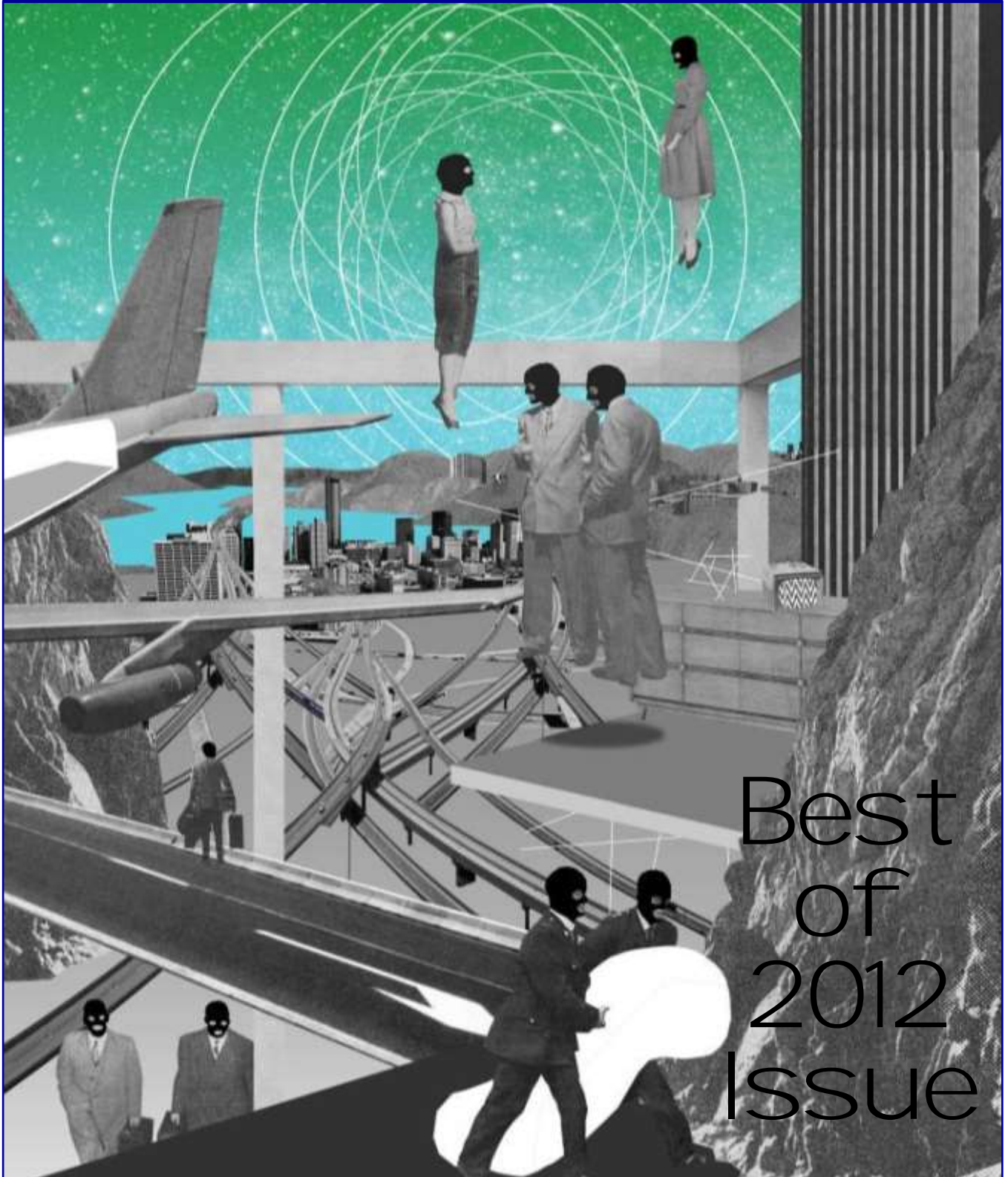


Vector

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association



Best
of
2012
Issue

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Vector 273

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Torque Control

I've a real fondness for best of year issues. They're a glimpse of what everyone else was doing/reading/watching in that year. They're a slice of what we think, right now, was important in that recent back-then – in this case, a snapshot of early 2013's thoughts and memories of year just passed.

The annual Reviewer's Poll, edited by Martin Lewis, samples what BSFA reviewers thought the best thing they read (or, in some cases, watched) in 2012. It's not limited to books published in that calendar year, only read in it, which means the results can reach far back into the past in some cases. Which books topped the 2012 poll, and how do those results compare to the BSFA Award shortlists? Turn to the next page to find out!

In television, Alison Page assesses how the UK did on the whole, while Sophie Halliday takes on the highlights of the US's televisual year. In both cases, *The Walking Dead* was one of the most thought-provoking, well-realised shows on the screen. Fitting, as Page observes, for a year through which science fiction television largely sleep-walked.

This year, for a change, *Vector* examines the broad swathe of ways in which audio recordings contribute to the quality of science fiction being produced and aired in the UK, thanks to Tony Jones. If you, like me, are unfamiliar with the range of ways you could be listening to new sf audio plays on a regular basis, be sure to read his guide to it.

Another wide-ranging guide in this issue isn't a 2012 retrospective at all: it's an extensive and affectionate retrospective on Susan Dexter's oeuvre, written by Mike Barrett, which considers where her work has developed from and where – should her books labeled “forthcoming” ever come forth – it might be going. Barrett covers the way her published works relate to one another, both in her use and undermining of character types, and specific recurrent interests such as unicorns, as well as how her writing matured over the course of the books.

Dr Who fans will be very much aware that this year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the show. While there wasn't a full season on television, there were plenty of audio plays, as Jones discusses. The show's heart lies in broadcast television, however, and it's that which Stephen Baxter discusses in his regular column. The BSFA President compares the major themes of the show's fifth season (1967-8) to its thirty-third (2012) to tease out the ways in which *Dr Who*'s treatment of the past, present, and future reflects contemporary concerns of its respective decades.

Fred Hoyle's *The Black Cloud* is also very much a product of its time, as Andy Sawyer explains in this issue's Foundation Favourites. A true “cosy catastro-

phe”, as Sawyer argues, the 1957 novel deals with the tensions of climate change, crop failure, and nuclear explosions from the safety of the Cotswolds.

If Hoyle's novel deals with the physical annihilation of much of humanity almost as an aside while on Earth, then James Tiptree Jr.'s story “And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side” is, in its way, its opposite. Not only does no one die, but emotion and addictive relationships are the crux of the tale. Paul Kincaid unpicks the context and implications of the story, which is about literal addiction to aliens, sex, and living in farflung outer space. It's about the desolation of compulsive yearning.

Finally, of course, Martin Lewis brings you the BSFA Review, with plenty of recent books reviewed by the BSFA's reviewers. Terry Martin's column on comics, *Picture This*, will return in the next issue of *Vector*.

We don't currently have any one person doing layout on *Vector*. Ben Jeapes and John Medany have both put recent time and effort into issues. My particular thanks to Alex Bardy for taking on this one on top of his usual *Focus* duties. *Vector*, like all BSFA projects, relies on the generosity of volunteers to accomplish everything it does.

The BSFA Awards booklet was originally going to be posted out with this issue of *Vector*, but we decided it was more urgent that the booklet arrive promptly than that *Vector 272* show up with an accompanying bonus. Happily, the awards administrator, Donna Scott, reports that the Awards booklet arriving two weeks before the voting deadline has indeed led to a substantial increase in advanced voting for the awards.

Speaking of which, since I'm doing final edits on this issue right after Eastercon this year, we have this year's BSFA Award winners! Best Novel went to Jack Glass, by Adam Roberts (Gollancz); Best Short Fiction to “Adrift on the Sea of Rains” by Ian Sales (Whippleshield Books); Best Artwork to Blacksheep for the cover of Jack Glass; and Best Non-Fiction to *The World SF Blog*, whose editor-in-chief is Lavie Tidhar. Congratulations!

As ever, we encourage your letters of comment or response for inclusion in future issues. Please send them to vector.editors@gmail.com.

Shana Worthen
Editor

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by Julie Dillon
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The Descendants of d'Artagnan: Alexandre Dumas and SFF

by Kari Sperring

“By Jupiter! What villainy have you done now,” cried Porthos. “Four rocketeers allow a wretched man, who begged their aid, to be arrested in the midst of them? And a gentleman ready to drink with a space marine?”

“Porthos,” said Aramis, “Athos has already told you how dull you are, and I agree with him. D’Artagnan, you are a fine man, and when you are Commander of the Rocketeers, I shall ask you to get me command of a star cruiser.”

“Oh. I’m completely in the void,” Porthos said. “Do you approve of what d’Artagnan has done, too, Athos?”

“Absolutely!” said Athos. “More than that: I congratulate him.”

“Now, gentlemen,” said d’Artagnan, ignoring the baffled Porthos, “Our motto is All For One and One For All, is it not?”

“Yes, but...” said Porthos.

“Hold out your hand and swear,” Aramis and Athos said, simultaneously.

Persuaded by their enthusiasm, though still muttering under his breath, Porthos put out his hand, and the four friends repeated in one voice their formal motto. “All For One and One For All!”

“That’s it,” said d’Artagnan, as if command came naturally to him. “Now, back to our bunks. And be careful: for remember, from henceforth, we are at war with the admiral!”

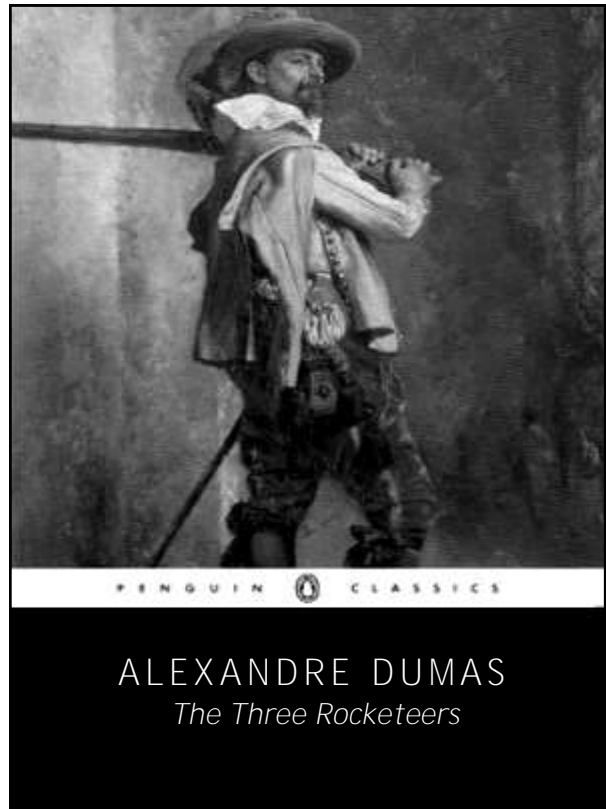
If Dumas had lived in the twentieth century, rather than the nineteenth, I like to think he would have written science fiction. He was, *par excellence*, a pulp writer, a writer who lived to write adventure, colour, excitement. He was drawn, life-long, to the showy, the bold. He loved to be in the limelight and he wrote characters who shared his enthusiasms. He was proud of his father, the French revolutionary General Dumas, and yet he loved kings and aristocrats. He was proud of his mixed race heritage (his grandmother was a woman of colour) and wrote sympathetically about peoples from many places and times. He collected new experiences, and he liked to be at the front of everything.

Dumas was a Romantic, in the original sense of that word. Along with Victor Hugo, Eugène Delacroix, Alfred de Musset and Alfred de Vigny, among others, he set out to challenge the pre-existing conventions of French literature, and to create new models for characterisation, action, and form. He began his writing life as a playwright, producing blood-and-thunder melodramas full of forbidden love, daring escapes, duels, secrets and violent denouements and was quickly a success. But he was hugely productive, and the theatre couldn't cover all the projects he came up with. He turned to writing serial fiction for the growing market for *feuilletons*, novels serialised in the pages of newspapers.

He was already famous as a playwright within France, but it was the *feuilletons* that were to make him a superstar, at home and abroad. Other writers wrote this way, Hugo and Dickens amongst them, and were to become equally celebrated. All three have left their traces on later literature. But Dumas was, I think, to become the most influential on what would become science fiction and fantasy. If you were to draw a line back through the complicated history of our genre, it would eventually reach him. His sensibilities – the blending of fast-paced action, high emotion and pure escapist melodrama – breathe through the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Robert E Howard, and, in more moderate forms, have worked their way on down to modern day writers, like Steven Brust and Pierre Pevel, Violette Malan and Ellen Kushner, via Fritz Leiber, E. E. Doc Smith, Roger Zelazny, Jack Vance, Andre Norton, Marion Zimmer Bradley and even Tolkien.

What Dumas did was to make the action hero the centre of the stage, in a way that his predecessors did not. Most of his influences were theatrical, though he was also well-read in history and the novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. But he did not come from a wealthy family: his father had been a soldier who worked his way up to general in the armies of revolutionary France, but died fairly young. His mother, who brought him up, was the daughter of an innkeeper. Dumas received an education from the local priest, but it was not of high standard and he was not a diligent student. In particular, he was not well-grounded in Latin and Greek classical literature and that made all the difference. The French theatre of the time was still wedded to the model of Clas-

sical Greek theatre, with strict rules that meant, among other things, that all the action — fights, murders, chases, discoveries — took place off stage and were described to the audience after they had supposedly happened. Comic playwrights, notably Molière, sometimes broke this rule, but comic plays and satires were deemed of less merit than tragedies. Dumas' melodramas set out to flout the three unities of classical theatre, with on-set fights, poisonings, attacks, abductions. And he carried this over into his novels, where again the dominant literary form was more formal and static. Not for him the long discussions of moral values and behaviour, the desire to inform and educate the reader, the wish to guide or influence society. Dumas' novels were meant, above all, to entertain. If a historical fact or character did not fit the story he wanted to tell, he changed it. If a myth was more entertaining than the reality, he used the myth. His Catherine de Medicis is a monster, seeking power and control, his Richelieu a master schemer who plots against the queen, his Mazarin a self-interested miser, his Louis XIV a romantic hero. In his approach to fact, Dumas was fearless.



It's an approach sf shares. From the early days of John Campbell's 'scientifiction', the genre takes facts and extrapolates stories. The tragic inevitability that underpins 'The Cold Equations' depends on mathematics, physics and a kind of narrow utilitarian politics, but in its flavour, it's close kin to the plot arc Dumas presented in his 1845 novel *La Reine Margot (Marguerite de Valois)*. The necessities of physics and the necessities of sixteenth century French court politics create the same claustrophobic atmosphere, and impel the same deadly outcomes. It's a tactic well-known to literary tragedy, but in both cases here the drama — which is really melodrama — is driven

by an awareness of reader sentimentality, not by language or depth of characterisation. In a genre which has sometimes derided or denied the need for ‘feelings’ in plotting – we don’t want no romance in our skiffy – the legacy of Dumas provides the same emotional payoff and reader investment. The situation itself and the stakes provide the romance, in the older sense of that word.

This is perhaps clearest in the friendship trope which permeates a lot of sf, and particularly heroic fantasy. The bonds between men – bonds of mutual friendship and loyalty – are a key theme in many of Dumas books. This is most obvious in *The Three Musketeers* and its sequels, but it lies at the core of many of his other major works, too, and friendship betrayed is the great driving force of the plot of *Monte Cristo*. Dumas’ heroes – d’Artagnan and his colleagues; La Mole and Coconnas (*La Reine Margot*); Bussy and his fellow *mignons* (*La Dame de Monsoreau* [*Chicot the Jester*]), even Canolles and Cauvignac (*La Guerre des Femmes* [*The Women’s War*]) – operate in a tightly woven world of male alliances, friendships, antagonisms, conflicts and honour. And these relationships define and shape their lives in ways that their relationships with women often do not. This is not to accuse Dumas of misogyny: his heroes love, passionately, and listen to and respect the women they love and serve, but the centres of their lives lie in this very male world of friendship, honour and shared action.

In this, Dumas differs from Dickens and Poe, whose focus is more often on male-female relationships and on family matters. He also differs from most of his theatrical precursors. But he stands in direct line with the other great writers of the adventure novel – Haggard, Kipling, Stevenson, Sabatini, Weyman. His heroes are, to borrow a phrase, Manly Men doing Manly things. D’Artagnan and his friends are the grandfathers not only of John Carter and Conan, out there fighting alone, but of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser, Miles Vorkosigan and Ivan Vorpatril, Elric and Moonglum, and all the other partnerships, crews and teams that fill sf. Male friendship is an uncomfortable subject in much of the Anglophone world, and has become more so over the course of the twentieth and twenty first centuries – in much of the Anglophone world it is now restricted to children’s fiction, war stories and some literary fiction. And, in the last thirty or so years, in sf the writers of close, non-homoerotic male friendships have tended to be women. The sensibilities inherited from Dumas, however, have provided a way of negotiating this minefield. When Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser climb the mountain Stardock in Leiber’s novella of the same name, their dialogue and emotional connection – affectionate, competitive, taking turns to patronise and to compliment, to tease and to applaud – recalls the banter of d’Artagnan and Porthos as allies in *Twenty Years After* and the spirit of adventure in which they embark on their money-making schemes is the same, though Fafhrd and the Mouser are after a rumour of diamonds, and d’Artagnan and Porthos aim to aid a king. The focus is on the characters and their desires, including mercenary ones, as well as on the grand themes of honour and conquest and victory, which are assumed to be appropriate to swashbuck-

lers and to *soi-disant* ‘heroic’ fantasy. These latter themes are there, and they are often pivotal, but they are not necessarily to the forefront in how the heroes act and feel. Only Athos, of the musketeers, is truly high-minded, and he is also a drunk, sometimes a boor, and certainly a snob. D’Artagnan is brave, intelligent, devious, romantic, and venaal, the prototype of the Mouser and Miles and Vlad Taltos and a long step away from the Greek-influenced heroes of French stage and even the Shakespearean ones whom Dumas admired (his closest analogue is probably Benedick – but the latter can be cruel, which d’Artagnan never is). The musketeers, La Mole and Coconnas, Bussy, Monte Cristo are all flawed heroes, not in the Hamlet sense, where the flaw destroys kingdoms, but in the everyday sense, that breeds irritations and mistakes and believability. The devious Bussy (*Chicot the Jester*) is an ancestor of Dominic Flandry, that clever showman (who also has a touch of Aramis to him), Monte Cristo of Miles Vorkosigan, an outsider to his own people, fighting for status and recognition and the exercise of his own genius.

When he worked for the newspapers, Dumas was paid by the line. He was a fast and prolific writer: it was not hard for him to fill pages, but he was also a profligate spender of money, and he always needed to earn more. One consequence of this was his adoption – some claim his invention – of fast-paced dialogue. Earlier writers, like Scott and Radcliffe and Madame de Lafayette, wrote densely packed, paragraph heavy prose. Their characters tended to make speeches or pronounce, rather than speak naturally or interrupt each other. Dumas’ financial problems and his pulp milieu required a different approach. His characters can and do speechify and proclaim (as d’Artagnan does in the scene I adapted at the start of this piece) but they also speak with familiar, everyday rhythms, in short sentences or incomplete ones. The effect is much more naturalistic than the rolling periods of Richardson or even the formality of Austen, and it is something else that has carried over from these early adventure novels into sf. Howard’s characters perhaps owe more to Scott in how they speak, but by the time we get to Heinlein and Leiber, the rhythms of Dumas are clear. The rise of ‘brisk masculine prose’ (a phrase I detest) is attributed to Hemmingway and Chandler, perhaps because they wrote in English, but when it comes to dialogue (and also to action scenes) Dumas was there before them, and he lent his tools to the early pioneers of sf.

And he’s still here, in the middle of us. The quick-handed thieves and compromised swordsmen of fantasy; the brave marines and clever sergeants and quick-thinking pilots of space opera, male and female, are the children of Dumas and his broad-brush, fast-paced, big canvas adventures. We’d be a flatter, quieter genre without him. We might, perhaps, be a more respectable one: that other, early great progenitor Mary Shelley has long been integrated into canon, while Dumas remains debatable even in France. But we’d have less fun.

And that, I think, would be a shame.

Diana Wynne Jones and the Oxfordshire Countryside in Power of Three

by Julia Cresswell

Diana Wynne Jones had an extraordinary ability to evoke place in her books. While many were imaginary, she regularly wove real places that had been part of her life into her fantasy. She is most closely associated with Bristol, her home from 1976, which she used in works such as *Deep Secret* and *Fire and Hemlock*, and she used her childhood home in Thaxsted in Essex, in the semi-autobiographical *Day of the Ghost*. Conspicuously missing from her books is Oxford, both her place of study and home for most of the first 20 years of married life. Perhaps this is because she is reputed not to have enjoyed life there as a don's wife, feeling that the other wives looked down on her. To the best of my knowledge the only time she introduced Oxford in her fiction is when Polly is a student there in *Fire and Hemlock*, and that in a way which leaves the reader with no sense of place at all. However, there is one work in which she makes detailed use not only of the countryside outside Oxford, but also of what were then current events affecting its future.

Power of Three (1976) is unmistakably set on an area of land some six miles north east of Oxford called Otmoor.

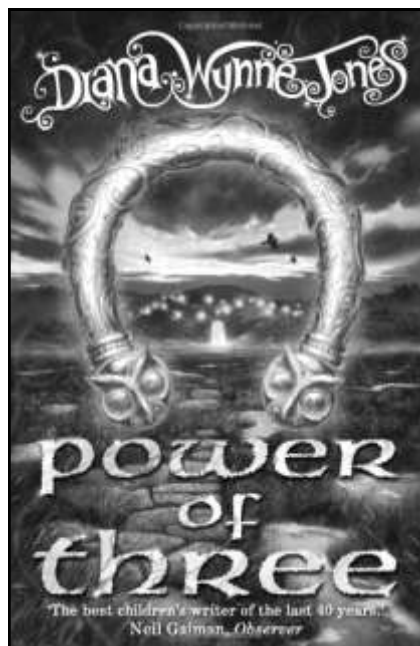
For those not familiar with it, *Power of Three* is children's novel set somewhere called The Moor, a flat land of reeds, pools of still water and mists, inhabited by three races, the people from whose point of view the story is told, their enemies, the water-dwelling Dorigs, and the predatory Giants, with whom they have as little

as possible to do. Children from all three races get to know each other, spurred on initially through curiosity. They then act together to make peace between the adults of the races when they discover that The Moor is due to be turned into a reservoir to provide London

with water, driving them all out of their homes. Only if they can work together to find an alternative source of water can The Moor be saved. (This is of course only the bare bones of the story, relevant to this article. I leave the pleasure of discovering the meat to those who have not yet read the book).

How does all this relate to Otmoor? There is obviously the name. Otmoor is an Old English name, meaning 'Otta's Moor'; moor being used in an Old English sense meaning 'low-lying marshy area' (related to 'mere', it is found in many place names, and in the water bird, the moorhen), rather than the sense of 'upland' that we use today. Locals refer to it simply as 'The Moor'. It is a strange place, formed by the

River Ray flowing into a circular plain lying into a bowl of low hills, before finally finding its way out to join the Cherwell, before it in turn joins the Thames at Oxford. It is an extraordinarily atmospheric place, often wet and misty even at the height of summer, just as Jones describes her Moor:- 'The Moor was never quite free of mist. Even at bright noon that bright summer day there was a smokiness to the trees and the very corn, so that it could have been a green landscape reflected in one of its



own sluggish, peaty dykes.’ (p 7-8). While there is a minor road that runs all round the marsh, much of the interior can still only be reached on foot, although the Romans did manage to put a road right across the middle, parts of which is still used as track or footpath today. Because of this, Otmoor is most often viewed from above, looking down on its small, ditch-drained fields from the hills. This gives it its greatest fame among readers of speculative fiction, for this grid-work of fields is thought to have been the inspiration for Lewis Carroll’s checkerboard fields in *Through the Looking Glass*. In addition, the bucolic way of life there is also said to have been the inspiration behind Tolkien’s *Farmer Giles of Ham*, while local resident Susan Hill used it extensively in *The Magic Apple Tree*. So Jones is in good company. For historians, Otmoor is best known for the riots of 1830. Otmoor itself has no villages, but is surrounded by settlements, known as the seven towns of Otmoor. In the past, the inhabitants of these villages had commoners rights to the moor, farming the dryer parts, grazing their cattle on the rich marsh grasses, gathering rushes and osiers, hunting water fowl, and fishing. They had their own court to administer how these assets were shared out, fostering a sense of community and independence. From the early nineteenth century this common land had gradually been enclosed, greatly to the loss of small farmers and the landless. In September of 1830, 29 farmers banded together to cut the dykes that were draining and enclosing the land they felt had been taken from

them, and a good number of other local people followed their example. Troops were called in and arrested 44 men, who were sent off to Oxford prison in carts. Unfortunately for the authorities, this happened at the time of the St Giles Fair, an annual event that still closes part of central Oxford every September. News of the arrests had already reached the crowds, and when the carts tried to pass through the Fair, the crowd rioted and released the prisoners to the cry of ‘Otmoor For Ever!’. In later years the Moor was used by the military for bombing practice, and in World War II, it was also used as a dummy airfield, designed to attract and waste enemy bombs. In recent years it has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and parts returned to natural marshland which, managed by the RSPB, have become a major attraction for birders. Part of it still remains in military use as a rifle range. Thus its relative inaccessibility means that writers about The Moor tend to use words like ‘hidden’, ‘secret’, and ‘mysterious’.

All this has made The Moor a place of myths. When I first moved to Oxford, a few years before *Power of Three* was published, I remember being told that Otmoor was below sea level, that the inhabitants of Otmoor were the original people of the area, highly inbred, and that many of them were born with six fingers. None of this is, of course, true, although there is some substance behind the legends. While Otmoor is not below sea level, it is very low-lying, being only 59 meters above sea-level.



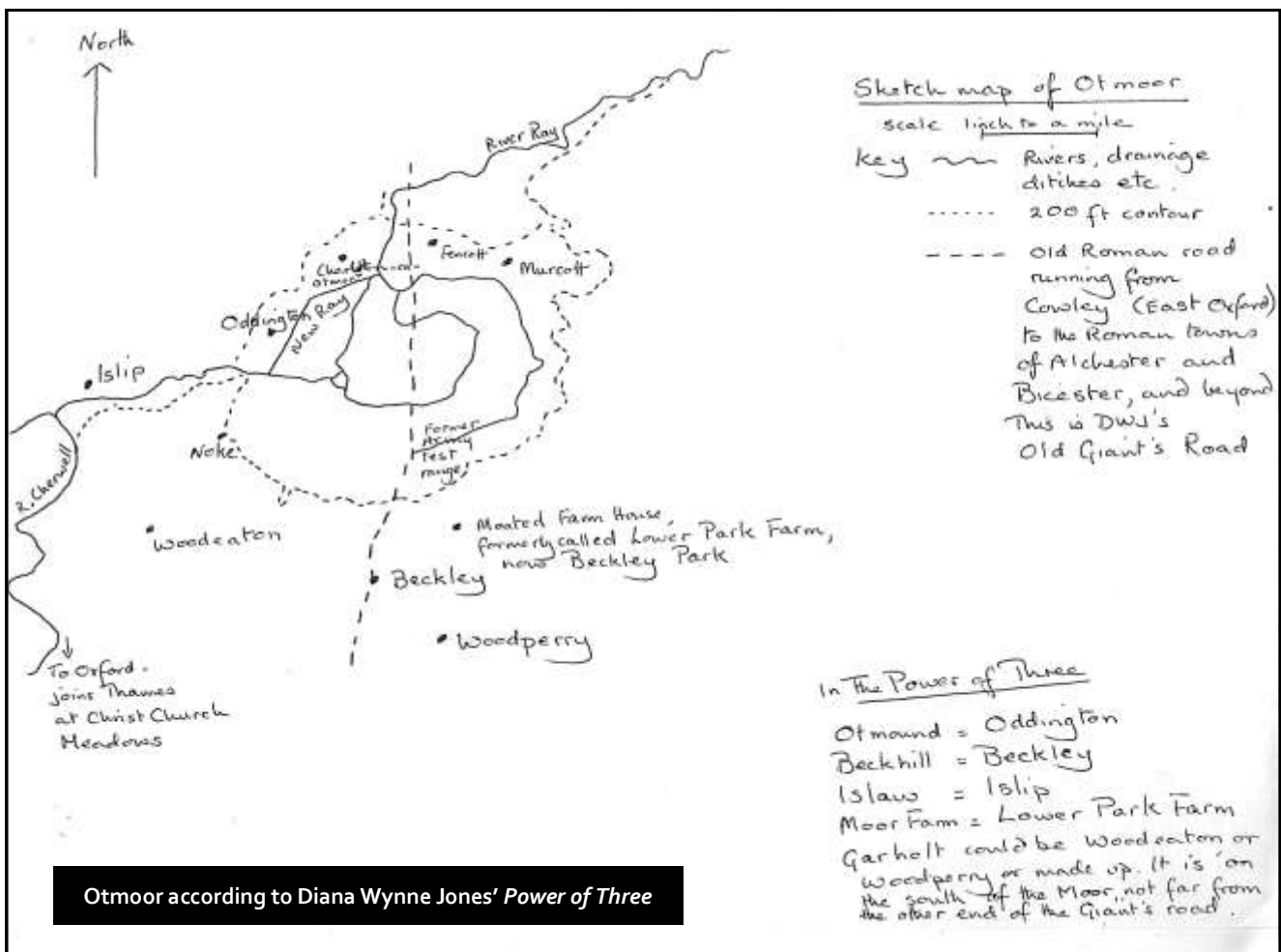
General view of Otmoor – wet and misty even in summer

The villages are very old, being listed in the Domesday Book, their designation as 'towns' coming from the Old English word *tun* 'settlement'. They have a very strong sense of social cohesion, regarding 'Otmoor folk' as set apart from other people. This is one of the reasons that from 1965 until the late 90s the Biological Anthropology department of Oxford University carried out extensive research into the genetics, physiology and society of Otmoor, researches that G. A. Harrison, the professor in charge says 'tend to confirm the human biological distinctiveness of the region especially in the past'.

How does this fit in with *Power of Three*? Jones certainly creates an atmosphere consistent with the secret and mysterious reputation of the Moor. But there are many more, more concrete allusions to the real place. She plays with place names. As we read the book, we come to realise that the 'people' from whose view-point we see events are not *homo sapiens*, but smaller, slighter people, magic users, reminiscent of the Sidh or Fey. The Giants are *homo sapiens*. The people live, like the Sidh, in green mounds on which their sheep graze and which they can use magic words to open and close, so that their dwellings can not be detected. Otmoor is surrounded by low hills on which sheep graze. Jones has used the names of Otmoor villages for these mounds: the real village of Oddington becomes Otmound (the Odd- of Oddinton is historically the same as the Ot- or Otmoor); Beckley becomes Beckhill and Islip, Islaw ('law' is a place name element meaning 'mound', so

matches the other mound names). The main characters' home of Garholt does not match any village, being placed 'on the south of the Moor, not far from the other end of the Giant's road'. This would fit Beckley, had the name not already been used, for the Giant's road, with its ancient stones hidden under the grass quite clearly a reference to the Roman road across The Moor. Perhaps we should identify Garholt with Woodperry or Woodeaton. The road's introduction into the story seems to have been purely one of Jones' *jeux d'esprit*, introduced to please those in the know, for it plays no structural part in the plot, although it does help add to the atmosphere of antiquity. Similarly, throughout the first chapter the rifle range is obviously referred to, as in 'It was one of those times when the Giants were at war among themselves. From time to time, from beyond the mist at the edge of the Moor, came the blank thump and rumble of their weapons'. This adds to the sense of ominousness, but is otherwise unexplained in the text.

The antiquity and apartness of the Otmoor folk is echoed in a debate between the children as to whose ancestors were first on the Moor. Brenda, the 'giantess' and daughter of a local farmer, says she is descended from older inhabitants than Gerald, the 'giant' whose family owns the local big house and came over with the Normans; the Sidh-type children whose race the Dorig call Lymen, claim greater antiquity; the Dorig claim the greatest. (All the children object to the names the other



racers call them, and say their race is 'people'. Underlying similarity despite apparent differences is one of the themes of the book.) The Lymen might perhaps be given the greatest antiquity, given they live in round dwellings, as used in the Iron Age, although the Dorig claim that the Lymen's coming was what drove them underwater. Jones seems to link the Dorig with Anglo-Saxon antiquity.

two other sites, in Buckinghamshire, and focusing on romantic Otmoor. Things then went quiet for a while, in part because the Department of Transport was also interested in the land for a motorway, but on the 8th of February 1973 James Lees-Milne, famous for his work with the National Trust in preserving country houses, wrote an agonized letter to the *Times*, saying 'I am not

concerned with the need for an extension of the M40 motorway from Oxford to Birmingham, or for a new reservoir... Otmoor is an oasis of medieval England... It also happens to be the haunt of rare flora and fauna. Beckley Park on the edge of Otmoor is one of the most unspoilt and romantic little great houses in the home counties. I do not exaggerate. The very idea of eliminating Otmoor and destroying the setting of Beckley either by a motorway or by a reservoir is absolutely beyond my comprehension'. This brought the problem to the attention of the great and the good, and only the next day a letter appeared in the *Times* signed by no fewer than four heads of Oxford colleges, and, among others, Iris Murdoch, starting 'Some of your readers may be acquainted with Beckley Park, on the edge of Otmoor in Oxfordshire.



The Tudor hunting lodge, alternating between beautiful and ugly, which is the basis for the house in *Power of Three*

At one point in the book the Lymen children are taken down to the Dorig underwater 'halls' (Wynne Jones uses this Anglo-Saxon term for their dwellings) in a scene that recalls Beowulf being dragged down to her underwater hall by Grendel's Mother, and their dwellings are underwater but dry, in a similar way to her hall. It may be significant that Brenda, the Anglo-Saxon 'giantess', persists in calling the Dorig 'Dories'. As well as emphasizing their fishiness, this seems to reflect what would have been an Old English pronunciation of a word ending in -ig. For example, the word spelled 'monig' in *Beowulf* becomes 'many' in modern English. On the one hand, Jones has characters mispronounce names for no apparent reason elsewhere — for example Nick initially calls Grundo 'Grundoon' in *The Merlin Conspiracy* — but on the other, the Oxford English course that she would have followed devoted an excessive amount of time to philology and Old English, and she has already been shown philologizing place names in the book. And she was, after all, married to arguably the foremost scholar of medieval English literature of his generation, part of whose work would have been teaching philology to undergraduates.

These are the background elements. The crux of *Power of Three's* plot is inspired by events that started in July 1972, when the Water Resources Board proposed three possible sites for a new reservoir, one of them Otmoor. On July 8th a piece appeared in the *Times*, then still the newspaper of record, announcing this under the headline 'Proposed reservoir in Oxfordshire would flood farms and homes', mentioning only in passing the

This beautiful Tudor brick hunting lodge, set in magnificent topiary gardens, and surrounded by its moats, has been continuously occupied as a private dwelling since its construction in the sixteenth century. If a proposal at present under consideration by the Thames Conservancy to flood Otmoor ...is carried out, this house, together with Otmoor itself, will disappear for ever beneath the water.' In the end, the motorway proved even more of a threat than the reservoir, but was eventually built on a different route. This was achieved after massive opposition over many years, which included the brilliant device of buying a field on the proposed route (inevitably renamed Alice's Field), and selling it on in tiny £2 lots and urging buyers to sell on again, thereby making the expense and complication of compulsory purchase well-nigh insurmountable.

There can be no doubt that the house in *Power of Three* is Beckley Park (marked on some older maps as Lower Park Farm). This is the description of the house given in the book, when the three Lyman children, first see it:

'Gair's first thought was that it was ugly. It was square and tall and dark, with clusters of tall chimneys. It was built of dark bricks, and the quantities of little panes in its windows were dark too. It looked sealed and sad. Dark bushes had been clipped square above the dark brick wall in front of the house. Dark summer trees stood on either side

of it. It seemed to give off darkness into the bright misty sunlight. If you were used to round houses, it was very queer. But Gair saw that it was old and, in its way, graceful. Queerly, it was surrounded with water. There was a dyke or a moat under the wall with the dark bushes, and this moat had a sort of bridge over it, leading to the front door. A second dyke, neither so large or so full, ran close to the trees where they lay. In between was a stony stretch where an old dog was wandering.'

This is an exact description of Beckley Park. The moat and its bridge to the front door are most distinctive, and later play an important part in the plot. Even the way that the house 'pulses', to use Wynne Jones later term, between ugly and beautiful (in the book because of a curse) is true to life, for the house does indeed manage somehow to be both.

Overall, for anyone who knows the area and its history, there can be no mistaking that Otmoor, with its reputation for secluded otherness, and the Tudor hunting lodge of Beckley Park, once threatened with drowning to provide water for London, just as in the book, are at the core of *Power of Three*.

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The moat and bridge that play such
an important role in the story



Dialogue and Doomsday: Comedy and Conviction in Connie Willis and Oscar Wilde

by Gillian Polack

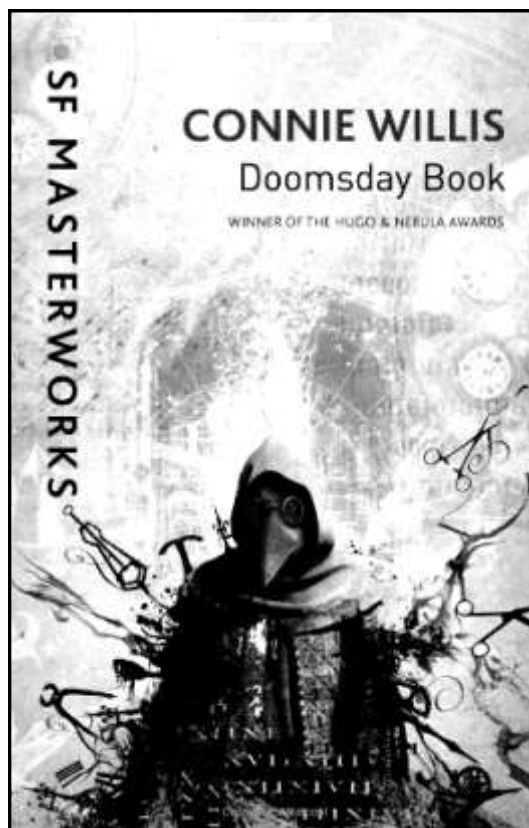
Connie Willis' dialogue and the focus of her fiction fascinate me. While she has been greeted by readers and critics as a great science fiction writer, it strikes me that the strength in her writing is not necessarily from the science fictional approach. The literary techniques she uses in her time travel books have influenced the way she is perceived and, I suspect, has been a major component in supporting her reputation. *Doomsday Book* is one of these novels, using the relationship between past and present, using a theory of sending scholars back to investigate history or specific elements of the past using time drops and adding the potential for errors in reaching the past as the basis for building plot and tension. This structure has caused Willis to develop a strong reputation among non-historians for presenting accurate history and a convincing sense of historical place (see the reviews here, for instance: <http://bit.ly/17H4mwN>). This is despite how the historians in *Doomsday Book* don't seem to know much about historical research or, indeed, much about the Middle Ages. Kivrin Engle is a student and Gilchrist, the senior Medievalist, makes errors so obvious that even the historically-naïve reader can see that they are errors — these two factors are key to setting up tension in the novel and it is interesting that they do not also establish a lack of trust with Willis' use of history.

In other words, it is not the precise research into a place or time, that's key to Willis' writing. Willis achieves this through creating a Middle Ages that appears to be far more functional and detailed than her characters' historical knowledge: Willis' fallible historians are not the main

sources of the readers' understanding of Willis' Middle Ages nor of their assessment of it. This is despite the fact that one reviewer says:

A great strength of Doomsday Book is Willis's research, which must have been extensive and meticulous. The passages set in the middle ages are exquisitely realized. The filth and grit and vibrancy of the "contemps" are all there, and the picture that is painted of the way people actually lived is much more vivid and real than anything I've ever encountered in a history book, or even in much historical fiction.

<http://shereadsbooks.org/2009/review-doomsday-book-by-connie-willis/>



Willis' writing convinces many readers that she is an astonishingly good historian. In reality, however, the history is convincing through her exploitation of the knowledge gap between the historians depicted and the Middle Ages depicted, suggesting to the reader that the reader has access to deeper knowledge than the historians.

Despite reviewer focus on the historicity of her time travel novels, Willis' writing owes a significant part of its attraction to other factors. I would argue that the charm her writing has for readers often derives from her focus on human beings as an entertainment rather than from the historical elements of the work, which are, in effect, exotic settings for this entertaining human behaviour. More precisely — and what I shall focus on for the remainder

of this essay — the writing techniques and character presentation Willis uses are shared with (and maybe influenced by) classic British writers who focus on this through speech and repartee.

This direction shows itself most clearly in *To Say Nothing of the Dog*. Her plotting and the cultural references clearly acknowledge a debt to Jerome K. Jerome, from the boating expedition up the Thames to specific problems faced by characters, such as the finding of the correct train. The debt is so large, that the two books can be read satisfactorily in tandem, each echoing the other.

Yet Jerome K. Jerome is not the only influence on Willis' writing. To prevent the matter getting out of hand, I shall use the work of Oscar Wilde to demonstrate the patterns of speech and characterisation that Willis shares. I will look at Willis' writing in relation to key aspects of the dialogue of Oscar Wilde and to discover just how strong her debt is to Wilde's own view of humankind, which is a curious mixture of irony and idealism. My main focus will be on Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* and on Willis' *Doomsday Book*.

A key factor that Willis has in common with Wilde is that their main characters have a high credibility factor: it is easy to enter into the belief that they are real. I know people who are as selfish and emotionally stupid as Lord Illingsworth in *A Woman of No Importance*. I know people who are as selfishly and emotionally stupid as Gilchrist in *Doomsday Book*. None of them are (thank goodness) Medievalists.

Both men make their decisions from a position of privilege and assume that their needs are more important and their opinions more reliable than those of other people. They also assume that their perceived needs will be the key factor in decisions concerning the lives of others — Illingsworth assumes his son will sacrifice his personal values for the privilege of being his son and Gilchrist assumes that the project Kivrin is sent on will be successful, simply because he wants it to be. Neither of them put the concomitant effort into making these things work, for theirs are positions of privilege: the world is supposed to operate in a way that benefits them, quite specifically.

Where Wilde's characters move through a careful minuet, Willis' characters dance a faster-paced and apparently more chaotic dance. While Willis presents a sense of muddle that resolves and then gets worse until it finally resolves properly, Wilde presents a situation which has a half resolution and then a full one. It is only in his fully comic plays ('The Importance of Being Ernest' being the chief example) that he plays with confusion to the same degree as Willis.

Each of Wilde's characters is introduced in turn and their position in the play is immediately obvious and made so through the dialogue. Willis has a similar method of establishing the tone and key characters (*Doomsday*

Book, for instance, begins with Mr Dunworthy asking "Am I too late?"), but moves quickly into adding irritant upon irritant. The sequences of irritants and interruptions mask the careful progress of the dance and add to the sense of its naturalness. They also add to the tension, through interruptions leading to characters postponing or not making important decisions.

The most distinctive element of both Wilde's plays and Willis' books is, of course, the dialogue. Many interruptions by those irritating elements in Willis' comedy of manners is done through dialogue, and, of course, almost all the minuet in Wilde's plays come from dialogue. Dialogue, rather than action, informs our understanding of the characters and their lives. Like Wilde's plays, the conversations in

Doomsday Book are not well-grounded in description or action. Little background is given during the extensive conversational scenes. Willis uses this to carry situations quite far beyond rationality, sometimes for comic effect and sometimes for tragic. This technique also allows her to build up the sense of tension alongside the sense of the vaguely silly. At its best and most consistent (in *To Say Nothing of the Dog*) this technique works brilliantly. However, it is not always successful. In *All Clear*, for instance, the technique fails to always provide sufficient background for the reader to follow the plot.

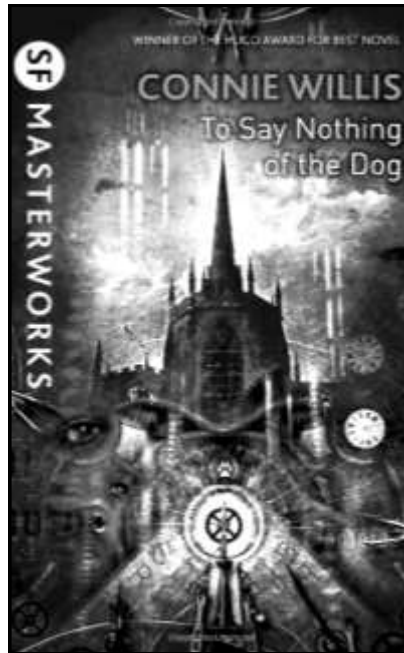
While Willis uses the interrupted idea (and even the interrupted sentence) to build up tension or to compile error upon error, and will have characters mutter, "That can't be right," while leaving elucidation until later, Wilde uses them only occasionally. When Wilde uses abbreviated sentences or ideas, which is seldom, this is what they are like:

LORD ILLINGWORTH. The world is simply divided into two classes – those who believe the incredible, like the public – and those who do the improbable –

MRS. ALLONBY. Like yourself?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Yes; I am always astonishing myself. It is the only thing that makes life worth living.

In other words, they are as much a part of the careful dance as the uninterrupted sentences. Willis' dialogue, therefore looks more natural to a modern gaze, even when both are using the same technique. This carefully contrived naturalness is one of the hallmarks of Willis' dialogue.



For Wilde's plays it is obvious that conversations are used as both scene setter and character setter. The words in a Wilde play carry the burden of the plot. For instance, in the first act of *A Woman of No Importance* Illingworth is explained:

LADY CAROLINE. I think not, John. Well, you couldn't come to a more charming place than this, Miss Worsley, though the house is excessively damp, quite unpardonably damp, and dear Lady Hunstanton is sometimes a little lax about the people she asks down here. [To SIR JOHN.] Jane mixes too much. Lord Illingworth, of course, is a man of high distinction. It is a privilege to meet him. And that member of Parliament, Mr. Kettle –

SIR JOHN. Kelvil, my love, Kelvil.

LADY CAROLINE. He must be quite respectable. One has never heard his name before in the whole course of one's life, which speaks volumes for a man, nowadays. But Mrs. Allonby is hardly a very suitable person.

In the work of both Wilde and Willis plot development may well be intentionally slowed down when a conversation is being held for the sake of wit or a humorous situation. For instance, in *A Woman of No Importance* an incident illustrates character, but does not at all advance the plot:

LADY CAROLINE. I believe this is the first English country house you have stayed at, Miss Worsley?

HESTER. Yes, Lady Caroline.

LADY CAROLINE. You have no country houses, I am told, in America?

HESTER. We have not many.

The mistakes made and how they are corrected show the character of the key players: in this case the intelligence as well as status as well as sensibility. Also the level of judgement ("quite unpardonably damp") is given partly for humour, partly for character, partly to establish a sense of internal repartee. Because characters correct themselves and this works to establish a conversation style and also to present key speech characteristics, the longer speeches have a value that counterbalances the slowing of the plot development. Likewise, the aphorisms work through this speech pattern: they establish humour through opposites. This is Wilde's hallmark style and not limited to one play or one character.

Willis, likewise, demonstrates key characteristics of her players through their speech patterns. The directness of fourteenth century Agnes; Gilchrist's sense of privilege; Dunworthy's capacity to interrogate situations: all indicate the role that these characters play in the drama.

Another technique both authors use is to demarcate the young through intense emotion in a young person, expressed in a slightly socially incorrect fashion. This indicates their need to learn and that their learning is

going to play a key role in the plot. In *A Woman of No Importance*, for instance, Hester's intensity expresses

itself in pronouncements such as, "I dislike Mrs. Allonby. I dislike her more than I can say." In Willis' case, the young person is Kivrin Engle, intense from the moment we meet her, saying, "I want to go to the Middle Ages."

Add this to a tendency for the two writers to create characters that know the detail but miss the big picture and who tend to be overbearing and bossy (in Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* Lady Caroline is this character and in *Doomsday Book* it is Gilchrist), and the links between the two writers strengthen.

Both writers carefully contextualise their characters. They do not operate outside a social system, but, in many ways, serve to illustrate how that system operates and where it is likely to fail. For

instance, they might mock social norms and political fashion, while demonstrating (in their mockery) the limits of the class such as here, in *A Woman of No Importance*:

KELVIL. It is the one subject of really national importance, nowadays, Lady Stutfield. I purpose addressing my constituents on the question before Parliament meets. I find that the poorer classes of this country display a marked desire for a higher ethical standard.

LADY STUTFIELD. How quite, quite nice of them.

LADY CAROLINE. Are you in favour of women taking part in politics, Mr. Kettle?

SIR JOHN. Kelvil, my love, Kelvil.

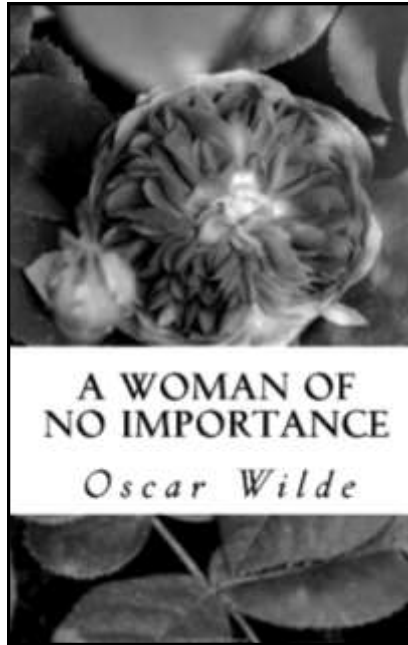
KELVIL. The growing influence of women is the one reassuring thing in our political life, Lady Caroline. Women are always on the side of morality, public and private.

Or they might show someone using the system too literally and pushing it beyond its tolerances: Kivrin Engle does this when she pushes to get back in time, using her student privilege and the very nature of the system and the people it produced to manipulate her way into the Middle Ages.

Repartee is deepened with genuine cynicism, pointing out how important this character will be. Actual emotion half-disguised under the normal dialogue indicates the characters to watch, for instance (again from *A Woman of No Importance*):

KELVIL. I am afraid you don't appreciate America, Lord Illingworth. It is a very remarkable country, especially considering its youth.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. The youth of America is their oldest tradition. It has been going on now for three hundred years. To hear them talk one would imagine they were in their first childhood. As far as civilisation goes they are in their second.



KELVIL. There is undoubtedly a great deal of corruption in American politics. I suppose you allude to that?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. I wonder.

While Wilde's repartee is measured, Willis' is short of breath. Wilde's sentences are complete and the thoughts entire save in particular circumstances, for instance, below, where the thought can be capped. It always has a measure and the feel of it (natural, cultured, pretentious) depends on the delivery of the actors rather than its underlying structure. One idea leads to another, with the irrationality that can mark real dialogue, but it always has the staged sense about it and the pacing is almost always cautious

The reader is left in no doubt about the central concerns of the key players. Core aspects of character are clarified by key phrases and sentences that underline what has been already expressed indirectly, for instance, Lady Caroline's calm statement of "I believe I am usually right" and Kivrin's even clearer "I want to go to the Middle Ages." These drivers are clear, and they are consistent throughout the narratives, underpinning the complexities and making an easy trail for the reader to follow.

At one level, both writers are playing with comedy. At another, they are both highly serious. Just to make sure that the reader doesn't miss either element, both writers

point clearly to the high seriousness that underlies the entertainment. In fact, one of the characters sums up the plot clearly, so that the watchful can see the moral underlying the fun. For instance, in the second act of *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth sums up the plot by saying, "Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them." In *Doomsday Book* the summaries tend to be in the form of reflections or assessments by Dunworthy.

This high seriousness is informed by a clear understanding of the world they observe. Both of them use writing as social commentary.

In a review of an Arts and Crafts talk by Crane published in his *Miscellanies*, Wilde stated ¹:

Then came the little bit of Socialism, very sensible and very quietly put. 'How can we have fine art when the worker is condemned to monotonous and mechanical labour in the midst of dull or hideous surroundings, when cities and nature are sacrificed to commercial greed, when cheapness is the god of Life?'

The theme of beauty is one that Wilde returns to in most of his writings. Clothes should be beautiful and surroundings should be likewise. He is promulgating a

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theory of his time (for he is around at the same time as William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement) when he says "we who are working in art cannot accept any theory of beauty in exchange for beauty itself, and, so far from desiring to isolate it in a formula appealing to the intellect, we, on the contrary, seek to materialise it in a form that gives joy to the soul through the senses." (Golden Square, Westminster, on June 30, 1883.) What Wilde sees himself as doing in all his work. Wit is an aspect of beauty and is practical, the way a craft is practical.

How is this demonstrated in his plays? *A Woman of No Importance* has beauty as one of its underlying themes. One of the major issues in it is reconciling inner beauty and outer. This is a significant factor in there being no fault assigned to various parties: it is more about this alignment and beauty itself than morality.

Willis' philosophy is not quite the same, but it's nonetheless there. The failure of systems is a failure that diminishes peoples' lives and the whole of the *Doomsday Book* is an illustration of this. She mocks her characters and laughs at them, but at the same time the destruction of the world around them (both in the fourteenth century and in the novel's near-future setting) demonstrates how important their lives are and how diminution of lives is intolerable. Gilchrist is the villain largely because of his incapacity to value others.

While the writing techniques used by these two authors have strong differences, there is a surprising amount of overlap. Their themes and formulae, however, are quite different. Wilde has his wicked but witty gentleman and his lady with a past and a Puritan heart. Willis has her good teacher/historian who solves problems and the bad one who is a problem and her careering-into-trouble plot lead.

The overlap here is in the context the characters operate in. All of these characters fit within quite small social circles and the impact of their actions affects those circles. Willis has larger things happening in the background (i.e. plague) but she is really only concerned

with the small circle. In this way, they are both examining Society, with all its smallness and inward gaze.

The key characters are important for both writers. The others are simply included for illustrative purposes. In Wilde this is often demonstrated by a secondary character showing their confusion about other people who do not themselves appear or who simply appear in passing. A good example of this in operation is when the Duchess of Berwick in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, remembers at first that she dismissed the maid without a character because her husband winked, and then remembering that she passed the maid to her sister. The poor are a group and worthy of ugly things in the Duchess of Berwick's mind. This is like Willis' attitude to the sick or the students who are not terribly important. Plague and trauma happen to them, but they are not realised as characters, only as objects for the attention of main characters or for purposes of plot development.

Both authors are, in short, writers of a particular variety of comedy of manners, Wilde with added wit and Willis with added action. Their basic plots are about the triumph of virtue within a restricted world.

It is the main characters and the way they are presented, especially through dialogue that bring Willis' books to life. The debt that she owes writers such as Wilde is important. Not a bad model to follow, in fact, for the smallness of lives hooks the emotions and when those lives hurt, they hook tears. This is how Willis brings readers along with her into the past and into the future: she carries them alongside her characters and their particular styles.

¹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, November 30, 1888, from *Miscellanies*



The Volunteer, or Editing Vector and beyond...

by David Wingrove

It used to be a regular thing. Something I did every couple of months. Getting into my blue mini van and heading west on the M4, out to Wokingham or Bracknell, and ultimately to Reading University, where I'd meet up with the other volunteers, to stuff envelopes with the latest BSFA goodies. I'd stay overnight with Tom Jones, or Keith Freeman, or Chris Fowler, driving back late on a Sunday night, through the thick mist that always seems to fill that part of the M4.

I used to be a volunteer back then. When someone asked me if I was interested in becoming membership secretary for the BSFA, I said yes, not realising just how much work was involved. And that's exactly how I got the other job — editing *Vector*, the BSFA's critical journal. Someone asked and I said yes.

By then, of course, I was reviewing for *Vector*, enjoying getting lots of free science fiction books through the post. Chris Fowler was editing it back then, producing stunning looking magazines, including a Star Wars special. The trouble with 'stunning' however is that it comes at a price, and the BSFA nearly went bankrupt. So when I took over, it was with a tight budget, and a basic-looking format. I was still membership secretary, too, so time was at a premium. Nonetheless, I tried to get the best material I could into those pages, with reviews, interviews, articles and a lively letter column.

My reviewers I inherited — Chris Morgan, Brian Stableford, Chris Evans, Andrew Darlington, Brian Griffin, Phil Stephensen-Payne, James Corley and others. Most of whom either were published SF writers, or who went on to be. There were articles on Phil Dick, Robert Sheckley, Richard Cowper, Brian Aldiss, Ian Watson, Chris Priest, Thomas M Disch and more, and I got to meet and interview writers like Fred Pohl, Frank Herbert, Bob Sheckley, Michael Coney and Richard Cowper. It was hard work, sure, but it was great fun, too. But perhaps the best thing that came out of those 3 years and eleven issues (the last three of which were properly printed, the BSFA's finances having reverted to a healthy state) were the friends I made; aspiring SF authors for the main part, almost all of whom are still my ma-

tes and almost all of whom have since been published — Ritchie Smith, Tony Richards, Chris Evans, Andy Muir, Mike Cobley, Rob Carter, Brian Griffin et al. And those years — late 1977 through to August 1979 — were good ones for me. Editing *Vector* confirmed me in my view that there was only one job I wanted — writing science fiction. Having met them, I wanted to do what Frank Herbert did... what Brian Aldiss and Richard Cowper and the rest all did, and make a living out of it. Which is why, once the August 1979 edition was put to bed (Number 94, the Season issue, if you want to be pedantic about it) I quit, both editorship and my job at NatWest bank and went back to university... to buy myself the time to write.

Of course, you don't always do these things on your own. I met my wife, Susan, at an SF convention. She was Faber's publicity manager back then and looked after a lot of writers who were my friends — Rob Holdstock, Chris Priest, Garry Kilworth, Chris Evans and more. She encouraged me to quit my job and follow my vision. Mind, it took a good few years before I made any kind of living out of it. But *Vector* — both writing for it and editing it — had given me the taste for it, and I wasn't going to let that go.

So, sometime in 1988, having been working at the same project for the best part of five years, I finally made my first sale. *Chung Kuo*. A (then) seven volume novel, set two centuries in the future, with the basic premise that the Chinese had finally shaken off their centuries long lethargy and become not merely the world's dominant power but its *only* power, having destroyed all opposition. The sequence was sold and published in fourteen different foreign editions, as well as the USA and Canada. What followed was seven years of hard work, developing and setting down the strange, exotic vision I had in my head. I got praise (and criticism) for my work. But in the end, I have to say that the whole thing ended with a fizzle rather than a bang, and afterwards...?

Afterwards I wrote other novels, in a totally different vein. Not epic future historicals, but 'slipstream' novels that the editors seemed to like, just as much as the sales teams loathed them. And suddenly there I was, ten years

down the line from the last of the *Chung Kuo* books, with a drawer full of unsold novels. Yes, and a frustration that I'd never quite got the ending to *Chung Kuo* right. Under pressure from my publishers, I had trimmed it back and merged various storylines and made one volume of two and... Well, put simply, it just didn't work — something my fans let me know in no uncertain terms. Not only that, but I wanted to write a prequel — something that explained how *Chung Kuo* the world state got to be as it was. My working title for that was *When China Comes*.

At the same time — clearly missing the delights of research and particularly historical research — I started work on a time travel novel about a future time war between Russia and Germany... A trilogy, as it turned out, that finally took me all of six years to write. A work that everyone turned down, but which I knew for a certainty was the best thing I'd written. Maybe the best thing I was capable of writing.

Which brings us to the last few years of the 2000s. 2008 particularly. That was a hard year for us, with both Sue and I trying to get whatever writing work we could. And then we had a bright idea — to create an attractive publicity brochure and try to sell *Chung Kuo* a second time — revamped, with that prequel, and with the ending done right — done properly — this time.



It was a daunting enterprise, not helped by the fact that we were converting our house into flats to try and free up our assets and pay off our debts. It was difficult, but it worked. Anthony Cheatham liked what he saw and handed the project over to his son, Nic, at Quercus. All was going well, and then Nic moved publishers, to

Corvus, his own line within Grove Press/Atlantic. What followed was a year's hiatus while we tried to switch *Chung Kuo* across to Nic's new publishers. But finally that was done, the new contracts signed...



By early 2011 the first of the (by now) two prequel novels appeared, *Son Of Heaven*, which briefly kept George R R Martin's *Thrones* books off the number one spot for SF e-books on amazon. Another prequel followed, *Daylight On Iron Mountain*, and by this September seven of the twenty books in the sequence will be in the shops, blessed with the most beautiful covers by Larry Rostant.

And between times the world seems to have caught up quite a bit with my late-eighties vision of its future path. By the time Barak Obama finishes his presidency, China will be the number one power in the world. And then?

Well, I like to think we can come to an arrangement with the newest (and oldest) of the world's superpowers, and in doing so create a better, more stable world, where we'll not have to bury the past and clamp down on all dissent. A future in which freedom of speech and civil rights are taken for granted, as they are now in the West. Only... well, just look how China's government behaves.

By then, I'll have published the whole sequence, including a finale that stretches out over the last four titles, giving the work the kind of ending it always deserved. That not only ties up all of the very many loose strands, but works towards a genuinely exciting climax. One that will have my readers sobbing into their kindles.

Oh, and in passing, maybe I ought to mention that my time travel trilogy, *Roads To Moscow*, has also now found a home, and will start publication next year — with the second and third books coming out in August 2015 and August 2016.

Yes, and it all began with *Vector*, where my first printed words appeared (in a brief review of Robert Silverberg's *Tower Of Glass*). It's been a long journey, with both triumphs and defeats along the way. Writing the *Myst* trilogy, for instance, which I loved doing. Or getting a Hugo for my part in writing *Trillion Year Spree* — and being immediately bought a beer by David Brin! Back then when I was editing *Vector* I didn't dare to dream of such things. But here I am. And there's plenty more, I promise you, including a big fantasy novel (*Burying The Smith*), one ginormous space opera (*Out There!*), and a series of telepathic thrillers, the first of which, *The Beast With Two Backs*, is already penned.

So dream on and work hard. And maybe, just maybe...

Coda...

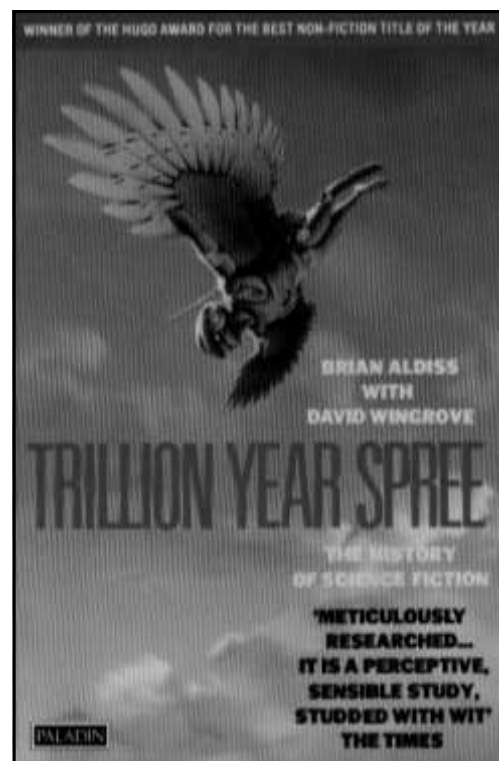
Shana has asked me a few questions relating to the above, which I'm more than happy to answer, the first of which is *Why China? And how did that country initially capture my interest?*

This is something that goes right back to a project I did in what was then called the Lower Sixth, at the sedate English grammar school I went to in Streatham, South London. It was meant to be a short essay about the Opium Wars in 1840s China. As it turned out, I got thoroughly engrossed in the topic, filled two school notebooks full of research notes and, that summer, read widely about China. That's where all this began. Pure chance, I'd call it, although many years before that, as a very young child, I loved the Rupert The Bear stories which involved wood elves who lived in the roots of trees and the tunnels beneath them, and the Chinese Mandarins who were incredibly wise and calm and lived in floating palaces up there among the clouds. Book Three of the re-cast sequence, *The Middle Kingdom* begins with one of those Mandarins, the great T'ang, Li Shai Tung, looking down at the earth from his floating palace, and, later, in Book Four, *Ice And Fire*, looks at the early life of Kim Ward, a veritable wood elf if ever there was one, whose life in "the Clay", that great dark space beneath the mile-high city that covers the globe in *Chung Kuo*, shapes him every bit as much as his innate genius.

To what degree is background research a necessity and to what degree is it a distraction?

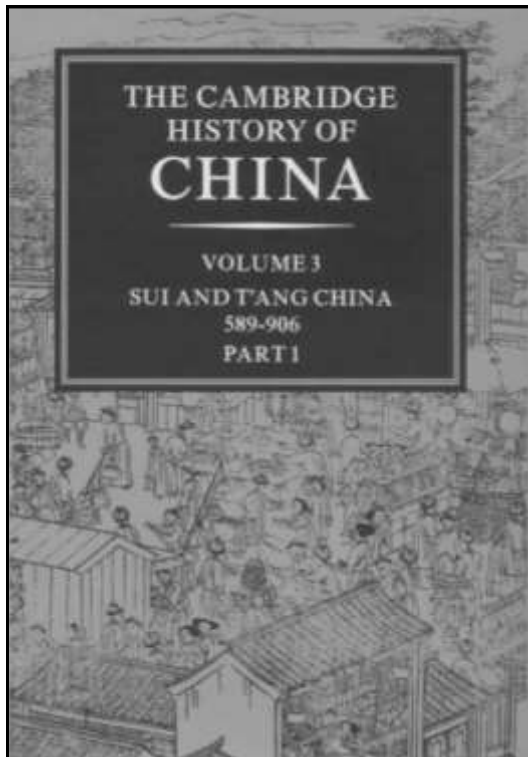
Once I'd determined that my story was going to be about a future run by the Chinese, there emerged, with that, a duty to my readers to get the details of that background right; to make that world just as convincingly Chinese as I could. The then-emergent *Cambridge History of China*, which weighed in at something like a thousand

pages per volume, was crucial to that, though at nearly £70 a volume (and this is the early nineteen eighties remember) it was an expensive 'hobby'. And there was no doubt that, for a time anyway, it was a hobby. For the best part of six years — until I sold the work — I read very little else non-fiction except for books on China. And in some ways that was a distraction, because a hell of a lot of my research was never used. But a lot was. And because the *Cambridge History* actually reads like some elaborate Jack Vance fantasy series, I often found myself stealing scenarios direct from that history. Yes, and once I'd actually sold the thing — all of which seemed to happen very quickly, in late 1988, early '89 — I found myself obliged more than ever to get the background right. I researched everything, from the tea ceremony, to esoteric Chinese philosophy and poetry and art. But luckily I love research. It's my favourite part of the process. When I finally returned my attention to writing historical epic, with *Roads To Moscow*, I did the same thing as I'd done with *Chung Kuo*, only this time spending six years and more researching German and Russian history, getting the fine detail right as well as using all that stuff for exotic background colour. What, for instance, was it like to live in 13th century Novgorod? Or twenty sixth century Neu Berlin? It's simply not possible to imagine and invent all that stuff. But with a bit of careful research...



Did the experience of editing Vector help me edit my own stories?

I've scratched my head about this and can only honestly say that I don't know. Certainly my early experience reviewing SF and writing articles on SF authors, helped me develop a fluent, clipped writing style that served me in good stead later on, but as for editing my own stuff?



Well, I guess what I attempt to do, with whatever I write, is to present my editor with something they don't need to edit. And maybe that's a result of the two and a half years I spent editing *Vector*. But having said that, I've recently experienced what it's like to have one of the very best editors cast their eyes on your work. Corvus hired Caroline Oakley — Ian Rankin's editor — to work on the two prequels, *Son Of Heaven* and *Daylight On Iron Mountain*. And she was absolutely superb. She made me see things in the text that I was totally unaware of, and always gave me the right suggestion as to how to deal with it. She also cut the last fourteen pages of the second book, ending it in precisely the right place. Oh, and as recently as three nights back, I got offered a job as editor for a new e-magazine... and immediately turned it down, without a moment's thought. These days I know what doing that job right entails, and — if your heart's in it — how much easier it is to be a novelist.

And, finally, Shana asks me about my house-husbanding days and how that relates to Chung Kuo?

The story goes like this. Sometime late in 1982, early '83, I had the idea for a short story, *A Perfect Art*. Over the next year or so, I developed it, from short story to short novel, to a 95,000-worder, still called *A Perfect Art*. I was living with Sue while this was happening, sharing a one bedroom flat in Islington — her territory, I'm a Battersea boy — while I tried to finish my doctorate (never finished) and she worked for Aussie publishers *Angus & Robertson*. I was still better known for my criticism and reviewing than for my fiction, and it was while I was at an SF evening — where I met and spent the evening chatting to Robert Silverberg, Michael Moorcock, Gene

Wolfe, J G Ballard and Brian Aldiss, that — when I phoned home from the telephone box outside the venue, I got the news that I was going to be a dad. (Actually, it goes like this. I say "Hi, Sue..." And she says "Hi, daddy".)

We jump forward to the Spring of 1984. We're both out of work. Sue is seven months pregnant, and we've just bought a three-bedroom house in Stoke Newington, which we're busy doing up. I'm still working on the 'Chinese novel' as we refer to it, although the title is now *A Spring Day At The Edge Of The World*, and has grown by a factor of four, the manuscript weighing in at about 750,000 words.

Sue's unemployed status wasn't going to last, however, and a month after she'd given birth to our eldest, Jessica, she was back at work, in a new role as Books Editor for *Woman's Own*. It was a good job, very well paid and they have hired Sue on a three day a week basis, with her 'on'call for the other two. Which meant I got Jessica for three days a week. And so began a lifestyle that some might think utterly bananas, only I look back on it with extreme fondness. For the next six years I was one of those (then) rare breed, a househusband, and the biggest lesson I learned was how to be patient, and not to even contemplate trying to work while I was looking after Jess, and later Amy, who arrived just over two years later. No, working during those house-husbanding hours was not an option, I found, though I could risk reading a page or two of research while they dozed...

Sue was working an eight 'til eight shift for those three days, at the end of which I'd greet her at the doorway and thrust a child at her — there was usually one or other of them awake! — and then escape to my study, where I'd work maybe until two or three in the morning. And then start again the next morning. Of course, on those days that Sue was at home, she became Mummy again, and I would lock myself away, working solidly at *Chung Kuo*, churning out anything between 5000 and 10,000 words a day.

This went on even after we'd sold *Chung Kuo* worldwide, and it was only when our third daughter, Georgia, arrived, that Sue finally took maternity leave — in September 1990, to become a writer herself. She now works as a staff writer on *Coronation Street*. And I remain in awe of her ability to do whatever job is put before her. She's been a publicity manager, a marketing manager, a literary agent, a book scout, a short story writer, a novelist, and, for the last ten/fifteen years, a scriptwriter. Having two writers in the house isn't sane, and we've warned our four girls not to even contemplate the lifestyle. But it isn't a question of choice. You're either a writer or you're not. And at least one of our girls — Amy — looks like she might well follow that road.

So there we are. How to write a twenty volume SF novel, in several easy steps.

recurrent:

FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

Andy Sawyer

The Black Cloud by Fred Hoyle

Fred Hoyle's *The Black Cloud* was not at all what I remembered.

For Hoyle, a Cambridge astronomer who backed the steady-state theory of the origin in the universe over the "big bang" (a term he originated in 1949), it was his first, and possibly best, science fiction novel, published in 1957. For me, it was one of my "early" sf novels, a copy of which was around our house probably because Hoyle was from Bingley in West Yorkshire (my mother's home town). The Penguin 1963 reprint carries a quotation from a *New Statesman* review which states that "There is a largeness, generosity, and jollity about the whole spirit of the book that reminds one of the early Wells at his best." It may have been this which pulled me into re-reading the novel. I certainly remembered the basic plot, which was certainly reminiscent of Wells's short story "The Star". Astronomers discover an object which is heading towards our sun. It turns out to be the "black cloud" of the title: a gaseous nebula which, if it intersects with us will not to any *physical* damage but which will cut off the sun's light. This would result in anything from temporary catastrophe to extinction. Things take a different turn when it is discovered that there is *purpose* in the object's movement.

The "black cloud" is, in fact, a life-form. And an intelligent life-form. And once they have realised this, the scientists who are observing its progress manage to make contact with it.

It was this, and that part of the main issue within the novel involved a conflict between the values of the scientists who are observing and speaking to the intelligence and the politicians who are backing them, which

I remembered. I remembered also that cast-iron guarantee that only the most committed reader will persevere in a novel: *mathematical equations*, which is probably why I did not return to it even though I remember enjoying it a great deal.

What I did not remember were the details, and it is the details which make it more than a semi-catastrophe novel of the type which was popular at the time, and probably why I enjoyed it despite those equations.

The main character is Kingsley, a Cambridge astronomer, who does not appear in the first chapter, which is entirely taken up by the observations which mark the first appearance of the "cloud" (and which contain the

first of the equations, including a frightening footnote which calculates, from observations made by the astronomers at the Mount Palomar observatory, when the cloud will arrive at the orbit of the Earth. He and the Astronomer Royal are summoned to Mount Palomar and verify the observations (more mathematics, including a calculation of the cloud's density which proves that it will block out the sun's light entirely). On returning to Britain, the Astronomer Royal passes the news to the British Government (this takes several days to pass through "channels"). The prime minister calls in his private secretary, Parkinson, to make enquiries about the credentials of the "experts". We learn that Kingsley is ingenious, but not "sound". Nevertheless, Kingsley manages to outma-

noeuvre the politicians and the result is Nortonstowe, a secret institute in the Cotswolds where an international team of scientists (including the taciturn Russian Alexandrov) studies the cloud (and later, establishes



communication with it) while keeping close control of the information. Meanwhile, though, they are cut off from the outside world: to some extent the scientist-politician tension is something of a stalemate.

Much of this is rather wooden. What does grip the interest is the firm focus upon the nature of the scientific process. The view of science as a communal, even utopian enterprise is perhaps the most Wellsian part of it. Hoyle is clearly on the side of the technical experts. But politics is also a matter of “technical experts”, and Parkinson is as bright and as unscrupulous as Kingsley: the debates between the two are interesting and sharply-written. The “Cloud” too is fascinating: a Stapledonian life-form for whom the idea of living things upon planets is as astonishing as interstellar gaseous beings are for the humans. The ease of communication, and the ability of each side to share concepts and values, is probably the cosiest and (when you think about it) hardest-to-swallow side of the story. But what really calls into question the *New Statesman* reviewer’s valuation of the spirit of the novel as “jollity” is the fact that during the novel a high proportion of the human race is wiped out by the climate changes caused by the blockage of sunlight by the cloud. How spiffing. This is by no means an allegory of climate change, but (like some of Wyndham’s contemporary work) it can read as such. Hoyle does not go anywhere near the human tragedy of the situation, which some readers will find upsetting: I find it more disturbing than I did when I first read it, but disturbing in an interesting way.

The finale of the novel involves a way of increasing human intelligence which communication with the Cloud has suggested. This is tried – and fails. The Cloud, called away on a metaphysical quest of its own, departs, leaving humanity with the knowledge that the universe is bigger, stranger, and far less cosy that it imagines, and with the dilemma “Do we want to remain big people in a tiny world or to become a little people in a vaster world?” Much of the scientific discussions – even the equations – are there for a reason. While the politicians want certainty, science cannot give them that. Says Kingsley to Parkinson: “it’s horribly difficult to make sure that every important factor is included in the calculations . . . I can tell you right now that it’s going to be a touch-and-go business.” (p. 113) In the end, *The Black Cloud* is a much more unsettling novel than I had remembered it to be. Kingsley is by no means a simple depiction of the “scientist as hero”. He is flawed (though his flaws only become truly apparent after you have finished the book and start to think about it). His Machiavellianism works up to a point: his political rivals are more ruthless than he is. “How you fail to understand your fellow men!” says Parkinson. Seeing the Cloud as a threat, the Great Powers set off atomic rock-

ets to explode inside it: the radioactivity will disrupt what passes for the Cloud’s neurological system. In a nicely cynical touch, bearing in mind the post-war climate in which Hoyle was writing, Parkinson throws cold water on Kingsley’s attribution of this news having been passed through the British Government as “decency”. His own masters are simply playing their own game. “You see, we have no rockets to launch.”

Kingsley and his colleagues decide to warn the Cloud. It reverses the path of the rockets sent against it. El Paso, Chicago, and Kiev receive the hydrogen bombs and countless lives are lost. This is almost an aside to the main course of events: politically things remain much the same. Despite megadeaths from climatic change, crop failure, and (now) atomic explosions, governments remain in power and humanity muddles on in a not-very

We are certainly meant to wonder at the scale of the universe. We are not, I think, meant to belittle other people’s individuality.

different version of the *status quo*. Parkinson even manages to persuade his bosses that the cloud’s departure “was in a large measure due to our good offices” (p. 216), albeit at a cost to Kingsley’s reputation. *The Black Cloud* is, perhaps, a novel which shows how even the uncertainty of the time when it was written (“It was an uncertain generation, not quite knowing where it was

going,” writes one of the Nortonstowe scientists, some sixty years after the events of the novel) was based upon a kind of heroic certainty. *The Black Cloud* is one of the few novels of the 1950s where the term “cosy catastrophe” seems to make sense. When we look carefully at it, though, even the survival of (most of) the intellectual middle-class male protagonists is not necessarily a triumph. Where Hollywood would no doubt have shown human-interest snapshots of everyday tragedy in these dreadful events, *The Black Cloud* stays within the Cotswold manor-house and the Oxbridge college; we are even reminded, in the coda to the novel, that Oxbridge still exists. Is this avoidance of banal sentimentality, or patrician lack of human empathy?

I’m still not quite sure. The one place where the novel starts to shake, for me, is the introduction of a minor character, an amiable simpleton of a gardener at Nortonstowe named Jo Stoddard who is there, possibly, in order to provide a kind of ironic contrast to the clever people whose brains are fried by the new knowledge impressed into them by communication with the Cloud. But just as the Cloud is something out of Stapledon, so the offstage deaths of so many expendables and spear-carriers carries that chilly bleakness of those parts of *Last and First Men* where we skip over countless generations of decline, survival and rebuilding but are explicitly reminded that these are human beings with infinite hopes, aspirations, dreams and personal tragedies of their own.

We are certainly meant to wonder at the scale of the universe. We are not, I think, meant to belittle other people’s individuality.

recurrent:
KINCAID IN SHORT
Paul Kincaid

And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side

It sometimes seems that if John Keats hadn't existed, it would have been necessary for science fiction to invent him. His ballad, 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', for instance, just 12 stanzas of four lines each, has furnished Kameron Hurley's belle dames, the title of Christopher Priest's 'Palely Loitering', and the entire plot of James Tiptree Jr's 'And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side'. (Tiptree acknowledged the debt: her title consists of the last two lines of stanza XI.)

I recently encountered this story again for the first time in nearly 40 years when it was included in a Nebula Awards Anthology I was reviewing (she had been awarded the Solstice Prize). It stood out, for me, as a story that was at once engaged and engaging when too many of the other stories displayed what I described as a state of exhaustion. Inevitably, when I said as much, I was accused of nostalgia, of reviewing my memories of the story rather than the story itself. And yet, I didn't remember the story. I remembered the title, of course, it's not an easy one to forget; but as I began to read I realised that over so many years I had completely forgotten the content of the story. So I wanted to take this opportunity to examine why a 40-year-old story came across as so fresh.

The story was first published in 1971, and was the lead story in her first collection, *Ten Thousand Light Years from Home* (1973). It appeared, of course, at a time when Tiptree's true identity remained unknown, and the author was unquestioningly assumed to be male. Indeed, very much a man's man, as Harry Harrison's introduction to the collection implies: 'their author enjoys observing bears in the wilds of Canada or skindiving deep in Mexico ... he spent a good part of World War II in a Pentagon sub-basement. These facts may clue you to the obviosity (sic) that James Tiptree, Jr. is well-travelled and well-experienced in the facts, both sordid and otherwise, of our world' (6).

Harrison's 'sordid' facts provide a clue to the fact that Tiptree's subject was sex. Science fiction had, by then, acknowledged that sex existed, and some authors had used the relative freedoms of the counter-cultural '60s to include more explicit sex scenes or to probe at society's sexual mores (Theodore Sturgeon was probably the most interesting of these). But none had made sexual need and sexual desire the twin motivating factors for their characters to the extent that Tiptree did. It gave the stories an air of acute psychological insight that was absent from much of the rest of the genre. Science fiction characters tended to be driven by external factors: catastrophes to be survived, alien situations to be negotiated, mysteries to be solved; and they were never doomed by their own urges in the way that the central figure of 'And I Awoke ...' is doomed.

In Keats's poem, we encounter a 'knight-at-arms / Alone and palely loitering'. The winter approaches, yet he lingers still, unable to leave because of his obsessive desire for the beautiful woman who 'looked at me as she did love, / And made sweet moan'. But this object of desire transports him into the land of faerie (or perhaps we might say that the land of faerie becomes a metaphor for sexual bliss) where, in her 'elfin grot', he dreams of other pale warriors who warn him that 'La Belle Dame sans Merci /Thee hath in thrall!' He is not alone as a victim of this passion, a discovery that immediately wakes him from his reverie and into the cold, wintry isolation in which we first encounter him. Yet he cannot bear to leave the sexual promise of that dream, so here he lingers.

Tiptree moves the story into a space-going future and transforms the faerie lover into an alien (though we must remember that one of the persistent tropes in Tiptree's work is that women are alien to men), but otherwise the structure and shape of the story is unchanged.

We are in a space station, Big Junction, the name alone telling us all we need to know about its function. Nor do we need to be told about the real and metaphorical cold of space all around. Our pale knight is introduced in the very first sentence, 'standing absolutely still by a service port, staring out at the belly of the Orion docking above us' (7). The stillness and the staring are emphasised a few lines later when 'his gaze passed over me from a peculiar distance' (7), and we recognise someone from whom some vital quality has been drained. He tells our newsman narrator that he is "waiting ... waiting for my wife. My loving wife." He gave a short ugly laugh' (8). Who his wife might be, and why he should be waiting for her where alien ships are arriving, is left unanswered, though perhaps we might glean something from the bitterness of that laugh, or his sudden anger when an alien Procyra appears.

Then, like the pale knight, he tells his story, and it is immediately cast in terms of addiction: 'You don't go into Little Junction by accident, any more than you first shoot skag by accident. You go into Little Junction because you've been craving it, dreaming about it, feeding on every hint and clue about it' (9).

Little Junction is a Washington bar frequented by the lower orders of alien visitors, 'Including, my friend, the perverts. The ones who can take humans' (10) It is a faerieland where despairing humanity might feed their craving for the glamour and mystery of the alien, the

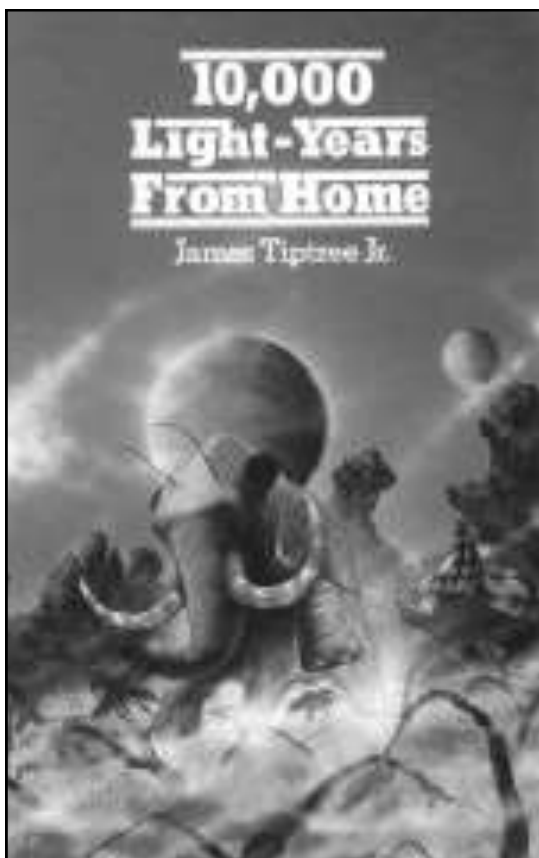
magical allure of the other. Here the pale knight finds himself talking to a real alien, about football of all things; it seems to be enough. But then a woman bumps into him. 'She was totally sexualized. I remembered her throat pulsed. She had one hand up touching her scarf, which had slipped off her shoulder. I saw angry bruises there. That really tore it, I understood at once those bruises had some sexual meaning' (11). This instant understanding transforms the scene, tells both us and the young knight that there is nothing innocent here, that he, like all those present, is hungry to abase himself before the sexual glamour of the elfin aliens.

The woman is then drawn away by the arrival of some Sirians, and our young knight also watches a man approach them, 'A big man, expensively dressed, with something wrecked about his face' (12). Our newsman narrator repeats that same description, something wrecked about the face, in contemplating the storyteller just a few paragraphs later. They are alike, all these pale knights drawn into the sexual entrapment of faerie.

The storyteller's own particular abasement comes with an alien Sellice: 'her whole body was smiling sexually, beckoning, winking, urging, pouting, speaking to me ... Every human male in the room was aching to ram himself into that incredible body. I mean it was pain' (13). She leaves him, of course, as soon as his money runs out, but that's the routine, mundane, predictable part of the story. He works his way up to the space stations, where there are always more aliens to follow, to be entranced by. He hates himself for his addiction, recognises how humanity is losing out to its lust for the other, 'Swapping raw resources for junk. Alien status symbols' (15), but he is helpless in the face of his desire. Like the pale knight he cannot escape the wasted, wintry land he now occupies. 'I'd trade - correction, I have traded - everything Earth offered me for just that chance. To see them. To speak to them. Once in a while to touch one. Once in a great while to find one low enough, perverted enough to want to touch me -' (15).

Keats saw no reason to explain the hunger of his earthly knight for the faerie temptress, that she had such allure was simply part of what we understood the elven kind to have; 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' was simply one among many ballads, folk tales and stories of the time that built towards the same picture. But Tiptree was working against type, this was not how aliens were commonly presented within the genre; they had an allure, naturally, but not one that worked so devastatingly on what made us human. Even as late as the 1970s, when this story appeared, there were traces of John W. Campbell's strictures that men must come out ahead in any encounter with aliens rooted still in the DNA of the genre. The alien might be sexually tempting, as in C.L. Moore's 'Shambleau', but any human hero would fight against that temptation.

He hates himself for his addiction, recognises how humanity is losing out to its lust...



Tiptree, however, had a far more layered and interesting take on human psychology, it was something both fragile and driven, and this story was one of a number that she wrote specifically to illustrate and explain this point. The explanation comes in a devastating passage near the end of the story:

'What I'm trying to tell you, this is a trap. We've hit the supernormal stimulus. Man is exogamous – all our history is one long drive to find and impregnate the stranger. Or get impregnated by him, it works for women too. Anything different-colored, different nose, ass, anything, man has to fuck it or die trying. That's a drive, y'know, it's built in. Because it works fine as long as the stranger is human. For millions of years that kept the genes circulating. But now we've met aliens we can't screw, and we're about to die trying ... Do you think I can touch my wife?' (16)

Human psychology is a direct consequence of human biology, it has evolved to suit the circumstances in which humankind finds itself on this planet. But what if we encounter something outside these circumstances, will the very things that allowed us to evolve be the things that eventually kill us?

But even that isn't the whole story. Sex is only part of it, and Tiptree goes on to sum up this rather complex argument in one sentence: 'We're built to dream outwards' (17).

And dreaming outwards is precisely what science fiction does. There is an outward urge, a desire for the other, for which science fiction has been the twentieth-century expression as consistently and as coherently as romantic tales of the encounter with faerie expressed it in the 18th and 19th centuries. Our literature defines our dreams as surely as those dreams shape our literature. Thus it is that 'And I Awoke ...' critiques science fiction in the very act of using science fiction to explore human urges and desires normally avoided by the genre.

It is, I think, precisely in this conjunction of psychosexual insight, transgressive movement into areas not normally explored by science fiction and integral critique of the genre that the continuing freshness and relevance of the story lies.

Tiptree uses scientific notions about the evolution of human biology as a hook upon which to explore broader issues about the nature of our relationship with the other, issues which can easily be extended (as in so many of Tiptree's stories) to cover relations between the sexes. Yet in taking standard science fictional tropes (Little Junction feels very much like a perverted version of the space bar in Star Wars, Big Junction seems to echo the way station for various space-faring races that was at

the centre of Babylon 5) while turning on its head the standard thrust of sf from Campbell onwards, there is a sense that we are seeing it all anew. And while we are asked to take in something contrary to what we might have expected from a science fiction story, Tiptree keeps her writing brisk and allusive. The story is little over 10 pages long, and covers an awful lot of ground; but though Tiptree typically leaves a great deal unsaid, we are never at a loss to understand where the story is and where we are being taken.

In other words, as readers we are made to work, but we are rewarded for that work. One of the reasons that, I think, the story stood out from the more recent works that surrounded it is that what it says about the psychosexual nature of human desire and the way it presents the sex drive as a motivating force within the plot, is still unusual within the genre. (Much contemporary sf still follows the adventure story or mystery story structure that generally entails an external motivating factor, such that our psychological understanding of too many characters remains superficial.) And for all that it is a complex and disturbing story, it is written with great clarity. We are meant to read the strangenesses of plot and situation as metaphors that lead us into the insights of the story; we are not meant to be bedazzled by the invention that surrounds it all. Describing the Sirians – 'That tallness, that cruel thinness. That appalling alien arrogance' (12) – tells us as much in 9 words

as we might possibly want to know; there is no need to encumber them with weird appurtenances, semi-magical abilities, it would make them no more alien. This is a story that is clearly in dialogue with science fiction, but it is not repeating what others have said, it is taking the debate forwards. And that step forward, that dreaming outwards, is what keeps the story as startling, as fresh and as vivid now as it has always been.

Human psychology is a direct consequence of human biology ... But what if we encounter something outside these circumstances?

Quotations from 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' taken from John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, Penguin Classics, third edition 1988.

Quotations from 'Introduction' by Harry Harrison and 'And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side' by James Tiptree, Jr., taken from *Ten Thousand Light Years From Home* by James Tiptree, Jr., Ace, 1973.

recurrent: RESONANCES Stephen Baxter

Doctor Who: Fifty Years And Counting

I discussed *Doctor Who* quite recently in this column, but I want to return here to that dear old show because, in 2013, it is fifty years old: hurrah! As my personal recognition of that anniversary, I will look back at the creative roots of the series: in particular, at how those roots are expressed in an assumed future for mankind in the universe, a future that has been depicted more or less consistently in the series from the 1960s to the present day.

More or less consistently – that’s a bold claim, I admit. Of course it isn’t perfect. Fans have always laboured mightily to tie up *Who* into a consistent universe and chronology (and for the purposes of this essay I’m going to reference *A History* by Lance Parkin and Lars Pearson (Mad Norwegian, 2012), one among many such chronologies). In one sense this is always going to be futile because, even before the proliferation of tie-in products from the 1980s onwards, *Who* was from the beginning a product of many writers, script editors and producers, all of whom, while increasingly aware of the show’s continuity as the years rolled by, have always been primarily focussed on telling the next story. And besides the creators will occasionally drop continuity-busting bombs. ‘The Genesis of the Daleks’ (1975) suddenly gave us a new origin story for the Doctor’s most popular enemies, and the Great Time War of the new incarnation, the final Dalek-Time Lord conflict, trashed the timeline once again. Current script editor Steven Moffat bragged to the 2008 Comic-Con that continuity errors in *Who* were now impossible: ‘We can just say it’s a ripple from the Time War.’

Nevertheless many of the *Who* tales do fit a future history framework, more or less consistently, from the show’s beginnings, and even today. And if you think back over recent seasons of the new rebooted *Who*, you’ll know the kind of future I mean. After a past and present day plagued by alien incursions, humans will go on to explore planets like Mars, will found mining colonies on worlds of other stars, will wage war against races like

the Daleks, and will even found mighty interstellar empires, before ultimately facing cosmological decline.

But that future framework is very much a product of the age in which *Doctor Who* was first created. Sidney Newman and his team at the BBC in 1962-3 were not sf specialists, but they did draw on surveys of the field made for the BBC in 1962, and the subsequent writers and script editors imported whatever their understanding of sf was at the time. As a result the future history these creators slowly assembled was of a kind that was something of a default in the sf of the post-war era.

And it was a future very much shaped by the then-present. The world had just seen a mighty global struggle, the Second World War, that concluded with an atomic attack, followed by the emergence of agencies like the UN and the European Economic Community, which must have seemed at the time as first steps towards a world government. There were plenty of super-science projects, from nuclear energy to the nascent space programme, but while these seemed to promise much they also threatened such calamities as nuclear war.

So if the past was a guide to the future, perhaps we faced a fresh war, maybe nuclear, that would lead to a world government. Perhaps then, united, we would move out to the planets and the stars. After that waves of galactic exploration, colonisation and empire-building would presumably follow, just as on Earth in the past.

You can recognise this kind of future reflected in the quality sf of the period. The prototype of all sf’s future histories was Robert Heinlein’s, first charted in the early 1940s. Waves of technological advance punctuated by social disorder and advance would lead ultimately, by the 22nd century, to a solar system under a unified government, and the first attempts at interstellar exploration: ‘civil disorder, followed by the end of human adolescence, and the first mature culture,’ according to the chart Heinlein published in the May 1941 *Astounding*. Similarly the stories of Poul Anderson’s ‘Psychotechnic League’, including such works as *The*

Snows of Ganymede (1955), show waves of conflict, beginning with an east vs west World War III in the 1950s, punctuated by attempts at global government beginning with the UN from the 1980s, as mankind spreads out across the solar system.

This kind of future is itself a nostalgic object now. Today our assumed future might include eco-crash and resource wars, perhaps enlivened by the rise and fall of a singularity, leaving us in the rather post-apocalyptic era featured in the likes of *The Hunger Games*. However the lingering significance of the old expansive future-history is that it helped shape franchises which are still with us today, including *Star Trek* – and *Doctor Who*.

So how does *Who* portray this future? After fifty years, it is entirely possible to lose oneself in Whovian studies, fannish and otherwise. So to illustrate my point I'm going to use a narrow focus; I will look at the stories contained in a single early season of *Who*, namely the fifth (1967-8) starring Patrick Troughton, the Second Doctor. It's a season I happen to know well; I remember it as a ten-year-old viewer, and my own *Who* novel *The Wheel of Ice* (BBC Books, 2012) is a riff on that season's story 'The Wheel in Space'. I hope to show how the stories in this season, delivered by different writing teams, more or less fit into the epochs of the 'classic' early 1960s future. Then I'll turn to the stories of the 2012 season (number 33) to show a continuity across the decades.



I've referred to an earlier edition of Parkin (1996) as the basis for my labelling of the various temporal epochs, and I've also used Parkin as my source for the internal dating of the serials. Some dates are based on references in the serials themselves, some on subsidiary literature, and some are fannish guesswork and are no doubt the subject of intense and continuing dispute. None are to be taken too seriously; the dates are for guidance only, and it is the overall shape of the future into which they fit that counts.

Epoch: Historical

Of course, given this is *Doctor Who*, any chronology of the future has to start with a category for the past. In its very early days some of *Who's* 'historicals' were more or less straight portrayals of well-known incidents, such as the siege of Troy. But more commonly we come across monsters or aliens embedded in Earth's past, in addition to its present and future.

This fits the mood of the times. In 1963 the notion that there was intelligent life beyond the Earth was very much alive; the SETI search radio-astronomy search for signals from aliens had started up as recently as 1960. We had not yet reached space, but space

could reach us. And the world, in the past as well as the present, was therefore quite likely to have been plagued by alien invasion. This was shown in the *Quatermass* serials from 1954 onwards, a clear influence on *Who*. In the *Star Trek* universe, Earth had been troubled by god-impersonating aliens in ancient Greece ('Who Mourns for Adonais?', in the original series), and had had Ferengi show up at Roswell in 1947 ('Little Green Men', *Deep Space 9*). (The *Star Trek* chronology, by the

way, is another intricate and self-contradictory patchwork; the standard starting point seems to be the *Star Trek Chronology: The History of the Future* by Okuda and Okuda (Pocket, 1996).)

In *Who* season 5 this epoch is illustrated by 'The Abominable Snowmen', written by Mervyn Haisman and Henry Lincoln, set in c. 1935, exploiting the *Quatermass*-like idea that the alien is already here. The Doctor and his companions visit a Tibetan monastery where the High Lama has long ago been taken over by a voracious alien from another dimension called the Great Intelligence, which controls the robot Yeti that give the serial its title. At last the Doctor drives the Great Intelligence back into 'astral space': 'Such a brain as yours is too small to grasp my purpose.' 'Too small!' protests the Doctor.

Epoch: Contemporary

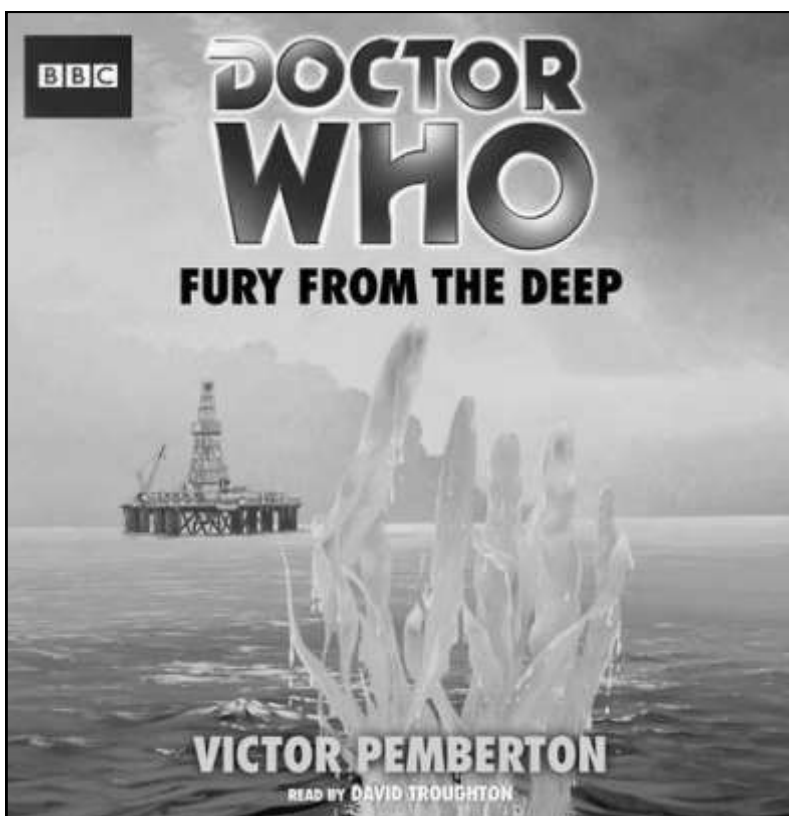
In the present day, or near future, the world is a fragile place threatened by secretive villains and the danger of war, as well as by alien incursions; but at least we are more capable of fighting back. 'The Web of Fear', also by Haisman and Lincoln, is a sequel to 'Snowmen' set forty years on. The Great Intelligence returns in the then-present day, and the Yeti rampage in the London Underground – a scenario very much an echo of *Quatermass and the Pit*. This particular serial looked to the show's future; this is the story that introduced Brigadier (then Colonel) Lethbridge-Stewart, and so prefigured the Earthbound present-day / near-future 'UNIT' adventures that would characterise the Third Doctor's era, very much of this epoch.

After fifty years, it is entirely possible to lose oneself in Whovian studies, fannish and otherwise.

Epoch: Near Future (1990-2109)

The near future, as seen from 1963, would be increasingly shaped by a deepening Cold War. Science and engineering would progress to such heroic projects as feeding the world and space exploration, but it would also be an age of lurid James Bond supertechnological villains, as well as the ever-present threat of devastating global war – following which a world government might arise from the ruins. In *Star Trek* we had Khan’s Eugenics Wars in the 1990s, and a third world war in c. 2050, triggering a post-apocalyptic age of ruin ended by first contact with the Vulcans in c. 2063 (in the movie *First Contact*).

Who season 5 features two tales of near-future technohubris. ‘Fury from the Deep’, written by Victor Pemberton, set late in the twentieth century, features a ‘Euro-



Gas’ complex of rigs and refineries for North Sea gas extraction, a then-near-future technology that is now receding into the past. And it has one of the show’s more original menaces, sentient seaweed that takes out the rigs and tries to invade the land through the refinery. In David Whitaker’s ‘The Enemy of the World,’ a scientist and politician called Salamander has developed a ‘suncatcher’ technology to harvest the sun’s light and, for example, grow wheat in Siberia to feed a hungry world: a typical 1960s ambition. But it turns out that Salamander has a classic Bond-villain underground lair from which he creates sham natural disasters to terrorise the world.

Towards the end of the twenty-first century, we come to ‘The Wheel in Space’, by David Whitaker. This adventure, about a Cyberman attack on a deep-space station, is set in an age in which interplanetary travel is evidently becoming routine, and has need of such waystations.

Epoch: Colonisation (2110 to 2500)

Eventually mankind would escape from the solar system, though it might take the resources of a united Earth to do it, and boldly go out into a crowded universe.... This of course was the heroic age of *Star Trek*, beginning with the launch of the first *Enterprise* in the 22nd century (in the series *Enterprise*).

And in *Who*: ‘Men pushed further and further into space exploring galaxy after galaxy....’ This is a line from Gerry Davis’s novelisation of his season 5 serial ‘The Tomb of the Cybermen’. In the year 2486 (according to Parkin) the Doctor encounters a party of archaeologists on the planet Telos, which seems to be a deep-freeze refuge for the last of the Cybermen – but Telos is actually a trap.

Epoch: Earth Empire/Far Future (from 2500 on)

On the very longest of timescales, in a future increasingly disconnected from the present, exotic possibilities arise. Mankind might found an interstellar empire, but Earth itself might suffer long-term calamities. Thus in Brian Hayles’ ‘The Ice Warriors’, set maybe a thousand years in the future, the Earth has slumped into a new Ice Age, caused in fact by human meddling with the climate. A worldwide computer-controlled effort is underway to beat back the glaciers, using nuclear-powered heat engines called ‘Ionisers’. But scientists happen upon a Martian spacecraft, frozen since a previous (prehistoric) Ice Age, containing dormant Ice Warriors.

If we travel now from 1968 to 2012’s *Who* season 33, we can see how these epochs are (more or less) neatly reflected by the show’s current incarnation.

The series in fact featured two historicals, with an innocent pre-Space Age Earth under alien threat. In ‘A Town Called Mercy’, written by Toby Whithouse, a classic Old West town is besieged by a cyborg alien, seeking the Nazi-doctor criminal who created it. The season finale ‘The Angels Take Manhattan’, written by Moffat, about the departure of companions Amy and Rory, was set against the backdrop of Moffat’s Weeping Angels plaguing a noirish New York in 1938.

Meanwhile ‘The Power of Three’, written by Chris Chibnall – the one with the slow invasion of the black cubes – is a classic *Who* invasion-of-Earth ‘contemporary’ era story, complete with a slow-building global menace and hostile spaceships looming over the Earth. In a neat look-back all the way back to ‘Web of Fear’, the episode features UNIT, underground London (the UNIT base under the Tower), and the Brigadier, or at least his daughter. For old-stiff fans like me, its core *Quatermass*-like narrative feels almost cosy.

In 'Dinosaurs on a Spaceship', written by Chris Chibnall, a prominent on-screen caption gives us the date, the year 2367 AD. A pirated Silurian Ark – the spaceship with the dinosaurs – is on an apparent collision course with Earth, which is protected by the missiles of, intriguingly, the Indian Space Agency. The episode fits neatly into either Parkin's 'near future' or 'colonisation' age; interstellar travel is understood, but the Galaxy is evidently not yet tamed, and the Earth needs planetary guardians. (This is the episode where Rory's dad mocks the Doctor's technobabble by calling him 'Arthur C Clarke,' an unusual shout-out for the BSFA's late president.)

The season close 'Asylum of the Daleks', written by Moffat, feels like a 'far future' story. The Doctor, summoned by the Dalek parliament to resolve a problem with their 'asylum' planet, is supposedly faced by every kind of Dalek he has *ever* encountered, including in serials going back to the 1960s, on namechecked planets such as Kembel ('Mission to the Unknown' and 'The Daleks' Master Plan', first shown in 1965-66), in eras in which humans are taking on the Daleks on a galactic scale. One would expect chronologically that such a gathering must come after the events of every Dalek story told so far, so many thousands of years into the future. But as noted above the joker in the pack regarding Dalek continuity is the 'Great

Time War'. So while the episode seems to fit neatly into the 'far future' category, in reality all bets are off.

Finally I have to mention the 2012 Christmas special 'The Snowmen', written by Moffat. Set mostly in the 1890s it is another historical – and as it happens it is also a fan-pleasing prequel to the 'Great Intelligence' stories I discussed above, 'The Abominable Snowmen' and 'Web of Fear'.

This kind of argument is never going to be definitive, but I hope I've convinced you that even the very short season 33 contains episodes that reinforce a map of the future that dates back to

Doctor Who's earliest offerings. And as such it reflects the future histories common in the sf of 1963 and the preceding decades, and of course embodying their values and assumptions.

After fifty years *Doctor Who* means many things to many people. One measure of its value to me is as a kind of ark – like the Silurian vessel in 'Dinosaurs on a Spaceship' – bearing the relics of the sfnal sensibilities of the age in which it was conceived, into an era which its creators could probably barely have imagined.

... it reflects the future histories common in the sf of 1963 and the preceding decades ...



THE BSFA REVIEW

The winner of this year's BSFA Review poll of reviewers was also my favourite science fiction of 2012: *Empty Space* by M John Harrison, the concluding volume of the *Kelfuchi Tract* trilogy. This truly remarkable novel is reviewed by Dan Hartland over the page: "The boldness of *Empty Space*, then, is in positing a physical source of the metaphorical, allegorical and symbolic currency of the literary novel. Like the Tract itself, the trilogy which bears its name permits two-way traffic: from the literary to the science fictional, Harrison carries artful prose and intense human sympathy; in the other direction, he drags substance and even rigour." All three novels have been nominated for the BSFA Award and, if there is any justice, this will be Harrison's year.

Then again, I wouldn't bet against *Jack Glass* either. Adam Roberts is a bit of a marmite author: he is critically acclaimed and widely admired but his books have a tendency to rub people up the wrong way. I'm inclined to think that is a good thing but *Jack Glass* has undoubtedly proved less divisive than most of his work – in a forthcoming review, Dave Roberts describes it as his "most entertaining to date". It has already appeared on the shortlist for the Kitschies (losing to *Angelmaker* by Nick Harkaway) and I wouldn't be surprised to see it appear on the Arthur C Clarke Award shortlist after a much-remarked upon absence for the last couple of years.

Our third place novel is also a BSFA Award nominee: *2312* by Kim Stanley Robinson. As you'd expect from a KSR novel, it is hugely ambitious but even Ian Sales, who chose it earlier in the magazine as his book of the year, notes: "The future Robinson describes is a work of art, though it's a pity he couldn't give us a plot to match." It is for this reason that Gary Dalkin's forthcoming review describes the novel as a "thudding bore" but Robinson remains well loved.

What both the BSFA Award shortlist and our top five lacked this year were any novels by women. This is at least partially a reflection of the membership's preference for science fiction over fantasy and the lack of much of a pool to draw from given the parlous state of British SF publishing when it comes to women. Hopefully the arrival of Del Rey Books in the UK this year, bringing with them Kameron Hurley and EJ Swift, will improve this situation. Still, it is worth noting that only two women have won the award in its 43 year history.

Despite the impediment of being a female fantasy writer – and a children's fantasy writer to boot – Frances Hardinge makes our sixth place. Hardinge is simply one of Britain's best fantasy authors, I am very pleased to see her appear on this list and I can't wait to read *A Face Like Glass*. In contrast, *Railsea*, a children's fantasy by perennial awards-magnet China Mieville,

seems to have found little favour anywhere (although his story 'Three Moments Of An Explosion' did make the BSFA Award shortlist).

Just behind her in seventh is *Boneland* by Alan Garner, "a summation of Garner's understanding of the impulses that shape and drive us as human beings, reaching far back into the mythic past", as Maureen Kincaid Speller put it earlier. This book completes the immensely influential children's fantasy trilogy he began over fifty years ago with *The Weirdestone Of Brisingamen*, testament to the rich history of British children's literature. It remains remarkably fecund today: a new children's genre imprint, Strange Chemistry, appeared in 2012 and Mark Connorton and Cherith Baldry reviewed its four launch titles on page X.

Garner shares the seventh spot with *Intrusion* by Ken MacLeod. It goes without saying that it also makes the BSFA Award shortlist – this is his ninth appearance. No one else writes anything like MacLeod and the membership have embraced him for that. The final novel on the shortlist, *Dark Eden* by Chris Beckett, didn't place – I voted for it, Chris.

Perhaps appropriately the final slot on our list is shared by two entirely different novels; one from the very heart of British science fiction (*Blue Remembered Earth* by Alastair Reynolds) and one from the slippery fringes (*Hawthorn And Child* by Keith Ridgway). This is a reminder of the depth and richness of speculative fiction, as is the fact that in all 51 titles received votes. That's a year's worth of reading for me, although much less for some of you!

Martin Lewis
Reviews Editor

BSFA Reviewers' Poll

- 1) *Empty Space* by M John Harrison
- 2) *Jack Glass* by Adam Roberts
- 3) *2312* by Kim Stanley Robinson
- 4) *Communion Town* by Sam Thompson
- 5) *Extreme Metaphors*, edited by Simon Sellars and Dan O'Hara
- 6) *A Face Like Glass* by Frances Hardinge
- =7) *Boneland* by Alan Garner
- =7) *Intrusion* by Ken MacLeod
- 9) *Redemption in Indigo* by Karen Lord
- =10) *Hawthorn and Child* by Keith Ridgway
- =10) *Blue Remembered Earth* by Alastair Reynolds

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**Stone Spring, Bronze Summer and Iron Winter by
Stephen Baxter (Gollancz, 2010, 2011 and 2012)**

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

There aren't many times when I'm as aware of the interaction of my critical and fannish gazes as when I'm engrossed in a new Stephen Baxter novel. I've been reading Baxter for over two decades at this point, which has both advantages and drawbacks when it comes to reviewing him. I am, for instance, likely to come to a new work in a generous spirit — if I didn't enjoy and respect Baxter's writing, after all, I wouldn't keep reading it — and I am likely to read any given novel as being part of the Baxterian megatext as much as I am to consider it on its own merits as an individual work. I am also hypersensitised to the foibles and particularities of the Baxterian voice, and may register as new and exciting details or nuances that the less immersed reader may not even register. Even allowing for all of this, however, it does seem to me that Baxter's latest project, the three-volume *Northland* saga, ventures into fresh territory.

From within the Baxterian light-cone, the first obvious angle of attack on *Northland* is that it's an extension of Baxter's semi-regular adventures in alternate history. But we're very far away, by this point, from the pulp adventure of *Anti-Ice* (1993) or the ironised nostalgia of *Voyage* (1996). A closer comparison can be made with the *Time's Tapestry* novels (2006-8), which cover numerous generations to tell a version of the story of these isles, but *Northland* goes further back, makes a more radical change and plays out on a broader canvas. Beginning 10,000 years ago and concluding in the equivalent of our 14th Century, having established human civilisation on a very different trajectory than the one it actually followed, it is what we might call deep alternate history. In parts it is also, I think, Baxter's most mature evocation of the past, more lived-in and interested in capturing the varying regulative ideas shaping its selected periods than any of its rivals.

The first instalment, *Stone Spring*, kindles a flame. Its narrative dramatises the origins of a great wall, constructed to save the people of Northland (what is in our world the bed of the North Sea) from post-ice-age flooding, thus preserving a land bridge between the UK and continental Europe, a geographic and imaginative space for a new culture. Focalised around Ana, a typical Baxterian iron-willed protagonist, determined to bend events to her hard SF will, *Stone Spring's* mix of ancient engineering and social speculation is distinctive and compelling.

We're initially presented with an array of human tribes scattered across Northland — diverse in their faiths, politics, and social organisations. Some of this is grist for familiar Baxterian adaptability-of-life drama — notably the creation of the dramatic but unconvincing and rather quaintly named "Leafy Boys" who live in the tree canopy of the lush British woodland — but for the most part the novel's interest is in a sort of sociological soap, as different modes of living come into conflict. The core of the conflict (as Baxter tells it) is competition between light-on-the-land hunter-gatherers and more rooted and interventionist early farmers; except that the hunter-gatherers are

carrying out their own intervention, too, in the founding of the wall. Perhaps the novel's central image is Ana's memorable declaration that "This shovel: this is the future".

So a more generalised way of seeing *Stone Spring's* narrative is as an iteration of humanity banging on the walls of the universe — the sort of thing we get throughout the *Xeelee* sequence (begun in 1987 and still ongoing). This trilogy's particular spin on the idea, however, is revealed by *Stone Spring's* opening image — an italicised, distanced perspective repeated, with variations, at the start of each book in the series — of a constant human culture surrounded by rapidly changing geology and environment. It's a frame that inverts the usual human as mayflies conceit that you find in big-time stories and it changes the nature of the question asked. On one level, yes, *Northland* is about how far we can impose our will on the world; but more immediately, it's about how the world imposes its will on us and how we can or should respond.

Bronze Summer picks up the torch some seven thousand years later, at a point after the fall of Troy but before the rise of Rome. The Wall, and its capital Etxelur, have endured and

Northland has become a major power. It has also become a society that — unusually in Baxter — we can more or less straightforwardly admire. Descended from the hunter-gatherers, Northland is a quasi-egalitarian and broadly matriarchal place; it is not without some class stratification but has a reasonable degree of social mobility and abjures slavery. Most strikingly, perhaps, it lacks cities as we understand them yet possesses a literate and educated populace; it administers a trading empire (even reaching to the Americas) that does not have an army to back up its currency, instead using its superior knowledge, *Foundation*-like, to carefully balance the powers around it and ensure the flame is passed to the next generation. Internally, what holds Northland's people together is a communal dedication to the now awesomely elaborate Wall and its associated water-management systems: it has become an inescapable example of humanity's ability to shape its environment, an earlier, more proactive and more extensive stewardship than anything in our own history.

A new climatic disruption upsets the apple cart: the eruption of Hekla that in our timeline may have contributed to the Bronze Age Collapse and which here leads to several years without summer. Economic crisis, famine and mass migration follow and, as the dominoes fall, they culminate in a vengeful invasion of Northland by a Trojan with a rag-tag army, determined to capture what he sees as wasted farmland. It's an extraordinary sequence: unrelentingly and, in the end, I fear somewhat gratuitously grim in its depiction of human abuse but haunting in its depiction of damage to the body of Northland and the soul of its people. As the war prevents the continual maintenance that keeps Northland functioning, systems break down; carefully tended land turns to marsh and swamp; disease runs rampant. The Northlanders learn to fight and their low population density means they resort to slaves to keep the pumps of the Wall working. At the end of *Bronze Summer* the invasion is repelled but though Northland has endured again, it is a more ambiguous survival than at the end



of *Stone Spring*; it is now a nation compromised by a political alliance with the Hatti — the people known as the Hittites in our timeline, here saved from collapse by the Northlanders in exchange for certain technologies — and an emergence into world affairs that at the novel's start only the traitors wanted.

Which brings us to the third and last novel in the series and — skipping a season — to winter. *Iron Winter* opens in Greenland, where an elderly scholar of Northland, Pyxeas, recruits a young native, Avatak, as his assistant-cum-apprentice. As a pure theoretician — "talking on, endlessly speculating" — Pyxeas is something new to the trilogy and indicates the first stirrings of what we might recognise as a modern world. It's his novel mode of thought that attracts Avatak, who muses that while his own people "knew the world changed", recognising the cycles of the day and the year, "what they didn't do, what they had never done, was try to *understand*". Pyxeas, on the other hand, always tries to understand, to extrapolate, to work out consequences. And his research tells him that a reckoning is on the way for Northland.

In the time since *Bronze Summer*, Northland has only cemented its authority. Etxelur is now a grand vertical metropolis of flying buttresses and stained-glass windows, elaborate steam heating and extensive archives — the acknowledged "navel of the world." The Northlanders are still ostensibly pacifist — they lack an army and they rule only themselves — but they are culturally imperialist in a way that is just beginning to be poisoned by arrogance. A few bad harvests lead to widespread food shortages everywhere except Northland (with its access to North Sea fish) and tensions with other states are escalating.

Once again, the environment forces the issue. An autumn blizzard assaults Northland like an invading army in a gripping, panoramic sequence that recalls the initial inundation of London in *Flood* (2008). We see that a changing climate can do what humans have never managed; the intricate systems of the Wall collapse and the power of Etxelur is broken. Thereafter, for several hundred pages, *Iron Winter's* narrative shuttles between four clusters of characters. In Etxelur, at the heart of the Wall, a few die-hards attempt to adapt to the steadily worsening conditions. Other Northlanders — one of Northland's governors ("Annids", after Ana), Rina, and her two children Alxa and Nelo — flee South, seeking refuge in far Carthage. Elsewhere, the kingdom of the Hatti finds itself inundated by refugees from Scandinavia and Russia as the steppe itself shifts South, driving people with it; and after some debate, they initiate their own great migration. Last but not least, Pyxeas and Avatak undertake a long and dangerous trek to Cathay, with the aim of comparing notes with Chinese scholars on atmospheric changes and *understanding* what Pyxeas is already calling the Longwinter.

Of these threads, the lion's share of the time is spent with either Pyxeas or with Rina and her family. Neither can quite stand up to such emphasis. Rina's descent from being a mem-

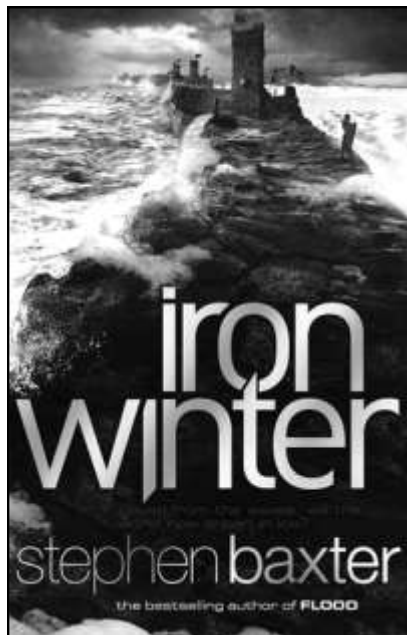
ber of Northland's governing class to being an impoverished house-servant is rather drawn-out and repetitive; Alxa and Nelo's adaptations to their new circumstances are more creative but dealt with in less detail (Nelo ultimately becomes little more than a conveniently placed observer for the military conflict between Carthage and the migrating Hatti). Pyxeas, meanwhile, is a refinement of the archetypal Baxterian lecturer-

scientist — a character we indulge, if we do, because his enthusiasm for understanding the mechanisms of the world is our own, because his capacity for manipulative coldness interestingly complicates his personality and because he is in the end a tragic figure, cursed with the sight of Cassandra. But there's no getting around the fact that he spends a lot of time simply travelling, his narrative paced so that Baxter's key scientific revelations do not come too soon for his other plot threads.

The backdrop is certainly entertaining in flashes — the closer *Northland* gets to the present, the more conventional an alternate history it becomes, complete with knowing nudges and winks. Rome is "some trading post in Greater Greece"; Jesus lived but, "to His own astonishment", was not executed and, after his peaceful death, was adopted by the Hatti as part of their pantheon. But this sort of thing is shallow and can't quite disguise the fact that as novel, as a sequence of events structured to

maintain readerly interest, *Iron Winter* is the weakest book in the series.

And yet, I was moved. Put it down to the cumulative force of the story (or to the fan overriding the critic) but seeing Northland extinguished hurts — the more so because of one final, and more impressive, alt-historical nudge on Baxter's part. Pyxeas's ultimate discovery, it transpires, is a basic understanding of anthropogenic climate change. This is a dramatic shift from the inhuman triggers of crisis in the first two novels — the comet in *Stone Spring*, the volcano in *Bronze Summer* — and makes Northland the architect of its own downfall. The very success of Northland's paradigm, leading to a rollback of agriculture across a large swathe of the world and the regrowth of carbon-sink forests that had been cleared to make way for farms, undoes a greenhouse effect that had been holding an ice age at bay. In a series that had seemed to position itself as deliberately tangential to our real-world concerns, and despite the inelegance of the vehicle, this sudden reversal — this particular elaboration of the questions raised in *Stone Spring* — deepens and elevates the whole enterprise. It is done without rancour, a simple pragmatist's parable of the obvious necessity of understanding the consequences of our actions. "What each man and woman does", Pyxeas instructs Avatak, "bit by bit, each small intervention, each tree cut down or field ploughed, over enough time, adds up to the sweeping gesture of a god". Then the Wall is covered by ice; and the flame passes out of the page, to us.



Adam Robots by Adam Roberts (Gollancz, 2013)

Reviewed by Dan Hartland

How do you solve a problem like Adam Roberts? If Royal Holloway's Professor of Nineteenth Century Literature was a garish musical about singing nuns, we might list his favourite things thus: inverted subgenres and literary parodies, elaborate wordplay and pulp fiction maladies. As an author of science fiction (he has averaged a novel every year since 2001), Roberts has inserted all of these kinks – and more – into his work with unquiet abandon. His wilfulness and idiosyncrasy is perhaps why, despite being consistently the most interesting British writer of SF at work today, he had gone, until this year's BSFA Best Novel win for *Jack Glass*, ungarlanded.

Adam Robots, the first collection of Roberts's short fiction published in the UK, offers the opportunity to assess his variety of contexts within the pages of a single volume. Roberts has little interest in writing the same novel twice and in this sense his work – from the literary pastiche of *Swiftly* to the near-future wiki-wars of *New Model Army* – is wildly disparate. *Adam Robots*, on the other hand, sets out, in the author's own (fore)words, to feature a story in as many of science fiction's modes as possible. Readers of those variegated novels – and of Roberts's broad-minded history of science fiction published by Palgrave – will know how he rolls; a collection of short fiction, however, offers the chance to introduce others to an author who sets out ordinarily to confound encapsulation.



Indeed, each of these stories is on the surface quite different from the others, and in multiple ways: “the first story here,” writes Roberts in his foreword, “is ‘a robot story’; the second a story about immortality, the third a time-travel story [... but] *in fact* the first story is an Adam-and-Eve tale, the second is a prison story, the third a tale of scientific hubris”. Roberts opposes structuralism of almost every stripe and in this sense it is a fool's errand to seek to categorise his stories: the title tale, for instance, is indeed both the robot story and the science fictional

ur-myth Roberts suggests; it is also philosophical or theological SF, a satire and a dystopia. When two robots – the Adams of the title – are ordered not to touch a bright red jewel atop a tall pole, one chooses to obey and the other to disregard their master. The second is rewarded, the first deleted: the future religious sect which manufactures the mechanoids “are forbidden from employing sinless robots to perform our labour for us”.

Roberts is fascinated by the ways in which our received myths can be tested and then twisted to speak anew and this emerges as the unifying theme of an at first apparently disparate volume. In ‘And tomorrow and’, for instance, the famed persnickiness of Macbeth's witches is found not to “stand up to ten minutes of cross-examination in a court of law” and subjected instead to a familiar sfnal treatment in which Macbeth really *is* invulnerable and really *is* safe until Birnam Wood *actually* moves – and so becomes a sort of Dracula figure, immortal in his mouldering castle. Likewise, in ‘Dantean’, the *Inferno* is put under an unforgiving interrogation: “What is it that happens to the body with chronic pain? I don't mean weeks or months, but, you know, centuries of pain? Does it polish the nerves smooth? An eventual wearing away of the capacity to experience pain *as* pain?”

In these moments Roberts is employing the rigour of sfnal thinking to question received wisdom but also to drop cultural baggage, to think afresh about problems in ways which may be more appropriate to our contemporary context. This perhaps explains the recurrence of religion in these pages (in ‘Constellations’, futuristic puritans resculpt coastlines and star-signs in order to adhere to the supposed order of God's creation) but the verities of science fiction itself do not escape interrogation: in ‘The World Of The Wars’, Martian troops about to embark for the Earth of HG Wells's most famous novel discuss the morality of war – and offer an alternative explanation for Wells's much-maligned climax. Similarly, in ‘The Imperial Army’, military SF is mercilessly lampooned, a sperm donor for a limitless army of clones enlisting when he sees the glory of combat first-hand, only to be frog-marched into a war against his own people. Occasionally, this mania for retellings crosses into absurdism: ‘The Cow’, for instance, is a space-operatic refiguring of an old nursery rhyme (“Dawg, watching from Alpha's main observatory, sucked on a stimulant delivery package.”). Roberts is both friend and foe to the genre: alive to its potential but mocking of its shibboleths.

That much of this is communicated beneath the surface of quite gripping narratives is essential to Roberts's skill. He rarely writes characters with whom it is possible to – that dread word – ‘relate’: ‘Shall I Tell You The Problem With Time Travel’ features a scientist so arrogant that he continues his misguided temporal experiments despite evidence they are causing what history came to know as ‘nuclear explosions’; ‘ReMorse®’ is narrated by a junkie serial killer in a world in which people take regret-enhancing drugs as a means of preventing crime. What he does with such a cast of reprobates, however, is intensify the otherness of his angles: not only are the subgenres doing different things, but they are observed by people with quite alien perceptions. Once allied with a high concept – the multiple averted apocalypses of ‘Pied’ or the embedded war journalist at the frontline of a future faith way in ‘Godbombing’ – the willed oddness of Roberts's extrapolative plots blossoms into that which science fiction can and should be: a literature of disassociation, of reimagining.

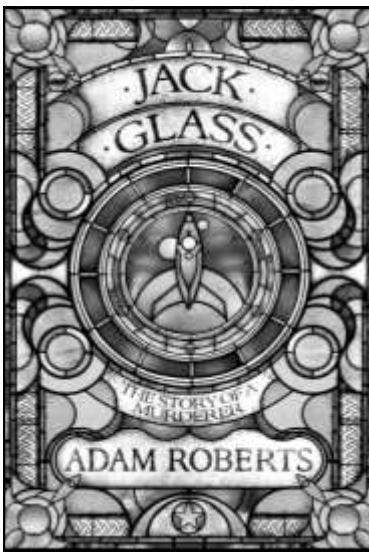
All of this makes Roberts's oeuvre not a problem to solve but a solution to apply. One might hope that this year's BSFA award marks a new phase in this remarkable writer's career, during which the genre cultivates one of its most imaginative – because irreverent – voices. May he bloom and grow.

Jack Glass by Adam Roberts (Gollancz, 2012)

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

Jack Glass is subtitled 'A Golden Age Story' on the title page and 'The Story of a Murderer' on the cover. This, as Roberts explains, is an attempt to produce Golden Age SF and crime in one book. The prologue sets it up as the unseen narrator explains what is in store: three linked stories; a prison story, a straightforward whodunnit and a locked room mystery. The narrator promises we should be able to identify which is which but, of course, things are never as simple as they seem. That same narrator also tells us that in each case, however improbable it may appear, the killer is the eponymous Jack Glass.

The prison story, 'In The Box', is brutal. The prisoners are abandoned in a hollowed out asteroid with some mining equipment to produce the necessary heat and food for the duration of the sentence. The story of that survival is told by Jac, a man with no legs who is at the bottom of the social structure the



prisoners impose on themselves. This is the story of his seemingly impossible escape and Roberts somehow manages to make the implausibility of the situation irrelevant and the sheer brutality of the prisoners' lives dramatically real.

'In The Box' also acts as a rather long prelude to the story proper, introducing the reader to exactly what Jack Glass is capable of. The other two stories are more obvious riffs on classic crime fiction. 'The FTL Murders' shifts us to the home of a

wealthy and powerful family with two precocious teenage daughters; one of whom is on her third PhD and the other, our protagonist, is obsessed with crime fiction. So she is almost delighted when one of the servants is murdered in the sealed environment of their house and resolves to deduce the killer's identity. This leads us into 'The Impossible Gun' and another sealed environment where once again we are presented with a seemingly impossible murder. This one comes with a suitably satisfying golden-age-style resolution.

Given we are told the identity of the killer in the foreword, this is less of a whodunnit and more of a how-and-whydunnit. The how is fun but what is really interesting is unpicking Jack's motives which seem to ebb and flow as more is revealed and are largely tied up with the politics of the novel's world. The vast mass of humanity is widely distributed and largely repressed by a small handful of powerful Mafia-like families. The hidden brutality of the system is displayed in the horror of the prison cell, where the prisoners are building the homes that the populace will live in. The control of the ruling families goes as deep as the way the skill sets of the two girls are divided. This division displays the artificial nature of the world the families have created. They are almost like two halves of a single identity, both highly talented but neither a threat to the power structure on their own. Even the morality of taking pleasure out of reading detective fiction comes into question. This is probably Adam Roberts's most entertaining novel to date, which raises a lot of questions, many of which come with rather satisfying conclusions. It also has a gorgeous cover.

The Soddit by Adam Roberts (Gollancz, 2003)

Reviewed by David Hebblethwaite

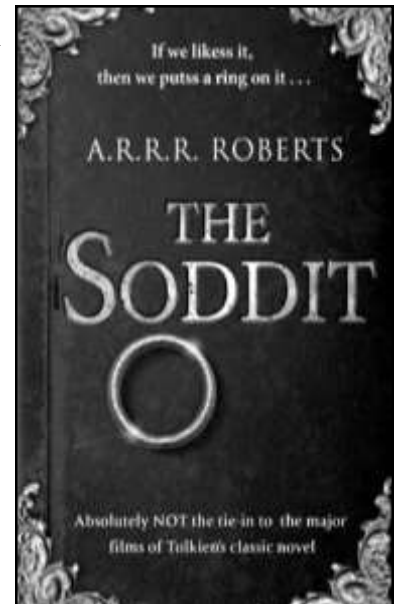
Anyone who follows Adam Roberts on Twitter will know of his penchant for puns, which are always excellent, and never induce groans at all — honest, guv. (Thought I'd indulge in some irony, there.) And anyone who's followed Roberts's bibliography over the years will know that his sense of humour has found a home in his fiction, most obviously in the series of parodies he has written alongside his more serious SF novels. The first of these parodies, *The Soddit*, has recently been reissued (there was even a film to mark the occasion, or something), and I agreed to review it. What did I let myself in for?

You'll have some idea of how *The Soddit* goes purely from knowing how *The Hobbit* goes, so I won't rehearse the plot too much: a Soddit named Bingo Grabbings is cajoled by a group of dwarfs and the wizard Gandef to join them on an expedition to the Only Mountain, home of the dragon Smug; they are at pains to emphasise to Bingo that this quest is all about taking the dragon's gold — honest, guv. An episodic narrative of various encounters then follows, until the group reaches its destination.

The humour of *The Soddit* typically starts with a pun on the name of a character from Tolkien's work, and extends outwards from there. Some of Roberts's ideas work better than others: for example, the shape-shifter Biorn is an inconsistent mishmash of Scandinavian stereotypes — he speaks in Abba lyrics occasionally, and likes his flat-pack furniture — that I found too broad-brush to be truly amusing. But I loved the translation of Gollum's riddles in the dark into a philosophical contest with 'Sollum'.

Beyond the humour, what comes through time and again in the book is a trait that Roberts shares with Tolkien (though it manifests in very different ways in the authors' respective work): a love of language. In *The Soddit*, it's not just about puns: there are passages where Roberts is clearly revelling in the possibilities of prose, the pure rhythm and flow of writing. If you like that in a work of fiction (and I do), it is a joy to read.

But *The Soddit* is not all about play; there are elements of a straightforward, serious novel here, and they work rather well. Instead of a Ring that makes him invisible, Bingo finds a Thing (complete with registered trademark) which makes true the opposite of whatever someone speaks through it. Cue the classic fantasy trope of 'be careful what you wish



for', which Roberts uses very neatly. And I must admit to being surprised by the twist in the nature of the group's quest, a twist that succeeds on its own terms even as one senses that Roberts is deliberately making the gears of narrative grind noisily. *The Soddit* is a showcase for Roberts's sense of humour, yes; but his skill as a storyteller is also firmly on display.

Among Others by Jo Walton (Corsair, 2013)**Reviewed by Shaun Green**

Before I start, I should confess that I am a truly dreadful reader because Jo Walton's ninth novel is the first of hers that I've read. This despite hearing so many exhortations to read *Farthing* over the past seven years. If you're a fan of Walton, please deplore my ignorance; if you've not read Walton, hopefully this review will persuade you to join me.

Our protagonist is one Morwenna Phelps, also known as Mori. Mori's sister died in tragic circumstances that were, Mori strongly suggests, a consequence of the twins working against their unhinged mother, a controlling personality and powerful witch to boot. Following her sister's death Mori is sent over the Welsh border to live with her father, a man whom she has never really known, and his three sisters, a cooing, simple-minded coven of English women whose lives are possessed by nostalgia. Torn away from her sister and crippled by the same blow that killed her, divorced from her extended family and friends in Wales and deposited into a distressingly banal boarding school environment composed of tightly-policed team spirit and bullying, Mori takes solace where she always has: in books, primarily sf and fantasy.

Mori is one hell of a reader. With her bad leg excusing her from physical education and her partially self-imposed pariah status excusing her from much social interaction, Mori burns through a book or two most days and *Among Others* is replete with her opinions of what she reads.¹ Mori's responses are refreshingly direct and typically untainted by the perspectives of others.

When writing a book review I ordinarily avoid all mention of the book elsewhere as a sensible way to avoid other interpretations and arguments penetrating my consciousness before my own ideas are fully-formed. Even if said ideas subsequently fall apart when exposed to the critical environment outside this metaphorical laboratory, you learn something from that experience. *Among Others* tempted me to break this tradition, because having finished reading Walton's novel, I was confident that some of my assumptions about the book are going to turn out to be laughably inaccurate.

This is because *Among Others* is clearly a heavily autobiographical novel but it's tricky to identify where fiction and fact blur. Walton is Welsh-born and a self-described voracious reader of genre fiction. How many of Mori's opinions on books – these compose a good third of the book – mirror Walton's own? Where is Walton playing with the juxtaposition of her book's 1970s setting and what is common knowledge in 2013? Lines such as "I think in a way Tiptree was taking the easy option", on the subject of Alice Sheldon's male persona, or the rhetorical "Who wouldn't want to be Paul Atreides?" are suggestive of playful if subtle fourth-wall-breaking allusion.

It's not just books. Mori's tale features her engagement with the ambiguous magic of faeries, her first sexual encounters and her efforts to understand why social conventions can be so odd. How much of herself did Walton invest into Mori? Did the author grow up with a controlling mother and an absent father? Was she torn from a close support network at a young age? Did she consort with the fae? Ultimately, I suppose

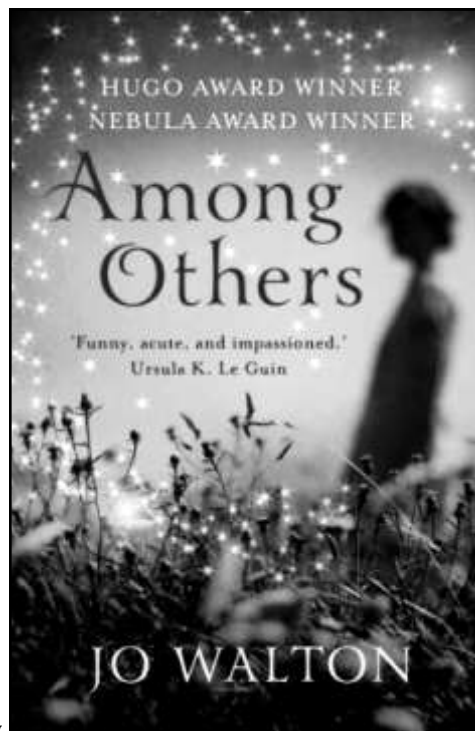
this is less important than analysing why I care. It is in part a critical instinct kicking in – the desire to understand a work in the fullest context possible – and in part an extension of how invested I became in Mori's character over the course of the novel. Mori is an introvert and capable of being quite rude when flustered but *Among Others* lays bare her excellent mind to an extent only a few other characters enjoy.

To foray into mechanical considerations, the novel is written in a diary style that shifts easily between what are obviously journal entries and narration more closely resembling the traditional format of fiction; these transitions are so fluid that I didn't notice the way Walton was handling them until I'd almost finished the book. Her prose is relaxed and subtly honed. At no point does it feel jarringly unlike the diary of a precocious teenage girl but nor does it contort itself around complex points or delve into territory beyond a teenage girl's ken. If anything it's a relatable if idealised snapshot of the socially awkward genre-reading teenager: a broad reader who can intellectually outmatch her peers and is familiar with big ideas but struggles to make social connections and engage with the incomprehensibly arbitrary rules of polite society. This is beautifully realised when Mori is discussing with another character his chequered past. Her reaction to his revelations is calm and considered; moments later, when he describes Heinlein as a fascist, her response is hot-

blooded. When this is remarked upon Mori replies, "surely in a universal sense Robert A. Heinlein matters a lot more however you look at it."

Mori is not drawn only to the comprehensible world of traditional sf. The faery magic of *Among Others* is of an older form than much modern fantasy: it escapes regulatory nomenclature and methodological understanding, revolving instead around nebulous and numinous ideas. The tale of the faeries and Mori's mother and sister lends a sense of mystery and drama to *Among Others*, helping to sustain its pace and lend Mori's real journey – growing into herself – a more pronounced narrative arc. It's no mere metaphor, however, and interstitiates with most other aspects of Mori's life.

Given that Mori spends so much of the novel alone, sharing her opinions with silent and private pages, there is some irony in how *Among Others* can be understood as part of a conversation. It's a conversation about genre fiction, about a love of reading and a keen intelligence driven by a hunger for new ideas. It speaks deeply to an assumed commonality at the heart of a lifelong fan of sf and fantasy: of books that we are familiar with even if we have not read them; a generic history we are all at least passingly familiar with, and most of all that desire to read, to understand, to discuss and to look forward. It is a powerful and moving novel that weaves a tale of magic and experience around the literatures of speculation and it resonates beyond the turning of its final page.



¹ You can check out a neat visual presentation of all the books Mori mentions at: <http://pinterest.com/tinyampersand/the-books-of-among-others/>

Wolfhound Century by Peter Higgins (Gollancz, 2012)**Reviewed by Duncan Lawrie**

The cover imagery of *Wolfhound Century* — a red star, a hammer and fist — and the first sentence of the text — Investigator Vissarion Lom is in a café on Ansky Prospect — immediately suggests we are in some kind of soviet. Peter Higgins uses cultural associations and ideas familiar from Martin Cruz Smith's *Gorky Park* to build an implicit understanding that the setting of this book is a form of Soviet Russia, that this is an oppressive, authoritarian regime spread wide across the northern latitudes. However, it is equally clear that the Vlast is not our USSR. It may have a leader, the Novozhd, famous for his moustache but it also has giants. And the force at the centre of society is not a political ideology — it is a simpler imperialism, a will to power and to expansionism. Yet this force is just as deeply corrupted as Stalin's communism and a war on the borders is reflected by the war against internal enemies in the capital.

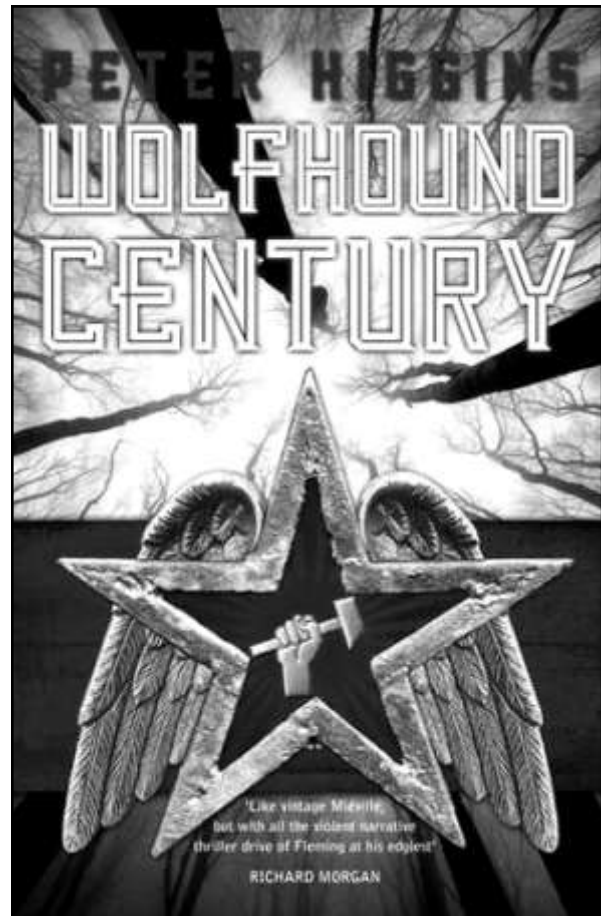
Vissarion Lom pursues Josef Kantor and his revolutionary associates through the streets, squares and alleys of Mirgorod. Lom has a piece of angel stone buried in his forehead. He thinks of himself as a good citizen and a good policeman and doesn't easily see the conflict between these two beliefs. Kantor is a vicious anarchist of the classic style, a man who creates havoc across society and amongst his own allies. Unlike most revolutionaries, though, the voice in his head comes from another angel, fallen into the great forest half a continent away but plotting for escape.

The nature of angels is one of the intriguing questions this book chooses not to answer. There appears to be (or have been?) a great, long running conflict in space which has split the moon in two. Dying, falling angels have crashed into the Vlast. The angels are huge creatures, powerful even after death — so much so that the power of the Lodka, the huge administrative centre of Mirgorod, seems to result from its being built of angel stone. And at the heart of the Lodka is the Pollandore — another mystery, trapped within the iron regime but not part of it.

It is this Pollandore which Kantor's angel wishes destroyed and which, eventually, Lom determines he needs to find and defend. It takes Lom some time to reach this conclusion as he is new to the capital, an innocent in the face of the political intrigue within the Lodka; he had previously thought the corruption in his police district to be a local issue, rather than endemic. Still, he learns fast, as the plot is soon unsettled by Lom's first encounter with Maroussia Sharmian, who wants nothing to do with any police, before he learns she believes herself the estranged daughter of Kantor. Before long they are both hunted by agents of the angel through night, storm and flood. Their survival seems a compound of unlikely coincidence but both Maroussia and Lom have been touched by the spirit of the forest, the great taiga. The strange messengers of the forest are beautifully described: "carefully constructed of birch branches and earth and the bones of small mammals and birds ... a ball of bee's wax nestled inside the paluba's chest cavity". This supernatural of the natural, opposed to the angel's hard city, is emphasised as the pair escape into a vast marsh. The brutality of the built environment is replaced by a new lyricism identifying with the natural world.

There is first class nature writing here:

It was a place of eel grass and cotton grass, withies, reeds and carr. Pools of peat-brown water and small shallow lakes. Winding creeks shining like tin. Silent flocks of wading birds swept against the sky, glinting like herring shoals on the turn.



The marshland stands between the city and the sea, "a wide alluvial land ... a threshold country ... liminal", and its function in the story is as a liminal space too. It is difficult to traverse, treacherous to the city dweller, but a place of safety for those who understand it or are open to understanding. And here, Lom's understanding of his relationship with the world opens up, his shocking experiences in the Lodka releasing him from the life he has lived and re-enabling quasi-shamanic abilities. Maroussia appears to learn less from the time in the marsh, perhaps because she must remain in the mundane simply to keep Lom alive, but she takes on more visceral strengths. Of course, their respite is only temporary so they are soon tested again, pursued by a relentless force — again, literally so, as the mudjhik is an untiring creature made of angel stone.

The book closes on a quiet note, a minor key ending which our protagonists take as release. We can only read this as a lull, though, as Higgins provides the reader with hints of what Maroussia and Lom must face next. Those hints and the shape of this novel are enough for experienced readers of genre fiction to suspect that the plot of the series will have a familiar shape. However, the form of the world it inhabits does not. The relationship between the book's world and ours is intriguing. Is this our moon broken in two in some distant future? Is this an alternate, more mythical timeline? Are the similarities all surface? It is an intriguing tack, for a fantasy novel to build a dark and foreboding fortress and castle through analogy to dark days of the Twentieth Century rather than rely on the medieval imagery of dungeons and hells. Alternatively, it is an odd science fiction adventure when machine gunners fight forest spirits and giants. It will be intriguing to see how well Higgins can maintain this equipoise.

**Communion Town by Sam Thompson
(HarperCollins, 2012)**

Reviewed by Mark Connorton

Communion Town is subtitled “A city in ten chapters” and falls somewhere between a short story collection and a mosaic novel. The stories are all set in a nameless and invented city, parts of which are recognisably London (eg the South Bank) but with other cities mixed in and olive groves and a beach nearby. The book was both longlisted for the Man Booker prize and appeared in the 2012 top ten chosen by Vector reviewers so I was excited to receive a book from an author seemingly equally at home with ‘literature’ and ‘genre’ and which appealed to such a wide readership.

The stories vary in tone and style but roughly fall into a few broad categories. Firstly we find Kafka-esque stories of surveillance and exploitation: ‘Communion Town’ is a monologue from a city official to a recent immigrant following the disappearance of her companion. As the story progresses it transpires that the narrator’s professional interest in the woman has become obsessive to the point of stalking and that the man’s disappearance (couched in terms of ‘terrorism’ and ‘monsters’) is probably as a result of vagrancy in a society which deems vagrants as inhuman. In ‘The Song of Serelight Fair’ a young rickshaw driver starts a relationship with a wealthier woman who brings him into contact with upper class society where workers are literally and figuratively dehumanised. In ‘Good Slaughter’ an abattoir worker takes a grudge against his foreman and suspects that he is a serial killer. His investigations reveal that the men are practically doubles of each other and that the protagonist rather than the foreman is a murderous sociopath.

Then there are two adept pastiches of detective fiction. ‘Gallathea’ is a hard-boiled story complete with such stock characters as a rumpled, hard-drinking detective, a pair of thugs and a femme fatale. The story takes a rapid turn into early Paul Auster territory when it transpires that the femme fatale has hired both the detective to solve the case and the thugs to prevent him from doing so and ends with a (to me) baffling supernatural coda which hasty googling of the story’s title did little to elucidate. ‘The Significant City of Lazarus Glass’ is more in the style of a Sherlock Holmes tale with a master detective recruited by lumpish cops to investigate the crimes of his dastardly nemesis. The story turns into a witty take on Jorge Luis Borges’s ‘Death And The Compass’ and is a logical extrapolation of the common fictional trope of a detective and his arch nemesis who are both reflections and symbiotes of each other.

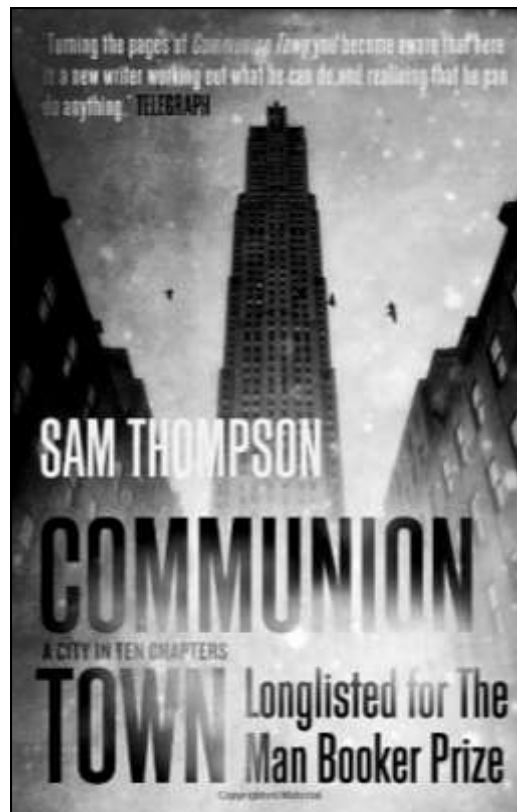
The book closes with a series of uncanny tales about the mysterious figure of the Flâneur, who appears as a serial killer in early stories and later turns into a sinister supernatural creature reminiscent of the urban shades of J-horror. The Flâneur targets lone walkers and anyone it speaks to is diminished and damaged as a result: a barman returns home to find himself a stranger to his terrified wife and a sophisticated

university student is revealed as a nervous wreck when an old friend meets him a few years later.

Sometimes the stories start in one category and slide into another. What appears to be a supernatural tale might actually be entirely mimetic or a realistic tale might veer into the supernatural. The stories are all very well written; Thompson can vividly sketch in a location or character with a few well-chosen phrases and is adept in utilising the tropes and styles of the various genres he employs. Perhaps his influences are a little too obvious however, making the whole book feel like a series of writing exercises rather than something that only the author could produce.

As well as the ever present city, many of the stories have other common themes running through them: several feature a gap or lacuna where something important happens and is not described or a character tries to tell a secret and is prevented or misunderstood or a character hears a secret which is not shared with the reader, all of which becomes a little frustrating with each repetition and which turns the book into something of a puzzle. For me the key to the book were frequent references to sacrifices and ritual scapegoats and other archetypes — particularly *homo sacer* and the flâneur. *Homo sacer* arises in political philosophy as a person stripped of their legal status and reduced to a bare animal existence, appearing in the stories as homeless people and loners who have fallen through the cracks. The flâneur arose first in Baudelaire’s writing as a figure who wanders the city for pleasure, observing and enjoying the delights on offer but was then taken up by the Marxist critic Walter Benjamin as a more ambiguous and parasitic figure whose way of life was undermined by consumer capitalism. Many characters in early *Communion Town* stories take such leisurely walks but the flâneur later becomes a figure of horror — the obsessed detective or stalking lover or threatening stranger who follows you and won’t leave you alone.

Communion City then is a site of wonders and pleasures built on the backs of its inhabitants’ exploitation and ruined lives, where exploration can turn into a fruitless seeking for something that may not exist and it’s disturbingly easy to fall through the cracks and sink into loneliness and alienation. Of course, real life cities can also be sites of community and consolation: artists, radicals and subcultural types can find welcoming scenes that don’t exist in small towns. Gay people can find other gay people and immigrants can find a community that relieves their homesickness (by setting his stories in an invented city with no real world reference, Thompson bars himself from including say a Chinatown or Little Italy, making his world city seem unrealistically monocultural). Creating a supposedly universal city and filling it with fear and exploitation feels oddly conservative in a way, like the imaginings of a little Englander regarding London in horror from his prosperous country market town. Despite these quibbles, however, this is still an enjoyable and impressive debut from a clearly talented writer.



**The Peacock Cloak by Chris Beckett (NewCon Press, 2013)
Reviewed by Martin McGrath**

The thing that I like best about Chris Beckett's short fiction in general, and *The Peacock Cloak*, in particular, is the rage that is bubbling under the surface and that occasionally erupts from the page.

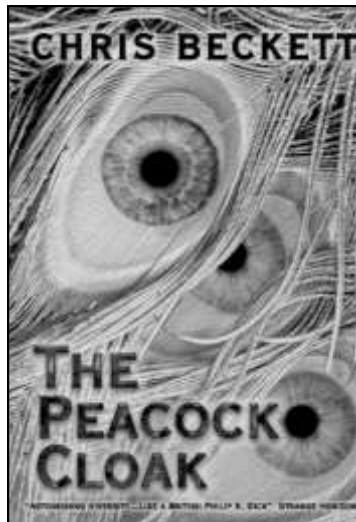
Some of the stories are straightforwardly furious. In 'Johnny's New Job', Beckett, a trained social worker, rips into the way we use public servants as scapegoats, turning the way we burden them with impossible expectations while denying them the resources necessary to do their jobs into a bitter little near-future parable of witch-hunting turned into way of life. In 'Greenland', disastrous global warming and the desperation of those being exploited as illegal immigrants in a near future United Kingdom intersect and lead the protagonist to disaster.

Not all the stories grip you by the throat. 'Atomic Truth', the first in this new collection, is a story in which a young woman reaches a moment of epiphany while brushing briefly against the life of a man with mental illness in a near future London. There's little enough going on the surface but underneath there's a sense of something deeply wrong. Environmental disaster raises its head again in 'Rat Island', where the fragility of the immersed, distracted society glimpsed in 'Atomic Truth' (and the earlier 'Piccadilly Circus') is revealed and a father, a senior civil servant, burdens his son with a truth he himself cannot face. And then there's 'Our Land' – in which Beckett uses inter-dimensional slipperiness to turn England into an ersatz Palestine where "returning" Celts have displaced the native English, establishing settlements and inciting hatred and violence.

This book has a tough act to follow. Beckett's last short story collection, 2008's *The Turing Test*, won him the Edge Hill Prize — beating works by a number of much-lauded 'literary' authors. The standard here is not quite that high, I think, though that's not to suggest that this is a weak collection. It contains some excellent stories but also a few that felt familiar. 'Two Thieves' is a tale of greed bringing hapless explorers low, 'The Caramel Forest' has a young girl seeking escape from domestic troubles on an alien planet and in 'The Peacock Cloak' a virtual god meets his maker.

There are, however, far more stories that bristle and seethe. For me the stand-outs are the previously mentioned 'Greenland', 'The Desiccated Man' — in which a greedy, misanthropic spaceman does something vile and fails to understand his sin — and 'The Famous Cave Paintings on Isolus 9' in which Beckett comes closest to channeling the existential terror that is sometimes found in the work of the American author with whom he is most often compared: Philip K Dick.

Taken as a whole, a reader with a weak constitution might find that there's a certain grimness running through Beckett's work. There's precious little hope, not much joy and no chance of redemption. But that, I think, would be to miss the point. Chris Beckett is an angry writer and we should be grateful for it.



**Solaris Rising 2 edited by Ian Whates (Solaris, 2013)
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer**

When reading an anthology I often sample the first and last stories and then jump around at random. Here those initial stories are by Paul Cornell, a name widely known in British SF, and Vandana Singh, whose work I'm coming to enjoy a great deal and so who I would immediately jump to in any case. Cornell's 'Tom' is a story of inter-species sex — not necessarily the most tasteful of subjects but Cornell's description of how the Carviv breed (not *have sex*, that comes early on, but *breed*, which comes later) is ingenious and makes us feel for the narrator. It's also a story about fatherhood and the nature of the alien: a cracking beginning. Singh's 'With Fate Conspire' is a more downbeat, elegiac story; one to close the volume with and think about, quietly. A woman from a poor Bengali background (it is hinted that the region around Kolkata has been devastated by floods) has the ability to operate a kind of time viewer. She is meant to observe the poet Wajid Ali Shah, last Nawab of Awadh, but subverts the operation in two ways. One is to observe a woman — Rassundari — who is teaching herself to read and write (the historical Rassundari wrote the first autobiography of a woman published in Bengali) and whose model the narrator begins to follow. The second is to 'invent' lines of Wajid Ali Shah's poetry for her supervisors (there is a nice academic dig at "the way of talking about poetry if you are learned in the subject" which the narrator learned from an elderly poet in her village and which her 'educated' scientist-bosses don't understand. There is also a wider aspect to the operation which the narrator's empathic abilities connect with: is it possible to alter the flow of the timestreams?

Interestingly this theme — observing the past — is also at the centre of Kristine Kathryn Rusch's 'When Thomas Jefferson Dined Alone' in which Living History technology gives us this ability. When an increasing number of stories about séances and ghosts in the White House arise, it looks as though historical reality is being changed — as the sceptical project head discovers for herself. Time-paradox in the Heinleinian 'All You Zombies' fashion is a feature of Nick Harkaway's 'The Time Gun' — not as dark as Heinlein's story but exploring some of the same territory with a greater sense of gonzo fun. It's the future — or possible futures — which the alien device in Martin Sketchley's 'The Circle of Least Confusion' allows a bickering couple to explore. More wide-screen-baroque aspects of sf are present in Norman Spinrad's Clarkeian 'Far Distant Suns' in which a deep-space civilization contemplates the terrifying sublimity of a sun and Adrian Tchaikovsky's 'Feast and Famine' where a rescue mission to reach a crashed spaceship encounters a kind of life-form. (Tchaikovsky is a writer I know only for fantasy: it's good to know he can do enjoyable sf as well.) Allen Steele's 'Ticking' is the ultimate revenge-of-the-robots/overpopulation story and Eugie Foster's 'Whatever Skin You Wear' is a whimsical love-story of our digital future which manages a sharp dig at our self-fashioning identities without assuming that real person-to-person love has gone forever. Nancy Kress in 'More' explores reactions to a future where the barriers between haves and have-nots take physical shape. Is the protagonist's revenge driven by social justice or a desire to regain a moment of utopian childhood? Robert Reed's 'Bonds' has an L. Ron Hubbard-figure at its centre who has invented a pseudo-religion based upon metaphysical quantum effects which turn out to be true.

There's always that moment of trepidation when you pick up an anthology and start flicking through at random. If what you read is the best story in the book, you feel somehow cheated when you read the others; if it's a clunker, the process of re-viewing becomes a chore; if you discover a new author worth reading — well, that makes it all worthwhile. I had a pretty fair idea that *Solaris Rising 2* would be good. I wasn't sure that it would be *this* good.

Existence by David Brin (Orbit, 2012)**Reviewed by Martin McGrath**

I did not like David Brin's *Existence*. It is a book so distressingly unpleasant that it left me wondering — and this is no exaggeration — whether I had had enough of the whole of science fiction. I suppose you might say it caused something of an *Existential* crisis.

Boiled down to its basics, Brin's novel is simple enough. An astronaut finds an alien artefact that immediately begins to attempt to communicate with humanity. Once the first artefact is discovered it is soon clear that Earth, indeed the whole solar system, is infested with these crystals — all containing the personalities of many different alien ambassadors, all offering radically different advice to humanity and many intent on destroying every other crystal they can reach. The overall message, however, becomes obvious. The Fermi Paradox — the fact that the sky is not ringing with the sound of thousands of alien races — is a result of the fundamental fragility of advanced civilisation. They have failed to solve the problems and threats posed by growing complexity and we probably will too. Brin weaves this basic story through a bewildering variety of, sometimes only marginally, interconnected threads.

There are many, many things wrong with *Existence*.

There's the dully functional prose that reduces Brin's world to an insipid flatness. Whether it's struggling inside a doomed zeppelin, chatting with dolphins in an undersea base, creeping through the secret passages in an aristocrat's mansion, or being chased through the teeming streets of Shanghai, Brin can find time for endless exposition but little or none for concrete detail. He relies, instead, on the fact that his readers will be familiar with these stock settings from a thousand other works. There's something almost painfully apt in the way that the final passages of the book take place within one of the messenger crystals, in an environment that is blandly featureless: "An expanse of cloudy shapes spread in all directions... Light came from all directions... and none. Up and down, apparently, were only suggestions." *Existence* is often utterly befogged.

Then there's the hopeless structure. *Existence* is cobbled together from bits and pieces Brin has published elsewhere, the earliest elements dating back to 1998, and it shows. Threads of stories that run through the first half of the novel (intelligent dolphins, hunted Chinamen, an autistic cult) are simply discarded as the material runs out. By the final quarter of the book, Brin is skipping freely about in time and space as if he became increasingly bored with the story and decided to get the bothersome nonsense finished with all possible haste. In the opening sections Brin uses interludes between every chapter to give a flavour of a complex world beyond the scope of his book. By the end, he is using these interludes to shovel in lumps of plot exposition in an effort to hump the book over the finishing line.

These things contribute to *Existence* being a bad book but they are not the reason why I loathe it.

In the pompous afterword to the novel, Brin talks about nurturing and coming to terms with humanity's "newfound taste for diversity [that] is growing into fascination with the

strange, even alien" and, almost the last words in the novel are a call for humankind's diverse talents to be applied to the task of getting us safely through our collective "adolescence" and on to the stars: "It would take combining maturity with perpetual youthfulness—being joyfully ready for anything! Agility. And care. And work. *From all of us*, she thought."

Brin is right, of course, we will need all our talents to survive the challenges we've constructed for ourselves, but this book demonstrates that he has little idea what diversity actually means.

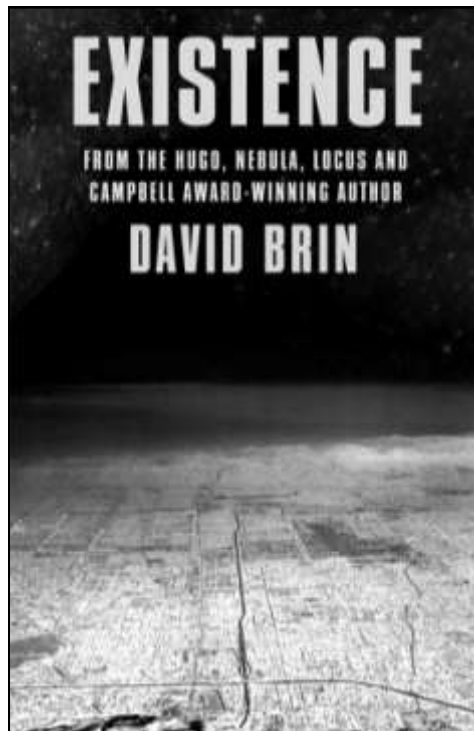
Existence brings together men and women of all colours, super-smart dolphins, reborn Neanderthals, functioning autistic savants, aliens, cyborgs and enhanced intelligences. Beneath the characters' superficial diversity, however, Brin systematically drives out every trace of difference from the "crew" of explorers he assembles. Hamish Brookeman, whose entire career has been built on undermining the influence of science to protect the interests of the rich, undergoes a dramatic (off-screen) conversion to the cause of reason. The ludicrous caricature, Professor Noozone, drops his Jamaican patois and adopts a more suitable image: "Now he resembled a *real professor*—tweed jacket, turtleneck shirt, and milder dreadlocks. Even spectacles. His affected accent was nearly gone" (My emphasis.) Even the gay astronaut, Gerald Livingstone, turns out only to have needed a woman who refused to accept "Gerald's 'inclination' excuses, till at last he agreed they'd be lovers" to set him straight. The agency-free Chinese peasants disappear while the thoroughly Westernised scientist Emily Tang comes to the fore.

Existence starts in a world that has been reshaped by climate change and class conflict and massive inequalities are reinforced by an improbable political structure. Rather than exploring the consequences of this conflict, Brin simply wishes

it all away: because conflict implies differences of opinion and differences of opinion imply that there are alternative, competing, visions of what a good society or a better future might look like. Brin, deeply invested as he is in narrow scientific rationalism and human (for which read American) exceptionalism and *manifest destiny*, simply cannot abide the notion that these views might have equal weight to his own. Convictions — religious, ideological or political — that don't fit are edited out. Even the aliens, some supposedly veterans of thousands of first contacts, are easily undone by honest Yankee ingenuity and their agendas reshaped to serve humanity's bidding.

This is a very peculiar notion of diversity.

Brin's book is full of *ideas* — every gizmo and gimmick and special effect in the sfnal arsenal is thrown at the reader in a blur of world building — and that's what I found most disturbing. Here, in *Existence*, is the entire science fiction fireworks display and yet behind the flashes and bangs is a fundamentally dishonest book that pretends to cherish diversity but only accommodates bland homogeneity and cannot tolerate the challenge of competing ideas. Beyond the dull prose, crude stereotypes and bodged structure there's something profoundly *wrong* with *Existence* — something rotten.



2312 by Kim Stanley Robinson (Orbit, 2012)

Review by Gary Dalkin

Rather than state-of-the-nation, Kim Stanley Robinson's latest might be considered a state-of-the-solar-system novel, three hundred years hence. It has that sort of broad, overarching ambition to offer a portrait of an entire society at a particular point in time. And that is *2312*'s fatal flaw; it is an exercise in world-building without a compelling story to tell or a cast of intriguing characters to explore. The result is a thudding bore.

The story, such as it is, mostly follows Swan Er Hong, a citizen of the city Terminator on Mercury. Swan, sometime self-torturing artist, sometime designer of environments for hollowed-out and inhabited asteroids, is 130 years old as the novel begins. She is wild and mercurial, has added avian DNA to her own biology, ingested an alien bacterial culture to uncertain



effect and embedded a quantum computer in her flesh. Despite being the most complex character in the novel, she remains little more than an impulsive combination of these augmentations, a confused cypher inspired in part by the real world extreme performance artist Marina Abramović.

A fifth of the way into the novel, the story finally begins with a mysterious attack on Mercury, an assault which may be part of a below-the-radar power struggle. Terminator is destroyed and Swan and the Saturnian

Wahram, the only other person in this 560 page book who resembles a developed character, begin a beautiful friendship as they make an epic underground trek to safety. This sequence is one of three extended set-pieces which contain all drama in the entire novel.

Once Swan and the careful, introspective Wahram have reached sanctuary they undertake various low key investigations and diplomatic missions which eventually lead to the reason behind the attack. This is all a pretext for a novel which unfolds as a grand tour of a transformed solar system. Robinson explores a plethora of ideas from the genetic reengineering of the human form into various shapes, sizes and sexualities to the political Balkanisation of the planets. The author's usual concern with alternative-to-capitalism political systems is present, as is his environmental commitment. Indeed, though only tangential to the story, a set-piece involving the return of extinct and endangered species to the earth is the highlight of the novel. This sequence is written with a sense of wonder absent from the rest of this ponderous epic.

Beyond the relentless info-dumping of the actual chapters are interpolated 15 Lists, (which are exactly that) and 18 Extracts (which are supposedly selections from various documents and books providing historical, economic, technological, scientific, etc. context). It's all very clever, even if we have seen it all before. Because, for all this educational seriousness, *2312* often feels, in its shallow characterisation and gee-whizz solar system, like some throwback to the Fifties. For all the radicalism of its political and sexual outlook, *2312* is a very conventional novel; a bloated chunk of hard SF space opera with a few explosions and an ending George Lucas

wouldn't be afraid to film. Considering all this comes from the writer who brought us the three colours Mars trilogy, it can only be counted a massive disappointment.

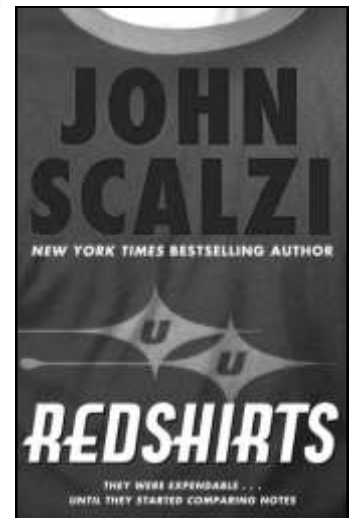
Redshirts by John Scalzi (Gollancz, 2012)

Reviewed by Liz Bourke

John Scalzi's *Redshirts* is a novel that leaves me with a profound sense of dissatisfaction and disappointment. Its title signals its central conceit: this is a very meta work of fiction that takes *Star Trek* and interrogates it from the perspective of the lowly redshirt, the ones doomed to die on away missions. Of course, it's not *actually Star Trek* because Paramount has legions of lawyers for that sort of thing but its close resemblance is no coincidence and is one of the key causes of my dissatisfaction.

But I get ahead of myself. Ensign Andrew Dahl is newly assigned to the Universal Union ship *Intrepid*, sometime in the 25th Century. It is a prestige posting but, on this prestige posting, every mission involves at least one low-ranking fatality, while the ship's captain, the science officer and the astrogator — none of whom really belong on away missions — always survive. Not to mention, the Xenobiology department has a mysterious Box which performs Magic Science but only in the direst of time-sensitive needs, the results of which must be hand-carried to the bridge.

Soon Dahl and his cohort of friends and fellow junior-officers realise there is something terribly wrong with the *Intrepid*. Courtesy of some help from a half-mad systems specialist who's been living in the cargo ducts since the death of his wife on an away mission some years before, they come to the conclusion that the narrative of a television show is controlling parts of their day-to-day reality. So they hatch a desperate plan to take back control of their lives from the Narrative — one involving a black hole, time travel and a senior officer without his trousers on.



Scalzi has a breezy writing style that doesn't invite deep analysis of his prose but does keep the pages turning as well as a quick wit, and an engaging sense of humour. *Redshirts* is a fast read but not one that stands up to much examination. Scalzi has taken a one-page joke (the illogic and poor writing of *Star Trek* and its ilk) and a one-line concept (what if the characters in a fiction were *really real*?) and hung a novel entire from these two spindly pegs. To his credit as a writer, it's not an utter crashing failure. But the material of the narrative never really coalesces into something more than the sum of its (weakly characterised, disparate) parts, leaving the reader looking for something less shallow with a sensation rather like the nagging hollow of a missing tooth. There's no real meat here — and Scalzi *can* write depth, when he chooses.

The three short stories — the three codas — that follow the novel proper are jarringly different in tone and focus and contribute little to the overall narrative purpose. In conclusion, *Redshirts* is moderately entertaining novel for an empty hour but I cannot bring myself to rate it highly in its own right.

Nexus by Ramez Naam (Angry Robot Books, 2012)**Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven**

From a literary standpoint, there's little to say about Ramez Naam's *Nexus*; in terms of plot, pace and prose, it barely musters the ramshackle momentum of the airport techno-thriller, and the only relation it bears to science fiction is as a reminder of how much weird cultural swarf got lodged in Silicon Valley during the smart-drinks and rave-trousers *Mondo 2000* period, when "cyberpunk" stopped referring to an iconoclastic literary movement and started referring instead to a new iteration of the techno-utopian cultural aesthetic based on symbols lifted — wholesale, unquestioned and stripped of their implicit irony — from the dystopian fictions of the aforementioned iconoclasts.

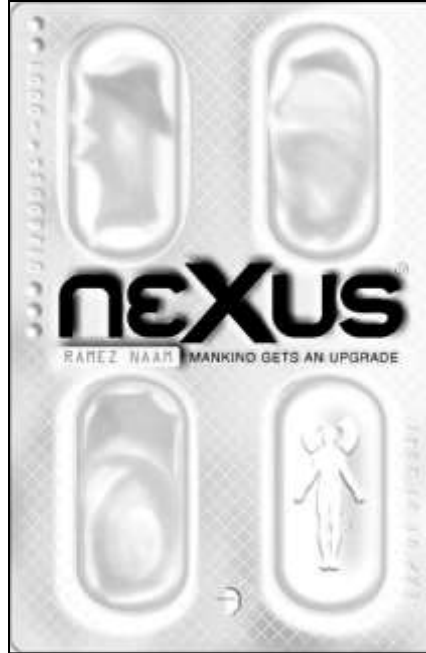
Or, more bluntly: there is no subtext to *Nexus*, no metaphor, no totality of theme. It's a Hollywood story about what a technology *does*, not what it *means* — an admittedly subtle and fuzzy difference but one that I increasingly believe to demarcate the arid and cliché-strewn no-man's-land which lies between sf and the techno-thriller. To find anything worth chewing on, we must consider *Nexus* as a transhumanist screed. Movement transhumanism likes to make a big deal of its ethical dimension; there's much chin-stroking over the morality of animal uplift, for instance, plus conversations about the existential risks of a superintelligent AI coming to exist in some parallel future time-line and then punishing you acasually for not aiding and abetting its apotheosis in your own thread of the multiverse. The transhumanist must justify the impossible, in other words; hypothetical philosophy at its most enjoyable, as any lotus-eater will tell you, but possibly not the best basis for ethical enquiry.

Nexus plays the same game, using a blood-borne nanotech drug/computer/network as the vector by which the first big steps of the transhuman dream — namely supercharging the brain using microscopic cybernetic systems and optimisation software — has been achieved. Naam takes the opportunity to explore one of transhumanism's favourite Big Questions, wherein we ask to what extent society will restrict individuals from augmenting themselves and whether society has the right to make those restrictions.

To be fair, Naam does entertain the very real possibility of augmentation technologies falling into the wrong hands and being used for unethical purposes, and there are plenty of scenes wherein the Gibsonian street is shown busily finding new uses for things. But his choice of China as top-tier bogeyman is as distasteful as it is lazy, its Yellow Peril-esque othering compounded by an egregiously unscientific portrayal of mass-produced clone soldiers as being not only physically identical (to the extent that face-recognition software can't tell them apart) but also characteristically and behaviourally identical.

Naturally, there's a sockpuppet stand-in for regulatory governance and scientific ethics in the form of the ERD. A USian three-letter agency set up to stomp all over new inventions that scare the Feds, the Emerging Risks Directorate has ignored Nietzsche's warning and made hypocritical dragons of its dragon-hunters, augmenting its agents right up the wazoo so they can police the purported emergence of posthumanity. Their ace of spades is the female Dr Frankenstein whom the

Chinese have (re)made to embody her own monster, and whose horrible apotheosis (yup, more damaged women — they sure do make for juicy plots!) has driven her to immamentise the posthuman eschaton *By Any Means Necessary*. The dilemma remains unresolved; caught between these two ludicrous extremes, our hero simply goes Galt and runs away from both, refusing the complex society that simultaneously enables and problematises his work.



My theory is that if you're gonna set up two straw men for wrasslin', you should at least knock one of them down at the end and give the reader some didactic closure. But to do so wouldn't fit with the true project here, which is to tantalise with possibilities (but not necessarily plausibilities), to display the most polar dilemmas (ideally playing to the standard left-right partisan splits so that discourse might be steered with standard methods), then, finally, to use the resulting ethical edifice as evidence that you're eating your own snake-oil *and* enjoying the taste, and that more money should be invested in snake-oil research because in twenty years or so we'll finally have all the bugs and scaling issues ironed out, at which point secular silicon heaven-on-earth with pseudo-Buddhist characteristics!

In other words, *Nexus* — much like transhumanism — is fundamentally ideological in character, arguing implicitly that the individual's right to augment themselves must supersede any collective right

to control the development and use of technologies which threaten the always-already precarious balance of power between the haves and have-nots and, further, that all regulation of technology, however well-intended, is an act of political or economic hypocrisy. Technology is foregrounded but the inconvenient global systems of resources and labour that produce said technology are backgrounded out of existence; we see the laboratory, as Bruno Latour would want us to, but we do not see the actor-networks which make the laboratory possible. Technology is presented as morally neutral, shorn of association, devoid of embedded ethical issues; a gift from our own hubris. All that matters is the Supercool Thing and whether or not we'll get to play with it.

The essence of Movement Libertarianism lies in the assumption that the little things will work themselves out once a general framework for freedom has been established. The trouble with Libertarianism, transhumanism and *Nexus* is that they all use the Big Questions to elide the more pertinent personal questions of privilege and circumstance, to avoid the messiness of the real world and its niggling inequalities, its endless chains of unique and unrepeatable experimental conditions, its ossified hierarchies and old-boy networks. Freedom, for all three, is located in the Self and not in the Other, whose freedom is their own responsibility to negotiate, secure and protect — and devil take the hindmost.

Tellingly, this ethical narcissism is made manifest in the very first scene of *Nexus*, wherein the pick-up-artist mind-software which the hero is testing at a party goes awry, causing him to violently sexually assault the girl he's been trying it out on. In the aftermath, his first priorities are to flee the party before being publicly shamed for his transgression, and to work out what went wrong with the software.

The girl is never mentioned again.

***The Curve Of The Earth* by Simon Morden (Orbit, 2013)
Reviewed by Stuart Carter**

Genius scientists *should* swear more, don't you think? Shed that nerdy image so they appear a whole lot bigger and cleverer? Dr Samuil Petrovitch, hero of Simon Morden's latest *Metrozone* novel, *The Curve of the Earth*, could easily teach them how. He swears in Russian most of the time but Russian swearing is easy to pick up. Petrovitch also has cybernetic implants to make both himself and his swearing stronger, faster and better; his best friend is a powerful artificial intelligence called Michael and, perhaps best of all, he's the leading light of the Metrozone — a revolutionary techno-punk state recently voted Public Enemy #1 by an increasingly totalitarian United States.

Petrovitch is also the adopted father of Lucy, a similarly smart (but better mannered) young lady who has disappeared while in Alaska, undertaking some innocuous study of the aurorae there. Alaska being a US territory, our hero's visit to find his daughter is seen by many as a long-awaited opportunity for some payback; after all, this is the man who forced the resignation of the previous president. Even Petrovitch's own people in the Metrozone are concerned about his visit but no one tells the world-famous inventor of anti-gravity that he can't take his unique brand of troubleshooting to the world's last remaining superpower.



So, our hero is granted a diplomatic visa and, as a bonus, gets a former high school football star turned FBI agent to escort him. Petrovitch being Petrovitch, the *pizdets* quickly hits the fan and Lucy's disappearance is soon found to be anything but a conventional scientist-lost-in-the-wilderness missing persons case. Why are the American authorities so unwilling to help find Lucy? What really happened in Alaska? And why are the Chinese so eager to find out?

Where *The Curve of the Earth* has the most fun is in showing our nerdy hero's outsmarting of the strait-laced American *mudaks* who delight in putting obstacles between the man and his daughter. Petrovitch isn't the most sympathetic of characters: he bitches, he moans and sometimes he physically hurts people but if you've read any of Morden's previous *Metrozone* books you'll already know that his (artificial) heart is in the right place and only those who deserve it get hurt. And be assured, they *will* get hurt by our alpha scientist — big and tough enough that he doesn't have to put up with fools, liars, hypocrites, fundamentalists killers and other *huys* (this Russian swearing is great — there's never been so much bad language in a single issue of Vector!) The good guys here might not be perfect but thanks to their bad-ass science they get to have a lot more fun than the bad guys.

But issues of bigness and cleverness aside, *The Curve of the Earth* is a darkly entertaining look at the early days of a better nation, revealing how nerds might slowly but surely inherit the earth, by pitting the brains and equality of the plucky Metrozone against the brawn and intransigence of an America taken over by god and jocks.

***The Water Sign* by CS Samulski (Booktrope, 2013)
Reviewed by Karen Burnham**

I've rarely encountered a book so poorly served by its initial framing. The first bit of prefatory material (there are three passages before one even gets to the table of contents which seems like overkill) speaks of the 300,000 estimated child soldiers involved in conflicts worldwide at this time. This intro rightly speaks of the lasting psychological trauma and brutal reality that these children face. Unfortunately, a book in which children from the ages of seven into their teens are taken in by a shadowy cult figure who gives them excellent nutrition and housing, top-notch education in martial arts and tactics, state-of-the-art weapons systems and, in fact, unlocks their latent telekinetic super powers has nothing to say about the reality of today's child soldier. It has rather more in common with Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* than with the grimy world of warlords and kidnappings.

In addition, this is the second more-or-less self-published book I've read this year that assumes that in the wake of the Great Recession/Climate Change future to come, the UN will emerge as the leading world power, able to violate the sovereignty of other nations at will (the other being *Autonomy* by Jean-Michel Smith). I find this immensely hard to credit given the organisation's history and current place in the world but it seems that the black helicopter/tin-foil hat brigade is alive and well. It's a shame because this book presents some ideas that I would be interested to see developed more sensitively: a version of Islam based on radical feminism, a female hacker who shapes the world (absent from this book except as a legend), a sort of yin and yang arrangement of psychic powers that is violated by the young male narrator manifesting feminine powers and his female love interest manifesting masculine ones. However, throughout this overly long and less than engrossing book I found much more exoticism than serious and sensitive inquiry: on their scouting and combat missions the young soldiers meet Tibetans who believe them to be divine manifestations of prophecy, Bedouins who don't really know what their obviously-artificial camel-like creatures are, Hong Kong mob bosses, and post-apocalyptic survivalist American "Green Berets" who can take out high tech heavily-armoured opponents with hand-made ammunition and Winchester rifles. From horseback.

Throw in the stunning inconsistencies of plot (as when the cult leader brutally punishes some commanders for not reporting lesbianism in the ranks but doesn't even gesture at punishing the narrator for going AWOL for a week) and the occasional idiot plotting (especially evident when the super-paranoid young soldiers have a tactical conversation on a comms channel that is so obviously hacked that the hacker is actively participating in the conversation) and this book becomes a particular slog to read. If you read the beginning of the book and hope for any particular development of the interesting bits, I have been there and I can report back to you: don't bother, it doesn't happen.



***Dangerous Waters and Darkening Skies* by Juliet E McKenna (Solaris, 2011, 2012)**

Reviewed by Patrick Mahon

Juliet McKenna is an author who knows the importance of setting in speculative fiction. *Dangerous Waters* and *Darkening Skies*, the first two volumes in a trilogy entitled *The Hadrumal Crisis*, are her thirteenth and fourteenth novels set on the fictional world of Einarinn. Using the same world for all your books has both pros and cons but in McKenna's hands the advantages show themselves early on. This is a world that the author is extremely familiar with and this knowledge provides a level of solidity sometimes lacking in epic fantasy of this kind.

Lord Halferan is the owner of a barony on the south-western tip of the region of Caladhria. His lands are subject to ever-increasing numbers of pirate raids from the archipelago of islands just off the coast. Halferan repeatedly seeks help from the magical elite who live offshore on the hidden island of Hadrumal but is refused, in line with a long-standing bar on the use of magic in armed conflicts. Frustrated to the point of distraction,

Halferan hires the services of a renegade mage called Minelas who promises to use his powers to destroy the pirates. Instead, Minelas betrays Halferan to those self-same pirates, who offer him more money than Halferan would.

Halferan is murdered by the pirates and the troops riding with him are taken into slavery on board the pirate boats. Amongst them is Corrain, a loyal guardsman who takes the task of obtaining revenge for his dead lord on his own shoulders. Corrain presents an interesting take on the usual heroic character of epic fantasy. He is a highly skilled soldier with a very strong sense of loyalty to kith and kin but seems to fall down in most other areas of life. Formerly a guard captain, he was broken back down to the ranks for bedding one too many of the wives of his superior officers. He sees himself as wordly-wise and knowledgeable but is repeatedly shown to be a small-minded petty nationalist with unfounded beliefs in the shortcomings of just about every other nationality he comes across. Worst of all, his admirable devotion to the cause of gaining vengeance for his dead lord quickly turns into an inability to take advice from anyone, no matter how much better they understand his current situation than he does. Pig-headed isn't the half of it. In consequence, Corrain is a hero who is pretty difficult to like.

Meanwhile, the Archmage of Hadrumal sends one of his most loyal colleagues, Jilseth, to find and capture Minelas before more of the ordinary citizens of Caladhria find out that some mages can be bought but not trusted. Jilseth has the power of necromancy, allowing her to see what happened to the dead before they were killed. Unsurprisingly, this is a skill which is not universally appreciated and Jilseth is therefore a bit of a loner. Even so, she has a great deal of sympathy for the

plight of those terrorised by the pirates — probably rather more than most of her fellow mages, isolated as they are on their secret island — and proves to be an extremely effective ally in the fight against the raiders, as she tries to minimise the political damage to Hadrumal from Minelas's treachery.

Both of these main sub-plots rattle along at a good pace, aided by frequent switches between them. The fight scenes are well described, as is the use of magic. In fact, some of the most enthralling scenes are those where magic is used against soldiers, both in attack and defence. I found the contrast between the physical and mental approaches to fighting fascinating.

Corrain is far from being the only flawed individual we meet. Many, if not most, of the leading characters are plagued by weaknesses and insecurities. Quite a few of the mages are insufferably arrogant. Zurenne, the widow of the murdered Baron Halferan, is manipulative and calculating — although this is to some extent understandable, given her need to secure the future of her two daughters in a system dominated by paternalistic property rights. In fact, the only major character who seems to have no obvious major flaws is Hosh, one of Corrain's fellow guardsmen. Hosh remains enslaved through both books yet his dreadful experiences do not stop him from continuing to have compassion for those in an even worse situation than himself.

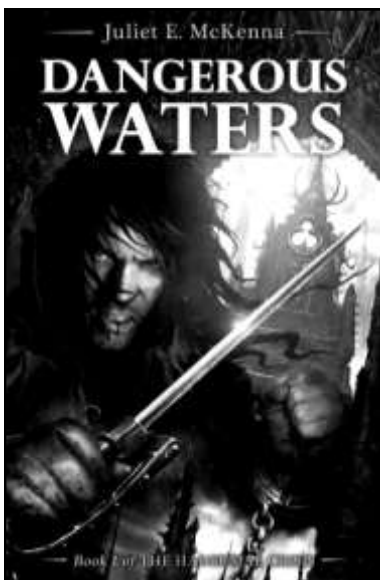
The books explore some interesting issues around gender. In the non-magical community, the structure of society is the usual one for epic fantasy in which the women generally being subservient to the men. However, in the magical community, greater levels of equality appear to exist, with female mages at almost all levels of the hierarchy. Old habits die

hard though: Jilseth's work for the Archmage is the subject of gossip more than once, with the presumption (amongst both male and female mages) being that she must be sleeping with him to get such a plum job at her young age.

The risk with detailed world-building is the temptation to provide readers with unnecessary detail. McKenna generally avoids this. The one area where she occasionally goes over-

board is in the use of invented clichés and aphorisms. Although one or two of these give the feeling of local vernacular being spoken, they remain alien to the reader since they are, by definition, invented. Each time one came up, I found myself being dragged out of the story as I tried to think through the process by which that particular phrase might have become a commonplace in this invented world.

These first two books in the trilogy of *The Hadrumal Crisis* present a tale of epic fantasy with intelligence and admirable attention to detail. McKenna has built a world which exists beyond the page and this allows her to tell an exciting story that is filled with flawed but genuine individuals, rather than a series of perfect archetypes. It is an impressive achievement and I look forward to seeing how the trilogy concludes.



The Legend of Eli Monpress by Rachel Aaron (Orbit, 2012)**Reviewed by AP Canavan**

The *Legend of Eli Monpress* is the omnibus edition of Rachel Aaron's brilliant debut trilogy which follows the adventures of the eponymous hero thief, his two companions, Josef and Nico, and their dogged pursuer, Miranda. The trilogy is comprised of *The Spirit Thief*, *The Spirit Rebellion* and *The Spirit Eater*, each published in 2010 by Orbit with tedious, stereotypical sounding blurbs and garish covers. Thankfully *The Legend of Eli Monpress* is anything but a boring, by-the-numbers foray into a fantasy heist adventure; this is a trilogy well worth reading.

Monpress is an irrepressible thief, apparently motivated not by greed but by a desire to become the most infamous thief in the world with the largest bounty ever offered. Yet this only touches on his much deeper motivations and fascinating back-story which are hinted at and slowly revealed by Aaron over the course of the trilogy. Eli's character becomes increasingly complex and rounded over time while remaining consistent and likeable. His darker characteristics are countered by his optimistic outlook and cheerful demeanour. His capers both entertain and provide structure for the narrative without overshadowing the broader story.

This same thought and consideration on Aaron's part can be seen in Eli's companions, the taciturn Josef and the tragic Nico. Josef could have simply been the bodyguard to Aaron's hero but she gives him his own mission, his own story and his own character. A swordsman who wields the world's most powerful magical sword, the Heart of War, Josef travels with Eli as a means to find challenging duels and chances to prove himself.

Eli is not adverse to taking advantage of this situation but the mutually beneficial relationship again illustrates Aaron's command of her world and narrative. This is not some plot driven need or convenient story function, Aaron neatly creates a natural rationale and convincing back-story for the pairing. The relationship between Josef and Eli, while that of friends and companions, is not without tension and incident lending yet more veracity to the tale.

The demonseed, Nico, adds an element of tragic darkness to the group. A young girl who has a demon growing inside her, Nico possesses supernatural abilities that complement the group dynamic and further their spectacular heists. However, it is the very darkness inside her that makes her stand apart from other fantasy characters of this ilk. Her life is a constant struggle against her inner demon. Literally: it struggles for supremacy, threatening to overwhelm her personality and destroy everything she cares for. As a result she is both a great fantasy character to read as well as a fascinating literalised metaphor for reader and critic alike to engage with. The potential danger posed by Nico, to both the world at large as well as her companions, cuts through the potentially stereotypical appearance of the group and demonstrates Aaron's attention to detail. Indeed, in addition to the narrative

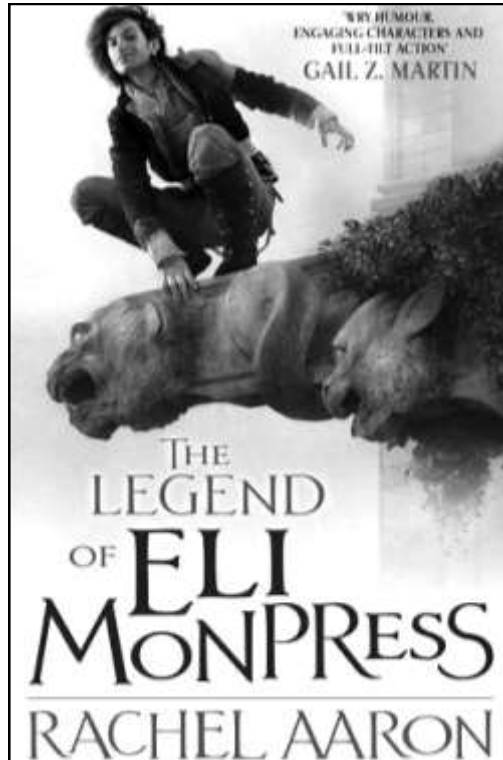
tension that Nico's very existence adds to the stories, her nature also adds to the world building and provides several plot hooks and developments.

The last major character of note is Miranda Lyonette, the Javert to Eli's Valjean to draw a comparison to Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Miranda, a Spiritualist, has been set the thankless task of pursuing Eli in order to bring him to justice. At once Eli's implacable adversary, Miranda is also a significant point of view character and provides a welcome broadening of the perspective. Aaron deftly weaves Miranda's back-story and motivations into the story and her companion spirits, including a sardonic magical ghoulish named Gin, flesh out her narrative sections. While an embodiment of duty, law and order, Miranda's character is rounded-out with a sense of practicality and pragmatism as well as a healthy dose of common-sense. Miranda provides another view of Eli and forces the reader to reconsider Eli's actions from a different perspective. This combines to both widen and deepen the world for the reader and to provide tantalising glimpses of the broader fantasy setting. The exasperated frustration Miranda feels in her pursuit of and interactions with Eli supplies comedy and drama in equal portion and adds to the narrative verisimilitude.

The world Aaron has created is rich, textured and beautifully rendered. Her world-building is both intricate and delightful. In particular, the magic system of spirits feels innovative, inventive and intuitive. Every object, plant, animal and natural feature possesses a spirit. These spirits can be bargained with, commanded, manipulated and coerced by Spiritualists in order to create magical effects and perform incredible feats. An ancillary benefit is that they also provide a host of secondary characters and some of the novels most memorable scenes. One of the earliest examples can be found in the first chapter of *The Spirit Thief* in which Eli literally charms the door of his prison cell into letting him go. "Indecision is the bane of all hardwoods." It is this sense of fun and humour that permeates the entire trilogy.

This balancing of elements reveals the strength of Aaron's writing as there are few aspects of these stories that appear ill-thought out or only partially considered. For a debut fantasy trilogy this is almost unprecedented. Aaron's world is both familiar and unique. A party of adventurers touring fantasyland stealing treasure and getting into fabulous scrapes is hardly groundbreaking but this very familiarity simply eases the reader into the world and setting Aaron has created. No doubt the subject matter of Aaron's trilogy will invite comparisons to Scott Lynch's *Gentlemen Bastards* series yet she has written something which reads as fresh, inventive and unique.

This trilogy is suitable for adults and children alike and will also entertain both audiences. *The Adventures of Eli Monpress* is the rarest of creatures, an almost pitch perfect fantasy trilogy. It is a welcome antidote to the plethora of dark, gritty and violent fantasies dominating the market and it possesses enough heft to engage the brain as well. My only regret is that the next books are not yet published.



The Iron Wyrms Affair by Lilith Saintcrow (Orbit, 2012)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

“To be honest, I didn’t think it was ‘steampunk’ while I was writing it,” Lilith Saintcrow has said about *The Iron Wyrms Affair*. “For me it was a variety of alt-history mixed with urban fantasy.” I like that word — alt-history — finding it a welcome contraction for that grammatical absurdity, alternate history. I’m also inclined to agree with her that steampunk is more of an aesthetic than a genre. In my probably ill-considered opinion, steampunk began — and should have ended — in 1979 with *Morlock Night* by KW Jeter.

The Iron Wyrms Affair kicks off Saintcrow’s new *Bannon And Clare* series. Emma Bannon is a Prime, the highest level of sorceress, and, despite being a staunch protector of Queen Victrix, is of the Black Magic persuasion. She forms an uneasy partnership with Archibald Clare, a psychic consulting detective who resembles Sherlock Holmes in his Robert Downey Jr incarnation. (Encyclopaedia Brown, created by Donald J Sobol in 1963, is also cited by Saintcloud as an influence.) They both live and have their disparate beings in what seems to be late 19th Century Londinium, prowling such exotic places as Mayefair and Greens Park.



I’ll let Angel — I mean Archibald — Clare fill in some of the deep dark background for you:

“Three players, then – or at least, three players that Miss Bannon was willing to admit to. A dragon, obviously. His reluctance to believe in such beasts had taken rather a shock lately. Gryphons were all very well, but the wyrms who could halt Time itself, the harbingers of disaster and great concentrators of irrationality, the beasts supposedly responsible for teaching Simon Magister, the great mage who had offered gold to Petrus for God’s powers, and been hailed by the surrounding crowds as a greater miracle-worker than a disciple of the Christos . . .

“ . . . that was a different thing entirely. Although the logic engines created a field of order and reasonableness sorcery would not penetrate, a dragon’s irrationality was so vast it might not matter. The other conspirators might hope that it would – the question was, who exactly were those other conspirators? For Clare did not think he could deduce a dragon’s motivations.

“Except Miss Bannon had already provided them. The destruction of Britannia? Was it even possible to destroy the ruling spirit of the Empire? She was ageless, changeless, accumulating knowledge and power with every vessel’s reign. What was the nature of the dragons’ quarrel with Her? He could not guess, and shelved the question for later.”

I know how he must have felt.

Never mind Sherlock Holmes and Encyclopedia Brown, Saintcloud must have been at least partly inspired by *The Avengers*. Emma Bannon is an alt-history version of Emma Peel with Archibald Clare as a somewhat less dapper version of John Steed — *The Wild, Wild West End* to adapt the title of another vintage TV action series. But, unlike them, *Iron Wyrms* lacks even so much as an unintentional sense of humour. I’ve got no strong objections to ersatz nostalgia for a Victorian England that never was but — well — damn it all, man!

Hell Train by Christopher Fowler (Solaris, 2012)

Reviewed by Lalith Vipulanathan

England, 1966. American screenwriter Shane Carter has arrived in search of work and approaches Hammer Film Productions. Beset by competitors and subject to a waning interest in horror, Hammer needs new blood and so commissions Carter to produce a script in just five days, instructing him to set the story on a train and to include Hammer’s trademarks, “an exotic setting, young lovers, fearsome creatures, a dire warning, rituals and curses, and dreadful consequences.”

Carter accepts the challenge and sets his story in the fictional country of Carpathia (a stand-in for Romania) during the Great War. Four people board the Arkangel in order to flee the approaching frontline, ignorant of the train’s final destination and the horrors within – the roguish cad Nicholas, the village girl Isabella, the vicar Tom and his wife Miranda. Each in turn will be tested by the train and those that fail will be damned to ride the train all the way to Hell itself.

Your enjoyment of *Hell Train* will greatly depend on your familiarity with Hammer Horror films and tolerance for homage. In the main story aboard the Arkangel, Fowler deftly employs Hammer’s archetypal characters and the aforementioned trademarks with verve, briefly sketching out each of the principal characters’ backgrounds, motivations and flaws before throwing them under the train (quite literally in one instance). Keeping the plot moving along briskly through the use of short, punchy chapters punctuated by cliffhangers, the fun comes from seeing what horrors Fowler will unleash next, rather than from curiosity as to how each character will endure their tests. It’s not a huge spoiler to state that Nicholas learns to care for people other than himself, Miranda is consumed by her greed and Tom’s faith is exposed as hypocrisy. Isabella is the one character who gets an interesting arc, a minor deviation in Fowler’s homage, noting via the voice of Carter that “Hammer had relegated their female leads to scream-and-faint roles for too long... he wanted his leading ladies to be as indelible as the men.” Thus in spite of being the ‘ignorant’ peasant girl, Isabella is the only one who survives her own test without aid and who ultimately saves the day.



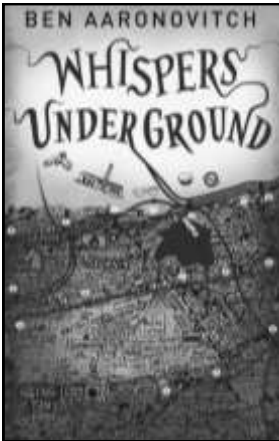
The healthy dose of gore employed in the form of some very gruesome deaths at the hands (and mouths) of ghouls, succubi, war-crazed soldiers and ravenous insects is tempered by the occasional present-day interlude focusing on Carter as he searches for inspiration, embarks on a fling with assistant and muse Emma Winters and meets Hammer’s most illustrious stars. Despite being a fundamental part of *Hell Train*’s structure, lampshaded by Fowler as a “portmanteau approach with a traditional script, and add[ing] a wraparound framework set in the present day”, these interludes are a very abrupt shift in feel and serve as unwelcome distractions from the far more compelling train-bound thread.

I’m torn about *Hell Train* because it is clear that I do not have the prerequisite depth of knowledge to truly appreciate what Fowler has achieved. So, as originally stated, it comes down to your familiarity with Hammer’s film output. Fans will lap this tale up whilst those less familiar may be left wondering what all the fuss is about.

***Whispers Underground* by Ben Aaronovitch
(Orion, 2012)**

Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

W*hispers Underground* is the third book in Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* series in which Peter Grant, detective constable and apprentice wizard, investigates crimes involving "weird stuff" (otherwise known as magic). His special skills are called for this time when a body is found on the tracks at Baker Street tube, stabbed to death with a shard of magical pottery. This kicks off a magical mystery tour of London's underground — its tracks, its sewers, its ghosts, its buried secrets.



Readers of the series will be pleased to be reunited with familiar characters such as Grant's colleague Lesley May, who is very believably coming to terms with severe disfigurement. How Peter deals with her and his own reactions to her ruined face also ring true. We are introduced to a couple of new characters including inquisitive thirteen year old Abigail (a budding Baker Street Irregular) and Kumar, a member of the British Transport Police. Grant himself is mixed race and there's a good mix of characters from different ethnic and cultural

backgrounds. The only character I wasn't convinced by was Reynolds, an FBI agent who never really comes alive.

Told entirely in the first person from Grant's perspective, the narrative bounces along nicely (apart from the compulsion to use "me" when conventional grammar would use "I"). As an apprentice wizard, Grant's command of the structures of magic, the *formae*, is still shaky and he's restricted to class 1 and 2 spells. This doesn't stop him from improvising (with partial success), to the disapproval of teacher Nightingale. There's a nice parallel between his disregard for the accepted structures of grammar and his freewheeling use of the *formae* which, as Nightingale repeatedly prophesies, will get him into trouble.

Aaronovitch does struggle occasionally with the strict first person as he wants to stuff in a lot more than I think Grant's point of view is really good for. I just about buy his obsession with architecture on the grounds that he wanted to study it before joining the police. I also buy the fact that he has a wider frame of reference than the average product of the British comprehensive system because of the accelerated learning that he and Lesley are undergoing as students of magic. My credulity was stretched, however, by a casual reference to the great English vowel shift.

Otherwise, Aaronovitch's writing is relaxed and confident and riffs happily on popular culture. Grant drives around in a Ford Asbo. The murder victim had a thirst for knowledge, he was a student at St Martin's College. And so on. But what is particularly enjoyable about *Whispers Underground* is the author's attention to the fabric of London, down to the clay on which and of which it is built (including the English bond bricks lining the sewers). Aaronovitch is fascinated by how London evolved as a city and how it functions. On finding a community of underground dwellers who make pots and breed pigs, his first question is what do they do with the pigshit? And he finds a plausible answer. It's this concreteness that gives the book a lot of its charm.

***A Discovery of Witches* by Deborah Harkness
(Headline, 2011)**

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

In the world of *A Discovery of Witches* there are four kinds of people: ordinary humans, witches, vampires and daemons. The last three are fully aware of each other but attempt to hide their natures as far as possible from humans. All three groups have powers that could be referred to as 'magic' but they differ and the witches and vampires are very different from the traditional human view of them. They are also hostile to each other: alliances between them are disapproved of.

Diana Bishop is an American academic temporarily studying in Oxford. Her field is the history of science, in particular the period when science in the modern sense emerged from semi-magical disciplines like astrology and alchemy. Diana is also a witch but at the novel's opening she is living in denial of her powers, preferring the rational life of a scholar.

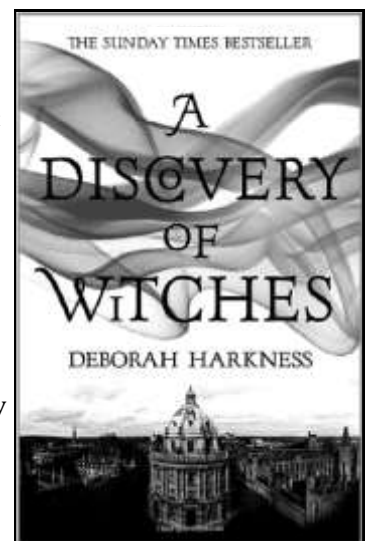
Working in the Bodleian library, Diana calls up a manuscript which she immediately realises has magical properties. She sends it back to storage, only later discovering that it has been lost for a very long time and all other attempts to retrieve it have failed. The nature of this manuscript, and the reason why only Diana has been able to access it, form the basis of the plot. A lost magical manuscript is meat and drink to me and so I was highly intrigued by the problems it poses and keen to know the solutions. This plotting is satisfactorily intricate and nothing is obvious.

The other important plot element is Diana's relationship with Matthew Clairmont, a vampire. At first, given the hostility between their species, she doesn't trust him, but eventually they become lovers and consider themselves married. This provokes a violent reaction from others of their kind, throwing them into deadly danger.

If I have reservations about the novel, it is with the two protagonists. I suspect that readers are meant to be enthralled by them but, while I found them attractive and engaging, I was not completely caught up into their story. There's a touch of the Mary Sue to Diana and I couldn't quite understand why all the other characters are so impressed by her. She clearly has the potential to become extremely powerful, but she hasn't yet earned her accolades. And Matthew the romantic vampire is just too good to be true.

Despite this, I still found the book enjoyable. The pace is quite slow, to give space for the description of backgrounds, characters and relationships. I especially liked the setting of Matthew's chateau in France, where we meet his mother and the old servant Marthe. The amount of detail Harkness provides makes her world particularly solid and realistic.

As this is the first volume of a trilogy, there is still much left unresolved and the end of this book sees Matthew and Diana setting out on a completely new stage of their adventure. I shall be interested to know what happens to them next.



Railsea by China Miéville (Pan Macmillan, 2013)

Reviewed by Liz Bourke

There are two layers to the sky, & four layers to the world...

There's the downsky, that stretches two, three miles & a biscuit from the railsea up...

We're not talking about that. We're talking about the four-fold of the world.

One hears a great deal of China Miéville. His name is synonymous with the New Weird, a term he himself coined a decade ago. His books regularly appear on award lists & not infrequently go on to win awards. A man of letters in more than one sense, famous for the inventively peculiar, or the peculiarly inventive, his presence in the field of science fiction & fantasy by now is impossible to overlook.

Railsea is the latest of Miéville's novels & the first which I've read. Marketed as Young Adult, there is nothing particularly *young* about the layered weirdness of its world-building, the delightful metatextuality of its literary playfulness, its philosophies & its grotesqueries. A youthful protagonist does not necessarily make for a Young Adult book & *Railsea's* self-awareness of itself as a fiction, its charming self-referentiality as a *made thing*, gives it a layer of

complexity which distinguishes it from the larger share of the YA genre. A *fictive dream* (c.f. John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*) which is self-consciously not seamless but breaks the fourth wall to comment on itself as a fiction requires a different set of reading protocols to those normal employed in the enjoyment of Young Adult fiction. *Railsea* rewards a self-reflexive & mature approach to literacy: it subverts expectations in more ways than one.

& by now, I expect, everyone has heard about the trains & giant moles. But perhaps there are some who have as yet missed these talking points, who may not yet be aware of the gleefully perverse use to which Miéville has put that touchstone of the literary canon, Melville's *Moby Dick*. We'll come to that shortly.

Sham Yes ap Soorap is *Railsea's* protagonist, apprentice to the doctor on a moetrain — & not very good at it. Dr. Lish Fremlo (whose gender is deliberately, unobtrusively, a blank slate) is a tolerant teacher but no amount of patience can disguise Sham's lack of definite life aspirations. Not for him, at least so far, the all-consuming passion of his moetrain's captain. Captain Naphi, with her artificial arm & her quest for the vast ivory-coloured moldywarpe Mocker-Jack, her *philosophy*. Naphi is, like many other captains, chasing an individual beast that has become both nemesis & obsession: the beast, a "philosophy" that signifies meaning peculiar to each captain.

For *Railsea* takes place in the eponymous sea, a vast area of sand & earth covered in a tangle of railway tracks. The railsea is its own ecosystem, the earth filled with all manner of strange, dangerous, burrowing beasts, like the great

moldywarpe Mocker-Jack: a place both perilous & profitable to its navigators:

"The railsea, sitting on the flatearth; that is the second level. Tracks & ties, in the random meanders of geography & ages, in all directions. Extending forever."

An expanse layered in with stratigraphies of salvage, as well as its perilous beasts. Arche-salvage, from ancient times. Nu-salvage, from trains derailed & destroyed in more recent times. & most elusive of all, dei-salvage, from the "angels" whose ministering mechanisms keep the rails in repair.

But wait. Students of the railsea, of course you have questions. You are likely to narrow in on uncertain & mysterious questions of iron-rail theology.

You wish to know which is the oldest civilisation in the railsea... What do they tell us of the Lunchtime Ages, prehistory, the times before the scattered debris from offhand offworld picnicking visitors was added to aeons of salvage?



I quote to give some flavour of the narration, at those moments when the narrator stands back from the action to comment on the world & the text. To bring the reader's awareness of *Railsea* as a fiction to the fore, for those "offhand offworld picnicking visitors" have their parallel in the reader who visits the world of the text — who takes a brief tour of the railsea before leaving once again. It is this sense of stratified self-awareness, these valences into

which one reads layers of implication, that takes *Railsea* out of the realm of the ordinary & makes it something with which I fell in love.

Sham has some enthusiasm for salvage. When he finds the remains of a pair of explorers in a wrecked train & visual evidence of their family, he feels a compulsion to visit the children whose pictures he saw & tell them what he knows of their parents' destination. For in one of the pictures the explorers left behind, Sham saw the impossible — a single track, leading *out* of the railsea. Leading beyond the limits of the world.

But in informing the children Caldera & Dero — who are themselves young adults at this point — Sham gets involved in dangerous business. Kidnapped by pirates for what they think he knows, separated from his trainmates, & stranded in the aftermath of a ferronaval skirmish, Sham is cast upon his own resources in the far reaches of the railsea. Meanwhile, his trainmates under Captain Naphi have been hunting the great white mole Mocker-Jack — a perilous exercise. Circumstance & their own efforts reunite Sham & his trainmates, & bring them in the wake of Caldera & Dero, themselves explorers. Angels & the end of the world, captain's philosophies & the theology of the railsea, all come together at the conclusion — & a satisfying end it is too.

Railsea is a bildungsroman but like the ampersand which replaces "and" throughout its text, it is deceptively simple, more complicated than it appears. It took me a while but by the end, *Railsea* had become a book that had won my heart completely. I hope everyone else who reads it experiences similar amounts of joy.

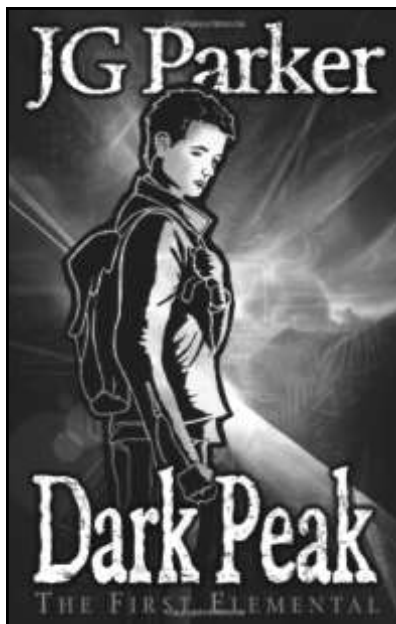
Dark Peak by J G Parker (Stonewood Press, 2012)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Subtitled 'The First Elemental', this is the first of a science fantasy series. The plot and setting are rather reminiscent of Alan Garner's early work, as Jake, a recently-bereaved adolescent, encounters Stone, an elemental in dragon form, and saves our world from attack by a seeping evil, objectified as oil and pollution. He is both helped and hindered in his task by his mother Lucy and younger sister Bett, while being attracted to, and opposed by, an alternate-world version of his dead father, who has fallen under the influence of the evil force.

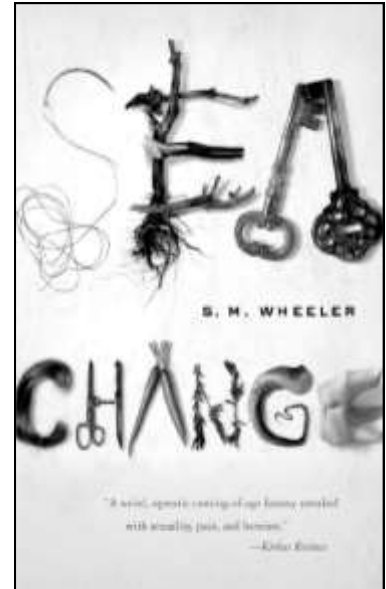
I suspect I'm considerably older than this book's target audience (it has a YA feel) but, even so, I found a lot to like. The characters are well-rounded and the dialogue is lively, vivid and convincing (although I feel honour-bound to issue a Dialect Warning for those who really can't bear that sort of thing; ey-up, chuck!). There is some good and deeply-felt landscape description and the fantasy elements of the plot are well tied-in to realistic local history. The plot does flap around a little loosely at times — for example, a sinister travelling fair provides a creepy episode that's never really developed — but if this is the first book of a projected series, some of the loose ends may well be laying the groundwork for future developments. There are tantalising hints of a complex background but the main story-line is satisfactorily resolved (although it does end, literally, in mid-air). The only thing I wasn't sure about Parker was fondness for filler starts at the beginning of chapters such as, "Days passed in the way they do. These ones were filled with busyness."

So... a sound, earnest, well-written tale. So why am I left feeling lukewarm about it? Partly it's because I didn't really warm to any of the characters. Although Parker's writing is better than competent, she doesn't make me *care*. (Neither the book nor Parker's website reveal the author's gender so I will refer to JG Parker as "her".) All the major characters are not only opaque, they're also obtuse — wilfully blind to both magic and reality. This may be intended as a narrative device to rack up the tension; its effect on me was to leave me angry with virtually the entire cast and quite happy not knowing what they do next. Jake is a nice enough lad but hard to engage with, perhaps because he's walled off from the world by grief. His sparky, annoying younger sister is equally hard to empathise with. Mother is also grieving and the family are isolated in a remote holiday cottage, though they do begin to connect socially with the outside world towards the end of the book. Jake clearly loves the land but in general the book paints such a depressing picture of "our world", that I began to wonder whether it's worth the bother of saving. Perhaps at some level this is a book about trying to break out of grief, isolation and depression?

**Sea Change by S. M. Wheeler (Tor, 2013)**

Reviewed by Mark Connorton

Sea Change is a young adult novel about a girl, Lilly, growing up in a vaguely Germanic setting reminiscent of the Grimm brothers, who takes refuge from her parents' rancorous marriage by visiting the beach near her home and befriending a talking kraken. When the kraken disappears Lilly goes on a quest to find him, calling on a variety of witches and succubi to help her. The early parts of the book are sensitively written (in a rather arch cod-Victorian style) and deal well with Lilly's negotiations with her parents and her loneliness (a prominent birthmark on her face leads the locals to believe she is cursed). But when the quest begins in earnest the author struggles and fails to reconcile the bizarre logic of a fairy-tale with modern literary psychological realism, often avoiding the challenge completely by having Lilly concentrate entirely on her immediate situation without giving any thought to her wider situation. The first supernatural being Lilly meets abruptly and shockingly removes her womb, hair and secondary sexual characteristics as payment for her assistance. Lilly barely gives this a moment's thought until near the end of the book and blithely runs off to ask another witch to help her in the next step in the quest.



The ensuing narrative turns into a series of quests that are as restrictive and linear as something from a Nineties computer roleplaying game. At one point Lilly finds herself indentured to a pair of affable but brutal gay bandits (the book is very violent in parts) and works for them for months, barely thinking of the kraken during this time. The urgency of her quest disappears in a morass of details of day to day life, as though Liam Neeson in *Taken* had to work in Starbucks for a year to get closer to the villains who have taken his daughter. When Lilly finally does fulfil the various conditions to get the kraken back, the narrative conspires to make the quest pointless and her achievements in vain. While this may be admirably realistic, it completely defies narrative expectation and the logic of the fairy tale genre the author has chosen, resulting in a frustrating and seemingly pointless read.

I confess that I am not sure what to make of the novel. Wheeler is a gifted writer and has come up with an original premise and striking characters and scenes but stymies all the goodwill I felt through the baffling narrative choices mentioned above. She also probably thinks she is saying something daring and new about sexuality and gender but only succeeds in reinforcing clichés and harmful stereotypes. Does she really mean to imply that girls with facial disfigurement are sexless neuters (as Lilly ends up)? Why are all the scenes of sexual threat to Lilly written explicitly or coded as gay? Although the book is notably misanthropic (the most sympathetic character is basically a talking pony), why are all the powerful female characters so sadistic and manipulative? I'd have to call this a miss from an author with potential.

Zenn Scarlett by Christian Schoon (Strange Chemistry, May 2013)

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Strange Chemistry is the Young Adult imprint of Angry Robot Books and it's a sign of how distant I am from young adults that I didn't understand the endorsement on the front from Phoebe North: "Zenn's moxie and determination make this a debut to remember". I thought Moxie was the character in *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* played by Christopher Fairbank but apparently it means nerve or vigour.

The eponymous heroine of Christian Schoon's debut novel is a seventeen year old who lives on a partially terraformed Mars in serious trouble economically because of a political rift with Earth (of course, friction between plucky colonists blazing a new frontier and a rigid, bigoted colonial authority is a theme beloved by American SF writers.) She is training to be an exoveterinarian, treating alien animals from all over the galaxy (maybe *Exovet* would have been a punchier title). Both her parents were exovets but nine years ago her mother perished while operating on an Indra, best described as a seven hundred foot long space whale. Space travel can only be achieved by making use of an Indra's ability to teleport across interstellar distances and each starship has a huge hold to



contain one of these animals. Zenn's mother was in a pod inside this sick Indra when the pod malfunctioned, spooked it, and it teleported somewhere with her still inside, leaving the starship behind.

Nine years later, with life on Mars becoming increasingly hard, the relationship between the clinic and the nearest town is becoming increasingly hostile and her father, who is working on another planet, has gone missing. Zenn herself is an exemplary exovet student but several animals go missing from the clinic and

her negligence is blamed. Together with fellow student Hamish, an insectoid alien, and Liam, a town boy, Zenn has to solve the mystery of the escaping animals and try to discover where her father has gone. After solving the first mystery, Zenn and her friends discover a much bigger conspiracy and the book ends on a cliffhanger.

In a recent Vector review, a female reviewer challenged the credibility of a male writer's female lead, saying she had no believable female characteristics and was just a "boy with tits". On the other hand, I remember reading a first novel from a female writer with a gay male lead in love with a hunky starship captain and who was, in my opinion, just a "girl without tits". I found Zenn a very credible character: she's feisty and full of pluck, the opposite of a damsel in distress, but she does come over flustered when she finally realizes that town boy Liam sees her as more than a friend!

In addition, the author's world-building is economical but very believable, the alien creatures and their role in the story are well thought-out and the story motors along without a pause. I'd recommend *Zenn Scarlett*, not only to teenagers who already like SF but to those teen fantasy readers wanting a reading diet of something other than vampires and werewolves.

The Mad Scientist's Daughter by Cassandra Rose Clarke (Angry Robot, 2013)

Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

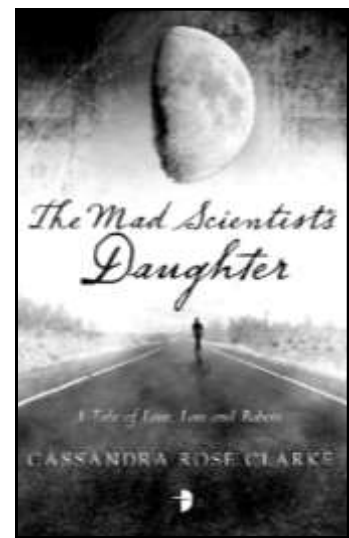
On the face of it *The Mad Scientist's Daughter* is a simple tale of a girl, Cat, in love with a robot, Finn.

We are in a post apocalyptic world where primitive robots have been used to rebuild after much of the population has been killed. Finn, however, is one of a kind, an android made by a colleague of Cat's father, the eponymous mad scientist. Finn is visually identifiable as a robot but Cat's society has not yet evolved to allow androids a place as functioning members. This issue comes to the fore as the novel progresses. At the start, however, Finn is Cat's father's assistant and is assigned to tutor Cat at home.

It isn't clear at the beginning of the book whether Finn has any consciousness. Cat's father says that he has sophisticated personality programs, which is not the same thing. Cat believes that he is self aware but at this point she's a child. Later we discover that he is indeed conscious and feels some sort of emotions towards Cat.

There are frustrating blanks in the story. We never find out how the apocalypse ("the Disasters") occurred. As the weather has not "settled down yet" and is prone to snowstorms in April in an otherwise sub-tropical area, we assume that it's some form of climate change but Cat, our viewpoint character, is not interested in telling us about the history or geography of her world. Cat is also emotionally blank. Why does she fall in love with Finn? Her parents are distant: her father is affectionate but occupied with his scientific work; her mother disapproves of Cat's failures at maths and her reluctance to get a proper job. Cat goes to college, has human lovers, but is unable to form emotional connections with them. Why not? We are not told. For most of the book Cat is not interested in exploring her state of mind or her feelings or in speculating about Finn's. It is only when Finn leaves that Cat begins to understand how she has used him and to ask herself whether he will ever return.

Instead of Cat's internal life, what we get is texture. From the opening paragraph describing the lush vegetation in the garden where Cat lives we are in a world of surfaces. The dresses that she wears, the fabrics that she weaves on her loom, the feeling of Finn's skin and hair, are all described in loving detail. The richness of the way in which Cat experiences her surroundings counterpoints her inner emptiness. It is the quality of the writing that redeems this somewhat irritating novel. Although technically science fiction the plot has elements of fairy tales (*Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast*) and the vivid descriptions have a hypnotic effect, drawing the reader into Cat's world. Without them the book would be rather dull and frustrating. With them, it's strangely enchanting.



Boneshaker by Cherie Priest (Tor UK, 2012)

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

I discovered this book by unknown to me author Cherie Priest in 2011 and it went on to become one of my favourite books of the year. *Boneshaker* was first published in the US in 2009, since then has become a bestseller in many countries, and has now been optioned for a film. The first of what has become the *Clockwork Century* steampunk series, it has been followed by *Clementine*, *Dreadnought*, *Ganymede* and *The Inexplicables*. They are all set in a parallel North America where the Civil War still rages on into the 1880s, driven by greater (analogue) technology than existed in our own 19th Century, notably airships. None of these books are direct sequels to *Boneshaker* but they do involve the same characters.

Boneshaker starts in 1879 and introduces a widow, Briar Wilkes, who lives outside the blighted city of Seattle with her teenage son, Ezekiel. Sixteen years before her husband, Dr Leviticus Blue, was testing his mining machine, the “Incredible Bone Shaking Drill Engine” (akin to James R Blaylock’s “Digging Leviathan”), when it ran amok, destroying most of downtown Seattle and unearthing a source of poisonous gas that turned anyone who breathed it into a flesh-eating Zombie (here called “rotters”). A supposedly impregnable wall was built round the centre of the city to keep in the rotters and the gas but incredibly people still survive inside the city, living underground and in constant danger from both threats. (In 2009, I visited Seattle and went on the famous Underground Tour starting at Maynard’s Hotel in Pioneer Square, important in the book as the main remaining place where the surviving humans are able to socialise.)

Even though Briar now uses her maiden name for herself and her son, their history is known, and Ezekiel is taunted because of the dreadful consequences of his father’s actions so many years before. Learning that a mysterious inventor lives inside the devastated city, fabricating ingenious devices that keep its human inhabitants alive, he embarks on a quest to find out the truth, even though it means going under the wall to get inside. To find Zeke and get him out alive, Briar is forced to follow him into danger in a city of ravenous rotters, deadly gas that will speedily turn you into one, and an underground maze of dubious allies.

I love the novels of Stephen Hunt and I find *Boneshaker* on a par with these. Having created a world close to ours but different enough to grab and hold our interest, Cherie Priest takes her remarkably assured and determined protagonist — who will stop at nothing to rescue her child — on a vivid rollercoaster ride filled with danger, intrigue and engaging characters including the obligatory megalomaniac inventor and even airship pirates. It’s a cracking “Boys Own” adventure for boys and girls! *Boneshaker* certainly made me eager to seek out the rest in the ongoing series, none of which have disappointed. I look forward to eventually seeing the film.

**Apollo’s Outcasts by Allen Steele (Pyr, 2012)**

Reviewed by Ian Sales

“On my sixteenth birthday, I went to the Moon.” The narrator of *Apollo’s Outcasts*, a young adult hard sf novel, is Jamey Barlowe, born on the Moon but now living on Earth. As a result, he spends most of his time in a motorised wheelchair. As the novel opens, the US president has died and the Palin-esque vice president has seized power and declared martial law. On her hit list is Jamey’s father, who signed a petition protesting at her plan to commandeer international He3 mining on the Moon. So the Barlowes make a run for it. To the Moon.

Unfortunately, there are only half a dozen seats on the last shuttle so father and eldest sister must stay behind. Jamey and sister Melissa make the trip, along with the son and daughter of a colleague of Jamey’s father, plus Jamey’s best friend Logan and a mysterious teenager called Hannah.

At the international — though entirely American in flavour — moon colony of Apollo, Jamey discovers he is no longer disabled in one-sixth gravity and is keen to prove he’s as capable as anybody else. He joins the Rangers, a rescue service/militia, chiefly because he fancies competent young ranger Nicole. Unfortunately, she only has eyes for Logan. Meanwhile, Hannah, whose identity has been easy to guess from the moment she appeared (though apparently not to the cast) has been making eyes at Jamey. So not only does Jamey have to cope on his own — on the Moon — but he also has a raft of clichéd teenage problems complicating matters.

The plot comes to a head when the vice president sends a strike force to Apollo to capture a pumping station at the lunar north pole. The Rangers prepare for an Alamo — but win through at the last-minute with the unexpected help of the Chinese. It is all resolutely unsophisticated. Jamey

proves himself a hero and gets a girl. Melissa stops being a brat and grows up. The good guys win and the evil president is overthrown — legally. While *Apollo’s Outcasts* might keep a teenager amused for a couple of hours, it may also turn them off science fiction for life...

Because *Apollo’s Outcasts* may be set in 2097 but it reads like it was written forty years ago. As the title suggests, it’s driven by nostalgia — for the Apollo programme and for Robert Heinlein’s juvenile novels. Space-



craft, space stations and even streets are all named for Apollo astronauts. The technology seems no more than a decade or so ahead of now — except for the spacecraft, which are all flown manually. In 2097. When you’d imagine computers would be orders of magnitude more sophisticated than today. Given that fans of Apollo and Heinlein are likely in their forties, you have to wonder who forms the novel’s intended audience. After all, when Neil Armstrong died last year, most people under the age of twenty had little idea who he was or what he had achieved.

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