

WINNER OF THREE EUROPEAN SF SOCIETY AWARDS

**INTERVIEW WITH
KIM STANLEY
ROBINSON**

ALBEDO

THINGS CHANGE

ISSUE 25

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**FICTION BY
CHRIS BUTLER
SARAH DE FOREST
SAM MILLAR
PHILIP RAINES
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ALBEDO

Welcome to our quarter century issue. The inclusion of four stories, a lengthy book reviews section and interview with Kim Stanley Robinson unfortunately precludes the inclusion of our Severian column and the letters page this time; they will be back next issue. What is notable, I think, about Kim Stanley Robinson is that, with his literate style and approach to his work, he is also very much an apologist for SF. This is very refreshing in a publishing world where as soon as a writer gets the sniff of literary respectability he/she doesn't want to hear the words 'science fiction' associated with their work.

Euro

In converting over to euro, we have rounded down our subscription rates, back issues and showcase items. So, there's never been a better time to fill in those gaps in your collection and SUBSCRIBE!!!

Mike

Contributors to this issue will be relieved to know that Mike O'Driscoll is not featured this time round, Mike having won 'Best of Issue' two issues in a row. In fact, he is the only contributor to win twice, so far, so keep sending us those stories everyone!

Liz

Congratulations to *Albedo One* contributor Liz Williams for being shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick Award with her novel **Ghost Sister**. By now we know that the winner has been announced (Richard Paul Russo's **Ship of Fools**), but it can't be a bad thing to have your first novel selected as a nominee. Well done. For a review of Liz's second novel, **Empire of Bones**, see our reviews section in this issue.

Chris, Philip, Harvey, Sarah & Sam

This issue sees the welcome return of Chris Butler with *One Last Look at a Half-Moon*. We also received Chris' first novel **Any Time Now**, published recently and reviewed in this issue. Philip Raines and Harvey Welles also make a welcome return with *The Olivia Reunion Party*, and Sarah de Forest and Sam Millar are newcomers. Enjoy.

Apology to Simon CLARK

Sincere apologies to Simon Clark for spelling his name wrong throughout the whole interview last issue. You see, it's that Arthur C fella; his name is ingrained upon the book and volume of our brains. We can but hope that Simon's name will become equally ingrained upon the book buying public. Once again, abject apologies.

Editorial

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Cover Art

Art Title: Loss Of Respect
Artist Name: Rico J.C.

California-based artist Rico J.C. specialises in dark photo manipulations. His art and poems can be admired on-line in the "At End" galleries, <http://atend.tripod.com/>

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Elvis is Dead

Sarah de Forest

Sarah de Forest has a Master's Degree from UC Berkeley and a Pit Bull named Bosco. She is fond of insects, especially spiders, and collects bones. 'Elvis Is Dead' is her first science fiction publication, and she is currently working on her first novel, which she expects to finish by fall of 2002. Sarah has been living in Germany since July 2000, and expects to return home in June 2003.

When I arrived at the office Wednesday afternoon I found an envelope on my desk stuffed with cash. Business had been slow lately and I should have jumped for joy, but I felt more unease than relief - cash jobs are more lucrative, but also more risky.

My only clue was a curt note: LATEST ELVIS MURDER. SF ZOO.

The streets were festooned with wisps of fog; a typical summer day in San Francisco. I put the bike on auto while I pulled up the news on Skylink.

A dead Elvis was nothing new, of course. For some time now violent death had been on the rise amongst Elvis clones. The large proportion of these were acquaintance murders or crimes of passion, but a distressing number were also the work of fetishists and serial killers. The media made a big deal about all this, but sociologists claimed it was just because Elvis clones were a convenient target for social aggression.

On the face of things, there was nothing sinister about the dead man at the zoo. Elvis (or George Hammers, as his birth certificate read) had been discovered in the Kodiak habitat early this morning. The rags didn't know the details yet, but hinted darkly at a gory demise. Several times they referred to the unlucky Hammers as "the gruesome remains." The only interesting twist on old George was that he had "extensive and sometimes bizarre animal grafts", as the media coyly put it; and even that wasn't terribly unusual, considering how popular cosmetic grafts are with clones.

I had to grease some palms to get into the zoo, and when I arrived at the bear habitat I found it crawling with the SFPD. Almost immediately Patrick Mulhooney swooped down on me, his reddish beard stubble bristling with irritation and efficiency. Pat and I go way back, you might say on a reciprocal favors basis. For various reasons of our own we don't like to be seen together in public.

"And just what in hell do you think you're doing here, Lamar?"

"I came to see the bears."

"Very funny."

"Come on, at least tell me what you'll be telling the media this evening."

Mulhooney eyed me with characteristic suspicion. "It doesn't sound like your kind of a case, but maybe it's some sex thing. This fella was torn apart by the bears, and I don't believe there was foul play involved. Looks like he climbed in there himself. And that's all I got for you sonny boy, so toddle off now."

I glanced towards the bear habitat, fingering the Nose in my pocket.

"The bears'll stay locked up till tomorrow morning," Mulhooney growled. "Now beat it."

So I hid in some bushes till they all went home, and then I let myself into the bear cage. Wasn't the best weather for taking samples. It was already pretty ghostly when the cops nipped out, but by the time the watchman made his first round you could hardly see a thing in the soup. Not to put too fine a point on it, I stepped in bear shit more than once.

I took a good sniff around the habitat, taking special care to go over the entrances and egresses and the areas marked with chalk where they'd found pieces of his body. It looked to me like the bears had torn off several sizable chunks of Elvis, but maybe I missed a few spots in the gloom.

Everyone's DNA is unique. Most people don't even think about this, but by law even clones have to be tagged with inert sequences to distinguish them genetically. So any time you scratch yourself, or spit, or run your fingers through your hair, you leave a genetic tracer more precise than any retinal scan-which I can pick up with my Nose.

On the way back from the zoo I stuck a clean bag in the Nose and dropped by the morgue. As I expected, my boy Harold was on duty. I tossed him the usual tenner. "Latest Elvis, my man. Important client."

There's this sound when you pull out a drawer in the morgue - a heavy sound. Harry was grinning at me like a ghoul through the frigid vapor. As he pulled back the sheet

...the bears had torn off several sizable chunks of Elvis...

which covered Elvis and exposed several feet of fat, furry, naked corpse, I began to see why. Even aside from the grisly extent to which he'd been mangled, Elvis was definitely pretty bizarre looking. The fact is he looked like a bear. His skull had been crushed, but he still had one of his ear grafts, and the nose graft was intact.

"Let me be your teddy bear," I muttered to myself.

His hands and one foot were gone, but Elvis' remaining foot had been genoscultped so that it resembled a paw. With the skin grafts all over him, he was the furriest son-of-a-whore I'd ever seen.

I pulled out the Nose and sniffed him all over. For good measure I scraped some crud from beneath his toenails and took some fur samples and snorted them up the Nose, too. I began to think Mulhooney was right: most likely this was some sex thing. But it pays to be thorough, and I didn't want to come back for seconds of Elvis.

The hollow boom it makes when the drawer shuts again-that's the heaviest sound in the world.

It was late when I stopped back at the office, but I found Frieda and a dirty-looking hood waiting for me. His greasy hair was slicked back like the feathers on a duck's ass, and his eyes buzzed around the room and up and down Frieda like mosquitoes. Not that I could blame him for looking at Frieda, my girl Friday. Five-foot-ten makes her a little taller than me and a lot prettier. Even though she's shrewd as a banker, those big emerald eyes of hers can make her look as innocent as a baby when she wants them to.

"Boss, this gentleman has a message for you. He says his orders are to deliver it personally and wait for a reply."

It was written on elegant stationary, the kind you use for wedding invitations.

I wish to speak with you as soon as possible. This man can conduct you to my presence.

Elvis Stradivarius

I read it over carefully and turned to the thug. "Tell your boss I'll be in touch."

The thug smiled, and I saw he was missing one of his front chompers. It had grown fashionable lately for young punks to leave ostentatious gaps like that. "Woana be izzy you finim alone," he said; or something that sounded like that. "Meetcha nodder time?"

"Your boss found me," I said coolly. "Don't worry, I can find him.

Tell him that from me." He nodded sourly

and left - but not without one last wistful glance in Frieda's direction.

I chucked her my collection of Nose-sacks. Frieda is the brains of this operation, as she regularly reminds me.

"Check out these snot-rags for me, will you?"

"I'll leave the gel-sequencer running all night. Dick, who was that punk?"

"A messenger from the King," I told her.

Elvis "the King" Stradivarius was not just any old Elvis clone: he was the kingpin of San Francisco. If you were

someone like me, you definitely did not want to mess with him because his justice was swift if you were outside the law. The cops tended to turn a blind eye towards a lot of his activities because the King had always been good about keeping peace on the streets.

Stradivarius took his name from the fact that he liked to make violins. Not just any old violins: the finest, the

All the Elvis clones run to fat.

most beautiful violins in the world. Every last piece was

made and assembled lovingly with his own hands (Home and Hearth articles about his country mansion invariably showed him doing this by a blazing fire of a winter's evening). His violins were so marvelous that they were literally priceless, and only the world's finest musicians and the underworld's most powerful criminals were privileged to carry them. The musicians got them for free if the King liked them, and because of this he was considered to be a great patron of the arts. He would cut the ribbon at Opera House openings and things like that. The gangsters got them for free too, in a way. Whenever the King formed a business alliance, he would present his partner with an exquisitely crafted, utterly unique violin. That was how he kept his money legal.

When I left the house the next morning to look for Stradivarius I almost fell over Pisser. Pisser is a blind old derelict who lives outside my door-and frequently on my doorstep-most of the year.

"Da kid did it!" he shouted at me. Several empty bottles lay scattered around the stoop, and it looked as though Pisser had lived up to his reputation all the way down my front steps. Frankly, my neighborhood's seen better times.

"Sure he did," I sighed. Surprisingly, a snake was curled up with him for warmth - I'd always thought their sense of smell was better.

"You'll see," Pisser crooned mysteriously.

It didn't take me long to find Elvis. I just went to one of his nicer restaurants to wait for him, and soon afterwards he dropped in.

I'd heard the King was originally from Brooklyn, but it sounded to me like he'd been educated in Boston. He was a big man. All the Elvis clones run to fat, it's something in the genes. But height is more of an environmental issue than a genetic one, and Stradivarius was unusually tall. He carried his bulk with distinction. His suit was charcoal grey, and he wore handsome cufflinks.

We both expressed polite astonishment and laughed about what a coincidence it was. The formalities over, he invited me to have lunch with him.

"I wouldn't want to interrupt you," I said, nodding towards the two gorillas behind him.

Stradivarius took the hint tactfully and waved them away. "They can dine over there. It's only my samurai."

As we sat down he made some gesture at the waiter which very shortly proved to mean "bring us the best of everything" and then turned back to me. "Do you accept my commission?"

I put an envelope on the table. I'd billed him for my

trouble at the zoo, but the rest was there. "Not yet. First I need to know your interest in this so I'm not wandering around with my head up my ass."

Elvis gave a wince of distaste at my wording. "I want you to investigate the Elvis Murders."

"Look," I said as patiently as I could, "there is nothing to investigate. Time and again it's been shown that there is no connection between any of the murders, and most of the cases are already closed. This latest guy looks like social Darwinism or suicide to me. Unless you got something new to tell me, I don't think we have a case."

"I don't believe Hammers' death was a suicide and I do believe there is a connection between the murders. Someone has tried to kill me, so you can start by looking into that."

"Who?"

"Jimmy Beretta, my own nephew. I practically raised the kid."

I had a sudden flashback of Pisser crying da kid did it and for a second I almost snorted with laughter. I was saved by the arrival of the wine and some appetizers.

When the waiter had gone again I'd regained my cool. "Motives?"

"None that I know of."

"Do you have Jimmy?"

"He's in a Free Zone in the Mission. He has a microchip implant from when he did time, and I can give you a tracer which will read it."

Those microchip IDs are supposedly encrypted so that Skylink will only relay their information to cops. And supposedly they're built to degrade very rapidly after you've served your time. But the hackers are always one step in advance of the authorities, and nowadays you spend most of your sentence on parole if someone can buy your work contract.

"I don't know if this is relevant, but he's using some new designer drug called TK," Elvis went on. "It's a new patent - Tetra something isopropyl something ketamine. The street name is TK or 'the Kid'; it's not for sale yet in the pharms."

I felt that itch I get on my left earlobe when things are starting to seem like too much of a coincidence. "What does it do?"

"I don't do drugs," Elvis said coldly, "so I wouldn't know."

"Of course not," I said. "Good thing, too. You might go crazy and try to kill someone. Seems to me you still don't need my help - I'm not a malpractice lawyer."

"OK, fine," the King snapped. "There's something else. When Jimmy went for me I had to disarm him myself. The reason I did, Mr. Lamar, is that for a second my samurai didn't react. They just stared at me."

"Were they involved?"

"No. I've replaced them, of course, but when their vid chips were played back every second was accounted for. If they were plotting anything together it was in a time warp."

"Surprised, maybe." But it was thin - these fellas

...the hackers are always one step in advance of the authorities...

are conditioned pretty carefully. You could tell that my proximity to the big guy bothered the ones he had now, especially when I picked up any of my silverware.

Stradivarius shook his head. "I'm convinced that for a second there they wanted Jimmy to kill me. There was this ... this look in their eyes."

"A look in their eyes?" I sipped my wine with open skepticism. I could see now why Elvis preferred not to use his own men on this job, and I wasn't terribly flattered.

"Yes goddammit," Elvis hissed, suddenly losing his cool, "a look in their eyes. Like they had been subliminally conditioned, maybe. I don't know why, but I think someone is trying to eradicate all of the... of the other... all of the clones like me, and I think it's being made to look like a coincidence. Your job is to find out who and why. Now do you accept that job or not?" And the King slapped a leather billfold on the table.

I opened the billfold. A lot of money - all in cash.

"That's for the trip to the Free Zone. We'll come to another arrangement afterwards, if you're agreeable." Elvis sniffed haughtily as though he didn't give a rat's ass either way.

I thought about it, and I decided to check out old Jimmy in the Free Zone. What the hell.

When I stopped by the office for my armor and knives Frieda had some results for me.

"About 60% of both the samples you gave me was from a man called George Hammers, forty years old, divorced electrician. I'm still trying to identify the trace genotypes, but so far all I've turned up are SFPD and zoo employees. Most of what's there is bear. Some of it's real bear DNA and a lot of it is DNA from grafts. The grafts in question are Animaltech. Of course Animaltech stuff is all over, but apparently a place called Beastiary is the only

place that does bear grafts.

So I gave them a vid and

...the carrion smell followed me for a long time.

they confirmed that they did George's skin grafts."

"Learn anything else from them?"

"The chief stockholder says that George was a nut case. He went all to pieces after his divorce, and about six months ago he started with the grafts."

"Okay. Now dig up as much info as you can on the Elvis murders. I have to take a trip to the Zone."

The Zone where Jimmy was holed up is a relatively small strip just a couple of blocks south of Mission. Most of the houses there have fallen or are in the act of falling down; one more good quake will shake the whole place to smithereens.

It doesn't bother me to go into the Zones, which is one of the reasons a lot of people hire me. Don't get me wrong: even if I'm not some soft civilian, it's still dangerous for me to step outside the social and legal umbrella. I've got my enemies. But I practically lived in the Zones during my misspent youth, and when one mistake will cost you your life you learn pretty quickly not to make mistakes. When I got out of the military and started the business, a few young punks tried to take me on. But they learned pretty quick what a man who's fought on Mars is made of, and my reputation

got around.

I came to the end of the City Street. The neat, well-tended pavement ended at two pillars: The Zone Portals. Two officers with Skycom helmets stood in a control office on the corner; if necessary they could slam a force field down between the portals like a heavy gate.

Once through the portals I switched on my pirate tracker and made out a blob that must be Jimmy not too far away.

The polis turned its back on the Zones for financial reasons. Houses get old and they get wrecked by quakes, and no one wants to shell out to restore them. Finally Proposition 995 came along, and taxpayers voted in the right for homeowners to zone "dead strips" out of their neighborhoods-and out of the budget. No more income in the Zones. That meant no more street maintenance, no more heat or light, no shops, no cops. You can drag race in the Zones, you can buy contraband, and you can get raped or killed. It's your lookout: the city isn't responsible for idiots here.

It's hard to find a logical distinction between the stray animals and the humans, and both use the place like one big latrine. That's how it hits your nostrils: like piss and shit; like sweat, blood, and decay. As I made my way around crashed vehicles and over broken glass, I saw a pack of dogs peering out at me from an alleyway. Probably guarding a corpse that the vultures hadn't found yet. I gave it a wide berth, but the carrion smell followed me for a long time.

You can buy black market data and chips in the Zones and you can get banned drugs or drugs that are pending approval or even gasoline, so deals were going on all around me. You can buy some highly illegal forms of sex, too - or just take it if you're tough enough. I saw two guys bargaining over some young chickie. She was giggling, but her eyes were glassy and it was clear she was higher than a kite.

Rule Number One in the Zones: mind your own business.

I followed Jimmy's electronic trail past houses that had disintegrated into rubble until I came to an old brick wall which was still partly intact. From the look of things, this was where the

Rule Number One in the Zones: mind your own business.

junkies hung out. Quite a collection were sitting on or leaning up against cracked cement, some lying on the ground where the grass grew through the pavement. Appropriately enough, a whole line of vultures were perched on the wall above their heads.

I reached the guy my tracer said was Jimmy and was discouraged to find that he was one of the ones on his back. I had to haul him up and put him against the wall before I could get even the most minimal response from him. And it was pretty minimal: he was a zombie. Whatever else this drug was, it was definitely a downer.

"Why did you try to kill your uncle?" I hissed at him. I knocked him against the wall a few times, hoping to liven him up. I even held my gun to his head. A few of the other junkies tripped out and ran away howling, but nothing fazed old Jimmy. His eyes were rolling around like marbles, and it was hard to tell if he even knew I was there. "He showed me

the wheel of fire..." he mumbled at last.

I shook him like a rat. "Why did you try to kill Elvis, you moron? Just tell me that!" But it wasn't enough to shake any sense into him.

"The whole is greater than the sum of its parts..."

I dropped the jerk on the ground and turned suddenly to the surrounding junkies. Most of them hustled out of my way, but one was in the middle of solvating his

dose and he had his works all spread out,

so he wasn't about to go anywhere. Consequently he was eager not to piss me off, you betcha.

I knelt beside him. "What's that guy on?"

"TK. It's pending approval."

"What does it do?"

"Fucks you up," the junky said with a disapproving air. He picked up a rubber cord to knot off a vein, but I stopped him.

"Please," I told him. "I have this thing about needles."

"Too bad," the junky said, "you'll never try this stuff, then." He grinned and squeezed a few drops out of the needle's tip. "I'm a busy man, captain. What more can I tell you?"

"Who makes TK?"

"I dunno. Hey, who makes TK?" he called out to the zombies all around us. But none of them seemed to know.

"Ask the Beastmaster," one whispered to me at last, and a few others nodded. "Ask the Beastmaster."

When I got out of there I went to a public bath. Afterwards I had quite an appetite, but first I stepped into a payvid and dialed up Frieda.

"Any autopsy news on Teddybear?"

"He was on a drug called TK at the time of death.

The degree of metabolization suggests he must have taken it right after he got into the cage." That made sense. I didn't think George could have climbed into the bear cage on TK; Jimmy couldn't have climbed into a bathtub. "How was the Zone?"

"Smelled like piss. I need you to look into TK. Find out its structure. See who uses it. Find out who makes it."

"Already on it, boss."

"Anything on the Elvis murders? Keep it local."

"There's an Elvis population in the city of about two thousand. There have been around five hundred Elvis deaths so far this year, sixty of them amongst the over-octo crowd. Of the remainder, 18% were massive coronary arrests and 11% were suicides. Virtually all the rest were due to violent attacks."

"Was TK involved in any of the murders?"

"Some, but not enough to draw a statistical conclusion. The Elvis murders have been around longer than TK has."

"Any census stats?"

"Most of them are employed by the entertainment industry. Quite a few are prostitutes - House of Elvis alone has forty or fifty of them. Then a bunch are employed by the chains - Fast Elvis, Roller Elvis, Chez Elvis - you know. A couple are mediocre musicians or actors or showgirls, and then there's the random array of plumbers and bankers and

housewives and lawyers..."

"OK, I get the picture. How many of the local Elvis crimes have been solved?"

"Eight are still open. They have a few suspects, but they can't establish a motive."

"Hmm..." I scratched my earlobe.

"There is one weird thing, Dick."

"Shoot."

"Well, it could just be a macabre coincidence, but a great many of the murders without an obvious motive relate to the Elvis Cult."

"In what way?"

"It varies. In one of them, some woman used an old machine to crush an auto with an Elvis inside it into a

A thick, silky tail curled over one naked shoulder...

cube of metal; that's the most unusual of the You're So Square murders. There are a number of Blue Suede Shoes murders: in the most famous one, a construction worker from Alabama made the victim wear blue suede shoes with magnetosoles. Then he stuck him on some metal and went over him with a steam roller. And get this: they've had to separate incarcerated Elvis clones from the general prison population because of the number of stoning incidents."

"Sounds like cult and coincidence to me. Like all those Marilyn Monroe suicides ten years ago." Still, it made my earlobe itch even more.

"That's what the sociologists think."

"Well, leave the files on my system. Can you try and find out who the Beastmaster is? Might be related to that place where Teddybear got his implants."

"Way ahead of you, boss. That's the guy I spoke to at Beastyary, a tattoo Artiste. 'Beastmaster' is his registered epithet."

"I need to see that guy."

"Let's go tomorrow. He offered to do some work on me."

When I arrived home Pisser was on my steps again. He was pretty far down the bottle, but on a whim I paused anyway and asked him, "Who's the kid?"

His black sunglasses shone like insect eyes in the darkness. "Da kid," he said, "oh yeah, oh yeah... you stay 'way from dat boy, cap'n..." he started cackling wildly as if he had made some incredible joke.

"Is it a drug, Pisser?"

"Naw. Dat's jus' a joke. He use it to speak wid you."

"Do you mean he can make you do what he wants when you're on the drug?"

"He kin make you do what he want period. He control ever'thang, and nothin' you an' me does really matters," Pisser said. He began to sing suddenly in a deep, cracked voice: "He's got da whole wo - old, in his hand - "

"Pisser," I interrupted him harshly, "is 'the kid' an actual person?"

Pisser stopped singing and looked at me with mirrored eyes which gave nothing away.

"You wouldn't understand," he said coldly, and turned his blind face away from me.

Beastyary is a huge, posh salon. The reception area was thickly carpeted and dimly lit, and there was a lily pond there surrounded by recliners. The water was full of brightly colored fish. I stood staring at them (some had as many as twelve eyes) while Frieda asked to see the Beastmaster.

The receptionist had extensive feline grafts: eyes, whiskers, ears, claws. A thick, silky tail curled over one naked shoulder as she led us out of the foyer, sort of like a boa. Beyond the foyer was a vast salon space. As we made our way towards a section which was screened off, we passed a number of brightly illuminated islands where the Artistes were working on their clients. I saw a guy who was getting metal spikes attached to his skull, another who was having fangs grafted into his mouth. There was a girl whose body was being covered with a rich tapestry of some kind of snake or lizard scales, and there was one who was having what looked like an additional breast attached.

Well, to each his own.

When we reached our destination the cat-girl slipped behind one of the screens. We could see her shadow and the shadow of a tall man through the thin paper. In another moment we came face to face with the Beastmaster.

At first glance I think I was as startled as I've ever been in my life. He was tall and very angular, and every bit of visible skin was covered with intricate tattoo designs done entirely in black. Lips and eye sockets were also black, giving him a skeletal look. His ears curled and spiraled up into elvish points, and his enormous earlobes were pierced with holes about an inch in diameter and closed with silver disks. Thick, dark animal fur ran all the way down over his shoulders. His face was pierced everywhere with silver metal: eyebrows, nose, lips, tongue, cheek. All of his front teeth were silver metal, too, and they were sharp and pointed. At first glance he appeared to be wearing a mask, and he might just as well have been.

You had to see him to believe it.

The Beastmaster didn't know I was giving him the eye straight off, because he was too busy feasting his own eyes (which were red) on Frieda. I can't say I blame

At first glance he appeared to be wearing a mask...

him if it was a while before he noticed me, but at last we all said hi and the Beastmaster waved me to a chair while Frieda explained what she wanted.

"So," I said to the Beastmaster as he was applying enzymes to the tattoo-template graft on Frieda's back, "I hear you knew Teddybear."

He made some movement with his mouth that was hard to interpret, coming as it did from a mouth like that. "A friend of mine did his grafts."

"I saw the job. There wasn't much left of it, but what was there was very cute."

The Beastmaster threw me a mirthless glance. "Some people want some pretty strange things." It was odd hearing a man who looked like him say that, as I guess was his intention. "Nice dragon," he told Frieda. There wasn't much of the dragon left, though. The enzymatic cream had turned into a thick foam of dye, bubbling off carbon dioxide and hydrogen gas, and the dye was fading rapidly.

"You ever hear of TK?" I asked the Beast bluntly.

"Sure. And if your next question is was George doing it, the answer is yes." He started wiping the clear foam from Frieda's back with a towel.

I paused to watch him sketch the image Frieda wanted on her back. In a few moments it took shape: a crane standing in a pool among the rushes.

"Did you ever try TK?"

"Yes."

"What's it like?"

"It's a Ketamine derivative. Ketamine is basically a powerful sedative, but TK has enhanced short-term psychedelic effects, like DMT. So you're really out of it, but all the time you're having these deep, wordless experiences. You feel like you're surrounded by a vast web of life, like you're just a piece of the big picture. Very dissociative." He made what I think was a contemptuous motion with his mouth and selected a needle. "Extremely dull. Infantile."

"Do you think it drove Teddybear mad?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But I think he was mad already." He smiled, flashing a mouthful of sharp teeth. "Maybe the kid told him to do it."

I looked at him sharply. "The kid?"

"Yeah - some people who do TK say they meet a little boy when they're tripping, like with peyote and the Green Man." He was working on his design now, so I shut up for a few minutes. Anyway, I had to look away - I really do have this thing about needles.

"Where did you and George get this stuff?" I asked when he was spraying Frieda's back lightly with evapo-cotton bandages.

"From a guy called Jimmy. He could get anything for you."

I wondered if the Beastmaster knew where the man who could get anything was right now.

"You can get up now," he said gently to Frieda, and turned away to face me while she put on her clothes. "If you want some," he went on, "I have one dose left."

Without waiting for an answer he dug around among the clutter of things on his worktable until he produced a tiny corked vial and a syringe in a plastic packet.

"This is the stuff. You have to shoot it up." I shuddered. "It only lasts about an hour, maybe two at this dose."

...when I started to tie off my upper arm with some rubber cord the conditioning really set in...

It was much harder to go through with it than I expected it to be. I was prepared for the wave of bad memories associated with melting the powder and sucking it up the needle. But when I started to tie off my upper arm with some rubber cord the conditioning really set in; they don't mess around in the military. I experienced a nausea so awful I thought my stomach would invert before the vein rose enough. A blinding headache clouded my vision. It was touch and go whether I would pass out before I could depress the plunger.

But I did what I had to do.

And I met up with the Kid.

He appeared to me at first as a very young child, maybe three years old. We were standing together in the

middle of the Painted Desert on Mars, and he was peering at me from beneath his tangled dreadlocks.

"You've been looking for me," he told me.

"Have I?"

"You want to know why I'm doing it." The boy said.

"It's because there are too many of them, all the same. Like a cancer."

"Who are you?"

He reached out one slim hand to grasp hold of my wrist. But as he leaned forward he suddenly blew up or flew apart, so that I never felt his fingers touch me. He had swelled to a vast, unimaginable size. As my eyes traveled upward, trying to encompass him, I saw a thousand men with flaming swords, a woman with an owl, countless winged forms and a herd of cattle. I saw a million blooming

flowers and a million rotting corpses. It was too much to

see, too much to tell. And still my eyes traveled upwards. Finally, somehow, they came to a huge wheel of fire which he held to his breast. As I looked into the flaming disk I saw-

The ocean. I was standing ankle deep in the water at Muir beach. I looked around for the boy, but instead I saw an enormous Thing towering over me, washed by the salty waves. It was a shapeless blob of slimy ectoplasm, studded with seaweed and anemones. I was reaching for a gun which wasn't there when it spoke in my head.

"The whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

It seemed to expand until it covered the universe. I flew rapidly through the pulsing protoplasm until I suddenly came face to face with -

Myself. Just a single cell in a huge body, one insignificant piece of its vast existence. And as I grasped this it gave a great convulsion and coughed me up, and I found myself lying on the floor in my living room.

I saw by the clock on the wall that I'd lost two hours.

There was one clear thought in my groggy head. Somehow I had to get to Stradivarius before the Kid did. I grabbed my hat and ran out the door, where I almost fell over Pisser.

"It's too late," he said sadly. "Elvis is dead."

I stopped and knelt down beside him where he sat in a doorway. "What are you talking about?" I asked. "Elvis who?"

"All of them," Pisser said. "The King is dead."

I hurried over to the nearest swanky nightclub and went straight to the bar. "Large coffee, black. Single malt, neat. And son, I don't care how you do it, but get ahold of Elvis Stradivarius for me right away and tell him Dick Lamar is here and I have to see him." I laid Stradivarius' note on the bar so that he could see the signature.

Somehow that bartender had a straight line to the King; to my great relief, he walked in about ten minutes later. His samurai were carrying shopping bags from the Wharf, and he had a skinny little girl with him who he introduced as his niece Zelda.

"Sit down here at the bar, Zelda, and have some ice cream while I talk to your uncle."

"I already had ice cream," the brat whined.

"Stay here with the lobsters, Zelda," the King said firmly, and he put a box down beside her. We grabbed a booth in the corner while the little monster teased the lobsters.

"You were right, Mr. Stradivarius," I told him. "You're in grave danger, and you should take every precaution. I think you should hide out until the murders stop."

Elvis turned pale. "Hide out? From who?"

"From everyone. From your samurai, from your family, from your best friend. I don't know how to tell you this, but I think there's a sort of... social... hysteria against-" Just then Zelda let out a scream which made us both jump. Lobsters always have their claws taped, but one of the smart ones had got one loose somehow and was pinching the hell out of the little brat.

"Help, my finger is bleeding!" she shrieked.

Elvis went to the bar, snapping his fingers at the bartender. "A knife, please," he said calmly, and in a moment he had freed her. The sight of Zelda clutching her bloody hand to her breast gave me a strange feeling in my stomach, and I stood up. The samurai got up too, staring at me suspiciously.

Meanwhile Elvis exchanged the knife for a handkerchief and began to blot the wound. I took a step forwards, feeling inexplicably uneasy, and the samurai began to flank me. I hardly noticed them. My eyes were glued to the little girl, who was jerking her hand furiously out of her uncle's grasp.

In her eyes I could see flaming swords and a wheel of fire.

"Elvis!" I shouted. "Get back!"

I reached for my gun so quickly that I had half-

drawn it when the samurai grabbed me. In the same instant, Zelda seized the knife from the bar and stabbed Elvis in the eye.

The knife was about six inches long, very thin-the kind you use to cut lemons and limes up in a bar, I guess.

Elvis went right over.

Even in death the King was generous towards me. After the funeral, his widow presented me with a violin. It's pale red-gold and smells like cedar, and sings as sweetly as an angel when Frieda plays it.

The vid chips taken from the samurai clearly captured the event, but things were still pretty sticky with us for a while. In addition to the local outcry over Stradivarius, a bunch of music critics and musicians and art enthusiasts kicked up a tremendous fuss and called for a national inquiry. But I know who killed Elvis, and for me the case is closed.

Nature is the Free Zone. Nature is kill or be killed. Nature is your immune system ruthlessly eliminating cancerous cells. You can't reason with Nature. You can't ask for mercy from a rock. I've thought this over many a time since then, and I don't see how the Kid could concern himself with any one of us: do you care about the fate of the individual cells in your body, which are dying and multiplying constantly? And in my darkest moments I think that if a population of human beings can sum to a new awareness, the way the individual cells of my brain make up my consciousness, then isn't it right and natural for that new awareness to reign over us, just as my brain governs my body? Can any one of us be held responsible for what he does? I think of the Thing on the beach and the wheel of fire. I've even thought about Free Will, a guy like me.

But one thing I know for sure is true: I know that it's like Pisser says.

Elvis is dead. ❁

You can't reason with Nature.



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Axes of Evil

Robert Neilson talks to Kim Stanley Robinson

RN: Define Kim Stanley Robinson.

KSR: Kim Stanley Robinson, Science fiction writer, Californian, kinda green, Buddhist, Leftist Mountain Lover. Mister Mom. House-husband.

RN: What did you do before you were a house-husband?

KSR: For a while I was a teacher of English Composition at the University of California and mountain person, spent a lot of time up there. And I've always been a science fiction writer since my college days.

RN: Was it when the writing became lucrative...?

KSR: No, no I wrote short stories to begin with like a lot of science fiction writers and published relatively early on, but short stories won't make you a living and that's when I taught composition, worked in a book store, did a variety of things and then got married and began to sell novels. My wife had a post doc appointment in Switzerland so we moved there. At that point I had sold a couple of novels so I slung my hook and quit my teaching job and I've only been a writer since then. A few years after that the first of our boys arrived and I shifted heavily into parenting and doing the house-husband, Mister Mom routine. My wife is a chemist and she works full time so I had the pleasure of staying home.

RN: Do you find the parenting element fulfilling?

KSR: It's been the greatest joy to come out of the writing life, which was

a complete surprise to me because as a young man, like any other young man, I never thought of it, had no knowledge of it and didn't look forward to it in any active sense. But when the time came and it was me and an infant ten hours a day, five days a week for his first two years. That was one of the greatest things that ever happened to me. So ever since then it's been less pure. I learned about day care and we have more friends now with kids and my wife has had more time away from work but it's been a major part of my life since then. The writing I fit in where I can.

RN: Are you a person who needs a routine or do you just...

KSR: I like a routine. I need a routine. My writing I think of like carpentry where you have to put in a lot of hours and you've got to hit a lot of nails and so in general it's gotten real easy these days. I send the family off in the morning. I have a few hours free to try to write every day, during the week. I take the weekends off, just like any other job and the rest of the time is family stuff.

RN: Do you target a number of words or hours?

KSR: It's more a number of hours. I'm not really in control of the number of words and I don't want to get, feeling guilty when I'm doing my best, so I try

to get in two or three hours. If I get one page it's an acceptable minimum for my puritan conscience. Usually I'll try for three pages and hope for five. And five per day is a damn good day's work and it's time to party.

RN: Your current novel, **The Years of Rice and Salt**, looks like you did an awful lot of research.

KSR: Yes.

RN: How many hours research to an hour's writing?

KSR: Tough to calculate but an awful lot of research for this particular project because I didn't know much about Asian history and the idea forced me to learn these things or I wouldn't have been able to do justice to the idea.. I do like to read and I can read in the evening when the kids are watching their video or after they've gone to bed. I hesitate to say. I'm sure there's a few hours of research for every page written. Not to imply that it's dense in that sense of being nothing but facts, but I needed to know, to imagine what it would feel like, so there was an awful lot of research that had to be left out. But nevertheless I had to do it.

RN: What sparked the idea?

KSR: The idea came to me about twenty or twenty five years ago and it was just one of those things as a science fiction writer that once in a while will pop up its head. The alternative history is an established form within science fiction itself and it's interesting. Science fiction itself is a

My writing I think of like carpentry where you have to put in a lot of hours and you've got to hit a lot of nails...



historical literature because every time you postulate a future you're also postulating the history that got us from here to that future. So alternative history works in the same way off of some moment in the past, some interesting moment in the past that's different and then you follow it out. And as you're following it out you're saying this is how history works. This is why things go the way they go. It's very much a matter of historiography or theory of history. It's been

...I thought, about twenty five years ago, about someone else going to bomb Hiroshima and the bombardier decides he doesn't want to do it.

implied in every science fiction novel but especially in alternative histories. So I had thought of a really good idea, I thought, about twenty five years ago, about someone else going to bomb Hiroshima and the bombardier decides he doesn't want to do it. And that turned out satisfactorily and I've often tried little alternative history short stories, but at that time, twenty to twenty five years ago, I can't really remember when, I had this idea what if all the Europeans died in the Black Death. And it's such a big change; everything changes. So many things change that I knew it had to be a novel and I knew I wasn't ready for it, so I just nursed this idea for all these many years. About three or four years ago it was its turn and then I was faced with this daunting situation: if I was going to do justice to it, it meant I was going to have to dive into all kinds of problems, not just with research but also how do you structure a novel that traverses 700 years? Because the novel basically isn't meant to do 700 years. You can argue about what its natural length was because often times they'll tell a story of a whole life or even a couple of generations. So they were models and possibilities but that was the problem to be solved.

RN: There was no pressure to turn it into a series of novels?

KSR: Not from publishers and not from me. My feeling is that the alternative history, while it is interesting, there is no given alternative history idea that justifies a series of novels, it's a little too distant from our world and I think that it will quickly become something like a game

or a crossword puzzle. I've never heard an alternative history idea that would suggest to me more than one book.

RN: I think Harry Turtledove might argue that.

KSR: I wouldn't agree with him. I haven't read his books, nevertheless I think that what he's doing is overextending the natural strength of the form. I'm really interested in

novels. If you said choose between science fiction and the novel as to where your ultimate loyalty lies, I'd say to the novel instantly. The integrity of the novel is really important to me. My Mars trilogy as they call it in science fiction is really just an old Victorian three-decker. It's one novel. It has a beginning and an end and there won't be any sequels. It wasn't a series it was just one of those novels that you need three volumes to tell. It's a big idea. This one I suppose could have been a three-decker but I was interested in compacting, a compression. I know it's silly when you've got a 700 page book to talk about compression but I squished to get it in that far. I think it does it good, it gives it a kind of springiness like when you compress a spring, a certain internal tension in the pages. I hope the pages fly by.

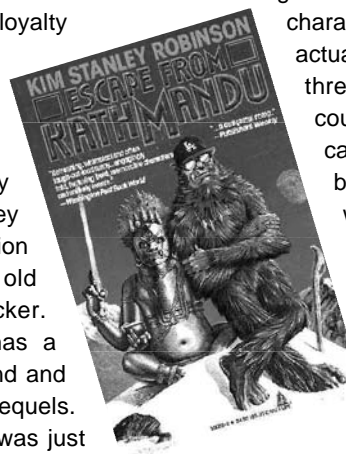
RN: In the Years of Rice and Salt you use the device of reincarnation to bring character types around again and again. You seldom have science fiction writers actualising themes like that and making it an actual element of the book itself.

KSR: Yes. It follows right on what we were saying before. It was a technical problem with the novel. How do you traverse 700 years and it's still

a novel about people you care about? And I don't like the multi-generational saga as a form as a reader myself. You start reading about characters, you start caring about them, and their children are introduced and you say, "All right, I'll care about them too." And then late in the book you're introduced to their children and at that point it's like enough already I can't care about these great-grandchildren or whatnot. So, personally disliking the form I thought I need some other thing so it started as a technical trick. It's an Asian novel, it's a Buddhist novel and I've always been interested in Buddhism since my college days so I thought, "Let's use that as the device to

get these people that are the same characters all the way through." It's actually a remarkably small cast: three major characters and a couple of minor characters you can identify that keep coming back. And I thought, "You don't want to make this some detective story or guessing game where the poor reader is always saying who's who or what's what?" So I thought, "Let's do what they do in

certain Buddhist reincarnation tales where they have a certain identifying mark." In Mishima's reincarnation tale it's a mole in the same position always. They're always a little bit silly when you describe them. In my case it's just their names always begin with the same letter so very quickly the reader, with no clue from



...there is no given alternative history idea that justifies a series of novels...

my part will notice there's always this B character who's always fumbling around and this K character that's very angry and always this I character trying to figure out how things work and being a scientist. And I think, I hope that that's relatively evident as you read so that every time a chapter begins you can just look at their names and say, "Oh, yeah, now it's a woman, now they're weak, now they're powerful, now they're this, now they're that, but you know it's the same character that's coming through."

RN: Some of the movers and shakers who would have seemed peripheral to the main story turned out

to be part of the group being reincarnated, which made me focus away from the main characters, wondering where this or that one got to.

KSR: I wanted to introduce variety because there are ten reiterations of this so I thought once the readers got the rules of the game that then you could find out that... Like this Japanese Samurai that the Indians called Fromwest - at one point he will say my real name is Basho and then the reader would have the game of going, "Yeah, I thought it was the B character," and sure enough it is. So, yeah, I wanted a little bit of something going on so that it wasn't just automatic and repetitious.

RN: And yet he seemed much cooler than all the other B characters. He was a hero type.

KSR: Right. But in the bardo (editor's note: the afterlife where the characters go to be reincarnated) right before that the K character kind of kicks his ass and says, "You're useless, you're always just hanging on and encouraging us and you've got to do something yourself.." He really gets lashed in a lecture in the bardo right before that lifetime and so even though they don't remember these bardo events I wanted to suggest that the B character was trying to do what the K character would have done in his own way. And it's true, this is his high point as an agent of history and of action.

RN: This novel seems to have a theme in common with the **Mars** and **California** novels that the progress of history is taking what's good from the past and adding to it. I see you as a utopian writer. Is that your view of history?

KSR: Yes that's a good way of saying it, I think. That's one way of saying it. It's obviously so complicated but we can't deny culpability or responsibility or opportunity that I think history is just six billion biographies added up and so we're part of it. It's not just the movers and shakers or politicians or the rules of the past but

no matter what was set down by parliaments a hundred years ago that seemed to trap us, we're actually still free agents in the existential sense and if we all chose to tomorrow we could restructure all the rules, cancel all the debts. None of these things are

binding physical forces, like gravity or even manacles, they're all just things we have agreed to. This is in some ways Marxist, to the degree that I understand him but in any case it's a collective, that we're all doing history together, and that being the case when there's six billion of us what one person can do looks so limited but it isn't. It's just that it's small. But one six billionth of something is not the same as zero and therefore you have to take on that burden such as it is. And that's what I wanted to show people doing, and also that every once in a while for certain people, maybe not us but maybe, it's not at all written in stone who

it's going to be, a moment will come big things depend on just you. That's sort of something I took out of Philip K. Dick in **The Man in the High Castle** and I think he talks about this explicitly where Mr Tagomi this little bureaucrat in an office in Japanese San Francisco, there suddenly comes a moment where he can save the world by taking action against these Germans and he's not an important person. Generally there can come

these moments where you need to act and so I keep telling those stories. They make interesting stories. It's almost the novelist's view of history. I think a lot of novelists, if you pressed them, would come down to saying, "Well, yeah, that's how history is made, by this collection of stories."

RN: Even though you can do anything at all in alternative histories, they very often parallel our own - you have a version of the Great War and

the Enlightenment. What made you chose which particular tangents?

KSR: In each chapter as I went along it seemed to me that Europeans

or not, there are certain things happening; there are really powerful Hindu mathematicians, there were alchemists all across Asia and there was a lot of Chinese technology that was incredibly advanced on its own in the 18th century. So those things already existed and in the 18th Century they were all thoroughly hammered by the European Imperial powers so we don't

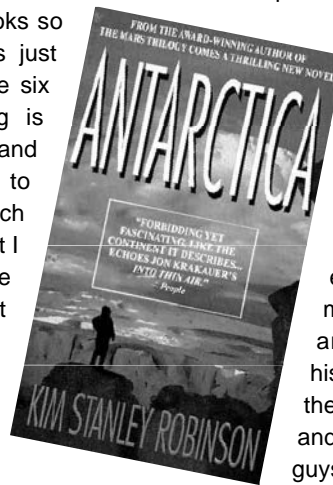
know how they would have developed. I eventually came to the conclusion that certain things would happen no matter what because humans would like to better their lives and make things easier so that the guys in the machine shops and the artisans - once again it's history from below, it's not just the Newtons and the Gallileos and the Leonardos, but these guys were trying to figure out how to make a harder plough

edge or how you could make a sharper sword edge. Here's a lot of weapons pushing that part of metallurgy. But also people were saying, "Why do things fall?" and "How fast is sound?" These questions are answerable because I do believe reality is the same no matter which culture you come at it from. I mean a certain aspect of reality is there to be discovered not invented. So it just seemed like and automatic logical conclusion that some of these things would have happened for sure.

Here we must thank the staff of the Shelbourne Hotel for interrupting and altering the reality of this interview.

I didn't just want to replace Europe with another colonial power that conquered the world, say China. It seemed pointless. So I wanted to create a plausible world where never did anyone dominate the whole world and where there were multiple forces who were powerful enough to imagine that they could survive. And that being the

...we're actually still free agents in the existential sense...



...I wanted to create a plausible world where never did anyone dominate the whole world...

case it seemed that after the industrial revolution there were possibilities for a severe war between civilisations that saw each other as a fundamental enemy as opposed to Germany, England and France who essentially shared the same culture with different languages who were dickering over who was going to control the spoils. I mean they had a terrible war over that, in World War One and World War Two; ridiculous

...researching World War One was just a painful experience, there was so much waste.

really when you think of the stakes involved. But what if it was China and Islam, two cultures that thought of each other as being fundamentally different, then the war might be worse. And I thought, "Oh well, that's an unhappy thought but nevertheless I am doing an alternate history and in this world there is going to be a world war that's even worse. So this is the kind of thinking I was running through. And that was such a dismal thought I thought I'm going to make that chapter really short. It might be dismal and brutal and a really bleak chapter, some of the darkest writing I've done, but it's only 30 pages out of 700. I really crushed it. You don't need much of that to get the tenor of what's going on.

RN: Yet a lot of writers having set that up would have made it the focus of the novel.

KSR: Yes I can see what you're saying but I'm just not that kind of writer. It affects me what happens in my books and that was a very hard chapter to write. A little goes a long way when it comes to describing trench warfare or warfare in general. There are so many clichés and so much darkness that some writers are willing to avoid the consequence of what they're really saying in terms of devastation but I'm not like that. It was a hard process to write that chapter. After I was done I didn't want to re-read it. And I would certainly never read from it aloud, at a reading, I'd never subject anyone to that. It's dismal stuff. And researching World War One was just a painful experience, there was so

much waste.

RN: I liked the metaphor you used, the War of the Assuras, a war between gods. It conveyed the monumental nature of it quite well.

KSR: I thought that that was a powerful image and also the Assuras being the servants of the devas and also thinking about forms of Capitalism and

privilege and power, that it's really these superhuman economic powers, people who are using ordinary humans to fight their battles for them, who are not in the trenches. Yeah, I thought it was a good image in many ways.

RN: Is this your single big venture into Alternate History or will you go back again.

KSR: No I'll never go back, that was it. For one thing I think it's certainly the best alternate history idea I'll ever have. I can't conceive of a more powerful one. And also I don't think, now that I've explored it, my feeling is that the alternate history form is not as powerful emotionally as the standard science fiction format: this is the future. There are two statements that these formats are making. SCIENCE FICTION

says this is what's coming to all of us. So it's like the Ancient Mariner grabbing you. It has very much of a prophet kind of thing. Alternate History is saying, well, this might have happened if something had gone different in the past that we know didn't go different.

Rhetorically that's a much weaker statement, a much weaker stance. So what good you can take out of Alternate History I think comes out of these theories of history and thinking about our world and there are things that it can bring to us, but in the end I think that the stance on the future is

...the alternate history form is not as powerful emotionally as the standard science fiction format...

probably the more powerful one. I'll probably go back to that, writing out of our future.

RN: It seems to me that there are relatively few science fiction writers who are writing about a sustainable future, using it more as a setting for ray guns and spaceships.

KSR: Every genre has its degraded possibilities or its lowest common denominator to have wish fulfilment fantasies. That's true in every genre. Science Fiction is certainly full of that.

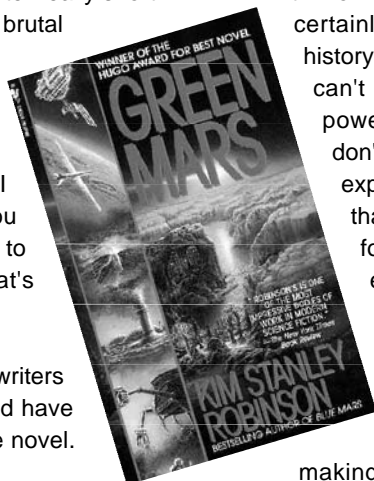
RN: Would you see yourself as a future social historian?

KSR: Just as a novelist or a science fiction writer. I think we've got to focus on that part of science fiction that's doing the full job, or taking full advantage of what the form can do. And also I think of myself as a utopian and a leftist or a political person and my novels are my political statements. And science fiction is a really powerful tool of human thought and we need a hopeful scenario; scenarios of sustainable futures to be sketched out because if every single science fiction novel says the future is going to be bleak, gonna be a wasteland, then the human community begins to think, "Well what's the future going to be like? Well, our professional imaginers all agree that it's going to be a wasteland and a devastation, so why shouldn't I buy a SUV and burn all the gas there is in the world right now. I mean there's this American kind of Gotterdammerung sensibility - why change my ways and work for a sustainable future when it's all going to hell anyway.

RN: But don't many writers, like Philip K. Dick, say it will go to hell unless...? And the unless is always implicit, and you

can see the set of mistakes these people made to get to this future.

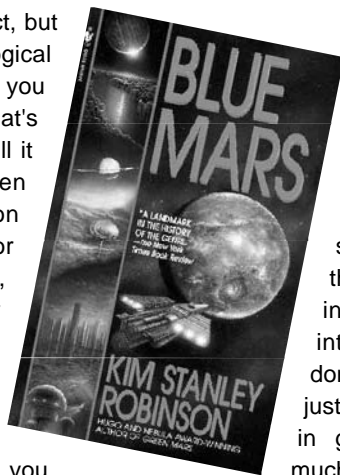
KSR: That's right, there's a critic called Tom Moylan who lives in Ireland who has written about the difference between the dystopia and the critical dystopia. There can be a dystopia



which says everything's going to hell so get your own while you can, a sort of an excuse for another Mad Max fantasy. And then there's a dystopia that's saying if we don't watch out we'll end up here and tries to point out the things that are going wrong, to be correctible. 1984 or any of the classical dystopias that seem to be making a point rather than just using the scenario like a video game. But on the other hand we had so many dystopias, the 20th century's science fiction literature was really dominated by dystopia, what we also need, given this historical situation we are in right now, 2002, globalisation, overpopulation, environment in danger, what could go right? And it's harder to imagine and it's harder to dramatise with good stories, 'cause it doesn't have that natural shoot-'em-up aspect, but it's also an empty ecological niche. It's an opportunity. If you can make a good story that's also utopian, if you can pull it off then there's seven hundred science fiction novels published a year or maybe more but they'll say, "Oh there's really interesting thing. I mean it's completely bogus or implausible but nevertheless you should check out this thing." So you have this empty ecological niche. People do like to have hope. It's not as if we are enjoying this dark moment in history. It's useful.

RN: You have a very positive view of science and technology.

KSR: I think science is a kind of unconscious utopianism. What we think of as neutral rules of the scientific method are actually political rules and ethical rules hidden so that when you talk about peer review or reproducible results or talk about things scientists would insist are just methodology to get to the truth, these are actually ways of dealing with other humans and with reality that are at their heart utopian already. So that I think of science at its best, in its theoretical sense or in the abstract, is



I think science is a kind of unconscious utopianism. A sustainable human civilisation on this Earth is going to be scientific.

one of the best hopes we have going. It sets rules of human behaviour that are very polite and are orderly, there's no corruption and everybody has to be straight. It also is trying to make things easier and better. Let's understand things better so we can make the ecology work right. A sustainable human civilisation on this Earth is going to be scientific. Given this historical moment right now we have no other choice. It's going to have to be a scientific world or no world at all. I like science, I like scientists and I like to encourage them in their utopian aspects so they aren't always just selling out to business. I do think there's two big forces in the world,

science and capitalism. Two ways of thought or controlling capital. One is a kind of absent minded professor, "Let's just see how things work, that's what I'm interested in, I'm not interested in world domination." The other is just completely interested in getting control of as much as possible and piling up as much capital at the top as they can. And that these two are in a giant 'War of the Assuras' and yet down here below we don't really see that or understand it yet, and scientists don't really see it or understand it. Really, capitalism has the capital and the guns so it looks like an uneven battle but science is the power that is understanding the world, making all the new toys and tools and weapons,

so in the end I think science could have the upper hand. One of my goals as a science fiction writer is to bring to consciousness the political element of science or scientists, to take them by the lapels and say, "You guys are the bosses of the world and yet you're like monkeys on a chain with the organ grinder and business and capital are telling you what to do, what to work on and now

they're trying to privatise the results. And this is where it is going to get interesting because science used to be open and public and now there are forces which are trying to make science just another commodity maker.

RN: Your Genes™.

KSR: Yeah, you got it. So now even the seeds in this are part of business and can be ground for a profit. So now, will science resist or not? And if it does resist, how? And this is the story I'm interested in next.

RN: Have you begun on that next?

KSR: I have. I've got a comedy about science policy in Washington DC where despite all the odds things begin to go remarkably right. I'm just going to tell the story of scientists coming to consciousness and struggling for all of us. And it's going to be very implausible - I might do like Gwyneth Jones who called her latest novel a fantasy even though it's near future science fiction, but I think what she's saying is that this is a scenario that's so implausible that I'm going to call it fantasy.

RN: You must have a ringside seat for the whole struggle in California, what with Enron and the energy crisis going on there.

KSR: Yes. And silicon valley and industrial agriculture, agribiz, ownership of the seeds and of the... the genetic heritage of the Earth being privatised also. I think we're at a moment now, this moment of globalisation, when almost everything is being privatised. Amazingly. It's not a great moment in world history obviously. But I do think that the more clarity you can bring to these issues or if you can at least illuminate them from this perspective and say, "This is what's going on," to the extent that people agree, it might allow them to chart better their own personal strategies, their own lab strategies or company strategies. The models have also been ethical documents and so this is just one more version of that.

RN: You seem to be very focused

would make Irish people dirty their hands.

KSR: Those situations arise. The distaste for getting your hands dirty has been inculcated in our schools. I'm a gardener myself, and I think this is something that's learned not natural, and also when you're young and you do a summer harvesting it's a lark but when you're old and you've done it all your life it's a grinding horrible job. So there are ways that the social burdens could be shifted around here. But the deliberate plan to keep people immiserated to make the economy work or when two thirds of the surplus value of all of our work is being siphoned off to people who don't need it... no we're in a crazed system. Not to say that it isn't highly articulated and highly defended - by guns in our faces - so it isn't like we can say that the system's crazy and I can talk the world into changing itself, because it does work in the way that it works now in a highly articulated fashion. I mean economics is a vast subject and so are the laws. And not only that but the future is kind of sold and mortgaged. They've already bought the next century or so, that's supposed to go the way things are right now. If we say that things have got to change there's already debts and mortgages that say the future is already bought up and can't change. "You can't do that, it would be illegal." So, yeah, this is a kind of frozen moment where the things that are wrong can't be fixed easily and all I can say is from my position as a science fiction novelist is to say, "At least I can talk about this stuff. But wait, couldn't we do this, couldn't we do that?" What's powerful about utopian fiction is what if I write ten books, one a year. Each one is like a weather projection saying, "Things go right because we did this, this, this. None of them very plausible at the start but look where it came out to: where things are decent. And then I try a different version. That's actually my plan right now as just being the most useful thing I can do because I don't think we're in a moment where any of it's going to be easy.

RN: It is an exciting thought

though, that you could actually make a difference.

KSR: Yes, I would love to think that. As you know, H G Wells was our great forbearer. I think that the British post war social system comes out of Wells's utopian novels. He must have written ten of them and there are none of them famous any more and they were all derided heavily by the intellectuals of the time and Wells himself called it crazed, but if you look at **A Modern Utopia**, his novel from 1905, **The Shape of Things to Come** and several other of his books he always is saying that it will be a scientific meritocracy and everybody will be taken care of and when you get old there'll be a little stipend that you are given so you don't starve.

And none of these things existed in his world and yet it was part of what you could call British classical liberal reform. People always deride the British liberal reform as just being a cover-up for capitalism but every little thing they did, the corn laws and the work week laws was helpful in its way. It reduced misery. The way that Marxists and the far left dismissed that as being a cover-up is not adequate. You've got to give credit where credit is due and that's another thing I

would like to talk about - there are many ways to betterment and you shouldn't put one down just because it doesn't solve all the problems at once, because I don't think we can solve them all at once now.

RN: They want a quick fix or nothing at all.

KSR: Yeah, sure. Well young people, young men particularly, are such absolutists. "We need things right, right now."

RN: Just what you said in relation to that and the idea of not imposing a particular system on things, doing away with things like Capitalism and Communism and systems like that; the anti-Globalisation movement for example, tends to be heavily criticised because it doesn't have an alternative vision to Capitalism or Communism and yet it's very very popular.

KSR: That's the thing, we're lacking those theories, we're lacking those visions, images, we're lacking a working utopian vision, or what to do right now or what to do next, so it's a nice moment for science fiction. In a way science fiction is not fulfilling its

responsibility or not taking up its opportunity. If a whole ton of science fiction writers were trying to write

positive futures in the largest sense then the anti-globalists could say I've got my Frank Herbert or whatever the equivalent is of an ecological novelist

and they read this book and this is what inspired the: "Let's do it like this or do it like Wells's *A Modern Utopia*." There should be a lot of these folks. I think it's a sign of the illness of our time that there aren't more people trying this.

RN: Is it not that people who are thinking about this are all coming to the same conclusion. "We're going to screw it up."

KSR: Utopianism is mocked, is not a very well regarded. But this is a political attack on it. Utopianism equals socialism equals communism equals Satanism. What you're saying is true. Naturally you look at the situation now and try to work out the most likely next twenty years and it looks really dire but I know some people who are working for the UN's environmental protection offices and everyone knows some people who are working in some kind of social health jobs. If only they had fictions that would give them encouragement for what they are working so hard to do, which would be

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science fictions, then they would have a better sense of the ultimate goal. So I think there are lots of people working towards the good and science fiction writers, too many of them are going for just the easy story - the teenage wish fulfillment fantasy, the violence, because violence is always dramatic. It is easy and it might sell and there are all these reasons to it but it's not helping out these folks in the UN or the WHO. We all know people who are - poorly paid usually - working for charities or the social services.

It all needs to be supported by visions; William Morris, William Blake; there's always been these visionaries who are saying things will be better. It's never been a very realistic statement.

RN: Visionary when you mention those kinds of guys, particularly Blake, has always had a subtext that says Looney.

KSR: Yeah, but we all still remember William Blake and he was writing in the 1780s. He'll never be forgotten while people know English.

RN: Maybe the problem is we're not prepared to be Looney, just let our minds go?

KSR: That's right. That's certainly not rewarded. That's a function of the young. It used to be true. You'd have a much more hefty percentage of idealists and loonies and unsocialised hoppers at the college level or high school level than you do among adults. Adults tend to have seen ten or twenty years of hammering and they know that it's not easy and not likely.

RN: But aren't kids much more pragmatic now? You don't see so much of the eighteen-year old idealist any more.

KSR: Right. That's why I qualified that. I think the percentage might have dropped. You do get a lot of the anti-

globalisation movement coming out of the young and the percentage was never as high as it looked like when all of us hippies were doing it in the early seventies. Then it looked universal but ten years down the line you realised that it was just a fashion for a lot of people.

RN: Has your current novel been even more politicised by the current political events?

It's interesting that it should come out at this time, showing a positive view of the East. Has

this been picked up on?

KSR: Yeah, sure, to the point where the book had to be vetted by Muslim experts because British publishers particularly are very sensitive to this after Rushdie, and so it had to be checked out to make sure I hadn't made any gross errors - which I had but they were fixed - and you know I finished it last June and I had no idea any of this was coming. I wouldn't claim at all to have predicted any of this. It just was the logic of this idea drove me into the east and into a contemplation of Islam. I have a fair number of Muslim readers because of the Mars trilogy. There was a nice solid Islamic element on Mars in it, just because of the old... kind of making up for Dune, and saying that a planet that looks like the empty quarter of Saudi Arabia is going to attract some Bedouins and also

that Islam is a major world culture that has not been taken into account. Like the big celebration of the year 2000. It didn't seem to occur to anybody that it isn't the year 2000 universally; it's the year 1423. It was a celebration of the British Empire, of Colonialism or Westernism and all these other cultures

were supposed to go along with it as though there weren't other calendars. So yeah, I was already hip to the idea

that there was a world culture that was not commensurate with Western values. Whenever you've got a culture that says separation of Church and State is crazy and that the Church and the State ought to be the same; that I find deeply frightening and needing to be taken into discussion.

RN: Which one isn't doing its job if they're both together?

KSR: As an American and fully believing in the separation of Church and State because I don't believe in any of the religions, I find the Islamic insistence on a theocracy and an Islamic State to be absolutely frightening. I think that is actually one of their major problems. It's their problem to solve but if they're ever going to get past a kind of reactionary regressive era of the mullahs they're going to have to do something about that because in this world you can't just declare that everyone has to be this religion or else they are second class citizens. I don't think it will wash. I think this is one of the world problems but the thing is it's not our problem to solve or it looks like Imperialism all over again. That's a different part of the ugly moment of our time.

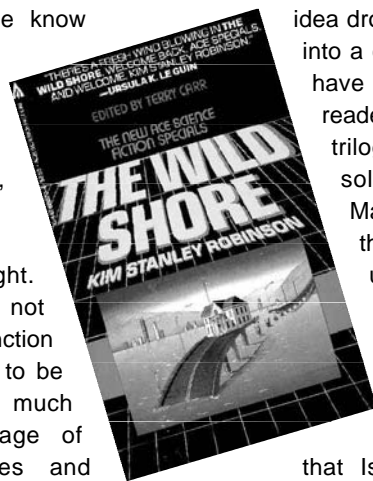
RN: It seemed to me that you tried to honestly cope with the shortcomings and the problematic nature of an Islamic state.

KSR: What I did was I went to the Islamic feminists and read what they said about it. I did not feel comfortable thinking up solutions as a white male Californian to the Islamic situation or even critiquing it, but there is a vast literature by Islamic feminists and Islamic progressivists that is saying we need to do these things in order to follow Mohammed's instructions to always modernise, always improve. They point out the parts of the Koran where Mohammed says this is just the

basic template, take these basic rules that all humans are equal and then keep improving the system and

so they always seize on that as opposed to the hadith and the regressives. A lot of the hadith are false

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and faked and the scholars can prove this, so the Islamic progressives are in a terrible battle and for them it's a physical battle. When they give lectures the windows of their cars are broken afterwards; they're jailed, they're assassinated. In Iran the progressive Muslims trying to fight the regressive government put in since the revolution, they're in big trouble. And since America is the one that fucked over Iran and put the Shah in power and caused the reaction that has the mullahs in power, just as an American I feel an extra responsibility to the progressives in Iran, just to support them in any way possible. For my idiot president to call Iran part of an axis of evil has just been devastating to their cause in Iran because now they have to defend themselves on both fronts.

RN: Pity we didn't get to the idiot president earlier.

KSR: Yeah.

RN: Also China and India are very much in the news at the moment. China shaping up to be a superpower, it's all coming to a boil, an East-West divide.

KSR: We'll see. Chinese are hard bastards; I hate what they're doing in Tibet. But I'm more comfortable thinking about China because of the rationality involved. A bunch of people who, because of their leftist roots and the way that they've come out of their own people and the way that they've taken their own fate in their hands and the way that they're not religious, I just feel that I can understand and talk to them. I feel that they'll accommodate my values faster than Islam will. I felt that throughout the novel. I was always more in sympathy with the Chinese characters and situations. I could understand them faster and have more sympathy.

I feel that (the Chinese will) accommodate my values faster than Islam will.



RN: But you did say at one stage that not having a god made them hard and cruel.

KSR: Having said that you can't deny this hard and cruel aspect to them and also as a supporter of Tibet I don't want to be sounding like a Chinese apologist because there's just too many things I object to. Nevertheless they don't make me uncomfortable in the same way.

RN: Is there any hope for Tibet as you see it?

KSR: Yes. But for some sort of... exactly what the Dali Lama's asking for. The Chinese don't like living there - they'll never give up that land, it's just a huge tract of land - but they could let the Tibetans survive rather than trying this slow-motion genocide.

RN: Can outsiders have any effect on the situation?

KSR: Sure. We shouldn't have given those bastards the Olympics, that's what I think. And on like that. We could keep on the pressure saying, "You're not yet in the human community." And this is something America can always do. I mean America is the heart of Capitalism so it's really the axis of evil in some ways. But on the other hand it's also the country of countries.

Everybody else sent their people there - you know I'm Irish-American myself - it's such an international community there and everybody's contributed so it's like our world experiment in doing things right.

RN: Or doing things wrong.

KSR: But that's the thing about being American, there's so much of both and they're so tightly intertwined, like a shrub or a hedge that's it's hard to pull out the part and say, "I like this part I'm proud to be American. I hate this part I'm ashamed to be American." And oftentimes they're just twisted up, the two parts.

...America is the heart of Capitalism so it's really the axis of evil in some ways. But on the other hand it's also the country of countries.

RN: I always think it would be a much healthier to be able to say that you're proud to be American despite the bad, rather than denying its existence.

KSR: There is an American patriotic mode that our idiot President represents and has got huge approval ratings for, although he did not win the election, the bastard, so even in America a majority of the people are saying let's keep with the third way, a soft liberal reformist slow-paced thing that Clinton and Gore were doing. More people wanted that than this.

RN: I have to say, as an outsider the September 11th tragedy has been a Godsend to your idiot president, in that it has taken the spotlight off his idiocy.

KSR: And now he wants to keep it a permanent war economy, like all governments, war is really good for government. That's why Iraq, the war on terrorism, it's all so transparent. So far it's working like a charm.

RN: It's probably going to get him re-elected.

KSR: I retain some hope, and there's precedent. His father was stupendously popular after Kuwait and lost just two years after. So anything can happen.

RN: Just like science fiction. ✿

One Last Look At A Half-Moon

Chris Butler

Chris Butler lives in Hove on the south coast of England. His debut novel, *Any Time Now*, was published by Cosmos Books in 2001. Other stories have appeared in *Albedo One*, *Enigmatic Tales* and the anthology *Strange Pleasures*. He has also written book reviews for *Infinity Plus*. Chris has a sneaky suspicion that the very large cappuccino served in the Borders bookshop cafe contains a portal through which a dunked biscuit can be transported to the other side of the galaxy. His website is at <http://www.chris-butler.co.uk>

1

When Jessie Revin closes her eyes for the last time, I like to think she'll be flying. Faster than the eye can follow, hurtling over the horizon and continuing out into orbit. I sometimes dream that I'm going with her into that unknown, but old Samuel Holden was never destined to be that lucky. I'm sat here in my office long after I should have gone home, reading her last case report - the report I promised I wouldn't read until after she'd gone. By rights I should wait a little longer, but when I think of her lying there, the life seeping out of her, I can't help feeling like she's already been pronounced.

Hewersone Software, case report, first paragraph, Jessie says she doesn't get out much. That's nothing unusual these days, except it's not a typical opening remark in a fraud investigation file. Jessie particularly didn't get out much because she had to limp on a bad left leg, but it seems like a lot of people with two good legs have forgotten how to use them. Why subject yourself to the smog and the hassle when you can go most anywhere you want in an instant as a virtual. Anyway, she goes on to talk about the day she was diagnosed. By and large, doctors aren't willing to examine virtual patients. So she'd had to go there in person. Real patient Jessie had stood in a real hospital listening to a real doctor telling her she was really going to die.

In her report she's included a link to the medical records from the consultation. I select it and a hologram play shimmers to "life" amid the office gloom.

"Please take a seat Miss Revin," the doctor says. I index forward searching on "patient reaction to diagnosis."

"...is there any point asking for a second opinion?" she asks, her voice little more than a whisper.

"I am very sorry, Miss Revin. There really is nothing that can be done for you."

"Do you have any advice at all?"

"The only advice I can give you is to make the best use you can of the time left to you."

"Three months. It's not a lot."

"No."

"Three quality months you say?"

"Yes. You will feel quite well. The end will come very suddenly... a matter of days."

The image dissolves. Three months; what do you do with your last three months?

I have no idea why she continued with the investigation of Hewersone Software.

I light another cigarette and read on. Hewersone were doing well. Too well, alarm bells went off when a company's financial performance improved that much that quickly.

I've worked for the Tax Department for forty years and I've seen a lot of changes, a lot of good people come and go. I can honestly say that Jessie was one of the best investigators ever to work here. She didn't specialise in company fraud by chance, it was her calling. To her its perpetrators were no better than muggers.

Maybe carrying on with the investigation was something she knew how to do. Telling her boss she was quitting because she only had three months to live... maybe that was too hard for her. Whatever. Hewersone was Jessie Revin's last case.

Three months; what do you do with your last three months?

2

When you investigate a possible company fraud you don't knock on the Chief Executive's office door, virtual or otherwise, and ask him whether or not he is committing fraud. Not at first anyway. You start with data, with the officially published accounts. Then you get sneaky.

Hewersone Software had been run by three generations of Hewersones. The

current heir to the throne was Rem Hewersone, by reputation a complete bastard. Utterly ruthless. The sort of person Jessie would enjoy taking down.

The Department had on-line access to Hewersone's official payroll data. The number of employees officially on the payroll had fallen over the last two years. That combined with increased profitability suggested some kind of efficiency improvement. Sneaky move number one was to obtain a company web directory and compare it with the payroll list. Easier said than done, most companies keep their "phone" books secret, and Hewersone were no exception.

She couldn't see the directory but she could speak to someone who could. Naturally she recorded everything. I sit back and watch the hologram play. She went on-line disguised as a man and called at Hewersone's main reception. Sometimes it pays dividends to take on film star good looks when dealing with female receptionists. "Message for Mr Smith," Jessie said, another standard ploy that sometimes paid off.

"We have three people by that name," the receptionist oozed sweetly, "Do you have a first name?"

Jessie fumbled in her virtual pocket for a virtual scrap of paper.

"John, Sarah or Malcolm?" the receptionist offered helpfully.

Interesting. According to the payroll data there should only have been two Smiths. John and Sarah. "Malcolm Smith is the one I want," Jessie said, "can you put me through?"

"Certainly. Connecting you now."

She thanked the receptionist for her help. An instant later she stood at Malcolm Smith's virtual front door. She rang the doorbell and waited. He must have been on-line and not terribly busy because he accepted the interrupt pretty quickly.

You start with data, with the officially published accounts. Then you get sneaky.

"Hello, Mr Smith. I wonder if I might have a few minutes of your time."

He regarded her a moment. "I guess you don't have a salesman's id else a virtual boot would have kicked your virtual butt into orbit by now," he said.

"No. I'm with the Tax Department."

"Oh hellfire," he said. It's a typical response we get a lot. You think you've suddenly become invisible as their minds fly over all things undeclared or dubiously dodged.

"Relax," she said. "You're not in any trouble. May I come in, sir?"

"By all means, come through son."

I approve of the design of Mal Smith's living room. There's remarkable carving in the mantelpiece, otherwise very subtle, sparse.

"A beautiful room," she said. I guess she agreed with me. "Is your real living room just like it?"

"Identical," he said, "I'm not one for fantasy. What about you? Are you as handsome in real life?"

"I may have smoothed out a wrinkle or two," she said.

"You tax men are all the same. Vain as hell."

She sat down in an armchair and studied him. We're trained to take a moment to assess people. He looks about fifty. Plenty of wrinkles, overweight, thinning grey hair. He wore a burgundy, patterned waistcoat over a white open-collared shirt, black jeans and a pair of training shoes.

"So, what's it like working for Hewersone, Mr Smith?"

"Please, call me Mal. I've worked for Hewersone a long time. They've been good to me."

Yeah, but officially you don't work for Hewersone at all.

"Of course, it was different in the beginning," he continued. "You know, we all used to go to a real office and sit together. I remember when they first started running trials in teleworking. Yeah, they ran trials, actually cared what people thought, wondered whether people would take to it. Eventually of course it happened whether people wanted it or not. Economics. It's just a lot more profitable, but it takes a certain kind of person to want to work this way given a

choice. Kids like you probably don't realise there ever was a choice."

The house computer system materialised in front of them, visualised as a young man dressed as a waiter.

"You actually travelled to an office every day," she said shaking her head. "It must have been a hell of a lot of hassle. And slow. I always hated going anywhere in person."

"Hated?" he said. Maybe he thought the past tense strange.

"All of a sudden I'm interested in travelling."

"I don't get out much. Problem with my back. Just as well teleworking caught on in my case, I guess. But I liked it better in the old days."

"So you liked working for Hewersone better back then, but it's okay now too?"

I can't believe how composed she seems. I wonder if there was some objective part of herself that was able to take a step back and wonder what the hell she was doing. Shouldn't she have been off in a corner somewhere crying? You've only got ninety days to live. Maybe the part of herself that enjoyed her work told the other part to sod off.

"Yeah. It's good," Mal said. "They pay me to do what I'm good at. They don't hassle me. I could retire any time but like I say, Hewersone are good to me and they appreciate what I have to offer. So I'm happy to carry on a few more years."

"You're paid monthly?"

"Yeah."

"Can you bring up last month's pay statement?"

"Sure. Sys?"

The house computer system materialised in front of them, visualised as a young man dressed as a waiter.

"What does sir require?" the waiter asked.

"Last month's pay statement for my guest, please."

A sheet of paper materialised in the waiter's hand, which he then handed to Jessie. It showed itemised gross and net income. Apparently Mr Smith was being told that he paid his taxes.

"Do you mind if I keep this?" As soon as she'd touched it, it was effectively her data anyway. She only asked out of politeness.

He nodded. "So what's this visit really about?"

"It's just a formality. Random check. I have everything I need for now. Thank you for your time. Oh, one other thing, could I see your entry in the Hewersone web directory?"

Smith asked the waiter for the book, it materialised in his hands and he thumbed through it until he found the relevant page. Jessie casually stood, reached out a hand and ran her finger down the page until she came to Smith's entry.

Then she smiles the way she does and I'm very glad to be able to witness it.

Smith studied his guest suspiciously then, knowing that she'd just copied the whole directory. "This isn't about me is it? It's about the company."

"I'd appreciate it if you could keep this discussion between us. I'd like to talk to some other employees. Check they're all as happy as you are."

"No problem. Call back when you finish your investigation though. That's not a lot to ask is it?"

She faltered, at last said, "If I'm able I will. One more question Mr Smith..."

"Please, do call me Mal."

"Are you alive?" she said blandly.

He smiled then. Could be any number of reasons but if I had to put a label on that expression, I'd say he was impressed. "Of course," he said.

She didn't bother walking back to the front door. Just blinked back to the reality of her home, and filed the recording in the report.

3

I put the file to one side. It's time I saw Jessie. It only takes a few seconds to generate a holographic body at the hospital. They say she drifts in and out, which is just so like her. I wish I could adjust the blinds to let a little moonlight in, she'd like one last look at a half-moon, I'm sure. She opens her eyes. "What are you looking at?" she says croakily. Then she smiles the way she does and I'm very glad to be able to witness it.

"I've been reading the Hewersone case file."

"You promised you wouldn't."

"Yeah, I promised. And it's been sat in a drawer for three months. Do you want me to stop?"

"It's okay. Doesn't matter anymore."

"You don't mean that. You never let go of a case."

"Yeah, well, as it happens it was an important case, but not for the reasons I expected. Open the blinds for me, Sam, it's so dark in here."

"I can't, sorry. I'll call someone."

"Shit, Sam, get your sorry ass down here and say goodbye properly."

I shrug my shoulders the way old men do when they've been caught out. "Take me half an hour. You gonna stay awake that long?"

"Hell yes," she said, and I believed that she would.

I put the report in my pocket and head down to the tram stop. The smog assaults my nostrils as I step outside the apartment block, even through the surgical mask tied around my face. I bury my hands deep in the pockets of my coat, thinking how much I hate the winter. I read while I wait.

She'd looked back over previous years' payroll information and discovered that no Mal Smith had ever worked for Hewersone. Comparing Hewersone's web directory with its official payroll data gave her a hundred names. One hundred extra that Hewersone weren't telling the Department about. She started calling on the others. They didn't seem to have much in common, except a tendency to live very insulated lives. They all seemed to live to work. There's a remark in her notes about how much she empathised with them.

She decided it was time to meet Rem Hewersone. She wanted to see him in person. She wanted to see the real man, not a virtual construct that might or might not look like the real thing. She made the appointment and when the time came she limped her way down to a tram stop just like this one. We've all come to rely on the trams, the private motor vehicle industry having died on its feet. I can picture her there, the wind cutting into her face the way it cuts into mine.

This was the day she was attacked. She's included a transcript of the interview she gave to the police:

A tram came at the opposite platform, heading out of the city. A single passenger got off it and walked away. I forgot about him, impatient for my own tram to arrive. The next thing I knew he had grabbed me from behind. He bent my arm behind me, forced me back away from the platform down among a line of trees.

He was choking me, his arm around my neck. Breathlessly I asked what he wanted. He spun me round, releasing me.

"To touch you," he said. "So little opportunity these days."

Slowly I moved my hands to the zip at my collar. "Is this what you want?" I said, slowly pulling the zip down to open the jacket.

"Oh yeah," he said.

"And then?"

"Then I'm going to rape you. Then I'm going to choke you to death with my bare hands."

I don't have long to live. I'm ill. All I could think was,

She wanted to see the real man, not a virtual construct that might or might not look like the real thing.

no way are you taking my three months away from me. I pulled the handgun from

my shoulder holster, which was accessible now that I had opened my jacket, and unloaded six bullets into the man's chest. Each impact knocked him backwards, his legs free-wheeling under him. I kept pulling the trigger even when the chamber was empty, it was clicking in my hand and he was still falling away from me. Then there were leaves flying out from under him as he hit the ground. Then I blinked and it was all so still. I think I'd been standing over him for a few moments - I must have spaced out or something.

Eventually, I had a minimal web hook-up with me: ear-piece and a microphone, and I went back to the platform and I contacted the police. You arrived within minutes.

As her boss, I'd arrived too. There were dozens of officers inspecting the scene.

"You don't think your reaction was a little extreme?" one of the detectives asked her.

"He would have raped and murdered me. He said so."

"No weapon though."

"He wanted to do it with his bare hands. He wanted the touch. I guess virtual reality just didn't do it for him."

"Yeah, well, he was a piece of trash that's for sure. Long record. Good of you to take him out."

She smiled but I couldn't see any warmth in it. "Guess I'll have to come down to the station?" she said.

He nodded. "I can't see there'll be any problem. We should have some video of your abduction from the platform."

With that, he headed back to the forensics men studying the body. He called back to her, "We'll have you out by nightfall."

At nine o'clock that night they released her. I was waiting and went with her back to her apartment. There are two kinds of people in this world. People you look at, and people you look away from. I know which category I'm in and it ain't the same one as Jessie. So I never told her how I feel about her, why embarrass myself? "What are you working on?" I asked.

"Possible tax evasion in Hewersone Software. I'm not sure what I'm looking at yet."

I'd heard of Hewersone through a contact in the IT industry. They were highly regarded; prestigious even. Something happened to the hackles at the back of my neck. "Any chance this attack on you is related to the case?"

She looked surprised. "I hadn't considered that. No, I can't see why it would be related. The guy... he was a nut. That's all there was to it."

I had no real reason to suppose she was wrong. "Okay. Well, just take care of yourself. I'd hate to see anything happen to you."

She faltered then. Maybe she was tempted to tell me about her illness. Who can know? I put it down to tiredness and after a moment she just said goodnight.

In her report she says she went inside and sleep took her the second her head hit the pillow. At some point during the night she had visitors, apparently Hewersone wanted to speak to her sooner rather than later. They forced their way into her apartment and "requested" an on-line conference. She accepted more graciously than they asked.

4

I glance at the watch she gave me for my birthday one year. She said a man in my position had to have a decent watch. Maybe when I get to the hospital I'll tell her how I feel about her. What harm can it do now? And she might like to know how much she was loved. Yeah, right. I'm too old for all this.

There's no recording of her meeting with Hewersone, just Jessie's written account of what happened. One good thing about getting old, I grew out of tram sickness. So I read.

On-line, the sun dazzling in her eyes, the rhythmic sound of oars dipping in water and the sensation of movement coinciding with each pull. She put her hand up to shield her eyes so that she could make out the rower.

"You wanted to see me," he said casually. "You're investigating my company."

"Hewersone?" she asked.

"Sometimes I go by that name," he said distractedly. He never looked directly at her, preferred to look away as if he were talking

...any competitive advantage it is only an advantage so long as you have it and your competitors do not.

to the fish. "I don't spend much time in reality these days. I suppose I'm a victim of my own success."

He had the appearance of an old man, weather-worn with grey hair and a shaggy white beard. "You're not what I expected," she said, "I'd heard you were a ruthless business man."

His muscles strained against the oars. "I just help travellers across the river," he huffed. "This is the only boat for miles you know."

"These are not quite the circumstances I had in mind when I arranged to meet with you."

"I wouldn't know about any arrangements. People come, I take them across the river. All day long, back and forth, back and forth. It's a simple life. People tell me their stories. I give them advice when I'm able. I just decided it was time for us to meet."

"Your people forced their way into my home."

"Please don't think of it like that. I had a small window of opportunity. An available... timeslice if you like. So here we are."

He set down the oars. "Now, what can I do for you?" he said cordially.

If she'd been at all thrown by any of this I guess she managed to stay composed. "The Hewersone company has had an amazingly profitable spell. How has this been achieved? Bear in mind that any false statements made to me could be used against you if I bring charges against you."

"Charges?"

He paused, as if trying to comprehend the meaning of her words, the water lapping against the side of the boat. "First of all," he said at last, "it's the board who really run the company. I advise them, that's all. So if there has been any impropriety it is they who should be investigated."

"That's not at all the public impression of the company."

"Really? Interesting. That aside, we do have a... competitive advantage. Something we're trialing that seems to be working. You will appreciate that with any competitive advantage it is only an advantage so long as you have it and your competitors do not. So I have a very real incentive to tell you nothing."

"If I bring the might of the department into a full-scale investigation, believe me there will be a considerable financial impact on Hewersone, both in terms of manpower to assist us in our investigations and also in terms of legal costs. I could even stop you trading, think about that! On the other hand, if you can convince me that you're not actually

doing anything illegal, I can back off quietly. If it's confidentiality that concerns you, I assure you I am more than familiar with the concept."

"You are most persuasive. Very well. The key to it all is reality. In the real world, you cannot say for sure that something exists until you perceive it, see it, hear it... You are familiar with this theory?"

"From school, I think, but..."

"But in virtual reality it is quite the reverse.

Everything you perceive is false. By perceiving it you know that

Everything you perceive is false. By perceiving it you know that it isn't real.

it isn't real. This becomes problematic. We're starting to see psychological problems in the population as a result of this."

"We are?"

"Yes we are. Because most people switch between the two and it disorients them. They're starting to lose faith in things. If someone doesn't start limiting the amount of time people spend in VR they're all going to go insane. Or the other possibility is the reverse. Spend all your time in virtual reality. The mind seems to be able to adapt to that. And it helps if you're careful about the design of the virtual realities."

"In what way."

"Look. When I'm rowing the boat, I cannot see the shore behind me. But I don't need to see it. I know that I always get to the other side. I've travelled across this river so many times. If one day some problem with the software occurred, and I just kept rowing and never came to the far shore, well I could never believe in it, or trust in it, again."

"So you're saying that the reality must be dependable."

"I'm saying that if it is dependable then it is survivable. Now, let me show you another kind of reality."

Instantly they were at Mal Smith's place. In the virtual living room she had visited days before.

"You know Mal," Hewersone said.

Mal took her hand and kissed it. "So nice to see you again," he said. "You look different."

5

The first thing I do when I get to her hospital room is to open the blinds. That half-moon's right up there in plain sight. I brush a few wayward strands of her hair back off of her forehead. She wakes then and smiles, her eyes crinkling at the corners like they always do. "You were sleeping," I say.

"Was not. I guess you're really here this time."

"Yeah. Really here."

"Isn't good to mix and match, you know. Real me. Real you."

"Yeah."

"Oh, and a real moon in the sky. Half a moon anyway. You know what, I believe in the other half, even though I can't see it."

I laugh. She always makes me laugh. "So Hewersone made a believer out of you."

"Oh yeah," she says. She sounds so full of joy but she looks so tired. "Talk to me, Boss."

"What about?"

"Anything, just talk to me."

"I... I'm still reading your case file. Let's talk about that."

"That old thing. Feels like a lifetime ago I wrote it. But yeah, why not, where're you up to?"

"Hewersone's been telling you about the problems of living in virtual reality. And he's taken you to see Mal Smith."

She smiles then, like a bad joke teller who can't resist laughing before they've told the punchline. I throw the report aside dramatically. "Tell me in your own words," I say. And she does.

"Multi-tasking.' That was the first thing Hewersone said. Then he took a moment to gather his thoughts, and words flew out of him like birds taking flight, 'In the early days of computers, there were single-tasking operating systems and there were multi-tasking systems. A single-tasking system could only run one computer program at once. But a multi-tasking system could run multiple programs at once. The single-tasking computer soon became obsolete. The human brain does multi-task to an extent. It can keep your heart beating and solve a crossword at the same time. But in terms of its perception of the outside world, and the conscious mind, it is only single-tasking. You only have one active personality.'

"I said, 'Certainly most healthy people just have the one.'

"Hewersone laughed out loud at that. 'Why do you think that is?' he said.

"'Because we only have one set of sensor organs. One body in one place. Perceiving the world in one place.'

"'Yes. Excellent. But what if you had two bodies? Two bodies in different locations but only one mind. Do you think the human brain is powerful enough to control two bodies at the same time? To hold two conversations independently at the same time?'

"It's not a question I had ever considered. My immediate thought was that it was not possible.

"'Perhaps it could not drive two real bodies,' Mal said. 'All that management of the heart, lungs, kidneys, et cetera, et cetera. But two virtual bodies, what's so difficult about that? It requires very little processing power at all. This is what we're trialing. Think of it. You employ one

person, but in virtual reality his brain drives twenty virtual bodies.

So you get twenty times the work per employee.'

"My mind raced, the implications beginning to dawn on me. I said, 'You've actually done this?'

"'Yes, it really works,' Hewersone said. 'Of course it has to be the kind of work that can be done in virtual reality. Writing computer programs for example. Not much point having multiple carpenters in virtual reality because they build real things.'

"'Show me the proof,' I demanded.

"Then he said, 'I already have. Mal here is one of my virtual bodies.'"

My jaw drops. I reach for my pack of cigarettes, then remember I'm in a hospital.

"I see you're as stunned as I was," Jessie says. "I

knew then, without any shadow of a doubt, that it worked. That in virtual reality, you really could be in two places at once. Twenty places at once. Have a career as a software engineer. Another as a novelist. Another as a man who rows a boat across a river. And any time you decide a life is not for you, you can shut it down."

Her voice is weak. I move my chair a little closer and she takes my hand and she says, "Not much time left I think. Thank you for coming. Thank you for showing me the moon."

A holographic image formed next to me, pixels all dancing into focus.

"Mal!" she said with a big smile. "It's good to see you."

"We thought at least one of us should be here. We learned a lot from you. A fair exchange wouldn't you say?"

"Oh yes! This... it's really happening, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid it is," Mal said gently.

"Yes... I... can... see."

She tightened her grip on my hand. "Please," she said struggling to turn her head towards Mal, "tell Sam what we did together."

Her whole body sagged then and she died. She died with her eyes open, I reckon she was determined about that.

6

Mal Smith stepped back. Afraid he might not concede to her request, quickly I asked him what he meant by "a fair exchange" and he told me how Jessie had spent the last three months of her life.

"Hewersone needs test subjects, people prepared to turn their backs on the real world and live in the virtual, so we can study the effects of long-term submersion. Jessie has lived solidly in that other-world for three months. I should say other worlds. While her real body was drip-fed, cared for as a comatose patient is cared for, twenty neural interfaces fed twenty virtual realities into her brain. In one reality she learned to paint. Another she spent at a holiday resort, dancing all night, learning to ski by day. In another she read all the unread books on her bookshelf, there were dozens she'd bought and never had time to read. Another she lived on an alien planet we invented for her. She saw more in those three months than many people do in a lifetime."

"But none of it was real," I say.

"Does that matter?" Mal asked me. I can't say I know whether it matters or not. "The very day she came to us," Mal continued, "in the real world, she was attacked. Sometimes the real world isn't everything we would hope for."

"That's no reason..."

"It's entirely the reason. Could she have danced all night? Could she have learned to ski, out here with that leg of hers?"

"She managed fine, that's one of the reasons why I loved her."

"Loved her?"

"Yeah. I never told her though."

Mal inhaled deeply, as if sucking real air into his ethereal body. "Perhaps it will help you to know of one other of her virtual realities. She could have lived any existence she could dream up. Any existence we could dream up. But

for one of her twenty, she went back to work with you, reliving old cases you worked on together. We generated the scenarios from archived case files. She must have enjoyed working with you."

Mal's image dissolved leaving me alone with Jessie. I'm not at all sure I trust him. The attack on Jessie right before her meeting with him seems a little too convenient for my liking. Maybe he set it up just to make her that little bit more inclined to accept his offer. Three idyllic

"...any time you decide a life is not for you, you can shut it down."

months in which to do all the things you never had time to do, versus

three months of cold, harsh, violent, polluted reality.

She ends the report saying how much she wanted those experiences. And that she had no evidence whatsoever of any illegality on Hewersone's part. That being the case, I can't see any reason to feel other than happy for her. How fortunate she was to have that opportunity. I take her head in my hands and angle it so that she faces towards the window. I look at a half-moon and I wonder how confident I am that it really is up there. For a moment I imagine I'm in a rowing boat, sailing on the moon, out of the lit side into the dark side. Until everything is darkness, but that big old moon is still sitting there beneath me, holding me up and carrying me forward.

I walk out of her room, out of the hospital, out into the cold night air. I think of her dancing. I think of her reading the last page of the last book, then placing it back on the shelf. I imagine all her lives coming to an end. To live in virtual reality, you have to accept that everything you are perceiving is not real; but that it really doesn't matter so long as you can trust it, so long as you have confidence that it isn't all going to fall apart on you. Is that so different from the life I've known until now?

Everything I've seen and heard today has been one step removed from "reality", has been half-seen. I perceive the story from reports, and statements and personal accounts. I don't know the real, first-hand truth of it. In VR, characters may or may not look like their real selves, but people may or may not reveal their true selves in real life also. I'm no different from anyone else. I loved her but I never let her see the whole picture. I'll tell myself she believed in me anyway.

Perhaps some day it'll be me knocking on Hewersone's door asking to take another look at some of the old case files. Yeah. I walk past a bonfire, tramps huddled around it for warmth. I throw the file onto it, feeding the flames. Jessie's moved out of the light into the shadows now, but I still see her. She's flying, faster than the eye can follow, hurtling over the horizon and continuing out into orbit. Gone but always with me.

I reach the tram stop and wait. I wait a long time but the tram doesn't come. I can't understand it, they're normally so dependable. A body could freeze to death out here. The wind seems to cut through me as never before and it howls in my ears. I hear things, almost buried under the roar but rhythmic and relentless. The oars of a rowing boat splash in water. And there is laughter.

My imagination is getting the better of me. I'm sure the tram must come soon. ❀

ROBERT HAD TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE. HE'D CONTRIVED TO FIND HIMSELF UNEMPLOYED AGAIN, AND HIS PARENTS WOULDN'T STOP TALKING. THE PAIR CONVERSED IN MINIATURE ARGUMENTS, AND DECIDED THAT THEIR CLUELESS SON SHOULD PROBABLY SPEND A YEAR IN AUSTRALIA!



ROBERT FLED TO THE COUNTRY-SIDE INSTEAD — A GESTURE TO ALLEVIATE HIS PARENTS' OBVIOUS EMBARRASSMENT!

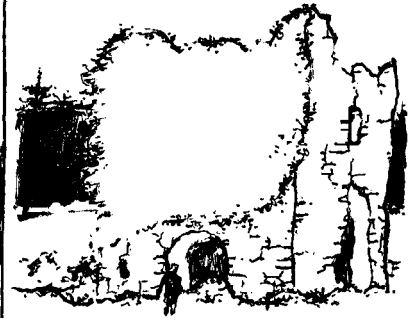
down under

sean mac roibin
&
john robbins
5 / 99

ROBERT APPRECIATED THE DETACHMENT PROVIDED BY THE ISOLATION OF COUNTRY WALKS — THEY ALLOWED HIM THINKING SPACE; THE CHANCE TO UNRAVEL THE TANGLE AND, FOR A TIME, RELEASE THOSE THINGS THAT HAD SIMPLY GOT CAUGHT-UP IN HIM.



HE MADE HIS WAY TOWARD CARTHY'S CASTLE, NOT FAR FROM OLD COURT ROAD. THE CASTLE STOOD APoloGETICALLY IN THE MIDDLE OF A FORGOTTEN FIELD...



ALWAYS THERE WAS THIS FEELING THAT IT TOO SENSED THE MISTAKE!

IN TRUTH, ROBERT HAD NEVER BEEN ANYTHING BUT DISAPPOINTED WITH THE PLACE. HE FELT CHEATED; AS IF THE BUILDING SHOULD HAVE COME WITH A FORM OF CONFESSIOAL FROM THE CASTLE'S COMMISSION OF IRELAND, OR WHOEVER!



CERTAINLY IT RESEMBLED MORE SOME SORT OF TOWER-TYPE-THING, BUT TO ROBERT'S KNOWLEDGE, NO EXCUSES HAD EVER BEEN OFFERED.

THE LAST TIME HE'D BEEN HERE, ROBERT WAS STILL IN SCHOOL. HE'D GONE ON THE MICH WITH TWO CLASS-MATES AND THEY'D SPENT THE JULY DAY SCRATCHING THEIR NAMES ON THE STONE SLAB JUST OUTSIDE THE SO-CALLED CASTLE'S HALF-HEARTED RUINS.



THE NAMES HAD ALL BUT DISAPPEARED; THE STONE SLAB SUCKED DEEP INTO THE EARTH. THE SUN-BURN GAVE THEM AWAY; THEY'D NOT BEEN FOOLING ANYONE (BUT THEMSELVES!)



SUBSEQUENT SUSPENSIONS SEEMED AN IRONIC PUNISHMENT!!

THE SIGHT OF THE SUBMERGING STONE AFFORDED ROBERT A CHANGED PERSPECTIVE. THE SMALL WALLS THAT RAN AROUND THE RUINED TOWER SUDDENLY REGISTERED — THESE WEREN'T ENCLOSURES FOR AN ELABORATE GARDEN, BUT A PART OF THE MAIN BUILDING ITSELF.



WHY, THESE WALLS STRETCHED RIGHT ACROSS THE FORGOTTEN FIELD AND BEYOND! JUST HOW BIG WAS CARTHY'S CASTLE?

ROBERT REALISED IT WAS WHAT WASN'T VISIBLE THAT MADE THIS RUIN A CASTLE. THE ABSENCE OF FORM ALLOWED FOR SUCH POSSIBILITY!



WAS IT ANY WONDER THE DEAD RESTED EASY? HE THOUGHT.

ROBERT RESOLVED TO STAND STILL, THEN; HIS MIND INTENT ON ATTRACTING GRAVITY. TO HIS SURPRISE HE BEGAN TO SINK IMMEDIATELY.



IT FELT ALMOST AS IF THE EARTH GRADUALLY ROSE TO CLAIM HIM!

AS HE INCHED HIS WAY DOWN UNDER, HE COULD SENSE EVERY UNFLATTERING NOTION OF HIM EASE IN ITS CONVICTION.



THE UNKIND WORDS AND NEGATIVE ASSERTIONS SIMPLY SLIPPED AWAY WITH HIS GENTLE DESCENT.



BY NIGHTFALL HE WOULD BE ADORÉD.

The Olivia Reunion Party

Philip Raines & Harvey Welles

But would Olivia have approved of him, Joan?"

Who cares? is my first thought, but I come over to the kitchen door, which Carol holds open a little wider. "Well, Our Paula does," she whispers. "Over there - by the stereo. She's got him pinned in the corner."

So she has, the little hustler. Paula is already sharing jokes with the drummer (I think that's what he is, though Sheena actually introduced him as a "percussion primitivist"), hand lightly on his elbow with the calculated casualness of our youth. Then that look: rolling her head from side to side, fixing her target with a glazed expression reserved for you and you alone. It's a look we've seen a hundred times - Carol, me, all of us here - and Paula's uncharacteristically bobbed hair and cherry lipstick can't conceal it.

Our younger sister, Sheena, knows what's going on, but with an embryonic hint of that nonchalance Paula has down so well, she's pretending not to notice. Instead she throws herself into a party game, a kind of truth-and-dare with the other sisters where each name their favourite things in different categories. But of course, Paula is an expert at how to needle her and I can tell Sheena's edgy. Her nerves show in the way she picks at gashes in her Clash t-shirt and taps her Docs together too fast.

Oh well - I did warn Sheena about bringing the boyfriend. This was supposed to be a sisters-only party. It's been three weeks since the funeral, and as our parents and Richard had politely asked us not to attend, I decided the sisters should have some other occasion to get together in memory of Olivia. A time for mutual support - not these stupid antics.

Carol's pregnant belly shivers beside me. "That tickles."

"I can't help it," she says, backing away from the door, giggling. "It's just so *funny*."

"Is not."

"Come on, Joan." Carol reaches out to the kitchen table to steady herself, knocking her glass over. "It's like home videos. Don't you remember what it was like then? Feuding sisters?"

"But we don't feud."

"That's different. We're more mature - two eldest, and so on. Seriously, don't you remember being their age?"

What a thing to ask - Carol must know what I would say. "I don't think about much before, you know, *it*."

"Yes. I know. Our Moments."

Sighing, Carol fills her glass from the bottle of Chilean white and takes a long drink. At this rate, she'll be on her second bottle soon, a bit heavy for a woman six months pregnant. I have a sudden perverse desire to lecture her on the harm it could do the foetus, but catch myself in time. Absolutely the wrong thing to say, almost as bad as Paula asking her earlier when the baby's due - and look what that remark led to. The better part of an hour feeding Carol tissues in the kitchen.

Carol wipes a red eye with a napkin. "Not that I'm surprised. Paula's been spoiling for a fight for ages now. Didn't you hear how Paula tried to empty Sheena's bank account?"

"Now you're kidding me, Carol."

"No, honest. Sheena came to Olivia with a story about Paula trying to steal her money. Actually went into her bank, dressed in one of those army trousers of Sheena's, hair cut in Sheena-style spikes, and forged her signature. Just as well Sheena had virtually nothing in the account. I think Sheena had the crazy notion that Olivia would *chastise* Paula or something."

Carol pours herself another and looks away to some point outside of the party. I know what she's thinking - Carol's 35, I'm two years younger, our thoughts never get that far apart - so I say it for her. "Imagine - Olivia taking an *interest*, for God's sake."

The door bumps against my back and in slouches our *divine* Liz, her coughing

At this rate, she'll be on her second bottle soon, a bit heavy for a woman six months pregnant.

muffled by a garish cravat. "So sorry, Joan. Sheena's about to garotte that awful Paula, and you know what I'm like in these situations. Any objection to me escaping here for a joint?"

"Bathroom," I tell her sternly.

"Fussy," she pouts.

As Liz backs out, I'm once again grateful that Olivia gave up those French cigarettes and ridiculous scarves as she got older. Beyond her though, my living room is unnaturally quiet.

"Carol, I'd better go police things. Will you be OK?" Carol waves me away and draws the bottle towards her like a child in need of comfort.

The party game has collapsed and the other sisters have retreated, leaving an arena for Paula and Sheena. Five women stand in a semi-circle, so quiet you could hear a

To be directly addressed at last must be as heavenly as a kiss from George Best...

chip drop on the carpet. In the middle, Paula is curled up on the floor, too self-consciously relaxed to be anything other than predatory. On my couch, Sheena knocks her boots together in a steady angry thump.

"My turn. Now - favourite song?" Paula asks.

"*Police and Thieves*," Sheena says cautiously, trying to work out how Paula is getting at her this time. A few of the sisters mouth the answer with her, the older ones biting their lips with a smile.

Paula turns away from Sheena to the surrounding audience and winks. "Which is what you would tell anyone if they'd ask, but Sheena, we're your *sisters*, we know your favourite song, then, now and forevermore, is really *Puppy Love*. Isn't that right, Livvy?"

Livvy - at 13, the youngest among us - has been watching her elder sisters in admiration and fear from her safe spot besides my VCR. To be directly addressed at last must be as heavenly as a kiss from George Best - well, I thought so at her age. Little Livvy beams and shouts over to Paula, "The Osmonds are the best!" and clicks her heels the way Sheena does.

"Next category," Paula continues, loving every minute of the room's attention. Show off - but then how can I judge? I did the same once. "Film star?"

Sheena catches herself biting her lip and stops. Carefully, you can imagine the words peeking out to make sure the coast is clear. She's about to answer, but Paula's there first, "Why John Travolta, of course - and food?"

Sheena tries to get the words out quicker this time, but as she takes a breath, Paula's timing is perfect and she jumps in front of Sheena again. "Maltesers. Football player? George Best -"

Each time, Sheena can't stop herself falling for Paula's trick. She always opens her mouth, hoping that something unexpected would come out - but Paula's always ahead of her, just as she's always been. Finally, Paula asks, "Drink?" and folds her arms to show that she'll let Sheena say something this time.

"Chocolate milk," Sheena answers truthfully, glaring at her sister.

"But if you'd been two years older and could go to pubs you'd have said bitter shandy. Hmm?"

Enough. "Pax, girls," I say, breaking through the ring of sisters.

Paula deliberately looks past me, over to Sheena's boyfriend. "That's what so fun about you, Sheena," she says for his benefit. "Still 16, still so 1978."

The drummer laughs as if she's made a joke, though he obviously doesn't understand what she means. "1978, yeah, that's right, Olivia," he says while exploring the sound possibilities of my cushions.

"*Olivia?*"

Paula accepts my challenging stare, acknowledging me at last. "That's right. I'm going to be Olivia from now on. Objections?"

She smiles and yawns, a practised trick she must have got from watching Olivia on television. And that very nearly gets a rise out of me, if only because Olivia never tried to look so gauche when she was Paula's age. Before I can respond, Paula's decided the show's over for now and breaks the room's tension with a shake of her head. She rushes over to Livvy and bends down to talk with the surprised girl and show her new bob to her fan club of one.

Carol's looking after Sheena in the kitchen. I know I should have words with Paula, but Gail and Kate start nagging me about when the video is going to be shown. Anything to keep them from joining Liz in the bathroom and reliving Olivia's drug years, so I have to go back to being the good hostess. As always, I'm the one who puts everything back in its place.

Come on, Joan, give it time, I keep telling myself. I'm tired of having to remind myself what a good idea this party was, but it's true. Everyone said so, even Carol who was after me for weeks to arrange something. *You spend too much time moping in that flat, she told me. Getting the sisters together is just what you need.*

Rich, coming from Carol. I wasn't the one who hung around children's stores, trying to decide between baby dungarees there was no point buying. Admittedly, it was a rough time when Olivia first moved out of our flat and started living with Richard, but of all the sisters, I was the only one who wasn't lingering over the past. I wasn't rushing to Olivia to sort out my spats with other sisters - I hadn't spoken to Olivia in the year before her death. Painting

All we needed was some memorial, a celebration of everything that had been Olivia...

classes on Tuesdays, out with friends from the theatre group for a Friday

drink, weekend rambles - I was making a new life for myself.

But Carol had a point - the other sisters had needed something like this ever since Olivia was killed by that drunk driver. Her death had been such a shock - Olivia, *dead?* It was almost unimaginable. What would the sisters do without Olivia - Liz said on the phone (in her usual full-blown style) that we'd just drift away like balloons snatched in the wind. No! no! they had to be told. We all could lead independent lives. All we needed was some memorial, a celebration of everything that had been Olivia so we could finally let go and get on with our lives.

The invitations said a reunion, but it was really an exorcism.

It had all been so carefully planned. I picked out old

photo albums that I'd cleared away after Olivia moved out and left them open on strategically-placed coffee tables around my living room. I made lists of our favourite food and drink, put together party tapes of the songs that meant something to us, got out the video all of us would want to see. The party would be an Olivia-fest. Get it out of our system.

In the end, my preparations hardly mattered. No one touched the photo albums, the party tapes went down badly. The younger ones felt patronized and the older ones embarrassed by the blatant nostalgia. No one minded when Sheena and her euphemism took control of my stereo (or "aural environment", as the primitivist called it) and put on some concoction of their own, consisting of clicks, thunder and clips from political speeches.

Now as bits of party fog drift around me, little frustrations keep flaring up among the sisters like brushfires: Gail and Kate, both stoned, fighting outside the bathroom, Sheena snarling at anyone who tries to turn down the volume, Sally angrily denying to Paula that she'd pocketed some crystals Olivia had left behind in the flat. And everywhere, Olivia's name, like a fly buzzing invisibly close by. I get an itchy feeling in the back of my neck that rather than going away, somehow she's found a way of watching us still, like a ghost, but more solid than any of the sisters.

I do what I can with wine and garlic dip, but things only calm down as I soon as I start the video and one by one, the sisters wander into the spare room. In relief, I'm opening another red for myself when Liz comes to tell me that Livvy's crying in my bathroom.

"What happened?"

I stop myself shrugging at the same time as Liz does. "Now Joan, it's a situation and you know what I'm -"

"Yes, yes, I remember," I tell her, exasperated. Fortunately, Carol's already in the bathroom with Livvy, crooning to her gently. Carol signals for me to close the door. The air's choked with Liz's dope smoke, so I push the door back and forth a few times to get a quick draught.

Livvy's curled up in my tub, burrowed beneath a blanket of scrunched-up towels the way we used to after our parents had one of their fights. I sit down on the edge of the tub and stroke Livvy's head. "What's up, Livvy?"

I can't hear what she says through the towels, so I pull them back and - poor Livvy. Face wet and red. The mascara she put on to be like her older sisters has streaked her cheeks, still puffed with baby fat. Poor thing - how many times had she stood in front of the mirror, sucking in those cheeks, trying to make herself look like Sheena, or one of the older sisters? The same way I used to stand in here behind Olivia, watching her doll herself up for a date with Richard.

Livvy pulls away the strands of hair sticking to her face. "Is it true?" she asks.

"What, dear?"

"That - Olivia couldn't stand us."

"What? Who said this?"

"Olivia."

"Olivia? How -"

"You know, Paula. She said - Olivia didn't want

anything to do - with us. She used to call us - her *little reminders*." Under the towels, I can see Livvy's shaking with the effort of holding in the tears. "I just wanted to be like - like *her*."

Carol reaches over to hug Livvy, jumping at the opportunity to hold a child at last. "There, there, you will, Livvy, one day," she says and glancing at me, puts a finger to her lips to protect the lie.

Not in front of the others, I promise myself as I go

Carol reaches over to hug Livvy, jumping at the opportunity to hold a child at last.

back out, but in the dark room, lit unreliably by the television, I can't see Paula. Looking

at the faces of the seven sisters, slumped on bean bags in front of my video, for a few seconds, the only thing I can see is all these Olivias, slinking back into my flat, but there Paula is, standing at the far side, deliberately apart from the others. One hand lightly brushing the head of Sheena's drummer, she stares at me, daring me to make a scene in front of the others.

Clever Paula. It's the first time the sisters have been at ease all evening, so I swallow my anger and sit down between Gail and Sheena, who's huddled in one of Olivia's - one of *my* old blankets. Sheena reaches around with the other end of the blanket to collect me in - God, how tense her body is. It only relaxes as she gets caught up with the video.

We're halfway through the clips of Olivia's short appearance in *End of the Pier*, a soap opera set among Brighton's young down-and-outs and part-time criminals. I remember this first time around. Carol had phoned me as soon as she'd badgered the screening dates out of Richard and I told her I wasn't going to see it - but I set the video anyway. Religiously, twice a week. I don't know why - just to keep a record for the sisters, I thought. But I was going through so many tapes that after a month, I had to edit them down on weekends for a compilation.

End of the Pier was Olivia's big break in television after we met Richard - a small part as Jo, the pregnant owner of a shop devoted to New Age paraphernalia. She'd been brought in as love interest for one of the series' main characters, Curt, an occasional drug-dealer trying to put a band together. The romance developed slowly. Tentative at first, both wary after recent relationships that had gone bitter, and then the misunderstandings, the threats by Jo's ex-husband, the police detective trying to frame Curt. Finally, Jo's and Curt's first kiss, the night they sneaked onto the crumbling Brighton pier. The scene was filmed a week before Olivia's accident.

We follow the unfinished story, savouring the dissatisfaction. The sisters love it, the way Olivia keeps the hero guessing about her feelings in each episode. When Olivia considers dating another of the show's regulars - a lead singer in a rival band - Sheena shouts out, "Screw 'em and dump 'em, Olivia!" and from then on, advice is offered at every stage of Olivia's romance, as if she could hear them.

"Is that it?" Paula asks when static comes up on the screen. "Not very much."

Liz reaches over to the video, rewinds the tape and

presses the play button. "We'll see it again then."

As they watch, the sisters start to imitate Olivia's mannerisms unconsciously, their faces reacting to the expressions on the screen. One or two quietly recite the lines, their voices soft enough to be echoes. Sheena squeezes my hand in excitement. Holding Livvy, Carol watches with a hand kneading her belly and bites her lip. A bottle is passed around and someone puts the tape back to the beginning.

At some point, I realize that Curt looks like Richard. No - he *is* Richard. God, I must really be drunk, it couldn't be Richard, he was only involved in the money side of the production.

What if Olivia's old man had broken Richard's legs just as he threatened to do?

When I look again though, Richard's still there with Olivia. I concentrate on the drama now, piecing together the sequence of events carefully. At what point does the whole romance become inevitable? When they have their first shared joint? The walk along the seafront? But what if it hadn't gone this way? What if Olivia's old man had broken Richard's legs just as he threatened to do? What if Olivia *had* gone out with that other musician?

And I begin to think, there must be other film. Segments of how it might have gone the other way, little dramas abandoned in a wastebin in the post-production unit. *What if* - What if Olivia hadn't met Richard? What if Olivia hadn't run away to London - had passed her second-year exams at university - didn't have the miscarriage after six months? Didn't those other scenes deserve a chance? Didn't they deserve to be their own dramas?

"Oh dear," Paula observes from above us. "And what would Olivia have thought of her little fan club sitting around like this? We should get t-shirts made up next time."

She walks across our line of view, crunching chips into Olivia's carpet, and pauses at the door. "Assuming there is a next time."

T-shirts - next time - Just the sort of remark that Olivia would have made. The fury hits me so quickly, that I don't realize what I'm doing until I'm on my feet and after Paula. She's already got on her brown leather jacket, exactly like the one that Richard gave Olivia last Christmas, and as I grab it, for a weird moment, I think that it's the coat I'm after, something that I've wanted for months. The material twists under my hand, and for what seems ages, we look at each other as if we've both forgotten what we're doing here in Olivia's hall.

Paula tugs her jacket free and smiles at me, giving me the same look she gave the drummer. "You're not Olivia," I tell her angrily.

Her grin says *I'm not like you other sisters, I'm the real life*, but I can tell she's frightened. "You're not going to be Olivia," I say evenly. "None of us are."

"And why *not*? I'm nineteen, when Olivia was in her prime. Can't you remember what it was like at this age?"

Her age? Remember? But I'm always remembering, for just as I'm in the hall fighting with Paula, I'm still in that crowded vegetarian cafe with Olivia and Richard's walking through the door for the first time. The Moment. We take the newspaper from the free chair and we smile at him as he stands above us with his tray - but it's

only Olivia who gets up to leave with him. I stay in the seat, staring into my coffee, wanting desperately to leave with this wonderful man but fixed to the point.

"But can you remember any other age, Paula? See - Olivia could."

Why are we both shaking so much? I put my hand on her shoulder again, this time a comforting gesture. Paula shrinks within the jacket, like a child trying on her mother's clothes, but she pulls away from me and heads for the front door.

"Oh, such a - big sister," she says in the corridor outside, her voice breaking up just the way Livvy's did. "Pretending - you're so much wiser, but - still just a sister. Just like us, Joan. Richard's not coming back for you."

As Paula closes the door, I feel like I'm being shut in. Someone's calling behind me, and I stumble back into her spare room with "Olivia?" on my lips, but it's only the sisters. For a moment, I can't recall anything, apart from a loose thought that I should phone Richard, he must be in this time. But why would I do that? He'd only just hang up on me again.

What did Livvy said? *Little reminders*. As Olivia shed us away like dead skin, we stayed behind to mark her passage: Sheena on the train watching Olivia on the platform have second thoughts about running away to London, Paula staying in college when Olivia decided to drop out, Carol touching the swollen belly after Olivia had fallen from the ladder, me looking into a cup of cold coffee as Richard helps Olivia with her coat. All the big Moments in her life.

And we're still there in those Moments.

The drummer is waking up. "Where's Olivia?" he says.

Sheena moans something. I realize she's stopped knocking her boots together. "Sheena -" I start to say, when suddenly she's on her feet, throwing down the blanket, sweeping the bottles and bowls away with a savage kick.

"Why *her*?" she shouts at her boyfriend. "Huh? Why her?"

The drummer looks up at her stupidly but then surprises everyone by saying, "Because she's more mature than you'll ever be."

After he's gone, the others start to clear up and I

Someone's calling behind me, and I stumble back into her spare room with "Olivia?" on my lips...

take Sheena into the bathroom and try to talk her down. "What did he mean?"

she repeats, crying into the towel. "What did he mean?"

I want to hug her, but I remember that Olivia didn't want hugging at that age. "It'll be alright."

"What did he mean?" She wants an answer and looks directly at me. She's deep in her Moment, in a conviction that time has stopped and that she will be this cool and this young forever. Only the Moment goes on and on, and never changes, and she doesn't understand why it hurts so much.

"*What did he mean?*"

I don't know what to tell her. I wonder what Olivia would say. ❀

Famous Monsters

Reviews

Spirit of Crap Or How To Get Ahead In Publishing (Not).
A critical deconstruction and some reviews.

Reviews by Underview

Spirit of Independence (Barclay Books, Trade Paperback, US\$14.95, 276pp) by Keith Rommel is that rare beast, a novel that is definitive of something. For many years I have read reviews which say 'beautifully written' or 'this guy can write' and over the years I have read many bad novels for review purposes but until now I could never truly say, hand on heart, this guy cannot write. Now, I know that all these claims and counter-claims are merely opinion, but being able to write encapsulates a number of skills such as turning an apt phrase or coining an unusual or interesting simile, finding exactly the correct word to describe a person or thing, evoking people and places or merely getting the grammar and punctuation right. So defining someone who can or cannot write becomes almost impossible. Almost. So step forward Keith Rommel - non-writer.

When I read the publicity blurb on this novel I thought it indicated something metaphorical and possibly thoughtful in the novel. It spoke of the fight between good and evil, of angels and devils pitted against one another in a daily fight for the souls of men in the battle between Heaven and Hell. How wrong can you be? The blurb was a literal description of the novel's content. The protagonist is murdered so that he can take up his place in this vast battle, as an angel. And pretty soon he is meeting with the Devil himself and from there it can only go downhill all the way.

I can't find it in my heart to

condemn Keith Rommel for foisting this mess upon an unsuspecting public - he wrote this to the best of his ability and then did his best to get it published. I don't know anything about Barclay Books but based upon Spirit of Independence I have to question if there is an element of vanity publishing here. Maybe it is not the author's vanity; perhaps it is the editor's. Ultimately, it is at the editor's door that I lay the blame for this aberration.

A brief perusal of the first twenty or thirty pages (more I cannot recommend) will amply demonstrate my hypothesis that Rommel defines the 'guy who cannot write'. His prose is plodding, his reported speech stilted, his grammar occasional, his use of the apposite phrase or even word non-existent - Mrs Malaprop used the correct word as often - and his punctuation inventive. In the end I suppose it was the simple and repeated use of 's to indicate

plurals that was the final straw. Most crap writers (check out any tabloid newspaper for abundant examples) mix up it's with its (possessive) but even semi-literates tend to get their plurals right.

Here I must reiterate that I do not blame the author for this. But no editor or even copy editor worth the name should ever let muck like this smear the pages of their product. So, congratulation to Barclay Books for becoming the first equal opportunity publishers and giving illiterates an equal chance in their editorial department.

(Editor's Note: any mistakes in this review were left in for purposes of irony)

A new short story collection from Stephen King is always a matter for excitement in the commercial world - as well as amongst readers - unlike the collections of others, which are merely tolerated as a necessary evil. Publishers and booksellers love them because anything by King sells in quantity; readers love them because they're so damn good.

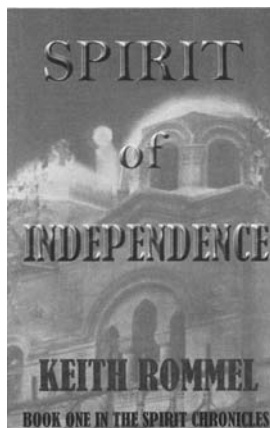
Everything's Eventual (Hodder & Stoughton, Hardback, UK£17.99, 416pp) is his usual mixture of the great and the good. Thank heavens for *That Feeling You Can Only Say What It Is In French*, which is ordinary in the extreme and based upon a premise which was hackneyed when Adam (or King himself) was a boy. At least I don't have to gush about absolutely everything here, eventually, and that allows me to appear somewhat critical - or critic-like. But take any one of the other stories and there's little you can say that hasn't been said about King already by better writers in bigger magazines.

On the contents page King claims he chose the running order for the stories by assigning them the spades in a deck of cards, then shuffling and dealing the cards. So, in no particular order, except the one the

cards chose I have selected just three of them to give you a flavour of the collection. First up is *Autopsy Room Four* where we are introduced to a man who has been bitten by a snake and is currently paralysed to such a degree that he does not appear to be breathing. But he is alive, although he has been pronounced dead of a

heart attack on the golf course. Then his brain awakens as he is rolled into the autopsy room and the medical staffs prepare to cut open his chest with an enormous scissors.

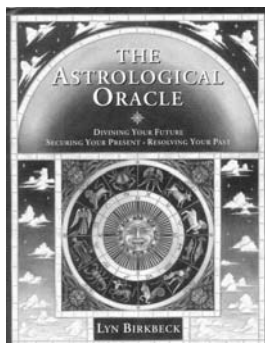
The Man In The Black Suit



has the feel of a folk tale, in which an old man recounts a meeting with the devil, from his childhood. There is nothing in the storyline or the *denouement* to set this apart from a thousand other similar tales. The difference is in the telling. King's cosy, homely delivery gives it a taste of authenticity that engages the reader beyond the apparent sum of its parts.

And finally, *All That You Love Will Be Carried Away* is a simple story about a travelling salesman who has decided to kill himself. He checks into a faceless motel, one in an unending stream of such rooms and motels from his life, and contemplates the end. The title is a piece of graffiti he found on a washroom wall at a gas station, the latest gem in a collection of scribbles on toilet walls stretching over several years. Unlike the generic contributions of "Don't Look Up Here, You're Pissing On Your Shoes" and "Here I Sit Broken Hearted..." this one could be construed as some sort of suicide note. As he sits and reads through the notebook we are shown one small window into this man's mind, something many other writers would struggle to achieve in an entire novel.

The Astrological Oracle (Element, Large Format Paperback, UK£14.99) by Lyn Birkbeck is a new method of divination utilising astrology. The method is relatively simple, not unlike the I Ching coin method, and the answers are fairly straightforward, even though they are designed to be universal enough to answer many different questions. A book like this can only be evaluated over a long period of time and many enquiries. Time is necessary so that accuracy and relevance can be evaluated.



As a fan of the I Ching I cannot see the relevance of this particular oracle, nor do I see any need for it. All it does is muddy the waters. It may or may not work, though it is unlikely to be better than the traditional methods. The author or the method's supporters could claim it is modern and contemporary, but so are the answers delivered by the I Ching, it is only the language that is archaic - there are now-friendly versions of the I Ching

available - not the results or the sentiments. I always feel that something like this is designed with a niche market in mind whereas other methods have universality of appeal and application. I guess I'm just an old stick-in-the-mud but if it ain't broke don't fix it.

Come back in a thousand years and I'll let you know if it's any good.

Myth & Magic, The Art of John Howe (Harper Collins, Hardback, UK£19.99, 141pp) is a beautiful presentation. It is coming out now because of the jump in interest in all things Tolkien and John Howe has a reputation as one of the best interpreters of his magical landscapes and characters. If you find yourself looking at a Tolkien illustration that perfectly encapsulates a favourite part of **The Lord of the Rings** or **The Hobbit**, then likely as not it was drawn by Howe. In many cases his pictures are the way you would have imagined the person or place, if only you had an imagination that good. His other work is also covered, including work for Anne McCaffrey on dragons, of course, Robert Holdstock and Charles DeLint all of whom have contributed a short commentary on his contribution to their work. But don't take my word for how good he is, take a trip to your local bookshop and open this wonderful book at any page. If you don't like what you find



you don't like fantasy art. It's as simple as that.

Reviews by Nigel Quinlan

Area 7 (Macmillan, Paperback, UK£10.99, 608pp) by Matthew Reilly is, without a shadow of a doubt, the worst book I have ever read. It is an awful, awful piece of work. Reilly cannot write for toffee. I have received essays from semi-literate Junior Cert students that were better written than this garbage. This book is so very, very bad that I quite simply could not put it down. I mean here we're talking about

a book where dramatic events aren't simply described in a manner which renders them dramatic: they're put in italics! Reilly does not want his reader distracted from the action by putting in more sentences or even words than are absolutely necessary, and why should he? Why all the unnecessary verbiage in describing how "down" something is, when you can just say down? And why describe noises when you can just use sound effects? In italics? So stuff goes *blam!* Stuff goes *zzzzzz!* Stuff goes *smack!* Stuff goes *shooooom!* When stuff goes *whoosh, crunch* and *shwack* all on the same page and the writer's a little excited and probably bouncing up and down his chair as he writes, you know things are getting a bit intense. Then, when he does get a little ambitious and finds an adverb he can make use of, he tends to stick with it, hence the varied and oftentimes

contradictory use of words such as 'amazingly' or 'ominously.' At some point, I suspect, quite early on, his poor editor gave up and went into a corner somewhere to cry.

But where are my manners? You probably want to know what this latter day **War and Peace** is actually about. The President (you know, of the United States, that guy) goes on a tour of Area 7, a vast, secret underground military installation, only to find himself in a bit of a pickle. There he finds a rogue army officer who's supposed to be dead and who thinks there's nothing wrong with America that a few nuclear strikes, a racially selective plague and a ruthless military dictatorship can't cure. To this end he has subverted the elite commando team providing Area 7's security and ordered them to murder everything in sight. He's also had the forethought to plant an explosive device in the President's head, which means the poor guy not only has to run the entire country, manage foreign policy, avoid being eaten by alligators, raped by prison inmates or being torn to shreds by 'millions and millions of bullets!' but he's also got to put up with the nagging feeling that his head (of state) is about to explode. Meanwhile our American Caesar (that's actually his nick-name,

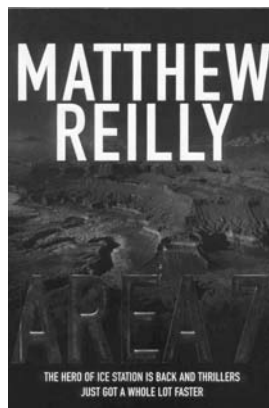
believe it or not. Bit of a giveaway, no? Though maybe Brutus or Cassius would have been more appropriate...) is broadcasting his attempted coup live to the American public, just to let them know who's boss. Massacres and explosions and running around ensue, but the loony commander has reckoned without the Prez's bodyguard, a certain Captain Shane M. 'Scarecrow' Schofield who's, like, really good at this stuff, and who shan't be going down without a fight.

It's worth pointing out that Reilly is actually quite good at this nonsense. His writing style may be worse than childish, but even that doesn't actually impede the narrative drive and the sheer spectacle of his carefully constructed, well planned set pieces. He also piles on the plots, as a team of South African mercenaries sneak into Area 7 mid-coup to steal some sneaky bio-warfare agent which was, in turn, stolen from the Chinese, who, by the way, also want it back. Then there's the couple of hundred convicted murderers and rapists and whatnot being stored on-site for experimentation and who get out in all the kerfuffle to make life difficult for everyone. The best bit, though, is when Schofield blasts off into space to blow up the (unarmed) Chinese space shuttle. And that's not even the climax, that's just Reilly tying up a loose end. Still, grudgingly, I have to admit, he gets through it with admirable economy. If only the writing wasn't so unbearably sub-literate, I might have enjoyed it.

There isn't a whole lot of what you might call characterisation in Area 7, and thank God for that. During the rare lulls in the proceedings, someone might ask Schofield how his date went last Saturday, or Schofield might have to bond with the son of the guy who was fed to killer whales in the last book (don't look at me, I haven't read it either.) 'If developing characters slows down the action, then developing characters gets the chop!' Reilly bumbles in a little self-interview at the back of the book, an attitude this reviewer can only applaud, given that Reilly's characters tend to distinguish themselves from each other by the way they kill, the way they die, or the way they info-dump (and they usually die shortly after they info-dump, unless their technical expertise is required to

resolve some knotty plot point that might slow up the action without the intervention of a dweeby idiot-savant.)

With the techno-fetishism of a Tom Clancy book - to the extent that the prose is at its most serviceable when it turns into an excerpt from a technical manual - and the overwhelmingly cinematic feel of a Michael Crichton book, reading Area 7 is more like flipping through the transcript of an enthusiastic pitch to some moron of a Hollywood film producer (don't ask me why, but the names Bruckheimer and Bay kept



springing to mind...), and to be fair that's what saves from being a total loss. Atrocious dreck though it may be, it ain't dull.

I had actually planned on giving **Honoured Enemy** (Voyager, Hardback, UK£17.99, 336pp) by Raymond E Feist and William Forstchen a good review on the grounds that while the writing may have been no great shakes, the story was a cracking good yarn. Beside Matthew Reilly, however, Messers Feist and Forstchen stand revealed as prose stylists to rank beside the likes of Hazlitt and Burke. There's something quite old-fashioned about this book. It's the sort of story you might expect to show up in the type of forgotten old black and white war or cowboy movies TG4 show at noon every day. Set in the world Feist invented for his Magician books, Midkemia, this hearkens back to an obscure corner of the Riftwar, when invaders from another dimension flooded the world bent on conquest. Of course, it was all a fiendish plot to sow chaos and death and destruction so some evil bastards could take over the whole lot, but that's not important right now.

Well removed from the main

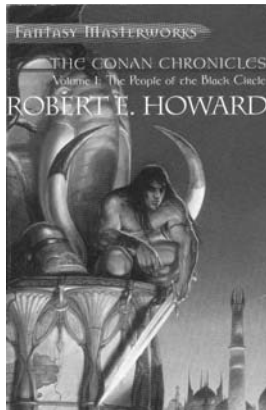
action of Feist's **Riftwar** epic, way up in the Great Northern Mountains, where the fighting is particularly bitter, a band of Kingdom raiders and a Tsurani patrol are hell bent on killing each other over some godforsaken outpost in the middle of a godforsaken forest. Suddenly, they're rudely interrupted by a migrating band of moredhel, or Dark Elves (no sniggering down the back!) who just want to kill everyone because they're just, you know, evil. It's a rather childish trope in genre fantasy, isn't it? That you can come up with an entire population of creatures who are irredeemably bad?

Sworn foes find themselves uneasy allies on the run with the evil nasties breathing down their necks and winter on the way. Hectic pursuit, running battles, lots of tension and backstabbing and betrayals and setbacks: the fact of the matter is, this is just pure fun. You have two likable, heroic figures in the respective command of the rival bands of brothers, forced by circumstances first to fight each other, then to fight together (while still technically at war) knowing they simply cannot afford any warm feeling towards each other. After all, if they get away from the moredhel alive, they will be obliged to turn on each other. Anything else would be a betrayal of everything they're fighting for. It's this tension that keeps things interesting and makes you forget you're reading yet another derivative fantasy. Honoured Enemy could just as easily be a medieval adventure, or a western. It's actually about soldierly values that are universal, though often odd and contradictory, which at least raises it above the level of the usual plot-coupon fantasy. It's a tight, hard, gritty story, well handled and highly entertaining.

Which makes David Zindell's **The Lightstone** (Voyager, Paperback, UK£11.99, 840pp) almost perverse, in that it is by far the best written of these three books, and by far the dullest. Dark lord, mystical gem, oddly gifted young nobleman with a dissolute friend and a wise old mentor who all go off on a quest and pick up some bint who's handy with a sword on the way. My interest went flapping out the window sometime around then. I kept expecting it to turn into something akin to Gene Wolfe's **Book of the New Sun**, instead it trod the weary, well

worn genre fantasy path all the way to the bitter end. Zindell does try to make the characters more sophisticated than the archetypes they represent, but all to no apparent end. With some hefty works of science fiction behind his belt, it's clear that Zindell is slumming it here, which would be fine if it were fun, but it isn't. Too big to bother with.

Volume One of **The Conan Chronicles** (Millennium Fantasy Masterworks, Paperback, UK£7.99, 559pp) by Robert E Howard, on the other hand, is a whole lot of fun. Despite being someone whose interest in epic fantasy was all-consuming when I was growing up, I always steered clear of Conan the Barbarian. Hard to say why. Perhaps even to my innocent eye the figure of the loin-clad muscle bound warrior hewing everything in his path was a bastardised, charmless cliché. Perhaps the ample bosoms and servile posture of the thinly



clad maidens on the cover of any Conan or Conan-like book I ever came across was off-putting. (Not that I found it distasteful on a personal level, it's just that stuff like that is hard to hide when you have a large and nosy family.) Maybe I just wasn't a fan of the short form. Either way, it's probably just as well I didn't read these when I was a teenager as I'm not sure what they would have done to me. A heady blend of insane violence and extreme physical sensuality, they're like Mills and Boon with added blood and guts. The stories are set in a nasty, corrupt and hedonistic world and Conan's adventures are framed with a morose, fatalistic philosophy that boils down to life being brutish and short, so do what you want before you die.

Howard's stories of the Cimmerian thief and warrior are vivid, lush, fast-moving and packed to the gills with death and slaughter. Conan is of heroic stature, certainly, but he's no hero in the classical or Romantic sense. Ruled by animal passions and with a healthy contempt for the ways of so-called civilisation, Conan takes what he wants and is more than willing to chop anyone who gets in the way in half with his trusty broadsword. Not given overmuch to introspection, when

he does contemplate his place in the great scheme of things, he isn't especially cheerful about it. Most of the time, he's happy enough to rocket relentlessly around Howard's proto-Eurasia, a thief, a bandit, a pirate, a warrior; battling gods and dark demons and men and women and anything else that comes his way, because that's what Conan is. While we're at it, let's not forget his pantherish walk, his smooth rippling muscles, his perfect, bronzed body (often naked, save for a loincloth), his clear brow and his raven hair. What a hunk.

Read in one sitting, **The Conan Chronicles** can, perhaps, be a bit too much, but the fact remains that at its best it really is incredibly good. The stories leap off the page, grab you by the throat and don't let go until they're done. To put it bluntly, they make most modern works of fantasy look effete and, of course, politically correct. Along with certain other latent sub-texts, Howard's Conan stories can, at times, be almost hysterically racist. Given the depraved nature of Conan's world in general, it's only in the most extreme stories that it's particularly noticeable, but hook-nosed Shemites and Blacks tend, on the whole, to be the worst of a bad lot.

But Fantasy has come a long way since Howard's stories first appeared in *Weird Tales*, hasn't it? Nowadays we demand something more sophisticated and intriguing from our Fantasy authors, don't we? I told you to stop sniggering.

Step up and take a bow Tim Powers, who I thought had gone away, but who has come back with **Declare** (William Morrow, Hardback, US\$25.00, 517pp), another of those historical fantasy thrillers which he does so well, and which I thought he'd stopped doing with **Expiration Date** and **Earthquake Weather** which were long and tedious in ways which **Declare** is not.

Andrew Hale is recruited into the British Secret Service at the age of

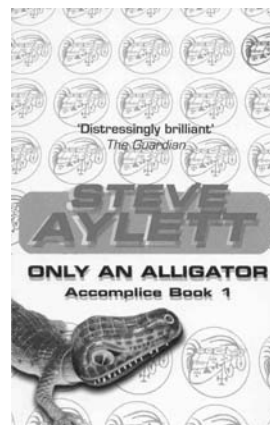
seven on the day of his First Holy Communion. Years later he is activated, and placed as a double agent in a Communist network in German-occupied France. There he meets Elena, a Communist agent whom he grows to love, and encounters for the first time the higher forces in the Heavside Layer, where radio signals bounce around the globe at night. The exact nature of these forces, their relationship to Hale, the strange and deadly operation known as **Declare** which Hale will try and fail to resolve at the end of the Second World War, and again later during the Cold War, form the central notions of the novel. Powers structures the plot around these, a narrative inspired by real events and by the grey underworld tales of John LeCarre. The British traitor Kim Philby is a major figure in the book, and other real-life figures are important, such as Philby's father and T.E Lawrence.

In **Declare**, Powers takes real events and grounds them in the supernatural, which is business as usual for Powers, except this time the events form the backbone to the twentieth century, giving a certain immediacy to the secret history he describes (though always in the back of the mind when reading this sort of thing you have to ask yourself if things weren't bad enough without the addition of supernatural bogeymen).

Unusually, Andrew Hale doesn't receive the 'expert punishment' Powers tends to dole out to his protagonists. He manages to keep a full complement of limbs, eyes and organs throughout, though the life he lives is one of austere secrecy, regret and unrequited love, which are all very Catholic punishments, when you think about it.

There's plenty of excitement, suspense and adventure, as well as lots of fun manipulation of supernatural and natural history. Nobody does weird epic action scenes as well as Powers when he's on a roll, but he also does a good job of capturing the vastly different secret worlds of World War II and the Post-War Era.

Steve Aylett will take you as



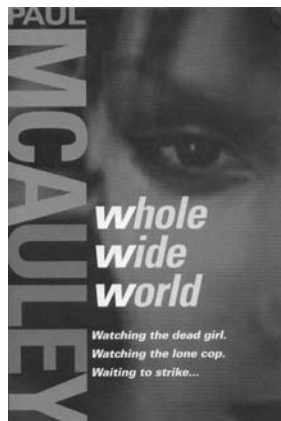
far from the real world as you like in **Only An Alligator** (Victor Gollancz, Paperback, UK£9.99, 144pp), which is Book 1 of *Accomplice*, though how many books he's planning for this series is anyone's guess.

As many as he feels like, I would suppose. *Accomplice* is a town of sorts, full of people of sorts, who do jobs, of sorts, though God knows why. That won't be the first question you ask yourself if you read this book, and it certainly won't be the last, but by then you'll have stopped thinking the questions out loud. Questions aren't the point. Logic is out the window here.

Barny, friend to the winged and hoofed creatures of the earth, wanders into a creepchannel and rescues an alligator. Said alligator was being stored as a choice morsel for a demon king, Sweeney. Because it turns out *Accomplice* is perched on the roof of hell, though citizens of the good town tend to studiously avoid acknowledging that fact. Sweeney vows revenge and despatches his right hand demon minion to wreak havoc on Barny's life. Barny, however, is far too dim and harmless to be a nemesis and most of the plots and traps go awry, much to everyone's frustration and Barny's good natured bewilderment.

I'm not sure what this is. William Burroughs by way of Terry Pratchett, perhaps. The setting and the characters are wildly surreal, but so is the story. I'm not sure I discerned much in the way of internal logic. Events tend to be dictated by the predominant whims of any given character. It is, however, very funny, and full of marvellous nuggets of pure imagination, rendering the story unpredictable, but also diffusing any suspense or sense of expectation, though maybe that was the point. Your brow may crease alternately from laughter and puzzlement while reading it, but somehow it all ends up feeling refreshing even in its madness. I'll have more of that, then.

I don't think I'm familiar with



the titular song of Paul J McAuley's **Whole Wide World** (Voyager, Hardback, UK£16.99, 388pp), so maybe there's some resonance of punk sensibility I'm missing; be that as it may this is a timely, cutting, foreboding thriller about the internet and freedom of information in the future. Set in an oppressive, puritanical Britain of tomorrow, where pornography is outlawed and CCTV cameras are everywhere, a young woman is brutally murdered in full view of her web-cam, while on-line. An ambitious young detective inspector whose

career is on the skids gets himself assigned to the case, only to find himself neck-deep in the proverbial can of worms.

McAuley uses the case to lay bare the ugly and rather pathetic limitations of a society that tries to control information on moral grounds, where frustration and failure lead to ever more oppressive measures to keep filth out and protect the poor wee children. *Whole Wide World* is also a pretty decent modern British thriller. Heck, most people wouldn't even notice that it's science fiction. Maybe that's the idea.

Sagittarius

Whorl (Voyager, Paperback, UK£6.99, 362pp) by Julian May, the final volume in her *Rampart Worlds* trilogy, would be hard to mistake as anything other than science fiction, but it's a damn good romp for all that. Asa Frost's adventures and misadventures continue in typical breakneck fashion. Having defeated a hostile take-over by a rival Corporation and rooted out the traitor in his own family's Corporation, Asa finds it difficult to shake off

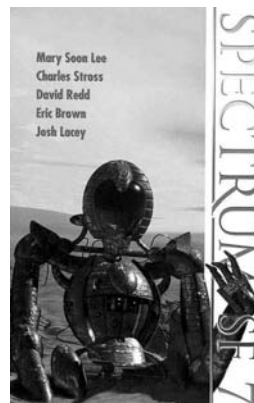


his obligations and responsibilities, and reluctantly allows himself to be drawn in to the running of the family business. Before long, however, he's

embroiled once more in efforts to forestall a potential invasion of human worlds by the devious alien Haluk. This time, however, thanks to some miraculously evil gene-manipulation, Asa finds himself inhabiting the body of a Haluk and on the run from assorted diabolical plotters the Toronto underworld.

The three books in this trilogy comprise a fine selection of intergalactic fun and adventure, old fashioned in form, utterly modern in style and execution. They're intelligent, occasionally fiendish, often funny and always entertaining. Take all three along on your summer holidays.

Spectrum SF 7 (November 2001, Spectrum Publishing, Paperback, 192pp. UK£14 for four issues (one year) from: Spectrum Publishing, 53 Waverley Park, Kirkintilloch, Glasgow G66 2BL, UK. Website: www.spectrumsf.co.uk) is a magazine of science fiction short stories and book reviews, only it's shaped like a book and actually pretty cheap. This particular issue is from November 2001 (*Albedo One*, timely as ever) and I haven't seen number 8 yet, but I hope it comes out soon because I'm dying to read the second part of the Charles Stross novelette *The Atrocity Archive*. Part one is the centrepiece of *Spectrum 7*, a very funny, very British take on the supernatural secret agent.



Not so much a secret agent as a civil servant, and not so much supernatural as mathematical expressions of physical beings we might recognise as the squeamous bugs out of HP Lovecraft. It's a bit like Steve Aylett, actually, only with a plot and a recognisable setting. The other four stories in this issue are surprisingly strong, too. (Why 'surprisingly' I don't know. For some reasons my expectations were low.)

The Kethani Inheritance by Eric Brown: the science fiction element in Brown's stories is always strong, but somehow sidelined by the knotty human traumas and dilemmas they're used to powerfully illuminate. Here, a man struggles to forge a relationship with a woman while haunted by the knowledge that his abusive father has

been resurrected by the alien Kethani. It rings true, and cuts close to the bone.

Crew Dog by Mary Soon Lee is one of two stories this issue written in a particular idiom. Here, the point of view is that of a smart ship-board canine who, for reasons we are gradually led to understand, must keep her cleverness a secret.

The Pilgrim by Josh Lacey is a story about a man's overwhelming drive to launch himself into space, and the story has a few illuminating things to say about the cost of and the need for that drive. *Green England* by David Redd is a sneaky story about American ambassadors to a radically greenified, but not so pleasant, England. Why exactly the ambassador is referred to as Mizta Shagga and his wife as Mizz Bina remains unexplained, but that doesn't detract from the story's effectiveness. Clever and horrifying in equal measure.

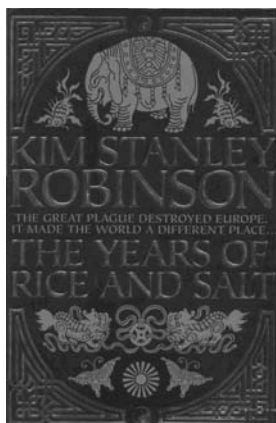
Perhaps some of my surprise at the quality of *Spectrum* comes from a lingering sense of science fiction as a spent force. It seems like ages since anybody broke new ground or set the reading world on fire with excitement. All of science fiction's ideas have been colonised by lowbrow marketing and cheap merchandise. Science fiction itself is a pale and flaccid thing held up to ridicule every time a new scientific breakthrough makes the papers.

Kim Stanley Robinson to the rescue. **The Years of Rice and Salt** (Harper Collins, Hardback, UK£16.99, 669pp) may well be the first truly great work of science fiction in the twenty first century (I'm open to correction on that. Please correct me).

A mammoth volume covering seven hundred years of alternative history, *Years of Rice and Salt* is a surprisingly timely and topical publication. With the war in Afghanistan throwing into sharp focus the divisions between east and west, could there have been a better time for a book that describes a world where the West never was? For in the opening pages, outriders for the horde of Temur the Lame enter a village in medieval Europe, only to find the inhabitants long dead. It is a scene repeated throughout the European landmass. European civilisation and Christianity are gone. China and Islam are free to dominate world history. It is a history related here in ten parts, the

emphasis, in typical Robinson fashion, being on the problems of making the world a better place. And so a Chinese admiral about to invade Japan finds himself instead crossing the Pacific and discovering a new world. In Samarqand an alchemist turns away from the old established methods and lays down the foundations of scientific method. In China a widow and a scholar combine intellects to discover the beginnings of modern thought. In the new world an exiled Japanese ronin teaches the natives how to resist the Chinese invaders - a short chapter that delivers the book's most Waldropian moment (any time in an alternate history story that causes your brain to fizz and pop).

Robinson uses an unusual (for science fiction) conceit to weave a common thread through this lengthy



timeline. As each chapter ends, his characters die and are reincarnated: different people but with the same general characteristics and no memory of their previous lives. This helps keep the story on track and reinforces his theme of historical progress as taking what is good from the past and building on it. A world without Christianity is no utopia of eastern delight. The struggle is, if anything, harder, as political and religious differences divide the world, leading to an horrific sixty-year war.

There are longeurs and gaps: Robinson is in love with knowledge and seems to argue, effectively, that true human progress is through the acquiring and dissemination of knowledge coupled with a profound compassion for humanity. This does tend to lead to long passages full of historically crucial but slightly arcane knowledge. Very often, though, it's knowledge worth having, and these are matched with passages of the

profoundest insight and wisdom. As for gaps, well, there doesn't seem to have been an industrial revolution. Instead there's a benevolent despot in India under whose rule progress flourishes, which doesn't quite cut the mustard. However these are fairly small faults in a book that has much to offer. It's a deeply illuminating and ultimately hopeful book, despite the suffering and setbacks. It might teach you something about the world we live in.

At this point Terry Pratchett is pretty much review-proof. Nothing I say is going to make you go out or not go out and buy **The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents** (Doubleday, Hardback, UK£12.99, 269pp) It's a story for children, set on the Discworld, about a scheming, talking cat who leads a band of talking rats from town to town, scamming the locals with the old plague of rats and a piper trick. The piper is a stupid looking kid, who is turning out to be cleverer than he looks, and the rats are starting to get ideas that you and I might recognise as morality and spiritualism, but which to Maurice just means his days of lucratively conning money out of small towns are numbered. Bad Blintz is the name of the town where they're to pull their last job, but it's not going to be easy. You see, something very strange to do with rats and rat-catchers is already underway in Bad Blintz, something a bunch of vermin newly awakened to sentience are ill-equipped to deal with.

I know Pratchett is all over the place to the point where we're all sick of him, but *The Amazing Maurice* is an object lesson in why he's so successful. It's because he's so damn good. He can write a killer story full of great characters, non-stop jokes and still pull the rug put from under you with fear, suspense and almost shocking poignancy. Couple that with a step by step lesson in Pratchett's particularly humane view of humanity and you've got something that all children should have read to them at bed-time, and which the reader will enjoy every bit as much as the child.

There's a picture on page 28 of **Hardyware: The Art Of David A. Hardy** (Paper Tiger, Hardback, UK£20.00, 128pp) that I'm certain graced the cover of one of those old hardback Irish annuals that used to come out once a decade or so.

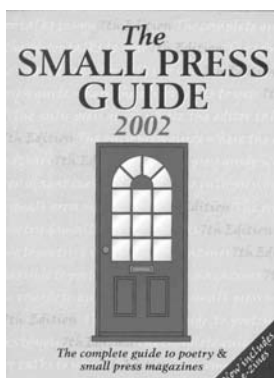
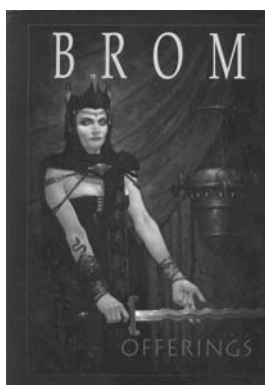
(Usually put together with a few comic strips, some hacked-out adventure stories, puzzle pages and features on sport). It features a massive spaceship crashing into the sea behind a flotilla of old sailing ships. Young and tender and innocent as I was, I knew that nothing in that annual could possibly match that cover. No fictional story, no factual rehashing of stuff about UFOs and the Bermuda Triangle would do that painting justice. So I never got that annual, figuring I'd already seen the best it had to offer. Perhaps this sums up the plight of the talented science fiction illustrator: you can do a cover that is so gorgeous, vibrant, detailed and exciting that people will stop and admire it as they pass it on the bookshelf, but it's all for naught if the book it graces is a steaming pile of dreck. Kudos then to Paper Tiger for producing these collections where you can enjoy the works of these talented artists for what they are: really cool pictures.

With text by Chris Morgan which you can peruse or ignore as your fancy takes you, *Hardyware* charts the career in pictures of this renowned cover artist. Books, magazines, cd's, Hardy's colourful

illustrations have graced them all. Lots of huge spaceships, moonscapes and alien landscapes to enjoy here, and no silly second-rate writing to detract from your enjoyment.

But wait! There's more! **The Science Fiction Art of Vincent Di Fate** (Paper Tiger, Hardback, UK£20.00, 112pp) is another selection from a guy I've never heard of but whose work seems altogether familiar. I love browsing through books like this. Every page brings something new and exciting to admire. Di Fate provides his own commentary for this volume, ruminating on science fiction and alien sightings and abductions.

Brom: Offerings (Paper



Tiger, Hardback, UK£20.00, 128pp) is a whole different kettle of orcs. No primary coloured space invaders here. These paintings are dark, shadowy, gothic and primarily fantasy of one sort or another. Sword wielding zombies, winged ogres and S&M dominatrixes populate these pages, and there's a great selection of sketches at the end, too. The minimalist text is a cross between fragments of bad poetry or bad genre fantasy or bad erotic horror. All three of these are worth a look, and serve as a reminder that there's more to the visual side of science fiction and fantasy than movies or television.

The Small Press Guide 2002 (Writers' Bookshop, Paperback, UK£9.99, 358pp) is an invaluable tool for anyone with a mouldering pile of stories or poetry you really think you should get around to sending somewhere. Plenty of fantasy, horror and science fiction zines happy to read your stuff and maybe even print it, paying you with a complimentary copy. It's worth even just flicking through for the odd glimpse into assorted sub-cultures. Small circulations but big hearts.

Finally, let me direct your attention to a new paperback edition of Humphrey Carpenter's fine and accomplished **JRR Tolkien: A Biography** (Harper Collins) If you've seen and enjoyed the film but are wavering about whether you really want to re-read the books, then perhaps you might try this instead. It's a scholarly, sympathetic and insightful look into the rather ordinary life of one of the most gifted imaginations of the twentieth century. Somehow the contrast between the high romance of Tolkien's

work and the subdued, donnish existence he led makes this all the more compelling to read. He was entranced by language, he loved the English countryside, he was a devout Catholic and he preferred the intellectual and spiritual consolations of male company, none of which should endear him to the children of the twenty first century, but all of which were fundamental to the creation of one of the most enduring works of popular culture, ever. Which is odd, because popular culture was the last, if even that, thing on his mind, ever.

Such are the contradictions, but it seems to me they're contradiction success has imposed on Tolkien. One of the many pleasures to be drawn from reading this is the growing sense that **The Lord Of The Rings** is something that grew out of affection, learning, mythology, language and an imagination bigger than we can ever know. It's a fusty, dusty, almost doddering origin, a far cry from the modern, streamlined techniques of publishing and marketing, which seems to be more about strip-mining popular culture than adding to it. However, the creation of everyone's favourite epic fantasy is but one of the concerns of this lucid, pleasant book, and I heartily recommend it to you as a source of much pleasure.

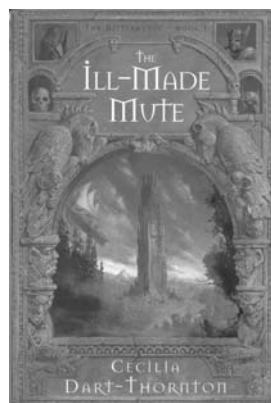
Reviews by Frank Ludlow

The Ill-Made Mute (Macmillan, Hardback, 437pp, £17.99) by Celia Dart-Thornton.

On seeing the book, the first of three making up *The Bitterbynde Trilogy*, I'll admit to being impressed by the cover art. Not so much for the art itself, although it is quite good, but for the fact that it looked like Macmillan had sunk quite a bit of money into promoting a first time author. As usual, someone was quoted making a comparison to *Lord Of The Rings*. To any publisher interested, I will also do this (for a small expense fee!)

So, did the story actually match up to the cover?

The Ill-Made Mute is a



fantasy, set comfortably within the borders of the genre. There's scant all innovative or daring in either the themes, the plot or the writing. Sword and sorcery, basically, with the main character, a deformed mute suffering from amnesia, on the usual quest to redeem his (her, should I let that slip?) body, mind and memory, but meeting with the usual setbacks along the way, and, of course, the ever-worsening situation.

The story begins in the Isse Tower of the world Erith, surrounded by a host of good and evil spirits known as Seelie and Unseelie Wights. But wait! That's not all. There are flying horses and flying boats too! In this world, the unfortunate mute of the title finds himself pressed into service as a



menial labourer and the recipient of the 'bad people's' irrational aggression.

But of course, as the hero of the piece, possessing all the hidden strengths and subject to all the mandatory plot requirements that entails, is able to escape this life of toil and the quest begins. During the course of the story, he progresses from stowaway, to captive, to crewmember on a pirate ship, to partner in finding a horde of treasure, to becoming the subject of some unknown (obviously evil and magical) force's attention, and so on.

On the good side, the internal logic of the story is fairly well kept to, and the lore fed in digestible pieces, though the verse at the beginnings of chapters became quickly tiresome. There are moments when the story is absorbing, and moments where interesting themes are just waiting to be played out. But these are rarely utilised. The big twist isn't really a surprise, and the book is not one that

will broaden your mind or make you stay up that bit later to see what the next page will reveal ... unless you've never read fantasy of this sort before, then the consistency of the world created might compel you on.

This is an almost-standard fantasy, borrowing from somewhat familiar mythology that many of you will recognise. I was cringing in the anticipation of leprechauns appearing. Thankfully, they don't, though the use of (often miss-spelt) Gaelic names was sometimes amusing. At the end of the book, I'm left wondering what she managed to fill the four hundred or so pages with; no great plot movements have occurred, though there is the anticipation of a war between good and evil. But isn't there always?

But to be fair this is the first book of the trilogy. It's not unreadable or un-enjoyable, just nothing out of the fantastic ordinary that we haven't come to expect. I'm sure it lives up to the standards of many of its bookshelf companions. If you get this book as a gift, don't be disappointed; it will look good on your shelf, and let you pass your time in a comfortable, familiar escapist realm. But if you're tempted to buy it, there may well be more stimulating experiences to be had from your local book store.

Toxicology (Gollancz, Paperback, 131pp, £9.99) by Steve Aylett.

Toxicology is a collection of short stories, with some being very short indeed. So rather than giving a comment on every one - which could well be longer than the stories themselves - I'll suggest right now that you go out and buy this book! Don't be put off by the cover.

The stories are full of satirical sarcasm and dripping with cynicism and colour. The characters are rarely less than interesting, and for their sort, the stories hit with unexpected force and meaning. You might actually rethink a few things on reading this book, and have a laugh along the way.

I'll admit some few pieces didn't really hook my interest, such as *If Armstrong Was Interesting*, which isn't really a short story in any sense I know. But the good, surprising, mind-boggling stories, set in some of the strangest places you'll ever read of, far outweigh the negatives.

This is one for those of you tired with the less inventive side of short fiction.

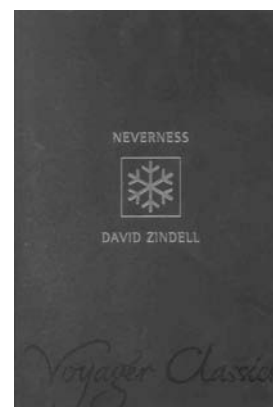
Neverness (Voyager, Paperback, 685pp, £7.99) by David Zindell

Zindell's first novel, *Neverness*, comes twenty-fourth on the *Voyager* classics list, framed in a cover that is striking for its simplicity.

Obviously, *Voyager* sees no need for an elaborate cover to sell these books. Anyway why should they? There are few here of the list of SF and fantasy titles that I would or could disagree with as representing a sample of the best genre writing over the past years.

Against classics such as Gibson's **Neuromancer**, I had to wonder how a debut SF novel would fare. With this in mind, I let Zindell take me through the city of *Neverness* and the surrounding worlds. From the start of his pilot's career, to his adventures in the icy *Unreal City*, to his exploration of the manifold, the solid-state entity (a nebular intelligence) and much more.

I wasn't disappointed. The story encompasses and explores all that it means to be human, to be immortal, even what it could mean to be a God. This is not just a coming of age novel for the main character, Mallory Ringess, it is a becoming of



Godhood novel!

And no, it doesn't get boring. Action is dispersed in thorough, realistic and satisfying measures and is used as part of the plot, not as a mere measure to keep the pace going. The characters are interesting, complex, motivated and rarely transparent. I struggled to find fault with the story at all, even though that's what I'm here to do.

I sped through this book, savouring in ideas which still feel as fresh today as they must have been in 1989 when the book was first launched. And this is a book of ideas, of concepts that stretch the SF element into almost-fantasy without discomfort. For once the poetry, proverbs and quotes introducing each chapter didn't bore me and had some relevance to the story as it unfolded.

I won't detail what happens over the course of the 685 pages, but I can assure you that *Neverness* stands at least level with the others you may have read on the Voyager list. A fine read.

Reviews by Roelof Goudriaan

Spectrum SF 7, November 2001. 192 pages, paperback. £14 for four issues (one year) from Spectrum Publishing, 53 Waverley Park, Kirkintilloch, Glasgow G66 2BL, United Kingdom. Website: www.spectrumsf.co.uk

This seventh issue of Spectrum SF opens with the first half of Charles Stross's *The Atrocity Archive*, a humorous novel set in a world where magic works - at least the kind "based on the Thuring theorem" that opens holes to other universes. Stross has written some truly brilliant stories in the past few years, like *A Colder War* (which originally appeared in an earlier issue of Spectrum SF) and *Antibodies* both collected in last year's Dozois **Best SF of the Year**. *The Atrocity Archive* is not as assured as either of these stories, mostly because Stross is too rushed in the delivery of his jokes and doesn't take the time to bring the reader with to a point where the punchlines are funny. However, the half novel is still filled to the brim with imaginative detail, which made me read on even where the humour didn't.

The shorter fiction is very good indeed. David Redd's *Green England* is strong in its use of language to portray a

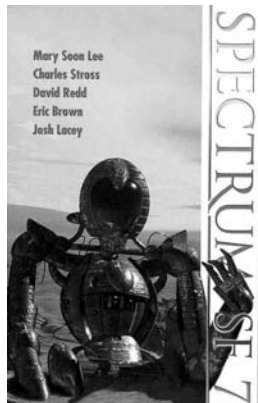
different society - what at first seems to be tiresome shtick actually works in the story, and becomes engrossing. It describes an American trade mission in *Green England*, and its resolution is bitterly elegant.

Eric Brown's *The Kethani Inheritance* is a novelette set in a near future where humans are resurrected by an alien race. Having set the scene in other stories, Brown concentrates completely on the human element. His love story is unsurprising, and as a "mainstream" romance story would be too thinly plotted to be satisfying, but is beautifully told nonetheless.

The Pilgrim is Josh Lacey's first published story. It's bittier in style than I like, but packs plentiful emotion. Its impact on you will depend on the strength of your belief in a Space Programme.

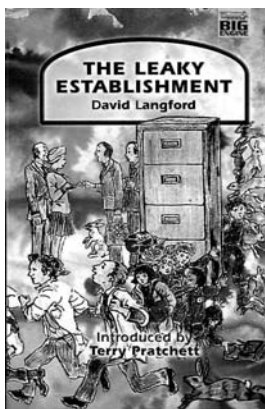
My favourite is Mary Soon Lee's *Crew-Dog*, a short but effective tale about smart animals: I'd never seen this perspective done before. A very stylish story, and again a very moving one.

Staying close to the core of the genre, *Spectrum SF* offers solid modern SF stories. It is the most exciting new SF magazine to emerge from the United Kingdom in the last years.



The Leaky Establishment David Langford. 210 pages, trade paperback. Big Engine 2001, £7.99

David Langford is well known in SF circles for his fannish Hugo-awarded newsletter *Ansible* and columns in numerous SF magazines. He also has a small number of novels to his name, which are all excellent. Even his serious works betray a wicked sense of humour: his SF novel **The Space Eater** (1982) for instance, which explores the unpleasantness that must ensue when matter transmitters can only handle objects that are smaller than the eye of a needle. **The Leaky Establishment** (originally published in 1984) is an



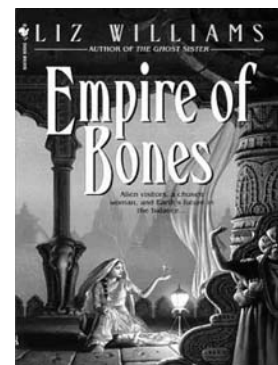
outright hilarious "atomic farce". It all starts when atomic scientist Roy Tappen, busy bee worker in the bureaucracy of a nuclear weapons research centre, accidentally takes an nuclear warhead home with him... And then things start getting really out of hand.

Langford worked for six years in the Aldermaston Atomic Weapons Research Establishment, so he knows the kind environment he describes. However, what makes this book so masterly is the way in which the peculiarities of bureaucracy, academics, the military machine and marital life interlace and amplify each other. The Leaky Establishment is perfectly delivered, building layer upon layer of embarrassment, mayhem and impending oh-so-funny doom.

The timing of the humour is perfect, and the plotting likewise is without a flaw - every hilarious twist and turn of the book is a logic consequence of some earlier desperate deed or the other, and every deed makes sense at the time!

The Leaky Establishment is a welcome reprint of a rare comic masterwork. Terry Pratchett mentions in his introduction that this was a book Pratchett was meant to write. I'm glad he didn't, but that David Langford wrote it instead. Langford's humour grates closer to the bone. This is a book that John Cleese should have filmed.

Order through Big Engine's website www.bigengine.co.uk



Empire of Bones by Liz Williams (Bantam, Proof Copy, \$5.99, 336pp)

In the third decade of the 21st century, Jaya Nihalani, a freedom fighter obviously inspired by Phoolan Devi, has lost her revolution. She's crippled by a mysterious illness that ravages the Untouchable caste, and is doomed

to meet either a violent death, or death by disease. Then the voices in her head get louder, and Jaya begins a new life and new role as nexus for the aliens who once colonised Earth and are now ready to "harvest" the planet...

There is much to enjoy in this novel, but let me talk about the flaw first: the portrayal of its societies lacks depth. The alien society is a caste system relying on the use of suppressants, with a set of "naturals" who don't use these suppressants and are barely tolerated by "civilized" folks. Most of the descriptions in the book that focus on the society rather than local colour illustrate this one-sentence description rather than building upon it by adding more layers and complexity. In a similar manner, the scenes in India focus on the caste system inequalities at the expense of more texture and richness of culture. As a main character, Jaya herself has a lot of difficulties stepping out of her bandit queen mould – the flashbacks to her defining moment (the murder on her husband) are too frequent, and her one moment of defining choice arrives only at the conclusion of the novel.

However, *Empire of Bones* still succeeds as a well-written fast-paced SF thriller. Liz Williams deftly intertwines her plot of political intrigue on the aliens' world with Jaya's struggle to discover what is happening to her, what the aliens' real motives are and what they will mean for Earth: she uses the parallels and the differences between the alien and Indian cultures to their best effect. There is vivid richness in the alien detail, like the pheromonal transmissions which form a core of the aliens' communication, and the suspense is enriched by a healthy dose of ironic humour (no spoilers in this review – but once you've read the book, you'll recognize the lice and mammoth moments. An assured, solid novel.

Reviews by John Kenny

Any Time Now by Chris Butler (Cosmos Books, Paperback, UK£12.00, 161pp)

Joe, Kate, George Hurley, Darnell, London

Freaknest by Lance Olsen (Wordcraft of Oregon, Paperback, US\$12.00,

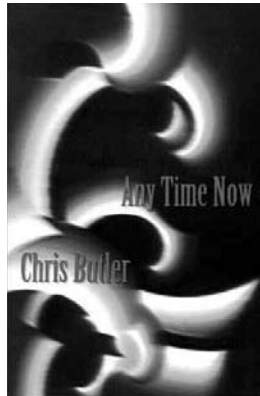
258pp)

You Said It

(A PR man's guide to some recent books)

The Mothman Prophecies (nel, paperback, UK£6.99, 336pp) by John A. Keel

For



thirteen months the entire town of Point Pleasant, West Virginia was gripped by a dark terror that culminated in a tragedy that made headlines throughout the world. Homes throughout the town were plagued with unearthly noises and ghostly manifestations. Winged monsters and frightening apparitions terrified the population. The mothman still remains an enigmatic figure, a fascinating and compelling mystery - sometimes determined to save lives, sometimes standing by to watch the death of thousands. The story reads like a novel - but every single word is true...

Shock (Macmillan, hardback, UK£10.00, 342pp) by Robin Cook

Students and close friends Deborah Cochrane and Joanna Meissner have spotted a newspaper ad that may solve their financial problems. An exclusive and highly profitable fertility clinic on Boston's North Shore is looking for female donors, so they reckon they can do a bit of good by helping infertile couples while earning some money for themselves. Even when dark rumours surface of a previous donor's unexplained disappearance, the two young women remain undeterred.

Everything goes smoothly until second thoughts and curiosity prompt the pair to find out more. When stymied by a veil of secrecy, they even seek employment at the clinic in order

to continue probing. Working there under aliases, Deborah and Joanna soon discover the horrifying true nature of Dr. Windgate's research - and immediately put their sanity, maybe even their lives, at risk.

The Skinner (Macmillan, Trade Paperback, UK£9.99, 474pp) by Neal Asher

On the planet Spatterjay arrive three travellers: Janer, bringing the eyes of the hornet Hive mind, on a mission not yet revealed to him; Erlin, searching for Ambel - the ancient sea captain who can teach her how to live; and Sable

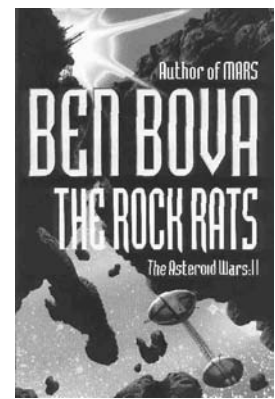
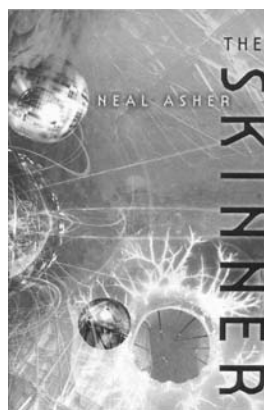
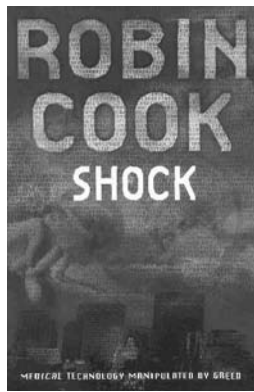
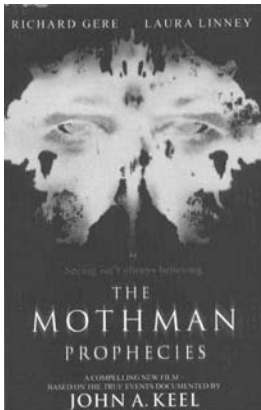


Keech, on a vendetta he cannot abandon, though he himself has been dead for seven hundred years. This remote world is mostly ocean, and all but a very few human visitors keep safe inside the island Dome. Outside it, only the native hoopers dare risk the voracious appetites of the planet's wildlife. As the fortunes of the recent arrivals converge, major hell is about to erupt in a chaotic waterscape - where minor hell is already a remorseless fact of everyday life... and death.

The Rock Rats, The Asteroid Wars:II (Hodder & Stoughton, Hardback, UK£18.99, 440pp) by Ben Bova

The Asteroid Wars: Millions of chunks of rock and metal float silently, endlessly, through the deep emptiness of interplanetary space. They contain more metals and minerals, more natural resources, than the entire Earth... The story of the men and women who risk everything to mine the riches of the asteroids began in The Precipice. It continues in

The Rock Rats: Martin Humphries - the fabulously wealthy,



coldly ruthless owner of the greatest space-based industrial giant - has been checked, but his malice and ambition remain. He still dreams of bankrupting the rival space exploration company of Astro Manufacturing and bringing the independent prospectors who are beginning to stake claims on large and small rocks in the asteroid belt under his control. And most of all he wants to capture the love of beautiful Amanda Cunningham, the woman who spurned his money, and take his revenge on Lars Fuchs, the space prospector who both defied Humphries and married Amanda. His weapons will be piracy sabotage and murder.

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The Barber

Sam Millar

Sam is married with 3 kids. He is winner of the Brian Moore Short Story Award; runner-up in The Cork Literary Review Awards. He has been published in Books Ireland, The Burning Bush (Ireland) Lexicon, Cadenza, Voyage, Buzzwords, Acid Angel (UK) A-List, Write Gallery, Short Stories Magazine (USA) and Southern Ocean Review (New Zealand).

From his house, the boy watched as snow fell in thick leaves, swirling tightly in a rage at the base of the old shop across the street.

He had always loved the solitary feel of the old abandoned shop with its fearful loneliness avoided by others.

He had always loved it, but now he hated it.

It had always been derelict; at least as far back as he could remember. Pigeons made their home in it, as did rats and the stray, wild cats that spat at you and chased the dogs, leaving their snouts a bloody mess.

He remembered -hating to remember - how he had climbed in through the back window, searching for something that he knew couldn't be there. The dark drew him in, seducing with its magnetic pull, knowing the weakness of curiosity that the young possess.

The smell of human waste was overpowering, as he entered, almost a living being.

As his eyes adjusted to the cobwebbed-filled interior, to his horror the shop was carpeted by the carcasses of dead birds, their fragile bones gleaming like hulls from tiny ships caught in the rocks, blending wickedly into an origami of shadows and repulsiveness.

The ever-skillful rats had been proficient in stripping the flesh. It was a massacre, a feasting of the dead, and he was baffled how creatures of flight could have been captured so easily.

Only when he stumbled on the two birds, each crucified to the beams, their necks twisted into grotesque, feathered question marks, did he realise the rats had only played a meagre part in the bloody pantomime.

A shudder iced his spine. What if the killer was still in the shop, watching him this minute, knife in hand? No one would know. They hadn't seen him enter. The killer could leave him dying in his own blood, just like the ugly birds pinioned to the mast, staring at him in disbelief, at his stupidity in remaining.

Then the rats would come, finishing the job...

The shop's acoustics echoed behind him in the darkness, making his heart thump, his face swell with rushing blood. He wanted to ask who's there but feared it would expose him, so he moved slowly across the room, as if swimming in a morass of sand. If he could only make it another few feet, freedom would sweep him away to safety, away from whatever lurked there, watching him.

Suddenly, the sound of feet crushing glass made his hair tight, burning his scalp. Liquid was flooding his brain and he could no longer think. Was it *his* feet, or someone else's that had made the sound?

He heard a laugh, so soft it was almost silent, meant for his ears only, sinister and deliberate.

Not thinking, not caring, he took a chance and ran. He had only one thought and that was to escape. He wouldn't die, not here with the dead.

It was funny how John Wayne always made it look so easy, jumping through windows of a saloon as the bad guys shot at him. But he was no John Wayne. He was a failure, and the perfect casement of glass suddenly became a kaleidoscopic pattern, all in slow motion, as he tumbled to the ground watching his blood hit it before he did, the shreds of glass following him, piercing every inch of skin.

Afterwards, he could only remember the pain as he drifted in and out of needle-induced nightmares, screaming for water to be thrown on his face, stop the burning heat that came from it. People with masks floated above him, surrounding the face of his mother.

Scarred for life, he remembered her voice whispering, contradicting the specialist, sitting there in his fat leather chair, manipulating the shadows on his face, obscuring clarity of expression. "They will fade", he said, his voice a politician. "Given time, he'll hardly notice them."

But four years had passed and there had been no fading, either of scars or memory. If anything, the opposite was true.

...the rats had only played a meagre part in the bloody pantomime.

He would have gone insane had it not been for his plastic models of the *Werewolf*, *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* with whom he found comfort and friendship.

The plastic monsters were the only therapy he needed, not doctors. They sustained him, building his confidence as he meticulously attached each intricate and tiny piece together, shaping them, giving life to them.

At night, with the lights dead, they would glow eerily, like a lighthouse bathed in fog, guarding him against the completeness of isolation.

Just as he was about to close the curtains of his window, his eyes captured a small blue car coming into view, its loneliness augmented by the starkness of the deserted street.

It stopped at the entrance of the shop and an old man emerged to stand at the doorway, nodding to himself in a world of his own.

Every now and then he would quickly scribble something into a tiny pocket book, wetting the pencil with the carpet of his tongue, staining it black.

"What was he doing?" said the boy, out loud to no one but his monsters, as he watched the car disappear into the snow, its liquorice tyre marks chasing it.

A feeling came to him at that exact moment but he quickly erased it, as he had done many times before, not wanting to set his hopes high.

If the shop were to change, be transformed into something. - *anything* - perhaps he would change and it would no longer have the power to make him wince with terror each time he saw it.

If he were a good boy, he would have whispered a nice wee prayer to God. But he wasn't nice, and God didn't exist.

Months passed and the old shop remained unused. Then one Saturday he watched as men with tools piled planks of wood outside the shop, talking loudly to each other.

His heart skipped a fraction. *It was happening*, he told himself. *Don't look at it. You'll jinx yourself. They'll disappear.*

Expectation began to swell in his chest, but doubt, heavy as an anvil kept it firmly in place.

Normally, he hated Saturdays. All the other kids in the street loved Saturday, but they didn't have to endure all the nonsense that he had to handle. He would much prefer staying in his room, putting the finishing touches to *The Mummy's Vengeance*.

At least it was raining outside, he told himself, plus he had the added advantage of being up while most people in the street slept. No one would see him, he hoped.

First on his agenda were the boxes of apples from his mother's trees.

As he approached the fruit shop, he stopped to watch the horses utilised by the local glazier. They stood in unison, eating, pissing and shiting. They never stopped, their arses perpetually pushing out fist-size boulders with slivers of undigested straw protruding from them like burnt cacti. Kamikaze sparrows darted in and out between the horses' legs capturing the spillage.

Sometimes his mother made him scoop up the dung to fertilise the trees, much to the amusement of the kids in the street. He had wanted to poison the horses, burn down the trees, make his mother eat her precious dung, and even though these were only thoughts, they became at times so tangible he could taste them, boring deep down into his skull, as if searching for oil.

He took a deep breath before entering the fruit shop, before having to deal with Richardson, the green grocer from hell.

"Ah! Young Gary!" exclaimed Richardson, crowbar in hand. "Good to see you're not like the rest of the dirty dogs, sleeping in their beds on a beautiful morning like this." It was still pissing outside.

Dead, supine flies lined the window of the store like a contiguous military convey debilitated by superior forces, while their air-borne comrades struggled above, stuck on dusty flypaper.

Gary stared at the adhesive, fascinated by its struggling victims trying, in vain, to detach themselves from the sticky graveyard. It always reminded him of the currant buns sold next door in Mullan's bakery. He had never eaten one in his life.

Richardson squeezed the teeth of the crowbar between the lips of the banana crate and with slight movement of his elbow, popped the wood asunder.

"How many, young Gary?" asked Richardson, a giant with tight clothes. The man's large stomach had sheltered too many beers for its own good.

"Fifty, Mister Richardson," squeaked Gary. He hated this part, the barter of apples.

Richardson handled one of the apples, rubbing his thumb against the texture, smelling it with his giant nostrils.

...darkness ruled, bullying out the decency that he knew he possessed...

"Four cabbages. Howsaboutathen?" He said this as one word.

"My ma said *five* cabbages, four carrots and a stone of blue spuds."

Gary wished Richardson would speed it up, in case one of his schoolmates came in for a toffee-apple, witnessing his humiliation.

"Ha! Yer ma's arse is out the window!" laughed Richardson, who was now juggling some of the apples, like a clown, into the air, winking as he pretended to allow them to fall. "But you've caught me in a generous mood. Four cabbages. And here's some carrots as well."

Gary was not in the mood this morning, so he didn't argue.

As he left the shop, Richardson handed him a pear. It was badly bruised and had teeth marks in it. "Here, that's for you. And tell yer ma she's gotta get up early to catch me!"

Gary could still hear the laughter halfway down the lane and he knew his mother would look on the exchange with disdain.

"That's all?" she asked as he entered the living room.

Tiny needles of pain began to burn his skull.

"Why didn't you go yourself, then?" he answered, watching her face flush. A few weeks ago he wouldn't have

answered his her back, but she was becoming just like the trees: hateful.

Suddenly, the pressure on the edge of his skull began to ease into an acceptable throb. Pleasurable, almost.

A week later and the old shop had been transformed into the new barber's. It would be a godsend for the men in town who traveled at least three miles, on foot, to have their hair cut.

A few days after the initial opening a 'Help Wanted' sign was placed in the window.

Gary stared at the sign from his room. It was teasing - *no, torturing* - him, whispering for him to return, to be friends.

But he knew his mother would not permit him to take the job and he was more than surprised when she said she would consider it.

Then surprise changed to anger.

Consider it? How could she allow me to enter that place after all I have gone through? Had she being doing her job as a so-called mother, perhaps I would not have these scars for the rest of my life, nor her crocodile tears.

But he said nothing, simply smiled at her, like a fox hiding in the dark of night.

Yes. You do just that. But while you consider that, consider this, also: One day the oil is gonna come bursting out, like a geyser, all hot and sticky. There were times when he tried - and succeeded - to keep these terrible feelings for her consecutively, allowing each a life of its own, each dominating the other in equal periods. But most times the darkness ruled, bullying out the decency that he knew he possessed but hated for its weakness. He thought the darkness like ink seeping destructively into bread, destroying all that was good in him.

It had been over two years since last he saw his face.

Stop, he admonished himself. *You're not to blame. She is.*

So, you've come at last?" said the old man, scissors in hand, clipping perfect shapes from the flawed head of a customer.

"What do you mean? Am I not allowed to come in for a haircut?" said Gary, indignantly.

"Of course! Of course! Silly me. I thought you had come for the job - at least for the summer, get some money in your pocket. But not to worry, I believe another boy is interested." Both the barber and customer smiled at their reflections in the mirror.

A stone of fear moved in his stomach, sliding downwards like acid.

"Did I say I wasn't interested?"

"Are you?" smiled the old man, knowing the answer.

Gary started that afternoon, sweeping puddles of hair, making tea and reading the comics. Occasionally, he wiped the mirrors on the wall, keeping his eyes glazed, as if in a trance, not seeing his face. It had been over two years since last he saw his face. He doubted if he would ever look at it again.

As time went by, Gary started to love the shop. It was an emporium of treasures so delicious they hurt his heart:

sweets harboured in jars lined the groaning shelves; towers of American comic books piled haphazardly, waiting to collapse; shrunken, rubber heads dangled ghoulishly from the nicotine ceiling. Religious paraphernalia sat incongruously with magazines of half-naked women, decapitated corpses and Mafia rub-outs - appropriately enough - in barber chairs.

A *Brylcreem* poster of Denis Compton, cricket bat in hand, proudly proclaimed: *Perfectly set for the day.*

This is home. This is what it should be all about, thought Gary as he watched the barber wield his magic on a customer.

Not even his mother cried when she witnessed his destroyed face.

The old barber, razor in hand, quickly attended the

soapy face, making a swathe in the air before resting it on the man's pliable throat and protruding Adam's apple the size of a robin's egg.

With a slight, invisible movement, the old man removed the soap, leaving the customer's cheeks gleaming a pink red, not unlike a baby's bum.

Power, thought Gary, watching the stubble vanish. *To make something disappear, with such ease, is true power.*

The old barber broke his thoughts. "One day, Gary, you will be able to do this. You will become the best barber the town has ever known. They will remember you forever..."

The crackling static of an old Bakelite wireless nipped at his neck as the classical music of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* floated abstrusely about the shop, appreciated by no one except the old barber who prayed for the last pangs of day when he would sit, upstairs, listening to his beloved music.

Once, not too long ago, Gary slipped up the stairs, hiding in the shadows and watched as the old man prepared supper, listening to the tragic love story of Mimi and Rodolfo in *La Boheme*, tears rolling down his face.

The young man was fascinated. How could music make you cry? He could never remember having seen anyone cry. Not even his mother cried when she witnessed his destroyed face.

Have you gone mad?" said his mother jokingly. "Wouldn't we look the proper fools sitting here covered in soap, you with your plastic razor trying to shave a couple of my hairy moles!"

"But it's the only way I'll prove myself to the barber. I know I can be the best."

She laughed out loud, stopping suddenly, seeing the hurt on his face. "I suppose it would do no harm," she said, relenting.

He warned the towel at the fire.

"Must do it right."

"Watch you don't burn it," she almost said, before holding her tongue. She had upset him enough today.

"And how are you today, Mr McCarthy?" asked Gary, taking on the role of the old barber.

The mother was laughing, now. "Don't be expecting a tip from me, young man, unless you do a good

job," she said, her voice hamming a masculine throaty gruff.

"Oh, no sir! You will never forget this shave. Like a baby's bum."

"Gary! Now watch your language," said his mother's muffled voice from beneath the hot towel.

Gary, *watch your language*, mimicked a snide voice somewhere on the oil rig. Gary, *pick up all that horse shit, rub it in those scars of yours. That'll take them all away, all on a summer day.*

The hedgehog's voice was laughing now, blending seamlessly with his mother's. He felt his fingers tighten on the towel and something bubbling in the hollow of his stomach.

"Gary! You almost suffocated me! Enough of this nonsense!"

He found his mother's skin not unlike the naked chicken he practiced on.

"No! Please, mother. I'm just nervous, that's all. I want to get it just right. Please..."

She shook her head then sat back in the chair as Gary applied the shaving brush, gently but firmly to her face.

"What's that music you're playing?" she asked, the soap tickling her nose. She felt a sneeze coming on.

"Opera. *La Boheme*. It tells the tragic love story of a poor poet, Rodolfo, who falls in love with Mimi, a seamstress."

"I didn't know you knew opera, son?"

He smiled: *There are a lot of things you don't know about me.*

He found his mother's skin not unlike the naked chicken he practiced on. It was withered, beyond care and

he wondered if the consumptive-ridden Mimi's skin was as horrible.

Her skin may be withered, sneered the voice in his head, *but at least it isn't scarred.*

He watched as his mother's eyelids became heavy, listening to the softness and adagio of the music.

Why should I have all the scars, he thought, as oil moved faster and faster, pumping in his brain.

It was strange and powerful how a tiny nick could create such a forceful release of fluid. Her clothes would be ruined, but it was a small price for freedom.

She hadn't even stirred, lost somewhere in the music of dreams and failed hopes.

He made another nick - a fraction wider - to the left of the original.

She moaned, but he held her hand tightly, giving her strength, the strength he had needed all the years of his isolation.

Somewhere outside, nightlights came on, accentuating the darkness in the room. *La Boheme* came to a crackling end leaving only his soft breathing in the room.

He looked back at her, before closing the door, thinking how she resembled one of his models: stiff yet life-like. He tried to think which model, but the tiny hedgehogs had returned, biting at his brain.

It was only later in bed - as he closed his eyes, squeezing in the night and feeling his lids flicker as if housing angry ants - did he agree with himself to tell the old barber that the time had now come. He was a real barber now...



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