Vector

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Vector 250

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

Contents

Cover: The Woking Martian. Photo by Peter Young ©2006

Photos: Peter Young again, he's all over the place this month.

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Vector

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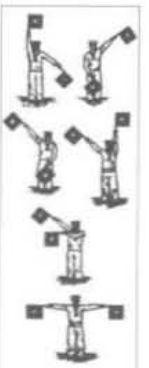


Editorial

by Niall Harrison

Sometimes I think *Vector* should have a better tagline. *SFX* is "the best SF magazine in the world"; *Interzone* is "Britain's longest-running science fiction magazine"; *Vector* is... what? Better than *SFX* (at least, so claimed Gary Dalkin in his editorial for *Vector* 200, and who am I to disagree?) and longer-running than *Interzone*, for starters. Perhaps the the second (1993) edition of the Clute & Nicholls *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* can help. Here's what the entry (credited to Peter Nicholls and Peter Roberts) says, in part:

> *Vector* has been published since the foundation of the BSFA in 1958, fairly regularly since the 1970s. [...] Both production and literary quality have fluctuated severely from editor to editor, and *V* has appeared variously as an association newsletter, a typical fanzine, and an academic journal. [...] The page-size varied between large and small for many years, but since 1984 (#122) it has been large-format A4. [...] it has continued to print good interviews, major articles and substantial reviews, often approaching professional standards, but equally often lapsing into fannish polemic, which is quite proper, since its function is to act as a kind of central clearing house for UK fandom. Almost every UK sf writer of note has appeared in its pages, and many US writers too.

Of course, this was before the tenures of Gary Dalkin and Andrew M. Butler, which I think it's fair to say is the most consistently professional run the magazine's ever had; but there is still, at least in my mind, something eclectic about the spirit of *Vector*. These days, "central clearing house for UK fandom" might be overstating it a bit – surely, if anything, that's either Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer's fanzine *Banana Wings*, or possibly livejournal. But in terms of the sort of material published, and the perspectives taken, I'd like to think *Vector* is a broad church, and that it's not incongruous for there to be an article by Gary K. Wolfe one issue, an opinion piece by Peter Weston the next, and a transcript of a panel discussion from Worldcon in the one after that. I want intelligent, interesting writing about sf, and I don't much care who it's by.

Or, I should say, about sf and the sf community, since it's the latter that a large part of this issue focuses on. As is traditional when the number on the cover is big and round, most of this issue's content has a retrospective feel. I've already mentioned Peter Weston's column – a one-off revival of his "Behind the Scenes" column from the 1960s, that takes a look at the origins and original purpose of the BSFA. That sets the scene for "The View From Vector", which collects short articles by *Vector* editors from Rog Peyton to Andrew M. Butler, on either their memories of the BSFA, or of British sf, or both – and despite Chris Amies' comment on livejournal that "a stint as *Vector* staff is a bit like what people said about the '60s – if you can remember it, you weren't there", they tell some fascinating stories. I'm grateful to all those who contributed, and to those who helped me track down other editors; and I regret that I didn't manage to track down more. While I'm going around thanking people, I really have to thank Pete Young for the stunning photograph of the Woking Martian on this issue's cover, and the equally beautiful photographs on the back cover, and scattered through the interior of the magazine. And, of course, I have to thank Geneva for her work on *Vector* over the past five issues; putting together this issue on my own has made it painfully obvious how much she'll be missed.

But it's not all nostalgia. Andrew M. Butler concludes the editorial review by noting that it's up to each generation to "define the magazine and shout for their next big thing"; in his column this month, Graham Sleight doesn't do exactly that, but he does pick out some current trends, both commercial and aesthetic, in an attempt to describe the shape of the field. Myself, I wouldn't go as far as China Mieville, who in the November 2006 *Locus* states that "The much-vaunted British Boom was from 2001 to 2003, and basically now I suspect it's on a dying fall", but I would say that the ground feels a bit less firm than it did a couple of years ago. The article that didn't make it into this issue, for both time and space reasons, is a discussion by me of some recent issues of some British short fiction magazines – *Postscripts*, *Farthing*, *Hub*, and of course *Interzone*. It'll be in *Vector* 251, so I don't want to give away the ending, but it was striking how few British writers the above magazines featured. There could, of course, be any number of reasons for that: it's not like British writers have stopped writing (or being noticed for) short fiction, or like short fiction is a particularly reliable barometer of the health of the field in this novel-driven time. But it does make you wonder.

I'm doing my best here to invite comments from the floor. This issue features the first letter of comment since I started working on *Vector*, and I'd like to receive more – looking through the contents lists for past issues, it seems as though the magazine has had a lively letter column more often than not. If at all possible I'd like to revive the tradition; the discussions on the blog (http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/) have been gratifyingly lively, particularly when discussing BBC4's recent history of British sf, *The Martians and Us*, but blog comments have a different quality to a thorough letter of comment. Or to put it another way, Graham keeps threatening to write a column about the immorality of comment-hooks – but I say, bring on the fannish polemic.

@ Letters to Vector

From Paul Raven

Graham Sleight's column in *Vector* 247 got me thinking. Actually writing reviews that people can (and do) read has forced me to tighten up my thinking about science fiction quite considerably, from the lazy consumption of it that I was still engaged in a few years ago. I was never a 'true' fan as a kid, really. I was largely unaware of fandom – I just knew what I like to read, and that was almost always to be found on the sf/fantasy shelves.

But now I'm in the position of talking to other consumers from a platform of authority on the subject (albeit a very minor authority), I've had to engage far more seriously with the whats, whys and wherefores of the genre. The internet (and some patient editors, bless them) have been an immense help, but mostly it's been a case of me re-learning how to read.

I am not a critic. I aspire to becoming one, but I think it's a long slow process, and there's some time to go before I can step up to that level. I am a reviewer. What's the difference?

I'm not sure anyone could define with certainty what the difference is. In my personal view, a reviewer simply reports as accurately as possible on what the book contains, its plot, storyline, characters, the writing style ... basically, an objective examination of the work in question, addressed to a consumer who is assumed to have a similar level of knowledge.

A critic does all this too, but has the benefit of a deeper wider knowledge of other works, and where all these works stand in relation to each other – and so it falls to the critic to treat the work objectively, to place the work correctly amid the rest of the pantheon of the genre, often comparing and contrasting the stylistic elements (that a reviewer will merely report on) to those of other authors.

More than anything, I think the line is probably one of confidence in one's knowledge of the scene being discussed, and the ability to back up that confidence. When you can make a controversial yet heartfelt comparison, and then defend yourself successfully against a rabid horde of enraged fen on your blog or in your magazine, then you have become a critic. Whether or not that is a position to be envied is another question.

But what *good* are reviewers and critics?

Science fiction is a notoriously 'un-gatekeepered' scene, as I witnessed at Concussion last Easter – my first con. I worked in the lower echelons of the music industry for a few years and, with a few exceptions in the more obscure (and hence egalitarian) genres, the line between artist and fan is carefully controlled, even exploited. The same goes for 'literature' and popular fiction authors – they aren't known for sitting down with a bunch of people from a fan-site and buying them a round of drinks.

Why sf works differently is a question for someone with a far better knowledge of its history than I, though I'd suggest that the relatively small size of the genre, combined with the proudly geekish mindsets of both authors and fen, must play a large part in keeping the barriers down.

Graham discusses the openness of conversation in the genre in rather less glowing and positivist terms than I tend to take, and he has some good points to make. He's certainly not decrying the scene for its openness, but he is questioning the merits of this unmediated flow of discussion, when he says that "The un-gatekeepered world is full of stuff that's not worth spending time on." He also says it's easier to talk about the stuff you are already familiar with than the stuff you know not at all, and that's very true – though personally I am enjoying being stretched by receiving books to review that I might never have considered picking up, and it's encouraging me to grab more randomly from the library shelves when a gap in the reading schedule opens up.

But it is an observable truth that fan communities often tend towards small areas of focus – one author at a time, usually. That's not to say the members don't like other authors. But it does ensure a certain wikipedia-like consensus of opinion will prevail within the environs of the group - excepting for a few fringe voices and the odd popular contrarian, conversation will focus on affirming how much alike author X and the object of fandom are, and hence how good author X is, and so on. This is natural – the same dynamics occur in any pub or bar with a regular set of patrons.

But how to prevent the problem worsening? This is (or should be) the job of the critic, according to Sleight, and I think he has a point, when he says that "The task of a critic these days, or a reader, or an anthologist, or a magazine like *Vector*, seems to me to be the organisation of information." This puts me in mind of an old recording of H. G. Wells, fittingly enough. If I remember correctly, he was addressing some conclave of scientists (possibly in Canada), and after praising the individual achievements of all the different fields and disciplines, he laments the fact that there is no one whose job it is to keep an eye on what all the disparate sciences are working on, to collate and draw connections between them, to suggest fruitful linkages and exchanges of ideas, to coordinate scientific endeavour as a whole, and get everyone pulling in essentially the same direction without too much duplication of effort.

I think science is still in desperate need of this kind of benign oversight – and it is starting to happen democratically, as more and more researchers are opening up their data to the search engines. And I think Sleight is right – science fiction could benefit from this, too. It is easier than ever before to share information about the bigger picture, and hence rather ironic that opposite seems to occur. And as Sleight suggests, perhaps this should be the job of contemporary sf criticism – and maybe reviewing, too.

Editor's note: Paul's full thoughts on this topic can be found on his blog, Velcro City Tourist Board, *at http://www.velcro-city.co.uk/what-is-the-job-of-contemporary-sf-criticism/.*

Behind the Scenes: Origins

by Peter Weston

Between March 1966 and June 1968, "Behind the Scenes" was an occasional Vector *column, and it's a pleasure to present a new installment. Back then, the column was attributed to one Malcolm Edwards – who was not, as you may at first think, the man who later brought us the Gollancz SF Masterworks line, but a pseudonym for Peter Weston. "Behind the Scenes" focused on fanzine reviews and fan commentary – you can read the original columns online at <http://www.gostak.co.uk/bts/index.htm> – but it's the latter Peter takes on here, with a look at the origins and original purpose of the BSFA.*

A few months ago on Greg Pickersgill's Wegenheim e-mail list, we were speculating on how things might have turned out if the BSFA had never existed – or if it had failed early on, like the three – or maybe four – previous attempts at 'national organisations' in this country. I said that I doubted if we would have seen much change to science fiction itself, although Chris Priest would probably still be an accountant and Rob Holdstock a specialist on Tropical Diseases. Oh – and Terry Pratchett might still be writing press releases for the electricity generating industry. But for British SF enthusiasts it would have been disastrous!

Let's just go back a bit and look at the complex relationship between the BSFA and that larger, looser 'fandom' with which it has been inextricably entwined for nearly fifty years.

The very first fans – people like you and me, who loved reading and talking about science fiction – popped up in Britain almost as soon as the early SF magazines crossed the Atlantic in the late 1920s, and by 1937 there were enough of them to hold the world's very first science fiction convention in Leeds, which attracted over twenty people! They voted to set up the Science Fiction Association (SFA), which was rather optimistically 'devoted to the stimulation of interest in science fiction and scientific progress.' Unfortunately the SFA lasted little more than two years and had to be disbanded at the outbreak of war.

The second attempt at a national organisation was the British Fantasy Society, established in June 1942 by Michael Rosenblum and many of the same fans who had been behind the former association (and no relation to the current BFS which was formed, originally as the 'British Weird Fantasy Society', in 1971, as an offshoot of the BSFA). Its object was entirely practical; to give members better access to SF magazines through its extensive library, although the BFS also published news bulletins and organised several small conventions. At its peak it had nearly a hundred members, but it failed to survive long after the end of hostilities and was wound-up in November 1946, having lasted just over four years.

By this time Captain K.F. Slater was on the scene with 'Operation Fantast', a trading organisation which bought, sold and swapped books and magazines. In mid-1948 he put out a circular titled 'The Time Has Come' pushing the idea of a new national fan organisation, and the result was the Science Fantasy Society. Unfortunately, Ken Slater was posted to Germany, other committee members failed to share his 'flaming enthusiasm', and by September 1951 the SFS was declared 'a glorious flop.' Ken wrote at the time, "British fandom flatly refuses to be organised," to which a wag later added, "and will form groups to prevent this from happening."

With some relief science fiction fans returned to their accustomed state of anarchy. Local groups came and went throughout the fifties, Londoners met weekly at 'The White Horse' pub, and there was a convention every year, even a World SF Convention in 1957 which attracted nearly 300 members. But slowly and imperceptibly fandom was running down, fans were getting older, few newcomers came in and every year fewer fanzines appeared. The Easter convention had become an unprogrammed, largely social event, and attendance was steadily declining – 150 in 1954; 115 in 1955; 80 in 1956; and under fifty in 1958. There might not be another. What had gone wrong?

In Ken Slater's opinion, fandom had turned in upon itself. "Fans and fan-magazines had stopped referring to anything remotely connected with science fiction, fandom had become a tight little clique, and any enquirer who wanted to know something about science fiction got a very rapid brush-off. It's fairly simple to be enthusiastic about almost anything ... but it gets difficult to be enthusiastic about being enthusiastic. And that is what fandom has been doing for some time now."

Spurred by an impassioned diatribe ('Don't Just Sit There') from long-time London activist Vince Clarke, the 1958 Kettering convention staged a discussion about the whole future of British fandom. Liverpool fan Dave Newman conducted the meeting, at which it was agreed that both fanzines and conventions had moved so far away from science fiction that they were not likely to be attractive to newcomers, and worse, there were almost no channels of recruitment into British fandom anyway. After hours of lively debate it was decided that a new national organisation was the only answer, ostensibly devoted to the serious study of science fiction, but carrying material about fandom in its publications so that those hooked and nurtured in this way might eventually go on to a more personal involvement.

But even the name of the new organisation caused disagreement. Professional writer Ted Tubb argued that the very mention of the words 'science fiction' was guaranteed to provoke ridicule from the media. "We don't want that to happen *every* time we meet the Press," he said. Dave Newman retorted by saying, "Well, merely calling ourselves 'The Imaginative Fiction Society' is not going to make any difference – the Press will immediately say 'Oh, they're science fiction readers.' My feeling is that avoiding the name 'science fiction' in the title is cowardice in the face of the enemy." In the end the following motion was put forward: –

"This meeting proposes that a national science fiction

> society should be formed, whose aims and objects will be the encouragement of readership of science fiction and liaison and general social and literary contact between SF readers, and that the persons present in this room shall, when called upon to do so, fork out a sum of money (to be later agreed) to set up a capital fund for the formation of this society."

That seemed a fair enough summary of what everyone wanted, tidied-up into formal language (although not actually mentioning the word 'fandom') and the proposal was passed unanimously. And so the British Science Fiction Association was formed, with Dave Newman as first Chairman, Archie Mercer as Treasurer, and Ted Tubb as editor of the official journal, *Vector* (a title proposed by Sheffield fan Terry Jeeves, elected as joint Secretary along with fellow veteran Eric Bentcliffe). Additionally, it was agreed that the BSFA would be responsible for organising the annual conventions; from now onwards there would be continuity, accessibility, maybe even *respectability*!

So much goodwill existed towards the new Association that most fans of the day joined immediately, and by the first anniversary Bentcliffe could proudly state that membership had passed the 100-mark. But the problem with this and any other voluntary organisation, the same conundrum that had killed both BFS and SFS, is 'who exactly does the work?'

After Kettering, nothing seemed to happen for several months. It was summer before *Vector* appeared, largely written by Ted Tubb himself, who then resigned, quite rightly feeling that he couldn't spare precious writing time when he needed to be earning his living. Meanwhile the first chairman, Dave Newman, moved from Liverpool to Bournemouth and vanished without trace. Jeeves and Bentcliffe carried on until the following spring and then stood down from office (with a feeling of relief, one feels), having 'done their bit'.

They had actually done rather more than they had been asked to do, by framing the first Constitution for the BSFA in such a way that it muddled and confused what had been a simple 'mission statement.' Deviating quite far from that original, simple motion at Kettering, they produced an altogether more pretentious document mentioning neither 'fandom' nor the national convention, which after all was the original inspiration for the whole affair. It began:-

> "The association shall exist for the benefit of those interested in science fiction and allied branches of imaginative literature. It shall encourage the reading, writing and publishing of good literature of this class, shall assist and encourage contact between enthusiasts, shall provide liaison between its members and the SF profession, shall endeavour to present science fiction and associated art-forms to the Press and general public in an advantageous manner, and shall provide such amenities as may prove desirable for the use of members."

When Vince Clarke saw this, he commented that "to be serious in the sense of setting up an organisation to improve the standard of science fiction strikes me as sheer egotism; SF criticism, yes, but it's up to the pros to improve the output of the stuff itself. I'm for fandom first and SF second. I sincerely hope the BSFA won't forget that it originated at a 'social' convention."

But it *did* forget, and remarkably quickly, too! Almost immediately the BSFA began to dissociate itself from the fandom which had given it birth. The seeds for this schizophrenic misunderstanding had been planted in that constitution in the Association's very first year, and in 1964 – at Peterborough – an unholy row broke out at the Easter convention when one of the older members innocently mentioned the BSFA's original purpose. North-East fan Phil Harbottle, then a newcomer, commented, "I nearly fell off my chair I was so surprised. Surely the BSFA stands for the advancement and recognition of British SF, and is only indirectly connected to fandom? One was given the impression that the BSFA is being run as a sufferance sideline by the fans."

That was exactly right, and the Association had been fortunate in finding volunteers who carried it through those first difficult years. But in that same period it had succeeded brilliantly in fulfilling the original hopes of its founders. The BSFA was established to 'top-up' an existing, amorphous, British fandom, and through a campaign of advertising, PR, and word-of-mouth it had brought in newcomers almost from the beginning. The first half-dozen (Jim Linwood, Ken Cheslin and their pals) came in with the first BSFA-run convention (*Brumcon*) in 1959, and more appeared every year so that by 1964 a third or more of convention attendees were 'new blood', people like Charles Platt, Chris Priest, Rog Peyton and the present writer.

Without the BSFA, conventions might have ended with Kettering, and even if they had survived as shrunken 'social weekends,' who know they existed? Without conventions the old fandom would have continued to atrophy, and all those people – like us – who enjoy reading science fiction would have been isolated, without opportunity to learn more about our favourite reading matter. Yes, without the BSFA, organised fandom would almost certainly have died out in Britain – what Greg Pickersgill calls 'the doomsday scenario.'

"Would fandom have been re-invented anyway?" asks Greg, "by following hints and descriptions gained from such sources as Lin Carter's columns in *If* magazine or mentions in *New Maps of Hell*? Dedicated SF specialists like Ken Slater would still exist, so would this make it inevitable that potential fans would get to know of each other and clump together again as a proto-fandom? Would fandom eventually have been re-invented as a coalescence of University SF societies? Has that actually happened anyway?"

All interesting questions, certainly, but would the absence of the BSFA have made much difference to professional science fiction? I don't think so. Very few professional writers have actually come from the ranks of the fans during the last 40+ years other than the examples I noted in my opening paragraphs. And publishers have rarely taken the slightest notice of such a small (although admittedly vocal) part of their reading public. But the fans, those keen types who write about science fiction, who congregate in clubs and societies and organise the ever-growing number of conventions, the people who take satisfaction in editing *Vector* and running the modern BSFA – how different – and how much greyer – their world would have been!

Peter Weston's fanzine Zenith/Speculation *was nominated for a Hugo Award four times, and his fannish autobiography* With Stars in My Eyes *was a 2005 Hugo nominee for Best Related Book. For further information about the origins of the BSFA, see Greg Pickersgill's BSFA archives <http://www.gostak.co.uk/bsfarchive/BSFA1.htm> and Rob Hansen's history of British science fiction fandom,* Then *<http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/SF-Archives/Then/Index.html>.*

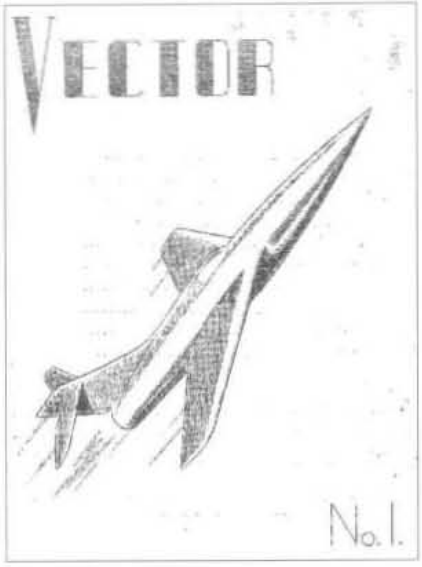
The View From Vector

As is traditional for issues with a big round number on the cover, I asked some past Vector *editors and staff to write about their time working on the magazine. The result? Over 12,000 words about the BSFA, science fiction, and* Vector *over the past 48 years. It's not the story, of course, but it's a story, or a series of stories. Enjoy.*

26-39 – Rog Peyton:

Vector 250! Wow! 211 issues since the last one I edited (#39). It doesn't seem possible that 40 years have gone by – over two thirds of my life. So much of the time of my editorship is still fresh in my mind – even the bits I'd rather forget!

It all started back in 1963 when several of the old Birmingham SF Group decided to join the BSFA. We'd been told that no-one from Brum had ever been a member (we recently discovered there were actually two Birmingham members in the very first year of the BSFA in 1958 though neither of them were known to any of the rest of us). I was member #409. My good friend Peter Weston was producing his sercon fanzine *Zenith/Speculation*, and having taught Pete how to use a Gestetner duplicator and having helped out on collating and stapling a few issues, I found myself wanting to do something similar. In November of 1963 Archie Mercer announced that he was retiring as *Vector* editor and a new editor was being sought. I found myself writing to Archie volunteering my services. I thought that nothing would come of it and a more well-known fan would step forward and be accepted. By return post I got a letter from Archie, saying something like, "There are no spelling mistakes in your letter and no split infinitives, so I guess you're the next editor!"



Think about it. I had been in the BSFA three months, no-one knew me, and I knew very few people in fandom. I couldn't remember what a split infinitive was from my school days! And I'd only seen three issues of *Vector*. Suddenly I was about to become Editor of the BSFA's Official Journal, starting with issue #26. Of course, I didn't realise till some time later that I was a very rare animal – a volunteer! I'd been snapped up before I could change my mind. At my first convention in Peterborough, Easter 1964, immediately after I was officially placed into the editorship, I was asked to be on the committee for the following year's Eastercon. I hadn't learned anything – yes, I agreed.

I learned a very important lesson in that year – Do Not Volunteer! I'm told that no other *Vector* editor has ever volunteered – every one of them has a twisted arm.

Looking back from today's perspective of a world of computers and emails, it seems a miracle that any issues of *Vector* (or any other fanzine for that matter) got published at all. Every contribution had to be asked for by snail mail. If you were lucky, an article would arrive two months later. Did the article need artwork? If so, then again, by snail mail, artwork from artists who worked fast had to be sought. Then it had to be edited, typed onto wax stencils, artwork cut onto electro-stencils had to be spliced into the wax masters. Then duplicated, collated, stapled. Address labels to be typed (not once, but for every single issue!). Mags stuffed into envelopes, stamped and taken to the post office. All this by one person when the average membership during my tenure as editor was about 350 – no computers, no emails and we didn't have a phone at home!

I quickly learned to work at least three issues ahead. That often caused its own problems, suddenly finding that everything was promised for the next issue or the one after – but nothing for *this* issue? Somehow I managed 14 issues in two years plus the first two issues of *Tangent*, the BSFA's fiction mag.

It was one of the most hectic times of my life but one that I don't regret. I loved those two years. Well, not all the time ... but that's another story. Ask me for that for issue 500.

Congratulations, *Vector*.

41-42 – Ken Slater:

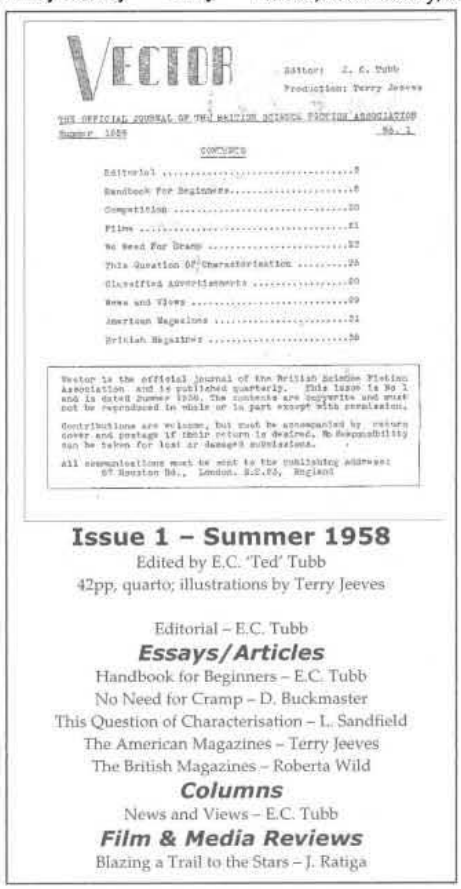
A lifetime ago? Perhaps not quite, but it was around 1948 I started thinking that Britain should have a national science-fantasy society, and the account of my rather off-hand editing of one issue, and joint editing (with Doreen Rogers) of, I think, two other issues of Vector has been worn thread-bare in the telling, so this time I am using my mental time machine to retrace some of those events. Actually, you will find a lot about those events on the web, if you look, but for the record that is mostly recounted by other people. We don't all look at things from the same angle, do we?

I never used to distinguish between British and American science fiction, or even the author until i had finished the book or the story; so far as possible this removed "expectation" from the equation. As writers such as Ian Watson, James White, E.C. "Ted" Tubb and others started writing tales the differences twixt

the American and British styles decreased, anyway. But in terms of fandom at that time, in the States there was the N3F (National Fantasy Fan Federation) and in Britain there were only a few small regional or "town" groups – mostly very small – except for the folk in London. Basically, London's fans had no need for organisation; anyone who cared could attend a meeting every week, and so could anyone from out of London who happened to be visiting. Easy and anarchistic – but not really helpful if anyone had a "project" in mind. I had spent a fair amount of time bombarding British fandom with letters, one-shots, and even physical visits when I was in England on leave. Finally I talked Vince Clarke, Owen Plumridge and some others into forming the society that was called "the British Fantasy Society" – really original! – which survived a couple of years, and was outlived by the fanzine originally published in its name. At this point I more or less gave up. I had left the army, and was struggling to convert parts of "Operation Fantast" into "Fantast (Medway) Limited".

This was the time of "Cytricons" in Kettering, and at the fourth one of those, in 1958, my dream came true. The initial formation of the BSFA took place. Unfortunately, I was not there. I can no longer recall why – maybe I was ill, or my wife was. But the first I knew about was a letter from (if I remember correctly Ted Tubb) telling me of the formation, and informing me I had been made founding member number six, in view of my past efforts. Note, therefore, that I did not join the BSFA. I was conscripted!

I must admit that I did not take a very active part in the proceedings; I contributed an item to *Vector* as requested which was a sort of "catch-all" column titled "General Chuntering", and would help out with other things if/when asked. But things seemed to continue on a reasonably smooth course – the odd stagger occurred, but there were always enough of us helpful folk around to grab hold of the organisation by the collar and put it back on its feet.


VECTOR

Editor: E. C. Tubb
Production: Terry Jeeves

THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION
Summer 1958 No. 1

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Issue 1 – Summer 1958

Edited by E.C. 'Ted' Tubb
42pp, quarto; illustrations by Terry Jeeves

Editorial – E.C. Tubb

Essays/Articles

Handbook for Beginners – E.C. Tubb
No Need for Cramp – D. Buckmaster
This Question of Characterisation – L. Sandfield
The American Magazines – Terry Jeeves
The British Magazines – Roberta Wild

Columns

News and Views – E.C. Tubb

Film & Media Reviews

Blazing a Trail to the Stars – J. Ratiga

A very good *Vector* was being produced, and there seemed to be a reasonable number of people joining the BSFA. But then at the AGM at Yarcon it was revealed that the financial position was far from good; there was a fair possibility that the Association was bankrupt, although the accounts were unclear. What was clear was that the cost of the publications was taking too much of the income, and although there were new people joining, they were not renewing memberships when they expired. So everything was put on "hold", people were appointed to consider how bad the position was, and what should be done.

Well, most of you probably know the following action. The BSFA became "BSFA Ltd." so that officers had a legal responsibility, we produced some duplicated (and self-typed) *Vector*s as a stop gap and information line, and then I resigned – not for any particular reason, except that I felt I had done enough – and was made Life member Number Four. Go onto the web and dig if you wish to know more – it is all there; and much more as well! There is an industrious group of fans from the 60s or thereabouts who are industriously putting all things fannish into electronic format. Even all the book reviews I wrote for *Nebula Science Fiction*, and the issues of Ron Bennett's excellent *Skyrack* fanzine, at <http://gostak.co.uk/skyrack/>. If anything, I guess the *Skyrack* issues contain more "historical" fannish data than anything else I can think of, and I was pleased to learn that they were widely available before Ron's regrettable death. Perhaps increasing records of that sort is something the BSFA might care to engage in.

43 – Doreen Rogers/Parker:

Ken Slater sent me *Vector*s 41, 42 and 43 when I was asked to do this article and it all came flooding back to me.

I was the Secretary of the BSFA. We had a new Publications Officer, Steve Oakley, and review books and money were sent to him. He lived about 20 miles from me, but he had romantic problems (his mother refused to speak to me, as I had introduced the lady in question), and I don't believe *Vector* ever came out during his tenure. In fact, he went off to university in the autumn. I had applied for and got a job in charge of a legal department, and was attending evening classes studying law, when Ken rang me about the non-appearance of *Vector*.

I arranged to go over to Wisbech, and we had a committee meeting. We decided that Ken and I would jointly edit *Vector* until the AGM at Easter, and Ken gave me a load of stencils (remember them?) which I took home to type. We had no material, so I wrote to Dan Morgan, Ted Tubb, Chris Priest (who was also auditor, and wanted to know whether we had any money), Ken Bulmer and Phil Muldowney.

Then the fun started. Ken typed his own stencil – no spelling errors – and I typed the rest. We got in touch with Phil Rogers (the Chair) and all met at Ken's on a Saturday. Phil turned up late in the afternoon to find Joyce and I stood there, duplicating. Ken had a really old Roneo, and on every fourth page it got stuck and destroyed the paper. We stood on our feet from 10am to 4pm. When the men appeared we had something to eat, and I remember getting very drunk that night and motoring back to Deeping St James with all the papers, envelopes given to me by Ken, and money for postage from Phil.

We were pleased with the outcome, and carried on for *Vector* 42 and 43. You ought to read those *Vector*s to get the flavour of them.

In the meantime Ken and I were meeting weekly (with Joyce, of course) and spent hours trying to think how to make the BSFA safer. Phil sometimes joined us, staying late on Saturdays – but never overnight, as he had a regular Sunday appointment. We expected there was a lady involved, but later when I married Phil (in 1972) and asked him, he just smiled and said he never kissed and told.

I was working, as I said, in a legal office. I was in charge of Probate; there was a company solicitor, Danny, in the same office who went all over the world forming companies. It was office policy that all solicitors and clerks had to do a certain amount of conveyancing. Danny hated conveyancing, though, and asked me to do it for him. I agreed, on the condition that he would help me. I explained all about the BSFA, and asked whether it would be feasible to form a Limited Company with shares. He said now,

and explained to me about a Limited Company by Guarantee, which was one of the options that had been suggested by Ken. Whilst looking into this question, of course, we were still producing *Vector* as before; Trish (aged 9) was proofreading and helping me to assemble the pages, which we then stapled and posted. Ken and I had such good support – although of course not everyone was pleased with our efforts.

In the meantime, I was also studying for my exams, which I took in February (and passed), and approaching authors, publishers, etc to ask whether, if they company was formed, they would become Directors. I asked everyone from Edmund Crisping to Brian Aldiss.

We decided to enact the change by referendum, and not at the AGM. There was a lot of approval, and a lot of opposition – some of the loudest from Peter Weston, who refused to become a member. I was surprised and hurt, as we had become come good friends – it wasn't until I read *With Stars in my Eyes* that I understood we were at cross-purposes. Peter thought I wanted to break up fandom; I wanted science fiction to be recognised and respected as a genre, but not at the expense of the breakup of fandom. I thought fandom was a vital part of science fiction.

We formed the company before November when the law was changed. (After forming BSFA Ltd., the company solicitor made me form another company for the theatre he'd started in Peterborough.)

I don't remember who took over Publications. We never saw Steve again. I carried on for a few years, but after a time, with other things on my mind, my membership lapsed, and I haven't seen *Vector* for years. I'm sure it isn't typed on stencils any more.

What energy and what fun we had in those days! Terry Pratchett said recently that there are no old people, just young people looking around and saying "what happened? Where did the time go?" I couldn't agree more.

Issue 41 – December 1966
Edited by Doreen Parker and Ken F. Slater
44pp, half foolscap

Editorial – Ken F. Slater

Fiction

Story – Dan Morgan
Natural Selection – E. C. Tubb

Essays/Articles

Migrant Angel – Major Claude Eatherly – Chris Priest
Time Binding Moebius Strip – Ken Bulmer
Review of *Impulse* 4, 5, 6, & 9, and *New Worlds* 163, 165, 166, 167 – Chris Priest
Vice-Chairman's Report – Ken F. Slater
International Contact Department Report – Phil Muldowney

Columns

General Chuntering – Ken F. Slater

56-68 – Malcolm Edwards:

How do you become editor of *Vector*? Easy in my case. I was willing. They were desperate.

After spending my teenage years as a solitary sf fanatic, I'd joined the university sf society (CUSFS, founded four or five years earlier by Charles Platt) in October 1969, at the start of my second year. CUSFS was then run by two people who knew the wider world of sf fandom, and the BSFA. One was Roger ('Roje') Gilbert, a graduate student at Trinity Hall. The other was Vic Hallett, who wasn't part of the university, but was manager of one of the several branches of Heffer's bookshop. Vic was older than the rest of us – he may even have been somewhere near 30! – and he and his wife lived in a narrowboat moored on the Cam. That might have seemed more exotic to me had it not been the self-same narrowboat that my aunt and uncle had owned a few years earlier (it really is a very small world sometimes).

One thing led to another, and over the next few months Vic and Rog introduced those of us who were interested first of all to the monthly meetings of sf fans at the Globe pun in Hatton Garden, and then to the annual Eastercon (there was only one convention a year then), which in 1970 was held in London. Perfect for me, as that was where I lived. CUSFS also held a regular programme of talks from visiting eminences, so the first sf writer I ever met, late in 1969, was Kenneth Bulmer. My image of sf writers was that they would all be giant, godlike figures, so the friendly, unassuming, pipesmoking Ken was a (welcome) surprise.

By my final year at Cambridge, I was itching to publish my own fanzine, and two issues of *Quicksilver* appeared in late 1970 and early 1971, when I should have been preparing for my finals. But frankly, student life had been swept into the background by the exciting sf world which had opened up in front of me.

Having graduated, by the autumn of 1971 I was confronted with the harsh realities of adult life. I had no money at all, certainly not enough to produce the third issues of *Quicksilver*, though I had a lot of the material on stencil. (The standard form of amateur publishing in this distant, barely post-Caxton era was duplication, which I imagine will be completely unfamiliar ancient technology for most current BSFA members.) But I couldn't afford to buy paper, let alone stamps to mail the copies out.

I could just about afford to go to the Globe once a month, and at one of those meetings, either at the end of 1971 or early in 1972, I drifted into a crisis conversation about the BSFA. *Vector* was a huge problem: after a run of regular publication, principally when Roger Peyton was editor, there had only been two issues in 1970 and two in 1971. Bob Parkinson, the editor, had resigned. There was nobody else to do the job. I hadn't known about this, because joining the BSFA was another thing I couldn't afford, but to me it was a brilliant opportunity to publish my fanzine with someone else footing the bill. So I volunteered. Most of the people there barely knew who I was, but Vic Hallett did, and for want of any alternative I was appointed there and then.

Fanzines can be about anything under the sun, but *Quicksilver* had reflected my twin interests in science fiction and rock music. I had to drop the latter material – all I can remember is something by Charles Platt about the Allman Brothers Band – but I had, among other things, an article by German fan Franz Rottensteiner about Stanislaw Lem, whose novel *Solaris* had recently introduced his work to English-language readers, plus a short story by Lem himself which Franz (who had become his agent) provided.

All the material was typed on to stencils to be printed off on quarto paper (10" x 8"). The BSFA had a stock of duplicator paper, but it was A4 size. But waste not, want not. *Quicksilver* 3 was quickly turned in to *Vector* 59, and appeared in March 1972 with unusually big margins at top and bottom and no cover at all. It wasn't much, but at least it would placate the membership a bit.

The BSFA has always depended on volunteers, working for no visible reward. At least if you're editing the magazine you get some credit, but there were – and I assume still are – unsung heroes without whom nothing would happen. In my time, the two people who kept the show on the road were Gill Adams, who was Treasurer, and Keith Freeman, who I think was Secretary, but who certainly organized the mailings from the chemistry department of Reading University where he worked. Among the many things I didn't have at the time was a telephone, and I remember accumulating enough 10p pieces to go to the phone box down the road to call Gill (who lived in Southampton) to arrange to get the printing paid for. She was a good bit older than me – maybe somewhere near 40! – with husband and family, and was always calm, unflustered and helpful. I was taking too many amphetamines and had a bit of a tendency to gibber.

After that, the next seven issues appeared pretty regularly through 1972 and 1973, as I worked up from a quarterly schedule to bimonthly. I introduced a couple of regular columnists – Peter Roberts on fanzines and Philip Strick (who sadly died recently) on film. And I used the fact that I was editing the journal of the BSFA to approach people who I would never have dared

99-106
Kevin Smith, Joseph Nicholas, Paul Kincaid

107
Alan Dorey; Joseph Nicholas, Paul Kincaid

108-123
Geoff Rippington, Joseph Nicholas, Paul Kincaid

124-125
Paul Kincaid

approach for my own fanzine. This seemed to work, particularly with Americans.

I was also at the time British agent for *Locus*, then a much less glossy publication than today. They would airmail me in bulk the copies for their hundred or so European subscribers, and I would post them onwards and collect subscription monies. It meant I was the first person on this side of the Atlantic to read it, at a time when news traveled very slowly. When I read there that Philip K. Dick had delivered a major speech at some US convention, I wrote to him asking for permission to reprint it, and I can still remember the unbelievable thrill of coming back late one Thursday night from the Globe and discovering on the doormat a letter from Phil graciously – indeed, enthusiastically – granting permission.

Then it started to go wrong. After no. 59, my issues of *Vector* were neatly printed, I don't remember where. But round about no.63 a BSFA member, Jim Diviney, who ran a print business, offered to produce it at lower prices than the BSFA was paying. He would, moreover, print the covers in two colours. We of course took him up on his offer. Everything went smoothly at first, but then delays started to creep in, accompanied by excuses. In retrospect, I can see that Jim was running a tiny business on a shoestring, and what began as a generous and well-meaning offer started turning into a rod for his back. Nos. 65 and 66 both appeared later than the dates on the magazine. No. 67 never came. Eventually I got the material back and reorganized it into a double-issue, which was the only one to appear in 1974.

It was a very disheartening experience, at a time when my enthusiasm was in any event waning. I'd got freelance work as a reader for Gollancz (which in 1976 turned into a full-time job and the start of a career), and in 1974 they were running a competition for a first sf novel. As first reader for the competition, I had the task of reading some 130 full-length typescripts in the space of three months, which pretty much blew everything else out of the window. I was also more involved in fandom, and was Chair of the 1975 Eastercon. And the lack of response from BSFA members – when I could see that other fanzines got reams of letters from people who never saw *Vector* – made me feel more and more that I was wasting my time and energy.

So I resigned, and Chris Fowler took over. At least I had assembled all the material for the next issue (I had received nothing from Bob Parkinson), and it appeared in 1975 as no.69. Since then *Vector* has never appeared less than four times a year, a fact which fills me with absolute astonishment, and admiration for my successors.

98-123 – Joseph Nicholas:

In 1979, a group of us took over the BSFA because we didn't want to be left behind by the forces of history.

My main co-conspirators (as I remember them) were Alan Dorey and Mike Dickinson, with support from John and Eve Harvey (who I think had already taken over the editorship of *Matrix*), Dave Langford and Kevin Smith (who took over control of the finances, before moving on to edit *Vector* after Mike Dickinson dropped out). There were others – we seemed to tap into a groundswell of support – but from this distance I can no longer put names to many of the faces. We were in the grip of a monolithic theory that fandom's prevailing mood was determined by the swinging of a pendulum. The fifties had been very fannish, the sixties very sercon, the seventies fannish again – therefore the eighties would be sercon and we needed to get in first to maintain our position of dominance. Of course, we were completely wrong; instead of swinging back, fandom splintered into 57 or more varieties, of which the BSFA was just one. Our bid for continued dominance was a busted flush.

Those were the selfish reasons for the seizure of command. The other, and possibly more important reason, was that the BSFA had lost its way, and in doing so was slipping towards not just irrelevance but possible oblivion as well.

Although established in the fifties to help "recruit" new fans, by the mid-seventies the BSFA had reached a point at which the then editor of *Matrix* could claim that it was unnecessary to acknowledge the rest of fandom. Obviously, no one wished to argue that the organisation should be central to fandom (as a literal reading of its Memorandum and Articles of Association might suggest), but the implication that it should exist in Second Foundation-like isolation struck many as quite surreal – even though many of its members and then committee members took no part in any other fan activities and were rarely seen at conventions. (Which itself was a problem: if the organisation wasn't visible, how did it expect to acquire new subscribers?)

There were other problems. Lax financial controls meant that the organisation had run up a large deficit over the printing costs of *Vector*. The annual award seemed to be decided in secret by the committee, was restricted solely to British authors, and given no publicity. (There was even talk of hiding its link to the BSFA by renaming it the Carnell, after the recently deceased editor.) And the critical standards were abominable: everything was reviewed, and everything got a favourable review, no matter what. (The excuse seemed to be that if they didn't say nice things about the books they were sent, they might not be sent any more.) To cap it all, there was a writer's magazine which appeared to specialise in publishing stories characterised chiefly by their authors' inability to spell, punctuate, or make any sense whatever. We knew the BSFA deserved better; we knew we could do better; we had friends who we knew could help us do better; so we moved in.

The first couple of issues of the new *Vector* had a small amount of older material to use up; but otherwise we put the pedal to the metal and started to remake it. Out went the pursuit of comprehensive coverage; in came longer, more discursive reviews of fewer titles, with – in the paperback supplement I edited alongside *Vector*'s review column – KTF-style kerb-stomping of the rubbish. In came impassioned articles about the state of science fiction (I wrote one myself), then suffering from both the dystopian after-effects of the previous decade's economic slow-down and a post-Star Wars mini-boom in derivative hackwork. *Vector* began to run big (as in several pages long) interviews with authors passing through London and lots of short articles by people who had succinct points they wanted to make but didn't need more than a page to make them. It tried, quite deliberately, to create a buzz about itself and the BSFA.

There were other changes. The writers' magazine was handed to Chris Evans and Rob Holdstock, who gave proper feedback on the material submitted and made the publication genuinely useful for would-be writers. The proposal to rename the Award was dumped, the Award itself split into four (novel, short story, artwork, media), and a proper nomination and voting process introduced. And we established the monthly meetings in a pub in London, with a programme of quizzes, interviews and panel discussions which continues to this day. Indeed, it seems that, looking back, everything the BSFA does now was made possible by what we did then. To be hubristic about it, we saved the organisation.

At least, that's my take on that period in the BSFA's history. Whether my comrades in the struggle remember it the same way is another matter. As to whether we'll be remembered for what we did – ask that one for the 500th issue, would you?

99-150 & 182-204 – Paul Kincaid:

I first heard about the BSFA in the early 1970s, about the time my interest in science fiction was turning into an obsession. But it was one of those periods when the organization was going through a melt-down, so when I tried to join, nothing happened. In the end I didn't manage to become a member until around 1979, when Alan Dorey orchestrated a take-over of what was then seen as a moribund organization. I have a suspicion that I was already reviewing for *Vector* before I actually joined, even so,

though I was friendly with just about everyone who was now running the BSFA, it would be another few years before I allowed myself to be conned or cajoled into any official role. I co-edited one interim issue of *Vector*, then settled into the job of Reviews Editor, which would last a lot longer than I ever anticipated.

In retrospect, this was an interesting period in British science fiction, but I'm not sure it appeared that way at the time. The Seventies had been an era of retrenchment after the heady experimental days of the 1960s. Writers who had emerged at the tail end of the New Wave were producing some of their best work (Christopher Priest, M. John Harrison, Keith Roberts, D.G. Compton among others), but though the quality was undoubtedly higher there wasn't the excitement that went with the cavalier, rock'n'roll style of the Sixties. New writers did burst into print (Ian Watson, Robert Holdstock, Christopher Evans), but it was a trickle compared to the flood of the New Wave. The release of *Star Wars* had transformed the sf landscape, marking the return to ascendancy of the American extrovert future over the British introvert present, but at the time all we could see was a new and not altogether welcome populism – we had no idea of the effect this film would eventually have on the written literature.

By the start of the Eighties, therefore, there was a sense of waiting for something to happen, but with no notion of what that something might be and with no lively expectation that it would actually occur. What happened, just a little while before I finally found myself on the *Vector* editorial team, was the appearance of *Interzone*. Not that we immediately saw this as any sort of salvation, even though it was the first new British magazine since *New Worlds* (which at this time was still staggering on through a series of scrappy and increasingly unreadable, and generally unobtainable, manifestations). The first few issues of *Interzone* at least were regarded as a pale imitation of *New Worlds* at its Sixties height. And while the magazine did flush an unexpected number of new writers out of the woodwork, their early efforts didn't always sparkle, and there was doubt about how many of them would last the course. Meanwhile, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* appeared, dragging in its wake a whole new subgenre: cyberpunk. Almost overnight, it seemed, *Interzone* transformed itself from being a home for survivors of the New Wave into the British outpost of cyberpunk, an inordinate number of its pages given over either to American cyberpunks or to British wannabes.

And here, I think, lies the nub of what I am writing about. It feels as though sometime during the backwash from the new wave, British science fiction lost its self confidence. In contrast, post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, inspired by the gung-ho heroics of *Star Wars*, American science fiction was regaining its confidence after a period of unfamiliar and uncomfortable introspection. At the time we were all probably too close to the subject to understand that cyberpunk, which seemed such a vigorous literature, was underlaid by as profound a pessimism as had inspired the British cosy catastrophe. So we didn't see beyond the optimism, and we couldn't match it.

Those of us who got involved with the BSFA during the early Eighties did not have an agenda, other than keeping the organization going. But within my small corner, at least, I set out to cover what was happening in British sf as comprehensively as I could. I cast my net as wide as possible, so that over the next few years I made a point of featuring reviews of as near as dammit every work of sf being published in the UK. But I also started to cover fantasy, horror, nonfiction, non-sf books by sf authors, sf books by non-sf authors. Not so long ago, former *Vector* editor Andrew M. Butler won an award for an essay called 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at the British Boom'; well, I want to suggest a few more. For a start I think that throwing the net of coverage as wide as possible in *Vector* helped to make science fiction look like a far more varied and exciting place than it had appeared for some time.

Even so, it was obvious looking at the books that I sent out for review every week that most of what the British Science Fiction Association was covering was American science fiction. Not so many years before, this wouldn't have bothered me; I didn't distinguish between regional accents in the universal language of sf. But by now I was starting to feel that something distinctive was in danger of being overlooked. This was something that was made explicit when we started the Arthur C. Clarke Award, because in the early years at least it was difficult to find any more than one or two eligible novels by British writers. But things were already beginning to change. Back in the early Eighties, Greg Pickersgill and I were instrumental in inviting to Mexicon a mainstream writer who had published no science fiction. But we both felt there was a science fiction sensibility lurking in the first couple of novels by Iain Banks. By the end of the decade his sprawling, optimistic space operas were helping to instill a new vitality in British sf; a process accelerated by the appearance right at the end of the decade of Colin Greenland's *Take Back Plenty*. Between them, *Consider Phlebas* and *Take Back Plenty* were responsible for providing role models for British science fiction during the coming decade and so, I am convinced, kick-starting the British Boom.

Issue 101 – April 1981
Edited by Kevin Smith and Joseph Nicholas
56pp; A5; cover by Gaynor Smith

Editorial: Towards a Critical Standard (Part 3) – Kevin Smith

Essays/Articles

The Shape of Things To Come – Joseph Nicholas
You Can Get There From Here – Arnold Akien
Punk SF – John A. Hobson
Scientifaction – William Bains
Science Fiction Art – R.G.A. Wilkinson
Saving the Tale – David Wingrove
Letters from Maxim Jakubowski, Simon Bostock, Christopher Priest, Andy Sawyer, Malcolm Edwards and others.
Book reviews by David Langford, Ian Watson, Roz Kaveney, Mary Gentle, Andy Sawyer, Joseph Nicholas and others.

By the time of my second stint as *Vector* reviews editor, in the Nineties, I didn't have to worry about British science fiction getting lost in the mix. Newly established writers like Paul McAuley, Gwyneth Jones, Stephen Baxter and Ian McDonald were writing the most significant sf novels of the decade, while we were seeing more debuts, from the likes of Ken MacLeod, Jeff Noon and China Miéville, than we had seen at any period during my active involvement with science fiction. So, if I was to ask what changed during my involvement with the BSFA, the answer would have to be that we discovered Britain.

126-150 – David V Barrett:

Editing *Vector* takes up vast amounts of your time and rules your life. Delivering the magazine was the major fixed event in my life, six times a year, for over four years. I couldn't have done it without Paul Kincaid handling the reviews, three superb production editors and several production assistants.

Ours were probably the last cut-&-paste issues. (Younger readers: this involves scissors and paper and glue, not Ctr-X and Ctr-V.) We typed it up on our trusty Amstrad PCWs, then printed out columns of text on our dot-matrix printers and sent it all off to the production editors who stuck everything onto A3 sheets to be photo-reduced and printed.

When I started I didn't even have a computer. I typed up my copy on a portable typewriter (which has outlived at least half-a-dozen computers), sitting on my bed in the tiny hotel room where I lived for my first few months as editor. But then that nice Mr Sugar came up with the PCW, and suddenly every writer in Britain had one. Why? First, we could afford it. With its 256Kb RAM it cost around £400, instead of well over £1,000 for the cheapest IBM PC clone. Second, it was dependable; it used

151–158
Boyd Parkinson, Kev McVeigh & Paul Kincaid

159–160
Boyd Parkinson, Kev McVeigh & Chris Amies

161–165
Kev McVeigh, Catie Cary & Chris Amies

166–168
Catie Cary, Kev McVeigh & Chris Amies

169–171
Catie Cary, Kev McVeigh, Chris Amies, Stephen Payne, Maureen Speller

CP/M, a tried and trusted operating system, not that flakey new thing called MS-DOS. And third, it was specifically designed as a word processor, a clever typewriter. LocoScript was by far the best WP software I've ever used. It did what writers wanted it to do, rather than forcing writers to behave in perverse and unnatural ways, as the later omnipresent MS Word did.

Today's *Vector* is a far more polished affair, in production terms; there have been a *lot* of developments in computing since I left the editor's chair in 1989. But looking back at those 25 issues, after the transitional one which Alan Dorey produced, Hussain R, Mohamed's distinctive design makes them an identifiable chunk of *Vector* history. And overall, I'm still proud of them.

What about the content? We were dependent, as always, on the enthusiasm of members writing articles, and on the kindness of authors prepared to give us their work for nothing. Mary Gentle, Chris Priest, Colin Greenland, Michael Coney, Keith Roberts (who also contributed all the artwork for V132), Bob Shaw, Garry Kilworth, Diana Wynne Jones, Dave Langford... all these and more said Yes when I asked them, or volunteered articles. In case I didn't say it enough at the time, Thank You to all of them. (I'm sure today's editors would echo that.)

Through editing *Vector* I got to know most of the British SF and Fantasy writers of the time, some of them becoming good friends, and also met many of my teenage heroes – Michael Moorcock, Harry Harrison, Fred Pohl, Arthur C Clarke and more. Some are no longer with us: Bob Shaw, Keith Roberts, John Brunner, Christopher Hodder Williams and others, I feel honoured to have known, whether slightly or well. (One of the many spin-offs from my involvement in the BSFA in the '80s is that I've had the sad job of writing a number of obituaries of SF authors for the *Guardian*.)

Niall asked how I remembered the BSFA and British SF during my tenure – the view from Vector. A few quick personal snapshots.

There was the awful moment when we discovered that, because people had moved address and official letters hadn't been received, the BSFA faced immediate dissolution as a legal entity. Each of us on the committee had to sign documents pledging that we were personally responsible for the debts of the company if it went bankrupt – which was more than a slight possibility. (Just a thought: are these still in force?)

Happier memories. Chris Priest and Malcolm Edwards used to run the SF Supper Club in a posh central London pub. Authors, editors, agents and critics would have a damn good meal and a few drinks. Then came the ritual of each author saying how much the then-new PLR had paid them that year: £25, £30, £50 ("ooh!"), £95 ("aahh!!") – and then Brian Aldiss would just hold up the fanfold pages of his PLR statement, which nearly reached the floor, and say with a smile, "I've written a lot of books". That's where I met, for the only time, the wonderful writer Richard Cowper; and it's where I first met one of the most important agents in British SF who sadly died last November, Maggie Noach, always with one of her trademark little dogs.

There were Council meetings of the SF Foundation, when it was still based in Dagenham. There was the thrill of the new Arthur C. Clarke Award, which I later had the privilege (and burden) of running for three years.

And there were the Milford Writers' Conferences, where I read and commented on, amongst much else, Neil Gaiman's original short story which later became *Good Omens*, and received much very painful and very valuable criticism of my own work. I don't know how it is now, but in those days a number of well-established and skilled authors used to go to Milford, to the great benefit of the rest of us. The phrases I remember are "What *he* said" and "the True Quill"; Milford veterans will know what I mean.

Milford was annual, and lasted a week. Paul Kincaid, the then Maureen Porter, Mary Gentle and I set up the Writers' Blot (I always wrote it with a filled-in "o"), which met for an afternoon several times a year, always at Microcon in Exeter (my all-time favourite convention) where we'd be joined by luminaries including Colin Wilson, and otherwise in each others' homes. Paul Barnett/John Grant, Colin Greenland, Liz Sourbut and Dave Hutchinson were among the regulars.

My best memory of British SF during my time at *Vector*? Perhaps a summer's afternoon in my back garden in Croydon with a bunch of writer friends, and wine and beer, helping each other with stories which often went on to be published, and then going for a curry together. And yes, I miss those days.

151-172 – Kev McVeigh:

I always said it was the late Bob Shaw's fault. One Saturday in 1983 a callow, naïve student walked into Odyssey 7 bookshop in Manchester to find a signing session in progress. I had never heard of Bob Shaw (nor most of the other authors on sale there.) So, attracted by the novelty of having a signed book I bought one of Bob Shaw's books. I think it was *The Ceres Solution* that somebody recommended. I took it home and started to read. Later that same afternoon I was back buying more by this wonderful new discovery. In one of those books I found an advert for The British Science Fiction Association.

I liked science fiction, I thought, because I had read John Wyndham repeatedly since childhood, been introduced by a schoolfriend to 'Doc' Smith, Frank Herbert and Robert Heinlein. And when the mobile library came to Milnthorpe I soon learned that I liked the books in yellow covers (though that also led to things like Ellery Queen.) I knew what I liked, I just didn't know what else I might like. I remember vividly lying sprawled on the living room floor reading a wonderful SF story in the Sunday Times, then rushing across the village to recount it to my best friend. It was a decade later through the BSFA that I rediscovered Garry Kilworth.

I knew nothing of fandom, of the BSFA or of the wide world of science fiction that was to start dropping through my letterbox every other month. Suddenly I was reading about all these fascinating authors and their wonderful books.

That was a boom time in many ways for the BSFA, new editors such as Andy Sawyer, Maureen Kincaid Speller and David V Barrett were full of enthusiasm and ideas and all three tolerated clumsy, misguided and naïve letters from people like me. One such letter to *Vector* was so long David sent it back and asked if I could turn it into an article. I did, he published it, and people reacted to it. People responded to my letters with copies of fanzines, I wrote my own (initially as a way of asking out a girl I'd met.)

And so in 1989 I teamed up with Boyd Parkinson for what I like to remember as *Vector: the Rock'n'Roll Years*. I have great memories, of a member of the BSFA staff dropping acid before a meeting; of interviewing an author who was drunk when I hadn't slept for 36 hours; of hitchhiking across the country to interview others. And on a more genteel note, sipping tea from delicate china whilst interviewing Josephine Saxton in her living room. (Just one of the many lovely people and great writers for whom I owe thanks to the BSFA for my introduction.)

We had big ideas, we upset people, we impressed people. We were learning what we were doing slightly after we did it, mostly, but I'm proud of some of the articles we ran. Pleased that we were able to cover some less obvious names amongst the usual suspects. It was, for me, an interesting time, the start of the British Boom, and we covered the likes of Stephen Baxter and Eric Brown. Charles Stross and Simon Ings wrote for us, and I seem to remember one issue featuring Garry Kilworth, Gwyneth Jones, and Geoff Ryman. It was also the tail end of cyberpunk, though our interviews with Shiner, Sterling & Gibson focussed more on other aspects of their work. We were reading *SFEye*, *Nova Express* and *New Pathways* as much as *Interzone* and *BBR*, and spread our net as wide as we could. Which wasn't easy, much as we wanted to cover Martin Millar or Steve Erickson or Misha, we were always aware that we had a core readership to think of. Still I think we maintained the good work David Barrett

had begun, and paved the way for Andrew Butler to follow us. We wrapped all that up in great art from SMS, the late Dave Mooring, Ian Brooks and I even persuaded Jim Burns to do a cover for us; the original hangs in front of me as I type.

When Boyd dropped out Catie Cary joined me, which is where the official record goes astray. Somewhere in those issues I stopped being a co-editor and Catie took on most of the work. I just talked on the phone (this was before t'internet, Niall.) and offered comments, that's what that vague phrase 'Contributing Editor' meant.

But that's the personal bit. The other side is the side you all know, the discoveries *Vector* has made on our behalf. The ideas arising in articles and editorials, the debates in the letter column, the recommendation and warning of a review. This is why *Vector* (and *Matrix*) shaped my life so strongly.

In 1983 I had a few SF books and no real knowledge of the genre ('I knew what I liked') In 2007 we have the internet, those review sites and blogs that would have been a magical world to that 18 year old meeting Bob Shaw. They are interesting, absorbing, distracting and informative, but they are not *Vector*. They don't appear through the letter box as a counterbalance to all those bills, tangible and significant. And mostly they don't have the clear personality that *Vector* has developed over its 250 issues. Andrew Butler may have had a more academic view than I did; I had more interest and focus on new and seemingly more radical authors than David Barrett who explored the strengths of British SF; and Niall has his own ideas too; but still *Vector* has maintained a consistent quality and a clear position in SF, erudite and enlightening, welcoming to the newcomer as I was, and of interest to the academic and the expert. Its roll of contributors is immense and covers all aspects of SF and SF appreciation. It would be impossible to list all the names. And that is why it has reached 250 issues, and why I believe we will all reconvene here in around 2015 for *Vector* 300. I look forward to seeing you all then, and a whole slew of fascinating issues of *Vector* in the meantime.

169-187 – Maureen Kincaid Speller:

I joined the British Science Fiction Association some time in the early 1980s, because I wanted to find out more about the literature, and to find people who also cared about the literature. I'd been involved in sf fandom for several years by this time, prompted by a desire to meet other people who read the same things I read. However, I'd noticed that not all fans actually read sf, and as I saw it, joining the BSFA was a sensible step towards finding the people who did.

The magazines arrived fairly regularly: *Matrix* was frankly baffling, because I had no idea who any of the people mentioned actually were. *Vector* was still being published in an A5 format. My memory says they were thick little magazines in tiny grey print; looking back, I find I was wrong about the grey, but maybe not about the minute type size. The articles seemed scarily erudite; I'd frequently not read the novels under discussion and I really couldn't follow the arguments much of the time, but I kept reading. In my mind the BSFA was something that existed 'out there' in the postal system. I found it all too intimidating to even think about corresponding with the magazine editors but I was glad of the magazines' regular arrival, to remind me that other people read science fiction.

Things might have stayed that way, except that in 1984 I met Paul Kincaid, who was by that time Reviews Editor of *Vector*. He recruited me to review for the magazine, on the strength of a conversation about Russell Hoban, and some time later, in early 1986, when *Matrix* was in need of an editor, and I was heard to observe out loud that I could probably do a decent enough job, the committee pounced. Which is how I came to spend about thirteen years variously editing *Matrix* and running the BSFA. Time is merciful and the memory fades in such a way that the collating sessions, the endless struggle to get things to the printers on time, the regular trips to the post office with parcels of books to send out for review (for years I was practically on first-name terms with every post office clerk in Folkestone, and most of the deliverers too), the hunt for material for the magazine (and this was all very much BE, before email), acquire a rosy tinge.

The BSFA, as one group of people was fond of telling me, had been created to bring people into sf fandom; it was a recruiting agency, if you like. Whether or not people read sf was almost incidental. What, demanded another, and rather larger, group of people, did these conventions and fanzines we kept writing about have to do with science fiction literature? A good question. How to reconcile the two groups in what was the sf community's very own version of C. P. Snow's Two Cultures? Initially, I sought to explain each group to the other through the pages of *Matrix*, but as time went by, it seemed to become more important to support the readers, who looked to the BSFA to provide them with information about forthcoming books, reviews, articles and information about authors, rather as I'd looked to the BSFA when I first joined it. I'm not sure I ever really came to terms with the at times vehement rejection of the attendant fannish culture, not least because I was heavily involved in that as well, but I tried to see it from the point of view of people who couldn't, for all sorts of reasons, participate in conventions and pub meetings but who took immense pleasure from reading the literature, and I tried to ensure a reasonable balance of material.

In 2006, it is perhaps difficult for people who have grown up in a culture where science fiction images and references are splashed all over the place to understand what it was like in the days when sf readers were a comparatively small group, when the racks in general bookshops were not overflowing with trilogies with individual volumes the size of house bricks. *Star Wars, Blake's Seven* and various other things were beginning to generate a new wave of popular interest in visual sf, and *Dr Who* had not entered its long hiatus at that point, but readers were still, on the whole, very isolated from one another, and I wanted the BSFA to put them in touch with one another. I also wanted to break down what I considered to be very narrow definitions of science fiction, the ABC – Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke – approach, with a little H for Heinlein thrown in for good measure. SF was undergoing its most radical transformation since the New Wave of the 1960s, with the arrival on the scene of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1984, and I wanted to challenge people to read widely, think about speculative fiction, not just science fiction. In *Matrix* I listed anything that looked as though it might have some sort of vaguely fantastical component – magical realism was particularly flourishing at that time, I recall, alongside cyberpunk – and did not simply focus on the output of the sf publishers. Paul Kincaid was taking a similar approach with material reviewed in *Vector*. Soon enough, the Clarke Award would begin its eclectic odyssey to explore the boundaries of sf. What I enjoyed then, still enjoy now, is to find a book in an unlikely place, or from an unexpected publisher, and think 'yes, this is sf', whatever the author and/or publisher might think. It's like prospecting.

I don't know if any of us at that point actually started a revolution; I don't think we effected any kind of reconciliation between the two sf cultures. I'm not even sure there was a revolution that needed starting, or a reconciliation that needed to be made. Twenty years is enough time to realise that what goes around, comes around. Something becomes important for a while, then something else arises to take its place. I freely admit I glaze over when the discussion turns to *Buffy* but I will be there with bells on when the discussion turns to text again. The most important thing any of us has done, still does, is to stoke the fire, keep the discussion going, and make sure there is a place for it to keep going; one way or another the BSFA has been doing that since 1958 (the year before I was born) and keeps on doing so.

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Andrew M. Butler, Paul N. Billinger & Tony Cullen

185-213 – Gary Dalkin:

When Niall asked me to write something for the 250th issue of *Vector* I knew I had to, because otherwise some people would become even more convinced I don't exist. It all started with an advert in *Vector* (or maybe *Matrix*) asking if anyone would like to take on the roll of Features Editor. Andrew Butler and myself both independently said yes, and one sunny afternoon in September 1995 I received a phone call from Maureen Kincaid Speller asking me if I would like to have a go, jointly with Mr Butler. What with neither one of us having any editorial experience it seemed like a fine idea. I suspect Maureen was hedging her bets that one of us wouldn't prove completely useless. We could blame each other for the mistakes and each independently take the credit for everything that went right. Of course there were one or two mistakes. But they were all his fault. We must have done more right than wrong because we managed to produce 30 issues (186-215) over a period of 5 years before I stepped down, and Andrew heroically continued solo for about as many issues again.

Personally I'd just had enough. Another editor once said to me five years is long enough to work on a particular project. After that enthusiasm flags and inspiration rapidly fades – Mr Butler's sterling work being the rule-proving exception. In any case, I'd simply become very busy, by then writing professionally for various publications, and working in a similarly fanish capacity for the MusicWeb group of websites, first deputy editing, then editing, now associate editing Film Music on the Web. What with also being part of the Clarke Award judging panel, something had to give.

But its what happened in between that this article is supposed to be about. So how did it happen? Back then, before the war on tourism and Firefox 2, it was a different world. Extrapolating backwards based on how technology has advanced since you started reading this article, we must have been the first generation to use word processors. Indeed, logic dictates earlier editions of *Vector* were carved on stone tablets. Not for us on-line collaborative realtime editing in Google Docs. In 1995 I'd never even seen an email. We started without a clue, and not many contacts. Fortunately we inherited some material, begged for more and wrote some ourselves. We talked a lot on the phone on Sunday afternoons, discussing *Vector* and the latest films in equal proportions. When I received an article I would do my editorial thing on a steam powered Atari ST. An advanced 1989 model with 2mb of RAM but no hard disk. When it was done I would save the edited article to a floppy disk, pop it in a mailing packet, walk down the street and post it to Mr Butler. And so on back and forth until we were mutually satisfied, or too frustrated to argue over the finer points any longer, or the deadline loomed very close.

Then came a period in early '97 when eye problems almost completely stopped me looking at a monitor. 45 minutes and I would be in agony. Unfortunately this coincided with the release of the *Star Wars* Special Editions, and I found myself sitting further and further back each visit to the cinema, instead of in the first six rows far from the popcorn munchers like any true fan. I packed the Atari away and bought an electric typewriter. Then a chiropractor solved my eye problems and from October it was "hello" to my first PC and Windows 95. A modem arrived the following year, and *Vector* progressed to email, via AOL and three hours internet access a month for just £5. Which I am sorry to say I embarrassed the then treasurer with by assuming the BSFA would foot the bill.

I don't recall any serious editorial disagreements. I know I had little time for academic-style dissertations and did my best to render whatever we published into English comprehensible to normal human beings. We sought, which I think is of prime importance, never to impose our opinion on an article, but to try and bring out to fullest advantage whatever the author was aiming at. No matter how much we might disagree with what they were saying. I think most of what we published was worth reading, and some of the articles were very good. Singling out articles or writers would be invidious, but I am particularly pleased we were able to print a series of substantial essays considering many different aspects of the relationship between science fiction and music – a topic not often addressed.

We had some fun too. Despite being, not that I knew the term then, a fan since I was five, I'd not met any other fans. After a year or two reading BSFA magazines, working on *Vector* introduced me to fandom proper. The first time I met Andrew Butler he was wearing Magic Roundabout socks. Allegedly. Rumour had it, and how these things start we never knew, that I didn't exist. That I was some Butlerian Jihad pseudonym devised to promulgate views that might be controversial in certain quarters. Apparently we did publish at least one letter of, shall we say, suspect provenience. And one from a fictional character, briefly escaped from the pages of a novel by a writer much respected in these parts. But that was a whole other interaction ...

I am immensely grateful to *Vector*, and thereby to the BSFA, for the chance to learn how to be an editor, and writer of reviews and non-fiction articles, for allowing me to practice on an actual real magazine that people I respect go to the trouble of subscribing to and reading with careful interest and intelligence. It gave me the confidence and experience to take things much further. By 1999 I was a 'filthy pro', as a result of which my life changed in all sorts of ways, all for the better. Without *Vector* I wouldn't have become a judge of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and I wouldn't have got to meet all the interesting and lovely people I have met since. And certainly I wouldn't have had the opportunity to interview people such as Sophie Aldred, Gerry Anderson, Kevin J Anderson, Ed Bishop, Colin Baker, Elmer Bernstein, Kathleen Ann Goonan, Robert Holdstock, Christopher Priest, or Sir Arthur himself. So if you're ever asked if you fancy editing *Vector* take my advice and say yes. Why reach for the moon when you can have the stars?

185-244 – Andrew M. Butler:

I've always had this tendency, as all-too frequent appalled silences in my presence attest, to be too frivolous about the serious and to take the trivial all-too seriously. I always feel out of step. On the other hand, it's an ideal qualification to write about science fiction, in a number of its forms, since we are still told it's all just squids in outer space, and not worth wrapping your fish and chips in. Somewhere along the line this seriousness led to me going to HUUSFFS – aka Who Suffers, the Hull University Union Science Fiction and Fantasy Society – on Monday nights and the Hull SF Group two Tuesdays a month, and trying to give various talks on science fiction.

(In another universe, I went to the club that also met on Monday nights in the room next door, and ended up in a different life entirely. That was my Jonbar Point.)

Before long I was working on the club's magazine, and writing reviews for *Foundation* and *Vector*, and contributing to *Focus*, before effectively abandoning writing any fiction, save annual reports, for another decade. I walked into a PhD on PKD, and started going to academic conferences. Perhaps the weirdest of these was one in Warwick on Virtual Futures, in about 1995, where I met Istvan Csiscery-Ronay for the first time. (He claims we met in 1992, when he gave a paper at Reading, but that can't have been me. Perhaps the twin from the other universe was passing through, but he'd long since given up on science fiction.) Istvan, part of the team that edits *Science Fiction Studies*, was excited about a number of British writers, including Gwyneth Jones, whom he got to meet that weekend, and Jeff Noon. He already had the sense that Something Was Going On, or his palate was already jaded by American sf.

It was not long after that that I became co-editor of features with Gary S. Dalkin, and one of the things we were keen to do was to take British sf seriously – we knew we were the British

Association of Science Fiction rather than the Association of British Science Fiction, so to speak, but we were still aware of the nationality. I guess part of this was practical, since British authors were more getatable; this was pre-Blog, barely post-email. This didn't mean we'd give British writers an easy ride, but we would give them a ride.

I'm not sure where the idea came from, but by the time I went to my first International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts in 2002, Istvan was already talking about Mark Bould and myself editing an issue of *Science Fiction Studies* on the British Science Fiction Boom. We'd been at the Science Fiction Foundation conference in Liverpool in 2001 where a guerrilla panel had talked about the state of the field, and this had talked of a Boom (not even my double was there). Hold up, said Mark and me, you say there's a Boom in British *science fiction*, but what about, say Harry Potter and Philip Pullman? And you'd want to talk about China Miéville, but he's one for the fantasy box. Istvan was certain there was a Boom, with the clarity which comes from being an ocean away, whereas I was aware that things appear larger in close up. The night of the ICFA banquet I scribbled on the back of an envelope about a dozen ideas about the Boom, trying to demonstrate that there wasn't a necessary and sufficient definition of the Boom – that it all depends on what you mean by British, science fiction and Boom. Istvan took the envelope and I never saw it again (perhaps one of my doubles still has it).

Most articles I write disappear into the void, and perhaps that is where they belong. A few things I've revisited because editors want second editions, or they've been reprinted. Occasionally I come across people for copies of the books with bits underlined or highlighted, and I wish to edge nervously away. But "Thirteen Ways of Looking at the British Boom", the piece I came to write on the booms, has had a unique afterlife. We'd suggested that the special issue of *SFS* be sent to places like *Vector*, *Interzone* and *Foundation* for review, and Paul Brazier in *Interzone* gave it such a stinker that when Bruce Gillespie asked to print my piece in *Steam Engine Time* 4, I suggested that this be reprinted as well. Brazier called my piece "a farrago". To steal from Bernard Shaw, My dear fellow, I quite agree with you, but what are we two against the judges of the Pioneer Award who made it their article of the year on science fiction?

The bit that hurt in Brazier's piece was he described me "having apparently made notes towards an essay, then finds that he can't make a coherent essay out of those notes but doesn't want to waste all that work so publishes the notes undigested." Well, there was much digestion which went on, and the whole was conceived as something to be written in sections, some of which would be contradictory. I was still agnostic if not atheistic as to the possibility of there being a single Boom. "It is impossible to draw a clear, stable boundary around these distinct and overlapping booms," I wrote. You might be able to say, yes, there's a boom in British genre sf, but then people would say what about horror, what about fantasy, what about children's literature, what about comics, what about movies, what about the older generation of writers who have come back into fashion, what about... But we had been told by the editors there was a Boom, and I had to work within that parameters. Certainly our call for papers allowed people to argue with there being a (single, unified) Boom.

To summarise for those lucky enough to have missed the piece, one section was a listing from Aiken to Wooding of (almost) all the people who were active in contemporary sf and fantasy, with some horror and children's writers, some people in comic and media, and there was a sense that the listing would be an incoherent grab-bag of names and would inevitably miss out someone vital, as well as including the insignificant. (I called it a partial census, in the sense of being incomplete rather than biased, but the second sense would also fit).There's a section which traces the fluctuations of British science fiction from the early days to the 2000s (I'm nothing if not ambitious), a section on American perceptions of the scene and another on the Cool Britannia hysteria of the mid-1990s. There's a discussion of US fiction being written out and then on the remixing of genres which occurs in British fiction. The next three sections deal with pessimism, irony and also the relation of the mainstream to genre fiction. The final section suggests that there was a Boom because people were looking for one – people like Farah Mendlesohn, China Miéville, Cheryl Morgan, Mark Bould, Roger Luckhurst and Andy Sawyer had come along and were opening up spaces in which British genre fiction could be discussed and taken seriously, in addition to the many fine people who had been doing equivalent things for decades, in *Vector*, *Foundation*, at Mexicons and elsewhere. There was a new sense of momentum, demanding articles, reviews, polemics, papers and editorials to discuss it. Yes, to base that section on my experience is, as Brazier puts it, "self-referential". Or as the subtitle for the section had it, "An[drew]thropic".

What is curious about a number of the (negative) comments on the article is how often I got taken for task for not mentioning something. On the one hand this seems to lead into the book-length version of the article (and I'm going to try to forget I ever mentioned that), in that there's always that author that had that one story in an issue of *Back Recluse*, or that Radio 4 Afternoon Play, and I'd hoped to at least be least definitively incomplete. We were inevitably subject to chance when we sent off the call for papers – if there wasn't an article on *X* it would largely be because no one offered one (although we did reject material). On the other hand, sometimes these were things I had mentioned – see, look at that paragraph, I mention it there...

Being reviewed is an odd experience – I get it through course questionnaires at work as well as in publications – and perhaps should be taken as a cautionary one. I don't think I'm any less forgiving in my reviews than I used to be, and I certainly don't believe that you should only review things you like, but I do write fewer of them than I used to. I know a negative review can hurt. The odd thing about Paul Brazier's piece is that really – to borrow a phrase from Claire Brialey in a letter of comment *Steam Engine Time* 5 – he violently agrees with me.

I stopped editing *Vector* after ten years in the chair. It's up to the next generation to define the magazine and shout for their next big thing, for a boom of their own. There was a point when I wondered if I should step down at V250, but that would have been too long and frankly I'd be dead by now. As it is, I've read very little science fiction since then, aside from vast quantities of Terry Pratchett. Reading seems to be defined by the next big project, and I've three of them on my plate before I can get back to the things I want to write (and therefore decide my reading). That makes it hard for me to say that the Boom, if it ever existed, is flourishing or withering.

But I suspect that we are still just damn close, too involved in it, for a Boom, rather than booms, to resolve itself into a movement like Romanticism or Modernism (and those two are contested anyway). Colin Greenland made a fair stab at resolving the nature of the New Wave in the late 1970s, but I think Rob Latham's more recent work will have a better sense of perspective. The continual death of cyberpunk suggests we won't understand that in the next five minutes. At the end of the day, all we can do is to try to offer an opinion, albeit a partial one (as if impartial is possible). We still need to have the conversation, but it will take another decade or more to complete.

A complete listing of the contents of Vector *back-issues is maintained online by Michael J. Cross at* <http://www.mjckeh.demon.co.uk/ topvec.htm>.

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Geneva Melzack, Niall Harrison, Paul Billinger & Tony Cullen

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Niall Harrison, Paul Billinger & Tony Cullen

The New X

Pattern Recognition

by Graham Sleight

It's now a year since I started writing columns for *Vector*, and looking back I realise the subjects I've picked have dotted around a bit. So, in the retrospective spirit of anniversaries, let me try to step back and put forward a bigger picture of where I'd suggest the speculative fiction field is right now.

First, in North America – its homeland as a self-conscious genre – science fiction is in relative but not absolute decline. Looking at *Locus*'s figures for original books published in the US, about 250 original sf novels have been published per year since 1990. Fantasy, by contrast, was at about 250 a year in 1990, and is now closer to 400. This is reflected in, for instance, the Hugo results: before Robert Charles Wilson's superb *Spin* won the Hugo this year, the last time a widely-acclaimed science fiction novel won that award was Vernor Vinge's *A Deepness in the Sky* in 2000. Other wins have either been fantasy novels (Harry Potter, Strange & Norrell) or best explained by the circumstances of a particular Worldcon.

Second, the short-fiction magazines which have historically been the field's proving-ground for writers and ideas are in a sharp circulation decline with no obvious signs that this can be arrested. The *Locus* figures are sobering: the paid circulations of *Analog*, *Asimov's*, and *F&SF* are currently around 31,000, 21,000, and 19,000 respectively. (*Asimov's* lost 23% in 2005.) In 1990, the same figures were 80,000, 80,000, and 50,000, and most of these magazines had higher peaks than that in recent memory: *Analog* spent several years above 100,000 in the 80s. That's not to mention the deaths of any number of venues for short sf – *Omni*, *Aboriginal SF*, *Amazing* (repeatedly), and most recently, Ellen Datlow's *Scifiction*. Even people who are bullish about the continued health of sf have taken to proclaiming at every opportunity, as Gardner Dozois does in the most recent instalment of his *Year's Best*, "I'm urging everybody who reads these words, if you like there being a lot of short sf and fantasy out there where it can be easily found, to take the time to *subscribe* to one of the genre magazines ... .Subscribe *now*, however you do it, if you want to help ensure the survival of print sf/fantasy magazines as we know them." Moreover, since the last edition of Patrick Nielsen Hayden's *Starlight* in 2001, there has been no non-themed anthology series from a US trade publisher – a far cry from the 70s days of *New Dimensions*, *Orbit*, and *Universe*.

Third, some of this slack has been picked up by the burgeoning small-press scene in the US. I've gone on in the past about how the barriers to entry for those wanting to publish their own books and magazines have dropped. I think this is one of the reasons for what I identified in *Vector* 248 as an excessive number of tools in the field for working out its meta-story: year's bests, recommended reading lists, awards, endless blog chatter. Perhaps we need some of this (though not, please, all of it) to make sense of a field which is too diffuse and diverse for any one person to grasp.

Fourth, the small-press scene (and therefore the interests of the young writers coming into the field) is skewed heavily away from what would be considered traditional genre stories. *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, the obvious leader of such magazines, publishes almost nothing that would conventionally be recognised as sf and fantasy. The most interesting young American writers, like Kelly Link or M. Rickert, take the tropes of the fantastic for granted, as tokens that neither need to be explained or dwelt on. So we have an increasing body of work which derives its force from its liminality, from the knowledge that, this late in the day, readers knowledgeable in genre protocols respond to stories that play with those protocols.

Fifth, almost none of this applies to the UK. Since, say, 1987 the archetypal UK novel of the fantastic has been the big, slightly-ironic-but-nonetheless-joyful widescreen space opera. (Paul Kincaid suggested a few years ago that US and UK sf have swapped attitudes since the 70s, when we were reading gloomy post-*New Worlds* stories of constraint and limitation and Americans were having fun with their tropes. It's a little too neat to be true – there's plenty of exuberant US sf, certainly at novel length. But I find it unarguable that most of the genre-mixing work is happening in North America; next time, I'll talk about some of the reasons why it's registered so little over here.)

Sixth, the big success story of the last decade has been Young Adult fiction. I'm not just talking about Harry Potter and Philip Pullman, or even notionally non-fantastic work like Anthony Horowitz's Alex Rider books. The establishment of specifically YA imprints like Firebird or Tor Teen represents a series of votes of confidence in this market, that it's going to remain at its current levels of success – as do the increasing numbers of YA books by "adult" writers.

Lastly, science fiction and fantasy remain profoundly conservative genres, at least in terms of literary technique and approach. The stylistic experiments of the Moorcock/Ellison new waves of the 60s have been largely rolled back. The default style of an sf novel these days may be cyberpunkishly dense, but it tends to tell a story in a straightforward, beginning-to-end way. (Although this isn't true of some of the genre-mixing US writers I've referred to above: people like Alan DeNiro or Theodora Goss are strongly interested in playing with the formal strctures of their stories.) Similarly, the mainstream's preoccupation with beautifully-turned phrases has, by and large, failed to infect the fantastic. Creators of graceful sentences like Lucius Shepard or John Crowley remain the exception in sf rather than the rule.

Some of this undoubtedly falls into the category of stating-the-bloody-obvious; and I'm sure I've omitted as many trends as I've included. But I think it sets out a few bases for a discussion of where the field might head in the future – which I hope to get to in the next couple of columns.

The 2006 Thomas D. Clareson Award

The Thomas D. Clareson Award for Distinguished Service is presented by the Science Fiction Research Association, and is intended to recognise, among other things, the promotion of SF teaching and study, criticism, publishing, teaching, and related activities. Previous winners include Frederik Pohl, David G. Hartwell and Joan Gordon; the winner of the 2006 Award was Paul Kincaid. The following article is a transcript of Farah Mendlesohn's remarks on the occasion of the presentation of the Award at the BSFA London Meeting on 26 July 2006.

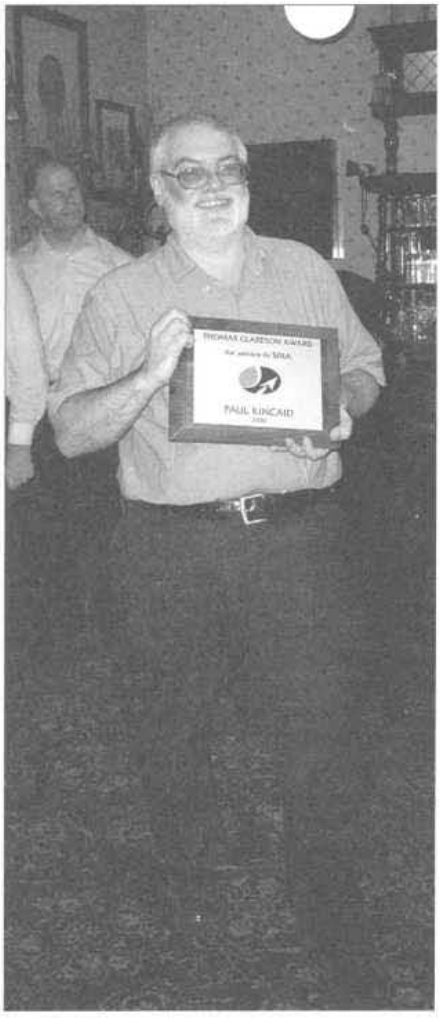
This year's decision by the SFRA to present the Clareson award to Paul Kincaid has made the British sf world very happy. We are a small community, and in many ways we still look very much like the sf fan and critical community which existed when Tom Clareson first began to teach and write. There are very few full-time sf critics in the UK: perhaps ten of us who are paid to teach science fiction, a few more who as fiction authors also have a presence in the critical field. But by and large, science fiction criticism in the UK is hosted at conventions, in fanzines, and lately on-line. This has been noted by many people, who are frequently surprised at the fannish presence at UK conferences, the intense critical debates at our conventions and the high powered criticism in the fanzines. The gentleman (or Independent) scholar is alive and well in the UK. As far as the study of British science fiction is concerned, it is these independent scholars (the likes of Mike Ashley, Roger Robinson, Claire Brialey, Mark Plummer and Greg Pickersgill) who may be said to have shaped the field.

Paul Kincaid is an exemplar of this British fan. He is a true gentleman scholar. He has been active as a reviewer since 1975 and has a genuinely international presence. He has published articles in *Foundation*, in *Extrapolation*, in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, in *Vector*, in *Steam Engine Time*, on the *SF Site* and at *Strange Horizons*, has written for the British Council's *British Book News*, for the *Times Literary Supplement*, for both of the Clute and Nicholls Encyclopedias. In his spare time (a concept which boggles the mind) Paul has produced a number of fanzines, including *Tripe-Pickers' Journal* (with Mike Scantlebury), *A-pauling*, *To Craunch the Marmoset*, *A Balanced Diet*, *The Crooner Takes a Solo*, and *Guffaw*. He was a stalwart member of Frank's Apa for a while, and of course of Acnestis. He was also one of the editors of *Steam Engine Time* for a period. He wrote a fairly controversial fanzine review column for *Banana Wings* for a while – controversial because he applied his usual rigorous critical style to the zines, and people didn't always appreciate it ...

After 1995 Paul wrote over twenty essays for *Vector* under the general heading of Cognitive Mapping, a very wide-ranging set of studies of different aspects of SF. He is probably the most knowledgeable of Christopher Priest scholars.

As you can see from these examples he is a major contributor to the reconstruction of a history of British science fiction. In addition to the items already mentioned, he has co-edited two sets of essays on British sf writers, and written the first real history of British sf and fantasy. Over on his web site you'll find the impressive time-line of early British science fiction which is the kind of project which only the independent scholar can complete and which will be a vital resource for so many of us. His book, *What is it We Do When We Read Science Fiction* is due out in 2007. And with all this activity he is also a rather fine short story writer.

As well as producing excellent scholarly research and sharp criticism, Paul Kincaid is one of the great facilitators of the field. He was associated with *Vector* from 1981, and served as Reviews Editor for two long periods, as well as editing or co-editing several issues of the journal. And along with his wife Maureen Kincaid Speller he chaired the BSFA through the 1990s. He was on the committees of Channelcon (1982 Eastercon, in Brighton), Mexicons 1–4 (he was one of the founders of Mexicon, Intuition (the 1988 Eastercon, in Manchester) and he worked behind the scenes on the 1987 and 1995 World-cons. In recognition of this work, Paul was the Fan GOH at Intuition, the 1996 Eastercon at Heathrow (along with Maureen Kincaid Speller), and was the 1999 GUFF delegate to Aussiecon II, in Melbourne in 1999. GUFF delegates raise money for the award as part of their campaign, so that this, too was a service to science fiction. In 2008 he will be co-organising the SFRA conference in Dublin. As a regular attender of both conventions and conferences, Paul has emerged as one of the sharpest critical voices, and one of the deftest of panel chairs, a critic who can shape a discussion without imposing an agenda.

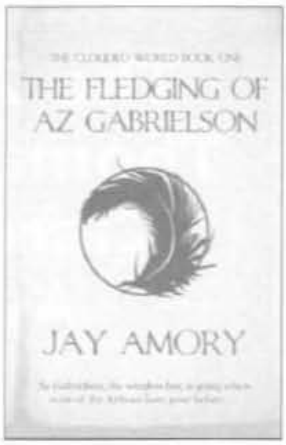


For the past decade much of Paul's energy has gone into the administering of the Arthur C. Clarke Award. In those ten years the award has garnered increasing respect from the industry and from the fan community, and has generated links with the British Science Museum, with *New Scientist* magazine and lately with the London Sci-Fi film festival. Although Paul has worked with others, it is his energy which has stoked the rise in the esteem which the Award has garnered.

In all he has done, in his writing, and his organising, and most especially in the leadership he has provided for the Clarke Award, Paul Kincaid has had an immense impact on the British science fiction community. I thank the SFRA once again, and in particular my fellow jurors, for bestowing upon him this so richly deserved award.

First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger



Jay Amory – *The Fledging of Az Gabrielson*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 347pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07878-2

Reviewed by Penny Hill

The opening of this YA novel is brisk and effective. Jay Amory manages to introduce a new world, build-up interest in and empathy for the main character, give the readers points to identify with and kick off the plot all within the first four pages. The school museum trip may be a bit of a cliché as a way of filling in back-story but combining it with Az's obvious outsider status and adding a disturbing encounter is a pleasantly efficient way to check all the boxes above.

This novel's key concept of luxury above and toil below is not new: I would be generously tempted to call it a homage to *The Time Machine*.

Although the initial political and economic setup of this world is a little silly, I found I could suspend my disbelief and it's a nifty idea to posit that people down below are essentially supplying the airborn above by sacrificing to the gods. The exploration of how this belief, and therefore supply, is gradually breaking down forms the crux of the book, I am left with the feeling that the air cities' future position is untenable. I keep finding myself thinking: resources – what possible resources beyond sunshine do they have to trade? After all, can you build an entire trading relationship purely on tourism when every other commodity (including soil) has to be transported in? But then, how does Las Vegas survive?

And now I think about it – if the sky cities are above the permanent cloud layer and Az has never seen substantial rain before and all the goods come up on pallets in elevators, then what is the sky cities supply of water and power (assuming electricity or equivalent)? There's mention of garbage chutes and sewage pipes going down, but not of water pipes or cables coming up. Maybe I'm just looking for too much detail here – but given the main thrust of the plot is about the supply and demand of raw materials to the sky cities, I think it's reasonable to enquire.

On the whole the writing is competent and the narrative switches are well-handled. The chapters are refreshingly short. However, one more edit would have been good – I winced when Cassie threw the shoes she had just sold back into her vehicle and someone needs to tell the author that turning taps clockwise normally turns them off. When a glitch like this is focussed on in the text as a key part of the plot, it does rather stand out. When building a world where flight is so important, it's worth spending the extra time to get the physics right – an airship, even with the best air-currents to aid it, would not be faster than a propeller-driven plane.

This book also feels rather old-fashioned in its treatment of women. There are only three women in a main cast of fifteen or so and their roles are fairly conventional. We have the plucky girl – who does all the domestic work for her family and looks after the sick, the political matriarch – powerful and elegant – and her brilliant protégée, whose key role is as a high-status girlfriend for the hero's brother to aspire to.

One element that did disappoint was that Alan Steamarm, leader of the Humanists, is simply a two-dimensional villain. He is solely motivated by selfish purposes and therefore we are allowed to hate him. It would have been a much more interesting book if the Humanists, whose belief in their right to their own goods seems eminently reasonable, had been led by someone who genuinely believed in their cause. The problem is that the struggle becomes defined as a 'good aristocrats versus misled working-class people' and I have a horrid feeling that the next volume will come up with a feudal solution to the problem, rather than a democratic one. I've seen *Metropolis*. I know how the revolution ends.

Overall this was an enjoyable book. People with wings living in sky cities perched on high columns, create a small tingle in the sense of wonder department. I liked details like the fact that the author made it clear that all the meat the winged people were eating was bird, without focussing on it.

Allen Ashley – *Urban Fantastic*

Crowswing Books, Kings Lynn, 2006, 285pp, £10.00, p/b, ISBN 1-905100-06-X

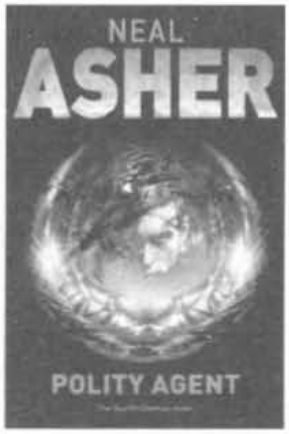
Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

Urban Fantastic is, not surprisingly, a collection of what could be loosely described as urban fantasy tales. Mainly a mix of new stories and recent stories, with one or two dating back to the 1980s. These tales are all solidly grounded in the world we know, generally with something slightly out of kilter and it is this sense of things being 'not quite right' that is the great strength of this collection. There is a quality to the writing that draws the reader into the story, so that the sense of being not quite right is just that, a sense. This not-quite-rightness is also very much in the eye of the beholder, as in a good many of the stories the element could be simply in the mind of the protagonist. This is particularly so in the tales of obsessive love, where the characters develop an obsessive love of somewhat peculiar people, a scarecrow ('Scarricrow'), a playing card character ('Queen of Clubs') or a woman the size of a barleycorn ('Barleycorn Wife'). In each of these stories it is apparent that the character has real difficulty in developing more normal relationships and so these various replacements allow them to live out not their fantasies, but a variation on the normal life that they don't feel able to develop. The most touching of these has to be 'My Wild Love', in which the object of affection is a Mermaid. In this, the action moves beyond the two lovers, and confronts us with the reactions of those around them. This is what it's like to fall for someone perceived as different by your community.

These stories are, to a very large extent, about dealing with life. Whether it's the desire to be in touch with those we've lost in 'Dead Dot Com' or understanding your parents in 'Playing Statues', a significant number of the stories portray people struggling with the contemporary world and the effect it has upon them. Again, this struggle is described in a fantasy manner, substituting analogous physical difficulties in place of the psychological ones. In 'Dead to the World', the protagonist is quite literally shutting himself off to the world, as all his

bodily orifices are slowly closing up. 'The Overwhelm' shows us a world where the sky is falling. For the character of Josephine this is happening in her own life as a social worker, as well as (it would appear) in a much more real sense as her world is overwhelmed with a fog that cuts people off from one another as well as crushing down on the buildings. Where the line between what is really taking place and the difficulty Josephine is having with her life really exists, if it does exist, is left up to the reader to determine.

Obsessions are plentiful here, with people, with objects and with ideas and it is these recurring themes that I found to be the only real weakness with this collection. There is certainly no shortage of ideas. If anything, it is quite the opposite, with such a flood of intriguing central ideas that the reader can become overwhelmed. However, in spite of this, so many of the stories are so similar in tone and theme that they still have a tendency to blur into one another. This is something of a shame, as individually the stories have a great deal to offer, often remaining in the mind for some time after reading them. This is a collection that is worth taking your time over, and not to be ploughed through at a single sitting.



Neal Asher – *Polity Agent*

Tor, London, 2006, 488pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1-4050-5498-0

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

Polity Agent is the fourth in the series of novels concerning the future civilisation The Polity, and its agent Ian Cormac. On the evidence of Neal Asher's novels to date, it is pretty much a given that a new novel by him will be a tightly plotted, fast moving, highly enjoyable widescreen space opera with some spectacular set pieces. *Polity Agent* fits comfortably into this category.

What is also becoming apparent is that, as well as developing and exploring a future civilisation in the form of The Polity, the functioning of which is dependant on the inherent benevolence of advanced AI to the human race, Neal Asher is also in the process of developing a fully fledged future history which takes in the development of this civilisation from the mid-twentieth century through hundreds, if not thousands, of years into the future. Once again, he uses extensive chapter headings to fill in many of the gaps, and these also imply that what we are reading here is a story being told as part of a history/mythology related from far into the novel's own future. The facts of the main text are occasionally questioned by the extracts from texts from the story's future, with its implication that not only is the story set in a fictional future history from the reader's perspective, but that that future is itself not necessarily reliable.

The link with our present day is provided by the re-appearance of Horace Blegg, a semi-heroic figure who regularly appears associated with major historical events over several centuries, starting with the bombing of Hiroshima. As more is revealed regarding the nature of Horace Blegg, it becomes clearer that what we are being told is in the nature of the construction of a mythology. Not only this, but The Polity itself is more than a little involved with this construction. The benevolence of The Polity is called into question when, in order to operate, it feels the need to develop a whole belief system to help control its own population.

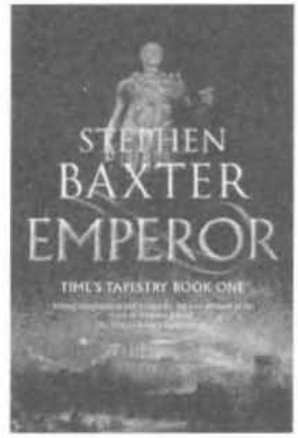
A theme that Neal Asher has explored before is the distinction between Human, Human enhanced by AI and AIs themselves. Within *Polity Agent*, residual technology from the vanished Jain civilisation is threatening The Polity. The behaviour of these Jain nodes, once triggered, starts to question this distinction between the biological and the technological, not just in terms of intelligence, but in a very physical way. These nodes are small objects, triggered by direct contact with any technologically advanced biological society. It would appear that the sole purpose of them is to bring down any technological society in large part by taking advantage of the biological and psychological weaknesses of that society. The Jain technology is extremely advanced, and also extremely difficult to control, spreading like a virus once released. The characters are a mix of individuals who vary from fully human, humans restructured with AI technology to fully fledged AIs and the differences in their behaviour is clearly determined by their psychology rather than their technology. More and more, the advanced technology starts to behave in a biological fashion.

The main thrust of the novel is the appearance of these Jain nodes and the attempts to contain and destroy them. A significant part of this is the effort to determine who or what is behind it all , and what exactly their purpose is. An effort that is complicated by the Polity's belief that the AIs that control it would not turn against it. This is not based on any in-built restriction, but on faith in the logic of The Polity's operation. There is an inherent assumption that something that looks set to destroy it must be alien to it and that whatever agent is spreading the Jain nodes must come from outside. The AI's behaviour is once again shown to be human in nature. To paraphrase Arthur C. Clarke, any sufficiently advanced technology becomes indistinguishable from biology.

Stephen Baxter – *Emperor*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 302pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07433-7

Reviewed by Tony Keen



It's not always a good idea for historians to read novels set in periods they're familiar with. However thorough the author's research, the historian's view of what actually happened is unlikely to entirely coincide. Best to go with the author's flow, regardless of disagreements on issues of interpretation.

So, when I read Baxter's previous Romano-British excursion, *Coalescent*, I put aside finding implausible a Cotswolds villa-owning family not speaking Latin as their first language, or having connections with troops on Hadrian's Wall. I let Baxter take me through his version of Roman Britain's end.

But sometimes the author pushes the historian too far, and that, sadly, is the case with *Emperor*. It isn't just the things that are definitely wrong – the emperor Vespasian was not the son of an Asian farmer, but of an Italian *tax*-farmer (someone contracted to collect taxes) who worked in Asia, and was an active military commander when he came to power, not brought out of retirement to reign. Nor is it including every historical figure of the time if at all possible (something Neal Stephenson does so well, for the most part, but can look

awkward in other hands, and something found in *Coalescent*, with the unnecessary insertion of Arthur) and referring to every recent archaeological discovery (at times, such as the mention of the circus in Colchester, I felt Baxter had been reading and watching the same archaeological news stories as me, and had deemed each worthy of an aside). Nor is it even characters having implausible conversations about matters that seem significant to us, but would not have been to them (the emperor's freedman Narcissus talking to Vespasian about whether the city that might become the greatest in Britannia will take its name from legendary King Lud, or speculating over whether the island was once joined to Gaul).

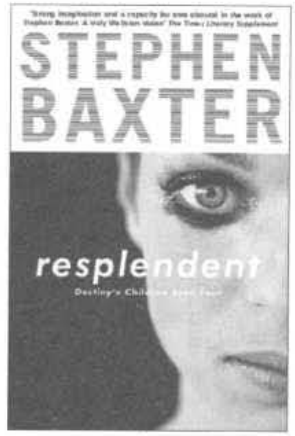
The real problem comes in the central section, with Baxter's explanation for how Hadrian's Wall was initially designed. No historical record illuminates the processes of Hadrian's planners, so there is some freedom to speculate, but Baxter's version struck me as frankly preposterous (though he may be closer to the reasons for the change of design mid-construction). Consequently, I was left reading a novel I was no longer prepared to believe. That's fatal for a historical.

But, of course, *Emperor* is not, despite its obvious debt to the works of Rosemary Sutcliff, a historical; it's science fiction. Driving the plot is a mysterious prophecy (rendered into Latin by Adam Roberts in a way that suggests a long time has elapsed since he's worked with the language) that not only predicts three Roman emperors, but also the American Declaration of Independence. There's even a defence of the genre and the importance of ideas over characterisation, prompted by finding a copy of Lucian's *True History* – though like many claiming Lucian for sf, Baxter overlooks that the *True History parodies* fantastical adventure.

An sf audience is accustomed to swallowing logical impossibilities, such as travel faster-than-light and through time. In sf, historical details don't have to tally with what we know as 'reality'. Perhaps *Emperor* is meant as an alternative history. Characters speculated about a Weaver in the future trying to manipulate history – has the Weaver created the distortions in Baxter's account? These questions will not properly be answered until the four-book *Time's Tapestry* sequence is completed, though in interview Baxter has hinted that the Weaver is trying, through the prophecy, to change history *away* from what we know.

How does *Emperor* read for the non-historian? It's certainly not badly-written, but Baxter has done better (*Voyage* comes to mind). Because the novel is broken up into chronologically-separate sections, characterisation does not quite have enough space to develop, especially in the first part, where Baxter has two different POV characters (though each section is not that much shorter than a Sutcliff novel, and she could build character in such space). The historical detail, while excessive, does create a sense of time that may entice the unfamiliar reader. Baxter is less good on sense of place. I understand why he wants to write about the magnificent Northumberland countryside in which he now lives, but I read *Emperor* whilst on a holiday along Hadrian's Wall, and made no mental connection between the setting of the book and my location.

In the end I keep coming back to the massive historical problem I have with this novel. The thing I take away from *Emperor* is that, when it comes to suspension of disbelief, what one can get away with in the conventions of sf is far greater than the license available within those of the historical.



Stephen Baxter – *Resplendent*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 549pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 0-57507-896-0

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Resplendent is the fourth and presumably final book in Stephen Baxter's *Destiny's Children* sequence, itself part of the author's Xeelee future history. Including this present volume the epic now spans nine books, of which this is the second collection of stories. Newcomers should not be scared off. Unusually for such an extensive project the books can be read in any order, and the same applies to the short stories. Each stands alone, to the extent that although the acknowledgements state 'All material has been revised for this volume,' essential context-setting material has been left untouched, even when the same information recurs in several stories. It is not surprising the stories stand alone, as apart from one which is new to this volume, they were originally published in various markets between 2000 and 2006 – eight in *Asimov's*, the remainder in *Interzone* and assorted anthologies. That said, each tale is part of a greater whole and the more previous Xeelee material one has previously read, the more resonances one will find.

Resplendent presents its eighteen stories in chronological order by way of Baxter's future history, spanning a period of a million years starting in AD 5301. Following *Vacuum Diagrams*, it is the author's second collection of Xeelee tales. Dedicated fans may notice at least five recent Xeelee stories still remain uncollected, all of which were written for *Analog*.

Despite the previously mentioned notice of revision, it would take an extremely attentive reading to discern any changes in the stories themselves. What Baxter has done is added linking material, ranging from a couple of paragraphs to a page or two, between each tale. This material takes the form of retrospective musings on the part of Luru Parz, one of 'The Undying' and formerly a supporting figure in *Destiny's Children*. This new material is not essential, but does help unify a text which is already more than the sum of its parts. Even the lesser stories gain added dimensions from being part of a much larger totality.

The book is divided into six sections. 'One: Resurgence' begins during the earth's occupation by the Qax, with 'Cadre Siblings' recounting how Parz accepts immortality while collaborating with the alien enemy. Highlight of the section is the challenging and surreal 'Reality Dust'.

By 'Two: War with the Ghosts' humanity is free and expanding ruthlessly into the galaxy. Five stories recount genocide against the intriguing and genuinely alien Silver Ghosts. One can't but help consider the battle against the rogue Black Ghost something of a homage to the Daleks, with the story in which it appears, 'Ghost Wars', the weakest of an otherwise strong and complex section.

'Three: Assimilation' finds the Expansion developing at a tremendous rate, reabsorbing earlier offshoots of human colonisation with chill, industrial efficiency.

'Four: Resplendent' is the bloody, violently pulsing heart of the book. Humanity has surrounded the galactic core and is stalled in millennia-long struggle against the vastly more advanced Xeelee. The book is dedicated to Baxter's grandfathers, and these soldier's stories are

as impassioned as anything the author has written. One doesn't need to have read Baxter's comments in *Matrix 181* (in his article 'The Wars of the World') to realise all these stories are Baxter's response to the 'war on terror' – 'stories of occupation and resistance, totalitarianism and asymmetric warfare'. 'The Chop Line' is a companion piece to *Exultant*, with a comparable time paradox the centre of a superb tale delineating the consequences of fighting a war over millennia. 'In the Un-black' requires a strong stomach (as do several other stories) in depicting the disregard for human life of the elites who steer the destiny of the mass of humanity. 'Riding the Rock' is a stunning story of love and war on a front line which sees the carnage of the Great War's trenches recast on a galactic scale.

After these stories the remainder of *Resplendent* is a little anti-climactic. 'Five: The Shadow of Empire' features 'Mayflower II' an intense saga of a generation starship which recasts Wells' *The Time Machine* among the stars, as well as paying tribute to Wyndham's 'Survival'. 'Between Worlds' offers ethnic cleansing, gentle terrorism and a strange hard sf finale.

'Six: The Fall of Mankind' contains just one story, the previously unpublished 'The Siege of Earth'. This begins as a haunting variation on Ray Bradbury's Mars stories, with a lonely boy making friends with three virtual children on an almost abandoned Mars, before heading off into less interesting territory to bring Luru Parz' story full circle.

Baxter began creating his Xeelee future history long before the changed political landscape of the new millennium and it is fascinating to see how seamlessly he is able to focus anger at the injustice and inhumanity of current events into his hard sf space opera. *Resplendent* is almost exclusively a book about soldiering and war. It is as far removed from gung-ho military sf as can be imagined, the title itself being furiously ironic and laced with bile. Ideas, political, sociological, evolutionary, are to the fore. Some will criticise the lack of characterisation in most of these stories. But this is to miss the point, for much of what Baxter is writing about is the deliberate, coldly calculated dehumanisation of humanity on a monumental scale. As one character says, it doesn't matter why they think they fight, as long as they fight. Individuals do not matter, only statistics count in an economy of death, a war of attrition in which imperial conquest becomes an end in itself. Baxter has shown elsewhere in the *Destiny's Children* books that he can handle characterisation as well as most. Here it is as if Stapledon and Orwell had written *Starship Troopers*. The prognosis is bleak, a future of endless slaughter to match a past and present of endless slaughter.

The best of these stories are deeply imaginative, immensely hard-hitting. *Resplendent* is as good as anything Baxter has ever written.

Shane Berryhill – *Chance Fortune and the Outlaws*

Starscape, New York, 2006, 266pp, $17.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31468-0

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

I approached this book with high hopes because I like its premise very much: a society where comic book heroes are so common that they have their own Department of Superhuman Affairs and their own training academy. Written with wit, irony and style, a novel based on this idea could be truly memorable. Unfortunately, this is not that novel.

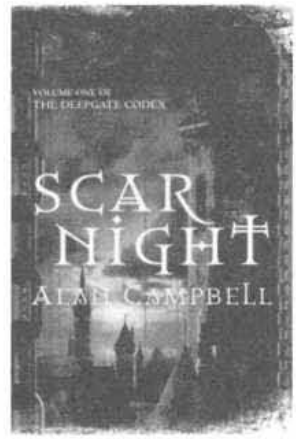
Josh Blevins is an ordinary boy who desperately wants to become a superhero. He is trained by the retired hero Captain Fearless, but his application to Burlington Academy is turned down on the grounds that he's a normal human being with no super-powers. Subsequently Captain Fearless inveigles him into Burlington under the alias of Chance Fortune, whose superpower is phenomenal good luck.

This early part of the book is most interesting, because here Josh is fighting the system to get what he wants. However, once he arrives at Burlington the plot becomes entirely predictable: Josh becomes the leader of a fighting team of superheroes known as the Outlaws, leads his team to victory in the academy competition, defeating the unpleasant Superion and his gang of nasties, and on the way discovering and overcoming a threat to Burlington itself. There's very little attempt to develop the situation that Josh is there under false pretences, and between his training and the hi-tech gadgetry he's given when he arrives at the academy there's little difference between him and the rest of the super-heroes.

The style is pedestrian at best. Large chunks of the action are taken up with the description of super-hero battles, which really belong in the pages of comic books, or even better on film, where we can all go 'Wow!' at the special effects. They simply don't work on the printed page.

The only character to be at all developed is Josh himself, and he's a particularly irritating version of the All-American Boy (though to be fair, that might be just my take on him). The others are mostly identified by their appearance and their super-powers. There are so many of them that it's difficult to remember who is who. Though there are effective female characters, they are subordinate to the males, and the only character with any intellectual clout is fat and cowardly and a figure of fun (and black, but that's a whole other can of worms). Though the book openly offers positive messages to its young readers about self-belief and never giving up, the hidden messages it conveys are rather less desirable.

Adults might hope that young comics fans would enjoy *Chance Fortune* and be encouraged to try other 'real' books. I doubt that will happen. Comics fans will find what they enjoy depicted more vividly and excitingly in the comics themselves, or on film. And for children who are already enthusiastic readers, it's thin fare indeed.



Alan Campbell – *Scar Night*

Tor, London, 2006, 517pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1-4050-9035-9

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Scar Night, from first-time novelist Campbell, is blazoned on the cover as Volume One of The Deepgate Codex. Dominic Harman's rather fine cover – of brooding towers and hanging chains against an ominous blood-red sky – even comes pre-scuffed, as if this work had been found

forgotten in the back of some musty old bookshop.

The pretence, though, that this is a lost volume of some ancient work, appears mostly cosmetic, and doesn't really survive far into the text. There are no prefatory passages or chapter headings from ancient prophecies or religious tomes. Instead, the story opens on a scene-setting prologue, as a planned ambush of an ancient horror stalking the city turns rapidly to carnage, panic and slaughter:

> "The angel stepped out into the lane, small and lithe and dressed in ancient leathers mottled with mould. Her wings shimmered darkly, like smoke dragged behind her. Her face was a scrawl of scars: more scars than could have been caused with the current battle with the Spine, more scars than a thousand battles could have caused. Blood spattered her similarly scarred hands and arms, and her eyes were the colour of storm clouds. She wore flowers and ribbons in her lank, tangled hair. She had tried to make herself look pretty."

A tad clumsy and overwritten, to be sure, but I can forgive Campbell a lot for the beautifully judged pathos of that last line, and indeed there were times, later in the book, when he – or his editor – sorely needed it.

The scene then jumps forward two thousand years.

The city of Deepgate hangs suspended by immense chains over a fathomless abyss, at the bottom of which the city inhabitants and the church Presbyters believe their god, Ulcis, resides. To Ulcis, they consign the bodies and souls of their dead, or most of them. On the morning after each Scar Night, other bodies will be discovered: soulless husks, drained of blood, which the church hold anathema and unable to be shriven and offered to the abyss.

Deepgate is a city under threat from outside and in. Outside, across the barren Deadsands, are the Heshette tribes, once scattered and broken by Deepgate's archons, but now starting to reunite. And inside the city, every Scar Night, the inhabitants lock themselves away and pray for the dawn.

Against both these threats, Deepgate's symbolic protection rests in one young angel, Dill, last of a once-great line, armed with a blunt sword he can barely lift, and forbidden, even if he were able, to fly.

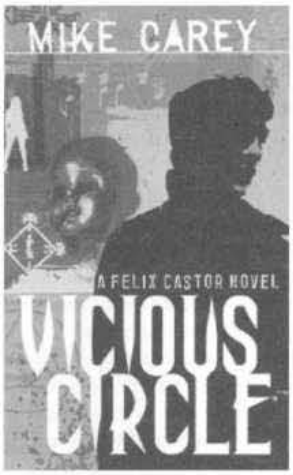
Deepgate itself is a fabulous, insane construct, suspended over its god-filled abyss more by an act of faith and will than of engineering. The publishing blurb hints at echoes of Gormenghast, but the city's claustrophobic geography owes as much to Mieville's New Crobuzon, and its variously haunted, damaged and obsessed characters to both those and works like Steph Swainston's *The Year of Our War* and Storm Constantine's *Burying The Shadow*.

Campbell's sense of spectacle is also matched by a deft hand with characterisation. While a number of his secondary characters – the old, bookish priest, Sypes, the plump, fastidious and perfumed Fogwill, and the monstrous, bullying and eczema-scarred Poisoner, Devon – might appear initially as gothic grotesques, they often turn out to have hidden sides to their characters that rescue them from being mere stereotypes.

But too often, Campbell's prose, or his editor's lack of attention, threaten to mar what is otherwise an intriguing and different fantasy. The difference between a pallet and a palette, for example, is a simple dictionary error, and other grammatical errors occasionally stop the reader in mid-flow. And rarely have I seen the adjective 'skeletal' quite so often used (and misused) in a single book, or so inappropriately at times: not only of faces and bodies, but of teeth, contraptions and even a control panel (the latter three times in less than half a dozen pages toward the end of the book.) It's a shame, because it breaks concentration, the literary equivalent of stubbing your toe, and bumps the reader back out the book and the story.

But that said, I have, like Milton, a peculiar fondness for damaged rebel angels, and Campbell's Carnival (who appears in the above quote) is up there with Swainston's drug-addicted Jant, Justina Robson's Valkyrie, Constantine's Beth and Gimel, and Stableford's Angel of Pain.

If Campbell can polish his prose to match his keen visual imagination and sense of drama, I'm intrigued enough to see what the next volume brings.



Mike Carey – *Vicious Circle*

Orbit, London, 2006, 512pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-414-3

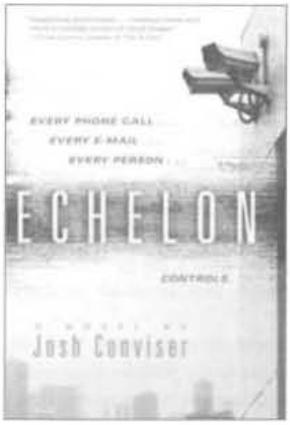
Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

Hot on the heels of *The Devil You Know* (reviewed in *Vector 248*), *Vicious Circle* follows the further adventures of Felix 'Fix' Castor as he tries to eke out a living and keep surviving in a world filled with demons, ghosts and assorted were-creatures. Felix's trade, for want of a better term, is that of professional exorcist. It is not a particularly glamorous profession, nor does Felix have the luxury of a Mike Oldfield soundtrack. No. Instead he must make do with a tin whistle, his weapon of choice in the wacky world of spiritual skulduggery. This time around he is on the trail of a kidnapped girl Abbie, whose distraught but stupidly rich parents will pay anything to get her back. The catch? The kidnapped girl is already dead, it's her ghost that they are after. This apparently simple case soon leads Felix to very dark places via murder, possessions, demonic hysteria and ancient religious sects. When his friends – dead, alive and even demon – begin to desert him the prospect of a, how shall we say, spiritually uplifting ending, seems bleak indeed. And with a dangerous, rogue exorcist on the loose Fix's options are reducing by the hour…

Even though the appearance of a secret Catholic society of shady thugs may bring unwelcome recollections of Dan Brown there is no need to worry – with *Vicious Circle* you are in safe hands. Carey knows how to write a throat-grabbing yarn but this is one where the unusual turns of phrase are deliberately humorous. Fix is a wise-cracking exorcist always on the scrounge in order to pay the rent to his long-suffering landlady and struggling with the knowledge that he put her boyfriend (and his best friend) in an asylum following a botched demon extraction. His regular informant is a paranoid zombie who lives in a cinema and spends his money on treatments to halt decomposition, while the book's femme fatale is a particularly voracious succubus trying to go cold turkey on draining souls. Rather than making this set-up knowingly hip or steeped in gothic gloom Carey seems to root this premise in a contemporary version of classic British television – *Callan* or *Rising Damp*. Combining this with horror and the supernatural is an inspired move. Fix is a very British detective – dry, witty and prone to being roundly beaten-up. It is the humour that is

the lifeblood of the book, it is wry, sarcastic and economical giving a real sense of the person for, despite his faults, Fix is a likeable and amiable lead, the kind you'd like to meet in the pub, providing he didn't bring a demonic entourage. This certainly helps with the depiction of violence. While *The Devil You Know* didn't hold back on the violence when it was necessary, *Vicious Circle's* violence is on a grander scale with many more innocent people getting caught in the tug-of-war between the planes. On one hand this makes the book more epic than its predecessor – disparate elements slotting into place to confirm a universal-scale catastrophe that could be at hand – but conversely some of the back-to-basics charm of the first has been stretched. But our familiarity with the characters manages to retain things firmly back on terra firma.

Like its predecessor *Vicious Circle* is a fast-paced, well-written and well-plotted page-turner free of pretension but never dumbed down. A witty, violent and entertaining read.



Josh Conviser – *Echelon*

Del Ray, New York, 2006, 289pp, $13.95, t/p, ISBN 0-345-48502-5

Reviewed by Tom Hunter

"Our world is shaped by its internecine connections, not its parts. If a tree falls in a forest, its sound is shaped not by physics or gravity, but by how that sound is linked to the masses."

If you choose to follow this logic then *Echelon* is a very well connected book indeed, with cover blurbs from everyone from *X-Files* creator Chris Carter through to the executive producer of *Minority Report* and a former inspector general of the C.I.A, and as such deserves to do very well for itself.

That said, you google the word Echelon and there's a whole world of hits to sift through before you start getting anywhere close to this individual book and suddenly those book blurbs are starting to gain far more context.

For those too busy to bother with how their elected officials are choosing to monitor them today, the word echelon may not register much notice. For others – the neo-punks, hackers, libertarians, journalists and, now, fiction readers – the term is synonymous with government surveillance at the highest levels; a virtual space where the corridors of power lead to a single grey room, and inside the walls echo with the babble of the world.

Echelon the novel takes all this rumour and denial, spin and counterintelligence and filters it down until the information is meaningful and, most importantly, *actionable*.

Josh Conviser has created a world where the Echelon listening project is not only entirely true but where technological developments have empowered its operators to move on from merely monitoring global communications to a point where they can alter them in real time. He's then spliced this ultimate paranoid premise to a rapid-fire spy thriller plot engine and turned the resulting spy-fi hybrid loose on the page.

Ryan Laing is an agent for Echelon, a special operative in a near (enough) future that has known calm, if not exactly peace, for decades. He is the man that Echelon sends in when covert surveillance and data forgery fails and a more specialised black bag of tricks is required; and if his name sounds like an amalgam of every airport thriller hero ever conceived that doesn't mean he's any less good at his job.

The core of the thriller plot is that the actions of the hero directly affect the outcome of the story. You don't get anywhere by sitting back and waiting for someone else to take control of events, and in *Echelon* Conviser has created a story that is driven by the theme of taking and preventing action and what this means for the individual.

Having dissolved its links with the NSA and then quietly removed itself from all of the world's databases, the new look Echelon project has taken it on its self to monitor The Flow (the internet of the future, and a place that can now only be described in terms that are also applicable to oceans). Unfortunately these self-appointed new watchmen are themselves being watched, and with even less altruistic purpose, and it's up to Ryan to fight back against the conspiracy.

The story manages to play entirely fair with its action-thriller set-up while still working hard enough to unsettle the usually cast-iron credibility of its central protagonist and also using its futuristic environment as more than a convenient backdrop for the next big set piece.

Conviser's writing style is smart and efficient while still leaving room for characters to grow, and whereas the first half follows the strict disciplines of the thriller, the more overtly science fictional tangents of the second act show it's possible to both play around with big ideas and kick some ass on the same plotline.

Jack Dann – *Promised Land: Stories of Another America*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2006, 243pp, £25.00, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-904619-92-4

Reviewed by Chris Hill

Snapshots:

Marilyn Monroe, shortly before marrying Arthur Miller, pays a visit to Jack Kennedy.

A young, awestruck Elvis Presley visits James Dean in hospital where he is recovering from the car accident that killed him in the real world.

Joe DiMaggio finds a public way to have his revenge on Marilyn Monroe for her abandonment of him.

James Dean and Jack Kerouac travel to Paris to try and persuade Elvis to star in a film version of *On the Road*, which Jimmy has helped script.

Marilyn Monroe's desperation to bear a child for Miller leads to tragedy.

These are some of the stories among the ten in this collection, many of them originally appearing in *Postscripts* magazine.

Be warned: *Promised Land* is not cheerful reading. Although bearing a superficial resemblance to some of Kim Newman's, celebrity-laden alternate histories, this is far more serious fare. None of the cast are allowed to get off lightly: Marilyn Monroe is deeply troubled, but her manipulations of the men around her makes it difficult to sympathise, Elvis preaches the word of God while having orgies in his hotel, and so on. Jimmy Dean in particular internalises this struggle between the worst elements of his nature and what role God has for him after his miraculous survival.

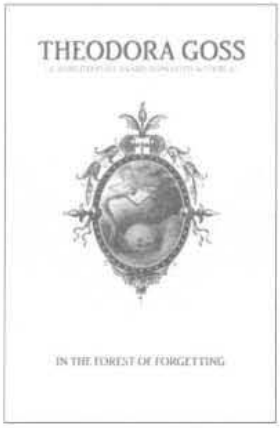
There is no doubt that the stories are well-written, with Dann giving each character a distinctive voice. Having said that I admit that I struggled with this collection to an extent, one reason being the determined cheerlessness of the whole

thing. There is no doubt that Dann is fascinated by these figures of popular American mythology, but he is pulls no punches in his depictions of them. Not that he seems to be in the business of destroying the myths, but he is certainly *questioning* them.

I think that it is the very nature of this mythology that, in part at least, governed my reactions to the collection; British mythology is very different from American. The British myths of the second half of the twentieth century revolve around the Second World War and its aftermath: the blitz spirit, Winston Churchill, rationing, the End of Empire, CND, Greenham Common & Mrs Thatcher. It could be argued that most of these are myths of deprivation and stiff-upper-lip 'making do' against the odds. The US myths of the same time seem to revolve around death and conspiracy: James Dean's car crash, Marilyn Monroe's suicide, the several Kennedy Assassinations. The heroes of these stories are not normal people surviving against the odds but larger than life, and ultimately tragic, figures.

While I know something about these people, they do not really naturally resonate for me. For alternative history stories to work the reader needs to have a reasonable knowledge of the 'true' events, which I do not. For example, I know that Munroe divorced DiMaggio and married Miller. But I have no idea of the circumstances, what her relationship with the two men was really like, so to me it is not always clear what parts of the stories are real and what are imaginary. And because of that lack of emotional resonance I felt little inclination to find out.

I suspect that an American reader or someone with a better knowledge of the era would get more out these stories than I did. It could even be that, as someone in my late thirties, I am exactly the wrong age for it. Someone who just happens to be ten to fifteen years older than me, or in our pop-culture aware age, even ten, fifteen years younger, might find it fascinating.



Theodora Goss – *In The Forest of Forgetting*

Prime Books, Holicong, 2006, 284pp, $24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-8095-5691-X

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

"In this world," Meister Wilhelm tells his new pupil, "we all of us need somewhere else to go." He is talking of places both metaphorical and literal: in the first instance the country of music, to which he is both a traveller and a guide; in the second instance the flying island of Orillion, and its city of artists, to which he has never been. Orillion may not even exist, in fact, but in the end that doesn't matter. What matters is that the Meister believes it exists. His belief drives his attempts to reach the island, though he has only home-made wings and a dream to carry him.

Of the sixteen stories in Theodora Goss' debut collection, 'The Wings of Meister Wilhelm' is not the best, or the worst, or the most typical; but it is perhaps the most balanced. Like much of her work, it takes place in the moments before a crossing of some kind, but more than any of them it presents both the security of the world we know and the temptation of the worlds we don't with a level gaze. Wilhelm's desire to leave is all the more affecting because we know what he's leaving behind.

To judge by the potted biography in Terri Windling's introduction, Goss herself has left a fair amount behind. She was born in Hungary, while the Iron Curtain was still up, and spent her childhood not only there but also in Italy and Belgium, before settling in the United States. "The places we live determine who we are," she says. "That is why homelessness is experienced as a loss of self." It doesn't seem surprising, then, that transitions and thresholds should figure prominently in her work, nor that the places she gives us to go should seem so simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. England is here, as Albion and Britannia; (Soviet) Eastern Europe crops up more than once; and America's Deep South is the setting for half a dozen tales. What these places have in common is that they come with limits, either social, or geographical, or historical.

Most of Goss' characters are acutely aware of the limits they face, and what might lie beyond them. Sometimes they cross those limits voluntarily, like Meister Wilhelm. Sometimes, as in the nakedly self-explanatory 'Professor Berkowitz Stands on the Threshold', their dilemma is whether or not to cross at all. Goss is in general good at portraying the nuances of these dilemmas; sometimes, however, she takes the decision out of her characters' hands altogether. The subject of 'A Statement in the Case', a Hungarian immigrant to the US who sets up an apothecary in the protagonist's neighbourhood, has already crossed the limits that were facing him; for him, the question is what else might have hitched a lift. Other characters are pushed towards a crossing they might not be ready for, as Genevieve is pushed by the mysterious title character of 'Miss Emily Gray', or as Eleanor finds the surface of her world stripped away by the legacy of her sister's life in 'Lily, With Clouds'. These are often the stories that are most achingly familiar.

And sometimes, as in the gracefully melancholy 'Lessons With Miss Gray', the crossing is simply the process of growing up. The passage of time, in fact, marks many of the stories here, in one way or another. Often it is simply the way the stories are framed as the past (despite the title, much more is remembered in this book than forgotten). In 'Lessons With Miss Gray', for instance, in which five girls relate (in a first person plural voice reminiscent of that used by Karen Joy Fowler in *The Jane Austen Book Club*) their youthful experiences with witchcraft. Near the end of the story, there is a striking segment that appears at first glance to be a flash-forward, but which ends up foregrounding the fact that the whole thing is a memory. It deepens the story's perspective, and makes the losses that mark its end that much more poignant. Similarly, tales like 'Death Comes to Ervina', 'Conrad' and 'Phalaenopsis' (both new here) are direct explorations of memory, recollections of lives lived, with the shapelessness that that implies.

But in some cases the influence of time is more specific, and often lends a distinctive cast to the book's fantastic elements. This is perhaps most obvious in the brilliant opening story, 'The Rose in Twelve Petals', which retells Sleeping Beauty in twelve parts: 'The Princess', 'The King', 'The Magician', and so on. In the ninth part, 'The Tower', time passes before our eyes – not just fairytale time, but *real* time. When the Prince arrives on the scene a bit later, he's riding a bulldozer, and he's just a comrade in a socialist republic. Similarly, in 'The Wings of Meister Wilhelm', in the closing paragraphs, we are brought into the modern world by news of the Wright brothers' first flights. And in 'Lily, With Clouds', there is a sense that it is not just the effect of some striking paintings that unmoors Eleanor, but also the effect of the revelation that her sister died of cancer, a disease that seems far too *modern* for the world she lives in.

There is a price. To work, such stories have to be precisely choreographed, and so perfectly executed that the

choreography itself becomes invisible, leaving us to be gripped instead by the apparent simplicity of what is being told. Occasionally, one or more elements are out of alignment, with the result that either the story feels incomplete, their landscapes curiously fragile, as though made of spindrift and glass ('Death Comes To Ervina', 'Phalaenopsis), or it becomes hard not to notice how rigged everything is. The title story, for example, in which a woman called Patient wanders through a dream landscape that transmutes her memories of cancer treatment into fairytale icons, is too straightforwardly allegorical. It is all symbols, no story. More often the balance tilts the other way. Maybe half of *In The Forest of Forgetting* feels just that bit too *neat*, just a little too *mannered*. Goss' voice, with its playful disregard for convention and knowing asides, sometimes echoes that of Susanna Clarke, but the reader could wish for more of the sense that pervades the later chapters of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, that a wildness lurks behind the restraint. Goss is good at the lingering implication, the suggested unpleasantness, but she often seems uncomfortable with more overt darkness; the end of 'Letters From Budapest', for example, is marked by an awkward shift in register, of the kind that snaps us out of the moment, and leaves us looking at some props, and the wires that sustain them.

When everything works, on the other hand, the effect can be stunning and disorienting. Fantasy stories, and particularly those based, as Goss' usually are, in fable and fairytale, are usually meant to be timeless. They are not meant to *change*, or if they do, it is meant to be a stately solemn process, a fading of away of what once was. In the best stories in the book – stories like 'The Rose in Twelve Petals', 'The Wings of Meister Wilhelm', and 'Lessons With Miss Gray', as well as the enigmatic, entropic lament of 'The Rapid Advance of Sorrow' and the pitch-perfectly bittersweet 'Pip and the Fairies' – we can feel the ground shifting beneath our feet as we read, without the comfort of knowing what the end result will be. It is that inevitability of change that Meister Wilhelm was really referring to, I think, and it's a message that these days we cannot avoid: which is perhaps why Theodora Goss gives us so many places to go, and so few places to stay.

David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer (Eds.) – *The Space Opera Renaissance*

Tor, New York, 2006, 941pp, $39.95, h/b, ISBN 13: 978-0-765-17-3

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

As Douglas Adams said, "Space is big. You just won't believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is". The same can be said for both space opera and *The Space Opera Renaissance*, a collection which contains more fiction (around 700,000 words worth) than any other single volume I have ever read.

The book is a follow-up to the editors' *The Hard SF Renaissance* (which was reviewed by Paul Kincaid in *Vector* 234). It officially contains 32 stories. Officially, because two works, David Weber's *Ms. Midshipwoman Harrington* (approximately 56,000 words) and Donald Kingsbury's *The Survivor* (approximately 79,000 words), can be classed as novels in themselves. Meanwhile Tony Daniel's 'Grist' is the entire first section of his novel *Metaplanetary*. These three examples demonstrate something of the problem of compiling an anthology of space opera; its bigness. Space opera, especially in its 'renaissance' form, tends to be large. More than any other sub-genre of sf, space opera's vastness ideally suits modern marketing demands for lengthy sagas spanning multiple volumes. The modern incarnations of the sub-genre really are at odds with the short story form

But then that is where the 33rd, and in some ways most engrossing story of the book comes in. If *The Space Opera Renaissance* were a season of, say, *Babylon 5*, we would call it the arc. It runs though the overall introduction, a substantial essay in itself, and through the introductions to each tale. This arc story is a fascinating history of the sub-genre, discussing its origin, development, political leanings and possible future. It understands sf's conversation with itself. How this conversation develops over the decades. It takes pains to note revisionism, recording how stories once designated planetary romance, science fantasy or even hard science fiction have come to be labelled space opera. And how the term itself has changed in popular understanding from a derogatory dismissal, coined by analogy with horse and soap opera, become acceptable via nostalgia in the 1970's, to the present day where it is a largely neutral marketing category. And a genre far more widely understood to be a media phenomenon than a literary one.

That said, and given the roll of, particularly, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* in making modern space opera a resounding populist success, it is odd that the book doesn't include a single example of fiction spun-off directly from any of the media incarnations of the sub-genre. What we do get are six sections charting the form from early days to present. 'Redefined Writers' gives us Edward Hamilton, Jack Williamson, Leigh Brackett, and a quick spoof by Clive Jackson.

Hamilton's 'The Star Stealers' (1929) might be the Ur-story. Reading like H.P. Lovecraft had invented Star Trek Wars and written the 'Armageddon' episode. The inhabitants of a dead rogue star, wandering intergalactic space, alter their home's course and intend to use the immense gravity of their star to steal our sun. It's up to the Federation to stop them. Fun can be had counting the times Hamilton uses the words glowing, titanic and luminous... and one can wonder if Peter F. Hamilton has been paying homage to his namesake in his *Commonwealth Saga* with his relentlessly hostile cone-aliens who happen to vivisect a crewman. It's Star Trek Wars on an enormous scale, with science as idiotic as the worst of Hollywood, and yes, 'Han'/the cavalry do arrive in the nick of time so 'Luke' can attack the one weak spot on the Death (er, Dead) Star. So much of the genre is here it is easy to see why some consider *Star Wars* set sf back half a century

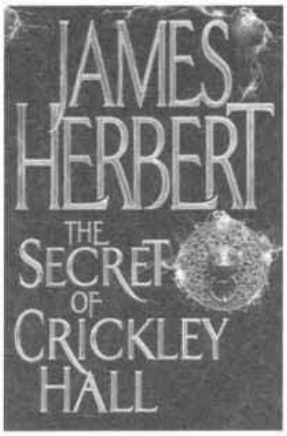
Williamson provides continuity by writing up to this year. Brackett (who was married to Hamilton) offers a planetary romance, and again provides a link between past and present in that she scripted the first draft of *The Empire Strikes Back*. Jackson's tale appears to be included because it neatly binds everything into the Lucas-Spielberg continuum by inventing the *Indiana Jones* saga's most famous joke.

Later sections are 'Draftees' (Cordwainer Smith, Delany, Scheckley), 'Transitions/Redefiners' (Brin, Drake, McMaster Bujold, Banks), 'Volunteers: Revisionaries' (Simmons, Greenland, Peter F. Hamilton, Weber, Asaro), 'Mixed Signals/Mixed Categories' (Benford, Kingsbury, Zettel, Le Guin, Reed, McAuley, Baxter, Moorcock, Kandal) and 'Next

Wave' (Daniel, Westerfeld, Reynolds, Stross and Wright).

Given that this review simply doesn't have the space to discuss each story individually it would be invidious to pick out a handful of tales for special praise. Everything here is of interest, much is excellent and that which is best will inevitably vary from reader to reader. It will have to suffice that all are expertly chosen to reflect the range of the genre, as well as to support the season arc. And yes, there is a story which goes to the logical conclusion by combining space opera with grand opera.

As for minuses, despite the book being copyright 2006 the editors didn't seem at the time of writing to be aware of Peter F. Hamilton's *Judas Unchained* (2005), suggest that Stephen Baxter wrote a novel called 'Rind', and knock a decade off Leigh Brackett's life in telling us she died at the same age as Cordwainer Smith. But that's just nit-picking, and it's entertaining to spot the occasional goof. It makes the editors human. The truth is *The Space Opera Renaissance* is a superb collection, though one probably best enjoyed by dipping into between other reading. Devour it all at once and visions of enormous mutant star goats beckon.



James Herbert – *The Secret of Crickley Hall*

Macmillan, London, 2006, 600pp, £17.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-4050-0520-3

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

The Secret of Crickley Hall is James Herbert's take on the traditional ghost story, and to a large extent it is very traditional indeed. A family with two daughters moves into an isolated West Country house for the father's work. A year earlier the couple's son disappeared and no trace of him has yet been found. The house, of course, has its own history. It is big and gloomy and cold. It was also used during the Second World War as a temporary home for a group of evacuees who were all killed, along with one of their teachers in The Great Storm of 1943. The pair that acted as guardians at that time were also clearly tyrannical and brutal disciplinarians. Construct your own ghost story from the above and you probably won't be all that far off the mark.

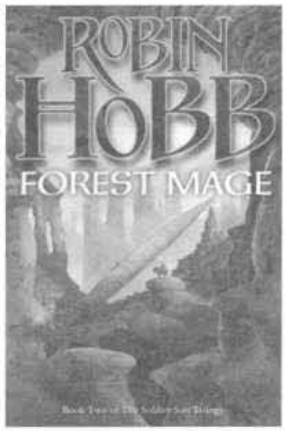
Therein lies the problem. The set-up is simply too obvious, and the development of the story does very little that we would not be expecting. The plot has been meticulously constructed in order to bring all the various elements to the climax of the novel, but this has been done with the development of the plot and constant drip of information being allowed to take precedence over atmosphere. A particularly stark example of which is when we are told a good deal of the actual events of 1943 by a character reminiscing to himself over a brandy.

Although the story is all told in the present, there is a second plotline, told mainly by characters reminiscing, of the events of 1943. It is these events which are clearly at the heart of the present day happenings, and the details of them are drip fed through the course of the novel. There is a fundamental flaw in the way these events are related to us. The villains of the piece are flagged early on as being so utterly monstrous, that none of the later revelations of their actions, while shocking, can be considered in any way particularly surprising.

The fact that the family at the centre of events has recently lost a child means that the psychological state of the various characters is affected, and so any slightly out of the ordinary events might be expected to play a larger role than would normally be the case. This loss does play on the mother, and her outward behaviour is affected, but the rest of the family comes across as being largely unaffected. The result is the family fall into a useful set of stereotypes, with the mother the emotional one, the Father the pragmatic and practical one and the children as the ones around whom the strange events appear to be centred. This is the only nod that the events may possibly be something other the obvious supernatural one. Although the characters do have some emotional depth, there is the definite feeling that they are there to serve the plot.

All of this means that the most powerful element of a good ghost story, the developing sense of unease, is lost and what we are left with is more of a supernatural thriller. None of this is to say that this is a bad book. It is a page-turner, and although there is nothing that really takes us by surprise, there is still a strong desire to see how the situation plays out. The climactic sequence is also genuinely tense.

For the aficionado of the ghost story, *The Secret of Crickley Hall* does not really have a great deal to offer that has not been seen countless times before. The James Herbert fan, on the other hand, is going to find another solid slab of entertainment.



Robin Hobb – *Forest Mage*

Voyager, London, 2006, 660pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0-00-719615-6

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Forest Mage is the second book in The Soldier Son trilogy and carries on from where the first book, *'Shaman's Crossing'* left off.

Nevarre Burvelle has recovered from the Speck plague which has decimated the Cavalla Academy where he is learning to become a cavalry officer in the King's famed Horse Regiment. He has defeated his arch-enemy, Tree Woman, and feels he has freed himself of the Speck magic that sought to turn him against his own people. However, all is not as it seems, and Nevarre still has disturbing dreams as the magic is actually dormant within him rather than gone.

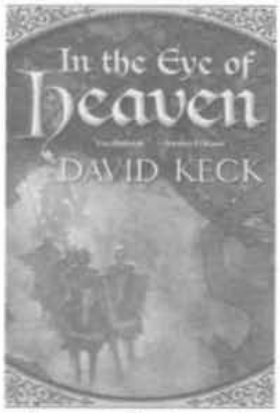
Although many soldiers and trainers at the Academy have died, and many more are too 'wasted' by the plague to continue their soldiering careers, Nevarre seems fully recovered. Indeed, he is starting to put on rather more weight than he has ever had in his life so far. His doctor thinks this is a rare side-effect of the plague and will soon stop, but by the time he returns to his family home in Widevale to attend his brother Rosse's wedding, it is clear that his weight is becoming a problem which, if not arrested, will threaten his place in life as the second son, *the soldier son*.

Nevarre's father, a soldier son himself who was made a noble by the King for services in battle, is displeased that his son has apparently let himself go so badly. He takes Nevarre in hand in order to get him fit to return to the Academy after the wedding, but despite his best efforts, Nevarre continues to grow in size. As a tough routine of hard work and a starvation diet is actively pursued by Nevarre, he continues to put on weight, and, at his brother's wedding, he realises that the beautiful young noblewoman to whom he is betrothed is not going to accept the changes to Nevarre's body and seeks company with another man.

With Nevarre's life seemingly spiralling out of control and falling apart around him, his father receives a message from the academy. Nevarre is honourably discharged from the King's Cavalla on medical grounds and, amidst this life-shattering experience, Speck plague comes to Widevale, and nothing is ever going to be the same again.

This is a thoroughly engrossing story. Whether or not Hobb intended to use the novel as a way of examining today's attitude towards obesity, it certainly serves to make the reader do so. Nevarre has a problem he has no control over, and is completely unaware of its cause. Even when it becomes more and more apparent what the cause is, he still cannot accept it and struggles against the inevitable. His problems spiral because no one else can accept that his weight is beyond his control, and Hobb portrays a character who is not only trapped in a body that he hates and is becoming increasingly alien to him, but is ridiculed by all around him.

It's the second book in a trilogy, so, as expected, little is actually resolved in the context of the whole tale, but goodness me, I really can't wait to see where it all ends up. An absolute page-turner, and another example of why Hobb is fast becoming one of the top British fantasy authors around today.



David Keck – *In the Eye of Heaven*

Tor, New York, 2006, 412pp, $25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31320-0

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

In saying this is a fantasy set in a medieval-style world, it would be easy to give the wrong impression. Magic or the supernatural exists, but there are no wizards in pointy hats. The focus is not on the courts of princes – though these have their place – but the much tougher world of the man at arms or landless knight.

The central character, Durand, has grown up believing that he will be the heir to an estate. When the real heir unexpectedly turns up, he is thrown on his own resources in an essentially hostile world. Earning his living with his sword, he is plunged into a conspiracy of rebellion in which he has a pivotal role to play. His fighting skills, and more important the integrity of his character, are what bring him through.

I was impressed by the authenticity of the background, but I have to say don't read this book if you're not interested – as I am – in the mediaeval tournament: not just the individual jousts on beautifully caparisoned horses, but the muck and confusion of the melée. Several of these occur along the way, and though they do have an important part to play in the progress of the plot, the constant repetition makes for a lack of variety.

Another area where I would have liked to see more contrast is in the characterisation; by far the majority of the characters are fighting men of one sort or another. Again, the plot dictates this to some extent, but I found many of the characters similar and hard to distinguish from each other, and with a few exceptions, notably Durand himself, not very interesting. All but one of the non-combatant men are servile or downright evil, and there are very few women. I'm not someone who wants a gender balance for the sake of political correctness, and female swordspersons leave me cold, but even in the masculine environment of the tournament there were more women than this in the historical Middle Ages.

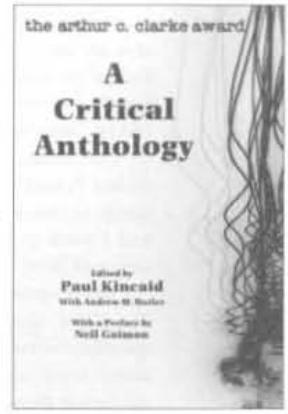
The novel is made more realistic by the weight of history, myth and legend that lie behind the events. The material witnesses to Keck's imagination, but I wish he could have made this wealth of background detail clearer to the reader. I also have a more minor niggle: the ethnicity of the names, which doesn't seem to follow a particular pattern; for example Durand (French-sounding) has a brother Hathcyn (Old English).

All this sounds as if I didn't like the book; in fact, I did. I thought the story is compelling, and the style is powerful. I'll certainly look for more work by this writer. However, it could have been a great deal better.

Paul Kincaid – *The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Anthology*

Serendip Foundation, Everdon, 2006, 243pp, £15.00, t/p, ISBN 0-9552416-0-X

Reviewed by Stephen Jeffery



All awards, by their very nature, are controversial, but the Arthur C. Clarke Award, seems to have garnered more than its fair since its inception.

The Arthur C. Clarke Award has always been something of an oddity. It differs from other popular sf awards such as the Hugo, BSFA Award and the Locus Awards in several respects. First, and most obviously, it is decided by a jury rather than by popular vote. It is restricted to works first published in the UK in the previous year, although not necessarily by a British author, and the definition of science fiction, decided by each jury, can often be an elastic one, guided less by how a book is marketed, or even regarded by its author, as by Damon Knight's famous dictum that science fiction is what we mean when we point to it. In part, that is an outcome of the jury structure, made up of representatives from the BSFA, the SF Foundation and, initially, a body known as the Science Policy Foundation and then later The Science Museum.

Some of those decisions have raised hackles, but what some, allied to the genre mainstream, see as a failing – in some extreme cases, almost a betrayal – of science fiction, has also been one of the Award's strengths. The Arthur C. Clarke Award, almost yearly, revives the discussion as to what actually constitutes science fiction, and serves to remind readers that significant work using the tropes and (even rarer) the speculative mindset of science fiction is being written outside the cosy confines of the genre.

The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Anthology collects eighteen essays, one on each of the winning novels from 1987 to 2004 (2005's winner China Mieville's *Iron Council* is not represented here). These are book-ended by a Preface from Neil Gaiman, Introduction by Paul Kincaid (Award Administrator between 1996-2006) and a handy checklist of the winners, the shortlists, and jury members for each year.

This is one way of constructing such an anthology. I've always felt, though, that, regardless of the actual winner, the strength of the Arthur C. Clarke Award is the publication of each year's shortlist, which should be recommended reading for any serious sf fan. After all, the jury has probably had to read ten times this many books, usually in a few short months before the selection. Faced with this sometimes explicit

demonstration of Sturgeon's Law, it's no wonder many judges feel (myself included), as Gaiman remarks of his own time, that it's a long time before they can read science fiction for pleasure again.

Controversy marked the Award from the outset, with its first selection of Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* as the 1987 winner. Looking back now it's hard to see why this raised the amount of ire it did. I suspect it had more to do with Attwood's public disavowal of her novel as science fiction. (Nicholas Ruddick has a more generous interpretation of this than the literary snobbery it appeared to many.).

Space in this review precludes giving all eighteen essays the full attention they deserve. All have interesting and insightful things to say. Go and read them. What follows is a taster to whet your appetite.

In 'The Possible Cost of Complacency' Edward James looks at Australian George Turner's dystopia of global warming, *The Sea and the Summer*, rather unfairly critically neglected now and largely forgotten outside the pages of Bruce Gillespie's *Science Fiction Commentary*.

I've bookmarked Elizabeth A. Billinger's discussion of Rachel Pollack's *Unquenchable Fire* as a story made up of, and about, stories, since this is the one book here I've not yet read, and I want to follow up the idea of stories illuminating the nature of Story.

Joan Gordon's 'The Nation Utopiant' uses Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden* (another global warming dystopia) to question the nature of utopias, arguing their impossibility as a static, fixed ideal (at which point they inevitably become repressive dystopias for the individual or the many), and that utopia can truly only be a movement or a process.

Justina Robson's delicious, freewheeling essay on Colin Greenland's *Take Back Plenty* is infused with the same infectious spangliciousness (yes, that is a real word. Justina says so) that she ascribes to Greenland's revisionist Space Opera.

> "Many of the spaceships were ruinously vast and in states of shocking untidiness and disrepair. All the computers were clunky and huge, like early mobile phones. The solar system was filled with council housing estates, and overrun with annoying chipper family-packs of vicious giant meerkats called Perks. Nobody emptied the bins and everyone slept late."

Even the footnotes carry through this bright, sassy tone, extending jokes on Jungian anima and postmodern notions of 'death of the author'.

Adam Roberts maps his notion of a science-fiction and fantasy divide arising from a historical split between Protestant/rational and Catholic/mystical mindsets, and uses Paul McAuley's *Fairyland* as a perfectly poised fulcrum between the two, taking in Grave's *The White Goddess*, Thomas the Rhymer, and Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' along the way.

Tony Keen recaptures the buzz of excitement that spread largely by word of mouth around the sf community when Jeff Noon's *Vurt* first appeared from small outfit Ringpull Press as one of the first true post-cyberpunk novels.

Much the same buzz greeted Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (selected in the shortest ever Clarke Award Jury decision, basically as long as it took six people to say "*The Sparrow*"). Andrew M. Butler looks at the intertwined concepts of money, sex and food that run through this thoughtful and harrowing novel.

Farah Mendlesohn considers Tricia Sullivan's *Dreaming in Smoke* (yet another debut novel) as a novel of colonization in which it is unclear exactly who or what is being colonized. This, like *The Sparrow*, is another harrowing novel (albeit one with an arresting and splendidly gonzo opening paragraph) which many people found both compelling and uncomfortable reading.

Elsewhere Pawel Frelick and Penny Hill consider two novels by Pat Cadigan (*Synners* and *Fools* respectively), Maureen Kincaid Speller the nature of consciousness and the golem legend behind Piercy's *Body of Glass* and Paul N. Billinger the combination of fever dream, shifting narration and non-Western critique of colonial science that runs through Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

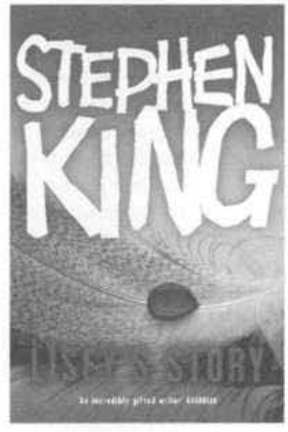
Of more recent winners, Cheryl Morgan asks who are the real monsters in China Mieville's *Perdido Street Station*, Tanya Brown examines the interplay of Blairite political satire and Arthurian mythos in Gwyneth Jones's *Bold as Love*, L. J. Hurst on the complex alternate histories and readings that spin out of Christopher Priest's *The Separation*, and Iain Emsley looks at the interplay of science, cryptography and economics in Neal Stephenson's *Quicksilver*.

And here's a wonderful bon-mot from Graham Sleight on Bruce Sterling's political satire *Distraction*.

> "The first and most immediate pleasure of *Distraction* is what one might call *The West Wing* concept: the opportunity to overhear very smart people talk very fast, and to just about keep up with them."

It serves as an equally apt description of this anthology. A critical essential.

[available from www.austgate.co.uk, The Aust Gate, 13 Yew Close, Greater Leys, Oxford, OX4 7UX: as recommended on www.BoingBoing.net (The Aust Gate that is)]



Stephen King – *Lisey's Story*

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2006, 756pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 0-340-89893-3

Reviewed By Martin McGrath

Stephen King stopped being a 'writer' decades ago. Stephen King is a giant, steamrollering, cash-making machine that trawls across the landscape of our ecologically over-burdened planet raking off a vast slice of humanity's combined wealth before one day – just as the final sliver of rainforest is gasps its last – Stephen King will unfurl its true self before us and ascend back to the stars whence it came leaving behind nothing but a fading maniacal cackle.

Which is to say: Stephen King is review-proof and faced with his awesome power many reviewers have buckled and decided to side with the alien invader – these quislings have infiltrated many otherwise reliable journals and claim that King is a master of storytelling and language whose novels transcend their roots in gore and horror and belong in the literary canon.

King's habit of flattering the literary establishment (and himself) by making his central characters writers and by making his central theme the importance of storytelling has surely helped his acceptance and this habit is again on display in *Lisey's Story*.

Lisey is the widow of the late, fantastically-talented,

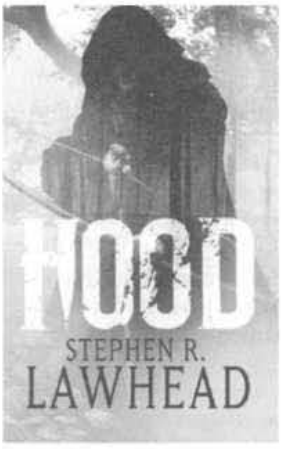
charismatic, endearingly-fragile and, of course, much-lamented author Scott Landon. Scott died two years ago but Lisey is only now coming to terms with her loss and beginning to think of starting life afresh. Suddenly, however, strange things begin to happen. Her sister slips into a coma and speaking to her in the voice of Scott. She finds herself threatened by a psychopath. Strange memories begin to surface of a place called Boo'ya Moon, the truth behind Scott's childhood and the monsters that haunted him.

The plot, though, doesn't much interest King. It is moved on by a series of 'bools' – clues left for Lisey by her dead husband – and improbable coincidences. Despite the formulaic attentions of the book's psychopath, any sense of tension in the story is built almost entirely on cheap tricks – convenient amnesia imposed on the characters and evasion on behalf of the author – making *Lisey's Story* an infuriating read.

King's focus is not, then, on an intricately constructed plot but on the relationship between Scott and Lisey and the nature of a long marriage. But it is precisely at this point that the novel feels the weakest. Scott is, frankly, a smart-aleck prick who prances around the world dispensing homespun (half-baked) wisdom while dragging his wife – unacknowledged, unheralded – along as a crutch for his emotional inadequacies. But Lisey is worse, a simpleton or a coward, she doesn't just suffer Scott's grandiosity, she revels in her place three steps behind her husband lacking not just personal ambition but any shred of personal dignity.

And then there's the language. *Lisey's Story* is a fireworks display of writerly tricks – chapters, viewpoints, time periods all change in mid-sentence – but none are so painfully irritating as the private language between Scott and Lisey. From "puffickly hoo-yuge" to "Manda bunny" being trapped with these two is like being stuck in a lift with one of those couples who wear matching cagoules, carry around Thermos flasks of weak tea and pictures of their cats and who, for years after a single chance meeting in Corfu, send you Christmas cards containing threats of impending visits. They are possessed of both mind-boggling inanity and a terrifying insularity.

With *Lisey's Story* Stephen King is revealed as an author who both believes his own hype and is unable to live up to it. It is a misconceived attempt to tie King's undisputed talent for telling an engaging story to a form that allows him to stake a claim to greater literary pretensions. But King, whatever his ability as a shifter of books and whatever the claims of fans and critics, is not capable of emotional or psychological insight. *Lisey's Story* fails to offer the chills and spills of a traditional King story but lacks the sophistication of character and theme of a truly literary novel.



Stephen R. Lawhead – *Hood*

Atom, London, 2006, 438pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 1-904233-70-8

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

This novel is sub-titled 'King Raven: Book One', so clearly it is the beginning of a series. Lawhead has taken the legend of Robin Hood and relocated it a century earlier in the Welsh Marches, when the Normans, having subjugated England, were beginning their incursions into Wales. He explains the reasons for his changes in a postscript to the book; his theories are interesting but the way he has chosen to embody them in a novel is less so.

The fantasy elements are slight; most of the apparent magic is trickery, and known to the reader to be so. Therefore the book must be read as a historical novel, and Lawhead himself states that he has placed his speculative Welsh Robin in the year 1093, during the reign of William Rufus. However, as a historical novel it falls down: I suspected this in chapter three when a Norman baron, on arriving home, lights the candles and then sits down to write a letter. I was convinced of it later in the book when – in a novel set a hundred years before the birth of Francis of Assisi – Lawhead introduces Friar Tuck.

Bran ap Brychan, who will eventually become Robin Hood, is the son of the king of a small Welsh domain, Elfael. At the opening of the book his father is killed fighting against the Norman baron to whom William Rufus has granted his lands. With no possibility of dislodging the baron by force, or of redress from the king, Bran's first instinct is to flee, but events, and the influence of the wise woman Angharad, conspire to place him at the head of a band of guerrilla fighters. Along the way, Lawhead introduces Robin's traditional companions, Little John, Friar Tuck and Maid Marian, and one at least of his traditional enemies, Guy of Gisborne. The end of the novel sees Bran/Robin established in the forest; there's obviously much more material from Robin's later career to be covered in subsequent books.

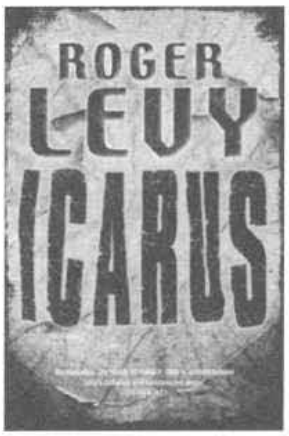
The plot is fast-paced but tends to be predictable, perhaps because we know what Bran's fate must be. As a character, he doesn't have enough depth or complexity to engage my interest in his fate. With the exception of Angharad – a beautifully realised character – his friends and followers are two-dimensional, and the Norman invaders are stereotyped as arrogant, cruel and treacherous. The same stereotyping appears among the clergy: while the Welsh men of God are good and selfless, if naïve, the Normans are venal and hypocritical.

The style is readable, but doesn't light any fires, and there's evidence of carelessness in the writing or the copy-editing. For example, the character who asks for the same information to be explained to him on two separate occasions. And the 'said-bookisms' become downright irritating. Even though I think the basic idea is interesting, I shan't be looking for the next volume.

Roger Levy – *Icarus*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 432pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07860-X

Reviewed by Paul Raven



Haven is a barren world, its surface scoured by ferocious winds. The human colony it holds has burrowed into the rock of the planet – years of desperate effort to stay alive have rendered their origins all but forgotten. What remains is held in the Vault, rigidly mediated by the Directorate of Fact. Storytelling is forbidden, as is the speaking of 'unFact'. When two survey-drillers discover a vessel buried in a sea of solidified magma, far out beyond the boundaries of the colony, Fact moves to conceal the evidence that it contains. One of the Surveyors, Quill, manages to escape alive with some mysterious artefacts and a whole lot of questions. He is a wanted man, on the run and in search of the truth.

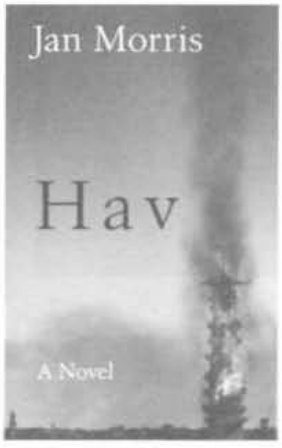
Haze, by contrast, is a lush jungle world. But life there is scarcely more idyllic than on Haven – the forest holds villages

of subsistence-farming peasants, living in thrall to the ruling caste of Lords who inhabit the AngWat temple-compound. Personal possessions are forbidden – the villagers are not even allowed to refer to children as being 'theirs'. Dissent against the rule of the Lords is anathema, but war between the villages is carefully engineered and encouraged. Petey's son Marten is taken to the AngWat by the Lords, as children sometimes are. A series of accidents and mishaps results in her turning outlaw, never to return to her village as she tries to uncover the mysteries that lay within the restricted compound.

The story of how these two worlds came to be centres on The Captain, and runs as a first-person retrospective narrative stitched between the action on Haven and Haze. Cap, as his associates call him, was a televangelist faith-healer on a near-future Earth, and his solipsistic history slowly fills the gaps as the book progresses. This demonstrates Levy's extraordinary skill with character, the first-person perspective means that we can only judge Cap by what he has to say about his own actions. At first, he seems like a fairly decent guy who is redeeming a childhood of abuse. But as his thread lengthens, and his interactions with the politics of a dying Earth are revealed, it becomes increasingly obvious that he is a monomaniacal sociopath of the highest order – a cunning, driven man with the charm and ruthlessness of a cobra. He stops at nothing to see his vision fulfilled – a vision that leads to Haven and Haze.

The core theme of *Icarus* is the concept of history, and also the mutable and viral nature of truth. The characters all have dark secrets and real human flaws – there are no paragons among them, and this makes it easier to sympathise with their often desperate actions. The echoes of Orwellian dystopia are resonant with today's world of governmental deceit and doublespeak, but have a timeless lesson as their axis. In the societies portrayed and in the writing itself, certainty is a fleeting thing, all the more precious for its scarcity. Near the end of the book, Marten experiences this in a revelatory moment; "Memory and knowledge were two different things, he realised, and neither was necessarily the truth." (p408) Perspective is everything, and judgements made in a vacuum of information are frequently revealed to be dangerously false. The truth must be mined, dug out from its grave of lies and obfuscation.

Icarus is a labyrinthine novel. Levy's measured pace of plot leaves the reader constantly yearning for the characters to unearth the next piece of the puzzle, as the story smoothly crescendos towards its climax. In some respects, this may be the book's only failing point – the perpetual demands it makes of the reader are a facet of modern sf that is much bemoaned by those who yearn for a simple all-action adventure story. Levy, perhaps, is an 'sf writer's sf writer' – a man unafraid to demonstrate his command of the genre's architecture at the risk of alienating its more pedestrian fans. However, readers who revel in the slow denouement of a story, and who hunger for depth of theme and character in the books they read, will find *Icarus* to be profoundly rewarding of their effort.



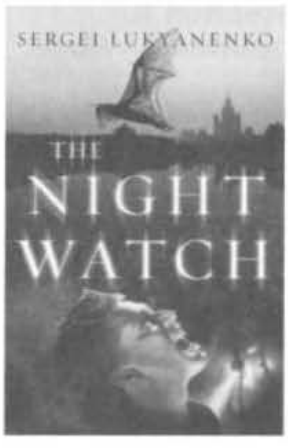
Jan Morris – *Hav*

Faber & Faber, London, 2006, 301pp, £16.99, h/b, ISBN 1-571-22983-2

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

The period, roughly, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s was the golden age of British travel writing, when richly evocative writers like Patrick Leigh Fermor, Colin Thubron and Norman Lewis were producing their best work. One of the finest and most distinctive members of that elite was Jan Morris, who was unusual in writing mostly about cities rather than journeys, and who managed to imbue the city with a vivid and individual personality. In 1985 she used all her distinctive qualities as a travel writer to produce an extraordinary fantasy, *Last Letters from Hav*. Written as a travelogue, it describes her sojourn of several months in the remote and independent land of Hav, a peninsula cut off from Anatolia by an immense and forbidding escarpment, reached primarily by direct rail line from Moscow, and at various times occupied by Greeks, Arabs, Russians, Chinese, British and others. Here the Cathars still survive, the British agency seems to be a central point in the espionage game, there are troglodytes still living in the escarpment, and traditions from the time of the Saracens still survive. It is a book suffused with a sense of loss, a prolonged and exquisite lament for the passing of a world. Although there are lots of names in the book, lots of people that 'Jan' encounters during her stay, there are few real characters, but the character of Hav itself is huge and overwhelming. I cannot think of a single fantasy writer who could not learn from this book how to give depth and solidity to a place by the patient accumulation of detail: the way the market operates, the unique Havian fruit of snow raspberries, the extraordinary roof race, the old woman living in seclusion who still recalls when Hav was a summer retreat for Tsarist aristocracy, the curious architecture of the Chinese tower in the old town. And on and on and on, by the end you understand why some readers of the original novel believed it described a real place.

At the end of that first book Morris was forced to flee Hav ahead of unknown invaders. Now, twenty years later, she has returned. This new volume reprints *Last Letters from Hav* and adds to it a novella, 'Hav of the Mymidons'. If the original novel was a lament for the passing of the eccentric, individualistic old world, this new novella is a lament for the world that has replaced it. After the 'Incursion', as it became known, the secret Cathars in Hav emerged to take control of the country, proving their descent from the Mymidons of Achilles and establishing a religious republic. Although she meets many of the same characters, it is hard to believe that this is the same place. The character has changed dramatically. The rare snow raspberries are now flavourless, mass-produced GM crops; the roof race has lost all its idiosyncratic nature thanks to health and safety officers, and religious repression has replaced divergence with conformity. There are hi-tech wonders to appreciate, and the people of Hav are certainly better off, but at what cost. If *Last Letters from Hav* is an exercise in nostalgia, the sequel represents a more straightforward sadness.



Sergei Lukyanenko – *The Night Watch*

William Heinemann, London, 2006, 496pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-434-01412-5

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

A welcome translation for the Russian triptych of stories *The Night Watch*, this

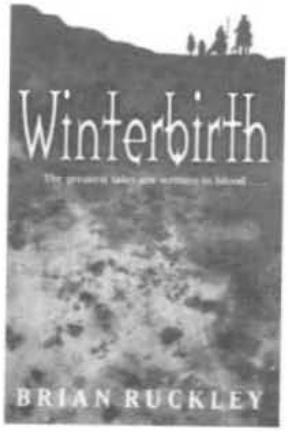
is an ideal way to transport yourself to a contemporary Russia where vampires and magicians are part of the populace.

Anton is an Other, a person who can enter the Twilight world and perform limited acts of magic. Magicians walk among us. Vampires and shape-shifters walk among us too, some working for the Light and some for the Dark. The Light and Dark have existed together under a fragile truce for some years – the Day Watch keep check on the Light Others, the Night Watch on the Dark. Anton works for the Night Watch, ensuring that the Dark keeps in line. One day two apparently unconnected incidents – saving a potentially powerful Other boy called Egor from a vampire and the discovery of a possible catastrophic curse vortex above the head of a young girl named Svetlana – initiates a train of events that places the balance of Light and Dark in jeopardy. Anton is assigned a partner, Olga, whose past misdemeanours have been punished by keeping her almost completely transformed into the shape of an owl. This unlikely pair must prevent the curse from devastating Moscow and hopefully turn the still wavering Egor to the side of Light. However, as events escalate Anton begins to form suspicions that Light and Dark, good and evil are not clear cut and perhaps there is a wider agenda, one in which he is just an expendable pawn.

A tightly realised fantasy *The Night Watch* succeeds because it creates a believable parallel universe that co-exists with us. Rather than place the conflicts of Light and Dark into simple camps of good and evil, Lukyanenko populates his world with ambiguity and mistrust worthy of a Cold War thriller. Being on the side of good doesn't make you morally good – the world of the Light Others is one where the manipulation of mankind has resulted in destruction and misery, not happiness and comfort. It's these complex issues of morality that make the book so chilling and interesting but they don't depart from the matter in hand which is to create an entertaining fantasy world, where powerful forces can battle as much with ideology as they can with magical violence. It is a book of contrasts, where a piece of chalk can be as important as a city full of people, where good commits evil for what it sees as a greater cause and evil can help peace and creativity.

For anyone familiar with the film version of *The Night Watch*, which had exposure in the UK before this translation of the book was released, the novel will come as a surprise. Although basically unaltered, the film is far more bombastic, filled with visual flourishes and set pieces that emphasise the epic scale of battle – it's a far less restrained work that actually explores beyond the book's focus on Anton. In contrast the book eschews pyrotechnic excess (something that is, of course, easier to do in novel form – words have a far lower budget than CGI) for a noirish thriller tone with all the requisite twists and turns that this entails. This is a far more downbeat work, though no less epic in overall design, where the freedom of the novel form allows the atmosphere of post-Soviet Russia to instil itself in the reader's consciousness. It is also worth noting that the film only concerns itself with the first third of the novel.

If you are after a solid supernatural thriller with noir fiction undertones then look no further, *The Night Watch* is an imaginative, epic and, paradoxically, down to earth read. Recommended.



Brian Ruckley – *Winterbirth*

Orbit, London, 2006, 546pp, £12.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1 84149 423 2

Reviewed by Colin Bird

The five races of the Second Age have become four: the warlike Huanin and Kyrinin have wiped out the cruel wolfenkind of the Whreinin, leaving the remaining four races, including the Saolin and Anain, to dominate the world to the disappointment of the Gods who created them all to coexist.

Into the Third Age – the year 942 and the two tainted races have been all but destroyed by constant warfare allowing the other races to found The Bloods, led by the Thane of Thanes. But a heretic faction rises up, known as the Black Road, and they are finally exiled beyond the Vale of Stones after a rout which includes an heroic stand, related in this novel's prologue, which is reminiscent of the Battle of Thermopylae.

The main story of *Winterbirth* (subtitled – The Godless World: Book One) begins in the year 1102 with a staple sequence for any heroic fantasy saga: the introduction of the crown prince in a boar hunt in which Orisian, sixteen-year old heir to the kingdom, demonstrates a streak of recklessness and courage which will develop as the saga progresses.

Soon the Black Road are fighting their way back into the Godless World, and the various True Bloods are thrown into tales of political intrigue and warfare. Ruckley counterpoints the large scale events with personal tales of courage and adventure.

Comparisons are being made, at least by the publisher, between Ruckley and the late David Gemmell (amongst others) and Ruckley will do remarkably well to match Gemmell's impressive output of 28 novels which are apparently all still in print at the time of writing.

Epic fantasy tends to obey an unyielding formula and is not a well-reviewed branch of literature for that reason. I would suggest that, as a reaction, fantasy authors have shrugged off hopes of critical attention and concentrated on honing their skills at pure storytelling. As a result several authors have ploughed long, lucratively successful furrows, meeting the expectations of their audience and offering little more to general readers. I would suggest that Ruckley (in an extremely well-realised first novel) offers evidence here that he could well follow along in that tradition.

Personally I long for a day when we find standalone volumes of epic fantasy with no maps and unpronounceable names... but why change a winning formula?

Karl Schroeder – *Sun of Suns*

Tor, New York, 2006, 320pp, $24.95, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-765-31543-2

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

What sprang to mind when I first started reading *Sun of Suns* was Bob Shaw's *The Ragged Astronauts;* not so much the concept, but the way it fired my imagination. Bob Shaw's novel

is set on two planets that have a shared atmosphere but no metal, and people could travel between the two worlds by wooden spaceships. In the *Sun of Suns*, Karl Schoeder hasn't created a copy of this at all: far from it. But in a similar way he has come up with something so different from the standard sf that it is difficult not to find this appealing. The novel is set in Virga (not to be confused with Virgo, Virgin or Viagra), a fullerene balloon three thousand kilometres in diameter, filled with water, air and rock. The inhabitants live on wooden and rope towns spun to give gravity and orbit man-made fusion suns for warmth and light. Virga is a place of fierce air currents, darkness, mist and cold.

The novel begins with the murder of Hayden Griffin's parents, rebels intent on creating their own sun so that their city can be free from the nation of Slipstream. The action then takes us to Hayden six years later and in the service of Lady Venera Fanning, the wife of Admiral Chaison Fanning, who headed the fleet that killed Hayden's parents. Hayden is desperate for revenge, but before he can fulfil his murderous intention, Slipstream is attacked. The Slipstream fleet is launched and Hayden finds himself accompanying Venera on the Admiral's vessel, but the vessel doesn't go with the rest of the fleet and separately heads out to Candesce, the Sun of Suns, but few aboard know why. This is a mission with risks not just from the enemy but from pirates as well, pirates Hayden was enslaved by in his adolescence.

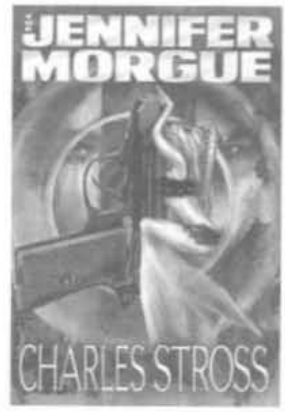
This should be swashbuckling, melodramatic pulp, but the concept of Virga and some of the characters stop *Sun of Suns* being just another run of the mill adventure, another quasi-*Pirates of the Caribbean* in space. To me, the most interesting characters were Lady Venera Fanning and Aubri Mahallan. Venera has motives of her own, being from an aristocratic family and schemed into marrying the Admiral. Aubri is the enigmatic armourer, who originally came from outside Virga. Aubri enjoys being in Virga, a place where there is still room to create and understand things, free from the outside world where Artificial Nature does all of Mankind's thinking, but the real reasons for Aubri being in Virga are not known, not even to herself.

Altogether, with the intrigue, the political struggles, the bloodlust, the revenge and so on, this should make for a thrilling, roller coaster of a read, but for some reason doesn't, at least not for me. Part of this is possibly due to marketing and the central protagonist. The blurb proclaims that Hayden is 'young, bitter and friendless... a very dangerous man'. Unfortunately, he's not particularly dangerous or bitter after the first few chapters. Furthermore, his time with the pirates could have been expanded more (possibly another book in the series?). The problem isn't that Hayden is a badly-drawn character as such, but at the same time he didn't come across as dark and brooding as he could have been portrayed. Usually, I find that men can't write female characters, but in this case, Schroeder has created better female characters than male. Ultimately, Hayden is not charismatic or compelling. Aubri and Venera are more interesting characters, but unfortunately *Sun of Suns* is not their story. Perhaps, theirs will be told in other books in the series. I can only hope this is true and Hayden either develops and grows or takes a backseat to more interesting characters.

Charles Stross – *The Jennifer Morgue*

Golden Gryphon Press, Urbana, 2006, 340pp, $25.95, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-930846-45-2

Reviewed by Paul Raven



Charles Stross is probably best known for his singularity-flavoured science fiction, exemplified by the fix-up novel *Accelerando* (which netted its author an award from the World Transhumanist Association, as well as nominations for more conventional sfnal plaudits). However, he's unafraid to trek off into different pastures, as *The Jennifer Morgue* demonstrates – there are sf tropes, plus fantastic and Lovecraftian horror elements, all wrapped up in another genre tradition that Stross has openly expressed his affection for – the classic British spy thriller.

Naturally, Stross being Stross, there's more than a *soupçon* of dry humour involved. So we have as our hero one Bob Howard, who is employed as a computer expert (read as 'hacker') by 'The Laundry', a branch of the British Secret Service devoted to keeping a lid on multidimensional manifestations. You see, magic is just mathematics, which means that the age of ubiquitous computing has made it very easy for some naïve or stupid coder to accidentally invoke a hungry daemon or vengeful demigod, simply by trying to number-crunch the wrong formula. To paraphrase Bob, he's no necromancer himself, but "he does countermeasures". Basically, he's a clean-up artist.

Or at least he used to be – right up until his employers saddled him with some active duty fieldwork, psychically entangled him with a demonically-possessed mermaid-in-mufti, and dispatched him to the Caribbean with instructions to infiltrate the machinations of a megalomaniac corporate über-villain, complete with gun-toting goons, an immense yacht-fortress and a foul-tempered fluffy white cat.

If that sounds a little obvious, it's supposed to. In many ways, *The Jennifer Morgue* is a work of metafiction – a playful, knowing and openly self-confessed deconstruction of James Bond novel and movie plots, mocking them and revelling in them at the same time. Each supporting character is a gag or cliché in his or her own right; for example, Pinky and Brains, a pair of exceptionally camp and gadget-obsessed tech support operatives who furnish Bob with the requisite tools for the task. And the gadgets themselves, of course; Bob doesn't get given Bond's Aston Martin and Walther PPK, but has to make do with a two-seater Smart car and a Treo smartphone that fires silver-jacketed exorcism rounds. Bob's innate cynicism comes through in the first-person narration, which deflects the outright silliness of the ideas into the realm of tragic comedy and farce and avoids the snake-pit of superficial spoof.

But does it work? Stross chipped into a recent resurgence of internet-based debate regarding the perennial 'decline and fall of the genre' meme. In a nutshell, he suggested that one way to grow sf's readership might be to 'pitch for the Slashdot generation', to write explicitly for an audience of intelligent and geekish outsiders who should (by rights and tradition) be sf literature's core audience – and would be, if there was more material that flicked the right switches for them. *The Jennifer Morgue* seems to encapsulate this demographic targeting, with our hero Bob providing a sympathetic lead to identify with. He

hates management, ties and PowerPoint presentations; he shops online for T-shirts emblazoned with internet in-jokes; he is the socially-stunted computer nerd at your office, thrust into an unfamiliar world of deadly intrigue and occult nastiness which he sets about to hack as if it were a defective operating system.

It's a fun book. And it's funny too, provided you either know the Bond clichés backwards or you're a paid-up member of the geek-and-proud subculture – probably doubly funny, should you place in the intersection of those two sets. And therein lies the flaw: *The Jennifer Morgue* is somewhat exclusive, in that a lot of the in-jokes and post-modernist nudges will fly straight past the average bookstore browser. However, as a naked pitch for the I.T. crowd whose *lingua franca* is one of irony, knowing pastiche and a lot of acronyms, it fits the bill perfectly. Only time will tell just how hungry that audience really is for long-form written fiction. But if Stross has surmised correctly, *The Jennifer Morgue*'s place in the padded laptop-bags of the techno-elite is already reserved.

Steven Utley – *Where or When*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2006, 235pp, £25.00, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-904619-61-4

Reviewed by Peter Young

Steven Utley has been around for a sufficient amount of time that enough of us (and I exclude myself here) have been long familiar with his writing, though his is still a name that probably exists in the peripheral consciousness of many who don't read much short-form sf. Yes, I'm trying to avoid using that word 'marginal' here, because clearly, on the evidence of *Where or When*, Utley ought not to be seen this way. He's already there in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* as "a figure of edgy salience in the field", and Utley wryly describes himself as "an internationally unknown author" given that his several critically-acclaimed collections, including two of verse, have perennially appeared as small-press editions around the world and therefore have always been somewhat hard to find. And then there is the matter of novels, or lack of them. But he's been penning science fiction for at least thirty years, and *Where or When* comes as a necessary compendium of his noteable 'chrononaut' time travel tales, which date as far back as 1975 and as recently as the two penned especially for this collection (the last of them giving us a clever temporal fix on John Clute). But given that time travel is such a common trope, and setting aside the fact that these short stories are all loosely connected within the same past/present/future timeline, what makes a time-travel tale identifiable as a Steven Utley tale and, moreover, what is there in *Where or When* that ought to make these stories more widely known?

First, Utley's well-rendered version of time travel begins as an evolutionary advance, with the kind of atavistic experience seen in Jack London's *Before Adam*, an unnerving natural talent that throws people back into the minds of creatures from prehistory. It's a rare thing and not at all understood. Journeys to the past begin as random mental events with time paradoxes avoided, the past remaining unalterable without the easy cop-out of branching realities. Over time this talent is refined, used and expanded to meddle in human affairs; no scientific explanation is offered as to how it is done, it's just how the 'chrononaut' human mind and body have evolved. Second, all these stories are particularly commendable in that Utley can clearly construct solid short-form science fiction with the minimum of literal science fictional reference, paring it down to give each story a barely detectable coat-hanger of unconformity upon which more explicable events take place, making each tale particularly accessible. All are different in intent as an episode of horror, romance, ripping yarn, an excursion into history or a comedy, with the constant of a well-tempered dryness in style that lets the reader in on just enough strangeness to buck the senses. Conversely, if a few of the stories may lack sufficient punch they instead deliver a few clever twists, either with unexpected observation, wit or sheer playfulness. Utley may have found a comfortable niche out there on the fringes, but the fact that he's been with us so long and is still so highly regarded means – along with the varied and many strengths of *Where or When* – that his previous collections would also be worth looking out for.

Peter Watts – *Blindsight*

Tor, New York, 2006, 384pp, $25.95, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-765-31218-2

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Have you ever known you were reading a book of genius, but couldn't quite get your head round it and enjoy it as much as you knew you were supposed to? This is the feeling I have with *Blindsight*, the first book that I've read by Canadian author Peter Watts, previously known for his Rifters trilogy. 'Blindsight', by the way, is when the eyes can see something but the brain refuses to register it, so you don't see it except with your subconscious.

It's the end of the twenty-first century and humanity is active in almost all of the Solar System. Suddenly Earth is hit by sixty-five thousand alien probes, all of which are gathering information about us. After that, nothing – until a human probe out beyond the orbit of Neptune picks up a faint signal beaming out of the Solar System. Whoever gathered the information must be sending it back home, but they haven't made any attempt to communicate with us. The ultimate insult – an alien race that has studied us and decided we're not interesting enough to talk to!

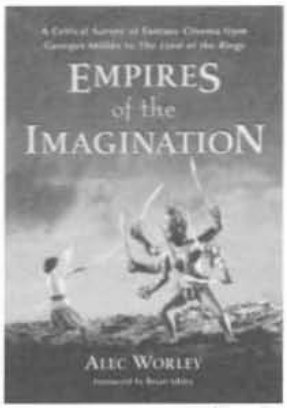
An alien mothership is traced to the Oort Cloud, and a bizarre crew is gathered for a mission to try to establish contact – aboard the *Theseus* are a linguist with four surgically-engineered multiple personalities, a cyborg biologist with augmented senses including X-rays and ultrasound, a pacifist soldier with an army of warrior droids, and the narrator, Siri Keeton, who had half his brain removed in childhood to cure serious epilepsy. Siri has no understanding of human feelings and behaviour – he had to work out who his friends and enemies were by compiling lists of actions which other people label 'friendly' or 'hostile' and tick them off for each person he knew. Despite this he has savant-like abilities that make him a formidable synthesist – an 'informational topologist' who can mine data from disparate sources to discover links which may help in communicating with the aliens and predict their actions. The *Theseus* is commanded by an AI called the Captain, while Jukka Sarasti, the leader of the expedition, is, believe it or not, a vampire. Yes, vampires really did exist (albeit in the Neolithic, not 19th Century Transylvania) and have been recreated from ancient DNA just like Michael Crichton's dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*. Their advantage is that they're smarter, stronger, faster and more agile than ordinary humans, which makes Sarasti an obvious choice as leader of such a potentially dangerous trip. The trouble is, despite him having brought his personal food supply, the other members of the crew can't help feeling he regards them as prey, and it's possible he feels the same way…

When the *Theseus* arrives in the Oort after a couple of years

in cryogenic sleep the crew find and make contact with the gigantic alien ship. The response is in perfect English, which shows the aliens have indeed been studying us. They call their ship *Rorschach* (after Hermann Rorschach, the Swiss psychiatrist who invented the ink blot test method of psychological evaluation). However, their only purpose for making contact is to tell the *Theseus* to stay away – it's 'too dangerous' to approach. This is when the sensible thing would be to say "Okay, guys, nice to meet you." And go. Instead, the humans ignore the warning, visit the alien ship and eventually trigger off a conflict which has disastrous consequences for *Theseus* and its crew, and possibly humanity. Along the way they do manage to collect a couple of alien prisoners to study. Watts' aliens are uniquely weird, frighteningly intelligent even though they may not be actually sentient at all, and don't possess DNA or an equivalent.

Watts, who is a marine biologist from Toronto, completes the book with a long 'Notes and References' section, full of footnotes referencing academic articles, that reads like an academic article itself. His explanation of the origin of vampires, their need for human blood and their antipathy towards crosses, is particularly fascinating. His purpose in writing the book was to explore the issues of intelligence and sentience, how the senses inform the brain, and how the body initiates motor actions. As he says – if a musician thinks about what their fingers are doing, they can't play…

This is the very definition of hard sf, a densely-written hard-nosed science-based tale that doesn't spare the characters. I found it hard to read, but I'm sure that if you like this kind of sf, you'll *love* this! Expect awards…



Alec Worley – *Empires of the Imagination: A Critical Survey of Fantasy Cinema from Georges Melies to the Lord of the Rings*

McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2006, 288pp, £31.50, h/b, ISBN 0-7864-2324-2

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

As its (sub)-title suggests *Empires of the Imagination* takes us right back to the origins of effects cinema to examine the history of the fantasy film. Cinema is, of course, about tricking the audience into believing that something is real when its whole purpose is to celebrate its own artifice. This is as true of documentaries as it is of westerns or science fiction films but arguably it's in the world of fantasy cinema that the joy of making the unreal become real is at its most pure. Because of this, though, the term fantasy becomes quite a slippery fellow – yes, you can be pretty sure that any film featuring pointy ears, magic and names with a paucity of vowels has a pretty strong chance of being a fantasy film but what about when the real world becomes slightly or tangentially associated with the fantastic? It's a tricky question that Alec Worley goes some way to answering – after all, *Eastenders* has as little bearing on real life as *Krull*, so does that make it fantasy? Splitting the fantasy film genre (including a couple of examples from television when the influence is too important to restrict matters to the purely cinematic) into distinct categories and sub-categories has a number of advantages. Firstly it means that Worley can provide us with information about early cinema throughout the book rather than a strictly chronological overview which would have sorely tried the patience of someone itching to get to Ray Harryhausen. It also means that each section has a more rigid focus thematically. This is essential because there have been an awful lot of fantasy films made (and, let's face it, a lot of awful fantasy films) and Worley has done his utmost to track them down like rabid wargs. While there are inevitably omissions (the sections that include Russian fantasy films are welcome but because of space restrictions and print availability they are limited in number, and a lot of Asian fantasy is absent) you can still admire the ambition of the exercise. At times this can be as exhausting as its attempts to be exhaustive, but because this is a reference work it's an accepted part of the process.

When given a little more space to examine the films Worley lets both his enthusiasm show and his vitriol flow. Those used to academically inclined books being less opinionated and more objective are in for a pleasant surprise here – Worley does not mince his words when damning a film (*Hook* is rightfully expressed as "a nadir in regressive fantasies") and has no problems in sacrificing sacred cows if he feels the need. Equally he champions films often maligned – notably, and quite rightly, he praises John Milius's *Conan the Barbarian*, waves the flag for Gilliam's oft-derided *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* and even finds moderately reasonable things to say about John McTiernan's Schwarzenegger flop *Last Action Hero*. He really reaches his element when touching upon the spin-offs and rip-offs of Conan, the low budget 1980's revival of the sword and sandal film. It's clear that Worley recognises these as ludicrous examples of film-making, poverty-row hack 'n' slash or exploitation flicks with has-been actors and second rate bodybuilders, but it's also plain that he relishes every guilty minute in their muddled company. This is ultimately what you take from the book – a love for the genre that transcends its academic intentions. It's willing to love an ugly straight-to-video atrocity as it castigates a prettier and wealthier Hollywood movie that really should have known better.

Worley argues the case for fantasy cinema well, he champions what, for many, is a hopeless cause – a genre reviled along with its sisters horror and science fiction to form a much maligned triumvirate. (*Lord of the Rings* notwithstanding, that's not a fantasy film it's a "remarkable achievement" – an argument that led to far too many bloated imitators in the literary world, let's hope it's a trend not repeated in the cinematic one.) For the most part Worley succeeds – at times *Empires of the Imagination* becomes an impassioned and enthusiastic read that really makes you want to seek out the more obscure titles, don a loincloth and believe in fairies. Which, of course, we do. We do. If there is a dead Tinkerbell in this ointment, though, it is that old bugbear of McFarland's pricing policy. Being aimed at the academic market the price tag seems far too harsh, especially considering the absence of colour illustrations – something a book about a very visual genre is crying out for.

Zoran Zivkovic – *Impossible Stories*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2006, 389pp, £25.00, h/b, ISBN 1-904619-65-7

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

Impossible Stories is, depending on your perspective, a collection of twenty nine short stories or five novellas with a linking story. There is even a case to be made that it is,

in fact, a novel, with the stand-alone story 'The Telephone', presented as a epilogue, forming a potent linking device for all that has come before it.

A curious omission from Dan Hartland's recent overview of Zoran Zivkovic's stories (*Vector 247*) is any analysis of their interconnected nature, which is absolutely central to this book. Each of the five sequences demand to be read as a piece and it should be remembered that the story cycle 'The Library' won the World Fantasy Award as a novella rather than a set of stories. This is not to denigrate the individual stories themselves, but to miss the ebb and flow between them is to lose out on a significant element of the work. *Impossible Stories* is a very highly structured story collection.

Each of the story cycles has a strong linking device, and in most of them this goes beyond being a simple thematic connection. It is only 'Seven Touches of Music' that lacks any specific referencing within the stories, and in this case each tale is concerned with emotional gain and loss triggered in some way by, as the title suggests, the touch of music. The cumulative effect of the stories, finishing with 'The Violin-Maker', which is ultimately about the frustration a true artist feels at the impossibility of attaining perfection, becomes almost overwhelming.

The first three stories of 'Time Gifts' have the protagonist being given a gift that allows them some movement in time. On return, this gift proves to be both a blessing and a curse. These are all referenced by the fourth story, about an artist who may possibly be the author of the other stories and is certainly well aware of their dilemmas. 'The Library' presents bibliophilia in various forms, as both obsession and curse. Again, the final story, 'The Noble Library', links the others with the appearance of the book 'The Library' in an unwanted form that just won't go away. This referential linking is at its most complex in 'The Atelier', the final story in the 'Impossible Encounters' sequence. This features an encounter between the author of 'Impossible Encounters' and an unnamed character from the final story of that sequence. This encounter involves a discussion of the five preceding stories and the sequence as a whole. The sequence also exists as a finished work in each of the other five stories. This is a sort of mobius-strip-type self-referential story telling, of a type I've not encountered in such an accomplished form since Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

The final story cycle, 'Steps Through The Mist', opens with the story of a schoolgirl who describes the dreams of three of her classmates and her teacher. She also claims that she was able to move in and out of the dreams to observe them. To do so, she has to pass through a mist. It is no surprise then when the following four stories then tell these dreams in much more detail. The teacher's dream in 'The Alarm Clock on the Table' rounds out the cycle by re-introducing the mist, with the suggestion that the whole is a complex individual dream. The stories are also short treatises on fate over cause and effect. A young girl who can see all possible futures and must select the one that is followed. The true meaning of a gift given many years before. A fortune teller faced with a man threatening suicide because the life-line on his palm is so short, and so on. The dream structure of this cycle, coming as it does at the end of the book, combined with the regular appearance of characters throughout the book who may possibly be the author of some or all the stories, places the entire work into a single construct which it is the reader's task to fathom rather than the author's to explain. The epilogue story, 'The Telephone', about a blocked author receiving a phone call from the devil offering him recognition either before or after death but not both, completes this effect.

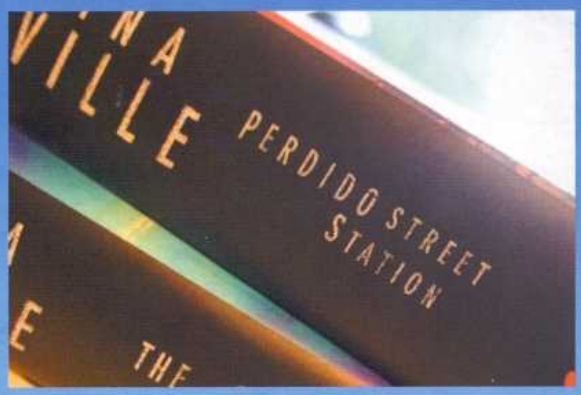
Much of this may sound overly tricksy, and there is a danger that this could be the case. *Impossible Stories* is saved from this by the simple beauty of the individual stories. These are tales of real people that the reader can genuinely care about. The man who meets his older self, the priest who encounters The Devil in his confessional through to the martyr shown the long-term effect of his sacrifice and the young woman who sees the fates of those catching trains while she waits impatiently for hers to arrive. There is an almost matter-of-fact quality to the prose which grounds the experiences of these people in a tangible reality, no matter how strange and unusual this may be. This has the slightly paradoxical effect of giving the stories a realistic feel, but with a certain dreamlike quality. The themes of loss and sacrifice, fate, redemption and the incomprehensibility of life run through these stories, and individually they are a joy to read.

The pleasures of *Impossible Stories* are many and complex, and the collection definitely rewards rereading. It is greatly to the credit of PS Publishing that this book exists in the form that its does, but I do feel that it is a shame that there are only 700 copies, as this should be considered essential reading for anyone vaguely interested in the literature of the fantastic.

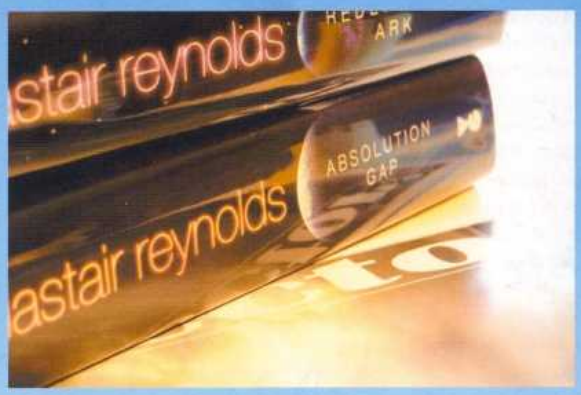
Vector #250 – Index of Books Reviewed

Reviewer's Key: AF – Alan Fraser; CB1 – Cherith Baldry; CB2 – Colin Bird; CH – Chris Hill; COMLB – Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc; DMB – Dave M. Roberts; GD – Gary Dalkin; MM – Martin McGrath; NH – Niall Harrison; PB – Paul Bateman; PH – Penny Hill; PK – Paul Kincaid; PR – Paul Raven; PY – Peter Young; SJ – Steve Jeffery; SJ – Stephen Jeffery; TH – Tom Hunter; TK – Tony Keen; VL – Vikki Lee;


THE STAR
FRACTION


PERDIDO STREET
STATION


ROGER LEVY
RICHARD
MORGAN
THE DE


stair reynolds
ABSOLUTION
GAP
astair reynolds


RIVER OF GODS


accelerando


LIVING NEXT DOOR
to the God of Love
NOVA SWING
No PRESENT LIKE TIME
VECTOR


evolution
a novel
GREETINGS,
CARBON-BAS
Genre
Evolution?