

ISSUE 3
SPRING 2018

THE BSFA REVIEW

EDITED BY SUSAN OKE



HAND OF
GLORY

SUSAN BOULTON

THE BSFA REVIEW

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SPRING 2018

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VIEW FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome to the third edition of *The BSFA Review*, and the first to be issued in our 60th anniversary year. The BSFA has been producing publications throughout its history, and reviews have always been at the heart of these. Though the very first issue of *Vector* in 1958 (edited by E.C. Tubb) was more occupied with contemporary American and British magazines, it was the second issue (edited by Terry Reeves) that was the first to contain reviews of novels – four, all penned by John D. Roles, covering books by Rex Gordon, Robert A. Heinlein, Charles Eric Maine and Roger Manvell.

Vector developed into an esteemed critical journal, and we have been proud to include an array of different voices, all united in respect and admiration for the science-fiction genre, and that was reflected in the range of reviews we published. One thing we have noticed is that throughout the BSFA's history, the appreciation for book reviews has never dented. We are extremely aware that reviews are important for both readers and writers, and within our remit is a responsibility for what we do with the space we afford reviews. This is why I see the creation of a separate *BSFA Review* last year as a positive move, as it gives us the opportunity to include more books by a wider range of writers and more reviewer voices.

We have the advantages not afforded to more commercial spaces in that we can publish reviews for books that are from big names, indie presses, self-published books, YA, collections, novellas, anthologies, and we can make efforts to ensure that diverse creators and fans are represented... we are unlimited in our scope. We are not fettered by release dates. We cannot be bribed to “face out” or

table-stack a particular title (as this is a booklet, not a shop, and such tactics would not work). There are disadvantages in being a non-commercial publication too, of course, and we are dependent on volunteers, but we have the ethos of being as welcoming and inclusive as we can to our reviewers and the works we cover. I hope that is clear when you read the reviews (and know that I'm not just saying that because one of *my* books has been reviewed rather nicely within these pages).

We are lucky to have a team of dedicated reviewers, but if you would like to join them please get in touch with editor **Susan Oke** (smayoke@gmail.com) with a sample of your writing and suggestions of what you'd like to review.

Donna Bond (aka Donna Scott)
Chair of BSFA

**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:**

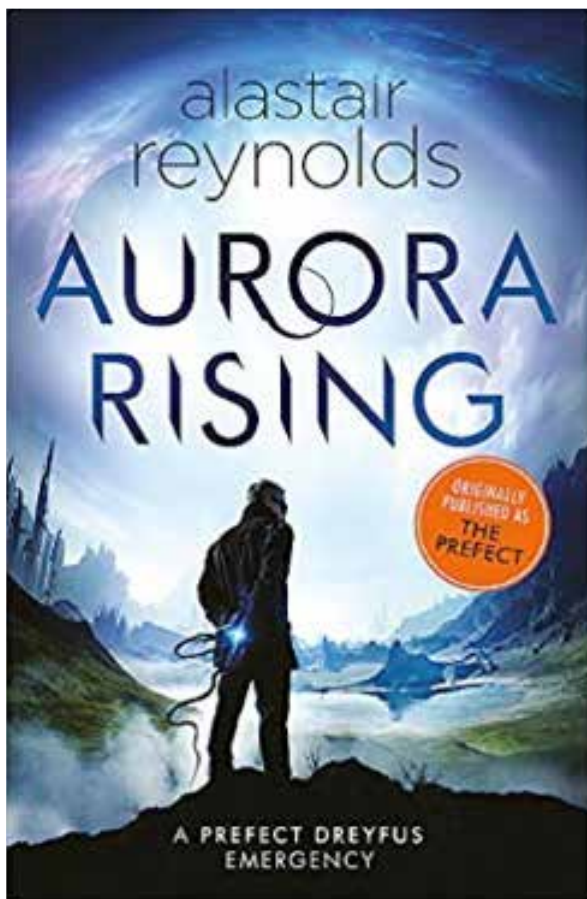
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Aurora Rising by Alastair Reynolds

(Gollancz SF, 2017)

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

I jumped into the e-book of Alastair Reynolds' *Aurora Rising* without glancing at the cover or paying attention to any publicity or even the blurb on the back. I then spent the first fifty or sixty pages with a steadily growing concern that this was all a bit familiar. So, it was a relief, when I finally checked, to realise that *Aurora Rising* isn't a new book, it's a new edition of *The Prefect* (first published in 2007). It has been re-released ahead of a sequel, *Elysium Fire*, which is coming in 2018. To be fair to the publisher (and author) this is made clear on the cover, so this confusion was not their fault, it was mine.



However, despite feeling a bit foolish, it was interesting to return to a book I first read ten years ago. I remember quite clearly looking forward to the release of *The Prefect*. It marked a return by Reynolds to the universe created in *Revelation Space* for the first time since 2003's *Absolution Gap*. Reynolds' first four novels remain, for me, one of the most impressive achievements

of British space opera and while I'd liked the two novels Reynolds had published in between (*Pushing Ice* and *Century Rain*) I was, fannishly, keen to return to the familiar.

Ten years on, my recollection of *Aurora Rising/The Prefect* was a little vague. I remembered some details vividly: the cool whiphounds – the Panoply's multi-purpose weapon of choice; the crucifixion of a Conjoiner captain on the hull of his doomed spaceship; and the distinctly unlikely way one of the characters escapes from a siege inside an orbital habitat. I had a less firm grasp on the details of the plot, a detective story that starts with the investigation of the destruction of a single orbital habitat and the murder of 960 citizens and quickly expands into an even bigger threat. Prefect Dreyfus uncovers a plot to take control of The Glitter Band – a collection of ten thousand semi-autonomous habitats orbiting the planet Yellowstone. He reveals multiple conspiracies within the Panoply, the closest thing The Glitter Band has to a police force; battles one rogue artificial intelligence, Aurora, determined to protect her own existence at any cost; and solves the riddle of the Clocksmith, a tortured AI that went on a killing spree more than a decade earlier.

I remember liking, but not loving, *Aurora Rising/The Prefect* on first reading. I suspect, on reflection, that I was expecting a book that had the vast scale of previous Revelation Space outings and this is a more contained book. Also, I think, that in books such as *Chasm City* I had created for myself a vision of The Glitter Band before its harrowing that was grander and weirder and more complex than it was possible for this prequel to deliver. But then, from this distance, I can concede that it was probably impossible that any book could meet my expectations.

On re-reading *Aurora Rising* I feel that my first impressions didn't pay sufficient attention to what is good about this book. I am, most of all, struck by how much fun I had on my return. The plot moves quickly and builds intriguingly, unpeeling layers of deception and mixing in regular doses of set-piece action. I found Dreyfus far more engaging this time around – perhaps because I have gotten closer to him in age – but also in my first reading I missed how much Reynolds plays around with the novel's central philosophical question: How much freedom should a society surrender to ensure its safety?

Dreyfus is rigid in his adherence to the rule of law and to the need to abide by the decisions of the democratic institutions the Panoply was created to protect. Aurora, however, has predicted a disaster that will soon destroy The Glitter Band. Her spy within the Panoply argues that freedoms are worthless if they allow civilisation's destruction and giving them up so that Aurora's superior intellect can keep everyone safe is a price well worth paying. This argument – between freedom and security – is familiar to the point of cliché, but what makes this novel more nuanced and more interesting is that, first, we know that the bad guys are right. We've seen in the earlier Revelation Space books that The Glitter Band will be destroyed and that perhaps restrictions and controls could have saved it and its citizens from destruction. And, second, in a side plot Dreyfus's deputy, Thalia Ng, is forced to abandon the niceties of democracy and become a dictator to, successfully, rescue a small band of survivors from a crisis created by Aurora's plan.

But if the argument for unfettered democracy is undercut, so too is the notion of benign dictatorship. Aurora is only really concerned with her own safety and her attempted coup quickly becomes a mass slaughter. Meanwhile, in battling Aurora, the leaders of the Panoply are also forced to make some difficult and complex decisions, balancing the lives of some citizens against the chance of saving others, stretching the limits of their authority and then exceeding them, as the crisis unfolds.

I got much more out of *Aurora Rising* the second time around. Alastair Reynolds has steadily become an even stronger writer over the last decade and his recent books – The Poseidon's Children trilogy and last year's young adult novel *Revenger* – are amongst his strongest works. So, once again, I'm looking forward to going back to the Revelation Space universe in *Elysium Fire*, though hopefully with a clearer-eyed set of expectations. The next adventure of Prefect Dreyfus can't come soon enough.



BSFA magazine for writers
(1979 - present)



The critical journal for fans, artists
and academics (1958 - present)



BSFA review of books
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Raven Stratagem by Yoon Ha Lee

(Solaris, 2017)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

If you read *Ninefox Gambit*, the first part of Yoon Ha Lee's *Machineries of Empire* series, then you'll already know that – SPOILER ALERT! – the mad, ancient General Shuous Jedao has survived and possessed the young mathematician Kel Cheris. The "Ninefox Gambit" worked and the two have hijacked an entire Kel fleet (or "Swarm"). But a Hafn fleet is waging war upon the Hexarchate which, despite its huge size and long history, is in a brittle, fragile state, and only Jedao's hijacked swarm, heading towards the inscrutable Hafn fleet, can hope to stop them.

Always assuming, of course, that *is* his plan. A frustratingly unpredictable and unquestionably brilliant general, Jedao is always three steps ahead of his opponents. But why steal a swarm *from* the Hexarchate if your plan is to defend the Hexarchate? And, with chaos and collapse imminent, is his mutiny the last, best hope for the Hexarchate or its worst nightmare?

No one knows – not even Jedao's new crew, rendered loyal to their new General by the "Formation Instinct" instilled in every Kel that renders them almost literally incapable of disobeying a superior officer.

Part of that crew is General Kel Khiruev, the Swarm's former commander. She first tries to stop, then to understand, this enigmatic new leader. Against them is Hexarch Mikodez, leader of the Shuos faction, politicking to hold together his corner of the Hexarchate against the invaders, against Jedao and the schemes of his rivals; and Kel Brezan, sole escapee from the compromised swarm, a "crash hawk" mistrusted due to his lack of formation instinct, but on a mission to warn his superiors and destroy Jedao.

All three narratives weave together into a subtle, often impenetrable, tale of intrigue and politics. There are deadly spaceships, huge stations and strange "Calendrical" technologies, but these are most often a mere backdrop to the machinations of Jedao and the

leaders of the six Hexarchate factions. Space opera, yes, but with the *opera* very much to the fore. If you're looking for the "ravening rays" of yore then best look elsewhere.

The "Machineries of Empire" universe is a fascinating and unfathomable one, governed by what feels like Magic rather than Science. Sure, it's "space magic", but space magic with very rigid and definite rules.

It's that "space magic" which drew me to *Ninefox Gambit* in the first place and fascinated me throughout – the sense that Clarke's third law ("Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic") didn't apply here; that this really *was* some kind of alien universe, its laws subverted through simple belief and advanced mathematics. It made *Ninefox Gambit* feel properly strange and new. Inevitably, as the second part of a series, *Raven Stratagem* feels less novel; there's no longer quite the sense that literally anything might happen next: of being thrown in at the very deep end, adrift in a book, struggling to stay afloat and make sense of the terminology and the bizarre technology that surrounds you.

Partly this is because the universe is now more familiar, both on larger and smaller scales. The concepts of "winnowing engines", "boxmoths", "bannering" and so forth have been codified somewhat. We may not know what they *are* but we know what they *do*, even if they're not quite everyday (for the uniquely messed-up values of "everyday" that science fiction produces, of course!) There's at least some understanding of what a winnowing engine can and (probably) can't do. We're also more familiar with the conventions and behavioural codes aboard Hexarchate vessels - these conventions are broadened with the introduction of viewpoints from outside the *Hierarchy of Feasts'* crew, such as the ruling Hexarchs. But what had previously seemed novel and strange is now mostly reduced to background, the foreground taken up with a more conventional game of thrones.

Raven Stratagem is still an accomplished and enjoyable novel, depicting a tense game of interstellar politics worthy of John Le Carre, but I wanted a little more Ian Fleming-esque insanity.

Raven Stratagem is still an accomplished and enjoyable novel, depicting a tense game of interstellar politics worthy of John Le Carre, but I wanted a little more Ian Fleming-esque insanity.



Binti: The Night Masquerade

by Nnedi Okorafor

(Tor, 2018)

Reviewed by Kerry Dodd

Nnedi Okorafor is a monumental force; an irrefutable presence within Science Fiction, Fantasy and other streams of speculative fiction. Arguably her status has only grown and shows no signs of stopping anytime soon – her first adult novel *Who Fears Death* (2010) won the 2011 World Fantasy Award and has been commissioned by HBO to be adapted for television. Her critical success has arguably grown in the wake of the immensely popular *Binti* series, which itself won the Nebula and Hugo award for best novella. These are a collection of vibrant texts that have quickly become a cornerstone of discussions within contemporary SF.

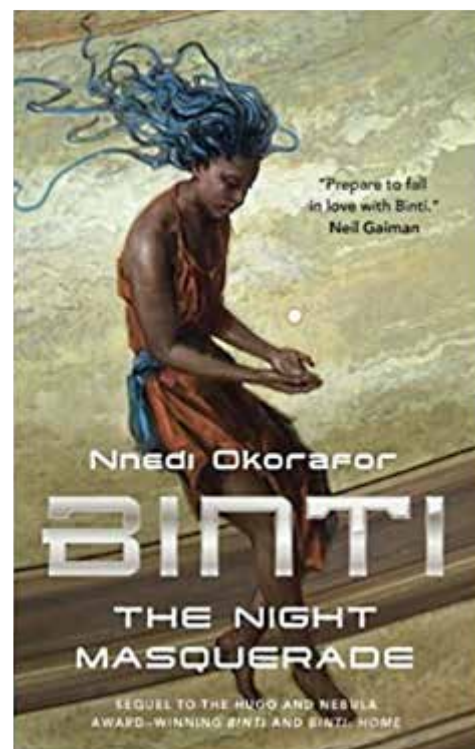
Binti: The Night Masquerade marks the third entry and closing chapter on the titular character's development. Binti, a master harmonizer of the Himba tribe, must not only resolve who she is as a person, but where she sits within the wider expanses of the cosmic universe. The first novella, *Binti*, followed the protagonist's odyssey from her home to the interstellar and multivalent Oomza University; a journey fraught with both physical obstacles and the negotiation of Binti's schism from her tribe's traditional lifestyle. The sequel *Binti: Home* charted the character's struggle as she attempts to create balance and symbiosis between the various parts of her identity, a spiritual wandering which takes her back to her home planet to undertake the traditional pilgrimage expected of women from her tribe. By *Binti: The Night Masquerade* however, Binti has come to question even the foundations of who she is – her three stage journey marks her departure, return and finally, in a sense, *becoming* home.

For indeed home is an integral part of the series. Binti struggles through the whole series to understand who she is. Part Himba, Meduse, Enyi Zinariya and arguably more, she feels these various elements pulling her in different, conflicting directions. One of the stark opening remarks that Binti tries 'too hard to be everything, please everyone', has a particular resonance beyond the text itself: how can we stay integral to the foundations of who we are and who we become? Her eventual resolution that she can be all of these individually and simultaneously, without necessarily placing one above the other, is a particularly poignant message on how tradition, change, adaptation and progress may be experienced. For Binti this novel marks her eventual realisation of where she stands

within the vastness of cosmic space, the depths of which Okorafor deftly navigates with a light touch.

Picking up almost immediately where *Binti: Home* concluded, the presence of the Night Masquerade – a spiritual entity which heralds profound change and thought to be seen only by Himba men – reveals another side to Binti as she travels to meet her grandmother and the Enyi Zinariya tribe. Throughout this movement, Binti's prejudice itself comes under scrutiny, as Okorafor's narrative challenges how the perception of the 'Desert People' as 'savages' in fact turns out to mark their vastly developed technological standing in the wake of their ancient and deeply secret meeting with an alien race. As such, the series stands not only as a challenge to who Binti is herself, but the attitudes of the reader themselves.

Binti hinted at an infinitely complex and multifaceted universe. Okorafor's writing has a particular vibrancy which contains a macroscopic perspective embedded within even the most minute asides. *The Night Masquerade* brings an appropriate and satisfying conclusion to the series, although one which perhaps becomes a little too ambitious towards the end, as more and more factors are introduced with little exploration. Yet, this is certainly a rich universe in which many further tales could be told – one which is also sure to be the centre of many SF debates, particularly around Afrofuturism. Published in January, *The Night Masquerade* starts off what promises to be a fantastical year in SF literature for 2018.



Artificial Condition by Martha Wells
(Tor, 2018)

Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

“It sounded like a great idea to go if you wanted to be murdered.”

This is the second of the Murderbot diaries, a series of novellas by Martha Wells. Having devoured the first, I leaped like a demon onto the review copy of the second. Out in May 2018 (sorry if you have to wait).

Just to recap, Murderbot is a SecUnit, a part-human, part-machine construct, that has hacked its own governor module. It named itself as a consequence of a massacre in which it killed numerous humans, although following a mind-wipe and reconstructive surgery it no longer remembers exactly what happened. In particular, it can't remember whether it hacked the governor module before the massacre (in which case it could have been responsible) or afterwards. If it was afterwards, then the massacre was the impetus for Murderbot to self-emancipate, which is philosophically important for the series and for the society. Following the events in the first book, Murderbot is now a free agent, although technically under the control/protection of its owner, who has carefully not tried to find it.

Murderbot's plan is to return to the site of the events that led it to adopt its name and find out what really happened. Unfortunately, the place has been deliberately wiped off the maps of the planet, and Murderbot needs an employment contract to get down there.

Looking for a job as a security consultant, Murderbot is interviewed by three hapless mineral technologists, whose files have been stolen by their previous employer, a mining company on the planet in question. The employer has offered them the files in return for giving up their signing-on bonus but insists on handing them over in person. As Murderbot delicately asks, “So, do you think there's another reason Tracey wants you to do this exchange in person, other than... killing you?”. The mineral technologists decide to go

anyway. The plot develops from there, but I won't go into it in order to avoid spoilers.

There are so many reasons to love this series: Murderbot's developing personality, its sardonic sense of humour, its need to retreat into comfort viewing of entertainment feeds.

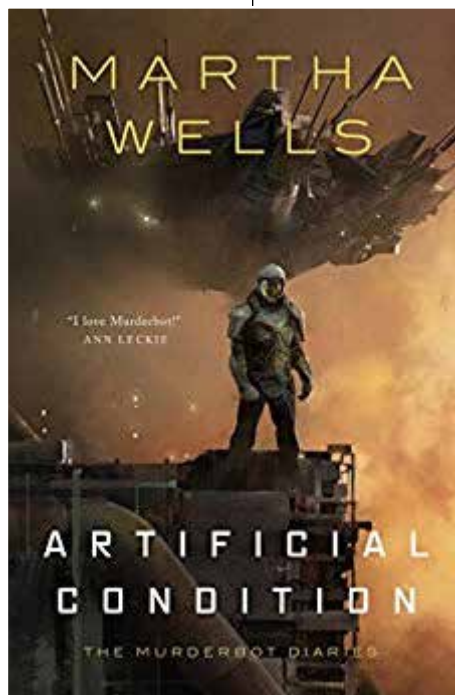
“I was actually watching episode 206 of *Sanctuary Moon*, which I'd already seen twenty-seven times. Yes, I was a little nervous.”

We find out more details about ComfortUnits (or sexbots, as Murderbot calls them). If you think that life as a SecUnit is grim, life as a ComfortUnit seems several grades worse. And there's a genuinely moving moment when Murderbot finds out exactly what did happen during the massacre.

We get all this excitement and terrific writing too. I can't overpraise the accuracy of Wells's prose; its lucidity, its brevity – and yet she manages to convey so much about the society, the environment and the characters with never a word wasted.

Abigail Nussbaum said recently (paraphrasing Aaron Bady) that “all robot stories are ultimately about slavery”, but it turns out that Martha Wells has some good stories to tell about slavery. There are certainly pointers in the story to what may be going to happen next. Verbatim, what Bady actually said was, “robot stories are, always and forever, allegories about worker revolts, especially coerced workers (e.g. slaves)”. It may be that Murderbot is the first construct to self-emancipate, but there are mentions of “rogue” SecUnits in the text, and it appears to be a known (and feared) phenomenon. Murderbot explains: “‘Unsecured’ is what they call rogue SecUnits when they want humans to listen and not just start screaming.” However, their existence seems more frequent in fiction (in this universe) than in actuality.

It seems fairly clear that the Murderbot diaries are heading, through the emancipation of individual constructs, towards some societal change in their status, and I'm very much looking forward to seeing how the author is going to handle this.



***Flame Deluge: A Canticle for Leibowitz* by
Andrew Ravensdale**

(Ravensdale & Co., 2007)

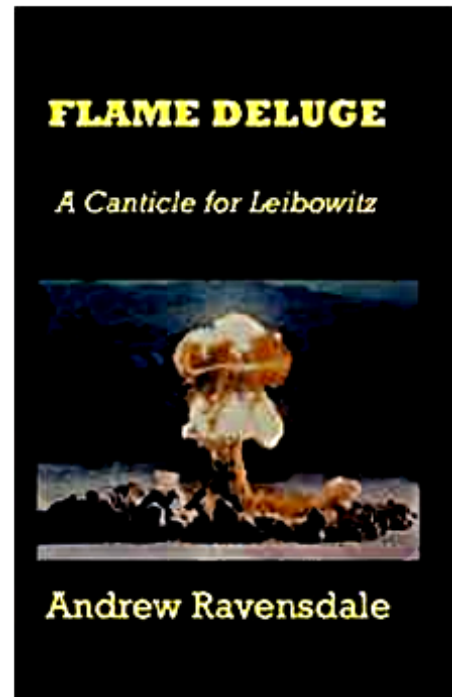
Reviewed by Duncan Lawrie

Flame Deluge has some interesting things to say, and plenty that I doubt, but all of it could really have been expressed better.

The sentences are short. All the sentences. Short paragraphs of five sentences abound. Each paragraph could be a single sentence. A long, well-constructed sentence.

Flame Deluge is, primarily, a critique of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M Miller Jr, a classic fix-up which won the Best Novel Hugo in 1961. The novel itself has three sections. Six centuries after the Flame Deluge destroyed global civilisation, the monks of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz preserve remnant material from our time. Another 600 years later, scientists are starting to piece together that knowledge to rebuild a scientific perspective. Finally, about 1800 years from the present, nuclear war brews again.

Ravensdale's approach to discussing the work combines biography with close reading of available material. However, the biographical record is rather thin, which leads to a lot of evaluation of the supposed interior state of the author. The central place of religion in the novel leads the discussion in some unusual directions. The Catholic doctrine of sin in the mid-twentieth century may seem an unlikely topic for the BSFA Review, but the original novel is set, mostly, in and around a Catholic monastery. Indeed, as Ravensdale quotes, Miller's Catholicity has been considered before as a wellspring for the work - though Ravensdale demonstrates that Miller was at odds with the Church at the time he was writing *Canticle*. Nevertheless, I would make more room to separate a writer's fiction, particularly plot events, from his own opinions. Ravensdale further states that "Miller argues that the desire to create technology constitutes Original Sin". Whilst this is a reasonable reading of the text, to state this was the author's belief rather than an element of the novel, seems a step too far. Ravensdale's further repeated judgements that Miller was a heretic seem a little strong. For example, Ravensdale argues that Miller was a heretic for his divorce, for cohabitation. He firmly states that Miller would have been asked to refrain from taking Communion as a result of his divorce, as this was Catholic practice. Still, it would be more common to describe Miller as a sinner rather



than a heretic. Perhaps I'm being too polite or allowing too much hope for redemption.

Ravensdale is on firmer ground when he writes more broadly about themes visible across Miller's oeuvre. Miller's work is described as technophile and evidenced by quotes from a variety of his short stories. From Ravensdale's descriptions, I am quite convinced that Miller's stories include regular themes of all male environments tending to violence, of rebellion against authority, of 'love interest' being the usual position of women. However, it is hard to see this as specific to Miller. Whilst I haven't surveyed 1950s American SF magazines, this sounds much like the expectations of the market in which Miller was writing.

The most unlikely section of this book is Ravensdale's close reading of Miller's story 'The Darfsteller' interpreting the work as a "literary suicide". That the story was published in 1955, whilst Miller published short stories for another two years, and rewrote *Canticle* in novel form until 1959 would seem to belie that. Nevertheless, it could be the case that Miller had, somewhat, lost heart after his fling with Judith Merrill and returned to his wife and to a more conventional life without science fiction. Equally, perhaps he simply ran out of stories, or enthusiasm, after a few years, much as Ravensdale explains Miller's failure of Catholicism.

Nevertheless, it is fascinating to read fresh views of one of the great SF novels of the twentieth century.

Iain M. Banks by Paul Kincaid
(University of Illinois Press, 2017)
Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

Iain Banks was a guest at a science fiction convention before he published any novels as science fiction. In 1986, he was invited to Mexicon II, as the author of *The Wasp Factory* and *Walking on Glass*. The experience was a great success and encouraged him to persist with the sf he had been working on since he was at university. *Consider Phlebas*, the first of the Culture novels to be published, as by Iain M. Banks, appeared in 1987.

This survey of Banks's work, part of a series on Modern Masters of Science Fiction, is by Paul Kincaid, who has known Banks and his work since that invitation to Mexicon II. Kincaid argues that the distinction between mainstream and sf in Banks's work is not clear-cut, so that it is impossible to give serious consideration to one strand without also dealing with the other. This survey accordingly covers all Banks's fiction, although from the perspective of the sf tradition and Banks's place within it, rather than the mainstream. Kincaid provides enough biographical information to set the context for the work, but this is a study of the fiction, not of the life. He draws attention to Banks's roots in Scottish fantastic literature, with particular reference to Alistair Gray's *Lanark*, and considers other influences. Ken MacLeod was a close friend from Banks's schooldays and both read the criticism of John Clute and M. John Harrison in *New Worlds*, with their vision of a new wave of science fiction.

Kincaid explains Banks's role in breaking the mould of space opera as perceived by those critics. Instead of militaristic, hierarchical stories about great men, the Culture novels display a complex, liberal civilisation full of contradictions and challenges that cannot easily be resolved by action. This reinvention of space opera helped in a revival of the subgenre but also has

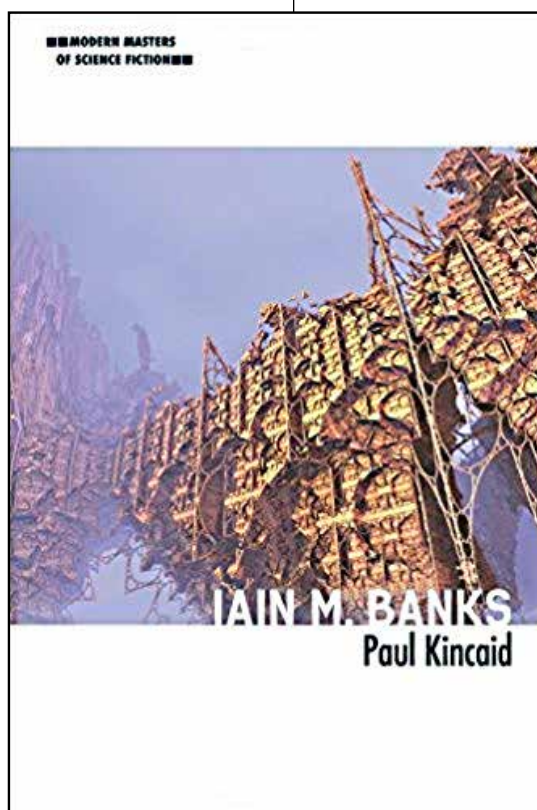
a wider resonance, in showing that it is possible to write interesting and exciting stories, which are not about saving the world. Also mentioned but not analysed in detail is Banks's influence on later writers, such as Stephen Baxter and Alistair Reynolds.

Another theme highlighted is Banks's interest in religion. He wrote from the standpoint of a committed atheist but from early on, in *Whit*, for example, he was interested in the impact of religious belief on the way people live. In later novels, he became increasingly drawn towards the depiction of different versions of heaven and hell and in the religious questions raised by the notion of 'subliming' – the transformation to the next stage of evolution which the civilisation of the Culture keeps backing away from. Even more fundamental to Banks's work is a concern with the family and the divided self, displayed from *The Wasp Factory* onwards.

Kincaid's plot analyses show how complex the novels are, both in structure and in world building, with elaborate detail and fantastical images which stay in the reader's mind. Kincaid looks at Banks's treatment of violence and the political and philosophical issues explored through the stories, particularly in the portrayal of the Culture as a kind of utopia. He also identifies humour as an important characteristic. Banks made his books fun to read, not just at the level of individual jokes but in the energy and excitement of the stories he told.

All of Banks's novels appeared on the bestsellers lists and earned him a devoted fan base. In the last few years, critical attention to his work has also increased. This book, however, is not just for academics. Kincaid has produced a highly readable and thought-provoking study. Not everyone will agree with all his interpretations but most people, whether or not they are already fans of Banks's work, will find plenty to interest them.

The book also includes a bibliography and an email interview from 2010 between Banks and Jude Roberts, in which Banks's own voice comes across clearly.



Living with the Living Dead: The Wisdom of the Zombie Apocalypse

by Greg Garrett

(Oxford University Press, 2017)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

There's a slightly illicit sense of gratification when reading academic books about pop culture: the sense that something seemingly unworthy might, in fact, be worth serious critical attention. I remember that same thrill after deciding to write my Master's thesis about science fiction and discovering, to my embarrassed amazement, that I wasn't the first ever person to think critically about the genre.

But even today a sense of justification accompanies the discovery that a favourite genre or trope has some literary merit or has at least earned itself some serious study. So, imagine my excitement when discovering *Living with the Living Dead*, Greg Garrett's study of the ways in which "...[t]he zombie apocalypse [...] has become an archetypal narrative for the contemporary world."

I couldn't wait to feast on Garrett's brains, devour his book and digest his body.

Of work, that is! Digest his body of work!

Garrett certainly knows his stuff: *Living with the Living Dead* is replete with references to most of the primary zombie texts, covering films, books, comics, games and even managing to bring in a smattering of poetry. But this is a book about the *idea* of the zombie apocalypse in our culture as a whole, not about particular works or authors. Garrett is asking *where* this explosion of interest has come from, and *why now*? What is this sudden prevalence of zombie apocalypses in popular culture telling us? What, he asks, is "The wisdom of the zombie apocalypse"?

And that's an interesting, slightly archaic choice of word: wisdom. This isn't a study or analysis, rather Garrett is asking what lessons we can draw from the behaviour of those still living humans trying to survive a zombie apocalypse. His book

is mostly a moral assessment of ourselves through a zombie lens. There are chapters addressing "How zombie stories encourage community," "The ethics of the zombie apocalypse" and even "Is the zombie apocalypse good or bad?"

Personally, I found the wisdom on offer a little limited. We've all come across the idea that zombies are a metaphor for us. We've all nodded sagely to the observation that the zombies in Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, aimlessly and endlessly wandering the shopping mall are us. The main difference being we're only, like, dead on the inside, man.

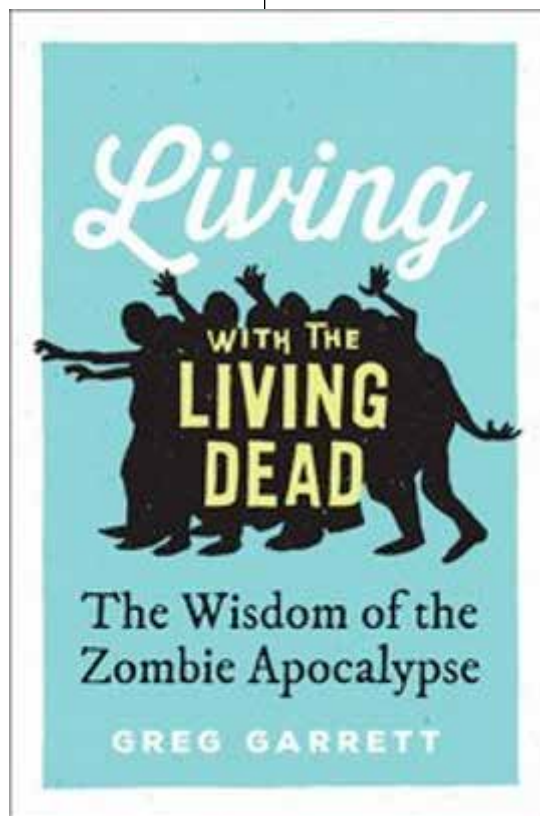
Most of the wisdom here is similarly unenlightening, along the lines of "*Zombies are popular villains because they have affinities to us yet seem alien.*" There are many references to other learned texts (and some not so learned); these suggest that the zombie apocalypse can, variously, reveal our basest instincts or our noblest, make monsters of us all, or shine a light upon many of our darkest fears. And the final conclusion is that these multiple zombie narratives "*all testify to the troubled times in which we live, and to our desire to make some sense of our experience by consuming narratives about times even more troubled than ours.*"

Basically, the sum of the wisdom in *Living with the Living Dead* is that things might seem bad now, but they could be worse.

Perhaps there is simply rather little to actually be said about the zombie apocalypse as a whole; perhaps

the fault isn't Garrett's, but a genre limited (despite some interesting and heroic efforts) by the fundamentally unlikely narrative of flesh-eating zombies? Or perhaps the fault is our own, we the reflected actors of the apocalypse: perhaps we're just not that interesting when faced with such a horrifically existential crisis?

I don't know. And sadly, despite having read *Living with the Living Dead*, I still don't know, because Garrett's book holds little real sustenance, and like zombies attempting to feed upon themselves, only leaves the reader hungrier than ever at the end of it.



***The Only Harmless Great Thing* by Brooke Bolander**

(St. Martins Press, 2018)

Reviewed by Arike Oke

A quiet, building, storm of a story, more of an extended short than a novella, this piece of work hits a nerve. Brooke Bolander is a writer whose stories have always evaded any easy placement. Her writing shimmers across genre, giving her imagination the wriggle room to explore complex structures and themes. Shortlisted for numerous big awards, could her slant towards the intangible be working against her in snatching a big prize or core audience? Or, perhaps, are we lacking in not being able to keep up with her modernist approach to the fantastic? Her prose in *The Only Harmless Great Thing* has shades of Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, that nebulous, structurally bizarre, take on grief, a modernist masterpiece. All this is not to say that you'd find *The Only Harmless Great Thing* a difficult or tricky read. At only 90 pages it can be read over lunch or huddled in a bus shelter while hiding from rain, or in bed with a hot water bottle and a glass of hot whiskey with honey. Really, it could be read anywhere, quickly. That's good, because there is a temptation to hold your breath while reading this book.

Bolander has drawn inspiration from the real-life story of the Radium Girls: a group of women who died from radiation poisoning as a result of using self-luminous paint to paint watch dials (what glows quite like radioactive paint?). The women worked for the United States Radium company and were instructed to use their lips to 'point' the brushes, thereby making them ingest the paint on top of their already unsafe level of exposure. They could've used cloths instead of their lips but, their employer thought, that would be slower and mean fewer watch dials could be painted.

Another inspiration for Bolander's story was another historical figure: Topsy. Topsy was an elephant killed in 1903 at Coney Island amusement park. The poisoning,

strangulation and public electrocution of the female elephant came after she gained a reputation as being 'bad', despite having been provoked into violent behaviour by mistreatment from her human handlers. Is it important to know of these historic injustices in order to read Bolander's book? Probably not, although the story she tells is richer for the knowing.

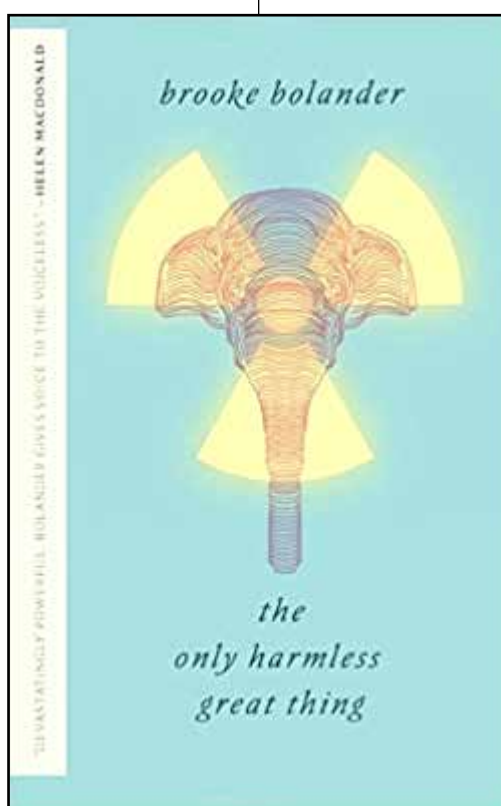
The Only Harmless Great Thing interlaces the stories of Topsy, an elephant tasked with painting watch dials with radioactive paint, her handler Regan who had previously done the same job, Furmother-With-The-Cracked-Tusk who is a mammoth searching for stolen stories, and Kat, who is negotiating on behalf of humans with an elephant representative. The prose is tight and overwhelming one moment, then flowing and poetic the next. The contrast between the narratives exposes cracks in society's treatment of the Other. Questions are asked, are we doing the right thing? Do we know where we come from and why we do the things that we do?

A rage simmers beneath the words. The central injustice in the book has already happened. Its effect radiates into the other narratives, but can it change them? Perhaps that's one thing that can be pinned down about Bolander's style, that it will affect the reader. You will be changed as a result of reading this book.

Bolander's book is also indelibly, unapologetically, female.

Every primary character is female. Each story within the book is female. The males within have agency, but as destructive forces. As a feminist text it stands up. It champions the value of women's stories, and women's power to move history forward. It posits the idea of identity being found solidly within the female. The female aspect of the text nests within the thrust of the narratives. It can't be separated out, but neither does it slow down the pace or obscure the clarity of the characterisation or world building.

The Only Harmless Great Thing is a well-balanced novella that rises to the challenges it sets for itself and challenges its readers to do the same. Are you up for the challenge? It isn't fun, but it's worth it.



***The Switch* by Justina Robson
(Gollancz, 2017)
Reviewed by Matt Colborn**

Justina Robson's *The Switch* operates on a number of levels. On the surface, it's a science fiction thriller concerning engineered humans pulling a series of increasingly audacious heists. At a deeper level, it asks searching questions about religion, nature versus nurture, free will and individual growth.

The story is set in the world of Harmony, a theocracy ruled by a engineer named Tecmaten. Tecmaten is the head of a religion called Alchemy that uses genetic science to produce 'ideal' or 'Exalted' human beings. The protagonist, Nico Perseid, is a reject who is gay despite being a designer human. Homosexuality is reviled in Harmony for ostensibly metaphysical reasons.

We begin the novel *in medias res* with Nico being sentenced to death for the murder of his employer, Dashain VanSant.

We then get flashbacks of Nico's life, starting when Two and he escaped from a state orphanage. Two — whom Nico names 'the brains of the outfit' — has also been rejected from society because of her lesbianism. The escapees seek refuge in a criminal zone named Chaontium, which is a slum run by criminal cartels.

Nico and Two soon become part of a child gang, and eventually join one of the cartels.

Having grown up, Nico becomes a fighter and a bodyguard, and subsequently Two and he are kidnapped by Dashain. Their 'employment' is a form of slavery, and Nico is used as a sex-slave by his employer. Meanwhile, Two has a clandestine affair with a woman named Tashin who promises that she can get them out. Nico agrees to have a form of alien tech implanted, a Switch. The next thing that he knows, he is on trial for VanSant's murder.

From here, the already complex plot develops a number of convolutions, the interpretation of which depends upon the assumptions we make about the nature of Harmony and its Theocratic dictatorship. We learn of alien worlds, and Earth, where Harmony is seen as backward and possibly criminal for its vio-

lations of human dignity. Harmony is only tolerated because it does not evangelise or attempt to spread its creed.

Nico learns much of this through the Switch, which provides him with telepathic contact with both

Tashin and a starship, with which he is now bonded. After his escape from execution, Nico is employed by the outworlders as a spy, meant to infiltrate Tecmaten's stronghold and confirm the rumours of engineered humans with mental superpowers. Having breached the stronghold, he meets an Alchemist named Isylon who becomes his lover.

The Switch is a clever title for this novel, which relies upon a number of baits and switches to achieve its effect. As Nico himself states: 'everything that I had lived in as absolute reality was a lie.' The purpose of Nico and

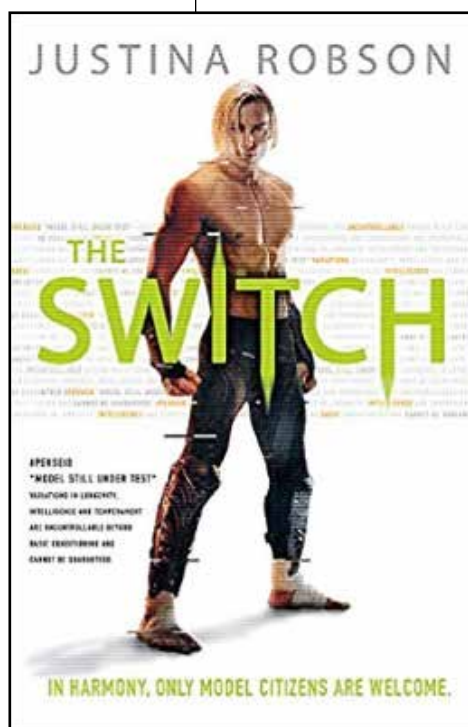
of Harmony itself is other than which we are led to believe.

For example, at one point Nico meets his Alchemist creator, who tells him that his homosexuality was not accidental but deliberate: 'I was trying to make strong people,' she says, 'the kind who don't follow everything like sheep.' His sexuality makes Nico an outsider, who is forced to question the nature of things because of his exclusion from mainstream society.

This raises pertinent questions concerning the relations of culture, society and biological constitution. It also challenges those who would use gene editing to eliminate personal 'flaws'; are we sure we want a population of uniform, 'normal' people?

The role of religion is also queried, being depicted as a system of control and a justification for arbitrary power. Nico's creator realises this, calling herself 'an agent of a theocratic oligarchy with no justification whatsoever.' Robson's point seems to be that genetic technology is dangerous in the hands of spurious and not especially benign ideologies.

The Switch forces the reader to question basic assumptions about culture, biology and the nature of the world in which they live. A powerful and thoughtful science fiction thriller.



**America City by Chris Beckett
(Gollancz, 2017)**

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

America, about a hundred years hence, and global warming has continued to have its impact on the world. The Eastern seaboard is now the Storm Coast, and to the west great swathes of the more southerly US states are now a dust bowl. In *America City*, Chris Beckett tackles the American attitude to its migrants head-on by making those migrants US citizens. This is not people coming from a foreign war, or coming over any border to improve their lot, these are Americans who have been dispossessed by the weather in their own country. The only areas where they could move to really don't want them.

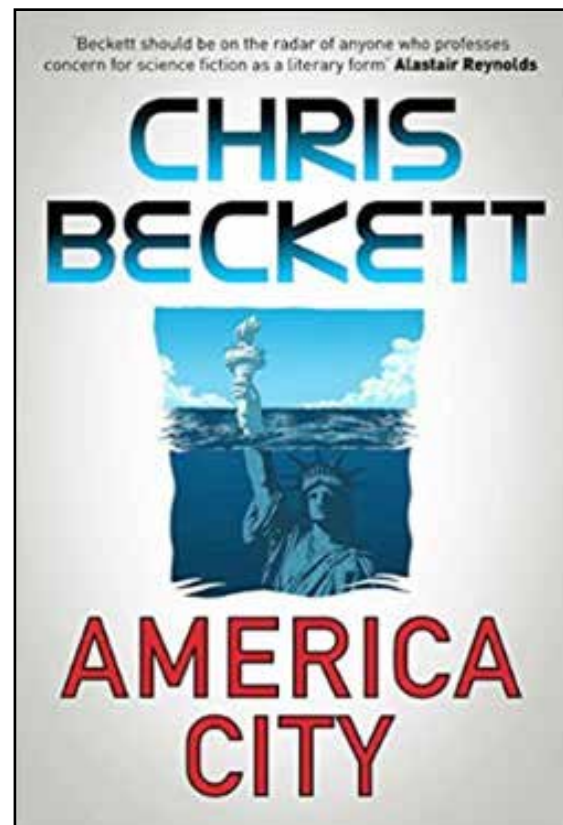
Into this situation comes Slaymaker, leader of the populist Freedom party, who believes that only a mass migration program setting up new towns and cities in the North West—the only remaining inhabitable part of the US—can alleviate the country's problems. However, his core vote is opposed to migration programs. Holly Peacock, a young publicist is enlisted to spin the idea into a vote-winner. Peacock has a liberal background and is usually a supporter of the incumbent Unity party.

Peacock spins out polls to the net and listens-in on what is essentially a neural internet feed. Much of public opinion is shaped by such feeds and, as has been experienced with Twitter, many of the more popular and radical feeds are not people, but AIs. Their *raison d'être* is not the spreading of opinion, but the gathering of listeners for commercial gain. It is in this realm that Peacock excels. She is a great manipulator of opinion and a scarily dispassionate judge of opinion. While the physical world is under the control of a changing climate, over which humanity now has little control, the world of ideas is considerably more malleable. It has been said that the greatest power one can hold is to change the way that someone thinks. If that power is raised from the individual to the entire population, then it may become almost unlimited. However, it can easily start to run away from the person wielding it. Peacock must confront the fact that she is working for a party that she is ideologically opposed to, in spite the fact that she supports what Slaymaker is attempting to do. The people in her home and social life act as sounding board for this inherent conflict. The stresses in her psyche are reflected through the stresses in her marriage and social life. In a very damaging way, she

chooses to step aside from the awkward questioning of her motivation.

Given that the Freedom party's core support would be opposed to the migration plan, and all Peacock's polling supports that, she is then forced to shift the focus. She does this by pointing out that Canada has considerably more open land, and a smaller population than the US. She feeds this out to the opinion formers of the net, some of which are under her direct control. The idea originates, in a relatively small way, in the belief that Canada is somehow the enemy. This starts to pick up unstoppable traction. Once planted, however flimsy the idea, the speed with which such ideas can gather and move far beyond the control of their originators is un-nerving. Having created a Frankenstein's Monster of ideas, Peacock, much like Frankenstein himself, finds herself unable to distance herself from them, with the commensurate impact on her own private world. The work she is doing may be achieving their goal, but the route to that goal is far from what she anticipated. The isolated intellectual bubble has burst and its contents spewed out.

Whilst *America City* is ostensibly about a major shift in the world due to environmental problems, it is the way that ideas and opinion can be formed and manipulated that takes centre stage. It is this that is truly scary.



***Best of British Science Fiction 2016* edited by
Donna Scott**

(NewCon Press, 2017)

Review by Gary Dalkin

This is the first volume of a hopefully ongoing new 'best of' series from NewCon Press (the volume covering 2017 has already been announced). In her introduction, editor Donna Scott notes that in order to make her selections she read several hundred short stories: 'I looked for stories that had great characters, believable voices and a real sense of place, and if the stories spoke to me about the Big Things of 2016, all the better.' The Big Things being Big Tragedy, Big Politics (Brexit and Trump) and Big Books.

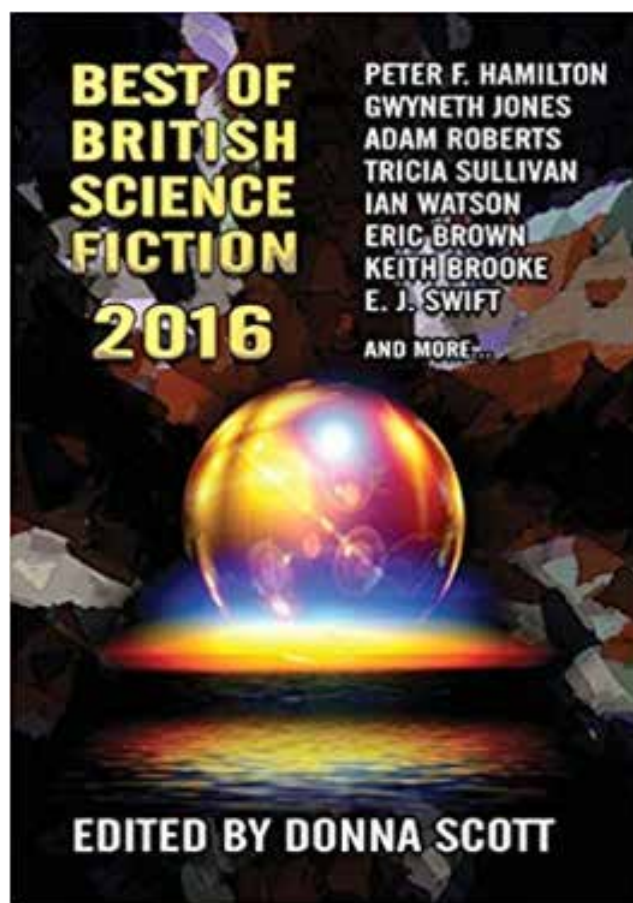
There are two dozen stories spread over 336 pages. They include some of the biggest names in British SF, and several writers previously unknown to me, and they span most facets of the genre from space opera to cyberpunk.

Are these the best British science fiction stories published in 2016? Not having read the hundreds of stories Donna Scott did in making her selections, all I can say is that there wasn't a story here I didn't enjoy, and I found several of them to be absolutely outstanding. I might quibble with the order of the stories as presented, as most of the very strongest works are towards the back of the book, an arrangement which might lead some readers to make an early assumption that, over all, the collection isn't as rich as it ultimately turns out to be. Which is not to say that there aren't some excellent stories elsewhere in the volume, only that it does, for this reader at least, have an increasingly powerful impact as one approaches the end of the book.

There isn't space to comment meaningfully on each of the 24 stories, and in any case it's always good to be able to read a short without any foreknowledge, and hopefully be pleasantly surprised. I'm just going to single out some of those stories which have either lingered most in my memory or seem most effectively to capture a sense of the mood of 2016 through the lens of SF.

'Joined', by Sarah Bryne, is a disorientating, moving and chilling technological ghost story exploring what happens if you link your mind to that of your partner, and then die. It is a quiet and thoughtful piece which feels horrifically plausible.

'Beyond the Heliopause' by Eric Brown and Keith



Brooke is a startling tale which pits an individual instance of loss of faith against a genuinely world-changing discovery. It's something of a Clarkian tale, infused with melancholy and wonder, and all the better for it.

Adam Roberts' 'Between Nine and Eleven' offers a typically ingenious take on what at first appears to be a conventional space opera conflict; while Liam Hogan's 'Ana' is a very short mind-bender. As the opening line has it, it is indeed 'weird, the things that can mess up a kid's head.'

With 2016's legacy--the intuition of a far darker future ahead now our country has been ruthlessly hijacked by Billionaires and Oligarchs--the heart of the collection proves to be a handful of stories addressing the end of the world, its aftermath and possible new beginnings. Often the world ends with a whisper, the center does not hold and no one notices or cares, as if it's all 'fake news'.

Adam Connors' story concerns a billionaire with an untreatable terminal illness and pulls a superb sleight of hand regarding our assumptions about the 'Possible Side Effects' of untested medical solutions. In so doing, he brilliantly illustrates that the obscenely rich differ from us in how much further they are prepared to go.

'How To Grow A Seed From Silence' is a striking bio-punk tale from Tricia Sullivan, deftly exploring the beginning of the end of one iteration of society and the tender shoots of its successor. It is as inventive and thoughtful a piece as we would expect from this fine writer.

In Paul Graham Raven's 'Staunch', post-collapse England is decidedly Brexited and the NHS has suffered terminally. All hope is not lost though, in what is essentially a classic redemption story set against a well-realised near future. In Den Patrick's 'People, Places, Things', it's as if reality itself has given up on humanity - and who could blame it given the past year? - a sedate apocalypse with echoes of one of the very best episodes of *The Twilight Zone*.

In two stories, 'The Apologists' by Tade Thomson, and 'Foreign Bodies' by Neil Williamson, aliens perhaps as flawed as us, but with more advanced technology, have already brought about the end of the world and are seeking, in very different ways, to make some sort of restitution. Thompson's story is as offbeat, inventive and morbidly funny as might be expected from the author of *Gnaw* and *The Murders of Molly Southbourne*, while the Williamson offers a touching and compassionate story of a sort of renewal and a kind of faith.

'The 10 Second War' by Michael Brookes is a rigorously imagined chronicle of a devastating conflict which could change the world in a moment, made all the more chilling by the implication that we might never know what happened.

Sylvia Spruck Wrigley's 'To Catch A Comet', offers, if not the end of the world, then the likely end of Brussels, brought about as much by bureaucratic inertia as the titular rock heading towards Europe. The story is told through a mordantly amusing exchange of emails. Ending the volume with a real emotional impact, E.J. Swift offers a 'Front Row Seat For The End of the World'. Which is like the Wrigley played straight, though not without humour.

The highest compliment I can pay Best of British Science Fiction 2016 is that I am already looking forward to the sequel. And as anyone who knows me, that's a very unusual thing indeed.

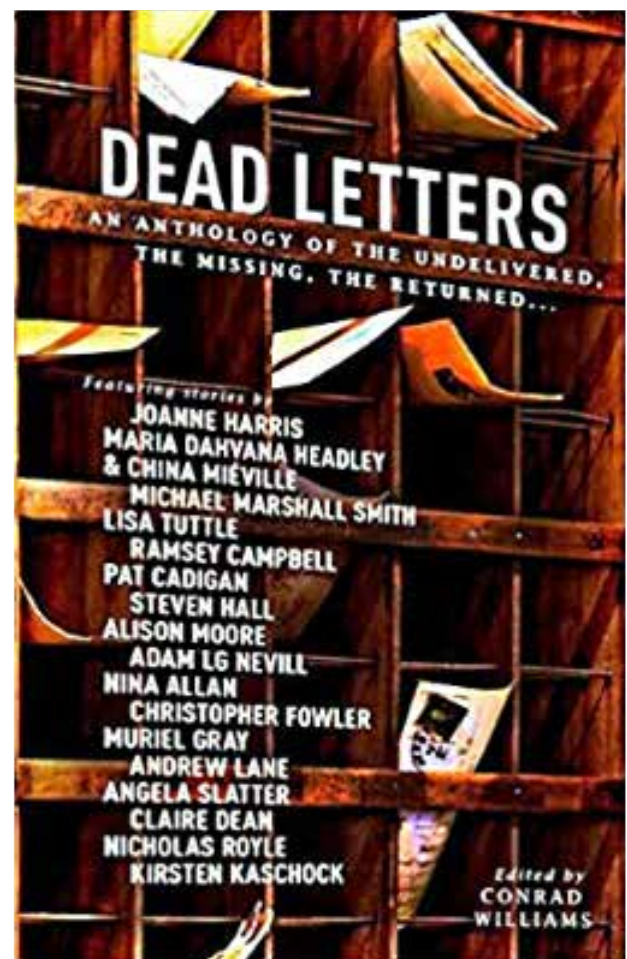
Dead Letters edited by Conrad Williams

(Titan Books, 2016)

Gary Dalkin

In his introduction editor Conrad Williams notes that, inspired by a parcel which went missing for a year, and which gave him the idea for the *Dead Letters* anthology, he 'decided to play around with the theme a little bit and actually make the idea of misdirected/lost/returned mail a physical part of how the writers would put together their stories. So instead of just asking for submissions dealing with lost post, I sent the writers an actual parcel that was constructed to look like an item of mail that had done the rounds and accidentally landed on their doorstep. Inside was the prompt they would use as a trigger for their own story. The only stipulation was that they incorporate the concept of dead letters, however tangential, into their fiction.'

The outcome is an anthology in which not every one of the 17 stories is about a letter, but all, though some much more closely than others, adhere to the theme of, as the front cover says, 'the undelivered, the missing, the returned...'



Williams opens with one of the strongest stories, Steve Hall's 'The Green Letter'. It takes the form of an official report into the consequences befalling the recipients of a particular letter, each copy of which is in some sense the exact same physical artefact. The investigation documents a nightmarish set of outcomes, and with expert world-building raises more questions than it answers. The result, which reminded me a little of Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy, is truly chilling.

Three stories are set in and around the real 'Dead Letters' office in Belfast: 'Change Management' by Angela Slatter, 'Ledge Bants' by Maria Dahvana Headley and China Mieville and 'In Memoriam' by Joanne Harris. The first is a dark tale of death and desire and might possibly be a sort of sequel to a famous horror novel. The second is a wackadoodle take on the 'Matter of Britain'. It's totally ridiculous, and exhaustive mad fun. While the third is about a middle-aged man who one day at work finds a letter addressed to himself, posted in 1971, when he was 6. The letter contains a photograph of himself, and a memory stick... what follows is a complex tangled tale of memory and family which is low key, enigmatic and disturbing.

There are a handful of stories which didn't resonate with me, in large part because, much as I love enigmatic, carefully ambiguous fiction, it felt like just too many pieces were missing. These stories were 'And We, Spectators Always, Everywhere' by Kirsten Kaschock, 'Gone Away' by Muriel Gray, 'L0nd0n' by Nicholas Royal and 'The Days of our Lives' by Adam LG Nevill. All four are well crafted, but they left little impression. Others, of course, may enjoy them more.

In Michael Marshall Smith's 'Over To You' a secret smoker has trouble with a chess piece which unaccountably turns up in the mail. The story subtly echoes a famous tale by M.R. James and the conclusion is quietly unnerving.

Ramsey Campbell's 'The Wrong Game' tells a familiar story, but in casting himself as the protagonist the author blurs autobiography and fiction, adding an extra frisson to this expertly wrought supernatural odyssey.

'Is-And' by Claire Dean is a sparely told tale about a young woman going with her new husband to visit his family for the first time. One might say it's a fairy story, of sorts, and in both its island setting and its transparent prose, I was reminded of Christopher Priest's *Dream Archipelago* stories. And that is high praise.

'Buyer's Remorse' by Andrew Lane transfer's Lovecraft's mythos to southern England. It's a tense, slow-

burning horror-thriller, but how much you will take away from it probably depends on how accepting you are of endless iterations of all things Lovecraftian.

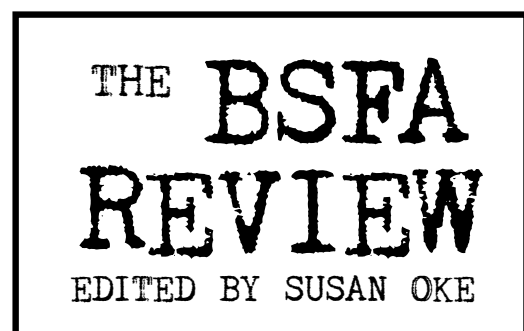
The female narrator of Lisa Tuttle's 'The Hungry Hotel', receives an item in the mail which evokes memories of a brief affair 20 years before, and then explores the present-day consequences to uncanny affect. A memorable tale of reality going gradually, terrifyingly askew.

Also set in a hotel, this time in an unnamed middle eastern country, Christopher Fowler's action packed 'Wonders to Come' is a sidebar to his recent Ballardian novel, 'The Sand Men'. It offers a diverting change of mood and pace, delivering head on apocalyptic action which counterbalances the more introspective stories which make up the majority of the book.

It is almost to damn with faint praise to say 'Astray' is a typically accomplished Nina Allan story. Allan is one of my favourite contemporary British authors, and here she delivers the longest story in the anthology, which isn't surprising, as typically Allen works at novella length. 'Astray' chronicles a quietly intriguing set of interlocking mysteries which exist at the intersections of what it is possible to know, of truths which arrive sometimes too late, and of tragedies born out of everyday betrayals and intrigues. A fine piece of work.

Even more outstanding is 'Cancer Dancer' by Pat Cadigan. This is a real nerve-wrecker. An American woman living in London, and living with cancer, attempts to find the rightful owner of a misdirected item of mail, and unlocks a complex mystery which is ingeniously plotted, original and deeply moving.

Everyone will react to these 17 stories differently. I doubt anyone will like them all, but I found *Dead Letters* to be one of the most rewarding anthologies I have read in years. A third of the stories are outstanding, another third is very good, the remainder are of interest. Quite simply, *Dead Letters* delivers the goods.



2084 edited by George Sandison

(Unsung Stories, 2017)

Reviewed by L J Hurst

Fifteen stories by fifteen authors, and an introduction by George Sandison make up this collection, yet I recognise only three of the authors' names. George Orwell once said that he could not follow the works of authors published in cheap editions; these contributors have written over thirty novels between them, probably more, yet the changes in publishing mean I have suffered in the same way as Orwell.

These stories do not extrapolate Orwell, and some have only a tangential connection to his work, with explicit allusions in only a couple of titles: Jeff Noon's 'Room 149' and Christopher Priest's 'Shooting an Episode'. Some seem better related to other traditions in speculative fiction: Courttia Newland's 'Percepi' describes a robot launch in much the same way as new mobile telephones and tablets are launched today but is describing a product similar to Asimov's domestic robots, specifically in *I, Robot* (his 1950 fix-up). Asimov's contemporary model would have been Detroit and Madison Avenue. Ian Hocking's 'Fly Away Peter' is more like Ray Bradbury, with a dark twist and the hint of one of the Brothers Grimm's grimmest tales set in futuristic ruins, while Anne Charnock's 'The Good Citizen' melds W H Auden's satirical poem 'The Unknown Citizen' with the housing shortages of Ballard's 'Billennium' and Harry Harrison's 'Make Room, Make Room' and referendums that seem more like Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery'.

J. P. Smythe's 'The Infinite Eye' and Priest's 'Episode' seem to share their streets. Between the two they manage to capture the new digital economy, which demands constant surveillance, pursuit, and exploitation even of its most important staff. Control Room officers and games players would see a very similar world, but those sitting in the observation ports will find themselves becoming less human whatever they are doing. Smythe's narrator undergoes surgery very similar to that in the film *Existenz* (novelised by Christopher Priest) in order to get the job. 'Shooting an Episode' becomes metafictional when the narra-

tor is forced to go out into the street to literally shoot someone when a shoot-em-up game becomes real. As Orwell, in his essay 'Shooting an Elephant', described how the pressure of the crowd forced him to do something unnecessary and cruel, so the crowds of 2084 London surround the armoured huntsman, who feels that he is nothing of the kind, in a similar way, though Priest is expert enough a writer not to labour the equivalence.

Jeff Noon's 'Room 149' is set after a dictatorship has ended and the subsequent government has been weak and inadequate (Romania and Albania in 1990 come to mind). Now the spirits of the dead, once archived in a satellite, are being abandoned after a period in which the living and dead were reunited. Despite a miserable return from space, Kara the archivist is able to make a last reunion of a pair of lovers.

Malcolm Devlin, Lavie Tidhar and Aliya Whitely, for all the title

of this volume, seem to make their references very current. Devlin's 'March, April, May' deals with the importance of social media and constant updating in knowing whether someone is alive or dead (probably by violence), while Tidhar's title '2084 Satoshi AD' and Whitely's 'Uniquo' draw from contemporary business: Satoshi Nakamoto being the inventor of Bitcoin while 'Uniquo' is only a letter away from that of a high street clothes chain. Cryptocurrency is not Tidhar's subject, though, nor is fast fashion Whitely's. Tidhar is concerned with the doppelganger problem that will come with DNA theft and consequent re-animation through 3D printing, while Whitely looks at the existence of a former fairground worker whose fairground was all virtual reality, true reality being Clacton, Margate and Blackpool blended until only the worst remains.

Rather than boots on faces, if anything, *2084* imagines uncollected rubbish and broken windows forever, though I applaud its reporting. Sharing that title, will I find Boualem Sansal's *2084: The End of the World* (Europa Editions, 2017) very different?



Waking Hell* by Al Robertson*(Gollancz, 2016)****Reviewed by Nick Hubble**

On his website, Al Robertson describes *Waking Hell*, a loose sequel to *Crashing Heaven*, as ‘what happens when the past attacks and only a dead estate agent can save us’. This is a peculiarly apt characterisation on more than one level because what might otherwise be read as a stalled reanimation of 1980s cyberpunk is jolted into life by the quirky appeal of its protagonist, Leila Fenech.

Leila might be thought of as something of an archetypal loser; despite being young she has already died and been resurrected twice. She exists as a ‘fetch’, a life-like avatar of her former body enabled by the digital ‘weave’ overlaying the decaying material infrastructure of the cluster of space hardware, ‘Station’, which the remnants of humanity now occupy. However, her condition is not conducive to earning a wage by convincing prospective buyers of the non-existent merits of unappealing accommodation. Her attempts to sell a flat to a rich couple quickly turn sour when she is identified as ‘a piece of software’ incapable of knowing, let alone telling, the truth because she isn’t real. To top it all, her genius older brother, Dieter, is dying in a hospital isolation ward after being infected by a rogue antique technological artefact.

All this changes when Dieter dies and his insurance with the mysterious Deodatus comes through making Leila suddenly the richest person on Station. Now she has only to make her new financial status clear to local weave systems for the world to transform itself around her. The zinc bar top in a local café becomes marble even as the waiter’s outfit changes from jeans and t-shirt to a formal white shirt and black bow tie. The coffee she orders turns out to be the best she has ever drunk in her life. Subsequently, one of the pantheon of gods – the embodied corporate AIs who run Station – manifests in her flat and explains how Leila can become the star of all the celebrity channels. All she has to do is relax into the role while waiting the six months required for Dieter’s memories to coalesce into a fetch at ‘the Coffin Drives’. There is just one problem; a clause buried in the small print of the contract with Deodatus means that Dieter has signed away his rights to his own weaveself. He isn’t ever going to come back unless Leila can uncover the truth about Deodatus and rescue him.

Cue a non-stop, spiralling sequence of frenetic

adventures across a bewildering array of rapidly-sketched settings. The unevenness and artificiality of the background that the characters traverse is appropriate for the imagined virtual environment and leads to some strikingly observed descriptions: ‘The landscape read like a crumpled hard drive’. Occasionally, goodwill is required from the reader – the narrative does teeter alarmingly once or twice on the brink of collapse into a by-the-numbers cyberpunk plot with outsider heroes and nasty corporate villains – but this is repaid by the decadent pleasures on offer for those prepared to wallow in the sheer messiness of this literally fly-blown melange of social satire, horror and random Quatermass references.

Overall, there is probably too much going on and not enough focus on the intriguing cast of supporting characters such as the Fetch Counsellor, the Caretaker and, above all, Cassiel. These are all AIs to varying degrees and it is their interactions with Leila which provide a utopian charge to the novel by sketching out a set of social relationships which extend beyond human limitations. From her first encounter with Cassiel, in which she immediately identifies the AI’s attempt to soft-soap her because it is so similar to her own repertoire of estate-agent tricks, through to the deep emotional bond which develops between them, Leila comes to learn that she is not a failed human but a citizen of the universe. Future books from this author are worth looking out for.



The Science of Games of Thrones

by Helen Keen

(Coronet, 2017)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

The craze for spin-off “The Science of . . .” books has come up with examples for just about every popular series, although surprisingly few of them move beyond the level of “actually this won’t work” or “let’s pretend that it does and go ‘gosh!’” into thinking in any depth about science. (An exception is Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart’s “Science of Discworld” series, partly because they were written in collaboration with Terry Pratchett himself and partly because as scientists, pop-science writers, sf writers and fans Cohen and Stewart tick every box that could signify an understanding of how such an enterprise *should* be done.)

Helen Keen’s *Science of the Games of Thrones* covers a lot of ground from how dragons might fly or breathe fire to Hodor’s ‘expressive aphasia’ (his ability to understand what others are saying with the ability himself to utter more than a single word, something documented by the 19th century French surgeon Paul Brocca), and the nature of the “White Walkers”. It’s written in a light, chatty style that sometimes over-balances into puns that could have been left on the cutting-room floor – longbows made of yew have an advantage because “on the inside the wood is supple and bends to a highly *un-yew-sual* degree” – or a kind of nudge-nudge wink-wink reminder that there is an *awful lot* of sex and nudity in *Game of Thrones*. Keen’s research is often a matter of going to experts in, say, astronomy or parasitology and hearing what they have to say.

These often give us the best bits of the book, such as a genuinely fascinating and creepy summary of “zombie spiders” which goes into how one species of wasp injects eggs into the abdomen of a spider to enable larvae to hatch and control the behaviour of the spider or how other parasites manipulate ants. At other times, however, a lack of referenced sources (this is, after all, a popular rather than academically-rigorous book) is irritating. It would have been useful to have known, in the context of Westeros’s weaponry and the nature of “Valyrian steel”, whether the stories of how Damascian swords were tempered by being thrust through the bodies of slaves were actually *true*. And as someone interested in archery, I was fascinated to read that the old story of the “V-sign” as an insult originated with the French mutilating captured Welsh and English archers (leading to archers

waving their fingers at the French opponents to show that they *still* had their fingers to pull back their bow-strings) and seems to be based upon a single French account of an English slur, and annoyed that not even the author’s name is referenced.



There are basic primary-school accounts of what causes the seasons, legends about mermaids, and other things that sort of have something to do with the Westeros-universe, but which don’t take us very far. The problem is that *Game of Thrones* (which I do like a lot) is not even as science-based as *Doctor Who*, let alone *Star Trek* or the “Discworld” books (which quite often parody “real” science and as frequently are about the effects on society of technological change). Hence, this is a miscellany of “amazing facts”, with occasional suggested “experiments” to add extra enjoyment. The experiment to test “how your mind can leave your body”, which involves (among other things) a fake rubber hand, a hammer, and a trustworthy friend, is probably one which it might be best to ask mummy or daddy to supervise, but it turns out to be a neat bit of combining speculation on the “out of the body” instances in *Game of Thrones* with ways in which we do experience such phenomena, and interestingly linked to research on the “phantom-pain” phenomenon felt by people with amputated limbs.

Something of a mixed bag, therefore. Still, as an amusing “edutainment” spin-off from the series it does the job.

Old Venus edited by George R R Martin and Gardner Dozois**(Titan Books, 2015)****Reviewed by Duncan Lawrie**

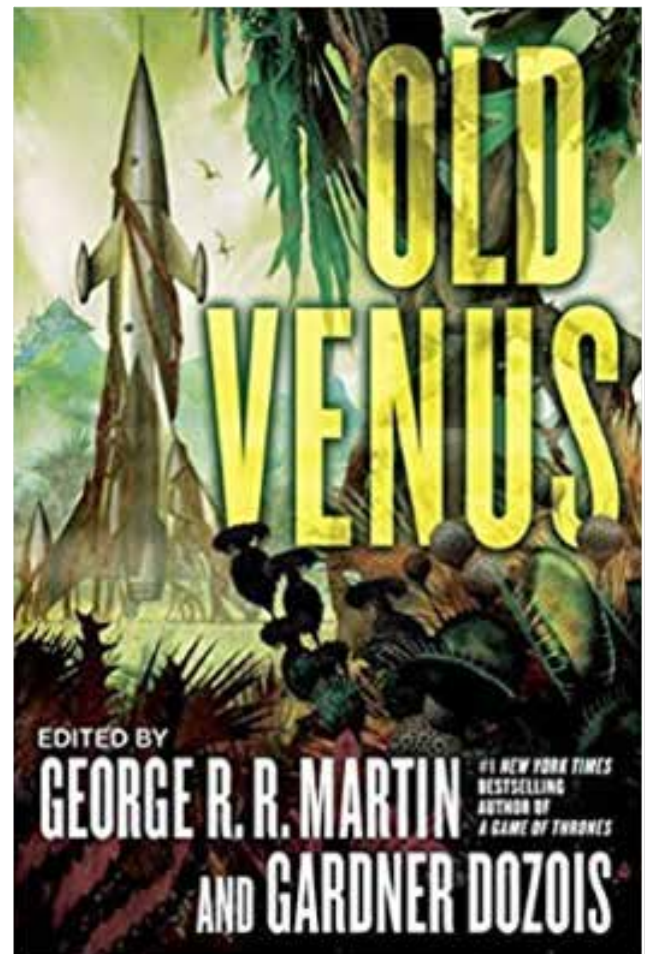
Old Venus holds a fractured view of our neighbouring planet, a kaleidoscope of science fiction's heroes and monsters of the past. Our old dreams of Venus may have been broken on the shore of fact, but we can choose to acknowledge that fact and ignore it. The stories here revive ideas, beautiful or hackneyed, and use them as inspiration or as blueprint.

Most of these tales agree that Venus is wet. There are the world-encompassing oceans of Allen M. Steele's 'Frogheads' and Stephen Leigh's 'Bones of Air, Bones of Stones' which each feature a single landing point for the people of Earth and sentient aquatic, though bipedal, natives. Steele's sentient beings are exploited by humans – and these same humans use them to create drugs with which they can exploit their own species. Leigh's sentient beings have more control over their interactions with humanity but still seem to be a subject people. Less wet are the swampy worlds of Lavie Tidhar's 'The Drowned Celestial' and Mike Resnick's 'The Godstone of Venus', both of which are tales of gods revived. Tidhar is utter pulp, with all the characteristics of a cents-per-word, words-per-minute writer. I found this joyously creative, whilst Resnick's work of hard-boiled pulp did nothing for me – perhaps too careful in the writing, not careful enough in the characters. Drier, but hardly dry, is a Venus covered with rainforest. 'The Heart's Filthy Lesson' by Elizabeth Bear has its protagonist traveling on foot through vast forests filled with deadly creatures. She is so self-absorbed, I almost didn't want her quest to succeed. The people of Eleanor Arnason's 'Ruins' safari through the jungle, more in danger from other humans than the wildest creatures. The highlight is a pterosaur-like creature with a greater vocabulary than a smart parrot.

These latter two stories reference extinct sentient species – a contrast to the majority of the volume. Abundant sentience strikes me as closer to the default sf of past eras; a solar system rich with neighbours to fight or fall in love with. There is a doomed cross-species romance in 'The Sunset of Time' by Michael Cassutt which successfully shows locals with mysterious ancient wisdom that the self-impressed colonists cannot access. 'Greeves and the Evening Star'

by Matthew Hughes has seductive sirens and foolish humans in a Jeeves and Wooster pastiche which may be dead accurate but had my teeth on edge throughout. Joe R. Lansdale's 'The Wizard of the Trees' is a tale of derring-do with swords against flying men, winning the love of a princess. It's almost note perfect evocation of Rice Burroughs is much more to my taste. 'A Planet Called Desire' by Gwynneth Jones uses accidental time travel to take her story "back" to the days of sentience on Venus. This is a rather cunning mechanism to both fit the brief of the anthology and keep with the latest science of the planet. Other stories use varying amounts of what we now know to be true. Arnason provides an addendum explaining how Venus has returned to an Earth-like day/night cycle, whilst Ian McDonald has Great Day and Great Night in 'Botanica Veneris: Thirteen Papercuts by Ida Countess Rathangan'. The story is driven by the coming of evening, whilst its affect is a meditation on colonialism and the impossibility of understanding the other.

Whilst all the stories are set on Venus, the narrators often offer opinions on the state of the rest of the solar system. Sometimes, as in 'Living Hell' by Joe Halde-man, it is a simple Mars dry / Venus wet comparison.



Garth Nix has *Venus* managed by a tripartite council of Earth, Mercury and Mars, implying an interesting, complex backstory which provides context for 'By Frogsled and Lizardback to Outcast Venusian Lepers', a rescue mission which relies on those who have accepted the changes which Venus brings. David Brin suggests that the last of humanity is cowering deep in Venusian oceans in 'The Tumbledowns of Cleopatra Abyss', where the protagonist discovers he is omniscient for another kind of life. Other stories stick closer to our history. In Tobias Buckell's 'Pale Blue Memories', there is a space race between Nazis and Americans. The protagonist's comparison of his black slave ancestors in the Americas with his own new slavery by the native peoples of Venus is effective despite being somewhat heavy-handed. There are several stories which background a USA/USSR space race. 'Planet of Fear' by Paul McAuley has a People's Republic, whilst 'Frogheads' is set in a post-Soviet Venus and 'Ruins' has a Communist nation surviving on Venus despite the end of the Soviet Union on Earth. McAuley's story also features fascinating biology and an infectious native agent. In stories where there is no sentience, it is highly likely that the native life is out to get you, whether it is a fungus or a pseudosaur.

There were moments, reading this book, when I wondered whether the ideal age of Venus fiction was a response to the horrors of tropical warfare – whether Burma, Vietnam or El Salvador. Whilst this is less likely to be a conscious resonance for most of the writers in our own age, there is a great emphasis on the tropics, rain and mud and endless forests full of creatures. The encounters with the alien are quite literal; perhaps the most old-fashioned theme is that none of them are massively superior to humanity. It might be an indulgence to settle into the dreams of a past age, but if you are after the escapism of the past aligned with the writing skills of today you will find pleasures here.

THE BSFA
REVIEW
EDITED BY SUSAN OKE

ALT.SHERLOCK.HOLMES, by Jamie Wyman, Gini Koch, and Glen Mehn

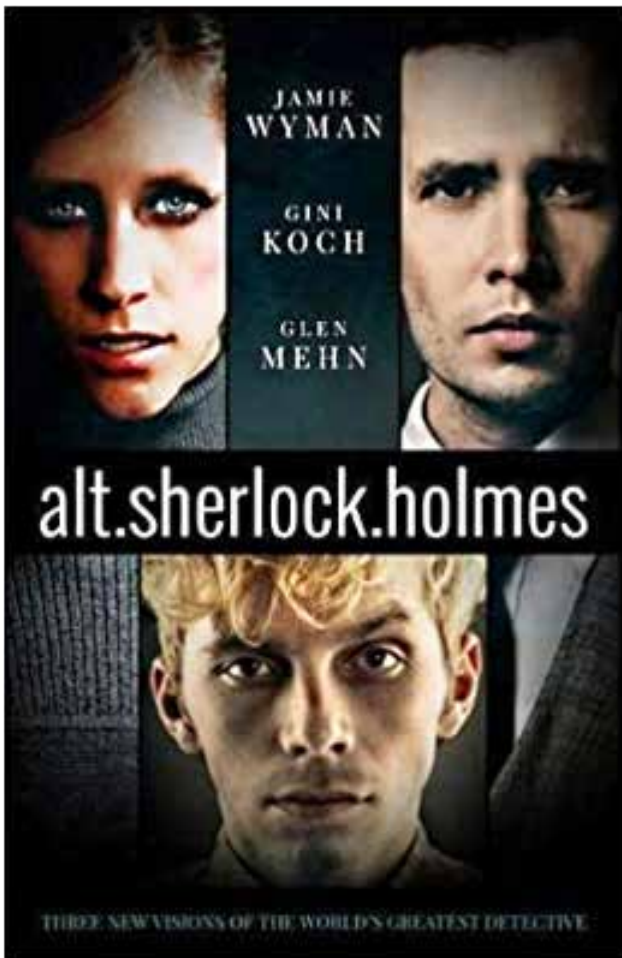
(Abaddon Books, 2016)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

If all the scholarly monographs ever penned about Sherlock Holmes were laid out end-to-end, they would stretch around the world, from Baker Street and back again – ten times over. I made up this amazing ratio, which does not mean to say that it can't be true. Just a few examples, from my nearest bookcase: *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street*, *In the Footsteps of Sherlock Holmes*, and *The Sherlock Holmes File*. The same goes for such 'non-canonical' novels as *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, *The House of Silk*, and – a particular favourite of mine – *An East Wind Coming* (1979), by Arthur Byron Cover. There is also a periodical entitled *The Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine*. But that's enough to be going on with, don't you think?

Despite/because of my reading-life-long affection for Sherlock Holmes, I tend to avoid the fan-fiction fluff that is usually locked in a time warp between 1885 and 1910. Hansom cabs, London particulars, deerstalker hats, Inverness capes – all that 'Holmesian heritage' foofaraw. I prefer the quirkier likes of August Derleth's long-running series about Solar Pons, alias the 'Sherlock Holmes of Praed Street', and the 'Mr. Mycroft' novels by H. F. Heard, notably *A Taste for Honey* (1941). Ditto *A Slight Trick of the Mind* (2005), by Mitch Cullins, filmed as *Mr. Holmes* (2015) and the modern Sherlock personified by Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller. *Ms. Holmes of Baker Street* (2004), by C. Alan Bradley and William A. S. Sargent, has a bearing upon the volume currently under review.

Alt.sherlock.holmes follows up *Two Hundred and Twenty-One Baker Streets* (2014), by Kasey Lansdale, Glenn Mehn, and Guy Adams. Jamie Wyman's 'A Scandal in Hobohemia' is the first of three 'bonus content' short stories taken from that previous volume. We are introduced to Sanford ('Crash') Haus (owner of the *Soggiorno Travelling Wonder Show*), Doctor Jim ('Dandy') Walker (late of the Great War and Harlem's Hellfighters), Mrs. Martha Hudson ('a dwarf with wild copper hair and an ample bottom'), Leland Haus (head of the American Secret Service), Agent Adele Trenet (Irene Adler?), and someone calling himself Moriarty. It sets the scene for 'The Case of the Tattooed Bride' (also by Ms. Wyman), a mystery novella set in Dust Bowl America, that might have been written by Fredric Brown – high praise, indeed, coming from me.



By the way, the vardo (a Gypsy caravan, it Wikis here) belonging to Sanford Haus is numbered 221B – for sentimental reasons.

From the first page of 'All the Single Ladies', Gini Koch's 'bonus' short story: "I'm Detective Straude. This is Detective Saunders . . . The lady is Sherlock Holmes. She's with us." Miz Holmes, as she prefers to be called. {Lee} Straude is addressing Doctor John Watson, a wounded veteran who is now the school physician at New London College for young ladies of quality, in Southern California. Holmes and (Black, again) Watson catch the murderer of five female contestants in the *Campus Queen* TV reality series. They end up as private-detective partners, sharing an apartment in 221B Baker Street, Santa Monica, rented from – who else? – Mrs. Hudson. Which sets the scene for 'A Study in Starlets' – far and away my favourite of the three original novellas.

Koch smoothly develops the gender-reversal relationship between Holmes and Watson while at the same time spinning one of the best present-day 'Hollywood' mystery yarns I've read in years. I wouldn't dream of spoiling the plot for you. But I can tell you that Watson falls base-over-apex in love with the prime suspect – none other than Irene Adler – like the

Big Sippy Eejit he was of old. Holmes takes the mickey out of him something rotten. For example:

"Stop calling her that {Miss Adler}," I said mildly.

"As you wish. Anyway, what else do you see in the picture of The Woman?"

"The Woman?"

"You've asked that I change how I refer to her. For now and ever after she will be The Woman as far as I'm concerned" (p. 177).

The remaining linked reprint short story ('Half There/All There') and original novella ('The Power of Media') have both been written by Glen Mehn. In this late 1960s incarnation, Holmes and Watson first meet at an Andy Warhol 'Factory' party before sharing a room at the Chelsea Hotel in Greenwich Village. As Watson says: "Even in New York City in 1968, you would be hard-pressed to find a more miserable hive of the desperate and demented." It isn't long, however, before they move to a permanent home/office at 22 Avenue B, savouring the domestic bliss provided by Mrs. Hendrix (who may or may not be related to Jimi). Irene Adler makes a welcome re-appearance in the 'origin' story.

I feel a bit out-of-sympathy with both these segments, especially 'The Power of Media'.

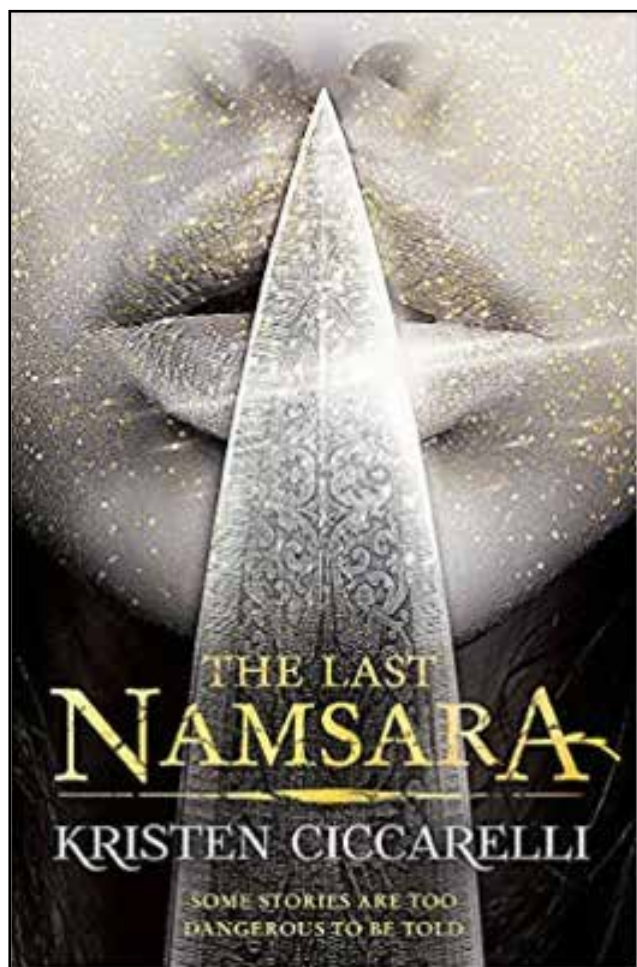
To my mind, French and Saunders summed up the Warhol 'scene' in one of their now-classic sketches. The whole hippie counter-culture dropped the acid of its own destruction. And the political background – Black Panthers, the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, Chicago riots, FBI secret surveillance, Kent State, etc. – seemed like same-old-same-old stuff to me. None of which takes anything away from Mehn's atmospheric evocation of that so near and yet so remote time and place. Or the stories *qua* stories, I'm happy to report.

As you've all probably gathered by now, *alt.sherlock.holmes* is a very dense volume, in the sense of being "closely compacted in substance" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*), not "crass, stupid" (ditto). I look forward to reading the surely imminent *release.2.0*. Meanwhile, Paul Cornell has given us the third novel in his Shadow Police series, entitled *Who Killed Sherlock Holmes?* Hmmm . . .

The Last Namsara by Kristen Ciccarelli
(Gollancz, 2017)
Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

The Last Namsara's biggest problem is its title. It's descriptive, but hardly grabbing. If you don't know what a namsara is then it won't be of much interest.

However, an alternative would probably have "dragon" in the title and that might put even more people off. The German edition is *Der Sturm naht* (*The Storm is Approaching*). Maybe that would work. But with that quibble out of the way, let me say that this is an enchanting YA fantasy by a debut author.



Ciccarelli's greatest achievement is finding something new to say about dragons. Any dracopositive book stands or falls on how well it does it: new and interesting, middling and meh, or tired old fantasy trope? These dragons are firmly in the former category. In the book's prehistory they were valued friends of humanity. Now they are vermin: vicious, fire-breathing and sub-intelligent. As the story progresses, we begin to discern their true position. And they have a

taste for stories, the older, the better. Telling a story is how you call them down from the skies to be ridden as allies - or lure them out of their lairs to be slain. In the very first line we get Asha, the most ruthless dragon hunter of her generation, doing precisely that. Ciccarelli gets her hooks in early.

But the dragons, like Asha, are the victims of lies that have distorted the natural order. Her home is in the grip of a culture based on lies - otherwise known as untrue stories - in an Orwellian, "this has always been the case" sort of way. We learn that the lies only go back to Asha's childhood, and she's no more than 18, so less than a generation, and we might stop and ask, hang on, can lies get such a grip on a culture so quickly?

Well, yes, they can: look over the Atlantic ... Okay, now get back to the book.

Asha is a conundrum. When we meet her she is a champion dragon hunter, ruthless and successful without being respected, but the lies have created a persona for her that doesn't actually fit. Inside that persona she is a lot tougher than outside, but of course (in true story fashion) she has to step outside it to grow as a person.

There is also the philosophical problem of when does a simple recital of facts become a story? Stories are outlawed, but what happens if someone simply asks how your day went? Does it become a story the moment you throw in a slight exaggeration or a bit of imagery? But if stories are made up, what is the difference between a story and an outright lie? Asha herself has an instinctive grasp of this: at a key moment, she summons a dragon simply by describing her present situation - but putting it into the third person and past tense. The fact that her present situation is rather a life and death moment, and she has been through a heck of a lot to get there, adds weight to the story. Maybe that's why it's not a lie.

A good story, of course, has a logic that all of its characters must obey, and that goes for Asha too. The ending is bittersweet, with bad banished and good restored, but Asha now beyond the pale of her own home due to some of the decisions she has made. In as nice a case of sequel setup as I ever saw, she is exiled, moving on into unfamiliar territory, finding her own story but leaving all the context she has ever known behind. Will the same rules she worked so hard to determine still apply in a new land? It will be interesting to see how well Ciccarelli introduces her to pastures new, but I suspect it's going to work.

Tales of the Apt Vol 1: Spoils of War

by Adrian Tchaikovsky

(NewCon Press, 2016)

Reviewed by Alex Bardy

Having only read the first volume of Tchaikovsky's vast *The Shadows of the Apt* decalogy, I was recently told off by a friend for daring to reading this:

"You can't be reading that if you haven't read the whole series!" he cried, evidently dismayed that I'd even considered the thought.

"I'm a professional", I lied. "I can review anything you throw at me."

"But... but... it's going to be full of spoilers!"

"Ummm.... I don't know, but if I'm unlikely to get around to reading the rest of 'em anytime soon, it's not really gonna matter, is it?"

"They're great books, y'know? Adrian's awesome."

And that, I'm pleased to tell you, is why I can categorically recommend this, without hesitation. Adrian is a fine writer, and his work eminently readable – be it in the *Apt* universe or anywhere else, this guy knows how to string words together into a good story, and that really is all you need to know if you love reading. Believe me, I'd love to read the rest of the *Apt* books, but every one of them is a massive doorstop of a book, and there are simply too many other things I also want or need to read (whether for review or personal interest).

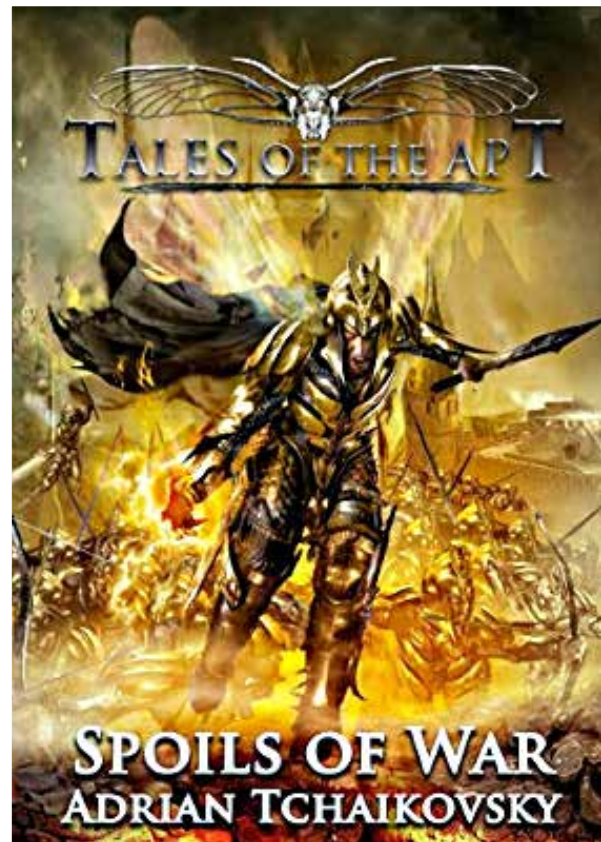
This anthology of short stories (set in the huge, sprawling world Adrian and his roleplaying friends enjoyed many years back, I believe) is a veritable goldmine of good, solid reading, and most of them are based around a particular era of the *Apt*: *The 12-Year War*. No doubt readers of the entire decalogy will already be chomping at the bit for more about this very dark part of that world's history, and here they'll get the chance to explore it in a lot more detail.

Whether it's an alternative view of the Collegium where Artificers and Beetle-kindens tinker to create their flying machines (*To Own the Sky*), or reliving the early history of Sergeant Varmen (a Wasp-kindens Sergeant of the Ironclad who features heavily in *Vol 7: Heirs of the Blade*) in *Ironclads*, there is no shortage of great tales herein.

We also get to meet one of the rare Thorn Bug-kindens in *Camouflage*, as well as learning more about the nomadic Roach-kindens as one of them returns to a war-torn area seeking his lost daughter in *Spoils of War*. Scyla the Spider-kindens gets a small chance at redemption in *The Shadows of Their Lamps*, whilst

The Dreams of Avaris suggests there is a lot more to this simple ghost-story than meets the eye (originally mentioned in *Vol 7: Heirs of the Blade* apparently).

Gaved the mercenary is a popular Wasp-kindens who features in two of these stories (*Shadow Hunters* and *Idle Hands*), at least one of which turns the 'damsel in distress' plot entirely on its head. Other tales include a daring prison rescue in *The Prince*, a wild-west-style introduction to the Mantis-kindens samurai-warrior-ish Ineskae (*Sword and Circle*), and *An Old Man in a Harsh Season*, in which we get to meet one of the most significant characters in the entire series playing against type: Hokiak the Scorpion-kindens.



Finally, this great anthology finishes back where it begins, with an Artificer called Ellery Mainler tinkering. Ellery is a young lady Beetle-kindens who is determined to develop an independent clockwork fighting machine to match and beat Weaponsmaster Tisamon, the Mantis-kindens character who features so heavily in the first volume: *Empire in Black and Gold*. To say more about this 'clockwork difference engine' (as the author so eloquently puts it) would be to spoil things, but rest assured this is a great way to end this collection.

Despite the warnings of my erstwhile friend, I am already looking forward to reading the next volume, *A Time for Grief*, featuring stories that take place shortly before the novels...

Hand of Glory by Susan Boulton

(2015, Penmore Press)

Reviewed by Kate Onyett

Up to the hips in the mud and slaughter of the 1916 WWI Flanders trenches, the plot picks up with two very different men. In one busy night, rage-fueled Private Archie kills his lieutenant and flees from the war to begin a life of supernaturally enhanced crime with the lovely Marie. Captain Giles, left hanging on wire in a flooded shell-hole, witnesses Archie's bloodthirsty act, and is then rescued and taken to a military hospital. While recovering he meets the sympathetic nurse Agnes Reed and sees for the first time the ghost of his former corporal. Meantime, the bombs, the mud, oh, the brutality of war....

We re-join them all in 1922. Archie and Marie are running fake séances and subsequent robberies on wealthy clients and Giles is still trying to settle into 'civvie street' in an inherited country estate. In Stafford, over the course of two weeks in late autumn their lives will collide, as Archie decides to put the murdered lieutenant's family and Giles in his sights. Old wounds and old demons gape wide. Only one old soldier will be returning from this battle.

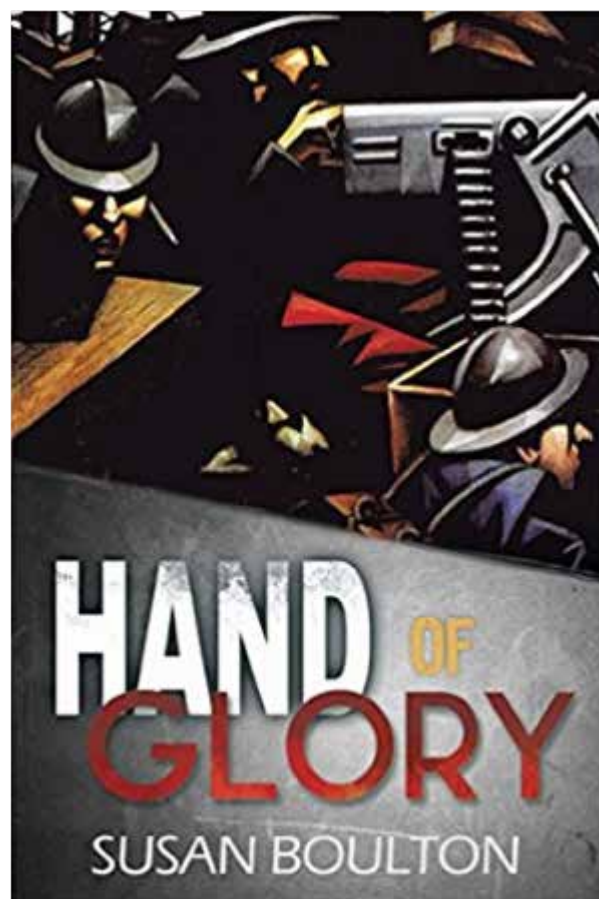
'Hand' is a solid, old school thriller. It feels very well researched, well presented and is exciting to read. There is mud, there is blood, but there are genuinely sympathetic depictions of survivor guilt and the fallout from violence; you feel the sickened reaction to the memory of the war. Boulton develops Giles and Archie as her templates for an examination on psychological break, dividing it clearly between angry, self-destructive, violent, criminal Archie and repressed, self-lacerating, nightmare-ridden Giles. So far, so noble. But in order to make the distinction definite, Boulton has split the duties straight down the middle with virtually no grey areas. Archie is the working-class boy from a criminal family who joined up for a better chance at life, and Giles is the middle-class gentleman who returns home to a well-heeled inheritance. Whilst there is post-war shock thrumming through all the classes depicted, it feels very black-and-white to spill all the nastiest elements and self-destructive vitriol into the working-class man, leaving the noble suffering to the upper-middle-class, moneyed man.

About the best answer I can come up with is that if the split of type with class seems a tad simplistic, at least it makes for a plot that would not be out of place in a 1930s noir film. The middle-class characters are

also familiarly connected, in the style of a cosy Agatha Christie caper, and the lines between the decent and un-decent are made very clear. This is not a novel to highlight social injustice or thrash out the rights and wrongs of mutual destruction; this is a novel with absolutely the flavour of its era. Stiff upper lip.

The main force of Boulton's writing is her decisive treatment of trauma. For Archie, his war-haunted life is filled with the lacerating, bloodthirsty ghost of his brother, but Giles sees the benevolent spirit of his former corporeal and friend. There are deliberate parallels between the 'haunting' of the two men and the mind-scarring effects of PTSD; it is the most *relevant* aspect of the book. With ghosts and the titular *Hand of Glory* the novel has a sprinkling of supernatural fission that adds to the pained uncertainty of the post-war world. It feels entirely right that vengeful war dead would return to punish their defilers, and a dead officer's hand can be used to break the law - as the war started to break the old social orders.

However, by the end a status quo *is* preserved; the criminals punished; the righteous saved. It is a journey of catharsis. With two minds broken by conflict, one will spin into self-destruction, another will find a hope for a new life through facing and acceptance of his ghosts.



***Dreams of Distant Shores* by Patricia A. McKillip**

(Tachyon, 2016)

Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

Here are seven stories plus an essay by McKillip and an appreciation by Peter S. Beagle.

Almost half the book is taken up with 'Something Rich and Strange', a novella first published in 1994. Jonah and Megan are lovers who live in a seaside town. She draws seascapes which he sells to tourists in his shop, along with jewellery, fossils and shells. Both of them are fascinated by the sea. Separately they encounter strange and seductive beings who threaten their love for each other and lead them into adventures underwater.

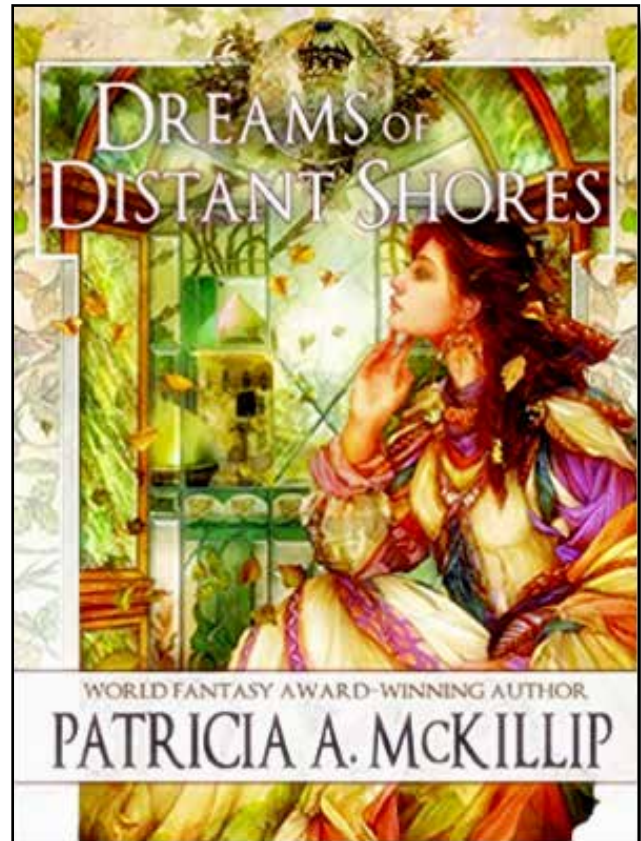
This story is filled with images of the sea and its changing moods. There are precise, vivid descriptions, as when Megan sits by a tide pool in the opening scene – 'Gulls cried overhead; pelicans flew low over the distant tide. She tasted salt on her lips. The water shivered again, wind-stroked; the wind was rising.' The danger and power of the sea have been a presence in much of McKillip's work, from *The Riddle-Master of Hed* onwards, but this story draws particular attention to the vulnerability of the sea and the impact of humanity. Early on, Megan clears out rubbish from her pool and the issue grows in importance until Jonah must undertake a journey across a ruined underwater waste and Megan goes after to try to rescue him.

'The Gorgon in the Cupboard' is set in a world much like Victorian England. Harry is a young painter, in love with Aurora, the wife of his friend. He searches for inspiration to create a masterwork which will make him famous and to attract Aurora's attention. His painting of Medusa comes to life and offers to help him. Jo, a servant girl, in desperate poverty becomes Harry's model and a relationship develops between them.

The characters in this story have a lot in common with the Pre-Raphaelite circle of William Morris and Burne Jones but come alive as people in their own right. They make us feel the charm of their creative work and their friendship. The Medusa provides a new perspective on her myth as she talks to Harry and leads him to a new understanding of Aurora and Jo and maybe himself.

The other stories are shorter. 'Mer' returns to the seaside and to the present day. 'Weird' is about two lovers who take refuge in a bathroom from unexplained disturbances that shake the house. In 'Alien',

a family worry about a grandmother who claims to have been abducted by aliens. 'Which Witch' is about a music group who fight off an emanation of evil with the help of their familiars. And two famous authors appear in 'Edith and Henry Go Motoring'. But you don't need to know who they are to be intrigued by what happens to them on their drive into the country.



A passage in McKillip's essay sheds an interesting light on the kind of fantasy she writes. 'Creating a spell can be as simple or as difficult as you want.' The ingredients for a love potion can be drawn from research into medieval recipes and herb lore. Or the writer can think about the nature of love, what makes people fall in love and how the lovers need to change in each other's eyes. That will lead to a different kind of spell. 'The Magic exists only in the language; the spell exists only in the reader's mind.' In all McKillip's stories, the magic is grounded in the desires and fears of the characters. As we enter their lives, we are drawn to expand our imaginations. We share the depths of their feelings but also experience new ways of seeing the world.

McKillip's prose is rich in sensory details, from the look in a goat's eye as it models for Harry's picture in 'The Gorgon' to the picnic in 'Weird', which includes mushroom brie, hazelnut chocolate and peppered salmon.

Some fantasy writers depict immortals and spirits as though their desires and emotions are much like those of ordinary people, despite their peculiar powers. McKillip's supernatural beings are different. They haunt us with a sense that their nature is more than we can grasp fully, even as they appeal to unexpected aspects of our own lives. The witch in 'Mer' should strike a chord with anyone who has ever felt a longing for uninterrupted sleep. But the hints we are given of the hundred years she spends as a local goddess open up the possibility of wilder and stranger stories than the one we are told.

Perspectives on public issues are expressed in some of these stories, most explicitly in 'Something Rich', with its ecological concerns. 'Alien' draws attention to the way society treats old people and the games children play with toy guns, without allowing us to reach any simplistic conclusions. But human relationships are at the heart of all the stories. In 'Weird', the upheaval which causes the lovers to take refuge in the bathroom may not matter to anyone but themselves. But as they talk to one another, they open up their feelings to lead us deep into their lives. In 'The Gorgon', we share brief glimpses not just of the delicate relationship that develops between Harry and Jo but the links among his friends, complicated by the traditional role for women in the society portrayed and highlighted by Medusa's subtle comments.

Only three of the stories are original to this collection but those are well worth reading, as are the essays at the end. McKillip's is a discussion of various aspects of fantasy writing and Peter Beagle gives his impressions of the stories. I am also glad to have all the stories gathered together in one place for rereading.

***Orsinia* by Ursula K. Le Guin**

(Gollancz, 2017)

Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

Ursula Le Guin's publishers have been rebooting her extensive oeuvre by repackaging it in various ways. *Orsinia* comprises several works of fiction set in the eponymous Central European country: the novel *Malafrena*, first published in 1979; the collection of short stories *Orsinian Tales* (1976); and two later stories, 'Two Delays on the Northern Line' (1979) and 'Unlocking the Air' (1990). NB. Library of America's *The Complete Orsinia* is a deluxe hardback edition of the same material plus an introduction and three songs.

An invented country is a common enough trope in mundane fiction, from Anthony Hope's Ruritania to William Boyd's Kinjanja, and hardly sufficient reason to regard this strand of Le Guin's work as science fiction. Yet Le Guin is known as an SF writer, *Orsinia* appears on the SF shelves in bookshops, and this review is in the *BSFA REVIEW* – so I thought I'd try to approach it from a vaguely SFnal perspective.

Orsinia is not a Suvinian novum. The country's existence doesn't change Europe's reality. It is subject to the same political forces as surrounding countries: from feudalism to the power games of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the rise of nationalism, fascism, and then absorption with the rest of Eastern Europe into the sphere of authoritarian communism. But a small invented country does allow Le Guin the blank canvas and simplification of a thought experiment.

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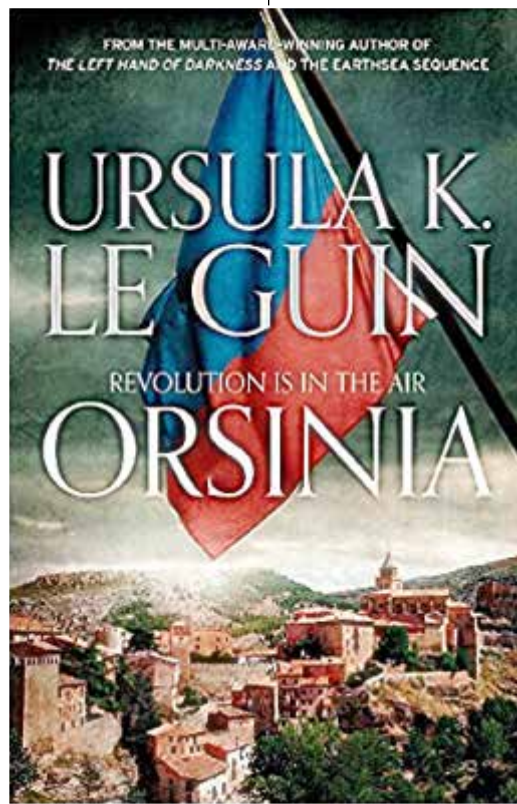
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Malafrena is set during a period of Austrian domination preceding the wave of half-baked revolutions that spread through Europe in 1830. Its omniscient narrative, following multiple protagonists to diverse locations, paints us a panorama of Orsinia's geography. The world-building becomes four-dimensional in the *Tales*, which jump around not only in space but also through history, to as early as 1150 and as late as 1965. In the earlier settings, in which the supernatural remains credible, the atmosphere is close to fantasy. In the post-1945 stories, we could be reading Orwellian dystopia of the near future, though it's actually the near past.

Malafrena reminds me of Turgenev, with its focus on the life of the gentry and the impetus of some of them towards reform or revolution. Revolution seeks utopia, and Le Guin is one of the greatest writers on the theme of utopia. One of the greatest because of her realism, because she understands that means cannot be justified by ends, that what's needed is not a blueprint but a process of change in which people and place are respected, not coerced, and that utopia has to be sought from where we are – not from where we're not. *Malafrena's* central character, Itale Sorde, seeks to liberate his country from Austrian occupation, and the urban poor from misery, but there's a subtle irony that his own family's life on their estate already feels like a rustic utopia and yet rests upon a hierarchy of landowners and servants. What comes across relentlessly from the whole body of Orsiniana is the intractability of the struggle against oppressive power – that again and again, throughout history, the effort to make a difference comes to nothing, and people have to find what consolation they can in the everyday relationships and routines that somehow carry on.

That Sorde and his comrades, and some of their analogues in other periods, use the vehicle of literature to advance their cause testifies to Le Guin's own commitment to literature's potential to change the world. If I'd read the *Tales* before *Malafrena*, I'd have missed some of the references to characters and locations

in the novel, but I wish that I had done that. Reading the *Tales* second – as they come in the book – I experienced an emotional anti-climax, not because the *Tales* are weak, far from it, but because the novel, through slowly accumulating Tolstoyan psychological detail, builds up such an emotional pressure that when the drama finally came I was so powerfully moved – to tears – that I found it almost unbearable to keep reading. Such dependence of a novel's impact on a nuanced structure of sensibility seems to me ever more alien to the contemporary commercial demands made of fiction, especially 'genre fiction'. Would *Malafrena* be published today were it not from the backlist of an author whose place in the canon is now as secure as Turgenev's and Tolstoy's?



But this same sophistication of literary sensibility was also condemned by Soviet communism as 'bourgeois', as arousing personal feelings potentially subversive of the state's authority. The demands of market capitalism are, in their own way, just as authoritarian, just as demanding of a compliant population that doesn't think or feel too deeply. That Le Guin believes this becomes evident in the final story, 'Unlocking the Air', which, whatever order you read the rest of the book in, should be read last. With the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 Le Guin's Orsinia at last catches up with the current of history. The story was written in 1990, before anyone could

know what would happen next. Le Guin portrays a moment of opportunity that is the moment that all the protagonists of her earlier Orsinian stories were awaiting, whose struggles in successive periods of history have each in their own way helped to bring into being. Will the people who've suddenly burst through into freedom simply surrender to the new tyranny of capitalist consumerism that's ready and waiting, or will they choose something new?

Reading the book 28 years later, you can draw your own conclusions, not about Orsinia – which of course doesn't exist, being only a thought experiment – but about the other nations of Central and Eastern Europe, and so about the larger direction of history.

THE BEST REVIEW

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