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Elven Blades and Zero-G Ki: The Evolution of Martial Arts in SF and Fantasy

By Rachel Manija Brown

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> Their new weapons they hung on their leather belts under their jackets, feeling them very awkward, and wondering if they would be of any use. Fighting had not before occurred to them as one of the adventures in which their flight would land them.—The hobbits, upon receiving blades from the Barrow-Downs, in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring.*

The Lord of the Rings is a microcosm of the evolving role of martial arts in SF and fantasy. In Tolkien's 1954 trilogy, the hobbits are given weapons but are never taught how to fight with them. The quote suggests that the hobbits have never even worn a blade before. But when the time comes for the hobbits to fight, they do so, apparently instinctively. In Moria, even Sam the gardener manages to kill a spear-wielding orc. I can suspend my disbelief enough to accept that a tiny hobbit could kill a huge orc, but Tolkien stretches it to the breaking point when he adds that the hobbit has never even used a sword before. It's a curious omission from a writer so focused on practical details that he never neglects to say where his characters are getting their food and water.

Both film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* add training sequences. Ralph Bakshi's 1975 *Lord of the Rings* animated film shows the hobbits being taught sword-fighting in Rivendell, and Peter Jackson's 2001 *The Fellowship of the Ring* has Boromir coach Merry and Pippin on the use of their blades.

This is not just the usual variation between page and screen—it marks a sea change in the attitude of fantasy authors in writing about fighting and martial arts. (For this article, I'm defining “martial arts” as coherent systems of unarmed or armed [excluding firearms] combat, which may or may not be Asian or “traditional.")

Lord of the Rings comes from an early period in the development of the fantasy genre. At that time, the convention was that the only thing necessary to make an ordinary person into a warrior is a weapon. Similarly, in C. S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia,* the gift of non-magical swords and bows endows English schoolchildren not only with battlefield competence, but with mastery.

Genre conventions have changed, and now the “training sequence” is almost obligatory in novels in which previously untrained characters end up fighting. Mirroring the evolution of the wizard from ancient Merlins and Gandalfs of mysterious origin to Ursula K. Le Guin and J. K. Rowling's youngsters in wizardry schools, writers began paying attention to how warriors, those other standbys of fantasy, learned to do what they do.

A cluster of historical events made a very basic knowledge of martial arts, and the necessity of having to study them

before one can achieve competence at them, become part of the collective Western consciousness. And once the knowledge became widespread, writers began to write about it.

The spread of martial arts knowledge

While Asian martial arts had been taught outside of Asia for many years—a Kodokan judo school was established in Seattle in 1904—the schools where they were taught were few and not widely known. But after World War II Asian martial arts schools began opening across America and Europe. Soon anyone who was interested could find one. A number of the people who were interested were or became SF writers.

As martial arts are now and were then a voluntary study, and one undertaken more for personal satisfaction than for necessity, the people who pursued such training did so because they loved it—and the things that writers love have a way of appearing in their books.

While a handful of people were experiencing martial arts first-hand, far more were getting a second-hand taste via television and movies. “Kung Fu,” which debuted as a TV movie in 1972 and continued as a TV series until 1975, brought basic martial arts concepts into living rooms across America. And in 1973, the kung fu movie *Enter the Dragon* catapulted Bruce Lee to international stardom.

On a smaller scale, but of major significance to fantasy, the Society for Creative Anachronism began with a medieval party and tournament at Berkeley, CA, in 1966. The party

was put on by a group of fans, including Diana Paxson and Marion Zimmer Bradley.

The SCA is now an international organization which re-enacts the Middle Ages “not as they were, but as they should have been.” Its members often practice medieval (or medieval-inspired) martial arts. Tournaments may include archery, Elizabethan fencing, and single combat and group melees in which participants wear armor and fight with rattan swords.

A number of SF and fantasy writers, such as Poul Anderson, Randall Garrett, Jerry Pournelle, Gordon Dickson, and Fritz Leiber, joined the SCA in its early days. That gave them the opportunity to practice or observe recreations of medieval martial arts.

Media portrayals and the new availability of martial arts training had a profound influence on writers and readers. By the early 1970s, there was an entire generation of writers who were also martial artists. They knew from experience what it's like to be kicked in the head, or how hot armor gets when you fight in the sun. Such details naturally began to creep into their books. And they knew that their readers were already familiar with martial arts, from the show “Kung Fu” if nothing else, and would find it hard to believe that characters could win a duel the first time they picked up a sword.

I don't mean to say that Tolkien and Lewis really believed that sword-fighting was instinctive; but only that depictions of martial arts training did not become a convention of modern fiction until the knowledge of martial arts was widely disseminated in the west.

Western martial arts, like boxing and fencing, have always been part of Western culture. But fantasy is the literature of the outré rather than the ordinary, and generally of the past rather than the present. It took the presence of “exotic” Asian arts and the revival of past Western ones to inspire fantasy writers to connect the fights in the stories they were writing with the fighting styles they now knew. Boxing may seem incongruous in a high fantasy novel and old-fashioned in SF; but elegant sword forms and deadly Asian-inspired striking arts fit right in.

Martial arts in SF and fantasy

Merriam-Webster dates the term “martial arts” to 1933. The first use of the term I found in an SF story was in Roger Zelazny's 1963 “A Rose For Ecclesiastes:”

> If they had refined their martial arts as far as they had their dances, or, worse yet, if their fighting arts were a part of the dance, I was in for big trouble.

Zelazny, an *aikidoka* (practitioner of aikido) who later edited *Warriors of Blood and Dream,* an anthology of SF martial arts stories, was, as usual, ahead of his time.

As the knowledge and availability of martial arts training spread through the West, the depiction of martial arts evolved. I would like to trace three stages of this evolution. These stages are as much a matter of content as of copyright date—at least one third stage novel was written when nearly

everyone else was writing first stage novels, and first stage novels are still being written today.

In the first stage, martial arts are limited to a brief mention, or as a bit of extra color in a fight scene. The term “martial arts” is rarely used, though individual styles may be named. Most importantly, no one trains and, while there may be fight scenes, there's no sense of a coherent system of fighting in use.

When Asian martial arts appear, they are often used as a spice of exoticism in the Western hero's background, as in Sherlock Holmes’ use of “Baritsu, or the Japanese system of wrestling” on Moriarty at Reichenbach Falls in the 1903 “The Adventure of the Empty House.” (Baritsu, also known as Bartitsu, was based on judo and invented by E. W. Barton Wright.) Asian arts also appear as the alien skills of a supporting character from the Far East. For instance:

> Saburo, whose knowledge of ju-jitsu had taught him everything there was to be known about nerves and nerve-centres, touched a spot in the scout's neck, and he went over as though he had been poleaxed.—*The House with the Red Blinds,* by Trevor Wignall, 1920.

Evidently the Japanese originated the Vulcan nerve pinch.

Early works of fantasy, from epics like *Lord of the Rings,* to children's books like *The Chronicles of Narnia,* to sword and sorcery like Robert E. Howard's *Conan,* belong to the first stage. Sometiems the characters in these books are already

great fighters when the story begins, and their training is not mentioned. When, like Tolkien's hobbits or Lewis's children, the characters rise from humble beginnings, their training begins and ends with a gift of weapons.

It could be theorized that Tolkien's hobbits and Lewis's children, like Galahad, have the strength of ten because their hearts are pure. (Conan is a force of nature, and to inquire about the state of his heart or where he learned his skills is like asking questions of a tornado.) Walter Jon Williams, a writer and martial artist whose own work will be discussed later on, suggests that Tolkien and Howard's books are in the Romantic tradition, and as such, their characters fight effectively because it's their nature to do so.

But Lewis chose to focus on children, as Tolkien did on hobbits, because they're unlikely heroes: small, frightened, and traveling in foreign lands. Their strength is moral, not physical. They have to learn to use a tinder box or address a king, and complain when they can't get a decent breakfast. Their fighting prowess cannot be entirely ascribed to a lack of realism, or to the idea that right makes might, or even to the Romantic notion of character, poised as the books are between Romance and modern fantasy.

The children and hobbits are beneficiaries of the writing convention of the time, which was to leave training in the category of going to the bathroom: presumably it happened, but off-page. So though they suffered many hardships, at least they never had to listen to a smug sensei make enigmatic pronouncements, then smack them with a wooden sword.

In the second stage, one of the most prominent aspects of martial arts—the idea that combat proficiency requires extensive and lengthy training—becomes important in the fiction. Training sequences become a near-obligatory part of books featuring characters who begin not knowing how to fight, but who will later have to. Martial arts are treated in greater detail. But they are not a primary focus, nor do they illuminate theme. They are there to provide realistic detail and entertainment value, and to serve the plot.

The Bakshi and Jackson *Lord of the Rings* films belong to this second stage. Both movies include training sequences, and the Jackson film has a sophisticated understanding of how martial arts differ by culture, and how similar fighting styles vary subtly depending on the personality and body type of the fighter. (The weapons and fighting styles of men, elves, dwarves, and orcs are quite different; Boromir's sword-fighting emphasizes strength as much as Aragorn's does agility.) But in neither film are martial arts a central or thematic concern.

In second stage works, the reasons for training are practical—to fight the war, to get revenge, to avoid rape by bandits—and don't go beyond the practical. Training brings skills but not emotional changes, except perhaps some mental toughness.

Martial arts may also be used to denote character, often by revealing hidden depths. In Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword,* Harry's unexpected aptitude for fighting and riding is the first hint that she has a Destiny; in P. C. Hodgell's *God Stalk,* the

amnesiac heroine's martial skills make her identity more apparent to others than to herself.

The third stage denotes books in which martial arts are no longer a mere convention, but are an integral part of the story, are explored in depth, and are used to illuminate larger issues common to fantasy and SF. This can be a rich and rewarding blend of genre with subject, for the central issues of SF and fantasy are often central issues for martial artists as well.

The thematic uses of martial arts in fantasy and SF can be broken into four general categories: practical, extrapolative, transformative, and transcendental.

Martial arts for practical purposes: self-defense, revenge, war, or as part of a gentleman's education

This is the most common use of martial arts in fiction. In addition, self-defense is one of the most common real-life reasons people start training. This is also virtually the only role for martial arts in first and second stage books. But in a third stage book, it goes beyond being a plot device. Martial arts, in both third stage fiction and real life, have a sneaky way of changing one's outlook in ways one hadn't bargained for.

This category is often explicitly or implicitly linked to feminism. I have read at least twenty fantasy novels in which a woman who has been raped, lost her family to pillaging Vikings, or is otherwise oppressed, finds a wise martial arts teacher, and, in learning to wield a sword or her fists, gains personal power and autonomy.

Martial arts are designed to make skill defeat size and strength, to give the underdog a chance; and no one is more of an underdog than a woman in the patriarchal cultures that are common in fantasy. When a small woman defeats a big powerful man, it's often a metaphor for the overthrow of the patriarchy by the collective power of women. In Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Thendara House* and Doris Egan's *Two-Bit Heroes,* women who learn self-defense from female teachers shake off their victim consciousness with every elbow strike.

> The wooden blade caught [Arya] high in the breast, a sudden stinging blow that hurt all the more because it came from the wrong side. 'Ow!' she cried out. She would have a fresh bruise there by the time she went to sleep, somewhere out at sea. *A bruise is a lesson,* she told herself, *and each lesson makes us better.*

Women have few rights in the brutal world of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice And Fire.* The tomboy princess Arya is too young to articulate this, but she's not too young to resent it. In what could be interpreted as a message that women need men's help, or merely as an unsentimental acknowledgement that sisterhood wasn't popular in medieval times, no women support Arya's desire to fight—but some men do. Her half-brother gives her a sword, her father hires her a fencing master, the fencing master teaches her and

fights to the death for her, and a mysterious man helps her kill her enemies.

Still, Arya spends most of the series cold and miserable and under others' control, lulling herself to sleep with a recital of the names of the people she wants to kill—a list which keeps getting longer, even though she occasionally manages to cross one off.

It's hard to tell how good she is with her sword Needle; most of what she does is to, as her brother suggests, "Stick them with the pointy end." But her teacher encourages her to be determined and independent-minded, and that proves as valuable as any amount of skill. Like the Braavosi sword style she learns, all nimbleness and evasive action, Arya uses her physical and mental agility to make the best of the perils she encounters.

In contrast, her obedient, feminine sister is beaten and abused, and the wolf to whom she's telepathically bonded is killed. (Arya sees this coming and makes sure her own wolf escapes.) In the end, Arya's training is less important than the spirit that made her want to train in the first place. As my own sensei Stan Uno says, "The hardest thing you'll ever do at this dojo is to walk through the door for the first time."

Martial arts as extrapolation: projecting the future of martial arts and using them to examine wider changes

The main thrust of SF is extrapolative: how do people and their arts and technology and society evolve, and how do they stay the same? Martial arts are also in a constant tug-of-war

between adapting to keep up with changing times, and being preserved as a cultural tradition and link with the past.

A number of works speculate about the future of martial arts: mastery in a chip in *The Matrix,* non-lethal weapons which provide the means for a humane rebellion in Steve Perry's *The Man Who Never Missed,* and the Might-Sword of China Mieville's *The Scar,* a probability device which enables a skilled wielder to select from all the myriad ways a fight might go, and choose the reality in which every strike is a kill.

And then there's Walter Jon Williams' *Aristoi*:

> Gabriel had been undecided whether to fight right-handed or otherwise, and the sight of Silvanus made up his mind: he gave his body to a left-handed daimon and shifted the sword to his left.
> AUGENBLICK: He's left-handed, Aristos.
> GABRIEL: Take command of my body, Augenblick. He won't be used to left-handed opponents.

In the section this quote is taken from, Gabriel, a man who has attained great inner mastery, is engaged in a deadly duel. Augenblick is but one of many of Gabriel's subsidiary personalities, or daimons, who chime in during the duel: chanting to direct his flow of qi, reporting on his opponent's pulse rate, suggesting strategies, expressing anger, reminding him to kiai. The world of *Aristoi* overflows with high technology and tapped human potential. Gabriel's daimons

are not a symptom of mental illness, but his mind working at its fullest capacity: he is vast, he contains multitudes.

Williams holds a fourth degree black belt in kenpo karate. The quote below is taken from an interview he did for SF Site:

> One of the things that a movement art will do for you is make you more aware of the interface between your mind and your body, and how that works, and how the one can program the other. And I realized that through doing kenpo, my mind was being reprogrammed through my body. The people who devised this art were very intelligent people who had very particular points of view, which they reflected in their movements. By doing these movements, you can absorb the thoughts and attitudes of generations of martial artists.
>
> I thought that expanding this idea into a kind of universal kinesic technology for *Aristoi* would be valuable, a way of creating a body language more universal than spoken language.

Within the world of *Aristoi,* this body language goes beyond communication: gestures known as mudras can compel obedience or force a state of mind in an observer. The term is taken from the hand gestures in the Indian dance-

drama kathakali, which is related to the south Indian martial art kalaripayat, which may have been the source art for kung fu. The mudras in kathakali, like the ones in *Aristoi,* have precise meanings.

Martial arts in *Aristoi* fuse such ancient terms and traditions with the highest of technology and psychology. The mudra is an ancient concept, but one given power with a science fictional gloss. Qi, today's mysterious and possibly non-existent energy, is *Aristoi's* controllable phenomenon. The rush of thoughts, feelings, images, and physical impulses experienced while fighting are distilled into daimon voices.

It seems idyllic: who wouldn't want to have daimons, or learn the Mudra of Compulsion? But daimons can take control. During Gabriel's duel, he discovers a new daimon within himself, and who subtly takes control. The progression of its hold on Gabriel is signaled through his kiai, or shout, which changes from “Tzai!” to “Dai!” to “Die!” At that, the new daimon gets its way: Gabriel, who had meant only to disable, kills his opponent. But when your daimon whispers, “Die,” it's hard to say no.

Aristoi's martial arts mirror the themes of the book as a whole: the utopian fusion of the best of the old and the new, and its hidden cost; and that the most significant changes have come about through psychology rather than technology. (In a sense, the psychology *is* the technology.)

Martial arts, in life as in *Aristoi,* are as much a matter of the mind as of the body; and the two are not as separate as one might think. Though physical capabilities decline with age, experience and savvy are quite capable of beating

youthful strength and speed. As Williams suggests, the final frontier may be inner space.

Martial arts as transformation

SF and fantasy is a literature of transformation as well as extrapolation: the stable-boy who becomes a hero or a king, the human who surgically or genetically alters himself into a superior form, and the callow youngster who gains maturity and self-knowledge are common. As Walter Jon Williams pointed out, to become a serious student of the martial arts is to transform oneself physically and mentally.

The most familiar way in which this plays out in fiction is the blossoming of the wallflower: timid and out-of-shape people take up martial arts and build muscle, lose the spare tire, acquire self-confidence and inner peace, and stride away with their fighting skills the least of what they've gained.

In fantasy, this dream of empowerment often has a feminist slant. Gael Baudino's *Strands of Starlight* involves a literal transformation: a rape survivor who's too small to wield a sword prays to the Goddess, and is changed into a tall strong woman. Only then can her training begin. (Such is the power of the “training sequence” convention that even the Goddess can't just grant her skill.)

In former karate instructor Barbara Hambly's *The Ladies of Mandrigyn,* the men of male-dominated Mandrigyn have been enslaved, so the women hire a mercenary to teach them to fight so they can rescue the men. But their training, and their time spent running the town businesses, empowers them in more ways than one. Gender relations in the town are

permanently changed, and not all the husband-and-wife reunions are happy.

> He drew back his hand, stepped back and watched her, amazed at the pig-girl who moved like a figure in a drifting dream. His teaching, he thought. He was capable of creating something like this.

C. J. Cherryh's *The Paladin* is a new twist on the archetypal tale of a young woman seeking revenge and the retired swordsman who reluctantly teaches her. It's told from the point of view of the teacher rather than the student, and this unusual strategy allows for a fresh perspective on an old story.

Saukendar is a disgraced swordsman with a crippled knee who intends to spend his last lonely days as a hermit. Taizu is a stubborn peasant who wants to get revenge on a lord and doesn't care if she dies doing it.

As he teaches her, they both begin to change. Taizu's transformation is immediately obvious, as she learns to harness her strength and agility into swordplay. She points out to Saukendar that he favors his wounded knee rather than strengthening it; and he, offended at first, begins training himself. Soon the changes go beyond the physical. She learns trust, he learns hope; both learn desire.

By the time they leave the mountain, the aristocrat who despised peasants and the peasant who hated men have become lovers. Taizu learns to make better plans than “I'll

just go to his castle and kill him," and Saukendar gives up his precious meditative solitude to lead what turns into a small-scale military campaign.

In a final transformation, this one of perspective, people take Taizu for a demon, as that's more plausible to them than a woman warrior. Taizu takes advantage of their fear and dresses up as one, claiming the power that she has been told women cannot possess. As a demon, she achieves her revenge. But the legends of demons say that they always leave after the battle, and Taizu walks away, caught up in her final transformation. But while Saukendar has taught her swordplay, she has taught him stubbornness, and he follows her. When you teach a student, Cherryh seems to say, the student will also teach you.

Martial arts as transcendent experience

SF and fantasy are uniquely well-equipped to deal with the desire for transcendence of earthly matters and the longing for a perfection that is inherently impossible. Martial arts may also be a spiritual path, or the pursuit of an unattainable level of physical and emotional control, or the medium in which to attain a level of focus so complete as to be ecstatic, as to lose oneself in the moment.

I group these issues together because they involve aspects of martial arts which are subjective, intangible, and exist only in the present moment—which makes them subject to ceaseless longing and endless pursuit.

Barbara Hambly writes sensitively of the doomed search for perfection through martial arts in the duology *The Silent*

Tower and *The Silicon Mage.* Steven Barnes often writes of martial arts as a means to transcendence. But one novel captures the quest for the perfect present moment better than any other:

> For the moment the two were evenly matched, arm against arm. Michael prayed that it would never stop, that there would always be this moment of utter mastery, beautiful and rare, and no conclusion ever be reached.

In this excerpt from Ellen Kushner's *Swordspoint,* two men are fighting a duel to the death. It's nothing personal: St. Vier is a professional swordsman who has been blackmailed into dueling Michael, a young student of the sword. Michael's teacher, Vincent Applethorpe, is a swordsman who was forced to retire young when he lost an arm. St. Vier is the best duelist in generations. But when St. Vier challenges Michael, Applethorpe claims the fight.

There can be no happy ending. Either St. Vier or Applethorpe will die; either Michael will lose his teacher, or a young man waiting across town will lose his lover. St. Vier is fighting the wrong man in a duel he never wanted; Michael is forced to watch as another man risks his life on his behalf; and a one-armed man can't stand a chance against the legendary St. Vier.

That's the view from outside. Inside the minds of the men involved, it's a different story. Michael is drunk on the beauty of the technique, swords flashing so fast that he barely follow

the movements. St. Vier is startled to find himself fighting for his life, and delighted: at last, a challenge. Applethorpe seems thrilled to be back once more in the life he was forced to leave, and even giving the great St. Vier a run for his money.

All three men are caught up in the transcendent moment. Like the cherry blossoms that symbolize the brief life of a samurai, its brevity is what makes it precious. The characters of *Swordspoint* are on a quest for such flashes of transcendence, for the grand and glorious gesture, for the stylish life that's lived purely in the moment, for a life lived at swordspoint.

Swordplay is not only a means to that end in *Swordspoint,* but the quest itself in miniature. The hypnotic concentration of practice leads up to the precious moment of the duel itself. And then it ends, and one man is dead, and another goes off to seek another moment. The quest, the art, the life, the sword itself all reflect each other, deadly and irresistible.

If you've ever wondered why people who are forced to quit martial arts because of injuries rarely regret the practice that ruined their joints and made expensive surgery necessary, but only say wistfully, “Sometimes I still dream of karate,” *Swordspoint* goes a long way toward explaining it.

There are two more uses of martial arts which are rarely or never dealt with in SF and fantasy.

One is the indictment of martial arts as part and parcel of a deadly military culture. While this has historically been a common sentiment—conquerors often ban the martial arts of the cultures they've subdued, and it's not just because

they're afraid of being attacked by barehanded jujitsu masters—it's rare in genre fiction.

SF novels which are anti-war or anti-military culture don't tend to deal with martial arts as I've defined them, as a study which requires extensive training and doesn't involve firearms. The powered armor of Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* or John Steakley's *Armor* is an anti-martial art, like an automatic rifle, something which needs only possession to confer deadliness.

Fantasy, which rarely features firearms and often features traditional martial arts, is not often written from a pacifist point of view. Though some writers, like Martin, are busy exploding the myth of the chivalrous knight, so far no one's done the same for the samurai. Fantasy still tends to glorify both knights and bushido-influenced societies.

Finally, people who write about martial arts often do so because they've studied them extensively, and no one voluntarily devotes enormous amounts of time, effort, and sweat to something they believe is pernicious.

T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* is one of the few books in this category, and it's an anomaly in more ways than one. It fits neatly into the third stage paradigm by including martial arts not only for the purposes of plot, plausibility, and atmosphere, but to illustrate some larger point—and it was published in 1939.

Throughout the novel, the young Arthur's martial training is a counterpoint to his intellectual training. As Merlyn uses magic and words to teach him the civic virtues of government, compassion, and justice, an array of knights and

sergeants teach him jousting and archery and sword-fighting—the pursuits of a culture that's convinced that might makes right.

A sword, not a book, is the talisman which reveals his heritage and gives him the throne; and by the end of White's later expansion of the tale, *The Once and Future King,* peace and government have given way to war. Arthur must fight Mordred, and their prowess with sword and spear results in nothing but death, and the end of Camelot.

This is one of the few books which makes a connection between martial arts as sport and martial arts as skills for warfare, points out that they're inextricably intertwined and suggests that getting a taste for the sport makes one start thinking that real fighting would be equally appealing. White pin-points political geography—the lines on maps that are national borders—rather than martial arts as the primary cause of war; but one suspects he'd have thought the SCA in poor taste.

And the loneliest category of all, which I haven't come across in a single SF or fantasy novel, is that in which martial arts are studied as a means of cultural preservation or exploration. This is not only a common real-life motivation, but one which has been covered extensively in mainstream literature.

A few non-fiction examples are Mark Salzman's *Iron and Silk,* about a year spent studying wu shu in China, and *Lost in Place,* in which he learns kung fu from the lunatic Sensei O'Keefe in 1970s Connecticut; and Dave Lowry's *Persimmon*

Wind, about his trip to Japan to visit his sensei and research the history of their sword style.

It's a strange omission from SF and fantasy, as so much of both genres is concerned with the destruction and preservation of culture. Surely the Taoist-analogue culture in *The Telling* had a martial version of the healthful tai chi-like exercises Ursula K. Le Guin so lovingly details; the fighting arts of Guy Gavriel Kay's *Tigana* must be an integral part of the sophisticated culture his Tiganans are battling to save; and when the elves of *Lord of the Rings* pass over sea, their sword styles no doubt pass with them.

But if any of that is true, it exists only off-page and in my speculation. Perhaps this will be the next wave of martial arts in SF and fantasy, as I can see no particular reason for its absence other than that no one has happened to tackle it yet.

That next wave has begun to break. We are in the midst of a renaissance in the depiction of martial arts in Western media, a more advanced version of the breakthrough in the early seventies.

Hong Kong has been making brilliantly choreographed martial arts films for decades; movies like Jet Li's *Once Upon a Time in China* series, Michelle Yeoh's *Wing Chun,* and the collected works of Jackie Chan. Now Hollywood and its American audiences have started to catch up, making hits out of *The Matrix, Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.*

As in the first media martial arts revolution of the 1970s, where visual media is at the vanguard, print media is bound to follow. The trend toward sophisticated and thoughtful

depictions of martial arts in written fantasy and science fiction is likely to continue and advance.

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Rachel Manija Brown has been a development executive at the Jim Henson Company, a staff writer on Fox Family's horror-comedy “The Fearing Mind,” and a disaster relief worker for the Red Cross. She has an MFA in playwriting from UCLA, and had a play produced off-Broadway before she was old enough to drink. She lives in Los Angeles, where she studies Shotokan karate and works on her first novel, a fantasy set in 1850s India which combines her favorite bits of weird history, like the practice of using monitor lizards as live grappling hooks for sneak night attacks on forts, with Indian mythology. She is collecting self-defense success stories, especially from women; if you have one or know anyone who does, please contact her.

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Interview: Maureen F. McHugh

By Pat Stansberry

9/9/02

Maureen F. McHugh often delves into the world of the outsider, from society, from politics, even gender. She has published four novels and numerous short stories. Her first novel, *China Mountain Zhang,* won the James Tiptree Award, the *Locus* Best First Novel Award, and a Lambda Award, and was nominated for a Hugo and a Nebula. “The Lincoln Train” won a Hugo for best short story in 1996. Her latest novel, *Nekropolis,* will be published in trade paperback in Nov. 2002.

The *New York Times Book Review* observes that “McHugh writes science fiction from the inside out, with the focus on character.” Karen Joy Fowler writes, “I know of no writer who is more deft, more dazzling, or more dangerous to read. You pick up one of Maureen McHugh's books and whole days pass before you remember to put it down again.” She has been compared to Ursula K. Le Guin.

This discussion took place at Café Tandoor in Cleveland, in the torpid afterglow of Jhinga Biryani, lightly spiced rice and shrimp, Baigan Bharta, rich and pungent roasted eggplant, Palak Raita, a spinach and yogurt condiment that cools the palate, and the wondrous Indian bread naan. “Food is the center of my existence,” says McHugh.

Pat Stansberry: When writers talk about writing, it's fun to start with our embarrassing youths. Do you remember your earliest speculative fiction story?

Maureen F. McHugh: Well, I was going to tell you what the first thing I wrote was, but it occurred to me that it really started before that. My family thought I was going to be an artist. I read a lot, but I drew constantly. I think that I was in fifth grade when I found Andre Norton, stories about people who thought they were ugly ducklings who had mutant powers. I just loved those books and I did a series of post-apocalyptic drawings of a girl who could communicate with animals, and they are long gone, thank goodness. There was, I'm sure, an implied narrative. In my head she was going through a series of adventures. They were probably pretty clumsy. I was a reasonable draftsman for a fifth grader, but not brilliant, and I remember being more fascinated with drawing the animals. All of them were her friends. And this post-apocalyptic landscape didn't have very many people.

PS: Animals were easier to draw?

MFM: Oh, much easier to draw. It was pretty pastoral, I'm sure.

PS: How long after that did you put pen to paper?

MFM: My best friend for years was forever writing novels that never got very far, so we were writing novels together. She was writing one and I was writing another one and it was a really, really bad space opera.

PS: Yeah, I did that. It was a collaboration called *Adapted Commandoes.* Don't ask.

MFM: (laughs) Mine owed a pretty big debt to *Star Trek.*

PS: Was that one of your early science fiction influences?

MFM: I wanted to grow up to be Spock. I remember coming home from school to watch *Star Trek.*

PS: Early literary influences?

MFM: Andre Norton was probably the first really big one. The library had a big portion of a shelf devoted to Andre Norton because, of course, she was prolific, and I read everything on that shelf. Then I read Heinlein, Asimov's *Lucky Starr* novels. Anything I could find. And then I discovered the adult science fiction of the library. I was in sixth grade and I asked my mother if I could read adult fiction and she said there were a lot of kid's books I hadn't read. When I started checking out adult science fiction I just stuck them in the stack of library books. I read Poul Anderson's *Brain Wave* and I remember it as really astonishing. I reread it recently and it hasn't held up well. There was a rack of paperbacks that were on the honor system—you took them and you brought them back—and there were some Ace doubles in there.

PS: I remember those. They had two books, back to back, front covers on both sides and you flipped them over.

MFM: Yeah. Then I found out that in one section of the library there were anthologies of short stories, and those included some Nebula and Orbit collections. I sat in the library and read Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonflight. The Martian Chronicles* confused the living daylights out of me.

PS: Was it the most literary book you had read at that point?

MFM: That wasn't why it confused me. It was presented as a novel, but there were discontinuities between the stories, which I thought were chapters, and I remember thinking, “Oh, you're not supposed to worry about that, just go with it.”

PS: So that's influenced you to this day?

MFM: Probably. Probably. People refer to *China Mountain Zhang* as a fix-up novel, which is how I read *The Martian Chronicles,* not recognizing that it was a collection of short stories. <laughing> So maybe that's why I worry less about structure than I probably should.

PS: One of the hallmarks of your novels is their utter realism. Where does that come from?

MFM: When I got into high school my reading shifted. I read a lot of Southern Gothic, like Faulkner and *All the King's Men* by Robert Penn Warren, and what I understood of them I liked. I read *The Sound and the Fury* and I was three-fourths of the way through the first section, the Benjy section, and because we'd studied the soliloquy from *Macbeth*—"It is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury"—I realized that they were talking about sending Benjy to a home because he was retarded, and that this was a tale told by an idiot, and I had to go back and start again. Before that I thought it was some sort of weird literary experiment. Then I understood that the perceptions of the narrator were not like mine.

When I was in college I got fascinated with people like Joan Didion. I liked that spare, minimalist style utterly grounded in reality. I grew up in the era when we all worshipped Raymond Carver in grad school. I guess what I've always done is mooshed those two things together, that exoticism I loved as a kid with acute psychological realism. Keep the exotic while writing what I think of as real, adult fiction.

Michael Kandel (writer of *Panda Ray* and *Captain Jack Zodiac,* editor at Harcourt Brace, and translator of numerous

Stanislaw Lem novels) remarked one time that if somebody in my books loses a job, it's probably a real problem in their lives. I don't know where that comes from, this feeling that everyday life is important.

When I was a kid, I would tell stories in my head before going to sleep at night—I've never been a person who could just nod off to sleep, so I always had to kill some time—and I used to fantasize, and a lot of women do, by the way. When you talk to women who read science fiction, a lot of them mention this phenomenon. I used to imagine myself as a boy, or no gender at all.

PS: That's something you've explored in your novels. Janna in *Mission Child* comes to mind.

MFM: Yeah, once I realized that this was a phenomenon.

PS: That it wasn't peculiar to you, so you might delve into it?

MFM: Exactly. At that point I came to feel excluded. It seemed to me that I wasn't in the books. That meant one of two things. Either I was incredibly boring and I wasn't worth writing about, or somebody just hadn't written those stories. And out of perhaps ego, perhaps terror that I was really a very boring person, I tried to write stories that I could see myself in.

Karen Joy Fowler remarked one time, when we were at Sycamore Hill critiquing “Bicycle Repair Man,” by Bruce Sterling, that she was so pleased that at one point the main character talks to his mother on the phone. She was pleased to see a mother in fiction. That struck me because I was dealing with parenting issues at the time, and they were the

most important things in my life. I realized that I had seen lots of father-son stories, lots of children-relating-to-their-parents stories, and nothing about the experience of being a mom. When I looked further, I found there are some, Tillie Olson's *I Stand Here Ironing* and others, but they're few and far between.

I don't think the experiences of being a mother are mundane. I think they are profound, although I don't know how to convey that profundity because there are no real conventions for it. We have conventions for conveying the profundity of falling in love, we have father-son, daughter-mother, but we don't have much mother stuff. As I've written some of that, I've found some interesting things happen when you write from the point of view of a mom, [for instance] that people get really upset if she's not perfect. A mother who has any flaws is thumped on. If I take a story to a writers' group, the reactions to the mother range from "she's competent" to "she's bulldozed" to everything. Speculative fiction allows that sort of thing to be explored in a guerrilla attack. You think the story is about cloning, but I'm actually writing about motherhood.

PS: Maybe we should identify what we're talking about. Do you want to take your stab at defining the genre?

MFM: No. <emphatically>

PS: <laughing> Okay, we'll edit that out.

MFM: Don't. Leave that in. I don't want to define science fiction because there's a basic assumption when you ask somebody to define a genre. The word *genre* in French means

species, and you can define a species, for example, by the fact that cats can't interbreed with dogs.

PS: Species are also defined by their characteristics.

MFM: And those characteristics are pretty mixed. It's hard to imagine that a Chihuahua and a Great Dane are the same species and they can interbreed, but they can't breed with a fox. You can identify certain characteristics. That's not true of genres in literature. They aren't definable because they aren't fixed in the same way. Nonetheless, if you say science fiction to me, you and I can have a conversation in which we have a basic understanding. I'm not saying that genres don't exist. I'm just saying that they don't have defined edges.

PS: They're amorphous blobs.

MFM: Exactly.

PS: Do you think one of the functions of this genre is as a kind of stealth cloak for the themes being explored?

MFM: There are cases where it is, though so much science fiction is actually rather conservative. Joanna Russ is a guerrilla writer, but most of the time science fiction has this way of reestablishing our expectations, and our expectations are often hidden. For example, whenever we meet with an alien race they are often smarter than we are, or faster, or stronger, but we are adaptable and they are slaves to their biology. Oh, us clever monkeys. Science fiction reestablishes that norm again and again and again and again, which is human-centric and species-centric and touts us as special and I'm not sure we are, even on Earth. So I tend to think of science fiction as a fairly conservative genre.

Stylistically it's also conservative. When you think of experimental writers in science fiction, they're not doing anything more experimental than *Ulysses,* by James Joyce, and that was [published] in 1922. Dos Passos used the same techniques that John Brunner would use fifty years later in what we thought of as experimental works, like *The Sheep Look Up* or *Stand on Zanzibar.* Right now, are there postmodern works in genre fiction? Is anybody doing the kind of self-reflexive stuff we see in cutting-edge literary fiction? Philip K. Dick did. I'm sure there are others.

PS: So here are writers who are forward-lookers, but they aren't experimental in their literary style.

MFM: Science fiction is pretty narrow in the things in which it looks forward. Those tend to be science, specific sciences in which it's forward. There's a hierarchy of which sciences are important and which aren't. In hard science fiction it's physics, astronomy, chemistry. In what they used to call soft or social science fiction, it's sociology, psychology, anthropology.

PS: Which is, without putting labels on you, more the direction you go.

MFM: Oh yeah. I can read all of the abstracts in science magazines. I just can't read the articles. And I do read the abstracts. But when I say science fiction is conservative, well, I'm pretty conservative too. I'm not an experimental writer and I'm not an earth-shattering thinker. I'm the kind of person who works on technique a lot. I try to learn to be better at a handful of things.

PS: Such as?

MFM: Most have to do with psychological realism, the accurate depiction of people as they are.

PS: Which takes us all the way back to the fundamental realism of your fiction.

MFM: Right. That's Raymond Carver and Virginia Woolf and James Joyce when you strip away stream-of-consciousness.

PS: You're pointing out, though, a number of so-called mainstream writers. That seems to be a dichotomy in science fiction, that there is a style that focuses on character and psychology and then a style that is more plot-driven, idea-based. I don't want to say that they never meet, but they tend to be separate.

MFM: I recently wrote a story about cloning, a near-future story in which a woman has a dead child cloned, and the clone has a lot of developmental defects. Two people who are pretty hard SF in their ways, Geoff Landis (*Mars Crossing*) and Ted Chiang, who I didn't think of as a hard SF writer until I was at a writers' conference with him and he calculated on the back of a napkin roughly how much energy somebody would get if they were photosynthetic, and the geek factor just went up—

PS: Do you remember that number?

MFM: No, but it wasn't much, by the way. If you were photosynthetic you'd still have to eat, unless you had really broad leaves. But Geoff and Ted both thought the story was very hard SF. Geoff Landis felt that it was the most rigorous and accurate depiction he had ever read of what cloning would really be like, which, of course, flattered me to no end.

To please Geoff Landis in hard SF is something I never, ever, ever even thought I would do. But the funny thing about that is the people who are not likely to calculate the photosynthetic potential of human skin tend to see the story as not hard SF, and since the majority of us are not likely to calculate photosynthesis on a napkin, for the majority of us it's a character story.

PS: So here we get into postmodernism. The nature of the genre depends on the observer.

MFM: Absolutely. That's why the borders are so amorphous.

PS: Why don't we get into your latest novel, *Nekropolis.* I know talking about plot is—

MFM: It's hard.

PS: Yes, it's hard, and I don't think it covers what's important in your novels. Certainly plot is important, but yours aren't plot-driven novels.

MFM: Oh no, and I get beaten up for that a lot. Okay, the main character, Hariba, is jessed, and that means she's given up her self-will to her employer. She's a house manager. She falls in love with a biologically constructed human, Akhmim. They run away to the Nekropolis. The nekropolis I know of is in Egypt, but I moved it to Morocco because I didn't want to write about Egypt because then you have to deal with the Pyramids and I didn't want to deal with the Pyramids.

PS: This is the future so you can do what you want.

MFM: Who knows? Any day now they're going to start building them in Morocco. So, Hariba turns to her family for help. She's a wanted criminal because Akhmim is worth a lot

of money and she's basically stolen him. The story is how they try to make a life.

PS: Akhmim has almost no free will.

MFM: He's designed to not have free will. He's designed to please, and that's what he wants to do, please. When I originally wrote the story, I tell people, I wrote a story of a woman who finds the perfect man and it works on her and her family like crack cocaine addiction, and I really wanted to pull family into it because it doesn't affect just her life. It affects the lives of her family and friends. They have to make decisions about loyalty.

PS: Something you've explored in all of your novels, the effect of the principal character's actions on family and friends.

MFM: Sometimes. In *Mission Child* I just kill off the whole family and that solves that.

PS: Yes, true, but Janna creates new family and friends, and it's the absence of her original family and friends that drives much of the story. So it isn't only the presence of family, but the absence of family as well.

MFM: Which is another science fiction convention. Much science fiction works hard to get the protagonist completely divorced of consequences to family and friends. I mean, like in *Neuromancer,* does Case have a family? Does Molly have a family? We don't know. And that doesn't seem to reflect my basic experience in any way, in a way far more fundamental to me than whether or not we have warp drive.

PS: Is that a consequence of the genre being male-dominated for so long?

MFM: No. I just think it's easy. Children's literature does that a lot, too. First thing you do is ditch the parents. Otherwise you can't have an adventure. If you go off on a quest, it's really hard to take a toddler with you, so when you have groups going off on quests, they tend not to take children. Mystery novels do the same thing. Their detectives tend to be divorced of human ties, though they often have a divorce in their background, literally.

PS: Which further accentuates the fact that they have no ties. I used to have ties, now I don't.

MFM: Exactly. I'm not capable of ties. She divorced me because I deserved it. And those are neat stories, and those are stories I like.

PS: But you wanted to do something where family was important.

MFM: I don't know that you pick what you want to do. As I write the stories, these are the things that unfold for me.

PS: So you don't set out to explore an idea or theme? It often seems the case that science fiction writers are exploring themes or exploring some sort of technical idea, and the story derives from there. We bring characters in then, but it seems like the main impetus is, wow, isn't that a cool idea? And I'm not criticizing. I love those stories.

MFM: Yeah, me too. I used to think a lot about Le Carré and his spy novels, which did a really good job of scratching the spy itch for me. You learn more spy lore in a Le Carré novel than you do anywhere else, scalp hunters and the guys who do phone taps and all that sort of thing. But his novels

are all about the moral implications of choices. When you're a spy, do the means justify the ends?

PS: Which is what you do in *Nekropolis.* We want to believe that their love is worth something, that Hariba should be free, that Akhmim should be free because he is essentially human, and yet there are consequences.

MFM: Right, and everybody pays. Some of the causes are good ones, and some of them are bad ones. I never want my consequences to be black and white because if I start them black and white they feel fake to me. They feel more interesting when they're more muddy.

PS: We're left with a lot of ambiguity in everything you write.

MFM: I'm not good at endings. At least that's part of it. There's also the old theater song that every exit is an entrance somewhere else.

PS: In science fiction, that would be construed as the promise of a sequel.

MFM: No. I just think that stories don't end. I think you can satisfy without being pat, though I'm not sure I always satisfy.

PS: You're being self-deprecating, but something we've discussed before is what it's like to critique your own work, which is a brave thing to do. You're really putting yourself out there.

MFM: Well, that's something I'd like to improve on. I don't do well with endings.

PS: You don't feel that they're typical of ambiguous modern endings that leave the reader with various ways to interpret the outcome?

MFM: They're that, and that I don't have any trouble with, but at the end of *Ulysses,* Penelope's “yes, yes” is an incredibly satisfying ending, maybe because I've been taught that it's a satisfying ending. I don't know. But you can get to the end of a book and feel very satisfied, or you can get to the end and feel exasperated. I got to the end of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and was truly exasperated, even though I think it's a pretty good book.

PS: What exasperated you?

MFM: I'd have to critique the whole book. It's a very postmodern ending. It ends *in medias res* and you never actually know what's going on. Samuel Delaney's *Dhalgren* has a very solid ending, a circular ending, because it ends with the first line, and even though you get a sense that you don't know what happens to the people in it, you know this is the end. You're signaled. Ta da! You've reached the end of this very interesting experiment.

PS: And the people are going to go on. That's what people do.

MFM: That's what people do. So the ambiguity of the ending is part of it, but it's still more satisfying.

PS: What do you like about your writing?

MFM: Oh, there's lots of things I hate about my writing, but what do I like about it? I think there are real nice moments in it. There are times I knew stuff that I'm really surprised that I knew. Insights into humanity.

PS: Are those conscious decisions?

MFM: No, I find them in the process of writing. I come to something and I say, “Oh I know,” and I write that. At the beginning of the first section of *Nekropolis,* the first line from the mother is, “All of my children are taller than I am.” I like that moment because it suggests a certain kind of pride. I have physically done well by my children, I have made sure they had enough to eat, that they grew strong. I liked finding that in her. It feels to me to ring true to an experience different from mine.

I really fought putting a mother into *Nekropolis.* I wasn't going to because I was going to work with mothers in the next book. It's a good thing I did because the next book didn't pan out, so the fact that there's a mother in the center of *Nekropolis* is not a bad thing at all. And she is in the very middle of that, she's the exact middle, and I think she is a character who is more important than you first feel when you read the book. But that's the kind of thing I like in my stories, those moments of what I think are psychological acuity, although I could be deluding myself.

PS: You often explore the idea of class, and notably those who are marginalized by the system, whether it be because of class, economic status, or gender identity.

MFM: Science fiction and historical novels have this common problem. When you're writing a contemporary novel you don't have to explain how the gas pump works, which means that when you read *Madame Bovary,* unless you've been pretty educated you find a lot of it perplexing.

PS: Which is why Norton annotates it.

MFM: Yes, but they never annotate what I don't know. <laughs> I want to know what they ate. But historical and science fiction have to create an understanding of the surroundings for the reader. Things that most fiction assumes, you can't. And one way to do that is to put an outsider in, so it's as strange for them as it is for the reader. They can naively describe.

PS: That's a classic science fiction ploy.

MFM: Absolutely. It's an old, old, old, old, old ploy. It's harder and harder to do without being cliché, so the kind of outside you pick has to get stranger and stranger.

PS: It can no longer be the football quarterback on the rocketship with the professor and his daughter. “Gee, professor, what does this strange knob do?”

MFM: Right, so now you can have a character who is pretending to be a boy, who notices all of the things the boys do, interacting with everyday stuff. Then I can describe the everyday stuff the boys are interacting with as well—the tents, the water pump, the way food is handed out in the refugee camp.

PS: Do you have a more overtly political motive behind using the outsider?

MFM: No. I think it's a cultural thing, and not just specific to science fiction. Our symbol of the Vietnam War is the P.O.W. Imagine that being the symbol of World War II. The P.O.W. is the guy who got captured. He's the victim. We equate victimhood with sainthood, and it occurred to me that victims were not necessarily saints, that they were just victims. In *Nekropolis,* I didn't want Hariba to be a good

person as a result of being in restrictive circumstances. I wanted to show how restrictive circumstances can simply restrict you. I write about outsiders because I live in a culture that tends to think about outsiders as privileged, morally. The worst thing to be, in certain circumstances, is a straight, white male.

PS: Could you say this about a gay character, though? Does a gay person have privilege in America? Certainly not the same way a veteran does.

MFM: Oh no. No. But if you watch how gays are presented in the media, unless you watch Jerry Springer, they tend to be witty, wise, or they die. When we marginalize characters, we often make them into either martyrs or Yodas. But I don't think picking outsiders is a conscious choice on my part. It's partly from being influenced by the idea that outsiders are somehow interesting.

PS: Do you want to riff on where the genre is and where it's going?

MFM: I don't know any trends, exactly, but it seems to me we're losing control of the genre. If you think about when I was growing up, science fiction wasn't on television. *Star Trek* and *Lost in Space* were it. There were *Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits,* but when I was a kid people believed those were horror. Now you have *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *X-Files* and *Terminator 2.*

PS: I agree with you. People don't think of *Terminator 2* as science fiction. Many people who go to that movie would never go see a science fiction film.

MFM: At all. It's an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. And there's some high literature that is science fiction influenced. I mentioned David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest.* Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* sold as non-genre literature. And they go to another planet! So I think there might be developing a split between our science fiction and SF of the world. But I do think that science fiction is in the culture in a way that it wasn't forty years ago.

PS: And what will science fiction be like forty years from now? In most visions of the future, we don't see what they think of as science fiction. Will it be science based, or sociological, or something we can't imagine?

MFM: And what is a science fiction geek doing fifty years from now. <laughs> What do they think will be the important future developments?

PS: What do you think will be the consequence of mainstreaming science fiction?

MFM: I think it might harden our conventions. You hear people say that mainstream writers reinvent the wheel when they write science fiction. People gripe about *The Handmaid's Tale.* I think that's a reaction to the fact that there's their stuff and there's our stuff. But I don't know. I have no clue. It's going to be an interesting ride.

* * * *

Pat Stansberry would like to call himself a writer, but he spends most of his time grading English essays. He teaches at Cleveland State University, edited *Whiskey Island,* the university's literary journal, co-directed the 2000 Imagination Conference, and teaches Imagination/2: Workshops for

Beginning Writers, none of which helped him finish his long-uncompleted novel.

Visit Maureen F. McHugh's Web site.

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Spirits, Art, and the Fourth Dimension

By Bryan Clair

9/16/02

In the mid-nineteenth century, Henry Slade of Albion, Michigan was notorious as an accomplished spirit medium. His séances and slate writing were sufficiently impressive that European nobles invited him to their courts, and it was on his tour of Europe in the 1870s that he convinced a handful of notable German scientists of the reality of the spirit world. Dr. J. C. F. Zöllner of Leipzig published an account of Slade's demonstrations in his 1878 book *Transcendental Physics,* arguing that the physical impossibilities must have been caused by spirit beings living in the fourth dimension.

The 1881 *Atlantic Monthly*'s humorously scathing review of his work says:

> One opens this work of Zöllner with great interest, in the expectation of something substantial and more edifying than the dreary accounts of table-tippings, and the insane conversations of great men who, entering into a Nirvana, have apparently forgotten all they learned in this world, and have nothing better to do than to move chamber furniture. Unfortunately, this hope is not realized.

Nevertheless, Zöllner's book and the controversy it engendered led to a surge in popular interest in the fourth dimension that lasted well into the 20th century.

So, what exactly did Slade do? Along with a torrent of slate writing, apparitions, and mysterious noises, he really got Zöllner's attention by causing knots to appear in a loop of cord, as shown below. Try this yourself, and you'll find it can only be done by unsealing the ends. Though the actual cord hung below the table, Zöllner observed the wax seal for the entire séance and was convinced by Slade's claim of spiritual intervention.

Zöllner designed several physical challenges for Slade, to test his fourth dimension hypothesis. To understand the challenges (and how Slade's responses almost entirely fail to meet them), we need to first understand the fourth dimension.

Mathematically, “dimension” refers to the number of coordinates needed to describe a point, or equivalently the degrees of freedom of motion in a space. A line is one-dimensional because a point in the line needs only one coordinate for its description. You could say “dang, there's a hundred people in front of me,” which describes very well your sorry position in line. As another example, the volume of sound is a one-dimensional concept. A particular volume needs only one number to describe it, possibly from the scientific decibel scale, or maybe on the stereo knob “turn it up to 10” scale.

A two-dimensional space needs two numbers for each point. The flat, infinite plane from high-school geometry is the

prime example, with each point given an x and a y coordinate. The surface of a sphere is also two-dimensional; for example, points on the Earth are described by longitude and latitude. Though we spend most of our days wandering the two-dimensional surface of the Earth, our space is in fact three-dimensional, which means we can move on three axes, North-South, East-West, and Up-Down. Describing points in space requires three coordinates: to spot an airplane, you need longitude and latitude, plus elevation.

> **Question:** What dimension is “color space"? That is, how many coordinates does it take to describe a color? (This is especially interesting because there are many different ways to describe color, yet all have the same number of coordinates!)

The next step is the fourth dimension. Mathematically, it's no problem to define four-dimensional space, or “hyperspace.” It's just an abstract space that needs four coordinates to describe each of its points, which works very well for computations, but is not much help in visualization. Trying to think in four dimensions is a serious challenge, and requires a complicated collection of mental crutches to make any progress.

The most effective crutch is the analogy with one lower dimension, a trick perfected in the novel *Flatland,* written by the 19th century minister E. A. Abbott. The book is the story of A. Square, who lives in a two dimensional world. Mr.

Square describes his world, with some not-so-subtle criticism of Victorian society, and then is visited by a sphere from the third dimension.

You can imagine a two dimensional being as an amoeba trapped in a microscope slide, or as an ink spot moving on a piece of paper. Often it's easier to picture him as very flat and living on the surface of a table. Let's use this analogy to explain Slade's feats of four-dimensional dexterity. Consider a challenge for a two-dimensional spiritual medium. We present him with a rubber band and a penny, and challenge him to put the penny inside the rubber band. You too, can play this game, but as a two-dimensional being you'll need to keep the penny and rubber band flat on a table at all times. Clearly, it can't be done. However, using the third dimension you can pick part of the rubber band off the table, slide it over the penny, and set it back down. The two-dimensional being would see part of the rubber band mysteriously disappear, then reappear on the other side of the penny.

> **Question:** How would a two-dimensional being know that the penny was actually inside the rubber band?

Now, we have some of the tools to help us understand Slade's challenges. In further sittings, Slade's “spirits” caused rings of wood to disappear from a tabletop and reappear encircling the table's leg, caused burns to appear on pig intestines held below the table, and caused snail shells to teleport from table to floor.

The rubber-band-and-penny thought experiment shows us exactly how Slade's rings-around-the-table trick could work, if the medium had access to the fourth dimension. He simply lifts “up” the ring into the fourth dimension, and sets it back “down” around the table. But putting rings around a table is not what Zöllner had challenged Slade to do! In fact, Slade was to link the two wooden rings to each other. The rings were of different woods, each carved from a single piece. Two such linked rings are physically impossible to create, so their existence alone would provide excellent evidence for the fourth dimension. Linking the table, though impressive, is possible to fake.

So are Slade's other feats. His initial feat, tying knots in a closed loop of rope, could also be done with four dimensions: move part of the rope out of our three-dimensional space, move it across the other part of rope, then bring it back to this world. But Zöllner was obviously suspicious of the rope trick, because his second challenge to Slade was to tie a knot in a closed loop cut from a pig's bladder. Unlike the sealed loop of rope, which could be switched or tampered with, Slade had no way to create a knot in any continuous piece of pork. He had three choices: cut the loop and risk exposure, actually use the fourth dimension, or claim that the spirits weren't in the mood. Not surprisingly, he chose the latter.

Slade's final feat was to teleport some snail shells. Again, the fourth dimension is a good way to do this sort of thing. You move the shell into the fourth dimension, move it where you want it to go, then drop it back into our prosaic three-space. The two-dimensional analogy should help make this

clear, as a third-dimensional being could lift an object out of the plane, move it, and set it back down. But again, this was not what Zöllner had asked for. In fact, Zöllner's challenge to Slade was to take the snail shells, which had clockwise spirals, and turn them into snail shells with counterclockwise spirals.

Way back in 1827, the mathematician Möbius, of “Möbius strip” fame, realized that a trip through the fourth dimension could turn an object into its own mirror image. To understand, we return to the two-dimensional analogy. Take a symbol which looks wrong in a mirror, such as an N, and cut it out of a piece of paper. If you set it down on a table, you'll find there's no way to turn the N into the backwards N just by sliding the paper around the tabletop. But if you allow yourself a third dimension, you can simply lift up the N, flip it over, and place it back on the table. The four-dimensional version works the same way. You could use the fourth dimension, for example, to turn a right shoe into a left shoe.

> **Question:** You could use the fourth dimension to turn a right glove into a left glove. But you can already do this by turning the glove inside out. What's the difference?

In 1909, *Scientific American* held an essay contest to explain the fourth dimension, and many of the essays focused on mirror reversals. Isomeric chemicals such as dextrose and levulose (literally right- and left-handed sugars) were presented as evidence for the existence of the fourth

dimension on the molecular scale, and one Zöllner enthusiast claimed that clockwise and counterclockwise snails are produced by a hyperspace reversal, right down to their "juices."

H. G. Wells used the mirroring phenomenon in "The Plattner Story" of 1896, which is about a man who accidentally blasts himself a short distance into the fourth dimension. The man finds himself in a greenish world populated by spirits of departed humans, and can see faint images of the earthly realm overlaid on his new reality. After a week he manages to return home, but has become his own mirror image, as evidenced by photographs, his writing, and most impressively his heart, which now beats on the right side of his chest.

"The Plattner Story" was not the only appearance of the fourth dimension in literature of the period. It is the science behind *The Time Machine,* and also the home for the angel that falls to Earth in *A Wonderful Visit,* Wells' first two novels. It is jokingly referred to in Oscar Wilde's "Canterville Ghost" of 1887, about an English spirit who is snubbed by the new American owners of his ancestral manse. And Joseph Conrad's *The Inheritors* of 1901 is about four-dimensional humans, devoid of conscience, who assume control of the earth.

Like many of the Victorians, I had my first exposure to the idea of the fourth dimension through science fiction, Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle In Time* and its sequels. In these novels, Charles Wallace, Meg, and Calvin "tesser" between worlds, traveling through the fourth dimension. The

word “tesser” means four, and shows up in the word “tesseract,” which is the four-dimensional analog of the cube.

> **Question:** There are two points on the segment, four segments on the square, and six squares on the cube. How many cubes should be on the hypercube?

The tesseract, or “hypercube,” is the most accessible four-dimensional object, so it's worth trying to understand. We work by inductive reasoning, starting with a point, and dragging it to trace out a segment. Then, drag the segment to trace a square, and drag the square to trace a cube. The next step is to drag the cube in a fourth direction, perpendicular to all edges of the cube, resulting in a tesseract or “hypercube.” The last step, as usual, is difficult to imagine because it requires the fourth dimension. We get the flavor with some drawings:

Using perspective, we can draw a cube a little differently. Doing a similar projection to the hypercube leads to the three-dimensional picture below. Your mind reconstructs the picture of a cube into a mental image of “cube” quite easily. Do the same with the hypercube, and you should have a pretty good three-dimensional image of a cube inside another, with corners connected by lines. However, this is only a picture of the hypercube, projected into our space using perspective. The smaller cube in the middle is smaller because it's further away, in that fourth direction. To get an

even better feel for the hypercube, play with this moving stereographic image.

Perspective images seem natural to us in part because we're used to looking at them, especially as photographs, and in part because our eye functions in a similar manner. But in fact, perspective results in tremendous distortion of images. Close objects are shown grotesquely large while distant objects become tiny. At the start of the 20th century, a group of painters led by Picasso and Braque led a crusade against traditional perspective. They argued not only that perspective destroys proportion, but that in fact we don't see like a camera—we see with two eyes, and our eyes move to understand a scene.

Although many other factors were involved, one of the instrumental ideas in the development of Cubism was that the fourth dimension could provide a viewpoint from which to observe the undistorted forms of objects. To understand how this might be true, imagine a two-dimensional creature looking at a square. Because the creature lies in the same plane as the square, it can see only one or two edges of the square at most, and seen corner-on, the angle measure would be difficult to determine. It would have to infer the shape to be a square. In fact, in Abbot's *Flatland,* class distinctions among the 2-D beings were based on measures of angles, and a man with irregular angles could disguise his lower class status by concealing one side of his body. In our three-dimensional world, you can look at a cube from the side, but only know it is a cube when you turn it in your hands or walk around it. To overcome this, the Cubists

attempted to portray all sides of an object at once, as if viewed from the fourth dimension.

Here are two fine examples of this technique, one by Picasso, who never explicitly acknowledged the influence of the fourth dimension, and one by Jean Metzinger, who clearly stated it as his goal.

P. Picasso, *Portrait of Ambrose Vollard* (1910)

J. Metzinger, *Le Gouter/Teatime* (1911)

In both, you can see the similarity between the faceted figures and the angled planes of the hypercube, and the teacup in “Le Gouter” is a perfect demonstration of multiple viewpoints combined to give a full impression of an object. As another example of four-dimensional cubism, look at Marcel Duchamp's “Nude Descending A Staircase, No. 2.” There's a somewhat robotic figure shown in various stages of descent, as if we're seeing multiple exposures. In this picture, Duchamp (who was the greatest advocate of the fourth dimension in the art world) considers the fourth dimension as time.

M. Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912)

Interestingly, this idea was one of the triumphs of Einstein's theory of relativity, but the relativity papers were published in 1916, four years after “Nude Descending"! Duchamp, though a brilliant artist, wasn't anticipating modern physics. He was simply following the lead of scientists who, from the mid 1800s, used time as another mental crutch towards understanding hyperspace.

The time crutch works as follows: Take your four dimensional object and cut it into a succession of three dimensional slices. Duchamp explains,

> *The shadow* cast by a four-dimensional figure on our space is a *three-dimensional* shadow ... by analogy with the method by which architects depict the plan of each *story* of a house, a four-dimensional figure can be represented (in each one of its *stories*) by three-dimensional sections. These different sections will be bound to one another by the fourth dimension.

Now imagine the slices played back as a movie, using the flow of time to “bind them to one another.” The classic example of this, used in Abbott's *Flatland,* is to imagine a ball passing upwards through a plane. A being in the plane would first see a tiny dot, the top “slice” of the ball. As the ball

moves up, the two-D observer sees the dot grow into a larger and larger circle. When the ball is halfway through the plane, the circle will be as large as possible, and then the observer will see it shrink to a point and disappear.

Just as we can't play kickball with a frisbee, a four-dimensional athlete would need a “hypersphere” in lieu of a ball. And if she kicked it through your room, you'd first see a pea-sized object, which would quickly grow to a melon, hover, shrink back to a pea, and disappear.

Capturing this sort of movie was the goal of the Italian artist, Boccioni, who brags:

> It seems clear to me that this succession is not to be found in repetition of legs, arms, and faces, as many people have stupidly believed, but is achieved through the intuitive search for the unique form which gives continuity in space.... If with artistic intuition it is ever possible to approach the concept of the fourth dimension, it is we Futurists who are getting there first.
> U. Boccioni, *Unique Form of Continuity in Space* (1913)

Ironically, as Einstein's theory of relativity was accepted in the early 1920s, its elegant definition of four-dimensional spacetime killed the romance between the public and the fourth dimension of space. Now that physicists were treating plain old time as a fourth dimension, speculations about

mysterious “other” directions seemed ludicrous, and the fourth dimension disappeared from art and literature.

The surrealist art movement was one of the few reappearances of hyperspace. The spiritual associations and irrationality of the traditional fourth dimension must have appealed to Salvador Dali, who used many images and allusions to the fourth dimension, for example in the “Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubicus)” and “In Search Of The Fourth Dimension.”

S. Dali, *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubicus)* (1954)

The fourth dimension in this crucifixion is the cubical “cross.” We know from grade school that a flat paper cross can be folded into a cube, so we should be able to fold a three-dimensional collection of cubes into a tesseract. It seems that it would be impossible to “fold” two stuck-together cubes, but it's not, and if you can visualize this maneuver you're well on your way to higher dimensions. At the very least, take some solace from the plight of a two-dimensional being faced with two squares attached along an edge. He would assure you that folding along the edge is an absurd idea—the two squares would surely rip apart.

If you'd like more help folding your hypercube, turn to Robert Heinlein. Heinlein's short story “And He Built A

Crooked House" is the tale of an ambitious architect who designs a house in the form of an unfolded tesseract, only to have it collapse in a California earthquake and fold into the fourth dimension.

Even relativity theory didn't answer the big question: does a fourth dimension of space exist? Physics says time is *a* fourth dimension, and modern string theories suggest a whole bunch of dimensions on the sub-atomic scale. But none of this precludes another direction, perpendicular to space, in which we could move if we only knew how. We are like the men in Plato's *Republic,* chained in a cave and illuminated from behind. Their entire world consists of their own shadows, thrown on the cave's wall. Shadows are all they have ever seen, shadows are all they know, and shadows are their reality. To tell these men that they are solid beings living in space is impossible, and it could be that way with us and the fourth dimension. If it's there, it's in a direction for which we have no conception and no way to look.

* * * *

Bryan Clair is a professor of mathematics at Saint Louis University. His previous publications in *Strange Horizons* can be found in our Archive.

Further Reading:

E.A. Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance In Many Dimensions* (1884) is available online. It's still the definitive discussion of the fourth dimension using the one-dimension down analogy.

Rudy Rucker's *The Fourth Dimension* (1984) is fabulous and readable.

Answers to Questions:

1. Color space is three dimensional. Colors are described by Red-Green-Blue coordinates, as shown below, or often by Hue-Saturation-Value coordinates. CMYK seems like it has four coordinates, but that's just to save ink by not mixing Cyan, Magenta, and Yellow to make Black.

2. The 2D being couldn't see the penny from any side: it's surrounded by the rubber band. It would have to push on the rubber band and infer that the penny was inside.

3. If you turn a right glove into a left glove using the fourth dimension, it will really be a left glove. It won't be inside out.

4. There are 8. Here they are:

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Interview: Brad Strickland

By James Palmer

9/23/02

Brad Strickland has been a professional writer since his first sale to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in 1966. His first SF novel, *To Stand Beneath the Sun,* was published in 1985. Since then he has written or co-written fifty novels, including five *Star Trek* young adult works written with his wife Barbara and several *Are You Afraid of the Dark?, The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo,* and *Wishbone* adventures done alone, in collaboration with Barbara, and in collaboration with fellow Georgia writer Thomas E. Fuller. In 1992, Brad began a collaboration with the late John Bellairs, finishing *The Ghost in the Mirror* and *The Vengeance of the Witchfinder* from uncompleted manuscripts and then going on to continue the YA gothic mystery series begun by Bellairs. Currently he is collaborating with Fuller on *Pirate Hunter,* a YA adventure series they created. It will be published by Simon and Schuster beginning this fall. In the daytime, Brad is Associate Professor of English at Gainesville College in Oakwood, Georgia, where he teaches American and British Lit, English Composition, and the occasional SF and Fantasy writing class.

This interview was conducted via e-mail.

James Palmer: What prompted you to become a writer?

Brad Strickland: I come from a family of storytellers. As a child, I listened to my grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles tell all sorts of stories around the fireplace of my

grandfather's farm at night. And I always loved to read, so storytelling came as a natural step for me. Despite being a teacher who stands in front of classes all day and an occasional actor, I'm actually pretty shy about talking to groups, so writing the stories rather than reciting them also seemed a natural step.

James: Who are your biggest influences as a writer?

Brad: I have a good many. For the characters, I love the works of Charles Dickens—flamboyant, memorable people who stick in your mind long after you forget the details of the plots. Ray Bradbury's wistful, gentle, but surprisingly muscular and emotional style was an eye-opener for me as I was beginning to write. And just lately, the Napoleonic-era historical novels of Patrick O'Brian have been a composition course on how to re-create the feel and style of a bygone era.

James: How did you get started writing young adult novels?

Brad: It began when The Byron Preiss publishing company put together a series of books for younger readers, based on fantasy characters or creatures. I did *Dragon's Plunder,* a comic fantasy involving some inept pirates and a studious dragon. Then a little later, the fantasist John Bellairs died suddenly of a heart attack. John is well-known as the writer of a cult favorite, *The Face In The Frost,* but he had also done more than a dozen YA gothic thrillers. He had left two books partially finished, and his son, Frank, wanted to have them completed (Frank was not himself a writer). He knew some of my work and suggested me to Richard Curtis, who was John's

agent as well as mine. Richard asked if I would complete *The Ghost In The Mirror.*

I wasn't sure I could do it. After four or five long phone conversations with Toby Sherry, John's wonderful editor at Dial Books for Young Readers, and after meeting the publisher face to face, I got up the nerve to finish that book (it needed a better climax and resolution and some earlier chapters to “plant” one or two plot developments). I also completed *The Vengeance Of The Witch-Finder.* Those did well, leading me to go on to write two more books from the briefest of descriptions left by John ("Johnny and Fergie fight a voodoo priest whose magic threatens to kill Johnny's family") and then to extend the series with original novels written in the style of John. Those did well enough that, somewhat to my surprise, other YA publishers began to offer me projects.

James: Was it hard to follow in his footsteps?

Brad: It still is. I get mail from fans who berate me bitterly for this or that in the books. However, I also get much more mail from fans who like my books, so it more than balances out. I'm always keenly aware that I have a responsibility to do the best I can to live up to John's books, though I'm also aware that I am not John Bellairs and will never be. The best I can do is to keep the characters true to their backgrounds and to write the stories that seem to me to show off their personalities best.

James: How are YA novels and adult novels different?

Brad: YA novels are a bit shorter and more economical. Of course, there aren't graphic scenes of violence or erotica in

YA fiction, but then I didn't have a plethora of these in my other fiction, either, so I hardly noticed the difference. I don't attempt to simplify the style or anything as I write for a younger audience; it's mainly a matter of thinking back to when I was younger and to the kinds of things I liked to read then.

The first concern, always, is to tell the best story possible. If the editor wants to change some of the vocabulary, or more often to explain it, then that comes later. I never really worry about it. When I was writing for the *Wishbone* series, the editors would frequently want to throw in a passage of explanation when they thought the vocabulary might be difficult. I would write, “Sam was wearing a poodle skirt and saddle oxfords as her fifties costume.” The editors would change that to “Sam was wearing a poodle skirt, which was a gray flannel skirt with an appliqué of a poodle on it, and saddle oxfords, which were white shoes with a black leather instep, as her fifties costume.” Lots of times I'd change it back or revise it to be somewhat less clunky.

James: Are YA novels more difficult to write than adult novels?

Brad: Yes and no. No because I don't really worry about it being a YA book while writing it, and yes because I have to be very careful about my research, about the clarity of the style, and so on. Kids are very sharp, and they'll eagerly point out any errors of research you might make. With adult readers, the main things you have to worry about are cars and guns. If you make a mistake about a car make or model, you'll hear

from readers; if you make a mistake about the caliber of a weapon, you'll hear from *armed* readers.

James: How did you get started writing the *Star Trek, Nickelodeon,* and *Wishbone* books?

Brad: Star Trek came first. About the second or third year of *Star Trek: The Next Generation,* the producers felt the ideas were getting stale, and they asked the members of the Science Fiction Writers of America (now the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, but still “SFWA") to pitch story ideas to the writing staff. My wife Barbara is a huge *Trek* fan, and on a long car trip, we crafted the outline for a Next Gen episode to be called “Happy Birthday Data,” all about Data wanting a birthday, and interviewing other crew members about their favorite birthdays. Each cast member got a little star turn in a flash-back scene about the character's birthday. We passed that on to Paramount, who liked the idea but not for a script, and they sent it to Pocket Books. The editors there then got in touch with us and said, “We love this as a book idea! Would you please write it for us? Except take out the birthday stuff and Data, and instead concentrate on....” It became a whole different story, but it got us the first of five *Star Trek* assignments.

Because of that, the people at Pocket Books asked us to write for the *Nickelodeon* series. And because the editor of Wishbone books at Lyrick Press had been a coeditor on the *Trek* books, I had the opportunity to launch all three of the Wishbone series: the *Adventures of Wishbone,* the *Wishbone Mysteries,* and the *Wishbone: The Early Years* books about Wishbone as a pup.

James: How difficult is it to play in someone else's universe? Does it limit you creatively?

Brad: It varies enormously. The Bellairs books are fun because each of them hangs from some odd little fact—the Voynich Manuscript, say—or some strange historical event—the attempt by Count Cagliostro to live forever. I have a great deal of freedom within these books, limited only by remaining as true as I can to the conception of the characters John created. The *Star Trek* books, of course, take place within a well-defined universe. Fortunately, my wife is a great fan of the series, and she knows it so well that Paramount had only two changes in all the five books: we had invented a computer component, and the next season of *Deep Space Nine* was going to include something called “isolinear chips,” so they told us to change our term to theirs. And once they asked that a character not carry a phaser, since he rarely if ever did on the show.

Sometimes, though, the publishers and/or the creators ask for changes that are more fundamental or even nix plot ideas altogether because they don't see how they will fit into the world that has already been established by the series. The creator of *Are You Afraid Of The Dark?* didn't really mind us using one of his characters, but insisted on re-dressing him, because “He likes earth tones.”

James: You have collaborated on many books, both with your wife and Thomas E. Fuller. Is that an easier writing process? Is it more fun?

Brad: I enjoy collaborating. Writing is lonely, and you never know if what you are doing is much good. Having

another mind and set of eyes to go over everything is reassuring! Barbara and I usually collaborate by talking through the plot idea. I then do an outline; she revises it; we talk through the changes and get a final version; I write a first draft; she revises it; then we again go to a final version for submission. That takes more time than a solo effort, but it's more enjoyable.

When Tom and I collaborate, we actually spend a great deal of time, a larger percentage of our time, on the outline; then we create a very detailed outline (about one page of outline to ten pages of book) and divide the labor. He'll do chapters 1, 3, 5, and so on, while I am doing 2, 4, and 6. We exchange chapters by email, revise each other's chapters, and put them together into the manuscript; then we go through and do a detailed revision and polish, meeting in person and turning page by page through the book as we fine-tune everything. It goes faster than a solo effort, and by the time we finish, it's awfully hard to tell who wrote what.

To be more specific, the first decision we make is who the protagonist will be and what problem he/she has. We build the conflict from there, and the plot from the conflict. Then we proceed as above.

James: You also write and perform radio plays. Does working in an auditory medium help you when you sit down to write a novel?

Brad: I think so, but then I've always been one to read the dialogue aloud (especially the good lines) as I write it. When I was working on *Pirate Hunter: Mutiny!* last year, the young protagonist (Irish by descent) surprised me at one

point. I had just typed out a line I knew he was going to say, and then, as if he had taken over, he made the side comment, “I always tell the truth, when convenient.” I stopped, read the line out loud in my best stage-Irish brogue, and laughed at what Davy had said—though the line, of course, came from my own subconscious. It does help to hear the characters in my head, and I think writing for radio or for the audio media is an aid to that. As T.S. Eliot wrote, “He do the police in different voices.”

James: You take great pains in your work to get every detail, the science, the historical facts, as exact as possible. Is this difficult?

Brad: Can be. When Thomas Fuller and I were working on the second *Pirate Hunter* book, we needed some background on the island of Tortuga. It is a very poor place today, not much of a tourist destination, and seeking on the Internet for material on it was a frustrating process. Tom and I began referring to it as The Island that Dare Not Speak its Name. In the end, we found enough contemporary information about it to piece together a reasonable picture of the life on the island in the 1680s, but that came mostly from print sources we got through interlibrary loan and other places. We also learned that we did not know as much as we thought we did. All the way through the first book we used the term “Caribbean,” only to discover toward the end of writing that the area wasn't called that for another forty years or so after the period of our book. It was the North Sea (because it was north of the Spanish Main) to the English, but since there was, and is, another North Sea, we didn't want to use that.

We finally decided to call the area in general the West Indies, and the ocean was just the ocean.

Sometimes you fudge little historical details. The *Pirate Hunter* series begins in June 1687. The first book ends the following September. The second book begins the following January—which, to the people involved, was January 1687. They were operating under the old Julian calendar, and the official New Year's Day was March 25 (though people did celebrate January 1 as New Year's, too). The calendar didn't change until March 25. But that's tedious to explain, and we didn't want footnotes, so we said the heck with it and followed modern usage, not contemporary usage, calling it January 1688. We knew better, in other words, but it seems a trivial point when compared to the plot, so we ignored it.

James: What common factual mistakes do writers sometimes make, and what can they do to prevent them?

Brad: My editors hate the moon. When a writer has the moon in a book, some unhappy wretch of a sub-copy editor will have the job of making sure the moon phases follow each other as they are supposed to do, so that one will not have a new moon in chapter one and a full moon two days later in chapter two. I use a calendar program and print out a calendar with moon phases to keep myself honest.

Generally, though, writers are prone to make mistakes about their own characters—Gwendolyn will have blonde hair and blue eyes in chapter one, and when she comes back in chapter seven, somehow she's acquired green eyes. The key here, I think, is just to write detailed descriptions and biographies and refer to them throughout the work. Just

recently in a new Bellairs manuscript I forgot that the town librarian was Mrs. Geer and called her Mrs. Greer, but fortunately a copy editor caught that.

James: What new projects are you working on?

Brad: There's a new Bellairs series book, *The Whistle, the Grave, and the Ghost,* coming out next summer. I'm currently doing proofreading on that one. And Tom Fuller and I have written three books now in the *Pirate Hunter* series, coming out from Simon and Schuster beginning in October of this year: *Mutiny!, The Guns of Tortuga,* and *Heart of Steele.* We'd like to do another three of these books, finishing with a bang in a volume to be called *The World Turned Upside Down.* I'm about to propose some new Bellairs entries, and Tom and I have some other plans in mind—an adult mystery novel, some science fiction, and some more fantasy. We'll see how it goes!

* * * *

James Palmer's work has appeared in such online venues as the defunct *SciFiNow* and *RevolutionSF.* He lives in Murrayville, Georgia with his wife Kelley. While recovering from his comic book addiction, James is vigorously plotting a novel about motherhood and faeries.

To learn more about Brad Strickland, visit his Web site.

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Guillotines and Body Transplants: the Severed Head in Fact and Fiction

By Fred Bush

9/30/02

There's just something about a severed head.

It gets us right in the gut. Whether it's saving Hitler's brain, keeping brains alive in cryonic suspension, or watching the headsman's axe drop, it's striking. The visual impact of a head being removed from its body is shocking.

Within movies, particularly horror movies, the severed head is vitally important. Zombie movies like *Dead/Alive* and *Evil Dead* often feature heads hopping around and wreaking havoc even when removed from their bodies. One of the more disturbing scenes in *Labyrinth* features strange monkey-like beings interchanging their heads, until the heads are kicked away. In the *Re-Animator* movies, a severed head becomes an important character, surviving the first film in an atrocious state and undergoing a remarkable healing process before entering the second movie. When we are told that immortals in the *Highlander* universe cannot be destroyed unless their heads are cut off, it makes perfect narrative sense, and we don't goggle at the absurdity.

Where does this power come from? Why is the severed head such a powerful image throughout movies and within our heads? I want to begin by taking us back to some prehistoric conceptions and myths surrounding severed

heads, and then move to some more contemporary science fictional ideas.

The severed head as item of power

Historically, the head has been a focus of power and strength, a sought-after trophy in many societies. Popular among native peoples throughout much of the world (the Solomon Islands, India, the Phillipines, Amazonia, New Guinea) the tendency to take heads has entered fiction as a fearsome element, not unlike the cannibal tradition of certain natives (like the Caribs or the Fore of New Guinea). While nowadays we tend to view headhunting as an eccentricity of these faraway peoples, in antiquity it was commonly attributed to the Celts, who were spread over much of Europe in Neolithic times, and who were the forebears of many modern European societies.

The Romans accused the Celts of maintaining a “Cult of the Severed Head.” The early Roman historian Diodorus Siculus relates that the Celts would take the heads of their opponents, fasten them to the necks of their horses, and dance and sing songs about them. Distinguished enemies were embalmed in cedar oil and preserved in chests, then shown as trophies to strangers. Heads, Siculus tells us, were quite valuable: chieftains would brag about how much they had been offered for their heads, or how much they paid for them, and some were literally worth their weight in gold.

Still valuable today as a curio is the shrunken head, another practice which evolved from a belief in spiritual power. The Jivaro people of Ecuador, responsible for this

addition to the horror canon, are a group of fierce warriors who actually managed to remain unconquered into the 20th century. Legendary among South Americans for their ferocity, they defeated the Incas under Huayna Capac, then defeated Spanish colonizers in a successful revolt in 1599. Isolated for a century and a half, they were visited by a Spanish trading mission in 1767, and gave the traders skulls of the defeated Spaniards as gifts. Their reputation helped to enhance the reception for their unique productions: their *tsantsa,* or shrunken heads, started to become valuable in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

According to anthropologist Michael Harner, the practice of creating *tsantsa* exists to ward off the avenging soul of a killed man. Upon a violent death, a portion of the victim's soul, the *muisak,* can emerge from the body and take the form of a deadly animal, such as an anaconda, and exact vengeance upon its killer or upon the killer's family. The act of shrinking a head, however, traps the *muisak* within the head, and makes its spiritual powers available to the head-taker. The preparation involves removing the skull (a gift for the anaconda spirits), boiling the skin, drying and scraping the skin, scorching it with fire-heated stones, baking it with hot sand, and then coating it with charcoal. It takes about six days, and repeated applications of hot sand and charcoal, to produce the tiny little withered trophy which the hunter will then wear around his neck.

These shrunken heads are now a valuable commodity. In fact, the Jivaro complain that several neighboring tribes have stolen their technique of making shrunken heads, not out of a

desire to protect their souls from the vengeful ghosts of murder victims, but rather in order to make some fast pesos. It is illegal to sell shrunken heads in Ecuador, but unscrupulous retailers often pass off monkey heads as the real thing, and sometimes the real thing does come on the market. Prospective buyers, be sure to read the fine print: the “Jivaro shrunken head MUST SEE” currently available on eBay is, alas, made of goat skin.

The commodification of the shrunken head attests to its effectiveness as a visual image. Within fiction, the shrunken head is a horror staple, showing up often as a prop, to indicate “generic witch doctor"—it's a visual cliche, not unlike the Jacob's ladder in the mad scientist's lab. It's often in this capacity that it shows up in movies—although the shrunken head is such a cliche that it does allow for jokes, such as in *Beetlejuice,* where a vexed witch doctor scatters some magic powder on the title character, shrinking his head into a helium-voiced miniature.

The prophetic head

Other ancient tales allow a severed head to provide wisdom ... for a time.

Welsh mythology has a famous story of a severed head within the *Mabinogion* (the source for Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles of Prydain*). The tale of Bran the Blessed is found in the story of “Branwen Daughter of Llyr.” Bran, king of Britain, invades Ireland and is wounded by a poison dart in battle with the Irish. Knowing he is about to die, Bran commands his surviving followers (including the bard Taliesin)

to cut off his head, bring it back to England, and bury it so that the head faces France. Bran proceeds to prophesy good fortune for his men, and indeed, after his men follow his instructions, this burial ensures eighty years of prosperity, known as “yspydawt urdaul benn,” or the “Hospitality of the Noble Head.” However, after disobeying one of Bran's instructions, one of his men breaks the spell of good omen, the Welsh become miserable, and they are forced to pick up Bran's head and rebury it in London, where its miraculous powers cease.

The early medieval scientist Roger Bacon was often alleged to have worked with a “brazen head,” which he left in the care of his apprentice. Gifted with oracular powers, it was able to speak and to answer questions, although it only managed to answer “Time is,” “Time was,” and “Time's past” before shattering, due perhaps to the poor keeping of Bacon's apprentice.

Within Greek mythology, one legend suggests that the singer Orpheus was torn apart by maenads after refusing their sexual advances, and his body parts thrown into the river Hebrus. His head kept singing its beautiful songs until it reached the island of Lesbos. The head uttered prophecies at a cave in Antissa, luring pilgrims and truth-seekers away from Apollo's shrines, until finally Apollo ordered the head to be still. While it maintained Orpheus’ gifts of music, and a newfound gift of prophecy, it was not Orpheus.

In these instances, the head seemingly channels a greater wisdom into the world, bringing divine power and allowing it to speak through the organs of speech. It's almost as if, by

removing the rest of the body, what remains is purified and given the ability to be a conduit into a higher realm.What is missing is an idea that the consciousness of the original thinker remains in the head. Some sort of power clings, still, but it's not the power of the original person. (A similar idea motivates Tanith Lee's “The Thaw.")

Of course, the ancients (and the native peoples discussed earlier) did not have a conception that being resided in the head. Early theories suggested that life resided with the pneuma, or breath; or perhaps in the heart. Descartes, famously, linked the soul with the pineal gland, within the forehead—and his idea, and those of others like him who linked consciousness with the head, allowed a subtler, more existential horror to evolve.

The consciousness of the severed head

Most of the modern fascination with heads comes from the guillotine.

The guillotine is the emblem of the French Revolution. While the French government refuses to allow guillotines to be filmed in France, choosing to project a different image of the Revolution (the liberte, egalite, fraternite part), in most people's heads the guillotine remains the image that describes the entire revolutionary period.

Fewer people died by the guillotine than died in the earlier St. Bartholomew's day massacre. But the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre is boring; I can only remember one piece of fiction that mentions it, D. W. Griffith's didactic *Intolerance.* The guillotine is much more exciting. It was held up for years

as the be-all and end-all of revolutionary violence; the example which damned the entire enterprise of the French, rather like the Canaanites sacrificing their kids to Moloch, or the Greek tendency to pederasty.

The guillotine produced its own fictional hero: the Scarlet Pimpernel, who rescued aristocrats from their deaths by donning disguises for feats of derring-do. Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* also mines the guillotine for its force, as does Sandman #29, "Thermidor," where Neil Gaiman links the Jacobin orator St. Just and the severed head of Orpheus—the scientific/political view of the head and its earlier prophetic, mythical significance—in a very unsettling way.

Why was it so shocking, startling, and titillating?

Partly, I think, because the guillotine also led to a public and heated discussion of whether or not those severed heads retained sensation. The presence of so many severed heads naturally led to amateur experimentation as well as more rigorous testing. A famous example involved Charlotte Corday, the young woman who stabbed Marat to death. After Corday was guillotined, her head was displayed to the crowd, and the executioner proceeded to slap both of her cheeks. Members of the crowd claimed that she blushed, and that her face assumed an indignant expression at the affront.

The guillotine was held up as a scientific marvel which would painlessly end the existence of evil-doers, and if it in fact did cause pain and suffering, if the heads retained sensation after being shorn by the "revolutionary razor," then the whole project was a bad idea.

In the end, the scientists of the day were unable to come to consensus on the subject of whether the heads could feel after their death. Many heads did show some sort of response to stimuli, whether it be blushing or moving the lips, or something more complicated. Doctors were occasionally able to get heads to respond to their names by focusing their eyes and blinking. However, the heads proved unable to communicate in any way to show they understood what was being asked of them. In 1836, for instance, the murderer Lacenaire promised to close one eye and leave the other open once he was beheaded, and proved unable to do so. Eventually, experiments like these were stopped, considered "torture" on the bodies of those already killed.

But with the French revolution came the idea of the severed human head as an item of intense observation and scientific experimentation, and its horrific possibilities became manifest. Its consciousness was suddenly in doubt, and the guillotine, along with the scientific forces at play here, *forced* an evaluation of the severed head, making it a potent image for exploration in fiction.

Donovan's Brain

This obsession with the consciousness of the head, which may or may not survive death, became the impetus for the classic science fiction tale *Donovan's Brain.* The original novel *Donovan's Brain,* published in 1942, was made into three different movies: *The Lady and the Monster, Donovan's Brain,* and *The Brain.* It was the first novel to feature the cliché of the brain in a vat, which rapidly began to spread through the

movies. Late author Curt Siodmak was better known for his film work than for his novels: he wrote the screenplay for the horror classics *I Walked With A Zombie, The Beast With Five Fingers,* and *The Wolf Man.* Thus, the novel, though it includes elements of science fiction, fits more within the horror tradition, and indeed it's not the science that matters here, but the loss of humanity that's the hallmark of horror.

Donovan's Brain features a noted scientist, victim of a car crash, who's been taken in and kept alive through a special treatment. As the plot of the movie develops, the brain, absent from its body, develops both a malignant, dark streak and tremendous psychic powers, which allow it to control others within the laboratory, including Nancy Reagan. By remaining alive as a brain in a vat, Donovan loses his soul, and becomes an inhuman monster with no regard for human life.

The influence of *Donovan's Brain* can be seen today in movies like *City of Lost Children,* with its brain which cannot dream, and in *Futurama,* which features brains-in-a-vat every week. While on a pragmatic level it allows the writers to feature contemporary celebrities in a cameo role, a technique perfected in the *Simpsons,* it also serves as yet another sarcastic reminder of science fiction gone awry.

Even philosophical inquiry has been infected by these games with severed heads. One well-known thought experiment in philosophy is the “Brain in the Vat” scenario, first proposed by Hilary Putnam in *Reason, Truth, and History.* The Brain in the Vat is a *Matrix* scenario, where real life may really just a simulation: if we were really just brains,

hooked up to computers which could transmit electrical impulses to us that were identical to those a regular body would transmit, how would we know we were just brains in a vat?

While knowledge of neurochemistry and behavior have no doubt contributed to the framing of this problem, so has the powerful image of a brain in a jar. There's an idea that the brain-in-jar would somehow be inferior or less than the original; its isolation and differentiation makes it seem like a poor choice to our embodied existence. Here's an example of *Donovan's Brain* feeding into the popular consciousness.

How important this head imagery has become can be considered through the development of something like *Frankenstein.* When *Frankenstein* was written, for instance, there was no specific discussion of brain surgery. The mind of the monster is not inherent in the brain, but rather seemingly created by the genius of Victor Frankenstein; its mind is described as unformed, a blank slate, and its acquisition of language and reason is lovingly described by the author. In the film versions, the acquisition of a brain requires much effort and confusion, and the monster is clearly affected by the criminal's brain that is inserted into it—similarly, in *Young Frankenstein,* a joke about a brain marked “Abbie Normal” can be made with the audience getting all the humor, and understanding that the brain transplant is crucial to the mental state of the finished creation.

Trading heads: Dr. Robert White

I want to end this article with a discussion of a man described as a “modern day Frankenstein,” Dr. Robert White. On March 4, 1970, Dr. Robert White performed the first successful head transplant, attaching the head of a recently-decapitated rhesus monkey to the body of another recently-killed monkey. The head, as soon as it regained consciousness, attempted to bite the finger of the experimenter (perhaps understandably!), leading him to proclaim the experiment a success. White's original transplanted heads were unable to achieve any control over the rest of their bodies, but a newer round of experiments, performed in 1997, have been able to establish respiration within the brains and their adopted bodies, keeping them alive for a lengthy period of time. Unable to reattach the spinal cord to the transplanted brains, White hasn't yet managed to create a monkey which could control its new body; but he remains hopeful.

White has offered for many years now to perform a head transplant on humans, but hasn't yet found any takers (that we know of). He prefers to call the procedure a “body transplant,” since in his belief his technique would be extremely useful for paraplegics and those with no functioning in the lower body. A medical adviser to the Pope, and deeply involved with questions of ethics, White nevertheless grants interviews to tabloids, and enjoys posing for pictures in lab coats with weird medical equipment around him. He's living out his Frankenstein fantasy, and not afraid to adopt some of the trappings of the myth to make his point.

White's head transplants have provoked outcry and shock from animal-rights activists and bioethicists, which have been used by supporters as evidence that the environmental movement is bankrupt and anti-progress. Indeed, his research holds out hope one day for serial immortality: shifting heads around onto younger host bodies. He conducted some pioneering experiments in preserving brains at low temperatures, endearing him to cryonics supporters. However, his ideas remain shocking and extreme to most, probably because of the heads.

The severed head is a profound image. It provokes ideas of sacredness and horror, prophecy and mystery.

* * * *

Fred Bush is Senior Articles Editor for *Strange Horizons.* His previous publications can be found in our Archive.

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Comrade Grandmother

By Naomi Kritzer, illustration by Marge Simon

9/2/02

"—glorious Soviet—soon bring Hitler—complete defeat. Heavy casualties—Dnieper River—"

The voice from the radio faded into the deafening hiss of static. Nadezhda knelt to adjust the tuning dial again, but lost the transmission completely. Her temper flared and she smacked the box in frustration, then thought better of it and returned her attention to the dial. "Please," she muttered. "We need to hear this."

The other workers from the steel mill waited silently, their faces stony. Nadezhda brought in another minute or two of speech: a different voice spoke about patriotism, sacrifice, Mother Russia. Anastasya, the supervisor of their group, reached over and switched the radio off. "Go on," she said. "Back to work."

They're coming, and we won't be able to stop them.

No one dared to speak the words. Nadezhda had to bite her tongue to keep from speaking them—but it was better not to invite trouble. She retied the kerchief she wore to keep the sweat from her eyes and her hair out of the machinery. For days now there had been no real news. The official reports spoke of great Soviet victories, but these victories somehow happened closer to Moscow each day.

Nadezhda returned late to the apartment she shared, pulling off her shoes in the cold stairway so as not to wake

the others. Stepping over sleeping women, she picked her way to the kitchen in stocking feet. As quietly as she could, she boiled water for tea, then sat down by the window to stare out into the darkness.

The Dnieper River was the last natural barrier before Moscow. And if Moscow fell.... Closing her eyes, Nadezhda could see the face of her lover, Vasily, before he'd left with the militia to fight. “We'll fight them to the end,” he'd said, speaking softly to avoid being overheard. “We'll make them pay in German blood for every inch of Russian soil. But if Moscow falls, we'll be fighting a lost war.” Vasily's blue eyes had been hard with fear, but he'd pulled loose her kerchief to stroke his fingers through her hair one last time before he boarded the train that would take him to the front. Vasily had no real military training—that he'd been sent to fight spoke of the Red Army's desperation far more loudly than a thousand radio broadcasts.

Nadezhda pulled her kerchief loose again and ran her own fingers slowly through her hair. She put away her teacup and took out her hidden bottle of vodka for a deep drink. Then she picked her way back through the apartment and out to the stairs, pulled on her shoes, and headed out of the small industrial city to the forests beyond.

Nadezhda was young; she lived in a world of steel mills and radios and black-market cigarettes. Her grandmother, though, was from an older time. When Nadezhda was ten years old, her grandmother had stopped telling stories—but Nadezhda had never forgotten the stories of the ancient woman who lived in the heart of every Russian forest, and

how she could be found by those who weren't afraid to surrender to the darkness. As the sounds of the city and its factories were swallowed behind her in the night, Nadezhda pulled her kerchief out of her pocket, and tied it tightly over her eyes. Groping blindly with her hands in front of her, she continued down the path.

Nadezhda could hear the wind around her, the trees overhead swaying in the night. She could hear an owl nearby, its call and then the beat of its wings. Then, silence. Nadezhda pulled the kerchief from her eyes, and before her in the forest was the little hut on chicken legs, rocking back and forth, turning round and round, dipping and spinning like a wobbly gear.

Nadezhda spoke: “Turn comrade, spin comrade, stand comrade, stand. With your back to the wood and your door to me.”

The house turned to face Nadezhda, and the chicken legs knelt in the soft earth of the forest floor. The door swung in on its hinges. At first there was nothing inside but moist darkness. Then the darkness thickened and deepened, and a gust of warm wind from inside enveloped Nadezhda. Nadezhda smelled cooked kasha and fresh bread; she smelled sour vodka like Vasily's breath in early morning; she smelled wet new-turned earth. As the wind swirled around her and the last of the light faded, Nadezhda heard Baba Yaga's voice.

“Russian blood and Russian tears, Russian breath and Russian bones, why have you come here?”

Nadezhda had expected an old woman's voice, cracked and rough like the voices through the static of the radio.

Instead Baba Yaga's voice was young and clear, honey-sweet and eggshell-smooth, but it echoed as if she spoke from the depths of a cave.

"I've come to ask for your help, Comrade Baba Yaga," Nadezhda said. "I've come to ask you to save Mother Russia."

Baba Yaga laughed, and now she sounded old. Two shriveled hands gripped the edges of the doorway for balance, and Baba Yaga stepped down to the ground. She was a stooped, hunched old woman with thin white hair. Her eyes were sunk deep in her wrinkled face, but they were a burning ice blue, and she had all of her teeth. "For everything there is a price, Comrade Daughter," Baba Yaga said. "For everything there is a cost. We are not socialists here. Have you come to me ready to pay?"

"I have brought no money," Nadezhda said.

"I do not trade in rubles," Baba Yaga said. "You have come to ask me to destroy the German army, have you not?"

"Yes," Nadezhda said.

"You are prepared to give your life for this, if that is the price?"

"Yes," Nadezhda said, though her voice shook.

"Your life is not the price," Baba Yaga said. "The price is *Vasily's* life."

Nadezhda was stunned silent for a moment. Then she pleaded, "Name another price."

"That is the price for your salvation," Baba Yaga said. "If you will not pay, ask me some other favor."

Nadezhda closed her eyes. She was too young to remember a time before socialism, and she barely

remembered life before Comrade Stalin. But growing up, she'd known that it was fear of Stalin that silenced her grandmother's stories and her father's jokes. The first day that Vasily kissed Nadezhda, they found a secluded spot in the woods. Vasily pulled her kerchief loose to touch her hair—then met her eyes with a wicked smile and said, without lowering his voice, “Have you heard the one about Comrade Stalin, Comrade Lenin, and Ivan the pig farmer?” Vasily was only a mediocre kisser, but it didn't matter. Nadezhda's heart had been his from that day on.

Vasily's life?

Nadezhda opened her eyes and looked at Baba Yaga. Baba Yaga looked at her with eyes as deep and cold as the sea. Nadezhda looked away from those eyes and said, “If we had more time to prepare, perhaps we could beat them. Turn the Germans away from Moscow.”

“That's an easy favor,” Baba Yaga said. “The price for that is your hair.”

Nadezhda had brought a knife, and now she took it and cut off her hair. She wished that she had thought to bring scissors, because she had to saw through the thick hank of hair, and it pulled. Her eyes were wet when she had finished. Looking at her hair in her hand, she touched it once more, as Vasily had, and then gave it to Baba Yaga.

“What did you do to your hair?” Anastasya asked the next morning at the steel mill. “You look like a bobbed bourgeoisie.”

“I had lice,” Nadezhda said. “Picking out nits would use hours that I could be working, so I cut off my hair. It's a

small thing to sacrifice if it helps our army defend Mother Russia."

* * * *

Baba Yaga summoned the Fox, the craftiest of all the animals, who had fooled czars and peasants alike. "Run west to a country called Germany," she told the Fox. "To a city called Berlin, and find a little German man with a moustache."

"Do you want me to eat him?" the Fox asked.

"His bones are for me," Baba Yaga said. "I want you to whisper into his ear that there is plenty of time yet this summer to take our Moscow. Tell him that the wise course is to divide the troops headed for Moscow and send some of them north, to Leningrad, and some of them south, to the Ukraine. Do not return until you are certain he believes you."

"I will do as you bid, Baba Yaga," the Fox said. So the Fox ran west and found Berlin, and the man with the moustache, and whispered into his ear. And the man with the moustache called his generals and ordered his troops divided, some sent north and the rest south, to return and finish off Moscow later in the summer. There was plenty of time—weeks and weeks of glorious summer left to take Moscow. All the time in the world.

* * * *

Fall came, and the armies returned from Leningrad and the Ukraine and moved towards Moscow again. It was possible to be executed for spreading rumors, but the rumors still spread. Nadezhda heard whispers in the mill of the death and capture of millions of Russian soldiers, and tried not to listen. She heard whispers of siege and starvation in Leningrad, and

tried to think of other things. She heard whispers that there were German soldiers in Red Army uniforms, infiltrating their forces and moving towards Moscow, and she snorted in disgust—but the true rumors were bad enough.

Nadezhda thought of Vasily often as she worked. They had quarreled sometimes, like any lovers, but only once seriously. Vasily had signed up for the militia, and Nadezhda had wanted to, as well. Vasily first tried to dissuade her with humor, but when that didn't work, he became angry. “Isn't it enough that the sons of Mother Russia go to die in this war? Should we send her daughters to die as well?”

“Are you a German, thinking that a woman is good only for bearing babies?” Nadezhda fired back. “I know as much about fighting as you do.”

But Vasily refused to give up. The steel mill needed her. ("It needs you just as badly,” Nadezhda said.) The militia would endure terrible hardships. If captured, Nadezhda could be raped, tortured, killed—the Germans had no respect for women soldiers. Finally, Vasily had wept in her lap and begged her not to join the militia. Nadezhda had given in, unable to bear his tears.

As the air turned chill, Nadezhda went again to the forest, to the hut on chicken legs and the old woman who lived inside.

“The Germans have returned,” Nadezhda said.

“Yes,” Baba Yaga said. “I did not promise that I would drive them away forever. You know the price for that.”

“Name any other price,” Nadezhda begged, but Baba Yaga refused. Finally Nadezhda made a different request. “Stop the German advance, at least until spring,” she said.

“That's an easy favor,” Baba Yaga said. “The price for that is your youth.”

“I give that willingly,” Nadezhda said, and felt herself grow more tired, her face grow more creased. She returned to the factory by daybreak.

“You look old,” Anastasya said to Nadezhda the next morning. “Older than yesterday.”

“I'm tired,” Nadezhda said. “Sleep uses hours that I can spend working. A little sleep is a small thing to sacrifice if it helps our army defeat the Nazis.”

* * * *

Baba Yaga summoned Father Winter. “Go to the roads leading to Moscow,” she said. “Bring rain to turn the roads to mud; then bring snow and ice and freezing winds. There are ill-dressed children on those roads. They do not belong there.”

Father Winter smiled his cold, fierce smile and bowed slowly to Baba Yaga. “When I am through with them,” he said, “they will curse every inch of Russian soil they must cross to flee my breath.” And Father Winter brought rain so hard the ill-dressed children thought they might drown, first in water and then in mud. Their tanks and their trucks sank deep into the thick black muck, and would not move.

Then Father Winter blew out his cold breath over all of Russia. The ill-dressed children wore thin uniforms and light coats, without the felt boots and fur hats that the Russians

wore. Some of them stumbled back the way they had come, dragging frozen tanks and trucks out of ice and snowdrifts. Their machinery and engines froze into cold, immovable blocks in the frigid breath of Father Winter, and the Russians on horses fell on the children and killed them by the thousands. The ill-dressed children cursed the Russian winter, and the Russian soldiers, and the Russian soil.

* * * *

Before Vasily left, he had given Nadezhda a square of red cloth. “It's a kerchief for your hair,” he'd said. He pulled loose her old kerchief and stroked his fingers through her hair, brushing her cheek.

Nadezhda pressed something cold and smooth into Vasily's hand. He opened his palm to see a rifle bullet. “My father fought for Russia in the war before the Revolution. He kept one cartridge in his pocket for good luck. He survived the war. Perhaps it will bring good luck to you, too.” Vasily had closed his fist around the bullet, then wrapped his arms around her, burying his face in her shoulder. “Come back to me,” Nadezhda had whispered into his hair.

Spring came again, and the German army began to rally. Summer began, and they began to move again. They weren't moving on Moscow this time, but along the Volga and into the Caucasus. Rumors spoke again of terrible losses.

In July, Nadezhda went again to the woods, to the hut on chicken legs and the old woman who lived inside.

“The Germans have remounted their attack,” Nadezhda said. “We are losing again.”

“Yes,” Baba Yaga said. “They are moving along the Volga River, and the Red Army is falling back before them.”

“Please,” Nadezhda said. “Destroy the German army. Stop them for good.”

“You know the price,” Baba Yaga said. “Are you prepared to pay it?”

“I will pay your price on one condition,” Nadezhda said. “I want to see Vasily one more time before he has to die.”

“I can send you to the city where the battle will be,” Baba Yaga said. “But if you go there, you may die with your lover.”

“Send me,” Nadezhda said.

Baba Yaga took a horn and blew three blasts. From the sky flew an eagle. “Sit on the eagle's back,” Baba Yaga said. “He will take you there.”

The eagle rose in the sky with Nadezhda on his back, and flew with her to the great city on the Volga River—Stalingrad. Baba Yaga went herself to whisper to the man in Berlin with the moustache, and the man in Moscow named Josef. “No retreat,” she whispered to Josef. “We must make our stand now, or die trying.”

* * * *

At the end of July, Stalin issued a new order: “Not one step back!” Anyone who retreated without permission would be shot. Still, the Germans pushed forward, further and further, for Hitler had become obsessed with the city bearing Stalin's name. Nadezhda waited patiently, trusting in Baba Yaga's word that the Germans would be destroyed.

The civilian population was evacuated from Stalingrad as the German army approached. Nadezhda remained behind

with the other workers from the steel mill where she had found work. “I am no soldier,” she said to her comrades. “But I can kill Germans.”

One of the other women spoke more eloquently. “We will die here,” she said. “But we will teach the Germans something about Russian bones and Russian blood, Russian strength and Russian will. And *no one* will do to our children as the Germans have done to us.”

Nadezhda clasped hands with the other workers. There were no weapons. There was little they could do. But they would not retreat. Not one step back.

* * * *

The battle of Stalingrad began with an artillery attack, and Nadezhda spent the first few hours crouching in a bomb shelter with the other workers. As the artillery grew louder, Nadezhda left the bomb shelter—Baba Yaga had said that she would see Vasily again, and after that, Nadezhda didn't care what happened. The others followed her out of the shelter, and soon they were able to pick up weapons from bodies in the streets. Nadezhda had never used a gun, but it wasn't difficult to learn.

Nadezhda took shelter in an apartment building, firing out the window as German soldiers marched through the streets. It quickly became clear that the Germans would have to secure or destroy every building in Stalingrad in order to take the city. They set about grimly to do just that, but Stalingrad was a vast city, 30 miles long, winding along the edge of the Volga. And the new concrete buildings that lined Stalingrad's dirt streets were not easy to destroy.

Through the months and months of house-to-house fighting, Nadezhda was never afraid. She would see Vasily; Baba Yaga had promised it. What had she to fear?

Nadezhda found Vasily one bright afternoon in the coldest part of the winter. He lay slumped behind a low crumbling wall, alone. Nadezhda ran to him and dropped to her knees, taking his hand in both of hers. “Vasily,” she said.

Vasily was alive still, but would not live much longer. She could feel the blood from his wounds wet under her knees. She had tried to prepare herself for this, but in the end it made no difference.

“Nadezhda?” Vasily said. “It can't be.”

“I'm here, my love,” Nadezhda said. “I'm here to be with you.”

Vasily turned his face towards her. “I'm so sorry,” he said. “The bullet you gave me, for good luck—I used it.” A faint smile crept to his lips. “I killed a German with it.”

Nadezhda pressed Vasily's hand to her face. “Our sacrifice is not for nothing,” she said. “The German army will be destroyed here.”

Vasily nodded, but did not open his eyes. For a moment, Nadezhda thought he had died, but then he took another breath and his cold hand moved from her cheek towards the knot at the back of her neck. Nadezhda bent her head, and he loosened her kerchief and stroked his fingers through her shorn hair one last time. Then his hand fell away. Nadezhda took his hand again, to hold a moment longer. Then an artillery shell rocked the ground where Vasily lay.

Nadezhda knew she didn't have much time left, but she wanted to die fighting, as Vasily had—not mourning. Vasily had a rifle; Nadezhda took it from his body and slung the strap over her shoulder. Standing up, Nadezhda turned and saw the house on chicken legs.

“Turn comrade, spin comrade, stand comrade, stand,” Nadezhda said. “With your back to the armies and your door to me.”

Baba Yaga came out of her hut. Though before she had always been an ancient hag, today she appeared as a maiden younger than Nadezhda—but her eyes were still as old as the Black Sea, burning like lights in a vast cavern.

“What are you doing here?” Nadezhda asked. “I thought you stayed in your forest.”

“Sometimes I must attend to matters personally,” Baba Yaga said. “This was one of those times.”

“Vasily is dead,” Nadezhda said.

“In one week, the Red Army will crush the army of the Germans, and their commander will surrender. There will be more offensives, but the Germans will never recover from this defeat. I have granted your wish,” Baba Yaga said.

“May I ask you a question?” Nadezhda said.

“Pick your question carefully,” Baba Yaga said. “I eat the overcurious.”

“Will Russia recover from this defeat?”

“Life in Russia will never be easy,” Baba Yaga said. “But Russia will always survive. Russian blood and Russian tears, Russian breath and Russian bones, these will last like the Caucasus and the Volga. No conqueror shall ever eat of

Russia's fields. No czar shall ever tame the Russian heart. Your Comrade Josef will live another ten years yet, but when he dies, his statues will be toppled and his city will be renamed. That is what you wished to know, yes?"

"Yes."

Another artillery shell exploded nearby; the ground shook, and the house stumbled slightly on its chicken legs. White dust settled slowly over Baba Yaga and Nadezhda, like snow, or spiderwebs.

"Tell me, Comrade Daughter," Baba Yaga said. "Are there any bullets in that gun?"

Nadezhda checked. "No," she said.

"Then take this." Baba Yaga held out her hand; glinting in her palm, Nadezhda saw one bullet.

"What is the price for that?" Nadezhda asked.

"You have no payment left that interests me," Baba Yaga said. "This one is a gift."

Warily, Nadezhda took the bullet and loaded it into the rifle. When she looked up, Baba Yaga and the hut on chicken legs had vanished.

Nadezhda heard the sound of marching feet. She flattened herself against the remains of one wall, crouching down low to stay hidden. She peered around carefully, and saw German soldiers approaching.

Nadezhda knew that in the dust and confusion of Stalingrad, the men would pass her by if she stayed hidden. Perhaps she could still slip away to the woods, survive the war, live to rebuild Russia and to drink vodka on Stalin's grave.

Nadezhda turned back to look at Vasily one last time. Then, in a single smooth movement, she vaulted over the low wall that concealed her to face the German soldiers.

Russia's blood can be shed; Russia's bones can be broken. But we will never surrender. And we will always survive. "For Russia," Nadezhda shouted, and raised her rifle.

* * * *

Naomi Kritzer grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, a small lunar colony populated mostly by Ph.D.s. She moved to Minnesota to attend college; after graduating with a BA in Religion, she became a technical writer. She now lives in Minneapolis with her family. Her first novel, *Fires of the Faithful,* will be published by Bantam in October. For more about her, see her Web site.

Marge Ballif Simon teaches art in Florida and free lances as a writer-poet-illustrator for genre and mainstream publications including *The Edge, Extremes, The Urbanite, Tomorrow Magazine of Speculative Fiction,* and *Space & Time,* as well for the anthologies *High Fantastic* and *Nebula Anthology 32.* She is a former president of the SF Poetry Association and the current HWA Membership Chairman. She is the illustrator for EXTREMES 2 CD-ROM and *Consumed, Reduced to Beautiful, Grey Ashes* by Linda Addison, both Stoker Award winners. View more of her works or contact her for assignments at her Web site.

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Rhythm of the Tides

By Lisa A. Nichols

9/9/02

Two ghosts haunted my childhood.

The first belonged to my mother, who according to my father was lost to the sea while I was still in my cradle. My father and I lived alone in a dwindling fishing community with my mother's shadow lying between us, keeping us company. My father's love for the sea was matched only by his love for my mother; he passed both these loves on to me.

He did not, however, pass on his healthy sense of respect for the sea's power. No amount of water frightened me. I was as at home in the strongest of tides as I was in my own bathtub.

My father often watched me play in the sea, his eyes full of fear, the eyes of one who had already lost much to her waves. That one love should have robbed him of the other seemed a terrible thing, yet somehow fitting. Of the sea he told countless tales, stories of the mundane and mystical things that dwelt beneath the waves. Of my mother he said nothing. She was little more than a name to me, a name never spoken without the echo of an ache filling the room.

The second ghost seemed to be a more literal one: the summer I turned six years old I began to see a woman walking the shoreline beyond our house. I only saw her late at night, nights I couldn't sleep, kept awake by an undefined longing. My bedroom window was a few boat-lengths from the

high-tide line, and although the distance and the darkness conspired to keep me from examining the ghost more closely, I was certain she was beautiful. Her clothing was shapeless and indistinct, a dark covering that did little more than drape over her shoulders. Long, dark hair hung damply down her back.

I saw her first in early summer, then once in a while as the weather began to grow warmer. She would walk past at the water's edge, always either watching our house or looking out to the water. Sometimes I saw her walk out into the sea, but I never saw her emerge. There was an aura of sorrow about her that I recognized even though I was very young. That sorrow and her mysterious disappearances were why, after hearing tales from the old men and women of the island, I began calling her a ghost.

* * * *

Finally, on a humid night late that summer, I mentioned her to my father. Supper was just finished, and a question pressed heavy on my mind. I was proudly helping my father wash the dishes, although the air was so still and damp that the plates I wiped held onto a patina of moisture. “Papa?” I asked shyly. “Are ghosts real?”

“Some folks think so,” he replied, scrubbing out a pot. “Some folks see ghosts in every wind and behind every shadow.”

“But what do you think?” I pressed.

He was quiet for a moment, then put aside the dishcloth and crouched to my level. “I think people usually see what

they want to see." He ruffled my hair. "Someone been telling you about ghosts, cap'n?"

"No, I just heard someone talking about them."

He studied me for a moment. "Did something scare you?"

"No...." I hesitated. "Haven't you seen her around the house outside?"

"Seen who?"

"Our ghost. She's a pretty, pretty lady but I think she has sad eyes. She stays near the water and watches the house. She doesn't look real, so I thought she was a ghost."

My father caught me in a fierce hug, his arms tightening painfully around my ribs. "I don't want you to go near her."

I squirmed in the uncomfortable hold. "But who is she?"

"Just don't go near her."

"But Papa, what if she's—I mean, she could be—" I couldn't finish the statement.

He sighed and let me go. That was the first time I noticed the streaks of gray in his dark hair. "I don't know. She could be. Just stay away." We finished the dishes in silence. My father didn't speak another word before I went to bed, but stared out the window at the empty beach as if hoping for a glimpse of my mysterious ghost.

* * * *

Several nights later, I was lying in bed, feeling a coming storm on the cool breeze from the water, when I heard someone calling outside my window. A woman's voice, both familiar and wrenchingly alien. Frightened, I didn't respond until I realized she was calling my real name, the name my mother and I had shared, the name my father never used.

The voice called my name with a terrible patience, never growing loud or harsh, until I followed it, creeping past my father's bedroom and through the dark house until I stood out on the beach. I waited there like a fogbound ship looking for the flash of a lighthouse, some sense of direction, a beacon to steer by.

Then I saw her. Standing near the water was my ghost. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She was wet, as if she had just come from the depths of the sea, depths that reflected like starlight in her sad sea-colored eyes. Her long hair flowed past her waist, the color of dark honey. Draped over her shoulders was a cape made of an uncut animal's pelt. Gray-brown with a texture between leather and fur, it glistened, alive, as if it had retained its animal soul as well as its shape.

I heard her draw breath at the sight of me, watching me as I came closer. “So many times I have waited here and watched your father's house,” she said, her soft voice flowing through liquid vowels and oddly accented consonants. “So many times I have waited, cherishing each small glimpse of you and your father there.”

I wanted to run back to the house and pretend this was a dream, but her haunted eyes kept me there, transfixed.

“Your father will not admit it, but I have watched over you all along. I wanted to keep you with me, but I knew I could not.”

I remembered my father's words—"lost to the sea"—as I looked into wild, watery eyes. “Wh-why did you leave us?” I couldn't bring myself to call her “mother.”

“I wanted to stay. I tried to. I begged your father to take this and hide it from me.” Here her webbed fingers clutched at the cape around her shoulders. “But in the end he did not hide it well enough.” She sighed, folding her body inward.

“I don't understand.”

“We are what we are. The sea called to me night and day, just as she does you, only louder.” Without asking, I understood the call she meant, the voiceless pull that kept drawing me to the water unafraid despite my father's fears. “She wailed for me, weeping, as I have wept to see you onshore. Finally the weeping grew too loud for me to bear. I found what was hidden in your father's shed and I ran to the water.

“Your father never understood. You will, though. You will. The sea is a beautiful, terrible place, impossible to leave for long. I have never known a love that could keep me from her.” I could see tears gathering in eyes that collected the light and held it until it shattered. “But I do love you. I always have.”

I cried then. I cried for myself and for my father, I cried for this lovely creature that stood in front of me. I was too young to understand, and for that also, I wept.

She smiled through the salt haze of her tears. From beneath her cape she drew a second pelt, similar to her own, but smaller. My heart beat staccato at the sight of it. I closed the rest of the distance between us and threw myself at her legs, clutching and hugging. For a single moment, too fleeting, one damp hand brushed over my hair in an awkward gesture. “I took it with me when I left....”

Before I could speak, I heard my father's voice behind me. “Siwan.” He spoke my name, but I knew he was not speaking to me. “Please ... not yet. She's still too young....”

My mother spoke. “She is old enough to decide who she is.”

For the first time, I saw my father's sadness, hidden behind all of his stories and smiles. “Siwan, I—” He stopped, lowering his head.

I turned to see him, my hands still reaching for the pelt. The three of us stood frozen, a broken family in tableau. My father stood there, with nothing of magic about him, no particular beauty. He was simple and human in every way that my mother was not. She was solemn magic and beauty beyond my imagining. My father had given me love and security and a home, but my mother offered me the entire sea, held out with the sealskin—my sealskin—in her hands. He was the earth and she was the sea; I was part of them both.

I looked from one to the other; then looked down. My hands, with their hard, thin-lined scars between the fingers, caught my attention. I looked up at my mother's hands, with the delicate tracery of webs between the fingers. I raised my own to my father questioningly, turning my open palms so he could see the scars.

“You were born with webbing between your fingers and toes like your mother,” he said, an ache in his voice. He turned to my mother. “The doctors said it was a simple thing to cut them away.... I just wanted her to be normal.” He stopped again, unable to meet my eyes or my mother's.

I half-remembered the smell of antiseptic, soothing voices that lied and told me it wouldn't hurt. I could, if I closed my eyes, still hear my own screams. I could remember the searing pain that cut through anesthetic and burned into the core of my being. I had never understood that memory until now.

“You knew what she was when she was born.” My mother was calm, almost emotionless, yet I saw a glimmer of moisture rise in her eyes as she looked at my scarred fingers. “Siwan,” she said to me. “She is calling you.” Again she raised the sealskin to me.

The breeze that had been playing with the hem of my nightgown and ruffling my hair stopped, as if the sea were holding her breath. Slowly, I reached my hands up and took the sealskin. My senses became confused in a brilliant swirl of stimulation. Colors danced into deeper hues, singing their new vibrant tones to me. The sea breeze picked up again, carrying with it a smell of life, of lives, of things beyond knowing. Off in the distance, I could hear a seal mother calling her pup, and I could make out the meaning without the need of words. I was complete.

My mother turned and walked into the sea once more, and I began to follow her. Once more my father cried, “Siwan!” I turned. My mother did not. My father looked old. Mortal. His eyes were as dry as the land he lived on, but the pain reflected in them has stayed with me always.

* * * *

The story always ends this way. My mother never understood my father's grief at losing her. Now, years later

on a different beach, I understand. I swore long ago I would never stand where I stand now, but the sea, with ageless patience, waited. My child is cradled in her father's arms, just as my sealskin—the one he hid so long ago—is cradled in mine. He begs me to stay. He does not understand and I cannot explain. I had the words once, but no longer.

“Forgive me, love,” I say. What my mother did not understand, I see so clearly in his eyes. I see in him my father's pain, a pain that stretches back for as long as men have lived and loved at the ocean's edge. Even with that understanding, I cannot stay, any more than my mother could stay.

“Think of Ellen,” he pleads, holding her out to me. She is rosy and perfect, as perfect as I remember my mother being. She waves a tiny fist and wraps it around my finger when I offer it to her. Between her small fingers are webbings of skin to the first knuckle, the flesh as tender and vulnerable as the scars on my own hands are horned and hard.

“Promise you'll never cut them,” I say.

“Anything,” he says, salt tears falling over his cheeks. “Just stay with me. Stay with us.”

“You knew this day would come, from the day you found me here.”

“I don't want to lose you.”

“I was never really yours to keep,” I say it as gently as I can. “I belong to her, love. She is ready to take me back.” I could hear her, the sea, weeping and calling me home. “Promise me,” I say again. “Do not cut them.”

“Promise you'll come back,” he counters, “and I will.”

I let go of Ellen's hand and I smile. “I will come back.” I will be Ellen's ghost, always watching over her. One night I will come back to give her what is hers.

“Do you swear?” he says, cradling Ellen close.

“I swear by my mother, by my father, and by the sea herself. I will watch over you and Ellen, and one night I will come back.” I smile as I speak, but behind me the sea laughs, her waves crashing into the shore in an endless rhythm. Like her, her children are always drawn to the shore, and like her they always eventually retreat.

I kiss my child, knowing she will grow up feeling the sea's pull but not understanding it. I kiss my lover, knowing that like my father he is destined to lose both wife and daughter. Then, like my mother, I turn and walk into the sea.

* * * *

Lisa Nichols is an almost lifelong resident of the Midwest, and likes it that way. Her fiction has previously appeared in *InterText,* and she has co-authored several books for Dream Pod 9, a roleplaying game company. When she is not writing, she is a full-time student of the breed quaintly labelled “non-traditional,” or, as her classmates like to call her, “Granny.”

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Wantaviewer

By Michael J. Jasper

9/16/02

Part 1 of 2

Alissa Trang couldn't keep herself away from the Winnipeg slums. She called in sick for her evening shift behind the counter at CanTechWorld once again and hitched a ride up Highway 3 into the city. For the entire ride from Sanford to Winnipeg, she kept her mouth clamped shut to keep from screaming at the old man driving the antique Saab to go faster. Faster. Everything was too slow for her when Ally wasn't using Blur. She would've borrowed her housemate Anita's car, but she didn't trust herself to drive after a visit to Jenae's in the bad part of the city.

Ally nearly leaped out of the car as soon as it stopped at the intersection of Portage and Maryland. She muttered a quick thanks to the elderly driver. Ally had known he didn't want to be caught in this part of the city, but she'd also known he'd take her wherever she wanted if she let her skirt ride up higher on her legs, which were covered in black tights. As the old car sped off, Ally began to power-walk down the empty street. She adjusted the fingernail-sized rectangle of her lapel camera and made sure the recorder in her pocket, connected to the camera, was still running. She smiled, knowing she'd gotten some great footage of the old fart checking her out while he gripped the wheel.

Ally hurried along the streets, keeping her vinyl coat zipped up tight and wishing she had her butterfly knife with her—one of her housemates had borrowed it last week and lost it. To reassure herself, she touched the handful of explosive caplets of Mace in one coat pocket and checked that she had all five mini-DVDs in her other pocket next to her recorder.

Her coat rustling with each step, Ally hurried down Sargent Avenue and entered the main section of the run-down neighborhood. Boarded-up restaurants and businesses stared at her from below dark apartment windows, empty places that had simply given up in the past few years. Jenae, her Blur dealer and occasional friend, lived above an abandoned bakery at the heart of the neighborhood, and she had told Ally that the aliens were coming to the city to live. Ally forced down her growing impulse to simply sprint like a madwoman down the street to her supplier's home. She calmed herself by thinking about how good it would feel to get a pink capsule of Blur in her, and to take a couple more back home to help get through the next day or two. With some Blur, Ally felt like she could face down a dirt-eating two-meter-tall alien if she had to.

Now that, Ally thought, checking her lapel camera, *would make a great flick.*

Ever since the priest in Illinois had somehow managed to get inside one of the ships last week, the Netstreams had been going crazy with a new wave of reports about the aliens. Ally, normally content to surf the Netstreams for the latest films to download to her wallscreen or to use them to chat

with friends around the world, suddenly was able to slow down long enough to watch the reports. She hadn't paid much attention back in November, when the first ship had landed less than fifteen kilometers north of Sanford. The town had enjoyed celebrity status for a brief time as flocks of ‘stream reporters filled the streets and jammed up the roads before the news of the other ships overshadowed Sanford's fame. The reporters had disappeared as fast as they'd arrived, heading south to the American cities or east to the sites in Ontario.

Judging by the broken trees and torn-up earth that Ally had seen at the landing site, the ship that was now hidden under a massive canvas tent hadn't landed so much as *dropped* to the frozen earth and skidded to a rest a kilometer later. Zipping her jacket tight to her chin, Ally shuddered as she thought about the Netstream reports she'd heard about the aliens. According to the priest and the U.S. operatives who had gone into the ship, the aliens could communicate with humans on a very basic level, using gestures and bits and pieces of English, but they would only talk to someone who was somehow affiliated with spirituality. The aliens supposedly told the priest that they were called Wannoshay, and most people immediately shortened the name to Wantas, though almost all of Ally's customers called them Wannoshits.

Winded after rushing through the strangely deserted neighborhood, Ally stood outside Jenae's closed apartment. Jenae wasn't in. Or at least she wasn't opening her door, something Jenae was prone to do if she was high or if the mood simply struck her not to answer. Ally pounded on the

dented, triple-locked door for another minute or two until she heard movement inside. She stopped, not wanting to piss off Jenae's neighbor upstairs. Milt was no one to mess with, especially at night, when he was cooking up Blur and God-only-knew what else in his apartment laboratory.

Ally flicked off her tiny camera and gripped the cold metal of the doorframe, contemplating banging her head on the door until someone answered. The door popped open just as Ally was about to try it. It was Jenae. Without a word she pulled Ally inside. Jenae's usually pale face was flushed red, and Ally counted two facial tics before Jenae closed the door behind them. The thin young woman was shivering as she strode across the floor to the couch, every movement exaggerated and too fast. Jenae was whacked on Blur. Ally fought off a wave of intense jealousy and need.

Taking Blur was like a combination of the best, most addictive aspects of every other drug Ally Trang had ever taken. When Ally was on Blur, the rest of the world turned to so much fuzz while she zipped through the simplest of tasks at warp speed. Even peeling an orange became a race for the most dexterous fingers this side of the Red River.

The only things she didn't like about Blur were coming down from it—"flashing"—and the way the world crept in on her while she was sober, pressing down on her with its mundane weight and distracting her to no end. And tonight Jenae had Blur, and as a result, tonight Jenae was Ally's hero. Ally already had her money card out.

“What's new up here?” Ally asked, pocketing a dozen pink capsules, thirty-five dollars apiece. Jenae returned Ally's card

to her. *There goes most of my paycheck,* Ally thought with a wince.

“Cops. We-got-'em-everywhere,” Jenae said, her words running into one another as she rocked back and forth on the dirty carpet.

Ally swallowed a pink capsule and grimaced, the drug burning all the way down. “No way. They finally figure out Milt's operation upstairs?” She grinned, already feeling her pulse pick up. Finally. *Finally.*

“Nah,” Jenae said. “Putting-up-a-show. Getting-ready-for-the-Wannoshit-invasion, y'know.”

Ally gave a mock-serious nod. “Oh, that's all. I thought we had something *serious* to worry about. But an invasion—shit. Nothing to worry ‘bout.”

They laughed, Jenae louder than Ally, and then Jenae passed out. Her heels rattled on the floor as she trembled and quivered on her back. The first time she'd seen this, Ally had panicked, thinking Jenae was having some kind of seizure, but she now knew better. She looked across the filthy apartment with its broken wallscreen and scarred furniture at Jenae's skinny, trembling body, and waited for the drug to kick in. Jenae was on her own; Ally had just wanted to get her Blur and go out the chilly air of the neighborhood to get some more footage. There was always something good to see around here.

* * * *

Ally had made only one attempt to film the aliens at the landing site, in December, three months ago, and that had ended in disaster. One of the advantages of working at a

satellite outlet for CanTechWorld was that she had access to the best tech a small-town girl could find. Sick of explaining for the thousandth time how to use a Netstream speaker remote to a farmer or a factory worker, Ally decided one night to “borrow” the best eyebrow camera in the store after her late shift. Her plan was to grab as much footage of the landing site as she could the next morning, and get the camera back before her manager knew it was gone.

Always grateful for the chance to get out of tiny Sanford, a town of eight hundred blue-collar and farming families south of Winnipeg, Ally drove off in her beat-up car before the morning had begun. Her car barely made it to the site. She started taking footage of the leveled earth leading to the landing site just outside Winnipeg. As she walked, the camera affixed to her left eyebrow like a third eye taped everything she saw. Recording the broken trees and scarred earth a kilometer from the site, everything bathed in the reddish-orange light of daybreak, Ally marveled at the fact that nobody, human or alien, had died when the ships hit.

Nobody died, she thought, shaking her head, *but it was total chaos on Thanksgiving when Armageddon didn't come like the evangelists had been promising. That was shitty enough. Who knows what New Year's will bring?*

Fighting the urge to squint, which would have thrown off the camera's focus, she zoomed the camera until she could see the massive tent that hid the wrecked alien ship, along with the six smaller tents surrounding it. After barely five minutes of filming, Ally noticed a dark object moving toward her off in the distance. She blinked into the eyepiece to

magnify and saw that the movement was a Canadian Forces jeep aimed at her, bouncing across the frozen earth of what had once been a soybean field. Nobody from the ‘streams had been able to get closer than this, and the airspace around all thirty sites had been restricted since the arrival of the ships in November.

“Shit,” she whispered. “Shit shit shit.”

Keeping her face pointed in the direction of the site, trying to see around the jeep speeding toward her, Ally caught her breath. Zooming the camera lens even further, she saw figures off to the right, walking in front of one of the gray tents. She could see that two of the figures were soldiers, but they were walking on either side of someone quite large. Ally immediately thought of the ancient hoax vids of Sasquatch on the Netstreams and almost laughed out loud, but she kept filming.

The jeep was less than a hundred meters away when she slipped her sunglasses over her eyes, hiding the lens of the camera. She popped out the mini-DVD in her coat pocket and slid the still-warm disc into the back of her jeans. Before she could get in her car, the soldiers stopped her and confiscated four of her mini-DVDs, but they missed the disc hidden in her jeans.

Half an hour (and one capsule of Blur washed down with iced lime vodka) later, Ally fired up her wallscreen to watch her footage. As she surfed through the footage and came across the shot of the tent and the three figures, she realized she held digital gold in her hands. She had managed to pick

up a three-second bit of a pair of soldiers marching single file, with a tall, swaying alien between them.

“Oh my God,” Ally whispered, grabbing for the remote so she could watch the footage again. “Ohmigod!” Her twitching hand knocked the remote to the floor.

After watching the snippet twice, riding one of the best Blur highs she'd ever felt, Ally had been so frantic to upload her movie to the Netstream that she'd hit the wrong button on her remote. Just like that, her twitchy fingers had burned over that day's footage. And she hadn't taken the time to make a backup. For the next ten minutes, Alissa Trang had screamed herself hoarse.

* * * *

Ally left Jenae's apartment with her vision tripled. She nearly jumped down the steps and jogged to the next block of the dark, quiet streets, unable to move slowly anymore. Her thoughts started bumping into each other, making her pant for breath at their rapid-fire pace. She felt every muscle in her body twitch as if she'd been hit with tiny bolts of lightning. Ally wondered if she could make it back to her place in Sanford, almost thirty kilometers away, if she started running now. As usual, she hadn't made any plans for getting back home that night.

She paused for breath on a cracked sidewalk on Ellice Avenue. Trying to stand still was a little war raging inside her. Just as she was wondering what had happened to all the traffic, an electric hum filled the air. Ally stood on the sidewalk, her arms shaking like snakes, and held her breath for as long as she dared. The hum grew closer. With a dull

gnawing sensation in her stomach, she realized she hadn't seen any traffic on the street all night.

Cops, Ally thought. *Something's up.*

She moved her right hand to her lapel to activate her camera. Already on, the camera beeped at her twice and kept recording.

As the hum got louder, Ally finally ran and hid in the recessed entrance to an abandoned Thai restaurant. Sweat covered her face and dampened her armpits as she crouched in the darkness, peeking around the corner. The first bus pulled up a second later.

“Oh-shit,” Ally whispered. She pulled the recorder from her coat pocket with trembling hands and looked at the readout. The current disc was almost full. She must have accidentally turned the camera on while she was at Jenae's. “Oh-shit-shit-shit.”

The hum of the buses had become a high-pitched squeal as first one, then another, and finally a third electric bus pulled to a stop half a block from Ally, who was desperately trying to reload her recorder. None of the buses had windows. When she got the tiny disk reloaded, she touched the sensor on her lapel and wished she'd brought the eyebrow unit from work. The footage from her lapel camera always came out grainy and dark.

Her feet had started tapping on the cold cement outside the restaurant when the doors to the buses opened. Ally's vision was tripling again as she fought the drug in her system, trying to will herself into sobriety, something that always made the Blur high even more intense.

The first to step off the three buses were soldiers armed with rifles, ammo belts crisscrossing their chests. Once she'd gained control of her tapping feet, Ally leaned around the corner wall of the alcove, holding her lapel camera up and out. For the first time she noticed the lights on in the apartments above the closed businesses, and the Open sign glowing in front of the old Howard Johnson's, facts she'd been too busy enjoying the Blur to notice before.

Something salty and moist tickled Ally's nose. At first she thought it was a bug or maybe the whiff of ozone left by the electric buses, but then she realized the smell was different. Alien. It was a scent she couldn't recognize, and it made her skin turn into gooseflesh.

“Oh-my-God,” she whispered, even before the first one stepped off the bus, a dark green Army bag held in its big hands. She couldn't see if the creature had fingers or not.

Just a delusion, she thought to herself. *Nothing to worry about, really.*

Most of the streetlights had been broken out long ago, keeping the aliens mostly hidden in shadows. To Ally, they looked like regular people, but taller and less graceful. Their legs looked too short, making them walk with a strange swaying movement. Ally felt a pang of disappointment at not being able to hallucinate something nastier, or at least something less human in nature. Their skin was dark, but with a bluish tint in the weak light thrown off by the running lights of the bus. Ally found herself staring at their feet. Each bare foot had only four toes. Four toes as long as her fingers. This was no Blur-addled delusion.

I just hope, Alissa thought, hugging herself tightly while recording everything she saw, *that I don't fucking erase this one.*

She continued filming as the aliens filed off the bus, apparently entire families of them in various sizes, though all of them looked thin and spindly compared to the human soldiers next to them. They walked half hunched over, like a tall person who was trying to look shorter, and they clumped together in small groups. In complete silence, the aliens carried their bags off the bus and were led into the hotel by soldiers.

Her heightened senses picked up movement off to her left. Ducking back into the shadows, Ally peeked through the broken windows of the restaurant. A group of cops were coming up the street on foot. They checked each doorway, and some of them disappeared into abandoned buildings. They were less than a block away.

She was trapped between the soldiers on her right and the cops on her left. Ally packed away her recorder and mini-DVDs into the depths of her vinyl coat, and nearly screamed as a burst of panic-laced adrenaline hit her. The door to the restaurant was locked, but the window next to her was broken, backed up with plywood. Pushing against the plywood, Ally slipped into the restaurant as quietly as she could. She clamped her mouth shut against a scream as she snagged her arms and legs on the shards of glass left in the window frame and dropped, bleeding, to the floor of the restaurant.

A female cop wearing a black leather jacket and faded jeans stopped outside the door to the restaurant a few seconds later, but she left after trying the door and finding it locked. Ally lay back in the dust of the restaurant floor and touched the disks in her pocket.

The aliens have come to town, she thought. *And I've got it all recorded right here.*

Her arms quivering from the shallow cuts crisscrossing them, her black tights torn and wet with blood, Alissa released the breath she'd been holding in her sore lungs. The sudden burst of adrenaline had killed her Blur high. With a suddenly-heavy hand, she reached up to turn off her lapel camera so she didn't waste more disc space. Then she lost consciousness.

* * * *

* * * *

Author's Note: I'd like to thank Lenora Rose for her excellent details about the city of Winnipeg. Any and all inconsistencies or errors are wholly my fault.

* * * *

Michael is “this close” to completing work on a novel entitled *The Wannoshay Cycle,* which is about the aliens in this story. His fiction has also recently appeared in Asimov's, Gothic.Net, Future Orbits, and *The Book of More Flesh* (upcoming). His previous appearances in *Strange Horizons* were “Crossing the Camp” and “Explosions,” both stories of the Wannoshay. For more about him and his work, see his Web site.

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Wantaviewer

By Michael J. Jasper

9/23/02

Part 2 of 2

The morning after the aliens moved into the Winnipeg slums, Netstream reporters descended on the city like vultures sensing a fresh kill. But with twenty-nine other cities experiencing their own alien integration throughout the Upper Great Plains, most of them in America and covered by twice as many journalists, public interest in yet another alien story was fading fast. Within three days of the arrival of the first group of Wannoshay, the last out-of-town reporter had left Winnipeg. Dozens of disposable Netstream cams dotted the buildings of the neighborhood, glued to the walls by reporters hoping to catch the first hints of any worthwhile Wannoshay news.

On her first visit a week after that cold night in March, Ally parked her newly-fixed clunker of a car on Toronto Street and swallowed a capsule of Blur. She entered the neighborhood flying high, but not so high that she wasn't constantly worried about being stopped by one of the loitering soldiers or plain-clothes police officers (she knew who they were, try as they might to act like they were regular people). But the soldiers on Ellice Avenue seemed more interested in keeping up a presence in the neighborhood and protecting the Wannoshay from the occasional mob of anti-integrationists than they were concerned with her passing by. The mayor of Winnipeg

was talking about having the aliens start working someday soon.

As her camera recorded the renovations taking place in buildings that had been empty for over a decade, Ally was surprised not to see more aliens outside. The sun had been bright all morning, but clouds had gathered as she wandered up and down Ellice. With the sun gone, the air turned cooler, and Ally saw three aliens walk out of the old Thai restaurant she'd hidden in a week ago. The window appeared to have been replaced recently, as silvery holo-stickers were still stuck to the glass.

Up and down the street, more aliens came outside, sweeping off the sidewalks or picking up garbage that had blown onto the street. The three Wannoshay outside the restaurant were cleaning the new windows under the casually watchful eyes of a pair of young CF soldiers with rifles slung across their backs.

Ally's throat locked up when she was five meters from the aliens and the soldiers, and she stopped. Her legs wouldn't move her any closer. She could smell them, and she could hear their muscles creak as they scraped the holo-stickers off the glass and washed the windows.

The aliens were tall and made her nose itch. They wore second-hand clothes that didn't fit their bodies well—cuffed jeans held up with rope belts around their thick waists, long-sleeved, patched flannel shirts in spite of the warmth of the day. Their long hair was thick and ropy, hanging partway down their broad backs. At the ends of their too-short legs, the feet Ally remembered so clearly from a week earlier were

still bare, their long finger-toes clutching the concrete sidewalk like claws, as if they were afraid of being top-heavy and toppling over if they leaned too far one way or the other. They were well over two meters tall.

Thinking about the Wannoshay she'd seen on that dark, Blurry night in March, Ally almost kept walking past the aliens hunched over their work, silent in their concentration. Then she saw a pair of ‘stream reporters across the street, attaching more cams to a wall and searching for an alien to talk to. Gritting her teeth, Ally felt a burst of energy from the Blur, and her confidence doubled as she thought about how great some real footage by a real person, not some clueless ‘stream hack, would look on her Netstream.

“Hello,” Ally said, stepping up to the three aliens in front of the restaurant. She made sure the tiny camera on her shirt was aiming at them. They towered above her, their long backs turned away from her. They continued working. “Excuse me,” she said. “Hello?”

Two of the three aliens looked back at her, their heads swiveling around impossibly far on their long necks. The ropy tentacles on the tops of their heads quivered toward Ally as if smelling her. She rubbed her nose, trying to get the salty smell out of it.

Their hair moves, Ally thought, her heartbeat tripling. *Holy-shit-their-hair-moves!*

“I'm-a ... reporter,” she said, forcing herself to talk slowly and clearly despite the Blur in her system pushing her to go faster, faster. “I am working on a story about the integration

process. For your people. Could I talk with you about your new jobs?”

She pointed at the sparkling clean glass of the window, then at the buckets, sponges, and squeegees around them. Ally had heard that the aliens knew some English, but they often preferred communicating with gestures, sounds, and the occasional word. She'd been secretly hoping they'd learn French first, but as usual the pushy Americans got their way, teaching English to the aliens, even those in Canada. Ally could see why talking wasn't preferable for the aliens—their wide, lipless mouths weren't shaped the same as humans.’ She made a waving motion with her hand in front of her mouth, trying to pantomime words coming from her.

The shorter alien looked at her intently with his dark eyes, and then the sideways eye in the middle of its forehead opened. Ally swallowed a gasp; for an awful split-second it had looked like the alien's forehead was splitting open, and then she realized it was the third eye she'd heard about on the Netstreams. It winked at her from its sideways socket, and Ally felt her mouth form a child-like grin of pure wonder.

“Yesh, we talgh,” the short alien said, painfully slowly for Ally, as if choosing its words carefully. This alien appeared to be male and the oldest of the three in front of the restaurant. His gray skin was lighter, and he was more hunched than the others were. He set down his scraper, and Ally saw a series of interconnected triangles and one tiny circle carved into the back on his long hand. He raised his right hand palm up, dipping his head forward as if to say, “After you.” Ally could have sworn she heard the voice inside her head.

“This-okay?” Ally said to the two soldiers, who had taken a few steps closer to her and the Wannoshay. The soldier on the left nodded. “Great-thanks,” she called to them, feeling her voice speeding up again. “Thanks-great.”

The other two aliens were females, if Ally was safe in assuming the bumps on their chests were breasts. Their skin was darker in color than that of the male who had spoken. They also set down their cleaning tools and all three aliens squatted low, resting their backs against the brick wall next to the window. They were now exactly Ally's height.

Relax, she told herself. *The hard part's over.*

“Let's-start-with...” Ally took a deep breath and willed her hands to stop shaking and screwing up the camera's shot. “Let's ... start ... with names. I'm Alissa Trang. Alissa.”

“A-issha,” the aliens repeated. The older male's voice was lower than those of the two female aliens, though all three voices were deeper than a human's. They all looked at Ally with intent black eyes.

“Close-enough.” Ally pointed at the male and raised her eyebrows. “Your-name-is?”

The male only stared at her, his oval face blank. The look on his face made her think of Marlon Brando, in his last movie before his fatal stroke. He'd played a bald con man who faked Alzheimer's to fool his marks. One of the females snorted and twitched next to him, as if she were laughing. Alissa took a deep breath and tried to think. *How do I explain what a name is?* she wondered.

Feeling foolish under the gaze of those black eyes, trying to ignore the two soldiers, who had stopped talking and were

watching her intently, Ally touched her chest and repeated her name. She reached a hand up toward Brando's chest. He didn't flinch, but his middle eye narrowed and his hair pulled straight back, away from her.

Ally raised her eyebrows and gave him her best questioning look. “Your name?”

“A-issha?” the male said. The smaller female gave another snort and knocked her head against the glass of the window, her tentacle-hair rattling against the window like hail. Her right foot kicked like Thumper from the old Disney downloads. Out of the corner of her eye, Ally saw one of the soldiers inch closer, and the two reporters across the street had stopped to watch.

She sighed. “I'm A-issha,” she said, her hands starting to quiver again. The aliens repeated her name and touched their chests, and Ally tried to come up with a way to get her point across, while the short female continued twitching and tap-kicking her foot as if in response to Ally's edginess. Ally fought the urge to tap her own feet in response, the Blur making her pulse race.

Before she could come up with a solution, however, the short female's head dropped, her black hair clinging protectively to her head. Her thick body shuddered in a wave-like motion that made Ally feel sick to her stomach. A fleeting image filled Ally's head as the alien brushed past her, a horrific vision of a red-burning sun seen through a tiny window in a room of black metal. With a screech, the female alien spun on her bare feet and ran off down the street, away

from the soldiers. Ally felt the alien's fear as clearly as she smelled the alien's peculiar, bittersweet odor.

“Go!” one of the soldiers shouted. The other soldier sprinted after her, while the first soldier glanced at the two Netstream reporters across the street. “Don't hurt her,” he shouted after his partner, “just keep her contained and in the neighborhood. Use the—”

The soldier stopped in mid-sentence and looked at Ally and the remaining two aliens. His hand had been resting on a small green box on his belt, but he dropped his hand from the box as soon as he stopped shouting orders.

Ally looked away from him and watched the soldier and the female alien until they disappeared around a corner. She barely had time to check to make sure her camera had gotten a clear shot of all the action. She closed her mouth, which had been hanging open. She was shivering, the Blur starting to flash in her system.

What the hell? she thought, glancing again at the green box on the soldier's belt. *Do they have some sort of devices attached to the aliens? Like GPS units, or stunners?*

“Listen,” the soldier said. The two reporters were walking off, shaking their heads. The soldier stepped up close to Ally, his face pinched and tight as he lowered his voice. “You may want to come by some other time, ma'am. Sometimes the Wantas get that way, get a little out of control.” He nodded at Ally's tiny camera lens. “Let's just keep that little outburst under our hats, okay? Don't put that in your news report, all right?”

Ally nodded and flipped her hair out of the collar of her shirt so it covered the small camera attached to her lapel, hoping he wouldn't ask for her mini-DVD. She was shaking as the Blur worked its way out of her system, her heart still beating too fast for comfort. Keeping her distance from the two remaining aliens, who sat in motionless silence, she thanked them and walked back to her car, suddenly in a hurry to get away. Ally drove back to Sanford shaking and giggling with residual adrenaline and flashing Blur.

She had the footage on her Netstream in under an hour.

* * * *

Nearly two months later, at the end of May, Ally Trang opened the door to her bedroom closet and discovered that the floor of the closet was completely covered by dozens of mini-DVDs. Each disc contained footage of her talks with the aliens she knew as Brando, Thumper, and Jane—she'd never been able to explain the concept of names to them, so she'd made up her own for them. The discs lay scattered in the closet like flattened coins in plastic casings. She turned to her bedroom door and locked it, afraid her housemates would come barging in.

She hadn't told anyone in Sanford about her Netstreams. She was known only as “Wantaviewer” on the ‘streams. At first the need to hide her identity was simply her instinctive, Blur-influenced reflex to keep all information from others unless forced to talk. The Netstreams were safe places for someone who wanted to be anonymous, as long as you covered your tracks.

Then, when she'd heard the news about the brewery four days ago, Ally's silence had become self-defensive.

The details of the explosion in Milwaukee on the 27th of May were shaky at best. After the smoke had cleared from the wreckage, three aliens who had just started working at the brewery as part of the government's integration plan had been found dead in the lower levels of the brewery. Their injuries had not been caused by the explosion. Another alien had been found a block away from the brewery, dead of some sort of shock. Some of Ally's friends on various Netstreams claimed that there had been a fight between the humans and the aliens in the brewery, while others were convinced the Wannoshay were simply out to get all humans, and the dead aliens had been planted there to confuse the matter.

Ally added that afternoon's discs to the pile and shoved all the stray discs back into her closet. Each mini-DVD had the date imprinted on the front, something her recorder did as soon as a disk was full. She thought for the hundredth time about organizing them, but then forgot about it the instant she turned her back on the closet.

Keying on the wallscreen, Ally dropped onto her bed in exhaustion. Her opinion on the issue of the explosions leaned in favor of the aliens' innocence. Despite their occasionally erratic behavior, she'd never had to fear the handful of friends she'd made in the alien neighborhood of Winnipeg.

Her gaze locked onto the wallscreen, where the remains of a grain elevator somewhere in South Dakota was burning despite the five fire trucks blasting water onto it.

"What?" she whispered. "Another one?"

The images flashed by faster, along with a voiceover. Very little was left of the elevator. Eleven men and women had been inside it when it blew, and all but four of them had been killed instantly.

A computer-generated face was superimposed on the image of the devastation. “The latest reports show that half a dozen Wannoshay workers were also working at the site at the time of the explosion.” The face paused for effect. “All six alien workers survived.”

Ally looked over at her closet door, a chill creeping over her despite the hot closeness of her apartment.

“Evidence,” she muttered, wishing she had more Blur. Her fatigue after taking two Blurs and talking with Brando all afternoon was making it hard to think. She'd started skipping work to talk longer with the aliens working at the renovated restaurant. The short one she'd taken to calling Thumper had calmed down considerably in the past few weeks, but Brando, the older male, had been having problems remaining calm if he talked with her for more than an hour.

Ally stared at the news unfolding on her wall. There were strange similarities between the explosion at the brewery and the explosion at the elevator. In both cases, aliens had been working there for less than a month before the accidents happened (the computer-generated newscaster added a strange, nearly human inflection to the word “accidents"). Both explosions had taken place in large buildings with humans and aliens inside. Both times only humans had died. The dead aliens in the brewery had been discounted, and

more theories had risen up about the aliens' uncontrolled emotional outbursts and tendency for violence.

Rubbing her face, trying to wake herself up, Ally knew she needed to make another trip to Winnipeg to see Jenae. She turned her head to look at her closet with its fallen piles of mini-DVDs. She jumped up and pushed all of them back inside, and then shut the closet door on them. After she collected her car keys and found her money card, Ally wasn't even surprised to note that, in a small corner of her fatigued mind, she was starting to believe that the aliens *did* have something to do with the destruction of the brewery and the grain elevator.

* * * *

Sitting on the floor of Jenae's dirty apartment, Ally swallowed her fourth shot of lime vodka and gasped for air. "Why would they blow up our buildings?" she said when she was able, her voice sounding too slow for her ears. "Especially with people and aliens in them?"

Jenae rocked on the floor next to her, her thin white arms wrapped around her knees. She'd been using all afternoon. "Part-of-their-master-plan," she said. "Takin'-over, y'know?"

"Oh come on." Ally stared at the whitish residue on her shot glass, in the shape of her lips. "Why wait 'til now, after letting the CF treat them like such shit for the past half year?"

Jenae answered only by rocking faster.

Ally swallowed, waiting for the Blur to hit her. She didn't like being sober like this—it made her imagine too many possibilities, none of them positive.

The two young women sat without speaking for a minute, until something rattled against Jenae's door. It sounded like skeletal fingers tapping on the dented metal, and it made a shudder run up and then down Ally's spine. Jenae was at the door and ripping it open before Ally could blink twice.

“Who-the-fuck—” Jenae shouted, but there was nobody there. A bitter smell floated into the room from the open door. Jenae looked up and down the stairs outside her apartment twice, her skinny body shivering as the Blur rushed inside her. Ally knew the feeling well—an almost orgasmic shuddering as the heart beat as fast as it could to push the toxic chemical of the drug out of the body. In five minutes, Jenae would have a bitch of a headache.

Ally still hadn't felt the Blur hit her, and watching Jenae dance like a puppet on invisible strings on the landing outside her apartment, she wasn't sure if she wanted to feel it.

“Cold turkey,” she muttered, and poured herself another shot of lime vodka. “I need to. One of these days, for sure.”

Jenae spun and marched over to Ally as if she'd heard her. “Drink-up. We're-going-now.”

Ally froze with the shot glass halfway to her lips. “Where?”

“To see those alien friends of yours.” Jenae's voice was slow and deliberate. Ally shivered as she swallowed the sickly-sweet alcohol, almost gagging. With numb hands she set down the glass as Jenae filled her pants pockets with capsules of Blur.

“What are you going to do?” Ally felt like she had a mouthful of glue as she spoke.

“Expand-the-customer-base,” Jenae said, her thin white face all angles and bulging eyes. She cackled as she spoke. “Wanta-Blur, Alissa? Or should I say, ‘Wantaviewer'?”

* * * *

There was a moment that night, the last day of May, when Alissa Trang realized she could stop it all. She could just walk away from the situation, taking the Blur with her, and nobody would get hurt. Ally saw the moment with the perfect, unfettered clarity of an addict at the peak of her high.

Jenae stood next to her, laughing and hugging herself as she shook her way through the Blur rush. Ally stared as Jenae held pink capsules out to the half-dozen aliens that crept up to them like hesitant forest animals approaching a watering hole.

No, Ally thought. *That's wrong. They're not animals at all. They're just extra-cautious, freaked out because of the way Jenae's acting. There's intelligence in those black eyes. They know what sort of poison Jenae is offering them. And they want it.*

One of the females, her squirming hair held back in a plastic clip, reached a short-fingered hand up to Jenae. Her long gray body rocked forward, and then back suddenly, as if she was trying to get her balance. The male next to her, wearing cuffed, second-hand jeans with holes and patches just like the other Wannoshay, also lifted a hand, palm up. The eye in the middle of each wide forehead remained closed. The night air was thick with the salty smell of the aliens.

The moment was there. Ally felt her own hand move, poised to either knock the Blur from Jenae's quivering hand,

or grab the capsules and run. She could do it. She *had* to do it. Then she thought about the images on her Netstream, and Jenae calling her “Wantaviewer.” Ally nearly bit through her lower lip as it curled up with fear and disgust.

The moment was there, but Ally allowed it to pass by.

Instead, the two Wannoshay took capsules and, following Jenae's pantomimed movements, placed them in their lipless mouths. Their black eyes widened as they swallowed. More gray hands reached for Jenae, the pink capsules disappearing.

“Now you fucking did it,” she muttered, and at least three alien voices repeated her words back to her: “Nah you fuggin’ did id,” one said, like a deep-voiced man with a head cold. “Fuggin’ did id,” echoed another, higher voice.

The screaming began less than a minute later.

Spinning and leaping up and down in a mad dance of agony, the Wannoshay on Blur broke free from the crowd and uncoiled into the streets. Most drivers from the city avoided Ellice Avenue, but a new hydro car with American plates flew up the road as if on cue and barreled into two Blurred, madly-dancing aliens half a block away. The twin thuds hit Ally like hammer blows to her chest, and she tried her best to look away from the wreck. But as always, she had no control. She looked at the broken bodies and screamed along with the others.

Hesitant Netstream reporters began to arrive as the night went on, come to collect their cams and report on the madness in the wake of the explosion that day. Many of them never made it back out of the city once the aliens got their

first taste of Blur. The drug seemed to activate the taste for violence in the Wannoshay, and nobody besides Ally got close enough to film Jenae passing out Blur like Halloween candy.

Ally's only consolation, in the midst of the chaos, was that her three friends were nowhere to be seen. She'd spent enough time with them—shot enough footage of them—that she felt able to pick them out immediately in a crowd of aliens. Also, there was a different feeling Ally got when Brando or Thumper or Jane was near, a slight ringing in her ears that was more of a tickle than a sound. Maybe it was the Blur, clogging her other senses of the aliens, but she didn't see or feel her alien friends, and that thought gave her a tiny sense of victory in this night of madness.

Amazed that she'd been able to get away from Ellice Avenue in one piece, Ally made it back to Sanford at half past midnight. She'd been sick twice on her way home, and the trucker had been nice enough to pull over to let her spill her guts both times. The driver didn't say anything when she climbed back into the truck, wiping her mouth. The big, gray-haired woman just looked at Ally with a look that was equal parts sadness and anger. Not at her, Ally knew, but at the deaths from the past week, and the Wannoshay.

Ally trudged toward her apartment from the gas station where the trucker had dropped her off. She cried silently, trying to cover her occasional sobs by humming a tuneless song. She felt the bag of Blur in her pocket, and a part of her wanted to throw the capsules into the sewer grate below her. Instead she pushed them deeper into her pocket and balled her hand into a fist. This was no time for drastic actions.

Casting her gaze skyward, Ally looked at the stars littering the sky. Somewhere out there was their home, she thought, wiping her eyes. She pushed the images of the burning elevator and the black smoke of the brewery from her mind. *Now they're stuck here with us, with no way to get back if they even wanted to.*

The thought made her bend over and heave, but she had nothing left inside her. Sobbing in spite of her tightly-closed mouth, her thin body wracked with cramps and shooting pain, she finally made it to her apartment around one o'clock. Her housemate Darius was asleep and snoring on the couch, while Anita's bedroom door was closed.

Inside her bedroom, Ally opened her closet door and gazed at the five or six dozen mini-DVDs she'd never gotten around to organizing.

“Evidence,” she muttered, her voice hoarse. She set a mint tab on her tongue and felt cool ice fill her mouth.

Just like the capsules of Blur in my coat, she thought. *It's all evidence, linking me to the Wantas.*

Ally pushed open her window and slid her metal wastebasket in front of it. She fumbled for an insta-flame on her cluttered desk, and after breaking it in half, she used it to ignite the garbage inside the wastebasket. She was crying again, as much as she hated the tears. She'd flashed on the Blur long ago, and all she felt now was emptiness.

“Damn it,” she whispered over and over again as the fire grew and she began moving discs from her closet, making a pile next to the wastebasket. “Damn it all to fucking hell.”

She dropped the first disc, labeled 4/2/16, into the fire. Grabbing an old paperback dictionary she'd been using to keep her desk legs balanced, she ripped pages out to feed the fire. More discs followed, melting and giving off an acrid blue-black smoke. Ally fanned the smoke out into the summer air as best she could.

With the last disc in the burning mess of plastic and paper, something Brando had been trying to explain after the brewery explosion came back to her. She nearly moaned at the memory of her Wannoshay friend.

“I knew them,” he'd said, sitting with his back propped against the wall of his furniture-less living room. His apartment had been cold enough to make his and Ally's breath steam, but he seemed to enjoy the chill. He pointed a stubby finger at his third eye, which had been closed all afternoon.

“The Wannoshay in Milwaukee, where the explosion was?” Ally stared at the design on the back of his hand, the triangles and the one tiny circle in the middle of them.

Brando bowed his head in his version of a nod of agreement. “They were...”

He stopped, his face going blank as it did when he was concentrating, trying to find the words in English. He put his right hand palm up, letting Ally know that the game of charades was on. When she grinned in response, Brando put both hands sideways in front of him, and then moved his hands over to his right, hands sideways again.

“Next to you?” Ally guessed. “Like neighbors?”

Brando bowed again. “And they were *late.*” His last word came out sounding like “lake,” but Ally had heard him say the word often in their recent conversations. It meant something bad, she thought, something worse than just being tardy.

As the stink of burnt plastic began to fade in her apartment and most of the smoke had cleared, Ally clicked on her wallscreen and spoke the name of her Netstream into her speaker remote. In less than five seconds the home page of her “Wantaviewer” ‘stream came up, and Ally felt her face grow warm at what seemed now like a childish logo and naive stills of Brando, Thumper, and Jane and the rest of their people in Winnipeg.

“Admin page,” she said into the remote. “Password atrang91.”

A sparse white screen appeared, displaying lines of code on the left with tiny thumbnails of all the screens of Ally's Netstream on the right.

What does it mean if an alien is late? she wondered, squinting at all the streaming digital movies she'd uploaded in the past few months. There was the movie from the night the Wantas first came to Winnipeg, along with the dozens of interviews with Brando and Jane and Thumper.

They were neighbors, maybe, she thought with a smile, thinking of Brando's earnest face and his strangely effective gestures. And sometimes neighbors were late, for one thing or another. Late as in tardy. Or late as in dead.

Ally wondered if Brando was hooked on Blur now, just like she was. Maybe someday they could talk about that, like old friends sharing their battle scars. *Maybe someday,* she

thought. *Maybe if the Wantas don't kill us all, and we don't kill all of them.* Still smiling through the tears sliding down her cheeks, Alissa Trang began deleting every single one of her movies from her Netstream.

* * * *

Author's Note: I'd like to thank Lenora Rose for her excellent details about the city of Winnipeg. Any and all inconsistencies or errors are wholly my fault.

* * * *

Michael is “this close” to completing work on a novel entitled *The Wannoshay Cycle,* which is about the aliens in this story. His fiction has also recently appeared in Asimov's, Gothic.Net, Future Orbits, and *The Book of More Flesh* (upcoming). His previous appearances in *Strange Horizons* were “Crossing the Camp” and “Explosions,” both stories of the Wannoshay. For more about him and his work, see his Web site.

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Coyotes, Cats, and Other Creatures

By Karen L. Abrahamson

9/30/02

"Let Agnes go," says Dr. Michael. "She's been dead a year. You have to move on."

I look at him, seated in his ochre armchair. "How can you expect me to let go of someone who joined her life to mine for forty years?" I ask. The tears come again, filling my eyes, coursing my cheeks. I sit back in my chair, daring him to respond.

Agnes, I still feel the brush of your fingertips, smell the scent of your herbal shampoo. It has only been a year since you ... left me. But this—this smooth-faced doctor my children hired to "heal" me—how can he help? He hasn't lived. Hasn't watched death slip past his guard and take away his love. I look away from him, firming my jaw, wiping the tears. I don't have to do anything he suggests. But I would like to stop crying.

Dr. Michael leans forward in his chair, his voice smooth as his skin, honeyed as if he were cajoling a cat. He smiles with sharp teeth. "Will you work with me, Richard? I've got something I'd like you to try. Something to get you living again." His furtive hazel eyes flick across my face.

I won't fall for his tricks.

But I nod, not meeting his gaze, and fight to breathe. "What is it this time? Another hypnosis session? More chat therapy? I've been through it all with the other therapists."

Dr. Michael sits back in his chair. The autumn sunlight beyond the window pushes through the closed blinds in long bands of light. His florid aftershave scents the room. “It's simple, really. You said you go for a walk every day?”

I nod again, resentful.

“Then each time you go, I want you to think about one of the difficult feelings you have about Agnes. The painful things that make you not want to get up in the morning. I want you to carry that feeling with you and imagine it's something concrete, something you can see. Take it with you into the woods and leave it there. Focus on the feelings being left behind. If the same feeling comes back later, take it back out to the trails and leave it there again. Can you do that?”

I nod again, amazed at myself for doing so. How can I take the advice of someone who has lived so little? My hands carry the marks of years, while his carry the smooth color of his voice. “For all the good it will do,” I grumble.

Dr. Michael ignores my petty resistance. “Good, then. Do it over the next week and we'll see how it's going next session.” He stands. I shake his hand, wipe my tears, and leave.

But I do as he asks. Agnes stands by as I decide to start with the haunted feeling—the sense that she waits in each room of the house. I take that feeling with me on my walk, like a pet on a string, and leave it in the forest.

It almost works.

But when I get home and unlock the door, the feeling has beaten me back to the house. Perhaps it entered through the cat door, but as I move around the house I know Agnes waits

in the kitchen. In the living room. In the bedroom. I will take her back to the woods tomorrow.

And I do. And this time I take string—a bit of Agnes's coloured yarn—and tie it to a tree to hold the memory there. And it works.

Dr. Michael praises me for my work. I resent his congratulations, but the tears come a little less.

* * * *

Agnes favored the fall. We'd go for long walks on the trails, long walks amid the discarded cottonwood and aspen leaves, and laugh at the rustling sounds they made. “Their voices,” she would say. “Hear them whisper?” She'd stop and so would I. A soft voice on the breeze would say, “I love you, Richard.”

I'd laugh and hug her to me. Her grey hair tossed around her blue eyes. “Whispering woman! I love you, too.” That was then.

Now Agnes fills the woods. Bits of my memories I've left behind as Dr. Michael encouraged. Bits of my life tied to branches in bright yarn, to empty out my house, my mind. I breathe deeper now, my children say. I'm “more present,” they tell me. More centered, Dr. Michael says.

“Centered,” I huff to myself in the November wind. I may cry less. But my walks take me further into the forest, into memories of Agnes, and my left hand fills my pocket, fingering Agnes's glove—the one I always carry. The cool air smells of snow. I walk the trails, listening to the leaves underfoot, to the wind in the stripped branches, to the rough cries of crows that watch me pass. They call warnings to

something of my approach, just as they call warnings of the coyote to the small things of the brush.

The coyote moved in this fall. The neighbors tell me they have seen him. They whisper of old legends—warn of coyote as messenger and trickster. With his coming, small pets go missing. Both of Agnes's cats disappeared last week. At first I thought they had simply tired of me, of my sadness. But the cat door no longer clatters in the night. Their warm bodies no longer dent the bed beside me. Their food remains untouched. It is an absence I don't care for—almost a betrayal of Agnes. I know the coyote preys on the small loved ones of the area, so I look for him on the trails. I never see him.

But small movements in the underbrush catch my eye: the quick tremble of a leaf, a shadow that shifts swiftly, a hurried movement across the trail. Though squirrels and birds elude me, I see the movements. I see them more now than I ever used to when Agnes walked with me. The woods ripple with them.

Sometimes I even see them at home. As I read on the couch, something scuttles across the floor and I look up from the pages. A spider? But nothing stirs. The room stays still except for my breathing. Until I look back to the words. Then the movements begin again. Perhaps mice or some other small creatures have moved in, in the absence of cats. I will nail shut the cat door. That will keep me busy for a while.

It might stop me from being haunted by the memories of Agnes I don't want to lose. Dr. Michael says to heal I must let

go of many more things. He says he has techniques that will work—even on me—and I believe him.

* * * *

I have walked all winter, leaving my bits of memories as gifts to the barren branches. Agnes waited for me on the trails. Her two cats waited with her. They left delicate paw prints in the snow. And the unseen denizens of the woods scurried after as I followed the trail of my previous days' footprints. The winds chilled my cheeks and earlobes; the snowflakes caught in my hair.

Agnes, I thought each time, *you would laugh at my salt-and-pepper mane. You would stroke the flakes from my face and eyelashes. You would kiss my cheek and make me warm.*

I left the house often this winter and spent my time wandering.

And I stripped the house, until it no longer rang with memories or Agnes's laughter. "It's over," Dr. Michael told me at our last session. "You've done well, moved on, forward." He smiled his cajoling smile as I shivered in my chair.

I know I have quit crying. I know my children are pleased. I know Dr. Michael wears a satisfied expression. But I hate the house now that I have done what they asked.

Today I take my last walk for Dr. Michael in the snow. My bit of yarn will tether my fears of being alone. I say a prayer to Agnes-of-the-woods and seek a likely branch for the bit of red wool I will use.

There. A willow branch swells towards spring. I remove my mitten and tie the wool in a neat bow and step back to admire

it. *Agnes,* I think. The breeze whispers in the pines. My breath steams in the air. I smile. Agnes smiles with me.

Afterwards I hike the hill to Thurman Ridge, where I can look out over the valley and the housing development that encroaches closer to the old house and woods where I live; the places Agnes also lived. The birch and poplar gleam blue-white in the afternoon sun. The cedar and pine wear skirts of shadow beneath the loads of snow in their branches. The air parts around me. From the corner of my eye I catch something moving across the trail.

When I look straight on, it is gone. No footprints mark the snow where it passed. The wind stills. I breathe in and out and look around. There's a sudden movement of leaves cascading from the crutch of branches where they were caught. They loosen from the hollows of trees. I hear scuttling and I twirl around. Nothing. Just a slight movement amid the lichen. The sunlight glitters on the marred snow of the trail. Shadows pool in my empty footprints that lead back down the slope.

I shake my head and laugh, then move up the hill. It is only Agnes. My love, my imagination. The muscles ping in the tops of my thighs. I sweat in the warmth of the wool cardigan Agnes knitted three years ago. And around me the woods still rustle. I catch small movements from the corner of my eye; see a great black-tailed squirrel dive for cover and tell myself it is only him and his brethren that cause the movements. But the cold suddenly chills me. There are not that many squirrels. Something else stirs among the leaves.

At the top of the hill I turn around like a lighthouse, surveying the changes the new snow brings to the landscape: a downed tree, a newness, a wound, a healing. Through the branches I catch glimpses of bright red—yarn I tied hither and yon to hold memories of Agnes in the forest. I sense movement in the way the leaves settle too smoothly in place when I look at them. The sun-glare on the snow hides all footprints.

The coyote interrupts my study. He approaches directly through a copse of aspen, shivering the saplings. At the top of the hill he circles me, his gray fur rough around his shoulders and hips. His sharp face holds hazel eyes that cast furtive glances at me. He has only mangy fur on his back and tail. A poor excuse for a coyote, I think. Something ill. No wonder it preys on the neighbors' pets. It still circles and I turn with it. Then it sits down and stares.

"What do you want? I've no food for you, I'm afraid." I think of Agnes. If she were here she'd want me to try to bring it home. She'd want to set out food for it. "Poor thing," she would say. "See how its ribs stick out?"

She would be right. The coyote looks poorly fed. It stands up and approaches. "Get on with you." I shoo it away with a sweep of my hand. "Go chase something small. Go trick someone else."

It stops and studies me again. Its dark eyes shift over me. I shiver as the wind picks up. As its eyes meet mine. Things move in the brush and then go still. The coyote starts moving again. I don't want a sick animal near me. I stomp my foot at it. The coyote jumps back. "Go on. Get away," I yell.

The coyote stops again.

And then it leaps forward. It comes at me from the side, its tongue still lolling from its mouth, its teeth bared. Its body crashes into my shins and I stumble. Almost fall. “Get away!” I yell and stagger a step. I kick at the coyote and it jumps back. It leaps again, sideways. Leaps again and hits the backs of my knees. I fall, oh-my-God, I fall. I hit the snow face-first. “Get away!” I moan as I scrabble in the snow for a stone, a stick, anything to defend myself. I wait for its weight on my back. Wait for teeth. Nothing.

I roll over and the coyote is nowhere to be seen. The underbrush trembles with unseen movements. Shivering, I fall back onto the snow. My head rests in one of the empty spots created by my footprints. What happened? I didn't know coyotes did such things—were dangerous. When I reach into my pocket, Agnes's glove is gone. Stolen.

“Give it back,” I yell into the still air. My words die, useless. I get up and stumble down the trail towards home. The woods rustle, whisper, quiver around me. Unseen beings hover. Fear—fear of the coyote—rides me. When I get home the house sits empty. Oh God, it is so empty. Except for my newfound fear.

* * * *

Spring, and Agnes's cats still have not come home. Small heaps of yellowed bone in the coyote den, I suppose.

The trails, though, have filled with birdsong. The robins returned last week and the song sparrows. I know because I stood at the edge of the woods and listened. But I did not enter. Only once have I entered since coyote came to me and

then I saw his flickering shape amongst the trees, watching. Waiting. Keeping me from Agnes just as Dr. Michael has done.

In the woods the branches fill with the blush of intended leaves. Once they fluttered with their load of yarn, but—well, I cut the strings from the branches on my last furtive foray into the trees. I left them to litter the forest floor; the birds would take them, I thought. Agnes would be pleased. But I could not leave those memories tethered as small offerings to the coyote that wanders those ways. Not when he has banished me from the forest. From Agnes.

So I no longer walk to Thurman Ridge. In fact I stay home much more. When I do walk—even just down the lane—I carry a walking stick. I tell my children my age affects me, I tell people the stick helps on the hills, but really I intend it for the coyote—to save myself. And when I walk the road, the woods that border it are full of whispers, full of half-seen movement. Agnes's doing, I know. She walks in the forest, tethered away from me, as Dr. Michael wanted.

I could live in the forest, if it were not for the coyote. But the beast has confined me to the garden.

I sit back on my haunches and study my handiwork. The cat door gleams, oiled and ready. I pulled the nails this morning, then tidied and painted the small opening. It looks welcoming to all.

That done, I turn back to Agnes's garden, which glimmers with crocus, primula, and the phallic swell of hyacinth buds that rise through last year's dead foliage. Leaves rattle under the cedar hedge, the sound I've known in the forest. I smile.

A wood-wren tsk-tsks me. A flock of titmice twitter in the hedge, in the hoary apple tree covered in lichen and old moss. The sword fern in the corner quivers as if something waits there. The rhododendron's dark leaves cup the offering of early flowers. The garden lives, knows. I smile more broadly and sit cross-legged on the still-cold ground.

The earth rises away from the garden towards Thurman Ridge, where coyote lurks. Lower down the trees cover the hillsides and shelter the memories I abandoned there. The memories I ripped from the house behind me. The memories I visited on all those long walks—until coyote.

I lay my hands on my thighs, palms upwards, pleading. “Agnes,” I whisper. “It's okay now. Dr. Michael and the children are gone. We can do as we please. We can repay their trickery.” I close my eyes and the spring sunlight warms my face. The breeze wipes at my skin in a familiar touch. I hear the foliage shift.

“Yes,” I whisper. Agnes returns on creature-feet, unseen in the underbrush. I open my eyes and the small things crawl toward me, brown and beautiful with bits of colored wool in their wild-lichen hair. “Come,” I say, and point towards the cat door. “You can come and go as you please. It's safe. There are no coyotes, no Dr. Michaels here.” I blink and the beings are gone. The cat door swings, beating in the sun. I hear Agnes's laughter from the kitchen. I climb to my feet and enter, calling to the denizens of my unempty house. Perhaps I will get a cat and call it Agnes, so people will not think me strange.

* * * *

Karen's stories and poetry have previously appeared in Canadian literary magazines. This is her first SF sale. She lives in Langley, British Columbia, and is currently working on both fantasy and mainstream novels. She says “The fantastic is all around us. We just have to be willing to see.”

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Interview: Blöödhag

By Victoria Garcia and John Aegard

9/23/02

Portland, Oregon; Spring 2001: it's a Saturday night and we've crammed ourselves into a dank little bar in Old Town. The crowd has dyed-black hair, torn jeans, Betty Paige bangs, and four-season leather. It's a thrash night, and we've just learned that the guys we want to see are third on the bill. A shaggy teenaged boy opens; he stares at his sneakers and wants, obviously and desperately, to be a guitar hero. The crowd likes him well enough; maybe they remember what it was like when they were shaggy, desperate and obvious too. A twenty-something bunch follows, roaring, their fingers egg-beater fast on their guitar strings. The lead singer has a razor grin. Bass boils through the floor and the crowd roars back at the band, pressing close to the stage. This is what they came for. A mosh pit develops. Beer flows across the floor. Kids at the front glow, slick with pearlescent sweat. Then their set ends, the bar goes dark, and twenty minutes later, it's our turn.

The boys mount the stage in pressed white shirt-sleeves; ties; studded belts; horn-rimmed glasses. This is what we came to see. The crowd quiets a bit when the bassist steps up to his mike and begins to read from *Parable of The Sower.* Then the drummer raises a copy of *The Sheep Look Up* and also begins to read. Seconds later, the lead singer follow with *The Lathe of Heaven,* the guitarist with *Dune.* Around the bar,

a dozen or so others are nodding and smiling along with us. When the reading is over, we, the die-hard dozen, scream our lungs out. A few drunken thrashers scream along with us, but the rest of the crowd seems a little confused.

Soon, the spotlight comes up again. The lead singer grabs the microphone. “This is Frank Bellknap Long!” he yells, and, feverish, launches into a lecture on Long's oeuvre. There can't be more than a handful of people on this earth who could get a beer-sodden thrash crowd to listen to an English Lit lecture. Thirty seconds later, the audience is sufficiently educated, and the guys begin to wail. Jake the singer holds the microphone over his head and belts out the song in a growling voice that's monster-movie low. “No reason! No corners!” he shouts. Two minutes later, they're done with the pulps and ready to move on to the New Wave. “Our next song is about Harlan Ellison!” Jake bellows, and the geeks, the hipsters, the metalheads, and the drunks let out a howl of mutual joy.

Blöödhag—note the dual umlauts—hails from Seattle. Describing themselves as “edu-core,” the band performs nothing but two-minute thrash tributes to science fiction writers. Between songs, the band pelts the audience with paperback books, quizzes them on book titles, and demands that the audience show their library cards. Their motto: “The Faster You Go Deaf, the More Time You Have to Read.”

Last month, we visited Blöödhag at the Seattle home of bassist Sir Zachary Orgel. Also present were guitarist Dr. J. M. McNulty and singer Professor J. B. “Jake” Stratton.

Strange Horizons: Where did the idea for the band come from?

Dr. J. M. McNulty: We made up the idea from a little thing that Jake and I would do just sitting around the house; we wrote a song about Edgar Rice Burroughs and we were joking about it, wouldn't it be funny if we did that. Then Jake started writing lyrics about this n' that and I actually started listening to a lot of metal at the same time.

Professor J. B. "Jake" Stratton: We were always a metal band. We wrote those songs and I just thought of every fact I could think about those guys.... Edgar Rice Burroughs, Tolkien, and Moorcock.

McNulty: A. E. Van Vogt, who was my favorite writer at the time.

Stratton: We just wrote those off the top of our heads with the basic knowledge I got from reading the books and the little biographies—and it wasn't until we started doing the band that we went back and studied up—

McNulty: And my mom gave me a couple books about it, like "here's a big book about these sci-fi authors." Thanks, Mom!

Stratton: So our early songs didn't have nearly enough details about the guys. They were just funny little songs.

SH: Who were the first songs about?

Stratton: Van Vogt, Burroughs, Moorcock, Philip K. Dick, Kenneth Robeson, J. R. R. Tolkien—

McNulty: Joanna Russ

Stratton: Well, Joanna Russ was second era.

McNulty: I wrote Joanna Russ.

SH: So Blöödhag has always been Blöödhag?

Stratton: Under the name Blöödhag we've always been the same. Writing about authors was a hell of a lot better than the subjects that have already been written about.

McNulty: How much more can you write about your ex-girlfriend?

Sir Zachery Orgel: The first year we were together I had to write down all the authors I knew off the top of my head, then I started going through all my collections of short stories. I made a list of 150, 160 authors.

McNulty: We've got fodder for the next five years.

Stratton: We've got 35 songs? 36?

McNulty: Way more than that. Like, 40.

Stratton: Wow.

SH: When did you guys play your first gig?

Stratton: Our first gig was a party at the house where my girlfriend and I were living.

McNulty: '97? '96?

Stratton: I thought it was '95. We were just winging it, inflicting ourselves on our party guests. One of our party guests, our good friend Brent—who wound up being our drummer a few months down the line—he got us our first real gig, at the former all-ages place down in Pioneer Square, Area 51. That was the first time we wore ties.

McNulty: Did we wear ties at the party?

SH: Is that when your look came together?

McNulty: We decided if we were gonna do it, we'd have to do something out of the ordinary. Since Day 1, we wrote simple precepts about what the band was going to be.

Science fiction, really short songs. We always threw books. Shirts and ties, everything.

Stratton: Having a stage outfit defined us as a band and also drove home the fact that we weren't just some other metal band.

Orgel: In many ways, we're a shtick band, but it's very liberating because we don't have to worry about what the song's gonna be about. It's gonna be about a science fiction author.

Stratton: Right, then it's up to me to find a resource that has enough information—good information. Some biographies are thin, you know what I mean? A lot of time I'm writing about an author I haven't even read yet.

SH: Like who?

Stratton: Oh, I can't say. A lot of time I end up reading them as a result of someone in the band giving me the book—

McNulty: We're doing a Gene Wolfe song right now.

Stratton: Then I get these guys to give me the facts.

McNulty: Like the lyrics to Moorcock.

Stratton: Right, or some major storylines in their best books, and I see what I can come up with. Other than the personal interest, I try to put in information about their major themes and theories, book titles, anything like that. In the early ones we were trying—

McNulty: We were trying to be funny—

Stratton: We were trying to be funny, and we were trying to lampoon metal styles at the same time. I was actually learning how to play—

McNulty: and sing, and everything else. The early four-track shit is hilarious, it's so funny.

Stratton: He's gotten really good now.

SH: The Alfred Bester line about L. Ron Hubbard is really funny. “When Campbell fell under L. Ron's spell, Bester said, ‘man, you can fucking go to hell.'”

Stratton: I try to have one funny line in there, at least funny to some nerd who's read everything about the guy, if no one else.

SH: Well, metal is like the nerdliest music.

Stratton: Yeah, most people who like metal are ugly loners.

McNulty: Rock-star metalhead guys don't like to think about it that way, but it's geeky as hell.

Stratton: I've said this before, but anybody who's particularly obsessed about any one thing is a nerd. It doesn't matter how cool you think that thing is, you're a nerd to somebody else. Like those hoity-toity record collectors out there. They're cool in their little world. Football nerds? Football players, they're nerds. That's all they can talk about.

McNulty: Baseball fans. Baseball is the geekiest sport of all.

Stratton: Even if it gets you girls, it's still nerdy.

Orgel: Not like Blöödhag really gets girls.

McNulty: Oh, don't say that.

Stratton: We're beating them off with a stick.

McNulty: No, not us. We're just sitting around on tour talking about different writers, making fun of them.

Stratton: Not making fun in a bad way.

McNulty: No, not at all.

Stratton: You sit and you think about it and you analyze it, you realize, aw, this shit's actually kinda funny.

McNulty: I think everything's humorous. I could be in a totally dark doom band and that'd still crack me up. That's why I like dark doom metal, because it's hilarious. The more serious they are about their music, the funnier it is.

SH: It's like you sprang fully-formed from the forehead of Zeus. You had the look, the tunes, the book-throwing. You see any change in direction, like including other kinds of writers?

Orgel: Our next album is for authors who are normally placed in the literature section but whom we consider sci-fi. Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, William S. Burroughs, Aldous Huxley, J. G. Ballard. Orwell, of course.

McNulty: That's *Appetite for Deconstruction,* our new record.

SH: Is that out yet?

McNulty: It's recorded. It'll probably be out by the end of this year. We definitely like horror too, though we're not going to write about Dean R. Koontz or Stephen King. Although we could do a song about Stephen King, but I kinda think he sucks.

Stratton: I try not to do too many songs where we have a really negative opinion. I felt like I was too negative in the Harlan Ellison song, I was negative in the Robert A. Heinlein song and I think that ultimately I did them a disservice—

McNulty: Well, it needs to be said, man.

Stratton: I'd just rather reach for something positive. What we want to do is look for ways we can expose Blöödhag to the rest of the world rather than switch up what we're doing. I still don't feel like we've done enough. We'll never get to play a stadium or anything like that. But I sure would like everyone to know about us. The other side of Blöödhag that's developed is the literacy program, playing the libraries. Even though we have a lot of fun with it, we're actually serious. I don't care what people want to read. I just want them to want to read.

SH: Tell us more about the literacy program.

Stratton: It's something we want to expand.

Orgel: A couple years ago, Jeff Katz, the young adult program coordinator for the Seattle library system started doing the “Shake the Stacks” series, getting bands to play the libraries, getting kids to see the library as a place to go, which was really very clever. So we played one of them—

McNulty: We were so excited to play—

Orgel: We just clicked, it was so up our alley. We did summer library tours two years in a row, with the contacts they gave me.

McNulty: A lot of stuff has happened because of that. We played at the library in Bellevue, and then it hit the fan and we were on NPR, Weekend Edition, and Bellevue public access. Also, we helped out with a guy who was doing a movie about James Tiptree, Jr.—we do a song about her.

SH: Yeah, after the NPR spot, two of the editors at Tor mentioned you on their weblogs.

McNulty: Oh, really? Tor Books? That's really exciting.

Orgel: The library thing, sometimes it's good, sometimes it's a little bit of a bummer, because you're in this podunk little town, they look at it and go “huh?” but overall afterwards, it's pretty positive.

Stratton: The kids get into it, and a lot of the younger adults, after they warm up and get adjusted to the music. It's like being in cold water. Older people, once they've adjusted to how loud it is, they start to absorb what we're doing, and then by the end of it they see how the kids react, and they're into it.

Orgel: Next spring and summer, we're going to go on a tour of pretty much the whole nation, and I really want to do libraries. We've got dates booked at libraries St. Louis and Ann Arbor. I've been writing people at the American Library Association, but I haven't gotten a lot of response yet. Though the publicity we got from just doing libraries in western Washington—we made a documentary about that—it's been kind of amazing. “There's this metal band that's playing libraries!”

Stratton: Both my parents were librarians and library directors. My mom works on various literacy programs, and that's sort of where that came from, but it also comes from playing so many rock shows. People take home the books we throw, then come back to us a couple years later and say “I hadn't read a book in twenty years.”

McNulty: And it happens more than you think.

Stratton: So we're all like, “this shit actually could work, you know?” So that's another angle, to make something worthwhile out of it.

Orgel: And we want to play cons.

Stratton: Why not play sci-fi cons? Although it's preaching to the converted, I just want to play to a room where, when you say the name of the author, everyone will go “woooow!”

McNulty: Well, it happens in San Francisco and Portland.

Orgel: I figure if we get into a con, it'll be worth it just to get someone to pay some serious attention to us.

Stratton: One of the reasons we haven't done half the shit we want to, is because we're lazy. We've all got lots of little things going. One of the things we want to get from the ALA is some kind of advance money so we can buy a new van or fix up our old one, or some kind of sponsorship. Exactly the same sort of thing we'd ask for from a record label, some kind of tour support.

SH: I wonder if Tor would be into that?

McNulty: I'd sell out to Tor Books like that. (snaps fingers)

Stratton: It's tough to get support. We're not super radio-friendly.

McNulty: That's kind of what I love about it, playing libraries.

Orgel: Yeah, it's brutal metal, but it goes over in libraries.

SH: Maybe you could play one of the parties at Orycon.

Stratton: Oh, that'd be great. We'll learn a bad cover song if they want—"Born to be Wild?” Though we should clarify to people out there reading this thing: We're not a filk act, by any stretch of the imagination.

Orgel: Another thing we're doing is we're going to put out a split single with Thomas Disch.

McNulty: It's him reading the first chapter of his book; a rap song by a guy called Saddam X who's popular like Britney Spears, but he's a totally militant Muslim, and militant Islam is really an underground popular thing—

Stratton: He's a twelve-year-old suicide bomber who lived and became a rap singer.

Orgel: On the flipside, we're doing our song about him [Disch], and a couple others. We'll package it like an Ace Double.

SH: Have any writers other than Disch approached you? Are you on any author's radars?

Orgel: I met Ursula K. LeGuin. I gave her the 45 that has her song on it. Someone else had told her about it.

Stratton: I met Octavia Butler. She must have thought I was a babbling freak, I was so nervous.

McNulty: She's got our gear, though, right?

Stratton: She's got our song about her, and our video. And we did talk briefly with someone who was really close to Robert Anton Wilson.

Orgel: I'm on his mailing list.

McNulty: Yeah, he's aware of Blöödhag.

Stratton: We were trying to put together something with him.

McNulty: It was you guys who were talking about Damon Knight, right? Down in Portland?

SH: Yeah.

Stratton: I just read *The Futurians* on recommendation from my mom. That's the book about the early days in New

York, about their little clubs, and their inter-scene politics back in the day, who was sleeping with who and whatnot.

Stratton: And Forrest J. Ackerman—should we tell the story? I'm so embarrassed.

McNulty: We screwed up like three times. He was supposed to introduce our record, and he called my answering machine.

Stratton: He left a great introduction.

McNulty: He left *two* great introductions—I erased the first one. The next one he did was so great, it was like Boris Karloff. Then my phone got cut off, so I lost my voice mail.

Stratton: We were too embarrassed to call him back and ask him to do it a third time.

McNulty: The next time we're down there, I'm bringing a tape recorder or something, and we'll get it for real. I love that guy.

Orgel: Have you seen his house?

SH: No.

Orgel: It's well worth seeing.

McNulty: You've gotta see it next time you're in L.A.

Orgel: He's got a whole Metropolis room.

McNulty: A whole Fritz Lang room.

Stratton: You go down in his book room—

McNulty: You just want to fall over.

Stratton: Everything you ever wanted. Entire collections of pulp magazines on sliding bookshelves.

Stratton: To answer the earlier question about whether we're going to expand—I think doing this literacy thing is about as far as we need to go.

McNulty: I don't want to get off this science fiction and metal thing too much.

Stratton: I don't know what normal literacy programs do—they have celebrities read to kids? We'll do that same thing. If we get tired of rocking it then we'll just turn it into a program.

SH: In the Multnomah county system down in Portland, they have a program called “Read To A Dog.” They bring a nice dog in, and the kid goes into a room with it and reads to it.

McNulty: That's good, because it gets them over the fright of reading aloud. A lot of kids have that problem.

Stratton: They've got someone who isn't going to interrupt them, or lose interest.

McNulty: And it doesn't matter how long it takes for them to sound out a word.

Stratton: Good idea.

SH: We've seen you a couple times in Portland—

Orgel: Portland, we always have great crowds. They're so well-read there. We have this standing thing where you bring a book report in, and we'll refund your door price.

McNulty: We've gotten a couple too. We got one in San Francisco. San Francisco's the best town, it's like the most well-read punk-rock town in the world.

Stratton: We don't ask for much, like 200 words.

SH: The people who come out and see you in clubs, are they mostly thrashers, or are there a lot of science fiction fans who come out and see you?

McNulty: It's a combination of guys who thrash, are into metal and enjoy the metal scene, guys who are geeks and just like sci-fi, and people who know us and/or like the band. It's a bunch of people you wouldn't think would be going to a hardcore show.

Stratton: We get librarians and old folks and people who are into the various writers.

Orgel: The one thing I like a lot that we've heard is "y'know, I'm not into this kind of music, but you guys put on a good show."

Stratton: Yeah, it's a diverse crowd. The best part is that people are willing to brave these stinky rock clubs to see us, people who, you can tell don't belong there.

McNulty: The intellectuals.

Stratton: The intellectuals, you can tell they don't go out to rock clubs.

McNulty: Like this sci-fi writer guy who came out to see us, and brought his girlfriend with him. She was dressed up to go out, you know what I mean, and this guy dragged her along to this stinky rock club to see Blöödhag. And then I sat there and talk to him about science fiction and horror for forty-five minutes while she was sitting there, and I felt so bad....

SH: How do the uninitiated react to the science fiction evangelism thing?

Stratton: Anybody who doesn't get it, they'll just yell for us to shut up the whole time.

McNulty: And that's great, because then we can yell back at them.

Stratton: A lot of people appreciate the enthusiasm we put into the show.

McNulty: Even if they get sick of our talking halfway through the set, as soon as we start playing, they shut up, and they're rocking. As long as we keep the music up, we're all right.

Stratton: We hear a lot of this at the show: “I don't read a lot, but I like you guys.” That's the opposite of “I'm not into this music, but I like you guys.”

McNulty: A lot of rockers don't think we're serious.

Stratton: They get there, and the first song is about Joanna Russ, the author of this and this, and everybody laughs. Some people laugh cause they know about Joanna Russ, and they know about the joke I'm telling, but most people laugh because they think the next song is about Satan and pussy. So they're like, okay, that song was about an author, but by the time the fifth song comes they're like, “oh shit, these guys are serious.” And as soon as they start getting hit with books it's like, “oh, these guys really *are* serious.”

Orgel: It's gotten Jake in trouble a couple times.

Stratton: I talked my way out of both of those fights.

McNulty: Either that or I have to actually fight.

Stratton: You never know what's going to happen. Seldom do we have no response.

Orgel: The cool thing about Portland is the books don't come back.

Stratton: Sometimes I have to give them a little lecture.

McNulty: We have actually stopped playing. I've walked offstage. In Phoenix, we both walked offstage.

SH: Is there anyone you're reluctant to do a song about?

Stratton: Like I was saying earlier, I don't want to do a negative song. It's kind of like, if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. I want to use the band as a way to promote these authors and get people to actually check them out, not just to talk shit about them.

McNulty: We're not going to do L. Ron Hubbard, we're not going to do Dean R. Koontz, V. C. Andrews, Stephen King, Michael Crichton. Why bother?

SH: J. K. Rowling? She would fly for the kids in the libraries.

McNulty: It'd be silly not to cash in on that. I like that shit.

Orgel: Pullman's better.

McNulty: I don't like that comparison. One's better? It's a totally different deal. One's this, and one's that.

Stratton: Whenever we can, we want to put together CD's of similar authors. Like for kids' authors—we have a plan to do a CD with Roald Dahl, C. S. Lewis, Lloyd Alexander, Daniel Manus Pinkwater. Pinkwater, I actually corresponded with when I was a kid, I was a big Pinkwater fan. Got a lot of positive support from him. Couldn't speak higher of him.

Orgel: Then we're going to do a whole Eastern Bloc album. Lem, the Strugatsy brothers, and a couple others you don't hear all the time. Technically we could do Asimov, he was born over there—

SH: You guys are really into the classics, like Arthur C. Clarke—

McNulty: We're half and half, man, hip writers and classic ones.

Stratton: There's so many classic writers we haven't covered yet that to concentrate on the new guys—

McNulty: We try to do one and then the other.

Stratton: We did Neal Stephenson, but we still haven't done Edgar Allan Poe.

Orgel: You can get a lot of blank looks. You want to do those classics just for the name recognition. Fortunately, we've already done a lot of the big names—Dick, Ellison—we've moved past that, those are old songs now.

Stratton: The old songs are not as much fun to play.

Orgel: We've gotten better.

McNulty: We do resurrect old songs now and then.

Stratton: We go to rewrite them and every time we start rewriting them, we could do a whole better other song.

McNulty: There's so many writers out there.

Stratton: It's kinda nice, because other bands must face the problem of knowing people want to hear their old songs, and never wanting to play them.

McNulty: Could you imagine having to play “You Really Got Me” or something like Ray Davies has to?

Stratton: They can express themselves in their solos. There's a drum solo, a guitar solo. We don't have any solos. It's just the way we are.

McNulty: The problem is, we like so many different kinds of music, it'd be so easy to come up with “this is a punk song

about such-and-such, and this is an acoustic song about so-and-so." We have to put boundaries on ourselves, because honestly I could play a space-rock song about Arthur C. Clarke if I wanted to. We could be a space-rock band right now. We all have the skills to do it, but that's not the point. The point is, when we made it up, we said, we've gotta stick to our guns here.

SH: So who brought the metal influence to the band?

McNulty: We grew up on metal. I grew up on metal in high school.

Stratton: So many metal bands had sci-fi titles, art, themes, but most of the time they don't say "this song was inspired by such-and-such." That was probably the initial inspiration way back in my psyche.

McNulty: You know what my inspiration was? The metalhead that I used to sit next to in English class. He would read fantasy and I would read sci-fi. We liked the same bands, but I liked more punk and hardcore, and he liked metal. We would read while the class was going on, and we still got straight A's. That was my inspiration right there. That's what it's all about—you don't have to be dumbass when you're a metalhead.

Stratton: We want to take the anti-intellectual slant out of rock and say, be smart.

McNulty: Be smart and rock and still not suck—

Stratton: It's not rebellious when the only job you can get because you're so fucking stupid is at the convenience store.

McNulty: And it's not rebellious to talk about drinking and fucking and Satan. It's not rebellious anymore. It's rebellious to talk about reading.

SH: What are you reading? What's your favorite stuff right now?

Orgel: Iain Banks. Jack Womack's Random Acts of Senseless Violence—very depressing. Lots of non-fiction, stuff about the Freemasons, physics books. Philip K. Dick. Michael Swanwick, Dorothy Allison. Raymond Chandler.

McNulty: Iain Banks. A. M. Holmes, magic-esoteric. One crappy sci-fi pulp and one new or modern thing and then one esoteric.

Stratton: Autobiographies and biographies. History. The last fiction I enjoyed was Michael Chabon's *Kavalier and Clay.* I was a big comic collector for years, so that really spoke to me. I just read the latest Johnny Cash autobiography, the Dee Dee Ramone autobiography, Graham Chapman. I can't stop thinking about the minutia of other people's lives. One of my favorites is Akira Kurosawa's autobiography. I live a few blocks from the library, so I'll go in there and search up various people and see if they have an autobiography and then request it.

Orgel: Our drummer, what's fun with him is to turn him on to the classics. We're conditioning him. He's not here with us because he's got a gig with another band. He's very enigmatic.

SH: It's like you live the lifestyle, always reading.

Stratton: Well, my cable's out.

McNulty: I read constantly, three books a week. Not voraciously, but a lot.

Stratton: I kinda had the rebellious reaction to having librarians for parents. I got into comic books, movies, anything that wasn't regular books, though I never stopped reading, and I snapped back eventually.

SH: Finally, one more question, the most important of all: teleporter or time machine?

Orgel: Teleporter.

Stratton: Teleporter.

McNulty: Can the time machine go back and forward in time, or only back?

SH: Both ways.

McNulty: Cause if you go back in time and you can't come back—I gotta be able to get back. But if I could go back in time, I'd already have seen the Velvet Underground and Black Flag at Redondo Beach and stuff like that. I would go everywhere, I would go back to all the places I'm interested in.

Orgel: I've been waiting, it's the year 2000, and where's my flying car? Why aren't we wearing silvery clothing?

McNulty: Where's my hoverbelt? They have the technology.

Orgel: If they wanted to make a flying car, they could.

McNulty: They got jetpacks, but I want a hoverbelt.

Orgel: That's why a teleporter.

McNulty: I'm not really into instant matter transportation.

* * * *

More About Blöödhag

Several of Blöödhag's songs can be downloaded from the Web in MP3 or RealAudio format:

“Jules Verne”
RealAudio format
“Octavia Butler”
RealAudio format
“William Gibson”
RealAudio format
“Neal Stephenson”
RealAudio format
MP3 format

Blöödhag has produced three short releases and one full-length album:

G.L.O.W. (Gorgeous Ladies of Writing) (45 EP)
Hooked On Demonics (Cassette EP)
Dewey Decibel System (45 EP)
Necrotic Bibliophilia (full-length CD)
Appetite for Deconstruction (forthcoming)

For more on Blöödhag, including their song list, ordering information for their albums, and concert schedules, visit their official Web site.

* * * *

Victoria Garcia and John Aegard live in Portland, OR in a state of holy matrimony. This is their first collaboration.

Victoria made her fiction debut this year in the acclaimed anthology *Polyphony: Stories Beyond Genre.* John's stories have been published by *The Third Alternative, On Spec,* and

Best of the Rest 3, and will shortly appear in 3SF. His reviews have appeared on Slashdot and also here on *Strange Horizons.* To see more about us, check out www.johnzo.com.

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All Those Bleached Bones ...

By Andy Miller

9/2/02

all those bleached bones
beside a road carved out of desert night

curled back in waves
propulsion

* * * *

having flung d'artagnan clear
to luna's tepid stone

all earthly aspirations
our astronaut ignites

* * * *

discarding only those most hollow shells
in his affective wake.

* * * *

Andy Miller is currently working out in the mountains of central Virginia. He's a writer, artist, and composer.

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The Children of the Moon

By Heather Shaw

9/9/02

I

You can see them as they move among you
their opalescent aura shimmers like summer pavement heat,
mother-of-pearl, on the tips of their frizzed-out split ends.
They like to think they're normal.
The light behind their eyes is a look they share with the acid-
eaters, you know, an enlightened other-worldliness.
Their power comes from this world, though,
the dark side lighted only by the cycles of the moon ...
Draw it down, draw it down.
The world of night is their kingdom—
they rule as the rulers sleep.
In woody nature the feather light edges soften
the twinkle of lights glimpsed in the trees.
They leap from one long shadow to the next,
Zig-zagging in catty-corners.
Everything in the negative, the feminine dark

shadows
moon-shortened.

II

In the suburbs, you can hear the triumphant "Hah!"
as the pretty girl dances from her tiny tab. Night vision
comes from dropping back, pupils wide giving dark eyes
innocent overtones. Lovely Sacred Daughter of Diane.
She is sister to children of the moon, city lights too
close, ancient roots faded. Frantic finger-
honey finds solace in the night, each star a distant diamond
winkling clearly reflected in the dark space of her eyes.
The mad chant sweats beneath her delicate summer rain gown.
Using the game to create the essential essence,
she is led in where glowing bulbs force the male upon her.
Mist is left on the threshold; inside where the air won't move

her delicate power pounds beneath the want of others.
In her tiny sleep, the music of her distant siblings dying
doesn't waken her.

* * * *

Heather Shaw has been a poetry editor, a performance poet at Lollapalooza, and was recently nominated for a Rhysling. When not immersed in verse, she writes fiction, non-fiction and makes up silly songs with her boyfriend, writer Tim Pratt. For more, see her Web site.

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Mr Hyde's Daughter

By Mary Alexandra Agner

9/16/02

watches her fingers shrink
back to human size, her knuckle hair
disappear,
leaving only the smooth, ivory skin
so coveted by gentlewomen.
Too tired to forget the rapist
she has stalked to empty alley in her madness,
she feels the flaking, dry skin
of his throat between her sensitive palms.
She feels his death kick cut her shins, again.
Again, in the morning light of the rented room
a cloudy liquid fizzes, full,
in the glass beaker on the desk.
The incessant sound mocks her, marks her
as a murderer. One draught down her throat
last dusk would have kept her human all night.

She picks up the paper coated with London
sewers and smeared with blood, to read
the elegant stanza she awkwardly printed
just hours ago, with her too-large hands,
while sitting on a corpse. She tastes the words.
The consonants bite and are swept away

by fluid vowels. They come so close to closing
the poem, five other stanzas written
in the last five feverish days.
One more stanza, one more life.

* * * *

Mary Alexandra Agner holds a Masters in Earth and Planetary Science from MIT and is currently enrolled in the MFA program at Emerson College. She has spent most of her life observing the universe and writing about it. She makes her home outside Boston.

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The Garden of Time

By Lorraine Schein

9/23/02

(after a painting by the Surrealist artist Eileen Agar)

Here, an atomic clock blooms chronons.
Nuclear pistils strike and quiver at the hour.
The bright petals of minutes enfold me.

A Cesium fountain spouts an arc of atoms
resonating with distant stars
that spread like weeds.

A sundial, growing profusely in the shade,
cross-pollinates a digital clock's electric blue numbers.
A nanosecond flowers into eternity.

Green horological splicings
oscillate hybrid pendulums.
Greenwich Mean Time droops on the vine.

Dinosaur seedlings sprout into
paleontologic remnants of the future.
A fossil-plant turns its bony head from the

moon
to watch us extinct.

* * * *

Lorraine Schein is a New York poet and writer whose work has appeared recently in *Gargoyle, Space and Time, Full Unit Hookup,* and *2001: A SF Poetry Anthology.*

Her work will be included in the anthologies *Angel Body and Other Magic for the Soul* (Wordcraft of Oregon) and *Mondo Alice.* Her novelette, “The Raw Brunettes,” is also available from Wordcraft.

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A Bestiary

By Tim Pratt

10/7/02

Plate Spinning

You know Amala? Big man, lives over
by the bay, hunched over with a pole
balanced on his back (I think it's a cedar
pole, but who knows?). Kids around here
(when there *were* kids around here)
used to climb on patient old Amala,
and shimmy up his pole, up through
the clouds and the top of the sky,
and they say the great wheel of the Earth
is up there, balanced on the end of the pole,
spinning, like Amala is a plate-spinner
on Ed Sullivan or in vaudeville, though
old Amala's been around since long before
those shows began. (Oh, you've got that
college-boy look on your face, you think
this sounds like that idiot Atlas, but
Amala's not as stupid, and he doesn't hate
his job, mostly; and you think “How
can he stand *on* the Earth, and at the same
time *support* the Earth?” There's a reason
the ancients never asked such dumb

questions. This isn't about physics or
geography, it's about the fact
that the world *must* rest on someone's
shoulders.) Amala always picked
one of those kids, whichever climbed
the highest with the least fear, to be
his servant for the year. It wasn't such
a bad job—I did it in my time. You
just rub duck oil into his muscles on
Midsummer's day, and soothe his
aches, and then you can go on your
way. The stories say that someday
all the ducks will be gone, over-hunted
to extinction (though I think it's more
likely they'll die from over-development
of the wetlands), and the servant
will search far and wide for duck oil
and find none, and Amala will groan
and cramp, and his muscles will shudder,
and he'll slip, just one slip in the whole
of forever, and the spinning Earth
will fall from the pole, crash into
itself, and shatter like a dropped plate.

And so, my son, I suggest you do
as I say, gather a few ducks from the lake,
take them back East with you somewhere
safe, and see that they breed; and when
a young man with callused hands

and a desperate look on his face comes
to you from far away, give him a bottle
of duck oil, free of charge, and teach
your sons to do the same. For all our sakes.

* * * *

Tim Pratt is a poet and fiction writer living in the San Francisco Bay Area. He attended Clarion in 1999, and now 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, Strange Horizons, The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror,* and other nice places. His previous publications in *Strange Horizons* can be found in our Archive. For more about Tim, visit his Web site.

Author's Note: *In my ongoing Bestiary, I focus on mythic creatures, often beings of truly cosmic stature, and attempt to look at them from an unusual perspective while still remaining true to the myths from which they originate. “Plate Spinning” is about Amala, a being from the mythology of the Tsimshian people, native to the Northwest coast of the United States.*

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Those Were the Days My Friend, We Thought They'd Never End: *The Golden Age* by John C. Wright

Reviewed by David Soyka

9/2/02

In Greek mythology, the Golden Age was an era in which humanity lived like gods, nearly immortal, without wars (because there were no nations or governments or weapons) and without need or appetite of any kind. It didn't last. In taking the name of “The Golden Age” as the title for his first novel, John C. Wright seems to suggest that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Of course, the Golden Age also refers to the pulp science fiction tradition of the 1930s and 1940s in which fabled editors Hugo Gernsback and John W. Campbell Jr. captained a bold band of storytellers who crafted tales of intergalactic adventure nevertheless grounded in scientific speculations: writings that reflected the zeitgeist of an emerging industrial nation and world superpower. Just to be sure you get that, on the dustcover above the title appears this description: “An Epic of SF Adventure.”

Considering that I recently had to explain to a 12 year old that the wooden dialogue of Star Wars was a jokey riff on the famous (well, maybe not so famous considering that she had never head of it) Flash Gordon episodic films, I suppose that there are readers who won't get it, any more than they'll get the myriad allusions to classical philosophy, SF and

mainstream literature, and contemporary culture. I suspect that a few went over my gray-haired head as well.

No matter. Even if you don't recognize all the references, *The Golden Age* is still a marvelous romp. It may deepen your pleasure to catch the more obvious allusions (when the main character wishes to reach “home,” he clicks his heels three times) or deepen your understanding to pick up on more the abstruse ones (the novel's actual subtitle, “A Romance of the Far Future” alludes to Olaf Stapledon's SF classic *Last and First Men: A Romance of the Near and Far Future*), but you don't need to go reference-hunting. This story, like all the best stories, can work without explanation.

In some ways, SF storytellers had it easier in the Golden Age. To evoke the future, all they had to do was strap a blaster onto their characters’ hips, mumble something or other about the atomic drive that got them to other worlds, paint the aliens green and maybe add a set of arms or eyes or webbed feet. In projecting a far-future humanity, Wright has to be a bit more inventive, since our present contains so much that only a short while ago was considered futuristic. Of course, predicting the future is not the point. But in paying homage to the space opera tradition, Wright avoids the cliches (except where he's making fun of them) while placing the convention in a whole new context. At the same time, quite in the tradition of Stapledon, Wright poses the big questions as to what makes human existence meaningful, though in a way that is perhaps more entertaining.

As in the Golden Age of Greece, humanity has achieved virtual immortality, with the emphasis on the “virtual” as the

means of life extension, as opposed to the grace of the gods. While still possessing flesh and blood bodies, people for the most part "exist" on a higher plane of computer-generated simulacra. As Wright describes it:

> Here was a future where all men were recorded as brain-information in a diamond logic crystal occupying the core of the earth; there was one where all humanity existed in the threads of a plantlike array of sails and panels forming a Dyson Sphere around the sun; a third promised, larger than worlds, housings for trillions of minds and superminds, existing in the absolute cold of trans-Neptunian space—cold was required for any truly precise subatomic engineering—but with rails of elevators of unthinkably dense material running across hundreds of AU, across the whole width of the solar system, and down into the mantle of the sun, both to mine the hydrogen ash for building matter, and tap the vast energy of Sol, should ever matter or energy in any amount be needed by the immobile deep-space mainframes housing the minds of mankind.

Got that?

The Golden Age has been compared to *Neuromancer* in that its breathtaking, if sometimes abstruse, language

comprises original world building of the first rank. While it seems unlikely that Wright's work will match Gibson's by inspiring a subgenre of its own, that is no criticism of Wright's creative prowess. Gibson's success was enhanced by the emergence of the Internet and computing capabilities that seemed to turn his vision of the digital age into realizable reality. His notions of “envisioning data” and avatars are not that far removed from what has actually evolved. Wright's future is not analogous to the Internet. (I doubt any of us will be inhabiting virtual Dyson Spheres around the sun anytime soon.) Instead, it represents what cybergenetics could conceivably lead to—a world so fabricated, so literally and “spiritually” unreal that it is arguably no longer human. For whatever adventures Case had in Gibsonian cyberspace, the characters were all too human, particularly their negative sides.

While the postulated virtual worlds of *The Golden Age* are extraordinarily inventive, the plot, or at least what we have of it so far, is a bit more conventional, loosely based on the Greek myth of Phaethon, the offspring of the sun god Helios. Accused of being illegitimate, Phaethon drove a drove a sun chariot through the heavens to prove his parentage, creating the Milky Way galaxy. Unfortunately, he's still on a learner's permit and gets too close to the Earth. To prevent the planet's complete incineration by the scorching flames of the chariot, Zeus kills Phaeton with a thunderbolt (though you would think a little water might have done the trick as well).

Similarly, Wright's namesake wants to explore interstellar space, a venture which the ruling Peers (among them his

ostensible father, named Helion) fear will upset the stability of a highly complacent civilization that, for all its technological achievement, is content to remain within the physical boundaries of the solar system. Instead of killing Wright's version of Phaethon, the Peers erase his memory so he will not only abandon the project, but will have no recollection of ever trying. Moreover, Phaethon consents to this amnesiac state. The book is about how—and, more importantly, why—Phaeton chooses to discover what has happened to his memory and to retrieve it, despite the warnings of dire consequences not only to himself, but his family.

Wright casts his Phaeton in the classic Heinlein mold, with a significant additive of the Ayn Rand individualist. He is a man of action, the consequences be damned, even if it threatens the greater good. For there can be no “greater good” if it stymies the individual initiative, creativity and risk taking that make humanity a force even in an immense universe and that inspire others to strive further towards ever new achievements.

The plot is not all individualistic heroics, however. The author is a retired attorney, so it is not surprising that some legalistic leavening moves the plot along. It is also, in parts, very funny.

What it is not, however, is finished. The ending, though it nicely reflects the philosophical proposition of the premise, is just a cliffhanger for a concluding volume (entitled *Phoenix Exultant,* due out in January of 2003). Until the real ending is revealed, I'll have to reserve judgment on Wright's talents as a storyteller. And the wait seems unnecessary. At 336 pages,

The Golden Age is hardly weighty in comparison to the 800-page doorstoppers that burden book sellers' shelves. The complete tale could have been bound in one volume. But, no, readers not only have to wait, they have to shell out another $25 to find out how the story works out. The same sort of strategy was employed by Tony Daniel's publisher, whose *Metaplanetary* is another highly inventive and distinctive space opera that ends as the preface for a concluding volume. Maybe it's an industry trend. No, come to think about it, it's really just the continuation of a longstanding tradition set by the aforementioned Flash Gordon serials: keep them hanging on the edge of their seats at the end so they'll come back next week and pay for more of the same.

Alas, the wait will be longer than a week. But I suspect it will be worth it.

* * * *

David Soyka is a former journalist and college teacher who writes the occasional short story and freelance article. He makes a living writing corporate marketing communications, which is a kind of fiction without the art. His previous publications in *Strange Horizons* can be found in our Archive.

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Art's Fiercest Spark Burns in Alan Moore's *Promethea*

Reviewed by Laura Blackwell

9/9/02

Promethea, born a mortal, grew to womanhood in the realm of the imagination. Thanks to the loving efforts of poets, artists, and writers, she has walked the material world as a dream lover, a fairy princess, a merciful angel, a warrior queen, and a comic-book superheroine. In some form or another, she must return. Denizens of both our world and the sparkling alternate Earth of Alan Moore's graphic novel *Promethea* may deny her existence—but real or not, Promethea, demigoddess of myth and fiction, is necessary. A new Promethea rises in the not-quite-here-and-now, where she struggles against both ancient foes and the stimulus-hungry amorality of her jaded times.

Award-winning graphic story writer Alan Moore (*Watchmen, Top 10, From Hell*) has expressed a desire to break away from the superhero genre that dominates the graphic-novel marketplace. With penciller and co-creator J.H. Williams III, Moore evokes the present-day Promethea as a “science heroine” of a glittering alternate New York, but there's no way to confuse her with either real-life figures or Spider-Man. Clad in golden armor, tattooed with symbols from Egyptian mythology, wielding a caduceus that glows with blue energy and writhes with snakes, Promethea is best described as a powerful living myth. These are the first three books of an ongoing monthly graphic novel, which has

contributed to two Best Writer Eisner Awards (for Moore, 2000 and 2001) and three Best Letterer Eisners (for Todd Klein, 2000, 2001, and 2002) as well as winning its own Eisner for Best Single Issue (Issue #10, “Sex, Stars, and Serpents, 2001).

College student Sophie Bangs is researching a character called Promethea for her folklore class. The unusual name recurs in seemingly unrelated stories from a 1780 poem to pulp fiction to a long run in comic books. Although the works bear little resemblance to one another—indeed, many of them are so dissimilar that each suggests near-total ignorance of the others—Promethea retains certain characteristics. Almost all the Prometheas have dark skin, and many of them wear clothes with Egyptian and/or Greek motifs. Whether from Fairyland or Hy-Brasil, Promethea always hails from a mystical elsewhere. Piecing together the puzzle, Sophie arranges to interview Barbara Shelley, widow of comic-book writer Steve Shelley, who was the last to write a Promethea. Sophie arrives at Barbara's New York apartment full of stories and enthusiasm, only to be turned away with the caution, “You don't wanna go looking for folklore. And you especially don't want folklore to come looking for you.”

At first, it seems the worst thing about this encounter is its impact on Sophie's term paper. When the city's resident science heroes, Five Swell Guys, hover their flying platform above Sophie to deliver a warning from their psychic team member, Kenneth, Sophie sees the encounter as nothing more than a random brush with celebrity. It is only when a living shadow pitches her from an elevated walkway that

Sophie realizes that Promethea is more than a term paper—and that there are humans, and other creatures, who would sooner kill than see her on Earth again.

The first, unheralded Promethea was a small child, daughter of a hermetic scholar in ancient Alexandria. When a murderous Christian mob attacked him—much like the fate that befell real-life mathematician Hypatia—Promethea's father placed her in the care of Thoth and Hermes, the scribe-gods of Egypt and Greece, respectively. They took her to the Immateria, the realm of myth and imagination, where she attained immortality as a story. At times, when the material world has felt the need of her, and when the seed of the Promethea myth has taken root in a fertile mind, Promethea has taken form to protect and mend the physical world with the tools of the Immateria.

It has never been easy. One Promethea saved wounded soldiers one by one in World War I, encouraging them and guiding them to safety. Another fought unseen battles in the legendary land of Hy-Brasil—witnessed by many, but believed to be fiction. Yet another died at the hands of a loved one when her identity was made known. Each of them brought something new to Promethea, and each of them reveled in the more-than-life of a demigoddess, but each of them keenly felt the dangers of being Promethea.

Sophie's interest in the Promethea myth has given imagination's enemies a new target. Sophie must use her pen to stretch herself to mythic stature, to become the Promethea her age needs.

This shiny, ironic, retro-futuristic present, with its flying cars and “computerized smart-slime,” is a smug era with a lamentably short attention span. It teems with ads for the one-note Weeping Gorilla comic, with billboards for Holo-Ho and similar establishments, and with news service TEXTure showing footage of everything from the New York mayor's forty-two personalities to the murderous antics of celebrity omnipath The Painted Doll. Disinterested in mythic resonance, listening only for the next sound bite, the people of the material world need something deeper than real. They need the spiritual substance that only a creature of myth can bring.

Thrust into the role of Promethea with little more than a handwritten poem full of cross-outs, Sophie must learn the rules of magic in order to protect herself and her two worlds. Magic does not answer to wishes, but to reason and ingenuity. The former Prometheas guide Sophie through the Immateria, teaching her to use the holy weapons: the cup of compassion, the sword of reason, the pentacle of worldly knowledge, and the wand of will. Moore and Williams weave the story around the suits and major arcana of the Tarot, Tantric lore, the Sephiroth of the Kabbalah, astrology, and probably other schools of magic as well.

In the hands of a lesser creative team, the plot would collapse under the weight of symbolism and literary allusion. Some writers would bury their story under piles of quotations or turn their characters into talking bibliographies. Even in Moore's excellent pseudo-Victorian *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* adventures, it's easy to get sidetracked by the literary allusions and forget about the

actual events. Moore and Williams work together to keep the concrete references as part of the story and the setting. Symbolic references sometimes enter in the background or as a decorative border, but they never impinge on Sophie's transformation in *Book One,* her lessons in magic in *Book Two,* or her journey accompanying a friend through death in *Book Three.*

Promethea's tone changes from solemn to arch to sprightly, sometimes in the course of a few panels. Williams's attractive, expressive art makes the shifting landscape of the Immateria as real as Sophie's poster-plastered room and the sulfur-belching demons as solid as Sophie and her worn-out mother. The layout adjusts to the demands of the story, using bubbles and even frameless construction as well as traditional boxy panels. Some stories, like *Book Two*'s Eisner-winning, tasteful Tantric tutorial, “Sex, Stars, and Serpents,” combine several of these elements to striking effect. In the same volume, “Pseunami” uses a “wide-screen” format, requiring the reader to turn the book on its side to read the long, seamless panels.

Williams lays a strong foundation, and the rest of the artistic team builds *Promethea* to great heights. Inker Mick Gray sets definite, but delicate, lines not unlike Jae Lee's work on the *Inhumans* limited series. Colorist Jeromy Cox handles flesh tones and candy-bright clothing under every light from near-darkness to retina-scorching brilliance, and makes them all look equally alive. Legendary letterer Todd Klein (*The Sandman*) employs a number of different fonts and word balloons to illustrate the characters and their

predicaments. Williams occasionally steps aside for notable guest artists. Charles Vess, who illustrated “A Midsummer Night's Dream” (*The Sandman* #19), the only series-based graphic story ever to win the World Fantasy Award, sets his pen to the earliest Promethea story in *Book One*'s “A Faerie Romance.” Digital artist Jose Villarubia fleshes out the images to hyper-realism when Sophie follows the path of pentacles in *Book Three*'s “Rocks and Hard Places.”

All three hardcover volumes contain original cover art, but *Book One* also includes Alex Ross's alternate cover for “The Radiant, Heavenly City” (Issue #1) and Williams's concept sketches. The dust jackets bear exceptional art as well; the way the back covers track Sophie's progress without spoiling the story is particularly pleasing. I have been unable to verify the contents of the paperback edition of *Book One,* but can confirm that it matches the hardcover's page count. The paperback cover also features original art, but is different from the hardback.

Book One begins with a bonus essay on the fictitious Prometheas. The only extras from the single issues not found here are the “Little Margie in Misty Magic Land” short, found in the 64-page America's Best Comics special issue, and the impressively literate letter columns, which serve as a makeshift bibliography of influences. All hardcover editions come with sewn-in ribbon markers, an elegant touch accentuating the fact that these books are not to be skimmed, but *read.*

Such trimmings make the books sound indulgent, and such professed depth makes them sound dull. The true genius of

Promethea, however, lies not in its immense beauty or its effortless erudition, but the way these things are blended with humor and with daily human life, fusing them into one shimmering, vital, yet accessible, work. It doesn't seem a bit odd that ordinary Sophie, who sleeps in a t-shirt and underwear and chows down on Achocolypse Pops every morning, is also Promethea, a magnificent demigoddess and self-described “holy splendor of the imagination.” Promethea embodies everything that is human—more than that, everything that a human can dream. Ever shifting, ever radiant, Promethea is the flame of imagination that casts the light of meaning on our lives.

* * * *

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The Honeyed Knots of Jeffrey Ford's *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories*

Reviewed by Amy O'Loughlin

9/16/02

In 1998, Jeffrey Ford won the World Fantasy Award for his second novel, *The Physiognomy.* Ford stated that before receiving news of his nomination he really had no idea what the World Fantasy Award was. Despite his lack of familiarity with the prize, however, Ford is no newcomer to the field. He's been contributing bold, stylish writing to the speculative fiction genre for many years. Ford's first book, *Vanitas* (1988, Space and Time Publications), can be regarded as a rehearsal for *The Physiognomy.* Some of his earlier short stories—"The Alchemist," "Becalmed at Sea," and "Weeps"—published in *Space and Time,* date back to 1989. And Ford's "Well-Built City Trilogy," which comprises *The Physiognomy*; the *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, *Memoranda*; and *The Beyond,* a Best Fiction Book of 2001 selected by *The Washington Post Book World,* has been acclaimed as a masterwork of surrealism.

Broad recognition for Ford may have been slow in coming because his work has proven difficult to classify generically. In comments on his writing, he has stressed that for him and his work, genre is less important than the quality and thematic intent of the narrative. His stories emerge from his head, heart, and dreams, not from a genre. Only after the story has been transcribed and has found its way to readers

can its genre be categorized. For Ford, it is the work of fiction that constitutes the genre, not the writer.

So Ford doesn't get bogged down in distinctions when writing. In fact, anything goes, and quite often Ford uses the bits and pieces of his dreams to carry his stories along. Like dreams, Ford's stories straddle the chasm between things manifest and things absurd in a realm where anything is possible. That *modus operandi* is delightfully evident in his first short story collection, *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories.*

A book of 16 diverse tales, including “Bright Morning” and “Something by the Sea,” both written specifically for this Golden Gryphon Press collection, and the previously unpublished “Out of the Canyon,” *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant* takes up a panoply of profound themes in ways that blur generic distinctions. The collection delves into consumerism and capitalism, religion and madness, in settings that range from the present to the far future to the never-were-nor-will-be. “Floating in Lindrethool” takes place in a futuristic world where human brains suspended in glass globes are the latest, greatest, and most cost-effective gadgetry with which to organize your life. Contemporary characters who find themselves living next to an enigmatic psychologist formerly involved in secret government projects are featured in the mysterious “Malthusian's Zombie.” “On the Road to New Egypt” develops in more improbable directions as its protagonist chauffeurs a prankster Jesus Christ and an irksome Satan through the streets of New Jersey and beyond.

While Ford's stories certainly lean toward the playful and the out-outlandish, the extravagance of his fantastic premises is balanced by the palpability his characters and plots. Ford's copious use of autobiography helps to keep his stories close to real life. His self-insertions are not heavy-handed; mostly you learn about them in explanatory epilogues that supplement your take on plot, prose style, and character. They nevertheless significantly deepen the relationships between reader, writer, characters, and themes.

Ford's use of autobiography is strongest in “The Honeyed Knot,” so it is unsurprising that this story teaches you the most about how his stories work. For the past 15 years, Ford has been a professor of Research Writing, Composition, and Early American Literature at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey. His students often inspire his writing with their own compositions and class assignments. In “The Honeyed Knot,” no inspiration was needed. The events happened. As Ford tells it, the story is “99.9% true.” He swears. And if so, there are some eerie phenomena occurring in those New Jersey suburbs.

“The Honeyed Knot” gets it title from the fifteenth-century, religio-philosophical book written by Nicholas Avramody, a text that offers the “honey knot” as metaphor for the “impossibly complex plot of human existence” and that within the knot, “all our lives touch and crisscross and bind together for good but unknowable reasons.” The sweetness is that this “inexplicable mess” is God's plan for us.

Position that concept in step with a middle-aged writing student named Mrs. Apes who has a plate in her head and the

inability to remember her dead daughter's name; a group of students who have stores of *News of the World*-type tragedies to relate; the professor, Mr. Ford, who must reason out the oddities in his classroom; and a dead, talking deer. Coincidence builds on coincidence, and strange things start affecting Ford's personal life.

As with most of Ford's writing, when you're submerged, you don't wish to be released, but you still scramble to reach a story's dramatic and satisfying wrap-up. That's especially true of “The Honeyed Knot.”

Ford creates many different kinds of honeyed knots in his stories. The title story of the collection uses satire to create its sweet mess. Nominated for a 2001 Nebula Award and a 2001 Locus Award, “The Fantasy Writer's Assistant” is a comedic, pointed play on writing, literature, and, as its title suggests, the genre of fantasy. Early on, it's clear that Ford is planning a fun trip, and you're bound for a chuckle or two if you're along for the ride.

Ashmolean, the author of an ever-popular series of “doorstopper” fantasy novels (Glandar, the Sword Wielder of Kreegenvale!), is more caricature than character. He's “a giant sloth whose DNA has been snipped, tortured together with that of a man's.” Undoubtedly, Ashmolean's been enmeshed in Kreegenvale for far too long.

Ashmolean hires Mary, the narrator of this adventurous tale, to be his research assistant. She must peruse Ashmolean's vast Kreegenvale chronicles to ensure that his new novels’ fantasy worlds are free of “inconsistencies":

> There was nothing he hated more than to go to a conference and have someone ask him, ‘How could Stribble Flap the Lewd impregnate the snapping Crone of Deffleton Marsh, in *Glandar Groans for Death,* when Glandar had lopped off the surly gnome's member in *The Unholy Battle of Holiness*?'

As Ashmolean tries to write the conclusion to his latest, *The Butcher of Malfeasance,* he discovers that he is suddenly “blind” to Glandar, cannot fathom what his next move should be. He calls on Mary to create the ending for him. Her foray into writing is as vivid as it is instructive. She experiences firsthand that words can “breath[e] life into the impossible,” and gains an inkling of her own future, in the process.

“The Fantasy Writer's Assistant” is hilarious and bitingly sarcastic. As an astute observer of the genre at which he pokes some fun, Ford shows that he has the lingo down and can replicate the construct. Ashmolean's writing may be “redundant, cliché-ridden hackwork” to some—Ford doesn't judge—but Ford's own stringing together of words offers originality and imagination.

“Make no mistake,” Ford writes, “words have magic.” Ford enforces this belief in “Creation,” a charming, heavily autobiographical coming-of-age fable of a boy on a quest for knowledge. Influenced by catechism lessons with the aptly named and witch-like Mrs. Grimm (would you believe Ford's own CCD teacher was a Mrs. Grim?), the boy finds enchantment in the creation story of Adam and Eve. He gets

the idea to try and “confer life” to a handmade “man,” which he has constructed out of branches, bark, mushrooms, and fern. Deep in the woods, the boy “practice[s] creation,” and much to his surprise, his man, Cavanaugh, comes alive.

Or does he? Ford's tale defies the explicit. “Creation” is enjoyably open-ended. You decide what is you wish to believe.

A touching subplot to “Creation” exists in the boy's relationship with his father. It's mutually respectful. The boy admires his father's no-nonsense attitude and weighs carefully his anti-religion pronouncements; the father supports the boy in his strange time of need.

Touching and charming are nowhere to be found “On the Road to New Egypt.” Ford's second story with religious themes returns to his more flamboyant and uninhibited style. Indeed, the two stories could hardly be more divergent. Ford admits that he often “like[s] to party” with Christ, “horn-head,” and sometimes the Buddha. That may explain the hallucinatory quality of this “remix of a contemporary legend.”

Christ, the Devil, and the narrator/driver Jeff get high on Carthage Red dope; cruise around in the car; and appear in Florida to collect a Mrs. Lumley, who's rumored to make sainthood because of a spate of miracles she's recently performed. Things go horribly haywire for the hopped-up trio, but the story resolves as dreamily as it begins.

As an examination of the interdependence of Good and Evil, “On the Road” is fresh but profane, and some may find its irreverence unsettling. After all, it's not too often that you read about Christ and an ex-blonde bombshell “eat[ing] of the

fruit of the knowledge of good and evil for a few hours and then lay[ing] back, hav[ing] a smoke."

Is Ford disclosing important insights about belief systems in these two stories, which turn "Judeo-Christian mythology" upside down and inside out? Perhaps. Yet in Ford's world of writing, there's not necessarily a link between the literal and the figurative; this off-the-wall weirdness comes straight from his head.

Weird doesn't begin to describe the characters and peculiar chicanery that takes place in "Exo-Skeleton Town." Ford tells this creepy-crawly tale in the "melodramatic fashion of the black and white movies" he watched as a kid. It's a "creature feature" of outrageous proportion, and while reading it you just might get the feeling that bugs are tickling on your skin.

On a very out-of-the-way planet, a giant flea-like entity named Stootladdle is mayor of Exo-Skeleton Town, the "dung-rolling capitol of the universe, where the sun never shines and bug folk barter their excremental wealth for Earth movies almost two centuries old."

What? Dung as commodity? Yes. But wait, there's more. This "*freasance*" has cashé back on Earth. Scientists discover that, when ingested, the freasance proves to be an unbelievably effective aphrodisiac for earthlings. A twenty-year, government-operated, mutually beneficial trade-off of bug dung for Earth's ancient Hollywood films of the 1940s develops. Things get dicey when the earthlings reach the limit of the '40s movie library and they try to peddle films themselves. As you might expect, rules are broken, black markets crop up, and crackdowns on illicit dealings follow.

To reach the bug planet, an earthling must embark on a year's journey in a spaceship and be outfitted in an essential, protective “exo-suit.” Improvements to this ill-fitting gear occur throughout the years, so that now earthlings can arrive at Exo-Skeleton Town in an “exo-skin” that looks exactly like any Hollywood star of choice: Rita Hayworth, Clark Gable, and, of course, Bogie. It's a clever little trick being played on Stootladdle and the Beetle Squad.

However clever the trick, it has unhappy consequences for the people who play it. Human lives have no real significance in “Exo-Skeleton Town.” If you must hide your identity—your true self—behind a preconceived image, then freedom is just a dream.

While Ford's “Exo-Skeleton Town” draws on the negation of the human spirit in a world where its inhabitants are “strung out on loneliness,” “At Reparata,” the collection's fairy tale, reclaims the human spirit by invoking harmony, a dedication to benevolence, and fellowship. Ford exchanges dehumanization for re-humanization, and the effect is provocative and incisive.

At the Palace Reparata, in a kingdom created by the generous and gregarious Ingess (or His Royal, as he insists on being called), the practice of “equanimity” is its very “soul": No one who stands and beseeches before the palace gates is ever turned away. Therefore, Reparata is populated by a “royal retinue” of wandering outcasts—prostitutes, lunatics, assassins, highwaymen—whose lives are transformed by the whimsical titles they receive from His Royal and the communal responsibilities that go with them.

The grace of Reparata is threatened, however, when the queen Josette dies and His Royal becomes completely unraveled by grief. The courtiers, especially the thoughtful "High and Mighty of Next Week" who narrates the story, seek out a cure for His Royal's sorrow. They discover the harsh price that must be paid for his restoration: only by sloughing off the old can the new be welcomed. Yet, in the way of fairy tales, when they sacrifice all they have gained, they recover themselves and their beloved Ingess.

The Fantasy Writer's Assistant, a powerful and solid collection, astonishes with its knots of strangeness, humanity, and inventiveness. While attempting to unravel these tangles of the inscrutable and the uncanny, Ford takes you on odysseys through time and space. He formulates a kind of complex circularity where reality and fictional creations depend on one another and may become impossible to tell apart. But, have no fear; Ford is not elusive. His brand of fiction is accomplished with an original voice, a satirical wit, and a reverence for human emotion. *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant* rates as a superb accomplishment in fiction. It underscores Ford as one of today's finest writers.

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Press. Her previous publications at *Strange Horizons* can be found in our Archive.

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China Miéville's *The Scar*: The Literature We Deserve (Lucky for Us!)

Reviewed by Sherryl Vint

9/23/02

Pirates, vampires, unfathomable creatures from the depths, a kick-ass ultimate warrior, science, magic, conspiracy, betrayal, action-packed fight scenes, and moments of moving philosophical speculation. Where can a reader find all these things in one package, and, what's more, be convinced that they should all occupy the same narrative space? In China Miéville's latest offering, *The Scar.* In this novel, Miéville again demonstrates his remarkable imaginative talent for breathing fresh life into the familiar tropes of fantasy, science fiction, and horror in the hybrid style that he has labeled “weird fiction.”

Miéville's impressive credentials are worth noting here, if only because the man has yet to write something that is not nominated for a major genre award. His first novel, *King Rat,* was nominated for both the Bram Stoker and International Horror Guild First Novel Awards. His second, *Perdido Street Station,* was nominated for the British Science Fiction Association Best Novel Award in 2000, and for the World Fantasy Best Novel Award in 2001; received the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the August Derleth Award (given by the British Fantasy Society) in 2001; and was nominated for the Hugo Award in 2002. *The Scar* has already been nominated

for the British Science Fiction Association's Best Novel Award for 2002.

The Scar returns us to the complex and frightening world of Bas-Lag, although we quickly leave the New Crobuzon setting of *Perdido Street Station,* following linguist Bellis Coldwine as she flees the city for the colonies. Bellis plans to lay low in the colonies until it is again safe for her to return to New Crobuzon, but is diverted when pirates hijack her ship, and she is press-ganged into joining the floating city known as the Armada. In the rest of the novel, what happens is less important than how Bellis responds to events. Not that the story is short on events, including the pursuit of the creature from the depths, visits to isolated and exotic civilizations, an epic battle naval battle that rivals the sinking of the original Spanish Armada, a civil war, and a journey toward a tear in the very fabric of reality, the Scar (to name just a few). Despite the page-turning excitement, however, *The Scar* remains one of those novels for which the answer to the question, “What happens?” is not the same as the answer to the question, “What is it about?” Miéville delivers something for both those readers who want to be swept up in the plot, and for those who like a book whose troubling questions stay with you long after the final page has been read.

I don't want to say too much and hence ruin the considerable pleasure of encountering these events at Miéville's intended pace. The experience of reading the novel is a bit like being hijacked yourself. Each time I thought I had sorted my way through the various heroes and villains to a stable moral picture, Miéville confronted me with yet another

layer of depth and complexity that required me to revise my interpretation of earlier events and the novel's characters. Like Bellis, the reader is thrust into an alien world in which our previous experience does not always prove the most adequate guide. Betrayal, loyalty, and trust are recurring motifs. As the novel progresses, Bellis—and through her, the reader—is forced toward a more intimate understanding of what these terms mean. The story avoids conventional black and white morality, working instead with a grayscale pallette that artfully captures the world we live in. I should quickly reassure you, however, that the novel is not merely a sterile or cold exploration of these themes. Miéville's penchant for portraying the bloody, the grotesque, the vile, and the visceral in almost loving detail remains in the forefront.

The real strength of the novel, though, is its characters. I found Bellis to be a compelling figure, all the more so because the novel does not present her in an unambiguously positive light. I was also very pleased to see a remade character, Tanner Sack, take a central place in this novel. The remade, who are criminals both political and “ordinary” whose bodies are surgically and magically reshaped according to macabre dictates of poetic justice, struck me as the most interesting “alien” figures in *Perdido Street Station.* In the earlier novel, we see the remade only through the eyes of other characters, preventing the novel from exploring the subjectivity that such a drastic change in one's physical self would produce. In *The Scar,* the suggestiveness of remade identity is explored from the inside, helping us to see the remade as another example of scarring, an image that Miéville uses productively

throughout the novel to represent both injury and healing. One of Miéville's gifts is his ability to truly engage with the Other in his portrayal of alien characters. From King Rat's insistence that he killed only the usurper, to Isaac's inability to comprehend Yagharek's crime in other than human terms, Miéville has demonstrated an ability to thoroughly think through his non-human characters, a refusal to reduce them to humans in fancy dress. In *The Scar,* this talent is put to good use creating the Anophelii. I, for one, think it is long overdue that someone recognized that mosquitoes are the most monstrous of species.

Structurally, *The Scar* makes the reader work harder than did *Perdido Street Station,* but it is rewarding work. The novel raises questions about the function of stories and storytelling by having multiple “truths” circulate to different audiences on the Armada, and through the device of Bellis's letter, which lets the narrative combine first- and third-person narration. The blank space to whom the letter is addressed, in addition to emphasizing Bellis's loneliness, draws our attention to the fact that an *author* is structuring the novel for *us,* the readers. In contrast to the more straightforward narrative mode used in *Perdido Street Station, The Scar* encourages us to reflect on story-telling as a process that shapes, as much as it reports, the “truth.”

This structure also creates a more complex and therefore more engaging portrait of our main character. Bellis's loneliness and isolation were, for me, more absorbing and evocative than Isaac's anger and grief in the earlier novel, because the mix of her first-person voice with third-person

narration gave access to her motives as well as to other's perceptions of her role in the novel's events. The gaps between her story and the reports others make of her reinforce the theme of loneliness by drawing our attention to the fact that we all live in our own subjective versions of the "truth" and the "good." Miéville admirably balances an obsession with detail (which he has linked to a background in gaming) against a firm grasp of the dependence of the uncanny upon the author's refusal to explain it (an art perfected by Lovecraft). *The Scar* is a deep and lyrical exploration of what it is to be mortal, fallible, and vulnerable.

Perhaps the most striking feature of *The Scar* is simply that it is so striking. It makes an impact; its ideas stay with you. The novel blends a page-turning, action-packed adventure with plenty of grist for the mill of the mind. The motif of scarring appears in a number of guises throughout the novel, forcing us to recognize the connection between scarring and healing. Although no one emerges from the novel unscathed, there seems to be more hope in this novel than in *Perdido Street Station* that the characters might make something out of the wounds in their lives. The title itself points to this more optimistic mood, focusing on the scar rather than the wound. As well, although there are monsters in this novel, the narrative, like Bellis, is hijacked, in a way. Although we initially think we are reading a story about defeating these monsters, we soon realize that this novel is not taking us to the familiar conclusion implied by the formula. Instead, we discover that the real crisis threatening the Armada is not the monsters without, but the conflicting,

mutually suspicious cultures within. In my view, the story of how the Armada's citizens begin learning to live collectively, so as not to destroy their home, proves more interesting than the monster hunt I initially expected.

I should mention that while this novel can stand alone, it will be more easily understood by readers familiar with *Perdido Street Station.* Most of our access to the story comes through Bellis, a citizen of New Crobuzon, and our experience of the Armada is coloured by her preconceptions. Bellis is determined to reject it and the diversion of her plans that it represents, struggling to find a way back to New Crobuzon for most of the novel. One of the forces driving the narrative is the tension between this Bellis-centred, alienated viewpoint and the conflicting perspective of the citizens of the floating city. However, I suspect that it is difficult for a reader who doesn't know New Crobuzon from the earlier novel to fully appreciate the nuances of this tension, given that the only information we have about it in this novel is that Bellis was forced to run away from its government in fear for her life, despite her innocence. This gives a pretty negative impression of the city and, without any other context, may make Bellis's overwhelming desire to return home inexplicable and hence unconvincing.

Although it is difficult to imagine an author who has already garnered so much praise continuing to get better with each novel, in many ways *The Scar* is even stronger than *Perdido Street Station.* Without sacrificing the exciting pace of the earlier novel, *The Scar* has greater emotional power and more substance. Bellis is changed by her experiences in the

novel, and so are we by reading about them. Miéville is perhaps most notorious for launching an attack on the work of J. R. R. Tolkien—particularly its endorsement of hierarchy and absolute morality—as a platform for more broadly rejecting the conception of fantasy as a literature of consolation. In contrast to such heavy-handed attempts to reconcile us to a world of inequality and injustice, Miéville argues, we should have "fantasy not as comfort-food but as challenge," a fantasy, he says, that we deserve. In *The Scar* Miéville delivers what we deserve and more.

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Quickening New Births: George Zebrowski's *Swift Thoughts*

By Walter Chaw

9/30/02

> *Drive my dead thoughts over the universe,*
> *Like wither'd leaves, to quicken a new birth;*
> —Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind"

There is an image in George Zebrowski's short story “In the Distance, and Ahead in Time” (November 1993) of an egg-shaped vehicle in the womb of space that captures at once the bliss of Shelley's procreative potential, and the melancholy of ambition addressed in each of the twenty-four stories collected in *Swift Thoughts,* Golden Gryphon Press's fantastic Zebrowski anthology. Obsessed with the idea that the separation between mind and fundament will eventually incite a civil war in the body politic, Zebrowski presents an ambitious variety of cautionary tales about the dangers and morality of artificial intelligence; the impossibility of communication with alien intelligence; and most importantly, the essential existential confusion between the limitless ambition of thought and the biological hardwire of the flesh. What *Swift Thoughts* manages with a profusion of eloquence is to illustrate a very basic truth about the breadth of

imagination bound to the limitations of the body, and the cruel crucibles of aspiration in which we burn.

Words made vital are primary in the author's thought process in the first story of the collection, “The Word Sweep,” concerning a world in which words manifest themselves, leading to speaking bans and “silence police.” The theme expands in “The Idea Trap,” a story set in a future divided between hunters and dreamers where fantasies come to life to be harvested for food. In both stories, Zebrowski hints at not only the proximate revelation of thought having weight, but the ultimate observation that ideas have the heft to change perception. In Zebrowski's most well known work, “Godel's Doom” similar in ways to Arthur C. Clarke's “The Nine Billion Names of God” before it), an artificial intelligence is put to work to prove or disprove Godel's Theorem once and for all. When it's suddenly determined that Godel was wrong, the results address the debunking of a core concept as the key to upsetting reality. Zebrowski is aggressive and disrespectful of dogma—his coda is grounded in logic and the truisms of human behavior, locating the author as one of our canniest chroniclers of the theoretical cultural evolution. Often compared (and self-compared) to authors like Stanislaw Lem and Olaf Stapledon, Zebrowski's fierce prose most resembles Harlan Ellison's.

“Godel's Doom” subtlely introduces the dangers that artificial intelligence poses to humanity's hubristic need to keep pace with his created beings. The collection's titular tale, likewise, details the struggle of man to push this brain into the realm of “swift thought"—a forced mental evolution with a

Daedalean ambition, but a predictable, Icarean (and fittingly Zebrowskian) result. Intentionally or not, the tales in *Swift Thoughts* are ferociously humanist even when the worst of humanity (the lingering madness of Vietnam in “Lesser Beasts,” the lurking lizard brain in “Bridge of Silence") is on display. For as certain as Zebrowski is that mankind will touch the sun, he is just as certain that we will be restrained by our mortal shell. To support this hypothesis, the author provides expert alternate histories ("Lenin in Odessa,” “The Number of the Sand,” “Let Time Shape") that examine the multitude of quantum possibilities that each end in the same eventuality. The message of Zebrowski's alternate histories and, in its sneaky way, “Godel's Doom"—is that man is not prepared for a non-structured universe so, therefore, man's universe is structured. He locates cosmology in the heart of man and it is here that the comparisons to Shelley (the quickening thoughts), Keats (dream made real from “The Eve of St. Agnes"), and now William Blake ("Thus we forget that God was born in the breast of man"—*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) become clearer—Zebrowski is a Romanticist with a post-modernist's perspective.

As a humanist, Zebrowski reserves his harshest trials for human relationships. “The Eichmann Variations,” a brilliant alternate history tale, has WWII ended by a nuclear attack on Germany, thus sparing countless Jewish lives that subsequently create a technological nirvana in the Holy Land. After capturing Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi hunters clone the criminal and execute the replicas—recognizing the barbarity of eye-for-an-eye, but seeing no other recourse but to equal

the loss of Jewish life with the repeated taking of Eichmann's life. The morality of creating innocent beings to be sacrificed to the grist mill of Eichmann's projected guilt and the victims' principles for existence is combed over with a surgeon's precision and a satirist's wit.

"Augie" addresses the question of our responsibility to our created beings from a different perspective, as a couple contemplates the destruction of their artificial intelligence "son." "Stooges" (a story which reveals Zebrowski's exploration of the gulf between human and alien consciousness) sees an alien visitation as it manifests itself in a product purely of our popular unconscious: the Three Stooges' Curly. Part and parcel with Zebrowski's histories and his fixation on relational morality is a recurrence of a father/son rift ("Augie" again, and "Sacred Fire," "This Life and Later Ones," "Wound the Wind," and "In the Distance, and Ahead in Time") appearing in his work as both a literal iteration of the classic Boomer concern and a figurative struggle between old traditions and new. Boiled down, we return again to the idea that man is of two states: the ascendant and the base (mind and body), where suddenly the father becomes the mind to the carnal impulse of the child. Tight and thematically shrewd, Zebrowski's work taken as a whole appears as immaculate as his individual fictions.

With the focus on the headiness of Zebrowski's many ideas, one might overlook the sadness and nostalgia of his best, most personal work. "Rope of Glass," featuring the most dystopian of his future societies, follows an Orwellian/*Logan's Run*-like struggle of a man to evade euthanasia patrols (at

fifty-three and stricken with disease, he is on the edge of obsolescence, thus fulfilling a portion of Zebrowski's signature concerns of thought vs. mortality). At its heart of hearts, “Rope of Glass” is about the search for love and connection. The question of love arises in more bestial fashion in the erotic “Starcrossed” (that nonetheless manages to strike a poignant chord in technology's demand of a sacrifice of humanity), and recurs in Zebrowski's friendships and affairs. For all the focus on the author's intellect, Zebrowski's masterful sculpting of his characters and the depth of their interaction wicks his best ideas and the bulk of his power.

Swift Thoughts documents the struggle between the life of the mind and the desires of the body. It speaks to our yearning to deny the basest parts of ourselves and our histories; to accumulate knowledge and drink deep from the well of collective thought; our need for progeny in the creation of beings in our own image; and of the ways in which we compromise our essential humanity when we reject our limitations. Zebrowski is a rare talent and *Swift Thoughts* is an invaluable collection for the longtime fan and the neophyte—a work of surpassing insight into our individual natures and our possible futures that, more often than not, rings with a Bradburyian poetry and that nameless, wistful, reflective dread sprung from a recognition of the collective self offered by an insightful stranger.

The twenty-four stories of *Swift Thoughts* are as provocative as they are organically crafted—each a stage for Zebrowski to give voice to the pitfalls of man's will to power in an exponentially evolving technocracy. In his recognition of

the limitations of our mortal coils, Zebrowski demonstrates a humanism that is as affectionate as it is melancholy and *Swift Thoughts* is alive with his intelligence and compassion.

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