ISSUE 9
SPRING 2020

THE BSFA REVIEW

EDITED BY SUSAN OKE

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/ REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

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/ VIEW FROM THE EDITOR

Happy New Year!

Welcome to the first edition of the ***BSFA Review*** in the new decade. Hope January 2020 is treating you well so far. I reckon we can look forward to year, and possibly a decade, of significant change. As my son-in-law is fond of saying: change is the only constant. Irritating, but unfortunately true. So, what challenges and opportunities are coming your way?

For me it's a change of location. By the time you read this I will be settled back in my hometown of Hull, in Yorkshire. I came to London in 2002 and have spent nearly eighteen years enjoying and benefiting from all the cultural and very writerly sff groups and events on offer. I have gained so much, made wonderful new friends and formed real attachments to the place.

But it's time. The trick is when to recognise that. Right now, I'm surrounded by boxes and ever-expanding To-Do lists. Not fun. You know what they say, moving house is right up there on the list of most-stressful events in your life. True enough. It's not the first time, but I'm sure hoping it's the last. I'm sure you all have harrowing tales of your own!

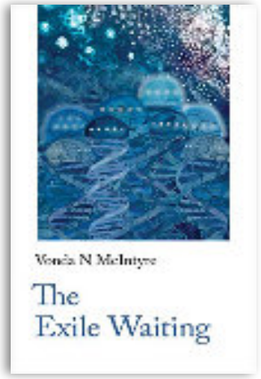
2020 is going to be different, that's for sure. But different doesn't necessarily equate to bad. I've decided that, for me, 2020 is going to be great. A time of new opportunities, expanding horizons, that sort of thing. Positive re-framing is a lifesaver. Let's grab 2020 by the scruff of the neck and make it work for us.

Enjoy reading through the book reviews written by our ever-dedicated team of Reviewers. As always, feel free to let us know how we can improve what we offer to members. In particular, I'm interested in your opinions of the e-format and whether it would be worth the extra cost of shifting back to print. Let us know what you think.

Ah, I spy yet another half-full box that is crying out for more stuff to be shoved in. This is me, signing off…

Sue Oke

The Exile Waiting by Vonda N. McIntyre (Handheld Press, 2016) Reviewed by Nick Hubble



Handheld Press originally intended to bring out this edition in 2020 for the 45th anniversary of the original publication but production was brought forward when Vonda McIntyre was diagnosed with a terminal condition. Unfortunately, she never got to hold this handsome volume before passing away in April 2019. The inclusion of an excellent and detailed afterword by Una McCormack, as well as a list of McIntyre's writings and helpful suggestions for further reading, make this an invaluable memorial. Also included is a fascinating short story, 'Cages', appearing in print for the first time since 1972, which details the origins of the 'pseudosibs', Subone and Subtwo, whose unexpected arrival from space drives the action of the novel.

The Exile Waiting, McIntyre's first novel, is set on the same world as her better-known *Dreamsnake* (1978) and like that book is predicated on values of individual agency, responsibility and consent that speak directly to the intersectional politics of the twenty-first century. For example, a conversation between protagonists Mischa, a streetwise 'sneakthief' who lives in the domed city of Center, and Jan, an offworld traveller who arrives with the pseudosibs, goes as follows:

'You talk like nothing was ever anybody's fault.'

'I don't think it is, the way you mean it. Not when another person can make decisions too.'

The logic of this is essentially anarchist: that one is responsible for one's own choices and actions and can't indirectly blame others by saying 'it's not my fault'. However, while arguably this kind of 1960s counter-cultural value eventually collapsed into selfish 1980s neoliberal individualism, Jan's point is not so much that one is entitled to ignore others in need because they've made their choices and they should live by them, but rather that if you decide to help someone, it's a choice that you have made and you can't then ascribe anything that happens as a result to the fault of the person you are helping. The overall result of following such values is a very different set of interactions and relationships than the hierarchical ones found in Western societies or Mischa's native Center, where freedom is normally understood purely in the negative sense of people not being forced to do anything against their will. Jan's offworld values implicitly suggest a different, more utopian form of freedom which can only be expressed positively through fully mutual interaction with the other, where both parties accept responsibility for themselves.

This sounds dry and theoretical when described in the abstract, but the subtlety of McIntyre's writing lies in the way in which she weaves this theme into both the action of the novel and the personal relationships of her characters. Mischa, Jan and Subtwo all have to extricate themselves from unsatisfactory mutual bonds in order to try and build more positive relationships with others in the context of the hierarchical slave-owning society of Center. Their personal experiences of the power exchange involved in mutual relationships intersect with their roles in the wider power struggle for control of Center. However, McIntyre avoids the main pitfall of novels of revolution by refusing to subordinate personal development to the achievement of the desired social change. As Fredric Jameson points out in a 1987 article on *The Exile Waiting*, collected in his *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), McIntyre not only illustrates some of the ways in which genre writing can generate characterisation as complex as any high literary novel, but she also solves SF's structural problem with closure. The need of novels for formal resolution sits at odds with SF's desire to boldly go beyond closed thinking and social constraints. McIntyre transcends this problem by relating personal development to spatial experience. Her reformulation of the relationship between personal subjectivity and social intersubjectivity into an interplay between inside and outside, scales up from Mischa hiding in a cave from the people of Center, to her looking down on the planet from a departing spaceship. *The Exile Waiting* is not a linear narrative with a beginning, middle and happy-ever-after ending, but an imaginative illustration of how an exploration of individual and social possibility without limits would proceed.

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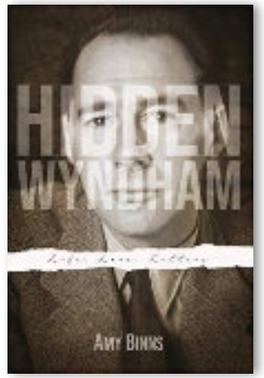
Hidden Wyndham: Life, Love, Letters by Amy Binns (Grace Judson Press, 2019) Reviewed by Andy Sawyer



To set things in context, much of the author's research for this book was done with the John Wyndham Archive (University of Liverpool Library) for which, up until just over a year ago, I was responsible. I did exchange a few emails with Amy Binns on tangential matters, but to the best of my recollection very much after the bulk of her work was done.

As the subtitle suggests, Binns' gripping biography is very much built around Wyndham's relationship with Grace Wilson, a fellow-resident at the Penn Club in London with whom he began a relationship in 1935 and whom he eventually married in 1963; and in particular around the some 350 letters written by him to her between 1939 and 1945. These letters, extracts from a very few of which are quoted by Binns, are a fascinating record of the war years and of an intimate relationship. From them, the writer "John Wyndham" (then, of course simply "Jack", and known to sf fans as "John Beynon" or "John Beynon Harris") emerges trying to work out his responses to the unreality of wartime and his emotional needs focussed upon Grace, his "Sweet" or "Sweetling". What we do not have are Grace's letters to Wyndham, so we are very much seeing a one-sided relationship. Furthermore, as the title suggests, Wyndham was not a man to reveal all of his life to all of his friends. The title of the BBC documentary about him, "The Invisible Man of Science Fiction" is perhaps exaggerated, but not by much. Reminiscences quoted by Binns show that he made a concerted effort to separate "John Wyndham", the reserved writer who would be seen at the White Horse and the Globe with the London sf circle from "Jack" Harris. "We didn't know Grace existed," says Sam Youd ("John Christopher"): "I had no idea he had a girlfriend," writes Arthur C. Clarke.

Binns suggests that this compartmentalisation came at least in part from Wyndham's early background. His parents separated to a salacious newspaper scandal, which, she argues, caused him and his brother Vivian to distrust the institution of marriage. Life at a series of emotionally-damaging schools (she cites an unpublished story, "Lesson" as a harrowing example of a young boy carving out a survival strategy) and finally the welcoming and nurturing but not altogether healthy "progressive" school Bedales prepared Wyndham for an adulthood scrabbling for suitable work and living an institutional life at the Penn Club. (Ironically, all this stood him in good stead when he was finally called up for the army.) But Grace also lived a "separate" life. As a teacher, and later a head-teacher, she would have been affected (at least until 1944 and the Education Act that outlawed the process) by the "marriage bar" in the profession, by which female teachers who married were expected to leave the profession. Her career would also have been affected by any whiff of scandal arising from a relationship *outside* the institution of marriage. And (anecdotally) she seems to have rather distrusted the science fiction world and got on badly with his friends from Bedales.

From this material, Binns constructs a highly readable and detailed picture of Wyndham and his relationship with a woman who (she argues) was the model of his strong female characters and the source of the proto-feminism we see in, for instance, *The Day of the Triffids*, *The Kraken Wakes*, "Consider Her Ways", and *Trouble With Lichen*. It is strongly recommended for any Wyndham fan. What we do not have, and this is inevitable, is Grace's own voice. (There are extracts from a few of her diaries, now in the possession of David Ketterer, but that is not quite the same thing.)

The book begins rather oddly with a highly coloured fictionalised scene from Wyndham's childhood based (we eventually discover from a later reference) from a single sentence in his brother's unfinished account of their childhood. And there is another, equally coloured entry into the mind of Jack, 12th June 1949 in the Penn Club, Grace asleep on his bed as he meditates on Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and his own possible literary direction. These are interesting fictions but draw attention to the fact that *any* biographical account of Wyndham is likely, given his "invisibility", to be in some measure a *story*. The story is created through Wyndham's letters (which it would be splendid to see published as a collection) rather than his fiction or the critical/reader reception of it, although the pictures of women (almost all more competent than their male equivalents) in his novels and stories are mined for evidence. Occasionally, there are gaps. The enthusiastic reception of "John Beynon Harris" in Walter Gillings' *Scientifiction* (1937) is overlooked. True, Gillings' title "He's Converting the Masses!" is almost comically overblown, but even here we have a sense of diffidence and withdrawal coming out of the conversation. Similarly a reference to the way "[e]xperienced science fiction critics disapproved of the way Jack had set up two initial premises" could have usefully pointed to an example or two (such as the way Groff Conklin calls *Triffids* simply "a good run-of-the-mill affair" in his *Galaxy* (August 1951) review column).

But *those* criticisms are essentially quibbles (though for the non-scholarly reader the omission of a secondary bibliography to back up the otherwise useful notes to each chapter is perhaps a greater lack). There's much to think about in *Hidden Wyndham*, and it sheds a lot of light upon a man who is, ironically and unfairly, also hidden from most accounts of major British novelists of the 1950s.

Gross Ideas: Tales of Tomorrow's Architecture
Edited by E Attlee, P Harper and M Smith
(The Architecture Foundation / Oslo Architecture Triennale, 2019)
Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

It is a genre fiction tradition that anthologies should come with an overt thesis, philosophy or theme. This makes it easier for the editor, giving them something to hang their commissions upon, and for the reviewer, giving them something to measure the book against. From this perspective, Phineas Harper's brief introduction to *Gross Ideas* is egregiously vague. After some *non sequiturs* about Asimov and robots, and drive-by mentions of Dick and Le Guin, Harper concludes that "we hope this book explores what makes a society" – which, to be clear, is a fine objective, but also arguably something of a low bar for literature in general, and sf in particular.

To be fair, Harper is not an anthologist but the alarmingly youthful deputy director of the Architecture Foundation, and curator of the 2019 Oslo Architectural Triennale, for which *Gross Ideas* is a sort of commemorative deliverable or intervention. So he might be forgiven for not framing his anthology as clearly as curmudgeonly critics might expect, though taken alongside the mixed bag of production values (in short: ambitious typography and internal design, and a nigh-complete lack of copyediting or proofing), it's enough to make me saddle my quality-control hobby-horse. I mean, *come on*: if fiction writers and editors got together to build a tower-block, you can be damned sure that the neighbourhood architects would snark about its misaligned walls and leaky basement. It frustrates me that fiction attracts this sort of good-enough dilettantism from academics in other disciplines and dents the pleasure in seeing sf speculation finally getting its due as something beyond mere entertainment.

That aside, the issue with Harper's intro is that it doesn't mention degrowth, which was the thematic topic of the Triennale, and thus of the anthology. The stories make a little more sense when seen in that light, though the partisans of degrowthist theory are unlikely to make *Gross Ideas* part of their canon any time soon, given its most degrowthy tales tend toward the dystopic.

Its most utopian tales, curiously, come from non-writers and as such they're rather clunky, their fictionality so obviously a vehicle for exploring the author's preferred future that you wish they'd just written a manifesto. Edward Davey's "Oli Away" and Robin Nicholson's "Growing the New Life" are admirable futures, but dreadful literature; structural engineer Steve Webb's "Aqueduct", however, has a formal ambition that almost distracts from the implausibility of its overconcretised metaphor.

The TOC's biggest names do what we've come to expect them to: Cory Doctorow does a zippy kid's-POV future where the present moment is a retro theme-park of material excess for Californian youngsters raised on virtuality and disposable printed garments, while Will Self shamelessly takes Calvino's *Invisible Cities* as a template which becomes more Selfish with each iteration. The biggest name you've never heard of would be architects turned graphic novelists Mill & Jones, creators of the ground-breaking *Square Eyes*, whose "Exile's Letter" (a graphic novelette, maybe?) is the most emotionally affecting piece in this book.

There's a fair few fables and satires in the mix, some of which are rather tangential. Deepak Unnikrishnan's "Cat" is a neat little tale, for example, but an awkward fit; Joel Blackledge's "Fountainwood" is an anti-capitalist fable with an anachronistic wild-western setting, while Sophie Mackintosh's "Placation" is a darkly degrowthist *Wicker Man*. Meanwhile, Camilla Grudova's "Deliberate Ruins" is a bleakly brilliant story of decline, both personal and civilisational, while Lev Bratishenko's "You Wanted This" is a wormwood-bitter satire of top-level climate change policymaking with a hint of the Pynchon about it – two memorable stand-outs.

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There are also some ambitious failures, giving greater cause to lament the lack of editorial influence. With Rachel Armstrong's "Bittersweet Building", a canny editor might have advised removing the bits at top and tail which strain to give it a moral impact, and instead lean in to the weird poetics of the biological that inform this piece and her other work. (They might also suggest that she ask DC whether they're looking for someone to re-reboot the *Swamp Thing* backstory.) With Maria Smith's "Lay Low", meanwhile, a canny editor might have taken this well-conceived but poorly executed idea about a society based on resource credits and helped knock it into shape, starting with the over-naturalistic dialogue; at the very least, they might have made it easier to follow by doing a hard edit on the punctuation.

Besides a couple of poems and a hard-to-categorise piece by Lesley Lokko (creative non-fiction?) about migrants sending remittances back home, the most singular story in *Gross Ideas* is also by far the longest, at over four times the page count of its closest competitors. I may well stand accused of home-team favouritism when I point out that this piece, "In Arms", is a multi-narrator novelette by none other than *Vector*'s own Jo Lindsay Walton, but it merits special attention for engaging most directly with the theme of degrowth. "In Arms" starts off as what seems like an awkward date at a coffee shop, but turns out to be a terrorism investigation in a world that partakes in the posthumanist tropes which I associate with Schroeder, Rosenbaum, Rajaniemi *et al*. Of course, JLW being JLW, it's stylistically unique: a demonstration of how naturalistic dialogue gets done right, for starters, and threaded through with breezy breachings of the fictional fourth wall. It may be too didactic for some short fiction fans, but of all the fictions in a book supposedly aimed at critiquing degrowth theory, JLW's is the one that most ambitiously combines the intellectual and the aesthetic concerns in a harmonious whole. It may dismiss degrowth as a label, but it takes the concepts behind the label somewhere else entirely, and if there's any good reason to use the sf toolkit for this sort of work, then that is surely it.

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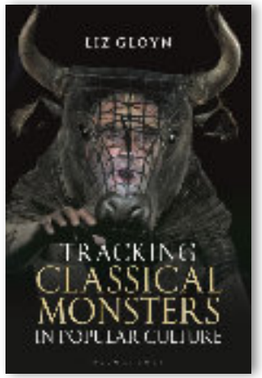
Tracking Classical Monsters in Popular Culture
by Liz Gloyn
(Bloomsbury, 2020)
Reviewed by Graham Andrews



Liz Gloyn is Senior Lecturer in Classics at Royal Holloway, University of London, whose academic publications include *The Ethics of the Family in Seneca* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). However: "[*Tracking Classical Monsters in Popular Culture*] belongs to a strand of classics known as 'classical reception studies', which asks what happens to the cultures of classical Greece and Rome in the post-classical world. I take as my focus Anglo-American popular culture from the 1950s to the present, with a particular interest in what has been produced on film, on television and in literature. I am also interested in monsters" (Introduction). It could have been subtitled *A Beginner's Guide to Basic Monster Theory* – a branch of cross-disciplinary studies previously unknown to me.

But I can claim personal experience of the subject, having spent my impressionable preteen years in the 1950s and early 1960s. Ancient Greek, Roman, Scandinavian, and Arabian monsters featured in comic books, Professor E. V. Rieu's Penguin Books translation of *The Odyssey*, Ray Harryhausen's stop-motion-picture extravaganzas (*The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad*, *Jason and the Argonauts*), and many Italian sword-and-sandal mini-epics that usually starred Steve Reeves (*Hercules, Thief of Baghdad*, etc.) Nor did I neglect the more 'literary' side of monster things. A BBC radio adaptation of *The King Must Die*, by Mary Renault, led me to search out and enjoy the source novel and its sequel, *The Bull from the Sea*.

It's a daunting task for me to catch anything like the full complexity and encyclopaedic erudition of Gloyn's book, but I'm honour bound to give it a go. The chapter headings alone will give you some idea about what to expect: What Makes a Monster? ["There are various ways of thinking about the monstrous in general and the behaviour of individual monsters in particular"]; Classical Monsters and Where to Find Them; Monsters on Film in the Harryhausen Era; Monsters and Imagination: The Modern Peplum [*Gladiator*, *Troy*, etc.); Monsters and Mythologies in *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*; Tripping the Telefantastic in *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Doctor Who* [e.g. the Minotaur and the Medusa in *The Mind Robber* episode, from 1968]; Thoroughly Modern Medusa; Lost in the Minotaur's Maze. The Sirens Still Sing [Epilogue].

I enjoyed the close cine-textual analysis of the Coen Brother's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000). (It rekindled my memories of the 1954 Italian peplum, *Ulysses*, with Kirk Douglas playing the title role.) However, Gloyn pays particular attention to the Minotaur and Medusa myths, not only in the chapters allotted to them but throughout the rest of the book. After reading the Renault novels, I turned to the *The Bull of Minos*, by Leonard Cotterell, the Pan paperback edition is with me to this day. There is also *The Reign of Wizardry* (*Unknown* magazine serial, 1940: Lancer Books, 1964), Jack Williamson's more robust take on the Theseus/Ariadne story. Just saying. Perseus vs. Medusa is one of the great mythological showdowns, done well in the original *Clash of the Titans* (1981) and not nearly so well in the CGI-heavy remake (2010). Hammer's *The Gorgon* (1964) is also not to be despised. William Tenn made great play with a modern day character named Percy S. Yuss in his novella 'Medusa Was a Lady' (*Fantastic Adventures*, October 1951: Belmont, 1968, as *A Lamp for Medusa*), who finds himself transported to ancient Greece and 'A Meeting with Medusa' (Arthur C. Clarke short story, also referenced by Gloyn).

Percy S. Yuss might serve to represent Gloyn's attitude to the conventional heroic mode of monster theory in practice: "Above all, this book has wanted to show that there is another way of doing things. We can be tired of heroes. We *can* turn to the monsters. And, in doing so, we can learn about another significant way in which classical culture continues to interface with the evolving forms and ideas of modern society."

Tracking Classical Monsters is a cracking good scholarly read.

Bridge 108 by Anne Charnock (Published by 47North, 2020) Reviewed by David Lascelles

You can tell that this book is going to be dystopian SF by the cover. The publishers have opted for a design for this first edition that recalls classic covers of books such as *Fahrenheit 451* or *1984* and the story within does not disappoint in this regard. This is a modern dystopia, however. One that is bred in a post-Brexit, post global warming environment of the late 21st century.

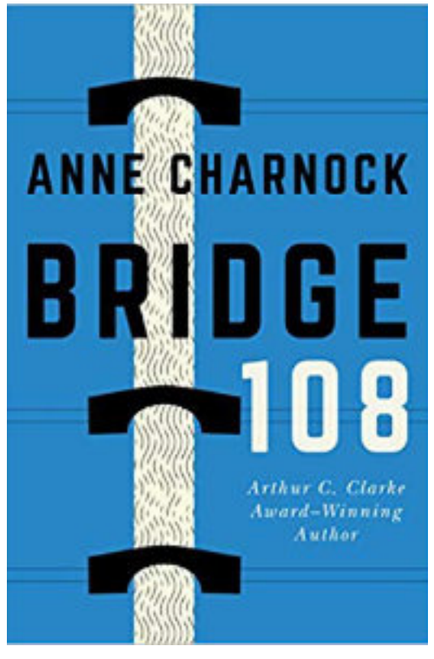
The story introduces us to Caleb, a boy from Spain who was travelling across Europe in a refugee train with his mother on a hunt for his father who left home to find a better life for them. Through a series of events told in flashback, Caleb ends up trafficked to an enclave outside Manchester where he is working for a gang of recyclers making clothing for sale on a market stall. From there we follow his story through the systems that are in place in this future Britain.

Told entirely in first person, through the point of view of numerous characters, *Bridge 108* delves deep into the motivations and feelings of the protagonists. Which is something to consider when reading, as this is a character driven rather than plot driven narrative. The main plot drive, that of Caleb's need to find his family and somewhere to call home, is secondary to both the tour of the characters' minds and the ways in which Britain has changed due to the climate and economic pressures. If you are expecting a British version of the *Hunger Games*, you will be disappointed, but you will find a solid piece of world building and a number of characters who are fascinating to get inside the head of.

Speaking as a Manchester local, I was interested to see how my home city fares in the latter half of the 21st century. This is especially the case as Manchester has been somewhat neglected in SFF, despite being a rich setting with a fascinating history that should be explored in more detail. In this, I did feel a little disappointed. Most of the Manchester action takes place in the enclave, which is described as a rather generic place based on something like US gridlines, and about the only reference to a Manchester landmark is a mention of the Emmeline Pankhurst statue. The same goes for the locations in Merseyside that appear later in the narrative. However, there are some excellent descriptions of the canals and the countryside around the enclave and, if I am being honest, the story is served better by showcasing the fact that one thing the combination of global warming and immigration has caused is the need for whole communities of rapidly built skyrises to accommodate the population.

Overall, this is an enjoyable story and one worth exploring. It tells a very strong message of the potential consequences of allowing global warming to continue as it is. The world that Charnock builds for us is realistic and frighteningly possible in the current political and social environment. The idea of Recycling gangs in the enclaves, ruling over a bin collection patch with an iron fist, or the existence of vineyards near Liverpool – the ultimate hint that the climate has changed – all show that we are no longer looking at the world of today. Even the few high-tech advancements that are hinted at – the idea of needing to be 'chipped' in order to get a job as anything other than a manual labourer, for example – are very plausible extensions of current technology and therefore have veracity.

Worth a read if you like dystopian fiction.



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What Not: A Prophetic Comedy by Rose Macaulay (Handheld Press, 2019) Reviewed by Nick Hubble

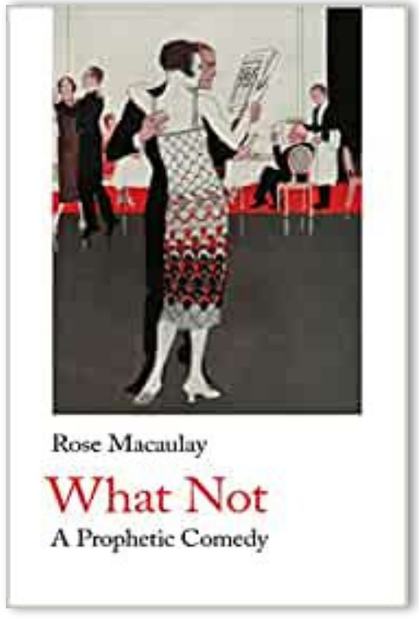
Originally published in 1918, Rose Macaulay's speculative satire, *What Not: A Prophetic Comedy*, extrapolates from the wartime state's unprecedented intrusion into private life – conscription, censorship, food rationing – to imagine a Ministry of Brains committed to raising public intelligence through various measures such as the 'Mental Progress Act', the introduction of a 'Mind Training Course' and, more sinisterly, stipulating who may marry who according to an A-C intelligence classification. Babies born according to the regulations gain their parents financial bonuses, but unregulated infants are taxed on a sliding scale 'so that the offspring of parents of very low mental calibre brought with them financial ruin'.

As Sarah Lonsdale points out in her helpful introduction to the novel, there are clear points of comparison with better known works of utopia and dystopia. Like William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), *What Not* begins in a carriage on the London underground. More significantly, Macaulay moved in the same circles as Aldous Huxley and it is difficult to imagine that her work was not in some way an influence on *Brave New World* (1932), which might be seen in Lonsdale's words 'as the world of *What Not* some few decades into the future'. Finally, the novel also anticipates George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), in its story of one clerk's revolt against the system in the name of love.

Macaulay's protagonist is Kitty Grammont, introduced to us as a woman who takes both the *New Statesman* and the *Tatler*: 'She was partial to both, which was characteristic of her attitude towards life'. This attitude of seeking to have her cake and eat it corresponds to the general sense conveyed by the novel – people's experience of the war having overturned all sorts of time-honoured and apparently stable social norms – of nervous, reckless times in which people are determined to make the best of whatever they can get and live life to the full. However, what makes Kitty stand out from the crowd of female clerks, whose culture is nicely evoked, is her determination 'to defeat a foolish universe with its own weapons'. Her romance and secret marriage to Nicholas Chester, the Minister of Brains – who is forbidden to marry by his own laws due to the mental deficiency of his siblings – is played out as a scathing comedy rather than the tragedy it might be in a lesser work.

The relentless cynical wit means that the novel remains, as Lonsdale suggests, an ambiguous and 'sometimes slippery book to grasp hold of'. On the one hand, Macaulay clearly does not endorse the eugenics programme of the Ministry, which unsurprisingly leads to many abandoned babies turning up on doorsteps around the country. On the other hand, *What Not* is not a straightforward dystopian warning or 'protest against social engineering' as the back-cover blurb suggests. One of the most heart-felt passages in the novel is Chester's bitter complaint at the stupidity of a society that fails to educate people and provide effective medical care. Equally in favour of social reform is this pointed narrative gloss on male audience responses to Kitty publicly talking on behalf of the Ministry: 'Rural England [. . .] was still regrettably eastern, or German, in its feminist views, even now that, since the war, so many more thousands of women were perforce independent wage-earners, and even now that they had the same political rights as men.'

Therefore, it probably makes sense to see *What Not* as a comically-resigned lament for the impossibility of evading the cruel stupidity of life without imposing a system that is even crueller and more stupid. However, there is also just the faintest suggestion in Kitty's momentary out-of-body experience, in which she realises the entire society depicted in *What Not* is no more than a 'queer little excited corner of the universe', that other worlds are possible. Overall, the novel should be recommended as more than a historical curiosity.



Wourism and other stories by Ian Whates (Luna Press, 2019) Reviewed by David Lascelles

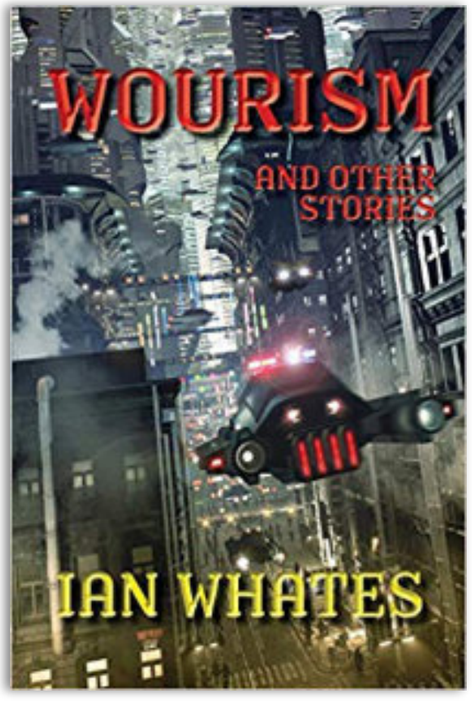
If you are an author, chances are you have a bunch of short stories lying around in various hard drives. Some of them previously published in magazines or anthologies, others that have never seen the light of day. Sometimes it can be a good idea to bring them all together and present them to the world in a new collection.

This appears to be what has happened in this collection by Ian Whates. As he describes in his introduction, it represents "virtually all my published stories from the past five years, along with two pieces I held back from previous collections due to the vague intention of including them in a mosaic novel". This means we have a broad range of work that showcases Ian's talent and understanding of science fiction as a genre.

The collection kicks off with the title story 'Wourism', this was helpful to me as I was somewhat baffled by the title and the story does ably convey the meaning. Wourism, it turns out, is tourism in a war zone. In this story, we see our protagonist doing just that and addressing the moral and ethical issues inherent in such a practise. As a title piece and the first story in the collection, this is a strong and worthy entry that makes the reader think about the issues discussed. The protagonist's sense of guilt is weighed against the cold indifference of her partner in an entertaining way.

Other stories that stand out include 'No Smoke Without Fire' and 'The Final Fable', both of which were part of shared world anthologies Ian was putting together and revolve around a group of people who regularly meet in a London pub to, as Ian says, "share anecdotes, whisper of state secrets, and conjecture about the nature of the universe." These stories, based on Clarke's 'Tales from the White Hart', present a very English form of SF literature and are reminiscent in humour and creativity of such things as the Cornetto trilogy of films (*Sean of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz* and *The World's End*) in that they present ordinary people encountering the extra-ordinary. There is also the entertaining 'Sane Day', which explores an alien culture in a way that is interesting and accessible and looks critically at coming-of-age rituals, and the experimental 'A Triptych for Tomorrow' which uses three linked flash fictions. However, these stories are standouts in a collection of otherwise excellent SF.

If there is a flaw in this collection it is that some of these stories don't feel like shorts but more like introductions to longer stories. Some of them are exactly that, but even those that aren't intended as such feel like they should be expanded. This can make the reader feel a little unfulfilled, they enjoyed the story and want more set in that world or using that character, but it is not physically possible for Ian to be able to make all of them into novels.



THE BSFA REVIEW #9 – Spring 2020

Arrow: A Generation of Vipers by Clay Griffith and Susan Griffith (Titan Books, 2017) Reviewed by Graham Andrews

"My name is Oliver Queen. I learned to survive in a merciless jungle for five years and found my way home. But until I help others survive too, I will remain in that jungle." That's what I call a catchy superhero mission statement.

Digression. Has anyone else noticed how many recent film/TV tie-ins have broken the 100,000-word barrier? I'm not making a value judgment, here – just saying. Digression ends.

Arrow: A Generation of Vipers is a direct follow-on sequel to *Flash: The Haunting of Barry Allen*, which I haven't read, but probably should have done before writing this review. Luckily, however, the back-cover blurb came to my rescue: "Still suffering from mysterious blurs in his powers, the Scarlet Speedster is finding Oliver Queen's rigorous training regimen hard to follow. Teams Flash and Arrow are racing to find a cure for him, but instead discover that if the glitches can't be stopped Barry {Allen} will blur out forever." It helped bring me up to – well – speed.

Clay and Susan Griffith make a decent fist at easing the uninitiated reader into both the Arrow and Flash mini-verses. But then initiated readers are their primary target audience. It all depends on how many seasons of *Arrow* you've watched and how much attention you've been paying. I've only got as far as Season Three – or is it Season Five? – I don't know, for sure. This is one novel that could do with a Cast List and Glossary of Terms. I felt a bit like the character in the Fred Hoyle novel whose brain gives way under the strain of absorbing information from the eponymous Black Cloud. It comes at you thick and fast. Cisco Ramon. Wormhole generator. Caitlin Snow. S.T.A.R. Labs. Ghosi Lazarov. Felicity Smoak. John Diggle. Oliver Queen's little sister, Thea, alias Speedy. The Glades. Reverse Flash/Eobard Thawne/Harrison Wells. Ray Palmer. A.R.G.U.S. Spartan, whom I think is Roy Harper, the comic-book Speedy, but don't quote me. The virtual list goes on . . .

Green Arrow – I'm ridiculously pleased that he's been given back his full name – has always been my favourite Second Eleven DC superhero. Also, Starling City of the TV series has been replaced by the original Star City. Despite being continuously in action since 1940, the Emerald Archer has never had the dignity of having his own magazine, being shuttled around between *Adventure Comics* and *World's Finest*. Even the Justice League snubbed him for a while, in favour of the Martian Manhunter. In the 1970s, he was teamed up with Green Lantern in a run of 'socially relevant' stories. And now here's a new crossover with another Premier League DC character. Not that I've got anything against the Flash – far from it – but *Arrow* was a unique series with a unique hero, which should have been left alone to go its own unique way. Sorry, but I tend to be a crosspatch where crossovers are concerned.

Meanwhile, back at the plot, which doesn't really get going until Oliver, Barry & Co. fly to the *Mission Impossible*-type country of Markovia. It seems that some new Markovian wormhole technology might create a reservoir for the malignant plasma inside the Flash and then siphon it out of him "like a singularity Hoover" (see page 54 for the voodoo-science details). However, they must first run the gauntlet of assassins hired by Count Wallenstein. This vainglorious villain wears a uniform that would "look more at home on a major general in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta than any historical figure. To Wallenstein's credit he had stopped short of a monocle and riding crop" (p. 209). But appearances, as we know, can be deceptive ...

FYI. The full secret-origin story of (Green) Arrow is revealed in *Arrow: Vengeance*, by Oscar Balderrama and Lauren Certo, which is also available from Titan Books.

Skyward: Claim the Stars by Brandon Sanderson (Gollancz, 2018)
Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

Think a young adult *Top Gun* in space, with brains instead of testosterone and a plot that makes sense. Though having said that, there is much within the plot that *doesn't* make sense – and that is the idea, a challenge for readers and characters. The incongruities and contradictions pile up until a resolution is squeezed out of experiences.

Cadet Spensa Nightshade, callsign Spin, and her contemporaries are the third-generation descendants of a starship crashed on the barren planet Detritus. Their ancestors were fleeing the alien Krell (yes, Krell) for reasons now lost. Detritus is a visual treat: a ruined, shattered world with skies full of rubble and wreckage. It obviously has a past that is yet to be explored in later novels. The sheer amount of clutter in orbit usually blocks the view of the stars from the surface and offers tantalising glimpses of ruined, massive and clearly artificial structures; something exciting and terrible happened there long before the humans arrived.

The orbital debris is one reason the humans have never ventured further back than the outer atmosphere. Another is that the Krell haven't given up and still send occasional sorties down through the rubble in an apparent attempt to finish the job. The humans' one defence is their small fleet of suborbital starfighters. The Krell attacks are the reason the humans mostly live far beneath the surface in terraformed caverns.

The least of Spin's problems is that her father was a fighting hero, right up until the definitive battle that let the humans establish a surface base, when he turned coward and fled. In a society obsessed by rank and heritage, that kind of thing works against you. I guessed the partial truth for this on page 254 of a 500-page novel, but the full truth went off in a completely unexpected direction. Nothing is as it seems and Sanderson loves scattering clues for both characters and readers to work on. Even his use of terms like 'Krell' is a deliberate misdirection for the sfnally aware reader.

There are whiz-bang battles enough to satisfy anyone who rates space opera by the number of exploding ships, but the real treat lies in the interactions. There is the obligatory clash of personalities, from the stuck-in-the-mud commanding officer to the hard-but-fair instructor to the bratty cadet who thinks she knows it all. The main crucible for personality clash is the pilots. These are kids, drawn realistically by Sanderson as incubators for insecurity and nurtured grudges that hide their inherent integrity and likeability. They have no throttle on their feelings: their emotions are either full on or dead stop. Meanwhile, the commanding officer is in fact

acting out of compassion, sheltering Spin from an ever harsher reality than she has imagined; and the bratty cadet very soon works out that she doesn't know it all, at all. The first time Spin tries to fly a fighter, she is all over the place, which is much more realistic than Luke Skywalker bringing his womprat experience to bear on the Death Star. You get to be good at this game through talent honed by practice.

One quibble is not in the story but in the illustrations, though Sanderson has approved them and even thanks the artist, so it seems relevant. The fighters as depicted perpetuate the design flaw originated by *Star Wars*, with the cockpit at the rear and a massive nose cone guaranteed to give the pilot a three-metre blind spot. In a reasonably hard sf novel that gives a lot of lip service to physics, and a lot of thought to tactics with the available technology, I would have enjoyed a more serious consideration of what a starfighter with atmospheric capability and gravity control could actually look like.

But that is nit-picking. Readers who let their imagination do the visual heavy lifting will find much to enjoy.

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The Darkest of Nights by Charles Eric Maine (British Library, 2019)
Reviewed by Graham Andrews

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Tide Went Out by Charles Eric Maine (British Library, 2019)
Reviewed by Graham Andrews

I'll take this opportunity to congratulate – and thank – those good people at the British Library for their noteworthy Crime Classics reprint series (e.g. *The 12.30 from Croydon*, by Freeman Wills Croft). And now they are in the process of doing the same laudable thing with Science Fiction Classics. The 'forgotten' book under discussion here is *The Tide Went Out*, by Charles Eric Maine (1921-81). Mike Ashley, an indefatigable scholar who has everything by and knows everything about everyone worth knowing-and-even-not-knowing, contributes an Introduction that covers the main facts of Maine's literary career. But I'd just like to put in my own ten (Euro) cents worth.

During the early 1950s, at least, Maine (*né* David McIlwain) was arguably more familiar to the general British reading public than Arthur C. Clarke or John Wyndham. He'd published a fanzine, *The Satellite*, in 1938, where his early stories appeared. [ACC made CEM a semi-regular character in his *Tales from the White Hart*.] After war service in the RAF, he turned to electrical engineering and freelance journalism associated with television and radio. His first novel, *Spaceways* (1953), was based upon a successful BBC radio play. Maine once said that "most of my SF books are short-term projections from present-day fact and technology, looking, perhaps, some 10 to 50 years ahead."

The Tide Went Out suits the action to those words. It was first published by Hodder & Stoughton, London, in 1958, with an American edition from Ballantine the following year. An abridged edition appeared in *Amazing Stories* (July, 1958), as 'The Waters Under the Earth', which is even more appropriate, in my opinion. Ashley's Introduction is entitled 'The End of Humanity?' And that question mark is there for a very good reason.

Adapted from blurb to the 1960 Corgi paperback edition: The trouble with people is that nobody believes they – or the world itself – can be destroyed. But there might be ways in which the misuse of atomics could eliminate life – and you wouldn't even know it was happening. Some things, after all, are unimaginable. For instance, the world couldn't conceivably dry up. The idea's ridiculous. It just isn't possible. Until the terrifying idiocy becomes real – the monstrous reality of total destruction in all the homes of all the people who, just like anybody else, are strong and weak, funny and foolish, loving and full of hate. People who always believe the best – and who face the worst with courage they never knew they had.

Mini-plot summary. The aptly named Operation Nutcracker exploded three hydrogen bombs in the South Pacific: one at an altitude of five thousand feet, one at sea level, and the third – and deadliest – two miles beneath the ocean. These simultaneous nuclear tests cause every tide in the world to go out – permanently, deep under the Earth's crust. Far-fetched, perhaps, but it makes more scientific sense than the Awful Warning scenario in *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (film and novelization, 1961). Philip Wade, a hard-bitten features writer for the Fleet Street news magazine, *Outlook*, is the main viewpoint character. He finds out for himself, and the reader, what's what and why as the story – and the world – breaks around him. Rather like *Caught Fire*'s equally hard-bitten Peter Stenning, of the *Daily Express* (in its long-gone heyday). Maine's catastrophe novel stands the test of time very well. I enjoyed reading it all over again.

Wade does a nice line in self-deprecation: "I'm deceiving myself, he admitted. I'm not really one of the ordinary people, nor am I really one of the survival group any more . . . That was Jack Wade all over – neither one thing nor the other. The jack of all trades, master of none." But he makes goodish, in the end, though I can't be so sure about the world . . . Maine's catastrophe novel stands the test of time very well. It deserves to be better known – and maybe it will be, now.

BTW. Following the 1976 UK drought, *The Tide Went Out* was ever-so-slightly revised and retitled *Thirst!* (Sphere, 1977).

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World Engines: Destroyer by Stephen Baxter (Gollancz, 2019)
Reviewed by Stuart Carter

The last Stephen Baxter book I read, *Flood* (2008), haunted me for quite some time after I finished it: a tale of global sea-level rise that *just would not stop* seemed almost a metaphor for Baxter's fiction style of taking a big idea, throwing some science at it, then run with it – and keep running, well past where any "sensible" writer would have stopped. Baxter is your go-to writer for demonstrating that not only is *space* big but so is *time*, such that you literally "just won't believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is".

Oh, and humanity is never ever going to conquer either of them; there's manifestly no destiny waiting for us anywhere out there. So, while those same big ideas are, for me, the raison d'etre of science fiction, they're also deeply unsettling (incidentally, if you want to get a sense of the size of the Baxterian universe, play the computer game *Elite: Dangerous*, which simulates our galaxy's 200 billion stars – trying to cross that galaxy, even with faster than light travel, is a huge undertaking – and that's just a single galaxy).

World Engines: Destroyer offers only a mid-level sense of wonder for a Baxter book. The biggest piece of engineering it offers is a super-earth type planet that is propelled by 65,000 gigantic rocket engines around its equator. Your expectations may differ, but I won't even get out of bed for anything less than a Xeelee-level Kardashev type IV civilisation these days.

Fortunately, there's action on a smaller scale to enjoy in *World Engines: Destroyer*, and long-time Baxter fans may recognise some of the characters here, such as Reid Malenfant and his ex-wife Emma Stoney, from the Manifold universe books (*Time*, *Space* and *Origin*). In this version, Malenfant has been asleep for 450 years, frozen after he nearly died in an accident on STS-719 in 2019, awaiting a time when medical science could heal his injuries. *Wait a second*, I hear you say, *STS-719? In 2019? Shuttle mission numbers only reached STS-135 – and its last flight was in 2011*. Well, hold onto your hats because in Malenfant's universe his ex-wife disappeared on a mission to Phobos, one of the moons of Mars, back in 2004.

This is *not* our timeline.

Malenfant awakes on a quiet Earth, one only just beginning to recover from the devastating effects of climate change. Everyone has enough to eat and a home to live in, and no one *has* to work; but it's a meek existence, especially when we realise that humanity once explored all the planets but has now returned home, realising that people are literally not built to survive anywhere else. For Malenfant, this defeatism is only made worse when he discovers that life on Earth will be wiped out in a millennium by The Destroyer, a mysterious body approaching our Solar System. Everyone – human and AI alike – seems to have quietly accepted their destruction as inevitable.

So, why has Malenfant has been awakened now? Because a message has been received from Phobos, from his long-dead ex-wife, calling for him to come rescue her…

As much as I always enjoy a Baxter book, there are a couple of problems with *World Engines: Destroyer*. Number one is Malenfant. If you want a character to sympathise with and give a balanced account of this both utopian and dystopian future, he's not it. In fact, to be frank, he's kind of a dick and is fairly unpleasant to virtually everyone around him; how he garnered a reputation as a natural team-builder is beyond me.

Second is the story itself, which does feel a little Baxter-by-numbers. All the usual elements are here: alternative universes, revived space programs, gigantic engineering projects, mysterious (alien?) objects, etc., but it doesn't feel as though there's anything new here, simply a reorganisation and deployment of ideas and inventions from previous novels. *World Engines: Destroyer* must surely be the start of a sequence, and one which might contain some of Baxter's trademark mind-bending extrapolation and ingenuity, but nowhere is a sequel mentioned...

It's not one of his best, but even a flawed Baxter has its pleasures.

A Man of Shadows by Jeff Noon (Angry Robot, 2017) Reviewed by Kate Onyett

Ostensibly this is a mystery-detection story, with a half-broken PI-on-the-edge, searching for a missing millionaire's daughter, in a city where a faster-than-the-eye murderer is on the loose. What he actually discovers along the way is the dire underbelly of his city's soul.

Noon spins a nightmarish reality where a vast mish-mash net of electric lights, so closely packed they permit of no natural light, thickly covers a city divided in two. In this nameless metropolis people choose to live in the light or dark zones, and all fear the mysterious Dusk that lies on the borderlands between Day and Night; a netherworld of fogs, half-light and strange occurrences. This is sci-fi at its purest: presenting a vibrant playground of ideas where any number of discourses and arguments can be read; it is a wonderfully sprightly novel that stimulates discourse with its every conceit.

This divided city expresses the excesses and hyper-reality of modernity in the frenetic over-illuminated Day zone, as compared to the more reclusive Night zone. It smacks of metaphor for commercialism at its most extreme. In Day zone, a person is constantly bombarded with product advertising: stuff to keep, experiences to have, hoardings, noise and music. This is capitalism having reached an insane peak; even one's chronological routine has been commodified. Everyone can live their chosen timeline, having purchased the right to it, regardless of the time of those around them. As a result, people are frankly going bonkers from the effort of keeping up. Circadian rhythms have been punched in the gut and left weeping as these lost souls slide into a temporal madness

A juicier prospect is that Noon has written a metaphorical discussion of the human psyche across this spavined bi-luminal city. Between Day and Night zones is the area of Dusk. This place of shadows, uncertainty and lurid visions is the Id, the subconscious. The citizens' fear of the Dusk zone is a Freudian terror of the psychotic unknown. Madness lurks in every page: madness of excess, madness of broken temporal living, madness of destruction, the madness of grief, the madness of the Dusk where nothing makes sense and the drug-induced madness of the terminally high. If this city is a mind-map, it is a mind in serious trouble. In the Id, in Dusk, a revolution of apocalyptic proportions is being plotted to overthrow the rule of 'normal' Day and Night. Is this what we all truly fear? The erupting of self-destructive passions from the subconscious? Or is this a symptom of a different form of change for a mind?

The whole city-mind's psychic plight is played out in micro across the main protagonists; there is not one unbroken character in this book. There's the obligatorily battered PI on the edge of soul burn, a mentally schismed mother, a control-mania father and the confused, angry daughter. It's a grim journey to self-discovery; something that the city inhabitants seriously lack, driven by intense compulsions; like over-fired neurons. But reading the novel is to watch an examination of one of the scariest of mental challenges: the birthing pains of maturation. Only those characters who can adapt (the PI and the girl), those who have enough insight to question and seek answers have even half a chance. It might bring out the monsters from the Id closet, but development is essential to prevent destruction. Nature has been splayed sideways to allow this weird place to come into being, and the humanity of the citizens, fearfully turning away and inward, is suffering as a result.

Noon weighs in with gritty realism and violence, and then pulls you out into mysterious badlands of the spirit. He has created a world so alive, so tangible, that its questions and propositions suck you in to a vortex of delightful awfulness. He is a master writer taking you into his morbid Disneyland of a tormented growth spurt of a human psyche.

The Wrong Stars by Tim Pratt (Angry Robot, 2017) Reviewed by Stuart Carter

I like to drop in on the space opera folks every now and again, see how they're all doing. More often than not I'm disappointed, scribbling in the margins in angry red ink, "Read a goddamn physics textbook!" or "Get some imagination!" Sometimes both!

More often my beef is with how *reactionary* space opera can be, especially the stuff from the other side of the Atlantic (no, not you, Mexico; or you, Canada…) I completely understand that so much of the joy of space opera is as the "romance novel" of the sf genre: that it's supposed to be fun and silly and throwaway; in fact, that's why I still have a soft spot for it.

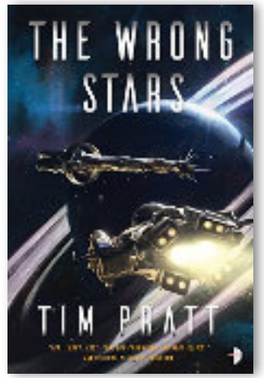
But space opera is still sf, which presupposes a certain level of invention, imagination and, of course, science. There really needs to be *something* there to stretch not just the heart, but also the mind.

Enter Mr Tim Pratt with *The Wrong Stars*, a thunderously good example of how to balance these competing demands.

It's the 28th century and the spaceship *White Raven,* working for the Trans-Neptunian Authority at the edge of the Solar System, has discovered an almost derelict 500-year-old craft, the *Anjou*, just one of many desperate sub-light attempts sent to colonise the stars when Earth seemed on the verge of collapse back in the bad old days of the 22nd century.

But this unlucky traveller didn't even make it out of our home system… Or did it? Something strange has happened to the *Anjou*; it's been modified and now looks unlike anything else the crew of the *White Raven* has ever seen before. Inside, there's just one survivor from the six-person crew, frozen in cryo-sleep; when woken she alerts the crew that the *Anjou* has made first contact. That's right - aliens!

The crew of the *White Raven* are less impressed by this than you might expect, mainly because humanity made first contact centuries earlier with a friendly but enigmatic alien race known, justifiably, as the Liars. Despite being pathological...well, *liars*, they have given humanity access to some very useful technology, including faster-than-light travel to 29 other system, where colonies are thriving. Humanity itself has gone through some changes, too. While brave and capable captain, Callie, and taciturn doctor, Stephen, are still common-or-garden human, the ship's likeable engineer, Ashok, is an enthusiastic post-human, while navigators Drake and Janice are… Well, you'll see.



If the survivor's tales of first contact don't impress the *White Raven* crew, they are at least surprised when, after reviewing the *Anjou's* onboard records, they discover the ship *did* make it out of the system and has been travelling for centuries. According to those same records, the ship crashed back into our system just a few days earlier, covering an awful lot of space in an awfully short time.

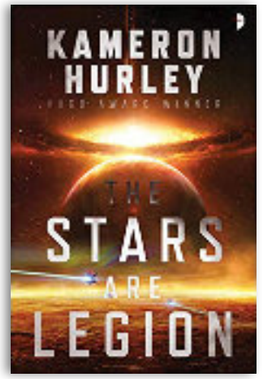
"What the hell," ask the crew, "is going on?" And well they might, for there's *lots* going on here.

Author Tim Pratt juggles action, exposition and emotion with aplomb, keeping a smart story zipping along with interesting questions and well-timed revelations, but most of all with rounded, believable characters who genuinely seem to like each other. They also don't, for the most part, do stupid stuff. When faced with a mystery (because there's plenty of mystery herein) they do what you or I might do, i.e. try not to get killed by, say, exploring dark, empty deserted corners of seemingly abandoned spaceships all by themselves.

Add in a rather sweet love story which is just as well done as the action, plus the alien Liars: pulpy, tentacled obscurantists who may or may not have something to hide, and you have a well-balanced, well-told and, as the young people say, well-*wicked* tale of inter-galactic adventure and derring-do.

It might not be great literature, but *The Wrong Stars* does exactly what it says on the tin, providing an entertaining slice of smart, action-packed space opera just dripping with humour and warmth. What more could you want?

The Stars are Legion by Kameron Hurley (Angry Robot, 2016)
Reviewed by Nick Hubble



Kameron Hurley notes in her 'Acknowledgments' that she knew this 'all-women space opera' would be a hard sell: 'science fiction without men in it? Not even a mention of men? WHAT IS THIS, 1968?!' However, following in the wake spreading out from hugely successful paradigm-changing novels such as Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* and Hurley's own *God's War*, it seems difficult to imagine any better time than 2016 for publishing an 'all-women space opera'. As might be imagined from Hurley, whose essay 'We Have Always Fought' won the 2014 Hugo for best related work, there is no shortage of violent action. Zan, the main protagonist, wakes at the beginning of the novel with no memory but soon learns that it is her role to lead doomed armies of her Katazyrna sisters against the Mokshi. The names distinguish the clans that rule giant organic world ships at the outer rim of a huge fleet known as the Legion, which is drifting through the void between the stars. It soon becomes clear to Zan that something doesn't add up and that this is bound up with the emotions of love and hate that she feels, without understanding why, for her most beautiful and enigmatic sister, Jayd. When Jayd is given in marriage to the ruler of a third clan, the Bhavaja, the scene is set for a cycle of bloody betrayal and violent retribution.

'One word will do it: badass', reads John Scalzi's back-cover blurb. But, actually, the first third of *The Stars are Legion* provides something of an object lesson in how one-dimensional 'badass' simply doesn't do it. It is very difficult to work out what is happening, who is betraying who and why we should care about either Zan or Jayd, let alone their other sisters who have no distinguishing characteristics whatsoever. Fortunately, it later becomes apparent that this set-up is deliberately intended to highlight the subsequent changes which Zan undergoes across the course of the novel as a whole. In this respect, the story follows John Clute's stages of wrongness, thinning, recognition and return and shows itself to be as much fantasy as science fiction. For lurking beneath the superficial space opera action is a more thoroughly worked-out generation starship plot – also very 2016 following the success of Adrian Tchaikovsky's *Children of Time* in the Clarke Award – which sees Zan have to traverse every layer of the rotting Katazyrna ship from the centre to the surface in her desperate quest to get back to those who have wronged her. It is the journey, of course, and the trials she overcomes and the people she meets on the way that allow her to rediscover not only her lost identity but also her humanity.

As a reading experience, *The Stars are Legion* is both relentlessly infuriating and oddly compelling. It is not entirely clear if Hurley is trapped within hackneyed genre tropes or intent on bludgeoning them beyond the point of resurrection ever again. It would be stretching the point to describe the novel as metafictional or even self-reflective but nevertheless it is difficult not to read Zan as a character desperate to breakout of the constrictive generic time loop that she is caught up in and into a different kind of story altogether. In this respect, it is particularly fascinating that the novel closes with two projected futures: one in Zan's mind, in which she envisages herself, Jayd and her new friends setting out to visit new worlds, almost like a separatist-feminist *Star Trek*, and the actual rather more ambiguous ending in which Zan and Jayd 'walk arm in arm … into our uncertain future'. This suggests that there is still a call for the 'badass' qualities which allow these women to survive radical uncertainty within that promised new society they are seeking beyond the decaying mass of the Legion. We can only hope that both they and Hurley find it.

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Lord of Secrets (2019) & *Lady of Shadows* (2020) by Breanna Teintze (Jo Fletcher Books)
Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

It's axiomatic that the second created work is harder than the first, but there is another phenomenon: when someone produces a perfectly serviceable first creation, but doesn't really hit their stride until the second, and you're left wondering whether they should have started with the second in the first place. Example: the first two novels by new writer Breanna Teintze. The first is merely good, the second much better.

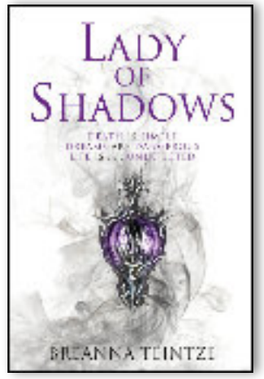
So, what do you get? First of all, Teintze deals quite handily with the question to be answered in any fantasy featuring wizards: if these people can do that, why aren't they running the world? There are three (known, so far) types of magic. In the most common and least harmful form, spells are performed by scribing them in runes, then pronouncing them. The spell might have been scribed in advance and awaiting someone to say it out loud, or the wizard might write it down – often on their own skin, to save time – and then say it. Thus, a wizard's most dangerous tool can be a grease pencil. The downside of this kind of magic is that it's toxic in every way – physically, mentally, spiritually. The runes will corrode whatever they're written on, given time, which is why very few spells are written down and a spell scribed in grease paint should be wiped off as soon as possible. Speaking the spell will then leave the speaker with at best a blinding headache, at worst a debilitating lassitude if they don't go and have a good lie-down at the right time.

Still, like toxic chemicals in our own society, this kind of magic has a place, if handled with care by professionals. Wizards (who can be male or female) must be licensed by a Guild controlled by a charter. A steady source of tension is that this charter, like many old documents written to address particular circumstances, may just have outlived its usefulness and relevance.

The other two magics – necromancy and alchemy – have access to deeper, darker powers. Thus practitioners of these types tend to be the villains of the piece. Two supposed gods – the Lord and the Lady of the two titles – started out that way. Their kind of magic is just flat-out illegal: if you meet someone practicing either form then you know they're a bad'un. They can be defeated, by enough people using 'proper' magic the proper way, or by cunning, or strength, or any combination of these, and they are still mortal with mortal limitations – so they tend not to rule the world either. Or, indeed, want to, as long as they can get what they want by other means.

Next, Teintze is happy to let sheer plot logic dictate what befalls her characters, and the result is an unpredictability and natural, unforced feel that keeps you turning the pages. *Lord of Secrets* opens in media res. Corcoran Gray, a renegade ex-member of the Guild, is on the run from the authorities. He finds the Guild to have outgrown its usefulness and, worse, it's ridden with corruption. By the end of page 1 he's met Brix, the future love of his life, who is the daughter of a tribe of people who can absorb and neutralise magical toxicity without actually using magic themselves – so, a very handy source of slaves for the less scrupulous wizards.

An adventure follows in which temples must be broken into, magic labyrinths navigated and in which Gray gets to meet the eponymous Lord of Secrets. Up to this point the setting seems very similar to any fantasy world from Leiber onwards and you're being carried along by the relationship between Gray and Brix, the mystery that is slowly unveiling itself through a strategic series of clues and answers, and Gray's sheer run of bad luck. The novel really gets going after the labyrinth scene, with the Lord of Secrets now a player in the story, an on/off ally of convenience, and not just a dead god in the background. He's an excellent villain – the kind you would almost root for if it weren't for the fact that he's evil and trying to raise his own undead army and in short needs to be stopped. This is also where twists start to emerge, and then we're hit with the kind of surprise ending that in retrospect you really should have seen coming, but the fact is, you didn't. The best kind, in other words.

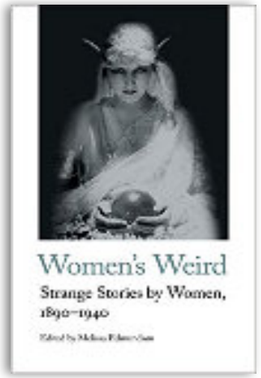


Lady of Shadows stands alone but also carries straight on from the end of the first book. The problems with which Gray began the first book have been resolved, only to be replaced by even worse ones that have emerged as a natural result of the plot and without any contrivance on the author's part. Teintze has hit her stride with more adventure, less traipsing around and a plot just as involving as before. There is also an edge of your seat, life or death magical duel of the kind *Lord of Secrets* could have had more of.

The world of the novels is the kind you get where the world isn't really the point of the story, it's just somewhere for the action to happen and you're not meant to worry about it. It's not meant to be another Middle Earth or Land or Westeros or Earthsea, which might disappoint readers who like to immerse themselves completely in the milieu, world and all.

Each book stands alone, but they are best read in sequence as a series. If the curve continues then book 3 will be very good indeed.

Women's Weird: Strange Stories by Women, 1890-1940
Edited by Melissa Edmondson
(Handheld Press, 2019)
Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller



Winter is a time for ghost stories, Christmas in particular. M.R. James, the doyen of the English ghost story, traditionally read a new story by candlelight to friends who eagerly gathered in his study on Christmas Eve. But James wasn't the only one writing ghost stories. During the period covered by this book, there were many women publishing ghost stories that equalled if not surpassed those of James and his male contemporaries. As long as publishers have been producing anthologies of ghost stories, women writers have featured in them: during the 1980s, Virago produced several excellent anthologies of ghost stories by women writers. This latest collection, edited by Melissa Edmundson, is a welcome addition to the shelf.

I'm sidestepping the 'Women's Weird' of the title for now, for reasons I'll come back to later in this review. Instead, I turn to the first story, Louisa Baldwin's 'The Weird of the Walfords'. It is a conventional example of period ghost story writing – the narrator believes that his family is blighted by a curse attached to an ancestral family bed and destroys it despite being warned not to. It gives away nothing to say that the curse will strike again. What is notable, however, is that the story is narrated by the Squire himself. And this is not the only story with a first-person male narrator: of the thirteen stories, only two first-person narrators are identifiably female, while most of the third-person narratives also use a male viewpoint figure.

There are many reasons why women might write from a male viewpoint, but it is not difficult to imagine that in some cases it reflects the fact that men often had greater access to the world and its contents, whereas women could follow only in the imagination. In Baldwin's case, I wonder too if she has not used it as a sly way to comment on how men infantilise women: the narrator refers more than once to his 'little wife', as well as blaming her for the death of their son because he acquiesced to her request to turn the room that once held the cursed bed into a nursery.

There are stories here of a woman whose freedom is circumscribed by her husband's jealousy (Edith Wharton's 'Kerfol'), a woman who is drawn into an inexplicable haunting while loyally taking care of a friend's daughter (E. Nesbit's 'The Shadow'), and a more traditional story of a wrong righted when a lost child's body is finally discovered ('The Giant Wistaria' by Charlotte Perkins Gilman). Other stories are more formally experimental, such as May Sinclair's 'Where Their Fire is Not Quenched', where the haunting persists beyond the mortal plane.

There is no denying this is a strong collection of ghost stories written by women, mostly reflecting on the hopes and fears of women. I'd recommend it as a collection without hesitation. I am, though, uneasy about the framing of this anthology as an expression of women's weird writing, insofar as I'm not entirely clear about the distinction Edmondson is seeking to make between weird stories and what I'm going to refer to as 'the English ghost story tradition' (embodied by the work of people like M.R. James, though it is by no means an exclusively English phenomenon). I think my difficulty lies in Edmondson's observation that these stories 'also explore more universal imaginings of fear, unease and dread' (viii), suggesting that writers have left behind them 'primarily domestic concerns'. Again, I'm not clear where these 'domestic concerns' might have vanished to, given that so many of these stories focus on issues and events that are firmly tied to the 'real' world of the household, family relationships, children's welfare, things traditionally seen as the female purview. There is nothing more domestic than a literally haunted saucepan, after all.

It doesn't help either that Edmondson bases her theorising on H.P. Lovecraft's attempt to describe the Weird tale. Lovecraft would not be my preferred starting point for formulating a female-oriented view of weird fiction, and it's clear from the quotations taken from writing by Mary Butts and Eleanor Scott, two writers of extremely effective ghost stories, and a better starting point for this discussion, that their philosophy is somewhat at variance with his, though more strongly aligned with the type of fiction I think we're probably talking about here. According to Butts, in an essay entitled 'Ghosties and Ghoulies: Uses of the Supernatural in English Fiction' such stories must evoke 'a stirring, a touching of nerves not usually sensitive, an awakening to more than fear – but to something like awareness and conviction or even memory' (qtd x), and that feels right to me. Because I cannot get past the fact that to me, that the stories here (with the exception, I think, of Francis Stevens' 'Unseen – Unfeared', which might be seen as 'weird') are unequivocally examples of the English, or Victorian, ghost story tradition.

I don't have the space here to go into this discussion further, much as I might like to, but the proliferation of terms – strange, weird, supernatural, ghost – is indicative that we are in danger of becoming lost in a forest of immense taxonomic complexity in which we risk losing sight of the actual stories themselves. Interesting and intriguing as the philosophical discussion might be (and I'm personally always up for that sort of conversation), I choose at this point to celebrate this anthology, and its thirteen stories, a number of which were entirely new to me. There isn't a single weak story here. They're often provocative, always entertaining, and they leave the reader in a thoughtful frame of mind.

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The Imaginary Corpse by Tyler Hayes
(Angry Robot, 2019)
Reviewed by Kate Onyett

How to sum up a book that poured in like a wave and went out like all the best 'happy endings' of stories of youth? There are heroes, there are villains, and nothing is simple black and white. It hangs on that moment when you first realised, in a dark, fearful place, that there were shades of complexity among the grey.

Tippy is our narrator: a three-foot-tall, bright yellow, triceratops PI, in the Stillreal where imaginary friends, who call each other Friend, abide. This is no fairy-tale land, this is a place where imaginary friends, and loved creations of mind and heart go when they have been 'from their creator's minds untimely ripped' (to paraphrase Shakespeare). As Tippy tells us, all the humans from which he and the other Friends have come had suffered some great emotional trauma or collapse, negating the need for imaginary friends, as they simply did not explain the new, more painful world now opened up to their originators. Each and every Friend nurtures abandonment and loss.

Yet from all this, they have made a supportive and wholesome community, balancing the needs of children's imaginary friends and foes, adult imaginings of superheroes and villains, and even an embodiment of capitalistic greed itself. A new arrival triggers a series of murderous events that it is down to Tippy to solve. For what is happening in the human world is starting to have violent and deadly repercussions in the world of Stillreal; and the Friends existence, fragile as it is, is very much at stake.

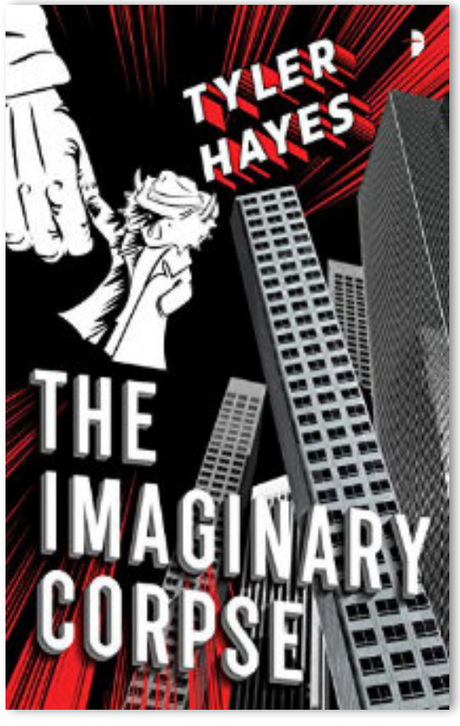
Tippy's case is a fantastic adventure-murder mystery featuring a large cast of colourful characters, with nods to the standard PI tropes. But it is an adventure, too; becoming a desperate quest by a band of brave heroes into the landscape of a disturbed and broken person, and the demons they have lurking there, to do battle with them and make the world safe again. It is an adult parable; a metaphor for growing up; really maturing by successfully negotiating fear and anger with forgiveness.

PTSD is front and centre throughout. Ideas that come to a natural end can fade comfortably away, but for Friends burned into the Stillreal by human pain, they are forced to live on, and one has to ask; is this heaven or hell? Tippy tells us that all Friends are in the Stillreal because the passion with which their humans thought of them and believed in them made them Real – truly Real. Which means they have to keep on going, despite the grief, paying a sort of penance for their very existence.

Each Friend is a case of coping mechanisms and trauma management. By the process of solving the case, finding the baddest of bad guys, and seeing him locked away, Tippy undergoes a journey into his own past, and by dint of being patient and kind, he is a therapeutic force for healing among those around him.

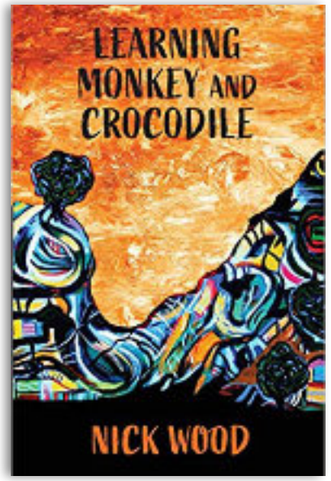
The power of concern, of helping, of caring for others and seeing them become stronger and happier, is a convincing one; stronger than falling before fear. By the end, I felt an odd relief of my own; Hayes packs more into one highly enjoyable novel than a lot of self-health books have to say.

The novel is open in treatment of gender. Tippy addresses every Friend neutrally until they have stated what their preferred pronouns are. In a world peopled with strange and wonderful creatures, monsters and random collections of shapes and colour, it makes sense not to make assumptions. And the acceptance of how a person sees themselves is as simple and clear as the acceptance of children with each other.



This comforting, hope-inducing story is therapy in a novel form. It feels very much a tribute to the strength of the human capacity to learn and grow, and how we cannot give up on ourselves or on others.

Learning Monkey and Crocodile by Nick Wood (Luna Press, 2019)
Reviewed by David Lascelles



This collection of shorts has a somewhat unusual title, one that is not really explained by the stories that make it up, but which does fit the collection quite well. It riffs off the moral tale of 'The Monkey and the Crocodile', which has the message that the monkey, with its brain, wins over the crocodile. This is a perfect analogy to make for a collection of SF shorts. For example, the first story, 'Of Hearts and Monkeys', holds the moral that humanity can survive an apocalypse by, to quote Wood himself in his notes on the story: 'By listening hard and respecting each other's space – and working together'. Which is exactly what the protagonist in this tale does.

The seventeen stories in this collection are all set in Africa or following African protagonists. This is unsurprising given Wood's origins in Zambia and South Africa and his other works, such as Azanian Bridges, which also follow the Afrotourism style. In fact, one of the stories in this collection (Bridges) was the short that would later morph into Azanian Bridges and which explores the idea of a South Africa where apartheid never happened. More than that, this comes across as a very personal selection of stories as Wood definitely 'writes what he knows' in many of them. For example, 'Mindreader' is clearly a work that touches on his career as a Clinical Psychologist while many of the others touch on cultures and locations he has undoubtedly had first-hand experience of or extrapolated from such experiences. This makes for a deep and rich reading experience.

If the collection has a flaw it is that it is sometimes too intellectual and philosophical in nature. Some of these are unlikely to be made into films or TV series, being too dependent on internal monologue and more character than plot driven. If you are looking for exciting SF adventures, you may find some here, but the focus is very much on speculative fiction and ideas. And there are some excellent ones here. For example, the story 'Paragon of Knowledge', one of my favourites, has the fascinating concept of a person permanently connected to a network – always processing information and data – which has elements of modern social media connectivity among other concepts inherent in it. The plot here sees our Paragon facing its humanity. Other stories, such as 'A Million Reasons Why' have themes based on the elderly or those with additional needs and treat these topics in a very deep, meaningful and, above all, respectful way. In fact, it is good to see so many normally ignored demographics treated very well across the entire collection. A majority of the point of view characters are well rounded, three dimensional female characters and they represent a range of ages and ability levels. This collection highlights the potential for greater diversity within SFF and speculative fiction that is often overlooked in more mainstream presentations (though a trend which is thankfully changing for the better).

One or two of the stories were a little too obscure for me. This may be more a commentary on my lack of awareness of cultural or SF ideas than any fault of the author, however. At times I did find myself wondering exactly what the story was supposed to be telling me.

The collection concludes with a series of 'extras'. These include a set of author's notes on the stories as well as four academic articles (fully referenced) covering topics ranging from 'Writing Ourselves and Others' to 'Writing Speculative Fiction for Personal and Socio-political Change'. These might be seen by some as mere filler to pad out some page numbers, but they are in fact very interesting and personal studies of the craft of writing and how it relates to politics and diversity.

In all, an enjoyable collection and one that is very different from the norm.

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Lost Acre by Andrew Caldecott (Jo Fletcher Books, 2019)
Reviewed by Kate Onyett

Too jaded by the commercialisation of *Harry Potter*? Want to feel that tingle of excitement over not quite knowing what might be around the next corner?

Enter a Byzantine world of adventure, tightly enclosed within walls of stone and ancient forces. To be more accurate; prepare to *re*-enter. *Lost Acre* is book three of the *Rotherweird* trilogy. And it is rather necessary that you go and read the first two if you are to make head or tail of it all!

Rotherweird is a picturesque valley town, its walls enclosed by a river. It is home to scientific genius: both eccentric and eclectic. Having forbidden some trappings of modern life; yet it sells high-level scientific discoveries to the outside world. A town of carvings, mechanical marvels and festive pageants; a town ruled by ancient ordinances.

Centuries ago, the uncovering of nightmarish experiments meant that, by royal decree, Rotherweird was locked down; allowed self-governance on condition that it never studied its own past. And so it buried its secrets and flourished in seclusion.

However, events have been set in motion for the return of a one-man apocalypse, and heroes will rise, battles will be fought; civil war will erupt and the light will fight the dark to stop the end of days. Caldecott's vision is astonishing in its richness and complexity (*Gormenghast's* influence runs deep). It is epic in scope, focused sharply into a fantastic microcosm.

The cast is huge, and there are occasions when you can get quite lost. Mathematics, alchemy, outrageous mechanical contrivances and magical weirdness from a parallel dimension; Caldecott delivers his suspense via detailed sleight of hand.

At its core, this is a morality play; the 'good' fight the 'bad' for the continuance of life – but without a religious imperative. When anything approaching the trappings of religion appears, it is associated with threat; a chapel houses dangerous artefacts, the messianic second coming is of a psychopath, a second coming made possible by human sacrifice. If anything, religiosity – as mindless adherence to law and lore – is under heavy critique, and what is advocated instead is human responsibility. The choices we make are ours to make alone, and we will have to stand by the results of those choices.

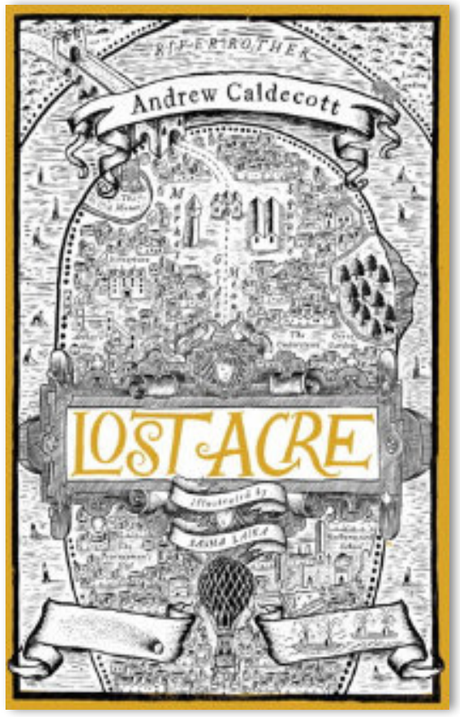
The question of morality is not based on any other absolute, either. For a town priding itself on rigorous science and discovery, it is the human heart and not the head that makes the call; love, fear, guilt, pride; the emotions are a driving force, and what both bind and tear apart. Indeed, it is science gone bad that began Rotherweird's enforced isolation.

Reason, it seems, cannot live without feeling, but woe-betide anyone who goes to an extreme.

In discussing extremes, one cannot leave out the strong political metaphor; Caldecott isn't subtle showing disgust of those who are charged to rule. The mayor is clearly corrupted through a system of preferment and bribes. The Guild system is a closed book to investigation, and the populism of a new regime turns fascist, fast. The heroes, in comparison, are questers and free thinkers.

So: never stop questioning and acknowledge that it can be physically precarious to stand up to events. For a very modern allegory, Caldecott's champions are bathed in ancient symbolism, and here lies the books' subtlety.

There are not new themes being discussed; that ultimately, human nature is a cyclical force with upheaval and renewal, to avoid extremism and moral health comes from emotion tempering reason. But the vivid, extravagant style is a love-song to ancient, stirring narratives, even while we are warned not to be suckered in by them.



The Castle in Cassiopeia by Mike Resnick (Prometheus Books, 2017)
Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

This is the third in the Dead Enders Series, which follows the misadventures of a mismatched group of ex-military/ex-criminal types, who, more or less, work for the government of the Democracy, a relatively peaceful confederation of planets. They are an 'A Team' in space, if you will.

This novel begins with the fallout from their actions in the first book, when they kidnapped General Michkag, the best military commander of the very expansionist, militaristic Coalition, and replaced him with a clone. This extremely dangerous mission led to the loss of some of their members from which the group is still recovering. This clone had all of Michkag's memories and knowledge but had been raised in the Democracy under its value system. However, the almost inevitable has happened and the clone has decided he enjoys being a despot. This means that the Democracy now have an opposing high-ranking soldier with the same formidable skills but considerably more knowledge of the Democracy. To add to this, they have no idea where he is.

Prometheus, the group's leader, is therefore called into the office of General Cooper and given the mission of finding and bringing the clone back to the Democracy. This will be no easy task as security will be significantly tighter even than the first time. In fact, it looks to be a suicide mission.

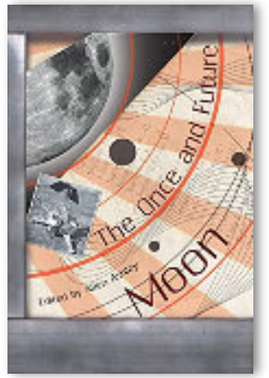
Undeterred, Prometheus sets about gathering together the remains of his merry, wisecracking crew, a job which, as usual, involves bailing one of them out of jail. Their first stop is at a well- known whorehouse, whose madam knows pretty much everything and everybody, which is how they come to acquire a new member, Apollo, a skilled and notorious thief and smuggler. By a convoluted process of elimination, they manage to track Michkag down to one particular star system and set off in pursuit.

While I enjoyed the story, which rattles on at a fair old pace, there were certain elements to the book which I did find distracting and occasionally, irritating. There is an awful lot of repetition and characters seem to make comments purely so that they and the readers can be reminded of who the group are and what they are supposed to be doing at any given point. This tends to slow down the narrative.

The characters, while mostly from central casting, are well drawn and quite fun. By far the most interesting is Proto, an extremely short, mollusc-like alien with the ability to project an image which makes him appear to be anyone or thing he wishes. The only problem is that he is still just his own size and shape underneath, and he can't actually, for example, hold things. Neither is he very strong. He is blessed with a self-deprecating sense of humour and a loyalty to the group, mostly because they are the only people he has encountered who have treated him decently. Snake is a highly accomplished thief, hampered by her own pride and ego, which means that she tends to show off. She successfully performs heists that nobody else could manage to do and is then arrested because the perpetrator is obvious. She is under some compulsion to work for the team, as this is the only reason she keeps being bailed out of jail. The other characters also have their quirks, and do manage to rise above being caricatures, even if the humorous banter between them can feel rather forced, rather than flowing naturally.

In conclusion, this book is actually a relatively enjoyable space opera episode, which would have been, I feel, much improved by the removal of repetitive narrative, which slowed down what was otherwise a fast read.

The Once and Future Moon Edited Allen Ashley (Eibonvale Press, 2019)
Review by Dev Agarwal



The Once and Future Moon is a collection of fiction inspired by the moon and humanity's long-standing fascination with it.

Fittingly, Allen Ashley's latest anthology was published in 2019, coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of Apollo 11's moon landing. However, this collection did not ultimately join a crowded field of works targeted around Apollo 11's significant anniversary. Despite that, the collection does join a body of genre works centred around the moon, stretching back down the centuries and including Daniel Defoe and Cyrano de Bergerac, Kepler, Wells and, more recently, Neal Stephenson and Andy Weir.

Our fascination with the moon remains strong and if the current market is mostly absent other anthologies celebrating the first moon landing, Ashley has laid claim to the space this creates and has the moon well covered. While coinciding with the anniversary of Apollo 11, Ashley's call for submissions wisely focused on the moon itself, rather than the moon landings. This distinction allows for works that range more widely than stories that only celebrate NASA's achievement or that centre on the science behind the landing in 1969.

Ashley has discussed in the BSFA's *Focus* magazine that "the anthology had coalesced around the theme of the relationship humans have with our planet's satellite and how it continues to influence us even in a digital technological age." This gave rise to the anthology's title, which indicates both the past (the once) and what the moon may become (its future as a colonised space with humans living and working upon it). The title also captures the romance of fantasy, as it mirrors T.H. White's Arthurian story cycle, *The Once and Future King*.

Ashley set guidelines that required stories that are distinctly rooted in the Earth's moon – rather than any other planet's moon – but that were also free to roam through metaphorical imaginings of the moon. While these touch on the science behind colonising and working on the moon, the collection also captures narratives that go beyond contemporary science. This gives the stories a strong thematic connection while also providing a tonal diversity. 'Dr Cadwallader and the Lunar Cycle' by Chris Edwards is a playful Victorian conceit, while Hannah Hulbert's story 'The Changing Face of Selene' looks up at the moon from the perspective of the Ancient Greeks.

It seems fair to say that all of the eighteen stories collected together offer a panoramic perspective on what the moon means as a concept and as a jumping off point for the imagination. These include stories of moon bases and lunar mining, such as 'Synthia' by A.N. Myers and Pauline E. Dungate's 'Moonstruck', as well as more interior stories of what the moon means to us as a species staring up at it, beyond our reach in the night sky, such as 'To Sharpen, Spin' by Charles Wilkinson.

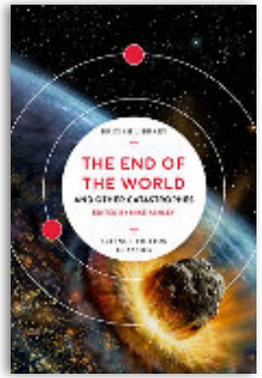
As with all metaphorical spaces, the moon is a concept as well as a physical location. It is neither intrinsically good nor bad and the stories reflect a range of reactions to it, as Aliya Whiteley's 'Bars of Light' and Gary Budgen's 'The Empties' reflect, while staying firmly rooted on the Earth.

As our closest celestial body, our understanding of the moon has shifted over time as our scientific understanding has grown, and, if anything, the more we know, the more intrigued we are with the moon. *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* notes, "Dead or not, though, the Moon was there -- a mere quarter of a million miles away -- to be reached and to be claimed."

The collection explores not only the moon (fantastical, mythical or scientifically extrapolated), but also our relationship to it, while remaining on the Earth. This feels like a bold approach to a collection that is inspired, in part, by the anniversary of humanity landing on the moon. However, there are many ways to reach and claim the moon – many of which do not require physical journeys there.

The Once and Future Moon will appeal to readers who are attracted to both the diversity of voices and to its central binding idea. Inevitably some stories will appeal more than others and readers will anticipate that level of 'gambling' when they purchase a copy. However, Allen Ashley's anthology is a case of "something for everyone" and they will not be disappointed.

The End of the Worlds and Other Catastrophes
Edited by Mike Ashley
(British Library, 2019)
Reviewed by Graham Andrews



Donald A. Wollheim once edited an Ace Books anthology entitled *The End of the World*, in 1955. But he stuck close to genre home with such then modern-day stories as 'Rescue Party' (Clarke: 1946), The Year of the Jackpot' (Heinlein: 1952), and 'Impostor' (Dick: 1953). But Mike Ashley has taken a much more wide-ranging and historical approach to the subject here. In his Introduction, he quotes these opening lines from 'Darkness', an apocalyptic poem by Lord Byron (first published in 1816):

> *"I had a dream, which was not all a dream.*
> *The bright sun was extinguish'd and the stars*
> *Did wander darkling in the eternal space,*
> *Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth*
> *Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air."*

First up is 'The End of the World' (1930), by Helen Sutherland, which "gets us off to a rousing start by covering just about every catastrophe that can afflict mankind in a little over fifteen hundred words." Ashley speculates that it might have been written by Helen Christian Sutherland (1881-1965), a patron of the arts who has been credited with discovering Pieter Cornelis Mondrian. Another story entitled 'The End of the World' (1903), by the astronomer Simon Newcomb (1835-1909), is an anticipation of *When Worlds Collide*.

After that comes a sort-of-trilogy headed THREE DOOMS OF LONDON. 'London's Danger' (1896), by C. J. Cutliffe Hyne, is an early climate-change story. 'The Freezing of London' (1908), by Herbert C. Ridout, is – well – self-explanatory. The same thing goes for 'Days of Darkness' (1927), by Owen Oliver (i.e. Sir Joshua Albert Flynn). Robert Barr's 'Within an Ace of the End of the World' (1900) is another trenchant climate-change story. What happens when agricultural over-production threatens to strip the world's atmosphere of nitrogen?

'The Last American', by John Ames Mitchell, provides some welcome light relief, using "humour and parody to satirize the American way of life through the viewpoint of a Persian expedition discovering a ruined and desolate United States years after its collapse. The first edition [1889] included many illustrations by the author [several included here]."

As Ashley explains, George Griffiths (1857-1906) was the most prolific and bestselling writer of 'scientific romances' in Britain until H. G. Wells came along to steal his literary thunder. He had gained wide popularity with *The Angel of the Revolution* (1893), in which a new form of flying machine enabled anarchists to take over the United Kingdom, thus pre-empting H. G. Wells himself: *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) and *The War in the Air* (1908). 'The Great Grenelin Comet' (1897) shows how the people of Terra – perhaps the first use of that word in science fiction to mean the Earth – deal with the onset of a destructive comet.

Other 'vintage' stories are 'Finis' (1906), by Frank Lillie Pollock, and 'The Madness of Professor Pye' (1934), by Warwick Deeping. Ashley also includes three comparatively recent stories: 'Two by Two' (1956: retitled 'The Windows of Heaven' in 1965), by John Brunner; 'Created He Them' (1955), by Alice Eleanor Jones; 'There Will Come Soft Rains' (1950), by Ray Bradbury (which became part of *The Martian Chronicles*/*The Silver Locusts*).

For me, it seems appropriate to round off this review with the final lines from Byron's 'Darkness':

> "The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,
> The moon, their mistress, had expired before;
> The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,
> And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need
> Of aid from them – She was the Universe."

(*The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. I wonder . . .)

N.B. Companion volumes from the British Library Science Fiction Classics program, so far: *Moonrise: The Golden Age of Lunar Adventures* (2018); *Lost Mars: The Golden Age of the Red Planet* (2018); *Menace of the Machine: The Rise of AI in Classic Science Fiction* (2019). I wish even more power to your editorial elbow, Mr. Ashley.