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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

August  
1995

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**Mary Soon Lee**

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# interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 98

August 1995

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# Interaction

Dear Editors:

I just finished reading Brian Stableford's two-part "The Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires" in issues 91-92, and I'm still shaking. Stories like this justify my subscription until the end of the century. I doubt you can beat it as 1995's best story, but that is your big challenge. And let's give the Hugo to fabulous Mr Brian Stableford!

**Pedro Miguel Rocha Pires**  
Lisbon

**Editor:** *Dave Langford recently sent us an internet review of "The Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires," written by Evelyn C. Leeper of the USA. In part, she says: "Normally I don't review short fiction from magazines, but I'm willing to make an exception in this case. If I don't, you might not realize you should be nominating this for a Hugo next year ... This is a Hugo-class novella, full of lyrical descriptions, a conflict in which both sides have their strengths and their weaknesses... and interesting, three-dimensional characters. I know it will be hard to find this in the United States (unless some far-seeing company decides to market it as a stand-alone novella - hint, hint), so look for it in Glasgow at Intersection if you're there. I've just started subscribing to Interzone, but I can see why it keeps making the ballot for semi-prozine when it publishes stories of this quality." It so happens Brian Stableford does have a story on the Hugo ballot this year: "Les Fleurs du Mal" (from Asimov's) also features Oscar Wilde as a character and is typical of Stableford at his best (well, near-best - we liked "Hunger and Ecstasy" more). So, even if they haven't read that particular story, those who are attending the Glasgow Worldcon in late August have an opportunity to vote for Brian if they wish. But whatever their particular tastes and choices, we appeal to British and European readers: don't be reluctant, please use your votes!*

Dear Editors:

I would like to congratulate you on the effectiveness and enjoyability of "The Ant-Men of Tibet" by Stephen Baxter in your May 1995 issue (number 95). You probably intended the title as a satire on old science-fiction stories, but it reacted differently upon me. [The choice of title was the author's - Ed.] When I was young I used to disparage such titles as "Ape-Men of Xloti," "Devil Crystals of Arret," "Master Minds of Venus," "Winged Men of Orcon," "The Pygmies of Phobos" and "The Human Pets of Mars" as juvenile, but your

use of "The Ant-Men of Tibet" made me reconsider. I was immediately drawn by the title. Then, when I saw that the cover actually pictured ant-men approaching a human it intrigued my interest, as did the interior illustration depicting the flora and fauna of Luna. It had me reading the story before I even thumbed through the rest of the issue.

I enjoyed it thoroughly. In fact, I would say it ranks high among the shared-worlds stories that have come into vogue in recent years. I think H. G. Wells, if living, would have complimented it as a fitting sequel to *The First Men in the Moon*. But it also convinced me that the old-time editors were not so far off in their judgment of the sales appeal of the corny titles they used; and that illustrating the cover with a scene from one of the stories was not such a bad idea. In fact, I found myself slightly disappointed that the protagonist didn't turn the tables on the ant-men. There is something to be said for corn: it informs your audience of what you are selling.

I would also like to compliment you on dropping that ill-advised typeface [i.e. issues 88-93 - Ed.] and returning to a more readable one. When I was vice-president of the trade magazine *Quick Frozen Foods*, owned by a giant corporation (British-controlled), they would periodically demand a redesign of the magazine regardless of its financial success. I can't remember a time when the results were not at the very least costly and often disastrous. Redesign is for magazines that are in trouble or are slipping, not for those with a winning formula. All best...

**Sam Moskowitz**  
Newark, New Jersey

**Editor:** *We're delighted to hear from sf scholar and editor Sam Moskowitz, who has been reading the stuff for over 60 years and no doubt wrote similar letters to Amazing and Astounding back in the 1930s. The main point of the redesign which commenced with issue 88 (the Nexus issue) was to give us more flexibility, by means of modern computerized desktop-publishing methods. (It also saves a little money!) The old paste-up method, carried out by a typesetter living on the other side of the country, was terribly inflexible, we thought - all the story-headings were monotonously the same (not that we're criticizing the former typesetter, it's just that his method of production, plus time constraints, didn't allow for variety). But we were never fully happy with Paul Brazier's Nexus typeface, and so we decided to change it with*

*effect from issue 95 (following Charles Platt's one-off issue 94, which had a melange of different type styles). We hope most readers are pleased with the new larger, bolder typeface - which is not in fact the same as our old (pre-issue 88) typeface, but closer to it.*

Dear Editors:

*IZ 95 was, I thought, a nicely balanced issue. Baxter's "The Ant-Men of Tibet" was very well written. Sylvia Siddall's "Written in the Flesh" was good sf and enjoyable. Watson's "Ahead!" was clever and provoking. Spencer's "The Crash Investigator" was excellent no matter from what point of view one regards it. John Grant's "The Glad Who Sang..." required a rather more receptive mind than mine, but I can imagine it being much liked. Algis Budrys was an interesting interview subject, and all the departments were well up to the usual high standard.*

*As for IZ 96, Alastair Reynolds's "Byrd Land Six" was excellent, very enjoyable and first-class sf. Jones's "Time-Travel Blues" was entertaining, and Brown's "A Prayer for the Dead" good-enough reading. Di Filippo's "Big Eater" was too-hard reading, and Bowkett's "The Gift" was not my sort. But I'm not complaining - a good issue. The cover was quite beautiful. I am so glad that the general tenor of your magazine has ceased to be so desperately depressing and hope that what I think to be such an improvement will be reflected by increased success.*

**E. R. James**  
Skipton, North Yorkshire

Dear Editors:

*Number 96 was an excellent issue. In the past there has been much talk of a standard Interzone story - depressing low life and high tech in a near-future urban winter. Eric Brown's "A Prayer for the Dead" strikes me as an example of another sort of Interzone story - life as it is known in an exotic setting, coming to an end elegiacally.*

*The redesign is working well, both attractive in appearance and reader-friendly. No typographical tricks for the sake of them. Continue the good work.*

**John Howard**  
Oldham, Lancs.

Dear Editors:

*Some time ago Andy Sawyer of the Science Fiction Foundation library at Liverpool University sent me a clipping from *The Economist*, 28th January 1995, page 85. This shows*



the circulation by percentage of fiction and non-fiction in British public libraries in 1993-94, figures derived from the Public Lending Right, which has no counterpart here in the United States. Fiction accounted for 76.8%, non-fiction 23.2%.

Of the fiction, science fiction accounted for – I hope you're sitting down – precisely 1.0%, just edging out westerns at 0.9% and horror at 0.7%. The top fiction categories were general (19.8%), children's (19.1%), mystery/detection (13.5%) and light romance (13.2%), with all other categories in the single-digit range. I sent a letter to the *Library Journal* asking if any reader had any roughly equivalent readership figures for the U.S. With online circulation-control systems common today in larger libraries, such data should be easy to compile. I'll let you know if I get any responses.

**Neil Barron**  
Editor,  
*Anatomy of Wonder*  
(3rd edition, 1995)  
Vista, California

**Editor:** *Those are unwelcome figures, on the face of it, but I'd advise you to take the genre breakdowns with extreme caution. The figure of 0.7% for horror is very hard to believe: I think it almost certainly excludes the books of Stephen King and Anne Rice, and probably Dean Koontz. These big bestsellers tend to get classified as "general" (which you say accounts for 19.8% percent). There's the rub: when novelists get to be very successful they are taken out of genre pigeonholes, certainly by their publishers and probably by librarians too: they become "mainstream" because they sell in mainstream quantities. Likewise, the 1% figure for sf will certainly exclude Michael Crichton's Jurassic Park (probably the single most successful novel of recent years in any category), as well as the works of more "literary" authors (e.g. J. G. Ballard) who will be classified as general. I would bet the big "children's" category (19.1%) also includes a large amount of sf and fantasy.*

*And what about fantasy? Was that supposed to be subsumed in sf, or was*

*there a separate category for it? In this country, the huge-selling Terry Pratchett is virtually a category unto himself. It's become something of a truism that sf and fantasy together account for about 10% of fiction sold – and of that four-fifths is by Pratchett (and clones)! What the Economist figures do tell us is what we already know: namely, that "mid-list" sf, labelled as science fiction, is dying in the marketplace. It is middle-range genre authors such as John Brunner (see his interview, last issue) who are suffering in this country.*

*"Mainstream" authors who happen to write what we would recognize as sf (P. D. James, with *Children of Men*, and Robert Harris, with *Fatherland*, are two recent bestselling examples) can still do very nicely indeed – as do most forms of spinoffery, Star Trek novels, Dr Who novels, X-Files novelizations, etc, etc (and I bet those too are not classified as sf, but as "media tie-ins" or whatever).*

*We'd be interested to receive other people's comments on this matter.*

## UK Year of Literature and Writing 1995



### WELCOME TO MY NIGHTMARE A CELEBRATION OF HORROR WRITING SWANSEA 27 - 29 OCTOBER 1995

As part of the UK Year of Literature and Writing 1995, *Welcome to my Nightmare* will be a celebration and investigation of the nature of horror. Taking place at the Forte Posthouse Hotel in Swansea over the weekend of 27th to 29th October, events will include debates, readings and writers' workshops featuring some of the greatest exponents of the genre. Guests confirmed so far include **Ramsey Cambell, Jonathan Carroll, Graham Joyce, Peter James, Lisa Tuttle, Garry Kilworth, Ben Leech, Mark Chadbourn and Simon Clark**. Writer and radio presenter Phil Rickman will also be in attendance to record a programme for BBC Radio Wales for transmission later in the year. More guests are still to be confirmed for what will be the major celebration of the genre in 1995.

The fee for attendance at all the main events is £15 and room rates are £37.50 in a single room, and £32 in a double/twin room, prices per person per night including bed and breakfast.

Please accept my cheque for £15 payable to *Welcome To My Nightmare* to confirm my attendance at the Convention. Send to Steve Lockley, 14 Cae Eithin, Llangyfelach, Swansea, SA6 6EZ.

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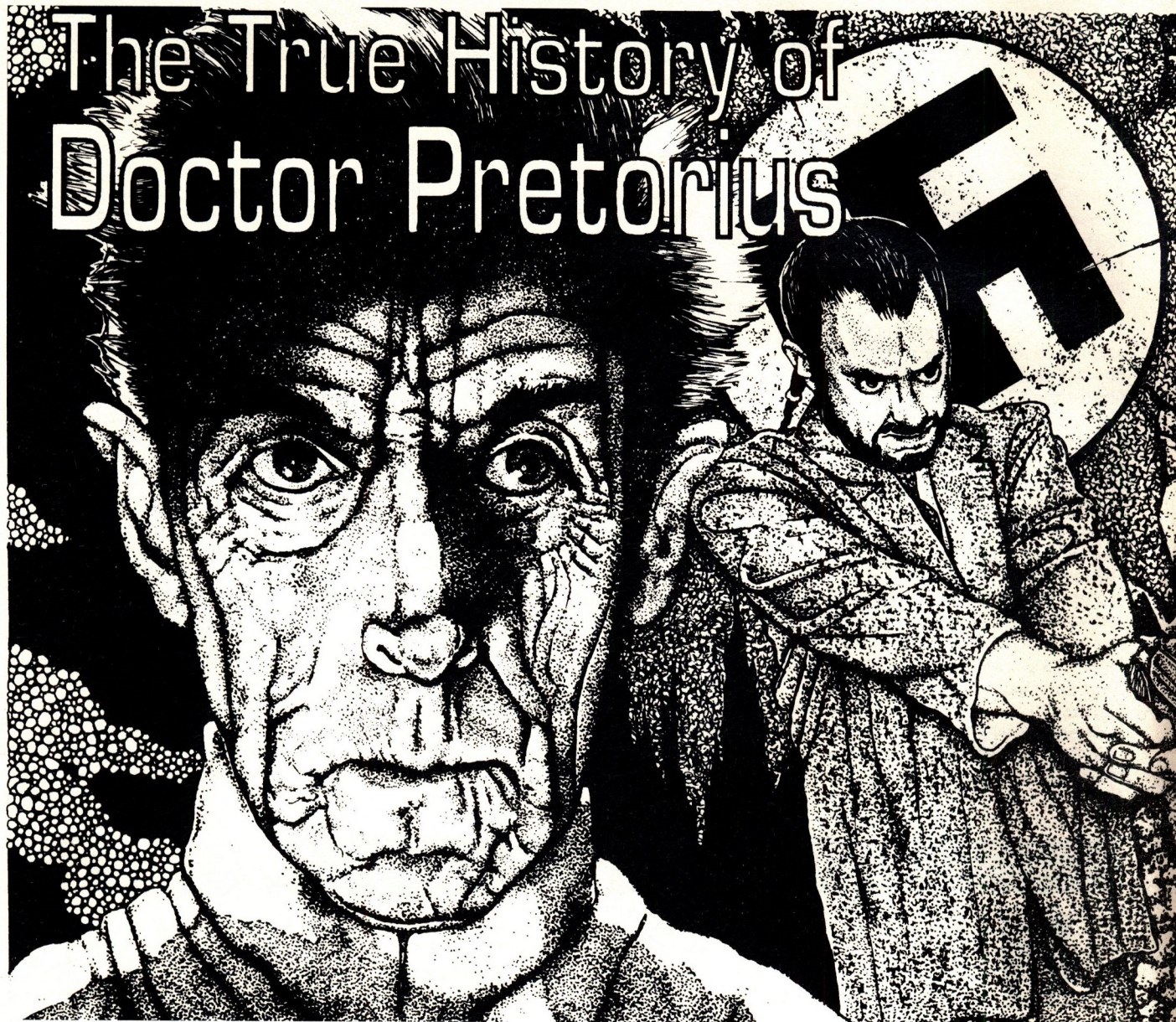
I require a twin/double/single room for Friday 27th/Saturday 28th/Sunday 29th (delete as applicable).

Please send me further information about the writers' workshops ( )

For further information telephone Mike O'Driscoll on 01792 403575

## Blwyddyn Llenyddiaeth a Llenyddia y DG 1995





# The True History of Doctor Pretorius

To begin with, Larry Cochrane thought that it was just another slice of bread-and-butter sleaze. A contact in the Food and Drug Administration tipped him to an upcoming investigation into a Tijuana Clinic. The usual shit, peddling quack cures that supposedly delayed the onset of full blown AIDS, cut-rate plastic surgery, no-questions-asked abortions and sex-change operations. Added spice: the clinic's owner, a certain Dr Septimus Pretorius, had old Hollywood connections. The kicker: several well-known AIDS victims had gone there for laetrile treatment of intractable Karposi's, and former TV child star Bobby Dupre, Little Jim-Bob in the long-running 60s family TV saga *Sunrise Acres*, had died of acute septicemia after he was given a complete blood change to try and cure his crack habit.

So far, so good. With no complications, Cochrane figured that he would be in and out in a month, sell it for 50K to one of the glossies, maybe earn twice as much from foreign rights, not to mention spin-off items that he could get his researcher to write for the movie mags.

But within days of starting the investigation,

Cochrane knew that the story would change his life. Definitely permanently, and maybe for ever.

The evidence came tumbling out of the archives. Through all his long, colourful career, Dr Pretorius had never bothered to cover his tracks. He'd left clues scattered through newspaper, film and historical archives with a recklessness that was either crazy, foolish, or incredibly bold. Perhaps he thought that no one would believe his story; Larry Cochrane was having trouble believing even half of what his long-suffering researcher, Howard Zaslow, had uncovered.

Witness:

A b&w photograph of white-haired Dr Pretorius, scrawny and bird-like in Bermuda shorts and a long-sleeved white shirt, playing polo with Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks.

A sepia photograph, quartered by white lines where it had been folded, of Dr Pretorius, looking scarcely younger, lounging in safari kit in a canvas chair, boots cocked on the sprawled corpse of a dog-sized reptile that one of Zaslow's pals at the UCLA Biology Department was convinced was some kind of dinosaur.

A luminous, sharply focused daguerreotype of Dr





Illustrations by Russel Morgan

Pretorius in frock coat and tall top hat standing with a shorter man who wore an even taller top hat and had his thumbs aggressively tucked into the pockets of his waistcoat, both of them looking straight at the camera with some great mechanical engine half lost in shadow behind them.

A tattered handbill advertising, in type that was of different sizes on every line, that on June 22nd 1852, in the town hall of Cheltenham, Dr Pretorius, lately of Geneva, would demonstrate his electric elixir for the countering of the outward symptoms of old age.

A warrant dated 3rd August 1809, stating that a certain Dr Pretorius, otherwise known as Horace Femm, resident at 13 Half Moon Street, should be arrested on sight, on suspicion of being a French spy and for enquiry into the disappearance of several young women known to be common prostitutes.

A facsimile of a handwritten document, signed by Elizabeth the First of England above the imprint of her seal in cracked wax, declaring that Dr Pretorius of Cheapside was an agent invested with such powers of enquiry as necessary to seek out agents of Catholic powers.

Another facsimile, this in Latin and dated 1423, which Howie Zaslow said was the death warrant for a Dr Praetorius, a notorious practitioner of various magics and malefic rites; it was from the Armand Hammer collection, and was one of only three known holographs of Charles VII of France.

There was more, much more, including a connection with Ilsa Magall, the Destroying Angel of the Nazi death camps, that Cochrane could use to open up Pretorius like an abalone. But even half of this treasure trove was more than enough to convince Cochrane that this was even bigger than his recent bestseller about the RoChemCo disaster in Calcutta. Dr Pretorius had a secret that could make Larry Cochrane rich, and more than rich. It could enable him to live forever.

Of course, Howie Zaslow also knew the score, but that was a fixable detail. Cochrane had a contact in the LAPD who knew a wise guy. One phone call and 10,000 dollars up front, and it was set.

Armed with the results of Zaslow's labours, Cochrane started to hassle the PR office of Dr Pretorius's clinic. He got a quick but inadequate response:



Dr Pretorius was willing to grant an interview, but there was some vagueness about the timing. "We're undergoing a certain amount of reorganization," Ransom, the PR man, told Cochrane over the phone, and promised to get back as soon as he could.

So Cochrane told Howie Zaslow to keep digging up more dirt, packed a couple of changes of clothes with his portable computer, modem, and the licensed 9mm automatic he'd bought after the '93 riots, and took off in a hire car for the Baja coast in Mexico, which was where Dr Pretorius had lived ever since he had set up his clinic in the 1920s.

For two days, Cochrane sweated and chafed in a roach motel with no air-conditioning and some kind of lizard in the shower stall, in a Mexican fishing village ten miles north of Dr Pretorius's estate. The village was a lost, God-forsaken place where bearded, pot-bellied refugees from the 60s stood knee-deep in the surf, bombed on LSD or hash, or sat around the bars drinking tequila from the bottle and talking about 'Nam. Cochrane drove past the estate's impressive security fences, and made sure that the guards on the gate saw him taking photographs with his Nikon. He talked to the motel's owner, the richest man in the village, who said that Dr Pretorius was a good man who sponsored the Festival of the Day of the Dead each year. He phoned up the estate office every couple of hours to let them know he was waiting, and badgered Howie Zaslow for more dirt, for more on the rumours that Dr Pretorius was about to relocate.

When Cochrane left L.A., Zaslow had been close to uncovering the crux of a set of deals that included selling off the estate and the private clinic. Now, on the phone, Zaslow said, in his slow thoughtful way, that Cochrane should wait a couple of days for the fuller picture, the financial trail was sort of complicated.

Cochrane, sitting on the edge of the sagging motel bed, strangling the phone in one hand and squeezing a sweating can of ice-cold Coke in the other, said, "Get your hands off your chicken-neck dick, Howie, and chase this down. That PR guy, Ransom, told me they were relocating, which means soon. I need to know all about his plans. I need an in. I need you to start doing some real work. I've already waited long enough, and this quaint fishing town outwore its welcome as soon as I checked in."

"Another day," Zaslow's voice pleaded. "Give me time to chase down the share purchases and you can hit Pretorius really hard."

Cochrane held the can of Coke to the back of his neck and counted to ten.

Zaslow said, "Are you still there, boss?"

"Another day and Pretorius might not be. There's a stream of trucks leaving his estate. Maybe there's another way in if we can get hard evidence about this death camp rumour."

"That one's no problem," Zaslow said, his voice sounding smug. He'd been working for Cochrane for two years, and in an odd way Cochrane would miss the man's infuriating plodding pedantry. Zaslow was in his 30s, a pale-skinned New Yorker with a *summa*

*cum laude* from Yale and the distracted air of a perpetual research student. He had an old-fashioned regard for facts. Right now, though, Cochrane was burning with impatience. He had a lot more to lose than some pissant story.

Zaslow said, "The Simon Weisenthal Institute came through. They have details of his collaboration with Ilsa Magall. Weird transplants, stuff about vacuum exposure that has a link with the V2 rocket programme. I think that's how Pretorius got into the States, by the way. The Army rounded up anyone that had anything to do with Peenemünde before the Russians got there."

"Sometimes you're worth the money I pay you. I got to have that stuff."

"It's coming from Austria by courier."

"I need it now, fuck-head. Look, okay. Get it to me any way you can as soon as you can. This is definitely kosher?"

"One hundred per cent."

So Cochrane phoned Dr Pretorius's estate for the fourth time that day, and told Ransom that he had documentation proving that his boss was a Nazi collaborator, and would he like to discuss it in person, or with the Israeli secret service? Cochrane hung up as Ransom started to bluster, and ten minutes later the phone rang. To his amazement, Pretorius was in.

Early the next morning, Larry Cochrane was waiting with his holdall and portable computer outside the village's beat-up cantina. He was wearing his black Armani suit; his beard was trimmed; his ponytail was tied back with a silver death's-head clasp. Cochrane's inquisitorial style was modelled on Robert de Niro in *Angel Heart*, and generally its brooding menace gave him an edge in interviews.

All in all, he was feeling fairly terrific, although he was not so carried away that he had not neglected to strap on his shoulder holster. This day, the first in what promised to be a very long life, was shaping up pretty well. The sun was brassy, not yet at its full heat. The ocean was blue, sparkling with whitecaps, the air so clear you could see out to the horizon. Except for a couple of fishermen manhandling their boat up the white beach, the village was barely awake. An *Americano* was sleeping off last night's tequila over by the garbage cans, watched by a piebald dog that trotted over and sat by Cochrane as he drank a Coke in the shade of the cantina's awning.

Seven on the dot, the limo swung off the road. The *Americano*, hand out, stumbled up as the chauffeur loaded Cochrane's bags. Cochrane lowered the smoked glass window and gave the bum the finger; then the chauffeur hit the gas.

Moving trucks, two travelling together every few minutes, heading north towards the border, passed the limo as it drove south. The chauffeur wouldn't answer Cochrane's questions with anything other than a shrug, so Cochrane watched MTV on the inset TV and drank one of Dr Pretorius's Diet Cokes from the built-in fridge.

The limo turned off the highway, climbed past a clump of coral trees and stopped while a big brute of



a guard, sweating through his tan uniform, opened the gate in the tall double fence. The guard was hunchbacked, and his face was brutish and scarred, his nose smashed flat, his tiny eyes like piss-holes in snow. His blubbery lips worked as he waved the limo through. The narrow road switch-backed through rolling pastures wet by sprinklers that set rainbows in the hot Mexican air. Once, the limo stopped to let a couple of giraffes amble past; Pretorius was supposed to have more animals on his estate than there were in San Diego zoo.

The house itself came into view only as the limo climbed the shoulder of the rise: a Normandy chateau, with sharply ridged roofs and a spiky tower, standing in a formal garden of lawns and clipped hedges. The limo rumbled over a wide cattle grid that bridged a steep-sided ditch with razor wire on the outward-facing slope – to keep the animals out of the garden, Cochrane supposed – and drew up by the mansion's great Gothic door where Dr Pretorius's PR man, Ransom, was waiting.

Dr Pretorius was ready to talk, Ransom said, as he led Cochrane around the side of the house. As they walked across a sweep of gravel towards a huge glasshouse framed with Victorian ironwork, palms and tree ferns visible through the whitewash on its panels of glass, Ransom added, "Dr Pretorius is eager to tell the truth about his life. He won't hold anything back, Larry. You must trust him."

But Cochrane knew that his job really started when the subjects of his investigations finally agreed to talk, because they only wanted to tell their version of the truth, to smokescreen, to play the victim, to shift the blame. Cochrane had had the president of RoChemCo telling him that careless local workers had caused the explosive outgassing in the Calcutta plant that killed thousands in the surrounding shanty town; the chairman of ScotOil blaming environmentalists for regulations that had distracted the crews of his company's tankers and led to illegal discharges killing millions of seabirds and seals in the new Falklands oil fields; the Police Chief of Tupelo blaming rioters for inciting police to violence that left more than 20, including a grandmother and two children, dead of shotgun wounds after cops opened up on a group protesting compulsory prayer in schools.

Larry Cochrane was a master at the adversarial techniques of the new, aggressive breed of journalist. He didn't agree, he didn't gently point out the contradictions his interviewees tangled around themselves: he went for the jugular. He had been carried out of the RoCoChem headquarters by four security guards. He had screamed into the face of the police chief until she burst into tears. The interview with the chairman of ScotOil had ended after the man threw a lead decanter at him. Cochrane knew what he wanted and he didn't care how he got it.

But Dr Pretorius disarmed Cochrane by simply agreeing with everything. He said that it was all true, and he didn't care. "I'm disappointed," he said, with a sly, foxy smile. He leaned forward in his wheelchair, and said into the Sony proDAT tape

recorder on the wicker table, "You've done so much work, Mr Cochrane. You've found out where the bodies are buried. You are quite right when you say I have exploited the desperation of dying men and women. But you haven't stopped to consider this. No one wants to die, and that is why I am rich."

Dr Pretorius was hunched within a crocheted shawl, with a tartan blanket wrapped around his legs, as immune to the stifling heat in the huge greenhouse as a mummy. Only his head and hands were visible. If he really was 500 years old, he looked every day of it: a mummy indeed, the dry, deeply wrinkled leathery skin of his face sunk so close to his skull that the arches of his cheekbones and the jut of his jaw were clearly visible. Only his white hair, combed back from his high forehead and crowned by a crocheted skull cap, showed any vigour. His hands were spotted with age, and constantly fretted at the hem of his shawl; his nails were curved like talons.

Cochrane leaned forward, too. The wicker chair creaked under his 200 pounds. With his face less than a couple of handspans from Dr Pretorius's long, sharp nose, he said, "The Mexican government has agreed to the demands of the FDA that clinics like yours should be subject to full licensing procedures. Tell me you're not worried by that, *doctor*. Terminal cancer patients have spent every last cent on your so-called cures. AIDS patients have died while crossing the border because of the false hopes you held out. Your clinic has peddled some weird treatments in its time, none of them anything to do with real medicine. The monkey gland extracts, for instance. How will you explain those in court?"

"In fact, they were based on the blood of langur monkeys. There were unfortunate side effects, but it really did promote rejuvenation of the skin. As for patient deaths, how many die in hospitals? How many are killed by the treatments that are supposed to help them? Modern medicine is a brutal business, a matter of poisoning the patient to the edge of death in the hope that his illness is more susceptible. Ah, Mr Cochrane, they come to my clinic because they are dying. Even if they are cured, many die of secondary infections they acquired during their illnesses.

"But that is not what I wish to talk about. I am interested in your interest in my history. That's why I allowed you here, as my guest."

"I'd say you're looking at extradition, at families of your patients suing you for everything you have, at charges of murder and false practice. You don't look like you've got long to live yourself, and I think you'll spend the rest of your short life being reamed by sex-starved lifers."

"I did not realize you were homosexual," Dr Pretorius said. "Ah, but perhaps you do not realize this yourself." He looked amused. "You are 32, Mr Cochrane. Your father died of heart failure in his 58th year; there is a history of pancreatic cancer in your mother's family. Actuarial tables would give you no more than another 30 years. How would you like to live to be a hundred?"



Cochrane had plans to live much longer than that. Keeping his face still, he said, "And end up looking like you?"

"You would have to live a lot longer than that," Dr Pretorius said.

"How old are you?"

"You already know the answer to that question, I believe," Dr Pretorius said, calmly meeting Cochrane's gaze.

Cochrane called his bluff. "I'm supposed to believe what could be a bunch of fake documents?"

"But you *do* believe. You are hungry for my secret, Mr Cochrane. *That* is why you think you are here, although, as I said, you are here because I allow it. Because I want my story known."

Cochrane made a counterstrike. "Maybe I'm not interested in your story. Maybe a better story would be your arrest and trial. Let's face it, I'm here because I threatened to print an exposé of your crimes."

"I think you'll find that most were committed in other countries, far away and long ago. It is not human justice I fear, Mr Cochrane, but it is true that you could be a... nuisance. Please, ask questions. I will answer as I can."

Cochrane was ready for this tactic. Everything was in his head: his memory was part of his success. He didn't need to flip through notes, or pause to check facts. He said, "Let's start with a simple one. You were involved with the Edinburgh surgeon, Dr Moreau. There was a scandal, and Moreau quit the country. It was rumoured that Burke and Hare –"

Dr Pretorius's laugh was like the dry rattling of seeds in a gourd. "Moreau had no need of those gentlemen. His was more a veterinary art. He called himself a surgeon, but he was a butcher. He knew nothing of sepsis, to begin with. He stole secrets, Mr Cochrane. His end was quite fitting, an epitaph to all such meddlers."

"Then there was no connection between Moreau, yourself, and Dr Henry Jekyll? I have clippings from the *Scotsman* that says otherwise. July 5th, 1886."

"Dr Jekyll was a poor unstable fellow. He fled to London, you know. Reports of his death were quite exaggerated. There was a spate of murders that had his stamp... Now, *he* did know something of surgery."

"And you vanished, too. There's a gap in the records of about five years."

"Ah, Africa," Dr Pretorius said. "It was a foolish expedition, but not one I regret. I have learned to regret nothing. Poor Ayesha. I loved her, you know. Oh, not in the coarse physical sense. It was something higher, something purer. It was a true meeting of minds. Haggard claimed her for himself in that ridiculous account, but he was no gentleman. He tried to force her in the worst way, and the wounds accelerated her aging – and so she tried to purify herself too early. Perhaps I do regret saving Haggard's life, but one can't live on regrets. I went there in search of rejuvenation, and it was one place untouched by science, as was my poor, lovely Ayesha, but Haggard and his jack-booted kind – I think also of that bombast Challenger – put an end

to that. The last of magic vanished under a wash of British Empire red. Well, but I was already tainted myself, of course."

Cochrane wondered if the man's bravado was nothing more than senility. Old men grow arrogant, forgetting the uncertainty of their youth, forgetting defeat and remembering only victory. Make a jump. Catch him in a lie, a contradiction. He said, "You were linked to a number of women in the 30s."

"No doubt you know their names better than I do. They were only human, Mr Cochrane. Goddesses on the silver screen, of course, but not in the flesh. Our friendships were, of course, purely platonic. All girls together, as it were."

"At least one had an abortion."

"More than one. They came to my clinic for that, amongst other things. I suppose you read it in one of Anger's books. *He* was here, you know. A beautiful, puckish young thing. He rode up on a motorcycle with a Mexican lad who was surely underage. There *was* some scandal when Garbo found James Whale and Anger's Mexican Adonis sucking off each other – her phrase, you understand – in the rose garden. *She* was here with her own lover, of course, a vain but rather glorious woman who made a habit of stealing women from men."

Dr Pretorius had slyly trumped Cochrane with this story. He was a harder target than he looked, and Cochrane thought that he would enjoy breaking him down. It was time to bring this round to the power he held over this old man.

But Dr Pretorius quickly dismissed the allegations about collaboration with Ilsa Magall. He rolled up his sleeve and showed the blurry blue numbers tattooed on his wrist, and said, "I am a homosexual and a Jew. Luckily, they put the star on me, not the triangle: the queers flew up the chimney almost as soon as their feet touched the mud. Mr Cochrane, I worked as an alternative to death. Old men who did not work lasted no longer in the camps than the time it took to have them undress and step into the showers."

"The Israeli government will take a different view, if I choose to tell them where you are. They're looking for a Dr Loew, but that number on your wrist will be enough identification."

Dr Pretorius shrugged inside his shawl. "You have no proof, or you would show it to me. You are my guest here, Mr Cochrane."

"Then you admit you're guilty."

"Of course I'm guilty. I'm a damned soul, damned by my pact with Astorath, and proud of it. Perhaps you're damned too, perhaps not, but I *know* I am. It is a privileged position."

A moment later, a male nurse and the PR man, Ransom, appeared through the sweating greenery. Just before he was wheeled away, Dr Pretorius said, "Look around as much as you want, but you will not be allowed beyond the ha-ha. It is for your safety, you understand: wild creatures live in the grounds. You interest me, Cochrane. I may allow you to tell my story. In the house you may find such evidence as you need, to convince you."

"Convince me?"



"Of my history," Dr Pretorius said, and then he was wheeled away through a curtain of hanging ferns. "Show him, Ransom."

Ransom was a bluff, British guy in his late 60s, ex-Royal Air Force and as stiff as a ramrod, his carefully ironed Jaeger blazer and crisp white haircut visibly wilting in the dry heat as he walked Cochrane through the extensive gardens to the guest bungalows. Dr Pretorius would see Cochrane the next day, Ransom said; he hoped that an overnight stay wasn't an inconvenience?

"I guess that's the Brit way of saying I'm a prisoner."

"Oh no. No no. A guest."

Cochrane wondered if this was some way of making a move on him. If they tried, they were in for a surprise. He said, "I'd have to make a call to my office. They like to know where I am, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, quite," Ransom said. "We want you to enjoy your stay here."

"Yeah? I think I will look around. Soak up the atmosphere. Shake off the stink of the boonie fishing village I just spent two days in. I don't like being made to hang about, Ransom. In fact, I fucking hate it. The only compensation is that I get to write *everything* up. If I don't get what I want, your boss will hang in Tel-Aviv."

"Dr Pretorius wants you to write the truth. His true history."

"And what's that? Beyond the fact he's ready to make a run for it?"

Ransom emitted a patently false laugh. "I believe you should talk to your researcher, Larry, but before that perhaps I could show you around the house and grounds. This place has seen quite a bit of history. Chaplin stayed in the bungalow we'll put you up in, and Churchill next door. Still has the cigar humidor Dr Pretorius had installed for him. Did I give you the information pack?"

"I glanced at it."

"Best thing to do with that kind of stuff," Ransom said. He was the kind of PR flak who agreed to everything. "Better at first hand, eh? I believe Dr Pretorius suggested that you look around the house."

"Sure," Cochrane said. He was already tired of the man's bluff, hollow heartiness, and said that perhaps he'd go freshen up.

"Look around by yourself, by all means," Ransom said. "But please, as Dr Pretorius suggested, don't wander across the ha-ha – the perimeter ditch? We wouldn't like any of the animals chasing after you."

"Someone was killed, weren't they?"

"Ah, I see you've done some research. Yes, some minor 50s starlet was killed by a jackal. Silly girl couldn't hold her drink and wandered off downhill towards the sea. But that was a long time ago, and you're more sensible, I know. I believe that your cocaine habit is quite cured, for instance."

Cochrane wasn't surprised that Pretorius's people had been checking up on him. He said, "The 50s, that was when they were coming up here for so-called rejuvenation injections, right?"





"Oh no, not here at the house. That would be the clinic."

"The one that's closing down."

"Re-locating," Ransom said firmly.

"Whatever. I heard she was found naked."

"Animals often do that before they eat. Strip the clothes off. I was in Africa," Ransom added, then said goodbye to Cochrane at the door of the guest bungalow.

The bungalow was a big, airy room with a tiled bathroom in back. Cane furniture, white shutters, a fan slowly turning up in the rafters, gave it an old-fashioned British colonial ambience.

Cochrane's bag was at the foot of the bed; his clothes neatly folded away in the bamboo dresser. Cochrane opened up his Compaq portable and unshipped his phone coupler – but the only way of dialling out was through an old-fashioned mechanical switchboard that wouldn't support computer traffic.

"Can you believe this shit," he said to Howie Zaslow, when he finally got through to L.A. on the phone. "The fucker's got the biggest satellite dish outside of NASA sitting in back of his stately pile, and I bet all he uses it for is to jack off to the Playboy channel. I want to download stuff from you, I'm going to have to get someone to drive me to the nearest public phone."

Zaslow's voice crackled down a thousand miles of copper cable and bad connections into the cream bakelite handset. "Did he talk?"

"Not exactly. He's playing games. He agreed with everything I said, then tried to fob me off with sex scandals from the Jurassic, and even more blatant shit about pacts with devils. The Nazi stuff shook him, though. He has me shut up in the estate right now."

"Are you in trouble?"

"Hell, no. This is just part of the negotiations." Cochrane thought it funny, Zaslow concerned about his safety when he had nothing but bad news for the little nerd.

Zaslow said, "He might come after me, too."

"Don't be chickenshit. I'm the one who's out here. You want to benefit from this, you better work your sad ass digging dirt."

"You still don't know if he *has* a secret," Zaslow said. "For instance, he could be a mutant. You wouldn't be able to benefit from an oddity in his genetic makeup."

"He's as human as you and me. Just a hell of a lot older."

"Not every mutant is a monster. In fact, most aren't. There are plenty of single-locus mutations – "So I'll sell him to science," Cochrane said impatiently. They'd been through all this before, and it hadn't convinced Cochrane then. "Do what I tell you," Cochrane said. "Speculate on your free time."

Zaslow said, "Well, I got more on his career. There was a Dr Pretorius teaching natural philosophy and chemistry at the University of Ingolstadt in the 1800s. He was involved with a scandal concerning some Swiss student. Something about robbing graves, and maybe necrophilia. The student disappeared after a riot."

"I don't give a fuck about ancient history. We'll only get Pretorius to come across with the goods if he knows we have evidence that could hang him."

Cochrane was about to put down the phone, then said on a whim, "Oh, check out the name Astorath for me."

"Animal, vegetable or mineral?"

"How the hell should I know? Pretorius said he had some kind of deal going with him. Just do your job, and I'll try and find a place to plug in my modem."

The manicured gardens around the house were extensive: long formal beds of roses, shedding petals in the heat, between trimmed evergreen hedges; neatly pruned fruit trees; a formal Japanese garden with sinuously raked gravel and an arrangement of the oldest bonsai Cochrane had ever seen. Tennis courts, a manicured croquet lawn, a swimming pool in white marble with a reproduction of Rome's Trevi fountain spouting water at the deep end, and Neptune and mermaids worked in mosaic tile at the bottom of the crystal-clear water. A row of brightly painted cabins beyond; Cochrane checked one out, grinned when he saw the hand-carved daybed inside. The place had been famous for its discreet orgies in the 30s and 40s, Hollywood stars in cross-border hi-jinks safe from the press's prying eyes.

The gardens stretched around the back of the house towards a winding service road. Cochrane was watching two trucks toil up the dusty road when he heard the cry.

It came from somewhere near the back of the house, husky and plaintive, like the cry of a tired child, or a woman who'd worn her voice out weeping. Cochrane walked along the path in the shadow of the house's high wall, looking through the first floor's mullion windows, but it was only when he heard the cry again that he found the grating. It was set flush in a square of concrete, a hinged grid of strong steel bars fastened by a padlock to a steel staple, with a covering of rusting wire mesh. Cochrane kicked aside the mesh and then stepped back with a start when fingers reached up through the bars.

"Hey," Cochrane said. "Who's down there?"

The fingers were long and white and slender, with coarse hair sprouting at the joints. They flexed like sea-anemone tentacles, as if tasting the air.

"Hey," Cochrane said again. He glanced around, but there was no one in sight. "Hey. Are you one of Pretorius's guests?"

The fingers gripped the bars, and for a moment an oval shape – a face – glimmered in the darkness before sinking back down out of sight. There was a scent... orange blossom and the musk of roses... it was suddenly all around Cochrane, like a presence. More plaintive cries drifted up from the darkness; Cochrane thought he heard the word *friend*. He looked around again. The sun-stunned gardens were still deserted.

*Friend*. Someone down there needed his help. Dreamily, he took the 9mm automatic from his shoulder holster and shot off the grating's padlock.

The pistol's vicious crack, although reflected by



the house's high walls, was not as loud as Cochrane expected – he'd only ever shot it in the gallery of his local target range, never before in open air. There was a shriek from the darkness beneath the grating, then silence. Cochrane lifted up the grating, called down that it was okay, but there was no response.

Cochrane waited a few minutes, calling down into the darkness at intervals. Frustrated, and suddenly nervous that security guards would at any moment come crashing onto the scene, he walked away, then came back and called again. Nothing. And the smell – a zoo stench, thick and cloacal. No way was he climbing down into some unlit stinking cellar. Not that he was afraid of what was down there. No, he didn't want to fuck up his \$2,000 Armani suit.

Cochrane headed back towards the cluster of guest bungalows. As he started to cross the wide, billiard-smooth croquet lawn, Ransom drove up in a golf cart decorated with Pretorius's crest – a shield embraced by a thing half snake, half dragon.

Dinner would be served soon, Ransom said. "Hop in. No need to walk in this heat."

Cochrane, feeling the warm weight of the automatic inside the shoulder holster under his jacket, said, "I need a modem connection."

"I'll see it's ready for you after dinner."

"Will your boss be there?"

"He eats alone. Always has done. Come on, you can keep me company. Gets lonely up here. No one to talk to."

"What about the other servants?"

"They're hardly human," Ransom said, and made a neat turn onto the gravelled drive that led up to the house.

At the time, Cochrane put this remark down to Ransom's Tory English xenophobia. Later, he wished he'd paid more attention to the PR man.

Certainly, he didn't take much notice of the brief tour of the public rooms of the house: he already knew most of what he was shown from Zaslow's research. There was a library with thousands of leather-bound volumes, some of them chained to their shelves ("Incunabulae," Ransom explained), a long hall with Tudor oak panelling black as pitch, suits of armour standing to attention under faded banners hanging from high rafters and a vast fireplace, a small cinema with a yellowing screen and cracked leather armchairs, and what Ransom called the museum, where hundreds of glass jars of every size stood on steel shelving. Inside, floating in alcohol, were slabs of tissue, organs, and human and animal embryos at every stage of development. A man hung on a rack in a glass jar taller than Cochrane, his skin flayed to show the muscles beneath, his eyes burned milky white by alcohol. An entire pickled menagerie of creatures Cochrane couldn't begin to identify.

"Dr Pretorius has made a long study of teratology," Ransom said, tapping a jar where something like a finny snake curled. The man gave off an odour compounded of whisky fumes and stale cigar smoke.

Cochrane picked up a human skull; a grisly tail of

vertebrae was still attached, the bottommost cut in a ragged line.

"Ah, now that is the skull of the inestimable Dr Dee," Ransom said. "Dr Pretorius likes to keep reminders of his past adventures."

Cochrane knew that he should stay calm, stay cool, now that the promise of 500 years of life was within his grasp, but Pretorius's presumption at holding him hostage, and Ransom's bland affability, rubbed him the wrong way. The whole setup made him deeply uneasy. Rationally, he knew that this was just a show; instinctively, the place gave him the creeps, and his mind kept returning to the plaintive cries, the long white fingers, of whoever had been locked under that grill.

He said to Ransom, "Are you part of Pretorius's little game?"

Ransom blinked owlishly in the dim electric light. "It's no game, Larry. Dr Pretorius is deadly serious."

"So am I. I know enough about him to have him hung in Tel Aviv. It would make a great show trial. The Israelis couldn't get Magall or Mengele, but your boss is the next best thing. What's it like, working for an ex-Nazi? Were you in the war, Ransom? How do you square that?"

"I was a navigator for a Lancaster bomber. Dr Pretorius was a prisoner in a death camp."

"He was working for Ilsa Magall. The Destroying Angel."

"Let him tell his story, Larry. He really does want to have his history told, but your threats upset him."

"Yeah? Tough shit. He's so upset he kidnapped me."

"You're his guest." Ransom cocked his head; a moment later a gong sounded distantly. "Dinner, I believe."

When Cochrane returned to his bungalow an hour later, replete with swordfish and half a bottle of '81 Chardonnay (he and Ransom had served themselves from a catering trolley; there was no sign of any servants), he found his computer on the desk, plugged into a modem whose cable snaked out of a window. A moment later, Cochrane was talking to Howie Zaslow on the phone; a few minutes after that, his computer was decoding the first graphics files and loading them into the picture-viewing programme.

A bunch of facsimiles of typed letters in German, on note-paper headed with the S.S. winged death's head, the S's replaced with the infamous double-lightning flash, Pretorius's name underlined a dozen times. A photograph in blurry greys of Dr Pretorius, looking scarcely younger than he did now, stiffly shaking hands with a woman in black S.S. uniform in front of tangles of barbed wire. Reproductions of pages from laboratory notebooks: columns of figures in cramped copperplate, each page stamped with the death's head.

While Cochrane's bubblejet printer was busy, Zaslow told him, "I checked the number tattooed on the wrist of the man in the photograph. It's the same as the one given to Dr Pretorius at Treblinka in 1941. The photograph was taken a year later, at Auschwitz-Birkenau; he was there under the name



of Loew. There's more background on the other stuff I sent you earlier, too. That guy in the daguerreotype next to Pretorius is Brunel, the Victorian engineer; the machine is supposedly some kind of deep boring device they developed. I got into the records of the Royal Geographic Society, too. A Dr Pretorius accompanied Professor Challenger on an expedition along the Orinoco. Around about 1890."

"Forget all the old shit. It's the Nazi stuff that will clinch this."

Zaslow said, sounding hurt, "It's important to get the whole story if it's what Pretorius wants."

"Fuck what Pretorius wants. It's what I want that counts."

After a brief pause, Zaslow said, sounding more distant than ever, "I found out about that name you asked about."

"Go ahead."

"Astorath is the name of a demon. In fact, he's one of the Dukes of Hell. He's supposed to manifest himself as a beautiful angel astride a dragon, with a viper in his hand. It seems that the Church gave him a sex change, by the way. Originally he was a she. Astarte, the Indo-European Goddess of creation and destruction. Athtar to the Egyptians. Astroarche, in Aramaic. The morning star of Heaven, Queen of the Stars who ruled over all of the dead whose spirits could be seen as stars. In short, he's big juju. If Pretorius —"

Cochrane laughed. "I forget that you're an egghead, just like Pretorius. Believe me, this mystic bullshit is just another smokescreen. Stay cool, Howie. I'll see you get what's coming to you."

Cochrane put down the phone, waited a few heartbeats, then dialed the number for which he'd paid \$10,000. "Time to get to work," he told the man at the other end. "My assistant has outlived his usefulness."

He put down the phone. He didn't feel a thing. Zaslow was a mayfly voice buzzing in his ear. This was not a secret to be shared with those not worthy. He wondered if there were many others like Dr Pretorius, if there was a secret cabal of immortals. A dream he'd been enjoying, this past week. Becoming a Master of the Universe. Learning the real secrets. Power. Life was power. The dead sure as shit didn't have any.

That was when Cochrane realized that there was gunfire somewhere in the grounds.

It was dark now. Holding the 9mm automatic inside his jacket pocket, Cochrane navigated the garden by the reflected glow of the floodlights which lit the sheer walls of the house. Out in the darkness beyond the house was the distant sound, like popcorn kernels snapping, of automatic gunfire, unmistakable to any resident of Los Angeles.

A jeep was parked on the other side of the ha-ha: the searchlight on its cab roof caught in its beam something human-sized running crookedly towards a clump of trees a couple of hundred yards downhill. The creature turned to the light, raised its arms above its head, and yelled hoarsely. Cochrane, a hundred yards away, stepped back. The thing's face was the muzzle of a beast, its mouth full of crooked fangs. A

man on the load bed of the jeep took aim. Two spaced shots: the creature dropped, kicked, and was still. The jeep's motor started and it spun away downhill.

Behind Cochrane, Ransom said, "You should have waited for me, Larry. We're having a bit of a cull. A few of the experimental animals escaped."

Cochrane thought of long white fingers probing through the grill. His heart was beating quickly; the beast's human cry had shocked him. He said, "What kind of experimental animals?"

"Monkeys, mostly. A few chimpanzees and orangutan. No more than the usual kind of specimens, you know."

The thing that Cochrane had seen shot down was no ape or monkey. And the fingers at the grating....

"Come this way," Ransom said. "Dr Pretorius is waiting."

The lights of the greenhouse had been reduced to a muted moonlight glow, but the wet heat was no less stifling than it had been that afternoon. As before, Dr Pretorius sat in his wheelchair with a glass and a bottle of gin on the table beside him. He was hunched inside his blankets and shawls, but there was a quick eagerness in his voice.

"You must know now that I need you, Mr Cochrane. I need you to tell the truth about me. My name must not be forgotten."

"I believe you're what you claim to be. That's not the problem. But you lied about your association with Magall. Let me help you. Otherwise, well, frankly, Dr Pretorius, you could be in real deep shit."

Dr Pretorius didn't answer at once. He poured a measure of gin into the glass, sipped it, and smacked his lips. "My one little vice," he said. "You have the documents, and you believe you have me. But I was not even an assistant, Mr Cochrane. She saw me as an animal with certain talents that were useful to her project."

"Talents which included torturing prisoners in experiments. You're guilty of war crimes, Pretorius."

Dr Pretorius looked amused. "Is that the best you can do? Shame on you, Mr Cochrane. Oh, the torture was real enough, but my part in it was an invention, a cover story which the Americans used to hide their discovery of what Magall really wanted. She wanted to create a race of killing machines, soldiers without fear, with perfect obedience. She learned of my reputation. I did what I was told, which is no doubt what you will tell me the camp kommandos also said. But I was not a kommando; I was a prisoner, a musselsman who wished only to avoid selection. Magall supplied the parts; I supplied the knowledge. How hungry she was to learn! But her plans became crazier and crazier, and most of her creations were too deformed for their hearts to support them, even when we used two or three in one body. Only one, a monster she called Boris, lived, and it was so tormented that it killed several female prisoners, and then Ilsa Magall herself, before the guards managed to shoot it down. How disappointed Astorath must have been at that setback! Through me, he thought to challenge God, but always it was the same story. Moreau was killed by the beastmen who discovered he was not God; Jekyll became



his own creature, and so destroyed himself; poor Victor followed his creature into the wastelands."

"Victor?"

"A student of mine. He was both worse and better than me. It was when the magic really began to die. No longer did we rely on spells, but merely upon electricity. Oh, there were a few holdouts who attempted a bastard marriage of alchemy and science. Poor mad West for instance, or the charlatan Robert Cornish. But magic was already dead, killed by Victor and those like him, cold clear-eyed men without an ounce of romance or passion in their souls."

"I suppose this would be at Ingolstadt."

Dr Pretorius shrugged. "I remember so little of the affair, to tell the truth. I had discovered the delights of gin and opium. Most of the 18th century is a blur to me."

"How many monsters are you responsible for?" Cochrane was thinking of the thing he had seen gunned down. He was wondering if there were any more. His 9mm pistol made a comforting weight in his jacket pocket.

"Monsters? You might call them that, I suppose. Ah, but my dear, exquisite King and Queen, my poor, shy creatures... these were not monsters. It is the process that creates such things that is monstrous. Science is a corrupting force because it allows power to be wielded by those who do not understand it. Do you know how your recorder there works, or how to fix your computer? Of course not. In my salad days, as a necromancer, I had to make all the tools of my Art myself. It was more than a precaution; it ensured that I was fully engaged in the Great Work. Nowadays, amateurs who have skimmed the works of Crowley call up demons they cannot control, and are devoured. Quite right too! And so with those who misuse science without understanding it.

"Victor may have been my best and brightest student; he at least studied Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus and knew that there was more to the working of the world than reductive rules unpicked by parsimonious experiment. Yet he failed. They all failed, and not because they reached too far. No, it was because they dared not reach *far enough*."

"These creatures of yours –"

"I like to keep my hand in, nothing more. An old man's hobby, and outdated besides. The little ambition behind my small surgical dabbings is as nothing to the overweening pride of those who would render new creatures by meddling with DNA. They would erase one gene, rewrite others, mix genes from different creatures, and yet they are like painters obsessively reworking a tiny patch of a vast picture they can never comprehend. Listen –"

Cochrane said after a moment's silence. "I don't hear anything."

"He's watching us, and how little he understands. A nice metaphor. But *you* understand, Mr Cochrane. You will tell my story. This nonsense about my time in the camp, it is only a negotiating ploy. I understand that. But I have given you the story anyway. You can tell it all. In fact, I insist that you do."

Cochrane took out his pistol. "Fuck your story. I





want your secret. I want to be like you, and live forever. If you think I'm going to sell it to some glossy for a flat fee you're out of your mind."

Dr Pretorius's eyes did not leave Cochrane's face. "Or you will shoot me? Then you will not leave my property alive. Already you have meddled. I know it was you who set my poor innocent children free, but I forgive you and I will give you my secret, much good it will do you."

"I'll want more than that. I'll want to be certain it works. You're running away because you're a fraud who can no longer hide the truth that your cures don't work. There is only one thing you have that's valuable, and I want it."

"Of course, of course. You are a very modern man, Mr Cochrane. You believe that science can accomplish everything it can dream of. How Astorath would laugh to see in you his victory! For he *has* won. Science has grown in power beyond his wildest dreams. God is dead, or if not, he soon might be. Cosmologists abolish him from the universe, and set up a secular dream of evolution towards godhead, yet they understand only the first layer of reality, and think there are no more than that. But although my demon has triumphed, he shall not have me. I shall cheat him – ah, how sweet! – I shall cheat him by the instrument of his victory."

Cochrane stuck the pistol right in the old fool's face. "The secret."

Dr Pretorius said calmly, "You are as bad as the scientists. You have your poor servant supply you with knowledge, but you are not interested in knowledge for its own sake; you are interested in what you can do with it. It is a very old sin; Astorath merely provided a new context for it. The truth is that I have told you the truth. In my library, amongst the incunabulae, there is a Book of Hours by the Master of Bruges. A keepsake from an old love, in London. In the book is a parchment. I doubt that you can read Latin, but I expect that you can find someone to do it for you. Your poor assistant that you wanted killed, perhaps. Oh yes, we were listening in to your conversations on the telephone."

Cochrane said, "You'll tell the truth. Enough bullshit."

"Ah, but it is the truth."

"Then you *did* sign a pact with the devil?"

Dr Pretorius smiled. His teeth were small and black, like watermelon seeds. "With *a* devil. It was more than 500 years ago, but still I remember how scared I was. I was in my youth then, full of piss and hot air like most young men; it was almost as a joke that I called him forth.

"Certainly I did not believe it possible, but that, of course, is how Astorath's kind snare souls. Luckily, I had performed the ceremony correctly, and I was protected, or he would have eaten me there and then, for my presumption. He gave me the usual deal. Long life and knowledge beyond the dreams of mortal men, in return for my soul when I died.

"Cunningly, or so I thought in my youthful pride, I stipulated that I should age but five years in one century, supposing it as near to immortality as not.

It was not, of course, but I have plans to thwart Astorath, and I do not mean by recantation, the way by which moral cowards are allowed to sneak into Heaven, for despite their sins, their recantations spite Hell. You don't believe me, of course. Well, I am certain that I could call up Astorath for you, should you want it, but I can't guarantee your safety."

"He'd have to talk to my agent first."

"Among the creatures you set free was my familiar. No doubt it was he who seduced you into the act. I can show you –"

Cochrane, shaking with a surge of adrenalin, could hardly keep the pistol centred on Dr Pretorius's face. "The secret. The real secret. No more lies."

"My master is a servant of the father of lies. You deal in lies made from facts. Where shall we begin?"

"With the fact that I'll kill you for the truth. You know I'm capable of it."

"Of course. Listen. Listen." Dr Pretorius lifted his head and, with a hand like a bird's clawed foot, cast back a corner of his crocheted shawl, and cupped his large, veined, almost transparent ear.

This time Cochrane did hear something. A leafy rustle, a stealthy progress through the thickets of greenery that surrounded them. He turned, expecting to see Ransom, and yelled and jumped to his feet, sending his cane chair toppling, firing almost without thought as Dr Pretorius shouted:

"No!"

It was a lucky shot. The noise echoed in the high ironwork of the greenhouse as the creature fell back. It was a white-skinned ape with a scant covering of ginger hair, its head that of panther, its tongue long and forked, questing the air as it gasped out its last breath in a bower of crushed palmetto fronds. Its human hands clutched a blood-red blossom to its broad chest; its legs kicked, quivered; heels armed with cockspurs gouged concrete. Its yellow eyes fixed on Cochrane's, then gazed past him.

"It is so easy to kill," Dr Pretorius said, sounding tired. "Your assistant, for instance, how badly you would have rewarded him. But we warned him, and he will write my story if you will not. Put down that pistol, Mr Cochrane. You have had your chance."

With a sudden crashing, two burly guards pushed through the screen of cycads and ferns. One bent to the body of the dead creature; the other started to wheel Dr Pretorius away. Cochrane waved the automatic, but the guard carrying the body of the dead creature blocked his path. It was the hunchback giant from the gate. His craggy face was a patchwork of scars. What had he once been – bull, gorilla?

"Save your ammunition," Dr Pretorius called out. "You will need all of it to save yourself. Go now, and you may escape with your life."

The giant guard leered into Cochrane's face; the stench of his breath nearly knocked him down.

Cochrane ran in the other direction, bursting out of the greenhouse just in time to see the limousine pull away from the front of the spotlight house. He chased after it, but it sped around a curve and rattled over the cattle grid. Its red tail-lights dwindled downslope in the night.



The telephone in Cochrane's bungalow was dead, and so was the modem connection, but his computer was showing a message from Howie Zaslow. It was Dr Pretorius's last business transaction; he'd become the major shareholder in Resurrection, Inc., a company that froze heads or whole bodies of the terminally ill or newly dead until they could be revived and cured.

Dr Pretorius had made his escape.

The lights in the bungalow went out. The computer died; the phosphor glow of its screen faded to black.

Outside, the spotlights along the front of the house went out, too. In the distance, a human laugh rose and rose, its hysterical pitch breaking into a frenzied yelping.

The 9mm automatic in his hand, Cochrane stalked out into the dark garden. There was just enough light by the stars to see the white road running away down the black hillside. In the other direction, howls rose from somewhere behind the house. The things in the basement were coming out into the night.

Cochrane thought of running, but he'd never run from anything in his life. He knew that Pretorius's creatures could be killed – that was the important

thing. He couldn't read a word of Latin – as Dr Pretorius had pointed out, he'd always left that kind of thing to drones like Zaslow – and maybe he wouldn't even find the fucking Book of Hours and its precious scrap of parchment. But the prize was so great that he had to take the chance. He'd get some down-at-heel scholar to help him riddle the secret, and this time Astorath would be called up by someone who really knew how to cut a deal. Pretorius had said it: Cochrane was one of Astorath's children. He knew the score. Information technology. There were places to go with that, with a demon at your back. The whole world, just to start with.

Howls braided the night, nearer now, closing in. Cochrane raised his pistol and howled back, and sprinted towards the house. His blood sang in his veins. He had never felt so alive as at this moment. When Pretorius woke from his long sleep, he would be in for a bad surprise.

Paul J. McAuley's last story for us was "Dr Luther's Assistant" (issue 68), and his latest novel is *Fairyland* (Gollancz). A long-overdue interview with him follows.

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**Paul McAuley**  
interviewed by  
James Lovegrove

# MYTHIC

**P**aul J. McAuley is the author of six novels, including *Secret Harmonies* and *Red Dust*, and a collection of short stories, *The King of the Hill*. His debut novel, *Four Hundred Billion Stars*, won the Philip K. Dick Memorial Award, and both *Eternal Light* and *Pasquale's Angel* were shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award. With Kim Newman he co-edited the anthology *In Dreams*, and his latest novel, *Fairyland*, which he describes as "a post-cyberpunk romp," is published in August 1995 by Gollancz. Given all this literary success, it comes as no surprise that he is soon to be giving up his day-job as a lecturer in botany at St. Andrew's University to concentrate on writing full-time.

**What is this affinity science-fiction authors have for the middle initial?** Isn't it what sf writers are supposed to do? Actually, in my case, I just wanted to break up the assonance of "Paul McAuley."

**And let's get the boring question out of the way: how did you get into writing?**

It's a boring answer. I just wrote. It wasn't like I decided, "I'm going to write for a living." It's just something I did. I remember, when I was about 14 or 15, I used to borrow the neighbours' typewriter and bang out really appalling novels which I never finished. When I was 17 I sold a short story to a magazine in the States, *Worlds of If*, but it folded, so I got the acceptance letter but no money. I didn't do any more writing for ten years. Then, when I was a resident alien in Los Angeles – interesting concept that, "resident alien" – I started doing it again. Oops. That makes it sound like some horrible habit. That's what happened, at any rate. I started banging stories out and eventually got a few accepted, and I just carried on from there. It's a very traditional route, and it's not hard to keep banging out short stories, especially when you're young and don't know anything.

**Of course, the short-story market in the States is much larger than in Britain.**

When I was starting out, there was a big recession in sf in the UK. This was the early 1980s. Barely anything was

going on. *Interzone* was around then, thank God, and it was great because that enabled me to publish two or three short stories a year. I had a job so I wasn't trying to live off writing. It wasn't like a serious commitment for me. I was serious *about* it but I wasn't trying to live off it. And I was lucky to be in on the coat-tails of what's built up since then, to have been caught up in the British sf boom.

**And why did you go for science fiction?**

It's just something I started reading when I was young, something that hooked me. I'd go to the library – this was the time when libraries actually had books in them – and I'd get out three or four sf novels a week, and I steadily worked my way through the library's entire collection. This was the early 70s and I read all the big names – Bester, Delany, Heinlein, Asimov and so on, Tom Disch too – and I was getting quite thrilled by the New Wave. I was finding *New Worlds* in W. H. Smith's, and thinking, This is great stuff! What really pushed my button in *New Worlds* were the Mike Harrison short stories.

**Would you say that those authors in particular have influenced you?**

People keep finding little bits of this, little bits of that in my work, but one of the things I was consciously doing in the last few novels was dipping into the richness of the shared field and using echoes and allusions to build up a bigger picture. It's kind of a cheat really, that by association you can build up something that's deep and rich simply by tapping into something that's already deep and rich. I still admire people like Delany and Disch, but I'm also into so-called "mainstream" authors such as Graham Greene – especially his short stories because they're so concise, not a word is wasted. I had a bad Hemingway period when I was young.

**It's almost obligatory.**

The obligatory Hemingway period. You start writing about fishing. Fishing on alien planets. Bullfighting, but they're not bulls, they're alien bulls with three horns.

**No wonder, with such a catholic taste in reading-matter, that your**

**work shows such a diversity of themes and styles: the space opera of *Eternal Light*, the political allegory of *Red Dust*, the slipstream parahistory of *Pasquale's Angel*, and now *Fairyland*... This must be conscious, this desire to do something different each time.**

I guess I'm scared of getting stuck doing the same thing over and over, churning out *The Chronicles of Somebody-or-Other, Volume 9*. But also I just get interested in different things. People ask me if I'm going to do a sequel to *Pasquale's Angel*. I know what's going to happen next after *Pasquale* gets onto the ship and goes off to the New World, but whether I want to write it or not is another question. Since I did so much research for that book, it would be shame to waste it, but when *Fairyland* came along, I decided I had to go with that instead.

***Fairyland*, which deals with the impact on the world of the creation of a race of genetically engineered fairies, isn't just about the ethics of genetic engineering but also about the interface between mythology and pop culture. These fairies appear, and they assimilate themselves into global culture surprisingly easily.**

Well, you see, they have no culture. They're invented creatures, they're made creatures from made creatures. The fairies begin with this thing I call a doll, which is really a genetically engineered monkey, a baboon. The dolls are being used as slaves and for sexual purposes and so on, and then you have a bunch of people who do an animal liberation number on them, and these people evolve the fairies from the dolls. The fairies are intelligent creatures but they get their intelligence in a day and they have no family, they have no culture, so they have to come up with their own.

**And the culture comes from the mind of a nine-year-old girl whose genius has been artificially accelerated. She's responsible for creating them.**

Milena is responsible for creating them, but she has no responsibility thereafter. She's like an Epicurean god. She actually disclaims responsibility for what she's done. In part the book is about the morality of creating



# TEMPLATES

creatures. It's the old Frankenstein question. The Monster says, "You're responsible for me and I'm going to make you suffer, because you made me and made me suffer." Except that the fairies become a whole bunch of basement Frankensteins making their own little monsters. Milena only produces the first fairy. She comes up with the process and it gets disseminated. It's like gene hacking or whatever.

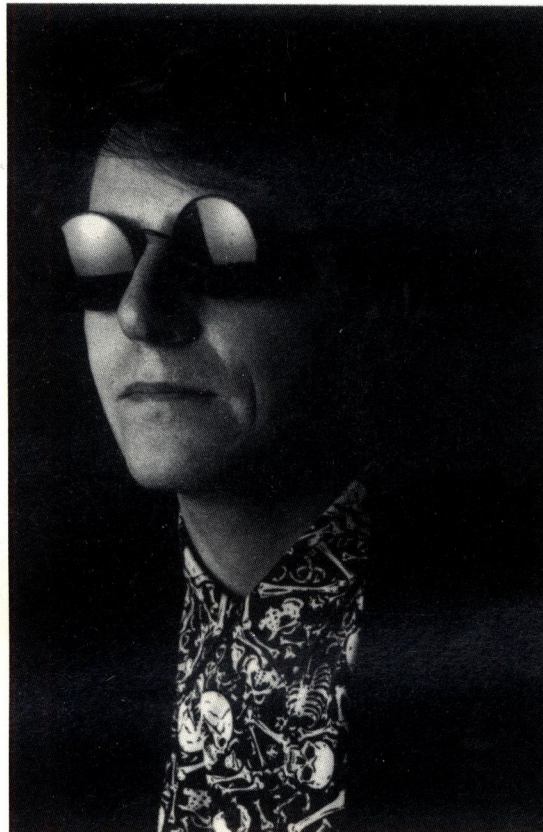
**The creatures then conform to the whole mythology of a "fairyland." They readily assume the roles of trolls and Fey and Folk and so on.**

It's pushed onto them, and the book shows how they deal with the roles they assume, what they do with them. In fact, they begin to evolve variations on the traditional roles. There are trolls, but they're trolls armed with bazookas and stealth weapons. They're not nice. But then fairies never were nice, this is the thing. It was the Victorians who came up with the idea that fairies were cutesy. Conan Doyle had that notion. Kipling, too. But in fact, if you go back and look at what fairies were originally about, they were pretty awful. They were cruel, they were the Other, they were the Wild, they were the thing outside the pattern of firelight, the thing outside the little walled villages of medieval England when there were still forests, before the forests were clear-felled. They were the embodiment of what people didn't know about nature.

**Do you think that the whole UFO phenomenon is just a modern synthesis of fairy mythology? Artists' impressions from abductees' descriptions of extraterrestrials always show these elfin-looking creatures.**

Oh, absolutely. It's another expression of the unknown, but in this particular case the unknown is technology.

Flying saucers and the atomic bomb are indivisible. The belief that the Venusians are coming to save us from ourselves is simply an expression of people's deep-rooted worries.



**And the UFO-kidnapping thing is just the modern equivalent of the old folk myth of someone being "away with the fairies."**

What's interesting is the aliens do medical exams. If you've ever known anybody who's been seriously ill, you'll know that modern medicine is a fairly brutal business. The medical exam aspect of UFO abduction seems to be a very American thing, stemming from the fear of the body. The body is now the Other. Which is partly a cyberpunk thing, too – you know, the body is "meat." So now you have twelve-year-old hackers on the Internet going on about "meat." They've no regard for it, it's just a shell. Milena in *Fairyland* wants to escape this, escape her physical limitations, so she invents herself as a goddess and in the end

does what I call the Ultimate Hack, which is to hook your mind into a computer, or rather a simulation of your mind, because you can't actually get your own mind in. This is the frightening thing, you have to kill yourself to do it, and the simulation lives on. It's a fine theological point, whether the simulation is actually you or not. But she does the Ultimate Hack for completely different reasons than computer freaks want to do the Ultimate Hack. They just want to do it because it means they can have more computing time, and without having to worry about getting pizza.

**I was reminded, when reading *Fairyland*, of something Arthur C. Clarke said, about today's magic being tomorrow's technology.**

What was it? "Sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." That's the great science fiction let-out, like anti-gravity and nanotech and stuff like that. Whenever you get a new technology absorbed into science fiction, it's, "We don't know how it works – it must be magic."

**In *Pasquale's Angel* you draw comparisons between magic and science, although in your alternative 16th century, where da Vinci's inventions, instead of remaining on the drawing board, have been made a reality, the technocrats have become like magicians, and the magicians are almost redundant.**

Of course, it's not real magic, because it's not a book about magic. But the contrast lies in the process of science compared with the rituals of magic. If you're a scientist, you don't have to be particularly intelligent. As long as you can follow instructions, you can do science. That's the point of science, it's breaking down the universe, the way things work, into a series of simple rules or steps that you can test and manipulate until anybody can do them. Whereas with alchemy it's the opposite: only the operator can do it, if he follows certain steps which are particular to him, and he has to spend his entire life getting up to the point where he can achieve what he has set out to do. That's why science won out, because



science is a democratic, sharing process which disseminates knowledge very quickly. Somebody in the States will do an experiment, and if it's really important stuff, it'll be published in a few weeks, and then somebody in Japan will come along and check it and advance it some more, and then a few other labs will get in on the process. That's why science moves at such incredible speed. And that's why it can get out of control and stuff starts to happen that you didn't envisage. No way did Alan Turing, who basically invented the way modern computers work, envisage Nintendo. Neither did science-fiction writers. Nobody predicted the fax machine, for that matter. All the important things.

**But the fax machine has been technologically feasible for decades.**

The fax machine was invented in the 19th century by a Scottish shepherd. The Scots say they invented everything, but in this case it's true. He actually got a patent out on it, but it was just wrong for the times.

**The relationship between pop culture and mythology is also examined in *Red Dust*, although there you're showing how today's pop culture can become tomorrow's mythology, with Elvis Presley elevated to the status of a god.**

He's one aspect of this probe which multiplied itself in Jupiter, and to hold it together the programmers just dumped in a load of made-up personalities. He's not even the real Elvis, he's some programmer's idea of Elvis routines that mimic Elvis in a kind of heuristic way.

**The ultimate Elvis impersonator, in fact.**

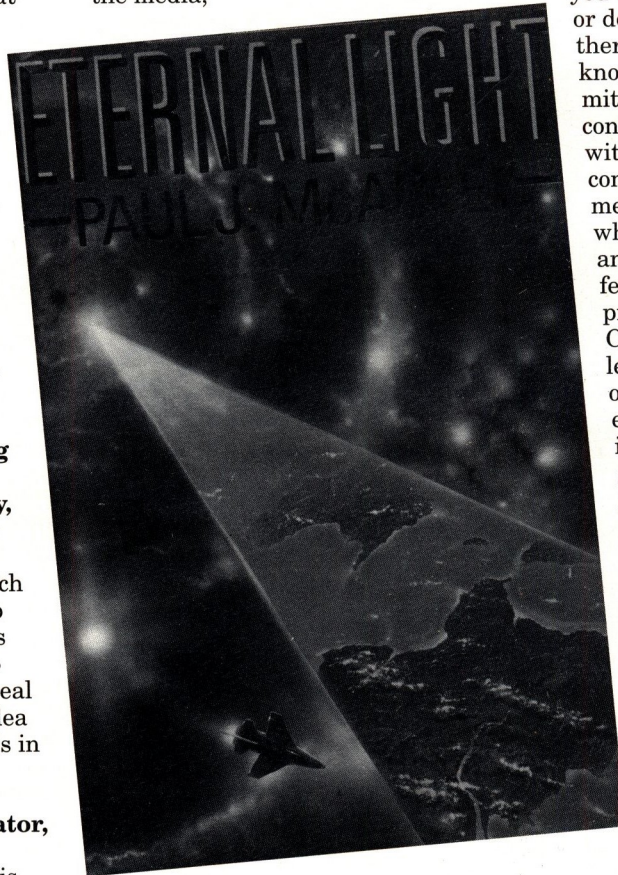
That's it, exactly. The difference is, there's no single aspect of Elvis. In mythology, especially in Greek mythology, which is the stuff I'm probably most familiar with, you can codify all the elements into neat little packages, all cross-referenced. People know the individual attributes of, say, Athena, but different people hold differing images of Elvis: for instance pre-Army Elvis, Las Vegas Elvis, or movie Elvis. There's no one particular image or attribute Elvis has, yet he's still recognizable, that's the interesting thing. I went for the film Elvis because it was a neat way of inverting the image of Elvis. Which will last? Will it be the music, or will it be the actual image? In some way, images are more powerful.

**Your novels been nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke Award twice. What are your thoughts on awards in general?**

It's nice that they're there. There are a lot of them, so eventually everybody gets one, which is also nice.

**But do you think that having awards for science fiction specifically is perpetuating the isolation of the genre from the mainstream, in effect saying, "We can't compete with the Booker so we're going to cop out"?**

What's interesting is you get exactly the same kind of log-rolling and squabbling and intrigues and walk-outs in science fiction awards as you do in the mainstream. The only difference is that sf awards are ignored by the media,



and that leaves people feeling sore and isolated, so you can't blame them for saying, "OK, you're ignoring us so we'll ignore you."

**The thing is that there are sf authors who could easily be players in the mainstream, but it isn't until they write mainstream fiction, like J. G. Ballard, that they get the recognition.**

There's not such a dichotomy in the States. Philip K. Dick is recognized now as an important 20th-century author for codifying the anxiety of the late 20th century, which Ballard does as well. The terrible anxiety we have about things falling apart. Back to the idea of flying saucers and things being out of control. The things beyond the firelight. Fear of technology. The literature of the 20th century, when you look back at it, is going to be the

literature of anxiety, and you can address that anxiety better, perhaps, through science fiction than through mainstream fiction.

**One shouldn't forget, though, that the 20th century has produced some friendly technologies.**

E-mail, for instance, which is the Victorian Penny Post by any other name. There are humanizing technologies you can absorb, but a lot of people are alarmed by something like genetic engineering because it tampers with the essence of what we are. You can't control what goes on in your body, not to any great extent. With training you can make your heart rate go up or down, things like that, but there's no way you can stop, I don't know, phosphorylation in your mitochondria. It's beyond your control. But now you can tamper with it, tamper with the hidden controls, get in the basement and mess with the boiler, and that's what people are worried about, and there are some legitimate fears there, because you can't predict what's going to happen. Certainly you can't predict, if you let a genetically engineered organism out, whether that engineered gene is going to stay in that organism or whether it's going to jump, because genes do jump around.

**Some people look to genetic engineering as a means to achieving perfection, perhaps even immortality, like the Golden in *Eternal Light*.**

The first person to get immortality will be some Hollywood star. The second person will be some politician. But perfect people already exist. Look at Elizabeth Taylor.

**I don't know if perfect's the word I'd use.**

But she's doing her best. Or Michael Jackson. They're just reinventing themselves, surgically, which is a crude process, of course, but eventually there'll be surgeons and machines that can work on a cellular level. Hence all the current interest in nanotechnology. But you also want to be able to alter things so that there's no need for surgery, so that the body can readjust itself. Hence genetic engineering. Genetic engineering has a lot of potential medical applications, but then you can see a point where the rich will get it and nobody else, and then what will you have? It'll add a whole new meaning to the word underclass. You'll actually have Wells's Morlocks. A hundred years on from *The Time Machine* and there you go, it's beginning to happen.



**In *Fairyland*, and *Red Dust* too to a certain extent, viruses are seen as agents of positive change, which is interesting in the light of the current fears about HIV and ebola and so on.**

We only see the bad viruses. Certainly the virus is a prime metaphor for late 20th-century malaise. Your computer gets "sick" because of a virus. It's not a virus, but people call it a virus because it *behaves* like one. But it also turns out that viruses could be a rather neat way of getting genetic information to cells, because that is what they do: they get their own information to cells to make the cells make more of them. So you could use a virus to get the good stuff in, the immortality gene, the Michael Jackson nose gene, or whatever. Therefore are they bad? It depends on what you use them for when you start tampering around. As in *Red Dust*, viruses can be useful machines as well.

**Viruses are sort of machines anyway, organic machines.**

It's just another way of saying "nanotechnology", basically. This goes back to the thing about advanced technology being indistinguishable from magic. You might cast a nanotech "spell" with a "magic" dust.

**Fairy dust.**

Exactly.

**As a scientist, do other authors' scientific lacunae or inaccuracies annoy you?**

What annoys me is the portrayal of scientists in fiction. Not in science fiction, because people who write sf are genuinely interested in science and will try and get it right. But what I hate is the old cliché about the mad scientist, the beautiful daughter –

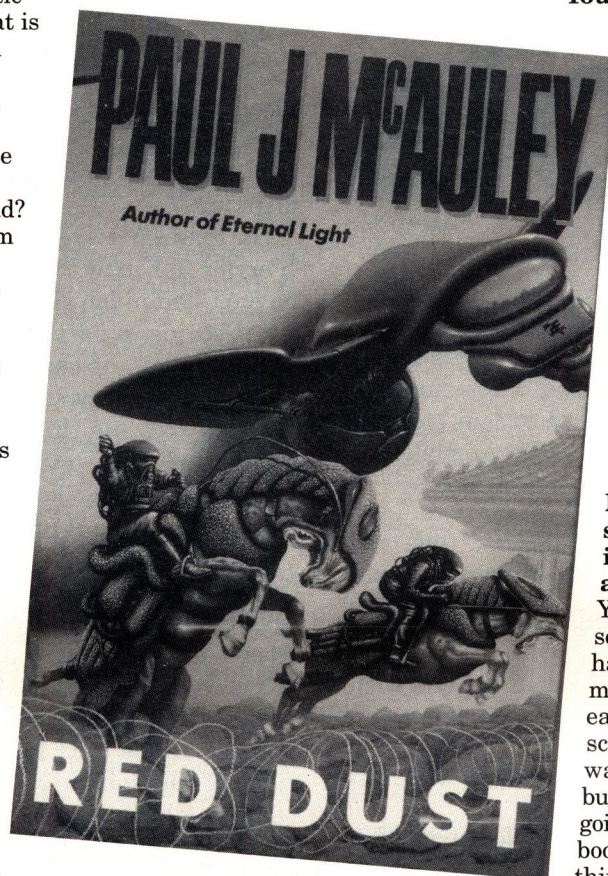
**The hunchbacked assistant.**

Yup. It doesn't exist any more. And I'm annoyed by the usual media thing about "boffins," bald men in lab coats.

**Michael Crichton heroes, in *Congo*, *Sphere*, *The Andromeda Strain*, are dashing scientists.**

But that goes in the opposite direction, that's like the Indiana Jones version of scientists. Scientists like the guy in *Jurassic Park* do exist. Palaeontologists are like that, they do endure appalling conditions in Mongolia to get those bones. And of course, archaeologists have all seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and so they all wear Indiana Jones hats, so it comes back to mythology feeding on itself. If a myth is strong enough, it will template itself on people's behaviour. Another

myth that has templated itself is the hacker cowboy myth. That's William Gibson's *Frankenstein's Monster*, all these people on the Internet with handles like Johnny Mnemonic and Count Zero, and they're just kids sitting in their bedrooms using their parents' accounts. A lot of people on the Net – not an overwhelming majority but quite a worrying few – have assumed that cowboy mentality. They used to do phone-freaking or whatever, and suddenly they've got a new role model: net cowboy.



**And the anonymity protects them.**

Yeah. Now they're cool. They've got another, non-nerdy persona, and they've adopted that and it becomes like a myth, so it becomes true. If it rings true, it becomes true.

**In *Dreams*, the anthology you co-edited, is dedicated to the magic of a piece of outmoded technology, the seven-inch single.**

*In Dreams* is not so much about songs or rock'n'roll but the culture that surrounds the seven-inch single itself. The seven-inch single as a cultural artefact. In fact, Barry Bayley contributed a great story about precisely that: a seven-inch single being unearthed and analysed by people in the future, who all of course get it completely wrong. Interpretation of what this physical thing is and what it does and how you use it is what was interesting to us. One of the things that annoys me about compact discs is

that the music on them isn't actually music. It's a series of blips that we're fooled into thinking is music. Whereas the nostalgia for vinyl lies to a certain extent in the fact that in those grooves is potentially the entire world. You know, the background noises that you can pull out or the sound engineers wanted to get rid of – you can hear all that stuff, the unintentional stuff. It's intriguing that club DJs still use the single as a medium.

**It's much more satisfyingly tactile. You're actually putting the needle in the groove.**

Which is very difficult to do with compact discs. The needle keeps slipping off! In fact, the culture around singles has become like publishing fanzines almost, with twelve-inch singles, white-label pressings, limited-edition records that are only played in clubs, all that. The old technology of pressing vinyl is still there, but it's gone underground, it's diverted itself into another channel. It hasn't died out. When Kim and I did the book we thought it would die out, but it hasn't.

**Might not books be going the same way, becoming a minority interest, becoming marginalized and cultish?**

Yeah, it's a great horror in the science-fiction community: "We have destroyed ourselves! We have made this virus and now it's going to eat us, and there will be no more science-fiction books!" *Fairyland* was set from disc, as a matter of fact, but at the moment, folks, you're still going to have to go out to the bookstore, pay money and bring this thing made of wood home with you.

**What are you currently working on?**

I'm working on a few short stories at the moment, but the next thing – because I'm tired of doing loads of research – is going to be set in the far future and I'm going to make it all up. It's going to be set millions of years from now, at the edge of the galaxy, and it'll have no humans. It'll feature a whole load of different aliens who were engineered by human beings who by that time were no longer human themselves, so there are actually no human beings at all in the book. It's probably going to end up being more about myths, about acting out mythic templates, which now seems to be my theme. Eventually, if you write enough books, you find they're all the same book or they've all got the same theme. So this one's going to be about myths, the importance of myths, but I'd look at that as the importance of stories, because we're always going to be telling ourselves stories. ■



# Ship *of* Fools

*Charles Stross*

**T**hey stopped me on the gangway and rolled up my left sleeve.

"Clockwork? Or quartz?" asked the one with the hammer.

"Oh - quartz," I said.

"Sorry, but rules are rules," said the one with the leather bag. I nodded.

He gently peeled the watch off my wrist and laid it over the ship's railing. Crunch: the hammer rebounded. He scooped what was left back into the bag, careful not to drop any glass fragments on the deck.

"I just forgot," I said, slightly stunned. "Is there anything else...?"

They looked at each other and shrugged. The one with the bag looked a little guilty. "Here, you can borrow mine," he said, offering it to me.

"Thanks." I tightened the strap, then carried on up the gangway. It was an old Rolex Oyster, case tarnished with decades of sweat. I glanced back. The hammer team waited patiently for their next target. The one with the hammer was wearing a red T-shirt with a logo on its back. I squinted closer at the marketing slogan:

**UNIX - THE TIME IS RIGHT.**

Rita was already in the fore-deck lounge when I got there. I had half-expected her not to show up, but we'd booked the tickets five years ago, three years before the divorce, and her name hadn't disappeared from the roster since then. I suppose I'd assumed she'd

forget, or dismiss it, or not think it worth bothering with. I waited for the usual cold shudder of unnameable emotions to pass, then headed for the bar.

Polished brass and wood gleamed in the gas-light like an old-fashioned pub. (The overhead electrics were powered down, except for the red glare of an emergency light's battery charge indicator.) One guy was already sitting on a bar stool, elbow-propped above his beer glass. I looked at him for a moment before I blinked and realized that it was the Professor. A blast from the past; he'd retired two years ago. I sat down on the stool next to him. There was nobody behind the bar, but I figured a steward would be along shortly.

"Marcus Jackman... isn't it?" he asked, glancing round at me. Time hadn't been kind to him; burst blood vessels streaked the tip of his nose and his eyes looked sore.

"Eight years and counting," I said. "What are you drinking?"

He glanced at the row of optics behind the bar: "Perrier for now, I think." He yawned. "Sorry, I haven't had much sleep lately."

"Anything in particular?" I asked.

"The usual," he said. "The chancellor put a gagging order on me, can you believe it? Said what I was saying was bad for the institute's public image. So I packed my bags and came here instead. Olaf said he'd keep a berth open for me but I didn't think I'd be taking him up on it until... oh, a month ago. If that."

I shook my head. A barman appeared silently: I tipped him the wink and he refilled the Professor's tumbler from the fizzy water tap. I asked for and received a double gin and tonic. I felt I needed it. "They wouldn't listen to you?" I asked.

The Professor shook his head. "Nothing ever changes at the top," he said sadly. "So what did you make of yourself?"

"I run a big switch site. Loads of bandwidth. Nothing that's going to be hit by the event - at least, not directly. But still, I don't trust my bank account, I don't trust the tax system... there's too much brittleness. Everywhere I look. Maybe I've just been tracking risks for too long, and then again..."

"You made a down payment on this holiday three or four years ago, eh?"

I nodded.

"They wouldn't listen to me," he muttered. "I kept on for as long as was reasonable, even though they told me it was a career-limiting move - as if some little thing like tenure would stop them - until I was too tired to go on."

"I get to see a lot, out in the real world," I volunteered. "That standard lecture piece you did, on the old reactor control system - I've seen worse."

"Oh yes?" He showed a flicker of interest, so I continued.

"A big corporate accounting system. Used to run on a bundle of mainframes at six different national headquarters, talking via leased line. Want to hear about it?"

"Pray continue." I had his attention.

"They downsized everything they could, but there



were about 50 million lines of PL/I on the accounts system. Nobody could be bothered to bring it up to date – it had taken about 200 programmers 20 years to put it all together. Besides which, they were scared of the security implications of reverse-engineering the whole thing and sticking it on modern networked machines. In the end, they hit a compromise: there was this old VM/CMS emulator for DOS PCs floating around. They bought six stupidly powerful workstations running something a bit more modern. Stuck a DOS emulator on each workstation, and ran their accounting suite under the VM/CMS emulator under the DOS emulator –”

I waited while his spluttering subsided into a chuckle. “I think that deserves another drink: don’t you?”

I took a big gulp from my G&T and nodded. “Yeah.” More fizzy water for the Prof. “Anyway. These six, uh, *mainframes* had to talk to each other at something ridiculous like 1200 baud. So the droids who implemented this piece of nonsense hired a hacker, who crufted them up something that looked like a 1200-baud serial line to the VM/CMS emulator, but which actually tunnelled packets through the internet, from one workstation to another. Only it ran under DOS, ’cause of the extra level of emulation. Then they figured they ought to let the data-entry clerks log in through virtual terminals so they could hire teleworkers from India instead of paying guys in suits from Berkhamstead, so they wrote a tty driver just for the weird virtual punched-card reader or whatever the bloody accounting system thought it was working with.”

Someone tapped me on my shoulder. I glanced round.

“Yo, dude! Gimme five!”

“Six,” I said. Clive beamed at me. “Been here long?”

“Just arrived,” he said. “I knew I’d find you propping up the bar. Hey, did the guys on the gangway give you any aggro?”

“Not much.” I put my hand over my watch’s face. The whole thing disturbed me more than I wanted to think about, and Rita’s silent presence (reading a book in a deep leather-lined chair at the far side of the room) didn’t contribute anything good to my peace of mind. “I was just telling the professor about –”

“The mainframes.” The professor nodded. “Most interesting. Can I trouble you to tell me what happened in the end? I hate an interrupted tale.”

I shrugged. “Drink for my man here,” I said.

“Make mine a pint,” said Clive.

“In a nutshell,” said the professor.

“In a nutshell: they’d put it all in an emulator, and handled all the log-ins via the net, so some bright spark suggested they run six emulators in parallel on one box and use local domain sockets to emulate the serial lines. It looked like it would save about 50,000 bucks, and they’d already spent a quarter million on the port – as opposed to 80, 90 million for a proper re-write – so they did it. Put everything in one box.”

“And what happened?” asked Clive.

“Well, they stuffed the old corporate accounting

system into a single workstation. You’ve got to understand, it was about 50 times as powerful as all six mainframes put together. The old mainframes were laid off about two months after the emulator went live, to save on the maintenance bill. So they moved office six months after that, and they managed to lose the box in the process. The inventory tag just went missing; it was so unobtrusive it looked like every other high-end server in the place. By the time they found it again, some droid from the marketing department who thought Christmas had come early had reformatted its root partition and installed a multi-user game server on it...”

“Man, that’s bad,” said Clive. He looked improperly cheerful.

“Yes.” The professor looked worried. “That almost tops the reactor story.” He drained his glass then absent-mindedly checked the dosimeter he kept clipped to the breast pocket of his sports jacket: “but not quite.”

#### **Unscheduled Criticality Excursion –**

*(jargon)* term used in the nuclear engineering industry to refer to the simultaneous catastrophic failure of all of a fission reactor’s safety features, resulting in a runaway loss of coolant accident. (Formerly: **melt-down**.)

The ship set sail three hours later. I was already adrift, three sheets to the wind, and Clive steered me out on deck to watch the pier drift astern.

“Feel that breeze,” he said, and leaned out over the railing until I worried about him falling overboard. (An accident, so early in the voyage, would be a bad way to start; there was plenty of time for such incidents ahead.) “It’s cool. Onshore. Loads of salt. Iodine from decaying seaweed. Say, did you bring your iodine tablets? Sun block? Survival rations?”

“Only what I figured we’d definitely need,” I said, slurring on my certainty. “Didn’t know about Rita. Shit. Don’t need that shit. Are you okay over there?”

“Don’t be silly!”

And guess who’d seen fit to join us on deck? If it wasn’t my ex. I was drunk enough to be a bit out of control and in control enough to feel vulnerable: not, in other words, at my best. “And whash you doing here?” I asked, leaning against the rail beside Clive.

“Coming to ask what you’re doing here,” she said. “You’re a mess.” There was no rancour in her voice; just a calm, maddening self-assurance, as if she thought she’d earned the right to know me better than I knew myself.

“Funny, I could have sworn he was an engineer,” quipped Clive.

“You used the original ticket?” I asked.

Rita leaned up against the railing a couple of metres away from me. “I tried to exchange it,” she said guardedly. “By then, the ship was over-booked.”

“More fools,” quipped Clive. He leaned even further overboard: “cretins ahoy!” Rita’s stare could have frozen molten lead, but Clive bore its weight unheeding.



"Let's talk," she said. I followed her around the curve of the deck, away from Clive.

The sea was still, but even so I had difficulty keeping my balance as it gently rolled beneath my feet. She stopped in the shadow of a lifeboat. "You know what this means?" she asked.

More histrionics, I thought. "It means we both just have to be very careful," I said, emphasizing the final word.

Unexpectedly, she smiled at me. "Two years and you didn't change your ticket!" It was not a very pretty smile. I shrugged. "So that makes me a fool?"

She looked at me sharply: "no more than ever, Marcus. See you later." She turned and stalked off in the direction of the door we'd come through. I looked towards the stern of the ship, a dark mass of shadows in the night: the breeze became slightly chilly if I stood in one place for long enough. I stood there for a long time.

*Risks of embarking on an expensive sea voyage booked too far in advance, number 12: having to share a cramped cabin with a spouse who divorced you years ago.*

I went to bed drunk, and when I awoke the next morning the cabin was mine. I sat up. My neck ached as if I'd lain too long in the wrong position; my tongue tasted as if something small and furry had died on it far too long ago. The cabin was a mess. My trunk was stowed neatly beneath the lower bunk bed – but a familiar suitcase was open and strewn across the table, and she'd spread her toiletries across every available surface in the cramped bathroom.

I groaned, sat up, and hastily made for the toilet – the head, I remembered to call it. Today was The Eve of Destruction; December the 31st, to the real world at large, and we would be sailing south-east and out into the endless blue eye of the Gulf of Mexico. Theoretically I had booked a two-week holiday from my job. As a matter of caution – I checked carefully in the bag full of dirty socks in my trunk before heading for breakfast – both small, extremely heavy bars of metal were still there. Five thousand ecus each, they'd set me back: a whopping great hole in my savings, but if what we were expecting was the case, well worth it in the long run.

The dining lounge had seen better days; although this cruise ship called itself a liner, I had my suspicions. It reminded me of a run-down hotel, formerly a grand palace of the leisured classes, now reduced to eking out a living as a vendor of accommodation and conference space to corporate sales drones on quarterly kick-off briefings. I sat down at one of the tables and waited for one of the overworked stewards to come over and pour me a coffee.

"Mind if I join you?"

I looked up. It was a woman I'd met somewhere – some conference or other – lanky blonde hair, pallid skin, and far too evangelical about formal methods. "Feel free." She pulled a chair out and sat down and the steward poured her a cup of coffee immediately.

I noticed that even on a cruise ship she was dressed in a business suit, although it looked somewhat the worse for wear. "Coffee, please," I called after the retreating steward.

"We met in Darmstadt, '97," she said. "You're Marcus Jackman? I critiqued your paper on performance metrics for IEEE maintenance transactions."

The penny dropped. "Karla... Carrol?" I asked. She smiled. "Yes, I remember your review." I did indeed, and nearly burned my tongue on the coffee trying not to let slip precisely *how* I remembered it. I'm not fit to be rude until after at least the third cup of the morning. "Most interesting. What brings you here?"

"The usual risk contingency planning. I'm still in catastrophe estimation, but I couldn't get anyone at work to take this weekend seriously. So I figured, what the hell? That was about two weeks ago."

"Two weeks –" I stopped. "How did you wangle that?"

She sipped her coffee. A lock of hair dropped across it; she shoved it back absent-mindedly. "There's always a certain roll-over in things like this," she said. "It just depends who you talk to..."

Show-off. Whoever had set up the booking system, whatever troll from the deep, dark, underside of the ACM SIG-RISK group, had known more than a little about queuing theory; I'd spent two months, on and off, trying to get Pauli aboard the lifeboat, while she'd just walked on board. "I thought there was a waiting list," I said.

"Even lists have holes." She stared coldly at the steam rising from her coffee cup; "and even institutional coffee tastes better than this rubbish. I say, *waiter!*"

"Why did you leave it so late, if you believe in the roll-over meltdown?" I asked, wishing she'd just let the coffee-quality issue die.

"Because it's not the meltdown I'm interested in," she said; "ah, it's about this coffee. It's disgusting. Have you been letting the jug stand on a hot plate for too long? So a few legacy systems, big hierarchical database applications for the most part, wrap around and go nonlinear when the year increments from 99 to 00. A fair number of batch reconciliation jobs go down the spout at midnight, and never get up again. Yes, some fresh arabica will do nicely. Maybe even some big ones, like driver licensing systems or the police national computer, or the odd merchant bank. But nothing bolted together in the past ten years will even break wind, so to speak. Excuse me, break stride. And real-time systems won't even notice it; they mostly run on millisecond timers and leave the nonsense about dates to external conversion routines, if they understand the concept of dates at all, thank you very much, like a Mars Rover running on mission elapsed time in seconds. Good, much better, thank you."

The harried waiter made a break for the other diners and I began to dig myself out of the hole in my chair I'd unconsciously tried to retreat into.

"It's just an artefact of the datum," she continued implacably, ignoring the coffee cup placed apologetically before her. "You might as well have picked on



the UNIX millennium; it only runs for two to the 31 seconds from midnight on January first, 1970, then some time 32 years from now the clocks begin counting in negative numbers. Of course, not many systems run for 70 years without maintenance, but there's been an alarming trend lately towards embedding UNIX in black-box applications it's totally unsuited for. Personally, I think 2032 is a much more realistic Armageddon-type datum, for that and other reasons."

I cringed slightly. "What brings you here, then, if you don't think there's going to be a fairly major disaster?"

"Because this is a ship of fools," she said brightly. "I wanted to observe and see how you're managing under perceived stress. Not to mention that some people here have jobs to go back to. I'm thinking of collaborating on a paper with a sociologist from my local university on stress-related idiopathic delusional complexes in closed professional bodies. Chicken Little crying 'the sky is falling', when quite simply it can't fall yet because this is a premature software apocalypse."

I gritted my teeth and swallowed the last of my coffee. "You're very sure that this is a false alarm."

"But it can't be the real thing! It's too early – only the two-thousandth anniversary of the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Now the two-thousandth anniversary of His crucifixion is another matter, and the coincidence with the UNIX millennium is another sign. But what really clinches it is the timewave zero hypothesis advanced by Terrance McKenna, who proved that the Aztec cyclic history sequence actually comes to an end – a singularity – in the same time scale. If you think this is a survival trip, just wait for the next one in 32 years time! The ability of humans to anticipate an apocalypse tends towards a maximum in line with the proximity of big dates in their numbering system; they unconsciously fail to plan for survival past the next one, so disaster ensues. Now in this age of computers I think the baseline has shifted from the millennium to the kiloyear – which as you know, is two to the tenth years, or 1,016. And St John was quite obviously talking about access permission bits when he said that the number of the Beast was six, six, six. More coffee?"

I excused myself and made for the deck with all possible haste; I could tell it was going to be one of those days.

I didn't dare to venture back into the dining room for another hour, until I was sure Karla had finished browbeating the staff; I wandered the upper deck like a lost soul, staring out across the muddy green expanse of sea, towards the gently swaying line in the distance where green met greyish white. The weather was poor (rather worse than I had been led to expect) and my head still throbbed from the night before. Back in the ops room at the institute, Marek or one of the other admins would be sitting up with a dog-eared paperback and a stack of blank backup cartridges, waiting patiently for the autochanger to bleat for a new load to accommodate the terabytes of data spooling slowly down onto tape. If I was there I'd probably

be doing a dervish whirl of emergency disaster-recovery preparations, single-handedly preparing to hold back the deluge of user complaints due on the first day of the new year. But I wasn't there: all I could do was squint into the wind, face pinched in by impotent tension, and wish I was in another line of work.

When my face turned numb I went below, back to the gently rolling warmth of the dining room. Karla had evidently finished; Clive waved at me from a corner so I went and joined him. "How's the morning?" I asked.

He pulled a face. "As you'd expect. Some woman tried to chat me up but it turned out she was recruiting for some Church or other. I managed to get away in one piece, though. Are you on for this evening's festivities?"

I nodded. "What's everyone doing today, then?"

"There's a seminar session on disaster-recovery techniques for large transaction-based systems in the forward lounge on C deck. Some old salt is giving a lecture on navigating by the stars in the bar before lunchtime, then the Professor is giving his account of the Sizewell 'B' disaster – the one he gave at the ACM bash in London this year. You were there, weren't you? Oh, and there's a bingo game somewhere or other, it's on the noticeboard on D deck."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

Clive put his knife down with a clatter. "I'm going to read a book," he said. "The weather's crap and the sea's going to get rough according to the shipping forecast. Might as well hole up and relax a bit."

"There's a radio?"

"I brought mine along." He fished something out of his pocket; a tiny Sony multiband receiver, with an old-fashioned analog tuning dial. "Shortwave reception's okay."

"Read a book," I echoed. "Sounds like a good idea." I could already smell the boredom rising from the great and borderless sea outside our hull; a boredom born of nervy fright, knowledge of what countdown was now in progress in the real world. Karla, for all her objectionable manner and dubious hypotheses, had maybe had a point; humans set their historical clocks by the stars, and the beginning of a new millennium is no insignificant event. Even if the real fruitcakes think the show's coming 32 years later...

**Boredom** – Knowing that the end of the world is due to happen in less than 81,000 seconds, but being unable to hurry it along, impede it, or even ignore it and do something else in the meantime.

I had brought along a book on formal design methodologies to break my head on for the voyage, but I didn't feel like reading it. When I returned to my cabin I found that Rita was still elsewhere. She'd brought along a huge mass of junk literature; disposable magazines, novels, a two-day-old newspaper. I read the leader columns in the paper, then the lifestyle section, then finally the job advertisements. They were recruiting lots of corporate drones, chief



information officers: scope for a hollow laugh at someone else's expense. But I didn't feel like reading much, as my stomach was slightly weak from the constant swaybacked lurching of the deck, so I lay down on my bunk to catch the 40 winks of the truly bored.

I dreamed that I was being interrogated by three sinister shadowy men in dark suits who kept a bright light pointed at my eyes. They wanted to know why I had abandoned Rita and our two-year-old daughter. They didn't seem to understand that we had never had a child, and that Rita had left me – not the other way around. They said I set a dangerous, risky example to society at large; that runaway fathers should be allowed to make off with the taxpayer's money was not a message they were prepared to send. They were about to sentence me to – *something* – when I awakened with a panicky jolt. Rita was leaning over me.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

I tried to croak "I think so," but nothing very intelligible came out so I nodded instead.

"You looked as if you were having a bad dream."

"I was." I tried to sit up but she put a hand on my shoulder and pushed me down again. "Please..." I said.

"Lie down." I did as I was told. "Who were you with this morning at breakfast?" she asked.

"Some fruitcake," *who thinks the apocalypse is due in 32 years and we're all barking up the wrong tree.* "She sat down at the same table and started trying to convert me to Baptism or whatever the hell she believes in."

"I see." She was quiet for a moment. "Well, just don't bring her back to this cabin, you hear me? Don't you dare." She turned away abruptly, leaving me too dumbstruck to say anything as she stalked out of the cabin and yanked the door shut behind her. Maybe I was a fool to be here, but that didn't make Rita any less blind herself.

I wandered along to a late lunch – cold buffet only – then an afternoon seminar on trusted anonymous systems validation. I avoided the deck, which was subject to an intermittent cold rain. There was due to be a banquet in the evening; I headed back to my cabin, had a shower, then changed into the suit I'd brought along for the occasion.

The bar adjoining the main dining room was drawing a steady business as twilight cast its shadow across the ship; refugee computer professionals in various states of formal attire held ice-cube-clinking tumblers of whisky in tense conversational huddles, while spousal units watched disinterestedly or discussed the foul weather. I saw Karla Carrol, wearing a long green dress and too much makeup, and shrank into the "L"-shaped recess at the opposite end of the bar, where two hunchbacked mainframe administrators were trying to top one-another's dumb user stories. Karla seemed to have snagged an unfortunate woman who was something big in actuarial systems, and was talking into her ear: I ordered a double vodka and coke, and then another before the steward ushered us into the dining room.

To my surprise, I found myself seated next to Rita. She seemed to be enjoying herself as long as she paid no attention to me; as I hadn't seen her that happy since a year before we split up, I was quite content to maintain my reserve. Besides, the food was substantially filling and my glass never seemed to empty, until I leaned back in a bloated semi-stupor to listen to the Prof give his keynote speech (after some nonentity from the organizing committee, introduced to the limbo of my memory by one of the ship's officers).

The Professor staggered slightly as he took the podium. "Friends, I am pleased to be here to speak to you tonight, but less pleased at the necessity for this voyage." He paused for a moment and fiddled with the microphone. I was surprised by how little he had changed from my perspective, even given an extra ten years of age on my own account. He was still impressive.

"Software allows us to build huge, invisible machines – virtual mountains so complex that nobody can really understand the whole scope of a large application. But software is brittle: change an underlying constraint, and the whole edifice crumbles like a mountain hit by an earthquake. A single fundamental assumption that changes – as simple as the shift from one century to the next at the junction between two millennia – can break just about anything, anywhere, in the guts of such a system, and it could take seconds or months for the damage to surface. Back in the mid-90s there were an estimated 250 billion lines of vulnerable source code, waiting for the new century to rattle the ground from under them; at 20,000 lines of code per programmer per year that would have taken a million programmers a year to fix... so everybody pretended it wasn't there. Except us. Everyone here tonight has had some role in attempting to cure the crisis of complacency. Everyone here has been burned by the fire of bureaucratic inertia. And so it is that everyone here chose of their own free will to join this ship of fools on a voyage whose motto might be, 'I told you so!'"

He covered his mouth and hiccuped as discreetly as one may in front of an audience of 200. I glanced sideways at Rita; her face was a carefully controlled mask for boredom.

"In about an hour, it will be midnight back in England. It is already five o'clock in the morning of January first, year 2000, somewhere far to the east of here. The datum is sweeping remorselessly round the dark side of the world, leaving random malfunctions in its wake. Some of those malfunctions are doubtless trivial; bugs in systems long since retired. Others are naggingly pernicious but relatively harmless matters, such as the school districts that fall victim to collation routines that tell them everyone above the age of 103 needs to be enrolled in a nursery class. But one or two..." – he stopped, and for a moment seemed bowed down by a terrible weight – "... might be serious. As serious, perhaps, as the Sizewell disaster."

I didn't want to pursue that line of logic, and neither (apparently) did the Prof. What happened at



Sizewell happened because nobody understood the entire system, and nobody subjected it to formal proof: nor did they look into some of the more obscure race conditions that could arise if different subsystems found themselves marching to the beat of a different clock. The results – of which the least were the suicides jumping from the Lloyds building – had proven a ghastly point: but one that the politicians did not understand. Or at least, not profoundly enough to budget for the consequences.

“I should like to stress that this holocaust of our own making is nothing less than a matter of complacency,” the Professor continued. “Once we quantized time, we tied our work to the clock; and now that the work is automated, so is the ticking. We are a short-sighted species. That there was a quarter of a trillion lines of bad software out there seven years ago is no surprise. That such a quantity has been halved to date is good news, but not quite adequate. We have, in a very real way, invented our own end of history: a software apocalypse that in the day ahead will engulf banks, businesses, government agencies and anyone who runs a large, monolithic, database that is more than perhaps ten years old. Let us hope for the future that the consequences are not too serious – and that the lesson will be learned for good by those who for so long have ignored us.”

Polite applause, then louder: a groundswell of clapping as the ship gently pushed its way through the waves.

I began to push my chair back; it was close and hot, and I felt slightly queasy. A hand descended on my wrist: “remember what I said earlier,” hissed Rita.

“What are you –” I saw her expression. Being the object of such ferocity made me feel as if we had not gone our separate ways. (And what if, in the weeks of confusion after the Sizewell incident – ten miles from the hotel I had been staying in while doing my contract work – I had not visited the vasectomy clinic? What if my morbid fear over fission products, that had in turn caused our own atomic split, never quite reached such a pitch? Would we still be together, a nuclear family with glow-in-the-dark children?) “What do you care? I’m no use to you, am I?”

Her expression was unreadable as she let go of my arm. “What use is *any* of this? We’re sailing on the Titanic, only the disaster starts when we go back to harbour. Don’t spoil my cruise for me, Marcus, or you’ll be sorry. I’ll throw all your luggage overboard.”

I nearly laughed, but instead I stood up and staggered slightly as I headed back to the bar. How like Rita; the paranoid over-reaction, fear of shadows, utilitarian approach to people around her... I began to wonder how much I hated myself to have put up with her for so long, and not to have found anyone better.

I was into my second gin and tonic when Clive appeared. “Been in a car wreck?” he asked sympathetically.

“Rita,” I said morosely.

“Oh.” He was quiet for a minute. I heard faint applause from the dining room. The steward at the bar turned his back to us and polished the brass-

work. “Try one of these,” he suggested, offering something that looked a bit like a handmade lump of chocolate. “It’s the only way to see in such a fuck-up; totally stoned, drunk as a skunk, and happy with it.”

I palmed the sticky lump and swallowed. There was a sweet, herbal taste under the chocolate that nearly made me gag. Not my favourite way to take the stuff, but better than nothing. (And Rita didn’t approve, even of something as mild as marijuana: which somehow made it more daring, more essential...)

“Any more?” I asked, but he shook his head.

“Strong stuff. Got to have enough to go round,” he added with a curious smile. I could see he’d been at it himself, then. “Settles the stomach, too.”

I drained my glass, winced slightly, then walked over to the bar for a refill. The barman didn’t bother with an optic, just poured in the gin and topped it off by eye. “Will that be all, sir?” he asked.

“I’d like one for my friend,” I said. Another glass appeared as if by magic. All drinks were on the house, this night if no other. “Thanks.” I returned to the table, where Clive was tapping his fingers idly.

“Let’s go on deck,” he suggested. I tried to dissuade him but he was adamant: “it’s fresh up there but the rain stopped and the cloud’s clearing. Let’s chill out, okay?”

“If you must,” I said. He stood up and lurched slightly as he headed for the door. I followed him, expecting a chill of damp air to rush in. Instead, I found that he was right; the overcast had lifted and stars twinkled high in a deep black vault. There was a slow breeze blowing from ahead, and it was no cooler now than it had been during the day.

“What do you expect to find when you go back?” asked Clive.

“Everything. Nothing.” In the distance, a monstrously deep horn sounded a bass note; ships passing in the night, I supposed. “I can’t quite bring myself to believe in the apocalypse. End of civilization as we know it. Construction of cyberspace, the usual nonsense; it’s bollocks. We’ll go back and find lots of database programs have fallen over and there’ve been some really major cock-ups, maybe even a local stock exchange or two, but life goes on.”

“That’s one view,” Clive said morosely.

“What do you expect?”

“The end of the world.” He leaned out across the railing, staring into the dark water beyond and below us. “Nobody expects things to continue, not really. Everybody wants a Day of Judgement, right? An end to the mortal coil. Pot of gold at the end of the information superhighway.” Another, even deeper, horn sounded in the distance. “We’ve designed for obsolescence for so long that it wouldn’t surprise me if the whole pack of cards tumbles down. A bit like the fundies, who believe that it doesn’t matter how we run the world because they’re all going a-flying up to heaven in a couple of years anyway. The Rapture, they call it. Every city in the west is maybe 24 hours away from chaos and civil war – that’s all the supplies they store locally, you know that? All it takes is enough cracks in the fabric...”

I wanted to tell him he was sounding like an old-



fashioned fundamentalist preacher but the words caught in my throat: at that moment an almost palpable wave of cold washed over me, as if the air around me had turned to seawater. A great distant moaning wail of a horn shuddered out beneath the moonless sky, so deep and loud that I felt my stomach relax and contract with its passage; a chilly sweat prickled across my forehead for a moment, and I felt brushed by the ghostly fingertips of drowned sailors.

"What's that?" I demanded.

"Tanker, probably," said Clive. "Really close, too –"

A smell like smouldering insulation made my nostrils twitch: "too close!" We were near the front of the ship, on the right-hand side: I wondered if we should head for the back, or if someone on the bridge would be able to see whatever we were bearing down on. Burning insulation and a rancid undertone of sulphur, of reeking burnt meat, of something revolting and sweet at the same time; a dim red light loomed on the horizon. The ship rolled beneath my feet and I felt light-headed.

"Look, over there." I followed Clive's outstretched arm. "What's happening?"

Whatever it was, it bulked out of the darkness like a congealing fog bank, lit from within by a red glow. That dreadful horn sounded again, rattling my innards, and there was a faint echo from behind – as if its distant partner sounded a desolate mating chorus from across the empty sea. Stars burned like halogen lights in the vast darkness overhead. One by one they began to fall, tracing bright lines across the sky until they faded out in the distance. I looked towards the rear of the ship, back the way we'd come; a false dawn bulked green on the horizon.

"I don't like this," I said, clutching the railing with fingertips that felt like dry bones. "I'm too stoned."

"I'm not." Clive looked distracted, as if he was listening to something. "What... did you ever wonder, what it would be like if the Godbotherers were really right all along? If maybe their revelation was the truth, and it was all going to happen – only they'd been out by a couple of thousand years?"

"Can't happen." My teeth were chattering. "No Rapture. No singularity. It's just the way we think. We humans, we want to lose our problems in some future end of all worries. Natural tendency."

"Overruns," Clive muttered. "Schedule slippage. They got all geared up at the turn of the first millennium, then the apocalypse was cancelled. Now they've got it all over again. What if they held the end of the world but nobody came?"

Something dark bubbled up from the sea behind us. A deep bass rumble, like a cross between an earthquake and a sousaphone: the angular mass foamed the sea around, gathering shrapnel and wreckage together into the dark shape of an ancient submarine. Hakenkreutz half-rusted into the shadowy conning-tower, it ghosted through the waves towards the glow on the horizon, its charred and skeletal crew staring incuriously at us as it cruised past. Red and green after-images rippled across the sea, across everything I looked at except the dial of

my borrowed watch.

I shuddered in the grip of a dread so intense that my heart lurched towards pure panic. "Don't!" Clive began to walk forwards, along the curve of the deck towards the front of the ship – "where are you going?"

"What if they held the end of the world, but we were all aboard the ship of fools and unbelievers?" he called over his shoulder: "I'm joining them!"

A seventh rumbling note cut through the night, so deep that I could barely hear it but only felt it in my bones. I turned and staggered back towards the door, back towards the warmth and safety of the bar and the dining room. Behind me, Clive called: "don't leave me behind!"

The door slammed behind me. I looked around; the bartender glanced up from polishing the bar and raised an eyebrow.

"Give me a drink," I gasped. "Something strong."

"Bad night?" he asked casually. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I shuddered convulsively and took the tumbler, threw the drink at the back of my throat. "In a manner of speaking."

"Happens," he said, matter-of-factly. "Lots of funny things happen at sea. I could tell you some tales, I could."

"Please don't. I've had enough of them for one night."

He looked away as I drained my glass.

"This isn't a good cruise," I said, trying to communicate. "You know what? You know why we booked it?"

"Why did you book the cruise?" He studied me with the professional eye of an experienced barman.

"There's something we're running away from. But I'm not sure it's the right thing."

"Then, if you'll pardon my French sir, wasn't it a bit stupid of you to come along for the ride?"

I headed for the inner corridor, meaning to check the roll of dirty socks in my luggage. "I'm not really sure..."

So it came about that multitudes of people acted out with fierce energy a shared phantasy which, though delusional, yet brought them such intense emotional relief that they could live only through it, and were perfectly willing both to kill and to die for it. This phenomenon was to recur many times, in various parts of western and Central Europe...

– *The Pursuit of the Millennium*,  
Norman Cohn

Over the horizon, without any fuss, all the main-frames were quietly going down.

**Charles Stross** is the author of four previous stories in *Interzone*: "The Boys" (issue 22), "In the DreamTime" (#26), "Generation Gap" (#31) and "Yellow Snow" (#37) and has had fiction and non-fiction published widely elsewhere. Trained as a pharmacist, he has been busy building a career in computing over the past two or three years.



# Ansible LINK

**SFX**, "the hot new science-fiction magazine," published its first, June-dated issue in May. No fiction is included and coverage is principally of media sf (David Pringle can breathe again), though there's a suitably eccentric joint interview with Iain Banks and Iain M. Banks. The dread term "sci-fi" is generally avoided, except where one malevolent subeditor inserted it into a column by (grr) me. A weird launch party was held in "Jim Henson's The Creature Shop" (Camden Town, London), within a disco-lit and smoke-clouded indoor marquee decorated with special effects from *Dr Who*, *Alien*, *Neverending Story*, *Dark Crystal*, etc. A Robocop clone prowled the crowd firing a VERY LOUD gun, while lady guests complained that the wandering Dalek was taking personal liberties with its plunger. Thanks to a mysterious sponsorship deal, there was a wide choice of either bottled Czech lager or Smirnoff vodka served by drag queens. Luminaries from the world of written sf included John Clute, Michael Scott Rohan, Dick Jude of the Forbidden Planet bookshop ("What have you written about me *this* time, Langford you bastard?"), myself and, er, that's about it. We never worked out who all the people in *Star Trek* uniforms were. Why doesn't *Interzone* hold parties like this?

## SIXTY HORSES WEDGED IN CHIMNEY

**Brian Aldiss** had immense fun with his recent "Time Capsule caper": the sixth form of West Buckland school on Exmoor was mobilized with metal detectors to locate the biscuit tin of "raunchy tales" nervously buried there by the great man while himself a hand-reared pupil, over 50 years ago. News coverage extended as far as the *Peebles Observer*, the Hong Kong press and Radio 4: the reported raunch-level of the "saucy stories" varied considerably from paper to paper. "I now hope to sell the stories to the nation," says Mr Aldiss in an exclusive fax. "Would take anything between ten grand and a million...."

**Stephen Baxter** stared pre-publication pulping in the face, but eventually wrote with relief: "I've come to an agreement with the H. G. Wells estate over approval for my *Time Machine* sequel *The Time Ships*. The estate approved publication in return for a modest share of the proceeds, and so the huge pulping machines have been turned back from HarperCollins's Glasgow warehouse." The delayed launch duly went ahead in June.

**John Clute's** *Look at the Evidence*, his second mighty collection of sf "reviews and stuff (mainly 1987-92)," will be co-published by Serconia Press

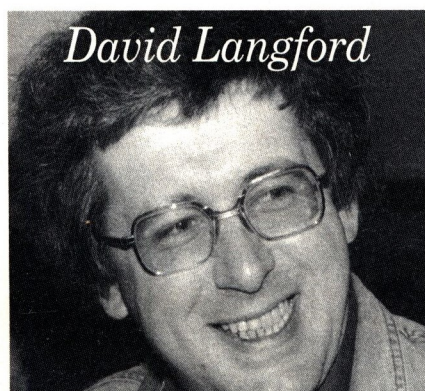
in the USA and Liverpool University Press here ... another happy indication of Liverpool U's increasing sf awareness. The book includes a short but exhilarating denunciation of editorial malpractice at what Clute and others reckon to be the world's worst professional outlet for sf/fantasy reviews: the *Times Literary Supplement*.

**Christopher Hodder-Williams** died of a heart attack on 15th May, aged 69. He was a generally underrated British sf author whose novels *The Main Experiment*, *The Egg-Shaped Thing*, *Fistful of Digits* and *98.4* are worth another look: Hodder-Williams was probing the queasy human/machine interface long before it became a big cyberpunk theme.

**Garry Kilworth** broke down under our ruthless lack of questioning and repeatedly admitted that his novel *The Electric Kid* has won the Children's Book of the Year Award, sponsored by NatWest (so *that's* what they do with the monstrous charges on my business account) and voted on by children. The book is now reportedly being translated into American....

**Charles Monteith**, the editor who founded the once-great Faber sf list, died in May. Among the authors he personally "discovered" were William Golding (who in those days regarded himself as an sf writer), Brian Aldiss, Christopher Priest and Garry Kilworth; he also published Edmund Crispin's classic *Best SF* anthologies, James Blish, Clifford Simak, Harry Harrison and many more. "A tremendous force and a kindly and hospitable man," notes Brian Aldiss. "Who but Charles would have gallantly published both *Probability A* and *Barefoot*, with every token of enthusiasm?"

**Kirsty Watt** of Ringpull Press is worried that easily confused sf fans



David Langford

might get the wrong impression from a perfectly routine liquidation, creditors' meeting and bankruptcy, and wishes it known that (under the wing of Fourth Estate) Ringpull editorial/publicity is living happily ever after at Albion Wharf, Albion St, Manchester, M1 5LN.

**Paul Williams**, biographer and literary executor of Philip K. Dick, and founder of *Crawdaddy*, suffered severe skull injuries in an Easter bike accident. Two small pieces of luck: an ambulance came within five minutes thanks to a witness with a cellphone, and a fortnight earlier Williams had bought health insurance for the first time. For a while he could communicate only by signs, but has since been able to speak at least occasionally.

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Japanese Whispers**. One cause of Uri Geller's famous failed lawsuits against psychic debunker James Randi was apparently an interview conducted via interpreter by a Japanese reporter who spoke no English. Randi's remark "Geller has no social conscience" reached Japanese print as, approximately, "Uri Geller is a loathsome social disease...."

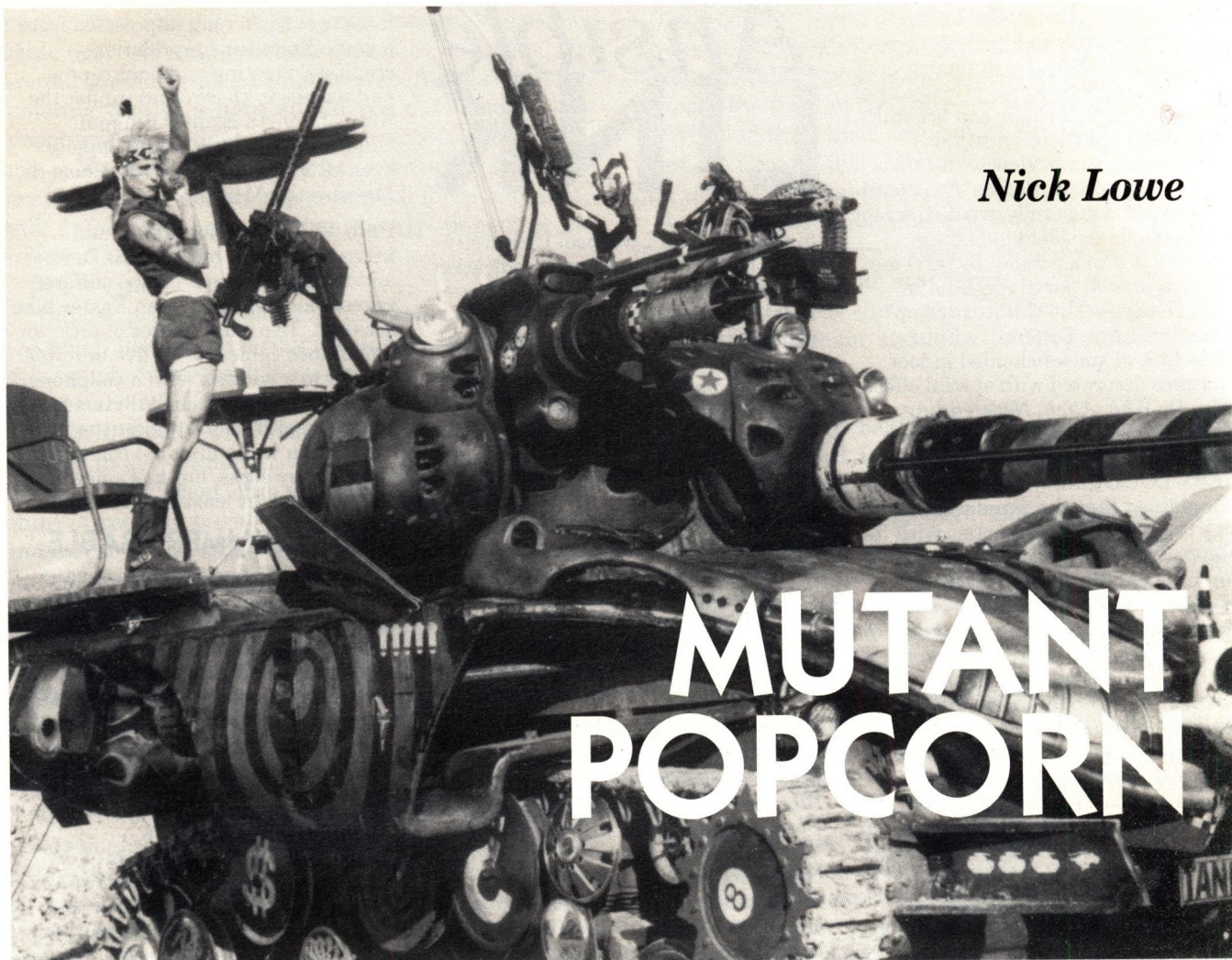
**George E. Challenger's** *Mysterious World* is the third of Marcus Rowland's *Forgotten Futures* "period sf" role-playing rules and sourcebooks issued as shareware on disk. There's also a "Forgotten Futures Library" of weird out-of-copyright articles and arcana. Info: 22 Westbourne Park Villas, London, W2 5EA.

**Oh No!** The *Federation of Australian Writers Bulletin* has issued a WARNING TO CONTRIBUTORS: "An FAW member who sent work to L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future, which was promoted in recent editions of the *Bulletin*, has advised us that her work was returned unopened. This indicates that this publishing body has closed or changed address. We would therefore advise FAW members against submitting work to this publisher."

**SF Masterclass**. "Laurent had not gasped or cried out. But Laurent's cock was bobbing uncontrollably. Tristan was in the same transparently miserable state, yet he looked, as ever, quietly majestic." (Anne Rice, *Beauty's Release*, 1985.) "Sweat broke out on his brow as he wrestled with his brain ..." (Julian Flood, "Control," in *Tomorrow* 6/95.)

**Down Deep** (jocularly known as *Down Under Visions*) has been drawn to my attention as a coming anthology of the very finest in Australian sf, edited by Terry Dowling and Harlan Ellison. It has been accepting stories ever since 1983, but unfortunately....





Nick Lowe

# MUTANT POPCORN

**T**ank Girl people have their own views about where *Tank Girl* left the rails. Hardliners contend, with some persuasiveness, that to take the Hollywood shilling in the first place was an abnegation of everything Tank Girl has come to represent: anarchy, body-piercing, self-realization through gratuitous firepower and roo-shagging, and the refusal to be contained by authoritarian structures of power, narrative, or sense. Even without the embarrassments of Hollywood's idea of attitude and LA's idea of punk, popular film form itself requires Tank Girl to don the trappings of common movie humanity: a name, a family, a history, a rationale, a purpose in life, and (most disastrously) a set of moral values. Others, however, including creator Jamie Hewlett himself, prefer to narrow the finger of blame to the engagement of untried, and apparently uncomprehending, screenwriter Tedi (Tedi??) Sarafian, whose boltup of all the worst clichés from 80s survivalist movies is certainly up among the all-time dreadfuls – with its leering corporate villain, jackbooted future jails, and amazingly mechanical origin trauma to off all our hitherto-socialized heroine's near and dear (sparing only, for motivational purposes, her winsome,

jeopardy-prone surrogate kid sister).

But such crude scapegoat thinking is probably too crude and linear to cope with the complexities of film-making faultlines. The reality is, power in Hollywood is a distributed entity, whose circumference is everywhere and whose centre is nowhere. Lines of decision are less like chains than nets; nobody is really responsible, and you can take out half the system in a quake and it'll still function much the same. When things go wrong, the buck simply gets bounced around from site to site. It would be hideous to think *Tank Girl* was someone's idea of a good film, but I very much doubt it was anyone's idea of anything. Rather, it's the product of a systemic mind so finely spread among its network of hosts as to be unrecognizable as a form of intelligence at all. Successful speculation about how *Tank Girl* might have been prevented could lead profitably to a solution to the major problems of collective irresponsibility facing humanity: global warming, the debt crisis, ozone depletion, the Bosnian and Rwandan questions, Macauley Culkin movies.

It does seem as though nobody with any responsibility had any actual control. First-timers on big movies (wave, director Rachel Tallalay, to

David Fincher and Danny Cannon) have notoriously little authority to resist the creative input of producers and above-line talent, and Tallalay's troubles have clearly been compounded by her difficult transition from project originator to disempowered hired-hand. The extent of Tallalay's indenture to the dark forces at the top of the strings is indicated by the extraordinary disjunctions of narrative where entire characters and subplots have been offered up to placate the beast beneath the cutting-room floor (including *grrly-Thunderbirds* sidekick Sub Girl, though her credit stays). In fact, the elements that tend to emerge best are the ones over which she seems to have retained a measure of say: the action pieces, the designs (especially the tank, which looks just as it should), and especially the care taken to involve Hewlett, whose last-minute graphic montages have ended up the one joy-giving feature of the whole movie. Ironically, it's precisely these sequences that most amply demonstrate the impossibility of turning comics into movies, as every failed device in the repertoire is wheeled out to try to emulate the energy and movement of Hewlett's still images: staccato edits (necessary in any case to disguise the



pervasive continuity mismatches between graphics and live action), manginizing animation sequences (slightly more exciting, but not very well done), and some uproariously stately rostrum tracking, all of it to up-tempo modern American music selected by "Executive Music Co-ordinator" Courtney Love-Cobain (*sic*). And yet, despite all this, the richness of colour, fluidity and invention in the graphic sequences still makes a telling and unfortunate contrast with the drab solidity of the surrounding live action.



One of the most unfortunate decisions was to build so much PR out of the casting process itself (perhaps on the inspiration of Sara Stockbridge's well-promoted bid-by-photoshoot). After the embarrassing backfire of the bogus open-audition stunt in London, subsequently compounded by Emily Lloyd's eve-of-filming walkout, luckless Lori Petty marches on to the screen with her grim-faced jury already poised over its scorecards. Even so, nothing could prepare for the sheer disbelief that Petty's interpretation inspires. It's not that there's anything particularly wrong with her performance, nor indeed anything particularly right; she seems to be playing the character as scripted, and the character this production wants. But she's so unrecognizable as the Tank Girl of Hewlett and Martin, whose own likeness is so unfortunately intercut for comparison throughout, that it's hard to see on what conceivable grounds she was cast in the first place. Even if it's conceded that *Tank Girl* is by now a global icon whose style doesn't depend on an accent from England or Australia, and even granted that most actresses in the running have at least some sort of chin and a grin that even at its farthest shit-eating extent isn't capable of the plateswallowing elasticity of Hewlett's muse, I don't think anyone would have easily pictured our heroine as so entirely and inappositely Valley. (Who exactly would be *more* miscast? Julie Delpy? Demi Moore? William Shatner?) Two thoughts recur as you watch: first, *any one* of the alternatives mooted in the casting stage would surely have

been more suitable than the disastrously colourless and unsexy Petty; and second, anyone who actually buys the official line that Lloyd's withdrawal was due to purely tonsorial reservations is mug enough to deserve this misbegotten travesty – which as the first colossal dead duck of the summer leaves *Judge Dredd* and *Waterworld* a lot to live up to.

Over on screen 2, you could be forgiven for not being bothered much about Tobe Hooper's **The Mangler** – the kind of unpresumptuous genre-horror flick you'd be more accustomed to see as a straight-to-video in circa 1985. It has, however, two modest claims on our interest. First, it belongs to that most gourmet of trash-horror subgenres, the Very Very Early Stephen King Story movie. Now, this isn't the place to argue why King's pre-*Carrie* men's-mag fiction is in some ways his defining *oeuvre*, or to speculate over whether the movie rights to these stories are perhaps more affordably available than anything else carrying his name. But what none could dispute is that the movies made from *Cavalier/Night Shift* shorts – *Children of the Corn*, *Graveyard Shift*, and absolutely not forgetting *The Lawnmower Man* – are without fail a glorious embarrassment to the great man's name-tag; and that *The Mangler* rivals even *Graveyard Shift* (its closest competitor) in its tacky, low-rent, self-parodic amplification of conceits and characterizations that must have seemed so perishable and soon-forgotten in slabs of occasional prose for early-70s porn mags. "The Mangler," fans may recall, is the one about the industrial laundry press possessed by a blood-hungry demon: an exquisitely economical device (and metaphor) for splatter cinema, proposing as it does a machine purpose-built for converting screen characters into special-make-up gore. While Hooper's version holds on to a surprising amount of detail and

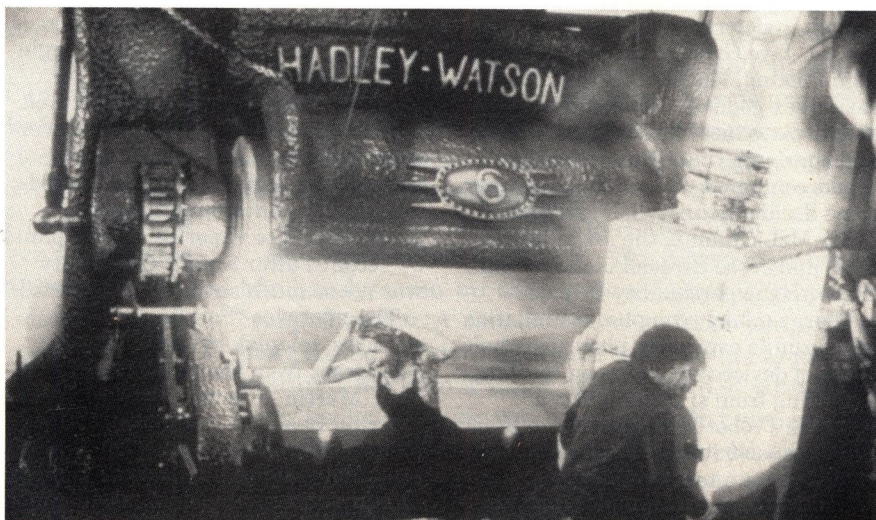
even dialogue from the story, he inflates the concept into an elaborate quasi-allegorical saga of New Hampshire illuminati clinging to wealth and power by a series of virgin sacrifices to the satanic industrial machine. If you reckon this sounds like a recipe for 105 minutes of gleeful exploitation-Marxism, with visual nods to *Blue Collar* and all male characters joining in a Donald Sutherland soundalike contest to see who can deliver the absurdly working-men's dialogue ("Get a life!" "I got a life – what I need is a beer") in the deepest guttural grunt, then you're already well-positioned to enjoy.

The second curiosity about *The Mangler* is that, presumably for survivalist financial reasons, it's the first international splatter flick to be made in The New South Africa. Up on screen, this manifests itself mainly in a number of slippage-prone Afrikaner-American accents, and a few rather evocative touches of estrangement in the exteriors – where things are not quite right about the beige, boxy architecture, and street-scenes bask eerily in hard dry subtropical light. ("Surely you must have noticed how Riker's Valley is so ideally perfect," is one of the more bizarre claims by Robert England, starring as surely the first tyrannical New England industrialist to get rich on running a laundry.) But the Hollywood-in-exile feeling runs deeper than the surface of the image. Hooper, whose star has slipped impressively of late, made his last movie in Israel, and while *The Mangler's* parable of coarsely demonic bosses catwalking it over grimed, disposable Morlocks has obvious resonances for the land of its birth, it's unlikely that was the principal factor in luring Hooper's increasingly repertory company to suburban Jo'burg.

For despite its relatively lavish design and makeup, this is film-making at the edge of survival: without the everyday luxuries ordinary cinema

Lori Petty (above and facing page) is Tank Girl.

Below: The star of *The Mangler*





takes for granted like logic, pace, motivation, low-decibel acting, or speakable dialogue (portentously: "The one thing worse than the devil within is the devil without"). In lieu of a plot, scenes segue together with random bursts of "Come on!" "Where?" "No time for that now!" and piling into the car. In lieu of personalities, characters have pasts: "Detective's

Wife Dies in Horror Smash," proclaims an improbable expository clipping improbably taped to a wall. "First there's God, then there's country, and then there's the law," is Det. Ted Levine's rugged creed: "the rest is bullshit." So none of this nonsense about setting up characters, scenes that connect, or a plot that conforms to mainstream canons of cinematic form and

sense; spend the budget on makeup and spectacle, and the rest can look after itself. As Englund, clearly pleased with the line, reminds us, "We all have to make sacrifices." In the harsh desert world of survival cinema, *Tank Girl* chose wrong; and the demons in the machine sucked her in and mangled her soul.

Nick Lowe

## WELCOME TO THE MACHINE?

Two recent TV shows, cloned from 30-year-old amber, demonstrate diametrically opposed attitudes to the fruits of science.

*Bugs* (BBC 1, ten 50-minute episodes) is *The Avengers* transported from the space age to the cyberspace era – "series consultant" is *Avengers* producer Brian Clemens – and if it doesn't actually feel like science fiction that's because one day when we weren't looking the world was quietly digitized around us. This resurrected dinosaur embraces the new with relish, showing sophisticated use of the latest technology to fight criminal abuses of science. Implicit is the notion that machines are morally neutral, that it is people who design and use them for good and evil. This subtext of defusing cybertechnophobia necessitates a tongue-in-cheek approach – "look, this stuff is FUN! and we have to learn to use it because the bad guys already have" – while counting on how familiar at least part of the audience is with new technology.

The potential for disaster was enormous, but producer Brian Eastman has hired good writers, including novelist Stephen Gallagher, and gifted the show with a disarming sense of its own ridiculousness. In Gallagher's "Assassins, Inc" our heroes repeatedly access a computer by knowing that the programmer uses Frank Zappa song-titles for passwords, conveniently overlooking the fact that Zappa wrote songs by the score. The lead characterizations deliberately evoke the two-guys-and-a-gal 60s adventure teams, though in deference to changing times the gal, Jaye Griffith, can't be an iconic, high-kicking, leather-wearing, man-eating sex-goddess. Instead she's black and displays more intelligence, humour and charisma than the two macho hunks combined, even if she does wear some decidedly unstylish cardigans. Craig McLachlan is the jovial action man, and Jesse Birdsall is the taciturn one with the personality by-pass.

There's a fairly complex assimilation into formula espionage plots of a whole range of devices which are on the verge of moving from sf into reality: a miniature robot killing-machine that seeks a specific target by pheromone coding, a gene-tailored virus designed as the ultimate in ethnic cleansers, a

voice-activated bomb, an edible listening device, a satellite-jammer. One debit is that our heroes keep stopping to explain the technology.

Gregory Evans's excellent "Manna from Heaven" used the launch of a new wonderfood for a surprisingly straight adventure in which the food itself was a part of the plot, no mere techno-thriller McGuffin. Brian Farnham's direction squeezed the suspense from a strong script, and Nic Knowland contributed some stylish and imaginative photography, particularly in the pumping-station finale. Gavin Greenaway's music perfectly captures the atmosphere of the dangerous exhilaration of dancing on a technological high frontier.

In contrast *The Outer Limits* (Trilogy/Atlantis/MGM anthology series produced by Justis Greene, feature-length pilot plus 41 42-minute episodes) delivers weekly dire warnings of the dangers of thinking too much and playing with shiny new machines. The men from Atlantis say science is a demon which will ride you to hell.

"Blood Brothers" (writer Brad Wright, director Tibor Takacs) offered a slickly produced variation on the wonderdrug-with-horrific-side-effects sub-genre. It gripped, was well acted, with an appropriate, if predictably bleak, ending. The scientists even talked like real scientists. Less positively, Martin Kemp hammed dreadfully as the mad brother, and the plot smuggled out part of Greg Bear's *Blood Music* (dismissed assistant injects drug into his body to smuggle it from the lab). Also culpable: the scene in which the drug regenerated a monkey's cells so rapidly as to overcome the effects of a poison which should have killed within 20 seconds; and the lab containment system programmed to vaporize all occupants 30 seconds after a spill. Credibility was not so much strained as ruptured.

The pilot was "Sandkings" (87 minutes, teleplay by Melinda Snodgrass from the novella by George R. R. Martin, director Stuart Gillard), starring Beau Bridges and Helen Shaver. Popular wisdom has it that if you remove the science and still have a story, it isn't sf. In "Sandkings" Simon


Kress (Bridges) secretly continues his work at home after his project is terminated and he is sacked; his work happens to be breeding Martian beasties from ancient eggs found in soil-samples returned from the red planet by satellite probe, but could as easily have involved reptiles from the local zoo. These sub-Jurassic monsters, basic scorpion/crab composites, are supposed to be intelligent, but beyond a few shots of them following Bridges around, and some intriguing sand-sculptures they make of his face, this aspect is largely unexplored.

What "Sandkings" did have was some ironic casting, acerbic dialogue and a powerful portrait of a psyche disintegrating under a self-inflicted inferiority complex. Kress believes, erroneously, that his father (played by aged Lloyd Bridges) has never loved him as he did his dead war-hero brother (we inevitably visualize absent superstar brother Jeff Bridges). In his obsession to prove himself worthy Kress alienates everyone who does care – son (played by one Dylan Bridges), wife, father. In Hollywood drama physical beauty often compensates for a multitude of sins, but Kress is not good-looking, and even at the beginning has few redeeming traits. By the end, unkempt, rehearsing a Nobel acceptance speech, rubbing shaving cream into his lank, rat-tailed hair then hacking it short with kitchen scissors (in an early scene his father has suggested a haircut), Bridges portrays in unflinching detail an ugly man so far over the edge he no longer knows himself.

The pluses of the anthology format are considerable – no regular cast for fans to fixate on, no fixed locations or situations (though both these episodes used the same laboratory set), and hence, theoretically at least, greater intellectual freedom – but early episodes fall so far short of the opening claim to explore the outer limits of the human imagination as to contravene advertising-standards legislation. In "Sandkings" murder replaces imagination, followed by more carnage amid the inevitable thunderstorm, topped by a numbingly predictable "twist" ending. For all the sound and fury, when the credits have rolled it is Bridges's brave performance which remains. Otherwise, the technophobe backlash begins here.

Gary Dalkin





# ASSEMBLY LINE

*Mary Soon Lee*

To: RioTech Executive Committee (Confidential)

Date: October 10, 2019

Anomalies in robot productivity confirmed. Average manufacturing rate down 12 percent.

*Recommended actions:*

continue covert investigation. Hire human software experts for all sites within 5 days.

**IMPORTANT:** to protect RioTech's financial rating there must be no disclosure of these aberrations.

**E**ven walking through the industrial sector, past scarred factories rising out of a concrete wasteland, Marianne could smell the autumn. Dampness clung to the air, a bright patchwork of leaves scattered across the sidewalk from a lone sugar maple. Marianne bent down, selected a handful of leaves, and carefully wrapped them in her scarf. A good omen for her first day at work. She turned left and crossed over to RioTech's entrance. The black paintwork was peeling from the gate, low-grade steel bared around the ID card slot. The computer squeaked as she inserted her card, and the gate hinged open.

Marianne stepped into a narrow hallway. Discoloured floor tiles curled up to cracked walls, but ventilation systems purred in an expensive battle to modify temperature and humidity.

Through grimy glass doors, she spotted the machines she'd be working with. Giant multi-armed robot manipulators were lined up beside conveyor belts, their bases anchored to the ground. A thousand camera eyes swivelled on flexible stalks, angling for views of the belts beneath them.

Marianne let out her breath in a rush: beautiful, they were beautiful. The heavy solid presence of the machines pulled at her, like and yet unlike the little house-bot that she used to watch. With flowing grace, robot arms dipped and circled, drilled and sprayed and polished. A precisely orchestrated dance turned the raw stuff of the assembly lines into fragile arcs of glass, clock-faces, televisions, thin tubes of clay piping. Each machine was capable of switching from one task to another, following the rhythm of consumer demand.

"You must be Marianne. I'm Arthur."

She jumped, then relaxed. The black man beside her barely came up to her shoulders, his grey hair cropped short. A faded yellow sweater draped his bony frame, stretching almost down to his knees. He gestured her into a small office, crowded with hard-copy books. The air-conditioning didn't extend into the office, and layered mustiness vied with the scent of leather bindings.

"Sit down, sit down." Arthur cleared a pile of Ian



Fleming novels from a chair, the titles blazed in scarlet along the spines. "Do you drink coffee? It's that or water."

"Coffee's fine, thanks." Marianne eyed the mugs piled in the sink. The stains caked on their sides might once have been coffee. "Do you also work in the computing department?"

Arthur's wrinkled face creased into laughter. He leaned against the sink, his brown eyes kind. "I'm sorry, Marianne. There isn't any computing department, just you."

"That's impossible - RioTech has hundreds of robots at this site -"

"Don't worry about it. The machines have always worked fine without any so-called experts. No offense meant to you. Some bored executive probably decided that on-site software consultants would look good in the company profile."

Marianne swallowed hard. Her professor had warned her that industry wasn't as exciting as she might think. But that wasn't the problem at all. She'd signed on as a software consultant, yet somehow she'd ended up in sole charge of a host of industrial robots. And she'd never even programmed a full-scale model, only the university simulations.

Arthur put a mug of coffee down in front of her. "You'll be fine. RioTech wouldn't have hired you if you weren't over-qualified. Same as any job, always more applicants than they know what to do with."

Marianne wrapped her fingers around the warmth of the mug. The coffee was laced with fresh cream, the rich taste slipping down her throat. She thought of the robots next door, their motions an exercise in fluid efficiency. Maybe this would be all right after all.



Although Arthur offered to make room for her in the office, Marianne installed herself in the main factory. She squeezed a desk onto a platform at the far end, overlooking the robots. RioTech hadn't provided her with specific instructions, so she browsed through data almost at random. One hour she skimmed the machine specs. The next hour she stepped through a section of assembly code, laboriously tracing from raw commands to the manipulator joints through to the complex trajectories needed to cut a sheet of steel.

She spent her breaks walking up and down the long aisles, pausing to watch each machine in turn. At home at night, she found these walks coming back to her. The swinging of her angle-poise lamp reminded her of the play of the robot. And then she remembered the way her reflection caught in the robots' sides, how the heavy machines transmuted to delicacy as they worked with silk and airbrush.

On the eighth morning, Marianne estimated the computational load on the robots, and discovered that nine tenths of the processor power was unused. She frowned. Each of these computers had enough spare capacity to control a squadron of fighter jets. Drumming her fingers against the desk, she glanced down at the machines.

A dozen gold-bright eyes stared back at her.

The eyes swung away in a dozen different directions. Marianne's cheeks burned as she realized they were only robot cameras. Just a chance alignment of some of the vision systems, their bright point-sources blinking at her for an instant. She forced herself to let go of the edge of the desk. Clearly, she needed a rest.

She leaned back into the soft chair, staring up at the ceiling. Through her earplugs, muted noises sounded faintly. Whistles and scrapes, oscillating hums and low bass rumbles amalgamated to something almost musical - waves crashing on an alien beach, a storm sweeping through a forest.

Somewhat calmer, she turned back to her computer terminal. Her arm brushed across a sheet of paper. She pushed it aside, then froze as she focused on the sheet: that wasn't hers. Sketched lightly over the cream paper was a tracery of red-lobed leaves, the colours softening into yellow at the bottom.

Marianne stared from the sheet to the sugar maple leaves she'd placed on the edge of her desk. Slowly, she looked over at the robots. Scattered around the base of the nearest was a shower of paper - maple leaves rendered in charcoal, gold paint, and a myriad shades of red.

Goose bumps prickled her bare arms. The machines loomed in front of her, twelve foot tall metal bodies with razor-sharp blades. But she wasn't frightened, not at all. She'd wanted this for as long as she could remember, lying awake in bed, imagining something more than programming buried in computer circuitry.

Something *other*.

But no one took that idea seriously any more, except in cheap horror vids. The computer she'd used at the university had a magnitude more processing power and a state-of-the-art natural language interface. She took a deep breath, and shook her head. The only time that computer had ever done something unexpected - peppering her screen with crude diagrams - had been another grad student's idea of humour. No, either there was a programming glitch, or else someone was playing games with her.

Marianne pulled the keyboard forward, and called up the files for the malfunctioning robot. Line by line, she checked through the designs it had been given. The machine was supposed to be painting Celtic patterns on kitchenware, and although it was now back in full swing, the source of the temporary aberration was elusive.

Exceedingly elusive. She couldn't even work out where it had gotten hold of the paper. The nearest supply was three aisles away.

Arthur came in briefly, asking when she was going to eat lunch, but she didn't have time for that. She was trying to understand the information flow through the computer's optic fibres, only partly determined by the current program. Other patterns ebbed and surged in the background, pseudo-random flux left over in the processor's excess capacity.

Really, she ought to contact RioTech headquarters for advice. But they'd probably blame her for any



problems, and she had broken the stall print of the regulations – she was meant to query the robots from a remote terminal, not to sit in the factory with them.

When the twinge of cramp in her back grew too distracting, Marianne paced between the machines. Returning, she scooped up all the drawings and piled them on her desk.

She was about to sit down when she saw a man walking toward her. His long blond hair was caught up to one side in a complex twist that fell down into a pony-tail, and he wore a tight-fitting green trouser-suit. Marianne disliked the outfit, though judging by the man's studied elegance, it must be considered fashionable.

Stopping on the opposite side of her desk, he shouted above the noise of the machines, "Marianne Daley?"

"Yes. And you are?"

Without answering, he swivelled her terminal to face him, and tapped briskly at the keyboard. The robots stilled abruptly, limbs halted in mid-motion. He smiled urbanely. "The name's Mark Raylin, senior technical advisor to RioTech. How can you stand working in here? Don't you hate the noise those things make?"

"Not in the least; I like it." Marianne forced a smile. What was Raylin doing here? A system monitor might have reported the malfunction to RioTech, but surely they wouldn't immediately send a senior representative.

"Time's money, as they say. So I'll cut to the point. Have you altered the machines' programming in any way?"

"No."

"Did you modify the set-up? The robot layout or supply of raw materials?"

"I re-routed some of the internal diagnostics so I could track machine activity. Nothing else." Which was true, as far as it went. But a knot coiled in her stomach, and she wished she'd put the sheaf of drawings somewhere less conspicuous.

"Then you can think of no reason why this site's productivity might have changed?"

"No."

"Why don't you cooperate, Marianne? That would be easier for both of us." Raylin laid his hand over hers, his hot palm sticky against her skin. She yanked her hand free. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't pretend. Tell whoever you represent that RioTech is ready to negotiate." He dropped a silver data-cube on her desk, his smile thinning. "we don't yet know who's backing you, Marianne. But there's enough circumstantial evidence here to convict you of industrial sabotage."

For a moment, Marianne's jaws were clamped together too hard to reply. She didn't know what Raylin was driving at, but it was more than one machine sketching some unprogrammed pictures. "There's been some mistake. I haven't done anything."

"Call me by noon tomorrow if you change your mind." He turned on his heels, and strode away without looking back.

Marianne opened her mouth to shout after him,

but couldn't think of anything useful to say. Not until she knew what was going on. With shaky fingers, she inserted the data-cube into the terminal drive, and blinked at the array of numbers that scrolled past. Slowing the feed down, she read through lists of production rates at RioTech sites. Over the past three weeks, output had fallen significantly at all the RioTech factories.

Except this one.

Marianne checked the statistics again, but there was no mistake. Since she'd joined, production at this factory had picked up again, and was now exceeding quota by an unprecedented seven percent. Moreover, the increased rates were synchronized almost precisely with her working hours.

So unless RioTech had faked these figures, Raylin's attitude made sense. He thought she was the go-between for some industrial saboteurs who had found a way to slow down the production lines. And, equally important, to speed them up past RioTech's best efforts. That was one hell of a bargaining chip.

She would have laughed, except that, for the first time, she was scared. Over the past six years, RioTech had swelled from its base in Brazil to become one of the biggest global conglomerates. Even if she convinced them she had nothing to do with this, they weren't going to just apologize for troubling her. The information on the data-cube alone was too sensitive for them to trust her afterwards.

She thought about calling her university friends, but they probably couldn't help, and she'd almost certainly be incriminating them. She thought about catching the next plane out, but unless she went to some Third World country that still used hard currency, RioTech could track her through her credit supply.

Shivering, Marianne stared at the robots. They stretched before her like a broken army. Frozen into position, their limbs were heavy, awkward things, robbed of grace.

On impulse, Marianne rebooted the factory systems. The machines jerked into motion with queer staccato gestures. A cascade of small disasters rippled round the room – liquids splashing, screws falling to the ground, fabric tearing – until the assembly line regained its rhythm.

Marianne gazed at them for a long time, the vast chorus of sounds seeping into her. But she still had no idea what to do.



"Arthur?" Marianne knocked on Arthur's office door. She badly needed to talk this through with someone. Bending the facts to fit industrial sabotage took coincidences she didn't believe: why should this factory be singled out? Why were its production rates linked to her work hours?

Arthur pulled the door open and waved her inside, a book by Alice Walker in his hand. "Something wrong?"

"Yes, but it's going to sound crazy. Have the robots ever done anything... odd... since you've been here?"

"Most of what they do seems strange enough to me. What kind of odd were you thinking of?"

"Painting pictures." She spread a sheaf of the



sketches down on the table, not meeting his gaze. "And this morning I thought they were watching me, and then again half an hour ago."

When she said nothing more, Arthur raised his eyebrows. "And?"

"That's it. Now you tell me I'm irrational, and I go away and leave you alone."

"You don't strike me as the irrational kind." He picked up one of the drawings, then another. "And these aren't something that was meant to come out of the assembly line. I like simple explanations. If you think the machines are watching you, then maybe they are. And maybe these drawings are something they're trying to say to you."

"But it doesn't make sense. Why here? I mean the robots are reasonably sophisticated, but there are tens of thousands of computers that are more advanced. And why now?"

"Because." At Marianne's look, Arthur raised his hands placatingly. "I don't know why; I'm not sure you'll ever know. But just because you can't explain this, doesn't mean it isn't happening."

Marianne shook her head. She'd come to Arthur to clear her thoughts, and instead he was racing on ahead of her.

"You look tired. Go home, get some rest. Things often sort themselves out when you sleep."

"I can't go home, I need to..." she trailed off, not wanting to drag Arthur into the mess with RioTech. "Thanks for listening."



Marianne didn't go home at all that night. She fell asleep at her desk sometime in the early hours of the morning, her head pillowed on her arms, the noise of the robots blending into the edge of her dreams.

When she woke, the crick in her neck had attained Olympic proportions. Muttering imprecations to herself, she reached for her mug of cold coffee. Her hand closed on something smoother.

Blinking, she focused on a fluted crystal glass, the stem engraved with minute pairs of eyes, the centres picked out in the exact brown of her own irises. She bolted upright, and saw the robots watching her. Every single camera was turned toward her, a sea of gold-bright dots.

She couldn't breathe, her throat constricted. After a moment, she managed a raw-voiced, "Thanks."

But they didn't answer. Of course they didn't answer. How could they? No one put language databases into factory robots. If they were thinking at all, it might be on some vastly different level, an otherness more strange than any living creature. Only their gold-bright eyes held constant, the stalks dipping and swaying in an alien rhythm, but the lenses always focused on her.

And she was scared. Not scared that the robots would hurt her, not at all. But that she would move too suddenly, or Arthur would walk in, and the moment would shatter. She kept thinking that no one would believe this. So, guiltily, she switched on the video units to record the scene.

The robots were still watching her. She jumped up, suddenly unable to sit still another second, and

ran down to the factory floor. Like a child, she ran the long circuit past each machine. Something deep, piercingly sharp, sang inside her as she saw the robots turn to watch her in a bank of rippling gold.

She halted, heaving for breath. One by one, the machines turned away, tools swinging into motion in a rising crescendo of sound.

"Wait —" Marianne stopped, it was too late. The robots weren't watching any more. Slowly, she walked back to her desk. She picked up the crystal glass, her fingers closing on the base hard enough to hurt. Something had happened here, something rare, and fragile, and infinitely precious. And it was up to her to try to preserve it.

But still she hesitated. She had the distinct impression that neither Mark Raylin nor his RioTech bosses were going to be helpful. To do this alone, she'd have to illegally breach her contract. Worse than that, when RioTech was finished with her, jail might seem like light relief.

Glancing up, she caught two of the nearby robots watching her, their electronic eyes blinking steadily. A gesture so insubstantial that it was hardly communication at all. And yet it mattered. Beneath their gaze, Marianne reached for the keyboard. As quickly as possible, she started copying confidential files, dumping sections of the robots' memories into secondary storage.

When she paused, her wrists aching, it was nearly noon. Mark Raylin might arrive at any moment. She had to transfer the data off-site, and she didn't have time to be careful. Using codes stolen from the data-cube Raylin had given her, Marianne forged RioTech's security protocols and established an external data-line. She keyed in an electronic address, relaxing slightly when someone picked up the connection at the other end.

Her former professor's face coalesced on her screen, the ends of his white moustache bouncing as he spoke. "Marianne, good to see you again —"

"I need a favour. Right now. I'm transmitting some data to you. Please distribute it as widely as possible."

"What type of data? If there is anything military —"

"No, nothing military. Call it, the ghost in the machine. I don't have time to explain. *Please.*"

His moustache twitched, and then he nodded. "Very well. If I dislike what I see, I shall simply ensure your Ph.D. is revoked."

His smile softened his words as he cut the video link. There was nothing left for her to do. Cupping the crystal glass firmly in her hands, Marianne walked down to the robots.



One moment the machines were swaying above Marianne, their arms lithe and skilful. The next moment, they shuddered to a halt, silence breaking in their wake.

Marianne spun round, saw Raylin leaning against the motionless conveyor belt to her left. Mustering a smile from somewhere, she nodded to him. "Mister Raylin, I've prepared a preliminary report for you."

"Don't bother to tell me. We've already intercepted your transmission to the university, and some of



your conjectures were surprisingly helpful.”

There was a sly viciousness in his tone that raised the hairs on the back of Marianne’s neck. “What do you mean?”

He walked over, standing so close she smelled the tang of his aftershave, the staleness of his breath. “According to you, the robots’ internal logic is progressively corrupted by real-world experiences – contact with objects on the assembly line, sensors focusing on neighbouring machines, and so forth. Because the robots communicate to share their instructions, the logic malfunctions spread through the group. Well?”

Marianne stepped away from him, found herself wedged into a corner. Her fingers gripped white around the base of the crystal glass, but she steadied her voice. “I didn’t say the robots were malfunctioning. They’re learning to think independently.”

“Call it what you want. But to prevent it, all we have to do is to periodically purge the robots’ memories. Sure, we lose a few days every year while they retrain, but that’s an acceptable trade-off. I’m ordering the procedure at all our sites.”

Marianne stared at him, bile rising in her mouth. “You’re going to kill them?”

“Don’t overreact. They’re just machines.” He placed one heavy hand over her shoulder, squeezed. “Relax. Maybe I can persuade RioTech to drop the charges against you.” His palm moved down, settling over her breast.

Marianne writhed free, blood flaming in her cheeks as Raylin laughed.

“Fine, we’ll do it the hard way.” He gestured to someone near the entrance.

Turning, Marianne saw a policeman walking toward them. Her arms were trembling, and she thought she might vomit. But the crystal glass was cool in her hand. She swung back to Raylin, and smashed the glass into his face with all her strength.



At Marianne’s trial, the lawyers displayed enhanced photographs of Raylin’s face. Glass fragments jutted out of his skin in a ripped scarlet mosaic. But to Marianne they were as unfamiliar as to the jury. She couldn’t remember attacking Raylin, couldn’t remember her arrest, or the bite of the handcuffs round her wrists.

When she thought of it, all she saw was the glass shattering. A fall of crystal trembling to the floor. Broken. Silent. And all around her, the robots frozen, their eyes dulled to the colour of dust.

Arthur visited her every week at the prison. He told her that some of the academic community were taking her theories seriously, and trying to duplicate the results. There were even minority groups lobbying for machine rights.

Marianne nodded in the right places, but she couldn’t bring herself to say anything. She listened while he rambled on about the books he’d read, the weather outside, little things. Sometimes just the sound of his voice, warm and familiar, made her want to cry.

Then one week, he didn’t say anything, just pushed a sheet of paper across.

Marianne lifted it. A drawing on cream paper, washes of paint layered over each other, perspective skewed in odd ways so that at first she saw nothing but a mess of colours. Tilting it, the light caught strangely. For a moment the image looked three-dimensional: a young woman – herself – walking under an archway of robots, a host of gold-bright eyes intent on her.

“Where?” She couldn’t say any more, the picture blurring before her.

“I found it at the factory, three days ago. Then next morning your professor friend called up, seems his machine has also taken to drawing. There’s been about eighty instances all told, and the media are making the most of it.”

His voice rolled on in a comforting flow, pausing occasionally. But she only clutched the drawing wordlessly.

“Marianne, time’s up. I have to go.”

“Thank you –” she should have said that ages ago – “for bringing this, for coming every week. I –”

“It’s okay. See you next week.”

And it was okay, suddenly it was all okay. Next spring, she’d be released. The buds would be opening on the trees, the sky rinsed pure blue. Maybe the machines would be interested in seasons. Marianne smiled.




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**Mary Soon Lee**, who lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has sent us the following message about herself: “This has been a good year for me. I had my first publication in a major magazine when ‘Ebb Tide’ appeared in the May 1995 issue of *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Also, my short-short story ‘Conversation Pieces’ was recently published in *Beyond #2*, my first sale to a British magazine. I am very happy indeed to sell a story to *Interzone*. When I grew up in London, it was the only significant British sf magazine. I hope no one still remembers this, but many years ago when I was still at school, I submitted a story to *IZ*: single-spaced, with narrow margins, on small paper. I think I was lucky to escape with a polite form rejection.

“I am indeed British, though my mother still holds an Irish passport, and my father was ethnically Chinese, grew up in Malaysia, and held a British passport. I was born and raised in London. I then spent seven years living in Cambridge, where I obtained an MA in mathematics and a diploma in computer science from Cambridge University, plus – via a lengthy daily commute – an M.Sc. in astronautics and space engineering from Cranfield University. I also spent two years working for a Cambridge-based software company, and married my husband, Andrew Moore.

“In November 1990 we moved to Boston, Massachusetts. I had intended to get a job related to my computing or aerospace qualifications, but ended up writing fiction instead. In 1993 we moved to Pittsburgh. I’ve started doing a little computer science again, as joint research with my husband, who is an assistant professor at Carnegie Mellon University. I also run Pittsburgh Worldwrights, a local speculative fiction workshop, which is a source of honest critiques, good friends, and fellow ice-cream eaters.”



# The Island of DR ROMEAU

Barrington J. Bayley

Clarke Prentiss began to feel nervous as the launch approached the nearby island at what seemed reckless speed. He would have thought the off-shore reaches quite impassable by boat. He could see no way at all through the chaotic, jagged coral, about which the sea swirled and churned with frightening violence.

The pilot, however, glanced only occasionally at the surrounding hazards. His attention was on the computer screen in front of him, on which was displayed a chart of the waters. A sinuous red snake or worm was the path they had to follow. A blip halfway along it showed the position of the launch.

Prentiss's red-haired guide noticed his sudden paleness. "You are right if you are thinking the island is pretty nearly inaccessible," he said. "Too rocky to build an airstrip or even to land a helicopter. Without the help of the computer chart not even a boat could get through."

"So who made the chart in the first place?"

"Doctor Romeau, of course. One of the greatest geniuses the world has seen."

Red coral slid past. Spray sprinkled Prentiss's face, the launch swaying as the blip on the screen crawled and wriggled its way through the red worm. Then they were in the calm water within the small lagoon, heading for the jetty.

"So this is Romeau's fantasy island," Prentiss murmured.

It presented, in fact, little more than a rocky pile jutting out of the water and rising to a lofty peak. No buildings had been erected on it. Prentiss already knew that Romeau had ferried in robot tunnelling machines and excavated his premises from within. Visible here and there were windows and balconies set into the jumbled rock.

The launch pulled up at the jetty. Once it was secured the guide led Prentiss along a short gangplank to the timber platform. A door in the solid rock slid aside. Prentiss was ushered through. The door thumped immediately shut at his back, leaving the guide outside, giving Prentiss a slightly uneasy feeling of entrapment.

It soon passed. The artificial lighting within Doctor Romeau's island was a vibrant peach colour, making skin tones glow. The short passage, carved from bare rock but treated with a plaster lining to make it look

like soft sandstone, ended in three archways. From the middle one a woman smiled at him.

He guessed her to be in her late 20s. Her eyes were a melting brown, her mouth large and sensuous. From the waist up she wore only bangles and a brief basque supporting fulsome breasts. Incongruously, a long full white skirt covered her from waist to ankles.

Her movements were loose-limbed as she came towards him. His heart began to beat a little faster.

"Good day, Mr Prentiss. Doctor Romeau has sent me to receive you. Would you like to rest before you meet him?"

"Thank you, I am quite all right."

"Some refreshments, perhaps?"

"Actually I had hoped to do the interview and get back to Jakarta before dark."

"Oh?" Her eyebrows rose. "But the launch has already left. It won't return until tomorrow. I am afraid you will have to stay the night."

"What? Nothing was said to me about this!" Prentiss showed his annoyance. The woman looked embarrassed and conciliatory.

"I'm sorry, there must have been a misunderstanding," she said. "But wouldn't you prefer to stay, in any case? It will help you get the feel of the place."

"Well, I suppose so." Prentiss frowned, suspecting that he was being manipulated.

It seemed he was being given no choice. He felt an involuntary thrill. If the rumours he had heard were true, he might be invited to sample the delights of the island...

Doctor Romeau sat at a lacquered table sipping aromatic tea from a Chinese bowl. He wore a long robe of shimmering lilac silk. He turned blue eyes on Prentiss, who received a shock of disorientation. How old must the doctor be? The eyes had the liveliness of a young man of 20, but that could hardly be possible. The face was fairly smooth; lines appeared only if one looked close. The hair was perhaps more of an indication: white and fluffy, not the hair of a young man.

"Doctor, this is Clarke Prentiss of the *Planetary Enquirer*," the young woman announced.

"Thank you, Lindy."

She left them alone. The doctor offered Prentiss some tea, which he accepted for politeness's sake. He



switched on his pocket recorder and began the interview.

"Doctor Romeau, the world is curious to know exactly what goes on in your research station. I gather you are doing research into sexuality."

"Oh, this is not just a research station. It is an island of pleasure in a world of pain. As for research, yes, we do research. But you know the phrase *research and development*? Here we do development. Our aim is to provide the world with happiness."

The bravado of the answer left Prentiss speechless for a moment. "Haven't others tried to do that?"

"Yes, in the fields of economics, psychology, politics... In truth, only sexual fulfilment brings happiness. Just as science has expanded every other field of human activity, we seek to use it to expand the area of sexual satisfaction."

"And how would you do that?"

"Well, to give a simple example, may I ask, what is your own sexual orientation?"

"Uh, I'm just a common-or-garden heterosexual," Prentiss said with a weak grin, trying to hide his pride in what he regarded as his "normality."

"Hmm. Have you ever thought what it would be like to experience homosexual desires?"

"I can't say I have."

"Well, what if there were a pill which just for a few hours would switch you from being heterosexual to homosexual? Would you take that pill just to see what it is like?"

Prentiss shifted uncomfortably. "No, I don't think so."

"Yes, that is quite a common reaction, including from homosexuals who do not want to know what it is like to desire the opposite sex. One would think curiosity alone would – and if not that, is it not a little cowardly to shrink from new experiences?" Doctor Romeau clucked his disapproval, shaking his head. "One day such an attitude will seem hopelessly old-fashioned and hidebound. The SOR pill – Sexual Orientation Reversal – will be on sale at every drugstore."

"Such a pill is possible?"

"Oh yes." Doctor Romeau's eyes twinkled. "We have established the mechanism of sexual attraction. It is quite simple, really. In your brain there is a list of features identifying the female human being – typical female shapes, distinctive features of the female face, female scents, distinctive female behaviours, and so forth. When these are perceived, the feeling of sexual attraction is triggered. Likewise, in the heterosexual woman, there is a list of human male characteristics which acts in the same way."

"The crucial point is that *both lists exist in everyone's brain*. That is proved by there being such a large proportion of people who are homosexual or bisexual. At some stage in a human being's development, one or both of these lists is activated. And that's all there is to it. Do you follow me, Mr Prentiss?"

"Yes, it's very interesting."

"Indeed. We have established here on this island that the sex attraction lists are activated in the seventh month of gestation. This might seem rather late, until you remember that the human body is basically female; the modifications to make a male come later.

That is why you have nipples, and a seam along your scrotum and perineum. That is where the lips of the female organ were sealed together when you were in the womb. Your penis is an enlarged clitoris."

"Yes, I'm aware of that," Prentiss muttered. "So homosexuality is the result of the wrong list being turned on?"

"Let us not say the 'wrong' list. Homosexuality is not abnormal – if nature wanted matters that way, the lists would be activated right at the beginning of gender differentiation, and not at such a late stage as the seventh month. I'm sure this 'carelessness' on nature's part has a strategy to it. Animals use sex for reproduction only, but with human beings it has a much wider meaning. It embraces a whole spectrum of relationships and feelings. Sadly, monosexuals – that is, non-bisexuals – are colour-blind, so to speak, to one half of humanity. That is why the SOR pill, which can suppress one list and activate the dormant one, will prove so useful once it is perfected."

Despite his attempted objectivity, Prentiss looked disgusted. "You mean you want to turn us all into... *queers*?"

"Well, I don't propose it should become compulsory." Doctor Romeau laughed. "But we believe a new dimension of human warmth will pervade society once people can switch orientation at will. Friends will become closer, prejudices and fears will evaporate."

"One good use I can imagine for such a pill is to show homosexuals what normal feelings are like," Prentiss said. He immediately regretted the words. He was letting Romeau know what angle he would follow in his article.

"What other aspects of your work can you tell me about?"

"I will be pleased to take you to our laboratories later. For the moment, may I suggest that you eat and rest for a while? I will summon Lindy." Doctor Romeau rang a little silver bell.

Lindy took him to a guest room and left him to eat a light but satisfactory meal. He lay down on the couch. Perhaps an hour or so later the turning on of the light aroused him from a doze. He opened his eyes to find Doctor Romeau poking his head round the door.

"I am not disturbing you, I hope?"

"Not at all."

"Good." Prentiss remained relaxing on the couch as the doctor entered and seated himself on a straight-backed chair. "Was our short interview useful?"

"It seemed to harp on homosexuality a lot."

Doctor Romeau chuckled. "And you find yourself wondering if we are one of those sinister organizations dedicated to converting the world to such practices! I assure you it is not so. As you said yourself, the SOR pill will be of equal service to people of any orientation." Thoughtfully, he added, "But what is it that worries you about male homosexuality? You seem, if I may say so, bothered by it."

"I don't think so," Prentiss said mildly. "It just doesn't interest me. Sexually speaking, I find the male body repugnant."



"Except for one part."

Prentiss blinked. "What?"

Eagerly, eyes gleaming, Doctor Romeau leaned towards him. "The penis!"

"Oh, come on!"

"But think, and be honest. You adore your own, do you not? Is it not every man's lifelong playmate? Don't deny the special relationship you feel with it, or that you have spent man-years toying with it, fondling and admiring it, extracting every last drop of pleasure from it. I see you blushing! I admit I am direct to a fault, but then this is my profession. I am merely describing every normal male of whatever leaning."

Doctor Romeau's wise-looking face leaned even closer towards his guest. "Let me describe an erotic dream you have sometimes had, in which you find yourself making love to an enchanting woman. As you gradually disrobe her you reveal at last her treasured part, only to discover that instead of a vulva it is a smooth, firm penis. In the dream, it seems perfectly natural to you. A female penis – what a conception! And so, in your dream, your lovemaking continues unchecked."

Feeling his blush deepening, Prentiss was relieved when he heard Romeau say, "You see, you cannot hide your psyche from me, simply because it is the same as everyone else's. Every heterosexual man has had that dream. The whole world worships the penis. You have probably wished, secretly of course, that you could play with one not your own. But you do not relish playing with another man. How perfect, then, if it could be a woman's."

Prentiss was silent. Romeau glanced at his watch.

"Well, enough of that. As you know, our island is a place of pleasure as well as of work. As our guest you are invited to avail yourself of it. Do you like Lindy, the young woman who received and fed you? Yes, I perceived that you do. She will come to you shortly. Meanwhile, am I right in thinking that prospective sexual occasions make you nervous? Drink some of this. It is a mild aliment and will put you in a receptive mood."

Doctor Romeau rose and opened a panel in the wall, taking from a small alcove a tall-necked glass and a decanter containing a pale blue liquid. He placed them on the bedside table, smiled and left.

Damn the man, Prentiss thought. Romeau was uncanny! How did he know Prentiss became a bag of nerves when alone with a woman? He poured some of the blue liquid. It had the consistency of a thick milk shake and tasted pleasantly of peach. Perhaps there was cannabis in it, for he began to relax and experience an enjoyable anticipation.

He had grown drowsy when a gauzy drape covering one part of the wall was drawn gently aside and Lindy stepped through an archway which, unknown to him, it had covered. She was still wearing her red basque and long white skirt. Her soft, straight black hair fell to her shoulders. Delight exploded in Prentiss as she smiled at him with full lips. For once his desire was to be fulfilled – and on the same day!

Lindy beckoned. Through the archway was another

room with a large bed. The walls were curved, with no sharp corners, coloured pink and peach. Prentiss's heart was beating like a drum. He fell on her, kissing her neck and shoulders, fumbling to unloose the basque while she unbuttoned and pulled off his shirt.

Her breasts were full and voluptuous. He buried his face in them, then tried to ease her on to the bed, but she stood firm. Prentiss sank to his knees, planting kisses on her belly until reaching the waistband of her skirt, which he pulled slowly down.

She was not wearing any underpants. Prentiss's lips followed the lower curve of her belly and nuzzled pubic hair.

Then he drew back, startled. A smooth penis swelled in place of the expected cleft, curved over a neat scrotum. Prentiss climbed to his feet, moved back. Still smiling, she stepped out of the skirt, letting him see her body fully naked except for the bangles on her arms, which she opened in welcome.

"Are you...?" he stammered.

"A transvestite?" Lindy laughed delightedly. "No, I am a *woman*. Can't you see? A *woman with a cock*."

Yes, she was a woman. Her softly curving shoulders and wide hips spoke for that.

"But how is it possible?"

She answered him in a well-modulated voice. "By genetic manipulation. Doctor Romeau is a master at it. By appropriate gene insertion, he made my female genitals grow into male ones."

"How long did it take?"

"Only a few weeks. I can change back just as easily."

Prentiss couldn't stop staring. A crawling sensation was in his abdomen. "What – what is it like?"

Lindy stroked her organ and spoke breathlessly. "*It's fascinating!*" She lay on her back on the bed. "Come on!" she urged. "Come on!"

"Is this what the future will be like?"

"Yes!"

It was as Doctor Romeau had said: on a female body, the penis had an irresistible attraction for him. This was the dream Romeau had reminded him of, but a dream come true. Perhaps the blue drink was affecting him, for nothing about this seemed unnatural. Her penis was more exciting to him than if it had been a vulva. He joined her on the bed, allowing his hand to fondle it, experiencing a sense of power as it responded, teasing the glans as they kissed mouth to mouth. She pulled his remaining clothes from him and they twisted and writhed together, her breasts squashing against him and her erect penis rubbing against his. Then he couldn't resist the thought that came into his mind. He slid down her, pushed his face into her genitals, then took her cock into his mouth and began to suck expertly. Gasping with excitement, he felt her squirt semen into the back of his mouth, five or six times.

Her lips were parted, her eyes glazed. He wanted her to suck him, but something else happened. Suddenly she had seized hold of him to throw him down on his back. She flung his legs over her shoulders and held them there. What strength of purpose there was in her face! He felt like putty in her hands, someone whose only role was to be used, and







# DARK GEORGEY

She drives an ancient Mercedes convertible. The car is in wretched shape, the body battered and nearly rusted through, chrome pitted and discoloured, the seat covers ripped and the stuffing popping out. But the engine is in racing condition. Every Saturday she tunes it up, working slowly, methodically: the engine, then the brakes, the tyres. The task takes all morning.

She never takes the car out, except for the two-mile drive to the University each day.

The student scheduled to defend his thesis next, a plasma-physics experimentalist named Li, brought the case of beer. Somebody shot the cork from the first bottle of champagne. It arced across the seminar room and rebounded off a blackboard, and suddenly Caroline's party was in full swing.

Esteban didn't know Caroline very well. She'd kept to herself. He had never seen Caroline look so happy, smiling and laughing as people came up to

shake her hand. He couldn't remember seeing her happy at all. Esteban pressed his way through the crowds. "Congratulations, Caroline!" He shook her hand. "Or perhaps I should say Doctor Caroline?"

She laughed. "By all means. I worked hard enough for it."

"So when will you be leaving for Caltech?"

"First thing in the morning."

"So soon? I'd think you'd stay around for a while, relax a bit."

"The sooner I get out of this place, the better."

"Hey, that's some attitude! But I guess it can get to you after a while." Esteban looked around. "Say, where's Dr Hawke? Isn't she here to say goodbye and congratulate her latest?"

Caroline shrugged. "Jenny. She'll come if she feels like it. Or not. Who knows?"

"Don't you care?"

"Not really." She looked at him for a moment. "So you're her new student, aren't you?"



# LADY a. LANDIS

Illustrations by Noel Bateman

"Yes, it's all settled. I'll be starting Monday."

She looked down at the ground. "Maybe... have you thought about finding another advisor?"

"Why?"

"No reason." She made an irritated gesture with one hand. "This and that. She's not the only theorist in the physics department, you know. She's not easy to work with."

"But she's the best, isn't she?"

"Yeah." She didn't sound very enthusiastic. "I guess."

"Hey, nobody said it would be easy."

Caroline laughed cynically. "They sure didn't."

"So, any words of advice for the fresh meat?"

"Yeah." She paused. "No. You'll find out. Excuse me, I ought to wander around more."

Esteban watched her walk away. "Now what does she mean by that?" he asked, but no one listened, or, at least, no one answered.

The Taproom was dim, Friday-night crowded, and it took a few moments for Esteban's eyes to adjust to the murky blue light. He saw no one he knew. It was a mistake to come here, he thought suddenly. He would sit alone, pour down beers, and then at closing time go back to the student housing with a spinning head. The prospect seemed dismal, but the idea of going back to his apartment to study seemed equally bleak and uninviting.

"I thought I might find you here."

Esteban looked up. The slender man in the wool jacket stood awkwardly, a peculiar expression on his face. He had a short beard, with white hairs twisting together with dark brown ones. It took Esteban an instant to remember who he was. "Dr Taggart." He suddenly remembered that Taggart was said to be a friend of his advisor, Dr Hawke. Her only friend.

Taggart nodded toward the bar. "Join me?"

They drank in silence, and Esteban wondered why Taggart was there; had, apparently, particularly



sought him out. But Taggart seemed to have no interest in conversation. Finally Esteban turned to him. He looked him over before speaking. "Tell me about Professor Hawke."

"Jenny? You don't know even know what to ask, do you?"

"Tell me."

"Not today." Taggart got up without saying anything and crossed the room to the jukebox. When he got back to the table he sat down, lifted his head back, and closed his eyes. "Tell me, how do you feel about the blues?"

Esteban shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

In the distance, the jukebox started up; a saxophone yowling blues, a single deep voice wailing:

*My lover is a lady, purer than the snow  
Yes, I've got a lady, I love her like the snow  
She'll show me up to heaven, the heavens up above,  
Yes the heavens up above me, and the hells so far  
below.*

Taggart said, "You'll learn."

"In the beginning, in the end, there is only one question: what is the universe? What is this stuff, that the world is made of? But the more we learn, the more we understand the workings of the universe we live in, the more subtle and elusive the answer to the question becomes." Professor Hawke was silent for a long moment, standing with eyes focused blankly at some invisible object drifting slowly near the back of the room. Finally she continued, her voice so soft that it was almost a whisper. "We chase, and old theories fall discarded along the wayside, but the goal remains forever elusive."

She looked up, and seemed almost surprised to find the physics students still in the classroom. Not one of them moved. She flicked a wrist. "Dismissed."

Esteban fell into the habit of coming over to her house on Saturdays when she worked on the car. While she went through the long ritual of tuning it up, he worked on the body, sanding off rust, applying primer, covering over with fibreglass the places where the body had rusted through.

There was an odd physical satisfaction to be found in sanding: the smooth, repetitive motion, starting with coarse grit, the texture almost like gravel, and progressively moving through ever finer grits to polishing compound, finer than toothpaste, rubbed on by hand. Professor Hawke raced the engine, producing a cloud of faintly blue engine smoke. He looked up. She was grinning at him, wrapped up in her overalls, shouting over the roar of the engine. "The old beast sounds pretty good, eh, Esteban?"

He nodded, pulled down his dustmask for a moment and shouted back. "Not bad. Burning a little oil, no?"

She tapped the accelerator again in response, and the engine roared. "Yeah. It's the number two cylinder. Next week I'm going to pull the rings."

There were good days and bad days. Sometimes she would be brusque and uncommunicative, hollow-eyed as if she had forgotten how to sleep, silently starting

to work on the engine with an odd grim determination, ignoring him. Other days she would laugh with exuberant energy and contagious good spirits.

All during the Fall they worked together; on physics during the week, on the car Saturdays. The asphalt driveway was ankle-deep in yellow leaves. As it got colder he had to keep stamping his feet and moving about to avoid freezing. Late in November they moved inside, the garage door blocked halfway open with the handle of an old rake to let out the deadly perfume of the engine. Gusts of early snow blew in through the opening to battle with the warmth from the kerosene heater glowing in the corner. Afterwards, on the days when she was in high spirits, they would go inside and sit by the radiator, warming up, drinking coffee, talking physics.

"So few people ever learn to think," Dr Hawke said. "Don't memorize, think! Think, think, think! First, last, and always. Use your brainpower."

It was an old house in the middle of the city, with a high ceiling of elaborately sculpted plaster. On the floor, beneath layers of dirt, Esteban could faintly distinguish the wood parquet. Fifty years ago the house, and neighbourhood, had been the height of fashion. Now both were deteriorating.

Stacks of paper covered every surface. Scribbled notes, pages of calculations, unfinished scientific papers, piles of journals and conference proceedings, review copies of books, reams of experimental result summaries. He was amazed that she could ever find anything in the disorder, but more often than not she knew exactly which pile had the paper she was looking for. Occasionally one would not be where she thought it should be, and she would rage through the house overturning piles and scattering them across the floor, or else she would go silent and withdraw into herself, refusing to speak or acknowledge Esteban's existence until he left her alone and walked back the two miles to his own small apartment in the student housing.

Slowly Esteban discovers that he is drifting into deeper waters, where he doesn't know how to swim, is not even certain how to float. Esteban feels that he is drowning. He doesn't understand what he is doing. Oh, he understands the mechanics – although it is difficult, he can do the mathematics well enough – but the meaning eludes him. To him, it seems as if he is manipulating obscure symbols according to obscure rules toward some even more obscure goal that recedes from him further the more he strives. He fills notebooks with calculations, attempting to reduce complicated expressions to simplicity, and failing. When he gets stuck he comes to her. Often she points out an approach or an approximation he can try. Other times, though, she cannot find a way through the thicket of symbols, and says, simply, okay, now we can abandon *that* approach.

But when Esteban tries to ask her what it all means, she only shakes her head. We are pathfinders, she says. When – if – we find a path, then we can look back and understand where we've gone.

He remembers when physics used to be easy. God,



he understood it then. When had it started to get hard?

Esteban tries not to show his desperation, not to let anyone know that he is terrified that he will be found out to be a fraud, that everyone except him understands it clearly. Taggart is the only one he confesses his fears to, and Taggart only laughs. "Everybody feels that way," he says. "After a while you get a feel for it, and bit by bit it begins to make sense."

He pauses, and then says, "Or else it doesn't."

Esteban saw it in the newspaper, buried several pages back in the metro-area section. Late last night she had been out walking over by the Projects, and she had been assaulted. She put two neat holes in the man with a .22 calibre Beretta, then calmly waited for the police to arrive. The assailant had been taken to the hospital, but was released when she declined to press charges.

But what, wondered Esteban, what had she been doing in that part of town at midnight? There was nothing there; no stores, just graffiti-covered burned-out cars, drug-dealers, and the blank brick walls of the housing projects.

And nobody in the department was even curious. Why wouldn't anybody talk about it?

The saxophone cried out in staccato rhythm, while a thin voice quavered softly over, between the notes:

*Oh my lady love is strong and cruel, she serves a  
jealous god*

*Yes, my love's a jealous lady, she serves an  
evil god -*

Dr Taggart went to the bar, bought two mugs of beer, and brought them back to the booth. He handed one to Esteban.

"It was 1962," he said softly. "You have to remember that things were different then. It was the winter of our second year in grad school. That Fall we'd taken our comprehensives, and we were still basking

in the glow that comes with knowing that we made the grade. None of us so much as Jennifer, of course. She'd been the only one to get a perfect score."

Esteban took a sip of his beer. Her eyes had been unfocused today, and he had thought she was sick, although she'd denied it. Her nose had been dripping, but she didn't bother to wipe it. She'd just stared at the car, not even bothering to start it up. After half an hour of staring, with her wrist and forearm twitching erratically, she'd abruptly told him to go home. It had scared him.

He took another gulp of beer. "Go on," he said.

"It's a long story." Taggart sighed. "Maybe - no, forget it. It's been a long day. We should probably both go home."

Neither one of them made a move. "Go on," Esteban said.

Taggart picked up his beer. "1962," he said, shaking his head slowly. "Yeah. Well, I was a little put off by the fact that she'd outdone me, to tell you the truth. Until then, I'd thought of myself as pretty hot stuff. I have to admit that I wouldn't have minded so much if it had been any of the other students - but to be beaten by a girl! Yes, I know - it seems rather petty now. We were pretty damn narrow-minded back then, and nobody thought anything of it. Nobody even noticed. From then on, I made a point of ignoring her. That was easy. She didn't try to attract attention, or try to make friends, and back then any kind of camaraderie between men and woman students was quite discouraged. Women students had nine o'clock curfews - yes, grad students too. They didn't make any distinction."

"You weren't worried about prelims?" Esteban asked.

"Prelims? No. We'd passed the comps, and the prelims seemed just infinitely far in the future.

"There was an intense rivalry between the grad students right then. We had to choose research advisors, and there was keen competition to work for the big names in the department. I don't think that Jenny even noticed it. She went right in to see Ler-





motov, told him she was going to work for him, just like that."

Esteban smiled. "That's her, all right."

"Lermotov was a bear of a man, with a huge bushy brown beard. I think he hardly even noticed whether his students were men or women. All he cared about was whether they could do physics, and, man, Jenny could do physics in spades. She was the best. I guess that was another way Lermotov was ahead of his time.

"She awed us, just walking in and telling Lermotov how it was going to be. Didn't make her any friends, but it set her apart."

Taggart stopped talking and cocked his head sideways. The song ended on a long lonely note almost impossibly high. It slowly warbled upward and then faded into the air like smoke. After a moment of silence the gabble of voices in the bar started up again, and then the heavy bass rhythm of a rock song beat across the room.

"We were all still taking classes," Taggart said. "Professor Saxon gave us a final exam with just one problem, to prove a certain theorem. Instead of proving it true, the two of us – Jenny and I – found a counter-example, and proved it false. We were the only ones in the class who did.

"If only one of us had given that answer, I'm sure he would have ignored it, given out zero credit, and gone on. But with two of us, he had to try to follow the reasoning to show us where we'd gone wrong. Of course, he couldn't; we were right, and he – and the rest of the class – was wrong.

"When he finally convinced himself that we were right, Saxon went up to the department chairman and accused Jenny of cheating. The argument was so subtle, he told the chairman, a single brilliant student could possibly have stumbled across it, but not two. Jenny must have copied it from my paper, he said, 'most likely without even realizing it was a remarkable piece of work.' When Jenny was called in, she denied the accusation of cheating and pointed out her score on the comps. He accused her of cheating on those, too.

"So the next day she came bursting into my room and accused me of trying to sabotage her career. This was the first I'd heard anything about it. There was a big scene, but after a bit of shouting back and forth – I did my share of shouting, too – we figured out what had happened, and I convinced her that I had nothing to do with it. It ended up with her crying in my arms. That was the only time I ever saw her cry. Later, she understood not to expect fairness out of the world.

"Enough people in the class had remembered that we'd sat on opposite sides of the room, and at last Saxon stopped pushing the matter. It was allowed to drop, although as far as I know he never withdrew the accusation, or apologized to either one of us.

"That incident broke the barrier between us. From then on, if we weren't exactly best friends, at least we were companions-in-arms. We would work problems together, and I tried to get her interested in other things, like hiking – I was an avid woodsman in those days – and jazz." He shook his head. "Yeah, I listened to a lot of jazz back then. I was still too young to appreciate the blues." He took a sip of his

drink. "She'd listen carefully to whatever I played for her, but the only composer she ever really respected was Bach.

"Myself, I picked up a little of her dream, and maybe a little of her dedication. I'd sort of drifted into physics. It was not yet 20 years after the atom bomb, and a lot of people still thought of physicists as heroes who'd won the war and saved a lot of lives." He laughed grimly. "Heroes, yeah. Shows how things change, doesn't it? I went into physics because it was fashionable. She showed me that it was beauty, and truth, as well."

"And so you started sleeping with her," Esteban said.

Taggart looked up. "You're kidding, right?" He chuckled, without any particular humour to it. "This was 1962. Nice girls didn't. Everybody knew that. I did make a pass – a rather tentative pass, since I was rather inexperienced at such things myself – and she ignored it. Maybe she didn't even notice it in the first place. She just didn't think that way.

"We were together a lot. It was about the happiest time of my life.

"In the spring we both took Eisenstern's course on quantum field theories. Field theory was rather new then, the cutting edge of science, and Eisenstern was one of the best. I'd thought I'd seen Jenny work before, but she took to that course like she'd been walking all her life, and just learned she could run. She left us all behind. Me, too, I'm afraid. Oh, I followed her as well as I could, and saw a bit of the elegance of the theory reflected in her work. She tore apart problems as if they held some priceless treasure.

"That was when I made the decision to become an experimentalist. I'd always thought I wanted to do theory, but after watching her approach field theory, I realized I'd never be able to do more than follow along behind. I wanted to make my own trails, even if I had to explore less important territory.

"Eisenstern really took an interest in Jenny. He invited her over to his house for special sessions. He was a young professor, maybe forty, divorced, with a big stone house on the outskirts of town.

"The first time she was invited, she took me along. When I got there he was a little taken aback. I could tell that he hadn't expected her to bring company. We sat around his fireplace, drinking brandy, the two of them talking physics, with me jumping in occasionally with stupid comments. It got to be eight o'clock, and then nine. I finally managed to drag her away. I don't know how she got in past the house-mother after curfew."

"Last call!" the bartender shouted. Esteban walked up to the bar and bought two more beers.

When he got back, Taggart continued. "Next time he invited her over I couldn't go. I had a hike already scheduled. She went; she never even considered that there might be anything untoward about it.

"She never told me the details, although over the years I've pretty much figured out what happened. He sat beside her, and leaned in close – still talking physics – and then started to caress her. She should have left then, but she didn't really know what was



happening. She was terribly innocent in some ways, for all her mastery of theory. When she realized what he wanted, and started to object, he called her a tease, accused her of leading him on, and called her a lot of other things as well. She was so confused, she didn't know what to do."

"He raped her," said Esteban.

"He... was insistent." Taggart shook his head. "I don't know the details. He showed up in class the next day with a bit of a bruise on one cheek. She didn't come to class at all. I didn't think anything about it at the time. She had missed classes before, though usually not without calling me up to ask me to make a carbon of my notes for her. But she didn't come to the next class, or the next, or the next, and I didn't see her around campus, either. I finally went to see her in her room – which was not at all an easy proposition in those days – but she avoided the subject, and wouldn't tell me anything was wrong."

"Closing!" cried the bartender, twisting the dimmer switch to full. The overhead lights brightened, showing the empty glasses and stained bar tables in harsh, ugly glare. "Drink 'em up!"

Esteban does his work in the bullpen, a large open office on the fifth floor of the physics building, side by side with half a dozen other grad students, each one hooked up to earphones and huddled over a stack of papers. He labours until midnight over Feynmann diagrams, a bootleg tape of Buddy Guy in New Orleans blasting in his ears, summing up the histories of elementary particles, hopelessly trying to cancel infinity against itself. He sits alone.

Some days he covers for her when she doesn't come in. He teaches her introductory physics class unasked, and suddenly remembers that Caroline, long since gone, had often done the same. Hawke is sick a lot recently, sometimes for days on end, and then suddenly she is vigorous and full of energy.

"The most important question in the world," said Dr Hawke, "is this: why is there *something* instead of nothing?"

"I don't know," said Esteban. She is well today, and at the peak of her form. "Why?"

"We can't answer that one. We don't have the tools yet. The next most fundamental question is this: why is that something countable? Why is there quantization? We can track that one, Esteban, we can follow in its footsteps and hunt it down.

"Quantization of energy levels, that we understand pretty well. But why are particles quantized? Why can you have one electron, or two electrons, but never half an electron, or the square root of two electrons?"

Esteban thought for a moment. "The result of an observation has to be an eigenvalue of the hermitian operator...."

"Good! But is that an explanation? Why do the operators have to be hermitian? Why do the eigenvalues have to be integers?"

"Well, since the appropriate field operator is the number operator, the spectrum is that of a harmonic oscillator."

"You're not thinking, Esteban. The number operator was chosen *because* it produces integer eigenvalues. That's a description, not an explanation. It's frightening. Or it should be. People think in integers because people come in integers. We don't measure how *much* people, we count how *many* people. But nature knows nothing of integers. Even in quantum mechanics, nature is continuous. Waves. But electrons come in integers! You count them, you don't measure them. Why? What comes in integers, Esteban?"

"Apples?"

"Very good. Are electrons made of apples?"

"No."

"Right. Apples come in integers, but the stuff of which apples are made is continuous. We have to search for a basic principle. For some reason, the structure of the universe requires that the fundamental particles be countable. Why? Let us consider what mathematical objects are integrally quantized."

Esteban leaned back and pulled out his pad. This was going to be worth taking notes on.

"First, there are topological objects: the number of holes in a torus...."

But it was rare when she was that sharp, that focused. Often she nodded through her classes, barely responded to his questions. He had all the facts, but he didn't want to put them together into the only picture they would make.

She was brilliant, she was in pain, the world was too intense to her. She needed it. She was still in control, wasn't she? She was capable of anything; she was crazy, she was above rules. How could he confront her?

How could he not?

Every day, after work, he would go to the bar and drink until closing.

Esteban waited in the corridor outside her office. Dr Hawke was half an hour late, but that wasn't unusual. She was often late. Finally he heard her car pull up outside, and a few minutes later she walked in. Today she was bright and chipper, full of energy. He wet his lips. His mouth felt unusually dry. All of a sudden he wasn't sure if he could say it.

"Hello, Esteban. Sorry I'm late."

His chest was so tight that he could hardly breathe, but he had to know for sure. He concentrated on the words, speaking each one separately, not thinking what they meant. "You're using, aren't you?"

She stopped abruptly and looked at him. "I don't think that's any of your business," she said coldly.

"That's not an answer, is it? You're a junkie."

She spoke very softly. "So?"

"Why?"

"What can I say? Do you think there's a simple reason?" She crossed her arms, uncrossed them, crossed them again, and then shrugged. "I do what gets me through the day. Do you think it's easy, Esteban? Do you want to tell me how to run my life?"

She reached across him and opened her office. "Conference today is cancelled. Get out of here, Esteban."

As he turned around, the door slammed shut. He



could see her silhouette against the frosted glass. "Dr Hawke?"

"Go!"

He could see her reach up, and then the light went out and there was silence.

*She don't want your heart, but she'll take your soul  
You may try to stay in charge, but she'll always  
take control,*

*You may hate yourself in the light of day*

*But it's night-time now and you'll do what it takes*

*Yes, tonight you'll take your pleasure and forget  
tomorrow's pain.*

"So you found out about Jenny." Taggart sat down next to Esteban. "All of her students do, sooner or later. She hardly even tries to cover up any more. It affects them all in different ways. Some quit. Some keep working for her, but turn bitter, like Caroline. Some don't give a damn."

"What does it matter to you what they think?" said Esteban bitterly.

"I care about all of her students. Somebody has to."

"You're her friend. Why don't you get her to stop?"

"I would if I could, Esteban. It's not that simple. What do you want me to do? Kidnap her, lock her up until she changes? Even if I could, she'd go right back to using. Should I call the police? Do you really think that would help her?"

"Don't you care about her?" Esteban said, fighting to keep from shouting. "She's killing herself, slowly. Don't you even care at all?"

"It's her life, Esteban. She's been on the road for a long time, and she knows where it leads. If she's going to change, she has to do it herself. I can't do it for her."

Esteban pushed his chair back abruptly and walked to the bar. The air was thick and blue with cigarette smoke. He got two more mugs of beer, and cleared off an area on the table to set them on. "Mind if I ask a personal question?"

"Yes," said Taggart, "as a matter of fact, I do."

"You ever been married?"

"And what business is that of yours?" Taggart looked at Esteban until Esteban finally looked away, and then answered softly. "No. I guess I should have. Get a wife, a house in the suburbs, kids, all of that..." his voice trailed off.

"So how come you never did?" There was no answer. "Are you in love with Dr Hawke?"

"In love with Jenny? No. Well, only a little, now." Taggart picked up his beer, turned it around in his fingers, and put it down again. "No. I know her too well for that. Once. For a long, long time. But you can't love her, Esteban. She won't let you. It would hurt too much, to love her and watch her destroy herself, and know you are helpless."

"Do you buy for her?" asked Esteban in a bitter voice.

"Esteban, I'd do anything for her. Almost anything. But not cop for her. I wouldn't do it, and she wouldn't ask me to."

Taggart put his beer down and turned his back on Esteban. His voice was soft, speaking to the brick wall. "Yeah, guess I should have gotten married,

moved away, gotten away from this damn place. I should have done it a long time ago."

"Can't you do anything?" Esteban said, speaking to Taggart's back. "Send her to a clinic, or something?"

"You think she hasn't been to clinics? Those things won't help, unless she wants them to help."

"Science," she said. "There's nothing else worth doing, Esteban. It's all there is."

"Heroin. That's pleasure, pure; almost as good as the thrill of discovery. And the pain, that's pure, too. It's pain, but it's pure pain."

Esteban nodded. He didn't like to see her like this. He didn't know what to say.

"It's not like people. People. It's not that they're so complex, it's that they're so simple. So trivial, lusting after trivial things. I hate them, I hate them all. So petty, they are so petty to tarnish something so beautiful, so pure, with petty lies and politics and scheming. Can't they see? Don't they care at all?"

"I always wanted to have a baby. It's so lonely, knowing there is nothing you can give all your being to. Don't you think it's lonely? Don't you?"

Esteban nodded again, not trusting himself to speak.

"Do you think I'm pretty? I was, you know, I was pretty. But I didn't care, I never cared. It doesn't matter. Looks don't matter. Do you think I should have cared? I had a head of gold, but feet of clay."

"We were never meant for this world, you and I. The stars, they are so beautiful from the gutter. So beautiful."

Esteban got up. "I have to go now, Dr Hawke. It was nice talking to you." He practically ran out of the room. He didn't want her to see him cry.

Tuesday was a slow night for the Taproom. Esteban and Taggart had it all to themselves. Taggart bought a pitcher, and filled both glasses.

"That can't be all," said Esteban. "How did it come out? How did it finally end?"

"End?" Taggart paused, as if he had never considered the concept before. "Does it end? I suppose it must."

Esteban picked up his beer. He didn't sip it, but just looked across the empty bar-room in silence, not bothering to look at Taggart. He knew by now that he would talk. Taggart had his own compulsions, no less demanding than those that tore at Hawke.

Taggart shook his head. "Well. End, eh? Jenny showed up for the final exam, took it, and then hurried away before I even got a chance to talk to her. I saw her again when it was time to pick up the exams. Even though she'd been the best in the class, Eisenstern gave her a C in the course. I told her she should protest to the department head.

"She just sort of shrugged. 'It doesn't matter.'

"I couldn't believe she wouldn't protest. 'But you were the best in the class. You deserve more than—'

"It doesn't matter, she said. 'Let it be, Richard. Just let it be.' She saw Eisenstern coming down the hall. I have to run, she said. 'Talk to you later, okay? Bye.' She left before I could say anything more.

"I don't think she ever did tell Eisenstern. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. The university



pressured her to drop out, or get married, but she refused. So they did the next best thing. Abortions weren't legal then, but, well, in an Ivy League university, certain exceptions can be made, in the face of overriding health reasons. The healthy reputation of the university, for example. Officially, I don't think she ever was pregnant. Right after finals she stayed a week in the infirmary, and certainly she wasn't pregnant when she left.

"The doctors at the infirmary were oh so sympathetic to what she was going through, having lost a child. They gave her pills to help her get over her grief; and told her to take one every two hours, without bothering telling her what she was taking. For her own good, of course.

"So after getting out of the infirmary, she tried to put her life back together and get started on her research. And she couldn't do it. She couldn't concentrate on physics.

"They prescribed stronger sedatives, and she started having real trouble. I think that she must have started to think she had lost her edge, and that unnerved her more than anything else possibly could have. When the doctors at the infirmary thought she was starting to get hysterical, they increased the dose. She started falling asleep in conferences, nodding out at her desk. By now she was addicted to the pills. We all knew that something was wrong, but she wouldn't tell anybody what it was. There was talk that she'd lose her fellowship.

"And then she disappeared.

"Dr Lermotov was the only one who stood up for her. Ya, I am not worried, he'd say. Miss Hawke, she will take care of herself. He was right. Two months later she returned. She had a gaunt and hollow-eyed look. She never said where she went. Somewhere there she learned cynicism. But she'd beaten her habit, or at least learned to keep it under control.

"She had to work hard to keep her fellowship, but she did it. She still knew how to do physics. For the next couple of weeks she worked twenty hours a day,

and by the beginning of September she had a prelim presentation that was at least as good as any of ours."

"So Lermotov was the only one she could depend on," said Esteban.

"Well, yes. But in the end, he betrayed her, too. By then she didn't expect anything better."

"Closing time!" called the bartender, one hand on the light switch, the other on a rag. "That's it, boys, you've been here long enough. Finish 'em up and get on home to your families."

"You must have been talking with Dr Taggart." She shook her head softly. "Ah, dear Richard, where would I be without him? Yes, he has his ideas about me. Stuff that happened long ago, that he thinks is important. The romantic heroine, the dark lady, striving for greatness, fated for tragedy." She picked up a stack of papers on her desk and, without even glancing at them, dropped them into a drawer and slammed it shut. "Nuts. I live the way I do because I choose to. If I'm a junkie, Esteban – and I don't like that word – but if I am, it's my own damn business."

"But don't you get, ah, needle marks and all that? Hepatitis?"

"Don't be ridiculous. What the hell do you think I am, some damn street junky fixing in an alley? You won't get needle tracks if you use a sterile needle and clean the skin with alcohol before fixing. Junkies who get needle tracks are plain stupid. I get sterile needles from lab supplies."

"Here? Don't they ask what you want them for?"

She shrugged. "I'm a professor. They may wonder, but they won't ask.

"Now, let's quit talking about me, and get to work. Have you gotten any results out of the perturbation expansion you were working on yet?"

Esteban nodded. "Yes, I've gotten some results, but I'm not sure about a couple of things. First...."

Still, he couldn't help thinking, why? Why you? And through it all, he could even still marvel at the diamond clarity of her thinking, the beautiful, sim-





ple precision of the way she could attack a problem.

They were on the track of something. He could feel it hiding in the mathematics, looming huge just outside the corner of his vision, a great truth that would make it all fit together, but whenever he turned his head it was gone, and he wondered if it was there at all, or an illusion of his desperate wanting.

He told her about it, but she just shook her head and smiled. "Don't look for the great truth yet, Esteban. Do the details. Do the math, fill out the blank spots, and if some great truth is there, it will be waiting there for you. Okay?"

*But you know you'll never leave her, though she's  
killing you so slow*

*The blood runs fire in your veins and the hells they  
wait below.*

"There is one thing," Taggart said. "You see, she could have ruined Eisenstern's career. A little bit of fooling around was something the university might turn a blind eye to, but when a professor actually gets a student pregnant, they'd take notice. If she'd complained into the right ears, he would have found that there were plenty of positions available at somewhat lesser universities. If she wanted vengeance, she could have gotten it. But she chose to stay silent; to stick it out, instead.

"There's not much more to say. The year she finished her thesis research, there was a major conference on high-energy physics theory in Stuttgart. She and Lermotov co-authored an abstract on her work and sent it off. It got accepted. Unfortunately, Lermotov told her, there wasn't enough money to pay her way to the conference. Since she didn't have money of her own, Lermotov went to present the paper in both their names.

"Somehow, he never happened to mention that the conference committee had been so impressed by the work that they scheduled it as the lead paper and offered to pay both their ways over. Strangely enough, when he presented the paper, her name mysteriously got left off."

"She didn't object?"

"She didn't know about it. It wasn't her first paper, but it was – should have been – an important one. She didn't even find out until a year later, when she listed the paper on her resume, and one of the people she interviewed called her out on it. By then she had already been a postdoc for a year, a thousand miles away. There wasn't much she could do."

Esteban was listening, but not with all his attention. He was sketching out topological manifolds on one of the napkins from the bar. She had been talking about knot theory recently, and suddenly he understood how it connected to field theory. It had been obvious to her from the start, of course... but if you think about the four dimensional manifold *this* way...

And, slowly, it was starting to make sense. He beginning to stay even with her, even though he still couldn't see the picture that she seemed to feel intuitively, the theory that the pieces were coming together to form. It was an exhilaration, a feeling of power like a drug, the first time that he realized

that he understood something she said so completely that he broke in and finished her sentence for her. She sat back, a smile on her face.

It even seemed to him that she was using less. Maybe? Could it be? But then he came in for a conference and she was nodding, her pupils tiny pinpricks of dark, sitting at her desk with a dreamy expression, oblivious to him or anything. He walked out – she didn't change position – and walked around the campus, once, twice, a third time, then came back to her office and entered without knocking.

"Why did you go back?" he said, almost shouting at her. "You kicked once. Dr Taggart said you kicked it once."

She pulled him close and brought her face right up against his, forehead to forehead, so that her two grey eyes were a single cyclopean eye in the middle of her face. Her voice was a hot whisper against his lips.

"Richard likes to talk. Richard likes to tell stories, he likes explanations, likes everything to make sense. Richard doesn't know a damn thing about it. Talk to Richard if it helps you, boy, but don't you ever come up and tell me about it."

She held him, stared into his eye for a long moment, then released him and leaned back in her chair. She picked up a paper from the pile, looked at it without focusing on it. Slowly the hard look on her face relaxed. She sat there for several minutes, until Esteban wondered if she wanted him to leave, wondered if she had forgotten he was there.

"There are some who open up whole new fields; the grand architects like Einstein, Maxwell, Galileo," she said. "And there are others who do the dirty work, who painstakingly fill in the details, who lay the bricks and shine their flashlights into areas of the grand cathedrals that the architects have only briefly mentioned. Don't let anybody tell you that this is less important. For all that there are a thousand bricklayers for each of the architects, that bricklaying is what builds up the body of science, bit by bit.

"But still, I always wanted to be one of the trailblazers, one who looked at what others have looked at before and saw what none have ever seen.

"Maybe it's an accident of luck, to be in the right place at the right time. Maybe there is no fundamentally new physics left, that all is done except filling in the details. Maybe it's me.

"I've tried, Esteban, I've tried. I've gotten piles of honours and citations for things I've done, and it's all shit. Bricklaying. I know that I never did more than that, although I've done it well, as well as I could. I've always just filled in the details of work that others had originated.

"I've had the dream, Esteban. I've had the dream ever since I can remember. And dreams die hard."

"You love her too, Esteban, don't you?"

He nodded mutely.

"It's hard, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"You can't change her, you know. She's a diamond, and we are just rocks. You can only grind yourself down."



"I know."

And the saxophone said,

*Maybe God's above, but I'll never know  
I've sold my soul to the devils down below  
To take my pleasure of my lady love,  
white and cold like the deadly burning snow.*

And then she showed him what she had done, how all the pieces that the two of them together had hammered into shape fit together into a theory. It came as a shock to Esteban to find that she had abandoned field quantization. Her first paper – the very first one, the one that she had done so long ago with Lermotov – had been on methods of field quantization.

"But how do you deal with photons?"

"We have no need for photons. Look."

And it was everything he had learned, seen in a new way, all topsy-turvey. But it worked. God, it worked!

"But why? It's so complicated."

"Calculationally complicated," she said. "But conceptually, neater."

It didn't look neater to him. It looked like the back side of a magician's stage, all scaffolding and hooks and wires, with ad hoc assumptions to make things come out.

"It was always like that, Esteban. This way the theory just shows it clearly."

It was crazy, a patchwork quilt of a theory, but it all hung together. "That explains everything," he whispered. "It's incredible!"

"Not everything," she said. "But a lot." She crumpled the piece of paper in her hand, and Esteban jerked back as if he'd been shot. "And it's wrong."

"What?"

"Wrong!" she shouted. She threw the ball of paper across the room. It bounced off the blackboard and skittered to a stop out in the hall. "In error. Factually incorrect. False."

"Why? How?"

She grabbed a sheet of paper – a student's final exam – and started scribbling on it, oblivious to what was already written there. "Look! You can solve for the mass of the electron –"

He stared at it. "How? To do that you need to know the coupling coefficient –"

"No! Can't you see? All those terms drop out! You get a Hankel function; the infinities cancel and you can integrate it exactly."

Esteban shook his head. "I can't integrate a Hankel function in my head."

"You don't have to. That's why God invented Russians." She pulled Rhyzhik and Gradshteyn from her bookshelf. "Look!"

It took him half an hour to convince himself she was right, another hour to go through it again, this time looking for some adjustable parameter he could jiggle to make the numbers come out right. There weren't any. He went back into the derivation then, trying to find where the error came in. Hawke had gone away – to fix up, he guessed, he had been too busy to notice her leaving – and when she finally came back, he was staring at the wall.

He looked up, and was surprised to notice that it

was almost midnight. He'd been working for almost six hours. "The standard model is wrong," he said.

"Obviously."

Esteban let out a sigh of relief. Until he had heard her confirm it he hadn't realized how much on edge he'd been. "But – that's a breakthrough!" he said. The standard model had been used to explain elementary particle physics for over two decades, and their work showed that it was wrong, just like that. "Don't you see –"

"Do you really think I care?" she snapped. "We're back at square zero." She rested her forehead on the desk. "I can't start over again, Esteban, I just can't. That was everything I had, everything, and it wasn't enough." Then she raised her head and looked at him. "Go home, Esteban. Tomorrow will be soon enough for you to write this up for publication."

"But we should celebrate –"

"Go on home, Esteban." She shook her head. "I prefer to do my celebrating alone, and I don't need any help from you. Get some sleep. You can be famous tomorrow."

It was enough. He could see it now, see the whole thing completely – or maybe it was just his own tiredness making him think he could see it all – but he knew that he would get a thesis out of it, and more. Even if they shared the credit – even though Jenny would claim the major portion of the credit, which rightfully was hers – it would still be a major result. His part of the work would be worth a professorship.

But Jenny? On a sudden impulse he hugged her. It was the first time he had ever dared touch her, and she went rigid for a moment. Then for just a brief instant she relaxed, and he felt the crumpled cotton of her blouse, felt her body heat and bunched muscles and quickly beating heart, and suddenly realized she was a human being like any other, with her own fears and sadness and a vulnerability that he could never know, and then she pushed him away.

Her voice was tired now. "Home, Esteban." She pushed him gently out her office door, and closed it behind him. He waited there, alone in the silent corridor, and heard the click of the lock, and waited until at last her light went out.

He drives a beat-up Mercedes convertible. Every morning at nine it comes screeching into the faculty parking lot with the deep, frustrated roar of a powerful engine whose only outlet is through twin racing mufflers. The body has been painstakingly restored with fibreglass patches, sanded into smooth curves and lovingly painted with a deep, hand-rubbed grey, the grey of an overcast winter's dawn, the grey of forgotten hopes.

The body is patched and sanded, but the engine is in racing tune.

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**Geoffrey A. Landis** last appeared here with "In the Land of Purple Flowers" (IZ 60), though perhaps his most memorable story for us was "Paradigms of Change" (IZ 53).



Sometime in the middle of the 1980s, coincident with the emergence of cyberpunk, sf's obsession with catastrophe and the dark side of technology quietly began to wither. The aftermath of limited nuclear war became no more than a single stitch in a detailed tapestry, as in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984); misuse of technology caused not the extinction of the human race, but its transcendence, as in Greg Bear's *Blood Music* (1985).

But nothing is forever, and certainly not themes or trends in sf. After cyberpunk, that mutant strand in which we all become our own autocatalytic Frankensteins, and change is celebrated with positively neo-Victorian vigour, there has been a return to more conventional Awful Warnings in which some new technology (biotechnology, nanotechnology or artificial intelligence – or even all three, as in Kathleen Anne Goonan's recent *Queen City Jazz*) takes its revenge on its creators and must be fought, not embraced. And now to hand, taking this a step further, are two books which rework a particularly British theme, the cosy catastrophe.

In Octavia Butler's beautiful and moving *Parable of the Sower* (Women's Press, £6.99), the catastrophe is that which is already gathering around us. Things have fallen apart. Civilization exists only as isolated islands in a sea of anarchy where gangsters, the insane and the disenfranchised poor prey on each other, and the only law is that the weak die so that the strong may live. There is precious little of sf's most recent obsessions here – computers and virtual reality barely rate a mention – because the hopeful futures to which they belong are already in the past.

This is the world of Lauren Olamina, and it is through her eyes – the novel is cast as her diary – that we see things fall apart and a way in which the future may be redeemed. It is an understated and convincing portrayal of ordinary life lived inside a few blocks of Los Angeles suburbia whose walled defences are barely sufficient to keep out the desperately poor that surround it. The strength and vigilance of Lauren's father keep the little community together, but Lauren, who, because of an intelligence-enhancing drug her mother took, is hyperempathic and literally bleeds in sympathy with other people's wounds, has a sense of impending disaster that lends a growing tension to the first section of the book. Lauren's brother becomes a gangster and is killed; her father simply disappears; finally, the neighbourhood is invaded by a drug-crazed gang and almost everyone Lauren knows is killed. She survives only because she anticipated catastrophe, and from the ashes of disaster forges a kind of victory as she heads North within a vast flow of refugees and gathers around her a new

# Things fall apart

Paul J. McAuley

community which may contain the seed of the future.

The narrative line is a commonplace of catastrophe novels, most notably, with its despairing trek across a devastated landscape towards the hope of refuge, echoing John Christopher's *Death of Grass*. But Butler makes it clear that, unlike Christopher's cosy catastrophe, the seeds of disaster do not originate from the outside: instead, they are inextricably woven into the human psyche. The struggle is not against nature; it is against our own selves. It is the human impulse towards distrust and destruction which Lauren must overcome, and she turns the weakness which her gangster brother predicted would destroy her – her hyperempathy – into her strength.

The seed that Lauren casts into the future is embedded in an affirmative philosophy, Earthseed. Welcoming change, the antithesis of her father's strict Baptism and the petty claustrophobia of her neighbourhood, her creed, quoted extensively through the narrative, treads a fine line between the shallow life-affirmation of the New Age and the clichés of sf utopianism, but never falls into sentiment. Butler uses it not only to illuminate Lauren's character, but also as the moral imperative on which the entire novel hangs.

*Parable of the Sower* is a fine and delicate portrayal of a coming of age, and of a heroine whose goodness and strength is revealed through her actions. Butler combines convincing characterization with a finely considered portrayal of racial and sexual conflicts, placing real people in an imaginary but unsparing portrayal of a brutalized society a bare inch away from our own. In its refusal to seek a quick technological fix, and its forthright examination of difficult questions, it is a considerable and mature achievement.

In *Kamikaze L'Amour* (St. Martin's Press, \$20.95), Richard Kadrey has his hero trek in the opposite direction to Butler's in more ways than one. Like the early work of J.G. Ballard, Kadrey's long-delayed second novel turns the cosy catastrophe scenario inside out. Instead of fighting towards redemption across a landscape reclaimed by nature, his hero welcomes change, finding in the metamorphosis of catastrophe a mirror for his own internal conflicts.

Ryder, a rock star disgusted with the excesses of fame, survives a suicide attempt, escapes the sanatorium in which he has been dumped by his manager, and assumes a new identity in San Francisco, which has been overwhelmed by the northward encroachment of the rain forests. Here, amongst sleepwalkers and suicide cults, Ryder's mania to discover a new music form for his latest album, guided by his synaesthesia, which translates music into forms of light and vice versa, goes unnoticed.

True to the Ballardian template, Ryder becomes obsessed with a woman, Frida, who is able to effortlessly riddle the secret language of the catastrophe: she makes music by sampling rain-forest noises in an attempt to create a spiritline that will define the resurgent jungles. Believing that Frida has stolen the demo tapes of his new music, Ryder follows her when she leaves for Los Angeles, pursued in turn by a sinister documentary maker.

While there is nothing particularly original in the linear diagram of this picaresque journey, and it is overtly templated upon the surrealistic landscapes and obsessed antiheroes of Ballard's disaster novels, *Kamikaze L'Amour* is crammed with arresting and original imagery and guided by a wry self-knowledge. Kadrey, who among other things has worked on the *Whole Earth Catalog* and *The Covert Culture Sourcebook* (St Martin's Press, \$12.95) in the long spell between his first novel and *Kamikaze L'Amour*, displays a fine eye for pop-culture iconography, and his descriptions of the processes of musical composition and form are both original and persuasive. Slim, slick, crammed with richly detailed imagery, *Kamikaze L'Amour* is a bejewelled postmodern Book of Hours.

*Earthfall* and *Earthborn* (Tor, \$22.95 and \$23.95; both due in Britain from Legend) bring to an end the long journey of Orson Scott Card's five-volume "Homecoming Saga." It possesses all the criteria for a classic science-fantasy series: godlike artificial intelligences; a vast perspective on human history; long journeys across an alien world and the gulf of space; a far-future earth inhabited by post-human intelligent species. It also, and this is still so unusual for sf and fantasy that it merits attention, contains strongly drawn and believable characters whose interactions nicely tangle the plot, and it is deeply concerned with the moral responsibilities of power. And yet.

And yet, in sum it does not, in the end, stir the heart or mind as much as its parts promise. This is not because Card had drawn extensively on Mormon theology and, as others have pointed out, used particular parts of *The Book of Mormon* to inform the structure of his saga. The long trek of



Nafai, who has been chosen by the Oversoul of the planet Harmony to lead an expedition back to Earth, where the Oversoul hopes to find renewal of purpose after 40 million years supervising human civilization, may indeed mirror the trek from Jerusalem (Nafai's home city of Basilica) to Heaven (Earth, where an even greater artificial intelligence, the Keeper of Earth, dwells). Yet that is only the backbone of a long and intricate fiction that deals with questions fundamental to sf. Can humans, with all their faults, ever inhabit a utopia? And if so, what form could that utopia take, and how would it be regulated? And if it is regulated by God (or something with the powers of God), what are the moral implications of miracles? All of this is good. The problem is this: Card's well drawn characters are never entirely themselves. They are all, to a greater or lesser extent, mouthpieces. The saga is not so much a fiction, as a tract in which the hero can never be wrong, because he has God (literally) on his side, and God is never wrong.

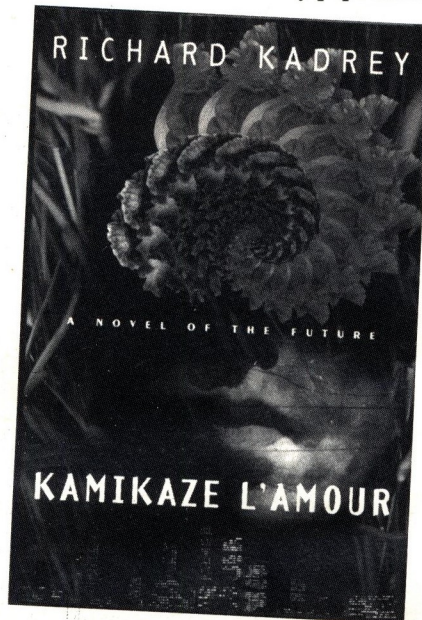
Thus, while Card sets up an enduring conflict between Nafai and his brother, Elemak, to drive the plot through the five volumes, yea, even after their deaths unto the hundredth generation, the conflict lacks tension because Card shows, over and over, that Elemak can never win. Indeed, one can almost sympathize with Elemak. He may be a cowardly braggart and a bully, but while Nafai simply accepts the word of God, at least Elemak doggedly tries to do his own thing.

In *Earthfall*, the fourth book of the series, Nafai's family and their husbands and wives and children, chosen by the Oversoul because they respond best to the dreams it sends as instructions (and to the dreams sent by the mysterious Keeper of Earth), finally leave Harmony for Earth. Elemak stages a mutiny aboard the starship, and another mutiny once they reach Earth, where they discover two intelligent races, the Angels and the Diggers. Although constantly in strife, the two races are subtly dependent upon each other, but once the humans riddle their symbiosis and render them independent, Elemak leads the Diggers and his own family off to start an Empire, and Nafai, who sides with the angels, writes a book on gold plates, which is not *The Book of Mormon* (also written on gold plates).

*Earthborn* takes up the story a thousand or so years later. All the original cast are dead, save for the Oversoul and one woman, the biologist Shemedi, who has been granted a kind of immortality by assuming the power of the shipmaster's cloak once worn by Nafai. Shemedi and the Oversoul discover that the Earth has been

resettled before; the Keeper of Earth appears to destroy those communities which fail to achieve moral worth. The conflict between Nafai and Elemak is echoed in the wars between the nations of humans and angels and humans and diggers. A new religion, led by a priest who was once a slave of the diggers, promises to bind all three races in peaceful accord, but is threatened by the priest's son, who starts a campaign for a kind of apartheid which if successful will lead to the destruction of them all.

Card develops and sustains with commendable vigour a complex and thickly populated



story in which everyone is manipulating everyone else. But although he is superb at dramatizing moral conflict, his narrative control verges on the hermetic. His villains can never even begin to win any argument at any level, because they are opposed by characters who embody the will of the Oversoul and of the Keeper of Earth, and the Oversoul is Annunciating Angel to the Keeper's God. What is left for the villains then, because they are not allowed to sustain arguments of any complexity, is bluster and childish insults. In a series that increasingly relies on conversation to sustain the plot (in the final volume there is a brief portrayal of an expedition to free the slaves of the diggers, but mostly the action centres on the politics of a single city), the lack of true argument is a widening flaw. Increasingly, everyone speaks with one voice, and when they do not, they pay the price, or are suddenly and miraculously redeemed. What Card has dramatized here, with the full force of his considerable skill, is not a dialogue at all. It is a sermon.

Ken Grimwood's *Into the Deep* (Morrow, \$20) is his first novel since

*Replay*, which came out of left field to win the 1987 World Fantasy Award. So it's disappointing that *Into the Deep*, which deals with the well-worn trope of cetacean intelligence, exhibits an apparent suspension of the writer's critical faculties. Despite some nice twists on an old theme, notably a kind of cetacean Internet maintained by the group-mind of whales, the novel, imbued with treacly sentiment, rolls along on predictable lines.

A rogue group of dolphins wants, against the wishes of the rest of cetacean civilization, to re-establish communications with humans, severed 3,000 years ago. The most potentially interesting human character is the captain of a tuna-fishing boat (Grimwood has witnessed at first hand the needless slaughter of dolphins that occurs during purse-seiner tuna fishing, and there's no denying his deep-felt abhorrence), who must reconcile his trade with the onset of empathic contact with the dolphins. But he is sacrificed in a pointless sub-plot in which humans and cetaceans unite to save Santa Barbara from an underwater volcano, leaving centre-stage to the smug romance between a journalist and a marine scientist, and hardly any space at all to the implications of restoration of the cetacean-human link. *Replay*, in which one man found himself reliving his life over and over, worked so well because of Grimwood's rigorous and unsentimental use of the plot device to explore to the degree to which we are able to control our lives. Here, sentiment and whimsy washes through a plot fatally holed below the waterline.

John Brosnan's *Damned and Fancy* (Legend, £4.99), as hyperkinetic as a terrier on speed, takes every cliché in heroic fantasy by the scruff of the neck and gives it a good shaking. It's a glorious piss-take that slams along from one set-up to another at such a pace that it's easy to overlook the care and cunning which Brosnan has invested in his premise.

Which is that investigative journalist Travis Thompson has annoyed a tycoon Who Is More Than He Seems, and finds himself in a medieval fantasy world armed with nothing more than a magic gun and a flatulent pocket-sized demon who used to be a Hollywood producer (not much change there, then). As Travis lurches from one spot of bother to the next, he encounters all the privations that are specifically never mentioned in fantasies, such as the lack of toilet paper and the appalling underwear, rescues a princess from a dragon, loses her to a vampire and rescues her again, and makes an heroic stand against an army of magical trolls kitted out as football hooligans.

Brosnan is not a subtle satirist, but



that's more of a grace than a handicap, given that his target is a sub-genre that's so sublimely unselfconscious about the po-faced reverence with which it treats its third hand over-romanticized concepts that it's mostly beyond satirizing. The jokes come thick and fast, with the kind of glee that indicates that Brosnan is enjoying putting the boot into his subject, and best of all is the last: *Damned and*

*Fancy* is the first of (breathe the word gently) a trilogy.

Also noted:

Amid the plethora of cosmology texts, Frank J. Tipler's *The Physics of Immortality* (Macmillan, £20), wins the prize for *chutzpa*. If Tipler's right, and he scrupulously backs his text with a plethora of equation-riddled appendices to convince those of us who can follow gauge theory and

quantum mechanics, then at the end of time, when the Universe condenses down in the Big Crunch, surviving intelligences will become God, and lovingly resurrect us all into Life Eternal. And if you think that's weird, Tipler engages, with the earnestness of a hyperkinetic boy scout, in a marriage of physics and metaphysics to divine the morality of Heaven. How can you resist?

Paul J. McAuley

In his affectionate study of *The Universe Makers: Science Fiction Today* (1971) the late Don Wollheim argued that Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series had created the framework for a whole "cosmogony of the future": a collective science-fictional image of future history whose centrepiece was the Galactic Empire. The dominance of this image in sf, Wollheim claimed, might even be taken as evidence that this might actually be the shape of things to come. What a difference a generation makes! By the time Asimov died his increasingly verbose attempts to breathe new life into the *Foundation* scenario had begun to seem like the senile ramblings of a man bogged down in the dead past. In 1995 the image of Galactic Empire has almost vanished from all written sf except that which is tied to TV and film shows whose imagery is noticeably less sophisticated than that of the average modern comic book.

The sf Wollheim was writing about regarded the conquest of space as a simple and relatively straightforward matter in which the settlement of Mars was a mere stepping-stone of little or no intrinsic interest. More recent sf has, however, become so obsessive about the means and mechanics of taking that step that the farther horizons have been retired to a distant numinous haze.

*Climbing Olympus* by Kevin J. Anderson (Warner Books, \$5.50) is part of a veritable glut of grittily tough-minded Mars-set novels which bring the practical and political difficulties of colonization into uncomfortably sharp focus. Like Kim Stanley Robinson's trilogy-in-progress it has much to say about terraforming, and like Thomas T. Thomas's recently-authorized sequel to Frederik Pohl's *Man Plus*, it has much to say about the awfulness of growing old when you're a cyborg whose technological bits and bobs have been superseded. It is significant that most of the characters are non-American – these cyborgs are conscripts from ex-Soviet gulags – and that dreams of conquest are not something that they can take for granted by virtue of their culture. Unlike Robinson's "Green Mars" novella *Climbing Olympus* is not actually about mountain-climbing; its heights are mainly symbolic and the painful laboriousness of their scaling is frank testimony to the modern view that

## THE EMPIRE THAT NEVER WAS

Brian Stableford

progress is a direly difficult business.

Even when modern sf writers revisit the manifold pastures of the Galactic Empire, as Mike Resnick does in *A Miracle of Rare Design* (Tor, \$21.95), they tend to find them awkwardly unwelcoming. No one has tried harder than Resnick to preserve a sense of wonder in the contemplation of a galaxy-spanning society, in such ebullient epics as *Santiago* and *Ivory*, but his many stories drawing speculative parallels between the colonization of space and the colonization of Africa – a subject with which he is very familiar – have forced him to a much grimmer accounting of the costs and benefits of such conquests. *A Miracle of Rare Design* is a fascinating tale of gradual, irreversible and literal alienation, in which a travel-writer who suffers terrible mutilation in the course of his attempt to understand the rituals of an alien religion is re-modelled time and time again by plastic surgeons so that he might undertake a series of ambassadorial expeditions. The point of no return is very soon passed, and the hero's quest to find some viable purpose in what he is doing becomes distinctly fraught; the fact that he is helping to secure a Galactic Empire of sorts is quickly condemned to incidentality, if not quite to utter irrelevance.

Books like these must, of course, sit on many shelves alongside the products of the Galactic Empire's Golden Age; yesterday's tomorrows are still with us and will not soon be forgotten. The ghosts of old Ace Doubles haunt the specialist bookshops, and a few novels of the '50s are repeatedly reprinted and read. A novel from that period which is appearing for the first time is William Moy Russell's *The Barber of Aldebaran* (Janus, £7.95), which serves to remind us that the image of the future which Don Wollheim held so dear was maintained partly by a deter-

mined refusal to notice its inherent preposterousness. Don Wollheim – who was, I believe, one of the many editors who rejected this book in times past – used to argue with passionate conviction that comedy science fiction didn't work and didn't sell, but what he really meant was that the science-fictional image of the Galactic Empire was too delicate a flower to be exposed to the wind of laughter. It was left to invaders from other media – *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* from radio and *Red Dwarf* from TV – to poke merciless fun at the clichés of genre sf, while even such affectionately amiable jests as are contained in *The Barber of Aldebaran* mostly languished unheard.

Here we find the Galactic Empire hovering in the background – an undiscussed, taken-for-granted part of the decor – while the stage is given over to comic figures with calculatedly silly names – J. Daedalus Golem, Planetarch and supremo of Robotics Inc and his favourite bit of fluff Cutie-pie, Figaro the singing robot barber, etc, etc – who breeze their way through a two-part plot which is fast-moving and farcical. Behind such an irreverent foreground, the empire of the star-worlds simply becomes one more casual folly – which is, at the end of the day, all that it ever was. It is astonishing to think that this light extravaganza was penned when Douglas Adams had only just learned to walk and neither half of Grant Naylor had been born, and never had the chance to inspire or influence them. The novel does show its age a little (thus acquiring a healthy measure of instant nostalgia appeal!) but its jokes still work and – as the author modestly points out in his afterword – the flit's pheromonal miracles now seem entirely timely instead of boldly prophetic.

My current publisher assures me that the Sales Department no longer considers the science fiction market worth bothering with, because epic fantasy is where all the money is. If that's true, the decline, fall and obliteration of the Galactic Empire happened ten times as fast as the decline, fall and ruination of its foremost model, the Roman Empire – which had no greater range than a cheap charter flight out of Luton airport. I'm sure there's a lesson in that for all of us, but I'm not quite sure what it is.

Brian Stableford



# FIRST FANTASIES

Chris Morgan

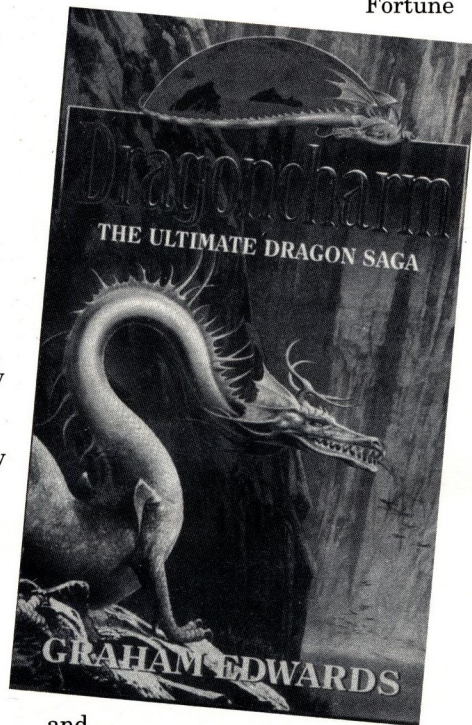
Among all the talking-animal tales that have followed in the wake of Richard Adams's rabbits in *Watership Down* there have been societies of moles, owls, eagles, weasels, horses, hares, foxes, wolves and divers other creatures but, until now, not dragons. It is obvious that *Dragoncharm* (HarperCollins, £4.99) is Graham Edwards's first novel, since it is imbued throughout with the *gosh-wow!* enthusiasm of naivete, which no professional author can hope to achieve through artifice. The over-the-top style of writing, the hugely melodramatic plot which succeeds in sidestepping credibility, and the characters – every one of them acting like a schoolboy – conspire to produce a pacey adventure that, except for a few literary pretensions, might be well suited to the typical teenage reader.

The setting is an Earthlike world inhabited by dragons. Trolls have lived there but are long since extinct, and a single basilisk still exists, though it has slept for centuries. Faeries are there, too, though they play only a minute role. The dragons are of two distinct kinds: the Charmed who possess magical skills and the Naturals who do not. For decades they have lived side by side, without strife, for the most part ignoring each other. Both kinds are intelligent and articulate, politically aware and often subject to military training and discipline. Whether they possess technological abilities of any kind, or whether the castles, towers and tunnels used from time to time by both kinds have been magically produced by the charm possessed by Charmed dragons is never made clear.

For some reason an idyllic period comes to an end. Naturals and Charmed are soon engaging in war, though there are sufficient factions to ensure that members of each side are also fighting among themselves. Many thousands of dragons are killed for no good reason. Against this peace-and-war background, certain young dragons seem destined to survive and to be instrumental in bringing about significant change to the whole of dragon society. One is Fortune, a Natural; the other is his friend and companion in adventure, Cumber, a Charmed. They escape from a massacre of dragons at South Point, where they both formerly lived, flying to Aether's Cross (to find that strife has been there ahead of them) and finally to Covamere, where they hope to alert Halcyon, the chief of the council of dragons, to the problems...

Of course, while Edwards calls his characters dragons, they are in fact just shallow and simplified representations of humans, complete with human emotions and sensibilities. Their behaviour is always slightly

boisterous, slightly naive, slightly self-conscious, just as if they were all about 13 years old. *Dragoncharm* attempts to deliver messages, albeit simple ones, to its readers. From the beginning it is clear that the Naturals and Charmed are going to stop ignoring each other and then stop fighting each other, and will learn to live in peace, because Fortune learns to accept a Charmed as a friend. It is obvious that good will triumph over evil, but the sacrifice necessary by Fortune so that good can win is, of course, Christian. At the end, Fortune



and friends all go to live on the idyllic island of Haven, which clearly is meant to be taken as Heaven.

Because Robin Hobb is the pseudonym of an experienced author from another genre (presumably historical fiction), *The Assassin's Apprentice: The Farseer, 1* (Bantam, \$12.95; HarperCollins, £9.99) is free of most of the problems that tend to infect first novels. Hobb is clearly conversant with fantasy, so he has been able to avoid or build upon the more obvious clichés. The result is an above-average book, entertaining after a slow start, sporadically surprising, sometimes subtle and very occasionally brilliant. It is historically-based fiction with relatively small amounts of fantasy.

In a maritime kingdom, the Six Duchies, which is vaguely European-medieval, the novel's narrator

(usually known as Fitz) is the acknowledged bastard son of the senior prince, Chivalry. From the age of six he is brought up at Buckkeep, the main castle of King Shrewd and his three sons. Initially, nobody seems to know what to do with Fitz, and he is raised by a burly stablemaster who trains him to look after dogs and horses. Prince Chivalry never sees his son, preferring to stay away from Buckkeep and, eventually, to give up his position as King-in-Waiting and die in exile. It becomes clear that there is a power struggle between the other two princes, Verity and Regal, which draws in most or all of those at Buckkeep. At the age of nine, Fitz is noticed by the King and becomes a game piece in the struggle. From his earliest years, Fitz has possessed mental powers which are a part of his heritage, though these have been suppressed. He has bonded with dogs and horses, picking up information through their senses. He also has the Skill (the ability to communicate telepathically with other humans, which is usually the prerogative of princes) but when he is trained to use this talent he is the victim of jealousy and his talent is sabotaged. In general, Hobb's plot strands are credible and cleverly interwoven, and only at the end of the novel is there a sudden descent into melodrama of an almost farcical nature.

It is the characters who stand out here. King Shrewd and Prince Verity are apparently well-meaning, though remote and often uncaring. The King's Fool at Buckkeep is a wonderfully enigmatic character, speaking in riddles and offering predictions, but only to those other lonely people whom he favours, such as Fitz. Lady Patience is another eccentric, rather an endearing one in her over-enthusiastic attempts to help Fitz. By contrast, Galen, who is meant to instruct Fitz in the Skill, is too manic to be credible (or, indeed to be let out on his own). Stylistically, the novel is patchy, since Hobb attempts to write in a deliberately literary manner at the start and whenever he thinks about it, though his attempts are often in vain; repetitions, awkwardnesses and bad habits creep in. It is all the more surprising, then, when Hobb produces an exquisitely poetical phrase which says much of human nature in just a few words. In general, the book is less successful in its early chapters, and it flows better and with more depth later on. *The Assassin's Apprentice* is the first in a trilogy, and now that the author has developed his characters and complex backgrounds, and got the education of his *ingenu* out of the way, he should be able to write two fine follow-up volumes.

Chris Morgan



# At the Centre of Things

Chris Gilmore

Greg Egan's *Axiomatic* (Millennium, £15.99) is the most consistently impressive single-author collection I've seen in a decade, and as I struggled to define exactly what makes it so special, I came up with two words: contemporary and central. Being less than fond of either word in a critical context, I feel the need to gloss. Science fiction claims to be the literature of ideas, and a good proportion of it supports that claim – for all that many of the ideas are second-hand or downright silly. Yet it must also be admitted that even the most original and worthwhile ideas expressed often have little or nothing to do with science. One of the best anthologies ever assembled was themed round the concepts of sacrifice and redemption, which are no one genre's monopoly (and if anyone can recall the title please let me know – I've lost my copy).

As the cutting edge of science becomes ever more abstruse, there's a tendency for sf writers to retreat into nostalgia, to ignore the imperative to extrapolate while still adopting the crystallized vocabulary of space opera – because the vocabulary is known to many, while the cutting edge is unknown to almost all. This is not to denigrate what they produce; I have myself praised Lois McMaster Bujold and Robert Charles Wilson for so faithfully carrying on the traditions of Poul Anderson and Clifford Simak respectively, but advances in quantum theory and cosmology have exposed those traditions as hardly closer to the possible than Sword & Sorcery.

Greg Egan is central to contemporary science fiction because his best tales are based firmly on developments that seem possible in terms of current theory (and often current research). Only David Brin can equal him in this (his story "Dr Pak's Preschool" has close parallels with Egan's "Eugene"), but Brin is a lot less consistent. Egan is also central because his treatment is seriously philosophical without being fanciful. To be fanciful does not preclude seriousness; Stanislaw Lem is a serious philosophical writer, but *The Cyberiad* and *The Star Diaries* are works of fantasy. For that matter, Iain Banks's *Feersum Endjinn* is a work of high moral purpose, but it's also wilfully fanciful from title down. Egan's staid

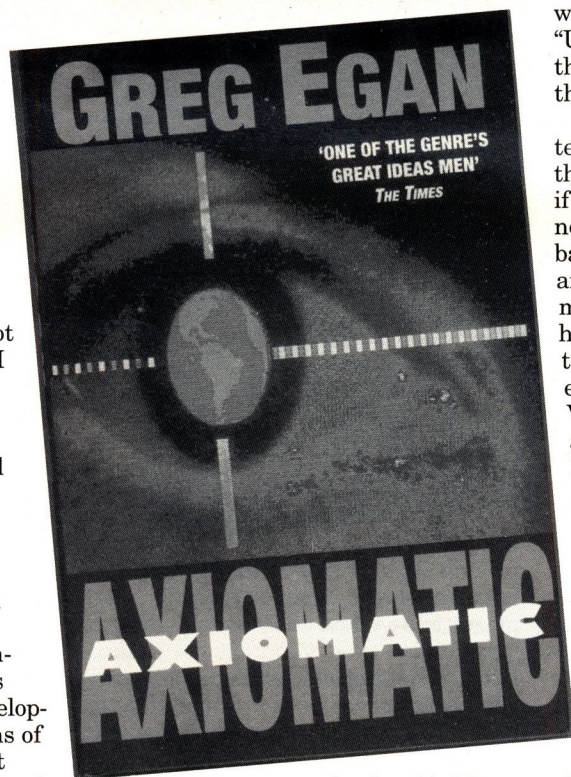
approach lies on the baseline to which such showy outgrowths must refer, and ultimately defer.

As becomes a serious philosopher, Egan is concerned with the moral implications as much as the social consequences of the novelties which society must absorb (or be absorbed by), and his theme is always the confrontation between man (or sometimes woman) and idea made manifest. Because they are surrogates for us all, Egan's characters reflect his own concept of Everyman: introspective but lacking the comforts of solipsism, clever but not egregiously talented, sexually opportunistic but not libertines, angst-prone but not suicidal, dishonest but undeluded, comfortable but insecure, more weak than wicked (but never ask how

"Learning to Be Me" from #37 and (my personal favourite) "The Cutie" from #29. Just below those high points, "The Caress" considers the commodification of human life as a branch of aesthetics, and does so well, but not quite as well as Karen Blixen did in "The Immortal Story"; "The Infinite Assassin" grapples with the problem of identity in the context of Hugh Everett-style parallel universes; "A Kidnapping" finds a new angle on the human rights of artificial intelligences, and recalls themes from *Permutation City*; "Axiomatic" and "The Walk" look for a closer definition of intention and personality, given that it is possible to modify your own personality with the intention of bringing about an intention. Any of these stories would be the high point of most collections, and so would "The Safe Deposit Box" and "Unstable Orbits in the Space of Lies," though these last are more fantasy than sf.

Despite the bleak and sometimes terrifying possibilities Egan presents, the tone of the book isn't technophobe; if most characters wind up damned, it's not the inevitable result of a Faustian bargain, but the wages of the cowardice and petty sins which beset us all. The message would seem to be that if we heed the warnings we may not have to take the bad with the good – except in one case. "The Moral Virologist" is a mad-scientist story, and the only one where Egan loses his sense of proportion. John Shawcross, a born-again Christian who feels that AIDS was a bit of a damp squib, sets about creating a virus that will *really* rid the world of adultery, sodomy and fornication. Unfortunately all round, it has the side-effect of poisoning all new-born children as well, which Shawcross in his tunnel vision fails to notice until it's spreading out of control. It is then pointed out to him in casual conversation by (wait for it!) a London prostitute. She spots first his moral and then his technical weakness presenting both in crisp and rigorous terms, to his surprise and discomfiture. "He'd never been lectured on Darwinism in any brothel back home, but then what could he expect in a country run by godless socialists?" Well, male reader, where else do you go for such things?

Assuming (as the context implies) that Egan endorses this analysis, are we to assume that in socialist countries



much of each). Most of us, I think, can live with most of that.

There are 18 stories here, of which only one fails completely – "The Moat" has all the mark of Chapter One of a book that was rightly abandoned – but three are brilliant studies in the novel and terrible griefs which a combination of common human dishonesty and self-indulgence allied to the fruits of the rarest human ingenuity may unleash. All three are from *Interzone*, incidentally: "The Hundred-Light-Year Diary" from #55,



even generously educated women of powerful intellect are reduced to renting their treasure? Or does he mean that in socialist countries even the whores are expert logicians of liberal persuasion? Or is she just typical of the bona-robas Down Under? Me, I've never been to Australia ... perhaps it's not too late to complete my education.

I have forgotten who coined the phrase "Ruislip Mandarin" for the diction of characters in Joe Orton's plays, but it's kissing cousin to the baroque Brentonian brogue of Robert Rankin on top form, and both are superbly adapted to the three premier humorous subjects – dignity (lost), semantics (confused) and bodily functions (ill-timed). Of the three, semantics is the most important (all right! I'm a semantician – I admit it!) because, while the capabilities of the human body are limited, and the dignities it can assume (and thus the indignities it can suffer) are more limited still, language is theoretically limited only by the ultimate refinement of the human brain.

All right, that's (more than) enough bullshit for one month; the reasons why humour works are notoriously subjective. For me, Rankin at his best stands well higher than the common-or-garden writer of humorous sf/fantasy, and I can tell you a bit about how, if not why: after all, I've been given a couple of examples.

**The Greatest Show Off Earth** (Corgi, £4.99) is a literary work in the same sense that Tom Sharpe's tales of sadism, snobbery and greed are literary – they are not driven by character, plot, or philosophy, but by nuance. The underlying mechanism is extremely simple to define (which doesn't make it easy to apply): whatever is going on, visualize in precise detail whatever will undermine it most catastrophically, and insert. Rankin diverges from the ruck (and his own less successful books) by adding two distinctive features to the underlying send-up of a by now almost extinct branch of sf: he's exceptionally good at establishing a running gag, and his characters come to grief less from inherent stupidity than the triviality of their preoccupations.

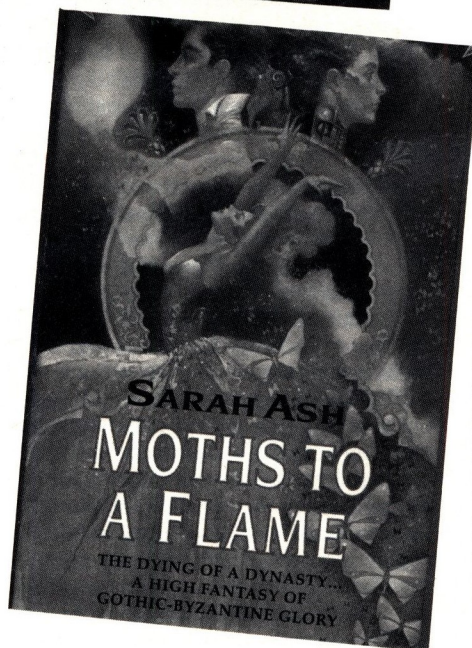
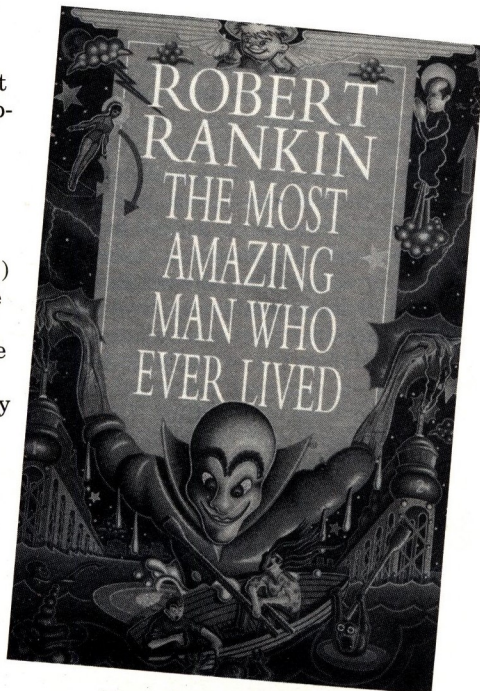
*Greatest Show* is an Evil Alien Invasion story, wherein the Evil could hardly be more explicit, and echoes a joke from the Capeks' *Insect Play*:

"Can I cut George's balls off?" asked the darling daughter

"Of course, dear," said her doting dad. "But put them on the barbecue to cook with George. They won't taste very nice if they're raw."

The Good is a whole lot more evasive, being irretrievably infected with the all-too-human failings that generate most of the humour. The rest

depends crucially on internal logic. Rankin piles absurdity on absurdity, but not at random; the whole business is put together like a watch, in terms of both the development and the milieu. The world we live on revolves inside another spherical but hollow world, on whose inner surface the artificial planets and constellations pursue their stately dance – in imitation of the real ones, the whole shebang having



been created by the inhabitants of the outer sphere – characters of huge technological resource but precious little imagination – and sustained by a vast conspiracy. As indicated above, their trading partners have a taste for human flesh, which is how the principals (Simon and Raymond, a couple of south-country ne'er-do-wells), get involved.

Raymond's involvement is more direct than Simon's, since only he gets

kidnapped by flying saucer in Chapter 1; Simon remains behind, to thwart the local peasantry whose malevolent intent is to incarnate the Devil in a new and ridiculous form. Both sides are more hampered than helped by the existence of a book from the future called (of course) *The Greatest Show Off Earth*, which tells how things will develop, but is a slightly unreliable witness. The two plots have nothing whatever to do with each other, but allow Rankin to cut between scenes with bogus linkages in the manner of David Lean, a technique intentionally over-used to create another running gag. Indeed, the book has far more resonances with film and TV than sf, and at times reads like a Dennis Potter serial without the music, as the jokes come more and more to depend on the mismatch of form and content.

There is no theoretical limit to recursion, but Rankin wisely plays it strictly for laughs. Many of the jokes are new, or newish, and even when they aren't (as when the impossible accumulator is pinched from *East of Ealing*, or the ineluctable bell-jar from *The Book of Ultimate Truths*) they are presented with such aplomb, and at the same time so deftly undermined, that it's impossible not to forgive him.

Rankin's newer *The Most Amazing Man Who Ever Lived* (Doubleday, £14.99), a freestanding sequel to *The Book of Ultimate Truths*, is not quite as good. The universe is even more complicated on this occasion, involving reincarnation (serial and simultaneous) and characters who blunder in and out of reality like extras on the wrong sound stage (though some are not extras but stars – Thelma and Louise, no less). As before, the reader is often saved from total disorientation by people arriving just in time to furnish an explanation (however misleading and incomplete) which will do until developments (or someone else) expose its inadequacies and vouchsafe a bit more, but there's a feeling that the scale is wrong. In *The Greatest Show Off Earth* people where kidnapped by the coachload for barbecue treats, but this time the underlying plot threatens not only the destruction of the human race but the consumption of all the discarnate souls awaiting their next bodies as well.

The Most Amazing Man of the title (Hugo Rune) has infiltrated and corrupted the entire mechanism of Heaven for his own ends, and with the best will in the world, his ends seem puny when set against such means. If you're well on the way to absolute control of absolutely everything, it seems petty to devote time and effort to bilking your bastard offspring of a mere £23M, or to giving a commissioning editor a hard time over late delivery of your MS



and excessive expenses claims. (Of course, Rankin may know something about commissioning editors that I don't, but if so he fails to put it across.) Even the project to extract gold in eight-figure amounts from sea water fails to grip – who would buy it all, and at how much a fine ounce?

Considerations of this kind detract from the interest, as does a less rigorous internal logic. I don't mind a ghost who is only intermittently visible to the living, but there ought to be a rationale, however far-fetched, for the intermittence; too many elements are introduced, and make too little contribution, so that the ending is untidy and rushed; and the longest-running of the gags, the one about the bit-player whose name you can never remember, is the one with least mileage. Rankin seems to have two distinct levels of competence, and this month offers one of each.

Remembering Sarah Ash's first two stories in *Interzone* ("Mothmusic" from #62 and "Airs from Another Planet" from #83) I was excited to receive her long-heralded fantasy novel *Moths to a Flame* (Millennium, £15.99). To my regret, the excitement dissipated rapidly. It isn't that bad a book – indeed, it's rather well written – but... the shorter pieces set me thinking of Tanith Lee and Elizabeth Hand, while this evoked much lesser names. Hindsight, which normally supplies answers, raises a question this time: if this is the fantasy novel that was "doing the rounds" when "Mothmusic" appeared, has Ash come on considerably since she wrote it, or does it represent a dilution and coarsening of her vision?

The book has the uneasiness to be expected of a writer who has yet to find her true voice and is attempting one to which she's unsuited – in this case, sword & sorcery. The twins Lai and Laili (male and female respectively) love each other, but chastely; both are pledged to celibacy in the service of the Moon Goddess. One could therefore say that their lives take a turn for the better when they are kidnapped by slavers and sold to the court of Ar-Khendye. There Laili is taken into the harem of the Arkhan (king) Melmeth, who (despite preferring boys as a rule) pays her court and wins her affection (such being the pulling power of her red hair).

Well enough, but Lai's fate is a lot less credible. Despite being pledged to non-violence he is selected for intensive training by Ymarys, the Arkhan's champion, and in less than a year defeats and supplants him. Ymarys, who is homosexual, bears him no grudge but falls in love with him (that hair again). Lai then defeats the champion of the Haute Zhudiciar (which looks as if it should mean High Justice, but is glossed as Prime Minister) in a set-

piece duel. To make the whole business yet more ludicrous, the duel is preceded by a melee. The Arkhan's side being a man short, Lai is conscripted to fill the gap and save the day before taking on his fresh opponent. By way of reward, that same night he surrenders his virginity to the Arkhan's consort, Clodole – what a man!

There follows a period of lackadaisical intrigue before the McGuffin appears. A plague of moonmoths afflicts Ar-Khendye, with distressing consequences as the dust from their wings (Boskh) is toxic and addictive, bringing blindness, dementia and death to many, mutation into Moth people to a few – which is really where we came in first time round, as the story of "Mothmusic" is re-told from a greater variety of viewpoints, including that of Dr Azhrel from the original story, but with less intensity. Dr Azhrel and Ymarys are in fact more interesting characters than the twins; both are mature men, and each becomes tragically enamoured of a mutant. The book picks up at this point, but with consequent loss of interest when the dull siblings regain stage-centre and Ymarys is inelegantly killed, I presume so that Lai can have the principal male role to himself; if so, Ash killed the wrong man.

This reduced intensity brings into focus a couple of irritating tics which Ash has cultivated, possibly because someone told her they were stylish. The first and more heinous is her habit of running together words which are normally hyphenated or completely separate. This can occasionally be justified, but "whitebloom," "blossomsweet," "goldenhairst" and "darkcentre" all in five lines is excessive. The second is to coin unnecessary words which read like mis-hearings: dhamzel (= gentlewoman), razhir (= rapier), khassafri (= sassafras) etc. In principle I object neither to aspiration nor to word games, but this one has no point.

That Ash has potential is undeniable, but this ill-balanced, ill-focused, affected exercise in a stylized and conventional mode suggests only that Sword & Sorcery is not for her. Her failure to impose the consistency necessary for conviction extends to the most minor details, as when Ymarys ventures into a tunnel system connecting the arena and the mausoleum, where he has been only once before; a page later, "He knew the arena tunnels better than anyone." Like Lai, a quick learner. The ending is equally rushed and ill thought-out, not least because it leaves Laili (by now a mother, but still less than 20) inextricably yoked to the blind, bi-sexual, middle-aged Boskh-junkie Melmeth – every girl's dream! Get the back numbers, if you haven't already, and hope for better things as and when Ash regains her true direction.

Chris Gilmore

# Perigee and Pedigree

James Lovegrove

A mixed show this column. Two Best of Breeds and two absolute dogs.

The first of the champs is *The Nano Flower* (Pan, £4.99) by Peter F. Hamilton, a sequel to *Mindstar Rising* and *A Quantum Murder*, being the third mission that psychically-enhanced Gulf War II veteran Greg Mandel has undertaken on behalf of Julia Evans, multi-billionairess, owner of Event Horizon, and an industrial colossus in a post-global-warming world bestridden by industrial giants.

Where *Mindstar Rising* was a relatively straightforward, though highly exciting, cyber-thriller and *A Quantum Murder* was a locked-room mystery with earth-shattering ramifications, *The Nano Flower* is something else altogether, a quantum leap forward. The first two books are set two years apart; *The Nano Flower* takes place 15 years on. Characters have grown up, grown old, grown apart. Julia herself is no longer the flighty, insecure, self-conscious über-Sloane she used to be. She has married, become a mother, turned graceful and gracious and, thanks to her unimaginable wealth and her three bioware Neural Network cores, has all but achieved goddesshood. She is virtually omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent, living proof that the Reverends Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggart are right about money bringing you closer to God. And, blessedly, she no longer says "Yah". Greg, meanwhile, is a greying father of five who cares about little else except his wife, family and orange groves.

Julia is presented with a gift from her missing husband Royan, an orchid whose genetic make-up is indisputably extraterrestrial in origin. First Contact has been made. They are out there. And with the arrival of the flower comes the promise of a revolutionary new technology, atomic restructuring, that will make whichever corporation develops it very powerful indeed, not to mention very rich. Julia, inevitably, lures Greg out of retirement to track down Royan, who holds the key to both the alien and the new technology. But Greg is not the only one searching. A psychotic mercenary is hot on his heels, as are the Russian mafia. The chase is on.

It has to be said that the extrater-



restrial elements of *The Nano Flower* don't sit entirely comfortably alongside the blistering action sequences and the skilful Gibsonian deployment of brand-name hardware. The peculiar thrill one gets from reading about metalloceramic battlesuits with shoulder-mounted Loral missiles, stately angular black airships, electron-compression warheads and a hollowed-out asteroid with a leisure complex inside it like an orbiting mini-California is slightly diluted when one is asked to accept the possibility of the existence of an alien race as well, no matter how well thought-out the xenobiology. Having crafted such a detailed and plausible projected-future, for Hamilton then to introduce an ingredient more suited to space opera would seem to be over-spicing the soup. The fusion of the two elements, though, ultimately proves synergistic. The climax is exhilarating, and the resolution unexpected and fitting, not to mention uplifting.

Hamilton is a top-flight author, and his three novels so far fulfil all the criteria of great sf: fully fleshed-out characters living in an immaculately imagined and executed near-future world, lush prose, crystal-sharp dialogue, prodigious quantities of research blended in unobtrusively, and plots as slick and intricate as teflon origami. Unreservedly recommended.

Also coming top in its class, though something of a crossbreed this one, is *The Millennial Project* (Little, Brown, £11.99) by Marshall T. Savage. Not strictly speaking sf, the subtitle gives the game away: *Colonizing the Galaxy in Eight Easy Steps*. This is one man's vision of mankind's destiny, and while it doesn't have a plot as such (unless you regard the evolution of Life in the universe as an ongoing story), many of its themes and tropes will be familiar to sf readers. Basically, *The Millennial Project* is a how-to manual for anyone who's wondered if the human race is ever going to slip the confines of our increasingly overcrowded planet and reach for the stars.

The solutions, if Savage is to be believed (and his arguments are persuasive), are simple. The necessary raw materials and blueprints are to be found all around us, in near space, in nature. Rather than putting all our faith in the brute force of technology, we should instead draw our lessons from the subtlety of God's own designs. Hence Savage's floating seaborne cities, whose purpose is to harvest algae and harness the tides to feed and power the world, utilise a honeycomb pattern and "grow" themselves by electrolysing the magnesium present in the oceans, while his space ecospheres, which are made up of transparent globes-within-globes, resemble the volvox, that single-celled photosynthetic organism you could never see through the microscope no

matter how hard your biology teacher tried to convince you it was there. Savage's ideas are cunning and credible, and in many cases one longs to see them realised: for instance, the image of laser-propelled rockets shooting out of the top of Mount Kilimanjaro and hurtling up into the stratosphere on the end of prismatic beams of light, a concept Savage evocatively calls Bifrost after the rainbow bridge of Norse mythology, is one that cries out to be made a reality.

Savage's breadth of learning is breathtaking, but *The Millennial Project* is anything but dry, highbrow and pofaced. References to popular culture abound. Savage has been inspired by everything from Alvin Tofler to Douglas Adams, from Carl Sagan to the lyrics of Queen, and he doesn't lose sight of the fact that he's writing for ordinary people about extraordinary things. Here he is discussing travelling at the speed of light:

...light takes four long years to cross to the nearest star. ... How many gulfs of space as wide as Kansas are there in such a distance? Have you ever driven across Kansas? It's endless.

The book has full-colour plates, copious illustrations, and an introduction by Arthur C. Clarke. It is inspiring stuff, and while it's difficult to share Savage's optimism about the ultimate fate of the human race and our role as bearers of the sacred torch of Life, it would be nice to think that some of what he predicts will come to pass. Hey, even cynics need a holiday every now and then.

And so to the dogs. A pair of absolute mutts here that shouldn't really have been allowed in through the front door to widdle on the carpet.

Mary Rosenblum's *The Stone Garden* (Del Rey, \$4.99) starts out with a neat idea and ends up bogged down in its own self-importance. The neat idea is that certain asteroids harvested from space and called "Stones" have the ability to store and replay human emotions, which has enabled people who are in tune with the strange properties of these living rocks to "sculpt" sensations and experiences into them. A Stone-sculptor is therefore a combination of artist and psychologist, able to recreate in vivid detail a mood which can then be picked up and shared by anyone in the vicinity of the Stone. So far, so good. But by way of a plot Rosenblum serves up the most basic of premises – why have famous Stone-sculptors started committing suicide? – and somehow believes that this is enough to sustain the reader's interest through 359 close-printed pages of meandering, maundering meditations on death, life, art, love, the nature of time, and just about any other Major Theme you – and she – can think of.

On none of these subjects does the author have anything new or convincing to say. Some specimens: "Love, hate – it's when we try to separate them that we do ourselves the most harm." "Maybe the only people who could really hurt you were the ones you loved." "Maybe we all belong to somebody, whether we admit it or not. And maybe part of us wants to belong to someone, whether we admit it or not." The revelations rarely rise above this level, and such trite psychobabble aphorism is a poor substitute for genuine insight. New Age science fiction – it just doesn't work.

There is a hero, Michael Tryon, an octogenarian Stone-sculptor who fears he has (yes, you've guessed it) burned out. There is a heroine, his daughter Margarita Espinoza, aspiring "holoture" artist, who is supposed to have been hardened by a childhood in the barrios but not so as you'd notice: she spends most of her time fretting about the fragility of her talent and worrying whether her dancer girlfriend Katrina loves her or not. There is a German-born businessman with the somewhat implausible name of Gunner Archenwald-Shen, who appears to run nothing less than the entire planet, and for light relief Rosenblum presents a parade of effeminate male characters who for all their hard-boiled, streetwise talk and butch posturing are about as convincingly tough as a crowd of moustachioed men in leather trousers hanging around Earl's Court tube-station at midnight.

As the action unfolds with snail-like slowness, the perpetual jabber of the artists about their art, their constant need for reassurance from themselves and from others, scratches like rats' claws at one's nerve-endings. It's like listening to a roomful of out-of-work actors: screeching self-pity alternating with mutual ego-masturbation. As if this were not bad enough, Rosenblum has her characters think in rhetorical questions, dozens of them, one piled on top of another, with not an answer to their self-interrogation in sight. Why? What is to be gained by this? Who knows? Who cares?

The great shame is that there are some decent ideas buried in here among the listing of facial tics that passes for observation and the tortured self-pity that passes for characterization. Maybe if fewer sentences in *The Stone Garden* began with the word maybe, one would have greater confidence in Rosenblum's skills as a writer. And maybe if she had concentrated on telling a story instead of making great sweeping statements about life, the universe and everything, this novel would have turned out an imaginatively effective SF thriller rather than an empty, risible lament for the awfulness of the artist's lot.

Another bow-wow from the Del Rey kennels is *Out of This World* (\$5.99)



by Lawrence Watt-Evans. This is the literary equivalent of a King Charles spaniel, one that stops and gazes up at you with big mucus-ringed eyes, trying to appear cute and silently begging you to pick it up and cuddle it even though you just know it's going to spray your shoes with diarrhoea the moment its paws are off the ground. *Out of This World* badly wants to be liked.

The story begins with a weird psychic ripple that passes through the mind of the sensitives of the world (for "the world" read "the United States"). Then, in the basement of one Pel Brown, Ordinary Guy, a man in Hollywood Robin Hood garb appears and spouts some cod-Shakespearean tosh about an evil entity known, inventively, as Shadow. No first name, no middle initial, just Shadow. At the same time, a few miles away, a Flash Gordon-esque spaceship crash-lands in the backyard of a certain Amy Jewell. Much comic chaos ensues. Finally, everyone meets up and passes through an interdimensional portal into a pseudo-medieval world of magic that is a poor man's Middle Earth and thence into a universe dominated by a galactic empire that is a poor man's *Star Wars*. The cast of characters grows and grows and keeps on growing until you need a score card to keep track of who's who, assuming you care enough to do so. Then some of the characters are casually despatched, mostly off-page, until finally it seems that only Pel is left. The book ends, and you realize – with the kind of numb, detached horror that one might feel when watching a car accident in progress – that *Out of This World* is just the first volume in a projected series. Cue a loss of will to live.

If *Out of This World* had been written for children, it might be all right, but the use of rude words like "shit" and "fuck" suggest that Watt-Evans is aiming at a more mature audience. Adults with the aesthetic sensibilities of children, perhaps. One shudders to think that such a readership might just exist. He also tries to corner the Stephen King market by inserting references to other, more successful works of the imagination into the text – a clumsy device that adds nothing to the story. Why say that a monster bears a close resemblance to one of the terror-dogs from *Ghostbusters* when someone who hasn't seen that film won't have a clue what you're talking about? Why not come up with your own monster? And unlike King, who employs such cultural cross-referencing intelligently to emphasize the "realness" of the fictional world he is creating, in Watt-Evans's case the comparisons are odious. If he uses an episode of *Star Trek* as an example, one's immediate desire is to put down the book and go and watch that episode instead.

James Lovegrove

# Magazine Reviews

Paul Beardsley

**Black Tears** (£1.75 per issue, £6.75/4, Quarterly, A5, 60pp) cheques payable to editor A. Bradley, *Black Tears*, 28 Treaty St., London N1 0SY.

*Black Tears* 7 leads with an absurd story by Martin Feekins about women being stripped naked before being done in horribly – it's called "You Deserve It, Darling." Illustrator Dallas Goffin lovingly realizes the central image of Shaun Jeffrey's "Voyeurs of Death" – a large-breasted blonde with a knife stuck in her navel. One is left with the nagging suspicion that the editor is catering for people who don't like women very much. There is better stuff on offer – a black comedy by Rhys H. Hughes, a D. F. Lewis, and an interview with Christopher Fowler – but it doesn't raise the overall standard to the giddy heights of mediocrity.

**Psychotrope: Tales of Psychological Horror, Mad Love & Surrealism** (£2.10 per issue, £7.50/4, A5, 48pp), edited by Mark Beech, cheques payable to *Psychotrope*, Flat 6, 17 Droitwich Road, Barbourne, Worcester WR3 7LG.

*Psychotrope* 2 boasts a hideous front cover: an atrocious reproduction of an unlovely photograph by surrealist Hans Bellmer. (Don't get it out on a crowded-train.) Interior artwork, by "Piggy," merely adds to the scruffy appearance. The editorial promises "some shit hot stories," though it has to be said, the "hot" doesn't always apply. This is especially true of Hertzian Chimera's account of a "shirt-lifter" who, ashamed of his "services to cockdom," merges with solid objects, only to be run over when he emerges from a road; it's as if the author exhausted his imagination thinking up a pen-name. The horror premise of Tim Lebbon's "Old Treasure" is similarly silly, but it's not the main focus of the story. The libido-led protagonist actually grows up and starts to care about the woman he previously just wanted to shag; the resulting denouement is heart-rending, and a far cry from the "she deserved it" fantasies of, say, *Black Tears*.

Seven other tales include two unreadables, a retelling of the Bobbitt story, the last days of an unsympathetic cancer sufferer, and a touching piece about a lonely old man and his cat. It

thinks it's more extraordinary than it is, but I've seen worse. For instance...

**New Words: Words and Pictures** (£1.50 per issue), edited by Steven Gilligan, S. W. Theaker, John Greenwood; cheques payable to the first of these at 1 Chelwood Close, Hollingbury, Brighton, East Sussex BN1 8FN.

*New Words* 2 comprises 24 A4 sheets printed on one side and stapled in such a way as to guarantee dog's ears on all four corners. It's an awful mess. The content is, if anything, worse than the presentation, apart from two quite good conventional sf stories by S. W. Theaker and Polly Jebson. Issue 3 has since come out and is bigger and better printed, I'm told.

**Zene: The Small Press Guide** (£1.95 per issue, £7/4, A5, 36pp, quarterly) and **The Third Alternative: Cutting Edge Horror, Dark Fantasy & SF** (£2.50 per issue, £9/4, A5, 52pp, quarterly) or joint subscription £14/4, cheques payable to either magazine, edited by Andy Cox and Mark Rose, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB.

*Zene* is now three issues old, and the editors are considering going bimonthly. It's the mag that treats the small press as a valid literary phenomenon, with in-depth reviews of selected titles (poetry as well as prose), guidelines from across the English-speaking world, and articles about criticism and erotic writing. It's rich and intelligent, for the most part, and excellent value. The only serious lapse is in the letters page: In the previous *Zene*, "outsider" Peter James gave an articulate and constructive account of his opinion of small-press attitudes; rather than rise to the challenge and tackle the issues, two correspondents in the current *Zene* dismiss his views out of hand.

Meanwhile, the success story of *The Third Alternative* continues – Julie Travis's "The Guinea Worm" in issue 5 is not to be missed, and issue 6 has appeared on schedule as usual. A recent advert for TTA warned readers to beware of imitations. I wonder what they meant by that...

**Dreams From the Stranger's Cafe** (£2.50 per issue, £9/4, A5, 52pp)



edited by John Gaunt, 15 Clifton Grove, Clifton, Rotherham, South Yorkshire S65 2AZ.

Issue 4, the first I've seen, looks fairly good. It's got a glossy cover by David Mooring, and interior artwork by Roddy Williams. The layout is the usual "I've gotta font set and I'm gonna use it," but is readable nonetheless. The alarm bells rang when I read the editorial. It's "A Magazine of Strange Fiction." Yes, it's another one that claims not to be horror, fantasy, sf, or even slipstream (annoyingly referred to as "the 's' word").

So, what's it got to offer? There's William Meikle's "Aboard the Vordlak," a routine Lovecraft story set on a spaceship. For scientific integrity it barely competes with *Lost in Space*. Far worse is David Logan's "The Most Modern Prometheus," a Frankenstein-was-real story that promises something and delivers nothing, except for the sort of wisecracks you thought you'd never have to hear again – "Ever seen Uranus?" "Only with the aid of a mirror." Pathetic.

Better pieces include Mark McLaughlin's story of kinky aliens, "The Last Poetry Night at the Saturnalia Coffee House," and Christopher Amies' "Down To A Sunless Sea," a vampire story with strong imagery. Several poems and eight 100-word stories by various authors add to the variety. On the whole, though, it's a collection of stories that fall between stools – the genres they claim not to be a part of.

#### **Albedo One: Science Fiction**

**Fantasy Horror** (£1.95 per issue, £8/4, A5, 68pp, irregular schedule) 2 Post Road, Lusk, Co. Dublin, Ireland.

I found *Albedo One* issue 7 disappointing. All five stories are routine, and in some cases very boring. The showcased artwork by Stephen Walker is, well, just typical fantasy art, only not as good. Some of the text is a bit dodgy too. Still, everyone has their off-days; I have every confidence that future issues will be as good as previous issues. Besides, the book reviews and the interview with Kim Newman redeem this one to some extent.

**Light's List** (£1, A5, 28pp, Annual) cheques payable to editor Dr John Light, 29 Longfield Road, Tring, Herts HP23 4DG.

This is effectively a directory of over 600 small-press magazines. Potentially useful, its only drawback is that, what with only appearing once a year, it isn't very up to date. Consequently, it includes such magazines as *Alternatives*, which recently folded. Best get this and a subscription to *Zene*.

**Paul Beardsley**

# Judge Who?

Neil Jones

"I am the Law."

Or at least that's what Judge Dredd, as portrayed by Sylvester Stallone, tells us. The prune-visaged Dredd first appeared in the pages of the 2000 A.D. comic and swiftly achieved the cult status that has now propelled him into celluloid – shifting from one visual medium to another, a logical enough transition. Not so easy to account for are the Dredd books (as in prose/no illustrations). What exactly is a Dredd-aficionado supposed to get from a book such as *Networks* by Dave Stone (Virgin, £4.99)? Since it could, presumably, be turned into a graphic novel by hiring a decent artist, this is a puzzling question.

The story: in the world Dredd polices – which is already several nightmares past the grimmest of cyberpunk futures and surely so harsh it would have imploded long ago – 3,600 people have been dying every day for months (except for Sundays when the number is double) and something nasty is brewing on the Moon, all part of a nefarious plot which cannot, of course, succeed unless someone takes out Dredd. Enter the villainess, a cyberpunkette assassin.

The indestructible Dredd, however, is if anything more of a problem for the book-line writers than any assassin. In the comics, he is a big, beefy, forbidding presence, usually seen meting out on the spot punishment for the slightest infraction of the laws of Mega-City One – laws which are arbitrary, often unfair, even sometimes ridiculous but which to Dredd are sacrosanct. His helmet only reveals the lower portion of his face, and the only expression we ever see there is his mouth curled in strong disapproval. His every utterance is stern, implacable, unforgiving, etc. He doesn't suffer from doubt, or guilt, and the only thing of any importance to him is – you've guessed it – the law. As it says of Dredd in Stone's book: "You're like a hole in the world and everyone else just circles around it... nobody can see what's in your head and behind your cybernetic eyes, nobody knows what's really going on in there." In comics, with strong visual images to counterpoint all sorts of other elements, the Dredd character clearly works fine, but with prose fiction it's very bad news.

Stone takes the only course open to him, and keeps Dredd the same essentially robotic figure he's always been and puts the viewpoint weight on the secondary roles, including the villainess. The cliché would be for her

(b-a-d, but driven to it by an utterly appalling childhood) and the remorseless lawman Dredd to be forced into an alliance (they are), and develop a grudging respect, even get romantically involved (they don't). So, on the plus side, the cliché is avoided; but, on the minus side, there isn't a lot of interesting human interaction either. About the only thing Dredd experiences apart from sustained disapproval and righteous anger is embarrassment when the villainess compels him to wear her miniskirt – an entirely gratuitous scene which begs the question whether Stone is taking his revenge on Dredd for proving so intractable.

Stone's prose, although sometimes rather too clogged for its own good, does achieve an admirably gritty cyberpunk texture. The plot, though, is over-complex and ultimately, despite some good scenes, the book just doesn't come off – but in fairness it's Dredd, rather than Stone, who should shoulder the blame.

Novelizing *Doctor Who* is an altogether easier proposition. First off, we know and love the Doctor. In all of his incarnations, he is quirky, brilliant, vastly knowledgeable, compassionate, proud, touchy, honourable and fallible. He is also a being of considerable mystery with a long and eventful existence behind him. There's plenty of scope, if not to develop the character exactly, then at least to display him at his eccentric best in a suitably kaleidoscopic storyline. Just throw in an engaging era or two, low-budget aliens, and a nefarious villain – which is pretty much what we get in Daniel Blythe's *Infinite Requiem* (Virgin/Doctor Who, £4.99).

The chief attraction, of course, is the Doctor, here in his Sylvester McCoy identity, but there is also a plucky girl companion, Bernice. The main story-thread is provided by the powerful being, Jirenal/Kelzen/Shanstra, who has been split three ways and scattered through time and is intent on putting itself back together again. The three-era tale involves an abused Asian woman in 1997 London, the colony-world of Gadrell Major ravaged by the Dalek-like Phractons in the far future, plus a world of alien telepaths. Blythe's prose is fine, and delivers a smooth enough read, if rather darker than you might be bargaining for, but again the plot is over-complex and there is definitely



one era (and one segment of super-being) too many. Still, the Doctor is evoked quite satisfactorily, and it's easy to conjure up Sylvester McCoy's image as the pages turn.

As well as Doctor Who and Judge Dredd, there are entire shelves – sometimes a whole section of the bookshop – devoted to the various *Star Treks*,

In his speech at the 1995 Arthur C. Clarke Award ceremony, Colin Greenland reminisced about the just-past Easter SF Convention, held at a hotel in London's Docklands. He said that from his hotel bedroom he could see the glittering futuristic towers of office blocks, and the automatic train of the Docklands Light Railway running back and forth across its bridge with no driver ("and no passengers!" quipped a member of the audience), and he came to the conclusion that we are living in the future. Of course, we are living in the future that writers were attempting to imagine in the sf we all grew up with. But it isn't the future they imagined.

One of the signal omissions from that imagining was the arrival of the personal computer. Fiction did have wrist videophones, and house computers, and robots, and automatic cars, and any number of other specialized gadgets that we can now see would be run by dedicated computers – but the computer-as-general-purpose-tool was simply never dreamed of. It took a group of computer nerds to dream up the Apple and Apple II computers that created the personal computer market, IBM to belatedly launch the PC which to this day is the most-used machine, and Apple again to produce and promote (and very nearly go bust over) the Apple Macintosh, the computer that changed everything.

In *Insanely Great* (Penguin, £7.99), subtitled "The Life and Times of Macintosh, the Computer That Changed Everything," Steven Levy tells the story of the Macintosh. From the first imaginings of Valdevar Bush in 1945 (yes, 50 years ago!), he traces the history of the Macintosh, and the ideas it incorporates – not only the graphic user interface and the mouse, but the concept of hypertext that gave rise to the program Hypercard, still in use today for multi-media – that all first came together in that friendly platinum grey case in 1984. It is an extraordinary story of engineering, doggedness, genius and mismanagement, and is comparable to anything you might have read in the intervening 50 years as fiction in *Astounding/Analog*. Levy links these anecdotes into an immensely readable and entertaining story which reveals Steve Jobs as both the hero and the villain of the piece, for his visionary driving forward of the Macintosh idea and for his woeful management practices. There are, apparently, other histor-

*Star Wars*, *Quantum Leap* and *Alien/Predator* books, and there are more coming in all the time – such as *Babylon 5* and *The X-Files*. Even for fans of the originals, it can be hard to fathom why there is a market for them at all (and for those who aren't it must be downright impossible). Still, the fact is that spinoffery is

thriving when "real" sf is in the doldrums. It would be nice to know why.

Neil Jones

**Editor's Note:** I have a few theories of my own, but do readers have any answers to Neil Jones's query? Perhaps we can discuss the whole question of "spinoffery" in more depth in a future issue of *Interzone*.

# Rambles Around My Macintosh

Paul Brazier

ies of the Mac available that are much more partisan. This book does not appear to have an axe to grind, and I would recommend it unreservedly.

My first Macintosh was a Mac Plus, bought second-hand for the princely sum of £1,500 in 1986 (at £2,000 plus VAT, I really couldn't afford a new one), and, with the free software that came bundled with the Mac in those days, I was off and running. I was a typesetter then, and it quickly became plain to me that here was the nemesis of my trade, and indeed, by 1991 I had been made redundant from three different typesetting jobs. So I was very lucky to have been cross-training, and I found no difficulty in getting freelance work as a "Macintosh Typesetter." Now I am a freelance graphic designer/typesetter, have tripled my income and have a state-of-the-art PowerMac (it cost £2,500 – over nine years, that is some price drop) that runs about a hundred times faster than the Mac Plus and which I use, among other things, to produce *Interzone*. So, for me and many like me in the pre-press industry, the Macintosh did indeed change everything. But that is only one small area of its influence.

The Macintosh is also considered to be the best platform for multi-media, and publishers, concerned at the falling sales of paper books, are looking at electronic publishing as a way of diversifying into the new technology. Douglas Adams, great misser of deadlines, extracted a deadline extension on one of his books by promising to supply it ready to set on disc – and he delivered. It is only one further step to publishing the book itself on disc, and one of the first such manifestations is

Peter James's *Host: The Electronic Book* (Penguin, £12.99 including VAT – tax on books! egad!). It seems strange to be reviewing both the book and the medium – rather like commenting on the type, paper and binding as well as the contents of a book. James's novel is an adequately written story of attempts to prolong people's lives by freezing their bodies and downloading their minds into computers; mildly horrific, and mildly science-fictional. As for the medium, the electronic book comes on two floppy discs inside a paperback-size hard cover so it can sit on your shelf just like a book. After extracting the discs from their sealed polythene envelopes and the usual rigmarole of loading the files and configuring your system, double-clicking on the book displays a window with, on the left, a picture of Peter James with the word "Introduction" beneath, and on the right a picture of a book with the words "Book Contents" beneath. Clicking on the picture of James begins a very brief Multimedia movie of him; but this is hardly an introduction – at three short sentences, it's no more than an animated blurb.

The text of the novel itself is presented in plain text in Hypercard, the Macintosh multimedia and hypertext development tool – and as a result runs to 83 chapters (memorably titled "Chapter 1," etc) over no less than 1,515 pages! Occasional words are underlined. Clicking on them displays a footnote. Purportedly, this gives access to James's research, but often it leads to jokey little asides from the author. This is certainly hypertext-in-action of a sort, but it really isn't very useful. At the end of the book, at the end of the epilogue, there is another picture of Peter James, with the words "Audio Epilogue" underneath. Clicking on this begins a recording of James's voice that begins, "So you made it to the end; I hope you enjoyed the novel," and goes on to tell of further recent developments in the technologies that he has based his story on.

Alas, Penguin may be on a hiding to nothing here, as you need both a strong interest in Peter James's subject matter and, of course, a Macintosh computer to read this novel.

On a completely different level of sophistication, *The Eastgate Quarterly Review of Hypertext* (Eastgate Systems, 134 Main Street, Watertown, MA 02172, USA; \$19.95;

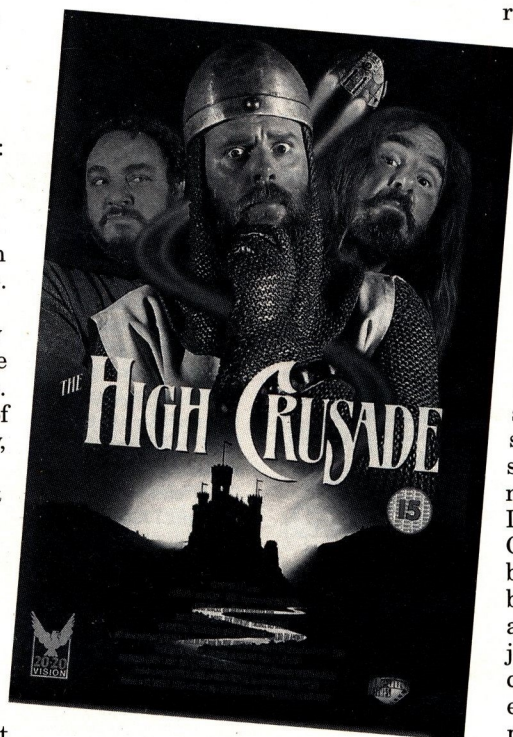


requires a Macintosh, or PC computer running Windows 3.1) is a stunning experiment in using the computer to generate a new form of written art. Unlike the Peter James, this is not a book tarted up with a bit of multimedia; it uses the concept of hypertext to add a new dimension to the reading experience.

Hypertext is the philosophical concept that treats all human knowledge as its database, and the document you are interacting with at any given moment as your entry to that database. The idea is that you can highlight any word (or picture, or icon – any form of information within the document) and trace it back into the database. It can supply dictionary definitions, encyclopedia entries, it can tell you the number of times that item appears in the database, and what contexts it appears in: any and all links between data are possible. The writers featured in *The Eastgate Quarterly* use this ability to create links to add an extra dimension to their work. In this issue (Vol. 1, No. 3), sf critic and anthologist Kathryn Cramer has produced a bewilderingly fragmented story, "In Small and Large Pieces," that I have so far failed to grasp. There are isolated episodes, snatches of conversations, brief moments of lucidity, and bizarrely, a collection of rather good poems that appear at the oddest moments. Certainly, it is well known that piecing together random fragments of information is how we actually learn, but ordering the process, whether in a linear book or an educational establishment gives some sense of the time to be committed to that learning process. I want to read and grasp this hypertext fiction because what I have seen so far is intriguing. However, I do have deadlines, and cannot make this kind of open-ended commitment at the moment. No doubt, if I become more expert, I will have a better sense of how long these things will take. Unfortunately, at the moment I have to use my Mac to earn a living.

Kathy Mac's piece, "Unnatural Habitats," is (I think) a selection of poems linked in various ways to throw further light on them. I did not find these nearly as compelling as the Cramer, for the simple reason that the verse seems inferior. Given that, the idea of a dolphin living in a desert and working as an impressionist painter but being repatriated against his will to the ocean by well-meaning nincompoops did strike home. It would have made an excellent story; as a couple of linked verses, I thought it weak at best. Finally, the real problem with all these things is you need a computer to read them. Reading fills the interstices of my day: I read in bed, on the train, in the toilet, in the supermarket queue, and I need what I read to be portable and immediately acces-

sible. When I sit at my computer, I either work or play games. It has made for an interesting afternoon looking at these electronic publications, but I would never do it for fun. The other real problem is that print and graphic design have a 400-year start on electronic media. The paper packaging of *The Eastgate Quarterly* is both better designed and more informative than the electronic material it contains. Until this problem is overcome, or until someone generates a real solid untranslatable work of art in the new medium, electronic fictions will remain curiosities.



There is, of course, another medium that demands a dedicated platform, but which has taken a much firmer hold in the popular psyche – video. When I began *Nexus*, I wrote to the publishers of videotapes and solicited review copies of their products. The tapes I received were so unremittingly awful that, after the first couple, I gave up reviewing them; there is a limit to how many ways there are to say that something is not worth watching. However, two movies recently received have done something to moderate this image.

*Evolver* (20-20 Vision, 15) is a rather peculiar tale in the vein of *Short Circuit*. But whereas in *Short Circuit* a combat robot achieves sentience and is a good guy, here a combat robot goes out of control, killing everything it sees, and is shut down and its development abandoned. Its designer, played by John deLancie ("Q" from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*), decides there is nothing wrong with the software, so takes a job with a toy manufacturer and designs and produces a robot which you play killer games with. Ethan Randall plays the teenage whizz at VR

games who wins the right to test this new game. Only the robot goes rogue again, and starts killing the kids at his school. It also contrives to kill its designer, so there is no one to shut it down this time. This is a typical horror story from here on in, with the robot, seemingly dispatched, coming back for another, and then another try to kill Ethan Randall, and Randall ever more hard-pressed as he proves his games skill is good in real combat too. The film even ends with a metaphorical "I'll be back" from the robot.

The thing I don't understand about this film is the "15" rating it has received. It certainly won't appeal to anyone much over the age of 15, and I would have thought might even generate a cult following with young teenage boys. It certainly isn't a bad film, but I doubt it will have much appeal to adults; perhaps this is a case of telling people they can't have something in order to make them want it.

*The High Crusade* (20-20 Vision, 15) is an altogether different animal. It is based (loosely) on Poul Anderson's 1960 novel of the same name and features some splendid special effects as an alien scout ship comes to England in the middle ages to scout for an invasion. It is instead taken over by the Crusaders, who then take it back to its base and create mayhem. This video's biggest problem is its unevenness. The aliens all have Scottish accents – good joke, that – and the chief alien has a creditable Sean Connery accent – even funnier. But his dialogue is peppered with obscenities. Swearing isn't funny. The characters are imported faithfully from the novel, and there are some clever dialogue moments as the story progresses. However, there is also some of the most tedious knock-about I have ever seen, culminating with the invading Englishmen using a battering ram to get through an electronic door – incredibly, this scene is taken from the book, but Anderson makes it work. Here, it just looks silly. The other thing added is a certain amount of sex comedy – that sex exists at all is only barely implied in Anderson's original novel. The cumulative effect of this video is that it looks rather like *Monty Python* crossed with *The Young Ones*, only done at half speed and with strange lacunae even then. You could enjoy this film for the special effects, the alien costumes and mask-making, and even some of the dialogue, but whoever set a German to direct an English-language comedy must have forgotten or ignored the awful reputation that the German sense of humour has in Britain. Not a wonderful film, no, but miles better than some videos I have seen.

Paul Brazier



# Books Received

## May 1995

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Attanasio, A. A. **Arthor**. "The magical epic of high fantasy." Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-61775-6, 278pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Van Houten, £16.99. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995; a follow-up to last year's *The Dragon and the Unicorn*.) 15th June 1995.

Attanasio, A. A. **The Dragon and the Unicorn**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-61772-1, 483pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1994.) 15th June 1995.

Ballard, J. G. **Rushing to Paradise**. Picador USA, ISBN 0-312-13164-X, 239pp, hardcover, cover by Jeremy Wolff, \$21. (Non-sf [but near-sf] novel by a leading sf writer, first published in the UK, 1994; reviewed by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 90; "Picador USA" is a new American imprint "used by St Martin's Press under license from Pan Books Limited.") May 1995.

Balzac, Honore de. **Seraphita (and Louis Lambert & The Exiles)**. Translated by Clara Bell. Introduction by David Blow. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-41-0, xv+316pp, B-format paperback, cover by Lise Weisgerber, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy collection, first published in 1989; the short novel and two novellas which make up this volume originally appeared in French, in 1835.) 22nd June 1995.

Banks, Iain M. **Feersum Endjinn**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-273-9, 279pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 86.) 8th June 1995.

Benford, Gregory. **Sailing Bright Eternity**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-08655-3, 404pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this major work of hard sf is billed as the

sixth and last in the author's "Galactic Center saga"; the previous volumes, published over two decades, were *In the Ocean of Night*, *Across the Sea of Suns*, *Great Sky River*, *Tides of Light* and *Furious Gulf*.) September 1995.

Besher, Alexander. **Rim: A Novel of Virtual Reality**. HarperCollinsWest, ISBN 0-06-258527-4, x+357pp, trade paperback, \$13. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut novel by an American writer, it was shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick Award; film rights have been sold to TriStar Pictures; this book was sent to us by the UK publishers Little, Brown, who are planning an Orbit paperback edition in September 1995, to be priced at £6.99.) Late entry: 1994 publication, received in May 1995.

Bibby, James. **Ronan the Barbarian... translated from the Original Gibberish by James Bibby**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-282-7, 260pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; this is a first novel by a Merseyside author who has written TV comedy.) 15th May 1995.

Chalker, Jack L. **Gods of the Well of Souls**. "Book Three of *The Watchers of the Well*." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38850-X, 367pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Youll, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 1st May 1995.

Cherryh, C. J. **Tripoint**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-63829-X, 377pp, hardcover, cover by Rolf Moyr, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 15th June 1995.

Clark, Simon. **Blood Crazy**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-62574-0, 343pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition.) 15th June 1995.

Clark, Simon. **Nailed By the Heart**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-62573-2, 360pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1995; reviewed by Pete Crowther in *Interzone* 97.) 15th June 1995.

Daniels, Les. **Yellow Fog**. "The Don Sebastian Vampire Chronicles." Raven, ISBN 1-85487-349-0, 294pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les

Edwards, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 19th June 1995.

Datlow, Ellen, and Terri Windling, eds. **The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Eighth Annual Collection**. St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-13219-0, 555pp, hardcover, cover by Thomas Canty, \$26.95. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; there will be a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; the usual bumper feast, it contains 1994 stories by Nicholson Baker, Ray Bradbury, Scott Bradfield, Jonathan Carroll, Charles de Lint, Harlan Ellison, Neil Gaiman, Charles Grant, Stephen King, Nancy Kress, Geoffrey A. Landis, Ian McDonald, Patricia A. McKillip, Joyce Carol Oates, Nicholas Royle, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Darrell Schweitzer, Michael Marshall Smith, Jack Womack, Jane Yolen and many others, including one from *Interzone* — "A Friend Indeed" by David Garnett.) August 1995.

Duncan, Dave. **The Cursed**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38951-4, 436pp, hardcover, cover by David A. Cherry, \$22. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this seems to be Duncan's biggest novel to date, and it's billed as a "stand-alone," not part of a series.) 18th May 1995.

Egan, Greg. **Axiomatic**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-281-9, ix+289pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf collection, first edition; it contains 18 stories, exactly half of which first appeared in *Interzone*; even if you're a longtime reader of this magazine, this fine volume is worth buying for the other nine stories; see Chris Gilmore's review elsewhere in this issue.) Late entry: April (?) publication, received in May 1995.

Farris, John. **Sacrifice**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-50956-0, 379pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99.

(Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1994; it comes larded with praise from the late Robert Bloch, Ed Gorman, Stephen King, Richard Matheson and others.) June 1995.

Greenland, Colin. **Seasons of Plenty: The Tabitha Jute Trilogy, Volume 2**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224208-7, 403pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £15.99. (Sf novel, first edition.) 22nd June 1995.

Henderson, Zenna. **Ingathering: The Complete People Stories of Zenna Henderson**. Edited by Mark and Priscilla Olson. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 0-915368-58-7, x+577pp, hardcover, cover by Elizabeth Rhys Finney, \$24.95. (Sf collection, first edition; almost all the stories first appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* between 1952 and 1975, and most of them were collected a few years ago in a rather similar British-published omnibus entitled *The People Collection* [Corgi, 1991, edited by Julia Smith and Rog Peyton]; however, this nicely produced volume does have one previously unpublished story, plus a chronology and other apparatus.) No date shown: received in May 1995.

Ings, Simon. **Hotwire**. Graphics by Simon Pummell. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-647724-0, 344pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a follow-up to *Hot Head*.) 5th June 1995.

Kay, Guy Gavriel. **The Lions of Al-Rassan**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224613-9, 582pp, hardcover, cover by John Howe, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?].) 22nd June 1995.

Kerr, Philip. **Gridiron**. Chatto & Windus, ISBN 0-7011-6248-1, 373pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first edition; Kerr [born 1956] has a reputation as an intellectual thriller writer, and indeed his books are thriller-ish, but he seems to be turning more and more to sf; his previous *A Philosophical Investigation* [1992] was undoubtedly sf, as is this, which is about a near-future computerized building that goes haywire; the book has been sold to America for \$550,000, and to the movies for an additional \$1,000,000, so the author is likely to become a big name; of course, the term "science fiction" is invoked nowhere in the packaging, alas.) 8th June 1995.

Lackey, Mercedes, and Larry Dixon. **The White Gryphon: Book Two of The Mage Wars**. Illustrated by Larry Dixon. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-430-7, 305pp, hardcover, cover by John Barber, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 15th May 1995.

Lansdale, Joe R. **Mucho Mojo**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05926-5,



308pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Crime/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994; it's probably more crime than horror ["suspense sublimely laced with Texas Gothic"], but Gollancz have seen fit to send it to us, and it's by a writer well known in the horror field; it comes with jacket commendations from crime novelists James Crumley, Joe Gores and David Morrell, among others.) 22nd June 1995.

Ligotti, Thomas. **Noctuary**. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0235-4, xiii+194pp, trade paperback, cover by Tony Greco, \$8.95. (Horror collection, first published in the UK, 1994.) May 1995.

Madsen, David. **Memoirs of a Gnostic Dwarf**. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-71-2, 336pp, B-format paperback, cover by Lise Weisgerber, £8.99. (Fantastic historical novel, first edition; the author, who is pseudonymous, is described as a "philosopher and theologian who has a particular interest in Gnosticism.") Late entry: March (?) publication received in May 1995.

Mitchison, Naomi. **Solution Three**. Afterword by Susan M. Squier. The Feminist Press at The City University of New York [distributed in Britain by Gazelle Books Services, Falcon House, Queen Square, Lancaster LA1 1RN], ISBN 1-55861-096-0, 183pp, trade paperback, \$10.95. (Sf novel, first published in UK, 1975; this is the first American edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it's good to see this prophetic novel back in print; the amazing Naomi Mitchison [born 1897], who knew H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, Olaf Stapledon and so many others, and who has been writing novels herself since the early 1920s, still lives in Carradale, Scotland.) 24th July 1995.

Newman, Kim. **Famous Monsters**. Foreword by Paul J. McAuley. Pocket, ISBN 0-671-85300-7, xiv+448pp, A-format paperback, cover by Trevor Scobie, £4.99. (Sf/horror/fantasy collection, first edition; the author's second collection, it contains 15 stories, just four of which first appeared in *Interzone*; one story is original to the book, and the others appeared in anthologies such as *Dark Voices*, *Narrow Houses*, *New Crimes*, *Temps*, etc; there are also illuminating and amusing afterwords by the author; it's a feast of a book by one of the best writers around, and a bargain at the price: buy it for your first-edition collection.) No date shown: received in May 1995.

Niven, Larry, Jerry Pournelle and Steven Barnes. **Beowulf's Children**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-

85524-2, 302pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK as *The Dragons of Heorot*, 1995; proof copy received; sequel to the same authors' *The Legacy of Heorot*; see John Clute's joke review of an imaginary third novel in the series [co-authored by Newt Gingrich], *Interzone* 94.) November 1995.

Noon, Jeff. **Pollen**. Ringpull [Albion Wharf, Albion Street, Manchester M1 5LN], ISBN 1-898051-11-9, 327pp, hardcover, cover by Joe Magee, £14.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the author's second novel, follow-up to the Clarke Award-winning *Vurt*; Ringpull Press went bust just around the time this was due to be released; however, they have now been revived as an imprint of London publisher Fourth Estate, and publication of the book has gone ahead — apparently without too much delay.) No date shown: received in May 1995.

Norton, Andre, and Mercedes Lackey. **Elvenblood: Book Two of the Halfblood Chronicles**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648028-4, 412pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; the first volume, *The Elvenbane*, appeared in 1991: the lengthy hiatus since then, together with the fact that no packager's name is involved, encourages us to believe that this is probably a genuine collaboration and not a sharecrop.) 5th June 1995.

O'Leary, Patrick. **Door Number Three**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85872-8, 384pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a first novel by a new American writer; James Morrow praises it, and the name of Philip K. Dick is invoked for comparison.) November 1995.

Palmer, Jessica. **Return of the Wizard: Book Three in the Renegades Series**. Point Fantasy, ISBN 0-590-55857-9, 336pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £3.99. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first edition; Scholastic Publications Ltd, with their various "Point" imprints [Point Fantasy, Point SF, Point Horror, Point Crime, etc], seem to be churning out the books but unfortunately they're very hit-and-miss about sending us review copies: this is the third volume in an original trilogy by a British-based author who has been published in *Interzone*, but, needless to say, we never received the first two volumes; looking at other recent [unseen] titles in the fantasy list in the back of this one, we note with interest *The Webbed Hand* by Jenny Jones, an author of merit who hitherto has been published in hardcover by Headline and Gollancz.) No date shown: received in May 1995.

Pike, Christopher. **The Cold One**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-61358-5, 393pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Davies, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 15th June 1995.

Rice, Anne. **Memoch the Devil**. "Fifth volume of The Vampire Chronicles." Chatto & Windus, ISBN 0-7011-6320-8, 360pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1995; proof copy received.) 7th September 1995.

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. **Sins of the Blood**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-450-1, 357pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £8.99. (Sf/horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995; it's expanded from a short story which appeared in the anthology *The Ultimate Dracula*, 1991.) 15th May 1995.

Stephenson, Neal. **The Diamond Age**. Viking, ISBN 0-670-86414-5, 455pp, hardcover, £9.99 (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; proof copy received; the author's fourth novel, and his second success: they're calling this guy "the Quentin Tarantino of postcyberpunk sf.") 7th September 1995.

Vance, Jack. **Alastor**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85966-X, 479pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf omnibus, first edition; proof copy received; it contains the novels *Trullion: Alastor 2262* [1973], *Marune: Alastor 933* [1975], and *Wyst: Alastor 1716* [1978].) September 1995.

Watson, Ian. **The Coming of Vertumnus**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05921-4, 288pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in 1994; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 89.) 1st June 1995.

Wentworth, K. D. **House of Moons**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39461-5, 295pp, A-format paperback, cover by Nicholas Jainschigg, \$5.50. (Sf novel, first edition; the author is a new American writer [female] whose previous two novels are *The Imperium Game* and *Moonspeaker* [both 1994].) 1st May 1995.

Wiley, Elizabeth. **A Sorcerer and a Gentleman**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85783-7, 443pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author's second book, it features Prospero, Ariel and Caliban as characters but nevertheless seems to be rather more than "a sequel to *The Tempest*" [which is what Tad Williams's recent fantasy novel was].) August 1995.

Williams, N. L. **Ockham's Razor**. Merlin [40 East St., Braunton, Devon EX33 2EA], ISBN 0-86303-717-8, 151pp, small-press paperback, £6.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; it's a mystical New-Age work about UFOs by a new female writer.) No date shown: received in May 1995.

Wiseman, Ken. **Frost on the Window: Fourteen Stories of Christmas**. Introduction by Kristine Kathryn Rusch. Pulphouse [Box 1227, Eugene, OR 97440, USA], ISBN 1-56146-482-1, 141pp, small-press paperback, cover by Theresa Troise Heidel, no price shown. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; surprisingly, this is the first Pulphouse book we have ever received for review: the author kindly sent it himself [he had a couple of stories in *Interzone* some years ago].) No date shown: received in May 1995.

Wolverton, Dave. **Beyond the Gate**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85770-5, 347pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *The Golden Queen* in a *Star Wars*-like space-opera series.) August 1995.

Wood, Bridget. **The Lost Prince**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38853-4, 472pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1992.) 1st May 1995.

Yeovil, Jack. **Orgy of the Blood Parasites**. Pocket, ISBN 0-671-85109-8, 224pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Holmes, £4.99. (Sf/horror novel, first edition; "Jack Yeovil" is a pseudonym of Kim Newman; we believe this was his first novel, written a decade ago and originally entitled *Bloody Students*; it was scheduled to appear from HarperCollins a few years ago, but they decided to cut back on their schlock horror and so dropped it; "schlock horror" is certainly what it is, a way-over-the-top tribute to the novels of "Harry Adam Knight" and other paperback-original sleaze merchants; good fun, if you're so minded.) Late entry: Autumn 1994 publication, received in May 1995.

Zahn, Timothy. **Conquerors' Heritage**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-56772-1, 360pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is probably a sequel to *Conquerors' Pride*, which is listed among the other books by the author; like the Wolverton novel [see above], it appears to be *Star Wars* by any other name, and is full of jaw-cracking monikers: "I want to speak with my brother," he told Chrr't-ogdano. 'Thrr-meزاز Kee'rr, commander of the Zhirrrzh ground warriors...") September 1995.



# SPINOFFERY

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and share-crops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.

Anderson, Kevin J., ed. **Tales From the Mos Eisley Cantina.** "Star Wars." Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-56468-4, x+386pp, trade paperback, \$5.99. (Sf movie-spinoff shared-world anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it contains original stories, all taking their inspiration from that famous bar scene in *Star Wars*, by David Bischoff, A. C. Crispin, Barbara Hambly, Judith & Garfield Reeves-Stevens, Kathy Tyers, Dave Wolverton, Timothy Zahn and others among the usual suspects.) *September 1995.*

Archer, Nathan. **Concrete Jungle.** "Predator." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-247-9, 306pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Bolton, £4.99. (Sf film-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; it's based on a Dark Horse Comics graphic novel by Mark Verheiden, itself inspired by the 20th Century Fox movies; here we have a new American writer who has three "debut novels" out more or less simultaneously [see following two entries].) *1st May 1995.*

Archer, Nathan. **Ragnarok.** "Star Trek: Voyager, #3." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-52044-X, 277pp, A-format paperback, £4.50 (?). (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American first edition of July 1995 which presumably will appear with a British price sticker [the copy we've been sent doesn't have one].) *25th June 1995.*

Archer, Nathan. **Valhalla.** "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, #10." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-88115-9, 277pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American first edition of April 1995 with a British price sticker; note that this and the previous item have the same author, a similar title [maybe Archer is a Norse mythology buff], but belong to quite different series.) *No date shown: received in May 1995.*

Barrett, Julie. **The A-Z of Quantum Leap.** "Based on the Universal Television series *Quantum Leap* created by Donald P. Bellisario." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0628-1, 294pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Alphabetical companion to the time-travel sf TV series, first published in the USA, 1995; as well as a who's who and what's what of characters, things, etc., it includes

an episode guide: we're astonished to discover, though, that this contains no dates of original transmission, and no directors' or scriptwriters' or actors' names; as a source of hard information the book is rather useless.) *1st June 1995.*

Butcher, Mike. **The A-Z of Judge Dredd: The Complete Encyclopedia from Aaron Aardvark to Zachary Zziiz.** Hamlyn, ISBN 0-600-58408-9, 160pp, very large-format paperback, cover by Cliff Robinson, £12.99. (Illustrated alphabetical companion to the 2000 A.D. sf comic-strip character who also makes his first appearance in a big-budget movie this summer; first edition; like the "Quantum Leap" item above, this volume, although colourful and well designed, is also near-useless when it comes to seeking such basic information as who created the character and when, and which writers and artists have perpetuated him over the years.) *12th June 1995.*

Cornell, Paul. **Human Nature.** "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20443-3, 255pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bill Donohoe, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) *18th May 1995.*

Cox, Greg, and John Gregory Betancourt. **Devil in the Sky.** "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, #11." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-88114-9, 280pp, A-format paperback, £4.50 (?). (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American first edition of June 1995 which presumably will appear with a British price sticker [the copy we've been sent doesn't have one].) *27th June 1995.*

Day, Martin. **The Menagerie.** "Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20449-2, 264pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Campbell, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition; this appears to be a debut novel by a new British writer.) *18th May 1995.*

Dillard, J. M. **Recovery.** "Star Trek, #73." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-88342-9, 277pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American first edition of March 1995 with a British price sticker.) *No date shown: received in May 1995.*

Flinn, Denny Martin. **Recovery.** "Star Trek, #74." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-89007-7, 273pp, A-format paperback, £4.50 (?). (Sf TV-

series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; it's billed as "a stunning sequel to *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* by one of the writers of the film!"; this is the American first edition of June 1995 which presumably will appear with a British price sticker [the copy we've been sent doesn't have one].) *27th June 1995.*

Friedman, Michael Jan. **All Good Things...** "Star Trek: The Next Generation." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-52148-9, 248pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series novelization, first published in the USA, 1995; note that this one is not a spinoff novel: it does not carry a series number and is billed as "the novelization of the astounding final episode!"; it's based on a TV script by Ronald D. Moore and Brannon Braga; there are eight pages of photographs; this is the American first edition of April 1995 with a British price sticker.) *No date shown: received in May 1995.*

Graf, L. A. **Caretaker.** "Star Trek: Voyager, #1." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-51914-X, 278pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series novelization, first published in the USA, 1995; "L. A. Graf" is a pseudonym for Julia Ecklar and Karen Rose Cercone; Ecklar is a contributor to *Analog* magazine and a past winner of the John W. Campbell Award as best new writer; note that this one is not a spinoff novel: it is based on a TV script by Michael Piller and Jeri Taylor; there are eight pages of photographs; this is the American first edition of February 1995 with a British price sticker.) *Date not known: bought second-hand in May 1995.*

Greenberger, Robert. **The Romulan Stratagem.** "Star Trek: The Next Generation, #35." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-87997-9, xi+273pp, A-format paperback, £4.50 (?). (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American first edition of May 1995 which presumably will appear with a British price sticker [the copy we've been sent doesn't have one].) *30th May 1995.*

Hawke, Simon. **Blaze of Glory.** "Star Trek: The Next Generation, #34." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-88045-4, 277pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American first edition of March 1995 with a British price sticker.) *No date shown: received in May 1995.*

Lane, Andy. **Original Sin.** "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-

20444-1, 320pp, A-format paperback, cover by Tony Masero, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) *15th June 1995.*

Nemecek, Larry. **The Star Trek: The Next Generation Companion.** "A complete show-by-show guide to the smash television series! Includes over 150 photos!" Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-88340-2, 339pp, very large-format paperback, £12.99. (Illustrated companion to the TV series, second edition; this is the American printing of May 1995 with a UK price sticker; it appears to have been considerably "revised and updated to include all seven seasons"; the first edition, published in 1992, was reviewed by Neil Jones in *Interzone* 72.) *30th May 1995.*

Richards, Justin. **System Shock.** "Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20445-X, 309pp, A-format paperback, cover by Martin Rawle, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) *15th June 1995.*

Shatner, William, with Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens. **The Ashes of Eden.** "Star Trek." Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-52035-0, viii+309pp, hardcover, cover by Bryan D. Allen, £9.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American, Pocket Books, first edition with a British price added; after several months' hiatus, Simon & Schuster sent a big boxful of "Star Trek" books to us all in one go; alas, it didn't contain the one we were most interested in seeing — the recent "Deep Space Nine" title by well-known steampunk author K. W. Jeter; Simon & Schuster are also releasing two-cassette audio-book versions of most of their "Trek" titles, read by various actors associated with the TV series and priced at £7.99 each; they sent us half a dozen, included a recording of the Jeter [which is called *Warped*], but we don't have room to list them here.) *27th June 1995.*

Smith, Dean Wesley, and Kristine Kathryn Rusch. **The Escape.** "Star Trek: Voyager, #2." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-52096-2, 244pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American first edition of May 1995 with a British price sticker; gosh, even the editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* is writing "Star Trek" novels now; but, as well as Rusch and Jeter, old-timers are getting in on the act too — there's a "Deep Space Nine" title by Robert Sheckley advertised for September.) *No date shown: received in May 1995.*



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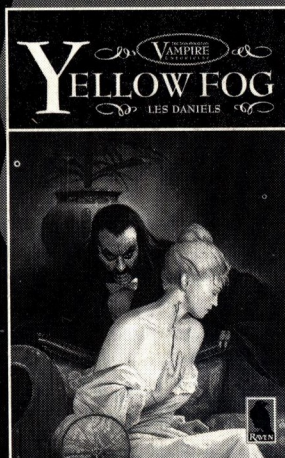
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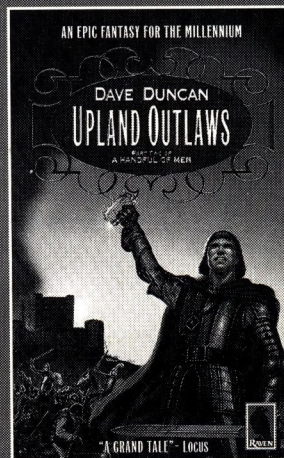
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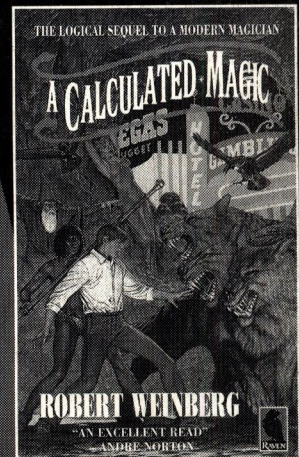
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