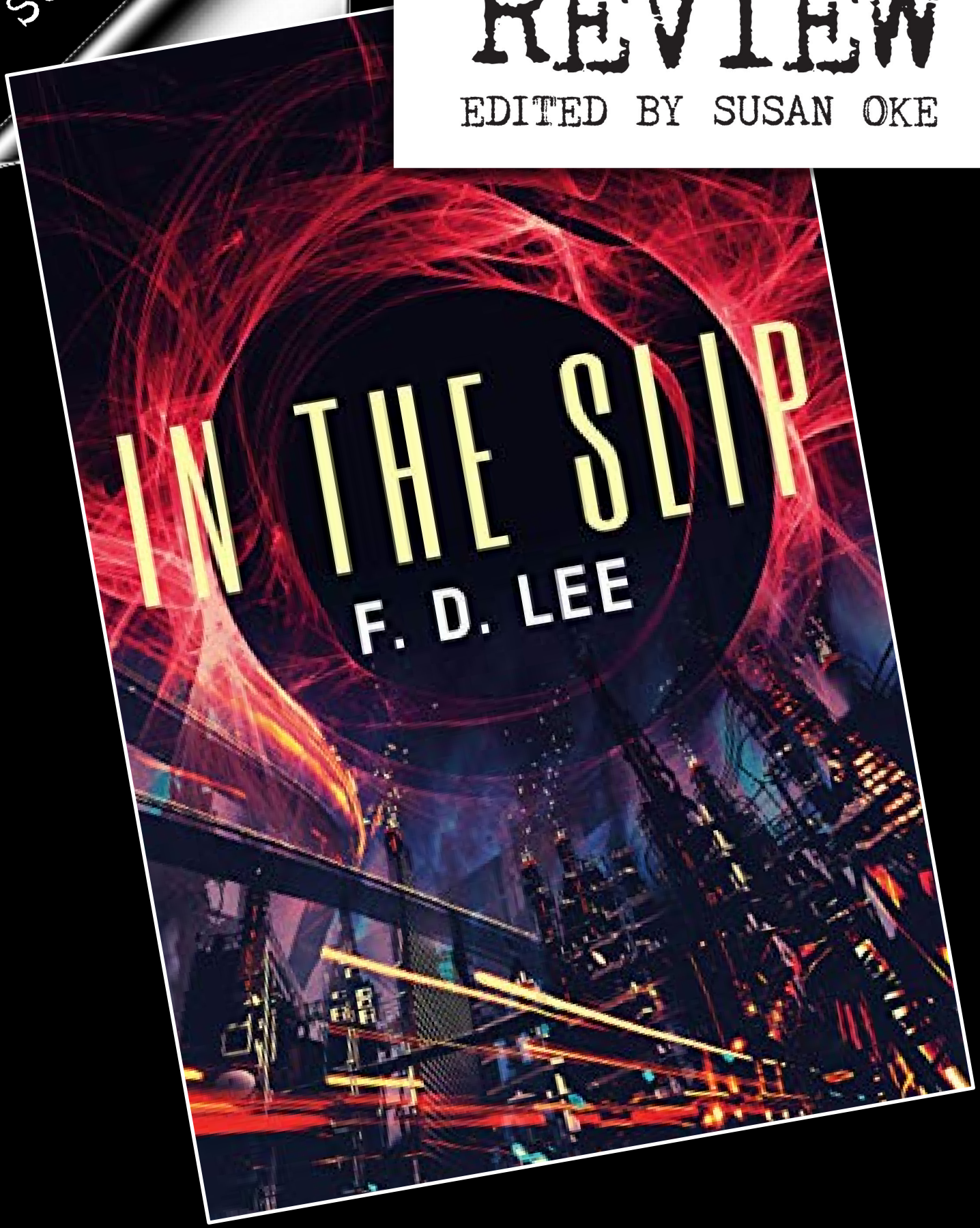
ISSUE 10
SUMMER 2020

THE BSFA REVIEW

EDITED BY SUSAN OKE



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/ REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

THE BSFA REVIEW #10 – Summer 2020

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/ VIEW FROM THE EDITOR

Here We Go Again...

Here we are again. Only the world looks very different. Not only that, it feels different. Sunshine should not be stressful. This edition of the *BSFA REVIEW* is coming to your in-box as if nothing has changed. New books are still emerging, hoping for eager readers and thoughtful reviewers, and we are more than willing to oblige. In fact, time closeted away lends itself to reading, reflection, and —a blessing— writing.

I spend more time looking out of the window than I used to. The divide between inside and outside is more tangible. Fortunately, inside is where I do most of my work, creative and otherwise. Outside holds an element of unaccustomed threat, ramped up exponentially every time snippets of news invade. On days when I am focussed entirely on creative work, the outside world, news included, is banned. It's the only way to get anything done.

Of course, I make sure my mother has all her groceries and medication; I do my best to help keep my grandkids occupied (we live in the same house); I even venture into the garden and dig out a few weeds now and then. And I liaise with all our wonderful reviewers, still working hard despite the '*Is-this-really-happening?*' world we are living in.

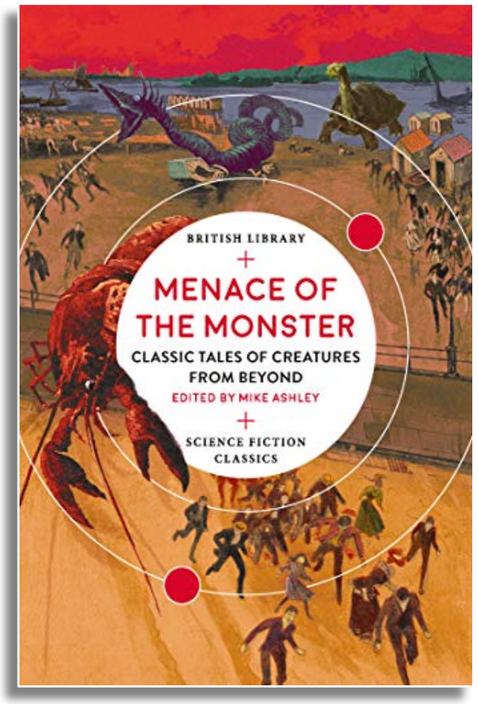
So, enjoy the latest edition. Soak up the commentary, discover new books and authors, and escape for just a little while. Let's look ahead, to future conventions where toe-tapping greetings are not the norm; where friends old and new can risk actual physical contact, and the opposite ends of sofas are *not* the sought after spots.

Positive mind sets, ladies and gentlemen. Fingers crossed for *Fantasy Con* and the rest of the year's programming! I look forward to catching up with you all, mask-free, in the near future.

Sue Oke

Menace of the Monster: Classic Tales of Creatures From Beyond
Edited by Mike Ashley
(British Library, 2019)
Reviewed by Duncan Lawie

My first glance at the contents page of this collection nearly put me off. I have an abiding dislike of story collections which include chunks of novels and the first fiction was 'War of the Worlds' by H. G. Wells. But turning to the introduction for this, I discovered that this was a 1920 abridgement by the man himself. There was pleasure in reading the story in summary, remembering for myself parts left out whilst delighting in Wells' beautifully turned phrases.



'The Cloud-men' by Owen Oliver, published in 1911 and set in 1915, was even more fun. It begins with Government Notices, warning against the writing of fiction and giving a UK population of about 100,000. The account of the strange alien invasion which follows includes a reference to 'Owen Oliver … one of the persons very properly convicted by the present government for wasting his time writing fiction' and then goes on to tell of utterly unfamiliar aliens. The tale of our protagonists' unlikely survival is delightfully coloured by the big strong man damaging his ankle and the good-looking young lady dragging him to safety.

The first group of stories, each published in London magazines, are powerfully specific in their use of place. Ludgate Hill or the Strand, places familiar to the reader, are made strange when emptied by pre-historic monsters or alien invasion. The stories feel like strange escapism, read a century later with the outer world again emptied of people, as we contain ourselves in our homes.

The following group of tales feels like a transitional phase, away from the centre of Empire. 'Dagon' by H. P. Lovecraft seems utterly overworked after the 'just the facts' style of the earlier pieces, while 'King Kong' by Draycott Dell & Edgar Wallace, in a version for a British boys' magazine, feels like a retelling by someone who had been to see the movie. (This may be unfair, as one of the authors was involved in the film treatment, but had died before book, film or magazine were released.)

The final set of stories provide pulp and post-pulp Science Fiction, with the latest publication date being 1961. As with the rest of the volume, there is a mix of familiar and unfamiliar names. 'Discord in Scarlet' by A. E. van Vogt has some claim to being an ancestor of the film 'Alien'. It earns a place regardless, with tense plotting, scientific problem solving and the idea of a spaceship with many portholes, which seems remarkably unlikely today. The James White story, set in his well-loved intergalactic hospital, also has a puzzle element whilst the stories by John Christopher, Idris Seabright and Marcia Kamien each have twist endings – indeed, I had to read the final paragraph of the latter twice to appreciate it.

Overall, this is a well put together collection, with rather more stories than I have mentioned. Apart from 'King Kong', they are all well-written, and even that story deserves its place as a representative part of a survey of the subject. However, the subtitle is a better description of the contents than the main title. The introductory essay provides more context for the choices. It also provides pointers to more stories and novels which follow similar themes and, in itself, shows off the depth of Mike Ashley's knowledge of the field. The one-page introductions to each story and its author(s) also add to the understanding, though I would have preferred more clarity on the date and place of publication there, rather than leaving this to the back of the book.

There are several more volumes by this editor in the British Library series. On the strength of this book, I would recommend all of them to seekers after the past, whether to understand the roots of SF better, or simply for well written stories of yesteryear.

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Bone Silence by Alastair Reynolds
(Gollancz, 2020)
Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

"We've only adopted piracy as a temporary measure, not a business for life."

Such is the story of the Ness sisters' life across the three volumes of this series: *Revenger*, *Shadow Captain* and now the conclusion here. They have accidentally become notorious pirates, inheriting the ship and reputation of Bosa Sennen, the worst pirate of them all, and in the process become just a little bit like her. Reynolds is very good at portraying extreme evil by only showing the periphery and letting our imaginations fill in the middle. The spirit of Bosa lives on in the sisters and continues to show occasional flashes, barely tempered by their innate humanity.

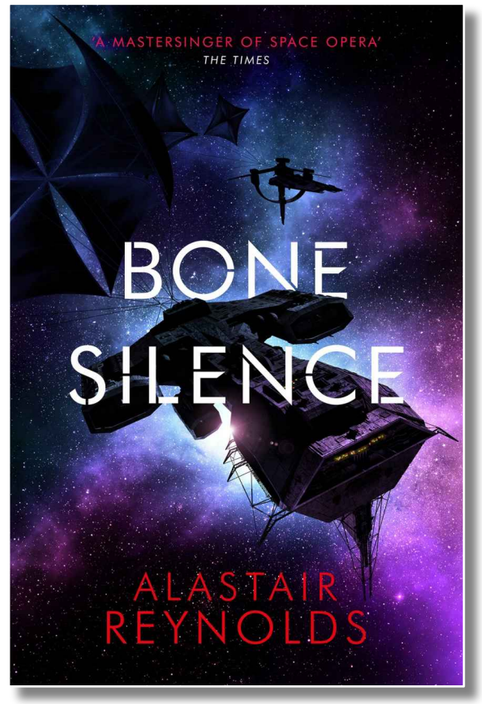
Worse, they find themselves quite good at it, and if the solar system isn't prepared to offer them the benefit of the doubt then they see no reason to claim it.

The three books make what is technically known as a cracking read: a very far future solar system of sunjammers navigating their way between habitats on the solar wind, mostly governed by Einsteinian physics, laced with just enough alien technology for a bit of mystery and the whole suffused with slowburning deep-time awe and wonder. This third book manages to round the series off in grand style worthy of its predecessors, exactly as you would hope. Paradoxically, where it has weaknesses, they are weaker than in either of the previous two.

The book opens right in media res, with far less explanation than before of what's going on. The opening chapters revolve around the sisters' need to acquire a skull. If you don't know that this is an alien skull enabling instantaneous ansible-like telepathic communication, there's precious few clues and readers may struggle catching up. Likewise, the whole background of Bosa Sennen and why so many people are after the sisters.

The Revenger books are shorter than many of Reynolds' earlier works, but this is still the first time I've wished he had been a bit more tightly edited. Reynolds at his best has an evocative poetic style. On one page we read: 'The sisters moved around [the skull] in circling opposition, two planets on either side of a bone-made star'. And yet on the same page there is the utterly mundane, and utterly superfluous, 'Bone rooms were always lit by electrical or gas appliances.'

Previously he has given his characters' speech patterns a certain floridness that matches the mental image of eighteenth-century Caribbean pirates that he is trying successfully to produce in our heads. In this case, however, floridness has given way to simple verbosity. These characters talk, at length, long past the point where the reader has got it and wants to progress with the story.



Yet, the story is told with the tension as tight as a sail riding the wind of a solar flare, with moments of humour and horror and breath-taking fear. Reynolds wisely separates the sisters for most of the book, giving us two parallel plot lines that still work together to tell the story to the reader. For a good third of the tale, one sister is caught up in the inexorable kind of chase that you could only get with sailing ships, where you're doing four knots and your enemy four and a half, so you know that battle must come and all you can do is plan for it. But despite that sister's scenes all being stuck on one ship, Reynolds keeps the story and suspense going throughout this long chase.

Then, with the sisters back together, Reynolds does what he loves doing: having established exactly what is going on, he completely turns the tables so that nothing can ever be the same again. He's done it at the end of each book, every time making the change even more irreversible, and this one is the grand culmination of the series.

Sideways in Time: Critical Essays on Alternate History Fiction

Edited by Glyn Morgan and C. Palmer-Patel (Liverpool University Press, 2019)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

History is, as the word tells us, a story. It is the narrative of the events that created our present compiled from whatever accounts, records and other documents may be available, and that are, inevitably, partial, generally incomplete, and often unreliable. History is not a science, since it is not open to empirical examination and cannot be repeated, and as any criminal lawyer will tell you, no two witnesses of the same event will agree on every detail. The relationship between history and fiction, therefore, is intimate and inescapable. The best historical fictions will attempt to use psychological insight and imagination to fill in the gaps in any historical record (for example, *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel); or to tell a story about those people who are largely absent from the historical record (for the same historical period we might consider, for example, the Shardlake novels of C.J. Sansom).

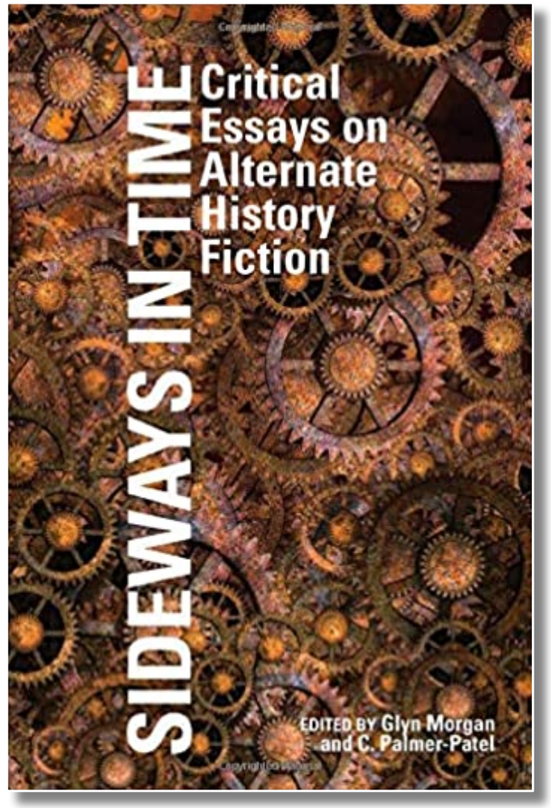
The relationship between history and the literature of the fantastic (in which we might include fantasy, horror and science fiction) is perhaps rather less obvious, but it is there nonetheless. For the sake of this discussion we will exclude time travel stories, which might be considered a special case of the historical fiction already discussed (although time travel can often play a key role in alternate histories, as for instance in *Bring the Jubilee* by Ward Moore or *The Guns of the South* by Harry Turtledove). Even so, there are several different ways in which history plays a part in the fantastic. I use the following terms simply to help me distinguish one form from another: there are apocryphal histories, in which legends and stories from the past are assumed to be true accounts; secret histories, in which major events are said to have been deliberately or inadvertently expunged from the historical record; revisionist histories, in which shameful or unfortunate events are recast in a more positive light; literary histories, in which characters from fiction are presented as being real historical figures (Sherlock Holmes being probably the most popular); and alternate histories, in which the consequences of one historical change are played out. For the record, the term "counterfactual" is often used as a synonym for alternate history, though I tend to see counterfactuals as dealing with the moment of change while alternate histories deal with the future consequences of that change. None of these divisions is hermetically sealed, the borders between them are inevitably porous, but these are, in broad terms, the most familiar ways in which science fiction imaginatively engages with history.

These ways of playing with history vary from thought experiments that are perhaps as close as we might come to scientific testing of history, to linking history to the more fantastic reaches of the human imagination. All have played their part in science fiction pretty well for as long as we have had science fiction, though, apart from periodic upsurges in time travel stories, they have never really been the most fashionable form of the literature. The occasional classics – *Lest Darkness Fall* by L. Sprague de Camp, *The Sound of His Horn* by Sarban, *The Man in the High Castle* by Philip K. Dick, *Pavane* by Keith Roberts – always seem detached from what else is happening in science fiction at the time, and rarely if ever generate anything that might pass for a movement. There are repeated tropes – the South wins the American Civil War, Hitler wins the Second World War – but really any study of alternate histories is going to look at a series of disconnected moments, of individual exemplars, rather than anything more coherent or overarching. (On a philosophical level, trends in alternate histories and secret histories and revisionist histories might reveal something interesting about the way any particular present regards the past and its study, but that is not an approach I have so far encountered in science fiction scholarship.)

The disjointedness of these engagements with history suggest that a collection of essays, such as the volume in front of us today, is perhaps the best way of approaching the topic. Except that this volume suggests there is a disjointedness also in the approach. Although the subtitle tells us firmly that these are "Critical Essays on Alternate History Fiction" (and I am uncomfortable with the need for that final word, since it implies there might be such a thing as alternate history fact), that is not necessarily what we get. Using the terms I have laid out already, there are essays on revisionist history ("Forever Being *Yamato*: Alternate Pacific War Histories in Japanese Film and Anime" by Jonathan Rayner, which looks at the way recent fictions have revisited the story of the battleship *Yamato* in order to present the defeat in a more noble and positive light; though Rayner doesn't really question how much this revisionism chimes with Japan's pre-War militaristic mythology); literary history ("Weird History/Weird Knowledge: H.P. Lovecraft versus Sherlock Holmes in *Shadows Over Baker Street*" by Chloé Germaine Buckley, one of the weaker essays which looks at a literary mash-up that hardly seems to warrant the word history); and apocryphal or perhaps secret history ("Between the Alternate and the Apocryphal: Religion and Historic Place in Aguilera's *La locura de Dios*" by Derek J. Thiess, one of the better essays in the collection about a novel involving the legend of Prester John). That's three out of the ten essays that, to me, seem to have nothing to do with the implied subject of alternate history.

And of those that do deal directly with alternate histories there seems to be little agreement on the characteristics of their subject. Take, for example, two of the best essays in the collection: Anna McFarlane, in "Time and Affect After 9/11: Lavie Tidhar's *Osama: A Novel*", presents alternate history as a form of stasis, an inability to deal with the trauma of the present; while Chris Pak, in "'It Is One Story': Writing a Global Alternate History in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt*", makes it dynamic, a consistency of development and growth whatever the present may throw at us. What this tells us, of course, is that alternate history is not one thing but rather a concatenation of ways in which we might confront the hopes and terrors of the present.

In their "Introduction" and "Afterword", the editors attempt, not altogether successfully, to tie all of these different essays into a coherent whole, whereas in many ways it is their very incoherence that is most interesting about them. Here we see alternate histories being used to undermine the "great man" theory of history (Molly Cobb's account of a couple of Alfred Bester's short stories in "The Subjective Nature of Time and the Individual's (in)Ability to Inflict Social Change") or to extol the "great man" theory (Adam Roberts on what is probably the earliest alternate history in "Napoleon as Dynamite: Geoffroy's Napoléon Apocryphe and Science Fiction as Alternate History"); to challenge gender assumptions in science fiction ("'Her Dreams Receding': Gender, Astronauts, and Alternate Space Ages in Ian Sales' *Apollo Quartet*" by Brian Baker) or to play out a slight variation on a conventional Hollywood romance (Andrew M. Butler considering the film version of a John Wyndham story in "*Quest for Love*: A Cosy Uchronia?"). Leaving aside the revisionist or literary histories, which seem to me more consolatory than disruptive, and therefore do not appear to belong in this volume, alternate histories represent a deliberate disordering of what we understand as the past, and therefore of the present. Since such disordering can take many forms, and play out in so many ways, it is inevitable that a collection such as this can do no more than start to feel out some of the nuances of alternate history. At its best, notably the essays by Roberts, Pak, McFarlane, and Karen Hellekson's take on the way alternate history is used on television, this volume does the job well and interestingly. Though other essays, including a slick but superficial survey of the field in Stephen Baxter's "Foreword", tend to slide past the subject without ever fully engaging. It is, in the main, an interesting book, but we do need many more of them to even hope to cover the field adequately.



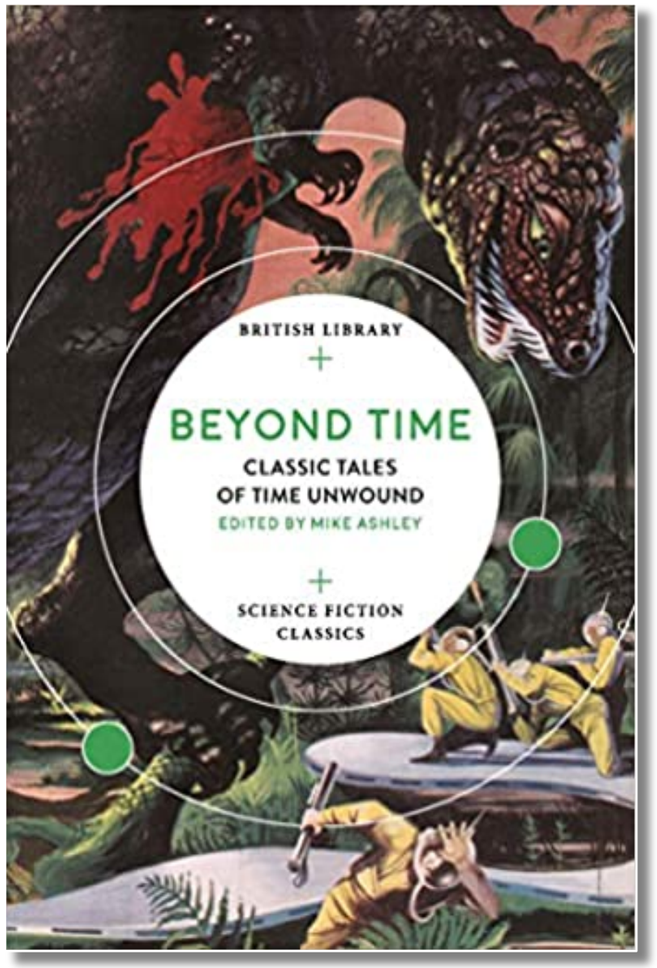
Beyond Time: Classic Tales of Time Unwound
Edited by Mike Ashley
(The British Library, 2019)
Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

Read a good old rollicking space opera, and as long as the author knows their stuff it's fairly easy to take it at face value. You don't immediately start asking questions about which laws of physics are being circumvented and how, or how they got from here to there, and so on. Read a time travel story, on the other hand, and the questions almost immediately start piling up. Readers start intuiting objections out of pure logic: is the past set in stone? What about the grandfather effect? Where are all the time travelling tourists? And so on. All those questions pretty well need to be dealt with by the end of the piece or the reader is cheated.

Mike Ashley has put together an interesting collection of thirteen obscure stories which were among the first to tackle these ideas with a proper, science fictional perspective rather than just shrug them off with 'because'.

Ashley kicks off with an interesting review of the development of time travel notions, which even if you leave aside the outright (and one-way) fantasy of tales like Rip Van Winkle, go a lot further back than H.G. Wells. Wells of course once wrote a story about a device constructed with the specific purpose of travelling in time. The first instance of using a mechanical device to do that, however, appears in 'The Clock That Went Backward' by Edward Page Mitchell (1881).

The stories range from 1881-1958, though the second oldest is from 1929. Readers well-versed in Golden Age sf might recognise more of the authors' names; other than Wells, the only really familiar genre name to me is E.C. Tubb, whose 'Thirty Seven Times' (1957) makes a good stab at reconciling free will and the predestination inherent in time travel. (Less associated with the genre, most readers have probably heard of J.B. Priestley.) Wells's own contribution is 'The Queer Story of Brownlow's Newspaper' (1932), in which a contemporary reader gets hold of a newspaper from the 1970s. It's easy to forget Wells died more recently than the Second World War; it feels odd to see him mention Einstein.



Several authors seem to have taken their cue from Wells's most famous work and have someone viewing the end of the Earth, all very much with the same elegiac tone as Wells himself used. There are also a lot of narrators relating what they've heard from another character who is in fact the protagonist.

In fact, there is a *lot* of talking in many stories, especially in the older ones, as the authors first of all have to lay down the theory of time travel that they then go on to explore. Priestley's 'Look After the Strange Girl' (1953) is a welcome exception, offering no explanation as it opens in media res with a rather confused time traveller having to work out exactly what is happening. Priestley obviously assumed his audience would be able to do likewise and the story repays its author's trust.

The best 'explanation of time travel' story (and one of the best, and funniest, overall) is Peter Phillip's 'Manna' (1949), an eclectic mix of themes. It opens with a new artificial food being unleashed on the 21st century, solving the problem of world hunger in a flash; *then* introduces the ghosts of a pair of 12th century monks, one of whom is scientifically minded and has already used the science section of the local library to work out the scientific basis of exactly what he is and how the universe works; and who *then* uses his knowledge to divert the output of the food factory back to his monastery in the 12th century to feed the hungry thousands displaced by the war between Stephen and Matilda.

'The Branches of Time' by David R. Daniels (1935) takes the punchline that Ray Bradbury would use in 'A Sound of Thunder' (1952) … and discards it as a throwaway line in a whole series of possible consequences of time travel.

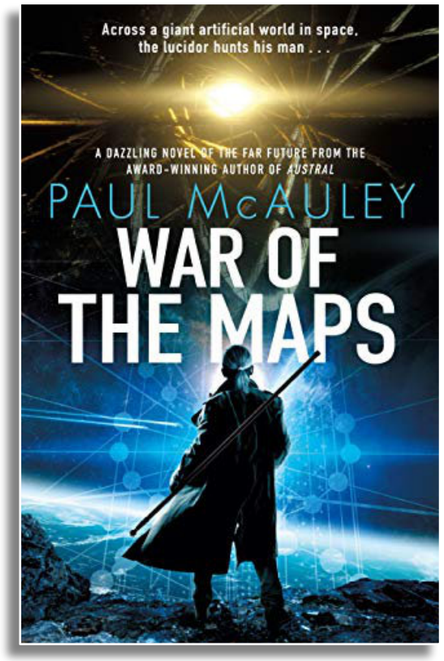
'The Reign of the Reptiles' by Alan Connell (1935) is the first story to allow a contemporary hero to have an actual science fictional adventure in the past, rather than a purely historical adventure, or a travelogue through the millennia. It also gives us the idea of sentient saurian civilisations, which is much older than *Doctor Who*. This one includes the hint that homo sapiens were created in the breeding labs of a saurian scientist, which I can imagine sending a delicious thrill through the ape-descended readership of the 1930s. It's also a necessary corrective to some of the alternative and far more harmful theories of race which flourished in that era.

It takes a major effort not to refer to the concept of 'Friday the Nineteenth' by Elizabeth Sanxay Holding (1950) as 'Groundhog Day' – but, having said that, you will immediately understand. Here the day is lived by a couple who are planning an affair but are never able to consummate it.

In 'Tenth Time Around' by J.T. McIntosh (1959) we get the first emergence of parallel universes as a result of time travel. The past is not necessarily written in stone: you're in a parallel universe so the only person who benefits from any differences is you, no one else. This also gives us a precursor of chaos theory, with major differences spiralling off from small changes.

There is nothing here that will slap you in the face and make you go 'wow', but if you enjoy the time travel genre and the concepts inherent in it, this is an excellent primer and a source of many nuggets of trivia.

War of the Maps by Paul McAuley (Gollancz, 2020)
Reviewed by Nick Hubble



On one level, *War of the Maps* is a really well-told, slightly old-fashioned science-fiction adventure novel, which is accurately summarised by the front-cover tagline: 'Across a giant artificial world in space, the lucidor hunts his man'. As McAuley notes in his 'Acknowledgments', the inspiration for the world depicted is an article by Ibrahim Semiz and Selim Oğur, 'Dyson Spheres around White Dwarfs'. However, as he has pointed out on his blog, the story grew from 'a character and a situation' and an idea for the ending. Once he had the character's voice right, the novel flowed because 'the protagonist's path through the world was mapped by his needs, desires and beliefs, and his interactions with other characters'. I quote at length both because this seems like useful advice for anyone wanting to write this kind of novel but also because I think this accounts for how convincing and satisfying this novel is to read; there are no false notes.

Lucidors are law-keepers in the Free State. While there are more than one in the novel, the protagonist is referred to throughout as *the* lucidor. Although he is retired, he is on one last mission to bring back to justice the villainous Remfrey He, who he had previously tracked down and captured at great cost but who has now been released by a political faction to go and help the war effort in neighbouring Patua against 'the invasion'. This set-up is reminiscent of a classic Western and indeed the opening finds the lucidor on horseback fleeing bandits in a beautifully written sequence which recalls the spare poetic tone of Cormac McCarthy. While this genre setting changes – at one point later in the novel the action switches into a Hornblower-style naval voyage – the lucidor retains the moral and narrative integrity of the sheriff pursuing justice. I imagined him as like Gary Cooper or James Stewart or possibly even Joel McCrea in *Ride the High Country*.

The novel turns on two linked questions: is the lucidor's single-minded hunt for Remfrey He correct, and what the right values to live by are. There is an ongoing disparity between the plain egalitarianism of the Free State and the aristocratic hierarchy of Patua. This latter contrast forms part of the war (although to be clear the two countries are ostensibly allies) mentioned in the novel's title. The term 'map' refers equally to land masses, countries, societies and the genetic make-ups of organisms and thus indicates some sort of scaled fractal relationship between the particular and the universal. 'The invasion' is a creeping wave of mutation producing a new biology, including the ant-like 'alter women' whose nests are gradually overtaking the north of Padua despite the best efforts of the army.

We see what is at stake in all of these struggles through the lucidor's various encounters with others: often women who, as the lucidor observes 'don't have the same obsession with hierarchy as men'. This is a point of superficial similarity between the lucidor and Remfrey He, who extols the alter-women colonies as utopias in which everyone works peacefully for the common good, even as he manipulates them for his own ends. Gary Wolfe likens Remfrey He to a Bond villain in his review of the novel for *Locus* and suggests that the archetypal confrontation between the two men is a little too clichéd. But I wondered if that was the point. The lucidor's most important relationships are actually with his dead wife (in memory) and with the novel's other main protagonists, the 'map-reader' Orjen Starbreaker and her steward Lyra. The standoff with Remfrey He seems more like a commentary on such male rivalries rather than the key point of the plot. Indeed, *War of the Maps*, with its intertextual allusions to 'new flesh', 'dire wolves' and Pratchett, may be read as a metatext subtly commenting on the traditional form of the genre and thereby opening the way to representing social change. Perhaps the novel is not so old-fashioned after all. It is certainly one that I recommend reading and which I will myself reread.

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The Library of the Unwritten by A. J. Hackwith (Titan Books, 2020)
Reviewed by Kate Onyett

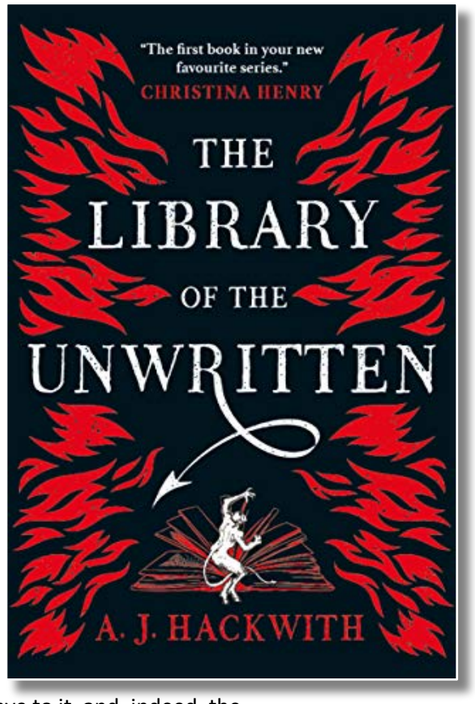
An emotionally distant Librarian, a playful Muse, a novel's Hero and a (kinda) demon are an unlikely crew to save the day. But in Hackwith's boisterous page-turner, they are apparently our best hope to prevent all-out destruction between realms human and supernatural.

A scrap of Lucifer's personal journal, written when he was much younger and angstier, has turned up inconveniently at the gates of Heaven, and ends up in the hands of the librarian/custodian of the Unwritten Library in Hell. Now she has to find all the loose pages and lock them down before they can be used as a weapon between Heaven and Hell, which would damage all of the Realms physical and metaphysical.

As you might expect from such a précis, prepare for adventure and action. We are diving into the classic quest of unlikely champions to save the day, who along the way undergo heroic catharsis of heart and head. The action is breathless, the characters vivid and sympathetic, and while some elements may feel a little familiar from other adventure yarns (betrayal, surprises, epic lone battles, deus ex machina), these well-trodden themes are eminently suitable for a story that is all about the *power* of stories. The various realms our motley band find themselves passing through are apparently there by the will of human belief, and at the very centre of the riddle is the Library of the Unwritten.

It's a wonderful conceit; a place where the *ideas* of undeveloped stories go, becoming leather-covered tomes on shelves stretching away into darkness. A place where people's pure imagination is kept, curated, safe. For any bibliophile, libraries are exciting, interesting places. One wonders what strange powers may lurk in the shifting shadows and beneath the covers of books stacked in there? A library is a collection of refined human concentration; all that thinking, planning and finding the right words. This novel is action-adventure *and* a love-letter to writing, reading, and the people who find power and amazement in such. The purest power to liberate, and to enchain, comes, we are told, from human imagination.

The style of it reminded me strongly of those brilliant, fondly (and most likely imperfectly) recalled narratives of my youth; the films of the 1980s and 1990s. It's a snuggle book; something warm and cosy about it, even when the Scooby Gang face deadly peril. Hell's geography is much like the winding corridors of the *Labyrinth*, Hero could be a shoe-in for the Dread Pirate Roberts, the Librarian is basically every sort-of geeky, female bad-ass of fervent teenage hero-worship, and as for the Vikings…



But while Hackwith may be using a Classical narrative paradigm (and a lot of action stories follow that old chestnut), she's no slave to it, and, indeed, the very nature of narrative structure is something the characters have moments to comment on in suitably post-*Buffy* meta-textual style. The female characters are strong individuals, carving ahead, and story's end can only be reached and saved by the female lead; moreover, a woman of colour. Sexuality remains fluid; pan- and homo-sexuality are more frequently referred to than hints of hetero desire. No automatic exaltation of your white, cis, heterosexual male champions here. Tall, strong Hero is useful, but stands very much at our heroine's command.

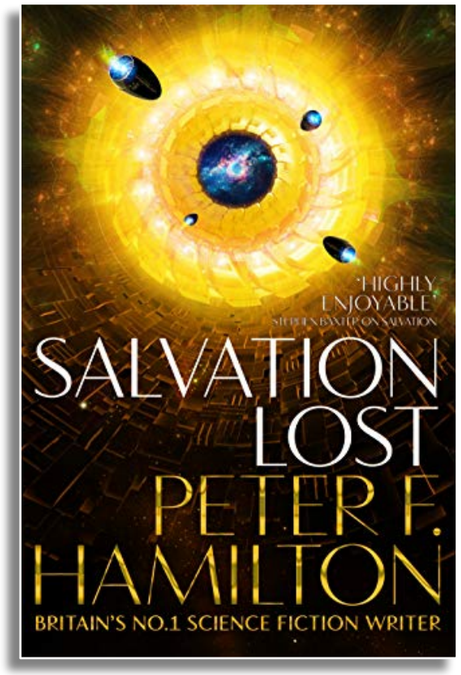
Further busting up that Classic paradigm is the fact that there is no ultimate good or bad, but the grey, grey areas of personal belief. Behind the action, there is the emotional life of the book. Through the characters' trials and tribulations, this is a story about growing up and being your best self; whatever form that quest comes in. It reminds us that we have a duty to ourselves and others not to remain static, but to embrace change and realise in doing so that we are far, far braver than we ever thought we were.

Salvation Lost by Peter F. Hamilton (Macmillan, 2019) Reviewed by Stuart Carter

My 2018 review of *Salvation* closed with a note of disbelief at realising a whole year of waiting lay ahead before the story would be continued. The good news is, that year was absolutely worth the wait; the bad news: there's now another twelve months before *The Saints of Salvation* is published.

If you haven't read *Salvation* – and you definitely should! – then be warned, there are spoilers for that book directly ahead…

At the very end of *Salvation* it was revealed that the alien Olyix, who had arrived in our solar system some 60 years ago, had never been our friends, despite their ongoing pretence to the contrary. They were religious fanatics with a *very* long-term plan for humanity: dragging everyone with them to the end of the universe to meet god, and they weren't terribly interested in getting us there in one piece, either. With this insane plan exposed, their vast ships are now approaching to scoop up everyone into their Arkships.



Meanwhile, on Earth itself, hidden fifth columnists have begun a covert guerrilla war to cripple what few defences humanity has. Oh, and the Olyix' wondrous gift of free biotech for everyone turns out to have a very high price tag after all, as the cheap transplants and implants available to anyone begin to turn on their owners, transforming them for the journey to the end of the universe.

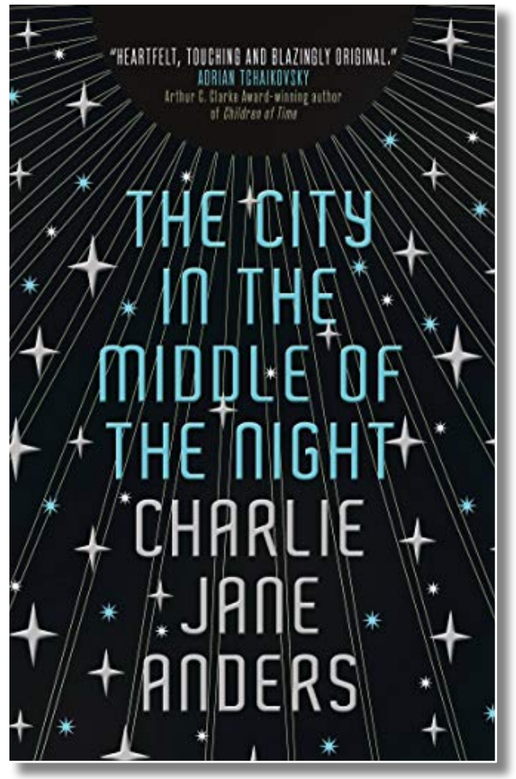
The tension is cranked up to an almost unbearable level by the parallel far-future storyline, where the fugitive remains of humanity, racing around the galaxy for thousands of years, continue to follow an ancient dream of revenge: forever awaiting a messianic call to arms that will see the combined forces of humanity defeat the Olyix once and for all. It's a genuinely chilling device. On the one hand, we're all familiar with the trope of an unstoppable alien menace threatening humanity – and everyone knows how *that* piece of jingoistic wish fulfilment always ends. Except in this case we already know there is no hope. We lose.

Creeping dread permeates the whole of *Salvation Lost.* There's no escaping the fact that this is the end of the world. Everyone is going to die. It is, frankly, pretty horrific, reminiscent of the Cold War when nuclear war threatened everything and everyone, and there seemed to be nothing we could do about it. Which, as someone who grew up in the '80s, might go some way to explaining why *Salvation Lost* seemed so mesmerising and unputdownable, because it felt like I'd been there before. Don't think that this is a miserable book, however, quite the opposite, it's an exhilarating festival of doom that your inner goth will relish.

Just like *Salvation*, *Salvation Lost* zooms in and out with dizzying gusto. The action switches from the still-recognisable streets of a doomed London, where street gang the Southwark Legion are still hustling at the end of the world, to glorious space sequences, where the realisation of the Olyix' overwhelming power becomes hideously apparent. I cheered out loud at moments, when the Olyix didn't get things all their own way, only to realise again and again, that this isn't *Independence Day* and no one is going to save us. On the mean streets of Southwark, things begin to fall apart for everyone – not least the members of the Legion, as the realisation that this is it slowly dawns on everyone.

You'll need your wits about you to keep up with the labyrinthine story that continues through *Salvation Lost*, but this is a hugely fun and adventurous book. You'll be surprised again and again by twists and revelations in the plot, and by Hamilton's story-telling chutzpah, taking old-fashioned space opera and making it feel new and exciting yet again. The end of the world has never been so much fun!

The City in the Middle of the Night by Charlie Jane Anders (Titan, 2019) Reviewed by Anne F. Wilson



January is a tide-locked planet. The side facing the sun is uninhabitable, the side facing away is icy cold and inhabited by hideous and deadly native creatures, nicknamed for earth species. Crocodiles, bison and squid look nothing like their namesakes, and are a lot more lethal.

The human immigrants, who arrived some generations ago, live along the terminator. They have lost touch with the mothership, circling endlessly above. Their civilisation is dying as they fail to live in harmony with the planet, but they are also exhausting the planet's resources and polluting the environment so that the native inhabitants are struggling to survive.

Sophie and Bianca are best friends and roommates at the Gymnasium, an elite school in the city of Xiosphant, where everything is rigidly timetabled. Sophie is a scholarship girl, Bianca a child of the city's elite, destined for a life of power. Then Sophie takes the blame for one of Bianca's pranks, and is thrown out onto the night side to die.

She is rescued by a crocodile. Enormous, tentacled and pincered, it is something out of a nightmare. Humans have killed them without trying to communicate with them, but they are sentient, intelligent and telepathic. To be fair, there is something Lovecraftian about these monsters, so it isn't surprising if they instil an instinctive terror. It is Sophie's vulnerability that saves her. The crocodile deposits Sophie back on the outskirts of the city that ejected her.

Mouth used to be a nomad, now she's a smuggler travelling between cities along the great circle, backwards and forwards. There are fewer things to trade, prices are going up, and the journey gets ever more dangerous. But the Xiosphanti have got – have stolen – something of Mouth's and she wants it back.

Impelled by Sophie's supposed death, Bianca tries to start a revolution, and is encouraged by Mouth for her own ends. Meanwhile, Sophie has been returning to communicate telepathically with her rescuer, whom she has named Rose, and her people the Gelet. Rose describes the polluting rain from the skies that is stopping their young from developing. Sophie tries to help.

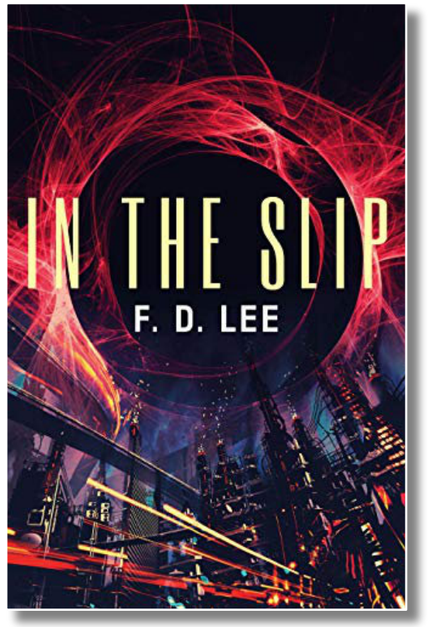
Eventually Sophie and Bianca have to escape from Xiosphant with the smugglers. They arrive in Argelo, which has no fixed timetables and hosts a multiplicity of languages, fashions and spicy foodstuffs. Sophie tells the others about the Gelet, but Bianca can only see them as a tool to bring about her revolution.

The author admits in her afterword that she struggled with writing this book, and it shows. Her previous novel, *All the Birds in the Sky*, was small scale, set in California, with engaging characters and a seductive mix of science and magic. Kudos to her for trying something different, and also for trying to talk about the major issue of our times: climate change.

As a novel, however, it has some flaws. After a lot of editing it is still very baggy, and I spent a lot of time wishing they would get on with the plot. While Sophie and Mouth are sympathetic, I found them a bit one-dimensional, and Bianca is entirely self-centred in her quest for power.

And this is a shame, because the author tries to deal with some important questions. How can the powerless get the power to change things? How can people from very different backgrounds work together? What sort of a revolution do we need to get rid of fossilised ways of thinking and have a chance to save our civilisation and the world that we live in? I'm afraid that this book didn't get very far towards the answers, but it has made me want to re-read a lot more of Ursula Le Guin.

In the Slip by F. D. Lee
(Self-Published, 2019)
Reviewed by David Lascelles



It is hard to review this latest offering by Lee without giving away spoilers because the whole story is about misdirection and unreliable narrators. However, I shall give it a try and hope I don't blow the whole surprise for you all…

Meet Kong. He's a wonderful 1950s detective cliché of a character, who could have stepped out of a Raymond Chandler novel. He's also a time traveller, someone who uses 'the Slip' to move through time and he uses these skills in the service of a company in order to ensure that the perfect world they created is preserved from rogue time travellers who want to go back and change the past. We see things from Kong's first-person perspective, he is the unreliable narrator referenced in the first paragraph, and obviously things are not as they first appear.

First, Kong may sound like a 1950s hard-boiled Chandleresque detective but in fact he is far from it. He is neither white nor heterosexual and his manner of speaking is an affectation which is commented on by several other characters as being weird. However, like all the best detective tropes, he does have an addiction, though Kong's is not booze but rather the pills he needs to take to prevent ill effects from time travel. You see, travelling through the 'Slip is like deep diving. The further/deeper you go the more pressure you feel and the more problems you get when you return. There is a sort of 'time Bends' a decompression sickness caused by time travel that is treated by taking 'Chloros' and in the course of this story, Kong takes a boat load of them like Smarties and is even driven to acquire stronger ones as an important plot point.

What Kong is becomes one of the mysteries of the novel. His past, his purpose and perceptions are all skewed and one of the goals of the reader is to learn the truth.

Secondly, if you are familiar with Lee's other works (the Pathway series) or indeed any dystopian fiction, you will not be at all surprised to find that the perfect future that Kong defends is far from what it claims to be. A society obsessed with shopping, a bleak cyberpunk cityscape, a corporation obsessed with maintaining the status quo in order to preserve its own grip on the economy, a whole host of signs that all is not well. A lot of the history of this society is, naturally, fabricated.

Having read both this and Lee's other works, I would say that this is by far Lee's best work to date. I enjoy her fairy tale themed fantasy works but they can feel a little derivative of other works – Pratchett, the Shrek movies and, of course, the Grimm tales themselves. This, however, is uniquely Lee. While it shares some classic SF and dystopian fiction tropes with other works (in particular I am reminded of Alan Moore's parody of *Dragnet* with a couple of 'Time Cops' in 200AD and some of it riffs off *Brazil*), Lee manages to turn these into something wonderful. A number of times I was trying to predict what would happen and was constantly surprised. Another amazing aspect is Lee's use of humour. She has a voice that hits the right timing points for comedy and some of her absurdities, including a bizarre situation with a penguin, are up there with the likes of Douglas Adams.

In all, an enjoyable book that, of all the self-published works I have read, most deserves to be taken on by a traditional publisher to reach a wider audience. A fact that is made clear by its nomination in the BSFA longlist and winning the *Writer's Digest Self-Published Book Award (SF category)*. If you like a time travel mystery dystopia you should check this out.

THE BSFA REVIEW #10 – Summer 2020

The Silver Wind by Nina Allan
(Titan Books, 2019)
Reviewed by Dan Hartland

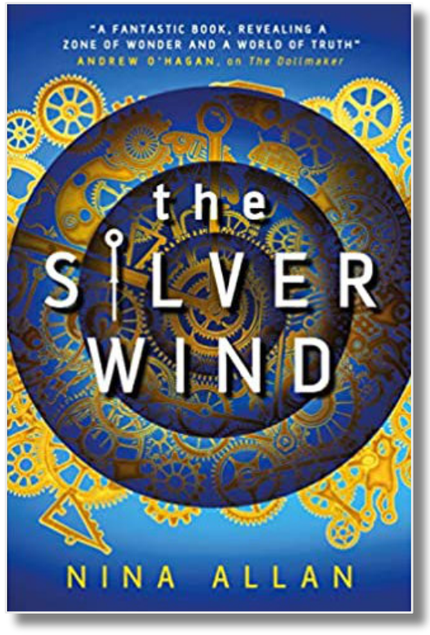
"Maine's initial ideas are always good" wrote Kingsley Amis, in *The Observer*. True enough. However, Maine also had the ability to follow through on those initial ideas, as in *The Tide Went Out* (re-issued by British Library Classics) and *World Without Men* (1958), about – well – a world without men. He aimed his books at a general market, casting them as 'scientific thrillers' rather than 'hard' science fiction, which proved to be a lucrative ploy for all concerned.

Author's Note: "The genetic effects on human beings of radioactive fallout from nuclear weapons have received prominent publicity in recent years, but what has not been stressed is that the same process of mutation can equally change the structure and nature of all life forms. This novel sets out to examine the threat to humanity posed by such an eventuality and show how men, being what they are, exploit the situation to their own several ends."

In *The Darkest of Nights* (first published by Hodder & Stoughton, 1962), Maine considered how nuclear fallout might cause a mutated virus to take fatal form. Two fatal forms. From Mike Ashley's Introduction ('A Plague upon Humanity?') to this edition: "The AB version is lethal and incurable. The BA version is harmless and even confers immunity against the AB version, but the BA version can't be cultivated on its own because it immediately breaks down into both AB and BA and the AB version becomes rampant. Scientists soon realise that there's every chance that the AB virus will wipe out at least half of the world's population."

It all began in Southern China. Perhaps a single radioactive gamma particle falling from the atmosphere, long after a nuclear weapon test, had traversed a single virus cell floating aimlessly in the subtropical air, damaging the molecular protein structure and forming a new variant which would continually reproduce its mutated form. Dr Ludwig Hueste, a German virologist, had been the first to isolate the new virus. It had acquired a name, but not an explanation or an antidote. Day by day the death toll mounted, running through the thousands and hundreds of thousands and then into the millions. There are no easy answers. There is no happy ending. But a spark of hope remains. Just about.

The critical response to *The Darkest of Nights* was generally favourable, as shown by blurbs blazoned on the 1965 Panther paperback edition: "The action is on. And so is the reader: chair's edge" (*Books and Bookmen*); "The book provides a moral and political situation which could keep us arguing through a long night" (*Sunday Times*). In these days of HIV/AIDS, the Ebola virus, and pollution-related toxins, it has become more relevant – and terrifying – than ever.



I have no proof that Terry Nation read *The Darkest of Nights* before he created *Survivors* (1975-77), the BBC TV series that ended up as a cosy-catastrophe version of *The Archers*. I have no proof that he didn't read it, either. Nation – or Maine – cannot be blamed for the awful 2008-10 remake. Maine himself was no stranger to the mass media. Four feature films were based upon his novels: *Spaceways* (1953); *Timeslip/*aka *The Atomic Man* (1955: novelized in 1957, as *The Isotope Man*); *Escapement/*aka *The Electronic Monster* (1957); *The Mind of Mr. Soames* (1970: starring Terence Stamp, Nigel Davenport, and Robert Vaughn). *Darkest of Nights* could – and should – be added to that filmography.

I concur with Ashley's verdict that: "Some of [Maine's] ideas have dated, but that does not stop his books from challenging our thinking about how we would cope with strange and frightening circumstances, such as when faced with only a 50.50 chance of survival against a deadly virus." *The Darkest of Nights* may not be the lightest of reads, but Maine brings it to a darkly logical conclusion. Not for people of a nervous disposition.

Alternative titles: *Survival Margin* (Gold Medal, 1968); *The Big Death* (Sphere, 1978: revised).

Atlas Alone by Emma Newman (Gollancz, 2019)

Reviewed by D. A. Lascelles

A woman works on some spreadsheets and plays some games. If describing *Atlas Alone* on one of those 'misrepresent a story' Twitter threads, that is what you would see. On the surface, for much of this book, the main character does very little but lie on a bed with her eyes closed.

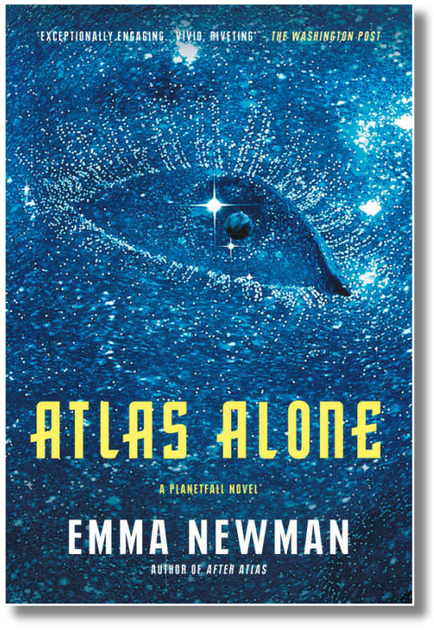
But, of course, there is a lot more to it than that.

Atlas Alone takes up the story begun in *After Atlas*. A second colony ship containing a passenger list mostly composed of the members of a single religious group, takes off after the Pathfinder mission. On board are three who are not part of that group: Deanna, Carl and Travis. The book opens with the three of them playing cards, bound together by a shared secret – that they are the only three on that ship to have witnessed the nuclear destruction of Earth at the end of *After Atlas*. At least the only three, other than the ones who arranged it all.

Where *After Atlas* follows Carl, a police detective, *Atlas Alone* shifts focus to Deanna. Like Carl, she is another indentured employee – hot housed in an education programme and sold to an organisation for a contracted period of time. Her job was data analysis in the gaming industry. Now, however, her goal is to find out who ordered the destruction of Earth and get revenge on them. Luckily, she gets the chance to do so by using her gaming skills when a mysterious online person drops some opportunities in her lap. A way to get revenge via virtual reality. When one of the suspects in the bombing of Earth mysteriously dies after an online game, Deanna gets drawn into a fascinating murder mystery and realises she is one of the suspects.

Atlas Alone is a fascinating story that explores some great SF concepts, while also touching on current issues – mostly ideas around online gaming and social media, in particular experiences familiar to many women in such environments. Deanna comes across as a strong female protagonist who is nevertheless believable as she struggles to figure out what is happening around her. She has realistic concerns and she uses her agency to solve problems effectively. Throughout the plot, she develops from a character with a definite goal, to someone being manipulated and led towards an unknown goal, to finally penetrating the mystery and exercising her right to choose again. On the way, we get an in-depth insight into her background: how she came to be indentured, how she came to have the personality that she does and so on. This all ties into the virtual settings she encounters.

If there is a flaw to this, I would say the villains feel a little too one dimensional. They come across as generic, rich US Christians and this contrasts with the rich background of the lead character. There are also scenes where it seems that things are being pushed a little too much to make them seem like the bad guys. For example, some rather over the top displays of misogyny. However, this is a minor annoyance in an otherwise excellent tale of virtual superspy antics. Overall, this is a solid entry, despite feeling a little like a book in the middle of a series. At the end we are still left uncertain as to the fate of the colony ship and I for one was intrigued to find out what happens next. We have had a book led by Carl, one led by Deanna, so I am hoping for one led by the third in that trio – Travis – as the ship gets closer to its goal. Obviously, Newman has not finished with this world yet, so we will see a lot more of it in the hopefully very near future.



Echo Cycle by Patrick Edwards (Titan Books, 2020)

Reviewed by Dan Hartland

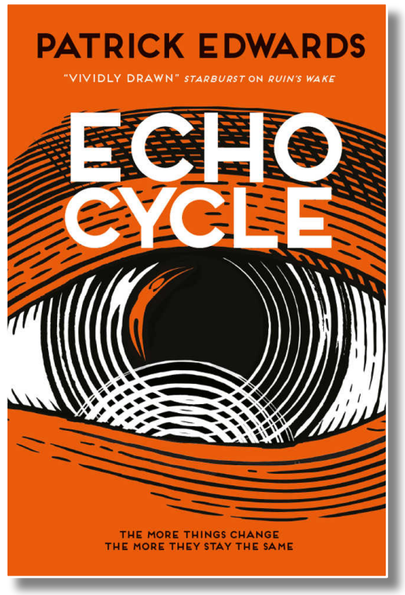
Edwards' second novel is bursting at the spine with ideas, vignettes and images. It reminded me of a range of recent novels – Ned Beauman's hallucinatory *Madness Is Better Than Defeat*, Jeanette Winterson's iconoclastic *Frankissstein* and most of all Dave Hutchison's *Fractured Europe* series – but it's also true that *Echo Cycle* is so intermittently bizarre that it is unusually difficult to bracket.

In a near-future scarred by Brexit (that already quaint obsession of the late-2010s), the British Isles have once more become the "sick man" of Europe; on the continent, meanwhile, a period of significant stress and turmoil has been brought to a close by the re-emergence of the EU – now known as the Confederacy. Centred on Rome, the new union has selected the language of ancient Rome as its international argot. Appropriately enough, we begin a novel predicated on a world in which Latin is once more Europe's *lingua franca* in the company of a gaggle of English public-school boys. When one of their number, Winston Monk, learns on a school trip that he has failed to win a place at Cambridge, he runs – naturally bereft – into the streets of Rome, never to be seen again.

Some decades later, Monk's erstwhile classmate and friend, Lindon Banks, is appointed to a diplomatic mission to Rome, tasked with re-establishing ties between the techno-utopia of the Confederacy and the meat-and-potatoes backwater of England. Readers might find the stark contrast between the two worlds a little heavy-handed, but Edwards commits to sufficient world-building that the edifice holds. When Banks runs into Monk in the street, however, the novel's structures start to creak.

Monk has spent the intervening years - for reasons which are never entirely clear – in ancient Rome. He witnesses the suicide of Nero, and fights as a gladiator; he works as a slave and lives in palaces. He develops a relationship with Sporus, a quasi-historical figure whom Edwards calls on to be the magical centre of the ancient sections of the novel, and to whom he gives Atlantean heritage, by way of the island of Thera.

There is, as I suggested, a lot going on. Banks's timeline is no different: there are Illuminati conspiracies and a range of SFnal McGuffins to complement the historical fantasy of Monks' story. Each half of the novel is delivered in alternate chapters, and the reader never quite settles into one narrative before being asked to shift attention once more. Eventually the two halves dovetail with a share of melodrama, but it is detail and incident which primarily fill the intervening pages, rather than a unifying theme or framework.



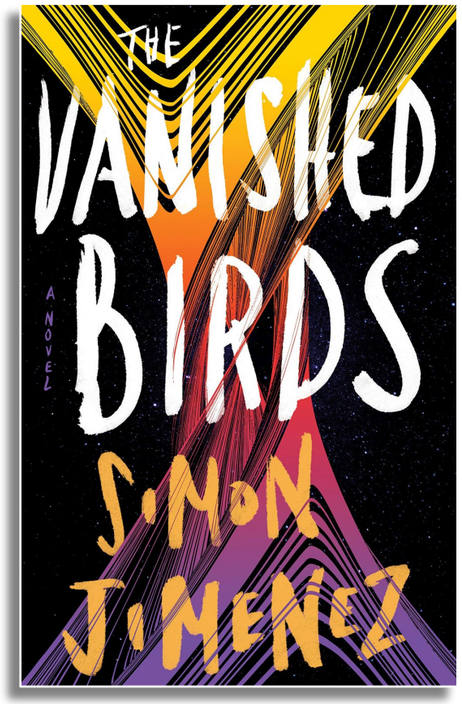
Edwards rewards his reader's patience – and creates the conditions for his ambition to come close to succeeding – by creating equally granular worlds for both Monk and Banks: his ancient Rome is pungent and grimy, his future Rome glossy and complex. Inhabiting these *milieus* is the novel's primary joy, although in layering instructive episode after episode in this way, it often feels longer than its relatively slight 350-ish pages. For a thriller, *Echo Cycle* is oddly ruminative.

The uncomfortable admixture is the novel's stock-in-trade, however: Mary Gentle-ish historical fantasy sits next to David Marusek-style futurism; romance juts against action; decidedly unlikeable characters demand our sympathy. These kinds of balancing act can be difficult to achieve, and *Echo Cycle* burdens itself with many; every part of it seeks to disrupt one kind of reading protocol or another. At times, however, so many plates spin atop their spindly sticks that the cumulative effect becomes disorienting rather than impressive.

In other words, *Echo Cycle* is an ambitious novel that should be commended for its difference, but which also falls foul of it. In its many deliberate dis-junctures lie both its value and its great weakness: one wonders whether fewer internal contradictions might have been easier to finesse into a paradoxical unity. The novel bodes well for Edwards' future work because it is a remarkable book, but what makes it so worthy of note is also what lead me to suspect his best book may yet be in front of him.

The Vanished Birds by Simon Jimenez (Titan, 2020)
Reviewed by Anne F. Wilson

The Earth is dying, and humanity is reaching for the stars. Colony ships are being built by the Umbai corporation, and people are desperate to buy places. Fumiko Nakajima, a gifted engineer, is commissioned to design space stations for humanity's diaspora.



The narrative spans centuries, from the gradual death of the Earth from humanity's toxic overload, to the future when Umbai corporation is gradually taking over all the worlds of humanity's diffusion. They are linked by Nakajima's memories, her life artificially prolonged through cold sleep. Then on Umbai-V, one of Umbai's Resource Worlds, a boy appears, the sole survivor of a spaceship crash. Nakajima has been waiting for someone like him, who may have the ability to challenge Umbai's dominance. The plot develops from here in ways that (at least to me) were unexpected.

Where the book really shines is in the characters. Nia Imani is a spaceship captain, on contract to Umbai, ferrying the cargoes that it needs across vast tracts of space, using fold technology. For her, a journey to Umbai-V and back is 8 months. For Kaeda, a native of Umbai-V with whom she has an affair, it's 15 years. She picks up the boy to take him to Nakajima. The affair with Kaeda is beautifully described, each of them having their own incompatible aims. Kaeda, committed to a relationship that only takes place every 15 years, must somehow build a life in the gaps. His friends and family, Nia's crew, Nakajima with her failed family and romantic relationships, are all believable characters, trying to live their lives as best they can.

As well as the characters, I found the description of Earth's slow collapse convincing and depressing. Nakajima's lover is an ecologist, and we see the gradual narrowing of possibilities from her point of view as she tries to give those who can't get off-planet a better life. The title of the book refers to the species of birds that are gradually becoming extinct, birds that Nakajima uses as a basis for the designs of her stations.

Music is also a theme. The mysterious boy turns out to be a musician, and Nia gives him a cheap flute that she picked up from a tourist market. His flute music pervades the ship, unsettling the delicate balances of love and friendships between the crew.

What I found less convincing were the social and political structures. Umbai is the only corporation, and we never get a glimpse of who controls it or why. It sems to have no serious competition. There is no mention of independent states or governments on the planets that Umbai takes over. There is no effective resistance to its security forces, the yellowjackets. We get glimpses of poverty and misery outside the corporate world, and it is clear that what is offered to Kaeda and his compatriots is diminished opportunities and limited education, but they all seem content with this. Nobody demands more. A minor point, but I was also not convinced that that Umbai would use independent contractors such as Nia for haulage, as this necessarily reduces the security of its imports.

The unitary nature of Umbai's control may be driven by plot necessity. The exploration of the possibilities offered by a more pluralistic and uncertain political structure might have turned the book into an impossibly baggy and uncontrolled narrative. Nevertheless, I found this part of the construction a bit too airbrushed to be convincing.

So, it's more a political and philosophical tract than a gritty tale of space haulage. In spite of this I enjoyed the book very much, read it quickly over a couple of days, and remembered most of it for this review. I'll be interested to read what the author is working on next.

THE BSFA REVIEW #10 – Summer 2020

Eden by Tim Lebbon (Titan Books, 2020)
Reviewed by Finn Dempster

It's the near future, and humanity's relationship with the natural world it depends on is, sadly, more fraught and destructive than ever. Pollution levels are out of control, and climate change disasters are the new norm. A final effort has been made to preserve at least some of the natural world; thirteen vast areas of natural wilderness, selected from each continent, are declared permanently off-limits to humanity. Monitored by the United Zone Council and patrolled by the armed guards known as Zeds, these huge nature reserves – desserts, forests, jungles – are named Virgin Zones. For some, the existence of the Zones is a good and noble thing; for most, they are a deluded and misguided fallacy.

But for a few, the call of the wild is irresistible. Zone adventure racing is the new extreme sport, a subculture of hikers and adventurers who compete for speed records, crossing the Zones on foot under the radar of the Zeds. One group has committed itself to the biggest challenge this outlaw sport has to offer: the successful traversing of the mysterious Eden, first of the Virgin Zones. So far, no team has made it through alive, and rumours about what might be in there have taken on a mythical, almost theological tone.

Lebbon has clearly taken a long, unsparing look at humanity's relationship with the natural world, and this dark tale of personal survival, set against the backdrop of a planet in crisis, makes for appropriately grim reading. But it's an irresistible premise, and apart from a few problems, Lebbon pulls it off.

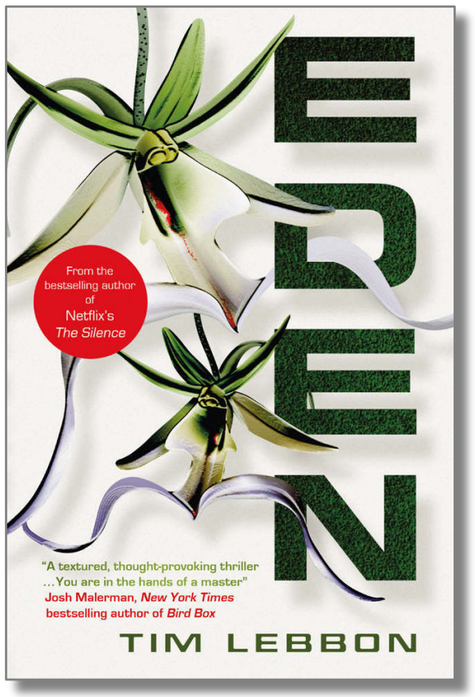
Lebbon combines his screenwriter's eye for cinematic visuals with an obvious passion for the natural world, and the forest into which his count-'em-while-you-can characters throw themselves is rich in detail. From misty woodland sunrises to moist, mossy undergrowth, Lebbon delights in the tactile and the sensory, bringing into sharp focus the ever more hostile world of Eden with smell, touch and sight. He allows himself particularly free reign when the narrative switches to the perspective of Lilith, the Elemental in the heart of Eden, who is able to see the forest from high above or from under the ground; those vivid, present tense passages are a clever way of breathing more life into the environment, effectively giving Lebbon a narrative camera with unlimited range.

The characters themselves – a mixed bag of youthful idealists, professional adventurers and retirees – are not always depicted quite as convincingly as their scenery. This is partly because Lebbon too often explains who a character is, rather than revealing it through their dialogue and actions. But this improves as the story develops, and we get to see who they are under more fraught circumstances. And when they do come into focus, they are endearingly flawed, their respective weaknesses and naiveties cleverly mirroring the flaws of their future world. Jenn, for example, approves of the Virgin Zones, but has a youthful, idealized understanding of the natural world.

These flaws make their moments of courage all the more meaningful and, on the whole, I was happy to root for them.

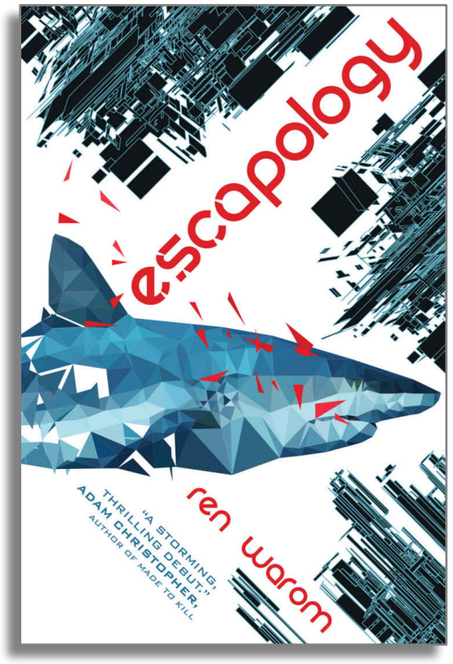
Elsewhere, Lebbon's enthusiasm does sometimes get the better of him. The minutiae of forest hiking and navigation, while evocative, is sometimes relentless; I didn't need to hear about *every* protein gel, boot lace or muscle twinge. A splendour of descriptive riches to be sure, but one whose currency would have increased in value had it been rarer. The knock-on effect of this surfeit of prose is a story which doesn't move as fast as it probably should have. This is less of a problem in the second half of the novel – once the stage is set, the pace picks up – but it takes a little shovel-work getting there. Those chapter-opening transcripts, which provide the global context of the tale with a handful of lines, prove Lebbon can do a lot with a little.

A dark, engrossing read.



Escapology by Ren Warom (Titan Books, 2016) Reviewed by Martin McGrath

If I reveal that the characters in *Escapology*, Ren Warom's first novel, have names such as Amiga, Shock, Twist and Deuce then some of you will immediately deduce a great deal more about the book. You'll intuit that this is an everyday story of hacker folk. You may guess that these down-at-heel types live in a world of improbably lurid crime bosses. Or that the events take place amidst a mulched-together mishmash of far Eastern cultures. You'll almost certainly be able to predict that the plot revolves around an improbable heist and semi-mystical technology.



The covers of *Escapology* could hardly encompass more cyberpunk set-dressing – from an unlikely virtual reality realm in which hacking requires solving *Crystal Maze* style puzzles to neon-splashed, rain-sluiced streets filled with ramen bars – every familiar element is stamped firmly in place. Whether this is taken as an opportunity to revel in nostalgia or as a tedious rehashing of a worn-out future will, I suppose, depend upon the reader. I found the whole thing a slightly dispiriting experience. It's not that *Escapology* doesn't have nice moments – there's a car chase escape in the final quarter that is a well-handled action sequence and some of the dialogue was sharp enough to make me laugh out loud. However, the whole thing is so firmly fixed on familiar rails that I frequently struggled to find any motivation to return to the book.

Escapology is too long. There's a subplot about giant paddle-wheel-driven moving islands whose purpose I still haven't fathomed. Other events drag on at extraordinary length and forward momentum is thrown away as viewpoint characters pause to muse on history and sociology or indulge in amateur psychological analysis of their own motivations. There is a leaner, more enjoyable, 300-page novel struggling to free itself from the 450 pages presented here and an editor should have found it.

Cyberpunk has always had a problematic relationship with "the East" – smothering it with love. Even at its best the subgenre has used Eastern cultural references as lazy exoticism. During cyberpunk's first-flowering the appropriation of Eastern cultural elements, however controversial, at least served a purpose in unsettling Western readers comfortable assumptions about what the future should look like. Four decades on, this seam has been worked to exhaustion.

It's not clear what purpose the Korean, Chinese and Japanese cultural paraphernalia serves in *Escapology* or why this range of cultures are mushed together except, perhaps, that it provides the characters something interesting to eat. Some of the characters are identified as Asian but everyone speaks and thinks in the same sardonic, Californian-inflected internal monologue familiar in tone from so much soft-boiled cyberpunk. In mannerism, voice and thought the main characters are, too often, indistinguishable and all cultural diversity feels skin deep.

Ironically, had Warom set her story amongst the chippies and curry houses of her West Midlands home, instead of imagined sushi bars, then *Escapology's* cyber noir stylings might have felt stranger, fresher and more interesting.

One curious element of *Escapology* is the treatment of hacker Shock's transgender status. Warom is clearly sympathetic but the denouement – in which Shock is forced to accept a part of him (an avatar in the form of an octopus) that is apparently innately and resolutely feminine despite his painful rejection of that identity – is uncomfortable. I believe Warom is trying to give the character a sense of peace after a (literally, in places) tortuous character arc – but the best one can say about it is that it feels confusing.

Some readers will revel in *Escapology* – glad to back in this kind of place with this kind of people. I can see that appeal. But this familiarity also edges the book too close to pastiche and is its greatest weakness. I won't be returning for the sequel, *Virology*.

THE BSFA REVIEW #10 – Summer 2020

Along the Razor's Edge by Rob Hayes (Self-Published, 2020) Reviewed by Shellie Horst

***Along the Razor's Edge* is a bit clever and a lot violent. It's not YA, despite the age of the main character, Eskara Helsene. Trust the author to take you on a journey and you won't regret it. Hayes hooks you without realising, develops a world that you're not allowed to see yet, and has you cheering for a character that goes against all the 'heroine' norms.**

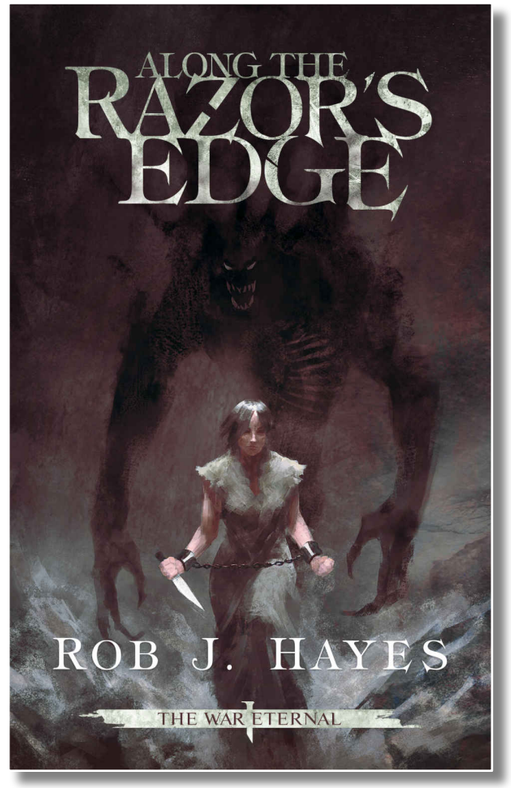
The tone is not quite Grimdark, (can we go with Dire-dark?) but certainly on par with the likes of Lawrence, Abercrombie and Smith-Spark.

Claimed for the war effort by The Orrans, Eskara endures a childhood of vicious training before being captured by their enemy, the Terralans. She and her companion Josef are left to rot in The Pit. Like all such places it has its own social rules, thugs and laws. Mostly, stay alive and dig. Eskara is quite the brutal pre-teen as we join the story, bringing all the 'kick-ass female' characterisation that can be poorly done. Hayes often warns that she's not going down that path even in early chapters as she learns to become a Sourcerer. No that's not a spelling mistake. Using a Source enables a related magic and Eskara is able to use five Sources. Like with all good magic, it comes at a cost. Inability to balance that cost prevents her from using her magic to insta-out of her prison, and so she is taken for a general (albeit very young) criminal.

The fact that Eskara is so personally driven is both her strength and her biggest weakness, in more ways than one. Importantly Hayes never loses sight of that. Fear is used well and with good reason, dividing characters, crushing hopes and spawning the very best poor choices. I look forward to seeing how the driving force behind Eskara's fear develops through the series.

Throughout the entire novel we don't see daylight other than in insightful future moments, but we know it is there, tantalising both reader and character, just out of sight thanks to the unusual Tamura. It adds to the claustrophobic nature of the surroundings, filling the pages with a hopelessness to which only Tamura appears unaffected. Tamura fulfils the druidic like role, dropping gnomic wisdom that no one has time for. He's also the light relief, excellently balanced giving the reader just enough air to carry on.

Hayes avoids a number of obvious possible female character tropes, despite the male-dominated society Eskara survives in. There is a lack of other women in The Pit. Perhaps this is down to the sheer brutality required to survive down there with the likes of Prig and Deko in charge. To balance things, it's clear there's plenty of other women in Eskara's future life, and hints of who Eskara becomes later the story. Much like the Old Woman meme from Titanic, Eskara's wisdom peppers the irrational choices of her youth as she retells how things in the Pit go from bad to worse. There isn't any doubt that The Pit won't hold her, it's just a matter of how a teen can blaze through powerful men, impossible rock, lack of food, non-existent medical care, and still maintain her desire to do it alone… even though she's not alone.

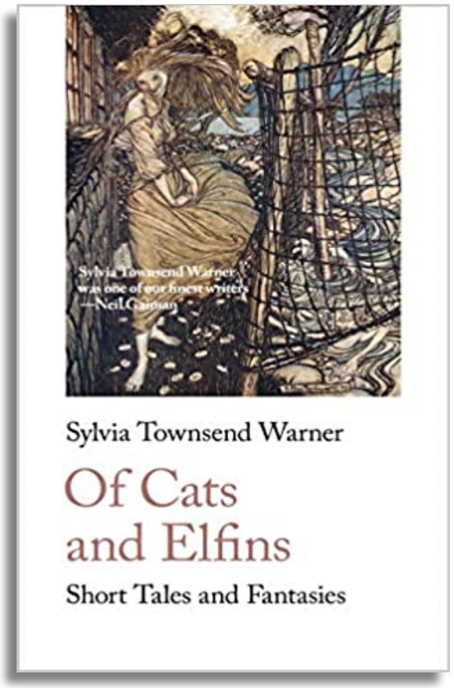


For me, the choices made and forced upon the characters fit within the world we are presented with, one very different from ours.

Along The Razor's Edge is a self-published novel, but the only thing it lacks will be prominent shelf space in book stores. A previous winner of Mark Lawrence's third Self Published Fantasy Blog Off, Hayes has already developed a following. If you haven't yet heard of Rob Hayes, I suspect you will be doing so *very* soon.

Of Cats and Elfins by Sylvia Townsend Warner (Handheld Press, 2020)
Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

'Cats have chosen to live among us, they have to reckon with us, analyse our motives, trace our weaknesses and peculiarities. The proper study of catkind is man.' We are told that sixteen of the stories in this book were narrated by cats to a young man who traces the origins of human folktales to feline culture. These versions are not, however, aimed at children. They share motifs with traditional tales but deal in more complicated emotions and social relationships. Also, cat lovers be warned: the cats die as often as other characters. Sylvia Townsend Warner's settings and characters are both recognisable and intriguingly strange and her plots take unexpected turns. But her impersonal style gives her narratives a particular, sardonic flavour, which the reader can relish, while being kept at a distance.



The stories provide new perspectives on old tales, not all of them about cats. In *Odin's Birds*, two ravens complain about a wasteful surfeit of hero corpses on which to feed in the old days and a lack of them in the present. In *The Castle of Carabas*, the descendants of the Marquis are born with a hereditary horror of cats, although their castle is dominated by images of heraldic cats. The heirs are taught that their ancestor fought a feline traitor, so wicked its deeds must be forgotten. As the story develops, we discover a different version of events, although we never find out exactly what happened between the first Marquis and his Puss in Boots. *Bluebeard's Daughter* takes the warning about the dangers of curiosity and gives it a twist.

Several stories feature animals who behave like humans, as in Aesopean fables. Warner uses the form to comment on the relationship between humans and animals. *The Fox Pope* draws on medieval fables about Reynard the Fox but in this story, the human cardinals who summon the hermit fox to the papacy are more cynical than he is and crueller.

As well as the cat stories, the book contains four tales set in the same world as Warner's *Kingdoms of Elfin* and with the same intense flavour. The Elfin courts are as stultifying as 18th century Versailles but the troubles of their inhabitants are fascinating. We are also given one standalone story, *Stay Corydon, Thou Swain*, set among the choral society of Wells in Somerset. This has a surface of social comedy over more complex emotions.

The book has an introduction by Greer Gilman, who provides some interesting background, including snippets from Warner's correspondence. The first chapter is an essay, which describes the many sources from which Warner drew her vision of the Elfin kingdoms, with references to William Blake, folklore about changelings and Robert Kirk, the 17th century cleric, who 'found the fairies a great deal more congenial than his parishioners' according to Warner.

The stories here range over the whole of Warner's career, from the 1920s to the 1970s and contain the full expression of her particular qualities, especially her humour. 'There is no injury so impossible to forgive as an impersonal injury,' says the traveller whose wife turns out to be partly of feline descent, and he is not consoled when a cat tells him 'Quite ordinary loves may be just as distressing' (*The Traveller from the West and the Traveller from the East*). Warner was an interesting person, with a complicated life and strong opinions. She does not use her fiction to preach but her views are reflected in some recurring themes, including the dangers of romantic love and too much respect for tradition. The importance of female characters is never to be underrated.

The stories in this book are not just for completists but are satisfying in their own right. This edition has a splendid cover illustration from Arthur Rackham and useful endnotes, as well as a bibliography and reading list.

Wonder Woman: Warbringer by Leigh Bardugo (Penguin, 2017)
Reviewed by Graham Andrews

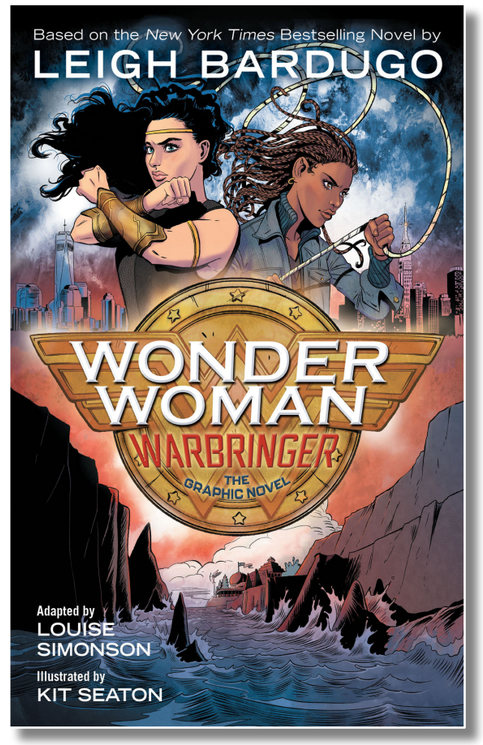
Who is Diana Prince? What is she? That all her fans commend her? Holy, fair, and wise is she. The heaven such grace did lend her. That she might admired be.

Wonder Woman is not only the most durable of female superheroes, but she is also the most durable of **all** female superheroes. She débuted in a 1941 issue of *All Star Comics*, with this introductory girl-power blurb: "At last in a world torn by the hatreds and wars of men, appears a woman to show the problems and fears of men are mere child's play." You can learn a whole lot more in *Wonder Woman: The Complete History* (2000), by Les Daniels. I have recently read *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (2014), by Jill Lepore, which gives us all the lowdown on her psychologist creator, William Moulton Marston (aka 'Charles Moulton'). There can be only one Wonder Woman, but she has gone through many character changes over time. The early babes-in-bondage years; the 'mainstream' period (c. 1949-68); the thankfully short 'Kung Fu' digression (1968-72); the Lynda Carter TV series (1974-79). It's been steady-as-she-goes after that, apart from a suspension of the *Wonder Woman* magazine in 1986-87).

Wonder Woman: Gods and Goddesses, a novel by John Byrne, appeared in 1997. Jill Thompson's equally 'revisionist' graphic novel, *Wonder Woman: The True Amazon*, was published in 2016. Now we have *Wonder Woman: Warbringer*, by Leigh Bardugo, an entry in the DC Icons Series, where "Super Hero Icons Meet Megastar Authors" (it says here).

As all comic-book fandom should know, Wonder Woman – alias Diana Prince – began her career when handsome blond himbo fighter pilot, Captain Steve Trevor, crash-landed on the secret Amazonian enclave known as Paradise Island. The history of Paradise Island itself has been recounted in 'The Secret Origin of Wonder Woman' (*Wonder Woman* # 105, April 1959), written by Robert Kanigher, but that's probably a bridging passage too far.

Now put most – if not all – of the above screed out of your minds. Leigh Bardugo has gone for maximum divergence from the mainstream WW universe. For one thing, it isn't that long drink of water Steve Trevor who prangs his kite on the Amazonian enclave of Paradise Island – I mean, Themyscira. Young Princess Diana is determined to win the cross-country foot race that's held to open the annual Nemesian Games; both to please her mother, Queen Hippolyta, and finally defeat her spiteful rivals. But she throws away her chance of victory to rescue someone from a schooner wrecked in the wild waters around Themyscira. A woman. A mortal woman, Alia Keralis.

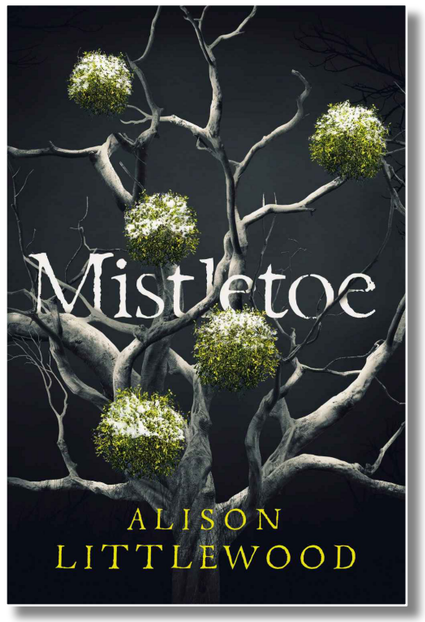


But no good deed ever goes unpunished – in or out of Paradise. "The rules were clear. You could not stop the mortal tide of life and death, and the island must never be touched by it. There were no exceptions. No human could be brought to Themyscira, even if it meant saving a life. Breaking that rule meant only one thing: exile" (p. 13). To make matters worse, the island's resident Oracle declares that Alia is a Warbringer, descended from Helen of Troy herself. "When a Warbringer is born, destruction is inevitable. One has been the catalyst for every great conflict in the World of Man. With the coming of the new moon, Alia's powers will reach their apex, and war will come . . . Unless she dies before then" (p. 43). The scene has been set. I will now leave you to enjoy watching Leigh Bardugo's well-wrought drama unfold.

Then to Diana Prince let us sing, that Diana Prince is excelling. She excels each mortal thing. Upon the dull earth dwelling; to her let us garlands bring.

Mistletoe by Alison Littlewood (Jo Fletcher Books, 2019) Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

After the sudden death of both her husband and her young son, Leah takes the decision to completely detach herself from her former life. Prior to the deaths, Leah and her husband had been in the process of buying a small farm, coincidentally called Maitland, Leah's maiden name. Rather than abandoning this, she rushes the purchase through and takes up residence shortly before Christmas. So, she is moving into an old farmhouse, which has been empty for a good many years, alone and haunted by the recent tragedies.



Shortly after moving in she is visited by the somewhat jovial and seemingly over-friendly neighbour from the nearest farm. There is an air of expectation that she would not be welcome in the area, and indeed, the local shopkeeper does sort of fulfil that role. However, where the neighbours are concerned there is no apparent animosity. In fact, it's quite the opposite with the neighbour seemingly going out of her way to be welcoming. At least on the surface. It does seem that any friction is much more in the mind of Leah than any actions of the neighbours would suggest.

Leah soon starts to be troubled by strange visions, and the initial feeling is that her grief and loneliness is playing tricks with her mind. It is these visions that appear to be the source of her perceived problems with the locals. These visions become more intense, reaching the point where she is actually within the visions and seemingly inhabiting the body of one of the earlier residents. They also give an indication of why the farm has not been successful for so long. The land itself seems to have rebelled against what took place there. That story, of misplaced love, betrayals and murders of ritual, passion and revenge, forms the core of the novel.

In many ways this is the real story, and it is played out through the ghosts that surround and inhabit Leah and the farm. Leah, it seems, is almost certainly the descendant of an earlier resident. It is clear that the sense of friction she feels is not with her neighbours, the actual people alive today, but between the families and their respective histories. There is definitely a malevolence that has driven the family feud for generations, in spite of, rather than because of, the people involved. As the visions start to take more physical forms, mistletoe starts not only growing in the farmhouse, but also seemingly growing from the house itself. A physical manifestation of the way that the prior lives from the farm did not and will not simply die away. It is very much a part of the farm and its past, and Leah finds she is just as deeply embedded there as the mistletoe.

This is a story populated by ghosts. The ghosts, metaphorically at least, of her husband and son, of those who lived and died at the farm. Even the farm itself is a ghost of its former self. Large sections of it having been sold off over the decades, leaving it with just the farm buildings and a fairly small amount of land. It has been a long time since there was any real life in the place. Not only are there the physical ghosts, but conceptually, that of the farm, her family unit and the lives of the people that were cut short. Even the ghost of the family Christmases she can now never have. It would be a fair assumption that this is a novel about grief, and this is very much be the case. The whole story can be seen as being refracted through that grief. It is also an effective and atmospheric ghost story, pulling both Leah and the reader into the story of those visions.

THE BSFA REVIEW #10 – Summer 2020

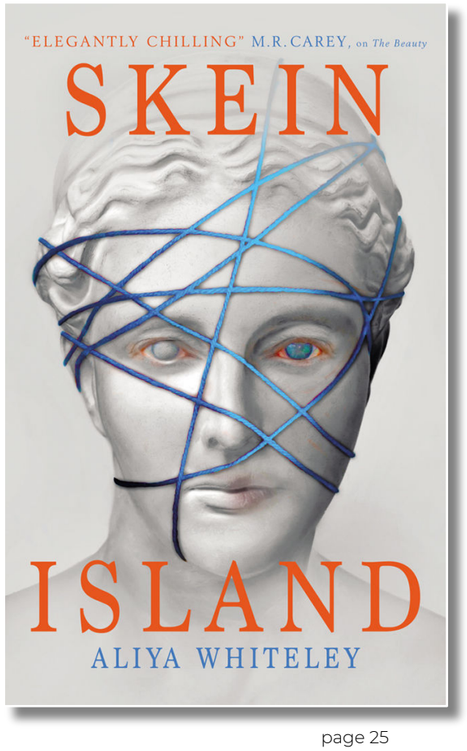
Skein Island by Aliya Whiteley (Titan Books, 2019) Reviewed by Nick Hubble

Aliya Whiteley is one of *the* writers of the moment: her *The Loosening Skin* was shortlisted for the 2019 Clarke Award and *Greensmith* is one of the most anticipated titles of 2020. *Skein Island* is an earlier novel, first published in 2015, that has been republished by Titan Books (who have also republished *The Beauty* and *The Arrival of Missives*) with an accompanying short story, 'The Cold Smoke Declaration'. The titular island, which I assume to be an alternate-world version of Lundy, is a privately-owned retreat for women only. Any woman can spend a week there as long as she writes the story of her past and deposits it in the archive. The experience of this visit has the potential to be life changing: the mother of Marianne, the protagonist of the novel, went to Skein Island seventeen years before the novel's opening and never returned to her family.

The novel's opening in Wooton Bassett, where Marianne lives with her husband David, reflects the attenuated nature of twenty-first-century English life, in which fear and anger are often the only remaining primary emotions. Marianne is musing over the arrival of an unexpected and unsolicited invitation to Skein Island while shutting up the library in which she works, when a strange man with a knife walks in and tells her to go into the back, take her clothes off and lie on the floor. We then cut to David waiting for Marianne in a car park, which turns out to be outside the Police station in which she is reporting what has just happened to her. He is reflecting on the fact that he never remembers driving anywhere; in the morning it is just like a continuation of the previous night's dream. 'Would he', he wonders, 'react in a crash, a crisis?' This, of course, is what we are going to find out as events in the novel cause everyone to wake up to the crisis of modern life.

In particular, David wakes up the next day to find Marianne has left for Skein Island. 'She won't be coming back', his father-in-law Arnie tells him in the pub, where the all-male customers share an unspoken understanding that beer is the best form of mutual support and that 'this leaving business was something that women did'. These men are here for 'the game', which involves Mags the barmaid placing four small cubes on the bar, one red, one blue, one yellow, one green. Wisely, David leaves the pub at this point but of course he is drawn back later in the novel and ends up playing. After choosing the red cube, he is given a drink of something that isn't brandy by Mags and told to come out back, where, as reality fades and his erection rises, he finds himself jousting as a knight before being overwhelmed in a sexual encounter. The experience reminds him of his discomfort at being a sexual object for Marianne and the only way to assuage the resultant emptiness is for him to take on the role of the manly hero by attempting to get to Skein Island to find out what has happened to her.

Meanwhile, Marianne is on the island, marked out with a logo of four coloured squares, trying to break into the archive in order to read her mother's story. In the process, she exposes a much larger story which embroils everyone as the segments of the plot snap violently together just at the moment David arrives on the island; and suddenly the world is changed. But, as Marianne realises, if men now find themselves at the centre of the meaningful stories they have craved, 'women will be marginalised into minor characters once more' and lose the freedom they never knew they had to make their own stories. Whiteley's resolution of this ingenious but also classically set-up genre plot is an exquisitely pleasurable combination of dark comedy (mostly at the expense of the four types of men in the world) and terror, which includes the greatest terror of all: the freedom of choice to make a truly different future.



Anno Dracula 1999: Daikaiju by Kim Newman (Titan Books, 2019)

Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

It is, as the novel's title suggests, the end of the Millennium, and in Tokyo's vampire quarter (ghetto?), the creatures of the night and their friends are preparing to party like it's, well, 1999. The fact that this practically self-governing enclave will be returned to Tokyo's control on the stroke of midnight adds an extra significance to proceedings.

There is, of course, only one party to be at, and that is the one held by vampire grande dame, Christina Light in the Daikaiju Building, which absolutely dominates the surrounding area and is shaped like a giant mechanical dragon. It is noted that a loose translation of Daikaiju is "Enormous Monster". VIP's and world leaders in finance, culture and technology have travelled across the world to attend, although several of Christina's friends and acquaintances are conspicuous by their absence. In fact, they seem to be as far away from Japan as they can get. The potential for trouble is high and the presence is, therefore, required of Mr. Richard Jeperson, leading agent of Newman's Diogenes Club, and Nezumi, lethal vampire schoolgirl and his self-appointed bodyguard.

Meanwhile, down in the Plaza, beat cop Azuma is dealing with a terrorist like organisation whose core belief is that life is literally just a computer game, and they are the players. This means that, anything they do, up to and including killing people, is more than acceptable. In this case, that means essentially biological warfare, attempting to set off a bomb which releases spores that in turn cause mushroom like growths and then liquify the body. Amazingly this is merely a sideshow to Christina's real plans for this special evening. It is quite literally at the eleventh hour, that the full extent of what is happening is fully realised, leaving very little time for our suave hero and ninja heroine to save the day.

The novel is, as usual, filled with Newman's trademark brand of engaging or revolting misfits. Not just physically compelling, although some would not look out of place in a Guillermo del Toro film, their personalities are diverse, well drawn, and just as individual. They can be largely sympathetic characters, like Harold Takahama, IT salaryman taken over by his own uber high tech prosthetic, acquired when his mind was taken over by another, significantly less pleasant IT whizzkid. They can also be psychotic schoolgirl vampires, (this would appear to be a thing), with sharp swords even the other baddies are extremely wary of. Cameo appearances include Dracula's more effete, much less capable and hugely jealous brother, who is happily prepared to throw any sentient being from the Daikaiju balcony if it gets him what he wants.

Newman's vampires are not homogenous, and their rivalry and the friction between the groups provides a reasonable portion of the narrative drive. There is precious little honour between vampires here. Some other traditional tropes are present, Azuma is the classic cop who is highly intelligent and extremely competent, but will never be promoted because his boss doesn't like him and he won't play the game. There is even a mad scientist holed up in the basement, performing high tech acts of genius and harassing the staff by insisting they go down there on ridiculous pretexts, particularly when they are at their most busy.

There is now what could be described as a Newmanverse, with crossover elements within novels primarily about Dracula, the Diogenes Club and Drearcliff Girl's School. It is so in this novel and works well. Nezumi, a several hundred-year-old vampire, returns to the school every few decades to relearn things she cannot retain over time, the eternal schoolgirl. If, like me, you appreciate Newman's mix of whimsy, tongue-in-cheek use of both real and already existing fictional characters and occasional outright horror, then you will thoroughly enjoy this addition to the canon.