

Vector

THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION



**LAURA SNEDDON TALKS
COMICS IN HER NEW
COLUMN, 'SEQUENTIALS'**

**PLUS JO WALTON, GABRIEL
GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ, EUROPE'S
BIGGEST SF BOOKSHOP,
AND MORE...**

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The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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Torque Control

My name is Glyn and I'm a social media addict. There, I almost feel better just for getting that off my chest. Despite this, I (perhaps naively) hadn't realised when I cheerfully tweeted about my first issue (@GR_Morgan if you're bothered), and dutifully tagged the @BSFA, that the hashtag #Vector wasn't going to be useful. That said, I stumbled across some interesting conversations about disease #vectors, and it seems there's more geometry on Twitter than I might have believed. After a brief discussion it seemed that #sfVector might be a good choice of tag to use to follow future discussions about the journal. So please take it up and tweet it with pride, fellow Twitterers and let me know your thoughts on the issue both literal and figurative.

Since the last issue the BSFA awards have been presented and a huge congratulations from everyone at *Vector* to all of the winners. My book club has since read and adored the *two* Best Novels, Anne Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* and Gareth Powell's *Ack-Ack Macaque*, and how wonderful that they can so brilliantly encompass what we love about this madcap genre but take their leads into seemingly disparate directions whilst retaining the crucial central core that, above all, good storytelling triumphs. If you haven't already discovered the joys of these two novels then I heartily recommend them, and when you're done why not dig through the rest of the shortlist too, you won't be disappointed.

As I write this, there's some sort of big sporting event getting into full swing in Brazil, everyone seems to be making a big fuss about it but I don't really get the commotion (the ball is the wrong shape to hold my interest, for a start). Far more tantalising is the prospect that an international event of a completely different flavour will be descending upon London before we know it. I refer of course to Worldcon (Loncon 3), and I'm greatly excited to be attending. It will be my first con, and I might have to stop at one because by the sounds of it, everything else afterwards is going to be a letdown. A packed academic programme, George R. R. Martin, a four metre tall monolith in the Exhibits hall (not to mention a BSFA sponsored panel on the state of British sf, featuring yours truly). How is anyone going to top this?

That said, the road to August 14th hasn't always been a smooth one. We can't pretend there wasn't the occasional bump in the road, but what large events don't have problems getting to their starting point? What medium and small sized events for that matter? I'm part of a team at the University of Liverpool who organise an annual Postgraduate conference on speculative fiction (this wasn't

supposed to be a plug, but it's called CRSF: www.currentresearchinspeculativefiction.blogspot.com) and each year we've been beset by new frustrations and fresh setbacks, but each year nobody cares by the time the event rolls around because it's always a great occasion catching up with others in the field and the fascinating work they're doing. With an event like Worldcon all of that is magnified, both the length of the road and size of the bumps, but also how memorable and how much of a pleasure it's going to be to welcome the world of sf to London and celebrate the diversity and plurality of the modern genre.

I'm quite proud of the issue in your hands right now. We've got a great interview with the ever wonderful and inspirational Jo Walton (conducted by Farah Mendlesohn at Novacon last November), a quick visit to Europe's largest sf bookshop, courtesy of Ian Watson, and an article celebrating and memorialising the late Gabriel García Márquez by Leimar García-Siino (in fact, special thanks to Leimar as she also transcribed the Jo Walton interview and has contributed a book review to this issue too). Of course we have the usual insightful musings and notations from our regular columnists Baxter, Kincaid and Sawyer, but it gives me particular delight to welcome aboard a new addition to the columns section: Laura Sneddon. Laura is a comics journalist (and sometime academic) whose writing I've been aware of for some time now (courtesy of Twitter – to bring things sort of full circle), she's immensely knowledgeable and passionate about all things comics and will, I believe, be a brilliant new feature to *Vector's* pages. Plus it means we might get more of the kind of artwork which adorns this issue's cover – a great piece taken from the pages of *Starstruck*. Please welcome Laura onto this journal in the generous and supportive manner which you've greeted my own arrival.

That's all from me until next time, see you in London.

Glyn Morgan
Features Editor

Cover art by Michael Wm. Kaluta
(cover of *Starstruck* #6 , 2010)

"Mumbo Jumbo"

www.starstruckcomics.com

The Jo Walton Interview

by Farah Mendlesohn

***Jo Walton in Conversation
with Farah Mendlesohn
Novacon 43, Nottingham.
November 2013***

Transcribed by Leimar Garcia-Siino

Farah: The meaningfulness of the Hugo is very much connected to how you feel, not just about science fiction, but about fandom, and the community, and that whole environment of science fiction. It seemed like a good place to start from to go back and say 'So, how did you get into all of this?'

Jo: How did I get into science fiction, or how did I get into fandom?

F: Which came first?

Jo: Oh, the science fiction. But, I started reading science fiction and fantasy without knowing what it was; it was just more books. You know, children's books then were not particularly delineated as genre, so you would have children's books and they would have magic, and then you would have children's books and they would have Martians in, or whatever, and they wouldn't be anything in particular. I know I read Nicholas Fisk's *Space Hostages* long before I knew what science fiction was. How I found out what science fiction was, when I'd read all the children's books in the library, I thought that I could read books in the adult section that were written by people who'd written children's books, and I would then have plausible deniability in saying they'd been misfiled if I was caught with them. So I did that. The first two that I read were *The Dispossessed* and Peter Dickinson's *King and Joker*. Because I'd read the *Earthsea* books and I'd read Dickinson's *Blue Hawk* and the *Weather Changes* trilogy. *Blue Hawk's* fantasy and the *Weather Changes*

trilogy's science fiction, but I didn't know that; they were just books. So I read *The Dispossessed*, which was one of the best books I'd ever read at the time, I was twelve, I think. And I read *King and Joker* and I really liked that too. And they were both in the science fiction section of the library. I thought, ok, there is this thing, and I like it, and I want to read more of it. So I read the science fiction section of Aberdare Library in alphabetical order over the summer of 1976, starting with Poul Anderson and ending with Roger Zelazny.

F: But, how many books?

Jo: Oh, I don't know. I mean, like, 600?

F: In one summer?

Jo: Yeah. But it was, you know...

F: ...If it's three month's reading, it's 4 to 5 a day!

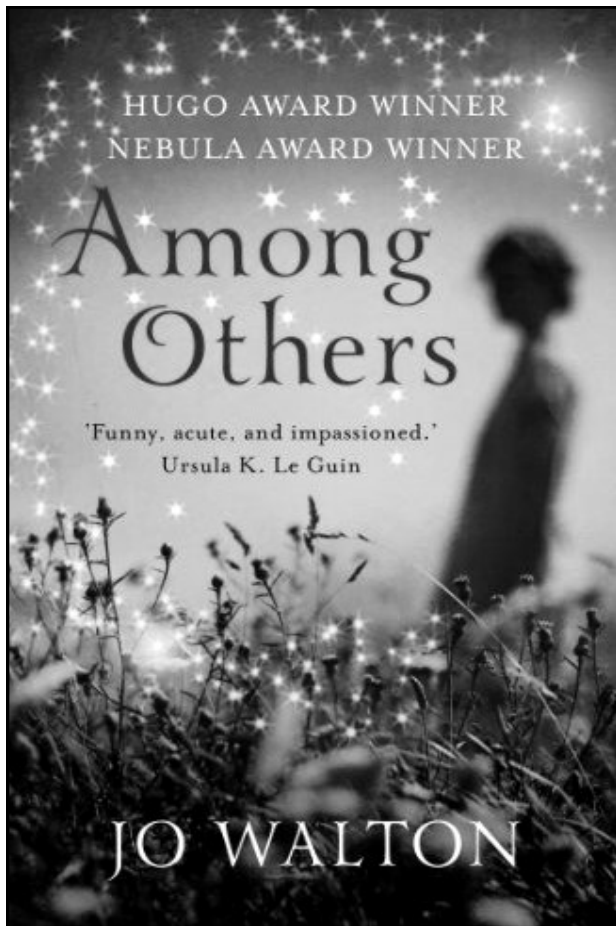
Jo: It was. I would take out two books in the morning and read them, and then I would take out another two books before the library shut and read them over night, and take them back the next morning. You know, the librarians must actually have realised. I had these two adult library tickets that belonged to my grandfather and if challenged I would say I was getting out books for him, but I'm sure they actually knew.

F: That kind of reading... Because I did about the same thing at about the same age, although I've come to realise I was disadvantaged by living in Birmingham where A to Z was actually a lot more books, so I never made it all the way through. But there is that period where, what I've come to call the extreme sport-reader, it's a thing.

Jo: Yeah.

F: We are not fast readers; the official definition of a fast reader is five books a week.

Jo: More like sixteen?



F: Yeah. And that is a really distinct moment. And one of the things I noticed when you, in *Among Others*, was how carefully you describe what it's like to be that kind of a reader. I mean, can you describe that feeling of all of those books just going in, one after the other after the other? Because, I think Neil Harrison complained, in *Among Others*, nobody sits in... Mori never thinks about the books she's read. But there isn't time, is there?

Jo: Right. She's not *thinking* about the books. She's *immersing herself* in the books, and when she's finished one, she's going on to the next. But she does think about them, she's constructing the world from them, as I think a lot of us did: learning about how the world works from the things that she's finding in the fiction. She's not stopping and sitting down and writing an analysis of the books; but the characters and the situations and the worlds of the books are going into her view of everything else that comes. My shorthand way of describing *Among Others* is that it is a fantasy novel about a science fiction reader, or that it is a novel about a science fiction reader who has fantasy problems. The thing in the book that I used to illustrate that is the moment where she's under magical attack and she uses the 'litany against fear' from *Dune* to help her. What that's actually based on, in real life, was that at a Unicon in Winchester, a group of us went to Portchester Castle, which is a Roman fort with a Norman castle built in it, down on the coast, not very far from Winchester. I don't know where it actually is; I went there with a group of people. But, there was a scary walk on the wall without a railing, and someone started to say 'fear is the little death, fear is the mind-killer'; we all joined in. We all knew it. There was sort of half a dozen of us, and we all knew it; we all said it to walk along this little

wall in Portchester Castle. That felt to me like a really significant thing. And, that's where that sort of came from... in the book she did that. But it works! It works for her. Because that's the metaphor for how you get the things out of books and they help you understand the real world, and they help you cope with the real world. Mori's got both real-world problems and fantasy problems, and reading science fiction helps her with both of those things. But the fantasy is the problem, and the science fiction is part of the solution.

F: One of the conversations we had when you were writing *Among Others* and I was writing *Intergalactic Playground* was about this thing that I am horrified to discover is called 'bibliotherapy'. My dean wants me to start a degree in bibliotherapy; I'm holding him off with garlic. You see it a lot on the children's literature lists, this idea that there is a match between the child's problems and the book. And you get the book about the thing.

Jo: Oh God! Stupid thing, yes.

F: And one of the things you seem to be tackling, in *Among Others* but also with a character called Jankin in *Lifeload*, is this idea that it's much more nebulous than that; you say that science fiction is the tool.

Jo: I was actually saying this on the panel this morning. One of the questions that I get asked a lot when I'm interviewed about *Among Others* is 'if you could recommend one book from that period for people to read, what would it be?' And I want to say 'well, did you read the book?' because it's not about one book. It's about reading a whole ton of books, and some of them are crap, because it's not one science fiction book that gives you the attitude to the world that you get from reading science fiction, it's reading a million science fiction books. It's not one future that lets you cope with a changing future that won't be like any of those futures; it's knowing that there are multiple ways the future could be, and it doesn't have to be like the present. I think if there's a lesson you learn from reading science fiction it is that the future doesn't have to be like the present and it won't be like you expect. So that, when it comes along and it isn't like you expected, there you go, that's what you expected. And you don't get that from reading one book, you get it from reading a whole range of books and developing your own tastes out of that. That's the thing where it's nebulous or it's giving you tools. It's what you get from reading almost at random. Bibliotherapy is a terrible kind of concept: the idea that if you've got a child whose parents are divorcing and you can give them a book about a child whose parents are divorcing and that'll make them feel better, it will, yeah, but having the problem book that is not the whole solution.

F: Taking up something that you've just talked about, about reading lots and lots of books. As a kid, I was always driven nuts by the relatives who wanted to know what my favourite book was. This was a meaningless question. But it's something I've continued to notice as an academic, because there are two basic types: those who are specialists and those who are generalist synthesists. I'm very much on the generalist synthesist side, so are you, so are most the people who I know are your friends. And re-reading *Lifeload*, which I did this morning, and most of you won't have read this because it's hard to get a hold of, this is my favourite Jo Walton. *Among Others* is stunning, *Lifelode* is something else again.

Jo: Coming soon as an E-book from Tor.

F: The character Jankin is precisely that kind of person, isn't he?

Jo: Yes.

F: He's an academic who pretty much gets kicked out of academia, walks away from it, because everybody expects him to specialise.

Jo: That's right, he's on a sabbatical, getting away from it; but yes, that's right, he doesn't want to specialise. He doesn't want to be an academician; he wants to keep studying. He wants to be a scholar rather than an academician.

F: And one of the things that just struck me was how very Heinleinian that is; this notion of the competent man, with specialism, is for animals. Do you think that does inform your work?

Jo: I guess, I hadn't thought about it. I have personally always been interested in a whole pile of stuff, and certainly I don't only want to have one thing that I'm interested in, and if I realise that I've got a blind spot about something then my natural instinct is to go read eight books about it, you know. So, certainly I am like that; I don't know that it is deliberately Heinleinian, and I think --- there are things wrong with that formulation of it that I -

F: Elaborate.

Jo: Well, the specialisation is for insects—

F: You're right, I got the quote wrong.

Jo: The specialisation is for insects. The thing about that is that, while it's nice to know everything about everything, actually, when you really need a doctor, and actually if you try to learn everything yourself and be completely self-sufficient, you will learn everything badly and won't know everything because you cannot actually be that much of a specialist in the world that we live in that is very complex. And there are also some things that are really boring that I'd rather leave to people who like them. So, you know, I do actually have issues with the idea—I think it's all tangled up with the weird American thing that you shouldn't be reliant on anybody else; you should be able to be completely self-sufficient, completely independent, which I don't agree with. We're communal people. Read about the things you find fascinating, and if you don't find things fascinating then... don't. You know, it's not like you've got to know those things; there are other people who can do that. So yeah, some of both. But, this is in *Among Others*, I genuinely thought, when I read Zelazny's *Doorways in the Sand*, that the American liberal arts education system was a science fictional thing that Zelazny made up for that book. The way he explains it is exactly the way that people explain, in slightly older science fiction, world changes, world building. He says 'there was this person at Harvard who came up with this idea of the liberal arts education and that it was instituted and it spread through the U.S.' in exactly the same way that Bester explains how jaunting works in *Stars My Destination*, or exactly the same way that you get that

kind of thing about how the rolling roads were put in in those days. So it's not all that stupid of me to think that it was completely made up, because, you know, I was living in a country where you could do ten O Levels if you were really lucky, and you could do maybe four A Levels if you really pushed, though you're only supposed to do three, and then you would go to university and you would study one thing. So the idea that you could go to university and study nine-hundred-thousand-million things and astronomy—it was a science fictional idea. And you know, I'm still kind of envious that I didn't get to do that, because I would have liked that a lot; it would have really suited me.

F: You'd have ended up graduating with no major.

Jo: I would have ended up staying in university for three-thousand years. Except that, of course, I could never have gone to university in the U.S. because I don't come from an affluent family. And, you know, I went to university in Britain with a full grant and, so, university in the U.S. would just never have happened, coming from a family and a background...

F: You mention something though about us not being lone creatures and it reminded me that I hadn't realised the degree to which sociobiology runs through almost all your books. It's strongest in *Tooth and Claw*, but when I was reading *The King's Peace* I realised that there's a lot in there about shift the sociobiology of humans, just very slightly, and you change the world, and that happens again in *Lifeload*.

Jo: Yeah, actually backwards. This is the same thing the other way around, I did it on purpose.

F: Do you want to explain to people who haven't read it?

Jo: Even people who *have* read it, very few people have actually noticed this. *The King's Peace* is kind of about how in late antiquity we went from being a society that had towns to a society that had villages in, with the medieval thing where there was a villa with a village around the villa. Economically that's, sort of, what the book's about. It's not actually about that, it's about people riding horses and, you know, killing the enemy with lances, but anyway, it's about feudalism, and it's about how feudalism is better than slavery. And, I had a character who was a female knight who goes to fight because it's fun, and then, in the sequel, *The King's Name*, is obliged to go back to fight as an obligation, because she needs to, as a grownup. So she does it when she's young, and she has a great time, and then she's got to go do it again, and risk other people's lives, as a grownup. That's where I started with the book, which is about a third of the way into *The King's Name*, so two thirds of the way through the story, but that's where I started. And, I thought, there have been women throughout history who have fought, but nearly always it's either been because it's a last-ditch situation and they're not trained, or it's been because they've wanted to, they're volunteers. If they prefer to stay home and knit, they could have done that. I had this idea that she had to go back and do it. So I had to make up a history - I had to change history - to provide a position where a woman could do that - would have the obligation to do it, and so I had to have a world where women were not entirely tied to childbirth.

So I said, ok, I will have magical healing, I will have magical stuff that allows no infant mortality, so that all the children you have survive, and that'll do it. And then I did some math on that and I thought, no, that's not going to work, because you'll have too many people, and it'll all break. So, I said, ok, I will do it so that you can only have four children; any person can only have four children, and some of those will die before having children of their own because they'll get killed or they'll die of disease, but also magical healing, so less disease. And they've got no sepsis, though in the third book, somebody does something to stop that working, and their wounds start getting infected and they think it's a curse. But generally, they've essentially got a magic pill – penicillin. And, so, some of them will die, but enough of them will survive that you'll get the population that you have, and you'll have it. But if you can't have more than four children that does all kinds of interesting things to what you get - the freedom that women have. It's all completely background, this is never overtly visible.

F: I missed that they couldn't have more than four children.

Jo: Well, actually in very rare occasions they have five. There's one Emperor who's called Quintus, who was a fifth child and Angus has five children, but it's like one in several million will have five.

F: The reason I didn't realise is because, actually, four is the standard size of a family for most of the period between about 1300 and 1900.

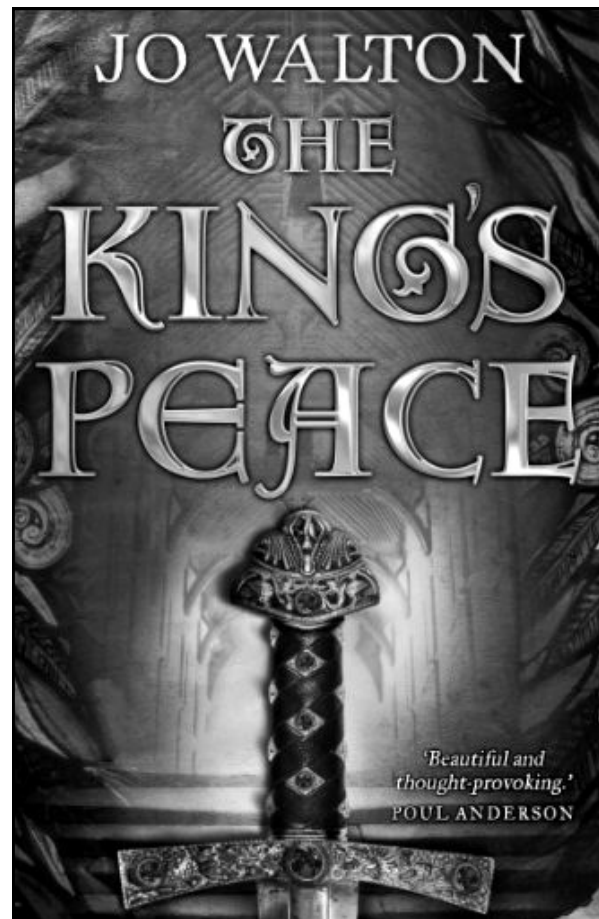
Jo: Yeah. This is actually overtly stated in *The Prize in the Game*, because somebody thinks about it, but Sulien would never think about it, because she knows it, and she's not interested. Which is a problem with writing in first person.

F: Because the other thing you added was that children are almost entirely born within wedlock.

Jo: Totally. Unless there's direct divine intervention, children can only be born within wedlock. There is a chant to unlock the womb so that until you are married, or at least have that chant said, you won't have children without direct divine intervention. So you can have sex before marriage as much as you like, but after the chant has been said, then you can have children. Again, to give women freedom to move around and do stuff. Then in *Lifeload*, it's the other way around, and the idea that you'd only be able to have children within wedlock is horrifying. They think this is the worst idea in the world, and they try to prevent it— it's a great disaster that they're trying to avoid. That kind of amused me, to do that, to make this thing that allowed me to have one kind of society be a terrible looming disaster problem for a different kind of society. I mean, I wrote *Lifeload* ages afterwards; I can't remember when I wrote it.

F: Ok, let's back up to world building, because, as I said, I've not read *The King's Name*, but I can see the loose Arthurian structure. Why did you choose that? Was it just a useful framework? Because it's very much in the background of the first book anyway...

Jo: I wanted to use the actual history and archaeology of sixth century Britain because I thought that was interesting and I knew a lot about it and it fit with what I wanted to do



to get the thing I wanted. Then I thought, well, if I'm doing that, I'm doing Arthurian, because that is the Arthurian period. And then I had the world building. I had the interesting idea of having a set of worlds that are connected together where the same mythically-significant events happen. They've got people who can see into the other worlds—they're not seeing the future, they're seeing into other worlds, and what happens in other worlds. I thought that if a mythically-significant thing doesn't happen, if you don't do it, if you're supposed to do it and it doesn't happen, you get the myth anyway, as if you'd done it and that could be, in our world, Arthur could just be the myth.

F: Right.

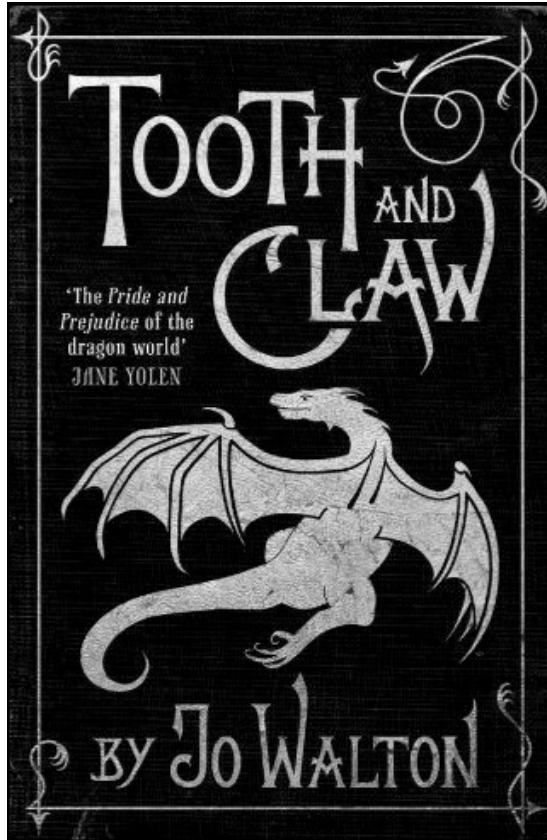
Jo: Because, you know, there's all this smoke, but not much evidence of fire. And I just thought that was really cool. I thought I could do that. And once I started doing it--

F: So a world that's literally Plato's pale shadow?

Jo: Totally. It's extremely platonic. Wait till you see the thing after next I'm writing! It is totally absolutely that. But I kind of have the problem with fantasy that nobody else seems to have, which is, it is a given in fantasy novels that you will have people on horses, but they're not our world, and I'm like, ok so there's people on horses, how did they evolve? What is the connection? What is with this? And so, all of my fantasy novels have explanations in my head for why they have people on horses; that's the explanation for that, there's a different explanation in *Lifeload*. And so on.

F: What's the explanation in *Lifeload*?

Jo: The explanation in *Lifeload* is that some Classical Gods and some people basically made a pocket dimension and went into it, and the gods in it are maintained the way that gods are, as it is explained in the book, out of people, and changed because they are made out of people. But they deliberately went into that dimension in the east, and spread out into the rest of it.



F: This raises something that came up when I spoke to one of my students this week, which is the nature of the gods in your books because the gods are always imminent and the more fantastical the world, the less imminent they seem to be. So in *Tooth and Claw* we don't really see the gods--

Jo: But *Tooth and Claw* is kind of science fiction, actually. There's no magic in *Tooth and Claw* except that there are dragons.

F: One of the dragons actually says "We fly through magic, because we're too big otherwise, we grow by eating each other because we're magic."

Jo: Yes, that's right. That is the magic, but it's a very, scientific magic. It's non-numinous magic. So, I don't actually think of *Tooth and Claw* really as being fantasy, because it lacks numinosity.

F: And I think that's what I'm trying to get at, because I'm fascinated that that's the book where the gods may or may not exist at all.

Jo: Yeah, no gods in that book. Religion, but no gods.

F: Whereas the earthiest of the books is probably *The King's Peace* sequence, where the gods seem to be very real, and in your face--

Jo: Walking around annoying you...

F: ...Making your life really difficult. So there does seem to be a kind of direct relationship with, I suppose, *Among Others* almost poised on the edge. But I they're not gods, they're fairies, but...

Jo: I think fantasy is about ways of approaching the numinous, I think that's my definition of fantasy. That's what I think fantasy is. So when I am making a fantasy world, I think about "how are we approaching the numinous here?" Basically, "how does this work? Where are the gods? How does the magic system work? How does it all fit together?" I come up with that as part of my initial world building in the first two minutes when I'm thinking about the world. It is part of the ingrained axiomatic bedrock of how the world works – where the gods are, what sort of gods they are, what their relationship is with the people and the society, how the magic works, how the magic relates to the gods. So in the Sulien books, the magic is all actually divine magic, it is all god-powered magic, but it works whichever god you ask for it. *The Mists of Avalon* had really pissed me off...

F: Why did it piss you off Jo?

Jo: Nine-thousand things about *The Mists of Avalon* pissed me off, but the main thing about it was the treatment of Christianity. Because, essentially, Christianity in the fifth century is a little different from Christianity in the twentieth century. I know this is probably news to many people, including Marion Zimmer Bradley, but really, they were not idiots. The people who converted to Christianity from following Classical and Celtic gods were not morons; they had reasons for doing it; they wanted to convert. That's interesting, why they converted. And if you're talking about a world with real gods, and real connections, that's even more interesting. Looking at the actual historical evidence, and then thinking about it in a world with real gods and why you would switch – that's interesting. Pretending that Christianity in the fifth century/sixth century was like Billy Graham is just kind of dumb and ahistorical and annoying. There are other things about *The Mists of Avalon* that annoy me; the whole cultural portrayal, the geography, but it was the religious thing. So I wanted to do sixth century Christianity the way that it actually was, and people's reasons for converting to it, while using a character who wasn't going to convert and didn't like it. I thought that was interesting. When you write a novel it takes ages. You've got to do things that you're actually interested in yourself and interested in exploring and that seem like they're fun and give you things to play with because otherwise you're never going to get to the end of it. You'll just get bored, and wander off write the exciting ten thousand word beginning of a new novel instead of actually plugging on with the one that you've got. So I try to give myself things that are challenging and interesting and that I'm interested in exploring. That's certainly what I was doing with that.

You asked about using gods, and that kind of thing, and the numinous... A lot of people in Poland, a couple of weeks ago, asked me whether I've seen fairies and whether I believe in magic. To which my answer is not "do you think I'm stupid", because I'm a very polite person. It's not that I believe in magic, and I certainly do not see fairies, it's that I think metaphysics is interesting and I think metaphysics is an interesting thing to play with. I think doing

things with metaphysics is a fun thing to do, and is a thing you can do with fantasy. You can decide what's real and how it works and where that is and people's relationship with it. And that's cool; that is a cool thing to play with, I like it, and when I'm writing fantasy that's a lot of what I'm having fun with.

F: That actually seems to be the core of *Lifeload*, which it's another novel that could have a claim for being a science fiction novel, because this is a world that seems to run in part like computer.

Jo: I regard *Lifeload* as a kind of unsuccessful novel that I don't think I really got it to work properly.

F: [to audience] She's wrong.

Jo: I know it's your favourite of my books...

F: Yeah.

Jo: ...and also the Mythopoeic Society gave it their Mythopoeic Award, so I now feel like I can't actually say anything bad about *Lifeload* without sort of insulting their taste. But, to me *Lifeload* feels like a book that I didn't quite get to work and maybe it needs some fixing, but, oh God, I couldn't face working on it. No, the thing with *Lifeload* is I wanted to write a book that would be small-scale and domestic-focused, but that would have incredibly high magic. I wanted to have masses and masses and masses of magic while telling a small-scale domestic story. This turned out to be

really hard to do, because the force of story, the weight of narrative and the way that you tell stories within fantasy wants you to have an action plot. I've got better at it since; *Among Others* does not really have an action plot, and *My Real Children*, which is a science fiction novel that I've got coming out next May, does not have an action plot at all, and I made it work, I'm pretty sure. But with *Lifeload*, it kept pulling me towards having an action plot. Hanethe had the protagonist nature, she had the action plot nature. Hanethe originally wasn't in the book; it was going to be a book all about Taveth and Jankin and none of that stuff was going to happen, but I needed it, because things had to happen; plot had to happen. And, no plot was happening, and I couldn't make it work. But it's an incredibly high-magic situation in a world where, if you go far enough east, you'll lose your personality and merge with a god. Your body is still there, and your personality is still there, as part of that god, and you're drawn toward the god that is most like you, and you will change that god somewhat by being different from them; you become a neuron of a god, essentially. If you go far enough to the west, you become like a robot, and go through the motions and don't have individuality. And in the middle people have got different amounts. And there's far more magic east and less in the west. Magic is called 'yeya', which comes from the Greek 'Aeaea', which is the island that Circe lived on. Almost all the names in *Lifeload* are from Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*; they're Greek filtered through Medieval French. That's what I was doing with that, that's where they came in from. Yeya is very domestic and familiar and normal, and the people who are living in the middle are like people, and could do things like people. I don't think it's like a computer program; it being a computer simulation is something that people have suggested that I had not thought of, and that I think is a fairly boring answer.

F: Ok.

Jo: It's not inherently ruled out by the text, but I think it's a fairly dull solution to the problem – that it's a simulation. It's more like the worlds in Karl Schroeder's *Lady of Mazes*, that are technologically set up to do that, in fact, Karl thinks it is one. So, it's not impossible that it could actually be set in *Lady of Mazes* universe. It was published before *Lady of Mazes* but we'll ignore that.

F: But that would actually work within the book.

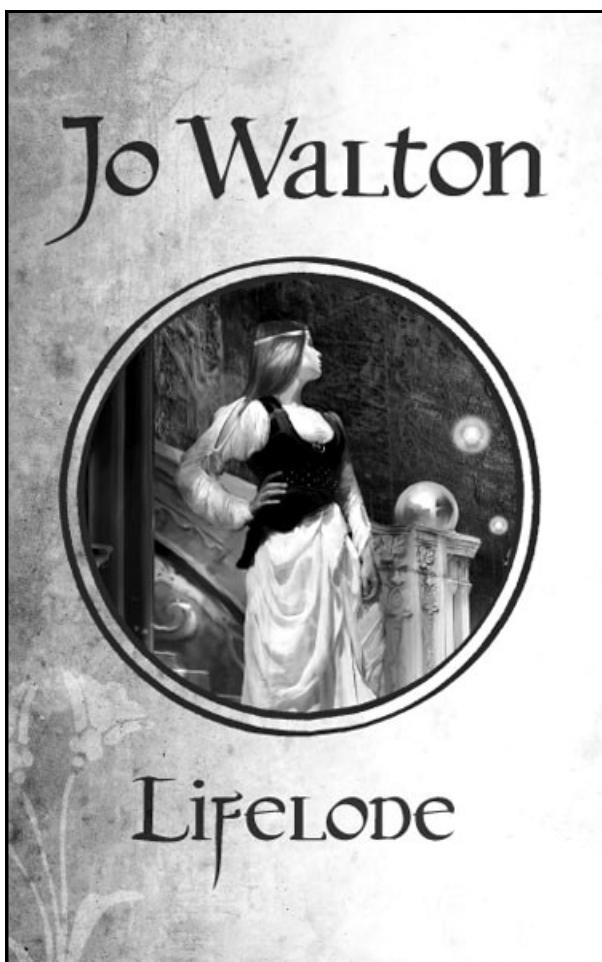
Jo: It would.

F: Because the thing that I was absolutely fascinated about, one of the characters, Taveth, can't see the future *per se*, but she can see slices of people in their future – shadows of them.

Jo: When she looks at people, she can see them at all different ages.

F: And one of the side-effects of that is time for her is not linear. And the book is written in Taveth's time, I think; is that right? I realised this maybe about a third of the way through, that the way it was being told was almost an attempt to capture the way Taveth saw the world.

Jo: Yeah. That's right.



F: Because that, I think, is where this book really scores for me – the characters in it. It struck me as the most character-driven, not in the way people normally mean, although they're really strong characters, they're really interesting. But that the tale can only be told in that particular way because it's coming from that particular character.

Jo: That's what I think, yes. The actual way that the story is written, with everything happening at once, rather than being told in a linear way, I got from Rumer Godden's *China Court* and *A Fugue in Time*. They are literary fiction, mainstream fiction, whatever you want to call it... books. They're kind of hard to categorise. But they are each about a house and a family, *China Court* has five generations, and *A Fugue in Time* has three, all happening at the same time. They both have a structure of going through a day where you have everything that ever happens in a morning, and everything that ever happens at lunchtime, and everything that ever happens in the afternoon. The actual story, the actual plot, is all threaded through and happening at different times. They're really clever books, much more interesting than what I actually did in *Lifeload*, really. But I thought that it would be interesting to try doing that. One of the places I started from when writing *Lifeload* was thinking how I feel Le Guin's *Tehanu* doesn't work, how *Tehanu* seems to me to be saying one thing and doing another. It's got the overt message that "women's things matter", with the subtextual message of "actually, no they don't."

F: Yeah.

Jo: Because the story that it has to have, with the invasion of evil wizards and everything, undermines the message that she was trying to put over about women's things mattering. I think *Tehanu's* is a very interesting book and it's kind of an interesting failure. I was once reading *Tehanu* and then I was reading *China Court*, and I thought *China Court* is a story about women's lives mattering, and it really is. It's a story that has this focus on small domestic things, and it's about women's lives mattering, and why does nobody ever do this in fantasy? I could try doing this in genre. And then, I discovered it was harder than hell. Ursula Le Guin kind of failed at doing this because it was practically impossible. And, there we go. Who could have known?

F: That, of course, takes us onto *My Real Children*, where we have...

Jo: Where I actually did make this work, but it's not fantasy.

F: I read it almost as a ghost story.

Jo: Science fiction. It's alternate history. Alternate history is science fiction. Also, it's got moon bases; it's science fiction.

F: It has the kind of voice of a ghost story, but I won't push that. But it's very much about women's lives mattering or not mattering and how they matter and the ways they matter. Want to explain the story? I don't want to give any spoilers, so I'll leave it to you.

Jo: *My Real Children* is about a woman who is born in 1926 and she is now in 2015, in her late-eighties, in a nursing home, with Alzheimer's. She can remember two completely different versions of her own past. She can remember two

completely different versions of the second half of the twentieth century. She can remember Kennedy being assassinated by a bomb in Dallas, and she can remember Kennedy resigning after the Cuban Missile Exchange. She can also remember her own life completely differently; it's called *My Real Children* because she had different children in her two different lives. In both of her lives she is a mother; being a mother is central to who she is and what she is; it is very much a woman's story, but it's kind of like science fiction crossed with feminist literature in a way that is sort of not really like anything else. It's got two different alternate histories that are taking place as the background of her two different lives. She can remember these two lives from her confused state.

F: One of the things it struck me as having in common with *Among Others* is a very strong sense of place; you always know exactly where you are in the book.

Jo: All of my books, actually, are set in real places. Almost all of the places in all of my books are places you can actually go, and they're places I've actually been. I pretty much always write real places that I've been to. Even in *Tooth and Claw*.

F: It's just reminding me of an exchange I had with somebody, I can't remember who, who was talking about *Among Others* as being nostalgic, and I pointed out "yes, but the point is about dispatching nostalgia at the end of the book." And that that seems to me to be part of the trajectory of *My Real Children* as well.

Jo: Yes. I think you need to remember things, but nostalgia can be poisonous; you need to be looking forward. Certainly in *Among Others* I wanted it to have that forward-looking. At the very end of the book she says that she'll always belong to libraries, and maybe one day she'll belong to libraries on other planets. That openness to the future, there is a strand within fantasy that is sort of anti-technological and nostalgic in a poisonous way, I think, which I try to resist. I'm interested in technology. I'm interested in the history of technology, but I'm also not giving that up.

F: One of the sub-threads running through *Lifeload* is the difference between the village as it is now, and the village as Hanethe's remembers it and that shift in technology, it's a constant little drip drip; and she checks herself every time she does it.

I know you're also putting together a collection, or have put together a collection of the posts you did for Tor.com.

Jo: *What Makes This Book So Great*, that is out in January 2014, and it's going to be out in the UK and the US simultaneously.

F: I've seen the cover and it looks fabulous.

Jo: The back cover is even better. The back cover's got like nine thousand ancient fonts, and it's a list of the names of the writers that I have written about in it, in awesome old fonts. It's really cool; it's on my webpage now. It's great. So, the book is a hundred and thirty of the best of my first five hundred Tor.com posts. You may say "aren't they all still online for free?" and indeed, they are still online for free.

F: But it's nice to have it on the shelf.

Jo: Good.

F: One will be on my shelf, I think we can be sure of this. [To audience] For those who haven't read them, they are really excellent pieces of criticism.

Jo: They're me burbling about books I like; "you'll want to read this."

F: Very acute burbling. Finally, tell us a little bit about the *Farthing* trilogy and what you were trying to achieve with it.

Jo: The *Farthing*... The *Small Change* books are alternate history, set in an alternate history where the Hess mission succeeded, and Britain made peace with Germany in May of 1941 on a "let's call it a draw" basis. It occurred to me that I could use the tropes and mannerisms of the cosy mystery to talk about fascism, because the cosy mystery talks about violent death in a sort of crumpets-and-cup-of-tea kind of way. I thought I could do that to talk about fascism and I thought that would be an interesting thing to do. Also, it was 2003, I was politically, kind of... really pissed off, because a government that I had voted for was waging an unjust war in my name, and I could do nothing about it and people look at history as if everything that happens in history is inevitable, as if it's all destiny. Whereas, my view of history is that it is all contingent and we're always dodging bullets. Also, my view of the future is that it is all contingent and we can change it and we are changing it by our choices and our decisions all the time. Historically, people were doing that, and they didn't know how it was going to come out, and all that. I'm very anti-providence. The *Small Change* books were really about that. *Farthing* is a cosy mystery, *Ha'penny* is a thriller and *Half a Crown* is a dystopia. I wrote *Farthing* first; I intended it to stand alone; I didn't intend to write sequels. I wrote it very quickly. I did the research for it afterwards... I mean, in fact, I barely really needed to, because I'd sort of done the research before without intending to. But I was doing more research for it afterwards. And when I was doing more research for it afterwards I got the ideas for the others. For both of the others at once.

F: Reading it, what I was most impressed by was how well you handled polite, poisonous anti-Semitism; which anybody who reads 1920s mysteries falls across all the time.

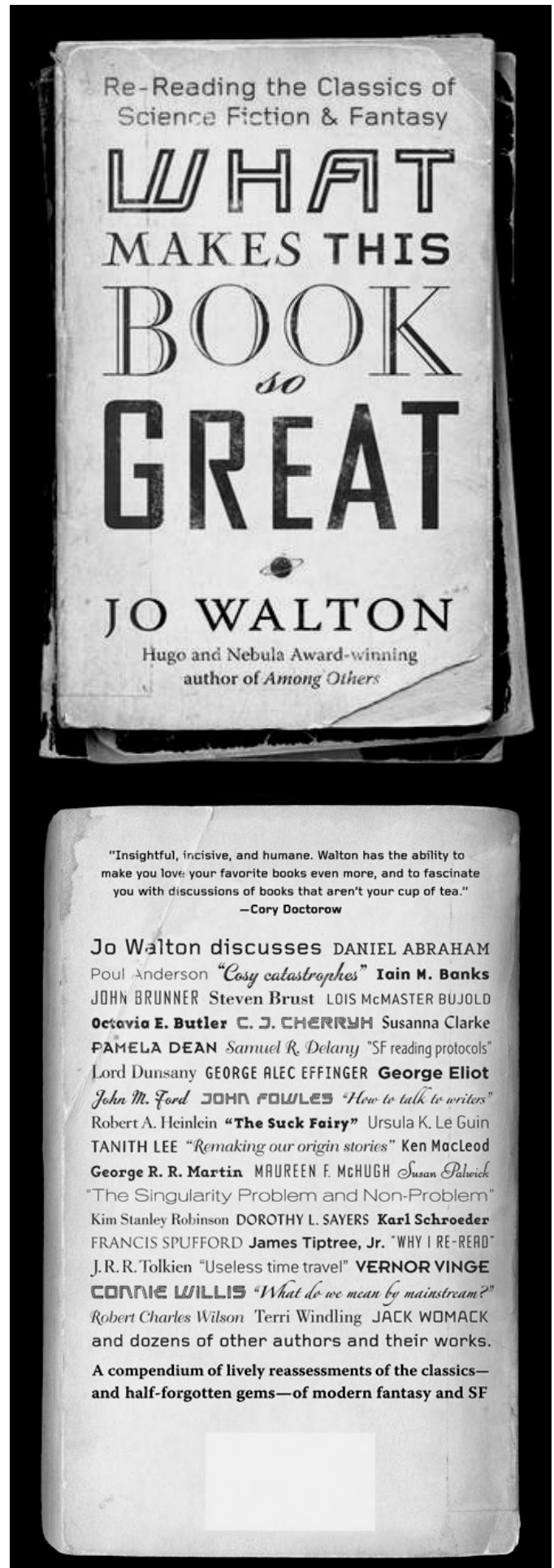
Jo: Yeah, yeah.

F: But then, almost all the other alternate histories I can think of set in the same period, is often not really quite grasped that you don't have to be smashing windows to ruin people's lives.

Jo: Right, yeah.

F: Ok, we should probably end there. If I can thank you very much for the interview.

Jo: Well, thank you for doing it! It was all very stimulating. Thank you for great questions.



Gabriel García Márquez: Conjurer of Reality

by Leimar García-Siino

Every century, hundreds of writers are born, some of whom will become popular, some of whom will shake the cultural zeitgeist, some of whom will become part of the literary canon to be taught in schools and universities forever after, and many who will be utterly forgotten until some daring college student decides to do a dissertation on them 80 years later. And then, once in a blue moon, or when the stars and planets align, or however these things converge, a giant appears who redefines the landscape of literature, transcends the period, and becomes not only the voice of a generation, but the voice of an entire culture. Britain has Shakespeare, Spain has Cervantes, the Greece has Homer, Italy has Dante, and Russia has Tolstoy; the list goes on. Latin America has Gabriel García Márquez. Plenty of Hispano-American writers have risen to international significance, from Jorge Luis Borges to Julio Cortázar and Pablo Neruda, but it is not farfetched to call García Márquez the definitive Latin American writer. To paraphrase from one of his stories, “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World”, ‘even though [we] were looking at him there was no room for him in [our] imaginations’, meaning he was too big to be constrained in the ‘mazes of [our] fantasy’.

Gabriel García Márquez was born in the ‘sad and unpaved’ town of Aracataca, Colombia, on the 6th of March of 1927, the eldest child of Luisa Santiaga Márquez and Gabriel Eligio García. His first eight years, however, were spent being raised by his maternal grandparents while his parents went to live in another town. Nonetheless, his time in Aracataca was probably, he acknowledged, his most influential and significant, as it coloured his outlook toward life, and served as his source of inspiration for the majority of his works. Biographers love to trace and document the connections between his books and his life – his native Aracataca is the original Macondo; Cartagena, where García Márquez moved to escape the unrest in Bogota, would be the setting for *Love in the Time of Cholera*; the downfall of Venezuelan dictator Marcos Perez Jimenez spurred *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. Mean-

while, several of his acquaintances, friends, family, and enemies, would make it into his works as characters: for instance, the colonel in *No One Writes to the Colonel* is partly based on García Márquez’s grandfather.

Early on, García Márquez’s life was characterised by dislocation and instability. In 1936 he was finally sent to live with his parents, whom he’d recently met, in 1940 he received a scholarship award to the boarding school of the Liceo Nacional de Zapaquirá, a high school for the gifted located outside of Bogotá. After graduating from the Liceo in 1946, at 19 years of age, a young García Márquez enrolled as a law student at the Universidad Nacional. While there he published his first stories in *El Espectador*, but in 1948 the university shut down indefinitely, forcing García Márquez to transfer to the Universidad de Cartagena where he eventually abandoned his studies. From then on he would move back and forth through different Colombian towns, working as a reporter and writing his stories and amassing quite a reputation. His ability to capture life *as it is* can probably be traced back to his beginnings as a journalist. While studying his law degree at the National University of Colombia, García Márquez wrote for *El Universal*, and would later write *El Heraldo* (1950-1952) and *El Espectador* (1954-1955). It was during the latter that he wrote the non-fictional tale of Luis Alejandro Velasco, the famous *Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* (1955), an account about a seaman who, as the subtitle says, went from national hero (made rich through publicity) to being ‘spurned by the government and forgotten for all time.’ If the story appears satirical that’s because life in Colombia was fraught with irony – a condition shared by the rest of the continent.

García Márquez’s almost universal popularity has been attributed to this ability to capture life for, as one biographer comments, he ‘[creates] a narrative of ordinary Latin folk that is without a hint of insincerity or condescension, and by articulating a kind of history ‘from below’ that is nonetheless joyous and shuns the dual traps of either idealized heroes or piteous victimization,



[...] García Márquez has given poetry, magic, and dignity to Latin American daily life and can thus be thought of in all justice as a “people’s writer” (Bell-Villada, 6).

Growing up in Latin America, ‘Gabo’, as he is affectionately known, is inescapable. Your teachers tell you to read him. Your parents and your aunts and your older cousins tell you to read him. The crazy neighbour with the ten cats who lives at the end of the lane has read him. Even the philistine who manages the till at the local Cash & Carry with a dull expression on his face has probably read him. And even those who haven’t read him, know about him, know about his creations, his characters and worlds, either from the simple fact that it’s become as ingrained into Latin American culture as rice and beans, or because they live inside his stories already and don’t even know it. Titles like *Leaf Storm*, “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World”, “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”, *Love in the Times of Cholera*, *Chronicles of an Announced Death*, and, most of all, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* have become as rooted within the cultural unconsciousness as *Romeo and Juliet* or *A Christmas Carol*, so that even if you haven’t read the text, the mere mention of them instantly brings to mind recognizable images, themes and characters. A frequently

recounted anecdote that exemplifies his fame is from the author’s visit to rural Cuba in the 1970s, where a group of peasants asked him what he did for a living. He answered “I write.” To which they asked, “What do you write?” and when he replied “I wrote a book called *Cien años de soledad*” the group cried out as one “Macondo!”, the name of the town in the novel.

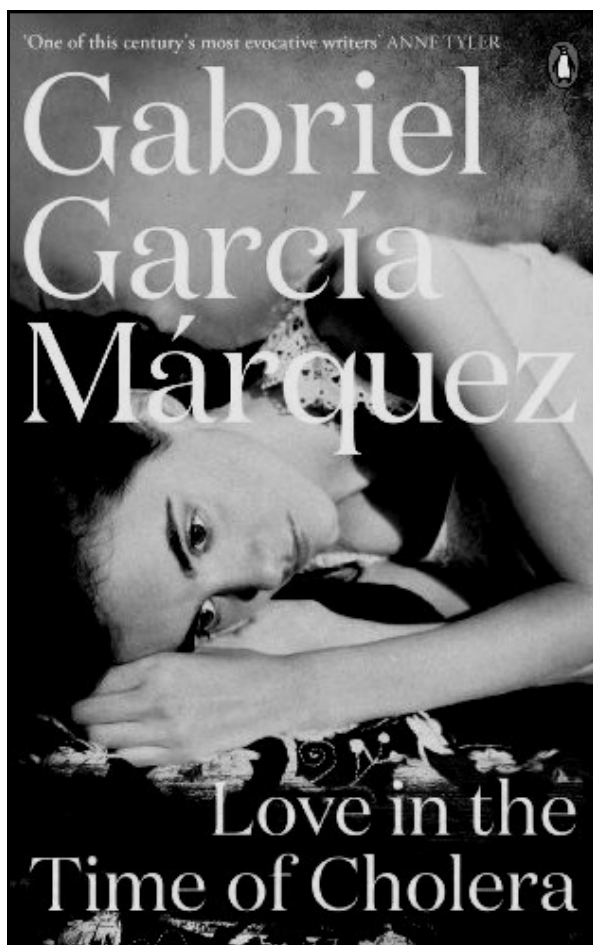
No other writer has so singlehandedly united a continent into one common identity as García Márquez did. From the southernmost town in Argentina, to Hispanics living up north in the United States, García Márquez gave us a home to call our own; we are all citizens of Macondo, the symbol-laden town that so reflects what García Márquez himself called ‘that boundless realm of haunted men and historic women, whose unending obstinacy blurs into legend’: Latin America. This haunting quality and semi-mystical perspective influenced much of the so-called ‘magic realism’ of García Márquez’s work. While not all of his oeuvre falls within this genre, (besides, as I’ll mention below, it all depends on the definitions of the genre anyway), García Márquez and magic realism have been undeniably tied to each other – and to Latin America – practically from the start.

Magic realism is a term that is often used to describe any type of ‘weird fiction’, frequently incorrectly. Generally associated with the genre of fantasy as either a subgenre or a more ‘literary sounding’ name for fantasy, the problem with the term is that it has no perfect definition. The term, as used today, was coined in 1925 by German art critic Franz Roh to describe an artistic counter-movement response to Expressionism. Today it is more readily associated with its literary counterpart, developed in Latin America, and most prominently through the works of Jorge Luis Borges and Alejo Carpentier. García Márquez’s own style is seen as both seminal and marginal magic realism, with many critics firmly arguing that it is and others that it is not. The question always comes back to “was Gabriel García Márquez a magic realism writer?” The answer might never be entirely satisfactory. The more pertinent question is whether this matters, and the response is “no, of course not”. The structuralist need to set definitions, demarcations and categories in order to safely contain authors within a genre will not aid us in explaining or analysing García Márquez’s works. In any case, it is the distinctive flavour that makes them so interesting and memorable, and García Márquez’s own descriptions of his work might at least shed some light on how many readers and critics perceive magic realism. To start with, García Márquez himself has stated that he is averse to the term fantasy as well as to magic realism when it comes to describing his works, saying that he views himself as a ‘realist writer.’ In a famous radio interview in 1980 for

Radio Sandino in Nicaragua, he answered a schoolboy's question on where he obtained his highly imaginative stories, explaining that:

The truth is that critics have given me the prestige and fame of being a writer of the fantastic, a writer of great imagination, and I consider myself to be the man with the least imagination there ever was on this world. In order to write, I have done nothing else but observe everyday life with open eyes to find the material with which to write. I have said, and can prove, regretfully not at this moment because it is technically very difficult, that there is not a single line in my books that doesn't have a departure point in reality. All that you, Roberto, and your literature professor find in my books, corresponds entirely to a real event that I have lived, or have been told about, and it's joined to my own experiences or those of people with whom I've conversed at some point in life. (Ramírez, 2012)

In other words, be these works magic realism or not, García Márquez's stance as a *realist* writer is the reason Latin American readers identify with them. His stories capture the essence of the absurdity of life in Latin America, the neverending fruitlessness of daily existence experienced by twenty countries still feeling the after effects of, in some cases, 400 years of colonialism, followed by dictatorships, corrupt governments, and unforgiving



poverty. That which seems to be supernatural to the rest of the Western world, is rendered commonplace through resignation and no small degree of cynicism. For example, in interviews García Márquez told of hearing accounts about circus animals that fell into a river and got caught, miles downriver, in fishermen's nets in Argentina; or of a Colombian boy born with the tail of a pig. Mexican critic Emilio Lezama, in his article on Gabo's death explained this warped or absurdist sense of reality, experienced throughout Latin America, by commenting on how it wouldn't be until much later in life that he would realise those common stories about 'Laura waiting by her piano a whole century for her lover to return' or of 'the old man sitting under a mahogany tree telling children stories' in exchange for the kids plucking out white hairs from his head after each story, weren't quite as 'common' as he thought them to be.

In his 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature speech, García Márquez went further in providing a historical context to his blending of the 'fantastic' and the 'real' by citing early traveller's tales from the region. Italian scholar and explorer Antonio Pigafetta's record of his journey to the Americas is, García Márquez claims in the speech, 'a strictly accurate account that nonetheless resembles a venture into fantasy' complete with 'hogs with navels on their haunches', and 'a misbegotten creature with the head and ears of a mule, [and] a camel's body' among other fantastically described sights. García Márquez continued his history lesson throughout the speech describes the reality of Latin America as a kind of madness, a condition that reflects an earlier description of the continents as ones of disproportion.

Madness and disproportion are probably two of the most common themes in García Márquez's works, and it's easy to see how they can be quite often confused for the fantastic. However, where in fantasy these can work either allegorically (though scholars like Tolkien would certainly protest at that, and with good reason) or for the purpose of creating estrangement and wonder, in García Márquez they exist simply because they also exist in reality (in a 'reality is stranger than fiction' sort of way). From lovesickness being comparable to an actual illness in *Love in the Times of Cholera*, to Elisenda's exasperated annoyance at finding her family saddled with a bedraggled 'angel' in "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings", or an entire village falling madly in love with a handsome drowned gigantic stranger in "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World".

Perhaps a useful way of thinking about magic realism, if we must call it that (or the 'marvellous real' as Carpentier called it) is to think along similar terms to Clarke's third law that 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic'. The worlds presented in magic realist narratives are ones of inversion and alteration, as some critics have argued. For these worlds - often rural, communities - things that would appear common place and 'technological' such as 'false teeth, magnets, films, trains, ice', etc. are instead rendered magical, miraculous, and impossible to believe, whereas the borderline (and frequently overt) supernatural and superstitious is part of the accepted

Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel Between Faith and Irreverence



Christopher Warnes



truth of everyday reality. In this sense, where realist fiction attempts to portray life in its most accurate state, magic realism unapologetically states that reality must be portrayed as the people who live that reality see it; García Márquez famously stated once that 'reality is not restricted to the price of tomatoes'. This separates the genre (or subgenre, however we class it) from that of fantasy, as the latter is a literature of the intentionally and consciously fantastic – of, as Brian Attebery has put it, things that have never been nor can ever be. A more apt and realistic description of the true essence of Latin American life than the one narrated in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* would be hard to find:

It was as if God had decided to put to the test every capacity for surprise and was keeping the inhabitants of Macondo in a permanent alternation between excitement and disappointment, doubt and revelation, to such an extreme that no one knew for certain where the limits of reality lay (230).

In April, we truly lost a great writer; but while there will never be any new stories by Gabo, the well of treasure he left us will not soon be depleted. Equally, the room for interpretation of and identification with his work is neither rigid nor stagnant. Though I might argue for the realist foundations of his works, others have become deeply immersed in its imaginative and seemingly escapist won-

der – an experience that the author himself would not take away from anyone. There's no better way to end than by letting the man himself have the last word. In his Nobel Prize speech, after listing the hardships, strife and rampant madness of his culture and its people, García Márquez nevertheless concludes with an optimistic call to imagination and its shaping power. Urging us to be 'inventors of tales', he invites us to create a 'new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth.'

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by Ian Watson



Beautiful Barcelona now has the biggest and most beautiful SFF bookshop in Europe, right up there with all the Gaudí architecture, the Picasso Museum, and the Boqueria food market as must-visits, for SFF fans certainly—with almost 2 kilometres of elegant and ingeniously designed wooden shelving, including several hundred metres of books in English. Move over, London's Forbidden Planet!

Gigamesh bookshop is the dream made reality of Alejo Cuervo ("Alex Crow"). At school Alejo was convinced of the power of SF when three bullies menaced him while he was reading Asimov's *Foundation*; Alejo quoted the wisdom of the Mayor of Terminus City at them—"Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent"—and the bullies turned away, defeated or bemused.

Alejo started out by selling secondhand SF from a street market stall. After a few years he moved to share a shop with his mother's ceramics, and began inviting authors; I was the lucky second one, in 1987, to launch *El jardín de las delicias*, the translation of my *The Gardens of Delight* set in the triptych of Hieronymus Bosch, published by Martínez Roca in an SF series directed by Alejo.

To publicise his shop, he set up the SF magazine *Gigamesh* (its title a homage to the epic *Gilgamesh* but with *Giga* instead of *Gilga* because he was thinking big—oops no, it's a homage to the part of Stanislaw Lem's *A Perfect Vacuum*, reviews of non-existent books,

which takes the piss out of academic analysis of texts). After some while he himself started publishing excellent translations of SFF, choosing only what he most liked personally rather than aiming for best-sellers. He was there at the starting line in appreciation of George Martin long before *A Song of Ice and Fire* was even dreamed of.

Move on twenty years and, even before the HBO television, successive volumes of Martin's epic published by Alejo became so popular in Spain that 10% of all books by GRRM in all languages including English were being sold on the Spanish mainland. And then the TV series hap-

pened... Between one year and the next, Gigamesh (publisher and bookshop) jumped from being officially classified as a small business to being a big business just like Iberia Airlines, completely leap-frogging the medium business status.

Being a literary, political, and economist idealist, as well as by now rather well-heeled largely due to GRRM sales, Alejo specified that big retail outlets such as the giant up-market department store chain El Corte Inglés—"The English Cut", as in tailoring—should order at least one copy per store of his other smaller-selling titles along with their orders for hundreds of thousands of a new GRRM plus reprints of previous GRRMs—even extending this courteously to "rival" small SFF publisher Alamut whom Alejo offered to distribute. When mighty El Corte Inglés only ordered vast numbers of GRRMs, and nothing else, they spent one Christmas season without any GRRMs. Duly chastened, El Corte Inglés changed their policies, and became once again the best and biggest Spanish chain-bookstore. Currently the FNAC chain is having its account shut down for the same reason. Alejo also refuses to supply outlets such as supermarkets, so as to support bookshops little and large.

Gigamesh is a perfectionist publisher which employs not only top-notch translators but professional correctors too, a role which I wasn't aware of before I came to Spain. No translation is printed without extreme and prolonged textual scrutiny of nuances (including by Alejo) and this continues as aftercare even once a book is published. Just for example, if a dwarf rides on a pig's back in Vol 1, and years later in Vol 4 GRRM reveals the animal to be female, reprints of Vol 1 will change *cerdo*, male, to *cerda*, female. Some other SF publishers don't take so much care—La Factoría de Ideas is



said to have destroyed the reputation of quite a few Anglo-American authors, whom fans simply won't read another book by after enduring the first mangled one.

28th and 29th March saw the Grand Opening of new Gigamesh into which Alejo has lovingly poured lots of his own money, accompanied by mass signings, masses of journalists, masses of fans, and masses of Cava and tapas. Alejo's hair and beard are white; his eyes are bright blue, as if he has taken Spice from *Dune*. For the occasion he dressed as a cardinal, a prince of the church of SFF, consequently "masses" is the appropriate word. The altarpiece is a cinemascope mural by genius Enrique Corominas who does the cover art for the GRRM volumes in Spanish, and whose recent illustrated hardback adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *A Portrait of Dorian Gray* is a gorgeous book well worth buying even if you can't read either the Spanish original or the French translation. A single piece of artwork from this recently sold at a Christie's auction for \$24,000, way beyond the estimate.

Unlike London's Forbidden Planet, where first you're principally confronted by toys and merchandising, its SFF literature being banished to the big basement, BOOKS is the major impact of Librería Gigamesh. Games and their manuals, models, *Magic: The Gathering* cards, and comics are also on hand in abundance, but BOOKS are what greet you, and mainly accompany you around the shop. Different areas are named in honour of great Spanish SF editors past and present. There's also a fun poster-size guide to all akin shops in this smallish area of rather elegant boulevards—near the Arc de Triomf just beyond the medieval Gothic Quarter—known to fans as the Friqui Triangle, since Friquis (= "Nerds", also spelled Frikis) is what

Spanish SFF fans like to call themselves. Alejo is perfectly happy to display a guide to rival shops, united by Friquidom. Be not afraid to be a Freak in Barcelona.

The shop is at number 8 Carrer de Báilen street. Its website, with photos, is <http://www.gigamesh.com/libreria.html>. The "subtitle" of the shop, *Vicio y Subcultura*, means "Addiction & Subculture". Our love of SFF is an addiction, isn't it? Gigamesh has a few mini shopping trolleys in case addiction gets out of hand, out of the grasp of one shopping hand anyway.

Oh, and regarding games, I don't only refer to SFF games—Gigamesh stocks the largest number of Go manuals in the whole of Spain, because Alejo likes Go.

On hand from the UK for the opening, joining a host of Spanish authors, was Lisa Tuttle with Colin Murray. Many were the munchy bibulous meals, the highlight being the Calçotada Friki on the Sunday. Calçots are giant sweet spring onions—no resemblance to little shallots—cooked barbecue-style and sometimes served in newspaper. Wearing a big and necessary bib, you peel off the carbonised outer leaves, dip into a sauce made of peppers, tomato, garlic, olive oil, and almonds, then lower the long calçot into a mouth best positioned agape horizontally. After half a dozen of these to warm up (or easily fill up), giant plates of meats appear, grilled chops, sausages, thighs.

Alejo gave away to all celebrants free copies of his own first book, *Exégesis* ("Exegesis") specially printed for the occasion, enshrining the rationale of his professional life, a historical survey of the Gigamesh catalogue, some fiction by him, and poems he has translated from English to Spanish, in both languages. Alejo himself translates the songs and verses in the saga which everyone now

just calls *Game of Thrones*, while my beloved Cristina translates all the prose.

Alejo also took the opportunity of the Grand Opening to launch an ambitious and innovative digital platform, LEKTU, offering books at really affordable prices in many formats, without DRM, giving the users freedom and control—as distinct from Kindle, where you never actually own what you think you bought (but merely rented) which can be erased at the push of a button by mighty Amazon without any recourse, as if a bookshop manager could break into your home and take back without compensation all the books you've bought. Users of LEKTU will not be regarded as potential criminal pirates. Already a dozen significant publishers have signed up to join the Gigamesh digital catalogue—including its translations of GRRM. The name LEKTU combines Read, Electronic, and You, with the E taking the form of the *I Ching* trigram ☵ for Creative Force. Power to its elbow.

The big airy conference room at the back of the shop, lined with glass cases of models, is already much in demand by other Spanish publishers to launch new SFF and horror titles. Gigamesh bookshop is the place to be in Barcelona, a cardinal point; and amiable Alejo, fluent in English and Spanish and Catalan, makes an excellent Pope—an alter ego bestowed upon him years ago in the now enormously popular comic *Fanhunter* as a lunatic ex-librarian possessed by the spirit of Philip K. Dick who blows up Vatican City to become the villainous Pope Alejo 1.

By the time this is published you'll be able to explore the *inside* of number 8, Carrer de Báilen, Barcelona, using Google Street View. There aren't many bookshops you can say that about!



recurrent:

KINCAID IN SHORT

Paul Kincaid

Standing Room Only by Karen Joy Fowler

Good Friday, 14th April 1865, must be one of the most well-documented days in history. We know where people were and at what time. We know when John Wilkes Booth, a handsome actor though never as successful as his brothers, went to Ford's Theatre to collect his mail, and there found that the President would be attending that evening's performance. We know which bar George Atzerodt drank in to build his courage, though he could never screw himself to the point of assassinating the Vice President, which was his assigned part in the conspiracy. We know when Mary Surratt left her guest house to collect money she was owed, and we know that the debtor did not turn up for their meeting. We know that General Grant, fresh from Lee's surrender that had happened on Palm Sunday only five days before, decided at the last minute that he and his wife would visit family in Philadelphia, so Lincoln and his wife were accompanied by Major Henry Rathbone and his fiancée, Clara Harris. We know that the door to the Presidential box at Ford's Theatre had been damaged some time before and was not yet fixed, so it could not be locked. We know which local bar the President's bodyguard, John Parker, went to at the intermission. We know which play was being performed (a rather tired comedy called *Our American Cousin*), and we even know which lines were being spoken by which actors at the moment that Booth crept into the box and fired a derringer at point blank range at the back of Lincoln's head. We know that Henry Rathbone attacked the assassin, but was stabbed for his pains (the subsequent marriage of Henry and Clara would be plagued by ill fortune and madness that can probably be traced to this incident). We know that Booth broke his leg when he leapt to the stage, but he still managed to evade capture for a further ten days.

It is not just that all of these details are known, they are well known. They have been recorded in any number of history books and biographies, encyclopedias and documentaries. This particular Easter was America's own Golgotha (the religious significance of the date has been pointed out on many occasions), so the details are seared into America's popular consciousness. To introduce a whole new cast of characters into these events, even if they are mostly anonymous, members of an audience for a unique performance,

takes a special sensibility and subtlety. But that is precisely what Karen Joy Fowler does in 'Standing Room Only'. In fact, she does this so subtly that it is easy not to notice they are there, so that only the fact that the story was first published in *Asimov's* in 1997, and was included in *The Secret History of Science Fiction* edited by James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel tells us unequivocally that it is science fiction.

Of course, in many ways it is a very conventional science fiction story. The idea of time travellers going to witness a significant historical (or religious) event has been common at least since Garry Kilworth's first published story, 'Let's Go to Golgotha' (1974); and there are any number of time travel stories in which someone warns, or attempts to warn, Lincoln, one of the most recent being 'Thought Experiment' (2011) by Eileen Gunn. So Fowler is working in very familiar territory here. But she shifts the focus, telling the story from the point of view of a contemporary character, in this case Mary Surratt's 17-year-old daughter, Anna. And since Anna does not know that there are time travellers present, or indeed have the concept of time travel, there can be no specific reference to time travel in the story itself. In fact, 'Standing Room Only' is a superb example of how much can be told through implication rather than direct statement.

If you want to read the story as a straightforward historical fiction recounting familiar events from the unfamiliar perspective of one of the minor players caught up in the drama, then it is perfectly possible to do so. Fowler makes Anna into a very interesting figure, a fairly typical teenage girl with a crush on John Wilkes Booth (he was arrogant but charismatic, and by all accounts was popular with everyone at Surratt's guest house). So we see Booth tangentially, as the object of a girl's uncritical adoration, which means he comes across afresh. And Anna's crush makes her not so much blind to other things that are going on, as blasé about them: 'Everyone around her had secrets. She had grown quite used to this' (269). It is unclear whether Mary Surratt was herself a Confederate spy, but she was certainly a Confederate sympathiser and her home was used as a channel by spies. To Anna, however, her mother was 'neither a pretty woman, nor a clever one, nor was she young' (268);

in other words, she is ordinary, and Anna therefore cannot conceive of anything that might disturb the ordinary tenor of their lives. As for Booth, he is simply the epitome of glamour, and that is all she sees. She can, therefore, dismiss the 'rumours that Booth kept a woman in a house of prostitution near the White House' (268). She does not notice the conspiracies that Booth gathered about himself like a stage costume; he liked to think of himself as a Southern patriot, but he spent the war years touring and performing in the North and it was only after Lee's surrender that he chose to act on that supposed patriotism, gathering together a ragtag assembly of incompetents for a plot whose point seems to have been its theatrical grandeur rather than any thought-through political or strategic purpose. As Anna's brother puts it: 'JW isn't satisfied with acting... He yearns for greatness on the stage of history' (271). When Booth inveigles Mary Surratt to carry a package for him, an errand that will later prove crucial in convicting and hanging Mary Surratt, Anna interprets it as a gift and feels envy. What we read, therefore, is the story of a starstruck girl on what is, for her, an ordinary day. Only in retrospect can we see the day as extraordinary.

This is how history is lived, but it is not how history is perceived, and it is that tension that lies at the heart of Fowler's story. We get the first hint of this when Anna is serving their lodgers with a breakfast of 'steak, eggs and ham, oysters, grits and whiskey' (267). There are two new boarders, one of whom keeps staring at her mother. If you found yourself in the company of someone you knew was about to play a prominent role in one of the most dramatic tragedies in history, you'd be likely to stare also. But for Anna it simply makes her uncomfortable, and worse is to come:

The new men had hardly touched their food, cutting away the fatty parts of the meat and leaving them in a glistening greasy wasteful pile. They'd finished the whiskey, but made faces while they drank. Anna had resented the compliment of their eyes and, paradoxically, now resented the insult of their plates. Her mother set a good table. (268)

While Anna can see only rudeness, we might recognise a modern fastidiousness about food. In the grimace over whiskey served at breakfast, we see the duality of the perspective this story offers. On the one hand there is Anna, in the moment, unaware of the turn that events will take, conscious only of contemporary mores, fashions and concerns. On the other hand we look back upon a known moment in history, as a historian or a time traveller might do, but with all our modern tastes and perspectives still in place.

Fowler plays with this duality constantly throughout her story, breaking off from the action to tell us what would come later. As Anna envies the present that Booth has given to her mother, for instance, we are told that

'Later at her mother's trial, Anna would hear that the package had contained a set of field glasses' though the damning witness would later

recant everything but the field glasses. He was, he now said, too drunk at the time to remember what Mrs. Surratt had told him. He had never remembered. The prosecution had compelled his earlier testimony through threats. This revision would come two years after Mary Surratt had been hanged. (274)

Again, as Booth rides away from an encounter with George Atzerodt, we are told that he 'was carrying in his pocket a letter to the editor of *The National Intelligencer*. In it, he recounted the reasons for Lincoln's death. He

had signed his own name, but also that of George Atzerodt.' (275) In this way, we are regularly reminded not just of the way that events will play out beyond the scope of this story, but more importantly of the retrospective view of the historian or time traveller, and that is very much within the scope of the story.

But always the attention returns swiftly and smoothly to Anna. We have been made aware that we are in a moment of history, but we are also reminded that it is not history to the young girl just living an ordinary life as usual. History intrudes on the story not through events so much as through the gathering crowd of observers. 'She had often seen men outside the Surratt boarding house lately, men who busied themselves in unperceptive activities when she passed them' (268). Fowler offers a half-

hearted explanation for these watchers: one of the boarders, Louis Wiechman, had told the authorities that a Secesh plot was being hatched in the Surratt house, and so the boarding house was put under surveillance. But the notion that the watching figures might be as much of the time as Anna is quietly dropped after a couple of paragraphs. Two sets of watchers is too much for the story to carry.

The accumulation of visitors from the future continues apace, though without ever making it obvious that they are not a natural part of the scene. At one point, for instance, Wiechman tells Anna that he had seen Booth in a barbershop, 'With a crowd watching his every move', to which Anna replies 'Mr. Booth is a famous thespian. Naturally people admire him' (270). The fact that this crowd is unusual is disguised by the way that Fowler draws attention to Anna's own admiration for Booth, and by all that is implied by her rather prissy choice of the word 'thespian'. Sometimes the fish-out-of-water nature of the time travellers is played for comic relief, as when we watch a woman, 'unfashionably thin and laughing giddily as with every unsteady step her hoop swung and unbalanced her' (269), attempt to leave a carriage that is stuck in the mud, unfamiliarity with 1860s costume making her clumsy. Sometimes, they seem to be actively interfering with events, as when a group of men get Atzerodt drunk;



...time travel implies that the past is set in stone, it won't be changed, it is deterministic: though the presence of visitors from the future is itself a change in history.

though the record shows that Atzerodt did indeed get drunk that afternoon, so it is unclear whether this might have changed the course of events. In none of these cases can we say for sure that these are not ordinary people of the time, even when the woman from the carriage reappears at the climax, or when one of the men with Atzerodt is identified as 'of a race Anna had never seen before' (276). But the implication, surely, is that they are time travellers.

At only one point within the body of the story does Fowler come close to revealing the frame within which it is set. Anna goes to Ford's Theatre in the hope of bumping into Booth. A crowd of people has gathered there already, and the owner, James R. Ford, announces that, though it is the last night of a lacklustre run, every seat for tonight's performance is sold out. Again, there is a natural explanation: 'It's because the President and General Grant will be attending' (271). However, later Mrs. Streichman, who had tickets but is unable to get into the theatre, offers another explanation: 'you wouldn't believe the waiting list. Years. Centuries! I'll never have tickets again' (277). For now, however, Ford allows Anna to go in and watch a rehearsal, and several members of the crowd bustle in after her. When it comes to the play's most famous, fatal line – 'Well, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal, you sockdologizing old man-trap' (272) – Anna is surprised that the woman sitting next to her whispers it aloud at the same time, and in an English accent. There were, of course, many English visitors to Washington throughout the war, but why would one of them know that particular line and repeat it aloud like that? Anna, of course, doesn't ask the question or examine its implications, but we, the readers, are meant to. And then the small audience is distracted by the appearance of John Wilkes Booth in the Presidential Box. For Anna, this is, of course, a moment of glamorous excitement, but also of jealousy. She immediately wonders whether the older woman sitting beside her – 'It was a courtesy to think of her as a married woman' (273), though no courtesy is intended by this assessment – might be a potential rival for Booth's affections. We are left to imagine that the frisson of excitement felt by the other members of this little group has an entirely different origin.

At this point the woman, Mrs. Streichman, introduces herself, and when Anna Surratt gives her name 'There was a quick, sideways movement in the woman's eyes' (273). The name clearly means something to her, yet for anyone of the time who was not already acquainted with the Surratts it is unlikely to have aroused any resonance. For a time traveller, however, we can understand how exciting it would be to meet the daughter of someone caught up in the conspiracy. For Anna, the encounter makes her uneasy and she walks quickly away. But one of the apparent time travellers has spoken, has been named, has betrayed an interest that marks her as other. We must remember that the identifica-

tion of Mrs. Streichman and her fellows as time travellers is entirely based on assumption and inference, at no point in the story is this identification made explicit. But in this brief encounter we have a fairly strong suggestion that this is the inference we are intended to make.

And at the end, when Anna sees 'Many people, far too many people were on the street' (276) and follows them to gather outside Ford's Theatre, Mrs. Streichman reappears.

'At least you're here, dear. That's something I couldn't have expected. That makes it very real. And,' she pressed Anna's arm, 'if it helps in any way, you must tell yourself later there's nothing you could have done to make it come out differently. Everything that will happen has already happened. It won't be changed.' (277)

Now, and only now, does this become a time travel story, because in this one speech Mrs. Streichman expresses the two great philosophical dilemmas of the form. She is in the midst of real events, yet she is simultaneously a member of an audience, or a tour group – "Can my group please stay together?" a woman toward the front asked' (277) – with all the artificiality that implies. It takes Anna's presence to make it feel real. And there is also the fact that time travel implies that the past is set in stone, it won't be changed, it is deterministic; though the presence of visitors from the future is itself a change in history. Mrs. Streichman's presence in this story is a contradiction, it makes the real and unchanging events she has come to witness into something unreal, a form of entertainment. But for Anna, of course, trapped in the moment as we all are, this is all too real and decidedly unentertaining.

For Anna, reality provides an explanation for the anomalous presence. She thinks of Mrs. Streichman as some sort of prophet. The scene has been set for this earlier, in a brief exchange with Booth about palm reading. So she asks if she will get what she wants. We know, tragically, that what she wants is Booth, but Mrs. Streichman doesn't know that. She answers, in a simple and powerful statement: 'People getting what they want. That's not the history of the world, is it?' (277).

And so the story ends, on the cusp of events. The shot has not yet been fired. The insensible body has not yet been carried from the theatre, through this unruly crowd, into the house across the street, where it will lie uneasily in a bed too short for it until it breathes its last the next day. 'Now he belongs to the ages,' one of the cabinet ministers present is reputed to have said. But that's not the history of the world, is it?

Quotations taken from 'Standing Room Only' by Karen Joy Fowler, in *The Secret History of Science Fiction* edited by Patrick Kelly and John Kessel (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2009) pp267-277.

recurrent:

RESONANCES

Stephen Baxter

The Beatles... Liverpool Fantasy?

I very much enjoyed Tony Jones's review of '2013 in SF Audio' in *Vector* 275. My own favourite audio piece of the year was 'Sorry Boys, You Failed the Audition' by Ray Connolly, a play broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 14th November 2013. In this alternate history of the Beatles, as the title suggests, in 1962 the band fails the final audition with George Martin at Parlophone, and drifts apart: 'I'm not going to waste my life trying to be heard,' says John. 'How *are* you going to waste your life then, John?' George asks. By the late sixties Paul is a teacher, George is a session musician, Ringo has won the pools, and John writes occasional sketches for Spike Milligan. When Paul struggles to finish a school musical, eventually called 'Blue Suburban Skies', Freda Kelly, their (real life) fan club secretary, cajoles John into writing with Paul. Connolly interviewed the Beatles many times and the piece has insider knowledge. It's sweet and funny, and hearing the familiar Pepper-era songs belted out by a school choir is pleasing.

2013 was actually a pretty big year for fans of Beatles-related alternate histories (and there are communities of them to be found online). Like the mythical buses, you wait an age for a Fabs counterfactual, and then three decent efforts come along together.

Buses, in fact, feature in the second of the new pieces, a TV adaptation of what remains my all-time favourite Fabs counterfactual: 'Snodgrass' by Ian R. MacLeod (1992, available in *Snodgrass and Other Illusions*, 2013). In this version of history John walked out of that audition with George Martin, refusing to perform somebody else's song ('How Do You Do It?', later a hit for Gerry and the Pacemakers). In the 1990s an embittered 50-year-old John, drinking, smoking and out of work, recalls the bus rides of his boyhood: 'I remember the rows of semis, trees that brush like sea on shingle over the roof of the bus...' The new adaptation for Sky TV was written by David Quantick and starred Ian Hart as John (Hart had actually played Lennon twice before, in *The Hours and Times* (1991) and *Backbeat* (1994)).

Counterfactual speculation about the Beatles has been

around a long time. One early experiment was Willy Russell's stage musical *John, Paul, George, Ringo... and Bert*, which premiered in 1974. The story of the band was told through an abortive attempt to stage a reunion concert. Of course in 1974 it was still possible that a reunion might happen. I've committed a couple of counter-Fabs myself. In 'The Twelfth Album' (*Interzone* 130, 1998) the Fabs stay together long enough to produce one more studio album - I had a lot of fun with the track listing. In *The H-Bomb Girl* (2007), a YA time-travel saga, when the Cold War turns hot John ends up being executed at Wembley Stadium, judged a dissident by an emergency government.

Just as in 'Snodgrass', John, perhaps the most complex of the Beatles, is often the central figure in these counterfactuals. A (rare) happy ending for John is depicted in 'Lennon at 70' (*Vanity Fair*, 24 September 2010), David Kamp's faux interview with a John who survived the 1980 assassination attempt. By 2010, with his 70th birthday approaching, Lennon is living happily and healthily on his dairy farm in New York State, and looking forward to a 40th anniversary performance of the Plastic Ono band album with Yoko. The piece is both funny and oddly plausible.

But more improbable adventures for John have been imagined. Edward Morris's 'Imagine' (*Interzone* 200, October 2005) is a caustic and ironic tale in which in 1966, when John makes his infamous remark that the Beatles are more popular than Jesus, the Governor of California bans their music, with the rest of the US quick to follow suit. It's the end of the band - and in revenge, on 11 December 1980, John becomes the assassin: 'John Lennon... truly became a force for peace when he shot Ronald Reagan.'

Sometimes the Beatles are secondary players in deeper divergences of history. In Bryce Zabel's *Surrounded by Enemies* (2013) John Kennedy survives the assassination attempt, and in February 1964 emerges from months of seclusion in the White House to greet the Beatles when they appear on the Ed Sullivan Show: 'Millions of Americans... remember the night... as the

greatest jolt of pop cultural intensity they'd ever experienced' (chapter 3). Paul McAuley's fine 'Cross Road Blues' (1991, collected in *A Very British History*, 2013) is an exploration of unintended consequences. Legendary American blues singer Robert Johnson - who in reality died in 1938 but was an inspiration for the British music explosion of the 1960s - lives on to inspire an early US desegregation movement in the 1940s. But a preoccupied America stays out of World War II, and by the 1960s 'the Quarrymen's mutated blues', inspired by Johnson, articulates the grievances of the disenfranchised youth of a still-mighty British Empire.

What about the significance of the Beatles beyond the music? In a previous column (*Matrix*, March 2005) I spoke about theories that the Beatles' music and their peace-and-love ideology, leaking through the Iron Curtain, may have aided the collapse of Communism - and if there's any truth in that, what a tremendous intervention in history they made. In Larry Kirwan's 2003 novel *Liverpool Fantasy* John again leaves the band in 1962, when Martin tries to have them release the slushy 'Till There Was You' as their second single - and by 1987 the National Front is in government in Britain. John, as in 'Snodgrass', is a self-destructive unemployed drunk who knows dimly that

Song' (2011) the eleventh Doctor includes 'join the Beatles' in a bucket list of things to do before he dies.

The Beatles also show up in the *Who* tie-in media. In Kim Newman's very enjoyable novella *Time and Relative* (2001), a kind of prequel to the first TV episode 'An Unearthly Child', Susan Foreman, the Doctor's granddaughter, has an old-young perspective on 'Love Me Do' her schoolmates can't share: 'This is the best and most important 45 single of the last five years. For the rest of your life, you'll remember that you were there when the Beatles started' (p23).

The Virgin 'New Adventures' novels included a five-book 'Alternate History Cycle' in which the Meddling Monk (from the TV serial 'The Time Meddler') tinkers with history. In the third book, Kate Orman's *The Left-Handed Hummingbird* (1993), the eponymous Hummingbird, an Aztec warrior turned into a kind of psychic vampire by alien technology, tries to bring down the Beatles to feed on 'ripples of rage and despair' (p200), and companion Ace has to avert an attempted assassination at the band's 'Let It Be' rooftop concert in January 1969. The closing book of the sequence, Paul Cornell's *No Future* (1994), contains the best possible *Who*-Beatles joke. By the 1970s the Monk

... and in revenge, on 11 December 1980, John becomes the assassin: 'John Lennon... truly became a force for peace when he shot Ronald Reagan.'

everything has gone wrong: 'We could have turned the world upside f**ing down!' (chapter 23).

There are more horrific alternatives. John is a zombie in Alan Goldsher's *Paul is Undead* (2010) (great title): 'I mucked about with rock 'n' roll, I killed a bunch of people, and zombified eight of 'em. Big fookin' deal' (p18). John's a vampire in Kim Newman's *Johnny Alucard* (2013), the latest instalment in the 'Anno Dracula' series. 'Imagine' is sung at the climax of an epic 'Concert for Transylvania', also known as 'Bloodstock'... And spotted among the line-up for that concert are Homer Simpson's barbershop-quartet Beatles parody the Be Sharps (part 4 chapter 5). Writers do like to play with parodic versions of the band. In the comics, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* episode *Century: 1969* by Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill (2011) is a surreal alternate history in which it wasn't the Beatles that made it big but the Rutles, from Eric Idle's 1978 spoof documentary.

Over the years *Doctor Who* has made a number of nods to the Beatles, beginning with a cameo in the Terry Nation Dalek serial 'The Chase' (1965), in which the crew of the TARDIS watch the group performing 'Ticket to Ride' on their 'Time and Space Visualiser'. According to Vicki, a companion from the twenty-fifth century, the Beatles will be well remembered: 'Of course I know about them. I've been to their Memorial Theatre in Liverpool... Well, they're marvellous, but I didn't know they played classical music!' As recently as 'The Wedding of River

is trying to broadcast a psychic alien invasion direct into the minds of humanity through a global TV concert called 'Live Peace', headlined by Paul's post-Beatles band. The Brigadier thwarts the scheme by stunning the band with anaesthetic shots: 'Chap with Wings, five rounds rapid!'

2013's third Beatle what-if was in fact a *Doctor Who* audio drama. Spinning off from a line in 'An Unearthly Child' in which Susan plays a record by 'John Smith and the Common Men', *1963: Fanfare for the Common Men* by Eddie Robson is set in an October 1963 where the new hit band is - not the Beatles - but the Common Men, Mark, James and Korkey. The fifth Doctor and Nyssa learn that history is being subverted by aliens from the planet Byulna, who want to use 'Commania' to control mankind. It's a fun piece of work that includes Rutlesesque hits for the new band, such as 'Oh, Won't You Please Love Me?' and 'Who Is That Man?'

So what can we conclude? There seems to be a vague consensus that, without the Beatles, Paul, George and Ringo would have found meaningful employment and even happiness, though none would have scaled the heights they reached as a Fab. The world would have been a poorer place without the Beatles' music, and, arguably, even a less free one. And John, bitter and unfulfilled, would have wasted his potential and never found happiness - but he might not have been shot at the age of forty.

recurrent: SEQUENTIALS

Laura Sneddon

Women and Science Fiction

It's no secret that science fiction is sometimes thought of, occasionally referred to, and frequently dismissed, as a "male" genre: a gendered pigeon-hole that is also said to house gaming, comics and anything even remotely non-mainstream.

While that is – of course – nonsense, with women both creating and consuming science fiction in all its various forms, it is true that in the world of comics, critics and historians have long been guilty of skipping over the names of female creators, even those that have made the biggest strides and innovations.

So it was with the early and mostly forgotten work of Fran Hopper and Lily Renée in Fiction House's glorious *Planet Comics* in the 1940s, and so it is with three of the greatest works of science fiction within the sequential medium in the late 20th century. Thankfully the most contemporary works have escaped this curse, and three in particular stand alongside the previous greats. Consider this a highly recommended reading list!

I'll start with *Starstruck*, a comic that beat *Watchmen* to the punch in using non-linear storytelling, overlapping and adjunct stories, recurring symbolism, and incredible complexity. *A Distant Soil* is a space opera of epic proportions and Arthurian themes that is still ongoing today. Then there's *Finder*, an entirely self-published creation of "aboriginal science fiction" that has been collected by Dark Horse due to popular demand.

In late 1970s New York, Elaine Lee was busy creating a small but very important play. Collaborating with artist and costume designer Michael Wm Kaluta, Lee put together a sprawling epic encompassing a heavily female cast of terrific characters adventuring across the entire universe. With the play rights tied up in production, and the overall myth-building on a par with that of *Dune*, Kaluta suggested turning to the emerging world of mainstream independent comics.

Explaining the plot of *Starstruck* to the unconverted masses is a little like trying to explain *The Invisibles* or indeed any of Grant Morrison's more symbolic and

brain-melting books. Elaine Lee in fact predates some of Morrison's signature moves, with a slow burning overall reveal of the greater mechanisms at play as one character orchestrates an entire web of interconnecting events and characters that seem to have no relation to one another when first introduced.

Set far in the future, with humanity in all corners of the universe, the stage is set with anarchic factions and revolutionary leaders. Galatia 9 and Brucilla the Muscle are perhaps our two main characters, a guerilla amazon and hothead pilot respectively. Erotic Ann, a pleasure droid that achieves awareness, and the Galactic Girl Guides are major fan favourites too.

The largely female cast set the book at odds with many other comics of the time (and indeed of today), while focusing not on good vs evil, but on the interactions of flawed and genuine characters trying to survive the manipulations of others. The incredibly twisted plot, with subtle symbolism and surreal imagery, includes references to retro science fiction and Art Nouveau.

The original volume, 73 pages long, covers three decades of stories across the universe, and the non-linear approach has seen critics today comparing it to later works such as *Lost* and *Watchmen*. Much of the praise given to the latter, its innovation of non-linear graphic storytelling, use of supplement texts for story expansion, overlapping dialogue, unreliable storytelling and so on, was in fact pioneered by the greatly overlooked *Starstruck*.

A comic truly ahead of its time. The entire saga was recently collected in deluxe editions, and after a successful Kickstarter, Lee and Kaluta will be returning to the *Starstruck* multiverse with a new 176 page graphic novel, *Harry Palmer: Starstruck*.

It was in the late '70s too that the first appearances of *A Distant Soil* arrived fresh from the mind of Colleen Doran in various fanzines. After a scuffle with her first publisher which saw Doran discard some 300 pages of published work, the artist started over and published the title herself until 1996 when she partnered with Image Comics.

Doran is well known by comic fans for her championing of creator rights and for her work at DC and Marvel, not least for her dreamy contributions to Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. But it is *A Distant Soil* that is truly her magnum opus, an entirely creator owned epic that is currently some 42 issues into its 50 issue goal – the ending will see the completion of a 1000 page single long-form narrative.

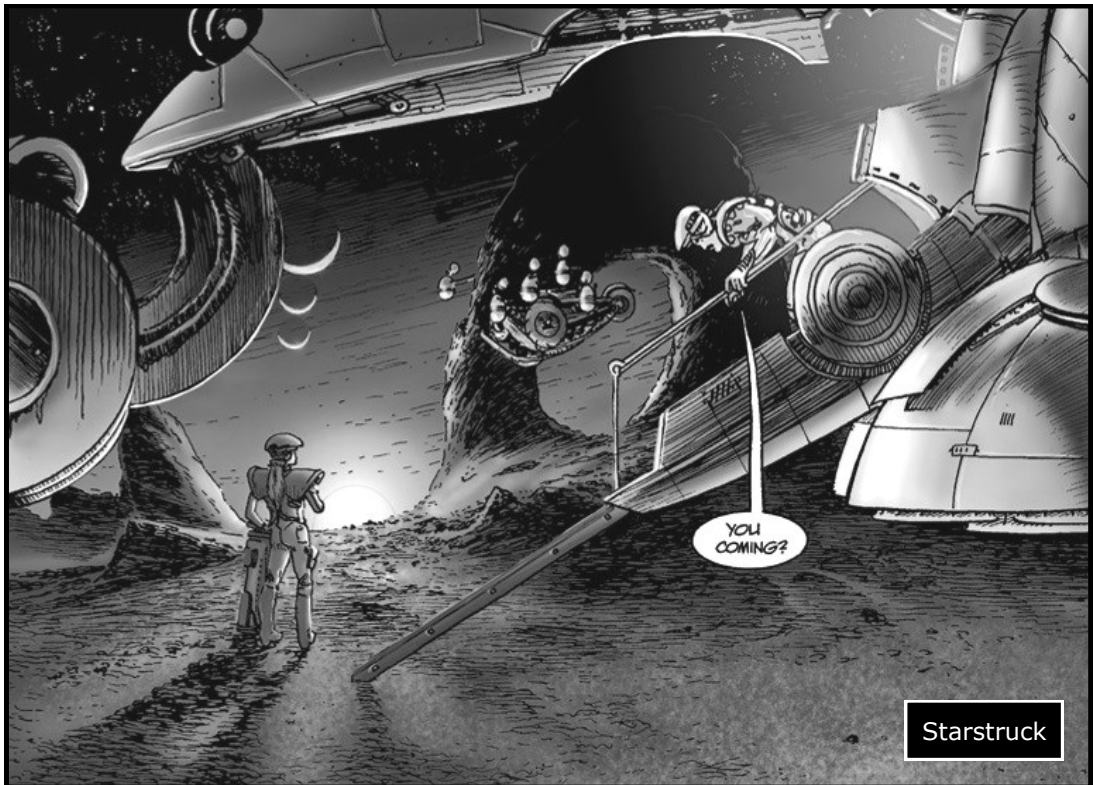
In the comics medium, *A Distant Soil* was something that really had not been seen before – a New Age take on science fiction with gorgeous costumes, young siblings with an unknown destiny, a blinding mix of magic with technology... fantasy and alien ships combine under Doran's ethereal watch. The book was also one of the earliest science fiction comics in the US to be visibly inspired by manga.

But what really marks this book as something incredibly special is the sheer diversity on display: alien races exhibit different skin colours in pigments which familiarly reflect humanity's own multiculturalism rather than a homogenous white "norm" - something surprisingly rare within sequential science fiction. The book also features gay relationships without it being a big old deal.

A Distant Soil, if created new today, would have a rabid tumblr following and a stream of awards if not a young adult adaptation. Much of the forgetfulness around the book is, once more, due to Doran being a little ahead of her time. But it is also down to the printer destroying the original photographic negatives, leading to a huge restoration project after tracking down long sold off art, and generous help from other artists. *A Distant Soil* made a triumphant return to Image last year, along with newly restored collected editions.

Jumping forward in time from the punk origins of the late '70s and early '80s, another very different kind of sequential sci-fi was born – Carla Speed McNeil's *Finder*, an almost perplexing mix of the straightforward and the indescribable. The storytelling is nominally linear, yet the main character barely appears in many of the volumes. The world-building is immense, yet most of the details have to be pieced together from background information.

Finder is set in the far future, built on the ruins of our own civilization, with much of the existing technology mysterious to this new society. Genetic purity is the be all and end all, with strict self-policing. Those who fail the grade live outside the domes that the full citizens inhabit. Jaeger, a half-breed, is a "Finder". The Grosvenor family live in the domed city-state of Anvard, and all their children are daughters... even the boys.



Moving from character to character is a risk few comic series are willing to take, yet the fandom around *Finder* is intense to say the least. After self-publishing the first 37 issues, McNeil made the then radical decision to start publishing the single issues online before printing the collected editions. With this change came new readers, new sales, and an eventual deal with Dark Horse.

With various comparisons to *Cerebus* in terms of the sheer scale of storytelling (if not in approach to feminism!), the series is one that seems rarely reviewed. Yet those who have read it will always recommend it passionately, and it's easy to see why. *Finder* grips you and never lets you go, remaining still near indescribable to those who haven't yet made the leap.

McNeil's art is cartoonish, with increasing sophistication in each of the 10 volumes so far available – the tenth in fact published later this year.

Lee, Doran, and McNeil are – of course – not the only women writing and creating sequential science fiction. But each of their key creations were simultaneously ground-breaking and still making great strides forward in 2014, with little to none artistic or creative degradation. A rare feat in this nostalgia prone medium. It is perhaps fitting then that three women are behind the more recent creations that are similarly pushing the form further into the unknown.

Saga, the critically acclaimed space opera from Brian K Vaughan and Fiona Staples is quite possibly the most celebrated comic being released today, with Staples receiving an unprecedented nine awards for her work on the book in 2013 alone. The epic series stars a husband and wife from either side of a long war between alien races, and their newborn daughter who is the narrator of their struggle.

Influenced by *Star Wars* and *Flash Gordon* amongst others, it is Staples's artwork that really gripped a whole new audience by the throat, with critics and non-comic readers alike drawn to her brilliant characters and visual storytelling. *Saga* is the new comic to convert anyone to loving the medium, with a wide cast of characters with immense appeal.

While *Saga* has swept aside the mainstream competition, the indie world has been entranced by *Decrypting Rita*, a highly experimental looking webcomic by Margaret Trauth (egypt.urnash.com/rita). The general plot centres on a female robot who is dragged outside of reality by her ex-boyfriend, she has to pull her self back together across four parallel worlds before a hive mind can take over the entire planet. So far, so sci-fi.

But Rita is also a former dancer mourning her best friend... and she is an acrobatic cyborg engaged in espionage. Parallel realities bleed together and are sometimes told simultaneously on the same page. How? The webcomic is formatted entirely in a side-scrolling landscape,

an infinitely wide page. Pages as a concept cease to exist when everything blends together in one long scroll, and even panels start to lose their significance.

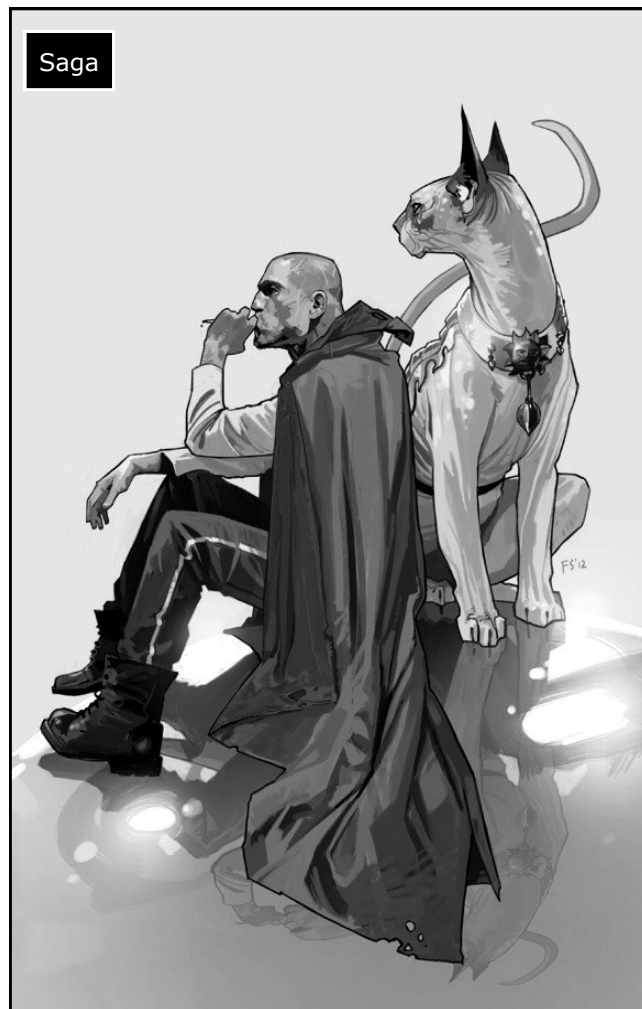
This is partly incredibly experimental but also a rallying call for the potential of all comics. The reader is in control of advancing time and space, as they are in all comics – a superpower that many take for granted.

Combine this with the vector art, gorgeous hyper-colour schemes, clever lettering, and innovative visual storytelling and the reader is left with something entirely and genuinely new.

And finally, there is Dark Horse's newest cult darling – *Grindhouse: Doors Open at Midnight*, from the critically acclaimed writer of science fiction thriller *Smoke/Ashes*, Alex de Campi. To be clear, this series is not all science fiction, instead being made up of (thus far) four two-part story arcs, of which two are firmly in the land of sf.

Grindhouse is a celebration of midnight exploitation cinema, the delicious and ridiculous B-movie masterpieces that belong to a sadly long-gone age. The series features the gore-tastic *Flesh Feast of the Devil Doll*, a classic rape-revenge horror with *Bride of Blood*, the maniacal and sexploitation laden *Prison Ship Antares*, and the sex and violence filled *Bee Vixens from Mars*.

The latter two of course are the focus here as de Campi revels in the sexed up sleaze-ball trope of lusty alien women landed on Earth to tempt the menfolk, with the added twist that they are in fact here to lay their eggs



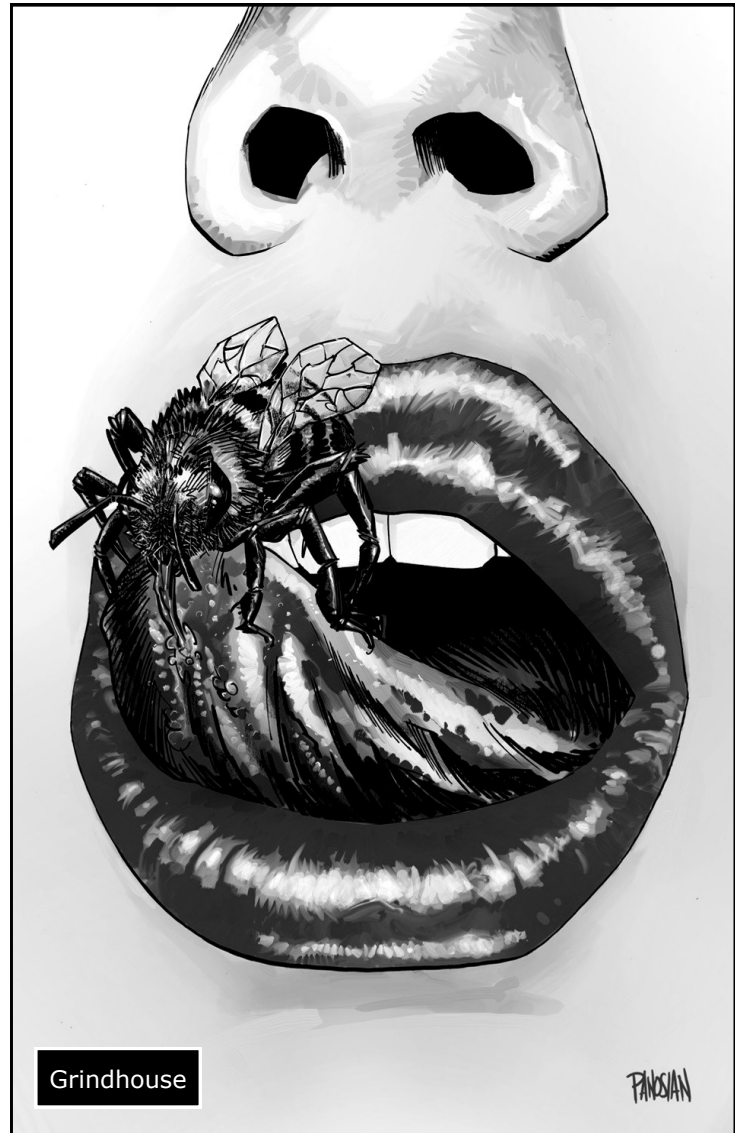
inside the poor horny human men. There are boobs and asses a plenty but men may want to cross their legs for one particular reveal...

Meanwhile aboard a prison ship full of the most depraved female convicts in the galaxy, we get the expected shower scenes and torture porn before it all turns a little bit wrong.

De Campi's love of the grindhouse genre is all too clear but the way in which she spins things away from the classic male gaze that dominated the cinema form and focuses things firmly for the female gaze instead is utterly genius. There is no taking away the sexy, rather she brings a joyful appreciation of the female form from a woman's point of view (gay or straight), and while the storytelling often begins to suggest things will go as expected for the men, tropes are flipped upside down in a way that actually makes more sense.

If science fiction was ever a male genre, and comics ever a male medium, de Campi is the saboteur extraordinaire. Like *Decrypting Rita* and *Saga*, and like *Finder*, *A Distant Soil*, and *Starstruck*, *Grindhouse* is carving its own path and its own direction for others to follow.

Laura is a freelance comics journalist who writes for the Independent on Sunday and SciFiNow magazine amongst other publications, and occasional comics academic. You can find more of her writing at her blog: www.comicbookgrrrrl.com



recurrent:
FOUNDATION FAVOURITES
Andy Sawyer

Marghanita Laski, *The Offshore Island*

Marghanita Laski (1915-1988) was a prominent contributor to those radio and tv programmes, such as the BBC's "Brains Trust", which in the 1940s and 50s brought together people known for their high intellectual calibre to discuss burning issues of the day selected from questions sent in by the public. Also a prolific contributor to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, she wrote fiction which at times verged close to science fiction. Indeed, on a programme broadcast on BBC TV in 1961, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00lk25p>, she can be heard speaking approvingly of sf ("the most moral books that are being written"), while novelist John Wain harrumphs that "to write science fiction is simply a confession of emotional and intellectual bankruptcy".

Her play *The Offshore Island* is proclaimed "The play that shocked TV audiences" on the cover of the May Fair paperback edition of 1961 and is, perhaps, an instance of her using the sf form for "moral" purposes (on the one hand) and the "emotional and intellectual bankruptcy" of the Hampstead intellectual (on the other). Set some years after a nuclear war has destroyed much of Europe, it focuses upon three survivors: Ra-

The children's bitter response amusingly (to readers of a later generation) foreshadows the coming revolution in sexual attitudes ("Why do they pretend?" "Outworn convention, I suppose"), but also introduces what has clearly been going on for some time. Mary, presented as "desperately obsessed with needs both too vague and too overwhelming to be formulated" is coming to terms with her own sexuality. James, younger and more intellectual, is horrified and a touch disgusted with the obvious answer to these "needs": that if the human race is to continue he must have sex with his sister. Meanwhile, Rachel and Martin are discussing the same question. Their conclusion, that Martin's daughter Jenny can be given to James if Rachel agrees to allow Martin to take Mary, avoids the possibility of incest in both groups, but the transactional nature of the discussion clearly shames them.

However, all is put on hold by the sudden arrival of a small group of American soldiers who "come as friends". Mary is enthralled by the new vistas of music, parties and dancing opening up. The American captain, Charles, is attracted by Rachel. James is suspicious. The presence of Martin, who had set off home before the

According to Laski, the play was commissioned by the BBC in 1954, but she was so unhappy with the result that she binned the manuscript and returned the fee.

chel and her children Mary (18) and James (16).

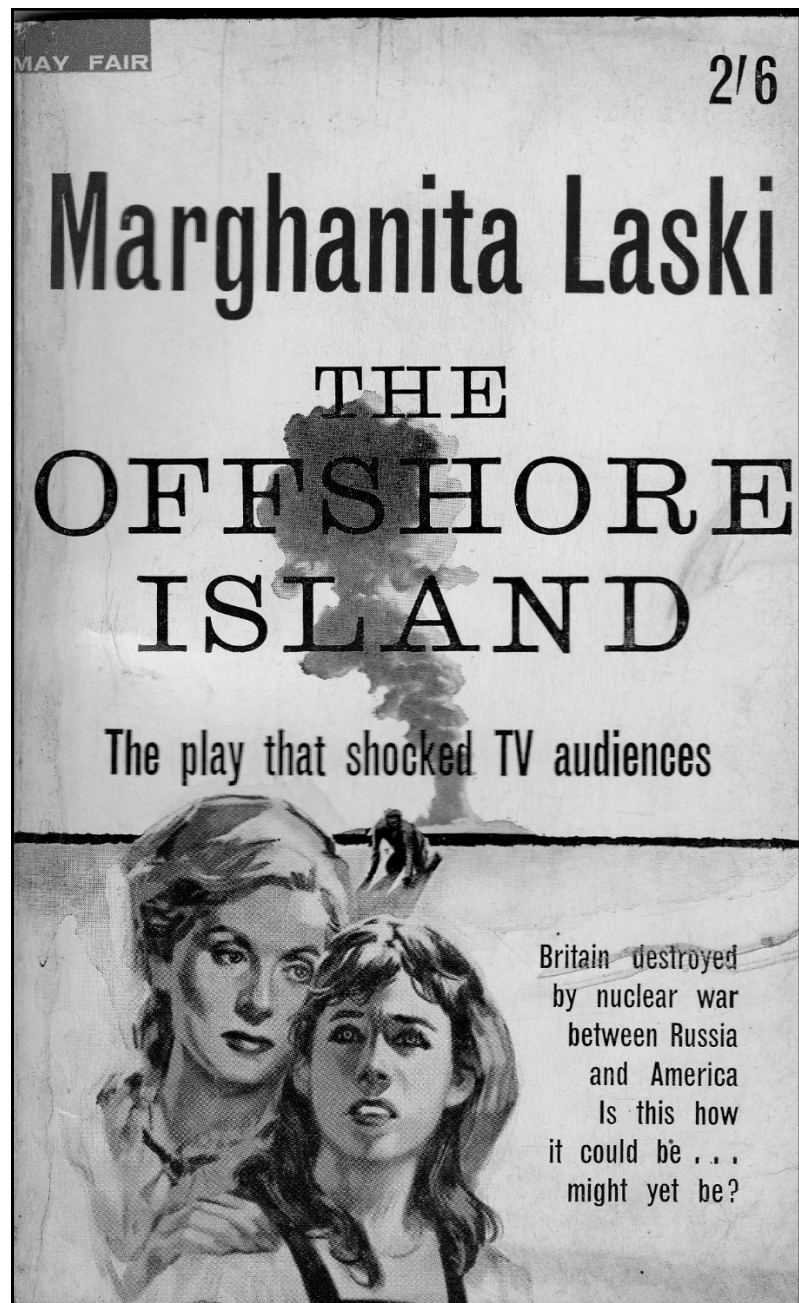
Struggling to keep alive on a farm in a patch of relatively uncontaminated ground, they are visited at times by Martin, who brings produce (especially salt) from the coast in exchange for sex with Rachel. (In one of the play's several excursions into wry humour, the transaction is transparently veiled: "There's a few things I'd like to talk over with you." "Yes of course . . . There are some things I'd like to talk over with *you*. Will you come up?")

arrival of the troops but (it turns out) had been unable to cross the river, is kept under wraps, although from the children's heavy-handed attempts to disguise their references to him and the clear evidence that items from the coast are present in the house (and from the fact that Rachel's lack of physical response to Charles's kisses means, of course, that she has already had her sexual needs met), the Americans suspect that another community is nearby.

According to Laski, the play was commissioned by the BBC in 1954, but she was so unhappy with the result that she binned the manuscript and returned the fee. However, before the waste-bin was emptied, the play was read by the visiting J. B. Priestley, who persuaded her that it was actually good. It was eventually broadcast on BBC television in 1959. The *Times* pulled no punches. “Grinding an Axe on the Bomb” was the headline, and words like “gimcrack construction”, “dishonesty”, “coarsely partisan and tendentious”, and “inadequacy” are scattered through the review.

Is the play as bad as the *Times* reviewer suggests? Well, it certainly is anti-Bomb propaganda, and parts of it do come across as heavy-handed. There is a smattering of slang which sounds dated even for 1959 (“Oh God, how wizard”) and while the introduction of Smithson, the “educated Negro” soldier, allows Laski to develop a point about the racialised attitude to “CPs” (Contaminated Persons), it probably, to a present-day reader, opens up (perhaps unfairly: liberal hindsight is an easy thing) charges of liberal condescension. The further twist to the plot (the arrival of a Russian group who “come as comrades”) simply feels mechanical, although it is vitally necessary to the denouement: the revelation of a cold-blooded deal between the adversaries. Mary’s romantic dreams of a family and a place in society are neutralised by the revelation of the true place of “Contaminated Persons” in American society, and what she, Rachel and James, have to look forward to. The play does not end happily.

“People like us,” stammers James, have “got to show what we stand for.” The problem with the play is that it is difficult to work out just *what* “people like us” do stand for, or even who “people like us” *are*, apart from Hampstead intellectuals for whom the greatest catastrophe appears to be forgetting how to play Beethoven, or only having three knives when four people are at the dinner table. The question of whether it is *possible* to be neutral is at the heart of the discussion, but is not really worked out, partly because, one feels, Laski has not made her own position clear. However, given the very real possibility during the 1970s of Europe being used as a battleground if and when the Cold War heated up, what was seen as far-fetched and axe-grinding in 1959, is, perhaps, less so after over 50 years of proxy wars waged on behalf of superpowers and the sacrifice of “satellite” states. And *as a piece of drama*, the play reaches something of a climax in the way James almost gives away the presence of Martin but instead covers up his revelation by giving a shocking interpretation to his words



which Laski has neatly set us up for. The play is certainly anti-American, but it is perhaps the American characters – basically decent people having to do a horrible job – who come over as the most sympathetic.

The Offshore Island certainly isn’t the best science fiction aimed at mainstream audiences in the 1950s, nor the most effective demonstration of anxiety over the possibility of atomic war (Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* (1957) scores much higher in both categories, while Judith Merrill, Walter M. Miller, Jr., John Christopher, John Wyndham and a host of other writers created truly great sf from the terror of the Bomb), but it links effectively to later attempts to galvanise the consciences of the left-leaning television-watching middle-classes, such as Peter Watkins’ *The War Game* (1965) or Mick Jackson’s *Threads* (1984). One does wonder, though, whether it was the sexual undercurrents in the play rather than the moral questions about staying neutral in an atomic conflict that “shocked TV audiences”.

recurrent:

THE BSFA REVIEW

Edited by Martin Petto

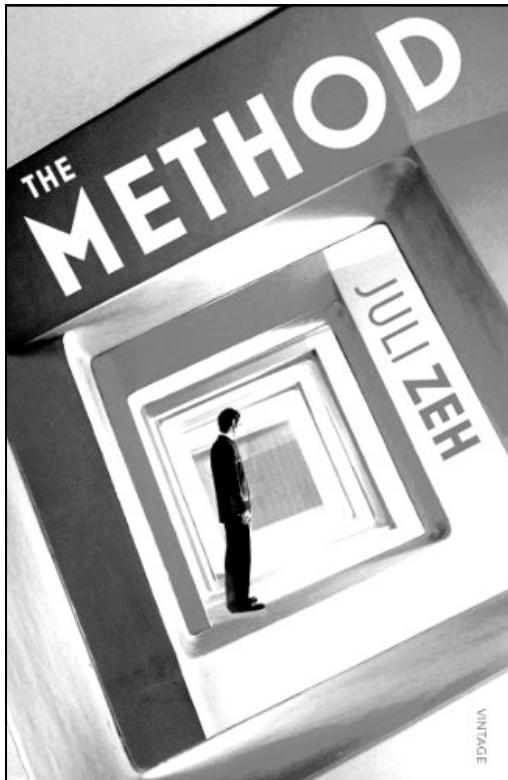
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Book Reviews: Martin Petto
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Water, water, every where, Nor any drop to drink

Like many of the people reading this, I own hundreds of books I haven't read. It seems likely that I will die with some of these books unread – and I'm not planning to die for quite a while. However, as you may remember, I recently moved house so the majority of my library is still entombed in boxes. This means that when I fail to keep myself sufficiently supplied with new fiction, I am reliant on the lottery of the charity shop pile containing books rejected by our reviewers. Such was the predicament I found myself in last month.

I didn't help that the book I had just finished was *Annihilation* by Jeff Vandermeer, a thrillingly cryptic reincarnation of New Wave SF with a thoroughly modern sensibility. You need something decent after a book like that. So my eye was drawn to his quote on the back cover of *The Barrow* by Mark Smylie. In hindsight, the warning signs were all there. For starters, Vandermeer's praise – "this fresh take on highly recommended heroic fantasy" – doesn't even make sense. Then there is the usual fat fantasy cholesterol: it is 700 pages long, preceded by half a dozen maps and rounded out with two epilogues and a glossary. But the real problem, as soon becomes evident, is that Smylie writes comics for a living and hasn't quite figured out the transition to prose. This means that when he introduces characters, he is thinking not of his reader but of his illustrator.



Here he is introducing the first character in the novel: "He was dressed in a dark brown high-collared long coat of stiff leather, tight blue-black cloth breeches, and black leather boots, all splattered with mud and dirt... A point

dagger and heavy-bladed falchion were strapped to his side by a broad black leather baldric." And the next one: "His fine travel coat and breeches were woven of good dark wool with silk trim..." The clomping foot of nerdism is alive and well; no wonder the book is so bloody long.

I do wonder if its relative brevity is part of the appeal to adults of teen orientated fiction. So the next book I plucked off the shelf was *Arclight* by Josin L McQuein from Egmont's new Young Adult imprint, Electric Monkey. It has an enjoyably prickly female protagonist and a weirder setting than the zombie apocalypse it initially resembles but it also has this:

"Move, or I'll move you." Tobin shifts his position for better leverage.

Desperation and lack of ideas make me stupid. I grab Tobin's face with both hands, close my eyes, and kiss him on the mouth.

It is astonishing that such a laughable and regressive cliché can be published in 2014. It killed the book for me – I don't want to read this rubbish and I don't want another generation to be taught that female sexuality is a tool for averting male violence. Another of Electric Monkey's launch titles, *Mars Evacuees* by Sophia McDougall, will be reviewed in the next issue and sounds a hell of a lot better.

At this point, I moved to my son's shelves and from books notionally written for children to books actually written for children. The first of these was an intriguing small press book, *London Deep* by Robin Price and Paul McGrory, where each page is split equally between prose and illustration with the narrative flipping seamlessly between the two mediums. It is an interesting concept and the stylised black and white art by McGrory is effective. Unfortunately this is not matched by Price's writing which marries perhaps the most preposterous plot I've ever read with relentlessly clumsy prose. I had to stop after a dozen pages.

In contrast, I read dozens and dozens of pages of *Zita The Space Girl*, Beth Hatke's SF graphic novel for kids, and could presumably have gone on doing so indefinitely since absolutely nothing happened. In despair, I turned to my local Oxfam where I found a copy of *Stonemouth* by the late, great Iain Banks for a quid. I overpaid: it is the latest and last iteration of a story he's told before and told better, a book that makes you gag on its nostalgia. Oh, Banksy.

Luckily, at that point *The Method* by Juli Zeh – which I longed for in my editorial for Vector #274 – finally dropped through my letterbox. It was every bit as wonderful as I'd hoped.

Martin Petto
Reviews Editor

***We See A Different Frontier*, edited by Fabio Fernandes and Djibril al-Ayad (Futurefire.net Publishing, 2013) and *Mothership: Tales From Afrofuturism And Beyond*, edited by Bill Campbell and Edward Austin Hall (Rosarium Publishing, 2013)**

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

As I'm writing this review, the shortlists of two awards have just been announced. One, for the three David Gemmell Legend Awards, featured seventeen white men. The other, for the John W Campbell Award for Best New Writer, included women and writers of colour on its shortlist of five. Which shortlist then is the more representative of contemporary SF and fantasy publishing? The answer is, of course, the Campbell Award. Yet given the nominating process for the Gemmells is much, much broader in its intake than that of the Campbell, one has to ask just how it happens that so many readers of speculative fiction either do not seem to be aware that it is also being written by women and by writers of colour or, worse, simply don't want to acknowledge that fact. This is 2014, for heaven's sake.

This is a question that Bill Campbell, co-editor of *Mothership: Tales From Afrofuturism And Beyond*, has frequently asked himself. As he puts it, "mainstream, American corporate culture 'whitewashes' all culture – past, present, and future – giving people the false impression that America has been, is, and *always will be* the 'White Man's Country'." This is reflected in much of the science fiction emerging from the USA in the last half century or so. I pause here, briefly, so that someone may observe – as someone inevitably will – that the protagonist of Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* is a person of colour. Or that Samuel Delany is a writer of colour. *Star Trek!* Octavia Butler! While not denying that all these facts are true, an argument that relies on such a small number of data point to prove that US science fiction is not a purely white male enclave four is a poor one, especially when it is the same two writers of colour who are continually offered as proof of the genre's diversity. We can surely do better than this.

What is all too easy to miss is that fantasy and science fiction *is* being produced by writers of colour but that it remains, for whatever reason, not as immediately visible as the work produced by Anglo-American writers. In part this might be that such stories are not published in mainstream genre venues (several of the stories in *Mothership* are reprinted from 'literary' journals) or simply because these stories are scattered through a wide variety of small-press publications and anthologies, lost in the welter of fiction being published. It takes projects such as these or small press magazines such as *Crossed Genres*, which has a specific brief to recognise diversity in what it publishes, to draw the attention of the wider reading public to what's actually out there. Likewise, it has

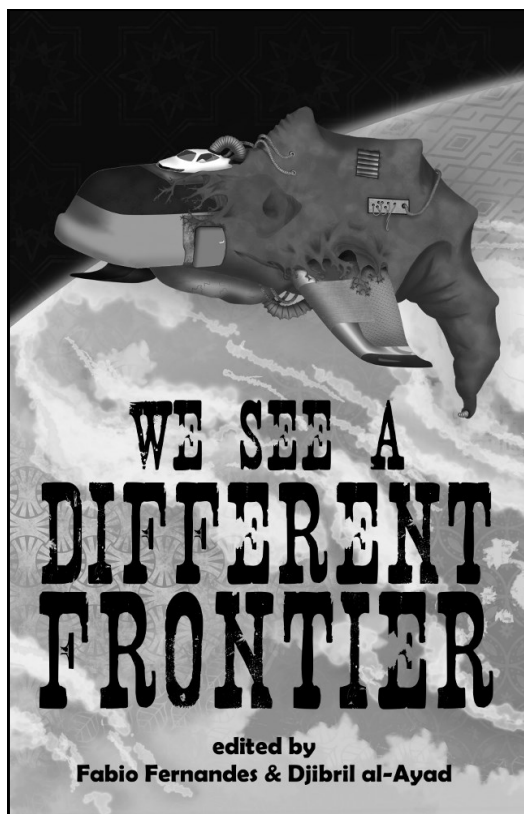
not always been easy for writers of colour to publish collections of their work, though the burgeoning independent publishing scene is mercifully changing this.

Mothership, edited by Campbell and Edward Austin Hall, and *We See A Different Frontier*, edited by Fabio Fernandes and Djibril al-Ayad, are part of an informal movement that directly opposes the idea that science fiction is, or should be, exclusively a white male Anglo-American activity. Charles Tan and Lavie Tidhar have been pushing this idea strongly for some years through the award-winning World SF blog, now alas in abeyance, and it has also been heavily promoted through social media. These two anthologies, both crowd-funded, take different but complementary approaches to demonstrating the genuine diversity of contemporary SF with *Mothership* offering us a dazzling variety of authors and stories, while *We See Things Differently* is more philosophical and structured in its approach.

In *Mothership*, Campbell and Austin have brought together a staggering range of authors, a good half of whom are new names to me (I thought myself reasonably well-read but clearly I'm not). If a preponderance of the authors are resident in the US, this only serves to show how ridiculous is the assumption that SF must be by and about Anglo American men. And if a good percentage of the stories are reprints this serves only to remind us that the genre has been rather more diverse for rather longer than most of us realise. Campbell and Austin also work with a commendably broad definition of genre, what Austin calls an "open-arms, fantasticated-tales-by-and/or-for-and/or-about-people-of-color approach". In practice, this means that a story such as NK Jemisin's 'Too Many Yesterdays, Not Enough Tomorrows', a neat take on the effects of the tiny universes we build for ourselves online (all the while in dialogue with EM Forster's 'The Machine Stops') can sit alongside Charles R Saunders's 'Amma', about the fate of a woman who can transform herself into a gazelle, told by a griot in the marketplace, while Abenaki writer Joseph Bruchac's 'Dances With Ghosts' is, unsurprisingly, a ghost story (which wittily reframes themes familiar from Native American novels such as Momaday's *A House Made of Dawn*).

These stories challenge the reader's expectations and assumptions in other ways. It is all too easy for 'white people' to look to indigenous writers and writers of colour and either expect to be educated about another culture or to assume that because you read fiction written by someone who identifies with a particular cultural group, this means you have gained knowledge of

that group. Throughout *Mothership* there are stories that subvert such assumptions; indeed, the collection's opening story, 'I Left My Heart In Skaftafell' by Victor LaValle, should stop such nonsense in its tracks. LaValle's African-American narrator is on holiday in Iceland and notes the reactions to his skin colour from others on the trip but his story isn't about that; it's about the narrator's sustained encounter with a troll. Lauren Beukes's 'Unathi Battles the Black Hairballs' is rich with references to animé; it tells us about Beukes herself, not what it means to be a white South African. SP Somtow's 'The Pavilion Of Frozen Women' is a story about a serial killer, with hints that the killer might have been driven to it because of the pressure of being part of an indigenous minority (and the narrator is



herself Native American) but it is primarily about the events leading up to the deaths rather than the issues behind them.

There are so many different kinds of story in *Mothership*, and stories of such high quality, it is actually very difficult to single out particular favourites. Other than the stories already mentioned, I was particularly taken with Tobias Buckell's 'Four Eyes'. This deals mostly with a young Jamaican man, Manny, finally acknowledging that his destiny is to become a 'four eyes' or obeah man. What really intrigued me is the way in which his teacher, Jimiti, easily accepts that La Llorona, the Weeping Woman, is his spirit guide, although "she ain't even the right mythology for me to see. And she had ask me, "what the right mythology, Jimiti? You a two hundred-year-old blend of cultural mess". Other

outstanding stories include Rochita Loenen-Ruiz's 'Waking The God Of The Mountain', which deals with issues of territorial sovereignty and deep, powerful ties to the land, as well as Rabih Alameddine's delicate, tender 'The Half Wall'. But there are just so many good things in this anthology; if you want to get some idea of just how diverse SF can really be, *Mothership* is a great place to start.

We See A Different Frontier takes a slightly different angle, as its subtitle makes clear: *A Postcolonial Speculative Fiction Anthology*. Aliette de Bodard's preface takes up this theme: "When we read science fiction stories where colonists leave their home and hearth, and make contact with funny-looking aliens, we are uncomfortably reminded of the days when English or French or Dutch colonists came to foreign shores ... and gradually took over everything under the pretence of "civilizing" barbarians." The voices we hear in *WSADF*, then, are those of "the invaded; of the colonized; of the erased and the oppressed; of those whom others would make into aliens and blithely ignore or conquer or enlighten". In other words, these are the voices which supposedly don't exist, the voices of the Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous subalterns. Yet these subalterns are only too eager to speak.

Shweta Narayan's exquisitely allusive 'The Arrangement Of Their Parts' leads off the collection. The story's setting appears to be the Mughal empire in the time of Aurangzeb but this is simply background to a story in which an Englishman, Sir James, encounters what appears to be some sort of automaton. It is possible to read this story simply as a cyberpunk interpretation of the presence of the British in India but it seems to me that there is also another more slippery layer of allegory in play. Samatar appears again and her 'I Stole The

D.C.'s Eyeglass' takes us into not dissimilar territory. We see from the point of view of the colonised what it is to be under the rule of an Englishman but also how supposedly lost indigenous technology is brought into play, not only to escape colonial rule but also, and perhaps more important, to escape the mindset inculcated by colonial rule. In Silvia Moreno-Garcia's 'Them Ships' the unnamed narrator, a slum dweller, finds herself enslaved by aliens, along with wealthier members of her own country. Chief among them is Leonardo, who "acts like we are totally partners ... but he would've never even looked at me if we'd bumped into each other on the street". For the unnamed narrator, life under alien rule is not necessarily that bad – there is better food, better conditions; for Leonardo it is intolerable and he compares her to La Malinche, the indigenous woman who acted as Cortes's translator. The story serves to remind us that under colonial or postcolonial rule, there is no one experience common to all.

As Ekaterina Sedia notes in the collection's afterword, the main theme of all these stories is the "push-pull of the contradictory demands of assimilation versus appropriation". We see it manifested in so many different ways through the stories, from the suppression and reclamation of a language in NA Ratanayake's 'Remembering Turinam' to Sunny Moraine's 'A Heap of Broken Images' which addresses such issues as guilt tourism and its effect on the culture that has to deal with it. More than one story touches on the presence of anthropologists and their relationships to the cultures they

study, including Dinesh Rao's 'A Bridge of Words' which suggests that in the proper circumstances this can be productive rather than appropriative (underlining, of course, that this is rarely so). And, intriguingly, JY Yang's 'Old Domes' considers the fate of old buildings, swallowed up by so-called regeneration. Jing-Li is a cullmaster of buildings, trained to extinguish the spirits of buildings, made out of the history accumulated in their very fabric. In this case, though, the spirit of Singapore's old Supreme Court is reluctant to go. Again, one might read this as an allegorical story, interrogating the assumption that modernisation is both good and necessitates the elimination of the old, but the story is rather more subtle than that, looking at different responses to history and how it affects a relatively new state.

If *Mothership* is a joyful celebration of diversity in science fiction and fantasy, *WSADF* is a more focused, more directly political consideration of the effects of colonisation on writers and how that is expressed in their fiction. A number of authors have work included in both anthologies but again in *WSADF* there are several writers whose names are new to me. In reading *Mothership* and *WSADF* together, I feel rather as I did when I encountered Alberto Manguel's 1983 anthology, *Black Water*, which first opened my eyes to the variety available in fantastic literature if one did but look hard enough. Reading both these books should prompt SF readers to take a long hard look at the world around them and then ask themselves why they are not reading more by such amazing authors. Because the point is that more diverse genre fiction is out there. It may not be on the shelves in one's local bookshop but we live in an age when it is easily available online and there is no excuse for not reading it.



***Sunshine Patriots* by Bill Campbell
(Rosarium Publishing, 2013)**

Reviewed by Shaun Green

United Earth oversees a steadily expanding interstellar empire whilst exerting tight control over every province on Earth itself. Its shock troops, the Freedom, lead the charge on every world they conquer, exterminating any native creatures they consider a threat be they giant poison-spitting spiders or cute sentient balls of fur. It is all for the freedom, security and economic prosperity of United Earth. But not every citizen to whom UE extends its leadership appreciates this act of benevolence. Exploited for years, seeing the resources they mine shipped away in exchange for barely-adequate food supplies and forbidden to take steps toward self-sufficiency, the colonists of Elysia rise up and take arms.

The Freedom are deployed to bring the colony to heel. At the head of its forces is the hero known as Aaron "The Berber" Barber, a survivor of numerous campaigns over eight years where many don't last a single battle. His body has been weaponised with cyborg components; his Brain2 reacts faster than a man can blink and his arms spit plasma bolts formed of his own bodily fluids. He's the photogenic hero that every UE citizen wants to be. On Earth the war is a minor footnote, significant primarily because of the involvement of Barber. Despite this the Elysian campaign will ultimately surprise everyone on the planet.

It is difficult not to be suspicious when you pick up a book, read its blurb and see proudly extolled the fact that what you are holding was written in three weeks. It is, however, more heartening to see the phrase "rastafarian science fiction". Sadly it's the former that dominates my feelings toward *Sunshine Patriots*. The book rushes along, almost tripping itself over at points, and this despite a narrative that is not particularly complex. It can be disorienting, confusing or simply unclear, particularly in the first half. This suggests that the novel was not significantly altered structurally from when it was first written (ie when the author was still figuring out how everything fitted together).

An unexpected side-effect is that this confusion actually lends itself to the narrative, as does the raw energy of Campbell's prose. This is a book about young people, specifically confused young people who are placed by their government and commanders into a series of deeply fucked-up situations, which has unsurprisingly produced soldiers who are deeply fucked-up. They spend their entire lives disoriented: yanked from planet to planet with no hope of a future beyond surviving another battle, ground under the debt they incur to pay for their medical care and the legal-high pharmaceuticals that United Earth encourages to keep its soldiers placid between fights.

There's a clear yearning in many of the soldiers we see and - though they rarely realise it, let alone share it - it's a yearning for

identity, history and community. It manifests in different ways but is rarely found. A band of female soldiers briefly locate it in the formation of a sisterhood, forbidding the practice of "trench love" - rape - and punishing violations. But for the most part it is submerged between violence, debt and drug haze.

Campbell's scenario is quite clearly derived from the realities of globalisation as an economic and sociocultural project, particularly divisions along ethnic lines, which have shifted but rarely significantly altered since he wrote the book in 1998. So *Sunshine Patriots* is a work of satire but it is a deeply heavy-handed one. Opinions vary on the efficacy of blunt satire but I found the presentation of United Earth media so exaggerated and ludicrous that it undermined the novel's foundations. The media broadcasts are presumably intended to mock the laughably propagandistic Fox News and its ilk but locking the satire to such a specific target and ramping it up to clear absurdity is not a recipe for fiction that resonates in the absence of specific cultural touchstones.

Similarly cartoonish is the Freedom as a military system. Its soldiers are barely-trained teenagers scooped up by recruitment Peace Squads and dumped almost immediately onto battlefields. Most don't take long to get hooked on drugs and spend most of their time strung out. Inter-squad murder is commonplace. Some troopers like Barber are cyborgs which grants them great firepower and agility but otherwise it's impossible to see these kids as an effective military force, despite the author repeatedly asserting that they are.

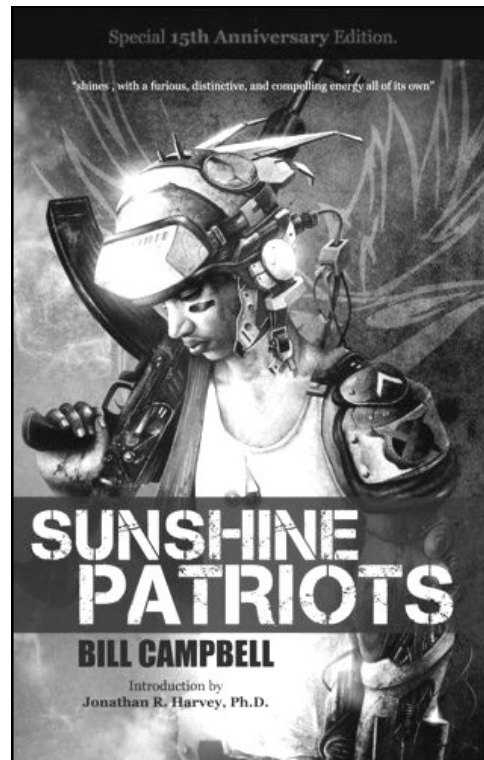
If you can get past those two fundamental issues, the satire does bite. Alongside the attack on globalisation there's a well-realised critique of the way the young and poor are chewed up by military machines to serve economic objectives. This is embellished by the inspired stroke of having soldiers incur debt as part of their military service, a concept that actually seems less absurd today, with neoliberalism's failures leading to a doubling-

down on its ideological tenets, than it would have when originally published.

Other features are more awkward; I certainly hope the novel's incessant homophobia is intended as part of its satire. The colonists are repeatedly described as radical sodomites and anal rape is rife among the soldiers. You can take this as further evidence of the UE's regressive nature but there is nothing in the novel to balance and acknowledge how problematic this is.

As previously mentioned, the book is hurriedly written. Perspective shifts between characters can occur without warning which isn't helped by character arcs that swerve erratically back and forth. The world-building also periodically contradicts itself. A case in point would be a Mexican soldier whose speech is liberally peppered with Spanish words, despite the authorial voice later stating that the UE has universally imposed English and "everything else was a dead language".

There's a vein of anger running through *Sunshine Patriots*, chiefly directed towards rich-poor ethnic divides and the powerful cultures that produced them, but also a cynical malaise that does not speak well of human ability to rise above the conditions that produced them. This is not a novel about the redemptive potential of humanity, but an ugly, bitter, black-humoured critique of the human capacity for cruelty, stupidity and willingness to maintain its own cages. It's a fascinating yet problematic novel, certainly unlike anything else I've read, but deeply flawed all the same.



Your Brother's Blood by David Towsey
(Jo Fletcher Books, 2013)

Reviewed by Mark Connorton

Your *Brother's Blood* is a sort of zombie-western set in the 30th Century. Long forgotten events have left a low-tech Earth sparsely populated and genetic manipulation or disease has led to the existence of living dead called Walkin' (not to be confused with the Walkers in *The Walking Dead*.) Rather than being zombies of the 'grr, brains' type, the Walkin' are mobile corpses with their memories and emotions intact. Our protagonist Thomas is a Walkin' soldier who died in a skirmish in what appears to be a retread of the US Civil War. The North, which allows Walkin' limited rights, are fighting the "burn-them-all" South. We first meet Thomas when he clambers from the mass grave where his corpse was dumped and inadequately cremated. A couple of passing Walkin' offer to take him to an undead haven somewhere in the mountains but instead Thomas decides to return to the Amish-esque town where he used to live in order to visit his wife and daughter. The Bible-thumping religious zealots who rule his town destroy all Walkin' on sight and have even started killing their offspring, having worked out that there is a genetic predisposition to rising from the grave. Thomas's trip home puts his daughter in mortal danger and the pair have no choice but to flee the town with a posse close behind.

From the plot summary above, you might be wondering if the book is a science fiction novel or a historical fantasy. Having read it, I am not too sure either. We are told several times that the novel is set in the 30th Century but, other than the existence of the Walkin' and the odd reference to an automated past, there is absolutely no evidence that humanity has changed at all in the intervening centuries. Indeed, society appears instead to have reverted to an exact copy of rural 19th Century life. Human names, gender roles and social structures and organisation are unchanged, the only ruins the characters find could have been built any time in the 20th Century and people have even managed to forget the sensible use of camouflage for their soldiery and instead dress them in blocks of primary colour again. The only noticeable change in a thousand years is that animals are now called stupid names (ants are "crumbers", horses are "shaggies"; rabbits, presumably, are "smeerps"). It might seem odd to dwell on something that has such a minor role in the novel but once I noticed the lack of futurism in this supposed future, it niggled throughout the whole novel. It's as if the author wanted a scientific explanation for his Walkin' but then could not be bothered to think of any other ramifications of the future world that requires it. As the book is so steeped in America-

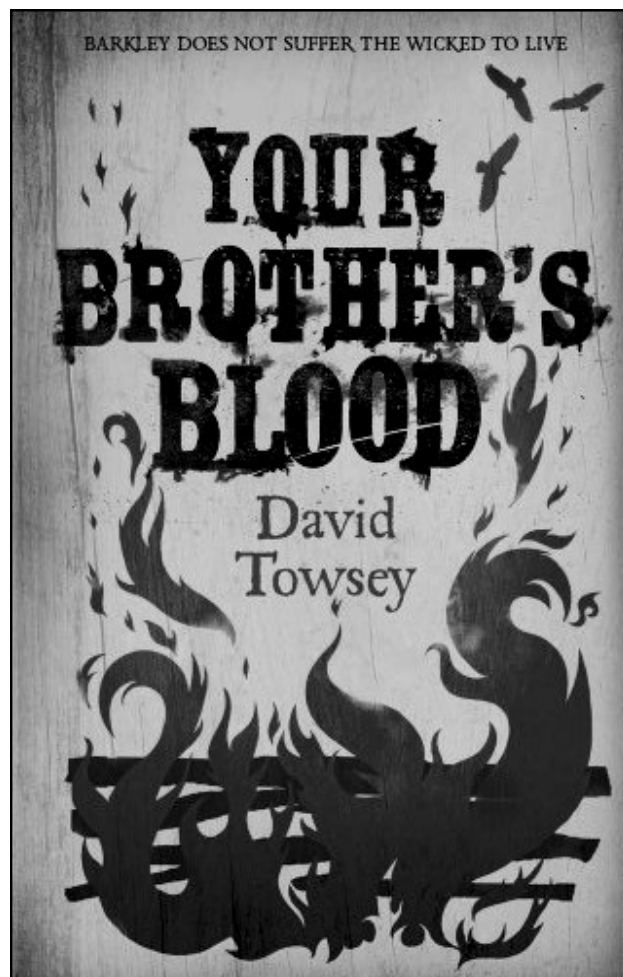
na, I don't know why he didn't just write a Civil War-set fantasy instead.

Treating it as a historical fantasy removes these problems but the novel isn't entirely successful on these terms either. To begin with, the town of Barkley, where much of the action takes place, is a rather overfamiliar and shop-worn setting – a small town run by highly conservative religious zealots. Other places mentioned in the novel which we don't see: the larger and presumably more diverse city where Thomas' wife comes from; the Northern cities where people trade with Walkin' and tolerate their presence; the Walkin' mountain community - all sound much more interesting than yet another version of that town from *The Chrysalids* or *Footloose* or whatever. The book is rather slowly paced too. Thomas doesn't return home until about the half-way mark and the posse doesn't set off until three quarters of the way through (at which point things improve markedly). The earlier parts mainly deal with Thomas's experience as a living corpse and his family's lives at home and these are not acutely written enough to be particularly compelling.

The slow and reflective nature of the book suggests an ambition to be more than a Western zombie yarn. The Civil War references raise the possibility of an analogy between the Walkin' and racism but the book doesn't give us enough to go on for this to be meaningful. We don't hear anything from the tolerant North about why they deal with the Walkin' and the southerners only seem to kill Walkin' because that is the sort of thing that clichéd religious zealots do. The Walkin' aren't contagious like other zombies, are as harmless or dangerous as any other person, and retain their intrinsic humanity. I would have thought that many people would be happy to have a dead loved one return to them and indeed this turns out to be the case. I got the impression that for many the animus

against the Walkin' was skin deep and only adhered to out of propriety, making the basis of their society and beliefs seem rather flimsy.

A more likely possibility is that the Walkin', and their relatives' experience of them, is a metaphor for grief and bereavement. One of the posse members has an undead wife that he let escape rather than be cremated and his memories of her prevent him from committing fully to his new wife, despite loving her and not wanting to hurt her feelings. The relationship between him and his wives is one of the better parts of the novel and it's a shame it was assigned to a supporting character. Rather oddly, the story of Thomas and his family is abruptly truncated at the climax of the posse's chase and we don't get any idea how the novel's events have affected them. It is possible that this will be explored in a sequel but, if that is the case, I would rather the book had started rather later in its timeline and some later events from the next book had been included here to make it a more complete work.



**Looking Landwards, edited by Ian Whates
(Newcon Press, 2013)**

Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

Looking Landwards commemorates the 75th anniversary of the Institution of Agricultural Engineers, but it's no promo publication; almost all of the stories herein go some way towards shining a light on the Janus faces of agritech, exploring the tension between being advantaged by technology at the same time as being reliant upon it. Douglas Adams used to say that technology invented before you were born always seems perfectly normal, technology invented before you turn thirty is fascinating, awesome and probably worth making a career in, and technology invented after you turn thirty is a profoundly unnatural threat to the right order of things; this is as true in agriculture as anywhere else, despite its lingering veneer of pre-Industrial mundanity.

In British culture particularly, the bucolic fantasy of the country farm retains its currency as a Romantic-era symbol of the pastoral Eden from which we were ejected, supposedly on account of our newly acquired fetish for factories and smokestacks; the farm is the anti-image of the factory, a reactionary yearning in response to the morally compromised progressivism of those dark satanic mills. Despite decades of significant and accelerating change in the science and *techné* of agriculture – the first and oldest of all human technologies – the semiotic power of the horse-drawn haywain lingers on: an unfounded conservative myth of stewardship and closeness to the land, unmediated by the troubling totems of modernity (and, ideally, the labouring classes).

All of which is to say: what we think of as 'the old ways' of farming were revolutionary in their own time, and the dichotomy between modern mass-output technofarming and pre-Industrial agriculture is false; they're simply successive stages of development, not an either/or binary. Once you get beyond pure subsistence, farmers (and their lords or bosses) have *always* yearned to harvest more crops with fewer overheads, for less effort, and at lower risk; what's unique about our contemporary context is a convergence of technological paradigm-shifts accompanying a growing sense of our troubled place as one dreadfully adaptable species among hundreds of thousands of others, embedded in a complex ecosystem whose most basic functions we are only beginning to understand. Our tactical ability to conduct technological interventions into our environment has leapt ahead, but our sense of long-term strategy has been slow to catch up, thus recasting the signification of the farm anew: it is now a frontline in the theatre of an ecological war, a site where our reliance on technology comes face to face with its long-term consequences. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a linkage between agricultural practice and broader, global issues with regard to climate change is also common to the stories in the anthology, and while a few pieces do little more than rehearse a sockpuppet duel between technology and those nebulous old ways, there's also a healthy spectrum of utopias and dystopias. In *The Cambridge Companion To Science Fiction*, Edward James tells us that, in contrast to the classical utopia, the tech-

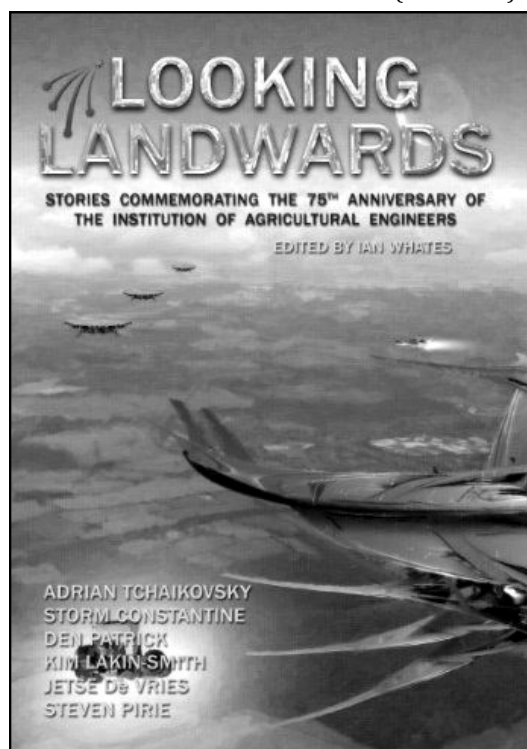
nological utopia – SF's native iteration of the genre – tends to both propose a perfected utopian society (predicated, at least in part, on a technological revolution rather than a purely political one) *and* to undermine the very notion that a perfected society is possible. In *Looking Landwards* this manifests in stories which explore both the necessity of an increasingly technologised and globalised agricultural system, and the consequences – ecological, economic and social – of that necessity.

In some such cases, ecological collapse and agricultural engineering are simply worldbuilding furniture for familiar narrative shapes, as in Terry Martin's 'Contraband', and Steven Pirie's disturbing sentient-machines-and-farmer drama, 'Mary On The Edge'; elsewhere, Kate Wilson's 'Tractor Time' gives virtual reality and intensive farming the *Black Mirror* treatment, but its breezy style sells it a little short, while Neal Wooten's 'Veggie Moon' buries a passable punchline in an mass of sub-Sheckleyean overstatement. However, Jetse de Vries just about manages to harvest his crop and eat it; 'The World Coyote Made' is one of evolutionary karma, and de Vries gives technology's two faces equal screentime, declining to stand in judgement even as he celebrates (and mocks) the fecundity of human achievement.

The stories that foreground agricultural life and processes in their narratives go further in their attempts to resolve or confront some of the capitalist contradictions at the heart of modern farming: Kim Lakin-Smith's 'Soul Food' highlights the age-old tensions between short-term productivity gains and long-term environmental decline; M Frost's 'The Blossom Project' concretises the metaphor of agricultural science being caught – like all science, in these post-normal times – between socioeconomic necessity and geopolitical circumstance; and Renee Stern's 'Touch Of Frost' leans toward the allegorical, warning against the total surrender of agricultural agency to the machines even as it suggests we have no choice but to rely on them. The pick of the litter, though, is surely Dev Agarwal's 'Blight', which not only foregrounds the thankless struggle of the visionary yet un(der)funded agricultural scientist – closer per-

haps to the travails of the isolated farmer than either might like to admit – against an ecological collapse scenario, but reexamines the short-term/long-term problem in the politically charged context of pest control and genetic manipulation. (It's also written with the sort of deft understatement I associate with Ken MacLeod.)

More generally, I think it's telling that there are no Competent Men or Technocornucopiae populating these pages, and very few Things With Which Hubristic Mankind Should Not Have Meddled; science fiction – in parallel, one might hope, with the broader population – is slowly internalising the grey-scale palette of technological ethics, and looking somewhat closer to home for the real alien invaders (who were always-already ourselves, hungry strangers in strange new lands). Somewhere behind its ribs, the SF *weltanschauung* is nurturing the growing realisation that the epistemological dichotomy between humankind and nature is false. We are all agricultural engineers, if only by proxy; our insatiable hunger is the mark of our complicity.



Shaman by Kim Stanley Robinson (Orbit, 2013)**Reviewed by Niall Harrison**

Do not come to *Shaman* for adventure. One of the striking things about Kim Stanley Robinson's latest novel is that, in conventional plot terms, very little happens. It is for the most part a novel of the late pleistocene day-to-day, the story of a few years in the life of a young man, and the extended family around him, hunting, foraging, making tools. He finds a girl, loses her, finds her again. The stakes are not high. Certainly, the novel remains distinctively Robinson's work: the rangy, loping sentences alternating between expository detail and open-hearted sentiment are present and correct, as is the attention to landscape, physical experience and the sensation of being-in-the-world. But there are no grand engineering projects, no visionary social projects, to grant *Shaman* scale. Instead, if the novel generates a sense of grandeur - and I think it does, in the end - it comes not from the awesome capacity of humans but from their smallness. *Shaman*'s characters are specks on the land and dust in the abyss of time.

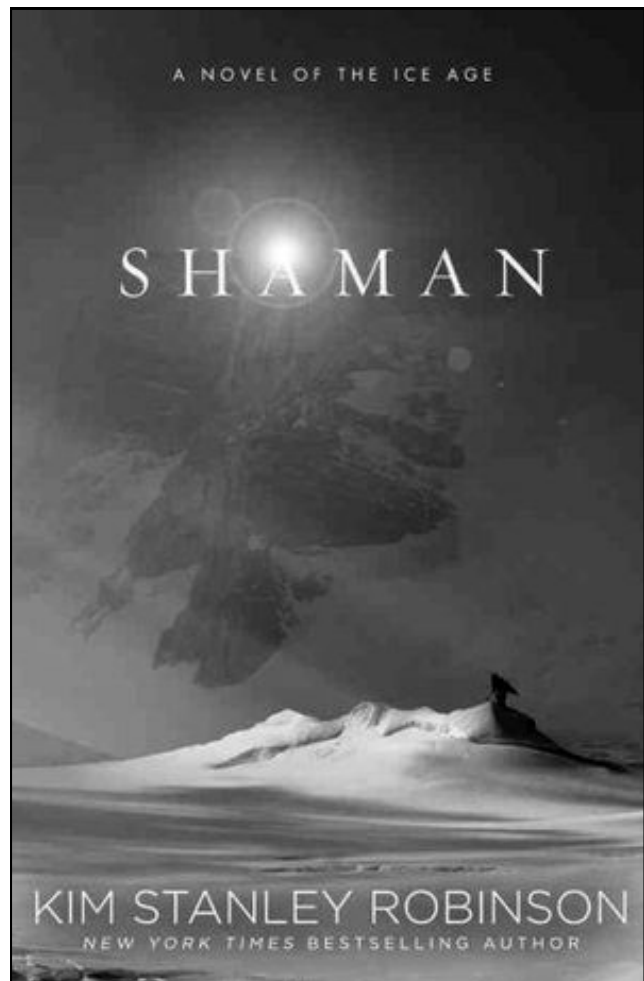
The novel pushes and pulls our empathy to achieve this effect, alternately welcoming and alienating us whilst constantly holding us at a slight remove through a fantastical framing device, the narration of the entire story by the "third wind", a spiritual force which occasionally swoops in to rescue one or other character. *Shaman*'s actual protagonist is human, though: Loon, an apprentice just turning twelve. For the novel's first 66 pages it's just us, him and the landscape (and the third wind), as he is sent on a "wander" to prove himself. It's a meticulous and intensely felt opening set-piece that foregrounds the lonely hard work of survival: how to set a fire, how to catch a fish, how to shape a knife, how to make basic clothes from bark. A mix of archaisms and neologisms defamiliarise some aspects of our world, mostly to do with time (measured in "fists") or materials ("earthblood" for clay) or sex ("pizzle" and "kolby" for genitalia; I could never quite decide whether these were in fact less jarring than the contemporary alternatives would have been); but at the same time Loon's characterisation reassures us that humans are still humans, even at this remove (he's a bit of a nerd, he likes figuring things out). By the end of the wander, we are in his corner.

When he returns home, the uneasy mix continues. The central relationships - Loon and his adoptive parents, current shaman Thorn and healer Heather; Loon and his later wife, Elga - are almost too familiar. As so often, Robinson writes vividly and creatively about masculine heterosexuality - to the point that such passages constitute a running argument for what a healthy and productive masculine heterosexuality might look like - but at the cost of writing weakly or not at all about every other kind of gender and sexual identity. Heather and Elga are well-defined and as capable as the men but they get very little page-time and very few of their actions and choices significantly affect the course of the story. More generally, men and women occupy clearly separate spheres. Elga bears children; Loon hunts. But perhaps this essentialism is intended to be part and parcel of the characters' distance from us, for *Shaman* is insistent that its humans are always another type of animal in a society of animals (Loon's people are never a "tribe", always a "pack"). Occasionally the narration shifts to a non-human perspective but the third wind does not differentiate them much: a wolverine's experience of the world, it suggests, is fundamentally the same *kind* of experience as that of a human.

But we know it won't always be. In Robinson's imagining that divergence will be driven not by, as you might expect, development of more sophisticated technology per se but by

increasing mastery of time. For much of *Shaman*'s length events occur as a series of vignettes separated by gaps of uncertain duration: fade in, fade out, fade in, fade out. Narrative tends to enforce itself only in the face of danger, such as on Loon's wander or during an intense late sequence in which he, Thorn and Elga, separated from the rest of their pack, are being pursued across endless fields of ice and rock by cruel folk from the North. But for all time's slipperiness, characters persist in trying to get a handle on it. We are told of the pack leader who meticulously counts out food for the winter to come and keeps records to better estimate future needs. Thorn and the other shamans operate a rudimentary calendar, marking sticks until the time of the next summer festival then comparing notes to see who's counted more or fewer days and trying to puzzle out what that means. Knowledge of the past lingers as sayings or stories, grasping towards continuity. Loon feels vividly that he doesn't want to just die and become dust; he wants to endure, to leave a mark.

There is no breakthrough. Oh, Loon eventually becomes a shaman and captures a few transcendent encounters with the world in cave paintings - paintings that have in fact survived to reach us, although the irony is that recent research based on male/female finger-ratios suggests that Elga is more likely to have created them than Loon; deep history is no more stable than the near future as a venue for speculation - but people die and leave gaps in the world that cannot be patched. Dramatic events happen but are swallowed up by the quotidian as soon as they have passed and lose urgency, become memory, become dream. Life continues in the present tense. Loon takes an apprentice in his turn and a new cycle begins. Their world seems very large and very far away. Vertiginous, I closed the book.



The Lego Movie (2014)

Film reviewed by Leimar García-Siino

“Everything is awesome” is *The Lego Movie*’s motto and, indeed, the film burst into theatres across the world to wide acclaim. From both a speculative fiction and postmodern standpoint, the film is the ultimate embodiment of the 21st Century cultural zeitgeist. While its fourth-wall-breaking, intertextual metafictional elements from non-SF pop culture, its bombardment of recognisable genre imagery is indicative of how intensely permeating the fantastic (and all that that entails) is in today’s mainstream media. Grand in scale and reminiscent of Pixar films like *A Bug’s Life* or *Toy Story* franchise where almost every frame is full to the brim with DeMille-sized casts and sets, it is nevertheless in the manic, self-aware convergence of clichés coupled with a penchant for throwing in every conceivable SF trope in the book that makes *The Lego Movie* stand out as what will surely come to be called the quintessential pop-culture film of its time.

The premise of the film is simple enough: what happens in the world of Legos? But though the film is straightforward in its narrative structure (a basic zero-to-hero quest to save-the-world-as-we-know-it that immediately brings Campbellian analysis to mind), it is complex in its execution without feeling bloated. Opening *in media res*, the wizard Vitruvius – an analogue of Gandalf and Albus Dumbledore (though each feature as individual characters later in the film) – is discovered by the villain, Lord Business (who makes no attempt to hide that he is a villain complete with robot henchmen, extendable legs for added height and a giant red horned fire-shooting helmet). Vitruvius, guardian of ‘the Kragle’ – a mystical super-weapon, prophesises that he may have been beaten by Lord Business, but that ‘the Special’ is destined to find the McGuffin known as the ‘Piece of Resistance’, and thus put a stop to his heinous scheme for world domination. This introduction alone is packed with half-a-dozen genre clichés and in-jokes: the setting takes place within an active volcano, the imagery reminiscent of Gandalf’s fight with the Balrog, Vitruvius refers to their world as ‘the realm’, and he states, eyes and staff glowing blue, that his prophecy must be true because “it rhymes”.

The film proper is set eight years later, following the life of everyLegoman Emmet Brickowski, a dim-witted construction worker who likes to follow the rules and doesn’t ask questions. Soon, because the “made-up-of-tropes” plot dictates it, his life is disrupted by accidentally discovering the coveted Piece of Resistance. Hailed as the Special by the resistance group called the ‘Master Builders’, Emmet has to discover his inner hidden creative abilities and save the world.

Animated films, especially ones targeted to the younger demographics, are often hard to categorise genre-wise. The first question I asked myself before writing this review was, “is this film science fiction or fantasy or neither?” On the one hand, a film about toys following the most standard hero’s quest plot while employing magic as well as sci-fi looking technology in order to save the world is nothing if not fantastic. But while it’s easy to stamp the title of fantasy on the *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* films or science fiction on *Ender’s Game* or *Elysium*, films that incorporate talking toys and animals appears to be trickier. Featuring a cast that ranges from Lego’s generic workmen to versions of DC superheroes, characters from *Star Wars* and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles among others, *The Lego Movie* feels like neither strictly fantasy nor science fiction but it also could not exist

without it. It is not merely that characters from well-known SF films make an appearance but that concepts such as ‘the chosen one’, the villain wanting world domination, the use of prophecy, the concept of the unlikely hero and his journey, or the mystical band of resistance fighters need not be explained or addressed at any point of the film’s breakneck run. In addition, ideas like parallel worlds (different themed Lego worlds exist separate from each other) or different dimensions of existence (as revealed at the end, but hinted throughout) both in internal and external relation to the film, are glossed over as simple facts of storytelling (one wonders whether this would be possible without films like *The Matrix* or *Inception*,



not to mention every time travel movie ever made). In fact, it feels as though the film is including the audience precisely by assuming from the get-go that we are all familiar with these other movies and elements.

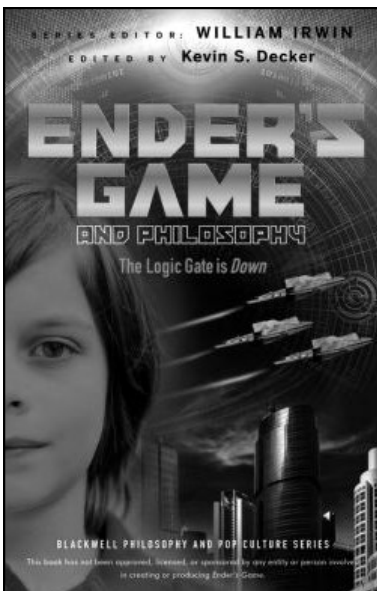
In short, there is ample potential for in-depth analysis not only in tracing the film’s taproots to its constituent genre influences (a Herculean task for any critic) but in studying its portrayal and regards for those precursors (and the study of the impact of these precursors on pop culture). Phil Lord, co-writer of the film, has commented: “My dream is to have terrible undergraduate term papers written about the movie.” Terrible papers might well be spawned but this film could also serve as a platform for studies in archetypes, comparative mythology, genre expectations and more. ‘Everything Is Awesome’, the pop song favoured by the characters in the film, at first seems like an Orwellian (or perhaps ‘Huxley-esque’ is more accurate) form of mass control, mind-washing the citizens of Bricksburg into believing their lives are not controlled by an evil corporate mastermind. As a metafictional statement, which the film is fond of, the phrase seems to imply that the film (everything the audience is watching) is awesome. Yet, seen against the backdrop of SF intertextuality in film, it becomes a kind of declaration about the individual parts that compose it – that all of these films and television tropes are awesome. As a self-professed nerd and lover of all things sci-fi and fantasy, be they schlock or refined, I find I cannot disagree.

***Ender's Game And Philosophy: The Logic Gate Is Down*,
edited by Kevin S. Decker (John Wiley & Sons, 2013)**

Reviewed by Jonathan McCalmont

Way back in 1995, a cosmologist named Lawrence M Kraus took a publisher's joke at face value and wrote a book exploring some of the scientific concepts used by the writers of Star Trek. Aside from selling over 200,000 copies and inspiring a BBC TV series, *The Physics Of Star Trek* also provided beleaguered academic publishers with an exciting new formula: academics + pop culture franchise + accessible writing = populist non-fiction titles with a potential to appeal to millions of fans. To say that this formula has proved popular with publishers would be something of an understatement as Kevin S. Decker's *Ender's Game And Philosophy* is one in a series of over thirty titles including *The Ultimate South Park And Philosophy: Respect My Philosophah!*

William Irwin, the editor in charge of the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture series, describes the books' ethos as "a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down" and it is easy to see why: Decker's book uses Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* as a sort of textual common ground and invites a number of different-flavoured academics to write about one aspect of the book using the conceptual tools of their respective disciplines. The spoonful of sugar description is apt as the book's aim is not so much to explore the novel itself as to use



it as a jumping-off point for a series of articles introducing philosophical concepts.

The main problem facing Decker is that while *Ender's Game* is an intensely complex and problematic novel, it does not draw on that many philosophical issues. In order for the book to work, Decker and his writers needed to find eighteen distinct philosophical concepts in the pages of the novel but this evidently proved something of a challenge as Decker returns to the

issue of moral responsibility no less than six times. Aside from making the book tediously repetitive, it also makes it rather obscure as examining a single issue in a single novel from six different perspectives demands precisely the kind of fine-grained theoretical distinctions that non-academics find incomprehensible and dull. It is easy to guess why people would be interested in how Warp drives might work, it is considerably harder to imagine why anyone would be interested in what *Ender's Game* tells us about the merits of vocational training.

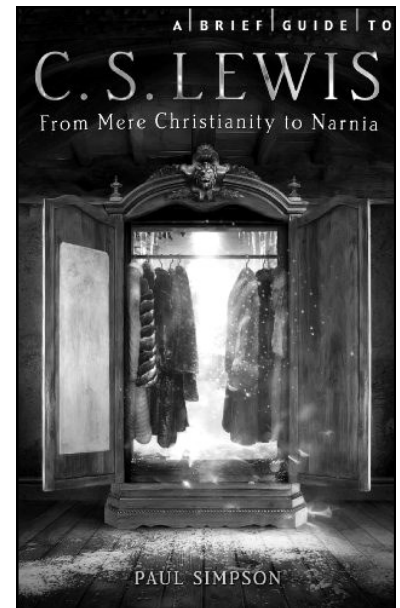
Part of the problem is that while this is supposed to be a book about *Ender's Game* and philosophy, the philosophy in question only refers to the subject matter and methods of analytical philosophy. This not only deprives readers of articles on feminism and post-colonialism, it also deprives them of articles taking a more critical approach to one of the most problematic works in genre history. If analytical philosophy cannot critique a novel as fascistic as *Ender's Game* then analytical philosophy has no business discussing it at all.

***A Brief Guide To C. S. Lewis: From Mere Christianity To Narnia* by Paul Simpson (Robinson, 2013)**

Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

CS Lewis and his work have been the subject of much discussion and many strong opinions. In this *Brief Guide*, Paul Simpson is not writing from either a Christian or an anti-Christian perspective. Rather, he wants to provide "a portal to the works of a great writer". He includes a shortish account of Lewis's life, plot summaries of his novels, descriptions of his religious writing and of adaptations of his works in other media. He indicates points of controversy but does not delve into them. The one field not covered is Lewis's literary criticism, as made clear in the introduction.

According to Simpson, Lewis's life story "provides vital clues to comprehending his work". Not in my experience. I read the Narnia books as a child and others of his books as a teenager without knowing anything about his life and I didn't feel any lack. But I am interested in Lewis's biography for its own sake and in order to understand something about the background to his books, as I would be for any author. Simpson provides a clear account of the main events of his life but there is not room for much detail, which means that Lewis's personality is only sketched out. There is enough to give some insight into his background and the influences which shaped his work though.



The plot summaries cover Lewis's lesser known fiction as well as the Narnia stories. There is also information about the circumstances in which the books were written, alternative drafts and post publication reception. I found this additional material more interesting than the plot summaries themselves. These constitute a reference guide but do not do much to explain the particular flavour of Lewis's fiction or why so many people have enjoyed reading and rereading his work. More analysis of the stories as literature would have strengthened the book for me.

The sections on his religious writings and on adaptations are again packed with information and may steer people to material they would not otherwise encounter. But to my mind, the omission of Lewis's literary work is a serious deficiency in a guide to his work as a whole. Literary history and criticism constituted his profession for over thirty years, after all. Moreover, several of the books he wrote in this capacity are highly readable and likely to interest fans of his other work. *The Discarded Image*, for example, is a fascinating evocation of the medieval world view, as Lewis saw it, and it deals with many themes and images that surface in his fiction.

Simpson does not set out to provide an in depth study of any aspect of CS Lewis. He draws together a lot of material in a readable account and supplies a bibliography to point people to further reading. His choice of what to include and what to leave out would not have been mine but he does what he sets out to do.

***Proxima* by Stephen Baxter and *On A Steel Breeze* by Alistair Reynolds (Gollancz, 2013)**

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

If you travel in certain critical circles then you'll be aware that 'core science fiction' is a corrupted form choking on its own complacency, bereft of the means of addressing today's real issues and, increasingly, not just irrelevant but offensively behind the times. In a recent review of Paul Di Filippo's *Wikiworld* in *The Los Angeles Review Of Books*, Paul Graham Raven described the remnants of the genre as an increasingly reactionary residue left behind by the evaporation of its worthwhile elements into the wider culture. Previously, in the same publication, Paul Kincaid (based on the evidence in the 2012 'best of' anthologies) had suggested that "the genres of the fantastic themselves have reached a state of exhaustion". In a recent review of David Brin's *Existence* (*Vector* #273) I experienced my own moment of enraged frustration with the dark heart of SF and its fundamentally conservative vision of who we are and where we are going.

The case, then, is made. The core of the genre has become a dead weight dragging its remnants ever deeper into a self-referential hole filled with aging white men who peek out at the modern world in confused terror from between the lumps of lost food matted in their scraggly beards.

Against that background come the latest works by two of British SF's male, middle-aged establishment. Stephen Baxter's *Proxima* and Alistair Reynolds's *On A Steel Breeze* are books that could hardly be more firmly plunged into the heart of science fiction. They are both set in the future and both feature the traditional trappings of the genre – space travel, strange technologies, mysterious planets and encounters with recondite aliens. Both Baxter and Reynolds write solidly – they plainly take their craft seriously and both continue to develop as writers – but they would concede, I think, that their prose pushes no particular stylistic boundaries. Their characters are functional and develop logically as the story unfolds but, again, I don't think either author would argue that they are writing work that provides startling psychological insights.

Given what we've already established, then, surely these books can be simply dismissed. This type of sf has nothing to say to us. Its day has been and gone... So, why did I derive so much pleasure from reading them? Well, if there are dangerous flaws in SF's heart – and there undoubtedly are – then it would be foolish to deny that it has also been sustained by significant strengths and both of these books tap into these roots very effectively.

The most obvious of these qualities is the ability to pro-

vide a ripping yarn. Storytelling remains crucial to most readers, if not most critics, and all the skills required to produce a really effective page-turner are on display in *Proxima*. The book is a straightforward pleasure from start to finish and Baxter manages the unravelling of his mystery deftly as each new revelation only raises more questions. The way in which he sweeps the reader along feels effortless but it is, in fact, the result of his precise structure and relentless pacing.

The storytelling in *On A Steel Breeze* is less apparently effortless. As the second book in a trilogy – following *Blue Remembered Earth* – the book has characters to shuffle and plot to unfurl. In places, this can feel forced and uneven – in particular the story of the Earth-based Chiku Yellow feels rather drawn out. But, even allowing for these problems, Reynolds has established big puzzles at the heart of this story and he piles upon them layers of intrigue and complexity that keeps the reader moving forward at a good pace.

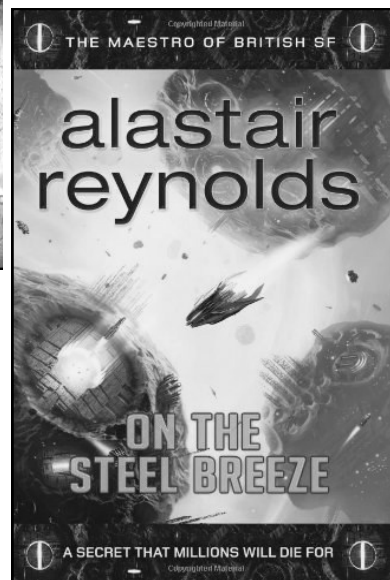
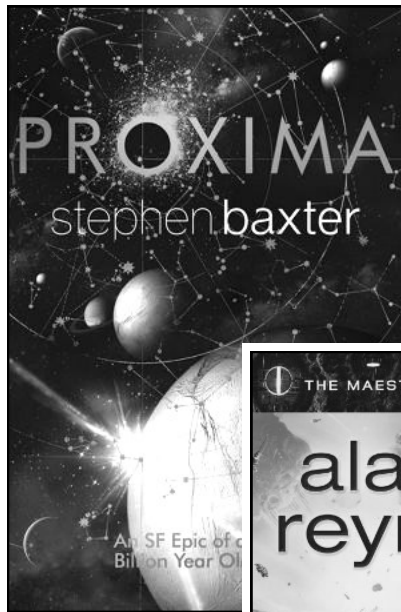
Another aspect of core SF is its incorporation of hope. Hope is not fashionable, and there are probably good reasons for that. With tightening resources, a loss of faith in collective institutions and imminent, possibly dramatic, climate change barrelling towards us, being optimistic about the future is tough. It might even be considered dangerously delusional. And yet hope is necessary. If there is no prospect of a viable future, there is no reason to struggle to make it a better one.

Both Baxter and Reynolds sidestep imminent challenges by setting their stories after humanity has reached some form of equilibrium with our current problems. These worlds, however, have been transformed by the hard choices necessary to survive an age of chaos and the accommodations made to cope with these realities drive both plots. Baxter's politics are more instantly recognisable: competing nations, a Cold War-ish stand-off and irrational, oppressive governments. Reynolds's setting is more complex: much of his world is enmeshed in an intrusive protective network, 'The Mechanism', a compromise which has bought peace, prosperity and security but also has its refuseniks and a rotten core which is being revealed as the trilogy unfolds. The concerns raised by Reynolds – personal freedom versus collective security and the intrusion of

technologies into our private lives – are unmistakably contemporary and his characters are intimately involved in difficult political manoeuvres. Some may find Reynolds's nods towards a post-colonial politics touch naïve, certainly the elephant metaphor he is constructing is, I think, problematic, but the book's heart is in the right place.

One passage, in which his characters discuss the need for tolerance, both made me laugh and reinforced the final, and perhaps most important, of the techniques in the core SF arsenal: it's ability to enlarge the great issues we face to allow closer inspection while, simultaneously, focusing the issue into tight, instantly comprehensible nuggets: "We're forging out into deep space – who knows what we'll meet out there? If we can't even accept a robot and some talking elephants, what good are we going to be when we meet something really strange?"

These are good books, perhaps not *great* books, but enjoyable, intelligent and, for the most part, well-constructed books. They don't make great demands upon the reader but they do deliver strong stories that reward attention and support more than superficial reading. In addition both suggest that we need not entirely abandon the core of SF just yet.



The Age of Scorpio by Gavin Smith (Gollancz, 2013)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

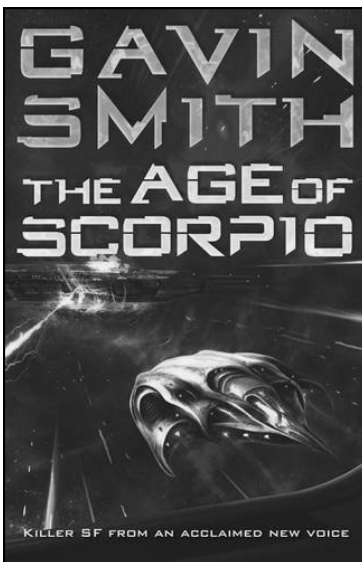
There are three stories running through *The Age of Scorpio*: an old one, a contemporary one and a future one. All three are pretty grim and gruesome and at no point does any character die peacefully in their bed at a ripe old age, surrounded by their loving family.

No one in *The Age of Scorpio* dies like that, even though practically everyone in the whole book dies. Those who don't die are only spared in order to suffer some kind of massively painful and permanently debilitating injury. *The Darling Buds of May* this is not. The three story threads follow, in chronological order, the bloody footsteps of Britha, an ancient Briton; Beth, a modern-day ex-con just finished serving time for murder; and Scab, a psychopathic future badass who spends his days smoking fags, injecting heroin and killing people.

Britha is a witch of sorts; part of a proud tribe facing a terrifying – demonic, even – threat to their very existence. They are about to discover there are things far worse than being humiliated in battle: supernatural forces from *out there* whose defeat will require greater sacrifice than even Britha, well accustomed to blood and loss, can possibly imagine. Beth is not a witch and neither is she a bad girl – not really. Having served her time she returns home to Bradford, only to find her hated prodigal sister,

Talia, has gone missing. Beth traces Talia to Portsmouth via a web of weird sex, bad drugs and large explosions and is amongst Portsmouth's thugs and gangsters that she discovers Talia has somehow become caught up in the end of the world. Tsk. And finally there's Scab and his comedy insect sidekick, Vic. Scab used to be one of the most dangerous and unstoppable forces in the known universe, an Elite, but stripped of his godlike powers, he's now little more than a wretched killer for hire, spreading death, misery and destruction wherever he goes. Chasing a piece of ancient Seeder technology in Red Space, Scab and Vic run into some of Scab's former colleagues – and when you face the Elite even an attitude as murderously unpleasant as Scab's is unlikely to save you.

I went through four distinct stages when reviewing *The Age of Scorpio*. 100 pages in, the unrelenting nastiness of every character had already become painstakingly obvious. 200 pages in and the law of diminishing returns was rapidly diminishing the never-ending waves of mutilation and murder. By page 300, this reviewer was still reading only so that you, dear reader, wouldn't have to. But it was at page 400 that the dreadful realisation suddenly hit: this entire book really was one grindingly miserable episode of violence after another. That's not *necessarily* a bad thing, right? But such an overdone shopping list of death becomes simply *tedious* – a tedium anyone who has read De Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* will recognise. *The Age of Scorpio's* end, when it finally comes, is a merciful release and, like many of the book's murdered characters, you'll be praying for a quick end too.

**Plastic by Christopher Fowler (Solaris, 2013)**

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

In her commendably cogent foreword, Joanne Harris maps the long and rocky road to publication of Christopher Fowler's *Plastic*. This 'orphaned' novel probably went through as many title changes as rejections before it finally found a safe home with Solaris – to whom many thanks are due.

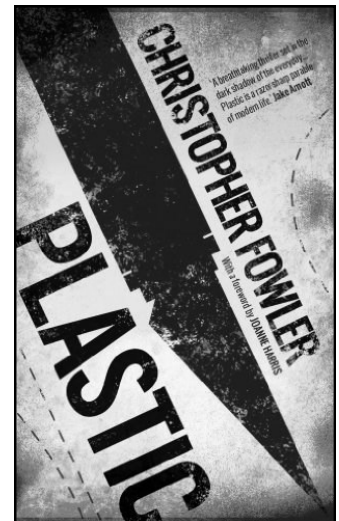
Harris read *Plastic* in manuscript form nigh on nine years ago and assumed that it would be only a matter of time before it became a bestseller. That didn't happen then but it bloody well should now. In all honesty, she has written the perfect review and your humble scribe might just as well copy it down for you verbatim. But here's a representative sample:

"In a world where credit rules supreme, where images of unattainable perfection are held up to women as not only achievable, but absolutely necessary, where nobody looks beyond the surface, where to be on TV is everyone's fantasy and where the acquisition of of yet another handbag, yet another pair of shoes, might hold the key to happiness, *Plastic* has an uncanny resonance. The heroine, June Cryer, whose description of herself as a 'dead housewife' come frighteningly close to home, is the existential Everywoman of the consumer generation. Unloved, unhappy, overweight, she is filled with confusion about the world around her; about her husband, who is leaving her, about the dreams she used to have."

That's the broad canvas for you; I'll now add a few more brush strokes. Penelope June Cryer's descent into chaos – if not madness – begins when her semi-detached husband, Gordon, finally takes off with Hilary, their attractive flight attendant neighbor (and supposed friend of June). In the twinkling of a bar-code light gun, June has lost her home, credit cards and bank account. So she takes a weekend flat-sitting job at the new Ziggurat high-rise building. There is no electric power and no phones – just a murderer. The set-up reminded me of *Fear* by L. Ron Hubbard or one of Fritz Leiber's urban ghost novels but June has a lot more than the supernatural to worry about.

I don't know what those interim titles might have been but *Plastic* strikes just the right semantic note. At its most flippant: "Why don't people take the plastic off? When Princess Diana died it looked like several tons of Quality Street had been dumped outside her house". But plastic also has a dark side; the dangers of a cashless, checkless society. Fowler shows how this consumerist nightmare has become an everyday reality for many marginalized people in present-day life – the term 'urban unease' doesn't even begin to describe it. *Plastic* could also reference the state of flux in which June suddenly finds herself, affected by socio-economic forces that are well beyond her conscious control.

As a bonus, Fowler guides us through a London that Nobody Would Want To Know. June encounters a geriatric police officer with "white hair sticking like icicles around the sides of his head". It is an unbilled appearance by Arthur Bryant, the senior 'matchless detective' from Fowler's long-running *Bryant & May* series. Bryant soon clears off, however, not to return. If only she'd had the good fortune to meet John May instead, his younger and infinitely more susceptible partner!



The Goblin Emperor* by Katherine Addison (Tor, 2014)*Reviewed by Mark Connorton**

Katherine Addison is the open pseudonym of Sarah Monette, author of several, well-reviewed fantasy novels. She was dropped by her previous publisher but is now back with a new name and a new novel. I found it a great improvement on her earlier work, which for me was marred by a dubious fetishisation of gay sexual assault and abuse.

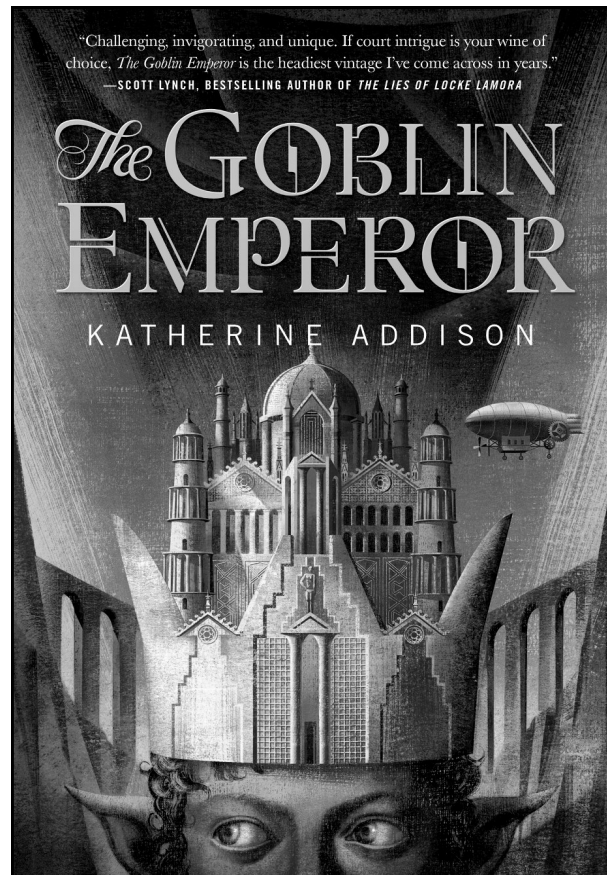
The novel is set in the Elflands, a huge empire inhabited by pale sophisticated elves and swarthy barbaric goblins. In true fantasyland fashion, everyone rides around on horseback and brandishes swords and spears, and wizards and priests have magic abilities. However, the elves have also developed steam power, clockwork and airships (giving the book a rather superficial steampunk gloss) and the empire is undergoing an industrial revolution.

The protagonist, Maia, is the fourth son of the elvish emperor through a brief political to a goblin noblewoman. His mother has since died, leaving him exiled to a remote castle in the care of his drunken and violent cousin. When the emperor and his other sons perish in an airship accident, Maia is suddenly elevated to the throne. He is whisked from his backwater prison to the imperial capital and thrust into a new and strange environment, where his lack of social skills and experience leave him a nervous and barely functional outsider, and his race and background lead many of the snobbish courtiers to consider him a savage.

Maia has no idea how the machinery of state works and who he can trust, and struggles with basic social interactions. The bulk of the novel deals with him adapting to his sudden change of situation. Although mainly a character study, the novel is also quite eventful. Maia investigates his father's death (which, unsurprisingly, was not an accident), tries to find a politically suitable wife, deals with obstructive civil servants, ministers and usurpers and tries to get a massive infrastructure project off the ground to improve transport links to an economically deprived region of the Elflands (sort of a fantasy HS2 project).

All Maia has going for him on arrival is his good nature, desire to learn and his own experience of cruelty and injustice which makes him determined not to inflict it on others. He is so constrained by his high position that he is not even allowed to wash or dress himself. He can never be alone without his bodyguards, meets others only in highly formal and artificial situations and gets most of his information about the wider world through conversations with his staff, letters and reports. Most fantasy novels about a new ruler would include battle scenes as they take their throne, a lengthy abduction and escape plot or some other excuse for fighting and action but the only time Maia holds a sword is when he is given an antique one for his birthday. The various violent plots against him are rather perfunctory and swiftly resolved as though the author's heart isn't really in it and she only included them to up the action quotient or please an editor. This might seem a little monotonous for some readers but the various situations he has to deal with are varied, interesting and skilfully woven throughout the plot, rather than appearing one after another in episodic fashion, and as a result the book is a compelling read.

As the sole viewpoint character, we discover palace life with Maia and learn as he learns. Unfortunately, the author tries a little too hard to replicate his confusion in the reader as she subjects us to a confusing deluge of characters. Although the main cast is well sketched, there is also an abundance of barely distinguished and unmemorable minor characters, all with ridiculous fantasy names and titles that make them a chore to keep track of.



My other main criticism of the book is that as a tale of courtly intrigue and politics, the level of intrigue and politicking is pretty poor. All the untrustworthy villainous characters reveal themselves to be so from the first time we meet them, likewise the helpful characters. Only one character is genuinely treacherous and he - or she! no spoilers! - is one of the unmemorable minor characters anyway. In a similar vein, for a naïve outsider with no grasp of court politics or high society, Maia is superhumanly insightful and always seems to know how to read people and what to do. I think this is something of a point-of-view problem, as although the book is supposedly in Maia's third person perspective, it feels as though the author can't resist leaning over his shoulder in each scene to tell us exactly what is going on and what people are really thinking.

Despite these quibbles, the book has much to recommend it. Elfland is presented as a fairly generic fantasy historical society with typical historical attitudes to women in place and, initially, presented without comment. As the book progresses, the sexism of the society is slowly uncovered and examined as Maia meets noble women whose lives are entirely controlled by the men in their families, woman who are discriminated against in guilds and professions or are patronised and treated as adorable novelties for seeking an education. The racism of the society is similarly highlighted when Maia's goblin relatives visit him and are shown to be as sophisticated and cultured as the elves.

In these days of cynical violent fantasy spread over multiple hefty volumes, it is actually an enjoyable change to read a stand-alone book about a decent, good-hearted protagonist, who tries to use his power to improve the lives of others (rather than wreak bloody revenge or maintain power for its own sake or whatever). By the end of the book it looks like Maia is pretty much succeeding, despite the obstacles placed in his way. We leave him with much to achieve, but on a hopeful note, and it is also refreshing to read a fantasy that left me wanting more rather than (lots and lots) less.

***The Many-Coloured Land* by Julian May (Tor, 2013)**

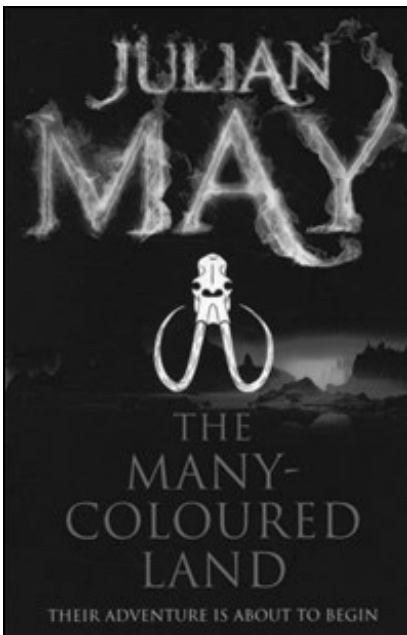
Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

This is a reissue of the novel first published in 1981, the first in a series. I have never read any Julian May before so I was glad of the excuse to tackle this one.

The story starts in the 22nd Century, when humans have been introduced to a galactic civilisation filled with alien species. Humans have been able to colonise other planets but have had to accept an increasing conformity in their lifestyles and beliefs. Some misfits choose to exile themselves by going through a one way portal to the Pliocene era on Earth. They go prepared to deal with life in a wilderness but instead find themselves threatened with slavery and caught up in a war between two alien races from a crashed space ship. We follow the adventures of a group of these exiles as they take sides in the war, in order to win freedom for themselves and those who have come through the portal earlier. By the end of this novel, a battle has been won but the war is far from over.

I found the opening chapters somewhat heavy going, as we are introduced to different characters and settings, without any explanation of the connections between them or the direction of the narrative. This changes when the leading characters gather together to prepare for their journey and once they are through the portal, the action goes at a lively pace. The introductory material then makes sense in providing background for each of the characters and their world, to contrast with what they find in the past.

The characters display an engaging mix of personalities, both male and female. They have different strengths and respond to their plight in different ways but all with determination and humour. Perhaps they overcome some of their difficulties too easily but solving one problem leads them to another. So the narrative tension is sustained and the characters are not given any simplistic triumphs.



However, the strength of the book, in my view, comes not so much from the characters as from the world building. As well as the future setting, which is confusing but interesting, May depicts the

dualistic society of the alien races, the Tanu and the Firvulag, in the Pliocene. Her descriptions of the natural world, the landscape and fauna of the Pliocene, are vivid and evocative in their own right. The society found there has some of the fascination of the Celtic mythology and folklore from which it is derived. And the intervention of the humans provides food for thought about the relationship between science and magic, the roots of folklore, mind control and the relationship between individuals and society.

This novel was first published before the great boom in fantasy adventures. It develops at a slower pace than much fantasy written now but, to my mind, this is an advantage. May's imagined world remains interesting and worth spending time in.

***The City* by Stella Gemmell (Corgi, 2013)**

Reviewed by Liz Bourke

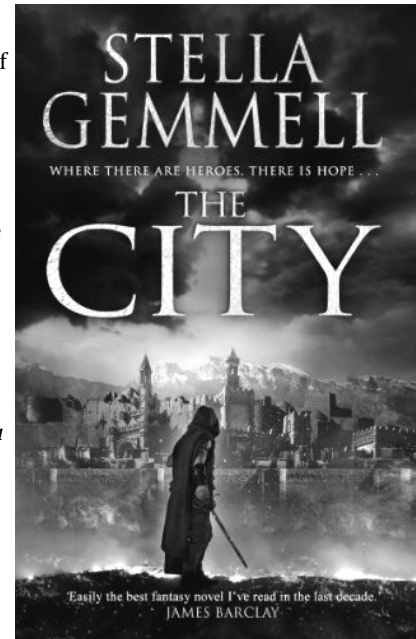
The City is Stella Gemmell's first solo novel but her best-selling collaborations on the *Troy* series with her late husband David Gemmell mean that her name is already widely known, and one might have justifiably high expectations for this seven-hundred-page-long standalone epic. But while the strong images and robust prose of this novel are undeniably the work of a talented writer, *The City* fails to bring its promise together into a unity that is more than the sum of its various moving parts. And, with a viewpoint cast numbering at least a dozen and a narrative taking place over the course of at least ten years, there are rather a lot of moving parts.

The novel opens in the sewers of the titular City. It is not a City but always *the* City, otherwise nameless, ruled by an emperor known as the Immortal. It's been at war with its enemies for generations so that the land outside the City's defences is a wasteland -- and all the people in the vicinity are the City's enemies, due to its happy knack of invading, conquering and all-but-exterminating its tributaries.

In the sewers of this bounded world, the reader is introduced to the child-siblings Elijah and Emly; the disgraced, tortured former general Shuskara, now an old man known as Bartellus; the woman soldier Indaro; and the powerful woman called Archange. Gemmell spends long passages on the dark, grimy, decaying, easily-flooded dangers of the City's subterranean levels until, separated, Elijah and Emly both emerge once more into the light: Emly as Bartellus's adopted daughter and Elijah with the enemies of the City. Then the narrative switches to the City's battlefields years later, to Indaro and her commander Fell Aron Lee; and to Bartellus and Emly in their life in the City's poorer quarters. We're led through Fell's backstory and his connection to Shuskara, through plots and intrigue to the novel's conclusion in which Fell, Indaro, and Bartellus make common cause with the City's enemies to kill the emperor and end the war.

This is where *The City* falls apart. For while Gemmell's novel has some really solid atmosphere, great set-pieces and - for the most part - interesting characterisation, its structure fails to support the weight of its climax and conclusion. The real nature of the City's emperor and greatest lords is introduced late, the culmination of all the intrigues is not well foreshadowed and the denouement leaves me scratching my head and wondering what was the *point* of those 700-odd pages, in the end?

Despite its leisurely pace and sprawling cast, *The City* is an immensely readable novel, and proves that Gemmell has a good deal of potential as a solo author. But it never quite resolves its disparate elements into a coherent whole - and thus, unfortunately, never quite lives up to its promises.



***Naomi's Room and The Silence of Ghosts* by Jonathan Aycliffe (Corsair, 2013)**

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

One of the biggest questions facing the author of a haunted house story is, what can keep the protagonists in the house once the scary stuff really gets going? Here are two books, the ninth and latest supernatural novel from Jonathan Aycliffe, together with a reprint of his first ghost story, which address that question head on with very different results.

Naomi's Room (originally published in 1991) is narrated by Charles from the vantage of 1990, reflecting on the terrible events of Christmas 1970 and beyond. Charles and his wife Laura (the first of many references to *Don't Look Now* without which the book would be stronger) are academics living in an old Victorian house in Cambridge. On Christmas Eve, their four year old daughter, Naomi, disappears and is found murdered and horribly mutilated. Mysterious children are seen, there are screams in the night, footsteps in the attic.

A Welsh photographer, Lewis, who Charles can only describe in terms of cliché - alcohol, rugby, sheep farming, mines - shows the couple mysterious images which have appeared in his photographs of their house. One foreshadows the murder of the detective leading the investigation into Naomi's death. Yes, Lewis has the David Warner part from *The Omen*. Eventually it all turns into a homage to *The Shining*.

Meanwhile, as the narration shifts between 1970 and 1990, the reader is forced to ask why Charles is still living in this terrible, actively haunted house twenty years later. Fortunately, Aycliffe is able to provide an excellent reason which proves integral to the story and, while not every aspect of the plot comes together satisfactorily, he takes the tale into some surprising, shockingly dark territory.

As Charles investigates the history of his home (Laura is rather sidelined), he discovers the traditional very bad things, which nevertheless provide a solid underpinning for the horror. His researches are expertly interwoven with nightmarish set-pieces which, for all the reworking of timeworn tropes, still send shivers down the spine. While the mayhem which occurs outside the family home feels not entirely convincingly connected to the supernatural events inside the house, everything in the home itself works marvellously. The last 30 pages ratchet the terror up to 11 as Aycliffe drags the classic haunted house atmospherics kicking and screaming into full-blooded post-Clive Barker Gothic horror. I read *Naomi's Room* in a day, utterly gripped.

In *The Silence Of Ghosts*, Dominic, following a disabling Second World War combat injury, has been dispatched from London by his unloving parents to the family house in the Lake District. From the very beginning this fails to convince - in 1940 the Royal Navy would not have discharged an otherwise healthy young officer in his early twenties 'only' because he has lost a leg below the knee. We know that many men who suffered serious disabling injuries returned to active

duty - Douglas Bader is the famous example in the RAF - but if not active service, surely the navy would have found Dominic a desk job. It seems equally unlikely that his rich family, however unloving, would pack him off to a cold, isolated house with only the company of his deaf ten year old sister, Octavia, who has previously never been outside London.

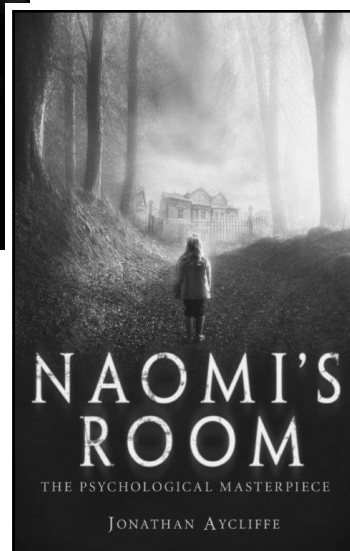
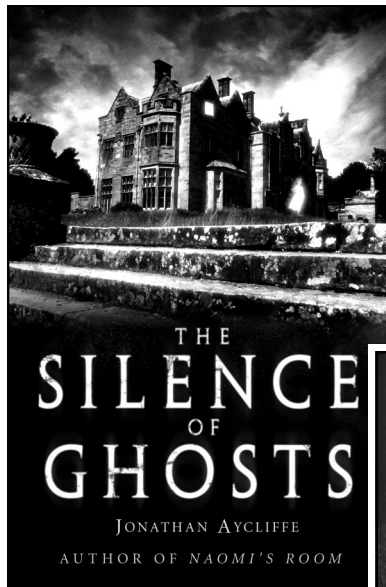
These aspects aside, the story is well told through Dominic's diaries, though a framing device in which Dominic's grandson Charles serves as a present day editor immediately undermines the suspense by revealing in the introduction that at least two main characters will survive. Happily Dominic and Octavia are a likable pair and the reader is soon having an enjoyable time as they find themselves spooked in the classic English haunted house, complete with ghostly children and... something else.

The first half of the novel delivers a series of effective set-pieces which provide the requisite chills, while also telling the routine but serviceable love story of Dominic and his nurse, Rose. This really is a standard issue wartime romance which plays on changing social mores as approaches to love and sex undergo whirlwind transformations in a radically uncertain world haunted by the spectre of sudden death. So far, so functional but then, halfway through the novel, something so terrifying happens everyone flees the house, quite sensibly determined never to go back. At least Aycliffe does not contrive a means to keep his characters in the house, but the effect is that the story loses focus between the local community - the village doctor and vicar become major characters - and a return trip to London.

There is a subplot involving an unidentified disease and an interesting thread in which it appears that it is Octavia's deafness which enables her to hear the voices of the undead. There are deaths but no one seems sufficiently concerned or grief-stricken. Charles investigates the history of the house, which is tied to his family's centuries old business connections with Portugal. This is intriguing thread but it is never sufficiently developed or urgent. Though the house does have a peculiar history what follows is neither entire-

ly coherent nor compelling. The supernatural events are ultimately so arbitrary and random that we are forced to ask, what, exactly, do the ghosts want? Uncanny events transpire because they are the sort of things which always happen in ghost stories. These stock haunting devices worked so well in *Naomi's Room* because they were properly integrated into that narrative. Here they just happen regardless. What is the purpose of the dancing? What was the thing on the stairs? Why the tragic incident on the lake? Why does Octavia have the same name as one of the children on a certain list? Who knows? You won't find out here.

The novel becomes increasingly less gripping as it goes on, with the love story marginally more engrossing than the underdeveloped ghost story. They may be stock characters but at least Dominic and Rose are engaging. Dominic's cold, possibly sociopathic parents are also compelling characters, though perhaps under utilised and too easily written out. The home front world of rationing is well captured and there is some interest in the portrayal of historical attitudes to disability but the language is anachronistic. Too much simply doesn't add together and a last page twist makes no psychological sense. As a thriller, *The Silence of Ghosts* won't even trouble a lamb.



***Dreams And Shadows* by C. Robert Cargill
(Gollancz, 2013)**

Reviewed by Donna Scott

In this debut novel from C Robert Cargill, we are offered a modern-day fairy tale, described by the blurb as “part Neil Gaiman, part Guillermo Del Torro, part William Burroughs”. The story is both fantastical and childlike but also darkly adult with references to *Trainspotting* and groupie sex – and, of course, grisly deaths at the hands of murderous fae.

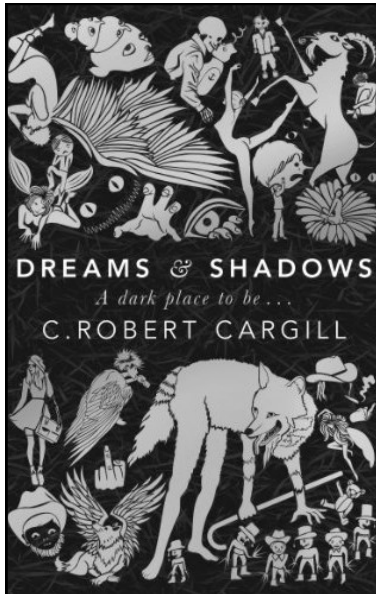
The story begins with a couple who fall in love, get married and have a baby. Their lives are happy and perfect until their baby, Ewan, is stolen by the fae, swapped for a changeling and taken to The Limestone Kingdom: a shadowy forest world that exists unseen alongside the mundane one. The fae raise Ewan like one of their own, telling him they love him and promising to make him a fairy one day.

In the meantime, a clever young boy called Colby comes across a djinn who promises him wishes. Colby's family are addicts, his life sad and neglected, so he seizes upon this opportunity to better his circumstances. Colby follows his new friend into the Limestone Kingdom where he befriends Ewan. The djinn betrays the fae's confidence and reveals that they have dark intentions towards the little boy they profess so much love for. Moreover, the changeling, Knocks, cannot hide his jealousy of Ewan and, at the moment of Colby's visit, he is turning from an unpleasant bully into a creature with a merciless bloodlust. Colby has no choice but to try to stop Knocks and the fae from harming his friend but, in doing so, he risks the very existence of the magical world.

The novel follows the boys as they age and their lives become more mundane, only for the darkness of the Limestone Kingdom to trickle back and make things much worse just when they are on the brink of adulthood.

The death of innocence is at the heart of this story: Ewan's perpetual state of innocence is destined to end with his childhood at the point of his death. His sweetheart, Mallaidh, is doomed to love a man to death and care nothing for any child, as her kind never have. They are mirrored by Colby - whose childhood was also stolen, first by addiction and neglect and then by magic, and whose kindly acts are doomed only to wreak harm - and by Knocks - condemned never to know unconditional love and be in a rush to destroy any remaining connection he has to humanity through bloodshed.

Dreams And Shadows is essentially a novel of two halves: innocence and experience, perhaps. Though it seems appropriate for the characters age to suit the grimness of their world, the narrative chronicling the boys' escape from the Limestone Kingdom seems more satisfying and rounded and the cruelty of the kingdom shown in starker relief against their youth. A rich cocktail of borrowed folktales from many places, subverted into a playful horror story, that delights and disgusts (in a good way).



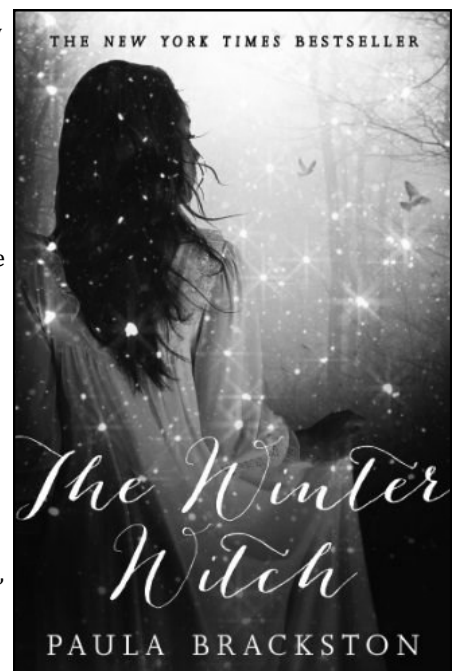
***The Winter Witch* by Paula Brackston
(Thomas Dunne Books, 2013)**

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

The Winter Witch, set in a vividly described early 19th Century rural Wales, is Paula Brackston's second novel in the *Shadow Chronicles*, although it is unconnected to the first, 2011's *The Witch's Daughter*. Morgana Pritchard is the teenage daughter of a single mother who hasn't spoken since childhood and is starting to develop strange powers. This would be very dangerous for her if her neighbours noticed (of course, if your daughter is destined to be a witch, naming her Morgana isn't a smart move...). Morgana's mother therefore arranges a marriage to Cai Jenkins, a wealthy widower whose wife died in childbirth and who needs a new wife (any new wife) if he is to retain his position as “porthmon” (head drover) for the area. Morgana initially finds marriage and separation from her mother very hard but Cai's patience and understanding, together with the beauty of her new isolated home Ffynnon Las, the Blue Well, win her round to her new life.

As her powers of witchcraft develop and her relationship with Cai evolves from a marriage of convenience into something stronger, Morgana discovers with the help of Mrs. Jones, Cai's housekeeper, that the Blue Well is an ancient spring that has great powers of magic, which can be used for good or ill. However, there is great danger for her in her new village. Morgana is strongly resented by Isolda Bowen, a wealthy widow who had designs on Cai herself, and Llewellyn Pen-yr-Rheol, the previous porthmon who lost his position after being attacked on his way back from a drive and losing a year of the area's income. Worse, there is a dark power somewhere in the village determined to turn its people against Morgana and gain control of Ffynnon Las. Morgana has to learn to discover herself (we learn the reason for her silence) and then how to control and direct her burgeoning but still weak powers to defend herself, her husband and her new home from determined attack by a much stronger enemy who has control over the villagers, who come to hate her and name her “the Winter Witch”.

This is a true page-turner; I read this book over the course of one sunny afternoon. The story has an urgency enhanced by being told in the present tense, whether in the first person from Morgana's perspective or in the third person from Cai's. While the Welsh landscape, people and customs are lovingly described, these details are never allowed to slow down the plot which leads inexorably to the confrontation between Morgana and her infinitely more experienced nemesis. A very enjoyable read that should win Paula Brackston many fans.

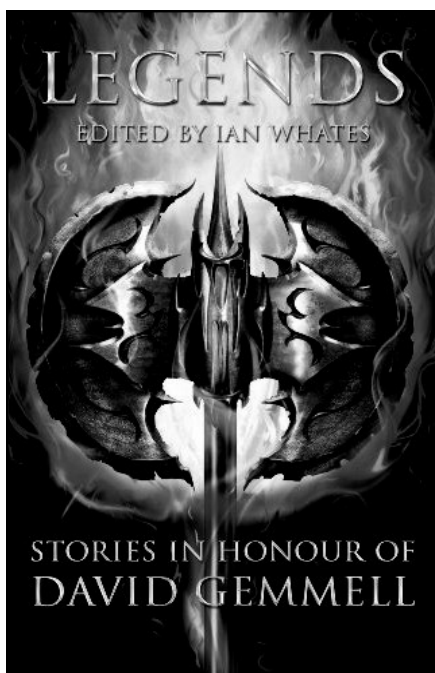


Legends, edited by Ian Whates (Newcon Press, 2013)
Reviewed by Tony Jones

Legends is an anthology of 13 new fantasy stories by a host of well-known writers. They honour David Gemmell whose first novel *Legend* was published in 1984 and who sadly died in 2006. This collection is a way of helping with the funding of the Gemmell Awards given in his memory.

I am a fan of the short story, both as a form itself but also as a good solution for readers like me who are sometimes constrained for time. I also value being reminded of authors I may have not read for some years whilst getting to discover authors I might otherwise never have read. This collection achieves both and, while it may be trite to say this, it is true that there will be something here for any fantasy fan.

I won't dwell on all those within but I do want to single out a few stories to indicate the breadth of writing. Juliet McKenna provides my favourite story, 'The Land Of The Eagle', in which a land throws off its conquerors and finds again the spirit it lost in defeat many years earlier. Although it might be argued that the story is perhaps a bit linear, this doesn't matter when you have well realised characters, a sense of place and a bit of faith thrown in as well.



Like all good stories, the ending then makes you realise that all you have witnessed is just the beginning of a story that is on-going and, in gaining their freedom, it is possible that they have merely drawn the attention of something more powerful.

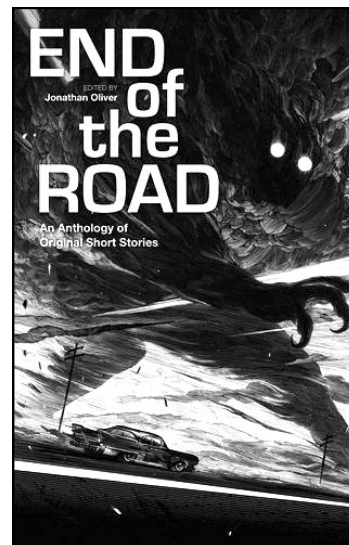
Gaie Sebold is a relative newcomer to the fantasy field but has written an excellent tale in 'A Blade To The Heart'. This tells of a fatally wounded warrior king who has entered the care of a healer. The tale of the king's treatment is emotionally wrought and the story presents two very well carved characters that are vivid in the imagination. The editor's own contribution, *Return To Arden Falls*, is an equally impressive tale of old battles, magic and the spirits of nature. With plenty of twists along the way, this story asks why some people get remembered for events when really many were involved and explores the consequences when the truth is uncovered. This story works well because its main character is far from flawless and by no means larger than life 'legend'.

I met David Gemmell in 1984 and we corresponded briefly. I remember him as being very unassuming and I think he would have been very flattered by this collection. This is a strong anthology, including good stories by Tanith Lee, Joe Abercrombie and Jonathan Green alongside many other pieces. However, I would have liked to have had individual introductions from the authors themselves so they could have discussed why they chose to pay tribute to Gemmell with their particular story.

End Of The Road, edited by Jonathan Oliver (Solaris, 2013)

Reviewed by Donna Scott

At an exhibition on the Beat Generation at the British Library last summer, I had the opportunity to see the 120ft long scroll of Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*. It struck me then just how circular the metaphor is: the road makes the story and the story makes the road. The voyage is more important than the destination and though Kerouac certainly wasn't the first storyteller to use travel as a narrative frame for his creation, it's his engagement with the metaphor that many successive writers and directors have sought to emulate. This is an anthology that takes you places – both geographically and emotionally.



The powerful opening story, 'We Know Where We're Goin' by Philip Reeves, neatly subverts the journey metaphor so we already know this is not going to be a series of run-of-the-mill journeys of self-discovery. From his introduction, we also know that Oliver asked for something 'weird' and there's none weirder than Adam Nevill's 'Always In Our Hearts', in which an unrepentant hit and run taxi driver must pick up a convoluted series of odd passengers to work out what's going to happen to him. It's a very well-told story, though on this occasion, the protagonist is not someone to be pitied. Conversely, the protagonist of Rio Youers's 'The Widow' is a richly drawn character whose sorrow has driven her to extreme action, with perhaps the most striking use of the road metaphor in the anthology.

Even more disturbing are the things people do with no real reason, regretting where they have ended up without understanding how they got there. In SL Grey's 'Bingo', for example, an episode of sexual cruelty from the night before is played out against a scene of a horrific car crash. The true horror of the story is that the involved motorcyclist is sickened by what he does; the mantra *don't get involved* proves to be his downfall. And in Jay Caselberg's 'The Track', the horrific fate of two desert-crossing adventurers is almost inevitable, though not in the way you might expect.

There are some great fantastical and mythological elements running through the stories: in Benjanun Sriduangkaew's 'Fade To Gold', a female soldier has to decide between compassion for the krasue who has accompanied her on her journey and saving other people from her. In Zen Cho's 'Balik Kampung', Lydia must carry her "personal agony" on a journey from hell to the living world – a sad tale told with a light touch. In Sophia McDougall's 'The Way Through Wylemere Woods', journeys and roads are thwarted in this compelling tale of magic and identity. More science-fictional is Ian Whates's 'The Hitcher', which offers the unexpected in an anthology dominated by horror fiction, with a twist on this familiar trope.

End Of The Road is the sister anthology to 2010's *End Of The Line* and seems to have offered a much richer vein for story. There isn't space to discuss each story here but there was an impressive variety of different genres and voices, distinct and entertaining. Also, unlike Kerouac's oeuvre, nicely punctuated too!

***A Gentle Flow of Ink* by Graham Andrews
(FeedARead Publishing, 2013)**

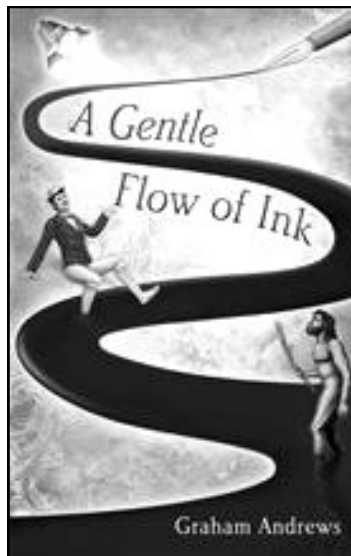
Reviewed by Kate Onyett

This is a collection of whimsical short stories billed as “a taut and eerie arc from the deep past into the distant future” that will challenge one’s perceptions of the world. It’s not as revolutionary as that but you have to give a book credit for such unashamed chutzpah. Andrews’s subjects roam from the beginnings of humanity into the far flung future with plenty of emphasis on cheesy science-fictional tropes. Mankind starts with the potential for peacemaking and self-improvement but this is lost to violence due to a lack of direct language to explicitly express what the group’s leader can see as a bright new day (his people having slaughtered the other clan first, of course). Through the present and into the future, people grapple with man’s brutish instincts, the real meaning of Christmas, androids, verisimilitude and computers. Yet all share this one inimitable truth: it is a struggle to make one’s mark in one’s own life and in one’s psyche. While we remain a confused and stumbling creature, we seek meaning through shared expression; what becomes language, as its structures make a framework from which to inform and explain.

Funnily enough, it is precisely language that also gets in the way most of time. With profligate use of quirky phrase and flourishes of decorative description, he verily floods his characters with demonstrative authorial gaiety in the malleability of language. But language fails even the best-spoken of his characters; they inevitably fall short of their goals in life, while not enough or too much is being spoken. Ironically, true communication has no place in these worlds ruled by language.

And, in praise of language (written between author and reader, read between character and reader and character to character as the reader’s avatars), these are word-rich, solipsistic characters. Inner thoughts come presented in open speech; so much so, you can’t help wondering if the other characters are not listening in and getting a clue. But, much like Shakespeare’s monologuing primaries, no one is bad-mannered enough to overhear another’s linguistic explorations. However, this blare of thought-speech hides considerably more than it reveals. Quiet thoughts and suppositional probing into motivation are prevented with the onrush of linguistic self-awareness. This is the play of language; its strengths, its failures, its power to describe ourselves to ourselves. It’s a precarious, bravado performance; balancing purely on its lexemic virtuosity.

There are missteps throughout: a story’s punchline weaker than it should be, confusing narrative direction and incompleteness, misspellings and incorrect and confusing punctuation. But the snippets of ‘The Illustrated Boy’, the space alien discovering the joys of being ‘Irish Enough...?’ and Satan’s direct connection to mischievous imagination explored in the first poetical questioning of ‘I make vibrant flash-bang moments to distract from these. Is this much sound and fury, signifying nothing, or a cheerful collection of energetic mind-benders? For my money, it could go either way - and it frequently does.



***How To Be Dead* by Dave Turner
(Aim For The Head Books, 2013)**

Reviewed by Kate Onyett

Dave is not an obvious hero. He’s just an apathetic worker; marking time perma-temping at a big business and going to pieces over Melanie, office hottie and girl of his dreams. Oh, and he can see ghosts.

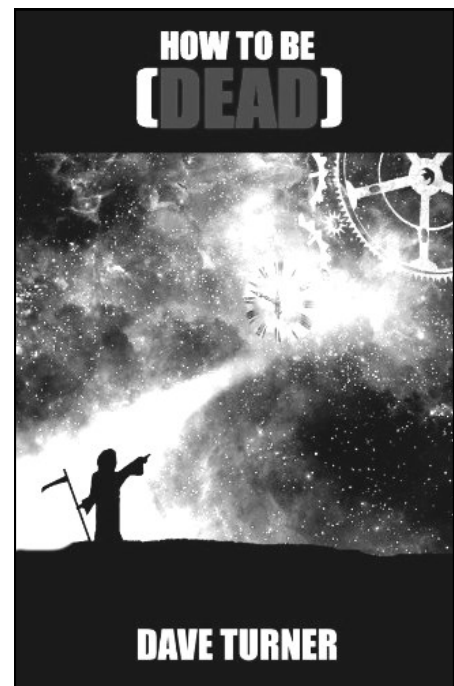
While saving Melanie’s life on a night out, he is hit by a car and has a near-death experience. Literally: he and Death go to the pub and Death offers him a new career opportunity. Will he make a deal with Death? Will he strike lucky with Melanie? Will he ever get to grips with his computer?

This novella has a recognisable premise: a bit of a loser, diamond-in-the-rough type living a humdrum life has a supernatural encounter and, as a result, starts to develop semi-heroic habits. Much the same as his obvious progenitor in *Shaun Of The Dead*, Dave is stuck in a rut with a slobby flat-mate, a smart girl to impress and a Bigger Picture to face up to. Dave might not be belting zombies with a cricket bat yet but this is just the set-up; the ‘Early Years’, as it were. More is expected to come in the same vein from Turner as his website promises that Death and his companions will be fighting “ghosts, zombies, vampires and medium-sized apocalypses.”

How To De Dead encompasses the highly enjoyable escapism of comedy-fantasy with a hero we can all relate to: the super nerd; the ‘special’ but commonplace character. Stories like *How To Be Dead* are pitched for us norms, reiterating the mythical hope that anyone - even the losers - can be winners. Given the right supernatural conditions, of course.

It is pitch-perfect in tone; gentle and humorous with little frissons of sarcasm. Turner is deft at turning on a pin’s head, taking the reader from giggling recognition of idiotic behaviour into something altogether more moving. If used properly, comedy and melancholy make great partners in crime and Turner makes excellent use of the sweet-and-sour approach without once coming across as mawkish.

As starter stories go, this has the makings of an extremely personable series. The writing is cheerful and the story is refreshingly lacking in self-acknowledging cleverness (always a very real risk with comic fantasy) so it zips along in honest style. This is light reading but so very entertaining and does everything you could wish. It is also an extremely visual story in style; it is easy to imagine how this would make a fun piece of telly, and yet it never lacks wit and wisdom. Turner’s voice is a welcome addition to the genre, drawing very favourable comparisons with the big guns of comic fantasy.



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