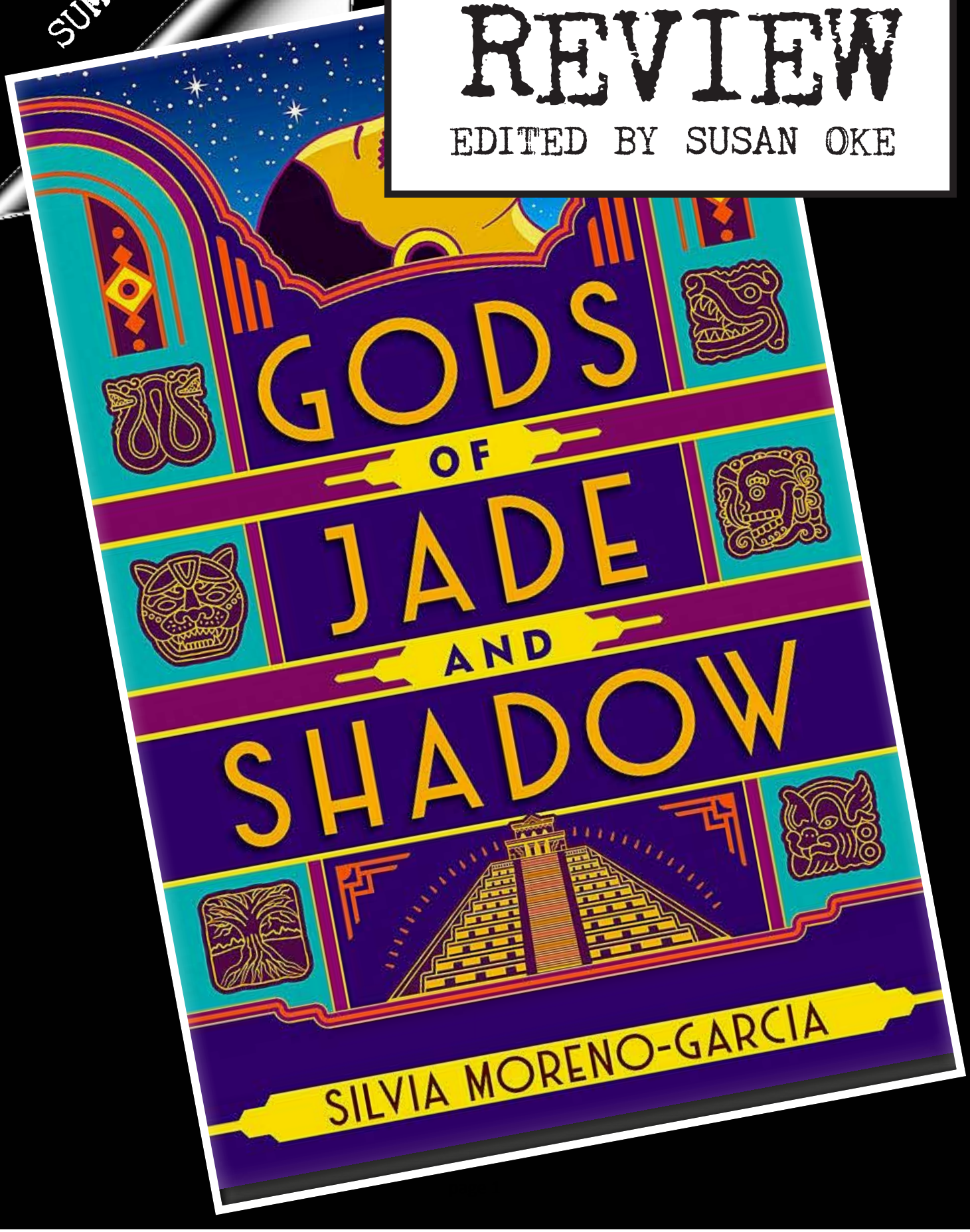
ISSUE 7
SUMMER 2019

THE BSFA REVIEW

EDITED BY SUSAN OKE



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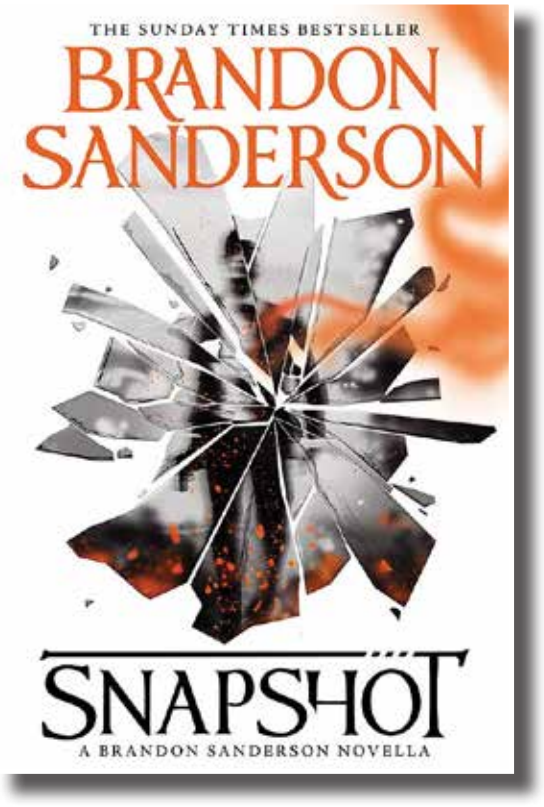
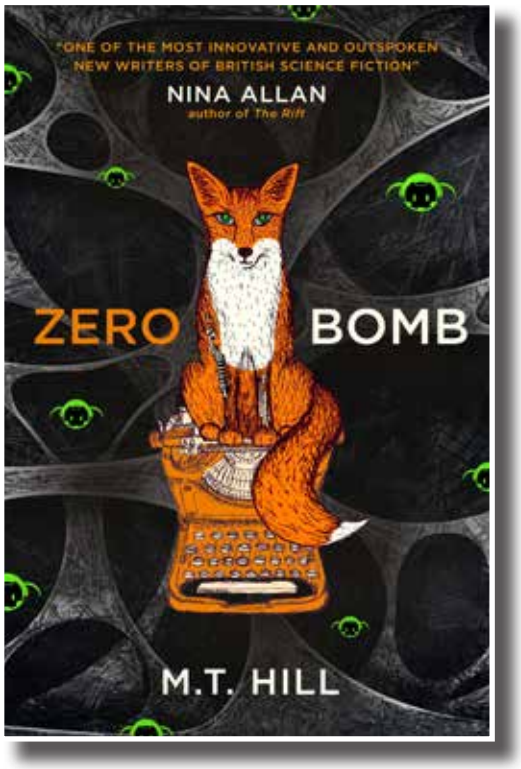
REVIEWED IN THIS ISSUE...





VIEW FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the Summer edition of the *BSFA Review*! A bit of a mixed bag this time around, much like the good old British weather.

So, who has gobbled their way through all six (only six!) episodes of 'Good Omens'? I had the good fortune to see Neil Gaiman at the Royal Festival Hall in May. To everyone's great delight, he was joined on stage by Michael Sheen and David Tennant. The trials and tribulations (e.g. delivering your lines while wearing large 'serpent' contact lenses in a dust storm; being bitten by the 'Hound of Hell' off set), and utter joy of making 'Good Omens' were shared, with good humour (lots of that) and some touching moments (especially in relation to Terry Pratchett).

Michael Sheen and David Tennant gave one planned performance of a very short scene (with Neil Gaiman as narrator) and later an impromptu performance, in response to a question from the audience, of a drunken discussion between the demon Crawley and the angel Aziraphale about 'gorillas' and 'nests' (I'm sure you all remember that scene from the book). I just loved the way they dropped straight into the personas of their characters.

Beforehand, the waiting crowds were given plenty of photo opportunities with the 'Chattering Nuns' from the series. Only these nuns did more than chatter, they sang! They treated the audience to quite a few, very enjoyable numbers, with some of the crowd (myself included) singing along to a chorus of 'the naughty little anti-Christ!'.

I came away clutching a signed copy of ***The Quite Nice and Fairly Accurate Good Omens Script Book*** published by Headline—essential reading for all those wonderful scenes that never made it to the screen. And, of course, I had to order the ***The Illustrated Good Omens*** published by Gollancz. This edition has been lovingly restored to its original glory by Marcus, and I can't wait to enjoy it.

All right, got to dash. Summer hols and all that…

Have a good one!

Sue Oke

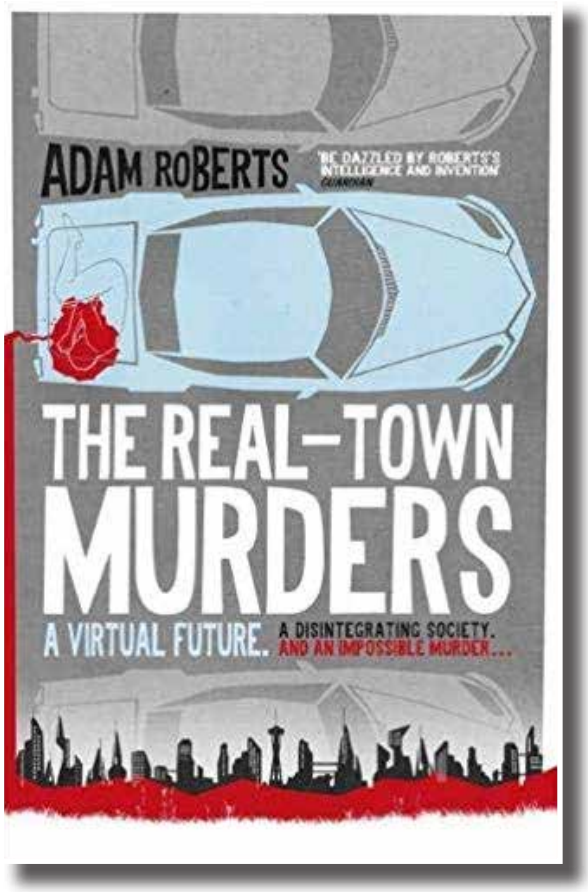
***The Real-Town Murders* by Adam Roberts**
(Gollancz, 2017)
Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

Any Adam Roberts novel is likely to have a high concept at its core, often one he hasn't tackled before. In this case, it is the classic crime staple of the locked room mystery, written as a Hitchcockian thriller. The story is set in a near future, where the entire production process is automated, and the production line is completely sealed off from human intervention. Except right at the very end, where, in this one case, a car manufactured in the sealed factory, with every part of the process closely scrutinised by CCTV, emerges and is inspected, a dead body is found in the boot. Alma, a private detective with a complicated life, is called in to investigate.

The complication in Alma's life is her partner Marguerite. Not, as would be traditional, with the relationship, but due to a previous adversary of hers leaving Marguerite with a genetic disorder that will kill her unless treated by Alma (and only Alma, a genetic fingerprint sees to that) every four hours. This obviously makes the life of a private dick somewhat more stressful than it normally would be. It also means that any action by Alma becomes a classic race against time, even if the plot itself doesn't really demand it. Alma's primary motivation is often less about solving the case, and more about getting back to her partner. Alma is instructed by a suitably shady figure to stop investigating by the authorities. So, nothing suspicious there then. Particularly given that she has a distinct Achilles heel in Marguerite that limits her movements considerably.

In true classic noir style, dropping the case doesn't appear to be an option as events conspire to drag Alma deeper into whatever it is that is going on. Obviously, teleportation is impossible. Although that is one mooted possibility for another case she picks up, investigating why someone keeps losing weight. Could the device in his stomach be teleporting the food out before it is processed? Obviously not, the idea is ridiculous.

Although this is a locked-room mystery, that becomes rather side-lined by the layers of intrigue surrounding the question of who exactly is trying to stop her from investigating the case, and indeed why. In this world, an immersive version of the internet called Shine, dominates the lives of a good many people, often using specially designed suits to care for their bodies. There is a strange mix in the streets of people inhabiting real-time, and those who are inhabiting Shine. They're the ones who are



completely oblivious to everything else. The question then, is if the virtual world is so attractive, how do the powers that be prevent very large swathes of the population simply disappearing into it. Indeed, could it be potentially desirable for this to start happening?

However ridiculous the situation seems, the resolution is quite satisfying, although the explanation for the body in the boot feels rather tossed in as an afterthought. For me, this feels appropriate, although that may be because I never really like the locked-room mystery sub-genre, and tend to feel that the resolutions are, of necessity, rather contrived. So, to not have the big reveal does seem to work rather better, particularly as the book has rather moved on from it.

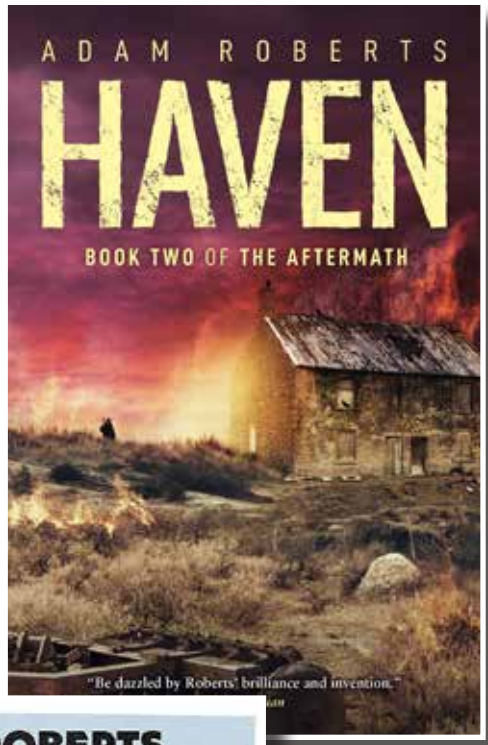
The Real-Town Murders is a fast moving and highly entertaining thriller with, to steal a quote from Blackadder, more twists and turns than a twisty turny thing. A good deal of it almost directly pastiching Hitchcock, including a very British version of the Mount Rushmore scene from *North by North West*. If Adam Roberts can be accused of anything, it is an over-affection for puns. The chapter titles are all puns, often on Hitchcock titles (Dial 'C' for caring, Strangers on The Terrain, and you can probably guess what the chapter entitled 'The Drones' entails). These will either please or irritate the reader, depending on their proclivity for such things.

By the Pricking of Her Thumb and *Haven* by Adam Roberts

(Gollancz, 2018 and Solaris, 2018)

Reviewed by Nick Hubble

If I listed all of Adam Robert's published output for 2018 I would have no space left to actually review these two particular novels: *By the Pricking of Her Thumb*, the sequel to *The Real-Town Murders* (2017), and *Haven*, the sequel to Dave Hutchinson's *Shelter* (2018). If ever there was a contemporary version of the Renaissance Man then it is Roberts. Four hundred years from now a minor academic industry on the 'Roberts Authorship Question' may well flourish in the margins of a monumental canonical edifice surrounding one of the giants of twenty-first-century post humanist fiction. I'm not being entirely facetious here but rather want to make the point that Roberts raises serious questions about the status (ontological as well as societal) of authorship today. If we focus on his nineteen (including these two) sf novels to date, Roberts has already written three which are so good that any one of them might form the pinnacle of a major writer's career: *Yellow Blue Tibia* (2009), *Bête* (2014) and *The Thing Itself* (2015).



It is not clear, however, how widely the excellence of these works is recognised; for example, only the first was shortlisted for the Clarke Award. On the other hand, would anyone want to be weighed down with the label of 'major writer' today? It all sounds rather regressively hierarchical and living examples such as Ian McEwan hardly present an attractive role model. While Roberts would no doubt love greater recognition and the increased readership that goes with it, the tendency of his fiction until recently has been to deconstruct playfully, but nonetheless brutally, his unattractive middle-aged male protagonists and to point to futures beyond the patriarchal order.

Aside from his personal creative capacity, the productivity of Roberts's career reflects an ongoing historical shift from the shared understanding of authors as public authorities to the idea of writing being a desirable profession in much the same way as playing football is a desirable profession. While the status and acclamation of an earlier period are no longer available, a democratic model of creative professional work has taken its place. In line with this shift, both *Thumb* and *Haven* seem more straightforwardly intended as professional genre fiction than *Bête* or *The Thing Itself*, which suggests Roberts has made a conscious decision to step back from uncompromising literary provocativeness in his sf. Significantly, neither novel's protagonist is a middle-aged male, unattractive or otherwise.

Haven is book two of 'Tales of the Aftermath', set in a post-apocalyptic Britain, which Roberts is writing in alternating instalments with Hutchinson. The plot is not directly sequential; *Haven* can be read as a standalone novel (although, given *Shelter* is also highly enjoyable, you might as well read them in sequence). Enjoyment is the key word here; I devoured *Haven* in pretty much one go, loving every second. Written predominantly from the point of view of a teenage boy with epilepsy, it's a fast-paced tour – much of it is an extended chase sequence – through a reimagined Thames Valley complete with technologically-regressed settlements and a more advanced women-only community. As someone who grew up with cosy catastrophes such as *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) and the 1970s TV series

Survivors but also loves the feminist sf of Le Guin and Russ, I found this irresistible and working all the better for Roberts by-and-large telling it straight and resisting the temptation of indulging in playful pastiche. I would have preferred it more from the women's point of view, but they are the most powerful presence anyway.

I'll certainly be reading the two concluding 'Aftermath' volumes when they appear but there is perhaps an argument that even if Roberts can write a better conventional sf narrative than most, it would still be in the public interest for him to concentrate on what he can do better than absolutely everyone else, which is to write distinctive Roberts-type novels. Fortunately for us, he seems to be able to do both simultaneously as *Thumb* testifies. I must admit that after reading the first few chapters of *Thumb,* I was starting to have doubts as to whether this structure would support a second novel, but then Roberts changes gear as, in turn, we are transported inside a detailed sim of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) – Kubrick pervades *Thumb* in much the same way as Hitchcock haunts *The Real-Town Murders* – and onward into unexpectedly deep waters of profound emotion and meaning. In the end, *Thumb* reveals itself to be just as much a rounded novel of ideas as *The Thing Itself*, although with less Kant and male whingeing, as it considers the big questions of love, money and death. It's still pulp, however. Roberts might quote Nabokov in *Thumb* but he's working in the tradition of Philip K. Dick by showing how professional genre writing is the most effective medium for expressing what it is to live in the contemporary world.

In the Time of the Breaking
by Andrew Darlington

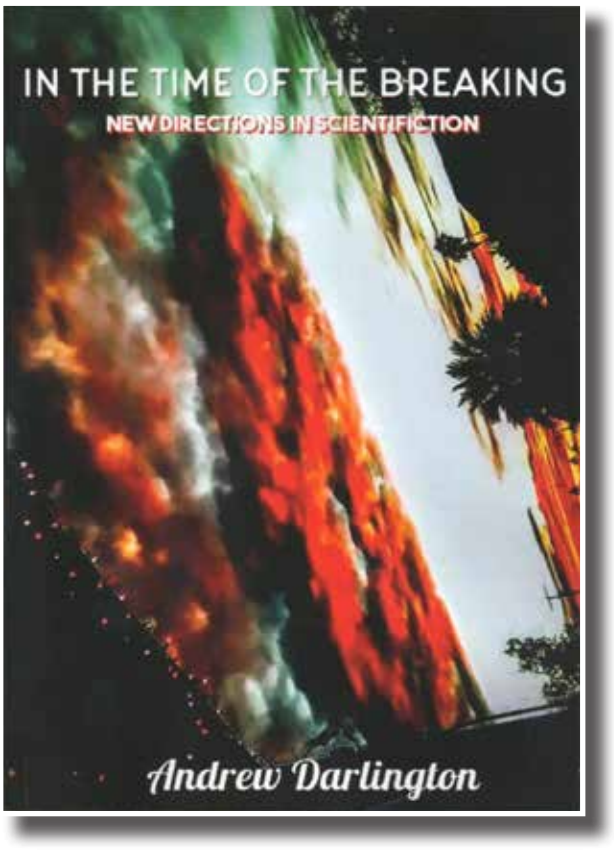
(Alien Buddha Press, 2019)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

Andrew Darlington has been around as poet, fiction-writer, and commentator on music and sf for a long time, and I have lost count of the times I have been indebted to his blog "Eight Miles Higher" and his variously-sourced writings on sf of the 50s and 60s for information and entertainment. His first professional sale was to an anthology (*Stopwatch,* edited by George Hay) in 1974. Yet I seem to have read very little of his fiction. The odd subtitle of *In the Time of the Breaking* ("New Directions in Scientifiction") accurately sums up its attempt to fuse the retro ("scientifiction") with the numerous "new directions" in the field which Darlington has lived through and contributed to.

Told in vivid, staccato, often imagistic prose, it is (says the publicity material) rooted in sources such as the gigantic walking-fortresses in the "Space Kingley" annuals of Darlington's childhood reading. The falling moon that regularly threatens the civilisation of the Qulan and the other clans of this world is one of a number of sense-of-wonder drawings-upon pulp weirdness. But what propels the story is a much more new-wavy confrontation with subjective and objective that is, with evocations of today's anxieties about how we interact technologically and otherwise with our personal and social histories, bang up-to-date. The result is an effective fusion of inner and outer world, which demands careful attention. The walking fortresses are impressive, but more impressive are touches of half-aside detail such as the "half-wild dogs who skulk restlessly about the machine's legs".

What brings the novel up to date is its attempt to use the sf of yesterday to engage with aspects of the *now*. There's a sense of instability at its heart: "People escaping from today . . . to wallow in memories . . . spending less and less time in the present". In order to ensure continuity throughout a series of recurrent crises the "engrams" of ancestors are stored in the subconscious of individuals (though there are "Voids" such as Jerouac who are, as it were, infertile and do not share in this ancestral memory, and whose loyalties are therefore not necessarily to the Families.) These ancestors can be accessed via "Deep-Com" when necessary, but the implanted minds and personalities can be a source of prurient



entertainment (experience the orgasm that resulted in your own conception) and can also, in crisis situations, lead to serious conflict and confusion. We see this in the struggles of the protagonist Culak to stay focussed on his own part in the Kralnetesis (time of the storm), caused by gravitational and electromagnetic stresses by the moon's closest approach to his world. The presence of these "engrams" mean that a cycle of collapse and renewal (as we might remember from Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall") is avoided. In cases of emergency during the chaos of the Kralnetesis, it's possible to make contact with leaders dead for thousands of years, but this is not necessarily conducive to stability. Culak's search for a Phantom City which will, he hopes, hold the key to a series of attacks on his own polity leads to a confrontation with both external enemies and his own internal voices.

This oscillation between inner and outer is not an easy read. Somewhere inside the mix is Phonetobardics, a kind of performance sound-poetry based upon the music of words, and Culak's own family trauma (we learn early on that his brother died in a previous Kralnetesis), all intertwined with the falling moon, the city and the physical, moral and spiritual equilibriums under threat from the "breaking". The result is a book which breaks every rule of generic expectation. It sets you up for epic planet-busting, veers into equally classic confusion between reality and hyperreality, and expects you to keep everything in focus. There are environments of cold, dirty snow, spindly bushes and leafless tress, desolate and minutely described. There are long passages which may, or may not, tale place in objective reality. At times, such close attention reveals fault-lines. The description of a symbolic artwork, the Tnevol "Heads", sculptures that have for thousands of years embodied both contradiction and balance, refers to "Eyes that bear the Qulan's slight hint of oriental cast". But this is another world, so "oriental" is a meaningless term that brings us out of Darlington's imagined world into a stereotypical visual image of our own. This is a minor quibble, but here, I think, we are thrown out of the carefully-constructed maze of concepts towards a jarring illogicality that many will overlook. Pedants, too, might take issue with the early reference to "Berelia's age-flecked copper disc" . . . the "largest in a necklace of five suns chasing each other around the world" and wonder what this startling image actually represents, though here, I think, we are not being invited to take part in the plausible world-building of Golden Age sf.

But aside from (or possibly, because of) this, *In the Time of the Breaking* is worth the attention. Less a classic 'realistic' sf novel than a long symbolic poem, like the novels in which Philip K. Dick was finding his voice, it is not content to remain where it started and simply deliver what we *think* should be in the tin. Instead, we are invited to sample different recipes. Its boundary-crossing and richness will not be to everyone's palates, but for those with a taste for the kind of super-charged images or plots to be found in British 50s comics who are willing to be pushed in new directions, this will be a worthwhile diversion from the norm.

Star Trek: Prometheus Trilogy
by Bernd Perplies and Christian Humberg
Vol 1: Fire with Fire
Vol 2: The Root of all Rage
Vol 3: In the Heart of Chaos
(Titan Books, 2018)
Reviewed by David Lascelles

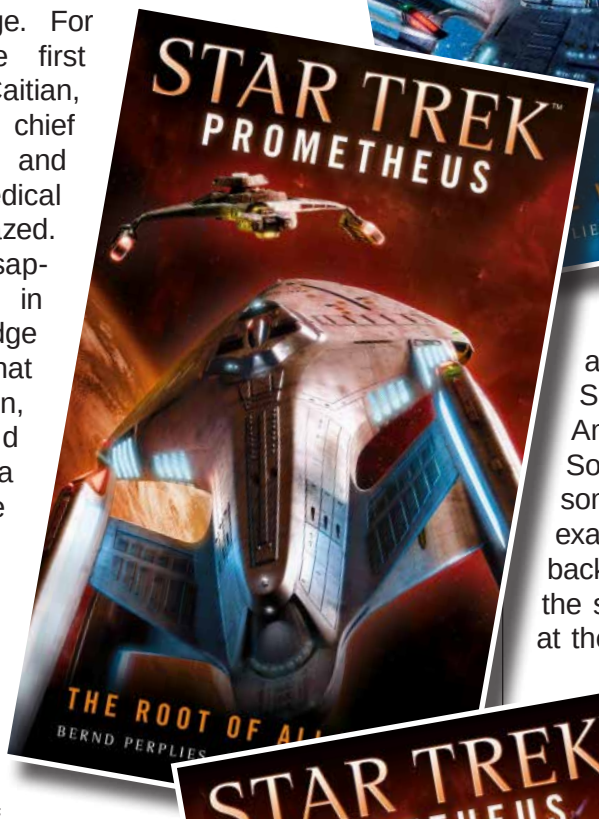
Since the end of *Deep Space Nine* (1999) and *Voyager* (2001), fans have been curious about 'what happens next'. Unfortunately, for whatever reasons, the producers of Star Trek seemed to think success lay in the past with *Enterprise* and (more recently) *Discovery* and the 'Kelvin time line' films created by JJ Abrams looking at different points in Federation history rather than looking to the future beyond the Dominion war. Luckily, this looks set to change with the upcoming Picard series. However, until that much anticipated TV event arrives, you can sate your thirst for Trek with this series of books.

Fire with Fire introduces us to a new Federation flagship and her crew as a new threat arises in the galaxy. High profile terrorist attacks on Federation and Klingon targets have put both on high alert and the Klingons especially are shouting for a war that their new Federation allies are unwilling to let them have. Instead, two ships (the USS *Prometheus* and the IKS *Bortas*) are sent to the Lembatta cluster, the home of the Renao - the alien race the terrorists claim to be. Their mission: to investigate these terrorists and bring about a peaceful solution before war is declared on the whole cluster. Through *Root of all Rage* and *In the Heart of Chaos* we witness their efforts in this endeavour and see it brought to a conclusion.

Overall, this is a nice concept. Trek has always been at its best when exploring current political ideas – for example, concepts such as the Cold War in the 60s. This brings the post 9/11 world to Trek. The terrorist actions that trigger the plot here are reminiscent of the Twin Towers as are the conflicting political responses of the Federation and the Klingons. It also tackles issues such as racism nicely

through the story of Jassat ak Namur, the sole member of the Renao to have joined Starfleet and how he is treated by some of his crewmates on the *Prometheus*.

The crew of the *Prometheus* are a very engaging and interesting bunch. The authors have gone to a lot of effort to make them a varied crew with a number of Federation species not normally see on screen too often (because of effects budgets) having prominent positions on the bridge. For example, the first officer is a Caitian, the security chief an Andorian and the Chief Medical Officer a Betazed. My only disappointment in the main bridge crew is that the Captain, Richard Adams, is a typical white male human. I guess he is intended to be more of an audience surrogate but compared to the rest of the crew he comes across as a little dull. Worthy but dull. Even attempts at giving him motivation, such as killing off a relative in one of the attacks, don't seem to have too much of an impact on him,



Another issue that may grate for some are the many, many references to the old versions of the series. It is almost as if they had to try really, really hard to prove they were a Trek series. The result sometimes comes across a bit too fan service because they really lay this on thick. For a start, *Prometheus* herself is a ship we have seen in a *Voyager* episode (Message in a Bottle: series 4, episode 14). You know, the one where the Doctor is transmitted to a prototype Federation ship that has been stolen by Romulans. The EMH on that ship is even present in the books, this time given a name (Trix – short for Tricorder) and an apparently active role in the crew. Secondly, the IKS *Bortas* was the ship used as Chancellor Gowron's flagship. Then we have a Chief Engineer with the surname Kirk (she is one of his Grandnieces), Commander Ro in charge of a rebuilt DS9 (which apparently got destroyed) and appearances by a host of past characters including Spock, Worf's son Alexander (now Federation Ambassador to the Klingons) and Lwaxana Troi. Some of these mentions do not make sense to someone coming straight from the series. For example, a throwaway mention has Chief O'Brien back as Chief of Operations of the new DS9 when the series had him take a prestigious lectureship at the Academy. Like the destruction of DS9, this feels like an event that may well have been covered in a previous novel but to a casual reader it may come across as dissonant. Regardless, some of the references are quite nice to see but others seem forced. While Alexander and Spock both contribute to the plot quite well, some of the references seem a bit pointless. For example, the 'genius' warp engineer from 'Where No One Has Gone Before'-TNG season one episode 5 – pops up for no real useful purpose other than to show he is still alive and is now in a dead-end job. His role in the story could have been done by any random Federation officer; I guess some Trekkies may enjoy spotting such obscure references, but others may find it tedious at times.

Beyond all of that, however, is a solid story. The characters are well handled and this feels

like Trek even without the references reminding you every few pages. Worth checking out if you are a fan of the series and can't wait for Picard to hit our screens.

Infinite Detail by Tim Maughan
(MCD x FSG Originals, 2019)
Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

You might know Tim Maughan for his BSFA Award-nominated story "Havana Augmented", or for his lengthening list of by-lines on articles about the imminent future. (Or perhaps for his caustic yet compassionate presence on the birdsite.) But from now on, you should know him for his debut novel *Infinite Detail,* a tapestry of near-term prognostication that stuns you with its contextual implications, while its streetwise prose gets to work on picking your emotional pockets.

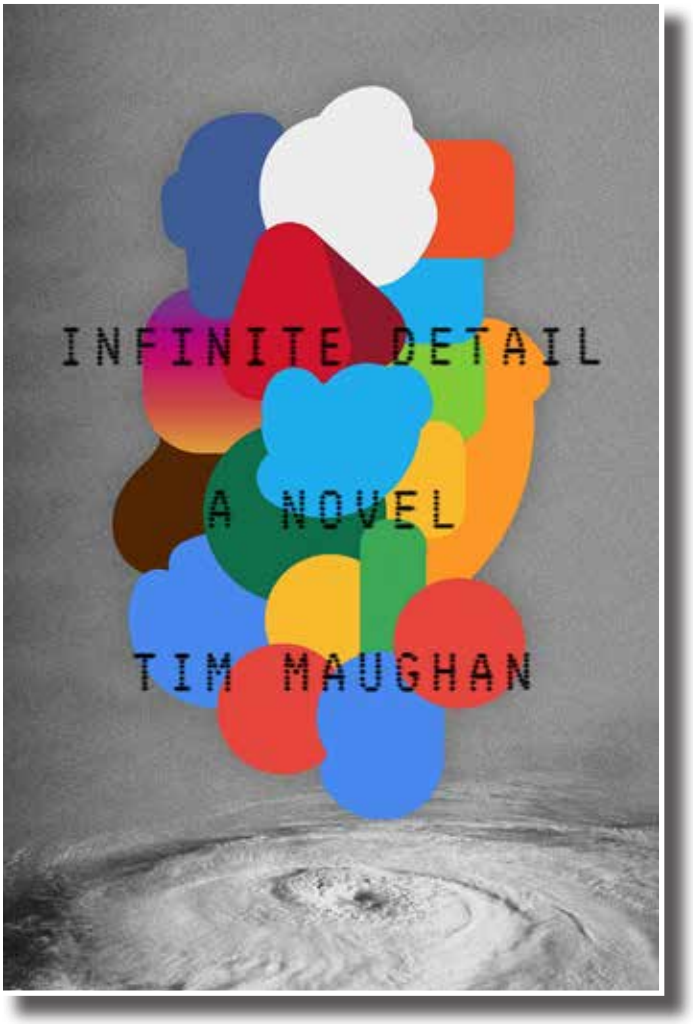
"You *would* say that, Paul," I hear you mutter, "he's a friend of yours." Well, that's true – but you should see the thousands of words of seething envy I discarded in the process of drafting this review, and read some of the blurbs from writers far better known than me. I say it because I believe it; if I didn't, I'd say nothing. It's a question of trust: do you consider me honest, or am I just another algorithm in the surveillance-consumerism panopticon? (Answers on a postcard, please.)

This is a central issue in *Infinite Detail*, which is – at least in part – about the mediation of social relations by global infrastructural networks of inscrutable complexity. It's not just about who (or rather *what*) you trust to recommend things, but who you trust to keep you safe, to keep the lights on and the shops stocked. In a very-near-future Bristol, a gang of smart young techies and artists have reached such a point of distrust that they start trying to build an alternative system… and in the same world, a handful of years later, everyone is dealing with the consequences of another group of smart young techies having decided that the best solution was to throw a global kill-switch and hope it all comes out in the wash. (Spoilers: it doesn't all come out in the wash.)

Infinite Detail is an angry, tragic plea for a more intimate and local sort of connection than we've become accustomed to. It's perhaps also nostalgic for a lost past in a way that might seem unimaginable coming from a relatively young writer… until you think back to the 1990s (if you can remember them) and recall, with a sharp lurch of anxiety and confusion, how different the world now seems. But that's actually an illusion, and Maughan and I (and others of our generation) are just now getting our own serving of the futureshock that so animated middle-aged people in the 1970s, the golden age of the critical utopia in sf. That movement was a bitter yet hopeful flinch from a transformation which must have felt sudden and totalising, but was really just the first flourish of a long, slow three-card trick: ARPANET, microprocessors, containerised logistics. *Infinite Detail* is about the end of that game, which not even the house can win in the long run.

It's not unremittingly dark; there's as much hope here as in Gibson's *The Peripheral*, if not more. But in both cases, it's a hope that emerges from Pandora's box, among a flood of horrors which cannot be recontained. The ghost at the feast is climate change, of course – but it's in no way a work of denial. Instead of using the warming world as his backdrop, Maughan has foregrounded the global machine whose *consequences* are climate change: the optical fibres and sub-arctic server farms, yes, but also the mines and power stations, the retail palaces and container ports, the logistical systems which create and distribute the disposable crap that arrives to fill our jam-packed lives before we know we want it.

It's a novel of failed utopias, then: the technological utopia of Silicon Valley, whose gloss is turning to



tarnish, but also the counter-utopia which is its negation. Maughan locates this latter in Stokes Croft, the gentrified but defiantly countercultural zone of Bristol which is his personal Mecca: a vibrant strip of street art, galleries and hipster hangouts whose cool is nonetheless parasitic upon the overlooked poverty of the city's underclass, from whom much of its now-mainstream cultural cachet – hip-hop, drum'n'bass, grime, graffiti – was originally appropriated long ago.

It's about the failure of utopias, but it's also about *why* utopias fail: about the cruel efficiency of networks, and the role of power and significance therein, but also about the cruelty of removing them suddenly without an adequate plan for their replacement. It's billed as a novel of "the end of the internet", but it's important to understand that "the internet", despite the reductive way we talk about it, isn't just Twitter and Snapchat and smartphones but, well, *everything* – the systems that feed us, light us, keep us warm and connected, keep us from a life of clothes patched and re-patched over decades, from jerk-seasoned seagull roasted over an oil-drum barbecue. And it's scary, because it's true... though I wonder if it reads as far-fetched to anyone who hasn't spent the last decade learning how this stuff all fits together.

But therein lies the redemption of the bits of the book that can feel a little like lectures on the fragility of our hypermediated just-in-time-and-always-on society: in a sense, this is the hardest of hard science fiction. There's nothing in *Infinite Detail* which isn't plausible as well as possible; Maughan knows networks and supply chains inside out, and that knowledge is reflected in the Janus faces of awe and horror with which the novel considers the crystallisation of a world which we don't yet quite inhabit, but are nonetheless rushing toward with arms open and eyes closed. So read it as a cautionary tale – but read it also as a searing debut novel from a writer who couldn't be more relevant to these troubled and troubling times. You can trust me on that.

Rogue Protocol and *Exit Strategy* by Martha Wells

(Tor 2018)

Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

These two novellas complete the Murderbot Diaries, of which I have already reviewed the first two, *All Systems Red* and *Artificial Condition*. This review will contain (slight) plot spoilers for the first two books.

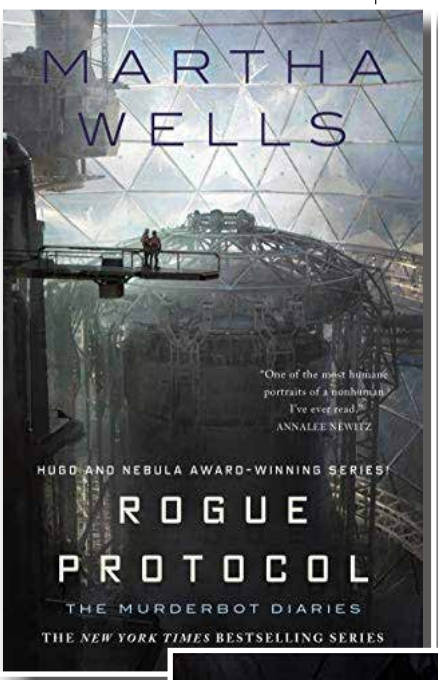
To recap, Murderbot is a SecUnit, a part human, part machine construct, that has hacked its own governor module. It named itself after a massacre in which it killed numerous humans, although following a mindwipe and reconstructive surgery it no longer remembers exactly what happened. In *All Systems Red*, Murderbot was engaged to protect a crew of scientists carrying out a planetary survey. The crew was led by Dr Mensah, who was also a political leader for her home world, Preservation. It turned out that there was another group on the same planet, sent by a company called GrayCris, who were illegally searching for remnants of alien technology and were prepared to kill Murderbot's group to avoid detection. Following these events, Murderbot is now a free agent, although technically under the control/protection of Dr Mensah, who has carefully not tried to find it. In *Artificial Condition* it returned to the site of the original massacre, to find out what had actually happened. It also met a sympathetic research ship, ART, with a full medical suite, which has enabled it to disguise itself (thinly) as an enhanced human.

While Dr Mensah tries to pursue GrayCris through official channels, *Rogue Protoco*l opens with Murderbot following another avenue of investigation. It turns out that GrayCris was involved in a failed terraforming operation. Suspecting that this might have been a cover for another alien tech retrieval expedition, Murderbot decides to visit the terraforming site to see if there is any supporting evidence. It hitches a ride with the group who are legally trying to retrieve the terraforming material, and who are working for GoodNightLander Independent (GI).

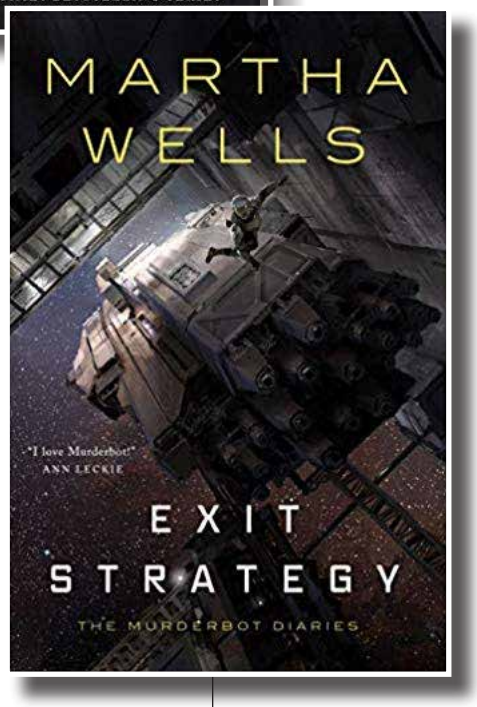
Matters develop as one might imagine, with GrayCris agents trying to destroy the site before evidence of their wrongdoing can be found. While this propels the plot towards its exciting conclusion, this is by no means the most interesting thing about the book. This, which I initially completely overlooked, is the GI group's pet bot, Miki.

When Murderbot first comes across Miki, it is deeply jealous of the way the GI team treat the bot. Within the boundaries of the Corporation Rim, the hypercapitalist society in which Murderbot was created, there is a clear hierarchy of beings. At the top are

humans and enhanced humans, followed by constructs (of which Murderbot is one, built using cloned human material) and then by bots, which are entirely mechanical (but can have sophisticated AI and, like ART, autonomous decision-making capability). Constructs have a governor module to keep them acting as slaves, and disobeying the module causes severe physical pain. Murderbot's own experience (until it met Dr Mensah) was of being treated as a slave. Miki, a lower being, is allowed to sit on human chairs, and is treated with affection. It is unexpectedly sensitive and responds to Murderbot as to a person.



"Had the humans actually coded it to be child-like, or pet-like, I guess? Or had its code developed that way on its own, responding to the way they treated it?"



Reluctantly, Murderbot is forced into a rapport with Miki. This is clearly another stage on its journey towards becoming a person and for the whole book, Murderbot complains and whines and kicks against it. Why? We have seen it establish good relationships with bots of different capabilities. It recognises ART as a friend. It is outraged that Miki has always been treated with kindness by its humans, because this transgresses the boundaries of the society in which Murderbot has been created. It also gives Murderbot a hope (that it dares not want) of possibly having the same sort of relationship with Dr Mensah, one of friends and not of slave and owner.

"I hate caring about stuff. But apparently once you start, you just can't stop."

Book Three ends with Murderbot deciding to return to Dr Mensah and hand over the evidence that it has found about GrayCris to her in person.

Exit Strategy concludes the tetralogy. Murderbot heads towards Preservation with the most recent evidence about GrayCris. En route, however, it learns that Dr Mensah has been kidnapped by GrayCris. Fearing (correctly) that Dr Mensah's team members will be unable to rescue her by themselves, it meets up with them to arrange a rescue.

For the first time since Book One Murderbot meets Dr Mensah's team, Pin-Lee, Ratthi and Gurathin. The author describes their interactions with skill and humour. Murderbot is still acting like a sulky teenager, but one who is improving at managing human relations.

"You left", Pin-lee accuses. Murderbot replies: "Mensah said I could learn to do anything I wanted. I wanted to leave." … "I was having an emotion, and I hate that. I'd rather have nice safe emotions about shows on the entertainment media; having them about things real-life humans said and did just led to stupid decisions."

There's a nice interaction with Gurathin, an enhanced human, and the closest thing to a rival, who asks what Murderbot has been doing while it was away. Murderbot sends him a video collage of itself acting as a human sheepdog. When Murderbot finally meets Dr Mensah again it is deeply self-conscious, unable even to look at her. One of the questions that we ask about AI is whether they are self-aware. Murderbot is hyper self-aware, but finds it difficult to deal with.

Running through the books has been the idea that one thing that teaches us how to be human is media, specifically, stories. For my generation it was *Star Trek*, for Murderbot it's *The Rise and Fall of Sanctuary Moon*. The serial is Murderbot's go-to place to restore its sanity when stressed out by dealing with too many humans.

"It was the first one I saw. When I hacked my governor module and picked up the entertainment feed. It made me feel like a person."

The word person is significant. Murderbot doesn't want to be human, and says so repeatedly, but it does want to be – and for Dr Mensah, already is - a person.

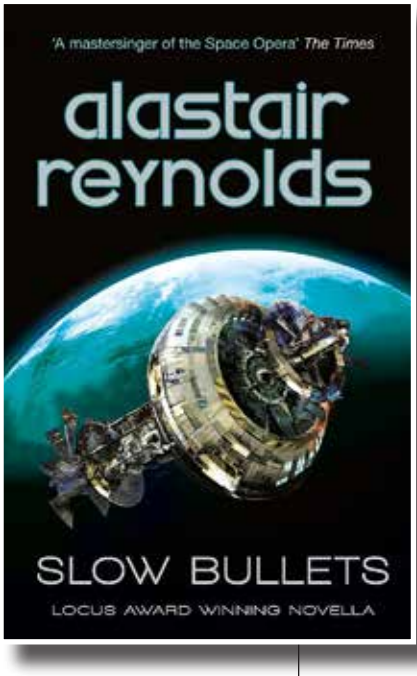
In case it isn't obvious, I adored these books. I loved the character of Murderbot and how it develops over the series. I was gobsmacked by the quality of the writing. Not a word is wasted. Every sentence either advances the plot, tells us more about a character,

or expands the cultural context. I've found them hard to review for the simple reason that every time I open one to revisit a scene or quote a sentence I get sucked back into the narrative. I was a little disappointed that there wasn't more societal development due to Murderbot's actions, although we are told at the end that in Preservation (not the Corporation Rim) there is a movement towards granting full citizenship for constructs and high-level bots. However, the series does take place over a very short space of time, so it's quite unrealistic for me to expect rapid societal developments.

I felt a little sad when I finished the book, having no more Murderbot stories to look forward to. However, Tor have recently announced that there will be a Murderbot novel, coming out in early 2020. I am anticipating this with some trepidation, as the novella format has worked superbly, obliging the author to compress the narrative but within this constraint managing to create believable, sympathetic characters, backgrounding the society so that we pick up on its structures almost imperceptibly, and creating Murderbot's uniquely sarcastic voice. On the other hand, Murderbot with added complexity…could be so good. And in the meantime, the four novellas will bear an awful lot of re-reading.

Slow Bullets by Alastair Reynolds (Gollancz, 2017)

Reviewed by Ben Jeapes



This seems to stand alone from any other Reynolds novels, but the future is immediately familiar: the narrator, Scur, is a foot soldier in a far-future war, forced to fight for a cause she cares nothing about. It's the kind of war where there is no right or wrong side; a disinterested external observer could barely slip a cigarette paper between the two. All this is back story to the point where Scur is captured and tortured sadistically by someone from the other side. And then … Scur awakes on a badly damaged starship.

Somehow Scur was rescued, and patched up, and put on the ship in hibernation along with a thousand-odd other sleepers, for repatriation. Somewhere along the way the ship suffered severe damage. It crept to its original destination, but enough interesting things have been going on in the galaxy for the destination – in fact, for everything – to have changed significantly, and a very long time has passed. The only memories of the war, and the motivations for fighting it in the first place, survive in the heads of the people on board the ship.

Scur accidentally becomes a leader in the new ship-born society. Discovering that her torturer is also on board is just one of the problems that face her, but it serves as the catalyst for the main theme of the story.

A telling sign of bad science fiction (which this isn't) is that a passing character can immediately fill the hero – and hence the viewers or readers – in on all the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of their society, as though your average Brit can immediately discourse on how our present constitutional monarchy has roots in Cromwell and the Restoration, or your average American can wax lyrical on how the political philosophy of Montesquieu on separation of powers ended up in the US Constitution. Scur is a handy and realistic corrective to this. She has a basic citizen's understanding of how things are, but very little of why and what should be. And it's coloured, of course, by having been caught up in a war that had no real purpose in the first place and which has brutalised the civilisation out of her. She, and her shipmates, essentially have to learn how to be civilised again, working it out from first principles.

The slow bullets of the title serve the same function as a soldier's dog tags but are considerably higher tech. They are injected into the body, then (generating their own anaesthetic) work their way deep into the body core to make themselves as secure as they can. They contain the soldier's biographical data and anything else that might come in handy. A handy breakthrough in the plot comes when Scur realises that as networkable computing devices, they can process data and hence act as a surrogate for the ship's own fried network – though for some reason that is never really explained, they still need to be introduced into the user's body first before they will work.

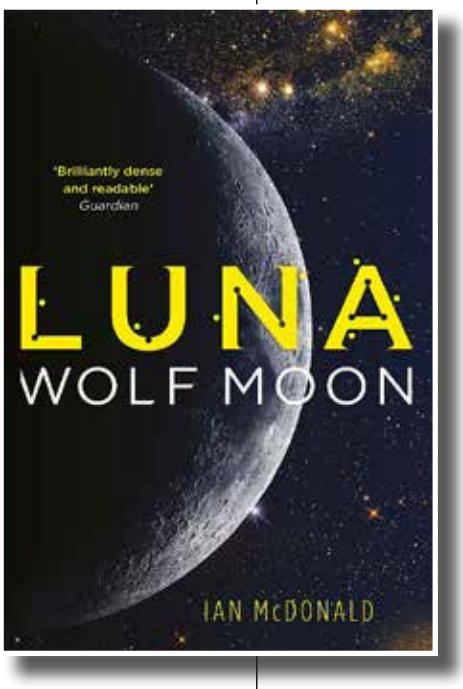
But they also represent the slow bullets that hit the characters and the readers as the story progresses. The realisation of shared and regained humanity; the preferability of civilisation over anarchy, for all the latter's superficially appealing advantages of guilt-free vengeance and the rule of force.

This is a Locus Award winning novella, according to the cover, so you go in with reasonable expectations and are not disappointed. From a purely commercial point of view, paying the same sort of cover price for approximately 30,000 words as for a full-blown Reynolds novel may seem a bit steep, but that's the harsh reality of publishing economics and not the author's fault. Pound for pound it delivers everything that you normally expect from a Reynolds work, and is a necessary antidote to far too many power fantasy space operas.

Luna: Wolf Moon by Ian McDonald (Gollancz, 2017)

Reviewed by Nick Hubble

'Did you know cake tastes better on the moon?' asks Lucasinho Corta towards the end of this second novel, in what is scheduled to be trilogy. As neither Lucasinho nor his niece, Luna, whom he is addressing, have ever lived anywhere other than the moon this is something of a rhetorical question. Yet from our perspective as readers, it may be seen as a measure of McDonald's success that we readily believe this; so compelling and intense is his depiction of life on the Earth's sole circling satellite. Lucasinho goes on to provide a two-and-a-half-page-long disquisition on the chemistry of cakes but in essence his argument boils down to the assertion that 'crumb structure is so much better on the moon'. It certainly is: a confection that would be too sickly in Earth's relatively unforgiving atmosphere goes down a treat in McDonald's lightly-whipped servings.



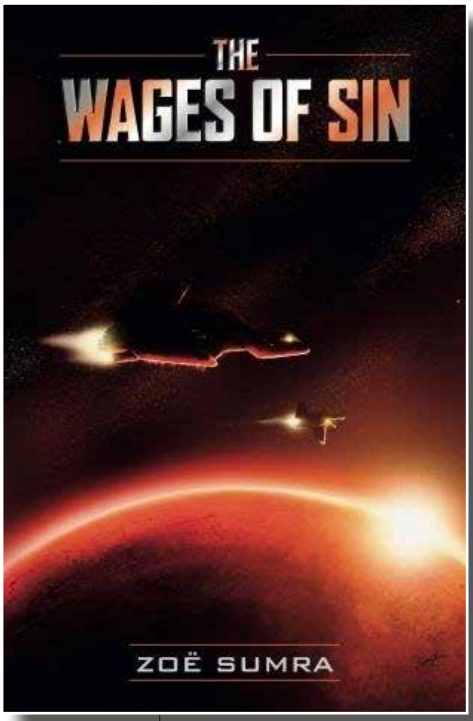
Talking about the first volume, *Luna: New Moon* (2015), McDonald described it variously as '*Game of Domes*' and '*Dallas* in space'. Comparison might also be made to *The Godfather* with the difference being that rather than five Italian-American families controlling New York, here five diverse families – the Cortas, Asamoahs, Suns, Vorontsovs and Mackenzies – are controlling the moon. The latter of these, a clan of preposterous Australian villains headed by an ancient patriarch held together by clunky biotech (any resemblance to a well-known media mogul would no doubt be explained as entirely coincidental), are particularly stereotypical though also enormous fun. If different types of book are suited to different needs, as Lucasinho argues to be the case with cake, then the *Luna* books are for those times 'when only something huge and stupid will do', complete with full make-up, soap-opera and feuds.

However, although sex, fashion and violent destruction are broadcast widescreen for our pleasure, the novels – as we might expect from McDonald's distinguished oeuvre – are not stupid. The moon setting functions, rather as the solar system (or faux solar system) settings of works such as Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy (1992-6) or Ken McLeod's *The Stone Canal* (1997), as a suitable setting for mid-term-future social extrapolation. In McDonalds's future there is no public sector or social security safety-net, the minute anybody arrives on the moon the tab starts running for the cost of their consumption of air and other essentials of living. Unless someone is an actual member of one of the leading families, then their credit is only as good as the contracts they hold (negotiated with the help of their personal AIs). The sense of precarity some of the characters experience within this set-up is reinforced by the lunar location. A series of set-piece surface encounters throughout the two books, culminating in an extended sequence featuring Lucasinho and Luna in the closing third of *Wolf Moon* (which includes the cake lecture), illustrate how fragile human life is in space. McDonalds's characters are only ever a suit failure or dome depressurisation away from a quick, nasty death and they live all the more intensely for always being aware of their mortality.

It turns out, therefore, that cake is not the only thing that is better on the moon: the sex is also pretty amazing. Not because of the lower gravity (and the desirability of zero-gravity sex in particular is questioned) but as a consequence of the individualised culture of contract and consent. The question of sexual identity or discrimination does not arise in a world where people simply have sex with other people across a similar range of varieties as those Lucasinho attributes to cake: 'Vanilla says: careful, boredom; lavender is hoping or regretting. Sometimes both. […] Cream can never be eaten alone. That's the rule.' McDonald allows us a generous taste of all of these, but he never forgets the most important question of all with respect to cake: 'Who's going to get a piece and who isn't?'

Wages of Sin by Zoë Sumra (Elsewhen Press, 2017)

Reviewed by Martin McGrath



Jumping into the second book in Zoë Sumra's *Underside* series was confusing. The universe she has created is complicated. So many different layers and so much conflict. There are criminal gangs, all at each other's throats. There are different cultures (the Septième, Neuvième, Treizième and more), two types of magician (spellweavers) – the Circle and the Guild – and two space empires, a Federation and a Union – all fighting each other. And on top of all that there are a bundle of competing corporations. After the first few chapters I decided I was missing some important layers of information. So, I went back and read the first book in the series – *Sailor to a Siren* – hoping it would help me understand what was going on.

I was wrong. I never quite got it all straight in my head and, coming back to the second book, I found I'd added another layer of confusion as it took me a while to realise that the action had shifted to a new planet. The first book is set on Pell Havasi, a busy world full of odd winged aliens. The second takes place on Mirqest, almost all the aliens have disappeared and so has much of the interesting colour.

In the end I found that I could read the book without worrying about how all this background stuff fitted together, which does leave me wondering if any of it was necessary.

These are basically crime novels with science fiction dressing. *Wages of Sin* starts with the discovery of a murdered woman, who works for Conor Cardwain – a mid-level crime boss whose rise up the ranks (with his brother Logan – who spends most of this novel off screen). The body is a McGuffin that leads us into a conspiracy involving one of those powerful off-world corporations, a coup, some space empire espionage and an ill-fated love affair.

I can't say I loved the Underside books. In the first book, and the first third or so of this one, Sumra has a tendency to let any forward momentum in her storytelling bleed away as characters pause to muse, at length, on a variety of topics. However, as *Wages of Sin* proceeds, she finally finds some pacing and this plot eventually takes off. By the end of this book I was genuinely interested to see how she was going to find a way to bring all her spinning plates safely back to earth.

I still think there are too many layers of conflict in the basic set up – overloading the story with unnecessary complexity. Conflict is obviously a key driver of plots like this, but much of the story is conducted at a high pitch, without light and shade and no way for the story to up the ante at key moments.

The plot also ends up relying on too many unlikely elements. Somewhat remarkably, a security system that doesn't recognise people under four-and-a-half feet tall is not the most implausible thing in the book. There is a political coup whose mechanisms don't feel remotely likely. And the mystery of the initiating murder is eventually resolved through the discovery that some of this universe's magic users are "immune to magic and magic is a form of electromagnetic energy" and so don't show up on security cameras. This raises questions like: "how can they see anyone or be seen?" and, possibly, "how do they avoid vitamin D deficiency?". Most pertinently for the plot, though, is: "how do they end up on the picture that forms a key clue in the first half of the story?"

Wages of Sin is a better book than the first of Underside series. I don't think I'd return for a third instalment of this series, but I do think Sumra has the potential to do better work.

Snapshot by Brandon Sanderson (Gollancz, 2018)

Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

Snapshot is indeed a snapshot – a brief, novella-length detective story that introduces its own little universe, conveys the rules and the plot, and then ends abruptly with a satisfying click an hour or so reading's later.

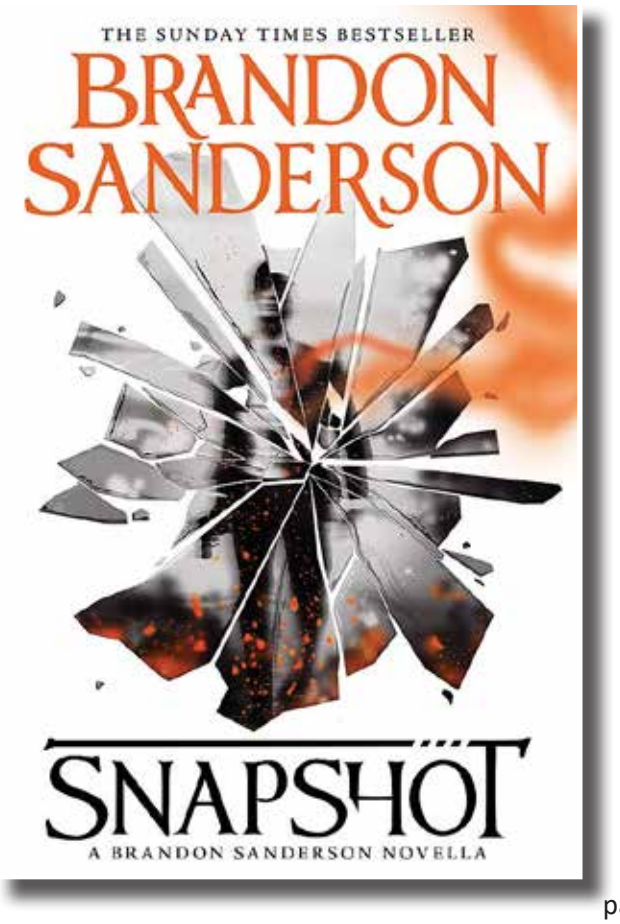
The snapshot is a perfect and exact recreation of a particular city for a given 24-hour period, more than a holodeck and less than the Matrix. Real-world cops go into the simulation and gather evidence to convict the perpetrators of a crime that has already occurred. It all passes in real time, so if the crime happened at 8pm, then the cops must still go in at the

start of the snapshot and hang around until then. But they are effectively time travellers who, just by existing, cause knock-on waves of cause and effect that did not previously happen. So, they must stay low – not because of any lasting effect on a continuum that will cease to exist in a few hours, but because they might do something to cause the crime to happen in a different way, or even prevent it altogether, in which case the evidence they gather in the snapshot will be inadmissible in the real world.

This isn't the first or the last sf title to explore the notion of recreated reality. Sanderson knows his audience will have seen *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*, not to mention *Groundhog Day*, and so the moment we know we're in the realm of duplicated reality, the obvious questions will start arising. Who is fake and who is real? At what level does the illusion stop? How far down do the turtles go?

He knows you know, so he has two tasks. The first is to present the world of the snapshot, with all its rules and limitations, and answer questions arising like: if people already have the ability to create a snapshot, don't they have easier ways of solving, or preventing, crimes in the first place? Why is the city so resolutely here-and-now and not showing any obvious signs of belonging to a society with this kind of technology?

The other is to present the case itself. By rising to the first task, he sends our heroes into a limited and defined environment with no chance to do something clever and hand-wavy to make everything resolve itself. These detectives detect, using nothing more than their own brains and the clues available to solve the case.



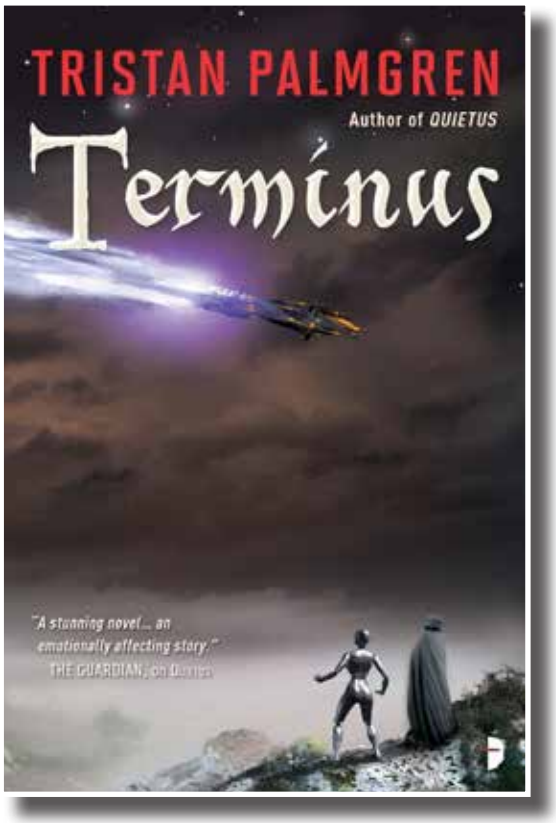
The two tasks come together because while the detection methods are resolutely real-world, we soon learn that the crime itself is one that could only happen in a world that has the snapshot in it. Meanwhile the detectives are learning to use the snapshot to their own ends. One can indulge his occasional taste for consequence-free violence (another *Groundhog Day* hint); the other can sneak repeated visits to his estranged son, which satisfies his own emotional needs, even though he knows out in the real world his son is waiting month after month for a visit that never happens.

There is one brief moment where the illusion wobbles with just a little too much emphasis on a background character, like those moments in a TV drama where the camera lingers a bit too long on an apparently unimportant actor and you know they're going to have something to do with the outcome. Then the apparent case – the surprise discovery of a serial killer, and his tracking down, and the prevention of his next kill and his capture – is suddenly all done, and there's still some pages to go, so the story can't be all over. But there aren't that *many* pages left over, and what happens, happens quickly. These are just blips in a denouement that comes out of the blue, the logical conclusion to a trail of clues hidden away in plain sight, like any good detective story.

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

The huge, ever-expanding, multiversal federation formerly known as the Unity has fallen, as described in *Quietus*, Tristan Palmgren's remarkable first novel. In the wake of this crushing defeat the huge and powerful planarship *Ways And Means*, a former part of the Unity, finds itself exiled, its much diminished horizons – and those of all its human crew – now crushed into a single universe, cut off from all its fellow AIs and the Unity's limitless resources.

Yet, even trapped and alone, *Ways And Means* is still a force to be reckoned with, and the vast, manipulative, untrustworthy intelligence at its heart seeks to replace its former glories with...what? At a single stroke it has saved the version of Earth it now orbits from the terrible plague that was sweeping



the planet, killing millions. That part was easy. But how can one universe ever compare to the infinite multiverse it had played in previously?

Meanwhile, humans from *Ways And Means* continue in their mission to understand the people of this particular Earth. After years living amongst and as them, it's becoming clear to a few that something isn't quite right, and someone or something is influencing and changing this world's natural development (although, this development is already not quite natural: a devastating plague has vanished overnight and a huge "comet" now dominates the sky!).

Osia, a one-time Unity agent, has lived on this Earth for years now, since the end of the Unity. Despite having her body replaced with Unity technologies that make her almost unkillable, a surprisingly effective plot to kill her is taking shape amongst the crew of the sailing ship she captains – a plot that's even more surprising, given that the crew are artificial constructs created by *Ways And Means*.

At the same time, Unity spy turned anthropologist Meloku discovers a secret that also makes her a target; while Fiametta, a mercenary soldier blissfully unaware of the hi-tech meddling taking place across her world, discovers the "inner voice" that has been a steadfast friend and guide since she was a child has inexplicably turned against her.

Suffice to say, there's quite a lot going on in *Terminus*. In fact, there might be too much going on – or, I suspect, simply too much exposition going on. For while, at a plot level, *Terminus* is smart and original, full of interesting characters and ripe with promise, at the story level it feels excessively long and burdened with too much detail. It's as though Palmgren doesn't quite trust his readers to properly follow and understand the story for themselves, and so details everything that happens. At a practical level this meant that after a week of regular reading I was disheartened to realise I was still less than a third of the way through the book, and often struggling to recall what had actually happened. Worse than that, I'd lost interest in what story I did remember and found myself actively avoiding *Terminus*.

Terminus is, for the most part, well written, but it also feels over-written, full of too many descriptions and musings and inner dialogues that slow down any plot development to a crawl. *Terminus* often feels Proustian in its detailing of events - but not in a good way.

I really wanted to like *Terminus*, given how much I enjoyed *Quietus*, but couldn't. Hell, I'm not even enjoying writing this review!

It's a shame because there's an interesting and original story buried in these 450 pages – not to mention some gripping space battle pyrotechnics towards the close, but Palmgren needs to remember the old adage that sometimes *less is more*.

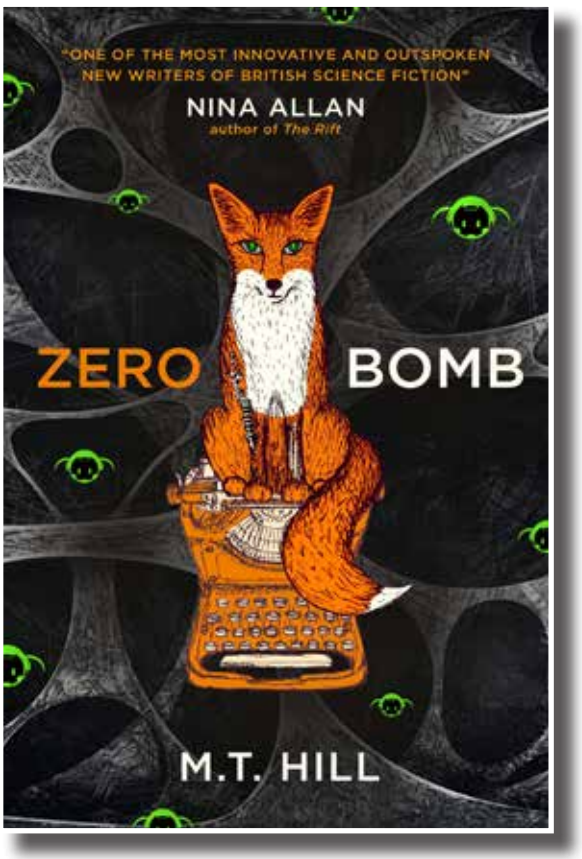
Zero Bomb by M T Hill
(Titan Books, 2019)
Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

You wait years for a horribly plausible novel about imminent civilisational collapse, and then two come along at once. In terms of topicality, M T Hill's *Zero Bomb* can – and should – be read as a companion piece alongside Tim Maughan's *Infinite Detail*, dealing as it does with an end-of-the-world inflicted by misguided infrastructural terrorism. But these are wildly different books in almost every other way: *Zero Bomb* is more focussed on the sociological dimension, more concerned with character and the role of alienation and bad-news anomie in producing would-be world-enders; it's also structurally stranger, comprising three distinct elements which might easily have been bulked out into separate novels in their own right. (Indeed, one section *is* a novel in its own right, albeit one reduced to a synoptic summary of itself by the secret resistance network for whom it is both gospel and recruitment tool.) But don't expect a fat tome; *Zero Bomb* is surprisingly short, refreshingly so in an age of wrist-snapping epics – the sort of length that you

could realistically scarf down in an afternoon.

First we follow the fall from grace (and sanity) of Remi, a naturalised European immigrant in the north of a bleak and brutal post-Brexit Britain, as he quite literally runs away from his life and seeks out a new career in a new town, riding courier bikes and delivering clandestine dead-tree manuscripts across a near-future London that reads like Jeff Noon remixing Jeff Bezos, a glitchy bit-rotted prospectus for the "smart city" that we're constantly told is coming to solve all our problems. Remi's recruitment into what he sees as a resistance movement is achieved in a manner which leaves the reader sympathetic to both him and it, before the novel hinges on the heavily excerpted (and convincingly anachronistic) novel of robot uprising already mentioned.

The second half of the book switches characters and locations to follow the life of Remi's estranged daughter, whiling away her late teens on an allotment of refuseniks, harvesting biotechnological replacement limbs for an all-but-vestigial National Health Service. Here, in a small northern town far from the political or technological centre of anything, as sympathies become harder to sustain, the threads draw themselves into a terrifying tangle as the book (and its world) take a definite turn for the terminal… or maybe not? As in *Infinite Detail*, there's some shafts of hope at the close of *Zero Bomb*, but they pierce a dark and gloomy future that could realistically result from our increasing over-reliance upon the technologies of automation and algorithmic analysis, and from the solipsistic alienation that is their seemingly inevitable consequence.



Hill's obvious authorial affinity for the hinterlands combines with his concerns for the intimate human cost of surveillance capitalism (and the ease with which it enables the scared and the angry to manipulate others, as well as themselves) to mark out *Zero Bomb* as something quite special and (dare I say it?) distinctly British, as well as more knowingly of-its-time than science fiction usually dares to be. The end of the world is always a local and personal experience, taking different forms depending on who it's happening to, and the technological apocalypse of *Zero Bomb* feels significantly secondary to the very personal tragedies of its three focal figures, even as it offers a caution to a nation on the brink of a socio-political breach of unprecedented scale and depth: decisions made now in haste and frustration may never be undone, and indeed might be the undoing of everything they were meant to protect.

It's not a happy book – though perhaps the epilogue will sweeten the last few sips? – but it's a thrilling, twisted trip across this septic isle, and an exemplar of a sort of science fiction which, at times, has seemed all but extinct. Do yourself a favour and get a copy right away, while there's still light by which to read it.

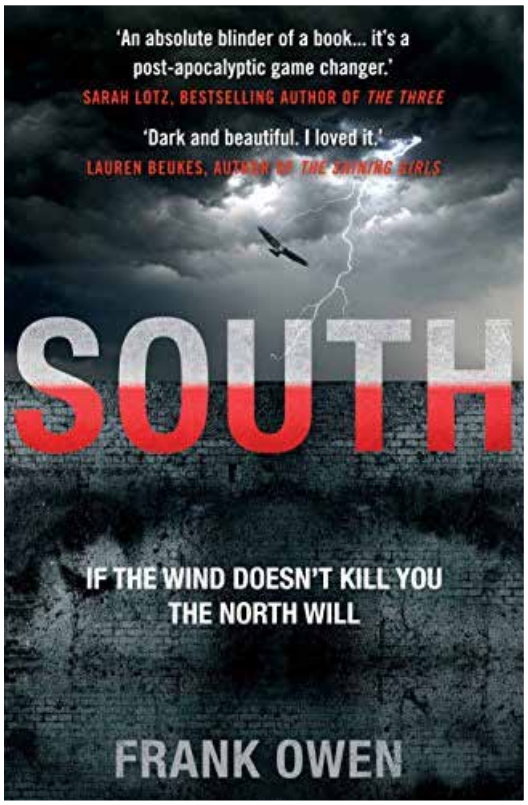
South by Frank Owen
(Corvus Books, 2016)
Reviewed by Stuart Carter

South sees the Jackson brothers, Dyce and Garrett, fleeing across a post-apocalyptic South from the vicious Callahan clan. Garrett's dalliance with a Callahan girl led to her tragic death in childbirth and now they're marked for death. But the Callahans aren't the only thing that will kill them. The South is now an empty, devastated land, still haunted by the biological warfare agents the North used to win the civil war. Spread by the winds, a stiff breeze can still bring terror, even now, 30 years later, presaging a hideous and untimely death.

Also braving the stricken land is Vida, hoping against hope to find a cure for her mother's illness. But travelling alone is almost unheard of in this day and age, and when she encounters Dyce and Garrett they are loathe to trust each other, mutually paranoid of infection. The three of them band together, if not in trust then at least for mutual aid and survival. They meet Felix, one of the last survivors from before the war, and the last weatherman in the South, still monitoring and recording the dreaded

winds – a meeting which will have disastrous consequences for both. Dyce, Garrett and Vida are forced to leave behind everything they know, pursuing the faintest rumour of a sanctuary out towards the coast, and embarking on a grim picaresque.

Suffice to say, things get a lot worse before they get even slightly better.



South is a well-written apocalypse from Frank Owen (actually a pseudonym for two writers, Diane Awerbuck and Alex Latimer), whose dreadful, emptied wasteland is conjured in surprisingly few words (that's wastelands for you, I suppose – not much to talk about…). The Jackson brothers, Garrett and Dyce, are hardly knights in shining armour coming to rescue Vida, but they are human, often funny, and roughly likeable, covering their own anxieties with bravado and insults. Vida is, similarly, a strong woman doing her best to cope in this nightmarish landscape while keeping her own secrets and hiding an agenda which doesn't necessarily match that of her two new companions.

And then, of course, there's the nightmarish Tye Callahan: a complete bastard with a dark past; an uncaring, unswerving and well-nigh unkillable old man, but all that remains of the rule of law in the South. He's a great villain, but what is his relationship with the North - the unseen Jekyll to the South's Hyde - that has all but abandoned this half of the country?

Where *South* fails to convince is in the biology. Writing about the aftermath of germ warfare, Owen makes a horribly convincing case for the ongoing obscenity of biological weapons of mass destruction. But it is when *South* seems to want a symbol of hope or rebirth, a chance for a future, that pseudo-science is rolled out to provide this hope. Perhaps it's what we should expect in a post-Trumpian, post-truth future, but in this case the shaky science seems to work even amongst the reality-based community, depleted though their numbers may be.

However, if you don't have a PhD in biology there's quite a bit to enjoy in *South* in terms of tension, action and character, with enough threads left dangling for a *North* in the not-too-distant future. Assuming, post-Trump, that we have one…

Celestial Empire: The Emergence of Chinese Science Fiction by Nathaniel Isaacson

(Wesleyan University Press, 2017)

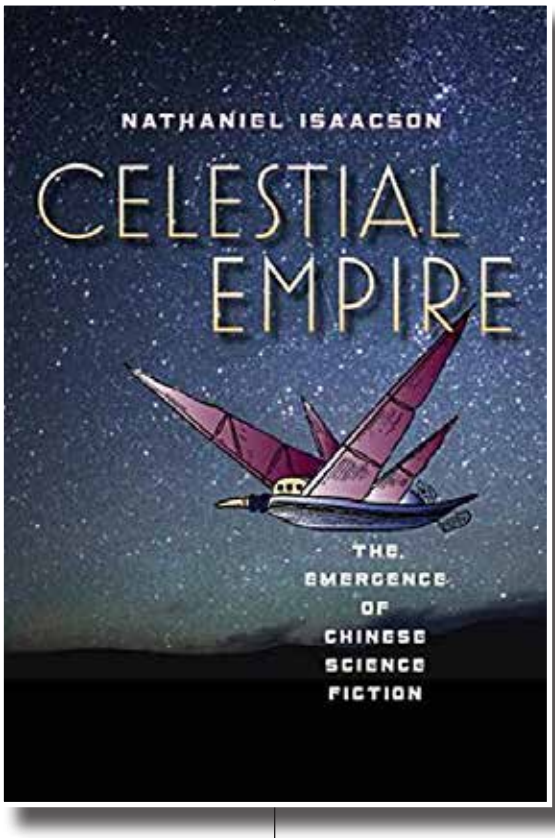
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

A few years ago, when I wanted some examples of new Chinese science fiction, I had to ask a contact in China to send me some and I was reliant on various websites for summaries. Now, Liu Cixin (one of the writers I was pointed to) has won a Hugo. While for the general reader it has some of the drawbacks of being a revision for book publication of his phd thesis, and it only covers the beginnings of modern Chinese sf, it's essential reading for anyone curious about the cultural background to the current scene.

The first chapter deals with definition and context, especially sf's relationship with imperialism. This is discussed frequently throughout, but it's something that cannot be left out of the relationship between China (and Japan, which nation seems to have served as a kind of mid-point in some of the developments here) and the West, especially Britain. As such, it's occasionally dense, but frequently rewarding. China's vast store of marvel-tales and utopias is rather skimmed over here because the focus is upon how a modern sf tradition grew out of Chinese intellectuals' and writers' engagements with clashes of culture. It's interesting that science fiction (*kexue xiaoshuo*) was used as a term in China earlier than in the West (p. 7), and "science" is linked here with the question of modernisation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We are told that Chinese sf can deal as much with the question of the country's own indigenous traditions as it does with confronting foreign powers or alien invasions, but that often "[t]he alien other than Chinese sf confronts is China itself" (p.45).

Lu Xun was one of the most significant Chinese writers of the 20th century, who translated Jules Verne into Chinese in 1903. In chapter 2, Isaacson discusses the debates about science in Lu Xun's essays and his adaptation and reinterpretation of *From The Earth to the Moon*. Two more chapters

look at two early Chinese sf works. The first is the utopian *New Story of the Stone* (1905) by Wu Jianren, a "sequel" to a classic novel which, in this version, takes its hero into a technologically "advanced" future inhabited by mythical creatures. The next is the first work actually labelled as science fiction in China, Huangjiang Diaosou's *Tales of the Moon Colony*, serialised (though never completed) 1904-5. Both works can be seen as exploring Chinese anxieties over whether, and how far, it is possible to emulate the technologies and internationalism (read "colonial aspirations") of the West and what can be gained and lost by this. (The latter, which largely takes place outside China, seems particularly interesting).



"New Tales of Mr Braggadocio", a kind of sequel to a Japanese story which, it has been suggested was a loose translation of Rudolf Erich Raspe's *Baron Munchausen*, is the focus of chapter 5. The next chapter describes *Cat Country* serialized 1932-1933 by Lao She, one of the great figures of modern Chinese literature, and, like Lu Xun a fierce critic of Chinese culture. Partly inspired by World's *First Men in the Moon*, *Cat Country* is a dystopia on Mars which the narrator quickly realises is doomed to collapse. The description is enhanced by translated extracts. The satirical flavour is given by a piece that tells how Martian "concubines" are titillated by the idea of foot-binding (which the narrator explains has been abolished though replaced by the wearing of high-heeled shoes which has equally grotesque effects). Other descriptions uncannily foreshadow the ideological battles of the Cultural revolution, during which the author was driven to suicide. The final chapter is a general exploration of how other forms such as the pictorial newspaper supplement and the science essay tackled the themes and anxieties that were highlighted in science fiction.

As a phd thesis, *Celestial Empire* is a genuine and welcome contribution to scholarship but written with a specific need to look to current scholarship, and in the first instance for those with some sense of the historical context. For instance, Isaacson draws upon recent work on sf and "Empire" by John Rieder and on locating sf in a world context by Andrew Milner. While it is eventually clear what the issues of the New Culture Movement and its "political" version the May Fourth movement were, Isaacson doesn't hold our hands by starting with a reader-friendly summary. A "Glossary of Chinese terms" is concerned with presenting the Chinese characters rather than explaining their meaning. The ignorant reader (myself) who wants to know more about the literary conventions and context may struggle. Part of the problem of these early forays into thinking anew about the world, we're told, is how to express it and what kind of literary Chinese is suitable for these speculations. Some of the discussion, such as that on the complex (in genre terms) "New Tales of Mr Braggadocio" focuses upon the vocabulary, diction, syntax and other literary features of the text in terms which see them as deliberately blurring a number of lines between aspects of Chinese culture and also between Chinese and Western culture.

Do we then get a full understanding of how writers like Liu Cixin are now part of the sf mainstream? Because Isaacson is focussed on the period up to around 1934, by which time there was a "long draught " during which "very few works of original SF were published in China, and publication remained anemic after 1949" (179), the answer has to be no. Still, anyone interested in the background to the recent successes of Chinese sf will find it extremely helpful.

Generation Decks by Titus Chalk (Solaris, 2017)

Reviewed by Alex Bardy

Magic: The Gathering (aka MTG) is one of those collectible card games that engenders a love-it or hate-it relationship among many gaming fans – detractors will call it out for the ludicrous expense and ongoing cost of maintaining a decent competitive deck, while fans will hold it up as a shining example of a game that is always developing, continually expanding, and can never truly be mastered.

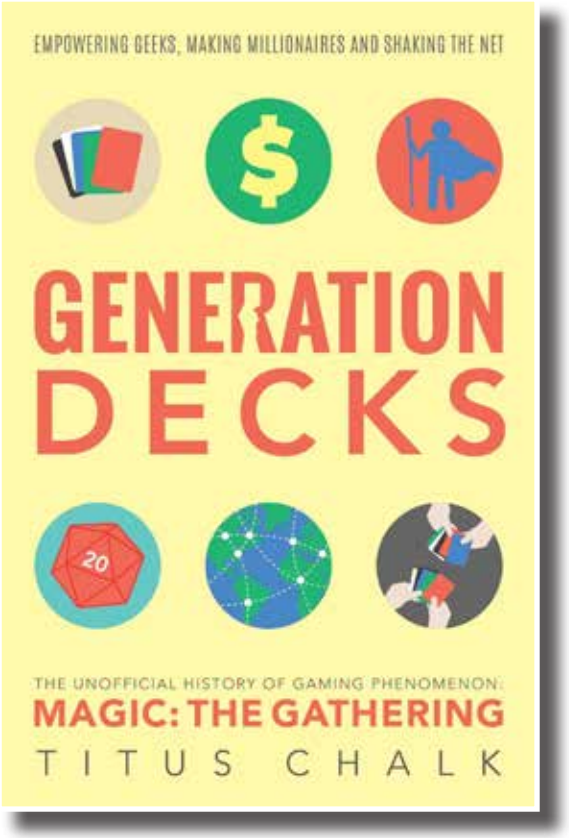
In *Generation Decks*, Titus Chalk weaves together a relatively complex narrative that is part history and chronicle, part memoir, and part social commentary, and on at least two of these counts, I think he's succeeded admirably.

Kicking off, Titus sets out his stall and confesses to being a fan and active current player of the game, and as we learn more about him throughout the book, it becomes abundantly clear that the game means so much more. Indeed, MTG seems to have been one of the few constants in the author's life, and as well as helping him find new friends pretty much wherever he goes – his family uprooted many times by the looks of things – it also, ironically, also helped to firmly ground him through many of life's ups and downs, trials and tribulations, etc. These recollections and fond memories are dispersed throughout the book, and although they do help to give it a personal touch, in truth they contribute very little to the core text, and arguably don't add much flavour to it, either.

It's when the author starts to detail some of the early history and development of MTG and chronicle its history that this book really starts to shine, transforming it into something you really don't want to put down. Told from a transient point-of-view that switches periodically from distant recollection to in-yer-face, fly-on-the-wall intimacy, it's cleverly done.

From its early conception by Richard Garfield to eventual release by Wizards of the Coast, the book details many of the backroom wheeler-dealings that helped to bring the game to life, pulling no punches when covering some of the many mistakes and clangers made along the way, and is enjoyably entertaining when read through such a voyeuristic lens. Detailing a typically rags-to-riches tale of a game and company that literally did start in the basement and transformed into a world phenomenon over a very short period of time (it was not what one would consider "an overnight success", by the way), the book does manage to reveal an awful lot about some of the shenanigans that took place behind-the-scenes, and how they in turn helped to shape and mould this incredible game into what it is today.

Just as interesting are those chapters in which the author talks about some of the big games and events (World Championships and Pro Tours) that helped to solidify the reputations of the key MTG players and those who made them possible. There are personal stories here that really are all the better for the telling, and although big MTG 'names' like Peter Adkison, Brian Weissman, Luis Scott-Vargas, Mark Rosewater and Jon Finkel get a fair few column inches (and even a whole chapter in the latter case), it's the tragic story of one of MTG's earliest iconic role models, Mark Justice, that brings forth some



idea of the huge amount of pressure top players are under to maintain their position and reputation at the top of the player tree.

A lot of these 'story chapters' are also where the author attempts limited social commentary, and one particular chapter (*'Magic's Missing Tribe'*) makes a somewhat awkward and convoluted effort to tackle the thorny question of women in the game, or rather, the lack of them on the competitive scene. Given that MTG is "a game of mental dexterity rather than physical strength," says the author, the game should "provide a level playing field for men and women." Really? In short, the chapter summarises that the game needs more women (and diversity), but efforts are continually thwarted by a sense of tribalism that, alas, seems endemic amongst male players. So full marks for effort on that one, or perhaps not.

My frustration with this book is not so much with the narrative itself (which, excluding the aforementioned chapter, generally reads quite well from start to finish), but with the lack of consistency and presence as the history of the game starts to catch up with the last decade or so – the staff at MTG's Wizards are no doubt under strict rules as to what can and cannot be discussed quite so openly, I suspect. Alas, this makes the book feel half-hearted, with the rich and entertaining early history of the company and main players therein depicted in stark contrast to the way everything inside the modern behemoth now works, I suspect.

Make no mistake, this is an entertaining read, and I'd recommend it to anyone with an interest in the

game and its history – *Magic: The Gathering* was at the very start of what many consider to be one of the key revolutions in geek culture, and as such, deserves the attention of geeks old and new alike. In the final chapter, the author sums things up rather nicely: "Despite its occasional sins, Magic is enriching." and "...has changed the world, one grateful geek at a time. And you? You could be next."

James Cawthorn: The Man and His Art, written and compiled by Maureen Cawthorn Bell

(Jayde Design, 2018)

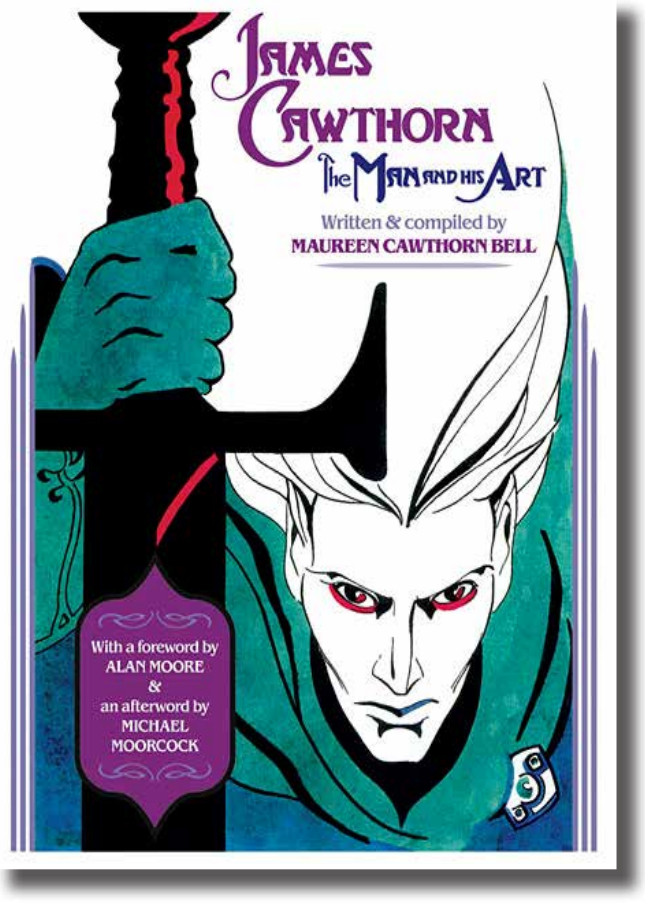
Reviewed by Andrew Sawyer

This beautifully produced book is a record of the life and works of the artist James Cawthorn, compiled by his sister Maureen with the help of John Davey. Cawthorn, who died in 2008, is possibly the archetypal British fantasy artist of his day, but here we are reminded of how much, even with that reputation, remains overlooked. There was a time when a certain style assured you that the volume you had picked up was quality, though you may not have been able to name the artist. Nearly always, that artist was Cawthorn. His work is indissolubly linked with that of Michael Moorcock, who contributes a number of tributes and reminiscences, focusing interestingly upon how Cawthorn mentored his reading, introducing him to such fantasy classics as William Hope Hodgson's *The Night Land* and the works of Mervyn Peake, Charles Williams, and Fritz Leiber. Many of the illustrations featured here were either commissioned by Moorcock or are for works by him. Cawthorn produced much for *Science Fantasy* and *New Worlds*, and later became part of Savoy Books' stable of artists, working especially on editions of Moorcock including graphic novel versions such as *The Jewel in the Skull*. What the book shows, though is that there was much, much, more to him.

A self-taught artist from a working-class background, Cawthorn came to fantasy and science fiction when they were colourful, energetic, but subordinate forms, with which establishment figures would occasionally dabble but were neither respectable nor, crucially, areas in which no self-respecting cultural dissident would be seen dead in. Comic strips such as Burne Hogarth's Tarzan brought colour and excitement. Finding fandom through Don Allen's fanzine *Satellite* Cawthorn became a master of the lost art of stencil cutting – producing detailed art for mimeographed fanzines. His work appeared in (naturally) Moorcock's fanzines, and zines dedicated to Edgar Rice Burroughs and Robert E. Howard. He also contributed to early issues of the BSFA's *Vector.* Working with Moorcock, the duo developed *Elric* – and British fantasy changed forever.

The memorial is divided into two halves and four sections. The first (though lavishly illustrated) is predominately text, consisting of tributes, memories, biographical material, interviews and Cawthorn's own writing – mostly reviews, but including an adept short story. The second is largely reproduction of artwork: anything from fanzine fillers to rough sketches for "work in progress" to high-quality illustrated books, but including examples of his stencil work, material illustrating Tolkien and Edgar Rice Burroughs, t shirts, underground press material, and book covers. The fourth and final collection includes a checklist of his work, almost certainly extremely incomplete.

What this book brings us is not only the sense of Cawthorn as an artist. Most of us who were around in the 60s know that, even though most of us took decades to become aware of just how far he had formed our tastes. But few outside a limited fandom (and I count myself one of that few) were aware of just how good a writer he was. The adventures of "Handar the Red" featured in three issues of *Tarzan Adventures* in 1958 are maybe the work of a young man for an even younger audience, but even so have a ring of authenticity. In the 1970s, he wrote



fluent articles on a number of subjects for *Look and Learn*. The 1985 story "The Bus" was an entry in a competition for which the prize was a posh fountain pen (to be fair: a Parker Premium 9 carat gold pen worth £850). It didn't even win. Yet it is a fine story. I hope the winner was as good! Cawthorn's reviews show an enthusiastic response to and a keen eye for fantasy. The selections from *Fantasy: the 100 Best Books* (which, though co-credited to Moorcock was, we are told, mostly Cawthorn) are heavy on plot-summary, but few can re-tell the story of *A Voyage to Arcturus* or *Jirel of Joiry* with as much atmosphere.

Yet it is his work as an artist which sticks in the memory. As his hero Burne Hogarth writes, "James Cawthorn has been able to touch the sleeve of the inexpressible and feel the chill of the abyss". The Moorcock of the early "Elric" sequence was perhaps his perfect partner, but the reproductions of his illustrations for *Satellite, Triode*, and *Amra* show that he was of that fannish tradition (with Arthur Thomson, Harry Turner and a few others) who could turn stencil duplicating into pure art, while the reproductions of pages from the never-completed graphic novel version of *A Princess of Mars* show that he could adapt the work that inspired so many.

At nearly 450 pages, the book is, after the first, biographical, section contributed by his sister and the tributes by friends and family, best skimmed through at leisure, to allow the joy of serendipity to guide our way through images that we remember from the days when we were discovering fantasy. But joy there will be.

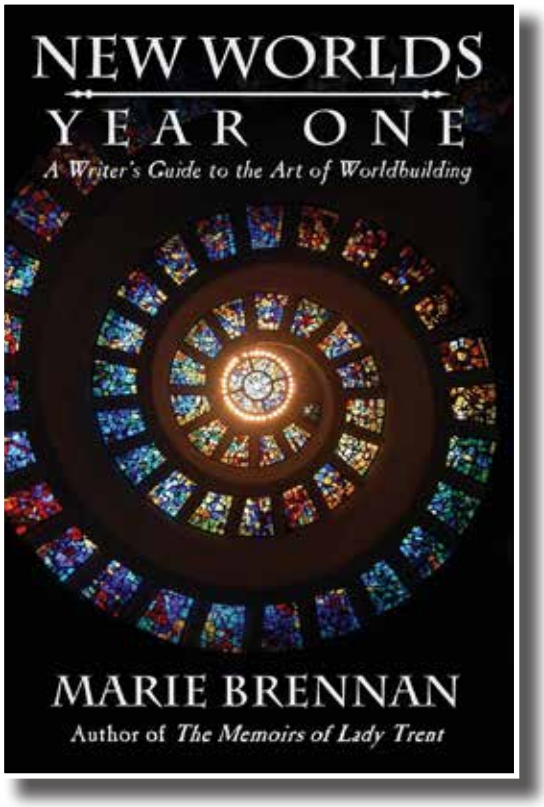
New Worlds, Year One, A Writer's Guide to the Art of Worldbuilding by Marie Brennan

(Book View Café, 2018)

Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

Marie Brennan, the author of *The Memoirs of Lady Trent* and other novels, has a background in anthropology and folklore studies. This book is a collection of a year of blog posts on different aspects of worldbuilding. The topics range from plate tectonics to kitchens, from insults to rites of passage and money. In each case, Brennan discusses different examples from human history and culture to consider how things could be different from the norms that might otherwise be taken for granted – and how the differences in a setting can be used in plot building and character development.

Brennan encourages experimenting with any aspect of a world, so long as the implications are



thought through. If you're going to put two moons in the sky, consider the consequences for geography and human life, although these might be mythological rather than scientific, depending on the kind of story you're writing.

She is also a fan of what she calls the throwaway detail – an aspect of the setting which does not matter for the plot but adds depth to the characters' lives. From her own experience, she points out that someone living in New York may decorate their home with ornaments above doors or windows, in a way that no Californian would, because of the risk of earthquakes. So, the risks from a natural disaster could be built into the thinking of a character in a novel, without featuring in the plot.

This set me thinking about Chekov's revolver: the principle that if there's a loaded gun on the mantlepiece in Act One of a play, the audience will expect a shooting in Act Three. Likewise, if the characters in a story are worrying about earthquakes, I might feel a bit cheated as a reader, if the earth doesn't shake before the end. All the same, I like the idea of the throwaway detail and the different perspective it can bring to character and setting.

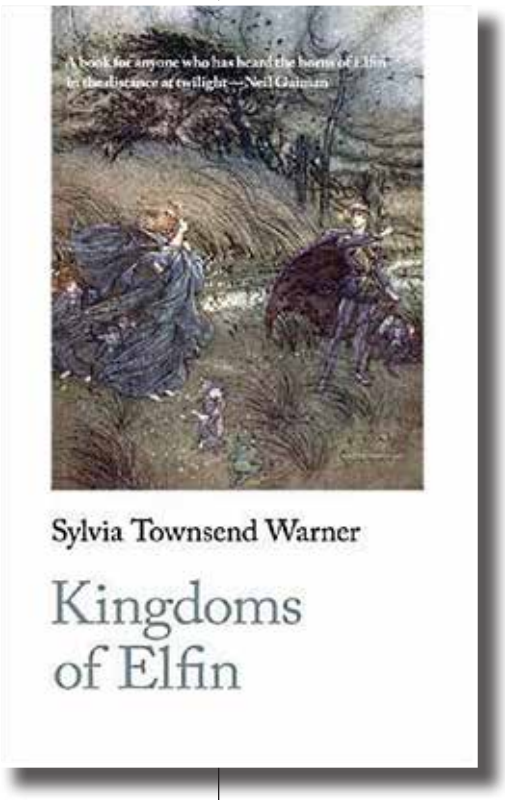
Brennan discusses briefly the difficult issues around cultural appropriation but recommends further reading for anyone who wants to pursue them in depth. Her wide range of examples open up the possibilities of thinking in new ways about a setting of a story and how that influences everything else. Her aim is to suggest new ways writers can approach world building, through developing

a sense of how societies work and how to make a world come alive.

The blog continues, for those who prefer that way of reading. Meanwhile, the book provides food for thought for writers of all kinds of secondary worlds. Even readers who have no ambition to write may enjoy her insights.

Kingdoms of Elfin by Sylvia Townsend Warner (Handheld Press, 2018)

Reviewed by Nick Hubble



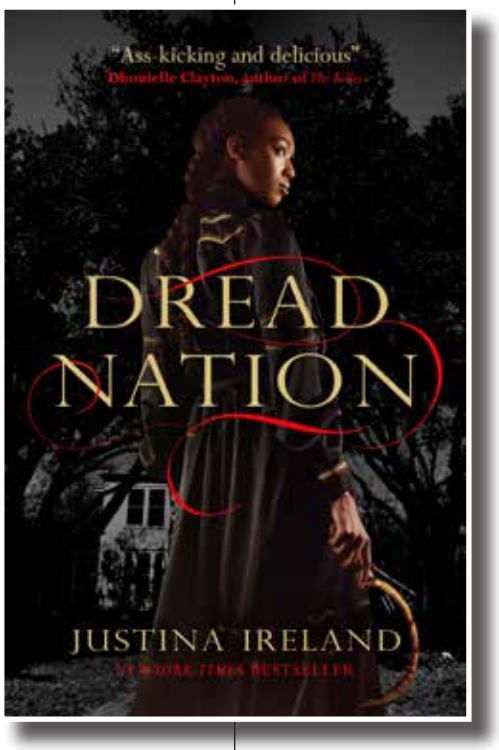
Originally published as short stories in *The New Yorker*, and first collected in 1977, *Kingdoms of Elfin* was the last of Sylvia Townsend Warner's books to be published in her lifetime. Although some of her books were among the first to be published as Virago modern classics in the late 1970s and her first novel, *Lolly Willowes* (1926), with its witch protagonist, is now well known, there was a period when Warner was chiefly remembered for her role in the anti-fascist generation of 1930s writers. Along with her life-partner, Valentine Acland, she joined the Communist Party and worked in support of the republican cause during the Spanish Civil War. *Kingdoms of Elfin*, with its enchanting and enigmatic tales of fairies scattered across Europe and beyond, seems far removed from such political concerns and yet under the surface there is something inexorable which gives these stories an exquisite, but nonetheless mortally sharp, edge.

Warner's fairies are fascinated with the short-lived humans around them but not overly bothered about their individual welfare. In the first of these stories, 'The One and the Other', a changeling accidentally kills the human he replaces – who has already grown old and been evicted from the fairy kingdom he was taken by – while experimenting on his blood, but consoles himself with the thought that he can probably sell the body to the anatomists in Edinburgh. In 'Elephenor and Weasel', Elephenor finds himself working as the assistant to a travelling necromancer – involving, amongst other tasks, deploying his wings to imitate the devil – and loving every minute: 'To have a great deal of power and no concern was the life for him'. In 'The Occupation', a group of fairies drive a Scottish clergyman mad by making a home in his manse and even attempting to clean it. In a rare but neat political twist, his wife leaves with the children 'to live with her sister above a grocery shop in Glasgow, where she was much happier, just as dirty, and insisted on her standing as a Minister's wife'.

Yet, if humans and their foibles are relentlessly subjected to dispassionate scrutiny, Warner's fairies, themselves, are also often shown as the victims of capricious fate. Or, at least, that is how it appears when viewed from a conventional perspective, but perhaps Warner's greatest achievement is to encourage readers to dispense with their pre-existing moral frameworks, which are made to look narrowly time-bound in comparison with a more fluid fairy temporality. In 'The Five Black Swans', the dying Queen Tiphaine (Warner's fairies are not immortal but have lifespans of centuries) of the Scottish elfin kingdom of Elphane, relives her relationship with the human Thomas of Ercildoune, making love outside whether in the dew-drenched grass, rain or even hail: 'Love was in the present: in the sharp taste of the rowanberries he plucked for her, in the winter night when a gale got up and whipped them to the shelter of a farm where he kindled a fire and roasted turnips on a stick, in their midnight mushroomings, in the long summer evenings when they lay on their backs too happy to move or speak, in their March-hare cuvettings and cuffings.' Here, the pure moment contains all of existence and thereby encompasses eternity as opposed to the insubstantiality of the conventional human present, enslaved by causality and condemned to endless unfulfilling repetition.

It's not that fairies don't have their problems. There is rather a lot of overly formal court procedure and an annoying class system that constrains those of the higher ranks from some of the more bodily pleasures, such as flying. However, being fairies, these boundaries are frequently transgressed. Long after they find themselves ejected at the text's end on to the cold hillside, the memory of these tales will haunt readers with the lingering sense that we could live differently.

***Dread Nation* by Justina Ireland**
(Titan Books, 2019)
Reviewed by David Lascelles



Take *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies*, relocate it to (more or less) the setting of Abraham Lincoln: *Vampire Hunter* (well, about 17 years later), add a splash of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* but make all your main protagonists people of colour and you come away with something that is almost, but not quite, entirely like *Dread Nation*.

Seventeen years after the American Civil War, a war in which a peace treaty was made following the battle of Gettysburg so that the Confederate generals could go home to fight the growing zombie threat, we enter a world that is vastly changed by the existence of zombies. At least on the surface. While we have steam powered 'mules', 'Survivalist' political parties and Negro combat schools, we still have many of the social and political issues of the time, including the quite nasty and prevalent racism.

The story follows our hero, Jane McKeene, who has been sent to one of the more prestigious 'Negro combat schools' in Baltimore – Miss Preston's School of Combat for Negro Girls – to train as an Attendant. Their role is to act as companions to a lady – a bodyguard and general servant – with a particular focus on protecting their charges from attack by zombies. Jane is incredibly good at the combat side of this but is very lacking in some of the finer skills of etiquette and ladylike behaviour expected of a good companion.

Ireland builds a rich and believable world, considering carefully the ways in which history might change following the 'rising day' apocalypse. Logical reasons are given for many changes – for example the use of steam powered mules (or carriages) is linked not only to the loss of horses to the apocalypse but also the need for transport that is armoured – and she has carefully considered the socio-political landscape. For example, slavery might be illegal in this post Gettysburg America, but that does not stop the black population from being exploited with ludicrously low wages, nor from being used as cannon fodder against the zombies. Which is exactly what happens. While Miss Preston's school is seen as a prestigious institution for the training of bodyguards for ladies, it is mentioned that there are other schools for those who are sent out into the more dangerous places. In her Author's note at the end, Ireland even mentions that the idea of Negro combat schools was based on the 'Indian Boarding schools' of the period that were used to forcibly educate the native population (indeed one character is even from such a school) and this seems like a natural progression.

The characters are engaging and interesting, with Jane herself being very well developed. Part of her arc is her relationship with her mother, a story that is wonderfully told in chapter heading snippets of letters between them. It is worth keeping track of what is said in these as they tell their own story separate from the main narrative. Of the main characters, the only one I have any issue with at all is Katherine who, early in the story, comes across as less capable in combat and overall less competent than she really should be with the same education and training as Jane. If you wanted to classify her in terms of familiar tropes, she is the Cordelia to Jane's Buffy. However, as the story progresses, she flowers into a far more fascinating character with a lot of potential.

Overall, this is an engaging and fun read that manages to address some serious social issues.

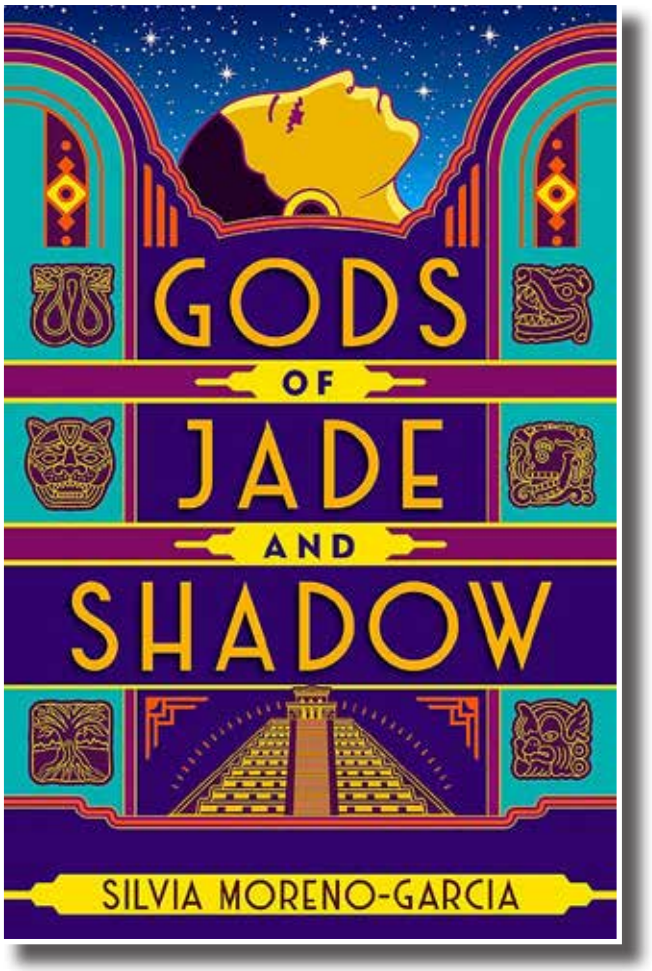
***Gods of Jade and Shadow* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia**
(Jo Fletcher Books, 2019)
Reviewed by Duncan Lawie

Gods of Jade and Shadow opens like a fairy tale. Our protagonist, Cassiopea, is the least cousin in a large family, treated like a servant whilst being reminded that she is supposed to maintain the respectability of a member of the family. The particularities of her miserable treatment are that her father was the wrong class, the wrong shade of Mexican and, after his death, Cassiopea and her mother had no choice but to return to the family that her mother eloped from. This is context, though, not the start of a misery novel. Then Cassiopea opens a box and out leaps a dead god. He is revived when Cassiopea unwittingly

scrapes a shard of bone, lodging it in her hand and so providing a link to the living world. What follows is an entertaining, if quite gentle, adventure through Mexico in the 1920s, a coming of age novel and an unlikely love story.

The box has been in Cassiopea's grandfather's bedroom for decades, holding the dry bones of Hun-Kame, rightful ruler of the Mayan Death Lands of Xibalba. In centuries past, the Mayan Death Lands had lost most of their adherents and sacrifices, but Xibalba does not simply disappear. Hun-Kame, first of the Mayan Death Gods has continued to rule, but the lack of (quite literally) fresh blood chafes at his twin, Vucub-Kame. Cassiopea's grandfather was part of Vucub-Kame's plot to rule the Underworld and to return the Middle World to the old ways of blood and sacrifice. This last element is a clever piece of plotting to bring our 18-year-old Catholic into allegiance with a Mayan God of Death.

The plot is a classic quest, where Hun-Kame must collect parts of himself which have been cached far from home. Each item (finger, ear, necklace, eye) introduces the reader - and Cassiopea - to another being from Mayan/Mexican lore. Each provides a chance for Moreno-Garcia to write about the nature of life in Mexico in this era. The border with Texas is one example - the Americans go south to drink during Prohibition, whilst priests and nuns escape north from the persecution of the Mexican Revolutionary government. Hun-Kame cuts her long hair to make a sacrifice for information and Cassiopea gets a short, flapper haircut - two parts daring and one part ashamed. And as Hun-Kame is drawn further from home, his powers reduce. He is forced to draw more on his blood connection with the young woman and becomes more human. Instead of an ageless, stern god, he becomes a young man, the blood of fresh life racing through his heart. Cassiopea is being weakened, consumed, by this but she is also learning the world, exposed to hotel room service, Carnival in the city, automobiles, short dresses and even shorter hair.



The book has lovely scene-setting, with each chapter having a distinct shape - often closing like a fadeout, with the next chapter lighting up a new day, or place. The shapeliness of the writing only crept up on me, though, as I realised how beautifully Moreno-Garcia was signposting her work.

Perhaps it is the fairy tale opening, the youth and innocence of the protagonist or the politeness of the death god but this felt like a very safe book. I could enjoy exploring the world with Cassiopea, listen to the lessons about Mexican folklore and notice the growing attraction between her and Hun-Kame without ever feeling that the adventure was about to be tipped into chaos. Indeed, there seemed to be more danger to Hun-Kame from his growing humanity and attraction to the woman in front of him than from sorcerers and all the powers of Xibalba. This romance provided the spine of the novel, rather than the adventure plot, and gave the ending a bittersweet slingshot. The result is a warm hug of a book.

The Haunting of Drearcliff Grange School by Kim Newman

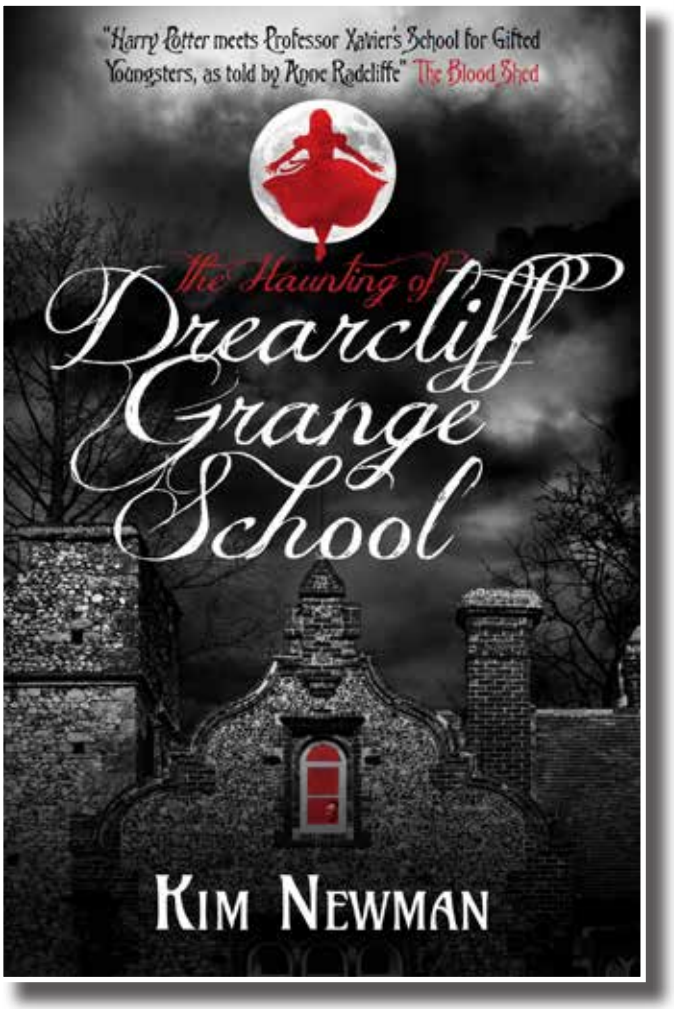
(Titan Books, 2018)

Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

This is the second novel in Kim Newman's *Drearcliff School* series and is described by the Blood Shed as "Harry Potter meets Professor Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, as told to Anne Radcliffe". This is, I feel, pretty accurate.

The story centres on Amy Thomsett, a girl who can fly using super-size moth wings, and a student at the titular school, one of a small number who specialise in educating and training unusual pupils with peculiar talents. She is one of a team sent to London to participate in the Great Game against several other such institutions. The Game is a contest of skill, trickery and treachery, the aim of which is to obtain

six tokens, in this case toby jugs, by finding and solving clues of varying difficulty. After an extremely challenging night, defeat is plucked from the jaws of victory through trickery, and the team are forced to return to the school in shame. The already prepared celebration tea, in which they are still forced to participate, is an excellently described exercise in ritual humiliation. For Amy, the Game has also been a salutary reminder that there are those whose powers, while similar to hers, appear to exceed them by quite some way.



The Game is set to have an even more profound effect on Amy's life as it brings her into the orbit of The Broken Doll, a nightmarish, life sized living toy, with a disfiguring crack across its malevolent china face. This entity now begins to appear at the school, and when it does, very bad things happen shortly afterwards. It is, of course, up to Amy and her friends to save the day

One of the joys of this novel is that Kim Newman has keyed in to the life and atmosphere of a real-life boarding school. The cliques that form, particularly between dorm mates, the unity in hatred against a particular person or thing and the rules, both written and unwritten, that must be followed all ring true. Punishments for breaking these rules or for being unable or unwilling to conform, also exist in Drearcliff's real world counterparts. This also explains why those with exceptional abilities will be simultaneously lauded for victories that enhance the school's reputation and shunned by those girls who are normal, as well as a number of the teaching staff. Fortunately, the main exception to this is the terrifying Head herself, for whom these girls are of immense interest, and their correct education is at the forefront of her mind.

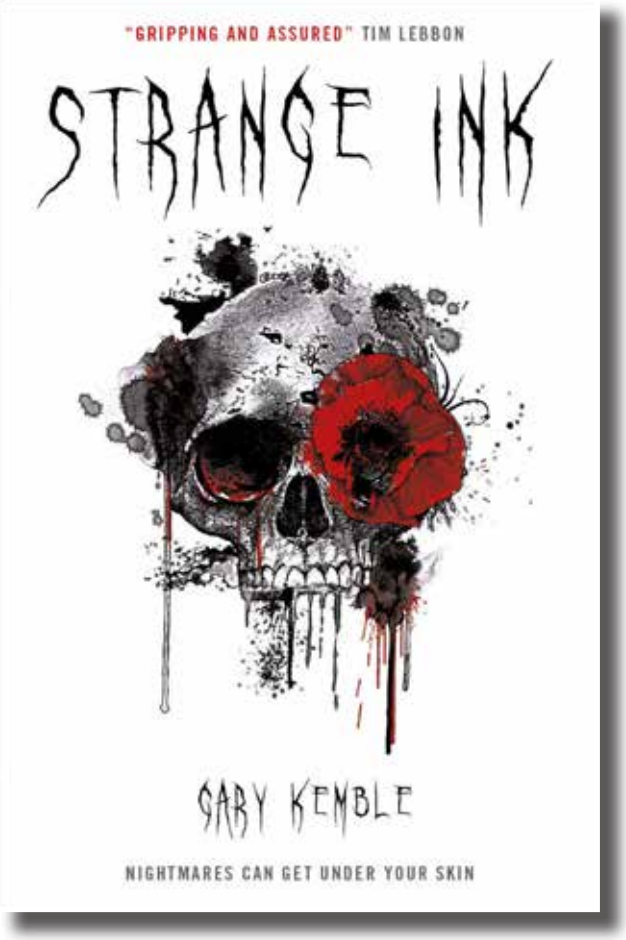
Amy herself is a sympathetic and relatable character, attempting to come to terms with her powers, while still young and lacking in confidence. It is fortunate, therefore, that she has friends who are not so encumbered. They include an Indian girl, Kali, whose father is a wife murdering gangster and Light Fingers, whose abilities are reflected in her name. Their friendship even survives a hellish homework assignment when their Remove teacher gives each girl in the class a card. On this card is written a secret about the student herself and another related to one of the other, unnamed, girls. Their task is to find out which, and, as can be imagined, this puts an almost fatal strain on some of their relationships.

Friendship is a key feature of the book, in extreme adversity, of necessity, broken and remade, it is celebrated as an intrinsic part of a particular teenage female experience, particularly where there are no, or very few male distractions. In fact, it is the girls' relative lack of experience with boys that contributes to their poor showing in The Game, tending, as they were, to be easily swayed by male attention.

This is a fun and quick read, written in a very accessible style. I have very much enjoyed both books I have read in the series and would recommend them for a not-to-be-taken-too-seriously book pile.

Strange Ink by Gary Kemble
(Titan Books, 2018)
Reviewed by David Lascelles

Harry is a journalist from Brisbane with a stalled career due to a discredited story and an ex-girlfriend he really wanted more time with. He is stuck doing fluff local pieces for the Brisbane Chronicle and trying to pull his life back together by moving into a new house. Unfortunately, his life changes when he wakes up after his best friend's Stag night with a very unusual tattoo on the back of his neck. From that point on, he has a mission to find out why the ghost of Rob, the former SAS officer who used to live in his new place, is not ready to go to his rest yet.



Strange Ink is an interesting mix of action thriller, political intrigue and ghost story that works very well. It doesn't really give us anything particularly ground-breaking, there are no real surprising twists and the concept of ghosts possessing protagonists for revenge has been done many times before, but it delivers on its concept very well. We follow Harry as he goes from hapless and unbelieving victim of a haunting to a solid protagonist who makes plans to counter the threats he is facing. These threats, in the form of corrupt politicians and biker gang heavies, are credible and give just the right level of danger. As the story progresses, Harry gets more and more tattoos magically appearing on his body and we slowly get more and more of the story of Rob and why he was murdered. In the meantime, we also get to see more of Harry's life and the day to day problems he is facing.

Of course, it should be obvious that Harry's interaction with the ghost of Rob is very OP. What we end up with is a person with the killing skills of a former special forces soldier, albeit lessened somewhat by Harry's less fit body, combined with the investigative skills of a journalist. Individually, neither could succeed in bringing the bad guys to justice, but together they have a chance.

One thing that does stand out is the setting. The plot reads like something which you imagine taking place in LA or another place in the States, but the Australian backdrop makes it different enough to be interesting. Kemble is British born but now lives in Brisbane and this shows in his knowledge of the location and use of Australian idioms. I for one was not aware of exactly how many words they add 'ie' to the end of. I knew about barbie (BBQ) and stubbie (can of beer) but not bikie or truckie. This does mean some parts of this come across a bit like 1980s Australian soaps. In fact, the scenes where Harry interviews a couple of old war veterans about saving local heritage, it feels as if those characters would be played by old soap opera alumni.

Flaws include a romance plot that seems somewhat forced and which then fizzles without any real resolution. There are logical reasons as to why this happens, but it feels a little flat at the end. The story is also a slow burn. It starts at a relatively sedate pace and for a while the only supernatural stuff going on is the mysterious appearance of the tattoos. This is no bad thing; it leads to some solid character development. However, do not expect a quick pay off.

Overall, a competently done thriller with a paranormal twist set in an unusual location. Definitely worth checking out if you like your action heroes tattooed, ghostly and drinking a stubbie of beer.

***Hallowdene* by George Mann**
(Titan Books, 2018)
Reviewed by Matt Colborn

Hallowdene, the second book in George Mann's Wytchwood series, is an entertaining crime novel spiced with possibly supernatural elements. It follows the journalist Elspeth Reeves and her policeman lover DC Peter Shaw's attempts to solve a spate of murders that happen after the excavation of the Hallowdene Witch. The witch, Agnes Levett, was buried under a large stone in 1643 after being accused of killing Lady Grace Abbott during a 'ritual.'

Soon after the witch is removed from her grave, the murders begin. The first victim is the fairly obnoxious Nicholas Abbott, a local man who until recently owned Hallowdene Manor, now sold to the family of Hugh Walsey. It emerges that Nicholas sold the property to Walsey to prevent his brother getting his hands on it.

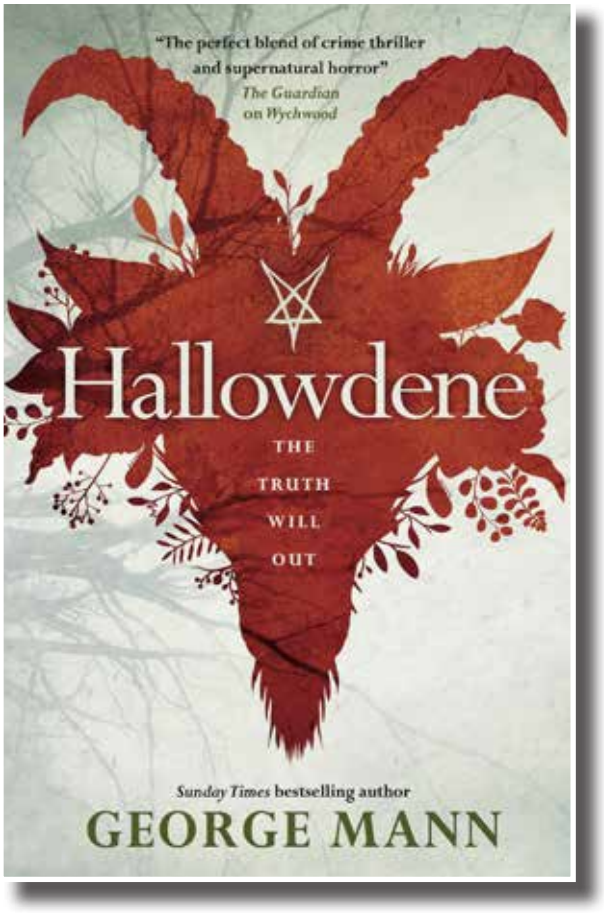
From the start, there is a suggestion of a supernatural force at work as Daisy, a young woman working in a local cafe, begins to suffer blackouts. At one point she finds herself deep in the local woods at night, encountering sinister figures and having visions of the past. The malign presence of the witch hangs over the village as more murders ensue. The investigators do have the experience of the previous case of the Carrion King, which has opened their minds to extreme possibilities regarding the supernatural. This element, however, is never overstated and the plot broadly speaking could have functioned without it at all.

Daisy soon becomes a suspect, but the truth has to do with old grudges and the tangled history of the local families, going back centuries. Hallowdene also has a Cassandra, Lee Stroud, who prophesies doom after the witch is dug up.

The character of the lead, Elspeth, is fairly well drawn. After the first book in the series, she moved back into the area having abandoned a career in London. Much of the romantic tension in the book comes from the question of whether one or both of the leads is willing to stay in the area and make their lives together or whether they should move on for their career advancement.

The secondary characters are also likeable and interesting. Daisy in particular, the hapless suspect who is having an affair with Walsey's daughter, is especially sympathetic. Elspeth and she develop a friendship throughout the latter part of the book.

The mystery itself is well plotted and the identity



of the killer is not too obvious. Detective stories are often at least as interesting for the sense of atmosphere and mystery they evoke as for the plot — especially works like P.D. James' novel T*he Skull Beneath the Skin* (1982) which has reflections on the nature of psychological and physical death.

In an interview for *Crime Time,* Mann stated that the theme for the novel was irrevocable shaping of society by 'the decisions of the past, and the aftershocks and repercussions' of those decisions. He also expressed an interest in the 'cyclical nature of human behaviour:' this is reflected in the book by the fact that the modern spate of murders were an echo of the mysterious deaths that occurred in the wake of the witch's execution. In many ways, the novel is about the slightly sordid and incestuous nature of small village life, a nature that is often hidden by a respectable front. Here it is not so much the skull beneath the skin as uncontrollable lust that's the problem!

I like the rural background of this story and the evocation of English history and folklore. This makes a refreshing change to the predominance of gritty urban crime. I would have liked to have seen more on the modern pagan community in this book: the fictional village is not a million miles from Glastonbury, after all. On the whole, this is a fun if lightweight read and I look forward to additions to the series.

Sherlock Holmes and the Servants of Hell
by Paul Kane

(Solaris, 2016)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

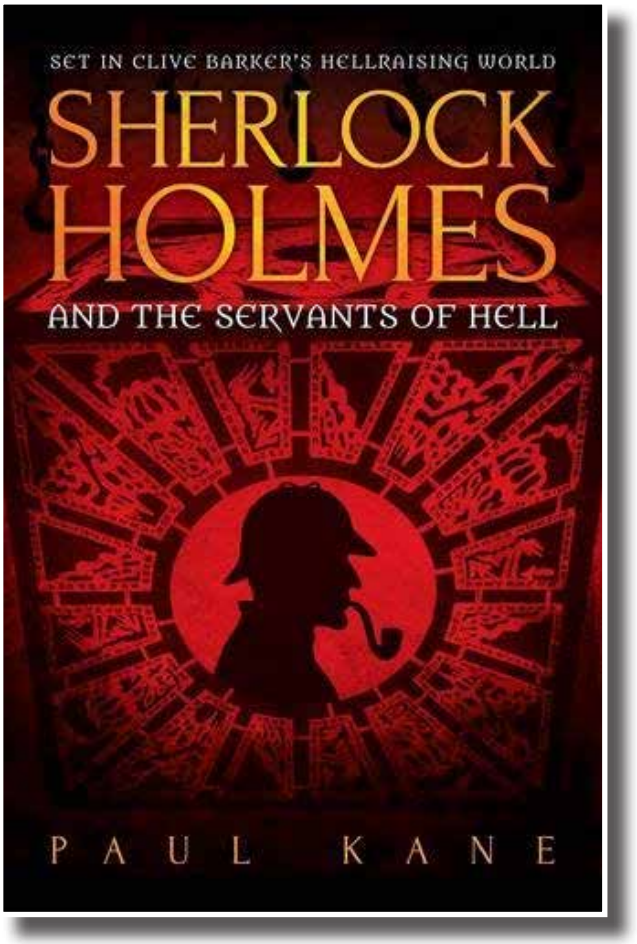
I'm having a Sherlockian field year, so far: *The Fifth Heart* (Dan Simmons), *Sherlock Holmes and the Shadwell Shadows* (James Lovegrove), *alt.sherlock.holmes,* (Divers Hands), and now for something not-so-completely different.

Paul Kane's *Sherlock Holmes and the Servants of Hell* is a Conan Doyle/Clive Barker mash-up. Or smash-up, depending upon how you feel about such things. I, for one, think that the actress Barbie Wilde (*Hellbound: Hellraiser II*) sums it up perfectly in her Introduction: "If you're a Holmes and Watson fan, you'll love this book. If you're an admirer of Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* mythology of labyrinths, Cenobites and the exploration of the ultimate in sexual suffering, you'll also love this book. If you like vivid, imaginative and muscular writing, then, hell, you'll adore this book." I'm tempted to stop writing this review right here and now. But that might mean having to return my free copy, so I'll just get on with it.

Not being as well up on Clive Barker as I am on Conan Doyle canon, I had to re-read *The Hellbound Heart* and do a spot of etymological research work. In uncommon parlance, 'cenobite' means "Member of a monastic community" (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*). In Barker's universe, the Cenobites are "acolytes of modern primitivism, their flesh riven and reinvented with surgeries that sense sadistic yet sensual" (purloined from *The Dark Fantastic*, Douglas E. Winter's 2001 authorized Barker-bio). I don't much like the films, to be honest, but that's neither here nor there so far as this review is concerned. *The Hellbound Heart* held me spellbound, by the way. Frank, the obsessive central character opens a Chinese puzzle box that sends him through a doorway to Hell – but not as we know it, Dante.

Which segues neatly into the 'teaser' Prologue, in which the world's first consulting detective is shown in the act of opening just such a box . . .

The long first part is narrated by Doctor John H. Watson, who channels the automatic-writing skills of Paul Kane. And a very enjoyable Sherlockian 'primer' it is, too. Watson sets the initial scene: Holmes has been approached to solve a combined locked-room and missing-persons case. The first of many, as it turns out. Part Two is told from the loftier viewpoint of Holmes, who conducts an undercover operation in 'Fu Manchu' Limehouse. The plot duly thickens, with the Order of the Gash, the Lament Configuration, the Engineer, and the Devil knows what all else. But then Holmes falls victim to the dreaded AWITH

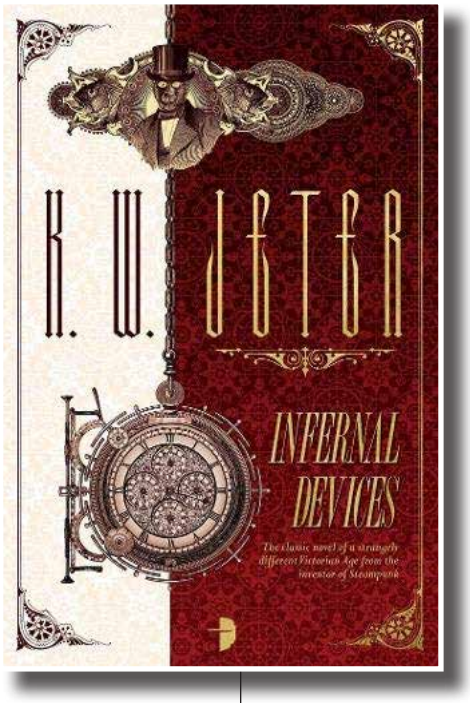


– author wants it to happen – effect. He partakes of potentially drugged food and drink in the arrogant assumption that it has no real chance of affecting him. Kane wants Holmes to be captured, just then, so simple common sense goes right out the window.

Watson does much the same thing in Part Three, in which he shares the narrative duties with the gadabout Holmes. Ordered by Holmes not to visit a certain 'sanatorium' near Paris, Watson does just that, with predictably dire consequences. Just as well for Holmes, however, so AWITH pays off yet again. After that, it's a straight satanic bundle down – presumably – in Hell, with all the pain-porn you can take and then a whole lot more. The evil Engineer is revealed to be . . . "Aargh!"

Paul Kane is admirably qualified to combine the Sherlockian and Barkerian Mythoses (sic). His fine Holmesian stories include 'The Case of the Lost Soul' (*The Mammoth Book of Sherlock Holmes Abroad*). Kane has been called "the resident *Hellraiser* expert" by Clive Barker himself. Peter Atkins, who scripted *Hellraisers* II-IV, refers to him as "the world's leading expert on the *Hellraiser* films and their mythology." As if all that wasn't enough, he has also designed his very own puzzle box – The Scribe Configuration.

***Infernal Devices* by KW Jeter**
(Angry Robot, 2017)
Reviewed by Kate Onyett



There is something very 'fishy' about Jeter's London. It's a heady brew of thick fogs, cackling rascals, clockwork marvels and questionable aristocrats, with more than a whiff of Lovecraftian sea-dwelling mysteries bubbling under the surface of things...

Dower, first-person hero, has inherited his brilliant father's watchmaker shop, clockwork leftovers, and mysterious past. After agreeing to repair one of his father's more obscure mechanisms, innocent Dower is thrown into a whirlwind escapade, his quiet, boring life suddenly turned upside down by mad lords, double agents, hucksters, religious fanatics and quite possibly the end of the world. The terribly staid Dower is going to have an adventure of a lifetime! If he can just manage to survive it, that is. From London to the Fens to Scotland and back again, Dower finds himself a participant in a secret society's mad experiments, the focus for a rather violent moral crusade and the would-be saviour of a near-extinct aquatic race. And all because his dad kept him in the dark as to what he was really up to.

Jeter is on record for thinking that 'steampunk' writing was a sub-genre of not taking things too seriously, of having a joke. Frankly, a sub-genre that can talk straight-faced about clockwork men and steam-powered space ships is a sub-genre that is definitely having a laugh up its sleeve. It semi-parodies modern technology and Boys' Own adventuring with its gung-ho action and anachronistic meta-tech. If proof of the playful possibilities of steampunk is needed, two of the characters speak in broad modern Bronx jargon, because they used a device that enabled them to see into the future and became heavily influenced by what they saw there.

Jeter's best joke is writ large across Dower's nerdy psychology, bless him. For starters, Dower is not heroic. He fumbles things, he discovers things too late and he runs away. Dower's voice is one of gentlemanly bewilderment and it is only by overcoming his very proper, prudish Victorian sentiment that will save the world. There is something delightfully, satirically, ironic about the most normal, least-excitable man in the book being the key to starting a doomsday device – and then having to have sex to stop it. All of this is pure 'punk', playing merry heck with the familiar tropes of a bygone era.

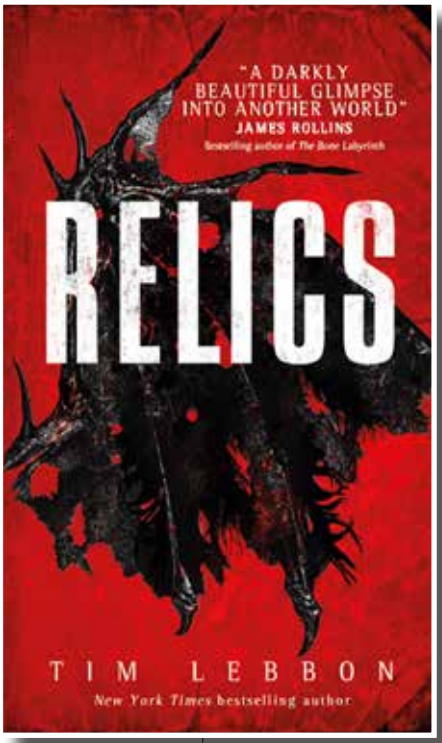
Naturally, this brings us to sex. No, nothing too hokey-pokey (Please! Downer is British!), and a discreet veil is cast over the only definite sex scene. But, along with the ludicrous plot, sex in this alt-history fantasy is funny. Mostly this is due to Dower doing all he can to fend off enthusiastic female advances. The younger women all seem to be dead set on getting into his knickers (although one of them thought he was actually a mechanical man – a sort of walking, talking, sex toy, perhaps?). This might seem sexist: women as being unable to think of anything else. But the women are also about the most feisty, most action-packed characters. Jeter cannot, at least, be accused of blind chauvinism, as he doles out character flaws equally among the men: line up, chaps; the barking mad, the criminal, the deluded and the bigoted.

The wordy, slightly prim detailing in the writing delivers like an affectionate pastiche of formal Victorian style (that satirical, playful steam-punk-ish-ness again) that is easy to read and exciting to follow. First published in 1987 and widely hailed as the first steampunk novel, it has the added chops of coming from the author who actually coined the term; prophesying that 'Victorian fantasies' would become popular. As the grand-pappy of a whole sub-genre, it still whups younger, more seriously self-absorbed pups in the same narrative vein, because, above all, it remains true to its author's intention: it is does *not* take itself seriously, it is splendidly impossible, and so it is, above all, so much *fun*!

***Relics* by Tim Lebbon**
(Titan Books, 2017)
Reviewed by Kate Onyett

Angela and Vince live in London in a cosy, middle-class world of happy coupledom. They share a tiny, comfy flat, intelligent friends, playful text messages and dining out. A partnership of some years standing, Vince works in commercial property sales while Angela finishes her criminology PhD. Then one day, Vince does not come home. Increasingly convinced that this is not simply a case of being brutally dumped, Angela

starts to follow what leads she has and opens up a very strange can of worms. Vince was in sales, all right, but in a dark, hidden market of magical 'relics'; the body parts of long, long dead mythical beings. Hounded and helped in turns by two lethal underground crime bosses, Angela stumbles on towards finding Vince and discovers a bigger truth. The mythical beings never truly died out, and the market for their *live* flesh is considerably more violent and mind-boggling. The beings, however, are becoming sick and tired of being victims and hiding to survive. They are biting back.



With strong overtones of Gaiman's *Neverwhere*, Butcher's *Dresden Files* and pretty much any supernatural King novel you can name, served up with lashings of popular crime-thriller styling, *Relics* is an exciting, energetic ride into a London underbelly supernaturally different from conventional pulp writing. And pulp writing it is; fast, page-turning and with character types that could slip into pretty much any thriller for sale in an airport book seller. I mean no disrespect by this; pacey, exciting writing has a huge market, and done well, as this is, it has a huge appeal. Crossing genres is a dime-a-dozen trick, but only a few authors get the balance right and create a satisfying confection. Lebbon manages it by focusing on just a few key characters, keeping extraneous detail to a minimum, and, above all, keeping it hustling along.

Just as *24* used a time limit to keep the action up, and the threat of violence against those loved by the heroes as the incentive to keep them – and us – on our toes, so *Relics* begins with a specific timeframe at the very start – 'five days ago' and promises a finale soaked in blood and layered with bodies. A little dip into Kay's biography reveals this is no surprise; he has produced novelizations of Hollywood films and also worked within some very familiar horror franchises (*Aliens*, *Predator*, *Star Wars*). Lebbon is used to working with an eye to the visual frame, and he is unafraid to bring the splatter, in buckets. The prehistoric 'Time' when his eerie creatures, the Kin, roamed free and somewhat lorded it over humans cowering in their primitive state, was centuries ago, and now the Kin are the hunted. Lebbon has a very levelling vision of the legendary; just because they are old and amazing to look at does not make them any better or worse than humans.

Some very familiar filmic action tropes (gods bless the 1980s!) are easily recognised: the blatant sexual interest (here, supernaturally excused), the ability of heroic characters to take multiple hits without succumbing to raging internal damage, a butt-load of gun-action, psychotic hench-persons and the sacrosanctity of true love. Again, given Lebbon's filmic work this is no surprise, and gives it a very comfortable familiarity to anchor itself by.

While there is strictly nothing new here, the constituent parts are sewn up tighter than the sub-clauses on a legal contract. If you want a supernatural thriller, you got one, no question. It is not going to set the world of speculative fiction on fire; other stories have broached more expansively on the magical hiding in plain sight, and humans vs. the bizarre, but *Relics* does exactly what it means to, solidly and expertly. Casting a levelling eye at the awesome, Lebbon has successfully managed to blend popular elements into a bouncing action flick for the reading public.

Hekla's Children by James Brogden (Titan Books, 2017)

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

In what could be taken as a fairly standard horror trope, a teacher takes four students on a hike as a part of the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. While he is distracted, the students all disappear. One returns shortly afterwards, in a very bad state, hungry and confused, and with no memory of where she has been. The teacher, Nathan, although cleared of any charges for their disappearance, finds his teaching career is effectively at an end. When, several years later, a body is found in the same woodlands, he is making his living as an outward-bounds instructor. The body is determined to be of ancient origin, but there are things about it that simply do not make sense. Although the bones are dated from the bronze age, one of the legs has marks that tie in with the modern medical treatment received by one of the missing children. It is quite early in the investigation that the palaeontologist brought in

to examine the remains starts to get somewhat blunt messages to put the body back where it was found.

Nathan's own investigations suggest to him that the children somehow crossed into a semi-mythical realm called Un. The body is most likely that of the a legendary being known locally as Bark Foot. The implication is that Bark Foot was created a very long time ago to guard the interface between the real world, and that of Un, to prevent the escape of the *afaugh*, a sort of inchoate, yet sentient evil. The *afaugh* getting into the real world would be very bad indeed. This is an ancient power held out of the real world by a mythical being.

Un is a fascinating construction and manages to become more interesting through the course of the book. Particularly in the lengthy section in which Nathan moves through Un, ostensibly in search of.., well I'm not sure that Nathan is actually clear about what it is he's looking for. The weakened Bark Foot, the missing children, the *afaugh* itself? It's also probable that in some way he's searching for himself and to somehow redeem himself and his life. This is reflected by the way he also comes back into contact with his girlfriend from the time of the disappearance, much to the chagrin of her and her current partner. It becomes clear that Un is extensive and populated by a number of different groups and peoples, from various different times, although much of this is only implied.

The fate of the children was determined by their response to Un, whether they found it an attractive and redemptive place where they might hold a greater power than they otherwise would have, or a place to be feared and removed from, or possibly somewhere they can retreat to, as they hide their presence in the real world. The motives of the remaining children are all very different, but somehow choosing to simply return to their previous lives never felt like a viable option for any of them. Obviously, the discovery of the body uncovers deep wounds in the families the children left behind.

All of this is with the presence of the *afaugh* sitting strongly in the background, that presence having an almost tangible feel to it. The novel climaxes, as would be expected, with its escape into the real world. Any questions about whether or not all this was taking place in Nathan's head are laid to rest at this point. Although he is clearly a key figure providing the link between events in Un and back in the real world, what is horrifying is the way it displays that his actions, or lack thereof, have dreadful implications for the people around him.

This is a startling novel, engrossing and horrific in equal measure, and the plot never quite seems to go where you are expecting it to. Its epilogue manages to be life affirming, yet heart-breaking.

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