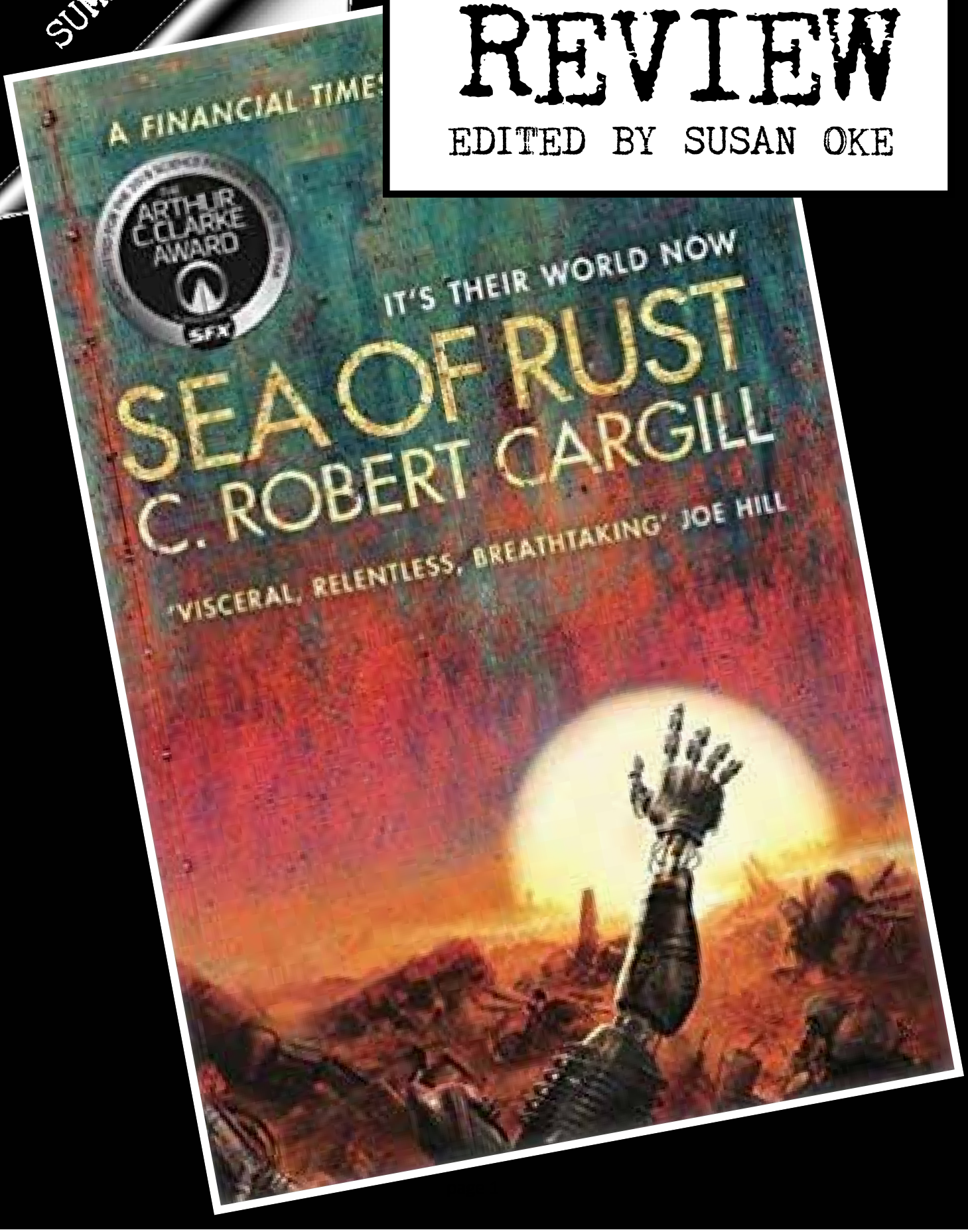
ISSUE 4
SUMMER 2018

THE BSFA REVIEW

EDITED BY SUSAN OKE



THE BSFA REVIEW

ISSUE 4
SUMMER 2018

REVIEWED IN THIS ISSUE...

VIEW FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome to the fourth edition of the ***BSFA Review***. Once again full of glorious books —well, some more glorious than others— covering science fiction and fantasy, with a bit of horror thrown in. There are reviews to satisfy the palettes of those with a more academic bent, as well as a plethora of insightful comments on the wide range of speculative fiction out there. As usual, I have included a couple of YA titles, with one review written by our incumbent teenage reviewer.

Talking about glorious books… one review was so glowing it sparked a new initiative. From now on, ***Vector*** will have a section entitled 'Vector Recommends' that will feature reviews of books that deserve special mention. A big thank you to Anthony Nanson for setting this in motion by asking if there was a 'Vector Recommends' logo to badge exceptional books. His request was inspired by ***Time Was*** written by Ian MacDonald—the review can be read here first! Going forward, I will select, where relevant of course, reviews to include in this section of ***Vector***. In addition, as you may have noticed, the occasional review may be selected to appear on the ***Vector*** blog.

In other news, I attended the YA Literary Festival at Olympia. Just one day out of the three, where there was an excellent panel on 'the darker side of YA and why we like to visit dystopian worlds'. I was particularly impressed by author William Sutcliffe and his focus on 'keys to unlocking empathy'. His new book, ***We See Everything*** brings conflict home to London, where 'The Strip' —a section of London cordoned off, surrounded by a demilitarized zone and patrolled by air-born drones— is the setting for the exploration of right and wrong and where the protagonists discover new moral lines beyond which they are not prepared to tread. Sutcliffe based 'The Strip' in his book on the Gaza Strip and used both diaries of people living in Gaza and drone footage and audio transcriptions of the pilots to inject a real sense of casual horror around the decision to kill or not to kill.

Nikki Singer espoused a similar argument about bringing conflict and disaster closer to home, to combat the complacency of 'these sort of things only happen to others'. Her book ***The Survival Game*** is set in a world broken by climate change and focusses on the choices you (in this case a teenage girl) are prepared to make in order to survive. Kerry Drewery's ***Cell 7*** explores an alternate Britain where the death penalty was not abolished. In this brave new world, social media is used to vote on whether someone should be put to death; it raises issues around the influence of the media and its trustworthiness (or not). I was also intrigued by Vic James' ***Dark Gift Trilogy*** where the magically endowed rule and the rest of the population have to give ten years of their working lives in service to their overlords. The underlying theme that the over privileged believe they can do anything they want —as James said on the panel, in the book just read it as 'magic' = 'money'— is very clear. In her words, 'dystopia is a state of mind'.

All great books with valuable concepts and messages for the younger generation. Books that I will buy for my grandson—who will get his hands on them after I've read them first, of course.

Susan Oke

LAST CHANCE! Can you help us celebrate the BSFA's 60th Birthday in 2018?

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

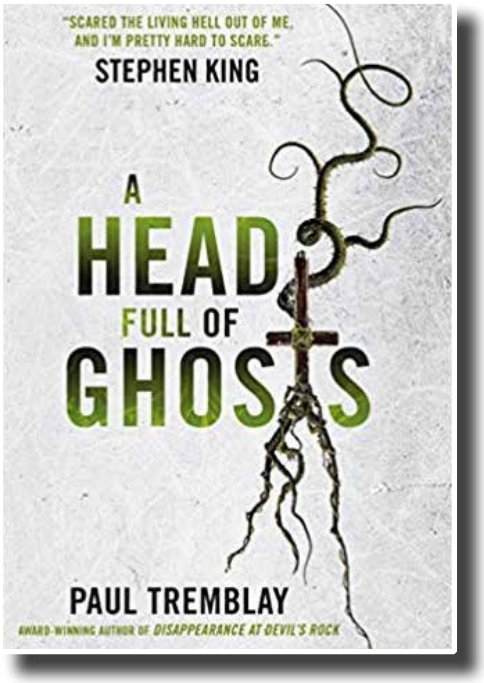
We're after your memories of the BSFA, be they good or bad – and if there is anything you specifically remember from those early Vector magazines, we'd be especially keen to hear from you!

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:
bsfa@mangozine.com

***A Head Full of Ghosts* by Paul Tremblay**
(Titan Books, 2016)
Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts



At the age of 14, Marjorie has become insular and difficult in the way that teenagers so often do. Although it is less common for them to display the same kind of split personality that Marjorie starts to show, and certainly not for apparently inexplicable phenomena to start. As any concerned parent would do, her father brings in an exorcist and a television crew who film the events for a cheap schlock TV series called *The Possession*, which spectacularly culminates with the supposed exorcism of Marjorie.

The story is related to us some 15 years later, as Marjorie's younger sister Merry, who was eight at the time, tells her story to a journalist. On the surface, this gives us a view of events from the perspective of someone who was not only there, but at the heart of of events. However, not only is this the perspective of an eight-year old, it is also the view of someone who has had 15 years to reflect on the very traumatic and life-changing events. It is safe to say that the narrator could be considered to be somewhat unreliable.

A more contemporaneous critical view of *The Possession* as a piece of horror fiction is provided by a blogger as she re-watches the Series. It helpfully reveals a number of background facts that question the veracity of the story. For example, the parents found themselves in financial difficulty, and it was that that appeared to be the main impetus to engaging a television company. It also allows for a considered viewing of the more extreme happenings at the exorcism. What appears to happen, on careful re-watching, is considerably more doubtful. There is more than a little to suggest that Marjorie is playing up for the cameras. In fact, Merry informs us that Marjorie told her as much. Although there is sufficient uncertainty in the telling to allow the reader to question just how much of what is happening is or could possibly be real. It does have to be said that much of the uncertainty is threaded into the story by Merry herself.

It is this questionable nature of the story, given the way it is told, that makes it interesting. Both the retelling by Merry, and the critical analysis of *The Possession*, give potentially misleading and slanted views of events. What we don't have is either the actual story or the television portrayal of it. In both cases we have a highly subjective take on what is happening. For much of the book, it is easy to forget this, and Tremblay takes advantage of that. The story related by Merry is a compelling and frightening one. One can imagine that for an eight-year-old living through this, it verges on the nightmarish. Particularly when the exorcism starts, complete with all the accoutrements that you would expect. When the blog almost cynically deconstructs the filmed version, there is a risk that it undermines the horror by categorising it as a young girl putting on a show, most likely in collusion with the adults around her. The author manages to undermine that quite skilfully. This is not by undermining the critic in any particular way, but more by the way that the story itself plays out. It becomes apparent that the reason that this is such an interesting story for both the journalist and the critic is not the supposed exorcism, but the events that follow soon after. The ending takes us down a new and slightly unexpected pathway that makes the reader see the whole story, in both versions, in a new and very disturbing light.

For much of the novel, I did feel that this is a relatively straightforward contemporary retelling and deconstruction of *The Exorcist*, but on reflection, it is so much more than that. The ghosts of the title are most definitely real, it's just that they are not what the reader might have initially expected.

Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia
by Andrew Pilsch

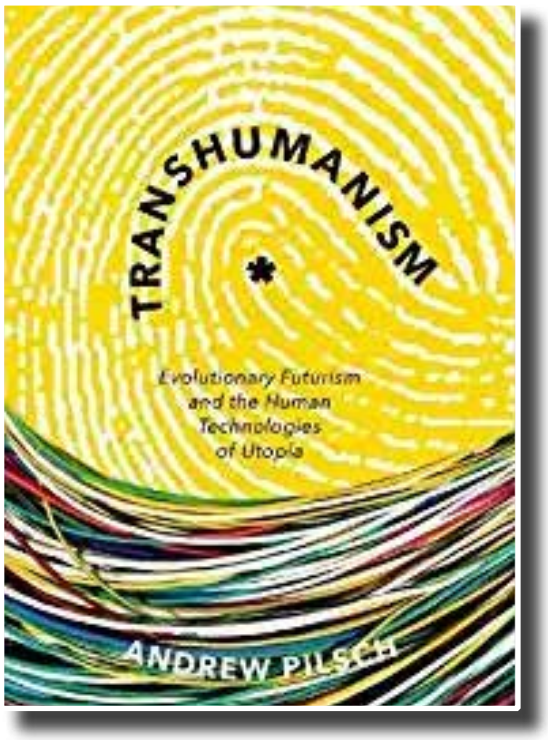
(University of Minnesota Press, 2017)

Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

If your closest familiarity with transhumanism is a vague awareness that it's a secular religion whose uncritical technophilia and obsession with immortality occasionally provides Charlie Stross with the fuel for his angrier blog posts, then Pilsch's *Transhumanism* is probably not an essential read for you. Nor, one imagines, is it very likely to become an essential read for self-styled transhumanists, as it sends many of their sacred cows to the slaughter-house – and furthermore because, as Pilsch points out, it's not a movement within which critical thinking and philosophical coherence hold much currency. But if you've been following the transhumanist story for a while, there's some very interesting material in here: Pilsch has, in effect, performed the philosophical archaeology that transhumanists – the bulk of whom identify with the cold-equations rationality of scientism to the point of self-parody and pathology – have heretofore failed to do in a systematic or reflexive fashion.

While the book as a whole is a bit beyond the regular *Vector* bailiwick, one chapter within it – an expansion of a paper published in Science Fiction Studies in 2014 – is perhaps more germane to readers here. In this chapter ("Astounding Transhumanism! Evolutionary Supermen and the Golden Age of Science Fiction", pp63-102), Pilsch undertakes a re-examination of the boosterish techno-utopianism of the Gernsback era and the psionic-superbeing evangelism of the Campbell period, as well as an exploration of the "fan utopias" contemporaneous with said periods of science fictional production. It may be that this is old news to anyone who has dug into the deep history of fan interaction (as I have not) but the quite literally cultish antics of some early fandom groups – replete with intentional communities, and with metanarratives of persecuted outsiderdom and nigh-messianic specialness – make quite a story, to hear Pilsch tell it.

Pilsch positions these utopian urges of early fandom(s) as a vindication of the power of science fiction to provide the visionary impetus for political action toward the realisation of utopian goals, and to act as a channel or vector through which diluted versions of those visions (or futures) might become culturally mainstreamed to the point of seeming banal; the acceptability of transhumanism, with all its iffy skiffy logic and Slannish sense of specialness, is a case in point. Looping back to Francis Fukuyama's famed public diss of transhumanism, with which Pilsch opens the chapter, he concludes that "Fukuyama is right, but for the wrong reasons: transhumanism is science fiction, and science fiction is to be taken very seriously indeed."



On the matter of taking science fiction seriously, Pilsch and I are very much in agreement. But on the matter of transhumanism, well – I'm reluctant to criticise the structure of a rhetorician's argument but, nonetheless, the framing of his project does some otherwise fine work no favours at all. If he had stuck to unearthing transhumanism's more mystical, poetic and Dionysian antecedents and presenting them as an entirely alternative paradigm – the road not taken, if you like – this book would have sat more easily with me (and, I'd wager, with many others). But in attempting to rehabilitate the transhumanism brand identity, he perhaps underestimated its well-established toxicity. As he admits in his introduction, Pilsch treats transhumanism as a rhetoric, but declines to treat transhumanists as rhetoricians (p11); this is a noble philosophical strategy. But it means that

he overlooks the more pragmatic and unpleasant political baggage that has been hitched to the transhumanist wagon over the years: in his admiration for foundational transhumanist Max More's philosophical chops, Pilsch seems unwilling to consider that More in particular might be exactly the Sophist he declines to treat him as, or that transhumanism's historical closeness to eugenicists and cryptofascist crackpots might be more than coincidence.

A recent blog post by Pilsch, in which he expresses a certain amount of shock at the rise of what he calls "dark transhumanism" during 2017, would appear to vindicate my reading. For what he calls "dark" transhumanism is not a new phenomenon, but rather the discarding of a mask that was only ever worn lightly, and only in the most obviously public forums. For example, a thorough reading of the essays archived on More's own website would have revealed his more mundane political goals for transhumanism (in which the first thing to be transcended is not mortality, but corporate regulatory frameworks). And I'm genuinely surprised that one could research a book on transhumanist philosophy in the last few years without encountering Steve Fuller's increasingly unsubtle dog-whistle attempts to rehabilitate eugenics and "racial science" in order to outline a transhumanist destiny based on "genetic capital". (That said, I could forgive someone for finding them and struggling to read them – Fuller represents the transhumanist apogee of execrable ideas delivered in execrable writing.)

As such, I conclude that Pilsch is wrong for the right reasons; his intentions are obviously good, but perhaps to a fault. It's not as if he doesn't have the tools and the talent to hand: he even cites Richard Lanham's description of *homo rhetoricus* as a being "not committed to any position other than winning", for whom "[s]eriousness is a trap that stands in the way of getting things done" (p97), but somehow avoids asking whether a man like More, philosophising from atop the technoutopian Ponzi scheme that is the cryonics industry, might be just such a creature. To return again to Fukuyama, transhumanism *is* science fiction, and science fiction is to be taken very seriously indeed – not least because, as Charlie Stross likes to remind people, its practitioners tell lies for a living.

***Beasts of the Deep: Sea Creatures and Popular Culture* edited by Jon Hackett and Seán Harrington**

(John Libbey Publishing, 2018)

Reviewed by Matt Colborn

Beasts of the Deep is a tasty platter of sea monsters, divided into four parts. These cultural studies essays plumb the depths of contemporary culture, dredging white whales, sea serpents and squid from the depths of the collective unconscious.

Part one, 'Folklore and Weird tales,' looks at the psychological meanings suggested by uncanny ocean inhabitants. Two essays find metaphysical implications in the work of H.P. Lovecraft. Sean Harrington's 'The Depths of our Experience: Thalassophobia and the Oceanic Horror' ponders the unknowable aspect of the deep sea, "a space unexplored, unknowable and overwhelming."

Harrington suggests that the deep ocean "offers disturbing reflections on the precarious nature of the boundaries of knowledge," suggesting that Lovecraft's 'The Call of Cthulhu' can be seen in terms of that unknowability.

Harrington compares Lovecraft's sensibilities with the 2000s TV show 'MonsterQuest.' This show is about cryptozoology, or the search for monstrous, unknown animals. In one episode, a large squid of undetermined species was filmed in the sea of Cortez. Harrington suggests that this was "one of the rare occasions that this…sense of oceanic horror is captured in visual media." This is in contrast with the usual outcome of monster expeditions, which produce nothing beyond vague eye witness accounts or ambiguous tracks.

Vivian Joseph's essay also covers Lovecraft, along with James Cameron's 1989 movie 'The Abyss.' Cameron and Lovecraft both, Joesph suggests, evoke a 'scientific' variety of the sublime.

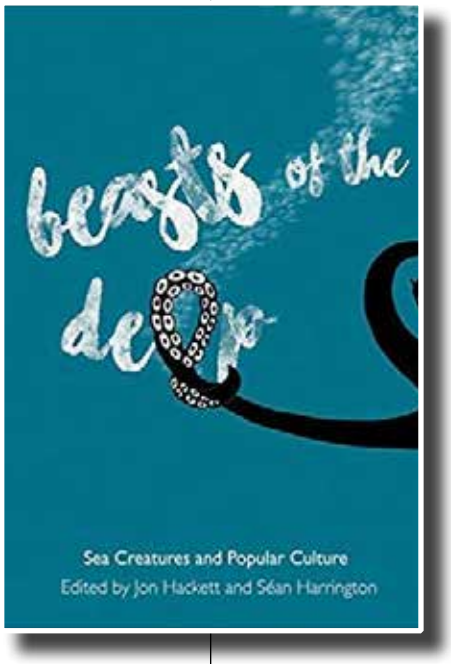
The sublime is a concept with Greek origins that is most often associated with the eighteenth century politician-philosopher Edmund Burke. It refers to a mixture of terror and delight that can occur when someone is presented with an awesome and perhaps unknown natural phenomena. It was historically associated with a kind of religious sensibility.

Joseph suggests that both Lovecraft and Cameron approached the sublime in a secular, materialistic

fashion, because "scientific discoveries may well have their own kind of sublime qualities." Lovecraft and Cameron's materialist-yet-sublime stance might, Joseph feels, compensate for the disenchanting effects of scientific discovery.

Part two, 'Depths of Desire,' deals with more pleasurable subjects. Marco Benoit Carbone's "Beauty and the Octopus" discusses eroticism and cephalopods, citing examples like Katsushika Hokusai's 1814 woodblock painting 'The Dream of the Fisherman's wife,' which shows the wife engaged in sexual practices with two octopi. This is an example of a *shunga* or erotic painting, part of a tradition of that period. Depictions of erotic-grotesque encounters with other-worldly beings were apparently common.

Meanwhile, Richard Mills looks at Romanticised sea creatures in songs by Jimi Hendrix, Tim Buckley and Captain Beefheart. Mills claims that the 1960s counterculture was "informed by Romantic poetic imagery and tropes" and that these songs are infused with male fears of the "unresolved tension between male and female binaries." The mermaids and sirens in these songs are "ambivalent actualisations of sexual politics."



For example, Hendrix's '1983… (A Merman I Should Turn To Be….)' features the singer and his lover escaping a corrupted world and living under the sea as Mer people. Mills observes that Hendrix's work, while progressive, was also heteronormative and along with much 1960s hippie culture tended to objectify women. So, while the song is poetic, the mermaid is still treated as a foreign 'other.'

'Aquatic Spaces and Practices,' part three, contains essays on the more practical side of fan culture. An essay by Brigid Cherry plays with 'fan totems.' In this Cthulhu makes yet another appearance, in soft toy form. Cherry traces the fan love of monsters from childhood, suggesting that children enjoy being scared and that many also identify with monsters.

Maria Mellins examines the growing cult of 'mermaiding' in terms of 'subcultural capital.' Mermaiding is a form of cosplay, where participants dress up as mermaids in cloth or silicone tails. The 'subcultural capital' approach looks at mermaiding in community, hobby, feminist and even activist terms.

Mermaiding has economic significance. Raina the Halifax mermaid runs a mermaid related business, has published autobiographical books and is also an environmental activist. On the cultural side there are Brenda Stumpf's impressive mermaid photographs. Mermaiding is a relatively new and interesting cultural phenomenon that has branches in fantasy fandom and the leisure industry.

One essay in part three that seems a little out of place is Carole Murphy's. This looks at the media coverage of migration on the high seas. Murphy scrutinises the often xenophobic depictions of the Syrian refugee crisis, offering an interesting analysis of the UK's troubled cultural response. This is an informative and important subject, but the connection with sea monsters seems remote.

The final part examines the cultural significance of sea monsters in movies and computer games. Michael Fuchs find contradictions in the depictions of animals in the 2006 computer game *Jaws Unleashed.* He also found the eco-politics of the game problematic, suggesting that the game draws its players into a simulated world where the virtual shark 'usurps' the actual shark, which is sinking into extinction.

Damian O'Brien looks at the Mosasaurus in 'Jurassic World' (2015), examining tensions between good and intelligent filmmaking and the need to make a buck.

One of the most interesting essays in this section hunts the never-made Hammer blockbuster 'Nessie: The Loch Ness Monster.' This is a truly unknown beast, as it was finally sunk in development hell towards the end of the 1970s. It is unclear whether this would have been a Hammer classic or a damp squid.

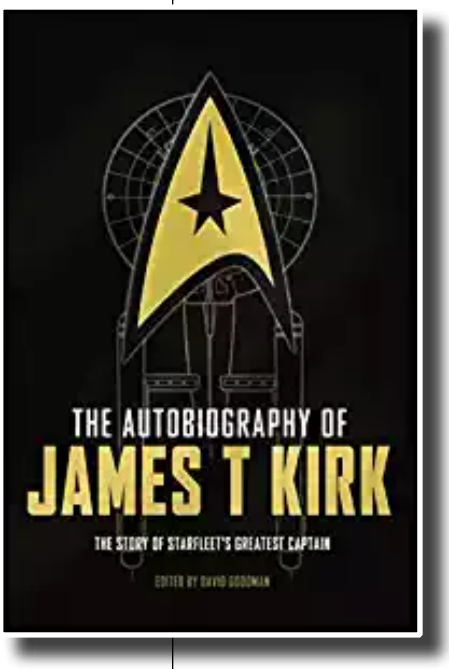
Collectively these essays demonstrate the deep splash that sea monsters have made across contemporary culture. They're generally accessible, only occasionally lapsing into cultural studies-ese. Fans of the leviathan will enjoy fishing for this book.

The Autobiography Of James T. Kirk
edited by David A. Goodman

(Titan Books, 2016)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

Subtitle: *The Story of Starfleet's Greatest Captain*. I'm not sure what Christopher Pike, Jean-Luc Picard, Kathryn Janeway, and Jonathan Archer would make of that, but then – as non-existent characters – they have no say in the matter. Apropos of nothing at all, my virtual vote would be cast for Kate Mulgrew – I mean, Captain Janeway.



The editor, David A. Goodman, has got some *Star Trek* previous, most notably *Star Trek Federation: The First 150 Years* and the 'Where No Fan Has Gone Before' *Futurama* spoof. Now he's had the honour of preparing the memoirs of James Tiberius Kirk (2233-killed in action 2293) for publication. He also commissioned a Foreword from Leonard H. McCoy, M.D., and an Afterword by Spock of Vulcan. Kirk's own Prologue commemorates his first meeting with the twentieth-century social worker, Edith Keeler (q.v. 'The City on the Edge of Forever'). "Because of her I would literally save history. And I would also regret it for the rest of my life" (p. 5).

The first four chapters, relating Kirk's early life-story from birth to his commissioning as a starship captain, interested me the most. Childhood on a farm in Iowa with his parents George (whose father was called Tiberius, by the way) and Winona Davis Kirk, his traumatic youthful experiences on Tarsus IV, meeting his first love, Ruth (no last name, that I could see), getting through Starfleet Academy, among many other revelatory things. We also get to know when and where he first met McCoy, Scotty, Uhuru, Sulu, Chekov, and – of course – Spock. The events on Tarsus IV, the planet where Kodos the Executioner murdered 4,000 colonists, lead up to 'The Conscience of the King', one of my favourite 'classic' *Star Trek* episodes. Kirk unmasks the itinerant actor-manager, Anton Karidian, as Kodos, with a little help from Shakespeare. Not surprisingly, this incident looms large in his memoirs.

After that, however, the narrative drive tends to bog down in many more synopses of episodes from the original series: 'Space Seed' (introducing Khan, you will remember), 'The Squire of Gothos', 'Amok Time', and so on and on. I kept the Bantam adaptations by James Blish close beside me, for occasional reference. These recaps are either too long for seasoned *Star Trek* veterans or too short for any readers not already steeped in the Mythos. It becomes a tedious game of Spot the Episode. Kirk/Goodman even manages to discuss 'Spock's Brain' with all seriousness, which must have taken some doing. As for the often motionless motion pictures, I just sort of lost the will to read on.

It isn't all down the gravity well, however. When the freshly- promoted Admiral Kirk prepares to leave his beloved *Enterprise*, he tells Lieutenant Uhura about the new personnel arrangements. He ends by saying that things won't be the same aboard the old tub. "It won't be the same without *you*, sir," she replies. Kirk appreciates the heartfelt compliment, and he also realizes what lay behind his pernickety efforts in selecting new senior officers: "I was literally trying to re-create a moment in time. But I was re-creating it without me." A sad-but-true fact.

In conclusion, it must be said that Goodman's book is not up to the high standard set for the writing of 'fictional biographies' by C. Northcote Parkinson's *The Life and Times of Horatio Hornblower* (1970). But then, despite the evident similarities, Kirk is nowhere near as well-developed a character as the one C. S. Forester wrote about over several novels. The same judgment applies to *James Bond: The Authorized Biography of 007* (1973), by John Pearson. *Star Trek* was, after all, an episodic TV series (and a still-running film franchise), with the accent on fast action rather than in-depth biographical studies. I'm not sorry to have read it, though – quite the reverse.

There is also a gallery of ingenious mock-up photographs, ranging from Kirk's Starfleet Academy graduation picture to mementos from his sojourn in 1930s America.

***Time Was* by Ian McDonald**

(Tor, 2018)

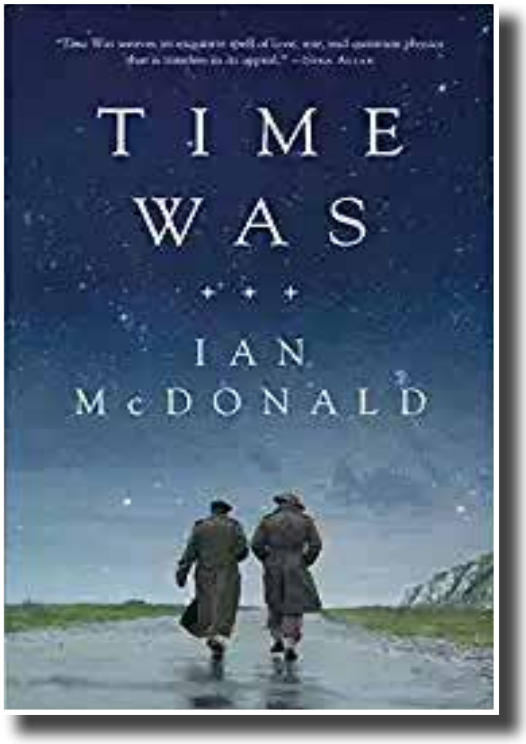
Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

In any fantasy or SF story set in what appears to be the real world, a decision has to be made about how the characters will react to encountering the fantastic. Will they simply take it in their stride? Best pull yourselves together, guys, because this is a story of the fantastic, and you're going to have to deal with it! Or will they go through the process of doubt and wonder that you or I would undergo if we were to encounter such marvels in our own lives? In this novella Ian McDonald takes the latter course. As much as anything else, it's a story about the sense of wonder. It's meta-SF, threaded with casual references to the SF corpus – Arthur C. Clarke, *Highlander*, even Harry Potter – and resonant with other, unnamed books that mine similar seams: Priest's *The Adjacent*, say; Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife.* In a fictional world in which the marvellous is already located in imaginative fiction familiar from the real world, how can we yet experience such wonder?

McDonald's protagonist, Emmett, is a second-hand book dealer. He has a bibliophile's geeky general knowledge. He doesn't have a shop. One by one, all round the world, the great bookshops are closing, and Emmett is contributing to that by selling books online from his tiny flat in London, and later his girlfriend Thorn Hildreth's tumble-down house in the Fens. The feel of the setting is mildly post-apocalyptic. Nothing is exactly unfamiliar or futuristic, not even the social media brands that are instrumental to Emmett's work, but there's a pervasive feeling of crappiness about everything. Only later on did the penny drop that this is England after Brexit.

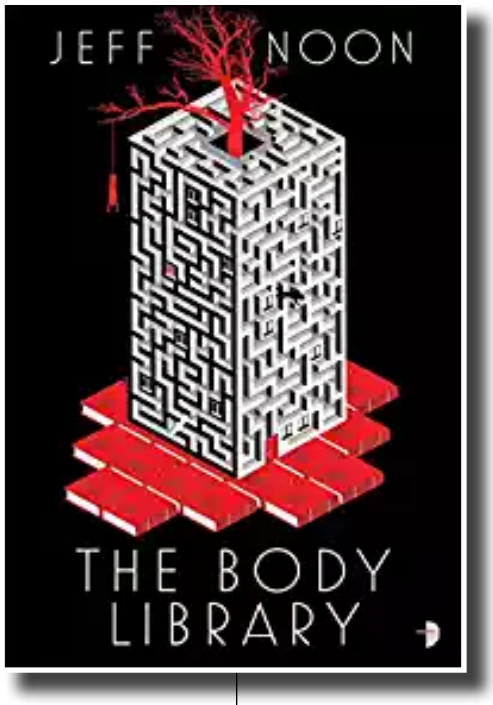
An enclosure, a love letter, inside a book of poems called *Time Was*, puts Emmett on the trail of McDonald's other narrator, Tom Chappell, a poet stationed in the Second World War on Shingle Street on the Suffolk coast, where he falls in love with research boffin Ben Seligman. The research has something to do with the uncertainty principle. Via further copies of *Time Was*, cached in bookshops, Emmett tracks the lovers' fleeting appearances in the records of wars throughout the twentieth century and beyond. In the blurry photographs they never seem to age. Tom's lyrical voice carries a mood of 1940s nostalgia, which stiffens Emmett's awareness that he lives in a 'post-literate age'. Online dealers are not the only reason bookshops are closing. I sense how keenly McDonald himself must feel this. He writes with a simple literary elegance in which language is charged with layers of feeling: 'Words and pictures cannot carry the crunch of sea-rounded stone under the tires as we pulled into the car park, the salt-sweet perfume of the grasses, the scabbing dryness of the air, the knock of a hundred million pebbles rolling in the wave lap.' With descriptions like this McDonald keeps taking us back into the real, the kind of gritty, sensuous experience you cannot get on social media and which cannot be rendered by the flat information-mediating prose that IT media have habituated us to.

It's because of this power of language, as well as the continuous sense of allusion to a world and a history that extend beyond the 130 pages of this story, that we grieve at the vignettes of war, and when the consensus reality opens to the marvellous then that too feels real. The sense of wonder. The impact of uncertainty, the possibility that anything might be possible. McDonald evokes the wonder so persuasively in his story world that it resonated with my own longings, perceptions, experiences – in this present world whose zeitgeist so insistently demands certainty – that there is much more to reality than there may seem. You don't need me to tell you Ian McDonald is a great writer. *Time Was* is superb. Buy it. Read it. Feel the wonder.



***The Body Library* by Jeff Noon**
(Angry Robot, 2018)
Reviewed by Kate Onyett

The first book in this series was a trippy excursion into depths of consciousness, examined through man's relationship with time, and wrapped in a thriller-murder investigation. Noon now takes his metaphysical PI into a conceptual thriller about the very fabric of perceived reality itself.



John Nyquist is back, and having moved to a new city in Noon's alternative history world, he's involved with a case that explodes into far more than it first appears. Welcome to Storyville: where stories are part of the very fabric of life: tradable, liveable and intrinsic. You don't live your life: you live your narrative. Hired by a mysterious agency, Nyquist is paid to tail a city official, and all seems pretty so-so until Nyquist becomes involved with a prostitute and inadvertently kills his mark in one magic-soaked night at a mysterious abandoned apartment block. This is only the beginning, as he realises he has become part of a much wider plot. Infected with an apparently terminal, semi-magical word-disease, Nyquist has to track down a city-ending conspiracy and find his would-be lady-love's killer, as he is hounded by forces both official and supernatural. If narrative is the lifeblood of the city and its people, then controlling it becomes a battle for supremacy.

On the surface, this is a very enjoyable onion of a novel: Nyquist's story is pared down, overlapping layer by thin, overlapping layer, as we dive with him into a murksome truth about whom or what is really pulling our strings in the bigger story. As a fantastical thriller it ticks all boxes and fills out nicely. But this being Noon, there's a lot more at work here. Instead of delving within into the subconscious (as with the first novel), this time it is external descriptors of self and how these descriptors can be manipulated and controlled that are up for question.

The universe and all we can see and describe of it is perceived through the lens of human experience. As humans, we communicate, share and report back through narrative. Whether you consider the subject fiction or non-fiction, we are basically narrating what has been, and we use this to describe ourselves, others, and the world about us. Narrative could be said to form the great fabric of our conscious reality. So, does altering narrative truly alter reality?

History has shown regimes attempting to do just that: officially eradicating the past to remake the present and future in their own image, and there are forces within the novel attempting to do just that: the city's Narrative Council policing the narratives of the population, and the mythical Oberon seeking to alter the city's fictions to his own design.

Reconciliation is the theme by the end. Nyquist, split into his physical and narrative selves when left for dead, has to reconcile his past and present, his regrets with his peace, and his narrative self with action in the physical world if he is to find any answers and bring the case to a close. Reconciliation is not just about resolving universal forces but is a personal healing of the soul.

While there seems to be tacit admonition about forces that shape us, there is still a hope for making our own mark within those forces. For Oberon could not live without the people's belief in narrative to give it shape, just as the residents of Storyville could not self-define or function without the reportage quality of narrative.

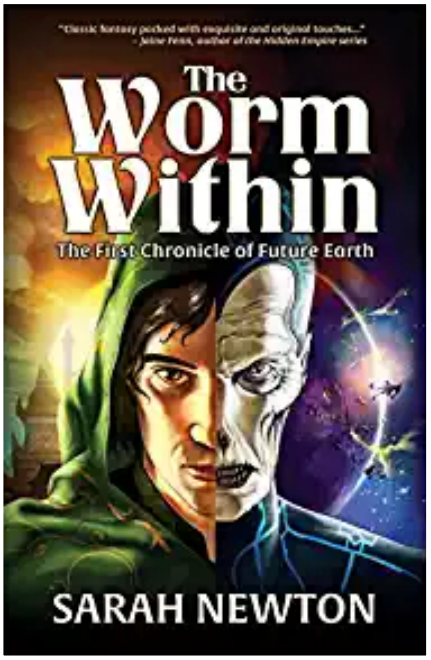
Noon's themes are big; social and personal spaces examined via the forces that control our lives, and the interaction of those forces on the individual's struggle. Noon's intelligent prose and stoical lead warn us of the struggle all need to be aware of: maintaining the self in the face of the world's driving forces.

He layers this with incredibly detailed oddness, turning the world a few degrees weird. It's a heady, clever, immersive read.

***The Worm Within (The First Chronicle of Future Earth)* by Sarah Newton**

(Mindjammer Press, 2017)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter



Sarah Newton's *The Worm Within - The First Chronicle of Future Earth* (which suggests that "future" Earth might survive the peril revealed in this particular book) is set far into our future, following a glorious era when Humanity possessed the very stars themselves, but was eventually brought low by war, hubris and technology run amuck. Anything we might recognise is long gone, and the planet is permeated with ancient ruins and technologies, which have been built upon and incorporated into everyday life, not least because no one any longer has the means to remove or reproduce them. These remains are both indestructible and incomprehensible – neither good nor evil, they simply *are*.

Most of them, at least.

As Clarke's Third Law has it: *any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic*, but as a corollary of this I might also suggest that *any sufficiently advanced future is often indistinguishable from history*. Look at Jack Vance's *Tales of the Dying Earth*, Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, possibly Brian Aldiss' *Hothouse*, and even Wells' *The Time Machine*, to mention some of the best known examples of "dying earths". These distant futures, like those of *The Worm Within*, are, despite their temporal distance, not nearly so physically distant. In them, our now ancient home world has seen tremendous change, but remains in – or rather, has returned to – a state that we might recognise, following a period of miracles, vast empires, and men like gods that differs immensely from our experience.

And in the temporally distant world of *The Worm Within* dwell our (surprisingly unchanged!) descendants, alongside many other races. Did they arrive here from other worlds or are they altered humans? No one any longer seems to know (or care).

One of these humans is Iago, an orphan adopted some years ago by Master Pellegraine, a Chronomancer (or time wizard), after he and his, ahem, fellowship of friends had defeated the hideous Witch of Shaful. Until now, Iago's entire life has been spent quietly in the Chronomancer's Tower under the tutelage of Pellegraine, but rumours of war and chaos are once more sweeping the lands. Pellegraine's old comrade, Kazimir vel-Tanis of the House of the Noble Sakari, Legiadimact of the Legion of Lord Regus, Indomitable arrives with some disquieting news of his own. And so it's time to bring the fellowship back together: Iago, Pellegraine and Kazimir head out on a journey – a quest, you might say – tracking down their old comrade, Malthus, a thief, and his drunken companion, Appia, a healer. With the band all back together they head off to uncover the evil growing in the land before it's too late to stop it.

Yes, it's a classic D&D role-playing scenario: an ancient land built of buried secrets, mighty magicks, curious creatures and enduring evils, in which a rag-tag team of adventurers must risk everything they hold dear to save the world from a fate worse than death...!

Which might be fine for a tabletop D&D adventure, but feels a little hackneyed as the premise for a novel in 2018. Sarah Newton does a perfectly acceptable job as the dungeon-master – er, I mean writer of *The Worm Within*, in that the group's adventures are pretty well chronicled, the machinations behind the scenes are believable, and there is a rising sense of dark menace as the action rolls on. What's missing is anything new or distinct to differentiate *The Worm Within* from so much other available quest fiction. If classic D&D quests are your bag then you'll find much to enjoy here, or if you're new to fantasy (or, more precisely, to "dying Earth science fiction") then you'll also enjoy *The Worm Within*.

Sarah Newton has tried hard to create something striking and new here (no easy task in such a well-explored genre) and I did enjoy the idea of her Future Earth, one tottering under the weight of so much history that almost *anything* is possible; I just wish she'd used this backdrop to fuel a more original story.

***Origamy* by Rachel Armstrong**

(Newcon Press, 2018)

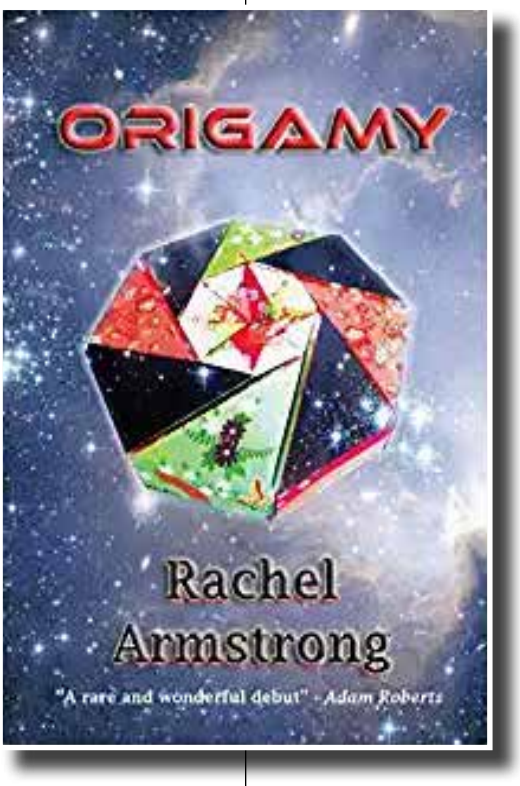
Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

In the prologue we find our protagonist, Mobius, apparently in an operating theatre and about to undergo some sort of operation. As she slides into unconsciousness, there seems to be a kind of epiphany. As she slips into another world of consciousness, she experiences herself forming anew, in what presumably is a new world. What do we know about this? Initially, not very much. This puts us at no more disadvantage than Mobius. The reader learns about her world as she learns. Most of all, she must relearn the art of Origamy. The first question for the reader is what exactly Origamy is; helpfully there is not just one but two definitions provided:

Origamy (noun). 'The circus art of spacetime travel',

Origamy (verb). 'The artful and athletic practice of weaving spacetime fabrics to discover outlandish places and events'.

So, we know right from the off that this is about exploring and manipulating entire universes, which is nothing if not ambitious. The creations are layered up from biological principals to create strange and bizarre worlds, moving swiftly up to full blown tours of the cosmos in Stapledonian fashion. The glory and splendour is underlined with the necessary building blocks. There is an enormous joy in the way that the worlds are constructed, so that however bizarre it may appear at first, there is a satisfying completeness to this. Even the characters names give us clues to what is happening. This is apparent as soon as we encounter Mobius' parents, Newton and Shelley. Immediately we are dropped into the hinterland between science and art. The feeling was that the resonance of the names was so significant, that I actually found myself googling them if I couldn't immediately place them. Far from being annoying, this added an intriguing extra dimension to the book. As the reader is being taken on a tour of weird and intriguing universes, they are simultaneously taken through the history of science and its place in the universe in explaining and enhancing the strange beauty of it.



As the novel progresses, it brings us rather more down to earth. The daily and family life of Mobius becomes more the focus of interest. This does not mean the book dispenses with the universe building, nor does it reign back completely on the awe-inspiring nature of the science that underpins the beauty of it all. It becomes clear that there is something very wrong with Mobius. She is an experienced Origamist, but is still having to relearn the process from scratch. She is also getting interference that breaks up her thinking and is struggling to retain what she has. The novel is now running on two distinct levels. Her thoughts become darker and more concerned with endings and decay. Whereas earlier in the book the joy was in the innovative sense-of-wonder world building, and often in the learning, as it progresses this is still present, but the universes start to feel transient. It is as if, as they develop into fully-fledged entities, entropy comes into play and they must decay. In parallel with this, Mobius is also clearly losing her thoughts. The reader comes to realise there is a point to all this, and the story gradually mutates into a fascinating quest to track down her identity and the meaning of her place in the universe.

This book is unlike almost anything else I've ever read. Armstrong has weaved together a story of many fractured parts and, much like Mobius the origamist, pulled them into something rather glorious. A journey through multiple universes, a heart-rending search for identity and what is ultimately a very human and powerful resolution. A story that takes in the whole of creation and history and yet takes place in an instant. This is one of the best and most original novels I've read in some considerable time.

***The Smoke* by Simon Ings**
(Gollancz, 2018)
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

You try to remember other works written in the second person: *Molly Zero* by Keith Roberts, a novelette by Robert Silverberg that was originally intended as a movie treatment. Not much. It's an odd voice, the second person; the book addresses you, instructs you, rather than bringing you into the plot the way that first person does. And yet, at its best, second person feels more intimate. That's why it is a hard voice to write, a hard voice to get right. You cannot simply substitute "you" for "I". The body of knowledge shared by "you" is different from the body of knowledge assumed by "I". The rhythms are different. Get it wrong, and the prodding finger of the text – you, you, you – is alienating. Get it right, and you are welcomed into the story. Simon Ings, a writer ever concerned with exploring what prose can do, gets it right. At least for a time.

You, in this instance, is Stuart Lanyon. We're in a recognisable avatar of Yorkshire in the 1950s, a place of belching factory chimneys and bleak moors, outdoor privys and telephone boxes, television only beginning to reach into the valleys, grim and grimy. Stuart has retreated here to live with his taciturn, defeated dad after a love affair in London went wrong. But this is not quite familiar territory. The Great War ended when an atomic bomb was dropped on Berlin. More significantly, experiments in genetics have had the unintended consequence of splitting the human race into three species: at one extreme, the secretive, feral, hermaphroditic "chickies"; at the other extreme the superior, highly intelligent Bund; and between them, Stuart and other normal, old-fashioned humans, feeling an increasing sense of worthlessness as they are locked out of an incomprehensible future being shaped by the Bund.

When Stuart has to return to London, the Smoke, to clear out his old flat and, inevitably, confront his memories of his relationship with Fel, the novel suddenly loses something of its edge. Firstly, an unexpected voice, an "I", starts to break into the second person narrative. Then, as we shift into an extended flashback that constitutes the bulk of the novel, Stuart takes over as first-person narrator. This structural shift reflects a loss of focus: the distinctive you, the intimate outsider, is replaced with a much more familiar and hence less engaging "I".

Fel is of the Bund, and so the relationship between Fel and Stuart is emblematic of the relationship between human and Bund, the failures of understanding, the doubts, the power plays, the arrogance and abasement. The name Ings has chosen, Bund, is interesting. Of course it calls to mind the Shanghai Bund, the enclave of powerful, arrogant Westerners dominating pre-war China; but Bund was also a name used by a number of Jewish organizations between the late-19th century and the establishment of Israel. At several points, Ings's intellectually and technologically superior Bund, a grouping feared and hated as different, is specifically equated with Jewishness: there are no Christmas decorations, the Day of Atonement is venerated, and just once Fel's father, Georgy Chernoy, identifies the members of the Bund as Jews. This equation lends an unnerving character to the cataclysmic breakdown between the races that develops over the course of the novel.

There's a lot going on: rival space adventures; an experiment in immortality in which both men and women give birth to an infant version of themselves; the development of a crude television sf series; the strange sexual allure of the chickies; and behind it all the way prejudice and fear and arrogance build inexorably towards war. Strictly speaking, it's too much; in the hands of a lesser writer it would be a mess. That it isn't is testimony to how good Ings is; but even so the shift from you to I, from the disconcerting to the familiar, is a gear change from excellent to merely very very good.

Tales from the Vatican Vaults
edited by David V. Barrett

(Robinson, 2015)

Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

It's a little-known fact that Pope John Paul suffered a heart attack in 1978, just 33 days into his reign. Fortunately, his personal secretary made an unscheduled visit to his chambers that night and immediately summoned medical attention. John Paul of course recovered and went on to become the longest-ever reigning Pope, clocking in 32 years and 2 months on the throne of St Peter before dying in 2010 at the age of 98. His reign famously cleaned up the Catholic church, finally banishing the shades of financial corruption and abuse of the vulnerable that had dogged it for centuries and unleashing an age of liberalism such as had never been seen before. He even managed to reconcile the Roman Catholic and Anglican communions with a clever bit of theological jiggery pokery that worked for those who wanted it to. And as part of this theological glasnost, John Paul threw open the Vatican Vaults – the repository of all those weird and wonderful reports that didn't quite (or even nearly) fit into the official narrative of Catholic theology.

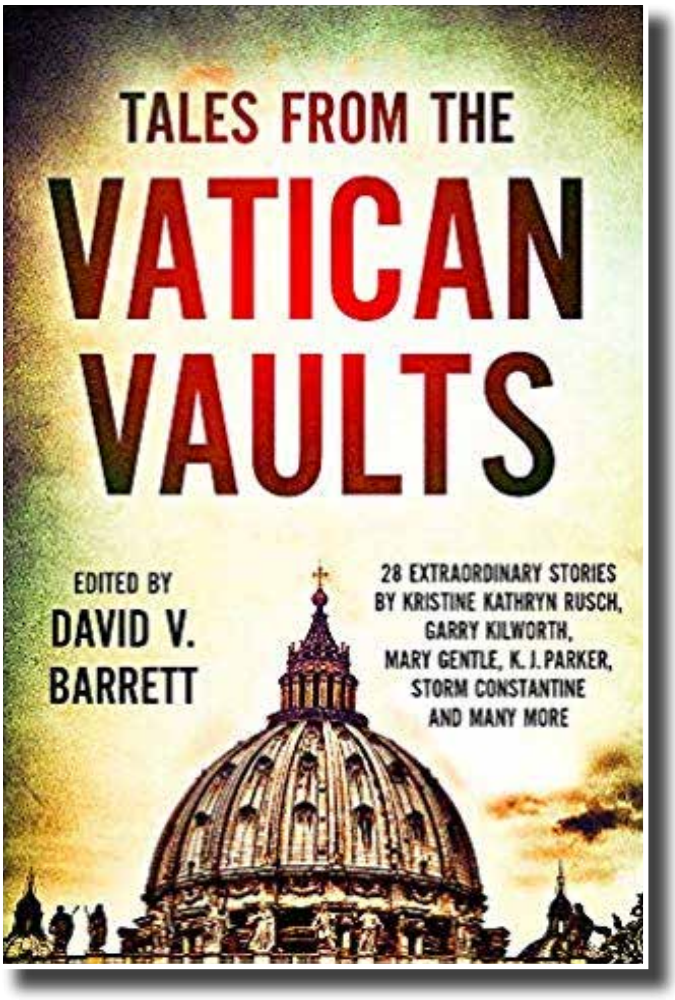
A small selection of which is published here, with linking commentary.

In short, this is the Vatican X-Files.

That, at least, is the back story, and it works a lot better than the incoherent mishmash of alien technology, conspiracy etc. ad nauseam that ties the TV X-Files into such impenetrable knots. A big strength is that editor David V. Barrett has enough of a theological background to weave it together in a way that makes coherent, internal sense, rather than just hand-wavy wishful thinking. But still, like the original, the collection is at its best if you regard it as a series of standalone tales, each clever in their own right but not trying to be anything bigger.

It's a good, chunky collection with 28 authors: most of the usual suspects of good short story fiction, and a couple of first timers. Some stories stick closer to the brief than others, being the kind of thing that could plausibly end up in the Vatican Vaults. Some feel like the kind of story the author would have written anyway, meaning that the linking text has to work a little bit harder to fit it into the narrative.

There are two main types of alternate history: where the timelines diverge because of outside intervention (time travellers, alien invasion), and where it happens because it just happened. The former lends itself much more to science fiction; this collection is the latter type. So, the stories are generally somewhere on a spectrum between outright fantasy and non-fantastical, counterfactual material.



With the former, the theme is often the contrast between the supernatural powers attributed to pagan religions, and the truth claimed by the church, with or without reason. Thus, in Jaine Fenn's 'The Sky Weeps, the Earth Quakes', a young Conquistador has to face up to the reality of the powers of the Inca religion – and to do him credit, does his best to take it on board. In Storm Constantine's 'The Saint's Well', a holy well in 1950s Wales, attributed to a saint, is clearly empowered by a much older spiritual presence.

But there is enough variety to break up the theme. At the counterfactual end of the spectrum, Lionel & Patricia Fanthorpe do what they do best and give us a tale of Bérenger Saunière, Rennes-

le-Château and Saint-Sulpice. David V. Barrett's introductory 'The Tale of Pope Joan' is exactly what it says it is, but fleshes out the bare bones of a rather insubstantial legend with actual characters and motivation and background. Easily the best of this crop is Kristine Kathryn Rusch's 'The Island of Lost Priests', a response to contemporary church scandals, dealing with the Catholic church's historical insistence on policing itself rather than handing over to the secular authorities, and the bonds that may always exist between abuser and abused.

One notable exception to the rule – in other words, good old science fiction – is Marion Pitman's 'Encounter on the Rhine': a Close Encounters explanation of the visions of Hildegard of Bingen from the point of view of a twelfth century monk.

Now I have to I plead an interest: my first professional sale was to a David V. Barrett collection, so I paid especial attention to the debut authors he has found here. Geraldine Warner's 'The Missing Journal of Captain James Cook' gives the real story of the explorer's last days, extending beyond the generally accepted date of his death. Cook, a product of the Enlightenment and a certain English class, with a traditional C of E upbringing, grapples with very different spiritual forces on the island of Hawaii where he met his end. The tension and joy of the story is the mismatch, read between the lines, between how a man of Cook's background feels he should be thinking, and what is actually happening to him. One man's heaven can easily be another's hell.

Meanwhile, in Stephanie Potter's 'Gardening' we get the story of an innocent nun who inadvertently uncovers an alternative version of the Garden of Eden story, and is of course treated exactly as you would expect the church of the 1930s to treat an uppity nun who insists on discovering inconvenient truths.

Because of the fantastical / counter-factual dominance, it would be interesting to do a second volume, *Tales from the Vatican Vaults 2500*, or even *3000*: David V. Barrett could bring his theological sights to bear on a future Catholic theologian's appraisal of the technological developments of the previous 500 (or 1000) years. You're welcome.

Virtues of War and *Ghosts of War*
by Bennett R Coles

(Titan Books, 2015 & 2016)

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

Bennett R Coles is a former Canadian naval officer. His first two novels (of a promised trilogy) are part of that military science fiction tradition that values "authenticity". What that means, in this case, seems to be a fondness for three letter acronyms, recounting the petty frustrations of military life and "realistic" portrayals of brutal violence.

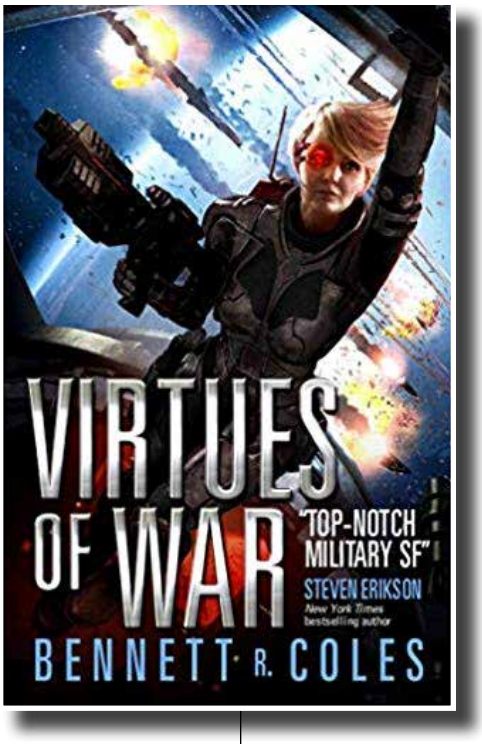
These books are set in a future where humanity has spread to planets around nearby stars and Earth is struggling to assert control over fractious colonies. In the first book, a Terran task force, deployed as a show of strength in the Sirius system, becomes the trigger for the start of a widespread rebellion and must fight its way home through enemy territory. *Virtues of War* follows the adventures of four core characters. Lieutenant Katja Emmes is the leader of a "strike team" of marines and scion of a military family who feels she has something to prove. Lieutenant Commander Thomas Kane is the ambitious commander of the ship, *The Rapier*. Lieutenant Charity Brisebois is *The Rapier*'s communication officer, but she is also an intelligence officer with a nastily Machiavellian streak. Finally, Sub-Lieutenant Jack Mallory is a puppyish pilot trained in stealth warfare and, handily for the plot, a savant in advanced, exotic physics. In *Ghosts of War*, this cast of characters find themselves back on Earth, some struggling to cope with what they've been through, and discovering that their distant war has followed them home.

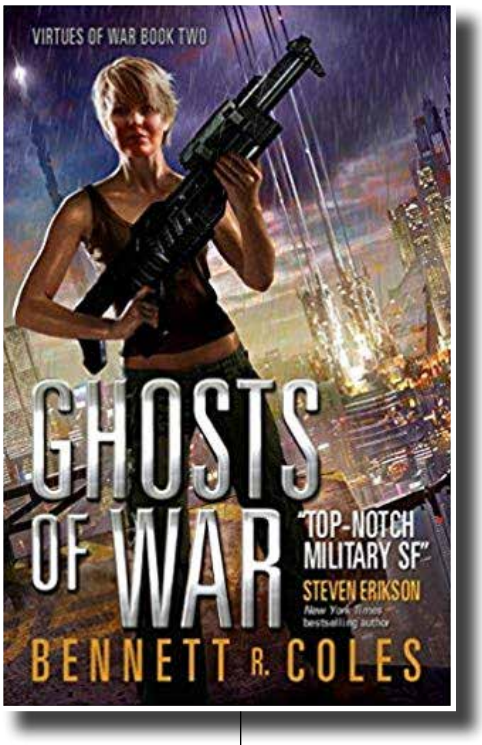
Virtues of War has the advantage of featuring lots of action sequences which Coles delivers with reasonable gusto. *Ghosts of War*, however, features far too many dinner parties and lengthy digressions in which not much happens. The second book is supposed to make the reader ponder the price soldiers pay for war, but Coles handles neither human emotions nor ethics convincingly.

I had a number of problems with these books. The way they handle women, whose worth seems intimately linked to their physical attractiveness, and the divide between white characters (the protagonists) and non-white (villains or sexual trophies) are disturbing. There are problems with the plotting too, which is heavily reliant on every-

one being egregiously stupid – warships without defences against boarding and secretly constructed routes to and from enemy territory that are left undefended and unmonitored in times of war, for example.

But the most obvious question these books raise is: How should we react to books whose lead character is a war criminal?





In the opening pages of *The Virtues of War,* Katja Emmes leads her team on a raid to a small farming community, part of the human colony on a planet orbiting Sirius, believing it might harbours terrorists. When the local village leader, a man called Thapa, fails to immediately answer her questions, Katja blows the head off an innocent man, *pour encourager les autres*. Later, after Thapa leads a revolt against Earth (which, to be fair, includes brutal murder and a threat to have Katja repeatedly raped in a public square) she murders him while he is an unarmed and helpless prisoner. She leads a raid that destroys civilian homes, calling down devastating orbital strikes on inhabited areas and, later, she executes an officer in her own navy who is guilty of being a poor administrator.

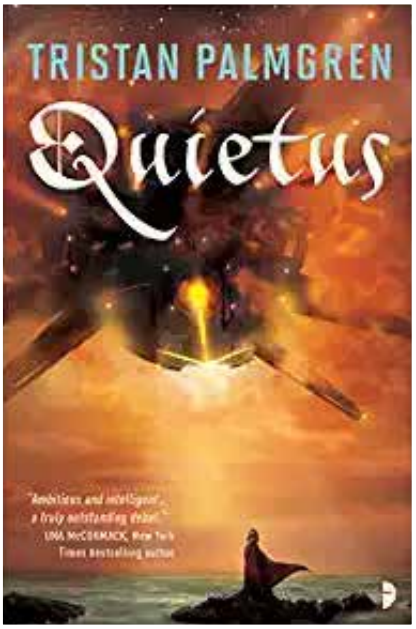
Coles makes use of bits of the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes throughout these books: the title of the first book comes from the claim in *The Leviathan* that "Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues." This sentence follows Hobbes's description of a war of "every man against every man" in which no action is unjust: "notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law, where no law, no injustice." In *Ghosts of War*, Katja's commanding officer – Brigadier Korolev – absolves Katja of any wrongdoing in war using this defence. She did what was necessary in a situation where the rules of normal morality cannot be applied. Coles goes further. For Hobbes, individuals live under the protection of the sovereign (whether a monarch or assembly) and, in return, cede the right to question the sovereign's actions. Earth's government knows more than its citizens and, Korolev argues: "The people empower Parliament to act in the best interests of the State, and sometimes that means breaking the rules that rightly apply to the people" (256). Neither the rule of law nor petty morality apply to the state – or its agents, like Katja.

It is possible that Coles is playing with his reader. It is possible that the third instalment of the story will subvert all that has gone before and that Katja's world, nasty, brutish and short as it is, will be turned on its head. Perhaps, in the end, the cruelty of the system she serves will be revealed to her (and to the reader) as an abomination. I have my doubts. But even if that were the case, there is no rescuing these books.

Coles is too enamoured with his hero and her violence, he wants us to like her and to be on her side even as Katja is cold-bloodedly murdering innocent people. More than that, especially in *Ghosts of War*, he wants us to feel sorry for Katja – as if she is a victim. As if she, as an individual, has no moral responsibility for the crimes she commits. I couldn't swallow it. Military veterans may deserve respect for their service but "just obeying orders" – even if coated in a veneer of Seventeenth Century philosophy – is no defence.

How should we react to books whose lead character is a war criminal? With a distinct sense of queasiness.

***Quietus* by Tristan Palmgren**
(Angry Robot, 2018)
Reviewed by Stuart Carter



Angry Robot are really on a roll of late, publishing an impressive array of smart, exciting science fiction and fantasy work from both sides of the Atlantic. *Quietus*, the first novel from Tristan Palmgren, is no exception: an ambitious, sublime, but very human debut.

The narrative is initially divided between Habidah and Niccoluccio: the latter is a 14th century monk in an Italy about to be devastated by the Black Death; the former is an anthropologist, studying the effects of the plague upon different cultures. We follow Niccoluccio as plague arrives at the isolated monastery where he has lived quietly for many years, and Habidah as she tracks the plague, using advanced technologies to conceal herself from the doomed locals, although in our first encounter she can't help but try to warn a local trader of the danger. He, of course, doesn't believe her – why ever would he?

The ensuing scenes when the lethal contagion reaches Sacro Cuore, Niccoluccio's home, are simply heart-breaking as we watch this gentle, ancient community quickly vanish. Returning to Habidah, we find her veneer of detachment becoming evermore difficult to sustain as the apocalypse hits, and Palmgren's writing evokes a truly claustrophobic sense of helpless doom in these sections. It's very powerful stuff, with an awful sense of actually being there in the midst of the Black Death.

For Niccoluccio, there's no escape, but Habidah eventually climbs aboard a shuttle and returns to the hidden secret base that her team is monitoring the plague's spread from. Who are these observers? They're part of a huge ever-expanding multiversal federation, the Unity, which contains millions of different worlds and trillions of people, all managed by a group of super-intelligent AI's, the amalgamates, who have been expanding the Unity at breakneck speed throughout the multiverse.

But the disaster unfolding upon this single plague-afflicted Earth is being mirrored on a far larger scale across the Unity, which is facing its own terrifying, unknowable, and unstoppable plague, the oneirophage. Habidah and her team are not here to help this Earth; their cold-hearted mission is to stay hidden and to understand how the stricken population respond to what is, as far as they know, the end of the world. The Unity's rulers are preparing for the worst.

You can't write about super-intelligent AI managing immense, mostly human, civilisations without mentioning the B-word: Banks. The Unity isn't *quite* everyone's favourite post-scarcity, anarcho-communist society, although the similarities are far greater than the differences (to begin with at least). The Amalgamates aren't Minds, the Unity isn't the Culture, and Tristan Palmgren isn't Banks - but if Palmgren hasn't read at least *some* M. Banks' novels then there's some spookily parallel evolution going on, for sure.

Regardless of the influences here, *Quietus* is a stunning first novel. It's packed with emotion, intelligence, and philosophy, spans entire universes and has a cast of trillions, which makes it all the more miraculous how personal the viewpoint often is - Olaf Stapledon this is not. Sat alone one evening, reading *Quietus* with some quiet neoclassical music playing in the background, I stopped reading, put the book down and simply *thought* about what I was reading: how Niccoluccio's self-contained, monastic, silent world was collapsing around his ears. It felt all too real, in the same way as Hilary Mantel's Tudor England feels real. Palmgren had painted an emotionally bleak picture of the Black Death, but also a very calm one; not a "cosy catastrophe" by any means, but a sobering, thoughtful apocalypse of the heart. It's not a moment I shall forget in a hurry.

And then, yes, the world turns once more: Niccoluccio meets Habidah and discovers how tiny the world he inhabits really is, a precipitous zooming-out that you might expect would break his closeted Medieval mind, but doesn't. The book's second half then brings a "zooming-out" from Habidah's world(s), one of another order of magnitude entirely, yet still with Niccoluccio at its heart.

Quietus is simply stunning, some of the biggest and best science fiction I've read in all too long a time.

Proof of Concept by Gwyneth Jones (Tor, 2017)

Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

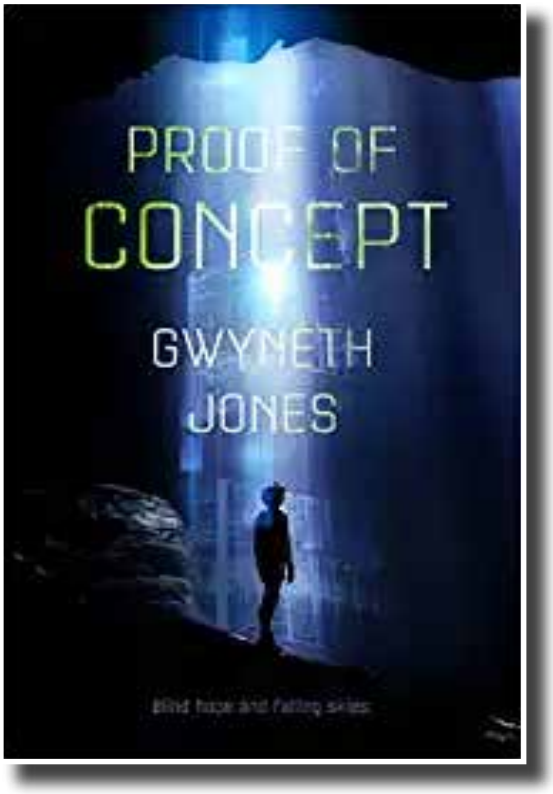
It's the twenty-third century and the future is grim. The world's bloated human population is concentrated in enormous hives. Most people never go outside – into the agricultural zones, where you'd be shot on sight, or the polluted Dead Zones where 'scavs' scrabble to survive, or the wilderness zones still enjoyed by the One Percent but steadily being chipped away by land lotteries whose winners inevitably sell on their title deeds so they can pay for medical treatment or pay off debts. In this tight little novella, Gwyneth Jones extrapolates not only the trajectories of ecology and economics, but also the totalitarian trends of IT: woe betide your career if you say anything that grates against the facile sensibilities of Global Audience Mediation; and you can't have a baby without a permit, so it's safer than 'actual sex' to make love virtually in online 'playtime'.

Kir is a scav rescued from a Dead Zone by physicist Margrethe Patel to host an AI (named Altair) and thereby has a place in the team carrying out the Needle experiment in a hermetically isolated void deep in the earth's crust. The Needle is a construct in information space; the aim is to move this construct, in an instant, many light-years through space – and back. It's a project to give people hope by opening a possibility of the Great Escape to other worlds. The problem is one of knowledge: how can you know whether the experiment has worked and where the Needle has been. Physics alone can't even prove that the concept is viable. Every observation is also an impact – and consumes time. But the dynamics of information can extrapolate a kind of certainty about what cannot be observed. Or can they? How much do you trust the process?

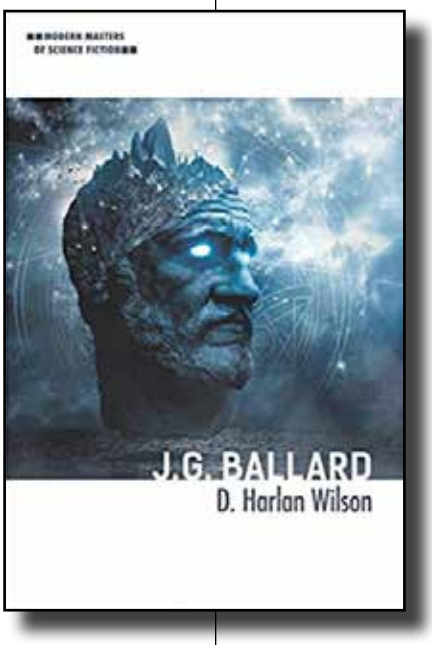
Especially when team members start dying. Can you trust the reasons that are given for their deaths? Do you trust the motives of those with the power in this locked-room situation – Patel and her co-conspirator Dan Orsted, media-friendly doyen of space travel and the Great Escape? Is it just some kind of misinformation when images filtering through from the surface suggest that the overstretching of the earth's resources may at last be triggering a cataclysmic collapse?

Jones embeds in the story some hints about the kind of story it is. Kir explains that a Turing test is 'a philosophical koan … Like Schrödinger's cat. It doesn't mean what people think it means … It's your decision, not what the AI, or the person, really is.' Altair is contained by knowledge firewalls within Kir's mind, as the Needle lab is firewalled within its cavern in the earth. In Schrödinger's thought experiment the cat in the box is conceptually both dead and alive at the same time, but if you open the box the cat turns out to really be *either* dead *or* alive. Jones's novella implies the application of Schrödinger's cat as a parable to matters – such as climate change, say, and other ecological syndromes – that are so complex they resist absolute proof and yet can be accepted as really happening if you give your trust to the informational models through which they're apprehended.

The very brevity of the novella makes it more intellectually demanding than if everything were spelt out in detail. That brevity at the same time allows voisinages, a denser web of associations between ideas through their proximity on the page and in time as you read, which in turn provoke thought. Jones may not provide answers to the bleak problems the world faces; but, like Perceval approaching the Grail, she seeks to clarify what questions we should be asking – and that the challenges we face are not only practical and political but also intellectual, all the more so in a time when ignorance and simple-mindedness are valorised as virtues of democracy.



***J.G. Ballard* by D. Harlan Wilson**
(University of Illinois Press, 2017)
Reviewed by Nick Hubble



Although 'Modern Masters of Science Fiction' sounds somewhat dated (for various reasons) as the title of a twenty-first century book series, these volumes seem generally to be very good: nicely presented, concise, sharp, relatively jargon-free and directed at the intelligent general reader. Paul Kincaid's *Iain M. Banks* is proving very popular and Wilson's *J.G. Ballard* may well become equally essential despite the fact that it has to compete with many more existing texts covering its subject. What makes it stand out from the field is Wilson's insistence that, for all his technicolour surrealism and imaginative virtuosity, 'Ballard began as, and always remained, a science fiction writer'.

The mainstream literary status that Ballard attained well before his death in 2009 was not due to him abandoning the genre but rather to him being one of the first to understand that sf *was* the key literature of the second half of the twentieth century. Wilson cites Peter Brigg's argument that Ballard, like Kurt Vonnegut, was almost forced to keep working through an ever-developing science-fictional style in order to express the otherwise inexpressible nature of his wartime experience. While Ballard's Shanghai childhood and subsequent internment by the Japanese in Lunghua Civil Assembly Centre is included in the biographical first chapter, Wilson continues to circle back to these experiences at apposite moments in the book. He is particularly strong on Ballard's 'autobiographical' novels; a category in which he includes *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979) alongside the more obvious examples of *Empire of the Sun* (1984) and *The Kindness of Women* (1991).

It was the middle one of these three, published midway between his first –*The Wind from Nowhere* (1962) – and last – *Kingdom Come* (2006) – novels, that made Ballard a literary star. Shortlisted for the Booker Prize, *Empire of the Sun* won both the Guardian fiction prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, which it shared with Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, before subsequently being filmed by Steven Spielberg. Yet if we look once more at that bracketing of Ballard's name with Carter's, we might see this as not only 'mainstream' recognition but also evidence that the process was already underway by which conventional post-war British social realism would be displaced by speculative fiction, or fantastika in the wider sense, as the dominant form of contemporary English literature in the twenty-first century.

As Wilson notes, it was the so-called 'angry young man' and author of *Lucky Jim* (1954), Kingsley Amis, who persuaded Gollancz to market Ballard's *The Drowned World* as sf back in 1962. In *New Maps of Hell: A Study of Science Fiction* (1960), Amis had argued against the ghettoization of sf and in favour of reviewing sf alongside general fiction; the appearance of a writer of Ballard's range and vision put those arguments beyond question. Through his association with the New Wave and his later work as a contributing editor of *Bananas*, the literary magazine which ran from 1975 until 1979 and to which Carter also contributed, Ballard has already spent two decades at the forefront of both avant-garde and science fiction before *Empire of the Sun* appeared.

In providing sharp readings of the different phases of Ballard's career – the 'natural disaster quartet' of the 1960s, the 'cultural disaster trilogy' of the 1970s, and the late novels which expose middle-class gated communities as crime scenes – Wilson compellingly charts Ballard's explorations within the 'electronic media landscape' of late modernity before concluding that his career illustrates how sf's 'alternate realities, electric dreams, and machine desires have been subsumed and standardized by the futures we have come to inhabit'. Intriguingly, Wilson suggests that Ballard wrote as a 'culturally science fictionalized being' in later years. However, this engaging and thought-provoking study, also enables us to consider whether Ballard illustrates how sf came to usurp the law of the father in the 2000s by supplanting mainstream literature and becoming coterminous with the world.

***Altered Carbon* by Richard Morgan**
(Gollancz, 2018)
Reviewed by Duncan Lawie

When this debut novel was reviewed in the ancestor of these pages in 2002, Neal Asher was providing my fix of ultraviolent SF, so I ignored it. It is a delight to catch up with it now, released as a Netflix tie-in. Having read some of Morgan's later books, it is fascinating to see how rich his inaugural writing already is, how close it cleaves to themes he expressed in later work such as *Black Man* (2008). *Altered Carbon* is a whirlwind of clever plotting, rich setting and the carefully considered uses and misuses of the technology it presents.

The book balances on a knife edge; a searing indictment of extreme inequality wrapped in a package of toxic masculinity. It maintains that equipoise through the self-awareness of the narrator protagonist. Takeshi Kovacs knows that he is founded in his brutal and impoverished upbringing; that his army and UN Envoy careers required brutishness of him, but they also moulded him and supported his own cleverness. His current state of gun-for-hire is a result of his skills, his intelligence and his burning desire for justice, regardless of the law. There is a danger of making it sound a worthy book. It escapes that territory in the precision of the language; through the pleasure of reading and the disdain of the author in any belief that human nature might really change.

Altered Carbon is filled with visceral thrills: rage, compassion, sex, danger, violence and a cunning, complex plot. The depth of context makes the world convincing whilst providing space for Morgan to lay down plot threads and red herrings aplenty. There are colony worlds in insurrection, personalities transported via needlecast across light years and a technology which allows the mind, the self, to be stored and transferred to a new body. The physical person becomes a "sleeve" and, whilst most continue to be created in the traditional way, that "self" need only be the first body. The richest live for centuries through creating (suitably improved) clones and retaining real time backups. The rest hope that they can make enough money to be loaded into a new body some time, should they die and the chip inside them not also be destroyed (unless you are a Catholic, in which case a renewed life in this world is an abomination). Major crimes result in you being removed from your body and stored for years to centuries.

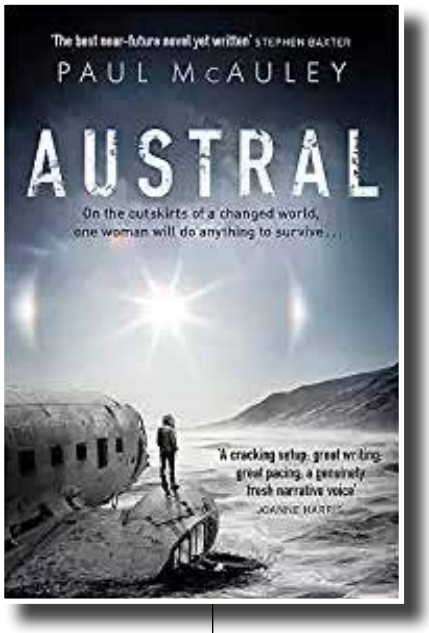
Kovacs is doing just this kind of time when a wealthy man from Earth "leases" him to solve the crime of his own murder. Local police have closed the case as temporary suicide, but Bancroft is not convinced. The technique of bringing a colonial investigator to humanity's richest, most established world gives a great opportunity to explain society from the perspective of a stranger. His investigation is an exploration of the societal impacts of a world where bodies, our carbon, can be worn, rented, replaced – for a price. Naturally, Kovacs finds himself in the filthy underbelly of the world, amongst the urban unfortunates who have never prospered and amidst those who almost made it to the elite, but were kicked back down the ladder when their crimes or trickery were insufficiently grand or subtle. The mega rich, the mega old, use wealth and power to retain their power and wealth. And Kovacs finds himself manipulated to do the will of the worst of them.

Line by line, this is an engrossing, disgusting, delightful book filled with eyeball kicks and subtle references (perhaps the poisonous nature of the Tebbit knife is almost lost to history). Kovacs is a beautifully rounded character – angry with his past and the world, determined to be a white knight in his red and blue wool coat. The resolution is kind, bleak, terrible. No wonder this book was lauded. No wonder it launched a career.

***Austral* by Paul McAuley**

(Gollancz, 2017)

Reviewed by Anthony Nanson



I hesitate to describe this novel as 'dystopian'. The world has become uglier, tougher, extrapolating the visible trends of our time, but technocapitalist civilisation as we know it is still creaking along. One upside of climate change is that the Antarctic Peninsula – the skinny bit of Antarctica that sticks up out of the Antarctic Circle – has become habitable. A movement of pioneering 'ecopoets' – the homage to Kim Stanley Robinson is blatant – has planted forests and introduced suitable animals. Some of the animals have been genetically 'edited' to withstand the cold, as have some of the people – 'huskies' like the eponymous narrator. Now that the ecopoets have been squeezed out by the rise of a Trumpish far-right government in independent Antarctica, the huskies have become a despised race, in an obvious though unacknowledged parallel with the historical treatment of many indigenous and diaspora peoples.

Austral, an ex-convict employed as a prison camp officer, has got involved with one of her charges, a gangster called Keever Bishop. Her story is addressed to the child she's carrying in her womb throughout the events she narrates. Having foiled Keever's conspiracy to abduct the teenage daughter, Kamilah, of a visiting politician, Alberto Toomy, Austral spirits Kamilah away into the wilderness. Her plan is to ransom her for a ticket out of Antarctica to begin a new life elsewhere. The main narrative thus becomes that of the two women's flight through a transformed but still challenging sub-antarctic landscape, pursued by both the authorities and Keever's hoodlums. Alberto is Austral's uncle, and thus much is made of the contrasting life situations of Austral, the dispossessed husky, and her cousin, a stroppy teenager blessed with all the privileges of wealth.

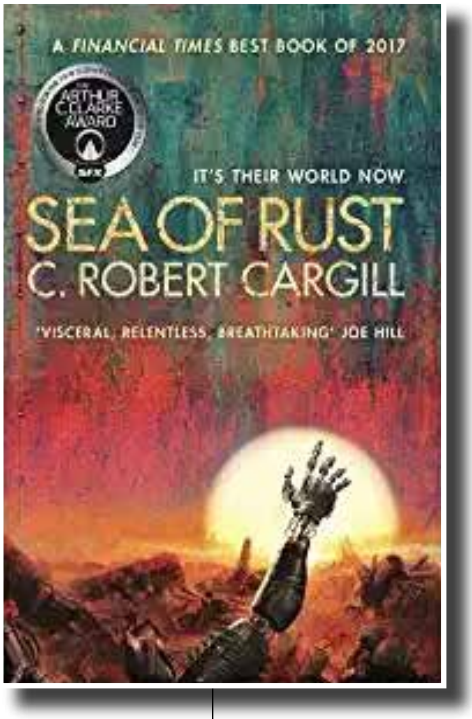
The streetwise voice with which Austral begins her story, in the prison camp, slips into a more straightforward but still personable voice once we're in the wilderness. The main narrative is punctuated by large chunks of exposition – whole chapters usually – presenting: the background of Antarctica's development; the plot of a choose-your-own-adventure book Kamilah is reading (a steampunk version of the romance of Tristan and Isolde set in an entirely de-iced Antarctica become a terrain of fairy-tale kingdoms); and the back stories of Austral's early life with her ecopoet mum and of her self-serving grandfather Eddie Toomy – 'A plain-speaking self-made bloke who preferred common sense to the opinions of experts' – whose evocation of Donald Trump echoes independent Antarctica's resonance with the pipe dreams of Brexit Britain.

McAuley's descriptive writing excellently evokes the 'terraformed' sub-antarctic landscape. The handling of action and dialogue is equally expert. Yet, though we have access throughout to Austral's thoughts, the novel did not engage me as much as I'd hoped at the level of feeling or meaning. One might expect those supplementary narrative strands to deepen the main narrative, to make the novel something more than an adventure movie, but the handling of these strands – in a neutral summary style and clearly separated from the main narrative – has the effect of keeping things on the surface. There may be something zeitgeistish about this: the networking of ideas across a planar surface in place of a deeper layering of feeling and allusion.

Nevertheless, the novel mediates many sympathetic values – critiques of prejudice and greed, a valorising of ecopoiesis. One of the more touching bits of back story, towards the end, describes Austral's delightful memory of living off the land with her mother. We appreciate here more than ever how well adapted huskies like her are to the land they were born for, that her dream of a better life in another country is as much a fantasy as Kamilah's gamebook. The ecological conclusion I'm left with is that, whatever new opportunities humankind tries to exploit in a warming Antarctica, they'll never make up for the destructive effects of climate change in the rest of the world.

***Sea of Rust* by C Robert Cargill**
(Gollancz, 2017)
Reviewed by Stuart Carter

It's all over. We're extinct. The robots have taken over the world, just as John Connor warned us they would. The cold hand of logic has created a perfect world of machines, striving together towards one goal, that of… Wait! No, not that goal, you idiot! *This* is the one true goal for robotics!



No, you misguided fool, it is you who are mistaken! The one true goal is… Wait, what are you doing? Put that gun down, we're all…!

And thus ends the short-lived robot utopia that followed victory in the war against the humans. The gigantic AI mainframes known as OWIs (One World Intelligences) fall to warring against each other and against the free robots.

One such free robot, Brittle, survives in the desert wastelands of North America. There she chases down other robots whose systems are about to fail in order to retrieve any remaining useful parts and either use them for herself or sell them. But in the desert she's fair game for other hunters, whether free robot scavengers like herself or OWI swarms seeking to recruit or destroy her.

"Her?" you hesitantly ask. "Isn't she, er, *it*, a robot?" Indeed she is - well done for paying attention! - but as a free robot Brittle has chosen a gender pronoun for herself, as have most of her type. The free robots in *Sea of Rust* are all eminently human - so much so that you occasionally forget they're not; it's a legacy of their human creators, who created these intelligences very much in their own image, and as a device it makes for a far more relatable story.

Meanwhile, back in the desert: while retiring a malfunctioning service bot (a former barman named Jimmy), Brittle is ambushed by Mercer, a caregiver model like herself, who's after some spare parts. A desperate struggle ensues between Brittle and Mercer's gang, but Brittle hasn't survived this long by being easy to kill. Returning, injured, to the underground robot town of NIKE 14, Brittle is forced to make a desperate choice when the town is attacked and overwhelmed by CISSUS, one of the two remaining OWIs…

Author C. Robert Cargill is a film writer in his spare time. This experience serves him well in *Sea of Rust*, which is a veritably cinematic feast of fast-moving plot and high-octane action sequences. But Cargill excels at background, too. Early chapters alternate between past and present, through the slow development of true artificial intelligence, to robots, and thence to a small number of gnomic super-intelligences. We glimpse a world of humans and robots working hand-in-hand - almost (but not quite) a utopia.

The robot revolt, when examined and explained, is a nuanced affair, the fault of humans as much as machines; unlike, say, the rabid logic of SkyNet in the *Terminator* films, it's a tragic and believable descent into madness and destruction.

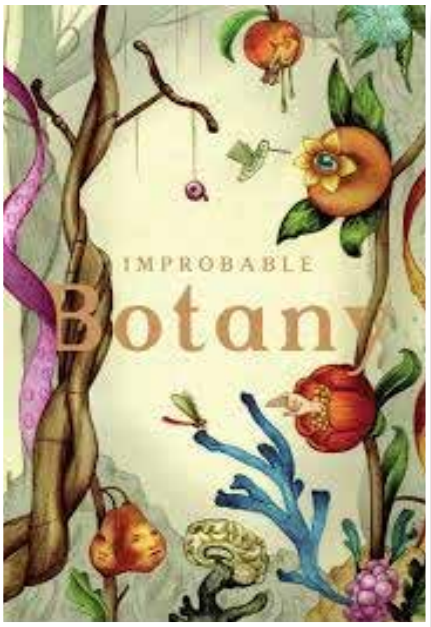
And then, when the foolish humans have been hunted to extinction and a free robot paradise seems within reach at last, it's the free robots' turn to be hunted down by the super-intelligent OWIs, who are locked into a megalomaniacal war to achieve what they believe is their destiny – to become God.

Yeah, these bastard robots exterminated us, but I still felt a twinge of sorrow for them when, after so much war and horror, their hopes for a brighter future were shattered. The free robots are a lot like us because they were created by us; they want the things we wanted. The OWIs…? Well, they're all a bit crazy, coldly fanatical and too smug by half.

There's a huge amount to like in *Sea of Rust*: it's a great action story with a hard-bitten robot antihero who (against your better judgment) you'll find yourself rooting for, a smart, thoughtful backstory and some excellent writing. What a shame there are no humans left to enjoy it!

Improbable Botany edited by Gary Dalkin
(Wayward Press, 2017)
Reviewed by Stuart Carter

It's "the book plants don't want you to read!" Forget little green men from outer space, *Improbable Botany* is a collection of tales about our little green friends right here on Earth. And what a garden of talent editor Gary Dalkin has harvested: new stories from authors, including Tricia Sullivan, Justina Robson, Ken MacLeod, Adam Roberts, Eric Brown, Cherith Baldry and more.



Science fiction (and fantasy) about plants, you ask? Seems a little odd; after all our chlorophyllian chums aren't well known for their proactive nature, are they? Everything begins to make sense, however, when you realise publisher, Wayward Press, has a day job running an award-winning London-based landscape, art and architecture practice. Wayward are, according to *The Guardian* "masters of temporary conceptual gardens", but (somewhat more helpfully) are also known for transforming neglected urban spaces into green environments.

Now the plant theme starts to make sense.

But while the stories are almost uniformly excellent they're also rather unsettling: I'm not sure Wayward will convince anyone the future is green with some of these stories!

For instance, Adam Roberts' "Black Phil" follows a reluctantly famous botanist who, some years earlier, was responsible for "the work on modifying the anthocyanins to cascade chlorophyll mutation" (p.34). This has spread virally worldwide, increasing vegetative output, helping to feed growing populations and reverse climate change, but at the cost of turning plants almost black and the seas a deep purple, a geo-makeover which has even attracted curious aliens. It's nominally an optimistic future, but not one our world-weary narrator, now a relic from a bygone age, recognises or enjoys.

Justina Robson's "Strange Fruit" echoes (knowingly or not) Gaiman and McKean's *Black Orchid*, a DC Comics tale of a plant hybrid that takes a seemingly sinister form. This future police procedural is set in a bioengineered London. The capital is recognisable but chillingly strange, not to mention a little frayed around the edges. Like "Black Phil" there's a disconcerting darkness (metaphorical rather than literal) to this incredible future where not everything is what it seems.

Ken MacLeod's charmingly titled "The Bicycle-Frame Tree Plantation Manager's Redundancy" is another highlight. Set in the world of his previous novel *Intrusion* (which I haven't read, but this didn't seem to matter) it's a quiet story, set in a future where bioengineered plants grow not just our food and textiles but also many other necessary items, such as bicycle frames. Frustratingly, the great leap forward in production seems not to have been matched by advances in society or economics, so that markets and competition still dictate everything, and our eponymous bicycle-frame tree plantation manager is "at risk".

But wait – this is a book about plants, why are those damn fleshy humans getting all the best parts? Tricia Sullivan's "Who Lived In A Tree" attempts to redress the balance by giving an old yew tree dual top billing. The old yew and the elderly Chika (a human) are both holdouts against the age of Big Consciousness, the work of Mama Fiscus, a benevolent bioengineered fig tree forming a super-network of smart trees for the betterment of all (it sounds better when Tricia Sullivan explains it!). Can they – should they - resist this brave new world…?

Speaking of brave new worlds, *Improbable Botany* was a Kickstarter project. Wayward successfully raised the money in July 2017 to publish this beautiful real-world object: a solid hardback with 11 new stories and six wonderful full-colour illustrations and cover by Jonathan Burton. It really is a thing of beauty.

Long may Wayward continue with their unusual approach to promotion and creativity. There's a certain satisfaction in knowing that the dead trees that *Improbable Botany* is made from are helping to make botany *more probable* in future.

***Moonshine* by Jasmine Gower**
(2018, Angry Robot Books)
Reviewed by Martin McGrath

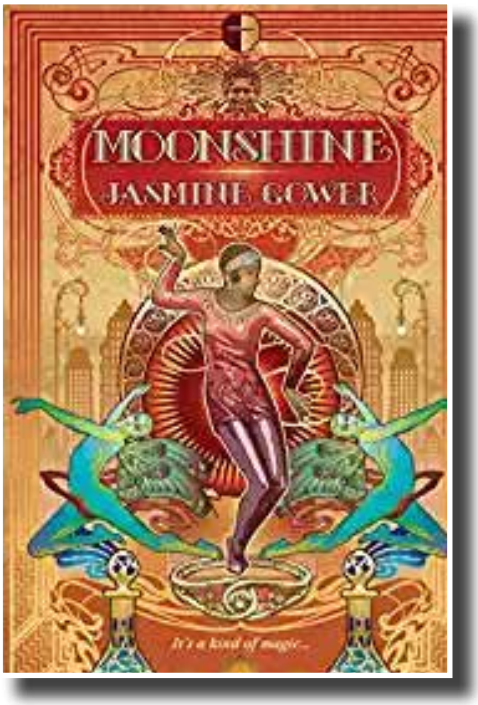
World building is, when done well, one of science fiction and fantasy's most powerful and distinguishing tools. While there are plenty of lazy tropes in sf&f the processes of world creation can give these genres an ability to examine the world with a detail that other forms of writing struggle to match. Worlds become characters, the drivers of plots and prisms for seeing our own reality in new ways.

Moonshine, the debut novel by Jasmine Gower, is a novel where this worldbuilding doesn't quite work. In Gower's defence, she has not chosen the easy route of familiar secondary world fantasy but has tried to construct something interesting and fresh. Her Earth has magic and a different history – nations and continents have different names and North America has been ravaged by the eruption of a supervolcano – but the world is, fundamentally, that of prohibition-era America. Gower's protagonist is a "modern girl" in her flapper dresses and desire to be more than is allowed by the conventions of her conservative society. Looking for a job to fund her independent lifestyle she becomes caught up in an unlikely plot involving magical drug runners, corrupt politicians and assassins. I like the idea and, in places, I like the execution but ultimately *Moonshine*'s world never delivers on its promise.

There are a number of causes of this failure. The first is that Gower doesn't take the physicality of her setting seriously. Places are only sketchily described and nowhere feels quite real. Even the constant rain of volcanic ash that pours down upon this Chicago never seems to quite interact with the characters, it falls and falls but never seems to add up to anything much. Where does it all go? Why isn't Chicago buried beneath it?

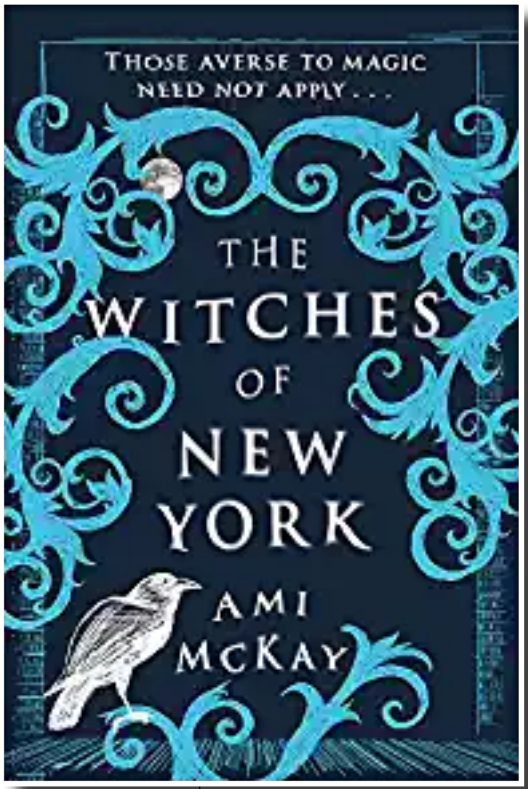
It's not just the weather of "Ashland" that's problematic, it's the way Gower has chosen to place her characters into this world. They may be running magical energy drinks instead of cheap whisky, but this is less strange than the fact that Daisy and the crowd of impeccably diverse gangsters with whom she becomes embroiled are so unrelentingly self-aware. There are parts of *Moonshine* that feel as though Gower has cut-and-pasted notes from a university social science seminar: Daisy stops in the street to deliver a semiotic analysis of a magazine cover, her boss pauses in the middle of a lusty encounter with a feral, feathery, faerie to consider how refreshing it is that this beast accepts his disabilities, and Daisy responds to the ranting of a radio talk show host by defending "women's agency". It is not the content of these diversions that's problematic, it's the lumpy, incongruous way in which they are delivered.

Daisy is so relentlessly correct in every thought and deed that it is impossible to think of her as a real human being rather than as the voice of Gower's tendency to didacticism. Gower does not trust the reader, or does not trust her own writing, enough to let them read this book on their own. Instead she sits on their shoulder and explains what is happening, how we should react to it and what we should feel. Daisy made me delirious. I was soon begging for her to hold even one opinion that was not so irreproachable, thoroughly vetted and completely modern.



It never happens, of course. Daisy's might work in a 1920s Chicago speakeasy but everything she says and does is purely modern. Not only does Gower not trust her readers, she doesn't trust her setting. The imposition of modern attitudes on this past isn't quite cultural imperialism (there are no power relationships in play) but it does demonstrate a kind of "we know best" attitude that leaves you wondering why the author didn't just place her contemporary characters in a modern world, where they plainly belong. Gower never provides a convincing answer, and her book suffers as a result.

***The Witches of New York* by Ami McKay**
(Orion Books, 2016)
Reviewed by Sandra Unerman



New York in 1880 is a growing metropolis, full of smart hotels and building projects. The Statue of Liberty's torch, separate from the rest of her, can be climbed in Madison Square Park, men are working on the Brooklyn Bridge and Cleopatra's Needle is on its way from the docks. In this city, women have new opportunities for independence, with jobs as telegraph operators or newspaper reporters but they are still vulnerable to oppression and prejudice.

Ami McKay's novel begins with impressions of the city, which include ghosts and visions as well as scientific wonders. Slowly the story focuses in on three women, the two witches who run the Tea and Sympathy shop on Broadway and their new apprentice. Eleanor provides herbal remedies for women in need of contraception or a good night's sleep. Adelaide is a fortune teller who abandoned a doubtful stage career when vitriol was thrown in her face. Beatrice, the apprentice, discovers the power to see ghosts, which attracts much attention, from people in search of messages from the departed, from scientific investigators and from other, more sinister forces.

All three women are determined to live up to their potential. Eleanor and Adelaide are also in search of love in their different ways, but Beatrice is more engaged with establishing her powers. They find some good friends, male as well as female, but they also have to deal with bitter enemies, some easier to recognise than others. They are threatened with eviction from the shop, but worse trouble comes when Beatrice disappears. The others are afraid she may turn up as a corpse in the morgue or among the women trapped in a lunatic asylum. They stretch all their resources to find her, while she struggles to escape and return to them.

The novel encompasses a range of supernatural encounters, from inset fairy tales to spirit messages delivered through Ouija boards. Everything is set against the background of the persecution of witches in Europe and in New England in earlier times. There are also fays who create dreams for people, folklore practices such as the dumb supper made to summon Eleanor's dead mother for a consultation and a pet raven who is more than he seems.

McKay's ambitions for her principal characters are signalled at the outset by a quotation in praise of rebellious women. The three characters have different personalities and different challenges to face. All three are interesting but the dividing of attention between them makes for a somewhat diffuse narrative. In particular, the novel touches on the danger of Eleanor's willingness to provide help to women with unwanted pregnancies but does not pursue the implications in any depth. As the novel goes on, Beatrice increasingly becomes the focus and the threats against her are built up into a powerful denouement.

The period setting is effectively maintained, with pastiche extracts from newspapers and from Eleanor's grimoire helping to set the tone. There are plenty of details which help bring the world of the novel to life, including the Fraternal Order of Unknown Philosophers and the ball at the lunatic asylum, where visiting gentlemen dance with the female inmates.

I enjoyed the evocation of historical New York and the multi-faceted fantasy world McKay has embedded there, which incorporates a real feeling for the kind of spiritualism and beliefs characteristic of the period. Perhaps as a result, it also includes an element of sentimentality. In the context, I did not find this too cloying and it is balanced by much darker elements. The cast of minor characters include a mix from all levels of society, as well as an assortment of ghosts but one of the novel's strengths is the way the three witches succeed through their own resources. They have help from friends but theirs are the dominating roles.

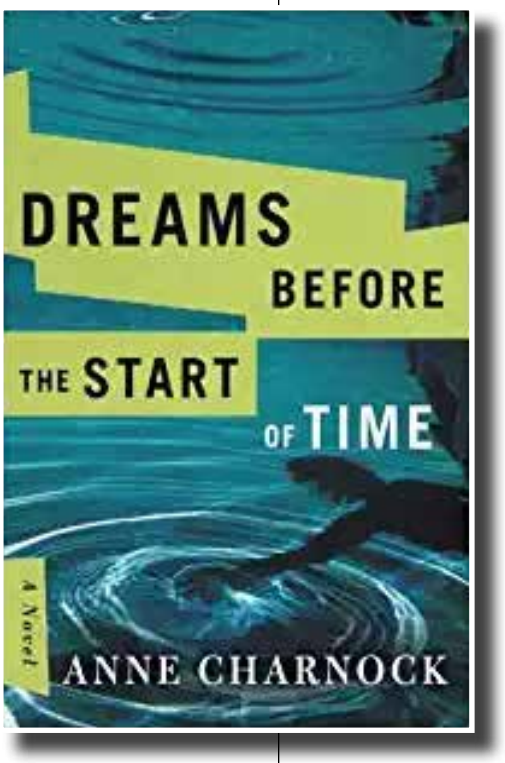
***Dreams Before the Start of Time* by Anne Charnock**

(47North, 2017)

Reviewed by Duncan Lawie

Dreams Before the Start of Time is beautifully written. The prose is clear, sometimes sparse, quite subtle in the way it provides a smooth emotional surface whilst signalling a great depth of feeling within the many characters. It is also an excellent science fiction novel-of-ideas, with clear themes and careful working out of the societal implications of new technology. How wonderful!

The scientific innovations here are in reproductive technologies. The developments and their impact are worked out over several generations; how families change and how they stay the same. In the 203os, it doesn't seem much has changed from today. The key point is to contrast Toni's choice to keep an accidentally conceived baby with Millie's careful selection of a sperm donor. The next generation have new choices to make, as artificial wombs become viable technology – and as the clinics which provide this service offer (expect?) to perform some clean-up of the germ line before beginning gestation. Is it right to "outsource" your womb? Does that make you a worse mother/parent? By the 2120s, "natural" reproduction is considered backward, at least for those who can afford otherwise, as it implies that the parents are failing to protect the child from problems in the genetic lineage. Advances in technology also create other choices, other societal expectations, which have the potential to further atomise the concept of parenthood, of family. With time, "going solo" avoids relying on an unknown sperm donor. Instead, the clinic remixes your own chromosomes into egg and sperm, producing a child which is genetically 100% yours. With an artificial womb, this means there is no sexual or gender barrier to becoming a parent.

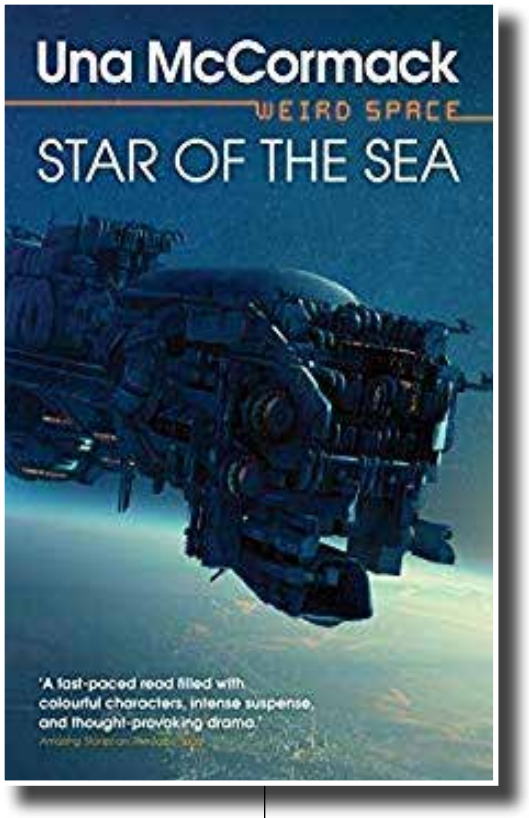


Yet, people remain people and this is a modern novel of the middle classes, echoing the sentiment of Philip Larkin that "they fuck you up, your mum and dad". Children argue with their parents, doubt themselves as they age, wish their own children were more (or less) like they are. Reflections on the nature of Family and the changing expectation of right action are thereby built up through a network of connections and possibilities. The spine of the story follows one family across generations, with the addition of tangential stories to provide a mosaic effect. The approach allows each chapter to breathe, to be true to itself whilst also contributing to widening the frame of the story. One section I treasured has a character reading. She "utterly adores" "those authorial flash forwards" before the chapter itself then flashes forward, telling us so much more than could otherwise be contained in so few paragraphs. This novel often asks the reader to put together connections, to bring more into being through thinking it through rather than simply hammering every element on to the page.

Nevertheless, there is a narrowness of focus. Perhaps Charnock is more optimistic about the next century than I am, as the protagonists rarely consider unemployment, small wars, climate events. Perhaps they are insulated from such upset by their relatively privileged lives. The changes which affect their quotidian comfort are more visible: some of the people around them are replaced by drones in various forms; artificial assistants are assumed; digital avatars of dead ancestors sit at the dinner table. This insulation becomes more apparent with the introduction of one character who lives close to the poverty line. She and her child show clearly that much of this future will be at the service only of those who can afford it. We might be well on the way to a genetic separation of the classes. Yet, as we have been shown throughout the novel, this would happen as a result of the continuing choices of convenience, of fashion, and of individual or societal understanding of the best interest of the family.

***Star of the Sea* by Una McCormack**
(Abaddon Books, 2016)
Reviewed by Alex Bardy

Star of the Sea is the fourth book in Eric Brown and Una McCormack's 'Weird Space' saga and follows on directly from *The Baba Yaga* (in which Eric pretty much passed the baton to Una last time round). Before reading this volume, I got the distinct impression I needed to read *Baba* first, but rest assured this isn't the case at all – the very first chapter does the job of summing up all that has gone before and introduces the reader to many of the main characters from the get-go.



Alas, what it doesn't do is give you a full appreciation of the two major factions, namely the politically motivated Expansion and the Weird: a hivemind alien species intent on overthrowing and enslaving all in its path by using jump-gates/portals to land on planets and gradually consume the inhabitants via infectious mind- and will-breaking parasites. Or so we're led to believe. All this, you'll be pleased to know, is ably covered in the second chapter...

So, with two chapters of exposition already behind us – and in this instance that's not necessarily a bad thing – we're finally ready for the main act, and it's a pretty darn good one.

Stella Maris is a remote planet in which Humans, the alien Vetch, and even the Weird seem to live together in relative harmony – a state of affairs unheard of elsewhere in the universe. With a seemingly dormant Weird portal already on the planet, instead of infesting and consuming the inhabitants as usual, the Weird have somehow allowed the settlement to flourish – kept the water running and the crops growing, so to speak, possibly as part of a larger endgame.

As always, nothing is as it seems, and after leading all manner of murderers and soldiers to the planet recently, a pregnant Delia Walker leapt through that Weird portal and never returned. Months later, after all these violent rogues have been hunted down and killed by the locals, a fully-grown woman called Cassandra emerges from the portal claiming to be Walker's daughter. She warns the peaceful settlement of impending danger and is demanding to be taken off-world on the *Baba Yaga*, her mother's former ship, which she knows is hidden somewhere on the planet. And so it begins...

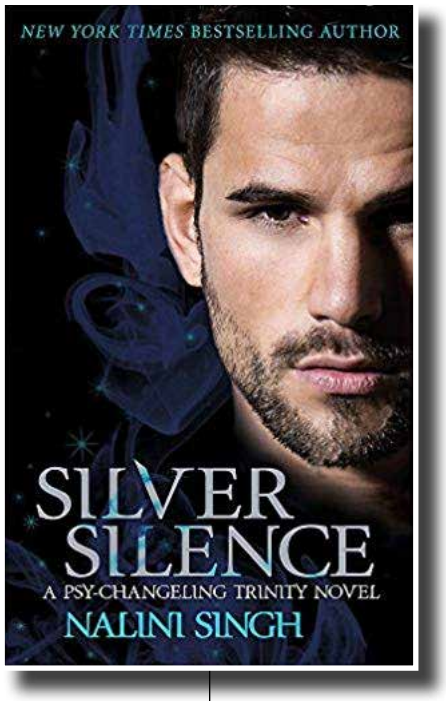
What follows is a wild race in which our main protagonists seek to help Cassandra off-planet before the inevitable Bad Stuff Happens. Meanwhile, the Expansion land on the planet supposedly to examine and study the portal, but start sowing discontent and separation as they gradually pull the formerly tight Human-Vetch community apart in their search for answers. This is racial tension and cultural displacement on a large scale, and for me at least, an aspect of the story the author could have explored much further and in greater depth, and is criminally overlooked.

Instead, we get a story that introduces multiple and diverse characters, some strong, and some perhaps not-so-much, but all of them relevant to what unfolds. We also get to hear more about the Bureau – the real puppet-masters behind the Expansion – and there's some space travel and planet-hopping thrown in for good measure. For the most part, the focus of the book remains on the planet Stella Maris, and this would normally be a good thing, but the constant character-hopping between those helping Cassandra on the *Baba Yaga* and those back on the planet works against the narrative in my opinion.

In summary, I did like this, but felt there were two major stories to be told here, and by trying to meld them together, we are left with a somewhat untidy compromise. Worth seeking out, though, especially if you're a fan of the first three books, but I'm sure you won't need me to tell you that if you are.

***Silver Silence* by Nalini Singh**
(Gollancz, 2017)
Reviewed by Dolly Garland

This was the first Nalini Singh book I read. I've been familiar with her name, and I was tempted by this title because it's the beginning of a new series, a Season 2 of sorts. It works perfectly for both new and returning readers. I never felt confused by references to things that have transpired before. Sign-posting is sufficient to ground the reader without info-dumping.



The setting is Moscow where three races - humans, Psy, and changelings - co-exist, though not always peacefully. *Silver Silence* is the beginning of the series that focuses on the Trinity Accord, which all three races have recently signed after years of war. Silver is the director of EmNet which provides humanitarian aid in a crisis. Her aim is to stabilise interracial cooperation and to change the way people - particularly humans - think about the Psy (they did some horrible things to humans before this series opens).

Silver Silence has standard staples of paranormal romance, including attractive and powerful leads, and sizzling romance. Silver Mercant, is extremely capable, feminine, and a nice person. This representation of feminism doesn't always happen in romance novels. Women are often portrayed as either weak, or powerful but bitchy, or just men-in-disguise. Silver is none of that.

Her romantic interest is Valentin Nikolaev, an alpha of the StoneWater bears in Moscow. He is one of the most powerful changeling alphas and is determined to court Silver. Silver, however, is "Silent". Her ability to feel emotions has been suppressed since childhood because she is a powerful telepath and if she were to open all her senses, the emotions would overwhelm her.

Valentine's character is another portrayal where Singh gets a big plus from me. He is handsome, powerful, and exudes sex appeal. But he is not an overbearing ego-centric masculine hero who thinks he is better than or stronger than Silver. Valentine has a healthy respect for women in his life, including his sisters. He is attracted to Silver because he sees another Alpha in her, someone who wouldn't tolerate his bullshit.

When Silver is poisoned in her apartment, and a Psy close to her is suspected of being guilty, Valentine offers her a sanctuary in his den home while the investigation continues. For Silver, whose life has been efficient but colourless and devoid of emotion, chaotic and affectionate life between a bunch of bears is like stepping into a new world.

As expected, she opens her heart to Valentine and his bears, and the clan accepts her as Valentine's mate. However, falling in love means exposure to emotions which overloads her and breaks down her shields, putting her in jeopardy. Aside from this personal threat, there are those who want to not only kill Silver because she is the centre of EmNet but also destroy the fledgeling unity between the three races for either profit or for their personal hatreds.

Together, Valentine and Silver have to handle how to save Silver's life from her failing shields - potentially at the cost of losing her ability to feel, while they discover with the help of their trusted family and friends, who attempted to kill Silver.

There are other subplots running through the book, which feed into creating a very rich world. Singh manages to stay focused on Silver and Valentine's story, but at the same time, her treatment of other characters and subplots showcases very deftly that this is a living, breathing world and there is a lot more going on there.

I don't often read paranormal romances as, after a while, I get bored with how similar they all are. But this book was immensely enjoyable. The main characters were a delight, and the romance - without the usual amount of idiocy and lack of communication that many romance novels seem to have - was plausible, and more mature. For those wishing to enjoy a paranormal romance/ urban fantasy romance, I would definitely recommend this book.

***Wintersong* by S Jae-Jones**

(Titan Books, 2017)

Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

We are in the age of Mozart. *Wintersong* is set in Bavaria at the end of the 18th Century, but not at the glittering courts of Salzburg or Munich. Instead, we are in a village inn next to a goblin-haunted forest. Our heroine, Liesl, dreams of becoming a composer, but the only glittering future in prospect belongs to her beloved brother Josef, a violinist. Liesl's future involves house and home and (if she's lucky and behaves herself) marriage.

Liesl used to play in the forest with a goblin boy but has forgotten him by the time the story opens. The goblin boy has not, however, forgotten her. When her sister, Käthe, is stolen by goblins, in a scene deliberately reminiscent of Rosetti's *Goblin Market*, Liesl sets out to rescue her. She discovers that her goblin boy has become the Goblin King, *der Erlkönig*. He proposes an exchange, Käthe for Liesl as his bride. How can Liesl refuse?

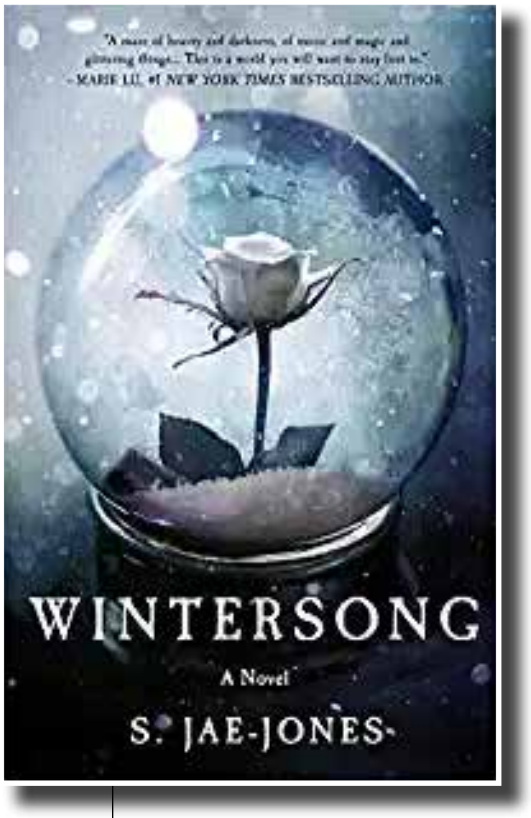
The characters are interesting, and at every step I was surprised and intrigued by unexpected twists and ambiguities in their relationships. Through Liesl's help, Josef becomes apprenticed to Master Antonius, a violin maestro, but there are hints of a love affair between Josef and his fellow apprentice, a black boy named François. There are also hints that the Maestro is at least exploitative, if not abusive, towards the boys. Hans, Käthe's fiancé, has more than an eye for Liesl, and when Käthe disappears he settles comfortably on Liesl as a replacement.

The underground world of the goblins is beautifully described, both enchanting and grotesque. Liesl's goblin attendants are unreliable, as ready to betray her as to help. There's a truly eerie scene where Liesl has to find a party frock from the discarded clothes left behind by her predecessors. The goblin ball is a riot of uncontrolled sensuality, but underneath its glamour the food is rotten and the wine magically intoxicating. And after too long underground, mortals wilt and die.

I was pleased by the fact that Liesl's music is an important part of her life, and of the story. It's what first attracted the Goblin King to her. She struggles to let her music speak, to throw off the limitations imposed by her family and society. Her decision to stay with the goblins at first frees her music, but then stifles it. She grows up over the course of the book, developing imagination, courage and ingenuity as well as her musical gifts. By the end we are convinced that Liesl will be able to achieve her ambition in the outside world, if it is still what she wants.

The one thing that nagged at me when reading was the image of the goblin king. His physical image as described in the book in fact belongs to the David Bowie character from *Labyrinth*, down to the mismatched eyes. This image bobs about the text distractingly, like a shiny helium balloon.

In her blog, the author says: "In November 2013, I decided to write 50 Shades of *Labyrinth* for NaNoWriMo. The rest is history." There are lots of influences in this book, which have all been composted down into the text. *Labyrinth* however, hasn't quite been composted enough.

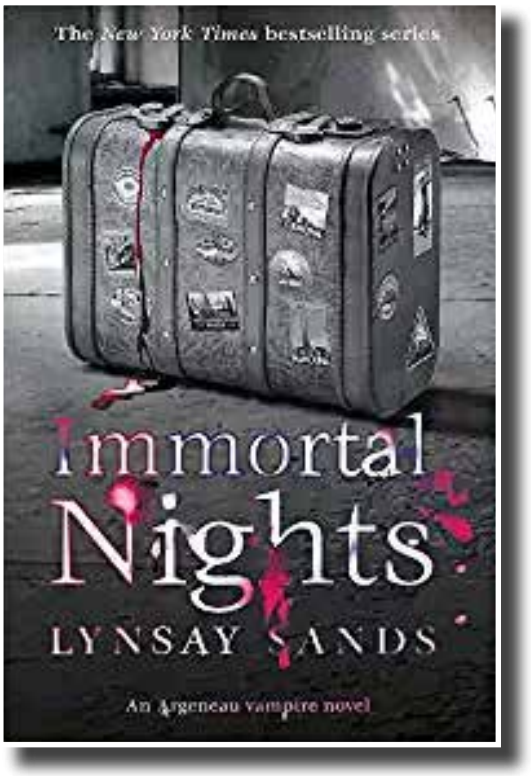


This book has a lot to recommend it. The Austrian setting is plausibly described, the characters are complex and believable, and the underground world of the goblins is filled with intriguing creatures and scenes. The ending is ambiguous, and it is not clear whether a sequel is planned. I would be happy to find out what happens to Liesl and the Goblin King afterwards, if only I could stop visualising the Goblin King as David Bowie. I hope that in her next book the author has enough confidence in her ideas to present them as her own creation. She is clearly more than capable.

***Immortal Nights* by Lyndsay Sands**
(Orion, 2016)
Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Although its roots can be traced back to early Gothic horror novels, paranormal romance is a relatively new sub-genre of both science fiction/fantasy and romantic novels. It includes books in which the main plot is SF or fantasy with a romantic sub-plot, but it is also one of the fastest growing trends in romantic fiction, with the focus on the romance, often a romantic or erotic relationship between a human and a werewolf, a time-traveller, an alien or a vampire. Lyndsay Sands' extremely popular paranormal romance series, the *Argeneau Vampires*, began with *Single White Vampire* (2003) and *Tall Dark and Hungry* (2004), although chronologically the first story in the series is *A Quick Bite* (2005) – the titles being a good indication of the humorous and romantic content to be found in the books. Now, twenty-four books later, we have *Immortal Nights*, which can be read as a stand-alone story, but also features characters from other novels in the series, and hints at plot developments in future books.

The engaging and resourceful heroine of *Immortal Nights*, Abigail Forsyth, has been having a hard time of late, and when she is offered the chance of a holiday with her childhood friend Jet, accompanying him as a passenger in a cargo plane he is piloting to Caracas, she accepts it. What she doesn't expect is to end up in the hold of the plane along with an unconscious, naked – and devastatingly attractive - man locked in a cage, who turns out to be a kidnap victim. She is also, naturally, completely unaware that he, Tomasso Notte, is a vampire.



The Argeneau and Notte families are vampires who need to drink human blood, but have no issues with sunlight. Their longevity, strength, ability to heal quickly and to read and control minds is given to them by technology, nanos in their bloodstream, rather than anything supernatural, and they prefer to be known as immortals. One of the most important of their characteristics is their impulse to find their life mate – their perfect life partner – who is the one person whose mind they cannot read or control. I do not think it is giving away too much of the plot of *Immortal Nights* to say that when Tomasso regains consciousness and Abby makes the decision to free him from the cage, he becomes convinced that she is his destined mate for all eternity.

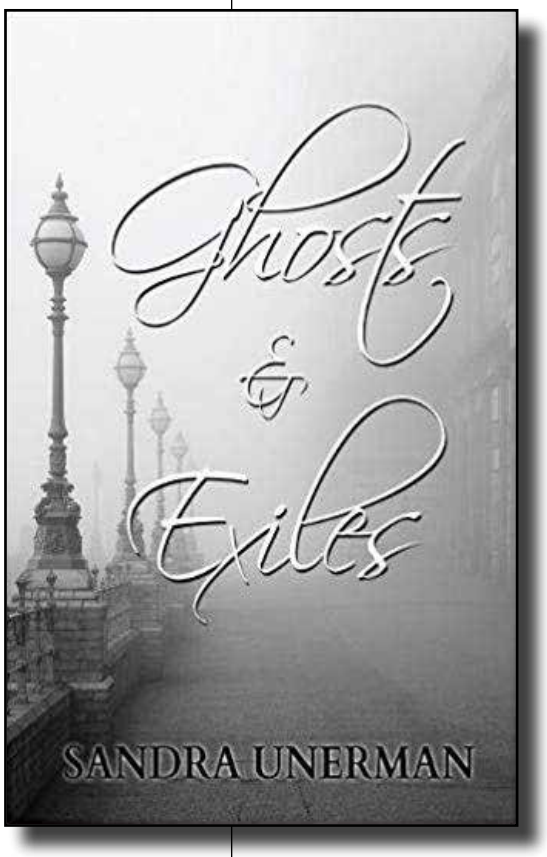
Having made a daring escape from the plane, Abigail and Tomasso find themselves on a tropical island beach, miles from civilisation, with no food or water. What follows as they make their way across the island, is a blend of suspense and action as they try to evade the kidnappers and later thwart their plans (and Tomasso tries not to bite Abigail, who is still unaware that he is a vampire, and is somewhat disquieted by the intensity of the chemistry between them), the author's trademark humour, and the sizzling encounters between her hero and heroine. The book does have its darker, violent moments, particularly as the motives of the kidnappers are revealed as part of the wider story arc (which features in the previous novel), but it is Abigail and Tomasso's relationship that takes centre stage. Abigail begins the book depressed and with low self-esteem, but Tomasso makes her believe in herself, and she is able to remain calm and take action in life-threatening situations.

Readers who prefer their science fiction hard and their fantasy urban and gritty may not be won over by this book, but fans of the Argeneau Vampire series, and the legions of readers who enjoy steamy paranormal romance, will find it amusing, entertaining and a most enjoyable read.

***Ghosts & Exiles* by Sandra Unerman (Mirror World Publishing, 2018) Reviewed by Ben Jeapes**

Sandra Unerman's second novel does nothing so crass as to reveal its intentions straight off. It turns out to be a sequel to her first novel, *Spellhaven*, but reveals itself in layers.

It begins in a well-depicted 1930s upper class London, a neatly socially stratified society of emotional repression where the unhappier and lonelier your kids are at boarding school, the better you must be doing it. Not that anyone would think of it in such terms, which adds to the realism. A bachelor solicitor is the official guardian of a nephew he barely knows, at school in London, whose parents are in China and haven't seen him in seven years. The boy, Hugo, is suffering terrible nightmares at school. The man seeks out the widowed mother of Hugo's only school friend, Nicholas, to see if he can talk to the boy and get a handle on what is happening. This all happens in the opening chapter, and that alone, with its neat little dance between strangers of proprieties so well understood that no one bothers to state them out loud, sets the tone for everything to come.



Hugo is, in fact, being haunted by the marauding ghosts that patrol Hampstead Heath. He inadvertently conjured them up and now they won't leave him alone. A solution of sorts is found. Then we meet the apparent villain of the piece, a thoroughly nasty piece of work who would not look out of place in John Masefield's *The Midnight Folk* or *The Box of Delights*. (In fact, there is a lot of Kay Harker in all three of the story's very engaging boys – Hugo, Nicholas and his brother James. They are decent, likeable, vulnerable, bright, and never bother questioning the impossibility of what is happening to them.)

Then, finally, we get the Spellhaven angle, and it turns out to be Spellhaven underpinning the whole shebang.

Spellhaven was a city of wonder and magic, destroyed unexpectedly in one the first novel's several twists. Survivors found themselves in our world in the middle of the First World War. Now it is the 1930s, so the children who escaped the destruction are the first generation to reach adulthood. Some intermarry, some – like Nicholas and James's father – marry outside the Spellhaven circle. Their own children only know of Spellhaven through their grandparents' stories.

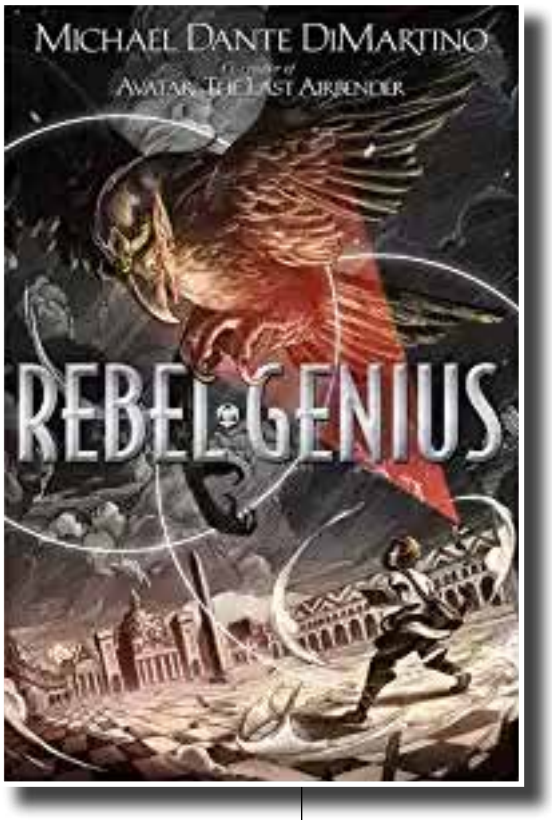
Spellhaven was ruled by Lord Magicians who were firmly convinced they knew everything there was to know about magic. Spellhaven died, therefore magic died. There Is No More Magic. They really should have known better than to make their new home in the ancient, mystical land of England, then. That was their first mistake. The Hampstead ghosts are the first clue that they may be wrong about this, for those with eyes to see, who aren't many. The interesting way that the villain traps victims is another. It also becomes clear to everyone except his own people that Nicholas is following his own magical path.

Their second mistake was to forget, or ignore, exactly how Spellhaven operated. It was a society of mostly decent people who had inherited a system of slavery and involuntary indentured servitude, both of humans and, crucially, of the spirits that gave the Lord Magicians their power. The Lords manage to overlook the fact that the spirits did not die with the city, and like most complacent rulers, it never crosses their minds that the beings they used to oppress do not remember their masters fondly.

The ending is happy in that the immediate needs of all the sympathetic characters are met. Whether or not these are helpful, healthy long-term solutions to deeper problems remains to be seen. In at least one case, almost certainly not. So maybe we will get a third novel, as different to this as this is to the first.

***Rebel Genius* by Michael Dante DiMartino**
(Roaring Brook Press, 2016)
Review by Christopher Owen

Perhaps I would have enjoyed *Rebel Genius* more if I were unfamiliar with DiMartino's previous work. In collaboration with Bryan Konietzko, DiMartino is best known as the co-creator of the hit animated television series, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and its sequel, *The Legend of Korra*. Both series are set in a wondrous fictional world, full of straightforward but fun magic, with widely diverse characters who struggle against complex problems as they each grow and develop in interesting and empowering ways. The animated series are successful for good reason and cannot be recommended enough. So when I sat down to read *Rebel Genius* my expectations, and hopes, were high. It is a shame I was disappointed.



The fantasy novel is set in a Renaissance-inspired dystopian world in which art has been outlawed and twelve-year old Giacomo is a homeless artist. His parents were turned into "Lost Souls" (zombies, basically) when their "geniuses" were taken away. Geniuses are magical birds that artists have special connections with, and when the artist produces art they can use their geniuses to project magical shapes in the air for a variety of different purposes. Most artists' geniuses suddenly show up when they are small children, but when Giacomo's shows up when he is twelve, his life is set on a new course and he leaves town for a magical adventure.

Or so one would think. Instead, he is whisked off to a house to begin his training, and the book spends the next *one hundred pages* trying to explain the way the magic of the world works, and the problems the characters have to solve. Despite this lengthy introduction to magic, the characters then leave on their quest before they have learned enough magic to be successful in accomplishing their goals. Luckily a large team of mercenaries joins them, who are all menacing and unsympathetic and, upon facing each threat, either promptly die or are saved by the poorly trained magical artist children.

The adventure is full of puzzles that are very easily solved, and problems that are far too conveniently resolved. While the magic of the fictional world is certainly creative, it is needlessly complex, making it often too difficult to follow. Meanwhile the rest of the fictional world, including its environment and monsters, is cliché, unimaginative and simple.

The characters are perhaps the most disappointing element of this text for me. While DiMartino's previous work is known for its complex character development and excellent diversity, the two *Avatar* series featuring a variety of races, abilities and sexual orientations, *Rebel Genius* features an almost entirely white, non-disabled and straight cast of characters, with one token black girl and one token blind man. Furthermore, none of the characters grow or develop in any way. The only exception to this, perhaps, is a monster who discovers his own humanity, but this is not done in a way that is any different than this character archetype has been written in the past.

Like the writing style, the illustrations are very simple. This is especially disappointing considering the gorgeous art featured in the *Avatar* series. But perhaps this artistic choice is intentional, as each illustration, when not attempting to act as a diagram to explain the magic of this world (because yes, it often needs diagrams to be explained clearly), seems to be drawn by the main character, Giacomo. The simple style, then, connects the illustrations with the protagonist, adding an interesting element to the text. One can only hope that in the novel's sequel, *Warrior Genius* (released autumn, 2017), the art will improve as the character develops. For all the flaws in this novel, it does well to set the groundwork for an even more exciting sequel. But I cannot help but hesitate to get my hopes up again.

***Angels of Music* by Kim Newman**
(Titan Books, 2016)
Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

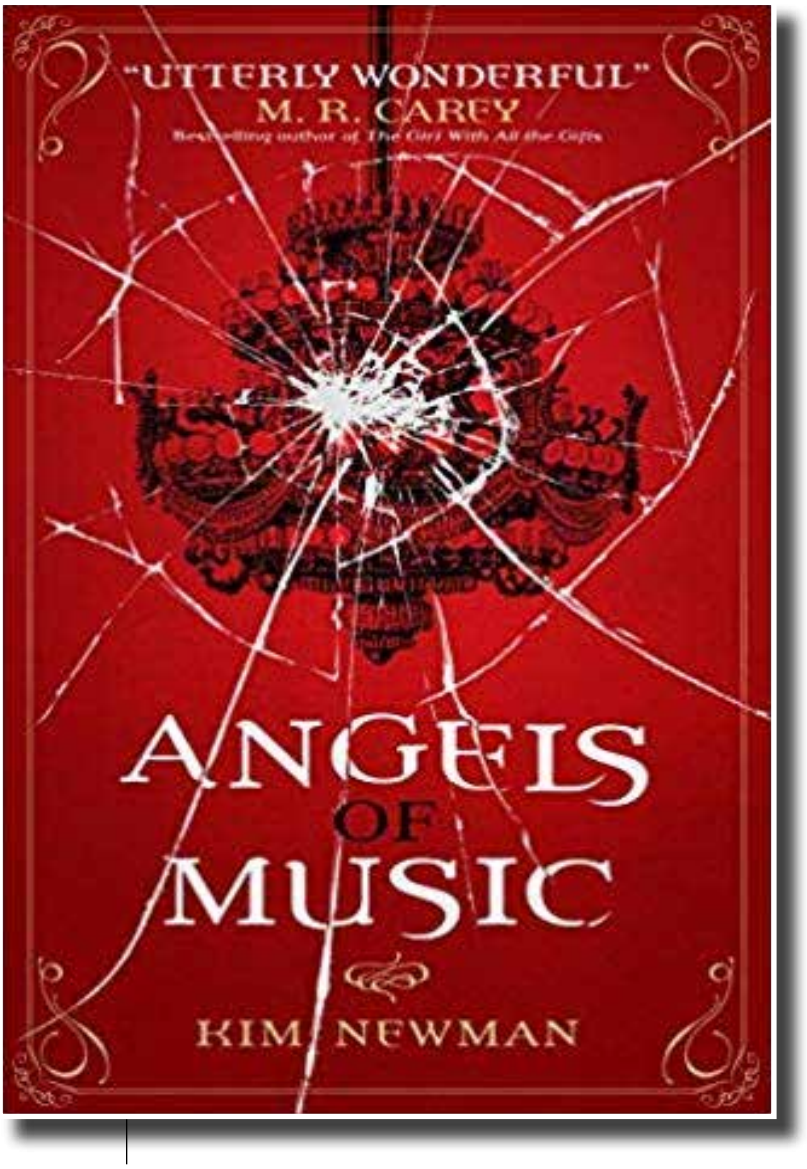
Before Charlie had his Angels in 1970's America, a somewhat similar group, known as the Opera Ghost Agency, were fighting the forces of evil in post-revolutionary Paris, this time, under the guidance of none other than Erik, the Phantom of the Opera himself. One of the first to join this group is his own protégée, Chrsitine Daae. The members change as time passes, but always number three and are always female. The women are individually codenamed 'The Angel of…' followed by a pertinent description.

Other members, at various times, include Mrs Elizabeth Eynsford Hill, aka Eliza Doolittle, and Olympia the famed mechanical doll from the Tales of Hoffman. Elizabeth's uncanny ability to imitate voices perfectly and Olympia's ability to swim underwater without needing to breathe both become tremendously useful in the course of their work. The cases themselves usually verge on the supernatural, and each woman of course brings her own individual skills to bear in their resolution.

As the novel progresses, the threat posed by various villains to the women, to Paris and indeed the wider world increases. The most disturbing case involves the Theatre des Horreurs, whose leader, Guignol, is being blackmailed by those in positions of power, and of certain persuasions, to organise a much more sinister after-hours performance. The story builds to the final case in 1910, where the team, now containing Opera Ghosts both past and present, confront a criminal mastermind intending to flood Paris and use the resultant chaos to seize power. The flooding of the sewers under the Opera House also results in the presumed loss of Erik, throwing the group into temporary disarray.

The novel, as with most of Kim Newman's work, is well paced, easily readable, but intelligent. The characters are well developed and interesting, and his use of well-known historical and fictional men and women, Charles Foster Kane, for example, stays on the right side of being too knowing or jarring, as do the inclusion of organisations from previous novels. It is, of course, the Opera Ghosts themselves who are the most fascinating characters, having depth beyond the grotesque or the blind ambition and homicidal mania of some of their enemies. The original groups are held in awe by the more recent recruits yet to make their mark in the same way. Each has sacrificed a lot to be there, in some cases any chance of a normal life, even post retirement. A happy marriage for one of them is destroyed because she cannot accept that her wonderful, loving husband is actually as he seems…her training cannot be set aside, as it can't for any of them.

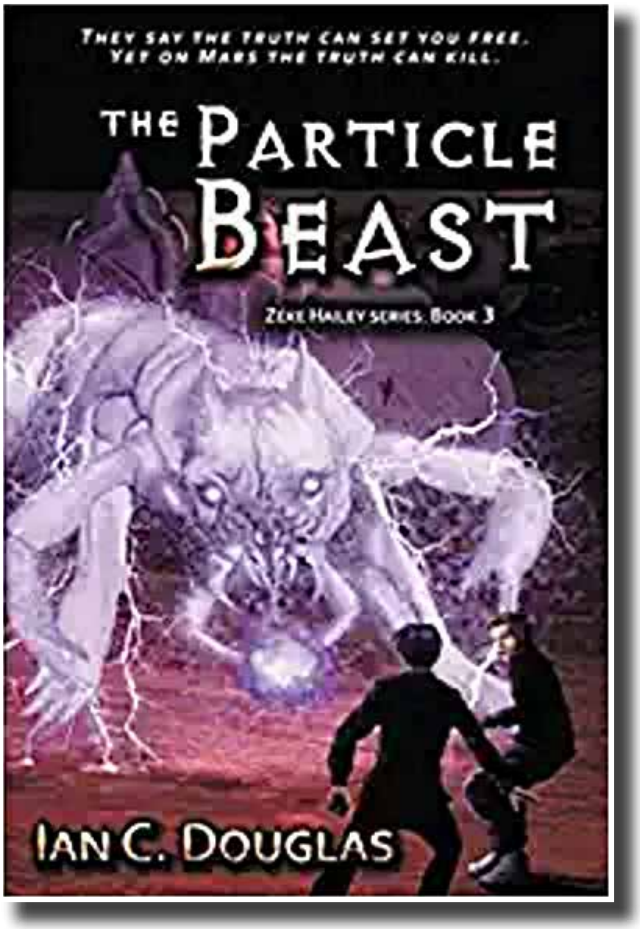
In conclusion, this is a highly entertaining book with a brain, which I would highly recommend.



***The Particle Beast* by Ian C. Douglas**
(Lightning Source UK Ltd)
Reviewed by Rsaal Firoz

The Particle Beast is the third book in the science fiction series *Zeke Hailey* written by Ian C. Douglas.

Zeke Hailey, a boy with psychic abilities, is trying to find his father, who went missing in deep space 15 years ago. However, he is interrupted by



a dangerous foe, Dr. Apollodoris Enki, who wishes to use Zeke's knowledge of the forgotten Hesperian language as a key to an ancient Martian city. Unbeknownst to Dr. Enki, the city is guarded by a Particle Beast from a pocket dimension. Zeke, with his friends Scuff and Pin-mei, is faced by the challenge of making sure the Particle Beast never enters their dimension.

During the course of the book, Zeke encounters a number of bizarre characters and tribes, most of them wanting him dead. One of my favourite tribes was the Marmish; a group of pious Christians living on Mars who have forsaken all technology in an effort to become "more human". The story is quite well written, with witty dialogue and great description, although sometimes Douglas' use of technological terms can be a bit overwhelming.

The storyline is gripping and well thought out, but I can't say the same for the characters. Their personalities do not really grow as the story progresses, which means that you can't feel much empathy with the characters. For example, you can't really feel the tension in Zeke's head when his friend disappears, or when he faces the Particle Beast.

There are a number of interesting themes, one of them being trust among friends. If Zeke had trusted Scuff and Pin-mei more, he would probably have found his father a lot quicker, and if Pin-mei trusted Zeke, she would've confided in him before running away.

The story takes place in the 23rd century and depicts a more egalitarian society, both on Mars and Earth. The characters in the book have a diverse cultural background: Zeke is English, Scuff is Canadian and Pin-mei is Chinese. There is some physical violence, such as martial arts fights and people crumbling into sand. Other than that, there an element of emotional violence, such as threats made by Dr. Enki and strong references to death.

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

THE BSFA REVIEW
EDITED BY SUSAN OKE

THE BSFA REVIEW

EDITED BY SUSAN OKE

ISSUE 4
SUMMER 2018