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Defining/Redefining the Masculine "Other" in Science Fiction

By Neil P. Baird

7/1/02

> *If you deny any affinity with another person or kind of person, if you declare it to be wholly different from yourself as men have done to women, and class has done to class, and nation has done to nation you may hate it or deify it; but in either case you have denied its spiritual equality and its human reality. You have made it into a thing, to which the only possible relationship is a power relationship. And thus you have fatally impoverished your own reality. You have, in fact, alienated yourself.*
> —Ursula K. Le Guin, "American SF and the Other"

The extent to which such writers, critics, and editors as Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, James Tiptree, Jr., and Pamela Sargent have explored the feminine "other" within science fiction is known to many. Indeed, it was Pamela Sargent who criticized and yet realized the potential of the genre in her introduction to *Women of Wonder* by saying, "One can wonder why a literature that prides itself on

exploring alternatives or assumptions counter to what we normally believe has not been more concerned with the roles of women in the future" (xv). While these and other feminist authors have explored alternatives to the alienated status of women constructed by patriarchy, the effects of participating in a patriarchy for men remain relatively unexamined. Although the social system of patriarchy privileges men, this privileged status places men in a position of power which isolates them from women and other men, thus constructing a masculine "other" alienated from relational existence. What Sargent and other feminist writers have done is create space for science fiction and its criticism to deeply explore alternatives to this masculine "other" constructed by patriarchy. Using Allan G. Johnson's conception of patriarchy in *The Gender Knot,* this essay will offer a new reading of Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream" and explore Candas Jane Dorsey's "(Learning About) Machine Sex" in order to explore the question being asked by the mad-scientist narrator in Michael Blumlein's "The Brains of Rats."

The mad-scientist narrator of Michael Blumlein's "The Brains of Rats" is asking a question that could only be asked in a post-feminist era: What does it mean to be a man? The short story portrays the discovery of a rhinovirus that, when transmitted through water or air, has the ability to cross the placenta into a developing fetus, creating either an all-male or all-female human species. This single science fictional element places Blumlein's mad-scientist narrator on a journey of self-discovery which creates a certain poignancy to the

questions of gender that many of us as readers are already asking.

Part of the beauty of this short story is not so much in what it is saying but in what it does to the reader. To put it frankly, reading “The Brains of Rats” makes some habitual science fiction readers uncomfortable. Several episodes are intended to shock readers, such as when the narrator portrays his homosexual experiment with a black man in as much explicit detail as possible (Blumlein 641-643). This same feeling is created when the narrator asks a friend what is the best thing about being a man and he replies, “Having a penis.... Having it sucked, putting it in a warm place,” (Blumlein 640) or by the patient who laments that he is impotent and, after having a metal rod placed in his penis, rejoices in his godlike ability to have sex for eight hours straight, pleasing his women by bending the rod in different directions (Blumlein 644-645).

Allan G. Johnson is a sociologist who has written prolifically about problems in gender, and his conception of patriarchy offers an explanation for why readers might feel uncomfortable with these scenes. In *The Gender Knot,* Johnson explores several cultures different from our own to make an argument about how patriarchy defines sexuality and our participation in this particular social system (17). Johnson notes that two to three percent of human children are androgynous at birth, and that those born with this sexual ambiguity are accepted in some Native American cultures because the system in which they live provides a space for androgyny to exist. For example, those born androgynous in

the Navajo culture occupy a third sex category—"nadle"—which exists legitimately among the common cultural categories of “male” and “female.”

To move back to Blumlein's short story, his mad-scientist narrator crosses boundaries which the specific social system in which we live does not recognize, or is only slowly recognizing. As the narrator crosses these boundaries, by dressing as a woman and experiencing sexuality as a woman, he begins to offend certain deep structures generated by the system in which we live. Our system only recognizes the categories of “male” and “female,” but Blumlein's narrator violates this system by living a hybrid existence in order to accumulate knowledge and decide the fate of human gender. To use Donna Haraway's term, he becomes a cyborg, an unnatural monster both male and female, which calls into question these acknowledged categories, thus disturbing some readers.

I would like to further explore Johnson's idea of “deep structures” (which is unrelated to the linguistic theories of Noam Chomsky) with reference to Raphael Carter's “Congenital Agenesis of Gender Ideation.” In the form of a scientific paper coauthored by K. N. Sirsi and Sandra Botkin, this short story recounts the discovery of a disorder which impairs gender perception. People with this disorder cannot readily perceive the sex of a person from appearance alone. In the course of exploring this disorder, Sirsi and Botkin begin to realize that “Sometimes an experiment reveals more about the experimenters than the subjects” (Carter 99).

It is their experience with twins from Minnesota which causes Sirsi and Botkin to view their own perception of gender as the disorder. These twins cannot identify gender in terms of the acknowledged categories of “male” or “female"; however, drawing on their own language developed during childhood, they can identify gender in terms of twenty-two categories, from those with clitoromegaly to different forms of hermaphrodism (Carter 101-103). It is at this point that Sirsi and Botkin begin to perceive the identification of gender using only the two terms “male” and “female” as the cognitive defect, not the other way around.

Sirsi and Botkin conclude that certain innate predispositions control our perceptions of reality. These “innate predispositions” are what Johnson means by “deep structures.” “Our knowledge of the world,” Sirsi and Botkin explain, “is filtered through an unreliable narrator whose biases deny us direct access to the truth” (Carter 106). Similarly, by dressing as a woman and using his homosexual experiment to experience sexuality as a woman, Blumlein's narrator disturbs those who approach the short story with the innate predispositions generated by the patriarchal system in which we participate because he moves within, without, and through acknowledged definitions of male and female.

Johnson argues that these innate predispositions construct gender and our perceptions of gender by creating paths of least resistance or acceptable ways of acting. To define this concept, Johnson turns to the paths of least resistance created by the board game *Monopoly* (79). Let me illustrate his argument by telling my own experience with this game.

Monopoly, essentially, creates a social system that rewards greed. The rules are built in such a way that a player attempts to create as much wealth as he or she can while pushing the others out of the game. Because of its length, it is a game that easily gets boring. When I get bored, I often miss the opportunity to gain more wealth when I don't notice players landing on my property. I am laughed at because of this, and you could imagine the reaction if I just went around the board not purchasing any property or allowing all to stay at my hotel for free instead of collecting $1500. In contrast, there is my friend who follows the paths of least resistance, and plays by the rules of the game so well that he throws the board at my wife when he loses and then isolates himself in his room. He is not like this outside of the game; the innate predispositions or rules of the game create paths of least resistance or acceptable ways of behaving which construct who the players are and how they interact.

Damon Knight's short story “The Handler” illustrates the nature of innate predispositions and the paths of least resistance they create. “The Handler” tells the story of Pete and Harry, the big man and little man (as they are so often referred to in the story): the mechanism and the handler who operates it from within. A group of people are celebrating the success of the show they have just put on, and Pete is the center of attention, capturing the glances of women and the envy of men. The tone of the party changes as soon as Harry steps out of Pete and reveals his true self as the handler. He is shunned by the people at the party, and only when he is

forced to reenter Pete does the party return to its normal state.

The genius of Knight's story is that the portrayal of this single moment can allow us to ask so many questions about the social system in which his characters inhabit and participate. The social system does not provide a space for the acceptance of Harry, the handler, because the notion of being a handler or the idea of interacting with a mechanical man is not acknowledged. When Harry exits Pete, the path of least resistance is to shun Harry; thus, party-goers begin to leave, and the center of attention turns elsewhere. Pete's girlfriend Ruthie does not even acknowledge Harry, and when she is forced to, she evades him, giving him the excuse that she has to talk to someone before he leaves (Knight 47). The path of least resistance for Harry is to climb back into Pete, which he does at the behest of two close friends. Once Pete comes back to life, Ruthie is on his arm as he once again becomes the center of attention. As readers, we are left stunned by the final sentence: “It was a great party, and everything was alright, far into the night” (Knight 48)—"everything was alright” meaning no other action offended the innate predispositions or rules founding the social system of the story.

Just as the social system within “The Handler” defines the ways in which Harry and the other characters react to the moment, patriarchy separates humanity into two sexes, male and female, by defining what these categories are, including acceptable ways of behaving. Blumlein's narrator shocks because his actions do not conform to the acceptable

behavior defined by patriarchy. As a man, he enjoys dressing as a woman; as a man, he uses his homosexual experiment to experience sexuality as a woman. The actions of patients, close friends, and loved ones which he relates also create dissonance in the reader because the acknowledged ways of acting are followed all too well, such as the patient who has a metal rod surgically implanted in his penis in order to control his erection as well as how he pleasures women. The same paths of least resistance that code the female as “other” can also encode the male as “other.” Here, the definition of “other” becomes something more than oppressed outsider; I redefine it as ways in which men are constructed adversely by the very same forces structuring the female.

Blumlein's narrator illustrates the nature of this masculine “other” near the end of the story. Unable to answer what it means to be a man by examining close friends, patients, and himself, the mad-scientist narrator turns to his wife:

> The question really is how I differ from my wife.... She says, my job, it is so hard, I am so tired my body aches. And I think, that is too bad, I am sorry, where is the money to come from, be tough, buck up. I say, I am insecure at work, worried about being a good father, a husband. And she says, you are good, I love you, which washes off me as though she had said the sky is blue. She strokes my head and I feel trapped; I stroke hers and she purrs like

> a cat. What is this? I ask, nervous, frightened.
> Love, she says. Kiss me. (Blumlein 645)

The narrator is continually trying to define himself by what he is supposed to be, and his inability to do so creates someone who is insecure and unable to connect with his wife on any emotional level. This is the male “other” that patriarchy creates. Arguing that “patriarchy encourages men to seek security, status, and other rewards through control” as well as “fear other men's ability to control and harm them,” Johnson states, “Patriarchy is grounded in a Great Lie that the answer to life's needs is disconnection and control rather than connection, sharing, and cooperation.... [It] separates men from what they need most by encouraging them to be autonomous and disconnected when in fact human existence is fundamentally relational” (30). In other words, because patriarchy privileges men by placing them in a position of dominance, the paths of least resistance created by patriarchy encourage men to seek control. The need to seek control and the fear of losing control weakens even the dominant, male sex by cutting off possibilities of connection, sharing, and cooperation not only with women but with other men. I would like to explore control and fear and ways in which these innate predispositions adversely construct men by offering a new reading of Harlan Ellison's “I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream” and exploring the construction of a female succeeding in a patriarchal system in Candas Jane Dorsey's “(Learning About) Machine Sex.”

In Ellison's “I Have No Mouth,” only five people survive on a post-apocalyptic Earth, and these five people are forced to live inside a sentient supercomputer called AM which torments them in any way it can conceive. AM is the social system in which these characters participate. AM intensifies the characters’ need for control and also their fear of losing this control, and these innate predispositions created by AM construct who these five characters are and how they interact with each other. The reader learns of two rules to this social system. First, the five characters must endure whatever torturous device or situation the machine creates. In Ted's words, “The machine masturbated and we had to take it or die” (Ellison 270). Second, no escape can be attempted (Ellison 271). AM removes all control; it is, in essence, portrayed as a malevolent god controlling the environment, the physical characteristics of the characters, as well as the “gift” of death: the characters have lived in the machine for one-hundred and nine years. Each character, forced to inhabit and participate in this social system, fears this lack of control; thus, resulting actions (no matter how immoral) are directed at regaining control.

Because the reader experiences the inner world of AM through the eyes of the character Ted, everything the reader sees is filtered through Ted's thinking. The story itself concerns the attempt to reach a pile of canned food which AM has supposedly placed somewhere within itself. As the journey continues, another one of the five characters, Benny, suffers a mental collapse, and he attempts an escape. The others attempt to subdue him, for they know if he tries, AM

will torture him (Ellison 271-273). Ted, however, becomes furious at Benny. He becomes envious of the oversized penis AM has given Benny, because Benny is the only one who can get Ellen, the sole female character, to climax. Because of this jealousy and anger, which even spreads to Ellen, Ted hesitates to help subdue Benny because Ted might regain a measure of control over Ellen if Benny is killed or altered again in some way. In this case, Ted perceives that the easiest action directed at gaining control is not to act, and by not acting, Ted isolates himself from the other characters.

Ellen is the only woman among four men, and it is particularly interesting how the social system structures the dynamics between these characters. As they are journeying to the canned food, two of the characters carry Ellen while the other two walk in front, hoping to deflect any malice AM throws at them (Ellison 271). Here, the fear is a loss of control. The men would rather face whatever AM creates to afflict them than lose or have something happen to Ellen because she is the only one they can control as each man has his turn with her. Johnson says that “men are encouraged to see everything and everyone as other, and to look on every situation in terms of how it might enhance or threaten their sense of control” (30), and it is this need to see everything in terms of control and fear which redefines intimacy. In Ellison's short story, intimacy is redefined as Ellen takes turns “servicing” the men.

Ellison creates a social system closer to our own than the surreal elements of his story would have us believe, and it is the ability to read AM as a metaphor for patriarchy which

brings a certain clarity to what patriarchy is and how it adversely constructs men. Johnson says that “Men pay an enormous price for participating in patriarchy” (29), and we see this “enormous price” in the types of individuals Ted and the other male characters become. It is the paths of least resistance created by the need to control and the fear of losing control that construct men who are insecure, scared, and have a chronic need to prove themselves by gaining more control. It ultimately creates men who are isolated and disconnected from relational existence (Johnson 29-30). The ultimate manifestation of isolation occurs when Ted, after he has regained some measure of control by killing the others, transforms into a green jelly with no mouth.

An exploration of Candas Jane Dorsey's cyberpunk piece “(Learning About) Machine Sex” is interesting in the context of this essay, for it is a story about a female, Angel, who seemingly succeeds in a patriarchal system by creating a machine sex program that simulates orgasm in those that use it. In *Science Fiction Culture,* Camille Bacon-Smith defines the cyberpunk movement as a “concerted effort” by male authors to force women out of science fiction, part of a backlash against the entrance of women into science fiction in the 1970s (10). What Dorsey does is explore the nature of this backlash which finds its way into the narratives of cyberpunk authors (and the cyberpunk myth as a result) by introducing a female character who apparently thrives in a male-dominated, cyberpunk environment.

The cyberpunk setting portrayed in the short story is a patriarchal system founded on the need to control and the

fear of losing control. The opening scene has Whitman, Angel's employer, physically abusing her because she will not reveal the machine sex program to him when he asks (Dorsey 746). Whitman goes out of his way several times to remind Angel that he has “the option” on her bioware or owns the computer programs she creates (Dorsey 747). The control and fear created by this cyberpunk environment is manifested most significantly when Whitman sleeps with Angel one last time before he tells her that he has sold the software company she has single-handedly made successful (Dorsey 751). Each of these episodes demonstrates Whitman's fear of losing control based on Angel's genius as a computer programmer.

Even though she becomes a success in this patriarchal system, the price exacted from Angel is that she becomes as disconnected and isolated as Ted (and the other male characters) in Ellison's “I Have No Mouth.” At Rocky Mountain House where she spent her childhood, Angel completes her machine sex program and allows a local cowboy to be the first beta tester. A computer's ability to generate an orgasm seems perverted to him, and the ensuing conversation concerns the nature of love in Angel's life which reveals much about her character. For example during their conversation, she discovers that she has left her drugs in Toronto. She remembers her attempt to “clean up her act” at this moment and how it ended: “All that had happened was that she had spent the days so tight with rage that she couldn't eat ... for the record, she thought, she'd rather be stoned” (Dorsey 757). When she is clean, the resulting rage, directed at

Whitman and other men who have used her, severs her from any other emotion; her consequent decision to remain stoned isolates her from reality. The paths of least resistance for Angel is to gain control and to prevent others from gaining control which is embodied in how she succeeds in this cyberpunk environment: “I know how to set up power blocs. Except in mine there is only one party—me. And that's the way it's going to stay. Me against them from now on” (Dorsey 758). Like Ted, she isolates herself, disconnects herself from everyone because of the insecurity of losing control.

The machine sex program itself is a physical representation of the ways in which patriarchy adversely affects men. In discussing the ethics of the program, Angel reveals her definition of intimacy: “Even when someone finally made me come, it was just a feather in his cap, an accomplishment, nothing personal. Like you said. All I was was a program, they plugged into me and went through the motions and got their result” (Dorsey 760). In “I Have No Mouth,” intimacy becomes nothing more than a service; in “Machine Sex,” intimacy is nothing more than a program. Both stories demonstrate how the acceptable ways of acting defined by the innate predispositions of control and fear adversely construct those who participate in a patriarchal system.

In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway says that “In a fiction where no character is ‘simply’ human, human status is highly problematic” (179). Blumlein's narrator crosses boundaries and explores experiences which make the acknowledged categories of “male” and “female” problematic.

Perhaps the narrator is not mad at all. The narrator concludes “The Brains of Rats” by saying “I am still baffled. It is not as simple as the brains of rats.... I want to possess, and be possessed” (Blumlein 645). Blumlein's short story is about the difficulty of defining masculinity in terms other than those acknowledged by patriarchy. Within the particular patriarchal system in which he is participating, the narrator cannot be anything else but baffled. The innate predispositions of the social system, represented by the rhinovirus which only recognizes the categories of “male” and “female,” will not allow the narrator to conceive a reality in which he can possess and be possessed, control and be controlled. He is asking what it means to be a man, a prescriptive question. Perhaps the better question is a descriptive one: “Who are we?” What feminism has done is create a consciousness that allows science fiction writers not only to explore alternatives to acknowledged genders, but also to explore the masculine monster created by patriarchy.

* * * *

Neil Baird and his family live in Reno, where he is working upon his Ph.D. in Composition and Rhetoric. He has recently become a proud father of a baby boy; hopefully, the first word out of his mouth will be “Gandalf.” His miniature schnauzer's name is “Q” (from *Star Trek*).

This article is a small part of a much larger work. As such, Neil welcomes any comments and criticisms, including suggestions of other works that he should consider, either via e-mail or the Forum.

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The Golden Age of Fantasy Is Twelve: SF and the Young Adult Novel

By Rachel Manija Brown

7/8/02

Like many people destined to become science fiction and fantasy fans, I discovered the genre at the age of twelve. The termite-gnawed shelves of an Indian library, a pack of bullies who chased me to and from school every day, and a family friend who later eloped with my father all had roles in the matter. But my age may have played the most important part of all.

The years between eleven and eighteen are crucial ones for making fans. People who pass their teens without getting addicted to SF rarely acquire a taste for it later on. But while younger children automatically encounter fairy tales, fables, and surreal classics like *Alice in Wonderland* via school assignments and parents who read aloud, teenagers find their own books; and even the brightest teen is likely to be put off if the first novel they tackle after Harry Potter is by Greg Egan or Gene Wolfe. While the latter two are admirable writers, their books not only involve exceptional levels of narrative complexity, they deal with specifically adult issues unlikely to be appreciated by a teenager.

The bridge between the lands of children's and adult literature is that of YA: young adult. But while there's a sharp separation between realistic YA novels and realistic adult novels—no one has ever mistaken *The Black Stallion* for *The*

Horse Whisperer—the country between YA SF and adult SF has disputed borders.

This is partly a matter of marketing, as a number of SF novels have both adult and YA editions. But there are deeper reasons for the fuzzy border, which explain the marketing confusion as well.

YA novels may be as thematically or morally subtle as adult novels, and may have intricate plots and richly detailed settings. The best of them are as well-written as the better adult novels in any genre. But the favored prose quality for YA is clarity. That same clarity, in which individual sentences may be elegantly structured, but are never so complex or quirkily fashioned as to call attention to themselves and so pull the reader from the story, is also highly valued in the world of adult SF.

Likewise, experimental or highly difficult prose is virtually unknown in YA novels ... and it's also far less common in adult SF than in adult mainstream literature. Even Gene Wolfe's prose is fairly straightforward on a sentence-by-sentence level; his novels are difficult because of their narrative complexity and the extent to which the reader must probe the subtext to make sense of the plot. So one similarity between YA novels and adult SF and fantasy is stylistic: both commonly aspire toward a transparent prose style that is unnoticeable yet well-wrought.

But this similar goal is often better-achieved in YA. Contrary to popular belief, the prose quality of the average YA novel is generally higher than that of the average SF novel. The lowest common denominator of YA fiction, represented by

cranked-out series like K. A. Applegate's *Animorphs* or Francine Pascal's *Fearless,* can be dreadful. But on a sentence-to-sentence basis, they're not half as badly written as comparable adult fantasy like R. A. Salvatore's series starring Drizz't Do'Urden the Dark Elf or Piers Anthony's lecherous *Xanth* novels, of which *The Color of Her Panties* serves as both representative title and warning.

The popular mainstream of YA fiction is often also better written than the popular mainstream of adult SF and fantasy: Lois McMaster Bujold and Barbara Hambly are splendid storytellers, but their prose can't match Jane Yolen's mountain-stream clarity, Margaret Mahy's startling metaphors, or Robin McKinley's evocative detailing of place and emotion. And Mahy, Yolen, and McKinley are not outré cult writers, but the popular favorites of both critics and teenagers.

Adult SF and fantasy also have master stylists, but few achieve mass popularity. In YA, the best-selling and beloved writers are very commonly the best prose stylists as well. This conjunction is not unknown in adult SF, but it's far less common. Randomly opening a novel from the adult fantasy best-seller's list is more likely to turn up a sentence like this, from Stephen Donaldson's *Lord Foul's Bane*:

“He was a leper; he could not afford suppositions.”

Although the execution may vary, the ideals of YA prose and adult SF prose are far more similar to each other than to those of realistic adult literature, and that comprises a large part of the interplay between the former two genres.

But more importantly, YA novels are about issues that concern teenagers: leaving home and exploring strange new environments, acquiring knowledge and skills, discovering sex and falling in love, finding one's place in the world, trying to change the world, and recognizing one's true identity. Or, in other words, growing up.

Adult SF and fantasy address those issues to a far greater extent than adult mainstream literature does. Not only that, but the protagonists of SF and fantasy, especially epic fantasy, are often young: teenagers or people in their early twenties. So the divide between adult and YA SF is not always an easy or obvious one, and is best determined by a close look at individual books.

My own first exposure to that border was also my entrance into fandom: the book was Andre Norton's *The Stars Are Ours!,* a novel and author who have captured more than a few new SF readers, and I came across it in a library, that birthplace of fandom.

An adult friend had recommended it, sending me on a trek from my usual confines of the children's section to that of adults, a realm so vast that it had to be divided by genre. The object of my quest was a yellowing paperback in the science fiction section. On the cover, a voluptuous redhead clad in a towel sat in a metal capsule and languorously accepted a drink from a gray-haired male doctor. I was dubious, especially since I'd have to hide the book and its sexy cover from my mom, lest she decide it was one of Those Books and confiscate it.

I opened it and read, “The ship had planted in the middle of an expanse of gray-blue gravel or sand—backed at a distance by perpendicular cliffs of reddish rock layered by strata of blue, yellow and white. As the scene changed, those in the control room saw the cliffs give way to the mouth of a long valley down the center of which curved a stream.

‘That water's red!’ Dard's surprise jolted the words out of him.”

Blue sand! Red water! Pulpy prose and all, I was hooked.

But the resemblance to the ordinary making of a fan ends there, for the library I read it in was a small, dusty, neglected room in the small, dusty, neglected town of Ahmednagar, India. My Californian parents had moved across the world in search of enlightenment when I was seven. I was the only foreign child in the town, and probably the only one within a hundred mile radius. The local kids, with that instinctive hatred of the Other that cuts across all cultural and geographical boundaries, treated me as one would expect.

I was an alien. An explorer crash-landed on a hostile planet. A stranger in a strange land. And I wanted to read about people like me.

The Stars Are Ours! showcases Andre Norton's trademarks: a young misfit protagonist; a breathless round of fights, escapes, and last-minute rescues; intriguing descriptions of strange landscapes; friendly and unfriendly aliens and alien animals; and an assurance that no matter how different you feel, you will eventually find friends and a community to value you for what you already are.

Norton's prose is serviceable at best, and often clumsy and melodramatic. Any poetry lies in the images, not in the words themselves. But her themes spoke to me, that adolescent alien, and to other misfit teenagers whose alienation, while perhaps not as dramatic as mine, was equally painful.

Many fans got hooked on SF by reading a book by Andre Norton, a fact which is only partly explained by her popularity. I've met lots of people who read a Heinlein or Clarke or Asimov novel or two when they were young, but never read more in the genre; but I haven't met a single non-fan who remembers reading one by Norton. While Norton's books were less widely read in the first place, it's also possible that the teenagers who found her novels tended to come back for more. Norton's novels may appeal even more strongly to adolescents than Heinlein's juveniles.

Heinlein's young heroes start out naïve, but they quickly evolve into supercompetents who scorn ignorant wusses who don't know how to use a slide rule or gut a fish. Norton's heroes spend less time reveling in their abilities and more time struggling to keep their heads above water. If they have psychic or other special talents, they don't know how to use them. As often, they're ordinary space brats, orphans, or refugees who do the best they can and, by the end of the book, find that it was good enough. We may wish to be like Heinlein's protagonists; but most of us, especially when we were teenagers, are more like Norton's.

The Stars Are Ours! doesn't just happen to resonate with teenagers; it was probably written for them. The first hardcover edition was marketed as a juvenile, but the

paperback that I read was aimed at the adult SF audience. I had fortuitously found a YA novel, clearly written and with themes that went straight to my heart, in a location that was my first entrance into a strange and marvelous new realm. Although the friend who'd recommended it ran off with my father the next year, I still give her a fantasy novel every Christmas.

The Stars Are Ours! was my first exposure to the concept of genre. Children's and YA novels are shelved together regardless of subject matter, *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* beside *Little House on the Prairie* beside *So You Want To Be A Wizard?.* The Norton experience, which was followed quickly by the discovery of Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonsong,* taught me that if I wanted to read about wizards and robots, I could go to a section of the bookshop where, for shelves and shelves, *any book I laid my hand on* would contain magic or spaceships, and sometimes both. And so a fan was born.

YA literature is not merely a lure into adult literature, but a complex and rewarding genre in its own right. But it's the interplay between the genres that offers the pleasures of taxonomy. The borderline between adult and YA is real but can be ambiguous. I'll take a look at four books on either side of that great divide in order to examine the qualities that place a book firmly to one side, and those that make certain novels dance around the boundaries.

* * * *

On the YA shelves:

“[Aeriel] gazed longingly at her well-born mistress’ hair, black as the heavens, with a blue sheen by earthlight.

Eoduin's skin, pale and blue as breastmilk, had a subtle radiance that gleamed even in shadow."

Meredith Ann Pierce's *The Darkangel* is suffused with such sensual images. It's a fairy tale of sexual awakening set on a terraformed Moon, about a girl who falls in love with the eponymous darkangel. Though it contains no actual sex, my mother would have certainly concluded that it was one of Those Books, far too adult for me, and snatched it from my impressionable hands. In fact, it's the apotheosis of teen girl fantasy novels.

The threads the book was spun from came from a young woman's heart, filled with dreams of love and terror, fiery passion and ethereal beauty, steely mentors to learn from and best friends to rescue and fabulous beasts to ride. Many writers have made ham-fisted, sentimental attempts at capturing that quintessentially teenage state of mind, which only make the reader despise them and their simpering protagonists. Others have brought the underlying sexuality to the foreground, and written books that really are for adults. But with a delicate touch, Pierce strips away the sap and the silliness, leaving only the narrow vein of gold.

There are echoes of Patricia McKillip in the exquisite prose; of a thousand gothic novels in the plot; and of Angela Carter in the delicious horror of loving a fallen angel. But the strangeness and intensity of the novel is Pierce's alone, and so is the seamless interweaving of a science fiction background, fairy tale characters, and dreamlike magic.

The teenage slave Aeriel accompanies her friend and mistress Eoduin to pluck flowers filled with burning hot

nectar. But Eoduin is carried away by a darkangel; a man with wings; a vampyre. He means to marry her by force and drink her soul in a vain attempt to fill his emptiness. But Aeriel follows him to his castle, hoping to rescue Eoduin. He takes Aeriel as a servant and commands her to weave robes for the wraiths that his twelve wives have become. She uses a magic spindle which spins thread from her heart: strands of loathing, pity, and finally love.

The resolution of the one-sided love story between the girl and the vampyre turns upon a startling sacrifice by Aeriel, one that could happen only in the realm of metaphor made real. Many a young woman has offered her heart to a handsome but uncaring man, in the hope that her love would change him; Aeriel cuts out her heart and places it in the vampyre's chest, making him human again.

Those flowers filled with a nectar sweeter than honey, stronger than wine, and hotter than a smoldering coal might represent sexual passion, Aeriel's love for the darkangel, or the psyche of a teenage girl, but they work equally well as a metaphor for the entire novel.

To be a teenager is to think in such flamboyant metaphors. To be a teenager is a matter of extremes: it's to experience the darkest despair, the purest love, and the deepest thoughts in the world, and quite possibly all in one hour.

It's these extremes that *The Darkangel* deals with so well. It's a teenager's psyche externalized and made real. By placing Aeriel in a fantasy context, in which the man she loves *literally* has a heart of stone, and in which her feelings are so powerful that they're *literally* tangible, Pierce gives

these teenage passions a dignity which they are denied in the real world. It's that which makes this a perfect YA novel, and one which could only be written as fantasy.

* * * *

“My name is Jamie Hamilton and I was a perfectly ordinary boy once. I am still, in a way. I look about thirteen. But you wouldn't believe how old I am.”

In Diana Wynne Jones’ *The Homeward Bounders,* Jamie and Helen are teenagers who run afoul of Them, the secret masters of the multiverse. As one might expect, They are cold-hearted bastards who are literally playing dice with the universe. Jamie and Helen are forced to travel through many worlds, always searching for their own but never to find it. Unless two bickering teenagers from two different worlds can defeat Them.

Jones is known for a madly playful imagination and laugh-out-loud comedy, and both are prominent here. She's also known for penetrating and witty insight into teenage minds, and that's on display as well. What better metaphor for being a teenager could there be than to be flung willy-nilly from world to world, forever a stranger and a refugee, and to know the secret of the universe but keep it to yourself for fear of mockery?

Still, even the most painful teenage years come to an end. Jamie and Helen seem likely to end up together once they save the world and get back home. It's uncertain whether they will marry or just become friends for life, but it seems certain that they'll learn some lessons, dispose of Them, find their homes, stay close, and settle down to the grown-up

business of jobs and relationships. That's *the* YA story, after all: coming of age. Growing up.

But that isn't what happens.

Tragedy is no stranger to the YA shelves. It fills entire YA sub-genres: adventures with much-loved pets destined for gruesome deaths; romances with much-loved dying teenagers; dramas about the death of a much-loved relative. (The latter tend to win awards, especially the Newbery.)

SF is usually a more optimistic genre, but one type of bittersweet ending is relatively common, especially in fantasy. It's the ending of *The Lord of the Rings,* in which good has triumphed and the war is won, and yet the elves are sailing over sea and Frodo must go with them. The price of his victory is that he cannot live in the land that he saved.

If stories for teenagers often involve learning to let go of dying loved ones in order to go on living oneself, stories for adults often involve learning to accept one's own mortality. In *The Homeward Bounders,* Jones reverses both those endings to show that however painful they may be, the alternative is worse. In order to prevent Them from taking over again after They've been defeated and scattered, Jamie, who has spent the entire book trying to get back home, must spend the rest of his life moving from world to world. Like a traveler at light speed, he will age very slowly compared to the worlds he visits. When Helen dies of old age, Jamie will still be thirteen.

While Jones seems to have written one of the very few YA novels that isn't about growing up, she's actually played the sly trick of writing about growing up by writing about not growing up. Like the mysterious chained man he meets,

Jamie sacrifices himself for the good of the worlds. It's the right decision, and it's an adult one.

Many YA novels include moral lessons, from the well-meaning but shallow pronouncement of *Go Ask Alice* (Don't do drugs) to the more profound questions concerning warfare and the use of violence raised by John Marsden's *Tomorrow, When the War Began.* The lesson of *The Homeward Bounders* is both a harsh and an inspiring one: you must do what is right, even if it requires an unbearable sacrifice; but if it does, you will find the strength to make it.

Diana Wynne Jones doesn't write down to teenagers or assume that they aren't tough enough to face hard truths, nor does she slight their potential for heroism. None of us will face Jamie's fate, but we will all have to make serious choices at some point or another. Jones does teenagers the courtesy of trusting their capacity to make momentous decisions wisely; and people have a way of living up to expectations. *The Homeward Bounders* is funny and lively and contains not one word of preachiness, but it's that rare moral tale that might actually change lives.

* * * *

On the adult shelves:

“Sometimes [Brionne] dreamed that the ships from the stars would come back, that they'd look all over Tarmin village, and take just her, because she was special, and the star-folk would see it.

She talked to the little, harmless creatures that came at forest edge, a small wickedness, by what the preachers said, but she'd learned she could hear them. She could hear them,

and her two older brothers couldn't—it was her special gift, and she kept it secret. She tamed them to her hand. She had names for them all and fed them with scraps, and they fought with the cat, dreadful squalling at night, but the cat always won."

C. J. Cherryh's *Rider at the Gate* and its sequel *Cloud's Rider* are a thorough skewering of that popular adolescent fantasy, the telepathic partnering with an intelligent animal. In the person of Brionne, the blacksmith's beautiful daughter, Cherryh deconstructs another favorite adolescent fantasy that's often combined with the first one, that of having your unique gifts discovered by an elite group who will take you away from your stifling life in your small-minded town with your family that doesn't understand you, dress you in cool new clothes, and make you Truly Special.

Anne McCaffrey's early *Pern* novels and a number of books by Andre Norton are examples of that story told well; Anne McCaffrey's late *Pern* novels and a number of books by Mercedes Lackey are examples of that story told badly. In *The Blue Sword,* Robin McKinley brings an exceptional level of realism, characterization, and prose to the concept.

But Cherryh's novel is the only work I've come across that examines the underlying selfishness of its appeal: the assumption that family exists to be abandoned, that being a sensitive teenager is proof of being gifted, that the lives of those misunderstood elites are more valuable than those of their mundane neighbors, and that personal dreams should always be fulfilled regardless of their suitability for oneself or consequences to others.

The *Rider* books are set in a strikingly eerie milieu, a planet on which the animal life is telepathic. Their sendings drive humans insane and make them easy prey for the multitude of creatures with jaws that bite and claws that catch. So people have evolved a partnership with native “horses.” The horses and their Riders, who pair up at adolescence, protect the rest of the humans.

But when Brionne ignores everyone's advice and goes out to bond with the horse she knows she deserves, the outcome is the stuff that nightmares are made of. For the horse she finds was driven mad by the death of its former Rider, and Brionne is a budding sociopath. They open the gates. Predators devour everyone in the town while Brionne rides through the streets, calling for her family to come out and see what she's become.

Rider at the Gate is a deeply disturbing novel, and a somewhat difficult one. Cherryh's prose, with its jarring, staccato rhythms and peculiar syntax, can be as confusing as the setting, in which the telepathic ambient melds with hallucinations projected by hostile and alien creatures. It takes a certain amount of reading and interpretive skill just to follow the plot. On that level, the book probably is better suited to adult readers.

And it may be that teenagers wouldn't appreciate a book in which their fondest private dreams are dragged through the mud. But while Cherryh makes a convincing case that some teenagers are misfits because they're psychopaths and that having one's mind linked to a carnivorous animal wouldn't be as idyllic as one might imagine, she doesn't entirely stomp on

the “adorable telepathic horsie” daydream. While the literal and metaphoric chill never leaves the air, the second book features genuinely joyous horse-and-Rider bonding scenes. Brionne is not the only teenage character, and there are others whose idealism and enthusiasm are portrayed sympathetically.

The issues in Cherryh's *Rider* books are youthful ones, but perhaps ones which concern people in early adulthood more than they do teenagers: weighing a free life of solitude against being part of a community, personal fulfillment against obligations to others, and being saddled with adult responsibilities when you're still trying to grow up yourself. But it's a close call, and I wouldn't be surprised if these books get reprinted under the YA banner some day.

* * * *

“‘Who dares ask questions of the dark? Who'll ask the dark its name?’

The old woman was rocking, chanting, lost in her incantation; but Tenar sat upright, and split a reed down the center with her thumbnail.

‘I will,’ she said.

She split another reed.

‘I lived long enough in the dark,’ she said.”

Ursula K. Le Guin's *Tehanu* is an odd duck. It's a sequel to a trilogy, raising the issue of what that makes *Tehanu,* and of whether its existence turns the trilogy into a quatrology. *The Farthest Shore,* which is the third book and to all appearances the final one, was written in 1973, the year I was born. *Tehanu* came out in 1990, seventeen years later. My copy is

headlined “The Last Book of Earthsea” and “The magnificent conclusion to the Earthsea cycle.” Those claims also turned out to be premature.

The original trilogy was a work of revisionist fantasy when it was written, though with the passage of time some of its then-radical ideas have become the unquestioned assumptions of current fantasy authors. *Tehanu* is also revisionist fantasy, but what it revises is the original trilogy. It's overtly political, specifically feminist, and a harsh examination of the unquestioned assumptions and implications of the first three.

A Wizard of Earthsea was one of the first fantasy novels to feature a young wizard or a formal wizardry school; most wizards before Le Guin sprang forth already elderly, robed and bearded in gray. The villain in *Wizard* is not a Dark Lord, but a wayward piece of the protagonist's psyche; the happy ending lies not in defeating that darkness in battle, but in understanding it, literally embracing it, and accepting it as a necessary part of a complete person. That Taoist and psychological conception of evil is not often used by fantasy writers, but Le Guin's related idea that wizardry disturbs the balance of the universe and should be used only at great need has entered the popular discourse.

The first trilogy has straightforward elements that mark it as YA: all three protagonists are teenagers who come of age by the end of the book. More subtly, the responsibility of power is a paradoxical concern for adolescents: modern teenagers have no power, unless they break loose from civilized society and take up the power of violence. Their lives

are regimented, their homes and schools are inescapable and not of their own choosing, and their privacy is a privilege granted to them by others who can withhold it at a whim.

Power thus becomes an obsession for many teenagers, like food for a starving person; and the dismissive phrase and actual genre of “adolescent power fantasy,” which encompasses both gloating tales of teenagers getting everything they want, and serious examinations of the consequences and responsibilities of being young and powerful, has rarely been more thoughtfully handled than in Le Guin's first trilogy. But *Tehanu* is about the other side: the lack of power, not as a temporary state that vanishes once one has lived long enough, but the permanent helplessness of being a disabled, oppressed, or otherwise marginalized adult.

I hated *Tehanu* when I first read it at the age of seventeen. I hated it as much as I loved the first three books, and that's a lot of hate. I hated that Tenar, the heroine of the second book, had turned her back on magic and power to become (ick) a housewife; I hated that Ged, who had lost his magic at the end of the third, had not settled into a peaceful life of contemplation, but was bitter and depressed; I hated that the mages of Roke were revealed as a bunch of narrow-minded sexist pigs; and I *really* hated that, after Le Guin spent the entire book writing about powerless people in an unjust world who find realistic ways to work change and do good, the scarred and abused child turns out to be a dragon who calls on her dragon buddy to save Ged and Tenar from poorly characterized baddies.

On some masochistic impulse, I reread it when I was twenty-five. To my amazement, I loved it. I still hated the ending; not the moving simplicity of the last page, but the thematically inconsistent dragon ex machina that precedes it. And I still prefer to believe that *Tehanu* is an alternate-universe story, and there's another Earthsea in which Roke was simply experiencing an unusual dearth of female mages when Ged was there, and where Ogion taught Tenar magic and she stayed single until Ged returned to Gont, and in which dragons remained unknowable.

But the book struck a chord with my adult self that it hadn't when I was a teenager. It wasn't that it was too dark for me to take when I was younger, or even that it was too much of a shock. *Tehanu* is simply an adult novel about adult matters, and its virtues are ones that are difficult to appreciate until you've had a certain amount of life experience. To be young is to have life ahead of you, full of possibilities. Youth is about doing and achieving and exploring, and however much lip service the first trilogy paid to simply being, the action of the books was action.

Tehanu is about day to day life, doing chores, accepting the consequences of past decisions, accepting one's lack of power, accepting that one has a circumscribed future and glorying in the small victories one can still achieve. Much of the action revolves around caring for children, the sick, and the dying. In the modern urban world, which most fantasy writers come from even if they don't write about it, that's an adult's job. Caring for animals, a major focus of many YA novels, is the equivalent child's or teenager's job.

A Wizard of Earthsea is about discovering and accepting oneself; *The Tombs of Atuan* is about sex; and *The Farthest Shore* is about death, but death seen from the outside as a young person sees it. *Tehanu* is about old age. The protagonists are middle-aged, but their concerns are even older. Tenar's children are long since grown and gone; Ged's career as Archmage was long and satisfying but has irretrievably ended; neither of them are as strong physically as they once were; both of them have retired from the public eye; and they go about their daily routines with the knowledge that they have already lived most of their lives, and death is never far away.

At twenty-five, I was just barely old enough to appreciate the novel as a glimpse into that distant world of age. At seventeen, the whole concept was loathsome. If I read it again as an old woman, as I hope I'll live long enough to do, perhaps even the ending will make sense.

* * * *

Now that we've journeyed to the inner reaches of YA fantasy, passed its borders, and visited the land of adult fantasy, it's time to look into the crystal ball and try to catch a glimpse of the future of YA SF.

Books in the YA section should, of course, appeal to teenagers, if we want SF to gain new readers and so survive as a genre after those of us reading this now have gone on to that great convention in the sky, the one where all the guests are entertaining, all the questions from the audience are intelligent, and none of the interesting panels are scheduled against each other. Given this, two publishers have

simultaneously launched YA SF imprints, both of which are primarily reprints, often of novels originally published for adults.

Tor's Starscape novels are split between undeservedly little-known gems like Will Shetterly's *Dogland* and Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose,* and adult best-sellers like *Ender's Game* and Robert Jordan's first *Wheel of Time* novel. The latter reprint has been divided into two volumes, presumably to be less intimidating to the youngsters. (That seems unnecessary given the length of the latest Harry Potter volume, which a harried father of my acquaintance dubbed *Harry Potter and the Brick of Death.*) Few of the Starscape titles were originally published for teenagers.

Penguin Putnam's Firebird series is reprinting more novels originally published as YA, like Nancy Farmer's African SF novel *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm* and Lloyd Alexander's masterpiece *The Kestrel.* The latter draws on Alexander's experiences in WWII, and is one of the best war novels I've read in any genre or publishing niche.

Both lines take some chances—such as Starscape's selection of the leisurely and ultra-subtle *Dogland* and Howard Pyle's old-fashioned classic *The Garden Behind the Moon,* and Firebird's of the wrenching *The Kestrel* and gloomy *I Am Mordred*—but hedge their bets with proven bestsellers. Both lines are attractively packaged and intelligently chosen. I can't predict whether they'll succeed in hooking new readers, or whether the new faces of SF will be children who proceed from J. K. Rowling to Diana Wynne Jones. Or perhaps the

future of SF lies where it always has, far from careful analysis of what teenagers are or aren't interested in:

Somewhere, some twelve-year-old is wandering over to a part of the library they've never ventured into before. They're going to pick up some book, and read a paragraph that, years later, they'll notice was badly written or clichéd, or that, years later, will be every bit as good as they remembered. But in that paragraph will be some image or situation or turn of phrase unlike anything they've ever encountered before. Something weird. Something different. Something that resonates with their teenage hearts.

They'll be hooked.

* * * *

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The Time of the Other: Alternate History and the Conquest of America

By Fred Bush

7/15/02

> It takes imagination and courage to picture what would happen to the West ... if its temporal fortress were suddenly invaded by the Time of the Other.—Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other.*

In the history that I learned in grade school, Native Americans were a helpful people who shared their food with the Pilgrims and then quietly faded away into the background, allowing Europeans to spread over this vast, empty continent. By the time I got to high school, the story had gotten more complicated, complete with mentions of Bartolome de Las Casas, a lone voice crying out in the wilderness for better treatment of the Native Americans. In college a woman from the Mohawk nation came to speak, to upbraid her listeners for not doing anything to help the Native Americans. No one seems quite sure how to address the United States' complicity in the deaths of millions of Native Americans. However, science fiction writers and others have for many years been producing accounts where the Native Americans are no longer eliminated, because of changes in history.

Critics have called these texts “uchronias,” “alternative histories,” and “allohistories.” I use the term *alternate history,* primarily because readers, writers, and marketers all seem to agree on this term to distinguish books where the Nazis win World War II, the South wins the Civil War, or Napoleon conquers the world, for instance. Alternate history can be distinguished by its alteration of the historical course of events as we know it, and its exploration of the effects of this change. Historical fiction is not alternate history, because historical fiction doesn't result in a change in known history: it operates in the unrecorded margins of history, or invents new characters entirely. In alternate history, something that we all assume to be true has changed, and this change alters things in the narrative's future. Sometimes the change, termed a *point of divergence,* is the result of an alteration from a time-traveling meddler; sometimes the change goes unexplained, but it is recognizably different from what's happened in the real world.

Since, like all commercial science fiction, the genre is dominated by Americans, alternate history often presents an America highly altered by the events of the past. I'm going to spend much of the time in this article discussing a recent work, *The Years of Rice and Salt,* by Kim Stanley Robinson, which features an Iroquois league holding North America in the face of Islamic and Chinese conquerors, but it's just one of many works to display a strengthened Native American community. My question throughout this article will be, what sorts of freedom does the alternate history form allow for

“history's losers,” the peoples and nations that have been cast aside in the struggle for power?

I've found Johannes Fabian's book *Time and the Other* particularly useful in working on this subject. In order to properly explain other cultures, Fabian says, we have to grant them *coevalness*—we have to accept that they're living in the same timeframe that we are in (33). Alternate history breaks this assumption: we really aren't living in the same timeframe as these others ... or are we? I argue that alternate histories implicitly compare the fictive timeframe that they've created to the actual timeframe that historians have recreated for our lives, and that this comparison inevitably limits the abilities of history's losers to act. Furthermore, I argue that alternate history is constrained by the history of our own time in order to appear plausible, and that this further limits the abilities and powers of oppressed peoples. The Other has to deal not only with the baggage of the past, but also the baggage of the future.

The fate of Native Americans in a changed world

The world that Kim Stanley Robinson lays out in *The Years of Rice and Salt* is one in which what are today marginalized societies seem to have free play to expand and explore. He extrapolates the future that would result from a Europe completely depopulated by the Black Death. The Islamic world, China, and India are the primary powers vying for supremacy in the world that ensues.

As a result of Europe's collapse, the discovery of the New World is delayed until about 1620, when the Vietnamese

Admiral Kheim leads a Chinese fleet to Japan—but it's blown way, way off course, then becalmed and caught on an ocean current and brought to America. The fleet encounters a tribe in the Pacific Northwest, who quickly develop smallpox and perish. Conscience-stricken at the deaths, Admiral Kheim departs, but not before one of his men stows away. (This sailor, we later learn, travels the continent teaching the natives how to inoculate themselves against smallpox.) Later on, a Japanese exile fleeing the conquest of his homeland by the Chinese enters the New World, travels from Gold Mountain (San Francisco) to the Great Lakes on foot and encounters the Hodenosaunee (Iroquois). Becoming a chief, he rallies the Iroquois to resist the expansion from Europe's Islamic successor states, who are slowly invading the East Coast. This chief teaches the Iroquois gunsmithing (evening the military edge) and literacy (the technology identified by Todorov as that which would have allowed the Native Americans to resist colonizers). The ultimate outcome is that the Iroquois are now able to resist European power, and bring the gifts of democracy to the world. I give this little plot summary to show the degree of narrative contrivance that Robinson is willing to go through in order to ensure a strong Native American presence—his two miraculous saviors who teach the Native Americans how to resist disease and how to resist Europeans are the most strained parts of his narrative. Clearly he sees a need for a strong Native American presence in his future world.

The strengthening of Native Americans is a common outcome of points of divergence in history: Poul Anderson's

The Time Patrol contains Native American nations battling Celtic settler states; L. Sprague de Camp's “The Wheels of If” has a small Celtic-ruled East Coast overrun by “Dakotians” led by Crazy Horse. Jake Page's *Apacheria* posits an Apache-controlled country in the southwest. (Of course, this increased Native American presence is possible only for stories which locate the point of divergence with reality before 1850. Since they have to maintain historical plausibility, as I discuss below, stories with points of divergence in the Civil War period or later can do little to allow for Native American dominance, since by then the damage was done, the tribes a shadow of their former size.)

While the natives of North America fare strongly in these books, the South Americans, particularly the Aztecs, are often early casualties. In *The Years of Rice and Salt,* Admiral Kheim's fleet encounters the Aztecs after leaving the natives of the Northwest. Various members of Kheim's expedition are kidnapped and almost sacrificed before they manage to escape. In the process, they level the Aztec city they've encountered. Upon returning to China, they point to the Aztecs as a culture ripe for conquest, and China grows rich looting Aztec gold. The Aztecs are a recurring villain throughout these books. Whether it's due to their oppressive monarchy, their ruthless military machine, or their custom of human sacrifice, they serve as the “justified” victims of military campaigns in many novels, from *The Years of Rice and Salt* to *King of the Wood* to “The Wheels of If.” I identify the Aztecs with the Cannibals which Ted Motohashi explores. Motohashi suggests that the mere existence of “Cannibals”

provided a convenient reason for Europeans to invade the New World: to exterminate the evildoers and protect other "innocent" tribes from their ravages. Like these cannibals, the Aztecs prove to be a pretext for imperialist ventures. They are the universal "bad guys," and their historical fate changes little: they are ground down and destroyed.

This focus on military effort is typical of the alternate history genre. Science fiction critic Darko Suvin has pointed to *The Battle of Dorking* as a crucial early text—involving a successful German conquest of England. (While not precisely an alternate history, the pseudo-historical style of *The Battle of Dorking* makes it a close cousin.) Most written alternate history focuses on World War II (usually allowing the Axis a chance to win the war) and on the American Civil War (with Gettysburg being the biggest point of divergence). In French fiction the most popular subject has been Napoleon, and one of the first known pieces of alternate history was an Italian story offering conjectures about Lorenzo de Medici (Chamberlain). Obviously there is a compulsion to reach into the meaningful battles of our past.

Alternate history was also, at the beginning, a form guided by historians, philosophers, and statesmen. Some of the first pieces of alternate history were written by political leaders like Louis Blanqui, Benjamin Disraeli, and even Winston Churchill. Many of these novels had an overtly political purpose. They're the converse of the paranoid fantasy that insists "it could happen here," they say instead: "it could have happened here!" But the exhortation demands the same response: change in order to meet the challenge. *The Battle*

of Dorking was intended specifically to change British military doctrine, through playing on the fears of a German conquest, and it succeeded. Alternate history, particularly of a Nazi victory in World War II, plays with the same fears.

What I've identified as the “it could have happened here!” fearmongering agenda explains one possible motive for strengthening the Native Americans in an alternate history: it makes them more dangerous and more credible opponents, and thus makes the victory over them seem the greater. One story, “In the Circle of Nowhere,” does indeed feature Native American war canoes enslaving the European mainland. Other stories feature tough Aztecs battling Vikings, or Crazy Horse leading a unified army out of the hills to battle a weak Irish confederation. The threat of a real Indian war looms.

Just as the terrain of America becomes a battleground, so too does the entire world seem up for grabs in alternate history. Alternate history portrays itself as a genre at the limits of possibility. It asks, “what if?", much like science fiction, and indeed author Harry Harrison has said that alternate history “is the very essence of what science fiction is all about” (Hellekson 3). The liberating power is the idea that history is arbitrary and that history's winners could just as easily have been history's losers. In Ray Bradbury's “A Sound of Thunder,” the prototype for many historical change works, a man stepping on a butterfly in the Jurassic period causes the results of a (fictional) presidential election to shift in the modern day. The outcome of a hard-fought political battle is shown to be the sign of chance, casting doubt on the inevitability and even the permanence of our historical

events. If every footstep can bring about a new leader of the free world, alternate history seemingly has limitless possibilities for change. However, alternate history has some hard-bitten rules that come with the history part of the terrain.

The rules of the game

Just like any other piece of commercial fiction, alternate history must be compelling, or no one will read it. It's not easy to persuade us that history could have gone differently. The impact of an alternate history story comes from its ability to convince us that it is just as rigorous and just as plausible a historical treatment as any other book. To perform this feat, alternate history relies on two things: a *plausible simulation of history* and an *implicit comparison to the history of the real world.*

There are two principles to the plausible simulation of history. Would-be writers at the Usenet newsgroup soc.history.what-if are confronted with an imposing set of dos and don'ts in order to attain plausible explanations. One is to create minimal, believable points of divergence. Giving the Zulus atomic bombs (or giving the South AK-47s, as bestselling author Harry Turtledove did in *Guns of the South*) is inelegant; giving them better tactics at a key battle is allowable. It is also considered advisable to make as few changes as possible. For instance, “The Wheels of If” postulates the Muslims winning the battle of Tours, and King Offa deciding in favor of the Celtic church rather than the

Roman Church at the Synod of Whitby. Most books make do with just one change.

The plausible simulation of history also means that all of what follows in the novel needs to seem believable within the framework of history. The word “history” in alternate history holds writers up to a higher degree of precision and probability than usual. Historians don't like to admit that they're creating fictions when they write; they think they're creating the truth. And fiction writers who create “alternate history” need to hold themselves to the same degree of persuasive explanation as historians do.

(I should make mention here of author Howard Waldrop, whose stories are more surrealist explorations than plausible projections of an altered future. “Ike at the Mike” features Dwight D. Eisenhower as a jazz singer jamming with president Elvis Presley, who used to dabble in music when he was young, while “Custer's Last Jump” features fighter ace Crazy Horse shooting down paratrooper Custer at Wounded Knee. But he is the exception that proves the rule—he's usually classified as “unique” or a “fantasist,” and none of his brilliant works were selected for a recent “best of” collection of alternate history.)

But more than that, the idea of an alternate history relies on the history of the real world. Calling it “alternate” presupposes the existence of an originary history, and indeed the genre relies for much of its force on comparisons to the original. Without recognizable historical mechanisms driving the story, it loses its place as an alternate history and becomes historical romance, shedding the eerie plausibility

which is the hallmark of the genre. Every alternate history is grounded in the history which its writer believes in, or which the writer believes the audience will believe in.

Karen Hellekson, drawing on the ideas of Hayden White, has identified alternate history as a genre which allows readers and authors to explore theories of history and the idea of history as a literary creation. In keeping with this idea, many alternate history stories feature a naive historian character, someone with experience with our timeline who is able to comment on the changes made in the past. (In Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee,* the main character actually is a historian.) While the primary role of these characters seems to be to gloss the text for the reader, they do bring in an authoritative outsider's stance on the narrative, and ground it in this world's history. Without the presence of a narrative gloss, however, the reader is expected to do the work.

Literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov identifies an “implicit reader” as a necessary component to the fantastic: the reader is left confused as to the ultimate state of affairs, whether supernatural or natural, and that is what creates the genre of the fantastic (31). Alternate history relies on a similar compact between author and reader, and a similar sense of confusion between reality and fiction.

Here, the implicit reader is one who is versed in the history of the world. In an alternate history, as in parody, knowledge of the original form is necessary to properly appreciate the work. The special pleasures of the alternate history come through the perception of difference—for instance, spotting historical personages in different roles. But to make this

happen, the story has to be close enough to the real to be recognizable. Historical characters under alternate identities/alternate occupations (Blake the ranting prophet, Castro the pitcher, Hitler the painter) or different names (Herr Schicklgruber, Mr. Wellesley, Richard Starkey) must somehow express their “characters” through their new identities. Those characters, of course, are historically driven through our knowledge of what they did in the real world. The character is supposed to be fresh and new and surprise the reader. But it also must be old, and fit the implicit reader's foreknowledge.

This foreknowledge not only applies to individuals, but also to nations. Alternate history presupposes an essential history of the race: what has already happened in the real world. This doom hangs upon the race or the individual like a millstone, forever shaping what we see of them, grinding them into their destined channels. Native American strength, for instance, can only be seen through the lens of Native American weakness.

In most of the alternate history scenarios where the Native Americans remain strong, civilization itself fails to develop at the same rate it did in the real world. Since Native Americans didn't discover major scientific principles in our world, they rarely do so in alternate history. Since they didn't develop an extensive written poetry, a unified nation, or a standing army in our world, they don't do so in the alternate histories either. Their poorly-imagined societies mostly just exist as placeholders, keeping terrain on a map of the New World, or providing a convenient foe. Indeed, in “The Wheels of If,” a character from our timeline explains his frequent cultural

gaffes in an alternate earth by suggesting that he's spent the last several years among the Dakotians (Sioux), and no one questions him on his imposture, since everyone understands that the Dakotians are uncouth and outside the pale of civilization. The increased presence of the Native American in the alternate history is a sign that civilization has failed to develop as it should.

The computer game *Civilization III,* by Firaxis, recapitulates this story of unequal societal potential. Arguably, Civ III is a game of alternate history: it resets all civilizations to the dawn of time, and starts them off on an even keel, with the world in front of them, open to exploitation. However, in Civ III, the Aztecs, Iroquois, and Zulu have strategies that make them lose, almost every time. The game is seemingly fair, but even when the natives are given a fair shake, even when history alters itself, they are unable to match Western prowess. It is really the Germans, English, and Russians who are the most dangerous in this game, just as has proven to be true in “real life.”

The Years of Rice and Salt

The Years of Rice and Salt is more unsettling because the Native Americans are no better or no worse than we are: they are us. The Hodenosaunee (Iroquois) are relatively untouched during the great World War that ruins Islam and China and India. They recover quickly, and are able to send great fleets around the world, forcing others to obey their will. While they are the proselytizers of democracy, they are also arrogant and pushy. They are America.

Robinson invokes the Native Americans as the ghost, the stand-ins for the vanished Europeans. Cultural advances come from the Iroquois and from another ghost culture, Nsara, the feminist Islamists who take over northwest France. Here, Robinson parallels real-world history as Americans understand it: we have it in our minds that most cultural and intellectual developments came from Europe and America, while Islamic and Chinese scholars were only responsible for a few inventions. This plays out in the text: the absence of Europeans means that new nations have to be invested with the power to carry out their reforms, in this case the Iroquois and Nsara. Islamic and Chinese scholars create many technological advances, but culture comes from Europe, or in this case, Europe's inheritors.

Robinson is clearly viewing his alternate past through the lens of the real present. Of course, Robinson is constrained here by his own Marxist beliefs. As befits a work by a student of Fredric Jameson, Robinson's novel features an inevitable class conflict and war between people's groups and oppressive capitalist hegemons and military generals, and postulates a worldview in the New World that is “pre-scarcity"—theories that hearken back to Raymond Firth's Tikopia, Ruth Benedict's portrayal of hunter-gatherer tribes in *Patterns of Culture,* and the anarchist theories of Alexander Berkman. This influences the “truth” of his civilization as much as the recent books *Non-Zero, Guns, Germs, and Steel,* and *The Clash of Civilizations. The Clash of Civilizations* in particular constrains his narrative, since it posits an essential identity for civilizations which can't be changed and leads

inevitably to grand historical events. However, throughout his text he situates it within an alternate historical viewpoint.

Robinson's text displays historical characteristics in a different manner. It's set over the course of 700 years, and the manner in which the story is produced changes from chapter to chapter as “time” passes. He sets his text into ten different “books,” giving each book a graphically different-looking map to start it off, and uses different techniques of ordering each book in chapters. At the beginning, the narrative resembles early Chinese fictions like Wu Chen-En's *Journey to the West,* breaking into verse on occasion and filled with supernatural intrusions. Gradually becoming more “sophisticated” and “modern,” by the end the text no longer allows supernatural events to occur and looks like a contemporary American novel. Time is a visible force in this novel, and it's reflected in the very bones of the piece.

The science of history is also under debate. The first few characters display a naive, supernatural view of history (events are caused by the gods); later, Robinson takes on the theories of the Muslim historian Ibn-Khaldun. By the end of the novel, the characters are discussing the Whig theory of history (here called the Burmese model), and even the appeal of alternate history itself. The increasing sophistication of the societies is mirrored in the sophistication of the text itself and its intellectual arguments. The development of this historical critique parallels the development of the field of history in our world, until by the end the characters are discussing issues important to the world today. Robinson ends his novel with his fictional world having advanced about as far as our real

world has. It's no accident that his novel ends in his world's AD 2002.

Kim Stanley Robinson's effort both expands the genre to its logical conclusion and shows its limits. The parallel societies developed by non-European races in his world show that we can only judge an alternate society by its resemblance to us. They exist solely so that we can play intellectual games with them. His characters' own reflections on "what if?" serve to shock the reader into acknowledging their own position within the text as a knowledgeable observer. By signaling that ultimately he's writing about our society and our culture, Robinson moves beyond the conceits of alternate history.

The natives of the New World were conceived and interpreted by the West, at first, through the lens of the past. Early explorers and commentators were guided in their initial picturings of the new world by pre-existing narratives like the stories of Mandeville and the *Alexander Romance.* In a similar manner, in an alternate history, the behavior and tendencies of all characters (but particularly the Native Americans) is bound to American concepts of how they behave. In a novel written in America, the reader is presumed to know the "historical" story of the Indians, and thus the power of the alternate history comes from the way it riffs on the original. Nevertheless, to remain plausible, to retain the title of history, it must recapitulate and brace conceptions of the past.

While alternate history seemingly involves an escape from time, or an alteration in time, it really never escapes the trap of the present.

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Lust, Love, and the Literary Vampire

By Margaret L. Carter

7/22/02

In Jacqueline Lichtenberg's novel of alien vampires, *Those of My Blood,* the heroine Inea asks the vampire protagonist, Titus, “Is it especially good with—vampires? Or is that a myth, too?” Titus replies, “I'll make it like nothing you've ever known” (Lichtenberg, 95). Carol Senf has pointed out that the very qualities that make the traditional vampire a threat in nineteenth-century stories such as *Carmilla* and *Dracula*—particularly his or her erotic power and unconventional behavior—make the vampire appealing to twentieth-century readers. Contemporary authors place “increasing emphasis on the positive aspects of the vampire's eroticism and on his or her right to rebel against the stultifying constraints of society” (Senf, 163).

Ever since changing mores began to allow the explicit rendering of the allure that remains latent in nineteenth-century fiction, it has been a truism of the genre that sexual intimacy with a vampire is “especially good.” What becomes of this convention, however, when the vampire is presented nontraditionally, perhaps in scientifically rationalized terms?

The sexual dynamic of the prototype of traditional vampire tales, *Dracula,* is often explicated as symbolic incest. John Allen Stevenson counters this interpretation with an analysis of vampire sexuality in *Dracula* as radically incompatible with incest. Count Dracula's predation alters the species of his

victims; his mates in life, in undeath they become his kin. Vampires cannot feed on—symbolically mate with—their own kind. Dracula is compelled to “marry out.” “His crime is not the hoarding of incest but a sexual threat, a sin we can term excessive exogamy” (Stevenson, 139).

Stevenson characterizes the focus of *Dracula* as “interracial sexual competition,” in which Dracula's predation is motivated by “an omnivorous appetite for difference, for novelty” (Stevenson, 139). The xenophobia of Stoker's novel centers upon the threat of the monstrous Other who not only steals “our” women but converts them into a threat in themselves. The sexuality of Lucy and Mina is “released in the wrong way, by a foreigner ... who has achieved what the men fear they may be unable to accomplish” (Stevenson, 146).

Another threatening aspect of vampire sexuality (as several earlier critics have also pointed out) is its multimorphic quality. As portrayed in the “baptism of blood” scene, in which Dracula forces Mina to drink from him, “What is going on? Fellatio? Lactation? It seems the vampire is sexually capable of everything” (Stevenson, 146). This monstrous Other, moreover, blurs the concept of gender, stimulating a fear of “vampire sexuality, a phenomenon in which ‘our’ gender roles interpenetrate in a complicated way” (Stevenson, 146). Men become “feminine” as victims penetrated by the vampire's phallic fangs; women devour infants rather than mothering them and take on the stereotypical “masculine” trait of aggressive sexuality. Bisexuality as well as alienness contributes to the terrifying

threat Stoker and his nineteenth-century readers saw in vampirism.

Contemporary readers—and writers—more often see the vampire's otherness and sexual ambiguity as alluring. Hence the more or less traditionally supernatural vampire, as transformed in the novels of such authors as Anne Rice and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, becomes attractive rather than horrible. If male, the vampire in such novels is usually incapable of penile-vaginal intercourse. Analyzing the impotent male vampire in recent novels of sympathetic vampires, Lloyd Worley describes this character as “a eunuch, a powerful, yet incomplete creature whose Satanic isolation is defined in terms of sexual impotence” (Worley, 25).

Like Stevenson, Worley emphasizes the blurring of gender roles typical of fictional vampirism. He ascribes the impotence of characters such as Yarbro's brilliant, chivalrous Saint-Germain—a Dracula with a difference, a Transylvanian nobleman with most of the traditional vampiric traits, whose feeding brings supreme bliss rather than terror—to the essential femininity of the vampire. From this viewpoint all fictional vampires, whatever their ostensible gender, are female in their sexuality. According to Worley, “the essential psychological nature of the vampire is negatively feminine"—in other words, the character's “femininity” is defined by his incapacity for “male sexual performance” (Worley, 29). Instead, for vampires erotic pleasure centers on “the experience of unity and sharing through oral gratification” (Worley, 33).

Since Worley's interpretation draws heavily upon Freudian theory, it is not surprising that his view of vampire sexuality has a strong bias toward a traditionally masculine paradigm of sexuality. James Twitchell's analysis in *The Living Dead* and *Dreadful Pleasures* shares this bias. He views the traditional vampire tale as essentially an adolescent male erotic fantasy. This approach leaves incompletely explained the contemporary fictional vampire's powerful appeal to women readers. A more fruitful approach would be to employ a model of femaleness as an entity in its own right, rather than the Freudian model of the female as an incomplete male.

In an article on narrative theory, Susan Winnett discusses critics who construct paradigms of narrative rhythm modeled on “the trajectory of male arousal” (Winnett, 506). Suggesting that a narratology based on female erotic experience might look quite different, she points out: “Everything that the last two decades have taught us about human sexual response suggests that the female partner in intercourse has accesses to pleasure not open to her male mate.... Without defying the conventions dictating that sex be experienced more or less together, she can begin and end her pleasure according to a logic of fantasy and arousal that is totally unrelated to the functioning and representation of the ‘conventional’ heterosexual sex act. Moreover, she can do so again. Immediately. And, we are told, again after that” (Winnett, 507).

On a more popular level, Sheila Kitzinger, widely read authority on female sexuality, notes the inadequacy of “the idea that the goal of every mature sexual encounter should

be penetration and orgasm" (Kitzinger, 36) and states, "By far the most frequent criticism women make of male partners is that they concentrate almost exclusively on the genitals" (Kitzinger, 136).

From the feminine viewpoint, then, vampire sexuality as portrayed in fiction, far from being "incomplete," instead compensates for the defects in conventional masculine sexual patterns. To many female readers, "unity and sharing through oral gratification" sounds more positive than negative. The erotic appeal of vampires such as Yarbro's Saint-Germain and Fred Saberhagen's Dracula draws its power from this fact. And it is suggestive that, as Joan Gordon documents in "Rehabilitating Revenants," the sympathetic, attractive vampire is more often the creation of a female than a male author (Gordon, 230). Gordon suggests as a partial explanation that "it is a feminist vision to see power in the giver of nourishment as well as in the taker," freeing the female author to find positive qualities in beings ordinarily considered monstrous (Gordon, 233).

Saint-Germain, the hero of Yarbro's historical horror series, is attractive not only because of his nobility and high ethical standards. (In the first novel, *Hotel Transylvania,* he rescues the heroine from a coven of Satanists, at one point holding them at bay—in a bold reversal of the traditional vampire image—with a piece of the consecrated Host.) He also appeals to readers, as well as to female characters within the tales, because his thirst for blood involves a craving for intimacy. In "Cabin 33" he informs an ignorant young vampire, "It isn't the power and the blood.... It is the

touching" (Yarbro, Chronicles, 168). Yarbro's vampires, incapable of erection and ejaculation, cannot attain full satisfaction in their feeding unless the human donor reaches orgasm. Saint-Germain makes this need explicit in his lecture to a newly-converted vampire who cynically remarks that he expects to get a "good lay" from his first donor: "It is essential that *she* have the—good lay. Otherwise you will have nothing" (Yarbro, *Chronicles,* 69).

Thus the vampires in these novels, whatever their personal inclinations, must in a sense behave "unselfishly" in their erotic encounters, making them ideal lovers. And their "impotence" makes it impossible for them to "concentrate almost exclusively on the genitals." Moreover, the union between vampire and human lovers, both before and after the donor's transformation, transcends anything attainable in ordinary human mating. Saint-Germain writes to his great love, Madelaine, "an ocean and a continent away from you and still I feel your tread, a tremor that speeds along the veins of the earth to me" (Yarbro, *Chronicles,* 172). Yet Saint-Germain, like Dracula, is radically exogamous. The great sorrow of his existence is that once Madelaine becomes a vampire, they can no longer express their love physically, for, being undead, they cannot give each other the life they crave. Therefore, Saint-Germain's attractiveness combines the allure of the Other with that of the feminine ideal of a consummate lover.

Fred Saberhagen confers much the same advantages upon Count Dracula in *The Dracula Tape* and its sequels. Saberhagen retells the events of Stoker's novel from the

viewpoint of the vampire. Setting the record straight in his own words, Dracula presents himself as a ruthless but thoroughly honorable nobleman, the victim of misrepresentation and harassment by the fanatical Van Helsing—this Dracula appears a “reasonable fellow ... of a superior intellect and even good will toward mere humans,” in the words of one critic (Wilgus, 93). Contrary to popular belief, he derives most of his nourishment from animal blood. He drinks from Lucy and Mina, who come to him of their own free will, not out of hunger but out of erotic passion. “The love of women I have known all my life and for me its essence does not change,” the Count explains. “But its mode of expression had changed when I awoke from my mortal wounds of 1476. Since then, for me, the blood is all” (Saberhagen, 37).

And though this author does not make the claim in so many words, Saberhagen clearly implies the superiority of vampire sex, since Lucy reaches orgasm from Dracula's bite alone. Dracula is also exogamous in this inversion of Stoker's story; he wants to postpone Mina's transformation because it would then constitute “incest, and worse, for us to try to suck each other's veins” (Saberhagen, 144)—a striking anticipation of Stevenson's thesis. *P. N. Elrod,* whose model of vampirism resembles Saberhagen's, has her vampire protagonist explain, “The pleasure centers and how they operated had drastically shifted [since his transformation]” (Elrod, 24). In this novel the heroine explicitly states her preference for vampire sex because, “When you do it this way, it just goes on and on” (Elrod, 25); again, a vampire lover is portrayed as

transcending the human male's sexual limitations. The supernatural vampire as presented in contemporary fiction, rather than representing a male adolescent sexual fantasy as Twitchell maintains, might more accurately be characterized as a quintessentially female fantasy.

Not all contemporary supernatural vampires, of course, share the traditional incapacity for genital intercourse. In movies, particularly, such as *Blacula* and *Love at First Bite,* this convention is often ignored. David M. Van Becker discusses a number of potent vampires in “Dracula's Impotence Cured?” Van Becker views this counter-trend as part of the recent “humanization, socialization, and domestication” of the vampire. Frequently, along with the abandonment of the impotence convention, traditional folkloric traits of the vampire are eliminated or downplayed. References to the unpleasant facts of death, or undeath, fade into the background. According to Van Becker, vampires subjected to this revisionist process tend to become “mock humans.” The author has the widest scope for revision, naturally, when he or she writes science fiction rather than horror-fantasy and attempts to fit the vampire into the natural order as we know it.

In this kind of fiction, what becomes of the vampire's traditional sexual appeal? Different authors, depending on what rationale they employ, use different strategies to preserve the vampire's allure under changed conditions. We may conveniently divide science fiction vampires into two categories, exogamous, preferring human sexual partners, and endogamous, able and/or preferring to mate with their

own kind. As we might expect, exogamous naturalistic vampires can retain much of the sexual magnetism we associate with Carmilla, Dracula, and their descendants.

We have already mentioned Lichtenberg's *Those of My Blood,* in which vampires are members of an alien species, the luren, marooned on Earth. Since the protagonist, Titus, is a human-luren hybrid, he does not take on vampiric traits until his apparent death, whereupon his transformation—including the onset of sexual maturity—occurs. His skill as a lover springs partly from the vampiric power of Influence, a kind of irresistible super-hypnosis. With his true love Inea, however, he uses no Influence but leaves her will free.

Like Saint-Germain and Saberhagen's Dracula, he requires his partner's ardent response for his own satisfaction and therefore must confer ecstasy upon her as an inescapable corollary of his need. “He took his time, following the body currents, stimulating each and every bit of skin and deep muscle, until the currents of orgasm would move unobstructed by tension” (Lichtenberg, 119). Only then can her “ectoplasm,” which nourishes him, flow into him unimpeded. His vampire nature also makes his sexual attentions more satisfying than an ordinary man's because “his hunger sharpened the experience for his bedmates, even when he used no Influence” (Lichtenberg, 95). Again the allure of the alien and the feminine fantasy of the ideally considerate lover work together to make the character erotically fascinating.

The Varkela, a people of the Russian steppes created by Susan Petrey in a series of novellas in the *Magazine of*

Fantasy and Science Fiction, perhaps the only unequivocally good vampires in fiction, pride themselves on their shamanistic healing talent and their superhuman skill with horses. Though, like Lichtenberg's luren, the Varkela possess an innate hypnotic power, they use it mainly for healing and seldom for seduction. They drink token amounts of blood from women in the act of love and sometimes offer their own blood in return, as Dracula does in Stoker's novel (and, with explicit eroticism, in Saberhagen's). After the heroine of "Leechcraft" tastes the blood of Valance, her Varkela lover, "For an instant it seemed as if she saw herself through his eyes.... 'Our souls have touched,' he said" (Petrey, 29). Vampiric love permits a union unknown to ordinary people.

By now we should not be surprised that Myrna finds Valance "the most sensitive lover she had ever known" (Petrey, 29). Similar attributes belong to the family of alien vampires in Elaine Bergstrom's *Shattered Glass.* Bergstrom's vampires possess superhuman sexual skill because they are telepathic; in the novel's opening scene, the renegade vampire pleasures his victim "perfectly—as she would herself" (Bergstrom, 3). These creatures, moreover, project a psychic magnetism that draws human beings to them even without conscious intent on the vampires' part. This attraction is explicitly the allure of the Other, for as Helen, a vampire-human hybrid, grows into her vampiric heritage, her vampire lover becomes less satisfying to her.

Miriam, in Whitley Strieber's *The Hunger,* also wields telepathic power that makes her erotic attentions superhumanly irresistible to both men and women. Since she

is the last of her species, she is exogamous by necessity. She tries repeatedly to end her isolation by transforming human victims into her likeness, an attempt never completely successful. Her essential solitude dominates the novel. “She was lonely and human beings gave her the love that pets give” (Strieber, 64). Later, speculating about the near-extinction of her kind, she attributes it to the dangerous seductiveness of humanity: “If one loved human beings, how could one also kill them and still be happy enough with oneself to love one's own kind, and bear young?” (Strieber, 189). Since the author dwells upon Miriam's futile craving for true companionship, her destructive exploitation of her donors as experimental subjects does not destroy the reader's sympathy for her.

When an author chooses to create endogamous vampires, the traditional erotic interest is less readily available. Therefore the vampire's attraction in this kind of fiction tends to spring from isolation and loneliness, arousing sympathy as in *The Hunger,* and from the allure of the Other. For example, Clifford, the nonhuman, scientifically rationalized vampire of Bob Leman's novella, “The Pilgrimage of Clifford M.,” exemplifies extreme isolation. His kind share less in common with *Homo sapiens* than do any other alien vampires I am aware of. They begin life as voracious den-dwelling carnivores, more like fetuses than fully formed animals, except for their fur and shark-like teeth. After a lengthy childhood, befitting their long lives, they grow into an outwardly human shape and become nocturnal creatures living exclusively on blood. Even then, however, their

nonhuman genitalia and the female's multiple nipples preclude any sexual intimacy with human beings. The novella centers on Clifford's search for other members of his species, for he was accidentally separated from his parents and brought up by human beings. One motive for this quest is “simple lust; but lust for whom, for what? Not any woman that he had ever met; not any man or child or beast. This most urgent drive was toward a female of his own kind” (Leman, 18).

Therefore eroticism plays no part in Clifford's appeal to the reader. Instead, Leman elicits sympathy by dwelling on Clifford's search for self-knowledge and the companionship of his own people. Once he attains adulthood, Clifford becomes circumspect, never killing or even seriously harming his victims. Leading the life of a wealthy recluse, he pursues his quest until he finds a group of three vampires in a rural mountain community, probably the last remaining vampires in North America. He now discovers that adult vampires gradually devolve into nearly mindless predators, “diurnally lying comatose in a muddy burrow, awakening only to prey disgustingly upon human beings” (Leman, 27). This discovery extinguishes Clifford's unfulfilled lust, making his sexual isolation complete.

Similarly, his social isolation is complete, for he can be neither a true vampire nor a true human being. Having joined forces with a group of small-town vampire hunters, he directs them to the den of the wild vampires, where he himself lies waiting to be killed as well. He had visualized vampires, he realizes, as “cultivated humans who possessed—as it

happened—certain nocturnal proclivities, and who required a somewhat specialized diet" (Leman, 30). He cannot face life with the creatures he has actually found, yet he knows that eventually "my mind would have failed, as theirs have, and my body would have gone on and on, year by year becoming more bestial and loathsome" (Leman, 30). Leman foregrounds Clifford's loneliness by casting the last two pages of the novella as a suicide letter from Clifford to the vampire-hunters he has induced to kill him. The vampire longs for communication and self-disclosure as well as self-knowledge.

Another alien vampire separated from his people in childhood and forced to discover his own nature unaided is Joshua York of George R. R. Martin's *Fevre Dream.* Unlike most fictional vampires, Joshua's kind crave blood only once a month, but at that period their uncontrollable bloodlust drives them to kill. Once reunited with members of his species, Joshua devotes his life to discovering an artificial blood substitute to quell the thirst. Thus Joshua appeals to the reader as a sympathetic figure because he hates killing and eventually becomes free of the need to do so. Like Clifford, Joshua is endogamous, unable to mate with human women. Male vampires in *Fevre Dream* are potent only in the presence of a female in estrus, an event that occurs very infrequently. Joshua therefore enlists the reader's pity because of his sexual isolation; freed from the monthly feeding frenzy, he has no chance to mate, since normally estrus follows the sharing of a kill.

Only at the novel's conclusion do Joshua and one of his female allies develop to the point where they can mate in the

absence of the feeding frenzy. Aside from Joshua's loneliness in childhood, his sexual isolation, and his dislike of violence, he appeals to the reader because, like Clifford, he reaches out to a human being. A central segment of the novel consists of Joshua's telling the story of his youth to a Mississippi steamboat captain he befriends. In this episode both Joshua and Captain Marsh are clearly motivated by the allure of the Other. "'I have never told the truth to one of you before,'" says Joshua. "'To one of the cattle,' Marsh grumbled. 'Well, I never lissened to no vampire before neither, so we're even. Go on. This here bull is lissenin'" (Martin, 144). Both of them long for honest communication, leading to a "true partnership" between members of the two species (Martin, 144).

Joan Gordon points out that several recent vampire novels focus on "cross-species responsibility with its implications about ecology and human relations" and the problem of "how to behave when confronted by our first alien being" (Gordon, 231). One novel addresses these issues more directly than any tale so far mentioned—*The Vampire Tapestry,* by Suzy McKee Charnas. Moreover, Charnas' novel, a connected series of five novellas leading us into ever-deepening intimacy with the alien vampire protagonist, appeals to the reader by addressing the human desire to know the mind of the Other, hinted at in *Fevre Dream* and explored in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire.*

J. R. R. Tolkien, in "On Fairy-Stories," identifies this wish as a perennial human longing. Fairy tales, he says, are valued because they provide the imaginary "satisfaction of certain

primordial human desires," among them the yearning "to hold communion with other living things" (Tolkien, 41). Like the classic vampire, we mortals suffer from isolation, too, for "other creatures are like other realms with which Man has broken off relations, and sees now only from the outside at a distance" (Tolkien, 84). As the very title of the central section of Charnas' novel, "Unicorn Tapestry," suggests, this link between supernatural fantasy and fairy tales is especially relevant to Charnas' treatment of vampirism.

Charnas' vampire, Dr. Weyland, is unique and solitary, apparently the sole survivor of a vampire species, so old that he remembers no parents or childhood. Hence he carries to the ultimate degree the isolation traditionally attributed to the vampire. When the dangers or pressures of a particular era becoming overwhelming, he retreats into suspended animation and sleeps until conditions change enough to make it safe for him to rise to a new life. During each long sleep he forgets the details of his previous lifetime, though general knowledge and skills carry over.

The Vampire Tapestry traces a period of development in self-knowledge that undermines his ruthless predatory nature, renders him dangerously introspective, and causes him to begin caring about his human prey. Rather than lose what he regards as his essential self, Weyland chooses to withdraw into the long sleep. As a protean creature who assumes whatever character best suits his goals during each lifetime, he does not even have a name; it is noteworthy that in the last scene of the book, as soon as he has decided to

abandon his “Weyland” persona, the author ceases to call him by name.

Applying our exogamous/endogamous categories to Weyland, we find that he fits well into neither. With no other vampires in existence, he cannot mate endogamously. On the other hand, he feels no desire to copulate with human beings, though he occasionally does so for pragmatic reasons. Sexual allure, therefore, should not be a part of Weyland's appeal as a fictional character. Yet, despite his scorn for vampire fans guilty of “mixing up dinner with sex” (Charnas, 28) and his contemptuous remark, “Would you mate with your livestock?” (Charnas, 138), Carol Senf still includes Weyland among fictional vampires “described as sensuous and physically ardent” (Senf, 8). Women characters within the novel display similar reactions to him. His female graduate assistant says of her desire for him, “next time somebody says they climb mountains because they're there, I'll have some idea what they mean” (Charnas, 237). His psychotherapist, Floria Landauer, unwillingly finds herself sexually aroused by his description of feeding and asks herself, “How come this attraction to someone so scary?” (Charnas, 135).

Floria later concludes that she is drawn to Weyland because he seems exempt from the confusions of ordinary human life: “All springs from, elaborates, the single, stark, primary condition: he is a predator who subsists on human blood. Harmony, strength, clarity, magnificence—all from that basic animal integrity” (Charnas, 160). Her desire for him, then, is not rooted simply in his rugged physical charm, but in the lure of the Other. This lure is first made explicit when she

asks him to speak for her, to state his perception of her attitude toward him. He draws an analogy between his condition and that of the unicorn, who can be trapped only by a maiden: “Unicorn, come lay your head in my lap while the hunters close in. You are a wonder, and for love of wonder I will tame you” (Charnas, 161).

When he decides to leave New York, reclaiming and destroying the case notes Floria has kept, she persuades him not to kill her, a task made easier by Weyland's own reluctance to do so. Though Weyland does not admit the fact to himself at this point, he has begun to care for her as an individual. “How did you grow so real?” he asks her. “The more I spoke to you of myself, the more real you became” (Charnas, 175). Even a solitary predator needs the Other against which to define himself. Earlier, Floria has suggested to him that “beneath your various facades your true self ... wants, needs to be honored as real and valuable through acceptance by another. I try to be that other” (Charnas, 160).

At their final meeting, she invites him to go to bed with her. He accepts, clearly not out of lust (she has to stimulate him manually), but out of an attraction toward the Other like the attraction she feels toward him—"She lived the fantasy of sex with an utter stranger” (Charnas, 176). Weyland admits to being motivated by curiosity. Later, in a letter written but never sent, he speculates on why he desired this union with her. Perhaps, he thinks, he wanted to “repossess a part of myself I had unwittingly given you,” or perhaps to “touch a part of you that our speaking together had revealed to me” (Charnas, 252).

This process of touching an alien mind constitutes one of the most powerful attractions of contemporary vampire fiction. When the bloodthirsty revenant of legend becomes rationalized into a member of another species, literalizing the metaphor of vampire as ultimate foreigner that Stevenson sees in *Dracula,* we get a glimpse into a mode of being somehow both human and nonhuman. When we cannot prejudge the vampire as satanically evil, because he is merely obeying the dictates of natural law, we can embrace his otherness and enjoy a fascination similar to yet not identical with the traditional erotic appeal. If the creators of such characters do their work well, their vampires, rather than "mock humans" (in Van Becker's phrase) are alien beings just human enough to be comprehensible. In the words of Floria Landauer, we vicariously experience "unlike closing with unlike across whatever likeness may be found" (Charnas, 178).

Parts of this essay have been revised and incorporated in Margaret Carter's Xlibris book, *Different Blood: The Vampire As Alien.*

* * * *

Marked for life by reading *Dracula* at the age of 12, Margaret L. Carter specializes in the literature of the supernatural, especially vampires. Author of a werewolf novel, several vampire novels, and a fantasy (co-authored with her husband), she also compiles annual update lists for her vampire bibliography (see her Web site for availability).

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Interview: Steven Barnes

By Greg Beatty

7/29/02

Steven Barnes has been publishing speculative fiction for over twenty years. A number of his early works were written collaboratively, some with Larry Niven, and some with Niven and Jerry Pournelle. However, beginning with *Streetlethal* in 1983, Barnes has written a string of books in which he has blended a lifetime of martial arts practice, independent inquiry, and philosophical and political issues into novels that are often original and always exciting. Recent books have tackled ever more ambitious topics, without relinquishing his early emphasis on action and adventure; *Lion's Blood* (2002) has been praised by Octavia Butler as “the best book Steve Barnes has ever written,” and by National Book Award winner Charles Johnson as “an epic, daring alternative universe novel.” In addition to his fiction, Barnes has written a number of teleplays, including episodes of *Outer Limits* and *The Twilight Zone,* and has published a wide range of non-fiction, primarily about the martial arts.

Barnes is one of the few African-Americans currently writing science fiction. The only time I met Steve in person was at a reading in Seattle for *Dark Matter,* where he shared a panel with Octavia Butler, Nisi Shawl, and his wife Tananarive Due. There, and in our conversation, his enthusiasm continually emerged, communicating a profound sense that Barnes is a man who loves what he does.

This interview was conducted by phone.

Greg Beatty: Let's start with the fundamental question. Why do you write?

Steven Barnes: I love thinking about life. Writing gives me a chance to explore the most exciting ideas about life that occur to me. I want to write about all the richness of existence.

GB: Well yes, but to cut to a specific element of your work, lots of writers want to write about life, without including as much violence, especially interpersonal violence, in their work as you do. It is possible.

SB: Yes, it certainly is. <laughs> But fiction is conflict. Conflict is the essence of fiction. It only seems natural to focus on conflict in fiction, and physical conflict is one of the easiest ways to dramatize the deeper conflicts that we all have to deal with.

But there's more than that. Life and death are two halves of a greater whole, two halves of a process. You can't really understand one without understanding another. And as for the martial arts, they've fascinated me most of my life.

GB: How did you get involved in the martial arts?

SB: By repeatedly getting the shit beat out of me as a kid. <laughs> Eventually, I reached a point where I said “I've had enough. This is killing me inside.” I keep practicing because of what I've found in the martial arts.

<Pauses briefly> There were an amazing number of pressures trying to shape me when I was a child. There are for everyone—we've all got pressures. But to grow up Black in America at this point in history is to be placed under a

particular and intense set of pressures attempting to shape who we are. It's been an interesting experience, and not necessarily one I'd recommend. <laughs>

I feel we all develop a shell or a spine to help us deal with these pressures. Martial arts helped me develop a spine, something that supported me from within. Blacks in America are outnumbered 10 to 1. When I was growing up where I did, in South Central Los Angeles, there was a war going on. There were no referees, and I was on the losing side of the conflict. I was being told I was nothing, in a thousand ways, every day. I had to look inside myself and find answers to the questions “Who am I? What am I?”

There were no paths for me at that time, so I had to create my own path. Martial arts was part of that path.

GB: You sound like you're very aware of just how much you went through, but anyone who reads your work will be struck by the absence of bitterness in your work.

SB: Bitterness—any negative emotions, such as hatred or rage—are useful only if you're doing something with them. If I were in a situation where I were going to kill someone, I'd let myself hate. But if I'm going to live, it only makes sense to forgive. The physical threat of negative emotions—stress, certain forms of cancer, all kinds of autoimmune disease—is immense. It's better to move past them if you can, and forgive those who hurt you.

Because the people who hurt me, they did it unconsciously. They were looking for answers about how to survive in the world. Now, the answers they found were not

to my benefit, and I disagree with them, but it's a waste of my energy to be bitter.

I filtered my emotions to an incredible degree growing up. I had to, to survive. I'm beginning to feel more directly. I can now let myself have access to these emotions, and honestly feel them. That wasn't possible when I was growing up. I remember my mother telling me that if I let people know how smart I was, they'd kill me.

But I don't see those people as evil. I see them as having taken another path to the divine.

GB: If these people aren't evil, what are they? And what about the villains in your work?

SB: I think of them as ill. Not evil, but ill. Some of them may be so ill, so incurably ill that to protect society, we may need to execute them, but still, ill.

GB: Is there anything you would call evil? Evil is a label we apply. How would I apply it?

SB: Evil is anything that adds to entropy. Anything that causes things to break down. Damaging children. Interrupting caring. Interfering with the process of life. That's evil.

GB: You've collaborated on several books, writing some with Larry Niven (the Dream Park books, and several others, most recently *Saturn's Race*), and some with Niven and Pournelle (*The Legacy of Heorot* and its sequel *Beowulf's Children*). What was the collaborative process like?

SB: It was like going to school. It was stressful, very stressful at times. I had some pretty profound differences with both Larry and Jerry politically, and there were some conversations about *The Bell Curve* I could have done

without. In a way, it was sort of like going incognito into the enemy camp, and at the same time, it was a tremendous learning opportunity. I like Jerry and I love Larry, and I had these two tremendous writers who I respected tremendously for their minds, and for their accomplishments, even if we disagreed politically. If I could sit there and let them tear up my manuscript, if I could keep my ego intact, there was no limit to what I could learn from them.

GB: Your wife, Tananarive Due, is developing quite a reputation of her own. Do the two of you have any plans for collaborating.

SB: Yes. Probably a supernatural thriller first, then a historical novel.

GB: Well, the mention of history brings us to one of your most recent novels, *Lion's Blood.* Besides being a great read, *Lion's Blood* seems quite brave. To envision Black Americans as the slave holders in an alternative America seems morally and emotionally explosive. Where did the idea come from, and what challenges did you face in creating the world?

SB: It came from a number of sources. Like many people, I've asked myself, why did things turn out the way they did? And what would have been different, what would it have taken for the European civilizations and the civilizations of Sub-Saharan Africa to have met under different conditions?

I was also responding to a very long legacy in science fiction, in which there were no advanced civilizations originating in Africa at any point in history. I have never read a science fiction story in which a consumer product was produced in Africa. And there were these wonderful, amazing

authors who were giving us images of white characters who could speak multiple languages and solve equations in their heads. And then there were menial black characters. There were hundreds of black menials in Golden Age stories. There's anecdotal evidence as well, about [John W.] Campbell and others in the field, who believed that the sub-Saharan African was inferior.

Then, once I had the idea to write an alternative history answering this, it took several years of research and planning. I couldn't just speed Africa up, I had to slow Europe down. I had to play fair by the rules of alternative history, and use tropes that readers were familiar with to do so. I had to address readers, especially white readers, via their subconscious. That's where we get Socrates and Alexander in the book, giving readers a way in. And I wanted to lead them in, giving them sympathetic, human characters, but shutting down any thought that this couldn't happen. The only way they could reach that conclusion is if they openly admitted seeing the sub-Saharan African as inferior, and that's not acceptable to say any longer, even to think. That was a challenge, because science fiction is very conservative in many ways.

GB: Why do you think science fiction is conservative?

SB: Because science fiction is the myth of our time, the myth of technological civilization. Myths are inherently conservative. They tell a people where they stand in the eyes of God. Myth tells them that they are descended directly from God, and that all other people came after them. Overwhelmingly, the mythological tropes employed by science

fiction are the myths of a largely Christian northern European society.

Modern science fiction does the same things as the ancient myths. It tells us who we are, and what we should be. Now, one of the key drawbacks to stories like this is that they are very binary. They see the world in positives and negatives. Good/evil. Us/them. Race is a part of this. When races and cultures clashed, it became mythologically appropriate that blacks were slaves. The myths were that Blacks were happy there.

GB: All of your works contain not just vivid characters, but heroes of one sort or another. However, the heroes in your earliest novels (*Streetlethal* and *The Kundalini Equation*) seem to be involved primarily in their own personal struggles, while later heroes (the later Aubry Knight in *Firedance,* the entire clan in *Blood Brothers,* any hero in *Lion's Blood* or *Charisma*) are involved in heroic struggles on a much deeper level. They are bound to a family, a people, and often, a mythical or ethical structure. How has this change come about?

SB: I had long been aware of the myths of the hero's journey. Beowulf, Gilgamesh. Eventually I came to realize that these were not just frosting, they were meat and potatoes. That these stories were essential to the maturation process. And I set out to create such modern myths for those who didn't have them. When I was growing up, I found a way to find such myths in Tarzan, in Conan. Even though they were insulting, and contained some tremendously damaging images, I found a way to reach past them, and connect. But

not everyone can do this, and I wanted to find a way to give them that.

The hero is the path to balanced power. I believe that we were given opportunities. We are given everything we need to learn what we need, to do what we are here to do. But to learn these things, we must engage with our heart, with our minds, and with our bodies. All are important, and we must work towards all of them, in balance.

If we do, we'll find ourselves face to face with every lie we ever told ourselves about why we can't have what we want. But we'll also gain two things. First, we'll gain tremendous compassion, by gaining this self-awareness. And second, we can become as obsessive as we want without tearing ourselves apart, because we'll have created a balance. We'll reach an ineffable place, beyond leaders, and beyond teachers.

GB: Likewise, your early novels include African-American characters, but race is not a primary concern in the first books. In later books, however, race is a major and explicit concern. How did this shift occur, and how does it relate to the thematic shifts in the nature of hero you create?

SB: I started publishing fairly young, and I was naïve. I figured that I had a lot of time, and I'd make it on my own talent. Then I woke up and looked around and said, “I'm all alone. I'm the only one. I'm the only Black man writing science fiction.” And I knew I had to do more. I couldn't just create good characters, and ignore race. Other people cared about race too much. I had to create solid Black characters and make them central to my books, and do so without

shutting out the open-minded, open-hearted white readers who make up so much of my readership. I had to find a way to make my black characters accessible to everyone, and to assure white readers they weren't going to get bashed if they read my work.

But it also isn't about me, or conscious decisions I make. It's not about me. It's never been about me, and the older I get, the more I trust my essence. I make conscious decisions less and less often.

I feel like I was set on this *path.* I was given the opportunity to be a writer. I was given certain opportunities, some of which were burdens, very painful burdens, but I'd be doing a disservice to Blacks, and to all Americans, to turn away from addressing these questions. Like many people, I want to tell the truth about what it means to be human, to be spirit in this flesh, to help us dwell a little closer to existence.

But that spiritual reality is always in tension with the historical reality. The myth of America—and I do not use the term “myth” in a pejorative fashion—is the myth of liberty. The myth that if you're willing to work, and to lay down your blood upon the land to defend it, you can be part of it. That promise is still echoing, and I'm trying to provide the strong shoulders, the shoulders that can bear the burden and not break, for future generations to stand upon. Just as I stand on the shoulders of those who went before me.

GB: Well, then, why in *Charisma* did you choose to give Alexander Marcus such a dark side?

SB: Why not? <laughs> Several of my recent books—*Iron Shadows, Charisma, Lion's Blood*—approach the same topic

from different directions. I keep coming back to the same thing, the same elements of self-directed human evolution.

For a number of years I had been thinking about using the Neurolinguistic Programming approach to modeling the thought patterns of another person. It is hyper-efficient, but seemed to carry the danger that someone would pick up the negative behaviors of the person along with the positives they were trying to copy. I thought about doing another novel in the Aubrey Knight universe, but ultimately I determined the idea would fit better in a more mimetic universe, and that led to *Charisma.*

GB: *Charisma*'s Alexander Marcus is a powerful figure. Did you have any historical models in mind for him?

SB: I originally thought of him as a cross between Jesse Jackson and Colin Powell, but added dollops of entrepreneurial energy as I went.

GB: I love the character of Aubry Knight, and I've welcomed each of the three books he's been in. However, in *Firedance* he reached a new level of maturity, and perhaps a natural stopping point. Do you have plans for any more books featuring Aubry?

SB: I tend to doubt it. These books haven't had the sort of sales figures I'd like that would allow me to move my career forward.

GB: How about *Lion's Blood*? The world of *Lion's Blood* is extremely rich. Do you plan further works in this alternative America?

SB: Yes. My next book that's coming out is *Zulu Heart,* which isn't a sequel, but is set in the universe of *Lion's Blood.*

After that, I'm going to decide what my next project is by the public response.

I've spent twenty years pounding on the front door, and I feel like I've made very little impact. If I'm the only voice in the field, I need to re-evaluate what I'm doing. I've got to flow like water and find the openings. I'm lucky to have editors who believe in me, and my current situation is both inspiring and humbling. I'm trying to create something that never existed. And all I can do is the best I can do.

GB: What sort of impact would you like to make?

SB: Oh wow. Well, first, I'd like to inspire young black writers. Right now, I'm the only black male writer writing science fiction today. There's Chip Delany, but he stopped writing science fiction twenty years ago. I'm it, and that can't be. There are a number of women of color in the field. Octavia Butler, of course, does wonderful, phenomenal work.

Second, my work with Lifewriting, in which one writes as if you, the writer, were going through the journey that your characters are experiencing. I keep coming back to that, approaching it from different angles. I think I'm getting closer.

I'd like to see my sales high enough to see an impact. I don't have to sell like Stephen King, but I'd like to have, say, one tenth the sales of King. In a couple of years I'll be moving back to California, back to Hollywood. There are so few films with positive imagery of black men. I'd like to contribute to providing healthy images for young black men. I'd like to add my voice to that dialogue.

One of the insidious dangers of Hollywood movies, especially extremely powerful movies such as *Gone With the Wind,* is that they portray Blacks without inwardness. Nothing could be more poisonous. If you ask yourself for one moment, would the Black characters in *Gone With the Wind* enjoy what they're doing, the movie falls apart. I want to provide alternatives to that world.

GB: I'd like to touch on a technical point. In several works you've either had a major figure dead throughout the book (*Blood Brothers, Charisma, The Kundalini Equation*), or off-stage through most of it (Swarma in *Firedance*). Why does this appeal to you so?

SB: That's interesting. I hadn't thought about that, not as a conscious pattern until you asked. I don't know. >pauses< Then maybe it is because my father wasn't around. A Freudian would have a field day with that. <laughs>

GB: Well, I wouldn't want to push anyone into the Freudian camp.

SB: <laughs, then becomes serious again> No, maybe it's that we all have to deal with history. All of us are shaped by those historical figures who went before us, who aren't on stage anymore, but who are still influencing us.

GB: Well then, let's close with this. Who inspires or influences you as a writer?

SB: [Harlan] Ellison. [Robert] Heinlein, especially his sense of the untapped potential of the human race. [Arthur C.] Clarke. Clarke communicates a sense that the universe is a spiritual place that was very precious to me. [Edgar Rice] Burroughs. [Robert E.] Howard. Mickey Spillane. [Leslie]

Charteris. <laughs> Basically, I love adventure. That's all I've ever had the urge to be. To be the best adventure writer I can be. That's all I want to be.

* * * *

Greg Beatty recently completed his Ph.D. in English at the University of Iowa, where he wrote a dissertation on serial killer novels. He attended Clarion West 2000, and any rumors you've heard about his time there are, unfortunately, probably true. Greg's previous publications in *Strange Horizons* can be found in our Archive.

Visit Steven Barnes's Web site.

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Other Villas

By Erika Peterson, illustration by Jeff Doten

7/1/02

Flavia heard the scrape of footsteps, quick and light, on the loose rocks of the road. She let fall her needlework and hurried through the portico, thinking she would find Caius back from a day on the hills with the goatherds. But the small figure who approached was not her son.

It was one of those children.

He carried on his hip another child, a girl with dark curling locks who looked no older than two. The boy had the appearance of a child of six, but he held the other child's weight with no awkwardness, and his steps were sure.

Flavia could not imagine why he walked. It was more their way to arrive unannounced, to appear swimming in the water trough between one dip of the ewer and the next, and then to fly away over the yard in a flurry of laughter. Flavia and her household never talked to the wild children. If one tried to pretend that they were simply little birds or animals, they were less disturbing.

The look on the face of this one was sober and adult. He stopped at the foot of the steps and stood in the white heat as if waiting for her.

Half-unwilling, she left the shade of the portico and sat on the dusty steps, directly in front of him. He joined her, settling the toddler on his lap. The girl looked up at Flavia and moved her lips in something like a smile.

“Are you well, Flavia? And Caius Amatius?” the older child asked.

“We're both well, thank you.” Useless to wonder how he knew their names. There were powers here, Flavia knew, but they did not intrude where they were not wanted, and they were not wanted at this villa. Perhaps they had sent the boy to speak for them. The little girl waved her arm at Flavia, and Flavia took the girl's hand loosely in her own. She drew her thumb lightly across the plump palm with its delicate lines; the girl laughed and pulled her hand away. Then a look of distress crossed her face. She looked from Flavia to the boy in confusion. Flavia touched the girl's cheek and made soothing noises. There was no strange wisdom in the little girl's eyes, no flash of visions beyond sight.

This was what children had looked like when Flavia was alive.

“She's Amatia, your husband's youngest daughter,” the boy told her.

“What? But I didn't know she was even ill!”

“The plague is in Rome again.”

Flavia knelt before the steps, the better to see the girl's face. Yes. The shape of her eyes and the breadth of her forehead, they were just like the features of her own son. “And you've brought her here to stay with me?”

“It wouldn't be right not to give you the choice,” the boy sighed. “But it won't make you happy. I know that. You can let the child come back with me. I promise we'll reunite her with her parents when the time comes.”

“No. No. Why would you bring her here at all if you don't want her to stay? Look at her, how young she is! She needs a family. She'll stay with me.” Flavia tried to keep her words calm, but she wanted to snatch the girl away from him, shelter her and hide her away, before the boy could change his mind and lure her into the wilderness. Perhaps he sensed that, for he stood up and passed the girl to Flavia, who nestled her in her lap and kissed her soft hair.

The girl's skin was pale and fine as silk. Her bones were sturdy, more prominent at the wrist than Flavia would have expected. Flavia remembered her with the tiny, round limbs of an infant; she had seen her once or twice at that age. She had never been sure whether it was a proper thing to do, to seek out visions of her husband and his new wife and their life together. She thought that perhaps as long as Titus Amatius still missed her and remembered her, it wasn't wrong. But last year he hadn't visited Flavia's tomb, and now she did not watch his family.

“Flavia, you have no obligation to her. She would be so happy with us.”

Flavia stared up at him. “Please, could you leave now? Before Caius gets home.”

The air brightened and the boy faded.

That wordless knowledge. That too-shining joy. Every day she feared she would awaken to find them in the face of her son.

Wait—the solemn boy might go to Caius, might be whispering wild thoughts in his ear even now. At that thought, Flavia began to run, out through the garden and into

the yellow hills to find her son, scarcely noticing the weight of the girl at her hip.

* * * *

Flavia watched Caius practicing his letters in the dust. Amatia sat beside him, and whenever he would lean back to think of another word, she would lean forward and smack the dirt with her palm, ruining what he had written. He didn't seem to mind; he was always so patient with her.

Then she heard a new burst of laughter from the shed where the farmhands were threshing, and one dusty man after another emerged. “It's finished!” someone cheered. The threshers dispersed throughout the yard, some to wash at the trough, some to rest in the shade beneath the poplars, some to the kitchen to nag old Luculla to hurry with the midday meal. Gnaeus Fortius came to Flavia with his report. “We did everything just as we've always done it. The work was no easier and no harder, and we've as much grain as we had in a good year.”

“Make the work easier,” she said quietly. He looked like he would protest, and she shushed him. “I don't want anyone to leave! I want us all to be happy. They must realize by now that no one need stay and thresh. They can do anything they dream of. Why do they stay?”

“Why do you? You could join Verus in Rome and live like an empress on larks’ tongues and roast peacock.”

“This is my home.”

He nodded as if that settled things. “It should be a month till the grape harvest.”

“I'll note it in my diary. We should take everyone out to the vineyard this evening—let them see the grapes and think of their ripening. Then we'll count the days.”

The serving-women brought out clay bowls and wooden platters laden with bread, cheese, fruits, and greens. Flavia called the children to her. They took their food and went to sit on the low wall that enclosed the yard. Flavia set Amatia in her lap and fed her bites of plum. She knew already that Amatia didn't like the skin, so she peeled it off and held the fruit by its fragile flesh, the juice running down her arm as she steadied it for another bite.

Amatia rarely ate. At every meal Flavia fussed over her, offering her every delicacy at the table and coaxing her with smiles. The other women joined in, too. They reminisced about other difficult eaters they had known. No one acknowledged that there was no longer any need for Amatia to eat, or for any of them to.

Caius ate. He was sitting next to her right now, eating bread and honey; his white teeth tore at the bread's hard crust. He ate, he drank, he even grew. It had been seven years since pestilence had ravaged the farms of their valley, bringing them all here, mistress and son, servants and families. Caius hadn't grown to be a youth of sixteen as he should have, but he had grown. He looked to be twelve, perhaps.

Did he grow because he ate? Or simply because he was old enough to know that growing is what children do?

Maybe she should ask one of the wild children. She could catch one next washing day. They often came to the river to

watch the proceedings, looking curious and uncomprehending as little cats. But she knew now that some of them did comprehend. Some of them could put words to their knowledge. She could drag one out from the bushes where they played beneath the drying laundry. She could carry him home and feed him honey cakes and candied nuts until he agreed to answer all the terrible questions she had not yet dared to ask.

Amatia wriggled in her arms, and Flavia realized she was crushing the poor child to her chest.

* * * *

Mutton roasted on a spit over the fire. Flavia chopped leeks. Luculla and Clodia lifted bread from the oven. Once, Flavia and Caius and Titus had eaten their dinner apart from the others. There was no sense in those distinctions now.

Hoofbeats and shouts came from the yard. Flavia leapt up, then smoothed her gown and moved at a more seemly pace toward the door. Tonight of all nights, Lucius should see her dignified and composed.

When Lucius came in, his hands were cold and the evening air hung in the folds of his toga. He murmured a greeting in her ear, and she in his. Then he stopped still.

She knew, before stepping back from him, before looking over her shoulder, that he was seeing Amatia playing on the floor. “She's Titus's daughter. Vera's daughter,” she explained.

“I know,” he said. He looked from the child to her. She saw pity for her, but no surprise.

“Did they—They brought her to you first, didn't they?” she asked.

He knelt on the clay tiles beside Amatia. He tilted his head and seemed to study the girl. Flavia returned to the table to master her tears. So many of the body's embarrassments were forgotten now, lost unless one called them up, yet tears still came unbidden.

“Flavia, what do you think will happen?” he asked gently.

“It doesn't matter what will happen.” If he objected, she would not defend herself. Nor would she ask him how he could have turned away his own daughter's child. She would simply take her new daughter in her arms and go sit in the moonlight under the fig tree. He would ride away back to Rome. He might never return.

Lucius came and stood next to her, his back to the table, his shoulder touching hers. He said nothing. Flavia scooped up the leeks and moved them to a bowl. She wiped her hands clean.

“And how is Rome?” she asked, finally, when silence had stretched so long that surely it meant acceptance.

“Which one?”

“Yours, of course.”

“Swamped with philosophers. Athens must be emptied; the halls of all the palaces are clogged with Greeks. The debate is noisy and ceaseless. Heady stuff, but I needed a respite.”

Flavia left the final preparations to the servants. She picked up Amatia and led Lucius to the chamber where once

she and her family had dined every night. Luculla had already slipped in and lit the oil lamps.

“What do they debate these days?” she asked him, settling into a carved chair.

“What don't they? And sometimes I think ‘debate’ does them too much credit. Before I came here, we all took a trip to see Nero. Don't let anyone tell you that philosophers are high-minded. They may have cheerfully given up all the pleasures of the body in favor of endless talk, yet when they stare and probe at a monster like Nero they're as avid as a mob at an execution. They all maintain that the purpose was to discuss what a bad example he provides, but in truth, we went to gawk. I at least am honest about it.”

Caius burst into the room. He and Lucius exchanged affectionate greetings, then he ran off again to eat with the servants’ children. Dinner was brought in. Flavia and Lucius were left alone.

With Lucius there to protect her, the fear of drifting was muted, becoming something akin to anticipation.

Once she had gone for a walk with him, far down the road out of sight of the villa. She had plaited poppies to wear in her hair and scuffed the dust up with her bare feet. They lingered to watch hawks soaring over an escarpment, and they argued over whether they had imagined the hawks into being and if so, whose thought it had been.

When they returned, the villa was gone.

Flavia remembered running. Where the lane should have been there was only meadow; she forced her way through the tangled plants, her gown hitched up. She didn't panic, not

entirely, at first. She felt strangely certain that the house was just invisible. She walked toward it with her arms out like a blind woman. Farther and farther she walked, and touched nothing. Then she ran again, arms whirling, stumbling, crying out.

Lucius grabbed her; she struggled against him as if he were keeping her from saving her child from drowning. Finally he caught hold of her hair and twisted it around his hand. He pressed his cheek against hers. “Close your eyes,” he whispered. “Think of Caius. How he looks. How he smells. The home you've made for him.”

“Caius,” she moaned, and he hushed her.

“No, think. See him. Do you see him?” She made some noise. He said, “My eyes are closed, too. Step forward, walk toward him, just a few steps. Now open your eyes.”

There Caius was, sitting on a bench in the farmyard with one of the men, learning how to whittle. Her sobs of relief must have embarrassed him, but he returned her embrace anyway.

After that, everyone had slowly learned how to keep from drifting, and how to find their way home when they did. But they all feared it.

Lucius didn't. He lived in Rome, that vortex of the swirling dreams of thousands of people. He traveled alone to see her—with less fear than he had ever felt traveling in life, he said.

Sometimes when he visited her, they would emerge from a chamber after some time alone to find the house empty and echoing. Knowing that she could find her son again as soon as

she wished to, she would allow herself to taste for a few moments the sensation of being lost, before she could stand it no longer.

“Nero is as mad as ever,” Lucius was saying. “Seneca can always find him; he led us all there. Vile as Nero is, he's a passable architect. He sustains acres of lavish palaces, and some of them are not without aesthetic appeal. He gave us a tour. Everywhere we went, the creations of his mind made obeisance to him. Senators, slaves, prostitutes, priestesses ... the whole panoply of Rome, bowing and cheering. We played along with it at first, but soon some couldn't resist baiting him. It was an ill thing to do, for all that it had its amusing side. It wasn't long before Nero was red-faced and spitting with rage. He must have hurled an entire legion of exotics at us—bronze-clad Parthians with bows, black Africans with golden scimitars—and of course nothing could touch us. He was on the verge of apoplexy when we left.”

They ate in silence for a time. Flavia shifted Amatia on her lap. The girl drew Lucius's attention again.

“If my husband hadn't married your daughter, we never would have met,” Flavia began, starting the explanation she had promised herself she wouldn't give. It would sound as if she was begging to keep Amatia, like a child with a stray dog.

“When the messenger came,” Lucius interrupted, “and I sent the girl away with him, it wasn't because I don't care for her. Or for my daughter. Or for you. I did it so that the child could be free.”

“What a horrible freedom!” Flavia protested.

Lucius rose and came to stand behind her. He rested one hand on her shoulder and the other on Amatia's head. The girl looked up at him. “Bread,” she said, holding up the sticky crust she had been sucking on.

“Yes, bread,” Flavia agreed.

“I wish you would come back to Rome with me,” he said from above her. “The children, too, of course.”

“No. This is where we belong.”

His hand left her shoulder. He moved away. “There's so much you need to see! Not just the palaces and monuments; if that were all there was to it, I could build Rome here for you in a day. But the people, the soul of Rome.... You isolate yourselves here, your handful of people, and enslave yourselves to your past. The same few words, the same well-worn actions over and over again. Can that really be what the gods intended for you? The people who have come together in Rome are brilliant and kind. They would welcome you into their fellowship in an instant.”

“I'm afraid of Rome,” she confessed, and the shining look on his face turned to incomprehension.

“But—but there's nothing to fear.” He spoke slowly, as if reexamining his own logic for flaws. “Not here, not in Rome, not anywhere. Nothing can hurt you now, not hunger or disease or the sword. You are set free in a land of marvels, and given the power to cherish the best impulses of your fellow man, while ignoring his worst....” His words trailed off when he saw they were having no impact.

“Perhaps we could speak of this another time,” she said quietly. She watched the flickering of the lamps on the side table.

“Another time,” he agreed, and sighed.

He came and took her right hand in both of his. His hands were warm. She wondered which of them had imagined them that way.

* * * *

Quinces grew in the valley, and their fruits were ripe. A fire burned in the kitchen hearth; Luculla was telling stories of her childhood in Salernum as the women took turns stirring the cauldron of quinces over the fire.

Flavia handed the long spoon to the next woman and turned to the spot where Amatia had been sitting moments before. The child was gone.

What she had feared all along had finally happened.

“Amatia!” she called. She hurried to the other side of the table. She shifted the jars of oil to look behind them. She looked up to find the other women peering about themselves, lifting up the hems of their gowns and looking over their shoulders, as if they might find that they were accidentally standing atop her. “Were none of you watching her? Was no one even thinking about her?” They stared back at her. “Leave. Get out of the kitchen. I have to find her.”

Amatia liked to play too close to the hearth, Flavia knew that. From the spot where Amatia had disappeared, Flavia closed her eyes and walked toward the hearth. She stopped when her fingers touched rough stone. The hearth was cold, the fire out.

She thought she knew whose villa this was. She ran from room to empty room, calling for her child. In the courtyard she surprised a man and a woman who were richly robed and weighed down with jewels. They glared at her. These were her husband's parents. They made believe that they were young and handsome and as wealthy as kings. Their son's wife and children had no part to play in that. Sometimes they drifted into Flavia's own villa, angry and unwilling ghosts.

Flavia ran from them without speaking. She rushed out into the farmyard. A bonfire danced, with shepherds gathered round it. The outbuildings were gone, and behind her, so was the villa. “Have you seen my daughter?” she pleaded. “She's only two years old.”

“A child was here,” one man said. The others nodded. The first man smiled in sympathy and patted a seat beside him on the log by the fire.

Flavia didn't accept his invitation. She moved close to the fire and felt the familiar assault of heat on her skin. She held her hand out further until it floated in the flame itself. Mutters came from the men around her, but she had no time to pretend for them that their fire was real. Something told her to step into the heart of the fire.

There was a dream of flickering color and distant heat. Other villas rushed past, her own yet not her own, a different villa for every thought of every person who had ever lived in this spot. Amatia could be in any of them. Trusting blindly in instinct, Flavia stepped out of the fire. She stood before the kitchen hearth once more, where a fire burned again. Perhaps

it was the first fire ever to burn there; no soot marred the hearth's smooth stones.

“You're here for the girl, aren't you?” An old woman was perched on a stool by the hearth. Amatia sat at her feet, playing with a lapful of apples. Flavia scooped up her child, scattering a hail of fruit. “I had hoped she would stay and keep me company for a while,” the unknown woman said.

Flavia brushed her cheeks against the girl's sweetly scented hair, trying to hide the evidence of her tears. She wished them home again.

From the kitchen of their own villa they went toward Flavia's bedchamber. She set Amatia down to walk, but didn't release her hand. When they reached the chamber, the child tugged free and ran to play with the inlaid combs and small mirror that sat on a low table.

Flavia opened a chest made of cedar and took out a doll she had been working on since Amatia had arrived. She understood now that she had meant the doll to be a charm. With every stitch, she had tried to infuse it with her will: *Let this be an anchor. Let it hold the child here.*

But she knew now that there would never be any such anchor, nor would there be walls. Amatia was open to every impulse carried by the wind. A butterfly, a tongue of flame, a bird perched on a reed, any of these might catch her eye and she would be off, sliding swiftly through the layers of this maddening world. And what need would she have to return?

Flavia would try anyway. She knelt by the table and took the mirror out of the girl's hand, replacing it with the doll. “Look at the baby I made for you, Amatia.” Amatia smiled.

She looked Flavia in the eye, and Flavia felt a surge of hope. In that look, for a moment she felt known. She felt she might be real to the child, a thing remembered and kept in one's thoughts, not just a shadow passing across the senses.

“Comb hair, comb hair,” the little girl sang. She drew the comb through her own hair, then across the featureless cloth scalp of the doll. Then she clambered across the table and combed Flavia's hair. She combed clumsily, pulling tendrils out of the loosely braided knot. She hummed odd notes as she worked. Flavia covered her face with her hands, momentarily overcome. Amatia danced from one side of her to the other, tugging at her hair, and then as suddenly as she had begun, she was finished. She marched out of the room on some errand of her own. She had taken the comb with her, but left the doll.

Flavia listened to the pad of small bare feet on the tiles. She listened until the steps were just on the threshold of hearing. For a moment she thought she should let the faint sounds slip away altogether, but in a burst of fear she changed her mind. “Amatia, wait!” She ran down the hall, catching up with the girl before she rounded the corner.

She thought about asking where Amatia was going, or whether her company was wanted, but even if the child could answer, the answers would make no difference.

* * * *

The carefully reconstructed pleasures of the villa began to pall. Nothing brought her comfort now. Fruits ripened in their turn and swine were slaughtered for the winter. The stars wheeled in their remembered courses. At night sometimes

she wanted to scatter the stars or turn them backwards in their paths; she suspected it was in her power to do so. But it would only upset everyone else.

Even with the fear of loss growing daily in her heart, she played her role in their shared life. She sewed and she wove. She cooked and swept.

One morning she was folding newly dried linens for her bed. She looked up the hill and saw children in the olive trees. They laughed and shrieked and danced on the branches. The sky behind them burned blue. She shielded her eyes. Then Caius came from around the corner of the villa. “Look!” He pointed at the children. He smiled in delight and took a step toward the hill. Frantic, Flavia grabbed his arm and jerked him back.

“Go back inside the house,” she insisted. He searched her face in confusion and finally turned to go. “And make sure your sister is still with Clodia.”

He looked over her shoulder at the children on the hill, then nodded and went inside.

The children were chattering but the sounds made no sense to her. It was empty birdsong. She climbed the path to the hill. She moved warily at first so as not to startle them. Closer now, she could see their faces. They saw her, too. Some ignored her; some stared back, as frank and friendly and unconcerned as any neighbor's children.

She moved among them now. The silvered leaves fluttered and rustled. The wind whistled and the children's songs surrounded her. Children of six or seven swung by their knees from the boughs. Younger children pelted each other with

fallen olives. Some made nests in the branches and lay curled in their cradles of leaves. In the middle of the grove was a sleeping child, no more than a year old, rosy and naked.

The other children ignored the baby. They tumbled around her, yelling like savages. Boys tussled in the branches above her, shaking leaves down upon her. Their cries were too loud. The sun was too harsh. No one protected the little girl.

“Go away!” Flavia yelled at the boys. She reached into the branches and tapped at their feet. “Go on, leave her alone.”

The boys laughed and kicked their feet. “Catch me!” one boy called.

It was all in play, but Flavia grew angry. “Go on!” she yelled again. She swiped at their legs and missed as they climbed higher.

“Catch me, catch me!” other children began to chant. The happiness in their voices was beyond bearing.

“Go home!” she cried. She still clutched the linen she had been folding. She unfurled it, waving it at the children she could not reach. “Go home!” She was sobbing now. “Go away! Go home, all of you!” She ran at the trees that encircled her, flapping the sheet in the wind as if shooing away a flock of birds. “Go home!”

And like a flock of birds, they finally flew away. From the tops of the trees the children leapt up. They floated in the burning sky and winked out one by one. Flavia turned to the branch that had sheltered the baby she had thought to rescue, but even that child was gone. Not helpless, not lost, no—she hadn't needed Flavia, not for a moment. Even that tiny child was as wise and wild and heedless as all the rest.

Nothing brought her comfort now, and when Lucius whispered in her ear again in the dark of night, asking her to come to Rome with him, she agreed.

* * * *

Three horses were saddled in the yard. No horses were needed, nor any road, but she knew Lucius enjoyed the semblance of a journey. Caius would like it, too.

It was for Caius's sake that the rest of the household was here to see them off. For him they pretended that the travellers would be home again in a month or two, full of stories and bearing gifts, and then everything would return to the way it had always been.

The road took them past waterfalls and over gorges and along a cliff by the sea. All this was Lucius's doing. Flavia remembered the time that people from her villa had tried to make a journey. In the world of their living days, the market town had been three days away from their farm. In this world, no one could say how far it was, because they had not been able to find it. The men who had tried to go to town returned a day later, frightened and sad. They spoke of a road that changed directions before their eyes, and a hill near the villa that appeared again and again on the horizon, no matter how far they traveled.

This road, however, was stable, unspooling solidly before them, pale and dusty in the sun. Lucius told her son stories of things that had happened in the lands that they passed. Here a long-ago battle had been fought. There a temple to an oracle had once stood. “And that cave on that far hill,” Lucius said, “is the lair of a band of notorious bandits. Their leader is

both cunning and strong. If he and his men can't steal something by force, they'll steal it by trickery."

"You mean they *used to* steal things," Caius corrected him. "Nobody has to steal anymore."

"That's true," Lucius agreed. "But if forty dangerous men with gleaming eyes suddenly melted out of the bushes, brandishing cudgels and daggers, wouldn't you pretend to be afraid, and give them some coins, just for old times' sake?"

Caius's eyes grew wide as he scanned the thick brush along the road. Flavia smiled. So one of her children was enjoying the journey. The other one ... maybe she was as well. Too much, even.

Amatia hardly fidgeted at all. She was rapt, gazing at the passing scenery. Little things would catch her attention—a nodding wildflower by the roadside, a gull floating in the air off the cliff—and it seemed that where her eyes went, her soul went also. She had never seemed so insubstantial, so illusory. Flavia could see the child sitting on her lap; she thought she could feel the weight of her. Yet when Amatia pointed to another flock of gulls, and Flavia's gaze fixed upon them, she began to wonder whether there ever had been such a thing as weight. Perhaps she had just dreamed it. If she weren't careful, the horses' hooves might not touch the road on their next step. They would all rise and rise and rise and then hang motionless in eternal blue.

For a moment, Flavia wanted to hurl herself from the horse and hug the ground, but slowly a knot in her eased and she looked up at the sky again.

Would it really be so terrible there?

Finally the road reached the walls of a great city and a new world sprang up about them. Rome was there in the blink of an eye.

The city was dizzying: trumpet fanfares and braying donkeys, marble monuments and fluttering pennants, and every open space hemmed in by hulking stone buildings and forests of columns. The streets were choked with life, an eddying river of men, women, and beasts. And there was a motion unaccounted for, something that forced her to grip her horse's mane for balance. As she swayed, she thought perhaps it was the buildings, rising and falling at a stately pace like constellations. But then she looked again and knew that it was the people. Among the great throng, men and women appeared and disappeared. A girl brought wine to men seated before a tavern, then she ceased to exist. Liveried slaves carried the litter of a wealthy man, and vanished with a wave of his hand after he descended.

Frightened, she looked back to Lucius and her son. Both were still solid and whole. Lucius moved forward to lead them. They pushed through the crowd and gradually passed from the great river to its smaller tributaries. Their road climbed now, winding around a hill crowned with palaces of gleaming marble. There was freedom to move here, but the streets were by no means empty. A tide of men and women flowed in their direction, everyone ascending the hill. They were different from the crowds in the streets below, their faces serene and joyful.

At their destination, Lucius held Amatia while Flavia dismounted. The crowd swept them up the steps of the palace

before them. Columns held up a roof so high it felt like a sky of stone. Doves and swallows sailed through the upper shadows. The music of voices swelled in echoes.

Lucius was greeted everywhere he went, and always he presented Flavia. Just as he had said she would be, she was welcomed, even by poets, statesmen, and emperors.

The noise of the crowd was like a rushing cataract. Everyone spoke. She listened for a time, but could not keep her attention fixed. There were so many people.... She hadn't thought herself isolated at her villa. She was never alone there; always there were people talking and laughing. But these were strange people, hundreds of them, whose names and voices and stories she did not know. Their foreignness pricked at her skin. She felt as if she were alive again. It overwhelmed her. Lucius led her to a cushioned bench off in a corner. Caius ran off to talk to some young people. Lucius returned to his friends. Flavia cradled Amatia in her lap and closed her eyes.

The voices rose and fell and rose again. There were shouts and laughter and sibilant whispers. She began to feel that they wove a pattern. Maybe if she were up with the doves, high above the gathering, the figure might become plain to her. Threads of silk and threads of spun gold, colors deep and glittering.... The separate voices coalesced into joyous chorus. She felt Amatia pluck at her arms, and without opening her eyes she set the child down beside her. A fleeting caress of Amatia's hair, and then Flavia withdrew her hands and folded them upon her breast.

She soared up into the song again. She picked out first one thread and then another, losing them again in the whole. The chorus swelled. It was a song of glory, of praise and magnificence. A song about the death of fear. She listened for a very long time.

And eventually, it passed away. Voices became voices again, human and separate. Nearest to her, she could hear conversations about the works of Hesiod and the civilizations of the Indus. Flavia opened her eyes and found Amatia gone.

She had known it would happen and had not prevented it. She smoothed the velvet of the cushion beside her, then knelt before the bench, her arm curled about the spot where the child had been. She could still try to find her. She could sink into the floor and submerge herself in the thousands of Romes that welled up from the minds of shopkeepers and gladiators and matrons, tracing Amatia's flight. Flavia could hunt her down and cage her again.

But she would not. She had known it would happen, from the moment she had chosen to come to Rome. She had felt the child leaving her along the road, but she had not turned back. She hadn't known the time and the place of their parting. She hadn't known it would come so soon. *But then,* she thought, *no one ever does.*

* * * *

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Jeff Doten has been painting for roughly twenty years and has been unable to stop so far. Science fiction and Fantasy subjects make up most of his work with the occasional dinosaur thrown in. Jeff works in acrylic paints and digital media. Recent projects include a group of six paintings for the Lord of the Rings themed restaurant “The House at Bag End", as well as cover work for Padwolf Books. A current personal project “The Fire Gods of Venus” is a heavily illustrated novel and is showcased on his Web site.

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Ignis Fatuus

By Timons Esaias

7/8/02

The Stranger came to town, his eyes by turns mocking and aglow. Long-legged and longer-armed, he gangled along Main Street, wonderful and frightening, his feet kicking up dust, his garish bow tie flapping half-undone at his throat, the drama and energy of a whole circus parade squeezed almost to bursting in just one man.

“Got fire,” he said. “Got fire right here!”

“Don't want fire,” Mr. Donaldson told him, looking deliberately at the sidewalk and pushing his broom, making that act an eloquent editorial.

The Stranger laughed, and kept on down the street. He greeted the Widow Collins, the pet shop lady. He hailed Frau Wein, who'd come to town to get away from something that had happened in Germany that she never spoke about.

“Got fire!” he told each one. “Fire!”

Frau Wein turned her back, stepped sharply into her shop, and dropped the blinds. Mrs. Collins hissed something polite, but firm.

“Right down from Heaven this very morning, and may I point out what a fine morning it is?” the Stranger observed reasonably. “Gift of the Gods, good woman.”

“Not the gift of any God worth worshipping,” Widow Collins snapped, and her eyes snapped too, and her knuckles rapped on the iron railing. “Now be off.”

He made a great, sweeping obeisance, the Stranger, then skipped off down the street. He ambled up Adams for a couple of blocks, then worked his way along Oak, calling out to milkmen, paperboys, and householders putting out the garbage. “Got fire!” he called. “Pure fire! Clean, warm, sparkling, regenerating, energizing, ever-oxidizing *Fire!*”

No one wanted fire on Oak, or on Monroe or Elm or back down on Railroad. They laughed him off Fillmore, they were rude on Monkey-Puzzle. On Harrison they called the police, who suggested filing a complaint if the Stranger did anything actually hostile.

Chortling with good feeling or its cousin, jaunty of step, almost dancing, the Stranger had circled back and nearly returned to the end of town when he came upon a young lad of whom nothing important had been asked that day, a lad footloose and at loose ends, loose of limb and loose of his parents for the morning, midway between some vague point of origin and an equally questionable goal.

“Got fire!” the Stranger shouted, as though for the first time that day.

“Yeah?” the lad replied, intrigued but cautious.

“Fire with your name on it, if you're half the boy I think.” The Stranger stopped then, as though brought short by a scruple. “You're not asthmatic, are you? Consumptive?”

“Nope.”

“Not prone to chondritic syphilis, or thrombosis of the pituitary process?”

“Never.”

“Never had a touch of the galloping carborundum, or the Type E Dushanbe peripatetic palsy?”

The boy shook his head.

“Well, that's all right, then,” smiled the Stranger. “Let's go!”

And follow him the thoughtless boy did, as well I know, for that young lad was myself.

The Stranger rattled on about Aldebaran and Khartoum, fearsome races with fantastic names, and untold glories awaiting “the right kind of adventurer.” I knew I would be that right kind of adventurer, even though I couldn't follow a tenth of what he said. Details just didn't seem to matter in the world the Stranger represented. Fine print, I sensed, was for fools and church ladies. The stuck-up brown-nosers in school, the geeks and the nerds, they would have balked. They would have missed their chance to master fire.

We went along a quarter of a mile to Conyer's Meadow, where the Stranger had landed. His ship was *BIG.* Great flaring tail fins held it up, and the ruby-colored nose seemed about to poke the clouds, it soared so high. A red carpet lay spilled across the clover, ending at our feet. At the far end of the carpet a staircase with gold railings and polished electrum steps swept up to the open portal. Ivory statues of mythical beasts with emerald eyes lined the way.

My heart pounded and my imagination reeled. This was what life should be like! This beat doing homework and feeding the cat. This topped sneaking a chaw of tobacco behind a school friend's garage, or hanging out with the glue-

heads. Spaceships on the meadow were what the universe should be about.

“Right this way, young sir. Right this way.” He waved a walking stick that seemed to have come from nowhere, and suddenly the stairs moved, became an escalator, and just as suddenly I *knew* that this was fitting, that an adventurer like myself shouldn't have to climb stairs under his own power. Not without a beautiful woman collapsed in his arms, anyway.

The Stranger had fire, all right. Cases of it, walls hung with it, probably crates of it stacked in the hold. The forms of fire lay all about, glorious and tempting. Ceremonial laser maces, chased with platinum and encrusted with jewels. Enameled thunderbolts that could bring down a castle with a single wish, and could level a city in an afternoon. Two display cases were filled with every kind of tornado-caster ever made in our end of the galaxy, and I knew what they were and how they could be employed without reading the little gold-lettered labels they each had. I *knew,* because I must be *meant* to know.

“That's right, lad, these are the tools you must have to protect your people from the dreadful dangers that await them outside this petty solar system. Don't get me wrong, it's a nice system, a sweet system. Worth the trouble of defending. But it's a limited field of action. Quite limiting, in certain ways.”

I couldn't have agreed more. I'd felt the limitations all my life, the pointlessness of it, the stupidity. Life, especially my life, should be filled with power, glory, honor and its just rewards; but everybody in my town thought in terms of

chores and rules and detention sessions. And, worse, the same old boring chores and rules and detention sessions day after day after day.

“Contemplate the subtle charm of this personal moon-crusher.” The Stranger held up a device that reminded me of an ancient dirk, the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Somehow I *knew* that whole kingdoms had been ransomed to own this weapon. Twice. “And let us not overlook the real treasures of this collection: the Star Strummers.”

He led the way into a second room, deeper inside the rocket, and gestured to the far bulkhead, hung with great staffs carved from the teeth of creatures who could swallow small steamboats and wrestle battleships into submission. One end of each bulged with a ruby the size of my head, the other with a beryl even larger. “With these you can tune a star to any resonance you desire, and play it like a pipe organ,” the Stranger beamed. “The destructive potential is unimaginable.”

“Chalmer!” a voice called from the first room. My mother's voice. “Chalmer Andrew Ginesson! I know you're in here!”

“Delightful!” said the Stranger. “A family moment.”

He turned to the door just as my mother came in, with my two sisters in tow. “So nice you could join us, madam. And are these lovely things your daughters, or your sisters? But I should introduce myself. I'm—”

“I'm sure you are,” my mother said, but her eyes swept past him and fastened on me. “Did you ask permission to come out here, young man?”

My Aunt Garnet came through the door at that minute, followed by Mrs. Fripperson, the town librarian. Their walk radiated determination. Aunt Garnet's face was pinched with disapproval. Mrs. Fripperson's brimmed with righteous self-congratulation, making it clear who had followed me to the rocket, who had telephoned my mother with the news.

“Forgive me, madam,” the Stranger was saying, “but I instigated—”

“I'm sure you did,” my mother snapped. “My son is capable of thinking for himself, thank you very much, and responsible for his own actions. Aren't you, Chalmer?”

But I wasn't paying enough attention to her to answer right then, because of something in my younger sister's eyes. Jillian was staring at the case full of sea scorchers and shoulder-mounted Planet-Buster-grade quake cannon. There was a smirk I didn't like on her face—but then, I'd never liked her smirks very much. But Jillian had always been my nice sister, and that look in her eyes wasn't nice. It wasn't nice at all.

“Chalmer.” My mother's voice rang with menace, with the threat of punishments more stern than the Spanish Inquisition, applied with a will more adamant than Stalin's and a technical facility that would be the envy of our finest engineers. That tone, if it could be packaged, would make any totalitarian regime invincible. That tone, I now know, has often saved the world.

“Right, Mom,” I said. “Time to be going.”

I thanked my host, grabbed Jillian's arm quite firmly, and whisked her out the door. True, the escalatoring stairs kept

trying to pull us back up to the ship, but we managed to get away.

At home my mother discovered a hundred pressing chores, all urgent, all my responsibility. I did each one in turn, only insisting that my sisters be kept just as busy. In a spare moment I took care to glue Jillian's bedroom window shut on the outside, and all that night I sat by my half-open door to keep an eye on the hall. Daydreams of heroic deeds on distant battlefields threatened to lull me into sleep, but I fought them off with spoonfuls of coffee crystals that burned my mouth, with pinches that left my arms mottled with small bruises, and with a score of other strategies.

By morning the Stranger had gone in search of greener planets, leaving the meadow a smoking, blasted ruin.

* * * *

Tim's stories have appeared in nine languages and twelve countries. He was a finalist for the 1999 British Science Fiction Award. His SF poetry has been translated into Chinese and Spanish, and he's had over fifty sales to such markets as *Asimov's, Terra Incognita,* and *Strange Horizons.* For more about him, see his Web site.

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Dream the Moon

By Linda J. Dunn

7/15/02

A cloud of lint hovered over the seamstresses and their sewing machines like a multicolored fog over a river. To the right of each worker rose a bank of shirt pieces, stacked on wobbly pine shelving units. On the left bank were wheeled bins, where the seamstresses tossed their finished work. When a bin was full, an expediter rolled it away, a tugboat captain steering a vessel across the channel to the banks of the next assembly line, where the collars would be attached to the shirts.

Sharon Wilson sat at a serger sewing machine in the middle of the first river of workers, working on a batch of red shirts and sending red lint swirling up to join the cloud hovering above her, and never slowing, never stopping, because time was money and money was important.

Sharon was joining shoulder seams today. Yesterday she had hemmed, and tomorrow she might be back in the screen printing section, printing the popular image of the moon's first lunar base on hundreds of shirt fronts.

On wintry days like this one, Sharon shivered from the cold wind seeping in through the cracked windows, and her chapped fingers ached as she kept them moving: gripping, turning, and pulling at the separate pieces until they were joined at the shoulder. Pay was based on production and she needed money, as much money as she could possibly earn in

a nine-hour day with a half-hour break for lunch. Pick up a single back from her lapful of shirt backs. Drop it atop the stack of shirt fronts stacked on the board to the left of the serger. Lift the entire shirt. Feed the material across the needle plate. Press the foot pedal. Keep going. Don't stop. Pull the other shoulder together and feed through. Wrap the threads around to cut. Toss the completed shirt onto the board behind the serger with shoulders toward the machine. Repeat. Her fingers moved faster than she could think, and she rocked back and then forward rhythmically, with the hum of the sewing machine motor fading to a blur of music within her mind.

She paused occasionally to brush material into the table's fist-sized hole, so the raw edges would slide down the chute's opening into the box beside her left leg. Sometimes she waved her hand above her head and the expediter hurried over with more work or a few more cones of thread to replace the empties. But Sharon never slowed. She couldn't afford to. A broken thread meant stopping work to rethread the needle and she could sew a dozen shirts in the time it took for that effort. Piecework employees don't watch the clock; they count their pieces. Sharon coughed the dry, hacking cough of someone who has spent too much time in a lint-filled factory and not enough time outside breathing fresh air; but she never once paused to cover her mouth, even when her body jerked with coughing spasms. Time was money and she was afraid to lose even a moment's production.

High above her head, but occasionally within her line of sight as she stood up to tie a bundle of shirts, she could see a

sparrow flying through the rafters above the cloud of lint. It crashed from one age-tinted blue window to another, desperate to escape.

Just like me.

She removed the tag for shoulder seaming from the bundle's work ticket and added it to the rows of tags already attached to her daily worksheet. Each tag represented a small amount of money. Too small.

I've got to get out of here.

At quitting time, the workers lined up by the air hose to await the opportunity to blow away the dusting of lint from their hair, their arms, and their clothing. Sharon moved the air hose over her graying blonde ponytail, down the factory-second shirt she'd bought in the company store last Wednesday, over the faded blue jeans worn thin, and a brief, final blast at her scuffed tennis shoes. She sneezed and blew her nose into her faded white handkerchief. Every color of fabric she'd worked with today was on that cloth.

This cannot be good for me.

Sharon dropped her daily worksheet into the bin and stepped out into the biting, fume-filled winter air. Above, she could barely find the pale moon in the grayness of the early evening sky. It ducked behind the clouds, vanishing as thoroughly as her own lost dreams.

I do not want to be here. I want to be up there with Marcia.

Sharon pulled her gray wool coat tighter and walked across the gravel parking lot to her rusting Chevy. She started the engine and waited for the car to warm up while others drove

off in their nightly race to depart. A single route led to their escape: up the hill, past the stop sign where only a few people turned left or right, and over the railroad track to Greenfield's main road. She waited for everyone else to leave and stared up at the moon with its hint of betrayed promise that was really her own failure to prevail.

* * * *

"I'm going to be an astronaut when I grow up," she had proclaimed on her tenth birthday.

"That's stupid!" Jimmy never did let her keep her enthusiasm about anything for long.

"Is not!"

"Is so." He folded his arms across his chest. "Only boys can be astronauts."

Sharon felt her dream slipping through her fingers and fought to keep it from escaping like so many others had before. "Mom! Jimmy says girls can't be astronauts."

"Course they can't." He picked up their copy of *LIFE* magazine. "Look at the pictures. They're all men. Besides, it's one step for mankind, not womankind."

Tears welled up in her eyes.

"I guess maybe you could marry an astronaut someday," he added. He looked up and pretended to study her. "Nah. No one would ever want to marry a dog-face like you."

Their mom grounded her for a week after they got back from the doctor's office. Jimmy said it was just a lucky punch and he knew it wasn't really broken even before the doctor saw it; Sharon was just a girl and girls couldn't really hit hard enough to break a boy's nose.

Their mother made Jimmy wash the dishes that evening. Sharon got to sit in her bedroom, listening to her mom explain the true facts of life.

Girls couldn't be astronauts or doctors or anything interesting. Yes, there was old Miss Mitchell, but look what happened to her.

Sharon could go to a nice church-sponsored college if she didn't change her mind and get married before then, but she shouldn't think about going to one of those sinful co-educational colleges where she'd meet people of different races and beliefs and all sorts of other dreadful things.

Sharon could find all she could possibly want at one of the better church colleges. After all, that was where her parents had met.

Now off to bed.

* * * *

“I hope you're happy now, Mother.” Sharon spoke the words aloud and turned the radio on to drown out the sound of her own thoughts.

The car was just beginning to warm up when she reached the lone remaining grocery store in their little town and checked in for her shift on her second job, working one of the three checkout lanes of Schultz's Market.

Ellen was waiting when Sharon arrived and her voice was as fatigued as her expression. “Can you work an extra hour tonight?”

Sharon managed a tired smile. “Yes.” The kids were grown and gone; her husband, the necessity her mother had insisted no woman could live without, had traded her in for a younger

model without so much as a thought about how a full-time homemaker like herself could survive without any job skills.

The children had drifted away like deadwood floating downstream in Brandywine Creek. They had no dreams. No ambitions. Just like her husband that way.

Maybe it's better never to dream. You don't have to live with failure.

Sharon spent the next five hours keying in items on the store's antique system, telling the customers the totals, resolving disputes over sale items, putting things back that people had changed their minds about buying, bagging up their purchases, and then sending customers off with a smile no matter what they had said to her earlier.

She didn't mind standing after nine hours of sitting and rocking to and fro with the rhythm of the assembly line; but the hours grew long and the people more irritable with each request until her time ended and she could finally escape into the night air.

She stared up past wisps of feathery clouds to see the moon still glowing impossibly far away. Beyond the reach of mortal men; certainly beyond the reach of this mortal woman.

She remembered her high school counselor, Mr. Carrico, whose bald head shone as brightly as the moon above.

“Calculus? But you don't need that to get into college.”

“Wouldn't I be better prepared for college if I took a calculus course?”

She hated the look of bewilderment that spread across his face. It reminded her so much of her own relatives' reactions to her interests.

"Sharon ... nurses, teachers, and secretaries don't need to take those kinds of classes."

"But I don't want to be a nurse or a teacher or a secretary. I want to be an electrical engineer."

She might have told him she wanted to dance naked across the gym during the next Open House and gotten a less stunned response. "That's a man's job! You—" He stopped and reached into his desk drawer. Sharon waited while he pulled out a bottle of aspirin.

"I don't understand what's getting into you girls," he said, with a shake of his head. "When I started out twenty years ago, no girl would ever have ever considered a career in science unless she wanted to become a science teacher. This year, there are three of you, all wanting to be electrical engineers."

She looked up at his words. "Three? Who else?"

"That's confidential." He stood up and gathered some brochures from his in-basket. "Here. If you're really serious about this, Purdue University has an engineering program."

"Rose-Hulman's supposed to be the best engineering school in the state."

"It is indeed." Mr. Carrico folded his arms across his chest, and the look he gave her reminded her of how her mother had looked, back on Sharon's tenth birthday, while explaining to her why her dream was an impossible one. "It's also a

boys-only private college. They don't accept female applicants."

"Purdue really isn't a bad alternative." He smiled and added, "One of the other girls was quite impressed with how many astronauts had attended Purdue."

She left his office determined to go off to Purdue, become an electrical engineer, join the Air Force, and then convince the good ol' boys that a girl could too become an astronaut.

But she never did any of those things. Instead, she married Jack the weekend after high school graduation.

Marcia didn't do anything that foolish. She left her boyfriend behind and went to Purdue.

Sharon looked up at the moon and wondered who that elusive third girl student had been who had given up, and how it was that Marcia, who was pretty and popular and seemed so scatterbrained all through school, managed to succeed where Sharon had failed.

Marcia was one of the fifty-three rotating crew members working on the lunar base, one of fifteen women assigned to the project, and the only crew member over fifty. Marcia had had the foresight and the determination to carefully research everything she needed to do to reach her objective; then, while Sharon had given up and married, Marcia had studied the right subjects, obtained the right degrees, and made all the right connections to put her where she was today. "Uniquely qualified" was how the decision-makers had put it.

"If John Glenn could orbit the Earth at his age, I can go to the moon at mine" was how Marcia had put it.

Sharon pulled her gray wool coat tighter and walked to the car while the glowing moon played peekaboo behind the clouds.

It could have been me up there.

It should *have been me up there.*

She got into her aging rust bucket and drove home without turning the heater on. It would be a wasted effort; the heater would just blow cold air against her face. By the time the air was lukewarm, she'd be ready to park the car in front of the two-story clapboard house where she rented a small room in what used to be the attic.

The external stairs leading up to her apartment creaked and groaned with each step. She paused by her door and looked up one last time as she shoved her key into the deadbolt lock. The moon hid behind the trees, teasing her with its absence and then peeking out at her again when she opened the door to step inside. She stood in the doorway for a moment, staring at the moon, before stepping into her room and locking the door behind her.

Her landlord called this an efficiency apartment, but Sharon called it a hole-in-the-wall closet.

The kitchenette was an ancient Whirlpool refrigerator and a portable stovetop that had to be plugged into an outlet to work. A toaster oven substituted for a real oven, and while microwaves were cheap, she just didn't see the need for one.

Money was too important, and never more so than now.

Marcia had made all the right choices to achieve her dream, while Sharon and the unknown third girl student in their one-gas-station town had failed. If Sharon could go back

in time and do it over, she would be up there on the moon with Marcia now instead of standing here, staring up at the moon every night while her heart longed to be there. But you cannot go backwards, you can only go forwards, and that was where she was going now.

Sharon picked up the mail from the table and stared at the envelope that had arrived years too late. Rose-Hulman was still the best engineering college in the state, and they had gone coed in 1995.

When Sharon had learned that Marcia was working for NASA, she'd signed up for some introductory engineering courses at IUPUI, just to see if she could have made it, but she'd had to stop when Jack announced he wanted a divorce.

But then Marcia was selected to work on the lunar base. Marcia hadn't let Mr. Carrico or age or anything else stand in her way, and now Marcia stood on the moon. The only impossible dream was the one you did not attempt to fulfill.

Money was important. Sharon would need every penny she could scrape together to cover her tuition and expenses.

Her half of the equity in their former home would barely cover two years of $30,000 per year tuition, and the room and board was almost $8,000 per year. She'd also need books, transportation, and a hundred other things that she didn't dare think about. Nothing was impossible if you approached it one small step at a time.

Sharon turned off the light, because electricity costs money, and stood at the window staring up at the moon's bright glow.

I'm trying, Marcia. This time, if I don't make it, it won't be because I didn't try.

* * * *

Linda J. Dunn is an Indiana-area author whose work has appeared in various magazines and anthologies. She is also a computer specialist at a government agency and enjoys working out at the local gym. For more about her and her work, see her Web site.

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Other Cities #11 of 12: The Cities of Myrkhyr
By Benjamin Rosenbaum

7/15/02

***Eleventh in a monthly series of excerpts from* The Book of All Cities.**

On the plain of Myrkhyr, in the first year of the cycle, a million nomads cross the salt flats. They go as quickly as they can, though they are not used to traveling by pony. Everyone has taken too much with them, and the salt flats are soon littered with endless miles of abandoned things.

Few reach the mountain crevasses before the enormous shadows rush over them. Each behemoth that screams by overhead is a mile wide, blotting out the sky in all directions. The wind it drives before it shatters the ground and spawns sandstorms. Its tentacles, as long and wide as rivers, end in yawning mouths which sweep the ground, devouring the nomads and their ponies, hundreds at a gulp.

The next weeks are bitter. There is nothing to eat in the mountain crevasses. The behemoths prowl the skies, their high-pitched screaming filling the air. Some people go mad from hunger and grief and the deafening sound. Some climb out of the crevasses to meet the giant mouths.

After that the behemoths roam farther and farther from the mountains, and the people come out to hunt. By the tenth year of the cycle, the behemoths are seen no more; by the thirtieth, they are only a memory. The people build crude huts of mud and wattle; they plant the plateaus above the

crevasses; their flocks increase. On clear nights, by the fireside, they recount their days of greatness.

Around the fiftieth year, the behemoths return. Soon there is no day, only a screaming night—the sky is filled with huge, writhing bodies. Then the behemoths fly to the salt flats to die, burrowing deep into the ground, each bearing within it a child which eats its parent's body as it grows.

Soon the people outfit themselves and set out from the mountains. They are lean and rugged and ride gracefully. Descending the mountains, they can see the great expanse of the salt flats, where a hundred cities glitter, white and clean.

At first the cities are simple: a few large ivory halls with many rooms, a small park, perhaps with a pond, and always a well sunk deep into the earth. The first arrivals at each city claim its rooms; others camp nearby, their yurts surrounding the city walls.

By the seventieth year of the cycle, the cities of Myrkhyr have grown turrets, parapets, ramparts; great domes and amphitheaters; fountains and lampposts. The people discover again how to use the foundries, book binderies, breweries, and halls of government that slowly push up out of the ground. The salt disappears from the land around the city walls, and the soil yields a lush harvest.

After a hundred years, or a hundred and thirty, the signs appear. The roofs grow scales. The rooms begin subtly to breathe. An animal smell fills the streets. The water tastes like blood.

The people love their cities—the concerts in the park in summer, the grand operas, the canals along the promenade

where children sail gaily colored toy boats. Only a few leave for the mountains when the first signs appear. Not this year, most say. This year I will be appointed director of the commission. This year he will love me. Anyway, autumn will be soon enough. Let me just enjoy the summer.

Finally, when it is too late, the people pack their things and hurry for the mountains—not looking back, or looking back in tears.

There are always a few who refuse to leave. They climb spires at the cities' edges. When the city-behemoths explode out of the ground and hurtle screaming across the salt flats, their riders hang on as best they can.

* * * *

Previous city (Penelar of the Reefs)

All published cities

* * * *

Benjamin Rosenbaum lives in Basel, Switzerland, with his wife and baby daughter, where in addition to scribbling fiction and poetry, he programs in Java (well) and plays rugby (not very well). He attended the Clarion West Writers' Workshop in 2001 (the Sarong-Wearing Clarion). His work has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Writer Online.* His previous appearances in *Strange Horizons* can be found in our Archive. For more about him, see his Web site.

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Once Upon a Time in Alphabet City

By Joel Best

7/22/02

It's two old friends running into each other in a grungy no-name dance club on Avenue B. Pinocchio's gunning Luckies and knocking back bourbon at the bar when the fairy with the blue hair steps in from the street wearing a sheer Day-Glo blouse and hot pants that leave little to the imagination. Blue sees him, gives her shimmering azure hair a toss; he can tell she's doing a little mental check, can this possibly be? Then she's sitting on the next stool, drinking a dirty martini, and marveling at the coincidence of this meeting.

“Actually,” Pinocchio says, lighting his tenth cigarette in an hour, “I was waiting for nobody else but you. A dream told me you'd be here tonight.”

“Flatterer.” Blue leans into him. “You've grown up.”

“I'm not a little boy anymore.”

“It's been ages since I last saw you.”

“Summer of 1970. The day we all arrived in this world.”

Blue averts her eyes. “I shouldn't have abandoned you. I was in shock.”

“It's ancient history.” Pinocchio exhales a fire-hose stream of smoke. “Those were difficult times for everyone.”

“How are the others? The old man and the talking cricket?”

“Later.” He orders another bourbon and signals the bartender to refill Blue's glass. A band takes the stage and people dance.

Go away, he thinks at the fairy. She remains on the stool. “How have you been?” he says aloud.

“Getting by. Doing this and that. Right now I'm living with a painter who thinks he's going to be the next ‘big deal.’ Problem is, his idea of achieving this goal is hanging around CBGB waiting to be discovered.” Blue gulps her martini and sighs. This is 1985. CBGB hasn't been a happening spot for years. “I don't know why I stay with him. Tell me why I put up with his bullshit.”

Pinocchio shrugs. “Your kind is obliged to take care of strays. I remember that from the Old World.”

He's thinking, *Get out of here. Don't look back.*

“The Old World,” Blue breathes. “It seems like a mirage.”

“That world existed. It was as real as this one.”

She regards him closely. “Were you truly waiting for me?”

“It's the unvarnished truth,” Pinocchio says, and Blue coos, “Liar.” But she's genuinely pleased and, taking his hand, leads him to the dance floor.

The fairy is warm and soft in his arms. Pinocchio shuffles his feet, as clumsy now as when he still wore a wooden body, and allows Blue to lead. He continues thinking at her, telling her to walk away, but she can't hear. He knows in advance she won't hear, but still he tries.

A scrap of waking dream comes to him. He's a few minutes up the timeline and Blue falls into him, making believe it's an accident. The dream takes him ahead another hour, to his room at the Hotel Commodore on Avenue D where Blue says she isn't going to do anything more than kiss him, but ends up in his bed. It's the fulfillment of ancient, forbidden desires.

They touch one another. It's delightful. It's sinful. Pinocchio has had this exact dream for years and often wonders if the feelings he's had for Blue since their very first meeting aren't what caused them to be transported from the Old World in the first place.

That doesn't explain the old man and the talking cricket. Why punish them for someone else's crime?

Because life is full of innocent bystanders?

He's with Blue in his room, he's on the dance floor. The dream makes it all the same.

Leave immediately.

“Time,” Pinocchio says, “is a profoundly screwed-up mess.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I really do see the future.”

Blue laughs and pretends to trip.

* * * *

Long past midnight, tangled in sweaty sheets, they talk about the past.

“So what happened to the old man and the cricket? I know it can't be anything very good.” Blue rolls another joint and the air grows sweeter. She's had to get a little stoned to bring the subject up.

Pinocchio lies quietly beside her. “Geppetto never adapted to the shift from storybook world to NYC. He's been in Bellevue since ‘71.”

He reaches for his Luckies, fits one to his lips, lights up. “And I still can't talk about the cricket. What happened to him made Bellevue seem like a walk in the park.”

Blue smokes another joint.

“Life has treated us harshly,” Pinocchio says.

Blue is small beside him. “Tell me about it. I used to be magic. Now look at me; I'm just another bimbo.”

Pinocchio stubs out the cigarette and holds her tightly.

Get up. Dress. Run.

He wants to speak the words, but can't. Knowing about tomorrow isn't the same as being able to control it, any more than understanding every molecule of a mountain grants a person the ability to move it a single inch.

* * * *

The telephone rings when he expects it to. Being flung into the New World turned Pinocchio into a seer. Dreams constantly speak to him of the future. They began the moment he was sucked into the same bright hole in the sky that swallowed Blue, the old man, and the talking cricket. Pinocchio picked himself up and found the dreams lodged within his soul like shards of glass.

Three rings before he lifts the receiver. Blue opens her mouth. He put a finger to her lips.

“Wood Man here. Yes? Uh-huh. No, everything is progressing as expected. Another day, maybe two. Be patient. You know I'm reliable. I'll call when the job's done.”

In the midst of this, another dream. He's standing with Blue in front of her flop, a shabby loft building off Tompkins Square Park. Part of him finds it ironic that she's been so close all this time, practically a neighbor. She's just finished telling him how her man, Leon, is upstate begging next month's rent from his sister. It's an invitation to come inside.

Pinocchio wants to leave, but the dreams have always told him he'll do otherwise.

He hangs up the phone and turns, still breathing the scent of her musk. “Sorry about that. Work.”

“Gotta pay the bills,” Blue says. “What do you do, anyway?”

“Solve problems for people. Life contains a lot of loose ends. I get paid to tidy them up.”

“Like a private detective?”

“In a way.” Pinocchio pulls up the sheets and swaddles them both like babies. “Part of my job usually involves finding someone who doesn't want to be found.”

Blue's getting excited. “That sounds interesting.”

“Sadly, it can be.”

“Why sadly?

He quiets her with a kiss.

* * * *

Early morning fog wraps the trees with wet gray wool. The streets bordering Tompkins Square Park are somber rivers; the shabby apartments occupying this part of town, drab and formless mountains. The air stinks of wood smoke laced with garbage. Someone's burning trash in a barrel to keep warm.

Blue dawdles at the bottom of the steps leading to her building. The light from a nearby street lamp paints her face a garish yellow.

“Someday,” Pinocchio says, “these lofts will go for small fortunes. Young urban professionals, fantasizing about the romance of city life, will roll into this part of town with wheelbarrows of money. With them will come the expensive

boutiques, the chic coffee shops, the late-model cars. Another few years and you won't recognize the place."

"You and your imagination."

"It'll happen."

"A dream told you so?"

Pinocchio nods.

"Leon isn't home," Blue says abruptly. "Once a month he heads upstate to wheedle rent money from his sister in Albany." She cocks her head. "You feel like a nightcap?"

"It's getting late."

"I wish you'd come up. Just for a while." The fairy hesitates, not wanting to explain, then going ahead and doing it anyway. "Two weeks ago I saw someone getting hurt, hurt bad. I don't know who he was or why it happened or any of the details, only that it was awful and I still have nightmares." She's breathing heavily. "I don't want to be alone."

Pinocchio knows all about the dimwitted bookie named Wagner who stiffed the wrong client and got his head caved in with a tire iron. Examples must be made, order maintained. Shit happens. The event took place below Canal, behind a boarded-up deli where no one else should have been. Blue, on her way to a party, drunk and slightly lost, saw the whole thing.

He searches a pocket for cigarettes.

Pretend you've changed your mind. Send me home. In the morning, pack a suitcase and get the hell out of the city.

"Guess I can come up for a drink," he says, lighting up, hands shaking.

Blue beams. "My hero."

* * * *

In the morning, the fog has grown even denser. You could build castles in the mist. Blue gives Pinocchio a quick kiss on the cheek as they walk to the street. She's happy. Slept like an innocent. Pinocchio had his dreams for company all night.

Blue smiles, as beautiful as the moment he met her back in the Old World.

He loves her. They're both paying for that.

A fragment of his last dream still hovers in his thoughts. Two days from now. He holds a bloody knife. Something lies at his feet, but he Won't Look Down.

Forgive me, he thinks at Blue. *I can't change the future. Maybe that's part of my damnation.*

“See you later,” she says, still half asleep.

Some storybook tales have terribly unhappy endings.

“Not if I see you first,” Pinocchio whispers to himself, fading into the fog like a ghost.

* * * *

Joel Best lives in upstate New York with his wife and son. His fiction has been published in *Writers of the Future, Electric Wine, Deep Outside,* and *Chiaroscuro.*

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Lion's Blood

By Steven Barnes

7/29/02

This excerpt comprises pages 14 through 22 of Lion's Blood *by Steven Barnes. The date at the book's start is 15 Shawwal 1279 Higira according to the Islamic calendar, and April 4, 1863, by the Christian calendar. The book opens with Aidan, a Celtic boy of 10 or 11 years, finding a strange, beautifully jeweled knife in the river near his home town, or crannog. Aidan lives in the village with his mother Deirdre, father Mahon, and sister Nessa. The night before, the town had a festival celebrating the founding of their crannog, and no one expected anything worse the next morning than a hangover. But morning brought change for everyone.*

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Chapter Three

From the fury of the Northmen, deliver us.
—Ninth Century Irish prayer

Four hours before dawn.

The O'Dere Crannog was utterly silent now. Even the dogs had curled up into a knot in the shadow of the central fire.

The children sprawled on the dock were still asleep. There was no one to see the arrival of the raiders. Out of an enfolding bank of mist glided twin dragons. Rearing back like sea horses, stub-winged and fanged, each dragon was perched on the prow of a ship, each ship about fifty hands in length. The ships' oars scooped water and sculled ahead silently, every motion practiced and perfect. They were flat-bottomed, designed for swift forays along smooth, shallow rivers like the Lute.

Aidan was the first to wake. He peered out across the lake, seeing the silent shapes, but certain that this was a dream following him even after he had opened his eyes. As he watched, the head of the lead ship began to glow with a strange light. Without warning, flame gushed from the dragon's mouth, directly onto the row of coracles.

Aidan's eyes widened. What a dream this was! Then he felt the rush of heat against his skin, and sat up screaming.

"Northmen!"

Nessa and the Boru boys bolted to their feet, grasping their peril in a single glance. For a moment they stood frozen, but as the ships smoldered and the flames licked at the docks, their paralysis broke and they fled back into the village.

Aidan walked backwards, watching, eyes wide. Since infancy he had heard tales of the dragons and of the village heroes who waged righteous war against them. Had been warned away from mischief with images of terrible beasts that tore and swallowed and carried away forever.

So even though he realized that these were ships, that what he watched was the work of men, not monsters, something inside him held him transfixed by primordial, nameless dread. The dragon vomited flame again, and another boat seethed with fire.

Now alien, vaguely human shapes stirred upon the decks. They drew closer to the dock and a grapneled rope flew down, anchoring itself to the weathered pier. Barely discernible in the mist, two-legged shadows emerged from the ships.

The first thing Aidan saw was that the invaders were giants. He had always considered his father and the men of the *tuath* impossibly huge, but these creatures were so broad and thick through chest and shoulders that Aidan's father looked almost childlike in comparison. These were not human beings at all. They were ogres, *sidhe* from hell, who would break their bones and suck their marrow, down to the last screaming child.

He stumbled backwards as the first of the invaders stepped onto the dock. Aidan was hidden behind a low wall

now, but he swore that the *sidhe* looked directly at him. The dock was aflame, and the invaders walked toward the village as if treading through deep mud, had all the time in the world to breathe between each massive step. One raised a knife. To his horror Aidan realized it was brother to the one he had found in the river just that afternoon.

The fire's flare illuminated a Northman's face. It was a thing of tusks and snout, more boar than man.

Suspended dizzyingly between dream and reality, Aidan wheeled and ran.

His feet pounded the earth. He registered distantly that the village alarm bell was ringing. A few of the men and women tottered out into the street shaking drink-muddled heads.

Half naked, Mahon himself had emerged, sun-burned chest broad and bare in the dark. “Drown me! What mischief is this?” Cuaran, their left-hand neighbor, seemed more awake: perhaps he had quaffed less deeply.

“Northmen!” screamed Cuaran. “Burning the boats!” He carried a halberd, an evil mating of spear and boathook, equally suitable for splitting a sapling or gutting an enemy. Aidan flattened against the wall as Cuaran ran past, bellowing his challenge. Aidan had seen Cuaran hurl that weapon half a hundred paces to behead a rabbit. Behind Cuaran was Willig, and then Angus, the great bear. Aidan felt a swell of pride and hope: These were the men of the *tuath,* mighty fishermen, fierce warriors. They would send the Northmen howling back to hell!

Cuaran's arm drew back hard, and in another moment Aidan knew that he would loose the thunderbolt—

Then Cuaran's head snapped back, and Aidan heard a sound like a whip cracking. Red splashed between the fisherman's eyes, and he flew backward to land in the dirt. The back of his head burst like rotted fruit, spattering the ground with seeds and pulp.

Aidan felt more awed confusion than fear. From his shadowed place he saw the burly, animal figures leveling long sticks, heard cracks, saw fire flash like lightning in the sky. A man behind him groaned and tumbled to the ground.

Were these gods? Or demons, emerged from the mist to hurl bolts of lightning? Hadn't the Druids made sacrifice, sung songs, danced and prayed and sown sacred seeds to the Tuatha de Dannan? Why, then, this day of destruction?

The crannog was fully awake now, and several villagers ran to those few boats still unconsumed by flames. Cennidi, the stout fisherman who tied his coracle next to Mahon's, tumbled to the ground, dead.

Cennidi's son Tirechan tried to save one of the boats, and a gout of fire erupted from the yawning mouth of a dragon ship; the youth became an instant ball of flames, screaming before he twisted jumping into the water.

Women and children scrambled from the huts now, fleeing away from the lake, toward the forest's shadowed depths.

His mother managed to make her voice heard above the frenzy. “Save the children!” she shrieked. “Quickly! Into the woods!”

Mahon had her by the shoulders, and Aidan ran to them. He grabbed Aidan's arm and pulled him close. Mahon's face was riven with strain. “Find my daughter,” he said to Deirdre.

“Care for our children. Pray for me.” He clung to them both for a fierce, brief hug, and then was gone.

Aidan twisted and turned in his mother's grasp, trying to join his father, to fight, to die if necessary. He was old enough. He was!

But the straw roofs and wooden walls of the village were aflame, and there was another part of him that wouldn't let him tear free from his mother's side, something so completely overcome with terror that he could barely think.

Around him, men who had taught him to walk, to fish and to dance, fought and died in the dirt, their precious blood flowing in the mist-throttled moonlight.

“Nessa!” Deirdre called, voice cracking in the early-morning frost. “To me, girl!”

Deirdre called out again and again as she fled toward the rear of the village, toward the wooden bridge linking the crannog to forest and field.

With a despairing cry, Nessa crawled from beneath a hut and ran to them. As she did, another of those sharp, strange cracking sounds rang out, and Molloy the net mender fell, humping along the ground like a crushed river eel.

The night was chaos and red ruin. The men and childless women were fighting, while mothers and grandmothers attempted to flee.

“Ma!” Nessa cried.

“Come,” Deirdre said, voice both soothing and firm. Framed by the wild light, her crimson hair wreathed her head in flame. “Quickly now...”

They were at the bridge now. On its far side lay the fields, and a hope of safety. But they were no more than halfway across when six net-wielding beast-men emerged from the shadows. Another boar, a stag, and one with an eagle's beak. Women and children were ensnared as they ran for the imagined safety of the forest.

Deirdre screamed and tried to turn back, but the masked men entangled the three of them. They fell into the dirt, the bestial eyes and mouths of their captors leering down at them. The captors' scent was a nauseating meld of rancid animal fat and caked sweat, thick enough to choke.

The net's rough strands bound Aidan's arms and legs tight enough to cut his skin. Aidan struggled until he was bested by fatigue and a gnawing, crippling fear beyond anything ever experienced in his young life.

His mother and sister strained against the tangled strands. "Mahon!" Deirdre screamed.

Nessa wormed a thin arm through the net, trying to claw her way free. "Help, Da!"

Suddenly, as if in answer to their prayer, Mahon O'Dere appeared. His shirt was red-streaked and torn, and he held a bloody axe aloft like a firebrand. His mighty arms were stained crimson, his eyes were wild. He seemed not completely the man Aidan called father; this enveloping night of horror seemed to have ripped away a facade to reveal something more primal than mere humanity. Aidan felt a strange and unaccustomed twining of fear, pride, and excitation.

One of the beast-men turned and charged just in time for Mahon's axe to cleave a diagonal chunk from his skull. A second raised his fire-stick. Mahon's arm whipped up and down. The axe flew from his hand end-over-end, blurred through the air, and struck the *sidhe*'s chest with a satisfying wet, hollow sound. Blood flowed, and the monster sank to his knees with an oddly human groan.

Then, thrillingly, Mahon pulled the golden knife from his belt, turning just in time to twist away from a descending sword, answering with a vicious upward stroke. The misery he wrought with the invaders' own weapon made Aidan's heart pound and sing in the same glorious instant.

"Yes! Father!"

Mahon's eyes met his for one golden moment. The boy was proud, hopeful. In that instant, it seemed that Aidan was on the verge of some terrific, overarching understanding of all the world's myriad things. Then another of those sharp, odd, cracking sounds rang out, and Mahon staggered. He froze in midmotion; his lips parted and crimson dribbled down over his beard. It seemed almost comical, as if he had brayed laughter with a mouthful of half-chewed berries. Then, still in that terrible slowness, he crumpled to the earth.

Aidan watched in disbelief as his father gasped like a beached fish, great hands clasping and unclasping, grabbing at the air as if he might be able to claw life from it. Their eyes met again, and this time there were no great answers there, only questions that would never be satisfied.

A giant strode into view, this one a man-bear. The beast looked down at the mortally wounded man, head tilted to one side. Thick hands rose to his own face, and peeled it away.

The face beneath was ruddy and unremarkable, windburned and bland. He had small, bright blue eyes and unruly red hair that stirred but little in the early morning breeze.

Aidan felt dizzy and sick. The bear-face was but a mask. Only a mask. The Northern demons were merely men, after all.

Almost tenderly, the invader bent down. He lifted Aidan's father's head with his left hand, and plucked the golden knife from the ground with the other.

As the Northman made the death stroke, Mahon's dazed eyes locked with his son's, blinked once, then rolled upward. And as darkness came to the father he loved, in the midst of his mother's and sister's pitiful screams, Aidan mercifully fell into a deeper, dreamless night.

And was gone.

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Chapter Four

The stench of burnt wood and flesh wafted with the uncaring breeze as women, children, and a few miserable, broken men were herded toward the ships, arms bound at their sides. One at a time the captives were shackled at the ankles with stout metal bands tight enough to numb limbs. Jarring hammer strokes locked them into place. Each bore a loop through which thumb-thick chain links were passed, connecting each miserable soul to another.

Aidan looked into the faces of the captive men and saw shock, disbelief, horror, and bleak resignation. Riley, the *tuath*'s massive blacksmith, was one such. Aidan understood why: the shambling, shamefaced Riley had preferred captivity to death. Aidan hated him. He should have died! Died as had Mahon O'Dere, fighting to be free, fighting for his family. Better a swift and endless sleep than this disgrace. Had not Aidan a sister and a mother to protect, he would have chosen the first good moment to jump overboard and drown himself.

He would, yes.

A brawny Northman locked the chains into place with thunderous hammer strokes. Nessa tried to kick him, and he casually backhanded her across the face so hard that at first Aidan thought her neck was snapped. She fell limply back, but the giant simply grabbed one of her ankles and dragged her forward. For Aidan, it was like watching events in a nightmare, submerging him in an ocean of rage so deep it blackened thought.

Now it was his mother's turn. Never had he seen her like this, wild-eyed, and almost like a drunkard. Her eyes were rolled up exposing the whites, and she pulled against the pig-eyed Northman's brawny arms. “Mary! Oh please, Mother of God,” she screamed over and over again in a voice not entirely her own. “Do not forsake us!” Her thrashing was without aim, without real thought, almost as if she were some kind of dangle-toy twisting in the wind. After the chain was hammered on she was shoved aside and Aidan hauled into position.

He struggled without effect, and the Northman slapped him across the face. Stars exploded, the white sparks extinguished in an ocean of red, and then black. When he came to his senses, the first strokes had already fallen, linking him to the wall. His mouth felt swollen and nerveless. The boy's eyes narrowed as he ran his tongue around his mouth, tasting blood. He longed for a knife, a boat hook, a sword. Something to grasp in his hand as he leapt and died gloriously.

Like his father.

Pig-Eyes watched him, and something in the big man's face smiled, almost as if he approved of what he saw in Aidan. “Careful, boy,” Pig-Eyes said, his voice guttural and unpracticed, as if he had never spoken a true language before.

Deirdre twisted about, her face pale, momentarily lifted from her own madness by the threat to her children. “Aidan!” she screamed. “Nessa! Don't fight—”

She was pushed brutally, but managed to reach back to take Aidan's hand. His sister's face, so like his own, was wide-eyed and slack. “Mother?” she asked.

His mother struggled to mask her terror with calm. “It's all right,” she said. “All right. We're together.”

With swift, ringing strokes the chains were hammered into place. They were walked up a plank and onto the dragon ship's deck, where they huddled on the deck in fear, guarded by armed, silent men.

Aidan put his face down. He would not let these monsters see him cry.

* * * *

Like a great predator returning to its lair after a prodigious feeding, the dragon ships wallowed toward the river, swollen with their burden of living meat.

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't—

Nessa gripped at his hand with hers, her small, sharp nails digging into his wrist. Her eyes were wide and almost unblinking, and she trembled like a trapped squirrel.

The journey from the lake to the sea was dreadfully peaceful, a silent slide between riverbanks lined with moss-hung trees and corded vines. He had fished these waters, played on those rocks, swum and run and speared frogs amid these shadowed corridors. And with every passing moment, every renewed moan from those chained beside him, the realization grew that he might never see this river again. That the village of his birth was gone. That he was in the hands of creatures whose motivations he could not begin to

comprehend. That for the first time his mother and sister really needed him, and he was powerless to aid them.

The Northmen seemed to need no sleep or rest or food, remained on the alert at all times. They began to relax only after the sun began to dip toward the west and they began to smell salt in the air.

The ocean.

Its steady roar rose gradually, building to a churning rhythm. Despite his chains and sorrows Aidan's curiosity sharpened. The ocean! Ever he had hoped to see it. Never had he imagined his first sight would be in such a state.

The raid boats slid out along the river current, bucked the waves and then turned toward the south, where he finally saw their destination: another, larger version of the dragon ships. This vessel was three times the size of the river raiders. They slid past its prow, and he looked up into the dragon's mouth, seeing none of the black stains that must have marked the flow of fire. This ship was for carrying cargo, not raiding or destroying.

Under threat by axe and fire-stick their gang-chains were struck and replaced with leg irons and wrist irons. By twos, the miserable captives were dragged belowdecks into the ship's black maw. Those who resisted were clubbed and lowered into the hold. When it was Aidan's turn to descend he looked back at the coast, the white beaches he had never played upon, the dense green forest beyond. The sun was nearing the western horizon now. He wondered if he would ever see its golden rays again.

Rows of horizontal wooden shelves were mounted on each side of the hold, with a narrow aisle running between. Without another word they were shoved onto the planks. Their chains were shackled to metal claws mounted in the thick wood at their feet. Someone's feet were in Aidan's hair, and his own rested almost upon some woman's shoulders.

When the hatch banged shut the darkness was abysmal, and seemed to signal an end to all hope. A low moaning rose up from the captives, a funeral dirge for the living. A cry of lament for the dishonored, unburied dead.

There was no light, but Aidan heard the clinks as the captives struggled with futile desperation to free their leg irons from the locking mechanisms. He heard the voices of the Boru boys, heard bold little Morgan's cry, was dragged toward despair by the steady weeping of his mother and sister. The last wail he recognized was his own, torn from deep in his chest as the darkness without and within joined arms to enshroud him.

With much clanking and rumbling of the planks the great dragon ship weighed anchor. The fisherman in Aidan's bones told him that they were not headed out to deeper water but were traveling nonetheless.

* * * *

It took hours for the weeping to stop and the first coherent conversation to begin. “Where are we going?” Morgan asked. Then: “Did anyone see my father? My ma?”

“Hush, child,” said Deirdre. “They're gone.”

Silence, and then a soft keening sound.

“They're going to eat us,” said someone, the voice so thick with phlegm and misery that Aidan couldn't recognize it in the dark.

Riley the blacksmith made a heavy grunting sound. “They'll not eat us,” he muttered. “They'll sell us. Sell us all for slaves.”

There was murmuring, and more cries. Aidan knew of slaves, of course, although there were no bondsmen in O'Dere Crannog. Slaves were captives of war, or those with heavy debts, or farmers who could not feed themselves through the winter and so exchanged freedom for food and shelter. Without fortune or honor, they worked like beasts and were lucky if a mere ten summers passed before they could buy themselves free. Was this to be their fate?

“Slaves,” someone else whispered in the darkness, and after that there was silence again.

* * * *

Steven Barnes, the author of fifteen novels and as many teleplays, has been nominated for both the Hugo and Cable Ace awards. Mr. Barnes lives in Washington with his wife, author Tananarive Due, and his daughter. For more about him, see his Web site; for more about the novel, see the *Lion's Blood* site.

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Interview: Heather Alexander

By Peggi Warner-Lalonde

7/29/02

Peggi Warner-Lalonde: How would you describe yourself as a musician? Would you say that you are primarily a vocalist, a guitarist, a composer, a folk singer?...

Heather Alexander: That's a hard one.... I guess I tend to think of myself as a “musical entertainer.” I sing, play, compose, and tell stories, so that's probably the best description I can come up with.

PWL: How did you first get started in music?

HA: Actually, I was born to it. My father was a professional jazz guitarist who taught me to read music before I could read books. My grandmother was an actress in the British theatre and music hall before she came to the US, and had me quoting Shakespeare to my third grade classmates (much to their confusion).

My voice has always been my most reliable instrument, and in and after college I was in several genres of music, while trying to find my forte; everything from opera to country-western.

I had very little formal instrumental training, save for the nine years of violin in elementary through high school orchestra. At the end of that, I hated the violin and hid it away in a closet for four years, until one day when I was at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire in Novato, CA, I discovered a serious shortage of fiddlers. I thought that since I was at their

level when I put the violin down, I could just pick it up again and play for the dancers.... I was wrong.

After four years of not playing, I was, shall we say “rusty.” I tried out for one of the groups at the Ren Faire, and was told to “come back when you can play in tune.”

The following year, after much practicing, I came back and formed my own group to play for the Irish dancers. This time we were successful enough that we had other musicians asking to join us. This group eventually became a band outside the Faire, and we performed Irish music and my originals at pubs in San Francisco.

PWL: Not only are you a musician, you're also a storyteller. Can you tell us how that came to be?

HA: It all started with a skunk.

I was driving to a gig one day, and a skunk ran out in front of me. He of course got frightened and turned his tail towards my brand new Jeep. At that point I was able to determine the braking power of my Jeep by leaving a matching, double-line streak on the road that looked just like the skunk.

After I came to a complete stop, the skunk dropped his tail and sauntered happily off the road.

I was so amused by this escapade that when I arrived at the gig, I found myself talking about it to the audience, from the stage. At the end of the night, I had several people come up to me and tell me that they enjoyed the show, but that they particularly enjoyed the story of the skunk.

From then on I found that my audience enjoyed hearing the little glimpses into my life from my own peculiar viewpoint.

So now, like the Tonight Show, I have my own little monologue at the beginning of several of my shows.

But if you're asking where I learned how to tell stories, then I would have to credit my grandmother with that. Being invalid and living with us, she had no other way to entertain a small child except by telling stories of her own life from “merrie olde England” to Hollywood.

PWL: Your stories come from your own life and experiences—what about your songs? Where do they come from? Do you primarily write your own material, or do you perform other people's songs?

HA: I tend to perform my own material, although I will do other pieces that capture my interest and fit into my genre (like Archie Fisher's “Witch of the Westmerelands").

Hmmmm ... where does my music come from? Some of it is wishful fantasies and some is real-life experience presented in a fanciful manner—since I tend to see everything that way, anyway. I would half-jokingly say that my life is a fantasy novel with myself as the hero. <grin>

PWL: I first encountered your music through filk, that is, songs related to science fiction or fantasy works. How did you first get involved in projects such as these? And can you tell us a bit about your work for *Lion's Blood*?

HA: When I first performed my originals, it was for friends and acquaintances, several of whom were in fandom and the SCA. When they heard my stuff, they felt it necessary to convince me there was an audience out there that would be receptive—so they took me to BayFilk, the Bay Area Filk Convention, back in the mid-eighties. Here, I heard Meg

Davis for the first time, and performed my originals for an audience that I hadn't met beforehand. They liked my show.

Off Centaur Productions was taping the concerts for a compilation album, and asked if they could put some of mine on it. I agreed. For several years after that, I performed on Off Centaur's and later Firebird Arts and Music's albums, primarily work for hire. Often I would learn the pieces during the plane flight up to Oregon for the recording session. Eventually, I was forced to split with Firebird, and began producing my own albums in the folk genre.

Almost three years ago at OryCon in Portland, Steven Barnes corralled me in the coffee shop and made me a proposition. He explained the story idea he had come up with, an alternate history where (in an nutshell) Black races colonize America using Irish as slaves, and asked me to write some songs to help him visualize the Irish slaves.

I was honored and excited by the idea. Steven burned with enthusiasm and we fed ideas back and forth for a while. I came up with four songs initially, and gave Steven rough recordings of them. He gave me a copy of his rough draft, and I came up with more songs. He used my music to inspire him to write, and I used his prose to inspire me.

I love this kind of collaboration, and had been wanting to do it on my own since I broke up with Firebird. We both were very pleased with the results, and when the album was released, I produced a series of performances which consisted of Steven reading passages from his book, interspersed with songs and music from the album. They were very magical shows.

PWL: Are you happy with what you've achieved so far with your music? Where do you see yourself going from here?

HA: My music has allowed me to reach a moderately stable place in life. My husband and I now support ourselves with the music business and we have just purchased the home that we expect to grow old and cranky in, so yes, I am happy with what my music has achieved for me.

I have several albums planned at this point, as well as new songs being written. I expect to produce an album with my band, Uffington Horse (who also performed on my last two albums) by the end of next year, and possibly a solo album later this year.

I also am hoping to tour farther from the west coast (but this is more difficult when you don't have a booking agent). There is a trip to Germany in the works for 2003, and with luck, possibly to the UK as well.

Musically, I'd like to do more author collaborations, creating music for fantasy cultures, or soundtracks to books. I also have some pieces written for fantasy instrumental music, not quite like the new-age-space-music of yesteryear—similar but with more teeth—which I plan on recording in my “spare” time. And of course I plan to continue writing, singing, and fiddling live, until I grow old and cranky. <grin>

For more information, including where to find Heather's albums, see her Web site.

Heather's “Not Quite Complete” Discography:

2001 *A Gypsy's Home,* Heather Alexander (Sea Fire Productions, Inc.)
2000 *Gaia Circles,* Gaia Consort (Suddenly Naked Arts)
2000 *Roundworm,* Bob Kanefsky (Prometheus Music)
1999 *Where the Magic is Real,* Various Artists, Live (FilKONtario)
1998 *Waxing Irish,* Shanachie Artists (Shanachie)
1997 *Midsummer,* Heather Alexander (Sea Fire Productions, Inc.)
1996 *Life's Flame,* Heather Alexander (LiveSea Fire Productions, Inc.)
1994 *Crosstown Bus,* Various Artists, Live (Dandelion Digital)
1994 *Now Four Shillings Short*, Four Shillings Short
1994 *Shadow Stalker,* Heather Alexander (Firebird Arts & Music)
1994 *Wanderlust,* Heather Alexander (Sea Fire Productions, Inc.)
1993 *Following Wind,* Morgan (Fishbite Recordings)
1993 *Rainshadow,* Thayer (Watershed Productions)
1993 *Songsmith,* Heather Alexander (Firebird Arts & Music)
1992 *Heather Alexander, Live!* Heather

Alexander (Firebird Arts & Music)
1991 *Oathbreakers,* Various Artists (Firebird Arts & Music)
1990 *Backlight,* Various Artists, Live (Firebird Arts & Music)
1990 *Border Patrol,* Various Artists (Firebird Arts & Music)
1990 *Encore,* Various Artists, Live (Firebird Arts & Music)
1990 *Fever Season,* Various Artists (Firebird Arts & Music)
1990 *Footlight,* Various Artists, Live (Firebird Arts & Music)
1990 *Freedom Flight & Fantasy,* Heather Alexander (Firebird Arts & Music)
1990 *Keepers of the Flame,* Phoenyx (Phoenyx)
1990 *Keltia,* Various Artists (Dirty Linen)
1990 *Limelight,* Various Artists, Live (Firebird Arts & Music)
1990 *Oathbound,* Various Artists (Firebird Arts & Music)
1990 *UnReal Estate,* Various Artists (Firebird Arts & Music)
1989 *Carmen Miranda's Ghost,* Various Artists (Firebird Arts & Music)
1989 *Firestorm,* Leslie Fish (Firebird Arts & Music)
1989 *Magic, Moondust & Melancholy,* Various

Artists (Firebird Arts & Music)
1989 *Tapeworm,* Bob Kanefsky (Firebird Arts & Music)
1987 *Southwind,* Morgan (Fishbite Recordings)
1987 *The Black Unicorn,* Various Artists, Live (DAG Productions)
1987 *Where No Man...,* Various Artists (Off Centaur Publications)
1986 *Stage Struck,* Various Artists, Live (Off Centaur Publications)

* * * *

“Lifetime of Song”
lyrics and music by Heather Alexander

How great is the need for the toys of mankind
If you learn how to feed from the joys you can find
When a smile and a wink and a snippet of song
Are good trade for a drink and a place to belong

What gift can I find in return for this prize,
All the genuine kindness I see in your eyes?
I can learn of your dreams and this much I can do

For this moment it seems I can give them to you

I will fashion a rhyme with a twist of my tongue
I will turn back the time to when all things are young
I will give to this earth of myself, right or wrong
For your kindness is worth my lifetime of song

I confront all your fears so for you they will die
I can cry all the tears that you tough boys won't cry
All the words you can't speak will be my common speech
All the answers you seek I can help you to reach

This vow that I make for my lifetime will stay
For the music you take, you can give what you may
A green paper eagle or a smile when we part
All tender is legal when sent from the heart

I will fashion a rhyme with a twist of my tongue
I will turn back the time to when all things are young

I will give to this earth of myself, right or
wrong
For your kindness is worth my lifetime of song

* * * *

Peggi Warner-Lalonde is Senior Music Editor for *Strange Horizons.*

Heather Alexander makes her home in the countryside outside of Portland, Oregon and is performing regularly up and down the West Coast, in venues from Portland to Seattle. 2002 saw the release of her fifth solo album, *Insh'Allah*, music inspired by SF author Steven Barnes' novel, *Lion's Blood*. Previous work on book/album tie-ins like *Songsmith* and *Shadow Stalker*, as well as her original Celtic rock album *Keepers of the Flame* (with her former band, Phoenyx), have assured her popularity at SF cons, while her appearances at pubs, coffee houses, Folk Music Festivals and Highland Games have made her music available to the public at large.

"Lifetime of Song" is available on *Life's Flame*.

This album, recorded live in 1996 during a series of house concerts in Berkeley, CA, brings home the unique magic and scintillating energy of Heather's live performances. Digitally recorded and mastered, Life's Flame showcases the warmth, humour, and musical breadth of a Heather Alexander show.

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The File of a Thousand Places

By Robert Randolph Medcalf, Jr.

7/1/02

His filing system
Was cosmosophy
In action:

What began
As a
Single

Double drawer
Filing cabinet
And a
Card table

Exploded
Into

Eight two drawer
And four
Four drawer
Files

Two desks and
A dining room

Table

And papers—
Papers,
Everywhere!

Was it
"The Big Bang"?

Or was it
"The Steady State"?

Or both?

Or neither?

The matter
Of the clutter
Began
To prey

Upon
His mind—

He searched
For files
He needed:

And could

Find them
Nowhere

He pulled
Files out
At random

And found
Their contents

Undecipherable

When his
Landlord
Came

To collect
The writer's
Overdue
Rent

He found
A bloated
Corpse

Crushed
Beneath
A four
Drawer

File

And

A file
Folder
Containing

An apparent
Suicide
Note
Beside

The dead
Body

* * * *

Robert Randolph Medcalf, Jr., was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1949, where he grew up and spent most of his early adulthood. He is a 52 year old, divorced, father of three, and grandfather of eight. His first published story, “Catapilla,” appeared in 1976, and his first published poem, “A.L.U.,” appeared in 1978. His previous publications in *Strange Horizons* can be found in our Archive. For more about him, visit his Web site.

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Long Voyage

By David C. Kopaska-Merkel

7/8/02

> “I would have liked you to have been deep-frozen too."—Hawkwind, “Spirit of the Age"

This world is all we could have wished for:
The native life is edible, sub-sentient, and
Just dangerous enough to keep us on our toes.
The continents, dispersed within a sea that teems with life,
Provide variety in weather, topography, and climate.
Cyclonic storms invest the coastal areas in due season,
But we know how to predict their courses,
How to build against their savage surges where we must.
I just wish that you were here.

You and I had something special back home.
The sex was great, but that was secondary,
To your gentle insight. You should have been a teacher.
I visit your tube each watch that I'm off work

And there are many such; the years like leaves behind us swirling
In our plasma trail. Have I aged well, you think?
I like to believe you do under your frost.

We built this city out of magic, sand, and dust,
A testament to those who brought us here,
The lonely souls who tended us while we coldly slept,
Who, dying, brought us here, through the generations.
I like to think that you remarried, raised some handsome sons
Or daughters who, clear-eyed, grasped the tiller and carried on.

My step is slower now, but not my mind or memories—
I still visit every watch. Soon my tale will end,
Adventures that await you I will never see.
I could have found another, but no man on this ship could
Stand the shadow of your sleeping face. Not for me the
Heady procreation of our next-gen crew; those handsome
Sons and daughters who will carry on.

The years have grown and so have I, but I'm alone here
In the gentle breeze. I stare seaward, but I see your
Face in every wave.
I wonder: Is this madness or a dream?
For now I seem to hear your voice, to scent you
In the gardens rife with native and transplanted blooms,
Burgeoning in sweet harmony in this distant spring.
But no, this colony of thousands, humming all around me
Just beyond my sight, could be no sluggish fantasy of
Cryogenic sleep.

They tell me that you're fine, your vital signs,
Still steady at the norm, will carry you
Beyond the years I knew.
These nurses treat me as a final, fragile
Link with worlds we left behind.
But they don't understand: that link lies
Sleeping under glass, and maybe dreaming of the past.

* * * *

Writing articles about ancient reefs by day and sick, twisted poetry by night, David Kopaska-Merkel has been called a workaholic. In reality, he is so lazy that clearing his calendar for sloth is a full-time occupation. David lives with a house full of artists and pets. His previous publications in *Strange Horizons* can be found in our Archive. For more about him, visit his Web site.

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To Atlantis

By S. R. Compton

7/15/02

Great city, fabled isle, were you at the far end
Of the world, across the starry ocean,
As some aver? Or Krete's sister,
Now only a dead volcano's crater?

Atlantis! Home of philosopher-kings,
Bull-leapers, golden fruit,
The port of a thousand ships!
Scholars came to you; poets sang of you!

Atlantis! Emerald towers sunk
A hundred fathoms beneath the waves,
You were the world's first civilization,
And suffered every civilization's fate:

By man or nature destroyed—
Only the faintest traces whereof
In the sands of memory remain.
But, Atlantis—

Your crushed heart's wound
Still burns!

* * * *

S. R. Compton is an occasional poet. In the last century, he had poems in *Star*Line, Velocities,* and *Alba.* His previous publications in *Strange Horizons* can be found in our Archive. He works as a senior copy editor at *PC World Magazine* in San Francisco.

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poet waiting for the season of despair

By John Sweet

7/22/02

rain
just after midnight
and the sound of
geese moving south

my own quiet breathing
in a dark room

the fact of
20,000 innocent people
brutally murdered
cannot stop the slow
approach of winter

* * * *

there is always
something stronger
than this luminous
shell of faith

* * * *

the poet avoiding confessions

By John Sweet

awake and mostly blind
at two in the morning
in a house where
nothing fits quite right

cold

ashamed of my
twenty-two years spent
feeding a pointless addiction
but unable to quit

unwilling maybe or
maybe afraid

nothing is ever gained
by putting
the truth on paper

* * * *

John Sweet, 33, lives in upstate New York with his wife and son. He has been writing for 20 years, and publishing in the small press for 14. For more about him, visit his Web site.

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Of Explorers and Button Eyes: Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*

Reviewed by Tim Pratt

7/1/02

The canon of my childhood favorites was set, not surprisingly, in my childhood, and includes Lewis Carroll's Alice books, Le Guin's Earthsea Trilogy, and too many others to list. And yet, recently, a new book made its way onto that list, and managed to inspire the same sense of adventure and wonder; to transport me, in all the good ways, back to childhood. That book is *Coraline* (which rhymes with “horror-wine,” if you have Gaiman's British accent), the new YA by that increasingly impressive author-of-all-trades, Neil Gaiman. The phrase “instant classic” is an annoying oxymoron, but I'm tempted to use it for Gaiman's book anyway—I think it's one that children and grown-ups will be reading for a long time. The US edition features fabulous illustrations by Dave McKean; I had no idea the master of photo-collage could draw so well. When I have children of my own, I'll be waiting impatiently for them to be old enough to enjoy hearing me read *Coraline* to them aloud.

But before I get to the book in more detail, I'd like to say something about the author, and why *Coraline* is his crowning accomplishment. Neil Gaiman is the consummate storyteller currently working in the various fields of speculative fiction. In a world where niche marketing is increasingly prevalent, where authors sometimes have to resort to pseudonyms in order to even publish work in a different sub-genre from the

one their fans are accustomed to, Gaiman defies categorization, and uses whatever approach seems appropriate for the story he wants to tell. During the course of his career, he has tried his hand at a variety of storytelling media—the comics that started his career (most notably *Sandman,* but also *The Books of Magic* and *Violent Cases*); illustrated narratives like *Stardust* and *The Dream Hunters*; powerful short stories like “Chivalry,” “Troll Bridge,” “Harlequin Valentine,” and “Keepsakes & Treasures: A Love Story"; poetry like “The White Road,” “Eaten: Scenes from a Moving Picture,” and “Vampire Sestina"; the BBC mini-series *Neverwhere* and the novelization of the same name; his first true novel, the Hugo-nominated *American Gods* (which won a Stoker award, beating out odds-on favorite *Black House* by Stephen King & Peter Straub); and now a children's book, *Coraline.* Opinions differ regarding the relative quality of these works, of course, but I find all of them worthy of attention. In the breadth of his efforts and the depth of his accomplishment, Gaiman is slowly proving himself to be the storytelling virtuoso of our age, and *Coraline* may be his single most successful work to date.

Coraline is immensely important to Neil Gaiman. In his online journal, Gaiman talks about how much *Coraline* means to him, making it clear that the work is very close to his heart.

It's not difficult to see why. *Sandman* is the work that cemented Gaiman's fame, but its effect is a cumulative one—over the course of several years, Gaiman created an intricate, vast story composed of smaller stories. *Coraline*'s effect is far

more compressed—the book can easily be read from beginning to end in a sitting—and all the more powerful for that. It's being marketed as a children's book, yes, but it's full of pleasures for adults, too.

So what's it about? Like most great children's books, it's about a smart, perceptive, quirky child dealing with deeply serious problems. The child in question is Coraline, who as the story begins has just moved into a new apartment with her mother and father. It's obvious that her parents love her, but they're too busy to give her the attention she would like. Her mother does her best to keep Coraline busy by setting her small tasks—like counting all the blue things in the flat—but Coraline is happiest when exploring on her own. (If her character could be summed up in a single word, it would be “explorer"—in the brave-and-intrepid sense, not the eaten-by-cannibals imperialist one.) In the course of her explorations, she finds a mysterious locked door in the drawing room. Her mother has the key, and shows Coraline what's behind the door—nothing but bricks. The door is an artifact from when the apartment house was a single dwelling, before it was split into flats, and there's an uninhabited apartment beyond the bricks.

Coraline explores the grounds and meets the other tenants. There's a “crazy old man” upstairs who tells Coraline that he's training his circus mice to play music, and Coraline finds him vaguely alarming, if only because she can't tell whether he's serious or joking. Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, two aging former actresses, live downstairs with a coterie of Scottie dogs. The ladies are happy to dispense tea, inedible

cookies, and advice, and they read Coraline's tea leaves, which indicate that she's in danger. Coraline is the type to find the prospect of danger more interesting than alarming. They give her a stone with a hole in the middle for protection.

Inevitably, Coraline takes the key and returns to the door, and this time when she opens it, there are no bricks, just a dark corridor. Coraline takes this in stride (perhaps because she's recently watched a television program about protective coloration, and understands that things can pretend to be other things). She passes through the door—what explorer wouldn't?—and emerges in a flat that is the mirror image of her own.

There she meets one of the most disturbing creatures I've ever encountered in fiction, a thing that looks much like her mother, except for the too-white hands and the black buttons she has instead of eyes. She tells Coraline that she's her “other mother,” and that Coraline may stay with her forever; the chief advantages of this arrangement seem to be delicious food (Coraline's own parents seldom cook anything to her liking) and a lack of disciplinary constraints. Coraline also meets her “other father,” who has buttons for eyes as well. The other mother leads Coraline into the kitchen, telling her there's just one thing she has to do before they can be a family. She shows Coraline a needle and thread and two buttons, which she wants to sew over Coraline's eyes.

Coraline sensibly refuses this disturbingly surreal request and escapes out the front door, into a garden much like her own. There she meets a black cat, which can travel freely from the real world to this one—but here, in the other

mother's world, it can talk. The cat is a marvelous character, as inscrutable and infuriating as Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat, and even more arch. “We—we could be friends, you know,” Coraline says to the cat, which replies, “We could be rare specimens of an exotic breed of African dancing elephants.” Nevertheless, the cat stays with her, and even provides help, later on.

Coraline explores further, and finds strange analogues to her own world—a theater full of dogs downstairs, where younger versions of Miss Forcible and Miss Spinks perform an endless vaudeville-style variety show, and a distinctly lunatic old man upstairs, who has dozens of red-eyed rats living in his suit. This world doesn't extend much beyond the garden gates, however, and seems altogether an unfinished place.

Unnerved, Coraline returns through the corridor, home—and discovers that her parents are gone. She tries not to worry, making dinner for herself—Coraline is a whiz with the microwave—but her parents don't come back, and later, Coraline sees them trapped behind a mirror, obviously imprisoned by the other mother. Being a sensible child, Coraline calls the police, and explains the whole situation to them. They react as one would expect, suggesting that Coraline have some hot chocolate and get a hug.

At this point, the problem is clear; Coraline will have to go through the door and get her parents back, though the prospect of facing the other mother again terrifies her. (At this point, she tells the cat a story about something her father did once, and in so doing offers the most concise and moving explanation of what it means to be brave that I've ever read.)

Getting back her parents is not an easy task. The other mother proves ever more monstrous, from the visceral (eating black beetles) to the temperamental (she calls the cat “vermin") to the personal (she tells Coraline that her real parents don't love her anymore). Things take a turn for the even-worse when Coraline meets the ghosts of children the other mother has “loved” in the past, and realizes what her own fate will be if she doesn't defeat the creature.

Armed only with her own resourcefulness, the stone with a hole in the center, and the cat's unpredictable assistance, Coraline has to outwit and defeat the other mother, and in so doing rescue not only her parents and herself but the poor trapped ghosts—and protect herself and the rest of the world from the other mother's grasp forever after.

The story is full of twists and nightmare images, dark surprises and moments of stunning beauty, and through it all there is never a misstep, nor a moment when it seems that Gaiman is unsure of what he's doing or what happens next, despite the fact that it took him ten years to write the book, and that he did so piecemeal, averaging about 2,000 words a year. It is a masterly achievement, a delight for children and adults alike—and I strongly encourage reading it aloud to someone you love, young or old or in between. You'll both be the better for it.

(For fun beyond the text, the *Coraline* Web site is quite entertaining, though it's Flash-intensive, so patience may be required; once it gets started, it's a very rewarding pointing-and-clicking experience.)

* * * *

Tim Pratt is a poet, fiction writer, and reviewer living in the San Francisco Bay Area. He works as an editorial assistant for *Locus,* and also edits *Star*Line,* the journal of the Science Fiction Poetry Association. His work has appeared in *Asimov's, Realms of Fantasy, The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror,* and other nice places. Tim's previous publications in *Strange Horizons* can be found in our Archive. Visit his Web site for much more.

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Crazy Corporate Creepy Crawlies: Mark McLaughlin's *Your Handy Office Guide to Corporate Monsters*

Reviewed by Michael Arnzen

7/8/02

Dilbert meets Edward Gorey.

That's Mark McLaughlin's *Your Handy Office Guide to Corporate Monsters*: a curious little chapbook just twelve poems long released from Richard Geyer, Publisher in Spring 2002. It's hilariously successful. And it's small enough to fit in your back pocket as you walk from cubicle to cubicle, diagnosing the office drones.

McLaughlin—who has been a leading voice in surrealist humor in the small press for the past ten years—is as well known for his witty charm and performative fiction readings as he is for being the editor of *The Urbanite* magazine. In the UK fantasy scene and among diehard US horror fans, he's known mostly for his short fiction, which has a tendency to combine Lovecraftian imagery with hilarious (and often perverse) comedy (for example, in a story posted on Horrorfind.com called “When We Was Flab,” McLaughlin unleashed a Cthulhu version of Lennon and McCartney on the internet that earned him several Bram Stoker Award nominations). In *Corporate Monsters,* you get a great example of his voice and a generous sampling of his clever wit in poetic form. And it's only two bucks.

Corporate Monsters is a book written in the tradition of the “grotesque"—a catalogue of character studies that accurately

captures the way a specific setting influences its occupants. But *Corporate Monsters* is also much more than that. It relies on an ingenious premise: that the people who populate any given corporation are really freaks of neurotic monstrosity who have not only sold out, but who are also out to get you. As the front and back cover illustrations suggest, these creatures staff (and infest) an imaginary corporation named “Hell Co."—and clearly, Mark McLaughlin knows what it's like to be enslaved—and mutated—by big business ideology.

Take “The Enthusiraptor,” for example. He's the typical hyperactive ninny who will “gush all over you / and before you know it, you'll be doing / whatever it is you're good at / for your company. For free. / ... And you won't enjoy it any more.” Recognize the type? It'll be immediately identifiable to any poet reading this who has been tapped to lend their creative writing skills to, say, write directions for the staff copy machine. In McLaughlin's world, the Enthusiraptor isn't just a moron—it has evil intent: it's “a vampire / eager to suck the fun / out of your life.”

While the poetic language I've been citing might not pack much of a punch, much of it does, and McLaughlin clearly uses poetry to unleash his creative unconscious, venting what are likely to be everyone's frustrations with go-nowhere work through comedic horror, throwing out madcap barbs with deadly accuracy. The rhyme, when it appears, is subtle and often slant ("The Finnickyfoofoo is very picky / about the work others do, / and always demands absolute / perfection"). But McLaughlin smartly represses any desire to refine the form of

his grotesques or wax poetic in sonnets ... formal design would clearly inhibit his humorous insights.

The genius of this book is in each monster's inventive title and *modus operandi.* You get character studies of self-explanatory monsters like “The Smiling Gladhander” and “The Waffler” side by side with the “Fumigorgon” (a health food freak with noxious breath) and “The Spittylicker” (a clerk who obsessively licks fingers when turning pages). And I won't be a “Blabberblort” and ruin the surprising nature of “The Normotron” or “The Potbellied Smirkleflab"—you'll just have to read this book and find out what they are on your own.

Chances are, you already know them.

I don't mean to sound like an Enthusiraptor, but I really mean it when I say you're going to love this little book. It's one of my favorite poetry chapbooks of the year so far. The premise is clever and the price is cheaper than, say, an espresso at Starbucks or a box of toner. The pocket-sized design is just right for slipping inside your blazer and tossing on the boardroom table before the big meeting. If they get the joke, the contents are certain to have your coworkers looking at themselves a little more closely, whether CEO or secretary. You'll want to pick up a dozen or so of these stocking stuffers to hand out at the office Christmas party. Just keep your eyes peeled for the ones who lick their fingers before they turn the cover.

Chimes in the Unconscious: *Quanta: Award-Winning Poems,* by Bruce Boston

Reviewed by Michael Arnzen

7/8/02

If you've never read Bruce Boston's poetry, I'd normally say “shame on you,” but instead I'll just look the other way and ask you to quietly purchase a copy of this book and read it quickly, before anyone else finds out. Because you need to read Bruce Boston, especially if you have any desire to be a SF poet. Boston has been defining the genre of speculative poetry for twenty years or more—and finally we have *Quanta,* a book that enumerates the core elements of that definition.

Boston's *Quanta* is a collection of his award-winning poetry. Again, with emphasis: *this entire collection is composed of award-winning poems.* I cannot think of another writer in the genre who could fill a book of short pieces with award-winners, with the exception, perhaps, of Harlan Ellison. Indeed, Boston is something of a Harlan Ellison of poetry—a living legend, an outspoken proponent of literary quality, and an embodiment of a ‘60s aesthetic that combines wonder with a longing for future possibility.

Reading through Boston's *Quanta* was for me something akin to poring over a photo album: I was nostalgically reliving my first experience with many of the poems (and relishing the poems I'd always wanted to read, but didn't have access to), remembering just how innocent I was before Boston blew my mind when I discovered him in the small press. And here he managed to do it all over again, knocking my well-worn socks off. You can't read Boston's *Quanta* without realizing that his work stands the test of time.

In an opening comparison to Van Gogh's rendering of “Starry Night,” Andrew Joron's glowing introduction to the

book praises Boston's “expressionistic” writing style, in which “words no longer function merely as record-keeping devices, but become a kind of darkly luminescent substance applied to the white surface of the page.” Boston accomplishes this through his emphasis not so much on what words mean, but how they sound and, consequently, ring the chimes we hang in our unconscious.

Indeed, this very *modus operandi* may be at work in the somewhat self-reflexive poem, “The Nightmare Collector"—winner of the Science Fiction Poetry Association's Rhysling Award in 1987. This poem generates a creepy effect by using second person. The reader is put in the position of an innocent sleeper, visited by a dark stranger wearing a mysterious dark coat: “From the endless slashes / in his voluminous greatcoat / you can feel the heat / of captured bodies / invade your rumpled bed / with delirium and fever; / you can smell a brassy sediment of tears. You can hear the pulse / and thump of unborn shadows, / a dense hysteric fugue.” These sounds conjure the very nightmare that the visitor hopes to gather into his dark “greatcoat.”

This is just one brilliant example of Boston's dark vision in the collection, and there are plenty of others—ranging from the dark fantasy of “Return to the Mutant Rain Forest” (another Rhysling winner, this time co-written with Robert Frazier) to the charmingly dark humor poem, “Old Robots are the Worst” (which won the Asimov's Reader's Award).

One of my favorites in Quanta is “Confessions of the Body Thief,” which successfully compresses a novel-sized premise into a long poem of 143 lines. “Body Thief” is about a soul

who hops from body to body, living another person's life over and over, but “like a raindrop on a window / that reflects the room beyond / can never find a passage / through the surface of the pane.” The poem manages to capture a speculative concept, rend the magical into a tragic and all-too-human viewpoint, and even sneak in a little metafictional poke at what it is that readers, too, do.

Quanta's range is remarkable. Because it spans so much time, it can take snapshots of recurring motifs in Boston's prodigiously varied work. For example, *Quanta* contains two poems each from his series of “Spacer” astronaut poems and his series of “Accursed Wives” poems. The latter series was so popular with readers that Boston himself admits in the introduction to “Curse of the Shapeshifter's Wife” that he had “painted himself into a corner” by writing so many of them. (To wit: 35 poems and 5 short stories, all collected in his book, *The Complete Accursed Wives* (recently released as an e-book on fictionwise.com)). Here we get not only the Shapeshifter's Wife but also “The Curse of the SF Writer's Wife,” who goes to extreme measures in her desire to stop her husband from—literally—taking risky flights with his imagination every time she turns her back.

Altogether, the book collects 12 poems, each introduced individually by the author, who either explains the history of the poem, or his intention within it. Rounding out the 60+ page book is a bibliography of all Boston's writing and a short autobiographical essay, “The Making of a Speculative Poet.” In the latter, the author insightfully discusses the differences between “science fiction poetry” and “speculative poetry,”

then attempts to explain what his poetry is about. Here, surprisingly, words fail him, so he ends simply, urging the reader to read the poems themselves. And he's right: there are plenty of lessons within *Quanta.* I urge you to learn them.

A collectible, necessary volume. Buy it before it's sold out.

* * * *

Michael A. Arnzen teaches the writing and study of popular fiction at Seton Hill University. His horror reviews have appeared recently in *The New York Review of Science Fiction, Science Fiction Studies,* and *Paradoxa.* Arnzen's novel, *Grave Markings,* was the recipient of both the Bram Stoker Award and the International Horror Critics Guild Award in 1995. He invites readers to visit his home page and e-poetry experiment.

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Sucked into a Whirlpool of Horror: The Spiraling Madness of Junji Ito's *Uzumaki*

Reviewed by Laura Blackwell

7/15/02

From a distance, the seaside Japanese town of Kurôzu-cho looks peaceful and idyllic. Ferns sway gently on the verdant mountainside, the ocean laps gently at the black lighthouse, and Dragonfly Pond sits serenely at the town's center. But closing in, the reader realizes that something darker lies at the heart of Kurôzu-cho—something beneath the sudden dust devils, the mysterious whirlpools, the inescapable convergence of the winding streets. A malevolent spiral contaminates Kurôzu-cho, churning dark thoughts within its inhabitants and goading them to the self-destruction that ends in the spiraling smoke from cremation fires. Junji Ito's first two *Uzumaki* graphic novels draw readers into the disquieting tale of Kurôzu-cho, infecting them with a heightened awareness of spirals and a case of the chills that may last for days.

Narrator Kirie Goshima lives contentedly in Kurôzu-cho, blind to its sinister element. Less of a protagonist than a witness to the horrors that befall those under the spiral's supernatural influence, the quiet teenager realizes something is amiss when she spies her boyfriend's father, Mr. Saito, staring avidly at an empty snail shell. Her boyfriend, Shuichi Saito, attends school in a neighboring town—a daily escape

which affords him the detachment to see how the spiral has infected his hometown and his family.

The first storyline, “The Spiral Obsession,” details Mr. Saito's deadly fascination with any spiral—whether a coil of wire or a special type of fish cake—and Mrs. Saito's resulting violent spiral-phobia. Kirie listens skeptically to Shuichi's theories about the wrongness of Kurôzu-cho, but withholds judgment until his father declines into a housebound wreck and his mother flees reality into an aversion so strong that she takes scissors to her own body in an effort to rid it of spirals. As Mr. Saito tells Kirie's father, “They're everywhere once you look for them.”

Some chapters from each of these two volumes stand alone as separate stories, similar in character to the best of *The X-Files*'s monster-of-the-week episodes. The spiral exploits the characters’ flaws in bizarre ways, often altering them physically as well as mentally. “The Firing Effect” and “Twisted Souls” show the heavy toll the spiral's flattery and perversion exact from characters who otherwise might behave perfectly normally. Ito goes particularly hard on feminine vanity in two just-desserts stories: in “The Scar,” a vain, cold-hearted beauty's crescent-shaped scar twists itself into a disfiguring spiral, and in “Medusa,” an attention-craving girl's hair takes on a life of its own. “The Snail” takes the reader to school with a new slant on the relationship between bully and victim. Despite its often-episodic nature, *Uzumaki* maintains continuity from tale to tale, building intensity from one to the next.

In the second volume, many stories veer away from the odd comfort of comeuppance stories to show the spiral's increasingly larger-scale, more violent, and less selective seductions. The circle widens to encompass anyone and everyone, and innocents dragged into the vortex suffer deeply. In “The Black Lighthouse,” characters guilty of nothing worse than foolishness pay with their lives when they investigate the abandoned beacon's hypnotic light source. Characters trying to save Kirie from the threats of “The Umbilical Cord” and “The Storm” die merely because the spiral ensnares them. These events leave an indelible mark on Kirie; with Shuichi as her only ally, she must resist the evil she sees around her even as others call her a liar. The spiral cannot twist her spirit, but it stalks and menaces her.

None of these stories, however psychological, goes without grotesque images or eerie supernatural twists. In context, a mollusk or a hairstyle can induce shudders as easily as a trickle of blood or a rotting corpse. Ito spares nothing and no one; small children, kindly craftsmen, and glowingly pregnant women stand as much chance of serving as conduits of evil as becoming its victims. Of the twelve chapters in these volumes, a few border on camp, but only the gimmicky (if tragic) “Jack-in-the-Box” falls flat.

Ito's exquisite black-and-white pen work, with its elaborate backgrounds and realistic figures, represents Kurôzu-cho as just south of normal—until he pulls out the stops with searingly disturbing images of the spiral's influence. Ito employs creative and memorable visions to show the spiral's erosive effects on the landscape, the little details of life, and

the human mind and body. In the first volume, he accomplishes this with minimal gore, but the horrific events of the second volume—particularly “Jack-in-the-Box” and the one-two punch of “Mosquitoes” and “The Umbilical Cord"—require blood. He chronicles the unsettling sights through Kirie's wide-open eyes—each lower eyelash lovingly drawn, creating a dewy, innocent effect—as she watches Shuichi waste into hollow-eyed gauntness. When the events of the second volume chip away at Kirie, it's wrenching to see her trusting eyes bloodshot and to watch her sweet face take on the tension of painful secrets.

For both volumes, Viz takes the welcome step of reproducing the beautifully painted first four pages in full color, setting the tone of uneasiness in dark reds, unhealthy greens, and sinister purples. The second volume raises the bar further with an embossed cover and spine. A lighthearted cartoon featuring Ito poking fun at *Uzumaki*'s concept (and at himself) closes each volume.

Ito lists his influences as “God of Horror *Manga*” Kazuo Umezu (who lent his name to the award Ito won for *Tomie* in 1987), *Hell Baby manga* creator Hideshi Hino, science-fiction/experimental novelist Yasutaka Tsutsui, and American horror writer H.P. Lovecraft. *Uzumaki* is that rare work that captures the style of Lovecraft's horror, gradually unveiling the grotesqueries underlying everyday life, without pilfering its distinctive content, or calling everything in sight “Cyclopean” or “squamous.”

“Spiral” to some translators and “Vortex” to others, *Uzumaki* inspired the 2000 live-action Japanese movie of the

same name, which spurred positive buzz on the art house circuit, but has not yet been released to home video. The *Uzumaki* graphic novel, currently serialized in *Pulp* magazine, will conclude in Volume 3, scheduled for an October 2002 release. The final collection will include one story not published in *Pulp.*

Lovely despite its moments of looking-glass distortion, Lovecraftian with nary an "eldritch," *Uzumaki* shows a town in which the inhabitants become wound around the points of their own greatest weakness. The townspeople's all-too-common and all-too-human failings, warped and mutating out of control, at first keep the evil that befalls them from seeming random or gratuitous. But like a piece of fabric with a few tiny holes, Kurôzu-Cho is rent from weak point to weak point, unraveling until it seems it will fall to shreds. Although some of these vivid stories read as cautionary tales, and some read as straight-up horror, *Uzumaki* infects the reader with nothing worse than a case of the chills and the desire to read more.

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Robert Sawyer's *Hominids*: It's Not Your Father's Cavemen Story

Reviewed by John Teehan

7/22/02

> The Neanderthal brain was most positively and definitely not smaller than our own; indeed, and this is a rather bitter pill, it appears to have been perhaps a little larger."—William Howells, Harvard, *Mankind So Far*

Hard science fiction has lately been enjoying a renaissance. As sciences from genetics to quantum physics continue to move forward in great leaps, a genre that once seemed *passé* is becoming *timely.* We're finding a number of novels that use recent breakthroughs in science to bring issues to the forefront that are simply too close-to-home now to be ignored. Robert Sawyer's latest novel, *Hominids* (Tor, 2002) exemplifies this by braving such stormy matters as privacy, religion, and the origins of man. It begins with the discovery of a Neanderthal in our midst.

Deep within the Canadian nickel mine that plays host to the Sudbury Neutrino Observatory, an inexplicable explosion occurs, and scientists discover a man floating unconscious within a sealed tank of heavy water. How did he get there? The scientists open the tank to save the man before he drowns and discover that the intruder is stranger than they

expected. Aside from being unusually large and muscular, he is covered with a fine down of hair, has heavily-ridged eyebrows, a receding jaw line, broad nose, and ... according to all outwardly visible evidence, appears to be a Neanderthal!

Enter Mary Vaughan, a geneticist, who confirms to the astonished scientists that this man, who arrived so mysteriously, wearing strange clothes and an unidentifiable biotech implant in his arm, is indeed a Neanderthal—a species of hominid thought to have died out over 17,000 years ago.

With the help of the biotech device, a type of highly personal computer, communication is established, and we're introduced to Ponter Bonditt, Neanderthal and theoretical quantum physicist. This is not a man who has ever lived in a cave or relied upon stone axes to get along. It's eventually decided that Ponter could only have come from a parallel dimension in which *homo neanderthalis* survived rather than *homo sapiens,* and created a peaceful, technologically advanced civilization.

Immediately, media and governments around the world express great interest in Ponter. What could easily turn into a feeding frenzy of network personalities and “men in black” scenarios is quashed, thankfully, as the Canadian neutrino lab where Ponter was discovered takes responsibility, and the scientists work to shelter and protect their Neanderthal guest. This also provides them with the enviable opportunity of learning more about Ponter, his world, and how he got here.

Running parallel to Ponter's story are a series of events occurring in the Neanderthal dimension. Deep within an

abandoned underground nickel mine located in the exact same location on Earth as the Sudbury site, Ponter's research and life-partner Adikor Huld cannot explain why their experiment in quantum computing resulted in Ponter's mysterious disappearance and his replacement by a small flood of heavy water. Before he can get very far into his investigation, Adikor finds himself under investigation and brought to trial for murder—Ponter Bonditt's murder.

Robert Sawyer establishes the setup then *runs* with it.

On our Earth, Ponter Bonditt learns much about how the world turns out with *homo sapiens* in charge. He's fairly well horrified and fascinated at the same time. Gone are the mammoths and passenger pigeons so common in his world. Present are a multitude of air pollutants that offend his highly acute olfactory sense. Overpopulation seems staggering to Ponter, who wonders how we feed ourselves. Crime runs unchecked in our world, while for Ponter, the concept of war is utterly alien. To him, *homo sapiens* is an insane race, and it's a wonder how we survived in this world while his people died out.

The people of our world are similarly fascinated by Ponter. Neanderthals, having been more peaceful, interbred more readily in their past and therefore exhibit more homogenous traits than the modern humans of our world. Neanderthal men and women generally live apart—meeting mostly to mate. Bisexuality is a common practice. But most surprising of all is a total absence of supernatural beliefs. Neanderthals, in Sawyer's creation, not only do not believe in an afterlife, but also have no concept of a supreme being. This would

appear to contradict current popular beliefs about primitive religion among Neanderthals, which are based upon archaeological discoveries of Neanderthal remains interred with remnants of garlands and bones arranged in patterns, but Sawyer points out more recent research which disputes many of these suppositions. Likewise, Sawyer points out that there is a distinct lack of solid evidence suggesting that Neanderthals displayed warlike behavior.

The part of the story that takes place on our world focuses mainly on the differences between our world and society and those of the Neanderthals. The part set on Adikor's side of the dimensional wall is more plot-driven as Adikor strives to prove his innocence. If he fails, he and all of his male relatives who share more than half his genetic makeup will be subjected to forced sterilization. In Adikor's half of the story, we see that the Neanderthal world is hardly an Eden. In addition to having a legal system that puts the onus of proof upon the accused, this society has very little in the way of personal privacy. All citizens wear biotech implants that constantly monitor their locations and activities, storing the data in a main computer. This practice is universally accepted in the Neanderthal world. Given this constant monitoring, it seems that crime should be nonexistent. The system isn't perfect, however (as we learn), and it still raises the issue of whether sacrificing privacy for safety is right—a very timely question in this post 9/11 world.

Adding weight to the privacy issue in *Hominids* is an event that occurs early in the novel. Mary Vaughan, before being called to examine Ponter's genetic makeup, is suddenly and

brutally raped by an unknown assailant near her lab. Rape does not occur in Ponter's society. How could it? People are constantly on record, and violent tendencies are bred out existence by sterilizing the few violent criminals that appear. It's a system that could only exist in a speculative world.

Much of the science in science fiction is of dubious quality—faster-than-light drives, universal translators and so on—but it carries along the story's plot and ideas. Sawyer's science sometimes seems to work this way. Whether or not the quantum science in *Hominids* is real is almost beside the point. It's merely the vehicle that transports Ponter into our world. The technology behind the biotech implant may be generations ahead of our own technology, but it's the conduit for exploring issues of privacy and public safety. Sawyer makes careful use of archaeology and sociology, however, to create a reasonably postulated world of modern Neanderthals not only to show us a world that might have been, but also to allow us to examine ourselves through the eyes of an alien culture.

On the other hand, excessive scientific exposition can turn readers off. Sawyer avoids this problem by relating technical information in an easy-to-swallow manner and weaving it seamlessly into the storyline. Although there's much discussion of studies of early man and quantum mechanics, the reader is never in danger of choking on force-fed information. Better yet, the reader often learns something new, because Sawyer carefully prepares his subject matter using current research and goes to great lengths to make the science used in *Hominids* accessible to the reader. I don't

know quantum mechanics from butterfly wings, but I was still able to follow the arguments in the novel and found them quite reasonable for the telling of the story. (Sawyer even includes an introduction in which he explains the issues concerning the *Neanderthal* and *Neandertal* spellings and pronunciations.)

Hominids includes much that will be familiar to readers of some of Sawyer's past novels (*Flashforward, Factoring Humanity,* and especially *Calculating God*): a multi-cultural cast of characters, environmental issues, religion vs. science, and so on. These Sawyeresque themes function well as springboards for the compare-and-contrast scenes between our world and the Neanderthals'. At times it seems like the Neanderthals represent an ideal, especially when heard from Ponter Bonditt's perspective. At others, we see that there is no real paradise as we follow Adikor's story. In the end Sawyer presents a balanced view, enjoying the opportunity to raise issues for the reader and not trying to force any one single answer.

Sawyer's balanced approach is especially important because, like Greg Bear's *Darwin's Radio, Hominids* addresses the highly controversial debate between evolution and creationism. Sawyer doesn't condemn one in favor of the other—at least not entirely. Fully aware of all the facets of the debate, Sawyer challenges the reader to think rather than accepting dogma and doctrine blindly. Readers may recall similar themes from *Calculating God,* which won both praise and harsh criticism from both sides for its handling of religion and science.

There are moments where the plot seems to take a break so Sawyer's characters can discuss the various issues the novel brings up, but they pass before they can become too didactic. Every now and then Sawyer also remembers to insert a little bit of humor to keep the novel from becoming too heavy. Many chapters begin with snippets of world news coverage over Ponter's appearance, including a manufactured Top Ten list *à la* David Letterman.

Not all of the popular-culture references made in the novel work out as well as one might wish, but they're minor and don't trip the reader too much. The only real negative criticism about this book concerns the flatness of some of the secondary characters. The story focuses primarily on Ponter Bonditt and Adikor Huld, who are the most developed characters in the story, but I feel the novel's third major character, Mary Vaughan, could have used some more fleshing out.

Overall, *Hominids* is a technically smooth novel with a pleasing style and sense of balance that is also interesting and timely in its theme and content. The parallel-running plot is straightforward and sound, with enough surprise to be interesting but enough integrity to avoid any sort of *deus ex machina.*

Sawyer's latest novel stands well on its own while also providing the setup for the next two novels to come. As the first of three books, collectively called The Neanderthal Parallax, *Hominids* will be followed by *Humans,* which takes up the story a few days after the end of *Hominids.* The third book, *Hybrids,* by its title alone, suggests that Sawyer has

some intriguing twists planned. (I recently met with Robert Sawyer at Readercon and mentioned this. He swears we're in for a surprise and nothing is as obvious as it looks.)

Given his track record, it will be an interesting and thoughtful read.

> ...a Neanderthaler is a model of evolutionary refinement. Put him in a Brooks Brothers suit and send him down to the supermarket for some groceries and he might pass completely unnoticed. He might run a little shorter than the clerk serving him but he would not necessarily be the shortest man in the place. He might be heavier-featured, squattier and more muscular than most, but again he might be no more so than the porter handling the beer cases back in the stock room.—*Evolution,* Time-Life Nature Library.

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Joining Forces: Steven Barnes's *Lion's Blood* and Heather Alexander's *Insh'Allah*

Reviewed by J. G. Stinson

7/29/02

A Parallax View: *Lion's Blood*

Those who read and comment on science fiction have disagreed on whether alternate history is its own genre or a subgenre of SF. Some argue that without a science-fictional element such as time travel, an alternate history is a fantasy. But others claim it as SF because it asks and answers what could be called SF's prime question: What if? What would happen if these historical elements were changed? How different would it be from “actual” history, and what could it tell us about ourselves today?

For definitional purposes, I take the latter stance. To paraphrase an oft-quoted maxim, SF is whatever I point my finger at. I can't define it, but I know it when I see it.

Steven Barnes' *Lion's Blood* is alternate history, and a novel that uses a major perspective shift to illuminate a prime failing of humanity, which is its tendency to make other humans into slaves. But Barnes doesn't go directly for the U.S. Civil War period, as did Harry Turtledove (in *Guns of the South*). Instead, he goes all the way back to the days of Socrates, tweaks some pivotal events, and follows through on them. What results is a world in the mid-to-late 1800s that is chiefly presided over by nations which are Islamic, not

Christian. Christianity is a minor sect, Islam and Judaism co-exist peacefully for the most part (having signed a pact), and the slaves are European—in this case, Celtic peoples. Vikings are slave traders, as well as settlers in the New World, what we call the North American continent.

Aidan is a pre-adolescent boy in a Celtic fishing village somewhere in western Europe when Viking raiders come to his village, murder his father, and kidnap his sister Nessa, his mother, and himself. They are taken south by ship to an unknown port. When their captors try to separate them because Deirdre can write and her children cannot, Deirdre pleads to be allowed to keep her children with her. The trio endures a long, torturous voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World.

But there's no North America here, no English or French or Spanish colonies. The Abyssinian Empire has endured and prospered, as has the Egyptian rule by the pharaohs, and both are major colonizers of this new continent. Followers of an Islamic holy man called Bilal have settled a portion of this new land and called it Bilalistan. It is here that Aidan's family eventually lands. Nessa is sold off to another slave owner while Aidan and Deirdre are bought by the Wakil Abu Ali, a provincial government manager working for the governor in one of Bilalistan's four provinces. Aztecs are in power and in close proximity to the Wakil's province, and are a constant source of tension for him and his people.

The Wakil has two sons and a daughter. Younger son Kai needs a companion and body servant, the Wakil decides, so he selects Aidan for the position. Through adolescence to

manhood, Aidan and Kai become less like slave and master, eventually earning each other's respect as men. But Aidan never stops searching for his missing sister or freedom. Kai is forced by events outside his control to view his life and family in a different light, and to choose a path that is morally acceptable to him.

Barnes' choice of the Celts as one of the enslaved peoples of this alternate Europe (along with Franks and Gauls) is certainly an inspired one, because the Celts—more commonly known to us as the Irish—have so many historical points in common with the African slaves from our own history.

Both peoples were once conquered and governed by more technologically sophisticated cultures. The Celts were ruled for a time by the Romans, and then by the English. African cultures were subjugated by European colonizers and sent as slaves to New World plantations. But neither the Celts nor the various African cultures ever surrendered entirely. The Celts maintained their cultural identity through wave after wave of oppression, and the Africans who were captured and sold as slaves to European and American masters brought their cultures and spiritual beliefs with them in secret. Oral-history traditions are common in African and Celtic cultures; among a captured people, oral history is often the only way a to pass teachings on to new generations. The keeping of written records does not correlate to the sophistication of a culture. Memories, unlike books, are not easily found and destroyed. Nonetheless, one way masters kept slave races under control was to restrict or prohibit literacy, and both Africans and Celts knew this well from experience.

The Afterword contains an alternate (to our world) timeline. The novel's Web site includes an expanded version of this timeline, with the births of Christ and Mohammad and some interesting additions. Socrates flees Athens in 400 BC (perhaps with some assistance). Alexander the Great loses a leg in 390 BC and becomes a Pharaoh of Egypt in 378 BC. Saul of Tarsis dies in 30 AD from being “kicked in head by donkey.” Ethiopia conquers Europe and Charles Martel chooses Islam over Christianity at the Battle of Tours in 750 AD. Thus Barnes establishes the primacy of Islam over Christianity and of African cultures over European ones, and paves the way for Islamic Africans to settle the “New World” and become slave-keepers. Barnes also provides the date by two calendars—Islamic and Gregorian—at the opening of each chapter. In addition to exposing the alternative calendric system, the technique subtly implies a sort of double vision of the past in the viewpoints of Kai and Aidan.

There are several other points of connection, too many to discuss in detail here. Readers interested in this topic should consult some of the books Barnes lists in his Afterword to *Lion's Blood*.

It would have been too easy to choose the Zulus or another strongly led, populous African culture as the masters in this alternate world. Barnes wisely chooses not a particular culture, but a religious group—the people of Islam—as the masters. This is a neat mirror of how history played out in our own world, since the majority of the countries that colonized Africa had rulers who were nominally Christians. The followers

of Mohammad and Christ both come from a wide range of nations and cultures.

The relationship between Kai and Aidan is the central source of the novel's story, and Barnes adds a few subplots to fill out what is already a densely imagined life for the two boys. Kai's brother Ali is the Wakil's heir, and bears the majority of the responsibility for maintaining and extending the Wakil's power in New Djibouti province. The Wakil wants to arrange a marriage between Ali and an Abyssinian noblewoman named Lamiya, who's been selected by the Empress of Abyssinia herself to be Ali's wife. The relationship between Ali, Lamiya, and Kai adds a romantic element that gives the story a richer texture.

Many historical elements from our own world remain the same in *Lion's Blood*. They provide a wealth of familiar touchstones that increase the story's verisimilitude, making Bilalistan a place we're sure we must have seen somewhere. Credit this to Barnes' skill in weaving vivid but brief detail into the flow of the story, without halting the action to describe minutiae.

Spiritual beliefs often get short shrift in SF, but that's certainly not the case here. The novel would've been far weaker, if not an outright failure, had it ignored the interaction of spirituality with politics and technology. Barnes not only breathes life into Islamic society and Celtic proto-Christianity, he adds another element to the mix: the branch of Islam known as Sufism.

Sufis believe that nothing separates God from his Creation; that humans are blinded to the divine solely by their

attachment to their material form. The religion teaches its adherents to purify their hearts, so that the Divine may manifest therein. As one scholar says, “Only then may man ascend from the level of his animal nature to the level of the true human being."[1]

Christian teachings also reflect this in their basis on a single creator who cares for humanity and the requirement to rise above one's “animal nature.” Hindus and Buddhists share the belief in seeking a pure heart as a path to the divine, but the former has many gods, and the latter no specific deity.

The exploration of self as part of the search for the divine is common to both Christian and Islamic adherents. Barnes introduces Sufi beliefs as a way for Kai, as a follower of Islam, to give a new interpretation to what his ancestors did and said, and search for an acceptable moral compass by which he can guide his life. Barnes uses the Enneagram (the Sign of the Presence of God, or *wajh Allah*[2]), the visible symbol of the Sufi search, as an ever-present reminder to the reader that important spiritual matters are part of the story. He also employs the Enneagram as a martial-arts meditation and training device (he is himself a martial-arts practitioner) to layer more meaning into its presence.

A key element in the novel is a mystical reference to the “lion's blood” which is said to run in the Wakil's family. The power of this ichor brings on what some writers have called “battle fever,” in which the blood seems to sing in the veins as the warrior fights. The Vikings called such warriors berserkers, which connotes chaotic behavior. Barnes clearly prefers a more controlled approach, shaped and governed by

years of practice, and blends it into both the well-drawn combat scenes and discussions of spirituality in the novel.

Another subplot involves Shaka Zulu, who's often been portrayed in books and movies as a brilliant tactician and field general with a megalomaniac's sense of self-worth. Barnes doesn't stint any of Shaka's “real-world” reputation in his novel, and his Shaka is every bit as arrogant, bloodthirsty and single-minded as any other megalomaniac in history.

A few details were jarring, such as references to “spanking palms together.” Verisimilitude is vital in this novel, but not to the point where it throws off the rhythm of reading. It's uncertain whether this was a literal translation of the words in Arabic that refer to the behavior of “applause,” or something else entirely. A reference to Kai's “sainted mother” is made from that character's viewpoint. I've heard of Islamic martyrs, but are there Islamic saints? This is never explained. I stopped reading to take note of these oddities, but they didn't detract from the overall story.

Lion's Blood is very much a coming-of-age story, involving characters on both sides of a social divide. Aidan never completely gives up his struggle to be free again, but he's not the pure-hearted hero of medieval Europe's chivalric tales. Kai is of the masters, but his deep emotions and spiritual life force him to examine, and later question, the fairness of what his ancestors have done to Aidan's people and others. They are equally important as “heroes” because both undergo major changes which cause ripple effects in the lives of other characters.

With masterful pacing and a very realistic setting, Barnes peoples his alternate world with vibrant characters in an engrossing and often though-provoking story of how different elements in life can bind us in varied and sometimes conflicting ways. Honor, duty, love, and social station create bonds for us all, and how we fight against or accept those bonds can determine our future.

Few novels in alternate history have delved as deeply as this one into the lives of Islamic people as major characters, or Islam as a religion and culture. (I cannot comment on Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt* because I haven't read it, but I understand it does deal extensively with Islam; see the *Strange Horizons* review.) The lives of Africans in the slaving years, and what it was like to be stolen from their homes and sold to others who considered them less than human, have been touched on in some SF novels, but not in such an outright manner. *Lion's Blood* tells a good story, and its job as a novel is accomplished even if it does no more than that. But if it makes even one reader stop and think about those who experienced slavery or oppression, then it's done a service to humanity as well.

Is alternate history a worthwhile method for examining issues of slavery and civil rights with respect to how modern society might comprehend it? In talented hands, yes. Can any free citizen ever truly understand what it was like to be enslaved? Not unless they are somehow transported into the mind and body of a slave. But in *Lion's Blood*, Barnes made me stop often to consider what the idea of living under someone else's thumb. I found it a chilling experience.

Slavery didn't end with the U.S. Civil War—it still exists in other places around the world. Whether Barnes had this in mind when he formed the world of *Lion's Blood*, as well as delving into the history of racism in the American psyche, is for others to discover. But the fact that the novel resonates so powerfully on this topic lends credence to such a speculation. Other writers may be more or less successful at creating this resonance in the minds of their readers, but this is, for me, the benchmark by which I'll judge future works dealing with this topic.

A Musical Companion: *Insh'Allah*

The resonance didn't stop with the novel. In the mid-1990s, when he was building this world in his head, Barnes met Heather Alexander, a musician well known in filk[3] circles and among Celtic and folk aficionados. He writes in the liner notes to Alexander's Sea Fire Productions CD, *Insh'Allah,* "...the most pressing question in my mind [in regard to writing the novel] was one of authenticity.... I needed allies." So he asked her if she'd be interested in writing some songs with that world as their setting.

I think he asked the right person, and he got far more than he expected.

Music and science fiction have been longtime companions. Works ranging from classical cantatas to rock concept albums have contained vague or bold references to science-fiction subjects or works. Karlheinz Stockhausen and Philip Glass have set science-fictional ideas to music in operas. The Steve Miller Band, Jimi Hendrix, David Bowie, Pink Floyd, Rush, Yes,

Blue Oyster Cult, Jefferson Airplane, and others used SF-flavored ideas or took themes from SF works for their own. (For a more thorough discussion of this, see the Music entry in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction.*) Music has also appeared in and been the subject of literally hundreds of SF stories and novels.

Todd Barton based *The Music of the Kesh* (1985) on the poems in Ursula Le Guin's novel *Always Coming Home* (1985), bringing that world to life in a musical setting. This deliberate effort to create music which fits within an imagined world is a rarer marriage of music and SF. Alexander's *Insh'Allah* is a work which acts as a soundtrack to Barnes' fiction and a further expression of the prose's themes, characters, and scenes. It's due to her skills and experience as a songwriter and musical performer that it works so very well.

When faced with a novel which has musical accompaniment, so to speak, a natural question is, "Which should be done first—read the book or listen to the music?" In this case, I'd recommend the music first, because then the reader will have the delightful experience of mentally "hearing" the music while reading the book. Barnes and Alexander clearly set out to make a collaboration of their work, and the two media are nicely interwoven as a result.

But the collaboration would have flopped if Alexander hadn't succeeded so brilliantly in combining traditional Celtic and Middle Eastern melodic styles. She also brought in elements from Pagan, Christian, and Moslem ritual in her musical structure and lyric content. I consider myself a pretty

eclectic listener, and only a few times have I heard this kind of Celtic / Middle Eastern fusion successfully attempted. Particularly effective examples are Willie and Lobo, whose influences range into flamenco, Latin, and gypsy styles in addition to Celtic and Middle Eastern; and the Jimmy Page / Robert Plant “No Quarter” project, which had a more Moroccan / Indian slant.

It's no secret that Christianity lifted elements from medieval folk beliefs and nature-based spirituality (generically referred to today as Wicca, though this isn't a very accurate description) to make their religion more palatable to potential converts. Pagan festival days were co-opted as holy days, and local musical styles were adapted into early chants and hymns. In *Lion's Blood*, Christianity plays a comparatively minor role as a religion, and is still infused with the Celtic spiritual beliefs that preceded it. Hollywood and other media have simplified this confluence into banality, sapping it of its original strength. Alexander avoids the Hollywood stereotypes of these influences and goes for their roots, bringing that strength back into the music she creates for *Insh'Allah*.

The musical parallels to slaves’ field-working songs (and their descendants, blues and gospel) in our world are also amply reflected in the songs on *Insh'Allah*. “Laddie Are Ya Working?” contains, as did the songs of America's slaves, “hidden” verses which were sung when the masters weren't within hearing range. “We Are Bound” is dense with layered meanings, lyrically and musically, from the physical and spiritual worlds. “Fresh Hops and Hemp” is a drinking song straight out of an Irish village tavern, but it also has a call-

and-response variant, an element characteristic of gospel hymns from the American South. The amount of conscious intent in these songs' structures is only revealed through time and attention. They seem simple at first hearing, but gain texture over repeated listenings, and as they are experienced in the context of the novel.

Drawing on the Celtic lament tradition, Alexander produces "Green Are The Hills" and "Deirdre's Lament." The oral traditions of both Celts and Black slaves of the American South are reflected in "The Mushroom Song" (which provides directions for the astute listener on the dangerous qualities of certain fungi) and "Gruagach!" (a children's song about the Celtic version of the Bogeyman).

The songs here aren't all about the Celtic slaves, though. As used throughout the novel, "insh'Allah" means "as God wills," reflecting the Islamic tradition of doing all things in service to Allah. "Insh'Allah" concerns Kai's spiritual struggle to determine how best to live his life and accept his role in his family and nation. The instrumental pieces "Path to Alexandria / Mushtaq's Jig / Sleepy Camel" and "Wild Seeds" feature seamless blends of Celtic and Middle Eastern melodic lines and instrumentation (fiddle, drums, tambourine, dulcimer, and others). "Battle for Mosque Al'Amu" combines the heartfelt prayers of slaves and masters as they face a common enemy in war. "New Northwest" details Aidan's deepest desire, and "Destiny" twines together his and Kai's hopes and fears for the future.

But the signature piece of this recording, the one that sets the tone and the story line, is "Fire on the Sea." Here

Alexander is at her fiery best, launching into the tale of Aidan's capture with energy and commitment. Her approach to her music is full of passion, vulnerability, and strength; and reminds me, in that way only, of Melissa Etheridge.

Most of the music on *Insh'Allah* is performed by Heather Alexander and Dan Ochipinti, and their skills on a wide range of instruments, both melodic and percussive, are amply displayed on this CD. Andrew Hare provides a rock-solid double bass and sprightly banjo. Mary Benson, Hank Cramer, Dan Maher, and Jon Lindahl support the melody lines with backup vocals of a depth and expertise many musicians would give their right arm to have. These musicians obviously work very smoothly together. Alexander and her co-writer, husband Philip Obermarck, lavish sparkling production values on every track, and the entire CD is a testament to the value of music produced and recorded independently by talented professional artists.

With wit, fire, compassion, and a certain wicked charm, Heather Alexander successfully captures Barnes' alternate world in musical form. *Insh'Allah* brilliantly evokes the emotions of both the slave and the master of its inspiration, *Lion's Blood*. Other writers should be so lucky as to find such a gifted collaborator.

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Notes:

1. From “An Introduction to Sufism” by Seyedeh Dr. Nahid Angha, in Sufism: An Inquiry, a journal of the International Association of Sufism.

> The principles of Sufism are all based upon the rules and teachings of the Koran and the instructions of the Prophet. To a Sufi there is no gulf of separation between all of Being, the Creator, and His creations.... If man were free from the limitations of matter, then he would surely witness this immense and eternal unity of Being. But there is a chance for mankind to ascend to such a level of understanding, a pathway that can be followed through purification and meditation to the realization of its achievement. When one's heart is purified, the manifestations of the Divine is reflected in the mirror of the heart. Only then may man ascend from the level of his animal nature to the level of the true human being.

2. From The Sufi Enneagram Website—Overview

> [T]he Sufi Enneagram or Sign of the Presence of God (*wajh Allah*) reflects both the macrocosm (in the conjunctions between the planets Jupiter and Saturn) and the microcosm (in relation to the three-fold aspect of ‘self’ as

> Cognition, Affect, and Behavior). The four Platonic virtues of Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, and Justice relate to the threefold constitution of 'self' when we try to morally heal the self and become balanced.

3. Filking is the practice of using well-known melodies (or creating new ones) as the music for lyrics which refer either directly or indirectly to works of science fiction and fantasy. The name came from a typo in an article published in a science-fiction fanzine many years ago. Filkers perform most often at science-fiction conventions and filk-only conventions. Some of the most well-known names in filk (including SF writers as well as musicians) are Leslie Fish, Mercedes Lackey (not as active now), Tom Smith, and Heather Alexander.
