

HELIOTROPE

THE SPECULATIVE FICTION MAGAZINE

www.heliotropemag.com

JEFF VANDERMEER
Explores the Novella

R. SCOTT BAKKER
Takes on the Skeptics

INTRODUCING:
• *Samantha Henderson*
• *Michael Colangelo*
• *Edward Morris*

WHERE'S THE SCI-FI
by Heidi Wessman Kneale

POETRY BY
Catherynne M. Valente

BOOK REVIEWS
Lords of Rainbow
Blood Follows
Bring the Jubilee
The Secrets of Jin-Shei
Out

MEDIA REVIEW
Bright Weavings



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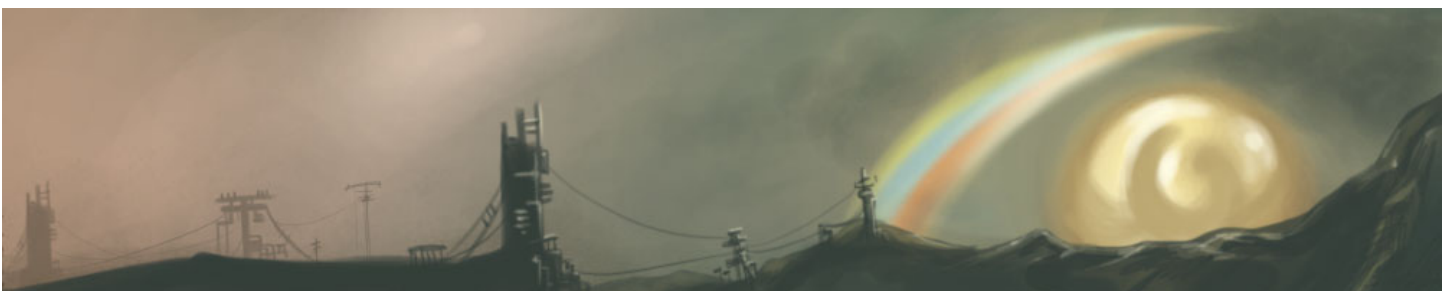
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Author Bios

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Robert Bee has published 25 short stories in a variety of zines and e-zines such as Outer Darkness, Electric Spec, Dark Krypt, Alienskin, Parageography, Parchment Symbols, Welcome to Nod and anthologies such as Magisteria and Kings of the Night. I have published a dozen or so essays and reviews in The New York Review of SF, the Internet Review of SF and City Slab.

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Victoria Hoyle is currently studying for a Masters in Medieval Studies at the University of York, UK. Her reviews have appeared at FantasyBookSpot, Emerald City and Strange Horizons and she writes regularly for Eve's Alexandria, a shared lit-blog.

Edward Morris is a thirty-year-old former bouncer and journeyman s/f/h author and British Science Fiction Association Award nominee from Portland, Oregon. His work has appeared in Interzone, Oceans of the Mind, and Nowa Fantastyka, among other places. He is currently collaborating with Lou Antonelli on several short stories for Asimov's and other places, and looking forward to reading at a soon-to-be-disclosed WorldCon event in Anaheim this August.

John Turing is a speculative fiction fan and blogger living in the UK. His collection of reviews and thoughts can be found at illusoryreality.blogspot.com

Catherynne M. Valente is the author of the forthcoming Orphan's Tales series, as well as The Labyrinth, Yume no Hon: The Book of Dreams, The Grass-Cutting Sword, and three books of poetry, Apocrypha, The Descent of Inanna, and Oracles. She lives in Virginia with her husband and two dogs.

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Heidi Wessman Kneale is an Australian writer of moderate repute. By day she works computer miracles for the local library. The wrest of the time she writes books and wraises babies.

Artist Bio

Liezl A. Buenaventura is a freelance graphic artist and designer.

She is also, in no particular order: a graduate of Fine Arts: Studio Arts (Painting), Filipino-Chinese, a firm believer in reincarnation, and a resident of Metro Manila, Philippines.

She owns the domains trinitcross.net and redtrinity.com, both of which house her graphic design and fine art work. She makes websites and designs brochures and posters for a living, working on commissions in between this. When she has free time, she eats and sleeps.

Her artistic inspirations include Milo Manara, Linda Bergkvist, Robert Chang, Frank Quitely, Alex Ross, Gary Frank, and the Renaissance period in general. She hates all things abstract and is thoroughly entrenched in the world of representational art. Her areas of expertise include digital paintings, watercolor, acrylics, and pen and ink, though she is also proficient in oil, charcoal, and color pencils. When given free reign, her tastes tend to lean more toward fantasy and science fiction than the modern world, though on occasion she has been known to paint the odd Wanton Woman Reclining On Couch.

In her next life, she hopes to be reincarnated as a turtle.



Artwork

By Liezl A. Buenaventura of RedTrinity.com

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Heliotrope Magazine

Boomtron, LLC

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Honey Mouth

by Samantha Henderson

I know she is here when I taste it. Just a hint at first: saliva turning sweet. Then a thick sugared whisper across my tongue. I know she is standing behind me, although I'll never see her, no matter how quickly I turn.



When I feel like complaining, I remember I got the house cheap because of the ghost. Or rather, first because it was a fixer, which begs for ghosts, and second because of the missing girl, which implies a ghost. That the ghost came should not surprise me.

They wanted to fix it up too, the Keenes.

"What?"

The realtor looks at me, owl-eyed behind round glasses. "The Keenes. The previous owners."

"The one with the..."

She doesn't let me finish. "The little girl. Amanda. Yes."

"She was never..."

"No." Sharply.

She turns from me to bustle about with the lockbox.

"Was there any idea that someone...well, killed her?"

She frowns at me, knowing I know already, and strains at the lockbox. It falls open. "They never found a body. And there were no signs of violence."

"But if they never found..."

"Yes...well..." she hands me the key. She's angry at me for spoiling her little ritual, handing over the keys, and I'm a little ashamed of myself too. Which makes me angry, which makes me cruel, and I press her.

"They searched the woods?"

Her lips press together and turn pale. "Of course."

I press the key tight in my palm, until it bites, and open my hand, looking at the red crease.

"And the neighbors?" Her forehead creases and she turns away, pretending she didn't hear me.



She first comes in the afternoon, on a day so hot the stripper dries too soon and bubbles hard and yellow on the redwood and I have to chip it off with the shaver. Carefully, so as not to scratch the wood, and still I leave some fine grooves. The wood dries silvery, like a weathered fence, and I'll have to sand it to find the ruby-red warmth beneath.

Beautiful heartwood, with a sheen like the gloss on chestnut horses, but the work is harder than I remembered. Harder, and I'm getting older, years of rough work breaking me down before my time. Years of pulling down old barns for the heartwood inside, breathing dustbowl ash. Years of wrangling river rock boulders into fences and arches for semi-retired CEOs, getting ready to retire into their own piece of paradise. Time for me to have mine, and I'm almost too worn out to do it.

So hot the air wavers outside the window, over the asphalt at the end of the walkway, over the small pond beyond that. I look out, careful not to wipe my forehead, the gloves clotted with stripper. A mirage floats in the hot air over the water. It looks like a black-clad woman with a parasol. Her feet shimmer three feet over the water.

The wet itch on the back of my hand turns into a burn and I look down. A thick caustic blob has oozed beneath the rubber glove, and I peel the worn rubber away and dab at it with paint thinner. A couple weeks working on this house and already my hands are scarred with chemical burns and mistimed hammers and rough as sandpaper.

Suddenly the honey-taste floods my mouth, thick in my gullet, and I choke a little on the saliva. I force my cramped knees straight, holding out my hands so I don't get stripper on me, and stagger to the kitchen sink, spitting and spitting.

The taste fades, from buckwheat to clover, and I peel off the gloves, wipe down with paint thinner, and walk back into the living room.

Nothing is there. The smell of chemicals is sharp in the hot room. Out the wavy window, over the pond, the woman with the parasol is dead black in the clear heat flicker.

I look at her a long time, waiting for her to fade, but she sticks.

From the corner of my eye, a flash of red.

Nothing there when I turn, though, and now the air over the pond shimmers, empty.

Someone's playing tricks on me.

Somebody's beginning to remember.



The neighbors: the Mullins to the east, Orioles to the south, me in the middle in the crook of the main road's elbow. Behind us a deep hollow in the cleavage of the foothills swells with cedar and pine.

I try not to be unfriendly. Maggie Mullins' children are away at college and she brings me a loaf of banana bread with cranberries, and I make us tea in cracked, coffee-stained mugs. We smile at each other politely and uncomfortably, and now I'll talk to her husband over the fence and be invited over for Thanksgiving and sometimes Christmas. They'll give me cookies and hand-knit scarves.

The Orioles work in town: he's a dentist, I think, and she's his office manager. We talk when she's weeding the front and he's fixing the brickwork. I want to tell him he's got the wrong mortar and it's going to crumble away after the first hard rain, but there's time enough for that later.

They have two sons. Austin's the youngest, an average kid, sixteen perhaps. He's not fat, particularly, but his face is doughy for his age, soft. When I start hacking at the Lantana that's grown into a tangled mass on my side of the property line



Austin comes out to watch me, and I let him see at the thick stumps. We uncover an old, low retaining wall, made of clinker brick. Some have come loose, and I set Austin to digging up the soil around it, looking for more of the red and black glazed ceramic. I tell him we'll restore it when I clear the Lantana and stop the river-rock porch from crumbling away. He digs with an archaeologist's interest.

I don't see much of Bobby Oriole, who's eighteen, spiky looking, and always wears black. Bobby, who got questioned twice by the police in the disappearance of Amanda Keene. Bobby, who before it happened got in trouble for selling a little pot at school. Not once, but two or three times. That's what Maggie Mullins tells me, with a tiny crumb of banana bread clinging to her cheek.

"The day she went missing he was pretty much accounted for," she says, looking surprised that she told me this much, but maybe there's something comfortable in recounting a stale tragedy to someone new. "He was at school, or in town, afterwards, playing videos."

"So why question him twice?" I stop myself from reaching over and brushing away the crumb.

She shrugs and I know the answer: he was such a good suspect. Punk kid, into Goth and pot, and she was a sweet neighbor kid, there for the picking.

Feeling morbid, I check the microfilm at the tiny Carnegie library in town. The librarian's suspicious look fades when I explain I bought the old Keene house; she smiles kindly and tiptoes around me, as if I'm a bereaved relative.

Amanda was seen walking home from school, and Bobby went straight to the video arcade with his friends, defying his parents, as he was on academic probation. It must have been frustrating for the police: a small town like this, knowing everybody so well, yet so few details. A girl goes home after school. When her mother gets home from her Tuesday-Thursday stint medical billing, she is not there. There's an idea she might have gone into the woods, looking for a plant for a school report. Mariposa Lilies. I've heard of those. They're rare in the south of the state, more common up here.

She was wearing a red sweater, since the spring was still young and chilly. She had new white hightops and a gold charm bracelet she got for her birthday.

I reel through the speckled, black and white images for a while, trying to ignore the sweet taste of my saliva.



I almost tell Maggie. But I think she might already know.

I do mention, casually, the woman, the black woman, the woman with the parasol over the pond, and she laughs.

"That pops up on hot days," she says. "It's a sort of fixed illusion. Scared me to death the first time I saw it, because it reminded me of that movie, with Deborah Kerr. Where she's a governess in a haunted house, and she sees the ghost across the lake. The Innocents."



Another hot day, like the day she first began to remember. Before it gets too hot I take the pick-mattock out to the front yard and start to chop at the rich, dark earth and now it's too hot to garden but bodies in motion tend to stay in motion and I keep at it, feeling the skin on the back of my neck burn. Bees are thick in the red and yellow lantana that remains between me and the Orioles. It's a noxious weed, and I wonder if it poisons the honey. I don't know much about bees.

I do know they dance in circles, to tell each other where the flowers are, and now one's on the fresh

clumps of dirt in front of me, crawling round and round in a figure-eight. I lean on the pick and watch it. It looks different from the other bees, plumper, and it waggles its fat, black striped bottom as it circles.

I go inside for a glass of water and as I turn on the faucet it's as if I took a spoonful of honey and sucked it down in a big glob. I take a big swig of water and it fades, then comes back strong and buckwheat. I turn to look for a girl in a red sweater but no one's there, and behind me a big-bodied insect taps on the picture window.

A bee. It lands on the glass, and I see its underside and delicate clawed feet and it circles, left, right, left, wiggle.

The taste lessens as I go outside, and the bee flies at me, almost hitting my face. It circles round the back of my head and in front of me, and as I take a step forward it continues, slowly, to the back of the property, where the woods begin and a rough path leads between the trees. It's flying so slowly it have no problem following it, although sometimes I lose sight of the yellow body.

It's cooler in the woods, but stuffy. The bee leads me down the main path. I see arteries leading off here and there, well traveled. There must be enough hikers and pot farmers around to keep them clear of fallen branches.

Now the bee swerves off the path, landing on the white bark of a fir long enough for me to catch up with it. I have to step carefully to avoid tripping on the litter of branches. Again and again the bee flies, lands, waits, flies again.

Soon I settle into a cautious half-trot. The smell of decaying leaves is thicker here, in the heart of the woods. My vision narrows, and I see the bee at the end of a dark tunnel; I avoid rocks and fallen trees by instinct. We must be two miles away from the house by now. There are no well-trodden trails now.

My foot turns on a slab of stone, and I hop to save my ankle. This breaks my concentration and the rest of the forest comes into focus. Although it must be noon it seems like twilight: shafts of green light strike slanting from spaces between the pines and the leaf litter is ankle-high. It's so quiet -- I might as well be a hundred miles from town, and not even the wind is stirring.

I've lost the bee, and stand still, looking for it. After a while I see it, crawling in circles on the bark of another fir. It's waiting for me.

I look at the tree, and about shoulder-high there is a white scar in the tan bark. Curious, I finger it. Something ripped sideways, skinning it, and there are burn marks above and below the gash. The edges have healed and are beginning to grow back.

The bee circles back. I still have my hand against the rough bark, and it lands on my shoulder. It buzzes under my ear, and tickles, and I raise my shoulder to shrug it off.

It stings me where the shoulder joins the neck, and in the first fraction of a second it's a mild itch, and then a burn, and then pain shoots up my neck and down my spine. I curse and brush it away: it falls into last year's leaves, dying. I feel for the stinger.

I get it, but must've squeezed the poison sac, because fresh pain rockets through my bones and

suddenly I see her, a flash of denim and red t-shirt and blonde hair dashing past the tree, and a flare of heat and power and the shotgun blast tears past the tree and spatters the undergrowth with shot, and she swerves to the left and keeps going

The stinger is smeared across my fingers. I brush it against my jeans and follow her, follow that flash of blonde through the undergrowth. The ache of the sting still pulses through my joints.

I push through the seedling oaks and gooseberry and bracken and there it is again, the slight figure of a

girl, vanishing between two tall cedars. And now, the taste of honey swells in my mouth.

I kneel on the ground at the edge of a clearing. I can't go on; I can't even breathe. The thick stuff clogs my throat, and I can't cough it up, because there's nothing there.

Please, I manage. "Please stop. I can't breathe."

It fades, leaving a tang.

On the other side of the glen, a flash of red. She's waiting.

The chirping of birds cuts through the heavy drone. The hum gets louder as I cross to the other side of the meadow.

Bees. The hum centers in a tangle of old branches, bleached white by exposure to the elements. Slender twigs branch curving from the center stalk. There is no trace of peeling bark.

They aren't branches. Nestled in the soft bracken at the forest's rim is a ribcage. It's human. I want to make it something else, but it'll always be human.

I inch closer and see the curve of the spine half-buried in the fresh grass, and the hipbones, spread apart. A few feet away is a round, mossy rock that could be a skull.

Between the hips and along the bones of the upper leg are small flowers, simple five petal blooms, white with a faint touch of pink in the center. Mariposa Lilies.

How did I know that?

The bee sting still pulses in the side of my neck. In answer, the hum of the bees grows. It draws me closer.

For a horrible moment I think the heart is still suspended inside the cage of ribs, huge and brown, not beating but vibrating.

Then I realize the dark mass is a beehive, the golden surface crawling with bees. Old wax and dark honey rope the brittle bones.

Bees come from the flowers in the clearing, big orange and yellow balls of pollen on their back legs. They land on a rib, and crawl inside.

I go a little closer, and I see that while the leg bones on the left lie smooth and straight, those on the right are shattered. I circle around the skeleton and the hive imbedded inside and crouch as close as I dare. Small grasses grow underneath and between the bones, and the ground is loose and damp. I kneel and poke at the loam and find tiny fragments, like bone needles. Something shattered her leg like a hammer into ceramic.

Something like a shotgun.

The bee sting burns a little, and there's a voice
watch out

clear as a bell, a girl's voice

watch out he's here be careful

in my ear, and I look behind me, and there's a boy, a doughy-faced boy, leaning on a tree with a shotgun tucked under his arm, his finger on the trigger.

Austin Oriole.

Her voice, again

i remember now

in my ear, not a whisper, and I feel a sharp little chin dig into my shoulder.

i remember the woods, the lilies and i knew where to go, but i found the plants, and i saw pictures at school, so i knew what they were, and i got out of there, but he saw me



I get up slowly, and Austin raises the gun. He has that interested, expectant look he gets when he's digging for clinker brick. He looks as if he's waiting for me to go first.

So I do.

"Bobby had some marijuana plants in the woods," I said. "And you knew all about them. I bet you helped with them. And I bet you held for him at school, and got a cut yourself. Made sure you seemed clean-cut, so no one would suspect the good little brother."

He grinned.

"And then Amanda went in the woods to find her lilies, got lost, and found your big brother's patch instead. Did you follow her? Or did she find you by accident? I don't suppose it matters."

"I followed her," he said, in a voice still squeaky with adolescence. "I didn't know she'd find the patch."

"Why bring a gun? Were you planning to kill her?"

He looked indignant. "No," he said, defensively. "I take it, sometimes. Sometimes growers are in the woods. It's better to have a gun."

"You could've stopped her before she found it."

His head tilted. "Yeah, I guess. But I didn't. She didn't see me behind her. I pretended I was stalking a deer."

In the back of my throat I taste not honey, but vomit. I swallow it and nod. "And?"

The muzzle of the gun never wavers. "She went to the patch like she was looking for it. And she figured out what they were. And I jumped out, like I was going to scare her. And she looked at me, like, I was this *thing*. And then I saw she knew. And I don't know what I would've done, but the stupid bitch *ran*."

"You chased her."

He's frustrated at my stupidity. "Well of course I had to chase her. I was yelling at her to stop, and she wouldn't stop, and I just wanted to talk to her, and finally I just took aim and shot. I thought she might get scared and stop."

The tree.

"But she kept on going."

"Yeah." He smiles. "And so I gave her the other barrel."

I'm still holding a fragment of bone.

"She crawled right through the clearing."

He's still smiling. "Yeah. She crawled a long way."

He glances, almost fondly, at the bones beside us. Still training that gun, both barrels loaded, on me.

"Do you come here a lot?" I say.

His eyes flick back. "Sometimes. Not for a long time, after the police were done with Bobby, and the dogs didn't find anything. I take a look, to see if it's still here. I had blood all over my jeans, and I was thinking about putting them in Bobby's closet. But I threw them away in a dumpster out of town and I guess they never found them."

"Did you take the bracelet? The charm bracelet?"

Something seems to conclude in his face and he raises the gun to his shoulder.

"I'll never tell," he says.

He aims, and I'm about to jump when the hum of the bees swells around us. They're boiling in a golden-brown mass out of the hive.

i remember now

Austin's eyes go wild, and I half turn, thinking she must've appeared behind me.

I only see bees darting about in the clearing, and when I turn back Austin's covered in bees. He drops the gun and swats at them, beats at his body. He's gasping, and his face is turning purple.

His eyes are mere slits now, and he reaches out to me with mottled, sausage-fingered hands. I feel a few stings on my arms, but no pain.

“Get them off me. Please. Get them off.”

I had blood all over my jeans.

He staggers against a tree and I bend close. My voice sounds remote. Calm. Too calm. Mildly interested: clinical.

“After you shot her, Austin, when she was lying there, in the middle of the woods with no one to stop you, did you do her?”

He looks at me. His eyes bulge. For a second I think he doesn’t understand. And then I see his tongue is swollen.

“No...” I can barely hear it. I turn my ear towards him and see a cluster of trees and a flash of red between them, and the honey floods my mouth again. I rub at the bee sting on my neck and

pain, and the feeling of bone crushed into splinters, and the claustrophobia of sprawling on the ground, helpless, and the looming soft face, and the sharp grinding stab when jeans are yanked down

I straighten and know he’s watching me walk away. I guess there’s a fighting chance he’ll live. Like there was a fighting chance somebody would’ve found Amanda, broken and dying, alone in the woods.



The Keenes came back to town to retrieve the body. I’m glad they took her home to bury her. If the funeral was here I’d have to go, and I had an idea she’d leave once her body was buried, if I didn’t want to confuse her by being at the graveside.

They did come to the house, and Amanda’s mother said some nice things about the renovation, and they thanked me for finding her. If they tasted honey, they didn’t say.

I went to Austin’s funeral, couldn’t get out of it, really. After all, I found his fresh body. Got the bees off, but it was too late.

It hangs over all of us that he was found with a shotgun, that Amanda’s leg was full of buckshot, that he had her bracelet of charms in his pocket. The police are letting the Orioles alone for a few days, to let them grieve, but they’ll be back and reality will break over that family like summer thunder.

It’s my imagination, perhaps, but the honey-flavor is weaker. I never see that flash of red. Perhaps she’s fading, slower to forget than to remember.



Nighttime, and I’m standing in front of the sink. It’s still hot, so I’m wearing pajama bottoms only, and that sweet taste comes. But also, the touch of a hand, small and cool against my bare back, and the feeling of a cheek laid against my skin. I’ve taken down the mirror to be re-silvered, so I don’t see anything.

I don’t turn, just wait, and soon she goes away. The honey taste fades, and I think I should brush my teeth again, but I don’t.

I’ve finished stripping the redwood in the living room. Sanded it smooth and stained it back to its original color. Maggie Mullins comes to see it, and brings me scones, and homemade jam from her blackberry bushes.

I like the scones, but the jam is too sweet, so I eat them plain.



On The Air

by Edward Morris

Red velvet proscenium curtains draw up to the sounds of Red Nichols and Bix Beiderbecke's signature mediaeval flourish of horns! The mind-melting lunar landscape of the main soundstage backdrop is unmistakably the work of Picasso himself. The stagehands, the true stars, backlight the backdrop and slowly rotate the follow-spots to make outer space come alive.

Up in the control booth, Irving Berlin fusses with the big cans on his ears, face close to the glass like a child window-shopping at Hanukkah, not caring that he still can't read music. His Visitor's Pass flaps as he conducts along, gesturing down, left, right and up, down, left, right and up. Down on the podium, Igor Stravinsky answers the gestures back, feeling every note.

In the pit, Gene Krupa is in the zone, high on tea, wide awake, delighted, spider hands weaving the web of the macumba beat with soft bop brushes over cymbals he invented. Professor Theremin's donated monster organ rises to power in the hands of Hoagy Carmichael, a volunteer here like the rest of these men.

The wind section steel themselves against Benny Goodman's vicious glare, hoping instead that he loses himself in the moment. Goodman does, and counterpoints Nichols and Beiderbecke in an Eli Eli Lama Lama Sabathani cry on the licorice stick that raises the hair of everyone watching. At the last note, Walter Page's big black mythic hands walk up and down the bass once, and wait, as he looks down and to the left.

The main percussion riser is given over, as always, to a crazy Dada sculpture of chimes and beer bottles and a pedal-steel guitar. The works look to have been built whole around a fresh-faced, smart-assed, whip-thin kid in cook's whites, a bow tie and a ridiculous checkered jacket. With the pedal-steel and a wildly disparate variety of kitchen utensils, Spike Jones twinkles out the eerie signature theme song of tonight's show.

"*Ostinato, ostinato...*" Stravinsky sings along with Spike under his breath, drowned by the Narrator's unmistakable directorial rumble.

"Do not attempt to adjust your television set. We control the rotation of the disk. We control the short wave. We operate from a place beyond that which is known."

"*Ostinato, ostinato...*"

"I'm Orson Welles, and your television is tuned to 'The OuterZone' on WRNY New York, from the Roosevelt Hotel studios at 45th and Madison in Manhattan. This broadcast was made possible by a grant from Governor Cox, the support of those like you tuning in at home, and the co-president of this station, founder of *Amazing Stories* magazine and Chief Executive Officer of the DeForrest-Zworykin Television Cooperative."

"*Ostinato.. Boot-doot-dootleootleooo.*" Then, silence from the pit.

"Mr. Hugo Gernsback urges every American to demand public access to the airwaves. Thomas Jefferson wrote that democracy's success depends... upon... an informed majority. Build your family a television set today to entertain, to enlighten, and most importantly, to

educate in a way of which no human invention has been capable since Gutenberg built the first movable press. Purchase a DZTC Home Television Hobby Console Kit from your local True Value Hardware Store today. The future... is yours!®”

The commercial is over. Orson Welles just got paid. He beams at Irving Berlin, then resumes speaking into the big bingo-mic.

“Tonight’s first story, ‘Mark of the Beast’, is, by popular demand, a return to the world of Detective John Thunstone, brought to you by Mr. Wade Wellman of Tennessee. Tonight’s second episode comes to us from London, and the distinguished expatriate Charles Fort, second installment in Fort’s serial ‘The Outcast Manufacturers.’ ”

They all know what’s going to happen. But every member of cast and crew waiting in the wings is still breathless.

“Ladies and gentlemen in our studio audience, and all of you watching from as far away as, I am told, Philadelphia, before we begin, our fearless leader has a few words to say...”

Thrust out into the spotlight by an unseen stagehand, the man wears a ribboned peruke, a huge black tri-corn hat with a peacock feather; white ruffled pirate-shirt, velvet jacket and pantaloons. Most of the audience recognizes Hugo Gernsback in costume at once, his nose like the great prow of a rocketship offset on one side by his famous monocle.

“How dare you?!” Gernsback bellows in his big radio voice at the stagehand . “I! Am Barrrrrron! Muuunchausen! Oh, what life is this, where an explorer can be so maligned, so molested, set upon the road, spit upon and curst! If there is a universal mind, must it be sane?”

The crowd roars with laughter. Baron Munchausen is an old favorite on the show. Clutching a copy of the evening’s *New York Times*, Gernsback surveys the audience and begins to tread the boards. The heels of his kid congress gaiters clock across the stage like Tom Mix’s boots over a hardwood saloon floor.

“Last week, my old friend Herb and I visited Flanders Fields, and I was stunned. Instead of a wilderness torn apart by artillery fire, a garden of rushes and wildflowers grew. Thousands of white butterflies fluttered everywhere like the souls of dead doughboys set free upon the spot. I could hear their wings, the beat-beat-beat of their tiny wings, each one changing the wind that blows across the globe.”

Hugo has the room. He *has* them. There is not a pin-drop, not a cough, not a rude flatulence or snap-crackle-pop of ill-placed stagehand wire in the joint. Even the band is worshipfully still.

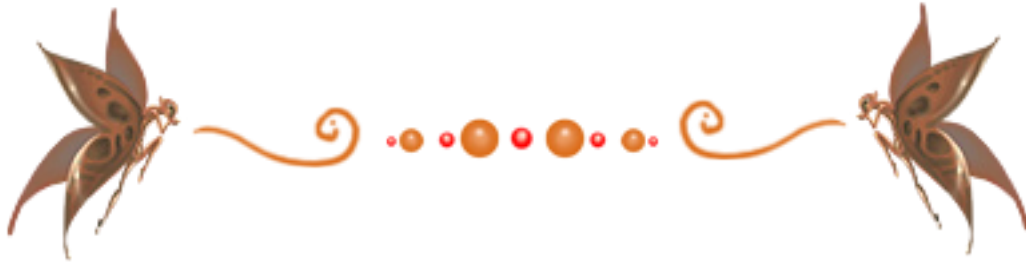
“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for welcoming me into your homes. Those of you in our studio audience, welcome to mine. I beg your continued indulgence. Tonight is a special night. Not only does this evening, September 10, 1930 mark The OuterZone’s one-hundredth broadcast, it is also Armistice Day, where we as a nation celebrate freedom from the draft.”

The audience laughs, and loosens up. He scratches the fake Don Quixote goatee on his chin, picking at the spirit-gum, squinting, considering. In the front row, a young English boy on holiday with his Mum looks up at him worshipfully, clutching his autograph-book as though it

were the Nag Hammadi Scrolls. The visitor's pass on its lanyard around the boy's skinny neck reads ARTIE CLARKE. Gernsback smiles at him, and makes a sweeping bow.

"When you look back on it all, it's amazing to think that things went the way they did, and horrifying to wonder what would have happened if they hadn't. History is a house of cards, my good viewers. One little pull, and down come the whole works. How then does it all not sound like Fabulism, like scientifiction?"

At that, the good Baron von Munchausen trudges back to center stage, and truly begins holding forth.



Armistice Day. It all makes a bad taste in my mouth, and a strange, bright light in my eyes. That light makes you feel so alone sometimes that everything makes sense. When you see it, you walk in a lost world, peopled only occasionally by every one of us experiencing the outer shard of something much larger, subjectively.

It is the duty of every human being to Keep The Camera Alive, no matter what form your own camera may take. I knew from the age of five that I wanted to write science fiction, as it is now called. But you kind viewers have also allowed me to live it, tonight moreso than ever. .. before... in History.

My crony Herb over in England, the great Mr. H.G. Wells, truly spoke from that light when he foretold what was to come, thus...This is from *The War of the Worlds*---

A hammy clearing of throat, a flourish of shopworn hands whose right index and middle finger are callused at the insides of their second knuckles thicker than the armor on a Bombardier Tank.

"No one would have believed, in the last years of the nineteenth century, that human affairs were being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than Man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their affairs they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water."

Hugo paces close to the front row of spectators, peering at them through his monocle and waving the newspaper, brandishing it as he speaks.

To the best of my knowledge, kind viewers, we are not presently being studied by alien beings... but by ourselves, through the visionaries among us. One of those just found Archimedes' lever. To quote the great Charlie Fort (who was kind enough to give us a new installment of his Mars story for later in this program,) an explorer has returned from a San

Salvador of the sky.

Charlie said we should give this fellow a parade. His name is Eugen Sänger, and he asks me to say a few things to you tonight, in my own idiom.

It's just as much a matter of chance that any of our visionaries survived the Great War. No soldier outlives their nine lives, but they all believed that the Being who made the stars would give them such luck to trust.

We forgot what war was like, going into the Big One. We hadn't really had one of consequence for almost a century and a half, I daresay. But a few nations told their people that the country that controlled the seas controlled the world, and used this as a bully bullwhip to keep the factories smoking and the welfare rolls low.

Sooner or later, it came time to pay the fiddler. The imaginary countries of the world poured out their hatred down shell-holes through the corpus of their young men until the veins ran dry. Europe gnawed at its own entrails. The old order of blood aristocracy was forced to cede to corporate aristocracy, military-industrial complexes, shadow governments, the blood lust for power and disdain for the common man *too* common among the great moneyed houses of the world.

Triple Entente or Triple Alliance, the last thing those great houses wanted was the dissolution of big countries. Heavens, no. Then we'd really have democracy on our hands, let alone that Marx fellow whose books scared people half to death.

The August Madness was carefully planned and orchestrated. The great moneyed houses told the world that the war would be over in a few months, and pay for itself in captured swag. Then we could all scamper off home for a week of ticker-tape.

Like Dante Alighieri, I am not very proud of my species, sometimes. We turned a regional conflict in the Balkans into the bloodiest, most needless war in human history. We invented poison gas, barbed wire and machine-guns, sub-marine and trench warfare and the Bombardier Tank, fulfilling the darkest visions of Jules Verne.

Twelve million people died, chewed up by the future and gasping the knowledge to anyone nearby as their own waters flowed back into the world sea and the demented choirs of shells sang in the heavens louder than God.

America should have joined the conflict a lot sooner than 1916, thereby ending it a lot sooner. The United States is a great beast, slow to rouse, and must have its gadflies. That's where I come in, folks, and so do every one of you watching at home, and in our studio audience.

Still, it could have been a lot worse. Who knows what kind of bloody casino would have transpired without Eleftherios Venizelos letting us use Greece as an Allied staging area? God love the Greeks. And the Russians. Without the many tacticians serving Empress Anastasia, the war could have taken years longer.

I cannot imagine that little girl's resolve, and iron will, to run an entire country in wartime at her tender age, with or without all the help. She ordered her dear, martyred sister's

traitorous advisor, a monk named Grigori Rasputin, burned alive by her Palace Guard. Rasputin's heart and head were removed and separately incinerated. They buried him at sea. You may mock, but peasant superstitions aside, that man would one day have marched on a road of bones, mark my words.

Outside the palace and the war, Anastasia also kept things together enough to order Vladimir Ulyanov neutralized from the first time she heard the word 'Bolshevik' in a newspaper. The Tsarina's Third Department finally caught up with Mr. Ulyanov the day his little coffee-klatch stopped handing out leaflets and tried to stage some sort of "push", as they called it. They were going to storm an armory, and use stolen rifles to overthrow the Imperium. No one remembers that now. We must not forget.

I remember. I remember reading of Ulyanov's secretary bowing out on him, and what Ulyanov said. "You are free to say anything you like, and I am free to shoot you for saying it." An hour later, Ulyanov was himself shot dead while running away, while thirteen of his men bled to death in the Moscow streets.

Perhaps Lenin, as Ulyanov styled himself, is in a better place now than that unmarked grave. That isn't mine to say. But his secretary, the visionary Premier Trotsky, turned himself in and lived to fight another day. Almost single-handedly, almost overnight, Leon Trotsky knitted the Petrograd Soviet into Russia's first parliament, and opened a new era of diplomacy with the West. He co-signed the Armistice with Anastasia. Visionaries, the both of them.

When we finally went Over There, the Germans knew their days were numbered. Everyone was afraid there'd be a hundred little countries killing each other afterwards. What If.

What If. Everyone knows now that President Wilson lived his last three years in the White House unable to move or speak following the poor man's stroke. The good Mr. Hearst was kind enough to leak that story, may he forever rot in peace, but at the end of the day it was the vision of First Lady Ellen Axson Wilson who formally made the U.S. a member of the Allies and the League of Nations, and got the caissons finally rolling along.

Even then, General Ludendorff went mad in the last days of the war and nearly turned Paris into an abattoir while Black Jack Pershing's men had their hands full of General Pasha's Ottoman *mujaheddin* guerillas at Armiens. What would we have ever, ever done without the Parisian Resistance rising up as one, crying *Encore, une fois*, slaughtering gunner and storm-trooper alike with kitchen utensils, with sticks and stones, with bare hands and watch-chains? The mind turns away in horror, and the senses rebel.

Under the leadership of an overeducated ambulance-driver named André Breton, those ragged bohemians stormed and dismantled every Krupp railway gun on the Seine, and drove Ludendorff's divisions clear back to the starting-point of the war, horrified, bewildered and badly wounded. Breton's men... and women... fought like army ants. They fought like Surrealists.

History calls them the Dada Brigade. At the time, the name was a joke among American doughboys. Now Prime Minister Breton's long poem 'L'Internationale' hangs on a brass plaque at Versailles Palace, the one that finishes, thus,

*Long after I forgot her, my lover returns from Chaos,
Wrapped in stars, on a black horse, to snatch me up
Out of the field, count my scars and medals, and
help me to die,*

*Help me to die. I am your vacuum-diode phosgene bastard,
I am your Johnny Come Rolling Home. In the end,
The ancient world remains,
And only Nature overtakes.*

No matter what that... teamster... Joe Hill in Chicago says, I get through my day by believing that our species has not yet given away all its power to the rich. Tsarina Anastasia, Leon Trotsky, André Breton,

Herb Wells, Ellen Wilson... All of them are real visionaries, like the noble Baron, who prove that one person, even working alone, can affect change. In the end, it is people, not the market or armies or moneyed houses, who make History.

What would we do, without our visionaries? Where, oh, where would this planet ever be?

All of you *Amazing Stories* readers, stop holding your noses and groaning. I'll editorialize as little as possible tonight.

"Too late!" Spike Jones wisecracks from the pit, blowing twice on his beloved Klaxon horn.

"You're doing an excellent job, Spike." Gernsback's answering, prolonged finger gesture is not caught on camera. "No. Really."

After that charming interruption by my learned young colleague, I beg you to excuse my cornball globalism, folks. I know this isn't a newsreel. There is a point, and I'm getting to it. Bear with me.

From the same species which invented barbed wire and machine guns and poison gas, another medic like Breton, a German named Hermann Oberth...

Excuse me, folks. I... something in my eye. I... I met Hermann Oberth last week, when I could get in to see him. I only knew him through his writing. Herb Wells was kind enough to do the leg-work with the Weimar government and get the three of us a meeting. I can say that Herb and I are both the richer for our visit. And so, now, is Planet Earth.

Dr. Oberth told me that the only thing he learned as a medic in the Great War was that he didn't really want to study medicine. Instead, he took up physics, but his doctoral dissertation on rocket propulsion was rejected as 'too Utopian', and 'too speculative.' *This time, Gernsback waits for the audience to laugh at that. They do.*

So was the thesis of his star pupil, former combat pilot Eugen Sänger. So the two of them decided to play hooky, and went into business for themselves.

They threw away schoolbook and rulebook alike, and went out to the park to fly model rockets with a couple of kids named Willy Lev and Wehrner von Braun. Playing hooky, indeed, in the same park where Goethe sat under the beech tree and wrote *Faust*. They tore up the game-plan and lived out loud. Visionaries.

Ladies and gentlemen, the *Times* was kind enough to inform me this evening that Dr. Oberth's *Silbervögel* plane has just returned to the Peenemünde Science Center from an altitude of seven miles. It employs something called an ion-wind engine, and a very tall rocket called an A-4, propelled by liquid oxygen. They set it loose like a glider, from a much larger plane, it... It's all in the paper right here.

Eugen Sänger has returned from outer space, that San Salvador of the sky. I promised him I'd tell you people if he made it.

I read here that Fritz Lang was kind enough to film the whole works. RKO's already bought the rights. The movie's called '*Triumph des Willens*.' It'll be in every movie-house in Times Square outside of a week, it... This is...

I'm at a total loss for words, folks, not that I ever let that stop me before.

This is what happens when we don't fight wars. President Al Smith and Vice-Presidents Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt (...*another ripple of laughter*...) have agreed to meet with Weimar Chancellor Von Hindenburg immediately to discuss the scientific applications of this incredible, incredible event.

Von Hindenburg has emphatically denied any plans for military applications of the 'Silver Bird.' The League of Nations weapons inspectors will, of course, soon clear this little formality and pave the way for... (gulp)... undreamed-of exploration.

I...uh... Yes. We'll be running the news, folks, as soon as it becomes available to us. For now, the Baron bids you good night...and may we all continue to watch the skies, ever outward. 1930 is the dawn of a new age of the world. We're here to go.

The show must go on, friends. We now return you to your regularly scheduled program already in progress. I give you Wade Wellman's "Mark of the Beast", and thank you very kindly for your attention.

For Paul DiFilippo and Lou Antonelli



American Gothic

by Michael Colangelo

The mask was a flat jigsaw puzzle of whittled wood eight inches across, about a foot and a half tall. Luke had felled a number of firs with his axe and then carefully whittled choice pieces into curving animal shapes with his buck knife. The thing was held together with an intricate patchwork of knotted cord across its inside.

He hid it behind the cabin in the dead center of a patch of dying fir trees, pushed down deeply into the soft soil, safely hidden from the road and the back windows of the house by a screen of heavy foliage and their long defunct outhouse. Every day, Luke placed a wooden bowl at the base of the mask, sinking the container into the soft earth to further ensure that its contents would not spill over. Behind him, from the cabin, a tinny radio announcer's voice droned off the names of towns hit by the storms. He listened casually, only so far as to see if he recognized any of them. If any of the listed towns were nearby. They weren't.

He regarded the stack of crudely carved animals before him. Each one had visited him in dreams, starting that previous autumn, and each one had made its presence known to him; Sheloman the Rat, Yedidia the Fox, Nadab the Mole, Omri the Blow Fly, and others. As long as he paid each of them homage, they would show him what to do to complete the mask. That was the purpose of his worship.

He scanned the yard. It was really nothing more than a patch of forest cleared back far enough for their needs. Remnants of the old farm, before the storms were still visible; a patch of barren topsoil that had long hardened into clay, the old chicken coop with fading plywood and fraying chicken wire, and a fence made of logs that was slowly coming apart, its wood slowly tumbling back into the ground as the years ticked past. In the pen, remnants of Father's livestock scratched in the dirt – only three of them left; his rooster, his sow, and his goat. All three were as jet black as the night, all three were as jet black as Father's heart. Those animals never visited him in dreams.

There was the sound of tires on gravel at the front of the cabin, and Luke moved between the trees at the side of the home to peer through the pine needles for a better view. An old black limousine with a gap-toothed front grill and body patchings up and down its sides slowly rolled up the driveway and stopped in front of the house. Stamped across the front license plate was the word FAITH in gold paint. Father stepped out from behind the wheel, slightly shaky on his feet, and staggered inside the house forgetting to shut the car door behind him. Luke stumbled backwards from the thicket, tripping over the offerings bowl. Its contents – bright red – spilled out across the cracked ground. Father was home.



'Finally,' Cock said, pecking at a dandelion that had somehow managed to find root and bloom on the floor of the pigpen.

'Finally, indeed.' Goat agreed. 'She's in for it now, isn't she Sow?'

The pig ignored him, settling into the muck, eyes closed, her back muscles rippling with pleasure.

'Well, then,' Goat recovered. 'I for one am happy to see him.'

'It's okay. We were all worried, Goat.' said Cock.

They laughed together while sow rolled over in the mud.



She woke to a sharp, dazzling pain across the side of her head. When her eyes snapped open – Frank was standing over her, eyes glazed and bloodshot and furious – beard still wet and matted with beer. He had one hand knotted tightly in her hair and was pulling her from the bed to the floor of the cabin.

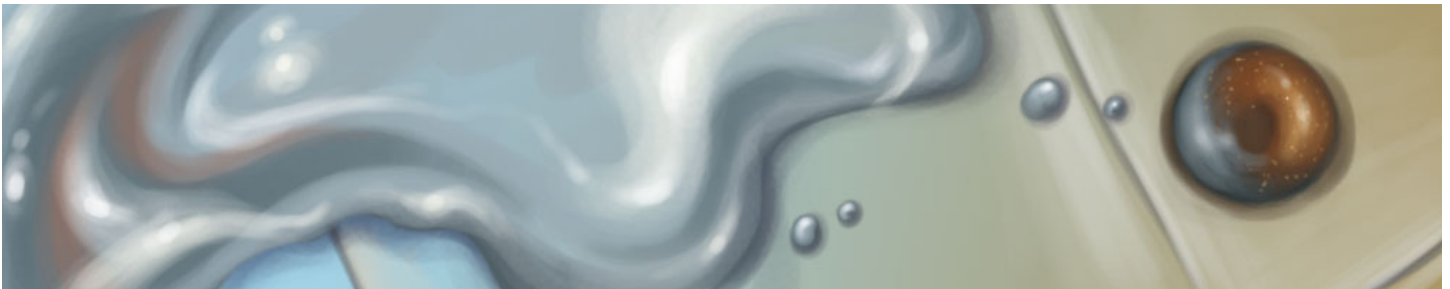
She protested. “Frank, I –”

“Fornicator!” He screamed in her face and then dropped her to the hardwood. She landed there with a thud.

She struggled against him, kicking uselessly with bare legs, flailing helplessly, too groggy from sleeping in late to be effective. He dragged her across the cabin floor, out of the bedroom, through the kitchen, and right out the backdoor of their home. Then she was being pulled along the spring thaw mud, towards the animal pen, towards the tin box that Frank had worked on so carefully for the last three months. Still gripping her by the hair, he reached across and opened the box’s makeshift door, and finally she understood what it was for.

“You wanna rut like a beast? I’ll keep you like one!” he shouted, startling the animals in the pen – Frank’s pets, his goat, his rooster, and his sow – jet black and bristling with pleasure at the sound of his voice. They scampered about the pen momentarily, circling each other at half-trots. Then they stopped abruptly, heads cocked, to watch the human proceedings unfold.

She screamed as he pulled her across him and attempted to thrust her into the box’s narrow opening. With renewed vigor (she was awake now), she kicked and fought against him hard, snapping at his hands with her teeth, pulling her head violently away from his grasp



until she felt her scalp tear and the blood flow beneath her hair in a warm trickle. She was hitting him with her fists as hard as she could, and he just-continued-to-push. He was too big, too strong; his face grim and work-oriented, like a pall bearer struggling beneath a heavy load but determined to get the job done.

This was it. He was going to kill her this time or worse. Something had finally broken up there inside his head forever.

The air inside the box was already hot and stale. He shoved her roughly from behind into the back wall of the box and swung the door shut behind her. She heard the padlock snap shut and he kicked the door, making the entire structure shudder.

“Y’all women can go fuck yourselves!” his muffled voice screamed once from the other side of the box. Then nothing. Quiet. The sound of her ragged breathing.

The cock crowed.



‘Why do you ask, Cock?’ wondered Goat, grinning through his beard. ‘It’s really quite obvious, no?’

‘Rhetorical, Goat,’ Cock responded. He quickly scratched a crude, upside-down pentagram into the dirt and then proceeded to erase it again, just as quickly. ‘Rhetorical.’

The trio watched Frank retreat towards the cabin.

‘It’s frozen the important bits of his brain,’ Goat observed. ‘Fermented grains. He’s poisoned himself.’

‘Again, Goat,’ Cock pecked at the muck. ‘It was rhetorical.’

‘We’ve a chance now.’ Goat pointed out with a hoof.

The pair nodded in agreement, and trained

their black, baleful eyes on the box again.

Sow shuffled in place, gleeful.



She slammed her palms against the walls of the box. It was just tin, bolted together and reinforced with a wooden frame. If she had more room to swing – more leverage – it would give away with ease. But that was not the case. Her blows simply rattled against the sheet metal, booming inside the confined space, splitting her ears with the sound of amplified thunder. Still, it was dark and hot and tiny inside the box, and stopping – being left alone with silence inside of Frank’s makeshift tomb would kill her. She tried the box door, held shut by a padlock on a hinge. It wouldn’t open, but gave an inch. She held it open and placed her face at the narrow opening, breathing the fresh air.

There was a figure making its way across the yard towards her out from behind the thicket of firs at the far end of the field. Luke was dressed in his trademark overalls (the only pair he seemed to own) with a large wooden mask strapped over his head. He looked like a jungle native, the stereotyped kind she’d watch in the old black and white films on Sunday afternoons while she ironed. All he needed was a spear, and maybe a loincloth instead of the overalls. The mask looked like it was made from all sorts of different kinds of wood and pieced together. Different shades and shapes mixed across its curving face, broken only by a pair of eyeholes pierced by Luke’s ice blue gaze. He lumbered right past her pen, and vanished somewhere near the animals. Then she heard him talking to them.

“Luke?” She called. His voice cut off abruptly. “Luke, get me out of here!”

There was nothing. Silence. She cursed

him; she cursed herself – her only son – a fucking retard who talked to Frank’s animals and couldn’t comprehend she’d been locked in a tin box to die. Then, there was the sound of scuffling against the wall of the box. Luke whispered, “Mama, Mama is that you in there?”

She reminded herself to remain calm and patient with him, speaking slowly. “Yes Luke, it’s me. Can you open the door for Mama?”

She heard him groan. “The pig doesn’t want me to open the door for you. She says that you deserve to be in there.”

“Luke, listen very carefully to me. The animals, they don’t talk. And if they did, don’t you think they’d want you to let me out?”

“Nuh uh. They talk like the animals in that book you read me sometimes. They also say you’re bad.”

“Do you think I’m bad, honey?”

There was a pause. “No.”

“Then you should let me out, Luke. The animals, they’re just uh, telling you what Frank told them to say. They’re scared of him too.”

She heard him moving outside of the box, and then he appeared, crouching, before the opening with his mask on. He fumbled with the chains on the latched door.

“I’m gonna need an axe or something Mama.”



‘Utterly fascinating,’ Cock exclaimed, peering at the boy. ‘We’ve rubbed off on him, I think.’

‘True enough, Cock,’ Goat observed. ‘However, he appears to have trouble following instructions. I’m certain Sow told him not to release her.’

‘Frank would disapprove of this, immensely I think.’ Cock said. ‘More so than Sow. Shall I rouse him?’

Goat chuckled. ‘He hates you more than his own family, Cock.’

‘Indeed. Here I go.’


‘Cad.’ observed Goat.



Frank was passed out on the ratty couch in the living room, dreaming with an erection sky-high in his pants. The refrigerator door was still open; a six-pack lay at his feet forgotten in his stupor. He awoke to a sharp, stabbing pain in the center of his forehead. His eyes greeted the sight of his rooster standing on his chest, pecking away. He flailed his arms, muttering, and it flapped its wings in a flurry of escape, gliding awkwardly down to the cabin floor in a burst of shiny black feathers.

“By fuck-” Frank roared, rising from the couch and staggering towards the .22 hanging from the felt-lined gun rack across the room. “I’ll kill you too.”

It cocked its head at him and pecked at the hardwood floor as he loaded two bullets into the weapon from an ammo box he kept atop the television set. Taking wobbly aim at the animal, he squeezed the trigger and the sound of the rifle crack echoed through the house. A large piece of flooring vanished in a spray of sawdust and the rooster, alarmed, flapped towards the door of the cabin, disappearing outside. Frank gave chase, reloading as he staggered across the backyard. Then stopped abruptly.



Luke was trudging his way across the yard towards the box, the wood axe from the shed in tow. He wore a mask over his face, tribal in design, but Frank recognized the overalls and slouching gait. He squinted, hoping that the retard wasn't doing what it looked like the retard was doing. Luke made his way over to the box and raised the axe.

“Oh no you don't.” Frank growled, raising the rifle to his shoulder. He fired and the boy fell to the grass trailed by the axe and a cloud of fine red mist.

‘A crack shot, Frank is.’ Goat grinned.

‘Crack shot, indeed.’ admonished Cock.

They watched as he dropped the rifle and ran towards where the boy lay unmoving.

‘Remorseful too, our Frank.’ Goat added.

Sow bumped Cock with her girth, sending him sprawling to the muck in the pen.

Cock bobbed his head at the larger beast. ‘I’m going, I’m going. Must I do everything?’

Goat raised a hoof. ‘You’re the only one with toes, Cock.’

‘True.’



By the time the rooster reached the rifle, Frank had reached Luke's body. He pulled the mask from his face and clumsily cradled the boy in both arms. The rooster fumbled with the trigger while the other two animals looked on. Its toes were not strong, and it took an almost Herculean effort from the frail avian to work the mechanism. At last, the rifle went off with a loud crack, sending a spray of dirt into the air. The bullet ricocheted off the ground, striking Frank in the small of his back. With a grunt, Frank slumped forward and then rolled responsively onto his back, the fabric of his shirt wet with blood.

Inside the box, he could hear screaming. She was screaming for Luke, screaming for him, screaming for herself. He tried to move but found his arms and legs unresponsive to his effort. His lungs felt heavy and painful – and his breathing came in short raspy breaths clotted with blood-spotted mucus. Luke's cold body lay beneath him.

It was a miserable ending to a miserable fucking day, to be sure.



'A CRACK fucking shot, if I do say so, Cock. You're better than Frank' congratulated Goat. He and Sow hopped the pen to join their brethren near the place where Frank lay.

Cock took a free peck at the side of Frank's head.

'How is he doing?' Goat asked.

'He's delicious.' reported Cock.

Sow lunged at the bird, catching him across the neck in her jaws. She crunched down and Cock gave a single squawk of surprise before blood ran from his eyes and beak and his body jittered uncontrollable trapped in the porcine's maw. Sow chewed slowly, savoring the taste of blood and feathers in her mouth.

'Positively abominable, Sow.' grinned Goat. He tugged at Frank's belt with his teeth, trying to eat the buckle. The man moaned loudly and Goat responded with two sharp kicks - one to the head and one to the groin.

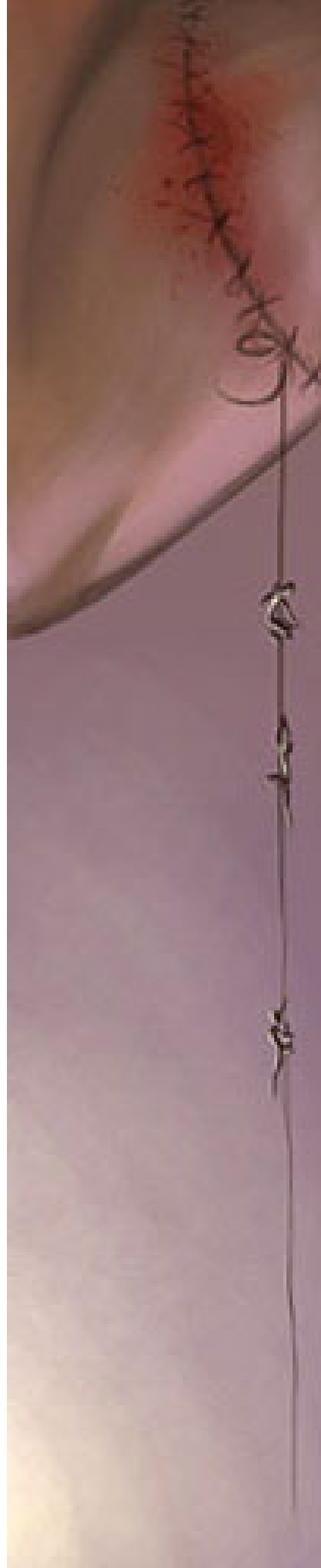
'I'll give you his flesh, dear. As long as I can have his belt and his boots.'

Sow shivered in agreement.



She was still screaming inside the box after the pig and goat had taken their fill. She would continue to do so well after the animals were sick of her dinner music. And after two days, Sow, swollen and sleepy and streaked bright red, noticed the mask that lay discarded and blood-spattered nearby. With two cloven hooves and all her weight behind it, she rose up on her hind legs and smashed it back into oblivion with glee.

Tired but satisfied, both animals moved off, upright, towards town.



The Novella: A Personal and Professional Exploration

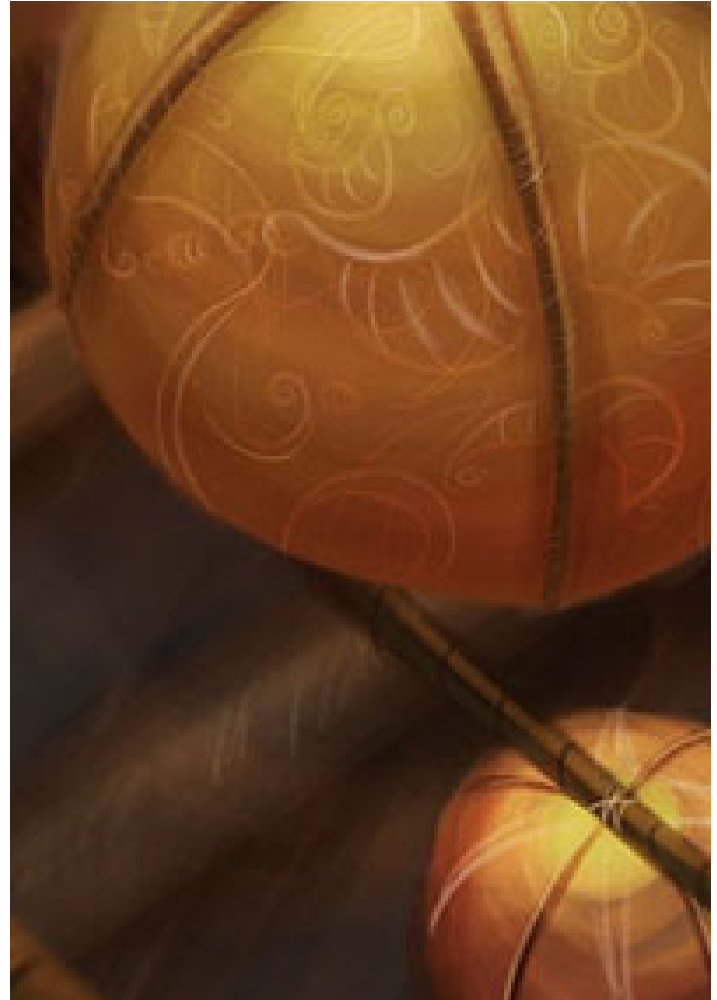
by Jeff VanderMeer

The novella has always been a very personal form for me because it was through the novella form that I came into my own as a writer. Even today, it speaks to me in a more personal way than either the short story or the novel. Perhaps this is because although I have not written nor ever want to write the perfect novel, I have come close to, for me, writing the perfect novella. Similarly, although I love the short story form, it is too restrictive in its miniaturization and compression—I have created short stories that were too perfect for their own good, in a sense.

The novella also has a personal resonance for me because it marked the beginning of a long journey in the wilderness after years of having built up a reputation as a writer of short stories. I soon found that writing novellas might best serve my progression as a writer, but it did not best serve my career. For several years in the mid to late 1990s, after I began to write almost exclusively novellas, I found that I had difficulty getting them published, and when I did, it was in venues that had more limited circulations and reputations.

Suddenly, I went from being an up-and-coming talent to being a kind of sequestered hermit or eccentric, or at least that's how I felt. Publications that were happy to risk a limited number of pages to a new writer were less interested in devoting a lot of pages to that same writer.

For five years, I labored in utter obscurity, writing...novellas. It was perhaps the most liberating experience of my life. Although I had not considered publication while writing the short stories, I had come to expect that I could place them, and would continue to place



short fiction, even if it was in the longer form of the novella. When that expectation turned out to be false, I retreated further from the idea of “audience” and “market.”

In a way, this preserved and protected me. Free of any expectation of success or of career, I matured as a writer in ways that I would not have otherwise—and all almost exclusively through the novella form. I became more original. I invested more in my characters. I invested more in the prose. This was in part because of the form. There couldn't be the instant gratification of completing a rough draft in a day, as with most of my short stories. There also, I knew, wouldn't be the semi-instant gratification of a

nice acceptance letter in the mail once I sent it out, either. So, I was content—and even happy—to simply spend each day held by the vision and promise of whatever novella I was working on. In short, I wrote more intrinsically for myself than ever before.

Now, for some writers this might have been self-indulgent and the lack of audience might have resulted in lack of focus or in lack of progression. But for me it worked because it re-established a high wall between art and commerce. It gave me the distance and the space to rediscover myself as a writer. I had some vague idea of “the reader” who might encounter my novellas at some point in the future, well after my death, the manuscript found in some aunt’s attic and resurrected with appropriate introduction, afterword, and tragic endnotes, but for the most part this shadowy reader had my own face.

The novella became, ultimately, deeply confessional in a way, exploring what writing meant to me as well as the nature of the imagination, obsession, and love. I think I can say with certainty that I was never happier than during that period when I had no prospects and no hope of a career.

Eventually, most of the novellas were collected in a book entitled *City of Saints & Madmen*, which went on to be a *Publishers Weekly* and *Amazon.com* year’s best pick and has been, to date, translated into five languages, indicating ironically enough that sometimes the best career move is to write unpublishable novellas until they become publishable.

But why the novella? What about the novella was so attractive? Was it just that I couldn’t write novels yet? That I didn’t have the marathon endurance to do so?

Reflecting back on this period before I wrote novels, I think the novella seemed so attractive because when you deal in images

charged with a magic realist or surrealist sensibility, when your style, as a reflection of your worldview, is naturally fantastical at the level of metaphor, whether anything fantastical occurs in your fiction, then the novella provides the perfect form for what is, at base, visionary literature.

By a naturally fantastical worldview, I mean that the style itself is suffused by it, so that on the level of metaphor a novel like Mark Helprin’s *A Soldier of the Great War* is more intrinsically fantasy or fabulist in nature than J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series.

This concept goes beyond the cliched idea of suspension of disbelief. It’s true that fabulist novels can be harder to sustain because the implications of the fantasy element are harder to sustain (generally) in a believable manner than the implications of a realistic setting or realistic events—at least in part because readers are already familiar with the here and now. However, I don’t believe this is the primary reason I attempted novellas before novels. After all, every writer, as they say, creates his or her own reality when sitting down to write fiction, and this can be just as difficult a task for the writer of “realistic” fiction.

It’s more that there is a deep anti-rational or irrational element to the best fantastical or visionary fiction, something that speaks to the intuition and the subconscious. Many times it comes out of the resonance of images connected to characters—or the way in which setting and style attain a hyper-realism. As Michael Moorcock writes in his collection of essays *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, this kind of fiction “may not be judged by normal criteria but by the power of [the writer’s] imagery and by what extent their writing evokes that power, whether trying to convey wildness, strangeness, or charm; whether like Melville, Ballard, Patrick White, or Alejo Carpentier, they transform their images into

intense personal metaphors.”

While such elements can be sustained in the short story or novella form, at the novel length, they often become diluted, and thus more ordinary, robbing it of its intrinsic power. In a novel, some elements of plotting or other “business”—even practical considerations like moving characters from scene to scene or the need for dialogue as narrative—can undermine the surrealistic vision.

It isn't about the suspension of disbelief on the reader's part—it's about the inevitable decaying orbit on the part of the writer, the succumbing to the mundane. Sometimes “filler” can take a form other than the wasted scenes in a typical commercial paperback. Sometimes too much focus on the rational can also be filler. (I'm tempted to say that it's about the difference between a 25-year-old scotch straight up and one on the rocks.)

Another element that entered my novellas at the time was postmodern technique. Very little that I used of postmodern technique hadn't been done before in so-called realistic fiction. I wrote a fictional essay about my fantastical city at novella length, which more or less compressed plot and character. Another novella inserted the author into the text. A third used an annotated bibliography to convey plot.

I found that using these techniques to support fiction set in a fantastical city changed the context of the postmodern technique considerably. Which is to say, those techniques that might be said to break the fourth wall instead reinforced the reality of the fantasy.

But postmodern technique can be perilous in more than small doses. Although certain narrative techniques can be deployed successfully over the novel length, I do believe the novella length is the upper limit for the

success of some of these approaches to fiction. (That said, someone will always come along to prove you wrong...)

So I believe this is also why I wrote novellas—the combination of the visionary and the postmodern made the novella length perfect, in that the visionary element didn't become diluted and the postmodern element didn't begin to annoy or seem affected. Certainly, it is even more difficult to sustain postmodern technique and visionary qualities over novel length when you are also trying to support the reality of a secondary world without allowing pure description/exposition to take over—in other words, trying very hard for the hull of your ship not to become so encrusted with barnacles and other extraneous matter that it affects your speed and maneuverability.

And, in fact, when I moved to the novel length, as with my new novel, *Shriek: An Afterword*, I found that I was writing in a slightly more conventional mode, jettisoning some elements of the fantastical and the postmodern in favor of strategies that work better at the novel length.

Now, at the same time I'd been writing novellas, I'd started an original fiction anthology called *Leviathan*. The purpose of *Leviathan* was to map the continuum of short fiction, recognizing that works tackling the same themes would generally have more similarities regardless of “genre” than just, say, “fantasy” stories versus “mainstream literary” stories. *Leviathan* mixed works of realistic and non-realistic fiction, using theme and other elements as a guide for coherence.

Because I'd found so few publications willing to even consider novellas, I decided that the second volume of *Leviathan* would be devoted to them. (The irony of editing an anthology of novellas that I couldn't submit to myself wasn't lost on me.)

So, for over six months, I read more than four

thousand novellas of all varieties, in all genres. This was an instructive if exhausting exercise. I was able to observe all of the myriad permutations from a wide range of beginning-to-experienced writers—from writers who had been published in *The New Yorker* or *Omni* to those who hadn't published anywhere at all.

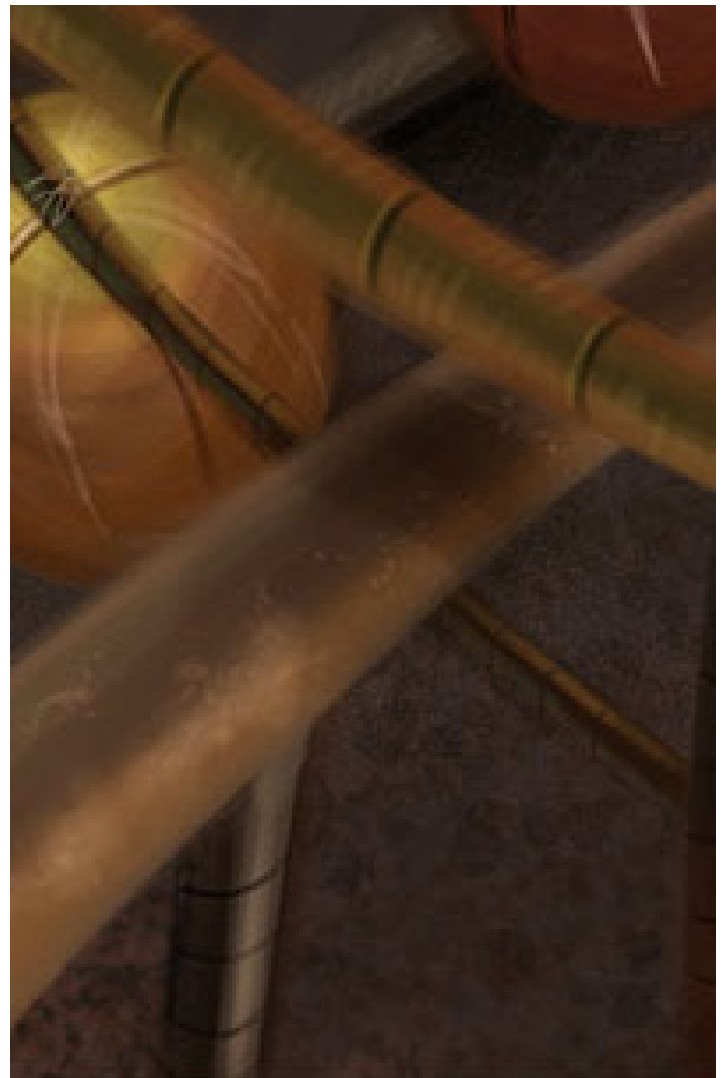
The most common reason, besides inadequate grasp of technique, for rejecting novellas during that reading period came from the realization that many of these so-called novellas were actually short stories. Many of them had unnecessary scenes or scenes that dragged on too long, or scenes that did not operate at the multiple levels necessary to make them “real,” thus necessitating the writing of additional scenes to make up for this lack, and just perpetuating a general slackness.

In short, many of the novellas read to me like rough draft short stories, and seemed to lack the recognition that a novella might be longer than a short story but that this didn't mean you could simply write something longer than usual and it would magically become a novella. It still had to have a pleasing form, a pleasing structure.

The other flaw that became preternaturally prevalent was the novel excerpt presented as a novella. While I do believe that the much-maligned A to B “slice-of-life” short story structure can still offer up new and delightful variation, I do not believe that, in general, it is sustainable at the novella length. And yet we received many submissions that had either been deliberately sampled from a novel or novel-in-progress, or, more interestingly, novels-in-waiting that the writers didn't realize should be longer, and at the novella length appeared to be A to B “slice-of-life” tales. A novella is not simply an interesting stretch of novel, would be one lesson to be learned from reading slush pile novellas of this type.

Although there are obvious exceptions, therefore, I don't think that a novella justifies apparent plotlessness as easily as a short story can. Short stories, like poems, can be about a moment in time quite easily. But the structure of the novella seems more practical—that if you are going to stretch your canvas over that length, you should have more to say on a structural level than just here's a segment of someone's life.

Which brings me to a third problem, one that can, of course, be inherent in a flawed short story as well, but that becomes more apparent in a novella: weak ideas or characters only become weaker at the greater length. The nervous stylistic tic that in a short story might even seem charming becomes unbelievably annoying in a novella. The character that might stand up under the



reader's jaded gaze for the length of a short story crumbles under the pressure exerted by the greater responsibilities created by the novella. Even a propensity on a writer's part to suggest setting through quick flashes of description can, in the novella form, begin to suggest a lack of commitment.

These statements might make it sound as if I think that short stories are a lesser form; not true. The ideal short story and the ideal novella are equals. I am talking about the context of slush pile submissions, the context of reading with an eye toward selecting work for publication. But it does make me think about the limits of the short story form in terms of your average published short story. How many writers run through the finish line, so to speak? How many of their characters really do have a life beyond the end of the story?¹

Since *Leviathan 2*, novellas have continued to play an important role in the anthology. Both *Leviathan 3* and *Leviathan 4* contained several novellas. In many cases, we were the market of last resort and the work would have gone unpublished otherwise. Ironically, these pieces are the ones that almost always receive the most praise from reviewers, which to my mind means there is a need for more markets for novellas. It may also be a perception issue, too. One writer I cajoled into sending in a novella had put it aside in a drawer and had no plans to send it out, having no idea of anyone who would be interested in a cross-genre piece of that length.

This attitude uncannily echoes my own experience in the mid-90s, when I ran out of markets willing to look at anything longer than a certain number of pages—or unwilling

to look at anything surreal or magic realist in nature.

For my own part, I have lately focused more on short stories and on novels. But both have been greatly enhanced by working in the novella form. Because of working with novellas, I have a greater appreciation for, on a purely instinctual level, what a short story does well and what it cannot support. It has, by way of contrast, made me better understand how a short story coils and compresses information and situation.

At the same time, working with novellas has allowed me to organically transition from writing short stories to writing novels. It has allowed me to experiment with using larger casts of characters, functional digressions (the kinds of things that novels thrive on), and to discover the kinds of textures stylistically that work best at the longer lengths, without having to commit to them first for the years it takes to complete a novel.

For all of these reasons, the novella remains my favorite form of fiction, both to read and to write. I believe it will continue to be a source of innovation for a long time to come.

Originally presented at the 2004 Associated Writing Programs Conference in Vancouver, Canada



¹ *What I did find interesting in making final selections was how many novellas used the original definition of the term—of many stories meshed together into one story cycle. That for some writers the novella was an opportunity to weave stories within stories in a way that, just for length reasons alone, would have been impossible at the shorter length. For example, a novella from Stepan Chapman, “Minutes of the Last Meeting,” takes place aboard a train in Czarist Russia, as it is about to be attacked by anarchists. Chapman uses the different compartments of the train almost as separate chapters or stories in his novella, spinning stories off of the inhabitants of each that intertwine and contribute to a greater whole.*

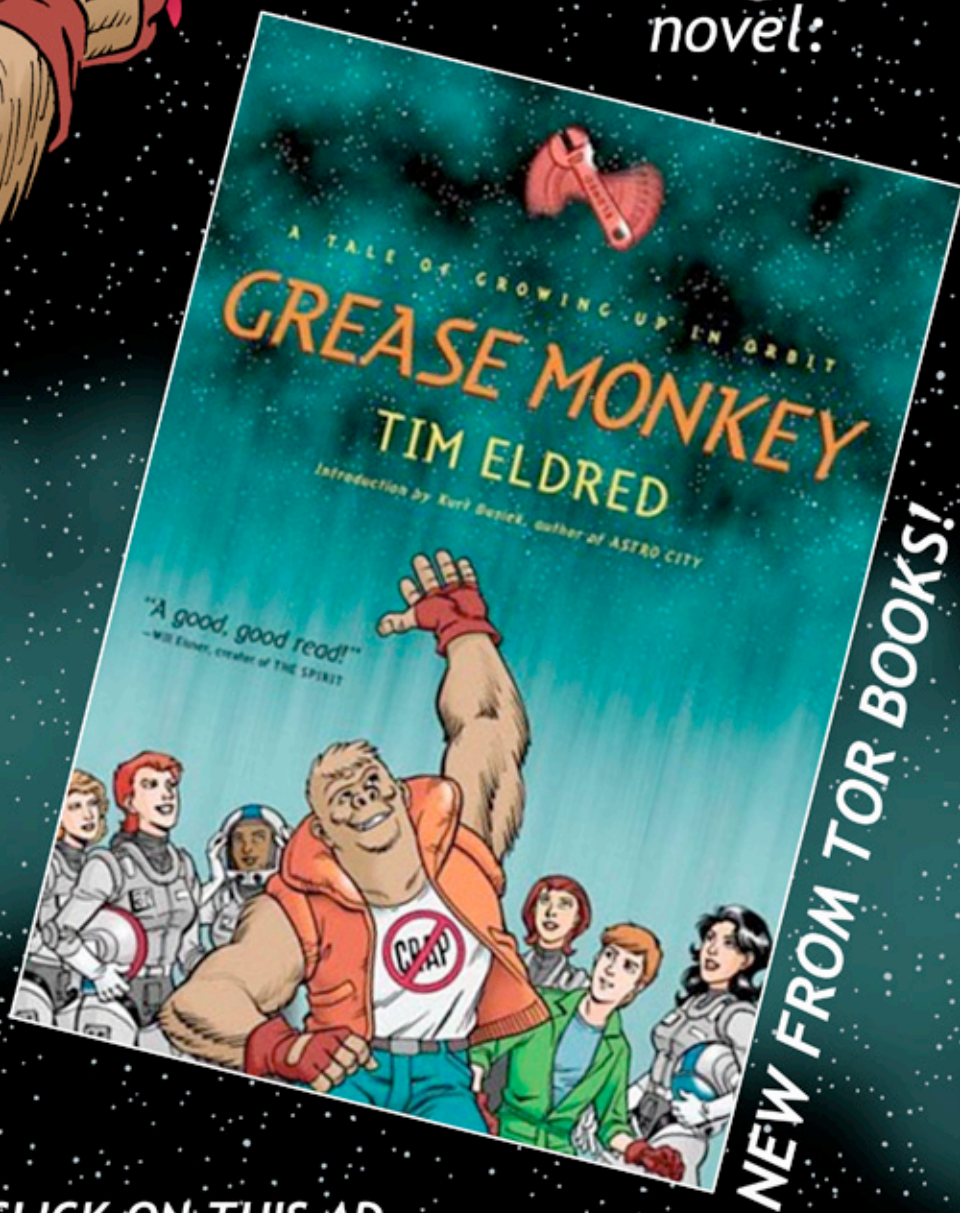
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The Skeptical Fantasist: In Defense of an Oxymoron

by R. Scott Bakker

I was crossing campus not so long ago and I happened to bump into one of my old professors. She greeted me with a warm smile and congratulated me on my success writing *children's* fiction. After swearing under my breath, I explained to her that I wrote *epic fantasy*, and that if anything, it was as adult as adult could be. The idea, I told her, was that in today's electronically balkanized society, genre was the only place where it was possible to write 'literature.'

She did not look convinced. But then I've been to several literary festivals now, and I have a pretty good sense of just how deep the pigeon-hole goes. We humans have three pound brains, and we live in a universe so big that we regularly see starlight older than our species. We are overmatched. As a result, we tend to economize by packing our terms with implicit judgements. In literary circles, 'epic fantasy' has all the cache of 'bag lady' or 'redneck' or even worse, 'corporation.'

Which brings me to my question: What should *skeptics* make of fantasy fiction? What kind of judgements should they pack into the term?

I think it's safe to assume that whenever 'fantasy,' as a generic term, appears within publications such as *The Skeptical Inquirer*, it connotes something negative. Fantasy, after all, is the bane of the skeptic. It is belief in the fantastic, measured by the yardstick of science, that is the target of relentless critique by the champions of science education. So you might say that my question answers itself, that it's like asking what priests should make of pornography. What should skeptics make of fantasy fiction? Not much.

But as obvious as this may seem, I want to argue the contrary. I want to argue that the world needs more skeptical fantasists. Many more.

Fantasy and the Scientific Worldview

People are usually surprised when I tell them that fantasy fiction is as much a product of science as is science fiction. The knee-jerk assumption seems to be that fantasy is pretty much as 'unscientific' as any genre can get. The story of science and science fiction seems pretty obvious: as the technological dividends of science leveraged more and more change, people became more and more aware that the future would no longer resemble the past. Since people abhor uncertainty almost as much as nature abhors vacuums, it was only a matter of time before they began stringing narratives across their now indeterminate future, using pseudo-scientific extrapolation as a yardstick to sort between competing possibilities. Of course, this is an oversimplification. As cultural phenomena, the full story of science and science fiction is bound to be far more complicated—if not out and out intractable. But, given the limitations of our three pound brains, I think it's fair to say that this story catches something of the essence of the relation.

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- R.Scott Bakker

So what about science and fantasy fiction? Here the relation is less obvious, but every bit as direct. Put simply, science is what makes fantasy fiction *fantastic*. As the technological dividends of science leveraged more and more change, people became more and more aware that their *present* knowledge no longer resembled their past knowledge. Where science fiction, one might say, constructs pseudo-knowledge of the future, fantasy fiction reconstructs the pseudo-knowledge of the past. The two genres can be seen as the flip sides of the same scientifically mediated coin, as attempts to use narrative to compensate for an ever more isolated 'cognitive present.' The worlds depicted in fantasy fiction typically operate on principles long since discredited by our contemporary scientific worldview. In terms of basic structure, very little separates Middle-earth from prescientific worlds like Biblical Israel or Vedic India or Homeric Greece.

So what is the draw of fantasy fiction? Contemporary culture is certainly awash in various fantastic representations. Fantasy writers such as Robert Jordan, Terry Goodkind, and George RR Martin are regulars on the bestseller lists. The receipts for Peter Jackson's recent cinematic adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* have surpassed the GDP of some small nations. JK Rowling is perhaps the first writer in history to become a billionaire, thanks to the popularity of *Harry Potter*. What is it about magical worldviews? Why, aside from morbid intellectual curiosity, should anyone *care* about our ancient, self-congratulatory delusions?

Why this mass fetish for reliving dead beliefs?

The 'Anthropomorphic Imperative'

Contrary to appearances, human beings are not inclined to believe things willy-nilly. Everyone thinks their cognitive commitments are 'compelling,' somehow. Before the institutionalization of scientific inquiry, however, the only real constraints on our theoretical claim-making were social and psychological. Without the appropriate social mechanisms to test our claims against 'truth conditions,' which is to say, without science, our practices of theoretical claim-making were effectively divorced from the natural world. This isn't to say that our ancestors could just make things up—if anything the limits on what claims could or could not be made were far more exacting than those found in science today. It just means that those theoretical claims were primarily fixed by 'assertion conditions,' which is to say, what others let them claim, and that these conditions were in turn informed by historical quirks, various social organizational demands, and the egocentric vicissitudes of human psychology. For our ancestors, the natural world was more a narrative than a cognitive constraint.

The extraordinary thing is that despite the vast historical and geographic differences that distinguish various cultures of claim-making, they all seem inclined to make the same theoretical mistakes. In particular, they *anthropomorphize*, they use social and folk-psychological concepts to explain natural phenomena. For our prescientific ancestors, the world was literally like extended family, something to be understood and engaged in the language of desire, affect, and intention. When the crops failed, they shook their fists at the heavens, much as they would at their neighbor. They used the crude logic of interpersonal exchange to pattern their environmental interventions: they made payment in the form of sacrifices, and they were careful to observe protocol, or 'mind their manners.' To their mind, the natural world not only watched, it *kept count*, and when individuals or communities failed

to keep up their end of the bargain, it punished.

The imposition of social and psychological categories on the world seems too universal to be the product of convergent cultural evolution. Humans are anthropomorphic rationalizers by nature; it's scientific reasoning that requires hard work. Perhaps anthropomorphizing is simply an evolutionary 'spandrel' of some kind, a side-effect of our capacity to understand one another. Perhaps, given the ability of psychological explanations to approximate causal realities, it inadvertently led to crucial adaptive successes. Perhaps, given the practical irrelevance of the truth content of so many anthropomorphic theoretical beliefs, the capacity to believe them was selected for reasons of social cohesion. One need only look at the galvanizing effect of propaganda in times of war to see that we humans have a decided tendency to rally around deceptions. It isn't, generally speaking, rational self-interest that sends soldiers into harm's way so much as the shared commitment to abstractions. Our actions turn on our beliefs. When the margins of survival are tight, interdependent communities require tenacity and pitch-perfect coordination, which is to say, conviction and orthodoxy—demands that are common to anthropomorphic worldviews.

In any case, it seems clear that humans possess some kind of innate 'anthropomorphic imperative.' If so, the yen for the kinds of obsolete worlds so common to fantasy fiction becomes easy to explain, at least in part. The reason so many find themselves drawn to fantasy could be same reason science seems to cut against the grain of human psychology: we are predisposed to look at the world in human terms. Since we are given to comprehend the world as a kind of extended family, perhaps we find a certain comfort in 'familial worlds.' Perhaps we *need* to return to them from time to time.

I know I do.

Know Thy Enemy - Literally!

As it turns out, I'm not alone. Millions of Americans seem to be embracing out and out anthropomorphic worldviews, and not simply as a form of entertainment.

The growing profile and influence of literalist religious beliefs should be a matter of deep concern, not only for skeptics, but for the world as a whole. Religious beliefs are not pernicious in of themselves; on the contrary, there's ample evidence that suggests they are socially and psychologically positive. The problem is one of commitment. Thanks to the vagaries of confirmation bias and interpretative underdetermination, pretty much *any* belief can be rationalized to one's own satisfaction. The human tendency is to turn the yardstick upside down, to reason backward from our conclusions to our premises. This is why scientific reason requires that we suspend our commitment to our conclusions: otherwise our cognitive shortcomings are such that we can always *make them true*. We cannot honestly debate beliefs we do not think debatable—it really is as simple as that. And this makes the prospect of reaching rational consensus between disparate believers, which is difficult enough even in ideal circumstances, all but impossible in a variety of crucial social contexts. It becomes a case of 'my way or the high way,' and at a time in human history when we can perhaps least afford it.

For the skeptic, it's difficult not to see the rise-to-prominence of literalist religious belief as a kind of social failure, and an ominous one at that. On a cynical reading, one might say that very many Americans, including the President, live in a prescientific version of Middle-earth. Many pin this failure on the education system and the declining rates of scientific literacy. Although I think these are undoubtedly important components of what is likely yet another theoretically intractable social phenomenon, I think there is another, obvious culprit which has been overlooked. Even though there is rarely, if ever, any convictions in the court of social criticism, it always serves to round up *all* the possible suspects.

Interpretative Literacy

Literalist religious beliefs, no matter what their stripe, all share a commitment to what might be called interpretative monism, a belief that infallible interpretations of religious texts are not only possible, but actually exist. The implausibility of this belief is such that very few critics waste words critiquing it. But it really is remarkable if you think about it: religious literalists actually assume that they, out of all the faiths and all the scriptures and all the interpretations, have more or less *lucked* into the 'one true one.' Now the social and psychological mechanisms that underwrite such blatant exceptionalism are too numerous to cover here. What I would like to draw attention to, however, is that many of the contrary-to-fact religious beliefs (such as 'young earthism') that cause so much consternation in scientific circles actually *fall out of this*. The problem of scientific literacy, in effect, is preceded by a problem with *interpretative literacy*. And this is not the purview science education.

Pretty much everyone agrees that the scientific establishment needs to do a better job at communicating, and if the number of titles and the sales of popular works of science nonfiction are any indication, many have taken this message to heart. But no one, to my knowledge, is talking about a parallel failure of the literary establishment. You would think an institution which purports to be thoroughly self-critical would at least consider the issue. After all, who else should bear institutional responsibility for *interpretative* illiteracy? Within the literary establishment itself, the consensus seems to be that the culture industry is largely to blame, that in the interests of reaping the efficiencies that follow from standardization, the media corporations have literally trained the capacity for critical interpretation out of consumers. Since these self-same corporations have a stranglehold on mass communication, the assumption seems to be, pretty much all the literate can do is wring their hands and avoid all things commercial like the plague. The system, the story goes, can only be resisted 'from the margins.' No one, they might say, laments interpretative illiteracy more than they do, but so long as the system continues unchecked, there is precious little they can do.

Of course this story is an oversimplification. Nor is it the case that all the literati buy into even its most sophisticated versions. But nonetheless reproductions of this tale float around university literature departments like bits of messenger RNA, ready to undo any damage to the master code that not only determines the form and content of all things literary, but also secures the authority of those with the proper institutional credentials. But what if this family of explanations is little more than a flattering rationalization, the kind we humans are wont to cook up to rationalize our authority? What if, far from the refugees of crass commercialism many in the literary establishment take themselves to be, *they are it's unwitting authors*?

In a recent television interview, I was asked about this year's disconnect between the movies that won the Oscars and the movies that pulled down the biggest box office receipts. The answer I gave, the answer which inspired me to write this article, was simply that people in the arts, like people in general, have a tendency to form communities based on shared interests and values. This is well and fine, I said, except that the subsequent tendency for the members of any given community is to communicate inward and to begin defining themselves against the members of other communities, usually in self-serving ways. 'They' become the arrogant elites, the ignorant masses, and so on. External differences get leveled, and somehow, in the course of things, the whole point of communication, which is to speak *out*, to expand rather than to entrench perspectives, seems to be forgotten.

This is precisely what, I want to argue, has happened with the literary establishment. Their argument against the corporations is belied by the fact that those selfsame corporations have no problem publishing 'difficult works' in the literary mainstream. In fact, the diversity available to readers in this the age of internet retailing is nothing short of staggering. In some respects, the so called 'margins' are doing quite well in the marketplace. So then what is the problem? How could one country develop two such radically different conceptions of *how words work*?

Isolation seems to be the obvious answer. Though literalist Christians are more than willing to share the 'Good News,' few in the literary establishment seem willing to take the 'bad news'—that outside of science, few if any interpretations warrant more than the most conditional commitment—in the opposite direction. Why? Because no self-respecting literary professor or writer would be caught dead knocking on doors in *those* narrative neighborhoods.

In my own case, it didn't take me long to realize that talking about epic fantasy was not likely to win me respect and admiration in my English Literature program. Fantasy fiction was lowbrow. It was a crass, commercial genre, not worthy the scrutiny of the learned. It certainly wasn't what I now know it to be: an opportunity to speak out, to use the frequency of shared interests to communicate different values, different perspectives, to people engaged in their own ingrown conversation. Religious literalists, not surprisingly, have an affinity for anthropomorphic worldviews. They love fantasy.

The literary establishment, I'm suggesting, is caught in vicious circle, a dysfunctional social circuit where their attitudes toward various forms of popular culture have the aggregate effect of sorting the future producers of cultural artifacts into two different camps, those with literary ambitions and those without. The former, filled with the desire to be 'taken seriously' by scholars and review editors alike, then go on to communicate subject matters that primarily interest readers who likewise desire to be taken seriously. The latter, who are primarily concerned with giving readers *only* what they want, generally avoid the ambiguities that teach readers the fundamental lesson of interpretation: distrust. The problem isn't that they do this—they are clearly producing something of value for millions of people—it's that they do this in a system that leaves whole swathes of cultural production to them alone.

Like the paranoid whose suspicion so alienates others that he makes his delusions true, the literary establishment robs mass culture of those with the yen to challenge, and redirects them inward, so bringing about the very ornamental, commercial culture it so often criticizes. Using

the institutional mechanisms at their disposal, they hoard what they think is valuable, then accuse everyone else of poverty. And none are so poor as religious literalists, which should come as no surprise. The authorized subject matter, be it 'tea and torment' or 'narrative experimentation,' simply does not appeal to the vast majority of them. But how does one blame another for lacking an *acquired* taste? Especially when those who claim to believe in the so-called 'transformative power of literature,' communicate only to those more or less already transformed. When they write on frequencies only the like-minded can receive.

Conclusion

So what should skeptics make of fantasy fiction? Much—much indeed.

If it is the case that humans are innately predisposed to find wonder, comfort, and delight in representations of anthropomorphic worlds, then perhaps it is not such a bad thing that they do so under the category of *fantasy*. If fantasists are inevitable, let them all be skeptical. Fantasy fiction, and genre fiction in general, represents an opportunity to communicate in the most profound sense, which is to say, to negotiate common ground between drastically different perspectives. Given the insularity of literary fiction, this is difficult if not impossible, which could very well mean that it isn't, in any practical sense, 'literature' at all.

There needs, at any rate, to be a wholesale reevaluation of terms and objectives within the literary community. In the last self-critical upheaval, the glorious mess of the 'post-modern turn,' the literati somehow convinced themselves that, despite our dismal track record when it comes to making theoretical claims outside the institutions of science, nothing was wrong with using prior commitments to contextualist or constructivist theoretical claims to condition our commitment to scientific theoretical claims. This makes no sense, insofar as it amounts to using Ted Bundy's testimony to convict Mother Theresa. It makes even less sense to assume that holding any *philosophical* position, even one as apparently radical as social constructivism or post-structuralism, means that all the important critical work is done.

Ask any skeptic: the work is never done. When over half the nation is oblivious to *the very thing that makes literature possible*, interpretative pluralism, it's safe to say the blame is stacked pretty high. The time has come to pass it around.



“Where’s the Sci-Fi:
The Relationship Between Trends in
Science Fiction and Modern History”
by Heidi Wessman Kneale

In The Beginning

Since the Dawn of Humanity, mankind has looked to the stars and wondered. They came up with reasons and explanations as to where the sun went at night, and more. They developed mythologies inspired by a need to figure out their world. A few early civilizations, such as the Greek, started to discover the wonders of science, but for the most part, mankind’s cultures remained with their mythologies to explain the world around them. For centuries, myths and guesses were all Mankind had to explain the world around them.

In the wake of the European Renaissance came a scientific explosion. Mankind, once again, looked to the stars but this time, tried to come up with plausible explanations as to why things were the way they were. They also looked at the world around them. Why did that apple fall from the tree? Why does a piece of glass, ground a certain way, make things look larger, and now that I can see that small item better, why is it constructed the way it is?

The speculations and discoveries of science paved the way to a technology revolution. The 18th Century saw a plethora of inventions, from little things that made everyday life easier, like the flying shuttle loom, to ground-breaking discoveries, like the piston steam engine, which completely changed the face of industry and travel.

The speed at which new technology was introduced must have been breathtaking for everyone. Some of these people looked at how life once was, how life was now, and they imagined what life could have been, for

good or ill. In 1744 German astronomer Eberhard Christian Kindermann wrote a novel speculating about traveling to Mars. In 1751 Ralph Morris published “The Life and Astonishing Transactions of John Daniel”, where the main character Daniel invented a flying machine. These novels were early attempts at a fiction speculating about the role of science--science fiction.

Science and Technology Take Hold

The advance of science continued into the 19th Century. By now, the concept of science and technology was firmly ingrained in the public conscious. Many began to question not the validity of science, but what would happen when such powers were left, unguided, unguarded in the hands of Mankind.

On a particular week in June 1816, several writers, including Percy Bysshe Shelley and his wife Mary Shelley, got together to dream up ghost stories. Everyone came up with tales to chill the heart, but Mary was at a loss for a tale. She, as she explains in the preface to the 1831 edition of “Frankenstein”, had a “waking dream” (nightmare) where she saw “the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together”. From this inspiration, she wrote “Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus”, arguably the first truly Science Fiction novel. It was first published in 1819.

The middle of the 19th Century saw a boom in literary works inspired by science. Authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe and Jules Verne created works that, by today’s classifications, are considered pure science fiction. These works were not treatises on current science but rather treatises on the philosophical states

of man, as per the prevalent literary tradition.

By the 1860s, science and technology had infiltrated into everyday life. Steel enabled stronger and better machines. Locomotives, the typewriter and the telegraph entered common use. Every decade brought greater technological miracles. Photography. Electric lights. Automobiles. Science and technology were no longer these vast mysteries to be investigated only by an intrepid few, but had become the servants of Mankind.

The nature and themes of science fiction changed to reflect this attitude. Many of Jules Verne's works reflect the theme of "technology as a tool". Many of his "extraordinary voyage" novels reflected traveling through space ("From the Earth to the Moon", 1865), through the sea ("Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea", 1870) and through the air ("Five Weeks in a Balloon" 1863), back when such travel was uncommon or implausible, but not unimaginable.

By the turn of the century, not only was science and technology commonplace, but its advancement was expected. World Fairs displayed the latest inventions, intrepid explorers traveled the world in the new automobiles, and countless people benefited from medical advancements in surgery and immunizations. Science and technology were here to stay. It was time, Mankind decided, to become "Modern" and "move into the Twentieth Century".

It became a reckless time. Travel was the easiest it had ever been in the history of the world. Science began to replace faith and speculation of the unknown in the hearts of many. H.G. Wells, considered the "father of science fiction", explored themes of adventure and the advancement of science in many of his novels.

Likewise, Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote about adventure and travel to distant places, most notably the "Barsoom" series

about Earth's closest potentially inhabitable neighbor, Mars.

In the decade of 1910, Mankind thought he was unstoppable. The idea of "Utopia", often dreamt and written about in the 19th Century, seemed to be coming true. The quality of life improved. Wells wrote "The Modern Utopia" in 1905.

Then came World War I, the "War to end all Wars", with its advanced weaponry, its chemical warfare, air warfare and terrible death toll. At the same time, the Spanish Flu epidemic killed millions more than the war. Mankind was humbled by these two terrible tragedies, one displaying just how terrible technology could be in the hands of man, while the other proved that for all his scientific learning, he was still vulnerable. E.M. Forster, normally a "mainstream" writer, penned "The Machine Stops", a story of technology and Utopia gone too far, and how a simple, uncontrollable event destroyed it all.

The Pulp Era

The social trauma of World War I affected the psyche of all nations involved. While some cultures, namely those of war-torn Europe plunged themselves into communist, fascist or socialist movements, with an unhealthy dose of nihilism thrown in, the United States held a dramatically different view.

It was the Roaring Twenties, with prosperity and a hedonistic sense of happy-go-luckiness for all. Pulp magazines were all the rage and science fiction, in the form of short stories and serials, found a ready audience. Instead of belonging to "literature", science fiction began to belong to the people, to become "popular". The magazine "Amazing Stories" edited by Hugo Gernsback, debuted in 1926, making science fiction easily accessible.

Cinema, into its third decade, became

an idea medium for science fiction. While the US enjoyed serials such as Flash Gordon, Europe indulged in masterpieces such as Metropolis, which reflected its post-war mood.

The concepts of the robot and the rocket ship emerge. Karel Čapek's play "R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)" written in 1920, could sum up Mankind's view of technology so far: servant of man. However, Čapek also puts up a mirror. The robots are treated poorly by humans. When they are empowered (ie given emotions) to know good from evil, they rebel and kill the humans. Again, the classic theme of reflection of the consequences of technology in the hands of mankind presents itself.

With the end of the twenties came the end of the "good times". The 1930s brought a world-wide financial depression. Science fiction changed, once again. Instead of the social reflections of the early 19th Century, the amazement of technology in the late 19th Century and the sense of adventure in the early 20th, it became a refuge, an escape from the drudgery and misery of the Depression.

During this decade, pulp magazines ruled. Joe Average couldn't afford to purchase novels, but he could scrape together a few cents for a copy of "Astounding" or "Doc Savage", and thus escape his hum-drum life. Superman and Batman were created. Adventure continued to reign supreme.

Pulp magazines were never meant to be great literary masterpieces. The stories were written quickly and meant to be read quickly, with little thought given to their literary merit--a quick hit for a science fiction fix. The covers themselves were sensational and arguably exploitative full-color illustrations often depicting Varga-esque women at the mercy of Martians or Robots or some other unnamed horror. Someone had to rescue them, and who better, within his own imagination, than a teenage boy? It is more

these covers than the contents or quality of the stories that led "proper society" to question the moral validity and acceptance of "sci-fi".

Cinema fared better with Buck Rogers and King Kong, featuring then-stunning special effects.

Because of the popularity of science fiction, fan clubs sprung up and the first World Science Fiction conventions were held. Part of the reason that science fiction was so popular during the Depression could be that it was a forward-looking genre, hoping for a better future. The Futurians, a fan organization, formed in New York City. Some of its members became influential science fiction writers: Issac Asimov, Damon Knight, Frederik Pohl.

The Golden Age

1941 was a good year for the science fiction serials with as many as 100 individual issues on a newsstand. Many of the "great names" of science fiction were published at this time. Even today, more than sixty years later, every fan is familiar with the names of Issac Asimov, Ray Bradbury and Robert A. Heinlein.

After the Depression and with the onset of war, people needed, more than ever, a way to escape and science fiction provided that.

For the second time this century, war threatened Europe. For many people, World War II was a scary time. It seemed not just Europe but the whole of the world was plunged into war. Pearl Harbor was attacked, and as an indirect result, many of the war industries on the continental US were moved far, far inland and many American were imprisoned by their fellow citizens simply because of their Japanese heritage. Australia seriously feared invasion and Great Britain suffered terrible bombings.

Then came the horror of the nuclear bomb as the United States unleashed its most terrible weapon upon Japan.

The speculations of science fiction seemed to be coming true, almost outpacing the imaginations of the writers, as it seemed that technology was outpacing its creators. It scared many people.

Science fiction took on a paranoid tone. It drifted away from the gadgetry of the adventure era and evolved more into a “social science fiction”, as Issac Asimov described it. It became more introspective, looking into the state of the human condition. Who were we, it seemed to ask. How far is Mankind willing to go?

Robert A. Heinlein worked with social themes, exploring the potential of mankind, more than the potential of technology. In his 1940s’ novels his characters are usually young males (for example, Hamilton Felix of “Beyond This Horizon” and Matt Dodson of “Space Cadet”) who learn that the society they live in might not be all it’s cracked up to be. Social mores and the destructive potential of mankind are examined.

Television became the new entertainment medium and science fiction adapted to it as well. The British enjoyed “The Quatermass Experiment” while Americans tuned in regularly to “Captain Video”. Radio and film continued to portray science fiction. The highly-successful radio program “X Minus One” featured science fiction stories from Heinlein, Asimov and Fredrick Pohl.

Prosperity returned after the end of the War, and with it, the science fiction novel, almost with a vengeance. The pulp magazines declined in number, taking the quickly-written serial with it. Novels took on a more literary tone and became more suitable to adults rather than children.

Despite the public access via radio, film and television, the new literary trend in print science fiction moved it away from

public consumption and more towards the a developing science fiction culture, aka “the Fen”.

The Cold War

While the United States enjoyed a few years of relief and prosperity in the late 1940’s, the 1950’s brought a return of fear: the Cold War.

The United States had proven that it had nuclear weapons and was not afraid to use them. This caused panic in countries such as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, including the current-day Russia) and other countries. This fear isolated the various nations and gave rise to what amounted to a barely-controlled panic.

The US had the “Red Scare” and McCarthyism. Patriotism and xenophobia reigned and this was reflected in science fiction. The general public preference turned to more “American” genres, like the Western, though “sci-fi” never really left the public conscience. This fear of invasion and aliens is portrayed in the movies of the time: “Invaders from Mars”, “War of the Worlds”, “Godzilla, King of the Monsters”, “Invasion of the Body Snatchers”, and “It Conquered the World”. The films reflected the science fiction styles of the Pulp era and not necessarily the science fiction being concurrently published. From the beginning to the current day, the science fiction in television and films would seem to be a decade or so behind the trends of the literary front.

In the literary side of science fiction writers indulged social science fiction. It pulled away from mainstream thought, which was plagued by the fear of appearing to be anything other than “Red-blooded American” and questioned society.

Robert Sheckley explored alternative social orders in many of his stories, often applying the balm of humor to counteract the air of fear so prevalent in society.

Because the American Public, who were raised during the Depression and who came of age during a time of war and the later xenophobia, had this desperate post-war need to become June Cleaver. Appearing “normal” and “patriotic” was practically an obsession and the thought of being “different” rattled them. Science fiction became regulated to a few “fringe” types and as a children’s genre, very much like fairy tales had been. It was no longer suitable for the average “grown-up”.

That all changed with the onset of the Space Age.

The Space Age and New Wave

Sputnik ignited everyone’s imaginations. People who read science fiction stories, especially the earlier pre-Golden Age adventures, marveled as they watched science fiction come true. Satellites, rockets, and astronauts were like these old stories coming true. Everyone who had access to a television watched men walking on the moon.

Science fiction resurged in the public conscience once more. A television show called “Star Trek” stirred many souls and the advent of the paperback novel made science fiction even more accessible to the average Joe.

The attitude of the 1960s rebelled against the stodginess of the 1950s. Flower Power, Social Consciousness and Liberation replaced the nervous fear of previous decades. Women discovered the Pill and burned their bras. People of Color rebelled against segregation and Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream. The social atmosphere seemed a complete change from the staid keeping up of appearances in the 1950s to outright rebellion and a push against the borders of propriety.

Science fiction authors took the attitude of this liberal decade and applied it to their works. They questioned authority and

boundaries. They experimented with style, with themes and social mores. This ‘soft’ science fiction focused more on the nature of man, rather than the nature of science and technology, as so much of the earlier science fiction focused on.

Heinlein explored alternative societal structures with “The Moon is a Harsh Mistress” and “Stranger in a Strange Land”. Ursula Le Guin explored sociological and feminist themes with “City of Illusions” and “The Left Hand of Darkness”. Frank Herbert’s Dune was published this decade and explored the consequences of Mankind’s choices, from the personal level to a galactic level, showing evolution, society and ecology inseparable and intertwined.

In the public conscience, science fiction started moving from a “kiddie” genre to one that an adult could openly admit to enjoying. Originally, “Doctor Who” was designed as a children’s program, but found its popularity more with adults.

Science fiction began to divide into subgenres: Hard SF, Soft (or Social) SF, Horror and Fantasy. Now known collectively as “speculative fiction”, the genre had expanded and had a significant population.

Fantasy started to come into its own. While Tolkien’s “Lord of the Rings” was published in the 1950s, it wasn’t until the New Wave of the 1960s that brought this more introspective subgenre to the fore. Fantasy started to match popularity with—and possibly outdo—science fiction in the 1970’s. Authors such as Le Guin, Stephen R. Donaldson, Terry Brooks and Patricia McKillip wrote fantasies to capture the imagination.

Little by little, fantasy started edging out science fiction.

The Technology Boom

The social conscience of the 1960s

and 1970s became replaced with a wild consumerism. The 1980s became the decade of personal technology: The PC, the Walkman, video cameras, VCRs and the early onset of the Internet. With this unprecedented boom of accessible technology, not to mention the approach of the 21st Century, the interest in science fiction resurged.

The subgenre Cyberpunk, starting with William Gibson's "Neuromancer" restored hard SF to the public conscience. Gibson coined the phrase "Cyberspace". While there was a resurgence of hard SF in literature, Fantasy continued to enjoy its popularity.

In film and television a subgenre called "new space opera" emerged. It had the same idealistic adventure feel as the early pulp stories of the 1920s and 1930s, but focused more on soft science fiction themes. They seemed to lack the "scienceness" of earlier works. The "Star Wars" series, "Star Trek: The Next Generation", "Battlestar Galactica" and "Buck Rogers in the 25th Century" are considered space opera.

A Dip in the Trend?

During the 1990s Fantasy exploded with hundreds of books being published, but science fiction, especially the hard science fiction seemed to not do so well. It thrived well on television and in the cinema (who continued the long tradition of running about a decade behind the literary trends), but not as popular on the shelves.

Cyberpunk came to the fore, offering a near-future technology-based dystopian view which reflected a potential direction the fast pace of technological development could be taking man. It posed the question of whether or not technology advanced so quickly that Mankind could not keep up. It suggested things could go terribly wrong.

Enter the Y2K bug. Instead of inspiring Mankind, it threw them into a panic. Billions were spent to prevent what might or might not have been a grave disaster.

The popularity of science fiction seemed to drop after that. Technology, for the average Joe, became either something to fear (like the Y2K bug) or so commonplace (like the home computer) it had lost its magic.

The Internet became not just a household name, but a household utility. Everyone was "browsing the web". The ideas of science fiction that were popular even a decade ago lost its "science fictionness" because of the speed of scientific advancement. A story of a cloned cat could have been a great science fiction story fifteen years ago, but today it's not a stretch of the imagination.

In science, while advances were made, especially in the area of genetics, the space race seemed to be over, thanks to two shuttle disasters and the prohibitive financial cost of space missions, especially since the results weren't significant enough to justify the layout. Aside of the occasional short-lived news stories of MIR or the occasional rich tourist wanting to hit orbit, it seemed the space race had stopped. Missions to Mars met with disasters and another Space Shuttle disaster, claiming more lives turned the American public off the thought of leaving the planet. Mankind seemed to develop more pressing closer-to-home issues, like global warming and wars of terror.

Yet looking to the past, one could extrapolate the future. While there may seem to be a decade of lull, after that decade something Dreadfully Exciting happens. (Aren't we due for another World War?)

One possible future technology that may reignite the public sense of adventure and bring back another resurgence of science fiction is the return of space travel.

In the past, one of the drawbacks of

space travel has been the high financial cost. Rockets and space shuttles were expensive to build and maintain. But thanks to the motivation of the Ansari X Prize (for the first non-government organization to launch a reusable manned spacecraft into space twice within two weeks) won by TierOne and their SpaceShipOne, commercial space flight for the rest of us within our lifetime is very possible.

The Future?

Where would science fiction be without a vision of the future? This genre is famous for looking ahead and wondering where--for good or ill--mankind may be. So look to the stars and continue to wonder. We don't know the course of the future but one thing is sure: it'll be a fascinating journey.

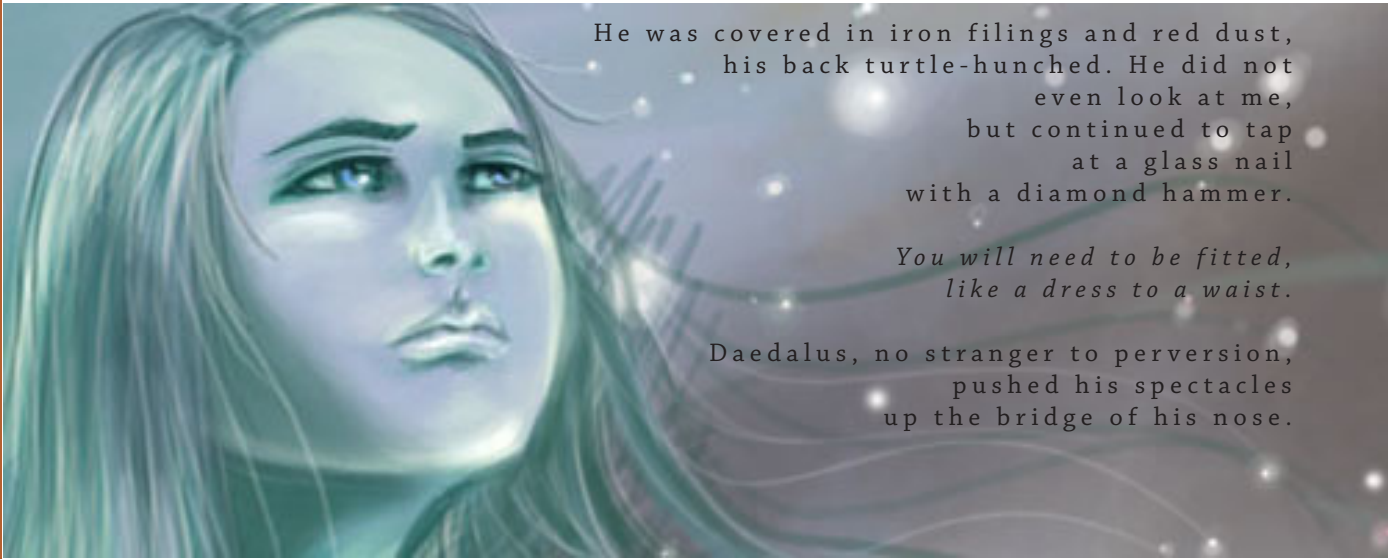


Pasiphae's Machine

by Catherynne M. Valente

I only needed the bull to set it going:
a bone key turning,
a hide bolt locking
into place.

I went to his house like a spice-buyer,
clutching my elbows. Away from my husband
for the first time since he fished me
thrashing from the sea
with a line of spider-silk
and a terra-cotta hook (my mother
had no better: the sun shone on her waves
and she found herself a blue ball,
full of queens.) I ran my hands
over mason jars and silver gears,
tin-and-ivory wings with harnesses of linen,
floor-tiles, serpent-jaws,
pipes and joinings
like white arms clutched in jeweled fists.



He was covered in iron filings and red dust,
his back turtle-hunched. He did not
even look at me,
but continued to tap
at a glass nail
with a diamond hammer.

*You will need to be fitted,
like a dress to a waist.*

Daedalus, no stranger to perversion,
pushed his spectacles
up the bridge of his nose.

My arm looks so small
in the bronze vise—the lynch-pin
slides through the delicate
fish-pale bones
of my wrist.

Every month
he widens the punctures.
I can hold six bolts in me, now,
crossed like rafters
through my breasts.

He lays a copper spine to my back,
knobbed with wire.

He fixes discs to my knees,
bowl-curved and singing.

He closes up my head
in a sphere of horned gold—
I did not want eye-sockets;
he smoothed them over
with lead, soft as wet sand.

Every month
he grinds the saw-toothed moon
along my shoulder blades,
and shunts another bolt
though my ankle,
my navel,
my mouth.

I gleam, rivet to spike
to bone:
latitudes hinged by stars.



I only needed the bull to set it going:
a battery of horn and gristle,
a switch of tail and hoof.

He left me on the dancing-floor,
whorled in super-conducting coils,
plated in mis-matched metals
which did not look unlike
a heifer's patched skin.

I waited. The birds kept clear.

Steam fogged the tin withers,
in the close, in the dark,
in the cloud of breath,
the bull closed the circuit,
and the bolts ground into motion,
moving in me like light,
a skeleton of glittering pistons
clattered into place—
bull-belly lifting up,

pins jingling, high and sweet,
and oh! The slick shove of them,
the sigh of bronze against bronze,
and I did not need the bull
but I will take it:
twins to batter this dusty island:
a bull-child and his favorite toy.

They will lie so sweetly,
thumb curved into wall,
nub-horns and a tiny, soft tail
within an infant labyrinth
of bronze and skin and silver,
angled and folded,
like the legs of their mother
finally buckling
under so much weight.



Passiphaer's Machine

Bring the Jubilee: SF, the American Character and the Civil War

Review By Robert Bee

“Any understanding of this nation has to be based . . . on an understanding of the Civil War. . . . the Civil War defined us as what we are and it opened us to being what we became, good and bad things” (Shelby Foote, Stars in Their Courses: The Gettysburg Campaign, viii)

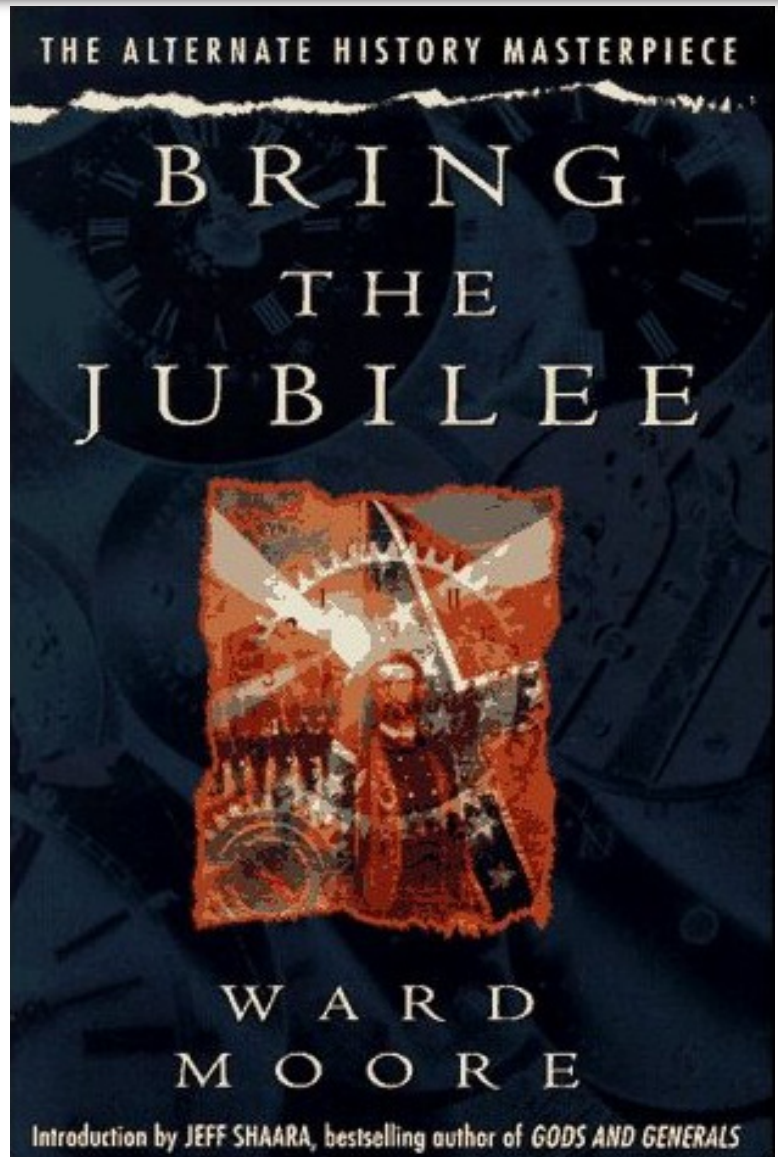
In Bring the Jubilee (1955) Ward Moore creates a powerful alternate world which uses science fiction and the Civil War to think about the American character and the nature of history. Since Moore’s classic novel was published, the basic premise -- the South wins the Civil War -- has become clichéd and spawned a number of mediocre works, (Harry Turtledove’s Guns of the South being one example). Moore’s novel is more powerful than many later books on the topic because of the detailed, believable alternative world he creates and the way he portrays history shaping the lives of his characters.

“The War of Southern Independence” splits the country in half: the North contains 26 states; the Confederacy possesses the remainder and expands into Mexico and Latin America. Although the Confederacy is a major power like Germany, the war reduces the North into a backwater.

The defeated North becomes a reversed mirror image of the South in our world. Northerners blame their troubles on the war and obsess on it as many Southerners did in our historical reality. “If it hadnt been for the war,” is a common complaint. Out of a sense of futility and misplaced pride, patriotic Northerners create a terrorist Grand Army, an underground organization that intimidates and sometimes kills Southerners and foreigners in an attempt to limit their influence, just as Southerners created underground organizations after the war to harass carpet baggers and emancipated slaves.

The Confederacy imposes the war’s cost on the North, forcing the U.S. to pay war reparations in gold which creates rapid inflation and economic devastation (similar to Germany’s experiences after the Versailles treaty of WWI).

In Moore’s 1930s world cars have not been developed, probably because Henry Ford did



not have an industrialized, populated Detroit to develop the auto industry. Most people drive carriages or ride horses. The wealthy have minibles: a small trackless locomotive or steam powered car. Electricity has not been harnessed, and most technology is steam powered. With no airplanes, air travel is limited to balloons. People watch tinographs, primitive movies projected by magic lanterns.

In the 1930s NYC is a city of one million and Brooklyn ½ mil, and the city's tallest buildings in NYC are no larger than 12 to 14 stories.

American literature develops differently in Moore's reality. Henry Adams becomes an expatriate historian disgusted with his country who writes a monumental history *Causes of American Decline and Decay*. Adams is critical of the "stay-at-home" essayists William and Henry James, who are patriotic exponents of the lost cause – the Northern war effort – and write in a colloquial dialect to espouse their Yankeeism. These are interesting variations because in our world Adams wrote extensively about American democracy and his personal experiences, whereas Henry James became an expatriate novelist, his brother William a philosopher-psychologist and university professor, neither renowned for excessive patriotism and certainly not colloquialisms. Moore does a superb job showing how history twists and alters human lives.

Race is an important issue in this novel. In the North "a black man was, more than anything else, a reminder of the disastrous war and Mr. Lincoln's proclamation" (66). Northern blacks are encouraged to repatriate to Africa. Mass lynchings occur in the North. Blacks are treated more humanely in the Confederacy, and one Southern character lectures the narrator on Northern racism again creating a reversed mirror image of our world and history in the reaction to defeat.

Many U.S. citizens blame abolitionists for their defeat, which is a realistic portrayal. In our historical reality, throughout the 19th century there was widespread contempt for abolitionists, especially in NYC where there were several anti-abolitionist riots. The most famous – the draft riot of 1864 – was a reaction against the draft, the war and black Americans (who were unfairly blamed by some rioters for the war), resulted in over 2,000 deaths, and was only broken up when troops returning from the battle of Gettysburg fired muskets and cannons on the crowd. See Herbert Asbury's *The Gangs of New York* for a good depiction of these riots.

It was commonly believed – especially by the working class -- that freed slaves would journey north and take jobs. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* discusses the problem of racism during the 1850s and 60s.

Just as manifest destiny caused the expanding U.S. power to colonize the West, the South invades Mexico and Latin America, becoming an imperialistic empire with 50 million whites and 250 million subjects of other races similar to the British Empire with its subject races in Hong Kong and India.

The novel fits within the genre of the young man -- Hodgins Backmaker -- making his way in the world, a type of novel dating back to *Tom Jones* in the 18th century. Hodges is a bookish young man in a United States so poorly industrialized and educated that it offered few if any opportunities for a man such as himself. The only great universities in his society are in the South. The opportunities available for him are limited to indenture, an impoverished freedom of hard farm labor, enlistment in the army or immigration.

Hodges escapes this limited future by becoming a fellow at Haggerhaven, a community

of scholars living a communal lifestyle on a self-supporting farm. Hagershaven resembles the utopian communities that sprang up in 19th century America – one of which Thoreau joined – but unlike them it is not socialist. Instead it provides scholars with a safe and free environment for the study of ideas.

A variety of interesting characters emerge in the novel. Roger Tyss is a bookstore owner and secret member of the Grand Army who employs Hodge and lets him have free range at reading the stock. A lot of Hodge's education comes from his reading and his love/hate relationship with Tyss. Tirzah is a pretty materialistic girl who Hodge has a love affair with and who ends their relationship because he refuses to conform to social norms. Rene Enfadin is a black ambassador from Haiti and ardent reader who is subjected to racist taunts from many people in NYC, but nonetheless befriends Hodge and teaches him a great deal.

Another Hagershaven fellow, Oliver Midbin, is an expert on Emotional Pathology, and develops a talking cure similar to Freud. He treats one patient through a dramatic reenactment of the emotional trauma that made her sick, in a dumb show reminiscent of Hamlet.

Another fascinating character is Barbara Hagershaven, one of Hodge's lovers and an Einstein analog, who develops theories of space and time – a variation of relativity -- which enable her to create a time machine.

Barbara's time machine sets off the narrative's final events. During his time at Hagershaven, Hodge becomes a historian of the War of Southern Independence authoring Chancellorsville to the End. He uses Barbara's machine and travels to Gettysburg to observe the battle and test his theories about the war. Throughout the novel Hodge has been described as an observer, a thinker rather than a doer, but his attempt to observe sets off a chain of events which causes the South to lose the battle of Gettysburg and ultimately the war. Distraught that he altered the course of history, Hodge discovers he cannot return to his own reality because his actions prevented Barbara's birth and the time machine's creation.

The book is dark in tone but not utterly a tragedy. Although Hodge's act destroys his life and his world, he creates our reality, where slavery is abolished in 1865 and the opportunity for a more democratic nation is created. Hodge comments: "That this world is a better place than the one into which I was born, and promises to grow still better, seems true" (219). However, Hodge is disappointed at the novel's end because political deals destroy the democratic potential of Reconstruction. In both worlds, the high ideals that motivated many during the Civil War are betrayed by politics and corruption. The novel does an excellent job at portraying how the Civil War or the War of Southern Independence encapsulates some of America's highest ideals and lowest realities.

The novel asks important questions about history. Can it be changed? Do we control history or does it control us? Moore's characters offer different interpretations. There is Tyss's Nietzschean decree that history is mechanist, predetermined and circular; we are doomed to repeat the same actions like automatons eternally. There is Enfadin's Christian belief in redemption; we can only see partial truths due to our human limitations; God is the complete reality. Many narrative events converge in a fatalistic way, but Hodge the observer is not helpless; he alters the phenomena of history and manages to escape the limited opportunities of his social milieu. Ultimately, the novel's philosophy of history is ambiguous, dark but offering redemption.



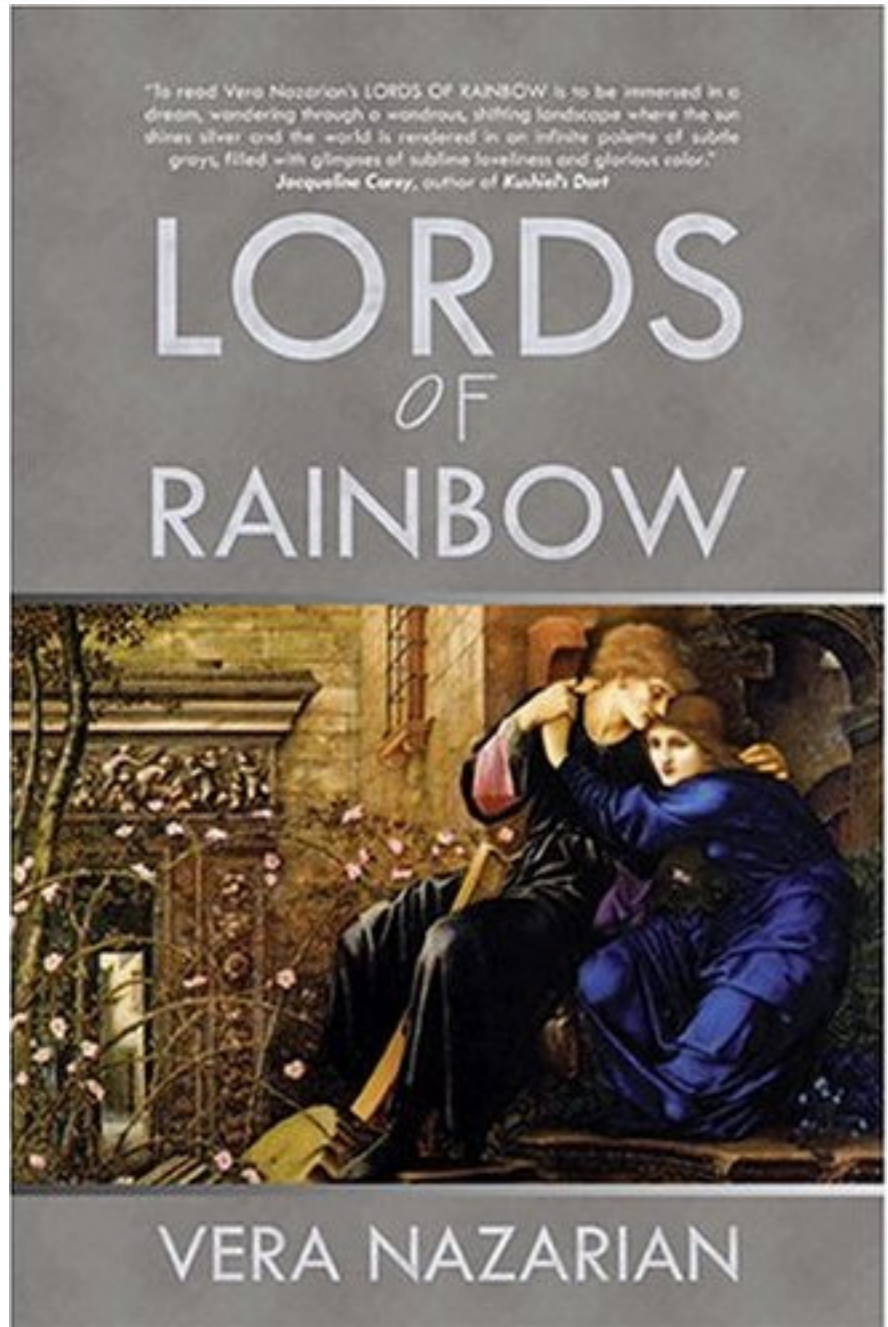
Lords of Rainbow – Vera Nazarian

Review by John Turing

The idea of the rainbow, of colour, permeates every aspect of this novel. The world we are introduced to from the very beginning is remarkably different from our own in one crucial respect – it is a colourless world, all is “a variegated greyscale”. But the world is never dull. It is filled with an intriguing cast of well developed characters who act primarily for themselves. Nothing is ever as it quite seems. Your first impressions are gradually reinforced through the novel, until, suddenly, they are shattered. *Lords of Rainbow* is one of the best single volume epic fantasies available. Yet, “rainbow is ambiguous”. It is not perfect, far from it. The ending is weak and the novel is predictable and on occasion, the illusion of brilliance she weaves is sometimes shown to be just that, an illusion. The traditional sometimes becomes cliché. The intriguing glimpse of the young Lissean Grelias’ life is barely developed, while the equally intriguing protagonist, Elasant Vaeste, becomes less interesting as the novel progresses. But there is one element constant throughout, the prose. Nazarian is more than merely competent at writing, in times, it reaches the poetic. From the very beginning, it is unique and enticing:

“Lifting the first, outer veil, you see the sun. It is steel and silver. It begins to sink like an old ship through the churning mass of cloud and mist, casting half-light.”

From the first page of the prologue, we are introduced to a fully realised world, brought to life by Nazarian’s description:



“Beneath the sky, chaos. Rock and tree limbs thread ascetic members into fathomless seething earth. Lesser things emerge past the roots of their greater wood-fleshed kin, and anemic shoots are sent to the sky. There is an unresolved hunger, a clamouring cry without sound”

This brilliant description immediately draws your attention. It distinguishes *Lords of Rainbow* from the countless other epics, with their simple utilitarian prose. Here, at once, the tone of the novel is set. The descriptive passages never become overbearing, they are limited and utterly appropriate. The pacing of the novel is almost perfect. Except for one brief explanatory scene in the middle of the book, Nazarian manages to resist the allure of infodumping. This is a world without colour; at least in the sense we know it. For at the heart of the city of Tronaelend-Lis, lies the Light Guild. Its members, for a price, will create orbs of colour. This is an unnatural form of light, and as you might expect in such a world, this talent is highly prized. Colour is magic. The Light Guild has a uniquely powerful position within the city. The importance of colour is continually emphasised by Nazarian. Each mention of colour is in italics, each noble family has taken a colour to represent them and the religious system is based around colour. The gods of this world, the Tilirr, each represent a colour and with that colour they represents aspects of humanity.

The novel begins outside the city with the mercenary woman, Ranhéas Ylir, in a brief battle against suspected Bilhaar, members of the assassin’s guild. This conveniently introduces her to Elasant Vaeste, head of his family, on the way to Tronaelend-Lis for the wedding of his cousin. Curiously he decided to take no servants and no escort, judging the risk of the journey minimal. The first impression we are given of him is of a calm, calculating intelligent personality; but one who makes the occasional mistake through his arrogance. It is an intriguing personality, and one which holds great potential. Unfortunately, this potential is never entirely fulfilled. Nazarian begins the novel with rapidly changing scenes – in the first one hundred pages the point of view changes every chapter and occasionally, it changes within the chapters. This can be a little bewildering, and certainly it is unusual for a moderately sized standalone novel, but it is effective. Nazarian has two great skills; in characterisation and writing style. Her technique is dazzling and the style rarely slips. My objection to this was not the introduction to these characters, but the fact that many of them were ultimately very minor characters with almost no influence on the story. For once, I feel that the novel could have benefited from being longer. These scenes are, of themselves, worthy of inclusion. In a larger novel of greater complexity, they would have been entirely worthwhile. But this novel was focused on three characters, Ranhéas Ylir, Elasant Vaeste and Lord Bilhaar.

Nazarian is remarkable in that she manages to create some of the most believable characters I’ve seen in all fantasy with just one scene. Her characters, especially the peripheral, manage to extend beyond the archetypes. Carliseral Lirr, a minor character who you could be forgiven for overlooking, is used to demonstrate the postulate “rainbow is ambiguity” with remarkable effect. For Carliseral is both male and female – depending on the day – and there is a scene in which two children puzzle over this mystery, one of the understated moments of genius within the book.

The most disappointing aspect of the novel was the plot. It began with an interesting, original structure, based around the twelve postulates of the rainbow, each scene demonstrating one of these. After these postulates, though, the story itself was rather

dull and predictable, with a few good twists which save the reader from boredom. *Lords of Rainbow*, while brilliantly original in the conception of the world, is rather traditional in its plot. There is the menace of evil and the dark lord (though this has, understandably, much significance in a world without colour) and the story becomes little more than a quest to save the city from this menace and to restore the rainbow. It is, on the whole, very predictable. There are interesting interludes which make this an enjoyable novel and it never falls to the level of a pastiche. There are hints of political intrigue, but these are often simplified.

Lords of Rainbow is a high quality single volume epic fantasy, and these are rare. It is deserving of a much wider audience than it has, despite its flaws. The quality of the prose is almost unparalleled within the subgenre and the characterisation is generally strong. The plot may not be the most intriguing or the most original, but it manages to remain entertaining throughout. Nazarian is not, as my initial impressions suggested, an equal to the current pinnacles of epic fantasy, but *Lords of Rainbow* is of an altogether different style to them. It is positive in its outlook but it does not subscribe to the naïve sentimentalism that has dominated the subgenre. It is both original and traditional. The influence is not primarily that of Tolkien but rather of Dunsany and it is refreshing. I have criticised the novel a lot in this review – but that is because it had such potential, yet it fell just short of being a masterpiece. For a debut, it is a remarkably professional novel. I would give it a rating of 8 out of 10. It is a novel that can appeal to most fantasy fans. It is not a masterpiece, but it is an excellent, concise and well paced novel.



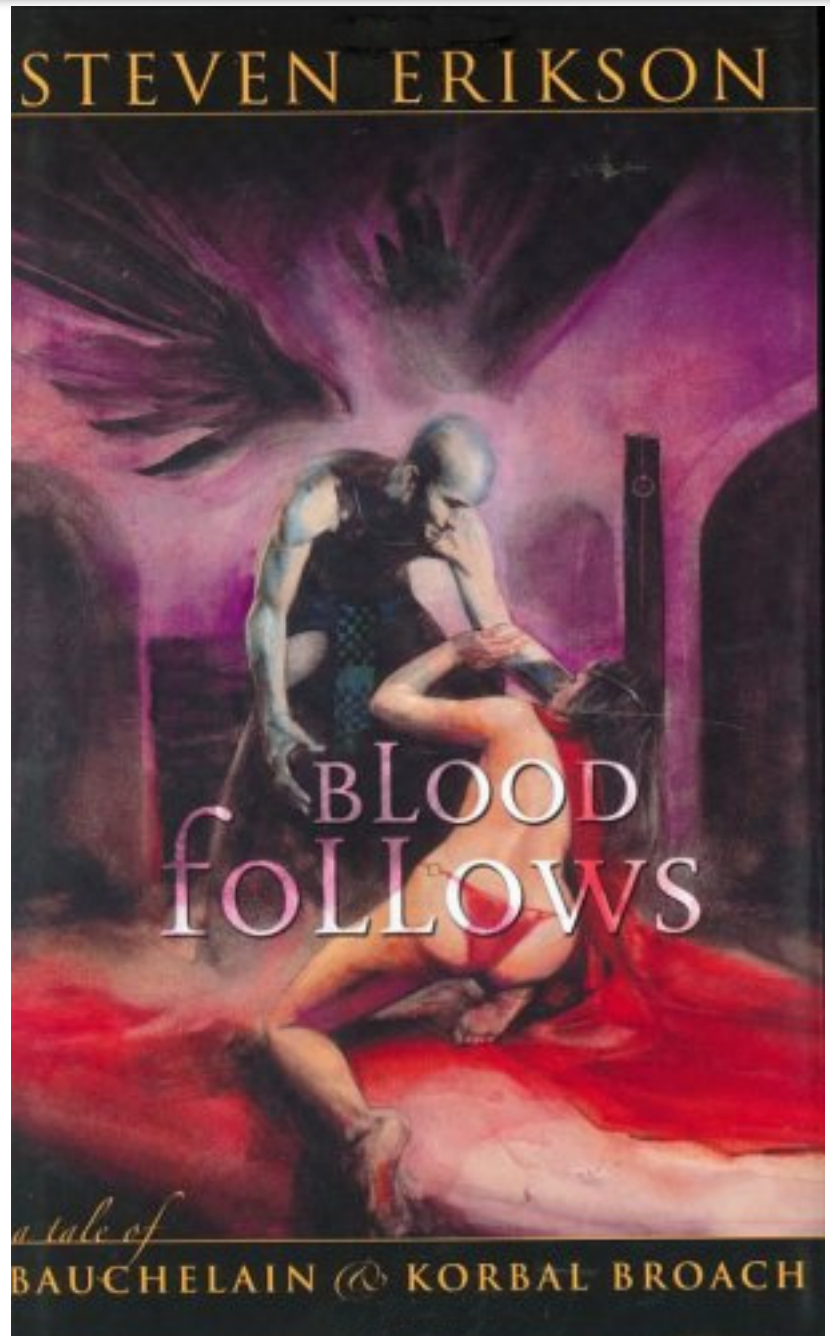
Blood Follows – Steven Erikson

Review by Scott Andrews

The vast majority of epic fantasy writers in the last twenty-five years have broken into the field with novels. As such, any short fiction by most of the top-selling authors in epic fantasy has been exceedingly rare. Robert Silverberg's two Legends anthologies filled this void with novellas written by popular epic fantasy authors, set in the same

worlds as their novels. These anthologies showcased the work of recognizable authors such as Robert Jordan, Raymond E. Feist, and Tad Williams, all in conveniently sized portions. Perhaps more important, Legends also exposed the epic fantasy novel readership to the short fiction format that started the genre, under such classic fantasy writers as Robert E. Howard and Fritz Leiber.

English/Canadian writer Steven Erikson emerged in 2000 as a monumental new presence in epic fantasy. His Malazan Book of the Fallen series is planned to cover ten novels, and it features perhaps the most thoroughly detailed epic fantasy setting ever put to paper. With the recent British publication of the sixth book in this utterly epic saga, and the American release of the third, Night Shade Books has reissued hardback versions of two earlier Erikson novellas set in the same sprawling world. Both of them feature two characters from the third Malazan book, Memories of Ice: the necromancer



Bauchelain, and his companion Korbal Broach.

Blood Follows, the first of these novellas, takes place in the city of Moll, called “Lamentable Moll” by its inhabitants. Despite the book’s label as a tale of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, the story actually focuses on the hardscrabble family man Emancipor Reese

and the city guard sergeant Guld. The most recent in a string of grisly murders drives the plot, with Guld investigating the killings. The pace of the novella drags through the early sections as Reese talks regional politics with two tavern companions, then trolls the city looking for a new job. Guld inspects the scenes of several new murders, and the crowd of onlookers provides interesting minor characters as suspects. Meanwhile, Reese takes employment with Bauchelain and wonders if his new master might be involved in the killings.

Although both are billed in the title, Bauchelain never emerges beyond the level of a supporting character, and Korbal Broach appears only at the climax. This leaves Reese and Guld as the main characters, and they only hold the reader's interest adequately. Reese's tavern session and drunken wandering fill the first quarter of the novella, but hold little value for the later plot. Reese's personal connection to the murders, with his previous employer one of the victims, is never exploited to get him involved in that plotline. After he joins Bauchelain's employ, he does suspect his new master, but he never acts on that suspicion. As such, Reese ends up merely being an observer, showing the reader the fascinating oddities of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, but with little drive of his own.

Guld encounters many colorful suspects in his investigation, including undead spirits, a seller of dolls sewn from skin, and two rouges who telepathically train rats to explore barrows. Yet in hindsight, these suspects provide far more background information than any misdirection or clues to develop the mystery. The character interactions in the mystery also contribute little to this plotline, save one conversation Guld has with Bauchelain during the climax.

Without a series of deepening clues, or any entanglements involving the characters, the murder mystery falls flat. The tension never escalates beyond the horror of the crime scenes. The resolution features several new and disparate elements that do not logically emerge from the few clues offered in the narrative. The climax answers all the questions, but in a jumbled manner that makes the previous scenes feel as though the author wasn't certain where the mystery was headed.

Erikson's supreme strength, the thorough vividness of his fantasy setting, dominates Blood Follows. The odors and the grit of Lamentable Moll are palpable. The scope of the world feels limitless. Perhaps from his professional training as an anthropologist, Erikson understands that in real cultures, the new elements grow up alongside the old. He shows this universal concept in the ancient barrows that pock the city, their original builders so long departed that the current city dwellers have no idea who they were.

The novella ends with Reese accompanying Bauchelain and Korbal Broach to sea, fleeing to lands unknown. The lack of focus on these title characters and the new expectations in the ending make Blood Follows feel more like an introduction to these characters rather than a full tale about them. As such, readers looking for a short but complete story set in Erikson's world may be disappointed. However, Erikson does continue the story of these three companions in a second Bauchelain and Korbal Broach novella, The Healthy Dead.

One other important issue with Blood Follows is the cover price. The reissue edition is only available in hardcover, with a price of \$25. At only 125 pages, printed in a large font and including several illustrations, Blood Follows

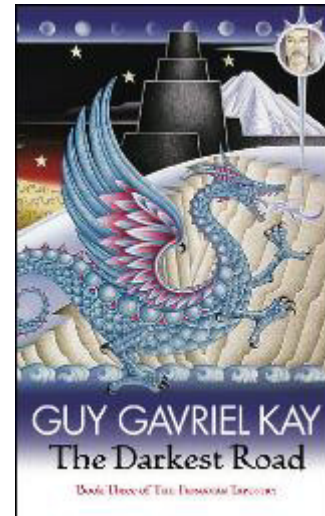
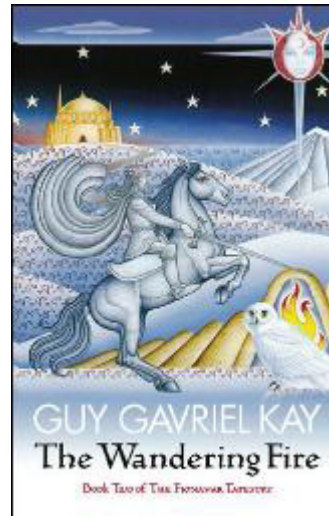
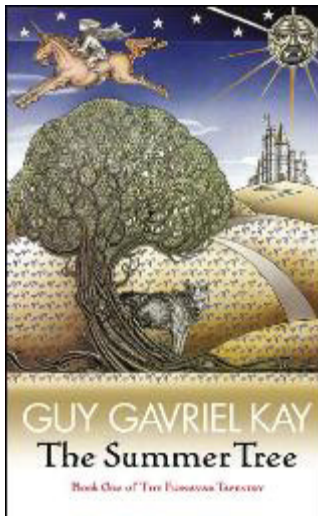
does not offer the same value as an anthology of multiple novellas, or as one of Erikson's 800-page Malazan paperbacks. Perhaps Night Shade Books will consider releasing a less expensive paperback edition.

Steven Erikson deserves praise for pausing from his epic saga to write these short fiction tales in the same fantasy setting. Despite the uneven mystery plot and the high cover price, Blood Follows allows readers to experience Erikson's vivid world in an easily digestible length, and it should expose readers of his epic novels to the elegance of the short fiction format.



Words, Music, Vision: A Multi-Media Literary Adventure with Martin Springett
by Victoria Hoyle

Earlier this year I found myself in attendance at a very small convention. It was all of five people (at times, only four) in a pub in London, brought together by a serendipitous confluence of events: a chance meeting at University, a review I wrote, an e-mail I received, a CD that crossed the Atlantic and a spot of antique collecting. The *raison d'être* of this “convention” (dubbed *SpongCon* for arcane reasons quite beyond my powers of explanation) was Martin Springett, the artist behind the beautiful original illustrations for Guy Gavriel Kay’s *Fionavar Tapestry* and the composer-musician of the Kay-inspired CD *Bright Weavings*. I took the opportunity to chat with him, over a few pints and several plates of nachos, about his visual and musical journey through Kay’s literary worlds’.

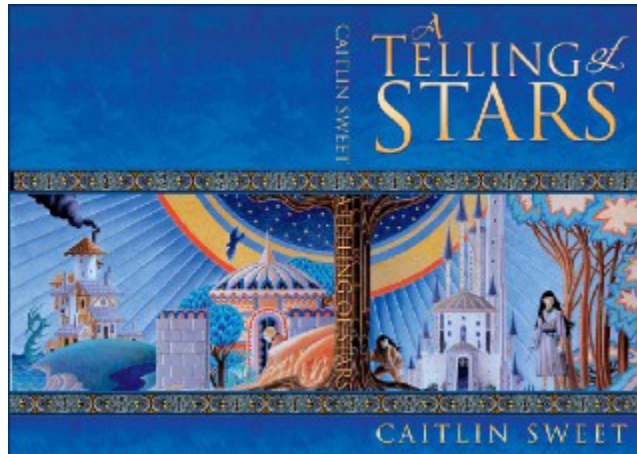


The recent Twentieth Anniversary reissues of *The Fionavar Tapestry* by HarperCollins in the UK (below) do Springett’s cover design proper justice, accentuating their style, so reminiscent of manuscript illumination and mediaeval iconographical painting.

Born in Kent, UK but resident in Canada since the mid-1960s, Springett began his career with a comic strip – “Awaken” – and a series of illustrative images for *Heavy Metal Magazine* in the late 1970s and early 1980s. His earliest genre forays were focused mostly on the science fiction side of the market, but as he explains: “I was leaning more and more towards Fantasy and eventually left the SF scene entirely, spaceships, aliens and the like no longer my thing.” Like many illustrators he “trotted” his portfolio around to various publishers and, subsequently, landed a commission with McLelland & Stewart to illustrate the cover of a Fantasy novel by first time author Guy Gavriel Kay. This was, of course, *The Summer Tree*, the first novel in Kay’s ***The Fionavar Tapestry***, to be followed by *The Wandering Fire* and *The Darkest Road*. It was the start of a great friendship with Kay and also of a lifelong creative relationship with his work, that has translated into both images and into music. As he explains: “The visual aspect came first with *Fionavar*, but after, having taken that journey and

explored that world, I felt compelled to write some music. I felt I “knew” it then.”

For my own part, Springett’s images have always been central to the power of the *Tapestry*. Their bold lines and delicate palettes speak clearly of Kay’s broad thematic strokes and his writing’s emotional resonance. As such they have a power – symbolical and iconographic – all of their own that reminds me of the illustrated fairytales of my childhood, and of the medieval manuscript illustration that I frequently come across in my professional life. More recently Springett has illustrated Caitlin Sweet’s debut novel *A Telling of Stars* (which is itself stylistically akin to Kay’s *Tapestry*) with a similar clarity of geometric line and colour.



But I also like the idea that good fiction has a cadence, a timbre, a tempo, a music. Not a soundtrack or an accompaniment - I don't quite mean that - but an alternative personality that plays and sings, a state of affairs in which sound is fiction and fiction resonates out through music. The compositions that Springett himself has written “inspired” by Kay’s oeuvre – through from the *Tapestry* to the most recent *Last Light of the Sun* – are like this and have now been collected together on a CD: *Bright Weavings*. This was the recording that bravely made the Atlantic crossing to me and later became one of the catalysts that took me to *SpongCon*.



It begins with “First Light” and a soft sense of the sun rising, a low hum of voice and instrument with the poem attributed to St. Patrick (the one that begins “I arise today/ through the strength of heaven;/Light of the sun”) spoken over. This is both a beginning and

a part of the final balance of the album, since 45 minutes later the final track, inspired by *The Last Light of the Sun*, turns out to be a rhythmic sunset. It is all strong drumbeat, a guitar and a violin coming through, adamant somehow and then gone as suddenly. The sun comes up and then goes down. Springett takes lyrics for it from the *Liber Hymnorum* manuscript, another eleventh century Irish text:

*"I have a tale for you
A stag bells, winter snows, summer has gone
The wind is high, cold. The sun is low. Its course is short
The sea is strong and running.
The bracken is very red; its shape has been hidden
The cry of the barnacle goose has become usual.
Cold has taken the wings of the birds.*

*Season of ice; this is my tale;
Season of ice; this is my tale;
Season of ice; this is my tale.
This is my tale.
This is my tale.
(Repeat)"*

The translation is unusual; poetic. Certainly the Latin original is bleaker and more like the season it portrays. But the character of the version Springett has chosen is most akin to the spirit of Kay's most recent novel, which is embedded in the Anglo-Saxon experience of landscape and season. "This is my tale" sung over and over at the end is also apt. Not only because it captures the insistent, determined overlay of voices and stories in *The Last Light of the Sun* but because it recalls the Anglo-Saxon *scop*, the poet-bard, and also because it stands as a statement for the CD in its entirety, it being a tale in itself.

Each of Kay's novels is represented musically, with the result that Springett's musical career runs close to the bone of G.G.K's development as a writer. He told me: "I felt as much at home with Guy's world's musically as visually, and kept noodling away at various themes and ideas over the years. Each new book inspired new musical ideas. I suspect it's my way of staying in these marvellous places, lingering a little longer."

First is *The Sarantine Mosaic*. "Shirin's Dance" is a duet of guitars that ends on a note of query, very like the fate of eponymous dancer herself, while "Painted Feet on Ochre Sand" is a questing palimpsest of guitar, percussion, flute and bansuri (a kind of wooden flute) that, like "Shirin's Dance" captures the urgency and ephemerality of the act of artistic creation. It was apparently inspired initially by *The Lions of Al-Rassan* but only came into its own after the release of the *Mosaic*, which takes many of the same themes – memory; sacrifice; beauty – and renders them deeper, making them more integral to the musical narrative. This is the same relationship (although partly in the inverse) enacted between "Shirin's Dance" and "Painted

Feet on Ochre Sand”. With their similar phonic patterns, they speak loudly to one another. *Lions* appears again behind “The Gardens of Al-Rassan”, a suite of three pieces that reaches out to the three vibrant cultures at the heart of that novel, weaving them together and about each other. As the music progresses it brings them, inexorably, into confluence and conflict.

Certainly though, the most moving composition is “Dianora”, a deeply poignant and wandering evocation, by cello and guitar, of a woman defined by loss and betrayal. Similarly, the most involved are the two long Fionavar suites that take scenes and characters from the weft of the Tapestry – the crossing; Paul’s loss of Rachel; Diarmuid; The Wild Hunt – and connect them up in new, wholly evocative ways. My favourite though, almost bizarrely, is the short but delicious melodic play with flutes that represents *A Song for Arbonne* and carries with it all the swift light and deftness that I associate with the ambience of Kay’s alternate Languedoc.

Nevertheless, the CD is still a whole thing; a body of work that, bracketed by “First Light” and “Last Light”, is a story or “tale” in it’s own right. I asked Springett about this: “The music, or at least the way it eventually appeared on the CD, has a thematic thread, and the emotional weave runs through fairly strongly... I have always loved the idea of a journey when listening, and so I instinctively went for an overall effect. Rather than pull out the differences in the novels, I think I ended up bringing out those themes that they all share: a sense of loss, compensated for by moments of beauty and redemption.” This seems true to me: the humanity and clarity of these wefts are key to Springett’s music and, equally, to his artwork.

It is quite startling to experience your favourite novels in another media; they speak to you, and to each other, in strange new ways. You *listen* the music, you *re-read/re-think/re-approach* the prose; and then, quite unexpectedly, it re-reads you. Thus I’m hearing, on new levels, how the themes of *The Sarantine Mosaic* and *The Lions of Al-Rassan* twine together, and how Kay’s female characters – Shirin, Dianora and even Jehane bet Ishak – dance on similar sands, placing down their feet in the spaces they find, balanced between conflicts and resolutions, between love and life. Springett elaborates: “I hope that it will communicate how I felt about the various stories and themes, and awaken a similar emotion in the listener. I must admit it always startles me when this does happen.” Indeed.

There is also, more simply, the delicious pleasure of good music well played. Martin Springett’s music is a lot like his illustrative work: distinct and clean lines; striking motifs; a deep engagement with narrative; a love of what he is creating. Also (and I find this particularly inspiring) the CD is a physical incarnation of the acts of creation and creativity that Kay’s work has been so focused on: the novels made not flesh, but sound perhaps? Whether you love Kay’s work or not I recommend the experience of *listening* to Martin Springett’s evocation of it. And then, of course, you should read the novels while *listening* to it and while poring over the associated images. How about that for a multi-faceted, multi-media literary experience?

[You can buy *Bright Weavings: Music Inspired by the works of Guy Gavriel Kay* directly from Martin Springett's website: www.martinspringett.com. Prints, posters and bookmarks of his *Fionavar Tapestry* artwork are also available, as is information on his most recent project *Jousting with Jesters: An ABC for the Younger Dragon*. You can also listen to sample tracks from the album at Guy Kay's dedicated website www.brightweavings.com/music/index.htm. His next public performance will be on September 14th at the Toronto Public Library (The Merrill Collection of SF), where he will play in compliment with readings by Guy Gavriel Kay, Caitlin Sweet and R. Scott Bakker.]



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The Secrets of Jin-Shei – Alma Alexander

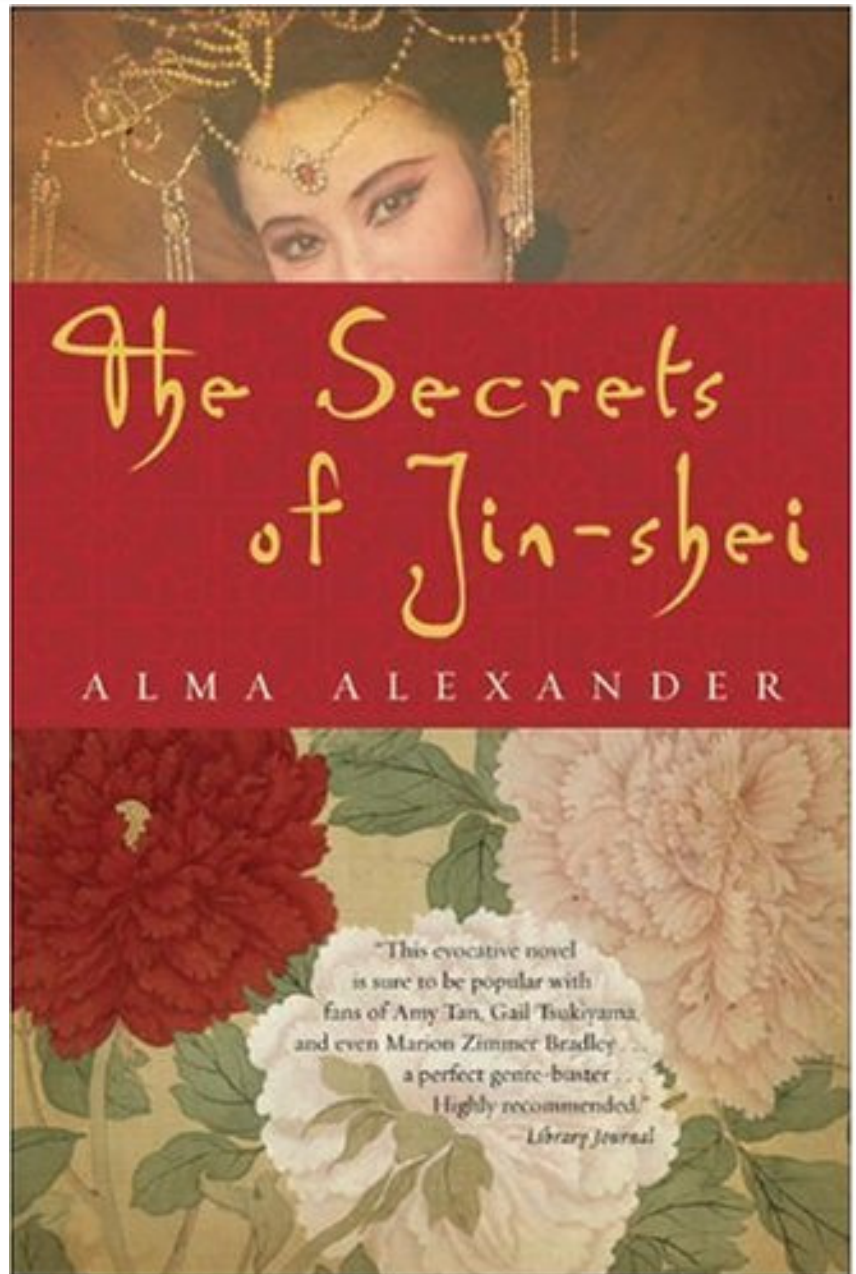
Review by Victoria Hoyle

Sisters, Doing It for Themselves

Let me be frank: Alma Alexander's third novel *The Secrets of Jin-Shei* is about women. It isn't just that it features female characters (although it does, eight of them, and almost entirely to the exclusion of men) or that it is predicated on a matrilineal, matrilocal culture. Rather, it is utterly *about* women, being concerned with their life cycles, their traditions and rituals, their languages, their friendships and their desires. Men get decidedly short shrift in its 492 pages. They turn up to be married, or to father female heirs, or as eunuchs, or as priests, or as monstrous villains (and villainy, for Alexander, always seems an encoded form of rape). They do not, however, have autonomy or genuine individuality.

Such gender-blindness is an inevitable, if slightly disquieting, function of the novel's narrative focus. Set in Syai, an Empire heavily reminiscent of early mediaeval China, it hinges entirely on a traditional bond of friendship made between women – the *jin-shei* vow of sisterhood. This is the central component of a demarcated culture of women in Syai that embraces all post-pubescent girls, from the very lowest to the very highest levels of society, and which is passed down, in secret, from mothers to their daughters. It has its own language – *jin-ashu* – that is only spoken and written by women:

“All women know jin-ashu...it is our language, the language of jin-shei... letting us speak freely of the thoughts and dreams and desires hidden deep in a woman's heart. Of things men do not understand and do not need to know.”



The *jin-shei* vow, once made between friends, is irrevocable and the connection closer than blood: it creates sprawling networks of women bound to each other's desires with threads of love and obligation. One's "sister" may have another "sister" who becomes your sister. This new sister will have other sisters who, again, become your sisters. And so it goes on and on, until all women are linked together, in one way or another, in a huge skein of influence, affection and duty:

"Jin-shei had shaped Rimshi's life – it was jin-shei that gave her the gift of her trade, and it was jin-shei, with another jin-shei-bao who had gone on to be an Emperor's concubine, that had given her the place to practise it."

Alexander's novel is about a singular locus on this web: the Dragon Empress of Syai, Liadun, and her *jin-shei* sisters, a circle of disparate women duty-bound together by friendship, even unto tragedy.

Tai, the creative and mild-tempered daughter of a Court seamstress, is Liadun's first *jin-shei-bao*, obliged to the cold and unapproachable young Empress by a promise she made to a dying friend. In time, she brings her other "sisters" into the Imperial circle: the precise and compassionate Healer, Yuet, and the crippled, club-footed Nhia, a seeker after religious wisdom. In turn, they introduce others: Khailin, a young woman of Court hungry for arcane knowledge; Xaorn, a foundling brought up to a fierce code of honour by the Imperial Guard; Qiaan, a stern advocate of social change and justice; and, finally, Tammary, a half-blood nomad from the mountains seeking her true identity. But Liadun, the circle's centre by virtue of her exalted position, makes for a steely friend. The daughter of a disgraced concubine and originally only third in line to the Imperial diadem, she is both desperate to prove herself and drunk on the authority of her title. While her *jin-shei-bao* try their best to mediate her increasingly risky power plays at Court, she only descends into stubborn self-reliance and mistrust. Finally, declaring herself to be absolute and sole ruler of Syai, she refuses to take a husband to be her Emperor or to father heirs. Forces around the throne are galvanised into open rebellion and it becomes clear that even the sacred trust of *jin-shei* is not above ambition or betrayal.

Equally motivated by the desire for power, and perhaps far more dangerous, is the Ninth Sage Lihui, the youngest and most powerful of the nine high priests of "the Way", the Empire's polytheistic religion. Seemingly charming and handsome, he seduces first one and then another of Liadun's circle into his sphere of influence, offering them both spiritual wisdom and arcane alchemical knowledge in return for their allegiance. Taking them from the city and from the protection of their friends, he secrets them away in his palace-beyond-the-world and sets about manipulating the *jin-shei* vow for his own ends.

The promised "secrets" of Alexander's novel are not in this plot though, which, as it is, is full of more or less believable contrivances – vapidly understanding lovers; knowledge hastily acquired; strangers met in dark alleys – as well as dalliances with *deus ex machina* ("ghost roads", golems and secret elixirs galore!) Rather, they are to be located in its female characters and in the idea of their friendship. The bond of *jin-shei* is by no means a simple act

of devotion between chums: it means something visceral, especially when one of your sisters is an Empress. For Khailin, for example, it means an obligation to do the unthinkable and, subsequently, an obligation to ask the unthinkable of Yuet; for Xaorn it means a complete subjugation of the self. At times it is a strong, necessary support network for the women, but at others it is an institution weakly susceptible to division, suspicion and duplicity. Not all of their bonds are made out of pure love. Liadun gathers *jin-shei* arbitrarily: some to protect herself, some for political gain, some for vanity. Even Tai and Yuet make their bond in a moment of fear and grief, and Tammary is particularly unwilling to submit to her sisters needs. What *jin-shei* is (or can be) is a form of power brokering, a tool of influence to be used as wilfully as affection will allow. It is not unlike a brand of mutual vassalage in which each participant is locked into a network of finely balanced give and take. If the take out-balances the give, even just a little, the whole schema is upset. Thus the *jin-shei* bond is made to carry many of the conflicts and tensions native to narratives of power - pro-action vs. passivity, violence vs. compassion, trust vs. suspicion – and it does so tolerably well.

Alexander also has a good grasp of historicity and of place. Her alternate rendering of medieval China captures something of the exoticism and gruelling etiquette of the period and, taking traditional poetic forms as her guide, she does a good line in seasonal description. She loves colour, particularly reds, golds and whites, and litters her story with embroidered dresses, hair-pins and jewels. The charm of Tai's wedding ceremony, for example, is all in the robes and the shoes; certainly it is not in her plank of a husband. There is some fine dialogue too, rendered in a flowing inflection, that manages to suggest not only the cultural alienness of Syai but also a wider emotional resonance. Tai, the novel's emotional centre, keeps a journal throughout and her allegorical musings are quite lovely, as are the expressive harmonics of the ending. I suspect there is more than a hint of Guy Gavriel Kay's influence in it; she mentions him explicitly as an inspiration in the Acknowledgements and often aims for similar imagistic tableau. She doesn't always manage it, however, and now and then her prose hits a low: there are intrusive and unnecessary qualifying statements and pieces of wince-worthy dialogue. The editing could have been much, much stronger. Too often this happens during love-scenes, suggesting a certain amount of authorial impatience: Alexander wants her characters in love and has little time for nuance, no time at all for subtlety. But this may have a lot to do with the involvement and presence of men – Alexander doesn't seem able to write a credible male character at all.

Finally, then, there is the unavoidable question: if *The Secrets of Jin-Shei* is a novel so determinedly *about* women is it also a novel *for* women? Certainly it is, in some aspects – it's located on an unsteady axis, at some point between Fantasy and, god forbid, "women's fiction." Nevertheless, the concept of, and the play on, the *jin-shei* bond is interesting and compelling beyond questions of gender-bias, and Alexander often writes well. Perhaps we might better read it as an exploration of certain individuals, their friendships and their propensity to mutual support than as an exclusionary novel about women alone.



Out – Natsuo Kirino

Review by Kimberly Fujioka

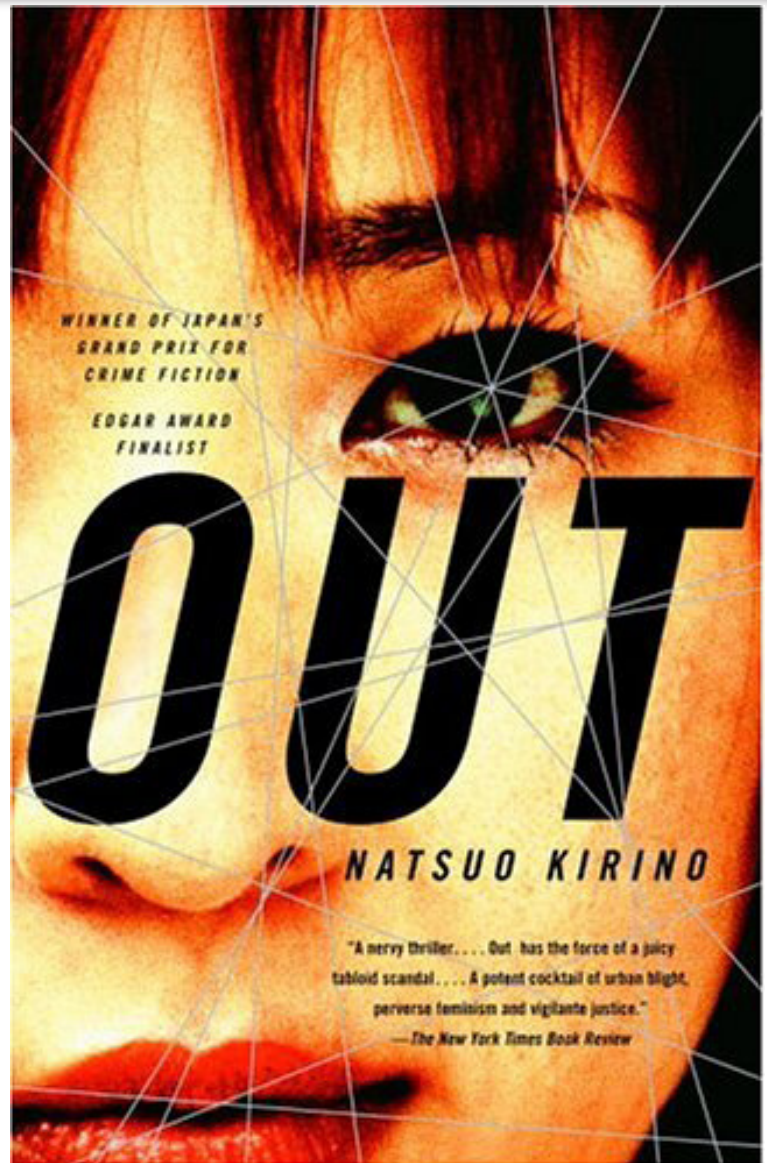
When you look in the mirror, what do you see? The Evil that is in you is also in me.

In Natsuo Kirino's *Out*, Yayoi has murdered her abusive husband, Kenji, and three of her co-workers, Masako, Kuniko and Yoshi, at the boxed lunch factory help her dispose of the body. While Yayoi and her co-workers get away with their crime, it's in the aftermath they suffer. During the dismemberment of the body and dumping, the characters perform rather coolly but that's not the point of this mystery-- it is the psychological ramifications of murder, of having handled a dead human body and cut it up like chicken. Getting caught or being recognized as evil by society is not important, Kirino is saying, but how one views oneself, is critical. After three of the women cut up Yayoi's husband's dead body in the bathroom, they argue:

"Will you shut up!" Masako bellowed. "It has nothing to do with us! It's between Yayoi and him, and anyway, it's over." "But I can't help thinking," Yoshi put in, her own voice growing emotional, "that he might even be glad that we did this to him. I mean, when I used to read about these dismemberings, I thought it sounded terrible. But it's not really like that, is it? There's something about taking somebody apart so neatly, so completely, that feels almost respectful." Here she goes again with her self-justification, thought Masako.

The four female co-workers in *Out* are not brought to justice by the legal system but by their own self-incriminating thoughts. Kirino's characters are normal people with a conscience, whom must live with their actions and the ones who survive, who get out, learn to acknowledge and integrate their evil side.

Kirino goes beyond the parameters of mystery in her novel, *Out* and enters the realm of philosophy, more specifically, evil. Through the characters inner self-questioning and the action in the plot, Kirino is asking: What is evil? How do we define it? Where is it? Can we protect ourselves from evil? Listening to the inner dialogue of one of the four female characters, Yoshi,



trying to come to terms with defining herself, after having participated in the dismembering of a human being, is chilling. Yoshi is trying to leave the house but her son keeps crying for her. She hands him to her mother and thinks to herself, “Will they ever stop, Yoshi wondered, clearing away the toys strewn across the tatami and lying down. She closed her eyes...She suddenly realized there were tears running down her cheeks, and the thing that made her saddest was the way she had parted with the money she’d taken from the poor, dead Kenji. She felt she had crossed a line and there was no going back—perhaps the same way Yayoi had felt when she’d killed the man.” (pg. 130) The reader can sense the tremendous weight of guilt involved in doing something one sees as inherently evil. Kirino’s main character Masako says in Out, “You never really knew your limits until you’d killed someone...there was nothing else quite like it.”

The novel is masterfully driven with the omniscient narrator entering the minds of all the players; each of the major characters is developed in detail, in all their psychological complexity. We can witness each of the four women go through her own private hell, in an attempt to come to terms with what she has participated in. In addition to the psychologically complex characters, the plot makes twists and turns that beguile a skilled reader.

Two unusual characters are introduced in the middle of the novel, Kazuo and Satake, who the authorities want to blame for Kenji’s murder. The narrator tells us that Kazuo is a lonely and innocent Brazilian immigrant to Japan. He travels two hours by bus, to go shopping in a town known as “Little Brazil” between Saitama and Gunma Prefectures. Kazuo is a foreigner, referred to as “gaijin” by Japanese, who like to blame for introducing evil to Japanese society. The other character the reader is introduced to is Mr. Satake, a gambling club owner with a violent past. Satake is a “yakuza” or gangster who lives outside of Japan’s social order. Why does Kirino bring in these characters, since we already know who committed the murder? Through how these characters are treated by the community, the author is showing society’s need to see “the other” as a social misfit, on the assumption that the one to name as evil is very different from oneself.

As the novel progresses we realize that Satake and Masako will meet one day. Their pasts are so similar in content yet the roles they play are so opposite, or should I say complementary? They meet and Masako appears to be the victim of Satake in a cat and mouse, sexually violent obsession. However, we don’t quite believe the intelligent and self-aware Masako would allow herself to be caught. Or would she? Masako is human, just like we all are, and has psychological blind spots where no rhyme or reason can alter her reaction to Satake. Along the same lines, Satake is subconsciously reacting to Masako. The sexual violence that results between them is like a dance to the death, where neither will give up until it’s over.

The message Kirino conveys through her characters is that the evil we see out there in the world exists inside ourselves. When we are not willing to look inside, but instead project our evil onto others, that is when we can be broken. In Out, Masako is the heroine because she survives. She survives because she is able to accept the capacity for evil in herself.





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