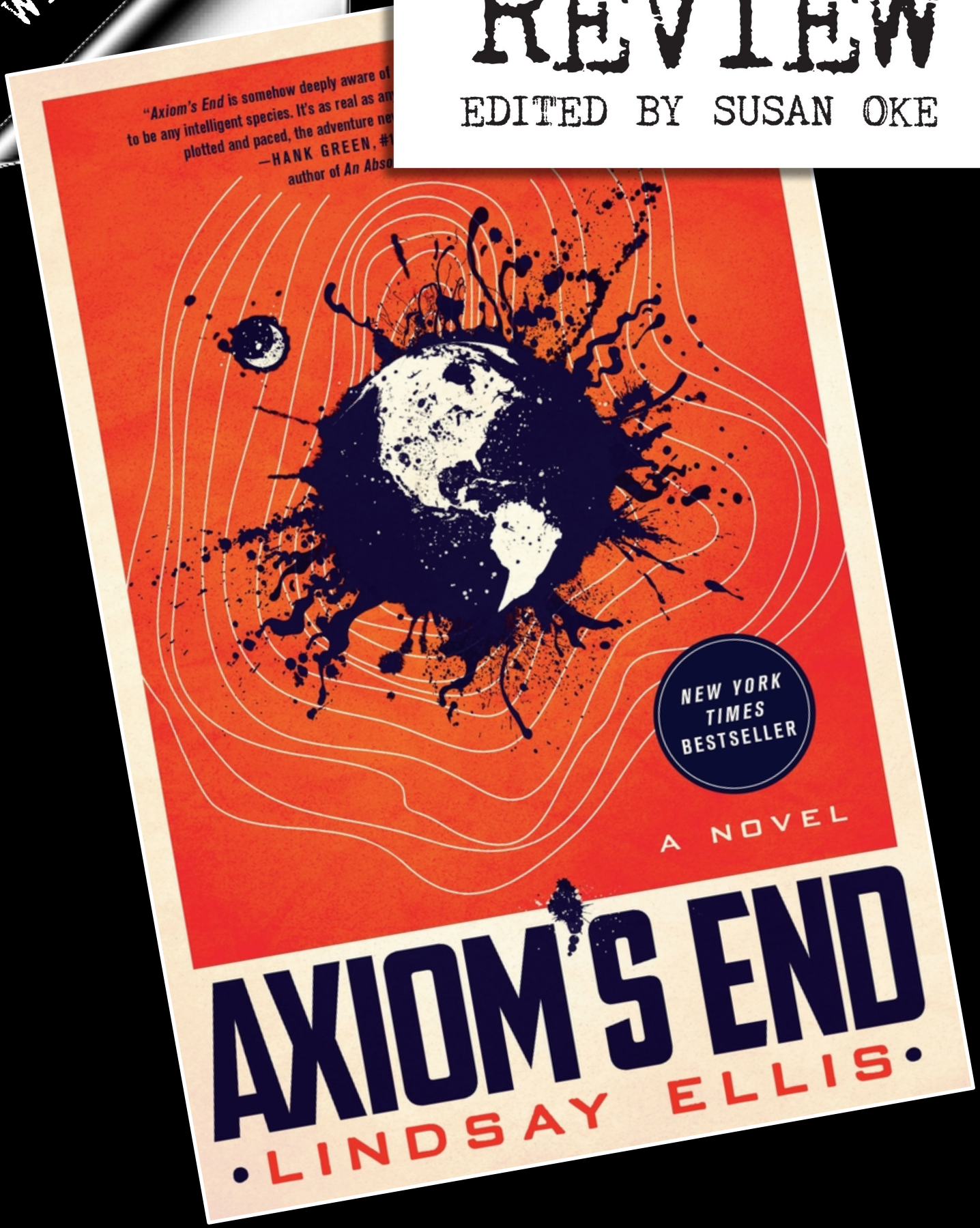
ISSUE 12
WINTER 2020

THE BSFA REVIEW

EDITED BY SUSAN OKE



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/ REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

THE BSFA REVIEW #12 – Winter 2020

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/ VIEW FROM THE EDITOR

The only permanent is change itself?

What's that saying? The only thing that's permanent is change itself. Well, they got that right. Change, by its very nature, generates energy, transforming and enhancing everything it touches.

We can harness that energy, make it work for us.

Within these pages are the solid manifestations of change and creativity at work. Worlds plucked from the ether and made real, both the beautiful and the beautifully terrible, conjured just for us. Transformed into words, skittering, marching, flowing across the page—invoked by opening the mind and laying bare the spirit (and helped along by regular infusions of tea, and if your very lucky, chocolate).

Intrepid explorers have immersed themselves in these words, soaked up meanings and innuendos, navigated their way through drama and suspense to provide—yes, you guessed it—more words. But these are special, succinct, appraisals of the myriad worlds out there. Selected, not purely on merit, but by the diverse paths they offer. Are you ready to dive in? Set free a flutter of ideas and concepts to challenge and provoke—or should that be evoke?—the geometric unfolding of further change?

We are creatives. We thrive in change. Who else has the skill to spin the world on its axis between one word and the next— between one breath and the next?

Get out there and create! Sing. Dance. Draw. Paint. Speak your poetry. Write your visions. Share.

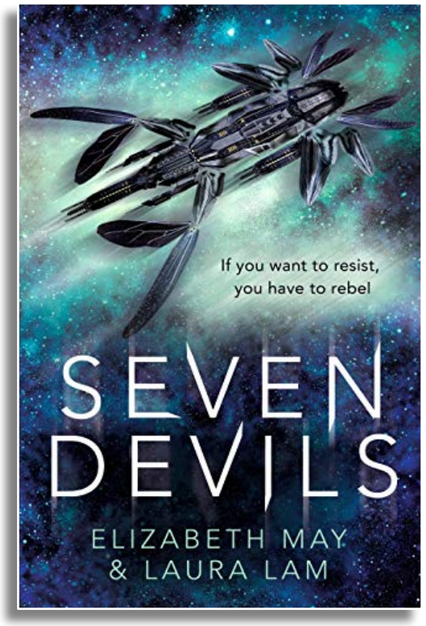
Sue Oke

Layout & Design ***Alex Bardy***

Seven Devils by Laura Lam and Elizabeth May (Gollancz, 2020)

Reviewed by Nick Hubble

'If you want to resist, you have to rebel' according to the tagline for *Seven Devils* but, despite the fast-paced presentation of this 'up your hummocks' feminist space opera, it's actually a bit more complicated than that. The novel opens with principal protagonist Eris killing soldiers of the Tholosian Empire with a succession of head shots from her antique blaster but, before her defection to the Novantaen Resistance, she was Princess Discordia, heir to the Archon of Tholos. Threaded throughout the narrative is the question of whether she might have simply waited to inherit and then reformed the Empire from within the hierarchy. Some might argue that this is a moot question given that what we see of the Tholosian Empire is so awful that there is no obvious pathway to redemption. A content note on Lam's website warns us that 'the Tholosian empire is misogynist, classist, racist/xenophobic (mostly against the Evoli, a human civilisation and long-term enemy–this is due to fear of their empathic abilities, not the colour of their skin. Both Tholosians and Evoli have varied skin tones), homophobic, and transphobic.'



So far, so 2020. In a recent edition of his *Guardian* column, Eric Brown commented that '*Seven Devils* is a curious mixture of the old-fashioned – novels of rebellion against an evil empire are ten-a-penny – and the up-to-the-minute: think *Star Wars* recast for the modern age.' It's not difficult to imagine the latter because that is exactly what the most recent *Stars Wars* trilogy was; in the Age of Trump, rebels fighting against the odds have become symbols of resistance. However, the problem shared by both *SW* episodes VII-IX and *Seven Devils* is the question of whether you can actually trust the rebels to build a better society. In both cases, the absence of any meaningful articulation of politics makes it difficult to decide. Sure, I would much rather hang out in the wisecracking company of Eris, (working-class) Clo, (teenage geek) Ariadne, (battle-hardened soldier) Nyx, and (companion) Rhea than with the Archon, Prince Damocles and their dystopian AI, the Oracle; but could our heroes actually run a functioning society. To their credit, Lamm and May do address this issue through Eris's identity crisis – which is exacerbated by her need to also impersonate an amoral arms dealer in what are the best and most subtle scenes in the book – but they are hampered by a wider moral and political framework which doesn't extend much beyond an acknowledgment of the need to keep the masses fed and housed.

Obviously, this is a crucial bench-mark but it is also a low one, which leaves few guidelines as to what good practice might be. Hence, Eris and Clo do little more than attempt unquestioningly (beyond snide backtalk) to carry out the commands of their rebel leaders, while all Ariadne, Rhea and Nyx have sustaining them is a dream of freedom from the tyranny of Tholos. In turn, this means that much of the dramatic tension of the novel is plot and action driven. This works well enough if you're reading on a Friday night with a glass of wine in hand but it is not so satisfying when you wake up in the early hours gripped by existential terror at the prospect of a future in which everything gets slowly and inexorably worse and worse.

Maybe the act of rebellion is not enough to support sufficiently meaningful resistance to effect genuine social transformation. You might think I'm taking a sledgehammer to a nut here in discussing what is after all intended to be an entertaining read. However, I can't help finding traces within *Seven Devils* of a desire for a more profound exploration of alternatives to the system. Perhaps the best example of this is the deprogramming by Ariadne and the others of the male Tholosian pilot, Cato, which, if I was a different type of literary critic, I might even read as a symbolic castration. But instead I read this scene as a sign of hope that 'we are not binary' and that we have a future beyond 'ones and twos'. Let's be more than rebels, let's make that future.

Born of the Sun: Adventures in our Solar System Edited by Mike Ashley (British Library, 2020)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

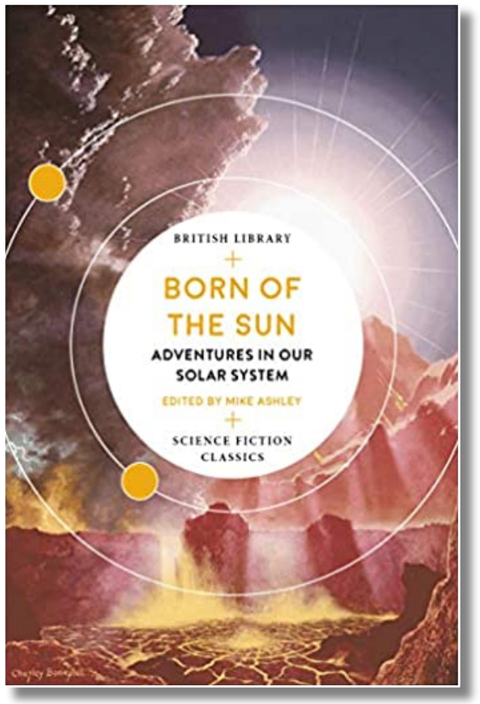
In Jack Williamson's thought variant short story, 'Born of the Sun' (*Astounding*, March 1934), Sol – like possibly every other star in the universe – is a sentient being and the planets are its incubating eggs. Well, you can't get much more "thought variant" than that! But since the Sun didn't give birth by self-genesis, Mike Ashley has excluded it from his whistle-stop tour of the solar system. (I would have plumped for 'The Golden Apples of the Sun' – which is neither here, there, nor anywhere else.)

Ashley explains in his general introduction that the stories will deal with "the old solar system, beloved of writers of science fiction, before the space probes discovered what was really out there." His Planetary Exclusion Order also applies to the Moon (but then he had placed Luna-set stories in the BL *Moonrise: The Golden Age of Lunar Adventures* anthology). Mars, however, could hardly have been left out of the batting order (see below). Following my usual form, I started by reading Ashley's erudite* prologues before reading the actual stories. *A redundant adjective, if ever there was one.

"So strap yourself in and prepare for a kaleidoscope of worlds!" (*ibid*.).

I'll get the Golden Oldies – or at least Silveries – out of the way first. 'Sunrise on Mercury' (1957), by Robert Silverberg, takes place on the hot-side/twilight zone/cold-side innermost planet that we used to know and love so well. It's one of his best early stories that never stops moving – or thinking. 'Garden is the Void' (1952) is Poul Anderson's haunting exploration of an asteroid: "A *green* asteroid." James Blish went over all Joycean again with 'How Beautiful with Banners' (1966), set on Titan, if not Saturn itself. *Par example*: "Feeling as naked as a peppermint soldier in his transparent film wrap, Dr. Ulla Hillstrom watched a flying cloak swirl away toward the black horizon with a certain consequent irony." 'Wait It Out' (1968) is a marooned-on-Pluto story that shows how well Larry Niven could write hard science fiction when he used to work at it. [And I, for one, will never accept Pluto as a 'dwarf' planet.] But my favourite classic story – and also my favourite story in the whole book – is Clifford Simak's 'Desertion' (1944). Set on and around Jupiter, it became an integral part of the fix-up novel *City* (1952) and inspired a crucial plot device in *Avatar* (watch and compare). The last four understated lines of this story never fail to move me. I envy anyone reading them for the first time.

As usual with Mike Ashley, however, it's the little-known or even unknown stories by ditto authors that make these BL anthologies so worthwhile. Leslie F. Stone (1905-1991) was one of the "pioneer women" contributors to the dawn-age sf pulp magazines. She set 'The Hell Planet' (1932) on the "real" Vulcan, once thought to lie between Mercury and the Sun. Background reading: *The Hunt for Vulcan* (2015), by Thomas Levenson. 'Foundling on Venus' (1954) by John and Dorothy De Courcy has a stinging twist in the tale. John Ashcroft (1936-1997) does Mars proud with 'The Lonely Path' (1961). 'Where No Man Walks' (1952), by E. R. James (1920-2012), about mining for industrial diamonds on the "surface" of Uranus, could well have been expanded to novella, or even novel-length. It's the strongest story in the book, in my opinion, after 'Desertion'. By the same token, 'A Baby on Neptune', a collaboration between Claire Winger Harris (1891-1968) and Miles J. Breuer (1889-1945) is by far the worst story in the book. "Ye Gods!" shouted Kuwamoto. "Just at the crucial moment, like a cheap novel serial! I suppose all we can do is nothing, and Elzar's child has been devoured by the filthy beast."



It just remains for me to say that *Born of the Sun* is yet another excellent theme anthology edited by Mike Ashley for the British Library. Buy it! Read it! Keep it!

Dominion: An Anthology of Speculative Fiction from Africa and the African Diaspora

Edited by Zelda Knight and Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki (Aurelia Leo, 2020)

Reviewed by Fiona Moore

It's become almost a cliché of conversations in sf circles: someone says that they would love to read more works by authors from non-Western, non-White, and/or postcolonial origins, but, they add, "I don't really know where to start." While the recent rise to prominence of African and African-diaspora authors like NK Jemisin, Nnedi Okorafor and Tade Thompson has been welcome, potential readers might still wonder where to look for writers in other sub-genres of sf, such as horror, Weird fiction, or post-apocalyptic fiction.

Dominion: An Anthology of Speculative Fiction from Africa and the African Diaspora provides a suitable answer to this question, being a sampler of a diverse range of stories by established African and African Diaspora authors, covering a startling range of genres that provides something for everyone. At the same time, however, there is plenty for those with a good understanding of Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism to appreciate.

All the stories were, however, at the very least interesting and in most cases very enjoyable to read. Some fit comfortably within familiar sf categorisations. "Trickin'", by Nicole Givens Kurtz, is a Hallowe'en-set horror piece which develops both the vampire and demonic-possession subgenres. "Sleep, Papa, Sleep" by Suyi Okungbowa Davies is also on the conventional horror spectrum, a Lagos-set story involving necromancy and revenant corpses to explore family relationships. On the science fiction side, "Red_bati" by Dilman Dila, about a former robot pet now repurposed as a mining robot after the death of its human owner, fits into the growing genre of stories exploring the morality of creating AI for human use; this example does a good job of handling the balance between making the AI sympathetic and not obscuring his non-human mindset.

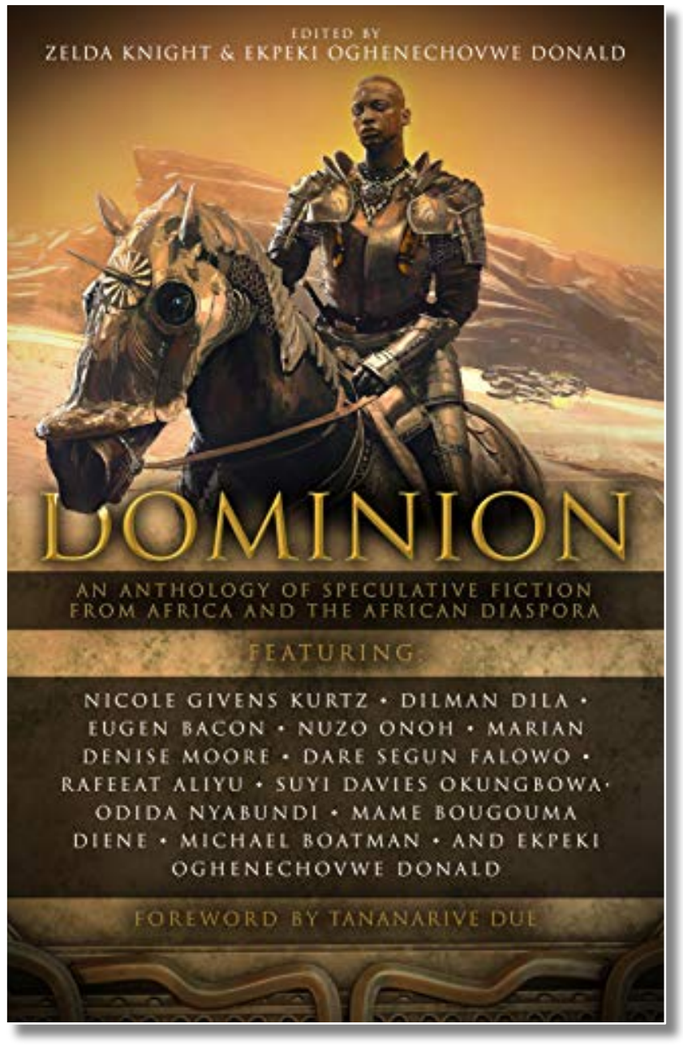
Other stories engage more directly with colonialism and postcolonialism. "A Maji Maji Chronicle" by Eugen Bacon is a fantasy about a mage who meddles with African colonial history, exploring questions about power, corruption and legitimate leadership. "To Say Nothing of Lost Figurines" by Rafeeat Aliyu is a mixed genre SF/fantasy, giving us a wizard from Earth tracking a magical object to an alien society and retrieving it with the aid of a half-human-half-alien woman. The idea of magic-as-science, a feature of much postcolonial sf including that from Africa and its diaspora, arises both as an embracing of the indigenous logics dismissed as superstition in a colonial context, and a challenge to the idea of "Western" science as hegemonic and objective. Here, it is counterpointed by the narrative of a mixed species character finding an escape from her oppressive birth society.

"The Unclean" by Nuzo Onoh is a genuinely terrifying horror fantasy about an Igbo woman in the 1950s in an abusive marriage; the best horror for me is always that which works as a metaphor for real-life issues, and the way in which the protagonist struggles against not just her husband and his family but the patriarchy of 1950s Nigeria in general is both reflected and amplified by the supernatural terrors she encounters (and sometimes brings into being herself). Mame Bougouma Diene's "The Satellite Charmer" engages directly with Chinese neo-colonial activities in Africa, the background involves two Chinese mining companies using satellite technology for resource extraction in Senegal, our foreground is the life of one man, Ibrahima, affected by the satellites in unexpected ways and how he, and they, converge to an explosive meeting.

History, and more specifically the loss of (and recovery of) history, also emerges as a key theme. "A Mastery of German" by Marian Denise Moore is a near-future hard-science story whose protagonist is an American project manager tasked with evaluating (and possibly cancelling) a project meant to enable the transfer of human memory for profit; at the same time, we have the counter-narrative of the protagonist's father attempting to trace the family history, thwarted by the invisibility of Black, enslaved and working-class people. The end result explores the meaning of individual and social memory not just in the USA, but any postcolonial country. "Emily," also by Marian Denise Moore, is the shortest piece in the book, a poem starting with a historical advertisement for the return of an escaped enslaved girl and imagining different parallel futures for her, picking up on the theme of lost history in Moore's earlier piece for the volume. "Thresher of Men" by Michael Boatman is a deeply satisfying revenge narrative: as a goddess takes vengeance on the White residents of an American town for past atrocities, we see the hidden history of the seemingly idyllic community emerge, beginning with a recent police shooting of a young Black man but going deeper into the past as the story unfolds, revealing the murder as one horror in a long chain of atrocities extending back decades, if not centuries.

Finally, some stories in this collection cross genres or defy classification. "Convergence In Chorus Architecture" by Dare Segun Falowo is a strange and surreal Weird fiction piece involving quests, boneships, human-arthropod fusions; the prose is beautiful and haunting and the imagery lingers. "Clanfall: Death of Kings" by Odida Nyabundi is a post-human post-apocalyptic adventure story, which reads like the setup to what could be a very interesting series, and one hopes the author develops this universe further. Finally, "Ife-Iyoku, The Tale of Imadeyunuagbon" by volume co-editor Ekpeki Oghenechovwe Donald tells the story of a society undone by its own essentialism; as the narrative twists and turns unexpectedly, so the story shifts genre, beginning as an epic heroic fantasy, before shifting into a postapocalyptic story with echoes of *The Chrysalids*, and shifting again into another divine revenge narrative.

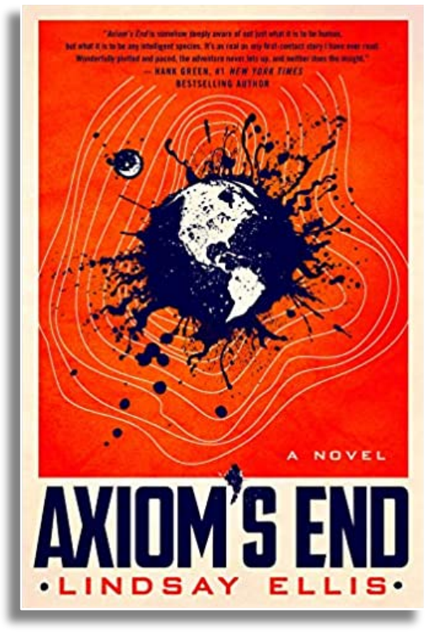
Dominion is a worthy addition to volumes like *Walking the Clouds* and *So Long Been Dreaming* which serve as introductions to postcolonial and indigenous science fictions and fantasies. The interesting range of stories, genres and themes provides a clear guideline for people looking for new work by African and African Diaspora writers in their favourite subgenres. However, the exploration and development of themes of colonialism, history, and memory, as well as the re-interpretation of colonialist sf tropes such as vampires and AI through African and/or Afrofuturist lenses, means that the volume also contributes to the ongoing dialogue on decolonising science fiction.



Axiom's End by Lindsay Ellis (Titan Books, 2020)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Shh! They're here – aliens! They've been here for years! Well, not actually *here* here, since *Axiom's End* is set in an alternate 2007, for reasons I don't quite understand, since it could be set now and not lose anything, except some snarky nostalgic references…



In this 2007, Julian Assange - er, sorry, I mean Nils Ortega, who is a *completely* different person to Julian Assange - is in exile. Already wanted by the USA, he's now cemented his reputation as a whistle-blower extraordinaire by releasing evidence that the United States government has been in contact with aliens. Assange – sorry, I mean Ortega – is estranged from his wife and children, who still live in the US, and who *Axiom's End* mostly follows. In fact, we never meet Ass- *ahem*, Ortega, it's his eldest daughter, Cora, who is the hero in the story, where a small meteor has hit the West Coast of the US. It's only a small meteor, but, y'know, a meteor, so still big news. Things get a bit conspiracy-*esque* when, not much later, a very similar second meteor lands nearby. Cosmic coincidence or *X-Files*?

Spoiler alert: it's *X-Files*.

We then find Cora, an otherwise unremarkable college dropout in her mid-20s, is probably already being followed by secret agents after her father's revelations and the first meteor. On the day of the second meteor she loses her job, her car and her temper with her mum, whom, she still (to her chagrin) lives with, the secret agents become decidedly less secret AND she realises there's now a decidedly non-terrestrial presence in her life. Are the exploits of her dad, Nils, to blame? Could this be connected to her paternal aunt's former top-secret job with the US government? Or is something bigger going on?

Spoiler alert: it's a mix of all three (except for the car – that really is just bad luck).

Now on the run, alone and completely out of her depth, Cora finds herself taking a terrifying road trip with an honest-to-god alien, code-named Ampersand. Even more terrifying than discovering that humanity is not alone in the universe, Cora discovers that we're not even alone on Earth: Ampersand has not come to talk to us, but to retrieve a group of his species, who have been locked in a government facility for 40 years. Still more terrifying than that is a third group of aliens threatening Ampersand's mission here; and while they might not like *his* kind they scarcely recognise *ours* as being worth the effort of speaking to.

No one has been unable to communicate with the first group of aliens – they haven't tried to communicate with us in all the years they've been here. Now, though, there's a new alien in town, and Ampersand is ready, willing and able (mostly) to communicate with us thanks to Babel fish-style technology he implants in Cora's ear. Which means that Cora has been chosen as Earth's first interstellar ambassador.

Or has she? Ampersand has a job to do on Earth and is surprisingly unwilling to act like an ambassador. Communications between the two are difficult, and while not actively dishonest, Ampersand is seldom forthcoming with information…

Does that sound complicated? Well, this is a book fascinated by both inadequate and failed communications, whether between families or aliens. How does first contact work if the aliens are unwilling to talk to us? What if your father is dedicated to freedom of information ("Truth is a human right," he says) but you know almost nothing about him?

Axiom's End is a properly fun and entertaining read; it's not too heavy, but not too stupid either, mostly walking a fine line between action and believability, while providing some interesting – and genuinely *alien* – aliens. Regular snatches of snarky humour and a little 'noughties nostalgia lightening the mood between moments of thoughtful horror at what first contact might *really* mean for us.

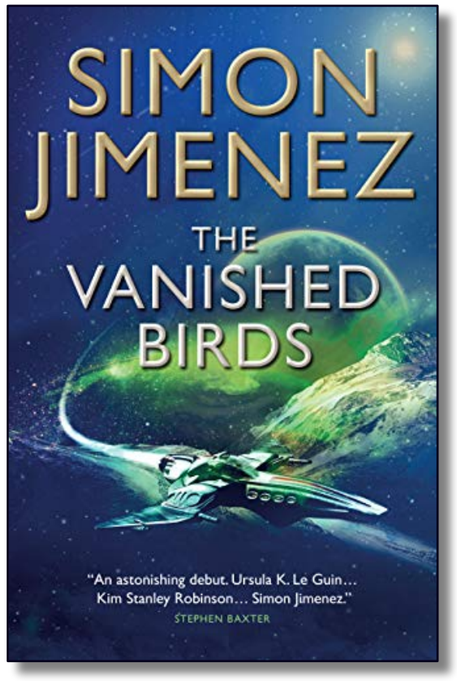
Sequels are planned for *Axiom's End*, and that's a good thing, because there's a lot that remains to be explored from good old 2007.

THE BSFA REVIEW #12 – Winter 2020

The Vanished Birds by Simon Jiminez (Titan Books, 2020)

Reviewed by D. A. Lascelles

***The Vanished Birds* is a story about space travel and the time it takes to traverse great distances. It is about colonisation and corporate greed and also lost love and regret and relationships.**



The majority of the story follows the character of Nia Imani. She is a captain of a ship that pilots through 'folded space', a travel method that cuts down journey times between planets to a few months – at least from the point of view of the traveller. To the universe outside folded space, years or even decades can pass. We follow Nia as she encounters a strange boy who mysteriously ends up stranded on an agricultural planet, takes him to the station where she is delivering her cargo and ultimately ends up responsible for his upbringing and safety while he comes to understand the secrets of the special gift that led to him being stranded in the first place. All of this under the aegis of Fumiko Nakajima, the scientist who was responsible for designing the corporate stations that serve that sector of space.

This is Jiminez's debut novel and, while it is competently written, it shows that he was primarily a short story writer before embarking on this. There are 14 chapters and several of them could standalone as a story in their own right. For example, chapter 1 follows the entire life of one character, Kaeda, on the agricultural planet – from birth to death – as he encounters an unageing Nia for one day every 15 years as she visits his planet. Another is the backstory of Fumiko which looks into some of her quirks as a character. Both could be removed in their entirety and be standalones with only a few details needing to be inserted to continue the overall narrative. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does give sections a somewhat disjointed feel, as if reading a collection of shorts rather than having the flow of a complete novel. And maybe this disjointed feel is intentional, in order to fit the theme of time moving along through decades and the characters being disconnected from it.

A more significant issue, however, is the lack of real connection to many of the characters. One chapter spends significant time setting up and building engagement with one set of Nia's crew only to casually discard them and replace them with a whole new set in the next. Bits of the plot are described in overview rather than being given more emotional impact, especially near the end which seems rushed compared to the slow pace of earlier sections, where not very much actually happens but is described in more detail.

This is not to say it is a bad novel, just that there were parts that took me out of the narrative and did not engage me the way they really should have done. Individual chapters are entertaining and there is a good exploration of some sf concepts. There is clearly a lot of world building done here and a significant part of this is a travelogue of the setting that shows it off nicely. The novel also builds up the main characters very well, despite only paying lip service to minor characters, with plenty of back story and motivation and some creepy visuals (in particular, the 'Silent Ship' which is only ever described but gives images of creepy musicians in masks and gloves). A tighter edit earlier on and an expansion of the final chapters may have served it better.

The Evidence by Christopher Priest (Gollancz, 2020)

Reviewed by Nick Hubble

Christopher Priest's sixteenth novel, his fifth in the last decade, returns to the uneasy setting of the Dream Archipelago, most recently traversed in 2016's *The Gradual*. On the one hand, *The Evidence* is classic Priest with the full panoply of twins, stage magicians and the endless war between Glaund and Faiandland trundling on in the background. But, on the other, it's a crime novel with several variants on the locked-room mystery and a particularly violent murder scene. Has Priest sold out to the demands of commercial genre writing or is he sarcastically deconstructing the format?

The novel begins with crime writer, Todd Fremde, on a train on Dearth Island heading to Dearth City, where he will be staying in the Dearth Plaza Hotel, in order to give a keynote lecture, to a conference organised by the University of Dearth Literary and Historical Society, on 'The Role of the Modern Crime Novel in a Crime-Free Society'. Fremde has accepted the invitation against his better judgment, swayed by the promise of top cuisine, a suite at the hotel, and being driven around in a university car. Therefore, he makes it clear he only has time to give the lecture and then leave the next day. While it would no doubt be a mistake to conflate Fremde with Priest himself, the following fear seems heartfelt: 'The prospect of prolonged and detailed academic discourse from theoreticians who knew little of the art and craft of writing filled me with dread'. Ouch! Suitably chastened, I shall try and rein in my well-known proclivities to quote large chunks of Derrida, Lacan or Agamben for the duration of this review.

Needless to say, the amenities on Dearth fail to match up to their billing but the real trouble arises from Fremde's inability to adhere to the 'Seignioral mutability regulations' with the consequences that his watch stops, the electrical equipment in his room (not suite) takes on a life of his own, letters disappear from his emails and texts, and he incurs hefty fines for 'electrical mutability abuse' and a 'Seignioral surcharge' for 'unauthorized horizontal prejudice'. Fortunately, he is able to offset some of the cost of these by cashing in the return half of his rail ticket and accepting the offer of a lift back across the island from a woman, Frejah Harsent, who attended his talk. But even this has its consequences as Harsent, who drives a gullwing roadster with a barely-concealed automatic weapon in the boot, turns out to be a semi-retired detective in the 'Transgression Investigation Department, Dearth Seignioral Police'. Not only does she insist on telling him extensive details of a cold case that she was involved in because it will give him material for his writing but it also transpires that she is incredibly prejudiced against serfs leading to his blunt admission that he is a 'citizen serf', which provokes the following exchange:

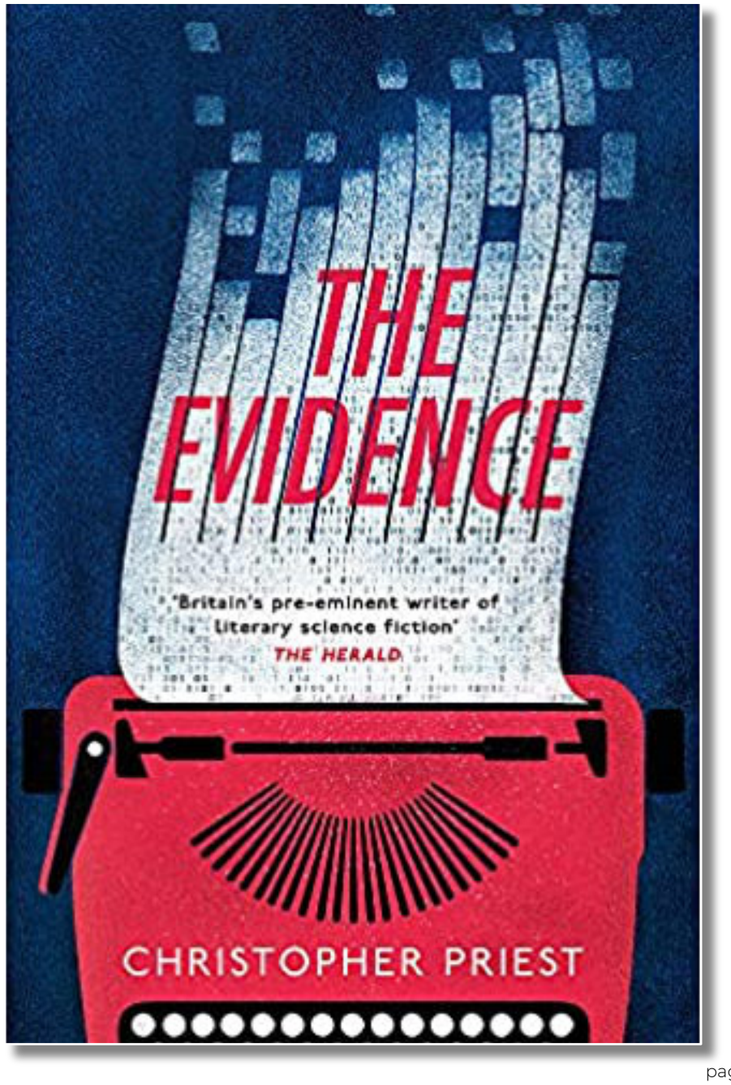
'I'm embarrassed – I assumed you were a professional, a vassal.'

'That's just your assumption,' I said. 'Don't feel sorry for me. I'm a writer. All writers are serfs.'

Subsequently, Fremde gets back to his home island of Salay Raba and over the following days all seems back to normal apart from the fact that there is no sign of his expenses and fee from the University of Dearth. But then, once more against his better judgement, he finds himself slowly dragged into the ongoing fallout of the cold case that Harsent insisted on describing to him and the attendant complications of twins, magicians and illusory perfect crimes. None of which is helped by the financial collapse and run on the banks, which threatens to destabilise the economy of the entire Archipelago that Fremde may have inadvertently triggered through his mutability transgressions. All of this is great fun, narrated with deadpan irony to characteristic understated comic effect; but with a marked political charge.

The feudal class system of the Dream Archipelago has never been laid out so starkly as in the drop-down list of 'social level' options that Fremde accesses at one point in the proceedings: '*Serf, Citizen Serf, Villein, Squire, Vassal, Corvée Provider, Cartage Provider, Demesne Landed, Knight, Manorial Landed, Baron, Seignior.*' Although, amusingly, magicians are categorised as a separate category of 'Mountebank'. In *The Evidence*, this outdated class system is linked with finance as a manifestation of mutability, which is both a real and unreal process that happens or is thought to happen: 'best understood as existing somewhere between quantum physics and psychology'.

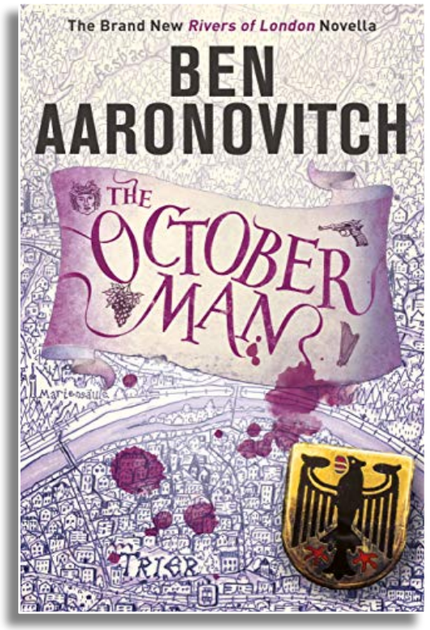
The unexpected appearance of the medieval term 'Vassal' in contemporary British usage presents an example of this kind of simultaneously real and unreal existence. It is used to express the concern of Brexiteers, such as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, not to be reduced to the status of vassals of the European Union regardless of the fact that this is neither a likely outcome nor necessarily an undesirable one. That this kind of absurdity now constitutes the political reality of the UK is a reflection of the state of affairs described in a recent book, *This is Not Normal: The Collapse of Liberal Britain* (2020), by William Davies, Professor of Political Economy at Goldsmiths, University of London. Davies posits that the mismatch between ever-expanding digital data and timebound analogue frames of meaning is generating 'escalating opportunities for conflict over the nature of reality'. This strikes me as essentially the same phenomenon that Priest describes as mutability. Fremde might have been tasked with the seemingly paradoxical task of talking about the role of the modern crime novel in a crime-free society but Priest sets himself the even more difficult problem of writing about the relationship between illusion and reality in a world in which the distinction between them has collapsed. Somehow, by sleight of genre and time-honed skill, he achieves this, and order is restored at the end of *The Evidence* with revels ended as all is mended. The dream still works even as all falls apart around us.



The October Man by Ben Aaronovitch (Gollancz, 2020)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

For new readers: In 2011, Gollancz published *Rivers of London,* a supernatural police-procedural novel in which Ben Aaronovitch mashed up Harry Potter (obviously) with Dixon of Dock Green (perhaps not-so-obviously). I'd just like to throw in John Creasey's 'Gideon' series, for good measure. *Gideon's Ghost*, anyone? The viewpoint character is P.C. Peter Grant, a relatively new recruit to the Metropolitan Police. As the first English apprentice wizard for seventy-odd years, he has been seconded to the Met's "Ghost Squad" – a real ghost squad, not the legendary "Untouchables" unit of that nickname. There is an actual *genii locorum* – the spirit of a place – for every river of London (hence the title). Not only Father Thames, but also Mother Thames – although they are not related to one another. I think.



Seven novels, two novellas, and six graphic novels have been published so far.

For even some not-so-new readers: The action takes place in and around Trier, a German city near the border with Luxembourg. "Trier is a fascinating city and well worth a visit. Come for the Romans, stay for the wine, and nurse your hangover with a nice cruise up the river" (from the Technical Notes). Much the same thing could be said – and I'm here to say it – about *The October Man*. Tobias ("Tobi") Winter is a spectral – I mean special – investigator for the *Abteilung KDA*, the department of the *Bindeskriminalamt* (BKA: The Federal Criminal Police) that deals with *Komplexe und diffuse Angelegenheiten* (KDA: Complex and Diffuse Matters). His liaison officer while in Trier is Frau Vanessa Sommer. "It might have been a coincidence but someone, I just knew, somewhere, was enjoying a laugh at my expense" (p. 6).

Sommer and Winter have been assigned to solve the "biohazard" murder of an unknown man whose corpse is covered in what looks like grey-coloured animal fur. "A fungal infection of the division *Ascomycota*," explains Professor Doktor Carmela Weissbachmann. "It covers ninety per cent of his body but is particularly concentrated at his feet, groin and armpits" (p. 15). Winter makes a preliminary *Umkreis-Magieer Fassung* (Perimeter Magic Sweep) of the crime scene, looking for *vestigia* (residual magical activity). The tortuous trail leads them to a Moselle valley vineyard that might or might not have connections with sinister events dating back to time immemorial. Also the Good Wine Drinking Club, of which Jörg Koch – the murder victim – had been a member. They have adopted this motto (epigraph to the novel): "*Das Leben ist viel zu kurz, um schlecten Wein zu trinken/*Life is too short to drink bad wine" (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe).

The "Rivers of Trier" have their own dedicated deities, with Kelly (goddess of the Kyll, a tributary of the Mosel) having some relationship to Methe, the goddess of drunkenness. (Methylated spirits? Sorry about that, folks.) Winter has an encounter with Morgane, the cute little "baby goddess" of the Mosel. "Strangely, the intelligence on baby goddesses is a bit sparse. We've been getting unusual reports out of London for years, and hints from other countries. But this was the first time I'd had direct dealings with one. Making this, I was sure the Director would point out, an opportunity as well as a danger" (p. 72). He turns out to be right – on both counts.

Aaronovitcb has packed so much background detail and characterization stuff into 178 wide-margined pages, that – with only two short chapters to go – I was getting a bit worried in case he had a sequel in mind. "To be continued, in *The October Man 2*." But my fears were groundless. Everything is wrapped up in a neat and not over-wordy way, with no loose ends that I could see (and I wasn't looking for them, anyway). Oh me of little faith. What next, I cannot choose but wonder? Ben Aaronovitch and Christopher Fowler collaborating on a Summer & Winter/Bryant & May crossover novel? Well, I'd buy it.

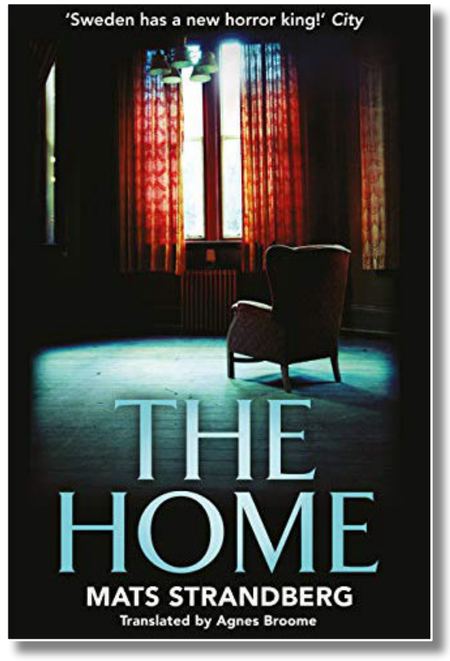
The Home by Mats Strandberg [Translated from Swedish by Agnes Broome] (Jo Fletcher Books, 2019)

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

When a person develops dementia, there is often a sense that the person they once were has gone, and someone who doesn't understand the world they find themselves in has taken up residence. That stranger has pushed the true resident out of the way, who then struggles to fight their way to the surface. For the horror writer, there is an obvious approach to addressing dementia, in making that impression something that is, or at least appears to be, very real. The sufferer, and often the people around them, are forced to face their demons in both a metaphorical and literal sense.

Joel's mother, Monika, has dementia and associated short-term memory loss. As a result, she is no longer able to care for herself and Joel has no choice but to return from Stockholm to his home town to care for her and arrange for her to be moved into a care home. Initially resistant, Monika becomes convinced that her long-dead husband is there and wants to welcome her in. The early signs are that the move was a good one. However, it's not long before Monika's behaviour becomes erratic and occasionally violent. She has regular violent outbursts and makes comments to staff and patients that seem designed to create the maximum hurt. These comments also appear to contain details that there is no reasonable way she could have known. Outside of these moments, Monika's own fear and horror make her believe that her behaviour is actually that of an external entity that has taken control of her body.

Strandberg's previous novel, *Blood Cruise*, was something of a high-octane and gore-filled affair set in the very enclosed atmosphere of a cruise ship. In *The Home,* he has largely abandoned the gore in favour of developing a sense of fear and a much greater character development, building on the characters' back stories. The home itself has a cast of residents and staff that fall just short of caricature. There is Petrus with his constant verbal sexual abuse of the female staff, completely out of character according to his long-suffering wife. There is Wilborg obsessively trying to phone long-dead relatives and friends, scared her parents will be worried about her, Lillemor who believes she is talking to angels, and various others. What saves them is their largely sympathetic portrayal. These are people who, through their various forms of dementia, have little or no control over their own personalities. They are trapped, not only in the confines of the home, but also by their own minds. It is notable how many of them are looking to, or believe they are, contacting external agencies, ostensibly of their own creation.



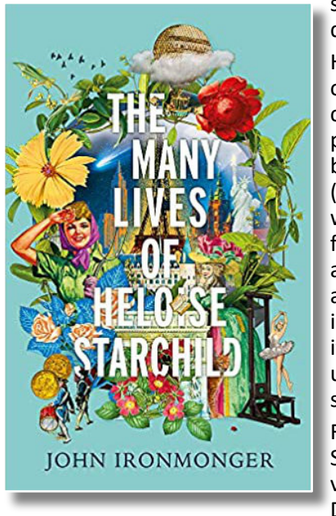
Joel has demons of his own. After moving to Stockholm twenty years earlier to pursue a music career, which failed to take off, he fell into drug addiction. Although now clean for some time, the clear stress of the situation is pushing him towards a relapse. Unfortunately for Joel, one of the senior carers, Nina, was his one-time closest friend and partner in his musical endeavours. She chose not to go to Stockholm with him, something he has harboured a long-standing grudge about. He is firmly of the belief that her failure to join him, as he sees it, was the reason for his lack of success.

Joel's inability to accept responsibility for his own failings reflects the way that his mother ascribes her shocking behaviour to some external entity. Except in her case, she genuinely does not have any control. Joel is unable to deal with what is haunting his mother without dealing with the ghosts of his past. His failed music career, the breakdown of his friendship with Nina, his more successful brother who is just too busy with is family and job to help, his addiction problems and most importantly, his own sense of guilt.

The Many Lives of Heloise Starchild by John Ironmonger (W&N, 2020)

Reviewed by Dan Hartland

This is an odd novel. The story of an ancestral line of women who share each other's memories – each passes them on to the next during childbirth (ceasing, in this sense, to exist at the point of motherhood) – its plot spans centuries and its themes might have been vital: history, agency, change, emancipation. But it exhibits a complacent conservatism poorly matched to its subjects.



The novel focuses primarily on the latter members of its central matrilineal line, Kay and Halley Hašek, in whose lifetimes the mysteries are solved of how the cross-generational link operates, what it means, and the location of the treasure belonging to the founder of the line, Heloise Maria Fouchard – the wife of a French aristocrat who suffers rape, mutilation and death during the Revolution.

Here we see the first and most obvious instance of the novel's true centrist-dad heart: in Ironmonger's pantheon, not only the Bonapartists but all revolutionaries are the enemy (the novel opens in the Soviet Union, with the KGB spying on a private funeral). As fair as it may be to decry a Terror of any age, the novel's apparent preference for incrementalism condemns many of its characters – and, indeed, ultimately planet Earth – to untold suffering.

Fouchard's great-granddaughter, Sophia Leitner, holds property only by virtue of her husband; Frantiska Dvorak, eighth of the line, dies in childbirth at twenty-nine; Heloise is trapped inside a near-future health system that "operates on the principle of compliance" (p. 220). Every character in the novel would benefit from radical, systemic change – but the novel's philosophy is that, "You can't ask *why* of anything in the universe" (p. 230). It is telling that none of Heloise's descendants become militant suffragists; likewise, Kay's mother merely hears about the Prague Spring – she does not take part.

This would perhaps be a less discordant a note in a novel that did not foreground the concept of multi-generational female struggle. Early on, we read that Katya has her mother's memories "and my mother had *her* mother's memories, and back, and back. I have all my mother's lives" (p. 29). Equally, she is told, "These things are past" (p. 14). What does it mean to remember, then, but not to act? In one of the most violent of the novel's episodes, Heloise's daughter takes revenge on her torturer; but more often women in the line sign "a petition that went to the House of Lords [… and] was the beginning of something" (p. 64).

Perhaps Ironmonger is aiming to make a statement about the heroism of incremental change: dozens of little advances building up over centuries to achieve minute improvements in human conditions. "Sometimes we have to make plans for a thousand years," one character intones meaningfully (p. 245). If so, his far-future coda – in which we are introduced to the titular Heloise Starchild – pulls, intentionally or otherwise, the thematic rug from under the novel's feet.

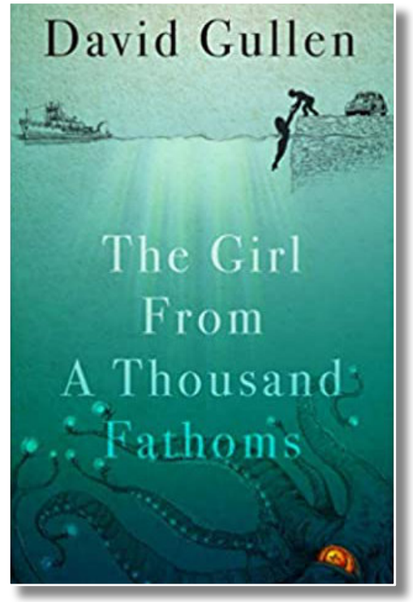
In this passage, robotic ants dispatched eons ago from Earth have over millennia terraformed a planet. Humans are grown from embryos which also secured passage on the ants' tiny spacecraft, and populate an island on a distant planet. Earth is out of contact from the colony's radio signals, almost certainly destroyed. One of the colonists carries the DNA of Fouchard's line – she has millennia of memories. But the human race has failed and the ants cannot build flying machines; they are stuck. The novel's final word is her "Hello" to a blackness that contains no home to which she can return. Perhaps something more than incrementalism might not just have saved her descendants from their pains – but her race's homeworld from its fate.

In other words, for a novel that begins in *Ancien Régime* France and ends perhaps ten thousand years hence, this is a curiously unambitious one, its characters passive and its message ultimately a shrug. Though it is ostensibly about a line of remarkable women, it robs them of their agency as surely as any of their husbands – and to little thematic effect. If it can said to be science fiction, it is only the kind that throws up its hands.

THE BSFA REVIEW #12 – Winter 2020

The Girl from a Thousand Fathoms by David Gullen (Independent, 2020)

Reviewed by Duncan Lawie



***The Girl from a Thousand Fathoms* is a delightful read. The pleasure comes from the tasty combination of a complex plot, a frisson of danger, and affection for the characters. Indeed, it is the way in which our author presents every person in the story as having a rounded character and real motives which means the story works.**

The eponymous girl is introduced in the first line as a mermaid, coming to shore in Brighton. This ensures there is no doubt in the reader's mind as to who she is, why she has such a remarkable name (Foxy Bolivia) or where the story is set. Foxy has some of the mien of the "manic pixie dream girl", at least in the eyes of Tim, the primary protagonist, appearing and disappearing in ways that seem mysterious to him. Tim is a failed police detective who is seemingly no more successful as an alternative investigator. As his part grows, the book starts to look like Douglas Adam's *Dirk Gently* novels. Whilst it maintains a penchant for the strange and amusing, it develops a distinct identity. Nevertheless, from a nice elderly Welsh lady who has lost one of her many cats to the somewhat autistic man who Tim hires to help him, Tim's ability to fathom his associates is no greater than his understanding of his antagonists.

The primary antagonists are three American women, oceanographers closely tied to each other since they met at college. Their relationship as a trio has been complicated by Dolores falling in love with a (very wealthy, Finnish) man. But it has been complicated far more by the fact that they were entranced by a spirit of the deep whilst descending in a bathyscaphe. They were already glamorous and dangerous. Now they are amoral servants of a thing long drowned in the cold depths which has been woken by the warmings of climate change. This being extracts mythology from the mind of Dolores and presents himself as the god of the Finnish underworld, shaping them as his lovers – and demanding the Foxy as a sacrifice. The Finn, with his wealth, is acting to fight climate change, but he becomes the enabler of their uglier project.

It takes a long time for all this to become clear. With many characters and story lines to set up, the short chapters meander, and because Tim is the primary viewpoint character and it takes him a while to catch on. Eventually, through encountering numerous perspectives, the reader is well ahead of Tim as we watch everyone justify themselves to their own satisfaction. For example, Tim's former policing partner starts as a tedious, self-centred bully but once inside his thought processes, his story looks different, which means that when he "does the right thing" as Tim would see it, we are already sympathetic.

As well as juggling all these viewpoints, Gullen manages to get multiple conflicting forms of magic to rub along. This is primarily done through the characters of Banipal, of ancient Babylon, and of Asklepios from a less well determined time. The latter visits Brighton as a result of Tim's dreams – and Tim delivers him to Banipal whilst attempting to return him home. This might seem like a subplot too far – and Banipal's story is abandoned for long stretches – but it gives the book a depth in time.

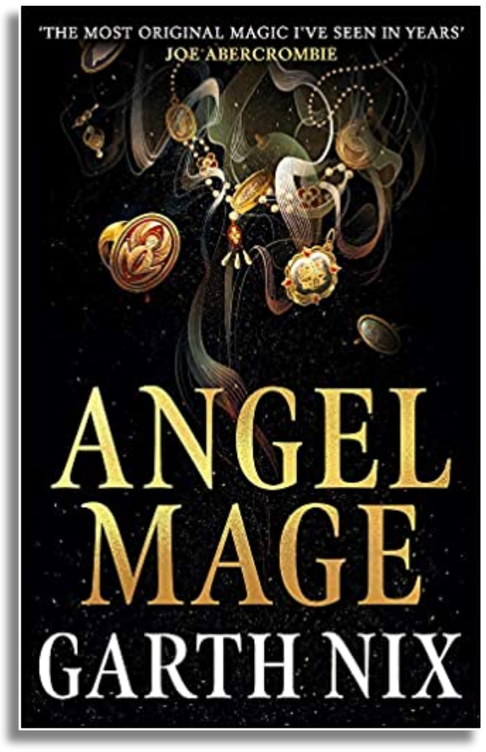
With so many diversions and amusements, it seems unlikely that the book will ever pull together, but the action at sea which brings the story to a climax is finely told. There follows a cascading series of conclusions, which tie off a number of threads without becoming too neat. The key characters' stories flow onward, out of the end of the novel and into our imagination.

Angel Mage by Garth Nix (Gollancz, 2020)

Reviewed by Anne F. Wilson

This is a stand-alone book, set in an alternate 17th Century France (here named Sarance). I wasn't quite sure what was going on at first, as there are angels (but no god), abbeys and cardinals. And then by chapter 3 I realised that Nix is doing Musketeers. With angels.

The angels appear detached but benevolent. Their importance is as power sources, which humans can access through icons (images that they carry around, on jewellery, wooden tablets, or scraps of paper). Using an angel's power ages the person doing it, and use of the more powerful angels is very draining. The most powerful are the archangels, who each have dominion over a country.



One hundred and thirty-seven years ago the archangel Palleniel, whose domain was Ystara (Spain) became corrupted, by a very powerful young girl known as the Maid of Ellanda. Magical plagues spread amongst the Ystarans. The other archangels closed the borders to Ystara, and the Maid disappeared. Now she has returned. She has a lot of icons. She doesn't age when she uses them. And she has a Plan.

The Plan involves getting the Sarancians to make a military expedition to Ystara, including four other young characters who are somehow connected. These are our heroes, who coincidentally all come from "Bascony". While two of them are well drawn and sympathetic (Simeon a doctor and Dorotea an icon-maker) the others are a bit sketchy. There is a cast of thousands, and Nix is very busy moving his characters around, getting them to meet each other, getting the Maid into position, and arranging the expedition to Ystara.

Nix takes famous personages from Dumas: D'Artagnan, Rochefort, the King and Queen, the Cardinal. These are however incarnated rather differently. For a start most of them are women. Nix never explains why the major roles in society should be taken by women rather than men, and women appear to be equally employed in combat roles. I can't help wondering how we have ended up with a world quite so different from our own. Is it an effect of the angels, compensating for different physical strengths?

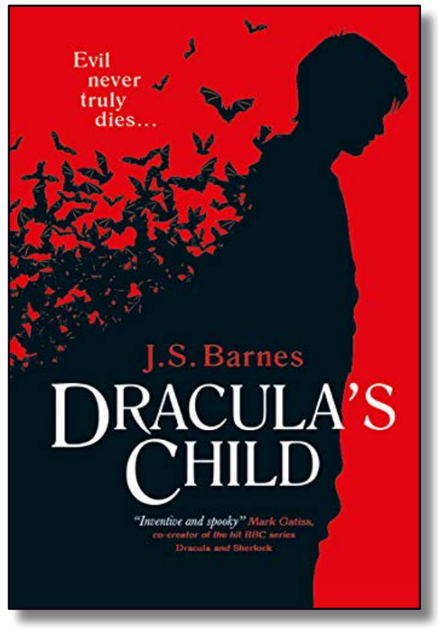
Having decided to use the Musketeers, Nix doesn't really, I feel, do them justice. He makes no attempt to imitate Dumas's elaborate prose, or his sly, cynical humour. Nix's influences are the films rather than the novels. There is some friction between the cardinal's guards and the Musketeers, but it doesn't drive the plot. The characters that we know and recognise are little more than bit part players. The cardinal is an important figure but she isn't Richelieu in any sense (not even in name). There are things that purport to link us with the Dumas story, (the names, a diamond necklace of icons), but our focal characters don't originate in Dumas. The Maid, for instance, takes over the identity of a Milady Dehiems (yes, de Winter, we know). But she is a completely different character, with a different back story and motives. She is deeply selfish and brutally casual with people's lives, but she doesn't have Milady's sheer terrifying wickedness.

It's an entertaining read, and the plot, thank goodness, is wrapped up at the end of the book. I enjoyed the novel, but it lacked the depth of Nix's best writing. The Sabriel books, for instance, engage with difficult issues, death and power, and how people can start off with good motives and end up doing awful things. And *Newt's Emerald*, which is a pastiche of a regency romance, and does include a very creditable imitation of regency language, is delightful in its own way.

Angel Mage is a romp, and none the worse for that, but I was left wanting more emotional depth, fuller characters, a more involving plot. If you are looking for these in a novel, Dumas delivers them, in spades. Though no angels.

Dracula's Child by J. S. Barnes (Titan Books, 2020)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer



J. S. Barnes's *Dracula's Child* picks up hints given in the original, most notably the threat towards the end that "My revenge is just begun! I spread it over centuries, and time is on my side". The Crew of Light saw Dracula crumble into dust. Now, Jonathan and Mina Harker are bringing up their son, Quincy. His twelfth birthday is celebrated by the surviving members of the "Crew": Jack Seward, Lord Arthur Godalming (with his wife Carrie) and Van Helsing – whose sudden collapse presents a warning which is taken up through the accounts of various new characters, such as Maurice Hallam, a louche actor travelling in central Europe with his new friend Gabriel, Arnold Slater, once deputy editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* displaced by a new breed of journalist, and Ambrose Quire, Commissioner of Police.

As Van Helsing remains in a coma, the remaining "Crew" become increasingly subject to their own inadequacies. A withdrawn Jonathan drowns his weakness and fears in drink. Seward embarks on what may be a wild goose chase after the discovery of Renfield's journal. Arthur's battle to modernise the House of Lords seems to be being blocked by sinister political forces: we read, in various contexts, more and more about something called the "Council of Athelstan". Carrie's pregnancy induces domestic strain. Only Mina remains with something of her old determination, and even her "New Woman" standards seem compromised by domesticity and motherhood. Meanwhile Maurice and Gabriel's travels in Transylvania revisit territory familiar to Stoker's readers, and it is clear that criminal gangs of London are being stirred up by forces with more than political subversion at their heart. While Maurice and Quire are being inducted into perverse sexualities, something is happening to Quincy, who talks of his "other father".

The problem with echoing a "classic" like *Dracula* is that it is both anxiety-fantasy about a specific time (the late 19th century) and something with specific resonances today. Indeed, these facets are fused. Stoker was creating a *modern* work, with people using "modern" technologies such as typewriters and phonographs, and reliant upon railway networks. *Dracula's Child* begins, significantly, in 1914, with Quincy Harker introducing his collection of records and journal entries as he volunteers to take his part in the war in which "the whole of Europe cries out in pain and grief". The story itself is gripping, full of the suspense and sexually-laced horror we might expect, and there are very effective moments when we understand that what we have read much earlier in *one* way is meant in *another*. There are characters, particularly the nurse Sarah-Anne Dowell, caught up unwillingly in the Harkers' marital tensions, and Maurice Hallam, in Europe to escape the post-Wilde trial atmosphere of censoriousness and persecution (Wilde's release from prison was in *Dracula's* year of publication) whom we feel for. To some extent they fill the gaps left by the mental or physical absences of the former Crew of Light.

Some gaps remain nagging. We see little of actual British events of the first decade of the Twentieth century. What seem to be plot developments are not followed up. Characters of great apparent significance come onstage and are disposed of. The mysterious "Council of Athelstan", containing individuals who, during the chaos afflicting London move to take control, suggests a burgeoning reactionary fascism absent in Stoker's anxieties. It is hard to avoid *21st-century* resonances in its response to the populist call that the country is going to the dogs and needs a bit of old-fashioned discipline. While melodramatic, even pulpish, it suggests that what we are reading is only *nominally* set in the early 1900s, but in spirit a century later. (The decades of *Dracula* and its aftermath certainly saw "terrorist" outrages: the actual suicide-bombs in *Child* perhaps come with more modern colourings of grooming and indoctrination.)

Readers of *Dracula's Child* will decide whether what Barnes does to Stoker's characters *works*, but it is an uncompromising and at times harrowing revisitation.

Mexican Gothic by Silvia Moreno-Garcia (Jo Fletcher Books, 2020)

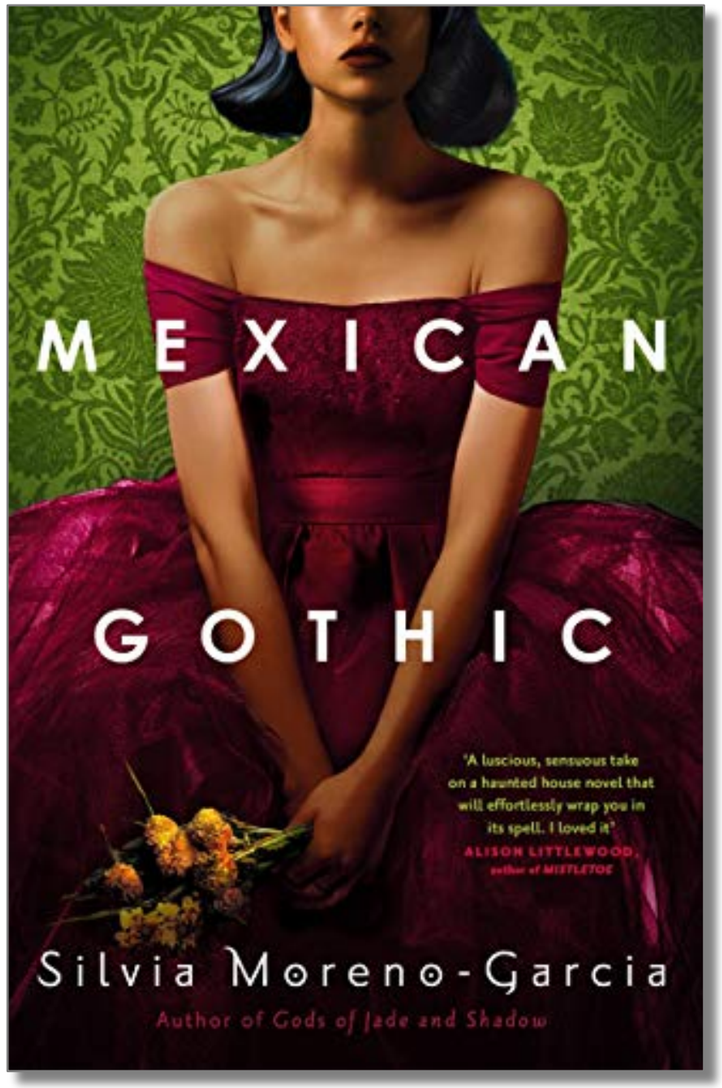
Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

Let me lay my *lotería* cards on the table: I read little horror, if any. I picked out Silvia Moreno-Garcia's latest novel because I bought and published some of her earliest stories, back when *Futurismic* was still a going concern, and I was curious to see what she was capable of with a decade more experience under her belt; suffice to say it's very clear to see why she's lasted the course. The novel's title makes it plain, even to a dilettante interloper, that there's a direct connection to the earliest manifestations of the horror tradition—but I can't tell you to what extent *Mexican Gothic* might be in dialogue with its generic predecessors, because I don't have the necessary knowledge. As such, I will limit myself to a discussion of the book's technique, affect and plot.

Let's start with the latter: Noemí Taboada is a socialite in 1950s Mexico City, and her life of glamorous parties (and carefully distant dalliances with handsome but stupid young men) is interrupted by her father's receipt of a letter from her cousin; Catalina recently married (unexpectedly, and against the family's wishes and better judgement) and shipped out to El Triunfo, a faded former silvertown in the eastern state of Hidalgo, and has hardly been heard from since. The letter, full of high-gothic histrionics—cruelty, decay, poison, whispering voices in the night, the full works—suggests to Noemí's father, already predisposed to disapproval of Catalina's unsuitable husband Virgil Doyle, that she needs rescuing from her situation, or psychiatric attention, or some combination of the two: Catalina had a traumatic youth before coming to live with Noemí's side of the family, after all, and has always been a bit flighty, her nose buried in literary Victoriana, a romantic in both the capitalised and lower-case senses of the term. Despite the horrors to come later in the novel, Noemí's being dispatched on this mission by her stern yet doting father is perhaps the hardest event to swallow in terms of plausibility—but it's done quickly, and no more than ten pages have passed before Noemí is *en route* to El Triunfo by train, with instructions to scope out the situation, and (if required) to persuade Virgil that he must either let Catalina see a shrink, or let her go entirely.

The Doyle family pile is the plainly-named High House, some way outside of El Triunfo proper, halfway up the mountain containing the mine that made the town's (and the Doyles's) much-diminished fortunes. High House and its cast of residents are as gothic as the title suggests they should be: this lot are, for the most part, monstrous and unpleasant from the get-go. Noemí, who starts confidently—as is her way—with the assumption that she'll soon have her cousin out of there and onto a train back to the capital, discovers that things are (of course!) rather more complicated than the simple abusive-gold-digger-husband set-up that she and her father had assumed (though that is very much a part of the problem) and is soon entrapped in High House herself.

Now, I've never been much of one for deferring to the Spoiler Police, but I will in this case refrain from going deep into the spooky mechanics of the plot, which leavens its classic gothic hauntings and horrors with some scientific speculation and an (un)healthy dose of social psychology. I will say that it's not a very violent or gory book, which I appreciated, and is perhaps all the more horrific (rather than thrilling or chilling) for that… and I will also note that the horror elements are used to explore, with no small degree of subtlety, the more mundane horrors of racism, colonialism and patriarchy. *Mexican Gothic* treats these themes with a sort of unflinching care, tracing the toxins without collapsing the veins of the plot. High House may be mostly lit by candles and oil lamps, but there's a fair amount of gaslight in play, if you catch my drift; the entitled and not-always-passive aggressions of toxic masculinity, and the ways in which it warps and damages its protagonists as well as its victims, is poignantly portrayed, to the point that what might have been a far-too-fairytale ending instead feels both earned and redemptive.



It is telling, perhaps, that Moreno-Garcia chose the era of the post-war "economic miracle" as the temporal setting for the story—a period in which Mexico, like much of the rest of the world, was generally on the up in terms of social progress, particularly for women and those with indigenous (rather than Spanish) roots. Noemí fits both of those categories, and her privilege is contextualised with an appreciation of how much has changed, and how much is still to be done. As such, her distaste both for the obsolete patriarchal mores of the Doyles, and their interest in eugenic "science", is informed by intellect and experience alike. (The redoubtable Clute would perhaps add something here about the ways in which the Doyles are Bound to the earth and their adopted home, both literally and figuratively, but I'll leave that sort of theory to the experts.)

In terms of technique, while the gothic informs the imagery, atmosphere and plot, Moreno-Garcia mostly leaves the overwrought prose stylings out of it, writing instead from Noemí's whipsmart sceptical POV as she figures out the form of the trap she's wandered into. Furthermore, the way in which Moreno-Garcia displaces the classic gothic tropes to Central America, so as to expand and illuminate both the source genre and its idiosyncratic setting, is handled with deft and understated craft. Is it good horror? I'm really not the man to ask—but it's a bloody good novel, that's for sure.

Hope Island by Tim Major (Titan Books, 2020)

Reviewed by Dev Agarwal

Writer and editor Tim Major's previous work includes one collection and two earlier novels, all well received. His most recent book is the novel *Hope Island*.

The titular setting is a remote island off the coast of Maine in the US. The novel quickly delivers the ingredients that develop tension between his characters and lead into the wider horror motif. This is horror built out of mood and setting (with a particular focus on sound).

Major takes on the challenge of writing exclusively and intimately from one character's point of view, immersing us deep inside the perspective of a young single mother, Nina Scaife. Intriguingly, Major also explores Nina's experience as an initially reluctant mother.

Another feature of Major's novel is that it is family rather than strangers that initiates the tension for Nina. Nina takes her daughter Laura to Hope Island to visit Laura's grandparents. These are not Nina's parents, they are her boyfriend Rob's, and Rob is both absent from this visit and not with Nina anymore. Nina, by being an urban professional and British, feels displaced by the American side of the family and also by the island's small and intimate community.

Major has written that the novel is his exploration of parenting. He wrote (on John Scalzi's blog) that "Becoming a parent rewires the brain" and that the role "split(s) your brain right down the middle."

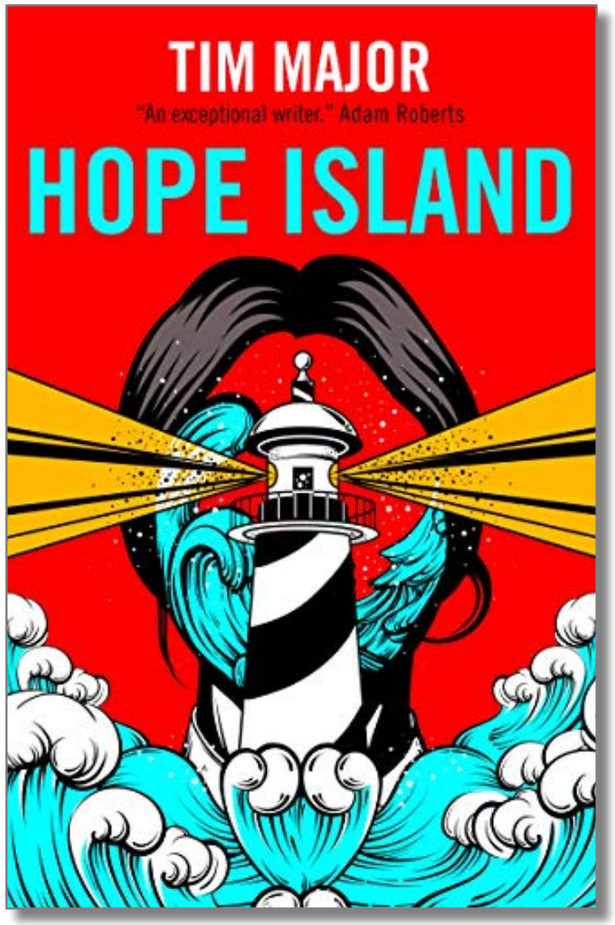
The experience of being a person in your own right *and* a parent (and thus determined by your relationship to your child) is a dichotomy for most parents. Added to that dilemma is that Hope Island is not a safe environment for Nina. She is isolated and awkward around Rob's parents and this awkwardness is the gateway into a growing sense of the uncanny when Nina encounters the children of the island. From there these themes develop into the novel's unfolding horror. Nina struggles with the natural desire to protect Laura, while at the same time ensuring that she also protects herself and her sense of self. In an effective, tonally disturbing reversal, Laurie, the child, is better acquainted with the island and its inhabitants (having visited regularly with Rob and without Nina). Laurie is able to navigate the island's culture as an insider and when the horror elements build, their pressure lands on Nina rather than Laurie.

Islands are specific psychogeographical spaces. They are often confined and isolated. Stories relating to islands explore how people react to their restricted physical space. In *Hope Island's* case, Major carefully reveals the disturbing and insular culture peculiar to the inhabitants. This menaces both Nina and Laura until there is literally nowhere to run to to escape the final conflict.

As well as the importance of setting, *Hope Island* is part of an ongoing dialogue with past texts. The novel has been well received by critics, garnering comparisons with Alan Garner, John Wyndham and particularly the seminal film work, *The Wicker Man (*directed by Robin Hardy). I found these accolades to be accurate, both in subject matter and tone. Major takes the opportunity to invert and react to these earlier works as they are built around male narratives. Male perspectives have long dominated both the wider genre and fiction in general and it feels like a useful corrective that *Hope Island* inverts the parental perspective into a mother's struggle with her maternal feelings and with the pervasive horror that threatens both her and her daughter.

In comparison to *The Wicker Man, Hope Island* begins similarly with Nina entering a closed community. Major has said that "*Hope Island* is about my newest fear, now that my children have survived infancy – the fear of a failure to communicate with them as they grow older. In the novel, Nina only reluctantly became a mother to begin with, and she has no support from her absent partner,

THE BSFA REVIEW #12 – Winter 2020



and the visit to the island represents her last-ditch attempt to reconnect with her daughter." *The Wicker Man's* protagonist, Edward Woodward's Neil Howie, is narrow and inflexible, refusing to understand the islanders' paganism. His worldview is the antithesis of communication. Major deliberately dissects that approach and in Nina, he builds a point of view character whose listening and engagement are at the heart of understanding the challenge that she faces.

Hope Island joins a crowded field of horror stories in general, and specifically stories of ethereal children, and stories of isolated island communities. Major therefore has a high bar to overcome to make his story distinct and memorable. Major does that by writing Nina "inside-out" through an immersive deep point of view. He then also occupies the reader's entire sensorium as the acts of hearing and listening become crucial. The horrific aspect of the story is particularly evoked through sound. This begins as a sense of eeriness that parallels Nina's earlier alienation and grows into a very immediate threat to her and Laurie.

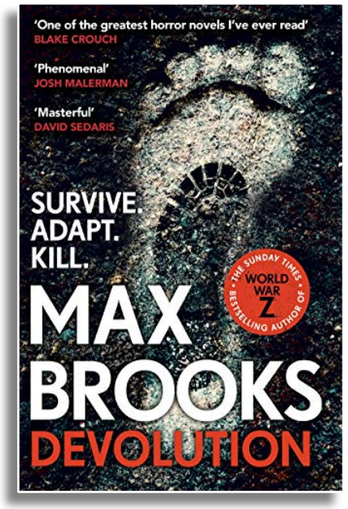
Not only does Major invest in Nina as a fully rounded and three-dimensional character, he crafts a story of horror that is both suspenseful and dream-like. The story builds to a dramatic conclusion that reaches a literal and metaphorical crescendo as sound and the power of a mother's voice take centre-stage.

Hope Island brings a new perspective to familiar tropes with a novel built around Major's strong narrative voice. This is both a lyrical and commanding novel. It will reward your investment in it.

Devolution by Max Brooks (Century, 2020)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

For anyone born in the 1970s, *Devolution* is a strange hybrid of the old and the new. Old because this is a book about Bigfoot. Bigfoot was one of the perennial B-list mysteries, behind UFOs, psychic powers and ghosts, and paraded endlessly in books and TV series such as *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World*, which were all the rage back then.



Despite the best investigative efforts of my nine-year-old self, the mass availability of high quality digital cameras on smartphones and the wider realisation that camera images often cannot be trusted, many of the wonderful mysteries of my childhood have largely disappeared, and Arthur C. Clarke had to find other lines of work…

Alas! If he could only have held on until 2020, when Max Brooks was able to reveal that Bigfoot is real after all!

For those that don't know, Bigfoot was a legendary ape-like creature reputed to live in the northern wilds of the US; a cousin of the tongue-twistingly named Abominable Snowman (or yeti, as my investigatory nine-year-old self was grateful to discover, was its more pronounceable local name). Blurred pictures and short snippets of film have been snapped of Bigfoot, but no other proof had been found – until now.

In *Devolution*, Max Brooks takes this rather moribund "missing link" and makes it scary and all too real, as he did with zombies in *World War Z* (the book, not the disappointing film). *Devolution* mixes historical sources and after-the-fact reactions, but most of the book is taken from the journal entries of Kate Holland, who has joined an experiment in ultra-modern rural living, out in the middle of nowhere – and in the US, unlike the largely tamed UK, the middle of nowhere really *is* nowhere.

Fortunately, the tiny community of Greenloop has all the latest conveniences. The brainchild of a Silicon Valley techbro and his wife, Greenloop is a high-tech communal village that enables its rich inhabitants to enjoy country living without all the inconveniences country living entails.

Journal writer Kate is a rather insecure and nervous thing, in therapy for… well, she's in therapy. Along with her man-child husband, Dan, a former "entrepreneur in the digital space", she's hoping to make a fresh go of their disintegrating marriage.

They're joined by a host of wonderfully dreadful caricatures: the hosts and creators of Greenloop are tanned, wealthy, charismatic and Californian (a PhD in Psychosomatic Illness Therapy, anyone?). Another couple have brought their traumatised, mute and over-protected daughter, who they rescued from an overseas orphanage. There's a "male, pale and stale" writer of pop philosophy books who has an answer to everything; a seemingly sweet old retired couple, and a forceful, no-nonsense artist who works in ceramics and is a "character".

Chaos erupts in the form of a nearby volcano, just as the group are beginning to get to know each other. Not close enough to be an immediate threat, but close enough to close roads, break phone lines and occupy rescue services for weeks, if not months. Greenloop is left catastrophically isolated.

The local fauna also run to escape the effects of the volcano, but there seems to be something unusual moving with them that hasn't been seen before – or at least, hasn't been seen *properly* before. And it has very large feet...

Devolution begins with some vicious social satire that may not be everyone's cup of tea; the characters are cringe-worthy, annoying, unpleasant – or all three! That we eventually end up rooting for (some of) them is a testament to Brooks' writing, and its slow, inevitable build-up to some real horror. The eventual appearance of the Bigfoot was so well done that it made me shiver, and horror which genuinely manages that is a rare find at my age.

If there's a weakness to *Devolution*, it's that the journal device of the narrative doesn't really work – I can't imagine being *this* scared and sitting down to write pages and pages about the experience.

Follow-ups to *World War Z* have some very large shoes to fill, but Max Brooks has found a pretty snug fit with *Devolution.*

The Twisted Ones by T. Kingfisher (Titan Books, 2020)

Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

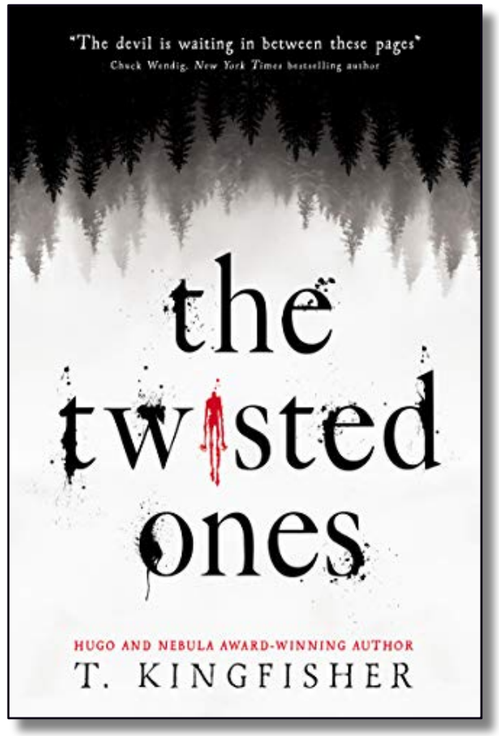
T. Kingfisher is the pseudonym of the children's author, Ursula Vernon. As Kingfisher, she has published new versions of fairy tales and fantasy novels. *The Twisted Ones*, however, is a horror novel. I don't usually draw attention to genre labels but in this case, it seems worth alerting Kingfisher's fans to expect something different. Some qualities of her other writing persist, including humour and vivid story telling but the mood is much darker.

In pre-Covid North Carolina, Mouse goes to rural North Carolina to clear out the house of her dead grandmother. This is a difficult, unpleasant job, because the grandmother was a hoarder and not a kind woman. But Mouse's real troubles begin when she finds the journal of her grandmother's second husband. She is disturbed by the lines 'I made faces like the faces on the rocks, and I twisted myself about like the twisted ones, and I lay down flat on the ground like the dead ones.' Out in the woods, she is led by her dog to a place which does not exist on the map: a hill topped by white, carved stones. She is terrified by misshapen creatures, including a crucified deer effigy, seen first in the woods and then at her bedroom window. She finds another manuscript, which describes the long-ago experience of a young girl with hidden folk in a mysterious place.

A note from the author explains that the found manuscript is derived from a story by Arthur Machen *The White People.* In this novel, Mouse encounters only the remnants of the 'holler people', from that story, non-human and much more sinister than glamorous, along with the poppets, the made creatures, who now make more things like themselves. Eventually, Mouse and a friend go back to the hill and are forced into a confrontation with those who live there.

Mouse survives and returns to something like her old life. This is apparent from the outset, since she is the narrator of the novel. Her voice is one of its strengths. Both her introduction to her adventures and her description of the aftermath make clear how much she has been affected and her inability to take the ordinary world for granted ever again. These passages bring alive the disturbing quality of her experiences even more than the central narrative, where the tension and excitement of the action predominate.

Mouse comes across as a likeable character, who relates well to other people, including her family apart from her grandmother. She can be unselfish and is braver than she knows. As a result, her troubles do not seem to be provoked by any quality of hers, any projection of her personality. Instead, they provide a vision of an alternative reality, which anybody might stumble into through bad luck. This makes the novel unsettling for the reader at a deeper level than the story of the strange young girl in the found manuscript.



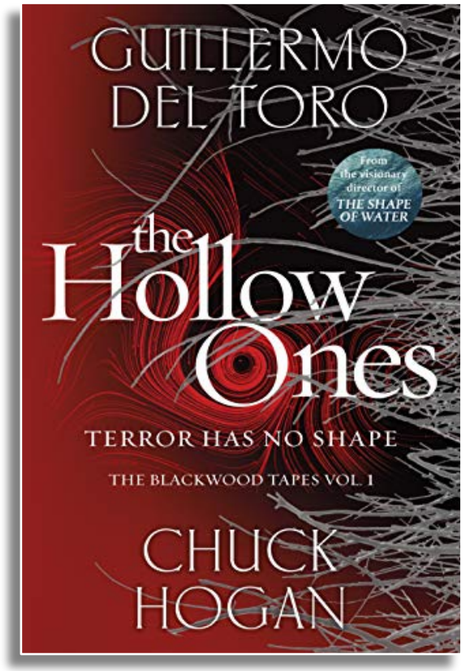
The setting of the novel is vivid, from the descriptions of the landscape – the woods which grow back every time they are cut down 'in a dense tangle of kudzu and buckthorn and honeysuckle and loblolly pines' to the house full of depressing junk, which Mouse has to tackle, including the collection of horrible dolls.

The narrative voice is full of humour. Mouse's encounters with local people are engaging and so is her attitude to her dog. She is self-deprecating about her job as a freelance book editor and her responses to life in general. She explains her attitude to guns (based on an experience not shared by many in the UK): 'I fired a BB gun in Girl Scouts. It went *bang* and made my hand hurt and that was the end of that.' All this lightens the mood for the reader, without detracting from the pace or the underlying intensity.

The Hollow Ones by Guillermo Del Toro and Chuck Hogan (Del Ray, 2020)

Reviewed by D. A. Lascelles

Odessa Hardwicke is a rookie FBI agent, working with a decorated, senior agent. When they are the first on the scene of a brutal murder spree, Odessa ends up shooting her partner when he inexplicably tries to finish what the murderer started. As he dies at her hand, she senses something unusual – a strange smell of solder and a haze as if something immaterial were leaving his body. As an agent who had performed a 'bad shoot', she ends up under investigation and side-lined into dead-end desk jobs while waiting for the tribunal.



Part of this involves clearing out the office of Earl Solomon, a retired agent in his 80s who recently suffered a stroke. In her discussions with him, she finds out that her strange experience may have something in common with a case he was involved in during the 60s in Mississippi. This leads him to tell her to put a letter in a particular mailbox in New York, addressed to a Mr. John Blackwood and not long afterwards meets the man himself, an apparently immortal occult detective.

The first thing I suspect anyone would notice about this book is one of the names on the cover. Yes, it is that Guillermo Del Toro – director, actor, former make-up artist and author. Normally, when one sees a second name on the cover with such a famous name it would be assumed that this was a ghost-writing gig and they did most of the work. However, Del Toro and Hogan have been working together since 2009 on a number of projects (specifically *The Strain* series of Vampire novels) and anyone who knows Del Toro's pedigree as a creator will know there is likely a more equal partnership here. Like *The Strain* series (which started as a failed TV pitch then became a graphic novel and finally came full circle to become a TV series), *The Hollow Ones* feels like it started life as a pitch for a TV series or film. In fact, after reading it, I am already mentally casting someone like Jonny Lee Miller, James Purefoy, James McAvoy or Benedict Cumberbatch as the irascibly British Blackwood against a spunky female partner. It's a formula that has been shown to work time and again – from 'Doctor Who' to shows like 'Elementary'.

The story is told in the modern day, mostly from the POV of Odessa but also in the form of sections that are in the voice of 'the Hollow Ones' and flashbacks to both Earl Solomon's case in Missisipi and John Blackwood's own life as a lawyer in Elizabethan London and friend to Dr. John Dee. These events are layered to build up to the revelation of what it is that Blackwood is investigating – a case that goes back to a ritual performed by Dee and why it is important to Blackwood.

Overall, the novel is competently written though there is little innovative in either the writing, the characters or the story. The idea of the occult detective is a concept seen many times before and done better – John Constantine, Felix Castor, Peter Grant among others – and we have the TV style formulaic pairing given above. The story also has a bit of conflict between its desire to be relatively 'TV' friendly and all out horror and it may benefit by focusing on one over the other – either delving deeper into the visceral gore of the murder sprees or dialling it back. For example, I expected to see more of the Del Toro horror we see in Pan's Labyrinth here. However, these do not stop it being an entertaining read and I suspect the authors will find the right level as the series progresses.

Definitely recommended.

THE BSFA REVIEW #12 – Winter 2020

Black Lives Matter

***The BSFA Review* stands in solidarity with the protests AGAINST RACISM AND POLICE BRUTALITY in the USA, UK, and around the world.**

This year at the AGM the BSFA has adopted a set of actions and expanded on policies aimed to ensure that the BSFA as a cultural institution is playing an effective role in opposing racism in society, for more information visit **www.BSFA.co.uk**. The BSFA is currently looking to fill the role of a Diversity Officer, so please do get in touch with us if you are interested.

For those of us in the UK who would like to learn more and find ways of offering practical support, but aren't sure where to start, a few useful resources relating to antiracism, decoloniality, policing, courts, prisons, include:

www.blacklivesmatter.com
www.inquest.org.uk
racialjusticenetwork.co.uk
www.stephenlawrence.org.uk
londonagainstpoliceviolence.wordpress.com
y-stop.org
www.stop-watch.org
weareadvocate.org.uk
uffcampaign.org
www.rota.org.uk
www.prisonabolition.org
cape-campaign.org
m4bl.org
criticalresistance.org
www.alternativestopolicing.com
www.opendemocracy.net
rmfoxford.wordpress.com
www.globaljustice.org.uk

See also the London Science Fiction Research Community's list of resources at www.lsfrc.co.uk/beyond-borders/anti-racism-statement-resources/

THE BSFA REVIEW

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ISSUE 15
WINTER 2020