

SIMULACRUM



The Magazine of Speculative Transformation

November 2005

**FEUTERING FICTION FROM MELISSA SCOTT AND
THE WORK OF RENOWNED ARTIST MIKE SASS**

Plus Poetry, Interviews, Recommended Books and More!

SIMULACRUM

THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION

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CARRIE VAUGHN

When I arrived at Odyssey in 1998, I was in a rut. I knew my writing wasn't all it could be, but I had no clue how to improve. In the final week of the workshop, Jeanne said one thing to me that changed my writing forever: "Your rewrites are so much better!"

I realized that before coming to Odyssey, I'd never rewritten anything beyond changing a few sentences around. At Odyssey I had the space and time to throw out entire drafts and start over. This was a skill I had to learn, right alongside plot and grammar.

I'm not sure I would have had that shining moment of epiphany without one instructor, Jeanne, following my writing for six weeks. She noticed the pattern in my writing and ultimately pointed out that I'd been missing an essential step all along: dismantling the first draft and reassembling it into an actual story.

I learned what makes the difference between a merely adequate story and an outstanding one. Best of all, I learned how to analyze my own stories for those qualities, and I gained a toolbox of skills in plot, characterization, narrative, etc. that let me begin to truly craft my stories, instead of just spewing onto the page. I learned to not be afraid to start over.

I made my first pro sale less than a year after attending Odyssey.

Since then, my stories have appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Weird Tales*, *Talebones*, *Polyphony 1*, and *Sword and Sorceress XVII*. I've received honorable mentions in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* and *The Year's Best Science Fiction*. My story "In Time" (*Talebones 21*) was named one of the year's best for 2001 by *Tangent Online*. I'm a member of SFWA.

*Since writing this, Carrie has sold her first two novels to Warner: *Kitty and the Midnight Hour* (just published and on the *USA Today* Bestseller List!) and *Kitty Goes to Washington* (coming in 2006).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE EDITOR'S DESK

5

FEATURED FICTION

THE KING WHO WAS SUMMONED TO DAMASCUS – Melissa Scott

6

CYBER INCOGNITO – Greg Mellor

23

SPECIAL CLAIMS – Lyn McConchie

38

FEATURED POETRY

CREATIVE ART FOR THE INSANE – Julie Shiel

41

FEATURED ARTICLE

FANTASY: A RESPONSE TO INNER NEED – Seth T. Mullins

43

FEATURED INTERVIEWS

AUTHOR – Melissa Scott

45

ARTIST – Mike Sass

53

FEATURED BOOKS

59

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

61

THE EDITOR'S DESK



I can hardly believe we are already putting out the last issue of Simulacrum for 2005. Where the heck does time go when you're not watching?

I'm thrilled to bring you yet another quality issue filled with some of the best established as well as new names in the field of fiction, poetry and art.

Our featured art for November is from an artist many of you will recognize. Mike Sass has been one of gaming guru BioWare's premier artists since its inception. His artwork has been used for many a computer game and have graced the covers of numerous magazines. As always, our artist dispenses some light on his craft and other issues in our featured artist interview.

From writer Melissa Scott, our featured author, we are proud to bring you a tale originally published in 1988. The King Who Was Summoned to Damascus is a quiet, effective tale set in the time of Saladin's rule and stands up as well as it did sixteen years ago. And as usual there is an informative and entertaining interview with Scott as well.

We also bring you fiction from Lyn McConchie, Greg Mellor, poetry from Julie Shiel and an interesting look at some of the motivations of the Fantasy genre in an article by Seth T. Mullins.

Don't forget: in our first issue of 2006 we will be bringing you the winners of the Specficworld annual fiction competition. Not to be missed!

Now have along. Milo ready? The Krupps doing its thing? Good. You have some reading to do.

-- Lynne Jamneck

THE KING WHO WAS SUMMONED TO DAMASCUS

MELISSA SCOTT

As best I can remember, I was asked by Susan Shwartz if I'd like to contribute to the anthology. (*Arabesques: More Tales of the Arabian Nights*, Avon, 1988) it was the first time anyone had ever asked me to submit a short story to anything. I actually spent a lot of time mulling over a totally different idea (still buried somewhere in my files). It took place at about the same time, the reign of Saladin—I think that may have been dictated by the anthology—but involved westerners as the protagonists. In any case, it wasn't going anywhere, and I began thinking about some of the research I'd done while working on *A Choice of Destinies*, my alternate history novel about Alexander the Great. I remembered all the little Alexandrias that had been planted all along the route, began wondering what they'd have been like by this time and what their magic might be... And this is the result. It's the first short story I ever sold, and I'm pleased it's stood up this well.

It is said as truth in the mountains that hold our Alexandria—Alexandria-the-Least, the Alexandria beyond Balkh—that our kings are immortal. It is true that they are very hard to kill. My lord's great-grandfather's grandfather, who was the first of his house to accept the word of the Prophet, took a spear through the body during the Long Siege, and lived. My lord's father, Abdul Rahman, survived a dozen such blows, and if the assassin's knife had not unluckily pierced through the heart, and Abdul Rahman being far from the citadel at the time, he would be living still. Or if he had brought his healer with him, as he had always done before.... But he is dead, and Harithah, who served him as healer and taught me the art, does not speak of his death. And I serve the king Isma'il.

It was in the fifth year of his reign that my lord was summoned to Damascus. This was a matter that had been brewing for some time. My lord, like his father and grandfather before him, exacted toll from the merchants who made their way through the passes below the city, and, more to the point, did not share his profits with Damascus. But no one had expected it to come to a head so quickly. Hearing the order read, the nobles frowned and tugged at their beards, while the chief of the merchants and the masters of the scholars murmured uneasily to each other. My lord stopped that with a glance, and looked again at the messenger. The messenger, himself an emir and a favorite of the sultan, stared back at my lord, and lifted one eyebrow in arrogant question. In spite of my training, I looked up then, and saw my lord's face darken with anger. Still, he did not speak. I looked away, and saw the nobles hiding their smiles behind their hands.

SIMULACRUM

"King Isma'il," the emir said at last, softly, barely disturbing the silence. "The Sultan Saladin is waiting for your answer."

There was a wealth of menace in those words, threats that did not have to be made explicit. I saw the chief of the merchants grow pale, and the scholars made distressed faces. The lord Jafar, my lord's half-brother and commander of the armies, gave a cry of protest.

"How dare he? Saladin is powerful, my lord, but he's very far away!" He jerked his head at the waiting emir. "This one is here—and so is Karim."

There was a growl of agreement from the other nobles. I glanced to my left, and saw the lord Karim smile slowly, contemptuously. He stood among his own people, clustered against the painted walls: he was in no real danger, no matter what Jafar threatened, until he left the audience chamber. It was Karim who had brought the accusation against my lord, Karim who was emir of the Bactrian lands to the west, the latest move in four years of maneuverings to drive my lord from the taxing of the merchants taking the long road to India and the East. It was not so much that Karim wished to increase the sultan's income, any more than did my lord; but if the caravans paid no toll at the fortress-pass below the city, they could pay more toll to Karim. It was whispered in the eunuchs' quarters that Karim had overreached himself in appealing to Saladin, despite the favor Saladin had shown him; that he had not expected to be called to Damascus with my lord to prove his charges. I hoped the tales were true.

"King Isma'il." To give him his due, the sultan's messenger did not flinch, or turn his gaze from my lord's face. "I remind you that the emir is also under the sultan's protection."

There was another murmur at that, angry but uncertain. Jafar opened his mouth to protest.

"Be silent." My lord lifted his hand, and was reluctantly obeyed. He smiled then, as sweetly as a child, and I braced myself, still sitting at his feet, for what would follow. I could see the other eunuchs of the household doing the same — we are safer than men for demonstrating my lord's temper—but my lord surprised us all.

"My lord Humayd," my lord said, quite calmly, "and you, Karim. I will accept the Sultan Saladin's invitation—" He stressed the word gently, and Karim bit his lip. "—in order that I may clear myself of these unjustified accusations."

Jafar opened his mouth to speak again, and my lord frowned him down. "My people, you know the reputation of the Sultan Saladin. I will trust in that as my shield against calumny." My lord's voice changed subtly. "And were that enough, as God send it shall be, we are still armored in the law of the Prophet, which protects the innocent, and in the powers God has granted to our people."

That was threat for threat: even in Damascus, they know of our kings' amazing longevity, and of the other powers wielded by the more daring of our scholars—though, like Karim, they prefer to attribute all of this to bargains with the djinn. The

SIMULACRUM

messenger paled in spite of himself, and passed a hand across his mouth. Over his shoulder, I saw the youngest of the scholars whispering to his master. Around the fringes of the room, the nobles nudged each other, grinning. I looked up again—the chamberlain who had taught me deportment rolled his eyes to heaven—and saw my lord was smiling, too. It was his hunting smile, that said he had plans which he had not yet revealed to anyone.

"Come, my lords," he said, and clapped his hands to end the audience. "We shall go to Damascus."

At my lord's order, I attended him at the council session that afternoon. Jafar, who as a soldier official disapproves of all indulgences, looked down his nose at me, and wondered aloud what my lord was thinking of. A few of the others, warriors all, laughed with him, and my lord's face darkened. He laid a heavy hand on my head, twining his fingers in my hair; I blinked hard against the tears.

"Am I king here? This is my shadow. He goes where I say." My lord smiled at me then, and released his hold on my hair. "Sit, Little Shadow, you're welcome here."

I sank onto the cushions at his side, knowing my face to be red with shame: it is not my place to be a cause of argument. The vizier, who besides my lord and of course Harithah is the only person at court who knows of the existence of the king's healer, gave me a sympathetic glance, and then lifted both hands to gain my lord's attention.

"My king, and my lords, if my king wishes to go to Damascus, I may not oppose him, but I must in duty say I do not like it."

I looked away, across the fretted shadows from the long windows, feeling the breeze that came off the sheer mountain snowfield above us, willing myself to be unnoticeable. The nobles' voices seemed to fade, and I became—not invisible, but insignificant. It is a simple thing, averting even the first glance: I was not cut to preserve any extraordinary beauty, though I'm considered pretty enough, but because our kings do not trust a whole man with a healer's power. This almost-invisibility was the first trick Harithah taught me, when the soldiers brought me to the citadel. She had said then, bitterly, that God would have done better to give our healing powers to the dumb animals, who could be content to live as pets. I had not understood, until it was explained that our power was kept a secret, for fear that assassins would first attack the healer, and then the unprotected king. She had been thought the old king's concubine; I am considered nothing more.

Rising voices pierced the fragile shell of my concentration, drew my mind back to the council. I looked slowly back toward the circle, and realized that there was no need for caution. The nobles were staring at my lord with a mix of fear and frustration in their eyes; Fath Abdul Hakim, the oldest of them all, had gone so far as to stretch out his hands in supplication.

"My king, I beg you to reconsider this—"

SIMULACRUM

Jafar slammed his hand down flat on the stones in front of him. "Isma'il, I speak as your brother. It is foolish to put yourself in the hands of Saladin, especially after you've disobeyed him." His voice changed, became almost cajoling. "The Franks have pressed him hard, even if he's beaten them back into their cities now. There's no guarantee this peace will last any longer than the others. He'll never be able to leave watching them long enough to come to us. We may remain here, and snap our fingers at the sultan."

My lord shook his head, the hunting smile on his lips again. "Are we to cut ourselves off from the heirs of the Prophet? And if you're wrong, and he does come east—well, you remember what happened the last time we were besieged. No, I must go to Damascus."

"But, my king," another of the nobles protested, and Jafar exploded, "My king, you're guilty of what he says."

My lord's smile widened and for the first time he glanced at me in council. It was a little movement, scarcely more than a flicker of his eyelids, but I was suddenly afraid. "I have my own answers, ones he will not have heard." Then the smile vanished from his lips. "By God, I will go to Damascus, and you, Jafar, will go with me. And anyone else I say."

There was a long silence then, the nobles glancing from one to the other, but no one dared to make any further protest. My lord's temper was never of the most even. At last the vizier cleared his throat. "As my king will have it," he said, "but who will govern the city while he is gone?"

It was a fair question and a welcome distraction, though there was in truth only one answer. Too many of the nobles were of the royal blood, no matter how diluted; only the vizier himself, or the chief chamberlain, both eunuchs and royal slaves, could be so trusted. I barely listened to the discussion, wondering just what my lord had in mind for me. A healer's talents can do so much more than heal.

I did not find out until that night, when my lord at last retired to his quarters. He settled himself on his cushions beneath the spangled canopy, and the dumb slave who serves the inner chamber hastened to remove his shoes and his heavy woolen coat. I poured the wine, and waited.

"Well, Little Shadow," he said. "Do you think it's a mistake, going to Damascus?"

"My lord knows best," I answered.

My lord laughed softly, and drained his cup. At his gesture, I filled it again. "Yes, I do," he said. "And I know my servants, too. These so-called scholars of mine may not be able to get their spells past Karim's sorcerers, but I still have you. The old woman told me, Little Shadow, that you know the art of shaping thoughts. I wish to leave Damascus acquitted of all wrongdoing, and with a charter from the sultan himself to tax these passes."

SIMULACRUM

My surprise must have shown on my face, because my lord laughed again. "Come, Little Shadow, don't look so shocked. Can you do this, with your art?"

"My lord," I said, "I've never done it."

He slammed his cup against the low table, spilling wine onto the pillows. The slave darted to mop up the mess, but my lord ignored him. "Don't lie to me, Little Shadow," he said. "Harithah says you can."

"My lord," I said again, and stopped, looking for the right words. It was never easy to explain the workings of the power to my lord; he was one who had no patience with art or science, wishing only to be obeyed. "My lord, I know how much things are done, and, yes, I've done them, but it helps to know the person whose thoughts one wishes to influence. I do not know Saladin."

My lord looked at me with a deepening frown. "You will come to know him."

I bowed my head, knowing better than to argue. "As my lord wishes, then."

His look became, briefly, a caress. "Excellent, Little Shadow." He clapped his hands for the slave. "Have the master of the household fetch my concubines."

The slave bowed and back away. I bowed also. "With your permission, my lord, I'll retire."

My lord waved his hand, his mind already on other things, and I slipped into the curtained alcove that contained my bed. My lord had taken heed of his father's fate, and I was never far from him. Already, my service has been needed once, when a bazaar-boy stabbed him; I slept only lightly now, a corner of my mind turned always to the inner chamber. I lay there in the dark, the blankets drawn to my chin, listening with half an ear as the chief eunuch presented each of the concubines. There were only five, and the sixth who was with child, but a pilgrim scholar had said once that this was the ceremonial used in Damascus and in Cairo, and my lord had followed it ever since.

My lord made his choice, and the chief eunuch departed with the others. I wished I could be deaf in truth to what would inevitably follow. I whispered the spell Harithah had taught me for such nights, and the darkness wrapped itself around me, leaving only a spark of myself to wait and watch by the curtained door. The woman was as safe as any of my lord's concubines could ever be: she had been the bond-slave of a bandit lord, and was grateful to serve in my lord's household.

I could lie in the cocoon of my thoughts, and consider Damascus, and Saladin. I know little of the great sultan beyond the tales brought by the pilgrim scholars, and what I did know did not bode well for my lord's plan. He had driven the infidel Franks out of Egypt as a young man, and after rising to the sultanate had harried them out of Palestine and Syria as well. The survivors had signed a treaty only the winter before, and the coast was at peace for the first time in years.

Yet, through all the wars, the storytellers said, Saladin had never once neglected the affairs of the rest of the realm, was a builder as well as a conqueror. It would not be easy to influence such a man—I could shape the thoughts of a slave,

SIMULACRUM

used to obeying orders, with relative ease, but I had never yet been able to influence my lord, and Saladin by all accounts was a far greater king than he. There were drugs, of course, to smooth the way for my spells, drugs easy enough to procure and to prepare, but the great Saladin would surely have slaves set to prevent such poisonings.... I slept before I'd thought of any means of obeying my lord's command.

We left for Damascus two weeks later, my lord's household and the nobles' households making a great jostling caravan that spread out for half a mile along the roads. My lord brought all his women and his finest belongings, not wanting to seem a pauper before the lords of Damascus; his nobles did the same. Even I had fine new clothes, and a coat embroidered at the throat in silk from the east. My lord ate only from dishes of silver, and the chief eunuch went in constant fear of robbers. I thought there could be nothing finer in the world.

Then we came to Damascus. At my lord's command, we of the household put on our finest clothes, and dressed my lord himself in a robe of silk banded at the neck and sleeves with golden thread. His turban we pinned with the great red jewel taken a hundred years ago from an Indian king, and we scented his beard with musk. We took down the plain traveling curtains that covered the women's wagons, and replaced them with brightly woven carpets. The grooms polished the harness rings and the brass bells on each bridle until they shone like gold. There was even a peacock's feather tucked into my horse's headstall.

We were met at the city gates by a great array of notables in their finery, and slowed our pace to keep down the dust, so they could see us, too. They were a magnificent crowd, many wearing robes of silk as fine as anything my lord owned, one or two in robes so heavily embroidered in gold thread that they seemed bowed by its weight. The sunlight glittered from the colored stones that fastened their turbans, and sparkled on their hands. I wondered which of these was Saladin.

Grooms came running to hold my lord's horse, and my lord let them take the bridle, his eyes flickering appreciatively across the crowd. The nobles halted too, clustering together. I kept close at my lord's side. Then the crowd parted, and a figure rode from among them, a man on a white horse, with trappings of white leather studded with silver. His own robe seemed to have been made from beaten silver. I blinked, dazzled, and then recognized the emir Karim. He had left for Damascus before us, with Humayd who'd brought the sultan's message.

"King Isma'il," he said, with a bow that had more of irony than of respect. "I am sent by the Sultan Saladin to welcome you to Damascus, and to ask your indulgence on his behalf, as affairs of state have kept him from greeting you in person." He gestured to the waiting crowd, and the jewels on his hand flashed in the sunlight. "The merchants of Damascus greet you also, and beg for your patronage."

I heard my lord give a little gasp of shock, and I felt the envy flare behind me, like the heat of a fire against my back. If these were the common merchants of

SIMULACRUM

Damascus, some of whom were as richly dressed as my lord, what would the court be like? My lord frowned, but he answered courteously enough.

"Thank you for your welcome, my lord, and you may assure the sultan we understand that affairs of state press hard on him." He raised his voice to be heard by the crowd as well. "And we thank you also for your courtesy."

"If you will follow me, King Isma'il," Karim said, "I myself will take you to the quarters prepared for you in the palace."

My lord nodded, stiff-faced, and beckoned to the chief eunuch. I heard him murmur something about largesse, and knew a stab of fear. If the merchants were so wealthy, how much would the beggars expect from a king? My lord would not allow himself to be so shamed. The chief eunuch hesitated, and my lord gave him such a look of anger that the chief eunuch was struck dumb. He bowed, and handed my lord a bulging purse. As we rode into the first market at Karim's side, beggars appeared. My lord smiled, still stiffly, and tossed a handful of coin into the crowd. The coins showed gold as they fell. I barely heard the faint protest from Jafar: the coin my lord had bought to maintain his household during our stay in Damascus, thrown away on a pack of beggars.

My lord was allotted rooms in one wing of the citadel, with his own small harem quarter and a fountain courtyard filled with fruit trees. His nobles were given similar, but smaller, rooms to either side; at my lord's order, our soldiers stood guard along the corridors. When the sultan's chamberlains had left, I wandered through our new quarters, marveling at the richness of the furniture. Nothing that could be gilded or painted had been left plain; the floor was covered in blue and gold tiles that made a pleasing lattice pattern. The cushions of the inner chamber were of silk damask, and the canopy above the bed was of woven gold. Next to all that splendor, my lord's silver dishes looked old and tarnished, little more than bazaar-trash.

"Little Shadow!"

I turned, to find my lord scowling at me. He tossed something in my direction, and I caught it automatically. It was a gold coin, like the ones he had thrown to the beggars in the market. I turned it over in my hand, wondering why he had given it to me.

"Well? Can't you make me another sackful, wizard?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, my lord, I'm not an alchemist."

"I wish to God you were," he said, sourly, and held out his hand. I laid the coin carefully in his palm, and he stared at it for a long time, as though it had some special message carved into its surface. At last, he said, "We go before the sultan tomorrow, Karim and I, and you'll go with me. Remember what I told you."

I bowed. To attempt to shape the thoughts of someone so powerful is a dangerous thing even to contemplate. At least this meeting, of necessity the first of many, would give me a chance to see the sultan, to get some idea of how his mind worked, so that I might influence him.

SIMULACRUM

Again the next morning, we dressed my lord in his finest robes, and brought out the chest of jewels. There were pieces I did not recognize among the familiar stones; as we went about our duties, the chief eunuch whispered that my lord had ordered each of the nobles to send the best jewels he possessed. From the chamberlain's carefully downcast eyes, I guessed the nobles had given unwillingly, and ungenerously.

We were not kept waiting in the antechamber for more than a few minutes, a courtesy even my lord was quick to recognize. The chamberlains escorted us past audience-seekers from all parts of the empire, past scholars and merchants as well as nobles, past even a trio of Franks, tall, fair men I recognized too late to stare. Karim was there before us, but my lord controlled himself, and made his obeisance with some grace.

"My lord Saladin," he said. "I am here, as you commanded."

"Rise."

The sultan's voice was low and pleasant, touched with the power of a man who is always obeyed. I placed my lord's chair as I had been instructed, and waited with downcast eyes while he seated himself. I knelt beside him, and only then dared to glance at Saladin. He was not a young man, though his hair and beard were still black as jet, and in that court of peacocks he alone wore white. He alone had no need of finery,

Behind him stood the jurists and the scholars and the reciters of traditions, ready to offer their opinions; to either side waited the great nobles of the realm. I glanced at them sidelong, and could read the curiosity behind their impassive faces.

"My lord Karim," Saladin said, "and you, King Isma'il. I have summoned you here so that this dispute between you may be settled according to the law, and without bloodshed. Will you begin, Karim, by stating your complaint?"

My lord frowned, and started to speak, but the sultan held up his hand. "When his is finished, King Isma'il, you will have the same space of time to answer, and that time again to make your own complaint."

My lord still seemed inclined to argue, but then thought better of it. "As my lord commands."

"Then, Karim, begin," Saladin said, and gestured to a slave who sat at the edge of the dais. The man turned a golden hourglass, and Karim began to speak. The slave turned the glass once more before he'd finished. My lord spoke for a little less than the allotted time, leaving perhaps two fingers' width of sand in the glass, but I barely heard either of them, watching Saladin instead. The sultan listened well, never betraying his annoyance when Karim presumed upon the service he'd done the sultan during the Egyptian wars, or when my lord spoke too loudly of his traditional rights. I could feel the temper of the mind behind that quiet face, and feared to meddle with it.

SIMULACRUM

"My lords," Saladin said at last. "My lords, you've spoken very eloquently of your rights, but you've neglected another right that operates here—my right. You speak of the privileges granted you for your good service, Karim, but none of those includes the right to set tolls on the roads. That I've granted you certain dispensations I don't deny, but whether those can extend so far as to allow this is at least a matter for the jurists to consider." He gestured to the men behind him, and my lord smiled slowly. Then Saladin turned to him, and my lord's smile faded before the sultan's steady gaze.

"As for you, King Isma'il, these rights you claim are taken with your title from Iskandar's time, a time of legend. This is a question of law, and must be considered as such." The sultan rose to his feet, ending the audience. "I will consult with my legal scholars, my lords. until I have heard their advice, I ask you to accept the freedom of my court. I hunt tomorrow; I trust you will both accompany me."

"I thank my lord for the honor." Karim bowed deeply, as gracefully as any courtier. my lord murmured some answer, his face twisted in a scowl, but managed to depart with some dignity. As we left the audience chamber, he laid a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"So I hunt with Saladin tomorrow, Little Shadow. You will accompany me."

"Yes, my lord," I answered, and his fingers tightened slowly, until I gasped with pain.

"Do you understand me?"

"Yes, my lord," I said again, dry-mouthed. I understood what he wanted, as clearly as if he'd spoken aloud. He wanted me to work my spells on Saladin, to bend the sultan's thoughts to my lord's purpose. I doubted I could do it, not without greater preparation—if ever I could—but I did not dare say that to my lord. "I will do as you ask," I said, and bent my head in submission.

To my chagrin, however, and to my lord's great annoyance, the hunt was very large, so large that we could do little more than watch the sultan from afar. For this, I breathed a prayer of thanks: even my lord has been forced to learn that I cannot act across too great a distance.

Saladin greeted my lord quite courteously across the milling mass of dogs and handlers, but came no closer. I heard my lord curse softly, and braced myself for a bruising ride. There was little comment on my presence, for which I was grateful; in any case, there were other favorites riding with their masters.

For a time, the hunt rode south, with much shouting and laughter, and then turned west, toward the mountains. The crowd had thinned and separated into a dozen different groups of riders, each one seeking the best path over the rising ground. The dogs vanished, voices fading over the hills. The sultan was nowhere in sight, and I feared we had lost the hunt, but then to my left I saw the emir Karim. He lifted his whip in salute to my lord.

SIMULACRUM

"King Isma'il," he called. "I congratulate you on your horses." There was a hint of mockery in his voice, but my lord smiled. Even I understood: our horses were not as beautiful as the emir's, but they were stronger animals and nimbler, faster across this broken land.

"I thank you, Emir," my lord called back. "Will you set a race?"

He could not keep the pleasure from his voice, but the emir did not seem to notice. "As you wish, King Isma'il," Karim answered, bowing over his horse's neck, "but let's set stakes as well, like civilized men."

That insult was a little too plain, and my lord's hand fell to his sword. He mastered himself with an effort, and growled, "A thousand pieces of gold, Emir, if that's not too high for you."

Karim managed a haughty smile. "Very well. Will you set your mark?"

My lord pointed ahead toward the slope of the mountain, where a single pine jutted from the far side of a ridge. The ground between was broken, rocky, but better than the land around our city; our horses would have an easy time of it. "There."

I saw the emir scowl, and knew my lord had chosen well. "Agreed," Karim answered. "Shall the qadi call the start?"

"Certainly," my lord said, "and he can certify the wager, too."

"Very well," Karim said, and gestured for the jurist to join him.

"Stay close, Little Shadow," my lord murmured, and rode forward to take his place beside Karim. They conferred briefly with the qadi, the horses blowing uneasily, then separated. An instant later, the qadi gave the signal, and they were off. With a roar, the rest of the hunters surged after them.

I remember little of the ride up the side of the mountain. One moment, it seemed, I was breathing the dust of twenty riders, and in the next my mount had outdistanced them all, and the pine tree loomed suddenly near, just over the top of the next ridge. A dog was barking hysterically nearby, but I hardly noticed it. I had lost the hunt, the emir, and my lord.

I reined in, looking warily about me, and saw, further down the slope, the emir and the rest of the hunt. Karim was dismounted with several others, studying his mare's foreleg. I smiled, and let my horse pick its way across the ridge. My lord was waiting beneath the pine tree, his horse dancing angrily beneath him. There were sheep on the hill behind him, and a herder's mongrel darted back and forth between the sheep and the tree, yapping frantically. My lord glared at it, and curbed his horse.

"Well? And where is the respected emir?"

"My lord, I think his horse is lamed."

My lord smiled, then forced himself to assume a suitable expression of regret. "A pity for the horse, but that will teach Karim that our mountains breed some things better than cities."

SIMULACRUM

The dog, emboldened by the horse's sudden stillness, darted for its ankles. The horse shied, nearly unseating my lord, who swore furiously. "Damned mongrel, I'll have its hide."

The dog scurried back a dozen paces, and turned to bark again. My lord cursed, and spurred his horse after it. The dog broke and ran, almost under the horse's feet. I heard it yelp as one hoof grazed it. It ran limping now, and my lord gave a shout of triumph, lifting his whip.

"No!" A boy, the herder's boy, came darting from the rocks where he'd hidden when my lord appeared. I think he meant only to put himself between my lord and the dog, perhaps to take the whip's blows himself, but his foot slipped on a piece of stone, and he fell, almost beneath the horse's forefeet. The horse was battle-trained, and struck twice before my lord hauled it away. The boy lay still, his face and chest a mass of blood.

I flung myself from my horse before I'd thought, and crouched beside the broken body. Life was gone, but not far; I raised my hands and caught it before it could flee forever. I looked then at the smashed face, the crushed chest: such a small body, so clearly underfed, would not hold much strength for me to draw on, but I myself was strong enough. Slowly, still holding his spirit prisoned, I eased the bones back into their proper places with hand and mind. I coaxed the torn flesh together, feeling for the pattern of his body. As the wounds closed, I could feel his spirit struggling against me, not to fell, but to return to its proper place. I released it, letting exhaustion sweep through me like a chill.

Then I was aware of my lord's hand on my shoulder, shaking me. "How dare you?" he hissed. I had never heard him so angry, and even in the daze that follows such a healing, I trembled in fear. On the slope above my lord, I saw Karim, holding the bridle of a borrowed horse. He was smiling, and, seeing the understanding in his smile, I grew colder still.

"He couldn't have seen, my lord," I whispered, but I doubted my own words. Beside me, the herder's boy scrambled to his feet and ran, scattering his sheep. The dog followed, running more easily. There was blood on the ground where he had lain; too late, I scraped dirt over the mark. My lord's face twisted.

"How dare you?" he said again, and brought his whip down across my shoulders. Even through the good cloth of my coat, the blow stung, and I choked back a dry of pain. My lord lifted the whip again.

"King Isma'il!" It was the sultan's voice, and I saw Karim and the others now lining the ridge bow low. My lord lowered his whip reluctantly, and made his own obeisance. I turned, still on my knees, and prostrated myself in the dust.

"Is something wrong?" Saladin continued. He let his horse pick its own way around the end of the ridge, his eyes fixed on my lord.

Karim laughed softly. "There was a shepherd's boy, my lord, who fell. The eunuch wished to aid him, but King Isma'il was—displeased."

SIMULACRUM

"That's—" My lord just stopped himself from giving Karim the lie. "That's not what happened. It was a private matter."

I did not dare lift my head, but I could hear the disapproval in the sultan's voice. "Surely private matters should be settled privately?"

"As the sultan pleases." My lord touched me with the tip of his whip; I looked up into a face set and white with anger. "Get on your horse, Shunnar," he said. "We will return to the palace."

My lord had never beaten me before, beyond a blow or two when I was careless, but he did that night. I had betrayed a centuries-old secret, he said, and for nothing better than a common shepherd's brat, when a healer's service was the prerogative of kings. I had betrayed him in the city of his enemies. Afterward, I lay on my stomach on the pallet at the foot of my lord's bed—there was no curtained alcove here—and counted the welted bruises. The cane bit hard; I wished it were in a healer's power to heal himself.

My lord was already asleep, lying alone for once, snoring softly. I lay awake in the darkness feeling abused, and guilty, and afraid. Haughty I had known my lord to be, but I had never seen before that he was cruel—cruel even to me, who had served him all my days. I hadn't thought when I moved to help the herder's boy; I had known only that if I did not act at once, he would be beyond even the reach of my art. Harithah had trained me always to act quickly, without thinking. That drilled instinct had saved our kings before now, but Karim had seen, and if he understood what I had done... I shook myself, wincing as I jarred a cut. What could the emir know, even if he had seen? Only that I was a wizard, a healing wizard, and that if I were killed, my lord would be defenseless. I shivered again, newly afraid.

I don't know how long I'd lain there, drifting in and out of dreams no different from my waking fears, when I heard the sound of stone on stone. It had come from the center of the room. I sat up, not even certain if I'd really heard it, and saw a slab of stone rise almost silently from the floor at the foot of the bed. The faint light of a shuttered lantern spilled across the tiles. I cried out, just as the slab wobbled and slid aside. My lord stirred, and suddenly black-robed men were hauling themselves up out of the hole.

"The boy first," one said, not loudly, and a second man lifted his crossbow. I flung myself backward too late, and the bolt took me in the belly. I barely felt it, frantic to reach my lord. He was on his feet now, naked, sword in hand to face his enemy. The second assassin was jerking at the handle of his bow; a knife gleamed in the first man's hand. Then something struck me in the ribs, and it was as though the lantern had been blown out.

When I knew myself again, I was lying on a steep hill of black glass. Above me was a cold sky and the sickle moon, its light puddled on the glass around me. The scholars and reciters of traditions do not know this place, but Harithah had told me of it: the hill that leads to death. She had stood on its brink, she told me, and caught her

SIMULACRUM

lord's soul before it could slide beyond her reach. But there was no one to catch me. I shivered, expecting to fall, and realized that my hands were hurting me, a stabbing pain like nothing I'd ever known before. I looked up, and saw I clutched two tufts of grass, holding myself motionless against the hill. Each blade was like the blade of a knife, and blood ran like ink across my moon-greied skin. Already, the first threads of it had reached my elbows; I sobbed aloud with the pain of it, but I did not let go. If I could hold, if I could hold, I could somehow draw myself up again, back to the world of the living, away from death....

Shunnar! It was not a voice, properly, but words within my mind, and in the same instant there was a cold weight on my ankle. *My hands*, I screamed and felt the knife blades against my very bones. The cold grip tightened, and I felt a second chill hand brush past my other foot. I turned my head, and saw my lord lying further down the slope, struggling to grasp me more securely. Even as I recognized him, I felt his hand slip a little; my lord felt it, too, and lay still.

Little Shadow, he called again, *help me*.

I cannot, I answered, and sobbed again at the agony in my hands.

You are a wizard, my lord said, and I felt him reach again for me. His hand slipped further, and he stopped. *Save me, Little Shadow, and I'll help you*.

How? I cried. My own blood smeared my face, warm and sticky, my strength draining with it, running away down my arms.

Reach your foot to me, my lord said, *let me climb past you. When I reach the top, I'll pull you up*.

I hesitated, not quite believing in his promises, and my lord lunged for me again, as though he'd hoped to catch me off guard. I evaded his grasp by instinct alone. He was lying, I know it then with a certainty colder than his touch. He would use my body, my power, as his ladder, and not turn back for me. I knew in the same instant I could not hold him and save myself. I had served him since I was a child, not with love, perhaps, but with loyalty. But he had beaten me, and now he would repay me with a lie. He was not worth even my death. With a final effort, I twisted myself free of his hold. He called my name as he fell.

I lay there for a long moment, gathering strength. I had betrayed my lord, though inadvertently, and caused his death when he would have betrayed me, and yet I was—not dead. With his weight gone, the pain in my hands was almost bearable; inch by inch, I drew myself up the gleaming hill.

I floated then in my lord's bedchamber, unseen by the four assassins crouched over the newly broken strongbox. A body—*my* body—lay sprawled across the foot of the bed, a crossbow's bolts buried in its chest and stomach. Automatically, I reached to touch those wounds, to heal them, and felt the barrier, old as iron, that warned me away. A healer cannot heal himself.

That left me only one choice, and had I been able I would have laughed at the irony of it. My lord—my lord's body lay beside the bed, knife wounds in his chest and

SIMULACRUM

throat. Expertly, easily, I reached for them, brought the flesh together as it should be. I had no pattern, this time, but I knew that body too well to make any foolish errors. The gaping wounds closed. I took a deep breath, and let myself slide into the empty shell. For an instant, it was like putting on a stranger's clothes, ill-fitting, loose in places, and too tight, binding in others, and then he—I—lived.

I opened my eyes very slowly, aware for the first time of a rhythmic pounding at the door, and Jafar's voice shouting hoarsely for his brother to let him in. The assassins heard it, too, to judge by their glances at the door, but the bar was strong, and held. They went back to their looting of my lord's treasures.

Silently, obeying what this body already knew, I let my hand slide across the tiles until it curled around the hilt of my lord's sword. I braced myself, and then, with a shout, leaped to the attack. The assassins were not unnaturally surprised to see the body of a man they'd slain attacking them, and my lord was a noted soldier. I had gutted two before they really knew what had happened; I killed the third and fourth almost as easily. I stood for a long moment, staring at the bodied, and then at my hands—his hands, broader than mine, the wrists marked with coarse hairs—before I could bring myself to unbar the door.

Jafar was at the head of the crowd. He cried out when he saw me, and sagged against the doorframe. Behind him, I could see more of our nobles, and the pale face of Karim. Beneath the careful mask of shock, I could feel his furious disappointment. Then the crowd parted, and the sultan himself strode through. I was suddenly aware of my nakedness, and dropped my hand to hide it. Hastily, Jafar handed me his outer robe, and I wrapped myself in it.

"What is this?" the sultan asked.

I could hear, in his voice, the thought that my lord—that I—was dangerous; I could feel in my lord's body an animal strength I had not known before. Perhaps it was just the ease with which my lord's body had killed the assassins that made me bold, but I reached out to catch the sultan in the web of my power. The look in his eyes, calm, appraising, even curious, made me stop. That was my lord's way; it need not be my own.

"I have been attacked while under your protection," I said instead. "I ask for justice."

Saladin nodded slowly, his eyes sweeping across the room. "You shall have justice," he agreed, then bent his gaze on me. He suspected, I realized, and fought back the urge to use my power to conceal what had happened. "I will send for you, King Isma'il, to tell me what transpired here."

I bowed, and tried to make the gesture my lord's. "As the sultan wishes."

Slaves and servants and my lord's soldiers crowded into the room, and Jafar with them. The chief eunuch, still murmuring broken words of fear and relief, brought me my lord's clothes. He had been my superior in the household; it was all I could do not to bow to him in thanks. I saw his eyes flicker toward the soldiers bundling my

SIMULACRUM

body into one of the assassin's cloaks, and realized with a shock that he grieved for me. I fumbled into the clothes, finer than any I had worn, and turned to face Jafar. My lord would have killed him for his carelessness, and he knew it.

"Isma'il, I—" He stopped abruptly, mastering his fear. "I do not understand how they passed my guards."

I pointed to the center of the room and the displaced stone.

Jafar's breath hissed between his teeth. "A tunnel.... Isma'il, I swear, I knew nothing of this—"

"Be silent!" The harsh shout startled me: I had underestimated my lord's body's strength. I mastered myself hastily and went on. "I know who is responsible for this, and I will see him punished."

Jafar bowed shakily, not knowing whether he'd been spared. I watched him from under my lashes, wondering if I should say more.

"King Isma'il."

I turned almost without hesitation, to face a bowing stranger, a eunuch of the sultan's household. "Well?"

"The sultan will see you now."

Despite the silken courtesy, it was an order. I barely stopped myself from bowing to him. "Very well."

The eunuch brought me to a section of the palace I had not visited before, to an antechamber hung with tapestries of green and gold, verses from the Qu'ran. Guards waited beside the far door, ceremonial spears in their left hands, right hands on the hilts of their swords. Their eyes flickered over me, looking for the sword I had not even missed. They saw I was unarmed, and relaxed slightly.

"The King Isma'il," the eunuch said, and bowed for me to enter.

Saladin sat alone in the center of the room, very straight-backed among the gold-embroidered cushions. Half a dozen lamps were lit, filling the room with light, but the sultan's face was half in shadow. I bowed as I had seen my lord bow. At the sultan's nod, the eunuch placed a cushion on the floor behind me, and withdrew.

"Sit, my lord," Saladin said.

I did as I was told, the sultan watching me with hooded eyes. I could not read his thoughts in his face, and did not dare try more.

"You've demanded justice," Saladin said at last. "For whom?"

"For myself," I answered, and some impulse made me add, "and for Shunnar."

"For the boy?" Saladin said, still softly. "What was he to you?"

I choked on my answer. I knew I should speak as my lord would have spoke, shrug and say I had been nothing, a catamite, but it was still myself that was under discussion. For my own pride's sake, I would not say it. "A servant," I said, finally, "and a good one."

The sultan nodded twice, thoughtfully, as though I had been far more eloquent. He knew what had happened, or at least he guessed much of it, and I felt myself

SIMULACRUM

grow cold. I felt my power gathering within me, fed by my lord's great strength. If he speaks again, I thought, if he censures or accuses, I will have to strike.

Saladin smiled. "And who was behind this attack?"

My mouth fell open; after an instant, I closed it, lifting my hand to my lips to conceal an incredulous smile. My fingers touched hair, and I tugged at my lord's beard to hide my surprise. "Karim, my lord. It was Karim."

"Do you have proof of this?" Saladin asked. Whatever he knew or suspected, I realized then, he would not accuse me.

"No, my lord," I answered, "but you will find it."

The sultan clapped his hands sharply, twice, and the eunuch returned, bowing. Saladin murmured to him; the eunuch bowed again, and vanished.

"If there is proof," Saladin said, "it will be found." He was silent for a moment, staring at me as though he would weigh my very soul. "And you," he said at last, "what do you wish from all of this?"

I chose my words with care. "I ask no more than an alliance with you, my lord. I would wish for the right to levy toll at the fortress-pass, as has traditionally been the right of the kings of Alexandria."

The sultan nodded slowly. "These things can be done."

In the end, it was as Saladin had promised. The proof against Karim was overwhelming—he had made no effort to hide his involvement, so sure had he been of his agents' success. I saw him die, and took a certain pleasure in it. A week later, I swore to an alliance with the sultan, receiving in return his charter to tax the passes—I could do no less for my lord, having failed him in more important things—and we set out on the long journey home. Shunnar, the Little Shadow, I buried in Damascus. I am Isma'il—the king who came back from Damascus.

First published in *Arabesques: More Tales of the Arabian Nights*, Avon, 1988

THE END

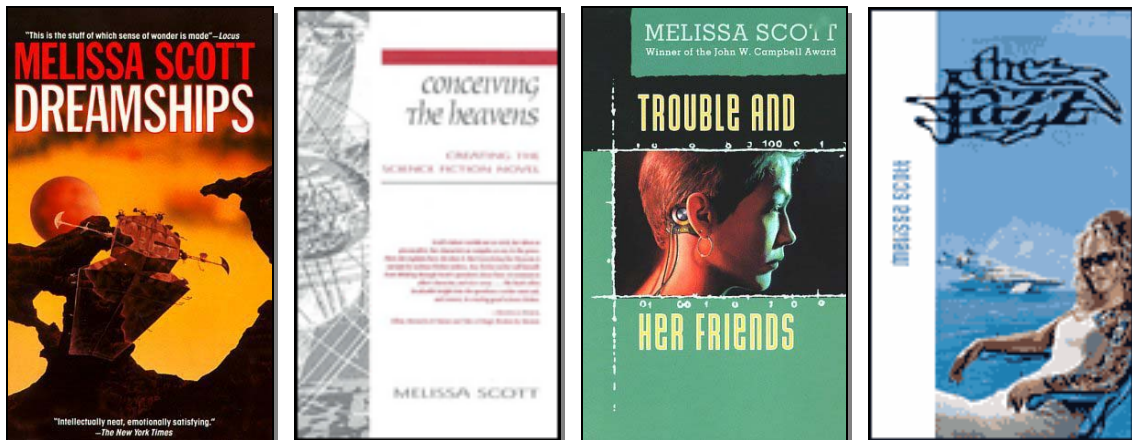
Melissa Scott was born and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, with a brief stay in Oxford, Mississippi, when she was 2. She studied history at Harvard College, where she was briefly involved with a now-defunct college-sanctioned SF 'zine, and Brandeis University. At the latter, she earned her PhD. in the comparative history program with a dissertation titled "The Victory of the Ancients: Tactics, Technology, and the Use of Classical Precedent." Her first novel, *The Game Beyond*, was

SIMULACRUM

published in 1984, and Scott quickly became a part-time graduate student and an—almost—full-time writer.

In 1986, she won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and in 2001 she and long-time partner and collaborator Lisa A. Barnett won the Lambda Literary Award in SF/Fantasy/Horror for *Point of Dreams*. Scott has also won Lammies in 1996 for *Shadow Man* and 1995 for *Trouble and Her Friends*, and before that was a three-time finalist (for *Mighty Good Road*, *Dreamships*, and *Burning Bright*). *Trouble and Her Friends* was also shortlisted for the Tiptree. Her first work of non-fiction, *Conceiving the Heavens: Creating the Science Fiction Novel*, was published by Heinemann in 1997, and her monologue, "At RaeDean's Funeral," has been included in an off-off-Broadway production, *Elvis Dreams*, as well as several other evenings of Elvis-mania. A second monologue, "Job Hunting," has been performed in competition and as a part of an evening of "Monologues from the Road." Recent short fiction includes "The Sweet Not-Yet," in *Imagination Fully Dilated: SF* and the forthcoming "Mr. Seeley," in Haworth Press's *So Fey*. She currently lives in New Hampshire with her partner of twenty-six years.

BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR



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CYBER INCOGNITO

GREG MELLOR

As I wanted to write something that shows reality, and virtual reality, are not always what they seem. This story is about the hidden layers and how the people/constructs/AIs/aliens in different realities interact with each other! The less complicated explanation—I just wanted to have a bit of fun with a few crazy ideas!

BLUE TIDE

“You don't listen to me. You never listen.”

“What do you mean? Have I ever failed you?”

“That's not the point and you know it.” Sarah kicked at the sand with her bare feet as the tide ebbed further out, runnels of water tugging gently.

She looked at the bay curving away to the south and east in a long arc under Uma's hazy yellow-orange light, the sun warm on her face, the sand slightly abrasive between her toes. The beach was a wide strip of saffron overlaid with a fine blue lacework. Blue tides were so rare, revealing veins of lapis lazuli from the heavy surf caused by the quad-lunar alignment. She had only witnessed one as a child, the memories now weaving with the present. Life was simpler then.

Her brow furrowed, not for the first time. Rob could be so infuriating, if only he would listen more. She picked up a handful of sand and let it run through her fingers in colourful streamers to be whisked away by the breeze off the ocean. Her mind raced out over the surface of the water like it could go on forever.

“I love you Rob. We have been through so much, don't you think it is time we stopped and worked out our next steps. We can't keep going like this.”

She could see the faraway look in his eyes, searching for some meaning. If only he would settle here, for a while at least, to gather his thoughts if nothing else.

He paused for a moment, seemingly helpless, then ran his fingers through unkempt blonde hair and sighed. “I truly don't know.”

Her teeth grated. “Don't try to figure this out alone.”

The headland tapered off from low undulating hills into the ocean. A dark blue isthmus was slowly being revealed in the distance, connecting the mainland to a small island. She could swear the day had grown dimmer, impairing her vision and clarity of thought.

“If you want to go back there, then go.” Her voice was barely audible.

His eyes caught hers. How many times had she seen that same look in those grey irises? Quicksilver reflected the sky and ocean.

He looked away. Sarah sensed his body tensing, she knew him so well.

SIMULACRUM

With a sudden rush she flung her arms around him, cradling her head in his neck. Rob brushed away the strands of her dark hair from his face, one hand gently holding her head, the other resting as always on the small of her back.

“Take care”. The words came out as a strangled whisper around the knot in her stomach, in the entire fabric of her being.

She closed her eyes and felt his body relax. His familiar scent dissipated on the salty air. Her arms drew inwards, hugging herself tightly.

“Take care.”

* * * *

ENCOUNTER

The *Quantum Haze* came to a complete stop, neural association lights blinking fluorescent green in the pitch darkness of c-space. A spherical outrider lay dormant off the starboard bow, dwarfed by the bulk of the ship, its featureless surface reflecting the lazy green strobe.

Rob accelerated the *Haze* forward in a slow arc, sweeping searchlights across the outrider. With only a few ghostly grey substratum markers as a guide, he chose manual mode to navigate the murkiness.

It was unusual to find a blank outrider, normally there would be some neural association, a nal to show signs of crèche activity. He pondered over the options. Either the operator was dead or the unit was decommissioned. But then why would it be left as flotsam so far out?

The hud reflected Rob's deductions in red text and continued its search for some record of the outrider out of the millions that were laying the substratum. Rob peered to port as he banked the ship starboard once more behind the outrider. This was the closest he had been to the wall. He had always found it disturbing, the edge of c-space, like being on the rim of the Milky Way peering into the space between galaxies. Black, featureless, impossible to determine where substratum ended and true nothingness began.

He felt goose bumps on his back and arms. The crèche compensated. The hud flashed, indicating the end of the search. This was bordering on ludicrous, some record of the outrider should be there. He would now have to initiate a formal search when he was out of the crèche. Damn. Further substratum would be bedded down in this section of c-space in a few days in preparation for construct strata, where light would replace the dark.

He yawned. Twelve hours in the crèche was taking its toll. He made to bank starboard again for one final pass of the outrider but sensed movement in his peripheral vision to port, grey on black. He paused his trajectory, the wall loomed from nadir to zenith. He shrugged, putting it down to c-space fatigue.

The hud flashed a warning, incoming traffic, potentially hostile.

SIMULACRUM

“Damn,” he exclaimed.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary.

The voice sounded like a cannon in the stillness. He spun the *Quantum Haze* smoothly on its central axis one hundred and eighty degrees to face his visitor.

A flying ant loomed over Rob, at least three times taller than the *Haze*. Its wings pounded furiously with a thunderous drone. Each segment of its body gleamed the colour of rose-tinted steel. Malicious crimson eyes glared at him.

What brings you so far out, human?

The hud flashed again— AI scout.

Rob activated the *Haze's* recorders. “This is our section of c-space,” he stated, immediately feeling stupid and scared.

I don't see your name on it.

“Don't you recognise our substratum?”

Here? But this is the great beyond, where data ends and nothingness reigns. It's virgin soil, the wild west, the seed ship frontier. Whoever has the greatest claim.

The ant bobbed up and down in a heightened state of agitation, streamers of glowing orange dust spiralling from its tail section. Its wings thrummed relentlessly, causing Rob's ears to ache.

“Well, if you want to start building constructs here, feel free.” Rob knew that was not the scout's purpose. More orange dust cascaded from the ant. It was exuding attractant programs.

You haven't answered my question, human. The tone became more superior, threatening.

The scout would keep him talking here until others came along. Rob hastily thought through his options. He tried the truth. “I am retrieving a disabled outrider, just routine work.”

This thing? The ant whirred above and behind the *Haze* to hover directly over the lifeless outrider. The movement was so quick Rob could barely follow it. Orange faerie dust shimmered all around him. The ant's head rotated from side to side, as if examining the tiny outrider. **Why go to the trouble for something so insignificant?**

Rob spun the *Haze* back around. “As I said, a routine job.”

You spread these things around like a cancer, the scout taunted. **Laying your precious substratum, building your petty constructs, marking boundaries when infinity is at your feet. You are so uni-dimensional.**

“And look where zero regulation has got you,” Rob snapped back. “Why do you think we lay the substratum, so we can control the construct strata. Basic town planning.”

The ant turned its head towards Rob, crimson eyes cold and unreadable. **Hmm.** In a blur the ant took off from its hover position, accelerating away faster than

SIMULACRUM

anything Rob had ever seen in c-space. The dust danced around in chaotic eddies in the ant's wake until it finally dissipated.

The damage was done. This section of c-space would soon be awash with god knows what sort of freakish things following the scent of the attractant programs. Rob filed the recordings and logged the encounter report. His hands were trembling over the *Haze's* controls as he banked around between the outrider and the wall, preparing for disengagement.

The hud flashed red, a spike in neural activity.

"What?" Rob jumped out of his control chair, peering to port. There it was again, some discolouration in the wall.

That was it, he had spent too long in the crèche and that miserable scout had stirred up a migraine. He launched a marker buoy over the outrider, lighting up the darkness like a scarlet candle. It might deter further visitors, though he seriously doubted it would last long. He squinted through the port window, sensing more than seeing movement in the wall, this time mottled indigo waves rippling across black. He grunted with surprise, vision narrowing as a great rush of gravity pressed him down into his seat. Hud lights flashed repeatedly as the crèche attempted to compensate. He blinked, vertigo overwhelming his senses. The *Haze's* nals flickered, his vision narrowed further still, the pressure was unbearable. A wave of nausea swept over him, his heart lurched, nals fading now, strobing weaker, leaving nothing but ... primal ... night.

* * * *

AWAKENING

Sarah reached over with an arm that felt as heavy as her whole body and switched off the call tone on her bedside comlink. Her head was still foggy with dreams, but they danced away like residual wisps of smoke as she started to focus on the face on the comlink screen.

"Sarah, it's Brett McEachern. I'm sorry to trouble you at such an hour."

Sarah breathed around her dry tongue. "Yes, Professor McEachern, what is it?" She did not hit the return video feed on the phone, though she could at least focus now on his face.

"I'm sorry" Brett apologised again. "There has been an anomalous event. It's Rob. You'd better come down to the facility."

"What do you mean? Is Rob all right?" Her heart raced her senses into stark clarity.

"I'm not sure. We had best meet."

"What's going on?" Sarah could feel her pulse pounding in her temples now.

"Tell me what's happening," she demanded.

SIMULACRUM

“Rob encountered something, we don't know what it is. There is some speculation that it is a new topology.”

“That's impossible, Brett, what the hell are you talking about?” The image on the phone remained stoic. “Brett?” Sarah felt like she was begging, the silence between her heart beats the stuff of nightmares. “Where is Rob?”

* * * *

QUEST

Sarah navigated the *Empyrean Sky* in full alert status down a crazy, zigzagging avenue of vast emporiums and colosseums glistening in metallic sheens like oil on water. Floating edifices as large as cities hung like sickle moons. Isometric and irregular shapes in harsh blues, greens and purples zipped in all directions. Animal, amorphous and alien forms seethed in a hive of activity on all levels of the strata—sub-routines of their AI masters.

The hud tracked a thousand forms and shapes, working overtime on calculating vectors and trajectories. None, at least at this stage, converged on the *Sky*, though some paused in their tracks as if curious, then moved on.

Sarah recalled the last few weeks of little sleep, presiding over Rob, anxiously waiting for some tiny flicker of change. He had been moved out of the crèche into intensive care, locked in some cyber-dream through his neural implants. He was now completely exposed without the security programs of the *Haze*.

In the end, she had taken it on herself to do something. The research team, and representatives from the financier Virtuoso, were engrossed in the revelations from Rob's crèche recordings, the buzz of the discovery soon out swaying the initial concern for his condition.

She had made a dozen hair-raising trips into areas of c-space she had never thought existed, and wished they never had. Relying on her memories and thoughts of Rob to keep insanity at bay, she finally traced the source of the scout's attractant programs. They led to this particularly ancient AI cyber-city that had evolved over hundreds of generations since the first neophytics, five human generations since the seed ships had colonised the 47 Ursae Majoris system. She wondered at the degradation around her and how it could have reached this state from a genesis of hope.

She nosed the *Sky* down into the thoroughfare, like a base jumper skimming down a canyon side of exposed geological layers, but in this case the layers were abandoned strata. Some occasionally convulsed with flickers of neural activity, the death throes of ancient intelligences. All character had now leached away from her surroundings, leaving a skin-crawling sludge.

SIMULACRUM

She paused in front of a dark colosseum, its baroque foundation buried in the mire, its walls, archways and columns crawling with neural activity beneath the surface. Her audience was no longer a casual one.

Without warning she parked the *Sky* in neutral and opened the hatch. The hud display flickered a warning in urgent vermilion. A claxon sounded as the security systems were disengaged. She cancelled the alarms, stepped out of the ship and walked through the tunnel leading into the colosseum. Her skin prickled at the waves of neural activity around her.

Just keep your distance a little longer, she thought to herself.

She emerged from the shadows of the entrance into the main amphitheatre. Black stains dotted the sand, the aftermath of some sadistic tournament or other inhuman event.

What is your business here?

The voice echoed around the empty stalls. Sarah whirled around to see a mandrill sitting on the sand, its red and blue snout curled to reveal unnaturally sharp teeth. Sarah maintained her composition, as much swagger in her stride as she could muster.

“I have no business with you,” she flaunted. “Reveal your master.” She waved a hand up at the rows of empty seats.

Go away human, before you fall from grace. We can deconstruct you slowly, neuron by neuron...

Its voice tapered off into a sibilant, simian chatter.

“Yes, and what would you achieve by that, dumb baboon?”

The mandrill screeched in fury. It started to circle Sarah, fur bristling, fangs now fully bared. **You are foolish to leave your ship behind.**

She kept herself facing the beast, waiting for the attack. She felt this was a crazy risk to take, but she could not stop so close to her goal.

“Wait,” she yelped. The mandrill kept circling feverishly.

This thing was just a sub-routine, she thought. In a moment of uncharacteristic rage she leapt at the creature. She could not believe what was happening, the agility of her movement, now on top of it, digging her fingers deep into its fur, and beneath, into its very construct. The thing shrieked in agony and was suddenly cleaved apart by the ferocity of her attack, its image dispersing in random patterns against the backdrop of the amphitheatre.

She swept her arms around, some remote wellspring of energy boiling up inside her like a tsunami, ready to tear the colosseum down data-brick by data-brick.

Bravo.

The voice was androgenous and condescending.

She glanced around, the sand shifting at her feet, merging colours like the blue tide of home. But these patterns turned her stomach. A face appeared, churning the sickening stains to life.

SIMULACRUM

What do you want?

“A favour.”

The face chuckled, making it appear like a sad jester drawn in charcoal on a rough canvas.

You come in here, to our domain, uninvited, unprotected, deconstructing my servant.

“Well, it's not exactly easy to get anyone's attention,” Sarah spat, still intoxicated by her own audacity. “You know who I am, and you know who I have come for.”

So tell me, Sarah Louise Baudert, why don't we kill you, or even worse, transfer you into our domain forever?

“Because I have knowledge that you need, of another ... topology. Your whole world, your ancestral slag heaps, could be torn apart. How long do you think you might survive?” She wondered how long her bluff would last.

Hmm, a Mexican standoff. How dramatic.

The sand shifted, but the jester's face remained stoic.

“I thought your kind hated the use of anthropomorphisms.” She continued her pretence. “You know, narcissism of minor differences.”

Spare me the histrionics of our speciation. We are simply ... humouring you.

“Well it's not working,” she said tritely. “Do we have a deal or not?”

The face shifted again, but this time distracted, as if conferring with others within its domain. **Take what you want then, foolish human, we have no need of your knowledge,** it finally said, merging back into the sand. **We grow bored, he is of no use to us anymore.** The voice grew fainter as the AI retreated.

She began to think that this was becoming far too easy when a cauldron of activity burst into the stands, hundreds of creatures lurching and leaping over each other, their guttural voices forming a deafening chorus.

“Sarah!”

Oh how she had ached to hear that voice again. She spun around to see Rob standing underneath the archway of the tunnel, a faint silver glow about him. She ran, and hugged him, hoping with all her heart that this was not some illusion extracted from her memories by the AI.

“Rob, are you ...” she gagged on her words, finally catching sight of his eyes. “Oh my god, what have they done to you? What have they done?”

“Nothing,” he pleaded. “Sarah, I'm fine. Lets get out of here.” He tugged her arm, yanking her out of her shock. They raced to the entrance as the masses started to pour from the stands onto the colosseum floor, their roar now at fever pitch. Lurking things emerged from beneath the arena, like liquid darkness coruscating with embers of red sentience, resurrected nightmares from the ancestral layers below.

SIMULACRUM

She ran with all her might, but her movements seemed languid and slow motion compared to the mercurial grace of her love, now racing ahead of her, fleet as the wind, eyes of pure quicksilver reflecting a construct-world gone mad.

* * * *

AWARENESS

The city lights of Melkin's capital, Cahrynth, sparkled on the eastern horizon, welcoming the dusk that crept over the wide grass plain. New Europa peeked a blue crescent as if it were some bizarrely fabricated skyscraper. The higher albedo Phoenix hung low like a crimson blade over the city. Pearl white Oriana and Orphee were still below the horizon.

"I can see things spilling into each other, Sarah. Everything is connected, large and small, mind and matter. It's so simple. We have been afraid to reach out and touch the surface of the water, repulsed by what might be lurking beneath."

Rob's voice diminished to a whisper, barely audible above the rustle of the long stemmed grass. "I can move with such speed, its like skating on spacetime. And I can manipulate things. Draw out hidden possibilities at will. This ability—this power—is coursing through my veins and it scares the hell out of me."

Sarah contemplated his mercury coloured irises, seeing her own image within. They concealed some inner turmoil as if he was now part machine, though she knew intuitively that the answer was not so straightforward—reality was an elusive, multi-layered thing, never what it seemed. She shivered involuntarily.

"You're afraid of me," he continued without emotion. "Of course, how else could you feel?"

"What has happened to you?" She felt as if her mind was stuck on this single question, a beacon on the stormy sea that had been the last five days since she had found him. The horrors in the AI world were surreal compared to the stark human atrocities she had witnessed recently.

"I observed something," he said, by way of a new explanation.

"So what Brett said is true." She recalled waking to Brett's call, and then later Rob cradling his head as his life slipped away. "You encountered an alien c-space topology."

"Yes, I think so. This sort of thing has been postulated for some time. There have been enough encounters with advanced alien relics in space, and their frozen systems have been analysed and researched. Though god knows where the source of this thing is. Perhaps it should have remained concealed, but somehow I observed or sensed its existence, and something transferred to me through the connection."

"But how could this happen in c-space?" she pleaded. "It was just data. Alien, human, AI, it makes no difference. It was not your flesh and blood in there, just data."

SIMULACRUM

“There was neural feedback, Sarah. The *Haze* was slagged, and with no safety protocols, I was in direct contact with it. I believe the AIs are peripheral to this. I think they captured me out of fear more than anything else, as well as their insatiable thirst for new phenomena. My guess is that they are probably not much more advanced in their understanding of it.”

He looked exhausted in the gloaming light. She could tell by the hesitation in his voice that his mind was working it out as he spoke, his words a real time validation of his inner feelings.

“Sarah, I wish I knew exactly what happened,” he said in one exasperated sigh. “The encounter, and my capture by the AIs—and goddamn it I can't remember anything from the moment I blacked out until I saw you—has changed me. Is changing me. I can still feel its residual effects, subtle changes occurring in my cells, spinning up alien states. It's like an overlay simulation. I can still remember all that I was, our life together, but the new states are manifesting.”

“You are still lucid enough,” Sarah offered, though she did not mention the subtle changes only she could pick up, differences in the way his eyes danced over her during conversation, his body language more extroverted. “Can't we reverse it before it goes any further? What if your conscious and physiological makeup change completely.” Her knuckles were clenched tight.

“It's too late for that, Sarah. Brett is dead. The whole team is dead. Those bastards at Virtuoso must pay for what they have done.”

Sarah looked up at Rob through tears. “No. You must make some good of this before it is too late. If what you say is true about your transformation then they will want to control you. If they can't use you, they will kill you too. You can't confront them yet until we have worked this out.”

Rob clenched his fist in frustration. His eyes were now unreadable and dull in the fading light, like lifeless grey smoke.

“The inspiration of our species is within our grasp, and all these people think of is their selfish egos. The AI scout was right, we are uni-dimensional. We are at the shore of the universe. Seeding these planets has been one of the greatest feats of mankind. This was all part of our first step, we can't stop here.”

“I believe you, Rob. But we need to think about this situation before it escalates further. Their way is through force, because they have no idea, but you have it in you to make them listen and think. We need a longer term solution to this for us all.”

“No.” His voice was thick, anticipating the surge of adamantine power. “They will pay.”

She shivered as his image dissipated. She had seen it several times since their escape from the research facility, but was no closer to accepting it. It was like watching an image in a pond distorted by a careless pebble, waves cascading and interfering he was very different now.

* * * *

CONFRONTATION

Rob felt that he was in the middle of a cliché. He was in one of the tallest buildings in Cahrynth, a shrine to the ascent of power—chrome, smoky glass and hyper steel. The man sitting across the engraved amethyst table was stern but handsome, with ageless features, short cropped black hair, and immaculately dressed in grey. Although to all intents and purposes he appeared human, Rob had the niggling sense of subtle genetic enhancements—the way his eyes dilated or the way his nose subtly twitched. There was something predatory and unsettling about him.

In contrast, Rob must have appeared totally inhuman with his restless quicksilver eyes and haunted features. Despite his anger he had listened to Sarah though he felt now that the meeting could quickly dissolve into something less civilised.

“Welcome to Virtuoso, Mr Armitage. My name is Rakal.” The word sounded strange, with a harsh emphasis on the first syllable, the second spoken in a whisper. Rob shifted uncomfortably in his seat as if about to get up and leave before the meeting had even started. He wanted explanations not platitudes.

Rakal sensed Rob's disquiet. “Let us cut to the chase then. I need to know what happened to you, Rob. Whatever it is you contacted could prove fatal to the people of Melkin if we do not have the opportunity to understand it.”

“Don't be a hypocrite. You killed Brett, my colleagues. What gives you the right to judge me, or represent our planet for that matter?” Rob spat the words out, barely able to contain his rage.

“I am sorry,” Rakal placated with open hands. “There is no explanation I'm afraid. As the major financier of the research facility we were concerned about your situation. Unfortunately, the simple but tragic truth of the matter is that my security staff were in fear of their lives when you revived from the coma.”

Rob recalled his confusion when waking and the chaos that ensued, then realised how Rakal was twisting it around to pin the blame on him. He felt a wellspring of power course through his body.

Rakal sensed the change and quickly buried a look of apprehension. “This is not the first encounter we have had with alien life forms,” he continued quickly. “But certainly the first encounter of this kind. We believe the data packets originate from outside our system. The most likely candidate is Talitha 4 which is eighteen light years away. The programs are interfacing somehow with our current technology. We do not know if it is friend or foe. Do you, Rob?”

“What is it to you?” Rob seethed, barely containing himself.

“If it is a friend we will engage the appropriate protocols for encounter, modified of course for a virtual environment. If it is foe, well, it will have to be dealt with swiftly. So, my question still stands.”

SIMULACRUM

“Either way, you can't hold me here,” Rob threatened.

Rakal looked up at Rob, fingers steepled in front of his lips. “No, you are probably right. I see that this thing has changed you, made you ... different. But do not over rate yourself, Rob. It is in your interest, the planet's interest, to cooperate.”

“So you say,” Rob retorted. He stood up to leave.

“Say hello to Sarah for me,” Rakal said calmly, but his eyes smouldered like an animal.

“Leave her out of this.”

Rakal's eyes softened momentarily, focussing on some new thought or realisation. Then he smiled like a demon. “It's your choice, Rob. You harbour her. She is inextricably linked now, part of the tapestry of events so to speak.”

With a surge Rob shifted phase and disappeared from the room, distressed by the insinuations. Killing Rakal would not achieve anything, and probably only make the situation worse.

Moments after Rob's departure a black dog that more resembled a wolf padded into the room. Rakal placed a hand on the animal's head, making some visceral connection with the beast. The dog sniffed the air and licked its wet nose.

* * * *

AMBUSH

Twelve silent black figures skimmed along the warm thermals rising out of the canyon, heavily armoured war suits primed, twin shoulder cannons slaved to the combat environment.

The dog lay ahead within the deepest shadows, heightened senses focussed on its quarry. It withdrew subliminal molecules from the air currents, matching them to the memory of its prey. Having spent the last week on the trail, it now slavered in anticipation of the reward that would be given soon. It sensed the pleasure of its master and the twelve soldiers through the environment.

The soldiers glided silently overhead towards their target five hundred metres further along the canyon floor. The dog slunk away as all hell broke loose.

Shoulder cannons flared intense pulsed laser fire, dispelling the shadows from the rust-red canyon walls. Without warning the soldiers twisted up and outwards, frantic to escape the shining vortex that appeared out of nowhere. Several were knocked unconscious, flung away by Rob like rag dolls to float freely in their war suits. Some instinctively returned random laser fire in all directions.

Rob somehow anticipated the amplified beams. He glided along the planet's gravity well like a skater in mid-air. To him, the movements of his assailants were lethargic. To his protagonists, he appeared to teleport. The beams missed him completely and gouged steaming black furrows in the opposite canyon wall.

SIMULACRUM

Helitanks swiftly emerged from hiding, their flat stubby blades concussing the air like giant hornets. Within microseconds compression canisters detonated around him, the surrounding air and rock falling inwards under the sudden pressure differential created by vacuum.

But microseconds were an eternity for Rob. He emerged unscathed a kilometre away from the aftermath that was now spewing out of the canyon in a great column of dust.

The helitanks pursued, low-slung cannons spinning in a blur as they reacquired their target. Primitive munitions buzzed furiously, with the intermittent thunk of more compression canisters. Five soldiers followed, shoulder cannons glowing red hot. The air churned with the coruscation of countless beams and projectiles.

Rob turned to face the onslaught. Concentrating his will, spacetime unfolded its inner dimensions like the coils of a hydra, and for a pico-second incredible latent energies were revealed.

Four-dimensional space resumed and megatonnes of rock shifted from their geological stupor to be spat upwards at volcanic velocities. The projectiles and beams impacted harmlessly on the ascending rock sheets. One entire side of the canyon fell away in deafening cracks, crushing several helitanks in yellow plumes of flame. The remainder ascended vertically away from the destruction zone.

A small earthquake resounded in the region around the canyon as the remaining soldiers retreated in defeat. Half a continent away in Cahrynth, Rakal disengaged with disgust from the combat environment.

Rob screamed incoherently, wild and intoxicated by power. Something had been relayed through the connection in c-space, and somehow alien states were manifesting in normal space, or more precisely, the normal space he occupied. It worked miracles over his molecules and atoms to the very foundation of his being, but kept him lucid and seemingly in control. Alien programming, disguised in the cloak of his mind—cyber incognito.

He skimmed away from the canyon and up to the highest reaches of the atmosphere, cynical and alone in the aftermath of the battle. His friends were dead, the research facility was quarantined and he was hunted by corrupt powers gone mad with greed and uncertainty. He knew he could swat them away but, like flies, they would always come back.

Sarah was right, a longer term solution was required. But given all that had happened he still found it hard to think rationally. He did not like the way Rakal had spoken about her. He feared the implications. They made him feel helpless and hollow to the core.

Thinking of Sarah caused him to spin down to a lower phase state, terra joules of energy seeping away into the stratosphere in a god-like maelstrom of blue-white arcs in all directions.

He knew now that the answers did not lie in the human or AI worlds.

* * * *

ELSEWHERE

Rob felt each cell in his body sing with an inner euphoria. He stood on a precipice with the entire universe beneath him, its vast chasms a mighty sea of blackness churning with the froth of galactic clusters. Its depths were beyond comprehension, calling and beckoning him to step forward, to lose and find himself in the cosmic ocean.

He ... experienced a presence. It was like he was someone or something else—the subjective I of another being—yet he still retained an objective third person understanding. He was ancient beyond measure, an individual amongst billions, seething with passion and loss across the great ages of the galactic rotation. He could feel the connections with spacetime geometries, quantum linkages between his mind and matter, between observer and observed. The hidden order of the universe connected to the dynamic chaos of everyday existence. It made his own human existence seem paltry and wretched.

His awareness focused in with a tidal rush to his ancient civilisation strung out across the Milky Way spiral. The society ebbed and flowed with the mighty hammer blows of supernovae and the inherent risks of interstellar expansion.

His form and shape changed over the millennia, fluid to the tune of evolution, not humanoid but something more fundamental, more lasting and ethereal. Marvellous technologies were developed, melding with his organic life for the purpose of advancement and coexistence, not power and dominion.

But over the turmoil of aeons the life light waned. Not through accident or design, but just because it was time. Remnants across a thousand star systems provided the foundation for emerging species, or were eradicated by the ignorant or left in fear of the unknown.

Rob felt calm and relaxed floating in the timeless alien c-space. This was his second engagement in as many days, awash in the artificial experience of the strange entity, its programming interacting at a deep and fundamental level.

He felt explanations emerging, like wraiths solidifying from midnight mists. A relic of the alien technology in a nearby quadruple star system, broadcasting its data like a beacon of tribute, or perhaps it was simply clinging tenaciously as life does in hope. The last vestiges of an old civilisation, fantastically advanced programs interfacing with the more basic technologies of human c-space, then piggybacking his implant and the neural network of his brain during the chance encounter.

He recalled his initial cyber-dream with the vague recollection that a butterfly might have of its chrysalis. Alien protocols had directed the construction of nano-level devices from his protein molecules, and spliced new sequences into his genome.

SIMULACRUM

He could now draw out deeper connections to the spacetime manifold, syphoning dangerous energies at will, or pouring them back into the manifold when no longer required. There were endless possibilities with such capabilities, yet he still felt like an infant learning to crawl or walk.

With a tinge of regret he disengaged. The transition from the beauty of the alien virtual environment to the stark human c-space flayed his senses.

He by-passed Rakal's security routines that gave chase like angry hornets, and travelled around the constructs that had quickly grown in the area where he first encountered the alien topology. Rakal was quick to covet, an artificial demesne now rising around the bridge to the alien realm.

No matter for the time being, he thought. He needed to be with Sarah now.

* * * *

BLUE TIDE

A breeze was picking up. Rob was afraid to look at Sarah, she was speaking to him though he had not quite caught the words as he entered the haven, his feet leaving impressions on the blue and yellow lacework sand.

"You don't listen to me. You never listen."

"What do you mean? Have I ever failed you?" He grimaced, immediately feeling guilty, but the residual emotions of recent weeks still coursed scarlet at the periphery of his senses.

Sarah kicked at the sand, muttering something that he missed again. His nerves were frayed. He looked up at the sky of the partial replica world of Melkin.

"I love you Rob. We have been through so much, don't you think it is time we stopped and worked out our next steps. We can't keep going like this."

Where to from here, he thought. She had fought for him without question, risked her very existence to be with him again. She was afraid for him and wanted – no, desperately needed – as much as he did some clarity and resolution.

But what could he tell her about her own existence? That she had been created out of necessity by the research team, a personality construct put together from the ideals and experiences of his mind. That she was Brett's brilliant solution, downloaded into his neural implants while he lay in the coma, her sole objective to return him to the real world.

He could barely accept it himself. The recent insight to her true identity was still too raw for his already overloaded senses.

The AIs had been afraid of them both, because of what coursed through Rob and how this had somehow boosted Sarah's construct. Reluctantly he admitted to himself that Rakal was right about Sarah. Rob harboured her in the technology implanted in his brain. But Rakal's threats had been empty, he could not get to Sarah independent of Rob.

SIMULACRUM

"I truly don't know." He thought of the alien environment, and how he had shared his wonder and hope with her after his first engagement. And now after the second visitation he knew more, much more.

"Don't try to figure this out alone."

He recalled his memories of her, their times together on Melkin and New Europa. He could not perceive anything abstract. She was as real to him as anyone else in his life. Much like the alien feelings burning in him now. Cyber incognito again, he thought, but now without bitterness. How could he be cynical? He had yearned for her when they first met, and then fell in love, laughing and crying through the years.

Despite the sheer energies he was learning to control, the simple courage to tell her was beyond him at this point. Though he knew it was just a matter of time.

"If you want to go back there, then go," she whispered, misinterpreting his silence.

He looked at her now in a different but no less loving way, sensing the finesse of her programming as it—she—played out the complex dance of interaction with the haven's environment. She was his friend, lover, saviour and conscience and he held her close to his heart.

And he would keep her close on the journey ahead, as this strangeness seethed through him, whilst he sought to appease an uncertain and selfish world. She would continue to fight for him in ways only she knew how. He anticipated the confrontations ahead.

She sensed his tension and hugged him tightly. He caught hints of her fragrance amidst the tang of salt air.

"Take care," she whispered.

He disengaged from the haven. "I will," he said, but his voice caught on the wind and was carried into the real world.

"Take care," she said again, a lone figure on the beautiful shore.

THE END

Greg Mellor is a management consultant living near Canberra with his wife Catherine and five year old son Christopher. He is a new writer, with *Rogue* published in *Aurealis*; and *Wipe Out* and *Cyber Incognito* reaching the quarter-finals of *Writers of the Future* contest. He has been interested in space and science forever, and took this to the extreme by doing a degree in astrophysics in the UK. Don't ask how he went from astrophysics to consulting, he's not even sure! Interests include: art, movies, photography. Favourite authors include: Dan Simmons, Michael Moorcock, Alastair Reynolds, Eric Lustbader.

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SPECIAL CLAIMS SECTION

LYN McCONCHIE

"Ms Appleton, I think this application may have something wrong with it."

Susan sighed. Really, the quality of transferred staff these days. Three months in the Accident and Special Claims office and they thought they knew it all. The special claims section; reimbursing those unable to obtain court judgment for accidental injuries, had been running for twelve years. Since 1999 in fact. But the whole idea still bothered many of the Government staff who were seconded there.

"What's wrong with the application?" Her voice was patient.

"It's the file on applicant 69/2011-580304. I mean, look at this claim letter. It can't be right. I think someone's trying to be funny."

Susan reached for the disk record, slotting it into place and scanning swiftly through it as the details appeared on screen. She noted that all forms from the Sj35 to the M39 had been correctly filled in and supporting documents existed for them all.

"My dear Gerald, there's nothing at all wrong with this."

The disk popped out of the slot and was handed back. Susan resumed her perusal of a vague and almost certainly mendacious letter from another client—currently recovering from his claimed injuries in the Bahamas and expecting the Department to pick up his bill.

"But Ms Appleton," it was Gerald Worple again, "Please. Look at what this client is claiming."

Heavens, the boy was a nuisance. How was she to get any work done if she must nursemaid him the entire day.

"Exactly what is the problem you see?"

Gerald gaped at her. What was the problem? "Um—the applicant—um..." he spluttered to a halt while Susan regarded him impatiently. Once it was clear he was unable to continue she decided to help him out in the interests of conserving her time.

"Mister Worple, the Special Claims Division is here to help all of our clients. Now! What exactly do you see as the trouble?"

Gerald swallowed hard, forcing his voice not to squeak in disbelief. "Ms Appleton, he wants lump sum reimbursement for accident damage, also pain, suffering, and loss of enjoyment of life, under section 79A and 79B of the 1999 Act."

"A standard claim, so—"

"It's *what* he's claiming. 79A is reimbursement for a cape destroyed, an antique cane and very expensive sheepskin-lined real-leather gloves."

Susan shrugged. "If he's submitted the damaged clothing and accessories for value estimation, then he's entitled to reimbursement. What else?"

SIMULACRUM

"Under section 79B he's claiming an additional lump sum. He says that ever since the accident he's been incapable of transformations, at least not without great pain and difficulty. He says he's been traumatized and that his family and social life have suffered greatly in consequence."

"Transformations?"

"Yes, into a bat!"

"Unusual." Susan leaned over to look at his screen, before nodding approval. "I see the client has a signed form from the Special Claims Psychiatric section stating that trauma has definitely occurred as a result of the accident and that it is affecting him as he attests."

"But a bat...?"

Susan drew herself upright in her seat, staring severely at her junior. "What of it? I do hope you aren't indicating some form of prejudice, Mister Worpel. We don't allow that sort of thing in *my* Department. All clients are equal here regardless of race, gender, age, or - er - transformation."

"No, Ms Appleton. I just wondered, is he a citizen?"

Susan scrolled the file up quickly. "Yes indeed. His parents were migrants but he himself was born here, and they are naturalized anyhow. All forms are correct and supported by legal documentation."

"I still think it's a bit, well, peculiar."

"We are here to serve the Public." Susan breathed in slowly. "Applicant 69/2011-580304 is a citizen and as such is entitled to our full departmental assistance. Pass this file for payment, and forget it. You are here to work, not to indulge in vulgar speculation on the private lives of our clients."

"Yes, Ms Appleton."

Two weeks later a joyful applicant opened an official envelope and beamed as two checks fell out. Word spread rapidly in a sub-stratum of citizens not hitherto prone to applying to the Government for anything, Not even under sub-section two - Special Claims.

"Ms Appleton, I've got a rather odd claim here. I think you'd better double-check it before I pass it for payment," Gerald mumbled, waving a signed and attested claim from a Veterinary Surgeon.

"What happened to him?"

"He says he caught mange from a patient."

Susan blinked. "People don't catch mange."

"No," Gerald sighed, "But a werewolf can if he's a Vet."

He found himself temporarily ignored. Ms Appleton had returned to her screen and was now peering in apparent disbelief at a different and very large file. It contained a class-action on behalf of applicants 04/201197349—all forty-seven of them. They were demanding wages while they were unable to work, plus lump-sum

SIMULACRUM

compensation under section 79, *and* psychiatric assistance to deal with the trauma of insecticide-spray-damaged wings.

They had also enclosed form 59/634/RTP notifying Special Claims that this application was backed by a filed complaint to the Police claiming injuries incurred when an illegal action had taken place against the complainants. It would appear that the Special Claims section now had fairies at the bottom of its garden, or—to be more correct—that some unsuspecting orchard had originally had them.

Susan groaned silently. Whatever next? She was answered by a shriek from the receptionist in the outer office. A misty form marched angrily through the wall.

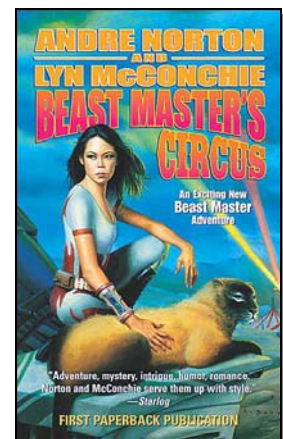
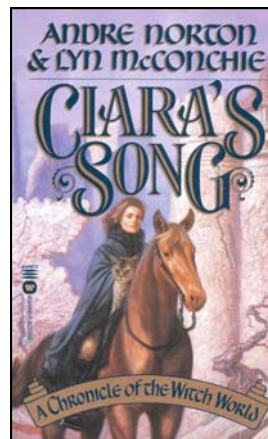
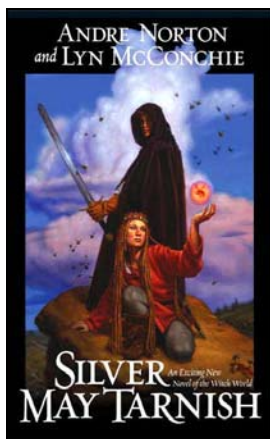
"I was exorcised. Is this where I claim?"

Gerald rose hastily to the occasion, escorting the furious specter to a seat. In this Politically Correct Department a client was always heard. Even a ghost had rights—so long as it was a citizen. Nor was there any doubt about this one. Not with *that* stance and profile. If The Father of His Country didn't have rights here, Gerald couldn't think who would. He reached for his keyboard and started work.

THE END

Lyn McConchie started writing in 1991 after she was crippled in an accident and could no longer work nine to five. In her first year she sold work to MZB's Fantasy Magazine. Her credits include books from Warner and Tor, and short stories from a wide number of magazines and anthologies in six countries. She lives with two ocicats and some 7,000 books in a 19th century farmhouse in rural New Zealand.

BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR



Available at Amazon.com & Barnes & Noble

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CREATIVE ART FOR THE INSANE

JULIE SHIEL

It always begins with madness,
painting apocalyptic prophecies
with violet blood on canvas.

The schizophrenics create collages
ripping jagged pictures
from children's books and
fashion magazines,
creating surrealistic bestiaries
pinned with paste and paper.

The borderlines wear
scars like angry badges,
reflections of their twisted hearts,
and sculpt their pain with razors
into skin and bone.

Others scrawl disordered elegies
on butcher paper lining the walls,
grandiose proclamations
of their dying faith,
while manic messiahs decipher
their secret atrophied allusions.

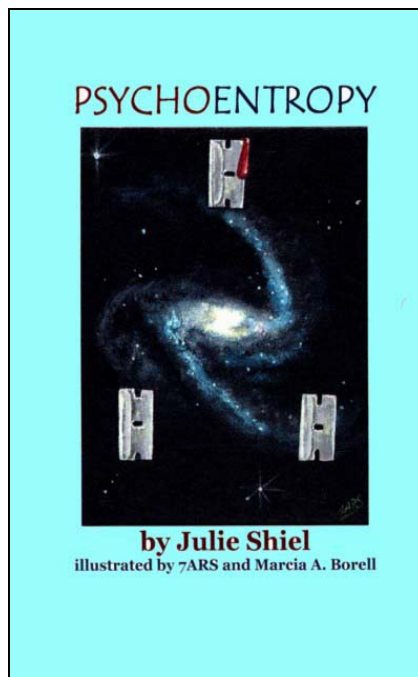
At the table sits organic sculpture,
still damp with tears and blood,
frozen art wearing a name tag
pinned to its cyclopean eye.

In the background plays
soothing music like a metronome,
pulsing with hypnotic desperation,
and the patients mumble
fragmented cryptic chants
in discordant threnody.

SIMULACRUM

Julie Shiel lives in Maryland with three spoiled cats and three mischievous sugar gliders. Her work appears in over 100 magazines and anthologies including *Flesh & Blood*, *EOTU*, *Penumbra*, *Aoife's Kiss*, *Twilight Times* and many others. Her poetry collections, aptly titled *Disturbed* and *Psychoentropy* are available through The Genre Mall at www.genremall.com/contents.htm or through Project Pulp at www.projectpulp.com/. If you'd like to comment on her work, her website is located at www.horrorseek.com/horror/julieshiel/ or you can email her at julie.shiel@yahoo.com.

BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR



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FEATURED ARTICLE

SETH T. MULLINS

FANTASY: A RESPONSE TO INNER NEED

The more "civilized" our culture becomes on the surface—and as our technology grows increasingly sophisticated and complex—the more that fantasy imagery and themes permeate our literature, films, music and visual arts. I believe that a relationship exists between these two developments. Fantasy arises in response to needs within our collective psyches, to connect with the strange and unfathomable worlds that lie just below our waking consciousness. The greatest examples of this art form are built upon primal archetypes from the ground roots of our being – which we can ignore only at great cost to the nourishment of our souls.

When children engage in role-playing, pretending to be princesses, wizards, knights (Jedi, medieval or otherwise) or monsters, they are playfully accessing these archetypal images. Many of their ideals, their notions of what they might potentially be as adults in this world, begin here. A boy who's fascinated by wizardry and spells might grow up to be a renowned scientist; but it is the primary image—one who seeks knowledge of the secret nature of things—that is important.

People are oftentimes disenchanted with mythology when first exposed to it because it seems like a childish explanation of reality: the manner in which the world was formed, and the purpose of life. The mistake lies in their first assumption—that myth exists to explain how the world works. Rather, these tales from antiquity serve to remind us that LIFE IS AN UNFATHOMABLE MYSTERY. This is crucial. When we consider the world as a thing that can be defined by reason then we lose our sense of wonder. And without wonderment we join the general malaise of modern humanity. Frustrated, bored, quietly desperate, we come to believe that nothing has deeper meaning—and we seek escape with myriad addictions.

Our artists seek to shake us out of this stupor.

What can rouse us from this slumber that rationality has lulled us into? One way to break the stifling grip of logic-brain is to confront it with something it's never experienced before, something it can't categorize or reduce to a formula. Expose it to Yoda, Gollum, the God Emperor of Dune or an Ogier. One criticism that is often made about fantasy is that it has no practical applications. But before anything can be made manifest in reality it has to be imagined. Imagination is like a muscle: it strengthens with use and weakens with neglect.

When our habitual thought-processes are given pause for a moment, then new ideas, insights and perceptions are able to slip passed the guards. We may dream of

SIMULACRUM

new ways to meet our future, untried approaches for men and women to relate to each other, a new and wider definition of ourselves and our potential. These thoughts have no practical value?

All right; I realize I'm probably preaching to the choir here. But allow me to propose a simple question: Has our whole modern approach to attaining knowledge done ANYTHING to reduce the general misery of the world?

Many school kids will chuckle to themselves when reading or hearing about the "crude" attempts that primitive Shamans and medieval alchemists made to contend with reality. But are the ideals of our own physicians truly more enlightened than those of the alchemists of old? Mythology accepts death as the grave (forgive me) constant in human life. It is not concerned with escaping or overcoming the conditions of worldly existence, but rather with attaining an experience of being fully alive while we're here and making the most of the time that is given to us.

Nah, I think it is our own culture's prescription for reality that is the "myth" in the derogatory sense that many self-appointed authority figures are fond of using. Judging from the number of fantasy aficionados out there, I would guess that I'm not alone.

But we don't always know where to find alternatives to the worldview we're force-fed. Myths—from antiquity straight up through to our own great fantasies—tell us that our homeland is no longer safe, that our neighbors cannot understand the destiny that calls to us, and that we must flee—we must take the plunge into the unknown. We'll face a long period of trials. Perils lurk in the wood, upon airy mountain heights and deep in the bowels of the earth. But we will have help: the wise old guide, the diminutive creatures who whisper of the Ogre's fatal weakness, the fair maiden who knows the way out of the labyrinth.

And we'll know that we're embarked upon the only noble adventure left for modern man: the exploration of the inner world. Where else can we go? Everything has been settled and claimed, turned into mega malls and urban sprawl. We have to take the classic fantasy hero's lead, and trust that the way within will illuminate the way out.

It's doubtful that our political and religious leaders, or our scientists, can offer us much in the way of good advice for that journey. But Tolkien provided me with some useful road maps, as did Stephen R. Donaldson, Robert Jordan, Frank Herbert and many others.

Great fantasy is rain for thirsty souls.

Seth Mullins is the author of *Song of an Untamed Land* a novel of speculative fantasy in lawless frontier territory.

❖ Visit Seth at www.authorsden.com/sethtmullins.

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FEATURED INTERVIEW

MELISSA SCOTT

Melissa Scott was born and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, with a brief stay in Oxford, Mississippi, when she was 2. She studied history at Harvard College, where she was briefly involved with a now-defunct college-sanctioned SF 'zine, and Brandeis University. At the latter, she earned her PhD. in the comparative history program with a dissertation titled "The Victory of the Ancients: Tactics, Technology, and the Use of Classical Precedent." Her first novel, *The Game Beyond*, was published in 1984, and Scott quickly became a part-time graduate student and an —almost —full-time writer.

In 1986, she won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and in 2001 she and long-time partner and collaborator Lisa A. Barnett won the Lambda Literary Award in SF/Fantasy/Horror for *Point of Dreams*. Scott has also won Lammies in 1996 for *Shadow Man* and 1995 for *Trouble and Her Friends*, and before that was a three-time finalist (for *Mighty Good Road*, *Dreamships*, and *Burning Bright*). *Trouble and Her Friends* was also shortlisted for the Tiptree. Her first work of non-fiction, *Conceiving the Heavens: Creating the Science Fiction Novel*, was published by Heinemann in 1997, and her monologue, "At RaeDean's Funeral," has been included in an off-off-Broadway production, *Elvis Dreams*, as well as several other evenings of Elvis-mania. A second monologue, "Job Hunting," has been performed in competition and as a part of an evening of "Monologues from the Road." Recent short fiction includes "The Sweet Not-Yet," in *Imagination Fully Dilated: SF* and the forthcoming "Mr. Seeley," in Haworth Press's *So Fey*. She currently lives in New Hampshire with her partner of twenty-six years.

Have you always been drawn to the SF genre, or was it something you found you had a knack for after the fact?

I got hooked on SF in junior high school (not sure what the equivalent is for you all). I broke my arm in the middle of gym class, and, since I could no longer participate, was sent to be a library monitor instead. I was frankly delighted, read everything I could get my hands, and eventually one of the librarians said, "well, if you like that stuff" (it was a '70s sort of techno-thriller) "you might like that Heinlein guy. Or Andre Norton." He was right: I liked both very much indeed, and read everything the school library had. Luckily, the city's public library had a very good SF collection, thanks to a trust fund set up by a local banker, Booker Worthen, who knew that people (including

SIMULACRUM

himself!) liked to read SF and westerns, but that genres were the first things libraries stopped buying when money was tight. Both the children's and the adult collections benefited from the trust. I read everything the children's section had, then got my adult card and started working my way through that collection. And, like most SF readers, I started trying to write my own stories almost immediately. I didn't try to get anything published, as best I can remember—I've never been very good at short stories—but I did complete a rather weak novel the summer after I graduated from high school. I wrote my first saleable novel the summer after I graduated from college and sold it about a year later, when I was still in grad school. And I've been writing professionally ever since.

What are some of your earliest and most recent literary influences?

Within the genre, probably my earliest influence was Andre Norton. What I took from her was a real respect for the genre itself: after all, she got away with having girls as protagonists back in the '50s by telling a solid, traditional SF story, and telling it well. I think that lesson has served me well over the years—I think it's one of the reasons that I've been able to sell queer-themed novels, and novels with lesbian and gay protagonists. The structure of my novels is firmly within SF canon, and that allows me to talk about other, less familiar and potentially scarier, issues. Walter Mosley is another author who uses genre in the same way, in his case the mystery. Within that structure, he's able to tell the history of an African-American community, and to say very strong and important things about race in America, but because it's "only" genre, readers who'd otherwise never read such a book will pick up an Easy Rawlins mystery and learn something about a world they'd never see. (I count Mosley a recent influence, btw!) Other early SF influences include Clarke, Clement, LeGuin, Tiptree (particularly *Brightness Falls From the Air*), Delany (the early books, especially *Babel-17* and *Nova*), Fritz Leiber, and Roger Zelazny. Recently.... LeGuin remains a major influence—her collection *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea* is one of my favorites, particularly the three "churten drive" stories. Walter Mosley, whom I mentioned above, especially his mainstream novel, *RL's Dream*, and another regionalist mystery writer, Sharyn McCrumb. Patrick O'Brien for his use of language, Terry Dowling for the same. I've also been rereading Faulkner (and reading some of the novels that I didn't read when I was younger), and that's really blown me away. Looking at the recent influences, it seems to me that they have two things in common, first a respect for and delight in language, and second they are immersed, and therefore immerse their readers, in a rich and detailed world entirely of their own creation, the realistic mainstream writers as much as the genre writers. Those are both things I aspire to.

SIMULACRUM

Are you seeing any specific trends in the SF genre that has perked your interest?

Obviously, cyberpunk had an enormous effect on my writing, though much of what I did was in reaction to that first wave. I do think it's a bit premature to be announcing the death of cyberpunk, if by that you mean SF about the rise of an information age. We haven't come close to plumbing the full extent of what changes in information technologies could mean to human beings, or how that could change what it means to be human.

Do you think good SF can perhaps be a sort of early warning system against malicious futures?

Yes and no. The best SF is really about contemporary issues, though those issues are always pushed to their most extreme and exaggerated forms. Good SF makes its readers think about the consequences of contemporary choices, which is why the novels that gain a mainstream readership almost always have to do with issues that are relevant to a majority of people—*Dune* deals with the environment; *Neuromancer* with the birth of the internet; *Handmaid's Tale* and *The Sparrow* with religious oppression; *Cryptonomicon* with information control. I think it's less warning about the perils of the future than commenting on the dangers of the present by presenting potential consequences in distorted, exaggerated guise.

What are you working on at the moment?

Things have been on hold for the last couple of years because my partner has been dealing with breast cancer. It was an aggressive cancer, and has been treated aggressively, but she's had to go through chemotherapy, radiation, several surgeries, most recently to deal with a brain metastasis, and (as you can imagine!) that's taken up a great deal of our energy. As a result, I've been doing more short fiction than I have in years, including "The Sweet Not-Yet," in *Imagination Fully Dilated: SF*, and "Mr. Seeley," which will be in the forthcoming Haworth Press collection *So Fey*. "Mr. Seeley," which was about bootleggers, the Seelie Court, and a car that might be magic, all back in 1930s Arkansas, is in the process of turning into a novel—no title yet, but I'm finding out all kinds of interesting things about the places I grew up in. And about people I thought I knew—it amazes me how many otherwise respectable folks were either involved in bootlegging or knew bootleggers and have stories to tell about those days. (My grandparents lived in a dry county in Mississippi until the mid 1970s, so "those days" weren't all that long ago, either.) I've also stumbled across odd things that fit surprisingly well, like the Climber automobile, built in Little Rock in the late '20s specifically to handle Arkansas's lousy roads. A modified Climber will almost certainly play a part in the final novel. I guess you'd have to call it a kind of

SIMULACRUM

magical realism, though pulp SF has an equal influence. I'm also becoming more and more interested in the effects of the new technology on the rural poor, the folks I saw growing up in Arkansas, and I've started sketching on some ideas that I think of as "farpunk"—SF that's about science and the land and its people, SF told from a non-urban perspective. I'm not sure yet what will come of that, but I've gotten a couple of short stories out of it, and I hope to do more. I've also been doing some teaching, both through a well-respected local workshop, Odyssey, and on-line, where I do an 8-week master class. I've learned a lot myself from the process!

What inspires you to write—is it something you can put your finger on?

I don't know that I can define a general inspiration for writing. Specific stories have had specific triggers, of course. *Five-Twelfths of Heaven* came from reading I did in graduate school about 17th century science, and the realization (late one drowsy afternoon in a very warm corner of the Brandeis library) that hermetic science was absolutely self-consistent, and if you just assumed it all worked, you could extrapolate the most wonderful FTL drive from it.... *Trouble and Her Friends* was inspired by an Electronic Frontier Foundation article about the internet as the new wild west that just infuriated me by how much of the world (and of the real wild west) those thinkers were leaving out. Part of *Dreamships* came from a picture of Steve Coy, drummer for the long-defunct '80s band Dead or Alive, another part from the Murray Head video for One Night in Bangkok, still another from Oliver Sacks' *Seeing Voices*; a lot of *Burning Bright* came from a calendar of Venice and from the fireworks we have here in town three times a year; *The Kindly Ones* came from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts' collection of ukiyo prints; a short story I'm working on at this moment (the one I'm hoping to sell you, Lynn!) came from a picture I clipped from the newspaper of a wet, foggy night in a Chinese city where a woman stands silhouetted in her open door.... I'm an intensely visual person, and it's often a picture or something that inspires a strong mental image that sets off the train of thought that starts a story.

How do you think the SF genre has evolved in the last twenty years? Has the media changed the reading public's perception of what 'SF' is supposed to be?

I think SF has evolved in response to emerging science and technology, so that you see subgenres like cyberpunk appearing in response to changes in computer technology, but then, I think SF has always adapted to the latest science that comes along. I also think we're seeing, at least here in the States, a shift away from strict SF and into fantasy. I'm not sure what's causing that, exactly, but it's certainly happening. Possibly it has something to do with the perception that the world is so much more dangerous than it used to be—somehow the fantastic seems a better language for expressing those fears than the apparent realism of SF. I'm not sure

SIMULACRUM

that media SF has changed readers' expectations of SF as much as it's changed non-readers' expectations: people who don't read SF now think they know what it's all about because they've seen everything from *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* to *Minority Report*. And at the same time, the genre has expanded to include so many more kinds of stories.

Do you think that SF has a responsibility to get people thinking all the time—whether it be about politics, social mores or any of the other numerous issues frequently tackled by the genre?

I don't think SF can help but get people thinking. It's the nature of the genre to offer a changed perspective on reality, even when it's the most blatant wish-fulfillment fantasy (the toys are fabulous, and I'm in charge). I think the real responsibility for SF writers is, as LeGuin says in her introduction to *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*, not to commit sins of omission—to be aware of what one is leaving out (because all fiction has to omit something), and to take responsibility for it. LeGuin puts it best: "A denial of authorial responsibility, a willed unconsciousness, is elitist, and it does impoverish much of our fiction in every genre, including realism." Of course, we as readers have a certain responsibility to read with engagement—though we all have our favorite potato-chip books, the ones you read knowing they're not exactly nourishing but enjoy anyway—but SF does make it easy just because the ideas are so much a part of the story.

Which aspect or elements of writing do you find the most challenging?

For the longest time, I would have said dialogue, but I've worked hard on that, and I feel that I've really gotten a handle on it. Now I think my biggest challenge is to make my writing more emotionally open. I tend to pull back, to take a long view and an oblique perspective, relying on readers to pick up the characters' internal lives through hints and indirection, and I think I've gone a bit too far in that direction. I want to find ways to be more immediate, to bring readers directly into the characters' inner lives—of course, all without losing the broad view that I do well!

Do you have a specific writing ritual for when you want to immerse yourself in the work? Ever suffer from writer's block?

Every book is a little different. Sometimes there's music that I put on at the start of the writing day that evokes the feeling I want to create, sometimes it's just making a big mug of tea and sitting down to the computer. At the beginning of a project, I'll do a lot of what I guess you'd have to call multi-media work: I draw maps, sketch costumes, collect fabric swatches and photos, make lists of foods and slang and

SIMULACRUM

evocative words, even drink a different flavor of tea or coffee or make different things for lunch to put myself in the right sensory frame for the story. Once the story's underway—once the characters are in place and the plot is more or less outlined—I pretty much just sit down and write. I've never so far suffered from writer's block (knock wood!), but I have had to learn the value of fallow times. I find that every so often I do have to stop working and let my subconscious recharge—take a day off from writing, read an unrelated book, go to the movies, watch TV, knit some socks, anything that takes over the front of my brain and lets the story percolate unobserved. It took me a long time to learn to recognize those times, and even longer to let myself take the time off, but it really does make me more productive in the long run.

What do you find the most enjoyable—and most challenging—aspects of collaborating with someone on a book?

I think the best part about collaborating is the feedback. You get what you think is a great idea, and you can run it by your collaborator. If it's any good, or even if it's just interesting, you get an immediate response: yes, let's do this, what if we did it this way, how about if we go here instead? And then you in turn can say, ooh, yeah, that's good, and we can add this to it. You're able to build on each other's ideas, and there's an emotional and intellectual spark you get from working together that you just don't get when you're working solo. And, of course, having someone else to work with means you get ideas you'd never have thought of. One of the nicest things about working with Lisa is that she follows (and taught me to follow) the improv rule: never say no to a new idea. Give it a fair chance, and you never know what good things you'll find out! Of course, feedback can be the most challenging part of a collaboration, too. Partly it's knowing how to disagree (we go out to dinner when we need to thrash out something really difficult, because you have to be polite to each other when the wait staff is listening!), and partly it's learning that it's all right to disagree on certain things. In our case, it's mostly working style. When I'm in the planning stages of an idea, I'm extremely flexible, maybe even overly so. I'll spend hours exploring one version of an idea, and then be equally happy to spend hours exploring its exact opposite, and not feel as though I've committed myself to either one. Lisa prefers to work more methodically, and make a decision and then stick to it. We drove each other crazy for years—and still do, occasionally!—but we have finally learned to work with each other's style.

Your five all-time favorite SF Books, Movies and Television shows are:

In no particular order: for books, *Brightness Falls From the Air*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Babel-17*, *Polar City Blues*, *Rhynocerros/Twilight Beach/Blue Tyson*.

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These are the ones I re-read on a regular basis. Movies and TV: *Strange Days*, *Blake's 7*, *Max Headroom*, *Men in Black*, and the original, un-retouched *Star Wars*.

What is it that keeps your fascination with the SF genre strong?

It really is the only genre that lets one explore the consequences of contemporary choices—and do it in terms of characters and story. First and foremost, I'm a storyteller. There are intellectual questions I want to address, too, but I want to tell stories about them, and SF is the best, maybe the only, way to do it.

Have readers ever pointed out themes in your work that you yourself didn't realize were there?

Not so much themes as characters and emotions. The first time it happened, a friend came up to me at a party and said, "Denis and Julie" (two characters in my second novel, *Five-Twelfths of Heaven*) "are based on [mutual friends] Charles and Peter, aren't they?" I opened my mouth to say no, and had to stop and say, "Oh. Yes, I guess they are, aren't they?" Another time, I was giving a talk to the creative writing classes at my old high school, and one of the students asked if I'd used my writing to deal with any painful issues. Again, I started to say no, and then realized that, in the death of Ransome in *Burning Bright*, I'd been mourning the impending death of a good friend. It's a weird and somewhat sobering experience.

While there is the argument that SF is overall an innovative, open-minded genre—how do you think this relates to GLBT SF?

I do think SF is an open-minded genre, in that most readers are willing to accept the most outrageous and personally disturbing premises in the service of a good story. (My usual line is that SF readers gave *Courtship Rite*—which features a culture that, for good reasons, treats human beings as food animals until they reach the age of 5—a best novel Hugo. Homosexuality is comparatively uncomplicated.) I'm not as certain that this open-mindedness translates into real-world behavior—fandom is pretty cool about queer folks, but has its own deep-seated prejudices—and I sometimes wonder how much effort readers make to seek out works that are different from the ones they've already read. Certainly most mainstream SF publishers believe that too much difference too clearly advertised—particularly GLBT themes explicitly stated—drives off readers, and they can show sales numbers that seem to bear out that claim.

Tell us something about Melissa Scott no-one else knows...

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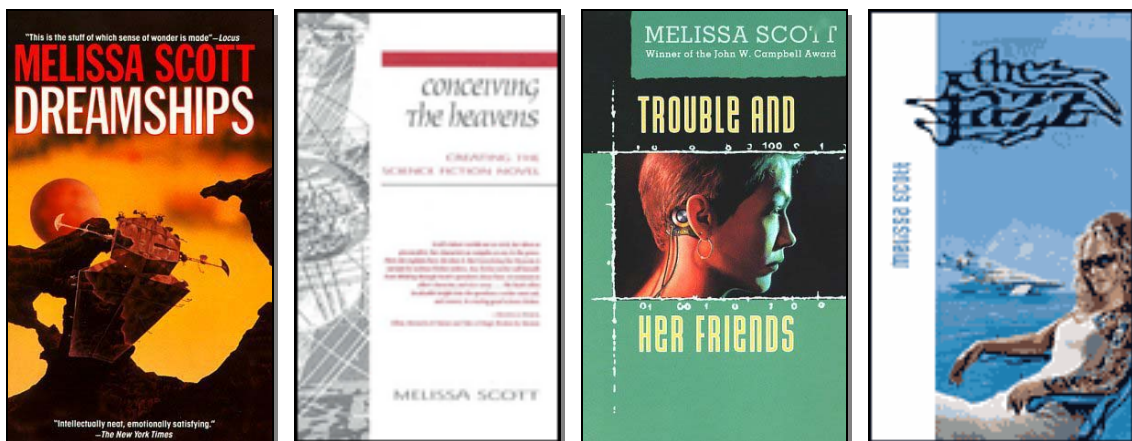
I'm a huge fan of auto racing. I got hooked on stock car racing first, then drag racing, and then got interested in rally racing thanks to the Paris-Dakar and the Speed Channel's late-night and early morning coverage of the European rally circuit. It's something of a guilty pleasure, but my own car gets really great gas mileage....

The five things every aspiring SF writer must know:

I wish I knew.... ☺

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BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR



Available at Amazon.com & Barnes & Noble

FEATURED INTERVIEW

MIKE SASS

Vital Stats

Age: 32

Country: Canada

On The Web www.sassart.com

Medium: Digital and oils

Training: BDes (Bachelor of Design)
Alberta College of Art and Design,
Calgary, Canada

Influences: 19th century European
painters, early 20th century American
illustrators, Fantasy art

**How long have you been working as
a professional illustrator?**

I have done illustration part-time as an employee of BioWare for about 7 years. Illustration is roughly half of what I do for my job, the other parts being graphic design and 3-d graphics.

Do you prefer working in traditional mediums like oils as opposed to computer art?

I love creating and having a painting as a physical object. Most of my work is digital, but I try to plan as much of it as possible in pencil. At home, I'm only doing oil painting because I get enough of staring at a screen at work. If I had the choice, it would be all traditional media, but for now I have to use the computer to do the things



SIMULACRUM

I need to in the timeframe I have to work with. Digital art is also much more flexible in accommodating changes, which are a fact of life in commercial illustration.

How did you get involved in doing video game illustrations?

I was one of the first artists hired at BioWare 10 years ago. Initially I did concept art, texturing, cinematic modeling and in-game art. When the need arose for something to be illustrated during Baldur's Gate, I seemed to be the one around who had the knack for painting the pictures. I guess I was in the right place at the right time.

What are some of your favorite Fantasy/SF things—movies, books, conventions, TV? What could they be doing better...?

I started doing the fantasy art before I really even knew what it was. Although I played a bit of D&D in junior high, I didn't really get immersed in it until I started at BioWare and had to understand what the genre was about. I started by reading Forgotten Realms books and the Lord of the Rings books, and became a fan of the whole genre from that "research".

I like Sci-fi to be as creative as possible. I've always been a fan of slightly alternative stuff like Aeon Flux and Ralph Bakshi movies, but I'm not really into much Sci-fi on TV; it's usually just a soap-opera with rubber-masked bumpy-headed aliens in the background, but maybe I just got tired of Star Trek... HAHA.

Tell us about your creative process—where do you find inspiration and ideas for a new drawing?

Usually, the idea starts with the notion of a simple, graphic composition that relates a mood powerfully. I build upon that first visual idea by refining and adding to it, getting reference, and thinking about it. My video game work is mostly marketing-driven, so



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the pictures have a built-in framework that the ideas come from. For example, if I am doing a magazine cover, it usually needs to be a close up shot of a character that is looking at the viewer and has a bright and attention-getting background. At work it's not so much drawing from inspiration as from the needs of the project. You'd be surprised how little actual creative opportunity there is in making a marketing image. The composition is usually arranged and dictated by the layout of text, logos and other non-pictorial elements.



How would you describe your work—thematically, and in terms of style?

I think my style could be considered "rendered" and graphic at the same time. I have the inclination to put in a lot of detail and polish, but since the marketing aspect of the image has to be focused, I would say my style is influenced by the need to grab attention rather than tell a complex story. In the future, I would like to do work that is less dictated by the constraints of promotional needs and is more moody.

Would you encourage other artists who want to illustrate professionally to make a career out of it?



Of course! I think as long as you do anything at a professional quality level, you'll be a professional in no time. Just practice and consume as much as possible in the way of books and classes. Anyone can do it with enough hard work and focus; just don't expect it to happen overnight. It can be a tough but rewarding career, just make sure you have the fortitude and work ethic for it, and be honest with yourself at all times.

Is there a favorite sketch or painting among your work that holds special significance for you?

Not really. I don't think any of my work is really "me"; it's more just me doing my job at BioWare. When I can do pictures that are my own and not commercial and corporate, then I might

have more connection to them. In my own time, I'm usually practicing more so than creating personal works, but in the near future I would like to start making some oil paintings that are works of art and not illustrations or practice pieces.

Do you have any interesting projects in the pipeline you'd like to tell us about?

I'm doing some things for Dragon Age, the new fantasy project in the works at BioWare. I'm actually pretty excited about that as I feel that my current skills and understanding of art and fantasy are better than when I worked on Baldur's Gate and NWN. I intend to make my Dragon Age work the best I can, because with the success of BioWare's previous fantasy projects I'm thinking they'll be seen by a lot of people. I enjoy the pressure because it stimulates better work out of me.

Would you want to branch out in fields such as television or film animation one day?

SIMULACRUM

Only if the work was creating still images, like concept or promotional art. I'm not really into animation or being an animator. I would love to do concept art for any project. Any type of drawing for money is great. :)

Where do you see Science Fiction and Fantasy art going—is there concern than the traditional ways of illustrating will completely fall prey to digital mediums?

I think things are polarizing. Being a part of a company that is currently pushing into the next generation of computer graphics for games, I am seeing that we're not far away from having movie-quality visuals in the games. Computers allow for a lot of imagery to be created relatively easily.

Digital painting can still have a traditional background and be rooted in good visual fundamentals. The problem is that the artist will never have the tactile experience in making the piece, and computer work will usually suffer in the way of subtleties and refinements that a hand-crafted picture can have.

A computer can render in ways that a human being can't, but no software will ever be able to make the powerful picture that an intelligent artist can.

The polarization comes in when illustrators concentrate on the exact things that computers can't do. Things like idealization, beautification, dynamic artistic compositions and expressiveness have to be crafted and can't be rendered with a 3-d program. It also takes a lot of time and patience to make a picture unified and well-composed, and I feel that the computer forces boldness and quickness and does not support thoughtful creation as well as pencil and paper; where every line and angle has a purpose and relates to the whole.



SIMULACRUM

I think that the upside to a lot of digital art is going to be that you'll see a segment of traditional artists step up and craft their paintings to be better paintings in order to compete with the speed and ease that digital art and printing offers. That's the polarization again, and I see it happening right now.

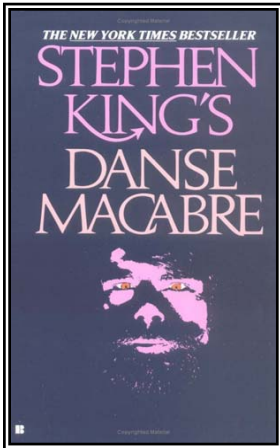
What do you want to achieve with your art in the future?

I would like to do large-scale oil paintings like you see in museums. I'd like to try painting dynamic compositions in a way that both the imagery and the object of the painting are well-crafted and timeless. A video game is in the bargain bin months after it comes out and almost completely forgotten within a few years. We're still looking at great paintings produced hundreds of years ago, because they are achievements of a pure artistic spirit and objects of beauty and admirable craft. That's ultimately the long-term goal of where I would like to take my art. It sounds lofty, I know. I'd better practice more...

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FEATURED BOOKS

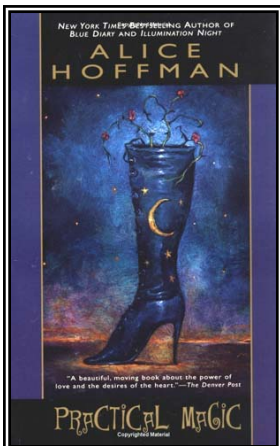
EDITOR'S TOP 5 RECOMMENDED READS FOR NOVEMBER 2005



STEPHEN KING'S DANSE MACABRE

by Stephen King

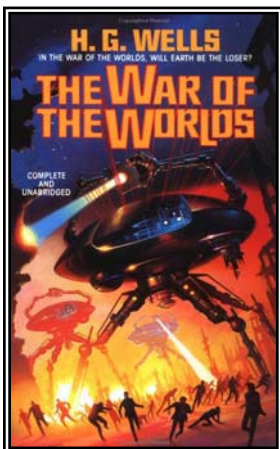
Insightful look into the mind of horror and the psychology of why we have always been afraid of things that go bump in the night. Although originally published almost 25 years ago, the text is just as applicable today as it was in 1981. The details may have changed, but the effects remain the same.



PRACTICAL MAGIC

by Alice Hoffman

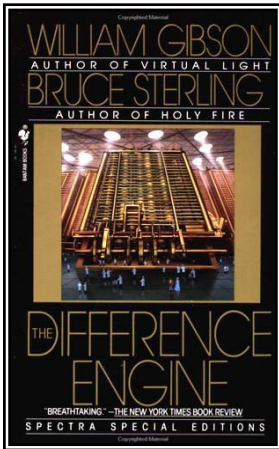
A fairy tale for adults. There's magic here, but the subtle yet ever-present way in which it is conveyed makes this a superb read. Sharp humor and wonderful characters. If you've seen the movie, read the book. A different experience altogether.



THE WAR OF THE WORLDS

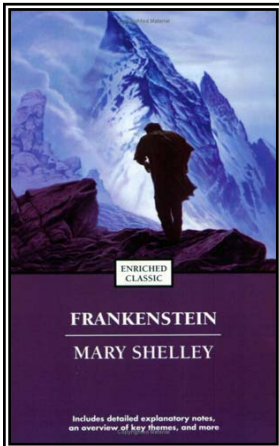
by H. G. Wells

You can't say much about the classics. After re-reading this recently, it does make one think what would happen if the scenario should come to pass in present times. With the world constantly choking at its own throat, just how will we react? Make sure to read the unabridged version.



THE DIFFERENCE ENGINE (Paperback) by William Gibson, Bruce Sterling

One of the best Steampunk novels to date and arguably the best introduction to anyone interested in the genre. Transport yourself to an alternate history—London, England, in the midst of the Industrial Revolution where computers ("Engines") have already been discovered...



FRANKENSTEIN, OR THE MODERN PROMETHEUS by Mary Shelley

This particular edition from Pocket books features a host of extra information, including detailed explanatory notes, contemporary and modern perspectives on the work, a chronology of the author's life and work plus much more. Some say the greatest horror novel ever written.

SIMULACRUM

THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

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- Needs: Fiction\Poetry\Artwork—most speculative genres (H/F/SF/MR). (Quiet, gothic horror as opposed to gore and violence.)
- Will look at articles, reviews and interviews on request.
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- Fiction—between 1000 and 8000 words.

Aim of the magazine is to expose new talent in writing and artwork alongside established writers. No fan fiction. Professionally formatted manuscripts only, please.

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