narrative outlined more, rather than a grievous fault. Outside of this and a few quibbles about how quickly the novel ended, *Alif the Unseen* was one of the better 2012 releases that I have read this year. Its mixture of Arabic mythology, cultural traditions, contemporary social concerns, with some elements of technological SF works very well and should appeal to a wide range of readers.

Larry Nolen is a history and English teacher who works with special needs children. He is also a freelance translator, with translations of Augusto Monterroso and Leopoldo Lugones appearing in the anthologies *The Weird* and *ODD?* respectively. Larry also has a very healthy fascination with squirrels and dreams to one day edit an anthology of squirrel fiction, to be called *Squirrelpunk*. He blogs at *The OF Blog* and *Gogol's Overcoat*. Several of his reviews are actually written by rabid Serbian squirrels.

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<http://ofblog.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/g-willow-wilson-alif-unseen.html>

THEFT OF SWORDS (2011) BY MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

Liz Bourke

Michael J. Sullivan is that rare beast, a man who self-published six books to moderate financial success, and parlayed that success into a deal with a major publisher. *Theft of Swords* collects the previously self-published *The Crown Conspiracy* (2007) and *Avempartha* (2009) in one volume. As of this writing, I want to hunt down every single soul associated with the decision to give this series the imprimatur of a major publishing house and rub their noses in it like a bad puppy. Sloppiness in amateurs is understandable. When professionals are involved, there should be consequences. I have words for these people. Bad words. But I'll restrain myself, and restrict my vocabulary to standards acceptable in polite company. The book's own words ought to be enough to condemn it.

I've read bad books. Tedious tie-ins, books that had a good idea and execrable execution, books where the standard of writing barely crossed competent and where clichés swarmed like schools of toothy fish. Thanks to my broad experience and lack of discrimination, *Theft of Swords* isn't, quite, the absolute worst book I've ever read.

But it loses the prize by a very, very slender margin.

Our protagonists are the honorable and infamous thief duo Royce Melborn and Hadrian Blackwater. Hadrian is a mercenary who wields a short sword and a bastard sword. He was trained by his father, a blacksmith, and we eventually learn – or, rather, are hit over the head with obvious foreshadowing – that he's been taught secret knightly skills handed down for a thousand years. Royce is a half-elf with a dark past and a tormented soul, who is – it seems – in love with a Hooker With A Heart of Gold. In *The Crown Conspiracy*, they're hired to steal a sword from a palace chapel, but things go wrong. When they're blamed for the death of King Amrath, imprisoned, and sentenced to execution, the Princess Arista insists that they kidnap her brother Prince Alric in return for her aid in escaping from the dungeons.

Henceforth, the plot bears a the marked resemblance to the kind of D&D campaign GMed by a thirteen-year-old boy whose naïve attachment to the worst kind of tropes hasn't yet been shaken by contact with reality or actual human beings. There are no characters here. Not really. There are collections of stereotypes strung together into caricatures, which are very occasionally enlivened by dialogue that sounds like something a real human might say. More often,

however, we get this:

I'll have you flailed to death! Release me this instant. [pg. 62]

or,

The blackguard means to have the kingdom for his own! [pg. 164]

or,

His father is a chivalrous knight of archaic dimensions. [pg. 174]

Royce and Hadrian escape from the dungeon, and kidnap the prince. Following Arista's instructions – who they've only just met – they travel to a secret prison and introduce the prince (who just happens to want them dead) to a secret prisoner, who (Arista claims) will be able to sort everything out. Within the next sixty pages, we encounter a monk who has never left his abbey, and – despite the abbey being a haven for travelers – has never seen a woman and is also under the impression that horses may come in shades of green or blue. Alric and our heroes convince each other they're all on the same side. Shortly thereafter, we make the acquaintance of Esrahaddon, an ancient and mysterious wizard, immured in the secret prison for a thousand years, who speaks in ungrammatical thous. Like Yoda, he speaketh, but he makes less sense:

Measures thou see art but trifles. Walls, guards and the abyss stand least among the gauntlet. Lo what works of magic ensnare me! Magical locks claim all the doors here as smoke and dream they vanish with passage. [pg. 113]

If you're going to write in a dialect with which you're not familiar, whether archaic or foreign, it behoves you to become familiar with it. If you're writing in Early Modern English (a language still read and performed, and not just by Shakespeare buffs), it behoves you – and your editor, and your copyeditor – to get the basic grammatical structures right. Early Modern English does have a grammar. And if you don't know the grammar offhand, the internet does.

The measures thou see'st be but trifles.

Esrahaddon only sticks around long enough to handwave mysteriously, point out the obvious, and declare that he has more important things to do than help Prince Alric regain his throne. Esrahaddon is a lucky wizard. He escapes both the scenes in which the Evil Plotters have a conference to explain to each other their Evil Plot (which involves getting an archduke the throne, and doesn't make any practical sense) and the most hideously described battle scenes I have ever had the displeasure to read:

A vanguard [of the attacking party] rode up and reported a strong force [of the defending party] entrenched around the city.

The nobles ordered their regiments to form ranks. Flags relayed messages, archers strung their bows, and the army transformed themselves into blocks of men. In long lines of three across, they moved as one. The archers were summoned forward and moved ahead just behind the foot soldiers. [pg. 196]

Knights on horseback charge fixed defenses. People defending a city do not bother to make use of the walls. The attackers say they "have to break a hole in that wall" and have no siege machinery. Three flights of arrows is considered a lot. Men with rapiers fight knights in plate armor.

In the meantime, Princess Arista is on trial for witchcraft, while Royce and Hadrian mount a rescue mission. Treacherous dwarves and Evil Scheming Aristocrats all come tumbling down into a truly terrible heap, and Prince Alric regains his throne. If this seems a little confusing to you, trust me, it was to me, too. Arista is on Alric's side – she isn't – she is but seems like she isn't – she really is, and Alric's sure of it, despite previous hints to the contrary. The characterization is wildly inconsistent, and Sullivan has chosen to attempt to increase tension by withholding any kind of clarity of information from the reader.

The Crown Conspiracy, the first half of *Theft of Swords*, is incoherent, awful, and as full of as much trite, stereotype-ridden nonsense as the worst kind of Forgotten Realms fanfic. Avempartha, the second half, is marginally more coherent. In all other ways it is, if anything, even worse.

The plot, what there is of it, involves the conspiracies of evil scheming churchmen, a magical sword hidden in an elvish tower, a terrible bloodthirsty beast which looks like a dragon, breathes fire like a dragon, and lairs like a dragon, but is always referred to as a Gilarabrywn, and a Naïve Farmgirl straight out of central casting. The farmgirl, whose name is Thrace Annabell Wood, comes to the city to find Royce and Hadrian. She wants to ask them to steal a magic sword that can kill the evil dragon Gilarabrywn.

Thrace Annabell Wood is the character that, for me, highlights what is worst about these books. In *The Crown Conspiracy*, I could put the author's female-gender-related hiccups down to a broad and bemusing lack of writing chops. Princess Arista is characterized with wild inconsistency—by turns decisive princess and dithering damsel—but so, speaking generally, is every character who's more than a walk-on. But in Thrace's first scene, she's the target of an interrupted rape. When Royce and Hadrian rescue her, she cries. A lot. And proceeds to thank them on her knees, after they get her cleaned up. Once clean, she proves to be a "young beauty with

startling blue eyes and golden hair" (p. 240) that "shimmers." Sullivan's female characters, all two of the ones with major speaking parts, are infantilized and sexualized in the same breath. From the perspective of a woman who reads fantasy, this is disappointing. It is, in fact, more than a little disturbing.

As it transpires, the wizard Esrahaddon is responsible for Thrace's quest to find our two protagonists. The mysterious ancient wizard is back, but fortunately for the reader's sanity, this time he has fewer ungrammatical thous. He does, however, have his fingers in the dragon Gilarabrywn mess. Which is confusing and needlessly complicated even by the standards of *The Crown Conspiracy*. I'm none too sure why the Gilarabrywn – which I will henceforth refer to as the dragon, rather than calling a rabbit a Smerp – is terrorizing the particular country village it's terrorizing, but some scheming churchmen have hatched a plot to set up a (fake) Lost Heir to an empire that's been gone a thousand years. They plan to get their patsy to kill the dragon and thereby prove his credentials. Unfortunately for them – and everyone else who's around when the dragon comes to call – things do not go as planned. Meanwhile, Hadrian is teaching Thrace's father how to fight, and Royce is visiting the elvish tower to find the magic dragon-killing sword (and get in touch with his roots) at the behest of the wizard Esrahaddon. The Princess Arista and some church knights are also around to pontificate, scream, weep, and be killed or kidnapped by the dragon. The general arc of the Plot Coupon Monster-Killing story is obvious to all, and where Avempartha diverges even slightly from the cliché, it's only to descend to new and even more cringeworthy depths of excruciating clunkery, which includes such dialogue as:

"No one is going to kill that thing," Hadrian told him. "Listen, I have been here for 3 [sic] nights. I have seen it and I know what it can do." [pg. 359]

and such political theory as:

The feudal system so prevalent across the four nations held them back, chaining the kingdoms to a poverty of weakness and divided interests. What they needed was a centralized government with an enlightened ruler and a talented, educated bureaucracy overseeing every aspect of life. [pg. 385]

and such glittering description as:

Elaborately decorated in silver and gold encrusted with fine sparkling gems, the pommel caught the starlight and sparkled. [pg. 431]

In the ultimate showdown, Arista, kidnapped by the dragon

(who, like Esrahaddon, speaks fake Early Modern English) bursts into tears as she's rescued by Royce and Esrahaddon; Hadrian and Thrace's father fight the dragon; and Thrace? Well, Thrace watches her father die and goes Inigo Montoya on the dragon.

"Daddy!" she screamed, running to him. She scrambled up the slope, crying as she came . . .

She would not let him go. She could not; he was all there was. She sobbed and wailed, clutching his shirt, kissing his cheek and forehead . . . (p. 447)

Unfortunately, her You killed my father; prepare to die moment fails to bring the win. We later learn that the death of her Daddy! has driven her into suicidal depression. This is really not a positive representation of women with agency.

For our conclusion, Esrahaddon acts mysterious, and engages in patently obvious foreshadowing – ominous and intriguing hints are neither ominous nor intriguing if you can immediately point at the people to whom they refer, a fact of which Sullivan seems entirely unaware – the scheming churchmen want Thrace, now semi-comatose from grief, for a Lost Heir figurehead, and sundry elves are, in an amazing and suggestive non sequitur, having a "congress of nations."

Theft of Swords is the kind of book that is so bad that it infects other perfectly innocent books with its badness. It is a screaming black hole of the very worst influences of Robert E. Howard and Fritz Leiber, mixed with naïve stereotypes, Dept. of Redundancy Dept. levels of word repetition, and prose that doesn't have much further to go before it plumbs the uttermost depths where the Eye of Argon dwells, down in the turgid, purple caverns of the deep. I finished it out of sheer disbelief at its badness, and my advice as a result is Don't follow my example.

If you see this book, run, do not walk, in the opposite direction. Your brain will thank you.

Liz Bourke is reading for a postgraduate degree in Classics at Trinity College, Dublin. In her spare time, she reviews for *Strange Horizons*, *Ideomancer*, *Vector* and Tor.com. Also at Tor.com, she writes the Sleeps with Monsters column, which focuses on women and genre. She blogs at <http://lizbourke.wordpress.com> and can be found on Twitter at @hawkwing_lb.

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http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2012/01/theft_of_swords.shtml

THE DROWNING GIRL: A MEMOIR (2012)

BY CAITLIN R. KIERNAN

Niall Alexander

India Morgan Phelps – Imp to everyone she and we come to care about over the course of *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* – is insane. Probably. Maybe. Possibly. But in any case "*there's crazy and then there are crazy people who believe in mermaids and werewolves and unicorns and fairies and shit*" [pg. 228], a decent distinction which, indecently, leaves Imp doubly damned, because she's a disorganised schizophrenic from a longish line of asylum attendees, tormented in the interim by lunatic visions of a spectre in the skin of a girl.

So what's her word worth? In all likelihood, not a lot. Perhaps nothing. Or else, equally, everything. Assuredly it's all we have to go on in the ninth novel from one of dark fantasy's most masterful artists. This is Imp's memoir, after all – her suggestively subjective account of certain incredible events – and though there are other characters sewn into the road of needles she takes, she is the author of each and every one; we only ever see them through her uncanny, meandering eye. Thus, the question is, was, will always be: is Imp's fly-by-night narration enough to unpick the enigmas within this eminently telling text?

The simple fact is, it isn't. But the truth is, it is.

Between these ideas, an initially bewildering hither and thither. A perpetual, oftentimes distressing tension between what is true and what is factual – to which I would append, in turn, what is false and what is fiction. As Imp cautions herself and by extension us in the early-going, "*there's no point doing this thing if all I can manage is a lie . . . Which is not to say every word will be factual. Only that every word will be true. Or as true as I can manage*" [pg. 6].

To wit, Caitlin R. Kiernan's latest and arguably, yes, her greatest, is rife with wrongness. With inconsistencies, reiterations, contradictions, omissions and not a few outright lies – and of course these are only the embellishments Imp herself confesses to in the text. Ultimately it falls to the reader to judge what other fabrications Imp may or may not have stitched into her curious quilt, and to determine too what the truth of the text is – if it is. To divine – as above, so below – what is true and what is factual, and differentiate falsity from fiction.

Certainly, as our sole narrator, Imp is utterly untrustworthy. She does not even trust herself – or so she says. But brilliantly, her

essential unreliability is as crucial an aspect of *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* as the titular presence herself: an impossible porcelain person. Which is to say a ghostly, glowing girl called Eva Canning, who appears before Imp in two borrowed forms – as a mermaid and a wolf-wife – on two separate and wholly incompatible occasions.

Mine's not a simple haunting, obviously. The sort you usually read about, or hear around a campfire. I didn't merely feel a sudden and inexplicable child in a dark room. I didn't wake to the sound of rattling chains or moaning. I was not shocked at an ectoplasmic woman drifting down a corridor. Those are only cartoons, caricatures or phantoms, invented by people who've never suffered (or been graced by) an actual, true, factual haunting. [pg. 44-5]

Again that distinction! Indeed, it positively permeates the text – a pernicious meme in miniature – from the unnerving impression of uncertainty overlaid upon every significant scene, every conversation and encounter with the uncanny, to the ambiguity inherent in Imp's justification of her written account and our reading of it, against her explicit assertions.

Dr. Ogilvy would probably tell me that I'm exhibiting 'avoidant behavior,' the way I'm going about writing this ghost story. But it's mine, isn't it? Yes, and so it's mine to tell however I wish. It's mine with which to tarry and stall and get to any particular point in my own sweet time. There is no Constant Reader to appease, only me and me alone. [pg. 33-4]

As to that: though Imp insists that she has in fact constructed this elaborate manuscript to exorcise her own demons—not, in other words, for any audience at all—in truth she goes to some lengths to excuse and explain and entertain herself, thus us. In the beginning she only muses: "It's a myth that crazy people don't know they're crazy. Many of us are surely as capable of epiphany and introspection as anyone else, maybe more so. I suspect we spend far more time thinking about our thoughts than do sane people" [p. 3]. In the end, however, as her formerly irresolvable hauntings begin to converge—to come together in one of dark fantasy's most grotesquely memorable sex scenes—she almost apologises: "I know now that my ghost story isn't the ghost story I thought it was, the one I set out to tell. My stories shape-shift like mermaids and werewolves. A lycanthropy of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, subjects and predicates, and so on and so forth" [pg. 288].

This, then, is a book of lies, yet there is truth to it, too. *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* is unquestionably Caitlin R. Kiernan's most ambitious long-form fiction to date, and its successes are multifarious, its failures truly few. I will say that the twofold conclusion the

esteemed author eventually arrives at feels unfortunately hastened, but this doesn't subtract dramatically from the inexorable impact of *The End*, and again, "*you really have no notion how delightful it will be, was, at the inevitable convergence of those two roads full sail*" [p. 214]. Kiernan's prose is in the interim as precise and appealing as ever, if a little less aesthetically poetic by dint of Imp's disorder (or discordant order). Similarly, her capricious characters ring true from their tailbones to their tippy-toes, and however far-fetched it is in fact, there is nothing false about this fiction.

Niall Alexander reviews speculative fiction of various shapes and sizes – whether in film, literature, video games, or comics – honestly, the lot – for a number of genre-oriented resources, including *Tor.com*, *Starburst Magazine*, and *Strange Horizons*. Failing all of the above, as is the case most days, he'll happily bend your ear over at his own blog, *The Speculative Scotsman*.

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http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2012/05/the_drowning_gi.shtml

THE FEY AND THE FALLEN (2011) BY STINA LEICHT

Martin McGrath

I want to start this post by saying plainly that I believe that it is possible for writers to create important and insightful work about cultures to which they do not belong. There is a somewhat crude (but, it seems to me, increasingly common) form of postcolonial criticism – often proceeding from a partial, or second-hand, understanding of the work of Edward Said – which argues that this is not the case. At its most strongly stated, this position dismisses all use of “exotic” (usually third world) cultures and locations by “privileged” (usually first world) authors as straightforward cultural appropriation, simply reproducing and reinforcing power dynamics that were set in place by European imperialism. This can lead to the belief that the “right” to write about specific cultures, particularly marginalised or oppressed communities, belongs only to those from within that culture.¹

In disagreeing with the crudest form of this argument I don’t want to deny Said’s basic point: culture played and continues to play a key role in reinforcing the position of the powerful in relation to those they seek to dominate. Nor would I want to underplay the threat posed to marginalised groups by cultural appropriation. But, like Said, I believe that there are dangers in oversimplifying this issue.

In *Culture and Imperialism (C&I)*, Said reflects upon the debates

1 The definition of culture here is, for me, complicated. What “culture” is mine? How is my “ownership” of a culture proscribed by geographical, ethnic, social or temporal boundaries and how do I prove my “rights” to that culture? How far, for example, does my “Irishness” give me the right to write about those who have radically different histories within Ireland? There are obvious potential limits to my experiences – I can only speculate about the different perspectives that are afforded with different genders or ethnicities. In the deeply divided culture of Northern Ireland, how valid are my speculations about a Protestant (I’m Catholic) character even if we share many characteristics? And cultures are rapidly evolving things – I would similarly be speculating, for example, if I tried to write about someone whose character was formed in generations outside my own. The Northern Ireland I grew up in was radically different from the one my parents’ generation knew and it has changed even further for those who grow up in Northern Ireland today. I know the history but it is not my experience. I can get angry or upset when I read about what was done in the past but these sympathetic emotions are not the same as those that surface when I recall what happened to me and my friends. I am sceptical, therefore, about those who claim that they possess some unique signifiers that allows them to speak authoritatively for large groups of people who they describe as belonging to “their” culture.

started by his most famous work, *Orientalism* (O). He uses this opportunity to forcefully reject the lessons that some readers had taken from *Orientalism* – in particular that artists should be exclusively concerned with the parochial or that cultures should be fenced in for the exclusive use of just one group. “I have no patience with the position that ‘we’ should only or mainly be concerned with what is ‘ours’ any more than I can condone reactions to such a view that requires Arabs to read Arab books, use Arab methods, and the like” [C&I xxviii]. Nor was Said simply dismissive of those works that carried the taint of cultural appropriation. Even when he explains how works like Kipling’s *Kim* or Conrad’s *Nostromo* carry within them the assumptions and power relations of Western hegemony, Said continues to regard them as “estimable and admirable works of art and learning, in which I and many other readers take pleasure and from which we derive profit” [C&I xv]. The temptation to dismiss any attempt to reach across cultural boundaries in literature leads towards an isolationism that Said explicitly rejects: “the narratives of emancipation and enlightenment in their strongest form were also narratives of integration not separation” [C&I xxx – Said’s emphasis].

It is also important to avoid the nativist fallacy. Taking as an example the increasingly metaphysical later writings of WB Yeats, Said argues against the idea that the native possesses some essential qualities that mark them as the bearers of special insight, of being in mystical commune with nature and the “truth” of their land. Nativism is a trap – far from providing escape from imperial rule it has, too often, simply reconstituted divisions along the lines of narrowly defined differences created under imperialism. Thus nativism has reinforced “pathologies of power” that block genuine progress towards liberation. There are powerful reasons for seeking to get beyond these “nativist identities” and:

...not remaining trapped in the emotional self-indulgence of celebrating one’s own identity. There is first of all the possibility of discovering a world not constructed out of warring essences. Second, there is the possibility of universalism that is not limited or coercive, which believing that all people have only one single identity is – that all the Irish are only Irish, Indians Indians, Africans Africans, and so on ad nauseum. Third, and most important, moving beyond nativism does not mean abandoning nationality, but it does mean thinking of local identity as not exclusive, and therefore not being anxious to confine oneself to one’s own sphere, with its ceremonies of belonging, its built-in chauvinism, and its limiting sense of security. [C&I 277]

Said, then, while offering a ways to understand how literature

is embedded within and contributes to discourses of power was not advocating the ever finer dicing of art into discrete sections each of which belong only to those possessing the “genuine” right to their expression. When Said came to write an afterword to *Orientalism* in 1995 (twenty years after its original publication) he said the book was “meant to be a study in critique, not an affirmation of warring and hopelessly antithetical identities” [O 340].

The point of this discursive introduction is to make clear that the criticism I’m about to heap on Stina Leicht’s books is not due to my believing that she, as an American, is intrinsically incapable of writing convincingly or with insight about Northern Ireland or that all such works are inevitably doomed to fail. Like Said, I believe that there is “a profound difference between the will to understand for the purposes for co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion” [O x]. Leicht’s intentions are clearly not linked to attempts to dominate, but just because it is possible to write well about cultures outside one’s own does not mean that it is easy. And good intentions are no defence from criticism when an author makes a balls of things.

Leicht’s books are “urban fantasy” set in Northern Ireland during the 1970s amidst the early days of “The Troubles”. Their protagonist is Liam Kelly, a young Catholic from Derry to whom a great deal of shit happens. *Of Blood and Honey* covers the period from 1971 to 1977 – in that time Liam (amongst other things) gets interned in the Long Kesh, gets raped, discovers that he is a shapechanger, joins the IRA, gets imprisoned (again), learns to drive, discovers he’s the best driver ever, drives the getaway car in IRA bank robberies, kills an RUC officer, gets married, discovers that his long absent father is actually a member of an ancient Irish race of “fey” warriors², discovers that there are demons (fallen angels) on Earth, discovers that his local priest is a demon hunter, discovers that his pregnant wife has been raped, murdered and mutilated, discovers that his wife

2 Leicht’s representation of Liam matches, rather unfortunately, many of the points made at the end of this post by Aliette de Bodard (<http://aliettedebodard.com/2012/05/08/sff-as-metaphor-aliens-vampires-foreigners-and-immigrants/>) where she sets out how fantasy often makes a terrible hash of the representation of people from “mixed-race” backgrounds. Liam has both the mental health problems and the neatly defined cultural characteristics that de Bodard identifies as both typical of fantasy’s portrayal of people of mixed-race and as deeply problematic. Indeed Leicht states that mental health problems and a tendency to commit suicides are fundamental to people like Liam.

and the priest had connived in the abortion of an earlier child and a whole heap of other stuff. It's hectic, and it all happens in less than 300 pages that are made even more breathless by the fact that Leicht's protagonist is often on the edge of hysterics. The second book, *And Blue Skies from Pain*, covers a shorter period, about a year following almost directly from the end of the first novel, and moves at a slightly slower pace over a slightly longer page count – it encompasses Liam's confinement by Milites Dei, an order of demon hunting priests, a battle with the ghost of a dead policeman, Liam's pursuit and capture by his former colleagues in the IRA, his struggle to come to terms with his "true nature" and a showdown with demons.

My problems with the Fey and The Fallen books (as the series refers to itself) start with some minor issues of detail that reveal Leicht's lack of insight into the setting of her story, but they quickly developed into more serious issues with her portrayal of the politics and people of Northern Ireland.

Let me start with the more minor stuff.

Leicht's writing is scattered with distracting Americanisms, autumn becomes fall, someone drives a block in Belfast and cars skid on pavement and people walk on sidewalks (what the Americans call pavement we'd call tarmac, and we call pavement they call sidewalk) [OBAH 134]. And it isn't just the choice of words, there are moments when she transplants American habits across the Atlantic to jarring effect. There is, for example, a long scene where a group of working class Irish men are sitting around having coffee and donuts for breakfast. Try as I might, I couldn't imagine my dad and the men he worked with sitting down to coffee and donuts for breakfast – if it wasn't fried in lard, they didn't eat it.³ Leicht replaces the word donut with the local idiom "gravy ring" [ABSFP chpts 22&23] but that only serves to make the whole sequence seem even more anachronistic. Then there's the moment when Liam's wife complains that she can't visit the doctor because "We don't have enough money" [OBAH 87] – which given that Northern Ireland is served by the National Health Service (the greatest of British institutions – credit where it's due) and free at the point of delivery, is just wrong. Someone talks about a father doing well enough to put two kids through university [ABSFP 152], but in Northern Ireland this was the era

3 Actually breakfasts bothered me throughout both books – they're a bit of a recurring theme and yet The Ulster Fry is (as far as I can remember) completely absent. Writing about life in 1970s Nor'n Ir'n and not mentioning soda bread, potato bread, a bit of sausage, bacon and a good fried egg seems perverse. When things were bad The Ulster Fry was often the only thing that was worth getting out of bed for. It is also our single great contribution to the world of cuisine.

of full student grants (another British scheme) and the barriers to people going to university were primarily cultural and not financial. And there's someone suggesting that they should play the card game "Go Fish" [ABSFP 262] – an American game that I had to look up on Wikipedia to find out what Leicht was talking about. These are all things that would seem perfectly normal in an American setting but, I think, must feel gratingly wrong to anyone who actually knows Northern Ireland.

Many of these problems could probably have been avoided by some judicious and informed editing and no doubt most of the audience, those not familiar with Northern Ireland, won't even notice that these things are out of place, but they are indicative of a wider failure with Leicht's writing. She just doesn't understand the place and people she's writing about.

Leicht has no ear for how the Northern Irish speak and her dialogue, even when it isn't horribly packed with infodumping,⁴ can clang dreadfully. There are problems with word choices⁵ but her writing is at its worst when she slips into an attempt to approximate the Northern Irish accent and delivers a Yoda-ish jumble that might have come from an old John Wayne movie (to be sure, to be sure)

4 This is one of my favourites: "Queen Mary's father was King Henry the Eighth. The one who established the Church of England. The Pope excommunicated him for divorcing Mary's mother. Henry killed English Catholics who wouldn't convert. Mary didn't agree with her father. So it was when Mary eventually became Queen long after her father's death she abolished the Church of England. Burned three hundred Protestants for heretics, Father Murray said. It was then that the hatred between Catholics and Protestants was born." [OBAH 56] How's that for a history of the reformation in England in 77 words!? It isn't just that this is a ludicrously simplistic version of history (though it is) or even that it's a horrible piece of dialogue (who, except maybe a university lecturer or a museum guide in a hurry, would talk like that?) but, worst of all, it isn't relevant to anything that actually happens in the novel. And there's tonnes of this stuff littering both books.

5 Like the frequent use of the word "mate" in ABSFP, a usage which strikes me as a peculiarly English. It certainly isn't a word I used until I moved to England, I think. Another example is the way people in the books refer to the British Army as the BA... every time I read this I thought of a large black man with too much jewellery and an aversion to flying in planes. This bothered me (not the image of Mr Baracus) because Leicht uses the acronym with such confidence that I assume she's got it from some book she's read, but I asked friends and I searched the Internet and I couldn't find anyone who referred to "the Brits" as the BA, indeed everyone I mentioned it to just laughed and mentioned the A-Team. And yet, Leicht is so confident...

and can't be read with a straight face.

"It's the man of the house, you are. And I'll not shame you."
[OBAH 53]

"Suffered you have. Made great sacrifices for the cause." [ABSFP
136]

Transcribing idiomatic speech with strong accents is a tricky job, so, for the most part, Leicht's decision to avoid this difficult task is understandable (especially since she's so bad at it) but it comes with a price. Accents are important in Northern Ireland – they're one of the key ways people identify where they stand in relation to one and other, which is crucial when a misplaced word could have serious consequences. But, in these books, everyone speaks the same whether they are from Dublin⁶ or Cork or Derry or Belfast. To an outsider, it might seem entirely plausible that Leicht has her protagonist Liam change his name to Billy and seek to escape his past by moving in with Protestants in Ballymena. The two towns are less than 50 miles apart, you can drive from one to the other in about an hour. But, ignoring, for the moment, the fact that the differences between people from the two communities in Northern Ireland are not stripped away simply by changing your name, Liam's accent would have marked him out as someone from predominantly Catholic Derry, which would have immediately aroused suspicion in predominantly Protestant Ballymena⁷ and, suspicions aroused, dozens of other things would have allowed the people he met to see through

6 At one point Leicht has a Dubliner react to a moment of crisis like this: "Bobby's English was long gone as well as his proper Irish, and he rattled off a long series of swear words in Gaelige Gaeilge" [OBAH 155]. I think this is a revealing moment in its wrongness. Bobby is a Dubliner – at least we're told he is the brother of Oran, who is definitely from Dublin – and the number of native Irish speakers born in fifties Dublin must be pretty bloody small. Yet, in this crisis, "the native" emerges as though deep inside all true Irishmen rests the spirit of the hidden Gael only waiting to burst forth. It's nonsense.

7 The people of Ballymena (God bless them) are burdened with an accent that makes the rest of Ireland wince – it's amongst the most distinctive (and annoying) on the island. Listen to these brave fellas from Ballymena: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3h54t7JrMQ> and then this girl, from Derry: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-16686119>.

To someone from the North these accents don't just immediately identify where you are from but begin to narrow down your class, your religion and more-or-less everything you need to know about what it is safe to talk about.

his lies.⁸

The problems don't stop with Leicht's use of language. The novels also lack any sense of place. Derry and Belfast, where most of the action takes place, are barely described and feel interchangeable but they're two cities with very different characters. Lots of Derry is built on hilly ground and with the medieval walls looking over the Bogside and encircling the city centre and the hilly surrounding countryside it has always felt, to me, like a place that's crowded and looking in on itself. Belfast is a flatter, more open city with, in places, a battered Victorian grandeur. At the same time, with the Black Mountain looming over it, Belfast has always struck me as a gloomier place. Leicht has nothing to say about how these places look and feel because it is obvious that she doesn't know them and has made no real effort to understand them. The result is a pair of novels in which characters appear to move around against blank canvases, street names appear occasionally but there's no sense of a solid place behind them.

So there are problems of detail in Leicht's writing, but the real difficulties for me were in the way she portrays the people and politics of Northern Ireland, specifically the way in which she (fails) to represent the Protestant/loyalist community, her representation of the British and her portrayal of nationalism. I'll deal with these in turn.

The representation of loyalists

At the start of *The Troubles* some two thirds of the population of Northern Ireland did not identify themselves as Catholic. You'd be hard pressed to tell that from Leicht's books. There's the occasional reference to Liam's Protestant uncle, there are some policemen (members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary – RUC) who get to rush around shouting “Taig” and “Fenian”, there's a gang of inexplicably

8 There's an interesting passage early in *And Blue Skies From Pain* where Liam meets some strangers, border smugglers, and tries to work out what religion they are. Leicht gets close to the way people in Northern Ireland sought to sound each other out, to identify religion and, therefore, their relationship to each other. But the good work in the passage is rather ruined when, for no logical reason (other than to inject an element of drama into the scene, presumably), Liam decides to blurt out his “true identity”. There's a cheery little song written by Colum Sands that goes “whatever you say, say nothing when you talk about you know what, for you know if you know who should hear you, you know what you'll get” that neatly encapsulates the more-than-a-little-paranoiac way Northern Irish people approach talking to strangers. Leicht's Liam wouldn't have made it to adulthood if he'd actually gone around blabbering like that.

murderous Protestant smugglers who appear briefly at the start of the second book and there's a Protestant punk⁹ who hosts a party Liam attends and says, I think, one sentence. And that, as far as I recall, is it.

It's not an impressive showing and it is problematic because by excluding this part of the population of Ireland from her novels, Leicht is (consciously or otherwise) saying something about their status. The Catholics have their "fey" – the true spirits of Ireland – who are plugging away on their behalf, they have the church¹⁰ with its cool kung fu nuns and kick-ass priests, they have their mystical native powers and they have their injustices shown and their "cause" constantly justified. They have a monopoly on suffering and their pain is given a face and we are given reason to empathise with them. The Protestants get none of this. So, in Leicht's book, even when she is protesting that the violence is terrible and everyone is just the same, Protestants are absent. And what, it seems to me, Leicht is saying (consciously or otherwise) about the status of Protestants by excluding them from any serious focus in her book is that they do not really belong in the Ireland she is creating. The peace process, for all its flaws, is built on the understanding that Northern Ireland's future hopes of peace, security and prosperity rest on the two communities recognising that neither has an exclusive claim to the history, the culture and the future of the Province. It's a shame none of this understanding makes it into Leicht's books.

Now I grew up a Catholic on a Housing Executive¹¹ estate in Northern Ireland and my sympathies are instinctively nationalist. As such Leicht might expect someone like me to be broadly supportive of the way she portrays Northern Ireland, it plays to some pretty deeply founded prejudices that I grew up accepting without question. But, in fact, I found the absence of any genuine empathy for the other side of the community deeply uncomfortable. I expect actual

9 It is possible that, despite all the other stuff I'm talking about here, the thing that annoys me most about Leicht's book is the way she takes punk culture, which at its inception in Northern Ireland was resolutely working class and occupied the hollowed out heart of Belfast when almost no one else went there at night, and turns it into a horrendous frat party with University students lolling about in some rich fops large suburban house. And they all talk like hippies. Bah!

10 Apparently Protestant clergy don't fight demons, only Catholics. It's a shame, because Reverend Ian Paisley: Demon Slayer is surely a better and more exciting idea for a movie than Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter.

11 The British governments couldn't trust the gerrymandered councils to treat housing fairly, so Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that didn't have council housing estates.

Ulster Protestants reading these books – especially those who have lost friends and family – would, justifiably, be enraged. Perhaps the most insensitive and disturbing example of Leicht’s treatment of Protestants is the way she absolves her hero of the murder of a RUC officer. Liam’s wife, Mary Kate, tells him:

I know. About the constable. It’s all over the papers. The radio. The telly. I don’t care. Sooner or later it was going to come to killing... You only did what you had to do. That constable had to have known. He’d have felt the same, were it you and not him.
[OBAH 144]

And then, for several pages, Liam gives his confession to a priest (an IRA “chaplain”) who is only too keen to grant absolution:

According to the Church, there is such a thing as a justified war... In order for there to be peace, sometimes someone must make a stand for those who can’t stand for themselves. Negotiation is the first moral option, of course. So, we attempt time and again. But the British are never serious about negotiations. They’ve demonstrated that. It’s on their heads. [OBAH 149]

I wouldn’t deny that there were people in Northern Ireland who justified the actions of IRA volunteers in these terms and who would remain sympathetic to this viewpoint even today. However, I believe, there is something deeply problematic in their use in this work of fiction. This is the only perspective we have on the meaning of this act of violence. The policeman is just an empty space. Mary Kate may encourage Liam to put aside his worries because killing was bound to happen “sooner or later” but the death of the RUC officer is treated differently from the deaths of Catholics in the book. The death of Mary Kate and, later, Liam’s friend Oran, have repercussions throughout the two volumes – they literally haunt Liam. And yet, once absolved of his sins, Liam never returns to the death of the RUC officer in the same way.

It is not my purpose here to defend or justify what the RUC sometimes did¹² and I had enough personal experience of them to know that they could be right bastards. But my concern is the fact that there are no consequences to this death – or any human face given to the suffering of the entire Protestant community anywhere in Leicht’s books – and this results in a portrait of Northern Ireland that is dangerously skewed. I understand why Leicht seeks to wash away the sins of her protagonist, she needs her character to be the

¹² The RUC and the UDR both did horrible things – as the Stevens Inquiries uncovered – rather than keeping the peace and enforcing the law in a fair and balanced way, they frequently acted as adjuncts to the Loyalist terrorist groups. Indeed, often enough, they were the Loyalist paramilitaries.

hero of her story. That, however, doesn't change the fact that the result of her selective presentation of history and the absence in her story of an alternative viewpoint means that her Northern Ireland is as one-dimensional, sentimental and misleading as a Republican rebel song.

The Representation of the British

Leicht doesn't convincingly convey the operations of British military forces in Northern Ireland. There are lots of specific details she gets wrong¹³ but these are, again, incidental to the bigger problem of the way they she represents this group of people.

My experience of the British Army in Northern Ireland was mixed. You sometimes met soldiers who did their job with as much decency as the circumstances allowed, but then again there were also those who did terrible things and then there were some who were just arseholes, like the drunken patrol who took great pleasure in taking turns pissing down the leg of my trousers late on Boxing Day in 1986. In that there were good and bad amongst them they were pretty much like any group of young men set loose in a foreign land, except, instead of lager and an insufficient supply of sunscreen, they came with helicopters, armoured cars and big guns. With Leicht's books, however, there is no light and shade and there is no realistic representation of the experiences of the British soldier on Northern Irish streets. For the most part the British security services are simply monsters – often literally demonic.

There's the cruel prison governor who takes sadistic pleasure in raping Liam [OBAH 19-20], there are demon British soldiers who provide cannon fodder for the big shootout [ABSFP 315], there's the demon Redcap – who takes the form of a paratrooper (they wear red berets, geddit?) in Derry during Bloody Sunday and who rapes and slaughters Liam's wife and rips their unborn child from her belly, and then there's Detective Inspector Haddock – who Leicht calls an MI5 officer [OBAH 239 – I think she probably means Special Branch] – who is a preposterous caricature of a villain who becomes

13 My favourite is the moment when she has a character ask a soldier: "Aren't our papers in order?" [OBAH 130]. This sounds good, it sounds like the sort of thing people say in movies all the time, but it is also nonsense. There were no identity papers in Northern Ireland. He might have handed his driving licence over to the police if he were stopped when driving a car, but there were no "papers". There are other details, like small groups of police or soldiers (even individuals) wandering around Catholic areas without support or describing soldiers as moving in "clusters", that are minor mistakes that reveal a lack of familiarity with her subject matter.

a malignant spirit haunting and attempting to murder Liam.

This dehumanisation of the British in Leicht's books, like the absence of Protestants, contributes to a one dimensional view of the politics and history of Northern Ireland.¹⁴ Even as a teenager, even while those British soldiers were ruining my suede shoes¹⁵ with their urine (well, perhaps a little later), I was aware that some of them were barely older than I was and that (despite being the ones with the big rifles and machineguns) they were in a frightening position too. Who knows why they were behaving as they did: perhaps they were acting in response to their training by the Army; perhaps they were pissed off that they had to spend Christmas in a shitty barracks in Northern Ireland; perhaps their friends had been killed; or perhaps they were just dickheads. Whatever, they had their motivations and to reduce them to beasts and monsters, as Leicht does, seems a serious distortion and gross simplification.

Representation of Nationalists

The IRA plays a very big role in Leicht's books. Liam joins the IRA when he is interned in the Long Kesh (apparently every male member of his wife's family is also a volunteer, though she isn't – it isn't clear why because she is plainly sympathetic and plenty of women were volunteers) and most of Liam's friends and acquaintances are also in "The 'Ra". Though Liam comes to regret his membership and attempts to escape from it, there are significant ways in which the "cause" of the IRA is reinforced by the choices Leicht makes. While some members of the IRA are represented as "bad guys" – though I think it is significant that in each case they are acting under the control of others (the evil British policeman Haddock in OBAH and a demi-demon in ABSFP) – there are things that are missing from the book that lead to a skewed picture of nationalism.

The only time that the IRA are shown interacting with the wider Catholic community is (in a scene that must surely rank as one of the most inane examples of a metaphor literally applied in any book I've ever read) when Liam and Oran go to mend an old woman's fence that was knocked down by some other IRA men.¹⁶

14 Of course there were plenty of awful things done by the British forces – from beatings and torture to mass murder on Bloody Sunday, collusion with Loyalist terrorists and "shoot-to-kill" (the deliberate and cold-blooded assassination of suspects and a perversion of the rule of law). Innocent people died at their hands.

15 It was the 1980s, let us not talk of fashion.

16 There's also some other nonsense about the IRA not stealing cars from Catholics.

This leads me to suspect that Leicht is either being deliberately disingenuous or is ignorant of the price the IRA extracted from the community they claimed to be protecting.

There is nothing in either of the Fey and the Fallen books that reflects the fact that Catholics were murdered and suffered “punishment beatings”¹⁷ or that people were driven from their homes and forced into exile by their “protectors” who were content to use extreme violence to establish and maintain control over their own community. From the earliest days of The Troubles, the IRA, and other republican groups, appointed themselves judge, jury and, too often, executioner in the Catholic community. People were attacked for falling in love with the wrong person, for taking jobs in the wrong place, for appearing too friendly with the Army and for having been accused (proof wasn’t necessary) of petty crime. The terror that the IRA inflicted on its own community is entirely absent in Leicht’s Northern Ireland.¹⁸ During The Troubles Republican terrorists killed more people in their own, Catholic, community than the British security forces. For every ten Catholics killed by loyalist paramilitaries, the Republicans killed six. From 1976 to 1990 more Catholics were killed by Republican paramilitaries than Loyalist groups. One in three of all Catholics who died during The Troubles were killed by groups who claimed to be defending them – and most of those were civilians, not other paramilitaries killed in the various feuds. There is not the slightest inkling of any this in The Fey and The Fallen.

Nor is there any mention of the economic costs the IRA imposed on their own community. The IRA didn’t just indulge in the kind of knockabout bank robberies that Leicht describes, they leached off the community, demanding protection money and they’d burn out (or worse) businesses that defied them. They made hard times (Northern Ireland was for many decades the poorest part of the UK) even worse.

Nor does Leicht allow any significant space to other forms of nationalism – the Official IRA (later The Workers’ Party), who pursued a Marxist-inspired, anti-sectarian agenda, get a brief mention but the Social Democratic and Labour Party and its form of more moderate nationalism is almost entirely absent.¹⁹ Yet it was the SDLP, not the IRA or Sinn Fein, that formed the most important thread of

17 A euphemism that covered many sins, not least the favourite: blasting away of the kneecaps to leave people permanently crippled.

18 And this vigilantism is not dead – thugs are still shooting and beating and killing and using Republicanism as a cover for their criminality.

19 Bernadette Devlin does get a passing mention.

nationalism in the Civil Rights struggle which forms the backdrop to the early parts of Leicht's first novel and it remained, by some distance, the most widely supported form of nationalism amongst Catholics throughout The Troubles. The SDLP was only surpassed by Sinn Fein after the peace process became established. Leicht seems to assume that every Catholic automatically accepts the basic principles of "the cause" – for example that they support the struggle for a united Ireland. But research shows that attitudes were always more fragmented, with only just over half of Catholics supporting unification even during The Troubles – and since the peace process support has fallen further. There has even always been a small fraction of Catholics who have been staunchly unionist.

Once again the effect of Leicht's decisions is to simplify Northern Irish politics and history. This is understandable. She is telling a story to people who aren't au fait with the history of the province. The problem is that this comes at the cost of seriously distorting the truth. Her image of nationalism is as one-dimensional as her portrayal of Loyalists or the British and all of it combines to create an image of The Troubles that suits her storytelling but does a serious injustice to the suffering experienced by real people on all sides in the community.

The obvious question is: does any of this really matter? After all, these are just fantasy novels. Leicht herself, in an interview, admits that she's not an expert on Irish history and says: "I am a fantasy writer and as much as I love historical fiction, I never really intended to be an historical fiction writer and I never really intended the story to stay in the politics one hundred per cent like it does in the beginning." If she wasn't interested in writing a book that is fundamentally grounded in politics then, I'd have to suggest, she might have made a mistake in choosing Northern Ireland as the setting and The Troubles as the subject of so much her story. Leicht goes on to describe a book as being like a buying a ticket for a Disney theme park ride that lets you experience someone else's life and be in a different place.²⁰ And this, I think, is the core of my problem with *The Fey* and *The Fallen*. It's all just a theme park ride, and Northern Ireland is just scenery employed to enhance the thrills and spills and fun. She doesn't really have anything serious to say, so why worry if her rollercoaster ride results in a twisted and distorted view of history?

The fact that I've just written this lengthy (apologies if you've got this far – stay for the footnotes, there's jokes!) screed probably gives away the fact that I think it does matter that these books

²⁰ There may be more, I was too busy shouting at the computer from this point to listen further.

are simplistic and ill-informed. This is not dead history – little in Northern Ireland’s past truly is – and Northern Ireland continues to be bedevilled by people who want to offer easy answers to difficult questions. The great struggle is to get people to come to terms with the fact that the things that divide them cannot be wished away, that no one possesses a monopoly on suffering and that both communities have valid claims to respect for their cultures and traditions. We have to live with the reality of our histories, not the fairytales we too often tell ourselves, if we are going to move on. I dislike the way Leicht romanticises one group, excludes another and dehumanises a third and it bothers me that the collective impact of these decisions drives her narrative towards the dangerous simplicity of “good versus evil” – the monsters are all on one side, after all, and the good guys are all on the other. And it is worse when she drifts into the kind of naive nativism that [edit: no "right-thinking" person] would accept if she were an outsider writing about, for example, Native American or Black African cultures.

The Americans have a long history of romanticising the Irish in the crudest of fashions. Leicht avoids the worst extremes, this isn’t a book that indulges in the simplistic Republicanism of those who sing rebel songs, witter on about “the ould country” and fill the buckets with cash “for the cause”. Her heart, I’m sure, is in the right place and she hasn’t set out to write a book that is offensive. Nevertheless, her lack of understanding, her playing with the politics and her clumsy characterisation combine to create a pair of books that are deeply unsatisfying and thoroughly problematic.

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<http://www.mmcgrath.co.uk/?p=2210>

THE TESTAMENT OF JESSIE LAMB (2011)

BY JANE ROGERS

Maureen Kincaid Speller

There are several ways to read Jane Rogers' *The Testament of Jessie Lamb*. One is to consider it as a not-overly-thought-through near-future science fiction novel. It is based on a rather vague premise about a virus which produces an effect similar to CJD, but only in women, and only if they become pregnant: Maternal Death Syndrome. The child may survive but the mother will die. The virus seems to have been released at airports, thus ensuring maximum distribution across the world, and women die in massive numbers. There is no escape. Who caused it, no one seems to know, nor why in particular at this time. And these are questions which are not answered. Most of this happens off the page; the only real indication of its full extent comes in the mention at the beginning of the novel of a mass funeral at York Minster and the huge traffic jams this causes, and later in talk of memorials. There are other hints: a scene in a charity shop when Jessie disposes of some of her possessions is especially telling – the shop is already full of containers of women's clothes that no one wants to keep or to buy.

However, what Rogers does not do, except in the broadest, vaguest way, is to give any indication of how this affects daily life at the most practical levels. For example, what happens to the economy when a large part of the workforce isn't there any more, and another significant chunk of the workforce has to suddenly consider childcare? Somehow the world seems to continue much as normal, yet the last pre-2012 fuel crisis showed how close to the edge this country habitually teeters. As one or two commentators have noted, this novel seems to fit into an older model of science fiction – John Wyndham would be an excellent example – which relies less on hyper-accurate, heavily researched detail about what would happen if, and more on creating a certain kind of mood.

For example, close to the beginning of the novel, Jessie and her friend Sal are talking about the impact of MDS for the population, coming to a realisation that the world they are familiar with is probably going to end soon.

We thought about our houses slowly falling to bits, the doors blowing open, the roofs caving in, birds and animals nesting there. 'Some other species will dominate,' said Sal, and we began to argue about what it might be. All the animals in zoos etc would have to be

let out before the last people died. Which would probably kill off a few more of us even sooner. And those animals that could adapt to life in their new territory might take over. There might be wolves again in England, and bears. Tigers might live off untended herds of cows. Tree branches would spread out over roads, and hedges would grow huge and wild, and weeds burst through the tarmac. After a hundred years the world would be one great nature reserve, with all the threatened species breeding again, and great shoals of cod in the sea, eagles nesting in old church spires. It made me think of the garden of Eden, how it was supposed to be beautiful before Adam and Even messed things up. [pg. 9]

Wyndham, to the best of my recollection, never actively considered the zoos but this excerpt reminds me sharply of the latter parts of *The Day of the Triffids*, when Masen returns to London for provisions, which in turn seems to draw heavily on Richard Jeffries' *After London*. This similarity to Triffids and its ilk is not coincidental, I think. Wyndham and Rogers are less concerned with the 'how did this happen?' and far more preoccupied with 'how do we manage now it has happened?' And by 'manage' I mean on an emotional level rather than the nuts and bolts of day-to-day survival.

Rogers' refusal to engage with 'how did this happen' is helped by her choice of protagonist, Jessie Lamb, sixteen years old, and as self-absorbed as any sixteen-year-old trying to figure out how the world works. To begin with, MDS doesn't really figure in Jessie's life except as a traffic jam. Only later does it begin to acquire a name and a face: a girl at school, a friend's aunt, and then personal significance when Jessie, along with all the other girls, receives a compulsory contraceptive implant at school. Events elsewhere are filtered through Jessie's consciousness, what she sees on tv, hears from other people; the picture is fragmentary because it doesn't impinge on Jessie herself.

But as the crisis continues, Jessie becomes more and more aware of how MDS will change her life. On the one hand, what is the point of continuing with things like GCSE exams? On the other, she and her friends experience a growing sense of impatience. Why isn't anyone doing anything? They blame the adults and decide they must take action themselves, but in what way? At the behest of her friend Baz, Jessie attends a meeting where young people are trying to decide what it is they want to do, and incidentally, who to blame. There are any number of scapegoats available, from climate change deniers to research scientists, and any number of strategies. One girl wants to set up centres for motherless children, run by the children themselves, without interference from adults. Others want to promote a greener lifestyle, by force if necessary. Still others want

to take the campaign to the scientists, Animal Liberation Front-style. For her own part, Jessie is convinced of the need to punish 'old people' for what they've done, but her perception of who is to blame is no clearer than that.

Jessie's journey through this confused post-MDS landscape might be an allegory for the teenage experience generally, of being half-child, half-adult, expected to make decisions then criticised for doing so. It could also be related to the journey that Bill Masen makes across England, moving from community to community, searching for Josella, but also testing and discarding any number of models for living in the world shaped by Triffids.

Jessie's understanding of what she needs to do comes gradually, influenced by a number of things. First, there is the experience of her mercurial aunt, Mandy, recently dumped by her partner, is desperate for a child of her own, about to undergo fertility treatment until it is cancelled by the MDS crisis. Later, Mandy becomes involved with the Noahs, a new religious group who, as their name implies, are trying to preserve something of the present to take into the future, but they reject her as a potential mother because she is too old. Jessie's friend, Sal, is raped by a group of her boyfriend's friends, and Jessie herself is spat at, threatened and robbed by a group of boys. Young women are suddenly expendable in the eyes of young men, and treated accordingly.

At the same time, young women are intensely valuable as a commodity, it having been discovered that so long as they are kept sedated and on life-support, babies can be brought to term. These are the Sleeping Beauties. People are very excited by this possibility of continuing the human race, not least as it buys time to do the research to counter MDS, but already different groups are in contention, for research, against it, pro-Sleeping Beauties, against them. A woman's body is once again a battleground, and for Jessie this is to become all too personal when she makes the decision to volunteer to become a Sleeping Beauty herself, prompted by her aunt's experiences in part but also, it seems, by her sense of what is likely to happen to her in the world as it changes. To become a Sleeping Beauty – and this is quite explicit if one actually thinks back to the fairy tale – is to be protected, not by a hedge of thorns but by the laboratory. One might counter that with thoughts of *Brave New World* but from Jessie's point of view, the decision is not as bizarre as it might at first appear. More disturbing undoubtedly is the response of Jessie's parents, who imprison their daughter – another version of the Sleeping Beauty story, if you like – in the hope they can persuade her to change her mind. Most of Jessie's testament is written while she is imprisoned; most of the rest of it while she is awaiting the implantation of the

fertilised egg.

We are meant to understand Jessie's decision as being one that is taken freely, an adult decision made with the full understanding of what it involves, and it would be wrong to try in any way to undermine Jessie's own perception of what she is doing. Nonetheless, Rogers does an excellent job of showing the vested interests that mass around her, from the creepy Iain, from the youth movement she was involved with, using her to promote the cause, which is itself in part a front for his own predatory activities. Her parents' refusal to accept her decision represents a denial of their daughter's having reached adulthood, no matter how much it is couched with scientific explanations from her father, who works in a research lab. Rosa, another girl about to become a Sleeping Beauty, is obsessed with the notion that in this way she will find love and celebrity at last, although she will not be there to experience it. Lurking behind that is the less well articulated but all the more disturbing assumption that the human race must persist, come what may, and that any means is acceptable in order to ensure its survival. Inevitably, this will be the burden that women bear (and one can already imagine a scenario in which it is discovered that men can safely carry babies to term and themselves survive; what then for women?).

Yet, I remain in two minds about this novel. It is, as I've noted, representative of a certain kind of science fiction, and done rather well, though I don't think it is especially innovative. But there is something slightly odd about it that I cannot quite pin down from just one reading. I've been watching Dominic Sandbrook's tv series about the 1970s, the decade in which I turned from a teenager into an adult, matching my fragmentary perceptions of it against Sandbrook's admittedly sketchy account. I am reminded on the one hand that Rogers catches that sense of uncertainty very well, evoking the internal and the external anxieties of being a teenager. But at the same time, assuming we take the 1970s to stretch into the early 1980s, far enough to embrace the beginnings of the Greenham Common Peace Camp and a new iteration of the women's movement, as well as the sudden awareness of AIDS. I can't help feeling that Rogers is reaching back to this in order to underpin her creation of a near-future society rather than drawing on the contemporary world as one might expect. Perhaps it's just me but the novel and the series seem to resonate in a way that the novel doesn't with contemporary experience, no matter how many references to climate change denial and CJD she includes. Which leaves me with an odd sense of dissatisfaction that at present I can't quite dispel. It may be that a second reading is required as this novel is rather more subtly layered

than it might appear to be at first sight.

Maureen Kincaid Speller is a critic, freelance copy-editor and graduate student. She has reviewed science fiction and fantasy for various journals, including *Interzone*, *Vector*, *Foundation*, the *Zone* and *Strange Horizons* as well as for her own blog, *Paper Knife*. She is an assistant editor on *Foundation* as well as writing a regular book reviews column for *Weird Fiction Review*. She is working on a PhD, focusing on indigenous contemporary literatures in North America.

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<http://paperknife.maureenkincaidspeller.com/2012/04/testament-of-jessie-lamb-jane-rogers.html>

THE ACACIA TRILOGY (2007 - 2011)

BY DAVID ANTHONY DURHAM

Ken Neth

Epic fantasy has traditionally tended to be a conservative genre at its heart. The overall goal of the quest to save the world is generally to preserve the status quo, not to create fundamental change for the better of people and their society. It's typically a pretty standard hero, often of modest, rural (and therefore generally conservative) origins who saves the day and ascends to the role of the next monarch. And while this is perhaps changing the most, the hero is also quite often a young, good-looking white male.

Epic fantasy of the last ten years or so often seeks to subvert many of the tropes I just mentioned. Heroes are grey, often not quite so heroic. The worlds and people within them are often now 'gritty', darker and more dangerous. The term 'realistic' often comes about, regardless of just how absurd the concept of reality is to whatever the term graces. Perhaps some change is sought, or maybe the good guys don't win, or maybe the world is set in a place where the bad guy has already won, or just maybe no real victory is won at all. But with the Acacia Trilogy David Anthony Durham goes in a different direction. Real, fundamental change occurs. Realization of the evils that the rule of the 'good guys' inflict is a key component. Class divisions, drugs, slavery, political elite, political movers and shakers, the corruption of power and magic, invading barbarians, ethnic tensions, and real ethical concerns dominate both the words of the trilogy and what's written between those words. And there is actual discussion of whether outright slaughter/genocide of the 'bad guys' should be the goal.

However, the politics and ethics that I describe above are integrated seamlessly into the plot that drives the trilogy. They are often fairly subtle and things are never didactic. The trilogy is still epic fantasy – there are cool beasts and monsters, there are dragons (of sorts), there is magic, there are vast armies that meet in battle and single combat between champions. Acacia embraces many of the essential elements of epic fantasy, only through a different moral and ethical lens.

The trilogy follows a group of four brothers and sisters from childhood to adulthood and (in some cases) to death. The Akarans are the children of the King of the Known Lands and are the latest in a long ruling dynasty from the island and ethnic group of Acacia.

The Akaran dynasty rules over what is essentially an empire of many subjected small nations and the reader soon learns that they rule through very disturbing means. Selected children of the population are sold into slavery in a distant and unknown land in exchange for a drug that the ruling elite use to mollify the population. After the initial set-up and introduction to the Akaran children, we follow them as they grow, as Akaran rule is usurped and regained, as magic is rediscovered and as people from the distant Other Lands invade and the world grows larger.

The series begins with *Acacia: The War With the Mein* and something of a slow start. Durham's roots as a writer lie in literary and historical fiction rather than SF/F and he shows some of his naivety as he embraces tropes that often feel far too close to other epic fantasy works. Some of his characters come across as too great and achieve the status of Mary/Gary Sue. And Durham's distinctive writing style is just a bit different than much of what is more common in the epic fantasy world – it's not that it's a hard style to read, just one that takes some adjustment. However, by the end of *The War With the Mein*, Durham finds his stride and the series quickly evolves into one of the most important epic fantasy series to be published in years.

The second, *The Other Lands*, and third, *The Sacred Band*, books are each better than what comes before. The series evolves in scope as it moves beyond the Known Lands and implications become even greater as the moral and ethical challenges grow in importance through in time. And, the series has another triumph to boast about – a great ending. All too often the end of a series just doesn't work as well as the build-up would imply. While I can see a case for disagreeing with me, I think that Durham pulled off the ending in a near-perfect fashion. The ending is idealistic – the good guys win, though not necessarily survive. Hope for the future is real. Systemic societal problems actually seem to be solved. I think many may complain that the ending is too neat and pretty, too unrealistic. But I think this is the point – Durham wants to show what a progressive message in epic fantasy can look like. Not the conservative, nostalgic end so common and not a cynical response to that conservatism. He presents a truly progressive move forward rather than backward or a simple reestablishment of a status quo – a vision of hope that could translate into our own lives and society.

Durham's *Acacia* Trilogy provides an encouraging departure from both the traditionally conservative fantasy and the increasingly common cynical response. Durham presents an epic fantasy that is hopeful and progressive – I would even consider the use of the word liberal if it weren't so politically tainted these days. In doing so, he

never loses site of the goal to write an engaging story that fans of epic fantasy can embrace. Acacia is one of the most exciting and important fantasy series that's been published in the last 10 years, and it's a shame that more aren't reading it.

Ken Neth is a toaster oven, granted sentience by the demon Azazel in return for one thousand and one years of lightly-crisped bagels. When the Neth is not browning baked goods, it blogs.

This article first appeared on the author's website on March 23, 2012.

<http://nethspace.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/review-acacia-trilogy-by-david-anthony.html>

2312 (2012) BY KIM STANLEY ROBINSON

Niall Alexander

The year is 2312. Scientific and technological advances have opened gateways to an extraordinary future. Earth is no longer humanity's only home; new habitats have been created throughout the solar system on moons, planets, and in between. But in this year, 2312, a sequence of events will force humanity to confront its past, its present, and its future.

The first event takes place on Mercury, on the city of Terminator, itself a miracle of engineering on an unprecedented scale. It is an unexpected death, but one that might have been foreseen. For Swan Er Hong, it is an event that will change her life. Swan was once a woman who designed worlds. Now she will be led into a plot to destroy them.



A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away – or so it feels, at least – I read *Red Mars*. I was at an age and a stage that demanded I discover those things that I'd love for the rest of my life: not the perfunctory pleasures I'd inherited from my parents, nor the playthings of my peers, but passions of my own devising. Thus, I invested in an alarming amount of classic sf and fantasy. Decades if not centuries of masterworks were mine in one fell swoop, and amongst them, the most celebrated of all Kim Stanley Robinson's novels.

I adored it, of course. Then as now. I'd never read such a meticulous and convincing future history, and Mars, though far-fetched yet, was not such an unknown quantity as to overstretch my limited imagination. By that same token, a lot of *Red Mars* went right over my head – not least the fact that it was book one of three – so it's been an occasional aspiration of mine to re-read it ever since, in quick succession with its acclaimed sequels, *Blue Mars* and *Green Mars*.

Alas, as is often the way with aspirations, it hasn't happened yet... though I have returned to Robinson's work in the succeeding years. *Galileo's Dream* was not for me, I fear, but I had a terrific time with the best of collection Night Shade Books put out in late 2010, such that I've been eagerly anticipating *2312* for, ahem, many

a moon.

It does not disappoint.

"Really you have no idea. It's like nothing you've ever seen. You may think you are inured, that nothing outside the mind can really interest you anymore, as sophisticated and knowledgeable as you are. But you would be wrong. You are a creature of the sun. The beauty and terror of it seen from so close can empty any mind, thrust anyone into a trance. [...] The sight of it can strike thought clean out of your head. People seek it out precisely for that." [pg. 3-4]

Three centuries on from the present day, everything has changed. Everything, that is, except Earth. Humanity has taken to the stars; spacers have radically overhauled the solar system; millions of people have been born and raised on Venus and Mars and Mercury, meanwhile countless thousands of terraformed asteroids – which is to say terraria – are now home to Earth's surviving flora and fauna. Longevity treatments have raised life expectancy amongst those who can afford the intervention into the high hundreds, and gender, in the future, is a thing of the past.

Advances along these lines are made every day – exponential progress is the name of the game – yet humanity's pitiable point of origin is in dire crisis, as ever.

"It was almost an ice-free planet now, with only Antarctica and Greenland holding on to much, and Greenland going fast. Sea level was therefore eleven meters higher than it had been before the changes. This inundation of the coastline was one of the main drivers of the human disaster on Earth. They had immensely powerful terraforming techniques off-planet, but here they usually couldn't be applied. No slamming comets into it, for instance." [pg.90]

For obvious reasons.

In short, "Earth was a mess, a sad place. And yet still the center of the story. It had to be dealt with, as Alex had always said, or nothing done in space was real." (ibid) Alex, incidentally, is the self-styled Lion of Mercury, a scientist and a significant political figure whose sudden death – supposedly from natural causes – sets off 2312. In the bravura prologue – a short but stunning sunwalk that serves to set the surreal scene ideally, as well as one's expectations – Robinson introduces us to Alex's daughter, Swan Er Hong, as she navigates her planet's scorched surface in an attempt to get to grips with the unbearable grief she feels. Some distance away from the relative safety of Terminator, Mercury's sole city – an awesome industrial colony that circles the world a scant step ahead of the world's own

orbit, and thus the sun, which burns hot enough here that it might melt a person (indeed a place) – Swan considers suicide, for a second, or seems to.

Her impetuosity will be the death of her, one suspects. If not now then not long from. She's a spacer, born and raised, and though she's more than a century old, as often as not she behaves like an entitled child. Swan huffs and sulks, pouts and shouts. Not unrelatedly, she's an artist. An aesthetic activist in full-fledged rebellion against the abstract of the establishment. To which end she's eaten aliens, and had bird-brains installed in her head – as you do – as well as a snarky quantum computer called Pauline whom readers of *Red Mars* may well recognise.

In terms of her character arc through 2312, however, the single biggest obstacle opposite Swan – at least when we meet – is that she has no sense of purpose, or of place. But Alex's death gives her a glimpse of these things, tantalising if not yet terrifying: Alex's last request is that Swan personally ferry some encoded information to those who need to know it. Thus, our odd duck comes into contact with Alex's cultish cadre, who (as it happens) have been working to disrupt the dithering establishment on Earth themselves. Almost as if it were meant to be, Swan finds herself falling in with one of her dearly departed's closest confidantes: Fitz Wahram, out of Titan. He is *"a very big man. Prognathous, callipygous, steatopygous, exophthalmos - toad, newt, frog - even the very words were ugly. [...] Once she had seen a toad in an amazonia, sitting at the edge of a pond, its warty wet skin all bronze and gold. She had liked the look of it."* [pg.15]

So it is that the scene is set for revolution, and perhaps a strange strain of romance.

Thereafter, 2312 gets quite complicated quite quickly:

"By the early twenty-fourth century there was too much going on to be either seen or understood. Assiduous attempts by contemporary historians to achieve an agreed-upon paradigm foundered, and we are no different now, looking back at them. It's hard even to assemble enough data to make a guess. There were thousands of city-states out there pinballing around, each with its presence in the data cloud or absence from same, and all of them adding up to – what? To the same mishmash history has been all along, but now elaborated, mathematicized, effloresced – in the word of the time, balkanized." [pg.78]

To paraphrase our occasional, omniscient narrator: to simplify history would be to distort Robinson's reality, and this award-winning author does not dilute. It is, therefore, a bold-type testament to his unflinching grasp of the narrative art that one understands as much

of the plot, and indeed its byzantine backdrop, as one should, or is supposed to. Wisely, I think, Robinson draws a hard line between the involved scientific speculation readers have come to expect from his work and the actual unfolding of the tale he's here to tell; that of – at long last – the end of the world as we know it, if not the apocalypse proper.

To wit, Robinson builds his single sprawling setting, and gestures toward the million (give or take) meticulously researched ideas underpinning it, in excerpts, as in in the extract above. In extracts – of which there are eighteen – in addition to fifteen lengthy lists, a miscellany of individually titled segments, ten strong, on top of a prologue, an epilogue, and forty-odd actual chapters. *2312* is a big book punctuated, and so forth made manageable, by lots of itty bits. Asides, mostly: postcards from the far-distant future, or the diary entries of an unfathomable AI.

This tension in the structure of *2312*, between the little and the large, reflects the relationship between the planet-cracking happenings and the seemingly insignificant events that Robinson is interested in for the bulk of the book. The reader is routinely shuttled between stunning set-pieces, like the sunwalk with which the whole thing begins, or the destruction of Terminator – Swan's sweet home if she has one – and quiet, composed, character-oriented moments, such as the prolonged underground walkabout our scattershot protagonist shares with Wahram, or the stop-overs she takes on various terraria.

You will come to look upon all these moments equally. In astonishment, in awe, at both the small, and the immense. Such is Robinson's success in terms of the sense-of-wonder *2312* evokes, like a sky full of stars exploding one after the other, over and over again.

Given all its ideas, not to speak of the myriad intricacies of each of these, I dare say *2312* is a substantially more accessible novel than it has any right to be. The author's decision to delineate his science from his fiction pays dividends in that respect, as it allows each scene to breathe, and more often than not to blossom. Furthermore, Robinson presents many of most complex concepts with a winning amount of whimsy. As recipes, among other things. For a successful revolution, for instance, Swan's qube would have us "*take large masses of injustice, resentment, and frustration. Put them in a weak or failing hegemon. Stir in misery for a generation or two, until the heat rises. Throw in destabilizing circumstances to taste. A tiny pinch of event to catalyze the whole. Once the main goal of the revolution is achieved, cool instantly to institutionalize the new order.*" [p.334]

There's fun in *2312*, then. Fun, and unbelievable wonder; love, profundity and a lot of legitimately gripping drama. Also some

startling ideas. I had not dared to dream that Kim Stanley Robinson could even equal *Red Mars*, but in time, *2312* could take the cake. That and biscuit-based relativity aside, it's a magnificent sweet treat in its own right. Robinson is as intelligent and compelling as ever he has been – at least in my experience – but herein he has tempered his the science of his fiction smartly, if not sensitively. The result, simply put, is stunning.

Never mind the usual genre divisions: *2312* is easily one of the year's best books, period.

Niall Alexander reviews speculative fiction of various shapes and sizes – whether in film, literature, video games, or comics – honestly, the lot – for a number of genre-oriented resources, including Tor.com, *Starburst Magazine*, and *Strange Horizons*. Failing all of the above, as is the case most days, he'll happily bend your ear over at his own blog, *The Speculative Scotsman*.

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<http://scotspec.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/book-review-2312-by-kim-stanley.html>

OSIRIS (2012) BY E. J. SWIFT

Niall Harrison

Founded in 1997, helmed by Jason Williams (publisher) and Jeremy Lassen (editor-in-chief), Night Shade Books has in the last few years made a concerted and largely successful effort to establish itself as one of SF and fantasy's talent-spotters. They have published a slew of well-received first novels, by writers such as Will McIntosh, Rob Ziegler, and Kameron Hurley, that have been notable for combining conceptual ambition, political engagement, and narrative vigor, and for not being overly strict about genre borders. Sometimes these qualities may be pursued at the expense of sensitivity – witness the critiques of Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, almost certainly Night Shade's best-known title, for its construction of racial and gender tropes – and a year-long suspension from being a qualifying market for membership of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America suggests that the company may at times have been a better friend to readers than to authors; but the impact of Night Shade's list on the field deserves to be recognized.

And so here is E.J. Swift's debut novel, *Osiris*. Four hundred years downstream, we're in a future that is, if not a consensus of the field, pretty common: ecocatastrophe has wrecked the planet, to the point that, at least so far as its inhabitants are concerned, there's no point venturing beyond the titular city-state. This is humanity's last redoubt. An ocean-borne marvel of massive pyramids and soaring towers, *Osiris* was originally a refuge, attracting "the world's most brilliant minds, rich and poor, from the northern hemisphere to the south." But by now it has passed "from elite technological masterpiece, to benevolent rescue centre, to reluctant tyrant": the city as we find it is an autocratic place, divided into a wealthy core led by a few established families, governing more or less by hereditary succession, and a western periphery of grim poverty. Our guides conveniently reflect this division. In strictly alternating, sometimes overlapping chapters, we are escorted around the city by Adelaide Rechnov, a wealthy heiress convinced that her recently-vanished twin brother is still alive, and Vikram, a third-generation climate refugee attempting to improve conditions in the west; before too long, the two are thrown together in a you-scratch-my-back plot, and ultimately they begin a more intimate relationship.

There are echoes here of many prior works, but the one that kept coming to my mind was Julie Bertagna's energetic 2002 novel *Exodus*. The two books are set in similarly afflicted worlds, and both

feature luxurious castle-cities surrounded by refugees, plus paired protagonists from opposite sides of the wall: in fact both the starkness of the premise, and the choice of protagonists, felt familiar in *Osiris* because they have been so often deployed in recent novels that were, like *Exodus*, published for young adults. *Osiris* not, itself, a young adult novel – not that that would be a problem, but if nothing else the protagonists are too old, Adelaide by a little, Vikram by rather more – but it’s interesting to see the dystopian narrative, having migrated from the adult to the YA category, making its way back again but preserving some of its mutations.

What a bare summary of the novel’s premise obscures is the amount of space Swift creates for her protagonists to simply live in their world and experience it for us – in other words, how textured the novel is. The world-building has a playfully oceanic flavor throughout – “Surfboard” now describes a tablet computer, on which you can access your “Reefmail”; “krill” is slang for journalists; and so on – but is most compelling when it is sketching out the psychology of *Osiris*’ citizens. Small episodes, such as an interlude on a freshwater iceberg during which Vikram muses that the slap of waves must be what land sounds like, or the “ground dreams” experienced by many citizens, underline that the sea here is all-encompassing: everything comes from it and returns to it. It’s the sea that catches the city’s ghosts, and the sea that gives the city’s criminal justice system its cues, from the underwater prisons to the official method of execution.

And of course it’s experienced differently on the two sides of the wall. For Adelaide, *Osiris*’ situation necessitates a certain self-awareness. She muses that, in the city, “every possession or belonging or simple luxury was representative of an achievement,” a much more conscious linkage than is common today. It’s the wealthy, too, who chafe against the city’s limitations, variously considering it a “lost city” and a place that “demanded the act of looking out”: one character suggests to Adelaide that “Human beings are not designed for confinement, however vast and exquisitely made the prison: the explorer in us will out.” Against this affirmation of the outward urge is Vikram’s more direct experience of the world beyond the walls, which reminds us how much of a luxury one of SF’s fondest psychological tropes can be. When presenting his case to the city’s council, he keeps nerves at bay by focusing on an “odd sight: the elderly weakened by heat,” rather than by cold; confronted by a bowl of fruit, he drifts into a reverie, recalling one of the few past times he had seen an orange, and the sense of intoxication that occasion yielded.

The novel’s context may be ecocatastrophe, then, but its core

subject is inequality. This is, it's worth noting, not an uncommon strategy for climate-based SF; or to put it another way, whatever the original animating impulse, such a depiction is an effective way of dramatizing the consequences of processes that operate on a timescale beyond the human. I've already mentioned Julie Bertagna's work (the story inaugurated in *Exodus* is continued in *Zenith* and audaciously concluded in *Aurora*); another useful comparison is to Adam Roberts' more satirical exploration of a world without a middle class in *By Light Alone*, particularly in terms of how the two writers imagine the conditions of wealth and destitution. For Roberts, both circumstances are extremities that deform the soul. His rich are cartoonishly selfish and cruel, his poor often grotesque or even animalistic: something has gone terribly wrong in both cases.

Correspondingly Swift, writing in a more naturalistic mode, finds humanity and dignity in both her subjects, while still refusing an easy verdict. Vikram may be in dogged pursuit of a noble cause, but he carries a great sense of injustice and an inculcated propensity to violence that is at times frightening both to himself and to the reader ("He saw the slow thick bleed of anger. He saw that it would take him apart bit by bit, until he was an alien to himself"). Adelaide may be arrogant and ignorant, but she can also be capable and resourceful. Yet, and this is perhaps where the YA-ish aspect of the novel rears its head again, there is something a little too easy about the underlying logic of Swift's scenario. One striking yet questionable aspect of her approach is signalled in a scene in which Vikram attends a party thrown by Adelaide. Without anyone to talk to, he finds himself playing "the old game: guessing which Old World land each guest was descended from, imagining the landscapes where their ancestors had lived." This is, in part, a tactic to underline how far from today *Osiris* is set; but to judge by the names we encounter, the city and the west are comparably diverse, with no sense that differences of origin have any present-day relevance. Such a removal of existing ethnic and racial tensions enables a class division that feels too novelistically neat, unencumbered by the complications that human societies tend to create.

Moreover, Swift is more convincing when writing about plenty than about poverty. Vikram's world is damp, and cold, and pungent, but lacking in intensity; Vikram himself is intense, but not always convincing as representative of the very poor, as when he mentally describes Adelaide's swearing as "vulgarity" – a more middle-class word choice than seems really apt. In the city proper, however, Swift revels in opulence. "The rooms were quiet and graceful, their walls striped with narrow ribbons of mirror, red cedar and sequoia"; "Deceptive sunshine polished the tapering structures of glass and

metal, turning the bridges and shuttle lines that webbed them into silver threads”; “They sat on opposite sides of the table, the polished lake of wood between them. At one end, a pot of coral tea on a ceramic base steamed gently.” This preference is reinforced by the structure of the novel. Over two thirds of *Osiris* take place in Adelaide’s world – indeed only in the last fifty pages or so does Adelaide leave her polder and directly experience the alternative world Vikram has been telling her about, and by that point plot has taken a tighter grip on the proceedings, and there is not very much time for sightseeing. All of which said, there is a sharp and serious political novel here; it’s just one in which the focus is quite clearly more on one side than the other. Vikram’s campaign for aid proceeds in painstaking steps, but we get only glimpses of what his former friends in the west are up to. The various schemes and intrigues of the *Osiris* families are matched in their intricacy only by the development of the protagonists’ relationship.

Which brings me back to the emotional core of *Osiris*. Swift takes her time developing the relationship between Vikram and Adelaide, and although the overall trajectory is fairly clear from the start, the details keep it compelling. It takes longer than you expect to become a romance, and even when it does both parties’ feelings are messy and partial, the power imbalances between them never far from the surface. Here’s Vikram, for instance, depersonalizing Adelaide even during one of their more intimate moments: “It was a body that had never known hunger, had barely known cold. Sometimes he despised her for its ignorance.” In general Swift is good at psychodrama, at cultivating a sense that her characters are driven by strong emotions; this strength, in fact, carries the novel through its closing stages, which are occupied by a kidnap-and-rescue scenario that is by far the most conventional and least interesting set-piece in the story, and which ends up costing not nearly as much as a reader might feel it should. This is particularly a shame because in the novel’s early stages Swift demonstrates a much more sophisticated control of pace and tone, an ability to rapidly shift gears within scenes, and a willingness to undercut one scene with another: most notably, the prologue removes ambiguity from one of the major questions facing the protagonists and requires Swift to show one character in particular as much more obsessive and less sympathetic than would otherwise be the case. In the end it’s that choice, perhaps, more than anything else in this nuanced, intriguing, occasionally frustrating book, that makes me think *Night Shade* have found another worthy

writer, and that has me cautiously anticipating Swift's next outing.

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<http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?id=751>

THE KILLING MOON (2012) BY N. K. JEMISIN

Stefan Raets

As is so often the case with great novels, the opening chapter of N.K. Jemisin's *The Killing Moon* offers a snapshot of the conflicts and relationships that end up driving the whole story. We meet the Gatherer Ehiru as he stealthily travels through the city-state Gujaareh at night, collecting tithes of "dreamblood" for the goddess Hananja from its dying or corrupt inhabitants. This dreamblood will then be used by his order's Sharers to heal and help others. Ehiru's first commission is an old man who gladly and peacefully goes into his final dream, but the second one is a foreigner who doesn't have the same outlook on Gujaareh's religious practices – especially now they mean his own untimely death. He calls Ehiru a "Gualoh" or demon and then, mysteriously, tells Ehiru that he is being used...

The next chapters introduce the other two main characters in *The Killing Moon*. Nijiri is a young apprentice Gatherer who is on the verge of graduating and taking the place of another, recently departed Gatherer, and who has a complex relationship with his mentor, the aforementioned Ehiru. Sunandi is an ambassador/spy from Kisua, another city-state that has a long and complex history with Gujaareh. She plays a crucial role in this novel because she provides a look at Gujaareh and its religion and magic from the eyes of an outsider and a non-believer. Sunandi's chapters reinforce the early impression that there is something rotten in in the city-state of Gujaareh, but exactly what that is doesn't become clear until later on.

The Killing Moon is a novel that sneaks up on you. It starts off slowly and somewhat confusingly, lots of showing rather than telling, lots of new vocabulary to get used to. N.K. Jemisin has created a fascinating fantasy world here, one that mixes unique and surprising elements (such as Jungian psychology and Egyptian history) in a way I've simply never seen before, but she doesn't just spell out all the world-building details you need to grasp its intricacies. Instead, this novel goes for full immersion in its world and its story from the very start. Narcomancy is described matter-of-factly, without much in the way of explanation. Likewise, the relationship between the city-states Gujaareh and Kisua is obviously complex and meaningful, but N.K. Jemisin doesn't just spell out the details. Everything eventually becomes clear, but it's also likely that you'll have to file away some things as you read, trusting they'll be explained later on. (If you're impatient, there's a glossary in the back.)

More importantly, the moral value of the characters' actions is

left to the reader to decide. The act of putting an ill, dying man out of his misery to collect his dreamblood is described as a simple mercy, but the next collection of dreamblood (in the very same chapter) is an involuntary one, from a victim who isn't even Gujareen. The Gatherer carefully explains to him that everyone in the city is subject to Hananja's Law, not just citizens and believers, but it quickly shows why Kisuati people like Sunandi have such aversion to narcomanacy. It's all described matter-of-factly, by characters who are firmly rooted in their own belief systems – which just happen to be diametrically opposed. As a result, the reader experiences these alien practices from both perspectives, and more importantly, gets a first-hand view of what happens when the characters' moral high ground gradually becomes shakier and shakier.

The first dozen or so chapters contain a wealth of information that is occasionally hard to grasp when you don't have all the pieces of the puzzle yet, making this a novel that merits more than one reading. Everything noticeably clicks into place about a third of the way in, and from that point on, the novel switches from mysterious and intriguing to impossible to put down. It may take some time to find your bearings, but once you have the vocabulary, the moral complexity, and the basic building pieces of the plot, *The Killing Moon* simply soars.

Characterization is usually subtle and indirect. We meet everyone in mid-stride, not as their individual stories are starting. Salient facts are sometimes tossed at you underhandedly, at times when you may not expect it. There's some misdirection here. The nature of first meetings, the possible true reason for an attraction between two people, the family background that may or may not play a role – all of these are introduced later on, after you've already read a good chunk of the novel, and all of them will make you reconsider previous events and their implications in a new light. Combine this with the way this fantasy universe is revealed, and it's again clear that this book rewards more than one reading.

Once the characters are firmly established, their interactions continue to gain in poignancy and depth, resulting in a few scenes that are so emotionally powerful, they're almost shocking. All of them are told in N.K. Jemisin's rich prose, appropriately giving the entire novel a dreamlike quality. This review has barely covered a fraction of the wealth of themes and plots that run through this novel: politics, sexuality, magic, religion, and the various places where they intersect. *The Killing Moon* has so many strengths that the main plot almost becomes an afterthought; it's simply a pleasure to soak up the novel's atmosphere and enjoy the depth of the world-building

and characterization.

As strong as N.K. Jemisin's first novel *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* was, it also had some of the flaws that are common for a debut. Still, you could easily see that this author was just gearing up for something great. Some debuts are clearly books or series the author has been working on forever, leading to an almost inevitable sophomore slump. With *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, I knew that wouldn't be the case, and *The Killing Moon* is the proof. N.K. Jemisin's newest novel is not as accessible as her Inheritance trilogy, but if you're willing to stick with it, *The Killing Moon* is a rich, rewarding and unique novel that will remain with you for a long time to come.

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<http://farbeyondreality.com/2012/04/27/the-killing-moon-by-n-k-jemisin/>

STORMDANCER (2012) BY JAY KRISTOFF

Cynthia Martinez

This book made me really mad.

I'll admit, I was a little leery of *Stormdancer* from the start – Japanese steampunk sounds cool, but coming from a white Western author, the chances of problematic fuckery are high. Exoticization. Romanticization. Plain old appropriation. Yet for some reason, I didn't really peg *Stormdancer* for this.

I don't know why. There was no good reason, and yet, I expected Kristoff to be a scholar of some sort, or at least, to do some very in-depth, scholarly research, borne of a deep interest in, and respect for, Japanese culture. And while even that could have also potentially yielded something problematic, at least it would have been sincere. What I thoroughly did NOT expect to get was a book informed by Wikipedia and anime, set in Japan for the sake of novelty. That came as a genuine shock. And a dramatic rise in blood pressure. *What the fuckity fuck?*

The thing is, that Wikipedia part? You can kinda tell. I mean, the first hundred pages or so of *Stormdancer*, basically until the airship crashes, are a chore to wade through, mostly because of the Wikipedia-esque info dumping. It takes almost exactly half of those pages to make any progress on the plot. The first fifty are just about showing off the world and detailing every little aspect of it, which is why it takes like twelve paragraphs for Yukiko and her father to walk down a street: we have to hear about the architecture, detail the clothing being worn (because we're using Japanese terms here, and not many readers will know offhand what a hakama looks like), and explain the exact geographical setting, right down to which rivers cross where, and the ~exotic smells~ in the air, even though none of it is actually relevant to anything that's going on at the moment. I understand wanting to set the scene and acquaint readers with the world, but Jesus Herbert Christ, get on with it already. Work this stuff in to the action. Make me not want to put the book down out of sheer boredom. I mean, I haven't even gotten the chance to get angry yet.

Making the world-building harder to parse are the Japanese words and terms strewn throughout the descriptions, most of which assume a familiarity with the culture that many readers just won't have. I had to break out the Google more than once to give myself a better mental image of what was going on, and though many of the terms aren't exactly vital to the story, it was still annoying as hell. I

want to be able to see this shit in my head, to get what's going on, and it doesn't help when half of the words are in Japanese just for the flavor of it. It's one thing when a word doesn't have an English analog; it's another when you're including easily translatable and even borrowed words, like "sarariman" (seriously? it's "salary-man" or even just "businessman", kthnx), in their romaji form just to make the story seem more ~authentic~. At the very least it's unnecessarily confusing.

There is a glossary in the back of the book that would have been quite helpful to know about while in the midst of those first fifty pages, but if you're an e-reader like me, you wouldn't have realized it's there until you actually made it to that page...just after the story has ended. Perhaps print readers will be able to make better use of it.

But blah blah blah, detail-heavy writing, I can skim past that. My only issue was boredom until I started noticing all of the shit got wrong. Then my head began hitting the desk.

Repeatedly.

And okay, preface: I'm not an expert on Japan, nor am I Asian. I've never studied the country or the language formally. I've got little knowledge outside of what I learned on my own, from, yes, mostly manga and anime. And yet I still came across glaring errors, repeated errors, stupid errors, errors that made it impossible to read through a conversation without wanting to strangle someone, and errors that lead to questions about some very basic assumptions of the book.

Let's start with my primary nails-on-a-chalkboard issue, the usage of the words "hai" and "sama", shall we? Here are a few examples of these words in action in *Stormdancer*:

Sama:

"That is more than fair." [...] "Ameterasu bless your kindness, sama."

"I want for nothing. Thank you, sama."

"He slew Boukyaku, young sama. The sea dragon who consumed the island of Takaiyama."

"Honor to you, great sama."

"What is Raijin song, sama?"

"Forgiveness, sama."

"Apologies, sama."

...and so on and so forth.

Hai:

"These cloudwalkers were men of the kitsune clan, hai?"

"I have no doubt of your success. The man who stood beside my father as he slew the last

nagaraja of Shima will not be trouble by a simple thunder tiger, hai?"

"You must keep it secret." [...] "It is a gift, hai, but it is not one to be squandered..."

"The solitude is pleasant, hai?"

"I can get into the trees, hai."

"Just deck-hands on a sky-ship, hai?"

...etc.

And both together, for a double-slap to the face of any immersion you've managed to scrounge up:

"Sama, please. Enough for one day, hai?"

That's not how you use those – either of those.

"Sama" is a suffix, an honorific. It goes at the end of someone's name (ex: Masaru-sama), or title, or profession, to denote respect or a higher social status.

You never use it by itself, it isn't a stand in for "sir", or "lord", and in fact, the included glossary explicitly acknowledges this, so how the fuck this managed to remain intact through editing I have no fucking idea.

Similarly, "hai" is not a one-to-one translation of "yes", or "right". A more accurate translation is "I have understood what you just said", and it's only used to answer a question or a request. You don't stick it on the end of the sentence to rhetorically prompt confirmation. There are actually Japanese words for that (well, not the "rhetorical part"), like "ka" or "desu", but Kristoff doesn't make use of those ad nauseum, just the jarringly, tellingly wrong "hai".

I have never heard that word being used that way. Never. Even as a manga reader, seeing it used that way struck me at a level of weird and wrong that prompted me to do some further research. It's counter-intuitive, even if you don't know it's explicitly wrong, and a simple Google search will explain why it is, in fact, wrong. So seeing really very basic words like "hai" and "sama" used incorrectly so often raises a lot of doubts, for me, about the level of familiarity with the culture, and the depth of research that went into the book.

There were other similarly wrong-feeling issues I came across. Like Kitsune? Turns out, that's not typically a last name in Japan.

Neither is Ryuu (although it can be a given), or Tora, or Fushichou.

That's like having characters in a western setting named "Sarah Dog", "Anna Horse", "Jeff Tiger" or "Mike Dragon". Those aren't names, they're words. It looks weird and inaccurate. Hahaha, but I guess that doesn't matter, right? After all, one Japanese word is the same as another, eh? All that matters is that it sounds cool.

Also, bringing it back to "sararimen"? That's actually a Japanese pronunciation of the word "salary-man", which is just another term for "businessman", and didn't come into usage until the 1930's. So seeing it in a book set in the late 18th – early 19th century is highly anachronistic.

The thing is, this is basic stuff. We should not even have to talk about this, especially if these characters are and are speaking Japanese.

Except... other potential "errors" bring that last statement into question. Are the characters in *Stormdancer* even speaking Japanese? Seeing as how the book is set in Japan, I went into the story operating on the assumption that they were, and that it was being "translated" by the author to English for our benefit. One would think that this is the case, that characters in Japan would be saying Japanese words, and yet:

"Impure." Yukiko whispered the word [...] It was such a simple thing; two syllables, the press of her lips together, one on another, tongue rolling over her teeth.

or

"Arashi-no-ko," she heard them whisper.

She could feel Buruu frown in her mind, puzzled by the word's shape.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

She smiled, embarrassed, turning her eyes to the floor.

Storm Girl.

or

"I lo-" She kissed him, stood on her tiptoes and threw her arms around his neck and crushed her lips to his before he could finish the sentence. She didn't want to listen to those three awful words, feel them open her up to the bone and see what the lies had done to her insides.

Mmmk.

1. "Impure" in Japanese? "Fuketsu". Three syllables, no "press of her lips together", minimal "tongue rolling".
2. If they were actually speaking Japanese? After Buruu asked what the fuck "arashi no ko" meant? Yukiko would have

said "arashi no ko", because those are the words for "storm girl*" in Japanese. Duh. How and why Yukiko would have even needed to translate Japanese for the Japanese-speaking tiger is beyond me, and yet, if they are speaking Japanese here, what she just did is completely illogical. (Except that even the translation is sketchy. "Ko" = child, not "girl".)

3. "I love you" in Japanese, those "three little words"? "Aishiteru", or "aishiteru yo"/"aishiteru wa". One or two words at best.

This pretty effectively proved to me that, either by accident or intent, the characters in the book are speaking English. In Japan. I can't imagine that that was the intent, because it makes no logical sense whatsoever, but even the fuck-up makes the book's narrative frustratingly Eurocentric.

Oh, yeah, and then there's the amalgamative "Asia-land" that Shima ends up reading as. That doesn't help in the slightest. Despite being 99% a fantastical analog of Japan, again whether by accident or not, bits of other Asian cultures slip in.

"Nagaraja", for example, are actually Indian creatures. Likewise, somehow the lotus pollution is threatening the local panda population, even though pandas are indigenous to China, which is, incidentally, not Japan. The characters also use Chinese expressions of exasperation, even though there are perfectly good and common and available Japanese ones.

And this is just what I've come across. Several other reviewers on GoodReads who are even better acquainted with the culture than I am have found even more gaffs and problematic elements.

You can see why this is problematic, right? The lack of research, the Eurocentric viewpoint, the playing fast and loose with Japanese culture, the smooching all things Asian into the same story, the same country, because hey, all Asian cultures are all the same, right?

HAHA, NO. No. NONONONONONO. This is not how you write this, people. As my friend Shiori put it, "Asian cultures are not Sizzler." You don't get to help yourself to the stuff you like and leave the rest – why the hell would anyone think that? For the love of god, please, educate yourself before you write about other cultures.

So, yeah, that was... frustrating, putting it mildly.

It was really, really difficult to put that aside and look at the book, I'll admit, and might be at least part of why I found it impossible to connect with the characters. That being said, I wasn't a huge fan of the plot itself, either.

The book takes forever to get going. Sure, stuff happened here and there, but it seemed like the *vvvvvaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaast majooooooooority* of it was Yukiko and Buruu sitting around doing

absolutely nothing. Thinking. Whining. Expositing. Moping. Waiting. Yukiko was painfully useless for nearly 3/4 of the novel. They try and trick you into thinking she's more helpful than she is, writing the battle scenes in the plural (when she and Buruu fight together, everything is "we" - "we" clawed the demon, "we" severed an arm with "our" beak), but really, Buruu does most of the killing, while Yukiko hacks at ankles like an angry Chihuahua. I appreciate that she got the chance to make with the stabby-stabby, but this is not the sword-play the cover promised me, dammit, and the action scenes are few and far between.

I didn't really get interested in the plot until, again, about 3/4 of the way through the book, because up until that point, it didn't really feel like there was one. Buruu and Yukiko just wandered, and it took quite a while for the endgame to reveal itself. That, however, was when the book picked up. I was actually interested in the last hundred or so pages - the court politics, the secret alliances, the sneaking and backstabbing, and the characters that were coming into play in that arena. That part was far too short.

I was also cheered by the presence and abundance of female characters. Excluding Yukiko, there were four prominent female characters featured throughout the various stages of the book, and I liked that. Princess Aisha, Michi, Kaori, and Kasumi were all more interesting to me than Yukiko. I was especially interested in Aisha - she seemed smart and clever and capable, without ever having to swing a sword. She's the kind of "strong female character" I'd like to see more of.

So of course, she dies. Presumably. Off-screen and at the hands of her cowardly, incestuous brother. Now I have even less motivation to read the sequel.

On the downside, the presence of female characters also attracts the obnoxious attention of the male gaze.

I mean, for chrissakes:

She was in her early twenties, possessed of the kind of beauty that inspired poets; the kind that a man might happily murder his own brother to taste for a single heartbeat. Porcelain skin, high cheekbones, full lips, waves of blue-black velvet falling past her chin, glinting with a moonlight sheen. Her eyes were the color of water reflecting polished steel. But the scar ruined it all. Angry, red, bone-deep, it ran in a diagonal line from her forehead, cutting down across her nose to a jagged conclusion at her chin.

First, gross. Second, eyes the color of "water reflecting polished steel"? Somebody's been reading too much *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Linda of Wistfully Linda has a fantastic post about exactly why

this sort of thing is problematic in her series of thoughts on Asian fantasy). Third, yeah, that description? Totally sounds like straight, female, sixteen-year-old Yukiko, right? She's all about the waves of velvet and moonlight sheen, and she definitely knows what kind of beauty would "inspire a man to kill his brother".

We also get to hear about Michi's "plump, pouting lips" and Kasumi's "feral beauty", despite the fact that she's "well past the age when she should have found a husband". Even Yukiko gets a chance to be objectified, and since she can't objectify herself, dammit, we get to warp into the head of a kid peeping on her in the bath house to wax on about her naked breasts and the way the light "creates shadows on the valley of her back" and the like.

She is sixteen. This is really gross and creepy, adult author. But hey, that whole plot point couldn't have been revealed any other way, right?

Also attracted by the abundance of female characters doing stuff? Tragic rape backstories, emphasized father-daughter relationships, and dead mothers. Because, y'know, how else do you get strong female characters? But it's all about gender equality, bro, because the men also run on a steady diet of angst and dead wives and manpain. But not rape. That's just for the wimmenz.

Ughhh, what else was there? Yukiko? I appreciated Yukiko's character arc. I appreciate that she had one. However, I didn't really find her terribly compelling. I suppose most of that could be attributed to the plot not giving her much to do until the final act, but even then, Yukiko rarely got the chance to shine on her own. It was always about Yukiko and Buruu.

Buruu was occasionally funny, but again, I didn't have much attachment to him either. Kin and Hiro were one-dimensional, and the presence of a "love triangle" struck me as unnecessary, especially since the relationships themselves were weak. I did like that Yukiko got to have sex without being shamed for it, and that when someone tried to shame her for it, she didn't buy in. That was nice. However, I swear to God, if Yukiko ends up getting together with "friend-zoned" Kin, I'm going to punch several non-existent Japanese griffins.

Also, that wrap-up? Great big deus ex machina. I mean, sure, Yukiko's power had to come from somewhere, but then why the fuck hadn't Masaru used it earlier? Like maybe before his friends were being stabbed to death while trying to rescue him?

Yukiko's level up there in the end totally counts though. Because, yeah, your animal telepathy can now kill humans, of course.

And then the epilogue, just, oh god. The message gets hammered into your brain, and more than an environmental message, it becomes an anti-Iraq War message and an anti-one-percent message, and so

very mired in Western society and politics and popular buzzwords. While all very good in theory, the usage of an Asian culture to make this point bothers the hell out of me.

So yeah. I'm sorry, but I don't have the patience for this. I don't get the hype. There's nothing in this book we haven't seen before. The dynamics are all the same. You could cut the Japanese terms out and easily transplant it back to Europe. The only differentiating thing the book has going for it is the Asian setting. Is that all it takes to make something "fresh" and "original" anymore?

Despite a few good points, ultimately, this book just kept pissing me off. The thoughtless, cavalier cultural appropriation is problematic, the errors are distracting, the story is boring and meandering, the interesting part is short, and the message is painfully heavy-handed.

You want awesome fantasy actually written by an actual (female!) Japanese scholar? Read *Moribito*. Its translation was cancelled after two books. is getting three. I just don't even.

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<http://ykmreviews.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/071-stormdancer-by-jay-kristoff.html>

**THE YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION: TWENTY-NINTH
ANNUAL COLLECTION (2012) EDITED BY GARDNER
DOZOIS, THE YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY
(2012) EDITED BY RICHARD HORTON AND NEBULA
AWARDS SHOWCASE 2012
("THE WIDENING GYRE")**

Paul Kincaid

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

The overwhelming sense one gets, working through so many stories that are presented as the very best that science fiction and fantasy have to offer, is exhaustion. Not so much physical exhaustion (though it is more tiring than reading a bunch of short stories really has any right to be); it is more as though the genres of the fantastic themselves have reached a state of exhaustion.

In the main, there is no sense that the writers have any real conviction about what they are doing. Rather, the genre has become a set of tropes to be repeated and repeated until all meaning has been drained from them. For example, "Dolly" by Elizabeth Bear (in the Gardner Dozois collection), is a story of police investigating a murder that may have been committed by a robot. It is not a bad story, in the sense that it is efficiently told, with enough detail of character and setting to reward the reader, but the story itself deliberately harks back to the robot stories that Isaac Asimov was writing in the 1940s. Bear has brought the trope up to date, but she has not extended the idea or found anything radically new in it. Asimov's stories can still entertain, and Bear's story is much the same, but to find that one of what we are told are the best stories of 2011 is ploughing a furrow that is more than seventy years old is somehow dispiriting.

Bear is far from alone in this, and I'll come back to other examples later in the review. This retrograde aspect of science fiction has been a commonplace in the genre since the emergence in the 1990s of what became known as the "new hard SF" and the "new space opera." What is even more evident throughout these collections, however, is a more recent trend of writing SF as though it were something else, usually high fantasy. Many years ago, Arthur C.

Clarke proclaimed that “any sufficiently advanced technology would be indistinguishable from magic.” It is a notion that has clearly taken root with today’s writers since they consistently appropriate the attire of fantasy for what is ostensibly far-future sf, even to the extent of referring unironically to wizards and spells and the like.

An example of how this can be done well is “Silently and Very Fast” by Catherynne M. Valente (in Dozois). Again, this is an old story, about an artificial intelligence becoming human (think back, for instance, to another of Asimov’s robot stories, “The Bicentennial Man”), and the only really novel thing that Valente brings to it is the manner of its telling. For Valente dresses the story up as a fairy tale, complete with magicians and evil crones and impossible quests and sleeping princesses. This works on two levels: fairy tales are what the human characters have told the A.I., Elefsis, in order to teach it narrative understanding; and Elefsis partly emerged out of the virtual-reality adventure scenarios a group of children used to play. Valente captures the diction of a fairy tale very nicely, and though this can, in truth, be wearying, on the occasions when it really takes flight, it can be wonderful. There is one brief section where the life of Alan Turing is recast as a variant on “Sleeping Beauty,” complete with poisoned apple, and it works extraordinarily well both as a fairy story and as a life story. Yet in the end, while admiring a beautifully crafted work of fiction, one can’t help wondering if it doesn’t work better as fantasy than it does as science fiction.

The problem may be, I think, that science fiction has lost confidence in the future. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it has lost confidence that the future can be comprehended. At its historical best, science fiction presented alien worlds and distant futures that, however weird they might seem, were always fundamentally understandable. The basic plot structure often involved the achievement of understanding. But somewhere amidst the ruins of cyberpunk in the 1980s, we began to feel that the present was changing too rapidly for us to keep up with. And if we didn’t understand the present, what hope did we have for the future? The accelerating rate of change has inevitably affected the futures that appear in our fictions. Things happen as if by magic (one thinks, for example, of *Matter* by Iain M. Banks, in which a character has casually assumed the appearance of a bush), or else things are so different that there is no connection with the experiences and perceptions of our present.

An example of this latter reality is “Widows in the World” by Gavin J. Grant (in Horton’s anthology), set in the aftermath of climate change, economic collapse, global wars, new and devastating diseases, and all sorts of other things that mark a decisive disconnect from our

present-day world. It is a world in which houses fly from place to place, babies hack into sophisticated defense systems while still in the womb, dead people continue their malevolent behavior as if nothing has happened, and silkies come calling. In the main, the story is an exhilarating ride through accumulating strangeness, but in the end one wonders: if anything can happen, then what is the consequence of any action? Any time the plot might put our central characters in jeopardy, the author is free to invent some new weirdness—and with one bound, they are all free. In another story that presents the future as essentially incomprehensible, “Walking Stick Fires” by Alan DeNiro (in Horton), which presents aliens plundering and warring upon the ruins of Earth, there is an exchange that seems to sum this whole approach up: one character exclaims, “‘there has to be some underlying goddamn plan to this endeavor.’ Sharon didn’t turn as he said, ‘Not really. No.’”

No longer sure of the future, therefore, an SF writer’s options seem to be to present a future that is magical or incomprehensible (like Valente or Grant), or to revert to older, more familiar futures (as Bear did). Perhaps “Laika’s Ghost” by Karl Schroeder (in Dozois) is what science fiction has become in such circumstances. It is set in the near future in Kazakhstan, in a world in which all the science-fictional dreams of the future have come to naught. The economy is wrecked, global warming is transforming the landscape, nuclear weapons are becoming readily available for everyone. Our central character is an arms inspector, drawn to a former rocket site, who discovers that the only people ready to take up the dream of flight to other worlds are aged remnants of the former Soviet Union. It is one of the best stories in these three collections, but it is almost anti-SF in its affect: the future has run its course and come to an end; what was one of the most exciting aspirations of science fiction – the promise of life on another world – is here made available only to those looking backward to a former time. It is a story that makes manifest the exhaustion that is immanent throughout these three collections.



It may be counter-intuitive, but this exhaustion seems to be marked not by a reduction in the amount of science fiction being published, but by an increase. The Dozois and Horton collections between them contain 57 stories first published in 2011 (six stories appear in both volumes); both also contain Recommended Reading lists that include several hundred other titles (over 350 in the Dozois alone).

The Nebula Awards anthology, in the nature of things, runs a year behind the others, so it includes ten stories from 2010 (plus a couple of novel extracts, a handful of poems, and one older story, which I will return to shortly). Assuming that all of these are only a sample of what was published during the year, and discounting the traditional threnody of woe that always runs through Dozois's introductory list of markets closing, circulations falling, and so forth, this would seem to suggest a certain rude health in the genre—that is, if more people getting more stories published in more places equates with health.

Of course, one might quibble with the word “best” as applied to these particular selections. I certainly do, repeatedly. Many of the stories strike me as unadventurous, attempting nothing particularly original or challenging; and there are some that are just downright bad (“Choose Your Own Adventure” by Kat Howard (in Horton) is a knowing play on the old build-you-own-adventure books but does nothing with its cleverness, while Neil Gaiman's “And Weep Like Alexander” (also in Horton) is an over-extended and weak joke). Indeed, two of the pieces chosen by the Nebula voters as award winners are not what I would consider the best of anything. The best novel, *Blackout/All Clear* by Connie Willis (there's an extract included in the Nebula volume), is a decent midlist 300-page novel trapped within 1,400 pages of bloat. Worse is the best novelette, “That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made” by Eric James Stone, a poorly-written apologia for Mormonism cast as the sort of clunky science-fiction adventure that feels as though the genre has remained unchanged for more than half a century. Of course, there is another way of looking at things: if these truly are the best that the genre can offer, then mayhap the health of the genre is not so rude after all.

While considering the titles of these volumes, we might also wonder about the terms “science fiction” and “fantasy” that appear there. There are, for instance, some stories included here that don't seem, or don't need, to appear in either camp. “Rampion” by Alexandra Duncan (in Horton) is a good and in places quite beautiful story set in Moslem Spain, but there is nothing about it that identifies it as fantastic other than its place of original publication (it appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*). When the son of the caliph falls in love with the Christian girl trapped in a high tower, there is perhaps a suggestion of the Rapunzel story, but not enough to make this a fairy tale. The girl's evil mother studies herbs for their use as poisons and has a reputation as a witch, but no witchcraft is really involved. What this is, in other words, is a fairly straightforward historical romance; I can only assume that any aura of the fantastic is wished upon it by the reader.

“The Adakian Eagle” by Bradley Denton (in Horton) employs

more overtly fantastic tropes, but they are subsidiary to the story's main interest, and I can't help thinking it would have been a better, or at least more logical, tale without them. The setting is a US army camp on the Aleutian Islands during the latter part of the Second World War. A young soldier meets a much older non-com known as "Pop" who edits the camp newspaper and who, we soon work out, is Dashiell Hammett. There is a murder for which the young soldier is apparently being set up to take the fall, there is some hand-waving with shamanism and visions of the future, then Hammett identifies the guilty party (there aren't that many suspects, so this comes as no great surprise to the attentive reader). It is clear that what interests Denton is the character of Hammett in these circumstances, and the shamanism has been added in simply to make the story a fantasy—or perhaps because Denton was uncomfortable with the structures of a crime story since most of the actual detection takes place off stage.



If this suggests some sort of crisis of identity – Rich Horton, in his introduction, admits to not knowing whether several of the stories in his selection are fantasy or SF, and doesn't think it matters – this is nothing new. Several years ago, the Science Fiction Writers of America became the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, and their annual award, the Nebulas, became open to both forms of literature. This is presumably because no one wants to police a border that has been so porous for so long.

One consequence is that that more and more of the stories shortlisted for the Nebula Awards are either overtly fantasy or else indistinguishable from fantasy for all practical purposes. What is possibly of greater concern is that the SFFWA so often seems to reward stories that do little or nothing to push either genre into new territory. "The Sultan of the Clouds" by Geoffrey A. Landis, shortlisted in the novella category, is another of the stories that marks a retreat to older versions of the future. It is full of color, it has an appealingly exotic setting in cities floating in the skies above Venus, it has a traditionally competent hero, and it has a plot that would have been solved in five seconds flat if any of the characters had happened to carry a mobile phone. There is something similarly old-fashioned about "Arvies" by Adam Troy-Castro (shortlisted in the short story category), in that it takes a familiar situation and then reverses it, the rather tired structure by which science fiction has traditionally essayed satire. In this case, unborn babies are aware, intelligent, in communication with each other, and rule the world, while the

women who carry them are little more than dull and unconsidered beasts of burden. In detail, it is original; in manner and approach, it feels painfully as though we have been there before.

Rather better are the stories that blur genre boundaries. “The Lady Who Plucked Red Flowers beneath the Queen’s Window” by Rachel Swirsky (winner of the award for best-novella Nebula, and perhaps the worthiest winner of the bunch) starts as straightforward fantasy. A sorceress is betrayed and killed by the queen she serves, but then finds that she can be periodically brought back from the dead to provide wisdom. At first this gives her snapshot views of what happens in the realm after her death, but slowly the intervals between resurrections become longer, the world she is recalled to becomes more modern, and the story starts to feel more science-fictional without ever really becoming sf. There’s betrayal within a female-dominated society also in “The Jaguar House, in Shadow” by Aliette de Bodard, which may not be the most brilliant story in this collection but is immeasurably better than “That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made,” which beat it out in the novelette category. As an alternate history, set in a world in which the Aztecs still rule Mexico (am I alone in recalling *Aztec Century* by Christopher Evans, which used this same scenario nearly twenty years ago?), it probably counts as science fiction, but there is something about the tone that makes it read far more like fantasy.



This blurring of genre boundaries led to the one question that I found myself asking repeatedly as I worked through these three collections: why was this story written as science fiction or, particularly, fantasy? We encounter all sorts of odd devices or strange other lands in these stories, but unless the device or setting is integral to the story being told, there seems little point in them being there. A rocketship glimpsed in the background doesn’t necessarily make a story science fiction. Two of the longer and better stories in these volumes illustrate the issue.

“A Small Price to Pay for Birdsong” by K.J. Parker (In Horton) and “The Man Who Bridged the Mist” by Kij Johnson (in Dozois and Horton) are both set in an unspecified place and time that is clearly not any place on Earth at any point in our history. It is upon this setting that their claim to be read as fantasy depends (there is enough that is genuinely alien in Johnson’s context to argue that it can be read as SF, though for the moment let us simply say that both tales are examples of the fantastic). Both are atmospheric and involve

character studies in which events unfold across an extended period of time. Both are very well written.

And yet I cannot help but wonder whether they need to be fantastic at all. “A Small Price to Pay for Birdsong” is narrated by a rather stuffy and conventional music professor in a world that feels close to the Europe of, say, Mozart or Beethoven. His star pupil, who may indeed be a musical genius, is on murder row; the professor aids his pupil’s escape and in return receives a composition written in his style but immeasurably better than anything he might have achieved. This composition earns him fame and fortune, and the release from fear that comes with it means that his own future compositions become better. The pupil, meanwhile, gives up on music and has a happier life as a result, until the professor engineers his recapture. It is an interesting and engaging story, yet it has nothing of the fantastic about it beyond the Ruritanian neverland of the setting. In fact, other than a need for historical accuracy, there is no reason why this exact same story could not have been set within a genuine historical and geographical context, possibly even using real characters such as Mozart and Salieri, as in Peter Shaffer’s *Amadeus*.

At first glance, “The Man Who Bridged the Mist” seems to be more firmly bedded into its fantastic setting, if only because Johnson’s creation is rather more baroque. The world is roughly cognate with the late-nineteenth century, and the story is summed up in the title: an engineer is sent from the capital to a remote rural area to build a bridge across a river of mist. The mist is a thing of strange moods and terrible monsters, but it is mostly there to provide a background to the story. In the foreground, the engineer builds a fairly conventional suspension bridge while interacting with the local population, especially with the woman who operates the ferry that his bridge will displace. It is an excellent story (it is worth noting that both Dozois and Horton have picked this as the closing tale for their respective volumes), but would it have been significantly different if the river had been water and the setting had been a remote part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire? Of these two examples, “The Man Who Bridged the Mist” is the better work because Johnson is more adept at using the mist metaphorically, but in both cases they seem to be works of the fantastic not because of anything inherent in the stories themselves but purely because the author has chosen to set them in an indefinite rather than a precise past.



Other than Johnson’s text, there are five pieces that appear in both

the Dozois and Horton collections. Though I would hesitate to include any of the five among the best in these two anthologies, they are, perhaps, indicative of what the editors are looking for.

“The Choice” by Paul McAuley, “Martian Heart” by John Barnes, and “Canterbury Hollow” by Chris Lawson are all traditionally structured stories recounted more or less in chronological sequence, and centered upon an almost archetypal science-fictional device. The stories by Barnes and Lawson are oddly similar: both are variants on the traditional frontier warning that life out there is hard and dangerous and people die. “Martian Heart” first appeared in an anthology aimed at young adults (you wouldn’t know it from either of these collections) and has a fairly simple moral about hard work and loyalty. I thought it was far from being the best thing in the anthology where it originally appeared, so I’m a little surprised to find it picked up by both editors. “Canterbury Hollow” is set on an even harsher world than Mars, where the two young lovers have been chosen by lottery to die, and so set out to enjoy each other and the beauties of their world before the end. There’s not much more to it than that; in places it reads more like travelogue than story, and I was left wondering why we were supposed to be interested in either the people or their world. In both cases, the stories use science-fictional settings, but they don’t actually explore much beyond this.

McAuley’s tale is much better, if only because he is simply a better writer than either Barnes or Lawson. It is set on a near-future earth where two young boys acquire a mysterious something from an equally mysterious alien washed up on a misty riverbank, but as a consequence they find bad guys after them with murder in mind. It feels like an extract from something longer, or perhaps it should be seen as another iteration (with the Grant and DeNiro) of the trope in which neither author nor reader is expected to fully comprehend the future being presented. The result is a sense of something perpetually just beyond our reach and therefore doesn’t quite satisfy as a story.

“Ghostweight” by Yoon Ha Lee is more orthodox in insuring that everything is understood by the reader, and though the story is not quite so rigorously chronological (the impact of the past upon the narrative present is more urgent and more fully developed than in any of the other three stories I have discussed here), there is a sense of orthodoxy in what she is doing. Again we have a familiar science-fictional future being re-used but not thoroughly reimaged. A cadet accompanied by a ghost steals a mercenary warship in order to exact revenge upon an intergalactic empire. Events move quickly, the necessary revelations come in their place, and yet having set up the situation, the author doesn’t really seem to know what to do with

it, and the whole piece rather fizzles out.

Of the six stories shared between Dozois and Horton, the only one that doesn't feel as if it would have fitted comfortably into any such volume in the past twenty or thirty years is "The Smell of Orange Groves" by Lavie Tidhar. It is also the only one that is not conventionally structured. The focus moves fluidly from past to present in a near-future Israel where modern technology means that the survival of memory has unfortunate effects for future generations. I'm not sure, in the end, that the story really works, but it is told with energy and freshness, and above all an engagement with its world, that is lacking in too many of the stories appearing in these volumes. It is, perhaps, not entirely coincidental that Lee and Tidhar, along with Aliette de Bodard, are among an emerging generation of writers of the fantastic (their work tends more towards fantasy than science fiction) who mostly are or have been resident in America or brought up in Britain, but whose background is not straightforwardly Anglo-American. Other examples include Shweta Narayan ("Pishaach" in the Nebula collection) and Amal El-Mohtar ("The Green Book," also in the Nebula collection). Without wishing to exoticize what they do, it is notable that their somewhat tangential approach to the traditions of Anglophone SF and fantasy can, at its best, produce some of the livelier examples of the genre today.



And that still leaves 25 stories from the Dozois collection and sixteen from the Horton that I haven't so far mentioned. Even in a review of this length, it would surely be redundant to try and list everything. The plain fact is that most of the stories gathered here are unremarkable, the only surprising thing about them being that someone should think them worthy of inclusion in a Best of the Year anthology. Stories such as "A Soldier of the City" by David Moles, "Digging" by Ian McDonald, and "A Response from EST17" by Tom Purdom (all in the Dozois) or "The Sandal-Bride" by Genevieve Valentine, "The Sighted Watchmaker" by Vylar Kaftan, and "The Silver Wind" by Nina Allan (all in the Horton) are perfectly well-written stories and entertaining in their own right, but there is nothing exceptional in them, nothing that really takes us away from a well-rutted path, that seeks to make something fresh or surprising out of the common material of science fiction or fantasy. I don't exactly object to them being in a Best of the Year anthology, but I wouldn't find their absence surprising either.

Of course, I am not always a reliable judge of these things. "The

Copenhagen Interpretation” by Paul Cornell (in Dozois) received enough popular support to win the British Science Fiction Association short fiction award, yet it seems to me one of the weakest stories in any of these collections. It is another of those tales where anything might happen by authorial fiat, which means that there is no genuine substance to the story, no real depth below the rather gaudy surface.

There are other stories that don’t earn their place in such purportedly canonical collections. “My Chivalric Fiasco” by George Saunders and “The Last Sophia” by C.S.E. Cooney (both in Horton), “The Dala Horse” by Michael Swanwick and “The Vicar of Mars” by Gwyneth Jones (both in Dozois) all seem to plod along predictable lines without doing enough to make you sit up and take notice. “Fields of Gold” by Rachel Swirsky (in Horton) is the fantasy equivalent of Elizabeth Bear’s “Dolly,” a deliberate turning back to old, safe, familiar formulae. In this instance, a character finds that the afterlife is a party in a limitless space where he meets everyone he knew in life. As with the Bear, the problem is not so much that it is a bad story as that it is an old story, one we’ve read countless times before.

Yet these failures are balanced by stories that do seem to take off in new directions. “After the Apocalypse” by Maureen F. McHugh does feel a little like a British catastrophe story of the 1950s transposed to contemporary America, but that in itself is surprising. This sort of slow economic and social collapse has been largely absent from American SF (which has tended to prefer the short sharp shock of nuclear catastrophe), so to find it here, especially in such a beautifully written piece, does feel somehow startling.

There’s a 1950s influence behind Dave Hutchinson’s “The Incredible Exploding Man” – in this case, it is a British writer picking up on American comics. Where it was once inevitable that a nuclear accident would suddenly imbue a character with super powers, here such an accident has cut the protagonist loose from time. Despite looking backward, this is a story told with a vigor that is a world away from the rather weary feel of so many of the other texts here, and it is this that makes it feel fresh and engaging.

“Pug” by Theodora Goss (in Horton) reaches even further back in time for its model. This is a time-travel story as it might have been written around the time of Jane Austen. Now Jane Austen has become a favourite source for fantasists to draw upon of late, from Susannah Clarke’s stories to the interminable Northanger-Abbey-with-Daleks type mash-ups, so this isn’t gloriously original, and it seems to run out of steam part way through. Nevertheless, this is one

of the better stories here.

And, of course, there's Kelly Link who has by now firmly established herself as one of the finest exponents of the American short story. "The Summer People" (in Horton) is perhaps not Link in full flight (the story does not get lost within its own convolutions, though there are loose ends all over the place), and there is an unexpected sense of being in familiar territory with its tale of something peculiar in a backwoods house. Yet she absorbs you into the tale, as if something is being told directly to you and it matters. And that gives a sense of urgency and importance to the writing that is almost totally absent from the rest of these collections.



Were I to go through the Dozois and Horton anthologies and filter them down to just those stories that seem to be truly worthy of being classed as the best the genre has produced in the last year (Valente, Schroeder, McHugh, Hutchinson, Johnson, Goss, Link, Parker, perhaps Tidhar), I wouldn't come close to the size of even one of these books. And yet the stories would all have a feel of the past about them, the sense of a genre treading water, picking up shiny relics from its own long history as though they were bright new ideas.

But in the Nebula anthology there is a reprint of a 1972 story, "And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side" by James Tiptree, Jr. (in recognition of her being awarded a posthumous Solstice Award for significant impact on the SF field). As in so many of Tiptree's stories, this one involves a sexual engagement with the other, and as the title suggests, its structure echoes "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" by Keats. Yet the story has a life and a vitality way beyond anything else in these three anthologies. It is full of loss and sadness and failure, it concerns people humiliated and demeaned by their sexual need, at a loss in the future where they live. And yet still it engages with that future as if it matters to us here and now. It is a story written at a time when science fiction might look forward and see a world that is dangerous and disturbing, but a world that fascinates nonetheless. That fascination makes this story feel newer and more relevant than any of the stories written forty years later.

This one story illuminates the exhaustion that seems to have overtaken SF and fantasy, the sense that the future is something to be approached wearily because we have already imagined it and rubbed away anything that was bright and new. Judging by these three books, the genre is now afraid to engage with what once made

it novel, instead turning back to what was there before. We might tinker with the details, but it seems that no-one has much interest in making it (a)new.

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<http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?id=904>

ON STRANGER TIDES (1987) BY TIM POWERS

Robert Berg

It's kind of sad that most people who hear the title, *On Stranger Tides*, think of the fourth *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, rather than Tim Powers' ingenious, critically acclaimed, and widely unknown 1987 fantasy book, upon which it was ostensibly based. For what it is, the *Pirates* film is alright, mindless entertainment, and before I read Powers' novel, it seemed like that might be enough, but now that I have, it just isn't. That this monumentally intelligent and simultaneously, rip-roaringly fun (Zombie Pirates!! Derring-Do!! Sword Fights!! Magic Battles!!) work of literature is even mentioned in the same breath as Johnny Depp's latest multimillion dollar jaunt as Jack Sparrow became almost offensive to me, as soon as I was fully in Powers' masterful narrative grip.

But perhaps Powers is having the last laugh. He surely made a handsome profit for having the title of his book attached to a film that has only two things in common with it: (1) pirates and (2) the Fountain of Youth. And even with that, the two bear little resemblance to one another. Disney's pirates (even their Blackbeard) are lovably campy, B-movie, scenery-chewing, comic book pirates, whereas Powers' are legitimate, historically accurate, and sometimes truly reprehensible. Meanwhile, both tales' depictions of the Fountain of Youth are almost comically divergent from each other. Disney's film seems to be trying to capture something of Powers' elegant reinvention of the mythology, but so utterly missing the point and mangling it all so terribly that the film likely could have been produced without acknowledging Powers at all. But for Powers' sake, I'm glad that he made more money on the title than the book itself likely ever did (which is also sad, if I actually stop to think about it, so I choose not to), and also thank the film for inspiring me to seek out the original novel. If it hadn't been for *Pirates 4*, I may never have been made aware of Powers' *On Stranger Tides* myself and would have missed out on an absolutely stunning read and one of the most beautifully, expertly melded fusions of historical fiction and fantasy I've yet to encounter.

For someone who is well-versed in pirate lore and legend, *On Stranger Tides* is something of a revelation. One would expect a novel that unites buccaneers with magic and zombies to go for a more theatrical, flamboyant, Peter Pan rendition of pirates, and yet Powers depicts them with the accuracy of a historian. He has done his research, and meticulously so, placing his characters in the

context of the history of the timen – the end of the Golden Age of Piracy – in a manner accessible to both pirate buffs and neophytes. Aficionados will marvel at the care with which he breathes life into the facts of (rather than the fictionalized beliefs about) pirate life and famous figures, such as the terrifying Blackbeard, while those who only know as much about pirates as Hollywood films have taught them will receive an in-depth and grandly entertaining education as to what being a pirate of the Caribbean was actually like—a life often fraught with hardship, discomfort, and misery.

Perhaps most impressive of all is how effortlessly Powers then inserts magic into his otherwise thoroughly realistic framework. Not only is his magic system brilliant, brilliantly worked out, and brilliantly depicted, but it complements the historical aspects in a manner that almost paradoxically strengthens them. He makes even the most outlandish of magic seem perfectly legitimate and fitting, and rather than ever allowing it to contradict or alter the facts of history, he instead uses it to explain them. Rather than being an alternative history in which an author posits what might have happened had magic been present in the past and then depicts how events would have diverged, Powers simply proceeds as if magic truly had existed, providing a legitimate source for the magic (the native cultures on the islands which the pirates inhabit), and using that to further ground his fantasy in what actually occurred. For example, he explains that the reason that the historical Blackbeard would stick slowly burning embers in his beard wasn't only to terrify passengers of the ships he plundered but also as part of a protective magical ritual. The pure ingenuity and genius of another similar historical/magical twist in the book's final third led me to gasp out loud.

But *On Stranger Tides* is never just a mere merging of fact and fantasy. As impressive a feat as that is alone, Powers achieves something even more impressive, using it as a backdrop to weave a complex character arc for his protagonist, John Chandagnac, a young man who starts off being idealistic but has also experienced genuine tragedy in his life before the story began, which distinguishes him from probably the majority of young heroes in this sort of tale. Over the course of the novel, John will come to experience a sort of reverse Hero's Journey – or perhaps an Antihero's Journey would be more accurate, for Powers traces his evolution from John Chandagnac, youthful hero, determined to reclaim the family estate from the vicious uncle who robbed from his now deceased father's inheritance, leaving the two in abject poverty, to Jack Shandy, an experienced, battle-hardened pirate. And he does so in a manner that parallels the traditional Hero's Journey.

Like the typical hero, John initially refuses the call to action,

though instead of the call coming from an old wizard, compelling him to save the world from destruction or some such, it comes instead from Phil Davies, a buccaneer who, along with his crew, attacks the ship upon which John is sailing, and shortly thereafter forces John into this new way of life. John resists for a long time, however, before circumstances eventually conspire to inspire him to take up the mantle of Jack Shandy out of his own free will and, ironically, out of his own sense of justice. In a certain sense, one could say that Powers is documenting the slow eroding of this young man's moral code, but what he is really doing is showing how Jack grows to realize that the code with which he has grown up was instilled in him by a corrupt society with corrupt rulers –that morality itself is relative and often arbitrarily decided by those in power – and that “wrong” cannot be simply defined.

These definitions begin to blur for him. He asks himself whether wanting to avenge his father really makes him any more noble than a pirate stealing treasure from people who have themselves plundered this treasure from lands that weren't theirs in the first place. He asks himself why an officer in the British navy has any more of a right to take a life than a pirate does. He even comes to see the hypocrisy in the government pardoning certain pirates, as long as they reform by a certain date. In other words, it is alright to keep performing piratical actions today, but if those actions extend into tomorrow, then one is again a criminal? There are certainly evil pirates, such as Blackbeard, but Jack comes to realize that being a pirate doesn't make one evil, but rather that evil can flourish anywhere – on a ship of pirates or the navy. Jack can justify his actions to himself because whatever actions he performs from the moment he decides to become a pirate to the end of the novel, he does either out of a sense of loyalty to his newfound friends or in the interests of saving the woman he loves, Beth Hurwood, from a tyrannical father and assorted evil pirates and sorcerers who are only interested in using her for their own nefarious purposes.

Another fascinating aspect to Jack is that he is a puppeteer, raised in the trade by his father. Powers uses this detail metaphorically throughout the work. At first, there is a level of irony to the fact that a puppeteer has himself become a puppet, forced to dance at the whims of outside forces beyond his control, but later, as Jack reclaims his own agency in the course his life takes, he once again becomes a puppet master, both in the form of his newfound leadership and the magical power he learns to wield. There is also a deliciously macabre instance of puppetry involving a corpse near the story's climax that must be read to be believed. Speaking of which, the zombie pirates that crop up, under the control of a rival sorcerer pirate, are also a

brand of puppetry. Beth's father, Benjamin Hurwood and his partner in crime, Leo Friend, and Blackbeard view her as a sort of puppet as well, in a manner that I hesitate to spoil. And this returns us to the Hero's Journey, for just like the traditional hero, Jack finds himself having to descend into the very underworld – both literally and figuratively – and to fight and vanquish monsters both literal and figurative in order to become the man he needs to be for himself, for Beth, and for his crew.

As far as dreampunk goes, while *On Stranger Tides* often sticks closer to magical realism, it does have elements in the form of fever dreams experienced when certain characters become overwhelmed by magic and delirium. It includes a number of absolutely luminous sequences in which an addled character will experience either a past memory or a dream version of a past memory, overlaying present events, the world around him or her perpetually shifting between awake and asleep, reality and dream. These scenes are among my favorites in the novel, and also are yet another reason I bemoan that the *On Stranger Tides* title was wasted on the fourth *Pirates of the Caribbean*. In general, *On Stranger Tides* could make a fantastic film, but these moments in particular are described with such cinematic flair that reading them, I felt as if they could be transferred from my mind's eye directly to the silver screen. I can visualize the different layers of reality and dream bleeding and melting into one another, and once again wish it had gotten better treatment.

Tim Powers' *On Stranger Tides* is a superlative novel that succeeds as a work of historical fiction, as a fantasy, as a character study, as a philosophical argument, as an exploration of adventure novel tropes, as a magnificently fun adventure tale in its own right. What will stick with me most, however, is likely how Powers manages to craft such an exciting and (to a degree) optimistic story without undermining his searingly accurate portrait of the grim realities of life or the fate of most pirates at the time, as well as his flawless execution of Jack Shandy's character arc, creating one of fiction's all-time great pirate (anti)heroes.

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<http://dreampunk.me/blog/tim-powers-on-stranger-tides-1987/>

RAILSEA (2012) BY CHINA MIÉVILLE

Penny Schenk

It says something about a book when one of its central conceits becomes an obsession before you've even read it. My long-suffering Twitter followers will know that China Miéville has written a book involving moles. Now *Railsea* (2012) is here, & on the mole front, it more than delivers. Take it from me; this is epic, insectivore mammalpunk. It undertakes an elaborate, affectionate dance with Melville's *Moby-Dick* (of which more later). And it is adorned with some quite scary illustrations of railsea fauna by Miéville himself.

Is *Railsea* without flaws? Here, I poke my critical snout above the dirt, sniff the air, & report – not quite. If I had to distill my criticism of *Railsea* into one sentence, it would be this: Not every book needs to contain *all the things*. This is an ambitious, audacious book; it aims to address a wide variety of readers on multiple levels. In it, I find myself more conscious of political points being made than in any of Miéville's previous novels. Part of me suspects that there are in fact two books trying to burrow their way out of *Railsea*, one YA and one adult.

And yet...

Miéville readers will be wondering: are there more weird, unforgettable ideas in *Railsea*, ones that I'll think about for a long time? The answer to this is an unqualified Yes. Bizarre assemblages of rubbish? *Tick*. Puns aplenty? *Yep*. & I for one will never look at a mole-hill in quite the same way. In addition, *Railsea* contains, to my mind, some of Miéville's very best writing, particularly in those passages where he steps back from conventional narrative structures to address the reader directly.

Railsea is about quests. The young protagonist, Sham, seeks an authentic purpose in life. His moletrain captain pursues her nemesis, the elusive white moldywarpe (Miéville uses this evocative old English name for mole throughout). As Ahab hunted the white whale, Captain Naphi stalks Mocker-Jack across the railsea. The railsea is, I'll wager, one of the coolest damn things you'll encounter in fiction for a very long time. Take the ocean, but imagine that instead of water, it's covered in a crazy, byzantine network of railway lines. Instead of fish, dolphins & whales frolicking below its surface, imagine moles, worms & other subterranean creatures. Some of them are huge; many of them are downright dangerous.

The world of *Railsea* is a future earth in which our current levels of consumption are no longer possible. Beneath & on the surface of

the railsea rests salvage of varied provenance – earth’s past (arche-salvage), earth’s present (nu-salvage) & off-planet (alt-salvage). One of the central narratives is the longing of Shamus Yes ap Soorap, a school-leaver from the moling nation of Streggeye, to be a salvager. Various factors conspire to make this impossible: he’s been raised by two cousins, & partly on their behalf, he feels unable to refuse a position as an apprentice moletrain doctor.

The prologue is the first instance of the author/narrator stepping out of the story to speak to the reader. In a memorable first line, we’re told that

This is the story of a bloodstained boy.

We are given some context, learn more about the boy’s surroundings.

And then, a change of mind, a rethink:

We’re here too soon.

Our first inkling that, among other things, the railsea represents story itself.

Into reverse: let this engine go back. Just to before the boy was bloodied, there to pause & go forward again to see how we got here...

Turn the page & board the moletrain in Chapter One. More choices must be made. We begin with a closeup, but then zoom out:

A MEAT ISLAND!

No. Back a bit.

A looming carcass?

Bit more.

Here. Weeks out, back when it was colder.

And we’re underway, in the thick of the action, at the moment a mole is sighted in the distance:

“There she blows!”

We then experience the excitement of the subsequent mole hunt, & the bloody work that follows.

Is it time to talk about Moby-Dick yet?

No. Let’s deal with the the Marx quote first.

The Marx quote?

“Well grubbed, old mole.” From Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852).

Captain Naphi utters the above in response to the hunted mole’s attempt to lead the moletrain into a catastrophic sudden change of gauge, & we learn that it is the “traditional praise for such quarry

cunning.”

You do know Marx is riffing on a quotation from Hamlet, right? - “Well said, old mole.”

Yes. & Hegel talked about moles too. I’m on it. But we should probably get back to the story, & leave some of this for the scholars.

We learn more about Sham (his nickname a good fit with his nagging feelings of inauthenticity), and watch his reaction to cruel animal fights arranged by other members of the crew. Then Sham’s moletrain, the Medes, encounters the wreck of a another train, & everything changes. Sham discovers an artifact that sets him on a new quest, ultimately leading him (& the reader) to the eccentric Shroake family of Manihiki . He also gains an animal companion that he nurses back to health, having accidentally injured it while fighting off naked mole rats – Daybe the daybat.

What Sham found in the wreckage was a memory card containing pictures or “flatographs.” One is of two serious-looking children beneath a strange archway; another is of something Sham can’t quite comprehend – an unheard-of single rail line making its solitary way into the distance. His reaction to both these images is an unquenchable desire to find both the children & the impossible rail line, & I must admit that his determination did strike me as slightly implausible.

OK. Now it’s time to talk about *Moby-Dick*.

The narrator of Melville’s *Moby-Dick* introduces himself by putting us on notice that he is telling a story, not relating fact. Is his name really Ishmael? No matter – that is what he asks us to call him. How long ago was this journey? Not important. But there is more to be said about the relationship of *Railsea* to *Moby-Dick* than I could hope to cover here.

I can’t help but mention, however, two relevant passages from Chapter One of *Moby-Dick*. The first is a description of Manhattan:

Its extreme down-town is the Battery, where that noble mole is washed by waves, and cooled by breezes...

Well that is just a Miévilian vision ripe for the picking, the island of Manhattan as giant mole, burrowing in the earth of the sea. Then, this:

Were Niagara but a cataract of sand, would you travel your thousand miles to see it?

Land & sea – reversed. *Railsea* seems, in part an attempt to answer this question: if the ocean were filled with dirt instead of water, would you want to read about it?

So. Where were we?

The Shroakes. Two of the Shroakes’ three parents perished the

train that Sham found wrecked. Sham eventually gets to Manihiki, bringing Caldera and Caledero “Dero” Shroake confirmation that their two absent parents have met an untimely end. They, in turn, relay this sad news to their reclusive third parent, Dad Byro, & begin making plans to complete the interrupted journey.

Here, I wanted more information about what the two Shroakes were looking for, to hold my interest over what is a lengthy trip. The Shroake family did remind me (pleasingly) of Madeleine L’Engle’s Murry family in *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) & also characters created by Joan Aiken, who is mentioned by Miéville in the acknowledgements.

The pace of the plot increases as the story goes on, with trains racing across the vast railsea, seeking secrets and prey. There is an episode where Sham is rescued & cared for by the nomadic Bajjer people, sailors on the railsea; they become important later, & the role their expertise plays could be a nod to Queequeg’s useful coffin in *Moby-Dick*.

To reveal much more about the ultimate destination of Sham, Captain Naphi, the Shroakes & their companions, would be to give away too much, so I will just say that the conclusion is at once surprising & quite satisfying. There are battles along the way – menacing Angel maintenance trains & the Manihiki navy are involved, & at the close, we are left in little doubt that Sham has at last found his calling.

Perhaps a few words about politics here?

The first thing to say is that, if I am not singing from the exact same political hymn sheet as China Miéville, I am certainly sitting in an adjacent pew, so when I object to what I see as political point-scoring, it’s usually not that I disagree with the point being made, but more with the fact of it being there at all, or being made less subtly than I’d like.

The best example I can give of this in *Railsea* is the use of “defoliant” by the Manihiki navy to blight swathes of the Bajjer’s railsea habitat. Encountering this took me out of the story; immediately I was thinking ah, I get it, that is the US military in Vietnam, using Agent Orange. I am old enough that I watched reports from the Vietnam War on the nightly news, so my reaction is necessarily different than that of YA readers. Do they know about Agent Orange? If not, shouldn’t they? I think there is an argument to be had about whether this works well or not.

Another plot point, I initially saw as a one-liner, but, on reflection, viewed as more appropriate and nuanced. It is to do with the very existence of the railsea – how it came into being, what motivated the tangle of tracks. The more I look at current events, the more I feel that it is something that needs saying. I will have to wait to find out

how it strikes others.

Gentler hints are dropped: the captain of the *Medes* is a woman, the figurehead on the train's "prow" is male, the Shroake family has three parents. All of this was deftly handled.

Shall we close with a few words about, well, words? This is Miéville, after all.

I'll leave you with some examples of delightful phrases encountered in *Railsea* (I won't spoil my favourite pun by revealing it, but suffice it to say, it is literally to LOL)

moonpanther moldywarpe

rigours & vigours & bloody triggers

gallimaufryan coagulum of mixed-up oddness

Railsea is a wild ride. Different aspects of it will appeal to a wide range of readers, and it will certainly merit multiple re-readings. Miéville fans will be pleased to encounter many of the things they have come to expect from this inventive writer.

Penny Schenk lives on a narrowboat in Oxford. She works in a library, spends an inordinate amount of time on twitter as @galoot, and is as odd as her taste in fiction would lead you to believe.

This review first appeared on the author's blog on May 13, 2012.

<http://pschenk.wordpress.com/2012/05/13/review-railsea-by-china-mieville/>

THE NEW YORKER “SCIENCE FICTION” SPECIAL (2012)

Maureen Kincaid Speller

I took out a subscription to the *New Yorker* in 1999, the year after I came back from my first trip to the United States. It was a way of keeping in touch with my new discovery, *America!*, or at any rate, with a very particular part of the US with which I'd fallen in love, New York, and, hindsight now tells me, a New York that was either entirely inaccessible to me, no matter how much I might want it, or which had vanished long before I arrived. But reading the *New Yorker* was also about buying into a particular style. I discovered a lot of new writers thanks to recommendations from my US friends. Many of those writers were essayists rather than novelists, and many of them had contributed to the *New Yorker* over the years: the late Joseph Mitchell was a prime example, but I became particularly besotted with the writing of John McPhee. Possibly I subscribed to the *New Yorker* just to read his infrequent essays though I also relish the biographical essays; and when it's in the mood, the *New Yorker* can really crank out the investigative journalism. And then there are the cartoons ...

The fiction? There is a distinctive *New Yorker* style, undoubtedly. The magazine has its favourite authors, some of whom are authors I especially like, such as Louise Erdrich and Chris Adrian; others, I'm less familiar with but I'm happy to try them out. Sometimes this is successful, sometimes less so, but I try to keep an open mind. The *New Yorker* would not be the first magazine to spring to mind if I'm thinking about science fiction, the fantastic, fantastika, whatever, but it has, in the time I've been reading it, flirted with it in fiction and in its non-fiction. See Chris Adrian again for short stories that remind me of Sylvia Townsend Warner, an excerpt from Karen Russell's *Swamplandia* springs to mind, and I recall essays by Michael Chabon, about Neil Gaiman, to name but a few.

And now we have the *New Yorker*'s first sci-fi issue. It is perhaps annoying that the *New Yorker* doesn't editorialise about its own content so we'll never know for sure what its intention was in creating this issue. One can only speculate, and of course I am going to do that, as others have already done.

Let's start with the cover, the first thing that people are going to see. I've already seen complaints that the magazine should have asked this artist or that artist to do a special science-fiction cover. My immediate thought was 'why would they do that?' This is the *New Yorker* after all, and the cover is situated firmly within its customary

cover aesthetic, and by a regular cover artist, Daniel Clowes. Looking through the slideshow of Clowes' *New Yorker* covers, he's a good fit for this issue as he has incorporated sf tropes into previous covers. He seems to have a taste for the gently ironic and is not adverse to mocking those who make a big production number out of things that are really straightforward. I particularly like the *New Yorker* cover where a young gun is trying to design a flying car while a middle-aged man cruises past his office window in a spacesuit rigged as a flying machine. Indeed, given he is a comics artist and cartoonist with a retrospective currently on at the Oakland Museum of California, he seems to me to be a more obvious choice as cover artist than, say, Bob Egging, one name I saw put forward.

However, the demand that the magazine should use a recognised sf artist already points to an assumption in various quarters that the *New Yorker* should first of all be embracing the genre as understood by hardcore sf fans, and various subsets thereof, and that secondly, if it is going to embrace the genre, it should make damn sure that everyone knows that from the outset. I'd hazard a guess this was not quite what the *New Yorker* had in mind.

But let's go back to Clowes' cover. What is going on here? At first glance we have what looks like a fairly staid party in someone's apartment. Little drinks, canapés, people talking. Six people: middle-aged white woman, perhaps the hostess; middle-aged white man, with beard and glasses, looks like he might be an academic. Is it his apartment? Don't think so, not least because the bookshelves are artfully empty. I've never yet met a real academic whose bookshelves aren't stuffed solid. And anyway, to the far right of the picture is another white man who, like the woman to the far left, is only partly in the picture. As well as framing the scene, his expression mirrors hers; their collective consternation seems as much directed to the damaged wall and books as to the appearance of three gate-crashers at their party.

And back again to the centre of the picture and to the male academic. He looks startled, as indeed one might, but more taken aback than horrified. Next to him is another middle-aged woman, this time a woman of colour; she is visibly startled by these apparitions; is there a slight hint of revulsion in her expression? In front of them is a young man, who might as well be a younger version of the middle-aged academic: the dress sense is the same, although he has different glasses, no beard as yet (but he carries the other badge of office of the male academic, the book under the arm) and it is not difficult to see what he is likely to become. This could so easily be a faculty party, with the man on the far right as the administrative head of the

department, the woman on the left his anxious-to-please wife.

However, there are four other figures present. Three of them are bursting through the wall, but we'll leave them aside for a moment. The figure I want to consider now is the woman we can't see. Right at the centre of the cover is a young woman with her back to us. She is strikingly bright in comparison to the others in the room, with her yellow hair, her black sleeveless top and a string of white beads (pearls?) round her neck. Who is she? What is she doing there? Critically, what is the expression on her face?

She is the one figure in the room who appears to look directly at the spaceman who has burst through the bookshelves; all the other figures look at him side-on, although the perspective of the picture makes it difficult to tell how far into the room he and his companions have actually intruded. Except, of course, that he doesn't seem to have stepped over the threshold of the hole in the wall at all, and a closer look suggests that the young woman is looking straight past him, to the green blob behind him. In fact, looking even more closely, the spaceman – young, dark-haired, more forehead, chin and teeth than seems feasible, plump-cheeked, redolent of apple pie and bubble-gum, the wholesome all-American sports jock – isn't so much gazing at her as past her, towards the viewer outside the picture.

And what of the spaceman himself? The epitome of science fiction, certainly 1950s comic-book style yet he doesn't quite ring true, either. He is a little too young, perhaps? Not exactly craggy Dan-Dare style, more teenage boy living his dream. And the blob-monster and the robot seem to be his companions rather than his adversaries. One might initially read him as the space adventurer who gets the girl, indeed who has come to rescue the girl from the dreariness of a mundane faculty-party existence, although we might suspect that 'rescue' would involve marriage and a Bradburyesque existence in astronaut-suburbia instead, but he is obviously not interested in her at all. Perhaps he wants us to admire him in his spacesuited glory with his whacking great raygun.

It is at this point we might begin to wonder whether this is a literal portrayal of a fantastical event or whether, within the terms of the picture, we should read it in a more metaphorical way. There is something about the way that hole in the wall seems to hang in space. Yes, it's surrounded by damaged books but in real terms, if that is a blaster, wouldn't the books be burned rather than have their corners blown off? Come to think of it, doesn't that gun look rather disproportionate? So, if this is not a real incursion into the ordered world of the faculty party, what is it?

I'm very tempted to interpret it as a thought bubble, the collective thought bubble of a group to whom the young woman, the

focus of this tableau, has just said that she reads science fiction. The apparition, then, is their collective perception of sf as being garish, filled with aliens and astronauts with jutting chins and rayguns. This issue of the *New Yorker* then might be seen as offering a corrective to that old-fashioned view, instead suggesting that there is more than one way of looking at science fiction. The contents represent the young woman's view of sf. This is in turn problematic in that it might be interpreted by hardcore sf fans as a rejection of their ways. And perhaps it is in that the contents are, after all, a *New Yorker* take on sf. Then again, what might have happened if they'd picked up a *New Yorker* with a Bob Eggleton cover and found inside Jonathan Lethem, Junot Diaz, Sam Lipsyte and Jennifer Egan. Just as much consternation as we see on this cover. Go figure.

In which case, it is time to consider the contents. The first 57 pages consist of the usual *New Yorker* diet of listings and short pieces, the editorial being about Obama and Syria. There is a distinction made in the contents page between 'sci fi', fiction and several non-fiction pieces, as well as two pieces in the critical section; investigation reveals that the 'sci fi' section comprises a series of very short memoirs by writers (Ray Bradbury, Ursula Le Guin, China Miéville, Margaret Atwood, Karen Russell and William Gibson). There is a certain flavour of 'the usual suspects' about the writers but they are for the most part regular contributors to the magazine so it is not surprising they've been called upon again.

Of the four pieces of fiction, three, by Lipsyte, Lethem and Egan, are in my view not exactly taxing pieces of contemporary sf. The Lipsyte and Egan fall into that category of 'experimental form' which is too easily mistaken for sf. There are hints in Lipsyte's 'The Republic of Empathy' that one of his characters is moving in and out of alternative versions of his life, but what is most striking about the story, apart from that same character being wiped out by a drone strike on his own front lawn, and not forgetting the interlocking multi-viewpoint narrative, is the fact that Lipsyte's characters are, for the most part, aware of their own fictionality and deliberately foreground that fact. Is it science-fictional? Probably not, and I doubt *New Yorker* readers are unfamiliar with this as a narrative form away from science fiction. For certain kinds of genre readers who prefer a straight linear narrative it may well be more of a problem.

Jennifer Egan's story was famously produced in a series of installments on Twitter, which I suppose might be perceived as science-fictional in and of itself, though equally it might be argued that it more than adequately demonstrates the shortcomings of Twitter as a medium for fiction. The last piece of fiction I read by Egan was in fact a list and one has a sense that she seems to enjoy

using this particular form. However, while some might see it as being achingly, post-ironically postmodern or some such to me it feels more old hat than anything, and not even having your second-person viewpoint character apparently festooned with surveillance implants makes it any more science-fictional than it already is ... or indeed, isn't. Though I concede it might have a certain novelty value if one is unfamiliar with such tropes.

The same might be said of Jonathan Lethem's amusing squib about the Internet within the Internet, though this is less about the internet itself, more about social behaviour in groups. One has never needed the internet in order to form a clique.

Which leaves us with Junot Díaz's 'Monstro' which would not look out of place in any one of half a dozen more obviously sf-oriented publishing venues. Set in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, this is a story of a mysterious plague, La Negrura, The Blackness, which begins to infect refugees in the relocation camps of Haiti. Which particular relocation this might be, Díaz doesn't say; one thinks immediately of the camps created after the recent earthquake but Díaz offers sufficient details to suggest that the story is a little further into the future though, of course, it may be that those camps still exist. But the nature of the future as such is not what interests Díaz; his focus is on what's happening in it. Our narrator is a young man, a university student, hanging out with a group of wealthy young Dominicans, marking time while his mother dies, chasing girls, one in particular, and the new disease doesn't really impinge much on his life. He has other things to do while, as he puts it, 'watching the apocalypse creep in'.

We might assume, and anyway he tells us, that he survives whatever the main apocalyptic event is, whatever it is that turns him into a 'time witness'; the nature of the events remains unclear. The narrator describes what happens to the sufferers of La Negrura but has little analysis to offer the reader. He is trapped in the thick of it, particularly once the island comprising Haiti and the Dominican Republic is cut off. Díaz is again using conventional sf tropes – the mysterious plague, the odd behaviour of the infected, the mass killings by the Possessed, the bombing of major population centres, the nebulous sightings of 'Them' – but while this is not precisely a polite catastrophe in the Home Counties, neither is it exoticised by its setting or its participants. The tone of the story is perhaps best summed up in the narrator's response to stories about the nature of the mysterious attackers: 'Forty-foot-tall cannibal motherfuckers running loose on the Island? Negro, please'. The narrator, more accustomed to Brooklyn though the DR is his family's home, is

simply incredulous.

Indeed, there is a lot more to dig out of this story about othering, expectations of settings and so on, but that was not the intention of this article. Instead, I'll leave it at saying that Díaz combines his Dominican roots and his long-standing familiarity with science fiction to produce a good solid story told by a relative outsider, trapped in an unfamiliar place. It is open to interpretation and indeed I am most intrigued to see how non-sf readers would respond to it.

If the *New Yorker* and I don't see quite eye to eye over the fiction, though I can see why such choices might be made, things get more interesting in the non-fiction section. The memoirs that make up 'Sci-fi' are boxed out, almost like advertorials, and perhaps in a way that is what they are: testimonies about the life-affirming properties of science fiction and how it shaped the lives of those writing, rather than people extolling the virtues of prescription drugs and financial packages (oddly enough the *New Yorker's* actual financial page is always boxed out in the same way, as though money is faintly vulgar and needs to be corralled). At the same time, I couldn't quite shake off the feeling that the boxes were also there to protect ... well, what, the rest of the magazine? The other thing that strikes me is how inevitably they historicise sf, position it as a thing of the past, a thing of childhood, even though all these writers, yes – even Margaret Atwood, work with the material now (though here I must excuse Ursula Le Guin, who writes instead of the problems of trying to get an sf story into *Playboy* with a female byline).

Even Colson Whitehead's excellent 'A Psychotronic Childhood', detailing the genesis of his love of horror films and incidentally showing how one acquires critical judgement, has its face turned firmly to the past (and god forgive me, at one point I did wonder whether I wasn't in fact reading a real-life version of Pinkwater's Snarkout Boys stories. Indeed, while checking that I hadn't muddled them with *Lizard Music*, I learned that a third Snarkout Boys novel, *I Snarked With a Zombie*, was planned but not written). At a critical level I am, I admit, mostly blind to film so it is interesting to read about Whitehead's filmic education. At the same time I found myself wondering if a secondary function of the article wasn't to demonstrate to genre readers that Whitehead was, so to speak, 'one of ours' while reassuring other readers that it was ok to put *Zone One* down to a misspent childhood.

The late Anthony Burgess's article on the genesis of *A Clockwork Orange* reaches even further into the past. Again, it's well-written, a fascinating meditation on what it means for society to intervene in the control of behaviour, but other writers have written about their fiction since 1973. On the one hand, it's good to have this article

back in circulation; on the other, it seems to reinforce the notion of sf as an historic literary artefact.

The two critical pieces focusing on sf take a similarly historical line. Laura Miller's 'The Cosmic Menagerie', on the physical appearance of early fictional aliens is a good general historical overview for the uninitiated, referencing the likes of Camille Flammarion (Lumen) and J.-H. Rosny aîné ('Three Science Fiction Novellas: From Prehistory to the End of Mankind' (Wesleyan)) alongside more familiar writers such as H.G. Wells, as well as mentioning a number of critics such as Brian Stableford and George Slusser (consistently referred to throughout as Slosser; so much for the much-vaunted fact-checkers of the *New Yorker*). Emily Nussbaum's 'Fantastic Voyage' tries, to some degree, to get to grips with the idea of the 'fan' and the tv series, with particular reference to *Doctor Who* and *Community*. There is no doubt that she 'gets' it in terms of discussing the intensity of that relationship, though one might argue too that she indulges in 'fan service' in that she plays to the geek mentality rather than considering it a little more rigorously. Are tv shows and their fandoms always 'so much larger when you're on the inside'? Possibly, but I wouldn't have minded her thinking about the possibility of there being edges. Overall, these articles offer history rather than context; the memoirs, by contrast, offer context but the history is, inevitably, sketchy.

So, let us return to where we started, to that thought-bubble spaceman and his intergalactic friends, messily intruding into an ordered world of panelled rooms, just enough books, the polite canapés and the modest glass of fizz, and to the girl who brought him into being when she cried sci-fi. If, as I suggest, he is a composite of the preconceived ideas of five people in that room about the nature of sf, do the contents of the *New Yorker* represent the sixth person's view of it? The contents present an alternative view, certainly, but they seem to me to be working terribly hard, maybe a little too hard, to establish a pedigree for sf beyond the standard genre sensibility. Time and again, we are assured that sf has a history, a long history; that well-known writers, even almost-Pulitzer-winning writers, care about sf. It is as though the *New Yorker* is telling us that it is ok to like science fiction, all sorts of science fiction, because it has made us what we are. Having said that the *New Yorker* itself was never that likely to include overtly genre stories; the Diaz comes closest but in such a way as to satisfy those who think they don't like genre as well as those who know they do. But mostly it talks about genre without actually performing it.

As to whether that is a good thing or a bad thing? In truth, I do not think for a moment it matters. I no longer see any point

in being an evangelist for the healing properties of genre, not least because there are as many ways of defining sf and fantasy as there are people queuing up to define it. To imagine that the *New Yorker* should be out there attempting to convert its readership to hardcore genre sf is both absurd and to make unwarranted assumptions about *New Yorker* readers. It is safe to assume that many *New Yorker* readers already know what sf looks like, thank you, and that they have places to go to find it. It's probably equally safe to assume that the rest had little interest to begin with and stuffing it down their throats now is unlikely to make most of them change their minds. At best, one might say this issue presents an idea of what sf might look like for some readers, and they can follow it up if they want. Of course, there is the risk that for some, this is a diluted extract of sf, to be taken with pinched nose and a reassuring 'there, that wasn't as bad as you thought it would be, was it?' Then again, so be it. But equally, it perhaps wouldn't hurt some genre readers to take a few steps beyond their own preconceptions about sf and take a look at this *New Yorker*.

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<http://paperknife.maureenkincaidspeller.com/2012/06/all-right-have-it-your-way-you-saw-man.html>

EMBASSYTOWN (2011) BY CHINA MIÉVILLE

Lavie Tidhar

Introduction, or, Fit the First

I have been struggling to come to terms with *Embassytown*, the latest novel by that most photogenic of genre writers, SF and fantasy's Marxist *Prince of Tides*. I have been searching for a single argument, a coherent framework with which to argue the novel, yet had been unable to. How, then, to articulate what I found so confounding, so irritating at times, about this big, well-received novel?

It occurred to me at last that my failure to discuss the novel was exactly for those terms. I was seeking a single line of questioning, a way of viewing *Embassytown* as a solitary edifice when, in fact, it is not that thing at all. (It is a thing which is like another thing yet it is not that thing, to take a metaphorical page from *Embassytown* itself).

It seems to me a far better way of viewing *Embassytown* is as a collage – “a work of formal art, primarily in the visual arts, made from an assemblage of different forms, thus creating a new whole,” to quote that most democratic of encyclopaedias, the student essay haven that is Wikipedia. I'd argue that, contrary to appearances, *Embassytown* is far from a unified argument; rather it is a patchwork tale, its moving parts themselves parts of other works, thus creating a post-modernist novel, one that borrows upon, and freely and ironically incorporates, various and sometimes conflicting narratives.

It is a paradoxical novel in several respects, most prominently, it feels to me, in the way it attempts to subvert – and yet becomes subjugated by – narratives of colonialism. It is also fascinating to examine it in view of the shift in Miéville's methodology over the course of his career to date. Let us, then, pick an approach almost at random...

1. Post-Modernity and the Novel

One of the things I noticed almost immediately about the novel – indeed, one of the core causes of initial confusion in my approach to critically reading it, is how it borrows, both covertly and overtly, a range of textual approaches to different parts of itself.

It begins. And almost immediately we recognise the framework we are in, for it is one acknowledging and paying homage to the works of Samuel Delany, and in particular to *Nova* (1968) and

Babel-17 (1966).

Let us refer to this first section as the Immer Section.

The Immer is a hyperspace “ocean”, in which Immersers travel in ships. That “space is an ocean” gets its own TV Trope entry is unsurprising, but suggestive I think. For all that *Embassytown* is presented very specifically – by marketing and PR people, and various readers/bloggers – as science fiction, it can easily be read in terms of fantasy: the immer as a literal ocean, Embassytown a colony on the edge of a foreign continent. This is suggestive of the fluidity of genre found in all of Miéville’s work *Perdido Street Station* (2000), which is presented as fantasy, can nevertheless be read in pure science fictional terms (and has indeed won the Clarke Award for science fiction).

But to the Immer. Our heroine, Avice Benner Cho – and notice that non-Anglo surname, for it is pretty much the only such you will see in this novel, and we will discuss names in much more detail in a moment – well then, our heroine, Avice Benner Cho, child of *Embassytown* (a remote colony on an alien world), grows up and becomes, to some extent, the Mouse, one premier point-of-view character from *Nova* who is, to again lazily quote Wikipedia: “Pontichos Provechi, a young Gypsy from Earth, who, by age 18, has led an extremely varied life, and is just beginning to work in a starship navigation crew.”

Avice goes off into space and, for a time, we think we’re reading a Delany novel. Avice travels around; meets and falls in love with a man, whom she marries; and at last she had her partner, a linguist, return to *Embassytown*.

And cut. And end part one of the collage, and a transition into another narrative altogether – *Nova* abandoned, its mysteries unrevealed, Delany let loose as we open the fan that is *Embassytown* further.

And suddenly we find ourselves in a little mystery. It is, almost, a Cozy Mystery, in which “the crime and detection take place in a small, socially intimate community,” where “The detectives in such stories are nearly always amateurs.” Wikipedia again, I’m afraid. But you get the gist, if not the authority of a weightier text.

The mystery in this case is the arrival of the new Ambassador – the nature of Ambassadors, with their curiously capitalised As – the nature of Avice’s being a Simile to the strange aliens who populate this planet, called the Ariekei – and the nature of Language, that strange, artificial construct of a Novum that is both the heart and the heart sickness of this novel. But we will discuss novums and their nature (do they, like a Snark, always look grave at a pun, for instance? Such questions keep us up late at night). Awaiting the arrival of the new Ambassador, we slowly find out that Ambassadors are conjoined

twins, two humans melded together by drugs and training into thinking and acting as one – since Language, it turns out, can only be spoken by two mouths, the Cut and the Turn. The Ambassadors all have names like MagDa and CalVin – the double capitalization suggesting the two individuals comprising that single Ambassador.

Anyhow.

It is both Cozy Mystery and classic Science Fiction, a way of Learning the World – or, more accurately, perhaps, a way of Teaching Us The World (and please take notes, you at the back!).

Anyhow. The Ambassador arrives and we promptly exist this stage of the proceedings and progress on to...

A zombie movie?

Yes.

If you're in any doubt as to the validity of such a statement, here is the author giving us an explicit wink:

Artists plumbed our archives, digital archaeology, back millions of hours, to the antediasporan age. They pulled up corroded ancient fictions to screen.

“These ones are Georgian or Roman, I gather,” one organiser told me. “They talk early Anglo, though.” Men and women bled of colour, in clumsy symbolism, fortified in a house and fighting grossly sick figures. Colour came back, and protagonists were in an edifice full of products, and sicker enemies than before relentlessly came for them. We read the story as ours, of course. [pg. 255]

Miéville is, of course, making a reference here to the George Romero film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), in which a group of survivors in the midst of a zombie apocalypse find shelter in a shopping mall. This section progresses in its zombie movie idiom, yet it is not merely a zombie movie narrative. It is, in fact, closer to the curious Canadian production of *Pontypool* (2009), a zombie movie which deals explicitly with language – particularly, the theme of language as a virus – and which itself builds on, and explicitly references, the Neal Stephenson novel *Snow Crash* (1992).

The Language spoken by the new Ambassador, EzRa (I do wonder, by the way, how this novel will be translated into a language that doesn't use capital letters. It is rather Capitals Intensive), proves to be wrong, somehow. It is, in fact, addictive (thankfully not Addictive!), and causes the previously calm aliens to turn into crazed junkies of Language. I have seen one person on Twitter – making the jump directly from Miéville's first novel, *King Rat* (1998) to the present one – make the reference to London's 1990s rave scene, which seemed to me quite astute (it is, of course, the subject of much of *King Rat's* narrative). And so the zombie-junkies of language –

which is, we must admit and admire, a rather fun concept – engage in a war with our small plucky band of human survivors, until, at long last, we reach the end, in which things are more or less put right.

Read in this fashion, then, *Embassytown* is a post-modernist collage: it incorporates explicit references and homage to varying and contrasting genres and works, stacking them one after the other while telling an overall story within that disparate framework. As such it is quite a fascinating exercise – though it is worth noting we are merely engaged, at the moment, in describing the structure of the novel, its form of narratology. It may explain some of the difficulty in engaging critically with the novel but, once we’ve done this, we should, perhaps, turn our attention to more pressing matters – though we will begin gently.

Also, yes, we like using commas. So sue us.

2. Hunting the Novum, Or The Exuberance of China Miéville

*The third is its slowness in taking a jest.
Should you happen to venture on one,
It will sigh like a thing that is deeply distressed:
And it always looks grave at a pun.*

- Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876)

I have mentioned earlier the need to examine *Embassytown* “in view of the shift in Miéville’s methodology over the course of his career to date.” (yes, I just quoted myself!)

What do we (I) mean by that?

In order to understand this shift – or what it may mean – we need to examine that most pernicious, the most weed-like, of all of science fiction’s egotistical, kamikaze-like attacks on literature. In that I am referring, of course, to the Novum, or “New Thing” (that thing which is like another thing but is not that thing?), a term coined by Darko Suvin to describe the superiority-I-mean-unique-snow-flake-I-mean-oh-whatever! of science fiction.

One of the things, indeed, one admires most about Miéville’s work is its almost casual contempt for the Novum – that central, science fiction idea that drives the traditional SF narrative. Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* is magnificent in part for what I can only term its exuberance of novums. It is chockfull of ideas, casually tossed into the melange – anything from steampunk robots, Lovecraftian monsters, mad scientists, a transdimensional giant spider and the ambassador of Hell all happily comingling. I have heard the term “kitchen sink” applied time and time again as a sort of derogative term (“anything

but the kitchen sink”), which I find ludicrous. To me the idea of the single Novum is the offensive one. Novums, I would argue, are decorations, they are the tapestry and background scenery of science fiction, but in order for SF to also be literature it must never treat the novum as central. I realise this is a controversial position in some quarters, to which I say – pffff! and raise two metaphorical fingers in an age-old salute.

Anyhow.

Miéville’s exuberance continued with *The Scar* (2002) and *Iron Council* (2004) – concluding the Bas-Lag trilogy began with *Perdido Street Station* – continued, with different affect, in *Un Lun Dun* (2007) and concluded, at last, with 2010’s *Kraken*.

It is with his *The City and the City* (2009) that Miéville changes direction. We may think of it as the dimming of exuberance, or the point where Miéville abandons the novum-as-decoration and begins to treat it as central.

In *The City and the City*, it works.

It works, in fact, tremendously well. Here, Miéville takes a central novum to create a sustained, measured, superbly controlled novel emerging entirely out of the one central idea. That he achieves this – technically tremendously difficult – novel, is the high point in Miéville’s career and his claim to literary standing.

My feeling – to bring the discussion back once more to its main thrust – is that this does not happen quite as successfully in *Embassytown*. I find the central novum – the aliens and their Language – overwhelmingly artificial. Of course, the central conceit of *The City and the City* is equally artificial, and yet it manages to say something profound about our way of Seeing the World. What does *Embassytown* represent, however? Our way of Speaking The World?

Perhaps. Yet it does not seem to me to produce a coherent argument, for all that it borrows on some interesting linguistic theory. Perhaps it lacks the poetry required to discuss language in an SF context, which is something Delany, decades earlier, appears to me to be doing with more elegance (and certainly fewer words!). Where a discussion of language must, by its very nature, be like a poem, compressed and brilliant, *Embassytown* plods through page after page, genre after genre, in search of an argument it never quite finds. That this statement might appear controversial to those who loved the novel, and found within it, as one correspondent memorably put it, a “linguistic orgasm”, suggests perhaps less that I am wrong, and more than the people who study linguistic theory could do with reading a decent poetry anthology every so often. Yet, for better or worse, *Embassytown* is not a poem; it is a novel; or at least it exhibits some

of the characteristics of one. And we must accept it on those terms.

3. Let's Talk About Names, Baby (And, Also, Colonialism)

Names. I'm obsessed with names in fiction. Names are so important. They tell us so much about the characters; their background; their cultural history; their baggage.

What, then, are we to make of the world of *Embassytown*?

Remember, we mentioned Avice Benner Cho. Such an interesting name. Avice – from Old German Avis. In Latin, Avis means bird. Very well. Benner. From South German, Basket Maker. Finally: Cho. A Korean family name, similar to the Chinese Zhao, which is represented by the same character, and was the name of a feudal state during the Zhou dynasty.

What are we to make of that?

The problem is not really with Avice Benner Cho. It is that Cho is pretty much the only hint of a non-Anglo culture in the novel. Yes, Miéville makes a passing reference to Embassytown having synagogues and mosques: “There were other congregations: tiny synagogues; temples; mosques; churches, mustering a few score regulars.” [pg. 144]. The dominant religion is Christianity-based, with references to Jesus Christ – modified somewhat, of course, but still there. Christ Pharotekton. Maker of Lighthouses (which, in the novel, were artificial structures created, for unknown reasons, within the Immer – the hyperspace ocean of the first part of the novel).

And then there are... everyone else. Let's take EzRa. An interesting creation. Ezra, from the Hebrew. Ezra the Author (Ezra Ha'sofer) was a Jewish leader in the Second Temple period. An apt name for the Ambassador whose literal words act as a drug to rewrite the consciousness of the Ariekei. Or MagDa. Magda, short for Magdalena, meaning of the town of Migdal, and referring to Miriam of Migdal, or Maria Magdalene.

Or take CalVin. Jean Calvin was a French pastor during the Reformation; Calvinism is named after him. Here, incidentally, is the entry on him from the Bislama version of Wikipedia:

JOHN CALVIN

Hem i bin bon long 10 Julae 1509, long Franis. Hem i stadi long Paris blong hem i kam wan pris. Hem i bin wan bigfala lida long ol muvmen blong mekemgud Katolik Jos. Hem i bin laef plante taem blong laef blong hem long Switzerland. Hem i bin tijim se man nomo oli nating mo sore blong God nomo i save sevem olgeta. Hem i bin raetem plante tingting blong hem long saed blong

Baebol. Hem i bin ded long 27 Mei 1564.

It is a curious turn of fate that, of the three languages I speak, Bislama, a form of English pidgin spoken in the South Pacific island nation of Vanuatu, is one. It is beautifully elegant. *Hem i bin tijim se man nomo oli nating mo sore blong God nomo i save sevem olgeta.* He taught that man must repent before God to be saved.

What do we learn from this? It is inarguable that *Embassytown* is a novel preoccupied with themes of colonialism. The very nature of a pidgin is to act as a contact language between two or more different groups of people. Bislama represents both a colonial product, and a post-colonial reaction (as do the so-called “cargo cults”, which need to be viewed as a reaction to colonial oppression). Language (Miéville’s capital-L Language) is, similarly, the battlefield of colonialism, in which the humans first corrupt, and then convert, the native aliens to their way of Speaking the World. But this is not really my concern, for all that much had been made of that elsewhere.

What disappoints me – that vague sense of unease at the back of my neck, whispering as I read – is that Miéville, like so many Western SF writers before him, has made the implicit decision that the future belongs to today’s dominant culture. *Embassytown’s* future is Western; it is Anglo; it is, by definition, White. There are Jews in *Embassytown*, we’re told. But they’re a minority. There are Asians – witness Cho – but they are a minority. Humanity Uber Alles goes to the star, with its Germanic names and Christian-derived names, there to once again perpetuate the great European Colonial Project.

Of course, Miéville is too smart a writer to fall into such a trap. Isn’t he? Is he, perhaps, saying something profound about our cultural assumptions? Is he gently mocking the great American tradition of SF, its Campbellian (in the John, not Joseph, sense of the word) sense of Jews Need Not Apply (as recounted by Isaac Asimov in his memories of John W. Campbell, Jr., within his autobiography, *In Memory Yet Green* (1979) and elsewhere)?

If he is, it does not seem to me effective. *Embassytown* is yet another Anglos in Space novel, the base default assumption of the vast majority of English-language (and not a little of other languages, too) science fiction. It occurs to me Miéville has had the opportunity to do something interesting with *Embassytown*; to examine the interaction with his fictional aliens by humans not speaking English, whose cultural assumptions may be different to the ones his characters end up exhibiting. It would have been a challenging book indeed – perhaps too much, for a beast already as cumbersome – and also challenging, conflicted and experimental – as *Embassytown*.

Yet it is a niggling feeling; it is a sense of regret, and of

puzzlement, that afflicts the non-Anglo reader when coming upon *Embassytown*. Of missed opportunities, of tired acceptance of the sign that says, This Is Not Your Future.

There are other issues of colonialism at play here, of course. The very ending of the novel, its faux-resolution depends on some acceptance of – and some subversion of – colonialism within the framework of the novel, in which *Embassytown* is itself a colony of a larger power, and is attempting to become an independent entity. But it is of less interest to me, somehow, for the tinge of disappointment has already touched and been subsumed within.

Conclusion, of Sort, or Fit The Last

What, then, are we to make of *Embassytown*, a novel that, within the past 3,000 words of this rather cumbersome review, we have hardly scratched the leathery surface of? It is challenging – frustrating – ambitious – like this review it is, too, rather cumbersome.

That it is a novel about language – about Speaking the World – we can, perhaps, agree. That it makes much of similes, and metaphors, there is no doubt. One is tempted to cynically sum up *Embassytown*'s approach simply with the statement that A metaphor is a 3G simile, which has the benefit of fitting in a single tweet, if nothing else. The frustration one feels on reading *Embassytown* is equivalent only, in Miéville's oeuvre, to the resolution of *Un Lun Dun* with, literally, a gun. In both instances one is let down only by one's incredibly high expectations. Miéville is, quite frankly, the most significant – one of the only significant – writers engaged with that thing like a thing which is not a thing that is modern-day SF. To add a note of cautious damning, and to ensure making myself dreadfully unpopular in the process, it is a field characterised by a moribund sort of mediocrity, a fortress of a strange sort of Pulp Privilege, an isolationist village which then cries most dreadfully when it is not taken seriously.

Miéville is to be taken seriously. He has created one genuine masterpiece, *The City and the City*, and several works of importance, chief amongst them *Perdido Street Station*, which represented nothing less than a paradigm-shift in commercial fantasy fiction but – like *Neuromancer* in its turn – could not turn its numerous imitators into anything but moderately talented hacks.

Embassytown is, without a doubt, one of the most challenging and ambitious genre novels of the past year. That in itself is, perhaps, a comment on the state of SF/F today, but one, perhaps, best suited for another, rainy day. But still – that *Embassytown* is overwhelmed by its own ambition, that it is cumbersome where it should be light, didactic where it should be poetic, and self-indulgent where it

should be trimmed, does not detract from its overall effect, which is considerable.

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<http://lavietidhar.wordpress.com/2012/02/20/embassytown-considered-as-a-post-modernist-collage/>

ESSAYS

FEMALE CHARACTERS WITH AGENCY

Ana Grilo and Thea James

We've been thinking a lot about agency lately. Although this is a topic that has always been important to us as readers and reviewers, the subject has become increasingly present in our reviews as we read more historical fiction and YA (please bear with us, we will segue into SF/F in a moment). The former, because more often than not, female characters are written to fit certain prescribed historical molds; the latter, because much of the YA we read is of the dystopian variety and character agency is hugely important in these types of worlds.

Perhaps we should rewind and start with a basic question: what is "agency"? How do we prescribe agency to characters in fiction? Basically, for a character to have agency, he or she must have the ability to act. Mind you: acting doesn't necessarily mean doing huge, larger-than-life deeds. Merely being able to think is a form of action. And, needless to say, the concept of "choice" is intrinsically connected with agency, too.

In recent articles and discussion, we've noticed that many people appear to be under the impression that a character's agency is inherently connected with their strength. This is usually based on a certain idea of "strength" that is connected with power and physical abilities – or more to the point, much of the time, a strong character is immediately thought to be "kick-ass".

This is a fallacy. There are many different kinds of strength (Ana is particularly fond of the quiet type of strength), and a character's strength is not necessarily tied to physical prowess. Rather, strength of a character is integrally tied to how well a character is written by his or her creator.

For a character to be written well, he or she has to have some form of *agency*.

Which brings us to the point of this post.

Female agency in SFF, or the lack of it, is a huge deal, and it has been so for years. Very recently – and prompted by this very celebratory month – blogger Justin at *Staffer's Musings* has started a series of posts about character agency. Justin has invited authors from across the SF/F world to chime in, answer questions, and write posts on this very provocative topic.

The posts have been both fascinating and illuminating – particularly this post from author Michael Sullivan, who writes epic

fantasy in a world that resembles Medieval Europe.¹ In this post, Sullivan explains that in order to keep a sense of authenticity he has followed the social conventions of that age.

He goes on to say:

In that context, women do indeed have fewer opportunities than men. Does this mean that I think women shouldn't have agency? Not at all, and in fact I have a six book series where women break the bonds of convention and become as strong and independent as any of their male counterparts. It's true that early in the series some women are portrayed as locked in established roles, but I did so to provide a contrast to what they develop into.

We don't mean to pick on Mr. Sullivan but his words are unfortunately representative of the frame of mind that usually accompanies female characters without agency in SF/F, based on a dual fallacy. The first refers to the issue of authenticity in SF/F and the other to the very notion of what exactly defines a true-to-life representation of said authenticity.

In our opinion, to call for authenticity in SF/F when it comes to female character agency is completely bogus. If you have a made-up fantasy world with dragons, with magic, and other fantastical elements, why in the world the *only* thing that needs to be “authentic” is the lack of agency of women?

Not to mention, we completely disagree with the assumption that in lands like Medieval Europe women were not able to exert any kind of agency or power because of their restrictive environment. To assume this is to ignore the very human capacity for adaptability and strategy – not to mention the factual evidence that while medieval women certainly were far less empowered than modern women, these females were active, even leaders, in the commercial and political spheres. Author Kate Elliott wrote a post about this very topic a few days ago, and this excerpt below is of particular interest:²

Even in patriarchal societies of the past (and present!), women who might otherwise have been banned by custom or law from partaking in the public life of politics, power, learning, work and so on still had personalities. I can't emphasize this enough. People—even women!—have personalities regardless of how much or how little political power they have. People can live a quiet life of daily work out of the public eye, and still have personalities. Really! They can still matter to those around them, they can matter to themselves, and they can influence events in orthogonal ways that any self respecting

1 <http://www.staffersbookreview.com/2012/04/guest-post-michael-j-sullivan-on-character-agency.html>

2 <http://www.kateelliott.com/wordpress/?p=571>

writer can easily dream up.

So, all of this said, where can you turn for science fiction and fantasy that features female characters with agency?

We call your attention to the following list as a starting point:

Jacqueline Carey's Kushiel's Legacy / Naamah's Blessing Series

Jacqueline Carey writes female characters that are chock full of agency, that embody different kinds of power, that embrace different roles and explore issues of gender, sexuality, and politics. These books are amazing.

Juliet Marillier's Sevenwaters Series

If you haven't read Juliet Marillier yet, please, please rectify this huge gaping hole in your SFF reading. Marillier's heroines are all so very different – some are curious and brash with power, some are quieter, subversive characters. They all, however, are brilliant.

Mira Grant's *Feed*

This first book, starring the cutting, exposition-laden (in a good way!) narration of a female character named George (for George A. Romero) is an unexpected mix of medical procedural, political thriller, and zombie awesomeness.

The Incredible Assorted Works of Catherynne M. Valente (see: *The Orphan's Tales* duology, *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*, *A Dirge for Prester John*)

No one can write effortless, lyrical tone as well as Cat Valente – add to this her beautifully complex, matryoshka-style of stories within stories within stories, and you have one of the best fantasy writers of our generation.

Patricia Briggs' Mercy Thompson & Alpha & Omega series

Patricia Briggs writes two very different types of heroines in these two spinoff urban fantasy series – Mercy is capable, independent, no nonsense, and a refreshingly under-powered character in a sea of UF stereotypes that tend towards wearing black leather, trash talking and are immensely over-powered. Conversely, heroine Anna (of the A&O books) has lived through some terrible things and derives her power not from brute strength or badass attitude, but from her ability to

calm those around her.

Kate Elliott's Spirit Walker Trilogy

We love Kate Elliott's heroines, Cat and Bea, and admire how different these characters are while still maintaining their own separate power. A fantastic fantasy series that we highly recommend.

Lois McMaster Bujold's *Shards of Honor* and *Barrayer* (collected together now in one omnibus called *Cordelia's Honor*)

While Miles Vorkosigan may be the star of her Vorkosigan saga, the books all began with one very memorable heroine in Cordelia. (And plenty of empowered female characters abound in this series, too.)

Thea James (US-based) and Ana Grilo (UK-based) are the multi-ethnic, transatlantic duo behind *The Book Smugglers*, a book review blog that specializes in speculative fiction and YA. They are also weekly contributors to Kirkus' *Science Fiction & Fantasy Blog* and the editors of *Speculative Fiction 2013*.

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<http://www.fantasybookcafe.com/2012/05/women-in-sff-month-ana-and-thea-from-the-book-smugglers/>

DECOLONIZING AS AN SF WRITER

Rochita Loenen-Ruiz

As I write this, I am thinking of a young writer somewhere in the world who comes from a country just like mine. I write reflecting on the process of decolonization that I am going through as I consider history. This look back may be painful and I may have to face unhappy truths, but still it is important. I need to understand the source of the pain, to accept it, embrace it and find healing so I can reclaim what is mine and become the writer that I want to be.¹

Towards the end of the Marcos regime in 1986, Filipinos marched through the streets protesting not only against the dictator, but also against the continued presence on our shores of the American bases and the perpetuation of American influence on Filipino politics and economics.

While history tells us that we were granted independence in 1912, we know for a fact that the Americans never truly intended to surrender their foothold in our country. Their presence in the Philippines was guaranteed by the acquisition of a lease that granted them permission to establish and maintain military bases in the Philippines.

In 1991, this lease expired and as the newly installed Philippine senate refused to grant an extension of this lease, America was forced to vacate the bases. Ostensibly the Americans have left, but they haven't really left us and what the American occupation has left behind is a great wound on the cultural soul of the Philippines.

Mark Twain, in his essay, *To the Person Sitting in Darkness*, speaks out against the Imperialism of the United States and in particular against the actions taken by the Americans in subjugating the Philippines and appropriating the victory of the Filipinos against the Spanish colonizers.

Mark Twain writes in his essay about the mindset of America in those days: *We have got the Archipelago, and we shall never give it up.*

When I read this essay, I can feel the bewilderment of the patriots who had fought and won the war against the Spanish, and I feel utter sorrow in knowing that our supposed allies painted us as being uncivilized and not fit to rule our own country. I also feel indignation on behalf of the soldiers who fought against the Spanish and who realized that they were facing another, more insidious enemy. The thing is, where Spain very clearly presented themselves

1 This essay was inspired by a Twitter exchange between Djibril al-Ayad, Kate Elliott, Requires Hate, Aliette de Bodard and me.

as conquering overlords, America presented itself as a friend. It was an excellent strategy which confused us completely because what they did to the Filipino was a betrayal of that word “friend”.

Perhaps this explains why there is a keen edge to the anger we feel when we look at this history. We love and yet we cannot love because on the one hand, there is the face of friendship and the knowledge that the Americans were our allies. On the other hand we see the face of the trusted friend who betrayed us. We realize that we were never considered equals but in the eyes of our white allies, we were savages to be treated as children and to be condescended to as “the little brown brother”.

I quote history because as an SF writer who comes from a nation steeped in colonialism, this history is relevant as I seek to reclaim indigenous narratives and to break the impositions of colonialism on my culture.

In his book, *Oral Traditions of the Ifugao*, Manuel Dulawan writes of the colonization of the Ifugao and how the Americans employed public education as a means to neutralize and to Americanize the people. This move was so effective that subsequent governments adapted the principles set down by the American education system without realizing just how much damage this had done and was doing to the existing indigenous culture.

Dulawan writes:

“They have been brainwashed in the schools and in the churches and made to believe that their culture is backward and not worth keeping or learning. As a result, their sense of cultural values is disoriented.”

He describes the effects of this cultural brainwashing as being traumatic, sad and painful and writes of how many of those who inherited or adopted the Christian religion assume the conditioned belief that anything of Ifugao cultural origin is either no good or inferior.

In Ifugao culture, the passing on of traditions and rites are done by native priests who are called Mumbaki. They are assisted in this by the elder tribeswomen who are also trained in the oral tradition. In the past, young girls would spend time with the elder women who taught them the traditions, the chants and the songs. Young boys were sent to spend time with the Mumbaki who passed on to the next generation the oral literature, the rituals of the tribe and the practices which were inherited from the forefathers.

During the American occupation, the passing on of the oral tradition was suppressed as the native priests and their rituals were demonized not only by the white colonizer but also by the white

missionaries who followed in their wake. This meant that the true traditions and the original culture were slowly overlaid with the glaze of white culture and white belief.

Add all this up and it is no wonder that the psyche and the culture of the Filipino is so scarred and wounded to the point where we see the white and the west as being superior to us in all things.

Reading the history of conquest and colonization is a traumatic experience for the colonized. The Philippines went through not one, but two colonizers. I wonder how many colonizers other countries had to endure.

From reading these histories, it becomes clear to me that the erasure and subjugation of existing indigenous narratives were prioritized as these were viewed as being rival to the colonizing power.

Before the coming of the Americans, the Philippines had already endured four hundred years of colonization under the Spanish regime (1521-1898). It was a colonization that started with the suppression and the eradication of many of our indigenous culturebearers. Where the American colonizers sought to erase the indigenous culture through the use of education, the Spanish brought with them Spanish friars with the intention of subjugating and exerting influence on the native Filipinos through the use of religion.

Reading this part of my country's history, I see how the image of the strong indigenous Filipino woman was slowly and surely erased to be replaced by the idealized and hispanized version of what a Filipina should be. The liberated women of our country were shamed and called lewd and bad and this Christianization inflicted a sense of shame and lesser worth in us.

In her essay "Silencing the Babaylan", writer Gemma Araneta Cruz writes of the Babaylan and of the Spanish response to the presence of the Babaylan: Fray Alzina (the Spanish priest) and missionaries like him saw that the babaylan was a formidable obstacle to Christianization who had to be discredited, if not destroyed and forever silenced.

Who are these Babaylan and what role do these women play in the cultural life of the Philippines?

When these Spanish friars came to the villages, they noticed the presence of strong women of influence. These strong women were the Babaylan who not only had the power to heal, they were the authority on mythological and cultural heritage, they were the harbingers of ritual and they knew astronomy.

It was during these encounters that the Friars saw how the Babaylan were a major force and a possible obstacle to their goal of Hispanizing and subjugating the archipelago. It was then that the

decision was formed to disempower the Babaylan.

In *Betraying the Babaylan*, Araneta Cruz describes the technique of divide and conquer which the Spanish employed to disempower the Babaylan and effectively erase them. The first thing that the Spanish did was to alienate the effeminate Babaylan from the women priestesses. They also gained the support of the tribal elite in their cause to wipe out the Babaylan through the use of bribery and promises of power. With the male Babaylan and the elite on their side, the Spanish friars went on to accuse the Babaylan of being of the devil and of practicing witchcraft.

While I narrate events that are specific to the Philippines, I find myself wondering if such events were also mirrored in countries that were colonized by foreign powers. How pervasive is that other culture? How much has it stolen from or killed of the original culture?

When I look at my country, I see how much these things have harmed our psyche and I also see the resilience of our culturebearers who employed whatever means was at their disposal to preserve our culture. Even so, the wounds have spread deep and there are certain things that demonstrate to us how deeply rooted colonialism is.

Even to this day, we see young women buying whitening creams because white is perceived as the ideal color. I long to tell my fellow Filipinos, there is nothing more beautiful than kayumanggi (brown).

At Eastercon, a good friend asked me who I wanted to read my work. It was a question that was unexpected and perhaps because I didn't expect it, I gave the answer that came quickest to me. I want Filipinos to read my work and in particular, I want the people from Ifugao to read my work. Of course, I amended, I want everyone to read my work, but when I write, I am always thinking of the Philippines.

When I heard of the *We See A Different Frontier* project, I was immediately attracted to the premise of an anthology that seeks to bring attention to stories coming from people and places who have endured colonization.

As a Filipino writer who engages science fiction, I see myself in conversation with the SF that comes from the West. A great part of existing SF narrative is that of the colonizer, but my narrative is one wherein I strive to reconcile my decolonization with the truth of my country's history, the reality of where I am now and my vision of where I want to be.

I may transgress against the rules of SF because there are many things that I do not know about science fiction. I did not grow up surrounded and soaked in its language as science fiction fans and writers from the West. But I do know what SF looks like when seen with the eyes of the decolonized. It is a different SF, but it is

still science fiction. As my Clarion West instructor, John Kessel said: science fiction is when I point to it and say that's science fiction.

It is easy to be intimidated, and it is a struggle not to be so. And that's why I think it is important for a writer of color to see other writers and fans of color in the field of science fiction.

In the course of this journey, I have been told that I need to learn English better. That I can't possibly grasp the nuances of the English language the way a native English speaker does and that I will never be published as an SF writer.

And then, there are people who say that because I write in English, my narrative is contaminated and no longer true to the culture I come from.

The people saying those things may believe those things to be true, but I persist because I hear the voices of those who have admonished me from the moment I engaged this genre.

I hear the voice of my elder sister telling me: *Don't be stupid. Is this your dream or what? Are you going to let yourself be silenced by those words?*

There is my precious grandaunt who told me: *there are no limits. If this is what makes you feel passionate, then you must keep on writing it.*

And there are dear friends like Aliette de Bodard who, when I was thinking of giving up, asked me: *So, are you going to wait until someone else appropriates your culture?*

And so I go and commit SF yet again.

Rochita Loenen-Ruiz was the first Filipina writer to be accepted into the Clarion West Writer's Workshop. She attended the workshop in 2009 as the recipient of the Octavia Butler Scholarship. Her short fiction has been published both and outside of The Philippines.

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<http://djibrilalayad.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/decolonizing-as-sf-writer.html>

ON FEMINIST CHARACTERS

Rose Lemberg

During #FeministSF Twitter chat yesterday¹, a question was floated about what kind of women we want to see more often in speculative fiction, and what kinds of characters are feminist. Keri at *Feminist Fantasy* called for strong female characters: independent women who save themselves and make their own choices, and are not defined by men. This is, I think, the popular notion of what a feminist heroine should be like.

A discussion followed, and I said many things, and some people said I should write up my thoughts as an entry.² Here goes.

In the Twitter chat, I said:

For me, a feminist work showcases a variety of women, not necessarily a “typical” strong female character. I feel that by limiting feminist expression to strong female characters only, we are shortchanging ourselves. If male characters are allowed to be strong, weak, broken, insane, anti-heroes – why can’t we have a range of female characters likewise? I think that writing women in a non-stereotyping way, as people with desires, weaknesses, strengths – is feminist. I want portrayals of women that are as vivid and varied as portrayals of men.

Limiting the range of female characters to the kickass-heroine, we are saying that only one type of woman is worthy of story.

I say, that approach is helpful in a short run, but harmful in the long run.

Let me unpack.

The Warrior Woman is a powerful archetype. We are still fighting very simple battles. We live in a world where all-male Best-of anthologies are published, where women’s books are reviewed less than books by men, where all-men panels happen – heck, we live in a world where all-male groups are empowered to decide on a woman’s rights to her own body. Against these, the Warrior Woman stands tall. She is powerful and unafraid of power. She does not complain, does not bend, does not hesitate. She may grieve, but her grief will never put her in a corner. She towers above the cowering figures of those who oppress us. She lends us strength. She is an Example of how we want to be, powerful and free and unafraid. She is an archetype,

1 http://wiki.feministsf.net/FeministSF_Twitter_Chat

2 Additional and very important points were raised by Ekaterina Sedia (@esedia) and Alex Dally MacFarlane (@foxtailedgirl) among others; I encourage you to check out #FeministSF.

a token, and we need her – we need her in life and we need her in books and movies. She empowers us. There is not enough of her, yet.

But in a way, she also undermines us.

A subtype of the Warrior Woman is the Professional. She is a scientist, a doctor, an astronaut. She is fearless, competent, and wise. She is usually alone, surrounded by male colleagues who are sometimes goofy, immature, undersocialized, or just plain wrong. But never the Professional. She is never immature, never undersocialized, never abrupt, never wrong, never makes horrible mistakes with friends. She must be polite and rational and calm. She must never, ever be impolite or offensive, because women are so often demonized and underrepresented and barred from professions for various reasons (including ascribed overemotionality) that the Professional must always guard against it, always present a flawless Example. She is always, always a Token.

In classic theories of gender and language, women are said to be more polite because women are disempowered. Robin Lakoff (1975) theorized that lack of power is a key factor in constructing women's discourse; due to women's subordinate position in society relative to men, women would strive to minimize any threat to the people in power (men), and would therefore come across as more polite.

“Men are power brokers in most speech communities, while women are subordinate. Men can dominate the talking time, interrupt, and use a narrower range of speech variants because they don't need to worry about pleasing their interlocutors, especially when the addressee is a woman. Women by contrast need to be supportive and non-aggressive and must be linguistically flexible in order to survive in societies in which they are not in control” [Eckert and McGonnell-Ginet 1998, pg. 491]

This notion of power and powerlessness is very, very basic. As sociolinguists, we've moved quite a ways from it, and we know now that these generalizations about women and power in discourse are not borne out by the data. The data are, in fact, extremely diverse. (c.f. the work of Cameron and Mills in particular). Still, this notion of women as powerless, however inaccurate or incomplete, “provides a powerful symbolic meaning” [Cameron 2000, pg. 333] that affects both people's behavior and societal expectations.

What I am trying to say is, with the Warrior Woman (and her subtype, the Professional) always and only our Story, we as women act out our powerlessness – our desire to be invincible and able to ordain our own fate (Warrior Woman), and our desire to be Impeccably Competent in order to be Allowed to Exercise our

Chosen Professions.

I want women to dream their literary heroines from a position of strength. Just as we know by now (I hope) that women are not always polite, so we should be able to have heroines who do not always represent our oppression. The way to get there, I think, is through multiple, intersectional, and diverse (yet not stereotyped or cartoonish) portrayals of women. I want women to be able to be Neurotic Geniuses. I want the Amazing Inventor with bad hair and mismatched socks who yells sometimes and makes her friends upset, and sometimes forgets to eat, and sometimes forgets to do laundry. I want to read about the Magician who forgets to check her email and gets embroiled in a political struggle at her University, which she loses ungraciously. I want to read about Neurotic Creative Professionals – architects, writers, film directors, music composers – who, in throws of creativity, can be quite upsetting to be around. I want to read about a brilliant woman scientist who is also a miserable drunk. I want to read about the person in a wheelchair who loves her work, but who takes her disability really hard. I want to read about women who are child-free by choice, and women who are mothers. I want to read about mothers who decided to stay at home, and mothers who work. I want to read about women who are fat and not, women who struggle with weight and women who do not. I want to read about asexual women, bisexual women, I want to read about people who are genderqueer and trans and questioning. I want to read about menopausal women. I want to read about a heroine who is eighty two. I want to read about women who are mentally ill. I want to read a book with a feminist anti-hero. I want to read about kinky women, I want to read about dominant women and submissive women. And note, I haven't even touched upon the questions of racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity!

One side effect of writing a range of women is that we might not be comfortable with all of those characters, all of those women, all of those people. In real life, unless you are extremely holy, you won't be comfortable with all the people you know. But what we often do in genre is allow men to be uncomfortable and difficult, but erase the women who are less than warm and fuzzy-making.

What I am saying is simple. As I see it, limiting women's creativity to the Warrior archetype is limiting us in difficult ways that are ultimately bad for us, because this perpetuates our oppression. There are all kinds of men in speculative literature. There are *not* all kinds of women in speculative literature. There should be all kinds of women in speculative literature. Having all kinds of women who are human and complex will empower us to be ourselves, and

comfortable in our skins. It is not easy, but I think we can get there.

Rose Lemberg is an immigrant, linguist, mother, and geek. She edits *Stone Telling* with Shweta Narayan, and has recently edited *The Moment of Change*, an anthology of feminist poetry, for Aqueduct Press. Rose is currently querying her epic fantasy novel.

This article first appeared on the author's website on March 5, 2012.

<http://roselemborg.net/?p=245>

SCARPER, MONTGOMERY

Sam Sykes

Joy and annoyance come to every party together.

Whatever is worth talking about is inherently joyous, but because we have to talk about it, it will always be annoying. Because you and I read fantasy, we are in a very joyous position that the question of how seriously fantasy should take itself will always be something worth talking about. And because you and I have opinions on the subject, we're bound to annoy each other eventually.

And under the auspices of this revelation did I realize that very few things annoy me more than the word "escapism."

Specifically, the phrase "it's escapist."

Always offered briefly, intended as explanation but offered as excuse.

At some point when we're talking about fantasy, we will reach a chasm. It will be a very short gap to jump, bridged by the words "you know, I don't think we like the same things," but it will always seem huge to us because to confess that certain things don't work for us, we confess that there is no one great almighty answer to the question "what is good fantasy."

So instead, we use the phrase "it's escapist" and we stay firmly on our side of the chasm. The conversation grinds to a halt, anything else we might have said about the subject will never be said and we have to wait until the next time we talk about this to be annoyed all over again.

That's a big reason I hate the word. But it's not the only one.

We don't use the word "escapist" correctly.

In general, when someone offers up the phrase "it's escapist," it's code for "I know it's perceived as shit, but I like it." Thus, our minds make the connection that "escapist" = "shit" and escapist fantasy is shit fantasy in which half-naked dudes save half-naked babes from wholly-naked dragons. Or something.

The thing is, no one escapes into a bad book. They devour a bad book, maybe. But to escape, to inhabit another life in another world with another conflict, you need to be invested in it. You can't escape into a character you don't feel anything for. And if there's investment in the character, the world, the conflict, then the author, on some level, has done their job. They have made you care. More than that, they made you care enough to feel like you're there, in this skin on

those feet in this pair of boots on that ground.

We escape into good books. We merely visit bad ones.

We think that escapism makes us turn our brains off.

There is, for some reason, a private shame that comes from enjoying oneself. If you love a sweet, it must be because it's bad for you. And if you love a book that's mostly sweet, it must be bad for you, as well. So we say that we read the shallow stuff to turn our brains off, to take a vacation from our own thoughts.

Brains don't work like that.

Just by reading something, you are, in fact, engaged. And if you happen to enjoy it, even if you know (or think you know) it's bad for you, then your brain is actually probably very engaged. But because the story has an element that might be considered simplistic, straightforward or juvenile, we don't bother explaining why we're engaged.

We never say that we happen to enjoy the straightforward, unquestioning morality of the hero and, thus, we never have a discussion about whether that's a good thing or a bad thing. We look at what other people say about that morality and somewhere along the line, someone says it's juvenile, or shitty fantasy and we, having liked that, say: "Well, I just wanted to turn my brain off for a bit."

You didn't. You just didn't want to explain why your brain wasn't turned off the same as anyone else.

We use the word to explain away the success of what we perceive as bad writers.

We love to bash *Twilight*. It's a hobby. We love to point to its simplistic characters and laugh, we love to point to its juvenile plot and giggle, we love to point to its bland-as-dishwater writing and slap our own genitalia in raucous joy.

Until it comes time to point to its success.

And then we say "well, it's escapism. People enjoy escaping their own lives." Because, for some reason, this is a more palatable explanation than suggesting that there might actually be something to this book in which love is a dominant theme, in which holding hands is sexy, in which we admit that maybe there is a part of us that wants that for ourselves. And it's certainly less work to call it "escapist" than to perhaps wonder why it is these readers don't get love from books we like, why it is that readers seek out comfort in human contact rather than political intrigue, why it is that we can or can't do it better.

And suddenly, we have a very good conversation wasted.

We use the word to excuse the difficulties of books we perceive to be good.

We love to praise *Name of the Wind*. We love to point to its

complex plot and swoon, we love to point to its lyrical prose and sigh wistfully, we love to point to its thoughtful, vivid characters and say “yes, that’s exactly how it should be.”

Until it comes time to point to the fact that there are debatably very few female character in that book that didn’t exist to placate/satisfy Kvothe.

Then we say “it’s escapist. No harm in a little wish-fulfillment.” Because, for some reason, this is a more palatable explanation than suggesting that, for as far as we’ve come, we’ve still got a ways to go, that maybe we actually do crave that but haven’t figured out how to do it better, that maybe once in awhile the relentlessly bleak, politics-heavy, evil-son-of-a-bitch-of-a-protagonist grim-darkness that has become the norm in fantasy might not be authentically true to life as we thought it was. And it’s certainly less work to say “escapist” than it is to discuss why it is that our authors can sometimes fall into the same mistakes as their forebears, than it is to discuss why we exchanged one set of tropes for another, than it is to say that sometimes, yes, we fucked the pooch a little here.

And again, another good conversation is wasted.

Summation.

Look, I write a series in which a brooding young man, along with a girl with a bow and tight pants, a fearsome dragonman and a boy wizard that urinates fire duke it out in tremendously over-the-top battles full of bloodshed, banter and emotions running so hot it sometimes even makes me stop and wonder if I’m going too damn far.

I’m not a stranger to the concept of escapism.

But I call it “fun.” I like stories like that. That’s why I write them. And that’s why I discuss them. And that’s why sometimes I persuade readers to give the story about the boy-with-a-voice-in-his-head falling in love with the hissing-girl-with-identity-issues while they both stomp on a pile of demon corpses a try. That’s also why sometimes I’m forced to eat a little shit when someone says that a 125-page fight scene is really exhausting and why sometimes it feels like every groan-worthy fantasy trope is being paraded around with gleeful abandon.

Somewhere along the line, though, we stopped giving “fun” a serious meaning. We stopped enjoying stuff that makes us smile because, surely, it must be juvenile. We stopped admitting that sometimes holding someone’s hand is amazingly intense because, surely, that’s not as important as who’s going to assassinate whom. And we stopped admitting that sometimes we don’t have all the answers because, surely, we don’t read “escapist” books.

Call it “fun,” call it “escapism,” but don’t make the mistake

that it's bereft of meaning just because of that. And don't make the mistake that, just because it is fun, that it doesn't have to have something else going on.

Everything that is joyful must also be a little bit annoying.

Sam Sykes currently lives in the United States with his two hounds and, at any given time, is probably yelling at something inanimate. His fantasy trilogy, *The Aeons' Gate*, is available at all good bookshops. Else they aren't good.

This article first appeared on the author's website on November 12, 2012.

<http://samsykes.com/2012/11/scarper-montgomery/>

AN EVENING WITH WILLIAM GIBSON

C. S. Samulski

Downtown LA is hot despite a rare overcast day. That makes The Last Bookstore even hotter with its lack of serious air conditioning—a non-necessity for most typical LA evenings. The store is located on street level in one expansive corner of a building old enough to retain an Art Deco longing to it. In the windows, vinyl records fill the spaces between the lattice, and inside the smell of old books beckons and welcomes you like an old lover. The ceilings, covered in intricate geometric patterns, bring back a near instant nostalgia for *Blade Runner* (which was of course partially filmed in these same Art Deco spaces around LA). On one wall, something like a giant eye, or perhaps a Möbius strip, near fifty feet in diameter, constructed entirely out of derelict paperbacks, stares down on all of us. It is the kind of place one expects to find William Gibson on an average Wednesday evening.

Gibson appears like a revenant, slipping in silently, but his height and gangly nature are not easily hidden even behind the high shelves here. A long sleeve navy shirt and dark pants. Something denim and one step above chucks, with what looks like after-market laces, all fresh and clean, and striped socks that he happily shows off for the duration of the chat, sitting cross-legged and seeming very comfortable in the red leather chairs. Close cropped hair on a slightly bald head. Tiny eyes behind glasses that would not quite belong on John Lennon but come close. The man in the flesh. The discomfort of the heat is washed away in the newly electrified atmosphere of his presence. One can feel everyone leaning slightly out of their chairs, waiting.

If one was to create some kind of museum for major moments in the history of SF publication, the release of *Neuromancer*, Gibson's first novel, would have to be on it for several reasons. *Neuromancer*, though not the first in its cyberpunk milieu, is largely credited with popularizing its aesthetic both within SF and eventually the broader pop culture. (*Blade Runner* probably is owed some dues here, having been released two years prior, but whereas *Neuromancer* was successful from its outset, *Blade Runner* bombed in theaters.) Not only did the book popularize cyberpunk with fans, it dazzled critics. It's rare to see a first novel take a Hugo, but it happens. Winning the Nebula and the Philip K. Dick Award for the same is a whole different echelon of amazing. That's exactly what happened in *Neuromancer's* case.

Gibson often speaks disparagingly about the start of his novel

writing career, alluding to the fact he was just beginning to figure out short fiction when the request from Terry Carr at Ace came in for something novel length. Gibson says he responded monosyllabic, “Yes,” at a pitch of considerable terror and apprehension. Still, if you’ve read his short story collection *Burning Chrome*, you can see the distinct pieces that had already begun the gestation of this first novel. As Carr must have noticed, there was already something there and looking to escape the shorter form.

Much fuss is often made over this kind of success in fiction, particularly with a new voice, and much is further romanticized. Tonight Gibson recounts, as he has elsewhere, his amusement that people continue to discuss the novel’s drafting on a typewriter as though this is somehow to his hipster credit or part of the book’s particular magic. The more mundane answer, that the modern word processor was not yet in existence, and that it was written just the same as any other manuscript in that era, apparently eludes many. And yet you can tell there were hints that something important was in the making.

Gibson tells us of his desperation to get in touch with Carr after submitting the MS (past the contract’s deadline, uh oh ...) Of course this is in the era of pre-electronic correspondence, which gives the whole anecdote a more nightmarish overtone to our modern sensibilities, and even attempted phone calls go unanswered. After three months of terrible silence, Gibson is finally reduced to heading to a convention he hopes Carr will be at. Spotting the man coming down the escalator, Gibson approaches uncertainly.

“Did you get the book?”

“Yeah.”

“And what did you think?”

We laugh as Gibson describes the way Carr cocks his head back a bit as his eyes take on a half-lidded squint, the way Gibson’s voice imitates that of a man who knows a secret the rest of the world, even young Gibson himself, isn’t quite in on.

“It’s very interesting,” Carr says, and stalks off.

Very interesting, as it turns out, gets you a triple-crown of major SF awards and an explosively successful career that continues to thrill nearly thirty years later.

And yet.

If you love Gibson for *Neuromancer*, and the other two books that make up the Sprawl Trilogy, you might be a little disappointed with the trajectory of his fiction. His latest book he is here to promote, this time a non-fiction work called *Distrust That Particular Flavor*, expounds on this subject frankly. Gibson will be the first to tell you he has gotten ever closer to the immediate present with each

new trio of books. The Bridge Trilogy was set in his imagination of the 2000s, whereas *Neuromancer* began somewhere in the 2030s. The most recent trio, starting with *Pattern Recognition*, landed straight in post-9/11 territory, maybe even predating the Bridge Trilogy's timeline, but offering a distinctively more realist tone in a world both immediate and still defamiliarized by his unique take. Gibson has taken us from hacker cowboys and self-aware AIs and street samurais to fashion consultants and prescription addicts and the fascism of Homeland Security.

This is a very Ballardian move and J. G. Ballard, who is brought up as a strong influence and inspiration, continues to appear during tonight's conversation with a frequency that does not augur well if you want a return to futuristic Gibson. But the future and Gibson, it seems, have been wrestling with each other for some time. He even goes so far as to describe this trouble in one essay in the new collection: That nothing is new in our hyper-fast era (it's already old of course) and, at the same time, that everything has changed and that this struggle may be "the central driving tension" of his work.

It sounds like a fair self-diagnosis. Even Gibson can be somewhat contradictory on these last three works of fiction, describing how he used science fictional devices to examine and extrapolate present-day trends. At the same time, he acknowledges that he never got very far removed from contemporary reality. Succumbing to the realization that every SF story is ultimately about the time in which it's written, Gibson sought to head off the imminent patina that accompanies any unrealized future, and therefore all science fiction, by encroaching on the present instead. Like I said, Ballardian.

It's clear then that there is also a certain frustration with his earlier work and particularly with the assimilation of cyberpunk into the genre. He speaks candidly about his low opinion of the majority of genre fiction during that time and that he thought he and the other idealists could make it "a viable pop art" again. But cyberpunk, rather than overturning the genre, was instead successfully absorbed, he says, as if genre possessed "an unplanned capacity to protect itself." Once a thing is named by the media and accepted by the mainstream, "your sect will inevitably fall into baroque decay."

It's also clear he has a fair bit of disappointment with the current offerings of SF. He describes with great despair, how he "came back to SF and realized that the people who read it referred to the entire rest of fiction as mundane." As if, he says, glowering, one can compare Asimov and Cormac McCarthy and declare McCarthy the mundane part of the pair. He describes the state of epic fantasy in even more skewering terms as the "banal, Holliday Inn-like ruins" of Tolkien's originality. But he dithers hopefully here, mentioning Lev

Grossman's interesting intrusion into this space, and David Mitchell's in SF as signs of life.

Signs, he would argue, that his preferred reading list for SF still makes him an outsider.

You see, I think underneath it all, Gibson still wants to be the rebel. Still wants to be overturning tables at conventions and getting people riled up, arguing on message boards, any kind of riot really. It's ironic his own success may be part of his failure to keep that dissatisfied fringe agitated, so one can also see his move to the present as an attempt to distance himself from what was so easily assimilated.

And yet.

Out of left field, he begins to talk about his next book, which he describes as "way future," two futures actually, one deeply unfamiliar and one slightly more. One gets a *The City & The City* vibe from the way he details this parallel construction. He says "way future," as in, beyond *Neuromancer's* time line. Out there. As he tilts back to look at the ceiling, humming along with us eating up every word, a very reassuring feeling falls over me. Gibson has not given up on the future at all, he has simply been refining, preparing for a new perspective. These last three books, he explains, were to stretch his "yardstick for weird," by examining just how weird the present had gotten.

Now he's back.

"I'm really enjoying it in a different way. It's been a long time coming." He laughs a little to himself.

There is relief at these words, as if a breath I've been holding since *Neuromancer*, is finally being exhaled. And he stares at us with half-lidded eyes, head cocked back and grinning, this time in on the secret.

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<http://cssamulski.com/2012/09/an-evening-with-william-gibson/>

SF IS HERE, IT'S JUST NOT EVENLY DISTRIBUTED

Tim Maughan

“Being middle class in Britain has changed. Politicians and the media and many Britons still talk about “the middle class” as if it is a steady, secure, cohesive social group. They assume it is growing ever more populous and influential. “We are all middle class now” has been a favourite newspaper headline for decades, as long-term social and economic and political trends have weakened the upper and working classes....(yet) there is the beginning of a more ambiguous story: the increasingly competitive nature of middle-class life and the decrease in job security; Margaret Thatcher’s opening up of the classic middle-class professions, such as university teaching, to market forces; the slow decline of the great state and corporate bureaucracies; the downgrading of middle managers by new business ideologies.”

– Andy Beckett, *Guardian* 24/07/10



Being middle class in Europe or North America ain't what it used to be. You used to know where you stood. You used to know how everything worked. It was easy, certain things were almost guaranteed, there was a path to follow. Work hard at school. Go to university. Get a good graduate's job. Buy a house. Have kids. Go on holiday every year. Retire with a nice secure pension.

But now there's a dull hum reverberating through the suburbs, the disquieting sound of self-questioning. Things really ain't what they used to be. Worried you can't afford to go to university? Worried you won't get a job afterwards if you do? Oh, you'll probably get a job... but is it what you'll want? Will it challenge you? Will it pay you enough? Will it be the dream career your parents and teachers promised you you'd get, if you put your head down and worked hard? Will you be able to get a mortgage? Are you still going to be renting – or even worse – still living with your parents in your 30s? Can you afford kids? Do you even want kids? Is your next foreign holiday going to be anywhere as exciting as your obligatory gap year was? How is that pension of yours doing? Is it even going to be worth jack shit in 30 years time? Who is going to look after you when you're old?

Any crisis of identity or confidence for the middle classes is

also – undeniably – a crisis for science fiction. Science fiction is one of the great middle class cultural projects; an exciting, upmarket gated community where you need to show your credentials to get admittance. You're allowed into science fiction because you understand the greatest middle class-empowering construct of the last 200 years – you understand science. You are welcome in science fiction because you understand that scientists and engineers and astronauts are heroes. You are welcome in science fiction because you understand that rationality and reasoning and hard work can fix anything. And most importantly, you are welcome in science fiction because you're middle class and you understand that the future is yours for the taking.

And that is the biggest problem facing science fiction right now. The future isn't just sitting there waiting for the middle classes to take it anymore (well, at least not the middle classes in Europe and North America – it's very likely the future is up for grabs for the growing middle classes in China, India, Brazil and elsewhere – but that's another, potentially far more exciting story). If the future is just a bunch of very scary questions, rather than something that belongs to the middle classes and makes them feel special than what's the point of reading – or even writing – about it anymore?

So it looks like everything solid is melting into air, but it's not time to abandon ship quite yet. Science – oh rather speculative – fiction still has ways of making the middle classes feel special. In fact there's so many options it's hard to know where to start. What about zombies? There's no need to worry about the future with the zombie apocalypse because there isn't one. Instead there's nobody telling you what to do and no boring job you have to go to, which is pretty great in itself, plus you finally get to put all that knowledge, cunning and expensive gardening/cooking/sporting equipment you've amassed over the years to good use killing people your neighbors.

Zombies feel a bit passé? Then what about urban fantasy? Don't be put off by the word 'urban', and how it became this kind of catch-all media phrase for black music and hip-hop and scary poor children wearing hoodies – there's nothing that vulgar here. Urban fantasy does away with all of that and replaces it with werewolves and vampires. In effect it's pretty much the same thing – it's about middle class fear of inner-cities and the guilt of privilege – but it's a lot sexier reading about your stylised fears getting carved up by a hot white girl with midriff tattoos and a samurai sword.

Of course if you're really scared of the future, then the obvious place to turn to is the past. Again it's tough to know where to start. There's time travel, where middle class readers can go back to the blitz and see how plucky the working classes were – before they

got shell suits, Blackberry phones that they surely can't afford and a welfare state. Or if that's a little too recent or unglamorous there's always the Victorian era, when Britain truly was great and still had an empire; a real one – based on killing and talking posh, not just on cheap manufacturing costs and investing in currency like empires are now. The only thing they didn't have was steam powered zeppelins and robots dressed like Colonel Sanders, which is why speculative fiction had to invent steampunk – the empowering benefits of which have been outlined far more eloquently elsewhere.¹

And if none of that appeals to then there is always 'The Weird'. The only problem with The Weird is that nobody actually knows what the fuck it is, apart from perhaps a handful of writers and critics who don't want their more literary colleagues to think they like sci-fi.

Either way forget the future, because as far as science fiction is concerned the future is dead. There's still some interest in the far future – with the singularity, journeys to the exoplanets, wish fulfilling nano-machines and all the other things that'll never happen – but as far as any future that might be relevant? Forget about it, and forget about the present too. Both are too scary, and worrying and talking about very real, very scary and very relevant things isn't science fiction's job anymore. It was in the past, in the 60s and again in the 80s – it even was back in the 1890s – but now it's here to comfort the bourgeois, to provide them with an escape from the encroaching mediocrity, and to remind them how special they once were.

Because the lower classes – the proletariat, the working classes, the 'chavs', whatever you wish to call them – don't really have anything to do with science fiction at all. They don't have the credentials to get into the community, because they don't understand science and rational thinking – they don't have the education. And if you don't understand science and don't have an education then you can't claim or shape the future, can you? Every good, hard working middle class child knows that.

Which is odd, because you only have to pause and look around you and it's clear that being working class ain't what it used to be either. They're still being accused of being responsible for all the crime and the economic meltdown they had no part in managing, yes – some things will probably never change. But while they might not understand the science they sure as hell understand the technology – maybe not the way it's taught, maybe not the way it's meant to be

¹ <http://lavietidhar.wordpress.com/2012/06/25/fascism-for-nice-people/>

used – but increasingly they seem to be understanding the potential.

Take a look around. Right now, in those places in the cities and edgelands that middle classes are too scared to venture, there are working class kids creating new forms of music on stolen laptops and pirated software. There are working class kids hijacking corporate networks to organise violent protests against police death squads, and riots against corporate gentrification of their homes – protests that don't just pack up and go home when they're told to, or snitch on their never-really anonymous buddies at the first sign of law enforcement. And there are working class kids talking a language melange made from tech jargon, emoticons, repurposed slang and SMS message shortcuts that makes Nadsat² seem antiquated and pedestrian.

Put simply the working classes are living an often fraught, uneasy but always fascinating science fictional future right now, and are pushing the present in directions it is near impossible – but thrilling – to try and predict. If the genre continues to sneeringly ignore them, what they do and the futures they are trying to shape for themselves then it risks continuing to destroy it's own relevancy and existence.

The street finds its own use for things. Almost certainly. The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed. Perhaps, but maybe not in the way you think.

In 2011 Tim Maughan released the critically acclaimed *Paintwork*, a collection of three near future stories dealing with the roles of art, celebrity and globalisation, and his story “Limited Edition” was shortlisted for the British Science Fiction Association 2012 award. He is also a regular contributor to Tor.com and New Scientist's *Arc* magazine.

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<http://worldsf.wordpress.com/2012/07/30/monday-original-content-tim-maughan-on-british-sf-and-the-class-system/>

2 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nadsat>

BOYS WITH BABIES AND WOMEN WITH KNIVES: RETHINKING GENDER ASSUMPTIONIST POWER STRUCTURES

Kameron Hurley

I have been meaning to write a response to this article by Ursula LeGuin for some time.¹ Needless to say, when she says stuff like, “It’s amazing, given their different physiology and complement of hormones, how much alike men and women are in most ways,” I want to tear my hair out. This stuff comes off like somebody saying, “Hey, it’s remarkable that men and women are so... so... human! Like, together. Like, the same species.” This is why I prefer Joanna Russ over LeGuin.

LeGuin goes on to say: “it seems to be the fact that women on the whole have less direct competitive drive and desire to dominate; and therefore, paradoxically, have less need to bond with one another in ranked, exclusive groups.”

It’s one of those assertions that makes me wonder what sorts of groups of women LeGuin hung out with when she was young. There’s a reason movies like *Heathers* and *Mean Girls* and *Clueless* are so popular. Women organize themselves into competitive groups all the time. It’s just that the acceptable ways for women to be competitive are different than they are for men in this particular society. And when you take away a lot of those restrictions, when you put women into the same kind of competitive atmosphere as men in stuff like violent sports, you start to see pretty similar competitive behavior (including some of the misogyny).

This is the part LeGuin takes great issue with – by joining in with the competitive power structures of men, women have begun to organize themselves like men, and are now displaying all the nasty negative things that guys do who participate in this hierarchy.

It’s this little nugget of the essay that I agree with wholeheartedly, and it’s something I explore a lot in *God’s War* and the other violent matriarchies I build in my fiction. By participating in certain kinds of power structures, people will find themselves becoming the very monsters they hoped to vanquish. Looking into the abyss, and all that.

My argument has always been that there are certain types of hierarchical structures that just naturally turn people into assholes,

1 <http://bookviewcafe.com/blog/2010/12/02/a-band-of-brothers-a-stream-of-sisters/>

and if we tell people that organizing themselves into those structures is how to get ahead, they'll do it. It doesn't have anything to do with women having more "fluid" social structures than men. If we told guys that the way to get ahead was to stop being assholes and building hierarchies and instead pushed hard on non-hierarchical ways of ordering societies, we could do it. There have been, historically, plenty of societies that have done so. It just so happens that colonialism built very good hierarchies so it could conquer the world, and we're still mucking around in the aftermath of that, desperately flailing for alternative ways of organizing ourselves. But are these inherently male structures? I'm not so sure, and I think we should think long and hard before we make that kind of gendered assumption.

I'm reminded of the story of the group of monkeys that encountered a big poisoned dump of goodies. Because the strong, aggressive male monkeys ate first and most, they all died off, leaving the alpha females and young males to rebuild the troop. In the absence of aggressive hierarchy, they rebuilt their entire troop as a matriarchy and banded together to run off any encroaching aggressive males who stuck to the old hierarchy model. The males that stayed were the ones they deemed acceptable to the new, less hierarchical structure. They were able to rebuild their society in a less hierarchical way because the old hierarchy was abolished.

Lots of folks hear that story and think, "Well, yeah, the females were in charge now, and they're naturally more fluid and crap in their social structures, so they rebuilt it in a way that's more feminine." But I'd argue that it was the fact that females were victims of the abuse of a hierarchy that challenged them to rethink it.

Women have traditionally been oppressed and enslaved in societies. Women who break out of this role may in fact go on to oppress and enslave other women as well because they stay in a society that values people based on how many people they oppress, but if you were somebody who was oppressed and suddenly found yourself in a society without oppression, would you really seek out to oppress and enslave others the way you'd been?

I don't object to the rejection of hierarchical structures, of course, I just reject the idea that hierarchical structures are intrinsically a male thing hardwired into a guy on his Y chromosome. I think we use abusive power structures because they are a very fast and easy way to get a desired result (long term, they are far less stable). So to LeGuin's question: "Can women operate as women in a male institution without becoming imitation men?" I'd say "Of course."

Our construction of what constitutes feminine social structures and ways of being are also socially constructed. Women are not naturally nurturing. All babies are inherently selfish. We have to learn

empathy. A good many of us – male and female – remain stuck in adolescence in a culture that does not encourage us to be socially responsible, unselfish, and cooperative. America in the 21st century is a special case, not a norm; we're acting like spoiled Americans, not "men." Because when you break down what exactly "man" and "male" is, it's just as tricky a definition of what "woman" and "female" is.

Much of the essay seems to lament a loss of a dream – the dream shared not only by feminists of the day but by the sort of free love hippy utopia ideals shared by the radicals and rebels and communists/socialists and commune-builders of the time – both men and women – who sought to create a non-hierarchical, fluid society where folks governed their societies in truly democratic/ideal communist ways.

This is truly something to mourn, and to question, but let's not pretend that it's some magical idea that bubbled up from the magical DNA women get when they have wombs. It was a radical rethinking by a people tired of being oppressed whose generation was just waking up, for the first time, to its own subjugation and looking for a better way.

Like LeGuin, I agree that we should continue to question dominant definitions of power and value, because our current system is based on Othering a great deal of people. One can only be powerful today by depriving others of agency. Interdependence, though, is already the way life works – it's how eight million people can live in a single city. What's missing is our awareness and celebration of our own interdependence, and to me, that is a very American oversight, not necessarily an oversight that comes with being born with a penis (though if you're born with that privilege, of course, you're even more likely to be blind to this interdependence – my argument is simply that creating hierarchical structures is not somehow carried by a Y-chromosome; it is a social construct that we're born into and that men, being closer to the top of this particular hierarchy in this society because of their gender, or going to be more likely to support).

So if I generally agree with LeGuin that hierarchies are bad and men certainly benefit from them more than women, and that as women join them, they will also probably become assholes, just assholes with wombs who have more reason to push for universal childcare and contraception, why am I taking issue with LeGuin's wording that building these power structures is somehow intrinsic to one's DNA instead of a social construct we support based on our gender?

Because it's arguments like LeGuin's that people use when

building worlds full of passive women and aggressive men. “Women are just naturally nurturing people who value interdependence” and “men are just naturally aggressive people who prefer unequal power structures” are statements that let people get away with lazy writing and world-building. They think, “Well, if women are naturally this way, I certainly couldn’t create a society of violent women without radically altering their DNA” or “Surely I can’t create an egalitarian society or society that actually has men in it who don’t abuse people without castrating all of them.”

That’s bullshit.

I’ve spent an inordinate amount of time researching war, atrocities, women fighters, rebel armies, and regular military training and operations, and I can tell you right now – men are not naturally killers. Fewer than 20% of the men who went off to WWI even fired their guns. They couldn’t shoot a stranger in the face, even if they were being shot at. The reason the U.S. reached a 95% fire rate in the Vietnam War was due do intensive training and indoctrination of troops (and that *still* means that 5% of the guys who went to Vietnam never shot their weapons at the enemy during combat). We teach men and women how to kill others. We desensitize them. There’s an entire other language we use in war that distances us from the actual people we kill, which is why they’re “insurgents” or “japs” or “ragheads” or “targets” and not “people.” It’s why we’ve come to prefer drones and killing people from afar over shooting people in the face. Studies have shown we’re psychologically a lot better off when we murder a million people from a mile away than a single kid with a gun to the face (of course, the kid still dies). Without “official” stats for women in combat in this country (cause women aren’t “officially” in combat in this country, right? Right? Ha, yeah), I can’t make a comparison, but after researching women who worked as part of guerrilla armies, I can tell you the experiences seem to be about the same no matter your gender (in fact, as I recall, firing rates in rebel armies tend to be higher overall than traditional armies because the people have a stronger belief in their cause and motivation to kill). The extra fun bit you get as a female soldier is that you have to deal with sexual abuse from your fellow soldiers (which is a whole other rant). But a gun is a gun, and killing a person is killing a person.

Anyone who’s actually been a mother or had serious, frank discussions with mothers also knows that being some beatific, unselfish, nurturing person 24/7 to your child is a myth. Not all women love their children. Not all women like their children. Not all women want to have children. And those who do have children and love them often feel intense guilt for wanting just five minutes

or even five whole days to themselves. Even women who love their children sometimes hate them. That's the actual, natural reality. Mothers are people, not symbiotic extensions of their children. And though women have absolutely banded together into interdependent groups, they have, as any high schooler knows, also successfully banded into very hierarchical ones. And let's not even get into that whole crazy soccer moms, pageant moms, and PTA meeting, non-profit and certain volunteer organizations today where we generally see a higher female-to-male participation ratio (these being activities that we, as a culture, encourage women to embrace). If you think women are naturally nice people, try listening in to the politics of a group of MA's at a medical practice or mostly female teachers and tell me that nobody is gunning for anybody else. Women can be just as competitive and underhanded and manipulative as men; sometimes even more so, because we learn early that outright aggression gets us shunned and shut down. We have to think of smarter, more manipulative ways to get what we want, and hence, the stereotype of the scheming woman throughout history. When you're not allowed to settle a score by hitting somebody in the face because aggression could get you thrown into a mental institution (yes, really), you're going to find other ways.

But.

But in other societies the ways that we're allowed to manifest our own will based on gender may be different. It may not be OK for guys to get into fights to "settle" things. There may be no rape culture because society considers it repugnant (no, our society doesn't – it's still seen as a grab-and-conquer-manly thing for guys). It may be seen as vaguely worrisome if a woman devotes every waking moment to the care and feeding of her children instead of going out into a fighting ring (hey, you never know. Figuring out a world where that happened and it made sense could be fun. Uh. Not that I'd know anything about that...). Your people could even totally live in an egalitarian society where men and women are expected to raise children communally, with an equal share in childcare, and women build the boats and men carry the water and women cook the food and men make the clothes. Or maybe the society doesn't organize things by gender at all, and lo, people just do whatever it is they have want to do, and society expects nothing of them, no matter what's between their legs or what clothes they want to wear.

It's funny because whenever you challenge somebody to look around at the people in their lives who don't fit dominant expectations of what men and women should be doing, they come up with hundreds of examples. But ask them to construct fictional worlds that contain that same kind of fluidity between gender roles,

and it all goes to hell. We write in shorthand. We make assumptions that men shun babies and hit things in the face and women protect things and avoid conflict. In fact, the people in our lives are so much more compelling an dynamic than this. Do a little digging, and you'll find that history is full of people who don't conform to this narrative either. It's a narrative we seem to have been carrying a long time, but which was solidified here in the U.S. in the 50's when we started rewriting and reinterpreting the history of our species so suddenly hunter-gatherer tribes actually had all the men going out to hunt and the women staying home at nursing babies and maybe gathering a few fruits (just like they were expected to do in the 50's! How convenient that history was rewritten to reflect current social norms!). It completely ignored the fact that a lot of big game herd-hunts required most of the tribe to lure animals off cliffs, and that the majority of prehistoric diets came from fruits and vegetables. Men were not occasionally hunting game and then just lounging around. Nor were women just nursing babies and lounging around. Everybody was working incredibly hard to ensure the survival of the group, including childcare and food gathering. In groups that small, there's no time for specialization. It's work together, it's interdependence, or death (if you're interested in a total mindfuck of your conception of how gender may have actually determined certain roles in prehistoric times, read Barbara Ehrenreich's *Blood Rites*).

Women are not "naturally" nice. Men are not "naturally" assholes. And the sooner we stop pretending that's somehow hardwired in our DNA, the more interesting stories we're going to be equipped to tell.

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This article first appeared on the author's blog on September 7, 2012.

<http://www.kameronhurley.com/boys-with-babies-and-women-with-knives-rethinking-gender-assumptionist-power-structures/>

THE OMNISCIENT BREASTS

Kate Elliott

My reading experience of fantasy & science fiction over forty years is that it is mostly written with the male gaze. By this I don't mean it is written from the point of view of a male character, although that is often the case. Nor am I speaking about the gender of the writer: a male writer does not automatically write every line of every book with a male gaze just because he is a man; in fact, a male writer can write with a female gaze, and women can (and often do) write with a male gaze.

How am I using the terms “male gaze” and “female gaze?”

In fiction it is easy to simplistically understand the male gaze as, for instance, the gaze of a male author reflected across the entirety of his story; he's a man so therefore he has a male gaze. It's easy to understand it as that of the male reader reading the story. I have heard people say “but if it is a male character, then of course the character is seeing with a male gaze.”

The idea of “the gaze” is a theoretical concept about how we look at things, especially in visual culture. Who is presumed to be the viewer, and how does the viewer view the people in the frame? A relatively short and clear discussion of the term “male gaze” can be found here.¹ For the purposes of this post I will use two short definitions.

Film critic Laura Mulvey writes that “the male gaze occurs when the audience, or viewer, is put into the perspective of a heterosexual male.” An example of the male gaze in film would be when the camera lingers on a partially-clad or fully naked female body (rather than on a male body) or when, in film or advertising, women are photographed in more sexual poses and wearing fewer clothes than men.

When I asked on social media how people might briefly define the concept in its broadest terms, graduate student Liamog Drislane (@AnotherWord on Twitter) said, “The “male gaze” is shorthand for a story being tailored to the perceived knowledge, interests, and prejudices of men.”

In a companion post to this one I will talk about why I think it matters for fiction writers to recognize if, when, and how they are using an unexamined default “male gaze” in this broader sense as

¹ <http://finallyfeminism101.wordpress.com/2007/08/26/faq-what-is-the-“male-gaze”/>

they write. But here is what I want to talk about in this post:

You can write from the point of view of a female character and still be writing with the male gaze.

A female pov character is not necessarily written from the perspective of a female gaze. Everything about her might be male defined. By that I do not mean “defined within the cultural context of the narrative” as in “culturally in this society she is defined as the daughter of Lord John.” I mean, defined unconsciously by the writer who is not aware of writing a female character through a male gaze—that is, one that “tailors” her to the preconceived tastes and prejudices of (heterosexual) men.

Last week on Twitter, I was exchanging comments about female characters and their often problematic depiction in fantasy novels with @Halffrican_One, aka TJ Tallie, a PhD student in history at the University of Illinois.

Reflecting on an epic fantasy novel he had recently been reading with several female point of view characters, he tweeted: “At one point I think one of the POV characters is having her breasts described omnisciently to the reader.”

A point of view (pov) character is a character through whose eyes and perspective we follow the action of the story.

Briefly, just to clarify my terms, first person is “I saw the child vanish around the corner” (and then nothing else because “I” can’t see around the corner), third person is “She saw the child vanish around the corner” (and then nothing else because she can’t see around the corner), and omniscient is “she saw the child vanish around the corner. The child ran into the candy store” because the omniscient narrator stands above and thus outside the action and can therefore See All.

Imagine a female pov character is going along about her protagonist adventure, seeing things from her perspective of the world as written in third person. She hears, sees, considers, and makes decisions and reacts based on her view of the world and what she is aware of and encounters. Abruptly, a description is dropped into the text of her secondary sexual characteristics usually in the form of soft-focus Playboy-Magazine-style sexualized kitten-bunny-I-would-fuck-her-in-a-heartbeat lustrous-eyes-and-nipples phrases. Her breasts have just become omniscient breasts.

This is what I mean when I speak of the male gaze. The breasts are no longer her breasts, they have become the breasts as described by the omniscient heterosexual male narrator (in the person of the writer) who is usually not even aware that he has just dropped out of third person and into omniscient to describe her sexual attractiveness

in a way that caters to a heterosexual male audience.

Listen, I like to read about positive, consensual sexual relations in stories. I am all good with descriptions of people's sexual attractiveness as an aspect of their person, whatever their sexual and gender identity, as long as it is not the only thing about them that matters.

One way a writer might describe a woman's sexual attractiveness is through the direct specific lens of another character examining her because that other character is attracted to her. "JJ checked out the woman as she walked into the room. Etc."

Another way could be a character deliberately measuring the female character for her sexual attractiveness because of a specific defined plot point. "JJ checked out the three women, trying to figure out which one had been down at the swimming pool when the painting was stolen. Etc."

If there is no specific reason to describe her sexual attractiveness for a defined plot or character reason, then the writer is deferring to the male gaze and objectifying the character even if the writer didn't intend to do that. The writer is dropping out of third into omniscient to package the character for a male reader who enjoys the titillation in large part because our culture so heavily exposes the female body to sexual objectification in our visual imagery, advertising, film, tv, games, and fiction.

If a female point of view character is constantly describing herself in sexual ways, ogling her breasts as if she is part of a GQ photo-shoot, or being placed in sexual situations that cater to heterosexual male "fantasies" – all too often defined by lubricious physical description and/or the use of "titillating" sexualized violence – she is probably being written with a heterosexual male gaze.

Female characters in science fiction and fantasy who are sex toys or sex workers are almost always being written from the male gaze regardless if they are the ones speaking, because the view of sex as being that of the male objectifying the female as his object of pleasure is so pervasive in our culture.

Is the character a lesbian or bisexual? Chances are good that her lesbianism or bisexuality is still being written through the veil of a male gaze if the way sexual attributes are being described leaps from the personal attraction to the omniscient breasts. *[Note: I would guess that transgendered individuals are least commonly depicted in positive sexual ways via a male gaze. I'm hard pressed to come up with examples.]*

Most problematically, descriptions of rape can be deeply offensive when they are purportedly being told from the point of the view of a woman being raped but when in fact everything about

the description and situation is being seen through a male gaze.

Furthermore, the expectations of who a woman is, what she wants, how she reacts, much less how she is physically described differ wildly dependent on the assumptions wielded by the writer.

A problem arises when people write and/or read without knowing or realizing they are writing and reading exclusively from the perspective of a male gaze. When this perspective has been internalized as the most authentic or real perspective, it can subsume and devour all other perspectives because it is treated as the truest or only one.

Let me tell a story.

Many years ago, I was accused by a reader/reviewer of having a “homosexual agenda,” a comment which puzzled me. I certainly do have such an agenda if by that one means I support QUILTBAG rights (as well as marriage equality). However, the reader meant a deliberate hidden agenda inserted into the books to warp young minds, perhaps as a form of semantic contagion. I usually don’t argue with reviewers (except sometimes in my thoughts), but the way the statement was phrased really did make me wonder what in my work could possibly have triggered this particular interpretation.

In fact, I wondered so much that I did the thing I know better than to do: I emailed him.

He wrote back, and was polite but insistent that I had this agenda. We argued back and forth for a while until a lightbulb went on in my head.

The reader was reacting without understanding why to the fact that I often write men from a heterosexual female gaze. When I write female characters, I describe them sexually only if they’re being observed from the point of view of a character who is sexually interested in them. Those of my female characters who are heterosexual, however, will see and describe male characters through a sexual gaze directed onto the men.

As an astute reader, this person was picking up on this (not particularly graphic) sexual description of men. Because virtually all the fiction he had read had been written from the heterosexual male gaze, to him a sexual gaze was by default a male gaze. I the writer was causing this reader to “see” male characters through a sexual gaze. Therefore, he interpreted my narrative gaze as a homosexual male gaze since “the gaze” and “the sexual gaze” by definition had to be male; thus he identified this as a homosexual agenda.

It’s been my observation that in our culture women can read comfortably about men’s sexual interest in women because it is considered normal and expected and acceptable, but men cannot always read comfortably about women’s sexual interest in men. In

the US in particular, I perceive that we have a cultural comfort in looking at women sexually and (although this is slowly changing) a discomfort in looking at men sexually.

This reader hadn't thought to consider there might be another "gaze" possible in this story. The concept of a female heterosexual gaze as something that could be present in fiction had never occurred to him. To give him credit, when I pointed this out, he immediately got it.

Here's my theory:

We will never get past the supposed disjunction between male and female gazes and viewpoints until men think nothing of reading and writing through the female gaze because it seems ordinary, plausible, and interesting to them. Writers will stop writing about omniscient breasts once they pause to ask themselves whose gaze they are really writing from when they are ostensibly writing from a female point of view.

However, this is not the only way the male gaze permeates everything. In the examples I use above, I describe male writers writing a male heterosexual point of view through a female character's eyes as well as a male reader's reaction to a female gaze.

Women also have to struggle against this pervasive idea that the male gaze is the most real and most authentic view of the "world." Women can view their own stories through the lens of a male gaze, or can feel most comfortable in stories that reinforce these norms.

Women can read comfortably about men's sexual interest in women. Women can watch and observe visual representations of sexually objectified women seen through a male gaze and think it is not only normal but the way things always have been, are, and will be. Women can enjoy shows and books in which the female characters are unclothed and sexualized and the men are clothed and sexual or just active doers, and not necessarily think about the disjunction in how women are portrayed compared to men because it is so common that it is seen as right. To see in some other way, through a different lens, then seems not right but rather false and wrong.

So here it is: Stories told through a female gaze are just as valid, just as true, just as authentic and universal. And they are just as necessary, not just for women but for men, too.

All of the stories are necessary.

This post has focused specifically on gender, and on a binary view of gender at that, but I want to suggest what most of you already know, that the issue of "gaze" expands exponentially and intersectionally outward from here through gender identity, race,

ethnicity, religion, age, nationality, class, and multiple other vectors.

Listen, there's nothing wrong in writing through a male gaze if that's the story you have to tell.

The problem lies in not being aware that the male gaze is a gaze. When readers don't realize how the male gaze pervades so much of our storytelling, they can't assess with what root assumptions the story is being told and how the default defines our expectations and our responses to how stories are told and how we read them. When writers don't even realize they are writing through the male gaze, then they can't possibly assess how that default male gaze influences the stories they tell and how they tell them.

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<http://www.sfsignal.com/archives/2012/09/guest-post-the-omniscient-breasts-by-kate-elliott/>

TOLKIEN AND ATTILA

Matthew Surridge

What follows may well be total coincidence.

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* over the course of many years of his life, a life shaped in part by his experience as a young man fighting in the trenches of World War One against the Germans. Or, as they were sometimes called at the time, the Hun.

The Germans had been equated with Huns for over forty years by then. It had begun as a term of abuse in French newspapers, but some Germans adopted the comparison with pride. Kaiser Wilhelm II notoriously inspired his soldiers by linking them to the historical Huns and their great leader, Attila.

Now so far as I know Tolkien made few direct references to Attila in his writing. He refers in a letter to attending a lecture his son Christopher gave about Attila, and to being thrilled by a reference to the etymology of the name – from ‘Atta,’ ‘father,’ so meaning something like ‘little father.’ And I understand in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*, Attila makes an appearance, as he did in the original poems on which Tolkien based his story. But I’ve begun to wonder if the idea of the Huns didn’t have a bit more of an influence on Tolkien than that.

I want to be clear in what follows that I’m not talking about conscious influence. I don’t think that Tolkien had the history of the Huns actively on his mind at any point as he wrote. What I’m wondering is whether that history unconsciously suggested certain plot patterns to him that manifested in his writings.

The Huns entered European history in the fourth century, one of a number of “barbarian” tribes drifting westward out of Asia. Other peoples had settled in Europe more or less peacefully, with some, like the Visigoths, establishing themselves as at least occasional allies or even client kingdoms of Rome. The Huns were more fractious, attacking the Eastern Empire – Rome then being divided between East and West – late in the fourth century. In the mid-fifth-century, Attila gathered control of the Huns, again attacked the Eastern Roman Empire, built an empire of his own north of Roman lands, and then, in 451, struck westward into Gaul, claiming that he intended to ‘recapture’ the Visigoths, who he said had once been vassals of the Huns. Leading a vast army built from all the people of his empire, Attila got as far as what is now Orléans, where he had to turn back in the face of a combined force of Romans, Visigoths, Franks, and other barbarians, led by the Roman general Flavius

Aetius.

For much of the past fifteen hundred years, that battle, the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains, was considered one of the most important conflicts of western history. That judgment's been challenged over the past century or so; Rome won, but would things have been that different had they lost? The very next year, Attila invaded Italy, where Flavius Aetius seems again to have blocked his route south before disease among Attila's troops – and a diplomatic mission led by Pope Leo I – forced the Huns to retreat northward. The year after that, Attila was dead, and his empire broke up. Then Aetius was killed by his Emperor, Valentinian III, in 454; then Valentinian died the year after that, and it was only about twenty years later that the rulership of what was left of the Western Roman Empire passed into barbarian hands. In other words, defeating Attila hadn't saved Rome. Conversely, if Attila had won on the Catalaunian Plains, was it any more likely that his cobbled-together empire could have outlasted his death? If no, how significant was the battle, after all?

It's a fair question, but one thing is clear: Attila terrified people even many years after he died. One story, certainly false, has him conquering the city of Troyes; the bishop of the city confronts him, identifying himself as a man of God, to which Attila retorts: "And I am Attila, the Scourge of God." For many years that was how the Hun invasions were seen: as a divine scourge. Even today in many places the name Attila is a byword for brutality and violence – not in Hungary, though, where he's more warmly regarded.

To get back to Tolkien: he loved the Gothic language, and I presume would have known a fair bit about Attila and how Attila's invasion was portrayed in various historical sources. Beyond history, Attila's invasions also left a mark on the literatures that developed after his death and after the collapse of Rome, as Tolkien would also have known well; memories of the Hun invasions echoed on in legends, myth, and poetry. Sometimes Attila was pulled into stories he had nothing to do with, as for example the tale that developed of Saint Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins.¹ He's mentioned in the Old English poem "Widsith." And he has a significant role in the medieval German epic the *Nibelungenlied*, the story of a cursed ring.

I've been reading up on Attila lately for a projected article elsewhere. And as I did I realised the story of the Hun invasion into Gaul seemed very familiar. Again, it may be coincidence. But...

Attila's stated reason for invading Gaul was to conquer the Visigoths, who had established a kingdom west of Roman territory. The Visigoths had come out of the east a little while before the Huns;

1 <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15225d.htm>

they'd established themselves as on-again off-again foederati of the Romans, allies who were theoretically compelled to furnish troops at Rome's request. Essentially, the Visigoths were a client kingdom of Rome when it suited them, an enemy when the Visigoths saw more advantage in war. Aetius had actually spent most of the decades before the Hun invasion battling the fractious Visigoths; when Attila invaded Gaul, not only did Aetius have to overcome his own dislike for his former enemies, he had to hope they would agree to answer his ambassador's call for them to come out of their homeland to join his forces and fight Attila in Gaul.

Now compare this with *The Lord of the Rings*, and specifically with Gondor and Rohan: an empire, the traditional source of culture and civilization, in decline. A younger and perhaps more vigorous culture comes out of the east, and settles into an uneasy alliance just beyond their borders. Then, many years later, another, more terrible, force also comes from the east; a frightful horde. Only a desperate alliance of the old empire and the younger culture can stop them. If, that is, the younger culture will respond to the old empire's need, and leave their homes to fight the coming darkness.

As it happens, the Visigoths agreed, joined Aetius and the Western Roman army, and their assembled forces met the Huns just before the walls of the city of Aurelianum (now known as Orléans). According to one version of what happened, the Huns arrived, saw the allies garrisoning the city, and turned back. Another version has the Huns arriving first, and besieging the city. In this account, the siege went on, the plight of the inhabitants grew more and more desperate, until just as the Huns actually breached the walls of the city the allied armies were seen coming, and the Huns were set to flight.

One way or the other, the Romans and Visigoths pursued the Huns, and on the Catalaunian Plains outside of Troyes the final battle erupted. They fought from mid-afternoon to nightfall, with no clear victor. The Huns were forced back into their camp, but both Aetius and the Visigoth king seemed lost. Aetius, in fact, had found his way behind enemy lines, and had to walk back to the Visigothic encampment hoping none of the Huns recognised him. It wasn't until the morning that the Visigoths found the body of their fallen king, Theodoric.

To carry the story further, then: the younger culture joins the older, and turns back the invaders just as the walls of a great city are breached. But in battle, though the conflict is won, the old king of the younger culture dies.

Again, this may not mean very much. The device of having an army rushing to the rescue of a besieged city and arriving just in the

nick of time isn't that distinctive. But I was struck by the sequence of events. And it's amusing to note the alliteration of the names: Theoden, Theodoric; Aragorn, Aetius.

Who was this Flavius Aetius? He was the commander of the Armies of the West – the Armies of the Western Roman Empire. After his death he was called ‘The Last of the Romans’² for the way in which he seemed to incarnate the traditional virtues of Rome (though other people have been given that title as well). Aetius, then, was seen as an image of his ancestors' nobility, the last incarnation of the virtues of his lineage. And, at the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains, he led his people in a struggle that, it was soon held, marked the end of an age of the world. What came before, the Roman Empire, did not last; but, said chroniclers, at least Europe was preserved from the terrible Huns.

It seems as well that for many near-contemporaries the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains was notable precisely because it was a great alliance of forces. That is, where Attila had his Huns and other people who were (to all appearances) entirely under his rule, the Roman-Visigothic alliance represented a coming-together of different peoples. That appears to have then been unusual, though of course it would harmonise with Tolkien's own experience in the First and Second World Wars.

And then we can look at the guys on the other side, too. I started off this post reflecting on the association the word “Hun” would have had for Tolkien. I wonder if surviving descriptions of Huns – basically, anti-Hun propaganda writings – may have influenced him. Here's Tolkien in a letter, describing orcs: “...they are (or were) squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes; in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types.” I recognise that this passage has relevance to various discussions about race and *The Lord of the Rings*; I want here to focus specifically on how it may relate to historical depictions of the Huns.

Compare to the historian Jordanes describing Attila: “He was short of stature, with a broad chest and a large head; his eyes were small, his beard thin and sprinkled with grey; and he had a flat nose and a swarthy complexion, showing the evidences of his origin.” Jordanes is actually following an earlier historian, Priscus, who saw Attila in person and described him as follows: “He was short of stature, broad-chested, with a large head, small eyes, thin beard flecked with grey, snub nose, and the repulsive complexion of his forefathers.”

What's intriguing to me is not just that so many characteristics

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Last_of_the_Romans

are the same, but that the order in which they're given is fairly close; height, width, (other matter in Jordanes and Priscus,) nose, skin (other matter in Tolkien). I note, incidentally, that I found the quotation from Priscus in John Man's book *Attila the Hun*; I'm not sure who did the translation. Man noted that "repulsive" is a translation of *teter*, a variant of *taeter*, or "foul, hideous, noisome, repulsive." Earlier translations, with no linguistic basis, often used "swarthy" or "dark."

(Jordanes, I might note, really didn't like the Huns. Consider, if you will, whether this description sounds like it applies to men or orcs: "*They made their foes flee in horror because their swarthy aspect was fearful, and they had, if I may call it so, a sort of shapeless lump, not a head, with pin-holes rather than eyes. Their hardihood is evident in their wild appearance, and they are beings who are cruel to their children on the very day they are born. For they cut the cheeks of the males with a sword, so that before they receive the nourishment of milk they must learn to endure wounds. Hence they grow old beardless and their young men are without comeliness, because a face furrowed by the sword spoils by its scars the natural beauty of a beard. They are short in stature, quick in bodily movement, alert horsemen, broad shouldered, ready in the use of bow and arrow, and have firm-set necks which are ever erect in pride. Though they live in the form of men, they have the cruelty of wild beasts.*")

Tolkien's reference to "Mongol-types" may be relevant in this context as well. Not much is known about the Huns, who came out of the east past the Sea of Azov. For much of Tolkien's life it was believed that they were descendants of a people called the Xiongnu, a nomadic people on the border of China who were believed to have migrated westward and become known as Huns. In the 1930s it was pointed out that actual evidence of a connection between Huns and Xiongnu had never been found. Learned opinion turned against the theory, but I gather it's been making a comeback lately. At any rate, while the Huns certainly weren't themselves Mongols (though Gibbon declared they were), the Huns do seem to have come from the same steppes that later produced Turks and Mongols.

Now, while there are some possible similarities, there are also major differences between history and fiction. Perhaps most significantly, there's clearly no direct counterpart to Attila in *The Lord of the Rings*. There's no great leader of the Orc horde; only Sauron, lurking in Mordor. As I say, I don't want to argue here for a direct correspondence, and freely admit it all may be coincidence. But if there is any connection, if Tolkien's creative mind was playing about with the story of Attila, it's interesting that Tolkien had a figure of active evil ready to hand, one of the great villains of western European legendry; and chose not to use him, or to make a figure of

evil suggested by him.

There are other massive differences between the Attila story and Tolkien's Battle of Pelennor Fields. For example, Attila's invaders got away. Even though Aetius had the upper hand, the old general still didn't really trust the Visigoths and Franks and other barbarians who were nominally on his side, and he convinced Theodoric's son to return home to secure his inheritance rather than wipe out the Huns. Aetius believed that the balance of power in Gaul was better served with the Huns still a credible threat. The alliance broke up, the Huns retreated, and noody had to drop anything into any volcano.

Although, that said, I will note one more odd coincidence: Attila won the loyalty of his people in part because he claimed to hold a magic sword. This sword, called by Roman historians the Sword of Mars, had been a treasure of earlier Hun kings. The story has it that a herdsman found the sword when its partly-buried blade cut one of his heifers; he took the sword to Attila, who proclaimed that the return of the lost sword of his forefathers showed that he was destined to win wars and rule the world.

As I say, the seeming similarities could be coincidence. There is no one historical source that I know of that presents all the elements I've found in the way that I've found them. Still, it seems to me possible that the Attila stories and legends became one of the seeds out of which grew a part of *The Lord of the Rings*. It's clear, I think, that there's no conscious influence. What I want to suggest is that at an unconscious level Tolkien creatively played on the images, themes, and ideas of the story of Attila as he had found it in the medieval texts. Those writings were among those that sparked his imagination. So when he came to tell his great tale, they helped to shape the story he wrote. If so, I find it interesting because it may suggest something of how one man's creative fiction-writing faculty used the matter of history to find themes for a great tale of his own.

I don't want to overstate any of this. There are so many elements to *The Lord of the Rings*, so many aspects of history alone that contribute to the tale or seem to harmonise with it in some powerful fashion. It so happens that I've been reading about Attila lately, and it may well be that I'm only projecting one story onto another – that Tolkien made something so close to medieval storytelling that it can't help but echo actual medieval narratives. At the least, though, I find it interesting that in so many ways the two things seem to align so neatly. I also find it interesting how very different the stories are. Similar or not, it's clearly impossible to imagine *The Lord of the Rings* being extrapolated out of the surviving historical matter. It is

a creation, or sub-creation, all its own.

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<http://www.blackgate.com/2012/02/26/tolkien-and-attila/>

BUT, BUT, BUT - WHY DOES MAGIC HAVE TO MAKE SENSE?

N. K. Jemisin

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. – Arthur C. Clarke

Any sufficiently analyzed magic is indistinguishable from science. – Agatha Heterodyne (Girl Genius) by way of Larry Niven by way of Clarke

La la la can't hear you. – Me



This is a whine, not a rant. I rant when I'm angry; right now I'm just frustrated and annoyed. It's hard out here for a fantasy writer, after all; there's all these rules I'm supposed to follow, or the Fantasy Police might come and make me do hard labor in the Cold Iron Mines. For example: I keep hearing that magic has to have *rules*. It has to be *logical*. It has to have limitations, consequences, energy exchange, internal consistency, clear cause and effect, thoroughly-tested laws with repeatable results and–

Waitaminnit.

This is magic we're talking about here, right? Force of nature, kinda woo-woo and froo-froo, things beyond our ken, and all that? And most of all, *not science*? Because sometimes I wonder. Sometimes, whenever I see fantasy readers laud a work for the rigor of its magic system – we'll come back to this word "system" later – I wonder: why are these people reading fantasy? I mean, if they're going to judge magic by its similarity to science, why not just go ahead and read science fiction? Science fiction has plenty of its own magicky stuff to enjoy (e.g., FTL, "psi" powers). Shouldn't fantasy do something different, not just in its surface trappings but in its fundamental assumptions?

Because this is magic we're talking about. It's supposed to go places science can't, defy logic, wink at technology, fill us all with the sensawunda that comes of gazing upon a fictional world and seeing something truly different from our own. In most cultures of

the world, magic is intimately connected with beliefs regarding life and death – things no one understands, and few expect to. Magic is the motile force of God, or gods. It's the breath of the earth, the non-meat by-product of existence, that thing that happens when a tree falls in the forest and there's no one around to hear it. Magic is the mysteries, into which not everyone is so lucky, or unlucky, as to be initiated. It can be affected by belief, the whims of the unseen, harsh language. And it is not. Supposed. To make. Sense. In fact, I think it's coolest when it doesn't.

And here's the thing: fantasy – specifically English-language fantasy since that's all I've been able to read – used to get this. When I read Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* again last year before the Center for Fiction's Earthsea Big Read, I was struck by the fact that none of the stuff Ged learned at Roke made any sense.¹ OK, it was all about names. To figure out the names of things, wizards basically had to experience enough to understand them, and disengage with their preexisting assumptions – and then, apparently, they had to cross their fingers and wish really hard. Because magic was an experiment whose results were never repeatable, never predictable, and even the most accomplished wizard could only make an educated guess about what would happen any time magic was used. And in fact, magic itself could change as its caster changed. It was an intuitive thing, not an empirical thing, and an intuitive wizard could build a spell out of guesses – or leaps of faith – based on nothing more than gut feelings. Also, feelings mattered. Bring the wrong feelings into a magic-working and it could all go pear-shaped. Le Guin rendered this beautifully, and I loved it, because *it felt like magic should feel to me*. So did Tolkien's magic, which had the same all-over-the-place weirdness to it. In the *Lord of the Rings*, sometimes magic meant forging a ring with a chunk of soul melted into the alloy. Sometimes it meant learning obscure/dead languages, or talking to obscure/dead creatures. Sometimes it meant brandishing a particular kind of stick in a particular kind of way, and shouting really loudly. Sometimes it meant being born with pointy ears, and sometimes *resisting* magic meant being born with hairy feet. It was organic, embedded, a total crapshoot. And it was wonderful.

Here's what I think happened between Tolkien / Le Guin and now: Dungeons and Dragons. D&D has a lot to answer for re the modern fantasy audience (and I say this as a fan of D&D). I blame D&D for systematizing so many things that don't need to be or shouldn't be systematized: fantastic racism², real racism, gender essentialism – hell,

1 http://www.neabigread.org/communities/?community_id=1169

2 <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AlwaysChaoticEvil>

let's just say all the "isms" – career choice, morality. Yes, yes, D&D has gotten better over the years, and yes all these things happened in the genre (in spades) before D&D, but remember boys 'n' girls et al: systems are remarkably effective at reinforcing stupid thinking. This is because systems are self-reinforcing and have internal consistency even when they're logically or ethically questionable. It's the way the human brain works: when enough events occur in a pattern, we stop thinking and go into macro mode.³ Then suddenly we see nothing wrong with saying that *of course* orcs are evil, because they're orcs. Or *of course* magic has to be logical, because how else are we going to simulate its effects numerically and in a fair way that encourages good team mechanics?

That's game logic, this concern over quantitative fairness and teambuilding. Game logic should not apply to magic, because it's fucking magic.

OK, let's get personal. The Inheritance Trilogy. There was a magic system, of sorts: the scribes had to learn how to write the gods' language. This was a science to them, very precise, very detailed, riddled with rules and empirical tests — and I deliberately did not focus on it or describe it beyond the most superficial level. Why would I? I wasn't interested in the mechanics. I created scribbling solely to frame gods' magic by contrast, and to illustrate the more fundamental differences between mortals and gods. Scribbling: limited, generalizable, a system complex enough to make Gary Gygax proud. Gods' magic: *smite*, the end. What, you think the Greeks ever rolled up stats for Zeus & the gang? (Please don't send me links to wherever someone has rolled up stats for Zeus & the gang.) As far as I was concerned, it defeated the whole point of writing about gods to focus on something so pedantic as "how they do what they do." They're gods. They work in mysterious ways. Also: fucking magic.

I imagine there will be some who take issue with the narcomancy used in the Dreamblood books, even though that's a little more systematized, because it's partially based on stuff Jung thought up during a psychotic break. Well, we'll see.

Part of my frustration comes from a few incidents lately in which I've worked with up-and-coming writers as part of convention workshops, etc. I've seen these folks, most of whom are future fantasy novel-writers, positively agonize over their magic systems, taking great care to consider rules, required resources, the laws of conservation of magic, yatta yatta yatta, all for fear that they'll get published someday and have their magic systems picked apart by the Fantasy Police. In some cases these writers had spent far, far more

³ <http://nkjemisin.com/2012/03/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-good-stereotype/>

energy on trying to create a magic system than they had on trying to create plot or characters. Sadly, I've seen this same kind of to-the-exclusion-of-all-else focus on mechanics in the works of some published writers – and worse, I've seen readers going ga-ga over this sort of thing, as if the magic system really is the only part of the story that matters.

Is that all fantasy is? Thin storytelling papered over a players' guide? Is that all fantasy *should* be? Mechanistic magic, formulas and figures?

Of course not. Fantasy is, can be, *should* be, so much more than that. So give me mysterious, silly, weird, utterly cracktastic magic please. And easy on the logic. It's not like we're doing science here.

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REMEMBERING MARGARET CAVENDISH

RO SMITH

Earlier today something came across my tumblr that perpetuated a common myth.¹ Which is to say that ‘Mary Shelley invented science fiction’. Now, if you want to say that ‘Mary Shelley was the mother of science fiction’... OK, there’s probably a case for that. I don’t want to diss Mary Shelley and her achievement, but it’s important not to let Frankenstein eclipse an earlier work by a woman who was at least as revolutionary: *The Blazing World* by Margaret Cavendish.

Written in 1666, and republished in 1668 alongside her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (a.k.a. ‘science’ before there was such a term), *The Blazing World* was inspired by a visit to the Royal Society (Cavendish was the very first woman to do so). She looked down a microscope and it blew her mind to the possibilities of different forms of life.

The Blazing World is about a woman who journeys to a parallel world before we had a vocabulary for talking about parallel worlds, and before we had even imagined space travel. This ‘twin’ of the Earth was connected at the North Pole. Cavendish’s heroine’s ship is caught in a storm, driven off course, and washed up on this new world. There she encounters strange and wonderful people (before anyone envisioned aliens – although non-human sentient creatures were common in mythology and theology, these are the first I’m aware of whose different physiology is premised on their living in a different physical world). These people elect this strange woman to be their Empress and present to her many scientific marvels (including a submarine). Cavendish uses this set up to satirise her own society and explore a world where a woman was allowed power far beyond what Cavendish herself could hope to attain (even as a duchess with an unusually permissive husband and rare education).

This looks like a pretty clear case of science fiction to me. It not only has the science fiction tropes of soft SF (aliens, parallel worlds, advanced technology), I’d make a case for it being hard SF. The story seems fantastic to the modern eye, and the idea of another world just stuck on top of the Earth just seems bizarre. It’s likely that although Cavendish was permitted to enter the Royal Society and had an understanding of science beyond most people of the time (and certainly most women), she was still merely peeking into a world that she was largely barred from due to her gender. Yet she

1 <http://rhube.tumblr.com/post/27395181035/theoncominghope-i-have-love-in-me-the-likes-of>

came away from her experience having gained a new perspective on the world based on scientific evidence and extrapolated a non-actual but plausible (based on the evidence available to her) premise upon which to base a work of fiction designed to transport readers to another world and use that world to make them reflect on this one. Definitions vary, but that sounds like science fiction to me.

Hence: Margaret Cavendish wrote the first work of science fiction, not Mary Shelley.²

The reason I think it is important to remember Margaret Cavendish's ground-breaking work for the piece of genuinely original,

2 Obviously this comes with the caveat 'that I am aware of', but I suspect it's fair. It's really difficult to distinguish science from philosophy prior to the 17th Century, when Cavendish was writing. The Royal Society for improving Natural Knowledge was founded in 1660. Early modern thinking about natural philosophy is usually dated to have been sparked by Galileo's work published in his controversial *The Assayer* (1623), which challenged the idea that the Church was the ultimate source of knowledge,³ and birthed a movement towards observational investigation as an approach to finding things out about the world that became what we now call science. I suppose some might want to argue for Utopia, but I don't see any science fiction elements in it, myself. It's more of an extended 'counterfactual' as we would say in philosophy – or fantastic hypothetical used to explore a philosophical idea. It's really a discussion of a possibility suggested by political philosophy rather than an extrapolation from empirical observation to non-actual, but physically possible, worlds, peoples, societies, and technologies (which is the definition I would lean towards if we're discussing works that predate the term 'science').

a. Wooyay – footnotes within footnotes, very 17th Century. Anyway: it should be noted that observational empirical philosophy of a sort can be dated back to Aristotle. The trouble is, Aristotle's philosophy and observations became so dominant as to become stagnant dogma, assimilated into Church doctrine and taught in the Schools.⁴

b. Caveat on a caveat on a caveat: all of this is very euro-centric. I can only apologise for that. My knowledge of Margaret Cavendish comes from my studies for my BA, which even though it was supposed to be 'English and Related Literatures', was mostly English or American literature. My knowledge of the development of science and early modern philosophy come from teaching and studying early modern philosophy, but I must confess that English philosophy is still dominated by the analytic tradition, with a side bar on 'Continental' (i.e. continental Europe) philosophy, and with the European canon of philosophy that leads up to the analytic/continental 'split'. I've never been taught any world philosophy and have barely dabbled in it on my own time. I know even less on the relationship between science and philosophy in non-euro-centric cultures. Any comments on the origins of science fiction should thus be seen as comments on a largely European and American tradition.

genre-creating art that it is, is that there are reasons we remember Shelley, rather than Cavendish. It wasn't easy to be a female writer when Shelley wrote, but it was next to impossible when Cavendish did. Writing was principally the preserve of wealthy and educated men. As Virginia Woolf so cleverly observed, it's very difficult to write if you have no money of your own and no space and time to devote to writing (a.k.a. *A Room of One's Own* and £500 a year). You either had to be exceptionally wealthy and well-educated (in which case it would have been scandalous for you to engage in such an activity as a woman) or have a rich patron (which would have been exceptionally rare for a woman to obtain – the only one I can think of is Aemilia Lanier³, who had a female patron). Margaret Cavendish was the former: she was the Duchess of Newcastle, and she was generally judged to be mad. Samuel Pepys called her 'mad, conceited and ridiculous', according to Wikipedia.⁴ And I recall a lecture in which it was described how theatre-goers would go to the theatre to watch Margaret Cavendish at the theatre, for she was known for bizarre fashions, including going out in public topless.

Whether she was mad or not is unclear. Anyone reporting on her at the time is likely to have viewed her through the customs of the time. She must have been a real force of personality to achieve all she did, as well as having a very open-minded husband, and it's clear that in certain ways she was pretty eccentric. But I think it'd take a real force-of-nature-style eccentricity for a woman to be published in the way she was at the time.

On the other hand, I've read some of her plays, and they're pretty bad, it must be said. *The Blazing World* itself is intellectually exciting, but artistically a bit of a slog. In her defence, it was early long-form prose fiction, so she'd have had little by way of reference points to guide her style, and the idea is as blazing as the title suggests. It's not Shakespeare, but it's equal to most equivalent works of the time.

Margaret Cavendish was a woman writing with few peers who was ridiculed for writing at all. That is why we have forgotten her. She would never have had the size of audience that was available to Shelley due to the advances in printing, and her writing was hardly likely to have been championed for inclusion in a gentleman's literary education. She was seen as a curiosity at best. Virginia Woolf speculated of what life would have been like for a sister of Shakespeare, equal to him in talent and determination, but bereft

3 <http://www.ic.arizona.edu/ic/mcbride/lanier/lanier.htm>

4 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Cavendish,_Duchess_of_Newcastle-upon-Tyne – they don't provide a direct reference for the Pepys quote, but the article does cite an extensive list of academic sources at the end)

of the opportunities he would have had simply by being male. She imagines an imaginative woman torn apart by passion and despair, shunned by society for rejecting the norms that confine her, ultimately killing herself.⁵ I can't help but feel, reading this fictional account, that there goes Margaret Cavendish, but for her fortune and sympathetic husband. If she was mad (although I suspect she was not), we should not be surprised; and if she was forgotten, we should not be surprised, either. If they couldn't silence her in life, they were unlikely to remember her in death.

So, I feel it's important to say: 'Yes, Mary Shelley was awesome and we should celebrate her epoch defining achievement; but also, no, she did not invent science fiction. Margaret Cavendish did, and more people should know that.'

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This article first appeared on the author's website on July 17, 2012.

<http://serenitywomble.wordpress.com/2012/07/17/reviewing-through-the-time-machine-remembering-margaret-cavendish/>

5 <http://egophelia.free.fr/2femme/woolfroomsister.htm>

WHERE THE WONDER WOMEN ARE: SUPERGIRL

Tansy Rayner Roberts

My recent immersion in the world of superheroes started in early 2010, with Supergirl. Raeli had taken an interest in the character, based almost entirely on the image on a drinking glass (like Superman, only a girl, what else is there to know?) and I started hunting for some kind of media property that I could stand to share with my 5 year old daughter. One thing I learned very quickly from the feminist comics blogs I followed was that it wasn't going to be the comic, which featured some pretty skeevey artwork (yep, let's all peer up the teenage girl's tiny skirt, shall we and *oh* apparently female superheroes don't need all their ribs) and was squarely aimed at men, not young and impressionable girls.

So where else? I had a vague memory that the 80's Supergirl movie had been fairly dreadful but I had loved it, so there was always that. At a pinch.

Finally I decided upon *Justice League Unlimited*. I'd enjoyed the earlier *Justice League* cartoon, though not enough to actually buy the DVDs. But it looked like they had a cute, interesting Supergirl character, and so I gave it a punt. Only to discover that in fact *Justice League United* (JLU) was full of all kinds of amazing and well-constructed female characters, and while the Supergirl was indeed spunky and super cute, she didn't hold a candle to Black Canary, Huntress and Wonder Woman.

Luckily for me, Raeli embraced female superheroes as a whole, and we started out on a long and crazy journey of discovery together. It's been super fun. And the massive pile of JLU lady action figures I acquired from eBay didn't hurt at all.

This week, while doing a bit of covert pre-Christmas detective work (as you do) I asked both Raeli (now nearly 8!) and her recently 3-year-old sister Jem which they preferred, Batgirl or Supergirl. To be frank, I assumed that at least *one* of them would pick Batgirl. They're both thoroughly Bat-obsessed, after all. Raeli has just received the LEGO Batcave she saved her pocket money up for six months, and Jem regularly dresses up as Batman and insists on being called that.

But no, they both immediately picked Supergirl. Which not only put a serious spanner in my Christmas present buying plans, it made me think. What is it about this character that makes her so compelling that she gets to be the best, the favourite, of little girls everywhere, based on a variety of wildly differing properties?

Like Wonder Woman, Supergirl has survived as an iconic female

superhero despite all kinds of bizarre and outlandish things that have been done to her story and character over the years. I'm pretty sure she's been killed off and rebooted more often than Wonder Woman.

At its heart, Supergirl/Kara Zor El's story is simple. She's Superman's younger cousin, his spin off, his girl equivalent. She has all the same powers he does, she comes from Krypton, basically it's all the same but she doesn't get to snog Lois Lane (or indeed Wonder Woman) and she wears a skirt.

Raeli has come across various versions of the character since she's been reading comics, and I'll admit that the world is a happier place for junior Supergirl fans than it was a few years ago (or maybe I have a better idea where to look).

There's *Supergirl: Cosmic Adventures in the 8th Grade*, a fun and peppy modern comic that gives Kara crazy eyes and a not-quite-manga sensibility. There's the sadly too-few *Super Best Friends Forever* minisodes from DC Shorts, which portrays her as a delightfully hefty gal who relishes her strength and lives to kick butt. There's the fun and baby-faced version from kid favourite comic *Tiny Titans* who remains one of the only characters who got to cross over into the next project by the same creators: *Superman Family*.

There's even a Polly Pocket.

In recent years, the explosion of popularity of superheroes has meant that even girls sometimes get tie in t-shirts, and the characters who tend to show up on those glittery pink tees are Supergirl, Batgirl, Wonder Woman.

As with the drinking glass effect, Supergirl is a character that young girls in particular are drawn to. The combination of super heroics and blonde hair are apparently irresistible. Like, imagine if Barbie actually did stuff!

I still haven't read many modern Supergirl comics. I tried with the New 52 but I was so outraged that her costume was explained as a Kryptonian uniform signifying graduation honours (you honour your graduates by making them wear skirts that tiny, what is this, Starfleet?) that I couldn't follow through. And then there's the inhumanly skinny waist which feels problematic to me in a character with so much pull among teenage and pre-teen girls. (most superheroines and indeed superheroes have unrealistic body types but when you're depicting teenagers with waists that would require even Buffy to have a few organs removed, that's a red flag)

Classic Supergirl, though. Ahhh, classic Supergirl. I'm a fan. And indeed, with all the reading I've been doing, I've come to the conclusion that even the modern tiny-skirted Supergirl can be quite awesome, when she's written for example as the awesome best friend

of Stephanie Brown's Batgirl.

So Supergirl. She's blonde, she's less experienced than Superman (it makes him feel manly), and she's a good friend. But what exactly does she do?

Let's go back to the beginning and find out.

The original Supergirl was launched in 1959 and continued until her death in 1986, one of the major events of the Crisis on Infinite Earths. The cover image of Superman holding her body and grieving is probably one of the most parodied, copied and remembered comics cover image of all time.

Supergirl was a sweetie. She appeared in *Superman* and *Action Comics* at first, then later had her own title *Adventure Comics*, and appeared in *Superman Family*. She was created by Otto Binder who had also created Mary Marvel, the sweet teen counterpart to DC's Captain Marvel, and Miss America, the girl version of Marvel's Captain America.

Kara Zor-El was the last survivor of Argo City, which fragmented off from Krypton when it was destroyed, and drifted through space for some time. This is one of many over-complex plot complications introduced over the years to ensure that Kara is always much younger than her cousin Kal-El, in every iteration of her character, despite the fact that he was a baby when sent away from the exploding Krypton (in *Cosmic Adventures in the 8th Grade*, for instance, his rocket simply travels at a different speed to hers, and she ages slower in stasis).

Once she arrives on Earth, Kara attends high school (later college) as brunette Linda Lee Danvers, putting on a wig to hide her natural blonde locks. Comics work that way. Men just have to put on a pair of glasses as a disguise; women have to change their hair colour.

Kara Zor-El had many adventures over the thirty five years or so that she was around as a character (appearing in over 750 stories during this period, according to Wikipedia), and after graduating went on to be a counsellor, news reporter and soap actress. She had a pet cat Streaky (who has a substantial role in *Tiny Titans!* My godson decided this year after their family lost their cat that they really needed a Streaky, though he wasn't sure how to make sure that they got one with superpowers) and Comet the Superhorse. She also regularly teamed up with Barbara Gordon's Batgirl, her best friend. Her family turned up at one point and took up residence in the Bottle City of Kandor, which is basically a Kryptonian city shrunk down and kept in a bottle.

The Silver Age version of Supergirl is mostly characterised by her student identity and her life with adoptive family the Danvers. The Bronze Age (1970s) version allowed her a more adult identity and

also heralded her first solo title actually named *Supergirl*, something Batgirl didn't get until the 1990s. An alternative version of Supergirl, Power Girl, appeared in comics set in Earth 2.

1980s Supergirl on the other hand stands out because of her extraordinary permed hair, red hair band and occasional resemblance to Olivia Newton John. In 1984, a live action film starring Helen Slater (with Faye Dunaway as the villain) appeared as a tie-in to the Superman movies of the time. It appeared a year after *Superman III*, and while both films were critically panned, *Superman* continued as a franchise and *Supergirl* did not. The Supergirl title had been cancelled only months before the movie was released. And of course, it was the first of a long line of "examples" why superhero movies starring women aren't financially viable, regardless of whether they are set up to succeed in the first place.

The comic book adaption of the movie is one of the first comics I ever read, and I recall loving it while still being aware that it wasn't actually that good. This is the power of Supergirl: as a character, she transcends crappy writing.

Supergirl's death in the comics was one of the central events of the 1986 Crisis event, and as with many other characters who died in that event (though not Barry Allen's Flash, the other most high profile sacrifice in that storyline) everyone's memory of her was wiped out, as if she had never existed.

Earth 2's Power Girl remained in the new reality (after the various Earths of the multiverse merged), believing herself to be Superman's cousin, though she later discovered she was wrong, then so wrong, then a bit right, then totally right, and possibly crazy. She'll get her own post later.

Behind the scenes, the head men at DC wanted Superman to be unique, and felt that Kara's presence diminished him and the epicness of his story. Which makes me want to go back in time and kick them.

Two years later, a new Supergirl debuted in the DC Universe. Matrix, created by John Byrne (who has a pretty good history of being awesome about female superheroes) came from an alternate reality where Lex Luthor was a good guy and Superman had died young. Luthor, who spent a lot of time gazing through realities stalker-style at the Earth 1 Superman when he wasn't sadly mourning his lost love, Alternate Lana Lang, created a pretend shape-shifting lady who merged qualities from both of them.

Matrix promptly put on a Supergirl costume, made her hair blonde, and kicked butt. Sadly the world was destroyed (through no fault of her own!) and Superman ended up rescuing only Matrix, bringing her through to his reality. He shipped her off to his parents (as Superman usually does with his cousin, the funniest example

being one of the *Super Best Friends Forever* cartoon shorts) who did their best to raise Matrix as their daughter with the same kind of old home values they had invested in Clark.

Sadly it didn't work out that well and Matrix (or Mae) lurched back and forth erratically, caught between her desire to be a superhero and her natural tendency to turn into shape-shifting goo or to flip out and lose hold on reality. She then found a way to freak out her entire adoptive family, by becoming the live-in girlfriend of Lex Luthor II.

The large, red-headed Australian son of the original evil Lex Luthor, Lex II was in fact the original Lex in the body of a rugged Aussie bloke. No one knew this, however, so frankly their suspicions were based on prejudice. I have to say, coming across "Lex II" and Matrix Supergirl for the first time ever in the "Death of Superman" storyline came as a shock to me, being familiar mostly with old school Kara and Luthor. What the *what?* Supergirl is a blob of goo and she's shackled up with *Lex Luthor?*

After being showcased to great effect during "Panic in the Sky", a storyline that emphasised how the relationship between Matrix and Lex had caused a rift between her and Clark, Mae and Lex later came into their own in the wake of the "Death of Superman" storyline, as a power couple striving to rebuild Metropolis and provide stability after the world's great loss. However, Lex's possessiveness and manipulative nature became more obvious, and Mae often had to slip away from him in order to help Lois and the city.

When she discovered that Lex had been secretly cloning her... well let's just say the break up was messy. Matrix was left drifting, with no real sense of who she was, or whether she was really even a person. She then merged with a dying woman called Linda Danvers, became an angel, and finally disappeared from the DC Universe just in time for the "original" Supergirl (or at least the original Supergirl concept) to return.

The new old Supergirl, Kara Zor-El, had reappeared briefly in continuity before the Matrix-Linda Danvers version was written out, in the "Many Happy Returns" storyline by Peter David. It had long been felt that, as with many characters, the post-Crisis continuity was too damn complicated, and the simplest version of the character's backstory was of course the original one. (you think?)

Stuck in a Kryptonian asteroid crashing Armageddon-style to Earth, Kara Zor-El arrived (again) with a bang in the Superman/Batman title in 2004, and took on the Supergirl identity. After a few years, even made an artistic choice to give her biker shorts instead of panties under her short skirt, this seeming more "respectful." While being chronologically older than Superman, she was of

course physically a young teenage girl (as always) and thus able to be patronised by him at any opportunity.

Trained at first by Wonder Woman and the Amazons, Supergirl's journey to find her own heroic path has continued in her own comic for many years now. She was transported to the future for a while, taking up membership of the Legion of Super-Heroes, and has also fought under the identity of Flamebird in the bottle city of Kandor. A variety of different creators meant a whole bunch of different creative directions through the 2000's, and many of them couldn't resist throwing in new "true" origin stories for her, which muddied the waters.

Kara's lack of experience with humanity and the loss of any solid family base for her meant that she had far more trouble fitting in than her Silver/Bronze Age counterpart had. She eventually finds a secret identity for herself, posing as Lana Lang's niece Linda for some time, though she eventually broke her connection from Lana after a traumatic storyline involving insect queens.

My entry point to this version of Supergirl comes from my reading of the Stephanie Brown *Batgirl* series, in which Kara/Linda turns up in one glorious issue for a Girl's Night Out which showcases their friendship beautifully and reveals Kara as a fun loving superhero without the kind of heavy baggage her character had been weighed down with in her own book.

The New 52 rebooted Supergirl yet again, came up with another reason for her to crash to Earth many years after Clark Kent and yet be way younger than him, and made her short skirt even shorter. The title didn't interest me much, but then I'm a 30+ woman who's all cynical. Supergirl's main DC title shouldn't be written for me any more than it should be written for blokes. It should be written for my daughters.

Kara Zor-El was a semi-regular character in season 7 of the live action TV series *Smallville*, played by Laura Vandervoort and Adrienne Palicki. The classic elements of her storyline – being young and confused and trying to fit in with humans despite having super strength, and not having the same rock solid childhood advantage of Clark Kent – were expressed through the show's seventh season, and then they shut her up in the Phantom Zone to get rid of her. She only returned in occasional guest spots after that.

The animated Supergirl – the point at which I came in – is based very much on the modern version of the character, including her fairly distant if fond relationship with Superman, and her inability to properly integrate with humanity. After appearing in other animated films/series, she found her destiny in the *Justice League Unlimited* series, falling in love with Brainiac 5 and leaving the present day to

join the Legion of Super-Heroes in the future. Yep, she might be cute but there's a *reason* I started encouraging my daughters to appreciate Huntress' awesomeness instead...

Animated Supergirl, who is designed as a teeny pocket rocket compared even to the other small women on the show, is voiced mostly by Nicholle Tom, both in the animated adventures of Superman and JLU, though a one-off movie, *Superman/Batman: Apocalypse* has her voiced by Summer Glau. This movie, based closely on the Superman/Batman comic storyline that introduced New Old Supergirl, had her name and image removed from the packaging in response to poor sales of the Wonder Woman animated movie. Which is why it took me two years to realise there was in fact an animated Supergirl movie out there. Sigh.

There's a solid story here. For all my discomfort about Supergirl being written out of JLU by falling in love, I think that this animated version of the character captured most of the key elements of the character. Supergirl can be cute and blonde but she also should be confused and angry. She never gets the stable childhood that Clark Kent received, and so the balance of her alien/superhero self and "real life" should be harder, and it's okay for her to be frustrated about it.

Tiny Titans, *Supergirl: Cosmic Adventures in the 8th Grade* and the brief appearances of the stompie Supergirl in *Super Best Friends Forever* get it very right, I think, while approaching the character in very different ways. I also loved the recent appearance of Supergirl in *Ame-Comi Girls*, and noted how differently the story works when Power Girl is put in Superman's place (and indeed in Clark Kent's place, with his childhood and loving parents) and then Supergirl crashes in her asteroid... I'm excited to see where this story goes, because while Supergirl is once more the "older" cousin who is now younger thanks to spacey-wacey time dilation, having two women at the centre of that story finally offers a new twist.

Kara Zor-El is a great character, with huge potential and recognisability to young girls. If written and presented well, she could easily be the new Buffy or Veronica Mars of a generation. But creators need to stop thinking of her as a property that must appeal to male comics readers. Like Batgirl, she was designed to appeal to young women back in the day, and she still has the power to do that, given half a chance.

Girls, especially young girls, love Supergirl. They will buy dolls based on her and t-shirts with her face on them, even if they've never read a comic or seen her on TV. They get her. So while I mourn the loss of *Tiny Titans*, I am delighted that the new project by the same creators, *Superman Family*, provides a home for a slightly

older version of the Tiny Titans Supergirl. There will be more fun, lighthearted adventures for my girls to enjoy, without me having to show them the ‘adult’ Supergirl comic.

They don’t want to see up her skirt. They just want to play with her.

Tansy Rayner Roberts is the author of the Creature Court trilogy, and the short story collection *Love & Romanpunk*. You can find her at her blog, on Twitter as @tansyrr and at the *Galactic Suburbia* podcast discussing science fiction and the publishing industry.

This article first appeared on the author’s blog on September 11, 2012.

<http://tansyrr.com/tansywp/where-the-wonder-women-are-20-supergirl/>

COVERAGE OF WOMEN ON SF BLOGS

Lady Business

The Backstory

In mid-2011 after a discussion about diversity in reading with my partner, we agreed to focus our reading in 2012 on women by undertaking a project called “She Wrote What?”.¹ The project is not focused on SF/F, but those are the genres he likes the best. To find recommendations for us I began following popular SF/F blogs for their reviews and back catalogues.

A trend emerged as I collected women writers. Women's names started to repeat while more and more new male writers emerged. This reminded me of “The Count 2010” by VIDA² and “The SF Count” by *Strange Horizons*³ (which I hope they repeat). I did two test cases on blogs I was already following, using their current reviews for a three month period. Toward the end of my test case, I mentioned it on Twitter and had a conversation, which I include here for context:

@renay: I am basically looking at SF/F blogs and counting how many books by ladies they've reviewed in 2011. SPOILER: it's depressing.

@kingrat: I've thought about doing that project. I could predict the results.

@renay: Is that why you never did it? End result too predictable?

@kingrat: When @niallharrison did the print mag review numbers this year, i thought a similar blog project might be worthwhile.

@niallharrison: @kingrat @renay I shied away from blogs at the time because so many of them are single-author it felt a bit personal.

@niallharrison: But it would be instructive to see, I think.

@renay: @niallharrison Many position themselves as professional, especially those receiving review copy.

@niallharrison: Even so, I think there's a difference in the implicit promises magazines and blogs make: comprehensiveness vs

1 <http://ladybusiness.dreamwidth.org/18890.html>

2 <http://vidaweb.org/the-count-2010>

3 http://www.strangehorizons.com/blog/2011/03/the_sf_count.shtml

idiosyncrasy.

@renay: Whereas if I sample a group of them over a one year period, meaning will be had! What kind, though, remains to be seen.

@niallharrison: Yeah, that's the level at which it gets interesting. Though I wouldn't want to be the one selecting the sample. :-)

@renay: @niallharrison I started at the Major Players and used blogrolls. I'm sure this is the most effective and least wanky solution! #doom

@niallharrison: Defined methodology is good! I look forward to seeing the results, anyway.

I'll come back to defined methodology.

The Inevitable Disclaimer

This has been such an undertaking; five months of my life were consumed by this project. An unexpected development is that after spending time with the blogs that became my sample, I feel protective of them even though all of the owners, sans *The Book Smugglers*⁴, are strangers to me. Toward the end, even though KJ⁵ told me early on I couldn't hoard the data and mask the blog identities, that it would be a Jerk Move, the more tempted I became to do so. But here we are, and nothing is being hidden, but I still feel like standing on the rooftop to wave my arms and shout about how awesome these blogs are for literature, how diverse of opinion and thought, how lucky we are to be in a community and fandom with this much to choose from, and to please not go pick on them or call them names or accuse them of things based on a year's worth of numbers gleaned from narrow rules I applied to collect the information. Honestly: don't do it. That's a Jerk Move.

I did not begin this project as an expose of individual blogs, because individually there's nothing to glean from the numbers. One year of a person's reviewing habits tells you exactly zero about that person, and furthermore, not all reviews are included – only SF/F and speculative fiction, defined by me, by using Amazon and Goodreads and tags, and reviews of the work elsewhere. On top of that, a list of reviews and an actual reading list are two different things.

I'm not making any claims as to how each blog owner or

4 <http://thebooksmugglers.com/>

5 <http://owlmoose.dreamwidth.org>

contributor feels about women writers.

Although Niall had qualms about examining blogs in this way because of the personal aspect, I obviously disagreed, as here we are, on the cusp of Tables and Lots of Data. Yes, it can be personal, but when we have review policies (most of the blogs I examined did) we're positioning ourselves as a voice for literature to other people, even if they happen to be our friends. When we tell a publisher we're willing to read and review books and then post those reviews, we're telling the world we have something to say and inviting the world in to listen. Furthermore, for me this is personal, because recommendations from mostly recreational, non-professional reviewers is how I tend to find the SF/F media I consume.

Methodology

I did my best to apply my decisions equally across all reviews. I stopped at 21 blogs because of severe issue fatigue. There are hundreds of SF/F blogs and 21 barely skims the surface.

I chose my sample by using the blogs I follow, blogs from their blogrolls, recommendations from my co-contributors to Lady Business and Ana of *The Book Smugglers* who is active in the SF/F community (this is apparently called snowball sampling). I based my decision on whether it seemed like the blog was SF/F related and subscriber count. I did not research archives of any blogs but my two test cases beforehand and once I started processing a blog, I did not remove it from my sample.

I am not sure what I would have found if I had kept adding blogs. Maybe 50 would have been the magic number where the scale tipped the other way from what my results turned out to be. However, anyone can feel free to look over their favorite SF/F blog and its reviews and report back what they find and how it compares to my results. Google Docs is free!

This survey focuses on reviews of science fiction and fantasy texts (more on sequential art below). Many blogs were good enough to note the genre. Some didn't and I had to do a little legwork. Several people came behind me and gave me advice and opinions on reviews I was unsure about and did checks on author gender for me.

In the reviews total, each book was counted M, F, or U. This project is, at its core, a binary one. I make no claims as to the gender identities of the authors or bloggers classified as Unknown.

Authors can appear multiple times in the reviews total. The only exception to this was when there were multiple books by the same author in the same post. That's counted as one because those reviews are happening at the same time in the same entry. That's different

than putting that author and their work in front of eyeballs three different times.

Other aspects to my methodology include:

1. I took a very generous line on what I counted as SF/F and speculative. There's going to be something like *Spellcast* by Barbara Ashford in the same study as *The Clockwork Rocket* by Greg Egan. That's how I'm rolling; it's okay if you don't agree.
2. I only counted reviews hosted on the actual blog. Woe, should they be posted elsewhere with a link to them!
3. Young Adult and adult SF/F and speculative fiction were included, but not Middle Grade. If anything was unclear, I used Amazon/Goodreads based on where it was listed to make that decision.
4. Anthologies with multiple authors are treated by authors (sorry editors).
5. Writers under a shared pseud that's publicly known were counted individually. Unfortunately concerning authors filed under Unknown, it's impossible to know if those are shared and thus they are counted as one author.
6. Co-authors were counted individually.
7. Guest Post reviews were not included (unless they weren't labeled as Guest Posts, and if so, well-played blog owners. Well-played.).
8. Originally I included sequential art (comics, manga, and graphic novels) in these numbers, but unfortunately, they skewed the results too much. While all blogs included traditional texts, only a handful covered sequential art: strike one. The sheer number of men in the industry also made some blogs have wild ratios that, bottom line, annoyed me and made their coverage look terrible through no fault of their own due to my inclusion standards: strike two. It was extremely difficult to find complete lists of all artists. Including all artists – colorists and pencilers, etc. – was a requirement for me based on opinions of artists I asked. Some projects were almost impossible to find information for, which meant some listings would be complete but others wouldn't be. Because this project relies on complete contributor lists, I deemed it too time intensive: strike three. It was also like a bonus round of "wow, women sure are invisible in the comics industry, huh?" It was supremely depressing and in the end that was a discussion I simply didn't want to dive into at this time.
9. Horror that was psychological or based on gore or torture

porn didn't count. Horror that was fantastical or paranormal did. This is still my most personally conflicting category; there are probably a lot of errors and missing information or additional information that shouldn't count. It still makes me unhappy. I asked for second opinions here because I don't read horror and did the best I could with research.

10. On gender of authors and bloggers: when possible, I checked when gender was not clear. I noted when it was unknown or if I couldn't find enough data to make a clear decision. I did my best to examine each. It feels pertinent to note that one of the hardest things I faced was women writing under male pseudonyms. There are so many men represented that it's truly difficult to say I researched each one as thoroughly as I could have. I did my best and erred when in doubt. If I was wrong, please tell me, and I will make the correction with apologies.

I was also dealing with hundreds of blog posts and Google Reader, which underwent a horrible, eye-gougingly awful redesign in the middle of this project (thanks, Google). I am certain there are reviews I missed because of this awesome development, authors I've placed incorrectly because of lackluster research, and other fun, humiliating errors. I'm willing to update my spreadsheets and include notes in this post if the information is brought to me and presented convincingly, although the data presented in this post will not be updated for a few months, as I'll let any corrections float in and request a final update of the tables to be included alongside the current information.

Version one of my spreadsheets can be found at "Coverage of Women on SF/F Blogs" (2011). All the data and the blogs I acquired it from that I am discussing below is contained in these sheets.

The Results

In the beginning, I was fairly sure of what I was going to find: men discussing mostly men, and women discussing both either equally or more. Does the data follow?

Table 1: Authors reviewed by gender

Male	57%
Female	42%
Unknown	1%

This is a fairly standard result that's not ideal, but is better than what it could be. Men still dominate the literary conversation, but women are in there, too. I was initially surprised by this result, because my gut back in 2011 had said it was not this even.

Even when expressed in a different way, the "overall" score seems to indicate that my gut was jumping the gun (Table 2).

However, if you start rearranging the data a bit, things change. There are women being reviewed by men, yes, but there are also women being reviewed by women. My initial instinct was correct. My results highlight an interesting development here given the context of *Girls as Omni-Readers*⁶, as Jodie wrote last year during an unrelated debate in the YA community, where she said:

'Omni-reader' is a term Maureen Johnson used on her Twitter feed two weeks ago. She used this word as a way of describing beliefs that girls are readers who will read about anything regardless of whether the subject matter looks traditionally masculine, or traditionally feminine. Articles like this one by Sarah Pekkanen of *The Washington Post* agree that girls tend to accept a broad range of books and will read a book featuring a boy on the cover [...]

If you look at the same table, reorganized to take into account the blogger's gender (as expressed in profiles, about pages, etc.) (Table 3).

Here we have the data reorganized by gender of the reviewer, female, to mixed gender, to male, to the one unknown. And thus, the feeling I had turned out not to be so wrong after all: the 40/60 is an average, and that average is the way it is because the women reviewing women drive it up.

6 <http://ladybusiness.dreamwidth.org/3930.html>

Table 2: Authors reviewed by blog

Blog	Female Authors	Male Authors	Gender Unknown
A	15%	85%	-
B	56%	43%	1%
C	5%	95%	-
D	15%	85%	-
E	15.95%	84%	4.7%
F	8.5%	91.5%	-
G	29%	70%	1%
H	59%	41%	-
I	38.99%	61%	1.27%
J	49%	51%	-
K	24%	74.4%	1.6%
L	86%	14%	-
M	23%	77%	-
N	24.1%	75%	.9%
O	68%	28.3%	3.7%
P	29%	71%	-
Q	52%	47.2%	.8%
R	46%	52%	2%
S	23.1%	75%	1.9%
T	23%	77%	-
U	33%	64.6%	2.4%
Overall	42%	57%	1%

**Table 3: Authors reviewed by blog,
organised by gender of blogger.**

Blog	Female Authors	Male Authors	Gender Unknown	
H	59%	41%	-	Female bloggers
J	49%	51%	-	
L	86%	14%	-	
O	68%	28.3%	3.7%	
Q	52%	47.2%	.8%	
R	46%	52%	2%	
G	29%	70!	1%	Group blogs; mixed gender
I	38.99%	61%	1.27%	
P	29%	71%	-	
A	15%	85%	-	Male bloggers
C	5%	95%	-	
D	15%	85%	-	
E	15.95%	84%	4.7%	
F	8.5%	91.5%	-	
K	24%	74.4%	1.6%	
M	23%	77%	-	
N	24.1%	75%	.9%	
S	23.1%	75%	1.9%	
T	23%	77%	-	
U	33%	64.6%	2.4%	
B	56%	43%	1%	Gender Unknown
Overall	42%	57%	1%	

Table 4: Authors reviewed by gender of blogger

Group blogs	25% women
Female bloggers	58% women
Male bloggers	19% women

(The blogger of unknown gender is not included in this table.)

So no, I wasn't wrong last year to go, "hey, wait a minute..." and feel like things were unequal. If you're following popular SF/F blogs run by men I believe this is a problem you will continuously run into, except by those focused on their review diversity. Reviews of books by women don't feature as often on blogs run by men or shared by men, but on blogs run by women, it's more equal and sometimes even women as majority because culturally women are trained to read "traditionally" male things, while the reverse is not true.

Recently I linked to a post by [coffeandink](#)¹ where she examined a panel of authors talking about SF/F titled "The erasure of women writers in sf & fantasy". I quoted that post then and said I would come back to quote it again because it's so insightful and says everything I wasn't educated enough to know or speak about:

I am not suggesting that the participants are consciously sexist or intend to suppress or erase the existence of women writers. I am saying that this conversation follows a typical social pattern in which (a) men talk more than women in mixed company; (b) men promote male writers significantly more than they promote women writers; (c) the criteria which determine value or worth inherently favor men's contributions over women's, which are deemed trivial or inapplicable; (d) women's contributions to the critical or cultural canon are systematically devalued, forgotten, or erased.

Are there answers in these numbers? I'm only finding more questions. There are no good, easy answers. Of course, some like to pretend there are easy answers and that's where I've watched this debate fall apart in the past whenever it's cropped up. It goes to Disasterland immediately and becomes a shame spiral. Someone inevitably shows up and starts talking about why quotas are bad and no, no, how dare you call them sexist and a game of Defensive Assholes is launched. The entire situation devolves into Don't Read the Comments™ and it's Gender Catastrophe Theater and general badness, which accomplishes less than nothing, because if we go

1 <http://coffeandink.dreamwidth.org/1140802.html>

back to the beginning, no one called anyone any names at all. I want to avoid that as much as possible. Reading diversity is a complicated subject and book selection often a process that we're not conscious of. We're impacted on all sides by a myriad of things influencing our decisions. But reviewing and talking about titles on public blogs and journals is an active decision that we're making every time we put a book down and go, "I'm going to write 1000 words about that and share it with the Internet!"

As friends finalized this data for me, made the tables you see above and I started thinking about what to say about them, VIDA released "The 2011 Count".² It's not specific to SF/F like my project and and it's professionally focused, but I think it's fascinating to look and see the same trends in an unrelated sphere repeated in this one.

What are we saying to those who trust our reading choices? What are we saying to the publishers who send us materials to review about the books that deserve that kind of virtual hand-selling? Does it impact what they think is relevant and sellable? What does it mean when we review that book by a man, and that one, and that other one and pass over the women writing the same kind of story? There's worth in examining the reviewing choices we're making. There's worth in thinking about what messages we're sending when our promotional energies favor the dominant gender without letting ourselves get mired in arguments grounded in gender essentialism.

Diverse voices in literature we celebrate is incredibly important. I encourage everyone to look at their SF/F review statistics. It's not an easy task if the results are uneven, but it's a worthwhile one.

Renay is one of the three heads of Cerberus, along with Ana and Jodie, that is the *Lady Business* blog. *Lady Business* critiques texts from a feminist perspective with high concentration of fluff, personal musings, pajama parties, talk of mystical creatures, in-depth analysis of cat macro shots, and Tom Hardy, who defies explanation.

2 <http://www.vidaweb.org/the-2011-count>

THE CIRCUS AS FANTASTIC DEVICE

Chris Gerwel

I grew up devouring the works of Ray Bradbury, and I have no doubt that *Dandelion Wine*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, and *The Illustrated Man* all had an enormous influence on my love of fantasy. Add to that the fact that I grew up in New Jersey, where the dilapidated boardwalks of the Jersey Shore eerily embody the same carnival creepiness, and I suppose it is no wonder that I love stories that feature circuses, carnivals, freak shows or anything at all related to them. And now that I am a little older (and can look two out of three circus clowns in the eye without crying), and having just finished Robert Jackson Bennett's *The Troupe*, I find myself considering what makes the device so compelling.

The Many Faces of the Circus

I group a pretty broad assortment of devices into my “circus” or “carnival” category: on one end of the spectrum, we have the traditional traveling circus as brilliantly depicted in Genevieve Valentine's recent *Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti* or Charles G. Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao*. The focus in these stories is performative: the players in the circus play certain roles which stand either in contrast to or in embodiment of their true natures. Where play ends and player begins is purposefully blurred, and the stories often explore this fuzzy gray area explicitly. On the opposite end of the spectrum, we have the traveling carnival, such as those that Bradbury so adores or the one used in Jonathan L. Howard's *Johannes Cabal the Necromancer*. In these stories, the roles that the performers play do matter but they are counter-balanced and contrasted against their lives outside of their performances, and further balanced by the devices employed in their show. The performances matter, but these stories feature an assumption that there is more to the players than their performances. Between these two extremes, lies the Vaudeville circuit that Robert Jackson Bennett explores in *The Troupe*.

The borders between these variants are fluid, and it is entirely possible that *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* is right to call them interchangeable: they share many of the same structural and aesthetic features. What such enterprises represent for the reader is a portal into the world of fantasy. When we read a story that features this device, the circus marks the jumping off point between a representation of

reality and the wild adventure of fiction.

As a device, the circus taps into a primal cultural touchstone. By the time we are ten, most of us will have had the disorienting experience of going to an amusement park, visiting a fair, or seeing a circus. As a result, we will have already internalized the mental shift that the circus' superficial fantasy demands of us. The process by which we accept the (clearly fictional) conceit of the real-life circus is close cousin to Coleridge's suspension of disbelief when reading fiction. By tapping into this physiological and emotional memory, writers who employ the circus as a narrative device boost the signal of their fiction, and significantly accelerate the reader's acceptance of the story. Everyone, after all, loves the circus.

The Real-world Circus as an Imperfect Portal

Despite its power as a cultural touchstone, the circus is not a perfect portal from reality to fantasy. And part of its strength as a narrative device stems from its very imperfection. When we go to the movies, we experience a complete immersion into the film's fantasy. If we see the wires, if we see the camera, we scoff and complain about the film's poor production quality. But at a real-life circus or carnival it is impossible to make such a complete break from reality. Even children will see the carnival worker smoking behind the tent, will catch the cracks in the face paint, or spot the smudges in the hall of mirrors.

This creates a certain level of cognitive dissonance: on the one hand, we want to immerse ourselves in the fiction of the circus, but on the other hand we are unable to divorce ourselves from its seedy reality. As a portal, the real-life circus is flawed. And the fictional portrayals of such circuses rely on that flawed nature by asking us to hold two conflicting thoughts in our head at the same time: that the circus is fake, a glamour, a sham. And that it is real, that the fantasy it asks us to concede is true. If that is not a perfect description of how fantasy – or fiction itself – works, I don't know what is.

The Circus as a Means of Transition

Many stories that involve the circus device feature young characters signing onto the troupe or at least peaking behind its curtain. Whether it is Bradbury's Will Halloway, Jim Nightshade, or Douglas Spaulding, Valentine's Little George, or Bennett's George Carole, it is children who are the natural window through which we can experience the circus. This extends the portal concept: we run away to join the circus, we transition from a "normal" existence into a fantastical one, and in many ways we grow from the innocence of

childhood where we hew closely to the fantasy into the more cynical reality of adulthood where we sneer at the greasepaint.

Circus stories often use a child's innocent perspective to deepen their basic cognitive dissonance. They use the circus, and their young protagonist's gradual understanding of its nature as a concrete expression of the dissonance of adolescence. Whether it is Douglas Spaulding, Holden Caulfield, or Katniss Everdeen, every young adult must wrestle with the transition from childhood to adulthood: it is the literal foundation of every bildungsroman ever written.

The Circus as the Anti-Quest

There is an (over-simplistic) interpretation of Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero that has given us the "hero's journey" as an almost write-by-the-numbers recipe for fantasy. With its nature as a portal device, its coterie of unusual characters, and its predilection for young protagonists, one might think that circus stories naturally lend themselves to the heroic quest model. It is a tempting theory, but from a thematic perspective, I find that circus stories are almost the anti-thesis of the traditional quest narrative.

Consider the object of the quest: it is an object, an achievement, a moment that is distinct in both time and space. The destruction of the ring in Mount Doom. The recovery of Henwen the Oracular Pig. Such specificity is anathema to the circus: they are traveling shows, by their very nature transient. From the perspective of the performers, there is no quest: there is simply a never-ending progression of indistinct towns. From the perspective of the towns they visit: there is merely a brief sojourn in a fantastical realm. When the circus itself is given a specific goal, as it is in Howard's *Johannes Cabal the Necromancer*, its thematic efficacy is sorely weakened. And when, as in most narrative fiction, our characters create for themselves a tangible goal – as in Valentine's *Mechanique*, Bennett's *The Troupe*, Howard's *Johannes Cabal*, Philip Reeve's *A Web of Air*, or Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* – they will leave the confines of the circus to ultimately achieve it. To do otherwise would elide the cognitive dissonance the device relies on.

The Troupe as the Anti-Band of Heroes

The attractions of the circus – in real life as in fiction – are invariably the characters that it invites us to meet. They are always distinct, extremely varied, and most importantly led by a charismatic, engaging, and mysterious leader. In much heroic fantasy, especially in the hero's journey school of quest fantasies, one might think that a circus

offers the perfect source for our hero's plucky band of entertaining companions. But just as the hero's quest structure eviscerates the circus' effectiveness as a narrative device, its performers are the antithesis to the stereotypical band of companions.

The Encyclopedia of Fantasy talks about how companions in heroic fantasy tend to either appear in "dirty dozen" configurations (where external circumstances force them together) or as "seven samurai" (where their association to achieve a shared goal is voluntary). Despite their superficial resemblance to a pariah elite, the circus performers by definition do not conform to either configuration. The defining characteristic of circus performers is their independence: both from each other, and from the broader society. This independence further heightens their fantastical disassociation from reality, and gives greater scope for the exploration of character themes. They are not brought together by some external circumstance, even if it might seem that way. Even if – as in *Something Wicked This Way Comes* – they serve the circus under duress, it is almost always their choices that put them there. Yet despite this, their association is rarely voluntary: they do not share goals with their fellow travelers, and their friendships are tenuous at best. Three threads bind them: the circus master, the circus itself, and the fact that they are all – in some way – broken.

And this represents the greatest departure from either the *Dirty Dozen* or *Seven Samurai* trope: in most heroic fantasy, and especially in the *bildungsroman*, the youthful hero's companions represent facets of the fully mature ur-hero. From the disreputable thief companion our hero might learn tactical flexibility and cunning wit, the noble knight companion might teach honor in the face of certain death, the magus might teach wisdom, etc. Each companion plays a certain role and embodies a certain facet of the mature hero's ultimate personality. Not so in a circus story. If anything, the youthful protagonist must build their mature self in opposition to their companions.

And this is something which Bennett nails perfectly in *The Troupe*. Each of the members of Silenus' vaudeville troupe is, as all fictional circus performers are, broken. Their fracture lines are intensely private, and tie directly into the themes of the book. The unity with which Bennett structures his story is very impressive, and a significant improvement over his debut *Mr. Shivers*. But his young hero, George Carole, must navigate the minefields of his companion's tragic histories. In some cases, he pours salt on their wounds. In others, he is oblivious until almost too late. But he grows to define himself not as an amalgamation of his companion's value systems, but with a worldview distinctly his own.

And it is this, the defining of oneself, and negotiating the border between fantasy and reality, that lies at the heart of every circus story.

It is the primary theme of Valentine's *Mechanique*, of Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao*, and of just about every circus story I have ever read. And I suspect that is a greater truth that lies at the heart of every fantasy. And, for that matter, at the heart of every work of fiction.

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<http://elflands2ndcousin.com/2012/04/24/the-circus-as-a-fantastic-device/>

CONCERNING HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY IN FANTASY, OR TRUTH FORGIVES YOU NOTHING

Daniel Abraham

I grew up devouring the works of Ray Bradbury, and so there's this argument about epic fantasy that keeps coming up, and it makes me uncomfortable every time I see it. Usually it goes something like this: a beloved novel or series set in a world with kings and knights and dragons – that is to say one set in an imaginary medieval Europe – is analyzed and found somehow wanting. Not enough strong women, too many white people, too much sexual violence. As the debate fires up, one of the defenders of book or series makes some variation of the argument that fantasy that has the set dressings of medieval Europe is better if it also has medieval social norms. Or, at a lower diction, “But the Middle Ages really were sexist/racist/filled with sexual violence.”

And there, my dear friends, I get my back up. With all respect, this is a bad argument. If you don't mind, I'd like to run down my objections to it in hopes of putting a stake through this argument's rhetorical heart.

First off – and I include this only because it deserves to be said – history is more complex than a fantasy novel. The Middle Ages, for all their many faults, also included Moorish Spain where religious tolerance and civilization flourished. Women in the 14th century England could own property and accumulate wealth. The argument that “it was really like that” assumed that there's a singular “it” that can be applied. There's not. That alone should be enough to stop this rhetorical strategy, but it's not the part of the argument that actually chafes me, so put it aside and let's pretend for a while that there was only one homogenous Middle Ages. And let's say that from the fall of Rome to the Enlightenment was one long uninterrupted stream of sexual subjugation, racial hatred, rape, and plague. It wasn't, but let's pretend.

What would that say about contemporary epic fantasy set in a faux medieval world? That it should be like that too? That a story is made deeper, more powerful, better by cleaving to that? Would, to give a concrete example, the *Chronicles of Narnia* be improved by plagues and vicious religious schism? I think it wouldn't. And I think there are many secondary world fantasies like it – Hughart's *The Bridge of Birds*, Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, Kushner's *Swordspoint* – that

would obviously be poorly served by greater historical authenticity.

Which is to say the standard only applies to the projects it applies to.

So fine. We've dispensed with the authentic complexity of history. Now, let's cut out *The Chronicles of Prydain* and Thomas the Rhymer too. Let's pretend that the argument might make sense if we only talk about the subset of epic fantasies where the author is trying for authenticity. George R.R. Martin, Joe Abercrombie, R. Scott Bakker, Richard Morgan. The kinds of fantasies that pull no punches and show medieval life the way that (we're pretending for the sake of argument) it really was. In that context, argument has to hold true.

Except that it doesn't.

The importance of God and the church in medieval Europe is the central cultural fact of the time, and the fear of damnation in the afterlife shaped everything from the creation of art to the customs of international banking. Surely everyone in these historically authentic fantasies must be pious, because the Middle Ages were really like that. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Western Europe had a massive ruralization that didn't start coming back to focus on large urban centers until the 1400s. Surely the majority of action in these realistic fantasies happens outside cities. And since there weren't any, dragons have to count as a huge minus.

Except that of course they don't. And what's more, they *shouldn't*.

The idea that the race, gender, or sexual roles of a given work of secondary world, quasi-medieval fantasy were dictated by history doesn't work on any level. First, history has an almost unimaginably rich set of examples to pull from. Second, there are a wide variety of secondary world faux-medieval fantasies that don't reach for historical accuracy and which would be served poorly by the attempt. And third, even in the works where the standard is applied, it's only applied to specific, cherry-picked facets of the fantasy culture and the real world.

At its heart, the argument that the Middle Ages were "really like that" misunderstands what epic fantasy is by treating it as though it was in conversation with actual history. It isn't. It's in conversation with the epic fantasy that came before it. George R.R. Martin (who, in the interest of full disclosure, is a friend and sometimes-collaborator of mine) has drawn a great deal from the incidents of real history, but he hasn't written a work of historical fiction. What gives his work its power isn't historical accuracy, but the subversion of genre expectations and a deeply-felt sorrow that infuses almost every scene. J.R.R. Tolkien drew his inspiration not from medieval history but from medieval romances, and the *Lord of the Rings* isn't

remembered for what it said about an imaginary 1300s, but what it said about (and to) a real 1950s. And 2010s. The roots of epic fantasy aren't with King William II. They're with King Arthur, and so they're timeless. Historical accuracy isn't what we come here for.

So why are people making the claim? Here's what it looks like to me:

There are legitimate reasons for racism, sexism, and sexual violence to be part of a fantasy project, and expressing how problematic elements serve a novel is tricky work. It invites conflict, and the issues about what fiction is and should be aren't straightforward.

It's hard to have a piece of fiction that spoke to you – and by you I mean me – criticized, and this argument seems to come up almost exclusively in the context of defending a beloved work against criticism. When a critic points out something problematic in a book that we enjoyed (or, God forbid, wrote), it feels like a personal attack. Also this is the Internet, and the level of rhetorical violence with which the analysis is presented can sometimes leave welts. It's natural to reach come to the defense of the work, because that also feels like coming to the defense of the writer and the fans. We don't do our best thinking when we're defensive. Sometimes we make dumb arguments. This is one of those.

We'll have to do better.

Daniel Abraham writes novels under three names – well, two and a half, really. Daniel Abraham writes epic fantasy set other worlds, M.L.N. Hanover writes urban fantasy set in something very like our world, and James S. A. Corey writes science fiction set well into the future. In the real world, he is Daniel Abraham, except that James S. A. Corey is written with a partner named Ty Franck.

This article first appeared on *A Dribble of Ink* on April 23, 2012.

<http://aidanmoher.com/blog/2012/04/articles/concerning-historical-authenticity-in-fantasy-or-truth-forgives-you-nothing-by-daniel-abraham/>

ON AGENCY

Elizabeth Bear

Agency, as we use the term in literary circles, is – quite frankly –the thing that makes characters interesting to the reader. As much as we talk about tactics of characterization that may or may not appeal to any particular reader (making the character accessible, making them funny, making them identifiable)... the one thing that I have found that does not fail to connect to the audience is giving a character agency.

You ask what it is: it's actually quite simple, for all that many writers have a hard time internalizing and writing it.

Agency is when a character has an agenda, and is making attempts to complete that agenda. This is the so called try/fail cycle of the three act structure of genre fiction; when internalized, it's the striving that drives literary fiction. It's what the character wants, and what they need, and what they are willing to do to get it.

We also refer to it as “protagging,” because it's what protagonists do.

Kurt Vonnegut famously offered this bit of advice to writers: “Make your character want something, even if it's only a glass of water.”

Now – especially in mythic fiction – there can be what we refer to as the refusal of the call before the protagonist settles in to doing their job. The character still wants something: they want to be left alone.

Rick in *Casablanca* says, “I stick my neck out for nobody.” His refusal is active. It can even be heroic, as when a protagonist chooses not to fight in an unjust war, for example.

And when the protagonist converts to pursuit of a different goal, he actively pursues that goal.

So agency is having an agenda. Being an agent. From the Latin, *agere*: “to do”.

Agency is doing stuff. Not because somebody else tells you to, but because it's got to be done.

A lot of people use the term “strong female character” to mean “kickass heroine.” I think this is silly. In my estimation, one of the strongest women in *Range of Ghosts* never picks up a weapon. She's a fourteen-year-old-girl who escapes execution for being pregnant with the wrong man's child by running across a desert at night in her bedroom slippers.

That's pretty damned tough. She wants to live, and she wants

her child to live, and she does what she has to do to make it happen.

Readers love agency. It lends narrative drive and connection better than any other tactic (I'd say any other three tactics) that a writer can use.

As for why female characters have it less often than male ones? Well, there's an implicit assumption in the question that I'm not sure I agree with. Do they really? Does Lessa have less agency than F'lar? Does Juliet have less agency than Romeo? Does Jessica have less agency than Paul? Does Elizabeth have less agency than Mr. Darcy?

Women may have traditionally had to express their agency in more limited ways – but that doesn't mean it's not there. Just that they were pushing a bigger boulder uphill to express what they want, and their options on what to do to get it were more limited.

But for the moment taking the question in the spirit in which it was offered, I'd say that if women are written passively by some authors (for reasons other than to make a literary point—which we'll get to in a moment), it's due to two things:

1. bad writing and
2. failure to interrogate an internalized social construct that men are active and women are acted upon. Which has probably never been true, but it's one of the founding myths of the patriarchy, ain't it?

As for the question of whether a character can be interesting and a book can be “good” if none of the characters have it – well. *Waiting for Godot* is still taught and performed, and the entire point of that play is that none of the characters have the least little bit of agency. Not a scrap, not a speck. They exist in a blur of existential despair.

But that's a special case, and we're not all Samuel Beckett, and frankly, I've read *Waiting for Godot* three times, I've seen it performed, and I hate the fucking thing. I mean, I admire it: it's a hell of a technical accomplishment.

But it's boring and painful.

And as genre authors, we're generally not trying to be boring and painful, because we're here to entertain as well as enlighten. Literature doesn't have to hurt.

Now, as a counterexample, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Again, a play in which nobody has a hell of a lot of agency, for literary and thematic reasons. They don't really want anything, and when they kind of start to, universe itself thwarts their attempts at agency! As it is written, so it shall be... and I kind of love it.

Because it's funny.

Now, your mileage may vary. There are those who love *Godot*

and hate *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*.

But I'd suggest that unless a writer is Tom Stoppard or Samuel Beckett, a writer might want to go with making their characters a little more active. Especially when writing for a genre audience – and a genre audience of which about half is going to be seriously upset with the work if they notice that all the women just sit around waiting to be rescued.¹

Elizabeth Bear is the author of a number of novels and short stories. She has received two Hugo Awards, the John W. Campbell Award, a Sturgeon Award and an honourable mention for the Philip K. Dick Award. She has also been nominated for the World Fantasy Award, the Lambda Award, the Romantic Times Reader's Choice Award and several others.

This article first appeared on *Staffer's Book Review* on April 18, 2012.

<http://www.staffersbookreview.com/2012/04/guest-post-elizabeth-bear-knows-what-agency-is.html>

1 And yes, *Godot* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* are both rather light on female characters, but they were the contrasting works I could think of that demonstrate how to use lack-of-agency as a thematic technique.

ARE ELVES GAY?

Gav Thorpe

I received some time ago a comment which stopped me in my tracks. I went back and forth on this, trying to work out my own thoughts on the subject, and to be honest, I'm not sure I came to any solid conclusions other than 'it's not been presented that way before.' Anyway, here's the comment and my reply:

First I wish to say, that I loved your books, especially Morathi was portrayed even better than I hoped. But I also hope I don't offend you if I say that there were lot of cliches, stereotypes and predictable events.

This brings me to my question. Basically I wish to know more about Elven homosexuality in Warhammer and censorship in GW/BL. Most fans get furious when I suggest I imagine Elves as pagans with very different view on sexuality.

I find it very curious that druchii who are often compared to Sparta and Rome, are according to most too "macho" pseudodarwinists to tolerate homosexuality, despite the huge importance of homosexuality in both those warlike cultures. In case of extremely hedonistic Druchii and sophisticated Asur this seems even more absurd.

Fans get even more angry when I suggest I imagine Malekith (and perhaps all Elves) as being quite bisexual. It's not just that Malekith the Great reminds me so much of Alexander the Great and Gaius Julius Caesar (both bisexual), it also seems natural to me that a mortal with such a long lifespan would surely experience some homoerotic affairs.

Am I wrong if I see GW as being similar to Blizzard when it comes even to mere homoerotic references? On one hand GW is not afraid to sell completely naked harpies, witches in g-strings and daemonettes with six naked breasts as well as referencing to incestuous relationship between Malekith and Morathi and cross-breeding between different species, but is reluctant to make even slightest reference to existence of homosexuality.

I am not some childish gay person who demands to have such themes in every piece of art, its just that in Warhammer fiction this phenomenon really lowers the potential for depth and credibility. It is especially obvious when it comes to any lore associated with Slaanesh and your description of athartists. Trying to bring such

a natural feature (with huge importance on peoples behavior and fates) out of existence is like creating a world without gravity.

Otherwise I really like your work and I just hope I shall know thanks to you what to expect from GW in the years to come regarding this matter.

Sorry for taking so long to reply – I’ve been busy with travels and deadlines and didn’t want to rattle off something short and glib. You raise a very interesting point, and one that I’ve had to think about very carefully before replying.

Are there gay elves?

Yes, would be my overall reply, but though your examples from pagan cultures would make sense in the context of elven culture, I do not see their sexual society being as close to those you cite, simply from the few examples we have to look at. While the logic of what you say stands up, I simply don’t think this was what was intended when the early background of the elves was being written. The comparison with Athens and Sparta is a rough shorthand at best, particularly to highlight Nagarythe’s militarisation compared to a mainly citizen levy from other states; and also to present the political influence of Nagarythe and Caledor over the other, ostensibly independent, elven kingdoms. In other aspects – slavery most prominently – elven society is substantially different. There seems nothing to suggest that the distinction between adult, sexually active elven males and everything else – the basis for Greek sexuality at the basic level – exists within Ulthuan’s culture.

The only real background we have regarding elf sexual politics comes via the Everqueen. We know that the Phoenix King is required to sire the next Everqueen, but after this their relationship is purely formal (Aenarion notwithstanding). The only other relationship we have to compare is Prince Tyrion as the Everqueen’s consort, which suggests a more high medieval, courtly love than the culture of classical pagans. With that said, I don’t imagine there to be any particular stigma attached to homosexuality within elven society, and it may well be prevalent as you say.

A particular difficulty is that any special emphasis on homosexuality for Warhammer elves, as opposed to any other races, would feed into the juvenile view held by some that they wear dresses, are effeminate and, in a derogatory way, are gay. To include one homosexual elf in a story might smack of tokenism, while to explore it in more depth would be difficult within the scope of a Warhammer novel – just as exploring any other facets of sexual society is difficult given the guidelines for content that exist with Black Library. Creating the correct sort of context to explore these

issues is tricky unless it is to be one of the main themes of a story, and cowardly though it may seem, it is not one I feel suitably skilled to present properly. Well, not until I've had a chance to think on it some more.

I'll end by saying that I don't think Black Library has any policy against portrayal of homosexuality any more than any other type of sexuality, but we all write from our own experiences and worldview and, as far as I know, as a bunch of straight authors we've simply stuck close to what we know.

It's been a long time since I've had to consider an answer to a question as involved as this, and it has made me think a lot about the assumptions I have made through my own writing. Thank you for that.

Gav Thorpe has written a pile of projects for Black Library and recently finished his original fantasy trilogy *The Crown of the Blood* for Angry Robot books. He also dabbles in games design and development. Gav lives near Nottingham with his patient and loving partner, Kez.

This article first appeared on the author's website on November 12, 2012.

<http://mechanicalhamster.wordpress.com/2012/11/12/are-elves-gay/>

COWARDICE, LAZINESS AND IRONY: HOW SCIENCE FICTION LOST THE FUTURE

Jonathan McCalmont

0. Awesomely Exhausted

One of the most striking things about the worlds of science fiction, fantasy and horror literature is their marked propensity for boosterism. Shattered into dozens of incommensurate tribes and forced together by award ceremonies held in mid-size hotels and conference centres around the globe, genre culture overflows with books purporting to be the very best of what science fiction has to offer.

This self-congratulatory urge is most evident in the steady flow of *Year's Best* anthologies that collect and reprint some of the year's most notable pieces of short fiction. Frequently little more than a pay-day for short fiction writers and publishers, these bloated and idiosyncratic collections present themselves in such a hysterically self-important manner that it has become traditional to take their vainglorious boasting entirely at face value and treat them as literal purveyors of the Year's Best Short Fiction.

Hoping to uncover some deeper meaning in the editorial selection process, critic Paul Kincaid has produced a brilliant overview of what (we are told) is the year's best genre short fiction.¹ Surveying Gardner Dozois's *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Twenty-Ninth Annual Collection*, Richard Horton's *The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy: 2012 Edition* and *The Nebula Awards Showcase 2012*, Kincaid concludes that:

The very best that science fiction and fantasy have to offer is exhaustion.

Kincaid's analysis is wide-ranging and tightly controlled. Rather than speculate as to the causes for the scene's apparent exhaustion, Kincaid merely levels a series of accusations flowing from one central problem:

The problem may be, I think, that science fiction has lost confidence in the future. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it has lost confidence that the future can be apprehended.

Usually, whenever someone attempts to start this type of debate,

¹ Editor's note: The complete text of Mr. Kincaid's review can be found elsewhere in this volume.

the field's gatekeepers² act swiftly to shut things down. Desperate to defend both their friends and themselves from accusations of complacency, they dissemble and dismiss rather than allow dissenting opinions the space to develop into something more concrete. While the Internet may have created the illusion of transparency and wider cultural discourse, the only conversation that really interests the field is how awesome everyone's next book is going to be.

To put it bluntly, I agree with Paul Kincaid... I think that science fiction has lost interest in the world and fallen out of step with the times resulting in the emergence of a narcissistic and inward-looking literature devoid of both relevance and vitality.

In an effort to keep the flame of Kincaid's observations alive, I have written an essay that expands upon some of his observations and attempts to unpack 'what it is we mean when we talk about science fiction being exhausted'.

1. Conceptual Blockage

The most common account of why science fiction no longer attempts to engage with the future is that the future is now deemed to be out of bounds. The world, we are told, changes so quickly that any attempt to predict the future would necessarily be out of date by the time the book was released. In an effort to acknowledge this particular difficulty without necessarily confronting it, science fiction manifests the intellectual inaccessibility of the future as a cultural event known as the singularity. Popularised both by the SF author Vernor Vinge and the futurist Ray Kurzweil, the singularity is (broadly speaking) the point at which machine and human intelligences begin to sharply increase in both size and speed resulting in a rate of cultural change that tends towards the infinite. As Kincaid puts it:

Somewhere amidst the ruins of cyberpunk in the 1980s, we began to feel that the present was changing too rapidly for us to keep up with. And if we didn't understand the present, what hope did we have for the future? The accelerating rate of change has inevitably affected the futures that appear in our fictions. Things happen as if by magic [...] or else things are so different that there is no connection with the experiences and perceptions of our present.

Rather than question this assumption in the context of a review, Kincaid simply accepts it and uses it as the basis for a broad narrative of engagement, exhaustion and retreat in which genre writers attempted to gain purchase on the future only for this future to

2 <http://www.jonathanstrahan.com.au/wp/2012/09/09/episode-115-live-with-gary-k-wolfe/>

somehow evade them. Having failed to generate much insight into humanity's future, science fiction responded by internalising and celebrating a set of aesthetic principles that marginalised engagement with the world in favour of the other avenues of creative endeavour celebrated in awards shortlists and *Year's Best* anthologies.

The problem with Kincaid's narrative is that it is overly charitable in that it accepts the inaccessibility of the future entirely at face value. In my view, SF turned its back on the world because genre writers decided it would be more fun and less risky to write about other things instead. Indeed, the critic Nader Elhefnawy was quick to point out that the singularity is really little more than a professional dodge:³

To throw up one's hands in confusion is a convenient way of avoiding the serious social and ethical and political questions raised by our problems (as with our ecological crisis). This can seem an understandable response to their genuinely intimidating largeness, but the feeling of being overwhelmed hardly seems to account for the whole tendency. There is, too, the fact that so many of the obvious responses to such problems – substantive critique of the prevailing orthodoxies, efforts to envision really meaningful alternatives, despair in the absence of such – are regarded as naive, disreputable or simply risky for the career-minded, encouraging the ever-present temptation to self-censor. Postmodernity has always concealed a significant amount of evasion behind its smugly enunciated epistemological doubts, and postmodern science fiction has not been an exception to the pattern. Indeed, the lack of conviction Kincaid finds in the writing is best understood as a parallel to that lack of conviction pervading our cultural and political life.

Elhefnawy is quite correct when he says that science fiction's failure to engage with the future mirrors that of our culture as a whole. Marxist thinkers such as Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek have both pointed out that our culture is now so utterly wedded to the principles of neoliberal democracy that it has become literally impossible for us to imagine what it might be like not to live under a capitalist system. According to Mark Fisher's book *Capitalist Realism* (2009), there is a:

Widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.

This conceptual blockage was most evident in the immediate aftermath of the subprime mortgage crisis when the housing bubble

³ <http://raritania.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/paul-kincaid-and-last-years-best.html>

burst and banks across the world began to collapse. Exposed as nothing more than a vast pyramid scheme, global capitalism lurched and stumbled but never quite fell. One explanation for the failure to dethrone neoliberalism is that, when the chips were down, nobody seemed to have a viable alternative. Lacking the imagination to develop their own plan B, political elites around the world responded to the crisis by pumping billions into the global economy and hoping that the system would somehow right itself.

Having failed to identify this culture-wide conceptual blockage as any kind of failure or flaw, science fiction never bothered to rout around it. Instead, genre writing turned inwards and began to produce stories that treated the world with a sense of ironic detachment. Sealing itself off from the world and a wider cultural context, science fiction sailed blithely on while the stories that did attempt to engage with the world were shunted further and further to the margins of the field. Is it really a surprise that both William Gibson and J.G. Ballard wound up having to leave the field in order to write meaningfully about the future?

Kincaid's essay touches upon a number of different types of story that have risen to prominence in recent years. However, rather than treating these various approaches to science fiction as separate sub-genres or categories, I have attempted to expand upon Kincaid's observations by discovering the single set of values that inform the celebration of these types of story. I refer to these shared values as 'The Weird' approach to genre writing though I could just as easily have termed it 'The Ironic' or 'The Postmodern' or 'The Exhausted'.

2. The Weirding of Science Fiction

The most obvious manifestation of science fiction's exhaustion with the future has been an intentional blurring of the line between that which was traditionally thought of as science fiction and that which was traditionally thought of as fantasy. As Kincaid puts it, this

is a notion that has clearly taken root with today's writers since they consistently appropriate the attire of fantasy for what is ostensibly far-future sf, even to the extent of referring unironically to wizards and spells and the like.

Aside from the short stories mentioned in Kincaid's article, this blurring of the line also features prominently in such recent and well-received novels as Hannu Rajaniemi's *The Quantum Thief* (2010), Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City* (2010) and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010) but the technique itself is old enough to have featured

prominently in the works of both Jack Vance and Gene Wolfe.

Once rare and purposefully transgressive, the intentional blurring of genre boundaries is now a central feature of the genre landscape. In fact, one of the most commonly deployed pieces of critical hyperbole in recent times has been the claim that a particular story or novel ‘challenges traditional genre boundaries’. The desire to celebrate this aesthetic and recognise its central importance to genre writing has even inspired the publication of a set of essays by the veteran genre critic and academic Gary K. Wolfe. Nailing his colours to the interstitial mast, Wolfe claims in one of the essays contained in *Evaporating Genres* (2011) that

The writers who contribute to the evaporation of genre, who destabilize it by undermining our expectations and appropriating materials at will, with fiction shaped by individual will rather than traditions or formulas, are the same writers who continually revitalize genre: a healthy genre, a healthy literature, is one at risk, one whose boundaries grow uncertain and whose foundations get wobbly.

Equally celebratory of the status quo is the critic and encyclopaedist John Clute’s attempt to provide a single shared creation myth for the field of science fiction, fantasy and horror literature. Rather than looking upon these genres as separate literary traditions huddling together for economic warmth, Clute encourages us think of them as different iterations of the same literary form that he refers to as “fantastika”. According to Clute, the different genres were driven apart by the enlightenment and the events that formed part of what he refers to as the “world storm”:

Up until about 1700, in other words, we did not categorize works of art according to their use of (or failure to use) material that might be deemed unreal. After that point, in English literature [...] a fault line was drawn between mimetic work, which accorded with the rational Enlightenment values then beginning to dominate, and the great cauldron of irrational myth and story, which we now claimed to have outgrown, and which was now primarily suitable for children.

Under this vision of genre history, the blurring of the lines between SF and fantasy is not so much a sign of cultural convergence as it is a heroic homecoming and a return to source.

It is easy to see why this particular vision of genre has become so popular: While highly visible critics such as Wolfe and Clute talk of homecoming, boundary transgression and assimilation into the great genre melting pot, nobody with any kind of platform defends the multicultural ideal that, while different genres can co-exist

and learn from each other, they are ultimately creatures with their own identities and sense of history. Now widely associated with an ageing cadre of pedants and puritans who appear to spend their time dismissing interesting books for the terrible crime of not featuring enough spaceships, genre multiculturalism has allowed itself to be painted as the elderly reactionary in a world of rebellious young Turks.

It is important not to underestimate the impact of peer pressure, social aspiration, and personal narratives in determining genre fashions. The Weird presents itself as being nothing short of revolutionary and who wants to follow the rules at a time of revolution? Who wants to do things the way they used to be done? Who wants to turn the handle and churn out the same old stories when you can break free from your shackles and borrow tropes from as many different genres as you want? While a number of different writers including both Neil Gaiman and Kelly Link deserve consideration as exemplars of what I am referring to simply as the Weird, British Academic and author China Miéville is undeniably this approach's figurehead and critical darling.

Miéville's first novel *King Rat* (1998) is an entirely readable attempt to infuse the contemporary London with elements of myth and magic. Unfortunately, the book sank largely without trace despite pre-empting Neil Gaiman's hugely successful novel *American Gods* (2001). It was not until Miéville began writing secondary world fantasy novels that his star began to ascend. Rather than simply follow fashions and churn out another Tolkienian secondary-world fantasy doorstop, Miéville infused his fantasy world of Bas-Lag with elements borrowed from other genres. By presenting the fantastical as horrific and weaving his story around what is effectively the old science fictional saw of a scientist seeking understanding, Miéville not only won many of the field's most important awards but also parlayed genre success into mainstream literary celebrity. Courted by journalists, universities and literary festivals around the world, Miéville is cool, sexy and a professional role model far more attractive than old school Hard SF authors like Ben Bova or Greg Egan. Miéville is also closely associated with one of the most influential movements in recent genre history: The New Weird.

The New Weird began life when a group of diverse but artistically ambitious genre writers attempted to find some sort of common ground. Much like Cyberpunk before it, the socially defined New Weird movement has since acquired its own aesthetic. As Jeff and Ann VanderMeer put it in the introduction to their 2007 *New Weird* anthology, the New Weird is a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in

traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy.

Though certainly evocative, this definition is almost completely meaningless. The New Weird, the VanderMeers appear to be suggesting, is fantasy that shares none of the defining characteristics of fantasy literature... but then in what sense is it fantasy? Paradoxically imbued with both gritty realism and the flamboyantly fantastical, the New Weird's true defining characteristic is a refusal to be hemmed in by anything as conventional as vulgar genre-based expectations. This spirit of taxonomical anarchy is also touched on in an essay by the author Michael Cisco:⁴

The "New Weird," as I've said, is a topic for critics and not so much for writers. Nothing could be more unenlightening or useless than a New Weird manifesto. What strikes the observer is precisely the spontaneity with which so many different writers, pursuing such obviously disparate literary styles, should vaguely intersect in this way. Instead of a set of general aims, we have a great proliferation of correspondences on a more intimate level, like a sprawling coincidence of idiosyncratic choices.

According to Cisco, the New Weird is not about ideology and purpose but relationships and decisions: Who influences whom? Who read what before they started writing? Who did that really cool thing I might want to try in my next story? This emphasis on the immediate and social aspects of literary culture at the expense of the historical and ideological has led to the creation of an intellectual climate in which authors are encouraged to appropriate a wide array of tropes without ever worrying about the cultural context in which those tropes were originally developed.

The history of genre is now little more than a toy box filled to the brim with sterile notions and techniques stripped of context. This desire to purge culture of both history and politics, Mark Fisher suggests, is as much a product of end-stage capitalism as our inability to see the future:

The power of capitalist realism derives in part from the way that capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history: one effect of its 'system of equivalence; which can assign all cultural objects, whether they are religious iconography, pornography, or Das Kapital, a monetary value. Walk around the British Museum where you see objects torn from their lifeworlds and assembled as if on the deck of some Predator spacecraft and you have a powerful image of this process at work. In the conversion of practices and

4 http://www.themodernword.com/columns/cisco_001.html

rituals into merely aesthetic objects, the beliefs of previous cultures are objectively ironized, transformed into artifacts.

By wrenching all genre tropes and techniques from their original contexts and placing them on an equal footing, the rise of the Weird has allowed writers to move freely between different genres and produce works that either deliberately straddle several genres at once or sit ambiguously between them. This sense of ambiguity is now so common in genre circles that whenever a genre writer produces a work containing no genre elements at all, someone somewhere will inevitably attempt to claim the work as genre. However, because genres have now been stripped of all defining characteristics, people are forced to rest their genre-related claims on the somewhat disingenuous notion that while genre boundaries no longer exist, all genre stories have a particular ‘feel’ that distinguishes them from all other types of story. As Kincaid puts it in his essay:

While considering the titles of these volumes, we might also wonder about the terms “science fiction” and “fantasy” that appear there. There are, for instance, some stories included here that don’t seem, or don’t need, to appear in either camp. “Rampion” by Alexandra Duncan (in Horton) is a good and in places quite beautiful story set in Moslem Spain, but there is nothing about it that identifies it as fantastic other than its place of original publication (it appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction). When the son of the caliph falls in love with the Christian girl trapped in a high tower, there is perhaps a suggestion of the Rapunzel story, but not enough to make this a fairy tale. The girl’s evil mother studies herbs for their use as poisons and has a reputation as a witch, but no witchcraft is really involved. What this is, in other words, is a fairly straightforward historical romance; I can only assume that any aura of the fantastic is wished upon it by the reader.

The positive repercussions of this development are undeniable: Once limited to a small circle of publications, contemporary genre writers are now free to roam from genre to genre, adding their unique voices to what were previously insular genre conversations. Science fiction has learned from fantasy just as fantasy has learned from horror and the increasingly porous nature of genre boundaries has even resulted in a number of mainstream writers trying their hands at works of genre. Once upon a time, works such as Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union* (2007) and Marcel Theroux’s *Far North* (2009) would have been arrogantly dismissed as incompetent literary tourism but now they find themselves being celebrated as great works of science fiction.

Unfortunately, while there is no denying that the Weird approach

to genre writing has resulted in many positive changes, it would be foolish to deny that these changes came at a high price. The most notable cost of softening the genre boundaries has been an increasing reluctance to treat anything with any degree of seriousness. For example, in order to write a science fiction story containing a talking horse, one must first deal with the fact that people do not expect talking horses to turn up in science fiction stories. Thus, in order to produce such a story, a writer must reach the conclusion that genre boundaries and expectations are things unworthy of being taken seriously. The problem is that, once writers began treating genre boundaries with a degree of ironic detachment, they found it rather difficult to be serious about anything at all. Fisher again:

When it actually arrives, capitalism brings with it a massive desacralization of culture. It is a system which is no longer governed by any transcendent Law; on the contrary, it dismantles all such codes, only to re-install them on an ad hoc basis. The limits of capitalism are not fixed by fiat, but defined (and re-defined) pragmatically and improvisationally. This makes capitalism very much like the Thing in John Carpenter's film of the same name: a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact.

The first lesson of postmodernity is that nothing is sacred. Once one accepts that nothing is sacred then all of human knowledge and culture opens itself to us as a vast toy box from which ideas can be plucked, played with and cast aside without fear of either misunderstanding or causing offence. Desperate not to appear hemmed in by old rules and boundaries, postmodern genre writers now crawl through the detritus of human civilisation like Mesozoic predators in search of a some new combination of ideas that might somehow hit a chord and garner some attention. Pulp bin Laden? James Bond vs. Cthulhu? Steampunk Macchiavelli? Post 9/11 Flying Cities?⁵ All are equally welcome in the world of postmodern science fiction.

In a famous essay about Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe angrily accused Conrad of reducing the entire African continent to the status of a prop in the break-up of a single European mind.⁶ At the time, Achebe's words were deemed to carry so much moral force that many academics were shocked that anyone could think such a thing about Conrad's novella. These

5 Lavie Tidhar's *Osama*, Charles Stross's *The Jennifer Morgue*, Paul J. McAuley's *Pasquale's Angel* and Ken MacLeod's *The Execution Channel*

6 Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'" (<http://kirbyk.net/hod/image.of.africa.html>)

days, Achebe's analysis of Conrad's cultural appropriation reads like an instruction manual for how to write successful genre fiction. Once marginalised by the mainstream, contemporary genre writers now behave like colonial viceroys; strip-mining foreign cultures and using their spoils to erect sinister temples to their own ironic mediocrity.

When the American writer Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009) suggested that a future dominated by South East Asia might well be hell on Earth, few people considered his demonization of entire South East Asian cultures to be in anyway racist or exploitative.

When the American writer Connie Willis's *Blackout/All Clear* airbrushed social class out of 1940s Britain, the field responded by handing her some of its most prestigious awards.

This failure to take ideas seriously or to recognise the ways in which they intersect with the world applies not just to other cultures but to entire areas of intellectual discourse. For example, China Miéville's *The City & The City* (2009) builds upon the idea that social and political forces have such an impact upon our perceptions of the world that two cities might co-exist physically without either set of inhabitants acknowledging each other's existence. Over hundreds of pages, Miéville draws on different forms of thought about class and race and uses them to construct a sprawling allegorical representation of the social construction of reality. However, once this allegory is constructed, Miéville pointedly refuses to apply it to the real world. In an interview with Geoff Manaugh at *The Bldg Blog*, Miéville makes his reluctance to speak about the world abundantly clear:⁷

My intent with The City and The City was, as you say, to derive something hyperbolic and fictional through an exaggeration of the logic of borders, rather than to invent my own magical logic of how borders could be. It was an extrapolation of really quite everyday, quite quotidian, juridical and social aspects of nation-state borders: I combined that with a politicized social filtering, and extrapolated out and exaggerated further on a sociologically plausible basis, eventually taking it to a ridiculous extreme.

But I'm always slightly nervous when people make analogies to things like Palestine because I think there can be a danger of a kind of sympathetic magic: you see two things that are about divided cities and so you think that they must therefore be similar in some way.

Faced with the possibility that an abstract idea might intersect with the world in a way that might provoke some sort of social

7 <http://bldgblog.blogspot.co.uk/2011/03/unsolving-city-interview-with-china.html>

change, the Marxist intellectual turns tail and runs.

In a brilliant essay on the supposed political content of recent superhero films, the film critic David Bordwell suggests that Hollywood's use of political ideas and imagery may well be intentionally ambiguous:⁸

*A Hollywood film tends to pose sharp moral polarities and then fuzz or fudge or rush past settling them. For instance, take *The Bourne Ultimatum*: Yes, the espionage system is corrupt, but there is one honorable agent who will leak the information, and the press will expose it all, and the malefactors will be jailed. This tactic hasn't had a great track record in real life.*

The constitutive ambiguity of Hollywood movies helpfully disarms criticisms from interest groups ("Look at the positive points we put in"). It also gives the film an air of moral seriousness ("See, things aren't simple; there are gray areas"). [...] It's in filmmakers' interests to push a lot of our buttons without worrying whether what comes out is a coherent intellectual position.

Writers like Miéville are in the business of pushing buttons. Rather than write about Palestine or about the British class system, Miéville wrote a book that alludes to the world whilst remaining firmly detached from it. However, because his sterile fantasia is seeded with symbols and ideas that are drawn from the world by less squeamish thinkers, people are lured into believing Miéville's work to be politically engaged.

This fondness for ironic posturing has even spread to science fiction's attitude to science itself. Hyped as the next big thing in science fiction, Hannu Rajaniemi's debut novel *The Quantum Thief* is filled with scientific ideas and jargon that are never fully explored. Strewn across the page like the spoor of a modernist poet, Rajaniemi's scientific ideas are really little more than set dressing for a baroque farce where gentlemen thieves battle boy detectives against a backdrop of ancien regime, post-singular affluence. Similarly, while the plot of Alastair Reynolds' *Terminal World* (2010) hinges upon the discovery of a scientific answer for the inconsistencies in the world's physics, the answer the book provides has no basis whatsoever in actual scientific thought. Thus, while the structure and vocabulary of the novel resemble those of a traditional science fiction novel, Reynolds replaced the boring 'science bit' with the sort of hand-wavy metaphysical claptrap usually associated with disgraced New Age gurus and roleplaying game magic systems.

The increasing popularity of using fantasy tropes in science

⁸ <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2008/08/16/superheroes-for-sale/>

fictional settings can also be accounted for in terms of detachment from the rules of coherent storytelling. Indeed, one of the great advantages of ‘magical’ solutions to problems is that their narrative power requires little or no unpacking. For example, after three thousand pages of densely plotted space operatic grandstanding in which entire civilisations fall apart, Peter F. Hamilton’s *Night’s Dawn* series ends with the discovery of a literal *deus ex machine* (a long-abandoned machine called ‘the sleeping god’) that instantly dissolves all outstanding plot points and transports human civilisation to the far side of the galaxy. Though presented as an alien artefact similar to something like the monolith in *2001*, the decision to name the artefact ‘the sleeping god’ and to attribute its construction to a long-disappeared elder civilisation locates the object more firmly in the fantastical tradition than the science fictional. As Kincaid puts it in an interview conducted for the blog *Nerds of a Feather*:⁹

The other crossover element that I criticized, and it is a different aspect of the same issue, is the number of stories that use the affect of fantasy in what is ostensibly a science fiction story. If you look back at science fiction criticism over the years you will find authors and stories consistently being criticized for hand-waving. That is, for setting up a rigorous situation and then resolving it in some less than rigorous way. Fantasy, now, is another and even more blatant way of doing that. True fantasy is as rigorous as science fiction: you play fair with the readers. If anything can happen, then nothing matters. Using the tropes of fantasy to resolve a science fiction story is just a way of waving your hand and saying ‘it doesn’t matter, because anything can happen, all it takes is the whim of the author’. I cannot read a story that takes that form without my confidence in both the writer and their creation instantly plummeting.

Contemporary science fiction is not interested in science, culture, history, ideas or real human psychology. Not really. To be interested in such things requires engagement not only with the world but also entire bodies of knowledge generated by hundreds of fevered human minds. Incapable of taking anything seriously and unwilling to risk disapproval by writing anything that might be deemed in any way political, genre writers spend their days like performing dolphins; pushing a load of battered toys around the pool while undemanding audiences roar their approval. Occasionally, a particularly well-trained dolphin receives a celebratory bucket of fish heads in the ballroom of

⁹ <http://www.nerds-feather.com/2012/10/interview-paul-kincaid-is-sf-exhausted.html>

a beige mid-Western hotel.

While this aesthetic of ironic detachment pervades most of mainstream science fiction, genre's postmodern turn is most evident in two particular approaches to science fiction that have become increasingly popular in recent times.

2.1 The Nostalgic

One of the most striking examples of science fiction's loss of interest in the future is the field's growing fascination with counter-factual histories. Once associated with works like Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), the alternate or counter-factual history relied upon the conceit that changes to the historical record might radically alter the world as we know it. For example, in *The Man in the High Castle*, America's failure to recover after the Great Depression resulted in Germany defeating the USSR and effectively winning the Second World War. Though still very much a part of the genre, this type of alternate history has now largely been superseded by stories set in versions of familiar historical periods that have been augmented by the addition of genre tropes such as a version of Queen Victoria's British Empire where steam power is highly advanced or a 15th Century Aztec Empire where the Aztec gods are real and people can cast magic spells.

While Steampunk novels such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1990) remain the poster children for this particular branch of speculative fiction, Kincaid points out that you do not need goggles and top hats to write about fictional histories. Speaking of Karl Schroeder's "Laika's Ghost", Kincaid says:

It is one of the best stories in these three collections, but it is almost anti-SF in its affect: the future has run its course and come to an end; what was one of the most exciting aspirations of science fiction—the promise of life on another world—is here made available only to those looking backward to a former time. It is a story that makes manifest the exhaustion that is immanent throughout these three collections.

In a move I find overly reductive, Kincaid includes Schroeder's self-conscious engagement with expired futures in the same category as works set in the same future elaborated by Heinlein and Asimov. In reality, this move does both sets of stories a grave disservice as while old school space opera may be lazy and formulaic, it is neither as unsettling nor as innovative as the stuff going on in a lot of Steampunk and retro-futurist writings.

In his brilliant overview of the prehistoric fiction genre *The*

Fire in the Stone (2009), Nicholas Ruddick argues that, far from being fixed, our concept of Humanity has changed over the course of time. For example, in the early 20th Century, when authors such as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells wrote about cavemen, their refusal to recognise humanity's capacity for violence lead them to look at the imposing size and ape-like features of the Neanderthal and declare them to be inhuman monsters. However, as cultural attitudes shifted and our vision of human nature began to change, prehistoric fiction writers came to acknowledge human savagery and so concluded that, though undeniably different, Neanderthals were most definitely human.

The humanisation of the Neanderthals reached its artistic pinnacle when William Golding suggested, in his novel *The Inheritors* (1955), that liberal post-War humanity might find more in common with the gentle Neanderthal than with the cunning and brutal Homo Sapiens who wiped out the Neanderthals and then set their sights on Jews, Romani, Socialists and well... pretty much everyone.

Much like Steampunk, *The Inheritors* is an attempt to clear the historical slate and equip contemporary humanity with a set of cultural antecedents more in keeping with contemporary values. By encouraging us to 'adopt' his pacifist Neanderthals, Golding built a synthetic creation myth that expunged the guilt that many Western liberals felt in the aftermath of the Holocaust. By choosing to empathise with long-dead Neanderthals rather than murderous Humans, Golding's readers were distancing themselves from the elements of human nature that allowed the Holocaust to happen in the first place.

The allure of Steampunk lies in the fact that it offers middle-class white people the chance to adopt a fictional past that is devoid of white liberal guilt. The Steampunk Victorian Empire is unaffected by sexism, racism, homophobia or class-division. Instead, it is a vast historical playground where modern attitudes prevail and immaculately dressed Mary Sues drink port with William Gladstone before firing-up their steam-powered iPads in order to hack the difference engines controlling Herr Bismarck's sinister land leviathans.

Steampunk's lack of historical foundation is precisely what makes it compelling. By adopting this set of fictional antecedents in place of the West's real colonial past, readers are distancing themselves from the racism, sexism, homophobia and social snobbery of their forebears. To be a fan of Steampunk is carefully cut all of the ugly pictures out of one's family album and replace them with pictures of Amanda Palmer wearing a top hat and a corset.

While the idea of an escapist fantasy that allows middle-class white people to escape their historical responsibility is about

as politically dubious as contemporary science fiction gets, the fundamental mechanics of the Nostalgic approach to science fiction are largely value free as they are principally about building a fictional past that fits with how people feel about the present.

Schroeder's short story is an interesting counterpoint to Steampunk as it is dealing in feelings a little bit more substantial than politically dubious power fantasies. "Laika's Ghost" exiles to space flight to the ruins of the Soviet era in an attempt to express the feeling that humanity's dreams of space flight have been left to rot like an old Soviet tractor factory. Science fiction built itself up by asserting again and again that, to paraphrase Alfred Bester, the stars were our destination. What Schroeder does is accept that humanity's future no longer lies in space and so repositions this future as an offshoot of the past similar to that embodied by Soviet futurism. The global revolution never came... and neither did the Terran Star Empire.

Another noteworthy example of a non-reactionary deployment of the Nostalgic is William Gibson's short story "The Gernsback Continuum" (1981) in which a photographer recoils in horror when he imagines what it might have been like to live in the world prophesied by 1950s science fiction. Unlike Steampunk that uses fictional realities to edit out the world's more unpleasant elements, Gibson uses his fictional reality to express both his disgust with traditional forms of SF and his desire for a science fiction that engages with the world as it actually is: ugly, messy, complex and real.

Written thirty years apart, both of these stories use possible futures as means of expressing personal regret and disgust. The futures depicted in both "Laika's Ghost" and "The Gernsback Continuum" are fictional even in the context of a story... these are not futures that reflect the realities of the world, these are futures built in the emotional aftermath of a particularly memorable dream. These futures deal not in facts but in feelings.

This willingness to re-write the past and replace unpleasant truths with kick-ass empowerment myths requires postmodern detachment both from the historical record and from political realities of the day. People feel able to write about heroic Victorian gentlemen because they do not really care what actual Victorian gentlemen were like and they certainly do not care that people with different backgrounds might find it hugely offensive that white middle-class people appear to be reclaiming their colonial heritage and reinventing it as a source of carefree escapist fun. Nobody cares because all of these symbols

have been wrenched from their correct historical contexts.

2.2 The Humanistic

The second demonstration of science fiction's exhaustion with the future is also the most politically charged. Choosing his words carefully, Kincaid praises both Aliette de Bodard's "The Jaguar House, in Shadow" and Lavie Tidhar's "The Smell of Orange Groves" and observes that:

It is, perhaps, not entirely coincidental that Lee and Tidhar, along with Aliette de Bodard, are among an emerging generation of writers of the fantastic (their work tends more towards fantasy than science fiction) who mostly are or have been resident in America or brought up in Britain, but whose background is not straightforwardly Anglo-American.

Both Aliette de Bodard and Lavie Tidhar are rising stars in the world of speculative fiction. Though undeniably talented in their own right, both writers are beneficiaries of the growing realisation that speculative fiction is too white, too male, too straight and too Anglo-American for its own good.

One of the more surprising things about the increasing status of writers from traditionally marginalised groups is that while these writers frequently possess insider knowledge of other countries and cultures, their most celebrated works seldom engage with the realities of these places. Thus, a woman of French/Vietnamese descent who grew up in Paris has risen to prominence by writing about Aztec detectives and pre-Communist China while a man who grew up in an Israeli Kibbutz before living both in Laos and South Africa achieved notoriety as a writer of Steampunk novels. With stories anchored in their experiences of the non-Western world either unwritten or uncelebrated, writers from traditionally marginalised groups find themselves being gently herded into a comfortably ironic and Humanistic approach to genre writing.

The reason I refer to this repercussion as 'Humanistic' is because this type of story relies upon the assumption that, while the human experience may differ from culture to culture, it retains an unchanging emotional core that allows people from different times and places to understand each other provided they have a shared vocabulary. One on-going attempt to create a shared artistic language is the movement known as World Cinema.

The best way of describing World Cinema's terms of engagement is to use an example. Set in contemporary Iran, Rafi Pitts' *The Hunter* (2010) borrows heavily from the iconography of 1970s American

paranoid thrillers such as *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The Parallax View* (1974) to tell the story of an Iranian man who is pushed to the edge by a brutal and incompetent government. Though packed with familiar tropes and techniques, the aim of the film is not to produce a work of genre but to use the language of genre to communicate a deeper truth about contemporary Iranian culture.

The film assumes that, while the emotional subtleties of contemporary Iranian life may not be immediately obvious to people from other cultures, the language of cinema is universal enough to allow some degree of cross-cultural communication. For example, though few people in the West will understand what it is like to live under a corrupt and incompetent government that does not hesitate to kill in order to cover up its own mistakes, they will recognise the similarities between *The Hunter* and *The Parallax View* and infer the existence of some shared cultural ground.

Films like *The Hunter* use genre tropes as a kind of Rosetta stone allowing people from one (usually Western) culture to experience a distant echo of what it feels like to live in another (usually non-Western) culture. In principle, the more these Western tropes are reclaimed and used to communicate non-Western truths, the more universal these tropes become.

The problem with this approach to inter-cultural communication is that the ‘universal’ elements of an artistic vocabulary tend to be determined by social means and thus are subject to the same inequalities as the societies that produced them. In a moving essay¹⁰ written in the immediate aftermath of a hugely traumatic confrontation of the field’s attitude to marginalised groups (an event now referred to as “Racefail ’09”),¹¹ blogger Deepa D points out a number of the political problems inherent in humanistic approaches to intercultural dialogue. By keeping traditional Western tropes in place and inviting non-Western people to make use of them, Western culture is not only assuming a level playing field in terms of access to publication, it is also assuming that all tropes speak equally to all people despite the fact that some people have very different cultural heritages:

Dragons are not universal. If I am defensive, it is because I have had to learn how to love Tolkien while trying to find myself in the unmapped lands in the East where the Green and Blue wizards disappeared to.

In other words, while World Cinema may aspire to humanistic universality the reality is that non-Western people are forced to

10 <http://deepad.dreamwidth.org/29371.html>

11 http://fanlore.org/wiki/RaceFail_%2709

approach the World Cinema scene as supplicants compelled to abandon their own cultural vocabularies in favour of a bastardised version of the Hollywood lingua franca. Somewhat unsurprisingly, the same problem is also present in genre writing.

Traditionally marginalised groups are forced to strike a balance between authenticity and Western accessibility: Rely too much on your own native tropes and Westerners will ignore you but embrace too much of the Western cultural vocabulary and you will not only lose your own voice, you will also wind up having to compete with Western creators on unfavourable terms. It is here that we find the tension between the scene's affected postmodern irony and its desire to become both more inclusive and more respectful of other people's cultures. The idea that non-Western people might have privileged access to non-Western beliefs and cultures does not sit well with a literary culture that struggles to acknowledge the fact that all cultural artefacts are born of a material world in which people struggle, suffer and die.

In an effort to resolve this tension, the field has begun celebrating works by authors from traditionally excluded groups on the understanding that, while these writers have unique perspectives we should all be listening to, their stories must never actually deal with the realities of what it is like to be excluded or oppressed. Instead of embracing reality, experience and understanding as means of expanding both science fiction's relevance and its accessibility to other cultures, emerging authors have been quietly herded into a Humanistic arena where new voices affect an ironic tone and wrap themselves around the same old toothless idioms of exhausted postmodernity. What is Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* if not a Gene Wolf pastiche with African set dressing? What is Beukes' *Zoo City* if not a generic crime/fantasy hybrid with a few postmodern inserts and a bit of local colour? In contemporary science fiction, the traditionally disenfranchised are encouraged to write as long as their stories do not remind us of the historical inequalities that marginalised these writers in the first place.

The problematic nature of the balancing act facing non-Anglo science fiction writers is recognised in an interview that SF Signal's John Ottinger conducted with Lavie Tidhar:¹²

World SF has always been defined by the American model of science fiction. Either trying to write just like it – even setting stories in America, and using American names for characters and so on – or, and more recently, trying to define against it, by writing

¹² http://www.sfsignal.com/archives/2009/09/interview_lavie_tidhar/

stories that are set in local milieus with local characters, stories that react against the American model, while still being influenced by it.

The apolitical and detached nature of the Humanistic approach to genre writing becomes even more evident once you realise that the idea of using genre tropes to communicate personal experience is not limited to intercultural dialogue. For example, Connie Willis' Hugo-winning *Blackout/All Clear* (2011) can be read as an attempt by an author in her sixties to communicate to younger readers the need to both remember and honour the sacrifices of her parents' generation. Similarly, Jo Walton's *Among Others* (2011) uses fantastical elements to communicate a youth littered with trauma and mental illness while Caitlin R. Kiernan's *The Red Tree* (2009) and *The Drowning Girl* (2012) use horror and fantasy techniques to represent a mental state that struggles to distinguish between the real, the mythical, the fictional and the delusional.

3. Historical Recovery Position

While many of these books are excellent examples of their styles of writing, I cannot help but yearn for books that plunge us into the world rather than aid our flight from it. The thing that unites humanity is not the trappings of popular culture, but the realities of a world that needs to be both confronted and understood if it is ever to change.

It is now almost a cliché to say that we are living in a science fictional world but it is genuinely astonishing to think about how much science fiction writers have got right over the years:

Every morning, I sit at my desk and fire up a Twitter client that allows me to communicate with people around the globe in real time. Both a sounding board and a source of information, Twitter has me bouncing my ideas off Australian graduate students and Indian journalists while other people retweet links to their latest blog posts for the people living in different time zones. Cory Doctorow's *Eastern Standard Tribe* (2004) predicted much of what it meant to have one's community exist in entirely different places and yet hardly any contemporary science fiction novels acknowledge the existence of social media let alone engage with the social and psychological changes heralded by such a radically different types of community.

Having grown afraid of the political repercussions of putting soldiers in harm's way, American political elites have increasingly come to rely on the use of remote controlled planes as a means of imposing American political hegemony on remote parts of the globe. Increasingly sophisticated at the level of both software and hardware,

these drones are beginning to resemble the drones that appeared in Iain M. Banks' Culture novels but while Banks' predictions of a hard robotic hand inside a velvety human glove come to pass, Banks himself seems more interested in reimagining the Culture as a fantastical backdrop similar to that of Vernor Vinge's Zones of Thought series.

I used the examples of Doctorow and Banks as both are writers whose careers have played out against a background of ironic detachment. Indeed, between Doctorow's fondness for Disney's Magic Kingdom and Banks' increasing fondness for epic quest narratives, both Doctorow and Banks demonstrate how even the most detached of writers can sometimes connect directly to the world around them. Indeed, the point of this essay was never to make monolithic statements about the true nature of science fiction but rather to draw attention to a broad narrative of detachment that has transformed the mainstream of science fiction into an airless postmodern vacuum. Science fiction never completely stopped commenting on the world... it's just that the works that do comment on the world do not get as much attention as those that pointedly ignore it. Similarly, few writers have completely abandoned writing about either the future or science, it is just that these ideas now lurk on the periphery rather than in the foreground of the text. I am not calling for a complete re-think of the science fictional enterprise, rather I would like to see the genre seize this historic opportunity and rediscover its heritage of engagement and prediction.

Part of what makes this moment so special is the fact that we have seen cracks appear in the façade of neoliberalism. Francis Fukuyama once wrote of the end of history having been achieved but the economic, social and political turbulence engulfing the world make it clear that history is very much alive and kicking.

The challenge facing contemporary science fiction is to widen the cracks and to peer through the fractured veneer of neoliberalism in an effort to see what could one day come to pass. These futures, though speculative, must always remain anchored in the present moment as the real challenge facing science fiction is not merely to create a possible future, but to create the type of possible future that is currently deemed unthinkable. As Mark Fisher puts it:

The long dark night of the end of history has to be grasped as an enormous opportunity. The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist

realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again.

My greatest source of optimism for the future of science fiction lays in the fact that science fiction has handled precisely this type of situation before. Back in the 1950s, the British science fiction author John Wyndham wrote a series of novels attempting to make sense of the end of the British Empire. Snarkily dubbed ‘Cosy Catastrophes’ by Brian Aldiss, these works painted a memorable image of middle-class folk struggling to cling to their old lifestyles as the world fell apart around them.

In *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) Wyndham describes middle-class people being shackled to the sick and blind in a misguided effort to create a more equal society. Confronted by this nightmare of post-Imperial socialist egalitarianism, Wyndham’s characters retreat to the Isle of Wight where they begin to draw up plans to re-impose their middle-class values on the world. A similar terror of unchecked social change pervades Wyndham’s *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) as a group of villagers realise that their brilliantly gifted children are in fact a group of inhuman monsters that must be destroyed lest their difference taint the entire planet.

Looking back on Wyndham’s work, it is easy to laugh at the astonishing narrow-mindedness of his concerns. Less than a decade after the publication of *The Midwich Cuckoos*, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby would take the idea of a generation of radically Other children and turned it into a franchise that sold millions of comics and inspired the creation of a series of vastly successful blockbuster movies. We laugh at Wyndham’s social conservatism and cheer the X-Men’s celebration of difference in part because Wyndham did his job as a science fiction writer. By using genre techniques to isolate social trends and force them out into the open where they can be discussed and analysed in a fictional context, Wyndham was helping an entire generation process and come to terms with a period of intense social unrest, a period very similar to our own.

We are living through a period of instability. As government and businesses teeter on the brink of collapse and individuals acquire fortunes so vast that they beggar belief, our cosy Western reality is beginning to fall apart. For the first time in decades, the next generation of Westerners will be less well off than their parents as jobs, housing and opportunity decline across the board. Devoid of ideas and clearly terrified by the responsibility of having to keep a decaying system together, Western leaders tear up a century of political reform and strip the state back to its feudal origins: Armies to fight foreigners and a police force to fight everyone else. Faced

with such terrifying instability and the shadow of a hideous future being born, Western culture has responded by dutifully ignoring the warning signs and encouraging us to buy more stuff. Don't worry about your job... picture yourself as a Victorian airship captain! Don't think too much about what the government is doing with your taxes... read a series of novels about bloggers fighting zombies! Don't pay attention to real world inequalities... moan about how oppressed and mistreated you are for wanting to watch a cartoon about magical ponies and friendship! Never has the term 'cosy catastrophe' seemed more fitting than it does today.

Just as Joe Haldeman once used science fictional tropes to process the experience of returning from Vietnam to find America completely changed in *The Forever War* (1976) and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) addressed the changing nature of female identity, contemporary science fiction must find a way to confront, process and make sense of the world as it is today. We are living in a science fictional world and this means that science fiction is in a unique position to help us to make sense of a dangerously unstable world. By rediscovering its ties to reality and using old tropes to explore new problems, science fiction can provide humanity with its first draft of future history.

Mercifully, some works of science fiction are still interested in processing the present as a means of unravelling the future. Adam Roberts' *New Model Army* (2010) is a brilliant exploration of what it feels like to lose oneself in an online crowd. Set in a near-future Europe, the book tells of a group of people who set up a mercenary company using real-time social media technologies such as instant messaging and wikis. As this new form of community proves itself far more efficient than traditional military hierarchies, the members of the community are drawn further and further together to the point where their identities become lost in a sort of institutional hive mind. The final scenes of the novel where the online 'giants' become self-aware and rampage across Europe can be seen as a foreshadowing of both the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring where new forms of political institution clashed violently with elements of the traditional nation state.

Similarly vital is the short fiction of Tim Maughan. Tim Maughan is a particularly interesting case as while his stories have received nominations for genre awards, his rise to prominence has owed more to social networking and word of mouth than to the more traditional approach of working one's way up through the field's various institutions and publishing platforms. Maughan's self-published short fiction collection *Paintwork* (2011) strips cyberpunk

of the air of bourgeois smugness it acquired in books such as Gibson's *Spook Country* (2007) or Doctorow's *Little Brother* (2008) and uses those tropes to confront issues of authenticity and personal morality in an age of cut-throat social capitalism. In Maughan's vision of the future, online communities are nothing more than the latest in a long line of institutions designed to strip us of our money, our time, our freedom, and our individuality. Maughan's most recent story "Limited Edition" pushes this engagement with the world even further by directly confronting the legacy of the 2011 London riots in which stores were smashed open and looted in a fit of what can only be described as consumerist rage. Set in a near-future Bristol, "Limited Edition" suggests how social media and gamification might transform civil unrest into little more than a PR stunt designed to sell trainers. Anyone who has jumped on a Twitter bandwagon only to see people benefit both professionally and financially from other people's anger will recognise the emotions distilled in Maughan's story.

These are the types of story that science fiction should be producing. These are the types of things that science fiction should be attempting to deal with. Science fiction need not be exhausted and ironic... it can be strong, it can be relevant and it can be vital. All it needs to do is remember how to write about the world and remember that the world is a complex place that can be apprehended from many different directions.

However, while I warmly recommend the writings of both Roberts and Maughan, I am very much aware that these are stories being told by the same types of white middle-class men who have always been allowed to tell stories in science fiction. My inability to recommend similarly engaged stories by non-male, non-western and non-middle class writers may reflect poorly upon the field but it definitely reflects poorly upon me as a reader, a critic and someone who purports to give a shit about the direction of the field. It is traditional for white men who write about these types of issues to turn these discussions into extended odes to their awesome capacity to see further and wider than other white men. Frankly, I ain't that type of boy and the only way to move past this type of problem is to stop paying attention to people like me. Diversity is not solely a problem for publishers, anthologists and jurors on awards panels, it is a problem for everyone who takes an interest in these types of state-of-the-nation debates. So... if you are as sick as I am of the narrow and politically naive range of viewpoints celebrated by the field, vote with your feet and seek out critics and reviewers who will take the system to task and direct your attention to non-white, non-male and

non-Western writers who can draw on their personal experiences and look through the cracks of a cultural system built by straight white men. The system may have us, but the world is out there!

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<http://ruthlessculture.com/2012/10/03/cowardice-laziness-and-irony-how-science-fiction-lost-the-future/>

SF LIFE

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A DRAGON?

Aishwarya Subramanian

It is probably not news to anyone by now that the new *My Little Pony* cartoons are quite good.¹ Unfortunately it is probably also not news to anyone who has spent more than a minute thinking about it that they have problems, particularly with regard to how they deal with race. Because despite this being a series in which the main character is purple and her friends come in all the shades of the rainbow, ethnicity does exist in Equestria. We see it in an episode where the sole zebra character (not a pony, note) is signalled as being African.² We see it again in the episode “Over a Barrel”, in which the ponies come into conflict³ with the buffaloes who are obvious Native American/First Nations analogues⁴ (in this as well as other episodes of the series the history the ponies are given is of the settler/pioneer variety). I find the show’s apparent comfort with that tradition a little bizarre – presumably at some point someone gave a thought to how the race thing worked within the show’s universe? Besides the obvious offensiveness it seems incredibly naive.

Children’s books/tv with talking animals tend to anthropomorphise unevenly. Pets and food in particular often don’t get a voice – everyone knows pets don’t speak, and food that did so would be creepy. Goofy can talk, Pluto cannot; Noddy and Miffy are friends with bears, monkeys, and pigs but Bumpy Dog and Snuffy only bark. In the *My Little Pony* universe, the cows, buffalo, donkeys, griffins and dragons all talk; the animals the ponies keep as pets (an owl, a cat, a tortoise who humiliates himself considerably for Rainbow Dash’s company, a rabbit, etc) do not.

Speech is important here because in a fantasy world with multiple sentient species in it I suspect the ability of a species to communicate becomes at least in part the arbiter of what personhood entails. So the buffalo are people in a way that Owloysius the owl (despite being excellent and an owl) isn’t.

My Little Pony does quite a bit of playing around with language, as is evident from the episode titles, the flood of horse-puns and

1 http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2011/05/my_little_pony_-comments.shtml

2 <http://tavalyara.deviantart.com/journal/My-Little-Pony-Unintentionally-Racist-218930814>

3 <http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.in/2011/03/settler-ponies-and-buffaloes-in-my.html>

4 <http://sanguinity.dreamwidth.org/49268.html>

cities like “Fillydelphia” and “Canterlot”. One of the things the show does is to insert the word “pony” into a number of words and phrases, such as “everypony”. “Pony” is thus used to replace “body” or “person”. I’d been bothered by this for some time, but in the most recent episode (“A Friend in Deed”) I particularly noticed that non-Pony characters, a pair of donkeys, were using “everypony” as well.

And so Spike the dragon, Cranky Doodle Donkey and other characters live in a world and communicate in a language in which personhood is literally defined as something that they are not. The idea that a person and a pony are the same seems to be at the heart of the language. And going by the racial stereotyping I mention above, if the Native Americans are buffalo-not-ponies and the African immigrants are zebras-not-ponies, it seems heavily implied that personhood in Equestria is limited to what in this world would be the white settlers.

Aishwarya Subramanian blogs at *Practically Marzipan*. The blog’s title comes from Mervyn Peake’s “I Cannot Give the Reasons” and it focuses on science fiction and fantasy, children’s books (particularly mid-twentieth century British children’s books) and Indian writing.

This article first appeared at *Practically Marzipan* on February 23, 2012.

<http://www.practicallymarzipan.com/2012/02/what-is-it-like-to-be-a-dragon.html>

WHAT DO CHINA MIÉVILLE, ORSON SCOTT CARD AND FRANK MILLER HAVE IN COMMON?

Myke Cole

They are all amazing writers whose work has fundamentally changed my life. *The Scar*, *Ender's Game*, and *The Dark Knight Returns* are some of the most important books in my memory. They've shaped me as an artist and a person. They are always at the back of my mind whenever I sit down to write.

But Miéville, Card and Miller are also vocal about their politics and religious views. They aren't shy about stepping out in public and taking a hard line, conscious of the feathers it will ruffle and not caring (at least on the surface).

In a perfect world, art would be judged strictly on its artistic merits. I firmly believe that's how it should be. But that isn't how it is. The fact remains that the personal views of these three writers have colored my impression of their work. I cannot pick up a work by any of these artists without remembering who they are *as people* and what they believe. This taints my experience, interferes with it. It makes me wish I'd never gotten to know them.

There are so many momentous changes in this country right now. I want to talk about them. Hell, I want to shout about them. The words are burning a hole in my palette.

But I won't.

Well, that's not entirely true. I won't *here*. You can bet your ass my friends will get their ears chewed. And should you catch up to me at a con hotel bar and share a drink with me, I promise you'll get an earful. But I'm not going to take to social media to express myself on this issue.

It's tempting. I've said many times in the past that I'm no Emily Dickenson. I got into writing because I'm an extrovert. I want to communicate. I want to influence. I want to have impact.

But I keep coming back to an old thought. I've said this before in interviews: when you go on a job interview, you generally wear a suit and tie. Why? Not everybody looks their best in that outfit. You do it because, in our cultural milieu, that clothing is invisible. The interviewer sees it, makes a mental note that you are dressed appropriately, and then focuses on what's important: your qualifications. I want the same for my writing. I don't ever want people to read me (or not read me) because I am liberal, or conservative, or champion

a particular cause.

I want them to read my work because it's *good* and for no other reason. I want my stories to be judged on their merit, and not based on the personal positions of the man who wrote them. I try really, *really* hard to do this with Miéville, Card and Miller, with limited success. I don't want to risk doing that to others who read my own work.

I have a further complication: I am a uniformed representative of the United States government. That means that *everyone*, no matter what their political views, has to feel like they can trust me to represent their interests. I can't have a conservative feeling I'm not going to dive into the water to save him because of something I said on my blog. I can't have a liberal be afraid to comply with me when I try to enforce maritime law because of a political tweet. My subordinates and superiors alike have to have full confidence that I will fulfill my duties without prejudice of any kind, at risk of my own life, if necessary. I can still vote (and by god I *will*), but I am subject to limits on free speech imposed by the UCMJ. There's article 88. There's the Hatch Act.

I read the blogs of John Scalzi, Chuck Wendig, Charles Stross and Cory Doctorow pretty regularly. Those folks have never been shy about expressing their political views, and almost always come across as real reasoned, even when they're snarky. They're brilliant. I admire the hell out of them. I pretty much always agree with them.

But I doubt I could do it as well. I think I'd come across cack-handed, sowing more discord than I resolved.

Part of me wonders, am I a coward? Am I abrogating my responsibility to speak out against injustice, to use my one ability (writing, communicating) to improve the world? Maybe I am. I wrestle with that question all the time.

But in the end, the primary purpose of my bully pulpit is to tell stories. Fiction. I don't want to dilute that experience, especially when I see the John Scalzis of the world doing it far better than I ever could. I am trained as a lifesaver and a warfighter, and I have stood in the gap twice since I first donned the uniform, dropping my life and heading off to handle a major oil spill and a major hurricane. I understand that's a very *different* way to help people than wading into a public debate, but it's still a way, and I comfort myself with the thought of doing that much.

Wanting to be a writer isn't enough. I have to know the type of writer I want to be. Paul Krugman is a writer. So is Mark Steyn.

But political punditry wasn't what got me through childhood

and adolescence. Religious polemics didn't show me the person I want to be.

Science fiction and fantasy did that.

As a security contractor, government civilian and military officer, Myke Cole's career has run the gamut from Counterterrorism to Cyber Warfare to Federal Law Enforcement. He's done three tours in Iraq and was recalled to serve during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

This article first appeared on the author's website on May 9, 2012.

<http://mykecole.com/blog/2012/05/when-to-speak-up>

WORLDCON 2012: FRAGMENTS

Matt Hilliard

Last week, I flew to Chicago for the 70th World Science Fiction Convention. It was my first Worldcon. Among other things, I was looking forward with the chance to talk to other people who read science fiction.



It's Wednesday evening and my roommate, a veteran of more than ten previous Worldcons, is unpacking the books he hopes to get signed. He has brought 10 Robert Silverberg books. I break the bad news about the signing policy (only 3 books per trip through the line) and then, with some embarrassment, I admit I haven't read any Silverberg. He suggests a novel that would be a good place to start, then asks what I've been reading lately. I tell him I read and enjoyed Kameron Hurley's *God's War* on the flight to Chicago. He's never heard of it.



A week and a half later I am writing the first draft of this post and trying to figure out what novel he recommended, but I didn't write it down. I have Silverberg's Wikipedia article open in another tab. My monitor is not even close to large enough to display the published novel list on one screen. Reading Silverberg's backlist would probably take me multiple years. Just reading the ten books my roommate wanted signed would put a substantial dent in a year's reading schedule.

According to a post by Gary K. Wolfe, in 2008 alone *Locus* recorded the publication of 254 science fiction novels and 436 fantasy novels. The rise of electronic publishing and the erosion of barriers to self-publishing seem sure to increase these numbers by an order of magnitude or more soon if they haven't already.

For the most part this is a good thing. As the genre fragments, readers can find novels aligned to their specific tastes, novels that wouldn't be viable if less SF was published. Although more bad novels are published, more great novels are published as well. None of this is in any way unique to SF, or even literature. The same process is much further along in music and not as far along in movies

and television, but entertainment of all kinds is moving in the same direction, or rather, is moving in all directions simultaneously.

Yet if you like talking about genre fiction as much as reading it, shared context is harder and harder to find. As Wolfe puts it elsewhere in the same post: “To claim a title as the best SF or fantasy novel of the year seems to me to imply a core readership with a common set of values and assumptions, but as far as I can tell that readership has been dismembering itself into various caucuses for several decades now.”



It is Wednesday afternoon, the day before the convention starts, and I have just registered and am putting mental breadcrumbs between important locations in the labyrinthine hotel. As I walk the hall, I hear the words “fen” and “mundanes” used unironically for the first time in my life. The big nametags make it easy to identify other people here for the convention, but in most cases it isn’t necessary. Convention people dress differently, talk differently, and act differently from ordinary guests. I’m amazed that people from all over the country, and indeed in some cases all over the world, seem much more like each other than they are like the people I see every day in my normal life.

Over the next few days I will revise this first impression. Certainly the sample was skewed by the day of the week, as for a variety of reasons the people I saw on Wednesday afternoon crowd were older and much more “fannish” than the actual convention average. But also I soon realize fan culture isn’t as monolithic as it seemed at first, something I should have realized just from reading the program. How many people at the convention were interested in filk? In costuming? In table gaming? In anime? These and many more hobbies could be pursued to the exclusion of anything else if the attendee desired. Alternatively, one could (and I did, I’m afraid) ignore them entirely.

In the convention’s pocket program, the convention chair’s welcome message included the following reassurance: “I promise you, there are several folks you haven’t met yet who are *exactly* the kind of geek you are.”

In this day and age there’s no need to settle for being friends with someone who is almost the same kind of geek you are. It’s not

just entertainment that's fragmenting, it's culture.



On Sunday morning, I am listening to a panel titled "Historical Reality in Fantasy". Two of the panelists turn out to have run pen and paper roleplaying games. When they spend a few minutes discussing fantasy roleplaying game settings and answer a question about them from the audience, another audience member raises his hand and objects that while he enjoys roleplaying games, he comes to Worldcon to hear about literature.

I sympathize, but he is one person out of an audience of a hundred or more. Should his concept of the panel prevail over that of the person sitting next to him? By the relentlessly democratic logic of Worldcon his opinion is, by itself, without import. Had he asked for a show of hands, the panel might have paid attention.



It's Sunday evening and I am sitting in a room with several thousand people waiting to hear the results of the genre's most prominent show of hands, the Hugo Awards. The Hugo Awards ceremony is the only event without anything programmed against it (on Thursday I went to a panel instead of the opening ceremonies), yet the entire convention population isn't there. Not even close.

Still, it's a large group, and toastmaster John Scalzi uses this to make an appeal to unity. The Hugos, he says, bring everyone together. He then builds a description of the breadth of the genre community out of allusions to the nominees. It's a clever and well-delivered little speech, but do the Hugo Awards really bring everyone together? Is that even possible?



It's earlier on Sunday evening and I am in the same big room with almost the same number of people twenty minutes before the Hugo Awards ceremony will begin. I am saving the seat beside me for my sister, but on the other side of me are two middle-aged men. When I notice they are talking about Ken Liu's short story "Paper Menagerie" I begin eavesdropping on their conversation. They seem like old friends, and after they both agree Liu's story was their favorite, they go on to discuss this year's Hugo-nominated novels. *Deadline* is

faintly praised, *Among Others* is agreed to be fantastic, but then it turns out one of them hasn't read a single China Miéville novel even though *Embassytown* is another of the ballot's novel nominees.



It is the Friday after the convention and I am back home plowing through an enormous Google Reader backlog. I get to popular British blogger Adam Whitehead's short post about the Hugo Awards. After listing the winners of some of the categories, he takes a backhanded swipe at the fact 2,000 people voted, a number he seems to feel is too small to justify the awards' reputation as the most prestigious in the genre.

In fact, not everyone votes in all categories. Only 1664 votes were cast for Best Novel, for example. We can't know how many of those votes were cast by people who, like the man sitting next to me at the awards ceremony, have only read some of the nominees, but it seems safe to assume it was a significant percentage. The numbers are even smaller when one considers ballots cast for nominating works to the short list: only 958 in the novel category. The novel nominated the most times, Jo Walton's eventual winner *Among Others* led the field with 175 votes while Hannu Rajaniemi's debut novel *The Quantum Thief* received 70 nominations and missed the short list by a single vote.

So Whitehead actually overstated the size of the voting population, but that's not to say he's right that the small scale of the voting, and the small breadth of the voters' reading, should decrease the awards' prestige.



It is Sunday evening again and the Hugo ceremony is nearly over. Jo Walton is accepting the award for Best Novel. Afterward the talk about her speech will center on her thanks to disgraced Readercon volunteer Rene Walling for suggesting "Among Others" as the title for her novel, but her first words at the microphone are an apology to George R. R. Martin, as if she has received the award through some irreversible clerical error and not the will of the voters. People laugh as if this is a joke, but she may not have been joking.

If the Hugo voting population was greatly expanded in the way Whitehead implies would provide greater legitimacy, it seems safe to say *A Dance with Dragons* would have won. In sales of actual books, the most democratic measure of a book's worth, there would be no

contest. Longtime genre award watcher Nicholas Whyte noted in April that even among users of the site Goodreads, a group surely biased toward reading more widely than the general population, four times as many people owned *A Dance with Dragons* than the other four nominees combined.

The only possible solution to this tangle is to be content to have multiple awards for the best genre novel of the year, each determined by different means. Prestige can then accrue organically. Happily this is already the case. One could argue that the Nebula Awards, given to authors by other authors in a manner similar to the Oscars, ought to in fact be the most prestigious awards, but strange choices and an even more problematic voter pool make them a distant second to the Hugos.

As a side note, as easy as it is to point to a few books and call them bestsellers, it is preposterously difficult to determine what the bestselling genre books of a given year actually are, and someone with access to those numbers could do the field a service by providing the answer. Unfortunately Amazon treats sales numbers the way dragons traditionally treat treasure, so this may be impossible.



It is Thursday evening and I am in the hotel bar surrounded by people with access to at least some sales numbers. My sister, a fantasy author whose first novel was published last year, arrived in the afternoon and has been introducing me to her friends, almost all of whom are authors here primarily to promote their writing and network with other people in the industry. There are exceptions in any group but for the most part they rarely attended conventions before they were published, have few of the cultural tics of longtime fans, and when pressed most admit that since they began writing they hardly have time to read.

One might think that being an author at a literature-oriented convention would be glamorous. Perhaps it is for superstars, but I don't meet the superstars. Most people I meet are authors who have published their first novel in the last three years or so. These are the 99% of authors, the ones for whom the exposure of sitting on a panel, even if it's a panel about writing attended almost exclusively by authors and people aspiring to be authors, might make a noticeable difference in sales. Although the names often strike me as familiar, in almost every case I haven't read anything they have written.

Introductions work differently in this networking-oriented population. People don't merely say the person's name, they add

something to indicate why people should care about them. Typically it goes “X, author of Y” but there is a “spouse of” present in addition to me, a “brother of”. After an hour of this, I use the fact I have published all of four reviews with *Strange Horizons* to promote myself to “Matt, reviewer for *Strange Horizons*”. My sister deservedly laughs at me for being status conscious, but I think I detect a change. Not in the willingness of people to talk to me, for everyone is surprisingly friendly and easy-going, but in their comfort level at the initial introduction. An author’s brother could be anyone: a writer, an agent, an editor, or... just a brother. A reviewer is known quantity.

Later, I am introduced to *SF Signal*’s John De Nardo. I don’t really know him, but I feel like I do, for his links to *SF Signal* content made up 90% of my Google+ feed even when I still checked it regularly. Unlike everyone else I’ve met so far, he at least pretends my name sounds familiar. Perhaps it does: I commented on one or two of those Google+ items, and while I’m not sure I think he might have linked to my blog once or twice. But even at Worldcon this blog is obscure enough that I expect to meet no one who reads it.



It’s Friday night, and I’m waiting for an elevator with *Strange Horizons* editor Niall Harrison. While vacationing in the USA he has been rereading Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars trilogy and tells me that he was reading my review of it on my blog. He very much disagrees with it, he adds, in the friendly manner of someone hoping for a stimulating discussion.

I blink. I reviewed the Mars trilogy? I know I read it in the late 90s, and thankfully for all of us I wasn’t reviewing books online at the time, but all I recall is that I enjoyed some of the political machinations but found the prose drier than I would have liked. Ever courageous of my convictions, I mutter that I’ve been posting reviews online since 2003, that I’ve become a lot more sophisticated as both a reader and as a reviewer since then, and in general I throw my past self and his opinions directly under the bus.



On Saturday morning I am using Google to locate the review Niall mentioned, half-expecting he had me confused with someone else. It turns out I did review the Mars trilogy in 2006. Reading the review in 2012, the language is recognizably my own but much of the content is new to me, in particular the half-hearted discussion

of the role of executives in the story. I think I was trying to say that no matter what one thinks of executives, accurately presented most of their activities make for dull reading, but I can't say for sure. The review reads like something dashed off in thirty minutes and posted without being read over, which was generally my practice at the time.

In one sense, I "know" Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy. When it comes up in conversation I have things to say: I have read it, I can describe features of its narrative and style, I can name elements that some people find attractive and elements that some people find alienating. But it is a shallow knowledge, the sort of knowledge people write guides for faking at dinner parties. The details are lost to me until I reread it.

In cognitive science there is a concept of a working set, the amount of information we can hold in short-term memory at once for use in solving problems. How many novels can I recall enough about to discuss in depth? Not very many. It was to avoid the loss of this information that I began to write reviews. By writing down what I think, I can have access to those thoughts in the future! The brief, incomplete nature of this site's older posts derives partly from their intended use merely as notes to stimulate recall. But whenever I revisit my reviews from before the last couple years, I run into the problem that I am no longer the same person. Six years ago I was someone else, a person who remembered different books than I do today. It's not easy for us to have a conversation.



It's Friday night and I am at the Night Shade party having the most free-flowing conversation I will have at the convention. I am talking with reviewer and anthologist Rich Horton, and I can cite stories and novels by name and continue to make my point without worrying he might not have read them. Eventually while discussing K.J. Parker I bring up historical fiction author Dorothy Dunnett. Even this succeeds, for like many genre readers he's also a Dunnett fan, and we talk about her Lymond and Niccolo series. It's only when we move still further from the genre that we run aground on the contextual rocks: I haven't read Raymond Carver and he hasn't read Faulkner.



It is Monday and I am flying home. I am thinking of the conversation with Horton, and how while I was able to toss out the names of short stories and be perfectly confident he would know what I'm

talking about, he was not in the same position. Me talking to Rich Horton about short stories is like the friend at work who talks to me about science fiction having only read *Ender's Game* and *Dune*.

This line of thinking develops into the beginnings of an idea for an unusual sort of convention wrap-up post, a present tense narrative that jumps around in time while following thematic threads. I have a hazy idea this is a standard form for feature articles in magazines, but I don't read enough conventional magazines to have a good feel for the way such stories are written. I know that if I write it, I will end up aping the Doctor Manhattan issue of *Watchmen* more than respectable journalism. I decide that while this resort to genre is slightly embarrassing, it's also more than a little appropriate. Doctor Manhattan's narrative is intended to underscore his inhumanity by illustrating his nonlinear experience of time, but this is not as foreign from the human experience as we tend to think.

First person novels typically present us with a linear narrative, but this is a conceit that is nothing like how the human memory functions. Not only can I not reproduce the exact words of a conversation I had last week (the way first person narrators often authoritatively provide exact words for conversations taking place years in their past), I have trouble even remembering when in the sequence of half-remembered events a conversation happened. In writing this post I frequently had to resort to the convention program just to determine the day on which something happened. The experience was linear, but the memories that endure are only fragments.



It is Monday morning, the last day of Worldcon, and I am packing. "How was your con?" my roommate asks me. His phrasing is considered. We have been at the same convention, yet my con is not the same as his con. In five days of programming I ran into him outside our room exactly three times: twice at the only two panels we both happened to attend and once in the aftermath of the Hugo awards. In almost all respects, we have been at two different conventions superimposed on one location: different panels, different readings, different conversations, different parties. And there are far more than just two: each attendee experiences a different convention. But how could it be otherwise? Each attendee has been reading a different genre, though they are all called science fiction.

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He writes about science fiction and fantasy in reviews for *Strange Horizons* and on his own blog, *Yet There Are Statues*.

This article first appeared on the author's website on September 12, 2012.

<http://matthilliard.wordpress.com/2012/09/12/worldcon-2012-fragments/>

USING YOUR PLATFORM

Maurice Broaddus

Jim Boeheim was honored by Syracuse Monday night for his 900th career victory when the third-ranked Orange defeated Detroit at the Carrier Dome. But instead of basking in his incredible achievement, the outspoken Boeheim, 68, railed against the gun culture that has turned this country into a shooting gallery for deranged serial murderers who have all-too-easy access to semi-automatic weapons.

After the tragic shootings in Connecticut, Jim Boeheim felt compelled to speak out on America's gun culture and used the platform afforded by his historic 900th victory to do so. In some quarters he was criticized for doing so, for politicizing this non-political moment. This comes only a few weeks after Bob Costas used his halftime report, in the wake of the Jovan Belcher murder-suicide, to also speak on the topic of gun culture and gun control.

While it's tempting to join the chorus of debate on the topic of gun control, especially from a spiritual perspective (because guns are designed to kill people and somehow we need to reconcile our gun culture with the kingdom mindset that says "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemies), one of the other things that interests me is the use of one's platform.

Writers are told all the time to shy away from political stands, religion, race, or anything controversial. It's all about protecting the brand and not offending any potential readers. We're urged to be bland to the point of inoffensiveness, as we're driven down the path of being more worried about not losing any Twitter/Facebook followers. True, sometimes readers can't differentiate your political positions from your work. More times than not, they can't separate your douchiness from your art.

I write because I have stories to tell and something to say. I have a voice, opinions, a worldview, a perspective. I could kid us both and not post any such views on my blog, but they will and should come out in my work if I'm true to who I am. And you know what? That's okay. What makes you unique as an artist is your voice and perspective, that special way you come at the world. Some people will like it, some people won't. That's okay, too.

There are some athletes who were criticized for being so bland and non-offensive, for example, Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan, because they never took a stand. They never used the platform they had to effect any real change. Maybe they ultimately weren't about anything except their brand. There were others who risked their

popularity, say Jim Brown or Muhammed Ali, chancing offending some and losing fans with each stance, but being true to who they were.

Not everyone is comfortable being a political target, I get that. I also think you're obligated to use your or else you have squandered your gift and your opportunity, thus ultimately failing yourself and your audience.

Maurice Broaddus has written hundreds of short stories, essays, novellas, and articles. He is the co-editor of the *Dark Faith* anthology series (Apex Books) and the author of the urban fantasy trilogy, *Knights of Breton Court* (Angry Robot Books). He has been a teaching artist for over five years, teaching creative writing to elementary, middle, high school, and adult students.

This article first appeared on the author's website on December 21, 2012.

<http://mauricebroaddus.com/uncategorized/using-your-platform/>

A LITERARY RORSCHACH TEST: THOUGHTS ON PETER STOTHARD'S RECENT COMMENTS

Larry Nolen

So another round in that epic clash between the bon ton and the hoi polloi has broken out over in the UK, this time centering around remarks made by Booker Prize chairman (and editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*) Peter Stothard regarding the pessimistic future of literary criticism. Oh, how the retorts have been swift and biting! If one were to play a drinking game in which one took a shot every time the word "snob" or "elitist/m" was used in those links, one would likely be comatose by now. Hopefully, I will be pardoned or at least not drawn and quartered if I view with a skeptical eye many of the sentiments expressed in the links provided above.

The first thought that occurred to me is that I could not find a transcript of his comments. That is understandable, as newspapers do edit their interviewees' comments into the space of a small column. But here is the offending part of *The Independent's* column, at least for some:

The 61-year-old says: "There is a widespread sense in the UK, as well as America, that traditional, confident criticism, based on argument and telling people whether the book is any good, is in decline. Quite unnecessarily."

*"Criticism needs confidence in the face of extraordinary external competition," the former editor of *The Times* says. "It is wonderful that there are so many blogs and websites devoted to books, but to be a critic is to be importantly different than those sharing their own taste... Not everyone's opinion is worth the same."*

The rise of blogging has proved particularly worrying, he says. "Eventually that will be to the detriment of literature. It will be bad for readers; as much as one would like to think that many bloggers opinions are as good as others. It just ain't so. People will be encouraged to buy and read books that are no good, the good will be overwhelmed, and we'll be worse off. There are some important issues here."

When I read that piece yesterday, before the flood of blog responses began in earnest, I thought he had a valid point. A critic is not the same as someone who goes on Goodreads or Amazon and leaves a star rating. A critic is not someone who expresses his/her liking/disliking of a book. A critic is not someone who describes

how a book unfolds. No, a critic is something different. To me at least, a critic is someone who delves into the "whys" of a story, teasing out elements that bear further consideration (or in some cases, dismissal). A good critic gives a reader a chance to (re)evaluate his/her own stances regarding the act of reading.

Yet in these type of reactions, you don't see the critic being portrayed as anything valuable. Oh, no. There is an underlying sense that one feels "attacked" when Stothard bemoans the apparent collapse of literary criticism beneath the sheer weight of other forms of literary discourse. Let me turn this issue around and try and see this from Stothard's perspective. I would imagine that he would probably counter some of the comments by asking simply, what reviews, blog-originated or otherwise, have you read lately that made you re-evaluate your position on what constitutes a "worthy" or "good" book? I know for myself, it is increasingly difficult to find a review that does little more than just provide the reviewer's likes/dislikes, take them as you please. Although there is some value, I suppose, in that style of review essay, is there really anything gained other than the reader finding someone who may confirm his/her already-held opinion on what types of works are worth reading? I don't think one reads Goodreads reviews or those of several genre blogs (to use examples with which many readers here would be familiar) to learn anything about the art of writing or reading comprehension, but for those (such as myself) who do occasionally want something more, where do we turn?

The answers to that question are not pretty. Newspapers and magazines traditionally have been the source for literary criticism that is more than two paragraphs long. Yet over the past quarter-century, their coverage has been slashed in the US and likely elsewhere. True, there are isolated blogs that do provide these voices (and Stothard is well aware of them, based on later comments), but how do you go about discovering them when you want something more than a review ending in 7.5/10? From blogrolls and others' recs? Sure, that'll work to a degree (this blog's blogroll does link to several who provide lit criticism), but it's hard to discover them on Google or elsewhere without wading through a lot of dreck.

Acknowledging this is not "being a snob." One can find oneself longing for certain forms of literary review/criticism without dismissing out-of-hand newer media. Stothard, I believe, is not dismissing blogging or online reviewing as much as he's expressing a fear that in this still-maturing online age, that certain voices that dare to dig deeper and to unearth things that are overlooked by the majority because they have chosen/are not capable of investing the time to explore why such a work is worth considering, that those

voices will be drowned out by white noise. I look at my shelves and I wonder if authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Samuel Delany, or Flannery O'Connor, just to name a few, would have achieved any sort of wide readership today if there were not critics as well as general readers praising their works and exploring just why their writings bear a closer examination.

It is too easy to get caught up in the rhetoric associated with "snob" or "elitist" and presume that the one expressing an opinion that runs counter to popular opinion is just fighting against an inexorable tide. Perhaps that is so. However, popular opinion does not mean that a work is good or that it will endure (true, the inverse is also correct). But if those so-called "elitists" are dismissed with finality, who then will dare to go against populist takes? That is the lingering question.

Larry Nolen is a history and English teacher who works with special needs children. He is also a freelance translator, with translations of Augusto Monterroso and Leopoldo Lugones appearing in the anthologies *The Weird* and *ODD?* respectively. Larry also has a very healthy fascination with squirrels and dreams to one day edit an anthology of squirrel fiction, to be called Squirrelpunk. He blogs at *The OF Blog* and *Gogol's Overcoat*. Several of his reviews are actually written by rabid Serbian squirrels.

This article first appeared on the author's website on September 26, 2012.

<http://ofblog.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/a-literary-rorschach-test-thoughts-on.html>

MA VIE EN ZINES

Chris Garcia

In the beginning, there were zines. Shortly after fish crawled out of the primordial ooze, and were greeted by First Fandom, zines started to appear. Science Fiction fandom wasn't even invented when folks started doing the earliest things we'd call fanzines. Mostly, they were related to sports at first, and later to film stars and the like. Science Fiction fandom evolved and became the group most strongly associated with fanzines, largely because we popularized the name 'fanzine'. Over the years, zines became the primary way that fans communicated when they couldn't be in the same place physically. Over the years, this was slowly replaced, first by more frequent cons and ever-growing clubs, later by electronic bulletin boards, then USENET, then CompuServe, then AOL, and nowadays we're up to blogs and such. Zines themselves evolved, first in the technology used to create them, later in the way they were presented. Most fanzines today are either done completely electronically or have a PDF version that echoes a printed version. And there are a few that have no electronic version at all. Not a lot, but there are some. We'll get into that later.

I came into fanzines twice. My Dad loved 'em. He had a fairly good little collection that he had for years. I used to color in them, but I learned how to read from issues of *Granfalloon* and *Niekas*. Over the years, I drifted out of fandom, only to return around 2004, finally starting my own zine, *The Drink Tank*, on January 31st, 2005. Over the last seven years, I've expanded the number of zines I've done, have got myself nominated a few times for the Hugo, managed to somehow win one of the things, and have made friends from around the world. That's what zines have done for me.

To me, a zine has a feeling of completeness to it. It's not a record of a moment; it's a record of a period of collaboration. There are zines that are entirely the work of one person, but they're getting rarer and rarer, it seems. In a way, those are the precursors of blogs, as I see it. Most zines are a mixture of writing and art, laid out in some form. The end result is an artifact; something with cohesion and a sense of togetherness. Many would say that Zines are a form of communication, and I'm not quite sure I agree. There are lots of ways to communicate, and I'd never really use a zine for that. To me, it's a place for presentation, to show some of what you're thinking, to show off the work of other folks. I'm lucky in that I've got a band

of friends who are willing to send stuff to me to include in the zines.

Of course, I'm not the only one doing zines, and maybe that's part of why people are having a hard time continuing to take zines seriously. There aren't as many zinesters as there were in the late 1980s up to the mid-1990s. That was probably the peak as far as numbers go. The number of zines being produced on paper alone is pretty small, frequent Hugo nominee *Banana Wings* is the most prominent, but there are dozens that do both print and web editions. Some of the zines that do both include the exceptional *Chunga* by J. Randrew Byers, Carl Juárez and Andy Hooper, Steven H. Silver's wonderful *Argentus*, Guy H. Lillian's excellent *Challenger*, and *Journey Planet*, where James Bacon and I team up with some great folks every few months. The combination form has become more and more popular as recent years have seen costs in printing and mailing increase greatly and this allows for a larger audience.

And yes, there are web-only fanzines. Since 2005, web-only fanzines have seen an explosion made possible by Bill Burn's eFanzines.com. Many people have pointed to Arnie Katz's *Vegas Fandom Weekly* for starting a flood of other web fanzines like *The Drink Tank* and *Science Fiction San Francisco*. An unexpected side effect of the existence of eFanzines is the return of a fair number of zines that hadn't been published in decades. Pete Weston's *Relapse*, Rob Jackson's *Inca*, and Mike Maera's *A Meara For Observers* all returned after long layoffs, and fans who hadn't seen the light of day for years like John Neilsen-Hall and Eric Mayer came back to regularly give us zines and articles. Legendary 1960s fan and former WorldCon chair Earl Kemk's *eI* recently ended a near-decade long run as one of the most impressive and far-ranging zines of all-time. More and more fanzine activity seems to be happening on or around the eFanzines crowd, including the current youth movement that seems to be taking hold. *Yipe!*, the *Costumers Zine of Record*, John Coxon's *Procrastinations*, *Dark Matter* by Nalini Harris, and the darkly humorous *Bullshit!* from William Housel are all a part of a youngening that has been happening over the last few years.

For me, fanzines are about having a good time. I love layout, I love playing with art and text and I especially love finding strange connections. I also love that there's absolutely nothing that I *have* to do. There's no requirements for what a fanzine has to be or do. I guess that's what's drawn me all these years, the freedom to work on what I want to do and not to have to worry about anything. Yeah, sometimes this leads to a "somewhat sloppy effect" (according to the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*), but it makes me happy to get to do it all the way I get to do it. It's a lot of fun, and to me, if it's not fun, why do it? That attitude would also explain the lack of grammar-

checking in GarciaZines...

There is also a lovely community that gathers annually at a convention called CorFlu. It travels around the world, usually attracting between 50 and a hundred or so folks from several countries. A lot of folks participate in on-line mailing lists as well. It's a community that can seem to be a bit closed off to folks who are new, but what's interesting is that anyone can find themselves in the fold if they participate. It's a good bunch of folks, a lot of fun to drink with!

There are challenges that face zines. There's the general aging of a lot of Fanzine Fandom. While we've got a string of youth woven in at the moment, there's a lot of folks in their 50s and 60s. There's the ever-increasing number of folks who might have gone in for fanzines back in the day who are now finding themselves blogging or engaged in other kinds of writing. There's the costs of printing for those who enjoy the feel of their works on paper. There's the problem of getting folks to notice what you're doing. There are so many other forms of writing out there, and the view that Fanzines are an old folks' pastime has helped to keep younger fans from checking out what's going on in the world of zines. For us web-based folks, there's the problem of Letters of Comment. In the past, Letters of Comments, LoCs, were very much the norm with many zines consisting of long letter columns that would sometimes outpace the length of the rest of the contents all together. Many of electronic zines have trouble getting comments. These things happen.

There are many impressive zines out there today. The first ones that come to mind are some of those I've already mentioned, plus ones like *Askance* from Mr. John Purcell. You can't go wrong with *Trap Door* from the legendary Robert Lichtman and a contributors list which reads like a list of the finest fannish writers in the world. Rich Coad's *Sense of Wonder Stories* is one of the best of all the zines about both fandom and science fiction. If you like your discussion of science fiction deep, thoughtful and thorough, you must try and read Bruce Gillespie's *SF Commentary*. It may well be the best writing about SF in the world today.

So, that's Fanzines to me. I really believe that some of the finest writing in the world is happening in zines. It's a world that you might wanna give a try. Start with eFanzines.com and look at what's out there. The variety of stuff there is huge and you can't go wrong... and if you do, well, there's so much more that might just work for ya!

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Clara, California. Chris is best-known for editing the Hugo-winning fanzine, *The Drink Tank* (<http://efanzines.com/DrinkTank/>) and Hugo-nominated *Journey Planet* (<http://journeyplanet.weebly.com/>). He is a curator at the Computer History Museum.

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SPECIAL NEEDS IN STRANGE WORLDS

Daniel Goodman

To those who need a little history about me: when I was born – prematurely, I should add – I suffered from a lack of oxygen, which therefore affected specific areas of my brain. I was diagnosed (along with my twin brother) with spastic cerebral palsy, which affected my lower body in mobility, stamina, function, and flexibility, and caused it to be extremely painful/difficult to walk for long periods of time. I wasn't like all the other little boys and girls; I could play sports, but only in limited ways. I was always picked last for schoolyard teams. I was the guy that everyone cared for, but many wondered about in the back of their minds. Staring was to me as common as cold weather in Canada.

As a result, I retreated into the comfort of more academic things; I fell in love with reading and writing. I (or we, for my brother was in a similar boat, likely more so) had a natural affinity for words, and we bonded with them like sodium does with chlorine to form table salt. To stretch the metaphor a little further, our early, regular exposure to books was like table salt itself: potentially difficult subjects coming together, to create something adequate for human consumption. All through my childhood, books were as necessary to me as food and water and I was able to establish what a lot of students my age lacked: reading can be, like the composition of table salt, made natural. You just need the right ingredients.

I was six years old when I first discovered fantasy in the pages of a storybook. It seems that as soon as I got my hands on it, nothing could stop me from reading it, or trying to, at least; my eyes drank in the lavish illustrations and glossed over the less interesting part that was the text. (Because truly, at that age, who cares for anything but the pictures?) I read the words I knew without stumbling, and my parents filled in the rest that I couldn't figure out. My first brush with genre had a quality that, at that age, I just found wonderful.

It wasn't the magnificent pieces of art that accompanied the text, or the world of wizened wizards, traveling dwarves, magical artifacts, and fire-breathing dragons that the author introduced me to. It wasn't the different locations that I went to in the adventure, or all the trouble our protagonist got into along the way. All of this was thrilling and entertaining stuff for an infantile mind, mind-blowing in the sense that one first discovers the unreliable protagonist or realizes the training simulation is more than just a game. But there was something so irresistible besides from all of this then that I can

only perceive now, something that my child mind couldn't grasp beyond pretty swords and rocket ships.

It was the thought of a small hero overcoming big obstacles. I'd never thought before that a hero could have any imperfections, that he or she could be anything but perfect. It was the first time I was shown the hero could be common, could be doubted, and could be at a disadvantage with the rest of their society.

I saw something of myself in that book.

And even though I wouldn't classify J.R.R. Tolkien's way of portraying Bilbo Baggins as liberally exploring the topic of disability head on, this was my first encounter to anything fantastic where the characters could be anything less than flawless. He – and later, the hobbits of the Fellowship – were a revelation to me as a young reader because it made me reevaluate my understanding of what could pass as heroic, world-saving, mountain-wandering material. To my six-year-old perception, I could now be one of those kinds of people, regardless of the troubles that I faced.

I believe that disability in fantasy & science fiction done well is fantasy and science fiction that forces the character to recognize their own permanent vulnerabilities and apply their own skills in ways that powers the centrifuge of the plot, even if they are skills that are difficult to integrate into the storytelling vein. People with disabilities I know in real life figure out unorthodox ways to do things, and even if those ways seem strange and incomprehensible to an outsider, they just do them because that's how it has always been done. These are the people that are the most inspiring in my own life; like Sarah, for instance, who had the courtesy to invite me to talk about this topic.

The heart of the matter is this:

If an author wants to write about special needs correctly, he/she has to recognize that their character has to be firmly grounded by randomness and reality in order for the unreality to make sense, because the reality of disability already should exist for that person in the cold void of what they can and cannot do. It is their reality of living; that fact has to be consistent with the fictional conceit and unreal narrative that the author is trying to tell. In the words of author Gregory Benford, effective speculative fiction writers of special needs "... aren't merely writing a message piece about the disabled and the related issues, but are instead writing about an interesting character who just happens to be disabled."

"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it

was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.”

Similarly, I think an effective understanding of how to handle disability in science fiction & fantasy requires connecting the dots between how the character finds solace in his/her own personal insecurities and flaws, and how the doubt expressed by the majority of others is a driving force behind that pursuit. It has to show them overcoming that judgment, surpassing insurmountable odds, carving out a place for themselves where they can be happy with who they are and live comfortably with the edges of their imperfections. Writing is how I have found comfort five surgeries later. With each phrase and curl of the word, I’m constructing my own personal Bag-End. It is how I’m becoming what I thought I could be back when I first picked up *The Illustrated Hobbit* when I was six years old: a hero in my own world, and hopefully, an inspiration in others.

So, for all those that have been there and back again, on roads less traveled, on quests finished and quests continuing, demons faced and battles fought, I say:

When you’re off to conquer your own personal Mount Doom, remember the little guys who got there first.

Daniel Goodman (<http://danieljgoodman.com>) is a writer and critic who has been telling stories since he was six, and considers that he probably will still be doing so until the day he dies. He will be attending the University of Toronto later this year to study humanities, and can be found online at [@makingmatter](#), working away on his latest project. He currently lives in Ontario, Canada, with his family.

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<http://www.bookwormblues.net/2012/05/08/special-needs-in-strange-worlds-daniel-goodman/>

RACISM, REVEALING EDEN AND STOP THE GOODREADS BULLIES

Foz Meadows

In the past few weeks, mass critical discussion of a YA novel by Victoria Foyt – titled *Revealing Eden: Save the Pearls* – has sprung up online after various people noticed that the book was, shall we say, extremely problematic vis-a-vis racism. And by ‘extremely problematic’, I mean the white female protagonist wears blackface (complete with extra-red lips), black people are called ‘coals’, the black male love interest is literally described as animalistic and bestial, the dystopian elements come in large part from black people being in charge while whites are a demonised minority, Aztec characters speak Spanish for no readily discernable reason, and the title literally translates to ‘save the white people’ – ‘pearls’ being an (apparently) derogatory term for whites, though as various other commenters have pointed out, the coals/pearls contrast is itself offensive: after all, coal is dirty and cheap, whereas pearls are beautiful and valuable.

Things might have died down had Foyt herself not waded in, angrily denying all assertions that¹ either the book or her attitudes were racist while simultaneously speculating that African-American readers might not even exist as a category.² It was at this point that an awful possibility occurred to me: what if the *Stop the GR Bullies*³ site were to start defending Foyt on the grounds that calling her racist constituted bullying? It was a cynical thought, and one I was prepared to categorise as uncharitable even as I tweeted about the possibility⁴ on Wednesday; surely, even STGRB could recognise that in this instance, the accusations of racism were both legitimate and extremely relevant to any discussion of the novel, given Foyt’s claim

1 For example:

<https://www.facebook.com/SaveThePearls/posts/444346182255531>,

<https://www.facebook.com/SaveThePearls/posts/443317462358403>,

<https://www.facebook.com/SaveThePearls/posts/443266232363526>,

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/victoria-foyt/white-and-in-the-minority_b_1632207.html and

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/victoria-foyt/judging-a-book-by-its-cov_1_b_1721066.html

2 <http://mybookgoggles.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/save-pearls-victoria-foyt-still-doesnt.html>

3 <http://www.stopthegrbullies.com/>

4 <https://twitter.com/fozmeadows/status/230460016606474243>

that the story was meant to “turn racism on its head” – after all, how can you assess whether a book has succeeded at its stated goals without analysing the author’s efforts at achieving them? How can you discuss the presence of blatant racism in a novel without asking why the author included it, and whether they even realised it was there, let alone offensive?

But as it turns out, my cynical predictions proved accurate: this morning, STGRB has come out in defence of Foyt, asserting that:⁵

“...calling the author racist (when she has clearly stated that she is not) or calling her ignorant, disgusting, terrible, sexist, etc., or saying that she and her agent, editor, and publisher should be sued – that is bullying.”

Which is, apart from anything else, monumentally hypocritical given that the site’s entire purpose is to label as bullies people who actively state that they aren’t. If Foyt can be deemed definitely non-racist simply by virtue of asserting that she isn’t, then how can STGRB accuse anyone of bullying who doesn’t openly identify as a bully without contradicting their own logic? Regardless of whether you agree with their judgements or practices, the primary assertion of STGRB is that sometimes it’s necessary to bestow negative labels on people who deny their applicability – but in this respect as in so many others, the site is determined to enforce a double-standard: one for them, and one for anyone who disagrees. Site manager Athena’s assertion that “someone’s intentions do define them” is fundamentally flawed: she assumes that someone with good intentions can’t cause actual harm, or that if they do, they shouldn’t be held responsible for it. I’ve written before about intentionality versus interpretation in YA, but what it all metaphorically boils down to is this: if a driver accidentally hits a pedestrian, the fact that they didn’t mean to is immaterial.⁶ The pedestrian is still injured, the driver is still negligent, and if, despite these facts, the driver continues to assert that they’re actually very good behind the wheel of a car, we are right to question them. If it really was an accident, a genuinely responsible driver will nonetheless acknowledge their error and take every precaution to ensure they never replicate it; but if it turns out that the driver has been drastically overconfident in their assessment of their abilities, their entire approach to driving needs to change.

Victoria Foyt is being called a racist because the number and severity of the problems present in *Revealing Eden* are such that the novel ultimately serves to reinforce the very same toxic behaviour it sets out to debunk. The assertion isn’t that Foyt is being consciously

5 <http://stoptheग्रbullies.com/2012/08/02/revealing-eden/>

6 <http://fozmeadows.wordpress.com/2011/03/04/intentionality-vs-interpretation/>

racist, in the sense of actively believing black people to be inferior, but rather that, despite her apparently good intentions, she has nonetheless subconsciously absorbed and then actively replicated certain impressions and stereotypes about black people without realising that they're offensive – and when the extent of her cognitive dissonance was pointed out to her by myriad readers, both white and POC, she responded by asserting that their accusations were “exactly what creates racism”. She has well and truly hit the pedestrian, and has responded by declaring herself to be an excellent driver.

I've said before that STGRB is not a subtle site, and now more than ever, I stand by that.⁷ In many instances – perhaps even a majority of instances – reviewing the author rather than the book is a bad thing to do; but it would be both impossible and irresponsible to try and fully separate a writer from their words, particularly in instances where they've chosen to openly discuss their inspiration or intentions. Foyt is being critiqued as much for the tenor and content of her blogged responses to criticism as for the book itself, and however strongly you might object to references to her as a person cropping up in reviews of the latter, attempting to outlaw commentary on the former is utterly unreasonable. Authors exist in the world, not a vacuum; we are influenced by everything around us, and when that influence transfers itself to our work – whether intentionally or unintentionally – it isn't unreasonable for critics to take notice, and to comment accordingly.

But let's take a moment to consider what racism actually means, as both the STGRB crew and several of their commenters appear to be confused about the issue. Contrary to the stated opinions of the STGRB site owners, racism isn't exclusively an active, conscious phenomenon – by which I mean, the terminology doesn't only apply to people in KKK hoods who openly assert that black people are inferior. In a cultural context where discrimination is still a daily fact of life for an overwhelming number of people, but where openly stating disdain for POC is socially frowned upon, racism has become primarily a subconscious affair. But this by no means blunts its effect; in fact, it makes it even more insidious, because it breeds in people a problematic belief that hating racism is identical to not actually being racist.

When Trayvon Martin was killed, a grass roots smear campaign sprang up to defend his killer and paint the unarmed, teenage Martin as a thug;⁸ some people even started selling shooting targets printed

7 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/foz-meadows/stop-the-gr-bullies-a-response_b_1690469.html

8 <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2012/03/26/452310/what-everyone-needs-to-know-about-the-smear-campaign-against-trayvon->

with his face.⁹ One newscaster blamed Martin's death on the fact that he was wearing a hoodie, saying that "black and Latino youngsters particularly "shouldn't wear them to avoid looking suspicious.¹⁰ Meanwhile, George Zimmerman, Martin's killer, defended himself using Florida's Stand Your Ground law:¹¹ his exoneration was instantly contrasted with the prominent case of a black woman, Marissa Alexander, who'd fired a gun while being physically assaulted by a violent partner.¹² Alexander was told that Stand Your Ground didn't apply in her case; subsequent journalistic investigation found that "defendants claiming 'stand your ground' are more likely to prevail if the victim is black"¹³ – which prompted an investigation into racism's influence on the law by federal and state officials.¹⁴ By contrast, the extrajudicial killing of black people by law enforcement in America was recently recorded to have reached the rate of one every forty hours,¹⁵ while just last Friday, a member of the GOP stated that members of the Republican party in Florida had actively sought to suppress black votes.¹⁶

Outside the courtroom, men and women of colour still earn significantly less than their white counterparts.¹⁷ A white Baptist church recently refused to marry a black couple, despite both parties being regular attendees.¹⁸ A poll conducted in March this year

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9 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/13/trayvon-martin-shooting-targets-sold>

10 http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/03/23/10830530-geraldo-rivera-blames-hoodie-for-trayvons-death-critics-tell-him-to-zip-it-up?lite

11 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/19/george-zimmerman-stand-your-ground_n_1685948.html

12 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/17/stand-your-ground-marissa-alexander>

13 <http://www.tampabay.com/news/publicsafety/crime/article1233133.ece>

14 <http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2012-06-09/trayvon-martin-stand-your-ground/55480352/1>

15 <http://hiphopandpolitics.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/every40hours.pdf>

16 http://www.salon.com/2012/07/27/fla_republican_we_suppressed_black_votes/

17 http://25.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_m7lee5rIX91qbhdnlo1_1280.jpg

18 http://thenewcivilrights_movement.com/white-baptist-church-refuses-to-marry-black-couple/discrimination/2012/07/27/44772

showed that 29% of Republicans in Mississippi think that interracial marriage should be illegal,¹⁹ while a recent study of college students showed that “white students and those who rated highly in color-blind racial attitudes were more likely not to be offended by images from racially themed parties at which attendees dressed and acted as caricatures of racial stereotypes” – a result which showed a strong correlation between colour-blind attitudes and a tacit acceptance/non-recognition of racism.²⁰ Similarly, implicit association tests (IATs) have frequently shown that the cultural effects of racial bias are widespread,²¹ while the shaming of and self-loathing among black girls who’ve been culturally conditioned to view their own natural hair and skin as disgusting is utterly heartbreaking.²² I could go on, but hopefully you get the idea: racism is everywhere, it is frequently subtle or subconscious, and its effects can be utterly devastating.

So when, to return to the case of STGRB and Victoria Foyt, I see site manager Athena responding to the suggestion that “Accusations of racism are no different than 17th. C. accusations of witchcraft” by praising the commenter’s “understanding and intelligence,” it doesn’t seem unreasonable to conclude that Foyt isn’t the only party to lack a meaningful understanding of racism. I cannot overstate this enough: calling someone out for racism is not worse than actually being racist. If you care more about being called racist than about the possibility that you actually might be racist, then you have a serious problem, because what you’ve just done, right there? Is concluded that it’s more important to appear to support equality than to actually support equality.

Distressingly, this isn’t the first time that race has become a prominent factor in discussions of YA novels. Negative fan reactions to the casting of POC actors in the respective film adaptations of two successful YA series – first to Amandla Stenberg as Rue in Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*,²³ and now to Godfrey Gao as Magnus Bane in Cassandra Clare’s *The Mortal Instruments*²⁴ – serve to

19 <http://www.amren.com/news/2012/03/29-of-mississippi-republicans-still-think-interracial-marriage-should-be-illegal/>

20 <http://www.blogger.com/frame.php?url=http://news.illinois.edu/news/10/0421online.html>

21 <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/background/faqs.html#faq18>

22 <http://vimeo.com/24155797>

23 <http://jezebel.com/5896408/racist-hunger-games-fans-dont-care-how-much-money-the-movie-made>

24 <http://www.dailydot.com/entertainment/mortal-instruments-godfrey-gao-backlash/>

highlight how toxic the assumption of ‘whiteness as normative’ can be.²⁵ Even in instances where characters are explicitly stated to be POC, as was the case in both Clare’s and Collins’s work, many readers assume otherwise – not necessarily due to conscious racism, but because they unconsciously edit out information that contradicts the culturally learned assumption that whiteness is the default setting.²⁶

Intentions are meaningless if contradicted by our actions, and doubly so if we refuse to even acknowledge the possibility of dissonance between them. Victoria Foyt is not being bullied; she is being called out for having written a horrendously racist book in the first instance and then for completely dismissing her critics in the second. Trying to turn the existing conversation about the negative themes of *Revealing Eden*, the reactions of POC readers, Foyt’s behaviour and the general problem of race in YA into a discussion about the appropriateness of various reviewing techniques is, ultimately, a form of derailing: however important the issue might be otherwise, it’s a separate topic to the one at hand, and the STGRB site managers have done themselves even less credit than usual by so hamfistedly conflating the two. Subconscious racism is a real problem – but so is the refusal of would-be allies to acknowledge that, despite all their active efforts and intentions, it can still affect them, too.

Foz Meadows is a bipedal mammal with delusions of immortality and YA urban fantasy author. Her current novels, *Solace* and *Grief* and *The Key to Starveldt*, are available in both paper and ebook formats. She is a member of the Melbourne-based SuperNova writers’ group. She is also a contributing blogger for *The Huffington Post*.

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<http://fozmeadows.wordpress.com/2012/08/03/racism-revealing-eden-and-stgrb/>

25 <http://thelearnedfangirl.com/2012/05/20/default-whiteness-in-tv-and-why-online-videos-not-much-different/>

26 <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/news.htm?articleId=4499>

THIS IS HOW YOU DESTROY SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

N. K. Jemisin

This is how my Monday morning began: with a slap in the face, courtesy of new *Weird Tales* editor Marvin Kaye.

If you haven't been following the "controversy" over author Victoria Foyt's self-published novel *Revealing Eden*, here's a good analysis of it with links to others.¹ I put air quotes around controversy in this case because there really isn't one. On the one side of the discussion you've got the author and a handful of defenders – many of whom seem to be sockpuppets of the author herself – insisting that the book isn't racist because... something. On the other side you've got several thousand readers saying OMG WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT RACIST MESS I JUST SAW. That's not a controversy, it's an object lesson in How To Be Wrong On The Internet.

I haven't talked about the Foyt book much because I didn't care. At the start of this I read the first chapter of the book out of curiosity (you can download a sample on Amazon); it's really not very good at all. It also falls prey to the usual problems that occur whenever someone who's not very educated on how racism actually works — and who's clearly unwilling to learn more — tries to address it. Foyt's characters adhere to every racial stereotype you can imagine, for example, in this supposedly not-racist book. But poorly-written books are a dime a dozen, and so are racist texts; I saw no point in giving additional attention to this one versus any of the thousands of others. I also tend not to negatively review other authors' works in general, since there's really no way to avoid the appearance of unprofessionalism and/or grudge-wank in the process. There are times when it's worthwhile to burn those bridges, but that one wasn't one of them.

This, however, is.²

Some context here. *Weird Tales* is a magazine with a long and checkered history. I didn't follow it back in the old days when it was all! Lovecraftian! All! The time!, simply because I wasn't interested in that sort of thing. In its more recent years it published some names I actually cared about, like Tanith Lee; I read an issue or two to sample it, but again – not my thing. In 2007, however, Ann VanderMeer, Stephen Segal, and some other folks decided to revive

1 Editor's note: You can find Foz Meadows' excellent article elsewhere in this collection.

2 <http://weirdtalesmagazine.com/2012/08/15/a-thoroughly-non-racist-book/> (Content has since been removed from that page. See 12.)

the old *Weird Tales* brand and evolve it beyond its classic roots. When their issues started coming out, I read a sample and was blown away by the fiction selections, the layout, the sheer collective beauty of the thing. I started buying it, and I also immediately started sending story submissions there. Most of them got rejected, although usually with nice notes encouraging me to keep trying. And I did. Then finally I sold one: “The Trojan Girl”, which was published in *Weird Tales* #357 in early 2011 with lovely, eerie illustrations by Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein. I was so proud, ya’ll.

And then last year something bizarre happened. New owners Marvin Kaye and John Harlacher bought the magazine – and promptly fired the team that had earned it its first Hugo award.³ Okay. That was stupid, but businesses do stupid things all the time. The new folks made a vague effort at damage control afterward, so I chose to hope that the new ownership would get its shit together and get back to the business of putting out a high-quality speculative magazine. I didn’t have a subscription – I buy on the newsstand, ’cause I actually like browsing newsstands – so it didn’t do me any harm to wait and see. They’d bought a magazine with an invaluable reputation that had been years in the building, after all; I figured no one would be stupid enough to piss that all away.

I was wrong. They’ve shat it away. And pissed on the steaming pile afterward.

It’s more than the fact that the editor has chosen to introduce the revamped magazine with a diatribe against evil anti-racists, or evil people with no sense of irony, or something. It’s more than the stunningly poor judgment that he displays by hitching his magazine’s new applegart to this spavined old horse. It’s also the fact that they’re going to be publishing the first chapter of this hugely problematic book in *Weird Tales*. What the hell is that about? In all the furor over this book, no one is defending it as high-quality literature. It’s not even “weird”, in either the old-school pulp sense or the VanderMeer-era modern sense; it’s a slushpile-stock discrimiffip with implausible science and banal writing.⁴ This is a book whose author self-published it – perhaps because the publisher of her previous novel⁵ saw what a mess it was — and then promoted it via self-reviews on HuffPo⁶

3 <http://weirdtalesmagazine.com/2011/08/23/ann-vandermeer-on-no-longer-editing-weird-tales/>

4 <http://spacehawk.livejournal.com/861602.html>

5 http://www.amazon.com/The-Virtual-Life-Lexie-Diamond/dp/0060825634/ref=la_B001HMPFDW_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1345474410&sr=1-2

6 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/victoria-foyt/>

and a bunch of vanity awards.⁷ Now I'm wondering whether she paid *Weird Tales* to publish this excerpt. Maybe she even bought Kaye's editorial. Or maybe I'm overthinking this. Maybe Kaye just thought it was a great idea to start his new regime with a bang. Any publicity is good publicity, right? Right?

How much does a good reputation sell for, I wonder? Hope Kaye got a good price.

All my pleasure and pride at having been published in *Weird Tales* is gone. Goes without saying that I won't be submitting there again, ever, but at this point I'm ashamed to have my name associated with the magazine at all. And that pisses me off especially, because something I really cared about has been destroyed. I was willing to give *Weird Tales'* new owners the benefit of the doubt after the regime change; sometimes change can be a good thing, after all. But this editorial, and this decision to publish such poor-quality fiction on misplaced principle, makes it clear that *Weird Tales'* reputation is now meaningless. By this gesture Marvin Kaye hasn't just slapped me in the face, he's slapped every author the magazine ever published, every hopeful author who's submitted during and since VanderMeer's tenure, every artist whose illustrations ever graced its pages, and every fan who voted for *Weird Tales* to win that Hugo.

Slap me and I'll slap you back. I can't revoke my Hugo vote and I don't want to; Ann and the gang justifiably earned that award. I'm just sorry the award is now attached to a magazine that's clearly going to be shit from here forth. *Weird Tales* #357 is a print magazine and nothing can un-print it, but here's what I can do: I can do my damndest to make sure the new owners don't profit in any way from my work. They're still selling back-issues of the magazine, and the story I published there has thus far only been reprinted in audio form.⁸ So on the thin chance that anybody reading this was thinking about buying a back-issue in order to read my story in it, no need. I'm reprinting it here now for free.⁹ Enjoy.

N(ora). K. Jemisin is an author of speculative fiction short stories and novels who lives and writes in Brooklyn, NY. Her work has been nominated for the Hugo (twice), the Nebula (twice), and the World Fantasy Award; shortlisted for the Crawford, the Gemmell Morningstar, and the Tiptree; and she has won a Locus Award for

7 <http://www.absolutewrite.com/forums/showpost.php?p=7479110&postcount=206>

8 <http://escapepod.org/2012/03/29/ep338-the-trojan-girl/>

9 <http://nkjemisin.com/2012/08/the-trojan-girl/>

Best First Novel as well as the Romantic Times Reviewer's Choice Award.

This article first appeared on the author's website on August 20, 2012.

<http://nkjemisin.com/2012/08/this-is-how-you-destroy-something-beautiful/>

Additional notes:

ETA: The publisher has backtracked on *Weird Tales*' brave commitment to racism, go figure. Damage done, I say.¹⁰

Daughter of ETA: Artist Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein has graciously given me permission to repost her art with "The Trojan Girl". Yay!¹¹

Sister of Grand-niece of ETA: *Weird Tales* has taken down Kaye's initial statement. (Good grief, don't these people have any clue how not to handle an internet controversy?) Here's a cached version.¹²

Friend of Cousin of Oh Fuck It: Jeff VanderMeer weighs in, with some deep-twitch-inducing insider info on how this debacle began.¹³

10 <http://weirdtalesmagazine.com/2012/08/20/a-message-from-the-publisher/>

11 <http://www.rhiannonrs.com/>

12 <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache%3Aweirdtalesmagazine.com%2F2012%2F08%2F15%2Fauthoroughly-non-racist-book%2F&sugexp=chrome%2Cmod%3D2&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

13 <http://www.jeffvandermeer.com/2012/08/20/weird-tales-ann-vandermeer-and-utter-stupidity/>

HULL 0, SCUNTHORPE 3

Christopher Priest

Just back from an appearance at the Sunday Times Oxford Literary Festival, in the preternaturally warm March weather. Oxford looked ravishing, the sandstone colleges and quads glowing in the sunshine, the rivers calm and peaceful, sunbathers and walkers everywhere. The trees stood wintry and leafless above, casting stark shadows over the meadows. It was a time for reflection.

As we arrived in Oxford, the shortlist for the 2012 Clarke Award was announced, providing much material for that reflection.

This year I took an interest in the books that were being tipped for the award, and as a consequence I'm in the unusual position of having read almost everything that is either on the final shortlist as announced, or which narrowly missed being on it.

It seems to me that 2011 was a poor year for science fiction. Of the sixty books submitted by publishers, only a tiny handful were suitable for awards. The brutal reality is that there were fewer than the six needed for the Clarke shortlist. Many of the submissions were fantasy of the least ambitious type, and many of the science fiction titles were firmly embedded in genre orthodoxies, to their own huge disadvantage and discredit. Discounting all those submissions did not leave many competitors at the top.

This first impression led naturally to a question that is often asked: what is an award like the Clarke actually for? Well, obviously to reward a writer who is seen to have done well that year. But there is the less often admitted reward for the sponsor, in this case the late Arthur C. Clarke, who evidently liked the idea of a literary award named after him. But with Sir Arthur now gone to the great communications satellite in the sky, the remaining collective motive must be to make some kind of statement to the larger world about the condition of science fiction writing in the present day. We want the best writer to win every year, but we also want to have a showcase to demonstrate that he or she is the best of an exciting bunch, that the overall activity is a progressive, modern literature, with diversity and ambition and ability, and not the pool of generic rehashing that the many outside detractors of science fiction are so quick to assume it is.

In short, the winner of the award must be found within an excellent shortlist, that the win must seem to have been hard-won, and that the choice was the result of reasoned argument and intelligent debate amongst the judges.

So let's consider the shortlist the judges have come up with in

2012. I'll begin, briefly, with a note of what they have not included.

Three novels, perhaps four, are outstandingly ignored. In some other year, and to some other group of judges, any of these novels or perhaps all of them would have been seen as natural choices for the shortlist.

Ian R. MacLeod is a former winner of the Clarke (as well as being one of the most consistently excellent stylists in British science fiction). His novel *Wake Up and Dream* (PS Publishing) makes an eccentric choice in its plot, in casting the actor Clark Gable as a private eye, which some might think counts against it, but MacLeod writes witty, inventive and attractive prose, always compulsively readable, and with a flair for a surprising narrative. He is one of the writers we should be most proud of. To have omitted his new novel is inexplicable.

Just as mystifying is the omission of Simon Ings's novel *Dead Water* (Corvus). This is modern science fiction in full pomp: it has a multitude of ideas, a wide-ranging narrative, an almost unbelievably ambitious casting of its net, taking one narrative chance after another. It is also a beautifully written novel, full of colour and inventive image. It is a book that should be standing as a hot favourite to win the award, not one to be discarded as an also-ran.

I am a fairly well known dissident from Adam Roberts's fiction (at least, well known as such to Mr Roberts), but that was in a negative review I wrote in 2004 of his novel *Snow*. The years have passed. Roberts has emerged as one of our very best critics of science fiction, arguing in an informed way, and in eloquent and readable English, for the books he discusses. Not at all discouraged by my snotty remarks in the *Guardian* he has gone on writing novels with energy and increasing skill. I saw a couple of negative reviews of his new novel *By Light Alone* (Gollancz), but what was described as the silly idea of the novel made me laugh, and I sensed an ironic intelligence at work and some sophisticated satire in the book. I have not been able to read all of it in the time available, but I read about the first 80 pages and I liked what I found. I plan to finish it soon. It is a most unusual and amusing book, with many wicked satirical moments. Adam Roberts has been shortlisted before – it is amazing that he should be ignored this time.

Finally, Lavie Tidhar's novel *Osama* (PS Publishing). Mr Tidhar is exactly the kind of writer to whom the Clarke Award should be drawing attention. He is young, ambitious, skilled and original. *Osama* is an ingenious inversion of modern history: Osama bin Laden is the central character in a string of pulp novels allegedly written by one Mike Longschott. The terrorist crimes we normally attribute to bin Laden exist, in this novel, in a different realm. There is excellent,

evocative and atmospheric description, as well as much well-written action and plotting. The book, incidentally, is a beautiful production, an edition sure to be highly collectible in the future. Whether or not *Osama* might actually win the award (in an alternative universe in which the present Clarke judges have no say) is not for me to guess at, but the fact that Lavie Tidhar has not been shortlisted is an outrage.

Speaking of outrages, let's turn to the shortlist with which we have actually been presented.

Of the six shortlisted novels, I can find only one which I think is something we should be proud of. I refer to *The Testament of Jessie Lamb*, by Jane Rogers (Sandstone Press). Ms Rogers is a successful and intelligent writer from what the SF world calls the 'mainstream'. Her venture into speculative fiction gave her career an unexpected setback, in that none of the trade publishers would accept it. It eventually appeared from Sandstone, a tiny indie publisher based in Dingwall, Ross-shire. It was quickly recognized by many commentators in the SF community as a work of real interest, and to the credit of the judges (the only one they deserve) it has made it to the shortlist. If this alone encourages Ms Rogers to try her hand at more speculative fiction in future then the whole business has been justified. It is not to my mind a wholly achieved novel: it is written with real style, excellent characterization and a lot of genuine emotion, but to be fully realized as a work of speculative fiction it needs a wider canvas, a sense that larger events are mounting in the background. However, it deserves its place on the Clarke shortlist, and if things go on as they are at present it ought to win.

Let me now turn to the most highly argued novel, for and against, on the list:

Embassytown by China Miéville (Macmillan). For reasons some people might readily understand, I have not until now had anything to say about this novel, but events have freed me. I like China as a person, and in his unsought role of media-friendly spokesperson for the SF world he has done well and has not aroused controversy. He is obviously serious about writing, believes in the weird or the speculative novel as a genuine force in literature, and aims high. He is an enterprising writer who comes up with some excellent ideas, and many of his images are memorable and effective.

Miéville has already won the Clarke Award three times – which is not his fault, and one assumes not his intention. No doubt he is pleased to have done so. His current novel is the leading contender for this year's award, and if it becomes the winner then it will be his fourth. Again, not his fault and not apparently what he necessarily

seeks, but also it's safe to assume he would not turn it down.

However, a fourth award to this writer would send out a misleading and damaging message to the world at large: it suggests that not only is Mr Miéville the best the SF world can offer at the moment, he is shown to be more or less the only writer worth reading. Worse even than this, it would send a misleading message to China Miéville himself.

Although Miéville is clearly talented, he does not work hard enough. For a novel about language, *Embassytown* contains many careless solecisms, which either Mr Miéville or his editor should have dealt with. This isn't the place to go into a long textual analysis, but (for example) a writer at his level should never use 'alright' so often or so unembarrassedly. He also uses far too many neologisms or SF nonce-words, which drive home the fact that he is defined and limited by the expectations of a genre audience. On the first few pages, alone, he uses the words 'shiftparents', 'voidcraft', 'yearsends', 'trid', 'vespcams', 'miab', 'plastone', 'hostnest', 'altoysterman' ... Yes, of course, it's possible to work out what most of these might mean (or to wait until another context makes them clearer), but it is exactly this use of made-up nouns that makes many people find science fiction arcane or excluding. A better writer would find a more effective way of suggesting strangeness or an alien environment than by just ramming words together. Resorting to wordplay is lazy writing.

I also find Miéville's lack of characterization a sign of author indifference: *Embassytown* is full of names, full of people, but mostly they just chat away to each other, interchangeably and indistinguishably. And for a writer who makes so much of ambience, China Miéville's fiction lacks a sense of place: this is not the same as a lack of description, as there is a lot of that, but a way of using a physical environment as something the characters notice, respond to, feel themselves to be a part of, so that the reader can also sense and respond to it. In *Embassytown* there is scene after scene in which these weakly drawn characters twitter away to each other in what might be a field or an airport terminal or someone's front room, for all the lack of evocation the author manages.

This is not to say that *Embassytown* is a bad novel. It is not, but neither is it a good one. It has too many common flaws that could have been eradicated by a more ruthless editorial process in the writing, or even more simply by an extra draft of the manuscript. Nor does it suggest that Miéville is a poor or failing writer: he is obviously not, but unless he is told in clear terms that he is under-achieving, that he is restricting his art by depending too heavily on genre commonplaces, he will never write the great novels that many people say he is capable of. In the short term, to imply that this is the

best science fiction novel of the current year by giving it a prize, or even shortlisting it for one, is just plain wrong.

Let me deal quickly with the rest of the shortlist. It is indefensible that a novel like Charles Stross's *Rule 34* (Orbit) should be given apparent credibility by an appearance in the Clarke shortlist. Stross writes like an internet puppy: energetically, egotistically, sometimes amusingly, sometimes affectingly, but always irritatingly, and goes on being energetic and egotistical and amusing for far too long. You wait nervously for the unattractive exhaustion which will lead to a piss-soaked carpet. Stross's narrative depends on vernacular casualness, with humorous asides, knowing discursiveness, and the occasional appeal of big soft eyes. He has PC Plod characters and he writes *och-aye* dialogue! To think for even one moment that this appalling and incapable piece of juvenile work might actually be chosen as winner brings on a cold sweat of fear.

Of Greg Bear's *Hull Zero Three* (Gollancz) there is little to say, except that it is capable in its own way, and hard in the way that some people want SF to be hard, and it keeps alive the great tradition of the SF of the 1940s and 1950s where people get in spaceships to go somewhere to do something. In this case, the unlikely story begins as the interstellar spaceship arrives somewhere. The paragraphs are short, to suit the expected attention-span of the reader. The important words are in italics. Have we lived and fought in vain?

Another nostalgic effort is Drew Magary's *The End Specialist* (Harper Voyager). This too is written in the type of fast-moving, quickly comprehensible vernacular that Charles Stross aspires to without success, but in Magary's case it's quite effective. It tells the story of a medical treatment that confers a form of immortality on anyone with a few thousand dollars to spare. The new future this creates unfolds inevitably. I was much reminded of past efforts in similar vein: notably Damon Knight's *A for Anything* (1961), and various works by writers like Frederik Pohl, William Tenn and Poul Anderson. Not bad precedents with which to be compared, perhaps, but this is not a literature of reminders, of retreads, of slightly updated versions of existing works. Speculative fiction is for the present, on the cutting edge, looking forward, not back. But remember what these Clarke judges have already done! Magary could win with this book; brace yourself.

Sheri S. Tepper's *The Waters Rising* (Gollancz) – how can one describe it? For fuck's sake, it is a quest saga and it has a talking horse. There are puns on the word 'neigh'.

Let's move on to the point of all this.

We have a dreadful shortlist put together by a set of judges who were not fit for purpose. They were incompetent. Their incompetence

was made more problematical because the overall quality of the fiction in the year in question was poor. They did not know how to resolve this. They played what they saw as safe.

They failed themselves, they failed the Clarke Award, and they failed anyone who takes a serious interest in speculative fiction.

You sometimes see past jury members trying to rationalize their role in the final decision. ‘Listen, I wanted BOOK A to be on the list, but I was out-voted by the others. However, I did manage to get BOOK B up there. Yes, I know BOOK C is terrible, but we argued about it for two hours, and in the end I agreed to it being on the list if we had BOOK D on the list too.’

A jury decision is a joint and collective decision. Whatever the process of discussion, whatever compromises are made en route to a decision, everyone on the panel is responsible for the outcome. There will always be minority opinion, but it becomes irrelevant at the end. If someone on the panel is in total and serious disagreement with the others, then the only course is to say so publicly, then to resign.

Of the existing Clarke shortlist, we have heard no dissent from any of the panel. Here is Andrew M. Butler, quoted on the *Guardian* website (26th March 2011): “[The shortlist]’s got something for everyone: alien contact, post-apocalyptic disaster, near future cyberpunkish police procedural,” he said, adding that the variety demonstrates the health of the SF scene. “It’s exciting because you can’t fit it in a box.”

Andrew Butler has thus endorsed the decision of the panel, and therefore reveals himself as incompetent as the others.

The easy way out of this problem is to do nothing. We wait for 2nd May, we troop along to the awards ceremony and we wait for the decision to be announced. In a sense, it does not matter which one of the six books is announced, because all of them are deficient in the ways I have described. (If this happens, I hope the winner is Jane Rogers, because the deficiencies in her novel are much less serious than those in the others.) The true winner of the award, the writer of the best book of last year, will never be known, because he or she is not on the shortlist.

But there is a better way forward, and here it is:

1. The present panel of judges should be fired, or forced to resign, immediately. Their names are Juliet E. McKenna, Martin Lewis, Phil Nanson, Nikkianne Moody and Rob Grant. Chairman Andrew M. Butler should also resign. These people have proved themselves incompetent as judges, and should not be allowed to have any more say about or influence on the Arthur C. Clarke Award.
2. The 2012 Arthur C. Clarke Award should be suspended

forthwith, and the planned awards ceremony on 2nd May should be cancelled.

3. The award fund (£2,012.00, as I understand it) should be held over until next year. Next year's fund should be added to it, so that the prize for 2013 becomes £4,013.00.
4. The 2013 Clarke Award should be made to the best novel published in the two years ended 31st December 2012. All novels currently eligible for the 2012 award, whether or not they have been shortlisted by this year's panel, are eligible again.
5. All the other usual rules of the Award should be applied.

And just in case this modest suggestion of mine is taken up, let me add one final thing:

If enough people seem to think that I have proposed this in my own interests, and that it is an attempt to have my own work made eligible once again, then I would withdraw my novel *The Islanders* from competition. If that does not satisfy such people, then the 2013 eligibility could be based simply on the books from 2012: and the doubled award be given to one of them. I have nothing published in 2012 that would be eligible.

Christopher Priest has published eleven novels, four short story collections and a number of other books, including critical works, biographies, novelizations and children's non-fiction.

The Separation won both the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the BSFA Award and *The Islanders* won the BSFA Award. In 1996 Priest won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for his novel *The Prestige*. He has been nominated four times for the Hugo award.

This article first appeared on the author's website on March 28, 2012.

<http://www.christopher-priest.co.uk/journal/1077/hull-0-scunthorpe-3/>

AFTERWORD

2013

Thea James and Ana Grilo

When we were invited by Jared and Justin to write this 2012 afterword (or rather, a foreword to the foreword of the 2013 anthology), we were given the general guideline of predicting the themes and topics that will be important to the online Speculative Fiction community as a whole in 2013. The first thing that crossed our minds was: where do we even begin?! If there's anything we've learned about the SF/F community in the five years that we've been a part of it, it's that there is no real single, clearly-cut, delineated SF/F community. The community is more of an SF/F multiverse, vaster and wider than we can truly grasp, with different neighborhoods and systems and realities.

And, like any good multiple-reality-spanning universe, it's hard to predict what the Internets will do. Things change and escalate in a matter of seconds.

On the other hand, there are certain aspects of the on-going conversations within the community that tend to be cyclical, and that we think will be of vital importance in 2013. Essential conversations about diversity, inclusion, and the importance of critical reading and response surface every year - and likely are happening right now in a corner of the SFF multiverse near you.

If it is impossible to make concrete predictions as to what will happen over the next few months, there are definitely some trends we can already spot, one quarter of the way into the year. In the past few weeks, a thoughtful conversation about Grimdark (a type of Fantasy that could be defined as well, grim and dark to the point of being excessive and bleak) has proliferated faster than a Gremlin taking a bath and chowing down at 2am, with opinions coming from authors and bloggers alike. In fact, there have been so many posts about the very definition and relevance of Grimdark fantasy, we could potentially be looking at editing *SpecFic '13 Special Edition: The Grimdark Collection*. Ok, just joking. Maybe.

Beyond the grim and the dark, another hot topic in 2013 is the visibility of women in SF/F. One of the articles collected in this volume of *Speculative Fiction 2012* is *Lady Business*' "Coverage of Women in SF/F Blogs" - theirs is an on-going study, and they have already posted their 2012 findings, sparking impassioned responses from SF/F fans. Similarly, *Fantasy Cafe* is about to kick-off its second annual "Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy" month.

With all of this in mind, and knowing that the future is hard

to predict, our main concerns as we take over the mantle of editors from Jared and Justin are thus:

1. We will strive to strike a balance between those essential, cyclical conversations (about diversity and representation and critical writing) and the New and Shiny catchphrases or topics (e.g. Grimdark) that steal the stage in 2013.
2. We will do our best to capture a broad sample of the many fandoms and subcategories that fall under the SF/F umbrella, including (but not limited to) reviews of novels/novellas/short stories, television shows, gaming, profession and fan art, movie talk, and essays about the different aspects of the SF/F life.
3. We will acknowledge the fact that SF/F conversations are also happening in forums that are not SF/F exclusive (much like our own blog).
4. We will maintain the gender balance of contributors. More importantly we will attempt to balance the content itself (what these contributors are writing about).
5. We will solicit voices that cover different age ranges of SF/F fiction - because the Young Adult and Middle Grade categories are exploding with books and discussions - as well as voices from often dismissed subgenres like Urban Fantasy and Romantic SF/F. We'll also do our very best to include international voices, beyond the United States and United Kingdom.

This is a daunting task, especially considering that we must cover all of these topics with just sixty articles, but we will do our best to adhere to the expectations and goals we have laid out in this afterword. Kudos must be given to Justin and Jared for putting together such a brilliant collection in this first volume of *Speculative Fiction*. Here's to hoping that we can do the same.

Internets, we will be watching you.

Thea James (US-based) and Ana Grilo (UK-based) are the multi-ethnic, transatlantic duo behind *The Book Smugglers*, a book review blog that specializes in speculative fiction and YA. They are also weekly contributors to *Kirkus' Science Fiction & Fantasy Blog* and the editors of *Speculative Fiction 2013*. Follow them on Twitter (@booksmugglers).

EDITORS' NOTE

Where possible, we have tried to preserve the content, style and literary idiosyncrasies of the original article. For example, if an author choses to refer to “sf”, “SF”, “science fiction”, “SF/F” or “speculative fiction”, we’ve (mostly) left that intact. However flattening a blog post to paper can prove tricky and we apologise for any errors in formatting that may have occurred as a result.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Justin Landon is the Overlord (proper noun!) behind the blog *Staffer's Book Review*. He once got eleventy billion hits in a single week by thrashing the Hugo Awards. He lives in Washington DC with his wife and daughter. You can find his witty insights and occasional trolling at www.staffersbookreview.com.

Jared Shurin is the editor and/or co-editor of a series of original anthologies from Jurassic London, including *The Lowest Heaven* and *A Town Called Pandemonium*. He is co-founder and current director of The Kitschies literary prize. He blogs at www.pornokitsch.com.



