Vector

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

Best of 2012 Issue

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Vector 272

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

ARTICLES

RECURRENT

THE BSFA REVIEW

In this issue, Dan Hartland fills his time in *Empty Space*, Paul Graham Raven breaks down *The Fourth Wall*, Mark Connorton and Cherith Baldry investigate some new *Strange Chemistry* titles, Patrick Mahon enters the *Vampire Empire*, Shaun Green visits *The Mall*, Donna Scott plays with Chuck Wendig's *Blackbirds* and more 35

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Vector

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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 catastrophe", 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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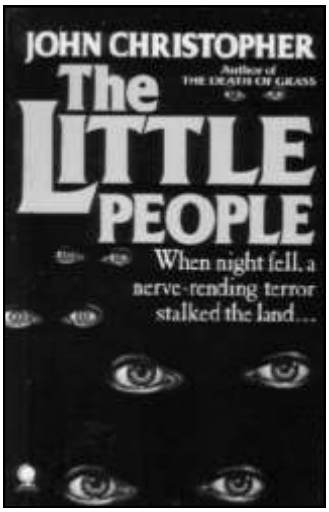
BSFA Review: Best of 2012

Edited by Martin Lewis

Graham Andrews on *The Little People* by John Christopher

F&SF serials are few and far between but always worth waiting for. *The Little People* by John Christopher (originally serialised January to March in 1967 before being published in book form later that year) makes a good –if verging on the buck mad– case in point. Christopher was a pseudonym for the late lamented Samuel Youd (1922-2012), one of those British authors who followed John Wyndham's apocalyptic lead to achieve prominence in the Fifties by killing off humanity and/or destroying the Earth itself in a myriad of fascinating ways. Christopher's variations on the theme involved a blight that destroyed all cereals and grains (*The Death of Grass/No Blade of Grass*), a new Ice Age (*The World in Winter/The Long Winter*), and multiple earthquakes (*A Wrinkle in the Skin/The Ragged Edge*). He later devoted his writing career to Young Adult novels, notably the *Tripods* trilogy, as well as developing a nice line in horror-thrillers.



The Little People is an enjoyably daft something else again. Sassenach-born Bridget Chauncey inherits Killabeg Castle, a dilapidated house and tower set upon a bog in County Mayo, from her eccentric cousin Seamus. Killabeg may be the Irish word for 'little church' – but Brid and her fiancé, Daniel Gillow, find nothing holy about this back-of-beyond money pit when she turns it into a hotel. Augmenting the initial guest list is a secret colony of one-foot-tall humanoids but any resemblance to the familiar crock-of-gold leprechauns or the 1952 Walt Disney film *Darby O'Gill And The Little People* is purely coincidental. More like psychotic littul divvils.

Created by Dr. Karl Hofricht, a not-sane Nazi scientist who had married into the Chauncey clan, they speak German, carry whips, and are possessed of strong ESP powers. It all takes a long time to get going, with some in-depth character drawing and Borrowers-like incidents. Stefan Morwitz, a German guest at Killabeg Castle, translates part of Hofricht's diary: "He had a laboratory hidden away in the Schwartzwald… They supported him well from Berlin. Cytology is a wide field and can be made to cover many things. Aging, for example." Perhaps someone thought he could make Hitler live as long as the thousand-year Reich. For whatever mad reason, the Nazis supplied Hofricht with experimental subjects – guinea pigs, white rats, and Jewish prisoners from the death camps. John Christopher's lucid exposition makes it all seem eminently reasonable, without detracting from the horror! the horror! Housekeeper Mrs. Malone is the first victim: "They harried me, and they took my voice from me so I could not cry out. The stairs door was open, and I made for that. And they threw me down. I heard them laughing up above, and I lay as though I was dead and prayed." First but not last….

The 1968 Avon edition of *The Little People* has become a sought-after collector's item due to Hector Garrido's cover painting featuring a veritable horde of whip-wielding 'leprechauns' – all of them wearing Swastika armbands. Dear old Darby O'Gill would never have got the better of these Little People!

Gary Dalkin on *Blade Runner: The Final Cut*

So wary have I become of the work of Ridley Scott that I summoned the will power not to see *Prometheus* at the cinema. This from someone who counted down the months to the release of *Alien* then counted the years from then to *Blade Runner*. But I sensed long before it came out that Prometheus was going to be terrible. Why go against all experience and lose ten quid only to confirm the inevitable? Why inevitable? Because Ridley Scott hasn't made a film that did not disappoint in 20 years.

Equally, when *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* was released in 2007 I avoided it. I'd seen the director's cut of *Alien*. Even when someone gave me a DVD of *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* I still didn't watch it. So what was the first thing I did when, long after the rest of the country, we upgraded to a High Definition TV? Watched *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* on Blu-Ray, that's what. Perhaps it was in the spirit of getting it over with. But the result was magnificent. Great Scott, he finally,

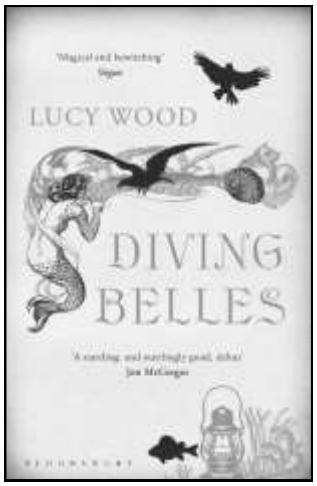
on the third attempt, has got the film absolutely right. The changes are minor, barely noticeable – fixes, rather than his usual tampering.

The picture quality itself is a revelation. The film looks as good at home now as it ever did in the best cinema. Infinitely better than video or the first, compression-artefact riddled DVD. Blu-Ray now makes films look like films. And if that isn't science fiction, what is? Roll on 4000p TVs. The film itself, 30 years old, looks better than almost anything released for the first time now (only a handful of years from the date when *Blade Runner* takes place). And we half live in that world, can take screen-grabs, look for hidden secrets, go through the door, into the mirror, track left, enhance. *Blade Runner* gave us 'vintage' fashion first and, whether by chance or extrapolation, caught climate change, the increasing importance of Asian culture to the West, the baroque-gothic architecture. Look at a modern night time cityscape now and you are seeing *Blade Runner* actualised.

The endlessly discussed themes of memory and identity remain as compelling and fascinating as ever, as do the conflicts, the fine performances, astonishing production design, lighting and score. And beyond all that, *Blade Runner* remains a compelling character-based noir romantic thriller with endless atmosphere, brilliantly realised, tense, exciting action and a deeply chilling, touching finale. *Blade Runner* was a great film when I saw it twice in its flawed original release in 1982. It was a great, somewhat less flawed film when I saw it three times in its *Director's Cut* incarnation in 1991. Now it is better than ever and, amazingly, doesn't appear remotely dated: its retro-future places it outside the normal continuum of film ageing and its unique cinematography, consolidating Scott's work on *Alien* to invent the modern era of screen lighting, means it remains contemporary to this day. Now Scott is planning a sequel. I won't be going to see it. Why settle for a replicant when we finally have the perfected original?

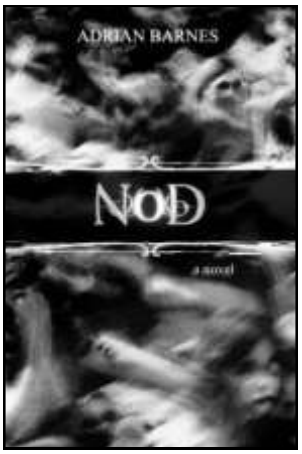
David Hebblethwaite's Books Of The Year

It was all about stories in 2012 — the telling of stories, and the denial of them.



Lucy Wood's debut collection, *Diving Belles*, marked the arrival of a significant new storyteller. The book ends with a traditional Cornish droll-teller rediscovering the spark of story, as he looks at the landscape around him and can see once more the tales buried within. It sums up a volume in which Wood draws on Cornish folklore to tell tales of the modern world – witches in a retirement home; a young boy who feels like a giant of old; house spirits bewildered by the changes around them.

Karen Lord's *Redemption In Indigo* is a riff on a Senegalese folktale, narrated by a storyteller who frequently interjects and addresses the reader, insisting that this is a didactic tale. The book might seem immovably caught in the grip of story but Lord's narrative is imbued with the chaos of quantum theory, and the only real moral is: make up your own mind. It's a joyous but sharp examination of choice.



In *Nod*, Adrian Barnes creates a battleground for stories, as most of the world's population succumbs to sleep deprivation, and a single word is enough to change what people think or perceive. There's a thrilling sense of the world as a work in progress, as characters come to realise how easily the stories they tell could be overturned, and how limited in time and space is the story of the book. You never know quite where *Nod* will end – not even when you get to the last page.

In *Jack Glass*, Adam Roberts uses the conventions of golden age sf and detective fiction to tell a story that provides the spectacle of both whilst interrogating their limitations. The novel asks who gets sidelined when the world becomes a playground for adventure, and explores the pitfalls of simplifying the world into neat parcels of story.

Keith Ridgway's *Hawthorn & Child* (perhaps not strictly speculative fiction but that hardly matters in practice) is a pretty comprehensive denial of story. In the first chapter, its titular detectives make gestures towards investigating a murder but anything that looks like evidence vanishes on closer inspection – there is no 'story' to be told of this case. In the rest of the book, realities, possibilities, narratives are glimpsed but similarly disappear – but Ridgway's marvellous prose remains.

And then there was *Viriconium* by M John Harrison, which I should have read long before now. A collection of novels and short fictions which progressively and thoroughly dismantles the notion of fantasy as escapism – indeed, the only thing that does escape is the fantasy. Then I read Harrison's *Light* and was faced with the intriguing prospect that the *Kefahuchi Tract* books might take a rather different turn – but that's something I'll discover when I read the others in 2013.

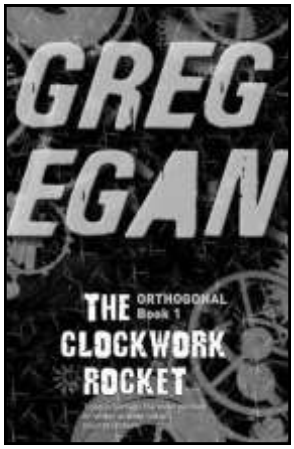
Patrick Mahon on *The Clockwork Rocket* by Greg Egan

I read about fifty science fiction and fantasy novels during 2012. The one that sticks in my mind more than any other is *The Clockwork Rocket* by Australian author Greg Egan.

Yalda comes from a race that are truly alien, with eyes in the front and back of their heads, the ability to reshape their bodies at will and a brutal method of reproduction, requiring the death of the mother through the metamorphosis of her body into two pairs of twins. Yalda's mother produced only three babies: a pair of twins and her. She is thus a rare 'solo': oversized, clumsy and seemingly destined for a life of manual labour. Luckily her intelligence is recognised early and she ends up going to university where she becomes a physicist. She will, though, always be seen as an outsider.

The gender politics of Yalda's society seems all too familiar. Since childbirth is terminal, there are few older women and society is ruled by rich old men. They see no point in

wasting energy educating girls since they're destined to die at an early age. It is only because Yalda is a large and ungainly 'solo', whom nobody will want to marry and have children with, that her father's wish to educate her is tolerated. Later in life, she repeatedly encounters discrimination on the grounds of her gender, size and intellect. The various ways in which she manages to overcome it are one of the great joys of the book.



It is not just the biology of Yalda's world that is different from ours. Whereas here the three dimensions of space and one of time are not interchangeable, in Yalda's universe they are. In mathematical terms the difference in the physics is trivial. The consequences are, however, profound. Yalda becomes the Einstein of her species, revolutionising their understanding of the natural world and helping them enter the space age. I loved the way that Egan includes diagrams from Yalda's lectures in the text, so the interested reader can follow the physics for themselves. This is very unusual in a novel and won't appeal to everyone but it genuinely deepened my engagement with the story.

When their solar system starts to be bombarded by ever more frequent meteorites, Yalda's pure science becomes crucial to the survival of their species. A colleague proposes sending a rocket out of their solar system to search for a way to deal with the meteorites. Yalda is chosen to lead the mission but she quickly learns post-launch that people won't follow you just because you're good at maths. Can she keep the mission on track when the going gets tough?

I truly admire Egan's ambition in this book. He has started from a simple thought experiment and worked out not just the scientific consequences, but a plausible set of social and ethical consequences too. Within that, he has told a story of great drama and power. I can't wait to see where he goes in the next two books.

Paul Kincaid's Books of 2012

2012 was one of those years when there were a lot of books challenging for a place on any best of the year list. But there were two books that I read one immediately after the other that represent my most exciting discoveries of the year. In a way, *Hawthorn And Child* by Keith Ridgway and *Communion Town* by Sam Thompson are very similar; both occupy a strange, ill-defined territory that is neither novel nor collection, and both challenge genre expectations. In fact, it is precisely that challenge that makes them such exciting books.

If anything, *Communion Town* reminds me most of M John Harrison's *Viriconium*: there is the same emphasis on a city that is precise in detail but somehow vague in generalities, names suggest a mittel-european setting though its feel shifts north to south, east to west depending on the nature of the story being told. It is a place that is all things to all people, whose character is established in the stories told about it. And those stories have a magical air, as if always there is something to upset our notions of reality, but what that something is is rarely confronted head on, rather it is glimpsed from the corner of the eye.

In his first novel, Thompson handles these uncertainties with remarkable assurance. In contrast, *Hawthorn And Child* is very precisely and exactly set in contemporary London, indeed in a fairly small area of London.

Ridgway's uncertainty is not of setting but of character, and of exactly what story it is we are being told. The title tells us the focus of attention is on two police detectives, one gay one straight, one black one white. Yet they are rarely at the centre of any of the stories, and in some pieces they barely have a walk-on part. And if they are both detectives, and if there is crime somewhere in the story (though what crime and where is not so easy to say), that is not to say that this is a crime novel. Rather, both *Communion Town* and *Hawthorn And Child* offer fragmented, kaleidoscopic, surreal glimpses of what it is like to be one small story in the vast web of story that is a modern city. Both make city life fantastical, extraordinary, something beyond the real; and both are compelling and engaging narratives that demand constant attention to detail, but reward that attention with constant novel delight.

Maureen Kincaid Speller's Books Of 2012

Paul Kincaid has already written about *Hawthorn And Child* and *Communion Town* as part of his best of the year commentary. Given I introduced him to both novels I shall say only that I'm glad that he enjoyed them as much as I did and instead turn my attention to the others in my list.

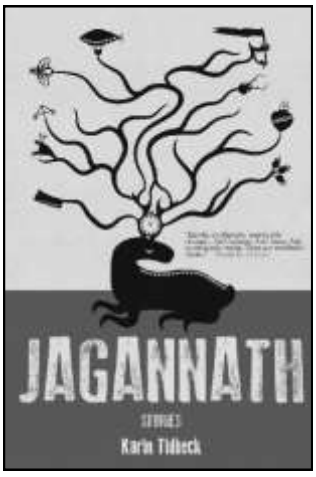
Andreas Neuman's *Traveller of the Century* enjoyed mixed reviews with commentators latching onto individual elements of the novel so as to distort the sense of its entirety. Granted, it is not an easy novel to encompass, being in some ways rather old-fashioned in its panoramic sweep and its devotion to the life of the intellect but I found the combination of philosophy, history and mystery, contained within a town that seems constantly to transform itself, to be compelling.

I'd not expected to enjoy Steve Rasnic Tem's *Deadfall Hotel* but found myself hooked when it was serialised by Weird Fiction Review. It is a delicately drawn anatomy of guilt and mourning made manifest in the fabric of the Deadfall Hotel as well as its many strange and unusual clients, a startling combination of solace and adventure.

For me, inevitably, the publishing event of 2012 was the publication of Alan Garner's *Boneland*, much anticipated but nonetheless startling when it appeared. Although *The Moon of Gomrath* had undeniably ended precipitantly, it had never occurred to me that there would be a 'Brisingamen trilogy'. However, we should think of it less as the completion of a trilogy, more as a summation of Garner's understanding of the impulses that shape and drive us as human beings, reaching far back into the mythic past. I've read it twice so far. It will take many more readings to fully appreciate what Garner is doing, but that is as it should be.

Jim Steel's Books of 2012

Smaller presses provided much of what I was looking for in 2012. Anne and Jeff VandeerMeer's Cheeky Frawg imprint looks especially promising although so far I've only seen one title. Karin Tidbeck's collection *Jagannath* is a slim volume but it contains some remarkable stories. Understated and introspective, they resemble nothing quite so much as an Ingmar Bergman take on magical realism. Tidbeck translated her own work from Swedish so we can be assured that the English versions are as close to the author's intentions as is possible. I cannot recommend them highly enough.



Anna Tambour's *Crandolin* arguably approaches reality from a similar direction but, as a novel, it has the luxury of space even if the chapters are tiny Borgesian constructs. The language is ornate, the text is witty and the metaphors are wild. And how often do you get to read a story about the quest for a recipe? Amongst other things, it cooks up a blend of the Russian masters and Arabesques. It is unique. This brings me to the debut novel by G Willow Wilson. *Alif The Unseen* tightrope-walked into last year across the Arab Spring and captures the zeitgeist perfectly. Set in an imaginary Gulf state, it starts off as hacker fiction before moving seamlessly into a hidden supernatural world. Wilson's Islamic beliefs are important to her but, like Gene Wolfe, she uses her religion as a frame to shape her narrative. One person's reality can become another person's fiction when delivered by a skilful writer.

The above titles are not an attempt at positive gender discrimination and are merely what fell out of the memory box. In the interests of fairness I should also point out that the next book is edited by a friend. This may have coloured my opinion but, regardless of the reasons, Ian Sales's *Rocket Science* makes it onto my list because I genuinely think that it deserves to be here. Unusually for an anthology that mixes fact and fiction, the stories and the articles were in balance. The stories by Sean Martin and Sam S Kepfield particularly intrigued me but that's probably because they intersected with my own fields of interest.

I eventually buckled to technology and crawled into the modern age last year. I now own a Kindle; mostly, it has to be said, in order that I can get my hands on books in a hurry but it is also useful to be able to read things that are not available elsewhere. It's a bit like the time when CDs started having extra tracks that were unavailable on vinyl. And, yes, I know everyone else is already moving on to tablets. KW Jeter stopped publishing novels at the turn of the century; one suspects for economic reasons. *The Kingdom Of Shadows* was his first novel since then and he self-published it as an ebook. It's bleak – much of it is set in a Nazi concentration camp – and it's warped but it's also eminently readable and it's great to have him back.

Paul Graham Raven on Borges, Burroughs and Ballard

2012 was dominated for me by a triumvirate of Bs, none of whom were new (not even to me) but all of whom appear to have finally achieved the sort of relevance that transcends their temporal origins.

Borges comes first, and indeed he came first; the more one thinks about it, the more plain it becomes that Borges kicked open the door on what we'd now refer to as the postmodern condition, breaking down form and style and story itself in ways that eerily prefigure the perpetual all-out brawl of narratives in which we find ourselves suspended – the very gyre of unanchored simulacra which Baudrillard used Borges' story 'On Exactitude in Science' to illustrate, in fact. Indeed, I find myself in the process of writing a paper for a conference of water supply engineers that references the same story, and for many of the same reasons. Strange times call for strange guides, and the map can never be the territory; even from their graves, sometimes the blind can still see further than anyone else.

Second B is Bill Burroughs, another writer whose work I've known for years but only now learned to fully appreciate. Like Borges, Burroughs captured the truths of his time with such uncanny accuracy that they were only discernible through hindsight; in this, Burroughs is a little like Philip K Dick, in that both truly lived their own opposition to (and deep-seated terror of) the world around them. But Dick descended fully into his darkness, in the counter-intuitive hope that only there would he find his Light; Burroughs, by contrast, threw in his lot with the gloom and went native, and told us what he fancied he saw. I fear we're still not listening.

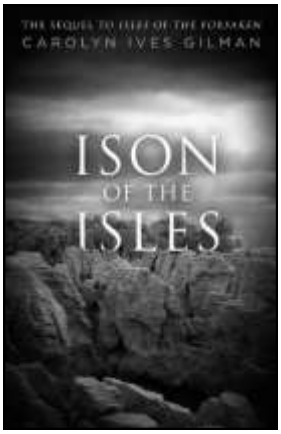
Third B would be JG Ballard. It seems sad that it took his fairly recent death to make it happen – though isn't that always the way? – but there has been a wave of reassessment of Ballard's work of late, a consolidation and confirmation of his uncanny and unflinching vision of humanity's headlong dive into inner space. Ballard, Burroughs and Borges alike have floated up serendipitously from my reading in areas very unrelated to pure literature over the past year, and it's the strange dark twisted tenor of the times that is surely to blame; when all around are refusing to see what's right before them, then we must turn back to those who told it how it was while we were unprepared to listen. When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro – and the trickster-prophets of the past become as sure a guide to tomorrow as anyone else ever could be.

Is it not foolish to look back half a century or so for tracings of the future's truth? Perhaps – but it feels no less futile than looking for such in capital-G Genre's present, a wasteland of narcissism and nostalgia marked only by its collective refusal to face forwards. Your mileage may vary.

Ian Sales's Books of the Year

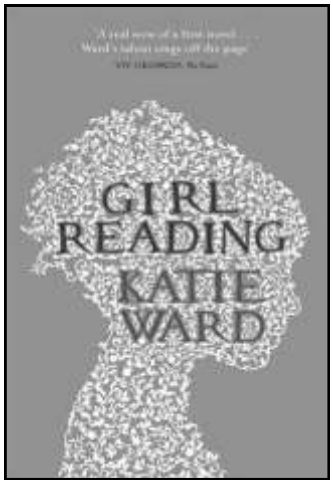
Everyone has been saying 2012 was a good year for genre, although I can think of one book that was promised as a "return to form" but proved disappointing – *The Hydrogen Sonata,* I'm looking at you. Happily, not every book I read published during the year failed to meet expectations. *2312* by Kim Stanley Robinson managed to exceed them and is, without doubt, my book of 2012. The future Robinson describes is a work of art, though it's a pity he couldn't give us a plot to match. Never mind; *2312* may be more travelogue than conspiracy thriller but it's a fascinating journey. Second is Ken MacLeod's *Intrusion*, which also gave us a well-realised future, albeit one that's a couple of centuries closer. Pastiching Labour's policies to create a "free and social market" was brilliant and, for once, the final swerve into heartland genre actually fit seamlessly into the story.

Last year, the first book of Carolyn Ives Gilman's fantasy diptych made my number one spot. The second book, *Ison of the Isles*, is still excellent, though it's not the book *Isles of the Forsaken* promises – that, in fact, is one of its strength. This is not just a clash of peoples or cultures but also of worldviews; magic is in the eye of the beholder.

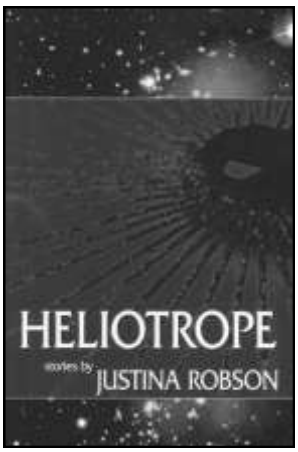


Adam Roberts's *Jack Glass* is the Adam Roberts novel I've come closest to reading in a way which meant I enjoyed it. It opens gruesomely, cleverly interrogates a number of treasured sf tropes and even satisfies, in a fashion, as a detective story. But there's still no such word as "irregardless". Finally, in *Blue Remembered Earth*, Alastair Reynolds gave us a bumptious tour of the Solar System in the Twenty Second Century. It's a thoroughly nice book, perhaps a little plotted by numbers, but with much of Reynolds's typically deft invention on display.

My book of the year, irrespective of year of publication, was *Girl Reading* by Katie Ward. It was one of those happy accidents: I'd seen mention of the book somewhere, I think in a discussion on mainstream titles eligible for the Arthur C Clarke Award, and months later found a copy at my mother's house. So I borrowed it. From the first page, I knew this was something special. Not just its prose style – present tense, no quotation marks, a style that appeals to me – but also its structure, a story built up from a series of loosely-linked vignettes. The title describes the link: each section is about a work of art which features a woman reading a book, beginning in Siena in 1333 and finishing in an unnamed European city in 2060. Comparisons with David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* are inevitable. Ward's control of voice may not be as accomplished as Mitchell's but *Girl Reading* makes sense of its structure – it's not simply an authorial conceit. Astonishingly, *Girl Reading* is a debut novel. Katie Ward is a name to watch.



Other excellent books read during the year include Gwyneth Jones's *The Universe of Things*, an essential collection by the UK's best sf writer; Christopher Evans's *Omega* from 2008, his first book after many years and he was sorely missed; *How to Suppress Women's Writing* by Joanna Russ, which everyone should read; Justina Robson's *Heliotrope*, another essential collection by one of the best of the UK's new generation of sf writers; and *A Son of the Rock* by Jack Deighton, which is the sort of character-led, considered and very British sf which rarely seems to be published these days.



I also read for the first time a number of good books for SF Mistressworks, including *New Eves*, edited by Janrae Frank, Jean Stine and Forrest J Ackerman, *The Wanderground* by Sally Miller Gearhart, *Islands* by Marta Randall and *Native Tongue* by Suzette Haden Elgin.

At the cinema, *John Carter* proved an astonishingly good spectacle – but too sophisticated a film for its intended audience, and so it flopped in the US domestic market. A shame. *Prometheus*, however, did very well indeed, despite being monumentally stupid. It *was* pretty to look at, however. And *Dredd* surprised me by being astonishingly good. A sort of art house *Dirty Harry* film, it successfully captured the flavour of the original comic strip, without the brainless grandstanding Hollywood films these days invariably include.

Sue Thomason on *Bad Pharma* by Ben Goldacre

My personal best of the year nomination is a non-fiction science book, *Bad Pharma*, which I assume people interested in SF may also be interested in. The book is an account of how much modern healthcare is based on a systematic perversion of the scientific method (the falsification, distortion and suppression of trial data) and what all of us can do to rectify this. It's a book about how to do science; how, why and where science is being done badly; and how ethics slippage can turn into reality slippage, bringing into existence a set of alternate worlds dreamed up by marketing departments. It's a gripping story, horrifying and inspiring by turns, and it ends with a list of suggested actions offering us the chance to become – in a very small way – the heroes who rescue science and save modern medicine.

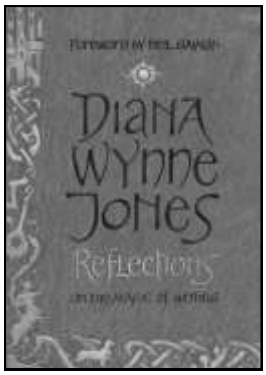
Sandra Unerman's Books of 2012

A Face Like Glass is set in an even stranger world than Frances Hardinge's other novels. Caverna is an underground city inhabited by Facesmiths, mad Cartographers and craftsmen of visionary cheeses and other extraordinary artefacts. The city is ruled by a Grand Steward who keeps each side of his brain awake in turn, while the other sleeps, to guard against assassins. Neverfell, the heroine, is a young innocent who becomes a food taster for the Grand Steward and undergoes many dangers before she discovers her true self. In the process, Caverna is changed for ever. I enjoyed the inventiveness of the setting and the wild pace of Neverfell's adventures but even more powerful are the contrasts between all the strangeness and Neverfell's perceptions of the things most of us take for granted, such as the way the expressions on people's faces change with their emotions.

Boneland takes the form of a sequel to Alan Garner's fantasies for children, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath*. It is, however, very different in mood and style. It concerns a grown-up Colin, a difficult, solitary man, who struggles to come to terms with his past while he works as an astronomer. The narrative is spare and it is not easy to be sure how much of the action takes place only inside Colin's mind. But his experiences come vividly to life and Garner's language provides a powerful evocation of loneliness and landscape.

Sixteen stories by Patricia McKillip are collected in *Wonders of the Invisible World*, along with her Guest of Honour speech at WisCon 28 in 2004. These stories encompass an interesting range of images and settings. One of my favourites is 'The Kelpie' which conjures up a Pre-Raphaelitesque group of painters in an alternative world where magic must be taken seriously and the women have a fairer share of the action.

Reflections is a posthumous collection of papers by Diana Wynne Jones. It provides some fascinating biographical information as well as insights into the writing process and her thoughts on such matters as narrative in *The Lord of the Rings* and the difference between writing for children and for adults. In 'Inventing the Middle Ages', she writes perceptively about the relationship between history and fantasy and the concept of 'story time'.



Marina Warner's *Stranger Magic* is a book about the Arabian Nights tales. Warner considers the history of the story collection, its impact on Europe, the continuing vitality of magic in every day culture and the interplay between imagination and reason. She retells fifteen of the stories and discusses themes that arise from them, including responses from Voltaire to Freud and early cinema. The illustrations are splendid and the book provides plenty of food for the imagination as well as for thought about the interaction between East and West.

Lynne Bispham on *The Last Werewolf* by Glen Duncan

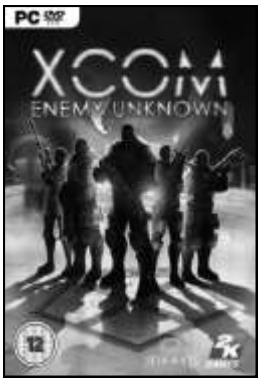
Reader, I ate him." This chapter opening, a horrific yet darkly humorous literary allusion, is typical of the writing in my standout book of 2012, *The Last Werewolf* by Glen Duncan. Unlike most werewolves in contemporary fantasy novels, the main character in this book is a true monster, transforming into a savage killer every full moon, and yet the writer still manages to enlist the reader's sympathy for his plight. I'm not a great fan of horror but I found this book to be both thoughtful and a compelling read. It is a genre novel that is also literature.

For two hundred years, Jake Marlowe has been a werewolf, driven instinctively to kill and devour people when in wolf-form. Through his journal, we learn how he became a werewolf and read of his first and most ghastly atrocity, which has haunted him ever since. Now the last of his kind, tormented by the murders he's committed, he decides that he cannot go on. The next time a werewolf hunter comes for him, he will simply let himself be killed. In the midst of his existential crisis, however, he discovers that he is not in fact the last living werewolf and has every reason to live. His attempts to stay alive, pursued as he is by the sadistic hunters of the World Organisation for the Control of Occult Phenomena, and various splinter groups, all with their own agenda, provide the suspense and action in what is, despite its scenes of graphic violence, a beautifully written book.

Liz Bourke's Best of 2012

I read over 275 books last year, not counting re-reads, and most of them were, in one way or another, connected to science fiction and fantasy. So picking out absolute favourites from the long, long list – or even the most technically successful novels – is a difficult proposition. The ones that stick in my mind include Elizabeth Bear's gorgeous epic fantasy *Range of Ghosts,* Leah Bobet's complex and crunchy coming-of-age *Above*, Max Gladstone's startlingly excellent debut *Three Parts Dead*, Ben Aaronovitch's London police-caper-with-magic *Whispers Under Ground,* Felix Gilman's *The Rise of Ransom City*, Barbara Hambly's *The Magistrates of Hell*... a lot of good novels stuck in my mind, let's just say. And that's only among the ones *published* last year. Too many excellent books to choose from – it's a good problem to have.

When it comes to film, I'm perpetually behind, and cinematic offerings failed to impress me, with the exception of *The Hunger Games* and the delightful pulp-comic *Iron Sky. The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* is possibly the most delightfully entertaining piece of Tolkien fanfiction ever made but, as an adaptation of the book, rather a failure.



In videogames, *Mass Effect 3* consumed a lot of my spring (a stunning and compelling conclusion to the trilogy, right up until the last sequence, where it all fell apart) and *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, a turn-based alien-invasion strategy game, has been a very entertaining addition to my December.

2012: a good year for entertainment, in my books.

In Review: The Best of US Science Fiction Television, 2012

Sophie Halliday

America's broadcast and cable networks have, in recent times, offered viewers a seemingly plentiful supply of science fiction and fantasy programming. A certain number of these have garnered a great deal of praise: series such as *Lost* (2004-2010), and *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009) were elevated in both critical and academic circles as primary examples of 'quality' television. They left an enduring impression in the sphere of popular culture. Yet the science fiction series that aired during 2012 were a mixed bag. Several keenly anticipated new shows failed to reach the heights of *Lost* or *Battlestar Galactica*. *Alcatraz* (2012), a new series from J.J. Abrams, was a critical and commercial disappointment. *666 Park Avenue* (2012) was quickly cancelled. *Revolution* (2012-), also produced by Abrams, fared somewhat better. Set in America fifteen years after a global blackout, *Revolution* depicts a family struggling to reunite as they negotiate a landscape in decay and populated by warring militia. Its premiere set a ratings record for network NBC. Although viewers have declined, it seems poised to continue beyond one season. Returning shows were more reliable. *Game of Thrones* (2011-) garnered several mainstream industry awards. *Falling Skies* (2011-) launched to record ratings figures for a cable show in 2011. It also places an American family at the centre of its narrative: in this case, a family that forms part of a human resistance in a guerrilla war against alien invaders. While its numbers declined in 2012, it will air a third season in 2013.

The trend of falling viewing figures across the majority of shows mentioned above might point to a pervasive inconsistency in current science fiction television. However, 2012 also featured two series that reached critical and artistic peaks in *The Walking Dead* (2010-) and *Fringe* (2008-2013). Last year, *The Walking Dead* proved to be a commercially successful cable show that also reached new creative heights. Its second season finale, 'Beside the Dying Fire,' marked a distinctive shift in tone for the series, providing a thrilling conclusion to a plotline in which its central characters sought sanctuary from zombie 'walkers' on a remote farm. While this arc was, at times, laborious, the death of Shane - a key character - propelled group-leader Rick into moral uncertainty. Alongside the revelation that everyone was infected with the virus that has swept the series' post-apocalyptic environment, this finale set up a welcome change of setting. The first half of Season Three, set largely in a prison, premiered in the autumn of 2012 and went on to produce the series' most memorable episode to date. 'The Killer Within' was traumatic and, at times, almost unwatchable. Rick's wife, Lori, dies whilst giving birth; she literally has her baby cut out of her. Carl, her son, then executes his mother as she turns into a walker. Ending with Rick's guttural screams of anguish, the episode was emotionally affecting in a way that *The Walking Dead* had not previously achieved. It elevated the series creatively and its return in February, 2013 was eagerly anticipated. It premiered to record ratings: among cable networks there is no comparison, and its average viewers in the all-important adult demographic betters many top-performing shows from broadcast networks.[1]

While *The Walking Dead* looks forward to a successful 2013, 2012 also featured the final season of the perennially ratings-challenged but critically acclaimed series, *Fringe*. Featuring many hallmarks of *The X-Files* (1993-2002) upon its debut, *Fringe* evolved into a truly original science fiction series that survived for five seasons on network television despite apocalyptic ratings. It has featured alternate universes, multiple versions of lead characters, numerous timelines and an array of fantastical plots inspired by actual research into 'fringe' science. For *Fringe*, 2012 proved to be a year that fea-

tured several highly original and creative episodes as the show ushered in 2013 with a dramatic conclusion. Notable for using the 19th episode in each season for presenting a particularly eccentric instalment of its narrative, 2012 was no exception. Season Four's 'Letters of Transit' broke continuity and jumped forward in time to 2036, wherein the Fringe team found themselves in the midst of an underground resistance against the rulers of a totalitarian state. Season Five, premiering in the autumn of 2012, set itself exclusively in this future world and featured several outstanding moments. In 'The Bullet That Saved the World,' Etta, the daughter of central characters Peter and Olivia, is murdered in a surprising and shocking conclusion. It was a cruel twist of fate: Peter and Olivia had just been reunited with Etta. That they had to lose her again, to leave her as she lay dying so she could detonate an explosive device, was both heart-breaking and dramatically incisive; effectively trusting the series towards its conclusion. While Etta's death provided *Fringe*'s final season with its emotional foundation, 'Black Blotter' delivered its most outlandishly inventive moment. Scientist Walter Bishop fears that he may return to his former self: a cruel, absolute man. His fears are fuelled by an acid trip – his good and evil side manifested by characters who appear to him during his hallucinations, culminating in a brilliant, Terry Gilliam-style animation sequence which touchingly references *Fringe* folklore.

Writing for *Wired*, Hugh Hart argues that *Fringe*'s finale in early 2013 marked the end of an era for pure science fiction on broadcast television, which he sees as lasting for the foreseeable future due to an "unfriendly atmosphere towards the genre."[2] Many network shows fell by the wayside during its run (see: *V* (2009-2011), *Terra Nova* (2011) and *The Event* (2010-2011)). *Fringe*'s survival was certainly improbable and it remains to be seen whether Hart's prediction will come to fruition. However, *The Walking Dead*'s indelible success in 2012 on a cable network suggests it is a science fiction series primed for longevity, ready to dominate popular imaginaries and to pursue future critical and creative accomplishments.

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[1] James Hibberd, 'The Walking Dead' returns to jaw-dropping record ratings, EW.com (February 11, 2013) http://insidetv.ew.com/2013/02/11/the-walking-dead-record-rating/ [Accessed February 14, 2013)

[2] Hugh Hart, 'Review: Fringe Sets Up Its Farewell' in Wired (September 28, 2012) http://www.wired.com/underwire/2012/09/fringe-season-premiere-review/ [Accessed February 14, 2013]

UK SF Television 2012: Dead things that will not die

Alison Page

2012 was a pretty bad year for SF television in Britain. In previous articles I have mentioned the problems of producing decent SF TV in the British context, compared to the American. There are only two ways that good will and a production budget can be raised and maintained: the show must manage to achieve wide (almost blanket) popularity outside the SF core audience or it must clearly fulfil the remit of the publicly-supported channels to produce innovative and challenging drama. To meet either of these standards the show must be loved by its makers. In 2012 UK TV did not produce any new shows which met these standards. The SF output of English language television worldwide seemed tired and lacking in innovation in 2012.

Beyond a back catalogue of cancelled shows, the impression in 2012 was of a dying genre. However, I am writing this in early 2013. I know that there are new shows coming up, both in Britain and abroad which already contradict this impression. It is possible that 2012 marked a low-point, and an upturn is coming.

The back catalogue

For an SF fan who wants something to watch on television there is a wonderful back catalogue of shows no longer being made but easy to access on digital television and online. And there is something appealing to the psychology of an SF fan (in my opinion) about a cancelled show. Imagining and regretting the unmade next season appeals to one of the most attractive traits of a typical SF fan, which is the yearning attempt to envisage something better or more stretching than what exists. This yearning drives the content of SF itself, but also shapes the experience of that content. Something better almost existed, we are sure of it, we can imagine it.

It's possible that the failure of SF TV also appeals to a less attractive trait of SF fans, which is a self-pitying belief in our unrewarded superiority to the mainstream. To love something which most people don't appreciate is perhaps not an entirely unpleasant experience.

New entries to the back catalogue

Two new SF shows which started in 2012 in the US might be worth looking out for amongst the back catalogue. One has been cancelled already, the other is touch and go. Both shows are about people confronting the end of civilisation. Armageddon is the new outer space.

The NBC show ***Revolution*** is set in a world 15 years after electricity failed. I have seen a little, and it seems a bit flat. I have heard that it emphasises 'action' over 'ideas'. The name 'Revolution' invokes the founding of the state, and the wholesome past. There is an audience hungry for that kind of thing, but *Revolution* is perhaps too boring to survive.

The other show is ABC's ***Last Resort***. It sounds more intelligent: the crew of a U.S. nuclear submarine refuse an order to fire nuclear missiles, and escape to a NATO outpost where they declare themselves to be the world's smallest nuclear nation. It was cancelled after 13 episodes, so hopefully this will be another of those poignant might-have-beens.

Invigorated corpses

By 'invigorated corpses' I mean those shows that have died at least once, but we see them walking around still. The three which stubbornly continued to walk and talk after their heads have been cut off are ***Misfits***, ***Red Dwarf*** and ***Futurama***. It is striking that these last remainders, when all the other long running shows have gone, are comedies.

Misfits was the least healthy British SF show of last year. It was launched triumphantly in late 2009 by Howard Overman, with an almost unprecedented vigour. It is the story of a group of teenagers on Community Service who gain superpowers, and blunder about killing people. The first two seasons were almost perfect television. The show was full of energy, and dealt with significant emotional issues in an accessible way. *Misfits* was always massive fun, without feeling like pointless junk. You watched it and you still respected yourself in the morning.

But the essence of the show was its motion, the fumbling of the characters towards maturity. For this reason the third season (in 2011) was problematic, and by 2012 the show needed renewal. The best way to do this would have been to bring in new people and reset. *Misfits* failed to do this well enough.

Misfits has lost all of its original cast by now. I think some of this happened on the fly during early filming, because the replacement characters don't seem to make a coherent team, they aren't strong enough on their own, and the whole lacks the coherent vision which gave context to the sex and violence. I wouldn't criticise the young actors, who do what they can with the material. Joseph Gilgun in particular, as Rudy, seems to give it all he's got, and that's plenty: he is funny, pitiful and priapic. The jokes are still funny and offensive. But the whole seems provisional, scrabbled together, and lacking in authority. I do not think *Misfits* will return.

Red Dwarf passed away in the 1990s, and the final series VIII was pretty bad. From interviews, and from the evidence of the show, it seems that the actors and writers were uncovering what *Red Dwarf* meant in the 1990s while they made it. They found that, perhaps because of the talent and warmth of the writers and actors, the show had a strong emotional core. But sadly, in realising what a great thing they had made, they became self-conscious about it, and started to flog some of the themes a bit too hard, particularly harking back to brilliant Season V. Too many Duane Dibbleys. Perhaps they became slightly scared to spoil it, and ironically this stifled the creativity of the episodes and spoiled it anyway. There was a self-conscious season IX called 'Back to Earth' in 2009, which confirmed that the series was trapped and mesmerised by its own image among fans. And that indeed was the precise theme of the three episodes of that short season, in which the characters are trapped in the cultural reception of the show itself, under the influence of Season V's hallucinogenic squid.

Dave broadcast a new season - *Red Dwarf X* - in 2012. It could have been very bad. It wasn't bad. It ran to six episodes, and they are worth watching. There are new ideas – meeting Rimmer's brother, travelling in time to meet Jesus (or a person called Jesus) – that are not mere rearrangements of old material, but are consistent extensions of the show. The whole seems nostalgic but enjoyable. It's almost like holding in your arms someone you have loved for a long time, and noticing that their skin is wrinkled. You feel tender towards them. I feel tender in that way towards this lovely show. The people are great, it is lovely to have them back, at least for a short while. Is it the future of SF? By its very nature it can't be.

Futurama is an animated series by Matt Groening. It's funnier than the Simpsons, many episodes are innovative in structure, and it is packed with memorable moments. It was cancelled in 2003 by Fox. The rights were picked up by Comedy Central a couple of years later. New episodes were eventually aired from 2008 onwards. Season 7 was shown in the US in summer 2012. There is a big problem for British viewers who follow *Futurama*: I do not think that any British Channel is showing the most recent season, and it is not available on DVD yet. Perhaps this is because we are still consuming seasons 5 and 6. It's a show that suits the British SF audience well. We are not well served by the people who have an opportunity to make money out of bringing it to us, but have not done so. Although *Futurama* has come back from the dead, the British have to watch the back catalogue. I think Season 7 will be great. That's just a guess though.

Is it significant that these three survivors are comedies? I think it is. Films and TV shows which mock SF from outside are dreary, but comedy that comes from within SF and is made by people who adore SF seems to have an authentic heart. It has more emotional power than a typical sitcom or straight SF drama. It may be that humour forms an alloy with sentimentality which can resist corrosion better than either element in unalloyed form.

Doctor Who

Doctor Who is a revived show, but I do not think anyone would call it an invigorated corpse. In fact it seems an unstoppable force. If it is an alloy – and I suppose it is – it has become adamantine.

But *Doctor Who* has something in common with the revived corpses. The episodes of 2012 were quite backward-looking. They seem bound by precedent. For example, Amy is replaced by Clara, but the new companion is not different enough. Supposing, as some predict, the romance between the Doctor and the new companion will be more overt – that is not innovation. That is just cranking up the old tired engine.

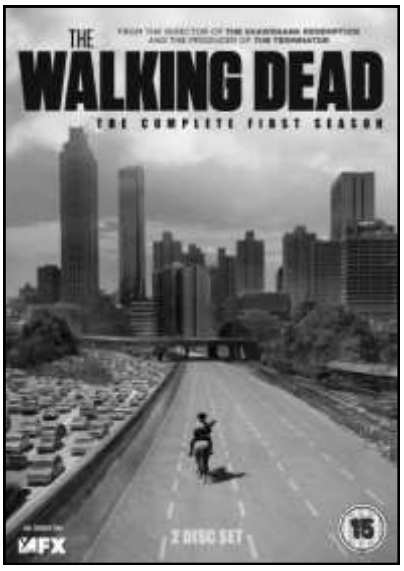
While I was researching this article I read the BBC Worldwide promotion of *Doctor Who* to advertisers [1] ('Advertising on BBC Worldwide … connects brands to influential, affluent and engaged audiences, and aligns them with the creative thinking and campaign expertise of the BBC'). Within this context *Doctor Who* is not even adamantine, it's pure dazzling diamond: 'Over 77 million viewers… BBC America's highest rating programme ever… Over 2.4 million Facebook fans and growing!'

That is not a criticism. I am proud of the success of *Doctor Who*. I want successful shows to bring money into the BBC. This mega brand attracts famous writers, brilliant guest stars, and it is a great advert for SF and for British creativity. But this power has also constrained it. The show is scared to innovate, trapped by its own past. To be fair, as the audience is perpetually young, perhaps *Doctor Who* has no more need to innovate than *Thomas the Tank Engine* does. I have argued about the conservatism associated with success. But by being rational, I have entirely missed the most important, and inexplicable, feature of *Doctor Who*. If you have not seen it already search on YouTube for the clip of fans watching 'Inspector Spacetime' (sic) as featured on the US show *Community* [2]. Once again, humour captures the heart. The fiasco they are watching is by any standards appalling rubbish, but at its close the viewer exclaims 'This is the best show I have ever seen in my entire life!' And

you know just what he means. You believe it too, you are converted. For one fleeting moment of time, or for the rest of your life, *Doctor Who* is the best show ever. Why? We cannot say, and we never will.

The Walking Dead

I have made a case in this article that SF TV in 2012 was like a dead thing walking around. The one show which – in my opinion – shows continuing life is ironically the one about dead things walking around. ***The Walking Dead*** is on AMC, the most interesting American TV channel. The first half of Season 3 was broadcast in autumn 2012. Most of my comments on this show are critical, but it has the great virtue that it is alive and creative and unpredictable. It has charismatic performances from Andrew Lincoln and David Morrissey, and particularly from Norman Reedus as working class Daryl. For these reasons I am driven to see each episode as soon as it is broadcast. It's an interesting thing, even if it is sometimes rather poorly scripted, with murky ethics.



Like *Revolution* and *Last Resort*, *The Walking Dead* is about life after the apocalypse. In this case the Zombie Apocalypse. Humans are as usual vastly outnumbered and facing oblivion. The tone of the show is grim, with explicit gore and guts, death by caesarean section and being eaten alive, all very much in your face. But that is not the problem with the show.

I heard an argument once between British and American SF fans. The American said his countrymen were more likely than Europeans to survive the zombie apocalypse, because so many people had guns and were trained to kill humans. The British fan angrily disagreed, but I think the American was right. However, it is worth noting that there *isn't going to be a zombie apocalypse*. I would go further and say it is not that American gun culture is uniquely suited to withstand zombies, but that the zombies are uniquely suited to justify American gun culture. If guns are the answer, then zombies are the question.

There are many drawbacks to guns as a solution to conflict between humans within the same community. Some of the most significant are that the people you are in conflict with can turn guns on you, that there are instinctive barriers which prevent us slaughtering each other, and that negotiation, compromise, and mental health care all give greater benefits than gun battles. But zombies are a new kind of human, carefully if not consciously designed to rule out all these objections. They cannot use your guns, they have no moral status, they cannot be negotiated with or healed. They are unremittingly hateful, and it is a kindness to kill them. They are perfect guilt-free gun victims.

Steven Schlozman, of Harvard Medical school, and author of the Zombie Autopsies, recently wrote in the Guardian[3] that Americans love zombie stories for cultural reasons. He quotes a teenage fan:

> *"If there were a zombie apocalypse, man, it'd be SO cool. It'd be like the Old West… As long as we keep our guns trained on the woods we'll be safe and happy."*

He continues:

> *"I'll admit that the unique freedom of a zombie Armageddon is itself strangely appealing. Our lives would be quickly and cleanly simplified."*

I do not mean to suggest that American attitudes are homogenous or unsophisticated. Attitudes vary widely, about guns, gender, race, class. *The Walking Dead* began in my opinion as a rather simplistic dramatization of a particular way of thinking on all these issues. But while that 'clean and simple' vision might appeal, like British nostalgia about the Blitz, viewers watch in sophisticated ways. The British don't want London to be bombed, Americans don't want to live in the Wild West. It just makes a good story.

The best American shows, for example *The Wire*, present a complex multifaceted moral vision which in my opinion is far more sophisticated and intellectual than any TV show made in Britain. *The Walking Dead* has not begun to approach that level of skill and nuance. But it is improving. There are clearly demarcated good and bad humans, but the relentless killing is poisoning the 'goodies' and merging them with the baddies.

The show could go one of two ways now. It could be crudely triumphalist, or morally complex. It could for example portray torture as good if it is done by the goodies. Or it could suggest that evil and madness come into us when we perform evil acts.

We need SF shows that deal with moral and cultural complexity. The only ones which do this at the moment are comedies, and they are getting old now. If we are lucky *The Walking Dead* could lead the way to a better kind of SF, which matches our complexity instead of burying it.

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[1] ***http://advertising.bbcworldwide.com/home/mediakit/reachaudience/brandedentertainment/drwho***

[2] ***For instance here: http://youtu.be/MMSyIgydYfs***

[3] ***http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/feb/11/americans-love-zombies-culture***

2012 in SF Audio

Reviewed by Tony Jones

I may be unusual but I find that I am consuming more and more of my sf in audio form. The main reason is convenience – I can carry several dozen hours of entertainment on my MP3 player and listen as I commute. Unlike eBooks which fulfil much of the same need I can listen while moving from train to tube and strolling to the office. Some days I can even keep listening while I work so for me audio is a particularly convenient solution.

A lot more audio is available than might otherwise be obvious to those unfamiliar with the medium; for the sake of this review I am splitting audio into three forms:

1. Narration – a single individual reads an original text. This may have the benefit of some music or even effects but is essentially an audiobook regardless of its labelling
2. Audio adaptations – full cast productions of works that already exist in written form and have since been adapted for radio
3. Original audio drama – also full cast productions but the work has been written specifically as an audio drama.

All three forms of audio are available in a range of forms including radio, CD or download. though in this article I am focussing on the original audio dramas, which is what I mostly listen to, I have not ignored the others.

For those readers less familiar with the medium I have organised this review according by source, starting with the simplest choice for anyone in the UK.

Radio 4 Extra

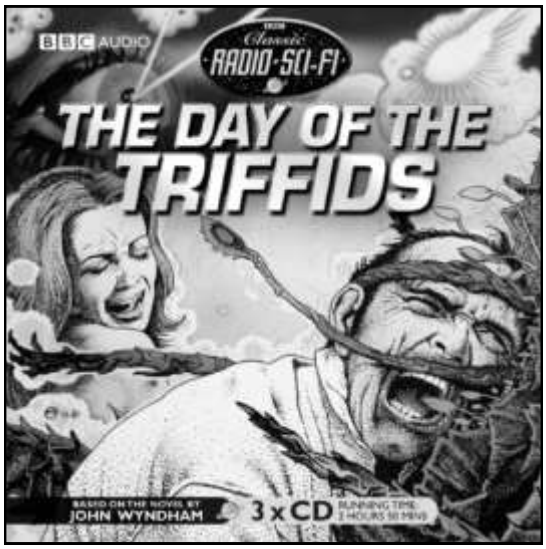
The first port of call for audio sf is Radio 4 Extra[1] or Radio 7 as was. Even if you don't have internet radio or DAB most, if not all, material can be downloaded in the form of podcasts within a week of transmission.[2]

All three types of material are available and what is more the station runs a rolling schedule which means that most titles repeat within a year of first transmission, with older titles generally repeating at least once within two years. The formal slot for sf is between 6pm and 7pm (repeats at midnight currently though it can vary). Series will be broadcast either weekdays, Saturdays or Sundays and although one hour a day may not sound like much, in a year you get around 75 series to choose from.

2012 had many highlights and I present the briefest of lists that, while it may only scratch the surface, demonstrates the range of material available and that there is something for every taste.

Narration: the usual suspects get plenty of air time including Brian Aldiss (*Hothouse*), HG Wells (*First Men in the* Moon) and Arthur C. Clarke's wonderful short story *All the Time in the World*. The short story format is particularly suited to radio where the standard half-an-hour slot allows time for stories such as Clarke's to develop then reach their conclusion. By comparison *Hothouse* develops over five evenings in an atmospheric reading by Gareth Thomas allowing the listener's imagination to paint the pictures that only radio can paint. Not all narrators can bring every piece to life but Thomas does well with this.

Audio adaptation: 2012 also gave us a chance to listen again to a great dramatisation of Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* told in two one-hour episodes; this is a careful choice as Clarke's prose is particularly suited to this format, possibly reflecting the author's own upbringing in a time when radio was the commonest means by which people could be transported to other worlds in their imaginations. There was also some John Wyndham (*Chocky* and *Day of the Triffids*). Ray Bradbury is also a favourite of the station and this year gave us another listen to *Fahrenheit 451* which was first broadcast in 2010.



It isn't all what might be termed classic writers; the wonderfully adapted Robert Rankin story *The Brightonomicon* is a personal favourite and starred David Warner in the lead role as Hugo Rune, Rupert Degas as the narrative lead Rizzla and a superbly performed Fangio played by Mark Wing-Davey who also, if you need reminding, played Zaphod Beeblebrox in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

Original audio drama is my particular taste and here we find that Radio 4 Extra gives opportunity for new material. Some of it is from the archives such as *Journey Into Space* the 1950s radio adventures from the recently deceased Charles Chilton (first re-broadcast in 2009) but we also get the chance to hear plenty of Wally K Daly's plays from the 1970s and 80s and in particular the trilogy *Before the Screaming Begins, The Silent Scream* and *With a Whimper to the Grave.*

For more modern material, we had *Blake's 7 The Early Years,* and a re-run of Ben Moors excellent *Undone* set in a version of London like, but not, like our own which ran for three series. There were also brand new programmes that I will come to later on.

AudioGo releases

At some point you will find yourself wanting more control over the material you listen to and this is where you need to find publishers (or just buy haphazardly from Amazon). The BBC releases everything audio through the AudioGo[3] label and here things are rather more mixed. 2012 gave maybe a couple of dozen releases with several tying into the release of *The Hobbit* movie, classics such as Isaac Asimov's *I Robot*. There are also several more obvious TV tie-ins with stories from both Doctor Who and Torchwood. The Torchwood releases split into those set before *Miracle Day* (the recent TV series) and those set after. Even those set after *Miracle Day* feel very much like pre-*Miracle Day* stories in that they are set in Cardiff and are set against new threats.

My favourite of the 2012 AudioGo Torchwood releases is *Torchwood: Fallout* which is written by David Llewellyn and read by Tom Price who plays Sgt. Andy who is the central character of this story. This is the tale of Yasmin who finds an alien artefact in her grandfather's allotment shed. Resembling a jewelled egg this was actually part of the explosion debris from the destruction of the Torchwood base in the TV series *Children of Earth.* The story is nicely paced and leads from Cardiff to a showdown at the British Museum.

Torchwood has a difficult path ahead of it: the US partnered *Miracle Day* was not universally popular and has been placed on hold. We may never get more TV Torchwood and AudioGo clearly has a range that has potential with fans but, so far, is focussing on the audience that prefer a less Hollywood version of the show.

The Doctor Who releases are a different story; as the anniversary year approached the number of titles started to proliferate covering everything from readings of classic novels, new stories for the eleventh Doctor and all ports of call in between.

Worth drawing out is the 8 (count them) CD release of Dan Abnett's excellent second Doctor story The Wheel of Ice and also the intriguing *The Angel's Kiss.*

The Angel's Kiss is the book shown in the TV show *Angels Take Manhattan* and is written by (and read by) Melody Malone. Given this is a pseudonym of River Song we have a conundrum here especially since the story is actually read by Alex Kingston and provides an amusing prequel to the TV episode. This (and the eBook) are both inexpensive and although it only runs at 1 hour 42 minutes is worth listening to if you are amused by the conceit of a character writing and reading a story that you can buy.

Cosmic Hobo / Bafflegab

The company known as Cosmic Hobo changed its name late in 2012 to Bafflegab[4]. Founder Simon Barnard explained that:

> *"We have lots of new material coming out next year, not just Scarifyers, and thought that Cosmic Hobo wasn't really appropriate."*[5]

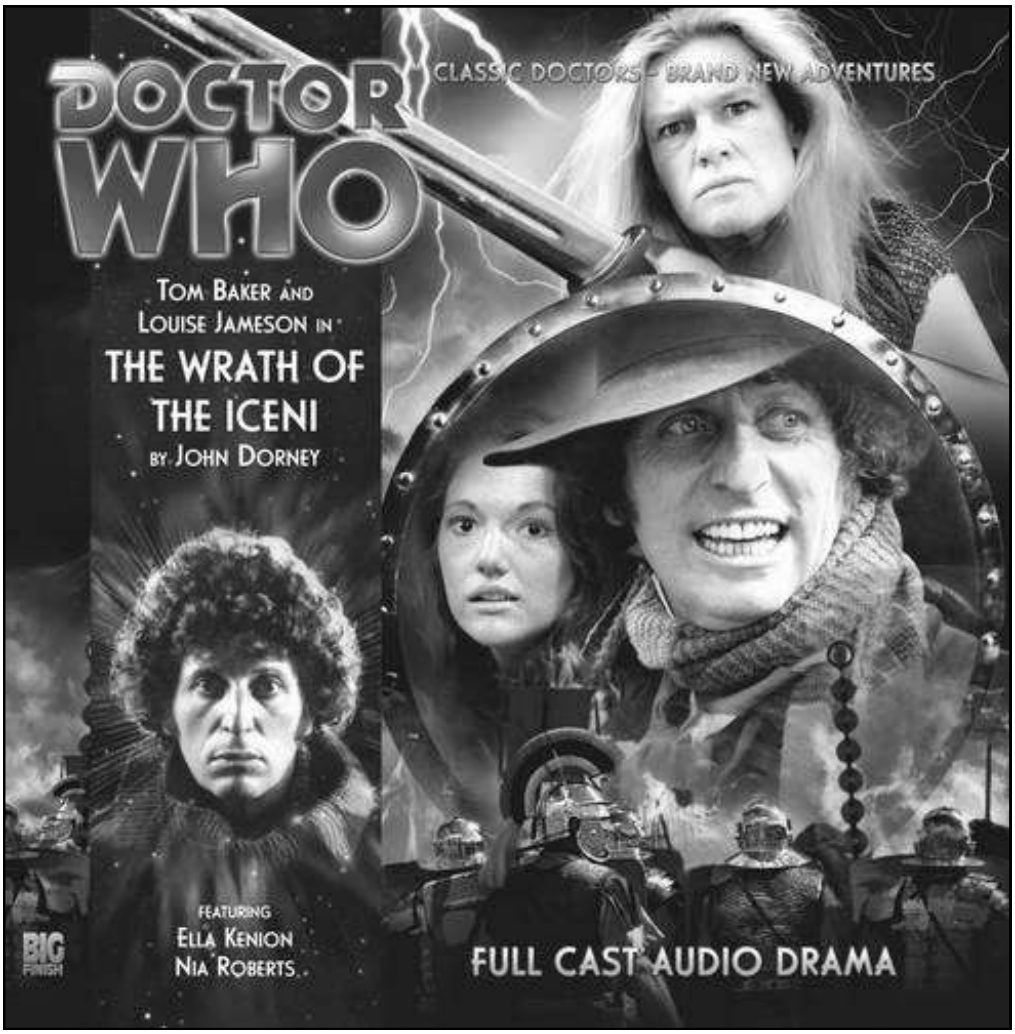
In 2012 they released *The Magic Circle* in their highly popular Scarifyers series all of which have been on Radio 4 Extra at some time or other and often appear in the archives meaning so you really have no excuse not to listen. These amusing stories originally starred the late Nicholas Courtney in the lead role of Lionheart. Think Ripping Yarns meets Henry Rider Haggard.

Magic Circle starred David Warner, Terry Molloy and Stephen Thorne and tells the story of Prof. Dunning and Harry Crow in their search for Lionheart. Clearly there is poignancy – the story revolves around the search which has to end with the confirmation of the death of the lead character. Instead of signalling the end of the range they have instead managed a dignified transition to a new pair of central characters. A bonus documentary is available for CD purchasers but not for downloaders.

The year ended with the release of *The Thirteen Hallows* set in Wales and adding Gareth David-Lloyd (Ianto Jones from Torchwood) to the cast.

Big Finish

It is impossible to discuss British audio sci-fi without covering Big Finish[6]. Formed in 1998 they have been steadily producing a stream of newly written or adapted audio content (and some books) all under license. Best known for their Doctor Who releases, they have also produced material in many other franchises including Stargate, 2000 AD, Dark



Shadows, Highlander and Sherlock Holmes. The majority of their work is features original cast in new productions.

Making their first appearance in 2012 were Blake's 7 in the form of two box-sets, each containing three one-disc stories featuring between them five different original actors. The best of these stories is *False Positive* by Eddie Robson[7] a two-handed story featuring Gareth Thomas as Blake and Beth Chalmers as Dr Lian.

This story works on two levels: Blake is the mysterious patient of Dr Lian. Suffering from a gunshot wound he is entirely candid in telling the story of how he and Avon carried out a mission to blackmail the Arbitrator (a supposedly neutral official who decides policy for the planet). Blake proceeds to narrate a Bond-esque adventure involving a luxury yacht and Federation troops. Dr Lian never believes the story but there is another level at play; an experimental drug is being used on Blake whose testing is being invalidated by the way Blake is responding to it. This means the Federation will abandon its use proving a victory for the Rebellion.

This is a clever tale, well told and entirely avoiding any sense that there isn't a full cast just two actors. At times it might have benefitted from having Paul Darrow playing Avon as Gareth Thomas does rather eclipse Beth Chalmers by voicing Blake, Avon and the Arbitrator but that is a minor complaint.

Of the 74 releases from Big Finish in 2012, 51 were Doctor Who or Doctor Who spin-offs. This is after all the mainstay of the company. Some previous titles were available on Radio 4 Extra during the year.

The main news for Doctor Who fans was that Tom Baker had joined the fold and a set of six stories featuring both him and Louise Jameson as Leela were released. These appeared as single CD adventures one per month from January. The best of these was *Wrath of the Iceni* written by John Dorney[8].

As its title suggests this is about meeting with Boudicca. The plot centres on Leela's relationship with the Doctor (this is set early in their time together) and starts with her being impressed by Boudicca and her story then she sees more of her character and is quickly disillusioned. This full-cast story paradoxically works well because it is minimal; most of the action centres on few people and the story is carried by some great performances particular that of Louise.

Louise also shines in *The Child* a story by Nigel Fairs[9] in what Big Finish call the Companion Chronicles, tales allowing actors of all Doctors (even those now passed on) to relate new stories of their time with the Doctor. They are generally two-handers with one actor voicing their original part as a Companion, the applicable Doctor and the other actor playing a new character around whom part of the plot pivots.

This beautiful tale is the first of an up-coming trilogy where Leela has died and has come back (somehow not yet explained) as the invisible friend of a young girl named Emily (played by Anna Hawkes). This tale comes across as a travel through Wonderland; the Doctor is held captive by an evil Ice Queen and Leela has to free him from his tower aided only by an old woman, a crow-man and a wise old man. That these are echoes of the first three Doctors is a masterstroke and the whole piece is a modern fairy-tale.

The so-called main range had too many great titles to single any out and the stories remained true to the show's roots (linking back to such TV stories as *The Talons of Weng-Chiang* and also *The Curse of Fenric*) and companions suffered, foes were vanquished, wrongs were righted and the Doctor was the Doctor.

Where 2012 was unusual for Big Finish was in the number of special releases that were fitted in. The most remarkable of these was *Dark Eyes*[10] a four discs epic tale for the Eighth Doctor. Following on from the loss of a companion in 2011 the Doctor ends up despairing and trying to crash through the end of time. Inevitably the Time Lords intervene and give him one more chance to find some meaning and do battle with the Daleks.

This four-parter was written by Nick Briggs who is also the Executive Producer for Big Finish, voice of the Daleks (and

others) on the TV show and much more besides. Paul McGann once more takes the role of the Doctor and has a new image without the wig and Edwardian frills of his one and only TV appearance.

The story starts with the Doctor bestride the battle-fields of France and ends up with him travelling across time and space with Molly o'Sullivan (Ruth Bradley) who has the dark eyes of the title. The pace is maintained well and one of many strong sequences is in the third disc. The Doctor finds himself in the far future where the Daleks appear to have renounced their evil ways and set out to be a force for good. This strikes to the core of the Doctor's relationship with the Daleks and Molly gets to challenge the view that Daleks cannot be redeemed.

Overall the story shows us a much darker Doctor and one who can easily be imagined as being involved in the Time War, that much speculated upon bridge between the Classic and the new series.

Minister of Chance

Although Minister of Chance spun out of Doctor Who[11], it has now become an independent production available free on the Internet[12] and funded entirely by fans. Despite this method of production the cast list is impressive including Julian Wadham as the Minister, Paul McGann, Sylvester McCoy, Tamsim Greig, Paul Darrow, Sophie Aldred, Philip Glenister and Jenny Agutter. Describing itself as a sonic movie it will eventually comprise six parts. Episode 4 is in production and funding is being requested for episode 5 through a sponsorship / donation model. Depending on how generous would be donors feel they can see their name appear on the web site or even have a character named after them.

In 2012 episode 3 was released – Paludin Fields. It received many positive reviews for the cast, production and writing. It was described by Greg Jameson on Entertainment Focus[13] as:

> *"…a gorgeous audio experience where new and exciting worlds explode into life inside your head. It's also terrifically engaging and frequently a hoot. Let's hope it's not too long before we can get our next fix and enjoy episode four…"*

For me the addition of Tamsin Greig is another example of masterful casting as the Sage of the Waves though I enjoy the way Paul McGann and Sylvester McCoy almost dance around each other's performances as though in a competition. This episode focusses more on action than previous ones but the mythic connection to *Death Comes to Time* remains intact.

Looking forward

Inevitably 2013 looks to be dominated by the fiftieth anniversary of Doctor Who but that doesn't stop others from striding forward; we already await episode 4 of the Minister of Chance and note that Bafflegab has a new concept *Vince Cosmos* created by Paul Magrs ready for release in February.

It promises to be another classic year for audio!

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[1] ***http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4extra/***

[2] ***It is possible to automate the process of capturing BBC podcasts with a program called Radio Downloader http://www.nerdoftheherd.com/tools/radiodld***

[3] ***http://www.audiogo.com/uk/***

[4] ***http://www.bafflegab.co.uk/***

[5] ***See http://www.starburstmagazine.com/book-news/3961-audio-news-cosmic-hobo-no-more-but-don't-panic***

[6] ***http://www.bigfinish.com/***

[7] ***http://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/the-liberator-chronicles-volume-2-736***

[8] ***http://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/the-wrath-of-the-iceni-656***

[9] ***http://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/the-child-745***

[10] ***http://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/new-eighth-doctor-box-set-1-doctor-who---dark-eyes-792***

[11] ***The story Death Comes to Time broadcast on the BBCi Cult website in five parts starting from the 12th July 2001 which gave us the apparent death of the Seventh Doctor, vampires, and Stephen Fry in the role of the Minister of Chance.***

[12] ***http://www.ministerofchance.com/The_Minister_of_Chance/Home.html***

[13] ***http://www.entertainment-focus/book-article/dan-freeman-the-minister-of-chance-episode-three***

Susan Dexter: Fantasy Bestowed

by Mike Barrett

Adult fantasy fiction comes in a variety of guises. As "high fantasy", it generally involves a magical quest and valiant adventures set within those imaginary lands that lie "beyond the edge of the world", where gallant heroes, beautiful princesses, evil witches, dragons, unicorns and more were all to be found. For many years it was the domain of male writers, with those such as William Morris, Lord Dunsany and E R Eddison producing undoubted masterpieces that would come to define the field, but there was an almost complete absence of contributions by female authors.

There was admittedly a preponderance of men in many areas of fiction writing in those formative days, but their domination of high fantasy was almost total. There had been genre novels written by women – Hope Mirrlees' *Lud-in-the-Mist* appeared in 1926 and Evangeline Walton's *The Virgin and the Swine* in 1936 – but these were very much the exception. They were also titles that only came to be popularly recognized as noteworthy many decades after their initial appearance, having received only limited acknowledgment at the time of their first publication.

As time passed by one of the problems for all writers, regardless of gender, was the fact that adult high fantasy had to a great extent become a form of writing that was considered anachronistic, the domain of older works and virtually a closed literary environment, with few new titles appearing apart from juvenalia. Other forms of adult fantasy still held their own, with the sword and sorcery format proving popular with readers in the wake of Robert E Howard having founded it in the 1930s, and Catherine Moore was an early and prime exponent in this area with her Jirel of Joiry tales. But up until the late 1960s high fantasy really did seem to be very much a nostalgic pleasure, a form of imaginative literature that had been sidelined and to which few writers were turning their hands. It was not until J R R Tolkien's epic *Lord of the Rings* trilogy single-handedly revived the field with the enormous success of its paperback publication that authors enthusiastically embraced a concept that had previously been regarded as old-fashioned.

This time those authors *did* include women, and amongst the first-class volumes that appeared were *A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula K Le Guin (1968), *Deryni Rising* by Katharine Kurtz (1970) and Joy Chant's *Red Moon and Black Mountain* (1971), with both the Le Guin and Kurtz titles marking the commencement of long and successful series set in the same respective milieus. Evangeline Walton's *The Virgin and the Swine* was reprinted in 1970, re-titled *The Island of the Mighty*, and the following year saw the publication of *The Children of Llyr,* a title which marked the start of a continuation of Walton's novels over the next three years, eventually rounding out a four volume set which had started in 1936 and which finished in 1974.

The first half of the 1970s also saw Patricia McKillip and Tanith Lee producing the first of a number of major titles, with *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld* (1974) and *The Birthgrave* (1975) respectively, while others such as Sanders Anne Laubenthall (*Excalibur*, 1973) and Louise Cooper (*The Book of Paradox,* 1973) made auspicious debuts with novels that were both impressive and original. Additionally, established writers including Marion Zimmer Bradley, Mary Stewart and Andre Norton were making their own positive contributions to the genre, and within what was a relatively short period of time, high fantasy had become a popular and expanding field of fresh and imaginative fiction.

The more recent past has seen numerous female writers producing excellent books and ongoing series, and they are responsible for the greater part of the memorable works that are now appearing. Such a situation could barely have been imagined thirty or even twenty years ago, and would have been simply inconceivable half a century earlier.

Among the women who closely followed the forerunners of the fantasy revival, but who were still well ahead of the surge that was to come, was Susan Dexter. Her first novel, *The Ring of Allaire*, appeared in October 1981, and six more had followed by 1996, with her last book to date published in 2001. Those eight titles, together with six shorter pieces, showcase an author whose abilities noticeably evolved with the passage of time, her literary voice becoming self-assured and strong, capably demonstrating that she was deserving of a place alongside the better of her contemporaries.

After delving into various areas of fiction, it was an early appreciation of the impressive art that adorned the covers of many fantasy books that led her to the field, and that is where she has devoted her principal literary efforts. Fairy tales and horse stories had been the staple reading of her childhood, and she has said "I think I was born to be a writer – it just took me a long time to figure it out". She began writing "when the characters in her head refused to go away", and the result was *The Ring of Allaire*.

That first novel was the opening episode in *The Winter King's War* trilogy, and it was an appealing and competent debut. It tells of how the realm of Calandra is threatened by the dark magics of the ice-lord Nimir, who is looking to bring the perpetual cold of Winternight to the land, and of the determined efforts to thwart him.

Tristan is an apprentice magician whose enthusiasm outweighs his skill, and whose master Blais is killed by Nimir. However, the wizard's shade persists long enough for him to tell Tristan that he must seek the long-lost and near-legendary

Allaire of the Nine Rings to defeat the insidious creeping menace of Nimir. He firstly releases Valadan the War Horse of Esdragon from an ensorcelled imprisonment many miles and years away on a carnival carousel, and then sets about the quest with his cat Thomas and canary Minstrel, both of whom have important roles to play at later points in the story.

Accompanied by Polassar, supposedly the rightful heir to the throne, they find the sleeping Allaire in the depths of Darkenkeep in the Winterwaste and awaken her from a slumber of many hundreds of years; they then need to discover her missing tenth ring. Captured by Galan of Radak they escape with the aid of Elisena, a serving girl who is clearly not all she seems, and make their way to the mages' city of Kovelir, crossing the mighty Est in full flood and pursued not only by Galan's men but also by the dread Hounds of Nimir. Ultimately the ring is found to be hidden close at hand, and the true identity of Allaire and the destiny of Tristan are also revealed.

The Ring Of Allaire was evidently quite successful and was reprinted in 1982. This may have prompted Dexter to develop the initial concept into a trilogy – there was no indication that there would be any sort of sequel, nor did one appear to be appropriate, as all seemed to have been resolved, with Allaire found and the true king of Calandra restored. But Dexter decided not to allow her characters to rest easy, and capably set the narrative into new motion with the second volume, *The Sword of Calandra*, published in March 1985.

It transpires that Tristan is not going to be accepted as the true king without a proper coronation, and for that the long lost Sword of Calandra is needed. With the ice-lord's influence subtly beginning to spread once more, and enemy armies gathering outside the royal base of Crogen, Tristan travels back to Kovelir in a desperate attempt to find some clue to the whereabouts of the missing sword. He is unsuccessful but does discover that it was forged by the master smiths of Kinark, and enlists one of them to make a new sword identical to the original in the hope that this will be sufficient.

Returning to Crogen during the onset of a major assault by Nimir, a formidable storm that only Valadan can carry him through, Tristan prepares for the coronation. He intends to use the duplicate sword, even though he accepts that there is a chance that this could prove fatal. However, during his vigil on the eve of the coronation he fortuitously discovers the true sword and is able to use it in the rite, which is then successfully concluded. Consequently the influence of Nimir is substantially diminished and the great storms that are afflicting Calandra are ended. But Nimir is not to be so easily defeated…

The concluding episode in the trilogy was *The Mountains of Channadran*, which appeared in September 1986. Nimir's influence is waxing once again, and it becomes clear that the original idea of the quest for Allaire was a deliberately planted bait to lure the mages of Calandra to their destruction. This ploy was totally successful; until Tristan appeared 6,043 mages had set out on the search and never returned, and consequently the sorcerous strength of Calandra was weakened disastrously.

Nimir in his fastness can afford to play a waiting game, content to outlast his opponents; he is centuries if not thousands of years old, and the gradual inroads he makes are acceptable to his purposes, which are very long-term. But that icy patience and a disdain for his antagonists could also be a flaw; he may regard a small band of adventurers as being beneath his attention, and so it is decided that a quest to his stronghold deep in the mountains of Channadran just might take him by surprise.

The journey is fraught with dangers, not least of which is the reappearance of old and vengeful adversaries, and there are some nicely imaginative touches, such as the depiction of Ambere Islin's Tower of Birds and Tristan's steering of an iceberg across seemingly impassable freezing waters. The bitter cold and constant effort of traversing the ice are also well depicted, although it must be said that this part of the book does begin to pall slightly – some astute editing to reduce the page count would not have gone amiss. The trilogy ends well, with the defeat of Nimir convincingly handled, as is its aftermath with summer transforming Channadran and the Winterwaste. Tristan's problems with magic are also resolved as a forgotten incident proves to be the psychological bloc that is preventing him from utilizing his talents to their fullest.

There is an interestingly sombre coda, with the realisation on the part of the main characters that the apparently happy ending is actually only a temporary respite, albeit one that may last for centuries. Evil never dies – Nimir will inevitably recuperate and regroup, and there will be others who will have to face up to his menace one day in the future. But in the meantime, Tristan and Elisena have done as much as could be asked of them and will now accept their life for what it is and make the most of it.

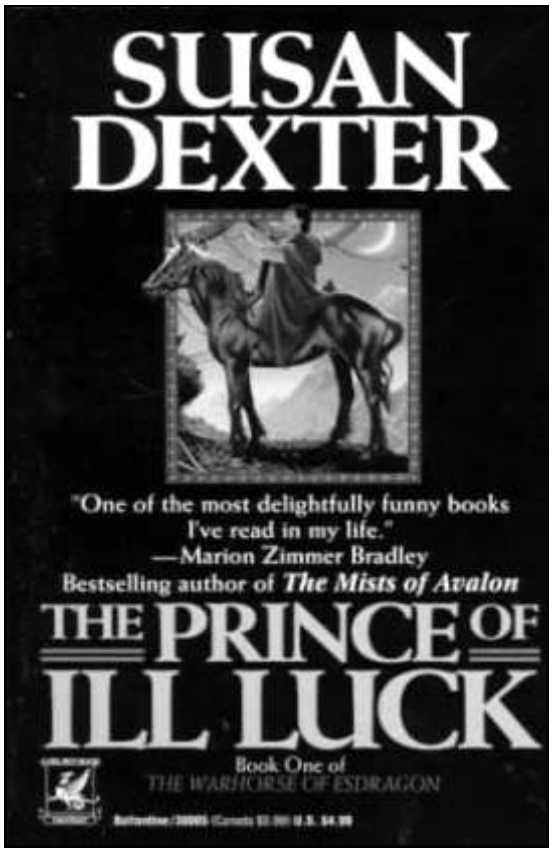
The Winter King's War is enjoyable, but it does have its minor flaws. One of these is Tristan himself, whose personality is never really developed and who seems to be an unchanging and awkward adolescent. He starts to become frankly rather tiresome with his regular mishaps, his self pity and his hesitant spellcasting, and his relationship with Elisena is puzzling – although they marry and he purports to be in love with her, there is little sign of any tenderness and no sign at all of any sensuality. Although it does not seriously detract from the trilogy's overall impact, it would have strengthened the tale if there had been something solid to establish the romantic bond between the two main characters.

All three of the books in the series are enhanced by the author's calligraphy for the chapter titles, as well as her own map of Calandra and its surrounds. Dexter's artwork had appeared in other places, for instance in *Fantasy Newsletter* in 1980 and 1981 and *Whispers* in 1982, and her keen artistic eye is demonstrated by the fact that she did work as a fashion layout artist between 1974 and 1992. Her maps do present an *apparent* problem in that there seems to be a mis-spelling of *Calandra* as *Clandara* in *The Prince of Ill Luck* and *The Wind -Witch*, reverting to *Calandra* in *The True Knight*, but it is not an error at all, as is explained in the latter title.

After *The Winter King's War*, Dexter's next foray into fantasy fiction came with the novella "Thistledown", which was included in the anthology *Once Upon a Time*, edited by Lester del Rey and Risa Kessler, appearing in November 1991. The five years that had passed since the appearance of *The Mountains of Channadran* was a period during which Dexter had clearly honed and developed her storytelling capabilities, and "Thistledown" is an outstanding effort.

It tells of the young mute orphan boy Flax who finds and rears a unicorn foal, abandoned after huntsmen have killed its mother. It eventually leads him to his true calling in a tale involving a pampered Lady and the arrogant young Lord to whom she is betrothed. All of the main characters learn valuable lessons and by the time the story comes to its agreeable end, all three are the better for their experiences and will clearly learn from them, moving on with a maturity and outlook on life that they had previously lacked.

The story uses characterisations similar to those that that had worked well in *The Winter King's War*. Flax echoes Tristan in his inability to use his inherent magic to its full potential,



while Lothair and Lowise are the counterparts of Polassar and Allaire, with the wizard Corlinn occupying the role of Blais. Although Thistledown – both the unicorn of the title and the novella itself – is gracefully unique, it is to the author's credit that she moderates other stereotypes by bringing notable innovation to them.

Dexter's next book was *The Wizard's Shadow* in August 1993, the novel taking place in the same world as the earlier trilogy, but over a decade later and much further west. It has a grim opening chapter as a wizard is brutally murdered, in such a way that he cannot speak or use his hands for spell-casting, and most importantly of all, such that not a drop of his blood is spilled. The killers leave him for dead – which he very soon is – but fail to stop him ensuring that his shadow escapes. That shadow – instilled with the dead wizard's essence – seeks vengeance but is stranded at the remote place of the murder until years later, when the disillusioned and dispirited peddler Crocken arrives on the scene. They make a deal, and Crocken (whose older sister is Crewzel, from *The Sword of Calandra*) reluctantly agrees to his own shadow being supplanted by that of the wizard, and to travel to far Axe-Edge in the country of Armyn, beyond the Borderlands, where the shadow has a score to settle.

On arriving at their destination, Crocken almost inadvertently saves a Princess's life and becomes well-regarded at the Court. He befriends the regent Ruishart, the man who the shadow claims was his betrayer, and who is single-mindedly dedicated to Kieron, the future king, a man with his own dark secrets and who merits no-one's devotion. Little is as it seems on the surface in Axe-Edge, with many identities and loyalties subject to question, and Dexter handles what becomes a complex web of intrigue and magic with consummate skill. Events move swiftly towards a violent conclusion, and it is only near the end that we finally find out exactly who the dead wizard was – the reader is cleverly kept guessing and the revelation when it comes is unexpected but satisfying.

The last pages of the book see the future of Armyn and its dynasty secure, but Crocken loses what he had hoped to gain and seems to be fated for disappointment. Then a new partnership surprisingly arises, one which gives the tale a nice balance and presents the reader with a pleasing conclusion. One consequence of that ending was its considerable scope for sequels, not that there were any loose ends, but nothing of that sort has appeared to date.

The world of *The Wizard's Shadow* is fleshed out more skilfully than was the case in *The Winter King's War*, with an appreciation of its size far more evident. Characterisation is less conventional than in the author's earlier writing, with Crocken a decidedly ordinary and unheroic individual, and the wizard of the title not at all the caricature that he may initially appear to be. Overall, the book is a superior offering that demonstrated that Dexter had moved smoothly from producing acceptable fantasy novels to becoming a writer to be taken seriously. Not such an easy step to take, but with *The Wizard's Shadow* she took it with ease and assurance.

Next came *The Prince of Ill Luck* in March 1994, the first of the *Warhorse of Esdragon* series. The Warhorse is Valadan, an ageless, powerful and magical steed who serves those of noble blood and who had previously appeared in *The Winter King's War*, although in a subsidiary role. The Warhorse is the result of a bay mare mating with a wind elemental, and his conception and birth are the subjects of the opening chapter of *The Prince of Ill Luck*. We then follow Valadan as he is stolen from his rightful owner, escapes, and eventually meets Leith of the Isles, the eponymous Prince, who after a shipwreck finds himself wandering the desolate wilds of Esdragon.

They travel to Keverne, where Duke Symond is missing, and join his daughter Kessallia on a journey to the Beriana Mountains in an attempt to find him. The Duke has gone there hoping to find his missing wife, the witch Raichim (Kess's mother), and it is Leith's hope that her abilities may be capable of lifting the curse of ill-luck that has dogged him throughout his life. After traveling through a mighty waterfall and enduring a nightmarish journey far below ground in the absolute darkness of an abandoned gold mine, there is a gripping encounter with a chimera before they finally find the Duke and, with Kess's inherent magical abilities, they also locate her mother.

The book concludes well, with Leith's curse negated if not lifted, and with happy endings all round. The reader is admittedly left wondering where the curse came from in the first place, something that is never explained, and also pondering the fact that while Leith is a sympathetic and likeable individual, Kess is quite the opposite. Consequently, the eventual relationship between the two of them, while not unexpected, does seem to be a little out of character as far as Kess is concerned, and is not entirely convincing.

Dexter's second short story, "Herding Instinct", came next, appearing in the October/November 1994 issue of *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. It is a captivating little tale of an unprepossessing and unwanted sheep dog who is reluctantly adopted by a wizard to save her life, and who eventually demonstrates the abilities of her kind in a quite unforeseen and very magical way.

This offering was followed closely by the second of the author's *Warhorse of Esdragon* series, *The Wind-Witch*, which appeared in November 1994. The book starts with a particularly poignant Prologue, which while serving as a bridge between this novel and its predecessor, might have better served as an Epilogue to *The Prince of Ill Luck*, bringing the

story of Leith and Kess to a conclusion. Even so, it is not out of place in *The Wind-Witch*, serving to highlight Valadan's immortality and his unchanging nature.

Druyan, the youngest granddaughter of the long-gone Kess and Leith, is Valadan's latest owner. She is a plain but spirited and magically talented girl who is married off to the ageing Travic of the remote Splaine Garth area in Darlith, a region to the north of Keverne. After Travic is killed fighting sea raiders eight years later, Druyan finds herself potentially homeless unless she can maintain the landholding and pay the crop tithes for a year and a day, following which the land passes to her in her own right. A major problem is a severe shortage of manpower, and Druyan recruits the reluctant Kellis, a wounded raider who has been imprisoned in her root cellar.

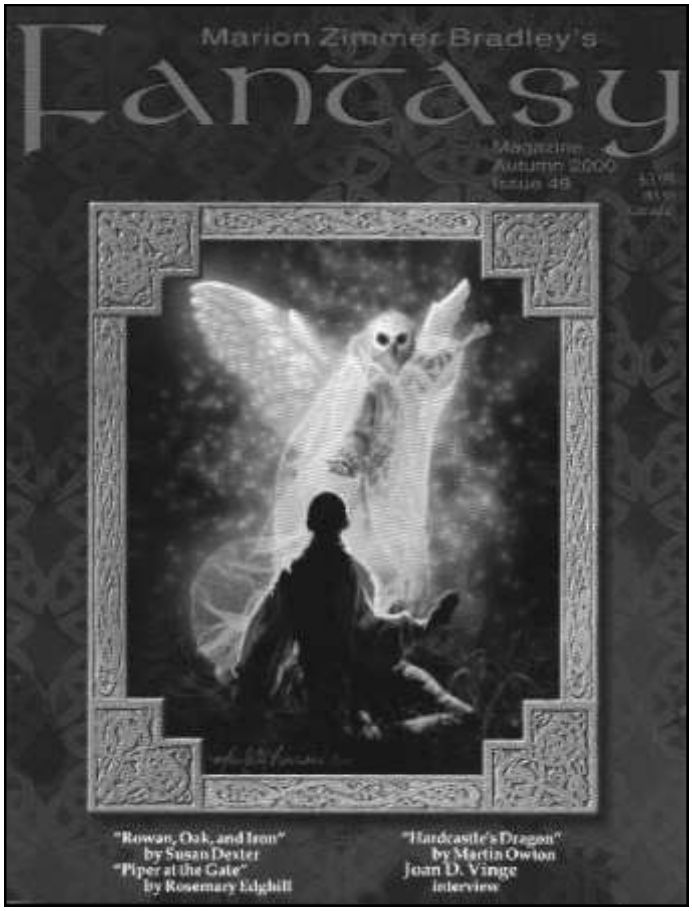
Kellis proves to be not all that he seems, and has his own reasons to hate the raiders. Using his abilities for divination and shapeshifting, he is able to aid Druyan in her efforts to thwart the increasing attacks along the Esdragon shore. Those efforts culminate in her magically raising a potent storm to wreck the raiders' ships in their secret harbour near the coast. There is a high price to be paid for her success, but that price ultimately brings her the fulfilment that she has been seeking and leads to a gratifying ending.

The Wind-Witch is an entertaining book telling a good story, and while its pace is leisurely in parts the plot development is compelling and periodically the narrative explodes into scenes of hectic action. Kellis, like Tristan, Crocken and Leith in earlier books, is an undemonstrative and reluctant hero who lacks confidence in his own abilities, and Druyan is an archetypal Dexter heroine, magically gifted, independent and strong-willed, but hesitant about revealing her true feelings, even to herself. Valadan has a larger role to play than in previous novels, with his presence becoming more relevant to proceedings even if his full potential still seems to be less developed than it perhaps could have been.

Another short story came between the second and third of the Warhorse books. "Where Bestowed" featured in the anthology *Excalibur*, edited by Richard Gilliam, Martin H Greenberg & Edward E Kramer and published in May 1995. It tells of the efforts of a knight of King Arthur's court to find the lost Excalibur after the King's death, with a view to using it as a symbol to oppose the Saxons who are despoiling the land and its people. He does find the sword, and its powers are magically bestowed on him in an effective and unforeseen manner.

This excellent story is notable for the fact that it hides its final twist until the last few lines, and only on re-reading do the admittedly broad allusions become apparent in the context of the ending. With this imaginative and original work, Dexter once more very capably emphasised the extent of her abilities in the short format, maintaining the high standards she had set with the earlier "Thistledown" and "Herding Instinct".

The *Warhorse of Esdragon* series concluded with *The True Knight* in January 1996. This takes place many years after the events of *The Wind-Witch*, although Valadan is naturally unchanged. Esdragon remained safe from the raiders, who harried Clandara instead, eventually settling permanently there and beginning to call it Calandra, a name fully adopted by the time of the Winter King's War. Small kingdoms proliferate, and consequently small wars, and it is one of these which culminates in the beheading of the young Princess Savrin's father and the drowning of her mother, a fate that Savrin herself is only able to avoid by instinctively shapeshifting into the form of an otter.



The girl is found and brought up by the wizard Galvin, becoming his apprentice; Wren, as she is now named, has magical skills and a peregrine falcon as a familiar, but the memory of her earlier life is gone. Years later she comes across Titch, badly injured and left to die, and saves his life; he is a young man who dreams of Knighthood, but although he is not lacking in honour and skill he only has an old sword and an ageing mare, neither of which seem likely to allow him to realize his ambition.

He, Wren and Galvin are drawn together once more when Queen Melcia of Josten – who killed Wren's parents – rounds up as many magicians as she can in a bid to find her son, sorcerously transformed into a swan by unknown enemies. Although the task is successful, the aftermath means that Wren and Titch incur the bitter wrath of the Queen and are forced to flee to Esdagon where further problems arise. But Titch proves to be the truest Knight of all, his righteous heart recognized by Valadan from the very start, and he is eventually rewarded with all that he ever wanted. This last of the *Warhorse* series sustains the quality of its predecessors and is a rounded, involving story peopled by likable characters and incorporating the unassuming and wry wit that is a part of the whole series.

The three Warhorse books are unrelated, linked only by the lands in which the action takes place and the immortal horse himself. Valadan aids each of the respective main players in fulfilling their true roles, joining them for journeys which are not without hardship, mishap and violence. He is owned by no-one and he chooses who he will bond with – he can be forcibly but temporarily constrained by cold iron, but that is most definitely not the way to ensure his loyalty or his co-operation, as Gerein learns in *The True Knight*.

Valadan may take pride of place as Dexter's most notable magical creation, but throughout her writing she also includes other sorcerous familiars that are of importance. They include Thomas the cat in *The Winter King's War*, the canary Minstrel

from the same books, and Alinor the peregrine falcon in *The True Knight*. These are creatures that are not simply window-dressing, but who have a direct and key impact on the unfolding sequence of events in the respective narratives.

All of the novels share the same common theme, with their central characters each seeking something that appears to be out of reach; they do ultimately achieve their goals, maintaining their integrity in difficult circumstances and developing emotionally through adverse experience. They never give up, even when all seems lost, and their determined persistence is such that they will knowingly risk their lives in pursuit of the cause that they believe in, a selfless attitude that is a deliberate choice rather one taken casually or recklessly.

Romantic elements do feature in all of the books but are sometimes conveyed less than persuasively. The relationship between Tristan and Elisena is one example, as is that between Leith and Kess; it is almost as if Dexter felt obliged to incorporate a love interest as an expected prop for her stories but had little interest in doing so. It was certainly incidental and even superfluous in *The Winter King's War* and *The Price of Ill Luck*, but is far better dealt with in *The Wind-Witch* and *The True Knight*. In these later novels, there is a warmth and credibility to the developing relationships that does add meaningful interest to the plot and provides a fitting and agreeable conclusion in each case.

As indicated earlier, Dexter had produced a modest three works of shorter fiction up until early 1999, but each was impressive. She then began appearing in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, and a further three tales were featured in its pages over the next eighteen months; again she demonstrated her aptitude for the well-told short story, beginning with "Tasks" in the Spring 1999 issue. This atmospheric piece tells of enchantment, with a man fulfilling three tasks that seem to be simple but which are actually quite the opposite, testing his resolve to the limit. He then receives his reward, which like the tasks he had been set is perhaps not all it seems in an enigmatic ending that is well-handled and forceful.

"Butternut Ale" followed in Winter 2000. A lighter offering set in Calandra, this is the account of an apprentice wizard who as a result of a spell gone awry automatically turns any liquid he touches (including whatever he drinks) into something alcoholic. His desperate and drunken search for a way to reverse things involves two old ex-mercenaries and an intoxicated unicorn in what is an amusing and readable tale. The relationship between the mercenaries, Martha and Jenkin, is suggestive of untold anecdotes and Dexter has acknowledged that they are "series characters who somehow never got a series".

In the Autumn 2000 issue (the penultimate edition of the magazine), "Rowan, Oak, and Iron" appeared. Another fine work, this tells of a woman forced by her father to crawl on her hands and feet for the whole of Samhain night to ensure her dowry. She meets a boggart, an owl woman, a kelpie, and animate standing stones before encountering the Great Hunt itself, but it is her politeness as well as a fearlessness borne out of determination that keeps her safe from all before dawn breaks. She ends her journey and earns not only her promised reward, but also a grudging respect that provides even more. A stand-alone story, "Rowan, Oak, and Iron" is reportedly a part of "what will eventually be a very large novel of Arthur's Britain".

Next came the short novel *Moonlight*, published in January 2001. This takes us back to Calandra and the youth of Tristan of *The Winter King's War* trilogy, relating how he met the cat Thomas and telling of their first adventure together. This involved attempting to transport a swarm of bees to a new location, but instead getting lost in a swamp haunted by bog-ghosts and then finding a trapped moon unicorn (unicorns clearly appeal to the author – they had already featured significantly in "Thistledown", "Where Bestowed" and "Butternut Ale"). Tristan learns early lessons about selflessness and the meaning of freedom in what is a pleasant if minor story that seems to be aimed primarily at the young adult market.

There are two further titles that Wildside Press indicate are "in press", although this has been their status for a long period of time. They are *The Wandering Duke*, which may or may not concern itself with Duke Symond of Keverne (last seen in *The Prince of Ill Luck*) and *Thistledown*, which is presumably either a reprint of the 1991 novella of the same name or an expanded version incorporating further adventures of Flax and his unicorn. The author has also stated that she is working on a novel of King Arthur because she wants to "bring back the magic to the legends", and the last short story "Rowan, Oak, and Iron" appears to be a part of that project.

Susan Dexter has said "I like to think of fantasy as a broad umbrella under which I can write *any* sort of tale I choose.... fantasy is a land without limits, its only boundaries my imagination. It's a good home for those things I love best – horses and falcons and castles, noble heroes and wise maidens, swords and capes and magic". It has been far too long since she last visited that "land without limits", but it is to be hoped that we will share many more pleasurable excursions there.

A Susan Dexter Chronology

Novels

The Ring of Allaire, Del Rey, October 1981 (Winter King's War 1)

The Sword of Calandra, Del Rey, March 1985 (Winter King's War 2)

The Mountains of Channadran, Del Rey, September 1986 (Winter King's War 3)

The Wizard's Shadow, Del Rey, August 1993

The Prince of Ill Luck, Del Rey, March 1994 (Warhorse of Esdragon 1)

The Wind-Witch, Del Rey, November 1994 (Warhorse of Esdragon 2)

The True Knight, Del Rey, January 1996 (Warhorse of Esdragon 3)

Moonlight, Wildside Press, January 2001.

Short Stories

"Thistledown", Once Upon a Time, November 1991

"Herding Instinct", Fantasy & Science Fiction, October/November 1994

"Where Bestowed", Excalibur, May 1995

"Tasks", Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine, #43, Spring 1999

"Butternut Ale" Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine, #46, Winter 2000

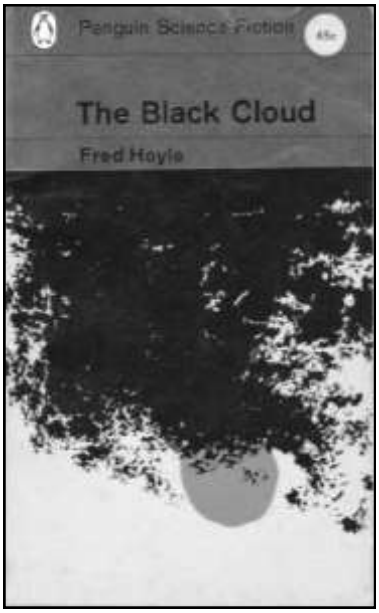
"Rowan, Oak, and Iron" Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine, #49, Autumn 2000

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 outmanoeuvre 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.

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

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 rockets 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 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 spearcarriers 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.

*re*current:
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, wintery isolation in which we first encounter him. Yet he cannot bear to leave the sexual promise of that dream, so here he lingers.

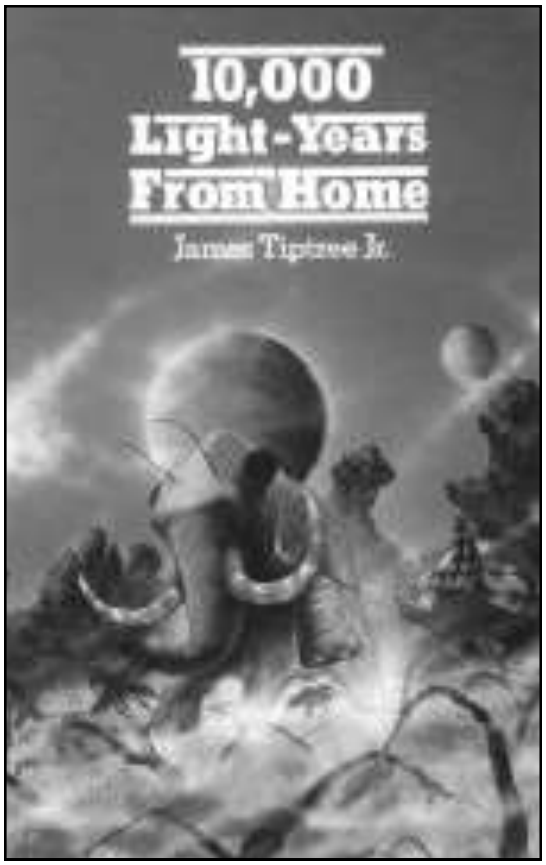
Tiptree moves the story into a space-going future and transforms the faerie lover into an alien (though we must remember that one of the persistent tropes in Tiptree's work is that women are alien to men), but otherwise the structure and shape of the story is unchanged.

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 Procya 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.

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



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 hu-

man hero would fight against that temptation.

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).

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

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 psycho-sexual 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.

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 sf 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.

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

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.

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 techno-hubris. '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.)

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

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.

INSIDE: THE BSFA REVIEW

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 Weirdstone 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 review 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

The Angel Of The Revolution by George Griffith, edited by Steven McLean (Victorian Secrets, 2012) and *The Purple Cloud* by MP Shiel, introduction and notes by John Sutherland (Penguin Classics, 2012)

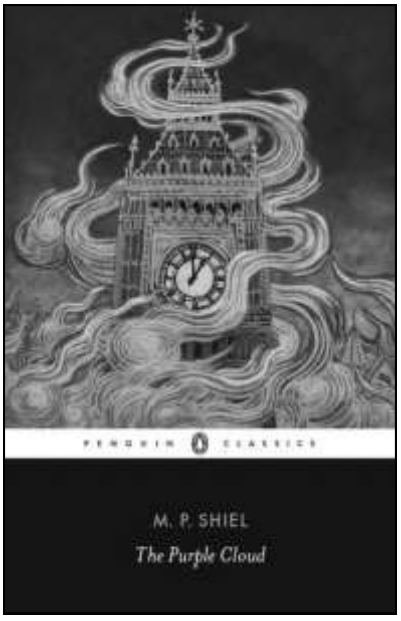
Reviewed by LJ Hurst

Two classic scientific romances have been re-published a hundred years or more after their first appearance. *The Angel Of The Revolution* (1893) is probably better known from histories of sf than from availability to readers and, while *The Purple Cloud* (1901) has been easier to come by, both are now published in annotated, critical editions. As described in *Scientific Romance in Britain, 1890-1950* (1985), Brian Stableford's academic study which is acknowledged by both McLean and Sutherland, the scientific romance was a precursor to science fiction. For reasons that are unclear but beyond coincidence, all the late Victorian authors of such works were sons of clergymen (unlike Wells who came from a commercial background) who struggled with poverty and were partly self-educated yet managed to see beyond the miserable city streets into global wars, aerial battles, and earth-clearing poisonous eruptions in which survivors could live like sultans.

The Angel Of The Revolution was inspired by another current literary craze, future war and stories of England invaded (though McLean's introduction does not pay enough attention to this). A struggling aeronautical engineer who has just discovered powered flight is rescued from poverty-induced suicide by a stranger who is a member of a revolutionary movement. Richard Arnold, the engineer, quickly joins the rebels, who finance a full-sized model of his craft (only described in general terms but something like a cross between the Great Eastern and a helicopter). He is tempted to stay, not only because his life makes him sympathetic to the politics of the movement, but because he quickly falls in love with the leader's daughter, the eponymous Angel. His opportunity has come only just in time, because the old world (Russia, Europe and North America) is splitting into warring blocks, with the Russian Tsar having the benefit of advanced war balloons which can impose his tyrannical totalitarian rule on every nation they overfly. In the Far East, alternate blocs of Buddhists and Muslims fall into an equally devastating war. Natas, the revolutionary leader, allows Europe to fight to near devastation before his fleet intervenes from the air, assisted by a secret army of sympathisers on the ground, and imposes the pax aeronautica along with trials for crimes against humanity brought against the totalitarian leaders. Starting with Europe and North America, under a new regime, the old world starts to rebuild a new, better political order, with the promise that something similar must follow in Asia.

M P Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* is a last man story - Mary Shelley had published a novel with that title in 1826 and she had not been the first to describe such solitude – in which Adam Jeffson is fortuitously the first man to reach the North Pole after an expedition taking years (as they really did), the colleagues who could have taken that credit for themselves dying on the way. The Pole turns out to be the only place on Earth to which a purple cloud of peach-smelling gas does not reach. Somewhere in the southern hemisphere a volcano has erupted, releasing cyanide gas and when Jeffson makes his way south he discovers that over the years he has been away it first forced mass migrations as people tried to escape it, ultimately to overwhelm everyone but him. He has the world to himself, and enjoys it first by returning to London, borrowing trains and motorcars and turning the electricity back on to illuminate the city; later, he takes a yacht and explores the Mediterranean and finally the Far East. It becomes clear that Jeffson, who was never normal (as exemplified by his dealings with his polar rivals), is becoming more deranged and his cry of surprise – "My God!" – becomes an appeal to his, probably mad, God. When he finds a young woman, who had been left as a baby in an airtight cellar, he does not know whether to kill or rescue her. They are living apart when she notifies him of another cloud approaching and the book ends.

When aircraft arrived they looked nothing like Griffith imagined they would, nor did they carry the powerful armament he gave them. However, he also imagined that these vessels could hover, essentially unnoticed, for long periods before striking, which is how the US Air Force is using its drones today. His prescience lay not in designing a heavier-than-air flying machine but in recognising that air power may be the root of political influence. Writing forty years later, H G Wells in *The Shape Of Things To Come* (1933) got the date of the Second World War correct but gave an insignificant role to Winston Churchill. Perhaps Griffith had a similar perspective as he describes how nations are driven into unions and then driven into war by financial struggles – the final straw is the failure of the British to support a sale of Italian government bonds, something which would have drawn almost no attention until we readers of the early Twenty First century realised its terrors for us. Shiel had inspiration nearer home; he was born on Montserrat, where the Soufrière Hills volcano issued sulphur rather than cyanide into the air. Sixty years after he died in London, it erupted devastatingly in 1995, as it continues to do today. Alternatively, Shiel may have never thought about volcanoes after he moved to Britain, but instead looked out at a London pea-souper and asked himself how long it could go on, creating a metaphor for future ecological annihilation.



The importance of works such as *The Purple Cloud* or *The Angel Of The Revolution* is that they contain more than a story synopsis can suggest and, as time passes, new significance can be found within them. Seek out Michael Moorcock's anthology *Before Armageddon* (1976) or Alan K Russell's *Science Fiction By The Rivals Of HG Wells* (1979) for more.

***Empty Space* by M John Harrison (Gollancz, 2012)**
Reviewed by Dan Hartland

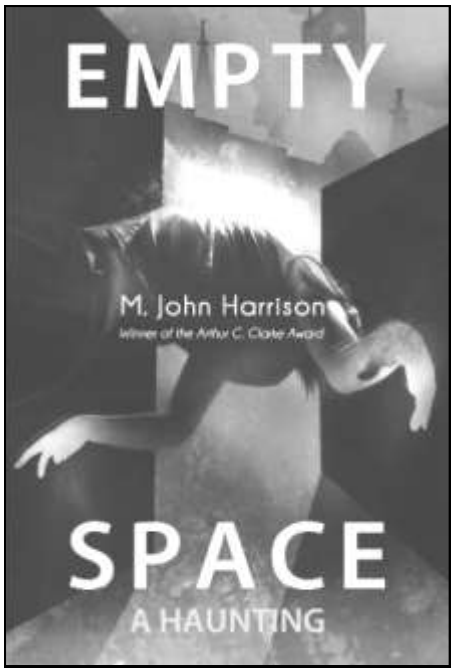
In a suburban London garden, a summerhouse is on fire. It belongs to Anna Waterman, a woman in late middle age who lives alone with her cats a couple of decades from now. She is drawn repeatedly to the dilapidated old construct, hearing the voices of her past there – most especially of her first husband, the theoretical physicist Michael Kearney, who disappeared on the eve of the millennium, leaving only a hard drive of data which Anna has never passed on to his erstwhile research partner, Brian Tate. She is therefore understandably distressed by the summerhouse's pending destruction – and yet the flames that lick around it resemble the static fires seen in woodcuts of Marian martyrs: standing iconically and heatlessly, one suspects, for something else.

Few if any writers working in the English language could write this scene with the conviction of M John Harrison. The destruction of Anna's garden sanctuary – in many ways the central moment of his new novel, itself the final entry in his *Kefahuchi Tract* trilogy – vibrates with so many valences that it can at times be difficult to know how to read it. Anna's story is told in the literary mode, a prose style careful and responsive, the sort of voice one hopes a Booker panel might reward (but is unsurprised when they do not); yet the drama of Anna's life, the fireless flame that is her fate, is not explicable as mimesis. The reader of *Empty Space* feels constantly as if she is surfing the waveform prior to its collapse: from atop Harrison's prose, it is possible to see for miles.

In *Light*, the rapturously-received 2002 novel which opened this trilogy, Kearney was revealed to be not just a gifted physicist but also a compulsive serial killer. On the run from the Shrander, a terrifying creature with a head like a horse's skull, Kearney is not just constantly moving but constantly covering up what he perceives to be his tracks, in the form of the women with whom he has intimate affairs. Kearney experiences what he describes as "the constant fall into the awareness of falling" – a sense that with every choice and with every acknowledgement of every observation, one not just limits possibility but embraces the onrush of entropy and therefore death. For Kearney, sex is the most potent of self-negations.

In a literary novel, all this would be reduced to metaphor – the Shrander as a sort of embodiment of the terrified Id, Michael's projection of the lessons of quantum physics onto his personal relationships suggestive of a childhood trauma – but the particular brilliance of the trilogy is its positing of a future history which validates and incarnates Kearney's experiences. The Shrander is a real creature, an ancient alien seeking to teach Kearney a lesson; the physics he is so scared of are not a sign of inevitable doom but the path to opening up the universe to human exploration. Indeed, the numbers Kearney and Tate compile are distilled into an equation which, by the 25th Century in which most of this trilogy is set, has allowed humanity to reach the stars.

The future Harrison depicts is fragmented and almost impossibly attenuated – it reads at times like a satire of our own postmodern, centreless late capitalism. In *Light* in particular, elements of the future begin, perhaps perversely, to read as the metaphor the novel's literary sections have eschewed: "Every race they met on their way through the



Core," we read of future explorers, "had a star drive based on a different theory. All those theories worked, even when they ruled out another's basic assumptions." It was hard not to see in this playfulness what John Clute has since identified, in a review of *Empty Space* for Strange Horizons, as Harrison's aggressive modernism – an awareness of the absurdity, even the bankruptcy, of the relativist mode of thinking and an underlying insistence on literature's continued capacity to represent experience more or less faithfully.

Nevertheless, *Light's* occasionally careless brio risked undermining this project. There was something clumsy, for instance, about the almost knowing manner in which Kearney fretted about capture by the police and yet improbably and consistently evaded even investigation. The brilliance of *Empty Space* – for a novel of eclipsing brilliance it undoubtedly is – lies less in its abandonment of *Light*'s intermittent illumination, and more in its bravura refinement of that uncertainty. Echoing the earlier novel's tripartite structure, Anna's near-future story is counter-pointed by two further narratives – the first featuring a band of smugglers and space traders transporting suspicious cargo, the second starring a cyberpunkish police detective investigating inexplicable killings. Both these strands pick up almost directly from the middle volume of the trilogy, 2006's *Nova Swing*, and it is in the adoption wholescale of both novels, rather than an emphasis on either, that *Empty Space* takes flight.

Though *Nova Swing* won the Arthur C. Clarke Award, it has never attracted the critical cachet of its predecessor. Paul Kincaid, for instance, has spoken for many by blogging that, "I was less impressed with *Nova Swing* precisely because it offered us no way out of the science fictionality of its world, we had to take for granted the fact that this was a future." *Nova Swing* deliberately adopted a noirish idiom to explore the responses of a clutch of characters to the touching-down on an unfortunate planet of a fragment of the Kefahuchi Tract.

The Tract is a kind of rift in space-time, an impossible hole in the universe within which there seems to be no physics as we understand it but which is bravely entered at the close of *Light* by the rocket jockey Ed Chianese, in an attempt to herald a new beginning for his increasingly –

depressingly – consumerist fellow humans. *Nova Swing*'s characters, meanwhile, must begin to handle the strong attraction of such a place – one protagonist, Vic Serotonin, acts as a 'tour guide' for bored dilettantes who wish to enter the 'site' – but also the impossible, and potentially damaging, elements which may in turn emerge from it – the novel's other main character, Lens Aschemann, is a detective monitoring 'site crime'. The fedoras and cadillacs of this retro future, the impressionistic science of its totalised speculation and Aschemann's fondness for hackneyed moralising ("Uncertainty is all we have"), threw many off the scent. But the novel's depiction of the effects upon individuals of Harrison's weirded quantum science becomes crucial to the perfected project of *Empty Space*.

At one point in *Nova Swing*, Aschemann describes an individual as classical, as avowedly unsciencefictional, as a pianist:

> *"Under his dexterity, this pianist hides neither intellect nor heart, only compulsion. If no one else is available he will play against himself; and then against the self thus created, and then against the self after that, until all fixed notion of self has leaked away into the slippage and he can relax for a second in the sharp light and cigarette smoke like someone caught fleetingly in an ancient black and white photograph. Do you see?"*

His assistant, who becomes the policewoman protagonist of *Empty Space*, responds quizzically, "It's only music, though," but of course she misses the point: what Aschemann describes is the messy palimpsest of personality – that eternal bailiwick of the literary novel. Where *Light* features two siblings denying childhood trauma – Seria Mau, a 'K-Ship' captain unrecognisably altered in biology and neurochemistry, and her brother, Chianese himself, immersed in escapist film noir VR – *Empty Space* places Anna Waterman's psychotherapy sessions front and centre. She has proven unable to align or separate her succession of selves: the ingénue student, the wife of the killer Kearney, the mother of her now-grown daughter Marnie (who tells Anna, "we don't seem to live in the same world"). In *Empty Space*, the fractured and fracturing self emerges as the subject of the entire trilogy – neither the Tract nor the physics but the psyches of those brought up against them.

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. In the universe in which *Empty Space* was written by Alan Hollinghurst, the burning summerhouse is a cheap, if meaningful, effect; in our own reality it is also a reaching into Anna's life of "the hidden mayhem of events", of the roiling quantum undercurrent.

Harrison most clearly enacts this sleight of hand with dreams, which recur throughout the trilogy as scienti-spiritual experiences. Visions invade not just characters' sleeping hours or virtual reality immersions but through games of dice and the faces of tarot cards – and come to resemble messages from the universe. "A dream is a kind of truth," insists the clone Irene to her lover, Fat Antoyne, in *Empty Space* whilst Aschemann's erstwhile assistant experiences surreal visions that begin to suggest her origins are murkier than she is aware. Anna's dreams are pored over by her psychoanalyst ("Tell me what you dreamed last night… and I'll tell you why you mustn't stop coming here"). The recurring images in these dreams – a baby's vulva, a man wearing a top hat and everywhere eels – form tessellating shapes which hint at the bewildering underlying shape of an unknowable universe. "Antoyne," whispers Irene, "the universe isn't what we think…. Nothing here was made for us!"

The defining image of *Empty Space* is of falling into this uncertainty. The cover features one of the novel's many corpses, killed by an unknown assailant and afterwards floating far into the air before fading at an almost imperceptible rate. "The sensation of falling," Anna muses, unknowingly recalling her first husband's reflections of thirty years before, "was… much the same as that of treading water: the more you struggled the less control you maintained." We fall, of course, between places and within empty space – the gap between observation and decision or between one choice and another. When we see what we think is a person frozen in the act of falling, it is equally true that we are witnessing an ascent: a fall is a transit to the next place. In a trilogy of the quantum, the tricks observation can play on the observer are a crucial element of Harrison's game-playing: "Your perception is what's fragmentary, not the space itself" says a man named Gaines, an individual who comes increasingly to direct Aschemann's assistant towards an awareness of who she is, as the questions surrounding those floating/falling bodies begin to seem uncomfortably close to home. That is, any space is only empty of understanding.

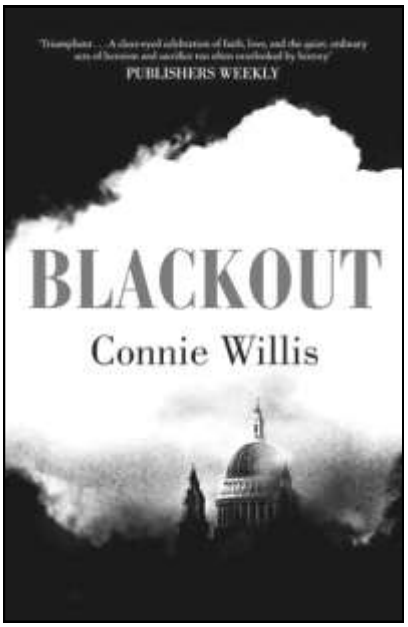
The power of *Empty Space*, and of the trilogy which it caps and defines, is in establishing a style robust enough to represent the self as a kind of illusion – a superposition observing events it cannot understand in isolation. One of the novel's innumerably superlative grace notes is its treatment of the near future, in which no one has anything left to sell to anyone else. A young doctor visiting Anna's home in the final chapter reflects that she "had seen the world when it was still proud of its future"; her daughter sees books from that time on Anna's shelves, in which "the self figured largely… even books by a man calling himself Self". *Empty Space* is a gloriously realised novel, perhaps more downbeat than *Light* but ultimately with the same, rather less gaudily-lit message: there is a better space for us to occupy, stranger and more communal. In *Empty Space*, the wanderlust of Ed Chianese – and of M John Harrison – leads the way into it.

***Blackout* and *All Clear* by Connie Willis (Gollancz, 2011)**

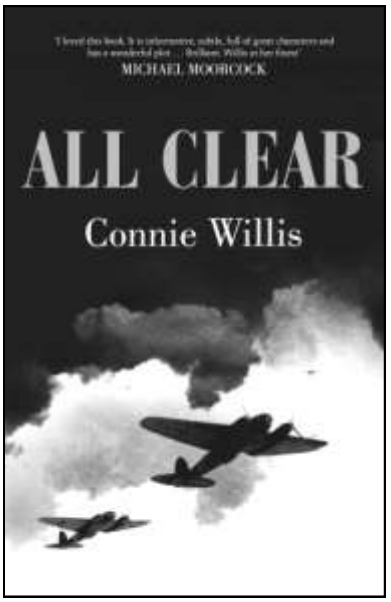
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

We've been here before. Of course we have, that's part of the point. With the exception of *Doomsday Book* (whose principle characters re-appear here), Connie Willis's time travel stories have always circled around the Blitz. Even *To Say Nothing Of The Dog*, which is mostly an excuse to pastiche Jerome K Jerome's *Three Men In A Boat*, begins with the bombing of Coventry Cathedral. In fact this overweight novel can probably best be seen as a companion to the story that started it all, 'Fire Watch', whose events are observed tangentially in this novel.

The key word in that sentence is 'observed'. Those earlier time travel works were tightly controlled, well structured, and, at least in comparison to this bloated monstrosity, short; but above all they were about characters who were actively engaged in the world they visited. Here the characters seem to spend their whole time trying to avoid any sort of engagement with the world. To an extent they are driven by the exigencies of plot in this: the three time-travelling historians at the centre of the book live in dread that anything they do might change the course of history. But there is an old literary conundrum: how do you write about a boring character without the work itself being boring. The problem here is analogous and Connie Willis has not found an answer. For the vast majority of the novel, in fact practically from the very beginning, the three characters are scared into immobility, if they act at all it is to do the least possible, and it is invariably driven by the promptings of the (rather contemptuously named) 'contemps'. And I lost count of the hundreds of pages following any such hiccup of activity that are devoted to repetitious angsting about whether they might thus have changed the course of history. The sheer inertia of the characters meant that when I finally put down the 600-page first volume and picked up the 800-page second volume, my overwhelming emotion was: 'Oh God, how much more time do I have to spend with these bloodless individuals?'



Of course, the fact that the protagonists do nothing but stand and stare is a boon for Willis, since it allows her to shoehorn in yet more of her copious and impressive research. Indeed, most of the time the various twists of plot seem designed simply to move the observer on to the next little tableau in this 'life in the Blitz' exhibition. In succession, therefore, we learn what it was like coping with evacuee children in the country, how shopgirls managed in an Oxford Street department store, what it was like on a small boat at Dunkirk, how people entertained themselves in a tube station during a bombing raid, how bad a cyclist Alan Turing was, what ENSA shows were like and so on and so forth. The research is up front and seems faultless, except that it is surrounded by lots of little details and nuances that Willis just cannot seem to get right: British travellers consult a railway timetable, not a schedule; it is Nelson's Column that stands in the middle of Trafalgar Square, not Nelson's Monument; Manchester is not in the Midlands; no British driver in 1940 would understand someone offering to pay for gas. In the end you lose interest in keeping a note of such errors; it's a very long book, in the end you lose interest in a lot of things.



And yet we have around 1,400 pages of this, there must be a story in there somewhere. Yes, there is, though there are long stretches when you might forget this. Three mid-twenty-first century Oxford students travel back to 1940 as part of their history studies. Merope takes the name Eileen and works as a maid in a country house where a bunch of East End kids have been evacuated; Polly takes a job in an Oxford Street department store during the Blitz and also gets involved in putting on amateur dramatics with a group she meets in an air raid shelter; Mike, disguised as an American journalist for reasons that are too complicated to go into here, goes to observe the Dunkirk evacuation. Pretty quickly, all three discover that their 'drop', the point at which they can go back to their own time, is no longer working. There is a lot of space devoted to them trying not to do anything or just being blown by the winds of circumstance but eventually they meet up in London, where they settle down to wait for a rescue team to come for them or make ineffectual attempts to find some alternative way home.

Actually, that's not entirely fair. By the second volume, as the three start to find themselves more absorbed into life in the Forties (or perhaps as Willis begins to realise how dull her protagonists were getting to be), they start to become more actively engaged in events. There is, indeed, one tremendous set piece on the night when St Paul's was nearly destroyed, with Eileen and two of her evacuee children tearing around the blacked out streets in an ambulance and Polly and Mike fighting fires, that nearly makes up for everything that has gone before. But the energy of this passage is not sustained. Then, about 500 pages into the second volume there's a revelation that is, I suspect, meant to add a touch of mystery to the story, except that the revelation wasn't all that surprising. Rather, I identified this as the moment where Willis stopped building up the threat (the shift in focus from this point on is unmistakeable) and started putting together the resolution. Even so, it takes another 300 pages to tie off the various loose ends. This is mostly because, as happens throughout the novel, her characters fail to tell each other the full story or they don't listen to each other or they are interrupted (the most repeated motif in the book is someone walking in at an inopportune moment leaving a key revelation dangling on an ellipsis …). What we end up with, as a result, is a moderately good medium sized novel that has been blown up beyond all sense into 1,400 mostly unnecessary pages.

The Fourth Wall by Walter Jon Williams (Orbit, 2012)
Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

Walter Jon Williams's *Dagmar Shaw* series have come to embody, for me, one of the oft-angsted-over perils of writing fiction set in the very near (albeit unevenly distributed) future.

While the plot device chugging away out on the back-lot of *The Fourth Wall* hasn't quite been pipped to the post by reality (unlike those from the series-starting *This Is Not A Game*, say), its convergence of ideas suffers a surplus of plausibility. Serial web-delivered science fiction TV-movies with social media and alternate-reality game promo up the wazoo? Sure thing, bindun. Oh, you want the audience to make the protagonist's next decision, choose-your-own-adventure style? No worries; if you've got the bandwidth, we've got the flops and the code. And while the concealed purpose behind said innovative media vehicle is not only far more profound but more ethically intriguing than the technology itself, it gets very little stage time and hardly a handful of lines.

No sensawunda, no gosh-wow, no leap of imaginative faith required: a technothriller of sorts, then, albeit with a low-median value-set for the variable "thriller". (For what it's worth, *The Fourth Wall* also fails Bruce Sterling's snarky technothriller litmus by neglecting to feature the POTUS as a walk-on character.)

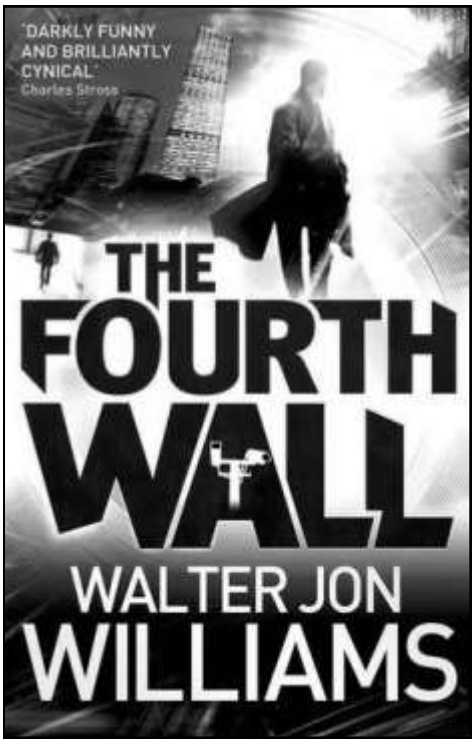
But I'm getting ahead of myself here, aren't I? So, for the synopsis-hounds: *The Fourth Wall* follows on from *This Is Not A Game* and *Deep State*, which introduced us to Dagmar Shaw, an alternate-reality games director whose career arc is littered with leakages between the worlds she creates and the world she creates them within. Having been implicated in incidents of international terrorism (even if subsequently exonerated) her reputation precedes her – especially in Hollywood, gossip capital of the world, where she's just begun pulling in talent for a highly secretive new project.

So even a washed-up child star like Sean Makin is smart enough to do some digging of his own when Dagmar asks him to audition. But given he's fallen so low that he's wrestling fellow Z-list nobodies in vats of cottage cheese in the hope of a few favourable column-inches, Sean's in no position to be fussy. He does a test screening and takes the gig, winding up as the lead star of a sfnal media vehicle that mashes up alternate reality and serial cinema in unusual ways and to ends obscure.

Which is great for Sean: after years on the skids, his parents having absconded with his childhood earnings just before he reached legal maturity, and with his unusual physiognomy excluding him from all but the sort of novelty roles that exist for an adult guy with a baby's face, he's stoked to be working again, even if someone in a battered SUV keeps trying to run him over. Then other talent and members of the production crew start dying; cue a selection of skeletons, stage right and left, tumbling out of Sean's closet just as often as Dagmar's. Hijinx ensue. In truth, I found Sean a very difficult lead character and I suspect this emerges from a deliberate attempt to seek out an ambiguity of morality in him. He has suffered through no real fault of his own, true – but he's insufferable as a result and the only reason the pathos wins out is that the Hollywood doldrums can only be survived by meekly taking your knocks in the hope of a helping hand upwards; he must squelch his own sense of entitlement, sit up and beg like a good doggie.

Of course, he's (partly? mostly? hardly?) a product of his environment and, while I can't speak to its accuracy, Williams's portrayal of the venal narcissism of Hollywood and the celebrity circuit certainly comes across as believably banal. But Shaun lacks the will, determination or depth to be an anti-hero, lacks a graspable past for the reader to relate to. This makes a certain amount of sense – he's an actor, after all, and wearing masks of performed emotion is what actors *do*. But following events from his point of view has a documentary feel to it, a falseness of affect familiar from low-budget 'reality' shows in which cheap actors play way below their paygrade, their suppressed shame leaking into their performances....

Perhaps, then, *The Fourth Wall's* true target is not technological at all. Perhaps it throws open the lid on a cynical industry long past its peak, ripping off mask after false face after veneer, portraying it – without, importantly, a whit of satire *or* subtext – as something akin to Hunter S Thompson's famous depiction of television journalism: "a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free and good men die like dogs, for no good reason." The few nice characters are bit parts or bodybags-to-be; even Dagmar, seen from Sean's vantage, comes across as an unstable and manipulative megalomaniac whose most redeeming feature is her long line of shadowy credit. Just another producer, in other words, albeit one who will make him the star he's always believed he deserved to become.



What is sorely lacking, however, is any thematic depth, any exploration of implication or situation, any criticism of or engagement with the multiculti-technocratic meddling implied by the plot engine or the privileged worldviews that inform it. The raw material is all there but it is used only as a distant backdrop for a busy and rabbit-from-hattish whodunnit with a side-serving of desserts that don't feel entirely just.

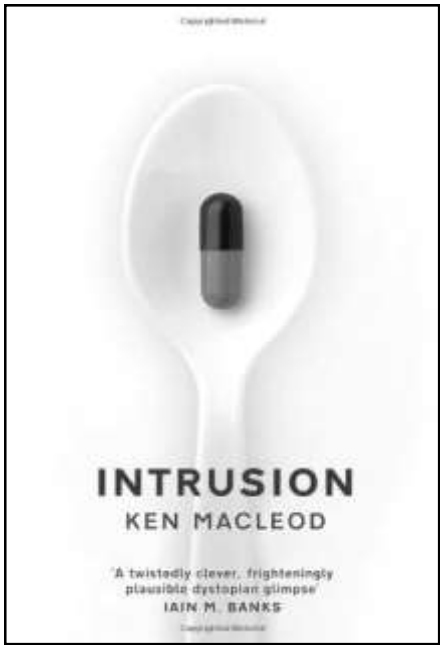
All of which leaves me sounding like a critic with a book that refuses to be read the way he wants to read it. Which is exactly what I am: despite the near-future setting, despite the technological novums, and despite the genre pedigree of its author, the hard-to-define intellectual kicks that that make a book science fictional are almost entirely lacking in *The Fourth Wall*. Which isn't necessarily to say it doesn't more than pass muster as a contemporary technothriller but it lacks the verve and energy-in-delivery of earlier books from the same series.

Put it this way: Walter Jon Williams has written a number of fine science fiction novels; this novel is neither science fiction, nor particularly fine.

Intrusion by Ken MacLeod (Orbit, 2012)

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Some decades from now, Hope Morrison is a young woman living in London with her husband, Hugh, and four year old son, Nick. Health and safety laws have driven most women from the workplace so Hope works from home answering enquiries, translated into English, for a Chinese website. Solar panel farms in Africa have ended Hugh's first career as a wind power engineer – his father Nigel still works on the family home island of Lewis, now dismantling the giant wind turbines installed a generation earlier – leaving Nick an expert carpenter labouring with genetically engineered New Wood. The combination of next generation renewable energy sources and New Trees draining carbon from the atmosphere has global warming on the retreat. London is suffering a series of unusually cold springs, implicitly the result of the collapse of the Humboldt current. The Warm War against Russia and India is white noise, Naxal terrorism and the security response to it taken as a given if considered at all.



The Fix is a recently introduced pill designed to be taken once during pregnancy. Without side effects, it repairs many common genetic defects in unborn babies. It is not technically illegal to decline The Fix, though conscience exemptions on grounds of religious belief were written into the original legislation on the supposition that it would eventually become compulsory. Shortly after Hope finds she is expecting her second child a legal ruling in a case between an atheist couple in which the husband (who wants his wife to take the treatment) and wife (who doesn't) finds in favour of the husband – setting a precedent which will make it illegal to have a 'Nature Kid' rather than a 'Faith Kid' or a 'New Kid'. Hope decides she doesn't want to take The Fix. As a matter of conscience she refuses to take the easy option of the faith exemption – as a person without a faith she will not stoop to hypocrisy to please the law. Further, Hope will not justify her decision, indeed she is uncertain herself of her motivations. She simply believes it is her right not to take The Fix and equally her right not to have to explain that decision to anyone else, much less to justify it.

Thus while *Intrusion* is on one level about The Fix, it is much more about the asymmetric conflict between the conscience and rights of the individual against the power of the state. The Labour Party is in power and Hope joins in an attempt to win the support of her MP, the aptly named Jack Crow. Yet the state is not actually particularly concerned if pregnant women take The Fix. It has, after all, allowed faith exemptions. What concerns the state is conformity to the system, being free to opt out within rules it defines. What is intolerable is that Hope simply refuses to go along with the velvet glove system which encompasses not only its own academic critique but 24 hour surveillance of the streets, workplace, home and body. The state may allow a wide latitude of freedom – police torture comes with strict rules and free trauma counselling, travel is unrestricted because they always know where you are – but on its own terms. Jack Crow cites the example of conscientious objectors during the world wars, arguing that those who objected always had to give a reason to prove they were genuine, not just cowards. Otherwise anyone could opt out of any law they didn't like. The result would be chaos. On this point and much else, *Intrusion* gives much to think about.

There are subplots involving a researcher, Geena, who tries to help Hope but inadvertently makes things worse. A further thread involves Hugh's apparent second sight. The various strands come together in complex, resonant ways. There are some good jokes, from the writerly amusement at a sign advertising vegan filled bread rolls to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* becoming a compulsory school text with a state sanctioned official reading. *Intrusion* is a novel rich with ironies, from the literal-mindedness of the law which ensures it works against its own goals, to the bitter truth that the only terrorism in the narrative is carried out by the state to its own paranoid, self-destructive ends.

War on Terror legislation collides with 'health and safety gone mad™' rules resulting in a well ordered British police state, all to the benefit of the citizen. In acknowledging the nonsense of the idea of the free market, Crow explains that in a true free market everyone would have perfect knowledge to make the best decisions. As people don't have that knowledge, the next best thing is for the state to make those decisions (because it has more knowledge because it monitors everything) with everyone's best interests at heart. From planting evidence to 'enhanced interrogation' it's all for your own good and automatic computer systems can flag you as a potentially unsuitable parent, or even a terrorist, because someone else made a phone call or you delivered a letter by hand. Alice hasn't gone through the looking glass, she's living in Islington.

Intrusion is the most gripping book by Ken MacLeod I have read. It offers much to think about and plenty of wonderfully involuted irony. Despite spending much of its time in London, it is a very Scottish book. The scenes on Lewis have a freshness the ticking-off of London road names doesn't manage. There is a strong sense of people getting by and living their lives in difficult circumstances. There is not the action of some of the author's earlier books but nor is it weighed down by long passages of humourless political and fractional debate and intrigue. Here the politics is personal and the people real. *Intrusion* is not perfect but, since the main flaws lie with the ending, it is impossible for me to say more without spoiling the entire book. Suffice to say that after considerable excitement the resolution is ingenious, splendidly ironic – that word again – but perhaps too whimsical and lightly won. Then again, this is Britain, land of cosy catastrophes and cosy police states. The gulags and global archipelago are elsewhere.

The Testament Of Jessie Lamb by Jane Rogers (Sandstone Press, 2011)

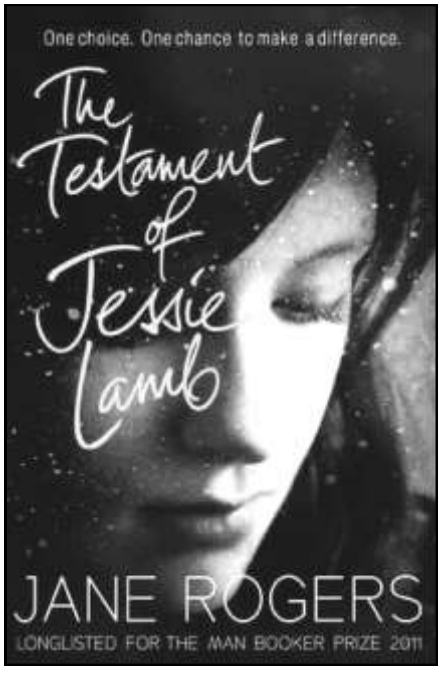
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

At first glance, this is a near-future, dystopian end-of-the-world-by-plague story. Someone has combined AIDS with CJD and distributed the resultant hugely infectious virus worldwide. Every living human is infected. Life expectancy is normal, except that all women who become pregnant die within weeks. Scientists have developed a vaccine for uninfected embryos produced from stored ova and

sperm intended for IVF. These babies can then be carried to term by "Sleeping Beauties" – very young mothers; age sixteen is ideal – who are kept physically alive on intensive life support while their brains rot and their precious pregnancies develop to term. Jessie Lamb is sixteen. Her parents' marriage is unhappy and she's unhappy herself. She sees no good future for her world, or for herself, and decides to exchange the messy imperfection-cum-failure of her own life for a quasi-perfect death-by-pregnancy.

This is not a scientifically plausible setting. The virus is a neat portmanteau of current fears, an emotional state rather than a medical possibility. The epidemiology is nonsense. Scientists are distant, mysterious, powerful, and rather frightening figures – apart from Jessie's father, an animus-as-Logos archetype who shows affection by explaining things; an exemplar of rational stability. So it's not a science fiction story, it's horror; not active adrenaline-spurt horror in which Something Nasty sneaks up behind the protagonist and shouts "Boo!" but insidious, passive horror, like sitting comfortably in increasingly warm water, unaware until too late that you are being boiled alive. A further dimension to this study of passivity is that Jessie, for much of the book, is a hostage: her story-within-a-story "testament", written in captivity, is a self-justifying autobiography. Maybe this is *women's* horror; we certainly seem to be in traditionally feminine territory here: passivity, pregnancy, the power of powerlessness, self-sacrifice, the attraction of a beautiful death.

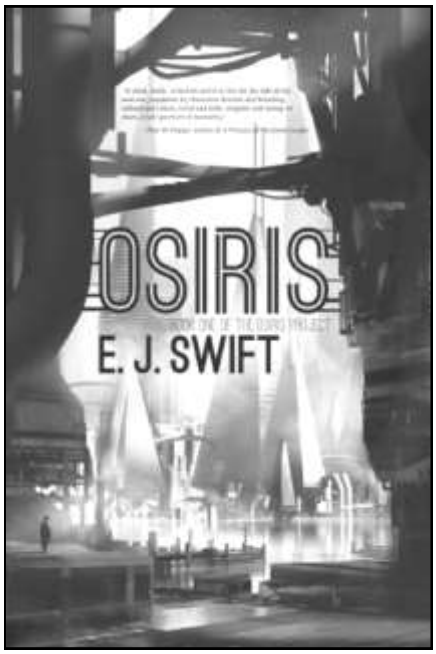
It's also an excellent psychological study of what leads an adolescent to desire martyrdom – in many ways Jessie could just as well be a suicide bomber. She is simultaneously utterly unselfish and utterly self-centred and looks forward to dying in a cheerful, matter-of-fact way. Has she made a logical, rational choice? Or is her choice based on feeling? When thinking and feeling quarrel, which should win? Is Jessie a vulnerable victim who has been manipulated into embracing the role of sacrificial lamb? Has she perhaps made the "right" choice for the wrong reasons? For most of the book, she is not-yet-adult; clear-sighted but with limited knowledge and experience. As someone who values her unborn child's life above her own, Jessie seems a perfect spokesperson for the pro-life movement. In a further psychological twist, Jessie's father is a fertility researcher and sperm donor and Jessie clearly hopes to bear his child, to do what her mother couldn't and give him a perfect replacement for her flawed self, making the book a study of the Electra complex.



So, a dark and deeply perceptive look at some very disturbing material. Recommended – but I won't be re-reading it.

***Osiris* by EJ Swift (Night Shade Books, 2012)**
Reviewed by Karen Burnham

Within EJ Swift's debut novel *Osiris* there are tantalizing hints of a story that combines a post-climate change cataclysmic future with the structure of a generation starship story. Osiris is a city built in the Bering Sea, a bastion for the survivors of a flooded future. The inhabitants believe that they are the last remnants of humanity and they are divided by class barriers and resentment. Vikram is a man of the West, a rebel who has spent time in a jail under the sea, who hopes to persuade the wealthy Citizens to step in and keep more poor Westerners from dying of the cold. Adelaide is the child of one of those wealthy families, the granddaughter of the Architect of the city. Her twin brother has gone missing and her attempts to find him cause her path to intersect with Vikram's. For her own reasons, she takes up his cause. They are uneasy allies, divided by a chasm of class and experience. So inevitably they fall into bed together.



There are several stories in *Osiris* and it took me until the end of the book to understand which one was the 'A' plot. Unfortunately it was the one that was the least interesting to me. The story is told in alternating chapters from Vikram and Adelaide's perspective and at its core this is Adelaide's story. She grows from being a Paris Hilton-style socialite to someone with more care and compassion. Unfortunately I found this transition unconvincing. While her emotional growth, especially learning to be a person without her twin and moving from social butterfly to socially engaged activist was fine, there was a lot of action at the climax that was terribly unbelievable. That same climax ultimately cast Vikram as a character in her play, which was unfortunate as he was the slightly stronger character. And any hint of the interesting worldbuilding story, where the city may not actually be the last bastion of humanity and the citizens may have been mislead about its nature (as in so many generation starship stories) is thrown entirely into the background, with an offstage resolution hinted at in the future (obviously, since this is marketed as *Book One of the Osiris Project*).

There is a lot of good worldbuilding to be found in this story and I appreciate a story that foregrounds class struggles. That aspect of society is often entirely erased by science fiction stories, especially any beyond the near-future time frame. The West is convincingly a ghetto of have-nots and the idea that the cold is the worst enemy (when a city is built off the coast of Alaska) was quite well done. Adelaide's world of warmth and ubiquitous technology is lushly described in a well-drawn contrast. If only the relationship between the two leads had been equally convincing, instead of falling into clichés of a high school wrong-side-of-the-tracks romance, this story might have been more successful.

Shift by Kim Curran and *Katya's World* by Jonathan L Howard (Strange Chemistry, 2012)

Reviewed by Mark Connorton

Angry Robot is the prolific genre publisher best known to me for bringing Lauren Beukes and Lavie Tidhar to the UK. They recently started a YA imprint called Strange Chemistry which looks set to continue the parent company's policy of publishing a very diverse array of horror, science fiction and fantasy. Browsing through the ten or so launch titles on their website I noticed books that I might quite enjoy (a promising looking ninja vs pirate fantasy series), books I would avoid (romances with mysterious, possibly evil, hot boys) and books that amused me with their laser-like targeting of a young audience (one that could only be described from the blurb as "pony vet school in space!!"). It is hard to make any pronouncements on a new imprint on the basis of this cursory overview and the two novels under review but, based on the track record of their parent company, I expect them to be a welcome a vibrant contributor to UK genre publishing.

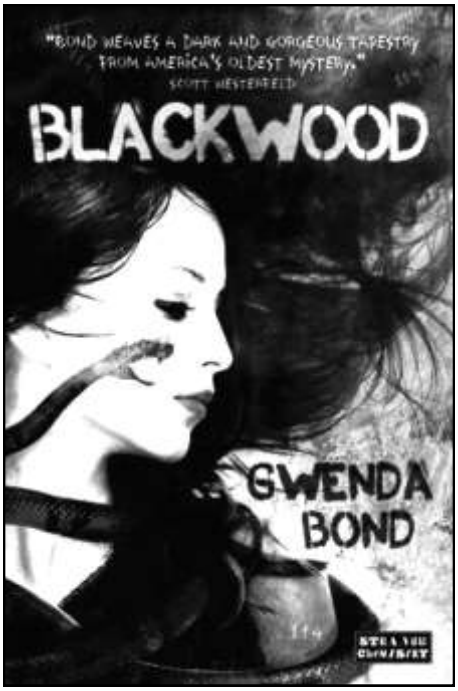
The first novel, *Shift* by Kim Curran, is sort of a plain-clothes superhero novel in which London teenager Scott discovers he is a Shifter with the ability to alter the outcome of decisions he has made in the past. (This is explained in true 'underpants gnome' fashion: 1) quantum physics shows that observation affects physical properties, 2) ???, 3) people can Shift). Shifters tend to lose their abilities in their late teens and are heavily regulated by a secret government department, though of course there is a group of rebel Shifters too. Scott is recruited by a feisty girl Shifter (who may as well have "Love Interest" tattooed on her forehead) and, a few Matrix-style training sequences later, finds himself embroiled in the conflict between various Shifter factions. The ability to change one's past made me think this might be a novel about the unintended consequences of wishes, as explored in numerous fairy tales and time travel stories, and indeed the blurb suggests that this is the case. However, the problems of meddling with time are explored and then dropped within the first third of the novel and no subsequent shifting has any consequences other than to win a fight or escape a disaster, limiting the practical effects of Shifting to a reboot like restarting a video game. Instead the novel settles into a well worn rut where the hero finds out that Everything Is Not As He Has Been Told and uncovers a conspiracy. Everything about it seems vaguely shop-worn and over-familiar and I eventually decided that the author must have watched the TV show *Heroes* and decided that it would be improved if all the heroes had the same superpower and the protagonist was Adrian Mole. The hero lives a dull suburban life with his annoying family, is kind of a dork and is nervous around girls (to the extent that if I was still a teenage boy I could imagine myself feeling insulted and patronised rather than relating to him). The shadowy world of superheroes is full of factions controlling and manipulating the Shifters and, in a particularly egregious bit of *Heroes* plot-nicking, there is even a supervillain who steals Shifters' powers by eating their brains. (For added eye rolling, the villain is also grotesquely fat and written as being quite camp). Of course, even the most hackneyed plot can be rescued by the execution but *Shift* is rather pedestrian with an oddly structured plot, many unconvincing moments and too many incidents where characters conveniently forget to tell each other important things for plot purposes.

The second novel, *Katya's World* by Jonathan L Howard, is rather better. This is hard science fiction set on a water-covered colony world, Russalka, that was first abandoned and then attacked by Earth in a failed invasion when contact was re-established. The novel is the first in a series but stands alone as a satisfying and complete story. It takes place not long after hostilities have ceased and the scars and damage are still raw (though no one is quite sure whether the war has finished or been suspended while Earth marshals its resources). The heroine Katya is a maths prodigy and war orphan who starts the novel taking her first trip as apprentice navigator in her uncle's cargo submarine. Before long the sub has been attacked by a powerful and mysterious object from the depths and Katya finds herself thrown into a series of increasingly dangerous and violent situations. As in *Shift*, Katya discovers that Everything Is Not As She Has Been Told and that there are warring factions and secret conspiracies but these flow more organically from the setting or background rather than coming across as a box ticking exercise. The plot is relentlessly action packed and, though it settles into a routine of 'incredibly dangerous situation, last minute escape, escaped into even more dangerous situation, last minute escape, repeat', I found myself impressed with the breathless pace. The practicalities of living and travelling round an ocean world are well thought out and the lack of visibility and reliance on sonar is used effectively (though at times the action does fall into more generic *Star Trek*-style running-round-a-spaceship-shooting-lasers and the distinctiveness of the ocean setting is lost). The emphasis on action and plot does have its drawbacks, however, and the depth of the background and the characterisation suffers a little as a result. For instance, we are frequently told what Russalka has rejected of its Earth heritage but we have little idea what they have replaced it with. Katya is an appealing character – resourceful and competent but still believably a teenager and only ever patronised for her youth and inexperience and not her gender. Other characters, however, struggle to emerge from a morass of indistinguishable people with Russian names and uniforms who become important to the plot without us having any idea what they look like or who they are. Hopefully future books in the series will take their foot of the throttle a little to round out the background. But this is a minor quibble and I would recommend the book to both young and less young adults.

Blackwood by Gwenda Bond and *The Assassin's Curse* by Cassandra Rose Clarke (Strange Chemistry 2012)

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Blackwood takes as its starting point the disappearance of the 114 colonists from Roanoke Island in the 16th Century, an event which still remains unexplained. The book opens in the present day with a theatrical performance of this event, showing that it is still a live issue among the local community. During the performance, Miranda Blackwood, the novel's protagonist, becomes aware of strange forces arising on the island, which later culminate in the disappearance of another 114 people.



Miranda is the last in the line of the Blackwood family, who have been under a mysterious curse since the disappearance of the colonists. On the death of her father, the curse is transferred to her. She needs to discover what happened to the lost colonists, to break her curse or discover a way to live with it, and to restore the latest group of vanished people. She is aided by Phillips Rawling, the son of the local police chief, who has a curse of his own, in that when he is on the island he hears the voices of the dead.

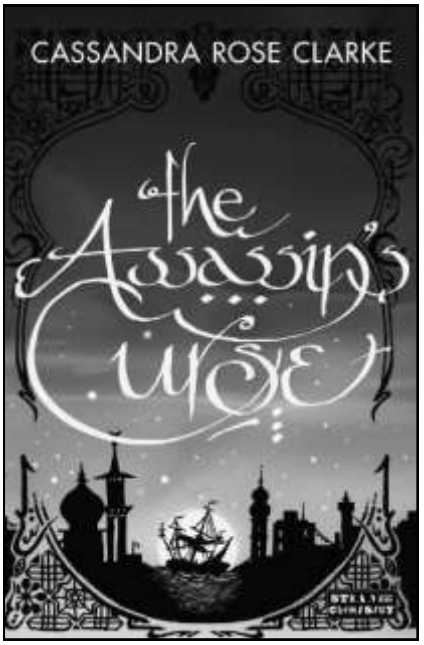
I found the book quite hard to get into, though I became more committed at the disappearance of the present-day inhabitants and the introduction of John Dee, always good value as a character, who is deeply involved in both the 16th and 21st Century disappearances. However, I still wasn't completely engaged with it. I think part of the reason might be that I couldn't become involved with either of the main characters or care deeply what happened to them. I don't think this is entirely due to the fact that I'm old enough to be their granny, though they might appeal more to the young readers at whom this book is aimed. There's a bit too much 'woe-is-me' about Miranda, at least for my taste, though Phillips's challenging approach to authority makes him more attractive.

Bond creates a vivid picture of the background and also of the sinister events which break into everyday life. However, as her two central characters are for different reasons outcasts in their community, I didn't get a strong sense of the social networks in the present day or the way in which the other characters relate to each other. What I did enjoy is the ending of the novel, the way in which Miranda manages to defeat the evil attacking her world and how she is prepared to test whether her own curse is broken or not. This I found genuinely moving.

The Assassin's Curse shares with *Blackwood* the element of curse-breaking and the development of a relationship between two young characters. However, it is a very different book. It's more conventional fantasy, set in another world with magicians, pirates and assassins among the cast of characters. But I never felt that the author was simply reworking the tired old tropes; her world is finely imagined and the plot bounces along at a cracking pace.

Ananna, the central character, is a pirate's daughter. A marriage has been arranged for her with a young man from another pirate clan but when she meets him she finds that he's a petulant idiot and runs away. By the conventions of her world this means that an assassin will be sent after her. However, when they finally confront each other, in a mixture of panic and natural reaction, Ananna saves his life. As a result, he is bound to protect her and suffers both physically and mentally if they are apart. Ananna can't bring herself to leave him so they set out together to discover how to release him from the curse. I found both these characters more engaging than the equivalent pair in *Blackwood*. I like Ananna's refusal to conform and her energy and the scarred, doomed assassin Naji works brilliantly as her foil.

Although *The Assassin's Curse* is presented as a standalone novel, it is clearly the first of a sequence or trilogy; I see from the writer's website that a sequel is due to appear next year. I admit to being pretty annoyed when I realised that I was running out of pages with the characters' problems nowhere near being resolved. The actual ending of the book points forward to the sequel with the characters committed to carrying out three 'impossible' tasks in order to win Naji's freedom. I eagerly await the next instalment to find out how they will do this.

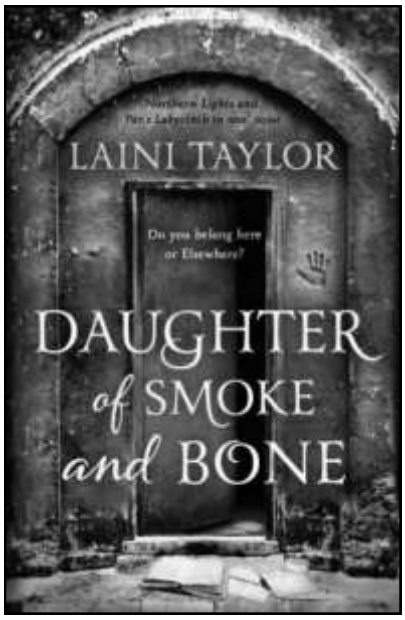


These books are both the first published novels of their respective authors. With *Blackwood*, I was conscious of this, particularly in the way that some plot elements, like the phantom black ship, are never fully accounted for, whereas with *The Assassin's Curse* I felt that the writer was fully in control of her material. Though *Blackwood* is more obviously literary, I feel that *The Assassin's Curse* is the more successful book: just a fast-paced, edge-of-the-seat romp with characters the reader wants to achieve their aims. Both books are labelled as Young Adult, though I feel that their main appeal will be to a slightly younger audience. The scary bits are not too scary for older children to cope with, and the romance which develops between both pairs of characters is tentative, with little of the physical. I feel that they'll both be successful within this age group and, though neither is the kind of crossover novel which appeals equally to adults, I shall be interested to follow Ananna in her subsequent adventures.

Daughter of Smoke and Bone by Laini Taylor (Hodder and Stoughton, 2011)

Reviewed by Liz Bourke

The narrative of specialness is a particularly common trope in Young Adult fiction. Laini Taylor's much-lauded *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* has a protagonist so special she makes my teeth hurt. Seventeen years old, blue-haired, cover in tattoos, Karou has mad martial arts skills and goes to art school in an American's Disneyfied-fantasia version of Prague where "the wind carried the memory of magic, revolution, violins, and the cobbled lanes meandered like creeks." Her family are half-beast chimaeras and her foster-father is the quasi-monstrous Brimstone who lives "Elsewhere", a mysterious space outside of the normal space-time continuum. The doors of his home open all over the world, in Prague and Paris, Russia and Hong Kong, and Karou balances her days as a student with a second life running his strange and sometimes dangerous errands, buying teeth and trading in wishes. After she has a violent run-in with an angel-like being, a "seraph" called Akiva to whom she feels a powerful and inexplicable attraction, the doors to Elsewhere go up in flames. All she has from the ashes is a single unbroken poultry wishbone. Naturally, therefore, she takes her newly-inherited wealth and sets out to find a way back to her foster-family – and their world, one which she comes to learn has been rent by a war which has lasted for generations.



Daughter of Smoke and Bone is a quick and fluent read. Seductively fluent, in fact: in terms of hitting a teenage geek girl's narrative kinks, this novel boasts the hat-trick of mysterious family/Dark Past, implausible personal ass-kicking competence and the powerful lure of doomed romance. Only on reflection does it become clear that the world-building is... well, saying that it's a touch on the illogical side is being mild, and you could drive a lorry through the holes in the plot. Dubiously touristical side-trips to places like the souks of Marrakesh and the Paris metro and fights with winged angels over the rooftops of the capital of the Czech Republic aside, how much meat is there really on this novel's bones? When the secrets of Karou's murky past are at last penetrated, by means of a narrative device wherein she recovers the memories of a previous life as a chimaera – and the reader is thrown into several chapters' worth of her previous persona's point of view – it's hard to escape the conclusion that everybody's been keeping secrets purely for the sake of having enough tension to drive the story onwards.

Underneath the flash and glitter and interesting quirks, this is a book that doesn't really have a lot to say. Well, apart from *Europe is cool!* and *War and oppression is bad, mmkay?* But mostly what I take away from this one is that you shouldn't fall in lust – except the attraction of a moment's whim turns out to be *really* love – with the enemy of your people. It's bad for everyone's health.

Timeless by Gail Carriger (Orbit, 2012)

Reviewed by Liz Bourke

Gail Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* novels are best described as Victorian steampunk paranormal romantic comedy-adventures. Quite the array of adjectives, I admit, but Carriger's books flounce across quite the string of subgenres with improbable if incomplete success.

I wouldn't treat *Timeless* as a good place to start. It's the fifth and final volume in the series and relies on familiarity with the characters for much of its effect. Alexia Lady Maccon (née Tarabotti) has been enjoying a period of (relatively) peaceful domesticity after the hectic events of last year's *Heartless.* Alexia being Alexia, peaceful domesticity involves managing her Alpha werewolf husband, Conall Earl Maccon, and his interactions with the London *ton*, staying in the vampire Lord Akeldama's third-best closet and dealing with her precocious soul-stealing toddler daughter. (The book opens with bathtime for baby Prudence, in a scene which displays Carriger's comic powers to solid effect.) Comfortable domesticity comes to an end, however, with a mysterious summons from the three-thousand-year-old vampire queen of Egyptian Alexandria, a summons complicated when a werewolf just returned from Egypt is shot dead at Alexia's feet. Wicked plots are afoot. It's up – as usual – to Lady Maccon to sort things out.

With Alexia's friend Ivy Tunstall's family and theatre troupe along for cover, Alexia, Lord Maccon, and toddler Prudence set out by steamship for Alexandria, with the inventor Mme LeFoux. Once there, events various, confused and nefarious transpire: there's a supernatural-ability-cancelling "plague" which has something to do with Alexia's dead, mysterious father; a vampire queen on artificial life support; baby-napping; chases up the Nile by balloon; and climactic confrontations both marital and martial. Meanwhile, back in London, the reluctant werewolf Biffy and pack Beta Professor Lyall investigate murder and dastardly-goings-on and find love in strange places.

Timeless is not as solidly constructed as its predecessors in the *Parasol Protectorate* series. The narrative leaps and veers even more wildly than is usual for an Alexia Tarabotti novel and the resolution of moments of deadly peril during the final pages is rushed and compressed. And this reviewer was sadly disappointed by the absence of large and shiny deadly mechanical contrivances. It's disappointing, too, that Egypt is an exotic colonial setting, mere colourful theatrical scenery.

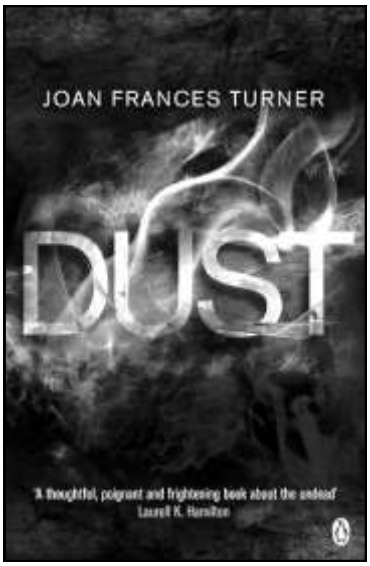
On the other hand, there's a lot to enjoy here. Kudos to Carriger for a positive portrayal of LGBT sexuality in a Victorian setting with the burgeoning romance between Biffy and Professor Lyall and Mme LeFoux's unrequited attraction to Alexia. Carriger's prose is solid without sparkling, but the banter between her characters proves brisk and wittily engaging, and she has a definite talent for depicting physical comedy on the page. The marriage of Lady and Lord Maccon

is warm without being saccharine, and toddler Prudence steals the show at not-infrequent intervals. Events trip along at an entertainingly break-neck pace: this may not be Serious Literature, but damn if it isn't immensely fun.

Dust by Joan Frances Turner (Penguin, 2011)

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

It's hard not to be intrigued by a book that starts: "My right arm fell off today. Lucky for me, I'm left-handed." This is the story of Jessie, a fifteen year old girl who died in a car crash, and is now a zombie, obliged to eat fresh meat to stay 'alive' when she used to be a vegetarian. She's in love with Joe, a maggot-infested corpse – zombies have to communicate telepathically because most no longer have working mouth parts. We follow Jessie and her Fly by Nights gang as they battle humans and gangs of other zombies in their endless search for food in North West Indiana on the southern shores of Lake Michigan, the area where Joan Frances Turner now lives and obviously knows extremely well (there's a detailed map at the start of the book).



There was one thought in my head as I read the first few chapters of this book – where can the story go from here? The author has created a lifestyle for Jessie that can never get better because her body, like those of her companions, is gradually falling apart as established in sentence one; her decomposition is certainly slower than if she were a normal corpse but it's still happening. It's refreshing to read a zombie book written from a zombie's point of view, one that gives insight into what the author imagines it's like to be one, but it does confirm what we already knew – being a zombie isn't much fun!

Of course, Jessie was only fifteen when she died, with no experience of adult life, part of a bickering family and killed in a car crash when her father was driving. This means that her life with the Fly by Nights gang is the only one she really knows and the gang have become her family in a way her living family never did. Even so, there has to be a game change or Jessie has no future. This change comes from the human scientists who have been trying to create a virus that will kill off the zombies. When they unleash their latest effort on the zombie population of the area it has some very unexpected effects: a new illness that actually causes the undead to become more alive, while at the same time making any human who catches it become zombie-like. Unfortunately the virus has side-effects that will in the end cause a final death for any zombie affected and this fate will befall Jessie and all of her friends unless she can figure out a way to survive.

I found the viewpoint of *Dust* very original and I liked the author's ability to write herself out of what seemed like a couple of very difficult corners. There are several very grisly moments, so I wouldn't want to see a film made of this book, but overall I'd recommend it to lovers of the zombie genre.

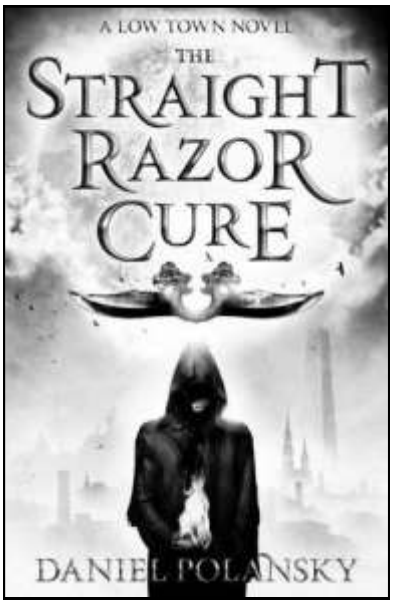
The Straight Razor Cure by Daniel Polansky (Hodder & Stoughton, 2011)

Reviewed by Mark Connorton

This debut fantasy novel is set in the imaginatively titled city slum of Low Town, where the protagonist, Warden, works as a petty crook. He has to turn detective to solve a series of brutal child murders which, of course, have the authorities baffled. Could Warden's past as a wizard's adopted son turned soldier turned policeman turned secret agent turned drug dealer give him the exact combination of contacts and friends he needs to solve the crime? Actually no, as Warden is a bit thick, is as easily manipulated as a toddler and also decides that a spree of child killings is the ideal time to take on a kid sidekick.

The novel combines hard boiled crime fiction and classic fantasy but rather than melding the two genres to make something new and interesting, the author just uses it as an excuse to give us two different sets of rote plots and stock characters instead of one. So a standard issue kindly old wizard rubs shoulders with a predictable array of two bit hoods, duplicitous whores, bumbling or thuggish cops and an abrasive but competent forensic examiner (or "scryer") straight out of *CSI: Minas Tirith*. Anyone from an ethnic minority is a complete cliché (the fantasy analogue Chinese with their opium dens and Fu Manchu-style crime lord are especially cringeworthy) and female characters don't fare much better either: the hero's love interest is alternately infantilised (tiny hands? how tiny?) or sexualised to creepy effect and a jolly barman's wife who appears throughout the novel is less vividly realised than each member of a squad of soldiers in a flashback who all die in the same chapter they are introduced.

The setting shows the same scattergun approach and is irritatingly inconsistent. Sometimes the book feels Dickensian but then Warden's war experiences sound more like World War One than the Victorian era. Technology in day to day life is generally medieval but then we see an abandoned factory of mechanical looms and there is gunpowder aplenty, though not even the police carry guns and duels are still carried out with swords rather than pistols. Whatever tech level you settle on, the police service and bureaucracy feel anachronistically modern in comparison and the nobles seem anachronistically renaissance-ish. The overall effect is of a book that hasn't had enough thought put into it and the plot isn't strong enough to compensate: Warden basically stumbles around having tough guy conversations and fights until he coincidentally stumbles onto one suspect and is later handed a piece of paper containing the name of another – not exactly top detective skills. There are twists and red herrings aplenty but the more you think about the plot after completing the book, the less sense it actually makes. It all rattles along briskly enough and is perfectly readable in an undemanding way but I can't really think of many more positive things to say about it.



***The Devil's Diadem* by Sara Douglass (Voyager, 2011)**
Reviewed by Nic Clarke

This book and I got off to a bad start, mostly thanks to a cover that screams "potboiler" with every fibre of its little matte-finish cardboard being: brooding clouds, castle perched atop improbable hill, female figure in generic 'period' gown gazing into the distance and a pair of fonts for author and title that wouldn't look out place on the discount romance shelves of your local branch of The Works. The blurb is not terribly inspiring either; as a fantasy reader I'm used to feeling faintly embarrassed by the way publishers market my genre but most of the time they do at least manage to get the name of the main character right.

In short, *The Devil's Diadem* is not the sort of book I would pick up, given the choice. But I soldiered on, like the dedicated *Vector* reviewer I am, and I'm not sorry I did. It is, indeed, a potboiler, being in large part a somewhat overwrought romantic saga couched in flowery prose and heaving bosoms; in that sense the cover was accurate. But after an exhausting few months at work, an undemanding page-turner was exactly what I needed to start my holiday.

The Devil's Diadem centres on Maeb Langtofte, orphaned scion of a once-prominent family that has fallen on hard times, mostly thanks to her Crusader father having willed what remained of the dwindling family fortune to the (boo! hiss!) Knights Templar. Slightly too old and much too poor to make a good marriage, Maeb trades on distant family ties and is taken in by the brooding Earl of Pengraic to be a lady-in-waiting to his saintly, sickly and heavily pregnant wife, Adelie. Maeb, of course, is stunningly pretty but oh-so-humble and within a matter of pages she has unwittingly turned the head of Stephen, the Earl's heir and possessor of "light wheaten gold" hair, a "warm, handsome face" and a "wicked smile". The Earl himself, meanwhile, is so instantly and pointlessly rude to her that he might as well have 'Mr Darcy' stamped on his forehead. Shortly thereafter, the king turns up at Pengraic's estate and he, too… you get the idea.

Luckily, an elaborate plague strikes (and I do mean elaborate; victims grow yellow fur and then spontaneously combust) and everything goes off the rails most entertainingly. This doesn't actually stop Maeb being the centre of all male attention for a two hundred mile radius – guess who's the first in the Pengraic household to succumb to the Burning Furry Disease? – but it certainly adds some drama to the proceedings. More importantly, it gives Maeb a chance to develop – convincingly – as a character, from timid object of desire to resourceful and courageous survivor, honed by suffering.

As might be expected from a former lecturer in medieval history, Douglass presents a medieval England (and Wales) of considerable depth and nuance, without overloading the reader with information for its own sake. Much of the detail is implicit in the way characters think about and react to events, rather than offered up in expository lumps. One early example is a discussion between Maeb and Adelie about reading. Maeb is ashamed to reveal that she cannot read and more so when she has to confess that her late mother could not either. What is interesting in terms of this exchange as an evocation of medieval sensibilities, though, is that Adelie's pity is excited not by their illiteracy but by *what* illiteracy prevented them from accessing, namely devotional texts: "It is a shame […] that the comfort of sweet Jesu's words and deeds and those of our beloved saints were denied her in the privacy of her chamber. I could not bear it, if I would always need to wait for the presence of a priest to comfort me." For Adelie, reading is a means to an end rather than a transferable skill: it is something that better enables her to connect with the divine will that shapes the world.

This sense of Douglass's world as one in which piety is a lived experience and the supernatural lurks ever around the corner is central to the way the story works. Religion is both Macguffin – the plague, we learn, has been sent by the devil, who seeks a diadem that was stolen from him – and motivation, shaping how characters understand and respond to events. When Maeb joins in the secret mercy-killing of some of the afflicted in the Pengraic household – euthanizing victims with drugs before they reach the burning-to-death stage – she does so in dread of how God will judge her. (And is told, in turn, "Who could judge you, Maeb, for what you did? But if you fear, then confess to [the household priest] Owain, and do penance, and all will be well.")

Less successful is the tension between capable, resilient Maeb, learning to rise above her ever-present fear, and the patronising pedestal on which several of the other characters – and, at times, the plot – seem determined to place her. The novel ends with a postscript from Maeb's breathtakingly arrogant son, who sums up his mother in terms of "her extraordinary inability to understand how lovely she was" (a tired romance cliché) and "how sweetly foolish she was not to understand those about her". He is not the only one to praise Maeb for being, essentially, not very bright, even if others prefer to phrase it as "innocent". This becomes a tedious drumbeat as the novel goes on, particularly when Douglass implicitly supports the judgement by showing Maeb have selective failures of perceptiveness whenever the plot demands that she miss things or when the emotional arc requires her to be angry with someone when they secretly don't deserve it, so as to lay the groundwork for suitably angsty reconciliations and/or bittersweet regret later on.

While I'm unlikely to dip back into the well of romantic historical fantasy any time soon – too sweet, teeth rotting, etc – *The Devil's Diadem* proved a surprisingly absorbing 500-page change of pace.

The Song Of Achilles by Madeline Miller (Bloomsbury, 2011)

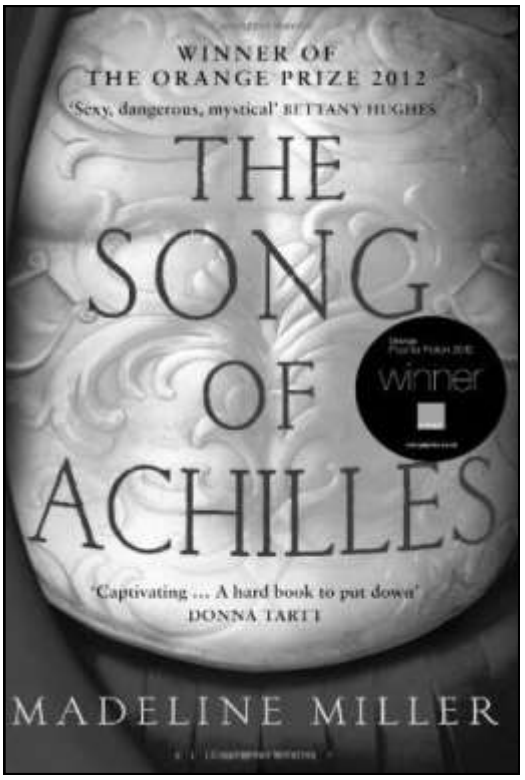
Reviewed by Mark Connorton

This debut novel won the Orange Prize this year and, like recent novels such as Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Ursula LeGuin's *Lavinia* (2008), takes a minor character from Homer and places them in the centre of the story. In this case the central character is Achilles's best friend, Patroclus, whose death in the Trojan war kicks off the series of events leading to Achilles's own death. (I hope it isn't a spoiler to point out that everyone dies!) The novel takes the bare bones of the two men's life stories from boyhood on, fleshes them out and tries to make narrative and psychological sense out of them.

The novel is written in first person present tense from Patroclus's point of view and opens with his childhood as the unloved son of a minor king. He accidentally kills another boy in a brawl and is sent to be fostered by Achilles's father in a neighbouring kingdom, eventually befriending Achilles himself. The solipsistic first person narrator has become something of a YA cliché in recent years and the combination of this and the depiction of young Patroclus as a sadsack wallflower – forever moping around and yearning after Achilles's superhuman hotness like a classical version of Bella from *Twilight* – did not make me initially well disposed towards the novel. Indeed, the entire first half of the book is fairly uneven, although, after the YA opening, things improve when the boys are tutored in the wilderness by a wise centaur. They hear that Helen has been abducted and Agamemnon is recruiting an army so Achilles's mother whisks him away and hides him in female disguise on a backwater island. Miller has trouble making this bit work and it drags somewhat but in the end Achilles commits to join the armies attacking Troy and the second half of the novel improves markedly.

Miller does a good job sketching in the other major characters like Odysseus and Agamemnon and the rivalries that lead to Achilles deciding to stop fighting and sulk in his tent. She is also very good at fleshing out minor characters like Deidamea, the mother of Achilles's eminently slappable son Pyrrus, and Briseis, the Trojan slave who causes the rift between Achilles and Agamemnon. In most retellings of the story she is little more than a plot device but here she is a likeable intelligent woman whose wariness and anxiety at being enslaved gradually retreats as she befriends Achilles and Patroclus and becomes indispensable to their household. The men's affection for her and their fear at what she might suffer as a slave of Agamemnon all makes perfect sense and give the novel some psychological depth and continuity rather than coming across as a checklist of key events.

Of the two central characters, Achilles is the more successful creation. As a boy he is kind and guileless and pleasantly ignorant of the affect his extraordinary good looks and superhuman fighting prowess has on others, only gradually hardening into pride and arrogance when exposed to the manipulation and jockeying for status of the other Greek kings. As well as starting out like a YA heroine, Patroclus is often saddled with expository asides as though the author does not trust us to understand how a martial, honour based culture might work without someone to hold our hand. Like the novel as a whole, however, he improves as it goes along and he emerges from Achilles's shadow, becoming a healer and a respected member of the Greek camp in his own right. The relationship between Patroclus and Achilles has often been interpreted as sexual and romantic and this is the route that Miller takes, a choice I liked in theory but in practice read more like *Iliad* slash fiction. The few sex scenes are written in a highly euphemistic sub-romantic novel style, with lots of references to warmness growing and swelling and the like. Miller also chooses to give Patroclus a rather anachronistic internalised homophobia and has him angsting over the relationship and his status because of it, whereas in ancient Greece such relationships were often celebrated; gods and heroes such as Zeus and Heracles also had male lovers and it would have been more interesting (and less tedious to gay readers) if the relationship was a source of pride for Patroclus rather than just something else for him to whinge about. However, she is much better when it comes to the emotional interaction between the two men and this is what gives the book its punch as it reaches its climax.



Although you are likely to find it shelved in the general fiction section of a bookshop, the novel fully embraces the supernatural elements of the *Iliad* and could just as well be categorised as a fantasy. Miller handles the supernatural elements very well, from the matter of fact talk of prophecies and the effects of the meddling of the gods to the occasional appearances of Achilles's sea nymph mother. Thetis is one of the book's most memorable creations: a terrifying mother-in-law from hell who instantly decides that Patroclus isn't good enough for her son and who has an unnerving habit of appearing out of nowhere and smiting everyone with her divine awesomeness. This matter of fact approach to the supernatural results in a brilliant narrative coup: throughout the novel I was wondering what would happen when Patroclus dies in the war, having disguised himself as Achilles to rally the troops. Would the book end? Would it switch narrator? Instead his narration simply continues as a restless ghost, watching Achilles grieve over him and eventually kill Hector in revenge, thus fulfilling the prophecy that leads to his own death. Patroclus having to see all this and then still not find rest after Achilles's own death reads as a powerful study of grief and bereavement and the work that Miller has done so far in establishing the relationship between the two men (and Achilles's mother) really pays off. The end of the book was so good that it made me forget my earlier misgivings and leaves me looking forward to whatever Miller tries next.

***Angelmaker* by Nick Harkaway**
(William Heinemann, 2012)

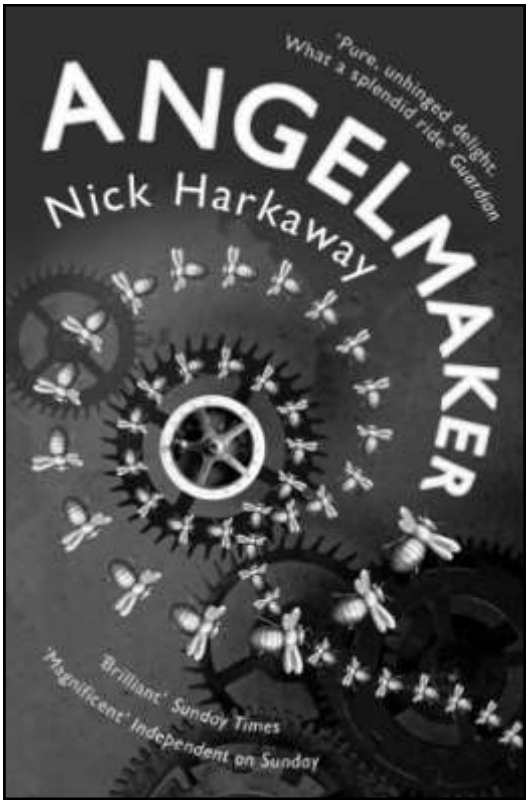
Reviewed by Jim Steel

There are few secrets outside of fiction these days. It's a fact not mentioned on the jacket or even on his own website but Nick Harkaway is, of course, the son of John le Carré. This is not generally regarded as a handicap these days; the likes of Martin Amis and Joe Hill have ensured that people will keep an open mind. Providing an author doesn't do a Brian Herbert, he can find his own audience. I came to Harkaway with innocent eyes: I haven't read his first novel, *The Gone-Away World*, and I was three-quarters of the way through *Angelmaker* before someone mentioned the author's parentage to me. By that stage it didn't matter as Nick Harkaway is quite distinct from John le Carré.

The fictional parentage of *Angelmaker* is decidedly more mixed in all sorts of ways. Initially we have Joe Spork, one of many characters with Dickensian names, who is working as a clock-repairer in contemporary London's East End. Automatically we feel we are in a London novel with strong steampunk tendencies (despite its contemporary setting). Joe's grandfather was a clock-repairer before him, although Joe's father was a renowned burglar. When Joe was but a nipper, his dad would take him to the underground Night Market which is a clearing house for honourable criminals who would then teach their skills to the young lad. Joe may have chosen to follow the straight and narrow but this background is obviously the gun on the table that will have to be used later in the narrative.

Naturally, Joe's occupation is the lever that starts the plot moving, as some very strange visitors call about a very strange object in an opening sequence that is reminiscent of KW Jeter's *Infernal Devices*. Spork's enthusiasm for, and skill with, clockwork devices reeks of authenticity but the novel gradually becomes less polished when it moves away from the opening chapters and other characters come into view. Eighty-nine-year-old Edie Banister – an old family friend – becomes involved and even becomes the viewpoint character when the novel back-tracks to the Second World War. Edie – then a wild *St Trinian's* sort of a girl – was recruited from school to work at Bletchley Park or, more specifically, operate a computer mounted on a steam train that moved around the country. Harkaway, clearly familiar with Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon*, body-swerves Turing (although figures such as Pyke and Tesla rate mentions) and moves Edie on, allowing her to become a cross-dressing secret agent called, naturally, James Banister. The supervillain she faces off against is an evil Indian aristocrat, the Opium Khan, who is bent on world domination. After a gloriously over-the-top battle at the villain's palace, the two become mortal enemies but can't quite dispatch each other. The large gap between the Second World War and the present day represents one of the hurdles that trips this novel up and we are left merely with the impression of a series of massive *Bond*-film escapades between then and now that doesn't impact on the rest of the world in any significant way.

Fuzziness is one of the major problems with this novel. The nature of the apocalypse feels as though it has been explained and its effect is even described in one harrowing, zombie-like episode but the workings remain elusive. When Spork unlocked a mechanical book at the start of the novel, he activated swarms of golden mechanical bees which were intended to increase the wellbeing of humanity by nine percent through the elimination of deceit. (The villain, naturally, aims to pervert their purpose.) The preciseness of the percentage is a mere slight-of-hand to distract from the vagueness of the method. There are plenty of other problems in here as well. Harkaway's prose style is wonderful but all his characters tend to speak in the same ornate, thought-out manner which doesn't happen in real life because other people would interrupt. *Angelmaker* is certainly not intended as an exercise in realism but this does have the effect of flattening the characters. There is even a noticeable distance between the viewpoint characters and the reader. Like Stephenson, Harkaway does not do strong characterisation. His female characters, in particular, come across poorly. Spork's love-interest, Polly, is a feisty girl who is highly sexed but fiercely loyal and might crudely be described as a boy with tits. It is not so much that their depths are hidden, more that they are nonexistent. On another occasion, a character undergoes severe torture without even a hint of post-traumatic shock to show for it at the end.



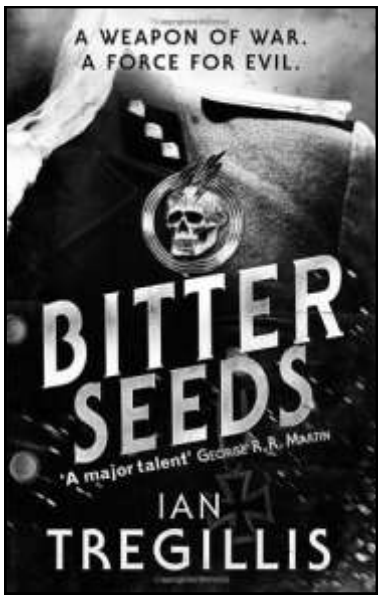
The characterisation isn't really a flaw because this is intended as a novel of dazzling invention. The characters serve the plot. When the invention starts to wobble, then we have a flaw. An ancient, moated castle in the middle of London being used as a secret base? Fine. We can believe in that. An old railway line that was built through the middle of London and which ends at the castle? Please explain why. And there are plenty of other instances of this. There are also minor factual errors that should have been caught at the editing stage. When the Opium Khan's mother writes to her very old friend, George VI, she calls him 'Georgie' instead of 'Bertie', for example. Albert Windsor only assumed the name George upon the surprise abdication of his brother.

Many of my points might sound damning but this is still a remarkably enjoyable and witty novel. The writing sparkles and, although it might be a bit like buying a music album solely because of the guitar solos, I can recommend it for that reason. Nick Harkaway is someone who knows his way around the genre and who also has a rare skill with prose. He might end up being labelled the British Thomas Pynchon if he keeps growing. Or, at the very least, he stands an excellent chance of becoming the British Robert Anton Wilson.

Bitter Seeds by Ian Tregillis (Orbit, 2012)

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Bitter Seeds, the first volume in the *Milkweed Triptych*, is an alternative history of the Second World War in which British warlocks are pitted against Nazi 'supermen' created by mad scientist Doktor von Westarp. This outline of the plot makes it sound like a comic book but in fact it is more redolent of an old black and white wartime film (if darker than most of those).



The novel begins in 1939, when British Intelligence agent Raybould Marsh acquires a damaged reel of film that appears to show that German scientific and technological experiments have enabled certain gifted men and women to develop superhuman powers, such as becoming invisible or deflecting bullets. In the early stages of the war, it seems that these individuals will make the Nazi invasion unstoppable, particularly as one of them, Gretel, is able to foresee the future and predict the British plans for defence. Raybould, now a member of Milkweed, an organisation formed especially to combat Westarp's creations, enlists the aid of a group of British warlocks, including his friend Will Beauclerk. The warlocks work magic through the power of the Eidolons, beings who live beyond our dimension and can manipulate our material world. However, as Raybould soon learns, the summoning of the Eidolons in not without cost; there is a blood price, which grows ever higher and ever more terrible, eventually leading to the sacrifice of innocent lives. The line between good and evil becomes increasingly blurred. By the final chapters of the novel, as the British and the Russians race to obtain the secrets of Westarp's technology, it seems likely that the next volume in the triptych will be even darker than the first.

Despite its thriller, SF and fantasy elements, *Bitter Seeds* reads like a well-researched historical novel. Although the plot increasingly diverges from the real events of the war (the evacuation from Dunkirk, for example, is a failure), the atmosphere of wartime London, with its air-raid shelters and blackouts, is vividly described. So too is the horror of the aftermath of a bombing raid when bodies are being dug out of the rubble. The characters of Raybould, a working class man of action, and his friend Will, aristocratic and deeply disturbed by the terrible things he is forced to do for the sake of the greater good, are particularly well-drawn. We are shown their back story, which explains why they act as they do, and we are also shown how they are changed by their horrific experiences and how their friendship is strained. The superhumans, collectively known as "Westarp's children" and with their mental powers augmented by batteries wired into their skulls, could have been mere cartoon villains but by writing some scenes from their point of view, the author succeeds in making them credible.

Overall, this is a well-written novel that blends several genres seamlessly. It is an accomplished debut for author Ian Tregellis, who is definitely a writer to watch. The story continues in *The Coldest War*.

Kultus by Richard Ford (Solaris, 2011)

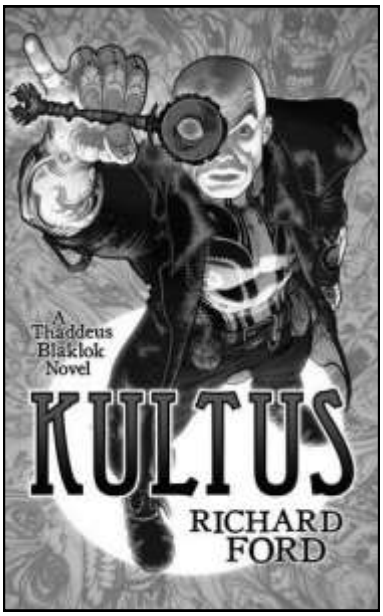
Reviewed by Donna Scott

If you were asked to imagine what Guy Ritchie might do with the genre of steampunk (forgetting that he had ever made *Sherlock Holmes*), you might well imagine a brutish British underworld setting with *really big guns*, some characters that Vinny Jones or Jason Statham could carry off, some choice colloquial phrasing... and a bit of steam. Welcome to the Manufactory – a city with its own literal underworld in the Cistern, the playground for the insalubrious machinations of the rich and powerful, who otherwise live in the clean air above the steaming towers and engines.

Making his living as a mercenary is Thaddeus Blaklok, a man whose loutish tattooed physicality belies his wit and whose humanity masks his demonic powers. Due to his unusual nature he is the guy the demon world turns to when the key of Lunos – a demonic artefact needed to stop a "deluge" – ends up on display in the Repository of Unnatural History. Despite the Repository's security, the key looks like an easy take for Blaklok. However, he's not the only one who wants it. We follow Blaklok as he quests for the key, gaining and losing it over and over, whilst trying to thwart the cults of Valac and Legion *and* trying to escape instant justice at the hands of Indagator Amelia's thuggish fantassin bodyguards as he is also mistakenly wanted for murder. A series of violent chases and clashes ensues and the very fabric of the Manufactory is threatened as demons are let loose.

Despite the blurb describing *Kultus* as "steam-powered" and it having the accoutrements of a Victoriana setting, the pistons of the Manufactory do not power the plot: magic does. If you are looking for a novel with heaps of violence and action where magic both causes and resolves your questions of "what next?" then this is fine. However, if you are looking for a detailed rendering of Ford's imaginings of the Manufactory's alternative technologies, these are unfortunately missing.

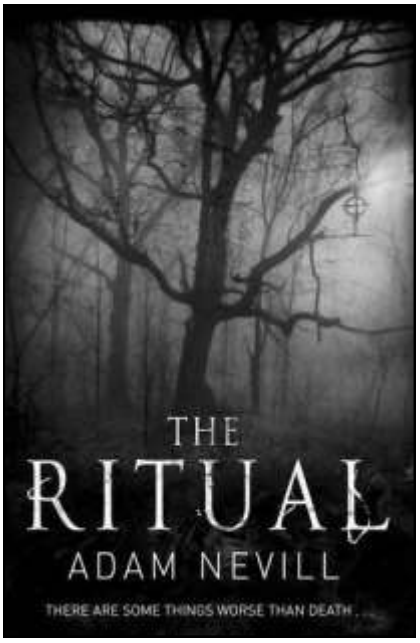
There is nothing terribly complex about *Kultus*; the plot has no real twists, the narrative is replete with Cockneyisms and swear words and the characters aren't very rounded. That said, they are superb grotesques, evoking a *Sin City*-like cynical bleakness. Given that the release of this novel was accompanied on Ford's website by a free 13-page comic story starring Blaklok, I assume he wanted to get across some of the visual impact of a graphic novel and luckily this has worked too. But I would like to know more about the structure of Thaddeus's society; how his world really works.



Hollywood also seems to have influenced Ford, not only in naming a villain Castor Cage but in the filmic scene-setting and action set-pieces. And whilst the two female characters mentioned do not fall into the category of 'love interest' but they do happen to be attractive. However, while *Kultus* is not deep, it is a zip-along story written in a very assured style, mixing blunt language with ornate to great effect.

The Ritual by Adam Nevill (Pan MacMillan, 2011)
Reviewed by Stephen Deas

Four former university friends, now in middle age, go on a walking holiday together in Sweden. Two of them are not, perhaps, as fit as they should be. Certainly not as prepared. It seems obvious, now they are in the wilderness, that the route they had planned is too much of a challenge. So they decide to take a short cut. Just a quick detour through a few miles of primal untouched pine forest and they'll almost be home. A few miles, that's all. And that's where it all starts to go horribly, horribly wrong.



Colours to the mast: Adam Nevill writes the kind of horror I like. His tongue is not rammed into his cheek. There are no wry knowing looks. There isn't much gore and the horror isn't thrown in your face. Nevill's approach is subtle and straight – a creeping unease, little whispers that something isn't right that slowly build into an understanding that something is, in fact, terribly *wrong*. The 'monster' is never fully revealed, only ever glimpsed, and even then, only towards the end. For the most part, the atmosphere of unease is built and maintained by seeing the world through the eyes and imaginations of the story's protagonists. This is the kind of horror I like, it worked for Nevill's first book, *Apartment 16*, and it works for *The Ritual*.

For the first half of the book, there are no characters apart from the four hikers themselves. Four middle-aged men with middle-aged lives and middle-aged problems; Nevill picks them up, one by one, and squeezes them until they break. They are lost, short of food and shelter, creeped out by the discovery of various old pagan remains and the growing sense that *something* is in the forest with them. It's expertly done with the focus very much on the characters and their own degeneration, and reminded me of early Stephen King (*The Fog*, in particular). Where Nevill breaks into descriptions of the disquieting relics they find, the language is positively disturbing and crafted to make the reactions of the four protagonists all the more believable as the true nature of the forest and their plight unfolds. This part of *The Ritual* has some of the best horror writing I've read in a very long time.

The second half of the book loses some of this intensity. There are new characters introduced and a lashing of nordic death-metal culture. After the depth of characterisation of the first half, these new characters feel shallow in comparison, perhaps inevitably, as they are never much more than one-track adversaries. The continued degeneration of the lead character continues to work well though, the forest itself continues to exude menace and the ending is delightfully ambiguous. All in all, a finely crafted, creepy and disturbing piece of horror.

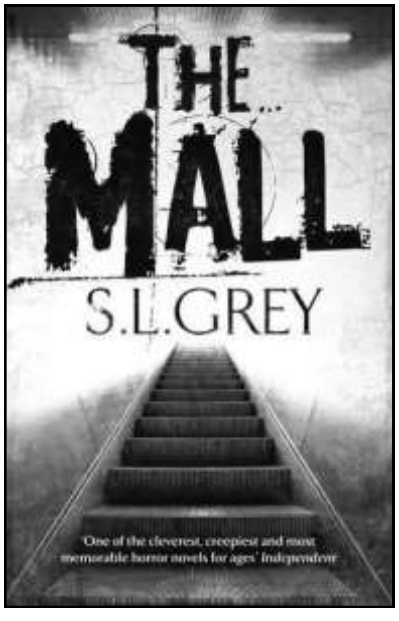
The Mall by SL Grey (Corvus, 2011)
Reviewed by Shaun Green

New novelist SL Grey is an authorial gestalt. One half worked in bookselling and holds an MA in Vampire Fiction while the other is a horror film animator and writer of prose and poetry. Both are firmly South African and their respective backgrounds heavily inform this novel, a satirical horror set in a Johannesburg shopping centre starring a bookshop wageslave and a drug-abusing runaway. (It does not, however, feature any vampires.)

Leading duo Rhoda and Dan are less heroic than most; the former has lost a child in the mall whilst scoring coke and the latter is a socially and emotionally stunted miseryguts who despises his job. Events fling this unwilling pair of misanthropes together in pursuit of the child Rhoda has lost. As they search the hidden network of corridors and storage rooms behind the mall's shops things get a little weird. Rhoda and Dan encounter unfamiliar tunnels and rooms, disturbing piles of dismembered shop mannequins, hideous grunting creatures always out of sight but forever in pursuit, an abandoned wing of the mall populated by a few other lost souls. Driven on by a combination of fear and bloody-minded co-operation, Rhoda and Dan gradually make their way through a series of trials laid out by an unseen tormentor with a fondness for text messaging his victims, until they eventually reach the destination they have been driven towards.

The Mall is a novel of two parts. The first is as I've previously described; an elaborate chase sequence which strikes an enticing balance between the supernatural and the ordinary. There's a strong sense of tension throughout and the mysterious nature of Dan and Rhoda's plight makes for quite a page-turner. Alas the second part of the novel shifts away from this strong narrative drive in order to explore a satirical vision of a demonic shopping centre. Although some elements of this are unsettling it rarely evokes horror, disgust or fear, while the satire lacks bite and – dare I say it – a clear target or cohesive message. Things tick along well enough but it's a disappointment after the novel's strong beginning.

What does work deliciously well is the relationship between Rhoda and Dan, which grows convincingly from shared contempt via grudging solidarity to a strong friendship forged through shared trials and stress. These characters carry the novel through its weakest portion and later we see a convincing take on how this relationship holds up when removed from the environment that produced it but the denouement which follows ultimately failed to convince me. I've no reservation in describing this book as a strong debut but I must also emphasise that I found it a flawed piece of work, one at its best when keenly focused on the plight of its anti-heroes pitted against an unknown threat. Still, if you're looking for a horror novel that does something a bit different it's worth your time – just don't expect a critique of consumerism of Ballardian depth and subtlety.



The Greyfriar and *The Rift Walker* by Clay and Susan Griffith (Pyr, 2010, 2011)

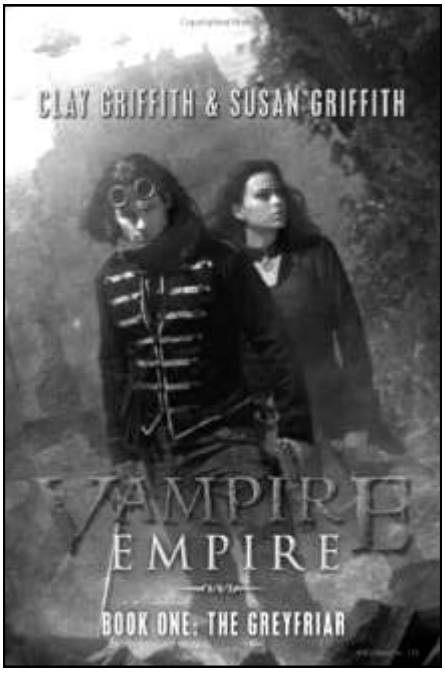
Reviewed by Patrick Mahon

Two of the more popular sub-genres of speculative fiction in recent years have been steampunk and vampire stories. The *Vampire Empire* trilogy, of which these are the first two volumes, mixes elements of both. I was worried about what that might mean for the quality of the writing, if husband and wife team Clay and Susan Griffith were simply trying to cash in on the latest fashions. I was therefore pleasantly surprised to find out what intelligent reads these two books are.

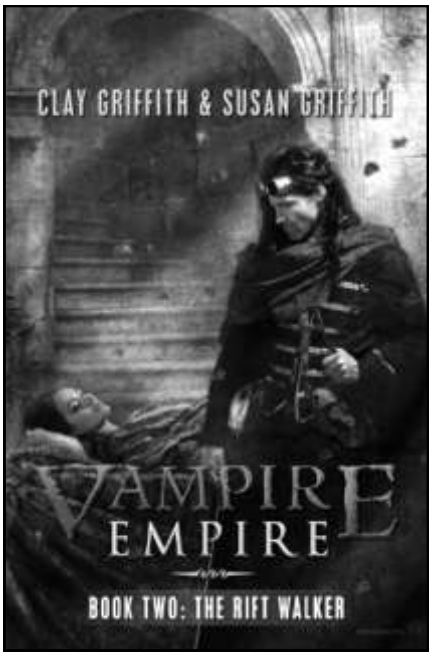
The trilogy is set in the year 2020, one hundred and fifty years after vampires rose up from their historic hiding places and destroyed most of humanity. Those that survived migrated towards the Equator, saved from extinction by the vampires' inability to function properly in the heat of the tropics. For the last century and a half, the Earth has seen an uneasy truce between the vampires in the temperate north and south and the remains of humanity sandwiched in between but this truce is about to collapse.

Senator Clark, an American vampire hunter of great renown and even greater ego, wants all-out war. He's proposing to marry Princess Adele, heir to the former British Empire and now based in Egypt, in order to create a strategic and political alliance between the Equatorian and American Empires. Then he's off to fight. He won't stop until every last vampire is dead and humanity, under his command, has regained control of the Earth. Clark is certainly brave, perhaps even foolhardy. He is also written as an unrelievedly arrogant bore throughout both books. It might have been nice to show a little humility or vulnerability in his character once or twice, in order to regain the reader's sympathy for him. As it was, I found it a little too easy to detest him from start to finish. Still, perhaps he deserves it.

In *The Greyfriar*, Princess Adele is captured by a large force of vampires during an ill-advised goodwill tour of her Empire's northernmost capitals. She is a fearsome warrior who is fully capable of holding her own in a fight. However, there are just too many vampires to beat. She is taken to London, home of Prince Cesare, the most audacious of all the vampire clan leaders, and held as insurance against the coming conflict. Clark plans to rescue Adele via a full-frontal assault on London but her freedom comes at the hands of the legendary Greyfriar, the masked hero of Equatorian pulp fiction and the only human able to match the lightning speed of the vampires in combat. He sneaks Adele out from under Cesare's nose and she quickly finds herself falling under his charismatic spell. However, the Greyfriar is not all he seems and when Adele finds out the secret behind his masked persona, she is left unsure who she can truly trust.



What raises this novel above pulp fiction is the interplay between Adele, a self-confident woman who is not fazed even when kidnapped by vampires, and the Greyfriar, a sensitive hero who is also capable of the most brutal violence against his enemies. There is mutual respect from early on but their conversations are also full of a dry wit, reminding me of nothing so much as the exchanges between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*.



In *The Rift Walker*, having been safely returned to Equatorian soil, Adele is faced with two big challenges. First, her father the Emperor is still expecting her to marry Clark. Although she now despises him as an ignorant bully, she will not ignore her duty, even though she has fallen in love with the Greyfriar. Second, her capture and escape brought to the surface a strange power which Adele could barely control; vampire flesh burned at her touch and many seemed genuinely scared of her. Adele worries about what is happening to her, yet knows she should try to use it against Cesare.

This greater focus on Adele's magical powers creates an interesting dilemma for the authors, who seem unsure whether to ascribe her abilities to natural energies flowing through ley lines or to the mythic power of the Christian church to combat vampires. They counterpoint the rationalists in the Equatorian government, who view both Western religion and Eastern mysticism as pointless twaddle and see military force as the only answer, with a counter-cultural minority who see Adele's growing powers, whatever their origin, as the best way to rid the Earth of the vampire menace. Caught between both camps are Adele and the Greyfriar, the only people who think that some kind of accommodation may be possible between the two species. As in the first book, it is the intelligent relationship between these two central characters which makes this a much more thoughtful read than the back cover blurb might suggest.

There is a great deal to enjoy in both *The Greyfriar* and *The Rift Walker*. The authors have created a story full of strong characters; Adele and the Greyfriar, in particular, are an impressive pair of leads who inspire the love of those around them, yet still suffer from self-doubt. I also liked the attention to detail with the minor characters: some of the strongest writing comes in vignettes that illustrate what it's like to be a bit player in this harsh and brutal world. Both books are well-plotted, with plenty of incidents to move the story along, and they provide an attractive mix of action, romance, politics and horror that should keep you reading from beginning to end. These books could have been forgettable pulp potboilers but the quality of the writing, combined with moments of real emotional power, raise them to a higher level. I'll certainly be picking up the concluding volume when it comes out later this year.

To Indigo by Tanith Lee (Immanion Press, 2011)
Reviewed by Graham Andrews

I've just got round to reading *The Hidden Library Of Tanith Lee: Themes And Subtexts From Dionysos To The Immortal Gene* (McFarland, 2001) by Mavis Haut so writing a review of *To Indigo* should have been easy-peasy for me – right? No – wrong! And – as much as I admire *Drinking Sapphire Wine, Elephantasm*, *Mortal Suns*, *Piratica* and all the rest – I'm more than happy to have had my lazy-reviewer expectations confounded.

To Indigo (a meaningful title but pardon me for not telling you why) is told from the viewpoint of Roy Phipps, an impecunious middle-aged author of mystery novels as by RP Phillips. Ian Rankin has got nothing to fear from him – and neither does Jessica Fletcher, for that matter. He is also intermittently working on a fantasy novel entitled – well – *Untitled* – which deals with an insane poet named Vilmos who becomes the victim and/or the leader of a secret society that makes the Hellfire Club look like *Romper Room*. Imagine if Ursula K Le Guin had written *Orsinian Tales* in the style of Arthur Machen with a dash of 'Monk' Lewis thrown in for bad measure.

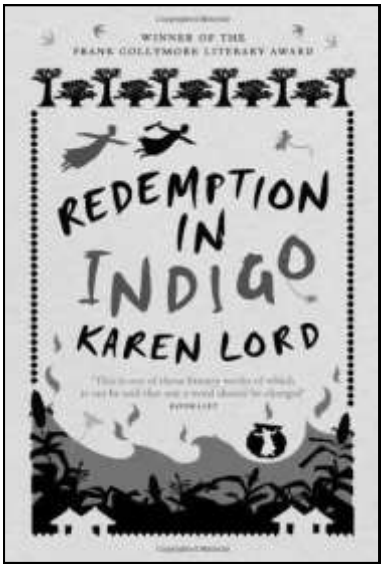
We've all probably had the experience of getting over-friendly with some unknown person in a pub and regretting it almost immediately. That very same thing happens to Roy Phipps, when he meets Joseph Traskul, who is an apparent dead ringer for the fictional Vilmos. Roy escapes from 'Sej' (who is dyslectic, hence the self-given nickname) but a strong psycho-physical bond has been formed with baleful consequences for them both. If any of you are thinking along the lines of *Misery* and *The Dark Half* by Stephen King or something by Paul Auster in self-pitying authorial mode then put your minds at total unrest. *To Indigo* is not the kind of novel that can be neatly summed up in a few sentences – and I won't even make the forlorn attempt. Experience it for yourselves.

Lee's understated but oblique style gives the impression that Phipps is sleepwalking his way to a dreary, if not dusty death: "When I heard his voice I felt the most peculiar rushing sensation inside my gut, the cavity of my chest. This wasn't disturbing. It was more like circulation spinning back in a foot or limb that had gone to sleep. A shutter seemed to fly up in my brain. I blinked, and seemed to see not only Sej but everything, with a bright abnormal clarity. It felt, and I use this phrase with dismay, as if my eyes had been cleaned like windows. I wasn't frightened. It wasn't like that. Perhaps I'd felt something like it before, but if I had, misunderstood and so forgotten it."

Mavis Haut has got some drastic updating to do and those good people at Immanion Press are to be congratulated for enabling Lee to strike out in a radical new direction with *To Indigo* as well as other recent books like *L'Ambre*, *Greyglass* and *Killing Violets* (which does sound a bit cruel to soppy old me).

Redemption In Indigo by Karen Lord (Jo Fletcher Books, 2012)
Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

Ansige is a wealthy man, whose wife, Paama has left him. He travels to the village where she has taken refuge with her family to fetch her back. But his gluttony and selfishness lead him into calamities until Paama is provoked into declaring the marriage is over for good. The failure of Paama's marriage gives an opportunity to the supernatural djombis, some more benevolent than others. One is the Indigo Lord, who has been deprived of an aspect of his power because of his failure to use it rightly. The djombis who have taken it entrust the power, in the shape of the Chaos Stick, to Paama and teach her how to use it. The Indigo Lord cannot seize the stick from her by force so takes Paama on a series of magical journeys to persuade her to give it back. Their experiences change both of them and influence the rest of Paama's life.



Redemption In Indigo, Karen Lord's debut novel, was first published in the USA, where it won several awards. Lord is from Barbados and the novel draws on Senegalese as well as Caribbean influences. The setting has a folk-tale quality and the locations are remote from my everyday experience but, even so, the story feels universal. The reader can see the strings of cold syrup which tumble into spirals as Paama cooks and the deep eyes of the spider who buys Ansige's messengers a drink but the locations are not particularised in any depth. We can enter the story without feeling that its events matter only to people far away or long ago.

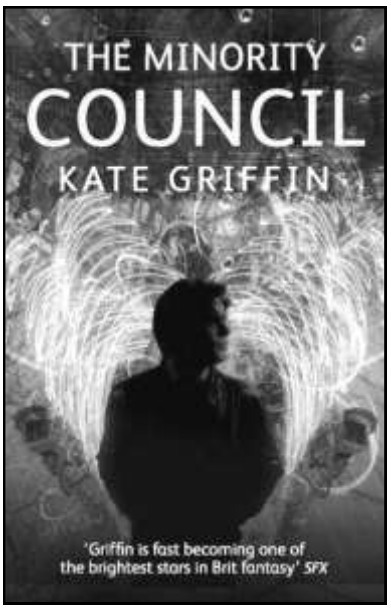
Paama is a likeable heroine. She possesses a strong sense of duty but also the determination to put an end to her disastrous marriage. She can feel anger when she encounters the village chief who recommended Ansige as a husband without knowing him. She understands what is at stake in her journey with the Indigo Lord, though nothing turns out the way she might expect. Her story is contrasted with that of her beautiful younger sister, Neila. Like a traditional heroine, Neila falls in love with a romantic poet who has come to woo her on behalf of a sinister merchant prince (the Indigo Lord in disguise). But Neila is never the focus of the reader's attention or sympathy for long and the love story is sidelined. In this novel, at least, making the right choices is more important than falling in love. Being able to cook and doing your best when in trouble are more interesting than beauty in distress.

The novel opens with a discussion of the storyteller's art: "a life story is not a tidy thing. It is a half-tamed horse that you seize on the run and ride with knees and teeth clenched.' Throughout, the narrator comments on the action and the characters and debates the merits of storytelling. But instead of distancing the reader, this technique gives us another character whose company we can enjoy and whose voice gives the novel much of its flavour.

The Minority Council by Kate Griffin, (Orbit, 2012)
Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

This is Kate Griffin's fourth book to feature urban sorcerer Matthew Swift, who draws his power from the life of the city, the energy of the streets and the "thick, hot, dirty magic" of the underground "that slaps you in the face like the winds carried ahead of the trains". Not only is Matthew the Midnight Mayor, the mystical protector of London, who, in his own words, turned back the death of cities and drove the creature called Blackout into the shadows at the end of alleys, but his identity has also merged with the blue electric angels, supernatural entities created from the emotions that humans pour into the telephone wires, and at times, usually when he is in a rage, he draws upon their godlike powers. Alerted to the presence of a new magical drug on the streets that is killing addicts in a particularly ghastly fashion, Matthew determines to rid his city of this menace that gives a whole new meaning to fairy dust. At the same time, he must find and destroy the culicidae, a magically constructed monster that is attacking teenagers and leaving them soulless, empty shells.

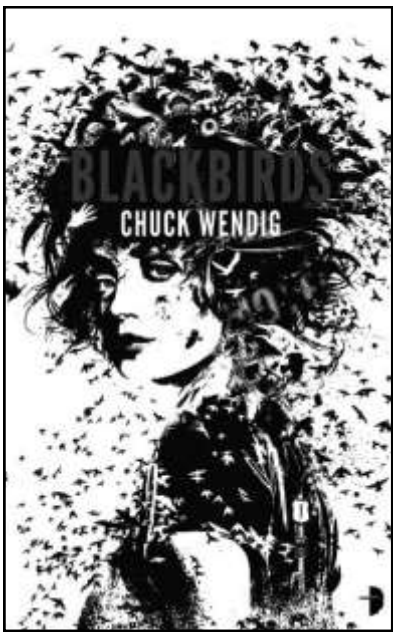
As in the first three books in this wonderfully inventive fantasy series, the urban landscape of the city of London with the Thames running through it, its sounds, sights, flavours and scents, is just as important as the plot. What this novel does just as well as its predecessors is to merge a London that will be easily recognisable to anyone who knows the city with a mystical, arcane London where imps perform tribal dances in rubbish dumps, a drug lord with the power of the Triads, Mafia and Yakusa also has the ability to curse you and all your kin and a sorcerer's stroppy apprentice together with a modern-day medusa (think metal tubes and fibre optic cables instead of snakes) take time out from the fight against evil to do a little shopping in Covent Garden. Then there is the tracker spell placed in a computer that Matthew uses to trace the sender of an email and the use of police crime tape in a binding spell, a seamless blending of the mundane and the magical.



Matthew's attack on the drug dealers and his investigations into the origins of culicidae lead him back to the Aldermen, the magical guardians of London who have never entirely accepted him as the Midnight Mayor's latest incumbent. As factions within the Aldermen jostle for power, Matthew is forced to recognise that the only reason he remains alive is that it is considered bad form to kill London's protector, even if the position would immediately pass to another on his death. While Matthew does regain the loyalty of the Aldermen by the end of the novel, there are hints that there are things he has yet to discover about being Midnight Mayor, things that will terrify him once he works out what they are. I very much look forward to reading about his discoveries in the next novel in the series.

Blackbirds by Chuck Wendig (Angry Robot Books, 2012)
Reviewed by Donna Scott

You'd be hard-pressed not to judge this book by its cover with its exquisite monochrome portrait of a messy-haired, black-eyed girl; a composite of body parts, road and motel signs and hundreds of sinister silhouetted birds. It seems the brief inspired artist Joey Hi-Fi to pick out some very Hitchcockian themes – that's a lot for any book of horror to live up to.



Miriam Black is a sassy young woman who has seemingly given up on life or the hope of finding any joy in it. She lives in the shadow of death, knowing exactly how the people she meets are going to die. Haunted by a memory that has her convinced that if she tries to prevent a death she becomes its cause, she is on the run, living a precarious chain-smoking existence, hitching from motel to motel and making marks of soon-to-be-dead men so she can steal from them to get by. That is until she meets Louis – a nice guy who she knows is going to be murdered while saying her name. This has her worried: if she's nearby when he dies, she's probably going to be the next victim.

Some of Miriam's death visions are gruesome but, though Wendig's feeling for horror is not limited to gore, these scenes are meticulously written and stomach-churningly plausible. Add to this the psychopathic hitman and hitwoman chasing Miriam and Louis when they become convinced they know something about a mysterious missing package and you have the makings of a tense psychological thriller with a dash of *Pulp Fiction*-style black humour.

Wendig's writing is full of the slickness we might expect from a classic Tarantino movie but behind the patter he gives us rounded characterisation; Miriam is painted for us in impressionistic style and we come to learn she's not quite the toughie she makes out. The murderers are more cartoonish, emphasising the lack that makes them different to the flawed characters we are meant to sympathise with. Likewise, the most grotesque aspects of horror are limited to the dream sequences that pepper the book. But that is not to say that the supernatural elements of the story are negated by these dream sequences but rather the effect of real/not real is sharpened, emphasising that the worst horrors in Miriam's life are all too human in origin.

The narrative itself is pure road-story and moves in a linear fashion along that road from start to end but with a final denouement that provides scope for taking the character elsewhere in the further books that have been commissioned, the next of which is *Mockingbirds* – a development that is much needed to be able to take Miriam's character further after this story, which is presumably why it is there in a novel that would work perfectly well by itself as a stand-alone.

Whilst the novel has a simple structure, the writing is strong and engaging and Miriam's character is one you can take to your heart. The cover does not deceive.

This Is The Quickest Way Down by Charles Christian (Proxima, 2011)

Reviewed by David Hebblethwaite

This Is The Quickest Way Down is one of the launch titles for Salt Publishing's new speculative fiction imprint, Proxima; it is not the most auspicious of starts.

The most successful stories in Charles Christian's collection, to my mind, are a couple of three- or four-page pieces. 'Already Gone' concerns a trio of crooks who have made it back to their 'borrowed' Norwich apartment after a hair-raising drive – though all is not as it seems. 'More Important Than Baby Stenick' is set in the aftermath of an unspecified disaster; the title refers to an old celebrity scandal which Christian uses to juxtapose the superficial past and the ruined present. Both these pieces work because their vision is distilled and focused.

Other stories in the volume tend to overplay their hand. For example, 'The End of Flight Number 505' has the core of an interesting tale – a terminally-ill young UFO enthusiast is treated by his parents to a trip to Roswell where he encounters a pair of Men in Black who might just be real. The story builds up an intriguing set of questions to resolve, over what is really happening and why but the coda then undoes the effect by explaining too much. Likewise, 'Empire State of Mind' begins with a compelling mystery – its protagonist is apparently experiencing multiple realities and is variously in England reminiscing about the old days with his friends; trapped in an elevator in the Twin Towers; and a character in a story written by his ex – but the actual resolution is less interesting than any of the possibilities raised during the story.

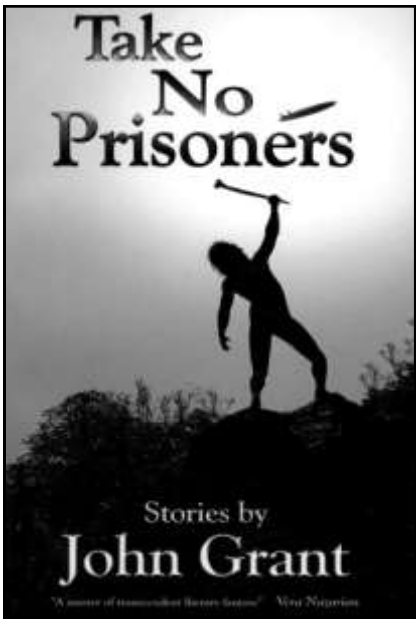
Sometimes the stories' focus on explaining events can act to the detriment of creating atmosphere. In 'A Beretta for Azraella', a group of gangsters visit a contact's country pile but get more than they'd bargained for. The first act of this piece lacks a real sense of menace and the middle is weighted towards exposition, leaving the end to peter out. 'Confessions of a Teenage Ghost Hunter' sees its title character tell his partner stories from his career; but the dialogue feels too mannered, and the twist ending too predictable. The twist in 'The Hot Chick' – in which a lecherous hack attends a science fiction convention and picks up a woman wearing a remarkably convincing alien costume – also feels obvious and a second twist is not quite amusing enough to compensate.

Christian's main strength in this collection is the abandon with which he brings together the fantastic and the mundane. Sometimes this works in a story's favour, as with the surrealistic notes of 'Waiting for My Mocha to Cool' which lend the piece an effective sense of disorientation. But, more often, the execution of the stories falls short.

Take No Prisoners by John Grant (Infinity Plus, 2011)

Reviewed by Tony Keen

John Grant has been writing science fiction since the Seventies and is perhaps best known as co-author with David Langford of the satirical disaster novel *Earthdoom!* and as co-editor with John Clute of *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. First published in 2004, *Take No Prisoners* is his first collection of short fiction and Infinity Plus have now brought it out as an ebook.



Grant is capable of turning his hand to a wide range of genres within the literature of the fantastic and many of them are represented here. The collection opens with 'Wooden Horse', which appears to be a mimetic story until it gradually becomes apparent that this is alternate history. There are also fantasy stories ('I Could Have A General Be / In The Bright King's Arr-umm-*ee*'), British horror ('Snare', one of the most memorable stories in this collection, even if the final twist is telegraphed earlier) and straightforward science fiction ('The Machine It Was That Cried' and 'Mouse'). Then there are those that cross genres like 'The Glad Who Sang A Mermaid In From The Probability Sea' which blends a fantastic narrative with elves into a space opera framework. Some stories, such as 'A Lean And Hungry Look', appear to eschew the fantastical altogether.

Threading their way through many of these stories are the characters that Grant has been working with for twenty years. Qinmeartha, who may be a god or may be a king, LoChi, the girl child, his nemesis (the two feature in Grant's novel *Qinmeartha and the Girl-Child LoChi*, also available from Infinity Plus), the woman Qinefer, the place Starveling. These names recur, often applied to very different individuals – Qinefer, for instance, is a space explorer, the wife of an elf or a number of other people, Starveling can be a planet or a fortress. Yet there are resonances between the stories which are set up by the repeated uses of the names and one reads each story differently from how one would if Grant came up with new names every time. The effect is positively Moorcockian.

This edition adds two novellas, 'The Hard Stuff' and 'Q'. 'The Hard Stuff' is another story in which Grant crosses the modes of science fiction and fantasy and reads a little like Ken MacLeod writing a Narnia story. 'Q', which places Grant's mythos in the context of post-9/11 US paranoia, has been much praised, not least by the *Vector* reviews editor. However, these bonus novellas also form the opening chapters of Grant's 2008 novel *Leaving Fortusa* and their presence here raises a few problems. Both are fine stories but, whilst both can be seen as self-contained, the fact that they are both part of a longer work creates a feeling of incompleteness, a notion that more is to come but it is not to be found in this volume.

But these are probably minor issues. Overall, this is a collection of entertaining stories that are worth reading.

Mythanimus by Storm Constantine (Immanion Press, 2011)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This collection of sixteen short stories is the fourth (and currently final) volume of Storm Constantine's collected short fiction to be published by Immanion Press. It's prefaced by a brief introduction from the author and notes on each story's genesis and publication history in a cozy, informal tone – this is Constantine talking to her fans. Many of the stories have seen previous publication in anthologies, magazines, or chapbooks which are now out of print or hard to obtain; several were originally written for shared-world projects or game-based anthologies, and have been substantially rewritten ("had the serial numbers filed off") for inclusion as stand-alone stories in this collection.

In general, the stories could be described as romantic fantasy, usually with a dark or occult tinge. The focus is often on the development of intense emotional relationships between two or three characters and the characteristic emotions evoked in each story are desire and longing, followed by either triumph or despair. Western occult magical practice after Crowley has mostly been based on the cultivation and deployment of the practitioner's will but Constantine substitutes desire for will; these are stories that tend to favour dreaming over doing and that aren't primarily interested in power or dominance issues (outside the realm of the erotic).

Many of the stories are primarily designed to evoke an atmosphere: they are feeling-driven rather than plot-driven and the characters are types rather than individuals; they tend to be rich in sensory detail and lyric rather than narrative. Several of the stories feel unfinished to me and Constantine herself refers to stories as "a snapshot" and "this little piece" in her notes, suggesting that several of them could be expanded into longer works.

In terms of content, unexplained apparitions, real or imagined, are common. There is a silver-armoured antlered man, a girl from out of time, a fire elemental and a large number of entities that look like people but aren't and who inspire wonder and distrust in about equal proportions. There's also a lot of madness, often presented as a seductively attractive alternative to boring mundane reality. However, the stories aren't unremittingly fey. 'The Deliveress', for example, is a very light, frothy piece intended to puncture a number of high-fantasy conventions, in which the heroine, snatched from outside Tesco into a fantasy world, worries about where to find tampons and disposable contact lenses and uses her negotiating skills from her mundane life as an estate agent's receptionist to chat up the Dark Lord and talk him out of a doomed career in world domination. This atypical story nicely demonstrates Constantine's skill and craft: far from being a formulaic and repetitive writer she is capable of exploring a wide range of emotional tone and story themes.

In summary, this is a collection that will strongly appeal to existing fans and completists but would also serve as a good introduction to Constantine's style and usual concerns for those unfamiliar with her work.

Words Of Re-enchantment by Anthony Nanson (Awen, 2011)

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Anthony Nanson is a storyteller and *Words Of Re-enchantment* is a collection of his essays on this ancient narrative art. Bringing the essays together in one volume enables him to examine the way a gifted storyteller uniquely engages an audience in ways that theatre or cinema cannot. More than that, he argues that oral storytelling is not only relevant to the contemporary world but also has the power to change that world for the better, to "re-enchant" that world and transform it.

The first essay in the book, 'Mythscapes of Arcadia', tells of a visit Nanson made to Greece where the resonances of the landscape impinge powerfully upon the visitor. Back in England he creates a storytelling epic that shifts between his own traveller's tales and ancient Greek myth. For him, this makes a connection between a quest for Arcadia in his own life and the utopian dream of a peaceful co-existence between humankind and nature. Other essays in this section of the book describe how not only traditional tales but also modern bestsellers, from *Lord of the Rings* to *Star Wars* to *James Bond*, use mythical archetypes and patterns to create a profound resonance with their audience's deepest longings. The importance of myth is further developed in essays examining legends of lost islands and "wonder voyages" like the Celtic immrama, asserting that the ultimate destination of the voyager is not the otherworld but an earthly paradise that may be unobtainable if we continue to ignore the ecological crisis facing the world.

The essays in the middle section of the book focus more closely on the art of storytelling itself. There are anecdotes about storytelling events that give the reader a picture of the oral tradition and the contemporary storytelling circuit. Above all, Nanson shows the importance of live storytelling in a contemporary secular society where modern scientific perspective has demoted the inner, spiritual world to the level of superstition. Storytellers and their audience not only share the same physical space but imaginatively enter together the inner world of the story so that storytelling can provide a spiritual dimension to everyday life.

It is in the third section of the book that Nanson's essays become more challenging, gathering together his writings about his belief in the ability of storytelling to change the way people think to the extent that the collective consciousness and society itself is transformed with commercial imperatives giving way to a sustainable relationship with the environment. The Ecobardic Manifesto, conceived by the author and his colleagues at the storytelling company of Fire Springs, invites each artist to consider how their work might respond to the threat of ecological disaster, to confront the present order and imagine alternatives.

The essays in this book are thought-provoking but the lucid style in which they are written prevents them ever becoming heavy; Nanson's arguments as to how we might make a better world remain accessible even when they are at their most radical. He makes a telling case for the value of myth and storytelling and while not every reader will agree with Nanson's response to the dwindling of the earth's resources, his conviction that the storyteller's ability to "imagine otherwise" can change the course of our culture and make a difference to the future of our planet certainly deserves our attention.

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