

Hub

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Contents

- Fiction: *Blood* by Simon Forster
Reviews: *Doctor Who s4 – Episode 6: “The Doctor’s Daughter”*
Doctor Who s4 – Episode 7: “The Unicorn and the Wasp”
Slaine – Volume 1
Interview: Michael Moorcock
2008 Nebula Award Winners

Stepping Back

A straw poll taken among the *Hub* editors told us that we preferred the new (landscape) format of the ‘zine. Feedback from you lot out there in Everywhereville, however, told us that (in general) you prefer the original portrait version, so here it is, back again!

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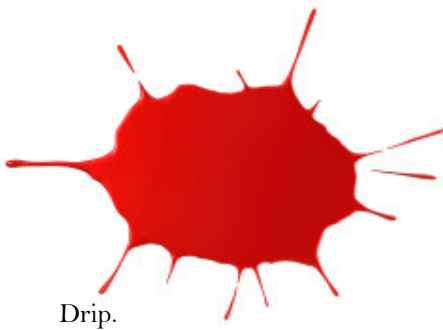
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Blood

By Simon Forster

This story first appeared in a collection entitled *10 little Stories*.



Drip.

A drop of red falls to the floor, blossoming into an ink-blot pattern of a dead body. It is a sharp contrast against the white tiles, so I immediately notice it.

I look up, following its presumed trajectory to the ceiling; but I can't see where it fell from.

The doorbell rings; it's my next client. What follows makes me forget about the droplet.

The following night:

Drip, drip.

A couple of drops splash onto the tiles, the second drop enlarging the pattern made by the first; the second altering the shape so that it now looks like a starfish.

I remember yesterday; again I look up and this time I notice a small, dark spot on the ceiling.

The doorbell rings, insistently, interrupting my thoughts. My next client awaits.

I spend the following couple of hours staring at the spot on the ceiling, only half-focused on what I'm supposed to be doing.

That night:

Drip, drip, drip.

More drops, adding to the growing painting on the tiles (I've no time to clean it up), mutating the pattern of a dark starfish into a fresh, red flower.

I look up: a matching stain has appeared on the ceiling, its flower-pattern subtly different.

The doorbell rings; another client. I ignore it. Instead I pull on a robe and grab a stool from the kitchen.

Balancing on the stool I examine the ceiling stain: it is dark, almost black, glistening wetly; a small bulge lies in the centre, but I can see no holes. I touch it; my fingertip comes away wet and red.

The next morning:

Drip, drip; drip, drip, drip.

The flower has become a red skull; the stain on the ceiling a circle with spikes.

I haven't cleaned any of it; I'm afraid to touch it.

No one lives above me. There is nothing up there beside the flat roof of this block of flats. The only way up there is by a skylight in the hallway; but that has been sealed shut for years.

Drip.

Another drop; I watch it fall lazily through the air. It explodes against the red-painted tiles, obliterating one of the skull's eye-sockets; as if the skull has winked.

I grab the stool again and a broom; my heart pounds in anticipation of what I am about to do.

The doorbell rings; I jump, startled, stifle a cry. It rings again; I ignore it. My clients can go elsewhere. I'm no one special.



Later:

Drip.

There is a puddle of blood on the tiled floor; no pattern, just a puddle. The stain on the ceiling is huge now, the bulge clearly noticeable.

I hit it with the broom and blood rushed out; the bulge grew; and I am now splattered with red dots and scarlet spots.

Drip, drip.

The drops now splash, the sound loud and bothersome. The puddle ripples with each drop and it seems to me that the bulge 'twitches' in sympathy.

I sit as far from the puddle as I can.

The doorbell hasn't rang for a while. I wish it would.



Afternoon:

Drip, splash.

The puddle, the stain, the bulge; all have grown. There is a smell in the air: blood.

The tiles have all but disappeared, the ceiling is dark and bulging. I find myself unable to move, transfixed by the dripping.

Drip, drip.

The doorbell rings; I hesitate. A client, or someone else? It rings again. A minute passes.

Drip, splash, ripple.

I move quickly to the door, open it; but there is no one there now. I return to my vigil.

In the middle of the night:

Drip.

Drip, drip.

A pitter-patter of red rain begins to fall. Each drop sends ripples that cause waves to lap up against the walls. The ceiling bulges heavily, threatening to burst. It covers the whole ceiling now, the dark stain reaching as far as the walls.

Pitter-patter.

There's no trace of the tiles now; the floor is wet and red. I sit on the stool, clutching the broom for the illusion of safety, surrounded by the puddle-turned-pond.

The air is thick with the smell of blood; a fine mist hangs over the pond, forced up from the constant rain. I shiver, although it's warm, and pull my knees to my chest.

The doorbell rings; but now I can't answer it.

I want to call out; the blood has stolen my voice.

The doorbell rings again, long and loud; but I can't move without stepping in the blood.

Silence; except for the pitter-patter, splash of blood.

The ceiling flexes and something moves inside the bulge, bringing a torrent of falling blood. The blood splashes forcibly into the pond, spraying the walls, the furniture, myself.

Impressions of hands against the taut skin of the wet ceiling; hands that grasp and clutch.

There is a bang at the door, someone knocking; the shock almost topples me from the stool.

The fright keeps me silent; the blood keeps me still.

A voice, raised in anger, disturbs the silence. It's a voice I fear, so I keep silent, I keep still. Another bang at the door; the doorbell rings loudly, for a long time.

I ignore it as best as I can, fixing my attention on the bulge that squirms above me.
The rain stops; just drops now, as if there is only so much blood that can be spilled in such a short time.

Drip.

Early morning:

I haven't slept.

Drip.

The incessant dripping has kept me awake.

Drip.

The pond is now a lake, covering the floor. I sit on the stool, a pale island amidst all this red. The smell would be overpowering, but I've become use to it.

The bulge hangs low, an arms' length from my head. The ceiling is one huge dark stain, glistening. The hands still move across the bulge, but slowly, caressing.

I can feel the blood on my body, where splashes caught me. It hasn't dried. I can feel it, against my skin, like an unwelcome client.

Drip.

The blood has almost reached my feet.

Drip.

The doorbell hasn't rang. There have been no more voices raised in anger.

Drip.

Is this it? Is this what happens to sinners, to me?

Drip.

I feel the blood move. I feel its longing. I feel its hunger like I feel my client's lust.

Drip, drip.

A final drip.

With a sound of tearing flesh the bulge bursts.

The blood gushes into the room, a flood of red.

It reaches my feet, my knees; covers my chest, my neck; flows over my head and finds a way in; and all I can feel, see, and taste...

...is blood.



About the Author

Simon Forster lives in London, writing stories. He has self-published some of his stories, in two collected works entitled *10 little Stories* and *Variations on a Theme*, but is still looking to get his novels and novellas published. He hopes that one day he can leave the dull admin job he has and become a full-time writer entertaining people around the world. You can find out more by visiting his web-site: www.theskyfullofdust.co.uk.

If you enjoyed this week's tale, and the non-fiction that follows, please make a donation at www.hub-mag.co.uk.

Your donations help us to pay our writers and to continue to bring you your weekly dash of *Hub*.

REVIEWS

Doctor Who s4, Ep6: *The Doctor's Daughter* & Ep7: *The Unicorn and the Wasp* reviewed by Scott Harrison
Slaine – Volume 1 reviewed by Alasdair Stuart

Doctor Who Series 4 – Episode 6 : The Doctor's Daughter
Written by Stephen Greenhorn
Starring David Tennant, Catherine Tate, Freema Agyeman, Georgia Moffett
BBC 1. First shown 10th May 2008



It had to happen, I suppose, sooner or later. After five great consecutive episodes the *Doctor Who* team has finally gone and presented us with a true head-in-hands moment with this woefully forgettable piece of sci-fi hokum.

The Doctor, Donna and a reluctant Martha find themselves thrown across the galaxy and onto a world torn apart by war. Two factions, human beings and the fish-like Hath, are desperately seeking out the mysterious 'Source', something that each side believes will help bring about a swift and decisive end to their long and bloody war. Shortly after arriving the Doctor's DNA is sampled and 'cloned' and he soon finds that he is no longer the last of the Time Lords as he comes face to face with his daughter.

As with his Series Three episode *The Lazarus Experiment* writer Stephen Greenhorn has once again split the fan community right down the middle. The major difference being, of course, that *The Lazarus Experiment* was a good episode, kick-starting the series story arc and providing perhaps the most important piece to the entire Saxon saga. Sadly this cannot be said of Greenhorn's latest contribution, which seems to do nothing but tread water for its 45 minute entirety. Obviously lacking in budget (most evident in the rather poor realisation of the Hath) and with far too much of that running up and down corridors business, which is obviously trying to compensate for the scripts lack of plot, *The Doctor's Daughter* does nothing but waste the viewer's time. It begins with an interesting premise – what would happen if the Doctor were suddenly to become a father again? – and then promptly descends into a well-worn tale of two opposing armies deadlocked in war, criminally wasting what could have been a truly fascinating, and series-shattering, idea, which in the hands of a writer such as Steven Moffatt or Paul Cornell could have been a controversial gem!

Having said that, not all is bad with this episode though. David Tennant and Catherine Tate are on splendid form, going through the motions with their usual energy and vigour, while Freema Agyeman continues to delight as Martha, a character that has matured and developed wonderfully since exiting *Who* at the end of the last series. It is Georgia Moffett's marvellous performance of Jenny the Doctor's 'daughter', however, that really shines out in this episode, presenting the audience with a complete and fully-rounded character from the moment she steps down from the humans' 'cloning' machine and begins to kick alien ass – much to her father's dismay.

Sadly *The Doctor's Daughter* is a strong contender for 'the most unexciting *Doctor Who* episode' since its return to Saturday night telly – right up there with Series Two's *Love and Monsters*. Let's hope that this is a momentary blip on an otherwise exemplary set of episodes and Series Four gets back on track and rattles off in the right direction once more with Gareth Roberts's much anticipated *The Unicorn and the Wasp*.

Doctor Who Series 4 – Episode 7 : The Unicorn and the Wasp
Written by Gareth Roberts
Starring David Tennant, Catherine Tate, Fenella Woolgar, Felicity Kendall
BBC 1. First shown 17th May 2008

It is England, 1926, and legendary crime writer Agatha Christie is about to disappear in mysterious circumstances! Was it a nervous breakdown, or is there a more sinister purpose behind those 'lost' ten days? Only time will tell, but first there's a good old murder mystery to be solved with bodies in libraries, country manor houses, sparkling cyanide and giant wasps. The bodies are mounting up, a

notorious thief is on the loose and the Doctor and Donna find themselves taking tea on the lawn with the most famous author for the next five million years!

After last week's fiasco and all round missed opportunity that was *The Doctor's Daughter* the entire *Doctor Who* fandom breathed a collective sigh of relief and climbed out from behind the sofa happy in the knowledge that their beloved Series Four had picked itself up, dusted itself off and strode purposefully back towards surer ground. There's an old adage out there in the magical world of the Telly-Box and it goes something like this: If there's one thing the BBC does well its period costume dramas! It's true! TV history is littered with prime examples! In fact, some of Doctor Who's greatest hits have been period pieces; *The Talons of Weng-Chiang*, *The Time Warrior*, *Black Orchid*, *The Curse of Fenric*... to name but a handful! It's safe to say if you set your script in 1920s Britain you just know it's going to look authentic! Writer Gareth Roberts did just that, delivering a script that both amazes and sparkles in turns, proving he was no one-hit-wonder after last years brilliantly inventive *The Shakespeare Code*. With the crime author's entire back catalogue seemingly at his fingertips, Roberts has rather cheekily sprinkled many of Christie's novel titles into the characters' dialogue, and much fun can be gleaned from trying to see how many you can spot – I managed to uncover eleven, including *Appointment With Death*, *Crooked House* and *Death Comes As The End!*

At this point in the proceedings David Tennant and Catherine Tate have really hit their stride, playing off one another beautifully and genuinely making this episode laugh-out-loud funny! The pair seem totally at ease with one another and their perilous adventures and much of the humour, both physical and verbal, arise from the scenes which they share. While guest star Felicity Kendall and the supporting cast turn in some marvellously solid performances this week's salute, however, must go to Fenella Woolgar who not only manages to give the Doctor a run for his money as the sharp-witted, yet deeply agonised Christie, but gives a performance that must rank her alongside Simon Callow's Charles Dickens and Pauline Collins's Queen Victoria for sheer authentic value.

The Unicorn and the Wasp is a marvellous return to form, proving yet again why *Doctor Who* is by far the best bit of telly our Saturday nights have ever seen! Series Four has reached the halfway point and things are starting to look hopeful again! Six episodes, and only two writers, are left, but both are safe pairs of hands – Steven Moffatt and Russell T. Davies!

Slaine Volume 1: Birth of a Warrior **Written by Pat Mills** **Art by Massimo Belardinelli, Angie Kincaid and Mike McMahon**

Slaine Mac Roth, 2000AD's best know barbarian has had a long and storied history. This first volume collects his very first appearances in the comic, long before the seminal 'Horned God' trilogy and the recently concluded epic 'Book of Invasions'.

The surprising thing here is that the character was so well formed, so early on. Whether presented in the realistic, fluid style of Kincaid, the supremely muscled and pragmatic work of Belardinelli or Mike McMahon's feverish, angular work there's a clear sense of the character's identity right from the get go. Slaine is a swaggering, cocksure, frequently and casually violent figure but here hasn't become quite the loinclothed washbuckler of later volumes. Instead, there's an exploration of his past, the death his mother and appearances by his endearingly boozy dad, Roth Bellyshaker. Yes, really.

What really makes this stand out though is the sheer invention on display. As well as the genuinely fascinating inter-clan politics and the frequent, and frequently very funny, violence there are moments of genuinely incredible imagery and invention. The hair masks worn by the evil Skull Swords, the wicker man in 'Bride of Crom' and the flying Viking longboats in 'Sky Chariots' are fantastic concepts presented



pragmatically and have twice the impact as a result. This is not normal history, but it's just to the left of normal history and as a result all the more captivating.

Anyone looking for the grand guignol of 'Horned God' or the intricacies of 'Book of Invasions' will, odds are, go home disappointed. But if you want to see how one of the most successful and iconic characters in British comic history got started, if you want to see the first steps in a hero's journey that shows no sign of finishing and, fundamentally, if you want to see a very large Celt dismember bad people in a wide variety of entertaining ways, then this is for you. **Highly Recommended.**

An Interview with Michael Moorcock

Words: Richard Whittaker

There're not many famous things about the city of Bastrop in Central Texas. Its roughly 8,000 residents says it is famous as the second oldest incorporated city in the state, and for being near the city of Austin, the state capital and self-described music capital of the world. Oh, and it's home to one of the defining geniuses of science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction. The man behind Elric, Jerry Cornelius, and the multiverse: the Science Fiction Hall of Famer, Nebula award winner: And, what's more, he's almost quintessentially English. He's Michael Moorcock.



But don't tell Texans that the man who recently became the newest Grand Master of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America is not one of their own. At the society's Nebula Award ceremony, held April 26th at the Omni Downtown Hotel in Austin, the induction of the adopted son of Texas was the highlight of the evening. Moorcock moved to Texas in the mid-1990's: Nebula Awards committee chair and native Texan Karen Meschke claims that, when Moorcock was visiting Central Texas over a decade ago, friends took him to try the brisket at the Salt Lick Bar-B-Que, and he was hooked and decided to move there (Not impossible. Their brisket is pretty damned good). When the king of West Texas horror (and toastmaster for the awards' ceremony) Joe R. Lansdale was asked about when Moorcock became a Texas author, he sat back and said, "The minute he got here."

But it has undoubtedly become a home to him. A lot of native Austinites would say he passed that test when his books got transferred from the science fiction section to the pride of place "Texan Authors" shelves in the massive, rambling Book People store. But Austin, as most Texans will tell you, is not like the rest of Texas. If Moorcock lived there (a city whose unofficial mantra is "Keep Austin Weird") he may not stand out as much. But he lives in Bastrop County, as rural and Republican as any in Central Texas. Moorcock told the Nebula Award ceremony attendees about a time he visited a traditional spit and sawdust honkytonk bar near his home, and got talking to the locals. "I had this urge, and I'm still not quite sure why I had to, but I had to tell them that I'd actually voted Socialist in the last election. And I don't say the piano stopped playing, but the juke box seemed to drop a few decibels. There was pretty much complete silence, and eventually this guy who had been sat at the end of the bar, about eight feet tall with a cowboy hat that would have sheltered some of the smaller states of the Union, came up to me. I thought, I don't think he's going to kill me, because that wouldn't be cool. I thought I was going to have to give a speech, defending my voting record. As he loomed over me, and I waited for the worst, suddenly he slapped his arm around me and said "Michael, you're a true Texan."

That provided him with an important lesson. "Texans value balls over political opinions, and I knew I'd come to the right place." There's little doubt he still has balls. In the afternoon of the awards ceremony, Moorcock had seemed frail. A delicate old gentleman, soft spoken, with an undoubted but non-specific Home Counties lilt to his voice, he was in a wheelchair, recovering from foot surgery. At the ceremony, clad in a tuxedo that hung well off him, he balanced himself precariously on crutches. As he stood to receive the applause of his peers and take to the stage, everyone expected the revered and venerable old man of letters to be helped to the stage. But who were they kidding. With a wicked grin, Moorcock levered and catapulted himself to the low stage, ignoring the stairs and the specially-prepared ramp, using his crutches as a pivot and causing a gasp from the crowd. In a posting on the Daily Telegraph's website, he had threatened to take to the stage with "a suitable hat, parrot and patch to go with my crutch," but he made do instead with a cry of "A-ha, mateys!"

Even with that childlike vitality, there was a good dash of speculation that the whole event had been moved to Austin just to make it easier for the Grand Master to get to. Again, some humility. "It feels like I happened to be in Texas and it was convenient for the committee," Moorcock said, "But generally speaking, in my experience of awards, it's some semi-political compromise." But if Moorcock has been adopted by Texas, his acceptance speech pointed out that hoary issue of how difficult it remains for 'genre' authors to be adopted by the literary mainstream. He was, after all, in at the beginning of the SFWA and the burgeoning tide of speculative fiction. "The 1960s were a great time for a change, in the sense that we should be putting some houses in order." Science fantasy, Moorcock said had "a vitality we felt generally missing in literary fiction," and the movement was eager to be part of the mainstream. He pointed out the impact of 60s SF on the French Existentialists and the New Wave, and that British writers like Angus Wilson, Kingsley Amis and Doris Lessing were keen readers of SF, wrote their own, and encouraged publishers to pick it up. From his end, he had always argued "for SF and fantasy to be incorporated into the mainstream, and the best literary standards to be incorporated into the SF genre." But Moorcock felt the struggle of being part of a genre that was written off as "a bunch of marginalized geeks with slide-rules for genitals." ("Size isn't important," he playfully added.) "The SFWA came about result of the frustrations felt by those of us sensitive to the condescending of the mainstream's refusal to take SF seriously."

The solution, which has now become part of sf lore, was to create a literary and literated science fiction and fantasy magazine: *New Worlds*, which Moorcock edited from 1964 until March 1971, then again when it became an anthology series from 1976 to 1996. San Antonio-based John Picacio, whose Moorcock covers include the 30th anniversary printing of *Behold the Man* and the latest edition of *Elric: Stealer of Souls*: (Moorcock has returned the favor by providing the introduction to *Cover Story: The Art of John Picacio*) talked of his "ability to craft whole novels in a tiny weekend, just so he could pay his bills and keep a lot of other authors afloat at the same time." He reminded the attendees of Moorcock's pivotal role as editor of *New Worlds* through four decades: during his tenure he published work by a mixture of 'genre' and 'mainstream' authors including Harlan Ellison, Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, Brian Aldiss, J.G. Ballard, Norman Spinrad, Philip José Farmer, John Sladek and an early story by Terry Pratchett.

But while he kept the door open for non-genre writers, the literary mainstream seemed to regard SF and fantasy as a ghetto from which 'good' writers could escape. Moorcock cast his memory back to when T.H. White and Mervyn Peak, both of whom encouraged him as a young writer, "were seen as outside the mainstream and not quite respectable. This was frustrating for me, particularly when inferior writers were getting praise for the slightest effort of imagination or stylistic ambition." The problem, he argues, was never about the accessibility of genre literature's counter-establishment, since he could recall times when CS Lewis (before he became a literary mainstay), would hang out with Arthur C. Clark and John Wyndham at The Globe Pub, and J.R.R. Tolkien almost joined SFWA in part because of what they had done for him in the fight over US reprint rights ("It's hard to remember the time when the jury was out on Tolkien). But he gave one key example of how the literary establishment could be destructively blinkered. "About 50% of the early reviews of Peak and Tolkien were wrestling with what this stuff was supposed to be," he said, "and somehow it had to be connected to reality. The only reality the critics of the time could come up with was nuclear disaster. And so Tolkien and Peak had come up with two of the great post-nuclear disaster novels."

Sadly, things may not have changed that much. Michael Chabon, whose book "The Yiddish Policemen's Union" earned him the Nebula for best novel, slyly thanked his editors in his acceptance speech for not realizing that his book is "at its dreaming, counterfactual core, a work of science fiction."

But Moorcock's position and influence within the SF and fantasy community remains undoubted. A handful of his peers and acolytes sent messages to the Nebula dinner that had that Moorcockian twist mixed in with the ink. Neil Gaiman, who claimed that "Mike Moorcock changed the inside of my head," added that "when people ask me about my influences, I tend to forget Mike, much in the way that people listing the things that were important to them growing up, fail to list the earth and air and sunlight." Alan Moore called him "A literary zeppelin captain who has never lost his faith in, or completely left, the underground, the ultimate outsider just by virtue of his altitude above the Earth." China Mieville, who counted himself as one of those "fortunate enough to have our souls sucked down by his evil crooning typewriter," called the title Grand Master "inadequate. Moorcock is the Sensei of dissident fiction, mad skills, pirate prose, ninja critique. We only just, on our best days, deserve him." In picking up his own award, Michael Chabon praised his first-name name-sake, and said "I'm only here because of you, because reading your great dark dazzling books made me hope and want and dare to try to write some of my own."

So what is Moorcock working on now? "Either nothing, depending on how you look at it, or another really big London novel, with a large element of fantasy to it," he said. "But the fantasy acts as a structure, rather than anything else". As with his last two capital-centric books, *Mother London* and *King of the City*, the new novel *Alsatia* takes historic reality as its inspiration. "The area below Fleet Street used to be sort of a free zone, a thieves zone, where if you got there, you could get sanctuary, because the Carmelite monks ran it all. It's just this idea of a free zone in London."

There seems to be a little bit of a love-hate relationship with London: the love is unstated, but runs deep in many of his books. The hate? Same reason as most people. It's so bloody expensive. "What we're looking for is a flat in Paris so we can nip over on the Eurostar for a short time," he said. It would allow him the best of three worlds: to spend half the year in Texas, still visit the location and inspiration of so many of his literary masterpieces, and get away from the brutal humid Lone Star State summers by the Sienna. "[Paris is] still a nicer city to live and work in than London. I spent three months in a wheelchair in Paris, and that's when you learn how nice people are, and they were very nice indeed." Not that he and his wife, Linda, have any plans to abandon Texas yet. "We've got all our books here," he said.

As for the politics a week before the mayoral election, he seemed to be not so much divided over the candidates as entertained. "I actually know both of them. Ken Livingstone's a keen science fiction reader, and Boris (Johnson), there's something incredibly likeable about him. If he's elected, he won't be much of a mayor, but everyone will like him, even if they oust him at the next election."

How does an author whose multiverse has so often been grounded in London write about it at such a distance? A fictional universe travels in the writer's head, but David Peace, author of the Yorkshire-based crime novels *The Red Riding Quartet*, has said that living in Tokyo has made it easier for him to write about the Leeds of the 1970s and 1980s. The distance helps him concentrate on what was, not what it is. Not so for Moorcock. "I'm feeling, at the moment, that I need to get back to London for a bit, particularly for this book," said the new grand master. "The London books I have written have come from being there. Plus, my grandkids are there, my children are there, there's a whole continuity."

But what about this whole being a Texan author thing? "I've never really understood that. It's the same way PG Woodhouse became an American, it's just living somewhere long enough. Like T.S. Elliot," he said. "Authors get adopted wherever we end up."

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2008 Nebula Award Winners

Novel: *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon

Novella: "Fountain of Age" by Nancy Kress

Novelette: "The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate" by Ted Chiang

Short Story: "Always" by Karen Joy Fowler

Script: *Pan's Labyrinth* by Guillermo del Toro

Andre Norton Award for Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy:
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows by J. K. Rowling

Damon Knight Grand Master for 2008: Michael Moorcock

SFWA Service Award: Melisa Michaels and Graham P. Collins

Author Emeritus: Ardath Mayhar

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