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Nominee!

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Paul Witcover

## A Fabulous, Formless Darkness: Some Infernal Remarks on Samuel R. Delany's *The Einstein Intersection*



These fragments I have shored against my ruins.  
—T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Origin of the experience of space and time, this writing of  
difference, this fabric of the trace. . . .  
—Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

When I was a teenager growing up in the geographic and temporal suburb of the '70s, a voracious reader of all things science-fictional, with aspirations of breaking into the field myself one day, no writer loomed larger in my private pantheon of sf gods than Samuel R. Delany. I knew next to nothing about him. It was enough that he and his books existed. My friends and I invoked his surname with the kind of reverential awe kids our age normally reserved for rock stars. And in fact Delany was a rock star to us, right up there with other one-named wonders like Hendrix and Bowie. Not just because he was young and hip and wrote about sex and drugs in ways guaranteed to piss off our parents. There was a supremely musical quality to his prose such as I had never before encountered or even imagined possible. His style was incisive, poetic, complex, allusive, and elusive, alive with swirling, clashing melodies woven layer upon layer. It was beautiful, disturbing, hallucinatory. It was also, and somehow most of all, a miracle of translucence able to communicate, as if effortlessly, truths beyond the everyday capacity of language to convey or of reason to comprehend. At least my language, my reason. It rocked.

Fortunately, in those days I wasn't reading Delany's jeweled sentences primarily for meaning, but to be moved. I read him in a way I can, alas, no longer read anyone: naively, as an act of faith, of religion. Not "religion" in the sterile, petrified sense I knew all too well as a reluctant Roman Catholic dragged to Mass each Sunday to suffer in sullen silence through a gilded hour of dead and deadening ritual—no, the sacrament I received from Delany's pages was realer than anything the Church had to offer. It was something both immeasurably old and perpetually young, a tangible mystery play of possibility, transgression, and transformation that plugged directly into the secret, sacred places where all things begin and end in art. It was the same kind of Orphic connection I was simultaneously seeking, and sometimes even making, through drugs—especially LSD, which might as well have stood for Liquid Samuel Delany as far as I was concerned. He was more than a writer to me. He was a magician, a priest. If I had a Bible, it was *Dhalgren*.

I'll never forget the moment at Clarion when the writer and critic Algis Budrys referred to me as "Samuel R. Witcover" (oddly enough, my grandfather's name). It was not meant as a compliment. But it had the effect of crystallizing a realization that, however obvious, had been a long time coming to my 20-year-old self: by that time I knew a lot

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## Special Readercon Issue

Clute casts a cold eye on the Nebulas  
Robert Borski on Wolfe's *Mandragora*  
Paul Witcover on Delany as Orpheus  
Susan Palwick remembers a pulp artist  
And 10 book reviews, of Goldstein, Gilles  
Deleuze, Hendrix, Kit Reed, Zebrowski, etc.

Plus Kevin J. Anderson on *sf classics*  
& Michael Swanwick (twice!).

John Clute

## Thirty-Three Years of Nebulas



I

Pushmi-pullyus are delicate creatures, so let there be unguents of praise before the swat. For many years now, SFWA—hoary sf head at one end, delightfully neotenuous fantasy head at the other—has served its members well, as trade union, as forum, as clearinghouse for gossip and harder data, as pressure group, as nest, as club, and as the originator of the Nebula Awards, which it has been presenting since 1965 to honor (so it has always been claimed) the best sf and fantasy published. Period. No qualifications. This is good.

The membership of SFWA includes many (I'd guess most) of the Americans who publish (or have at some time published) science fiction or fantasy in a professional capacity, but relatively few writers from abroad. The exact meaning of "professional" for SFWA has been, it seems, *movable*: currently (either Connie Willis's phrasing is over-casual or in fact there has been a change of criteria) membership is open to any writer "after the acceptance of and payment for one professionally published novel, one professionally produced dramatic script, or three professionally published pieces of short fiction." The only qualification is that the published work be sf or fantasy, and in English—no longer (so it seems) is it necessary for qualifying work(s) to be published in the United States. This is good.

And surely, if writers who publish outside the American market can now become full members, this reviewer (and others, certainly) will put his money where his mouth is and move from affiliate to full membership: because, for all the reasons mentioned above, SFWA is worth supporting; because it is appropriate for professionals in the field to join SFWA. This seems good.

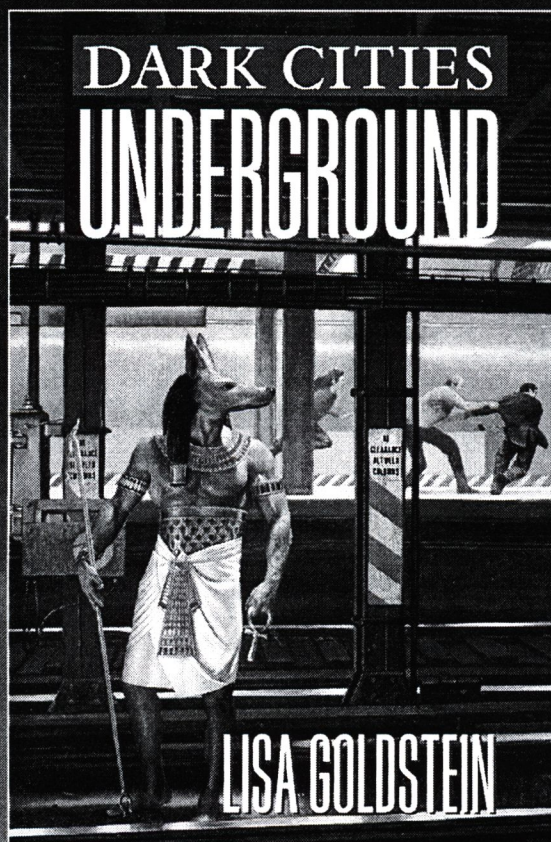
But now we must address the book itself. We must ask ourselves why *Nebula Awards 33*, which reflects the aims and accomplishments of such a fine professional klatch of folk, is such a difficult book to read without embarrassment for its hapless editor, for the writers, and the

(Continued on page 4)



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## The New York Review of Science Fiction

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## Clute on Nebulas 33

*continued from page 1*

field SFWA claims to represent to the world.

It's not an easy question to couch an answer to. The stories themselves are of varying merit; none (not even Jerry Olton's stretch-limo novella, which he boasts in an author's note is *not even finished yet*) is scandalously bad. Connie Willis, as editor of a volume whose contents are mostly preselected, may deport herself with something less than a full head of gravitas, but a few toastmaster misfires (see below) are not in themselves sufficient cause for the itch of shame this reviewer (for one) felt on finishing the book, though Willis's Introduction does strike a warning note.

There is indeed something telling—something revelatory—about the depressive jollity of her words of welcome, which she has composed in pure Toastmaster Goose, a style emcees invoke when Old Members need to be prodded out of the Rubber Chicken Glums. Her Introduction, in other words, has been addressed to members of the SFWA Club, guys and gals foregathered to hear themselves praised; it is not addressed to potential readers of the book.

Here she is, for instance, telling the elect how she was first allowed to touch the hem:

I didn't know anything about the SFWA banquet at which the awards were given, or what the award looked like, or what a witty, intelligent, insane bunch of people science fiction writers were.

Here she is on the first year's awards in 1965, which (she deposes, chastely declining to define her terms) were given, she says, to

the stories the science fiction writers themselves had decided were the best of the year. The best of the best.

And what stories!

Here she is on this year:

And you know what? I'm just as dazzled, just as awed and impressed by the Nebula Award stories as I was that first time.

That includes this year's Nebula-nominated and -winning stories, which are an amazing mix of fantasy and science fiction, technology and myth, shoes and ships and sealing wax—though the ships are sometimes sailing the methane winds of Jupiter, and the shoes are patent leather and worn by a five-year-old robot.

That sort of thing.

This may be amiable enough, but it's flapdoodle. There is nothing here to tell any outsider, any objective or curious reader, just what the Nebula Award actually *means*, just who is actually eligible (or likely) to win—whether or not the Awards are given to genre products only, or if fiction published outside the field, or by non-SFWA members, is eligible too.

These questions are, in fact, ticklish in the extreme; it is unfair to scapegoat Willis for a silence she shares widely. But she is altogether too clever a writer not to know what she's doing, and the vacancy of her introduction has all the appearance of a confession of dis-ease.

So what is there to make anyone uneasy?

Before we assay an answer, here's a short run-down of the contents of *Nebula Awards 33*, not in itself a shameful list of titles. Willis has been governed by the same remit that shaped previous volumes of this anthology series: She has been instructed to include all the year's Nebula-winning stories; to select one story by the Author Emeritus of the year, and one by the new Grand Master, when one has been announced; and to select as many Nebula-nominated stories of her choice as the book can hold.

So she had no choice at all about the winning novella, "Abandon in Place" by Jerry Olton (1996 *F&SF*). It is a lament for the death of the space age as First SF dreamed it, couched as a tale of redemptive defiance. Long after the Death by Nixon of the space program, the ghost of a Saturn V launches itself; our NASA heroes board a subsequent ghost ship, which takes them to the Moon and brings them back. What or which or who the ghost entity is never comes clear,

though one thing is certain: It's a very *dumb* ghost entity, given its propensity to dissolve whenever things are going well (because it's no longer needed, our heroes speculate). But to dissolve on worldwide TV, thus precipitating *another* public relations disaster, would hardly help the space program—a pretty obvious circumstance nobody works out (the ghost ship's passengers aren't any brighter than it is), so that a patently false tension *wracks our nerves* for 60 whole pages. I spend more than 60 words on the tale for two reasons: It occupies nearly a quarter of the anthology, and the fact that it won a Nebula gives one cause to ponder.

"The Flowers of Aulit Prison" by Nancy Kress (1996 *Asimov's*), one of her steel-grey dissections of alien cultures, gained the novelette award; and "Sister Emily's Lightship" by Jane Yolen (in *Starlight 1*, 1996, ed. Patrick Nielsen Hayden), a just slightly sweetened portrait of Emily Dickinson fairly near death, gained the short story award. Both tales rest easily within their respective authors' formidable tessituras; neither stands out in particular. They are good stories from very good authors. That they both won Nebulas shows neither bad taste nor daring. Willis also includes an excerpt from the winning novel, *The Moon and the Sun* (1997) by Vonda McIntyre, whose odd march-in-step prose rhythms—"The underbrush disappeared; the trees grew farther apart; no branches littered the ground. Hunters could ride headlong through this tame groomed forest."—do not benefit from excerpting, though they must surely be deliberate in the context of the book as a whole.

The Author Emeritus is Nelson S. Bond; Willis reprints "The Bookshop" (1941 *Blue Book*), a neat Slick Fantasy from the great days of that subgenre, a story deep in the bones of this reviewer—I'm pretty sure I read it in the 1940s, and know I read it much later in *Mr. Mergenthwirker's Lobbies* (coll. 1946)—and probably deep in the bones of anyone who read it when young. It is part of the fabric of the genre, and justly honored. The new Grand Master is Poul Anderson; Willis selects, from his hundreds of tales, "The Martyr" (1960 *F&SF*). For a reader in 1999 there are creakinesses to navigate—the scientific language is older than yesterday's newspaper, and the space opera backdrop lacks any rhetoric of complexity beyond the ken of the tale—but the surgical unfetteredness of its melancholy, after all these years, makes the heart ache for the days of sf. It is the kind of story—with its wrenching reversal-of-field ending, a conceptual breakthrough that implodes rather than opens outward—that seemed to readers like myself, 40 years ago, to lie at the inner heart of the sense of wonder.

The remaining stories in *Nebula Awards 33* are selected from various shortlists. "Itsy Bitsy Spider" by James Patrick Kelly (1997 *Asimov's*) neatly embeds family romance riffs into a politically correct take on the "Helen O'Loy" tradition. "The Crab Lice" by Gregory Feeley (in *Alternate Tyrants*, 1997, ed. Mike Resnick) draws a poison bead on the Alternate History retro gig; Feeley's aim is right on and gnarly. "Three Hearings on the Existence of Snakes in the Human Bloodstream" by James Alan Gardner (1997 *Asimov's*) inevitably falls short of its superb title, but draws another poison bead on the same subject, as the alternate world here proposed is grim and thin. "The Dead" by Michael Swanwick (in *Starlight 1*, 1996, ed. Patrick Nielsen Hayden) is absolutely brilliant: a dystopia, a horror story, an analysis of late-century sexuality, a parable, a black hole with scissorhands. And "The Elizabeth Complex" by Karen Joy Fowler (1996 *Crank!*) is a razor dance in the gender wars—and as you get deeper the scars more and more resemble graffiti.

There are as well two Rhysling Award poems, "Day Omega" by W. Gregory Stewart and "Spotting UFOs While Canning Tomatoes," by Terry A. Garey. Nothing much to say here. The Rhysling is not an SFWA award as such. Fifty percent of this year's recipients were not members of SFWA.

So far so good. The embarrassment that this anthology generates cannot be laid down to any one story, not even the Olton, a tale which was at least likable as it went on. So let us return to Connie Willis's Introduction, to the point where she says, without qualification, that the Nebulas are awarded to "the stories the science fiction writers themselves had decided were the best of the year."

Two points. One: Clearly it's not "the science fiction writers themselves" who award the Nebulas, but that caucus of the science fiction writers who are active members of SFWA. This may be so obvious that Willis needn't bother to make herself clear. Two: "The



stories” means “the stories.” Nowhere in Willis’s Introduction, or in any other explanatory notes anywhere in the volume, or in the Press Release accompanying the book, or in the wrapper copy, is there a hint that any restrictions apply. Any sf or fantasy story, by anyone, is eligible.

## II

The first thing that can be said is that—like most awards—the Nebulas are a crapshoot. The also-rans Willis prints are as good or better than the stories that won (she has no room, incidentally, to print a second novella, so the Olton story risks, in her pages, no invidious comparison.) This is embarrassing, but is something inherent in all awards.

The second thing that can be said is that—unlike the way other awards are run—stories deemed to have been published within the period of eligibility for any one year’s awards are so deemed according to an opaquely and tortuously complex system; those writers *who know how to operate that system* routinely manipulate its rules almost at will so as to position their offerings for a successful victory at the polls. But rule structures that are confusing to anyone but initiates are *always* designed for the benefit of precisely those initiates. They are not designed for anyone else. They are *meant* to exclude outsiders.

Let us be clear: the eligibility rules for the Nebula Awards are of such complexity, and are so arcanelly couched, as to be practicably operable only from within, by members of SFWA. These rules were not, in other words, designed for the benefit of the public at large, whose natural assumption—that retrospective awards are given, on a level-playing-field basis, to one or more out of a range of works published within a fixed and given period—must cause the sages of SFWA the occasional wry chuckle. Nor are these rules designed for the benefit of non-SFWA writers, whose access to the Byzantine innards of the eligibility protocols is necessarily partial.

The third thing that can be said is that exactly what one might expect does exactly happen. Awards which are touted (in the Press Release) as honoring “only the finest science fiction and fantasy,” are in effect restricted almost exclusively to—and exclusively honor—science fiction and fantasy written by members of SFWA. Of the 26 novels and stories short-listed for the current awards, *not one* was written by a non-SFWA member (I was fooled for a moment by Kate Elliott’s *King’s Dragon* [1997], until I realized that Kate Elliott, a name which does not appear in SFWA membership rolls, did not in fact exist; but that, as Alis Rasmussen which is “Kate Elliott’s” real name, she is, indeed, a member of the firm. Phew. Close one). All of which means, for those whose arithmetic is not strong, that only an SFWA member’s story could win an award this year.

The fourth thing to be said is that a familiar observation—that the more a system can be defined as closed, the more vulnerable that system is to manipulation—proves fatally true in the case of the astonishingly tasteless antics SFWA members in the know routinely force on fellow SFWA members, in their attempts to manipulate the outcome of the Nebula Awards. The eligibility period is routinely, and blatantly, operated to maximize chances of selection. Now that e-mail is almost universal, SFWA members routinely subject other SFWA members to floods of copy begging them to vote for their stories. SFWA members routinely nominate other SFWA members’ stories in the expectation that the favor will be reciprocated, for—astonishingly—those who nominate stories for Nebula Awards are *listed* as so doing, so that nominees can actually see who nominates them *and who doesn’t*, which is an absolutely guaranteed open door for the sleaziest of pressure tactics (look, you can see I nominated you; if you don’t nominate me in turn *I’ll know you didn’t* and *I sure won’t nominate you next year*). At least one writer of the current 26 has been known actually to *telephone* other writers he (or she) had previously nominated to ask them to return the favor.

Here is a topic for discussion on a panel at some convention, one like Readercon perhaps (held every July in Massachusetts) where writers and readers gather together to discuss the written word:

*That any story whose author is detected touting for its selection onto a Nebula Awards Final Ballot shall be deemed ineligible for the Award in question.*

All these abuses of good taste and art and ethic are human failings, certainly, and there is no excuse for them. But SFWA, as it is currently constituted, positively demands that they be committed, because abuses of this sort are occasioned by, and endemic to, closed shops. SFWA is a closed shop; the Nebulas are merchandise.

## III

There are rejoinders to this. “We do our best,” an SFWA initiate might respond, “but we can’t read *everything*.” “It just so happens,” one can hear another add, “that the best stories this year were in fact written only by SFWA members.”

Rejoinders of this sort are, in a sense, unanswerable. It may indeed be the case that every voting member of SFWA conscientiously attempted—and failed—to read everything eligible, after conscientiously working out the eligibility status of stories published by non-SFWA members ignorant of the steps that should be taken to make sure those stories were eligible. And it may be that only stories written by SFWA members passed muster.

I can’t myself attest to the virtue of this line of response—so far as stories, novelettes, and novellas are concerned—as my reading of fiction in shorter forms is too limited for me to make more than a disparaging guess.

But it is possible to look at the shortlist novels, and to see how they consort with the field of published novels as a whole: The Nebula Final Ballot consists of Lois McMaster Bujold’s *Memory* (1996); Kate Elliott’s *King’s Dragon* (1997); George R. R. Martin’s *A Game of Thrones* (1996); Jack McDevitt’s *Ancient Shores* (1996); Vonda N. McIntyre’s *The Moon and the Sun* (1997); Walter Jon Williams’s *City on Fire* (1996); and Connie Willis’s *Bellwether* (1996). Four of these books are dated 1996, two are dated 1997. As I do not know precisely how the protocols of eligibility were applied in each case (and very much doubt that any non-SFWA reader of *Nebula Awards 33* does, either), I will have to take a raw stab; I will mention a few novels of science fiction and fantasy of merit, published in 1996 and 1997 by authors who are not members of SFWA. I’m perfectly aware that many novels written by SFWA members also missed the shortlist; but suggest here, without statistical evidence at hand, that many of the SFWA authors not listed this year may have in fact been recognized in previous Nebula shortlists; I further suggest, without statistical evidence at hand, that very few if any non-SFWA authors not shortlisted this year and not themselves now ex-SFWA members were *ever* shortlisted. And, finally, I would argue that the failure of any—even *one*—of the following books to reach the shortlist is deeply peculiar.

So here is a list of some titles SFWA did not mention: Gill Alderman’s *Memory Theatre* (1996); Patricia Anthony’s *Cradle of Splendor* (1996) and *God’s Fire* (1997); Iain M. Banks’s *Excession* (1996); Stephen Baxter’s *Voyage* (1996) and *Titan* (1997); James P. Blaylock’s *Winter Tides* (1997); Roberto Calasso’s *Ka* (1996); Richard Calder’s *Dead Things* (1996); Orson Scott Card’s *Children of the Mind* (1996), *Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus* (1996) and *Treasure Box* (1996); Raphael Carter’s *The Fortunate Fall* (1996); Stepan Chapman’s *The Troika* (1997); Bradley Denton’s *Lunatics* (1996); Paul Di Filippo’s *Ciphers* (1997); Candas Jane Dorsey’s *Black Wine* (1997); J. R. Dunn’s *Days of Cain* (1997); Greg Egan’s *Diaspora* (1997); Steve Erickson’s *Amnesiascope* (1996); Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere* (1996); Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1997); William Gibson’s *Idoru* (1996); Molly Gloss’s *The Dazzle of Day* (1997); Richard Grant’s *Tex and Molly in the Afterlife* (1996) and *In the Land of Winter* (1997); M. John Harrison’s *Signs of Life* (1997); Mark Helprin’s *A City in Winter* (1996) and *The Veil of Snows* (1997); Russell Hoban’s *Fremder* (1996); Peter Høeg’s *The Woman and the Ape* (1996); Robert Holdstock’s *Ancient Echoes* (1996) and *Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn* (1997); Denis Johnson’s *Already Dead* (1997); Garry Kilworth’s *A Midsummer’s Nightmare* (1996); Stephen King’s *The Green Mile* (1996–97); William Kotzwinkle’s *The Bear Went over the Mountain* (1996); Brad Leithauser’s *The Friends of Freeland* (1997); Ian R. MacLeod’s *The Great Wheel* (1997); Paul J. McAuley’s *Child of the River* (1997); Michael Moorcock’s *The War Amongst the Angels* (1996); Jeff Noon’s *Automated Alice* (1996) and *Nymphmation* (1997); Anne Rice’s *Servants of the Bones* (1996); Mary Doria Russell’s *The Sparrow*



(1996); Jose Saramago's *Blindness* (trans 1997); Dan Simmons's *Endymion* (1996) and *The Rise of Endymion* (1997); Brian Stableford's *Salamander's Fire* (1996) and *Chimera's Cradle* (1997); Sheri S. Tepper's *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* (1996) and *The Family Tree* (1997); Kurt Vonnegut's *Timequake* (1997); Cherry Wilder's *Signs of Life* (1996); Tad Williams's *City of Golden Shadow* (1996); Jack Womack's *Let's Put the Future Behind Us* (1996); and Ronald Wright's *A Scientific Romance* (1997).

This list is very partial—it includes only books I happen to have in my own library—and may mislead in some particulars, as some of the titles I've chosen may have been ineligible for perfectly good and transparent reasons. In any case, it may be that some are not very good. Others, however, have won other awards. And at least some of these novels are—speaking gently—entirely as formidable as anything incorporated into SFWA's own list of “the best of the best. And what stories!”

So the embarrassment of *Nebula Awards 33* lies deep in the

### **Brute Orbits by George Zebrowski**

New York: HarperPrism, 1998; \$23.00 hc; 222 pages

reviewed by **Howard V. Hendrix**

*Brute Orbits* is a slim novel fat with speculative ideas about the role of crime and punishment in the shaping of societies and individual lives. If, however, you're hoping to find a lengthy and thorough delineation of criminal character (as Dostoevsky provides with Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, for instance) or an absurdist riff on society and bureaucracy (à la Kafka in *The Trial* and *The Penal Colony*), you won't find it here. This is a much more overtly philosophical meditation on society and its discontents—as if Plato had written his own *Penal Colony* as a companion piece to *The Republic*, and then Olaf Stapledon had revised and adapted the entire manuscript to his own liking.

This is not intended as a put-down of *Brute Orbits*, but instead to suggest the type of book it is. Zebrowski's novel is a fine piece of philosophical speculative fiction, a worthy successor in a noteworthy tradition that can be readily traced backward through Clarke to Stapledon and Wells. Given the novel's speculative richness, it is not surprising that the narrative voice at times becomes rather intrusive in laying out the exposition. Zebrowski partially overcomes this difficulty through the narrative device of the interviews/memoirs of Judge Overton, the Great Explainer who gives us the background to the story that is also very much a part of the story.

That background involves how it came about that Earth's spacefarers began capturing Earth-crossing asteroids as a safety precaution, then using convicts to mine those captured rocks, then imprisoning those convicts in the very rocks they'd mined and sending rocks and convicts on long (and eventually longer-than-life-sentence) orbits. The story proper involves the characters and societies that evolve on these prison worldlets, and what happens to those individuals and societies.

*Brute Orbits* is steeped in the history of the attempts by human societies to control the criminals which they (seemingly inevitably) breed. That history is not just Dostoevsky and Kafka, but also Friedman's *Crime and Punishment in American History*, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, and Viereck's *Men Into Beasts*—all of which Zebrowski cites. Zebrowski's novel is also informed by the popular history of Anglo-American prison systems: His hollowed asteroid prisons are flying Alcatrazes, British prisonships of great size and ingenuity. The eventual Convict Diaspora, in which the descendants of society's discontents become the foremost explorers and settlers of the high frontier, owes more than a little to the history of convict settlement in Australia.

One can disagree ideologically with the discussion of crime and punishment put forward in *Brute Orbits* (which I do) and yet still very much enjoy the novel (which I did). Personally I found the sociobiological determinism of many of the assumptions underlying the book to be too easy a way out—the cop-out of “genetic inevitability.”

This determinism can be seen not only in the book's all too often repeated sentiment of “Raise up the meek and they will abuse as well as anyone” but also in the idea that “social systems grow out of deep biology, not discussion.” Yet *Brute Orbits* itself points out that the

origins of the book, which inevitably stain its contents. On reading *Nebula Awards 33*, I feel embarrassed for its editor, who had a thankless task which she performed with good humor. And I feel embarrassed for its contributors, who must know that their work—forged in the immemorial silence, exile, and cunning of the artist's hard craft—did not triumph on an open field through the judgment of disinterested peers; that their work was, instead, given the wink by a cabal of hucksters.

And that it shows.

Is this what SFWA has always been? I am very convinced it is not. Is this what SFWA was founded to accomplish? I do not think Damon Knight and his peers thought they were founding a *booth*. Is this what we're all going to have to live with all the same?

Only if we continue to fail. ►

---

*John Clute lives in London, England.*

“runaway richness of human brain structure permits a level of self-awareness unknown to most animals. . . . We have replaced nature's system of species survival with our own self-directed way.” Admitting that human culture is in many ways post-biological yet still trying to blame its quirks primarily on biology is trying to have one's cake and eat it too. Once humans have technologies—including words and discussion—biology becomes less and less responsible for the overall shape of human behavior.

A bit more reliance on sociology and a bit less reliance on sociobiology might also have corrected another recurrent premise in *Brute Orbits*—namely the idea that the “middle class” is robust and growing and will be the dominant class of the near future. Most current statistics show that in fact the middle class—in actual monetary terms—is shrinking (even if something like ninety percent of Americans believe themselves to be “middle class”).

*Brute Orbits* also pushes the idea that the earliest humans were muscular predators when the best current evidence suggests that our earliest ancestors were more likely rather humble scavengers. The need to see our ancestors as predators is an example of what I think of as “cave bear romanticism”: the idea that muscular hominids charged in and evicted enormous cave bears from their lairs at spear point. The more likely scenario (though much less discussed in the paleontological and anthropological literature) is that our ancestors exploited an ursine weakness: Northern bears hibernate. Let's see: My buddies and I are little Neanders or CroMags with flint-tipped spears about to go up against a bear with big teeth, big claws, a bad attitude and a body mass as much as all of us combined. Our options are: A. Attack that bear while it's wide awake and suffer enormous losses before the few of us left alive limp away, or B. Wait until that huge bear goes into winter deep-sleep and *kill it while it's sleeping*. Option B is not particularly noble or romantic, but it makes a lot more sense—not only in terms of personal risk but also from the fact that we get the bear's cave as shelter for the winter, and we can drag big hunks of bear protein out to the freezer beyond the cave's mouth (where it won't go bad) and eat well for much of the rest of the winter.

That “runaway richness of the human brain structure” tends to confound romantic—or reductively sociobiological—attempts to understand human behavior, criminal or otherwise. That complexity and richness is evident in *Brute Orbits*—especially in its paradoxes and apparent contradictions. Zebrowski's meditation on human individual and social behavior (and misbehavior) gives full weight to the complexity of the issues it discusses, and still manages to tell a century-spanning story. Highly recommended for those readers who—like this reviewer—don't mind a heavy dose of philosophical speculation in their speculative fiction. ►

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## ***Fearful Symmetries: The Return of Nohar Rajasthan* by S. Andrew Swann**

New York: DAW, 1999; \$5.99 pb; 288 pages

reviewed by Russell Blackford

Here is the printed-page equivalent of an action movie: a novel as vivid as a cinema blockbuster loaded with high-budget special effects.

I feel some hesitation in reviewing *Fearful Symmetries* because it is the fourth book in a series with which I am not familiar, S. Andrew Swann's Moreau series. Some of the views that I've formed about Swann's writing might not be sustained if I read more of his work, but I am sufficiently struck by aspects of this novel to stick my neck out and make some fairly strong observations, hoping that I'm not being dangerously presumptuous.

Fourth book in a series or not, *Fearful Symmetries* is easy to read as a self-contained novel. I never felt the need for information that I sensed must be tucked away in an earlier volume of the series. Indeed, the setting and background events are absolutely, though unobtrusively, clear. The book is not especially original or ambitious, but it is very good for what it is, and a theme of this review is that Swann (evidently a pseudonym for one Steven Swiniarski) has impressed me. He is such a skillful thriller writer that I'm surprised not to have encountered his work or his reputation before. Judging by this volume, he deserves to be enormously successful. And yet, I don't feel especially inspired to track down the other books in the Moreau series. How to resolve the paradox?

To go back a step, the story is told exclusively from the viewpoint of Nohar Rajasthan, a "moreau" who is called out of his retirement as a private investigator. As their Wellsian name suggests, moreaus are genetically uplifted animals; they were developed as expendable military personnel for wars that took place early in the twenty-first century. It is now half a century later, perhaps about the year 2070, and the U.S. is beset by grave social problems involving the interaction of moreaus and humans (whom the moreaus refer to contemptuously as "pinks"). The analogy with contemporary racial tensions is too obvious to labor.

Nohar, the retired PI, is a highly intelligent bipedal tiger, eight or nine feet tall, immensely massive and strong, and able to revert to his elementary fighting and survival instincts when in a tight spot. He is now aging and wishes only to be rid of contact with humans and to forget the demons of his past. Despite his phenomenal abilities, he suffers the aftereffects of various old wounds to both his body and his emotions, including the psychic damage inflicted by unhappy relationships with his father and with two former lovers. When someone tries to kill him, this battered warrior is forced against his will from a hermit's cabin in the woods, and into the novel's action in a near-future Los Angeles. He spends much of the book fighting heavily-armed rogue military types, whose identity he attempts to uncover at the same time as he tries to locate his son and break the cycle of disastrous filial relations.

Since this is a detective story, it is especially important to hold back at least some of the plot twists, even though many of them are predictable. Moreover, *Fearful Symmetries* has all the clichés of the kind of cinema thriller that it so much resembles, including father-son reconciliation and characters coming to terms with their past mistakes and overcoming their own emotional problems. It also has the rhythm of an action flick, with violent fight or chase scenes occurring at frequent intervals and taking up many of the 280-odd pages. In a familiar cyberpunk style, the twenty-first-century world depicted is full of sinister technology and is also marked by ubiquitous urban decay. We gradually discover that the Bad Guys are conspiring to use biological weapons to exterminate the moreaus, and that information to this effect is contained on a hot "ramcard," which they are trying to keep secret.

H. G. Wells aside, where have we come across these ideas before? The plotline, separated out, has the appearance of being put together by a committee of Hollywood scriptwriters who were locked away for a month with a sampling of William Gibson's early work, a wide range of cyberpunk-inspired movies and texts, and perhaps a few works by C. J. Cherryh and Cordwainer Smith.

Tell me I'm wrong, but nothing about the story, let alone the book's packaging, suggests that S. Andrew Swann is a writer whose

interest is in developing science fiction as a literature of ideas. *Fearful Symmetries* is not the sort of book that will change anyone's life or win major awards. It is simply not ambitious or original enough in its ideas. The reason I would give a low priority to reading Swann's other books is that I have the impression they will be more of the same.

But, and it's quite a large "but," Swann has superb technical skills. Despite my comments about the derivative nature of the novel's thriller plot and emotional subplots, the particular details and variations that he comes up with are inventive and neat. More importantly, he has a style that makes the action leap off the page, as if he's filmed the whole thing in his mind and then managed to replay it for his audience. *Fearful Symmetries* conjures up pictures and experiences with startling power and consistency, though it is difficult to pick out a particular quotation to illustrate this, since the whole effect is so seamless and cumulative. Many sf writers who have more famous names and are more thematically ambitious could learn a great deal from Swann, not only about giving reality to a scene, but also about the smooth feeding of background to the reader.

He is so adept in these ways that it raises an interesting question about what he is going to do next. At this point he has seven novels under his belt. Four of these are in the Moreau series. The other three are in what is called the Hostile Takeover series, and are titled *Profiteer*, *Partisan*, and *Revolutionary*. It seems as if he has found a zone in which he is competent and comfortable. There is nothing wrong with that, but it would be more interesting to see what Swann could come up with if he attempted to introduce some less predictable and more complex ideas into his work. He is surely ready to break through to a new, less comfortable, level. I hope that he'll do this and that his publisher will encourage him, rather than demanding more of the same product. ▲

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### **Singular Interviews: Tom Purdom**

Second in an occasional series by Michael Swanwick

Tom Purdom has been writing science fiction since 1957. In recent years, after a long hiatus, he's published a number of quirky and involving stories in *Asimov's*. To those who know him personally, however, he's primarily renowned as one of the great conversationalists of our time, as is demonstrated by the following exchange, occasioned by my overhearing Tom explaining the early history of Philcon to a fan. It was a childish question, but more than redeemed by the grace of his response.

QUESTION: Tell us about that time that Jules Verne was Guest of Honor at Philcon.

ANSWER: He was invited to be Principal Speaker; we didn't have Guests of Honor back then, we had Principal Speakers. He couldn't make it, unfortunately, but he sent us a telegram saying—in French, of course—"What one man can imagine, another can do." The con committee gathered in a little room when it arrived and after it was read, we cheered. We were all excited about it because the telegraph was a new invention and so this was a big moment for us. ▲



# Delany's Fabulous, Formless Darkness

continued from page 1

more about Delany than I had six or seven years previously. I knew he was black (that single piece of information did more to explode my smugly complacent suburban white-boy notions of race in America than Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Muhammad Ali put together). I knew, too, that he was a husband, a father, and a gay man (which demolished a whole other set of assumptions). Yet somehow, I'd never put these facts together into a portrait of the artist as a human being. Ironically, it wasn't until I was artistically outed in East Lansing that I understood, not just intellectually, but viscerally, that I was not and never could be Samuel R. Delany. At that moment, with a helpful shove from mama-bird Budrys, I began to find my own way as a writer.

Well, okay, but so what? Don't all young readers of a certain sensitivity and ambition pass through a stage in which they perceive the craft of writing as a magical enterprise whose holy secrets are practiced and jealously guarded by an exalted priesthood they would give anything and everything to join? (If they only knew!) Why would I entertain for even one second the idea that my juvenile identification with Delany might be of the slightest interest to readers of a new edition of *The Einstein Intersection* (Wesleyan University Press, 1999, with a foreword by Neil Gaiman)?

Because I'm far from alone in having fallen under his spell, that's why. Nor am I the only writer of my generation whose continuing struggle toward the achievement of an authentic voice has meant breaking free of, and coming to terms with, Delany's influence. William Gibson, Elizabeth Hand, and Walter Mosley, among others, have written eloquently on the subject. And that is very much of interest. Because as Algis Budrys wrote in an appraisal of Delany that appeared long ago in a *Galaxy* far, far away: "The ability to produce this reaction in people is one of the commonly accepted and apparently valid appurtenances of genius."

There is no better place to look for the sources of that genius than *The Einstein Intersection*, Delany's first mature masterpiece, published in 1967 as war raged in Vietnam and the streets of American cities seethed with protest and riot and dreams of revolutionary change that hadn't yet gone sour. What can be said about 1967, the last year in which it really did seem possible that all we needed was love? The following were alive and kicking ass: Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Brian Jones. So were Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. That sores of losers, Richard M. Nixon, was scheming, to the secret dread of his own party, to challenge LBJ for the presidency. With Neil Armstrong's one small step two long years away, the Hugo Award for best novel went to Robert A. Heinlein for *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. In Paris, the poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida published an essay entitled *Of Grammatology*, which would, like it or not, become one of the seminal works of postmodern thought. And "a young spade writer" (groovy white folks talked like that in 1967!) named Samuel R. Delany turned 23. Oh yeah, and won two Nebula Awards—for best novel, *The Einstein Intersection*, and best short story, "Aye, and Gomorrah."

Two years earlier, Delany had embarked from New York on a grand tour that would take him, in the course of an eventful year, to Paris, Venice, Athens, Istanbul, and London . . . a quest whose object was the record of its own making transmuted into art: the subject of this essay, *The Einstein Intersection*. The title refers to the intersection of functions plotted on a graph of time: the point (a moment, a day, a year) at which a conception of the universe based on Einstein's theory of relativity or, rather, the principle of orderly investigation known as the scientific method, crosses swords with its own suprarational reflection, a principle articulated by Gödel and concerned with "the vaster realm beyond the limits Einstein had defined." Though Delany doesn't use the term, we might think of this latter principle, this way of thinking and talking about the world, as quantum-level reality, that Wonderland of paradox and spontaneous generation and extinction so beloved of those modern-day Zen masters, particle physicists, and their armchair acolytes.

This, then, is a novel about intersections: life and death, love and hate, stasis and change, male and female, society and the individual, gender and identity, dreams and reality, and so on. As such, what it's

really about is difference, a word Delany invests with a special slippery meaning:

Spider nodded and rapped his rough knuckles on the desk.

"Do you understand difference, Lobey?"

"I live in a different world, where many have it and many do not. I just discovered it in myself weeks ago. I know the world moves toward it with every pulse of the great rock and the great roll. But I don't understand it."

Through the eagerness on his drawn face Spider smiled. "In that you're like the rest of us. All any of us knows is what it is not."

Here's Lao-tzu on the same subject (from the Mitchell translation):

The tao that can be told  
is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named  
is not the eternal Name.

The unnamable is the eternally real.  
Naming is the origin  
of all particular things.

Naming—that is, language—differentiates and particularizes. But the true, ultimate difference is not what distinguishes things or ideas from each other. Rather, it's that which precedes them: the ineffable essence of things and names. There's difference, and then there's Difference. The former derives from the act of naming; the latter is always already beyond the grasp of words and grammars. The writing of difference, says Derrida, is the origin of the experience of time and space. Difference itself is the Void of endless becoming and dissolution, the maw of chaos and creation: a fabulous, formless darkness simultaneously a construct of language and its deconstruction.

Is it just me, or do these cryptic, paradoxical concepts give off a heavy whiff of the transcendent? Kinda smells like that old-time religion, doesn't it? Well, guess what: it is. Postmodernism's odiferous little secret shouldn't come as a surprise, though, for hasn't language always been magical, liturgical, as much in the ads, newspaper articles, and scientific or literary journals of today as in the spoken or grunted rituals of ten thousand years ago performed in lightless caverns or around flickering campfires? Those ur-words were no different than the smoke of the sacrifices they orchestrated and accompanied.

But (the objection might be made) we're, like, way more refined now! We're civilized, cultured people with cell phones and e-mail! Okay, maybe we've got tattoos and piercings and stuff, but that's just style, man! It don't signify any of that superstitious bullshit.

Ho-kay. Fine. Only seems to me that when the scalpel of language is used to pare away its own edge, when consciousness studies itself under its own electron microscope, then you'd best believe what's really going down behind the firewalls of irony, philosophy, and science is some seriously atavistic ju-ju.

Which is pretty much Delany's subject in the remarkable series of novels stretching from *Babel-17* to *Dhalgren*. In *Babel-17*, Delany wrote about an invented language that disrupted consciousness and communications systems. Whoever successfully decoded that language would be able to repair and enhance those systems, whether organic or mechanical . . . sort of like how, in fairy tales, knowledge of the true names of things and people confers magical power over them. Rydra Wong's quest to translate Babel-17 drives the novel. But it's more than a mere Maguffin: Babel-17 (along with related linguistic theories and speculations) permeates the text on a multitude of levels, from Delany's choice of metaphors to the personalities and histories of his characters. Even in a field where it's almost impossible to throw a rock without striking a prodigy (try it; it's fun!), Delany's achievement was immediately recognized as extraordinary; the book shared the 1966 Nebula with *Flowers for Algernon*. Yet while the language of Babel-17 (and of *Babel-17*, for that matter) was a major advance into uncharted territories of Difference, Delany must have known he had to go further still if he wanted to find the grail of the language of



Difference. Babel-17, for all its power, is not that language. It can be learned, understood, manipulated. As such it remains, in the end, a language of difference, not Difference.

But how can anybody write about (much less *in*) a language that cannot be written about, a protean language that shapes us while wriggling away from all our attempts to set it down in words or symbols or even to capture it fleetingly in speech? A language underlying every aspect of existence, yet impossible to touch or see or represent other than by metaphors invalidated by the act of their own making?

*The Einstein Intersection* is Delany's solution to this technical and existential problem (which he will address with still greater sophistication and daring in *Nova* and *Dhalgren*). The book is autobiographical in an obvious sense; that is, Lobey's quest to wrest Friza away from Kid Death parallels Delany's grand tour. But every autobiography is also the tale of its own genesis: how it came to write itself, to find the unique language of its writing. Delany's breakthrough in *The Einstein Intersection* is his mastery of a style that approximates, more closely than any other, the language of Difference. It does so by drawing upon what we might call the fossils or, following Derrida, the traces of that language preserved in things, ideas, names: ghostly echoes of their lost origins in the realm of Difference. In other words, mythology.

Now there are many myths swimming about in *The Einstein Intersection*. There are the most ancient myths we know: from the Greeks and the Egyptians, and from the Bible. There are mythic figures of more recent vintage like Billy the Kid, the Beatles, Jean Harlow . . . all of whom can be seen as variations on a theme (or themes), as if myths, like men, evolve in random ways, toward unforeseen and unforeseeable ends. But the main mythic structure is simple and basic. It is the quest of Orpheus for Eurydice. We all know the tale of how Orpheus braved the terrors of Tartarus to win back his dead bride, the extraordinary beauty of his music lulling Cerberus to sleep and moving grim Hades himself to release the shade of the girl on condition that Orpheus walk out of Hell without glancing back to make sure Eurydice is following . . . which of course he fails (duh!) to do. It's that old story of boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets torn apart by Maenads. But another tradition makes Orpheus a prophet, a hero or demigod who founds a religion and records its sacred precepts in verses for the guidance of future generations before being torn to pieces as above—here his death has a redemptive power not unlike that of Jesus's crucifixion (actually it's the other way around). This Orpheus, again, like his mythic descendant Jesus, may have evolved from memories and stories constellating around a historically living man. At any rate, the religion associated with Orpheus was far from monolithic in its theology. Little is known about Orphic rituals today aside from an apparent influence on Plato's thought and certain affinities with the rituals of mystery religions practiced in honor of Demeter and Dionysos (rituals which are themselves exceedingly obscure, though we do know they involved ecstatic, orgiastic practices and communicated a profound experience of death and rebirth). Delany is keenly aware of both traditions, mingling them in the character and the exploits of his Orpheus and alter-ego, Lo Lobey.

Lo Lobey and every other character in *The Einstein Intersection* (save one) is an alien walking a far-future Earth in a more-or-less human form, with more-or-less human genes, long after "humans had gone somewhere else, to no world in this continuum." The speaker, a multiarmed man named Spider who serves as a guide of sorts for Lobey, continues: "We came, took their bodies, their souls, both husks abandoned here for any wanderer's taking."

The quotations that precede each chapter of *Intersection*, which almost seem to have been chosen at random, are the fragments of what humanity has left behind, detritus the aliens are simultaneously trying to inhabit and put back together, their method as much indebted to Frankenstein as Einstein. Delany also includes selections from the journal he kept during the writing of *Intersection* in which we find reflections on its autobiographical resonances, questions of plot and character, and the like. It all goes into the simmering humanary stew the aliens have come to sample.

Come from where? Everywhere. Nowhere.

Why? Well, let's just say that the reason, if there ever was a reason, has been lost. When the aliens put on human bodies, they clothe themselves as well in human myths and dreams and memories. They

become something . . . different.

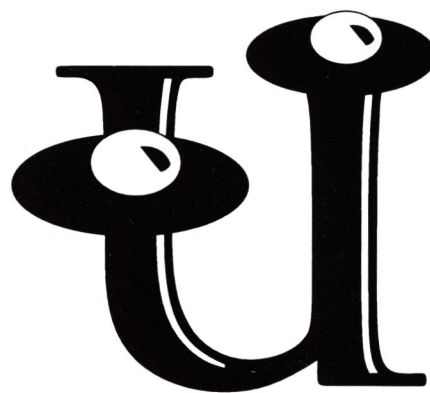
That difference is pursued by some but feared by most, just as with humans.

But it's irreversible. And ongoing. Little by little, difference is increasing as the aliens diverge further from the human template. It seems our bodies and souls aren't exactly a perfect fit for the incorporeal energies of the aliens! Alterations are spontaneously taking place, beyond their control. Something new is evolving from the marriage of alien and human. It manifests itself in a variety of mutations and malformations. Some are physical, like Spider's extra limbs and Lobey's feet with their semi-opposable big toes. Others are psychic in nature, like Friza's telekinetic abilities and Lobey's musical ESP. The worst afflicted are kept in cages where their faulty DNA cannot further pollute a gene pool already damaged by radiation. But those like Lobey, whose differences are not immediately apparent or, if apparent, don't significantly impair functionality, are given a provisional "human" status categorized by sex. Males are granted the honorific "Lo," while females are called "La." There is as well a third gender (a recurring, ever-expanding theme in Delany's work) distinguished by "Le."

What happens is this: Friza dies. Suddenly. Inexplicably.

Lobey mourns . . . then learns who killed her.

Kid Death. Pale-skinned, red-haired, an avatar of Billy the Kid by way of Lucifer, with a dash of Dracula thrown in for good measure, Kid Death hates and fears difference even though or because he is different himself. He has the teeth and gills of a shark. And his mind can swim free of his body to see through the eyes of others. He has the power to change whatever his mind perceives. He can kill at a distance . . . and then bring his victim back to life. He can do anything . . . except create



Michael Swanwick  
**U is for UFO**

The air in the habitats the aliens prepare for their abductees is always stale and invariably smells of old hair oil. Karl knows. He's been in enough of them in his time.

The road Karl finds himself standing by afterwards is usually dusty and never well-traveled. It takes him hours to hitch a ride back into town.

The officials Karl deals with when he goes to report the incident are, as usual, jovial and sarcastic. "Congratulations," Colonel Edwards says. "This makes an even fifty times you've been carried off in a UFO—if you'd given us some notice, I'd've baked you a cake." He thrusts his face into Karl's and smirks.

Something ruptures within Karl then. Maybe it's the accumulated weight of humiliation. All those rectal probes take their toll on a man. Whatever the cause, he convulsively seizes the Colonel's face in both hands and yanks.

It comes off with a pop.

Underneath is the triangular, mushroom-pale visage of an alien. Its eyes open wide. It bares its teeth in an unearthly giggle, hits a hidden teleportation device, twinkles, and is gone.

Karl just stands there. Not a muscle moves in all his face. If he lives to be a hundred, he'll never understand the aliens' sense of humor. ▶



something from nothing. Remember the two functions in the graph, one describing an Einsteinian, the other a Gödelian, discourse? Well, let's label the curve of relativity and rationality Kid Death. Kid Death seeks out and destroys Difference. He kills his victims. How? By naming them. Every time we name something, we kill all the possibilities of what it could have been just as, in Schrödinger's famous thought experiment, the cat is simultaneously dead and alive in its box . . . until we open the lid and look. It doesn't matter what we find in that box, a living cat or a dead cat; simply by looking we've collapsed the probabilities into one. We've given a name to what had been unnamable, shined a light into the scary darkness of Difference and filled it up with the differences of this thing and that thing, all so that we don't have to be so freaked out about being alive.

So if Kid Death (and the myths he embodies) is represented by one curve, who is represented by the other?

Not Lobey, though armed with his sword that is also a flute, an instrument of death and music, he goes after Kid Death to force him to resurrect Friza.

No, the other curve is Green-eye. Green-eye is your basic Jesus archetype, the god/man killed and reborn in harmony with the cycle of the seasons and the harvests. Born of woman, Green-eye had no father. His mother quickened her own egg. Self-generated, a product of parthogenesis, Green-eye is immune to Kid Death's power, which is why Kid Death hates and fears him. Green-eye can do the one thing Kid cannot: create something from nothing.

What of Lobey then? Lobey is the point of intersection where Kid

Death and Green-eye cross paths. His music is the sound of that collision. It is wordless, nameless, like the Difference of Green-eye... yet it is a language like the differences of Kid Death. It gives Lobey a share of both their powers and the ability to choose between them.

And Delany, who is also Lobey, shares in those powers and choices as well. In the final lines of *The Einstein Intersection*, Lobey speaks to Spider of his future:

In my village there was a man who grew dissatisfied. So he left this world, worked for a while on the moon, on the outer planets, then on worlds that were stars and stars away. I might go there.

Which is exactly where Delany went in *Nova*, his next novel. And in *Dhalgren*, his masterpiece (at least so far), Delany came down to Earth again. More than any other writer I know, Delany is obsessed with language and its shaping and distorting power, its power to create and to kill, a power present in all the forms of cultural discourse but perhaps nowhere with such primal clarity as in myths, those traces of an abiding Difference that utters all we are. Delany's enduring achievement in *The Einstein Intersection* was to tap into those traces as never before, fashioning from fragments of myth, shards of poetry and personal experience, a style of incantatory power as affecting, and transcendent, as the music of Orpheus. ►

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Paul Witcover lives in New York City.

## Susan Palwick Light and Shadow: Family, Pulp Fiction, and the West

My grandfather, Jerome Rozen, was a connoisseur of light. When my mother was a little girl, it drove her crazy; both of her parents were artists, and they could spend hours rhapsodizing over a slant of sunlight. Jerome was still like that during my own childhood. I never knew my grandmother, who died in a car accident when my mother was twelve, but Jerome and his second wife, another artist, still lived in the house where my mother had grown up, and they still talked about light. Once I asked Jerome what it had been like to be in the infantry during World War I, and he told me how beautiful the light had been over the fields in France. He'd never forgotten it, he said. If he remembered anything else about the war, he kept it to himself.

We lived in New Jersey, which wasn't much like France. It also wasn't much like Flagstaff, Arizona, where Jerome and his twin brother George, born in Chicago in 1895, had grown up. After World War I, the twins went to the Art Institute of Chicago, where they met their wives, and then they moved East, where there was more work for commercial artists. Jerome's first steady account was with Street & Smith, who published magazines like *The Shadow* and *The Mysterious Wu Fang*. He painted several *Shadow* covers before giving the account to George; he also painted at least one cover for *Boy's Life*, although that was probably later in his career. He penned magazine illustrations and painted billboards for Mailpouch Tobacco and the Pennsylvania Railroad. Many of the billboards had a Western flavor, with lots of horses and cowboys. Jerome missed horses, although I discovered this only as an adult.

Arizona was only a vague blur to me when I was a kid; Jerome still owned property near Flagstaff, and he made fairly frequent trips back West, but I'd never been there, and it didn't mean much to me. I found Jerome's attic far more interesting. By the late '60s, commercial art had long been eclipsed by photography; Jerome now made his living from real estate rather than painting, but he still had a wonderful attic, full of studio props and costumes, including the famous black fedora worn by artists' models who posed as the Shadow. That attic was heaven for a kid, especially one like me, fascinated by spaceships and other worlds. I didn't yet know that the science-fiction stories I loved were the direct descendants of those early pulps, but I thought the Shadow was pretty cool. Jerome's attitude was one of affectionate dismissal; to him, the Shadow had just been a job.

It became a job again in the early '80s, when two art collectors commissioned Jerome to paint full-sized copies of George's *Shadow* covers. (George had died in the '70s.) This mystified Jerome, who didn't understand why anyone would be interested in these old images, but he enjoyed the work. Now, when my mother and I went to his house for our Saturday visits, we often found him in the garage, fussing over some canvas.

I loved watching Jerome work, especially since, over the years, it had gotten harder for me to find things to talk about with him. He hadn't gotten past eighth grade: Algebra was a mystery to him, and computers remained sheer nonsense no matter how often I tried to explain them. ("How can you give a computer a command? It doesn't understand anything. It's just a box with wires inside!") He couldn't fathom my academic interests or my office jobs doing word processing, but when I told him that I was writing science-fiction stories and trying to sell them, he understood. "You just keep at it, honey. Don't give up." He often told me how he'd pounded the pavement with his portfolio, day after weary day, until finally Street & Smith liked what they saw and asked him to paint some magazine covers.

By 1984, when my first story was published in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, I understood that much of the kinship I felt with Jerome came from our shared pulp background. Three incidents reinforced this connection. The first was being introduced, by David Hartwell, to Richard Powers. I mentioned that my grandfather and his brother had painted some of the original *Shadow* covers, and Richard said promptly, "That would make you a Rozen." I must have looked astonished, because Richard smiled and went on. "George and Jerome were two of the major American illustrators of their generation, you know. People who know their work rank them with Norman Rockwell and the Wyeths."

I was impressed and moved, but also a little skeptical. *Rockwell?* Rockwell was all over the place; I'd never seen Jerome's work outside his garage, let alone on calendars. And then one day my mother handed me the latest issue of *Saturday Review* and said, "They have this new feature called 'A Writer's Desk.' It's just a photograph of where someone writes, but this month it's a science-fiction writer, so I thought you might be interested."

I opened the magazine. The desk belonged to Philip José Farmer,



who was more famous than I had any hope of ever being, and above it hung a familiar image sporting a black fedora. I squinted. "Mom, look! That's one of Jerome's new *Shadow* paintings! We watched him working on that in the garage!"

I can't remember if we showed the photograph to Jerome, although we must have, if he was still alive. Not until his funeral, in 1987, did I learn how Philip José Farmer had acquired the canvas. As I stood talking to a cousin, my mother came over and grabbed my arm. "Susan, you have to meet these people. They go to science-fiction conventions!"

"These people," it turned out, were Tony and Adrienne Tollin, the collectors who'd been buying the new paintings from Jerome and then selling them to collectors like Farmer. (They told me that Harlan Ellison owned two.) When I introduced myself, Tony said, "Yes, Jerome told us he had a granddaughter who was a science-fiction writer." Jerome had been invited to be Guest of Honor at a comic-book convention; he'd had to decline for health reasons, but he'd asked Tony to give a short speech for him, and the speech had mentioned me.

Jerome had never told me this, and I'd never realized that he saw the same connections I did between our work. In my sorrow over his death, I clung to that conversation with the Tollins. My writing wasn't just the baffling, slightly comic hobby it seemed to friends and relatives who didn't share my love of science fiction; it was part of a family legacy Jerome had begun.

That legacy has now taken another form, because in 1997 I moved West, to Reno, into a landscape very similar to the one where Jerome grew up. I knew very little about Jerome's childhood in Arizona until I was in my mid-twenties, when a bad fall put him in the hospital for a month. Delirious with fever, able to remember only the distant past, he spent my daily visits telling me about the pet coyote he and George had kept in the backyard, about how their mother wouldn't let them go into town on Saturday nights because of the shootouts, about how much he missed horses. As a teenager, he'd saved a group of horses from a barn fire. He fought his way through the smoke, led each terrified animal to safety, and then went back in again. He saved all of them. It was the proudest moment of his life, he told me.

Listening to him in the hospital, I realized how homesick he'd been for years. And when I moved to Reno after thirty-six years in the East, reversing the family migration, I discovered how homesick I, too, had been for the West, for this place I'd never even seen. Living in New York and New Jersey, I'd become starved for space and air and sky. I love the smell of sagebrush; I love the colors of the Nevada landscape, the way the mountains change hue depending on the time of day. Often I'll exclaim, as my husband and I come around some bend in the road, "Oh, look at that! Look at the *light*!"

When my mother visits, it drives her crazy. ▲

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*Susan Palwick lives in Reno, Nevada.*

## Kevin J. Anderson Classically Speaking

When I was a young science fiction fan and a wannabe sf writer, my ambition was to read all the classics in the field. The genre was small enough that my boundaries encompassed not only science fiction, but fantasy and supernatural horror as well.

Needless to say, I grew out of that ambition through sheer exhaustion.

A few years ago, Easton Press asked me to write an introduction to one of the volumes in their leather-bound Classics of Science Fiction series, a novel I had not yet read. This was the incentive I needed to check another book off of my long-abandoned classics list.

While I enjoyed the novel, convinced that it must have been innovative in its time, I was left with the nagging suspicion that if the same book were published today, it would cause no stir whatsoever. In fact, it would probably appear without much notice at all and then quietly go out of print.

And this is a classic of science fiction I'm talking about here.

When speaking to one of my editors, someone who's been in the business a long time, I brought up the subject. I asked: "If this novel were published today, do you think it would win awards or become a classic . . . or would it vanish without a trace?" The editor paused a moment, then said with absolute conviction, "It would vanish without a trace."

I'd been afraid that was going to be the answer.

That led me to my next soul-searching question: What does it take these days to write a classic of science fiction? A book that will truly endure, that will be read by a majority of the sf audience?

As science-fiction writers, we keep crafting our stories, doing our best work, publishing book after book after book in hopes that something will catch on. But with the changing nature of the publishing world, with the sheer number of titles clamoring for every reader's attention, it is becoming harder and harder even to be noticed above the background noise.

Back in the 1950s and '60s—when giants walked the Earth—the science-fiction field was small enough that a diligent reader truly could pick up every worthwhile novel. Before his death in 1987, Terry Carr claimed that he read every science-fiction book published each calendar year, but at the end of his life even he had given up, saying it was an impossible task.

It was much easier to gain a dedicated readership when you

wrote the best book out of a hundred. According to the latest *Locus* numbers, though, there were almost two thousand genre books published last year. To be in the top one percent of that, you write a better book than 1,940 others. Tough competition.

In the late 1960s, it was not unreasonable to expect that a fan would read the sf classic *Dune* and then turn around and read the fantasy classic, *The Lord of the Rings*. In the 1990s, it seems unlikely that the fan who grabs Kim Stanley Robinson's *Blue Mars* will also be first in line for the newest Robert Jordan novel. The field is just too huge, with numerous subcategories.

It's a fool's dream to want to go back to the days when the genre was minuscule and insignificant in the publishing world, when all the fans could get together in somebody's living room for a world science-fiction convention. In its good old days, science fiction was like a private gentlemen's club, an elite group of readers with specific tastes different from those of the rest of the world.

Now the genre has become more like the Teamsters, a group so vast and with so many subsets and special interests that no one can know everybody else. Fans can't even keep up with all of the authors, much less with each other.

I'm not saying that there won't be any other classics of science fiction, just that the playing field is getting harder and harder. I suspect it was easier to win a gold medal in the 1890 Olympics than in the 1990 Olympics.

Only time will tell, but a handful of books stick out in my mind as worthy candidates—Dan Simmon's *Hyperion* novels, Stan Robinson's Mars books, Scott Card's Ender series, Vernor Vinge's *A Fire upon the Deep*. Those novels deserve to be read and reread over the years (I certainly plan to), and I'm sure the future has plenty of surprises in store for us.

As the field expands continually, classics are more likely to appear in specific subgenres rather than in the genre as a whole. There will be classics of hard science fiction, classics of fat fantasy, classics of supernatural horror. As science fiction grows and becomes more and more mainstream, the range gets wider and broader.

However, if that's the price we have to pay for the overall acceptance and popularity of our once-maligned genre, then in my opinion it's worth every bit of the sacrifice. ▲



## **Standing Wave by Howard V. Hendrix**

New York: Ace, September 1998, \$6.50pb; 386 pages

reviewed by **Brian Stableford**



I ought to begin this review by confessing that I read *Standing Wave* without having read Howard Hendrix's previous novel, *Lightpaths*, to which it is presumably a sequel. I am sorry about this, partly because the sin of omission may have so comprehensively spoiled my chances of making sense of *Standing Wave* that the following comments might be ludicrously misguided, but mainly because the passages of *Standing Wave* which appear to be summarizing *Lightpaths* make it sound rather interesting and strongly imply that its climax was almost coherent. I say "almost" because the prologue which apparently summarizes the climax of *Lightpaths* does seem to me to be a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic. I dare not attempt to estimate by how many sandwiches its following 384 pages seem to fall short of an intellectual banquet, but if one were to imagine them removed by an entirely arbitrary but aesthetically nifty timeslip (which is the kind of thing that Howard Hendrix is not unprepared to do for dramatic effect), Jesus could probably have catered for five million instead of five thousand.

I cannot remember who it was who coined the term "kitchen sink novel" to describe a narrative into which the author gleefully throws everything, but I hope that I might be forgiven for borrowing it without due acknowledgement, because *Standing Wave* is the kitchen sink novel to end all kitchen sink novels, at least for the time being. This is its great strength, because you certainly won't find another sf novel with quite as much meat in it as this one, and also its great weakness, because you probably won't find one anywhere near as difficult to chew.

*Standing Wave* has more in it than all previous kitchen sink novels because we have recently heaped up so many speculations about life, the universe, and everything—especially everything—that yesterday's offerings now seem conspicuously half-full. Howard Hendrix is not only passably familiar with the entire spectrum of contemporary speculations in biology, neurophysiology, information technology, cosmology, mathematics, music, and so on; he also has an opinion about it and a theory about how the whole shebang fits together. If I read the prologue right, *Lightpaths* must have proceeded by measured degrees to the final revelation that such a unified vision might be

possible; being an authentically science-fictional sequel *Standing Wave* has to progress to the next order of magnitude by spelling it out. This is heroic, not merely because it is impossible, but because it requires narrative contortions of a kind which clot the text with an extremely rich and ill-assorted patchwork of opinionated info-dumps which reduce the procession of the plot to a pace that even a snail might consider labored.

The main thread of *Standing Wave*'s plot concerns the investigation of a series of grisly murderous assaults launched from within the "infosphere." This thread eventually becomes entangled with another, which tracks the exploits of an undercover agent for the fundamentalistically inclined Christian States of America. There are three other substantial story threads, but they exert no significant narrative tension and cannot really be regarded as having plots; their only purpose is to fill in background and to provide an ideative foundation of sorts for the climax, whose magnitude renders trivial questions of who was killing whom, why, and whether religious fundamentalists are all vicious dickheads with shit for brains entirely irrelevant.

One could, I suppose, regard the eventual culmination of all five of *Standing Wave*'s main story threads as a kind of macroplot, but the only consequence of doing that would be to reveal that when all the Tiplerian revisionism is sensibly weighed in the balance, modern science fiction still only has one macroplot to play with and it is still *Childhood's End* and still incoherent (perhaps necessarily so). Borrowing the Mad Mind from *The City and the Stars* does provide the aforesaid macroplot with a complicating bogeyman but serves no other purpose. In spite of these reservations, however, I unhesitatingly recommend *Standing Wave* as a book worth buying, reading and repeatedly chewing over. Even if its food for thought does turn out to have far less nutritional value than it pretends, with very little compensation in the way of gourmet taste sensations, it really is trying to push back the frontiers of the imagination—and who but a fool could possibly condemn a book for being too intellectually ambitious for its own good? ▲

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*Brian Stableford lives in Reading in the UK.*

## **Standing Wave by Howard V. Hendrix**

New York: Ace Books, 1998; \$6.50 pb; 386 pages

reviewed by **Greg L. Johnson**



Growing up, as I did, as the only person I knew who read science fiction, I often found it necessary to try and explain to people why I was reading that stuff. "Literature of ideas" is a phrase that always sounded good, and in a few cases it was even true. Howard V. Hendrix is a writer for whom the phrase has real meaning. *Standing Wave* is a book that revels in its ideas. History, physics, biology, hallucinogenic mushrooms, disappearing and reappearing mountains, and vast galactic intelligences are all interwoven in an almost overwhelming mix of speculation. As a sheer display of Hendrix's imagination and knowledge, *Standing Wave* is a solid success. Whether or not the book succeeds as a novel is more problematic.

*Standing Wave* is a sequel of sorts to *Lightpaths*, Hendrix's previous novel. *Lightpaths*—a novel that is, if anything, even more dense with ideas than *Standing Wave*—is set in an orbiting space colony whose inhabitants are visionary utopians. It consists mainly of discussions among the various characters regarding their own theories on what constitutes the perfect society and how to fix the many problems of those people living on earth. What story there is in *Lightpaths* concerns the development of an artificial intelligence in the High Orbital Manufactured Environment, HOME. Earth nations perceive the AI as a threat and their response provides what little dramatic tension there is in the story.

The problem with *Lightpaths* isn't that the ideas aren't provocative; almost every page presents you with something that is worth stopping

and thinking about. The problem lies with the serious nature of the characters. I've rarely read a book in which all the characters so completely lacked a sense of humor. Even the ostensibly satirical rock band, Möbius Caduceus, comes off as ponderous and self-important. Instead of the wit and brevity of someone like John Lennon, we get what sounds like the most pretentious and mannered art-rock band this side of Kansas.

*Standing Wave* is more promising from the very beginning. There are actually jokes in the first paragraph of the prologue. And both the story and setting of *Standing Wave* are more expansive than *Lightpaths*. The story, in part a continuation of *Lightpaths*, grows as the setting shifts from Ireland to South American jungles to a balkanized U.S. and finally back into near-Earth orbit.

At almost the same time as the events that ended *Lightpaths*, a phenomenon known as the Light affects people near and on the Earth. The Light is seemingly a consciousness-raising event, though the effect is different on different individuals. The Light leaves Mei-Ling Magnus with a growing fascination with waves and mazes. Seeking peace and seclusion, she is yanked back to the rest of the world when she is called on to investigate a series of grisly deaths which may be related to the fact that the victims were online at the time, and which may also be related to the Light.

For Aleck McAleister, the Light is little more than a blip in his college student routine. Working nights as the attendant for a dead



man whose brain is being used as an organic computer, Aleck, his roommate, and others discover there are interesting images coming out of the dead man's brain.

Ray Dundas is a fundamentalist Christian whose resolve to do what is necessary is only heightened by experiencing the Light. His part of the story gives the book its element of action and suspense, and Ray's fanaticism provides a good counterpoint to the idealists of HOME, whose convictions are just as strong, but who are not nearly as violent in their attempts to communicate those beliefs.

Meanwhile, two of the characters from *Lightpaths*, Paul Latkin and Roger Cortland, are hiking through the rain forest in search of a mountain that is rumored to have reappeared in the jungle. They find Latkin's sister, Jacinta, and become reacquainted with a mushroom that contains a "fungal symbiont" (which will link many of the events in *Standing Wave*). Jacinta also has an interesting tale to tell of where she, the mountain, and its other inhabitants have been. Her story adds an element of mysticism and mystery to the book. As one character explains, "trying to understand the universe through a physical approach alone is like taking a tour through the ruins of a great ancient cathedral with a structural engineer as your only guide."

In this review, I can really only hint at the complexity of thought that is displayed in *Standing Wave*. A good part of the reason is the amount of research time it would take to check out all the references Hendrix makes. Suffice it to say that the book is every bit as idea-dense as its predecessor, displaying a wide range of knowledge and speculation from history to science, philosophy, and religion. But what makes *Standing Wave* a better novel is the greater attention to character and story development, along with the occasional use of humor.

An adventure subplot and bits like a funny *Star Trek* parody do not detract from the discussion of the serious ideas that Hendrix wants

to get across. By pulling the reader in and providing a reason to care about what the characters think, the story and humor actually make the ideas more effective. A good example is the scene in which Aleck and his friends try the hallucinogenic mushroom. The writing is very human, serious, warm, and a bit comic all at the same time. It builds empathy for the characters and makes their ideas all the more interesting.

The endings of the two novels illustrate this well. In *Lightpaths*, the characters are so sure of themselves and so serene in their convictions that they never become excited, disturbed, or even bothered by what's going on around them. This is where the characters' lack of humor comes in. An inability to make fun of your own pretensions is related to a lack of self-criticism and doubt. Doubt in characters' minds increases dramatic tension and helps the reader identify with the characters. Characters who never doubt themselves and aren't emotionally involved in events are difficult for the reader to empathize with. (A minor character even comments on the lack of excitement on the part of the others.) The result is an ending so emotionally flat that it doesn't even rise to the level of anti-climax.

The contrast with *Standing Wave* is striking. Though many of the characters from *Lightpaths* are reintroduced by the end, their ideas are now supported by a story. And characters like Mei-Ling Magnus and Brandi Valeriano have had difficulties and doubts along the way, enough for us to care about what happens to them in the end. *Standing Wave* aims for transcendence in its last pages, an effect that has characterized some of the best sf ever written, from *Childhood's End* to *Blood Music*. *Standing Wave* is not quite up to those two examples, but it does present a wide-ranging intellectual curiosity, along with just enough story, empathy, and humor to keep the reader engaged. ▲

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### **The Gift by Patrick O'Leary**

New York: Tor Books, 1997; \$22.95 hc/\$13.95 tpb; 288 pages

reviewed by Candas Jane Dorsey

Spoiler warning: this is a positive review—I think. It also quotes the most powerful section of the book. But it starts out rough.

It isn't often that a book really annoys me, and more than that, repels me in that same way that I felt repelled watching *Blue Velvet*, for instance. And I don't usually start reading with a chip on my shoulder about anything, including—despite my recent tenure as a Tiptree Award judge—gender issues.

True, I can get annoyed by bad writing, and dull plots, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about that skin-crawly irritation that comes of reading something that I think is actively bad for people, like second-hand cigar smoke in elevators.

However, when I first read *The Gift* by Patrick O'Leary I was annoyed and repelled.

*The Gift* is a fantasy novel that on the surface seems not much different from many high-end good-versus-evil fantasies set in low-tech, high-magic kingdoms where the prince and the commoner lad must fight the evil wizard. It has a classy cover painting by Thomas Canty; it's published by Tor with David Hartwell as its editor, which double-whammy is—and despite who published my novel recently, and despite the venue of this review, I will still venture to say this—one of the best recommendations for intelligent readers these days. Imagine how disappointed I was when I discovered that the book was setting my teeth on edge in a serious, dentally dangerous way.

Very soon in my reading I was tempted to throw the book across the room, something I haven't done since reading Paul Theroux's *Kingdom by the Sea*, though for different reasons. Theroux's book was just condescending; *The Gift* seemed full of matter that cued me as a reader to an actively misogynist, heterosexist, and homosocial worldview; seemed more than usual to trigger those gender-conscious reflexes that have been grafted intellectually onto my experience and that had been exercised by my early Tiptree reading. The only reason it didn't fly repeatedly was that I'd made a commitment to review it. I had the book for months, forcing myself through it bit by teeth-gritting bit. Finally I reached the end and considered calling the editors to say, "Look, I hate this book so badly that you might want

to give it to someone else." I would have but for a chance event.

Just before that moment, I read a review which called the book "feminist." Say what?

So I went back for the second reading, armed with the question that incredible dichotomy left me: how could a feminist book read as misogynist, or how could a misogynist book be read as feminist?

This time I kept a list, starting with the c(l)ues that had turned me off, and here beside me as I write I have a whole list of them, by page number—the page where the mad king says "The women think so much nothing it's painful." The page where the abusive Book Tender says sarcastically, "How wonderful a woman's mind. . . ." The page where women's magic is described as necessarily of a lesser rank compared with men's, the page where the spirit of the wood comments on the almost-human nature and bumpy chest of the one woman he ever saw: "strange creatures—make the damndest noises—" but as I listed them, I began to realize that there was another list to make, comprising the clues and cues I had *missed*, cues which referred to the ways men treat women badly and labeled the treatment wrong. Oh, I had *read* these bits all right, and even *noticed* some of them, but somehow they did not tip the balance the first time around. Why not? I began to actually get intrigued. . . .

The book, after all, begins with a dead woman caught in the tangled nets of a boatful of men. On one level, that has to be one hell of an allegory. The storyteller who tells the book begins his tale into the silence as these men sit, staring at the trail of silvery water left when her corpse was dragged across the deck, aware that evil has been done and yet unwilling to speak against it. The most important lessons that one of the characters is taught are taught by female characters, and it's clear that's unusual in his public world but apt in his private world. Then there's the spooky torturer scene, where our young hero must visit the psyche of a man in a parallel universe who is trained to kill women who dare take control of their own lives—in a society which is at war: "It was a war against women." Ever after the torturer lives in the boy's mind, providing the foreign voice that speaks against women as humanity—a voice which is resisted and argued against by



the boy. It's a powerful metaphor.

The eerie similarity to the film *Blue Velvet* began to surface. I was appalled when I saw *Blue Velvet*, thought it a vicious movie that not only oozed misogyny but advocated misogynist behavior in its viewers. Then heterosexual men I knew began to talk about how that movie had done more than any other movie to make them aware of the crawling evil of objectifying and abusing women. They talked of being seduced into the notion that the abuse was okay, was sexy, was necessary, and then sharply coming to realize that they had been manipulated into a position that they found morally, emotionally and personally repugnant.

The effect they described was much like our experience during that scene late in *Apocalypse Now* when the boat finally arrives at the spot upriver where Colonel Kurtz is living. As our hero gets out of the boat and walks up the hill, the viewer only gradually notices that the trees through which he is walking are festooned with the mutilated corpses and body parts of human beings—and we realize with shock that *we didn't notice!* At that moment, we have been led to understand what it was like in Vietnam—and we were led there in less than two hours by the filmmaker's use of surrealism, excessive imagery, and hyperbole to create an allegory of real life.

And so with *The Gift*, I think. I can't speak with final authority, because still, despite three readings, I'm just not heterosexual enough or male enough, so I don't experience this book that way—but let's say that I have come to believe that for heterosexual men especially, young men just out of the deepest throes of adolescence especially, and men who are not willing to give up gender duality in their worldviews especially, *The Gift* is going to be a feminist book, perhaps even powerfully feminist.

Yet nothing I said about it above is proven wrong, exactly. You might find yourself echoing that earlier *Say what?*

Pause here to define feminist, for which I've often wished there were a better word. Briefly, let's say for now that feminism is the effort people of all genders make to change the world to one where the experience of all genders can be as equal, fair, and real, without warping any person to a social requirement which takes away individual, social, or environmental power or responsibility, and without limiting individual or social options, choices, or rewards on the basis of gender. Well, it's a start, anyway.

So why is *The Gift* defensibly feminist? No denying it maintains a weird gender duality throughout, much as many traditional fantasies do: by boys for boys, it sometimes seems. No question it establishes a primacy of homosocial relationships, both good and bad, over heterosocial ones, with a few notable exceptions. No mistaking its message that healthy male bonding—nonsexual—is the best bond—except perhaps for the tender and nurturing relationship of a man with his mother (the exception mentioned above). And most difficult for me on all readings—no question that in the entire plot, “the proper study of Mankind is Man”—Man, which almost never “includes Woman, of course.” At the end, when the men who have the primary positive homosocial bond find women for life partners, each has to deal with the jealousy he feels as his male friend withdraws from the friendship bond to bond with the woman, so they have trouble being happy about this, just as in real, homosocial, heterosexual life.

Well, odd as it is, and although it may seem to be damning *The Gift* with faint praise, which is not quite the case (keep reading), I have to admit that there is an argument for feminism at work here, and the argument is best expressed with a parable:

I can imagine a teenaged boy, a reader of fantasy and science fiction, picking up this book to read what he thinks is another storyteller/quest/good-versus-evil puff pastry. It has a dead woman on the cover, though he may think at first that she is just sleeping, her shapely breasts cleverly wreathed with seaweed, her thighs voluptuous. He will read the first two lines:

This is a story about monsters.  
The real ones. Not the ones we tell children about.

He will not think these lines are referring to him.  
Then he will find out they are.  
He will arrive at pages 205–207 and he will be deep in the strange

world of the story. He will have thrilled and chuckled at the sly references to technology amid the magic. He will have bonded with the king as Tim has. With the boy he will have met Marty the frog and discovered its secret identity. He will have seen this magical being kill its disabled child to free itself to help the hero, Tim. He will have met Dub, the eagle who taught Tim to fly. He will be fighting with Tim the battle between the good king John and the evil Tomen, locked with its acolyte the Usher in the dark opposite of the positive homosocial bond that John and Tim have. He will have accompanied Tim as his consciousness becomes imprisoned in the awareness of a man whose job is to kill women who've gotten out of line in a parallel world that has much in common with ours, but warped into a shape a bit like the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

He will be waiting for Tim—who is, remember, at this point just a boy, not yet pubescent—to wake up after this battle (for battle it was), to return to himself. And he will read this:

In his fever-dream his familiar self clashed with the presumptions of the man he had worn. . . . The simple act of living became a debate.

Yet, that was the easy part.

His mother now had two names. His fears were doubled. He knew what it was to have a woman before he even had an inkling of desire for one. He knew things he never wished to know. He lacked things he never missed before. He was a boy; he was a man.

He could find no comfortable compromise between his dual memories . . . try as he might, he could not shut out the man he had adopted; his feelings would erupt and flood him with fire, and he was forced to let him out.

Years later he would still see the world through a killer's eyes.

That woman there will go quickly. That woman there will beg. Her neck is easily snappable. Her bones would give him trouble.

Stop it! He would cry in his mind. How can you think of people like that?

I was trained to, his other self would reply.

It isn't right, Tim would say.

No, the man inside would reply, but it is my duty.

You could have refused, he would insist.

And then, in his mind, the man would show him the body of his best friend who had dared just that, and what they had done to him would sicken Tim.

You can change, he would say fiercely.

No, the man inside would simply say.

At this point my young reader will know where the monsters live, and where the battle is. A few lines further on, he will read:

. . . he learned in silence and despair that a person was capable of containing anything—any horror, any grief, any hideous notion that battered his skull. He discovered that the body has extra places reserved for these new and awful things, as if there were rooms within, like the unused rooms of a great castle, rooms that could hold and honor and sustain infinite levels of wonder and pain.

He found those rooms one by one.

And he learned to be two men.

If he has lived at all, he will recognize this. He will realize that he is at least two men already. He will learn something about the killer he was taught to be. And he will decide instead to be Tim—the hero who resists evil.

'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.

*The Gift* is well written; it has a tense and dense and vivid language well-controlled by the writer; it has a tight clear plot; it has this stunningly brutal and awakening moment. And that is why in the end I will believe, provisionally, awaiting the corroborating evidence of



readers who are male, heterosexual, and perhaps also as young as the lad in my parable, that *The Gift* really can be a book that does women—and all people—some good.

But I would like to hear too from young women, and from non-heterosexuals, and from women my age who have read it, and from feminist men of any orientation, and from all the people who have left

gender behind, whether they found any of this bright hopeful allegory at all in *The Gift*—or did they just want to throw it across the room?

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## Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels by David Pringle

New York: Carroll & Graf, 1997; \$10.95 tpb; 220 pages

reviewed by Matthew Appleton

Over the past decade or so, Carroll & Graf became a leader of sf reprints by bringing many classics of sf back into print, even if only for a brief period. This army of reprints includes, but is not limited to, Kingsley Amis's *The Alteration*, at least three J. G. Ballard books, Ian Watson's *The Embedding*, Clifford Simak's *Ring Around the Sun*, and Murray Leinster's *The Forgotten Planet*. As part of their marketing strategy, Carroll & Graf made extensive use of David Pringle's *Science Fiction: 100 Best Novels* for their back cover blurbs; if a reprint made it into his list, then Carroll & Graf made it clear by placing the line "Selected by David Pringle as one of the best 100 novels of all time" on the back cover. Sometimes, the novel itself didn't even have to make the list; if another of the author's novels made the list then Carroll & Graf would excerpt a Pringle quote that praised the author in general. It should then come as little surprise that Carroll & Graf is reprinting David Pringle's *100 Best*, originally published in 1985, but out of print for many years.

As with many of Carroll & Graf's previous reprints, a new printing of *100 Best* is a something of a blessing. As a critic and as editor of both *Interzone* and *Foundation*, Pringle is an important voice in the field, and any list he claims represents the best 100 sf novels of all-time demands our attention. The list achieves additional notoriety because of the two-page essays—essays that contain his insights on each novel and its author—on each of his choices. Most other lists, like David G. Hartwell's in *Age of Wonders* and James Gunn's at his Center for the Study of Science Fiction website <<http://falcon.cc.ukans.edu/~sfcenter/sflib.htm>>, give little information as to why particular books were chosen. The reissue of *100 Best* comes as an added bonus for those of us who over the years bought novels tagged with the "100 best" line but were unable to find Pringle's book; we now have a chance to read the reasons for the novels he chose and to see the list in its entirety.

For the most part, quibbling with Pringle's choices for the 100 best seems pointless. As Michael Moorcock points out in his foreword to the book, any individual is likely to quarrel with some of the choices. Moorcock elaborates further when he says "most readers would agree on at least fifty of the books mentioned here. And that, I think, is an excellent percentage." To test this statement out, I compared Pringle's list with David G. Hartwell's list of 105 most important books of all-time from the 1996 edition of *Age of Wonders*. Admittedly, the comparison contains a couple of flaws: Hartwell presented a time frame spanning the mid-'20s through the late '80s, listed 105 books rather than 100, and included short story collections in his list. Nonetheless, 32 novels made it on to both of their respective lists. By removing all the books from Hartwell's list ineligible for Pringle's list, you get a list only 75 books long. Based on this shorter list, Hartwell agrees with approximately forty-three percent of Pringle's choices. A seven percent margin of error seems acceptable.

However, Moorcock had plenty more to say in his foreword, much of it not necessarily good. Instead of something that piques the reader's interest, Moorcock's foreword comes across as criticism of Pringle's work. Early in his foreword, Moorcock states "many of Pringle's choices are actually readable." While this statement may have just been facetious, I wasn't entirely sure. Later, Moorcock points out that the restraint of picking novels leaves out many of the listed authors' best works, not to mention leaves out authors such as Harlan Ellison who specialize in the short story. He then speaks of his

disappointment in the fact that white male authors overwhelmingly dominate the list (which, as he points out, was inevitable given the history of the genre). He does manage to end his foreword on an up note, that the genre has become more diverse in recent years, but the damage was done. While much of what Moorcock says about the genre rings true (some of which needed mentioning), the book should be a celebration of sf, a celebration he manages to dampen.

Fortunately, Pringle's introduction helps make the reader a little more comfortable about reading this book, but not without one more disconcerting admission. He admits to be unhappy with some of the choices he's made, that he's not enthusiastic for the books, up to 10 of them by his best guess, that he added solely for "variety and balance." Otherwise, Pringle smartly handles the rest of the introduction. He takes the time to define what he means by sf, and whether you agree with it or not, he remains consistent in its application. He also points out that this is just the working definition for *his* book, that he is aware of the limitations of the definition, and that by all means it's not to be taken as *the* definition of sf. In fact, he acknowledges that his definition excludes some novels that many readers would list as sf. Also important: Pringle admits that the sheer number of sf novels printed over the years means that he might have missed a couple books that merited inclusion. This leads into his awareness of the problems that the words "100 best" will cause, and that a better name would be *A Hundred Good-to-Brilliant SF Novels*. However, saying that his reason for not calling the book by that name is because it sounds silly and that it sounds like he's hedging his bets probably hides some of the truth: a title screaming "100 best" is much more likely to sell. Pringle also takes time to explain the short time frame covered by the book, 1949–1984 (unfortunately, the outside cover makes no mention whatsoever of this; it's not until the cover page that you find out that he has ignored science fiction's formative years when making his selections). Although he acknowledges the arbitrary nature of his decision and gives some decent reasons for his decision, the arguments feel inadequate in light of the title of the book. If nothing else, the cover of the could have included the subtitle "Of the Post-War Period" or "1949–1984."

With all this knowledge, it's almost pointless to argue some of the choices in Pringle's list. After all, as he also points out in his introduction, such a list is a matter of taste and some long-time favorites might end up excluded for one reason or another. However, it's still hard to sit down, scan the list and not scream in protest. Where are Larry Niven's *Ringworld*, Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-5*, Joe Haldeman's *Forever War*, Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama*, Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, and Frederik Pohl's *Gateway*? For many authors, such as Heinlein, Clarke, and Delany, Pringle provides explanations on why some of these titles don't make the cut. Beyond the explanations, another reason why these and other classics didn't make the list may be that Pringle's list has such a strong British flavor. Considering Pringle's location concerning the Atlantic Ocean, this is understandable. However, many American readers might wonder why Pringle lists four of Ballard's novels, three of Aldiss's novels, three of Heinlein's, and only one each by Le Guin and Delany. Otherwise, Pringle does not seem to have much of an agenda. His choices run the gamut from hard sf to soft sf, from the literary to those with a heavy sense of wonder, and from the highly polished to some of the



somewhat clunky classics of sf. If there is any pattern in his choices, it's that he'll choose novels that first explored certain ideas and concepts over those that later explored the same ideas in a different fashion.

Aside from this, however, Pringle uses some questionable logic when excluding and including books. Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity* shows the most bewildering case of such logic. In his essay on it, Pringle states his feeling that none of Asimov's work merits inclusion (Pringle pointedly rejects *The Foundation Trilogy* as strongly overrated and the robot novels as inferior to murder mysteries he'd rather read outside of the genre), but because of Asimov's stature in the field, Pringle felt he had to include something, and that this was, in his opinion, the best Asimov which had "the merits of being pure sf and a novel." Ouch! I would have liked to hear his rationale for disregarding *The Gods Themselves*. Using similar logic, Pringle mentions in his piece on Phillip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* that he thought at least three more of Dick's novels deserved mentioning but that he had to draw the line somewhere. If one wishes to put together a list of the best sf novels, then the authorship should not be a factor. If you feel that Asimov didn't write one of the 100 best, then stick by your guns and don't include him just out of some sense of obligation. Conversely, the short period covered by the book makes it very likely that the truly great authors will dominate such a list. If you feel that one author wrote the nine of the 100 best sf novels over a 36-year period, then include all nine of those novels. As it is, Pringle stops at six nominations for Dick.

Interestingly, he didn't seem to feel it necessary to place limits when picking books by year. True, the quality of the best novels of any given year can vary. But consider that seven of the novels he chose saw initial publication in 1980 and eight saw initial printings in 1953; together with 1964 and 1968, each of which saw six books in his list, twenty-seven percent of his picks came from just four different years, or eleven percent of the time frame. Just as a point of comparison, the five authors picked most frequently represent just nineteen percent of the choices. However, to be fair, if you break down the list into five-year intervals, the number of picks per period consistently remains between 13 and 16.

Another quibble with this reprint has to do with its status as a reference book. Along with the two-page essays for each of his selections, Pringle includes publishing information such as year of publication, publisher of the first edition, and the most recent printing of the novel in both the U.S. and the U.K. This normally would be wonderful information to have. However, since this a reprint and not an updated edition, much of the most recent printing information for many of the books is now incorrect. This is all the more puzzling when you consider that for many of the books, the most recent U.S. printing was released by Carroll & Graf—you'd think that they would have either exerted a little pressure to have that information updated or just removed that portion of the information altogether.

I would love to say that the actual essays in *100 Best* make all these nitpicks irrelevant, but unfortunately this is not the case. After reading through them, I was left wondering just who the target audience for this book was. If the target audience consisted of people familiar with the genre, then the most of the plot-heavy essays didn't have enough meat—you were left wanting to know more as to why Pringle felt a particular work was so important. In most cases, his statements placing

the novel in the context of the genre were not much more than a paragraph out of the two pages. If Pringle was targeting readers unfamiliar with the genre, then the fact that he gives away so many of the books' endings is outright frustrating. At least, I found this to be the case for the novels that I haven't read yet. It's understandable to give away the ending if that is one of the reasons why a book is special. However, Pringle seems to reveal many of the endings, not to mention quite a few of the surprising twists in the novels, for no other reason than having thorough plot summary.

What makes the plot summaries all the more frustrating is that there are a number of essays where Pringle strikes just the right balance of summary and criticism. For novels such as Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*, Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants*, and Ballard's *The Crystal World*, Pringle's commentary clearly communicates what makes the novel, and usually the author, so special. He even manages to avoid giving away the endings! Reading these particular essays makes you see why they deserve being on a best 100 list and makes you want to run out and find a copy of the novel, even if it means hunting through numerous used book stores because the novel has been out of print for years. This is in stark contrast to novels such as Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human* and Brian Aldiss's *Non-Stop*, where the essay is little more than a plot summary. Yes, the summaries are written well enough to make the novels sound interesting, but they don't give reasons as to why the novels are compulsive reading.

Finally, an updated or revised list of 100 novels would have been much more welcome. Individual tastes and opinions change over years, and even if Pringle used the same time frame I find it completely possible that there would be some changes given that it's been 13 years since the initial publication of *100 Best*, especially given that he wasn't too fond of some of his choices and that the sheer number of works meant that he could've missed novels that merited inclusion. Better still, Pringle could've expanded the time frame in an update or revision. Surely the 13 additional years since initial publication brought forth at least ten books worthy of mention within these pages, books he would feel more comfortable mentioning than those that were included just for "variety and balance."

Nonetheless, even with these assorted caveats, *100 Best* should still be a welcome addition for most sf fans. Even though you most likely won't agree with all the selections, Pringle has pointed out 100 novels that, if nothing else, should entertain their readers and, for those not intimate with the genre, give some insight into its history and progression, at least in the novel form. Despite the plot-heavy nature of many of the essays, he provides readers with at least a minimal reason as to why they should read each of these books. Furthermore, maybe the reprinting of this book will lead to the reprinting of some of the out-of-print titles mentioned within, which is about 40 novels according to the "trusty" Amazon.com search engine. At the moment, that list includes Bernard Wolfe's *Limbo*, Pohl's *Man Plus*, Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X* and Norman Spinrad's *Bug Jack Barron*. If for no other reason, you should check into *100 Best* because at least there's a rationale behind why the novels are chosen—which is more than can be said about the Modern Library's list of the best twentieth-century novels that came out last year. ►

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Matthew Appleton lives in darkest Maryland.

Robert Borski

## Thinking about the Mandragora in Wolfe's *Citadel*

So, of a lone unhaunted place possesst,  
Did this soul's second inn, built by the guest,  
This living buried man, this quiet mandrake, rest.

—John Donne, *Progress of the Soul*

*The Citadel of the Autarch* concludes Gene Wolfe's New Sun quartet and it is to this titular edifice deep within Nessus that Severian retires very near the volume's end. Having consumed his predecessor's forebrain, Severian himself is now autarch. Desiring quarters suitable

to his position, he is assigned lodgings in the most ancient part of the Citadel, and it's here, among the more interesting effects in his dusty new environs, he encounters a mandragora in spirits—a mysterious bottled fetus that he inadvertently resuscitates and who engages him in conversation (although telepathically for its part). But who—or what—is this mandragora? In his *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, critic John Clute boldly suggests it might be Severian's own long-lost sister, and in many respects, given that the mandragora at one point addresses Severian as "Brother," and that Severian describes the



pickling fluid surrounding the homuncule in placental terms, this seems as potent a guess as any. But is it the only guess that warrants making, or is there other evidence that suggests the mandragora may be something else? In lieu of deferring to Clute or decrying the general indeterminateness many readers seem to find in Wolfe, let us investigate the Something Else Theory.

In my opinion, author Wolfe, whose interest in etymology is well known, often draws upon a word's roots to provide essential clues in unriddling the deeper significance of much of his fiction. It therefore seems logical to take a closer look at *mandragora*—the Latin and more poetical version of mandrake. Almost at once, and without recourse to a single dictionary, we notice its *man* + *dragora* binomialness. *Man* requires little exegesis, the mandragora tuber being notoriously man-shaped (whence, in addition to its hallucinogenic properties, its use in folk medicine). *Dragora*, however, is slightly less evident, relating back to *draco*, the Latin word for *dragon* (as does *drake*). But while interesting, is this same hybridity manifest beyond an etymologic level in Wolfe's mandragora? Perhaps. His bottled imp does resemble a wizened foetal man, after all. Yet what about the draco moiety? Is there, on further reflection, anything or anyone in the Book of the New Sun that might relate to the notion of dragonness, whether symbolic or literal?

To answer this requires a bit of reappraisal and involves Typhon, Urth's grand Emperor—the Stalin-slash-Genghis Khan of Wolfe's posthistory. Typhon's namesake, of course, harkens back to classical Greek mythology, where he's the consort of Echidna and father of many monsters (a relationship Wolfe will perpetuate in his *Book of the Long Sun*). But while many readers may be familiar with Typhon's literal hot-windedness—our word typhoon derives in part from this—few may be aware that he is often described as a hundred-headed dragon, with a body covered in serpents (From *The Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology* [New England Library, London, 1975]: "Typhon: Son of Typhoeus or the youngest son of Gaea. A powerful and destructive whirlwind which had one hundred dragon heads and a body covered with serpents. . .").

This is *not* the only Typhon = dragon connection, however. Dragons, in Christian symbology, commonly represent Satan/Lucifer, and just as Satan once tempted Christ, offering him stewardship of the world from atop a high mountain, a similar scene takes place in *Sword* ("The Eyes of the World"), with draconic Typhon offering Severian the autarchy of Urth.

Now recall Wolfe's naming stratagems for the New Sun series—i.e., that while the human denizens of Urth are named after saints, *all extraterrestrials bear mythic names*. This is a point I seldom see mentioned in connection with Typhon: that he's an alien, or at least at one time had an alien body. For clearly by the time Severian first meets him, he appears human, if bizarrely so—his head having been grafted to the body of Piaton, a slave, whose head also remains. But surely this macabre arrangement has been undertaken only as a stopgap or intermediate measure, something that will allow the aging and mortal Typhon to continue living while he and his technicians devise something better than mere flesh to house him. And what might that alternative be? Well, how about an artificial, man-made body; an android, or to use the convention that Wolfe uses in his *Long Sun* books, a chem.

Chems, of course, play an important role in Wolfe's Whorl series. We're also given to understand that the majority of them were created before Pas launched his giant spaceship (Pas = Typhon's *nom de soleil long*). But while for the most part these chems are programmed to be servitors or soldiers, several have in turn been co-opted for other purposes, not only by the so-called black mechanics, but by members of the Ayuntamiento, Viron's ruling council. Indeed, Councillor Lemur is seen to be mentally controlling a chem body while his decrepit physical body lies comatose, connected to life-sustaining machinery. Who's to say he might not eventually have been able to download his entire mind into the chem, completely obviating the need for a physical body? This, after all, is what Pas/Typhon has done, although the downloading in his case has not been to a mechanical proxy, but to Mainframe, the Whorl's supercomputer. Lemur, for his part, dies under Lake Limna before any such advanced transference can take place. But given Typhon's success in a very similar area—sort

of a reverse Pinocchio effect, where flesh becomes not wood, but metal and synthetics—it does not seem unreasonable to conclude such transformations are possible.

Certainly Pas and the other "gods" of Mainframe can already subsume chem bodies should they so wish—we see this in *Caldé of the Long Sun*. Echidna, at this point, has taken over the mechanical sibyl, Maytera Marble, killing the brutal Hawk. Protagonist Silk, however, is caught somewhat unawares by this ability. Says he: "I knew you gods could possess bios like us. I didn't know you could possess chems as well." Echidna, who has only seconds before revealed that Pas is dead, replies, "They are easier . . . My husband . . ." But the snake-wielding monstress never finishes her sentence (such aposiopeses are common in Wolfe), and this leads Silk to wonder if perhaps Pas may have killed his host during possession, thereby causing his own demise. Or at least that appears to be the context of Silk's follow-up question, as he asks: "Did Pas possess someone who died?"

No other citation is more crucial to the meat of this treatise than Echidna's terse response: "The prime calcula . . ." she says. "His Citadel . . ." (*Caldé*, 102) And that's all we're given by the parsimonious Wolfe—two fragments connected by ellipses, a mere five words between them, that we're left to wring some meaning from. But given that while on Urth Typhon has at least temporarily operated out of Nessus, what other citadel could Echidna be referring to than *the* Citadel—soon-to-be traditional home of the autarchs? (Wolfe does capitalize citadel in each instance, removing them from the realm of the generic.) As for "prime calcula," it's not difficult to posit that *prime* means first; while *calcula* connotes both *calculator* (read thinking machine or robot) and *calculus*, the Latin word for stone. The latter is more important than it may initially seem since all chems, by convention, are named after metals or minerals; e.g., Marble, Schist, Shale. Could the prime calcula, built and housed in the Citadel, therefore be the very first chem—who died when alien Typhon attempted to possess it? Is the mandragora, preserved in white brandy for purposes of either study or commemoration, this 1.0 chem prototype?

Let us return to the chapter wherein we meet the mandragora (*Citadel*, XXXV) and see if we can find any additional support for this notion. Here again we note that Severian's new quarters are in the *oldest* part of the Citadel, where we're told that the furniture seems designed more for alien than human inhabitants. Comments Severian: "They did without chairs as we know them, having for seats only complex cushions; and their tables lacked drawers and that symmetry we have come to consider essential." Severian cites changes in fashion for the outré look, but exobiology might just as well account for the lack of convention; I submit that monocephalic Typhon would probably feel quite at home here. Furthermore, in a connected laboratory, there's the fabled "emerald bench" of alchemy, one of the major goals of which was discovering the Philosopher's Stone, a magical artifact that would not only transmute base metals, but allow its possessor to achieve transcendence over all disease. Typhon, if nothing else, is obsessed with his own longevity. As Scylla, his daughter, puts it, "Daddy had this thing about a male heir, and this other thing about not dying" (*Lake*, 274).

But by far the most telling evidence for making my case is spoken by the mandragora itself. After first identifying Severian as "the heir"—i.e., Typhon's male successor—it, in turn, is asked who it is. "A being without parents," it tells Severian, "whose life is passed immersed in blood." It has no parents, of course, because it's artificial (this echoes a similar statement by Typhon in *Sword* about not having been born: "No, I was not born as I am, or born at all, as you meant it."). As for being immersed in blood, remember that, the homuncule is preserved in white brandy, and alcohol is as much a fuel as gasoline or oil (Brandy, it should be noted, is also sometimes referred to as *aqua vitae*, "water of life."). Just as we cannot function without life-sustaining blood, neither can androids function without fuel (that energy source is primarily radioactive by the Whorl series, but it's also interesting to note that the giant robotic taluses of Viron run on fish oil).

Severian, drawing upon his status as both orphan and torturer, subsequently tells the mandragora how congruent their lives have been, saying, "We should be friends then, you and I, as two of similar



background usually are.” Also: “I think we are more alike than you believe.” It’s statements like these that lead the mandragora to address Severian as Brother, not any putative genetic link, and even then the usage seems more cynical than fraternal. Or, as the mandragora complains when Severian refuses to smash its imprisoning cucurbit, “So much for brotherhood.” As for the latter’s response to Severian’s question about it dying, it says, “I have never lived. I will cease thinking.” (Which is pretty much what a calculating machine does when the metaphorical plug is pulled.) “I neither grow, nor move, nor respond to any stimulus save thought, which is counted no response. I am incapable of propagating my kind, or any other.” The *any other* here, I maintain, is Typhon, who, as I’ve argued, may have attempted to possess it, seeing himself, to use the Donne epigraph, as a guest hoping to check into alternate accommodations—“a second inn.” Unfortunately, there appear to have been some bugs in the chem 1.0. programming. “I was deformed,” the mandragora tells Severian, “and

died before birth.” That is, before Typhon could make his transference complete, or at least complete its trial run. Whereupon the mandragora is put into the pickling jar, until Severian comes along, reviving it.

Of course, rather than admit failure here and quit, Typhon and his technicians must have continued to work on new prototypes, for more sophisticated and stable chems are readily available by the time of Whorl, including ones capable of breeding. Somewhere along the way Urth’s Emperor also seems to have discovered how to scan himself directly into a computer, leading to yet another discard—this time not of a bottled man-dragon fetus, but a grotesque double-headed monster that Severian first resurrects, then kills—as if Jesus at dawn, but Heracles by twilight. ▲

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## **Weird Women, Wired Women by Kit Reed**

Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998; \$16.95 pb; 272 pages

**reviewed by Lisa Tuttle**

I remember the first time I read “Songs of War” by Kit Reed, back in 1974. I was fresh out of college, and all fired up about the Women’s Liberation Movement, eagerly anticipating the Revolution which I was sure was on the horizon. I kind of assumed Kit Reed must feel the same—anyone who could turn such a killing, sarcastic eye on housewives and consumerism in a story like “Cynosure,” or create the horrifying little fable about marriage that is “The Wait” just had to be a feminist. So when it turned out that “Songs of War” was not propaganda for the WLM, was not a Utopian vision of how we sisters were going to smash the Patriarchy, was, in fact, totally non-PC . . . well, I was shocked.

The fact that I remember my reaction to this one story so well after twenty-five years tells me just how disturbing I found it. I used to read a lot of stories around that time which angered me because of their politics, but I’d be hard-pressed to name any of them now. “Songs of War” shocked me not because it was not what I expected, but because I didn’t know what it was. It sure wasn’t politically correct feminism (“As soon as it’s over we dump the housewives,” Rap said [71]), but it wasn’t anti-feminist, either—this was not one of those diatribes about the folly of women attempting to abandon their “natural” role as cooks and cleaners. I didn’t like it—I preferred my revolutionary dreams and the belief that women *would* run things better than men. However, I didn’t admit to myself that was why I didn’t like it; I decided that I didn’t like it because it didn’t work. It was an attempt to joke about a subject too important to be joked about.

I hadn’t reread it since, and when this collection arrived, and I got to this story, I expected to cringe through an unfunny, unfair attack on women . . . but my expectations were overturned. The fact that this time I found a lot of it very funny may reveal the dreadful disintegration of my once noble nature, because it is still nasty and unfair . . . but then, so is life. And it is a lot more than that. More surprisingly, this savage, clear-eyed look at a particular moment in the recent past is far from being of historical interest only. The belief in a coming women’s revolution may have died with the ’70s, but Kit Reed’s story is still shocking in 1999, a bleak and powerful vision which has retained its power to disturb. I think it may be the best in a volume full of very strong stories.

I was on the jury for the 1998 Tiptree Award, and this was one of the books we discussed. Everyone admired it; and it made us all uncomfortable. Probably most short story collections should not be read straight through—didn’t Harlan Ellison preface one of his books with the admonition that it be taken in small doses? This is another one which really should have a mental-health warning. To quote Candace Jane Dorsey, “I found this book almost unbearable to read . . . because it was such a relentless indictment of a certain era of social prejudices that reading one story after another in chronological order was like watching

a torture session, hearing scream after scream.” I’d only disagree to go further—although they are very much of their time (each story is helpfully tagged with date of first publication, the earliest being 1958), at least a third of them were written in the 1990s, with a thoroughly contemporary attitude, and even the earliest can’t be dismissed as period pieces. We (women, particularly) haven’t outgrown or left behind the situations dramatized here; the specific forms or the details may have changed, but the emotions remain. “Cynosure” (1964), about a woman struggling for acceptance in the neighborhood hierarchy through use of the appropriate brand-name goods, is so clearly an artifact of the early ’60s that it may be of mainly historical interest, but the woman in “The Hall of New Faces” (1992) could be anyone today under pressure today not to “give in” to any physical signs of aging, to stay forever young and beautiful.

The majority of the stories here center on a woman trapped in a struggle she can never win, a struggle seen as inevitably bound up with being female. Although this struggle may be with social and cultural expectations, at the heart of it is the fraught relationship between mother and daughter.

Kit Reed has dedicated this collection to the memory of her mother (“who would have been proud. And horrified. And proud.”), and in her introduction (“Where I’m Coming From”) she reveals why: “If you are a woman people expect certain things.” When she was a child, a woman was expected to have a man. Kit Reed’s father was lost to World War II: “Overnight, my mother and I were disenfranchised.” Her mother, raised to be a Southern lady, had to struggle to bring up her daughter alone, constantly worried about appearances. The daughter grew up determined to have it all—and did—and also to write social criticism in the form of satire and speculative fiction. Her first published story, “The Wait” (1958), she describes as “A high school girl is used as a pawn by an insecure mother intent on fitting into a new society.” Commenting on the rest of the stories in the book, Reed says, “Most of us write better about what we hate and fear than about what we love, and it would appear that at some level I have always been afraid of my sisters’ expectations, from the day in high school when I understood that I would never fit in with the girl gang to the moment when I pushed back from the bridge table with the sense that I’d blundered into a territory where I did not belong.”

It is the attitude of the outsider, permanently divided between the lonely child who wishes she did belong, and the intelligent, critical adult who is glad she doesn’t, which informs all of these stories. It’s great to have them all in one place—but approach with caution, handle with care. ▲

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## **Essays Critical and Clinical by Gilles Deleuze**

translated by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; \$44.98 hc/\$17.95 pb; 216 pages

reviewed by A. Iwanow

The discovery-package has arrived. Eighteen essays in powerful new translations. But what is the price of daemon's hire? Who is this Deleuze?

"Deleuze was a monster," wrote Keith Ansell Pearson, taking his coat off in the theater. "His work is marked by a subversive, perilous attempt to map out a new becoming of thought beyond good sense and common sense, in which thought becomes monstrous because it forsakes the desire for an image of thought." The media-eval simulacrum of contemporary "life" is surrendered to the masses (all sheep go to heaven), while an advance guard of nomadic road dogs go in search of new algorithms for the Human Factor, new tools and equipment for the bladerunner on the beat, a new sensibility at the mountains of madness. My contention in writing this review is that science fiction *needs* Deleuze, to discharge its body of unrealized potentials in the post-Millennium, where J. G. Ballard's proleptic avowal of the sf writer's centrality may at last come to pass.

Deleuze argues that the Death of God enacts five crucial consequences for the condition of literary language and the production of narrative. Five intrazonal effects or phases. I will now play these quickening possibilities into the hybrid-zones of sf literature, using fictions by Erickson, Calder, Delany, Womack, and Iwanow respectively.

### **I. The Destruction of the World (Singularities and Events)**

Text: *Dyer's Eve* (2003) by Steve Erickson

When literature turns to language as its condition, narrative fiction is forced to reckon with its own source code, to recognize that every written word is superimposed over its own ghost or negative, a literature of fragmentation and the mythographic exploration of those fragments. But rather than slump into the pomo abdication of life-critical issues, the sf author is compelled to take on the whole charge of planetary angst, to become a generator of values at the heart of Erewhon. Science fiction discovers itself to be political and world-historical while forsaking Ideology, ethical and pragmatic while negating Morality, concrete in its extrapolations yet reaching far beyond the ephemeral meta-journalism of, say, everything Bruce Sterling wrote in the late 1990s. In order to test oneself against and within this apparatus, the sf writer must break his/her text down into prelinguistic blocs, to the literary equivalent of what one experiences during the REM state, to the shadowload of lucid dreaming. The writer must ask: just *what* have I wrought, and is any of it truly original?

Let us search through Erickson's posthumously published last novel for these transworld "singularities and events":

- to watch where machines go when humans lose track of their trajectories
- to subvert and overthrow the whole realm of government permissions and grants surrounding Science
- to conquer the gun tower of institutional coercion
- to record the conversation of an entire city
- to become the oldest name in future history
- to demanufacture the body's dream of becoming a machine
- to dislodge salt deposits from chronic wounds and ulcers
- to perceive the future as a primitive epoch
- to touch a woman before the time towers strike thirteen
- to fabricate a working replica of New York City and to carry that world *inward*
- to scale the Zero; to write the future

### **II. The Dissolution of the Subject (Affects and Percepts)**

Text: *The Black Book* (2006) by Richard Calder

Calder understood that there is nothing to "discover" in contemporary culture, no mystery to unravel, no puzzle to solve, no enigma to disengage. Rather our subjectivities must be *constructed* with whatever incomplete materials come to hand, a *bricolage* of screaming metal fragments culled precariously from the slipstream. If technology

can be troped as "a language of artifacts," then literature must be the most intricate and demanding technology, all the more influential in its anonymity, its seeming political value of naught.

Cyber-solipsism is perhaps not a new subjectivity at all, but a prehistoric mythography generated at infinite speeds and with catastrophic influx. The Black Book is the cypher-punk's equivalent to the philosopher's "black box," to the maze or junction between corporeal brain activity and the semiosis we use to construct meaning. The cryptographer wants to "crack the codes," to spy "the desert of the Real," only to realize that the decoded flows constitute *yet* another code. It is clear that another form of self-reliance is required.

The protagonists of Calder's charming novel are Pragmatists to the hilt. Their modes of perception are not bogged down in the morbid theurgical science worship of a Greg Egan novel. They do not prattle on about splitting the ontological atom to forge some dishumanized silicon utopia. Rather they live and love in a schizoid tracery of blood, sweat, and stench, however adulterated by grotesque prostheses and paleotechnic junk. "We are not *in* the world," Deleuze remarks, "we become *with* the world." In Calder's universe, we are not *deceived* by an external simulacrum, since the simulacrum is us, it is *ours*, it is what we've created in the interest of Theater, the only context that burns quickly enough for the dissoluted self. Everything that takes place on- or off-stage is as "real" as it needs to be, the difficulty being how to distinguish between those affects and percepts that are life-affirming and those which are vampiric. Deleuze follows Nietzsche in affirming that literature, at its strongest, plays a *clinical* role in our lives, providing us with a technology to discharge blockages, to liberate the penal colonies of our overcoded neuroses.

### **III. The Dis-integration of the Body (Intensities and Becomings)**

Text: *Fudge Tunnel* (2005) by Samuel R. Delany

Deleuze's reality engine and conceptual leitmotif, the Body without Organs, is as widely fetishized today as (for instance) Heidegger's *Dasein* was in previous generations. (I suppose this book-review is no exception, however intense my passion for the Deleuzian theater of philosophy.) The BwO tells us that biological reality is not Life, that our corporal identity (this would include the physical brain) is merely a meat puppet for world-historical institutional dictate. Yet the intensities produced by the earthbound organism, the zones of thought and feeling irreducible to their organic ingredients, are a multiverse unto themselves, the psychopoetic spawn of humankind seeping out of the temporal death of the organism.

At last Delany has devised a pornotopia sufficiently strange to engage the Deleuzian apparatus. The sexual athlete has taken up desire wholly into the imagination, a new erotomania at once exilic and transglobal (a neo-Zionist sexual kabbalah?). As with the personalities in Ballard's *Crash* (1973), fatal strategies are required to keep the erotic carnival in flux (in Delany's case a tribe of Fourth World outlanders caught between shifting regimes). Consequences soon crop up, however, as the members of Chaos A.D. begin coopting their sexual patents to various theme-park and resort conglomerates. Once a gay couple on their honeymoon are castrated by Mr. Choad's Wild Ride, a lawsuit ensues to disband the tribe, sending three of its members on libidinal odysseys of their own. Sexual transgression is thence extended to its creative limits, leaving a whole continuum of cultural rebirth and disintegration in its wake.

What is so revolutionary about Delany's novel is that the deterritorialized members of Chaos A.D. never achieve an actual orgasm, are not interested in procreation and/or romantic passion, and never once bitch about the inadequacy of corporeal genitalia. Like the Egyptian god Horus, they desire to create civilizations via masturbatory rites, but without discharging their flows, without ever *stopping* the intensities of libidinal desire. Rather than give birth to a new generation of death-driven organisms, they suspend their emissions



long enough to ascertain new possibilities for Life, for the orgasmic epiphany of cultural betterment. “I want more life, fucker,” as the lunar veteran Roy Baty (a.k.a. Rutger Hauer) once put it.

#### IV. The “Minorization” of Politics (Speech Acts and Fabulation)

Text: *The Dillinger Escape Plan* (2009) by Jack Womack

Well, “more life” without the political perception to contextualize it is rather like a lone sparkplug yanked from the engine’s cylinder head, or a car removed from the street. Thankfully, the frag-bomb mutant dawn of Jack Womack’s NYC has long granted us bridging action to the Polis incarnate. It astounds me that so few sf novels have been able to render a persuasive anatomy of our metropolises, without resorting to the cartoon backdrop of fifth-rate Giger knock-offs (*Queen of Angels*, et al.). With the *Escape Plan*, Womack leaves all caricature behind, transposing the hammer-blow realism of a Cormac McCarthy to the interzone of our city streets.

In Deleuzian politics, we are in the scanning lines of the machine, a recording surface colonized by stories, television, movies, advertising, partisan ideology, familial and institutional captivity. Literature is just subversive enough to help us burn away our contexts, to replace old fictions with new, an ever-burgeoning virtual-reality to redirect the hive-lines of cultural conditioning. Culture is intolerable for the literary intellectual, but neither is it *escapable*. On the razor’s edge between Intolerability and Inescapability, a new politics is constantly being formed.

Womack’s mutant protagonist Cavalero is a policeman, a scholar, and an outstanding philosophical talent with a mind above the game. His literary gifts are an open secret amongst his superiors, who wish to exploit his conceptual genius in the interest of multi storied city warfare. Cavalero has other plans, however, looking for night work amongst the City’s envious shadow of mutants and outsiders. When he is given orders to infiltrate a vigilante social unit, a riot-zone soap opera erupts—bright lights in association with a trapping or killing medium, where the sworn officer Cavalero jacks into a schizo-escape, having found and understood the Law. A straitjacket stoops to conquer the boneweary policeman.

#### V. The “Stuttering” of Language (Syntax and Style)

Text: *Eyehategod* (2010) by A. Iwanow

In my second and perhaps most interesting novel, I had striven to fashion a New Gothic Wingshape for sf tradition (in lieu of the spent rocket stages of its more mainstream factions). Surrounded by career-novelists who long scoffed at my schizo-narcissistic ramblings, I wrote a book for myself and a few lonelyheart academics. Little did I understand the micropolitical implications of my narrative, which was

misread by certain authorities as “journalism” documenting the Replicant Night of 2008. The vernacular I had worked my whole life to generate, the stolen numerals I had put in circulation, the journal entries of my eleven-year incarceration. . . . Ah, politics.

Deleuze taught me early on the virtues of independent cinema and hand-held technique (transposed to literary production). The discourse-making principalities with their style-manuals and semantic maps, their static migraine-aura of grammar and syntax—language itself can be sapped and impurified by the gifted author, disenthralled from the molar nodes of the marketplace. Those who can control their own language truly control themselves, as well as that little piece of the world adjacent to one’s roving subjectivity.

A cyborg-psychiatrist known only as “the Nautiloid” is sent into a ruined monastery to arrest and schizo-analyze its deranged monk population. The brothers have smokescreened themselves in a vernacular of their own, a night-language encysted by madness and religious hysteria. The Nautiloid must do much more than decode the flows of their dialect; he must allow his own psychic lexicon to be invaded by the dying-earth tonicity of the demented brotherhood, a voyage of self-excitation that will throw into question his own integrality as a cybernetic life-form. Himself past love, the Nautiloid cannot be but moved by the Luddite daemony of the guerrilla monks who, while committed to his destruction, are equally pained to see what (in essence) the human race has become. Could language alone be enough to de-machine their metallized guest? What type of literature is being exchanged between this island of monastic exile and the pedagogical embodiment of Western tech-wealth? ►

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A. Iwanow is embodied in East Brunswick, New Jersey.

#### Recommended further reading

Boundas, Constantin V. and Dorothea Olkowski. (ed.) *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Hardt, Michael. *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprentice in Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Kaufman, Eleanor and Kevin Jon Heller. (ed.) *Deleuze and Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy, and Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Murphy, Timothy S. *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Patton, Paul. (ed.) *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996.

Pearson, Keith Ansell. (ed.) *Deleuze and Philosophy: The Difference Engineer*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

### **Dark Cities Underground by Lisa Goldstein**

New York: Tor Books, 1999; \$22.95 hc; 256 pages

reviewed by Paul Kincaid

The body of myth that has come down to us from around the world is an inchoate mass shot through, as commentators as varied as J. G. Frazer and Joseph Campbell have told us, with certain recurring themes and images. Death and rebirth, for instance, fertility and infertility, all somehow seem to coalesce into one ur-myth. It is tempting, therefore, to pull all these myths together into a cohesive whole, to try to find the one story that is all stories. Malory attempted this within the relatively small scale of the Matter of Britain, and it is something that, knowingly or unknowingly, fantasists have been trying to do ever since. The quest, the descent into darkness, the realm in chaos, the return to light, order restored: Though tricked out in coats of many colors and carried off with varying degrees of panache, these patterns shape the great mass of fantasy. Sometimes authors pay specific homage to the culture whose myths they have plundered—Celtic myth and its offshoot, the Arthurian cycle, seems to be far and away the most popular—and sometimes not. Many times, they are simply borrowing routines from old stagers like Tolkien without even noticing how much further back these same tricks and tropes can be traced.

More and more, however, self-aware fantasists are not only

recognizing such patterns but making the conscious exploration of mythic archetypes the central purpose of their fiction. But the more they try, the more myth there seems to be awaiting incorporation in this Grand Unified Theory, so that somehow the consequence of all this knitting together of loose threads is to end up following the all-too-familiar path already worn down by countless other fantasists.

Lisa Goldstein is one of the most self-aware and most daring of fantasists writing today. Her novels have regularly explored the nature of our mythology, and in *Dark Cities Underground* she is consciously tracing connections between Egyptian, Greek, and British myth. To suggest modern underground railways as a contemporary aspect of the underworld is a literalness that seems out of keeping with Goldstein’s usually subtle work, but there is far more complexity in this than may at first appear. The same impulses that once drove ancient man to conjure the shapes of gods in the random placing of stars today makes us trace the alien and the divine in otherwise random patterns. (Iain Sinclair, in his dark and mad prose poem *Lud Heat* (1975), identified a cabalistic symbol in the placing of Nicholas Hawksmoor’s London Churches, while Peter Ackroyd, in *Hawksmoor* (1985), shaped con-



temporary life and death to its dictates.) However, there is one far from random pattern that shapes London intimately: The network of lines that make up the London Underground. It is already a system freighted with mystery and symbolism, from long-abandoned stations (I passed through one once, as a child, a gray, shadowy place where it seemed that yesterday had stopped) and service as a wartime bomb shelter. Neil Gaiman explored the Underground as a repository for ancient archetypes in *Neverwhere* (1996), but in Lisa Goldstein's "Neverwas" the symbolism has not just come to reside within the Underground, but was built into the system by its original engineers.

The underlying pattern of the novel is the story that begins when Set kills his brother, Osiris, and cuts him into twenty-eight pieces, which he scatters over the land. Infertility settles in, until Osiris's sister and wife, Isis, gathers all the pieces and makes him whole once more. The Nile floods, and fertility is restored. It is a story that is told again as Ceres/Demeter descends into the realm of her brother, Hades/Pluto, to restore her daughter, Proserpine/Persephone, and to bring Spring back to the world. It is told yet again in the story of the Fisher King, whose wound to the thigh is a clear emasculation which cannot be healed until the perfect knight, Percival, is found to restore fertility to the realm. The cycle of the seasons is the oldest myth of all, and Lisa Goldstein recapitulates it here in several forms.

Even just this blending of mythologies is flexing the muscles of fantasy about as much as they have ever been flexed. What makes *Dark Cities Underground* work is that the myths are infiltrated into the novel on several different levels. The core myth of Osiris and Isis and Set is presented straightforwardly (at one point our heroes actually find themselves on the banks of the Nile as it was at the dawn of time) but is also refracted through a children's story, *Jeremy in Neverwas*, in which a boy helps Iris restore her husband Cyrus, illustrating the way fantasists domesticate raw myth for modern consumption.

At the same time, the core myth is shown to be current still, in actual terms—Set has been reincarnated as Barnaby Sattermole, whose malign presence casts a long shadow over the novel, and one of the quests to be fulfilled in the Underground is to find the Eye of Osiris—and an underlying motivation—the vogue for all things Egyptian initiated by Napoleon's corps of engineers is the trigger for the building of Underground railways according to a mystic pattern which provides the second major strand in the novel.

What's more, although the habit of fantasists has always been to treat magic as part of our reality, commentators on myth have tended to see it as a reflection of psychological truths; and so, while Goldstein makes the story of Osiris into a history of real events, she also presents it as a echo of the psychology of her characters, particularly Jeremy. If the underworld in ancient times continues to be real today, children are most likely to find their way through its secret portals and past its fearsome gatekeepers. It is their garbled, only partly understood accounts of the astonishing things they have seen there that provides the inspiration for most of the classics of children's literature (Goldstein here neatly reverses the traditional image of a parent telling stories to a child and then writing them down in book form). Jeremy, of course, was one such child, inspiring his mother's famous books; but the effect of becoming famous for being a fictional character, as well as the long-suppressed memories of what were in fact terrifying adventures in the underworld, has damaged him psychologically. Ruth must restore Jeremy just as Isis must restore Osiris.

Jeremy is part of that long line of real children who have been incorporated into successful fiction. One obvious model for the character is Christopher Milne. Before he was old enough to shape his own life, it was taken away from him. From that moment on, whatever else he might become, he was always Christopher Robin. He spent his life cursing his father for turning him into a story. Still, although this figment of a childhood overshadowed his life, at least he had a life; Peter Llewelyn Davies, one of the brothers to whom J. M. Barrie addressed his stories of *Peter Pan*, would go on to commit suicide. It is a familiar story, the way that fiction steals from life (much as a photograph was once thought to steal the soul); Geoff Ryman touched on this in *Was...* (1992) when he revealed an elderly Dorothy, mind long gone, in a nursing home. This is the kind of story that Lisa Goldstein tells, the story of Jeremy Jerome Gerontius Jones (a name that sounds suspiciously as if it belongs in one of A. A. Milne's poems) who was once

the hero of his mother's best-selling books and now, in middle age, lives in furious isolation, convinced that his mother has stolen his childhood.

Once the action of the novel moves predominantly underground, the psychological insights which make the early chapters so arresting begin to be lost. There are moments when the various participants in this modern resetting of one of the most ancient of myths rush around in our contemporary underworld, thought seems to give way to adventure, and coincidence and bravado and a last-minute snatching of victory from defeat seem to win out over conviction and character. Too many things seem to be going on at once: Our heroes find themselves battling not one but two villains (representatives respectively of ancient myth and modern technology); they are caught in the midst of not one but two eternal wars (between Set and Osiris, between King and Sneath); they are playing with symbols from at least three different mythologies (at one point, Jerry is carrying the actual Holy Grail, their companion Sarah has the Eye of Osiris, and Ruth unwillingly plays the role of Ceres as she seeks her daughter Gilly, who has been kidnapped by Sattermole and hidden somewhere within this realm of the dead). And all the time they are trying to avoid being trapped within the mythic roles that seem to be destined for them.

All these various intricate threads of plot suddenly and inevitably spin themselves into a web of dramatic action, but as the book works itself up into its climax it does for that brief moment seem rather ordinary. Goldstein does regain control before the end, however. What seems like a traditional happy ending is rendered ambiguous, as Ruth and Jerry unwittingly start to follow the pattern of the mythic roles they have had to take on to complete their quest. All at once, we are back with the quietly unsettling psychological novel we began with.

The result is a good book, a daring book, a book whose ideas are extravagant and whose reach is bold, even if at the climax it cannot quite grasp all it might reach. It is a book made up of too many elements, the raw and the refined, elements that do not belong together, a book that should not work at all. That it does is a testament to Goldstein's talent. That she has the vision to bring these disparate parts together and the skill to make it all so nearly a success is what makes her perhaps the finest fantasist writing today. ►

*Paul Kincaid lives in Folkstone in the UK.*

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## Spinners by Anthony McCarten

New York: William Morrow; 1999, \$24.00 hc; 288 pages

reviewed by Michael M. Levy

Anthony McCarten is one of the best-known playwrights in New Zealand today and is also the author of a number of highly regarded short stories and screenplays. His play *Via Satellite*, which he adapted as a feature film and directed himself, received its world premiere in 1998 at the Cannes Film Festival. *Spinners* is his first novel.

The story takes place in Opunake, on New Zealand's North Island, a small industrial town where Borthwick's Freezing Works, a meat packing plant and the town's number one employer, is about to automate, putting eight hundred workers on the dole. The mayor, desperate for some way to keep his nondescript town from going under, has hit upon the rather farfetched plan of recreating Opunake as tourist mecca. Unfortunately, his ideas for accomplishing this feat are so far limited to the creation of a town water park, complete with space-aged waterslide, and the reestablishment of the long-defunct Opunake town library. He has also hired his nephew, Phillip, recently dishonorably discharged from the armed forces for fighting, to be the new town librarian.

One of many teenaged girls working a dead-end job at Borthwick (where she packs cow hearts), Delia Chapman is innocent and pretty, and comes from a family with a history of mental illness. One night Phillip, newly arrived in Opunake, discovers her wandering in a trancelike state beside the road. After he delivers her to the town policeman, Harvey Watson, she publicly announces that she has had an encounter with aliens. Beautiful men bathed in light have taken her aboard their spaceship and have had their way with her. Although Delia's claims are initially met with derision, and although Watson and the mayor do their best to keep a lid on the story, the entire town soon knows about it, and after Vic Young, a reporter for a tabloid newspaper picks it up, the story quickly goes national.

Delia's female friends, all of whom are employed packing cow hearts, are deeply jealous of the attention she receives and two of them quickly come up with their own equally ridiculous abduction stories. The three young women's claims begin to receive more serious attention, however, when a cow is discovered crushed to death in the center of an otherwise untrod field surrounded by what appears to be a crop circle. The immediate assumption, of course, is that the spaceship carrying the spacemen who had sex with Opunake's fairest flowers also landed on the cow. Soon after this Delia announces that she is pregnant by one of the aliens, and her two friends quickly follow suit.

In fact, virtually all of the characters in *Spinners* love to make up stories, often without being entirely aware that they are probably creating those tales from whole cloth. Delia, deeply disturbed and manifesting more and more signs of obsessive-compulsive disorder, appears to believe completely her story of abduction and seduction by aliens. Her girlfriends, however, don't seem to care whether their stories are true or not, just so long as they get some of the fame and material wealth that they incorrectly believe Delia is now rolling in. The police officer, the mayor, the local priest, and Delia's father all seem to believe that if they simply put enough pressure on her to change her story, whatever they get her to say will turn out to be true enough. Phillip, the new librarian, who has fallen half in love with Delia and who, oddly enough, is also showing signs of obsessive compulsive behavior, seeks to create his own narrative of her life and their relationship by copying long quotations from the more obscure classics in the Opunake library. Meanwhile, yet another obsessive, Gilbert Haines, a not particularly intelligent, Uriah Heep-like mechanic who has been in love with Delia for years, has begun to claim that he's the father of her child, despite the fact that she has never shown any interest in him whatsoever and vehemently insists that she's still a virgin. I don't know how much reading McCarten has done in genre science fiction, but it may not be coincidence that the local hotel and pub in Opunake is called the White Hart, a reference perhaps to Arthur C. Clarke's popular series of tall tales, set in a pub of the same name in England.

Opunake is a town where virtually everyone is a bit eccentric and appears to have a secret. Strange events apparently occur just off-stage with considerable frequency. The sheer number of citizens suffering from some form of undiagnosed mental illness defies statistical

probability, and repression is the name of the game. Few people in Opunake will give straight answers to even the most innocent questions, and even outsiders, like Phillip or Vic Young the journalist, soon find themselves both deeply enmeshed in the town's problems and up to their necks in self-recrimination.

*Spinners* remains fairly low key throughout. After all, we're talking about a town full of intensely repressed people here. What fuels our curiosity, other than our concern over whether Delia will go the way of her mother and attain full psychosis, is the question of whether or not anything extraterrestrial did in fact occur. McCarten's narrator, looking over Delia's shoulder, as it were, in the book's opening pages, seems to imply that her experience with the aliens is real. As the narrator says:

Who expected to see something like a spaceman in Opunake? Since Delia was unprepared for such a nationally significant experience she was, at best, clumsy in her observations. Two hours later she was able to report that she had had a nice time, seen some lights and a few shapes, and had received a dozen or so non-verbal commands. But beyond that, and when pressed for more explicit details, she could add only that her guests had been extremely polite throughout the incident and had treated her as if she were extremely important.

The very banality of the young woman's recollections, hardly the technicolor fantasies of a publicity seeker, appear entirely sincere. Although it gradually becomes apparent that her friends' abductions are fake, it's equally clear that Delia does indeed believe her own story. And lest we be tempted to put the whole thing down to her developing mental illness, there is the matter of the squashed cow in the field.

If you want to find out the truth, you'll have to read the book. I'm not going to tell you.

I enjoyed *Spinners*, for both its dry satire on blue-collar, small-town life and its adept fooling around with the by now well-established conventions of abduction-by-aliens narratives. Readers interested in a series of more traditional, genre-style takes on these conventions might want to look for a recent short-story anthology entitled *Whitley Strieber's Aliens*, which features well-done tales by, among others, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Esther M. Friesner, Edward Bryant, and P. D. Cacek. McCarten, however, is writing in a more literary vein. Despite its apparently science-fictional apparatus, *Spinners* feels closer to the humorous realistic fiction of, say, Roddy Doyle (*The Commitments*, *The Snapper*) than it does to traditional genre literature. The book, however, might very well appeal to readers who, like myself, savor the work of Jonathan Lethem. ►

Michael M. Levy lives and savors in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

### A Correction

Through the auspices of the friendly, fun-loving folks on the newsgroup rec.arts.sf.fandom (particularly Joseph T. Major and Marty Helgesen), we have learned that the quotation we ran from the Rev. Jerry Falwell ("Can Our Young People Find God in the Pages of Trashy Magazines? No, of Course Not," *NYRSF* 117), which was putatively an excerpt from an article in *Reader's Digest*, August 1985, is, in fact, not genuine. No such article exists, and it is exceptionally doubtful that the Rev. Mr. Falwell has ever expressed an opinion of any significant length on the subject of science fiction, with or without three-headed alien love toys. We are certain that the piece was passed on to us with good faith in its authenticity, and blame only ourselves for not verifying its origins.

We run this correction with a little sadness. It would be a much easier world if all of its chowderheads were willing to spew forth only transparent nonsense instead of wrapping their idiocy in blankets of sensibility.

—KJM for the editors.



# Screed

## (letters of comment)



### Damien Broderick, Coburg, Australia

In *NYRSF* 129, David Drake takes exception to a sardonic value judgement in a review of mine, suggesting that it might lead to my being lumped in with racist, misogynistic, homophobic Australians (presumably a more virulent breed than other predominantly English-speaking nationals). I had claimed that “benighted machines” who turn out hexalogies, war-in-space series, and routine fantasies do not write as well as M. John Harrison and Thomas M. Disch. My remark was perhaps carelessly phrased, since I assumed that “turn out” would be understood as equivalent to “churn out.” But in any case, I was surely wrong; of course benighted machines who turn out routine fantasies can now write as well as the finest artists ever to grace the mode.

By the way, in my latest piece (in *NYRSF* 129, on Dick and transrealism), a typo has me alleging that a GABA antagonist is a “disinheriting substance.” Actually it is a disinhibiting substance. I’m afraid I can’t disinherit some other literals and confused page references, which slipped through despite several careful proofreadings by all concerned.

### Ginjer Buchanan, New York, New York

Since several of the folk involved in *NYRSF* are or have been working professionals in publishing, I’m amazed that no one explained to Russell Blackford that Ace is an American publisher, whose rights to sell *The Warlock in Spite of Himself* are specific to the U.S., with distribution into Canada. Thus the sell-copy is, logically enough, aimed at the readers to whom we are actually selling the book.

I don’t, in fact, know if *The Warlock in Spite of Himself* has captivated readers all around the world—presumably Chris Stasheff’s agent, who controls the foreign rights, would be a better source of info on that. But it’s really much beside the point.

Blackford’s comment is uninformed, petty, and pointless.

*[Ginjer Buchanan is Senior Executive Editor of Ace Books. We felt there was a point-of-view issue in the last paragraph of the review, and decided not to cut the piece she objects to. Her facts are correct. Then there are his feelings. —DGH]*

### John Clute, London, England

Just got *NYRSF* #129, with photo of me, Ellen Sascha, and Ursula. Thought I’d note the misspellings so you’d be forearmed if they get back to you. It is indeed Sascha not Sasha, and it’s Ursula Kiausch not Kaiusch.

### E. A. “Eric” Johnson, Washington, DC

Oh my! Here I’ve been a simple pawn *all along* of the Great Saturnine Gnostic-Kombinat Conspiracy—and I didn’t even know it! (But isn’t that the way it always is?) I’ve even managed to convince myself that I don’t even know who A. Iwanow is—just like Fred/Arctor’s bifurcated brain in *A Scanner Darkly*. Hard to believe, but it’s actually true. Of course no Dick Dart (who is he trying to kid with a name like that?) is ever going to believe that when he reads the special PKD (read: Gnostic) issue 129 of *NYRSF*. . . .

### Ed McKnight, Taylors, South Carolina

I have just received the February and March issues of *NYRSF*, and as usual found them very stimulating. With regard to your March editorial on alternate history, I agree that it has largely “drifted right out of science fiction into its own class of speculative fiction,” although—as you note with reference to *Bring the Jubilee* and *The Man in the High Castle*—the relationship between the two has always been problematic.

In my exhaustive (but lively) dissertation on the genre, I pointed out that the earliest alternate histories (we’re talking nineteenth

century, here) had very little to do with science fiction, and many “mainstream” alternate history novels continued to crop up throughout the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s (Martin Cruz Smith’s *The Indian Wars* is an example of this, although Kingsley Amis, perhaps the most notable mainstream writer to delve into alternate history, regarded *The Alteration* as a deliberate foray into science fiction).

Another indication of the genre’s independence from science fiction, one that you may have noticed (and that I mentioned in *SFRA Review* #232), is Del Rey’s use of the “alternate history” label on the spines of its paperbacks. I’ve yet to see a bookstore that shelved them separately, of course, but then I’ve seen few bookstores that even separate fantasy and science fiction.

*[This letter was sent in March and misplaced by—the Eds.]*

### Taras Wolansky, address....

Gentlebeings:

A. E. van Vogt’s “The Mixed Men” is only the conclusion of a series of stories, beginning with “Lost: Fifty Suns,” eventually published as the novel, *The Mixed Men*, more commonly known as *Mission to the Stars*. It is possible that reading only the one segment—and not the strongest, in my opinion—led Darrell Schweitzer to get a little mixed (up) himself (“Screed,” *NYRSF* 129).

Darrell writes, “most of the cast either have two brains or are really robots (‘Delian’ or ‘non-Delian’).” First, there are no literal robots in the story: “robot” is a derogatory term applied to “Dellians” (not “Delians”), a human subrace that resulted from imperfect early experiments in matter transmission. (Dell was the machine’s inventor; the Dellians are physically stronger and healthier than normal humans but allegedly less imaginative, hence the slur.) By contrast, “non-Dellian” is simply the term Dellians apply to the normal humans who live among them. Second, no one in the story has literally “two brains”: rather, this is a reference to the doubled neurons in the brains of the “Mixed Men,” the rare hybrids of Dellians and non-Dellians.

Darrell quotes van Vogt: “Imperial Earth had more warships than there were men, women, and children in the Fifty Suns.” Darrell continues, “This is the realism, and logic, of a small boy playing with toy soldiers in a sandbox. I’m tougher than you. I’ve got a *billion* spaceships!” Setting aside the question of what kind of navy an empire dominating the Milky Way galaxy might plausibly maintain, Darrell forgets that our protagonist, Capt. Maltby of the Fifty Suns Navy, is on the other side. Indeed, in an earlier part of the series, his ship defeated by Imperial Earth forces, Maltby commits suicide rather than be captured and interrogated (though he is revived, using the matter transmission technology central to the story).

Darrell again: “even the emotions of the human characters are programmed or deprogrammed. . . . Next to this, Doc Smith was an icy realist. There is *no* intersection with adult reality at any point, for all van Vogt was able to write was that small boy’s sandbox game with an adult level of intensity.” Icy, indeed! van Vogt envisions a psychological technology that, to facilitate an interrogation, can condition a man to fall deeply in love against his will. I wonder what that “small boy” would make of that; or of the edgy relationship that develops between Maltby and the object of his coerced affections: the Imperial commander, Grand Captain Lady Gloria Laurr.

Aside from the story’s powerful women—van Vogt was wildly ahead of his time—another thing that makes *The Mixed Men* stand out from other products of the Campbellian Golden Age is the complex ethical and political universe the protagonist inhabits. Maltby, both a Fifty Suns officer and the titular head of the despised and feared Mixed Men, suffers from severely conflicted loyalties. In the end, he betrays both sides.



## Attack of the Artificial Stupids

As we stride forward into the unforeseeable future, we stumble over a variety of hindrances and roadblocks, but are helped onward by new friends and old. We are approaching the year 2000 with Stanley Kubrick deceased and his major sf film, *AI*, now forever gone, and I am currently quite taken with Michael Flynn's notion of Artificial Stupids (AS)—computers that do only one thing, such as answer your door. I think the term is widely applicable and should prosper in the coming millennium, along with Melissa Scott's notion of "the jazz"—the tissues of lies and misinformation promulgated as news or truth on the internet. We are grouchy about computers this month.

For those of you who have followed ten years of technological advance in these columns, together with thefts, crashes, and other disasters, we have this report: Upon arising one morning last month, I went in and turned on the Power PC, and smoke began to pour out of the monitor, attended by crackling sounds and the smell of insulation burning. It was a good monitor, and when last repaired had been sent to the obsolete equipment division in Texas because it was a bit over three years old then. Now it was five and we junked it and bought a new one, bigger and better it must be admitted, for a thousand dollars less.

But we had just ordered a G3 upgrade chip and System 8.6, and Word was crashing and will run only if we avoid using any macros, and we had to order a Type Manager upgrade right away, and the scanner no longer worked (it still doesn't unless we use a System 7 startup disk), and we still haven't finished throwing money and hours of time at the problems, although nothing, of course, can prevent us from producing the issue. (We remember when we used to type in every manuscript and do layout on a Mac Plus). We are particularly grateful to those loyal subscribers who have recently sent in their renewals, preventing too much of a cash crisis.

Our masthead is about to suffer a terrible blow as stalwart and reliable Managing Editor, Ariel Haméon, is resigning for health reasons, and this fall another of our staffers is moving out of the area. We need two new staff members willing to attend weekly evening meetings in NYC and work weekends once a month in Pleasantville, especially people who know Word, Excel, Pagemaker, and QuarkXPress. This is your chance to become a secret master of sf without charge (and no pay). Love of cats and small children a plus. Editing and reviewing lessons when you least expect them.

And just as we thought that perhaps the *NYRSF* reading series might cease, Dixon Place has a new lease and a new location (check the ad on page 21) and we have a new Readings Coordinator on the masthead, Joe Monti, who is smiling and enthusiastic and ambitious for the series to continue. Meanwhile, in support of sf in general, we will begin running announcements for the new sf reading series run by Terry Bisson and Mark Jacobson that will complement their existing mainstream reading series in NYC. This is a good time for you to contact us about a reading in NYC if you are planning a visit this fall or winter.

—David G. Hartwell & the editors

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