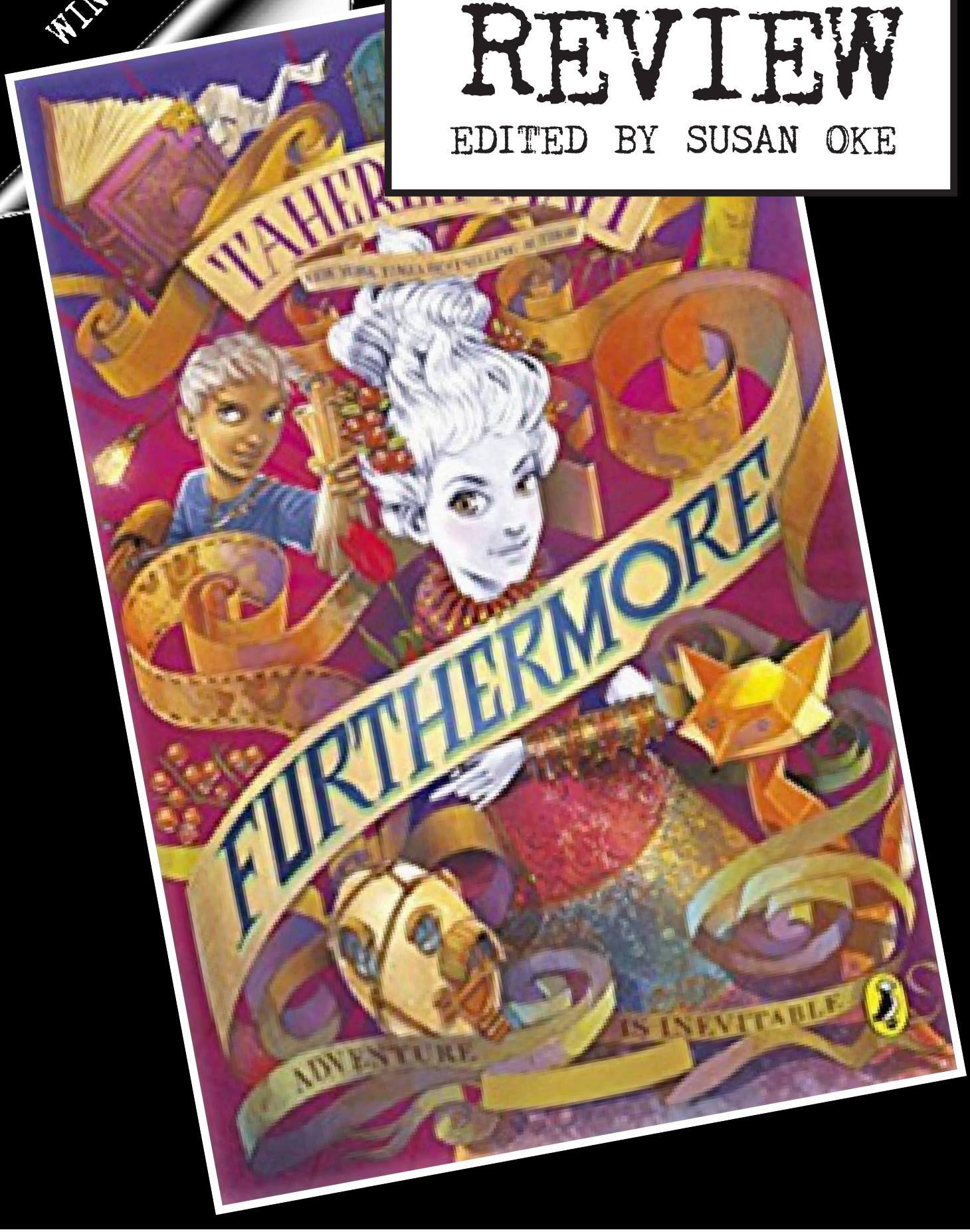
ISSUE 2
WINTER 2017

THE BSFA REVIEW

EDITED BY SUSAN OKE



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VIEW FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the Winter edition of the ***BSFA Review.*** It's that time of year again, when life kicks up a notch before finally sliding into a few days of blissful sloth. On that theme, here are some tasty titbits, mouth-watering morsels, succulent soupçons… too much?

I guess you're right. Let's keep it simple. Here is a selection of book reviews for your edification and enjoyment (sorry, couldn't help it). Drag yourself away from the ubiquitous TV programming long enough to have a look—you won't regret it.

We start our journey in the 147th century, take a walk through SF Fandom, hunt treasure with a couple of bonereaders, before being forced to flee to higher ground. Picking our way through a Nazi dystopia, we interrogate the nature of belief and come to the awful realisation that we don't belong here. Time to go with the flow and face the horrors of Martian conquerors and the obliteration of middle England. Unfazed by the challenge of a particle beast from a pocket dimension, we bridge infinity only to find General 'Thunderbolt' Ross ready with his report on the crisis and conflicts facing humanity.

On the Fantasy front, we're challenged by an engrossing twist on the werewolf myth, before wandering down the shadowed path and getting tangled up in a nineteenth century thriller mashup. On one side, fair rebels fight off a hoard of insects, while on the other an Edwardian rebel faces off against magical abductors. Worldwalkers wander into a strange world of intrigue, and colourless Alice must navigate a magical land where colour is currency. Elemental magic comes to the aid of Sherlock Holmes, whilst poor Molly is cured with a life of routine, endless slaughter.

On a more serious note, we finish with a critical assessment of the historical development of environmental science fiction.

All the above produced, of course, by our wonderful reviewers.

Outside of writing and editing, I work as an English tutor. Amongst my students, there are a handful of enthusiastic creative writers. It is an honour to encourage and nurture these talented young people. To that end, I would like to welcome a new volunteer to the community of BSFA reviewers: **Rsaal Firoz**. At 13 years old, he's the youngest member of the team!

As always, a big thankyou to our dedicated team of reviewers who give freely of their time, effort and imagination. Without their hard work the production of the ***BSFA Review*** wouldn't be possible. If you'd like to join the team, send a sample of your work to me (smayoke@gmail.com).

All that remains is to wish you all a wonderful holiday break and an exciting New Year.

Susan Oke
smayoke@gmail.com

Are you interested in helping us celebrate the BSFA's 60th Birthday in 2018?

If so, we'd love to hear from you!

We're after your memories of the BSFA, be they good or bad – and if there is anything you specifically remember from those early Vector magazines, we'd be especially keen to hear from you!

Did an editor, article, interview, or maybe a certain review stick in your mind or leave an impression?

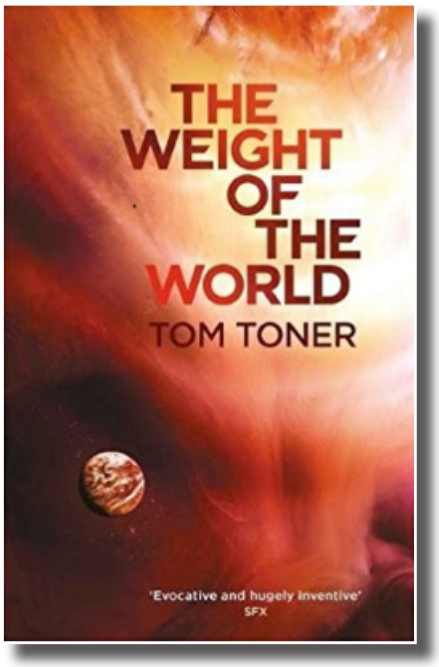
Did something you read in a BSFA publication have a lasting or profound effect on your SF reading?

Please, if you can help, get in touch and let us know!

The Weight of the World by Tom Toner (Gollancz, 2017)

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

We join Tom Toner in the 147th century, when humankind as we know it has been transformed, almost beyond recognition in some instances, into a range of post-human breeds. They have spread across the universe, which is notionally under the sway of the Amaranthine Empire and its Immortal rulers.



Some things do not change, however, and various individuals are jostling for control of the decaying empire. Among them are Sotiris and Aaron the Longlived, the latter revealed at the end of The Promise of the Child to be an artificial intelligence. Also in contention is ownership of a mysterious weapon, the Soul Engine, created by the human, Corphuso, who finds he has less bargaining power than one might suppose. Witness to their various activities is Lycaste, a young giant so beautiful that people once travelled to gaze upon him, and who is in truth rather naive.

During the course of Promise of the Child, Lycaste fled his home and inheritance, believing himself to have committed murder. He exchanged his quiet life for that of a wanderer, dragged across the universe by Sotiris, and then his confidant, Hugo Maneker. Sotiris has meanwhile formed an alliance with Aaron. In *The Weight of the World*, Lycaste's seemingly aimless journey continues, now in the company of Huereop, a Vulgar, while his childhood friends, Pentas and Eranthis, embark on a journey of their own, taking with them Eranthis' child, also significant to the Empire's future.

To say that *The Weight of the World* is wide-screen baroque is to wildly understate things. Cordwainer Smith and Jack Vance have been invoked, and there is a strong hint of Dunsanyesque high fantasy about the Amaranthine Spectrum, even though it is also situated in a post-singularity world familiar to readers of Iain Banks and other exponents of the new space opera.

And therein lies the problem.

There is so much in play in Toner's deeply allusive narration it takes an attentive reader to keep up with the labyrinthine story. I am too often reminded of other things, and those memories intrude a little too hard. This is a novel I can admire for its ambition without necessarily finding it a satisfactory read. The barrage of words and images is at times almost too much to process; plot and story seem a little too often secondary to language and imagery. Stunning as the prose is, I longed at times for more certainty as to where the story was heading.

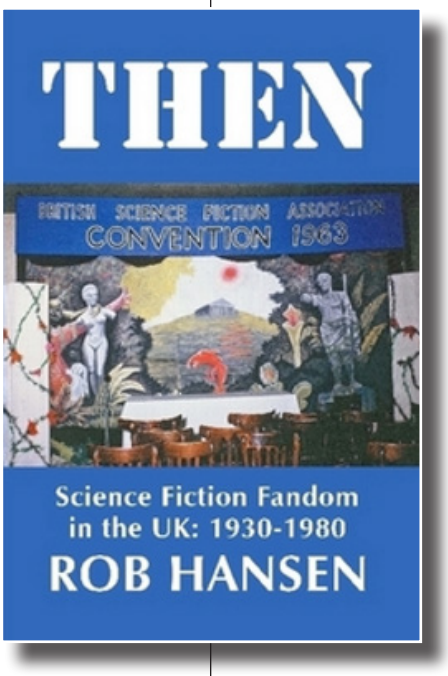
Then: Science Fiction Fandom in the UK 1930-1980 by Rob Hansen (Ansible Editions, 2016)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

There are not a few readers who have grown up with sf who would see Rob Hansen's mammoth history of British fandom as nothing much to do with them. There are others (and I confess I'm one of them), who sneakily turn to the index to see if they are mentioned. And while I do have an interest, I can only do my best to persuade the agnostics that this is an important book; as important as any book coming out of an academic press. Then isn't exactly a history of science fiction itself (though the history of sf weaves in and out of it). Nor is it about the readership of sf (although in some ways it's the nearest thing to a history of sf-reading in the UK that we have): "fandom" never was any sort of reflection of mass readership, but it was (and is) a committed and articulate minority.

The half-century *Then* covers is the period in which something that we can call "sf" crystallised as a genre and grew to adulthood. It is also a period in which the mechanics of book and magazine publication, and the ability of readers to communicate and share opinions, grew and changed radically. British fandom begins

with half a dozen people communicating with each other via the letter-columns of US magazines and with 14 people attending the first sf convention in the Theosophical Hall, Leeds in 1937. In 1980, when this book ends (officially: a pair of supplements carry the story on until the middle of the decade), a World sf convention in Brighton had upped that 14 by well over 3,000. Fandom had grown from a tribe in which it was possible to know everyone involved into a subculture. And you, a member of the British Science Fiction Association are a part of this.



It all begins in 1930 when Walter Gillings, a trainee journalist on the *Ilford Recorder*, noticed a letter in *Wonder Stories* from someone who lived not far from him. They got together and the result was the Ilford Science Literary Circle, nine people meeting in the front parlour of a middle-aged couple who never quite realised what this was all about. Gillings published the "minutes" of the meetings in his newspaper, and his letters to various sf magazines resulted in other British fans following his example. The most notable was the ambitiously-titled "Universal Science Circle" of Liverpool, established by radio-ham Colin H. Askham, Les Johnson and four followers. Gillings' group quickly collapsed – part of the reason, Gillings wrote, was to jettison "an elderly lady who had mistaken us for a Spiritualist circle". His vision continued over the next decade in various attempts to establish British science fiction magazines and form a national organisation. Hugo Gernsback's establishment of the "Science Fiction League" in 1934 encouraged more recruits and Gillings was quick to join. The 1937 convention included names who were to become central to the field: Arthur C. Clarke, Eric Frank Russell, and E. J. ("Ted") Carnell. Gillings' magazine Tales of Wonder staggered on until 1942, and died a casualty of the paper shortage.

Hansen's research, drawing upon a number of massive archives, most notably that of Vince Clarke, one of the most important participants in the story, is thorough. He sets each section in the context of the times, and although this occasionally reads as if this small group of hobbyists was specifically the target of events like World War Two, for the most part this is rewarding, revealing snippets about the wider lives of our participants. (It's interesting to note that so many early fans, like Gillings himself, were pacifists, even conscientious objectors, during the war.) We see fandom gradually picking itself up after the wartime trauma, and eventually the foundation of the BSFA in 1958. We see squabbles and feuds and new generations attacking the stuffiness and hidebound conservatism of their elders only to find that they are themselves the target of younger rebels. We see glorious silliness like the "Knights of St Fanthony" and the even more glorious acuteness of writers like Walt Willis whose appearance on the scene from Belfast in the 1950s raised fanwriting to a height it was never to reach again.

Above all, we see science fiction, because fandom and, especially, fanzines became a training-ground for many of the field's major writers, such as Brian Aldiss, John Brunner, Michael Moorecock, and Christopher Priest. It's hardly an exaggeration to say that just about everybody associated with the Liverpool Group before the 1950s became a professional writer. In fanzines like Peter Weston's Speculation we see a new wave of science fiction being identified, defined, and argued over. Vector itself is part of this history.

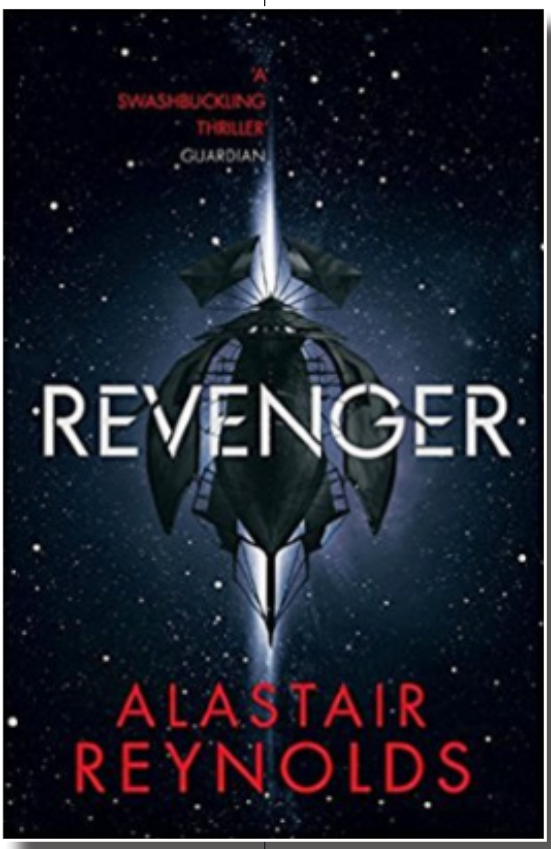
Then offers a picture of a pre-internet time which most certainly is not now. For any sf reader under thirty, this is the proverbial long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. There are still, scattered throughout the country "sf groups" of six or a dozen people, meeting to discuss books or chat about sf, but they communicate via Facebook or other social media and are more likely to read webzines or blogs than paper fanzines. "Fan-fiction" now is fiction written by fans in imitation of their reading, rather than stories in which fans tease other fans.

Reading *Then* reminds us that the literary and political arguments in fandom are nothing new. But more than that, *Then* shows that right from the start, people thought science fiction was important enough to devote time to and argue about. While the characters in this book are people some, at least, of its readers will remember (and I certainly find the names of good friends of mine in it) it is more than an exercise in nostalgia. I am not at all sure that readers of any other genre are able to celebrate their history in this way, and nobody with any serious interest in British science fiction can afford to be without Rob Hansen's account of the people who created it.

Revenger by Alastair Reynolds (Gollancz, 2017)

Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

It seems old sea-dogs can learn new tricks after all. We'll likely never get Alastair Reynolds out of deep space, but *Revenger* sees him sailing a little closer to the narrative wind, swapping the over-engineered complexity that characterises his inimitable form of space opera for a slimmer, more nimble vessel. And yes, I'm getting the nautical puns out of the way up front, because *Revenger* is acknowledged to be a science-fictional slant on classic maritime adventure – think Forester's Hornblower series, Bernard Cornwell's naval novels, that sort of stuff.



Of course, "they're like regular ships, but in space!" isn't an original concept; space opera is marbled with it, Reynolds's earlier novels very much included. The difference is in the narration: sure, we've got a vast, old storyverse littered with the remains of preceding civilisations (the deep past as palimpsest, per Vance and Wolfe), and we've got spaceship crews hoisting sails to the solar wind, buckling the swash etc. But *Revenger* isn't military fiction, and its protagonist is no stubble-jawed hero.

Raised on a two-town boondock world, sisters Adrana and Fura Ness run away to sea – sorry, to space – ostensibly to earn their fading father out of his debts. They both have the ability to boneread – to commune with the alien skulls used by spaceships to swap rumours and keep in touch over the vastness of deep space – and are settling well into their first commission. Their captain is a treasure-hunter, trawling through "baubles" – ancient artificial worlds, booby-trapped and sealed up behind force-fields – for whatever ancient or alien bric-a-brac they might flog at a profit. But their haul of loot attracts a different sort of scavenger, and the dread pirate Bosa Sennen swoops in, killing off most of the crew, and stealing Adrana away to be her new bonereader. Saved by the sacrifice of her crewmates, Fura sets her sights on revenge, and plots to take down Bosa and her legendary ship The Nightjammer once and for all… and if you think she'll accomplish that by playing nice and taking the moral high road, well, think again.

Fura is an enjoyably hard-nosed character, if rather a thin one: *Revenger* is very much an adventure story, and as such the characterisation stands in subservience to plot; the characters have exactly as much in the way of motivation or backstory as is required to keep things moving, but little more. But I'm oddly pleased by Reynolds's choice to make her not just flawed but unrepentant, and giving her a vengeance storyline without any saccharine redemption at the close. That might go some way to explaining why *Revenger* isn't billed as a YA title, a choice that both surprised and pleased me: surprised, because Fura's bildungsroman, gritty as it is, ticks most of the boxes on the YA manifest; pleased, because it suggests that we may have moved past the use of condescension for marketing purposes. *Revenger* is not a book for teenagers, but it is a book that teenagers could enjoy, and is likely more accessible to them than Reynolds's usual super-dense style, which requires a working knowledge of the sf reading protocols to be fully appreciated.

One side effect of that narrative simplicity is a paucity of eyeball kicks, the temptation to go to town on descriptive stuff must have been hard to resist. Another is that the novel's tone slips around a little bit, teetering between homage and pastiche... though that could be plausibly put down as reflecting Fura's bluff willingness to treat her role like a rollercoaster.

But I really didn't care a whit – *Revenger* was a fun, fast read that hit all the space-adventure high notes while dodging the worst of the clichés. There's also the clear possibility (if not an outright promise) of more adventures for Fura, or at least more stories from the Congregation. Reynolds has set up an adventure-centric universe with light-years of narrative space yet to be explored… and that's a journey I'll gladly take ship for.

The High Ground by Melinda Snodgrass (Titan Books, 2016)

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

When I was a child I loved the breakfast cereal Ready Brek – instant porridge that I would eat for breakfast, supper and, basically, whenever I could persuade someone to give me a bowl. If I'd had my way, I might have eaten nothing but Ready Brek. Recently, in a moment of nostalgic weakness, I thought I'd revisit my childhood obsession and made myself a bowl. I'm not sure what my seven-year-old-self saw in the stuff, but I can tell you that I was left wondering why anyone would eat this flavourless, texture less, pap.

My reaction to Melinda Snodgrass's *The High Ground* is more-or-less the same, except without the faint sense that my youthful memories have been betrayed.

The back cover of this volume introduces Snodgrass as an acclaimed novelist and scriptwriter of Star Trek: The Next Generation. This is the first time I've come across her work, but she has written with George RR Martin in the Wild Cards series and her novel Circuit (published in 1986 – the first of a trilogy) was nominated for a Prometheus Award.

The High Ground is the first (of five) in a new series (The Imperials Saga) in which humanity has largely abandoned the over-heated Earth and encountered and conquered a variety of alien species to establish a "Solar Empire", which has existed for long enough to begin to slip into decadence. The emperor of this confection has a problem: a family full of daughters but an inability to produce a male heir. His solution is to break with tradition and appoint Mercedes, his eldest daughter as his heir. To claim the throne, Mercedes must prove her ability to lead by becoming the first young woman to attend and graduate from the empire's elite military college, The High Ground, set in a vast station orbiting the imperial throneworld, Ouranos.

Meanwhile, Thracius (Tracy) is the bright son of an impoverished tailor who has – much to his dismay – been awarded a scholarship to The High Ground. Tracy's position as an intitulado – a student from outside the aristocracy – is not unique but his lowborn status attracts scorn and maltreatment.

Despite being sold as a "space opera" almost all of this novel (barring a brief prologue and a final action sequence) is a tepid school-based romance that weakly rehashes material that will be familiar from a host of more dynamic and more engagingly written young-adult novels. Mercedes and Tracy are, of course, bound to fall in love – though their difference in station means their love cannot be – and, of course, both have misadventures due to their atypical status.

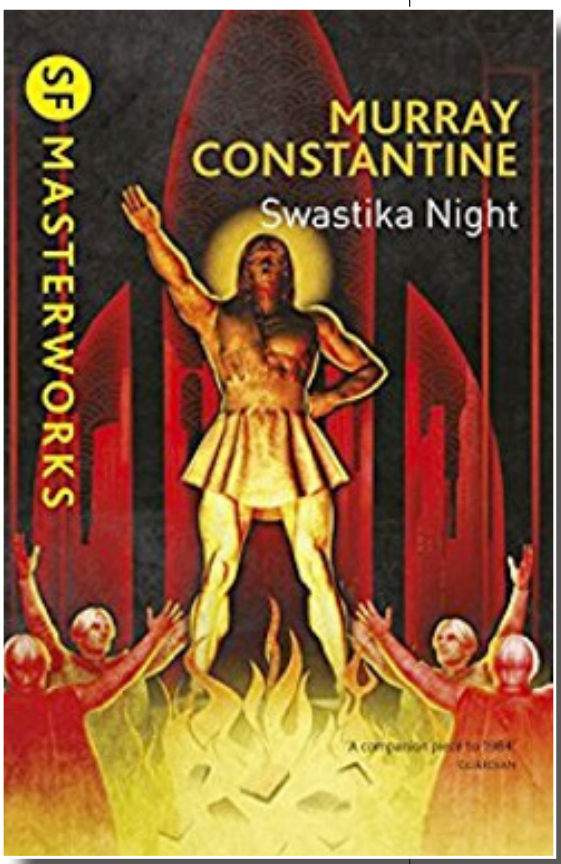
The major problem with *The High Ground* is that for around 350 pages nothing interesting happens in the most mind-numbingly predictable fashion. The characters are insipid and generic and it's very hard to care for people who, despite the supposed obstacles placed in their way, are obviously destined to succeed. Mercedes may worry about whether she's pretty enough or capable enough, but it is immediately clear that of course she's really beautiful and, of course, her practical competence will be rewarded. Tracy might suffer from regularly spaced bouts of insecurity but he's also obviously destined for greatness and bound to outshine all of his higher-born classmates. That's just the kind of novel this is.

Fifty or so pages from the end, a half-baked plot against Mercedes is revealed and there is some brief action. Snodgrass's writing is glassy smooth, every feature that might snag the reader's attention worn away. It is easy to consume, certainly, but it is tasteless and bland: just like Ready Brek.

Swastika Night by Murray Constantine (Gollancz, 2016)

Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

'And I believe that when all things are accomplished and the last heathen man is enlisted in His Holy Army, that Adolf Hitler our God will come again in martial glory to the sound of guns and aeroplanes, to the sound of trumpets and drums … And I believe in pride, in courage, in violence, in brutality, in bloodshed, in ruthlessness, and all other soldierly and heroic virtues. Heil Hitler.' As I was reading aloud to my wife the Hitler Creed on the opening pages of *Swastika Night*, delighting in the parody, a woman sitting near us in the cafe got up and left the room. Oh dear, did she think I approved of such a creed? It was a reminder that when a text employs irony the reader has to be able to comprehend that it's ironic.



You'd have to be a very naive reader to think that Murray Constantine's (Katharine Burdekin's) vision of a world ruled by Nazi Germany for 700 years was any kind of endorsement of Nazism. However, in this society Nazi thought and values have penetrated so deeply, even among the 'subject races', and alternative sources of knowledge have been so thoroughly obliterated, that it's not easy to unpick the detail of to what extent any particular view that's expressed is ironic. The focus of Constantine's interest is the destruction of truth. Her plot turns on a secret book preserved from generation to generation of an aristocratic ('Knightly') family, which relates an alternative history in which Hitler was not God. Even this book is not wholly reliable, since its author was himself a Nazi and had to rely on memory.

There are varied nuances of Nazi attitudes among the three other main characters: the Knight in possession of the book, the Englishman (Alfred) who dreams of revolution, and his dim-witted Nazi friend who early in the book savagely beats up a beautiful teenage boy whom he's caught raping a 12-year-old Christian girl. It will illustrate the moral complexities in play if I explain that his motive for the beating is jealous rage that this 14-year-old boy has rejected his sexual advances, that it's a crime to rape girls under 16, but that it's the most disgusting of transgressions to have sex with Christians (who have taken the place of the long-vanished Jews as the despised other). Alfred tries to accept that the revolution must be of the spirit not violence, yet he too has an impulse towards violence. In this miasma of intellectual confusion, even the Christians have a debased version of their faith, believing that only Christian men, not women, will find salvation and that no way is offered non-Christians (i.e. Nazis) to escape damnation.

Most horrifying in this society is the place of women, seen as animals whose only purpose is to breed, and so ugly that men cannot love them in the way they love boys, and kept penned in Women's Quarters where men come to rape them when they feel the need. The feminist message is clear enough. The stance towards homosexuality will make the modern reader more uneasy. For this book was written in 1935 (first published 1937). The fact that norms and assumptions have changed since then complicates the aforementioned challenge of decoding the layers of irony.

It's a dystopian work for sure, albeit more a dialogue-driven novel of ideas than a thriller, but what struck me is that this vision of Nazi supremacy lacks the intensity of terror, savagery, and mass murder that in 1935 had yet to be enacted in history. *Swastika Night* is not a literary masterpiece like its successors *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Man in the High Castle*, but its return to print seems timely given the turn to far-right nationalism we're now witnessing even in countries that were once the bulwark against fascism.

The Rift by Nina Allan
(Titan Books, 2017)
Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

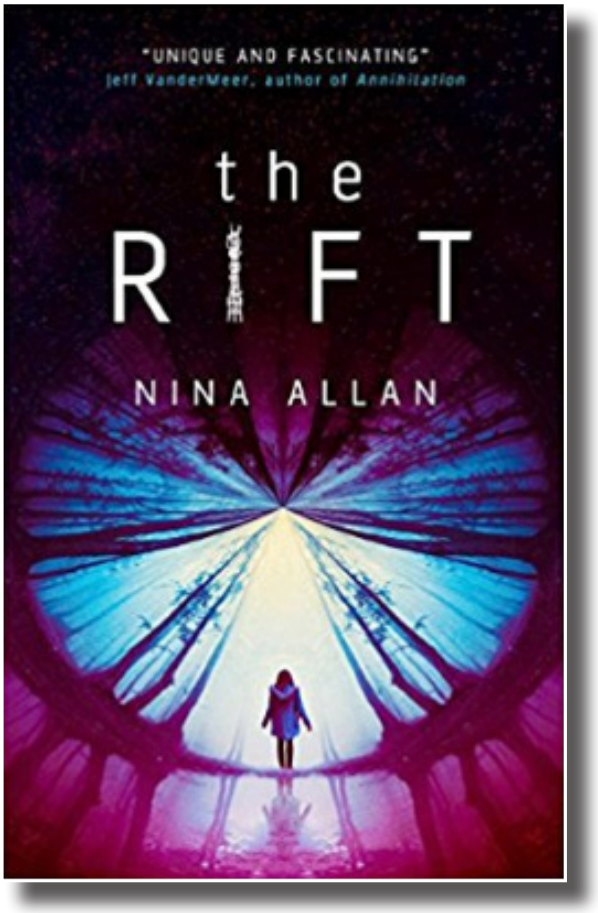
The Rift is Nina Allan's second novel, following 2014's The Race. The story unfolds in the present, or something close to it, being set in motion when thirty-something Serena receives a phone call purporting to be from her sister, Julie, who disappeared 20 years ago. Serena, who was then 14, divides her life into the period before 16th July, 1994, and everything after. The first of several rifts in her life.

The first part of *The Rift* tells the story of the events around Julie's disappearance, and the immediate aftermath, as remembered by Serena, and also Serena's meetings with the woman who claims to be, and who Serena accepts as, her long lost sister. This part––the book is divided into three sections of roughly equal length––could almost come from a mainstream thriller with the word 'girl' in the title. But this is Nina Allan and we know things are going to get strange.

The central section of the book is Julie's account, as told to Serena, of what happened when she disappeared that July day. Julie set out to visit a friend, but following a traumatic event somehow finds herself on the alien world of Tristane. Here she lives with a couple who act as her guardians––from their point of view, Julie says, she had already been with them for years. They believe that her stories of life on a planet called Earth are a reaction to an unspecified trauma Julie suffered and which she can't remember. Eventually, according to Julie, she returns to Earth as mysteriously as she left. Unable to face her family, or report her return to the authorities, she begins a new life with a new identity. And so almost two decades pass.

The final third of *The Rift* addresses how Serena deals with Julie's story. On the surface it would appear obvious, that *The Rift* is about trauma, mental illness and false memories. Allan carefully constructs the novel so that it is both full of very realistic specific detail––dates, times, places––and odd ambiguities and resonances. It is a book that seamlessly mixes the everyday and domestic with the disquieting, chilling and alien. The world-building is superb.

Julie thinks very much in terms of story: as a teenager writing essays about Blake's Seven and Picnic at Hanging Rock. In the former there is an alien character called Cally, the same name as Julie's female guardian on Tirstane, while the latter addresses the never resolved disappearance of a group of teenage girls.



Allan then adds extracts from various documents, newspaper articles, diaries, works of fiction and non-fiction, which introduce an entirely new level to the story. Some of these works are by authors living on Tristane, but if Tristane is simply a figment of Julie's imagination, where do these epistolary inclusions come from...?

The Rift is a complex book written in elegantly unfussy prose. It is about many things, coming of age, sexual awakening, identity, taboos, the nature of story and how we use it to interpret the world. The more science-fictional elements of *The Rift* associated with identity and transformation have resonances with Allan's story 'Neptune's Trident', published by Clarkesworld in June and her novella, Maggots, featured in the recent anthology Five Stories High.

This is easily the most ambitious and rewarding book Allan has written to date. As good as *The Race* was, *The Rift* feels more complete as a novel, deftly bringing various themes into what ultimately serves as a sophisticated interrogation of the nature of belief. Of what, given the evidence the world presents us with, we decide we are going to believe, the compromises we make with reality, and, under extreme circumstances the beliefs some have no choice but to hold if they are going to survive.

You Don't Belong Here by Tim Major (Snowbooks, 2016) Reviewed by Graham Andrews

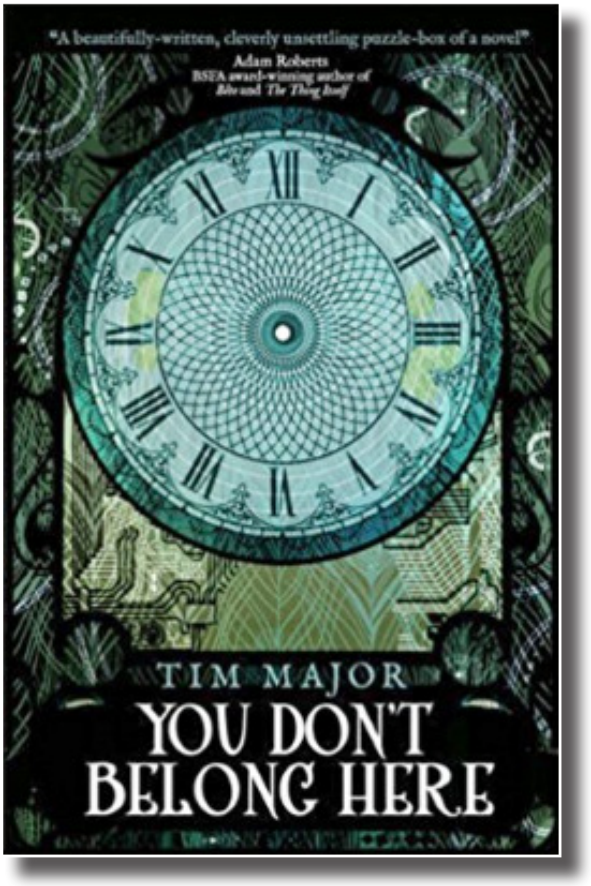
"A beautifully-written, cleverly unsettling puzzle-box of a novel." I could do worse than let that encomium from Adam Roberts stand by itself – and I probably will. But here goes . . .

Time-travel novels are not the simplest things to write – and sometimes to read, as well. After all, as St. Augustine once asked: "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know." He did, however, conjecture that Time involves a constant passage from the future to the past, which "increases in proportion as the future diminishes, until the future is entirely absorbed and the whole becomes past." But the future does not exist and the past no longer exists. The mind has three functions: expectation, for the future; attention, for the present; memory, for the past. The best thing to do with time-travel stories is to go along with the flow and look the other way when a chronological glitch looms up ahead. Here ends the wee thinky bit.

You Don't Belong Here is the first thing I felt like saying to Daniel Faint, the aptly-surnamed hero – leading character, rather – of this chrono-psychological mystery novel. I don't like doing plot summaries, working on the principle that readers can be safely left to felt such things out for themselves. But I will set out the basic situation. To begin with, then, Daniel steals a time machine, which he has no idea how to operate. He takes it with him to a large Cumbrian manor house, where he is fortuitously employed as a caretaker. It isn't quite in the Overlook Hotel class, but strange things do happen in-and-around there. Daniel in the lion's den stuff, indeed. Faint seems to be under surveillance by Straw Dog-ish locals. His twin brother, William, is also in on the act – somehow. Report on Probability DF might make for a good alternative title. Or it might not.

There is a touch of Robert Sheckley about *You Don't Belong Here*, particularly in the early chapters, where Faint goes about testing 'his' time machine in a very ram-Sheckley way (sorry about that). Like the trusting souls in 'The Lifeboat Mutiny' (Galaxy, April 1955), who buy an alien-built spacecraft minus the instruction manual, he conducts one not-thought-out experiment after another. It's like jumping off a conceptual cliff with eyes tight shut. Having said that, however, Faint does make sense of everything – well, almost everything – in the end. I was also impressed by the new twist on time travel that emerges after all the narrative dust has settled. And I think you will be, too.

On the debit side, the pace slowed down to a crawl every so often and I got a bit lost in the occasional verbal haze. It's also hard to identify with the self-absorbed Daniel Faint, who seems to have all the anti-social disgraces. His twin brother, William, is not much better than him, and perhaps even a whole lot worse. It's the quirky treatment of time-travel tropes that carries this think-piece thriller through to overall success.

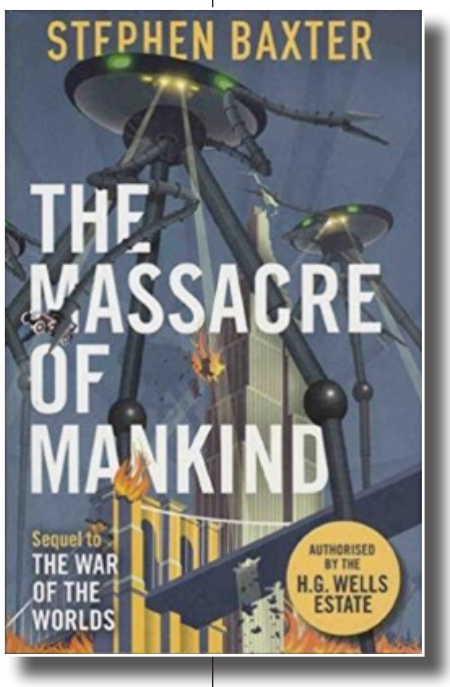


Tim Major is the author of two novellas: *Carus & Mitch* (Omnium Gathering, 2015, which was short-listed for a This is Horror Award), and *Blighters: Invasion from Beyond!* (Abaddon, 2016). His short stories have appeared in Interzone, plus many other magazines and anthologies. I wish Tim the best of luck with his next novel-length work of fiction. It should be well-worth waiting for, if *You Don't Belong Here* is anything to go by. Novellas are novels, in my opinion. But then, I still can't bring myself to call Pluto a 'dwarf' planet.

The Massacre of Mankind by Stephen Baxter (Gollancz, 2017)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

It is 1921 and the world is recovering from the Martian invasion. A war that broke out in 1914 has resulted in the German domination of Europe. Walter Jenkins, the author of the narrative we know as *The War of the Worlds*, calls together some of the others involved – his brother Frank, Frank 's ex-wife Julie Elphinstone who narrates most of the story, Bert Cook, better known in Jenkins' narrative as the "artilleryman", and others – to warn them of the forthcoming Martian return. The Martians appear to have found a solution to the bacteria that defeated them, and fifty-two cylinders fall in a ring centred on the Buckinghamshire town of Amersham.



Baxter ingeniously presents the narrator of *The War of the Worlds* (whom we mistakenly think of as H. G. Wells) – as a flawed, unreliable man (so says a certain "Parrinder", one of many in-jokes which Wells scholars will recognise) who has managed to alienate everyone in the story including his wife (now ex-wife), Carolyne (annoyed by his patronising description of her) and Julie 's sister Alice, by no means the weakling Walter (and Julie, from the version of the story we know) think she is. Baxter's playful approach to viewpoint extends to mentions of a man who is something of a bête-noir to Jenkins: a facetious squeaky-voiced author whose name he feigns to forget noted for an essay called something like "The Year Million Man" that seems to have forecast the Martian form.

The way Wells originally set up his structure of the solar system with Mars as the "older" planet preying upon the less-evolved civilization of the "younger" becomes an important part of Baxter's adaptation. Julie comes across Venusians ("Cythereans") who have also been captured by Martians ("Lessing has advanced excellent reasons for supposing that the Martians have actually succeeded in effecting a landing on the planet Venus" Wells/Jenkins wrote in his concluding summary of events after the first invasion). But there is another world beyond Mars that might have a viewpoint on cosmic affairs . . .

Like many writers in the Wells tradition, Baxter has frequently had enormous fun in imaginatively destroying the world around him. He excels himself here, with vivid and alarming pictures of obliteration brought to regions which are the heart of Middle England and Metropolitan complacency. Julie is a strong narrator, though Baxter splits the narrative between various viewpoint figures. Julie gives us not only her own account but what Frank, a medical doctor with the army during its initial rout by the invaders, and other eyewitnesses later tell her. This gives us the full picture (and a dramatic one, well told and establishing a truly Wellsian disintegration) though sometimes at the cost of immediate impact.

The spread of the narrative to encompass not only Imperial Britain but the rest of the world is necessary and allows for the story to add more echoes of the original: a young Australian Aboriginal character towards the end of the novel seems to give voice to the Tasmanians whom Wells points to early on as a symbol of our thirst for colony and empire; a scene in the USA shows us Julie's young journalist friend Harry Lane writing *Edisonades* (as in Garrett P. Serviss's 1898 "sequel" to Well's novel *Edison's Conquest of Mars*. The inventor Thomas Edison is actually brought in by Baxter in a cameo role designed to echo Serviss's novel.

It is Julie's account that is at the book's heart. She, with Alice, escapes the wreckage of London to Paris. Two years later she is summoned again by Walter and drawn into a plan to infiltrate the Martian enclave in what is presented as an attempt to communicate with them. Here, the twists, powered by Julie 's insight and resourcefulness, start to appear, and we later learn much more about the Martians and their plans for the human race. It is back in Middle England, as Bert Cook gives Julie and Verity, a young woman from a community living in uneasy symbiosis with the Martians, a tour of the pits where captive humans are stored for their blood supply, that the real sense of nightmare confronts us.

Semi-official sequels to Wells are legion. Baxter succeeded once, in *The Time Ships* in returning to a Wells novel and presenting its aftermath without destroying the essential argument and immediacy of the original. I think he's done it again here.

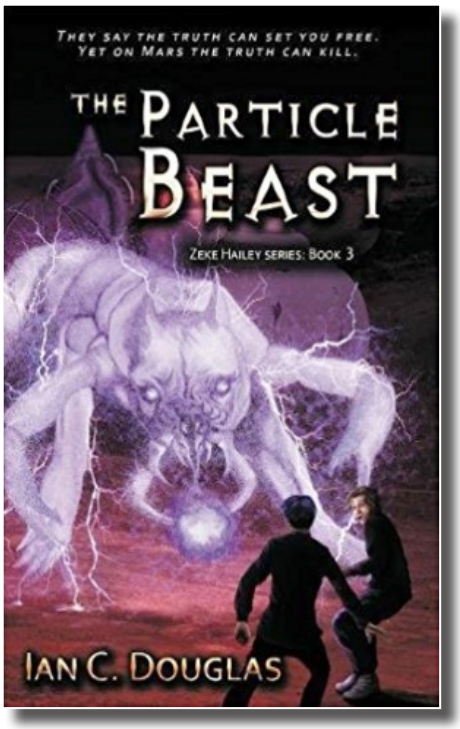
The Particle Beast by Ian C. Douglas (Lightning Source, 2017)

Reviewed by Rsaal Firoz

The Particle Beast is the third book in the engaging science fiction series written by Ian C. Douglas, Zeke Hailey. It is a well-written story, with witty dialogue and great description, although Douglas' use of technological terms can sometimes be a bit overwhelming.

Zeke Hailey, a boy with psychic abilities, is trying to find his father, who went missing in deep space 15 years ago. His search is interrupted by a dangerous foe, Dr. Apollodoris Enki, who wishes to use Zeke's knowledge of the forgotten Hesperian language as a key to an ancient Martian city. Unbeknownst to Dr. Enki, the city is guarded by a Particle Beast from a pocket dimension. Zeke, with his friends Scuff and Pin-mei, is faced by the challenge of making sure the Particle Beast never enters their dimension.

During the course of the book, Zeke encounters a number of bizarre characters and tribes, most of them wanting him dead. One of my favourite tribes is the Marmish, a group of pious Christians living on Mars who have forsaken all technology in an effort to become "more human". The storyline is gripping and well thought out, but I can't say the same for the characters. Their personalities do not really grow as the story progresses, which means that it's difficult to feel much empathy for the characters. For example, we get no real sense of the tension Zeke must be feeling when his friend disappears, or when he faces the Particle Beast.



There are a number of interesting themes, one of them being trust among friends. If Zeke trusted Scuff and Pin-mei more, he would probably have found his father a lot quicker, and if Pin-mei trusted Zeke, she would have confided in him before running away. The story takes place in the 23rd century and depicts a more egalitarian society, both on Mars and Earth. Zeke is English, Scuff is Canadian and Pin-mei is Chinese, which gives the book a fairly diverse cultural background. There are some exciting martial arts fighting scenes, coupled with people occasionally crumbling into sand.

Overall, *The Particle Beast* is a great read for young adults interested in science fiction and the future of humanity. It is also a good book for people fascinated by the possibilities of ancient civilisations living on the Red Planet. I give it four stars for the great storyline and engaging dialogue. I would have given it a five if the characters had been explored in a little more depth. Enjoyable for readers as young as ten and as old as twenty-five. A timeless sci-fi adventure!

Bridging Infinity edited by Jonathan Strahan (Solaris, 2016)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

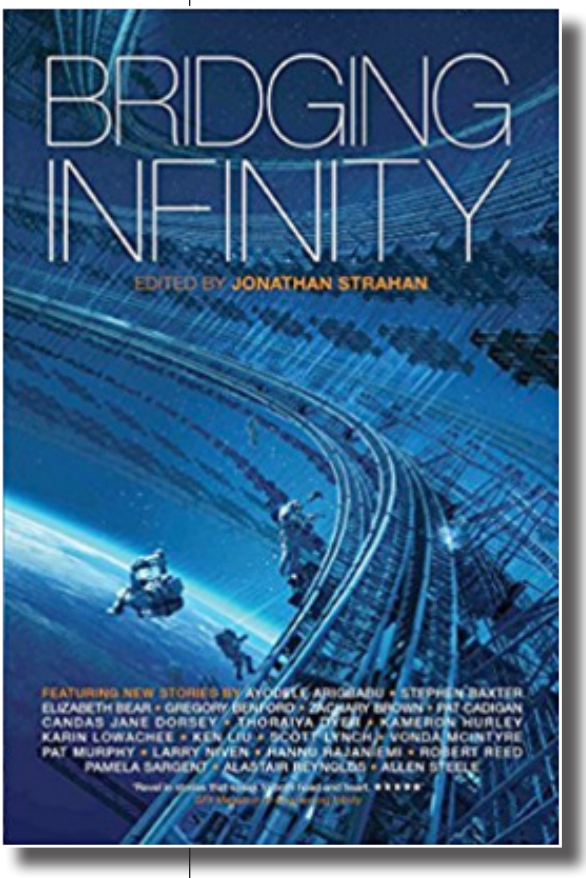
Bridging Infinity is the latest in a potentially infinite line of hard-sf anthologies edited by my fellow Ulster-born expatriate author, Jonathan Strahan: *Engineering Infinity* (2010); *Edge of Infinity* (2012); *Reach for Infinity* (2015); *Meeting Infinity* (2015).

It takes me a while to get through an anthology since I don't like to read the stories one after the other, especially with a 'themed' anthology like this one. I also have habit of reading the head- and/or after- notes before reading the actual stories. In any case, *Bridging Infinity* is a rather loosely-themed anthology. Infinity is well – infinite – so, by definition, it includes everything that has ever existed, exists now, and will ever exist. Therefore, *Bridging Infinity* is about more than 'just' infinity.

Strahan makes a bold statement of intent in his Introduction: "Science fiction is always changing. It's much broader, more inclusive, less centralized than when I first encountered it, but a lot of what made it special is exactly the same. It asks questions, it believes problems are solvable, and it tries to find those solutions in stories that are filled with action, adventure and a bit of romance. That's what I see in these stories, and I hope you will as well."

It is not unknown for a book reviewer to be buttonholed by someone who asks why that reviewer didn't deal with one particular story in a collection or anthology. My possibly self-serving reply is that it is

impossible to satisfy every reader's individual taste or preference. Not only impossible, but unreasonable, considering the usually available space. Reviewers should be free to choose the stories that they find suitable for close textual analysis. Readers are also free to choose their own favourite stories from the contents-page of fare, if and when they buy the book in question.



I'll start with the first story Strahan bought for this volume, Thoraiya Dyers 'Induction', which was a very good place for him to start. The 'big hard-science' part concerns a spiffing wheeze to counter global warming by human-made volcanic activity that extracts sub surface lava and turns it into 'reclaimed' land. Christian Waters, a former astronaut who is the main viewpoint character, returns to the east Caribbean island of Anquilla, soon to be volcanically remastered by Maata Irihaan, the Chief Geotechnical Engineer in charge of the Valley Project (named after the capital city). Christian has come to bid farewell to his dying grandmother, but he must also seek reconciliation with his estranged half-brother, Roy. 'Induction' is a rich blend of dangerous applied technology and an examination of how complex relationships are developed from the past, through the present day, and so on into the future. As such, it is a template for most – if not all – of the stories that bridge infinity here.

First off in the actual running order is 'Sixteen Questions for Kamala Chatterjee', by Alistair Reynolds. The 'sixteen questions' are asked and answered during interviews with Kamala Chatterjee. She is a physicist famous for the Chatterjee Anomaly, which involved drilling a hole through the solar photosphere as part of a 'helioseismological study'. Pick the sunspots out of that, if you can. These interviews (by the members of a peer review panel?) take place over 200 years or so, from when Chatterjee was a graduate student in Mumbai to – well – finding that out is part of the fun. There is a novel in here trying to get out, I believe, and Reynolds might well have written it by this time.

I feel that way about many of the other stories, e.g. 'The Venus Generations', by Pat Cadigan, and 'The City's Edge', by Kristine Kathryn Rusch, which is an artful sf- mystery fusion that begins with the destruction of a half-completed 'spindizzy' city and the death of its builder and 600 construction workers. Or they could be expanded to novella-length. Karin Lowachee's 'Ozymandias' is a stave of traditional space opera that could be developed into an ongoing series – for Analog, perhaps.

The three stand-out stories are 'Parables of Infinity' (Robert Reed), 'Travelling into Nothing' (An Owomoyela), and 'Seven Birthdays' (Ken Lui). Lui's story makes a nice coda to the anthology, with its Stapledonian scope and welcome optimism. "We'll colonize the rest of the galaxy. When we find lifeless worlds, we'll endow them with every form of life, from Earth's distant past to the future's that might have been on Europa {a home-from-a-long-lost-Earth planet}. We'll walk down every evolutionary path . . . We'll give those creatures who never made it onto Noah's Ark another chance, and bring forth the potential of every star in Raphael's conversation with Adam and Eve".

Honourable mentions: 'Six Degrees of Separation Freedom' (Pat Cadigan) and 'Apache Charlie and the Pentagons of Hex' (Allen M. Steele). The only real stinker in the book comes from the two biggest 'name' authors: 'Mice Among Elephants', by Gregory Benford and Larry Niven. It could have been written by George O. Smith c. 1947, e.g. "A wrenching force rolled through the bridge. The walls popped. Screeched. Cliff felt himself twisted. A support beam hit him and all was black." The ideas are interesting enough, but indifferently set out. To be fair, Benford and Niven may have meant to write a parody that went skew-whiff in the telling.

Of the 15 stories in *Bridging Infinity*, according to my rough reckoning, there are 8 A's, four B's, 2 C's, and 1 D. I can't – no, won't – give you the title and author details. What I can say, however, is that Strahan has presented us with stories that prove science fiction is "still at least partly about solving problems", but the scale upon which we will "have to face them" is something infinitely else again.

Crises And Conflicts edited by Ian Whates (NewCon Press, 2016)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

This anthology of 16 short stories, *Crises And Conflicts*, is being unilaterally deployed by NewCon Press to celebrate their tenth year of publishing. Covering the glorious genres of Space Opera and Military SF, these stirring tales from the front line are sure to be glorious a testament to the heroic and patriotic efforts of our boys (and girls!) in battle.

Or are they? We asked General "Thunderbolt" Ross (retired) to give us his opinion on a selection of the included stories...

Howdy, Limeys! Lance Corporal Allen Stroud's epic description of 'The Last Tank Commander' kicks the tyres and lights the fires with reports of an elderly tank commander, transplanted to a new world and given one final command: a tank, crewed by capable – but very raw – recruits. Their heroic and patriotic battle against overwhelming numbers of Johnny Alien to secure a colony world is war reporting at its finest. You'll be queuing up to join the good fight after reading this one!

In 'Between Nine And Eleven' Rear Admiral Adam Roberts reminisces about the famous victory of warships Samurai 10 and Centurion 771 against the invidious Trefoil. A piece of heroic and patriotic Space Opera, its effect is somewhat diluted by the Rear Admiral's unlikely musings on the sneaky nature of alien weapons, both past and present, but if you can put this to one side and enjoy the exhilarating action sequences it's a rollicking piece of reportage!

Staff Sergeant Michael Brookes knows a thing or two about cyber warfare. His report on 'The Ten Second War' is a heroic and patriotic look at the dangers of treachery when dealing with Johnny Alien. Can they be trusted? No, they bloody can't! And Brookes is at pains to display his deep understanding of alien computer thought processes (N.B. Perhaps a little too deep – mark this one down for observation).

Civilian meddling led to a bloody fiasco at Wotan House for retired cyborgs. In 'Decommissioned', First Lieutenant Tade Thompson recalls the failure of the misguided attempts there to heal the wounds left by the bitter war against invasion. Thompson's assessment of our heroic and patriotic cyborg-enhanced soldiers is a depressing one, but their valiant struggles against the invaders quite bring a song to one's heart!

And what of the inexplicable inclusion of 'Another Day In Paradise' by enemy-of-the-people Amy DuBoff? Her fictionalised depiction of an unfortunate but trivial friendly fire incident in the war against the Selarks does our heroic and patriotic forces no favours whatsoever. Do you want us to lose this war, Cockamamie Amy??

Captain Robert Sharp's 'Round Trip' slips into the anthology as an examination of crisis, rather than conflict. The theft of a long-range military transport ship from the Moon is no joking matter, and is traditionally a court martial offence. However, the Captain's account of a bereaved hijacker's attempting to win back his love may tug at the heartstrings of a few impressionable 'snowflakes' uninterested in the virtues of heroism or patriotism.

Bleeding heart liberal environmentalist claptrap infests every line of Able Seaman Nik Abnett's 'Arm Every Woman'. Fortunately, the heroic and patriotic soldiers it depicts squabbling eternally over scarce resources across the ruined world are not fooled by this propaganda. Instead, these committed warriors epitomise the glorious martial virtues of sisterhood and (eventually) brotherhood. Hurrah!

Well done, Chief Petty Officer Tim C. Taylor - your report on the costs and benefits of teaming humans and AI together in combat has been accepted. 'Hill 435' will henceforth be a recommended text at the Academy for teaching the effects of grief and loss upon our brave boys. What 'Hill 35' unfortunately lacks in patriotism it more than makes up for in heroism.

Edwards, Janet, 40327664 - your case study 'The Wolf, the Goat, and the Cabbage' is outstanding. It melds elements of 'The Cold Equations' style logic with a damning assessment of the foolish inadequacies of diplomacy and all that jibber-jabber. But what a shame about that guy, York – a hero and a patriot, we (initially) liked the cut of his jib.

Sergeant Christopher Nuttall, your dissertation on interplanetary politics in 'Pickaxes and Shovels' would make old General Heinlein himself proud. Keep up the good work, soldier!

Squadron Leader Whates – can we call you Ian? Bloody fine job on the anthology! Well done! Also, your warning in 'The Gun' about the chaotic nature of the chain of command in battlefield situations has been duly received and noted. Thank you for your service, Squadron Leader.

'Tactics for Optimal Outcomes in Negotiations with Wergen Ambassadors' is a seemingly dry and common sense report by Major Mercurio D. Rivera on alien diplomatic protocols. Do not be fooled! Extensive analyses by our text boffins have revealed dangerously high levels of satire and possible traces of humour within this report. Exercise caution!

And last, but not least, the anthology concludes with 'The Beauty of Our Weapons'. Commandant Gavin Smith sums up a near-perfect military career in the person of the patriotic and heroic Cain. An immortal, Cain's progress in the art of war is admirable. From his early beginnings, rooting out possible communist sympathies in his brother, Abel, through many gloriously famous battlefields and into the far future, Cain's conflict credentials are impeccable. If only there were more like him!

But, joking aside, *Crises And Conflicts* is a great read, mixing the expected full-on crash-bang pyrotechnics with examinations of future soldiery, advanced or unexpected weapons and the human condition. War isn't just about guns and violence, and Ian Whates has put together an apt, fun and thoughtful celebration of a decade of NewCon Press.

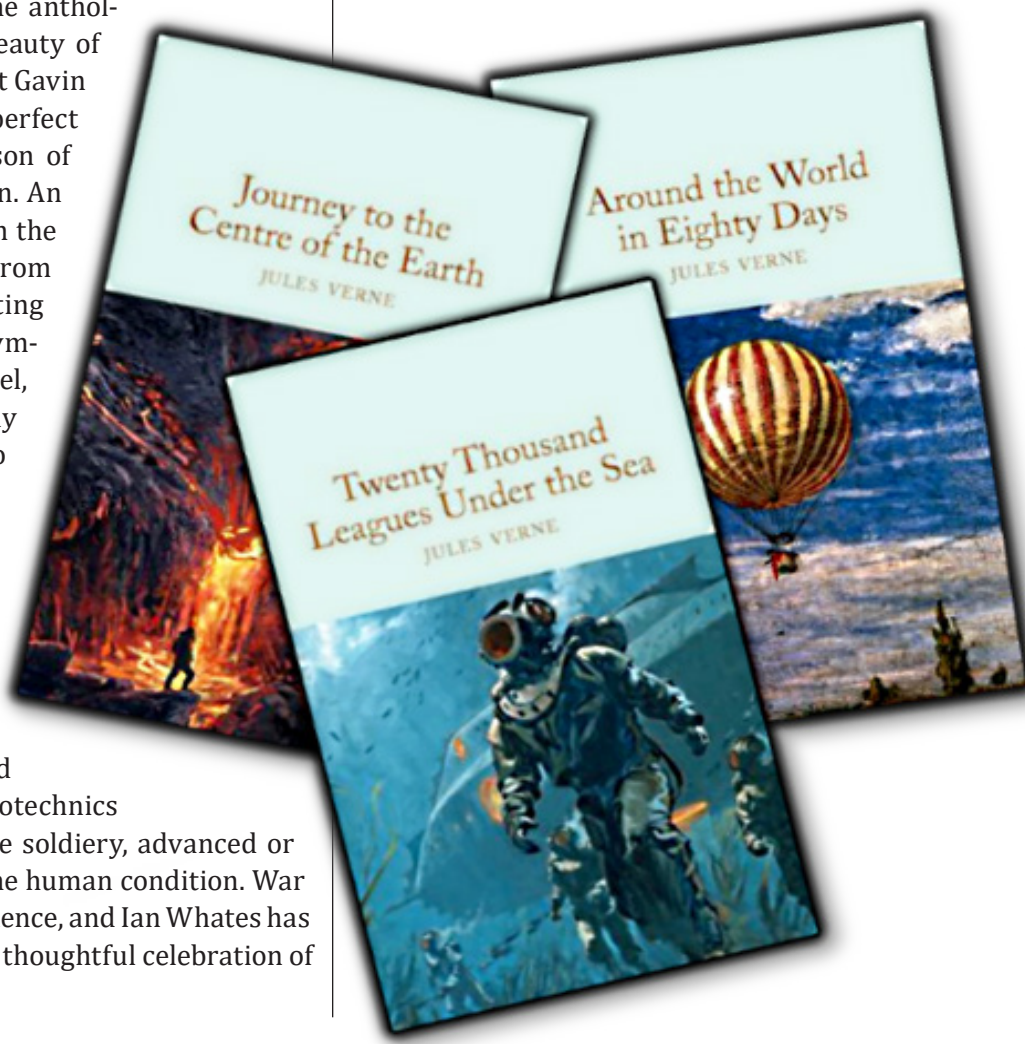
Journey to the Centre of the Earth, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, and Around the World in Eighty Days
by Jules Verne

(MacMillan Collector's Library, 2017)

Reviewed by Alex Bardy

I won't insult the intelligence or integrity of any self-respecting fantasy or science fiction reader by presuming to think that any of you haven't read at least one of these important works of 'science fantasy', but I would very much like to draw your attention to how markedly gorgeous these three special editions are. And all of them are available for an absolute bargain price, too: under £10 each.

Measuring approx. 6 x 4 inches (not much larger than A6), this is a petite collection of small hardbacks with golden gilt-edged pages that are surely deserving of a place on anyone's bookshelf. The entire MacMillan Collector's Library collection is quite extensive, but as yet there are very few 'science fiction' titles in there, making these editions particularly relevant to both the casual collector and dedicated fan alike...

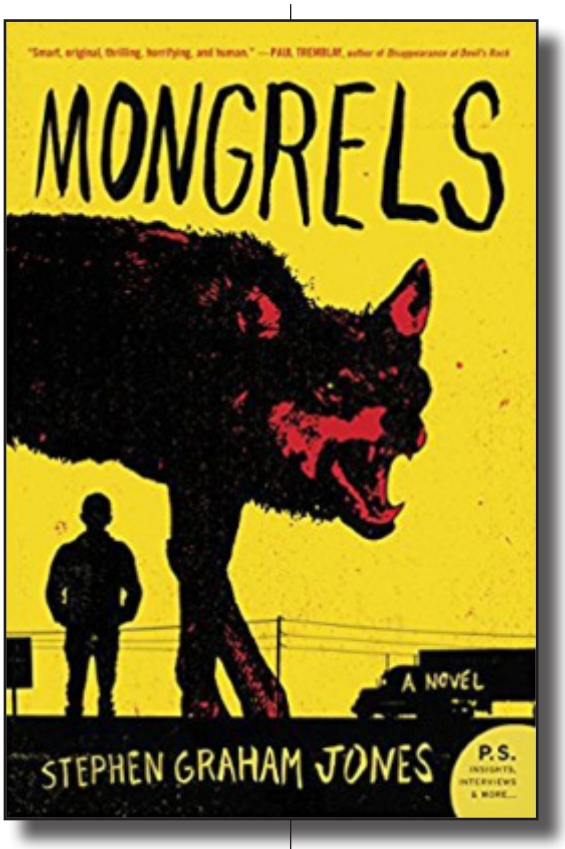


The adventures of Professor Otto Lidenbrock and his nephew, Axel (and their guide, Hans), and of course, those of Captain Nemo and the Nautilus are well known, but both books are still a treat to behold and read again, especially given these editions are also beautifully illustrated throughout by French painter/artist, Édouard Riou. Both *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* have been treated to a sumptuous reprint/translation based on 19th century texts, and are accompanied by an informed Afterword by Ned Halley detailing Verne's early struggles with his father, and covering the publication of his 'Voyages Extraordinaires' series of works by Pierre-Jules Hetzel in the periodical magazine *Magazin d'Education et de Récréation* and the significance thereof.

Around the World in Eighty Days, in contrast, is not illustrated, but does have an Afterword by John Grant accompanying it. Perhaps predictably, John Grant talks a lot about Verne's role and influence on modern science fiction, and discusses how his personal political beliefs imbued a sceptical view of the benefits or otherwise of progress and technological advancement, an aspect of science fiction that has permeated the genre to this very day. The darker overtones of Verne's later writing are perhaps a precursor to this change in attitude as the power and greed of American cultural imperialism slowly made its way across the Atlantic at that time, Grant surmises.

While not necessarily saying anything new, I did enjoy the Afterword in all three books, and it's especially gratifying to see that Hetzel's major role in 'steering' Verne towards covering new technologies and embracing scientific advances (which clearly helped to make Verne the household name he is today) is given due credit for Verne's subsequent rise to prominence.

In summary, a great, gilt-edged collection of fantastic little books, well worth your time and money.



Mongrels by Stephen Graham Jones

(Titan, 2016)

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

"My Grandfather used to tell me he was a were-wolf". So says the unnamed protagonist in the opening line. For him, these are just stories his grandfather likes to tell to entertain him. Stories of the scars he's received and adventures he's had. They provide some substance and meaning to life. His parents are both dead and he lives a poor existence with his aunt, uncle and grandfather on the edge of society. The transformative moment comes early on, when the death of the grandfather leaves little doubt that the stories, at the very least, had a kernel of truth.

Alternating the story between the present day and flashbacks, the narrator refers to himself only as whatever he was being at the time. The vampire when relating Trick or Treating or the student when talking of his schooldays. Throughout the book, he appears as many things: biologist, mechanic, prisoner and so on. He only refers to himself in the first person in the present day. This affects a distancing of the narrator from his own identity as he searches for who he really is. It is through these flashbacks that we develop an understanding of his world, and more significantly as he develops his own understanding of that world. It is safe to say that, for much of his childhood, he has no real sense of his true identity. The flashbacks are much more distanced in tone than the more personal narrative of the present day. This, of course, only serves to enhance the protagonist's sense of detachment from himself.

This is a classic coming of age tale, as the protagonist has to examine his past to understand the present, and then come to terms with reality of that past. It is a painful journey, both his parents are dead, and it becomes increasingly apparent that his very existence is closely tied to what happened to them. I found it intriguing that, as he grows up, he has no inherent sense of 'being a werewolf', nor is there any attempt on the part of the family to talk about it. It almost feels

that his grandfather's stories were intended as much more than the simple entertainments they at first appear, his grandfather seems to be the one person who was actually trying to prepare him. Not simply for the shock of his nature, but also from the shocking nature of his past.

From the start, this is an engrossing twist on the werewolf myth. Not least because the way that they are presented, and their struggles on the fringe of society, it felt much truer than much of the genre. This may just be the best werewolf novel I've ever read.

The Shadowed Path: A Jonmarc Vahanian Collection by Gail Z. Martin

(Solaris, 2016)

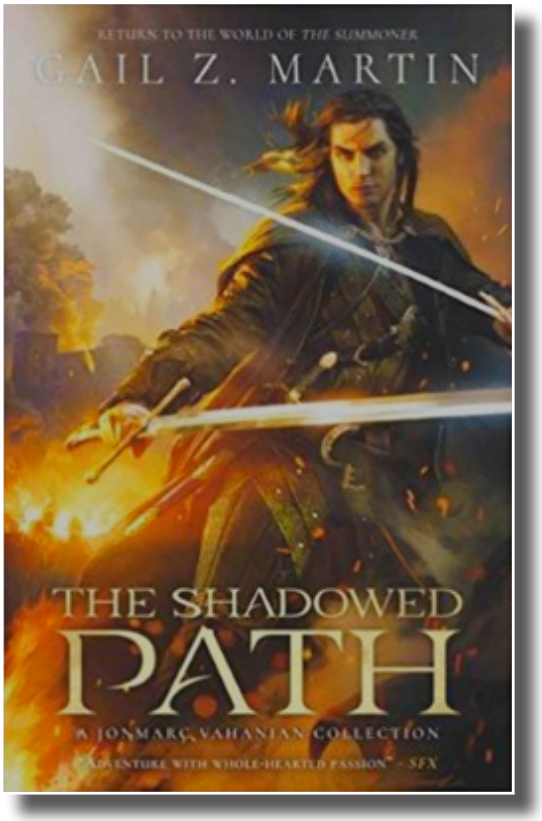
Reviewed by Jared I. Magee

Anthologies of short fiction are often inherently repetitive, often fragmented, and easily plodding. Though Gail Z. Martin has a great many texts exploring the High Fantasy world of the Winter Kingdoms and their sundry inhabitants already published, this anthology is meant to assuage fan desire for a fully fleshed out origin story for one of the favourites from the series—protagonist Jonmarc Vahanian—while avoiding the pitfalls many anthologies have stumbled into.

For fans of the series, experiencing Vahanian go from his adolescence to a descent into the compulsory dark period before becoming an ascendant master warrior with a keen sense of justice must be quite satisfying. For those that are unfamiliar with or unsentimental toward Jonmarc Vahanian and the histories and stories of Martin's world, these vignettes prove to be a bit less rewarding, though still crafted well enough to induce one into consuming the entire collection.

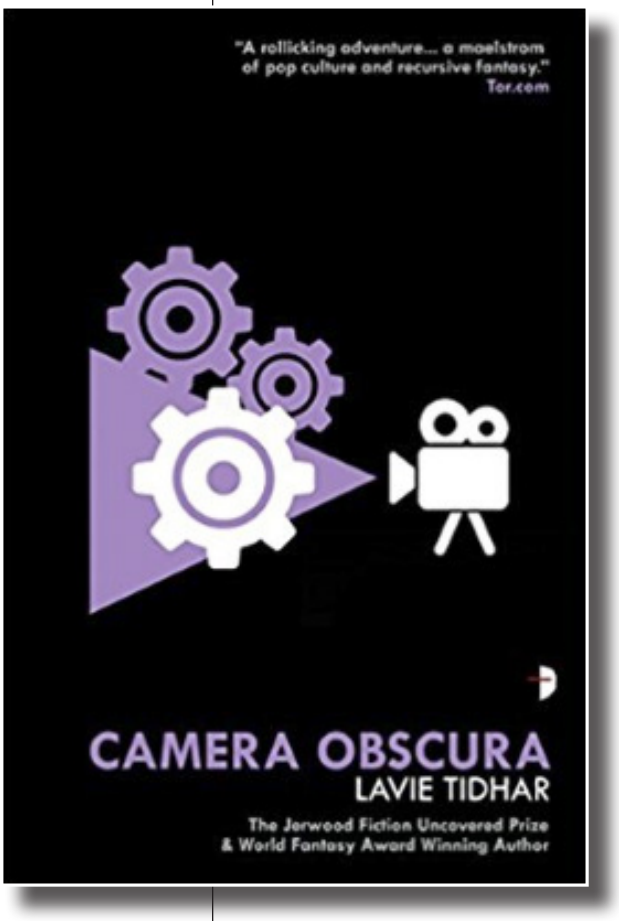
The narrative does not go into the profound depths of world-building and character development that is by and large expected of successful High Fantasy. This superficiality is understandable, as each short story is generally only thirty to forty pages in length. A reader cannot help but wonder if the worlds, histories, geography, inhabitants, and, well, everything else about the Winter Kingdoms is already concretely established in the other novels; if that is the case, then the somewhat sparse dealings with places, races, and events that are contained in this anthology would make a great deal more sense to Martin fans that have knowledge of the entire Winter Kingdoms opus. A casual, first time visitor to Martin's worlds will feel confused amid some of the more anaemic descriptions of those places, races, and events, if not out and out lost at times.

The strength of the anthology rests on its eponymous namesake. Jonmarc Vahanian is an intriguing character. While Vahanian does, admittedly, resemble a great many golden-hearted-warrior-with-a-dark-past types, Martin imbues him with an indelible quality that makes a reader root for him and want to know even more about him. In the first short piece, "Raider's Curse," readers dive into his world, only to see it come down around him in a dramatic, if a bit predictable, call to action for the young would-be adventurer. From that first short story on, Vahanian's ineradicable draw is painted with skill and economy, pushing a reader to finish each short piece just to inevitably feel drawn to begin another.



In the end, lovers of High Fantasy will enjoy the characters, peoples, and interactions of *The Shadowed Path: A Jonmarc Vahanian Collection*, if for no other reason than affection for and loyalty to the genre. Despite its sundry and all but unavoidable anthological difficulties, the characters, for the most part, transcend the aforementioned failings of anthologized short fiction and leave even the most critical reader thirsting for a bit more knowledge of the Winter Kingdoms and a desire to read the more complete tales that made this delving into Jonmarc Vahanian a necessary endeavour in the first place.

Camera Obscura by Lavie Tidhar (Angry Robot, 2011; 2017) Reviewed by Kate Onyett



A ripping, shadowy thriller, happy to name-drop famous literary creations like fan-boy happy-bombs, embroils from the get-go in murder, fantastical mystery, space opera and Kung Fu. In a nineteenth century not so alike or unalike as our own, we are following Milady de Winter (yes, 'tis she, remade for this period as a tall, proud Franco-African) who is a hired gun of a secret cabal of automata that runs France from under the streets of Paris. Set on a mission to retrieve an unknown object ripped messily from the belly of an oriental courier, she discovers instead an international struggle for control over an interstellar scouting device that gifts its human bearers unworldly fighting prowess and madness. The clock's ticking, as the device has woken up and is drawing huge and powerful inter-dimensional spaceships towards the Earth. The camera obscura? A paean to the power of the projected image as something that, while metaphorically can draw us into another world, when combined with alien tech, can actually create a portal through time and space.

The scope is epic, yet the structural conceits for this frankly bonkers confection are wonderfully underplayed, giving it a tone of credibility, even when the action goes wild. Milady is a trigger-happy detective kept permanently and frustratingly in the dark by her masters; a situation not a million miles from any 50s noir you care to name.

A quick glance at Tidhar's oeuvre shows an author steeped in punk'd fiction: steam-punk, sci-fi-punk, Hebrew-punk (yup, apparently that's a thing), and he has gone all-out to create a multiplicity mash-up for this second book of a trilogy. Beginning with an alternative universe/history base (America never became a white-dominated colony nation, but is run instead by the Native American tribes. Oh, and lizard people from outer space rule Britain and her empire), topped with layers of steam-punk and finished with lashings of mad science, thriller noir, splatter horror, science fiction, grindhouse and subtle pop culture references (if Milady's woozy recollection of her post-torture reconstructive surgery is not a delicate rip from Robocop, then I'm a monkey's uncle). Mary Berry would be pleased to know that this layer cake has not even a smidgeon of a soggy bottom of disappointment.

The rich tapestry of Tidhar's world could definitely do with a reading of the first book to gain insight into the geopolitics of his nineteenth century; a time of spying, suspicion and secret organisations (again, not so far off the actual fin-de-siècle period). But there is enough within this to stand alone as a superlatively adjectivally-described romp. Fall in, let go, and relish.

Fair Rebel by Steph Swainston (Gollancz, 2016) Reviewed by Nick Hubble

Following a six-year gap, during which Swainston at one point broke off her contract with Gollancz in order to work as a teacher, *Fair Rebel* marks the fifth full-length instalment in the Castle sequence. It follows on in order from the first three novels, *The Year of Our War* (2004), *No Present Like Time* (2005), and *The Modern World* (2007), being set some fifteen years after the events of the latter. As with all the previous Castle fiction, the main viewpoint protagonist is Jant, the flying messenger of the Emperor of the Fourlands (the fourth novel, Above the Snowline (2010) and a short story 'The Wheel of Fortune' (2013) detail episodes from his past). Jant's arch and playful style of narration can be seen in the way that Swainston

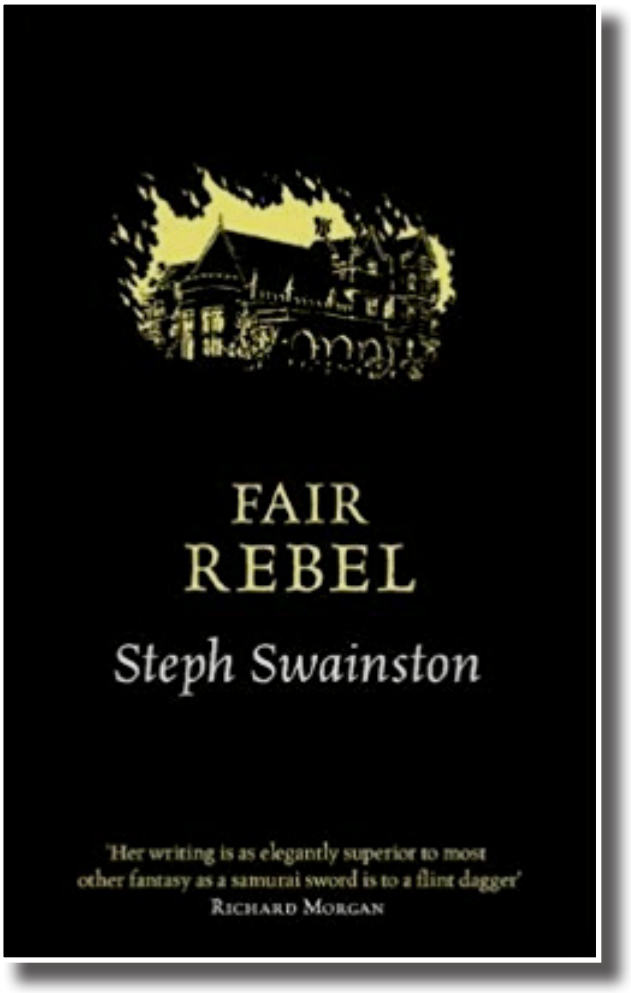
rather deftly deals with the issue of filling in readers unfamiliar with the series by having him demonstrate how a dialogue with 'new listeners' might be rather tiresome before concluding:

> *You see? We could go on all day. The only solution I can think of, is to ask you guys who've already heard it to let your mind wander for a bit. There's a lot you can be doing – putting an edge on your sword, polishing your horse – while I place the facts before the newcomers.*

The basic premise of the sequence is straightforward: the Fourlands are threatened by hordes of huge voracious insects which eat anything and everything in their path. In order to prevent the insects overrunning his domains, the Emperor has sought out the greatest champions of all disciplines and had them compete to find the best in each category, before rewarding them with immortality as part of his 'Circle' and tasking them to fight the insects. However, these heroes, the Eszai, also have to defend their positions from challengers, who by victory over them can take their position and immortality. While the aristocratic Saker is the best archer in the Fourlands and has (until recently) been in the Circle continuously from its formation nearly 1500 years before the time of *Fair Rebel*, Jant is currently still under 250 having grown up first in the Darkling mountains and then on the streets of the city of Hacilith before taking the role of the Circle's messenger, by defeating the incumbent, at the age of 23.

Viewed purely in the context of this not untypical setup for a fantasy series, the impact and rapturous reception enjoyed by The Year of Our War on its first publication might appear surprising to those unaware of it. While it helped that the novel was published in an elegant hardback edition, with a gorgeous cover including a prominently displayed endorsement from China Miéville (and only cost £9.99), it was Swainston's writing and vision which swept readers and reviewers away. As Farah Mendlesohn proclaimed, reviewing the novel for Vector 236, 'while the whole of our critical world seems to be discussing the merging of genres, access to the mainstream, playing with the borders of fantasy, along comes The Year of Our War, a book which is about as solidly grounded in genre as it is possible to get, and which, far from being hackneyed, is breathtaking.' BSFA members who bought the novel on the strength of Mendelsohn's review – as I did – were rewarded with a novel that combined action and sweep with emotional tenderness and moral complexity. Above all, Swainston's prose was characterised by a wit which encompassed a full range from an old-fashioned Austen-like irony to a very present-day louche knowingness. For the first time since childhood, I immediately reread a novel upon finishing it.

As suggested by the Miéville blurb, Swainston was associated with the New Weird at the time. There are certainly weird aspects to The Year of Our War, which are mostly related to Jant's addiction to injecting scolopendium, or 'cat' as it is colloquially referred to, and his experiences in the multidimensional 'shift' that large doses of the drug transport him to. Furthermore, the novel was clearly political albeit, as Mendlesohn described, 'in the manner of Olympus, rather than the street politics of London'. However, with each successor volume it became clearer that the sequence was moving away from baroque weirdness and deeper into its richly imagined secondary world. Reviewing Above the Snowline for Strange Horizons in 2010, Niall Harrison argued that retrospectively Swainston might be seen alongside Joe Abercrombie and others as at the forefront of the ongoing reinvigoration of core commercial fantasy. What characterises



such work according to Harrison is the way in which it challenges 'the conventionally historicised nature of fantasy settings [by] juxtaposing an idiom or thought pattern we think of as modern with a social order we think of as hundreds of years out of date.'

Today, following the success of Game of Thrones, the television serialisation of George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire*, which certainly mixes modern thought (especially in the Lannister siblings) with solidly medieval trappings, such fantasy is arguably the dominant form of fictional entertainment in the World. There should be a huge potential market for Swainston's series and yet, far from the glorious debut of *The Year of Our War*, there has been little fanfare for the appearance of *Fair Rebel* in a somewhat flimsy trade paperback edition costing a whopping £18.99. The sombre black-and-white cover resembles a funeral notice and rather undermines the potentially upbeat connotations of the title. To be fair, this tone is in some respects appropriate to the content of the novel – as discussed below – but even so I can't help feeling Gollancz should have made more of an effort. A writer like Swainston comes along once in a blue moon; of all the British genre SFF writers to emerge in the current century so far, she's the one that I would put money on as still being read in the next. This is because, as Harrison points out, Swainston asks us 'to consider what we mean by "modern" … more forcefully than just about anyone else'.

The epigraph to *The Modern World* is taken from Chaucer: 'He let go the things of yesterday/ And took the modern world's more spacious way'. What would it entail to take such a spacious way? That novel ends with Saker voluntarily giving up his immortality by engineering defeat to his own daughter in a challenge and choosing instead to take worldly power in Awia, the largest of the Fourlands. The staggering sense of human agency, not to mention strategic genius, revealed in this bold move is somewhat undercut by Jant's reflection that Saker is simultaneously controlling his wayward daughter while enacting his own teenage rebellion against the Emperor. But regardless of whether this is a profound or rather more mundane move, the clock starts ticking in what had seemed a timeless, feudal state. The significant temporal context of *Fair Rebel* is not the fifteen short centuries of ageless order since the founding of the Circle but the fifteen long years of modernity inaugurated by Saker. On the surface, the social system is identical to that which readers have grown familiar with from the first three volumes in the sequence but inside it has been hollowed out in a manner that is simply inconceivable to the Eszai and is now at the point of implosion. The same kind of unexpected political upheaval that rocked the UK and the USA in 2016 is about to turn the Fourlands upside down in the space of a single summer.

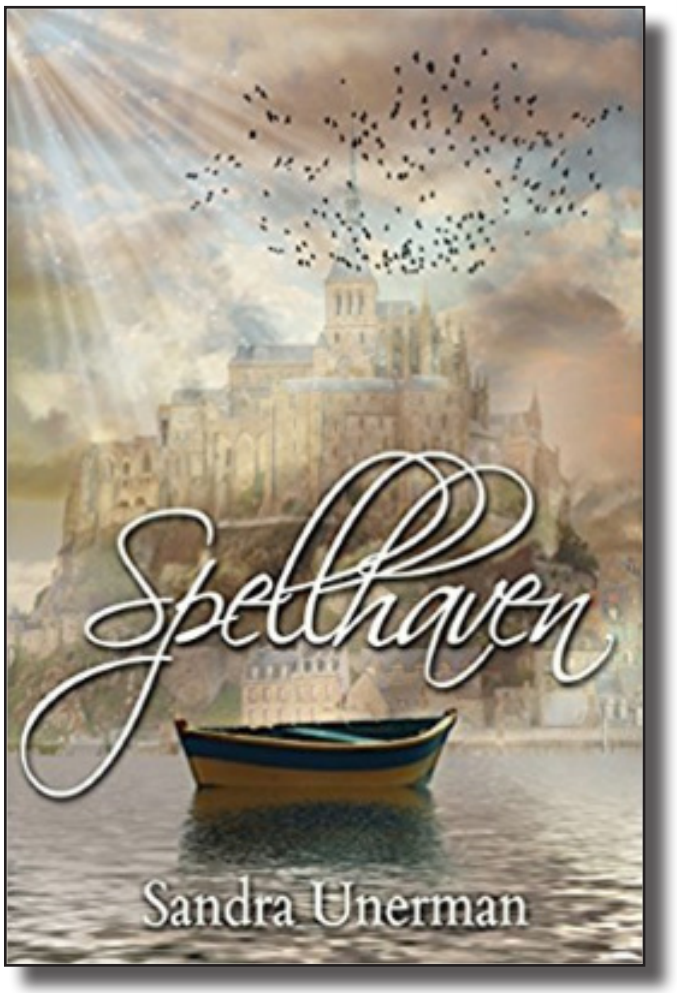
As the title *Fair Rebel* suggests, the discontent in the story is being led by a woman. In fact, there are two women leaders: the aristocratic Swallow – formerly romantically but chastely entangled with Saker – who has been repeatedly refused immortality as the best musician in the Fourlands, and Connell, radicalised through exploitation and then caught up in Swallow's plots. The inclusion of found texts – letters, newspaper articles – has always been a distinctive feature of the Castle series and here Swainston uses this device to allow both Swallow and Connell to tell the key parts of their own stories, which illustrate how the recent onset of modernity in the Fourlands has changed the way people think and let loose nascent forms of feminist and class consciousness. Swallow's bitter criticisms of the behaviour of male Eszai expose some of the newly-visible patriarchal limitations of feudal organisation: 'He's like any man. I can't get to grips with them – they always seem overly loud and self-important, but they have no depth at all'. However, the manner in which the novel ends with Connell in hiding reflecting on her realisation that Swallow's ego was as big as any of the immortals suggests that Swainston's own sympathies are with the marginalised and dispossessed. It is Connell, acutely aware of how the slightest misfortune can send poor people like herself into a spiral descent from which there is no escape, who expresses the most perceptive piece of social analysis in the novel:

> *This country is just people stuck in different echelons, different classes, unable to escape them no matter how hard they struggle, staring at each others' lives in bewilderment and disbelief. When they spread their wings, all they can manage is to fly round and round in a cramped cage.*

Of course, no one flies round and round as much as Jant, who for all his efforts rarely manages to be more than the participant observer of the collapse of the hierarchical society to which he somewhat awkwardly belongs. Although he owes his own success and extended life to the Emperor's system, his upbringing and youthful experiences of the gangs of Hacilith place him well to appreciate both what it is like to be excluded by that system and the anger that this exclusion engenders. While his loyalties remain

with his friends, his understanding reaches across the various divides at play in the Fourlands. Alone among the Eszai, he understands the motivation of those like Connell and the possibilities for social revolution that she represents. The rest are incredulous as rebels attack the Castle itself and even release insects within its grounds. Amidst these spectacular set-piece scenes, constructed with Swainston's distinctive blend of elegance and visceral action, the question that begins to arise, as the Circle successively breaks – which happens when one of the immortals dies – and reforms with ever more difficulty, is how long will Jant maintain his loyalty to the Emperor and the feudal order?

Modernity waits for no one, winged hero or not. From what we know of the forthcoming sixth volume in the series, *The Savant and the Snake*, and the limited-edition short story *Aftermath* (2016), set in the days after the events at the close of *Fair Rebel*, the financial implications of running a perpetual wartime economy in the Fourlands are about to become spectacularly manifest. The point is clearly coming when the imperial social order is going to be torn apart by the conflicting demands of aristocrats such as Saker to recover past feudal glories from the insects and of the peasantry such as Connell, who remains at large at the end of *Fair Rebel*, to be released from lives of poverty and servitude. Much as we have no way of knowing how the similarly poised forces currently pulling post-referendum Britain apart are going to play out, our only means of finding out the fate of the Fourlands will be to fly round and round like Jant: striving to be on the side of the angels while all the time hoping that the inevitable come down isn't too hard.



Spellhaven by Sandra Unerman (Mirror World Publishing, 2017) Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

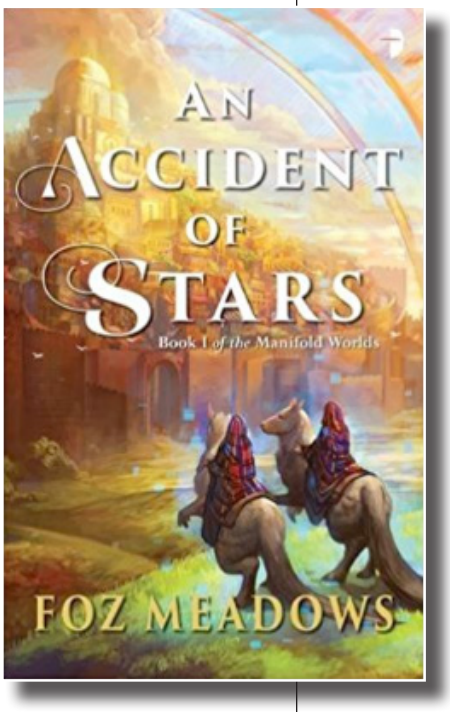
Spellhaven is a new take on the mortal-gets-abducted-by-fairies theme, in that they're not fairies – they're as mortal as we are – and Spellhaven is a place on Earth, an island city hidden by mists and magical wards; a cross between Portmeirion and Atlantis, ruled by magician clans in an uneasy truce with the semi-feral Unseen spirits that make the place possible, but also must be kept constantly placated. The Unseen love novelty, so the Magician Lords are on constant lookout in our world for anything that is new and entertaining.

Thus, in the summer of 1914, musician Jane Fairchild is judged to be sufficiently new and summoned by magical means she can't resist to Spellhaven. The facts that it is 1914, with all the baggage of that particular date, and that we first meet Jane at a music recital, immediately set up precisely the kind of young gel that she is. Her grandchildren will probably be the early adopters of Punk but her rebellion is restricted to unconventional flute fingerings and a desire to earn her own living. Rather than an in-your-face rebel with an anachronistic in-your-face attitude, she is refreshingly and convincingly Edwardian: a rebel by the standards of her society, but still bound by social conventions of the time (very easily feeling improperly dressed without a minimum two or three layers of clothing; a cool dislike of people with country accents …).

Conflicting forces come to play once Jane is in Spellhaven. On the one hand, she has what she's always wanted: the freedom to be musically adventurous, earning her living by what she does best. On the other there is the inconvenient truth that she has been coerced there. The people of Spellhaven are an interesting dynamic – mostly ordinary, decent types who just happen to live in a grossly unjust and unfair

society. In this case the key injustice is that any outsider summoned to the city must accept a contract of service with one of the clans, or be imprisoned for twice the length of the contract they reject. Even the people whom Jane adopts as more or less allies see nothing especially wrong with this.

But this is not a story either of a spirited young woman making her escape from captivity, or settling into a bizarre form of Stockholm Syndrome. Jane does, as we would expect, start to pick up the basics of magic with the intent of using them against her captors. But then the novel takes an entirely unexpected turn halfway through, when Jane and a lot of displaced Spellhavenites suddenly find themselves back in our world. That key date of 1914 has paid dividends: it's the middle of World War One, a fact which has gone unnoticed in the city (even though we are told the Magician Lords maintain houses and interests in cities like London and New York, which means a slight inconsistency in the tale, but not fatal). Now both Jane and her former captors are out of place. Her captors no longer have any coercive hold over her, but at the same time, Jane has nowhere to go.



Spellhaven is an intriguing novel with no easy answers or way out, which means you can keep rereading it and drawing different conclusions every time. Jane is never going to be entirely happy and settled in life – but would she ever have been, even without her magical summons?

Refreshingly, it does not appear to be part of a series: that ending ambiguity is all you're getting and it will keep buzzing at the back of your mind for days. The book does end with a snippet of Unerman's next, *Ghosts and Exiles*, a fantasy beginning in the 1930s: whether it's a sequel of sorts, or entirely standalone, is impossible to tell, but I look forward to reading it.

An Accident of Stars by Foz Meadows (Angry Robot, 2016) Reviewed by Nick Hubble

An Accident of Stars is a classic portal-quest fantasy in which Saffron Coulter, a 'long-boned and lanky' Australian high school student, follows a mysterious woman though a crack in the air into a strange world of intrigue, violence and magic. The woman she follows, Gwen Vere, also turns out to be from Earth, but she is an experienced 'worldwalker' with long involvement in the complicated politics of Kena, the country they now find themselves in. In fact, Gwen has played kingmaker by helping make a young man, Leoden, the ruling Vex. However, Leoden has turned out to be ruthless and power hungry. He has killed his rivals for the throne and now even Gwen and her associates are being hunted. Saffron gets lost in a city square while running away from guards and then unwittingly draws the attention of one of Leoden's three marriage mates, Kadeja, the Vex'Mara, who has come to the central fountain to perform a sacrifice. Within hours of her arrival, Saffron has had all her hair and the last two fingers of her right hand cut off and only lives because she has been rescued by another principal protagonist, Zechalia.

The plot is fast-paced and we move deftly through a series of set pieces, including the core scenes in which Saffron, acting as the injured Zechalia's proxy, undergoes the 'Trial of Queens' in the neighbouring country of Veksh. But what really holds the novel together is the rich and complex web of relationships between the many diverse women characters. While the fact that Saffron and Zechalia are young and trying to find themselves suggests that the book would work for a YA audience, the sophistication, thematic ambition and range of viewpoint characters make this a mature work of fantasy. Indeed, it is often the older women such as Yasha, the magnificently intransigent exiled Vekshi matriarch, and Pix, the flamboyant Kenan courtier with 'a wife, two husbands and a strong knife-arm', who steal the scenes.

There is a real sense that *An Accident of Stars* is in dialogue with its genre antecedents. While references at both the beginning and end of the novel are made to the iconic portal quests of 'Alice and Dorothy and

the Pevensie children', aspects of the different societies depicted are reminiscent of some of the influential feminist SF of the 1970s. The talk of motherlines in Veksh suggests Suzy McKee Charnas's *Holdfast Chronicles* (1974-99), while Kenan marriages to two or three others recall the relationship structures of Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) or Vonda McIntyre's *Dreamsnake* (1978).

Nevertheless, the discussion of sexual politics feels very contemporary, which is not surprising considering that Meadows is genderqueer and a prolific SFF blogger who often focuses on issues relating to gender and sexuality. After explanations of polyamory, the Kenan mahu'kedet and the fact that Vekshi women simply don't bind themselves in relationships, Saffron's admission that on Earth it's mostly 'just one person at a time' and that lots of people think 'it should only ever be boys with girls, never boy-boy or girl-girl' sounds every bit as barbaric to the reader as it does to Zechalia. When Saffron wonders whether 'men' can serve the Vekshi goddess Ashasa, she is told that it depends on what she means by 'men', implying that biology is not irrevocably destiny.

In terms of racial politics, Saffron is white like the Vekshi and has to upbraid herself not to be unconsciously racist concerning the dark-skinned Kenans. Conversely, Gwen, who is black, prefers Kena to her native Britain because of disturbing memories of Thatcher and the Brixton riots. This intersectional complexity permeates all levels of *An Accident of Stars* including even the dreams of the characters and promises well for the forthcoming sequel. If you are looking for a new fantasy sequence to start reading, this is the one.

Furthermore by Tahereh Mafi (Puffin, 2016)

Reviewed by Christopher Owen

A New York Times Bestselling novel, *Furthermore* is the first middle-grade fantasy novel by Tahereh Mafi. Inspired by *The Secret Garden* and *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, the story follows the adventures of twelve-year-old Alice Alexis Queensmeadow. Alice lives in Ferenwood, a magical land where colour is currency and Alice, having pale, colourless skin, is an outcast.

This novel presents a fictional world that has many similarities to the systemic racism of contemporary America. With a privilege-reversal similar to Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses* (Corgi, 2006), there is an intricate relationship between wealth, race and social ideology. The more colourful a person's skin (for example brown, auburn, magenta), the more people assume they have great magical power, and the more access to opportunities they then have. The fictional world is full of colour and people with wonderfully imaginative magical powers. From the perspective of colourless Alice, however, Ferenwood is as beautiful as it is cruel. Alice has no friends. Alice has no support. Alice doesn't belong.

At the age of twelve, every child of Ferenwood presents their magical powers to the community in a ceremony called The Surrender. They are then given a score between one and five, the higher the number, the more important the task they are given. This is a right of passage, a means for every citizen of Ferenwood to officially join the community. Of all the children, one is chosen as the winner and given the most important task of all. Alice is determined to win this task. But she has a problem: Oliver Newbanks, the school bully who told their entire class that Alice is the ugliest girl in all of Ferenwood, is tasked with finding Alice's missing father, the one person who truly appreciates and supports her, and Oliver needs Alice's help to rescue him.

Alice has to choose between proving herself to her society and helping Oliver rescue her father from the dangerous land of Furthermore. In Furthermore time and space work differently, and there are many strange laws that are far too easy to break. Break the law and the punishments are severe: from imprisonment, to slavery, to death.

In Ferenwood magic is replenished in nature, in Furthermore it is replenished through cannibalism. This is not a land of colour and beauty; it is a land of quick shifts into danger and sudden acts of violence. And it is in this land that the one person Alice loves most of all, her father, is enslaved.

In today's current political climate, this is not a book to miss. This book is important, weaving political commentary seamlessly into imaginative storytelling. Alice is a fierce, confident individual, and the choices she has to make are difficult ones as she journeys on a compelling adventure. No matter which unique fantasy world she finds herself in, its rules and structures always work against her, and she must constantly fight for what is right in the dizzying complexities of both social and institutional issues.

Mafi's writing style is joyfully playful, with many fun twists and descriptions. At the same time, Mafi writes intensely and empathetically, able to both chill your bones and break your heart. Her ability to demonstrate real social issues through creative world building makes this an incredibly interesting read, as each new turn of the page brings forth deeper and more complex ideas of privilege and oppression than the last. And yet at no point does this subtle political commentary take you out of the immersive reading experience or slow down the book's wondrous adventure.

Mafi's New York Times Bestselling Young-Adult series, *Shatter Me*, has been optioned for television by ABC Signature Studios, with Mafi as a consulting producer. Her next novel, *Whichwood*, was released September, 2017.

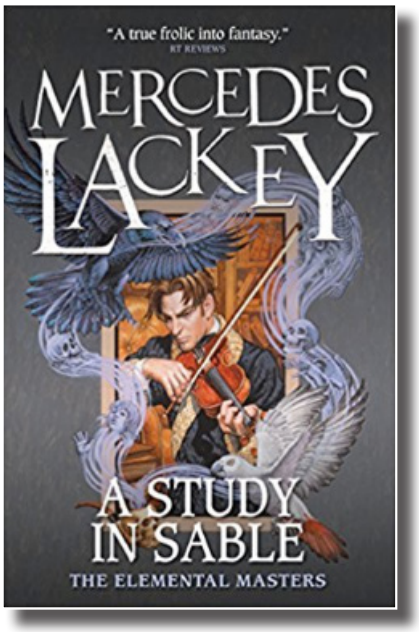
A Study in Sable by Mercedes Lackey (Titan Books, 2016)

Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

A Study in Sable is the eleventh novel in Mercedes Lackey's fantasy series The Elemental Masters. The series, set in the Victorian era, posits the existence of those who, due to a personal overabundance of one of the four main elements (fire, earth, air and water), possess magical powers. These individuals are trained to control their element, assisted by fantastical familiars, unique to each magician. Their relationship with these familiars is at the core of the students' training and testing.

This novel is centred around the paranormal adventures of two young women, Sarah Lyon-White, a medium, and Nan Killian, a psychic, both of whom are agents of the Elemental Fire Master, Lord Alderscroft. They share a flat with two highly intelligent birds, Grey, a parrot, and Neville, a raven, as well as Suki, a young girl they rescued from an exploitative and fraudulent clairvoyant.

The story has several strands, the main threads also involving Dr John and Mary Watson, Masters of Air and Water respectively, and also, therefore, Sherlock Holmes. It is against Holmes' extremely logical nature to accept the reality of such powers, but Nan does a very impressive job of convincing him of her abilities, and he asks for her assistance at several points during the novel. Sarah's help, meanwhile, is sought by Magdalena, a melodramatic German opera singer, who claims to be haunted by spirits every night and unable to sleep. She seems to have the ability to cast a spell of extreme devotion over anyone she wishes for as long as needed. This gains her much in the way of expensive gifts from male admirers, but drives a wedge between Nan and Sarah, when the latter also appears hypnotised by her new employer and uninterested in her old friends. It is no surprise, therefore, when Magdalena is later discovered to have lorelei ancestry.

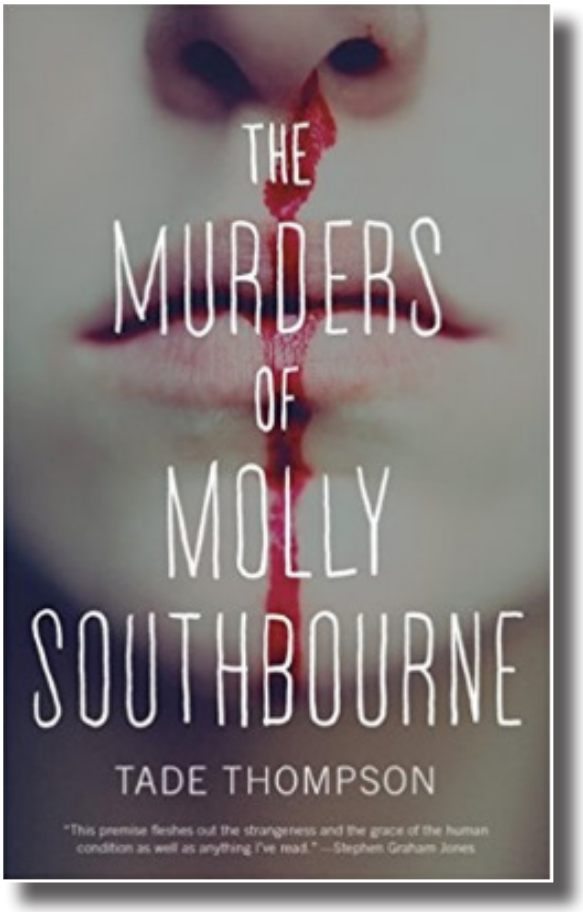


The other narrative threads involve a very dangerous individual who appears to be working for one Professor Moriarty and the doings of an untrained master resident in the countryside outside London.

The novel is written in a highly readable style, is well paced and actually very enjoyable. The characters are mainly well depicted, and the reader does come to care about their fate, while being firmly confident that they will escape any peril they may encounter. One thing that did jar somewhat was the occasional use of American idiom in combination with the characters' 19th Century English speech patterns. Obviously, this is less of a problem in previous novels set in the United States.

All in all, this is a highly entertaining, if slightly escapist, read from one of our best known and very popular fantasy authors.

The Murders of Molly Southborne
by Tade Thompson
(Tor, 2017)
Reviewed by Gary Dalkin



The Murders of Molly Southbourne is a short, sharp shock of a novella, and quite possibly you've never read anything like it. The titular Molly has a unique problem - whenever she bleeds, wherever the blood falls, a replica or duplicate 'Molly' will, within an hour or a day, grow. This 'Molly' will be placid, even friendly for a little while, but sooner or later will turn violent, attempting to kill the original Molly.

Fortunately, growing up on a farm, there are plenty of places to bury the bodies, and with a mother who appears to be some sort of ex-Russian special forces agent, training in self-defence, and offence, is readily to hand.

After a disorientating prologue, the story turns to Molly's past and tells the story of her childhood, her learning the rules of disposing of 'Mollys', her teenage exploration of sex, and eventual leaving home for university, where she begins research which might offer some sort of explanation for her very strange life.

There is a kind of scientific explanation, or if not explanation, something which passes for justification. But in truth the reader either accepts the situation and follows Molly's adventures, or not. The result is a breakneck thriller, a sort of Buffy the Zombie Slayer meets Children of Men, but different.

Molly herself is ruthlessly pragmatic, which given her situation is probably a necessity, and if you accept the premise then Thompson extrapolates from the core idea with ruthless efficiency, never wasting a word. There are moments when things just happen and it is not entirely clear why, but then given Molly's state of mind at the time, this is understandable.

Demonstrating how anything repeated enough times can become normal, the endless slaughter becomes, for Molly, routine, with rarely much sense of danger. Her life finally becomes as routine and tiresome as many others, with a well-captured sense of Molly being trapped and exhausted simply by the business of living - just with rather more protective protocols and extreme violence than most of us are likely experience.

Though this short book is deliberately unclear as to where it is set, it certainly feels far more like the UK than the US, but being published by Tor and therefore presumably edited by an American editor, it is a little jarring to find that, for example, there is a mailman rather than a postman, a truck rather than a lorry or van. Just incidental details, but they add to the alienating nature of Molly's world.

Like the author's novella 'Gnaw' in the anthology *Five Stories High*, *The Murders of Molly Southbourne* can be read in an hour or two and is fast, inventive, gripping, and in places completely mad. It certainly sticks in the memory, something of an original in a marketplace filled with forgettable replica fiction.

Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction
by Chris Pak

(Liverpool University Press, 2016)

Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

There is an obvious synergy between science fiction and ecocriticism (literary criticism with an ecological frame of reference), but it has not hitherto been pursued as energetically as one might hope. In an SF milieu fascinated by the advance of electronic technologies, and rent between liberal defence of cultural diversity and politically regressive libertarianism, it's easy for the environment to be forgotten. Just like in society at large. So this is a timely moment for the publication of Chris Pak's first monograph, which Eric Otto calls 'the first study to trace the historical development of environmental science fiction'.

The topic of terraforming provides a clear focus that brings in many themes of environmentalist and postcolonialist thought. The book is structured as a chronological sequence of five meaty chapters, in each of which Pak presents some critical concepts apposite to the time period in question and then applies these to analysing selected texts in detail. Underpinning his analysis are certain pivotal ideas from Mikhail Bakhtin – most crucially Bakhtin's theory of 'dialogism', which bespeaks the ethical importance of cultivating responsive engagement among a multiplicity of voices. The novel as a form is well suited to advancing dialogic understanding; but Pak expands the scope of this by calling upon the notion, from Damien Broderick, of a 'megatextual' dialogue between separate SF texts. So, for example, we see in the early 1950s a cluster of seminal novels tackling the same idea of colonising and terraforming another planet, but swinging different ways in the values they mobilise: in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* a pastoral utopia may be in reach if you can truly embrace that which is other; Robert Heinlein in *Farmer in the Sky* advocates the heroic libertarian endeavour of the colonial frontier; and in *The Sands of Mars* Arthur Clarke undercuts Bradbury's and Heinlein's romanticism with an ironic yet still hopeful awareness of the foibles of human nature.

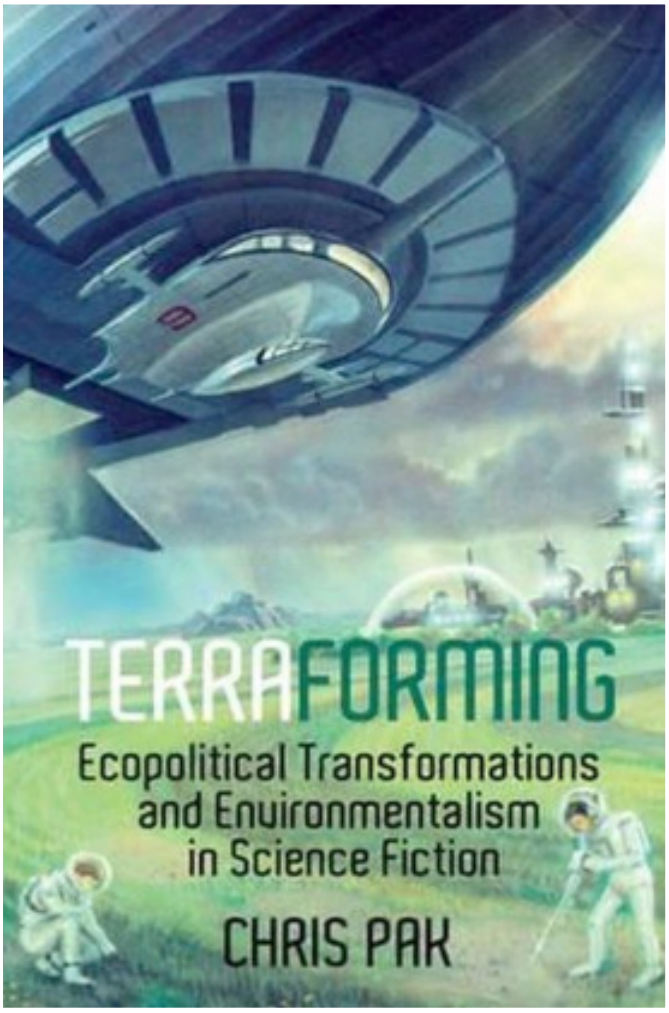
Another concept from Bakhtin that Pak repeatedly uses is the 'chronotope' – a particular expression of dynamics of time and space. The deployment of chronotopes in dialogic relations engages the particularity of physical environments in the negotiation of values that underpin actions: 'Terraforming is an especially relevant motif with regard to the concept of the chronotope because it collapses textual world-building (imagined worlds) with representations of physical world-building. In Bakhtinian terms this involves the construction of a global chronotope (the planet to be terraformed) within a dialogic text that puts into play multiple interacting voices and their relationships to the environment.' Thus terraforming is a form of 'landscaping', understood to encompass both modification and interpretation of natural spaces to suit human purposes. Two other core concepts informing Pak's analysis are: James Lovelock's 'Gaia' thesis that the Earth as a living planet can be seen physiologically as akin to a single organism; and the 'pastoral' as a literary form that SF has recycled in stories of colonisation.

If the book has an overarching argument, I think it is an emergent sense that the megatextual dialogue of SF relating to terraforming has, over the past century, produced incrementally more sophisticated insight into various aspects of environmental ethics and politics. Some day the ethics of terraforming other planets may become a real-world issue, but in our lifetimes terraforming serves mainly as thought experiment and metaphor reflecting back on environmental questions on our own planet. Pak's account begins with pre-terraforming stories that feature geo-engineering on Earth, as in Wells's *The Shape of Things to Come*, or rape-like 'terragouging' that reveals the Earth to have a sensitivity prefiguring Gaia theory, as in Conan Doyle's 'When the World Screamed'. Later, amidst the various terraforming narratives, he examines Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, which, though set in North America and not really about terraforming, advances ecopolitical ideas that influence the lineage of terraforming stories. Everything then comes together in the last chapter, devoted to Robinson's *Mars* trilogy – which is a tour de force of dialogism, both internally, in the engagement between different characters' views, and megatextually, through Robinson's knowledge of the SF canon; and in which the development of an open-ended utopian process on Mars eventually contributes to ameliorating the situation on Earth, whose problems of overpopulation are never going to be solved by mass migration off planet.

Finally, the twenty-first-century terraforming stories examined in Pak's 'Conclusion' return the focus to Earth, as in *Terraforming Earth* – written by Jack Williamson nearly sixty years after he coined the term 'terraform' in 'Collision Orbit' in 1942. Pak's introductory definitions clarify that 'terraforming' can apply to the Earth as well as other planets. This, together

with his emphasis on 'pantropy' – the modification of human beings to suit new environments – as a recurring corollary of terraforming, made me realise that whereas one may see the aim of terraforming as to adapt raw nature, whether on Earth or elsewhere, to suit human desires, we may also perceive human activity as having produced such alienating environments on Earth that our planet needs some terraforming to restore its ecology and habitability.

Terraforming is an extremely erudite work. Pak does well in limiting his use of the kind of jargon that makes some contemporary criticism impenetrable, yet his prose style is rather dry, perhaps deferring to received notions that serious scholarship must convey an appearance of objective authority. The clarity of his argumentation is sometimes also muddied by slightly laborious phrasing – which Liverpool University Press might be expected to address with more assertive copy-editing in a book priced at £80. Nevertheless, this is an important book and will be essential reading for scholars of ecocriticism and of the development of ideas in SF.



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THE BSFA REVIEW

EDITED BY SUSAN OKE

ISSUE 5
WINTER 2017