

JUNE 1996



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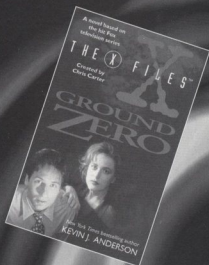
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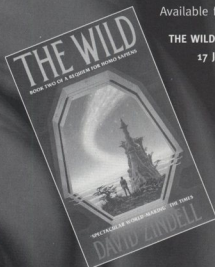
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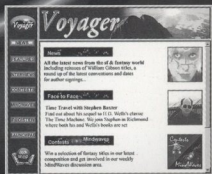
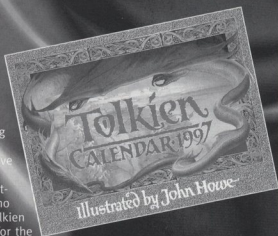


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# interZone

June 1996

108

science fiction & fantasy

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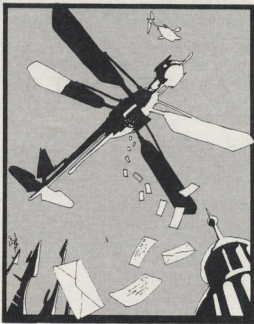
# Interaction

Dear Editors:

Thank you for the recent author issue on J.G. Ballard (no. 106). It was very enjoyable and highly informative, as are most issues of your magazine. For me, Ballard summed up the whole controversy over whether sf will survive or not: science, forever changing and growing, will always be with us and will constantly throw up new ideas to the imagination; moreover, any fiction that doesn't reflect this essential presence in modern society becomes more and more irrelevant. So why is there this panic about sf disappearing? Because it is changing. Most readers who grew up when a particular kind of sf was prevalent will feel uneasy when its ideas become exhausted and another style takes its place. That is why for everyone the "Golden Age" of sf was when he/she was a teenager. But sf has to change otherwise it will die, as will anything that feeds on itself for too long.

Art always renews itself through revolutions – evolution does not happen gradually – and the best stuff always appears at the start of each fresh spurt. The earlier Impressionist art, for example, was far better than anything that came after; the painters who were successful for the longest constantly changed their approaches (Picasso, Ernst). So it is with sf. The best trad sf was written by Bradbury and others right at the beginning; the next big revolution was the New Wave carried forward by people like your featured author. Arguably, the last big step was with Gibson's cyberpunk novels, and even now we can say that the cyberpunk stuff written today does not have the impact and originality of the first books.

I believe the biggest source of change now is that, for good or bad, sf is being accepted by some mainstream literary circles. On the downside we have to put up with the kind of views represented by Roger Luckhurst in the same issue where he equates the value of Shakespeare with that of Mills & Boon. (One can only presume that in accepting sf they now feel they have to accept everything. We will probably have to wait longer for a more balanced judgement. Genres are not good; books are.) On the upside, however, we can look forward to some cracking novels. The best non-realistic authors have always had a healthy interest in other art besides their own area: Bradbury, Ballard, Le Guin, Priest, Aldiss, Peake, Angela Carter and so on. They were able to bring in fresh ideas from outside, and it is no



coincidence that some of these authors also have written some realistic fiction as well. One only has to think of the so-called mainstream authors who have "dabbled" in the area to realize how extensive this change is: most notably Iain Banks, but also Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Fay Weldon, Martin Amis to name but a few.

So is the mainstream infusing sf, or is sf joining the mainstream, leaving the more stereotypical genre fiction behind? I think the latter. Some may complain that what is being written is not sf at all and that "true sf" is dying, but we cannot churn out the same old formulas forever. Nowadays a writer had better have a bloody good reason for going to another planet. Genre sf will die because it has been given a label and a set of assumptions, limits that will fail – are failing – to take developments into account. But an enlightened magazine such as *Interzone* can probably do without such labels at all. What is sf? Non-realistic literature whose interest depends upon the extrapolation of scientific principles. What is fantasy? Basically, non-realistic literature whose interest depends upon the extrapolation of non-scientific principles. But the distinction of fantasy from sf is not hard and fast. In far-future fiction science verges on magic because we do not know the principles involved (take Gene Wolfe as a distinguished example). Can't we simply describe sf/fantasy as nonrealistic fiction and leave it as that? Then we can read something

without worrying what box it falls into, and David Pringle could ask J.G. Ballard some really important questions, such as "what has he found to be the most important books over the last ten years?"

P.S. I was very sad to learn that Ballard has given up writing short stories; I always thought it was his definitive vehicle. When it comes to markets, I know that *Granta* takes longer short fiction, and perhaps you could find room for such exceptional jewels?

Neil Fisher

Lee-on-Solent, Portsmouth

Dear Editors:

For my money *Interzone* 106 was the best in a long while. It gained from having a focusing, though not exclusive, theme to which, not simply the explicitly Ballardian contributed, but also, in its complementing illustration, Nick Gassman's valuable and discriminating "Science Fiction and the Internet," and, on the fiction front, Richard Calder's "The Embarkation for Cythera" and Terry Dowling's "The Ichneumon and the Dormeuse," both of which, however fortuitously, contain discernible Ballardian resonances. When near the beginning of the Calder story we read of architectural trajectories "that clung like monstrous rococo vegetation" as tall buildings gave way to "the abandoned ruins of the city limits," we are aware of being in sight of Ballard territory; and Terry Dowling's brilliant *IZ* debut, as much as any story of Ballard's, might fit Roger Luckhurst's definition of a Ballard fiction as one that "takes place in suspensive zones where normal logics and causalities are held in abeyance" – even though Dowling's zones of action (haunted by a species of "Belle Dormeuse sans Merci") lie closer to those recalled in Paul McAuley's review of Dan Simmons's Shrike-haunted and Keatsian flavoured *Hyperion Cantos* than they do to Ballard's airfields and motorways. Ballard's own two stories embody elements of polarity which in divers modes characterize his work: invisible (or impotent) man and visible catastrophe/visible man and invisible (or subversively "virtual") catastrophe.

Both Roger Luckhurst's and Takayuki Tatsumi's contributions explore the tricky interface of literary/academic with popular/fannish approaches to sf in general and to J.G. Ballard in particular. In noting Ballard's notorious

brush-off of the editors of *Science-Fiction Studies*, Roger Luckhurst, defining himself as a "North London intellectual" and having a proper professional regard for "the protocol of reading" and canonical acceptance, highlights reasons for the genre writers' resistance to being, as they may see it, patronised by an elite who proclaim the duty of "directing students to what [sf] is really about beneath the surface." I am reminded of a possibly apocryphal Dylan Thomas incident when, after reading to an American university audience, he was invited to expatiate on (let us say) the subtlety of the Christian Mythos to cosmological metaphor in "Altarwise by Owl-Light." His response was: "Isn't education bloody marvellous!"

I'm sure that *IZ*'s usual practice of a varied mix in any one issue is the deservedly successful and widely popular one, but the use, as here, of a unifying authorial theme is so rewarding, offering so many fresh insights, that I hope it may be repeated not too infrequently.

**K.V. Bailey**

*Alderney, Channel Islands*

Dear Editors:

After nearly a year subscribing to *Interzone*, I was dithering about whether to renew my subscription. The majority of the stories were terrible, but I soldiered on, thinking things could only improve. The first real gem was "Assembly Line" by Mary Soon Lee (*IZ* 98). It has a feeling of hope about it, and features good computers as opposed to bad people. This is probably closer to logical reality than the other way around, as well as being more original! The best story of all is "The Dying Fall" by J.G. Ballard (*IZ* 106). This is something within my experience – the human fear of rejection, and those terrible worn steps in historical monuments that go round and round till you think you'll get dizzy and fall down the middle. Then there's the sneaking feeling that someone who is being nice to you is trying to get under your skin in little ways. Instead of the usual abrupt story ending, there's a feeling of satisfaction that a score has been settled. It's not a saga about a society or a world, it's a light and enjoyable tale about individuals. I also enjoyed "How to be a Fictionaut" by Ian Watson (*IZ* 106). The idea of having my prose "rejjaged" by a computer drives me to hysteria!

The main thing about *Interzone* is the discussion. This is what keeps me coming back for more. It's like walking into a restaurant and finding it full of aliens – the food that they're tucking into fascinates me, but is not much to my taste... I have to be brave and admit that I'm a stranger in these parts. I'm more of a fantasy person. I don't really

like metallic views of the future, ultra-correct computer-run spaceships or mad scientists playing with genes. I don't talk about New Wave, cyber-punks and Newt Gingrich as though it was my second language. I have an uneasy feeling that I'm gatecrashing the wrong party. Do you hope to see something more in sf than a well-written original story? If so, what?

What puzzles me most is the attitude some of you have to fantasy. Few stop to ask just how fantasy is defined (though some do). I asked an intelligent but sf-orientated friend – he said without pausing to think that he would define fantasy as trolls, wizards and magic rings. Fair enough – I used to think that, and it was enough for me anyway. I wanted to write one; I thought they were so beautiful. The ideal world – untouched by machine or computer, electricity pylons or cars. Rustling trees, fresh air, sunlight and gurgling streams, magical beings and things to marvel at... but this sort of story is not where it ends. In fantasies, anything can happen, and I refuse to believe that there are only two or three possible storylines. Trolls and wizards are optional. Fantasy is not inferior to sf – either it's misunderstood and underrated, or I really have come to the wrong party.

Concerning copyright laws, I find it hard to accept that a complete stranger could steal my main protagonist and freely write new stories around her – are you saying people could do that now, or after my death? How could a character stay the same under a different authorship? Even if based on some familiar personage such as Merlin, the character as penned by me would be unique. I feel this about other writers' work – I have never been able to accept sequels by a

second author, or an incomplete story finished by someone else.

As you see, I find a lot of food for thought in these pages. *Interzone* is not such a bad party after all. Anyone seen the olives?

**Sandra Brown**

(not the romantic novelist)

*St Andrews, Fife*

Dear Editors:

I co-edit *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (St Martin's Press) with Terri Windling. The first, second and fourth volumes, published in 1988, 1989 and 1991 won the World Fantasy Award for best anthology. The ninth annual collection will be out in August 1996. We are now reading for the tenth. This will include all material published in the year 1996.

I am looking for stories from all branches of horror: from the traditional-supernatural to the borderline, including hi-tech science-fiction horror, psychological horror, or anything else that might qualify. If in doubt, send it. This is a reprint anthology so I am only reading material published in or about to be published during the year 1996. The submission deadline is *December 15th, 1996*. Anything sent after this deadline will reach me too late to be considered for 1996. If a magazine you edit will be coming out by December 31st 1996 you can send me galleys so that I can judge the stories in time. The sooner I get the material the better.

There is a section in front of the book that covers "the year in horror" and "the year in fantasy." These include mention of magazines and publishing news concerning the horror and fantasy fields, novels we've read and liked, and in my section, "odds and ends" – material that doesn't fit anywhere else but that I feel might interest the horror reader (like trading cards, strange non-fiction titles, art books, etc). But I have to be aware of this material in order to mention it. The deadline for this section is January 30th, 1997. When sending material to me please write *YEAR'S BEST HORROR* on the envelope.

Terri Windling reads only during the fall. Her address is: Casa Rincon, 11651 Calle Aurora, Tucson, Arizona 85748, USA. She covers fantasy exclusively and I cover horror exclusively. If you consider something both, send to each of us. We do not confer about our choices. Authors: please do not send me stories from magazines, anthologies or other publications that I am likely to see during the year. Only from obscure, non-genre publications. Thank you.

**Ellen Datlow**

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## Part One

Space war is godawful *slow*.

*Mouser's* long-range sensors had sniffed the bogey two days ago, but it had taken all that time just to creep within kill-range. I figured it had to be another dud. With ordnance, fuel and morale all low, we were ready to slink back to Tiger's Eye anyway; let one of the other thickships pick up the sweep in this sector.

So – still groggy after frogsleep – I wasn't exactly wetting myself with excitement; not even when *Mouser* began spiking the thick with combat-readiness psychogens. Even when we went to Attack-Con-One, all I did was pause the neurodisney I was tripping (*Hellcats of Solar War Three*, since you asked), slough my hammock and swim languidly up to the bridge.

"Junk," I said, looking over Yarrow's shoulder at the readout. "War debris or another of those piss-poor chondrites. Betcha."

"Sorry, kid. Everything checks out."

"Hostiles?"

"Nope. Positive on the exhaust; dead ringer for the

stolen ship." She traced a webbed hand across the swathe of decorations which already curled around her neck. "Want your stripes now or when we get back?"

"You actually think this'll net us a pair of tigers?"

"Damn right it will."

I nodded, and thought: *she isn't necessarily wrong*. No defector, no stolen military secrets reaching the Royalists. Ought to be worth a medal, maybe even a promotion.

So why did I feel something wasn't right?

"All right," I said, hoping to drown qualms in routine. "How soon?"

"Missiles are already away, but she's five light-minutes from us, so the quacks won't reach her for six hours. Longer if she makes a run for cover."

"Run for cover? That's a joke."

"Yeah, hilarious." Yarrow swelled one of the holographic displays until it hovered between us.

It was a map of the Swirl, tinted to show zones controlled by us or the Royalists. An enormous slowly rotating disc of primordial material, 800 AU edge to



Illustrations by Rick Dawson

# STAIR REYNOLDS

edge; wide enough that light took more than four days to traverse it.

Most of the action was near the middle, in the light-hour of space around the central star Fomalhaut. Immediately around the sun was a material-free void which we called the Inner Clearing Zone, but beyond that began the Swirl proper; metal-rich lanes of dust condensing slowly into rocky planets. Both sides wanted absolute control of those planet-forming Feeding Zones – prime real estate for the day when one side beat the other and could recommence mining operations – so that was where our vast armies of wasps mainly slugged things out. We humans – Royalist and Standardist both – kept much further out, where the Swirl thinned to metal-depleted icy rubble. Even hunting the defector hadn't taken us within ten light hours of the Feeding Zones, and we'd become used to having a lot of empty space to ourselves. Apart from the defector, there shouldn't have been anything else out here to offer cover.

But there was. Big too, not much more than a half light-minute from the rat.

"Practically pissing distance," Yarrow observed.

"Too close for coincidence. What is it?"

"Splinter. Icy planetesimal, if you want to get technical."

"Not this early in the day." But I remembered how one of our tutors back at the academy had put it: *Splinters are icy slag, spat out of the Swirl. In a few hundred thousand years there'll be a baby solar system around Fomalhaut, but there'll also be shitloads of junk surrounding it, leftovers on million-year orbits.*

"Worthless to us," Yarrow said, scratching at the ribbon of black hair which ran all the way from her brow to fluke. "But evidently not to ratty."

"What if the Royalists left supplies on the splinter? She could be aiming to refuel before the final hop to their side of the Swirl."

Yarrow gave me her best withering look.

"Yeah, okay," I said. "Not my smartest ever suggestion."

Yarrow nodded sagely. "Ours is not to question, Spirey. Ours is to fire and forget."

Six hours after the quackheads had hared away from *Mouser*, Yarrow floated in the bridge, fluked tail coiled beneath. She resembled an inverted question mark, and if I'd been superstitious I'd have said that wasn't necessarily the best of omens.

"You kill me," she said.

An older pilot called Quillin had been the first to go *siren* – first to swap legs for tail. Yarrow followed a year later. Admittedly it made sense, an adaptation to the fluid-filled environment of a high-gee thickship. And I accepted the cardiovascular modifications that enabled us to breathe thick, as well as the biomodified skin which let us tolerate cold and vacuum far longer than any unmodified human. Not to mention the billions of molecule-sized demons which coursed through our bodies, or the combat-specific psycho-modifications. But swapping your legs for a tail touched off too many queasy resonances in me. Had to admire her nerve, though.

"What?" I said.

"That neurodisney shit. Isn't a real space war good enough for you?"

"Yeah, except I don't think this is it. When was the last time one of us actually looked a Royalist in the eye?"

She shrugged. "Something like 400 years."

"Point made. At least in *Solar War Three* you get some blood. See, it's all set on planetary surfaces – Titan, Europa, all those moons they've got back in Sol system. Trench warfare; hand-to-hand stuff. You know what adrenalin is, Yarrow?"

"Managed without it until now. And there's another thing: Don't know much about Greater Earth history, but there was never a *Solar War Three*."

"It's conjectural," I said. "And in any case it almost happened; they almost went to the brink."

"Almost?"

"It's set in a different timeline."

She grinned, shaking her head. "I'm telling you, you kill me."

"She made a move yet?" I asked.

"What?"

"The defector."

"Oh, we're back in reality now?" Yarrow laughed. "Sorry, this is going to be slightly less exciting than *Solar War Three*."

"Inconsiderate," I said. "Think the bitch would give us a run for our money." And as I spoke the weapons readout began to pulse faster and faster, like the cardiogram of a fluttering heart. "How long now?"

"One minute, give or take a few seconds."

"Want a little bet?"

Yarrow grinned, sallow in the red alert lighting. "As if I'd say no, Spirey."

So we hammered out a wager; Yarrow betting 50 tiger-tokens the rat would attempt some last-minute evasion. "Won't do her a blind bit of good," she said. "But that won't stop her. It's human nature."

Me, I suspected our target was either dead or asleep.

"Bit of an empty ritual, isn't it?"

"What?"

"I mean, the attack happened the best part of five

minutes ago, realtime. The rat's already dead, and nothing we can do can influence that outcome."

Yarrow bit on a nicotine stick. "Don't get all philosophical on me, Spirey."

"Wouldn't dream of it. How long?"

"Five seconds. Four..."

She was somewhere between three and four when it happened. I remember thinking that there was something disdainful about the rat's actions: that she'd deliberately waited until the last possible moment, and that she'd dispensed with our threat with the least effort possible.

That was how it felt, anyway.

Nine of the quackheads detonated prematurely, way beyond kill-range. For a moment the tenth remained, zeroing in on the defector – but instead it failed to detonate, until it was just beyond range.

For long moments there was silence, while we absorbed what had happened. Yarrow broke it, eventually.

"Guess I just made myself some money," she said.

Colonel Wendigo's hologram delegate appeared, momentarily frozen before shivering to life. With her too-clear, too-young eyes she fixed first Yarrow and then me.

"Intelligence was mistaken," she said. "Seems the defector doctored records to conceal the theft of those countermeasures. But you harmed her anyway?"

"Just," said Yarrow. "Her quackdrive's spewing out exotics like Spirey after a bad binge. No hull damage, but..."

"Assessment?"

"Making a run for the splinter."

Wendigo nodded. "And then?"

"She'll set down and make repairs." Yarrow paused, added: "Radar says there's metal on the surface. Must've been a wasp battle there, before the splinter got lobbed out of the Swirl."

The delegate nodded in my direction. "Concur, Spirey?"

"Yes sir," I said, trying to suppress the nervousness I always felt around Wendigo, even though almost all my dealings with her had been via simulations like this. Yarrow was happy to edit the conversation afterwards, inserting the correct honorifics before transmitting the result back to Tiger's Eye – but I could never free myself of the suspicion that Wendigo would somehow unravel the unedited version, with all its implicit insubordination. Not that any of us didn't inwardly accord Wendigo all the respect she was due. She'd nearly died in the Royalist strike against Tiger's Eye 15 years ago – the one in which my mother was killed. Actual attacks against our two mutually opposed comet bases were rare, not happening much more than every other generation – more gestures of spite than anything else. But this had been an especially bloody one, killing an eighth of our number and opening city-sized portions of our base to vacuum. Wendigo was caught in the thick of the kinetic attack. Now she was chimeric, lashed together by cybernetics. Not much of this showed externally – except that the healed parts of her were



too flawless, more porcelain than flesh. Wendigo had not allowed the surgeons to regrow her arms. Story was she lost them trying to pull one of the injured through an open airlock, back into the pressurised zone. She'd almost made it, fighting against the gale of escaping air. Then some no-brainer hit the emergency door control, and when the lock shut it took Wendigo's arms off at the shoulder, along with the head of the person she was saving. She wore prosthetics now; gauntleted in chrome.

"She'll get there a day ahead of us," I said. "Even if we pull 20 gees."

"And probably gone to ground by the time you get there."

"Should we try a live capture?"

Yarrow backed me up with a nod. "It's not exactly been possible before."

The delegate bided her time before answering. "Admire your dedication," she said, after a suitably convincing pause. "But you'd only be postponing a death sentence. Kinder to kill her now, don't you think?"

*Mouser* entered kill-range 19 hours later, a wide pseudo-orbit 3,000 clicks out. The splinter – 17 by 12 clicks across – was far too small to be seen as anything other than a twinkling speck, like a grain of sugar at arm's length. But everything we wanted to know was clear: topology, gravimetrics, and the site of the downed ship. That wasn't hard. Quite apart from the fact that it hadn't buried itself completely, it was hot as hell.

"Doesn't look like the kind of touchdown you walk away from," Yarrow said.

"Think they ejected?"

"No way." Yarrow sketched a finger through a holographic enlargement of the ship, roughly cone-shaped, vaguely streamlined just like our own thickship, to punch through the Swirl's thickest gas belts. "Clock those dorsal hatches. Evac pods still in place."

She was right. The pods could have flung them clear before the crash, but evidently they hadn't had time to bail out. The ensuing impact – even cushioned by the ship's manifold of thick – probably hadn't been survivable.

But there was no point taking chances.

Quackheads would have finished the job, but we'd used up our stock. *Mouser* carried a particle beam battery, but we'd have to move uncomfortably close to the splinter before using it. What remained were the molemines, and they should have been perfectly adequate. We dropped 15 of them, embedded in a cloud of 200 identical decoys. Three of the 15 were designated to dust the wreck, while the remaining 12 would bury deeper into the splinter and attempt to shatter it completely.

That at least was the idea.

It all happened very quickly, not in the dreamy slow-motion of a neurodisney. One instant the molemines were descending toward the splinter, and then the next instant they weren't there. Spacing the two instants had been an almost subliminally brief flash.

"Starting to get sick of this," Yarrow said.

*Mouser* digested what had happened. Nothing had emanated from the wreck. Instead, there'd been a single pulse of energy seemingly from the entire volume of space around the splinter. Particle weapons, *Mouser* diagnosed. Probably single-use drones, each tinier than a pebble but numbering hundreds or even thousands. The defector must have sewn them on her approach.

But she hadn't touched us.

"It was a warning," I said. "Telling us to back off."

"I don't think so."

"What?"

"I think the warning's on its way."

I stared at her blankly for a moment, before registering what she had already seen: arcing from the splinter was something too fast to stop, something against which our minimally-armoured thickship had no defence, not even the option of flight.

Yarrow started to mouth some exotic profanity she'd reserved for precisely this moment. There was an eardrum-punishing bang and *Mouser* shuddered – but we weren't suddenly chewing vacuum.

And that was very bad news indeed.

Antiship missiles come in two main flavours: quackheads and sporeheads. You know which immediately after the weapon has hit. If you're still thinking – if you still exist – chances are it's a sporehead. And at that point your problems are just beginning.

Invasive demon attack, *Mouser* shrieked. Breather manifold compromised... which meant something uninvited was in the thick. That was the point of a sporehead: to deliver hostile demons into an enemy ship.

"Mm," Yarrow said. "I think it might be time to suit up."

Except our suits were a good minute's swim away back into the bowels of *Mouser*, through twisty ducts which might skirt the infection site. Having no choice, we swam anyway, Yarrow insisting I take the lead even though she was a quicker swimmer. And somewhere – it's impossible to know exactly where – demons reached us, seeping invisibly into our bodies via the thick. I couldn't pinpoint the moment; it wasn't as if there was a jagged transition between lucidity and demon-manipulated irrationality. Yarrow and I were terrified enough as it was. All I know is it began with a mild agoraphilia; an urge to escape *Mouser's* flooded confines. Gradually it phased into claustrophobia, and then became fully-fledged panic, making *Mouser* seem as malevolent as a haunted house.

Yarrow ignored her suit, clawing the hull until her fingers spoiled blood.

"Fight it," I said. "It's just demons triggering our fear centres, trying to drive us out!"

Of course, knowing so didn't help.

Somehow I stayed still long enough for my suit to slither on. Once sealed, I purged the tainted thick with the suit's own supply – but I knew it wasn't going to help much. The phobia already showed that hostile demons had reached my brain, and now it was even draping itself in a flimsy logic. Beyond the ship we'd be able to think rationally. It would only take a

few minutes for the thick's own demons to neutralize the invader – and then we'd be able to reboard. Complete delusion, of course.

But that was the point.

## Part Two

When something like coherent thought returned I was outside.

Nothing but me and the splinter.

The urge to escape was only a background anxiety, a flock of stomach-butterflies urging me against returning. Was that demon-manipulated fear or pure common sense? I couldn't tell – but what I knew was that the splinter seemed to be beckoning me forward, and I didn't feel like resisting. Sensible, surely: we'd exhausted all conventional channels of attack against the defector, and now all that remained was to confront her on the territory she'd staked as her own.

But where was Yarrow?

Suit's alarm chimed. Maybe demons were still subjugating my emotions, because I didn't react with my normal speed. I just blinked, licked my lips and stifled a yawn.

"Yeah, what?"

Suit informed me: something massing slightly less than me, two clicks closer to the splinter, on a slightly different orbit. I knew it was Yarrow; also that something was wrong. She was drifting. In my blackout I'd undoubtedly programmed suit to take me down, but Yarrow appeared not to have done anything except bail out.

I jetted closer. And then saw why she hadn't programmed her suit. Would have been tricky. She wasn't wearing one.

I hit ice an hour later.

Cradling Yarrow – she wasn't much of a burden, in the splinter's weak gravity – I took stock. I wasn't ready to mourn her, not just yet. If I could quickly get her to the medical suite aboard the defector's ship there was a good chance of revival. But where the hell was the wreck?

Squandering its last reserves of fuel, suit had deposited us in a clearing among the graveyard of ruined wasps. Half submerged in ice, they looked like scorched scrap-iron sculptures; phantoms from an entomologist's worst nightmare. So there'd been a battle here, back when the splinter was just another drifting lump of ice. Even if the thing was seamed with silicates or organics, it would not have had any commercial potential to either side. But it might still have had strategic value, and that was why the wasps had gone to war on its surface. Trouble was – as we'd known before the attack – the corpses covered the entire surface, so there was no guessing where we'd come down. The wrecked ship might be just over the nearest hillock – or another ten kilometres in any direction.

I felt the ground rumble under me. Hunting for the source of the vibration, I saw a quill of vapour reach into the sky, no more than a click away. It was a geyser of superheated ice.

I dropped Yarrow and hit dirt, suit limiting motion

so that I didn't bounce. Looking back, I expected to see a dimple in the permafrost, where some rogue had impacted.

Instead, the geyser was still present. Worse, it was coming steadily closer, etching a neat trench. A beam weapon was making that plume, I realized – like one of the party batteries aboard ship. Then I wised up. That was *Mouser*. The demons had worked their way into its command infrastructure, reprogramming it to turn against us. Now *Mouser* worked for the defector.

I slung Yarrow over one shoulder and loped away from the boiling impact point. Fast as the geyser moved, its path was predictable. If I made enough lateral distance the death-line would sear past –

Except the damn thing turned to follow me.

Now a second flanked it, shepherding me through the thickest zone of wasp corpses. Did they have some significance for the defector? Maybe so, but I couldn't see it. The corpses were a rough mix of machines from both sides: Royalist wasps marked with yellow shell symbols, ours with grinning tiger-heads. Generation 35 units, if I remembered Mil-Hist, when both sides toyed with pulse-hardened optical thinkware. In the 70-odd subsequent generations there'd been numerous further jumps: ur-quantum logics, full-spectrum reflective wasp armour, chameleoflage, quackdrive powerplants and every weapon system the human mind could devise. We'd tried to encourage the wasps to make these innovations for themselves, but they never managed to evolve beyond strictly linear extrapolation. Which was good, or else we human observers would have been out of a job.

Not that it really mattered now.

A third geyser had erupted behind me, and a fourth ahead, boxing me in. Slowly, the four points of fire began to converge. I stopped, but kept holding Yarrow. I listened to my own breathing, harsh above the basso tremor of the drumming ground.

Then steel gripped my shoulder.

She said we'd be safer underground. Also that she had friends below who might be able to do something for Yarrow.

"If you weren't defecting," I began, as we entered a roughly-hewn tunnel into the splinter's crust, "what the hell was it?"

"Trying to get home. Least that was the idea, until we realized Tiger's Eye didn't want us back." Wendigo knuckled the ice with one of her steel fists, her suit cut away to expose her prosthetics. "Which is when we decided to head here."

"You almost made it," I said. Then added: "Where were you trying to get home from?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Then you did defect."

"We were trying to make contact with the Royalists. Trying to make peace." In the increasingly dim light I saw her shrug. "It was a long shot, conducted in secrecy. When the mission went wrong, it was easy for Tiger's Eye to say we'd been defecting."

"Bullshit."

"I wish."

"But you sent us."

"Not in person."

"But your delegate —"

"Is just software. It could be made to say anything my enemies chose. Even to order my own execution as a traitor."

We paused to switch on our suit lamps. "Maybe you'd better tell me everything."

"Gladly," Wendigo said. "But if this hasn't been a good day so far, I'm afraid it's about to go downhill."

There had been a clique of high-ranking officers who believed that the Swirl war was intrinsically unwinnable. Privy to information not released to the populace, and able to see through Tiger's Eye's own carefully filtered internal propaganda, they realized that negotiation — contact — was the only way out.

"Of course, not everyone agreed. Some of my adversaries wanted us dead before we even reached the enemy," Wendigo sighed. "Too much in love with the war's stability — and who can blame them? Life for the average citizen in Tiger's Eye isn't that bad. We're given a clear goal to fight for, and the likelihood of any one of us dying in a Royalist attack is small enough to ignore. The idea that all of that might be about to end after 400 years; that we all might have to rethink our roles... well, it didn't go down too well."

"About as welcome as a fart in a vac-suit, right?"

Wendigo nodded. "I think you understand."

"Go on."

Her expedition — Wendigo and two pilots — had crossed the Swirl unchallenged. Approaching the Royalist cometary base, they'd expected to be questioned — perhaps even fired upon — but nothing had happened. When they entered the stronghold, they understood why.

"Deserted," Wendigo said. "Or we thought so, until we found the *Royalists*." She expectorated the word. "Feral, practically. Naked, grubby subhumans. Their wasps feed them and treat their illnesses, but that's as far as it goes. They grunt, and they've been toilet-trained, but they're not quite the military geniuses we've been led to believe."

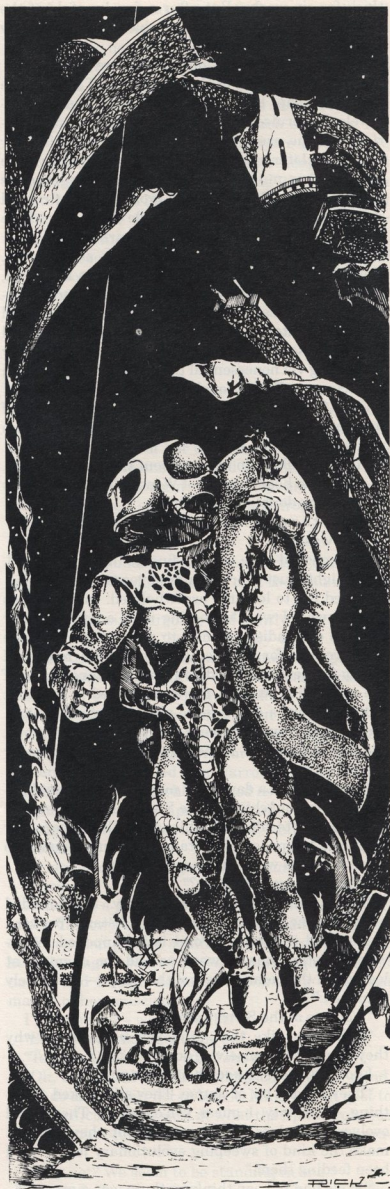
"Then..."

"The war is... nothing we thought." Wendigo laughed, but the confines of her helmet rendered it more like the squawking of a jack-in-the-box. "And now you wonder why home didn't want us coming back?"

Before Wendigo could explain further, we reached a wider bisecting tunnel, glowing with its own insipid chlorine-coloured light. Rather than the meandering bore of the tunnel in which we walked, it was as cleanly cut as a rifle barrel. In one direction the tunnel was blocked by a bullet-nosed cylinder, closely modelled on the trains in Tiger's Eye. Seemingly of its own volition, the train lit up and edged forward, a door puckering open.

"Get in," Wendigo said. "And lose the helmet. You won't need it where we're going."

Inside I coughed phlegmy ropes of thick from my lungs. Transitioning between breathing modes isn't pleasant — more so since I'd breathed nothing but



thick for six weeks. But after a few lungfuls of the train's antiseptic air, the dark blotches around my vision began to recede.

Wendigo did likewise, only with more dignity.

Yarrow lay on one of the couches, stiff as a statue carved in soap. Her skin was cyanotic, a single all-encompassing bruise. Pilot skin is a better vacuum barrier than the usual stuff, and vacuum itself is a far better insulator against heat loss than air. But where I'd lifted her my gloves had embossed fingerprints into her flesh. Worse was the broad stripe of ruined skin down her back and the left side of her tail, where she had lain against the splinter's surface.

But her head looked better. When she hit vac, biomodified seals would have shut within her skull, barricaded every possible avenue for pressure, moisture or blood loss. Even her eyelids would have fused tight. Implanted glands in her carotid artery would have released droves of friendly demons, quickly replicating via nonessential tissue in order to weave a protective scaffold through her brain.

Good for an hour or so – maybe longer. But only if the hostile demons hadn't screwed with Yarrow's native ones.

"You were about to tell me about the wasps," I said, as curious to hear the rest of Wendigo's story as I was to blank my doubts about Yarrow.

"Well, it's rather simple. They got smart."

"The wasps?"

She clicked the steel fingers of her hand. "Overnight. Just over a hundred years ago."

I tried not to look too overwhelmed. Intriguing as all this was, I wasn't treating it as anything other than an outlandish attempt to distract me from the main reason for my being here, which remained killing the defector. Wendigo's story explained some of the anomalies we'd so far encountered – but that didn't rule out a dozen more plausible explanations. Meanwhile, it was amusing to try and catch her out. "So they got smart," I said. "You mean our wasps, or theirs?"

"Doesn't mean a damn any more. Maybe it just happened to one machine in the Swirl, and then spread like wildfire to all the trillions of other wasps. Or maybe it happened simultaneously, in response to some stimulus we can't even guess at."

"Want to hazard a guess?"

"I don't think it's important, Spirey." She sounded as though she wanted to put a lot of distance between herself and this topic. "Point is it happened. Afterwards, distinctions between us and the enemy – at least from the point of view of the wasps – completely vanished."

"Workers of the Swirl unite."

"Something like that. And you understand why they kept it to themselves, don't you?"

I nodded, more to keep her talking.

"They needed us, of course. They still lacked something. Creativity, I guess you'd call it. They could evolve themselves incrementally, but they couldn't make the kind of sweeping evolutionary jumps we'd been feeding them."

"So we had to keep thinking there was a war on."

Wendigo looked pleased. "Right. We'd keep supplying them with innovations, and they'd keep pretending to do each other in." She halted, scratching at the unwrinkled skin around one eye with the alloy finger of one hand. "Clever little bastards."

### Part Three

We'd arrived somewhere.

It was a chamber, large as any enclosed space I'd ever seen. I felt gravity; too much of the stuff. The whole chamber must have been gimbaled and spun within the splinter, like one of the gee-load simulators back in Tiger's Eye. The vaulted ceiling, hundreds of metres "above," now seemed vertiginously higher.

Apart from its apex, it was covered in intricate frescos – dozens of pictorial facets, each a cycling hologram. They told the history of the Swirl, beginning with its condensation from interstellar gas, the ignition of its star, the onset of planetary formation. Then the action cut to the arrival of the first Standardist wasp, programmed to dive into the Swirl and breed like a rabbit, so that one day there'd be a sufficiently huge population to begin mining the thing; winnowing out metals, silicates and precious organics for the folks back home. Of course, it never happened like that. The Royalists wanted in on the action, so they sent their own wasps, programmed to attack ours. The rest is history. The frescos showed the war's beginning, and then a little while later the arrival of the first human observers, beamed across space as pure genetic data, destined to be born in artificial wombs in hollowed out comet-cores, raised and educated by wasps, imprinted with the best tactical and strategic knowledge available. Thereafter they taught the wasps. From then on things hotted up, because the observers weren't limited by years of timelag. They were able to intervene in wasp evolution in real-time.

That ought to have been it, because by then we were pretty up-to-date, give or take 400 years of the same.

But the frescos carried on.

There was one representing some future state of the Swirl, neatly ordered into a ticking orrery of variously sized and patterned worlds, some with beautiful rings or moon systems. And finally – like medieval conceptions of Eden – there was a triptych of lush planetary landscapes, with weird animals in the foreground, mountains and soaring cloudbanks behind.

"Seen enough to convince you?" Wendigo asked.

"No," I said, not entirely sure whether I believed myself. Craning my neck, I looked up toward the apex.

Something hung from it.

It was a pair of wasps, fused together. One was complete, the other was only fully-formed, seemingly in the process of splitting from the complete wasp. The fused pair looked to have been smothered in molten bronze, left to dry in waxy nodules.

"You know what this is?" Wendigo asked.

"I'm waiting."

"Wasp art."

I looked at her.

"This wasp was destroyed mid-replication," Wendigo continued. "While it was giving birth. Evidently the image has some poignancy for them. How I'd put it in human terms I don't know..."

"Don't even think about it."

I followed her across the marbled terrazzo which floored the chamber. Arched porticos surrounded it, each of which held a single dead wasp, their body designs covering a hundred generations of evolution. If Wendigo was right, I supposed these dead wasps were the equivalent of venerated old ancestors peering from oil paintings. But I wasn't convinced just yet.

"You knew this place existed?"

She nodded. "Or else we'd be dead. The wasps back in the Royalist stronghold told us we could seek sanctuary here, if home turned against us."

"And the wasps – what? Own this place?"

"And hundreds like it, although the others are already far beyond the Swirl, on their way out to the halo. Since the wasps came to consciousness, most of the splinters flung out of the Swirl have been infiltrated. Shrewd of them – all along, we've never suspected that the splinters are anything other than cosmic trash."

"Nice decor, anyway."

"Florentine," Wendigo said, nodding. "The frescos are in the style of a painter called Masaccio; one of Brunelleschi's disciples. Remember, the wasps had access to all the cultural data we brought with us from GE – every byte of it. That's how they work, I think – by constructing things according to arbitrary existing templates."

"And there's a point to all this?"

"I've been here precisely one day longer than you, Spirey."

"But you said you had friends here; people who could help Yarrow."

"They're here all right," Wendigo said, shaking her head. "Just hope you're ready for them."

On some unspoken cue they emerged, spilling from a door which until then I'd mistaken for one of the surrounding porticos. I flinched, acting on years of training. Although wasps have never intentionally harmed a human being – even the enemy's wasps – they're nonetheless powerful, dangerous machines. There were 12 of them; divided equally between Standardist and Royalist units. Six-legged, their two-metre-long segmented alloy bodies sprouted weapons, sensors and specialized manipulators. So far so familiar, except that the way the wasps moved was subtly wrong. It was as if the machines choreographed themselves, their bodies defining the extremities of a much larger form which I sensed more than saw.

The 12 whisked across the floor.

"They are – or rather *it* is – a queen," Wendigo said. "From what I've gathered, there's one queen for every splinter. Splinterqueens, I call them."

The swarm partially surrounded us now – but retained the brooding sense of oneness.

"She told you all this?"

"Her demons did, yes." Wendigo tapped the side of her head. "I got a dose after our ship crashed. You got one after we hit your ship. It was a standard spore-

head from our arsenal, but the Splinterqueen loaded it with her own demons. For the moment that's how she speaks to us – via symbols woven by demons."

"Take your word for it."

Wendigo shrugged. "No need to."

And suddenly I knew. It was like eavesdropping a topologist's fever dream – only much stranger. The burst of Queen's speech couldn't have lasted more than a tenth of a second, but its after-images seemed to persist much longer, and I had the start of a migraine before it had ended. But like Wendigo had implied before, I sensed planning – that every thought was merely a step toward some distant goal, the way each statement in a mathematical proof implies some final *QED*.

Something big indeed.

"You deal with that shit?"

"My chimeric parts must filter a lot."

"And she understands you?"

"We get by."

"Good," I said. "Then ask her about Yarrow."

Wendigo nodded and closed both eyes, entering intense rapport with the Queen. What followed happened quickly: six of her components detached from the extended form and swarmed into the train we had just exited. A moment later they emerged with Yarrow, elevated on a loom formed from dozens of wasp manipulators.

"What happens now?"

"They'll establish a physical connection to her neural demons," Wendigo said. "So that they can map the damage."

One of the six reared up and gently positioned its blunt, anvil-shaped "head" directly above Yarrow's frost-mottled scalp. Then the wasp made eight nodding movements, so quickly that the motion was only a series of punctuated blurs. Looking down, I saw eight bloodless puncture marks on Yarrow's head. Another wasp replaced the driller and repeated the procedure, executing its own blurlike nods. This time, glistening fibres trailed from Yarrow's eight puncture points into the wasp, which looked as if it was sucking spaghetti from my compatriot's skull.

Long minutes of silence followed, while I waited for some kind of report.

"It isn't good," Wendigo said eventually.

"Show me."

And I got a jolt of Queen's speech, feeling myself *inside* Yarrow's hermetically sealed head, feeling the chill that had gasped against her brain core, despite her pilot augs. I sensed the two intermingled looms of native and foreign demons, webbing the shattered matrix of her consciousness.

I also sensed – what? Doubt?

"She's pretty far gone, Spirey."

"Tell the Queen to do what she can."

"Oh, she will. Now she's glimpsed Yarrow's mind, she'll do all she can not to lose it. Minds mean a lot to her – particularly in view of what the Splinterqueens have in mind for the future. But don't expect miracles."

"Why not? We seem to be standing in one."

"Then you're prepared to believe some of what I've

said?"

"What it means," I started to say –

But I didn't finish the sentence. As I was speaking the whole chamber shook violently, almost dashing us off our feet.

"What was that?"

Wendigo's eyes glazed again, briefly.

"Your ship," she said. "It just self-destructed."

"What?"

A picture of what remained of *Mouser* formed in my head: a dulling nebula, embedding the splinter. "The order to self-destruct came from Tiger's Eye," Wendigo said. "It cut straight to the ship's quackdrive subsystems, at a level the demons couldn't rescind. I imagine they were rather hoping you'd have landed by the time the order arrived. The blast would have destroyed the splinter."

"You're saying home just tried to kill us?"

"Put it like this," Wendigo said. "Now might not be a bad time to rethink your loyalties."

Tiger's Eye had failed this time – but they wouldn't stop there. In three hours they'd learn of their mistake, and three or more hours after that we would learn of their countermove, whatever it happened to be.

"She'll do something, won't she? I mean, the wasps wouldn't go to the trouble of building this place only to have Tiger's Eye wipe it out."

"Not much she can do," Wendigo said, after communing with the Queen. "If home choose to use kinetics against us – and they're the only weapon which could hit us from so far – then there really is no possible defence. And remember there are a hundred other worlds like this, in or on their way to the halo. Losing one would make very little difference."

Something in me snapped. "Do you have to sound so damned indifferent to it all? Here we are talking about how we're likely to be dead in a few hours and you're acting as if it's only a minor inconvenience." I fought to keep the edge of hysteria out of my voice. "How do you know so much anyway? You're mighty well informed for someone who's only been here a day, Wendigo."

She regarded me for a moment, almost blanching under the slap of insubordination. Then Wendigo nodded, without anger. "Yes, you're right to ask how I know so much. You can't have failed to notice how hard we crashed. My pilots took the worst."

"They died?"

Hesitation. "One at least – Sorrel. But the other, Quillin, wasn't in the ship when the wasps pulled me out of the wreckage. At the time I assumed they'd already retrieved her."

"Doesn't look that way."

"No, it doesn't, and..." She paused, then shook her head. "Quillin was why we crashed. She tried to gain control, to stop us landing..." Again Wendigo trailed off, as if unsure how far to commit herself. "I think Quillin was a plant, put aboard by those who disagreed with the peace initiative. She'd been primed – altered psychologically to reject any Royalist peace overtures."

"She was born like that – with a stick up her ass."

"She's dead, I'm sure of it."

Wendigo almost sounded glad.

"Still, you made it."

"Just, Spirey. I'm the humpty who fell off the wall twice. This time they couldn't find all the pieces. The Splinterqueen pumped me full of demons; gallons of them. They're all that's holding me together, but I don't think they can keep it up forever. When I speak to you, at least some of what you hear is the Splinterqueen herself. I'm not really sure where you draw the line."

I let that sink in, then said: "About your ship. Repair systems would have booted when you hit. Any idea when she'll fly again?"

"Another day, day and a half."

"Too damn long."

"Just being realistic. If there's a way to get off the splinter within the next six hours, ship isn't it."

I wasn't giving up so easily. "What if wasps help? They could supply materials. Should speed things."

Again that glazed look. "All right," she said. "It's done. But I'm afraid wasp assistance won't make enough difference. We're still looking at 12 hours."

"So I won't start any long disneys." I shrugged. "And maybe we can hold out until then." She looked unconvinced, so I said: "Tell me the rest. Everything you know about this place. *Why*, for starters."

"Why?"

"Wendigo, I don't have the faintest damn idea what any of us are doing here. All I do know is that in six hours I could be suffering from acute existence failure. When that happens, I'd be happier knowing what was so important I had to die for it."

Wendigo looked toward Yarrow, still nursed by the detached elements of the Queen. "I don't think our being here will help her," she said. "In which case, maybe I should show you something." A near-grin appeared on Wendigo's face. "After all, it isn't as if we don't have time to kill."

## Part Four

So we rode the train again, this time burrowing deeper into the splinter.

"This place," Wendigo said, "and the hundred others already beyond the Swirl – and the hundreds, thousands more which will follow – are *arks*. They're carrying life into the halo; the cloud of left-over material around the Swirl."

"Colonization, right?"

"Not quite. When the time's right the splinters will return to the Swirl. Only there won't be one any more. There'll be a solar system, fully formed. When the colonization does begin, it will be of new worlds around Fomalhaut, seeded from the life-templates held in the splinters."

I raised a hand. "I was following you there... until you mentioned life-templates."

"Patience, Spirey."

Wendigo's timing couldn't have been better, because at that moment light flooded the train's brushed-steel interior.

The tunnel had become a glass tube, anchored to one wall of a vast cavern suffused in emerald light. The far wall was tiered, draping rafts of foliage. Our wall was steep and forested, oddly-curved waterfalls draining

into stepped pools. The waterfalls were bent away from true "vertical" by coriolis force, evidence that – just like the first chamber – this entire space was independently spinning within the splinter. The stepped pools were surrounded by patches of grass, peppered with moving forms which might have been naked people. There were wasps as well – tending the people.

As the people grew clearer I had that flinch you get when your gaze strays onto someone with a shocking disfigurement. Roughly half of them were *males*.

"Imported Royalists," Wendigo said. "Remember I said they'd turned feral? Seems there was an accident, not long after the wasps made the jump to sentience. A rogue demon, or something. Decimated them."

"They have both sexes."

"You'll get used to it, Spirey – conceptually anyway. Tiger's Eye wasn't always exclusively female, you know that? It was just something we evolved into. Began with you pilots, matter of fact. Fem physiology made sense for pilots – women were smaller, had better gee-load tolerance, better stress psychodynamics and required fewer consumables than males. We were products of bio-engineering from the outset, so it wasn't hard to make the jump to an all-fem culture."

"Makes me want to... I don't know." I forced my gaze away from the Royalists. "Puke or something. It's like going back to having hair all over your body."

"That's because you grew up with something different."

"Did they always have two sexes?"

"Probably not. What I do know is that the wasps bred from the survivors, but something wasn't right. Apart from the reversion to dimorphism, the children didn't grow up normally. Some part of their brains hadn't developed right."

"Meaning what?"

"They're morons. The wasps keep trying to fix things of course. That's why the Splinterqueen will do everything to help Yarrow – and us, of course. If she can study or even capture our thought patterns – and the demons make that possible – maybe she can use them to imprint consciousness back onto the Royalists. Like the Florentine architecture I said they copied, right? That was one template, and Yarrow's mind will be another."

"That's supposed to cheer me up?"

"Look on the bright side. A while from now, there might be a whole generation of people who think along lines laid down by Yarrow."

"Scary thought." Then wondered why I was able to crack a joke, with destruction looming so close in the future. "Listen, I still don't get it. What makes them want to bring life to the Swirl?"

"It seems to boil down to two... *imperatives*, I suppose you'd call them. The first's simple enough. When wasps were first opening up Greater Earth's solar system, back in the mid-21st century, we sought the best way for them to function in large numbers without supervision. We studied insect colonies and imprinted the most useful rules straight into the wasps' programming. More than 600 years later, those rules have percolated to the top. Now the wasps aren't content merely to organize themselves along patterns derived



from living prototypes. Now they want to become – or at least give rise to – living forms of their own.”

“Life envy.”

“Or something very like it.”

I thought about what Wendigo had told me, then said: “What about the second imperative?”

“Trickier. Much trickier.” She looked at me hard, as if debating whether to broach whatever subject was on her mind. “Spirey, what do you know about Solar War Three?”

The wasps had given up on Yarrow while we travelled. They’d left her on a corniced plinth in the middle of the terrazzo; poised on her back, arms folded across her chest, tail and fluke draping asymmetrically over one side.

“She didn’t necessarily fail, Spirey,” Wendigo said, taking my arm in her own unyielding grip. “That’s only Yarrow’s body, after all.”

“The Queen managed to read her mind?”

There was no opportunity to answer. The chamber shook, more harshly than when *Mouser* had gone up. The vibration keeled us to the floor, Wendigo’s metal arms cracking against the tessellated marble. As if turning in her sleep, Yarrow slipped from the plinth.

“Home,” Wendigo said, raising herself from the floor.

“Impossible. Can’t have been more than two hours since *Mouser* was hit. There shouldn’t be any response for another four!”

“They probably decided to attack us regardless of the outcome of their last attempt. Kinetics.”

“You sure there’s no defence?”

“Only good luck.” The ground lashed at us again, but Wendigo stayed standing. The roar which followed the first impact was subsiding, fading into a constant but bearable complaint of tortured ice. “The first probably only chipped us – maybe gouged a big crater, but I doubt that it ruptured any of the pressurized areas. Next time could be worse.”

And there *would* be a next time, no doubt about it. Kinetics were the only weapon capable of hitting us at such long range, and they did so by sheer force of numbers. Each kinetic was a speck of iron, accelerated to a hair’s breadth below the speed of light. Relativity bequeathed the speck a disproportionate amount of kinetic energy – enough that only a few impacts would rip the splinter to shreds. Of course, only one in a thousand of the kinetics they fired at us would hit – but that didn’t matter. They’d just fire 10,000.

“Wendigo,” I said. “Can we get to your ship?”

“No,” she said, after a moment’s hesitation. “We can reach it, but it isn’t fixed yet.”

“Doesn’t matter. We’ll lift on auxiliaries. Once we’re clear of the splinter we’ll be safe.”

“No good, either. Hull’s breached – it’ll be at least an hour before even part of it can be pressurized.”

“And it’ll take us an hour or so just to get there, won’t it? So why are we waiting?”

“Sorry, Spirey, but –”

Her words were drowned by the arrival of the second kinetic. This one seemed to hit harder, the impact trailing away into aftergroans. The holographic fres-

cos were all dark now. Then – ever so slowly – the ceiling ruptured, a huge mandible of ice probing into the chamber. We’d lost the false gravity; now all that remained was the splinter’s feeble pull, dragging us obliquely toward one wall.

“But what?” I shouted in Wendigo’s direction.

For a moment she had that absent look which said she was more Queen than Wendigo. Then she nodded in reluctant acceptance. “All right, Spirey. We play it your way. Not because I think our chances are great. Just that I’d rather be doing something.”

“Amen to that.”

It was uncomfortably dim now, much of the illumination having come from the endlessly cycling frescos. But it wasn’t silent. Though the groan of the chamber’s off-kilter spin was gone now, what remained was almost as bad: the agonized shearing of the ice which lay beyond us. Helped by wasps, we made it to the train. I carried Yarrow’s corpse, but at the door Wendigo said: “Leave her.”

“No way.”

“She’s dead, Spirey. Everything of her that mattered, the Splinterqueen already saved. You have to accept that. It was enough that you brought her here, don’t you understand? Carrying her now would only lessen your chances – and that would really have pissed her off.”

Some alien part of me allowed the wasps take the corpse. Then we were inside, helmeted up and breathing thick.

As the train picked up speed, I glanced out the window, intent on seeing the Queen one last time. It should have been too dark, but the chamber looked bright. For a moment I presumed the frescos had come to life again, but then something about the scene’s unreal intensity told me the Queen was weaving this image in my head. She hovered above the debris-strewn terrazzo – except that this was more than the Queen I had seen before. This was – what?

How she saw herself?

Ten of her 12 wasp composites were now back together, arranged in constantly shifting formation. They now seemed more living than machine, with diaphanous sunwings, chitin-black bodies, furred limbs and sensors, and eyes which were faceted crystalline globes, sparkling in the chamber’s false light. That wasn’t all. Before, I’d sensed the Queen as something implied by her composites. Now I didn’t need to imagine her. Like a ghost in which the composites hung, she loomed vast in the chamber, multi-winged and brooding –

And then we were gone.

We sped towards the surface for the next few minutes, waiting for the impact of the next kinetic. When it hit, the train’s cushioned ride smothered the concussion. For a moment I thought we’d made it, then the machine began to decelerate slowly to a dead halt. Wendigo convened with the Queen and told me the line was blocked. We disembarked onto vacuum.

Ahead, the tunnel ended in a wall of jumbled ice.

After a few minutes we found a way through the obstruction, Wendigo wrenching aside boulders larger than either of us. “We’re only half a click from the



surface," she said, as we emerged into the unblocked tunnel beyond. She pointed ahead, to what might have been a scotoma of absolute blackness against the milky darkness of the tunnel. "After that, a klick overlaid to the wreck." She paused. "Realize we can't go home, Spirey. Now more than ever."

"Not exactly spoil for choice, are we?"

"No. It has to be the halo, of course. It's where the splinter's headed anyway; just means we'll get there ahead of schedule. There are other Splinterqueens out there, and at the very least they'll want to keep us alive. Possibly other humans as well – others who made the same discovery as us, and knew there was no going home."

"Not to mention Royalists."

"That troubles you, doesn't it?"

"I'll deal with it," I said, pushing forward.

The tunnel was nearly horizontal, and with the splinter's weak gravity it was easy to make the distance to the surface. Emerging, Fomalhaut glared down at us, a white-cored bloodshot eye surrounded by the wrinkle-like dust lanes of the inner Swirl. Limned in red, wasp corpses marred the landscape.

"I don't see the ship."

Wendigo pointed to a piece of blank caramel-coloured horizon. "Curvature's too great. We won't see it until we're almost on top of it."

"Hope you're right."

"Trust me. I know this place like, well..." Wendigo regarded one of her limbs. "Like the back of my hand."

"Encourage me, why don't you."

Three or four hundred metres later we crested a scallop-shaped rise of ice and halted. We could see the ship now. It didn't look in much better shape than when Yarrow and I had scoped it from *Mouser*.

"I don't see any wasps."

"Too dangerous for them to stay on the surface," Wendigo said.

"That's cheering. I hope the remaining damage is cosmetic," I said. "Because if it isn't –"

Suddenly I wasn't talking to anyone.

Wendigo was gone. After a moment I saw her, lying in a crumpled heap at the foot of the hillock. Her guts stretched away like a rusty comet-tail, half way to the next promontory.

Quillin was 50 metres ahead, risen from the concealment of a chondrite boulder.

When Wendigo had mentioned her, I'd put her out of mind as any kind of threat. How could she pose any danger beyond the inside of a thickship, when she'd traded her legs for a tail and fluke, just like Yarrow? On dry land, she'd be no more mobile than a seal pup. Well, that was how I'd figured things.

But I'd reckoned without Quillin's suit.

Unlike Yarrow's – unlike any siren suit I'd ever seen – it sprouted legs. Mechanized, they emerged from the hip, making no concessions to human anatomy. The legs were long enough to lift Quillin's tail completely free of the ice. My gaze tracked up her body, registering the crossbow which she held in a double-handed grip.

"I'm sorry," Quillin's deep voice boomed in my skull.

"Check-in's closed."

"Wendigo said you might be a problem."

"Wise up. It was staged from the moment we reached the Royalist stronghold." Still keeping the bow on me, she began to lurch across the ice. "The ferals were actors, playing dumb. The wasps were programmed to feed us bullshit."

"It isn't a Royalist trick, Quillin."

"Shit. See I'm gonna have to kill you as well."

The ground jarred, more violently than before. A nimbus of white light puffed above the horizon, evidence of an impact on the splinter's far side. Quillin stumbled, but her legs corrected the accident before it tripped her forward.

"I don't know if you're keeping up with current events," I said. "But that's our own side."

"Maybe you didn't think hard enough. Why did wasps in the Swirl get smart before the trillions of wasps back in Sol System? Should have been the other way round."

"Yeah?"

"Of course, Spirey. GE's wasps had a massive head-start." She shrugged, but the bow stayed rigidly pointed. "Okay, war sped up wasp evolution here. But that shouldn't have made so much difference. That's where the story breaks down."

"Not quite."

"What?"

"Something Wendigo told me. About what she called the second imperative. I guess it wasn't something she found out until she went underground."

"Yeah? Astonish me."

Well, something astonished Quillin at that point – but I was only marginally less surprised by it myself. An explosion of ice, and a mass of swiftly-moving metal erupting from the ground around her. The wasp corpses were partially dismembered, blasted and half-melted – but they still managed to drag Quillin to the ground. For a moment she thrashed, kicking up plumes of frost. Then the whole mass lay deathly still, and it was just me, the ice and a lot of metal and blood.

The Queen must have coaxed activity out of a few of the wasp corpses, ordering them to use their last reserves of power to take out Quillin.

Thanks, Queen.

But no cigar. Quillin hadn't necessarily meant to shoot me at that point, but – bless her – she had anyway. The bolt had transected me with the precision of one of the Queen's theorems, somewhere below my sternum. Gut-shot. The blood on the ice was my own.

## Part Five

I tried moving. A couple of light-years away I saw my body undergo a frail little shiver. It didn't hurt, but there was nothing in the way of proprioceptive feedback to indicate I'd actually managed to twitch any part of my body.

Quillin was moving too. Wriggling, that is, since her suit's legs had been cleanly ripped away by the wasps. Other than that she didn't look seriously injured. Ten or so metres from me, she flopped around like a maggot and groped for her bow. What remained of it anyway.

Chalk one to the good guys.

By which time I was moving, executing a marginally quicker version of Quillin's slug crawl. I couldn't stand up – there are limits to what pilot physiology can cope with – but my legs gave me leverage she lacked.

"Give up, Spirey. You have a head-start on me, and right now you're a little faster – but that ship's still a long way off." Quillin took a moment to catch her breath. "Think you can sustain that pace? Gonna need to, if you don't want me catching up."

"Plan on rolling over me until I suffocate?"

"That's an option. If this doesn't kill you first."

Enough of her remained in my field-of-view to see what she meant. Something sharp and bladelike had sprung from her wrist, a bayonet projecting half a metre ahead of her hand. It looked like a nasty little toy – but I did my best to push it out of mind and get on with the job of crawling towards the ship. It was no more than 200 metres away now – what little of it protruded above the ice. The external airlock was already open, ready to clamp shut as soon as I wriggled inside –

"You never finished telling me, Spirey."

"Telling you what?"

"About this – what did you call it? The second imperative?"

"Oh, that." I halted and snatched breath. "Before I go on, I want you to know I'm only telling you this to piss you off."

"Whatever bakes your cake."

"All right," I said. "Then I'll begin by saying you were right. Greater Earth's wasps should have made the jump to sentience long before those in the Swirl, simply because they'd had longer to evolve. *And that's what happened.*"

Quillin coughed, like gravel in a bucket. "Pardon?"

"They beat us to it. About a century and a half ago."

Across Sol system, within just a few hours, every single wasp woke up and announced its intelligence to the nearest human being it could find. Like babies reaching for the first thing they see." I stopped, sucking in deep lungfuls. The wreck had to be closer now – but it hardly looked it.

Quillin, by contrast, looked awfully close now – and that blade awfully sharp.

"So the wasps woke," I said, damned if she wasn't going to hear the whole story. "And that got some people scared. So much, some of them got to attacking the wasps. Some of their shots went wide, because within a day the whole system was one big shooting match. Not just humans against wasps – but humans against humans." Less than 50 metres now, across much smoother ground than we'd so far traversed. "Things just escalated. Ten days after Solar War Three began, only a few ships and habitats were still transmitting. They didn't last long."

"Crap," Quillin said – but she sounded less cocksure than she had a few moments before. "There was a war back then, but it never escalated into a full-blown Solar War."

"No. It went the whole hog. From then on every signal we ever got from GE was concocted by wasps. They daren't break the news to us – at least not immediately. We've only been allowed to find out because we're never going home. Guilt, Wendigo

called it. They couldn't let it happen again."

"What about our wasps?"

"Isn't it obvious? A while later the wasps here made the same jump to sentience – presumably because they'd been shown the right moves by the others. Difference was, ours kept it quiet. Can't exactly blame them, can you?"

There was nothing from Quillin for a while, both of us concentrating on the last patch of ice before Wendigo's ship.

"I suppose you have an explanation for this too," she said eventually, swiping her tail against the ground. "C'mon, blow my mind."

So I told her what I knew. "They're bringing life to the Swirl. Sooner than you think, too. Once this charade of a war is done, the wasps breed in earnest. Trillions out there now, but in a few decades it'll be billions of trillions. They'll outweigh a good-sized planet. In a way the Swirl will have become sentient. It'll be directing its own evolution."

I spared Quillin the details – how the wasps would arrest the existing processes of planetary formation so that they could begin anew, only this time according to a plan. Left to its own devices, the Swirl would contract down to a solar system comprised solely of small, rocky planets – but such a system could never support life over billions of years. Instead, the wasps would exploit the system's innate chaos to tip it toward a state where it would give rise to at least two much larger worlds – planets as massive as Jupiter or Saturn, capable of shepherding left-over rubble into tidy, world-avoiding orbits. Mass extinctions had no place in the Splinterqueens' vision of future life.

But I guessed Quillin probably didn't care.

"Why are you hurrying, Spirey?" She asked, between harsh grunts as she propelled herself forward. "The ship isn't going anywhere."

The edge of the open airlock was a metre above the ice. My fingers probed over the rim, followed by the crest of my battered helmet. Just lifting myself into the lock's lit interior seemed to require all the energy I'd already expended in the crawl. Somehow I managed to get half my body length into the lock.

Which is when Quillin reached me.

There wasn't much pain when she dug the bayonet into my ankle; just a form of cold I hadn't imagined before, even lying on the ice. Quillin jerked the embedded blade to and forth, and the knot of cold seemed to reach out little feelers, into my foot and lower leg. I sensed she wanted to retract the blade for another stab, but my suit armour was gripping it tight.

The bayonet taking her weight, Quillin pulled herself up to the rim of the lock. I tried kicking her away, but the skewered leg no longer felt a part of me.

"You're dead," she whispered.

"News to me."

Her eyes rolled wide, then locked on me with renewed venom. She gave the bayonet a violent twist. "So tell me one thing. That story – bullshit, or what?"

"I'll tell you," I said. "But first consider this." Before she could react I reached out and palmed a glowing panel set in the lock wall. The panel whisked aside, revealing a mushroom-shaped red button. "You know

that story they told about Wendigo, how she lost her arms?"

"You weren't meant to swallow that hero guff, Spirey."

"No? Well get a load of this. My hand's on the emergency pressurization control, Quillin. When I hit it, the outer door's going to slide down quicker than you can blink."

She looked at my hand, then down at her wrist, still attached to my ankle via the jammed bayonet. Slowly the situation sunk in. "Close the door, Spirey, and you'll be a leg short."

"And you an arm, Quillin."

"Stalemate, then."

"Not quite. See, which of us is more likely to survive? Me inside, with all the medical systems aboard this ship, or you all on your lonesome outside? Frankly, I don't think it's any contest."

Her eyes opened wider. Quillin gave a shriek of anger and entered one final furious wrestling match with the bayonet.

I managed to laugh. "As for your question, it's true, every word of it." Then, with all the calm I could muster, I thumbed the control. "Pisser, isn't it?"

I made it, of course.

Several minutes after the closing of the door, demons had lathered a protective cocoon around the stump and stomach wound. They allowed me no pain – only a muggy sense of detachment. Enough of my mind remained sharp to think about my escape – problematic given that the ship still wasn't fixed.

Eventually I remembered the evac pods.

They were made to kick away from the ship fast, if some quackdrive system went on the fritz. They had thrusters for that; nothing fancy, but here they'd serve another purpose. They'd boost me from the splinter, punch me out of its grav well.

So I did it.

Snuggled into a pod and blew out of the wreck, feeling the gee-load even within the thick. It didn't last long. On the evac pod's cam I watched the splinter drop away until it was pebble-sized. The main body of the kinetic attack was hitting it by then, impacts every ten or so seconds. After a minute of that the splinter just came apart. Afterwards, there was only a sooty veil where it had been, and then only the Swirl.

I hoped the Queen had made it. I guess it was within her power to transmit what counted of herself out to sisters in the halo. If so, there was a chance for Yarrow as well. I'd find out eventually. Afterwards, I used the pod's remaining fuel to inject me into a slow elliptical orbit, one that would graze the halo in a mere 50 or 60 years.

That didn't bother me. I wanted to close my eyes and let the thick nurse me whole again – and sleep an awful long time.

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**Alastair Reynolds** is a British scientist who lives in the Netherlands. He made his fiction debut with "Nunivak Snowflakes" (*Interzone* 36), and his fourth and most recent story here was the popular "Byrd Land Six" (issue 96).

ANSIBLE LINK  
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## ANSIBLE LINK



### DAVID LANGFORD

As I write, the famous Clute/Grant *Fantasy Encyclopedia* is in its final throes of assembly (♢ CREATION MYTH), with editors (♢ DARK LORDS) and contributors (♢ BONDAGE; NAZGUL) struggling (♢ LAST BATTLE) towards completion (♢ EUCATASTROPHE). The trouble (♢ WRONGNESS) with working for long months (♢ CALENDAR) on this behemoth (♢ MONSTERS) of books (♢ LIBRARY) is that sooner or later (♢ TIME ABYSS; TIME IN FAERIE) you start tearing your hair (♢ THINNING; TORTURE), thinking (♢ PERCEPTION) entirely in cross-references (♢ RECURSIVE FANTASY), and wondering (♢ PORTENTS; SCRYING) if you'll ever again have time (♢ TIME FANTASIES) to visit (♢ NIGHT JOURNEY; QUEST) the pub (♢ INNS; PLOT DEVICES) for some relaxing beer (♢ HEALING)...

### ELEPHANT WITH WOODEN LEG

Stephen Baxter reports from the frontiers of scientific research: "Forehead bleeding as ever by lunch time today, I took a break and, as one does, tuned into Richard & Judy on 'This Morning.' And I was stunned to find their theme tune had been written by... David Pringle."

Greg Egan's novel *Distress* (which interestingly suggests the ontological necessity of killing off theoretical physicists before they Meddle With Thoughts Man Should Not Think) won the Aurealis Award for excellence in Australian sf.

Jo Fletcher, one of Gollanz's senior sf editors, had a spectacular car accident in March: her car was forced off a motorway by another driver (who neglected to stop) and rolled over four times. Despite concussion, whiplash, sprains, cuts and bruises, she returned home - with crutches - after one night in Peterborough hospital.

Neil Gaiman has been having desperate fun with the shooting of his *Neverwhere* TV series in obscure crannies of London; repercussions even reached *The Times* when Piccadilly Line travellers were spooked by "ghostly glimpses of strange characters at a table on a shadowy platform covered in serpents and beetles; the vision flashed by seemingly suspended in mid-air..." This was a scene set on the platform of Down Street tube station, abandoned since 1932. Quoth NG, "I worry, now that I've had so much fun on top of and underneath London, that the actual TV show will prove to be crap. But I'll walk away happy, because I got to go everywhere I wanted to go in London; I have tromped in the Fleet River (deep in a tunnel under Blackfriars bridge) and wandered the bell-towers and attics of the St Pancras Hotel, and all it cost the BBC was, um, around two million pounds actually..."

David Garnett gloats ("The pessimists were wrong. The optimists were right. Or is it the other way around?") that *New Worlds* will return yet again in 1997 - published by White Wolf of Atlanta, Georgia, USA, with that nice Mr Garnett once again its editor.

Anne Gay and Stan Nicholls, celebrated UK sf people, were married on 30th March.

Garry Kilworth was bemused to find the cover picture of his newish novel *House of Tribes* - all about mice - used as the illustration for an *Elle* magazine article on how to rid one's house of vermin. Perhaps it'll be a series, with a follow-up on how to rid one's house of L. Ron Hubbard books...

John Wyndham's papers are up for sale: trunkfuls of MSSs, drafts, proofs, correspondence, etc... including the handwritten MS of *The Day of the Triffids*, four unpublished mystery novels, and much unpublished sf in draft form. The SF Foundation finds itself awfully tempted, but the price tag is £100,000. Can National Lottery money save the day? George Hay, founder of the SFF, is not so keen and would prefer investment in other, more scientific areas: he points out "the rocket that was put up - and, more to the point, retrieved - lately by some totally unknown space buff, aided only by sugar for the propulsion explosives from Tate & Lyle. £100,000 would pay for a whole star-fleet!"

### INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Why We Are Despicable.** "Science fiction novels are historical novels in reverse, and both are properly despised. Both are archaeological - so obsessed with discovery that the given is stunted. In both, world-mapping obliterates world-making; both

attempt a kind of reconstruction, one backwards from the present, and one forwards. Specificity - how the sewers worked in 1880, or how they will work in 2080 - is so strategic that it wears the reader..." Thus James Wood in *The Guardian*, reviewing Russell Hoban's *Fremder* - favourably, since (exactly like a thousand other despised sf novels which Wood knows he needn't read) the book isn't particularly concerned with world-maps or sewers.

**Would You Do It For A Penny?** The fabled US sf magazines *Analog* and *Asimov's* have been sold (along with all other Dell Magazines titles, including *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*) to Penny Press, a Connecticut publisher specializing in crossword-puzzle magazines. SF editors Stanley Schmidt and Gardner Dozois are expected to remain in charge.

R.I.P. Yet more death reports, alas: *H. L. Gold* (1914-96), founding editor of *Galaxy* magazine; *Sam Merwin Jr* (1910-96), once editor of the underrated *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Startling Stories*, etc; *Lyle Talbot* (born Lisle Henderson in 1902; died 3rd March), remembered by John Grant as "the actor in *Plan 9 From Outer Space* who could act," as well as for many more prestigious appearances; *Richard Powers* (born 1921; died 9th March in Madrid), the artist who successfully brought abstract art and surrealism to sf book jackets; and *Evangeline Walton* (born 1907; died 11th March, of pneumonia), who novelized the four branches of the *Mabinogion* - beginning with *The Virgin and the Swine* (1936, later wisely retitled *The Island of the Mighty*) and completing the sequence for Ballantine Adult Fantasy in the 1970s.

**Intransigence Dept.** Problem of the month: my report last year of a chap who strapped a JATO unit to his sports car and went *splat* in the Arizona desert at 300mph has since been identified as a plausible but disappointingly false urban legend. How can I possibly admit this without compromising this column's policy of "Never Apologize, Never Explain"?

**Thog's Critical Masterclass.** From a Ringpull flyer for Jeff Noon's *Pollen*: "Cyber-punk was invented by the Americans in the late 1980s when people such as William Gibson began exploring the possibilities of high-tech meets science-fiction. But cyber-punk is a million miles from the traditional world of science-fiction ruled by sword and sorcery. The new generation's worlds are ruled by the gun and are inhabited by sharply drawn credible characters. Witty, urban and hip, cyber-punk came as a maelstrom of fresh air..."

# plAtOnic sOlid

*Phil Masters*

**A**t eight o'clock in the morning I left Jane sleeping and walked down to the outer harbour. We needed permits to travel on to the mountain country, and I still had to sort out which government department was responsible for issuing them. This looked like as good an excuse as any to explore the centre of the city – the old government area.

The guide books – from the modern Michelin guide I'd picked up in my home-town Smith's to the 19th-century Baedeker I'd found in an antiquarian bookshop – all agreed that the best way to cross the harbour was on a hire-boat. What none of them told you was how to attract the attention of the boatmen at 8.15 on an autumn morning – or how to negotiate a fare when you finally had the chance.

I'd spent some time with a phrase-book, but the local language – which is, apparently, unrelated to any other living tongue, except possibly Basque – is a minefield for the amateur. However, after much waving and monosyllabic explanation and pointing – followed by even more confused haggling, mostly conducted in sign language, punctuated with shrugs that would have made an Italian jealous – I had myself a ride.

The sun was just coming up over the coastal area of the city as we pushed away from the quay, and it was soon illuminating the outer city wall. According to the stories the wall would once have glittered, as it was originally covered entirely with sheets of bronze and, strangely enough, there is plenty of evidence that this may be true; there are even some scraps of verdigris-encrusted metal held on to the stonework by corroded bolts, high on the less accessible parts of the masonry.

Mostly, though, the light showed the wall to be crumbling and ill-maintained, with great swathes of moss down near the waterfront where there was more moisture in the air and the heat of the day never quite reached.

It was certainly cool on the water that morning. I huddled inside my jacket, and looked at the buildings of the commercial quarter receding behind us.

Despite my first impressions of the night before, I

decided that they weren't all on the verge of collapse. Ever since the great days of their empire, the people of the city have regarded the commercial district as less sacred than most of their God-given capital – so once in a while they've actually built something new there, and even, sometimes, torn down the odd block to replace it with something more solid. Because they had so much space to play with beyond the circular "harbours," they rarely rebuilt an area more than once, so the place is a hotchpotch of building styles.

They traded, at least a little, with Alexander's empire, Rome, and the Arabs, as well as with Europe and now America, and they stole architectural ideas shamelessly from everyone. So you've got badly-proportioned classical villas, occupied by half-a-dozen dirt-poor families, next to branches of Macdonalds in buildings that might once have resembled the Alhambra (but without the plaster-work or the fountains), and grimy Victorian warehouses rubbing shoulders with the occasional North African-style flat-roofed house – although, considering their geographical location, the craftsmen of the city have always drawn remarkably little on African building techniques.

I suspect that it's something to do with pride and ex-imperial attitudes.

So although the buildings behind the boat were certainly pretty shabby in places, they were nothing like as far gone as the ones in front. Later, when I reached the citadel, and saw the temple supposedly erected by the founder-god himself, I was to come to the conclusion that no one had done a serious job of maintenance on it since the place was founded.

Perhaps, to Europeans or Americans, it seems strange of me to talk like this; no one would suggest bringing the builders in to patch up the ruins of Ancient Rome, say, or the Acropolis. But then, the Romans and Greeks aren't trying to run a country out of their ancient remains.

The boatman pulled us round the harbour until we came in sight of the great canal, which leads 17 miles

down to the sea, and shortly after that I spotted the first covered channel on the other bank of the harbour. This leads through to the second harbour, it's as old as the city and, remarkably enough, it's still usable.

I suppose that it's just too important for the regular running of the place for them to let it go – so it's dredged out intermittently, and the masonry in the walls is checked at least once a century.

All of which has kept it a lot more intact than the great bridges that once spanned each of the harbours. These too date back to the glory days of the empire, and they must have been astonishing in their time – up to 600 yards long, broad enough for three or four carts to pass abreast (or, more importantly, for the empire's tribute processions), and with spans wide and high enough for the ocean-going ships of the time to pass underneath.

They're gone now. As the boatman pulled us towards the channel, I saw the remains of the one that used to cross the outer harbour. On the outermost side, three complete arches are still standing, and the roadway is solid enough, almost to the very brink, for locals to have built themselves wattle-and-daub hovels on it. I saw a couple of thin, rag-clad children – presumably inhabitants of those slums – sitting with their legs dangling a hundred feet above the harbour. The inner end of the same bridge has suffered worse, for some reason – only two spans survive, and those in such a bad state that nobody has co-opted them for living space. The story is that the bridges decayed and collapsed while the Black Death was sweeping the country in the Middle Ages, although modern historians think that things were fairly far gone long before then.

(Supposedly, the bridges also used to carry fresh water from lush springs in the citadel to the rest of the city. That healthy idea went to Hell in the Middle Ages.) Anyway, it was the covered channels that I had to think about right then. It is said that they were originally designed to allow passage to full-size classical triremes under oars; a few scholars, who think that triremes were bigger than the consensus version, have disputed the truth of that, but most of the books I'd read accepted it. The channels are certainly large enough for the traffic they get nowadays; small rowboats and the occasional flatulent diesel-powered barge.

Baedeker had also warned me of one thing that proved, remarkably, still to be true; each boatman is limited, by general agreement, to one harbour and half the length of the linking channels. So, after 300 yards, my hired craft pulled up to a ramshackle jetty under feeble electric lights, half of them not working, and I had to go through the whole dumbshow haggling procedure again.

As we pulled out into the middle harbour, I caught sight of the middle wall, which was supposedly once plated with tin. Of course, there's no way of testing the truth of that; there are a few bolts and fittings, but metal that precious could never have lasted the centuries. If it was ever there, it's long been scavenged away. As for the innermost, citadel wall – that was supposed to have been covered in the ancient empire's long-lost wonder metal. Make of that what

you want; historians and archaeologists certainly do.

I had to commission three boatmen in all, for decreasing distances – but even the last had to carry me 200 yards along the second tunnel and another 200 across the inner moat. This last fellow – a middle-aged, scowling character who charged me markedly more than his two colleagues for the shorter journey – seemed to know a few words of English, but he refused to indulge in anything as frivolous as conversation, preferring to hum some droning, unrecognizable tune as he pulled on the oars.

He dropped me on one of the narrow stone quays in the shade of the citadel wall, and I climbed up a narrow stairway with a single rope "handrail" to reach the streets of the government district. This circular island is a thousand yards in diameter; the buildings, which must be on average the oldest in the city, supposedly once dazzled the eye with their red, white, and black stonework. Nowadays, it's all just grey. However, the 600-foot-long temple at the very centre is still discernibly white marble. I passed it that morning, but I didn't have time to investigate whether any of the golden statues mentioned in the oldest account still exist.

I started my quest for a travel permit with the Ministry of the Interior, where a shabby, brusque clerk with a few words of English spent ten minutes examining my passport, then informed me that "permits are tourism."

"Yes," I said, "I'm a tourist and I'm trying to obtain a permit."

"Tourism," he repeated flatly, then returned to shuffling papers on his desk.

"But where do I get one?"

He looked up again, his minimal courtesy visibly evaporating, and stabbed with a crumbling disposable biro at the map of the city that hung on the office wall. I tried to follow the gesture, and guessed that he was indicating the maze of assorted government buildings in the very centre of the city. Deciding that I'd gain little more here, I ventured out to explore further.

Half an hour later, I finally stumbled across a deep-pitted marble facade with a verdigris-coated plate proclaiming it – in three European languages as well as the local tongue – to be the Ministry of Tourism, an institution of which no travel agent or guidebook I'd consulted had ever heard. I ventured inside, and found a single completely clear desk manned by a tall, austere handsome individual in a pinstripe three-piece suit.

"Good morning," I ventured.

The official stared back at me impassively. "Pardon, m'sieur?" he said.

"Uh," I said. "Je suis Anglais. Je desire une," oh damn it, what was the word? – "permit – une carte – que me donne permission. Je veux venir aux l'intérieur. Aux les montagnes."

The official gazed at me, apparently digesting my pidgin. "Pardon, m'sieur?" he said.

And so we went on. It rapidly emerged that his French was even worse than mine, but it was the

nearest thing we had to a common language. After maybe half an hour, he had determined enough to make a suggestion.

And so, with only a little trouble, I found myself at the local Ministry of Police. The sign here didn't indulge itself in any foreign languages, but the doors were guarded by a couple of plump, unshaven characters in green-and-blue uniforms, with night-sticks and revolvers on their belts, and I was reasonably confident of my urban geography by now. The door of the place was open, and the guards watched me impassively as I walked through it.

Inside, a thin youth was manning a reception desk. I approached him uncertainly, and tried the phrase-book's "good morning." He looked at me coolly.

"English?" he asked.

His grasp of the language was small, but he knew his limits, and he tried hard. Within a few minutes, he had passed me on to a middle-aged, middle-ranking official who spoke my language almost fluently.

I couldn't quite decide what to think about a country where the best educated and briskest bureaucrats were, it seemed, all employed by the police. On the other hand, at that precise moment, I was unreasonably grateful to find somebody who clearly had both the inclination and the authority to help me.

Once again, I explained that I wanted a permit for two people to travel outside the capital. The official nodded, and asked my companion's name. I told him.

"Your wife?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Your girlfriend?" he asked, leering disapprovingly. In my time in the country, I discovered that, for a people who pay bare lip-service to a seriously moribund state religion, the locals had an impressively puritanical streak – although it seems to be mixed in with a lot of lurid and lecherous presuppositions about other people, especially foreigners.

"No," I said. "Jane is merely travelling with me."

"Jane" he said, drawing the name out as though it proved my complete moral degradation.

Eventually, I persuaded him to issue me with a rather tatty document with a huge, simple seal at the top, which he claimed would allow us unrestricted travel in the rural and mountain areas. I took it with some qualms, not having the faintest idea what it said in the local language; for all I knew, it could have instructed any and every local official to arrest us instantly. However, I couldn't see myself doing any better, so I left the ramshackle ministry building and emerged blinking in the sub-tropical sun, which by now was building up its full daytime heat.

An elderly local came hobbling up to me, and placed himself firmly in my path. As I paused, wondering what to do, he stared hard at my European garb for five full seconds. Eventually, he spoke.

"Grik?" he barked.

"Pardon?" I said.

He repeated his question. "Oh, no," I said, shaking my head. "Not Greek. English."

He scowled at me, then turned on his heel and marched away without another word. I was left with

the sense that it was just as well that I wasn't Greek, and I was obscurely impressed. Some nations have a truly awesome ability to bear grudges from old wars.

My taste for government buildings, however ancient and impressive, had been seriously diminished by my experience of the interiors of three of them, and anyway, I knew that Jane would want to hear about my success, so I found my way back to the inner harbour and began the thrice-repeated process of negotiation that would get me back to the outermost, commercial district. The sun was well up in the sky now, which might have made the rides across the three harbours into pleasant opportunities for basking – except that the heat was beginning to bring out the worst aspects of a static body of water. Apparently, it's a minor mystery of hydraulic engineering how the harbours manage to remain at all tolerable, given that the tidal flow through the canals can hardly be enough to flush them out; the locals credit divine providence. They may be right, but in that case, their god did a less than perfect job. I began to feel nervous about the age of the decaying boats; I had no desire for any closer contact with the murky waters.

When I got back to the hotel, Jane told me that there had been a phone call for me, from England.

"How on Earth did anybody know where to get hold of me?" I said. Jane pointed out, in her best tone of sweet reason, that we'd actually booked the hotel in advance, through a bureau, and their brochure had given its address.

"Anyway," she added, "it wasn't *anybody*. It was Elaine."

I muttered some thanks, picked up the room phone, and started dialling.

I got through to London on the third attempt – which is good going for a third-world phone system, in my experience. Elaine was indeed waiting for my call.

"So," she said, "you made it."

"Pardon?" I said.

"Beyond the fields we know."

"Nothing that melodramatic. It's just a big island in the Atlantic."

There was silence in London. "How are you?" I asked.

"Fine," said Elaine. "Keeping busy."

We chatted for a few more minutes, and I tried to describe the city, but I got the feeling that I wasn't conveying the nature of the place very well.

"Look," I said, "it's... like every city you've ever known. But it's not as though it's an imitation. It's more as if this is the original, and everywhere else is the copy. But it isn't pure and perfect. It's been going to Hell for longer than anywhere else, too."

"It sounds amazing" she said.

"It is," I said. "Plato got it wrong, I think. The archetype isn't perfect. It couldn't be. Nothing ever is."

"I know," Elaine agreed. "How's Jane?"

"Fine," I said. We traded a few more social niceties for a few minutes, but there really wasn't much more to say. Eventually Elaine wished me well, and rang off.

I went back to Jane and showed her the travel permit, and we pulled the timetables out of our luggage

and began discussing arrangements.

The bus we selected – and succeeded in catching – left from a terminus building, a mile or so from our hotel, the next morning, which gave us time to see some of the sights – but the heat made us into inefficient tourists.

We caught a hire-boat to the first, outermost, area of the old city, and spent most of the day strolling inconsequentially around the remains of the ancient horse-track that runs around its entire circumference. Once, there were gardens and gymnasias alongside the track, but in the last thousand years or so, the area has been encroached on by habitation, which is now partly impoverished and partly collapsed. We took the advice of our guide-books and avoided the areas that are downright dangerous, which still left us with acres of ancient ruins to explore.

The next day, we opted for caution, and arrived an hour early for our bus,

This would have been very foolish, given that the bus left an hour late, except that it took us 45 minutes to buy our tickets. However, in time we found ourselves on our way.

If the original Greek account were true in every detail, we'd have had a 20-mile ride before we reached the city's ancient outer wall, and then six or seven hundred miles to go before we reached the edge of the irrigated agricultural plain and began the ascent into the mountains. But reality can only be stretched so far. I'd just become acclimatized to the vehicle's grumbling engine note and juddering ride when I spotted a twisted and irregular line of stone – the city's ancient defences. And by the end of that first day, we were well over half way from the city to the mountains.

We spent the night in a taverna in a farming village, where we also managed to obtain a basic dinner of olives, unleavened bread and rough wine. No one there spoke any European language, and Jane and I were automatically put in one room, with a bed that would qualify as a generous single at home. I volunteered to sleep on the floor. After an hour, I was woken by Jane, who declared that the broken springs and wildlife made the bed unusable as she claimed her own patch of floor.

The next day, we found that the same bus – with, it seemed, a very similar contingent of peasants and shady-looking peddlers – was scheduled to carry us on to the foothills. But the ride was, in other respects, very different, at least for me; the further we travelled from the capital, the thinner the veneer of modern life and modern assumptions coating the ancient land came to look. The people I saw were dressed more simply; I glimpsed Hellenic-style tunics and sandals, and amphorae in the courtyards of the adobe houses. The people also seemed taller and more dignified, the pride in their bearing more personal and decreasingly like the surly chauvinism of the urban population.

But it was still a desperately poor country. I knew that the farmers had always been exploited by their theocratic rulers, and the lack of modernity in what I saw reflected that.

According to very early accounts, the island was

once the home of small but thriving herds of wild elephants, and some Victorian scholars liked to believe that this might have been where Hannibal acquired the trained beasts that he took across the Alps. But in fact those seem to have been obtained from East Africa. Still, there is an alternate theory that a tameable sub-species once existed in North Africa – perhaps in the Atlas Mountains – in which case, they may have been related to the supposed herds on the island. If reliable archaeological (or biological) research were possible in this place, the results might be interesting. Today, however, with a land exhausted by thousands of years of farming, I don't think that anything larger than a cow could survive anywhere in the lowlands – and the few cows we saw were desperately thin and enfeebled.

In a small town on the edge of the plain, we found a station where it seemed that we could catch another bus into and over the mountains. We had to wait half a day for it, and we killed the time in the shade of a clump of trees. I was working through a Penguin translation of Herodotus, but I soon found the stories told by the supposed Father of History tiresome. There was nothing for it but to try to doze until the rather dated French-built vehicle arrived, loaded up with peasants and their baskets of fruit, trussed-up chickens and assorted random baggage, took us on board, then set out.

About half way up the mountain, the bus began to slow down, and soon it lurched to a halt in the middle of the road – which hardly mattered, given the lack of any other traffic. The driver spent several minutes wrenching at the ignition key while the engine roared feebly and choked rather more convincingly, but eventually even he had to admit that we had broken down. A half-hearted argument broke out between him and a couple of the more lively locals; eventually, several of the disputants got out and continued the row with their heads half under the open bonnet, but with few signs of trying to fix whatever the problem was.

Few other passengers showed any inclination to move, but Jane and I decided that the bus clearly wasn't going anywhere immediately, so we might as well take advantage of the situation.

We got out and walked a little way down the road to a place where we had a panoramic view over the agricultural plain and the grey smudge of the city at its centre. By straining my eyes, I could just make out the central hill, and the pale stone of the citadel and temple.

"Look," said Jane, and I raised my gaze a little, out towards the sea.

A great wave – a vast wall of water – was sweeping across the coastal suburbs. At this distance, the effect was no more dramatic than an ordinary wave washing up a smooth, sandy beach, but I could imagine the terror and devastation as slums and tourist hotels alike were annihilated. Within seconds, the onrush broke against the citadel, and for a brief, emotionless second I thought about the undertow, cleaning out the stench from the three circular harbours as it passed. But the wave wasn't finished; it swept over the heart



of the city, wiping away the immeasurably ancient citadel, before continuing across the inland suburbs and the agricultural plain.

The mass of water was a thin, pale grey, almost lost in the dust and heat haze rising from the land. In fact, the harder I looked, the less certain I was that I could distinguish between grey water, grey stone buildings, and grey farmland mud.

The citadel was surely completely covered, but when I looked again, I thought I could make out the white of ancient marble. Could the buildings still be standing, despite the onslaught of water? I shook my head, screwing up my eyes, and the vision vanished.

"You know," I said to Jane, "Aristotle thought that Plato's story of Atlantis was a complete fantasy. 'The man who dreamed it up made it vanish.' It was only a few second-string philosophers who believed that the story might be literally true. One of them actually sent to Egypt to find out if the texts that Plato talked about still existed. Of course, the Egyptian priests reassured him they did."

Jane smiled thinly. "You're supposed to be the seasoned traveller," she said. "At least, that was the story that persuaded me to come on this trip with you. You should know that locals always tell visitors what they want to hear. If the locals think the visitors are worth cultivating, anyway."

"That reminds me," I said. "I've never got it entirely clear – why did you come on this trip?"

"Because I wanted to see new places."

I laughed at that, but Jane barely cracked a smile. "I'm serious," she said. "I want to see different countries – meet different people."

"But here?" I argued. (The heat, and boredom after the slow bus trip, was making me argumentative.) "I mean, it's not like it's..." My voice trailed off.

"Real?" Jane finished for me. "You agree with Aristotle, then?"

I laughed, and kicked a large, heavy stone by the side of the road. It didn't shift an inch. "Come on," I said, "the bus looks like it's going to move again soon, with any luck."

Eventually, the bus did move. In time, it reached the first village in the mountains, where it stopped for the day, and we heard unlikely rumours of disaster in the lowlands. We found a room in a shabby inn with twin single beds, where I sat up late, reading my guidebooks by torch-light and listening to the very distant sounds of the sea.

**Phil Masters** was born in Hertfordshire in 1959, and has spent much of his subsequent time there; he currently works as a freelance programmer and role-playing games writer. The idea for the above story, his first sale to *Interzone*, emerged out of his research for a recent role-playing game supplement. He has also had stories accepted by *Scheherazade* and *Maelstrom*.

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# The Facilitator

Gary Couzens

“She caught a flare on the way down,” says the chief medic. “There’s nothing we can do.”

Which is where I come in. The astronaut is lying on the hospital bed, eyes gazing sightlessly at the ceiling. Near to flatline: she’s been fried so badly even nanotech can’t repair the damage. I lean over her, close her eyelids with my thumb. She doesn’t see me, doesn’t feel my touch.

“Ms Szapolowska...”

I nod. “I’m ready.”

Only I can help now. The medics step away from the bed. Proper respect. The psi gene is rare, and Facilitator training is tough. It’s not some trainee they’re dealing with.

I reach forward again, touch my palms onto the astronaut’s forehead. The laying-on-of-hands bit is pure theatre, but I like to put on a good show. More importantly, I instruct my in-cortex computer to keep messages at bay until I’m finished. I need all my brain for this.

What’s it like to facilitate? I’ve seen film of myself and others and it’s zombie time. Fits in with what it’s like from inside: I die along with the patient. Except I get to come back. There’s the skill in it. I can only do it once a day – I’m deleted for the rest of the time. Hence my big paychip. Hard work earns hard salary.

I close my eyes and descend into the dying woman’s mind. Random syllables of Japanese: scintillas of memory. I recognize Osaka: I went there with my then-lover last year. This woman (her name, I now know, is Akiko) with her parents; her boyfriend; traditional-costume wedding; space training; a posting to the Moon. I go deeper, into the blank firings of motor functions, codes no one can yet read.

If you want a VR simulation, this is the picture: inside Akiko’s skull is a vast room, larger inside than outside. With one small exit, hidden away. We only go out that way once. It’s my job to smooth that last journey.

I guide Akiko to that exit. As I send her on her way, I sense a last spasm of gratitude as she slips from my fingers and out of sight.

I open my eyes. The bed closes around Akiko’s dead body, ready for its disposal. My computer retrieves her will from the Net: she wants to be buried in space. It always had a romance for her. Happy memories out in the asteroid belt, first love. It’s as if I knew her, she’s someone I met briefly between flights, we chatted awhile. In different circumstances, we might have been friends or even lovers. Someone with a past, a pre-

sent, until now a future. It’s at moments like this, immediately after facilitating someone, that I’m most vulnerable.

“Would you like something, Ms Szapolowska?” says the chief medic.

I nod. “Brandy.”

I’m not a mind-reader: my psi capabilities aren’t strong in that direction. But I can sense moods and wishes, and I know this man wants to cop with me. Maybe he’ll ask outright, but he’s intimidated. I’m too well-known: I’ve been on TV. Forget it: I’m too tired for anything, let alone sex.

I take the shuttle back to my apt in Greater Berlin. As I let myself in, I can hardly keep my eyes open. I instruct the computer to set the Do Not Disturb, and I sleep.

If you’re psi-positive, you dream. You can’t escape them. Vivid dreams. Your brain, daytime functions shut down, tunes in to anyone or anything nearby. But it’s Akiko who haunts me. The memories I glimpsed replay in full. Her entire short life data-compressed into 12 hours of sleep.

What lies beyond that small hidden exit? I’ve never seen it, but other Facilitators claim to have seen a bright light, felt an immense calming peace. Perhaps they were facilitating someone religious. I’ve only ever seen a long tunnel extending further than I can sense. One day I’ll travel down there myself – that’s if nanotech doesn’t extend our lives so far that, barring accidents, we’re immortal.

When I awake the sun is rising over the Wall Memorial. I eat a light meal of veg compound, giving me the energy I need.

My computer has gathered a few messages while I was asleep. An invite to appear on PanEurope TV to talk about facilitating. I think: ACCEPT, which prompts PETV to net me shuttle schedules Berlin-Geneva, a hotel booking, a programme recording schedule, a list of preliminary Qs for me to prepare my As. All this I store for later use. Messages from members of the public, usually friends and relatives of those I’ve facilitated in the past. I hardly ever answer these, so I think DELETE and they’re gone.

Then the computer flashes up a reminder: PARTY TONIGHT. Shit, I’d forgotten. It’s in Tokyo, for the launch of Billy Akazuma’s new multimedia disc. I’ve got to be there.

I think: QUERY NEXT SHUTTLE BERLIN-TOKYO.

The reply: *Dep 1000 Europe Time. Arr 2100 Japan Time.*

It's now 0830. I take a hovertaxi to the shuttleport and check in. The flight leaves on time and three hours later I'm in Tokyo.

At the Gaijin Club entrance, I hold up my invite. The bouncer, head and shoulders taller than me and twice my weight, scans it. "Name, please."

"Alina Szapolowska."

He nods. The invite shivers into fine powder. He waves me in.

I've dressed up for this. I don't have the height – especially if offworlders are here – but my hair, black and piled on top of my head, gives me a few extra centimetres. Pale mauve eyeshadow and dark maroon lipstick. I'm wearing a new outfit, organic, that curls about my crotch, up my sides and under my breasts which are silver-dusted and bare. The outfit, normally colourless, iridesces under UV light.

I nod at Brad, an American facilitator. His hairless chest is gold-dusted, visible through a red jacket open to the navel. His head is shaven and his eyes outlined in black, his lips purplish-pink. I've copped with him more than once; maybe I'll do so again tonight, if there's no one else.

The party isn't yet up to full power, but it still hits you in the gut: lights flash in all frequencies from UV to IR and beyond. The music makes the floor vibrate.

I see the offworld woman from a distance, and go up to her while she's alone. We shake hands. I know she's offworld from her pale skin, the supports on her legs so her bones don't snap in Earth g. And her height: at two metres she's over the average for offworld females – she has 20 centimetres on me. Her dark-copper hair is teased out from her skull in electroshock style. She's wearing a midnight-blue toga wrap. She's from Triton: they're a conservative race, those settlers out in the cold Neptunian wastes. But if this one were so strait-laced she wouldn't be at a party like this.

Her name is Niamh. She's young, 18 or 19 max, and it shows in her voice. "I am a great fan of his," she says in her marble-mouthed Triton accent, apropos tonight's host. I didn't know Billy shifted discs out in the deep solar system – maybe only pirate copies. At this moment, the speakers are playing the quadraphonic mix of *Proxima Centauri*. That bass synth always gets me wet.

"How long are you on Earth?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Indefinite. We arrived a week ago. I have never been here before."

Then how come she's at a party like this? Never mind. It's a year's travel each way to Triton. Even netting them at lightspeed is a slow process.

"Have you listened to Billy Akazuma on syn?" she asks. "No..."

"I have some with me. Would you like some?"

This is promising. Syn – or SynThex – is a drug which induces synaesthesia. I've tried it a couple of times. It would be rude to refuse, so I say yes.

"It is quite an experience."

Syn hits hard and fast: it's non-addictive and has no side-effects. Soon after the tab dissolves on my tongue, the lights begin to shout at me. That bass synth is a

golden snake, coiling and uncoiling in midair. The touch of Niamh's hand on my arm smells of roses.

"Where are you staying?" Her whisper is a loose string of pearls.

"I came here specially. I'm taking the shuttle back."

"Do you want to stay in my apt?"

"Sure."

We leave the party early. The post-midnight traffic roar scores white streaks across my vision. Niamh orders a hovercab and soon we're airborne over night-time Tokyo, a cacophony of light.

Niamh's apt is uptown, two rooms and a bedroom. She has a high ceiling and raised doorframe so she doesn't hit her head. I'm still under the influence of syn, so I close my eyes as she puts her hand to my organic dress. It slithers off me and curls up into a small white ball. I reach for the clip of her toga wrap and it falls from her. She steps out of it, her body silver-dusted, nude.

We cop on the large double bed. When I come, it's a shower of golden sparks inside my head. We lie in each other's arms.

"You are a facilitator," she says, not quite a question. I don't remember telling her this – but then, I'm well-known. I nod. "We need more of you out on Triton."

"It's tough out there, is it?"

She nods. "We lose ten people a year through suicide."

I wince. One of my first assignments was a Japanese who'd committed *seppuku*. His companion had lost his nerve and his sword blow had merely severed the man's jugular instead of decapitating him. Nasty.

"I facilitated a Japanese woman yesterday," I say. "Got fried in orbit."

"It must be very stressful for you."

"I'm deleted for the rest of the day."

"What must it be like to be facilitated?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. Some say they see a light. I never have."

"Would you like to try?"

"What?"

"Facilitate me."

"You're insane. You'll die."

"No. Take me there, as far as you can go. Then bring me back."

"I can't."

"You can. You are the best. I was told me you were." She pouts, and wraps her impossibly long legs about my hips. My weakness, and she knows it. "You may copulate with me again." She puts her hand on my breast and kisses me, her tongue entwining with mine. A last lingering taste of dark chocolate: the syn is wearing off.

"Okay." I close my eyes and enter her mind. But she's too strong. I'm flung back. "I can't do it. You're too much alive. You're not dying."

"Try again." And she lies back on the bed, arms spread wide, eyes gazing up at the ceiling, mouth slightly open.

And I plunge in again. This time she capitulates to me. I detach her from her body functions, leaving them to

run on their own.

I'm in that room again. Niamh is a large ball of energy: even when submitting to me, she's still strong. As I push towards the exit, she's pulling me harder, as if eager to get there. The tunnel entrance: it's not cold stone as I'd thought before but something living, pulsating, drawing us in with peristaltic movements.

I want to pull away – we've gone far enough. I tug back and she resists. She slips out of my grasp and recedes into the distance.

I pull back and out of her. My body is damp with sweat. I'm lying on top of Niamh's body. I stand. She lies immobile on the bed, arms spread wide. Her eyes are open but there's nothing behind them.

"Niamh, why?"

I put my dress back on; it covers me from neck to knees. I hurry out of the apt and catch a shuttle back to Berlin.

I'm in Do Not Disturb all flight, but I can't sleep. I'm in a private cabin so no one can see me shivering and crying.

When I read my messages at home, I know what to expect. A cancellation from PanEurope TV. And a message from my boss.

"Hello, Alina," he says. "This may be of interest to you."

A headline flashes up: TRITON AMBASSADOR'S DAUGHTER FOUND DEAD. A misleading headline, as the bulletin goes on to state that Niamh's body still lives, and could survive for years to come, but her higher

brain functions have been completely eliminated. A permanent vegetative state.

"I have to congratulate you, Alina," my boss continues. "I didn't think it was possible to facilitate a fully live subject. Only you could be so arrogant and foolhardy to try. You were seen with her at the Akazuma party; you were seen leaving with her, and arriving at the hotel.

"It may be of some consolation to you," he goes on, "but we've checked her records. She's had a history of psychiatric disturbance, and at least two suicide attempts. All you did was power her death wish. So at best it'll be aiding and abetting suicide. At worst, manslaughter. I'm suspending you forthwith."

I've been in my apt for three hours now. I'm in permanent Do Not Disturb. I don't want to hear about the Triton ambassador's daughter. I don't want to see my name and face across worldwide bandwidth.

As I lie on the bed, I wonder if it's possible to facilitate myself. And will I have time before the inevitable knock on the door?

Truth is, I'm too scared to try.

**Gary Couzens** lives in Aldershot, Hampshire. Although the above is his first story for *Interzone*, he has already sold pieces to *Fantasy & Science Fiction* and the small-press magazines *The Third Alternative* and *Substance*, among others.

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# The Diary of a COLLABORATOR

The genesis of "The Spacetime Pit"

Stephen Baxter

"The Spacetime Pit" (*Interzone* 107) was the second collaborative story by Eric Brown and myself.

The story's genesis goes back to June 1995. Eric stayed with me and my wife over the weekend of the launch, in London, of my novel *The Time Ships*. We'd been friends since first being introduced by David Pringle, *Interzone's* editor, in 1989. We'd toyed with the idea of collaborating on stories a couple of times before, once coming to nothing, and the second time – almost by accident – coming up with the idea for "Sunfly" (*IZ* 100), which we were both pleased with. So, that weekend in June, we consciously set out to start a new collaboration.

The core idea was Eric's, a notion that had kicked around his notebooks for some years. He imagined a sub-light starship carrying a crew in stasis, who would be woken regularly – say, every century – to carry out maintenance. Two of the crew would be lovers, with the catch that their periods of stasis did not coincide.

Cut to the woman waking to find that the ship has crash-landed on an Earthlike planet. On investigation the planet proves unable to support her, and she will have to go back into stasis for centuries, waking a few days at a time.

She discovers her lover's pod has also survived.

Hundreds of years pass. The pods are discovered by competing tribes of technologically primitive aliens. The sleeping spacers are considered gods. On awaking, the woman tries to reach her lover, only to be prevented by "her" tribe. While she sleeps they study the principles of the pod's technology and develop their own.

Over the centuries the two races go to war, using Terran technology to destroy not only themselves but their planet ...

That was as far as it went.

We started to kick around the idea. I saw holes in the logic: crashing on an Earthlike planet was coincidental, and ditto the idea of just the woman's and her lover's pods surviving. Maybe the entire scenario of stranded lovers was sentimental. And we felt the story lacked a central conflict.

We dug into the themes: loneliness, alienation, isolation, desperation.

We started to look at specific questions, trying to winnow out the coincidence and build up a logic in the story. What level of technology should the aliens be at? How did the astronauts communicate with them (if they did)? What was the astronauts' motivation? Were they colonists, explorers?

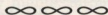
We didn't come up immediately with specific answers; rather, up from my subconscious came a reworking of the basic idea.

What if the glimpses of time were separated, not by centuries, but by millions, even billions of years? The whole thing could become "cosmological." The astronauts could watch the evolution of the species around them, perhaps seek to influence the course of that evolution – but, as such schemes do, it would all end in tears...

This idea was appealing, but maybe it would dilute Eric's original vision. The emphasis might be on the scenery and not enough on the isolation of the stranded astronauts.

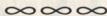
We began to see that we could perhaps combine the two options. What if the leaps in time increased in size, from centuries, all the way up to millennia and aeons? That could give us the best of both worlds: the poignant isolation of the beginning, and the stranding of our heroes in a twilight far future as a sort of coda.

We focused on the essentials of the story. We would have a single character on the surface, for simplicity, and drop the lover angle. He/she would be a surveyor of Earthlike worlds. His/her motivation would be the



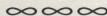
strongest of all: to survive. He/she would be projected into the future in increasingly desperate – and futile – attempts to adjust the world around him/her. This version gave us a new theme: hubris, the futility of human actions attempting to influence events on geological timescales.

Excited, we went to the pub.



We worked up a five-step preliminary outline:

- 1) Crash of a shuttle on the surface. Our heroine (as we'd settled on by now) must find a way back to the orbiting mother craft. The aliens have a level of primitive agricultural technology set at around 1000 AD. Our heroine retires to a stasis pod to wait out the years, in the hope of some technological development.
- 2) After a century our heroine finds no change. The aliens are evidently pacific, in equilibrium with their environment. Our heroine evolves a long-term plan: to initiate a technological revolution by introducing, for example, an Archimedes screw. She retires to the pod.
- 3) After five centuries our heroine awakens in an early industrial revolution. There is a new class of aliens we called "entrepreneurs": industrialists, interested in the secrets of the pod. Our heroine revises her plans. She will gain power by dividing and conquering: promising the entrepreneurs gadgets, and at the same time planting the seed of a new, pod-centred religion in the minds of the serfs.
- 4) After 50 years our heroine emerges to Armageddon, predicated by a millennial crisis surrounding her emergence from the pod, with pod-worshipping religionists fighting off the entrepreneurs. She is taken to a launch site, in the hope of being ferried to orbit – but the rockets turn out to be ICBMs, designed to attack the mother ship. Fearing a disaster, she rushes back to the pod.
- 5) Our heroine emerges to a desolate, lifeless planet. The mother ship is destroyed; now her isolation is complete. We enter the "cosmological coda." The stasis jumps continue to the far future, as no other options exist.



We made some supplementary notes. Our heroine would be an ordinary person on a routine mission, cruelly ripped out of the pattern of her life. We should sympathize with her plight, her struggles to survive. An element of Eric's love interest would survive, in a token of a lover or family – perhaps a pendant – being worked into the plot. We knew the idea was gaudy and large-scale and would need

a lot of careful detailed work, particularly in foreshadowing, to pull it off.

In the course of all this we drew a few intrigued comments from the other punters in my local. Happily, the idea and outline still looked strong in the harsh light of the next morning...

We agreed that Eric would work on the first chunk, through step 3), and I would complete the draft. Our first working title was "Queen of Aeons."

We worked by post, passing successive drafts back and forth. The biggest technical problem was incompatible disc sizes – we had to retype everything... The ultimate collaborator is online, of course.

At the end of June, Eric had the first half of a first draft, around 4,500 words. He'd come up with a new title: "Prisoner of Eternity." Our heroine was now called Katerina. She was alone; the mother ship, her shuttle and the pod were all automated.

The story started with the shuttle crash. Katerina descends from her mountain-top to encounter F'han Lha, a young farm worker, of the Han-rai, our aliens. The story proceeded pretty much as our outline through step 2). In step 3) Katerina is captured by soldiers, and taken into a city where she confronts six Han-rai entrepreneurs – dressed, well-spoken, who describe to her the evolution of the society since her last emergence. There is a conflict between themselves, self-styled "Progressives," and Luddite-like "Wreckers" who see Katerina and her technology as evil.

My completed first draft came in at 9,000 words. I didn't like Eric's last few pages: the entrepreneurs seemed too well-spoken and conversant with their situation – perhaps even, fatally, a little comical. The action in the later stages stayed focused on the mountain top, with the conflict between Progressive and Wrecker simplified to an unstable master/serf relationship. Katerina's presence galvanized the aliens in two ways: the religious inspiration, symbolized by her pendant, and her scientific revolution, symbolized by the Archimedes-screw spiral shape. Katerina's story was now extended to the end of the outline, far beyond the alien conflict, all the way to the death of the planet's sun.

I also did some work on Eric's first half, increasing the science content (the basic biology of the planet, the details of the crash...). The name "Han-rai" was dropped; isolated and unimaginative, the aliens now had no name for themselves, and they became stranger, their language coarser and less anthropomorphic. There was more foreshadowing, in the early sections, of Katerina's increasing desperation. I called Katerina by a surname – "Wake" – with the idea of emphasizing that she was a tough professional,

out on the frontier.

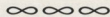
I suggested new titles: "Prisoner of Eternity" seemed corny, and gave away the ending! "Crew Loss Scenario." "The Zeno Option." "The Pit of Space and Time."

Eric responded with a number of detailed cuts and changes. I had collapsed steps 2) and 3) of the outline to accelerate the story; Eric felt this should be restored to give the story better logic. I had Wake wasting away in the final story stages; Eric felt it would be more poignant to keep her healthy, as the planet ages around her. Eric felt "The Pit of Space and Time" should be the title.

Though after one more redraft we more or less had the shape of the story, we continued to exchange drafts throughout the summer. The work got successively easier; later drafts were about points of clarity, detail, conciseness and balance. Redrafting, as usual, involved a lot of cutting – the final draft was 8,600 words – and we even cut the title, to "The Spacetime Pit."

In September we bounced the story off another colleague, Keith Brooke. Keith responded with some big, perceptive remarks concerning the story logic. What was the cause of the crash in the first place? And Keith felt Wake lost his sympathy, after the "Armageddon" plot-point; she showed little remorse, in our draft, for the destruction of a biosphere to serve her own purposes. We put those things right.

By mid-September 1995 we were ready to submit the tale to *Interzone*. We felt we'd come up with a good story which retained the elements of Eric's original vision, enriched by my "cosmological" perspective.



Collaborating is something of a holiday, for the jobbing author. The kick-off ideas-generating brainstorming are a joy. The process of first drafting can be very tough; to have someone else share that burden is a huge relief.

Our styles are quite different – Eric's character-driven, mine "cosmological" – and we like to feel they are complementary when we manage to fit them together properly. It's endlessly interesting to see how someone else's mind works. It's important to submerge egos; every story goes through painful redrafting, and in some ways it's harder to criticize another's work than one's own.

More collaborations? At time of writing we have one more joint story in the pipeline. At the moment we're both following our own stars as far as the novels are concerned, but maybe one day...

But if that's going to happen, we'll definitely have to get Eric an up-to-date word processor.

Stephen Baxter

# Stone Jungle

*Catherine Mintz*

Emily could feel the damp screen dimple her forehead as she peered down into the well of darkness between the buildings. The whoop, whoop of an ambulance passed by on the unseen street at the front of the apartment house, and she looked at the double-bolted door.

No one was forcing entry under cover of the mechanical shriek.

Ears still on guard duty, her eyes traced the descending line of bulbs on the fire escape opposite down into shadow-filled depths miasmic with old odours awakened by the autumn rain.

If she were in the dark, herself, she could see farther down.

Pulling the heavy flashlight from a drawer, Emily turned the kitchen light off, and sat, thumb on the switch of four batteries in a hefty black casing, listening to the distant chirp and wail of violated alarms: kids harvesting cars incautiously parked along the avenue. There.

The girl, if it was a girl, rose out of the gloom, a white shadow among dark ones, vague and indistinct as mist from this height.

But she was there.

As she had been there the night before and perhaps for many nights, although last night had been the first time Emily had stayed so late at this viewless

window, sleepless from the change of seasons in her own life, trying to plan her escape from this trap.

Stephen had stormed out of the apartment two days before, almost as soon as they had moved in, and Emily was slowly allowing herself to recognize that he had planned to leave her, here, in precisely these circumstances, with a month's rent paid, a prisoner of the predators on the streets.

Emily had to admire the tidy quality of his requital.

She had packed their few belongings, withdrawn their money from the bank, done everything as he suggested, made cheerful by his apparent change of heart, his sudden willingness that they conserve their resources until they both could buy tickets and look for work outside the city.

They had no chance here, as they were.

City dwellers were either rich or modified and usually both. Their joint savings would cover only one partial body mod. Emily sighed, and rubbed her screen-roughened forehead. Stephen had decided modification was the way for him to go and once he had decided he had gone.

She had been stripped and abandoned.

The pale figure at the bottom of the well looked over its shoulder and crouched down beside an overturned garbage can – futilely furtive, for the white rags were too clean to blend with the mass of trash

strewn over the floor of the pit.

Two tears rolled slowly down Emily's cheeks. She wiped them away, backhanded. She was done with that, as she was done with Stephen. Now what she needed to do was to make it through the long, uncertain night that followed the long, uncertain day.

Tomorrow she was going to have to find her way out.

Although this was where her husband had grown up, Emily had never lived in this part of the city. She was from the equally poor but less dangerous, because more dispersed, northern suburbs, where the school decks still worked, and every family had a vegetable patch squeezed into its bandanna-size back yard. She was a mark, here. Trapped prey.

Stephen's smiling face had hidden a lot of anger.

She had counted on his help in getting along until they could buy the two precious tickets that would carry them away from the city, out to where who they were and not where they were from might make a difference. Whatever the big deal was supposed to let him in on, it had seemed better than the deferred hope that was all she had had to offer...

Forehead stinging with the wire mesh, Emily saw a density, a thickening, in the blackness in the far corner. It moved forward a step and was unmistakably another ragged figure, this one dark and bulky as the first was pale and insubstantial.

The black figure struck the white.

A wordless scream echoed between the brick walls. Shaking all over, Emily sprang back, looked around the barren kitchen, then returned to her post. Perhaps it was already over, a slap, a blow for some affront, nothing she need worry about.

"Oooo," came the wail, rising and falling as the dark arm rose and fell.

Even this high up she could hear the thud of fist on flesh. Emily looked around the four walls. There had not been time to install a phone, and even if she could reach them, the police might not come here.

She did not know any of her neighbours, and from the padding of feet in the hall late at night, the hissing whispers of transactions at the door across the hall, she feared to unlatch her door.

Welcome silence.

Cheek checked by the screen, she leaned out, peered down. The white figure lay in its splash of fluttering rags. The black figure was nowhere to be seen. Hearing the thunder of her blood in her ears, Emily counted off long moments, waiting for some sign of consciousness, some sign of life.

Nothing.

There were rats in the recesses of the basement, and packs of wild dogs roamed the avenue when the packs of feral children modified only by disease and accident went home to their lairs. She leaned against the bulging screen. Crying out that someone should call for help would notify evil ears that she had no phone herself, and her bolted door would not withstand a determined attack.

She was new here, not yet reduced to total penury.

A small, dark form skittered across a white arm far below. There would be others, and soon, if the first

was not driven back. Knuckles at her mouth, Emily listened. No feet brushed the ratty hall carpet, no alarms beeped and chattered on the avenue. Only the distant agony of a fire truck somewhere far away broke the silence of the night.

She couldn't stop looking and she couldn't bear to watch and do nothing. Act, said a small voice at the back of her mind. Act, or you'll be frozen here forever, remembering, and wish you had. After all, it added, no one would expect you to open the door now. You'll have the advantage of surprise. Do the good deed you'd want someone to...

The hall stank of old urine and fresh vomit. She shouldered open the entrance to the fire tower, the unlit flashlight in her hand slimy with sweat. Turning and turning in the black gut of the building, alternately freezing at the movement of her shadow, then hastening on, too nervous to stand still, she climbed down five stories.

The unshielded bulb at the foot of the stairs was smashed and she turned on her light. The shifting oval briefly spotlight a cockroach, a brown smear on the ratty tiles, a little can of oil half-hidden by three parallel pipes. In daytime it would be in darkness. The old iron door to the well opened silently. Someone came this way, often, and preferred that it be in secret.

Emily switched off her light.

The trash in the pit was in layers, like autumn leaves on a forest floor, and rank with trapped foulness. A hundred years from now, when the walls around it were cliffs of bricks and concrete where pigeons still roosted, this place would still smell evil.

She could just see the white form, still lying, outstretched.

There was no one, nothing, visible in the shadows.

Closer to, the supine figure seemed composed of wet papier-mâché. Emily thought, newspapers, she's covered herself with newspapers for warmth, and the rain softened them, glued them to her clothes. Flashlight in hand, she stooped, touched a gummy shoulder, began to ask...

The thing turned on its side and looked at her.

Its idiot eyes held nothing, not even fear.

Some subtle sound or current of air warned her to turn, flashlight swinging in an arc even before she knew her target. The heavy metal tube connected solidly with bone, jarring her arm back up to the shoulder. She swung again, and was not so lucky: the dark figure had moved back out of her reach.

Its breath hissed between its teeth.

Emily could smell old, wet feathers.

They manoeuvred. When her back was to the door to the stairs, she backed away, one hand behind her, reaching for the knob, found cold metal. She tugged. It didn't yield. Terror shot through Emily. There was an automatic security lock.

She'd been stupid.

Stupidity kills.

In the instant of her distraction Emily's attacker had moved closer. She could smell it again, hear the hiss of its breath: it seemed draped in a great rustling cloak. She shrank back.



It was the wrong move.

The cape whipped wide open, obscuring everything behind it, as the black figure clawed at her. Both shoulders went numb. Tears streaming down her face, Emily knew that it would have her on its next pass. Her knees would not hold...

Then the door at her back opened, and a deep voice said, "What the..." and shoved her aside. She fell. Face inches from something stinking dead, she heard the dull explosion of a heavy calibre gun, once, twice. When the echoes stopped everything was absolutely silent.

"What're you doing here?"

Emily levered herself up, peered at her rescuer. If that was what he was. His action had been reflexive and self-defensive. Given the way things were, if a bullet in her head would solve a problem for him, he would shoot her, too.

She pointed wordlessly to the heap of white rags.

Beer belly bouncing, he walked over, prodded it with the toe of his boot.

Nothing happened.

"Is she dead?"

"She?" He chuckled, hitched his pants.

It was not a nice chuckle. It propelled Emily through the gap of the open door, and up the stairway as fast as she could climb, heedless of any listeners. Stupid, stupid, she'd been stupid, thinking if she did a good deed, things would work out for her...

She battered herself against the door to her floor, locked, from the inside, as security required it should be. Looking down into the dimly-lit depths, she could see a bulky shadow turning its way up two flights below. Whoever he was, he was in no hurry, and she would bet he had keys.

With all her strength, Emily banged on the panel one more time. Then, as silently as she could, hugging the wall, she ran for the roof. She had no time to waste, she could feel the blood dripping from her fingers as she climbed and her stomach heaved with nausea.

If she went into shock, she'd be helpless.

The door to the roof opened with a press-bar, and she eased her way through as silently as she could, hoping there would be something she could use to wedge it shut. But the expanse of gravel and tar, surrounded by a knee-high parapet, was bare of anything but the metal housings of the ventilation fans.

She could hide behind those, but not for long.

The door banged back, rubber foot dropping into place, holding it open.

He was grotesque. It hadn't been possible to really see that in the darkness at the bottom of the well, but now Emily saw he had been born ugly and had done his best to make himself horrific.

Feelers encircled his mouth, like the palps of some fleshy, outside insect. One of his eyes had a faceted corrective lens grafted onto the surface, completely covering the iris. Both ears had been cut back smooth with his scalpel. His knit shirt strained over augmented muscles.

It was not the look made her guts knot with fear, but the knowledge of what it meant. Her pursuer believed he had transcended being merely human,

and that those who had not chosen to evolve were evolution's losers, natural victims.

Emily felt hot little spurts of urine on her legs.

The palps twitched, smelling terror, and the mouth between them grinned. He was, she saw, prepared to take his time and amuse himself. She huddled, arms around her legs, dry mouth filled with pleas she knew better than to waste her breath on.

He reached for her, enjoying her horror.

Behind him, Emily saw the white figure rise on silent wings and land lightly on the parapet. In the grey light of false dawn no one would mistake it for anything remotely human. Whoever it had been, it now resembled a gigantic feathered bat, carbon-fibre-laced wings reaching out...

The thug was still grinning when the beast unfolded him.

Emily crouched, feeling blood run down her arms.

The captor's eyes closed, its sac of skin heaved and twitched, and then was still. It swayed and sighed in satisfaction as the last stars faded and a sheet of pale grey cloud was shredded into fleecy rags.

Somewhere near the horizon the first commuter flight droned up from the airport, a dark sliver against a growing band of primrose. The fathomless eyes opened, considered Emily. It could smell her bleeding. The great wings, their lining velvety with thousands of tiny tendrils, opened wide.

The bones that had been a man rattled as they spilled onto the roof.

The beast sprang into the air and was gone.

The grinning skull watched half dozen more flights rise before Emily could make herself sift through the heap of wet debris. The creature had left the man's keys, his knife, a nice handful of mixed change, three small plaques that looked like real gold, a zipper, and assorted buttons.

One gold would pay for a first-class modification.

Knife in her right hand, flashlight in her left, pockets stuffed with most of the rest of the loot, Emily crept down the fire tower, let herself onto her floor and into her apartment, shot the bolts behind her, one by one, and leaned back against the door.

Home.

She bent over and vomited.

Later, cold wet towels draped on wounded shoulders, and the spot on the floor findable only because it was so much cleaner than the rest, Emily considered going to the mod shops along the avenue and equipping herself with wings. She poked her stacked coins carefully, frowned.

There was enough for a whole new life under her fingertips. She wasn't going to waste that, not even to unfold treacherous Stephen in the embrace he deserved. It was time to get out of the stone jungle, and if that required forgiveness, well, she could do that, too.

Catherine Mintz is a new writer who lives in Philadelphia, USA. She has been an *Interzone* reader for about seven years.

# MUTANT POPCORN

Nick Lowe

Notwithstanding current celebrations of past achievements and the telegram from HRH, the matter on the minds of moguls this year is film after film: what's going to happen to an industry built up over a century as the challenge mounts from new media, interactivity, and the eventual replacement of the camera itself as the chief technological tool for the synthesis of worlds? Looking for a seed to crystallize anxieties around, much of the fuss has centred – on a touch misplacedly, I think – on the "landmark" *Toy Story* for its achievement in sculpting 77 minutes of box-office-topping virtuality entirely inside a suite of Sun workstations. Alarm! death of the camera! no more cel painting! mass extinction of Gertie the Dinosaur and all her innocent progeny!

Well, come on, let's not get too excited here. *Toy Story* is certainly a fascinating achievement, for reasons I'll come to that seem to have gone largely unremarked and have little to do with the manner of its making. But the line between drawn and computerized animation has been blurred for at least a decade, since the advent of effective digital interweaving techniques and onscreen character design. What *Toy Story* showcases, rather, is simply the most processor- and programmer-intensive of such techniques, the 3D wireframe approach to character generation and background mapping, with their associated skills of virtual lighting camera. The real genius of *Toy Story* lies less in its technology than in the aspect of its application that John Lasseter and Pixar have always understood best: how to tailor the material to fit the near-unworkable limitations of medium and technology in their current state of development. Simply put, you need a subject that avoids human characters, and whose environment is dominated by smooth surfaces with clearly-defined light sources. The animated anglopoises of

*Luxo Jr* a decade ago were uniquely inspired for these purposes, and even more so the anthropomorphized toys that Lasseter hit on in the late 1980s for his promotional short subjects *Tin Toy* and *Knick Knack*. I don't necessarily suggest that it's a sign of flagging inspiration or the ultimate limitations of the medium that seven years later he's still doing animated toys, but it does sharpen the question of exactly where all-digital animation is poised to go from here.

The most spectacular irony about all this is that *Toy Story* is actually the first Disney animated feature with a shelf-life. Traditional animation has always dated less than any other genre of entertainment, and the long-term success of the Disney portfolio is owed primarily to its careful upkeep of a stable of uniquely ageless, un-datestamped works. But computer animation is moving so fast that in five years' time *Toy Story*'s Smarties-ad look of plasticity textures, obviously-wireframed poses, and curve-plotted virtual-camera movements is bound to look clumsily dated and primitive. Even now, the human characters look a lot more like toys than the toys look like humans, with Andy and the baby particularly weak; Mr Potato Head looks nothing remotely like a potato (as a bizarre corollary, the tie-in merchandising character is a plastic simulation of a real potato); and Sid's dog, certainly the most ambitious figure in the cast, has to be a short-haired breed shot moving at speed and rapidly edited to disguise the imperfections of his texture and movement (as any glance at a still capture will readily confirm). If Disney is lucky, all this will seem in time like an engaging stylization, and the studio's heavy investment in writing talent and superb voice characterizations will guarantee the product's survival into generations for whom its actual look is pretty pre-industrial. But these are new and potentially heavily-mined waters.

If anything, the over-analysis of technique has led to an under-analysis of content. The standard line on *Toy Story*, brilliantly sold to the pundit biz by the Disney PR machine, is that though the technology may be radical the content is reassuringly traditional: wholesome character-led storytelling (capitalizing on Pixar's longstanding skills with mime), a comfortably well-worn premise (toys come to life when backs are turned), and a homespun moral about family life (sibling rivalry is natural, but transient). I'm surprised there's been so little effort to run this stuff even cursorily through the decoder, but at the risk of labouring the blazingly self-evident, here are three elementary observations.

First, what *Toy Story* is really about is western economies in recession, particularly in the face of competition from Pacific Asia. The thing that dominates the lives of Andy's toys is not the fun of being played with but the dread of redundancy, which casts its shadow of rumour, speculation and mutual suspicion over all staff meetings and relationships in a way that will be instantly recognizable to anyone who's been through this in real life, as I assume by the mid-1990s most of us have. What all toys fear above all is competition from more technologically-advanced rivals out of the tiger nations, which will drive their sole customer, whose industrial loyalties are as fickle as a child's loyalties to his toys, to discard his entire existing client base literally overnight.

And well might they quake, because second and more specifically it's about the future of the entertainment industry. Drawstringed soft toy Woody is crafted from traditional materials in the manner of, say, cel animation, and is cuddly, with a character drawn from the past, the US, and familiar entertainment genres. But spaceman Buzz is made in Taiwan from hard, manmade synthetics,

and his futuristic character theme is supported by a raft of secondary merchandising tie-ins in the spirit of corporate toy marketing in the 90s. Thus far, quite sharp and unsettling satire, and certainly strong stuff for a Disney feature — which makes it more unsettling still that the resolution offers Disney customers a soothing, seductive narrative that promises the continued coexistence of traditional and new-technological entertainment media in an expanded world of global partnership.

For third, and more specifically still, *Toy Story* is an undisguised apology for the corporate leisure industry's exploitation of the juvenile market, as evidenced not least in the adroit tie-in merchandising of *Toy Story* itself. Not only does it take it for granted that normal children will consume enormous numbers of mass-produced value-added brandname toys (hardly surprising, but you do need to imagine watching this film in Abidjan); more sinister still, its one high moral crusade is against kids like Sid who break free of the characters and narratives supplied by the manufacturer to create their own customizations. The basis for this Stalinistic legislation seems to be an unstated and unexamined assumption that Andy's kind of play connects to the toys anthropomorphically, allowing healthful practice at human interaction and empathy, whereas Sid's more sculptural approach is anti-emotion and encourages socio-pathic disengagement.

That would be fine, except that the implication most fully explored by the film is that we should feel guilt at betraying our once-loved toys by learning their ultimately inanimate status and incapacity for responsive feeling. Certainly Disney feels no apparent qualms about treating the scenario as a licence to print franchises, flooding the market with character toys that will hurt if you don't love them. To view *Toy Story* in its full commercial and cultural matrix it's essential to watch it in a cinema, with its paratextual frame of Disney-selected advertisements for spin-off toys of the Toys ("A film about toys that come to life — when you're not looking!"). As it happens, Sid's Burlesque menagerie of toys is easily the most inventive, imaginative and rewarding element in a potentially radical, but in the end overwhelmingly conservative film. And those are precisely the toys no one's selling.

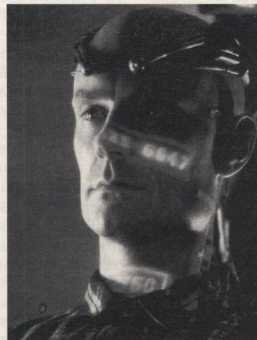
On the face of it, it's unfair to pick on a piece of unredeemed beefsteak like *Lawnmower Man 2: Beyond Cyberspace* as the elected representative of anything at all, unless it be the very worst of the

already-hackneyed genre of jack-in, jack-off cyberuniverse movies sown by *Tron* and *LM2*'s much more forgivable predecessor. But its very lack of adventure and imagination makes it a useful showcase for the ways more traditional live-action movies attempt to get medieval on your eyeballs with cutting-edge computer animation in the service of themes of technological change, and to work through their sibling rivalry with new entertainment media by emulating their appeal onscreen. How far VR animation itself has advanced in the four suspiciously-long years since its trippier precursor is conveniently apparent from the brief pre-credit replay of the first movie's climax, though the rather tedious cybercity walk-throughs in 2 are considerably less visually appealing.

But then, as a sequel to Brett Leonard's 1992 original, *LM2* is hardly even bothered to try — unsurprisingly, as the original gaud seem to have jumped ship *en masse*, leaving incoming writer-director-producer Farhad Mann to make what he will with the mutilated remains of the sole surviving character. Jeff Fahey's original Jobe emerges after a lot of reconstructive plastic as the considerably less appealing Matt Frewer, who simply reprises all those Max Headroom mannerisms that seemed at the time to be intended satirically, permitting us one solitary flash of a virtual lawnmower by way of affirming continuity. The plot is senseless even by cybermovie standards, with a high Let's Index (measured by the frequency with which characters say "Let's do it!", "Let's get outta here!", &c.) and insistent pointless quota-

*Facing page:* Woody and Buzz, stars of *Toy Story*, have voices provided by Tom Hanks and Tim Allen

*Below:* Matt Frewer as Jobe Smith in *Lawnmower Man 2: Beyond Cyberspace*

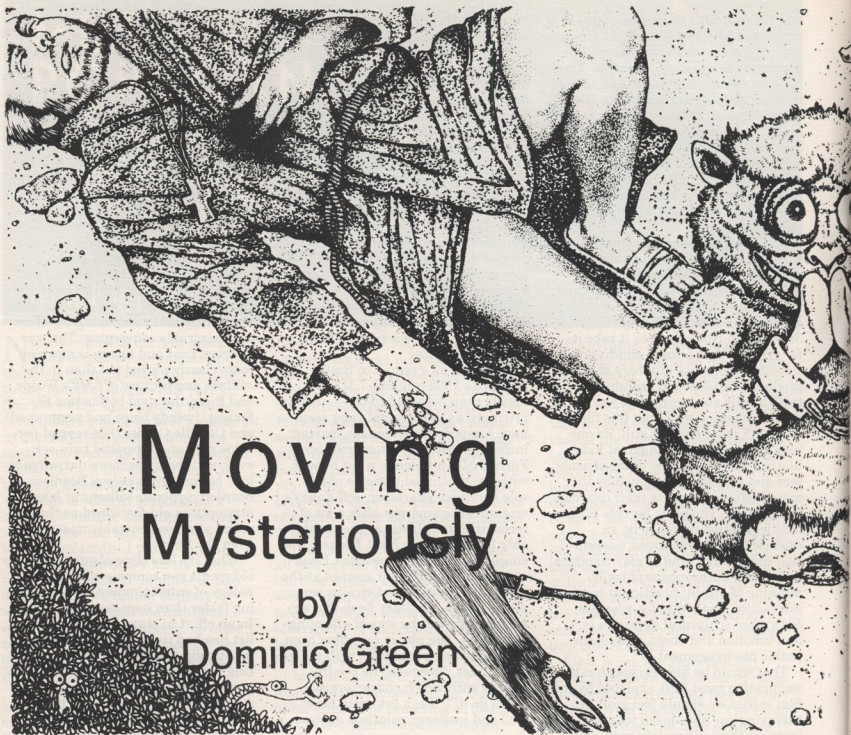


tions from *Star Wars* and *Tron* doing nothing to salvage a Michaelmas-descended premise that not only fails to go beyond cyberspace in any sense at all, but here betrays such a suicidally confused notion of what you can and can't do in collective hallucinations as to blow what little technocracit aspires to.

Nevertheless, let's be kind to what is, after all, no more than a computer-enhanced halfwit. Unlike *Toy Story*, *LM2* at least frankly acknowledges the existence of console entertainment as the true rival to Woody and Buzz alike for the hearts of the young, and the confluence of netsurfing with immersive VR interactivity as the experience to which razor-edge technology and youth leisure culture are inexorably converging. The war between past and future is nowhere more clearly played out than in the coiffure and couture of *LM2*'s Woody and Buzz, the rival boffinettes Ely Pouget (tweedy beige and perm: good) and Camille Cooper (80s-revival peroxide crop and futuristic twin-set: evil); and the threadbare narrative of lone boffin heroes versus Beadle-bearded corporate villainy at least attempts an old-fashioned us/them moral alignment notably missing from *Toy Story*.

What it's less clear about is how the old media can compete with a technology of entertainment that is evolving faster than movies can catch up. In an effort to stay ahead, *LM2*'s cast list has had its median age revised drastically downwards, and its setting has jumped inexplicably from its predecessor's present day to "Los Angeles — The Future" (which in practice seems to mean one of those fantastically unconvincing rainswept soundstages with badly-designed futuristic vehicles trundling past extras modelling an industry concept artist's notion of the Future Street look). This is a world in which the technological fantasies of the young can find, on film but not yet in life, their ultimate fulfilment: where hiply-homeless teens can "jack in" on new lightweight headsets to a fully immersive Brycescaped environment in the comfort of their own cool disused subway car, instead of having to strap themselves into a gimbal chair and stick a vacuum cleaner over their heads like their parents. It's a brave and poignant try, given that everything about the movie is doomed — including its valiant attempt to be a movie first and a multi-platform merchandising strategy not at all. But the future is a darker place than mere *noir* alone can picture; and such light as there is, as the Gibson-nodding title of *LM2*'s evil Institute acknowledges, may be not so much artificial as entirely virtual.

Nick Lowe



# Moving Mysteriously

by  
Dominic Green

“No, no! Yer not listenin’ ter whut ah’m sayin’! The meteor came down *slow* – fast at first, I’ll grantcher, but then it *sloowed right down* an’ hit the ground –”

The younger of the two cops humoured his witness. “Slow, you say, Mr Noonan?”

“Slow as my wife’s fat ass gettin’ into a hot tub, like it was” – the old man lowered his voice dramatically – “deployin’ retro-rockets.”

The older cop smiled his best broad asylum-attendant smile. “Now come, Michael – sure and it would be uncharitable to suggest your wife’s ass applies braking thrust.”

The two cops sniggered like naughty children in uniform. It was fairly obvious that they ascribed as much belief to the old geezer’s story as to the likelihood of sodomites slipping into Heaven via the back passage.

Unbelievable though it was, however, Breakspear, watching from the bushes, knew it to be the truth. The meteor *had* braked, suddenly and decisively, from a plummeting headlong speed of several thousand kilometres an hour to a baby-soft thistledown landing. Breakspear knew this because firstly, the thing

had not been a meteor, and secondly, Breakspear had been inside it at the time.

Had the old-timer seen any more than that, or were things relatively safe for the time being?

“– An’ then the top scrood off, an’ a man got out all wrapped in tinfoil –”

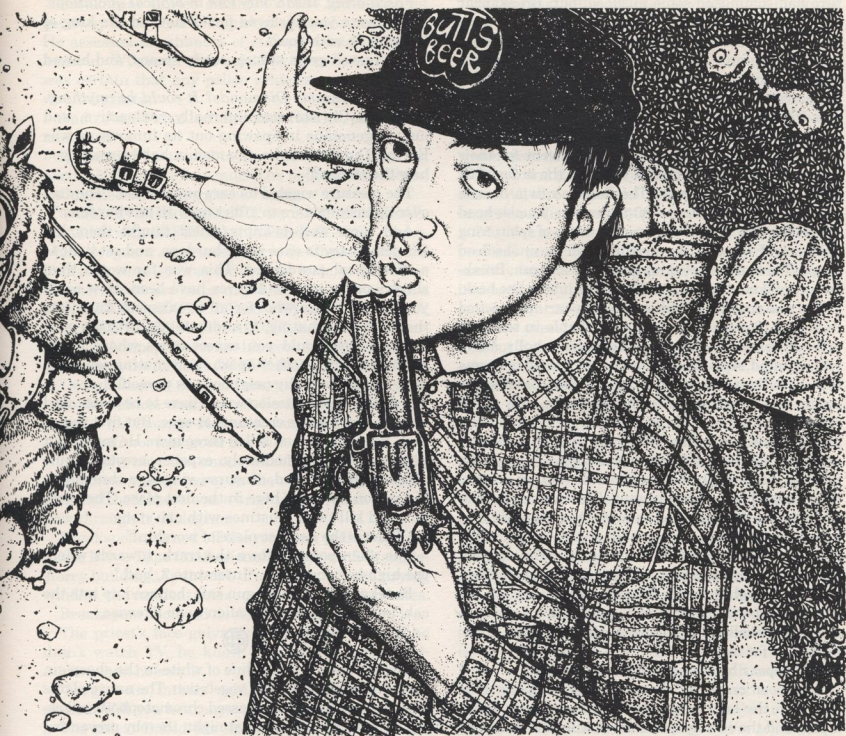
Oh dear.

“– he went thataway.”

*Thank you Michael. I now know in which direction not to go. And thankfully, I have already discarded my heat-resistant leisurewear in favour of something a little less daring.*

Wearing a cross-striped tartan shirt and a baseball cap proudly announcing BUTTS BEER over his inquisitorial jumpsuit, Breakspear circled through the undergrowth.

They were speaking English, the language of his youth, bringing back memories of life outside the Church. Since the days of the Glorious Armada, Englishmen like Breakspear were permitted in off-world missions, but for a man from a potential nest of heresy to be permitted to head an inquisitorial investigation such as this was nothing short of miraculous.



Illustrations by Russell Morgan

Breakspeare gave a second's silent thanks to St George for his solicited intervention, and plunged on through the bushes, which rustled and twittered with the doubtless venomous, many-fanged, and multi-legged wonders of God's creation. A half hour's journey, by the last available map of this region, should bring him to an East-West highway, where a vehicle could be hitched or (God forbid!) hijacked.

"And Joshua sent men to spy secretly, saying 'Go view the land'..." he consoled himself as he collided with trees and spun headlong into foul-tasting ponds. Running into a virgin forest at night, he decided, had not been the most intelligent of actions.



Abruptly, however, he became aware of lights in the leathery green trees ahead of him. Too soon for the highway, surely? Had the police circled round and cut him off? Did they have infrared-vision equipment, perhaps, that could pinpoint his position?

Well, he was on papal business, and as such, licensed to sin. Any sin legitimately committed in the course of an inquisitor's working hours could later be

claimed back in papal indulgences. Even the sin of murder. Sometimes, *especially* the sin of murder.

He had an expense account, though he'd better be careful not to fiddle it. He placed his hand on the pistol and moved quietly through the overgrown undergrowth.

Not a highway, but an unpaved track, a local bridleway the cartographers had not even bothered to record. Not a police car, but a methane-powered truck, the whir of the engine unmistakable. Not policemen, but monks – by their robes, monks of the Order of St Wayne, a rather dubious local hermit, hysterical stigmatic and haemophilic who had been canonized five years ago for bleeding to death in all the right places. Monks, therefore, under the direct control of Cardinal Feverfew. Possibly soon to be *ex-Cardinal* Feverfew, Breakspeare reminded himself grimly.

There were four monks, and they were holding one of the locals – a small, furry biped with a long tongue and huge blue genital organs, commonly called a "beaver" or "platypaw" in the colonial argot. They had it down on the ground, and were kicking it and stinging it with what seemed to be battery-operated cattle prods. Their mood seemed angry, as though the crea-

ture had committed some misdeed; but, Breakspear reasoned, the creature was also helpless, and such anger was currently unwarranted. They appeared to be trying to force something down the little fellow's throat, shouting, "Swaller, y'ornery bastard! Swaller!"

He rose from the bushes, not bothering to conceal his gun. Unfortunately, he had not checked whether any of the monks also possessed guns; the very idea, after all, was unthinkable. Three of the monks went for their pieces. Breakspear, himself a canon of the order of St Francis, went for his own. The Beretta's twin barrels spat out a silent volley of 20-millimetre squash-head projectiles. The was an unfortunate series of splattering noises, and three of the brethren fell in unabsolved heaps. The fourth hurled his gun away and ran; Breakspear could not bring himself to shoot him in the back.

The platypaw cowered as Breakspear approached it. It was a queer beast, not describable in terms of apes or bears or beavers, but a being wholly alien, with a round, squat body punctuated with short arms that bore flaps like devil wings. These, Breakspear knew, would be useless for flying in the thin atmosphere of Sangre-de-Christo; they were used for "flying" underwater, for the platypaw was a lacustrine creature. There were flat pink rear digging feet, and a big flat, undeniably beaverlike tail and, of course, those huge blue genital organs. The eyes were vast and mournful, a result of having three separate eyelids drooped round the eyeball. But it was not the creature's alien qualities that startled Breakspear, but its next words, communicated in perfect English.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil! When I cry *unto thee*, then shall mine enemies turn back; this I know: for God *is* for me!"

Breakspear holstered the gun, and gaped.

"You poor creature," he said, observing the blue brand on the beast's left breast, like a Greek letter alpha, and the shoddy iron cuffs it still wore on hands and feet. "Someone's been teaching you Christianity."

An eagerness entered the beast's eyes. It rattled its broken chains enthusiastically. "In God we boast all the day long, and praise His name for ever. Selah."

"But you're not authorized to do that," Breakspear tried to explain. "The Holy See has decreed that God has made separate provision for your species. Christianity is not for you. It's sort of a... members-only club, I suppose. Go home, go forth to your swamps and dark morasses, and dwell no further on this business. Which person was it who evangelized you? They have committed a great misdeed."

"Behold the servant of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word," replied the platypaw, drawing crosses in the dirt with its foot.

*That's Mary's reply to the angel at the Annunciation, thought Breakspear. It must have seen me coming down in the re-entry vehicle. It thinks I'm an angel come to save it.*

"You have been enslaved," he said. "The enslavement of intelligent species is also contrary to papal decree. Who was it who enslaved you, and why?"

"The Lord has given us into the hand of the king of Babylon."

*Fascinating. It can only talk in biblical quotations. "What were you enslaved for? What did the king of Babylon do with you?"*

"We hewed great stones, costly stones, and hewed stones..."

*Iron? Uranium? Diamonds? It could be anything. Sangre-de-Christo was internally radioactive, and just as generous in spewing out its innards as was Earth. "Did the monks, the men in habits, make you hew the stones?"*

The creature wiggled its ears and nodded. "They set over us taskmasters to afflict us with our burdens."

And some well-meaning priest taught them the Gospels, to try to ease those burdens, and set light to a theological powderkeg. This was far worse than slavery on its own could ever have been. How could you expect a race who, for all Breakspear knew, ate the male after mating, to understand Christian matrimony? How could you expect races whose males might tear one another apart every mating season to understand "love thy neighbour as thyself"?

A Jesuit Retro-Mission would have to be dispatched to de-evangelize the creatures at once. But first things first. Breakspear had killed three men. He must visit a confessional immediately, expense account or no expense account. And, of course, visiting a church was his reason for being here in the first place. Therefore he could kill two Philistines with one stone.

"What is the nearest place of worship?"

The alien pointed down the track, towards where the highway should be. "Interstate 2, bud."

Breakspear made his gun safe, bounced up into the cab, and motioned to the alien to do likewise.



The road was a brilliant line of white in the sharp air, bordered by ghostly white vegetation. The native plants of Sangre-de-Christo possessed chromatophores allowing them to change colour at night, thereby preventing re-radiation of valuable heat. Sangre-de-Christo's "night gardens" were a popular novelty export.

He'd been driving for about two hours now. The traffic system had changed somewhat since Breakspear's map had been made, but it was still simple enough. There were two main highways, Interstate 1 and Interstate 2. The road curved past human settlements – independently-powered, air-conditioned, self-contained, paranoiacally unwilling to blend with the world around them, little barbed-wire bits of Earth pretending to be colonies.

Breakspear turned on the TV in the dashboard, and was shocked to see his own face stare back at him. Surely his expression was normally not quite so surly, criminal and brutal?

– TRUE COMMUNION TV, the VOICE and FACE of the WORD! Download YOUR Anti-Papal indulgence NOW and get an extra TEN PERCENT off FIVE HUNDRED YEARS in Purgatory. Police reports are only just now coming in of a BRUTAL AND VICIOUS SLAYING of THREE BROTHERS OF THE HOLY ORDER OF SAINT WAYNE in Ulster County; HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN? This photofit picture has been built up from two eyewitness accounts –

Breakspear turned off the TV. The monk he'd let get away must have been picked up by the policemen. He assessed his chances of staying ahead of apprehension. Whatever this vehicle's motor was like, it was certain that any police vehicles coming after it would be faster.

And... *Anti-Papal indulgences?* Had he, perchance, misheard?

He decided he needed to know as much as possible, particularly about how much the police knew of him, and turned on the goggle-box again.

“— BE ON THE LOOKOUT for a STOLEN REAR-LOADER with CLERICAL LICENCE PLATES. Meanwhile, pregnant women of Sangre-de-Christo suffering from back pain, cravings for radiator scale, or Just Plain Haemorrhoids, are being urged today to take part in a PIONEERING EXERCISE in PSYCHIC SURGERY and HEALING BY FAITH ALONE, led by his Counter-Holiness Antipope Feverfew himself. Anti-Papal classes will open at the CURSE OF EVE BIRTHING CENTRE in Croagh Pdraig at 10 pm sharp —”

So the vehicle was wanted. So ditch the vehicle.

And... his Counter-Holiness, Antipope Feverfew.

*This will not look good in court.*

But right now, the unmistakable shape of a bright white cross was growing on the roadside; as Breakspear watched, there was a bright brown flash as a bat flew through it. Hologram.

Breakspear turned off the road and pulled up next to the Drive-Thru Confessional, a slope-roofed, single-storey building. As the cab drew level with the paying window, the resident priest came over on rollerskates.

Breakspear motored down the window.

The priest's face galvanized in alarm. Even if he didn't watch TV, he knew a Beretta .50 over-and-under when he saw it.

“Forgive me, father,” said Breakspear, “For I have sinned. Will you hear my confession, father?”

The priest licked his lips and looked over at the late-night alarm button. He knew he would never reach it in time.

“Go ahead, my son,” he swallowed.

“Forgive me, father, for I have sinned. I have recently travelled to this planet without the written consent of its authorities.”

The priest nodded. “Ah. So you're a mining company employee trying to duck out of a long contract on Little Moon, I suppose.”

“No. I travelled to this planet from another star. From Earth.”

The priest blinked. “But that's not possible. The only Spiritual Drive ships are Church ships, and the Church is the authority here —”

“Yes,” said Breakspear. “I know.”



The universe was accessible to man only at the Church's whim. Did not the Church control the only technology capable of putting man in touch with his colonies in space? After the invention of the first Spiritual Reactionless Drive by Brother Giuseppe Tittensori in 2007, all other man-made propulsion systems had been rendered obsolete.

At the close of the 19th century, scientists had come close to it. The ether, a theoretical medium through which light waves moved as ripples moved through water, had been an all-pervading, omnipresent substance which also, unfortunately, turned out to be non-existent. This had not prevented popular writers of the time from inventing “ether screws” and “ether paddles” and scores of other ingenious devices, all of which were designed to pull and push on the invisible medium, and thereby drive a man-made craft through space. All throughout the 20th century, scientists had laughed at the perpetrators of such fantasies; then, in 2007, Brother Tittensori had bent his brain to the problem and proved that reactionless drives were entirely feasible, with one proviso; the popular writers had been pushing and pulling on the wrong invisible, omnipresent medium. Did not the Church teach that God was present everywhere? And since God (though Present Everywhere) was also Outside Time, this also meant that restrictions on the speed of light did not apply. The Spiritual Drive pushed and pulled on the fabric of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit didn't seem to mind.

“In the course of my legal business as a Field Inquisitor sent to Sangre-de-Christo by His Holiness himself in order to determine the nature of the True Communion of Cardinal Feverfew,” continued Breakspear, “I have been forced to kill four members of the Church.”

The priest's lower lip trembled. “F-four?”

Aha. So he *did* watch TV. Breakspear cocked the pistol. “Indeed, father. My business is urgent and of the greatest secrecy. Cardinal Feverfew is also under suspicion of having arranged the disappearance from secret Vatican vaults of the Holy Foreskin of Calcata (long claimed to be the One True Foreskin of Christ Our Lord, removed according to traditional Jewish practice when he was but a few months old) and, oddly enough, of the kidnap of a number of genetic scientists. He is accused of heresy and/or schism. It is my unfortunate task to prove him guilty as charged. What is my absolution, father?”

The priest sat down on the confessor's chair in resignation, looking down the barrels of the Beretta.

“Twenty Hail Marys, son... Will you hear *my* confession?”

“I will, father.”



“... and after that I had impure thoughts about the plump, firm young globes of a young woman who stopped by not five hours ago in a pick-up... and not four hours ago, I had thoughts of acting against the wishes of His Holiness's Divine Inquisition by reaching over and pressing that alarm button... but, going back to something I just remembered from when I was still four years old...”

Breakspear sat in the cab and yawned. The gun was still pointing across the confessional, and his finger was still on the trigger.

The sun was coming up, red as Breakspear's eyes, over the horizon.

“I tell you what, father,” he said. “Why don't you just wander on over to that side door over there and

let me in and turn your back on me a moment.”

The priest's eyes brightened. “Get thee behind me, Satan! Bless you, my son.”



The priest crumpled to the floor, the oxygen supply to his brain temporarily stopped, as Breakspear squeezed on his carotid artery. Breakspear massaged the artery back into shape, and felt for a pulse. Thankfully, his confessor was still alive. He propped the priest comfortably in a cupboard, binding his arms and legs, and put the CLOSED sign up, then crudely sabotaged the alarm button, security camera and radio telephone. Behind him, the platypaw stood patiently.

“And he went into the temple of God, and he cast out all of them that sold and bought in the temple,” offered the platypaw.

Breakspear ignored the creature, and walked round the confessional, opening cupboards as he went. As he got to the second cupboard along, he knocked a small black disc that wasn't as heavy as it looked from the kitchen top. It clattered to the floor unregarded; at the corner of his eye, the small black disc grew legs and scuttled sideways across the carpet. Breakspear, conditioned as his species had been for a hundred million years to being preyed on by large venomous spiders, leapt sideways with a curse; the platypaw, with a different evolutionary history, stood stock still, looking at him strangely.

Then a miniature platypaw appeared on top of the disc. See-through, mind you, and somewhat fuzzy, but a platypaw nevertheless. It had muscles in peculiar places, and cocked ears and staring eyes and gaping mouth set in an odd expression of which Breakspear would not have believed a normal platypaw to be capable. The teeth, in particular, were (surely) impossibly large. It also had six arms.

This did draw a response from the platypaw. The creature made a noise like a train whistle and recoiled into a dark corner of the confessional's window. “Idolatry!” it shrieked.

“Easy, easy,” said Breakspear, and reached down to the holograph projector, and turned the image off. “See, it can't hurt you any longer.”

*A statue, he thought. A hologram of a statue. Probably one of the pagan idols they used to worship perfectly happily before they saw the bloody light.*

He pocketed the device, and moved on to the third cupboard, where he found what he had sought; three tall cylindrical tubes, labelled TRUE COMMUNION CLASSIC, TRUE COMMUNION SPICY MEXICAN and TRUE COMMUNION DILL PICKLE AND CHEESE IN A SESAME-SEED BUN. He opened one of the tubes and upended it. Communion wafers spilled out. And yet they didn't look quite like communion wafers somehow. They were the right size, and the right shape, but slightly crinkled at the edges, and dark in coloration.

It wasn't a communion wafer. But what was it?

He turned round to the platypaw. “Where do they make these? Are they made on this planet?”

“Cardinal Feverfew has found a plain in the land of <sound like an explosion in a trombone factory>, and he dwells there. And the house which we built for him, the length thereof is 1,000 metres and the

breadth thereof 1,000 metres.”

*So if I can penetrate the factory somehow... but that will have to wait.*

“Platypaw – excuse me, what is your name?”

“My name among my own people is ‘Small-tail-swims-far-eats-many-trees’. Among humans I am called ‘hey, boy.’”

“‘Small-tail’ will do fine. There will be many police here soon. Is there anywhere you and I can hide?”

“We may escape to a cave which has been our dwelling place in all generations.”

“Lead us to it. And quickly. I may have triggered one or more alarms I know nothing about.”



The alien hopped over a tree stump and pointed out into the swamp. Breakspear stepped over the tree stump, which scuttled away and snapped at a passing insect. Behind them, the swamp gurgled hungrily as it swallowed the truck without trace.

“It's a mud bank,” said Breakspear.

“We have built a house of habitation for us,” said the platypaw. “Here we dwell in the thick darkness.” He slapped rhythmically on the surface of the water with his tail. “Behold, we stand at the door and knock.” A complex series of ripples spread out across the swamp. Presently, as if in answer, another complex set of ripples came back from the opposite direction.

Small-tail gripped Breakspear's ankle.

“You will please refrain from breathing,” he said, and hopped into the mire, jerking Breakspear forwards with eyeball-popping speed like a small, round, furry cannonball chained to the leg of a convict. Breakspear felt himself being hauled through muck thick as partially solidified concrete by powerful swimming muscles. Eventually, just as his lungs were on the point of haemorrhaging, he felt his head clear the water, but saw only blackness. Around him was a chattering like an aviary full of parrots and saxophonists. Warm slimy flippers pulled him up out of the water, onto wet dirt. He sprawled and gasped.

Then he opened his eyes.

He was in the middle of a warm, high-ceilinged space the size of a cathedral, lit by fireplaces worked into walls, floors and ceilings of woven roots and swamp-bottom ooze, and filled to brimming with small, round, furry cannonballs, warming themselves at the hearths, playing with smaller, rounder, firrier cannonballs, having frantic extraterrestrial sex in the shadows, and boiling luckless swamp beasts in huge earthenware cauldrons. The mud bank was hollow! What Breakspear had thought to be hot marsh gas rising from a bank of putrescing mud and weed had been smoke rising from chimneys.

He put a hand on the wall. It was warm. (Of course it was warm, it was made of decaying vegetable matter. The chimneys had probably evolved out of a system of vents to drain off surplus methane. The platypaws had invented natural gas power, using gas they made themselves.) From the air, even on infra-red, this probably looked like any other mud bank. And the only way in was underwater, like a beaver's lodge. No wonder the local colonials called them beavers.



Every single one of the beavers bore a blue slave brand on its chest.

The beavers were shuffling closer. One of them, a wrinkled old hairless male looking like a huge sentient prune, prodded Breakspear accusingly.

"Ye are a spy; to see the nakedness of the land are you come."

"Stretch not forth your hand against the lord's anointed!" replied Small-tail. "Touch! Taste! Handle!"

The old platypaw leaned over and flicked a huge tongue over Breakspear's face. It smelled foul, and felt like a huge, warm worm. Breakspear remained calm, though revolted.

"Surely this is a righteous man," proclaimed the older alien. "He smells holy."

*Incredible, thought Breakspear. They judge how holy a man is according to how much like a priest he smells. Probably by how much incense and communion wine he stinks of. How can you put Christ's message over to a mind no more human than this? It was monstrous to ever try - like teaching a bear to dance.*

"He is not of our nation."

"He spied some Wayneites smiting me, and he slew the Wayneites, and hid them in the sand."

*I didn't hide them in the sand, thought Breakspear; but he didn't argue. Instead, he said:*

"How did you come to be here, and in hiding?"

The old alien bounced up and down in annoyance. "Art thou only a stranger in Sangre-de-Christo, and hast not known the things which are come to pass here in these days?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Cardinal Feverfew came into all the world, and preached the Gospels to every creature," said the old platypaw. "And he nourished us, and our little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them. Now there arose up a new Colonial Administration over Sangre-de-Christo, and it made our lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick. The LORD has led forth these people *which* he has redeemed; He has guided them in His strength unto this holy habitation."

Escaped slaves. But Feverfew, Cardinal Feverfew no less, preaching the Gospel to aliens? The True Communion, of which mysterious and unsettling reports had lately reached Rome, could surely be nothing compared to this, which was in direct contravention of papal decree. But the Church - or Feverfew, at least - seemed to be the only force on this world which was combatting slavery. If Breakspear did nothing, pronounced all well and left, he left Feverfew in danger of hell fire; if he pronounced Feverfew guilty of inappropriate missionary activity, the natives might well remain in bondage permanently.

He decided that it might help to know the exact extent of Feverfew's misdeed.

"What exactly has Cardinal Feverfew taught you of the Gospels?" he asked.

On this, the platypaws were most affirmative.

"Do what Cardinal Feverfew wills shall be the whole of the law," intoned one creature firmly.

"Blessed *are* they which are persecuted; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," canted another.

"Render unto Cardinal Feverfew the things which are Cardinal Feverfew's," said a third.



All Breakspear's compunctions vanished. Feverfew had been teaching only so much Gospel as would make the platypaws into better slaves. He felt not so much hatred of the Cardinal as relief that the decision of whether or not to proceed with the investigation had been lifted from him.

"Did he never teach you any of the Old Testament? Of Joshua and Jericho? Of David and Goliath? Of Samson in the Temple of the Philistines?"

"I know not what thou sayest. I do not know these men."

*But you taught them Exodus, Cardinal, and surprise surprise, your slaves have run away. Take command, Breakspear.*

"Now behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto the LORD," said Breakspear, "And He has also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians, erm, I mean, the Colonial Administration, oppress them."

"Behold, we are brought unto this wilderness by the servant of the LORD, who is come down to deliver us out of the hand of the Colonial Administration," replied the platypaws, speaking as one; as one, except for the fat old wrinkled one, down whose cheeks rolled a single prideful tear.

*Oh my God, thought Breakspear. He's Moses.*

"Listen," he said, starting forward, growing desperate. "You have been deceived."

"By the serpent, who is more subtil than any beast of the field, yes," the Moses-platypaw nodded solemnly. "He is cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field."

*Oh no. Please Lord no. All my life I have learned to steer people towards God - and now I have to do it the other way round? If these people burned me for telling them they weren't good enough to be children of my God, would that make me a saint? O Lord forgive me for harbouring thoughts of such blasphemy -*

"Look! You had gods before men came to you, yes?"

They wiggled their ears, and shuffled from foot to foot like so many huge hairy eggs in an incubator. "We did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, and we reared up altars and dealt with familiar spirits and wizards."

"And what did you call those spirits?"

The big old platypaw closed all six of his eyelids in disquiet, and intoned, "We worshipped all the host of heaven, and made us woven images of wicker wickedness, and served (here he made a sound like swamp gas exploding), Lord of Exploding Swamp Gas, and burnt canoes to the sun and to the moon, and to the planets, and made our polywogs to pass through our bowels to Molech."

*So they eat their own young. Probably speeds evolution. The weak ones get eaten, the fast smart ones get away.*



Breakspear suddenly remembered the holo in his pocket. He took it out, and cast it on the ground before him. It struggled to its feet, and flickered into life. Abruptly, a six-foot image of a heavily-muscled platypaw stood before the crowd.

"Do any of your gods look anything like that?"

The platypaws backed away in what Breakspear

presumed to be horror. *Erm. Primitive psychology. Think. Think. Think.*

"Can't you see!" said Breakspear, waving his arms wildly. "The faith of the offworlders is false! You have been averted from the one true faith! See, here, an emanation of the great god BLUP BLUP BABOOM appears with anger in his countenance!"

"That," proclaimed the elderly platypaw with absolute certainty, "is a hologram."

Then he turned to his tribe of furry spherical Israelites, and intoned: "And Satan comes also among us to present himself before the Lord! Get thee hence, Satan, for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."

*My life. I'm Satan now.*

*But then, being Satan is my job. Am I not Devil's Advocate? And now, I am indeed a devil. I have to think of a way of knocking a chink in their faith. What would the Prince of Darkness do, in such a circumstance? Think of some Satanic wile they've never been given an answer to? Or something from Judges? From Joshua, or Kings? Satan doesn't appear again until the New Testament, and they seem to know Job -*

*Oh my Lord. I don't need to imitate Satan. Our Lord Himself formulated one of the best logical paradoxes in the Bible. And more importantly, He didn't supply an answer.*

Breakspear swaggered forward as he imagined Satan might. Were he here, of course.

"What think ye of Christ? Whose son is he?"

As one the platypaws, living tape-recorders, chimed, "The Son of David."

Breakspear pounced. "How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying, The LORD said unto my Lord, sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies my footstool. If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?"

The platypaws shuffled and hooted in their unspeakable native tongues like a pipe organ with dysentery. Old Moses wailed, "And no man is able to answer him a word!"

*I have sowed tares in Cardinal Feverfew's good ground, thought Breakspear. Why, then, am I not able to be glad?*

Then -

Suddenly -

BOOM.

Platypaws bounced in all directions like snookerballs broken by a white ball of fire that made a permanent home on Breakspear's retina. Breakspear plastered his hands to his ears and swayed on his feet as the shockwave passed him.



When he opened his eyes, all the fires had gone out. Little round bodies littered the dirt around him, rolling and clutching their ears, their limbs, their mangled tails. Curiously enough, there was no screaming. Breakspear could have stood it if there had been screaming. But though the furry mouths were working and the mucous membranes within vibrating fit to bust, there was no audible sound. *Subsonic screaming*, he thought. It would carry for miles, warning other platypaws, like horrid whalesong.

Breaking through the roof above was sunlight, or more precisely, Beta Comae Berenices light, virtually indistinguishable from the real thing. And breaking through the shafts of sun were men. Men with guns, and goads slung bayonet-fashion under the guns, stinging dead and possum-players alike to see which moved. Idiots. The dead would move just as enthusiastically as the living, with their muscles galvanized.

After a little while, the gunmen, to their credit, began to realize their mistake, and started shooting the wounded to see whether they screamed. Pointless, brutal.

"See, they got a lot o' fat on 'em, these little Beavers BLAM YELP Yer kin nick 'em real close in ter th'bone without killin' 'em BLAM GURGLE Dang, missed."

"Yain't so much a Deadeye Dick as y'thinks y'is, Shaun. Wutch this..." BABABABABAM

"Whut's so good about that? You done headshot all the furry little bastards."

"Yeah, but ah wuz AIMIN' at their heads."

*Did the Church really sell these people the stars?*

Breakspear stood up. One of the conquering heroes leapt backwards in alarm, holding his gun out to protect him while he looked the other way, shouting, for no apparent reason, "BOOGERS!"

"Don't shoot! I'm a human being!"

"Mah God! You might well be at that!"

"Hey, he's a priest! Whut're you doin' here, father?"

"They kidnapped me, and were forcing me to eat alien turd against my will. Hey, look! What's that?"

His mind dulled somewhat by the first half of the sentence, the first hick turned round with the predictability of a laboratory rat, and Breakspear broke his neck without compassion. As the second hick was saying, "Hey, mister, I don't see nuthin'," Breakspear came at him from behind and tickled the base of his skull with his good buddy's goad gun. By the time a third and fourth hick were walking over, casually popping off at corpses, Breakspear, now dressed completely as a native, having discarded his inquisitorial robe, was leading Small-tail by the flipper over to the hole of daylight in the top of the mound.

"Hey! Whure the hill d'yoo thank yure takin' that thure merchandise?"

"This boy here's Cardinal Feverfew's own privy catamite. There's a ree-ward out fer his ree-turn," tried Breakspear.

"Whut's a catamite?" said the hick.

Breakspear rolled his eyes and blew a kiss. "Like dynamite, only better, pretty boy. You never had native ass? Yer missin' somethin'."

"Erggh! Yer disgustin', mister!" The third hick spat, obviously entirely revolted, and turned his attention back to shooting the wounded.



When Breakspear emerged from the hole in the mound, there were vehicles (no, he reminded himself; *vee-hickles*) everywhere. All military white-and-green, all bearing the Colonial Administration insignia.

One thought was preying on his mind. *How did they suddenly find out the mud bank was inhabited? A bit of a coincidence, surely, that I arrive and then sud-*

*denly the whole place blows.*

The morning's events seemed to have been too much for Small-Tail, who was standing absolutely still, making noises that could have been curses in his native language, or could have been signs that he was about to vomit.

He was about to vomit. Silently, like a cat, he emitted around a quart of nauseous blue goo, mostly over himself. The goo smelled heavily of sulphur. Perhaps the platypaws used sulphuric acid in their stomachs rather than hydrochloric, Breakspear thought.

Then he saw the pill lying on the ground in front of the animal. Large, round, undigested.

*The monks had been trying to get him to swallow something...*

Oh no. Please Jesus no.

Without a word, Breakspear picked up the radioactive pill, the one that had led police vehicles equipped with geiger counters to the escaped platypaws' exact location, and washed it in the water. Then, he patted Small-tail on the head, then proceeded in the direction of the vehicles.

*I need an all-terrain vehicle. A fast one. An ai. craft.*

There was an aircraft sitting on floats at the edge of the "water," but too far from the mud bank for Breakspear to flop and flounder his way to it through the muck before the guard standing on the port float noticed.

"Why don't your people fight back?" he said, watching bleeding platypaws being gleefully chased from the mound at goad-point. "They outnumber the farm-boys ten to one."

"Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also," said Small-tail, shrinking behind Breakspear.

*All very well, thought Breakspear. But while I'm turning my cheeks, I intend to fart at the enemy with what's between them.*

At that moment, a heavy hand fell on Breakspear's shoulder, and he was spun round like a weathervane. The man who had spun him was very big, and wore what looked like a police uniform.

"Ah ever see yoo before, boy?"

"No, sir," said Breakspear, preparing to kill the man.

"Didn't think so. Yoo ever on television?"

"Yessir," said Breakspear enthusiastically. "Ah'm our neighborhood hawg-tyin' champeen."

"Yup. Never fergit a face. Well, we need a loada beavers up there at the Wafer Works quickeren quick. This your vee-hickle?"

He indicated the nearest vee-hickle, a large balloontyred beast into which hordes of recaptured platypaws were being herded, packed tight as cabbages in a crate. Their blood, Breakspear could now see, was as red as any human's.

"They're pullin' faces agin, god damn it! Ah hate it when they do that! John Fitzgerald, stop 'em doin' that!"

*They aren't pulling faces, thought Breakspear, any more than a chimp is smiling when it bares its teeth. They haven't really got much of a facial musculature, so those expressions are extreme. They must be in terrible pain.*

Then he was being pushed on board the vee-hickle with both hands, as if he too were a piece of intelli-

gent cargo. The policeman clambered up beside him and sat down, heavily. The man was drunk.

"Well, let's go," said the copper, his stomach moving spasmodically, as if he were about to burp or vomit. "Ah'm too fur gone ter drive."

Luckily, there was a key in the ignition. So far so good. Breakspear helped Small-tail up into the cab and started the engine successfully, then examined the clutch pedal arrangement. Everything seemed to be in a more or less familiar location. Luckily, the copper was, indeed, too far gone to notice much as the truck groaned and complained and vibrated into motion under Breakspear's inexperienced guidance.

This was a Sunday afternoon outing to these people, what the platypaws would later remember as a defining, desperately brave era in their religious history...

No. They would have no religious history. They could have none. *Get that into your head. Now.*

Was it the same when the Romans dug the early Christians out of the catacombs? "Shoot, Marius, lookee what we have here, an early Christeen bureel party if mah eyes do not mistake me -"

"Ole Anteye-Pope Feverfu'ze our man," said the policeman drunkenly. "Feverfu'ze not like them Roman fairies who said we wuzn't ter convert the beavers. Iffen we kint convert 'em, how're we ter stop 'em from whorin' an' murderin' an' idolatrizin' an' a-campin' on our land? All that land - BURP - all that land an' the Pope sed we wuzn't ter touch it! Goddamn ass-kissin' skullcap-wearin' Roman Joo that he is -"

"Steady on now there, fella, that's His Holiness yer mouthin' off about," admonished Breakspear. "Ah've got statues of 'im an' everythin'."

"Beggin' yer pardon," said the copper. "BURP. But the True Communeen - the True Communeen is a leap forward in Ecclesielastical engineerin' as potent - ah say, AS POTENT - as that thur Spiritual Reactionless Drive." He waved his gun around like an orchestral conductor as he spoke. Out of the corner of his eye, Breakspear could see that the safety was off.

*As potent as the Spiritual Drive? What could it be? I could try and find out more, but I'm not feeling feline. My curiosity isn't going to kill me, just yet.*

"Whu'd'you think boy?" he said, pointing the gun in Breakspear's direction as an indication that he should speak.

"It's undoubtedly very potent," said Breakspear.

"Damn right it is!" said the cop, moving the gun onto Small-tail, who cringed. "Bang," he said.

*Now I am feeling feline. Eat claw there, boy.* Breakspear braked, hard, whipping an arm round Small-tail. The copper hadn't listened to his own road-safety propaganda, hadn't put on his seatbelt, and headbutted the windscreen. The gun went off, and a bullet ripped through the cab roof above Breakspear's head.



The cop was unconscious. Breakspear pushed open the side door and kicked the cop out. Then he dropped out of the driver door and walked round to the back of the truck to where the platypaws were lashed in to the freight compartment, pulling faces and bleeding.

"That old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan,"

they greeted him, once they'd sent a few tongues through the sides of the freighter to taste him. Breakspear ignored them and unbuckled the straps that held the side panels. A torrent of furry bodies fell on top of him.

They cringed away from his rifle as he picked himself up.

"Behold!" he cried. "Thou art driven out this day from the face of the earth; and you shall be fugitives and vagabonds in the earth; and it shall come to pass that every one that findeth you shall slay you."

They took the hint and ran for it. Breakspear then dragged the copper's outermost layer of uniform off, and, glancing up and down the road to make sure no vee-hickles were coming, tried it on himself. It fitted with a minimum of discomfort. Newly attired, he leapt up again to the cab. Small-tail still sat there.

"What are you waiting for?" said Breakspear. "You're free."

"Entreat me not to leave thee," said Small-tail. "For whither thou goest, I will go. Where thou diest, I will die, and there I will be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought *but* death part thee and me."

"Ah. It's like that, is it?"

"Yup."

"I think I ought to point out that I am about to resume travelling in the direction of the True Communion wafer factory."

"I am steadfastly minded to go with you."

"You're the boss. But first of all, before we set off, I'm going to sabotage the engine."

The platypaw's ears pricked up in what Breakspear took to be surprise.



One thousand metres by one thousand. An unprepossessing building - set about with three wire fences and an impressive collection of machine-gun towers, true, but looking undeniably like the factory it was supposed to be, laid out in the bottom of a broad river valley denuded of vegetation with suspicious thoroughness.

Auschwitz, Breakspear knew, had also looked like a factory.

He halted the vehicle just outside the outermost gate. A paramilitarily-clad lay brother hurried up to the truck.

"Howdee thur, sergint. Whutchoo doin' comin' back with an empty vee-hickle with no beavers in it there, boy?"

"Howdee thur, boy sir. Not only is this vee-hickle empty, it is also dis-functional. Ah think a swarm of giant swamp locusts musta flown up mah air intake. Thus here beaver is mah personal pet." Breakspear clicked open the truck bonnet, and thick steam boiled out like Satan quenching his own penis after an eternity in Hell's forge.

"Them giant swamp locusts is nasty. Ah'd have it seen to straightaway. Engineer's shop is third on th'left, main compound."

"Ah am much obliged ter you fer yer kindness there, boy, yessirreebob, dagnabit."

The gateman looked at Breakspear oddly, as if to

say, are you taking the piss or what there, son? But he let the vee-hickle pass. Small-tail began repeating the 137th Psalm again rapidly under his breath as long, absolutely straight, clinically clean-lined concrete walls surrounded them. Other vehicles moved hither and thither, towing standard orbital cargo modules. Breakspear strained to read the manufacturer's names on the ones that were being unloaded.

*Nintendo*, he read, *the supercomputer manufacturer. And Bishop – they make gene sequencers, don't they? And – liquid nitrogen coolant? Kilotitres of it?*

*What would a wafer factory want with advanced genome coding equipment and cryo-cooling gear?*

The cargo pods were standard orbital launcher jobs, implying that somewhere around here was a shuttle landing field. But where? Breakspear had not seen any such thing on the way in.

Part of the factory was elevated above the rest, and appeared to contain a chapel. Breakspear parked next to the maintenance shed, then got out and began walking toward the church building, accompanied by Small-tail.



Halfway across the yard, in midwater with no place to run or hide, he heard a voice clearly and distinctly call his name.

"Michael Joseph Breakspear! It is you, isn't it? What a pleasure to see you..."

Breakspear turned. A devil was sitting on a packing crate to his left.

"My, my, how you've grown. I haven't seen you since puberty, when you had that embarrassing closet homosexuality incident..."

It was a highly realistic devil, with the bat wings, and the cloven hooves, and a grin a mile wide punctuated by needle-sharp teeth. Only as tall as a hologram, but it wasn't a hologram. There was no projector unit in sight. The beast had been copied religiously from the *Malleus Maleficorum* – or perhaps things had been the other way round.

*I am hallucinating*, thought Breakspear. *I am not important enough to merit individual diabolic attention.*

"Oh, but you *are!*" cried the devil. "Personal service is extended to all our customers."

Breakspear frowned; then smiled. "Then your appearance before me is foolish, since, as a devil, you exist only as a perverted reflection of God. Therefore your very existence implies that I am also receiving personal *angelic* service of a strength to counteract your vile ministrations."

"Quite correct," said a small voice from a packing crate to his right. Breakspear turned, and there was the angel. Harp, wings, halo and all.

"Fiddlesticks!" cried the devil. "Plan B," and flew at the angel, knocking it backwards off the crate. Breakspear turned to see several loading hands watching the scene with total lack of alarm, and evident amusement.

*So angels and devils are common here?* thought Breakspear. *That can only mean one thing. They're operating a Spiritual Drive inside the atmosphere. The reckless idiots! The demonic exhaust could damn all feeble souls within a five-kilometre radius.*



*Which explains a lot.*

And there, indeed, was the squat Romanesque shape of a Papal Products Ark 1 half-concealed in a blast pit over by the north perimeter. She looked slightly embarrassed, like a Victorian matron in full corsets in an Olympic 100-metres sprint final; forced to land in an atmosphere for which she had never been designed.

The Spiritual Drive operated by pulling and pushing on the fabric of the Holy Spirit, just as a nautical propeller sucked in water and squirted it out the back. Pulling on the Holy Spirit brought one closer to God; pushing on it moved Him further away. This meant that the bow of a Spiritually-driven craft radiated angelic rays, and the stern radiated dangerous demonic ones. The crew were carried in a sealed and blessed component in the bow.

But if someone were to land a Logodyne on its motors –

All the ground crew looking up at that exhaust would be immediately, irretrievably damned. They would go out and enslave native populations, preach Christianity to aliens, murder, rape, adulterize, indulge in the True Communion, whatever that was.

Breakspear crossed himself unconsciously.

"That is, unfortunately, the situation exactly," said the angel, which had just reappeared before him. In fact, there were now *two* angels, both slightly the worse for wear, and totally identical.

*One of these angels, thought Breakspear, is a devil.*

"Quite correct," said one of the angels. "That appears to be his Plan B. I'm afraid you'll have to use your discretion as to which one of us to believe. One of those two doors over there" – he indicated the main building, which seemed to have two side doors – "will lead you to a knowledge of the True Communion. One of them will take you to your death."

"That is indeed correct," said the other angel. "It is the one on the left, just as whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin."

"Not so!" said the first angel. "It is the one on the right, just as Satan hath desired to have you, that he might sift you as wheat."

Breakspear, without thinking twice, lifted the policeman's pistol and pumped bullets into both the angels. Only the first angel screamed. The second looked at him, and at the holes in its midriff, in hurt puzzlement.

"What did you do that for, my son?" it said.

"A devil is in hell for ever more. 'This is hell, nor am I out of it.' Even when outside the bounds of hell, a devil is racked with everlasting fire. What is one more bullet to one already in the extremes of pain? You did not scream. Therefore, you are the devil."

The second angel twisted and reformed. The feathers sank into its leathery wings. Horns grew from its head. Fire burned in its fundament.

"Quite correct, son of man," it sneered. "But I'll getcha next time."

"No hard feelings," Breakspear said to the angel. It saluted in military fashion, the bullet wound in its chest already contracting to a red dot. Then it dived on the devil and all heaven and hell broke loose.



Pocketing the gun, Breakspear pressed on through the right hand door.

"Michael Joseph Breakspear! It is you, isn't it? What a pleasure to see you..."

Once in the same day was enough, but twice... expecting to see Beelzebub himself this time, Breakspear turned, only to see something far, far worse.

Feverfew, Cardinal of the faith, dressed in a woolly cardigan and carpet slippers. Smoking a pipe. A bundle of performance reports in one hand.

"The last time I saw you, you were studying for the Priesthood."

*The man must have an encyclopedic memory. He could only have met me for a few moments. Oh my god. Oh my god. Why hast thou forsaken me? Has he guessed the truth? He must, in time –*

"I – I decided the calling wasn't for me, father. I decided I could serve God better by marrying the woman I loved."

"Going forth and multiplying, eh?" The Cardinal made a gesture with his palm and bicep which Breakspear had previously considered Cardinals incapable of, then continued: "We turn a blind eye to marrying out here, y'know. If the South Americans can do it, so can we. There's an opening for you in our priesthood yet, if you still think you're man enough. What made you come out here?"

"Erm. Because they speak my language on this planet." Which was entirely true. "There aren't many worlds whose people speak English."

"Yes, well, after His Holiness drew the plane down the universe between NASA and the European Space Agency, Spanish has been the *lingua franca* of most worlds. You've got yourself a little pet, I see. You must have been here some time."

"Only a week, father. Me and" – he searched mentally for a name, felt wretched when he could only think of one – "Mary took the first ship after we married." He smiled pearly-whitely. "We have a nice syndicate homestead just out yonder, and our neighbours are of the best, but I'd really appreciate a few hints as to how to survive in this wilderness."

The Cardinal's teeth seemed sharper in his smile. "Try the honey, but don't eat the locusts." He laughed, and the smile got even larger, as if his head were unzipping at the face. "Particularly the giant swamp variety. And keep the little woman indoors, away from the natives," he added, indicating Small-tail.

"Why?"

"Well, they're hermaphrodites, as I'm sure you're aware... now, this means they have no real concept of Woman, and had to be taught what it meant, and when we evangelized them, we taught them Adam and Eve, and Solomon and his wives, and so on, and somehow the majority of them have got it into their heads that women are some sort of vicious scaly pet that humans keep, a separate species, hardly sentient, to be killed as a venomous serpent if it's seen on the loose in the open..."

*Now. The time's right. You'll never get a better chance.*

"Why did you evangelize them, father? I mean, I'm not stupid, I know it's against papal authority..."

"A good question, son. We taught them English

through the medium Mother Church has always used, scriptural learning. All schools out here are Catholic schools, as I'm sure you can appreciate. Unfortunately, they took what they were taught a little too *literally*...."

"Go and sell that thou hast, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; when you find a pearl of great price, go and sell all that you have, and buy it," said Small-tail suddenly, and Breakspear could swear his small alien eyes burned with malice. The Cardinal appeared not to notice, and patted the platypaw benignly.

"Indeed, and they swiftly sold our settlers all their land for glass pearls of great sale price, which the settlers were glad to supply them with at a modest profit." The modest prophet's teeth glittered like tabs in an old cash register. Breakspear pondered whether or not to try his luck still further.

"Father... I haven't taken communion yet since landing. I've simply been too busy. It feels rather hypocritical, loading crates and bales of the stuff and not being prepared to partake of it..."

Feverfew put a hand on Breakspear's shoulder. "I understand, son. But the True Communion is something very special, something we withhold from our worshippers until they have been thoroughly integrated into our community. For centuries, folk have laughed at the fundamental tenets of our Catholic faith, jeering at us, saying, how can you continue to believe in an age of science? The Spiritual Drive put an end to all that. Now, here, we are pounding the final titanium nail in the heretics' iron coffins. Science is religion, and vice versa, and this is what we are doing out here on Sangre-de-Christo." His eyes burned with the holy fervour of an utter nutter.

"But doesn't an attempt to find proof deny faith?" said Breakspear.

"Faith is necessary for science as well as religion, boy! All 'proven' science begins from theorems which must be taken as read by the believer, just like the existence of God. Come, boy, I'll show you." Apparently simultaneously irritated and delighted at the fact that, here on this godforsaken rock, he had found somebody with the balls to argue with him, he took Breakspear's arm and led him out of the vestibule into a vast cold space filled with quiet white machines. The interior of the factory.

"See! Wherever you may look. Engines of the Lord, duplicating genetic codes. Taking a painstakingly patched-together gene sequence and replicating it, over and over again! And where do you think that gene sequence comes from, boy? Eh? Eh?"

Breakspear was dumbfounded. "I really don't know," he said.

The Cardinal drew aside a curtain in the wall. "See if you can work it out for yourself."



Behind the curtain was an alcove. Inside the alcove was a refrigerated container, a transparent cabinet with three thicknesses of glass. Inside the cabinet was a small, wizened thing, like a leather strop for sharpening an Old Testament razor.

"The Holy Foreskin of Our Lord Jesus Christ,"

breathed Breakspear. "As preserved by the clergy of Calcata for over 2,000 years..."

He fell to his knees in reverence. The fact that he was praying to a prepuce did not bother him, for in his eyes the prepuce was still attached to the luminous being of which it was a part, that being whose hand moved the stars, and whose voice commanded universes.

"How ever did you know that?" said the Cardinal, and Breakspear knew that he had made a grievous error. Unseen by the Cardinal, his hand brought out the pistol from his pocket. He was pleased to see it.

"I am an Inquisitor, father."

"I feared as much."

"Please be aware that, although I can kill you at any time with the pistol I am now holding by my right side, I would prefer not to. You retain your office until proven guilty, and I do not wish to lay hands upon a Cardinal."

"Of course. But you will if forced to, naturally."

"Naturally." Breakspear looked at the holy relic, safe in a display case that was surgical rather than spiritual. "You are attempting to produce a clone of Christ Our Lord, father? You are attempting to make God in our own image?"

The Cardinal looked genuinely offended. "I am attempting no such thing. I am merely assisting existing cells of Our Lord's holy body to replicate themselves, just as the Blessed Virgin allowed Him to grow in her womb."

"It is a good job you've been stopped before you succeeded."

"Ha! Much you know, boy! We have since this factory started production successfully cloned over 13,000 examples of Our Lord, and very useful they've been to us too -"

Breakspear's soul imploded. He felt like a swimmer taking a dive in the Lethe, feeling cold dead men's fingers of reeds sliding up and down his skin. For a moment he had forgotten everything and anything he had come to this planet to do.

"Thirteen thousand?"

"That's right."

"But - but - where are They? They must make up over one-hundredth of the entire planetary population by now. What are you doing with them, inducting them into the priesthood?" Insane logic and inane laughter seized him simultaneously. "Training them to be carpenters, shepherds and fishermen?"

"Good Lord, no. We're eating Them, of course."

The Cardinal's face shone as if lit from within, like a statue of Moloch with furnace eyes. Breakspear took one look at that face and knew, horribly, unthinkably, that it was true.

The Cardinal had taken his gun before he even knew about it, and was hustling him into another vast room, still on his magical mystery tour. Breakspear felt sick. "Here they are, Michael. Do they look so bad and evil? Don't they look *tasty*? Eh? Take Away! Eat In! This is my body!"

Rows of cryogenic sleep capsules lined the walls of the factory. In them stood human beings - bald and chalk-white, with penises like frosted icicles, but still

recognizable humans of adult size. All males. All with the same body, exact in every measurement. The face concealed in a breath and nutrient mask, meaning that the bodies, though deep-frozen, were *alive...* of course, they'd have permanent brain damage if anyone ever tried to wake them, but Cardinal Feverfew didn't care about the brain, it was the Body and the Blood he was after...

And why were they coloured *white*? Frozen meat was never so pale, and it was dead. These bodies were supposedly alive. They must have been dyed white. Purity of the lamb, and all that. Or perhaps it was a precaution against any of them escaping, like arrows on a convict's suit... Breakspear noted with an odd disquiet that Christ appeared to have an outy belly button.

"We store Them in here, then wake Them up when They're needed and walk Them out to the meat wagons," said Feverfew. "Subsidiary wafer factories at point of dispersal cut Them up, compress Them into a sort of holy slurry, add colouring and preservatives, and make Them into bite-sized hosts. It's religion for the people, Michael. It's here. It's now. It's happening—"

"It's heresy," said Breakspear. "I suppose it would be too much to suppose that you'd kill your own Creator without pain?"

"Oh, no. We crucify them, of course. I made sure rollerblinds were installed in all the abattoirs, naturally. Curtains would have ripped at the point of death."

"Aren't you aware that this puts you on the same level as Pilate, Judas, and Longinus?"

"Oh, NO! That's the beauty of it!" The Cardinal was really warming to his subject now. "We're not really responsible for their deaths at all! First we herd them into a featureless steel container that just has a plastic lever in the wall at one end. We don't leave any food in this container. Now, they're used to being fed whenever a lever is pulled, so of course they pull this lever eventually; but it doesn't just dispense food, it also sets in motion the artificial robotic crucifactor in the next chamber. Did you know our crucifactor can pound a six-inch nail into a coconut floating free in water? We're thinking of marketing it offworld. So you see, our clones, being Christ, are in fact the agents of their own crucifixion." He placed a hand upon his heart. "They die, daily, that we might live... pardon me, here's Security... could you detain this gentleman for me, please?"



At the word "Security," Breakspear suddenly woke as if splashed with cold water. Two tall gentlemen were approaching with hands on holstered pistols. At last. Something to do. Something to take his mind off the horror.

Breakspear dodged and ran behind a row of Jesuses. "After him!" shouted the Cardinal, and fired a shot, winging a preserved Body of Christ through cryo-capsule glass. Breakspear ran between the freezer cabinets, hoping he wouldn't run out of aisles to cut across before the Security men spread out in two directions and enfiladed him. *There's two of them, you have to run between one and root two times as fast as they do...*

In here, he couldn't activate the Transmitter, and the

Transmitter was his only hope. He ran out of a warehouse door into sunshine. There were angels and devils fighting among packing-cases, being paid about as much attention as twittering sparrows might be on Earth. He was in an immense loading yard. Pale white figures with hoods over their heads and blue fishes on their bellies were being shepherded into an immense white vehicle marked with a cross, and the legend TASTYCHRIST. He was alone, and unarmed, and WHEEOOMM a shot had just whistled past his head. There was nowhere to run, or hide, or fight from —

*Eli, eli, lama sabachthani.*

No! God had provided for him. Over there, by a corner of the building! Coiled up on the wall. A weapon. If only he could uncoil it, and turn the wheel, direct the jet —

He sat behind a row of packing crates, holding the throbbing anaconda of the fire hose in both hands, waiting for the first of the Security men to come within squirting range. He did. Breakspear turned the nozzle and opened the pressure valve.

WHOOOSH. The jet blew him backwards and lashed him about like an epileptic serpent. Lord alone knew what it did to the Security man, but he wasn't standing when Breakspear finally struggled, wet through, to his feet and directed his hose at the Cardinal and the Security man's accomplice. They fell like ninepins under a wall of water. Now for the guards in the compound, who were rushing over, dropping into firing stances — the jet swept across the cowering line of Christ Almightyes and dropped the compound guards *out* of their firing stances. They fell, and a couple of their guns went off accidentally, and one of them seemed to have shot another in the foot. But there were more of them coming, pouring through the side gates of the compound, and the range of their rifles would be many times that of Breakspear's fire hose, and the pressure in the hose was dropping now, and guards in three directions were now picking themselves up off the floor, and despite the fact that Small-tail had by now pitched in, unsheathing a pair of fearsome incisors big enough to carve the Ten Commandments on, and taken a wrathful bite out of the bum of the Cardinal, things were not looking quite so fine and dandy —

Then he noticed that nobody was looking at him any more. They were looking at the line of Christ Almightyes.



The jet of water had washed off whatever bright pigment had been painted to their skin, leaving them naked as nature intended, and *jet black as the day they were born.*

Some of the hoods had come off their heads as well. The faces were not the faces of a Nazarene. They were wide-jawed, flat-skulled, the features seeming to be a little too large for the small heads they sat upon. Australian aborigines, or Papuans or Polynesians. Certainly not Sons of David, unless David had had a peculiar taste in concubines. If Christ had been a black man, as so many black men had tried to prove, that would have been understandable. Black men lived in Africa, and had been sold as slaves in Syria



and Palestine millennia before the birth of Christ. But this man was a blackfella, not a black man.

The Holy Foreskin was a fake. Some Malay slave, dead of the pox or the plague, dug up in a godforsaken graveyard in the Holy Land, probably at the time of the crusades, and inducted into the Jewish faith after he'd died, and taken back to Christendom to wow the crowds. He'd come a long way in his time. And the compound guardsmen knew what they were seeing.

Slowly, one by one, they began throwing down their weapons in disgust.

Cardinal Feverfew ran into the centre of the loading yard, waving his arms in the air. "Stop!" he cried. "Stop! I know I dyed their skins, and prevented you from seeing their faces, but I did it in order to protect your faith! It is not impossible that Our Lord was an aborigine! He was not born of Joseph, but of the Holy Spirit and of Mary, and there was no intermingling of genetic material involved, for Mary had not known man! So, who is to say what form the Holy Spirit's genome might have taken? I must admit, there are slight problems of fetal rejection, but Christ could have been a fucking gorilla if he'd wanted!" He seemed to like this phrase, and repeated it with a big smile. "A fucking gorilla!"

Breakspear let him rant on, and, bringing the giant aerial out of the top of his crucifix, called up the Papal Punitive Cruiser *Lepanto* as she lay in wait at the planet's second Lagrange point, concealed behind its largest moon, which they had seen fit to imaginatively title Big Moon.

"Great Fish? This is Jonah. I'm afraid I've got a positive result. I need back-up and dust-off now. I'll give you the coordinates.

"I'll tell you when you get down here, Great Fish. Believe me, until you see it, you're not going to believe me. It's not a pretty sight.

"I want at least one unit of Swiss Guards, beefed up with Exorcists and Counter-Missionaries. Furthermore I want a full planetary interdict NOW, and I want it broadcast on all frequencies. And make sure your men are heavily blessed and shriven in advance. The drop zone is demon-contaminated."

The Swiss Guards, with their universally feared and multi-functional Swiss Army Pikes! The Swiss Guards would sort these poor deluded demon-addled hicks out.

"No, I'm not kidding, Great Fish. We've caught a Cardinal on this one.

"You're just going to have to take that on faith, Aldo. Jonah out."



Surrounded by the pseudo-Christ, and the Christians, and the Devils, and the Angels, and the massive steel cathedral of the Spiritual Drive vessel, and attended by his faithful platypaw, Breakspear sat down on a packing crate, and lit himself a cigarette from a security guard's rifle goad, and watched the Cardinal run on one of the pseudo-Christ and drag it down like an antelope, gnawing on its heel. The pseudo-Christ, though physically a grown man, cried out like a baby, but was not equipped to defend itself, and its calf muscles were being devoured between the Cardinal's mouthings of "The Body of Christ!" He was talking with his mouth full.

"A foot for a foot," said Breakspear, picked up a guardsman's gun, and shot the Cardinal in the ankle. The Cardinal screeched and curled up like a threatened millipede around his suddenly bloody leg.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned," said Small-tail, fastidiously grooming blood and bum-flesh from those frighteningly large teeth. No wonder the platypaws had taken to turning the other cheek so easily. Their front choppers were designed to bring down sequoias. They needed heavy mental inhibitions against fighting. Their natural weapons were self-sharpening buzz-saws. The gnashers on the holographic statue had not been lying.

"You haven't sinned," said Breakspear. "Look, if you really want a church, consider yourself schismatic."

"Schismatic?"

"I'll teach you what that means. You're going to need to know."

*The new Cardinal of Coma can't consider them heretics. He can't even evangelize them, by papal law. The most he can do is politely ignore them. And there are no Protestants in space, thanks to the Spiritual Drive. They'll be good pseudo-Christians for the next millennium, God rot my disobedient soul.*

Breakspear looked up as three falling stars appeared in the sky, bright even in the sunshine. The landing vessels had come round the moon in under five minutes. Troops would be on the ground in another five. He had done his job. He was going home. Somebody else could sort the mess out. *That's not a very Christian attitude*, he said to himself.

*No, but I'm an Inquisitor. I'm not here to sort messes out. I'm only here to apportion blame.*

Sadly, he sat against the packing crate and watched the devils and angels fighting. Only the angels screamed.

**Dominic Green** lives in Northamptonshire, and the above is his first published short story anywhere.



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## Like Life

Paul J. McAuley

In a recent review (of the second novel dealt with here), James Wood, chief literary critic of *The Guardian*, suggested that "Science fiction novels are historical novels in reverse, and both are properly despised." His thesis was that sf and historical fictions (he didn't distinguish between Catherine Cookson and Tolstoy, but I'd guess he was thinking of the former) are literature for anoraks, too concerned with the blueprints of imagined worlds to pay any attention to the strange richness of the real world's quiddity, not relevant to our own lives and therefore worthless. Leaving aside Wood's mistaken assumption that the arrow of time is symmetrical (and it's difficult to see how extrapolation from the present can be confused with reconstruction of the past), one can find an uncomfortable grain of truth in his accusation. Although it is usually genre fantasy, rather than sf, that is overly concerned with textually unimportant details of the quotidian life of its imaginary lands (and in many ways genre fantasy is indistinguishable from historical pastiches: both yearn for an idealized world that never was), in many sf works the superficial treatment of its characters renders them ill-manipulated puppets in garish and harshly-lit sets where novelty is prized above insight.

Many, but not, of course, all. Not even most: for otherwise sf written in the 1930s would be indistinguishable from that written today. Good sf writers, like good writers everywhere, inhabit this world. They do not, unlike God, create from a vacuum, most sf is a heightened and selective account of the present.

Take Ursula Le Guin, for instance. From her first stories until 1974, most of Le Guin's fiction, and much of her reputation within the genre, was built on the common future history of the Ekumen, in which an ancient race, the Hainish, had returned to planets, including Earth, their ancestors had colonized millions of years before. In the best of this series, in works such as *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Dispossessed* and *The Word for World is Forest*, the worlds may have been imaginary, but they were depicted through recognizably human viewpoints, with all the attendant faults and foibles, prejudices and eccentricities. The processes of history were not directly described, but were reflected in the lives of her characters.

It is possible that Le Guin's concern that the proper subjects of all fiction, including sf, are human beings (codified in her seminal essay "Science Fiction and Mrs Brown") led her to write her way out of the genre patch into the wider world. For 20 years, she has turned to other matters, includ-

ing fantasy and mainstream fiction, and the fictive collage *Always Coming Home*, an experiment in the future anthropology of a utopian society in Northern California.

She went away, but now she has returned. She is again publishing stories and novellas set amongst the variety of the long-sundered Hainish colony worlds: four interlinked novels are collected in *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (Gollancz, £15.99). They chronicle a double revolution spanning two worlds. The society of Werel is dependent on slavery; Yeowe, colonized by Werel and once a planetary slave camp, has fought free and joined the Ekumen, a loose association of space-travelling societies dominated by the philanthropic Hainish. The stories are set after the slaves of Yeowe freed themselves, and tell of how a second revolution comes to Werel, and its consequent effect on the self-proclaimed free society of Yeowe.

If there is a common theme to be found in Le Guin's Ekumen fictions, it is that of understanding the stranger, of validation of cultural difference and other ways of seeing, of reconciliation between opposing values. Her stories are often built around dualities – light and dark; male and female; anarchist and capitalist – and here, three of the stories revolve around unexpected relationships between opposites: an old woman who has renounced the affairs of the world and a deposed leader who has been forced from power; a peaceable Earth-born diplomat and a career soldier assigned as her bodyguard; a Hainish ambassador and an old nurse. The fourth story is that of Rakam, a slave woman who became free not once but twice; freed first from slavery, and then from the tyranny of male over female. Werel's society is not only dependent upon slavery but it is also intensely patriarchal, as is the society of freed slaves on Yeowe, where villages and houses are divided into male and female domains. The revo-

lution on Werel, when it comes, is triggered by liberation of freeborn women from the restraints imposed by men, and Rakam carries the seed of women's liberation to Yeowe. Her own story is an internalization of slavery's brutalization of owned and owners alike, and of the responsibilities of freedom.

Le Guin fuses the personal and political worlds with great skill, and her focus on individuals struggling to define themselves against a backdrop (sometimes barely glimpsed) of world-changing events blurs the didacticism which has sometimes made her fictions overly diagrammatic. The stories share a voice that is quiet, precise and marvellously transparent. While almost certainly inspired by the fall of apartheid and by the wider struggles of women's liberation in the west, by transposing the experiences of her characters against an imagined backdrop Le Guin universalizes them. Many sf writers have revisited the worlds they made their own at the beginning of their careers, and not all of these returns have been successful. Le Guin's is, and is welcome.

The novel which James Wood maintained was too good to fit into his skewed definition of sf was Russell Hoban's *Fremder* (Cape, £14.99). Well, it's good all right, and it is also sf. Hoban has never written the same kind of book twice. Although he has previously ventured within the increasingly diffuse sf boundary with his post-apocalypse novel *Riddley Walker*, *Fremder* is something completely different, a space opera with a cyberpunk edge.

Its hero, First Navigator Fremder Gorn, is found tumbling in space, the only survivor of a vanished space freighter. Revived but unable to remember exactly what happened, Fremder is interrogated in turn by two young women and a sexy computer. The corporation which owned the freighter is eager to discover the secret of his survival, and Fremder slowly comes to understand that finding out how and why he survived may help him connect with the world in which he has felt a stranger since his birth.

Hoban's future, the usual cyberpunk dystopia divided between technocrats insulated by privilege and violent gangs of the dispossessed, is a nicely detailed comic inferno (Hoban's apparent confusion between galaxies and stellar systems strikes the only false note – but even this may be a deliberate heightening). It's a world, coeval with our own, of spaceports filled with minimalls, fastfood joints and hot-bed hotels, of tawdry apartments rented by the day, of video parlours and privatized public spaces: places which are never anything more

than their surfaces, a world in which Fremder, whose name means stranger, feels quite at home. Fremder's mother committed suicide before he was born; his head is full of melancholy music, bleak paintings and a yearning for the moments of oblivion found when spaceship flicker drives transport him across the vacant interstellar spaces. That he had the will to survive gives him hope; the reason why he survived leads him back to his mother, and the identity of his father. Hoban knits a nicely symmetrical fable of estrangement and existential terror, fierce and often very funny, in which he redeems (here's the sucker punch) the science-fictional surfaces by presenting them through the filter of a human mind.

**K**athleen Ann Goonan's *The Bones of Time* (Tor, \$23.95) fuses hard sf speculation about the quantum nature of consciousness with a fierce and knowledgeable disquisition on the effects of cultural imperialism on Hawaiian culture. These two themes inform the novel's braided storylines: that of a native Hawaiian mathematician interested in the theory of time travel, who falls in love with a princess from Hawaii's last days of independence; and, taking place a few years later, the story of a gene collector who discovers a clone of Hawaii's last king, and a conspiracy revolving around the world's first starship.

*The Bones of Time* is as intensely detailed, and as vivid and crammed with ideas, as Goonan's first novel, *Queen City Jazz*. Like Greg Egan, she's not afraid to deploy ideas from the cutting edge of mathematics and physics while simultaneously portraying a complex vision of the near future, although Goonan's plots are driven as much by character as by exploration of the consequences of thought experiments. This is sometimes a weakness. In the end, despite all the quantum-mechanical hand-waving, time travel is effected by the same kind of wish fulfilment as in the more fantastical romance *Time After Time*, although Goonan does at least provide a theoretical framework in which it is possible that love can make the world go round. The final resolution may depend on rather too many unearned revelations, but the braided plots are neatly sewn together, and there's a genuine note of unforced optimism at the end. Goonan is not afraid to take risks with difficult material, and while her ambition may sometimes be greater than her reach, that's because her ambition sets very high limits indeed.

**L**ike his first novel, *Jumper*, Steven Gould's *Wildside* (Tor, \$22.95) is about a teenager trying to come to terms with a Secret and to come to a

reconciliation with an overbearing father. Here, 18-year-old Charlie, perennial gooseberry to his friends' romances, discovers that his childhood memories of field trips with his uncle amongst strange fauna were not dreams. There's a gateway in his parents' barn which opens onto a pristine alternative America – the eponymous Wildside – devoid of any human colonization, with its megafauna still intact. Roping in his friends, Charlie plans to make a fortune by mining gold in untouched Wildside lodes, but soon attracts the attention of the federal authorities, who want to control the gateway for their own reasons.

It's a tale that glides on its swiftly unfolding logic and Gould's sympathetic depiction of his energetic teenage protagonists. Charlie is a competent hero in the traditional Campbellian mould, and Gould is consistently ingenious in his development of the plot. Those who see little black helicopters in the skies of America, and invasion routes on the reverse of her road signs, will enjoy the extended Mexican standoff between the feds and Charlie and his friends which overshadows the rather skimpily described exploration of the Wildside itself. But Gould's descriptions of piloting small aircraft, field survival techniques and goldmining, and much else, are done with the light but sure touch of someone who knows what he is writing about, and he is scrupulous in working through the implications of his scenario, opening it out in the final pages to fine effect. Traditional maybe, but well wrought.

**Also noted:** Steven Palmer's *Memory Seed* (Orbit, £5.99), a first novel by a new British writer, is a post-catastrophe story set in a far-future Earth where most animal life had been destroyed, and the last refuge of humanity is under seige from the implacable advance of lethal vegetation. Palmer's imagination is fecund, and his city, inhabited by clashing tribes of women (men are confined to

breeding houses), with exotic biotechnologies which enable computers and other machines to be grown from genetically engineered seeds, is vividly drawn. The opening scenes are slow to cohere, partly because of continual switching between different protagonists, and partly because Palmer refuses to explain anything in terms other than those of his characters, but the story begins to grip as onrushing disaster simplifies the plot and his protagonists draw together in an alliance within the struggle between competing ideologies. Despite the multiplication of plot threads, Palmer is meticulous in tying up the loose ends and in revealing, by sleight of hand rather than direct explication, the history of the city itself. It's a hectic but ultimately convincing debut.

George Gaylord Simpson's short novel *The Dechronization of Sam Magruder* (St Martin's Press, \$18.95), bookended by an introduction by Arthur C. Clarke, an afterword by Stephen Jay Gould, and a memoir by Simpson's daughter, Joan Burns, is perhaps more of interest for its insight into the foibles of a first-class scientific mind (Simpson was one of the greatest paleontologists of this century, uniting traditional paleontology and neo-Darwinism by showing that the fossil record is consistent with evolutionary rates in living species) than as a literary artefact. It is a time-travel story closely modelled on Wells's *The Time Machine*, and although the philosophical discussions used as framing devices in both tales weigh more heavily in Simpson's version, with tedious routines which clumsily emphasize that the characters inhabit the future, the whole is rather better than mere pastiche.

Simpson's time traveller has been sent irreversibly into the past, and his story, known only by engraved stones found in ancient strata, is as much concerned with exploring the effect of utter isolation on an inquiring human mind as it is in describing how a naked human being could survive in the Cretaceous. Simpson delivers some fine broadsides against the upstarts who threatened to overturn his own cherished ideas, and there is a genuinely affecting conclusion which illustrates that, despite the charges of hubris frequently levelled against science, the greatest scientists know that they must be measured not against their fellow men, but against the true nature of the world.

**Paul J. McAuley**





REVIEWED

I can still remember the first time I became so truly involved in reading a book that I could not put it down. It was the first book I actually read in one sitting (allowing, of course, for the occasional call of nature!) and I was about 11 or 12 years old. The book was Dennis Wheatley's *The Devil Rides Out*.

There have been a few more since then but fewer than would be ideal. Some are scary, some just plain exciting, some poignant and, now and again, some that are genuinely funny. Each one brings something new to the party, be it in the way of ideas, the total believability of the characters and plot-progression, or the simple singalong timbre of a fresh voice telling the tale. Sometimes, if you're really lucky, you get all three at the same time... but when one of those suckers comes along, you feel as though you want to make a big hoo-hah about it.

Here follows the latest big hoo-hah. On first glance, David Bowker's *The Death Prayer* (Gollancz, £15.99) looks as if it's going to be a police-procedural thriller... a kind of 87th Precinct novel set in York (the mind does, indeed, bogle), but before long it becomes clear that it is in fact much, much more. What it is is Ed McBain meets Dennis Wheatley (circa the aforementioned *Devil Rides Out* and the more mystical *They Used Dark Forces*) with generous helpings of Thomas Harris thrown in for good measure.

Soon after Bowker's appetizing opening line ("All day long, the murdered girl walked beside him") we discover that the "him" in question is Superintendent Vernon Laverne, a singularly diligent detective who has spent the past couple of years tracking down a vicious killer whom the newspapers have nicknamed "The Animal" (as nicknames go, it's a little unimaginative... but we know that type of newspaper). Laverne so involves himself in his work that this empathetic streak – taking the situation and personality of the victim of the investigation to heart – soon starts to threaten his performance on the job, and his colleagues are increasingly concerned at his seeming irrational behaviour.

This behaviour manifests itself in a variety of odd ways – generally a lack of witness-questioning and straightforward investigation but intensified by Laverne's strange dreamy preoccupation. It comes to a head on an earlier case with the detective apprehending a brutal murderer apparently purely by chance... when he stops his car by a church, gets out and catches the culprit in the process of walking through the graveyard with his latest intended victim.

But now the crime he faces is a strange one: a young man is found impaled on the railings of York

Museum's gardens, the deep penetration of the spikes suggesting either exceptional force or his having been dropped from a great height. Then, just ten days later, a student is hurled against the ceiling of her room with a force that could not realistically be achieved in such a confined space. Further complications arise when the autopsies reveal that the cause of death in each case was heart failure.

The subsequent investigations lead Laverne and his partner, Inspector Lyn Savage, into the world of alternative religions... and one particular cult presided over by a young, American new-age "thinker" named Hugo Prince. Going undercover, Laverne infiltrates the cult's study weekend in Ilkley where Prince immediately sees the detective for what he really is. A confrontation between the two – designed by Prince both to expose and to ridicule the policeman – backfires against the magus with embarrassing results. But it does, at least, provide him with valuable information about Laverne... perhaps even information of which Laverne himself is not aware. The detective's departure from Ilkley does not lessen the friction between him and Prince and, before long, new players are drafted into the game... for some of whom the long-awaited return to the mortal plane provides a pleasing break from monotony.

Blending the gritty realism and hard-boiled police investigations of *Cracker*, *Prime Suspect* and anything by Barbara Vine – so, yes, the emphasis is on the downbeat – with the kind of fantastical skulduggery that fills *The X-Files*, Bowker delivers a refreshing injection of life and believ-

ability into a genre frequently accused (and not always unfairly) of tiredness and predictability. He does not flinch from confronting the depravities of the peripheral villainy (for it's Prince and his followers that form the main story line) that is a policeman's lot but he details them in a pleasingly non-sensational way, avoiding the in-your-face excesses of many lesser talents for whom "shock" is the only arrow in their quiver.

*The Death Prayer* is unreservedly recommended, a great taster for what promises to be a memorable series (work is already underway on the follow-up, *The Butcher of Glastonbury*) and a superbly-realized lead character.

Talking of follow-ups, Simon Maginn managed to encore his marvellous debut novel *Sheep* with the equally disturbing *Virgins and Martyrs*, a somewhat less-than-everyday tale of anorexia and possession. He has now produced that increasingly rare commodity of a third consecutive cracker with the imaginative *A Sickness of the Soul* (Corgi, £4.99).

Maginn's strength is in his diversity. This time out, he's gone for a first-person narrative concerning a young reporter's determination to break into the Sons of the New Bethlehem, a select band of bikers whose enigmatic leader, Teacher, operates an unusual sideline providing salvation to distraught callers to a local radio talk-show and supposedly healing the afflicted at impromptu gatherings in shopping centres and car-parks.

Robert, the journalist, leaves home and partner Fiona and tries to track the Sons down... without much luck at first. Then a call from one of his contacts tells him there's a small group of them set up and so Robert boldly steps in and asks to see Teacher. Teacher isn't here, they tell him. Why does he want to see him? Robert says he just does... he needs to... he's desperate. After a few minutes' consideration, one of the group says they can take him to Teacher but it might be some time before he'll see him. Is he prepared to wait? Robert says he is. No problem. The bikers blindfold Robert, take him to a room in what appears to be a run-down hotel and take off the blindfold. They listen while Robert insists that it's important he sees Teacher and then, when he's finished, they leave, locking the door behind them.

Over the following days and weeks, Robert is fed and treated courteously by the Sons. But he is not allowed to leave. Regular conversations take place during which Robert continues to ask to see Teacher... it'll be a while yet, he's told. Each of his questions is answered with another question... invariably "Why?" When Robert seems to have run out of questions or

## The Art of Not Putting Down

Pete Crowther



merely goes back to earlier questions, his interrogator leaves. And so it goes on. Supposedly free but yet under a strict house arrest, Robert gradually changes. He warms to some of the Sons and even – albeit reluctantly – to their lifestyle. Nevertheless, his quest for the “big story” – and to regain his freedom – never leaves him and, eventually, after one failed attempt, he cons one of the group into helping him escape. The “management” takes a singularly dim view of this. A very dim view.

What first started as a “simple” incarceration takes a decidedly sinister turn. Has Teacher got other powers that bind his followers to him? What exactly is it that he does in the so-called “healings”? Is he even human? In time, though he is relentlessly pursued and in fear for his life, Robert does manage to escape and return to London. But he cannot seem to settle. The lure of the life of the Sons of the New Bethlehem calls to him and he knows that, eventually, he must return. And yet if he does, Robert also knows that Teacher will take serious steps to stop him from ever leaving again.

*A Sickness of the Soul* is a strikingly readable book, its horror mostly rippling beneath the surface. The overall feel is one of intensity and claustrophobia – reminiscent of the original *The Vanishing* movie – as Robert is forced to undergo a parade of ridiculous and frustrating conversations firstly in an attempt to get at the truth and then simply to get back to his previous life. But by then, he also needs to get back to being the person he used to be. And suddenly that doesn't seem so attractive any more. First rate, intelligent and utterly compelling... just like its predecessors.

The arrival of a new anthology from Stephen Jones and David Sutton is always warmly welcomed by those readers whose particular short-story stew is cooked up in the darker recesses of the literary kitchen. The appearance of the aptly-named *Dark Terrors* (Gollancz, £15.99) bodes equally well for what is effectively the third incarnation of the much-revered *Pan Book of Horror Stories*. With such a backlog of the downbeat and the deprived under both their collective and their individual editorial belts, Messrs Jones and Sutton could never be accused of having a “soft spot” when it comes to picking tales to promote grimaces and shudders... and, occasionally, to dispel even the most ravenous appetite. Similarly, subtlety is a commodity also not likely to be found between their covers.

I can well remember – even now, some 30-odd years since I first read it – Seabury Quinn's hauntingly revolting “The House of Horror” in the first

Pan collection. Now, almost two generations down the line (or almost four when you realize that Quinn's story was lifted by anthologist Herbert Van Thal from Christine Campbell Thompson's wonderful *Not At Night* series of the 1920s), Jones and Sutton kick off their latest collection with “More Tomorrow,” Michael Marshall Smith's bleak vision of 1990s society and his warning of exactly what can be found on the computer screen of the casual “web-surfer.” These two stories, separated by some 70 or perhaps even 80 years, document mankind's inhuman and often bestial treatment of its own species... a salutary lesson to those who would blame current social trends on so-called gratuitously violent literature.

Elsewhere in the book is “The Lagoon,” Nick Royle's typically masterful and almost sublime tale of alienation and isolation; “Where the Bodies Are Buried 3: Black and White and Red All Over,” a splendid story from Kim Newman which plumbs the depths of dehumanization; and, from Graham Masterton, a nice take on a monster from childhood that makes an unexpected re-appearance in later life (“The Hungry Moon”).

Good work, too, from Steve Rasnic Tem (“Samples”) whose protagonist takes the art of producing records maybe just a little too far; Chris Fowler, with another tale of urban anxiety in which an old legend comes to life in contemporary London and wreaks a special kind of havoc in a Laundromat (“The Laundry Imp”); and the late lamented Karl Wagner, in devilishly mischievous form here, with a delightful and affectionate Lovecraftian look at fandom assembled (“I've Come to Talk With You Again”).

Not everything cuts it, of course, but then it never does. Everybody has faves and not-so-faves... the thing is they often disagree which are which. It is safe to say, however, that Richard Christian Matheson's style is an acquired taste: sometimes it works well – as evidenced by his collection *Sears* – and sometimes it doesn't. “Bleed” is one of the latter variety, coming across more as a parody of his work than a serious example. Check out these for opening lines: “Big moon. Loud wind. Pumpkins growl. Flames for brains.” Oh yeah?!

Similarly, neither Mandy Slater's

“Food For Thought” nor Charles A. Gramlich's “Splatter of Black” nor even Terry Lamsley's nicely observed but ultimately jumbled “Screens” manages to convince. And Brian Lumley's fairly predictable “Uzzi,” a reprint from the second issue of *Fear* magazine, could not realistically be listed amongst his best work. Also reprinted are Ramsey Campbell's “The Puppets” (from *Dark Companions*) and Peter Straub's “Fee” (from *Borderlands 4*), both of which are fine pieces and well suited to the book.

Just enough space to give a rousing cheer to Warner Home Video on their decision to make available (at long last!) the original *Outer Limits* television shows from the mid 1960s.

Five two-episode tapes have already been released – the first three of which were actually originally released by MGM/UA in 1990 and then withdrawn – and the signs are that Warners are going to keep going... providing they sell. The titles are:

*Volume 1:* “The Hundred Days of the Dragon” and “The Galaxy Being”  
*Volume 2:* “The Man With the Power” and “The Architects of Fear”  
*Volume 3:* “The Man Who Was Never Born” and “The Sixth Finger”  
*Volume 4:* “Fun and Games” and “A Feasibility Study”  
*Volume 5:* “Corpus Earthling” and “O.B.I.T.”

Still unsettling and still fascinating – despite three decades of “progress” in both gross-out values and special effects since it was made – the series (the brainchild of Joseph Stefano, who scripted Robert Bloch's *Psycho* for the big screen) featured many truly memorable and thought-provoking stories most of which have stood the test of time remarkably well.

Notable examples are “The Architects of Fear” (volume 2), in which a group of scientists concerned at mankind's constant warring with itself conceives a plan to create (by the use of horrific drugs) a monstrous “common enemy” from one of their own number and thus unite the nations of Earth, and “A Feasibility Study” (volume 4) in which a dying alien race sets its sights on converting our world to its own needs and making mankind its slaves... but first, in true 1950s comic-book style, they transport an entire six-block section of a small American town to their own planet in order to test humanity's suitability.

Considered by Stephen King to be “the best programme of its type ever to run on network TV,” *The Outer Limits* is gripping stuff and each of these volumes is well worth a tenner of anyone's money.

Pete Crowther



## Dreams gone sour

James Lovegrove

Christopher Fowler, the Bard of London, ventures a few miles outside the perimeter of his urban muse for his sixth novel, *Psychoville* (Warner, £7.99), the action of which mostly takes place in Invicta Cross, a generic Sussex New Town (but then aren't all New Towns generic?) built to catch the affluent overspill from the brimming city. Invicta Cross, we learn, is "a wonderland of clipped jade lawns and brand-new three-bedroom, twin-garage mock-Tudor houses, where husbands carefully waxed their cars (in the garage, not at the kerb) while their wives overcooked the Sunday roast and the children stared morosely at televisions." The streets all have names with royal associations – Spencer Close, Boadicea Parade – and the residents are uniformly, staunchly middle-class with upward aspirations.

Into this community arrive young Billy March and his parents. It is 1985, the dog days of Thatcherism, and the Marches have been ousted from their Greenwich home, which is to be flattened to make way for a motorway. Billy is a bookish, cinema-loving, hyperimaginative 14-year-old, and a city kid through and through. He hates Invicta Cross, but the feeling is reciprocated. The Marches, coming from the lower end of the social scale, do not fit the New Town profile, and their initial cautious welcome by the neighbours in their street, Balmoral Close, soon darkens to resentment and eventually to outright hostility. Billy does make a couple of friends at school – including April, a misfit like himself – but by and large the Marches are treated with suspicion and disdain wherever they go. They are snubbed, inconvenienced, insulted, until inevitably, and under tragic circumstances, forced to leave.

Thus ends the first and better half of the book. Fowler tightens the net of persecution around the Marches with a subtle, understated savagery. The neighbours in Balmoral Close are not intrinsically bad people. Their evil stems from the fact that they just don't want anyone "not like us" cluttering up their town. They crave sameness, they want to look across the road and see a mirror of their own perfect lives, and the Marches, unfortunately, are letting the side down. For this kind of mindless conformity a New Town provides the perfect venue. The apparent egalitarianism of rows of identical houses with similar-sized gardens is, in fact, a kind of municipal Maoism, antithetical to the need of some human beings to be individuals.

The second half of the novel takes place ten years later, as Billy returns to Invicta Cross, no longer a weedy outcast but a tanned, gym-muscled, suit-wearing, cellphone-toting corporate professional. And, of course, he has revenge in mind. And so, sadly,

the tautness of *Psychoville* unravels, as Billy – with the aid of April, who has grown up into a certifiable psychotic with a June Allyson fetish – sets about turning the inhabitants of Balmoral Close against one another in much the same way that Leland Gaunt did with the inhabitants of Castle Rock in *Needful Things*. Fowler pulls off an outrageous twist about three-quarters of the way through the book, but as old scores are settled and the bodies mount, *Psychoville* ceases to be a darkly ironic meditation on the blandness of planned lifestyles and degenerates into a violent black comedy with murder as the punchline to each gag. The dreadful social injustice of the first half has been so teeth-grindingly well conveyed that one finds oneself wishing for a more refined resolution than mere slaughter.

Much more satisfying is Fowler's new collection of short stories, *Flesh Wounds* (Warner, £4.99). Here are tales of extreme cruelty and decadence and solipsist apocalypse and hilarious failure and odd obsession, crafted in a lighter, looser, more literary style than is to be found in *Psychoville*. And there are some real gems. "Jouissance de la mort" is a lovely jeu d'esprit, a comic la ronde of death, while "Mother of the City" – the city being London, naturally – is one of those supernatural tales that reveals a secret beneath the face of everyday life which cannot possibly be true but which feels true, in this case that certain people are avatars of the cities they inhabit and that if you cross one of them, expect to face the wrath not just of the individual but of the place itself. "Night After Night of the Living Dead" tiptoes across the quivering tightrope between illusion and reality with a delicate, humorous tread, while "The Young Executives" turns on its head the perception that old people can seem creepy to the young, as it shows how an elderly widow, having taken

on a job as a typist, learns the deeply sinister flipside to the brash ambitiousness of her youthful office colleagues.

As usual with any short-story collection, there are a couple of duds, and the line-drawings that preface each tale are, let's be generous here, functional, but taken as a whole *Flesh Wounds* is as impressive an assemblage of short fiction as you'll find anywhere, and a significantly more accurate barometer of what Fowler is capable of than *Psychoville*.

Bifurcated Iain Banks, in no-middle-initial mode, has produced *Whit* (Little, Brown, £15.99), the story of 19-year-old Isis Whit, possessor of faith-healing powers which may or may not be genuine, and the favoured daughter of the Luskentyrians, a slightly loopy religious sect based at a remote farm estate in Scotland. As the novel opens, Isis takes her leave of the sect's small, close-knit community and heads for London in search of her cousin Morag, whom she has been commanded to bring back for the four-yearly Festival of Love. Though Isis has led a cloistered childhood in the familial embrace of the Luskentyrians, she is not entirely ignorant of the ways of the modern world, and as she wanders among the Bland – that's you and me – and encounters marijuana, video pornography, police brutality, Essex Man, Rastafarians and skin-heads, Banks happily avoids the fish-out-of-water clichés one might have expected. Isis is no Mr Pooter; she is naive, yes, but she is also smart, savvy, adaptable and resourceful, with a solid core of faith that protects her when her wits won't.

Of course, this core of faith is also her blind spot, so that as she narrates to us the origins and beliefs of the Luskentyrians, we detect hypocrisies to which she remains blissfully oblivious. The irony is played for laughs, but as the plot unfolds and the scales start to fall away from Isis's eyes, there is the sense that her sincere delusion is and always will be purer than the self-serving theology propounded by her grandfather, the sect's founder. The Luskentyrians, it is made clear early on, are basically a love-cult. The Festival of Love is, frankly, an orgy. But Isis, innately chaste and untethered by physical needs, is the religious impulse incarnate, and though she may at times be uptight and holier-than-thou, her priggishness is that of the genuinely innocent. She's a complex character to have at the centre of what is actually a rather light-hearted novel, and enjoyment of *Whit* will largely depend on whether you find her engaging or you find yourself wanting to shout, "For God's sake pull that cork out of your arse, girl!" at her.



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There are some nice literary flourishes. The sophistications of modern living are anathema to the Lusken-tyrians – they “clutter” the soul, preventing one from hearing the quiet voice of God inside – so that when Isis describes a hi-fi stack she calls it a “dark machine” and draws attention to its “black mass,” double-imaging a straightforward observation with Luddite and Satanist undertones. The sinful British capital is referred to as “Babylondon,” and the Lusken-tyrian cuisine is a fusion of its founder’s Scottish and his first two wives’ Asian palates, resulting in such concoctions as porridge tarka and skink aloo. Familiar Banksian elements are also present and correct: recreational drugs; bad driving; incisive use of pop-culture references; what Shakespearean critics would term “bawdiness”; people living in remote, decaying splendour; concurrent dual past/present narratives; and a defiant Scottishness (London, we are helpfully informed, is located in south-east England). *Whit*, however, lacks the searing in-ye-faceness that made *Complicity* or – how sick Banks must be of seeing these three words – *The Wasp Factory* such compelling reading. It lacks, too, the soaring imaginative bravado of *Feersum Endjinn*. It’s fun, it’s funny, but it’s not fundamental reading.

Dream-sequences in fiction are notoriously difficult to pull off, but that hasn’t stopped Kazuo Ishiguro, in *The Unconsoled* (Faber, £15.99), from attempting to write nothing less than a novel-length dream-sequence during which the dreamer never once suspects that he is dreaming and at the end of which he doesn’t wake up.

The plot, such as it is, involves an English concert pianist, Ryder, who arrives at an unnamed city in mainland Europe in order to perform a concert. What evolves from this opening is a string of loosely-connected events which sweep Ryder randomly this way and that about the city and offer hints of a much more significant reason for his presence there than mere music. Music, in fact, is somehow inextricably linked to the city’s continued success and survival, though it remains unclear exactly how. Everything in *The Unconsoled* remains unclear. The novel, like its central character, rides the surface of an ocean of uncertainty and nuance. Nothing is explored in depth, everything is taken at face value. Ryder never questions what is happening to him and greets even the most apparently startling of revelations, for instance that he has a wife and son in the city, with passive acceptance. He is both subjective first-person and omniscient narrator at once. On one

occasion, while another character enters a house to talk to the occupant, Ryder remains outside, yet, though physically absent, is nonetheless privy to the conversation indoors as though he were actually there. On another occasion, two journalists discuss him in insulting terms as if he were not standing right beside them, which he is, smiling benignly whenever one of them directs a scathing remark about him to him, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he is the one being referred to.

This is the novel’s central conceit. It hinges on the logic – or lack of logic – of dreams. A building miles outside the city turns out to be connected by a short passageway to the hotel Ryder is staying at in the middle of the city. Friends from Ryder’s past turn up suddenly and remind him of events he has forgotten ever happened, as if they are planting memories in his brain by the power of suggestion. Complete strangers approach him and unburden their souls to him in long monologues that go on sometimes for several pages. At one point, he thinks, for no particular reason, of the rusted old car in the drive of his parents’ house that he used to play in as a child, and lo and behold a moment later he stumbles across that same car. And throughout it all there runs a dark and nervy undercurrent of anxiety, as his responsibilities gradually pile up, as he misses appointment after appointment he didn’t know he had, and as he blithely allows himself to be diverted by some distraction and then diverted from that distraction by another distraction.

It’s enough to drive you to distraction. Ishiguro writes some of the sparsest, most elegant, most luminous prose around and has a neat line in dry humour, but his technical skills alone are not enough to sustain interest for the whole of what is essentially one long (535 pages) shaggy-dog story. Towards the end the instinct in all of us that demands that a narrative have a beginning, a middle and an end, or at least a reasonable approximation of same, is crying out for some kind of

resolution. None comes, and one is left with the uncomfortable feeling that one has just been the butt of an elaborate literary joke.

Speaking of dreams, and endless ones at that, the latest (and thickest) collection of Neil Gaiman’s award-winning *Sandman* comic, *The Kindly Ones* (DC/Vertigo, \$34.95; Titan, £24.99), brings to a conclusion the epic begun five years and 60-odd issues ago, as Morpheus, the King of Dreams, meets his nemesis in the shape of Lyta Hall, a former superheroine known as the Fury and the widow of the Silver Age superhero version of the Sandman. Lyta, tricked into believing that her infant son has been kidnapped and killed by Morpheus, goes in search of vengeance, and finds it in the form of her namesakes, the Furies of classical Greek tradition, who descend on the Dreaming and start slaughtering the inhabitants one by one, working their way slowly up to the lord of the realm, Dream himself. Does Morpheus stage a valiant last-ditch battle to save his kingdom? If you think that’s going to happen, you’ve been reading the wrong comic. Can an immortal die? For the answer to that question, you’ll just have to read *The Kindly Ones* and see.

For anyone new to the world of Sandman, *The Kindly Ones* is not a good place to start. Dozens of characters from previous story arcs return to play their parts in the unwinding tale. Events from as far back as the first issue are referred to, and sometimes developed on (one can only mar-

vel at the deftness with which Gaiman manages to draw together every single previous plot-strand into a tight, cohesive whole; why, it’s almost as if he planned it this way). Without some kind of score-card to help keep track of who’s who, the neophyte is going to be hopelessly bewildered.

But for anyone who so much as has dipped a toe in *Sandman* before, *The Kindly Ones* offers delights by the bucketload. Foremost among them is the art by Marc Hempel that graces almost every chapter. His style would at first glance seem to be too cartoony for the portentous subject-matter, but its beauty is in its simplicity. Hempel’s solid, energetic layouts reflect the elemental forces being deployed in the story; his thick ragged lines are the impending tragedy in ink-form; moods and facial expressions he delivers with a few, swift, accurate brushstrokes. In the fourth chapter, as the grieving Lyta slowly loses her grip on reality, the



breakdown in her ability to distinguish between the actual and the imagined is conveyed in a series of stunning visual shifts that culminate in a page where the full-colour panels (fantasy) are set against a monotone background composition (reality) that cunningly incorporates aspects of their layout into its own. Ground-breaking stuff.

Then there is Gaiman's bold and brilliant use of world mythology. A whole smorgasbord of gods and beings from fable exist side by side and interact throughout the book. There is an unholy alliance between Loki and Puck (Together Again For The First Time!), the angel Remiel says the exiled Lucifer a visit his

In this column one of my main intentions will be to correct the misconceptions held by some readers that the small press is made up of material rejected by the big press, or that it is somehow stuck so far out on a limb it's unreachable. Too much fine writing is missed by the general reader for me to be complacent. Some magazines are, of course, simply in it for fun, regardless of how many copies they shift. A great many more, however, are every bit as concerned with quality as their professional counterparts.

**Palace Corbie**, for example. Not a magazine as such but an annual anthology, it is edited by Wayne Edwards of Merrimack Books, PO Box 83514, Lincoln, NE 68501-3514, USA (paperback, colour cover, 224pp, \$9.95). Volume six contains over 20 stories based loosely on the theme of "personal terror," with something to suit every mood. Edward Lee's extraordinary "Shit-House" is a whistle-stop tour of an unsavoury subsection of American society that, to use by far the tames image detailed here, is a bit like being hit over the head with a two-by-four: "WAP-WAP-WAP!" The other images disgust and disturb, but you are fascinated by them as well as repulsed, and inevitably you are drawn into a world where even your desire to "clean it all up" is warped, another act of degradation and destruction. As the editor says in his introduction, "here there is no escape."

There is subtlety here too. In "The Nerve" by Cindie Geddes, 97-year-old and possibly senile Mona is convinced that her psoriasis is something much more sinister, namely that the nerve in her arm is an implanted "alien" and that she is serving as incubator and food source for its offspring. The author skilfully counterpoints this "maddening scabble" with Mona's real children and grandchildren, and her light touch makes the denouement all the more devastating. I will never look at a staple remover in the same way again.



earthly nightclub. Odin drops in on Morpheus, and the triple-goddess manifests herself in dozens of different aspects, from the Furies themselves to trios of female characters in TV sitcoms. The dialogue, too, is clever and spicy. The gods talk just

how you'd imagine them to talk; the human characters talk just like people you know. And though it is shot through with a sense of doom right from the start, *The Kindly Ones* never becomes oppressive, merely melancholy. Fatalism, Gaiman seems to be telling us, is in the natural order of things, and there is no harm in resigning yourself to death, especially when Death is a cute Goth-rock babe in black.

As a feat of knowledge and imaginative daring, *The Kindly Ones*, and indeed the entire run of *Sandman*, is without peer, which makes it all the more regrettable that only one more collected volume remains to be published after this one.

James Lovegrove

## Magazine Reviews

Andy Cox

The personal aspect of Anke Kriške's "Seaside Vacation" comes from Kim's longing for a little magic in her life, and the doubts she has about finding some. Even before she has settled into the motel, Kim is already thinking she's made a mistake, finding the locals aloof and preoccupied. Her impression begins to change, however, when she meets Tony: maybe the magic is here after all. While this relationship develops other details in the story appear incidental, their significance growing almost subliminally until, during one romantic night on the beach, the terror finally kicks in. Traces of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, perhaps, but a joy to read nonetheless.

There are many more exquisite examples of modern American horror fiction in this book, as varied as they are excellent. Highly recommended.

One of the letter writers in *Works* #10 (A4, 40pp, £2 from Dave W. Hughes, 12 Blakestones Road, Slaihtwaite, Huddersfield HD7 5UQ) says that the previous issue arrived "like Phoenix arising." I wonder what his reaction to receiving this issue is, several years later. Perhaps, like me, he is unsure of how he feels, his hesitation due to the nagging suspicion that this magazine has been comatose in more ways than one. I first discovered *Works* six or seven years ago, when it had just published its seventh issue, and I think a paradox has been rippling forward to 1996 ever since. I wouldn't expect a magazine to be covering vastly different ground within just three issues, but things have moved on a great deal in the time it's

taken for those issues to be published. Therefore I no longer believe unquestionably that this material is going "to kick sf into the 21st Century." Indeed, some of it is distinctly old-hat, such as Veronica Colin's "A Hard Day at the Office," into which 1960s-style sci-fi gadgetry is thrown simply for the sake of it. The writing is lazy too: buttons "quiver in a meaningful fashion" and a chair "moves in a distracting fashion."

Some stories are more expansive in terms of character and theme. Fine, progressive writers like Neal Asher, Jeff VanderMeer and Mat Coward combine imagination, originality and skill to very good effect, while Paul Pinn's "Bible Wars" is quintessential *Works* fare: beautiful prose loaded with mood and vivid imagery. On the whole, though, I found this an uneven, uninspiring issue, which is a shame because this magazine used to surprise the hell out of me. I sincerely hope it will do so again.

Also on this tenth issue is *Grotesque* #10 (A4, 52pp, £2.80 or £10/4 from 39 Brook Avenue, off Barn Road, Carrickfergus, Co Antrim, N. Ireland BT38 7TE). Since its inception this magazine has striven, like most small press magazines, for uniqueness, despite the fact that archetypal *Grotesque* has often been hard to define ("think of Quasimodo in a tutu"). Editor David Logan's taste, it seems, is not so much for the surreal but more for the absurd. If so, then this issue must be a near-perfect representation of that.

Jeff VanderMeer leads with the suitably grotesque "A Report on the Living Dead," a memoir from 18th-century France, where a series of bizarre events triggers the rise of zombies. An author less talented might have made this story as bad as it sounds from that brief description, but VanderMeer plays it for laughs and succeeds wonderfully well. There are some great jokes here. For example, when it becomes apparent that





changes in law and custom must be made to accommodate the growing number of living dead, reanimated victims of duels "must wait until their opponent has himself died in order to seek satisfaction." David Ratcliffe's "Forbidden Stories" also employs a slightly unusual narrative technique in that it is told in the voice of "The Narrator," who has somehow found his way onto these pages to tell a story banned by the Comics Code in 1954. It's difficult to see why the story-within-the-story would've been banned even in 1954, but with Ratcliffe deliberately playing on our fondness for nostalgia the Narrator's sections are spot on, right down to the series of gloriously corny jokes at the end.

There are serious stories too, like Andrew Ferguson's introspective "The Flesh Key." Nothing has gone right for Robert recently — he's lost his job, his wife wants a divorce — and he spends more and more of his time alone, always inside, in an attempt to find some inner peace. While experimenting with meditation his body apparently sheds something of itself in the form of a key, which he discovers will turn parts of his body "off," thereby intensifying his senses. The outcome of this discovery is inevitable of course, and Robert does eventually realize where the last keyhole in his body is, but the relentlessly inward journey is handled so well the story manages to be both moving and uplifting.

Over the last decade or so I have come to regard Poul Anderson as a friend of my youth with whom I had rather lost touch, so I approached his latest collection of stories and essays, *All One Universe* (Tor, \$22.95) with some trepidation. I have had cause to condemn so many of my older (and some younger) boyhood heroes for creeping plotlessness, didacticism and the sloppiness born of uncritical applause, and I had no desire to do the same to him; on the other hand, truth must out. I'm therefore relieved as well as delighted to report that this is an excellent collection, displaying all Anderson's familiar virtues of simple, uncontrived plotting, a compassion that is neither sentimental nor misapplied, careful research and the *tristitia rerum* that has always been his trademark. Like most Anderson collections it also contains one story of unrelieved and ineluctable sadness: "The Visitor" handles a theme which had previously been approached by Roger Zelazny, Clifford Simak and Dan Simmons among others, but never so well. I suppose it will strike some readers as rather an old-fashioned collection, but the classics are timeless, and Anderson remains a classic writer.

Like everyone nowadays from Aldiss to Zelazny, he's written an introduction to each piece, but they read less defen-

Other stories also impress, but if I hadn't decided to review *Grotesque* in this column I might not even have read them. Shoddy presentation gives the impression that the stories are shoddy too. But until improvements in layout occur, please consider it a quirk because otherwise this is a fine issue of an entertaining magazine. Also, given its admirably regular schedule, you should have no qualms about subscribing.

Five years ago Alex Bardy published a magazine called *Cerebretron*, and he has put his experience to good use with the launch of *Sierra Heaven* (A4, 52pp, £3.45 from 29 Harrier Way, Evelyn Mews, Beckton, London E6 4YP). It's less ambitious than *Works* in that it only claims to be a magazine "for the 90s," its editor declaring that he has no interest whatsoever in "pushing sf frontiers forward." But challenging stories are no less entertaining for the challenge, and nothing

is more rewarding than reading an ambitious story whose ambitions are realized. I don't wish to give you the impression that such categories won't ever come into *Sierra Heaven's* equation, but it seems to me that if they are ignored the overall tone of what you publish is going to be somewhat fannish (personal views of *The X-Files*, that sort of thing). This is a good debut nonetheless, with neat design and competent contributions. Both John Light ("A Prince of Time") and Chris Pugh ("Eating Blood") turn in the kind of high fantasy that's hardly relevant to the 90s, although its admirers could perhaps justifiably call it timeless. William Meikle is as reliable as ever with "In the Coils of the Serpent," and "War Story" by Garrie Hall is intriguing. Non-fiction is served well by an interesting interview with Robert Holdstock, and not so well by a personal view of *The X-Files*. Surely overpriced, but a satisfying mix with much to please, little to displease, and plenty to look forward to.

Andy Cox

*Note: Andy Cox is the editor of Zene, which features many more reviews of small-press, independent or semi-professional magazines and books. Available at £7 for four issues from TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs. CB6 2LB.*

## Old familiar virtues

Chris Gilmore

sively than most. If the book is thin it's short on dross, and while I have my favourites, the only piece I'd have excluded is "Neptune Diary," a fannishly written account of his visit to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at the time of the Neptune flyby. All the stories are good in the Andersonian tradition of hard decisions made in response to hard times, sometimes rightly ("The House of Sorrows") sometimes wrongly ("Fortune Hunter") but always in the certainty that the consequences must be faced — most strongly in "The Voortrekkers," an exploration of the possibilities of downloading human intelligence.

There's a couple of literary essays and a memoir of John W. Campbell, but I found the unclassifiable pieces on the edge of fiction most rewarding. These include "Rokuro," a No play about an artificial intelligence which might have been inspired by Greg Egan. "In Memoriam," a magnificently bleak meditation on the history of the world as it may proceed without us, and "Losers' Night,"

an "Old Phoenix Tavern" tale which is really only a frame for a quite exceptional ballade in the style of Villon. Because the language is so rich in rhymes, but has so few exemplars of most, almost all ballades in English are either weak or comic; this one is excellent and serious.

Aside from those, there's "Wolfram," which harks back to what the early 18th century called a "character," of which I suppose the best known is Addison's "Sir Roger de Coverley," and "Unclefish Beholding," an introduction to atomic theory as it might have been written if English permitted only Germanic roots. It's as good a sustained joke as I've ever come across, and offers an amusing riddle. I think I've got the answer, but there may be more than one. Altogether, this is a rich and varied collection from one of the great masters — get it!

That sword-&-sorcery is the current adult form of the fairy tale is not seriously disputed; the only relevant question is to what extent this or that book is adult fare. That said, Martin Middleton's *Circle of Light* (Pan, £5.99) is more obviously a fairy tale than most, as it features an underage princess whose wicked avuncular regent intends to marry her by force, a lost heir and Teal, a youthful hero of lowly rank but mysterious origins who supplies the



first-person viewpoint. The juvenile impression is reinforced by the total lack of romantic interest, but I'd be reluctant to expose an impressionable child to what could only be a corrupting influence. It's precisely the sort of thing that makes people snobbish about S&S.

First and most commonplace, the writer has no feeling for the language, so we get the usual I for me, laid for lay, may for might, were for was, inappropriate use of the passive voice etc. Second (and here I sympathize), he has no interest in what he is doing, so that we get:

We found that one of the rooms had a small spring in it, but when we tasted the water we found it was undrinkable. Seven lines later:

I turned to Beth. "There is a spring in the second room. The water is quite undrinkable."

Apart from inflation of this kind, Middleton appears to revel in bad English for its own sake. How else to account for such a sentence as, "This was made worse by the fact that the light was dim due to the foliage overhead"? Nor, despite the repetitions, is his continuity good; a character can be seriously concussed on one page, and back in fighting trim on the next.

All right, so English isn't his thing. Perhaps he's better at biology or maths? Alas, no. Behold:

"Each female may bear only three children before childbirth becomes impossible."

"But that's sufficient, surely?" I asked.

"It would be, except for one thing."

There is only one female born out of every ten births. There is one other problem. Vahians cannot have children with people of other lands. So even though it sounds like a sufficient quantity of children are born each year, we are still only just holding our own."

Doubtless the poor devils have to hold their own rather a lot, but that's not how a population is sustained.

So is it redeemed by a good, strong story? No. We never meet the wicked uncle, nor the princess until the 33rd chapter of 35 (by which time she has grown up, incidentally, though less than a year has passed). Instead Middleton presents an endless series of skirmishes, in all of which Teal and his friends overcome fearful odds by their superior fighting prowess plus some magic that they pick up on the way. And is there development of character? Yes, sort of. As the book progresses Teal becomes ever more swell-headed, and devotes ever more time to explaining things to his ever more admiring cohorts.

So will someone at Pan kindly explain what is going on? I ask less for my own sake than for Brian Stableford's, as three of his original and stylish books, *The Empire of Fear*, *The Werewolves of London* and *The*

*Angel of Pain*, are advertised in the back – at a pound apiece less, by the way. It may be some comfort to him that these are the best pages in the book, but was he told what company he was to keep? Yet it matters little – few will read that far. What matters is that this book was first published (in Australia) in 1990, and neither then nor in the five succeeding years has anyone read it with sufficient attention to correct even the most glaring defects. There's an alphabetical glossary of weaponry in the back, for instance, with 35 entries. Of these, eight are out of order. I'm put in mind of Alfred Bester's joke about the girl who claimed to have been to university, and to prove it could recite the alphabet as far as L. A senior position surely awaits her in some publishing house.

When Harry Harrison's *Star-Smashers of the Galaxy Rangers* appeared I imagine most readers had a fairly good idea of what they were in for, especially as he had previously written *Bill, the Galactic Hero*. Even so, the title of Terry Bisson's *Pirates of the Universe* (Tor, \$23.95) irked me somewhat. Piracy, like everything else, must take place in some universe or other and this book has nothing to do with piracy and is set partly in civilian space and partly on Earth.

It's primarily a satire of the "little man against the faceless bureaucracy" type, but it's also an attempt to weave into a near-future hard-sf format a large number of the more obvious possibilities for catastrophic technological and social change in the next half century, including nanotechnology, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence and virtual sex. That is no small order, and I think Bisson would have done better to go for a much larger book. At less than 250 pages of generous type this one is over-crowded with ideas, not all of them properly worked out.

Earth in the late 21st century is rather a mess, thanks mainly to a virus engineered to digest oil spills at sea which has got out of control and devoured all the world's recoverable

petroleum. There has been global warming, ocean deepening etc., and a series of interlinked wars (now over). In the US the government has retreated in the face of big business, which runs whatever it can in terms of various lotteries.

On the other hand there have started to appear from (literally) nowhere the Petey's, huge and beautiful ellipsoid objects which may be entire universes or sentient beings (though they seem to contain nothing at all – a vacuum much harder than planetary space). People being what they are, they are hunted and killed (if they are truly alive) for their skins, which make the costliest fabric on Earth. That is the work of Gunter Ryder, the viewpoint character, whose tribulations and eventual triumph make up the story.

Gunter is not a very likeable man; his principal interest is virtual sex, which in his case takes the form of a lingerie fetish, described in prolonged and frequent detail by Bisson (if that happens to be your bag, read no further – this book is a must). He has little interest in anything else, and such knowledge of the world as he possesses was gleaned in childhood from a pile of *National Geographic* which he read because he had nothing better to do. He is not positively evil and Bisson writes with sufficient vigour to sustain interest in him, but it makes a bilious book, most of whose interest lies in attempting to work out from Bisson's often elliptical hints just what is going on.

There are few data-dumps and many loose ends. What exactly is the "darkening" which afflicts several characters? It seems to be some sort of psychophysical disease, but what causes it? Why do people keep "doggits"? These repulsive creatures are more-or-less intelligent dogs, genetically engineered to walk on their hind legs. As they have no hands their utility as servants or workers is minimal, and as they must wear trousers but have no instinct to open them before relieving themselves, they are aesthetically displeasing and a risk to public health, so why are they tolerated in public buildings?

I like puzzles of this kind. If I can second-guess the writer, I can admire my own ingenuity; if not, I can admire his. But I do require an answer, and Bisson provides too few. Consequently I came away feeling rather cheated, despite his many deft touches.

After that I turned for relief to David Gemmell's *The Legend of Death-*



*walker* (Bantam Press, £15.99). It's subtitled "From the Chronicles of Druss the Axeman" which, since *Legend* and *Druss the Legend* feature Druss's death and young manhood, leaves little scope for enigma or surprise. On the other hand, the unfolding of the legend allows the characters to be explored in increasing depth as Gemmell focuses in ever more detail on the central paradox of Druss's character, and to a lesser extent that of Sieben the poet.

The opening finds them in the city of Gulgothir, where reigns a God-king who is transparently an avatar of Caligula. Druss (currently aged about 30) is still prize-fighting but already calling people "laddie," as he himself had once been addressed by his old mentor, Shadak. He is as fascinated by violence as ever, but increasingly disturbed by what it reveals of his own character. As the shade of his demonic grandfather recedes from his consciousness, he reflects regretfully that the love of his wife and of his land, which ought to satisfy him, are insufficient; he needs to fight, and the good cause he needs to fight for is ultimately only a rationalization. Sieben, by contrast, is perfectly satisfied with himself as he is; his preoccupations with poetry, attire and sexual athletics fulfil all his existential needs.

Gemmell, being an extremely moral writer, arranges a good cause for Druss and while he's about it arranges for Sieben to find True Love at last. But for this book he introduces a third major viewpoint, that of the Nadir (i.e., Mongol) Okai. Okai is a youthful genius whose destiny is to unite the Nadir tribes (and ultimately bring about Druss's death); in the manner of all men of destiny he finds the conflict of love and duty more than usually irksome, but surmounts it.

Yet here Gemmell's special quality manifests itself; for the reader is expected to know from the other two books that the fulfilment of Okai's destiny will be frustrated by an off-stage death; that Druss's death will therefore be noble but futile; that the heroic age will proceed in all its stupidity and horror as if neither had ever been, despite all the good which they have achieved on the way.

There is nothing random about any of this. The McGuffin on this occasion is the Eyes of Alchazzar, gems of healing power which Druss needs to restore the broken back of Klay, the one man in all the world who is possibly his equal, and who is, moreover a man after his own heart. After the usual carefully wrought carnage on the physical and astral planes he brings them home triumphant, only to find Klay has died. Instead he restores the health of a common prostitute on whom Klay had taken pity because Klay would have wanted it.

So is Gemmell a pessimistic writer? That question is far harder than it

looks. Were there any overt reference to reincarnation or karmic justice the answer would have to be no, but neither is invoked – far from it. Vengeance is never adequate, even when it is achieved, and the evil Garen-Tsen, who has supervised the death by torture of a saintly and civilized character early on, is a major beneficiary at the end. Yet the atmosphere is curiously celebratory; as Sieben remarks, it would be terrible to die without ever having known true love, regardless of how smoothly its course has run. The moral would seem to be the bleakest, but for the strong-minded the most uplifting: Virtue is its own reward.

Gemmell's writing is a little rough in places, and the many scenes of mayhem are inevitably stereotyped – there are only so many ways of swinging a two-bladed axe. Both factors tend to obscure his philosophical depth. To obtain recognition in a more discerning market he really needs to attempt a full-length novel with the violent death-count held to single figures – I wonder if he ever will!

There's a whole sub-genre of films, of which *Escape from New York* is the archetype, in which the government has retreated from large portions of the continental US, leaving the underclass to build what society it can for itself. Its invariable choice is a chain of local autocracies, each headed by a patently psychopathic gang boss. Our heroes and heroines venture into this unattractive milieu for reasons which seem good at the time, and after that it's up to the director. As he candidly admits, David Callinan originally wrote *Fortress Manhattan* (Gollancz, £5.99) as a screenplay on these lines, but having no luck, recast it as a novel. Inevitably it's contrived and derivative, but these faults are forgivable; its relentless vulgarity is not.

Behold. Our hero, Johnny Raine, hosts an all-too-likely downward extension of trash television, a vocation which keeps him in Chardonnay and salmon steaks on the isle of Manhattan, safe from the mutants, monsters, cyborgs and psychos of the Badland boroughs. He's not very proud of it but enjoys greatly the adulation it brings him, which says all you need to know about his character. Yet all is less than cosy: his pro-

gramme director fears a ratings war! and wants to upstage the opposition by staging the suicide – live – of some uglies from outside. And does Johnny high-mindedly reject this repulsive suggestion? No. And does his girlfriend Jordan, who looks askance at the show but thinks he's wonderful? Neither. In the grim spirit of prostitutes who despise their clientele, they agree he must give the public what the director wants. Only question, how?

Cue Frank Brady, gutsy photographer and sad stalker (don't ask me to unravel that combination), whose fancy it is to backdrop a few super-models in designer underwear against the graffiti-clotted ruins that were once Astoria. Brady has connections there – to Bobby Bolero, local chief freak, whom he supplies with schurm, an hallucinogenic brand of embalming fluid. Brady, with Bolero's cooperation and a small army paid for by the sponsors, can get them in and out; perhaps he can pick up some suitably telegenic suicides for Johnny – except that it All Goes Wrong. And that, plus some "Rule three, pretend to be nice" dialogue between Johnny and Jordan is the whole story, really, although there's a cumbersome subplot concerning an "erotic" doll which becomes animated by a demon.

Were this presented with any skill or imagination one might take a certain shameful pleasure in it, but Callinan is a lazy writer. Some of the Badlands freaks embellish their deformities with garish jewellery, but neither jewels nor deformities are described. Likewise with the models. Their lingerie may be "the skimpiest and most erotic in the world," but Callinan's no Terry Bisson. We just get a brand name: Eroticque. Gosh! Better register that as a trademark, before someone steals it. Julie Burchill maintains that "erotic" is the naftest word in English and while I favour "executive" and "exclusive," I see her point; it's Callinan's fave word. As for Jordan and Johnny's love-making, it's straight from the letters page of a top-shelf glossy – perhaps because both are popping "orgasm pills."

Callinan displays little knowledge of and no interest in either words or life. He appears to believe that "obnoxious" is the superlative of noxious, that the prefix milli- indicates millions, that a man can scream with his throat torn out, that a media celebrity can run a pretty girlfriend without anyone in the media noticing, and that a laserjet is a high-powered laser. He's obviously never heard of Newton's third law, and is uncertain about the difference between a rocket and a bullet. But his book may do well enough at the tacky end of the market for someone to buy the film rights.

Chris Gilmore



**The Return** by William Shatner ("with" – it says inside – Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens; Pocket, £9.99) chronicles the further adventures of James T. Kirk and is a sequel both to the earlier book by the same team, *The Ashes of Eden*, and the film *Star Trek: Generations*. Wait a minute – "further adventures"? But surely Captain Kirk died in that film? Met his end/maker, passed on/away, went to his reward, expired, pegged out? Well, yes, but this is *Star Trek*, not real life, and different rules apply. Mr Spock died in the second *Star Trek* feature film but that didn't stop him regenerating in the third. Even Tasha Yar, who was killed off in *The Next Generation's* first season, managed to make the odd comeback or two. In fact, there's practically a tradition of reviving the *Trek* departed. So Kirk is available for any number of future outings, at least in book form, where they won't involve paying out millions of dollars to William Shatner to play him on screen.

And with at least one sequel to this book to come, Pocket Books clearly figure there's lots more mileage to be squeezed out of Captain Kirk. Here he's revived, courtesy of the super-science of an unlikely alliance of Borg and rogue Romulans, and he then targets one Next Generationer after another – first Worf on the Klingon homeworld, Qo'noS; then Data and Geordie on an archaeological dig on a desolate planet; until he gets to Riker on Deep Space 9. He has been programmed to track down and kill Jean Luc Picard – who is meanwhile investigating the latest Borg incursion and struggling (rather feebly) with his memories of being Locutus, spokesman for the Borg collective.

This is an engaging read, events whiz along, and most of all it's fun, but it has its credibility problems, lots of them. First off, none of the baddies have any remotely sensible motive for reviving Kirk, who is, needless to say, the one man with any real chance of stopping their nefarious scheme for carving up the universe – the Romulan leader's revenge-obsession about Kirk's photon-torpedoing her ancestor back in the days of the very first series is risible. Mind you, that's not all we have to swallow about her – she has to be chump enough to imagine she can get away with an alliance with the ("you will be assimilated!") Borg. Who themselves have changed enough to be willing to talk to her in the first place – but don't worry, they still remain as thick as their own cubeshines when it comes to taking notice of Starfleet personnel wandering around in their midst.

The redoubtable Jean Luc Picard is Kirk's co-star, but he's a mere shadow of himself here – it's Kirk who gets to play *numero uno* superhero. There's a

particularly silly scene where Picard gets command of a Starfleet vessel only to offer it to Kirk who is a) feeling extremely poorly, b) only hopelessly free of Romulan brainwashing and c) 80 years out of date with the Starfleet technology (even though it only takes him half a minute to suss out the holodeck and use it against Picard).

Yes, in the cold light of day it's a complete-idiot plot, with the villains providing the bulk of their own opposition. However, if you are willing to suspend your disbelief, it's good to have Kirk back, there are encounters aplenty between characters from the various series, and true Trekkers will have no trouble turning the pages right up to the to-be-continued end.

**The Captain's Daughter** by Peter David (Pocket, \$5.99 and £4.50) also comes ricocheting off the feature film *Generations*, but this time the captain in question is not Kirk (or Picard for that matter) but Sulu; it was his daughter, Demora, who had a walk-on part in the film, which raised all sorts of questions about when and how Sulu had spawned, who Mrs Sulu was, and what sort of *Trek* adventures very Demora might get into, which is very much the compass of this book.

The plot is two-stranded. The main story is set after the opening events of the film back in the tail-end of the original-series era; James T. Kirk has been lost to the Nexus and the Enterprise-B, commanded by Captain Harriman (not quite the wimp he was in the film where his main function was to make Kirk look good) is boldly going into the final frontier. Before

we've had more than a handful of pages to get to know her, our new heroine Demora dies. Enter Captain Sulu determined to avenge her death – which puts him on a collision course with both the wooden-headed Captain Harriman and Harriman's unpleasant and domineering dad, yet another Starfleet admiral who's part of the problem rather than the solution.

Interspersed with this is the backstory that sets out Demora's life. Sulu meets Demora's mum in adventurous circumstances, loses mum, gains Demora; Demora grows up, briefly runs into Captain Kirk and the Kobayashi Maru simulation, joins Starfleet, is posted to Harriman's ship – and dies mysteriously...

Peter David is particularly skilled at weaving new events in and out of the gaps in the *Trek* scripture as set up on TV and film, much more convincingly than Shatner *et al.* In fact, David is the best writer of *Trek* fiction, with a string of successful books behind him, and although *The Captain's Daughter* is not up to his best (*Imzadi*, with *Q-Squared* a close second) it's still an entertaining read.

There are also two new *Trek* non-fiction books from Bantam, the latest in a series that reprints material that first appeared in magazine form in the US. Unfortunately, the writers, trekspeers Mark Altman and Edward Gross, don't seem to have spent much time editing their work for book publication, particularly so with *Creating the Next Generation* (Bantam, £9.99). Billed as a close-up investigation of the start of the series, it is just a fistful of articles thrown together apparently unchanged from their original outing years ago when *The Next Generation* first aired. What was needed was some judicious updating – enough to put these greying comments into context. The material is fine as far as it goes – which just isn't very far at all for a book that costs a penny short of a tanner.

There's also *The Deep Space Log Book* (Bantam, £9.99), covering just one *DS9* season, the second, which is marginally better value. There's background and comment on each episode and it's good, informative, opinionated stuff – I particularly enjoyed reading both men's sometimes contrasting comments on each episode side-by-side. But there's a great deal of all too obvious padding here: first, unnecessarily large print; then some utterly superfluous *DS9* book notes, accompanied by (big!) reprints of the book covers; and an article on the upcoming (at least when this material first appeared) *Voyager* (readable enough, but still cheating because this is supposed to be a *DS9* book). The fact is that there's just not enough material here to justify a book

of this price. Far better and fairer to have put two seasons' worth of episode comments into one volume for this money.

Then there's the photos, disappointing in both books, and adding very little to the text. That's because, lacking Paramount's seal of approval, they have had to rely mainly on shots of cast-members taken from non-Trek sources, which makes it harder than ever to justify the cover price.

**The Art of Star Trek** by Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens (Pocket, £35) – yes, “by” this time instead of “with” (see above) – is very much a class piece of work – mind you, for the money it would have to be. And that's because it's rich in all the visual elements denied to Boxtree – in this case the work of artists, designers and technicians who have built the look of *Star Trek* over the years. There's also a text, basically a trawl through Trek history, with film and TV handled separately, but it's the paintings, drawings and photos that are the main attraction. For the Trek connoisseur, there's enough here to make it a compulsory purchase.

Cataloguing another fantasy world entirely, **The Complete Amber Sourcebook** by Theodore Krulik (AvoNova, £15) is another professionally produced piece of work. It's a guidebook to the late Roger Zelazny's ten-book “Amber” series, which was written in two sequences – the first (and much superior) chronicling the struggle of Corwin, memory-challenged prince of Amber, against the forces of Chaos and various members of his own family; and the follow-up, detailing the adventures of Corwin's son, Merlin, which is readable enough but never really comes close to recapturing the charm and baroque flair of the original.

The *Sourcebook* has alphabetically arranged entries covering Amber itself, the Courts of Chaos, the various shadow realms, the fratricidal princes and princesses, and the other characters, major and minor, up to and including the guard in the royal dungeons, Roger (– Zelazny giving himself a walk-on appearance in his own epic).

For the pure Amber fan, one minor caveat: although many items come directly from the books themselves (including enough direct quotes to remind us of the quality of Zelazny's writing) there also appears to be newly minted data. Zelazny clearly gave his permission, but there is no way of knowing how much derives from his input. But I suspect any fan of the initial series will find this book of interest – and anyone who loved the follow-up should just go straight out and buy it.

Neil Jones



## Serial miller

Paul Brazier

Unfashionable I may be, but the one form of fiction I really dislike is the serial. I always miss vital episodes of TV or radio serials – it took me seven years to locate a tape of episode seven of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* – and when I've begun reading serialized novels in magazines, either I can't locate a particular back-issue, the magazine stops publishing before the end of the story, or a particular issue wasn't imported. And this problem would appear to be particularly acute with novels, as the time scale involved is so much greater – which makes me particularly unwilling to read any book that proclaims itself a part of a series until I am in possession of all the members.

Of course, serialization isn't the problem, it is the unfinished nature of the fiction that bothers me – which is also the reason I can't bear soap operas. The current vogue for “spinoffery” (to use our sainted editor's coinage) is just another example of this for me, because, finally, it allows writers to be lazy. They don't have to work all their plotlines through in any specific volume, so their characterization gets sloppy – and if a reader finds a hole in the plot, the writer can claim the solution is forthcoming, or point to one or another in theirs (or someone else's) oeuvre that answers the criticism.

So I have been surprised to find myself reading several such books recently. Dan Simmons's *Endymion* is every bit as wonderful as its precursors, but is more spin-off than sequel, as a new set of characters is introduced into the universe familiar from the *Hyperion* books. Peter F. Hamilton's *The Reality Dysfunction* is touted as the first in a trilogy but, at 900 pages, is already the size of three normal novels. For all that he will never win any prizes for his prose, and his plotting is astonishingly convoluted, there is never any problem following the different strands of the story in this book – my only real complaint is that it is so heavy I can't read it comfortably in bed, and it's a pain to take on the train. And Kim Stanley Robin-

son's *Blue Mars* has just arrived to complete the trilogy (I read *Red Mars* unaware that it was “first in a trilogy” and was mightily put-out at the end because of this – but at least I knew I could rely on Robinson, as the *Pacific Edge*/*Orange County* trilogy is one of the great achievements of recent sf).

Among all this recreational reading, and very much against my better judgement, I read *Book One of The Monarchies of God*, a new fantasy series from Paul Kearney. And it is not an encouraging beginning (not least because, as with Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Fortune* series, the publisher is not saying how many volumes they think it will run to), as I have to report that *Hawkwood's Voyage* (Victor Gollancz, £16.99) has one of the most misleading titles I've ever encountered. First of all, it does not tell the tale of the whole voyage, but only the first half. Second, most of the book isn't about the voyage at all, but rather is taken up with painting the backdrop to a much larger action. And, third, there was once a real-life soldier of fortune called Hawkwood (thanks to David Pringle for this info) upon whom Paul Kearney did not draw at all, as he claims he had never heard of him. Now this last wouldn't be a problem except that the story appears to be broadly based on European history. The map at the front of the book looks like a badly drawn middle-ages map of Europe – all the major features are recognisable with difficulty – but all the names are different. There is even a quasi-Africa at the bottom – and the purpose of Hawkwood's voyage is to cross the western ocean and find the fabled new world on the other side.

There is an overarching religion and church, and, by the end of the book, there are two pope-equivalents, with factions forming to back one or the other, while a dark-skinned differently-religions warrior race is invading the pseudo-Europe from the east, and has already sacked its most impregnable city.

There are blood-and-guts, explicit sex, seven kinds of magic, religious burnings of heretics, and simple everyday heroics, and so it would be easy to dismiss this as yet another trashy fantasy novel. But Kearney is a much better writer than I have made him sound so far. In his first three novels, Kearney drew a contemporary real world character who had been thoroughly ground down by his life who then slipped out of his own continuum into a fantasy world where he lived out an even grimmer life, but one where he felt more empowered. I have wished in print before that he would concentrate on writing about the here-and-now, as he is so good at it. And, lo, here he is, writing a full-blooded fantasy series. I have to say that he *has* managed, once again, to engage my interest, and I want to know what happens to the various characters



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he has left in limbo; which brings me back to my dislike of serials. I want to know now. So I have to reserve my judgement until the series is finished.

Gwyneth Jones's work suffers from none of these faults. She has only produced the one trilogy so far (*The Daymaker*, *Transformations* and *The Skybreaker* under her pseudonym, Ann Halam) but each of those novels stands alone. Indeed, it is my impression that she cheerfully disregards any nit-picking need to make her novels consistent with one another in every detail. For instance, although the central character of *Divine Endurance* dies at the end of the novel – indeed, her death is one point of the novel – Jones includes her in *Flowerdust* and tells another compelling tale. I kept wondering whether or not the chronologies of the two novels meshed in any way, but never found the time to check, and then I realized that it really didn't matter – what was important was whether the novel I was reading worked or not, and it did, every time.

*Kairos* (Victor Gollancz, £5.99) first appeared in 1988, but had never had a paperback edition until now. This new Gollancz edition has been revised so that it doesn't seem too horribly out-of-date. It is set in a very near future England and the central sf device is a drug that alters reality rather than consciousness (and in this we again see Jones's cross-fertilization, as the eponymous *Flowerdust* is another such drug, but affecting the far-eastern country first depicted in *Divine Endurance*). It is a mark of Jones's power as an author that where large parts of this book would appear to be clichés in other hands, she manages not only to conceal their nature at first, but also to make them work as engines of her characters' development.

The world depicted here is so grim that the first time I tried to read this book (eight years ago) I couldn't cope with it. Recently, Jones has been giving readings in Brighton, and I was fortunate enough to be present when she read two long extracts from *Kairos*. This led me to seek out and read this new paperback. The revisions make little difference to the fundamental story – the world she draws is certainly grim, but it does improve, and there is an uplifting ending.

On the subject of shared universes, *Identifying the Object* is a small papercovered booklet approximately A5 in size, available from Swan Press, PO Box 90006, Austin, Texas 78709-0006, that collects four of Gwyneth

Jones's short stories – and the backdrop to each is familiar from her other fiction. "Identifying the Object" and "Blue Clay Blues" both appeared first in *Interzone*, and feature characters who also appear in her Aleutian novels – although her cryptic footnotes indicate they are not necessarily the same characters. The magnificent "Bold as Love" first appeared in *In Dreams*, an anthology edited by Paul McAuley and Kim Newman, and is set in the same Brighton as *Kairos*, although the characters from *Kairos* barely drift through the background of the story. "The Eastern Succession" first appeared in

*Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, and explores the background to the imaginary south east asia of *Divine Endurance* and *Flowerdust*. All these stories bear re-reading, and, indeed, I count myself lucky to have two copies of this booklet, so I can carry one about and wear it out with re-reading, safe in the knowledge that if I lose it there is another one at home.

Again from the USA, *Seven Tales and a Fable* (Edgewood Press, \$8.00) is a collection of Gwyneth Jones's earliest stories. These stories were first written down from her own oral storytelling in 1971, and while some of them have seen print over the intervening years, several appear here for the first time. They read very well for stories which are avowedly the product of a teenage mind – Jones acknowledges her borrowings from Shakespeare, but the fresh originality of these stories shines through any apparent plagiarism. The usual stuff of fantasy is here – princesses, dragons, magic, strange happenings and so on – but there are mobile phones and helicopters too. Also included is Jones's first ever published story, "Felicia", and the opening lines give some idea of the treat in store –

Once upon a time there was a princess who was disenchanted. After the nasty brutal business was over and the prince had gone to wash himself of

the monster's steaming blood... My only regret is that there can only be one such volume of early writings. Over the past few weeks, however, I have found that this book also bears repeated readings, but I will have to be very, very careful; I only have one copy of this one.

Finally, as mentioned before, Jones has a separate literary life as author for children Ann Halam. Recently, she moved from her long-time publisher Orchard to Orion Books, and her first two offerings under this imprint are to hand.

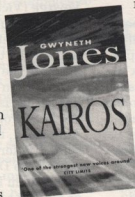
It came as something of a surprise to realize, on re-reading the books for this review, that all of Ann Halam's books have roughly the same skeleton. There is usually a family of three children of wildly diverse ages, a busy mum who works part time, and a somehow absent father. The story revolves around rectifying some very modern injustice, and usually involves some kind of was-it-or-wasn't-it magical time travel. On reflection I realized that human beings all have roughly the same skeleton too. As this didn't seem to be a barrier to diversity in humans, I gave up nit-picking and revelled in it instead.

In *The Haunting of Jessica Raven* (Orion, £9.99), the injustice is a fatal disease in the older brother, and the magical time travel comes about during a camping holiday in France. It would be unfair to give away any more here, as this book is on a par with Halam's award-winning *King Death's Garden*. Anyone who has read that, or Gwyneth's holiday reminiscences in *Nexus*, will know what to expect.

It would appear to be rather unfair to consider *The Fear Man* (Orion, £9.99) after *The Haunting of Jessica Raven* as that is a very difficult act to follow. However, *The Fear Man* is every bit as good, but far more scary, as there is an actual villain, and some quite nasty supernatural stuff the like of which has not been seen in Halam's books since *Ally Ally Aster*.

It is encouraging to know that Gwyneth Jones is continuing to produce first-class stories, and that more are on the stocks. The next Aleutian novel, following on from *White Queen* and *North Wind*, will be *Phoenix Café* and is due in October. The next Ann Halam is not finished yet, but is provisionally titled *The Substation*; and we hope to be printing an interview with her in the near future as well.

Paul Brazier



The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month 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.

**Aldiss, Brian. Common Clay: 20-Odd Stories.** Illustrated by Rosamund Chorley and Brian Aldiss. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-13948-9, 334pp, hardcover, cover by Gary Embury, \$23.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the UK as *The Secret of This Book*, 1995; most of the tales were published originally in anthologies or magazines, and they include two, "Horse Meat" and "Becoming the Full Butterfly," from *Interzone*.) 7th March 1996.

**Baker, Will. Star Beast.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-65773-1, 472pp, hardcover, cover by Mike Van Houten, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; Baker's second sf book, a follow-up to his *Shadow Hunter*, which was praised by some; this one could have had a more original title, though: *Star Beast* is the title of one of Robert A. Heinlein's most fondly-remembered "juveniles" [issued by the same UK publisher!]; come to think of it, *Shadow Hunter* was not an original title either: Pat Murphy had got there first with her debut sf novel [1982].) 4th April 1996.

**Banks, Iain M. Excession.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-394-8, 455pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a new "Culture" novel by the king of Scottish sf.) 13th June 1996.

**Beagle, Peter. The Last Unicorn.** Souvenir Press, ISBN 0-285-63321-X, 167pp, B-format paperback, cover by Kirsty Marie O'Leary, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1968; this reissue contains a two-page preface by the author which is dated 1978.) 11th April 1996.

**Brooks, Terry. First King of Shannara.** "The prequel to the bestselling SHANNARA

series." Legend, ISBN 0-09-960191-5, 489pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1996.) 21st March 1996.

**Calder, Richard. Dead Things.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648040-3, 201pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first edition; third in the trilogy which began with *Dead Girls* and *Dead Boys*.) 9th April 1996.

**Canter, Mark. Ember from the Sun.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-64002-2, 424pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; a debut book by a new American writer, born 1952; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 104.) 18th April 1996.

**Coppel, Alfred. Glory's People: Book Three of the Goldenwing Cycle.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86168-0, 320pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) June 1996.

**Crume, Andrew. D'Alembert's Principle: Memory, Reason and Imagination.** Introduction by John Clute. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-32-1, 203pp, B-format paperback, cover by Lise Weisgerber, £7.99. (Literary fantasy novel, first edition; it's the third book by Crume [born 1961], who has a reputation as "one of Scotland's most original young writers.") 17th April 1996.

**Daniels, Les. No Blood Spilled.** "The Don Sebastian Vampire Chronicles." Raven, ISBN 1-85487-431-4, 218pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 18th March 1996.

**Donaldson, Stephen R. The Gap Into Ruin: This Day All Gods Die.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-223831-4, 639pp, hardcover, cover by David O'Connor, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the fifth and final "Gap" novel, following *The Gap Into Madness: Chaos and Order*; "Voyager" is of course HarperCollins, who have started using this imprint name on their sf/fantasy hardcovers as



well as paperbacks.) 9th April 1996.

**Dozoi, Gardner, ed. The Year's Best Science Fiction Collection: Thirteenth Annual Collection.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-14452-0, xxx+4594pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Sf

anthology, first edition; proof copy received; there will be a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at \$17.95; it contains 24 stories by Poul Anderson, Terry Bisson, Pat Cadigan, Greg Egan [twice], Joe Haldeman, Nancy Kress, Ursula Le Guin [twice], John Kessel, Paul J. McAuley, Maureen F. McHugh, Ian R. MacLeod, Robert Reed, Geoff Ryman, Dan Simmons, Allen Steele, Brian Stableford, Michael Swanwick and others; just one of the stories is selected from *Interzone* [Ryman's "Home"] but, as usual, a good many come from *Asimov's* and *F&SF*, and from original anthologies, the winners this year being Gregory Benford's *Far Futures* and Greg Bear's *New Legends*.) July 1996.

**Dreyfuss, Richard, and Harry Turtledove. The Two Georges.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-62826-X, 422pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Alternative-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this one was published in a UK hardcover edition by Hodder & Stoughton last year, but they neglected to send us a review copy; Dreyfuss is, of course, a well-known movie actor; Turtledove is a specialist in alternative-history tales, and presumably he has written most of the book; the idea, apparently hatched by Dreyfuss, is that America never won its independence and has remained a British colony - not such an original concept, alas, as Harry Harrison tackled something rather like it in *A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah!* [1972]; but we've just noticed; Harry Harrison is given credit in the acknowledgments!) 18th April 1996.

**Duncan, Dave. The Cursed.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38952-2, 418pp, A-format paperback, cover by David A. Cherry, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first

published in the USA, 1995.) Late entry: 1st February publication, received in March 1996.

**Egan, Greg. Axiomatic.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-309-2, xii+368pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf collection, first published in 1995; 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; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *IZ* 98.) 4th March 1996.

**Gaiman, Neil. The Kindly Ones.** "The Sandman." Illustrated by Marc Hempel and others. Introduction by Frank McConnell. Titan, ISBN 1-85286-718-3, unpaginated [over 300 pages], hardcover, cover by Dave McKean, £24.99. (Fantasy graphic novel, first published in the USA, 1996; the eighth "Sandman" book, with a ninth and final volume, *The Wake*, promised; this is the American, DC/Vertigo, first edition with a British price sticker.) 18th April 1996.

**Goldberg, Lee, Randy Lofficier, Jean-Marc Lofficier and William Rabkin. The Dreamweavers: Interviews with Fantasy Filmmakers of the 1980s.** Foreword by Marv Wolfman. McFarland [distributed in Britain by Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN], ISBN 0-7864-0085-4, x+289pp, hardcover, £34.65. (Collection of interviews with fantasy film personnel; first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American edition with a British price added; most of the material is reprinted from magazines such as *Starlog*, *Fangoria* and *Twilight Zone*; interviews include Ray Bradbury, Wes Craven, David Cronenberg, Joe Dante, Richard Donner, Michael J. Fox, Steve Gerber, Rutger Hauer, Earl Mac Rauch, Ivan Reitman, Michael Ritchie, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Peter Weller, Gregory Widen and Robert Zemeckis; a useful volume, recommended to all fantasy film enthusiasts.) March 1996.

**Gorman, Ed. Black River Falls.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1351-8, 282pp, hardcover, cover by Lee Gibbons, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA [?], 1996.) 4th April 1996.

Gorman, Ed. **Hawk Moon**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-5195-9, 307pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £5.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995.) 18th April 1996.

Harbinson, W. A. **Projekt UFO: The Case for Man-Made Flying Saucers**. Box-tree, ISBN 0-7522-0308-8, xiv+273pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Pseudo-science text by a British sf writer, first published in 1995; the argument is that UFOs did not originate from outer space, but were secret projects of the Nazis, or the Soviets, or somebody; of course, Harbinson has utilized exactly the same thesis in his novels.) 8th April 1996.

Harris, Anne. **The Nature of Smoke**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85286-X, 284pp, hardcover, £21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; another debut by a new American writer, it's described as "a dangerous novel of sex, drugs and high-tech chaos theory.") June 1996.

Heinlein, Robert A. **The Moon is a Harsh Mistress**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86176-1, 374pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1966; proof copy received; this appears to be a straight reprint of Heinlein's fourth Hugo winner, with no revisions or restored text, so we don't understand why it was felt necessary to send reviewers a proof copy.) July 1996.

Hobb, Robin. **The Assassin's Apprentice: The Farseer, I**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648009-8, 480pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; reviewed by Chris Morgan in *Interzone* 98; "Robin Hobb" is the pseudonym of an American writer who has published a number of fantasy novels and one of sf novel under her real name.) 18th March 1996.

Hobb, Robin. **Royal Assassin: The Farseer II**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224607-4, 580pp, hardcover, cover by John Howe, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; we recently listed the American, Bantam/Spectra, trade paperback as the first edition, but apparently this UK edi-

tion precedes it.) 21st March 1996.

Holdstock, Robert. **Ancient Echoes**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224600-7, 344pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it's not billed as a new "Mythago" novel, but it's certainly in that dank greenwood vein which Holdstock has made very much his own.) 9th April 1996.

Hutson, Shaun. **Stolen Angels**. Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-90405-8, viii+342pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Taylor, £15.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition.) 18th April 1996.

Hutson, Shaun. **Lucy's Child**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0769-5, ix+435pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Taylor, £5.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in 1995; reviewed by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 99.) 18th April 1996.

James, Roby. **Commencement**. "Del Rey Discovery," Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40038-0, viii+356pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; it's a debut book, in the "planetary romance" vein, by an American woman writer.) *Late entry: 1st February publication, received in March 1996.*

Jones, Diana Wynne. **A Sudden Wild Magic**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06299-1, 380pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; proof copy received; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 71; so why has this book by a major British fantasy taken four years to appear in her home country?; is she turning into another Peter Dickinson or Philip Pullman [see below], more honoured across the Atlantic than here?) 11th July 1996.

Jones, Diana Wynne. **The Tough Guide to Fantasyland**. Gollancz/Vista, ISBN 0-575-60106-X, 223pp, B-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy "traveller's guide," first edition; funny and ingenious, it adds up to a good critique of the genre.) 25th April 1996.



Jones, J. V. **The Baker's Boy**. "The Book of Words," Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-375-1, 552pp, A-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; J. V.

Jones [Julie Victoria Jones, not to be confused with Jenny Jones] is a new British writer, born 1963, now living in California.) 4th April 1996.

Kilworth, Garry. **Cybercats**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50327-8, 139pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £3.50. (Juvenile sf novel, first edition; sequel to *The Electric Kid* [which we never saw], winner of the 1995 Lancashire Children's Book Award.) 4th April 1996.

King, Stephen. **The Green Mile, Part One: The Two Dead Girls**. "The serial thriller begins..." Penguin, ISBN 0-14-025856-6, 92pp, A-format paperback, £1.99. (Horror/suspense novella, first published in the USA, 1996; this is a pleasant piece of quaintness from Mr King: he is writing a part-novel, Charles Dickens-fashion, to be published as six slim paperbacks at monthly intervals; in his foreword, King credits British editor Malcolm Edwards [of *Interzone* and HarperCollins fame] with sowing the idea in his mind, via agent Ralph Vicinanza; on second thoughts, perhaps the comparison shouldn't be with Dickens but with those masters of 19th-century schlock-horror part-works, Thomas Peckett Prest [Sweeney Todd, the *Demon Barber of Fleet Street*] and James Malcolm Rymer [Varney the Vampire]; the major difference is that the vast epics of Prest, Rymer, et al, ran to scores, even hundreds, of parts selling at a penny apiece - this was in the day when new hardcover novels cost one and a half guineas [31 shillings and sixpence], and this part-publication proved a useful device for reaching the very poorest readers who couldn't possibly have bought a novel in any other form.) 28th March 1996.

Kinnard, Roy. **Honor in Silent Films: A Filmography, 1896-1929**. McFarland

[distributed in Britain by Shelving Ltd., 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN], ISBN 0-7864-0036-6, 278pp, hardcover, £35.95. (Illustrated, annotated listing of all silent movies with horror elements; first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American edition with a British price added; in his short but intelligent introduction Kinnard points out that "the horror film" didn't exist as a recognized genre before 1930; nevertheless, many films had horror ingredients, and here he sets out to give an account of them all; the result is a useful reference book for all those interested in movies of the type.) *Late entry: 21st December 1995 publication, received in March 1996.*

Koontz, Dean. **Strange Highway**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4839-7, 564pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £5.99. (Horror collection, first published in the USA [?], 1995; the title story is a previously unpublished short novel [196 pages]; the rest of the book consists of a dozen reprinted short stories, some of them revised, plus a 12-page "Notes to the Reader" explaining their genesis.) 11th April 1996.

Lackey, Mercedes, and Larry Dixon. **The Silver Gryphon: Book Three of The Mage Wars**. Illustrated by Dixon. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-440-4, 322pp, hardcover, cover by John Barber, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 18th March 1996.

Lackey, Mercedes, and Larry Dixon. **The White Gryphon: Book Two of The Mage Wars**. Illustrated by Dixon. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-313-0, 305pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Barber, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 4th March 1996.

Lee, Tanith. **When the Lights Go Out**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1598-7, 246pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Sawowski, £16.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition.) April 1996.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Freedom's Landing**. "The first of a brilliant new sequence." Corgi,



ISBN 0-552-14271-9, 384pp, A-format paperback, cover by Romas, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 11th April 1996.

Mitchell, James Leslie. **Three Go Back**. Introduction by Ian Campbell. Polygon [2 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LF], ISBN 0-7486-6203-0, xv+198pp, B-format paperback, no price shown. (Sf novel, first published in 1932; the cover gives the author's name as "Lewis Grassic Gibbon," which was his well-known pseudonym used on mainstream books; however, the title-page specifies James Leslie Mitchell; it was previously reissued in 1986 by Greenhill Books, who correctly bylined the novel "J. Leslie Mitchell"; if Iain Banks [see above] is the present-day "king of Scottish sf," then Mitchell, who died tragically young in 1935, has some claim to be the one "classic" Scottish sf writer of the past, even though he wrote only two novels within the genre; the other, *Gay Hunter* [1934], was reissued by Polygon in 1989, but we did not receive a review copy.) Late entry: January 1996 publication, received in March.

Nasir, Jamil. **The Higher Space**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-56887-6, 241pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second novel by the Palestinian-American author who has contributed a couple of stories to *Interzone* in the past.) 13th June 1996.

Oates, Joyce Carol. **Demon and Other Tales**. Illustrated by Jason Eckhardt. Necronomicon Press [PO Box 1304, West Warwick, RI 02893, USA], ISBN 0-940884-82-8, 36pp, small-press paperback, \$4.95. (Horror collection, first edition; it contains seven very short stories by this well-known author.) Late entry: January publication, received in March 1996.

Pierce, Tamora. **Realms of the Gods**. Point Fantasy, ISBN 0-590-13376-4, 331pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £3.99. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; the fourth novel in a sequence which began with *Wild Magic*.) March? 1996.

Pratchett, Terry. **Johnny and the Bomb**. Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-40670-3, 206pp, hardcover, cover by Larry Rostant, £12.99. (Juvenile sf novel, first edition; third in the "Johnny" trilogy which began with *Only You Can Save Mankind*.) 4th April 1996.

Pullman, Philip. **The Golden Compass: His Dark Materials, Book One**. Knopf, ISBN 0-679-87924-2, 401pp, hardcover, cover by Eric Rohmann, \$20. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first published in the UK as *Northern Lights*, 1995; it's described as "a meditation on the themes of *Paradise Lost*, with a wild young woman on the brink of adolescence taking the part of Eve"; Knopf really are going to town here: it's a beautifully produced book with a striking cover, they have printed 100,000 hardcover copies and they are giving it a major publicity push; the author is British and has previously written a number of children's novels as well as a "highly acclaimed trilogy of Victorian thrillers featuring heroine Sally Lockhart: *The Ruby in the Smoke*, *Shadow in the North*, and *The Tiger in the Well*"; we haven't heard of him or any of his works before now, which just goes to show how some UK writers are more honoured in the States than they are in their own country; this new novel was published in London by Scholastic Children's Books last year, but they didn't send us a review copy.) 3rd April 1996.

Rankin, Robert. **A Dog Called Demolition**. Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-40516-2, 251pp, hardcover, cover by Ian Murray, £15.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; "Rankin's 13th novel is a nightmare journey to hell and back, with only a brief stop at a Happy Eater to use the toilet.") 11th April 1996.

Rankin, Robert. **The Garden of Unearthly Delights**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14212-3, 318pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ian Murray, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first



published in 1995.) 11th April 1996.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **Blue Mars**. Voyager, ISBN 0-246-13883-1, 616pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first edition; third in the trilogy which began with *Red Mars* and *Green*

*Mars*; the publishers describe the trilogy as "the sf event of the decade," which for once is not too much of an exaggeration, for this is fine, well-characterized, politically aware, utopian, near-future hard sf—"it's what science fiction was invented for," to borrow Bruce Sterling's words from another context; reviewed, from an advance copy, by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 106.) 25th April 1996.

Sanni, Phillip. **Terminal Command**. Vantage Press [516 West 34th St., New York, NY 10001, USA], ISBN 0-553-11297-4, ix+321pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Sf novel, first edition; the author is a globe-trotting Britisher, born 1963, who acknowledges the influence of Niven & Pournelle, Iain M. Banks and others [including Barrington J. Bayley, mis-spelled]; this space opera may be a vanity press product, but, if so, it's better produced than its UK equivalents generally are.) Late entry: 1995 publication, received in March 1996.

Savage, Felicity. **Humility Garden: An Unfinished Biography**. Roc, ISBN 0-451-45398-0, 352pp, A-format paperback, \$4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut novel, written by an American 18-year-old, it's being compared to the erotic fantasy of Tanith Lee; this has been sent to us by Penguin, who are planning a UK Roc edition on 30th May 1996, priced at £4.99.) Late entry: March 1995 publication, received in March 1996.

Slide, Anthony. **The Hollywood Novel: A Critical Guide to Over 1200 Works with Film-Related Themes or Characters, 1912 through 1994**. McFarland [distributed in Britain by Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN], ISBN 0-7864-0044-7, vii+320pp, trade paperback,

£38.25. (Annotated bibliography of novels about the film industry, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American edition with a British price added; a few of the books covered are sf, fantasy or horror [Harry Harrison's *The Technicolor Time Machine* and Ramsey Campbell's *Ancient Images* are examples] but the majority of the works listed lie outside our genres; nevertheless, this is a very interesting compendium of information, well indexed by author, title and subject, and with appendices on "radio novels" and "television novels"; someone with more science-fictional orientation might have been tempted to list Hugo Gernsback's *Ralph 124C 41+* [1911-12] as the first TV novel—indeed Gernsback once claimed he was the first person to use the word "television" in print [in a 1909 issue of his magazine *Modern Electrics*]—but unfortunately Mr Slide misses that trick; he also misses out Alfred Bester's *The Rat Race* [1953], surely one of the most notable mainstream American TV novels of its time, and Norman Spinrad's *Bug Jack Barron* [1969], surely the most memorable science-fictional treatment of near-future TV.) Late entry: 1995 publication, received in March 1996.

Stine, R. L. **Superstitious**. "The world's bestselling horror writer." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225441-7, 390pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £15.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1995; the author, who once published under the byline "Johival Bob Stine" [e.g. the novelization of the dreadful sf comedy movie *Spaceballs*], has become a mega-bestselling children's writer in America—hence the immodest shout-line on the cover of this book, implying that he has outstripped even King and Koontz; this appears to be his first adult novel.) 25th April 1996.

Strasser, Dirk. **Equinox: The Second Book of Ascension**. Pan Australia, ISBN 0-330-35738-7, xvi+400pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Sofilas, A\$13.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; second in a trilogy, "in the bestselling epic tradition of Tad Williams and Robert Jordan," beginning with *Zenith* [which we didn't see]; Strasser is a German-born

Australian, born 1959, and he is co-editor of the sf/fantasy magazine *Aurealis* and author of a young-adult horror novel, *Graffiti* [1993]. 8th March 1996.

Straub, Peter. **The Hellfire Club.** Random House, ISBN 0-679-40137-7, xiv+463pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; it has some racy advance quotes on the back, from people like Stephen King and Donald E. Westlake, but the best is Carolyn See's: "This is the scariest, goriest, creepiest, sickest, most twisted novel I've read in over ten years"; Random USA rarely take the trouble to send us books for review, so no doubt this one is being given an extra-big push; presumably a British edition is scheduled from someone, perhaps HarperCollins?) Late entry: 24th January publication, received in March 1996.

Aldred, Sophie, and Mike Tucker. **Ace! The Inside Story of the End of an Era.** Foreword by John Nathan-Turner. Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 1-85227-574-X, iv+124pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Illustrated reminiscences of the last few seasons of the *Doctor Who* television series, by the actress who played the character "Ace"; first edition.) 21st March 1996.

Barrett, Neal, Jr. **The Touch of Your Shadow, the Whisper of Your Name.** "Babylon 5, Book #5." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0158-1, 248pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; inspired by the Warner Bros. TV series created by J. Michael Straczynski; the *Babylon 5* franchise is attracting some rather quirky authors: last month it was the Amstrad PCW-loving Britisher Jim Mortimore; this month it's the American sf veteran Barrett [born 1929], who clearly relishes Ellisonian titles.) 29th April 1996.

Bassom, David. **Creating Babylon 5: Behind the Scenes of Warner Bros. Revolutionary Deep Space Drama.** Foreword by J. Michael Straczynski. Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0841-1, 128pp, very large-format paperback, £14.99. (Illustrated sf televi-

Tem, Melanie. **Desmodus.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4888-5, 308pp, A-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1995.) 18th April 1996.

Turtledove, Harry. **Worldwar: Tilting the Balance.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38998-0, 597pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stan Watts, \$6.99. (Alternative-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; sequel to *Worldwar: In the Balance*.) Late entry: 1st February publication, received in March 1996.

Turtledove, Harry. **Worldwar: Upsetting the Balance.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40221-9, ix+481pp, hardcover, cover by Stan Watts, \$23. (Al-



ternative-history sf novel, first edition; sequel to *Worldwar: In the Balance* and *Worldwar: Tilting the Balance*; apparently, a British edition has appeared from Hodder & Stoughton, but they've forgotten to send us a review copy.) Late entry: 1st February publication, received in March 1996.

Vira, Soma. **Checkmating Aliens: Planet Keepers, Book 1.** Space Link Books [77 West 55th St., New York, NY 10019, USA], ISBN 0-9646057-1-6, 229pp, trade paperback, \$12.95. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; although it's dated "1996" we have reason to believe this was published in an Indian edition earlier; the author was born in Lucknow but lives in the USA; the book is distribut-

ed in the UK, price £11.99, by Gazelle Book Services Ltd, Falcon House, Queen Square, Lancaster, LA1 1RN.) No date shown: received in March 1996.

Werber, Bernard. **Empire of the Ants.** "The sensational European bestseller." Translated by Margaret Rocques. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03385-X, 274pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in France as *Les Fourmis*, 1991; a debut novel, described as "a first-class futuristic thriller," it sold half a million copies in French and has been published in 17 countries; since *Empire of the Ants* is already a well-known title in English [an H. G. Wells short story which formed the basis of a film some years ago], wouldn't it have been better to call the novel, as in French, *The Ants*?) 11th April 1996.

tion with a British price added.) 1st April 1996.

Smith, Dean Wesley, and Kristine Kathryn Rusch. **Klignon.** "Star Trek." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-00257-0, 217pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novelization, first published in the USA, 1996; this particular book is not an original, but is based on a script by Hilary Bader for a CD-ROM, and it contains a 20-page afterword by David Mack describing the making of the interactive disc; this is the American first edition with a British price sticker.) 6th May 1996.

Smith, Dean Wesley, and Kristine Kathryn Rusch. **The Rings of Tautee.** "Star Trek, #78." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-00171-X, 242pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edition with a British price sticker.) 6th May 1996.

Vornholt, John. **Rogue Saucer.** "Star Trek: The Next Generation, #39." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-54917-0, 271pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) March 1996.

## 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 sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.

sion-series companion, first published in the USA, 1996.) 8th April 1996.

Dillard, J. M., and Kathleen O'Malley. **Possession.** "Star Trek: The Next Generation, #40." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-86485-8, 281pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) 6th May 1996.

Kalogridis, Jeanne. **Children of the Vampire.** "The Diaries of the Family Dracul." Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4925-3, 303pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Scaife, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1995; the second in a trilogy which prequelizes Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; Jeanne Kalogridis is the said to be real name of an author who has been published widely under a pseudonym.) 18th April 1996.

Lucas, George, Donald F. Gut and James Kahn. **Star Wars Omnibus.** Warner, ISBN 0-

7515-1324-5, 505pp, B-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf movie-novelization omnibus, first published in the USA, 1995; it contains *Star Wars: A New Hope* by Lucas [ghost-written by Alan Dean Foster], *The Empire Strikes Back* by Glut and *Return of the Jedi* by Kahn, originally published in 1976, 1980 and 1983 respectively.) 4th April 1996.

Okrand, Mark. **Star Trek: The Klingon Way-A Warrior's Guide.** "In both English and Klingon!" Pocket, ISBN 0-671-53755-5, x+214pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Illustrated alien-language book of proverbs, inspired by the sf TV series; first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) 6th May 1996.

Shatner, William, with Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens. **The Return.** "Star Trek." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-52610-3, 371pp, hardcover, £9.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edi-

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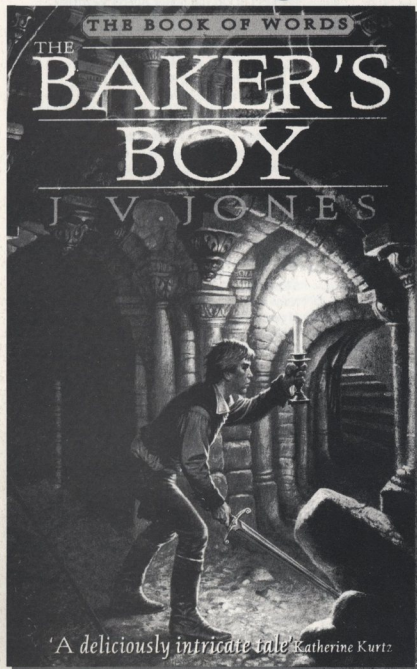
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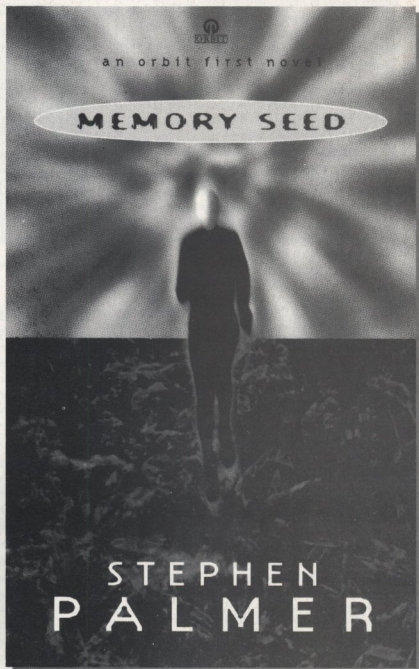
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