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SUBMISSIONS
The SFRAReview encourages all submissions, including essays, review essays that cover several related texts, and interviews. If you would like to review nonfiction or fiction, please contact the respective editor.

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Well, this is the last issue of 2006, so obviously we’re still running a wee bit late in the production schedule. We’re hoping to get things back on track with the next couple of issues, with the intention of producing a Heinlein-themed issue in time for the conference of which President Adam Frisch speaks in his introductory message below. Fiction Reviews Editor Ed Carmien is hoping to hear from anyone with thoughts on producing reviews, either full-length or mini-reviews, on fiction by Heinlein, particularly new editions recently produced or forthcoming. Nonfiction Reviews Editor Ed McKnight is the guy to contact if you’d like to review critical examinations of Heinlein’s work and his contributions to SF. And I would absolutely love to hear from anyone who has ever taught Heinlein’s work in the classroom, to any extent, for an article (or more than one) on Approaches to Teaching Heinlein. Even if you don’t feel up to preparing a longer piece for Approaches, I’d like to hear from you; if enough SFRA members put together their brief anecdotes and bits and pieces of experience, we could probably end up with a substantial addition to the Approaches series.

Speaking of the Approaches to Teaching series (nice segue there, huh?), I’m delighted to include Neil Easterbrook’s article on combating student plagiarism with SF scholarship. It’s useful advice for all of us in the classroom, as well as an entertaining read. I believe that Neil would very much appreciate someone buying him a drink at the next ICFA or SFRA conference and explaining to him in detail what a *troth* is. And I will happily buy Neil that drink in thanks for writing me an email message some time ago offering to share his classroom experience this way. Do you hear that, folks? A contribution to the Approaches to Teaching series gets you a free drink from the Editor.


The nominations for the Crawford Award for best first fantasy novel have been announced. The award will be presented at the International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts, to be held in Fort Lauderdale the weekend of March 14-18. A *Shadow in Summer*, by Daniel Abraham; *Skinny Dipping in the Lake of the Dead*, by Alan De Niro; *The Stolen Child*, by Keith Donohue; *In The Forest of Forgetting*, by Theodora Goss; *The Lies of Locke Lamora*, by Scott Lynch; *Temeraire*, by Naomi Novik; *Map of Dreams*, by M. Rickert.

The short list for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, presented to the best science fiction published in the UK, has been announced. The winner, who will receive a prize of £2007, will be announced on May 2 on the opening night of the Sci-Fi-London Film Festival, *End of the World Blues*, by Jon Courtenay Grimwood; *Nova Swing*, by M. John Harrison; *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*, by Lydia Millet; *Hav*, by Jan Morris; *Gradiสถิ*, by Adam Roberts; *Streaking*, by Brian Stableford.
a hidden challenge. Held in conjunction with the 2-hotel-wide Heinlein Centennial Convention (about as large as a meetin' oughta grow) and the prestigious Campbell Conference, SFRA's meeting will allow members to interact not only with its own guest authors such as Fred Pohl, James Gunn and Allen Steele, but also with celebrities invited by the other conferences, from astronaut Buzz Aldren and NASA administrator Dr. Michael Griffin to authors such as Spider Robinson and Arthur C. Clarke (via video). And while the “modern world” may have changed a tad since the days of Rogers & Hammerstein (and Robert Heinlein, who grew up in the area), Kansas City remains an exciting place to visit. Close to the conference hotel are world-class art museums (the Asian displays at the Nelson-Atkins are unrivaled, as are the Modern art collections at the Kemper), charming shopping districts (such as Country Club Plaza, with oodles of shopping, dining and entertainment just a short cab ride south of the Westin), family entertainment sites such as Union Station, connected by skywalks to the Westin Crown Center in case the dad-blamed weather is overheating the crops (no magic lanterns, but a 3-D IMAX + lots of interesting historical exhibits), and the best darn pork BBQ west of the Carolinas (such as Jack Stack’s, nestled in the heart of Kansas City’s art-gallery area, just across the tracks via an overhead walkway from Union Station. I ate there just this past October, and let me tell you…).

The challenge? Our SFRA meeting could easily get lost amid all this commotion and excitement. So your challenge is:

to attend if that’s at all a possibility (KC is cheap to get to),
to take a few moments right now (or this weekend at the latest) to send a short paper or a panel suggestion to Carolyn Wendell (cwendell@rochester.rr.com) or Phil Snyder (psnyder@monroecc.edu) – whether about this year’s “Golden Age of SF” theme or not; our 2007 program co-chairs will find an appropriate spot for any good proposal,
to phone in your hotel reservations to the Westin so you can get conference rates, and
to use all the synergetic energy of this year’s “multi-conference” meeting to make SFRA 2007 one of our best gatherings ever.

APPROACHES TO TEACHING

Promoting SF, Avoiding Plagiarism, and Serving Student Needs

Neil Easterbrook

A few years ago, I’d hit rock bottom. My general preference had always been to give undergraduates the maximum freedom in their essays, both because of my anarchist commitments and because I’ve always thought that independently developing a strong, “doable” topic was a significant portion of the intellectual work of any academic essay. The previous term, I’d given a “topic open” writing assignment, and eight of the students chose to write on Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Of the eight, seven committed plagiarism to variously disturbing degrees, something I was able to demonstrate for six. (Three years later, I saw that seventh student, now bartending at a spot frequented by my colleagues in the Department of History; she was very friendly with the History profs, and so in a moment when their attention was distracted and she could not be compromised by her answer, I asked if in that Frankenstein essay she’d actually plagiarized. She denied even having written on Frankenstein, which I took as an implicit confirmation that she’d cheated, and was doing what cheaters usually do—taking the lie up one notch.)

Whatever else it means, plagiarism means the students aren’t learning. It

The nominees for this year's Philip K. Dick Award, presented for best paperback original, have been announced. The award will be presented at Norwescon 30 on Friday, April 6, 2007. Carnival, by Elizabeth Bear; Catalyst, by Nina Kiriki Hoffman; Idolon, by Mark Budz; Living Next Door to the God of Love, by Justina Robson; Mindscape, by Andrea Hairston; Recursion, by Tony Ballantyne; Spin Control, by Chris Moriarty.


Femspec is pleased to announce the winners of the Best of Femspec’s First Five Years Awards, with many thanks to our judges. They will be presented by founding co-editor Robin Reid at the Cultural Identity Caucus on Thursday night at the March ‘07 IAFA conference in Florida. Best Art: Beth Blinebury; Best Cover: Bridget Tichenor; Best Critical Essays: First—Gina Wisker, Second—Rebecca Hains, Third—Baty Weinbaum; Best Fiction: First—Rebecca Lexy, Second—Judith Merril, Third—Samuel R. Delany, Fourth—Marilyn Gale, Fifth—Marleen Barr; Best Poetry: First—Barbara Mincheton, Second—Karen Alcaly, Third—Doreen Russell, Fourth—Tara Leonard, Fifth—Jane Liddell-King. Best Reviews: Janice Bogstad, Diona Shaw; Best Special Editor: Patricia Melzer.
The **Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Database** developed at Texas A&M University reached a significant milestone with the loading of the updated database December 31, 2007. The database provides author, title, and subject access to over 75,000 individual items about the fields of science fiction, fantasy, and related material, drawn from books, journals, newspapers, fanzines, the internet, and occasionally unpublished manuscripts. The database is based heavily upon the Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection in the Cushing Memorial Library and Archives and collections in the Sterling C. Evans Library at Texas A&M, with the substantial assistance of the Interlibrary Loan department of the University Libraries. Material acquired for indexing from other sources is archived in “Science Fiction: Collected Papers,” the research file of compiler and science fiction curator Hal W. Hall. That archive is housed in the Cushing Library Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection. In addition to the files of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Database, the Cushing Library Science Fiction Research Collection houses over 25,000 books, some 90% of the science fiction and fantasy magazines published in English, and manuscripts and papers of many science fiction and fantasy writers. The total collection numbers over 43,000 published items, and several hundred linear feet of archival material. The Cushing Library is open daily from 8:00 am to 7:00 pm Monday through Friday, and Saturday 9:00 am to 1:00 pm, during the regular semester. For more information, contact Hal W. Hall at the Cushing Library: 979-862-1840 or email hhall@lib-gw.tamu.edu

also means that I was wasting hours and hours enforcing our Code of Student Conduct. Ok, I wasn’t *wasting* the time, but I was spending time that could be better spent in a thousand different ways, from blessing lepers to watching reruns of *Deep Space Nine*. Ok, time I could have spent tutoring students or writing my own smug little scholarly diatribes.

So the very next semester, I did what all pros do in trying to avoid receiving plagiarism from their students: I crafted six very specific topics, thinking that each was sufficiently narrow that only a handful of published works addressed those particular issues. Thereby students would be less likely to plagiarize, even if they tried. I warned them, I begged them, I promised them my everlasting troth. (I still don’t really know what a troth is, but I was pulling out all the stops.) Still, a solid third of the submissions copied from secondary sources. The patch-writers were suitably chastised and sent back to correct their faulty documentation. For the real cheaters, such as the kid who didn’t address any of the writing prompts but did copy verbatim six pages from *Cliff’s Notes*, I wrote the appropriate letters to the dean, requesting appropriate punishments.

But even though the topics were carefully limited and the students suitably forewarned of my zero tolerance for plagiarism, I still had to spend hours and hours in the library and on-line, in sub rosa conferences and in drafting memos. Worst was the fellow who paraphrased the essay of his roommate. He’d initially told me he would write an essay on *Solaris*, then submitted something that followed his pal’s essay in every respect; the original was ok and the other was a pale paraphrase—precisely the same points in the same order, but with slightly different illustrations. Now I read all student work “blind,” without the student’s name attached; only after I’ve commented and graded do I connect the name to the paper, even then all I knew was that they sat together in class. Checking addresses, I discovered they were roommates. What apparently transpired was that the first roommate had just set up a LAN in their apartment, and then gone off for a weekend with his family. This left the second student with full access to the first fellow’s hard drive. The punch line of this anecdote? Well, the topic chosen was ethical integrity in Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* What’s even worse, the original author of the essay stood by his friend, insisting that he “would not believe” his roommate would betray his trust—while the roommate simply denied everything. So the dean punished them both—for collusion. Please don’t ask me whch of those two students eventually graduated, and which eventually dropped out.

I was furious—and seriously, deeply, astonishingly frustrated.

I thought about buying a subscription from a consulting service, such as Turnitin.com, something our dean had said the college could not afford. (Too expensive for me.) I thought about dropping the formal essay from my sophomore surveys. (Too close to an admission of defeat.) I thought about requiring that all essays address only one book, something so recent or so obscure that there was not more than one or two secondary accounts. (Too limiting for the students, probably even for graduate students.) I also thought about going to law school. (Alas, too late in my career.)

What I settled on has turned out to be very useful to the students, very useful to the course work, very useful to me, and I recommend it to you. Rather than asking students to write literary criticism, something that even the few English majors will probably never do outside the academy, I now ask them to write a 6-8 page piece of pure analytic exposition that fully and completely condenses a 200 or 250 page work of secondary scholarship. Their task is to capture the essential argument and important detail of an entire book—or specific designated portions of a book—in their own essay. Of course, they would present an
essay with substantial direct quotation and paraphrase (all appropriately documented), but they would be the ones digesting and processing and thinking. That sort of task is very easy to conceptualize, and very difficult to execute: it takes significant time, effort, and intellectual commitment. And it is very hard to plagiarize.

I ask them to conceive their task this way. *You have been asked by a very rich and very lazy student in next year's class to save them the trouble of actually doing the required work. Since the damn dyspeptic jerk of the professor is requiring them to read*, they have hired you, and at a very pretty penny, to do their work: to *read the book and capture everything that this wealthy sod needs to know, then present it in just a 6-8 page précis*. With both accuracy and economy at an absolute premium, that scenario will be rather more like the sort of writing task they get out in the real world than the sort of writing task that their (especially English) professors often present.

One of every 50 or so students will complain that they've had this kind of assignment in other classes, and loudly proclaim that *it's boring*. I tell those students that I'd be happy to negotiate the writing assignment, but first they will need to present evidence that they have mastered the skill of analytic exposition. *Bring me your papers from other classes, I say quite cordially, and then we'll talk*. No student has ever tried to negotiate the assignment. About one student in 20 will simply not believe that I'm sincere in asking for a purely expository essay, and so will venture off in some odd direction; one in 10 will misunderstand the assignment, and produce a book review. But in all my classes, I practice what a former colleague once called *“the infinite revision policy”*: I encourage students to revise and resubmit their essays, so even if a student has gone off in the wrong direction they will have to opportunity to correct and strengthen their work—and consequently, even these students learn more about SF and grow as writers.

The books I've used have been several, and I change them on a regular basis because of two fears. One is that the body of secondary scholarship (reviews and commentary) will eventually catch me up, and the second is that the fraternities and sororities will amass a database that will permit brothers and sisters to reach into a file and then merely retype a successful paper from a previous term.

Here are the books I've used so far: Adam Roberts' *Science Fiction* (Routledge 2000, soon to be available in a second, revised edition), Brooks Landon's *Science Fiction Since 1900* (1995, republished by Routledge 2002), Edward James' and Farah Mendlesohn's *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003), and Edward James' *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford 1994, though now out of print in the US). This spring, I'll assign Roger Luckhurst's *Science Fiction* (Polity 2005). (When I used this assignment last year in a course called "Fable and Fantasy," my text was Richard Mathews' *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* [1997, republished by Routledge 2002]—shockingly, the only such suitable text in fantasy.) All of these books offer synoptic accounts of SF's historical development and sustained reflections on some of the major figures, modes, and tropes.

Several times I've offered as an *option* a book that has a specific, specialized focus, such as Vivian Sobchack's *Screening Space* or Carl Freedman's *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*. Once I put 40 alternative titles on reserve (the class typically enrolls 36 students, of which about 32 are still around at the time the papers are due); about a third of the students choose alternatives that more closely matched their particular interests. When I posted that list to SFRA-L requesting comments and corrections, the only substantive reply was that Brian Aldiss' *Billion Year Spree* had been supplanted by *Trillion Year Spree* (with David Wingrove)—so you already know those titles.

Of course, some books can't be used this way, such as John Clute's and

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**Forthcoming Books:**


**CfPs:**

**WHAT:** A Volume on U. K. Le Guin

WHO: *Paradoxa: World Literary Genres*

TOPICS: *Paradoxa* is pleased to propose the publication of a special Ursula Le Guin volume, which will be in part a collection of critical essays and commentary about her work. This call for papers requests abstracts or expressions of interest for essays dealing with her adult SF
and Fantasy, her critical writing, her books for children and young adults, and her poetry, including her notable translation of the Tao Te Ching, and ranging from overviews of her work to studies of specific texts. Especially welcome will be essays that assess the value or standing of this work or works to the field(s) as a whole and at the present. We are also seeking personal reminiscences or memoirs, from those who have known Ursula Le Guin firsthand, those who have worked in these fields, or simply those who have read her work and wish to record and/or honor the value it has had for them. Such memoirs will be very welcome, as a means of deepening the volume's perspective and extending the academic and critical picture to the personal and, of course, the political.

SUBMISSIONS: Academic papers may be from 4000-10000 words. We ask that reminiscences or memoirs be substantial, 1000 words or more, rather than paragraph-length tributes. CONTACT: By email to Info@Paradoxa.com DEADLINE: March 30, 2007 INFO: www.paradoxa.com

WHAT: Pathologies: Questions of embodiment in literature, arts and sciences
WHO: The Inaugural International Conference of the Glamorgan Research Centre for Literature, Arts and Science
WHEN: August 20-21, 2007
WHERE: University of Glamorgan
TOPICS: Plenary Speakers: Tim Armstrong, Kelly Hurley & Jonathan Sawday. The newly formed Research Centre for Literature, Arts and Science, based at the University of Glamorgan, would welcome papers

Peter Nicholls’ The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction or Neil Barron’s Anatomy of Wonder (now updated in a fifth edition, 2005); no matter how wonderful such things are, and they are wonderful, their format isn’t appropriate for the task. Other texts could be employed this way, but are too expensive for classroom use, such as Seed’s A Companion to Science Fiction at $100. Similarly, in the three terms I assigned The Cambridge Companion I’ve modified the assignment. Rather than one paper of 6-8 pages, this time they wrote two papers of 3-4 pages each, where the first addressed the book’s four chapters of SF history (written by Brian Stableford, Brian Attebery, Damien Broderick, and John Clute), and then a second essay on just one of the 12 chapters from the book’s concluding section on SF’s major topics and subgenres.

There are two obvious drawbacks of this general kind of assignment. The first is the need to rotate new titles in; while it’s hard to think of a book that’s perhaps three years from initial publication as “old,” reviews and comments pile up in both journals and blogs, while fraternity archivists remain ever vigilant. Luckily, there have been many new titles to choose from, and several others are now in preparation with both US and UK publishers.

A second weakness is that one occasionally has to sacrifice a book that’s more appropriate for a sophomore-level survey for (primarily) non-majors (Roberts or James) for a book that’s really a little too sophisticated for the audience (such as Luckhurst). I’ve rationalized using the more difficult books largely by appealing to the kinds of students in the course; while the university catalog lists it as appropriate for sophomores, in a typical term at least three-quarters of the students are juniors and seniors, non-majors who have finally gotten around to satisfying their core curriculum requirement in literature.

Here are the four obvious advantages:

Students practice a writing/thinking skill that they will use beyond college. Analytic exposition is the singularly most transferable writing skill that students can develop, whether their major is engineering or nursing, accounting or recreation management. That’s true even if the student’s major is English!

Students really have to focus on historical development and precise terms, so they learn more about SF. And they retain that information better.

Recent works of sf scholarship find a larger audience and so increase sales, not only producing marginally stronger royalties for deserving authors but helping convince publishers that such works remain viable and hence worthy projects.

The poor beleaguered prof gets to avoid student plagiarism, and the awful, terrible, wasteful hours spent tracking it down.

In the eight years I’ve been giving this assignment, plagiarism has plummeted, at least as far as I can detect. I’ve actually had just one instance since then. As it turned out, I didn’t have to spend hours and hours tracking down the source of that plagiarism. I knew the source. I knew the author. It was me.

Alas, that suggests a very different problem in student awareness and skill, and calls for a different sort of pedagogical response.
Supernatural literature, perhaps because of its frequent links to religion, dates from the earliest years, and its appeal is therefore widespread, as extensively documented by *Supernatural Literature of the World: An Encyclopedia*, a balanced, clearly-written and wide-ranging survey. The editors wrote many of the entries, assisted by 64 other contributors, who include some writers of weird fiction, academics with an interest in the field, and knowledgeable fans.

The front matter, repeated in all three volumes, includes British author Ramsey Campbell’s foreword and a useful preface by the editors explaining the scope and organization of the guide. The approximately 1,000 entries are listed first alphabetically, then in a classified sequence, such as authors by 14 nationalities, editors/critics, genres (useful surveys of the supernatural in various national literatures), magazines/publishers, motifs like *curses*, *haunted house* and *vampires*, and a list of short essays devoted to short stories and novels, which supplement 700+ author entries. The King entry, for example, is supplemented by entries on *Carrie*, *The Shining* and *The Stand*. A very detailed general index (131 pages) is supplemented by an index of fictional characters and a motif index (many motifs have their own entries). These multiple indexes and the use of boldface for cross-references make the set easy to use and excellent for general reference. The supernatural in non-book media like films, TV and comics is largely omitted, aside from many mentions of film/TV adaptations of major works. Some of the black & white photos are from films, most are of authors, and all add little to the guide.

The set’s wide scope results in entries for more than 700 authors, from standard figures like Dante, Shakespeare, Hans Christian Andersen and Borges, to a very large number—perhaps 500 authors—known to few save their small number of fans, and whose works were published in long-defunct magazines or as cheap paperbacks and/or by small specialty presses, all categories rarely acquired by libraries. The entries range from 250 to 3000 words, based on the relative importance of the author. Most entries include briefly annotated critical bibliographies. Many author entries also include codes for one or more “frequently cited reference works,” three of which (volumes 178, 255 and 261) are part of Gale’s long-running *Dictionary of Literary Biography* as well as Everett Bleiler’s *Supernatural Fiction Writers* (2 volumes, 1985), a standard in the field. Cited only in the general bibliography is Bleiler’s authoritative *The Guide to Supernatural Fiction* (1983) and *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural*, edited by Jack Sullivan (1986), a more popular guide to fiction and film.

The set provides much specialized information, but mostly for hundreds of minor writers of undistinguished supernatural fiction. Bleiler’s two volume set provides coverage of 148 of the most important authors. *Contemporary Authors*, widely found in libraries, is a current and comprehensive guide to writers of all types, including some in this new set, which is recommended only for the largest libraries, especially those lacking the other cited reference works.
A Companion to Science Fiction

Neil Easterbrook


Following a long, protracted, and frequently painful adolescence, SF criticism may be entering maturity. While some might lament this transition—appealing predictably to the number 14 and perhaps invoking the trope of the gutter—others will rejoice in the clarity, precision, and sophistication of a scholarship equal in quality to that in more academically conventional genres and periods. All of us will rejoice in the belated institutional approval signaled by the current spate of synoptic accounts of SF history and reference works from our premier academic presses.

Last year in Extrapolation, Mark Bould enumerated a long list of recent titles, as well as suggesting that many similar books were in production. One of those is Blackwell’s A Companion to Science Fiction, a hybrid of encyclopedia, casebook, synoptic history, and miscellany. Intelligently compiled by David Seed, the text presents us with 566 pages of small print, detailed discussion, and scholarly reference, supplemented by a 45 page index of titles, authors, topics, and tropes. Confronting its bulk (symbolic but primarily literal), Carol McGuirk set it on a scale: it weights 2.8 pounds. By my very rough calculation, it contains about 333,000 words. The John Clute / Peter Nicholls Encyclopedia of Science Fiction is longer, as is Gary Westfahl’s three volume The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy, but Seed’s edition is a hefty, substantial contribution to our field. The cover price will keep it from classroom use, but you’ll enjoy reading and referring to it, so make sure that your library owns a copy.

The book’s 41 chapters are divided, general to specific, in 7 sections (I’ll follow section titles with the number of individual chapters and their total in pages): “Surveying the Field” (4—75), “Topics and Debates” (7—110), “Genres and Movements” (5—75), “Science Fiction Film” (3—50), “The International Scene” (3—40), “Key Writers” (9—100), and “Readings” (10—130). Most of the 43 contributors have familiar names. Many have been members of SFRA, and 19 are current members: Mike Ashley, Marleen S. Barr, Russell Blackford, Clute, Robert Crossley, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Donald M. Hassler, Veronica Hollinger, Van Ikin, Edward James, David Ketterer, Rob Latham, Farah Mendlesohn, Warren G. Rochelle, Andy Sawyer, George Slusser, Brian Stableford, Takayuki Tatsumi, and Westfahl.

Seed begins with a short introduction, noting that “No attempt has been made to define science fiction. Instead, the essays present it as a multigenic field…and its narratives as repeatedly challenging the stability of boundaries between categories and concepts” (Seed 6). Perhaps initiated in (or perhaps by) the New Wave, this heterogeneity is not an etiolation of gothic and scientific romance, but the rhizomatic growth of the genre. Seed prefers the metaphor of a “lattice” (3), and has consciously structured his Companion on that model.

The first of the chapters, “Hard Reading,” comes from Tom Shippey, who gives a breezy tour of sf’s generic tendencies and the reading protocols useful to its analysis. In addition to a quick survey of sf’s central conceits—contentious argument, exploration (both in outer and inner space), conceptual experiment, world building, information density, utopian dream or dystopian jeremiad—Shippey’s economical account sensibly condenses sf’s conceptual modes to just two: “Things do not have to be as they are,” and “Nothing is sacred” (18).
The remainder of the book seems both nicely focused and curiously hap-hazard, comprising a quirky but interesting set of subjects. Here’s the gist of the catalog generic evolution, magazines, SF criticism, postmodernism, the new wave, cyberpunk, monsters, religion, feminism, ecology, hard sf (twice!), and celluloid cyborgs. Then nine writers and ten texts, with no repeats. Key writers: Wells, Asimov, Wyndham, Dick, Delany, Le Guin, Clarke, Egan, and Gwyneth Jones. (It’s interesting to note that only one of these names requires two words.) Individual readings, all novels: *Frankenstein*, *Herland*, *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Female Man*, *Crash*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Neuromancer*, Robinson’s Mars trilogy, and Banks’ *Excession*. (Eight of which might frequently appear on a typical SF course syllabus.)

Almost all of the chapters are very good, and a few are simply superb: Csicsery-Ronay on criticism, Latham on the new wave, Stephen R.L. Clarke on religion and sf, Jenny Wolmark on “Time and Identity in Feminist SF,” Clute on Asimov, Chris Palmer on Dick, Carl Freedman on Delany, and Roger Luckhurst on Ballard’s *Crash*. I suspect that six or seven of the other chapters ought also to be singled out for excellence, but I similarly suspect that there are many cases where I know either too much or too little about the topic to be a completely objective judge. However, I can confidently say that almost every chapter is accomplished and informative, subtle and nuanced. I was surprised that the section of essays I enjoyed the most were the nine thoughtful overviews of individual writers. Clute’s discussion of Asimov provides a good example. Here’s a wonderfully economic, clear, comprehensive account of Asimov’s impact on the field; neither hagiography nor hatchet-job, Clute offers a fair assessment of Asimov’s successes and failures, refusing to recuperate his fading reputation but also insisting on his pivotal importance between 1941 (“Nightfall”) and 1993 (Forward the Foundation).

Weakest are the chapters that immodestly extol the prescience of their own authors, such as Barr’s self-aggrandizement, or Hassler’s crude reduction of the revived interest in hard sf to something like “Hey, look at all these novels on Mars!” Almost as annoying as immodesty are those moments where chapters, sometimes for pages, collapse into lists, indices or serial examples, items briefly touched and then quickly abandoned for another hesitant encounter with a different title. Several chapters (or portions) succumb to this lazy deixis, a tendency to substitute lists and catalogs for analysis. While it’s nice to have an index of names and dates, one wonders if for $100 one can’t expect something substantially more analytical. Alas, the list is my basic strategy in this review—but then again you didn’t pay $100 for it.

Despite the bulk, the book has several glaring omissions. Where, for instance, is Heinlein? Though many of the individual chapters discuss his work in detail, does Seed think Heinlein’s not among the 19 top authors or titles? McGuirk also makes this point, and rather more comically than I have (505-06). In his chapter on Asimov, Clute acknowledges Heinlein as the “dominant figure” and “the undisputed father of the modern genre” (367). Though James understands the “ideal” SF writer as A.C. Clarke, surely omitting Heinlein is very odd, especially for a book that announces its “intent[ion] to serve as an introduction and guide” (1). Similarly, where’s Stanislaw Lem, who receives only the most passing, tangential references?

Another quibble is with the otherwise laudable coverage of international sf—since with the exception of proto-sf precursors, the only discussion of non-anglophone sf appears in Tatsumi’s welcome chapter on Japan and China. And I keep wondering when, in the course of intelligent commentary on literary sf, we’ll also have some really intelligent discussion of the importance of comic books (primarily before 1945, but still today) and, since 1985 or so, video games;
these constitute an enormous omission that neither Seed's nor earlier volumes, such as the James / Mendlesohn companion from Cambridge, has addressed—and I don't mean not addressed well, I mean not at all.

Yet Seed's decision to avoid attempting "exhaustive coverage" (1) does provide room for some of the volume's specific value—its eclectic and sometimes idiosyncratic choices. Take, for instance, the case study of Ballard's Crash as a key novel. It's an odd, unexpected choice, but also refreshing to see an important and neglected text—around which has circled much controversy—single out for attention. (That Luckhurst presents us with an acutely insightful reading is, as they say, a plus.)

Highly recommended for all university and public libraries. And despite the unreasonable price, it's actually a volume that serious students and active teacher-scholars may want on their bookshelf. Even at $100.

Works Cited

NONFICTION REVIEW
The History of Science Fiction
Amy J. Ransom


For the most part, Adam Roberts' new work lives up to its ambitious title as The History of Science Fiction. Not to be confused with the second edition of his Science Fiction (also 2006, published in Routledge's New Critical Idiom series), this reference volume provides a thorough, erudite analytical history with a driving thesis. While the reader remains sympathetic to a writer who admits in his preface that his own "previous criticism on SF has been marred by a too great degree of mistake and sloppiness" and that he has "endeavoured to do things better in this book" (xvi), a few significant gaps left me only partially satisfied with a study which, nonetheless, should grace the shelves of any respectable library (home or institutional).

The work provides extensive coverage of the history of science fiction (which many would argue represents its pre-history), tracing the form's roots back to the ancient Greek and Latin novel, observing a significant gap during the Middle Ages, with an extensive renewal during the Renaissance and Reformation. This gap is explained in part by the work's central thesis that science fiction has developed in tandem with fantasy, based on a "core dialectic" (154) between a "Protestant" rational-materialism and a "Catholic" supernatural-mysticism. Similar arguments have been made before, but Roberts does a decent job of integrating it throughout the lengthy study for which the best metaphor that comes to mind is that of the geological clock indicating that man has been present on Earth for only the last thirty seconds (or less) of the twenty-four hour cosmic day. I say this because the work dedicates fewer than forty pages to prose SF since 1970, a period many would argue to have produced the genre's most exciting developments. Granted, a historical study of anything tends by nature to focus on the proven past, and the study of contemporary literatures remains fraught with risk, given that today's Michael Moorcock, Bruce Sterling or Kim Stanley...
example, I have read at least two articles that present B’lanna Torres of Star Trek graduates of Cultural Studies, rather than Literature programs. (An anecdotal shift already being made if we look at other recent academic work produced by paradigms for the field of SF studies. And yet, perhaps it simply represents an extensive and balanced chapter on the traditional pioneers, Verne and Wells, which reevaluates the mentor of the French writer whose work is sometimes scorned as commonplace in comparison to his English counterpart. On the other hand, while he acknowledges science fiction’s debt to Poe, I find a significant gap in Roberts’ failure to include a discussion of H. P. Lovecraft (mentioned only as an influence on the recent “New Weird” writers). In the area of Sterling’s “slipstream,” those texts by so-called mainstream writers who use SF tropes or who flirt with genre writing in other ways, Roberts’ work becomes a little slippery itself. On the one hand, he mentions Barth, Vonnegut, and Nabokov, and argues that Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow “has a plausible claim to be the greatest SF novel of the 1970s” (295); on the other, he fails to include William S. Burroughs (a major influence on writers of the New Wave) or Salman Rushdie. The question of Rushdie brings up another gap, or less a gap than a sort of random, hit-or-miss approach to international and postcolonial SFs.

Roberts makes an important attempt to be inclusive in his approach and mentions texts from around the world, including the obvious Kafka, Capek, Lem and the Strugatsky brothers, as well as an occasional French and Japanese writer. I most appreciate his parting comment on the work of Kojo Laing, which asserts Africa’s potential for providing the next fresh, new SF. Yet Roberts makes no mention whatsoever of the rising sub-genre of “postcolonial science fiction” to which Laing’s work would belong. Indian SF, recently overviewed by Andy Sawyer, bears no mention at all. Indeed, Roberts gives short shrift to all of my own personal research interests: not a single writer from French Canada and beyond the marginally Canadian William Gibson none even from Anglo-Canada. He completely ignores the recently popular sub-genre of alternate history and dedications a mere three pages to feminist SF. (Two more related, but minor flaws appear in his failure to mention either Judith Merril or Doris Lessing.) Now, it might be argued that given limited space, choices had to be made; yet, all of these lacunae could have been filled had Roberts himself chosen to exclude lengthy discussions of “visual SF.”

Here lies the most potentially controversial aspect of Roberts’ history, which in some ways also aligns it with a cutting-edge cultural criticism as well. In addition to minor coverage of SF illustration, the work includes extensive discussions of what purists might refer to as the sci-fi (“skiffy”) fields of film and television, arguing (heretically?) that “looked at objectively, the SF novel is now a lively but minor cultural phenomenon” (295). Roberts argues that instead SF’s meaningful contribution to culture appears in its dominance in visual expression. This argument, made in what will be an important reference work published by a respected international press, represents nothing less than a Kuhnian paradigm shift for the field of SF studies. And yet, perhaps it simply represents a shift already being made if we look at other recent academic work produced by graduates of Cultural Studies, rather than Literature programs. (An anecdotal example, I have read at least two articles that present B’lanna Torres of Star Trek...
Uncomfortable as it feels to see works from the Renaissance and Enlightenment referred to outright as SF (as opposed to proto-SF or some other hedge term), Roberts’ coverage of the field up through the Golden Age appears comprehensive. And while I have to disagree simply on principle with Roberts’ argument for “the creeping obsolescence of the SF novel” (295; and, by the way, how can someone who uses the phrase “creeping obsolescence” not have included a whole chapter on Lovecraft!), I am still going to forward my request for his book to my college’s acquisitions librarian.

**NONFICTION REVIEW**

**Mad, Bad, and Dangerous?**

Neil Barron


Our images of the scientist are conflicted. Marie Curie, Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein are generally admired figures. But the figures presented in cinema are often much more equivocal, ranging from someone like the wizard of Oz, an amusing fraud, to Dr. Strangelove, a nightmarish symbol of the classic “mad” scientist. The evolution and meaning of these images are explored in *Mad, Bad and Dangerous? The Scientist and the Cinema* by Christopher Frayling, chairman of the Arts Council of England and author of *Nightmare: The Birth of Horror* (1966), a study of the transition of *Frankenstein* from book to film.

Frayling provides a clearly-written and balanced overview of his topic, emphasizing science in various periods, such as chemistry in the 1920s and biology since the 1980s. He summarizes how the scientist was perceived in the influential work of Margaret Mead in 1957, and updated 25 years later by a Montreal study which found that the stereotypical traits (lab coat, glasses, beard or unkempt hair, symbols of research, usually male, etc.) are clearly obvious to children in the second and third grades, and are firmly established within the next few years. More than one hundred black & white illustrations from films, including posters and lobby cards, reinforce these traits.

For Frayling, the “most influential scientist in the history of cinema” was Rotwang in Metropolis (1926—he is featured in the book’s dramatic cover photo) and he devotes a thorough and fascinating chapter to him and the influential film. Strangelove’s damaged arm is derived from this figure, and other elements in Metropolis are common in many Hollywood and European films depicting scientists. Many other films, from the obscure to the well known, are discussed with insight.

Frayling is not the first to investigate this topic, and his bibliography is thorough if a bit difficult to consult because of its layout. Earlier, similar works include David Skal’s *Screams of Reason: Mad Science and Modern Culture* (1998), Andrew Tudor’s *Monsters and Mad Scientists* (1989) and Roslynn D. Haynes’ *From Faust to Strangelove: Representations of the Scientist in Western Literature* (1994). Frayling summarizes from Haynes a useful list of sequential images of the scientist: the alchemist, absent-minded professor, inhuman rationalist, etc.

Because films shape popular opinion so heavily, Frayling’s comprehensive and balanced analysis is a valuable contribution to our understanding. Strongly recommended to all save the smallest libraries.

**FICTION REVIEW**

**Best of the Best Volume 2**

Jason W. Ellis


As Gardner Dozois writes in the “Preface” to *Best of the Best Volume 2: 20 Years of the Best Short Science Fiction Novels*, “the novella or short novel is a perfect length for a science fiction story: long enough...to flesh out the details...yet, still short enough to pack a real punch” (ix). With that in mind, he collected thirteen solid science fiction (SF) stories in this tome. Within
the collection, Dozois gives a short introduction to each novella describing the author and his/her work including useful information such as awards won and other notable works by the author. The length of the stories ties the collection together, but there are also three observable themes: oceans, nanotechnology, and “other.”

The ocean stories are among the more spiritual of the stories, and include Walter Jon Williams’ “Surfacing” (1988), Greg Egan’s “Oceanic” (1998), and Alastair Reynolds’ “Turquoise Days” (2002). “Surfacing” is about alien oceans and relocated Earth whales helping to track deep-sea alien creatures known as the Deep Dwellers, which I thought to be one of the more imaginative ideas in the group. “Oceanic” concerns human religious experience catalyzing as a result of biochemical reactions with secretions from zooytes in the ocean’s waters. Faith is facilitated, not symbiotically, but tangentially by the interaction of humans with the zooytes. This story is closely allied with “Turquoise Days,” which is about communing with the “Pattern Juggler biomass,” a worldwide biological entity on another world that is made up of many individual, cooperating cells. Pattern Jugglers form a distributed computing system that can encode alien (read: human and other non-Pattern Juggler) thoughts as well as entire minds. Reynolds never makes it clear, but the Pattern Jugglers appear to be a biological and synthetic amalgamation. The author’s ideas are similar to those in Greg Bear’s Blood Music, but he pushes them out to the stars.

Another established theme in the collection is the naked use of nanotechnology, which in many ways elicits images of a rolling ocean of potentialities. This group of stories includes Ian MacDonald’s “Tendeléo’s Story” (2000), Michael Swanwick’s “Griffin’s Egg” (1991), and Ian R. MacLeod’s “New Light on the Drake Equation” (2001). “Tendeléo’s Story,” arguably the strongest story in the collection, features shifting narrative perspectives about alien nanotechnological substances called Chaga consuming and transforming the land in Africa as well as other places around the globe. The Chaga gives the oppressed the possibility of a bright future, but the power-elite aim to destroy it, because it eliminates existing power structures of control. Additionally, the author’s choice to have a female protagonist interface with the Chaga shares similarities with Kathleen Ann Goonan’s Queen City Jazz, but the empowerment of socioeconomically disenfranchised women connects to Neal Stephenson’s The Diamond Age. “Griffin’s Egg” is less of a “better tomorrow through nanotech” story and more of a threat from the invisible air we breathe. The story takes place on a moon base inhabited by workers embedded with “trance chips” that facilitates communication directly to the brain. War on Earth carries over to the moon base when an operative releases a nano-biotech weapon that creates havoc within the minds of the infected. However, redemption arrives for the moon dwellers by an “atoms for peace” initiative whereupon they choose to reengineer their minds with nanotech to face the challenges of the future. “New Light on the Drake Equation” is the warmest piece of the nanotech stories. It features a scientist listening to the sky for signs of alien intelligence who lives in a world impacted by commercial nanotech used for altering the mind and body for such ends as bird-like flight and overcoming alcohol addiction. The story is about the transformation of humanity into the aliens sought by the scientist, and breaching the gulf between those most alien to us—lovers, friends, and other cultures.

The final selection of stories is not a dustbin, but an expression of the variety of stories that are contained within Best of the Best Volume 2. These “other” stories include Robert Silverberg’s “Sailing to Byzantium” (1985), Joe Haldeman’s “The Hemingway Hoax” (1990), James Patrick Kelly’s “Mr. Boy” (1990), Nancy Kress’ “Beggars in Spain” (1991), Frederick Pohl’s “Outnumbering the Dead” (1991), Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Forgiveness Day” (1994), and Maureen F. McHugh’s “The Cost to Be Wise” (1996). “Sailing to Byzantium” is set in a far future populated by an altered humanity along with robots and androids. It showcases a unique vision of hedonistic immortality where the protagonist is faced with a dilemma of self and identity much like Deckard in Blade Runner: The Director’s Cut. “The Hemingway Hoax” features a time traveling overseer who attempts to maintain a particular sequence of events, but is continually thwarted by the ability of a Hemingway scholar with eidetic memory to remember his experiences from one timeline to the next. This story is arguably the most fun out of the lot with its shifting timelines and a touch of Raymond Chandler. “Mr. Boy” is a decidedly cyberpunk story that has a Paul Di Filippo feel to it. The story surrounds the posthuman restructuring of bodies and minds as illustrated in Mr. Boy’s eternal state as a twelve-year-old boy and his best friend’s existence as a dinosaur. In addition, the story shows how a world constructed of simulacrums leads to the destruction of humanity’s past. “Outnumbering the Dead” is the flipside of “Mr. Boy” in that otherness is not freakishness, but apparent normality. In a future where everyone lives forever, the oddity of death maintains the selling power of an aging video star. Le Guin’s “Forgiveness Day” also turns the tables, but regarding gender and ownership. Set in the same universe as her novels The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed, a female Envoy of the Ekumen attempts to navigate the Kingdom of Gatay where “free” women are sequestered indoors while “slave” women are free to roam the streets. Breaking down the barriers between sex ownership and gender roles, a male transvestite actor provides freedom for the envoy from a political trap. “Beggars in Spain” is another story about political intrigue.
surrounding genetically modified persons who require no sleep and therefore reap great rewards from their condition. This creates a divide of have and have-nots between the Sleepless and the Sleepers. Kress' story presents a powerful image of the human fear of otherness, while revealing hope through desperate acts of kindness. “The Cost to Be Wise” is a story of sacrifice that juxtaposes a chosen pastoral existence on an alien world, technologically superior visitors, and a malicious group of hunters. The marauding hunters decimate the agrarians, but the survivors unselfishly deliver the last visitor to her kind with the aid of technology supplied by the village matriarch. The tragedy of the story derives from the apparent superiority of the off-worlders who return the kindness of the “natives” by giving them a tuppence of food and blankets while their village smolders in ruins behind them.

When Dozois says that these stories pack a punch, he’s not kidding. It’s a kaleidoscopic KO of hard-hitting SF. He assembled a strong group of stories that convey a wide variety of SF themes and ideas. There is a weighting towards certain themes such as oceans and nanotechnology, but those stories combined account for less than half of the volume. Also, the editor has done a thorough job of showcasing long-established authors through their more recent works, while also presenting works by newer SF writers. SF readers will find the collection a source of distinctive entertainment. The quality of the work and the range of speculation in these stories make this a fertile collection for SF scholars as well as a valuable addition to library collections. Also, the spectrum of ideas presented in the collection would make this a worthy addition to university course syllabi ranging from biomedical issues to postcolonial literature to SF studies. A rich collection for SF readers and scholars alike.

FICTION REVIEW

Keeping it Real
Ritch Calvin


When I first picked up and looked at the new novel by Justina Robson, I saw the series title (Quantum Gravity Book One), a female figure decked out in leathers and heavy artillery, all superimposed over a *Matrix*-esque cascade of green data. Given those three things and knowledge of her previous four works, it seemed as though she were going to, if not pick up where she left off with *Living Next Door to the God of Love*, then at least mine similar territory. So wrong, so wrong.

The novel features a female protagonist, the latest incarnation of Joanna Russ’s Jael. As a government agent, Lila Black was badly beaten and left for dead. Her agency reconstructed her with all the latest technology, leaving her half flesh and half metal, and with a nuclear reactor to power it all. She has “Battle armour, multi-functional self-adapting guns, missile launchers, an extra five inches of height,” silver eyes, and blades in her hands (217), or, as one character describes her, she’s like “G.I. Jane on acid” (261). In addition, she has a built-in “AI-self” that contains a vast amount of data and built-in connections to a communications web. But with all her abilities, not to mention all the money and resources invested in her, her first assignment is guard detail for an elf, who is a rock star.

The preface to the novel, entitled “Common Knowledge,” details the “quantum catastrophe” that occurred beneath the Superconducting Supercollider in Texas in 2015. It left a giant empty space and opened up a gateway to five other realities or realms. These other realms are: Zoomenon, the realm of the Elements, Alfheim, realm of the elves, Demonia of the demons, Thanatopia of the undead, and Faery of the faeries. In the wake of this revelation, the human realm is now called Otopia. While some traffic between realms occurs, it is limited, as the realms are not entirely suitable to other beings, but humans have “diplomatic relations” with the elves in Alfheim, and the demons of Demonia have helped Earth scientists discover “the physically real presence of extradimensional regions (I-space)” (2). At the opening of the novel, two key events have taken place. For one, an elf named Zal, despite the fact that elves loathe all forms of machinery and technology, has appeared in Otopia and become a hugely successful rock musician. And secondly, Alfheim has severed all diplomatic ties with Otopia, and the ruler of Alfheim is determined to bring Zal back.

Although the novel contains elves and demons and faeries (and a dragon), although the novel contains “wild magic,” incantations, and magical “binding,” it is far from an ordinary fantasy novel. On the one hand, the “elves” and “faeries” can be read as beings from other, perhaps parallel, realities that fit the traditional descriptions of elves and faeries and so given those names. In other words, they can be read as aliens and not “elves.” On the other hand, since the novel is told
largely from the perspective of Agent Lila Black, the Otopian cyborg security agent, it becomes an attempt to posit and understand “magic” in scientific terms. For example, the opening between worlds is not the result of a magical spell but rather the result of a “quantum catastrophe” inside a supercollider. In addition, Zal ponders the cosmogonies in which the world was created by dragons spinning silk, but now, he knows, dragons have a scientific explanation: they are “creatures of the Interstitial” (204). Finally, the Interstitial “dragon” speaks to Lila and gives her a set of “magical” numbers, which she interprets as signifying “the numbers of electrons that completed each shell of an atom with three energy levels” (237). In this sense, it raises the Clarkean cliché that any technology sufficiently advanced will appear as magic; however, after an extended period in the “magical” realm of Alfheim, Lila describes magic as “the user and their will, no more than that” (247).

And while the novel does explore the relationship between magic and science, the larger theme of the novel is cultural purity and contamination. One of the primary reasons that Alfheim has cut off diplomatic ties with Otopia is that a group has come into power that believes that all of the changes, all of the evils within the realm are a result of the influence and contamination from the Otopian realm. As Arië, the ruler of Alfheim says, “Every degradation of Alfheim has occurred through contact with Otopia and Demonia, Paery, Thanotopia and the Void. In the days of earlier Ages we were many times near destroyed by unwise and ignorant efforts to explore the distant places beyond our borders and eagerness to bring their treasures home Other races value what we abhor” (225).

Here, an analogy with the current relationship with the West and (portions) of the Mid-East seems inevitable. Arië and her contingent, though small, wield enormous power within the region, but a resistance force exists, including Zal. He is appalled by the provincialism of Arië and her cohort, by the fact that she has selectively withheld information in order to shape public opinion (“the truth does not matter”), and uses coercion and torture to achieve her aim. He asks, “Why would you ally yourselves with this idiot, when the only solution she has to offer you is isolation and subservience?” (166), and he later argues that, despite her wishes, “No place can ever be pure” (225). But Zal is the antithesis of pure. He had, at one time, been an Agent of Alfheim, but on a mission to Demonia, he’d gone “all Kurtz” and become contaminated by demon culture and practice. It is this contamination that enables him to exist and succeed in Otopia. But his very existence threatens Arië’s assertions that elves can only live as pure beings, and so he must be eliminated and made an example of.

To be sure, this situation and the questions that it raises can never be far from our consciousness. What happens when two (or more) cultures exist side-by-side? What happens when cultural practices and beliefs come into conflict? How do we mediate or moderate the changes wrought by outside influences? What happens when those influences and changes are completely antithetical to our own values and practices? And what happens when an unscrupulous individual (or group of people) is able to manipulate the situation for her or his own gain? Do we desire and fight for purity or for hybridity, and hence change?

This, in the end, seems to be the ultimate message. The two protagonists, one an elf-demon hybrid who has learned to live in Otopia and the other a human-machine hybrid that has been shaped (and healed) by elf magic, survive, both as “liminal beings” (270). Their liminality, their hybridity becomes their strength and their salvation, for given inevitable interplay between worlds, between cultural realms, between belief systems and practices, the insistence upon isolation and purity lead to death and destruction and only adaptation and acceptance lead to life.

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**FICTION REVIEW**

**Blindsight**

Carol Franko


Peter Watts’ latest hard science fiction novel is powered by puzzles, angry wit, and a first person narrator, Siri Keeton, who is both special case and Everyman. Watts’ title—*Blindsight*—indicates the contradictions of Siri’s character and of the novel’s take on the human condition, but how that works cannot be explained without giving away the suspenseful plot. Siri Keeton is in part an interesting variant on a type—the character traumatized into humiliating self knowledge by revelations thrust upon him—revelations concerning his idiomatic blindness and sight. Siri is also a science-fictional novum, an extrapolation of the radical surgery sometimes performed in cases of severe epilepsy, a condition Siri was born with. It seems that when as a child, the left hemisphere of his brain is removed to save his life, Siri Keeton’s lump of empathy and probably also his capacity for happiness are cut out, too. An alien among his species, he functions pretty successfully by interpreting people’s
surfaces, and by researching typical emotional responses to various stimuli. Technological implants (occupying the space where his left hemisphere used to be) enhance his information-theory topology-reading skills. Siri’s reconstituted self is an emblem of the human condition as the special twisted state of having to imagine what is already in fact real (see the novel’s epigraphs). Siri also grows up to become one of the few useful members of his not quite, and now, perhaps, never to be Singularity-transformed society.

When truly alien objects appear in the sky, Siri’s personal and professional activities encapsulate contradictions of a late 21st century humanity that is enjoying a post-scarcity economy and hovering near a post-corporeal utopia, despite the ongoing violence of “realist franchises” who oppose progress. As the globe-encircling artifacts take earth’s picture with a massive click or crunch, Siri and the uxorious father he loves have just said good bye to Helen, Siri’s horrible mother, who is ascending into the supposed cyber immortality of “Heaven” —a mental freedom marred, however, by the need for consciousness to be hooked to meat. So, happily wired in, despicable Helen still needs her brain. Indeed her body is to be packed away, supposedly preserved entire in case she would ever need to be unplugged.

True monster of selfishness that she is, Helen is also just a nasty version of most people in the world of this novel: she is redundant. Machines mostly run things. Since she is not needed to keep an economy, a culture, an army, a lab or even her old-style dysfunctional family operating, Siri’s Mom might as well go to Heaven, where, like most of humanity, she is easy prey for whoever sent the alien probes.

Not all of humanity is redundant and unemployed. A formidable combination of government types and scientists are keen to defend Earth from the new factor. When the aliens signal their existence, Siri Keeton, now a professional mediator (termed Synthesist, or jargonaut) between “bleeding edge” scientists (modified, reconstituted, savant-like) and the “dead center” (everyone else), is involved with a project that could bring the dream of complete personality upload—no need for the meat—the end of corporeality and “the usher[ing] in [of] a Singularity that had been waiting … fifty years (p. 42). That goal is apparently deferred; Siri at least is taken off the project to join the crew of the artificially-intelligent ship, Theseus, whose voyage ends at a huge planet fondly called Big Ben, upon which broods the enormous torturous-spiny-shaped alien entity that initially calls itself Rorschach (lots of interesting names in Blindsight).

Theseus is intelligent; it also is nominally commanded by a Vampire—a reconstituted member of an extinct, sentient, predator species that has special perceptual skills needed on this mission. The crew, except for Siri, is “bleeding edge”—scientists and one soldier. The linguist has surgically created multiple personalities to increase the possibility of communication; the biologist has a destroyed and recreated-augmented sensory apparatus which enables immersion in his objects of study; the soldier is complexly hooked into her remote-grunts (and occasionally has them perform weird, I, Robot-type ballet). Siri flits about the ship conversing with and spying upon the crew, earnestly believing in his outsider status—that of the reporter, the mediator or translator who “merely” takes in and renders intelligible the inscrutable output of vampire and savants.

The adventures of Theseus’ crew are interspersed with flashbacks to Siri’s past—in particular his ill-fated relationship with Chelsea, a redundant brain fixer/editor and a woman who seeks old fashioned face-to-face sex and conversation in a world given over to the virtual-real. Chelsea apparently sees Siri as an ugly duckling just waiting to be brain-tweaked into a happy swan: she calls him Cygnus after he evades her question on the meaning of his name. (Might the unusual name Siri be an homage to Sir Arthur C. Clarke, long time resident of Sri Lanka?). Memories of failed connections with Chelsea alternate with increasing dangers on Theseus and Big Ben. The vampire and nominal or actual commander sends Siri with the crew into the spiny entrails of Rorschach where they are poisoned by radiation, violated by magnetism, and forced into various hallucinatory states by the hostile atmosphere. They discover horribly interesting and inscrutable little aliens within the big one. They bring the littler ones back to the ship and try to communicate with them. Tension mounts and a series of exciting and awful revelations occur. These revelations and the novel’s reflections on them came as surprises to me on first reading Blindsight. But the novel is admirably constructed and rewards re-reading.

Blindsight is a gripping novel. I don’t know whether I like or dislike it more. It is challenging and difficult in its devotion to a rigorous materialist world view, combined with its apparent insistence on some sort of importance, if not core reality, for things like morality. Survival is the bottom line that subverts assumptions when the characters debate evolutionary puzzles, but the bleeding edgers also feel things like guilt, responsibility, and affection and are not portrayed as only puppets and suckers for having such active consciences. Siri the survivor of empathy-excision evokes sympathy for himself and his cast.
Blindsight seems a natural choice to teach, even if it didn't have the interesting afterward where Watts discusses sources. Its difficult science and its aggressively unsentimental (except about vampires) attitude would split its appeal. Although I might just be projecting my own ambivalence, about half of a class I just finished teaching would have complained mightily about either the science or the attitude, while the other half would have been greatly interested by the same qualities. Several of the texts we read — War of the Worlds, I, Robot, “The Girl Who Was Plugged In,” “True Names,” “Bloodchild,” The Speed of Dark — would combine intriguingly with Blindsight. Whether one wants to reflect on humans as dodos, as dupes or beneficiaries of smart machines, as aspiring to virtual godhood, or as entangled in relationships or identity issues that perpetually defer resolution, Blindsight is classic science fiction.

FICTION REVIEW

Renegade

Amy J. Ransom


Reviewers praised the first volume of Duchamp's near-future dystopia, which comments on the (wrong, of course) direction that our country appears to have been taking since she penned the series' first draft in the mid-1980s. Yet, for readers like me (that is, liberal feminist academics), Alanya to Alanya provided a nearly perfect fantasy of revenge and empowerment, as a benevolent alien species made first contact to halt humans' self-destructive patterns of social and political behavior as typified by those of the United States. (See Ritch Calvin's piece on Alanya to Alanya in SFRA Review #275.)

The series' second volume, Renegade, continues with elements of feminist utopian fantasy, developing the anarchist system of Seattle's Free Zone and meting out just punishment on the rest of the United States, in the throes of civil and then world war. The feminist liberal's dream, however, soon becomes a nightmare as this novel stages the capture, incarceration and torture of its heroine, academic and former security agent (now pulled forcibly out of retirement) Kay Zeldin. While it unquestionably fulfills the mission of Duchamp's own Aqueduct press to publish "challenging feminist science fiction," Renegade challenges not only the casual reader of SF, who may find it a prosy, possibly preachy and, ultimately, unentertaining read, but also those readers who have bought in to the fantasy of its political agenda.

Renegade picks up where Alanya to Alanya left off, developing the character of Martha Greenglass, a woman imprisoned for subversive political activities and rescued by the alien marq'ssan in volume one. She now steps forward to play a central role in the development of a new social model in Seattle's Free Zone, free of the oppressive political, class, gender and economic systems that prevail in the rest of the United States. In this second volume, Duchamp shifts the focus in perspective, however, from uniquely presenting that of "good" characters, like Greenglass, Zeldin, or the marq'ssan Maggys, to exploring the mentality of characters on the "wrong" side of the series' conflict. Through the reflexions of two Executive (the dominant, oppressor class) women, Elizabeth Weatherall and Allison Bennett, Duchamp forces the reader to see how deeply ingrained their patriarchal class system, its behaviors and taboos have become in these women who are otherwise highly intelligent. It also allows for (an albeit slow and only partial) growth and transformation in those characters as well. This volume's particular narrative challenge to overcome, however, involves the brainwashing and negative transformation of Kay Zeldin. While Alanya to Alanya involves plenty of action and introduces a fascinating alien species, after the brief drama of her chase and capture, much of Renegade takes place in Zeldin's prison cell(s) and relies largely on her battle of wills with her gaoler, Elizabeth Weatherall.

As Personal Assistant to Zeldin's former lover and arch-villain, Chief of Security Robert Sedgewick, Weatherall had appeared to be only a marginal figure in volume one. She moves to the forefront of both the novel and the power structure it establishes for the United States as Sedgewick plummet into a deep depression after being betrayed by Zeldin, the obvious Renegade of the work's title. As the novel progresses, its title's point of reference becomes increasingly applicable not only to Zeldin, but also to Weatherall's protégée Allison Bennett, who comes to realize and unconsciously question the ugly realities of power relations and the Executive's exploitation of those "below" as she engages in a forbidden love affair with Weatherall. (While Lesbian sexuality is the norm among female Executives, they must choose partners from the lower professional or service-tech classes.) Even the latter, a deeply indoctrinated member of the Executive, lacks respect for the males of her class and behaves in a manner that contravenes Sedgewick's wishes, leading her toward the slippery slope of rebellion as well.
But even more fascinating than her construction of a budding prise de conscience on the part of these female characters who begin to see that even as oppressors they are oppressed, is Duchamp's destruction of her own heroine's will to live in a state which denies her almost every basic personal freedom. In his review of Alanya to Alanya for New York Review of Science Fiction (Dec. 2005: 21-22), Michael Levy perhaps rightly asserts that Duchamp's talent as a prose stylist fails to appear in the Marq'ssan Cycle. And yet, through the last two thirds of Renegade she successfully maintains narrative tension almost solely through the battle of wills between Weatherall and Zeldin. That Duchamp has also done her homework in the series' preparation appears in the scary verisimilitude with which she depicts the intelligence service sub-culture, its methods and their impact upon detainees. Indeed, the work at times reads much like a concentration camp narrative (Levi's Survival in Auschwitz or Solzhentisyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich come to mind) in its lengthy, semi-philosophical passages about self-preservation. While I have certainly been guilty of grousing about and skimming through such long-winded philosophical digressions in other works of SF, with Renegade, I devoured every word of every page.

Besides the obvious comparisons with the feminist utopias and dystopias of the 1970s and 1980s, Duchamp's Marq'ssan Cycle also reminds me of Doris Lessing's Canopus in Argos novels. Both depict a near-future dystopian earth, which allows for a social critique of the current order, but also proposes a new vision and direction for human society offered by a benevolent alien species. Yet there are also clear differences between these multi-volume works, the most evident being that while Lessing constructed each novel as a discrete entity that stands on its own, I think it would be difficult for a reader to enter Duchamp's cycle without starting at the beginning. A more problematic flaw, I think, given its political agenda, lies in its unbalanced or simply absent portrayal of male characters. Renegade's weak spot appears precisely where anti-feminist readers will attack it; just like in the Free Zone it depicts, while women have been liberated, men become either disempowered or, like Robert Sedgewick and his cohorts, believe themselves to be all powerful, a belief that turns them into short-sighted ignorant beasts. Perhaps as the Free Zone grapples with precisely this problem, the forthcoming volumes of Duchamp's Marq'ssan Cycle will deal with it, too. For if the highly pertinent political message it sends about the exercise of power and its abuse, particularly in the United States today is to be heard by those who need to hear it, the work must transcend its liberal feminist fantasy. Otherwise, Duchamp will simply be preaching to the choir.

FICTION REVIEW

Tiptree Award Anthology 3

Linda Wight


The James Tiptree Jr. Award was inaugurated in 1991 to recognise science fiction and fantasy that “expands or explores our understanding of gender.” If this mission statement seems somewhat vague, it is meant to be, as Jeffrey D. Smith explains in his “Introduction” to The James Tiptree Award Anthology 3. Smith sets the tone for this third annual anthology as he traces the evolution of this unique Award that asks new jurors each year to determine what this statement means to them and grapple anew with such weighty questions as: What counts as science fiction and fantasy? Should we recognise only novels and short stories, or expand the scope to websites and slash fiction? How important is gender content in comparison to a text's literary value? Do the stories have to be 'about' gender, or is it enough (or perhaps even better) to see gender issues woven into the background? And so on.

Each year the answers are different, resulting in an ever-evolving Award that is often challenging, sometimes controversial, and always interesting. The same can be said of The James Tiptree Award Anthology 3. Picking up where the first two anthologies (reviewed in SFRA Review 274 & 275) left off, this third volume draws together nine fictional works and three essays to give readers a taste of the wide variety of texts that have been acknowledged by the Tiptree Award.

As befits an annual anthology, four of the fictional contributions are drawn from the 2005 Award year (presented in 2006), including an extract from Geoff Ryman's Tiptree Award winning Air (2004) and three short stories from the 2005 shortlist. In addition, the editors have included four short stories from previous Award years, providing readers further insight into jurors' evolving notions of what constitutes a 'gender-bending' text.

Considered individually, each story is enjoyable, well crafted, and explores gender in an interesting manner. However, the strength of the anthology derives from the way the stories are juxtaposed to reveal complementary and varying approaches...
to common issues of concern including female strength and self-determination, social expectations of gendered behavior and family structures, and commodified standards of beauty. It is with this last in mind that the editors widen the purview of the anthology to include James Tiptree Jr’s own classic short story, “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (1973). This story is grouped with Ted Chiang’s “Liking What You See: A Documentary” (2002) to show that thirty years on concerns still persist that many women base their sense of self-worth on corporate definitions of beauty. Each story asks what might happen if we could look beneath the surface to the true identity within, and Chiang’s optimism contrasts with Tiptree’s pessimism to raise some interesting questions.

Geoff Ryman’s “Have Not Have” (2001) is another canny choice for inclusion. Chapter one of Air, “Have Not Have,” was originally published as a stand-alone story, as was Aimee Bender’s “Dearth” (2005), an extract from her Willful Creatures. These selections successfully avoid the incomplete and partial feel that often detract from novel extracts. Although “Have Not Have” does not contain the most talked-about gender-twist of Air, it thoughtfully questions the value of a technology that threatens to undermine the respect, status and self-confidence of women and rural peoples by teaching them to see themselves as ‘have-nots’ in a world of ‘haves.’

Ryman’s female protagonist fights against the imposition of these values, and demonstrates her determination to control her own destiny. Similar images of female strength are also presented in Nalo Hopkinson’s “The Glass Bottle Trick” (2000) and Margo Lanagan’s “Wooden Bride” (2004). Lanagan’s young female protagonist gently draws attention to some of the unquestioned assumptions and expectations of feminism as she asserts her right to choose a life of strength and dignity that embraces traditional feminine values. In “The Glass Bottle Trick” (2000) women also fight against those who wish to control and deny their choices. In a re-working of the Bluebeard fairytale, the wronged wives reject a fate of silent passivity to punish the man who sought to impose his unrealistic ideal of pristine femininity upon them.

Much more than just a re-hashed fairytale, however, Hopkinson’s tale also supports the editors’ claim that “we have always also cared about issues of race and ethnicity, even though they are outside our specific mandate” (91). Along with Pam Noles’ essay, “Shame” (2006) and Dorothy Allison’s “The Future of Female: Octavia Butler’s Mother Lode” (1990), “The Glass Bottle Trick” draws together issues of race and gender to reveal the common concerns of all writers who oppose the oppression and suppression of any one part of the human race. Commemorating the passing of Octavia Butler – another icon of feminist SF – the anthology reminds readers that as we expand and explore our ideas about gender, we must remain mindful of issues of race that often remain invisible and unspoken.

This review cannot conclude without mentioning what, to my mind, is the most compelling story in the anthology, Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Mountain Ways.” In this 1996 Tiptree Award winning text, Le Guin takes us back to her fictional world of ‘O’ where marriages consist of four people and each person’s sexual and marital choices are constrained by both gender and moiety. “Mountain Ways” reveals that in every society there are individuals who experience guilt and turmoil because they do not fit the social norm. Le Guin exposes the hard choices that such individuals are forced to make and presents a vision of hope for those with the courage to pursue their desires. A worthy Tiptree winner, “Mountain Ways” effortlessly weaves together issues of gendered performance, cross-dressing, and the constraints of masculinity, while defamiliarising our own society’s assumptions about ‘normal’ marriage.

Defamiliarisation is also central to the final two stories of the anthology. Vonda McIntyre’s aliens in “Little Faces” (2005) disrupt everything we thought we knew about love, male-female relationships, dependency, rape, reproduction, and parenthood, while Eleanor Arnason’s multiple-bodied goxhat in “Knapsack Poems” (2002) work as an analogy for the multiple identities and genders that underlie each seemingly singular human identity.

Combined with a complete appendix of Tiptree winners and shortlists since 1991, the range of stories in this third anthology will provide an excellent resource for any course on gender in SF and fantasy. General SF readers and libraries will also enjoy being exposed to a remarkable range of intriguing stories of high literary quality. Highly recommended – and I look forward to the fourth instalment.
The SFRA is the oldest professional organization for the study of science fiction and fantasy literature and film. Founded in 1970, the SFRA was organized to improve classroom teaching; to encourage and assist scholarship; and to evaluate and publicize new books and magazines dealing with fantastic literature and film, teaching methods and materials, and allied media performances. Among the membership are people from many countries—students, teachers, professors, librarians, futurologists, readers, authors, booksellers, editors, publishers, archivists, and scholars in many disciplines. Academic affiliation is not a requirement for membership.

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