

# Vector

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association



## **A YEAR IN REVIEW**

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# Vector 265

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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# Torque Control

As you will have read in Niall Harrison's last editor's column, he's now the executive editor of *Strange Horizons*, which is why I'm here, writing to you, as the new features editor of *Vector*.

The other week, I was asked what my vision for *Vector's* future was. I hadn't articulated one in quite so many words. When Niall Harrison and Geneva Melzack took over editing *Vector* five years ago, they began with an issue on manifestos. They had specific goals in mind on where to take the magazine, including using it to encourage discussion of contemporary sf, a mandate which the magazine has admirably fulfilled in the last half-decade.

Chronologically, my vision tends to run the other way. Without curtailing coverage of contemporary sf, my personal interest is in how these modern developments are contextualised by the history of the field. I'm a historian of medieval technology by training, so how things ended up the way they are is, generally, a subject of great interest to me, whether it's modern novels or devices long-since passed out of use. Yet I'm also a fan, with more recent reading interests, and became involved with the BSFA through its monthly London meetings shortly after moving there.

It's appropriate then, that my first issue is the annual retrospective, in which we're primarily not looking back very far, but we are looking back, surveying 2010 from the distance of up to thirteen months. The annual *Vector* Reviewer's Poll, edited by Martin Lewis, showcases the highlights of what the magazine's reviewers found to be the finest novels of the year. Jonathan McCalmont provides a look back at what the highlights – and lowlights – of science fictional film were last year, while Alison Page provides an analysis of the major elements and shows that television had to offer the science fiction fan in 2010.

Anthony Nanson looks back further, to the late 1980s, to survey Stephen Lawhead's original Pendragon cycle which, as a work of Arthuriana, is itself set in a still longer ago medievaesque setting. He examines the tension between Lawhead's revisioning of the Arthurian myth and the modern Christian influences with shape and limit his characterizations.

This issue also marks the start of two new columns. One is by Terry Martin, editor of graphic novel/speculative fiction magazine *Murky Depths*, whose column, previously in *Vector's* sister magazine *Matrix*, will now regularly appear in these pages. Appropriately for a year-in-review issue, his first column here surveys the state of the comics industry. (What's up with *Matrix* magazine itself? Ian Whates will be updating us on it in the next issue of *Vector*.)

The editors who took over five years ago also wrote that they wanted to focus on detailed analyses of short stories. This issue marks the start of a new column by Paul Kincaid that carries on that goal. He'll be re-reading

primarily older short stories, revisiting and exploring what made them powerful and memorable for him in the first place, starting with a vivid exploration of Kate Wilhelm's "The Infinity Box".

It's not all change thought, here at *Vector*. I'm happy to reassure you that the columns by Andy Sawyer and Stephen Baxter continue, as do, of course, the reviews, edited by Martin Lewis.

While I am not, for now, aiming for entirely-themed issues, I do intend to have clusters of related articles on a regular basis. Later this year, for example, one issue will be devoted to articles on novels by women sf authors of the last decade. This cluster is a follow up to a poll which Niall ran on the *Vector* editors's blog, *Torque Control*, this past autumn, inspired by the lack of recent Arthur C Clarke award wins by women, compared with the previous decade. Over the course of the year on the blog, we're discussing the top eleven books from the poll (a tie meant there are eleven books in the top ten), one book per month. Please do join us! Here is the schedule – and the top eleven books, in chronological order.

February	<i>Bold as Love</i> by Gwyneth Jones
March	<i>Speed of Dark</i> by Elizabeth Moon
April	<i>Natural History</i> by Justina Robson
May	<i>The Time-Traveler's Wife</i> by Audrey Niffenegger
June	<i>Maul</i> by Tricia Sullivan
July	<i>City of Pearl</i> by Karen Traviss
August	<i>Life</i> by Gwyneth Jones
September	<i>Farthing</i> by Jo Walton
October	<i>The Carhullan Army/Daughters of the North</i> by Sarah Hall
November	<i>Lavinia</i> by Ursula Le Guin
December	<i>Spirit</i> by Gwyneth Jones

My thanks to Niall for the hard work which he put into *Vector* over the last five years, and the amazing issues which he produced. It is a pleasure and a privilege to be able to take on the challenge of editing the features for a magazine which is in such good shape. I'm looking forward (instead of to the past for a change), to see how it all works out.

Shana Worthen, Editor  
<http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/>

# A YEAR IN REVIEW

## LOOKING BACK AT 2010

You could perhaps have anticipated the result...

In a change from previous years, for *Vector's* review of 2010 I asked reviewers to both vote for their five favourite novels published last year and write a piece on their reading in general. The freestyle pieces start on the next page with Graham Andrews discussing a forgotten paperback but by now I'm sure your eye has already been drawn to the results of the poll.

The triumph of *The Dervish House* by Ian McDonald was comprehensive; it received twice as many votes as *New Model Army* by Adam Roberts which came in second. If you've read any other end of year articles you probably won't be surprised, as it seems that *The Dervish House* was the science fiction novel of 2010. This was also reflected in its appearance on the shortlist for the BSFA Award for best novel. As BSFA members, the results of that award are in your hands. At this point, however, I would be surprised if McDonald didn't take it home. I would be equally surprised if *The Dervish House* didn't turn up on other award shortlists.

There was a strong showing for other novels as well though. *New Model Army* may have come runner up but in his review on page x, Mark Connorton hopes that this won't always be the case: "For the last few years Roberts has been the perennial nominee at SF awards. Hopefully this will be the one to change it for him." Iain M Banks is another writer whose stature and acclaim hasn't translated into prizes. After the disappointment of *Matter*, *Surface Detail* is seen as a return to form in many quarters, a "classic Banksian synthesis of a sprawling space opera" as Marcus Flavin puts it on page X.

The British edition of Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* only came out in December but it has already gained a substantial following. That it won both the Hugo and the Nebula last year probably had something to do with that and it is also shortlisted for this year's BSFA Award. Of the rest of the shortlisted novels, Ken MacLeod's *The Restoration Game* and Tricia Sullivan's *Lightborn* (reviewed by Jonathan McCalmont on pages x) both failed to make the cut but Lauren Beukes's second novel, *Zoo City*, just squeaked in.

The top five was dominated by science fiction – perhaps not surprising given the name of our organisation – but in fourth place was *Under Heaven* by Guy Gavriel Kay, "a reflection of Tang Dynasty China that rings our present world like a bell" according to Niall Harrison. Not far behind was *Kraken* by China Miéville. After last year's all conquering *The City & The City*, this was widely seen as a more modest work but a modest Miéville work is still a substantial beast and his popularity shows no sign of waning.

Completing the list, Patrick Ness concluded what has to be this young century's finest work of Young Adult science fiction with *Monsters Of Men*, Richard Powers provided the token non-genre book with his blending of science, fiction and science fiction in *Generosity* and, at last, Chris Beckett found both a publishing deal and the acclaim he deserved for *The Holy Machine*.

Finally, tying with *Zoo City* for tenth place was *Finch*, the third instalment in Jeff VanderMeer's Ambergris series. As Paul Raven says on page x: "Don't be afraid to enter Ambergris without knowing what to expect. But do be prepared to leave with more questions than you arrived with."

So that is what our reviewers thought. I am one of the judges of this year's Arthur C Clarke Award so I won't say what my favourite books of 2010 were. I don't think it is breaking the Clarke omerta to say I think it has been a very strong year though, a strength remarked upon by several

reviewers in their individual pieces over the next couple of pages and reflected in this top ten.

I hope the pages of this review section have introduced you to lots of new sf over the course of 2010. I've enjoyed my first year at *Vector* and plan to keep bringing you the widest range of reviews possible. Reviews of *Under Heaven*, *The Windup Girl* and *Zoo City* are all forthcoming and, in addition to the end of year pieces, this issue contains its fair share of reviews. I am particularly please to welcome Gwyneth Jones to these pages with a feature review of *Animal Alterity*, Sheryl Vint's examination of the animal in sf.

1. *The Dervish House*  
by Ian McDonald
2. *New Model Army*  
by Adam Roberts
3. *Surface Detail*  
by Iain M Banks
4. *Under Heaven*  
by Guy Gavriel Kay
5. *The Windup Girl*  
by Paolo Bacigalupi
6. *Kraken*  
by China Miéville
7. *Monsters Of Men*  
by Patrick Ness
8. *Generosity*  
by Richard Powers
9. *The Holy Machine*  
by Chris Beckett
- =10. *Zoo City*  
by Lauren Beukes
- =10. *Finch*  
by Jeff VanderMeer

# 2010: BOOKS IN REVIEW

## Graham Andrews on *The Greks Bring Gifts* by Murray Leinster

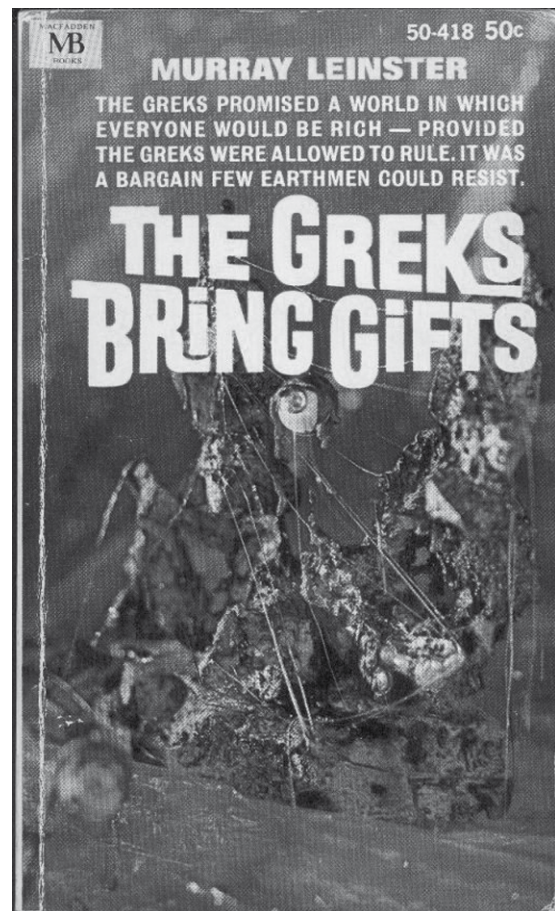
Most 'vintage' paperback originals (c. 1950-69) have had the near-zero life expectancy of Jack Elam in a Fifties Western. They become mere checklist curiosities. In sf, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) and *The Dream Master* (1966) are among the happy-few exceptions but many more of these PBOs – to use the technical term – deserve a second chance. Eeny, meeny, miney . . .

*The Greks Bring Gifts* (Macfadden-Bartell, New York, 1964) by Murray Leinster - real name William Fitzgerald Jenkins (1896-1975) - is as good an example as any (and better than most). The Richard Powers cover painting alone is worth an honourable mention. *Greks* - its title an evident take on Euripides and Virgil - made a rare PBO from Macfadden-Bartell and its uncommonly accurate back-cover blurb drives the main plot-point home. The Greks...

“... came to Earth in their spaceship, bearing fabulous gifts – such as machines that did any job automatically, and fertiliser that made plants shoot up overnight. But they presented their gifts with contempt, and with a look in their eyes that made people feel 'creepy' . . . Still, because of the brave new world they promised, the Greks could be forgiven anything – until they left and people discovered that the machines were breaking down. Then their only choice was to beg the Greks to come back, on their own terms. And they knew the terms would be hard . . .”

Leinster spends very little time in scene-setting. The quarter-mile-long Grek ship had supposedly come upon Earth by accident. This Big Smart Object was, so they said, a school ship for spacemen of the Nurmi cluster. The officers and teaching faculty were humanoid Greks, and the ship was taking a class of bear-like Aldarian students on a training voyage. Lack of space precludes a full plot summary but believe you me, Leinster covers all the thematic bases. The Grek biters are, at one fell swoop, well-and-truly bitten. Feigning craven docility, Earthlings welcome back their bogus benefactors with modified sinter-field generators\*, super-laser-beam projectors, guided missiles, artillery shell atomic bombs, a nerve stimulus field and an Aldarian slave revolt.

The story is told from the viewpoint of one Jim Hackett. “He was old enough to have been nominated for a



Nobel Prize in physics, and young enough to have been refused it because of his youth. But apparently nobody thought of him at all. Certainly not as a piece of good luck.” Jim’s obligatory light o’ love is Lucy Thale – who’d been Doctor Lucy Thale for a full month. (“Well done, that girl!”)

*The Greks Bring Gifts* is a neglected non-classic novel, to put it left-handedly. However, the whole complex story unfolds in no more than 50,000 well-chosen words. *The Monitors* (1966) by Keith Laumer reads uncannily like a light-hearted rewrite homage and the sadly late James P. Hogan’s *The Legend That Was Earth* (2001) takes the basic premise and turns it into a much longer, more militaristic – and uncommonly enjoyable – techno-thriller.

\* SINTERING. Compressing metal particles into a coherent solid body” (*The Penguin Dictionary of Science*). If that’s any help to you...

**Mark Connorton**

**On *New Model Army* by Adam Roberts**

Although I enjoy Adam Roberts's reviews and blogging, I have never really taken to his fiction before (the 'everyone shits themselves in a stagecoach' scenes in *Swiftly* were a particular low point). *New Model Army* changes that in an instant and was one of my favourite books of the year. This short, sharp novel is set in the very near future and tells of a battle of independence between Scotland and England. As Scotland does not have armed forces of its own, it hires the New Model Army Pantegral to fight for it: a mercenary force with no hierarchy, organised as a pure Athenian-style democracy, where information is shared and decisions taken communally using a sophisticated wi-fi and wiki system. Despite their inferior numbers and weapons, Pantegral's flexibility and superior morale enable it to run rings round the 'feudal' British army, devastating much of the Home Counties in the process. US military advisors lurk in the background, observing the events, as other New Model Armies spring up around the world. What starts as a series of sharply written action scenes soon transforms into an extended exploration of the way human societies are organised.

Our viewpoint character through much of this is a gay Pantegral soldier, Tony Block, who bears a deep platonic love for a straight colleague (thus allowing Roberts to explore the thin line between the homoerotic and homosocial commonly found in war fiction). Block is a likeable narrator - witty, quick thinking and humorous (rather like Robert's own non-fiction writing) - whose vivid imagery (explained by a youthful fondness for poetry) made me realise how pedestrian much genre prose can be. You often hear about a book being 'intelligent', generally referring to the ideas contained within, but the intelligence in this novel permeates every aspect of it; picking at the very language used, rifling it for puns and jokes and pop culture references and constantly exposing its own ambiguities and ambivalence. Pantegral, for instance, is a genius name, evoking Rabelais's giant Pantagruel, the suffix for 'all' plus integral, and bland corporate neologisms like Aviva or Consignia.

This depth of meaning and invention make the book a pleasure to read and provides the impetus to propel the reader past the more problematic aspects. For example, the model for the NMA is not entirely convincing. Would people really not end up specialising in, say, medicine or tech support due to personal interest or ability, especially if there is no one to tell them not to? Would a wi-fi and wiki system really be that reliable? Does it make sense for everyone to stop fighting long enough to consider tactical options and vote? In addition, the concentration on relations between men means that there are no memorable women in the book (as a possible snub to Freudian clichés, Block has an absent mother and a strong father and, although we are told the NMA is entirely egalitarian, female characters are relegated to walk-on parts).

Finally the book lifts free of the realistic conversational mode of the early sections and drifts into an experimental modernist style of prose that many readers could dislike but which for me was the logical conclusion of the novel. For the last few years Roberts has been the perennial nominee at sf awards. Hopefully this will be the one to change it for him.

**Gary Dalkin**

**Books of the Year**

Last year I read exactly 50 books, two-thirds of which roughly fell into the science fiction, fantasy or horror genres, a few more hovering around the edges by virtue of ambiguity (Ira Levin's excellent *The Stepford Wives*) or as associational titles (Nev Fountain's less than stellar *Geek Tragedy*). Two non-fiction titles stood out: *I Am Alive And You Are Dead: A Journey into the Mind of Philip K Dick* by Emmanuel Carrere and Radu Florescu's disinterring of literary corpses, *In Search of Frankenstein*. By far the worst thing I read all year, discovered in a 'thrift shop' for 25 cents (which was a quarter too much) and read to see what all the fuss is currently about Stateside, was Ayn Rand's *Anthem*. Execrable dystopian nonsense with all its good ideas stolen from better books yet unaccountably popular with dangerous people across the pond.

Of straight-ahead genre fiction *Let the Right One In* by John Ajvide Lindqvist struck me as the best horror debut I've read in a very long time; genuinely dark, thrilling, touching and far superior to the overrated film adaptation of the same name. Unfortunately that difficult second novel, *Handling the Undead*, turned out to be largely tedious. Iain Banks's *Transition* was sf, despite the lack of an M, and a great fun parallel world romp. Truly exceptional was Daniel Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon* which I had somehow managed never to read. Once in a while a book truly deserves its classic status and this is one of them. Don't make my mistake and wait decades before reading this brilliantly constructed, characterised and written book. *Palimpsest* by Catherynne M. Valente is a future classic, a novel which explodes language and ideas like a firework display staged by a mad poet, a dizzying, incomparably complex kaleidoscope of fictions which demands attention.

Four metafictional titles stood out. *The Angel's Game* by Carlos Ruiz Zafon proved vastly superior to the gripping but ultimately disappointing *The Shadow of the Wind*, to which it is a prequel. Adam Ross delivered an astonishing debut in the terribly titled *Mr Peanut*, even if he does spoil it a little by giving us a lecture on all the Hitchcock references. Steve Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* offered tremendous entertainment, *Jaws* references essential. Best of all, Jeremy Dronfield's *The Alchemist's Apprentice* fulfilled its own prophecies, a stunning work of imagination which is my discovery of the year. This book should be a huge bestseller...but then it was. Read it for the second time and remember what I mean.

A summer blockbuster inspired me to reread three Christopher Priest novels in a row: *A Dream of Wessex* clearly a key unacknowledged inspiration for *Inception*, *The Affirmation* and *The Glamour* remaining two of the finest novels of the past half century. My favourite new novel of the year, by a very long way, came from sometimes sf writer David Mitchell. People will still be marvelling at *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* decades after last year's award winners have been forgotten.



**Alan Fraser**

### On Martin Millar's werewolves

Martin Millar's *Lonely Werewolf Girl* (2007) was a delightful chance find in my local library, after which I immediately bought *Curse Of The Wolf Girl* (2010). What's not to like about a tale of werewolves and fire elementals in modern-day Britain, with broad humour, extreme violence, fashion victims, cross-dressing, comic books, computer hacking, rock music and Latin poetry?

In *Lonely Werewolf Girl*, teenage werewolf Kalix MacRinnalch is exiled from her Scottish clan and living homeless in London. She is being hunted by both human werewolf hunters and werewolf bounty hunters anxious to claim the reward for her head offered by members of the MacRinnalch clan after she caused the death of her father, thane of the clan. Meanwhile her powerful sister, Thrix the Werewolf Enchantress, is busy designing clothes for the fashion-obsessed Fire Queen Malveria and back in Scotland her brothers Sarapen and Markus are vying for the clan leadership. Almost dead from malnutrition, the anorexic Kalix is saved by students Daniel and Moonglow who take her in and look after her despite her unfriendliness. Because every vote in the Clan Council is needed to break the deadlock between the brothers, her cousin, the icy albino werewolf Dominil, is dispatched to London to rehabilitate the MacRinnalch twins, Butix and Delix, now renamed Beauty and Delicious and attempting to forge a career in rock music. Her task is hampered by the girls' fondness for alcohol which has made their performance up to now an utter shambles. Millar has created a cast of larger-than-life characters and deftly mixes the unlikely blend of hilarity, satire and violence to make a compelling tale.

In the second book, *Curse Of The Wolf Girl*, Kalix MacRinnalch has survived the battles of the first book and is trying to live normally in London. Her new friends support her as she goes to college, together with the deliciously annoying Vex, niece of the Fire Queen Malveria. The younger of her brothers, Markus, has become clan chief and, although Kalix's elder brother Sarapen is believed dead, some of his supporters still want Kalix dead for killing her father, while the Guild of Werewolf Hunters is still trying to wipe out the entire MacRinnalch clan. Kalix's elder sister, Trix the fashion designer, is totally preoccupied helping Malveria upstage her rivals, her cross-dressing brother Markus is organising an opera in Edinburgh and her cousin Dominil is busy trying to get Beauty and Delicious to buckle down to making rock music. Kalix still finds it difficult to cope with her drug-addiction (to laudanum of all things) and self-harming while avoiding the werewolf hunters and trying to pass her exams. Meanwhile, having realised that Daniel is the boy for her after months of ignoring him, Moonglow has to get round a curse from the first book that means she can never have him...

These books read like novelisations of comic books to me, with their vivid imagery, rich plots and strongly depicted characters. Even though the second book ends with a denouement in which our heroes are saved from an unlikely quarter when all seems lost, there is still enough unfinished business to believe Millar intends a third book in the series.

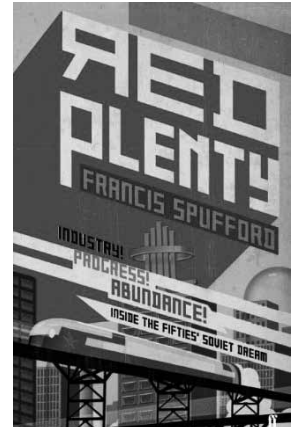
**Niall Harrison**

### Books Of 2010

My 2010 was an exciting year for sf. Narrowing down the list of books I admired to a top five for *Vector's* poll was exhausting so I'm going to allow myself ten here.

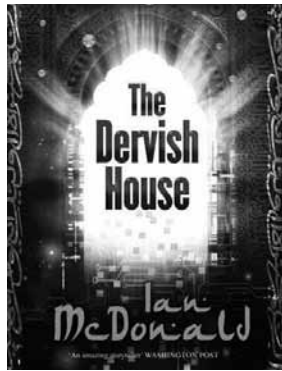
From the new writers come tricksters, time travel, technocratic utopianism and, inevitably, zombies. Karen Lord's *Redemption in Indigo* is a delightful trickster fantasy, set in a deliberately ambiguous time and place but narrated by the freshest voice I've encountered for some time. Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* is a ferociously smart piece of science fiction, science fiction criticism and genre literary fiction all at the same time, which makes it sound horrendously dull, except that it had me laughing out loud every few pages. The feel of Isaac Marion's *Warm Bodies*, on the other hand, is perhaps easiest to convey by noting that my edition is blurbed by Simon Pegg, Nick Harkaway, Audrey Niffenegger and Stephanie Meyer. The novel is more or less what you'd expect from that - goofy, playful, affecting and conventional - but it also delivers an undercurrent of cosmic horror and an advocacy of emotional and political agency so urgent as to overwhelm its weaknesses. And then there's Francis Spufford's *Red Plenty*, the best book of any kind that I read last year. It's not his first work but it is his first novel, a series of note-perfect character portraits that prise open the gap between the history and the reality of Soviet Russia in the Sixties by taking their utopian spirit seriously.

Leading the experienced team is Ian McDonald, whose *The Dervish House* perfects the formula that *River of Gods* developed: a rich, busy, brilliant novel. Very nearly as good is Guy Gavriel Kay's romantic *Under Heaven*. Like Spufford, Kay is interested in opening a possibility space around known history; unlike him he creates an entire secondary world to support this venture, his Kitai Empire a reflection of Tang Dynasty China that rings our present world like a bell. Catherynne M Valente's *The Habitation of the Blessed*, the start of a trilogy-long riff on the legend of Prester John, is the best thing I've read by her to date, filled with exhilarating intelligence and extraordinary fantastical visions. Similarly, Adam Roberts is at the top of his game in *New Model Army*, a timely speculation about the future of war that usefully critiques the less grounded parts of the contemporary sf field. I haven't read enough of Johanna Sinisalo's work to rank *Birdbrain* but the tale of two hikers venturing into the Tasmanian wilderness is as piercing as *Not Before Sundown*. And *Monsters of Men* wraps up Patrick Ness's Chaos Walking trilogy in as visceral a fashion as anyone could have hoped for; some of the trilogy's arguments aren't developed as fully as I might have hoped but it shares enough of the energy and honesty of the previous volumes to confirm the whole as a major work.



**David Hebblethwaite**  
**Books Of The Year**

In 2010, I ticked off another in my list of 'authors I really should have read by now' when I read *The Dervish House* by Ian McDonald. I'm sure there's plenty more acclaim for the novel in these pages but I shall add my voice to the chorus. I was hugely impressed by the scope and detail of McDonald's portrait of a near-future Istanbul and by his wonderfully evocative prose (the opening sequence was among the best-written passages I read all year). I also found the novel very satisfying at a structural level, the way that the intertwining lives of the six protagonists build into a broader examination of how patterns and systems underlie the fictional world. *The Dervish House* is surely a strong contender for awards this year; I know I'll be reading more by Ian McDonald.



Christopher Priest is another author who I should read more often. I was reminded of this when I read his 1981 novel *The Affirmation* last year. It's a novel in which almost nothing is certain, as versions of the same man in two different realities narrate their stories, with neither clearly identifiable as the 'real' one. Superbly realised and the third excellent novel in a row that I've read by Priest.

Bubbling under these were *New Model Army* by Adam Roberts (who is fast becoming a must-read author for me), *Zoo City* by Lauren Beukes (which makes me keen to read her earlier *Moxyland*) and two fascinating debuts: *Mr Shivers* by Robert Jackson Bennett and *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* by Charles Yu.

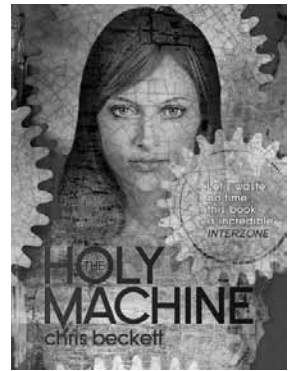
Of the sf books published outside the genre that I read in 2010, two fine post-climate change novels – Marcel Theroux's *Far North* and Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* – deserve a mention but I'd like particularly to highlight here two lesser-known works. *Light Boxes* by Shane Jones was given a wider release by Penguin last year after being published by the small press Publishing Genius in 2009; it thoroughly deserves to reach as large an audience as possible. The tale of a balloon-maker's battle against a months-long February, it is told in a strikingly fragmented way and open to several interpretations, none of which quite fit completely.

A.C. Tillyer's story collection *An A-Z of Possible Worlds* was published by Roast Books in 2009 as a set of twenty-six individual pamphlets in a box. Each is a snapshot of a place; there are a few connections but most stand alone and settings range from an island whose inhabitants have lost their sense of time to a remarkably popular orbital road. Many of the pieces are fine reads in their own right – Tillyer's prose has a wonderful rhythm – but they also gain from being part of the edifice of the whole.

All of these books were singular reading experiences for me in 2010; I hope for similar – yet different! – ones in 2011.

**Tony Keen**  
**Books Of The Year**

The most engaging sf novel of 2010 was Ian McDonald's *The Dervish House*. This does everything that *River of Gods* and *Brasyl* did, only that little bit better in every single aspect. It further establishes McDonald as one of Britain's best contemporary novelists. Another novelist as interested in the city as a living, breathing organism as McDonald is China Miéville. Miéville's fictional Beszel and Ul Qoma, the subject of 2009's *The City and the City*, are as convincingly portrayed as McDonald's near-future Istanbul. The strong narrative voice of Inspector Tyador Borlú helps – I found myself unable to avoid imagining him as Brian Cox. Some may ask a question of whether this novel is actually science fiction but the central concept is from the realm of the fantastic.



Chris Beckett's *The Holy Machine* was first published back in 2004 but only got its UK publication in 2010. It's a fascinating exploration of many issues connected with the production of robots for sexual gratification. In particular, it addresses the idea that human application of a sexual or gender identity to a sentient machine might mean nothing at all to the machine itself. This raises serious points about the way in which we look at the world and impose our patterns upon it.

Ian Watson and Ian Whates's collection, *The Mammoth Book of Alternate Histories*, is a good introduction to the range of what can be done with alternate history, without wallowing in its clichés. Kim Stanley Robinson's 'The Lucky Strike' is included but I found most intellectually stimulating George Zebrowski's 'Lenin in Odessa'. This latter story interrogates the notion of historical inevitability through alternate history.

H.G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* was a re-read. His satire of Darwinism still holds up well, despite certain quaint aspects. A television adaptation by Mark Gatiss captured some of the novel's quality but I also read Ian Edginton and D'Israeli's graphic novel adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*, a fine piece of work that leads into the pair's *Scarlet Traces* series. A more recent novel is Mary Gentle's *Golden Witchbreed*, a fine planetary romance, a science fiction novel that feels in many ways like a fantasy. Gentle's skilful characterization and storytelling makes the prospect of a new novel from her in 2011, *Black Opera*, a pleasing one.

In non-fiction, *The Mythological Dimensions of Doctor Who* (edited by Anthony Burdge, Jessica Burke and Kristine Larsen) includes an excellent essay by Colin B. Harvey, 'Canon, Myth and Memory In *Doctor Who*', which examines how canon and genre interrelate in *Doctor Who* to provide a structure that resembles a mythic one. Last year many people raved about *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. Finally reading it this year, I found it full of helpful insights. I may not always agree with it but every other page I found myself writing "very interesting" in the margin.



## Paul Kincaid Books of the Year

There's been a lot to get excited about this year: Richard Powers wrote the best novel of the year (*Generosity*), closely followed by David Mitchell (*The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*); in straight genre terms, Ian McDonald probably deserves to win all the prizes going with *The Dervish House* (though Tricia Sullivan is a good bet with *Lightborn*, too); and simply as a collection of stories it's been a long time since I read anything as good as *The Secret History of Fantasy* edited by Peter S. Beagle, though the critical apparatus behind it is very suspect. But I was particularly excited by two older books, both by women and both of which I've raved about elsewhere.

*The Rapture* by Liz Jensen came out too late in 2009 to make any impact that year but it should have done. A brilliant and compelling combination of tense thriller and thoughtful novel of ideas, it is the sort of accessible yet complex work that used to be a staple of science fiction; but that combination of qualities has become all too rare of late. It can be read as a straightforward apocalyptic adventure but that would be to miss the subtlety that is particularly noticeable in the interplay of characters. The fact that the characters are damaged and this is a novel about a damaged world may seem obvious but if so why aren't we reading variations on this novel all the time. The truth is, it takes considerable novelistic skill to make emotionally, physically and psychologically scarred characters come across as vividly, as believably and as attractively as they do here. As I write this, it's a year since I read this novel, yet it remains sharper in my memory than many of the books I've read since then.

If Jensen's book makes you wonder why science fiction isn't producing more works like this, the point is made even more forcefully by Kate Wilhelm's 1977 collection, *The Infinity Box*. I re-read this collection because of something I was writing for *Vector* (possibly for this very issue) but while my attention was fixed on the novella that opens the collection I simply couldn't stop myself going on to read the whole of the rest of the volume. The quality of the writing is outstanding but it is the interplay of ideas that commands our attention. I strongly suspect that a collection such as this would not be published as science fiction today; there are no rocket ships, no alien planets, no baroque adventures, no posthumans. What there are, are stories that undermine our confidence in our psychological make-up, our social context. A platoon of American soldiers bursts out of a sweaty forest to devastate a local village, the sort of thing that happened all the time in Vietnam (and that has become commonplace once more) but the village, we discover, is American, with American women going about their usual routines. The fact that neither recognizes the other is a telling comment on the war. It is a vivid story, full of images you cannot get out of your mind, and yet it is in many ways the weakest in the collection. It has been a long time since I first read Wilhelm's collection, I don't think it will be anywhere near as long before I re-read it.

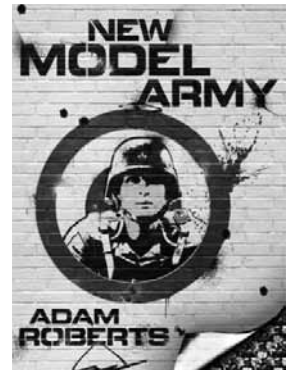
## Jonathan McCalmont Books and Magazines of 2010

2010 was an interesting year for me as it was a year in which I made a concerted effort to break out of my comfort zone and read works of genre that I might otherwise have steered clear of. Predictably, this was not a universally successful undertaking as the near wall-to-wall praise for works such as Nnedi Okorafor's postmodern African fantasy novel *Who Fears Death* and Connie Willis's *Blackout/All Clear* - a two-part time-traveling homage to the courage of Britain's War generation - left me scratching my head in complete bafflement. However, the experiment did yield some notable successes including M. D. Lachlan's beautifully demented mystical Viking werewolf odyssey *Wolfsangel* and the slowly unfolding brilliance of Fumi Yoshinaga's Tiptree Award-winning gender-bending alternative history manga series *Ooku: The Inner Chambers*.

However, while 2010 was all things considered a good year for me in terms of genre fiction, it was also a year dominated by two particular books and a magazine. My first pick is Adam Roberts's *New Model Army*. A commentary upon the state, the individual and the role of social media in changing not only the way we relate to each other but also the way we think about ourselves, *New Model Army* combines evocative prose and big ideas with Roberts's surreal sense of humour and critical insight into the history of science fiction to produce what was easily my genre novel of the year. This is the novel that Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* should have been and if it does not make it onto the Clarke Award shortlist then, as Larry Niven used to write, There Ain't No Justice.

The second book to attract my attention and inspire my imagination was Nicholas Ruddick's *The Fire in The Stone - Prehistoric Fiction from Charles Darwin to Jean M. Auel*. Ruddick's book is an attempt to reclaim prehistoric fiction as a part of speculative (rather than historical) fiction. Aside from being a brilliant overview of a much over-looked and really quite rewarding genre, the book also sheds some profoundly unflattering light on the careers of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne before providing us with a whole new way of looking at alternative and speculative histories. Ruddick's book is a real critical milestone and its ideas deserve as wide a readership as possible.

Another pleasant surprise this year was the quality of both the fiction and the non-fiction in TTA Press's *Black Static* magazine. *Black Static* uses the same formula as its bigger and better known sister publication *Interzone* but focuses on horror and dark fantasy instead of science fiction. As with *Interzone*, the quality of the non-fiction in *Black Static* is really superlative (Peter Tennant's Case Notes is one of the best kept secrets in genre criticism) but what sticks in the mind are the high standards of the short fiction. Some say that we are living through a new golden age of horror; *Black Static* lends serious weight to this view.



## Martin McGrath

### Books of 2010

Last year I didn't submit an end of year round-up to *Vector* because I had difficulty coming up with five newish books that I'd read and enjoyed. This year there were at least a dozen books that I could happily have included on my list. Either my standards are slipping or there was a lot of good sf published this year.

I read a number of good short story collections. Jetse de Vries's *Shine* anthology was a breath of fresh air, Allen Ashley's *Catastrophia* was excellent and *Never Again* by Allyson Bird and Joel Lane was a strong collection in a good cause. *The Best of Kim Stanley Robinson*, edited by Jonathan Strahan, was a masterclass in great fiction writing.

I also read a number of first novels this year that I thought showed promise. I liked Aliette de Bodard's *Servant of the Underworld* and Lauren Beukes blew me away with *Moxyland* (I also liked her sophomore effort, *Zoo City*). On finishing Hannu Rajaniemi's *The Quantum Thief* I was a little disappointed, it couldn't live up to the hyperbolic hype, but my estimation of it seems to improve with distance. Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* had stunning moments as well as flaws but his other 2010 release, *Ship Breaker*, was a more complete novel and a more enjoyable read. Don't let the Young Adult marketing put you off.

China Mieville continued to impress with *The Kraken* – I wasn't a fan of his earliest novels but he has won me over. Adam Roberts delivered his best novel yet with *New Model Army* and, while I still don't think he's mastered endings, his was the sf book that got my brain working hardest this year. I also liked Tricia Sullivan's *Lightborn* and *The Holy Machine* by Chris Beckett. No one writes military SF like Karen Traviss and no other author could have persuaded me to pick up a tie-in novel based on a video game – but her *Gears of War* series remains powerful and the latest, *Anvil Gate*, has a really knotty moral question at its core.

Old favourites delivered strong novels this year. I thoroughly enjoyed *Surface Detail* by Banks, *Stone Spring* by Baxter, *The Restoration Game* by MacLeod and *The Dervish House* by McDonald. All are mature writers at the peak of their powers delivering really strong novels. Ken MacLeod seems to have fallen a little out of fashion recently but he continues to hit all the right buttons for me and Ian McDonald did what I thought impossible by trumping *River of Gods*. William Gibson's *Zero History* met with a muted response from some critics and fans but I savoured every page and only regretted that it wasn't longer.

There were some disappointments this year. Charles Yu's *How To Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* was all surface gloss without substance while Graham Joyce's *The Silent Land* was beautifully written in places but the plot would have embarrassed *The Twilight Zone* and was utterly transparent.



## Anthony Nanson

### On utopia without fascism

The 1000-page bulk of Austin Tappan Wright's *Islandia* had sat intimidatingly on the shelf since I acquired it. Only in the period of forced leisure after an operation at the start of the year did I get round to reading it when long hours in bed gave me the chance to experience this leisurely utopian novel in one unbroken sweep. For a week, I inhabited the imaginary country of Islandia and, like the narrator, John Lang, I came to love it. I wanted to stay in this place where a life more authentic than seems feasible in my own society is imagined in persuasive detail. I surfaced from the novel desiring with all my heart to find in the real world a way of living more like that which is possible in Islandia.

But there's a worm in the apple. Turn the frontispiece map of Islandia upside down and it looks rather like South Africa. Across the mountain frontier to the north dwell 'blacks', who are the bronzed Islandians' implacable foes. Any blacks who cross the frontier will be hunted down remorselessly. Wright seems unaware how morally compromised is his utopia by the hints that, in centuries past, the Islandians exterminated the native people of the land they've made their own: white supremacist South Africa extrapolated to a Final Solution. Lang, the US consul, falls in with Islandia's conservative faction, who resist opening the country to modernising, mercantile influences from overseas. Exposed here is the linkage that can arise between authentic inhabitation of a land, which you love as your home, and xenophobia towards others who may wish to share it.

Islandia's utopia is not totalitarian, like some, but the means by which it has come into being and is defended cannot be condoned. A more benign process of change is captured, in microcosm, in Holly Phillips's 'Summer Ice' – for me the stand-out story in Jetse de Vries's *Shine* anthology (it was also published in her collection *In the Palace of Repose*). There are glimpses of a dirty-hands transformation of the physical environment as it's happening: "Pneumatic drills chatter the cement of Manon's street ... The art school is already surrounded by a knot-work of grassy rides and bicycle paths ... buildings are crowned with gardens ... She skirts piles of broken pavement, walks on oily dirt that will have to be cleaned and layered with compost before being reseeded." You're aware of pressures on people in this future – from social norms, from regulation, subsidy, and scarcity – to serve society's needs but the engines of change are neither totalitarian nor fascist. The young artist Manon feels a tension between the impulses to be useful and to follow her calling and achieves a synthesis.

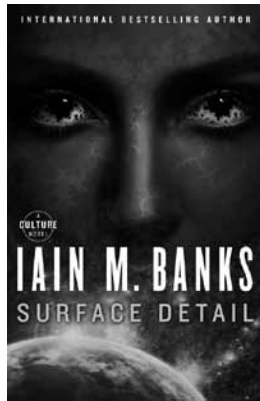
I'd have been glad to tarry in this imagined world as well but the story sent me back into my own world after only 30 pages instead of 1000. Unlike *Islandia*, its vision lies conceivably in the near future. Its challenge to me is to live the dream.



**Martin Potts**

**On *Surface Detail* by Iain M Banks & *Against All Things Ending* by Stephen Donaldson**

*Surface Detail* is Iain M Banks's eighth Culture novel and I was particularly anticipating it having enjoyed 2008's *Matter*. However, this time even my high expectations were surpassed and I was delighted with the variety of ideas he wove around the main storyline. Featuring a virtual war, virtual Hells, a fresh take on a vehicle for immortality and AIs that show far more emotion and personality than many of the human protagonists, this was my favourite novel of 2010.



His portrayal of the virtual reality Hells which are the subject of the conflict is vivid, disturbing and surreal. Appalling scenes of punishments and sadistic rites are portrayed with repugnant effect. But it is the nobility of Prin and Chay, the couple who have vowed to expose the truth of the depravity being experienced within which is so powerful in this narrative and is perfectly communicated in a speech by the male partner, Prin, during a cross examination in court. I found the scene wonderfully written and certainly one of the most moving scenes I have ever read. Overall, a truly wonderfully crafted work which will remain in my mind for a long, long time.

On the fantasy side of the genre, *Against All Things Ending* is superbly challenging and extremely complex in its examination of character and motivations. It is the third instalment in Stephen Donaldson's third and final Covenant sequence. With the original final book, *White Gold Wielder*, appearing in 1983 many fans were nervous about the resurrection of the series and I was a little disappointed by the first novel, *The Runes of the Earth*. Now I appreciate the set up required as the second, *Fatal Revenant*, delivered handsomely and this one does too.

This is no heroic fantasy with battles and fights on every page but a tale of flawed individuals fighting internal and external demons and trying to muddle their way through. The cause of my only issue with the book is that the first 100 pages was concerned with deliberations between characters as to what to do next. Donaldson's precise use of English and his love of obscure words make this no skim read and as he later refers back to many of these protracted discussions which are crucial but this reader would have welcomed a more succinct delivery. However, this is Donaldson's skill, not just as a teller of tales but as a meticulous constructor of narrative and he will not be rushed. The result is a final three-quarters of a novel which is on a par with anything in the previous series; conflict, dilemma, heart rending events and revelations which clarify the complex tapestry he has painstakingly woven. This is not a series for lovers of light, fast and furious fantasy but for those who like to be intellectually challenged and relish depth – fantasy more Michelin star than Big Mac. The scene is set for a wonderful final novel.

**Paul Graham Raven**

**On our Science Fiction Future**

I'm going to cheat and say that the most exciting sf I've read this year – the stuff that's had me in sustained states of awe, tension, stomach-fluttering terror and wide-eyed wonder – has been the stuff on the hundreds of websites and blogs I read every day. It's a massive cliché to talk about how "we live in a science fictional world" but I think it bears repeating until the deeper implications have sunk in. They haven't, yet.

Sure, we've all accepted that "where's my jetpack?" is a dumb question (we only asked it FOR TEH LULZ, anyway), but we haven't figured what to replace it with. Lots of people are trying to (myself included) but the future – not The Future, which was always an unreachable Fifties fantasy – is map and territory at once and we're all trying to draw our boundaries before everyone else's ink dries. There's a whole lot of smudging going on as a result... and the scribbling-outs of the larger players will have a knock-on effect on everyone's own little sub-plots. Life seen less as a science fiction novel, then, and more as a grimly-humoured post-modern cyber-dystopian RPG, played in the dark, using dice with no numbers on the faces and overseen by a games-master who smiles constantly.

What's more, you can read real history as alternate history; using it as a Wildean mirror for today to squeeze its spots in front of, if you like. Of course, 'real' history is almost as mutable as fiction – it's all about where you're standing, which way you're facing – but even so, reading a collection of Situationist essays on urban architecture (*The Situationists and The City*, edited by Tom McDonough) and re-reading the pop-cultural histories of Jon Savage has felt like a game of sociological join-the-dots, muffled echoes of today reflecting back from similar shapes along the fade-path of history.

The future is scary because it's uncertain. We've felt that way before and not even that long ago; singularities are poorly named, for they are legion. We stand on the verge of one but we won't know what it looked like until after it has swept over us. But at a guess, I doubt this will be the one where we come out of the other side as man-machine hybrids or silicon civilisations carked into silent solid-state substrates. That'd be too simple, too easily explained. The imminent singularity will be cultural, not technological, and all bets are off (unless you like the super-long odds, in which case please mail me your stake in used high-denomination Yuan notes whenever you're ready).

But I'm supposed to be talking about *proper* science fiction, aren't I? So let me say that Ian McDonald's *The Dervish House*, in addition to being a writerly masterpiece from an author who visibly gains power with each successive book, comes closest to capturing that imminent and unknowable chaotic future I'm talking about and manages to do so with an honest yet optimistic realism. You can't ask much more of a science fiction novel than that, I think.

**Jim Steel****Books and Magazines of 2010**

As usual there was too much to read and too little time to read it. Despite being the reviews editor for *Interzone* I never see the fiction until it's published and there are always a couple of astonishing stories in each issue. Jim Hawkins, Nina Allen, Aliette de Bodard and Matthew Cook are merely four of the contributors who impressed me. *Postscripts, Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Asimov's* were also dependable suppliers of short fiction while *Locus* and the *Guardian's* genre-friendly book review section remain essential for keeping track with what's happening in publishing. *Locus's* new PDF edition is already very handy; I still haven't completely got to grips with screen-based reading yet but I don't think I can hold out for much longer.

Keeping up with friends' books is almost a full-time job in itself these days but luckily it's rarely a painful task. Gary Gibson's *Empire of Light* and Michael Cobley's *Orphaned Worlds* are both parts of larger wholes and they contribute wonderful episodes to their respective space opera epics. And, since this is a personal retrospective of 2010, I can also justify mentioning Mark Harding's *Music For Another World* anthology which I was fortunate enough to be published in. It contained excellent stories on a musical theme from Neil Williamson, Sean Martin, Vaughan Stanger, Susan Lanigan and many others. It's one that I'm proud to be able to show to people.

This year saw the birth of Corvus, a new publishing imprint that did a sterling job of rescuing a title that had been missed by other British publishers. Why Chris Beckett's debut, *The Holy Machine*, had been overlooked in his own country is a mystery as it is amongst the finest books of the past decade but at least it is at last. Its exploration of bigotry, superstition and sectarianism is as relevant now as it was seven years ago. I also read *Marcher*, Beckett's powerful second novel, for the first time. It's still unpublished in this country and one hopes that Corvus can also acquire it as they're publishing his third novel this year. They also published Jeff VanderMeer's *Finch*, the third volume of his loose *Ambergris* trilogy. It's a masterclass in writing prose and an excellent slice of weird noir in its own right. Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* also deserves mention for the sheer audacity of the storytelling and the quality of the writing.

Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* has probably won more awards than any other debut novel and it's easy to see why. It takes place two centuries into a future of environmental and economic collapse that feels inevitable and, despite addressing massive, important issues, it retains a human scale and a human heart. Anyone who had read Bacigalupi's short stories knew what to expect. Everyone else was in for a surprise.

And what do I want from 2011? More by the above authors will do me nicely.

**Martyn Taylor****Books of the Year**

Easily the best book I read in 2010 was *Ancient Echoes* by Robert Holdstock, the journey of a man into the living history of the land. It forms part of that canon of Holdstock's writing exemplified by the Mythago sequence, although that sensibility informed almost every serious piece he wrote. The prose style is an exemplar of clarity and when the intellectual going gets tough – as it does – Holdstock allowed no intellectual prisoners; the prose just gets clearer, unlike so many others writers. Unreservedly recommended.

*Under The Dome*, Stephen King's contribution to a physical fitness campaign, hoed familiar ground: small town America and the creatures who inhabit it. It is, of course, a response to the collective headless chicken response to 9/11, yet at the same time portrays ordinary, decent people trying to go on being ordinary and decent in the face of incomprehensible circumstances. At the same time the monsters crawl out from under their rocks, assuming control. As such, *Under The Dome* functions as almost archetypal King until he introduces a science fictional deus ex machine to permit a resolution. As he proved with *It*, King doesn't do science fiction. The ending of the literally magnum opus was profoundly disappointing and not worthy of what went before.

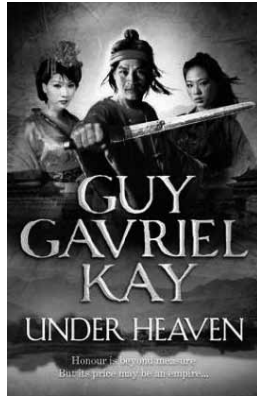
Michael Cobley's *The Orphaned Worlds* is space opera, a fast paced, action based story exploring that old scenario of brash humanity facing up to alien species that wouldn't even notice if humanity was destroyed. Being British space opera these humans speak in Scottish and North European accents, which is a change from not being in Kansas any more. Keep all appendages within the vehicle while reading and don't ask any questions. *The Orphaned Worlds* is a highly enjoyable romp.

'Enjoyable' is perhaps not the most appropriate word to apply to Iain Banks's excoriating, angry *Transition*, which demonstrates his opinion of our ruling class and their finance industry – that, were they on fire, he wouldn't piss 'em out. Personally I think he's paying them compliments but I used to work there. *Transition* shows Banks taking a Freddy Krueger razor glove to torture, to lies, to politics, to just about everything. A very clever, very angry novel with a very powerful fantasy trope at its centre, which doubtless confused some readers who assumed the absence of the 'M' in the name meant *Transition* was a follow up to the rather weak *The Steep Approach To Garbadale*.

Finally, another very angry book: *Never Again*, an anthology of "weird fiction against racism and fascism", edited by Allyson Bird and Joel Lane for Gray Friar Press. I expect many of us were outraged – as I was – by the murder of Sophie Lancaster for no reason other than she didn't dress like the drunken chav morons who took her life. Allyson and Joel place this within a broader context, that if we don't learn from history we will repeat it. The authors are a broad church – Lisa Tuttle to Joe Lansdale, Gary McMahon to Ramsay Campbell. Good stuff for a good cause.

## Sandra Underman Books of the Year

The most memorable new sf novel I read this year was *Under Heaven* by Guy Gavriel Kay. This is set in an alternative medieval China and creates a compelling picture of a remote civilisation and its clashes with the nomads on its border. The main character's loyalty and intelligence are tested to the utmost, while he finds love and friendship where he does not expect them. This is not a world of chinoiserie but stranger and darker. The landscape and the ghosts in particular linger in my mind.



For sheer excitement, the most striking book I read was Kate Griffin's *The Madness of Angels*. I enjoyed the setting in a contemporary London where the magic comes from the workings of everyday life and there are some memorable motifs, including the blue electric angels and the spells made out of rules and regulations. The protagonist has an intriguing and distinctive voice as he rushes from one crisis to another. But the action dominated so much that I did not feel the characters or the themes had time to develop and there did not seem enough to distinguish the climax from the build up of earlier adventures.

*Except the Queen* by Jane Yolen and Midori Snyder is a different kind of urban fantasy about two members of the High Court of the Faery Queen banished to the human world. There is a love story and plenty of danger and excitement but much of the charm of the book comes from the multiple points of view. The exiles provide an unusual perspective on modern life in New York and Milwaukee as well as a sharp awareness of the natural world in an urban environment and we also see other people's reactions to them, as well as to stranger and more sinister powers.

New to me this year was a novel first published in 1931, *The Brontes Went To Woolworths* by Rachel Ferguson (republished by Bloomsbury in 2009). This is a story about three girls living with their widowed mother in London in the 1920s, one a journalist, one a would-be actress and the youngest at home with a governess. Their lives are severely restricted by their class and income; they have few friends or potential boyfriends and they are deeply snobbish, unable to break through social barriers even though they wish they could. But they deal with depression and frustration by playing games of make believe about people they encounter, to the point where they and others can hardly tell the difference between reality and imagination. The book qualifies as sf partly because of the ghosts who make a brief but crucial appearance but mainly because it is about the power of the imagination, both positive and potentially destructive. The three girls lead richly imaginative lives and their humour draws us in to share their pleasure. But the governesses who have to deal with the family are left excluded and bewildered. This is a fun read with the added appeal of a period atmosphere but has an underlying, thought-provoking melancholy.

## Anne Wilson On *Intuition* by Allegra Goodman

The best book I read in 2010 came out in the US in 2006 but, although it was longlisted for the Orange Prize in 2009, seems to have gone largely unnoticed in the sf community. This is perhaps understandable, given that it barely qualifies as science fiction at all. But it is fiction about science and it was highly recommended in the Lablit panel at Eastercon 2010.

I was completely bowled over by the quality of the writing; every word is carefully selected, the imagery is compelling, the prose graceful and rhythmic. The characters are precisely delineated, with their flaws and virtues, their family relationships, their agendas; they live and breathe upon the page. And nobody is a bad guy. Their frailties are dissected with sympathy and we understand only too well how the disaster happens.

Goodman recreates life in a research laboratory, from the directors through to the lab assistants and even down to the mice.

"[Marion] had worked with many strains of mice in her time and knew their particular traits. She knew the sleek albinos, their fine white hair and timid manner, their ruby eyes like the tiny birthstones in children's jewellery. She knew a particular strain of black mice, always agitated, jumping and flipping over constantly, like dark socks in a Laundromat dryer. Those animals knocked food pellets from their wire holders. Their fur was spiked and greasy with their rations, their manner mischievous. They looked like little punks."

The plot is simple. The Philpott is an independent cancer research lab in Cambridge, Massachusetts, overshadowed by its larger neighbour, Harvard. Funding is tight. The directors, Marion and the charismatic Sandy, are worried about their survival. Suddenly, one of their postdoc researchers, Cliff, starts getting some positive results from a trial that they had written off. Fame and funding start to pour in but Cliff's girlfriend and colleague, Robin, thinks it's too good to be true. Cliff's results aren't replicable and soon the lab is involved in an enquiry. As evidence slowly mounts and the lab's problems become fodder for political agendas, the scientists' personal and professional relationships disintegrate. There is a fault line in the lab between the painstaking Marion and Robin, who follow scientific procedures to the letter, and those who, like Sandy and Cliff, allow their optimism to run away with them.

The book gave me an insight into the process of scientific research and, in particular, the idea that it is based on constant failure. I said above that it is barely science fiction and yet in many ways it's about the things that I love in science fiction: the effects that science has on real people. There is a perception that science fiction is badly written and the prose rarely rises above the pedestrian. *Intuition* challenges this because it demonstrates that writing about science can be truly excellent. I strongly recommend it to anyone who enjoys reading science fiction.

Ian Sales

Books Of The Year

2010 was the year I decided DG Compton was a favourite writer. His characters are sharply-drawn, his prose excellent and I especially love his sardonic tone. I read three of his books this year - *The Electric Crocodile*, *Ascendancies* and *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* - of which the last was the best and belongs in the SF Masterworks series. I also made an effort to discover some British science fiction by forgotten writers of the Fifties and Sixties. Rex Gordon's *No Man Friday* may creak a little these days but its mission to Mars has such a typically British beginning it doesn't deserve to be forgotten. Nor does Leonard Daventry's *Keyman* trilogy, the first book of which, *A Man of Double Deed*, proved to be a thoughtful, well-written novel with a nicely cynical hero. And the same for Christopher Hodder-Williams's *98.4*, although it proved an odd beast: a chilling central conceit spoiled by too much Bond-esque derring do.

Worthy of note are a pair of collections I read this year: Chris Beckett's *The Turing Test* and Simon Brown's *Troy*. Both are filled with beautifully-written stories which skim the edges of genre, supping from science fiction rather than making a meal of it. *Lord Byron's Novel: The Evening Land* by John Crowley is an astonishing work of fiction, an impersonation of Byron which seemed to me, though I'm no expert, pretty much pitch-perfect. And finally, I read two excellent and important quintets: the *Bold as Love Cycle* by Gwyneth Jones, and the *Marq'ssan Cycle* by L Timmel Duchamp. One is intensely British, the other is intensely political, both are recommended.



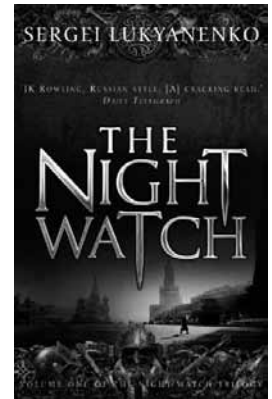
Lynne Bispham

Books Of The Year

Sometimes a book is published that reminds me why I read SF. In 2010 it was Paolo Bacigalupi's brilliant debut novel, *The Windup Girl*. The complexity of its depiction of a dystopian future where sea levels are rising, plagues and pests have run riot across the globe and the genetically-manipulated food supply is controlled by giant corporations makes the imagined world of the book feel extraordinarily real and immediate. In thirty five years of reading the genre, I have rarely been so impressed by a work of science fiction.

The fantasy that most impressed me this year was Kate Griffen's *A Madness of Angels* and its sequel *The Midnight Mayor*. Featuring Matthew Swift, a 21<sup>st</sup> Century urban sorcerer, these novels are shaping up into a compelling series. Griffen's take on the genre is highly inventive, remoulding urban myths and folklore to evoke a fantastical London that sits very easily alongside the 'real' London, with all its seediness and glamour, that is so wonderfully brought to life in the books.

My great discovery of 2010, having somehow missed it when it was published in 2007, was *The Night Watch*, the first volume in Sergei Lukyanenko's series of novels featuring The Others, supernatural beings who, unknown to the rest of the population, walk the streets of Moscow. The Others gain their power from the Twilight, a magical realm that exists alongside the everyday world, and they owe allegiance to the Light or the Dark. The treaty which prevents war between the Light and the Dark, which both side twist to their own advantage, provides an unusual dimension to this original fantasy.



# 2010: TELEVISION IN REVIEW

Alison Page

## CANCELLED

My first impression of SF television in 2010 was 'but everything was cancelled'. Two massive series – *Lost* and *Heroes* – did peter out early in 2010, leaving a jaded, exhausted feeling in SF audiences. I think many viewers became wary, approaching new shows with reservation, more ready than before to drop their investment in established narratives, determined that they won't get fooled again. But other than these two last-gasps, only *Caprica*, *Flashforward* and *Stargate Universe* have actually failed in 2010, while about a dozen SF shows survived and have been extended for 2011.

Each of these series was cancelled because of falling audiences, but the reason for that fall-off was different in each case.

*Stargate: Universe* was too much like a puppet theatre. It was the last TV show from the *Stargate* franchise, but could be watched as a standalone. It was set on a failing intergalactic spaceship, launched from Earth millions of years ago by 'The Ancients'. A bunch of space marines and some oddball scientists and women in skimpy vests found themselves stranded on the ship, many galaxies away from Earth, unable to return home or change course. Luckily the ship stopped every week at a different planet where they could get supplies and have an adventure. I think this was a smashing premise by the way, and *Universe* was the only new TV material in 2010 which was set on a space ship (aside from the *Tardis*), and that made it attractive to me. But the script was clunky and the acting wooden. The exception was Robert Carlyle as the amoral scientist Nicholas Rush. He moved among the cardboard cut-out men like a live wolf in the puppet theatre, swinging his grizzled head from side to side. He seemed literally to be of a different order of being to the other characters, but one real person on board wasn't enough, and *Universe* won't be renewed after season 2.

In contrast *Caprica* was perhaps too challenging. It was a prequel to *Battlestar Galactica*, set in the urban industrial culture which created the Cylons. It was a fairly sophisticated show, dealing with the technology and metaphysics of immortality. It starred Eric Stoltz. I haven't seen it right through but its advocates describe it unfolding like a flawed but interesting novel. All sounds so good. So what went wrong? Why were audiences poor? I suspect that viewers were unlikely to invest in this program unless they were already loyal to the *BSG Universe*: and yet it was expressly designed to appeal to a different kind of viewer (for example both writer Ronald D Moore and the network said publicly that they wanted

more female viewers). Thus the show sought its audience at the intersection of two groups which by definition had limited overlap. This is surely why it failed commercially. The first nine episodes aired from January to March 2010, and were shown on Sky 1 in the UK. The show was then cancelled and the final episodes were shown only in Canada (though some months later they were broadcast in the UK). This of course made it even harder to follow.

*Universe* and *Caprica* make an interesting contrast in reasons for failure: one not good enough, one not commercial enough.

The portfolio of failure is completed by *FlashForward* which failed for a 'new' reason which I have seen mentioned by increasing numbers of TV critics and fans, in relation to many different shows: lack of audience faith in its narrative coherence and core premise. There was a growing feeling among viewers that the creators of the show didn't really know what was going on, that they were 'making it up as they go along'. This is the same complaint that was voiced in previous years by viewers of *Lost* and *Heroes*, and contributed to declining audiences for those shows. If viewers start to feel that the show's creators are not 'playing fair', then they will feel literally cheated. It's a powerful emotional rejection of the show, and produces catastrophic audience decline.

It's interesting that *The X Files*, back in the nineties, was accused of exactly this fault - but audiences at that time were more tolerant of the meta-narrative about a vast conspiracy, which was being made up on the fly by Chris Carter and his team. Although complaints about the coherence of its so-called 'myth-arc' were being made from at least season 6, if not earlier, it wasn't until seasons 8 or 9, from 2000 or later, that there was a significant dent in viewing figures.

It is well known that viewers are engaged by a strong narrative arc, and so it is not surprising that SF television has developed in this direction over the past twenty years. In a wide range of genres a season-spanning narrative arc can be constructed from the controlled revelation of 'The Truth' (perhaps a criminal conspiracy or a relationship betrayal). Many recent SF shows have adopted a genre-specific version of this construction: 'The Truth' which is revealed during the season is not a set of hidden facts, but the *Nature of the Universe* in which the narrative happens. Think of *Life on Mars*: 'Am I mad, in a coma, or back in time?' This is not merely a question about in-universe events, but about the meta-context of the narrative. *Lost* invited similar speculation. Such a reveal is intriguing for audiences, reflected in good initial viewing figures. However a metaphysical arc has to be backed up by clever



Channel 4's Misfits strike a pose.

planning and good writing, and it is hard to spin out for more than one or two seasons. If the series creators seem unsure about their own meta-narrative, then audiences will lose faith.

*Flashforward* started well: the pilot episode had an audience of over 12 million, and was nominated for a Hugo award. It had a great initial premise: nearly everyone on Earth simultaneously lost consciousness for two minutes and seventeen seconds on 6 October 2009. During this “blackout”, people experienced two minutes of their future lives in 29 April 2010. They then reacted with fatalism or inspiration to what they saw. The story is based on an award-winning novel by Robert Sawyer. It dramatizes issues such as determinism, free will, and how we make peace with mortality and addiction. This intellectually-stimulating narrative was delivered by cold but skilful actors including Joseph Fiennes. At first it seemed that the creators (Brannon Braga, of *Star Trek* time-loop episodes innumerable, and David S Goyer who wrote *Dark City*) had the ‘truth’ of this fictional universe clear in their minds, and were revealing it in a controlled manner. But as the series progressed comments from fans and critics revealed a loss of faith in this process, and viewing figures fell off sharply. The lesson is that to succeed, an SF show must be participative; it must engage the viewer as co-creator. In return, in order to harness the energy of the viewers’ creative imagination to do half the heavy lifting, the makers of the show have to win and keep the faith of the audience. But of course at a minimum any SF show must survive, must complete a season, or be commissioned for a further season. Otherwise the most

engaged viewer is like one who loves a dying pet and that’s a bitter-sweet experience at best. Better to love something that will live as long as your love.

## IMMORTAL

Which brings us to **Doctor Who**: this strange immortal, whose immortality is its mesmerising characteristic. It seems old and alien among these young shows, and I don’t think it can be entirely judged by human standards. Many of its most devoted followers savagely criticise every actual episode. To some extent any episode, as a single iteration, is less significant than the fact of its continuing to be. The almost fifty-year-long chain of iteration is a weight that gives it gravitas, but also hampers it on every side. It doesn’t have characters and storylines but rather the latest way in which it *does itself*: the latest way it ‘does’ The Doctor, The Companion, The Tardis. Furthermore, in 2010 the show has performed its intermittent trick of renewing itself, to general if not universal approval. Matt Smith has replaced David Tennant and Russell T Davies has been replaced by Stephen Moffatt as lead writer. The new version is more breezy - more confident in its status, not trying so hard. It may not be taking itself as seriously as it used to. I probably don’t like it quite as much, but I think I am in a minority.

Most episodes of *Doctor Who* have great stonking flaws in them, which almost smack the viewer in the face, but the show nevertheless receives enthusiastic viewer participation. Viewers become willing co-creators, because they know the show will maintain its narrative



integrity, and the integrity of its over-arching frame. Other highly-successful TV shows serve their audiences through deployment of originality, lyrical writing, and incomparable acting. *Doctor Who* does it by deploying its gravitas as a social and cultural phenomenon. It can use (let us say) Van Gogh or *A Christmas Carol* as plot elements without being torn by the weight of the reference, because the cloth of Doctor Who is as strong as anything that could be sewn onto it.

The downside is that the writers don't have complete creative freedom; this show is too full of memories and significance, and old storylines. Like a pantomime or a seaside postcard, there is only partial scope for variation within an artefact which is shaped by long repetition and expectation. Creativity is expressed in japes (such as 'making fun of the Queen' or 'Dad's Army Daleks') which leave no permanent trace.

The new *Doctor Who* does sometimes gesture towards a characteristic new-SF-style narrative arc driven by 'gradual revelation of the nature of the universe'. Some long-term fans would say this has always been a feature of *Doctor Who*. It's true that almost every type of narrative, including the metaphysical reveal, can be mined from the ancient impacted strata of Old Who, while New Who has been exuberant in appropriating every type of new trope and narrative to itself. But, I think after all this time a simple 'what is really going on here' arc would be meaningless or even insulting. A better meta-narrative for Who is that narrative itself has become utterly fragmented by the churning of the Time-Wars: the more the nature and consequences of those 'wars' are kept firmly in the unexamined background, the better as far as I am concerned.

At its best *Doctor Who* makes its audience feel what it would be like to know an immortal being, of benign but inhuman disposition and ferocity. Or even to imagine what it would be to be an entity whose life-line has been torn up repeatedly by time looping and tangling back on itself, who nevertheless tries to preserve some sort of integrity – knowing nothing except that nothing is fixed. Now *that* is a meaningful and interesting meta-narrative, which speaks directly to the human condition. Compared to that, the saving *once again* of space-time is just a lot of noise.

## MORTALS

There are many new SF shows knocking around the schedules these days. I do not think these shows are ambitious to change your world, or to explode a love-bomb in your brain. Not everyone wants that anyway. How exhausting. They seem to be cannily positioned as being 'like other successful shows'.

So far none of them has completely engaged me, but I will need to give them more time.

**The Event** was new in 2010, and we are currently half way through Season 1. It stars Laura Innes (Kerry Weaver from *ER*). A ship carrying aliens or extra-dimensional visitors crashed in Alaska in 1945. The visitors are almost but not quite human, and they age very slowly. They have been interned in a harsh prison camp since the 1940s. Now they are trying to break out. In trying to contain the threat of the aliens, the US Government has created implacable

enemies. Ahem – I think we are on safe ground saying it's a political allegory. A liberal allegory where there is right on both sides. And it's a complicated story with a lot of double-crossing and unreliable witnessing. It was created by Belgian writer Nick Wauters, who previously worked on *The 4400*, which it somewhat resembles. It slightly resembles a lot of shows. In terms of sexual and emotional risk-taking I felt it was playing at being naughty, but then – what TV show isn't? On the plus side, I don't get the utterly flaky feeling I did from *FlashForward*. I'm going to watch more, and I'm going to hope it keeps its end up.

**V** is almost the right-wing antithesis to *The Event*. No wishy-washy liberalism here – but a definite moral stance. There's us, and there's them. We are good, they are bad. We are human, they are lizards. In real life *V* has been embraced by Tea Partiers as an allegorical criticism of the Obama administration. To what extent it was intended to appeal to the far right is arguable – its star Morena Baccarin has denied it, but would she necessarily know? Or say if she did?

Obviously *V* is a remake of the paranoid drama of the same name from the 1980s about aliens who seemed to come in peace, but were really evil lizard-people in human skin: a show which had a profound effect on a number of people including David Icke. Interestingly, the original series was first drafted as a near-future drama about the dangers of fascism in the United States (called 'Storm Warnings'). There were no lizard people. NBC rejected this proposal for a TV show, until the American fascists were re-cast as man-eating aliens. Although I am interested in the politics of shows, and *V* is an interesting political mess, the barrier which utterly prevents me from watching either version of *V* is the pitiful science. I know all SF shows take liberties, but I always felt *V* was for people who were so out of touch with science that they didn't even care. So, ideal for the Tea Party then.

**Fringe** is the creation of JJ Abrams, of *Lost* and *Cloverfield*. It is reminiscent of *The X Files*, but kind of more coherent and less playful. It's pretty violent though. An FBI "Fringe Division" team working for Homeland Security investigates a series of peculiar occurrences. It transpires that these relate to the incursion of a parallel Universe into our own. I think the acting and scripts are reasonably good, but to me it's a workaday functional show rather than an addiction. Perhaps I need to give it more time to grow on me, as I know it is growing on others. It stars John Noble as a mad scientist, and adorable Leonard Nimoy is a regular guest. So far it seems to have retained the confidence of its audience in its premise. I think for this reason there has not been that disillusioned falling-off of viewing figures that similar shows have suffered. Having said that, some of the embedded 'enigmas' have turned out to be trivial cyphers, and Abrams will have to watch his tendency to elaborate conundrums which end up disappointing his viewers. We know what he's like.

**Warehouse 13** is a modern-day steampunk-lite comedy-drama about a Government repository of weird/magical artefacts from myth and history (like 'Lewis Carroll's looking glass' which is a 'dimensional portal'). It is the creation of Rockne S O'Bannon, who gave us *Farscape*, and it has similar smart characterisation. It passes the time well enough; it's cleverly written, and a bit silly. It's quite funny and cute, but not emotionally

engaging.

It might also be worth checking out (**A Town Called Eureka** and **Sanctuary**, neither of which I have seen. Of all these examples of new shows, I would probably give *Fringe* the best chance of developing into something worth watching. That is the one I would recommend you give time to, if you are considering making the commitment.

Meanwhile **Futurama** is back, after a difficult couple of years. Reception has been mixed, but one of this year's episodes, '*The Prisoner of Benda*', was particularly impressive, and I recommend it to fans who might have lost touch with the show during its recent tribulations. Incidentally this is an example of a writer doing the homework to ensure the underlying premise is coherent: according to David X Cohen, Ken Keeler who wrote *Prisoner of Benda* devised a theorem based on group theory, to underpin the structure of this episode, which concerns mind-swap technology.<sup>1</sup> It's funny too.

## STRANGE ATTRACTORS

So it seems that a narrative arc, structured around the controlled reveal of an underlying truth, is powerful in engaging the TV SF audience. But is this a cold and intellectual engagement? A common criticism of SF, of which I am sure you are aware, is that while its ideas are great, it is weak on authentic emotion and characterisation.

There are a number of responses to this. One is that some people don't really want a heavy emotional scene. I think that's fair enough. Another is that we may have a dull bourgeois model of what 'authentic emotion' is, and that creative writers should challenge that model. And of course many would argue that the best SF (across all media) will stand comparison to any other art form, and the genre is unfairly judged by its worst exemplars.

I feel that SF dramas are often cold and stilted, but that the supposedly chilly SF audiences are able to generate an emotional charge – a love field – around the narrative structures that are presented to them. As co-creators, SF fans often generate great passion around unpromising material.

But in this final section I want to discuss two SF shows from 2010, which were not merely cold scaffolding, and not merely human dramas parachuted into an SF universe, but used the SF context to touch audiences deeply.

One is the zombie drama **The Walking Dead**. It's on AMC, which like HBO has a reputation for grown-up TV shows, such as *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* (both shown in the same Sunday Evening slot as *The Walking Dead*). Season 1 premiered at Halloween, rushed into production to meet this deadline, and ran to only six episodes – unusually short for an American series. It was well received by audiences and critics. The premiere had 5.3 million viewers - higher than for any previous AMC series - and the final episode had 6 million viewers. It's been nominated for various awards. A second season was commissioned, and will show in the autumn of 2011.

*The Walking Dead* is the story of survivors in the wake of a zombie apocalypse. It is based on a comic book series written by Robert Kirkman. The problems and mistakes in this show are manifold. Its storyline depends on everyone behaving like idiots: they don't exploit the resources of their world in any systematic way, or make sensible plans

for survival. Most zombie dramas are one or two hours long and such issues are resolved *tout suite*: you employ a successful survival strategy or you get eaten. To spin it out to even six episodes has required a kind of balancing act, where it is unclear why these idiots have survived when so many others have perished, and why they haven't sharpened up their game a little. They should either have died by now, or got much better at surviving. Just as one example, the abandoned farmhouses of rural Georgia (where the show is set) must in real life be well stocked with handguns and ammunition, but our heroes are hoarding a few precious bullets and have no plans for getting any more. It's possible that the intellectual premise of the show is not remotely sustainable. Perhaps it is only the short season which has postponed it coming completely unstuck. We will find out later this year.

There have been many criticisms of the values which underpin the show – it has been accused of classism, racism, sexism. One example is how the women always crouch helplessly screaming while the men fight the zombies. It becomes grating after a while, and seems to reflect a young man's nostalgia for a past which they have never experienced, which never existed, when only men were heroes. I think these are not trivial criticisms, and there's no room here to explore all the ways in which this show fails to hang together. And yet, every episode has managed to deliver a significant emotional punch: mainly fear and disgust, to be fair, but those are emotions. Many SF shows unfold horrific events, but this one communicates the horror and pity effectively. I welcome it for that reason as one of the best SF shows of the year.

The other standout SF show of 2010 is the British E4 comedy **Misfits**. This is an astonishing achievement by a single writer – Howard Overman, who also wrote the *Dirk Gently* mini-drama and the detective comedy *Vexed* – and a bunch of young actors, who all do a marvellous job. The first season was shown in 2009, and the second season in November and December 2010, culminating in a Christmas Special. Audiences started quite low, but have doubled in the second season – bucking the trend for recent SF series. **Misfits** won the **2010 BAFTA for Best Drama Series** – the first time it has ever been awarded to an SF show. A third season has been commissioned, and will begin production shortly.

## (ENDNOTES)

1The drama concerns a small group of British 'young offenders' on community service, who are struck by lightning and develop superpowers. The action and the comedy are violent and offensive, and the tone is flippant. I think it's brilliant. Season 2 delivers authentic drama through the use of genre conventions. Surely this is what we want most of all from SF TV – not mainstream-style drama in a context which happens to be SF, but an exploration of humanity which is only possible through the metaphors and imagery available to an SF show.

The teenage working class protagonists develop powers which are ironical commentaries on their social powerlessness. So, Simon who is socially awkward develops an involuntary invisibility which descends on him like an epileptic fit. The actor, Iwan Rheon, has based his portrayal of Simon on Ian Curtis, the tragic

frontman of Joy Division. None of the team is in control of their power, and the arc of the two seasons traces their developing maturity as they try to establish that control. The very problematic nature of their powers prevents the narrative collapsing - a danger for most superhero stories, where the fantastic powers of the hero make it difficult to keep constructing plausible dangers.

An issue which has caused a lot of controversy is the treatment of sexuality and gender in the show. It is very sexually frank, and to some extent – to an arguable extent – the two working class girls are objectified. The main black female character in the show – Alisha – is cursed with the power of making anyone who touches her overwhelmingly attracted to her. When I heard about this I almost decided not to watch the show at all. I thought ‘only a man could think that was a good power to have’. But, in fact, throughout this show powers are dangerous and destructive. Alisha’s power is the most dangerous of all. It is portrayed as a curse, and in the end I felt the storyline acknowledged the way that young women are objectified and blamed for being attractive, and the way they struggle to be recognised, both internally and externally defining themselves as more than their sexuality.

Not everyone will be convinced by what I say about *Misfits*, which is on the surface very crude, violent and offensive. It successfully delivers on all three of the dimensions which I have been worrying away at in this review. It reveals ‘the truth’ via a controlled narrative, which keeps faith with the audience, allowing them to be co-creators without fear of betrayal. It uses the freedom which SF brings to break out of the constraints of mainstream drama. And it delivers authentic emotion, rather than just being an intellectual exercise. I cried at the Season 2 Finale. I jumped to my feet with intense emotion.

For every single show I have mentioned here the challenge is to maintain quality and integrity through the seasons which are to come. For SF shows this remains a key challenge, as the premise of the narrative tends to exhaust itself, and the revelations of ‘truth’ tend to run out or hit insoluble contradictions. *Misfits* might go wrong, *Doctor Who* might become totally self-referential, and all the mortal shows might be cancelled. But then – something new will be commissioned next year and it will all begin again.

## BROADCAST DETAILS

1. **Caprica.** US (SyFy). The first nine episodes aired from January to March 2010, in the UK shown on Sky 1. The next half of season 1 began in October but Syfy announced that they had cancelled the series. The final episodes were only broadcast on the Canadian TV channel Space, but have since appeared on Sky1 in the UK. **STATUS: 1 Season. Cancelled. X**
2. **Doctor Who.** UK (BBC). Series 5 of the New Who was broadcast from April to June 2010, and Christmas Special on Christmas Day. The episodes are frequently repeated on BBC3. **STATUS: Next season coming up.**
3. **Eureka.** US (SyFy). Season 4 began in July 2010. Shown in the UK on Sky 1 as *A Town Called Eureka*. **STATUS: Season 4 is ongoing, Season 5 has been commissioned.**
4. **The Event.** US (NBC). Premiered in September. A full first season of 22 episodes was confirmed in October. It is shown in the UK on Channel 4. **STATUS: Season 1 is ongoing.**
5. **FlashForward.** US (ABC). Shown from September 2009 to May 27, 2010. The series was cancelled in May. It was shown in the UK on Channel Five, and is now available as a DVD set. **STATUS: 1 Season. Cancelled. X**
6. **Fringe.** US (Fox). Season 2 was shown from September 2009 to May 20, 2010, and Season 3 began in September 2010, and is on-going. In the UK it is shown on Sky 1. DVD sets of Season 1 and 2 are available. **STATUS: Season 3 is Ongoing.**
7. **Futurama.** US (Comedy Central). Originally distributed by Fox, midway through the production of the fourth season, Fox decided to stop buying episodes – season 5 was shown erratically. In 2009 Comedy Central commissioned 26 new half-hour episodes that began airing in June 2010. **STATUS: Season 6 is ongoing.**
8. **Misfits.** UK (E4). The second series aired from 11 November to 16 December 2010. A 60-minute Christmas special was broadcast in December 2010. **STATUS: Season 3 has been given the go-ahead.**
9. **Sanctuary.** Canada (SyFy). Episodes 1-8 were ‘webisodes’, designed to be viewed online, back in 2007. Sanctuary was broadcast as a TV show from October 2008. Season 2 ended in January 2010. Season 3 commenced in October 2010. In the UK it may be watched on ITV4. **STATUS: Season 3 is ongoing.**
10. **Sarah Jane Adventures.** UK (BBC Cymru). The fourth series began airing on 11 October 2010 and a fifth series has been confirmed. When the fourth series was transmitted in the autumn of 2010, a new spin-off series *Sarah Jane's Alien Files* was shown concurrently with each of the first episodes of the stories. **STATUS Season 4 is ongoing.**
11. **Stargate: Universe.** Canada/US (SyFy). Season 1 ran from October 2009 to June 2010. Season 2 began in October 2010. In December it was reported that the show would end after the second season. It may be watched in the UK on Sky 1. **Status: Season 2 is ongoing, but will be the last. X**
12. **The Walking Dead.** US (AMC). Season 1 consisting of only 6 episodes was first broadcast November-December 2010. It was shown in the UK on FX. **STATUS: Season 2 has been announced.**
13. **Warehouse 13.** US (SyFy). Season 2 was shown from July to September 2010. In October it was renewed for a third season. It was shown in the UK on Freeview Channel 1 (formerly Virgin 1). Season 1 is available on DVD. **STATUS: Season 3 has been announced.**
14. **V.** US (ABC). Season 1 ran from November 2009 to May 2010. In May it was renewed for a 10-episode second season, which begins in January. It was shown in the UK on SyFy. **STATUS: Season 2 has been announced.**

See for example [http://theinfosphere.org/The\\_Prisoner\\_of\\_Benda](http://theinfosphere.org/The_Prisoner_of_Benda)

# 2010 IN FILM: NOT MY KIND OF GENRE

Jonathan McCalmont

Anyone could be fooled into thinking that we were living through a golden age of genre cinema. Every week sees the arrival of another billion dollar franchise filled with magic powers, vampires, space ships and aliens. Every week sees another Red Carpet Leicester Square premiere full of glitz, glamour and beautifully turned-out celebrities patiently explaining to the world's press that the film is actually quite a bit darker than both the source material and the previous instalment in the series. Genre is on every bus shelter. Genre is in every newspaper. Genre is on every phone box, billboard and magazine cover. Genre is the universal glue that binds our culture together. However, while we may well bask in the triumphant glow of universal love and acceptance, it is difficult not to feel a pinprick of doubt. Yes, genre is everywhere. But is it our sort of genre?

One usually thinks of the difference between genres in terms of differences in tropes and techniques. For example, a work is science fiction if it has aliens, fantasy if it has dragons and 'an attack on genre boundaries' if it has both. But while it is easy enough to see similarities between your average sci-fi laden Hollywood blockbuster and the best works of speculative fiction, there are also many differences. Differences not just in quality or intelligence, but in approach. Indeed, might it not be better to think of genre not as a question of tropes but of tribal affiliation with different approaches to the same material competing for prestige and popularity? If it is then 2010 was a big year in the history of genre film.

For the best part of a decade, Hollywood studios have been falling over each other in a mad scramble to transform old comic titles into cinematic franchises. This scramble paid rich dividends as the likes of Spiderman and Batman seemed to perfectly embody the view from the Oval Office. Indeed, genre film told us that the world was a chaotic place, a dangerous place, a place that was crying out for a particular brand of muscular salvation. The spirit of the age had it that psychotic violence was okay as long as the violence was framed in therapeutic terms. Psychotic violence was an entirely acceptable means of social engineering just as long as it was motivated by Daddy Issues and the desire for revenge. Genuine philanthropic zeal was for socialists and losers. However, as Bush and his cadre of super villains departed the White House, the spirit of the times seemed to stifle a

yawn and look at its watch. Nowhere was this tiredness more evident than in the lugubriously self-indulgent *Iron Man 2*. Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* (2008) was something of an unexpected hit; its combination of clever casting and pseudo-political posturing caught the public's imagination while its lighter tone and aspirational Californian setting served as a useful counterpoint to the doom and gloom of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008). However, the second Robert Downey Jr.'s Tony Stark steps on stage in the sequel, it is obvious that something is terribly wrong. The film's onanistic triumphalism and bare-faced declaration that social ills are best confronted by private sector moral entrepreneurs feels astonishingly ugly and politically insensitive at a time when private sector entrepreneurs are having their companies propped-up at the expense of the poor and the hungry. The decision to cast Mickey Rourke as a shambling Russian baddy is laughably pretentious in a film that ultimately boils down to a bunch of computer-generated robots punching each other in the face for about an hour.

The fading glamour of the super hero is also evident in films such as Matthew Vaughn's *Kick-Ass*. Astonishingly violent but endearingly swearsy, *Kick-Ass* follows in the footsteps of films such as Kinka Usher's *Mystery Men* (1999) and Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* (2009) by depicting super heroes not as tortured saviours but as a collection of self-serving lunatics whose defining characteristic is a willingness to use horrifying levels of violence to impose their twisted moral prejudices on the world. The fact that *Kick-Ass* was more successful than *Watchmen* despite being both less interesting and less satirical of the form suggests a growing post-post-9/11 realisation that social problems require social solutions. Social solutions that are not to be found in an open-ended and solipsistic quest for revenge. This shift in social attitudes also accounts for the relative success of such lightweight satirical animated fare as *Despicable Me* -- in which a super villain is distracted from his grand schemes by much more human concerns -- and *Megamind* -- in which an alien super villain comes to realise that he is co-dependent upon the hero who bullied him as a child. However, while the release of new super hero films feel less like cultural events than they once did, the sense that Hollywood is turning away from the San Diego Comic-con is not matched by a clear sense of where Hollywood is turning to. One challenger for



Geekdom's Imperial purple is annual video game trade fair the Electronic Entertainment Expo.

When one thinks of films inspired by video games one usually thinks of direct adaptations of successful intellectual properties, but with the likes of *Streetfighter* (1992) and *Super Mario Bros.* (1993) resulting in gasps of horror instead of ringing cinema tills, Hollywood has learned to take a slightly different and more subtle tack. An approach pioneered by films such as the Wachowski brothers' *Matrix* (1999), Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) and James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009). Christopher Nolan's *Inception* is ostensibly a film about dreams but the characters interact with dreams through a warren of concepts lifted directly from video games. Concepts include training tutorials, levels, modifiable virtual environments and the useful device that being killed in the dream merely kicks you out of the game. The film also borrows heavily from video game iconography by featuring such recognisable locations as the mid-town gun battles of the *Grand Theft Auto* games and the kinds of snow-based infiltration missions that feature in pretty much every First Person Shooter designed in the last ten years. Arguably one of the year's most over-rated films, *Inception's* true genius lay not in its nonsensical narrative or its uninspired cinematography but in its willingness to use pseudo-Freudian cod psychology to pass a stupid action film off as a piece of intelligent film-making. Those who wanted to see Leonardo Di Caprio plumbing the depths of the human soul were better served by going to see Martin Scorsese's exquisitely paced, beautifully shot and cruelly under-appreciated adaptation of Dennis Lehane's mind-bending psychological thriller *Shutter*

*Island*. Another film that was eager to jump on the video game band-wagon was Edgar Wright's *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*. Though undeniably a technical achievement, Wright's adaptation of the source material seemed to completely miss the point of the comics. Indeed, Bryan Lee O'Malley's series of comics use video game imagery not as a literal depiction of a super-powered world but as a means of mocking the childish worldview of the comics' protagonist who cannot help but see his relationship problems through the lens of games.

While video games may well be inspiring the next generation of Hollywood genre films, art house cinema has also seen its attitude to genre soften in recent years. Indeed, the traditional view that genre is artistically vacant populist entertainment seems to be disappearing from the world of artistic film-making in much the same way as it is disappearing from the world of literary fiction. One of the year's most notable cross-over successes came from one of the most inauspicious of developments. *Bad Lieutenant : Port of Call New Orleans* was the sequel that nobody expected and even fewer people wanted. Ostensibly an attempt to turn Abel Ferrara's harrowing 1992 crime drama *Bad Lieutenant* into a franchise, the resulting film was not only a brilliantly funny and visually inspired work of cinematic surrealism, it also managed to coax a magnificent performance from Nicolas Cage who suddenly emerged as the natural successor to director Werner Herzog's erstwhile collaborator Klaus Kinski. Of course, as films such as *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979), *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005) and *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007) suggest, Herzog has always had a certain affinity for genre but it is heartening to see much younger

film-makers joining him in this acceptance.

Having made his name as the director of the brutally realistic *Pusher* trilogy of crime films, Nicolas Winding Refn returned to our cinemas with *Valhalla Rising*. An ambitious attempt to extract Conradian DNA from the Vietnamese jungles of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and implant it in the desolately savage landscapes of Viking myth, *Valhalla Rising* boasted precisely the kind of arresting cinematography that shows quite how much potential for greatness there is in approaching genre subject matter with an art house sensibility. However, despite an exquisitely doom-laden atmosphere, the film's lack of thematic heft and terrible pacing also showed quite how far art house genre has to go before reaching full artistic maturity. Another notable failure to find the right genetic cocktail was *Enter the Void*, the long-awaited follow-up to Gaspar Noe's infamous backwards tale of rape and murder *Irreversible* (2002). Set in the neon streets of Tokyo, *Enter the Void* tells the story of a young drug-dealer who, after being brutally gunned down by Japanese police, floats in and out of the lives of his friends and family as a disembodied spirit. Slowly learning what he meant to them and how his feelings for his sister defined him as a person, the spirit edges closer and closer to enlightenment as Noe's visuals become more and more extreme and more and more experimental. Reportedly shot in a semi-improvisational style without a proper script, *Enter the Void* boasts some of the worst screen acting I have ever seen. It also feels somewhat over-long despite having had its runtime dramatically reduced since its disastrous premier at last year's Cannes film festival. But while *Enter the Void* certainly felt like a disappointment, the film still managed to produce a far more intense and visually interesting impression of the afterlife than the one offered to us by Peter Jackson's sickeningly sentimental and intellectually vacuous adaptation of Alice Sebold's *Lovely Bones*. Another near miss came in the form of the Mexican cannibal film *We Are What We Are*. Borrowing heavily from zombie films and early works of Wes Craven including *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), the film told the story of a tightly-knit family of cannibals trying to come to terms with the death of their father. *We Are What We Are* followed Yorgos Lanthimos's deeply puzzling *Dogtooth* in attempting to use genre tropes as a means of stretching traditional human relationships to breaking point in the hope that some new truths about the human condition might emerge from the wreckage. However, while both of these films may have resulted in some magnificently unpleasant and surreally distorted pictures of family life, I am not sure that either film really had very much to say about families in particular or the human condition in general.

The art house director who came closest to successfully combining genre ideas with art house techniques was not only the director who won this year's prestigious Palme d'Or award at Cannes, he is also a director whose next film is said to be a work of science fiction proper. Thai New wave director Apichatpong Weerasethakul won the Palme d'Or for his sixth feature *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. Much like Weerasethakul's earlier films *Tropical Malady* (2004) and *Blissfully Yours* (2002), *Uncle Boonmee* explores the idea of the forest as a space

that is free from both the constrictions of civilisation and the laws of nature. In *Tropical Malady* a young lover turns into a Tiger, in *Blissfully Yours* the forest is a space of emotional and social transgression and in *Uncle Boonmee* the forest is home to all kinds of magical creatures including priapic magical fish, monkey spirits and the ghosts of departed loved ones. Overflowing with astounding imagery and powerful moods, *Uncle Boonmee* is about an old man looking back not only over his current life but over all of his past lives and wondering whether he has been a good person or whether he is doomed to be reincarnated as a recalcitrant water buffalo. Quirky, moving and beautifully shot, *Uncle Boonmee* was one of the very best films of the year even if it did feel like the work of a director who is content to revisit the same set of themes and ideas over and over again.

Of course, by focusing upon genre film as a series of squabbling tribes, it is possible to overlook films that seem to come out of nowhere. Films that make up for their lack of budget with singular visions and intelligent scripts. The year's most notable example of a genre film that comes out of nowhere was *Monsters* the debut feature by British director Gareth Edwards. Made on a shoe-string budget, *Monsters* initially presents itself as an exploration of American culture's growing obsession with the end of the world. Borrowing images from the War in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina and the Mexican border where America has built a giant Israeli-style wall to keep out immigrants, *Monsters* confounds expectations by suggesting that the things that seem poised to destroy civilisation may well have a beauty all of their own. A beauty no less compelling than the achievements of the society it threatens. Also interested in the end of the American century were Ruben Fleischer's hilarious *Zombieland* and Breck Eisner's ambitious re-invention of Romero's infamously terrible *The Crazies*. Both films use themes and images traditional to the zombie film to cast a critical eye over American society. For example, *Zombieland* combines Romero's misanthropic depiction of society as a mindless horde with the genre-based 'rules of survival' that featured in Wes Craven's *Scream* (1994) to create an image of a society so obsessed with individualism and authenticity that nobody seems willing to help when the end of the world does arrive. Similarly apocalyptic but more politically astute was *The Crazies's* attack on media depictions of Iraq and Afghanistan as savage and lawless places. By deploying a mind-shattering virus in Hometown, USA the film turns the tables and asks how civilised the American people would be if they were forced to deal with death and destruction on a daily basis.

Also wonderfully unexpected and only fleetingly present at the cinema was the British film *Black Death*. Directed by Christopher Smith, a film-maker perhaps best known for his horror film *Creep* (2005) and *Triangle*, the Hitchcockian revisitation of *Groundhog Day* (1993) that was easily one of the best genre films of 2009. *Black Death* is set in a devastated medieval landscape where superstition is just as likely to kill you as the plague. The film explores the sense of belonging and security that can come from devoting oneself to a particular religious worldview only to turn an amble through the British countryside into a Conradian descent into hell. Hell, in this case, being a



village that is free from the plague and free from religious belief. Similarly atheistic was Michael J. Bassett's *Solomon Kane*. Based upon the Robert E. Howard short stories and novellas, *Solomon Kane* depicts a world where the Devil rules while redemption and grace are little more than paranoid conspiracy theories foisted on the population by a self-serving priesthood. In Howard's world we do good because we genuinely believe that we must and not because we will be rewarded in the afterlife.

While most of the year's best genre films were dark in vision and apocalyptic in subject matter, the same cannot be said of the year's best works of animation. Lee Unkrich's *Toy Story 3* closed off the trilogy in style with the sort of exquisitely detailed characterisation that we have come to expect from *Toy Story* films but while *Toy Story* (1995) dealt with infantile feelings of abandonment in the light of a new arrival in the house and *Toy Story 2* (1999) dealt with the desire to keep childhood sealed in a box and to hang on to the past till it stunts one's development, *Toy Story 3* explored the altogether more abstract idea that childhood is not an absolute that can be the property of one person or another. Instead it is an evolving state that shifts from person to person and while there will always be children, they will not be you and your relationship to them will forever reflect that because that is what it means to be an adult. The gentle humanity of this vision of childhood stood in stark contrast with the vision espoused by Vincenzo Natali's no less enjoyable *Splice*. For Natali, parenthood means bringing into the world a genetically engineered freak that might remind you that your parents were complete bastards and that you are no better. Brilliantly imagined and spectacularly misanthropic, *Splice* is an allegory for parenthood that owes as much to H.R. Geiger as it does to Sigmund Freud.

Somewhat less brutal in its depictions of parent-child relationships was Hayao Miyazaki's first film since 2004's somewhat uneven *Howl's Moving Castle*. A funny and heart-warmingly quirky take on The Little Mermaid, *Ponyo* tells of a magical goldfish that falls so completely in love with a human boy that she changes not only herself

but the entire world, taking it back to a pre-historic era in which everything seemed possible.

Though undeniably superb, the brilliance of both *Toy Story 3* and *Ponyo* were entirely to be expected. Much less easy to predict was the fact that 2010's best animated feature came neither Japan nor America but from Ireland. Much like many of the other best genre films of the year, Tomm Moore and Nora Tworney's *The Secret of Kells* was only fleetingly present at the cinema and even then it only graced cinemas in a few large towns. This short film somehow managed not only to capture the same distinctive visual charm as the films of Studio Ghibli, but to augment that charm with a decidedly Celtic sensibility. Telling the story of a young monk's attempt to protect an illuminated manuscript from Viking raiders, *The Secret of Kells* follows Edwards' *Monsters* in suggesting that beauty and civilisation sometimes flourish in the last places you expect them and that while great walls may well keep undesirables out, they serve to bottle up a lot of things that are best allowed to escape.

Once again, 2010 cast genre fans in the position of the ancient mariner: Genre, genre everywhere, and all our minds did shrink; Genre, genre, everywhere... my God I need a drink! Indeed, despite a constant stream of genre films finding their way to our local cinemas, discerning genre fans still found themselves hard up for anything to watch. Great films sneaked in and out of small London cinemas while lumbering horrors like the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* franchises squatted in multiplexes across the country like misery woven of light and sound. Finding decent science fiction, fantasy and horror films is increasingly less a question of finding films with genre elements than it is an issue of filtration. In a world where genre is everywhere, how do we find the genre that is worth watching? One solution is to remember what it is that brought us to genre in the first place. Did we pick up our first paperbacks in search of horrifying violence and knuckle-dragging fascism or did we yearn for something different? Something unexpected? The question we should ask ourselves when deciding what to see at the cinema is not "is it genre?" but "is it our sort of genre?"

# STRIP CLUB: A FANCIFUL FLIGHT

## Terry Martin talks comics

I saw the *Kick-Ass* film before I read the comic - last summer on a plane from Perth to Singapore. I absolutely loved it! *Iron Man 2* was the other film I watched on that flight. Both films are based on comics but at the time I'd not read the *Kick-Ass* graphic novel, whereas *Iron Man* was a comic icon from my youth.

I need to tell you now that I'm happy to call a comic a comic, and it can be anything from a single page to a chapter or episode from a graphic novel (I do rather like the term graphic novel), and have been know to call a short comic a strip, which isn't strictly true. A strip is just a few panels long, and mostly found in newspapers (and I have a confusing tendency to call those newspapers 'comics' - as a derogatory term - but that's another story).

It's encouraging to see comics turned into films and I just had to buy the Mark Millar/John Romita Jr print version as soon as I returned home. Well . . . if you didn't

know, I like to own something a little more tangible than a bit of fancy code in a memory chip, and if my own memory is anything to go by then digital versions are pretty transient. Give me something to hold!

I digress, as you'll find me doing on many occasions. However, as I'm writing this, and not talking to you directly, I can come back to my main point with ease, and I'm going to digress even more before I come back to *Kick-Ass*.

What might next appear a moment of blatant self-promotion has in fact a point, so please bear with me. When I started *Murky Depths*, one of my aims was to convert non-comic book, even anti-comic book, readers over to the very unique method of storytelling that is comics. I was adamant I'd not feature super heroes - one of the reasons I enjoyed *Kick-Ass* actually (show me their super powers) - and have successfully promoted the idea







that adult stories have as much right to be told in a comic form as Superman has; in my mind, even more so.

One of the early *Murky Depths* reviewers, Gareth D Jones, refused to review the comics, as he wasn't interested in them (only reviewing the prose stories), but since then has sent us comic scripts (in fact he has a one-pager in *Murky Depths* #15); a testament that comics have a uniqueness that shouldn't be ignored.

That brings me on to the main point of this article. I've manned many a *Murky Depths* table in the dealer room at conventions, both comics and literary, genre and mainstream, during the years, and last year was no exception. The third one I attended was Hi-Ex in Inverness in March. Yes, it's miles away from anywhere, and miles away from the computer game-writing centre of the UK, Dundee, yet there were talented artists from the gaming industry at the convention, some of whom had their roots in comics, who were making pitches, to me in this instance, to get back into comics. Sure, *Murky Depths* isn't a comic but I think, at least I like to think, it carries a little more weight than a comic alone. I'm not saying it's better than a comic anthology, just that the mix with prose lifts the comics we do run to new heights. Now, I'd say that there is far more money in the gaming industry than comics, and book shops seem to be going the same way as comic shops once were, so why are the game creators turning back to comics? Is it a last-ditch attempt to make comics a mainstream storytelling medium or is there really a resurgence of comics? Jonathan Ross is living his dream of writing a comic. Many of the "classics" have been turned into comics – I even used the "Jane Eyre" comic for my OU exam revision on the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Novel module – and if Jody Picoult can write a Wonderwoman graphic novel then I'm obviously not the only publisher who thinks there's an untapped market waiting to appreciate the nuances of the graphic tale. Perhaps *Murky Depths* doesn't always get it right, but there is a positive vibe, and a strong comic underground in the UK that makes me feel there is a need for *Murky Depths* to fly the flag. I don't feel the comic/prose mix corrupts either medium although purists may argue otherwise and occasionally we'll get someone at a convention picking up a copy and exclaiming, "Er!. Pictures!" which just highlights their ignorance. *Judge Dredd Magazine* sometimes mixes prose

with its comics, and sister mag *2000AD* still seems to be going strong, and with readers coming back to it – if their forums are anything to go by – is further proof of a rising interest in the comic medium that at last seems to be garnering the support it deserves.

I know of a comic shop in Harlow that moved recently from tiny premises to a big space in the indoor shopping centre, and I bumped into Steve from Page 45 at Fantasycon last year, where incidentally *Murky Depths* was voted Best Magazine/Periodical in the British Fantasy Awards, who was giving advice to Peter Renshaw, a regular at comic conventions, on his plans to open a new comic shop in Glasgow. Are they just dreamers or are their business hats firmly planted on their heads? The digital age seems to be splitting the purists who want to own something solid and printed, and those that want everything downloaded and free (though you can get both with the likes of Warren Ellis's *Freakangels*). And is that the rub? Can the anarchy within the internet allow any kind of future for books and comics? I say yes despite one of the big boys of the small press comic world, *Insomnia*, going into insolvency last year leaving an abundance of talented writers and artists with half-finished commissions and nothing to show for their time-consuming work – and producing a comic makes publishing a novel a piece of cake. I doubt I was the only person who saw it coming. Sure, as a publisher you have to keep finding new work and refresh your catalogue regularly. *Insomnia* just seemed to be taking on far too much – and in the end it broke them; their unbridled enthusiasm was their own downfall.

But back to *Kick-Ass*, having digressed beyond the bounds of *Inception*. There are places where the comic is the film, but in still pictures – the narrative remains the voice of Dave Lizewski – but Nicholas Cage's Big Daddy has barely a walk-on part, and not who he claims to be. I think that reading the comic will help you appreciate the film better – I have it on DVD now. Sure, it's not quite the same story – and maybe that's another reason to buy the comic – but isn't that what's interesting; seeing something you love in different mediums? *Hit-Girl* is awesome in both, but I'm yet to be convinced that a follow up (the graphic novel is Book One) is going to leave me with as broad a smile on my face as the one I had at Changi Airport awaiting my connection to Heathrow.

# THE PROMISES & PITFALLS OF A CHRISTIAN AGENDA

## Anthony Nanson on Stephen Lawhead's Pendragon Cycle

As a Christian writer whose fantasy novels have sold well in the secular marketplace, Stephen Lawhead follows in the footsteps of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. After some mediocre early work, he hit the big time in the late 1980s with the Pendragon Cycle, a three-volume retelling of the legend of King Arthur, later expanded by two further novels.<sup>1</sup>

The first book, *Taliesin*, tells the parallel stories of Charis, a princess of Atlantis who escapes her war-torn homeland when it sinks beneath the ocean, and Taliesin, a gifted Welsh bard living at the time the Roman legions withdrew from Britain. The two strands merge in a love story, whose offspring is the subject of the second volume, *Merlin*. Having earned a reputation as prophetic bard and berserk warrior, Merlin is propelled into an exile of insanity. He eventually returns to orchestrate Britain's defence, under a Christian king, Aurelius, against the invading barbarians. After that king's untimely death, Merlin is left with his baby heir, who turns out to be the nation's real hope. The third book, *Arthur*, traces this child's rise to power and the brief establishment of the longed-for Kingdom of Summer before it is undermined by the machinations of the sorceress Morgian and her son, Medraut.

Among modern fictional treatments of the Matter of Britain, Lawhead's is distinctive in its overtly Christian outlook. The Pendragon Cycle made Lawhead the flagship author of Lion Publishing's mission to sell Christian books into a secular market largely hostile to Christianity. The novels' excellent Celtic-romantic cover designs certainly contributed to their success; but what is the strength of Lawhead's writing, how has he managed to rework the Arthurian legends in a way that both communicates his faith and engages a broad readership, and what are we to make of the *kind* of Christianity he's mediating?



Lawhead writes with fluency and clarity. You always know what's happening; your mind's eye beholds each scene as on a floodlit stage. The imagery is neatly defined, colourful, simplified, almost like an animated film. The narrative tone is suitably epic. The characters, most of whom are nobles, speak with understated formality. There are just a few incongruous slips into modern American idiom. Lawhead varies the tone by varying the narrator. *Taliesin* is told in an omniscient storyteller's voice. Merlin tells his own story in the second book, inviting perilous comparison with Mary Stewart's superb Merlin character who narrates the whole of her Merlin Trilogy.<sup>2</sup> In the central part of *Merlin*, Lawhead also nicely varies the narrative tone by having Merlin, in his madness, deliver a series of charged outbursts, prophecies, and increasingly lucid memories of the dreadful events that precipitated his madness.

The charisma and enigma of Merlin, as others perceive him, are more apparent in *Arthur*, whose three parts are narrated by three different characters: Pelleas, Bedwyr, and Aneirin. Of these only Bedwyr, one of Arthur's captains, has sufficient character to add zest to his narrative. Breezy and spirited, his voice conjures images of galloping horses and of cloaks and unbound hair flying in the wind. Pelleas seems devoid of personality – through Bedwyr's eyes almost robotic – and both Pelleas and Aneirin, in the sections they narrate, function as little more than foils for Merlin.

Touches of humour occasionally lighten the epic tone: for example, the comic naivety of two monks, one of whom is not very bright, when upon first encountering the lovely Charis they take her for a vision of the Virgin Mary. There may be some gentle mockery of Roman Catholicism here, but the more intelligent monk, Dafyd – none other than St David of Wales – is an instrumental

figure in the Christian conversion of Taliesin and the Atlantean refugees, and in supporting Merlin's plans for the Kingdom of Summer.

There's also a comic glimpse at the domestic behaviour of some Saxons after Arthur has made peace with them:

The Saecsen idea of a feast is simply to heap mounds of badly cooked meat onto the board and gorge on it until sated, whereupon you are supposed to drink whole butts of their sour beer. And, when everyone is falling-down drunk, they begin wrestling with one another.<sup>3</sup>

You have to remember that the Saxons – always the bad guys in quasi-historical retellings of Arthurian legend – are, of course, the ancestral English.

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Like Mary Stewart, Rosemary Sutcliffe, Gillian Bradshaw, Marion Bradley, and others,<sup>4</sup> Lawhead situates King Arthur in the immediate post-Roman period. He runs with the theory that Arthur was a Christian war leader, of a mobile force of semi-disciplined troops, who rallied the Romano-British against the invading Anglo-Saxons, Irish, and Picts.

This historicity contrasts with Charis's background in the final years of the fantastic civilisation of Atlantis. The settling of the surviving Atlanteans in Britain as the beautiful, long-lived Fair Folk echoes some cranky theories of links between Atlantis and the Celtic cultures of Western Europe.<sup>5</sup> They're noble and sophisticated; reminiscent of Tolkien's elves or the Tuatha De Danann of old Ireland. This pool of Atlanteans enables Lawhead to demythologise in his fifth-century setting such figures as the Lady of the Lake and the Fisher King.

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A character cast of stereotypes is not unusual in epic fantasy and is characteristic of the medieval romances ancestral to the modern genre. Lawhead presents a striking polarisation between the Christian characters, who are virtually sinless, and their enemies, who are hopelessly evil. The Saxons and Picts are generally depicted as savage brutes, comparable to Tolkien's orcs. Though we know the reason for Morgian's corruption, we see her as so overtaken by hate that her own personality is lost and she becomes little more than a symbol of Satan, as Arthur symbolises Christ. Though archetypes serve important mythopoeic purposes, this kind of ethno-religious stereotyping seems troubling in a quasi-historical novel. The idea of an irreconcilable conflict between good and evil is commonly associated with Christianity, but such dualism derives largely from Manichaeism. In mainstream Christian theology, even the most virtuous people are usually understood to have a dark side and

the most wicked to bear in themselves the image of God.

To be fair, there are characters in the Pendragon Cycle, such as Vortigern and Uther, who occupy the middle ground, neither good Christians nor totally evil, but their importance to the story is secondary.

The female characters disappoint. Several women make spirited early appearances but then, generally after marrying, decline into sweet submissiveness. When Gwenhwyfar arrives on the scene, the anxiety of Arthur's advisors about this fiery Irish redhead suggests all manner of drama – which never happens. Most striking is the transformation of Charis, from desperate Atlantean bull dancer to the cold and pure Lady of the Lake. In her case the change is justified by the tragedy of her homeland's destruction and then her beloved Taliesin's death, from which she never really recovers. Morgian's seductive enchantment of Merlin plays up the opposite stereotype of womanhood. Lawhead thereby rehearses tired old patriarchal values that can do no better than offer women a choice between humble submission and devious sexual manipulation.

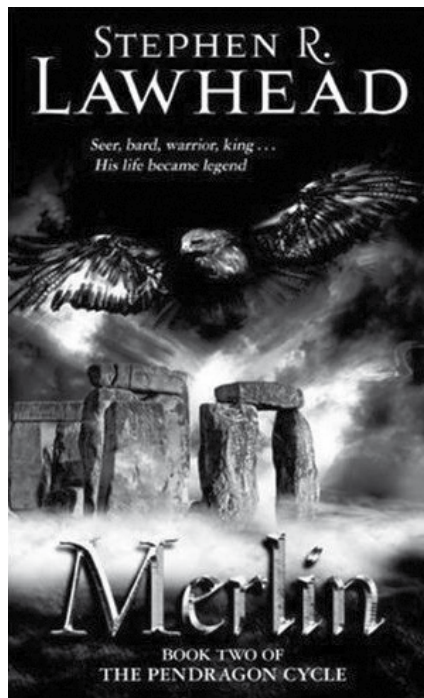
Arthur is too good to be real. He is so Christ-like that he functions as a 'type' of Christ in this narrative, and therefore Christ himself – who must historically exist within the same fictional universe – seems distanced as a religious concept that the Christian characters refer to but rarely perceive as a living spiritual presence. One exception is that the angelic stranger who heals Merlin of his torment does leave the impression this was actually an encounter with Christ. Even the biblical types of Christ had big character flaws: David's lust, Joseph's arrogance, Moses' lack of confidence. Only at the end does Arthur evince a minor flaw – of pride. He insists that his wounding by Medraut is negligible, and so resists treatment by Merlin until it's too late. This leads to Arthur's departure and the fall of the Kingdom of Summer. That the kingdom's demise should depend on such a trifle seems to imply – and here idealism yields to realism – that no human political achievement can stand in place of the Kingdom of God, which is not of this world.

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The trilogy's greatest achievement is the character of Taliesin. Lawhead had more freedom to create a distinctive personality for this less well-known character of Welsh tradition than in the cases of Arthur and Merlin, where both author's and readers' conceptions will inevitably be coloured by scores of other interpretations.

As Taliesin grows up, his poetic and prophetic gifts become increasingly apparent. There's a moving spectacle of the boy desperately trying to express his prophetic insights when he is too young to understand them or find words to match them:

I was in many shapes before I was born: I



was sunlight on a leaf; I was a star's beam; I was a lantern of light on a shepherd's pole. I was a sound on the wind; I was a word; I was a book of words.

I was a bridge across seven rivers. I was a path in the sea. I was a coracle on the water, a leather boat that ploughed bright waves.

I was a bubble in beer, a fleck of foam in my father's cup.

I was a string in a bard's harp for nine nines of years; I was a melody on a maiden's lips.

I was a spark in fire, a flame in a bonfire at Beltane ... a flame ... a flame ...<sup>6</sup>

The druids who train him in bardic lore discern his greatness. God's Spirit is working in them before they ever hear the gospel, baptising their spirituality, paring out wicked practices from their customs. So when Taliesin hears about Christ it's easy for him to embrace the new faith and find in it the source and fulfilment of his prophetic powers. In his maturity he can speak with tremendous power and authority, yet he never loses his charm as the quintessential silver-tongued poet.

It's Taliesin who conceives the vision of the Kingdom of Summer – a reign of peace and justice – but he dies too soon to see it, leaving it to his son, Merlin, to make the dream become reality. Merlin builds up the expectation of a saviour who will establish the Kingdom of Summer. With the seer's guidance, Arthur fulfils this hope.

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In Lawhead's world, magic is not morally neutral. It takes the form of either spiritual gifts from God, such as those granted Merlin, or the evil craft of sorcery as practised by Morgian.

Merlin's life begins in wonder: he dies at birth, but his father, inspired by the Holy Spirit, breathes life back into him. Merlin's public image is awesome: berserker, seer, enchanter, healer, bard, and one of the ageless Fair Folk. He lives in submission to God, but his supernatural powers look like sorcery and therefore distress the clergy. There's strong potential here for conflict between Merlin and the clergy, and also within Merlin's soul – the danger he might slip over the edge and use his abilities for his own glory. But Lawhead plays safe and, instead of allowing the conflicts to develop and milking them for drama, portrays the Christian camp as essentially united and Christian characters like Merlin as incorruptible.

Morgian's sorcery is mostly off-stage, though various unhappy events are blamed on her activity. My guess is that the author wishes to avoid glorifying Satan by dwelling on Morgian's satanic activities. However, we do see her power explicitly in an early confrontation with Merlin, which, after some sly attempts at negotiation by Morgian, becomes a direct contest of magical power.

Pelleas's account of Morgian's enchantment of Merlin is also nicely done. Lawhead conjures the eerie mood of the Forest of Broceliande, where Merlin and Pelleas are searching for a Fair Folk settlement, and Pelleas's confusion when Morgian enchants the woods to delay his return to her cottage to rescue Merlin:

Directly ahead, shimmering in the moonlight, stood the house, the light from

the hearthfire faintly glowing in the doorway. Smoke seeped slowly through the roof-thatch, silvery in the moonlight, rising like vapours from a fetid fen.<sup>7</sup>

We don't witness Morgian, disguised as lissom young 'Nimue', cast her spell on Merlin, although her attempt to seduce Pelleas is quite daringly narrated. Whether she actually had her wicked way with Merlin we're not told. Merlin's disgust with himself after this episode might suggest she did, but the tenor of the story makes it more likely he was just annoyed he'd let himself fall into her power.

The most violent confrontation between Merlin and Morgian is not actually described; we see only the aftermath when Bedwyr discovers Merlin blind and exhausted. In sum, the relationship of Merlin and Morgian is a very important thread in the plot but is largely hidden behind the scenes.

\*

Lawhead concocts two potent amorous situations. The first is Taliesin's unrequited love for Charis, which begins about the same time as his conversion. For a time Charis is so wounded by her experiences that she cannot respond to either Taliesin's love or Christ's. This generates some impassioned poetry from Taliesin:

Then tell me the word that will win you, and I will speak it. I will speak the stars of heaven into a crown for your head; I will speak the flowers of the field into a cloak; I will speak the racing stream into a melody for your ears and the voices of a thousand larks to sing it; I will speak the softness of the night for your bed and the warmth of summer for your coverlet; I will speak the brightness of flame to light your way and the lustre of gold to shine in your smile; I will speak until the hardness in your melts away and your heart is free once more.<sup>8</sup>

Charis does, soon enough, accept both Taliesin and Christ. Too easily, I felt. The courtship might have been drawn out into a more intense trial for Taliesin.

The other situation is the infatuation of Aurelius's brother, Uther, with Igraine, who becomes Aurelius's queen. Merlin's horror when he spots this source of conflict between the brothers suggests a great drama is about to develop. But this never happens, for Aurelius dies shortly after and we're assured that Uther was in no way responsible.

Merlin's own rather banal delight in his bride reassures us that sex is a fine and wonderful thing in its proper context of marriage. The contrast with the 'Nimue' episode is obvious, but the latter, besides being far more exciting to read, is quite an extreme situation of sexually charged sorcery. Once again, there's a polarisation between good and evil which leaves little middle ground and equates evil with sexiness.

To fortify Arthur's purity, Lawhead has cleaned up the sexual irregularities traditionally associated with him and so deflated much of the power of the myth. Medraut is simply Morgian's son; there's no hint of the tale that

he was the offspring of Arthur's incest with his half-sister Morgause. (Like *Excalibur's* Morgana, Lawhead's Morgian is a composite of the traditional characters Morgan, Morgause, and Nimue.) It's also made clear that, contrary to suspicion, Arthur is not Uther's bastard but was begotten in wedlock by Aurelius. Why should the legitimacy of a man's birth be laid to his moral credit? Might it not be consonant with Jesus' blessing of the humble that an illegitimate child should become saviour of his country?

\*

The third book of the cycle follows Arthur's escalating campaigns, first against the less cooperative British petty kings, then against the greater menace of the invading barbarians. Lawhead tries to build up the suspense of each struggle against heavy odds, but the suspense fails because we know that Arthur is going to win every time. So the battle scenes become tedious. They're also too clean; they fail to capture the horror of battle, though the second book does include a truly horrific scene in which Merlin finds his pregnant wife's corpse mutilated by Angle raiders. Just as in wartime propaganda, the enemy are so dehumanised that we're not distressed to see them slaughtered in huge numbers.

The British troops' use of prayer and worship to seek victory in battle is no doubt historically realistic, but it disappoints me that the narrative implies no consciousness, on the author's part, that such a practice might be considered a sad corruption of Jesus' teaching of love. At the same time, the very historicity of the setting together with the emphasis on practical military considerations weighs against our interpreting Arthur's battles as primarily symbolic of the spiritual struggle against evil.

Early in his career Arthur makes peace with a few Saxon chieftains by simply demanding peace with such audacity that they are astonished into accepting his terms. This ploy does not succeed for long. The Kingdom of Summer is built upon blood. That is its flaw. Arthur's imitation of Christ is imperfect, for Christ is not a warrior and his kingdom is not established by the sword.

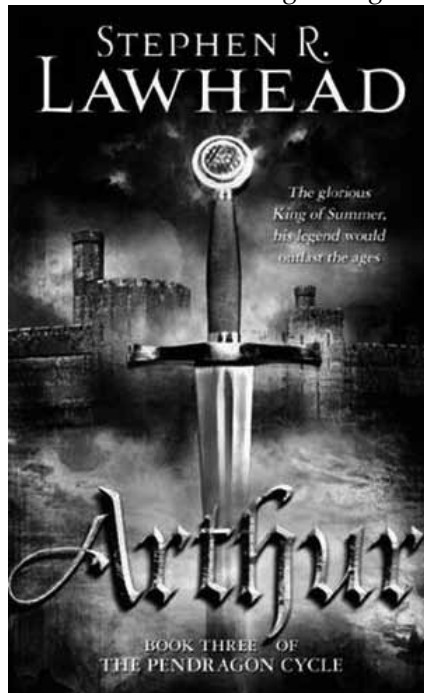
\*

In *Taliesin* Stephen Lawhead has written a work of historical fantasy as imaginative and moving as anything in that genre. There is much to admire in *Merlin* too, especially the depiction of Merlin's madness. *Arthur* seems to me less satisfying; even less so the later volumes, *Pendragon* and *Grail*, which I've not examined here. But all three books of the original trilogy fail to exploit fully the dramatic potential of a number of explosive situations – in particular, ones involving sex and sorcery. It's as though Lawhead avoids making the most of them for fear of inciting condemnation from conservative evangelical

Christians among his publisher's core market, some of whom regard the whole genre of fantasy – even Lewis's blatantly Christian-allegorical *Chronicles of Narnia* – as spiritually dangerous.

Yet the books have sold well, and not just to Christians; they've been continuously in print for more than twenty years. Dramatic conflict isn't necessarily the be-all and end-all of imaginative writing. Perhaps, as Stratford Caldecott argues of *The Lord of the Rings*, literature that celebrates genuine goodness may possess an inherent appeal.<sup>9</sup> One can certainly enjoy Lawhead's fresh interpretation of Arthurian and Atlantean legend, and the fine characterisation of Taliesin and Merlin, and some no doubt have enjoyed the military detail of the wargame against the invaders. What troubles me is that, again and again, in the polarisation of good and evil in ethno-religious conflict, in the stereotyping of women, in the indulgent narration of war but avoidance and demonisation of sex, in the suppression of pagan ingredients of Arthurian myth, these books rehearse discredited conservative attitudes that have long been associated with Christianity, that have facilitated that faith's fall from public grace in Britain, and yet have nothing to do with its core message of love and hope.

Christian hope, though, does endure in the trilogy's ending – a hope that is true to Arthurian tradition and also reflects the Celtic-pagan dream of paradise in the west. Arthur has won the crucial battle against the forces of evil, but taken a mortal wound; the Kingdom of Summer crumbles, yet Arthur lives on, somewhere beyond the sea.



### (Endnotes)

- 1 Stephen Lawhead, *Taliesin* (Oxford: Lion, 1988); idem, *Merlin* (Oxford: Lion, 1988); idem, *Arthur* (Oxford: Lion, 1989); idem, *Pendragon* (Oxford: Lion, 1994); idem, *Grail* (Oxford: Lion, 1997).
- 2 Mary Stewart, *The Crystal Cave* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970); idem, *The Hollow Hills* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973); idem, *The Last Enchantment* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979).
- 3 Lawhead, *Arthur*, p.177.
- 4 Stewart, *The Crystal Cave*, etc.; Rosemary Sutcliffe, *Sword at Sunset* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1963); Gillian Bradshaw, *Down the Long Wind* (London: Methuen, 1988); Marion Bradley, *Mists of Avalon* (London: Michael Joseph, 1983).
- 5 See, for example, P. A. Ó Síocháin, *Ireland: A Journey into Lost Time* (Dublin: Foilsiúcháin Eireann, 1983).
- 6 Lawhead, *Taliesin*, p.304.
- 7 Lawhead, *Arthur*, p.85.
- 8 Lawhead, *Taliesin*, pp.424–425.
- 9 Stratford Caldecott, *Secret Fire: The Spiritual Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003).

# Foundation Favourites: Scholars & Soldiers

Andy Sawyer

This “Foundation’s Favourites” series has always been a matter of personal choice, but this particular selection is more personal than others. For one thing, the hard-edged Hermeticism which infuses the two best stories in this collection has always been a favourite of mine, and for another—no, best leave that until the end.

Mary Gentle’s sf novels *Golden Witchbreed* (1983) and *Ancient Light* (1987) managed to tell a familiar story of diplomat-encountering-old-civilization in science fiction terms and then unraveled it to chilling extent. She then turned from postcolonial sf to explore other territories. *Scholars and Soldiers* (1989) collected a number of previously-published stories (several from *Isaac Asimov’s Sf Magazine*) but left the killer blow for the two new ones which frame the collection.

The first story, “Beggars in Satin”, is set in a world influenced by the fusion of magic and science described by Frances Yates in such books as *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), and *The Art of Memory* (1966). We see the young scholar-soldier Valentine arriving by steam-train (this is not quite the alternative Renaissance we might imagine) at a city ruled by Lord-Architect Casaubon. The “Miracle Garden” he has been constructing after the precepts of the Classical architect Vitruvius and his disciple in the Italian Renaissance Andrea Palladio, with its carefully placed and ingeniously-constructed automata, has been corrupted. Ideally, according to the maxim “as above, so below”, a city built in “just proportion” will compel Justice herself to dwell in its midst. This—and the revolutionary group from the Lower City may understand why—has not happened. All Valentine and her colleague from the Invisible College, Janou, can think of is to bombard the Garden to smithereens; but this would only spread the corruption. At the heart of the garden comes the obvious answer: a new pattern to defeat the corruption, the pattern of music; the music not of aristocratic art but of old dances wheezed out on the hurdy-gurdy by the revolutionary Feliche.

By the end, new patterns, new combinations of characters have been created. Valentine stays with Casaubon, to advise him on constructing his new garden; and more.

The closing story, “The Knot Garden”, is set some time later. Valentine has recovered from the plague. As



they are discussing mysterious “watchers” who seem to be spying on them, Valentine disappears. Casaubon calls up the Invisible College on a mysterious device (this really is *not* a simple alternative Renaissance), and we cut to Feliche and Janou meeting Al-Iskandaria, a member of yet another secret society who warns them that the stars are moving into a configuration ripe for the conjuring of “star-daemons”. Using the patterns traced out in the knot garden, Casaubon enters the realm of these “Lords of the Shining Path”, to find Valentine, who seems to have

discovered a means of combating them . But first, there are the City's seditious and revolutionaries, who have their own perspective on things . . . "As above, so below" is an aphorism which we need to keep our eye on here.

Gentle's prose is sharp, her powers of invention brilliant, her characters real, especially the greasy, obese Casaubon with his pet rat. They are not necessarily likeable. Casaubon is a Lord, and not on Our Side (there's a neat scene where he's confronted with the woman who does his laundry who has to live on far less than the cost of one single garment), and when Valentine re-appears a couple of novels down the line she does a dreadful and unforgivable thing. But, in the best tradition of the malcontents in the Jacobean drama, boy, are they vivid !

This was a new thing. For a time I used the word scholarpunk for this fusion of erudition and bad-ass attitude. Fortunately no-one noticed.

These characters were clearly too good to waste, and in 1990 followed a quite extraordinary novel, *Rats and Gargoyles* in which Valentine and Casaubon are found in the City at the Heart of the World together with a ruling class of bipedal swashbuckling rats who talk like characters out of *The Three Musketeers* but who, according to various interviews with Mary Gentle, owe much to Reepicheep from C. S. Lewis's "Narnia" series. Further adventures followed, including the novella *Left to His Own Devices* which took place in a cyberpunk-flavoured London in which Casaubon is a "renegade link-architect" and Valentine is now a games-designer and live-action roleplayer, formerly a Virtual Reality Designer for the US military. Weird things are happening on the internet, which seem to involve Christopher Marlowe's most influential play, *The Spy at Londinium* (1610). (Just google

it, OK. You'll get the point.)

All these were collected in one volume in *White Crow* (2003). Which is astonishingly good value.

But this leads me to the other reason this book is a particular favourite ... Well, "favourite" is perhaps the wrong word. "Irritant", possibly. "Object lesson", better.

Because Casaubon seemed awfully familiar. Mary Gentle says in the introduction to *White Crow* that one of the sources for Casaubon was playwright Ben Jonson, erudite (he was the source for "small Latin and less Greek" which is meant to tell us that *he* was better qualified than Shakespeare), quarrelsome (he killed a man in a duel and remind me sometime to tell you of his squabbles with fellow-playwright Thomas Dekker), and clearly a man who liked a pint or twelve.

And in my innocence I had picked on Ben Jonson as the model for one of the central characters in a novel I was writing. I looked at my description of "Orion Chirk, the hedge-priest's bastard." Corpulent... Check. Vain ... Ditto. Unsavoury personal habits ... Yup, right there. Links up with main character in saving a world loosely based upon some of the speculations of Renaissance Hermeticism and with loving nods to the wonderfully nihilistic Jacobean playwrights... You got it.

*The story I've just finished has wiped the floor with it . . . .*

So I salvaged a section in which "Orion Chirk" doesn't in fact appear, and consigned the rest to the "pending" file. Bitter, moi? Of course not. I just hope that British publishers think as highly of *Scholars & Soldiers* as I do. Indeed, they ought to be *grateful* for it. It certainly reduced their slush-pile slightly.



# RESONANCES

# Alpha Centauri

Stephen Baxter

The setting of the 2009 movie *Avatar* was the habitable world Pandora, a moon of a giant planet, Polyphemus, which, in the story, orbits one of the suns of Alpha Centauri.

As the closest star system, Alpha Centauri has not surprisingly often been the destination for fictional depictions of interstellar travel. For example there's Leigh Brackett's thrilling *Alpha Centauri or Die!* (1963), *Encounter with Tiber* (1996) co-written by moonwalker Buzz Aldrin with John Barnes, my own *Space* (2000) - and *Footfall* by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle (1985), in which Earth is invaded from Alpha Centauri, rather than the other way around as in *Avatar*. *Avatar* however seems to be the first depiction of the system in the movies, although it was the target for the hapless star travellers of the TV series *Lost in Space* (1965-8).

And as it turns out, aside from its nearness, Alpha Centauri is a promising destination for interstellar travellers.

Alpha Centauri is a triple star system. The two principal stars, known as A and B, are bound close together by gravity, following looping elliptical trajectories. Each of the stars is similar to our sun, A in particular - but these near-twin stars are no further apart than the planets in our solar system. Alpha B comes about as close to A as the planet Saturn does to the sun, though it loops out as far as Pluto's distance.

So imagine standing on a planet orbiting A, the brighter star. From here A itself would look like the sun in our own sky. The companion, B, would be an extremely bright lantern in the sky. Even at its furthest distance from A, B would be a hundred times brighter than the full moon; at its closest it would be over a *thousand* times as bright as the moon.

And somewhere in the complex sky around you would be Proxima, the third star in the system, orbiting the main binary pair four hundred times further away than B is from A (it's so far out that there's some controversy about whether it's really part of the Alpha system at all). Proxima is actually the closest star of all to Sol, which is why it's so named. Proxima is an unspectacular red dwarf, a minor component of this system - but of great interest to astronomers, for it is actually more representative of the Galaxy's stars than either Alpha A or B, or indeed Sol; while only a few per cent of stars are like Sol, seventy percent of stars are like Proxima.

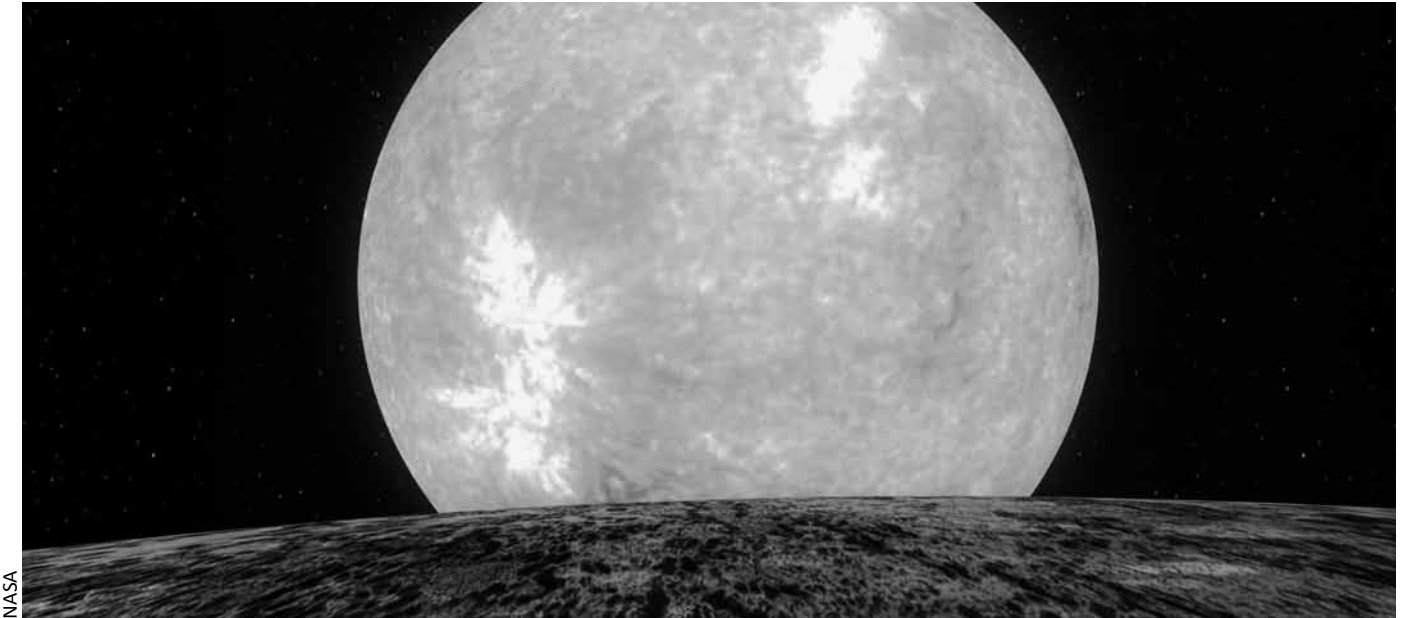
That Alpha Centauri is the closest system was established in 1832 by a Scottish astronomer called Thomas Henderson, working at an observatory in South Africa (Alpha Centauri is invisible from the northern hemisphere). To establish the system's distance he used parallax: studying the way Alpha apparently shifted across the background of more distant stars as Earth crossed from one side of its orbit to the other in the course of a year. Parallax was a well-established method at the time, having been used to measure the distances between the sun's planets - but the interstellar distance Henderson worked out, some four light years, was so unexpectedly large it made him hesitate to publish his result; suddenly the universe was bigger than everybody had thought it was.

Proxima, however, won't always be the closest star to the sun. The stars move relative to each other as they swim in their orbits around the centre of the Galaxy. In about 33,000 years a star called Ross 248 will come closer to the sun than Proxima - and in the longer term some stars will come closer yet. In 1946 a Russian astronomer called Alexander Vyssotsky noticed that a star known by catalogue number Gliese 710, currently about 63 light years away, seems to be heading straight for us. Recent studies indicate that Gliese 710 could come to within a light year in about 1.3 million years, and possibly perturb the Oort cloud of comets, potentially causing collisions with the planets. Maybe it will swim in even closer and do a *When Worlds Collide ...* The odds are sketchy. But perhaps by the time Gliese 710 gets here our descendants will be advanced enough to turn it away.

What of any planets of Alpha Centauri? One of the true scientific miracles of my lifetime has been the discovery of 'exoplanets': planets of stars other than our sun. When I was a boy, not a single planet beyond the sun's family was known; now we know of hundreds of other worlds, some of them thousands of light years away, and our ideas of how planets and planetary systems form have been revolutionised. Disappointingly, however, we have not yet detected a planet of any of the suns of Alpha Centauri, the closest system of all.

We used to think that multiple star systems like Alpha Centauri couldn't grow planetary systems because of the stars' gravitational perturbations; tremendous tides would break up any proto-planets before they could stabilise. However, recent studies have shown that for





NASA

planets as close to Alpha A as Earth is to the sun, B's gravity would have no significant effect on such worlds' formation, or, later, on their orbital stability. So Alpha Centauri may actually harbour twin solar systems: two planetary systems just a few light-hours apart, so close that humans might already have been able to complete interstellar journeys.

What about a giant planet, like *Avatar's* Polyphemus? Again, it used to be thought that the formation of Jupiter-like 'Jovians' would be inhibited because of the closeness of the suns. If this were so it could actually have side-benefits for interstellar colonists. The volatile material that would otherwise have been absorbed into gas-giant planets would be left unconsolidated, drifting in huge clouds of asteroids around the twin stars – for the seasoned space miners of the solar system who would likely be the first to make the crossing, a promise of unimaginable resources and wealth. Apparently this may not be the case after all. In October 2002 astronomers in Texas announced the discovery of a Jovian planet orbiting a star of the Gamma Cephei binary system, about forty-five light years from Earth, a system with twin stars with the same kind of spacing as the two suns of Alpha.

But even if we found a Polyphemus, would we be able to see a moon-world like Pandora? Maybe. One recent computer simulation, of an Earth-sized 'exomoon' orbiting a Neptune-sized giant, showed that the moon's orbit would affect the giant's path sufficiently for it to be detected by a future space telescope. So there's no reason in theory why worlds like Polyphemus, and Pandora, shouldn't exist, and if they do exist, some day we will see them.

Even so, if we're seeking habitable worlds at Alpha Centauri we may be looking in the wrong place.

If it is to be liveable for creatures like us, a world would have to be more or less Earth-sized, and would have to orbit in the 'habitable zone' of its parent's star – at a distance from the star that would allow liquid water to occur on its surface, not too hot and not too cold. But we no longer think the parent star has to be like the sun. Even red dwarf stars could conceivably have habitable planets. Such stars are small and dim, and the planet would have to huddle close to the central fire, probably so close that it

would be 'tidally locked' like the moon around the Earth, with a single face perpetually presented to the star. You would think that the dark side, a place of eternal night, would be so cold that all the water, and even the air, would freeze out; but it's believed that even a thin layer of atmosphere would transport enough heat around the planet to keep this ultimate chill-out at bay. As it happens the best candidate found so far of another Earth is the fourth planet of a red dwarf star called Gliese 581. From such a planet's surface, its sun would be huge – pink-white rather than red to the vision – and forever fixed in the sky, no sunrises or sunsets. It could be a dangerous environment, for such dwarf stars are prone to violent flares.

This may not sound much fun. But remember, not so long ago people thought you *had* to have a sunlike star to have a chance of even a remotely Earthlike planet. As I noted, seventy percent of the Galaxy's stars are red dwarfs - and not only that, the dwarfs have very long lives as stable stars, perhaps a hundred times as long as the sun's. Suddenly the universe looks a lot more hospitable for life like ours than it did just a few years back (and red-dwarf worlds are showing up in sf, such as in my own *Ark* (2009)).

And as Proxima is a red dwarf, maybe it's the runt of the Alpha system that nurtures 'Pandora', not the more glamorous Alpha A or B.

What about an Alphan sky? Standing on a world of Alpha A, because of the glare of B, you wouldn't get many dark starry nights – and on the wrong side of a world of Proxima you'd never see the stars at all. Yet if you were in a position to make out the stars, you'd see more or less the constellations familiar from Earth. Alpha is a mere four light years from home; most visible stars are much further away. But if you looked for a particular compact constellation familiar to any amateur astronomer – the W shape of Cassiopeia – you'd spot an extra star to the left of the pattern, turning the constellation into a crude zigzag. That star is our sun: just a point of pale yellow light, bright but not exceptionally so. And from where you stand, the sun, the Earth and all the planets – and all of human history before the first colonists left for Alpha Centauri - could be eclipsed by a grain of sand.

# KINCAID IN SHORT

In the first of a new column, Paul Kincaid looks at “The Infinity Box” by Kate Wilhelm

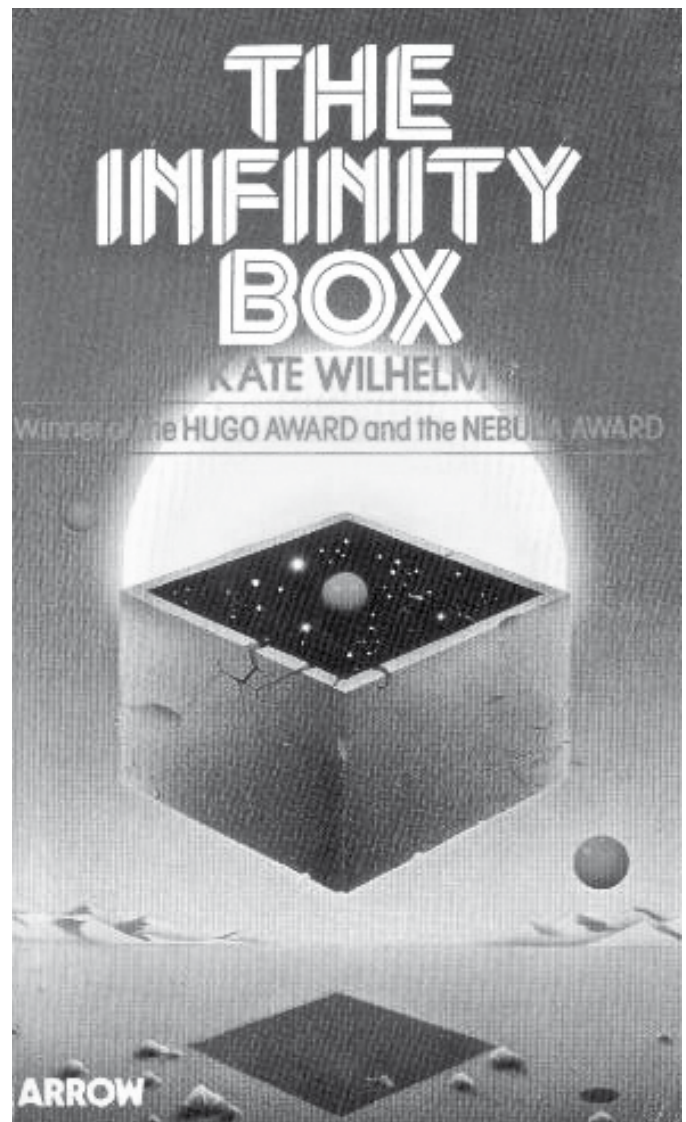
A while ago I was asked to contribute to a list of favourite novellas (if you really want to know, you can find my initial 10 choices here (<http://johnmadera.com/2009/04/10/paul-kincaid%E2%80%99s-favorite-science-fiction-novellas/>) and 10 further choices here (<http://johnmadera.com/2009/10/20/little-monsters-recommended-novellas-an-addendum/>)). I picked and discarded any number of great novellas, eventually choosing pieces because they were inescapably important in the history of sf, because I had read them several times or recently re-read them, because they were works whose quality was beyond question. But there was only one piece that I knew was going to be on the list from the very moment I received the invitation, because it was the story which convinced me that the novella is the ideal length for a science fiction story, long enough to establish character and tone of voice, not so long that readers are going to get lost in a welter of over the top invention. It was a story I hadn't revisited in some 30 years, but its place in my personal pantheon of science fiction was guaranteed. This was 'The Infinity Box' by Kate Wilhelm.

Of course, having put the story on the list without hesitation, I had to take Wilhelm's collection off my shelves and remind myself why this story has such an impact upon me. Now, I did hesitate. Tastes and interests change: you can never read the same story twice, not because the story has changed but because you have. If a story seems exactly the same every time you revisit it, it is not a sign of the richness of the story but of its poverty. And yet, there is something sad and painful if a treasured work is suddenly revealed to be insubstantial when you turn to it again. After more than 30 years there was no way that I was going to read the same story I had first encountered in 1977, but would my memories be completely trashed?

To be honest, it didn't start too promisingly. The first two or three pages are crowded with the sort of capsule character descriptions that come straight out of the pulps:

He looked like a dope, thick build, the biggest pair of hands you'd ever see outside a football field, shoulders that didn't need padding to look padded. Probably he was one of the best electronics men in the world. (1)

And alongside the broad-brush characterization is some equally broad-brush scene setting. Edward Laslow, Eddie, our narrator, is a partner in a two-man electronics



business with Lenny, 'one of the best electronics men in the world'. Their latest invention is a suit that acts as a body cast while keeping the muscles stimulated and allowing growth in the eight-year-old boy who is currently the unwilling guinea pig for the suit. But Mike, the boy, is unhappy so Eddie is summoned to the hospital by Janet, Mike's physical therapist who is also Eddie's wife: 'Janet, suntanned, with red, sun-streaked hair, freckles, and lean to the point of thinness, was my idea

of a beautiful woman' (2). At the hospital, Eddie is briskly and efficiently able to calm the fears of both Mike and his parents, so the experiment continues.

And so, after the first three or four pages, it seems that this is the story we have got: a story that will be built around some medical device created by Eddie and Lenny and told in this no-nonsense, not-overly-subtle style not much advanced on the genre's standard pulp model. But then the story takes an abrupt turn, in setting, subject and tone.

We follow Eddie and Janet home, a place which screams money:

Five one-acre lots, with woods all around, and a hill behind us, and a brook. If any of us prayed at all, it was only that the county engineers wouldn't discover the existence of Sweet Brier Lane and come in with their bulldozers and road-building equipment and turn us into a real development. (4)

This has all the pulp efficiency of the earlier passages, but the voice has become less brusque. There is still a tendency to list objects in threes (the woods, hill and brook lining up with Lenny's build, hands and shoulders, or Janet's hair, freckles and thinness), but this is immediately followed by a moment of hesitation ('If any of us prayed', which also tells us we are dealing with modern, rational people) which offsets the hard certainties the tone of voice had hitherto led us to expect. But more than that, we learn that this is not the typically solipsistic view of pulp sf's archetypal competent man, 'us' immediately places Eddie in a community, and, moreover, a community that isn't entirely comfortable with the onset of the future. In other words, where the opening can be taken as typically science fictional, we now start moving into something more concerned with the contemporary. Indeed, for a while this story now reads as mainstream fiction.

Eddie and Janet have a good marriage – 'No strain either way, nothing but ease lay between us. We had a good thing, and we knew it' (5) – a nice house, good neighbours 'talented and intelligent people' (5), and two kids, Rusty and Laura. It is an idyll that we know must be disturbed, and the disturbance seems to emanate from a new neighbour, a tiny, solitary woman who moves in to the next door house owned by an academic currently away teaching at Cambridge. The first harbinger of disturbance comes when Laura screams in the night, and the child is found standing rigid in the middle of her room. Then, a day later, Eddie himself has a curious moment while working into the early hours of the morning when he feels himself falling forever. But these are just eddies in a smooth domestic surface, until the new neighbour, Christine, comes to visit for the first time at the weekend.

But I knew her. It was like seeing your first lover again after years, the same shock low in the belly, the same tightening up of the muscles, the fear that what's left of the affair will show, and there is always something left over. Hate, love, lust. Something. Virtually instantaneous with the shock of recognition came the denial. I had never seen her before in my life.' (11)

The same tripartite list: 'Hate, love, lust' but this is now undeniably a different voice, much more uncertain of the world. In his business, mechanistic and material as it is, Eddie is as competent as an sf hero; but what concerns us here, we are being told, is his emotional and domestic life,

the side of the sf hero that we never usually see, and in this he is far less crisp and able, far more like you and I. The difference is shown also in the description of Christine; where, previously, Lenny and Janet had been introduced with terse phrases, this description is considerably longer and pays more attention to approximations and subtleties:

She was possibly five feet tall, and couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds. It was impossible to tell what kind of figure she had, but what was visible seemed perfectly normal, just scaled down, except her eyes, and they looked extraordinarily large in so tiny a face. Her eyes were very dark, black or so close to it as to make no difference, and her hair, as Janet had said, was beautiful, or could have been with just a little attention. It was glossy, lustrous black, thick and to her shoulders. But she shouldn't have worn it tied back with a ribbon as she had it then. Her face was too round, her eyebrows too straight. It gave her a childlike appearance. (11-12)

And notice how sensuous it is: this is a very sensuous story. When we are told, 'Janet and I always wondered about everyone's sex life' (13) we are also being told where this story is going.

Christine, we discover, is the widow of Nobel Prize winning psychologist Karl Rudeman, and herself an acclaimed photographer: 'She had an uncanny way of looking at things, as if she were at some point you couldn't imagine, getting an angle that no one had ever seen before' (14). The closest we get to an appreciation of this is when Eddie helps her set up her tripod for time-lapse photographs of a maple tree, which she intends to arrange '[s]ort of superimposed, so that you'll see the tree through time' (15). In this we are being told something about her character, but also something about the story to come. Re-reading the story it becomes obvious not only how much of the story is foreshadowed, but how complexly character, setting and story are intertwined: what is used to establish the individual actors also establishes the events that they will be playing out.

And what are those events? Let me put aside this close reading for a moment and hurry forward. Christine continues to fascinate and disturb Eddie: 'We have a good life, good sex, good kids ... I'm too young for the male climacteric. She isn't even pretty.' (16), but his relationship with Janet sours somewhat, they start to have meaningless quarrels. Then he has another of those episodes of seeming to fall, only this time he suddenly and briefly sees through someone else's eyes in Christine's study. Moments after he snaps out of it, Christine screams, and Eddie and Janet rush over to find her collapsed on the floor. As he looks around the room, Eddie realizes he had been looking through Christine's eyes. When she comes to, she reports 'there was something else in the room with me. I know it. It's happened before, the same kind of feeling' (20). She explains that she had been a student and subject of Rudeman, her past history of schizophrenia making her invaluable for his theories about madness and perception. After they married he continued using her in research that he had not published and never explained to her. Since Rudeman's death, his son-in-law Victor had been pressing for the research papers and also making unwelcome advances to her. We're now being set up for a tale of madness, but the madness when it comes isn't really Christine's, and it doesn't take a form we might

expect.

Eddie finds himself increasingly fascinated by Christine: ‘Her buttocks were rounded, and moved ever so slightly when she walked, almost like a boy, but not quite; there was a telltale sway. And suddenly I wondered how she would be. Eager, actively seeking the contact, the thrust? Passive?’ (24). And now, as he finds himself again behind her eyes, he learns that he can start to control her movements.

I knew I could enter her, could use her, could examine whatever was in her mind without her being able to do anything about it. I knew in that same flash that she didn’t realize what was happening, that she felt haunted, or crazy, but that she had no idea that another personality was inside her. (29)

The wording here – enter her, use her – deliberately evokes rape, because what we are just beginning to discover is that this entire story is about rape, told from the point of view of the rapist. It is a story not of physical sexual assault but of mental assault, but it amounts to the same thing. Eddie becomes addicted to his ability to enter and control Christine, an addiction that, as in drug addiction, has a physically and mentally debilitating effect upon the addict, because what he does renders him vulnerable also: ‘I suddenly wondered what she saw when she looked at me, through me to all the things that I had always believed were invisible’ (30). The more attracted he is to her, the less he wants to see her, to be seen by her.

At the same time, he also finds himself wondering more and more about Rudeman. Had Rudeman discovered the same ability to possess Christine? If so, why, as a psychologist, had he done nothing to cure her? And what was the mystery of Rudeman’s death?

Now, the psychological tension escalates as Eddie disintegrates. The first signs of Eddie losing touch with reality start to crop up: ‘The next few days blurred together. I knew that things got done, simply because they didn’t need doing later’ (33). When Christine and Lenny meet, they are attracted to each other, and one time while he is making love to Janet Eddie enters Christine expecting that she and Lenny will also be making love, when he finds they are not he hurts Janet, the first time he has done so. Eddie gets his revenge by making Christine masturbate repeatedly until she collapses, all the time ‘calling her names, despising her for letting me do it to her, for being so manipulable, for letting me do this to myself’ (36), mastery and disgust become the same thing. We learn from Lenny that Christine believes she is going crazy, and all the while Eddie’s own relationships start to shatter as he snaps at Janet and Lenny. Paranoia creeps into the mix, as Eddie begins to imagine that Janet and Lenny, in their friendship with Christine, are conspiring against him. Then, while away on a business trip to Chicago, Eddie comes to believe that Lenny has also learned how to possess Christine, and paranoia turns into possessiveness: ‘He couldn’t have her. She was mine now. And I would never give her up’ (43). While in Chicago, Eddie drinks more, eats less, and people comment on how bad he looks, but at the same time he makes a contact that could guarantee the future success of his business.

Then something new is added to the mix. One time, when inside Christine’s head, he sees the same room

at several different times, like the superimpositions of Christine’s time-lapse photography. This extraordinary vision is what earned her diagnosis of schizophrenia, and what brought her to Rudeman’s attention. It is also what opens her up to possession, and she now believes that Rudeman is continuing to possess her from beyond the grave. And she believes she caused Rudeman’s death.

Eddie starts to recognize that there is an identity between him and Rudeman, exercising the same invasive control over the same woman. And when we learn that Rudeman’s obsession eventually turned to fear, we realize that Eddie, also, is coming to fear Christine. The stage is set for a showdown in which identities become confused as Eddie and Christine, both sick, both losing grip of who they are, shift in and out of control, of awareness.

The infinity box of the title is, of course, the human mind. This story was first published in 1971, at a time when science fiction writers were beginning to explore issues of sexuality and of identity, and in this marvelous work (even better now, I think, than when I first read it) Wilhelm subtly elides the two. The result is a story that seems to shift direction several times, but most of these shifts are due to the way we try to reconcile our view of the protagonist with what is actually happening in the story. He’s a nice guy, he’s happy and successful, he’s got a wife he loves and who loves him: we are not used to seeing such characters as the villain. Particularly not when this is the character who narrates the story, the character through whose eyes we watch events unfold. Having been led to identify with Eddie, we don’t like to believe that we might behave that way. So the story allows us to construct excuses: it’s not his fault, she’s responsible, she’s mad, he’s ill. And the story shifts under us each time we try to tell it in a way that exonerates him, each time the reader tries not to feel so bad about identifying with him.

This is mostly a mainstream story; as it shifts from the pulpy feel of the first few pages the subtlety of the writing, the tone of voice, the emphasis on character are all typical of good mainstream work. Even the science fictional twist, the ability to see inside another person’s mind, can be read as a metaphor for the psycho-sexual drama being played out here. Except that the psycho-sexual drama wouldn’t exist without this device. In the end it does something that a mainstream story could not do; what marks it out as such a brilliant example of science fiction is the assured way it uses its effects to build a terrifying climax that would not be possible without the science fiction and yet which resonates so clearly and so chillingly with the world we see around us every day.

I had forgotten how powerful an effect this story had upon me when I first read it. Over time these things fade, so in the end I was left only with the memory that it had had such an effect. Revisiting the story, it hits home as devastatingly as it must have done in the 1970s. At least now I know why something in the back of my mind insisted that this had to be included in my list of the best ever novellas.

● Quotations taken from ‘The Infinity Box’ in Kate Wilhelm, *The Infinity Box*, New York, Pocket Books, 1977

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS

## THE BOOK REVIEW COLUMN

*Finch* by Jeff VanderMeer  
(Corvus, 2010)

Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

Never have I been quite so tempted to write a review in a pastiche of the subject book's style than I have with Jeff VanderMeer's *Finch*. Unabashedly paying homage to the classic hard-boiled detective novels, *Finch* – both the novel and its eponymous hero – speaks in clipped sentences through a clenched jaw. It's a strong flavour and VanderMeer hasn't spared the sauce; as such, it can take the palate a while to become accustomed to its subtleties. Indeed, I only know the noir aesthetic at one remove, most notably from its repurposed redeployment by William Gibson and Richard Morgan. The difference in intensity is like that between a chow mein Pot Noodle and a box of fried beansprouts bought from a street vendor in Kowloon. Making it past the surface style was, I confess, a bit of a struggle at first – but the pay-off was more than worth it.

*Finch* is the third novel of Ambergris, VanderMeer's signature fictional city, but, like a gumshoe fresh to a tough case, that's all I knew of it before walking its streets. With *Finch* as your guide, you needn't worry about knowing little of what's going on though: no one else in the novel knows the truth, either, and the more someone claims they know, the more they're likely to be wrong. Dead wrong. Despite growing up in Ambergris under a different name, *Finch* has no solid idea how it got the way it is – torn apart by civil war in the wake of a territorial expansion, and then invaded by a grisly and inscrutable species of fungal life-form known simply as "the gray caps".

*Finch* knows how he got where *he* is, though – investigating crimes at the gnomic behest of the gray caps, while partnering (and trying to protect) his former mentor Whyte, who is gradually succumbing to the symbiotic corruption that comes from close exposure to the gray caps and their saprophytic technologies. Thing is, *Finch* isn't telling. He's an uncoverer of secrets but he has plenty of his own, a cypher of a man caught between every faction in the game, beholden to all, protected by none. Unravelling the mystery presented to him at the novel's beginning – two corpses in a grimy room, one of a human who appears to have fallen from a great height, one of a gray cap shorn cleanly in two by forces unexplained – will unravel the mystery of Ambergris and what the gray caps are doing there, as well as the mystery of *Finch* himself.

No text is more fecund than one with an unreliable narrator. It is plain from the outset that *Finch* is hiding things from us, but there's no sense of VanderMeer cheating us with sleight-of-narrative; *Finch* dissembles to other characters as much as he does to us, and it's this aspect of his character that justifies the hyperstylised prose. *Finch* has made himself anew, built himself from nothing after razing his past to the ground; those clipped sentences

are the voice of a man ever wary of what he says, and to whom... to the point that he's not even sure what he can say to himself any more. Indeed, one could read the entire novel as *Finch*'s fabrication, or perhaps just extrapolation; the day-length sections of the story are framed by brief excerpts of a torturer's transcript, which could be taken to mean that everything we're reading is actually a fevered blend of facts and falsehood concocted by a man who'll say anything – no matter how incredible, no matter how mundane – to end the pain. *Finch* repeatedly confesses to us that he's a fictional creation, written by himself; only he knows where the line between his truth and his fiction may lie.

These twin themes of torture and misinformation also intertwine with the novel's subtext; whether he intended it or not, I found it difficult to read *Finch* as anything other than VanderMeer's metaphor for the paranoia and division of post-9/11 America. The symbols are all there: twinned towers of unexplained but obvious and powerful significance; the ubiquitous spore-based surveillance network; the compromised, collaborating "Partials" becoming part fungus themselves; the waterboarding of a captured gray cap and the reliance by all factions on intelligence obtained by torture; packs of playing cards depicting the ruling regime's most wanted; a state divided by political difference after a period of confident and grandiose empire-building, thrown into utter disarray by the appearance – as if from nowhere – of an enemy who not only has inscrutable motives, but whose very modes of thought are utterly alien.

The corruption of a fungal infestation mirrors the corruption of a state riddled with paranoia and there's an underlying terror and disgust at the irrational through-the-motions bureaucracy that coats the body politic like a white cloak of mycelia; old schisms are imperfectly patched over in the face of an inexplicable yet imminent threat, the external become suddenly and horrifyingly internal. The enemy of my enemy must be my friend... unless, of course, we are both unwittingly my enemy's servants. In Ambergris, you can't really trust anyone. Especially not *Finch*. Who can't even trust himself.

Metaphor aside, what *Finch* is about is how hard it is to live a lie, even – or perhaps especially – in a world of lies; it's about remaining loyal to your duty, even when the meaning of that duty has disappeared or inverted itself; it's about learning to trust others, in the hope that you might be able to trust yourself again one day. It's not an easy novel to start – not for this reader, at least – but it's a very easy novel to finish once its momentum has hold of you. Don't be afraid to enter Ambergris without knowing what to expect. But do be prepared to leave with more questions than you arrived with.

***Lightborn* by Tricia Sullivan  
(Orbit, 2010)**

**Reviewed by Jonathan McCalmont**

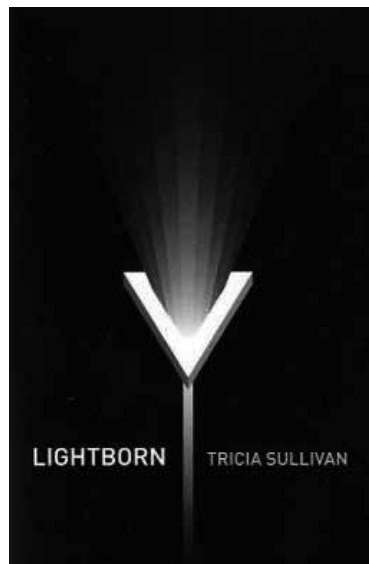
Tricia Sullivan's eighth novel *Lightborn* is set in the aftermath of a terrible catastrophe that has left the once prosperous city of Los Sombres looking like a smoking hell of bombed out buildings, psychotic raiders and ravening zombies. The apparent zombie apocalypse was caused by the inhabitants of Los Sombres losing control over a light-based technology that allowed them to re-wire their brains in order to get rid first of mental illnesses then psychological quirks and finally personality traits. As time went by, "the Shine" became more complex and self-perpetuating until a species of "Lightborn" AIs began to act on their own, refashioning the information Field and transforming the human Shinies into hollowed-out husks whose lives are entirely defined by a wide array of self-destructive and surreal life-scripts that caused civilisation to fall and the US government to erect a vicious quarantine around the city and the surrounding area. Outside of the city but within the quarantine zone, a mismatched community of survivalists, Native Americans and survivors of the Fall eke out a living by training horses and working the land. Those who were old enough to have their minds crippled by the Fall do what they can while those not yet old enough to access Shine use drugs designed to stave off puberty and thereby retain an immunity to the Field. Then a man comes from the city. His mind nearly fried by Shine, the man speaks of being able to fix things but as he speaks, the age-retardant drugs start disappearing. This forces the community's kids to take matters into their own hands and venture into the city where they find not an apocalyptic ruin but a community which, much like their own, has adapted to the chaos in the Field and found a way to survive. As the truth about Los Sombres emerges, Xavier and Roksana (the book's chief protagonists) have to face a difficult decision: Even if the mysterious man at the ranch is speaking the truth about being able to fix things, does the world really need a saviour?

Much like Geoff Ryman's novel *Air*, *Lightborn* uses the idea of an ambient internet that can be accessed without a technological interface to explore a clash of two different cultures. However, while *Air* was concerned with the inhabitants of a tiny mountain village encountering The World, *Lightborn* is more interested in the ways in which children ease themselves into the scalding waters of the adult world. Initially, Xavier see the Shinies' weird array of compulsions as both utterly incomprehensible and profoundly unpleasant but gradually, as he learns more about the world, a few green sprouts of empathy begin to emerge, an emergence reflected in the fact that he is coming off his age-retarding drugs and so is starting to feel the heady hormonal on-rush of puberty. Sullivan also uses *Lightborn's* science fictional concepts to explore the tension between needing to adapt one's ideas to the world as it unfolds and the desire to remain authentic

to oneself. She undertakes this idea by blurring the line between Shine and belief and setting up a number of points at which a character will suddenly change their opinion about something only for their friends to claim that they are under the influence of the Shine. But if all we are is a collection of beliefs and feelings, can we really meaningfully distinguish between a technologically implanted desire and a desire that we have formed as a result of our own private thought processes? What difference is there between religious conversion and being taken over by a rogue AI? Sullivan's powerful metaphorical apparatus carries within it fascinating echoes of the Memetic theories of belief perpetuated by thinkers such as Richard Dawkins.

The novel's final act is taken up by the fallout of Xavier and Roksana implementing an attempt at fixing the internet by imposing a single coherent conceptual framework on the Field. Sullivan portrays the uploading of this fix as an almost mystical experience. With dazzling stylistic flair, Sullivan communicates the sense of incredible harmony, beauty and power that could be achieved if all of humanity was suddenly able to talk to each other without misunderstanding or conflict. But at what price does this harmony come? The messianic nature that this event imposes upon the protagonist along with the book's deep ambivalence towards the very notion of a 'Saviour' is reminiscent of the deconstruction of the Campbellian hero carried out by works ranging from Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream* (1972) to Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010) but *Lightborn* is far more sympathetic, elegant and powerful in its analysis than either of those books. Keep an eye out in particular for a Hopi medicine woman who is a lot more than she appears at first glance. Sometimes being adult means not even agreeing to disagree.

Initially presenting itself as another dull dystopian zombie novel, *Lightborn* is in fact a lot closer to China Miéville's award-winning *The City & The City* in that both novels use their narratives and characters to construct an elaborate social metaphor. However, where Miéville allows the fruits of his labour to rot on the vine by refusing to apply them to the problems of the real world, Sullivan uses hers to address issues political, social and psychological. Exquisitely composed, fiercely intelligent, dazzlingly complex and quietly affecting, *Lightborn* is one of the very best works of science fiction published in 2010.



## ***Surface Detail* by Iain M Banks (Orbit, 2010)**

**Reviewed by Marcus Flavin**

In *Surface Detail* Iain M Banks (no doubt about the M with this one) once again gives us a sprawling space opera with several distinct threads weaving their way through a typically convoluted plot.

Banks's previous 'M' novel, *Matter*, was the first Culture novel for eight years, a gap which caused some of us to wonder if *Look to Windward* really was his goodbye to the Culture. It was principally concerned with the Culture's meddlings in a single culture, albeit a complex and utterly alien one. *Surface Detail* deals with the other end of the spectrum: a vast canvas involving many other civilisations (mostly rather less alien) with which the Culture competes and squabbles; journeys across vast distances of space to enigmatic and ancient... things; and, inevitably, epic space battles.

At the centre of the novel are two linked ideas Banks has largely skimmed past in previous Culture novels: effective immortality by way of digitally preserving back up personalities and virtual universes, massive simulations running in computers of unimaginable processing power. So far, so not-particularly-original, but Banks isn't particularly interested in some of the more frequently-trod ground such as the ability to return from death by use of backed up copies or the tedious 'Matrix question' of whether the provocatively-named "Real" might itself be another simulation.

While such points don't go completely unnoticed, deeper questions of personal identity in the light of such possibilities are far more important to the novel. But the typically Banksian twist on which the novel is founded is the concept that societies would make use of such techniques to create virtual hells (and heavens) reflecting their religions, cultures and general understanding of existence, buttressing the claims of those old-time religions by making them real (if not Real). What else would a Marxist expect?

The meta-civilisation of which the Culture is just part - not even, Banks implicitly reminds us, necessarily the most important part - contains a significant swathe of more conservative civilisations who do just that. That has become a matter of great contention; some consider the hells anathema and seek to have them banned by the vaguely described structures that somehow legislate for the meta-civilisation, others passionately defend their right to retain them as fundamental to their cultures. The debate, it has been agreed by some kind of gentleman's agreement, is to be determined by means of a war fought not in the Real but across other parts of the virtual universe. Or, as we might put it, by means of a range of totally immersive multiplayer computer games. (Banks, who back in 2004 said he had been forced to delete Sid Meier's *Civilisation* from his computer as it was preventing him from doing any work, is clearly fascinated by the possibilities.)

Against this background Banks gives us several different plots to follow, perhaps too many. Most touching is the story of Prin and Chay, anti-hell campaigners (from a society which has hells but pretends to its own plebs it doesn't) on an investigatory mission to a hell of which Hieronymus Bosch and Dante could justly be proud. One

escapes and takes the story back, the other does not. Then there's Yime Nsoyki, a Contact operative, emphatically not from Special Circumstances but rather Quietus, one of three new specialist Contact groups introduced in the novel and responsible for relations with the Dead.

The real protagonist, however, is Lededje Y'breq, genetically marked with a full-body tattoo who starts the novel as the indentured slave from birth of the vile Veppers - a splendidly horrible villain with the usual Banksian traits of utterly amoral capitalism and a vaguely sadistic sex-drive - and promptly dies. When, by means which only later become slightly clearer than mud, she awakes in a virtual environment running on a Culture GSV, her first thought is of revenge. Can the Culture help her? Should it?

For the Culture, though unchanged in its fundamental outlook, seems a little more grown up, a little more inclined to take a long view than it was a millennium before in the Idiarian War of *Consider Phlebas*. The veteran Minds who survive from that war are all considered a little odd and the Culture, to the surprise of all, has not itself entered into the virtual War against the Hells. (Knowing Banks's emphatic views on the foreign policy of the last decade, it is difficult to avoid wondering whether a parallel can be drawn with the idealistic fantasies of the feasibility of remodelling Iraq and Afghanistan in a liberal mould). At the beginning of the novel Y'breq muses bitterly on the fact that in the Culture, of all places, Veppers's wealth and importance is a reason to prevent her revenge on him.

Banks stitches all of this together into an extravagantly baroque tapestry, switching between the various plot threads, throwing in complications and revelations of wheels within wheels. As the title suggests, everything becomes more complicated the more carefully it is looked at. Along the way we encounter vast and unknowable entities, the Fallen and Unfallen Bulbitians - enormous fun but an excursus that seems to be there simply to be enormous fun for fans of space opera - and, with rather more significance to the plot, the mysterious NR (a machine civilisation) and the irritatingly enthusiastic GCFC (who want to be the Culture when they grow up).

While Banks isn't yet up there with the paperweight creators of the epic fantasy genre, my impression is that his science fiction novels are longer each time. *Surface Detail* weighs in at over 600 pages and that isn't entirely a positive thing. It is not as elegantly composed and beautifully written as *Look to Windward* (in my view his best work under either name) but it's much more a book for Culture fans than that novel (or, indeed, *Matter*). With his consummate talents as a writer, Banks does just pull it off. But only just: it all feels a little self-indulgent, down to the very last word of the novel, a fun little nod to fans of the series but hardly the novel-altering twist I have seen some argue it is. There's a feeling of a surfeit of plot threads, too many lovingly detailed battles and grandiose characters.

But ultimately the result is still the classic Banksian synthesis of a sprawling space opera which balances a gripping and highly entertaining plot with a wealth of ideas and questions. There aren't many others who can bring that off.

***The Technician* by Neal Asher (Tor, 2010)  
Reviewed by Stuart Carter**

Neal Asher pumps out books like some kind of termite queen - fourteen at the last count, plus four short story collections. It's a work rate that most other writers struggle to match but he's been consistently putting out thick books that are both well-composed and showcase an increasingly sophisticated and coherent universe: that of the Polity. A space empire mainly comprised of humans and mainly managed by AIs, the Polity continues to expand into a galaxy that is genuinely big, scary and at best ambivalent to humanity.

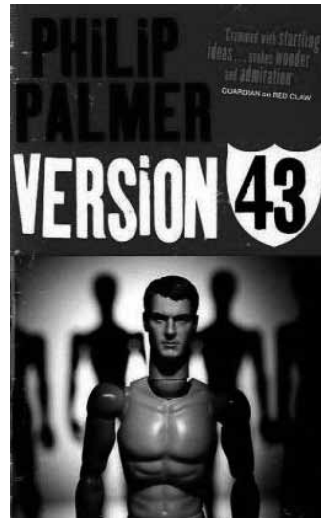
*The Technician* continues Asher's galactic epic as both oppressed and oppressors struggle to come to terms with the end of a vicious religious dictatorship on the planet of Masada. An obscure and backward world, Masada holds the key to the mysterious racial suicide of an advanced race, the Atheter, who destroyed themselves utterly some three million years ago, following millennia of war caused by the discovery of the even more ancient and advanced technology of the Jain - technology the Polity itself is now wrestling to understand.

Jeremiah Tombs, a former member of the hated ruling caste on Masada, is now quite insane after surviving an attack by the eponymous Technician. The Technician painstakingly removed his face and most other non-essential body tissue, but may also have done something else to Tombs - no one is sure what. The hated Polity saved his life after this horrific attack and have realised that the Technician is not simply some freakish predator. With Tombs now insane, however, the race is on to discover what he knows - but doesn't realise he knows - before a massive structure of unknown origin but hostile intent reaches Masada to finish a job it began three million years earlier.

I've dipped in and out of Neal Asher's Polity universe over the years; I haven't read all of his books but *do* keep coming back for more because they're so straightforwardly entertaining. Sometimes you want a bit more depth from a book but there are times when all you want are brisk stories with yucky aliens, cool technology, massive spaceships and killer robots. Cue Neal Asher. *The Technician* isn't Proust; it's brash and it's gaudy and Asher's interest in characters tends less toward their motivation than their evisceration. People (and aliens) die all the time in these books and never peacefully in their beds surrounded by loved ones. Asher might just be on a personal crusade to find ever-more disgusting and horrific ways that technology can kill us. This is not your new wave sf, this is space opera with all the original ingredients cranked up to 21<sup>st</sup> Century levels.

What is fascinating is Asher's ongoing development of his universe, the big picture that is slowly being drawn into focus through all of the little pictures he has drawn in his novels. Where is it all leading? I don't know and I wonder if Neal Asher knows either. But one thing's for sure: it's going to be big, loud and liable to explode.

***Version 43* by Philip Palmer (Orbit, 2010)  
Reviewed by David Hebblethwaite**



*Version 43* is a novel of vast, widescreen scope. It is constantly pulling back its focus to reveal a wider stage for its action. It is also full of incident and rarely pauses for breath. And yet... it seems rather less engaging than one might anticipate.

Philip Palmer's third novel takes us to the planet Belladonna and more specifically to Bompasso, commonly known as Lawless City, thanks to its being run by criminal gangs.

The only way to reach this world is via quantum teleportation, a process with only a fifty percent chance of survival; the scrambled bodies of five medics would seem to suggest that, somehow, the technology is now being used as a weapon. Sent to investigate this is our narrator, a Galactic Cop, once human, now a cyborg in his 43<sup>rd</sup> iteration; he is immensely powerful and unwavering in the pursuit of his mission - which turns out to have a much larger context than he first thought.

Alongside the main narrative, we follow the Hive-Rats, a species bent on conquest, controlled by a hive-mind of the species they have absorbed and able to alter the flow of time (and hence to subjectively speed up their evolution in response to any obstacle). Eventually, the two story-strands intersect, giving the Cop even more to contend with.

An ever-expanding canvas like this would seem to lend itself naturally to an exciting sf adventure story but, in this case, I found that the combination of the plot's great scope and the Cop's detached viewpoint instead distances one from the action. It becomes difficult to care about what's happening, partly because individual dramas get lost in the throng and partly because the *Cop* doesn't care - his directive is all and it doesn't matter who gets hurt or killed along the way. There are a few moments of introspection where the Cop starts to wonder about the ethics of what he is doing but they don't change the overall affect of the story.

Even on a scene-by-scene basis, the action is not particularly involving. It feels like watching one video-game fight sequence after another, without the immersion; this impression is reinforced by the episodic structure of *Version 43*, which sees the Cop repeatedly destroyed then regenerated as a new version; as he remarks towards the end: "They could keep killing me; I would keep being reborn; it would be a long slow game of attrition." Quite so - and that, I think, is part of the problem.

There's a certain amount of interest generated by the sheer amount of plot, as one wonders just how Palmer is going to resolve everything. And the squabbling between the Minds of the Hive-Rats is quite entertaining. Overall, however, *Version 43* is not a great read.



***How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* by Charles Yu (Corvus, 2010)  
Reviewed by Martin McGrath**

Don't judge a book by its cover is sound advice. Even wiser might be a warning that a reader shouldn't judge a book by the quotes a publisher puts on the cover. Even so, Audrey Niffenegger's prominently displayed claim that Charles Yu's first novel, *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, was "tremendously clever" made my heart sink. A performing monkey is *clever*. A tap-dancing pony is *clever*. *Clever* is showing-off, it is smug and it is complacent. Sadly, it is also the perfect adjective to describe Yu's novel.

*How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* is a book by Charles Yu in which the narrator, Charles Yu, is given a book (entitled *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*) written by a future Charles Yu which contains the story of Charles Yu. How *clever* is that? Charles is a time machine repair man who has become increasingly dislocated from his own time stream. Things come to a head when he meets a future-self, panics, shoots himself and leaps into his time machine. Charles then spends the rest of the novel worrying about his place in the time loop:

"Wait a minute. Don't you go through the loop? Should you have some kind of record, some residual memory, some counter for each iteration? How many times have I done this? A hundred? A thousand? Do I ever learn anything from it? Do I ever become a better person?"

It's a sticky philosophical question. The problem is it's not one that applies to the situation that the fictional Charles Yu finds himself – despite the novel's diagram of a time loop on page 91. You see Charles isn't in a time loop: Present Charles sees his future self, Present Charles shoots his future self, Present Charles sits in his time machine and grumbles for a while, then Present Charles emerges from his time machine, gets shot and dies. There is no loop. There is no reset. Present Charles can only ever go through the process once. In a novel so keen to display its cleverness this is a serious annoyance.

But the novel's greater problems relate to its emotional core. The relationship between Charles and his distant, long-absent father is supposed to provide the novel's heart but Charles is such a self-pitying whiner that it is almost impossible to care about his emotional state. Even in moments when both characters are fully engaged, Charles is not really concerned with how his father feels but is busy worrying about why he isn't more empathic. The novel feels as emotionally stunted as the relationship between father and son - Yu is too often too concerned with showing off. The language of the book is tangled and distracting. The metaphors are stretched beyond breaking point and the central motif of time travel and alternate universes are not used to move forward the emotional core of the story, instead they obscure it. Too often reading *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* felt like being lectured by a smart but slightly autistic teenage boy.

***Galileo's Dream* by Kim Stanley Robinson  
(HarperCollins, 2009)  
Reviewed by Anthony Nanson**

In *Galileo's Dream*, Kim Stanley Robinson makes a departure into history to tell the story of Galileo, from his first experiments with the telescope – introduced to him by a stranger who's obviously from the future – and his discovery of Jupiter's moons, to his trial in 1633 for the heresy of teaching that the earth orbits the sun. The novel celebrates his pioneering of mathematical physics, the historical moment when science really begins to distinguish how the world actually works from how people imagine it to work. But Galileo is also an iconic figure for the people from the future, in their own ideological conflicts about how to respond to the discovery of alien consciousness in the moons of Jupiter. For that reason – the motive is a bit flimsy – he is repeatedly transported to the Jovian system in this future time, where he learns how physics has developed from the beginnings he made, and participates in the encounter with the alien consciousness.

The lengthy sections of the novel that chronicle Galileo's life in seventeenth-century Italy were, for me, pretty leaden to read. Robinson's writing here seemed caught unhappily between the vivid evocation of the past you expect in historical fiction, and the concision and authorial insight of good historical biography. His research of the facts of Galileo's life and times is manifestly thorough, but the writing is relentlessly expository and thereby fails to bring the Italian setting to life or to evoke the strangeness of the mindworld of that time.

The future sections are more engaging and, though the evocation of the future world is rather thin, they include some lovely planetary description of the kind that Robinson has always done so well. What unfolds in these future sections is high concept indeed. The author attempts to transcend the conflict between science and religion, which Galileo so famously represents, by imagining an expansion of science to understand the universe in metaphysical terms – a universe alive with multi-dimensional consciousness, in which all that has been and all that might be coexists at once, and in which any worries the reader might have about time paradoxes are dwarfed by notions that the tragedies of the past can be redeemed by transforming past, present, and future as one. The particular plot tension this boils down to for Galileo is whether or not he will, in consequence of his trial for heresy, get burned at the stake, which he's shown does happen in some timelines.

The conceptual ambition of all this is stunning, accommodating even the mystical vision of Giordano Bruno, who ran foul of the Inquisition for what might seem polar opposite beliefs to the rational scientific ones that got Galileo into trouble. It speaks to ultimate questions arising from our mortality – of how we might conceive of our personal consciousness, of all the moments of being that matter to us, of the best of all that has been, or might have been, as somehow enduring through all eternity.

***Music For Another World*, edited by Mark Harding (Mutation Press, 2010)  
Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts**

*Music For Another World* is the first book to be issued by Mutation Press and describes itself as strange fiction on the theme of music. This is an original fiction anthology, comprising 19 original stories, and the collection has been structured along the lines of an opera, split into three acts with a prelude and coda. Mark Harding, in his introduction, does acknowledge that this structure is somewhat shadowy and may actually only be apparent to him. However, the imposition of this structure forces the reader to attempt, albeit subconsciously, to fit them into the pattern. The three act structure does not actually add anything to the collection and there appears to be no identifiable thematic link or arc through the stories that really warranted it. 'The Three Lilies' by Cyril Symsa and 'Fugue' by Gavin Inglis do, however, make for a reasonably effective prelude and coda with short tales of the eternal and fatally compelling nature of music.

Music, as a linking theme, is a broad topic and the diversity of the stories reflects this. The stories range from the high fantasy of Aliette de Bodard's 'Silenced Songs', through the horror of Chris Amies 'Cow Lane', in which the hell of some small music clubs takes a very literal turn, to the humourous space opera of Jackie Hawkins's 'Figaro'. The stories also cover a broad spectrum of approaches to music. 'Blue Note Heaven' by David H. Hendrickson takes on the divide between the religious and secular response to music. A jazz musician is invited to play in Heaven, and his guide is initially bemused by music where the primary function is not to worship God. While slightly heavy handed, it does question the meaning of the quasi-religious experience of being lost in music. Vincent Lauzon's 'Festspeel' addresses music's reconciliatory nature, with two musicians from opposing races of a recent brutal war recognising the skill of one another, even though that skill is muted on both sides by injuries received in the conflict.

My own personal favourite is probably 'Shostakovich Ensemble, The' by Jim Steel. This takes a somewhat different tack and is the story most removed from the music itself. It consists of the album discography of the eponymous group, a politically motivated art-rock outfit. The album notes run from 1978 through to 1992 and each describes the album and its place in the musical and political landscape of the time. The world described through these notes is an alternate Britain, where the Tory government of the Eighties actually became the fascist dictatorship that many seemed to fear. The picture painted of the time is remarkably vivid, even filtered as it is through music journalism.

This is a nicely varied theme anthology, taking in a wide range of styles and themes. *Music For Another World* also manages to maintain a fairly high standard throughout. On the strength of this collection, it is to be hoped that Mark Harding's project with Mutation Press is a successful one.

***The Immersion Book of SF*, edited by Carmelo Rafala (Immersion Press, 2010)  
Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller**

Immersion Press, according to its website, specialises in "limited-edition, single-author collections and short novels". The *Immersion Book of SF* is neither so one should perhaps regard it as a calling card. However, as an introduction to the press's authors and a laying out of its wares, it is a mixed bag.

The majority of these stories feel as though they belong in the Eighties rather than in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Chris Butler's 'Have Guitar, Will Travel' is a prime example, with its faux-Gibsonian plot about the consequences of a rock star becoming infected with virus software. Although competently written, the story was unsurprising. Al Robertson's 'Golden' was similarly predictable, its disillusioned salesman receiving tantalising hints of a world where humans had continued into space, its 'surprise revelation' heavily signalled. Both stories also suffered from a sense that the sf elements are window dressing for studies of emotional upheavals rather than integral to the story.

This feeling permeated the collection. Aliette de Bodard's 'Father's Last Ride', dealing with a daughter's coming to terms with her father's life as an "aurora rider" might as easily have used a non-sf setting and occupation and achieved the same cathartic ending. Jason Erik Lundberg's 'The Time Traveler's Son' was, like the de Bodard, a nicely observed mood piece and there were hints that it was moving beyond a merely evocative account of a mostly absent father with a taste for tall tales but didn't fully realise its own premise.

'Dolls' by Colin P Davies and 'Grave Robbers' by Anne Stringer were very disappointing. Davies's story, about child pageants taken to competitive absurdity, swirls aimlessly before ending in a desultory fashion. Stringer's story is the weakest in the collection (although Eric James Stone's 'Bird-Dropping and Sunday', a leaden fairy tale, ran it a close second). The idea of grave robbers uncovering alien artefacts is not new and Stringer did little to refresh it. Gareth Owens's 'Mango Dictionary and the Dragon Queen of Contract Evolution' had the most ingenious title but, as with so many of these stories, there was no sense of anything beyond the conclusion and it feels more like a writing exercise than a fully-fledged story.

Gord Sellar's 'The Broken Pathway' has flaws but he works hard to create a world beyond the story and sets up an intriguing clash of cultures, expressed through geomancy and cartography. Finally, Lavie Tidhar and Tanith Lee show how it should be done. Tidhar's 'Lode Stars' skilfully packs a fully-realised space opera into twenty pages of story, which is full of telling detail and wrong-foots the reader throughout. Lee's 'Tan' is tiny and has an improbable premise involving dead aliens and a sun tan but works because of an unforgettable final image.

But these three stories are not enough to sustain the rest of the collection. The retro feel - even down to the cover picture with its pouting female astronaut, hair floating softly, breast-shaped bulges built into her spacesuit - seems neither intentional nor ironic and as such suggests that the Immersion Press view of science fiction will be traditional rather than innovative. This might not be a bad thing in itself but let it at least be good traditional story-telling rather than, as in so many instances here, something lacklustre and unappealing.

***Zombie: An Anthology of the Undead*, edited by Christopher Golden (Piatkus, 2010)**

Reviewed by CB Harvey

The undead come in all shapes and sizes, a point ably demonstrated by this disparate collection of eschatologically-themed short stories. Editor Christopher Golden has amassed a collection of tales that offer frequently satirical but also unexpectedly moving disquisitions on the nature of dying. And, by extension, *living*. Sure, there are the walking – well, *staggering* – dead familiar from so many George A Romero flicks and associated remakes and cash-ins but even these are given a new twist. In David Liss's strange and powerful 'What Maisie Knew' the self-serving protagonist is obsessed with the dead version of a woman he inadvertently ran down. MB Homler gives us an unusual spin on the undead holocaust narrative, revolving around a zombie impaled on the spire of city hall and the events leading up to and succeeding such a peculiar incident. Jonathan Maberry's 'Family Business' is a touching exegesis on the nature of brotherhood set against a convincing, Depression-flavoured zombiescape.

Unsurprisingly the War on Terror in its multiple guises ambles its way through this collection. It's explicitly present in Stephen R Bisette's 'Copper', in which ex-Iraq combatants take over a town, while 'Weaponized' by David Wellington imagines undead soldiers as weapons of war, told from the viewpoint of an embedded journalist. 'Kids And Their Toys', in which a group of youngsters torment a zombie, makes explicit the connection with US involvement in Iraq. In its affecting exploration of the bravado but also the fragility of young teenagehood, James A. Moore's parable is redolent of Stephen King's non-horror novella *The Body* (famously filmed as *Stand By Me*).

The potency of the zombie sub-genre and its resonant connection with the War on Terror means that the undercurrents are present in many of the other stories: Max Brooks deals with the tension between collective and individual trauma in 'Closure, Limited' (another visit to his *World War Z* milieu), while Tim Lebbon's 'In The Dust' situates a love story in the small Welsh town of Usk, cordoned off because of a zombie epidemic.

Other stories mine different sources. The anthology begins by returning to the archetypal zombie story with John Connolly's 'Lazarus', in which the eponymous character is condemned to existence as a living corpse, excluded from society and from the ones he loved, a sharp new perspective on a mainstay of Christian lore. Tad Williams's 'The Storm Door' is perhaps the most overtly pulp-flavoured story, complete with inclement weather, a spooky old house and an Edward de Souza-style creepy uncle. Joe Hill, meanwhile, twists the pulp aesthetic in a family's encounter with a zombie circus told via the teenage daughter's acerbic Tweets, while Holly Newstein invokes the voodoo heritage of the walking dead in 'Delice', as well as bringing to mind the first feature-length zombie flick from 1932, the venerable *White Zombie*.

***The Loving Dead* by Amelia Beamer (Night Shade Books, 2010)**

Reviewed by Niall Harrison



There can't be many combinations of ideas that seem less promising than sex and zombies. Amelia Beamer's first novel, however, finds some congruencies that in retrospect look obvious. Zombies are, after all, "entirely focused on the pleasures of the flesh"; in *The Loving Dead* that extends to sexual assault as well as the more familiar brain-seeking kind. Where George A Romero's zombies stand for, say, the mindlessness of consumerism, Beamer's

exaggerate the terrifying single-mindedness of the horny.

The serious undertones to *The Loving Dead* therefore have to do with issues of promiscuity and consent. The two protagonists, co-workers and flat-sharers Kate and Michael, live highly sexualised lives, with Beamer attentive to the attendant power dynamics. Kate is the more active: within the first fifty pages, she has shagged her belly-dancing teacher, fooled around with Michael and given her sugar daddy a hand-job in a car-park. Michael, meanwhile, tends to spend more time thinking about who he wants to have sex with, how much he wants to have sex with them and how he wants to do it (often BDSM play). Both filter their experiences through a sexual lens, and Michael even perceives the architecture as getting in on the action: a complicated freeway junction is described as being "like a high school group of friends, everyone hooking up with everyone else." Zombie attacks come to be a kind of relief; at the very least, they offer a change of pace.

Most of the time, they offer more. Beamer's zombies can be plenty gruesome (and have their own creepy catchphrase), but her version of the mythos is wittily and aptly elaborated, as when it turns out her undead are made obedient by the crack of a whip. At its best, *The Loving Dead* can be entertainingly knowing; Beamer's characters have, of course, seen Romero's films and *Shaun of the Dead* and read Max Brooks and Kelly Link (or at least come across the concept of zombie contingency plans), and consequently spend a certain amount of time fretting about such things as the indefensibility of their houses. Nor is it just the good guys who model their behaviour on earlier stories.

Occasionally knowing cool becomes grating, as in the case of the Bay Area zeppelin tour, and the novel's momentum can be checked by the ruts of zombie apocalypses past. So the more adventurous final chapter is a welcome gamble, even if the execution is slightly cramped. It confirms and extends the themes noted above, rounding out a snappy pop fiction and perhaps hinting at bolder things to come.

**Feed by Mira Grant (Orbit, 2010)  
Reviewed by Alex Williams**

The Rising occurred in 2014, when viral cures for cancer and the common cold combined to cure both, with an unfortunate side-effect: zombies! Twenty-six years later, the populace has adjusted to a world in which corpses rise within seconds of death with a mindless lust for flesh; a world with more teleconferencing and smaller windows. *Feed* follows a cadre of news bloggers who are selected to accompany a Republican presidential candidate on campaign. They tour America in their van full of communications technology, interviewing politicians, uncovering plots, bickering with journalists, and (of course) battling zombies. (I assume that the decision to pit zombies against bloggers was driven by the wonderful punning title. Or perhaps a bet-winning attempt to find a less likely zombie slayer than Elizabeth Bennet.)

It's an interesting setting. Humanity is neither destroyed nor triumphant and while people go about their business as usual, there remains an uneasy awareness that they're just an accident or mistake away from deadly peril. Some details of the world ring true: door-handles that automatically extract and test blood before they will open, high-speed elevators to spare passengers from sharing enclosed spaces for any longer than necessary, the profound social gap between the pre- and post-Rising generations. Unfortunately, the fundamentals fail to convince.

The idea that bloggers might replace the mainstream media as a trusted source for news may be plausible in principle but not like this. In an excerpt from her blog, our viewpoint character Georgia explains that when the initial outbreak occurred: "The "real" media was bound by rules and regulations, while the bloggers were bound by nothing more than the speed of their typing. We were the first to report that people who'd been pronounced dead were getting up and noshing on their relatives." We're expected to believe not only that this left bloggers with a reputation for trustworthiness that has lasted for a quarter of a century but that this is A-list journalistic writing. The (otherwise well-written) book is interspersed with pieces from a number of the group and they're consistently painful. The self-importance, bathos and melodrama displayed here are typical; perfectly plausible blog material, perhaps, but hard to take as seriously as we're expected to.

Furthermore, as our heroes are licensed professional journalists, the oft-mentioned distinctions between them and the 'mainstream media' seem to amount to the medium itself and a rather wearing in-your-face indie attitude. This tendency to force unconvincingly stark distinctions between sides is displayed throughout the book, leaving little room for nuance and robbing the politics of any drama. It's a shame, because the incidental dialogue between Georgia and her brother lends them a depth and charm which they rarely have an opportunity to express elsewhere.

The book's final problem is its ending: where it is revealed that this is the first book in a trilogy. The cover of my edition doesn't advertise this at all and, while it retrospectively explains why the plot is sluggish with a dénouement that feels both rushed and partial, it doesn't excuse it.

**Tomes of the Dead: Anno Mortis by Rebecca Levene (Abaddon, 2008)**

**Reviewed by Shaun Green**

My early encounters with pulp genre imprint Abaddon were not particularly positive. That said I do have a measure of admiration for what they do and it's a pleasure to see them survive the dangerous early years of their existence. *Anno Mortis* is an entry in the loosely related *Tomes of the Dead* series for which the brief is essentially 'zombies in famous historical periods'; in this case, the beginning of the Roman Empire. I admit to being bored of zombies now but a friend pressed this book into my hands and insisted that I give it a try. "I thought it would be rubbish," I was told, "but it has zombie elephants!" She herself originally picked it up on the basis of the barely-clothed barbarian woman on the cover. These two facts tell you just about all you need to know about the unique selling points of *Anno Mortis*.

Sarcasm aside, it's pretty good fun. Here's how it goes: in the age of Emperor Caligula (casual mass murderer and serial fucker of all things with holes), the barbarian warrior Boda is brought to Rome to fight in the coliseum as a gladiator. She soon gets caught up in some shady business involving dark rites and the bodies of dead gladiators. Around the same time, feckless playboy and wannabe playwright Petronius is forced into the apprenticeship of Senator Seneca, who it turns out is involved in some shady business involving dark rites and the bodies of dead gladiators. I hate to include spoilers in a review but Boda and Petronius totally end up sharing some adventures and unlikely chemistry!

It's an unexpected and pleasant surprise that the book's key players do bear some relation to their historical counterparts, even if zombies don't seem to have been mentioned in the records of the period. I'm fairly sure that Boda is indeed supposed to be Boudica, though no mention is made of her being a leader among her people. Still, it's nice that the book does bear some relation to the history it plunders, even if it's at level of depth more akin to BBC/HBO's *Rome* than a serious historical novel. Blood! Sex! Death!

*Anno Mortis* is the sort of book for which the term "romp" or the phrase "rip-roaring adventure" were coined but Levene actually succeeds in walking the fine line of camp between the outright daft and po-faced seriousness. The novel is clearly written with tongue firmly in cheek but it never openly shares a joke with the reader about how silly the whole affair is. It also includes a succession of protagonists who aren't preternaturally competent. Boda is a strong warrior but doesn't know Rome at all, especially its lethal politics; Petronius is clever and possesses a silver tongue but he's also a lazy coward. There's nothing unique about this book but as a bit of lightweight adventure it's an awful lot of fun. Even its set-pieces - including a zombie-driven chariot chase scene through the streets of Rome and the city being laid siege by millions of zombies complete with undead tigers, lions, wolves, boar and the aforementioned elephants - are entertaining rather than tiresome. So, for all my piss-taking, I do actually recommend this book.

***Songs Of The Dying Earth*, edited by George R R Martin and Gardner Dozois  
(Voyager, 2010)**

**Reviewed by L J Hurst**

Jack Vance published *The Dying Earth*, a volume of linked short-stories in 1950. For many years it seemed to hang fire with occasional paperback editions, their covers of incredible naff-ness, only just keeping the work in the public eye. Much later he published three sequel volumes and he allowed Michael Shea to produce another spin-off during one of his own fallow periods. The names of the 22 authors who have contributed stories to this tribute, however, show that Vance's *Dying Earth* was really a powerhouse of imagination, inspiring many different figures including Robert Silverberg, Lucius Shepherd, Tad Williams, Tanith Lee, Dan Simmons, Neil Gaiman as well as half of the editorial team, George R R Martin. Their collected efforts in this enormous volume may double the word-count previously used to describe the *Dying Earth*. (You can find all of Vance's *Dying Earth* oeuvre collected in *Tales of the Dying Earth*, published ten years ago and still in print, part of Gollancz's Fantasy Masterworks series.)

Originally published by the specialist Subterranean Press with an elaborate cover illustration and line drawings within by Tom Kidd accompanying each story, Voyager's British paperback edition of *Songs of the Dying Earth* is rather duller in appearance. Inside Dean Koontz provides the introduction, Vance himself a one page preface in which he describes writing the original stories while crossing the Pacific as a deckhand in the late Forties, while every story has both a biographical introduction from the editors and a short note of appreciation from the story's author. Silverberg's 'The True Vintage of Erzuine Thale' begins the collection, and it ends with Neil Gaiman's "An Invocation of Incuriosity", which, being both shorter than most others and in a sense breaking the fourth wall by switching between our own day and the *Dying Earth*, seems an intentional conclusion.

'Dying Earth' has become a genre and a literary term. Much of humanity has departed to the stars, never to return, all contact lost, while humans have kept the forms that you and I have, even while magic is at work in the world, and that world is full of monsters, carnivorous plants, and creatures of other sentience. Vance named some of them in his original books – Twk-men, Deodands, Pelgranes - and named too the changed geography of Earth. Later writers such as Michael Moorcock in *Dancers at the End of Time* either borrowed or arrived independently at the atmosphere of the books: cynical, abrupt and cruel. Other writers, such as Gene Wolfe in *The Book of the New Sun*, adopted their picaresque exploration of torture, while as recent an author as China Miéville (in *The City and the City*) used the idea of individuals not seeing each other, which formed the basis of Vance's first *Dying Earth* sequel, *The Eyes of the Overworld*.

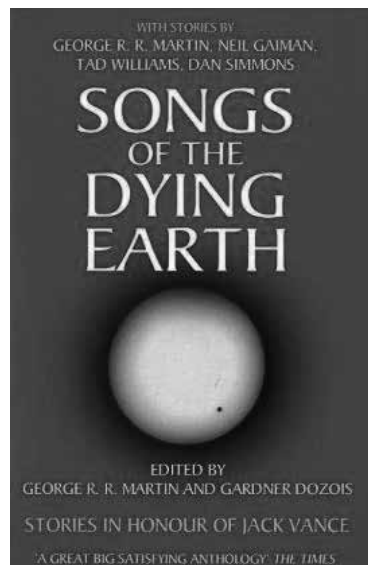
The inhabitants of the *Dying Earth* have a mythology, if not exactly a mythos. Vance's emphasis changed from book to book: the first introduced the world; the second and third dealt with trickster and irredeemable thief Cugel the Clever;

the last of the four concentrated on magicians who might or might not know spells. The authors of these 'songs' develop those varying interests. If spells work, magicians know only some of them (and several stories here are about the struggle to find Vance's ur-wizard Phantaal's original great book of spells). If there is an escape to another world, that world is likely to prove no better (climbing a barbothorn tree like a future Jack and the Beanstalk in Matthew Hughes's 'Grolion of Almerly' proves that, particularly as you might be eaten by the tree on the way to that other dimension). If there are no gods then at least some characters have godlike characteristics; unfortunately they are the characteristics of gods of the underworld.

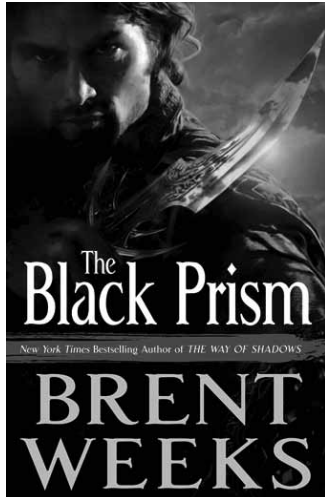
Mike Resnick's 'Inescapable' provides the background by which one of these creatures came into being: Chun The Unavoidable. Chun is one of Vance's notable characters but his origins have never appeared before now. Resnick also provides some of the story of Lith The Gold Witch. Lith reappears in several stories because it is her tapestry whose threads cross inaccessibly into the other world, following which leads many a poor fellow to his doom, as Phyllis Eisenstein describes in 'The Last Golden Thread'.

One of Vance's great inventions on the *Dying Earth* has been Cugel the Clever. Cugel is confident, pleasant, attractive to women and a thief. Whether it is his fate or mere chance, Cugel also never wins and his spoils turn to ash (sometimes literally). Kage Baker's 'The Green Bird' and Lucius Shepherd's 'Sylgarm's Proclamation' are both tales of Cugel in which one wonders if he will come through victorious this time. While Cugel epitomises the spirit of the *Dying Earth*, George R R Martin brings together a number of its individuals in 'A Night At The Tarn House' where Molloqos the Melancholy shows fellow guest Chimwazle that they are sharing the tavern with a malign spirit and ghouls clad in suits of human skin, while they share their dinner table with a demon and a leucomorph, the whole building sitting above a pool in which hissing eels are waiting to dine on the visitors who might plunge through the trapdoored floor. Sometimes enemies co-exist; sometimes they even find themselves bound together, such as in Tad Williams's 'The Lamentably Comical Tragedy (or the Laughably Tragic Comedy) of Lixal Laqavee', where Lixal finds himself with a monstrous Deodand as his perpetual travelling companion. Poetic irony seems to rule the *Dying Earth*.

Literary theorists who study the *Dying Earth* talk of 'thinning', meaning loss as magic fades. Those who voyage in the imagination, though, will find that *Songs of the Dying Earth* takes them far away; even the loss of magic is itself magical. And the theft of it is outrageous. Not only as time and chance happen to all men, but while villains and would-be thaumaturges plot and counterplot in the end times, as the authors who describe them continue to weave Vance's golden threads.



***The Black Prism* by Brent Weeks (Orbit, 2010)**  
 Reviewed by Donna Scott



*The Black Prism* is the impressive first book in Brent Weeks' new *Lightbringer* series; impressive not only for its reading quality but also for the dent in the floor it made when it arrived in the post. Weighing in at a chunky 629 pages, this book screams epic fantasy and fans of Weeks's previous *Night Angel* trilogy will be thrilled at the prospect of another marathon read.

Perhaps this was a bit too much though for Orbit's blurb writers. The plot they

summarise on the fly is not quite as it is in the book; though this could be Weeks himself, laying down red herrings before the story even gets started, since *The Black Prism* hinges on long-held family secrets and deceptions. At the centre of it all are two principal characters: Kip, a fat, hopeless teenager who cares for his addict mother and has a distinct lack of joy in his life, and Gavin Guile, the man who holds the highest rank in the magical academy known as the Chromeria and who, it seems, is secretly Kip's father.

The two are brought together after Kip's mother sends a message to the Chromeria to tell Guile about Kip. The boy had been fathered during the Prism wars, in which Gavin had fought against his brother, Dazen. Though there are gifted individuals who can draft the valuable magic material luxin from seeing one colour, fewer can do this from two colours or more, but Gavin and Dazen are both Prisms – able to draft from any colour, a hereditary gift that was supposedly unique to each generation until the brothers were born. They fought for ultimate power and Gavin had won with Dazen presumed dead. Except Gavin has secretly been keeping his brother imprisoned beneath his rooms in the Chromeria.

Having learned about Kip, Gavin goes to find him, just as Satrap Garadul has proclaimed himself king and has taken his army to Kip's village to raze it and quash resistance elsewhere. Gavin saves Kip but the rest of his village is killed. Gavin has little choice but to take the boy to the Chromeria and risk his secret being revealed.

It is easy to see how the book grew so big: not only is there a family history to match a long-running soap opera but the magical system is complex and there is battle upon battle to fight. There are many twists in the plot, making this a fun read, though one significant reveal about the brothers even seems to take the characters by surprise and so appears a little unplanned. A magical system based on colour could be an opportunity for poetic prose, but whilst Weeks makes this complex, *The Black Prism* has no literary pretensions. The characters are convincing and sympathetic, if not deep, but the story sweeps along at an energetic pace that belies its size. A great holiday read... but take the paperback.

***The Fallen Blade* by John Courtenay Grimwood (Orbit, 2011)**

Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

My first reaction to finding out that John Courtenay Grimwood had written a fantasy novel about vampires was: "Ooh, shiny!" I love Grimwood's brutally sharp prose, his clever characters, his labyrinthine plots and most of all I love the way he creates cities as fully realised characters, starting with the Alexandria of *Pashazade*. If nothing else, I was expecting it to be original.

And it is. Grimwood re-imagines vampires and werewolves so successfully that at first you're not entirely sure what you're reading about. Venice in 1407 is ruled by the descendants of Marco Polo. The current Duke is supposedly an idiot and his regents, his uncle Alonzo and his aunt Alexa, hate each other. His cousin Giulietta is contracted to be married to the king of Cyprus, to promote an alliance against the Turk, but she is mysteriously kidnapped. On an earlier kidnap attempt the family's personal school of enforcers, the Assassini, were devastated by an attack of *krieghund*, vicious, dog-like creatures who transform into men. They badly need new trainees.

Atilo, a Moor of Venice and master of the Assassini, catches a creature at the scene of a murder drinking blood from the dying victim. This is Tycho: a hundred years ago, he was a Viking slave. He isn't sure how he got to Venice, what his memories mean or even if they're his. All he knows is that his strange hunger for blood waxes with the moon. Tycho escapes capture but, impressed by his improbable athleticism, Atilo decides to train him up as his heir.

This Venice is a dark place. Each morning her streets are littered with fresh corpses and more clog the canals. The cellars are flooded and stink of sewage. Tycho and the *krieghund* are not the only creatures who stalk the night. Alexa watches events in the form of a bat, while Alonzo depends on his alchemist for poisons and other services, including preparing Giulietta for her forthcoming marriage. Grimwood creates a city where dark magics and political intrigue go hand in hand.

The book isn't perfect. For the master of the Assassini, Atilo makes several stupid mistakes. Apart from Tycho, the characters are more or less universally dislikeable. Their motivations are sketchy, particularly those of the women. Giulietta for example, is a spoiled and bored teenager until she is kidnapped and suddenly falls in love, which provides her motivation for the rest of the book.

Some of the writing is careless and I had to read and re-read some sentences and paragraphs before I could work out who was talking or what exactly was going on. And even for an ARC the book was riddled with typos. However, the plot is gripping, the narrative drive never falters and the portrait of 15<sup>th</sup> Century Venice is unforgettable. Superficially glamorous, filled with death and corruption, she squats on the Adriatic like a vampire over a corpse.

It hasn't superseded *Pashazade* as my favourite Grimwood but *The Fallen Blade* is hugely entertaining and (as it's the first of a trilogy) I'm certainly looking forward to the next two instalments.

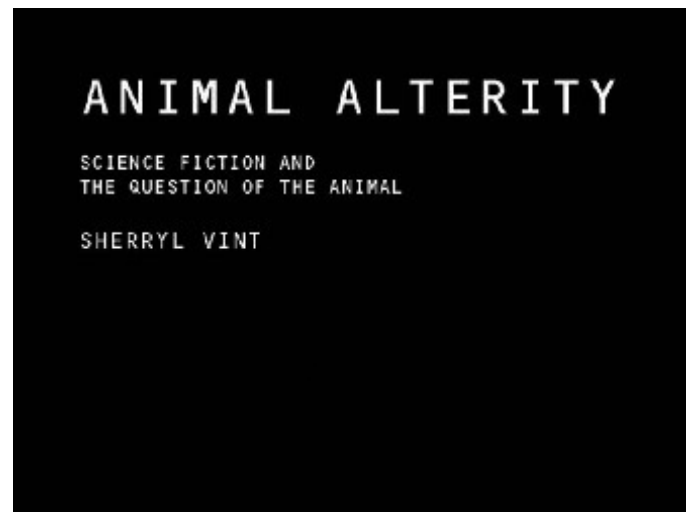
***Animal Alterity: Science Fiction And The Question Of The Animal* by Sherryl Vint  
(Liverpool University Press, 2010)  
Reviewed by Gwyneth Jones**

Earlier this year, I was looking into the question of animals in science fiction (in connection with the H G Wells Society conference in Kent). I found a Darwin site where a respondent asked “who else thinks Beatrix Potter may have developed her stories, about animals with increasingly human characteristics, from acquaintance with Darwin’s theory?” The idea that Beatrix Potter had to wait for *The Origin Of Species* before she thought of writing about reprobate foxes, trusting piglets, thieving magpies and insolent rats may seem ridiculous but this internet-generation query is revealing. Our animal folklore is no longer refreshed by experience. In my own lifetime, here in the UK, the estrangement that began as soon as agriculture was established, has accelerated almost to vanishing point. We see animals as pets; as entertainment products we consume through the screen (where their fate, nowadays, holds a tragic fascination). We see them, perhaps, as an increasingly problematic food source. We no longer ‘meet their gaze’ as independent neighbours. The neo-Darwinists have even been doing their damndest to *break* the link that Charles Darwin forged, when he transformed our deep intuition of continuity with the animal world into ‘scientific fact’.

Anthropomorphism has been outlawed. Ethics are seen as the unnatural (though, of course, admirable) product of human culture. When we discuss ‘the question of the animal’ –questioning the morality of our treatment of this lesser creation—the animals are excluded. They can’t contribute, they can’t have a point of view. In J M Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*, a loosely fictional collection of essays about the uses of literary celebrity (extensively cited in *Animal Alterity*), we see what happens to the animal question in public life. Elizabeth, the famous writer, hijacks award ceremonies and after-dinner engagements at academic banquets. She makes passionate speeches on the issue of Animal Rights. But no matter how hard her facts, no matter how indisputable the abuses she details, her outrage is bloodless. The whales, the apes, the factory-farmed masses, aren’t present to the audience. They’re just an empty box in the celebrity speaker’s text, marked ‘enter conversation-stopping moral crusade here’.

Here, according to Sherryl Vint, science fiction steps in. Already embraced by radical social scientists like Donna Haraway —who finds science fiction a rich source of illumination on feminist topics— the genre can provide the same service for the new area of Animal Studies. In this collection of papers Vint sets out to demonstrate, by citing a host of stories and novels, how much sf has to offer to the discussion. There’s certainly a huge amount of material. Non-human others, (aka aliens) are, of course, vital to science fiction. Frequently, these non-human others feature not as enemies or mentors but as victims, abused or misunderstood and though often these abused aliens are ‘standing in’ for abused human beings, there are plenty of texts that can be read as treating directly with the problem of how humans should behave towards animals (and many others that ask highly relevant questions).

Vint explores her proposal in eight chapters, each



a distinct essay. In “Always, Already Meat”, the topic is food: how do we decide that another being can be consumed? Carol Emshwiller’s story “Sanctuary”, in which a human being in a famine-struck future convinces himself an unlucky race of refugee aliens may be secretly harvested, provides the strongest illustration. But how do we set the boundary, when we are awarding “human rights” across the species line? In “The Mirror Test”, Vint studies sf treatments of the borderline between humans and those animals (the great apes, our beloved pets) we tacitly or overtly award almost-human status: brutalized and genetically manipulated child-soldiers who may never have been human in Paul McAuley’s *The White Devils*; an orang-utan candidate for Baptism in Connie Willis’s “Samaritan”; child-substitutes whose humanity may be revoked in Walter Miller’s “Conditionally Human”. “The Animal Responds” tackles communication: asking how we can be sure that animals *aren’t* speaking to us? In Paul Ash’s “Big Sword”, it’s non-human aliens who fail to make humans listen until a marginalised human becomes the interpreter. In Ian Watson’s *The Jonah Kit*, it’s the whales and futuristic science reveals the profound depths of their language skills. Gender issues are handled in “The Female Is Somewhat Duller”, where Harlan Ellison’s “A Boy and His Dog” and Leigh Kennedy’s “Her Furry Face” show that “embracing the animal other can leave the exploitative nature of human male/female relationships firmly in

place". An essay on "Animals and Colonialism" turns to pulp genre stories from the Thirties but also examines Karel Čapek's serious allegory *War With The Newts*. In "Existing For Their Own Reasons" animal-like aliens, who definitely aren't food and who have no trouble making their wishes known, finally appear. Powerful (fictional) creatures, like the herd-animal *fithp* in Larry Pournelle's Reaganite *Footfall*, and the seahorse-shaped *Eqba* in Karen Traviss's *Wess'har War* series, may shake our conviction that only human-shaped beings have minds and rights. "Humans as Animals" takes the boundary issue — the problem at the heart of all the previous chapters — through the looking-glass. Texts like Laurence Manning's "The Call Of The Mech Men", Carol Emshwiller's *The Mount* and Gordon Dickson's "Dolphin's Way" show humans on the wrong side of the divide: mistakenly, or justifiably, treated as non-sentient animals. "Animals and/as Technology" addresses animal experiments, from *The Island Of Dr Moreau* to Brian Aldiss's reprise of Well's classic scenario in the Pentagon sponsored sub-race of *Moreau's Other Island*. On a less monstrous scale, lab scientists can be accused of mental cruelty due to a failure of the imagination by an artistic rat in Ursula Le Guin's "Mazes". More controversially, William Kotzwinkle in *Doctor Rat* and James Tiptree Jr in "The Psychiatrist Who Wouldn't Do Awful Things to Rats" have both frankly equated animal suffering in the labs with the death camps of Holocaust.

In her concluding chapter — which dismisses Franz Schatzing's eco-apocalyptic bestseller *The Swarm*, where an animal "rebellion" is driven by another sentient (ie non-animal) species, essentially using the animals as cannon-fodder — Vint crosses over into fantasy (Ursula Le Guin's "Buffalo Gals Won't You Come Out Tonight"; Andre Norton's *Beast Master* series), and "science fantasy" (Sheri Tepper's *The Family Tree* and *The Companions*) to find genre images of humans and animals working together as equal persons. Meanwhile in Clifford Simak's quietly nihilistic *City*, "Mankind", having created a race of sentient pet dogs, must quit the scene. Otherwise the Dogs will remember that Man is God and Man the Wrecker will simply take control all over again. Ironically — since animals are not our equals and giving them the vote isn't going to help — it seems that science fiction has found the concept of *stewardship*, of an

unequal but moral relationship, exceptionally difficult.

In the course of this complex study Vint refers to literally hundreds of texts. The titles I've cited reflect the depth of analysis awarded; or else my own feeling that the novel or story was particularly significant. I haven't even mentioned the parallel strand of academic works (including Derrida, Foucault, Harraway, Lacan and Delouze) since this isn't an academic review. Inevitably, I wasn't always convinced. My initial problem — that science fiction uses non-human others as a means of talking about *human* "others"; or as the vehicle for a purely human point of view — kept resurfacing. Notably, the chapter on gender actually has nothing useful to say about Animal Studies. And was Karel Čapek really writing about newts? Meanwhile sf that directly targets Animal Rights, not to mention our current desolating mass extinction event, tends to be partisan, if not unhelpfully simplistic. The *Eqba* in Karen Traviss's *Wess'har War* series and the Yrr in Franz Schatzing's *The Swarm* are little more than "Gods in Machines", descending from heaven (or rising from the microbial substrata) to punish the wicked.

On the whole, however, Vint does a good job of disentangling "the animal" from the mix and *Animal Alterity* is an impressive achievement. A study of this kind isn't meant to offer solutions and there are none (beyond a rather vague promise that post-humanism will blur the line between human and animal). Instead there's a mass of evidence identifying sf as a resource: a treasury for Animal Studies academics; a rich means of bringing those moral arguments to life — drawn from an overlooked genre that has (always, already) developed sophisticated ways of thinking about looming problems that have only just occurred to the mainstream.

To the general reader, *Animal Alterity* offers food for thought and a quirky compendium of offbeat and classic titles. Could a "related book" on this topic become widely popular? I don't know. In my day, sf fans tended to be petrol-headed meat-munchers, their concern for our stewardship of the ecosphere constrained by a passion for beer, mayhem and go-faster starships. Times have changed. The younger generation may feel very differently: I hope so.

