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The following are the members for the SFRA awards committees:

Pilgrim: Charles N. Brown (c); F. Brett Cox; Elizabeth Anne Hull
Pioneer: Lisa Yaszek (c); Chrissie Mains; Larissa Koroleva
Clareson: Bruce Rockwood (c); David Hartwell; Doug Davis
Mary Kay Bray; Tom Morrissey (c); Ritch Calvin; Patrick Sharp
Graduate Student Paper: Paul Brians (c); Pawel Frelik; Jim Davis


The World Fantasy Awards were presented at World Fantasy Con in Saratoga Springs, New York. Life Achievement: Betty Ballantine and Diana Wynne Jones; Novel: Soldier of Sidon, by Gene Wolfe; Novella: “Botch Town,” by Jeffrey Ford; Short Fiction: “Journey Into the Kingdom,” by M. Rickert; Anthology: Salon Fantastique, edited by Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling; Collection: Map of Dreams, by M. Rickert; Artist: Shaun Tan; Special Award, Professional: Ellen Asher; Special Award, Non-Professional: Gary K. Wolfe. The 2009 will take place in San Jose, California and 2010 will be in Columbus, Ohio.

The Aurora Awards, celebrating excellence in Canadian Science Fiction, were presented the weekend of October 19-21. Best Long-Form Work in English: Children of Chaos, by Dave Duncan; Best Long-Form Work in French: Reine de Memoire 4. La Princesse de Vengeance, by

Due to the rapid decline of the U.S. dollar against the Euro, SFRA has had to switch its site for this coming summer’s meeting.

The 2008 SFRA Annual Convention will be held

Thursday, July 10th – Sunday, July 13th in Lawrence, Kansas (about 50 miles west of Kansas City, Missouri, and home to the University of Kansas and The SFRA Archives) in conjunction with The Campbell Conference.

Paper and panel proposals should be sent to Karen Hellekson at:

karenhellekson@karenhellekson.com

Registration Fees and Lodging Costs were still being determined as this issue went to print, but they will certainly be reasonable. Guest authors are also being contacted and will shortly be announced. For up-to-the-date details, check the SFRA website at:

www.sfra.org

www.sfra.org

The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts has announced the formation and presentation of the Jamie Bishop Memorial Award, presented for an essay about speculative fiction published in a non-English language. The first winner, Carlos Abraham wrote the essay “Las utopías literarias argentinas en el período 1850-1950.” The award is named for Jamie Bishop, son of SF author Michael Bishop, who died during the Virginia Tech massacre in April 2007.

The Sunburst Award for Canadian Literature of theFantastic was presented to Mark Frutkin for his novel Fabrizio’s Return.

The winner of the Gaylactic Spectrum Award, honoring speculative fiction on gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered themes, is Hal Duncan, for his novel Vellum.

Doris Lessing has won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Her science fiction includes Memoirs of a Survivor and the Canopus in Argos series.

Montreal is the site for 2009 Worldcon, which will be called Anticipation. Guests of Honor will include Neil Gaiman, Elisabeth Vonarburg, Taral Wayne, David Hartwell, Tom Doherty. Julie Czerneda is Master of Ceremonies.

SFRA BUSINESS

Message from the Editor
Christine Mains

What a strange feeling, to be working on my last ever issue of the SFRA Review! It’s been a wonderful experience, and I’m reluctant, really, to let it go. But I know that the Review can only get better in the more capable hands of Karen Hellekson and Craig Jacobsen.

I’ll still be a part of SFRA, contributing reviews and attending conferences (although, sadly, I won’t be in Kansas in 2008, as the Dublin conference provided the perfect excuse for a visit to family in Britain). And I look forward to future opportunities to contribute to the association which has been so supportive and rewarding. Hanging around to talk to Mike Levy and Phil Snyder after the business meeting in New Lanark was one of the best decisions I ever made.

SFRA BUSINESS

Message from the President
Adam Frisch

If there is one thing I’ve learned during my first year as SFRA’s president, it’s the amazing generosity of spirit that pervades our organization. Consider, for example, the quality work contributed during the past half decade by SFRA Review’s Chrissie Mains, for whom this is her last issue as editor, as she heads out to a new academic job with—no doubt—twice as many student papers to be graded as existed five years ago in her entire known universe. Consider how quickly Karen Hellekson and Craig Jacobsen have stepped forward to volunteer as Chrissie’s successor—it still remains to be seen if only two people can do all the work Chrissie has been handling four times every year. Then consider all the work that continues to be volunteered in assembling and publishing the Review by co-editors Jan Bogstad, Ed Carmien, Ed McKnight and Ritch Calvin. Go on to consider how graciously our Dublin Conference Group were willing to set aside several years of hard work when it became obvious that United States academics, especially those still in graduate school or beginning assistant professors, could no longer afford an overseas venue. And then consider how quickly SFRA members of the Campbell Conference, especially Jim Gunn and Chris McKitterick, volunteered their site as an alternative, despite the considerable increase in work their organization would need to assume to host a “double” conference. And finally, consider how amazed I myself have been over the past several weeks—and being an SF reader since childhood, I am not easily amazed—with the large number of reassuring emails SFRA’s membership has posted or sent me during the difficult times of giving up our dreams for a conference in Ireland, and the huge number of email requests that my fellow officers, Lisa Yaszek, Mack Hassler, Shelley Rodrigo and Dave Mead, have processed and responded to within only a few hours—or in some cases, a few minutes! I have been, quite simply, overwhelmed by these multiple instances of help and kind-heartedness.

A lot is being printed and televised recently about the emerging strength of the “millennial generation,” supposedly the most self-centered, me-oriented group of people ever to come to economic and political power. One nice thing about being a member of SFRA is that our organization obviously excludes those sort of folks from its membership.

I hope to see many of you in Lawrence, Kansas, this coming July.

Here's a gift idea for your favorite Philip K. Dick fan: the December 2007-released 5-Disc *Blade Runner* DVD set, and a copy of this book. Be prepared, however, to watch your fan disappear into an orgy of cross-referencing, for hours on end. With entirely appropriate emphasis on *Blade Runner/Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Brian J. Robb has put together the most complete description of the various cinematic PKD adaptations to date in *Counterfeit Worlds* (title from a speech PKD gave about his own work in 1977). The book is definitely an interesting read, though PKD scholars will have to wait for a more academic treatment of the subject.

Robb starts off with a thorough, if somewhat sanitized, biographical sketch of PKD, then proceeds with a comprehensive description of the media (including TV, radio, and game) adaptations of Dick's works. There are three chapters on *Blade Runner*, and chapters on each of the major film adaptations, plus the TV show *Total Recall 2070*. There are also chapters on “‘Innade Projects,” the unproduced Dick-penned screenplay adaptation of *Ubik*, and the French film adaptation of the non-SF *Confessions of a Crap Artist*. In an admirable attempt to stay ahead of the PKD-adaptation curve, Robb’s mid-2006-published book even includes material about the 2006-released film *A Scanner Darkly* and the loose Dick adaptation that became *Next* in 2007.

Robb’s style, while very readable, is much more *Starlog* (the magazine is an important source for the book) than *Science Fiction Studies*. That's not necessarily a bad thing; indeed, for a number of years in his teens and twenties, this reviewer bought and devoured nearly every issue of *Starlog*, and there is good information to be found there and in similar places. However, anyone looking for more mature analysis should look elsewhere. For example, Will Brooker's *The Blade Runner Experience: The Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic* (Wallflower, 2006) is a great new collection of essays by mostly British scholars. Two earlier books are Paul Sammon's 1996 *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner* and Judith Kerman's 1997 *Retrofitting Blade Runner: Issues in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner and Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. Any academic should be tipped off that this isn’t a scholarly tome by the blurbs on the back cover, not about the book but about PKD, from *Rolling Stone*, *Wired*, and Ben Affleck (*Paycheck*). While there is an extensive, if informal, Bibliography (good list of “Selected Websites”), the lack of an index, and, very troubling, any form of attribution or annotation at all, seriously limit use of the book beyond the casual.

Too, it’s hard to expect hard-nosed, objective writing on the subject when the acknowledgments include thanks to PKD’s daughters for “their invaluable input and advice,” as well as actor Peter Weller (*Screamers*), screenwriter Gary Goldman (*Total Recall, Minority Report*) and director Richard Linklater (*A Scanner Darkly*). On the other hand, it’s doubtful that an unconnected scholar with a hidden agenda could get the kind of access to those close to the projects, so you pays your money and you takes your choice.

In any case, there are plenty of fun anecdotes and photos you won’t find.
Counterfeit Worlds would absolutely make a good addition to any general personal or library collection, and is suitable for secondary-school or undergraduate classroom use. If you’re a Dickhead, you should buy a copy.

NONFICTION REVIEW

**E.T. Culture**

Lincoln Geraghty


*E.T. Culture* offers readers a fascinating insight into society’s one unifying desire: to encounter and understand the unknown. Notions of otherness and the alien are central to the science fiction genre; the figure of the extra-terrestrial or E.T. is an embodiment of our culture’s fear of and fascination for the alien encounter. Battaglia’s collection serves as an investigation into how these familiar science fiction tropes can be found and recognised in the roots of our society. *E.T. Culture* is an anthropological study that examines notions of community and how the individual reacts to the wide and ever increasing changes within society such as new technologies, governmental control, and racial and ethnic difference. The alien is the one unifying figure that can encapsulate the anxieties and fears of us living in the modern world; our attitude and relationship with the otherworldly being is a mere representation of our own attitudes toward social change and upheaval.

The book is divided into eight chapters, drawn together from seven academic experts from the fields of anthropology, information technology and linguistics, not the usual range of scholars that can be found in science fiction critical anthologies but nonetheless an intriguing selection that signals a trend towards science fiction scholarship’s extended family. Chapters include Battaglia’s own “Insiders’ Voices in Outerspaces” which calls for a reappraisal of E.T. culture, to look deeper at ideas of community and the individual. Using the tools of the anthropologist, Battaglia asserts that it is the intention of the volume to “acknowledge subjects’ own concerning what it is to be human… [to] consider, on the one hand, our openness to foreignness within the social spaces we know or have thought we understood as home and, on the other hand, our ability to make sense of everyday lives in which we sometimes seem foreign to ourselves” (6). We must not dismiss those defined as “other”, those that believe in extra-terrestrial life for example (measured to be about a third of North America’s population in 2000 according to Battaglia), since in their construction of communities and spaces through and in which they share and discuss their passion for E.T. culture they are redefining the creativity of social life and reimagining the global order (7).

Two chapters that focus on the fan communities of *Star Trek* and *Yu-Gi-Oh* best exemplify *E.T. Culture*’s claims for a new approach to otherness and the alien. David Samuels examines constructed languages in society, the Klingon Language from *Star Trek* being the most recent and media hyped example, and argues that people construct new languages and forms of speech and communication lines are drawn between communities that cloud our vision of who our neighbors are. Learning Klingon sets one apart from those who do not know the language and sets one among a small group of likeminded individuals that have all made the decision to slowly detach from mainstream society and use the
overlooked works in the Vonnegut canon—The trajectory of Vonnegut's career—Vonnegut as science fiction writer—Vonnegut's influence on other writers—Vonnegut and Abstract Expressionism/Vonnegut as visual artist—Race/Gender in Vonnegut's work—Vonnegut as stylist—Humor in Vonnegut—The political Vonnegut—Vonnegut in the 21st Century

SUBMISSIONS: Susan Farrell <farrells@cofc.edu>
DEADLINE: Dec. 15, 2007

WHAT: Contemporary SF Dreams of Tomorrows
WHEN: July 25-Aug 3, 2009
WHERE: Normandy, France

TOPICS: As it appears, there have been no major scientific revolutions since the 1950s, and as the future offered by science fiction as hypotheses has nearly become reality, it is indeed time to raise the following questions: does science fiction still have a future? What vision of a possible future can science fiction offer now? Submissions are encouraged in fields that include: film, visual and media studies, literature, science, communication, language studies, linguistics, women and gender studies, history, psychology, philosophy, religion, social sciences, cultural studies and popular culture.

SUBMISSIONS: to all 3 organizers: <danieleandre2b@orange.fr> <daniel.tron@free.fr> <aurelie.villers@wanadoo.fr>. Papers in English will have to be given ahead of the conference so as to be translated for non-English speakers.

DEADLINE: May 1, 2008
INFO: www.ccic-cerisy.asso.fr

constructed Klingon language and traditions to communicate identity. As society becomes all the more interconnected across national borders through the Internet, learning and communicating in an alien tongue such as Klingon highlights the fractured nature of our world. It may be getting smaller but it has become so segmented and compartmentalised that we can only hope to understand those bits with which we are already familiar.

Similarly, Mizuko Ito’s “Intertextual Enterprises” contends that today’s media spaces have grown so large and interconnected, drawing in new technologies that subvert the need for corporeal presence, that they have become akin to the otherworldliness of outerspace – that place that kept us looking to the stars throughout the twentieth century. The children’s fantasy trading card and computer game, Yu-Gi-Oh, offers “a world of fantasy made manifest through the workings of people, practices, technologies, and representations.” Those that play the game are not ostensibly looking for truth or meaning in the modern world gone mad, but instead “see themselves constructing and performing alternative realities rather than questing for a greater truth ‘out there’” (198). The “other”, in quite interesting terms, is not something to be feared or even sought on the outside, but rather is something which should be constructed and imagined on the inside. The ordinary is that which should be feared, the extraordinary or exotic is revered.

Community, then, in both cases pulled out from the collection’s diasporic subjects, is in a constant state of flux as individuals continue to shape and style their own relations to the world and the other. The E.T. amongst us can be the grey skinned alien or the UFO enthusiast, but it can also be the game card collector or Klingon convention attendee. Notions of otherness change as the tools with which we construct our own identities in a technological and global landscape also shift to accommodate difference. We work to alienate ourselves and others by creating and sustaining new groups connected through cyberspace, yet in so doing we naturally become that which we most feared in the first place: the alien.

NONFICTION REVIEW

Irwin Allen Television Productions, 1964-1970
Lincoln Geraghty


“Allen was no storyteller… he was into spectacle” (8). Jon Abbott’s description of Irwin Allen appears blunt and yet it is a statement with which many would find hard to disagree. The creator of the renowned sixties pulp science fiction television shows Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea (1964-68), Lost in Space (1965-68), The Time Tunnel (1966-67), and Land of the Giants (1968-70) is seen by some critics as an aberration, someone always keen to aim for the fantasy and kid’s TV audience rather than the perceived “serious and highbrow” audience who might have watched The Twilight Zone (1959-64), The Outer Limits (1963-65), and Star Trek (1966-69). Yet Abbott is keen to point out from the very beginning of his work that there was space for both in the TV schedules, that audiences could handle political science fiction and colorful spectacle: “But when we need to escape from the musing of the newscasts, or the tyranny of historical or scientific fact, that is when the door to the wacky worlds of Irwin Allen and his
Irwin Allen Television Productions is both a critical examination of Allen's work and a reference book for the 274 episodes of Allen's four TV series. Abbott has clearly spent much of his time watching and rewatching episodes, trawling through papers and documents, and reading all there is to read on the subject to produce a quite exhaustive and thoughtful piece of historical scholarship. The book is made up of trivia, comment, criticism, background, interviews, and information on episodes, writers, guest stars, directors, and actors in all four series. A comprehensive bibliography of further work and a thorough index complete the book – valuable cross-referencing tools that no reference work should be without. McFarland, the publisher, seem to produce a lot of this kind of scholarly reference material and they should be applauded for continuing to support such research. Abbott's book is invaluable to every science fiction television scholar, as it provides original and crucial insight into "cult" science fiction series and their production histories, often overlooked and vilified in previous scholarship.

It is true that the genre has allowed space for both story and spectacle; Abbott uses the work of Georges Méliès (regarded as one of the first filmmakers to experiment with screen science fiction) as an example of how the genre could be presented as a work of "showmanship and special effects" (1). However, many critics have dismissed so-called "childish" science fiction — Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, Captain Video, Allen's series etc. — as pure fantasy, products of an unscrupulous Hollywood industry that cared only for profits not politics. Yet what these criticisms often forget is that science fiction of this type filled a specific need and had a particular role in the survival and development of the science fiction genre on both the big and small screens. Without Flash Gordon serials in the 1940s, which enticed audiences to go to the cinema regularly, the genre may have died out and we might not have seen the classic sci-fi films of the fifties such as Invaders from Mars (1953) or Forbidden Planet (1956). Without Captain Video and the like on television in the early 1950s, which carved out a permanent place for science fiction in people's homes, we may never have felt the need or got the go-ahead to produce The Twilight Zone and its progeny.

Through the ever-developing television market, fixed on niche audiences and quality, short-run productions, science fiction has a definite future. New viewing technologies, such as digital TV, TIVO and satellite system where your TV can record programmes it feels you like, and the fan oriented DVD box-set market where Irwin Allen's series can be bought and kept by enthusiasts and completists, ensure that the genre has an evolving, cross-generational audience that revels in current and classic science fiction. With technology that allows viewers to revisit and relive childhood series from TV history, as well as watch new series that consistently refer back to the classics, science fiction television continues to do what the genre does best: mix spectacle with political comment, entertainment with education. Irwin Allen's television productions in the 1960s should not be dismissed as mere fluff, the fact that they have been and are being re-released and remade shows they have an audience that sees them as perhaps not only critically but also culturally important. Such importance cannot be overlooked since Allen's work is the epitome of popular science fiction: it keeps the genre colorful and alive.
FICTION REVIEW

**Rash**
Gail A. Bondi


Written by award winning author Pete Hautman, *Rash*, a young adult novel which takes places at the end of this century in the Safer States of America, has earned both a National Book Award and the 2006 Hal Clement Award for Best Young Adult Science Fiction.

During a track event, Bo Marsten commits several misdemeanors including verbal assault (name calling) and self-neglect (failure to wear knee pad liners). The next day several students at school break out in a rash and Bo is blamed. Convicted for the misdemeanors, Bo is sent to a labor camp where he is coerced into playing the illegal sport of football. After obtaining an early release through the machinations of his AI, Bo returns home to discover he has changed too much to live contentedly in a safe society.

On the surface, this is a good book about a high school athlete. Hautman ably combines science fiction and sports to create a novel that will be especially attractive to this large demographic. Additionally, the author skillfully defines new terms within the context of his story, providing a pleasurable way to expand reading vocabulary. The novel’s short chapters and continuous action will keep readers turning pages as they meet Pete and his friend, Rhino and his AI, Bork. Strong descriptive language gives the novel a feeling of immediacy and reality.

More importantly, this novel could be a useful spring board for several important topics in social science classes. First, there is the issue of security versus civil rights. From here there are several good he-ans to the development and maintenance of a labor force. The book might also lead to discussions about diversity since Bo is on medication for anger management and Rhino is jailed for being fat. (It should be noted, however, that there are only two female characters in this novel, both of whom are portrayed as conventional and unsympathetic.) The AI will ignite dialog about the definition of sentience as well as consideration of the near possibilities in hardware and software development. Finally, the book naturally invites conversation about teamwork and fair play.

FICTION REVIEW

**The Accidental Time Machine**
Andrew M. Gordon


*The Accidental Time Machine* is vintage Haldeman, providing what we expect from this veteran, award-winning SF writer: up-to-date scientific speculation; fertile imagination; a cynical, alienated young hero; a fast-moving plot loaded with dramatic twists and turns; romance; political satire; and wry wit. The device of time travel has been worked over and its conventions codified by so many authors that it is difficult to imagine a new approach. Haldeman’s novelty is a machine that operates by gravitons: “Casting about for some reasonably scientific mumbo jumbo to use for a time machine, I settled on gravitons and string theory,” he says in the author’s note (277). Halfway through the writing, however, he found a scientific paper “which indeed uses gravitons and string theory to describe a time machine,” which he believes proves that “if you wave your arms around hard enough, sometimes you can fly” (278).

Another innovation is that the protagonist was not building a time machine and discovered only by accident that it disappeared when he pushed the reset button. A few experiments prove that it leapfrogs forward in time by a factor of twelve with each push of the button: at first, only seconds, then minutes, next days, and on to years and soon, to centuries and cons. But each push is irrevocable, for one can only jump forward. So he keeps leaping, hoping that at some point in the far future he will meet someone who has a machine that goes backward and can return him to his starting point.

The story opens at M.I.T. (the university where Haldeman actually teaches) in the near future. Matt Fuller, a dropout
from the Ph.D. program in physics, now works as a research assistant—basically a lab tech—at M.I.T. When he loses both his girlfriend and his job and realizes his dissertation is a dead end, Matt uses the machine to escape into the future. But once there, he lands behind bars facing serious charges, until a mystery man (could it be a future version of himself?) provides the million-dollar bail. After that, he is forced to keep jumping, as each stopping point up the line proves either disappointing or life-threatening.

In the most developed and amusing future, “Jesus” (or perhaps a technological facsimile) has returned and established a closed, fundamentalist religious state on the eastern seaboard. This satirical “Christer” society is well realized, with M.I.T. turned into the “Massachusetts Institute of Theosophy.” Other futures are quickly sketched. Rather than tell you details and spoil the reading, suffice it that there are a variety of imagined futures for the Earth, from the supposedly utopian to the severely dystopian, and from the near future to far distant eons. Along the way, our hero picks up a companion, a naïve young woman who must learn fast as they leap into increasingly bizarre future scenarios. Naturally, a romance develops between the pair.

Haldeman includes nods to his predecessors in the time travel genre, including the grandfather of it all, H.G. Wells. At one point, when the hero dons a skin-tight, futuristic outfit, “He looked like Buck Rogers with no airbrushing and a small beer belly” (229).

In structure, the book somewhat resembles The Forever War: an alienated young hero is thrust forward in time, exposed to a series of near and then increasingly weird far future societies, and suffers the effects of “future shock.” Except for the fundamentalist American state, the story lacks the barbed political implications of Forever War. Nevertheless, The Accidental Time Machine makes for a fast and highly entertaining read.

FICTION REVIEW

Ivory: A Legend of Past and Future

Jason W. Ellis


Mike Resnick’s novel, Ivory: A Legend of Past and Future, is an impressive work of postcolonial SF set in a far-future, colonized galaxy that hinges on reclaiming lost cultural heritage through the rediscovery of the famed Kilimanjaro Elephant tusks dating from the late nineteenth century. It’s about Duncan Rojas, a big game researcher and authenticator, who’s asked to locate the afore mentioned ivory—lost for millennia within the spatial boundaries of the Milky Way—by Bukoba Mandaka, the last of Earth’s Maasai. The Maasai are a native African ethnic group that maintains a semi-nomadic lifestyle in modern-day Kenya and northern Tanzania, and they are well known for their bright red cloth tunics. Rojas quests for the tusks with the aid of his computer, which accesses information databases strewn across the inhabited portions of the galaxy (i.e., colonized and/or studied). Finally, Rojas makes an inductive leap locating the tusks, and in turn, discovering the ivory’s historical significance.

There are three significant elements that make Ivory a postcolonial SF story beyond its being about the Maasai and their subjugation as colonial subjects, and they are: layered meanings in the protagonists’ names, the colonized subject attempting to reclaim his people’s pre-colonial history in order to set right the imposition of Western values on his earlier, unadulterated culture, and the knowledge/power dynamic signified by the extensive use of computer technology to (re)present the past. Duncan Rojas is the only first person narrator in the story besides the italicized and abbreviated voice of the Kilimanjaro Elephant. Thus, Rojas is constructed as one who sees, but is not seen by others. Also, he lacks physical description from another character’s point of view. However, his apparent transparency is made opaque by layered meanings packed in his name. First, Duncan is the Anglicized form of ‘Donnchadh,’ the Gaelic word for “brown warrior.” His last name is of Spanish origin and derives from ‘rojo,’ which means red in relation to one’s hair. His non-white first name connects him with Mandaka, and his last name juxtaposed with the first marks him of another historically Othered group: the Irish. Mandaka’s name takes a different vector than that of Rojas. Bukoba is the name of a Tanzanian town on the shore of the colonial named Lake Victoria, and Mandaka (which unavoidably begins with the Western ‘man’) is a Tanzanian city at the base of Mount Kilimanjaro. Therefore, Bukoba Mandaka’s name is derived from places thus rooting his subjectivity with the land of his ancestors in contrast to Rojas’ physical or ethnic description without naming through place.
A second postcolonial aspect of the novel has to do with Mandaka's grasping for cultural subjectivity and heritage lost to the years under the pressure of colonial encroachments. The Kilimanjaro Elephant tusks signify the lost history of the Maasai. They become tainted by European culture after a Maasai hacks off the tusks of the dead Kilimanjaro Elephant in order to sell them to an African slaver. The acceptance of the fetishization of commodities is the event that marks the decline of the Maasai. Therefore, Mandaka attempts to exorcise the cultural influence of the colonial power over the history of his people, but the success of his mission is largely one of peace of mind, because the imposed traces of European colonization are embedded within the future history of the Maasai.

A final postcolonial element in *Ivory* that deserves further attention is the power/knowledge dynamic explicated by Michel Foucault and critically integrated into a theory of orientalism by Edward Said. The power/knowledge matrix is signified in Resnick's novel by the computer employed by Rojas to locate the lost tusks. Rojas' computer, provided by his employer, has the ability to intelligently search through an unimaginably vast number of databases. The computer, as mediator between a person and the knowledge contained in these databases, is the signifier of the power exercised over the colonized. Much of the computer's searches involve tax records, which is another indication of the Western colonial power exercising its might over the colonized through taxation. Additionally, the computer's reconstructions of the past (third person narration in the first nine chapters) are more detailed and fact-filled than mere tax entries. Resnick even provides the reader with an analogy of the computer's capabilities in the chapter, "The Graverobber." The archaeologist Boris Jablonski desires "the thrill of reconstructing the comprehensive whole of a civilization from the tiniest fragments." This archaeological deduction relies on fragmentary information provided by artifacts and not the voices of the people from those civilizations. Furthermore, the "missing pieces" have to be filled in through the lens of one's own cultural experience and subjectivity. Resnick contrasts this with the last three chapters, "Himself," "The Maasai," and "Ivory," which give voice to the Other via Mandaka and the Kilimanjaro Elephant. Therefore, the computer's imposition of power through its codification and analysis of stored knowledge signifies the colonial oppressor studying and incorporating the native into their own narrative and thereby obviating the native's cultural narrative, but the author reveals a hidden power contained in the native subject with his oral history.

SF readers as well as academics and libraries should seek out *Ivory*. I highly recommend it for its enjoyable story vehicle as well as its critical aspects. This is the kind of work that bridges SF with other discourses such as postcolonialism. As a stand-alone work, it explores the subjection of the Other to colonialism through a SF lens. Also, the novel would make a powerful and evocative addition to postcolonial literature course syllabi combined with other African postcolonial SF stories such as Ian McDonald's Chaga saga: *Evolution's Shore* (1995), *Kirinya* (1998), and *Tendeleo's Story* (2000). Resnick's engagement of postcolonial issues of subjectivity and voice in *Ivory*, coupled with fun, future historical stories, raises the novel to a higher tier of SF worthy of further critical attention and a wide readership.

**FICTION REVIEW**

**The Outback Stars**

Edward Carmien


Even the blurb is enough to bring to mind that paragon of female space-opera ship officerness, Honor Harrington: "Lieutenant Jodenny Scott is recovering from her last assignment, which resulted in the demise of her ship the Yangtze." The opening pages reinforce the sensation: Scott is shown heroically fighting through the pain of burns to help save those she can from the wreck of her first vessel.

McDonald cannily stops echoing Weber's omnipresent space hero after the opening pages, although her ongoing efforts to bring discipline to the slovenly department she's inherited will feel familiar during the early chapters, and another echo returns later in the tale when she trains a poor officer into the beginnings of a good one. *The Outback Stars* features a wormhole-style FTL transportation system built by Ancient Alien Others with accesses in space that go from system to system containing various planets on which humanity has managed to build a collection of colonies. Earth is 'debased,' the future lingo for 'ecologically wrecked' (all the space vessels are named after Earth's ecological disasters), and there is a colony independence movement in opposition to the Space Team, Earth government's spacefaring organization.
These rebels are blamed for the destruction of Lt. Scott's first vessel, and suspicion is rampant on her second, the Aral Sea. As Scott settles into her new job she learns the Aral Sea is a troubled vessel. The military culture is decidedly Australian and diverse, and there is tension belowdecks and in officer country. The overall setting of the Aral Sea blends civilian and military social factors—Scott's military department, Underway Stores, hires civilians for paper-shuffling duties, and her job does not involve lobbing missiles at enemy ships—it involves supplying the needs of everyone on board, from food supplies for the kitchens and restaurants to coveralls for the crew.

There are no enemy fleets, and the vessel Scott is assigned to is, like all the ships mentioned, a freighter. No cruisers, battlecruisers, battleships, or dreadnoughts need apply. As tours of duty are years-long, these huge vessels bring along the equivalent of port towns that contain bars, restaurants, and all the conveniences of home for the crew and civilian complement to enjoy. These civilians include military spouses, children, employees, and passengers going from point A to point B. On the Aral Sea that includes a cadre of prisoners as well as a colony made up of Australian natives governed by an aboriginal wise in the ways of the Dreamtime.

McDonald succeeds in crafting a miniature society that unites the traditional split between steely-jawed spacefaring captains with bomb-pumped lasers and terrestrial governments. Military discipline still pertains, as evidenced by (Montague) Scott's struggle to maintain proper decorum around (Capulet) Sergeant Myell, her romantic (forbidden fruit) entanglement, and the Aral Sea is under overall military control. This is a real navy ship, however, so Lt. Scott has sundry other duties, including committee work that will sound familiar to any member of a big corporation—or, it would seem, contemporary navy vessel.

McDonald works in a good number of twists and turns and turns along the way. Sgt. Myell, for example, has fleeting visions of an aboriginal shaman as he boards the Aral Sea, has an unsavory reputation, and an unfortunate conflict with the bad lad gang of the vessel. Lt. Scott has an old flame from her destroyed vessel to contend with, along with disturbing memories of the explosive destruction of the Yangtze and ongoing strife and mystery among those under her command.

The Outback Stars stands out in a field more accustomed to missile-slinging stories with settings transplanted from terrestrial Earth into interstellar space. While the wormhole-style FTL takes nearly all the drudgery out of long distance space travel, there is plenty of real-life drudgery remaining, and the details of this sort of Navy life provide a strong element of the appeal of this book. McDonald has plans for Lt. Scott, as the final chapters of the novel take great pains to forecast: she qualifies to stand bridge watches, for example, and the colonial rebels make a brief appearance at the very end of the tale.

There are echoes here of Cherryh (ship board life), Weber (tough female leader instilling discipline in those who need it), Bujold (secret agents!), Hunt (there is more out there in the dark than we know), even Traviss (pollution bad!). Although potentially unsatisfying for those looking for a clone of Weber's Hornblower-in-space tales, McDonald has produced an interesting tale a few course points off from the more customary Anglo-Saxons in Space one sees most often in military space opera. Lt. Scott is an interesting blend of professional officer, do-it-my-own-way leader, and soft-hearted romantic. McDonald does a great job of bringing ship-board life alive for her readers, and the dash of Australian adds flavor to the stew.

FICTION REVIEW

Futures from Nature
Jennifer Moorman


A short phrase from Michael Moorcock's brief bio in Futures from Nature, the forthcoming hard SF anthology edited by Henry Gee, pretty well sums up a major misconception at the heart of the book, one which continues to plague the realms of academia and literary criticism: “SF and fantasy as well as more literary fiction.” It is unclear whether Moorcock penned his own bio, or if Gee wrote it for him, but in any case this phrase is unwittingly telling: it highlights the sort of dichotomous attitude toward genre fiction that informs anthologies like this one (among other things). Although the average bookstore provides countless examples of “literary” SF—of which Moorcock's story in this collection, a short episode in the Jerry Cornelius microversal tradition, surely would be one—I do not get the impression that the majority of these stories were chosen for their literary merit.
Most anthologies tend to be uneven in one way or another, and *Futures from Nature* is no exception. In their original context, *Nature* magazine, these stories could provide a bit of novelty and a certain lively creativity; as thought exercises, they generally succeed. Far too many, however, fail completely as narratives or utilize only such narrative force and thematic resonance as can be provided through dry faux-histories of the future. While nearly all of the stories are creative in terms of their premises and/or their visions of future technologies or scenarios, most of them lack the literary creativity and facility with language necessary for truly inspired fiction writing.

There are, however, a number of notable exceptions. A sentence from Benjamin Rosenbaum’s excellent story, “Falling,” epitomizes the best of what this collection has to offer: “Tall, hook-nosed, the fashionable whorls of pox and acne making constellations of his cheeks and chest, the glowing, formal tattoos of his committees and lifebrands adorning his massive triceps.” Without providing heavy-handed explication or unnecessary background information, Rosenbaum manages to convey more of interest about his vision of the (Russian Mafia inspired?) future in this one evocative sentence than many of these authors do in the entirety of their stories. With its narrative about a future in which intelligent mites control citizens’ every move, and nonconformist individuals can inject themselves with a designer virus in order to engage in such “anticontributive behavior” as “airsurfing,” Rosenbaum’s story addresses the conflict between the protection and productivity provided by state control and the individual drive for freedom. Another highlight, James Alan Gardner’s “Ars Longa, Vita Brevis,” a humorous, Lem-esque tale, envisions supernovae and other celestial bodies and events as extraterrestrial art forms, ultimately challenging the hubris of scientists in their attempts to understand and categorize the world of our experience. Two of the best stories follow the same strain of speculation, the idea that plants can feel pain. One of these is Mike Resnick’s “Great Unreported Discoveries No. 163,” which explores the topic with delicious irony. It may come as a surprise, however, that he is given a run for his money by an eleven-year-old girl—Ashley Pellegrino, “the daughter of a scientist.” Her story, “Daddy’s Slight Miscalculation,” is amusing, well written, appropriate in scope, and effective—it is wonderfully creepy. Both of these stories raise questions about the ethics and significance of experimentation, environmentalism, and vegetarianism.

These stories and quite a few others in the anthology engage with a variety of ethical, technological, and philosophical concerns in productive, insightful ways. Stories of this length—two to three pages—work best on a micro-level as, for instance, a conversation, an advertisement, an email, a single event. Many of these stories, however, approach their topics on a macro scale, attempting to summarize in 1400 words everything that has happened between the present day and their imagined futures—a tendency that lends a certain tedium to the narratives. Others reach in the opposite direction, toward a jargony ambiguity or outright opacity—far from providing too much information or summary, these stories are all but impenetrable to a layperson. Taken altogether, as a fiction anthology, separated from their original context, the majority of the stories ultimately fall flat. It does not help matters that the alphabetical organization of this collection is uninspired. It might have been more interesting to arrange them according to their dates of publication, or more interesting still to group them thematically. In light of Henry Gee’s creative, *Waiting for Godot*-inspired introduction, in which he acknowledges the blurry line dividing science from fiction, it seems a curious oversight. Ultimately, it might be fair to say that, with one hundred stories to choose from, there is something here for everyone. Fans of hard SF may find much to enjoy in this anthology, assuming they would be willing in many cases to forgive clumsy, awkward dialogue and cliché-ridden prose; but for this reviewer the majority of the stories seem forced, rushed, or just plain dull.

**FICTION REVIEW**

**The Merchants’ War**

Rikk Mulligan


*The Merchants’ War* is fourth in Charles Stross’s contemporary fantasy series, *The Merchant Princes*, following *The Family Trade*, *The Hidden Family*, and *The Clan Corporate*. This installment begins by resolving a cliffhanger for the main protagonist, Mirriam Beckstein, aka Lady Helge, as she escapes a gunpowder plot and royal coup only to find herself trapped in the third parallel world of the series, New Britain. Once there her impetuousness almost leads to her death and she finds herself enmeshed in the plots of ideologues and revolutionaries as she attempts to escape authorities of multiple worlds and return home to her Boston. The budding war in this third world between the imperial powers of Britain and France, is
echoed by the coup-turned-civil war on the Clan’s homeworld of Gruinmarkt, where the new regent is attempting to annihilate all worldwalkers and seize their lands in a carefully planned campaign that echoes both the Spanish Inquisition and Thirty Years War in style, if not substance. Back in America, Mike Fleming, DEA and reluctant agent provocateur, does his best to act as a go-between for the Clan and his own bosses. Braided through these three narratives are two Manhattan Projects as the Clan begins to systematically investigate its ability and to search for new worlds, even as US black-ops agencies attempt to copy that ability and synthesize a mechanism to use it on a much larger scale.

Stross acknowledged his debt to Roger Zelazny in the first novel of the series and the core of The Merchant Princes saga remains a contemporary fantasy along the lines of the Amber series. However, he has a hard time leaving out science fiction as quantum computing and neurobiology, a betting pool on whether or not this is establishes Level IV multiverse cosmology theory, and an exploration of futuristic ruins by a MIT-trained Clan post-graduate round out the story. Gender remains central to the story in strong female characters and questions of arranged marriage and artificial insemination. Stross’s contrasting of the roles and treatment of women, especially in a class-based environment that also suggests comparison of Western, or developed countries, to those with fewer resources. Both the mafia/cartel-like Clan and US agencies add the flavor of a Tom Clancy techno-thriller to the series, but Stross is not above wry humor or twist when frustrating the competencies of trained agents and soldiers on all sides. The specific details of weapons and body armor, “box tails” and double-blinds, and quick disguise switches recur through the novel and add both nuance and fun to the typical chase story. Where Zelazny incorporates jewelers rouge to replace impotent gunpowder on Amber, Stross shows that even an early modern era musketeer can grasp the mechanics and strategy to use a heavy machine gun, or attempt to bring down an “air carriage” (ultra-light aircraft) rather than run from a “dragon.” Both combat and intrigue are deftly handled, but the most engaging aspect of the series is the discussion and elaboration of economics and resources reminiscent of C.J. Cherryh’s Chanur series.

Where Cherryh’s space-faring economics incorporate uplift with capitalism, Stross makes a point of engaging in critiques of mercantilism (in Gruinmarkt), robber-baron style capitalism (in New Britain), and late-era capitalism in his United States. As a former tech journalist, Stross incorporates familiar elements of the technology field, venture capital, and a developing information economy. Mirriam’s plan to shift the Clans from drugs to information and to modernize New Britain with older US patents can be considered as variants of contemporary arguments around the DMCA, intellectual property, and Creative Commons licensing. Those same plans suggest an indictment of US management and efforts to rebuild the economic infrastructures of Iraq and Afghanistan. The Dr. James character, equal parts Agent Smith of the Matrix and Dr. Strangelove, tells Fleming that “this administration” is very concerned about oil in the “Texas” of Gruinmarkt; he stresses that the US needs “its” oil to maintain control and hegemony. Rather than negotiate with another “power” the Clans are immediately branded as terrorists and an imminent threat—invoking comparisons to Afghanistan and Iraq, but especially in this latest novel, Iran.

The Clan’s family trade is predicated on heroin smuggling and the “phantom drug network” of Fleming’s Boston. In Gruinmarkt King Egon does not identify the fields of poppies by name, but his soldiers are ordered to burn them; the allusions to Afghanistan are clear. Mathias, the now deceased traitor to the Clans, plants a nuclear warhead somewhere in Boston as insurance against disappearing into an analogue for Camp X-Ray, but Stross makes the point more than once that plans are in process to take advantage of the explosion if it happens—against the Clan if possible, but Iran or North Korea otherwise. Disappearing drug-runners cum “nuclear terrorists” provide justification for the executive policies that literally designate enemy combatants and then subject them to abuse and experimentation without even the gloss of extra-dimensional diplomacy. While the use of collar-bombs to force the world-walkers to act as mules, and their inability to understand English should strike a nerve, a brief discussion of “tissue samples” raises the specter of Nazi camps and Tuskegee science programs.

Economics and politics dominate this adventure story and feminist and post-feminist critiques are threaded through different characters. Stross incorporates elements of social change but none are a silver bullet, nor is contemporary America a “best of all possible worlds” by any stretch. There is very little script immunity in the series, and Mirriam might reasonably be expected to survive, but she will be a different person than the self-assured and modern woman of the first novel. The series would make an excellent addition to a library as contemporary fantasy verging on alternate history, but as it truly needs to be read as a series it might be difficult to employ in an undergraduate course. That said, a course with a focus on economy and politics that incorporated Marx, cultural theory, or post-colonial studies would have a lot to consider by using this series as framework.

The initial premise is immediately engaging: a cadre of Orcs, with a dragon along for fire-support, have broken into a bank and made off with a small fortune. That this has happened within a virtual-reality game called Avalon Four in near-future Edinburgh is the first twist in Charles Stross’ absorbing and inventive novel. Three very different characters, a Scottish policewoman, a forensic accountant, and a down-on-his-luck game designer, are drawn into the investigation to uncover the real criminals, not to mention the real crime, behind the VR attack. Part noir-thriller and part video-game walkthrough, *Halting State* is a smart, if occasionally frustrating, adventure.

Stross’ fiction has ranged across a variety of SF modes, but in one sense he has been consistent: his prose is always fast-paced, humorous, and difficult. This novel is no different in that regard. Each chapter follows one of the three protagonists, but the voice is second-person, giving the novel something of the feel of a turn-based RPG. Fortunately, the effect of this style isn’t as disconcerting as it sounds. The second-person narrator is still free to delve into the thoughts and feelings of the protagonists, giving them some depth of characterization. It is probably not a surprise that the best developed of the three is game designer Jack Reed, a fun combination of technical wizardry and social anxieties. Stross provides Reed with enough complexity to evade the worst of the über-geek stereotypes, and when shadows from his past begin to impinge upon the investigation, he becomes the one character about whom the reader may genuinely be concerned. By contrast, neither police sergeant Sue Smith nor Elaine Barnaby, an auditor with a VR sword-fighting hobby, manages to develop into individuals as complex or appealing. One advantage of the sequential pattern of the chapters, then, is that the reader can always be confident that Jack’s turn will come around again soon.

Another element that makes Stross’ prose style challenging is his fascination with jargon. Each principal character has an idiosyncratic language that can become frustratingly dense. Reed’s heavily technological vocabulary will probably be more familiar to science fiction readers, although some experience playing MMORPGs or working as a systems analyst will help. Smith speaks a heavily inflected Scottish English frequently laced with police slang, and Barnaby’s business-speak can be even more opaque at times. As the investigation broadens to include corrupt business practices and international espionage, the layering of disparate vocabularies can become more distancing than the second-person voice. Yet this dense quality is also one source of the novel’s appeal. The attentive reader is drawn gradually into the personal worlds of these characters, and when the inside jokes or private insights begin to come more naturally, the reward is a thoroughly engrossing read.

*Halting State* is Stross’ entry in the ongoing fuss over “mundane” science fiction, and perhaps what makes it so much fun is the way lends support to both sides of that conflict. The novel does hold itself to the strictures of Geoff Ryman’s “Mundane Manifesto” – it is set in the very near future, with no aliens, time warps, or interstellar travel to distract from the Scottish rain and the London account books. In an interview with John Adams for Scifi.Com, Stross claims that the novel contains only “one piece of not-currently-existing tech.” Perhaps the most fantastic aspect of the novel, in fact, is that it is set in 2018. The information-saturated world these characters inhabit, with online goggles and remote cars driven by outsourced techs in distant call-centers, seems a dream – or nightmare – that will take more than eleven years to achieve. Still, Stross energetically takes up the challenge posed by Ryman’s mundane restrictions, and demonstrates that such restrictions do not necessarily require a sacrifice of imagination or of wit.

However, in his own blog and elsewhere, Stross has clearly articulated his opposition to the Manifesto if taken as merely a set of fussy rules. A book review such as this is not an appropriate forum to weigh in on the broader debate over Ryman’s ideas, but if *Halting State* is evidence that MSF can result in successful fiction, it may also serve as evidence that science fiction still requires that fantasy and wish fulfillment Ryman dismisses as childish. The invading Orcs who ravage Avalon Four and set off the plot are but one example; some of the novel’s most entertaining scenes occur when Reed and Barnaby enter the game to seek clues.

In that interview with Adams, Stross says that “what we are going to be seeing is a virtual world that will collapse onto the real world and subtly change our perception of it.” That tension between the perception and reality is the source of
much of the fun and inventiveness of the novel. Smith's glasses give her ready access to "Cop Space," where cascades of data are layered over the physical world around her. Barnaby takes time out from her investigation for a round of SPOOKS, a real-time James Bond espionage game that sends her anonymous tasks for no discernible reason. Again and again, the interface between objective and subjective experience is exposed as unreliable and amorphous. The most poignant example of this is, interestingly, the least technological. When Reed's niece becomes a target of the enemies whom they are investigating, Barnaby is confused by Reed's apparent lack of emotion, leading to a forceful revelation about Reed's relationship with his estranged family. Reality need not be manipulated by computers in order to be virtual. Proponents of the Mundane Manifesto will perhaps argue that virtual reality, because it is a legitimate technology today, easily fits within Ryman's ground rules. In the hands of a writer as inventive as Stross, however, its many permutations make a strong case that wonder and desire remain crucial tools for science fiction.

FICTION REVIEW

Ragamuffin

Stacie L. Hanes


Tobias Buckell's second novel, Ragamuffin, is a far-future, postcolonial novel about guerrilla warfare in space and on far-flung chunks of rock—terraformed planets, reshaped asteroids, and aboard starships. It's got a layered, hierarchical structure that focuses on one or two solitary, quasi-immortal characters who are technologically enhanced, augmented human beings hundreds of years old—very much like the characters in Wil McCarthy's To Crush the Moon, or Heinlein's Friday. Sometimes the action highlights the separateness of these superhuman people, each of whom is capable of taking out entire squadrons of trained soldiers alone. But the two we meet, Nashara and Pepper, are both part of something larger. Each is part of a human resistance movement fighting against alien overlords who are willing to commit genocide to prevent human technology from running amok; finally, we learn that the resistance movements are not alone, and that some of the former alien overlords are themselves being wiped out by a still more powerful species.

Part One of Ragamuffin is a guerilla-military, combat-intensive space opera with a complex cyberpunk flavor that runs for half the novel. The second half is divided into Part Two and Part Three; Part Two is a culture-clash, alien invasion, fight and flight sequence with a hint of alternative history, and Part Three is the aftermath, in which the characters try to hang on to the tiger whose tail they've grabbed.

Nashara dominates Part One. She seems to be a literary descendant of three canonical SF heroes: Heinlein's Friday; Lt. Ellen Ripley of the Alien series; and Molly, the Steppin' Razor of William Gibson's Sprawl stories.

The novel begins with Nashara walking through a human reservation on an alien world called Astragalai, which is dominated by the doglike Gahe, who keep indentured humans as pets. It's a cutthroat environment, through which Nashara moves as a covert operative in the pay of an insurgent group called the League of Human Affairs. The League has hired Nashara to assassinate a Gahe; she completes her mission in the first fifteen pages, but those pages contain a full measure of border crossings, treachery, and sudden violence. After that, Nashara is on the run, escaping first to an orbital habitat that resembles both Gibson's Freeside space station and almost any of Heinlein's non-terrestrial environments—we see Nashara on the run, stopping in a marketplace, where she tries to buy a "lamina" viewer before the authorities catch up with her. But someone else finds her first. From a League operative named Steven, she learns that the ticket to another planet that the League promised her as part of her pay does not exist—she was meant to be caught, killed, and martyred. The League had hoped that Nashara's action against the Gahe would provoke a widespread uprising against them.

Unlike Molly Millions, who is a mercenary "street samurai" by trade, for Nashara assassination was a desperate bid to get off-planet. She tells Steven, "That was a onetime thing, Steven. I was a desperate girl in a bad situation." In that, Nashara is a little less like Molly than Friday, but in the same encounter, her environment becomes more like Gibson's cyberpunk Sprawl. The lamina are layers of information, invisible to the naked eye, that are reminiscent of Gibson's cyberspace overlaid onto the tangible world. Everything is tagged with information that can only be seen with a combination of hardware and software, and it is possible for people who know how to move within the lamina, programming and manipulating it.
Ragamuffin and Nashara are especially interesting in one particular, when considered alongside Friday, Ripley, and Molly. Nashara is a clone (originally of Pepper, a male character, in which she slightly resembles Heinlein’s Lazarus Long clones Laz and Lor) whose uterus has been removed and replaced with computer hardware—she is carrying a payload of viral software, and therefore no longer has any option to bear children. Friday, on the other hand, spends her entire book wishing for family, especially children. Ripley has a child whom she leaves behind on Earth, who dies while Ripley is in suspended animation out in space; Ripley later fosters Newt, while Nashara rescues and protects two children who are being hunted by the alien Satrapy on a space habitat where all of the other inhabitants have already been wiped out.

Nashara and the Caribbean Raga culture are something individual in a genre that can sometimes seem very pale. Unlike the arguable race of some of Heinlein’s heroes, Nashara’s race is stated and contextualized on the first page. She’s got skin “as dark as the shadows” and hair that’s “tight and curly, but shorn military short,” and we see her walking through a place called Pitt’s Cross, which Buckell writes, “consisted mainly of the light-skinned.” She is part of the sf bloodline that includes Gibson’s Rastafarian characters in Neuromancer, but she’s the main character, not a member of the supporting cast.

Buckell sets the novel amid a clash of cultures both human and alien, and plays the concept of how people of different cultures see each other. The lamina can be culture-specific; the Raga have their own, almost everyone else has another sort, and the survivor of the habitat massacre, Kara, has her own private version. Everyone reads the lamina as a matter of course, and as a consequence, they sometimes don’t see what is in front of them: “the invisible killer staring right at her would see nothing of her, because he used the lamina too. […] he got info from his fellow murderers through his augmented reality.” In other words, agents of the genocidal Satrapy see only what they are told to see.

For readers who like insurrections, space battles, and tough women who are comfortable in their own skins—and can kick major tentacle—Ragamuffin is a sure bet.

FICTION REVIEW-ESSAY

Night Watch

Amy J. Ransom


Although labeled “Fiction/Science Fiction” by its publisher, its cover art and blurbs reveal the true colors of Sergei Lukyanenko’s Night Watch (Nochnoy Dozor, 1998), the first volume of an urban fantasy trilogy set in contemporary Moscow. A well-known and prolific writer of Russian SF & F, Lukyanenko has explored a number of subgenres from space opera, to alternate history (Kaplan 88, 93-94), to cyberpunk (Gomel 440), although little of this is available in English. This novel’s translation can be traced directly to the U. S. release on DVD of director Timur Bekmambetov’s film interpretations of the series (Nochnoy dozor, 2004; Dnevnoy dozor, 2006). Night Watch approaches fantasy’s traditional theme of the battle between good and evil from an intelligent, self-referential, arguably postmodern but ultimately humanist standpoint. This element, coupled with its running commentary on post-Soviet Russian society, offers much of interest to both scholars and students of popular genre literatures.

The novel’s title refers to an agency established to enforce adherence to “the Treaty,” an agreement reached between the forces of Light and Dark in order to maintain a balance of power on Earth. Its protagonist, Night Watch agent Anton Gorodetsky, represents a wonderfully sympathetic take on the detective figure as his novice blunders provide a forum for Lukyanenko’s dark humor. The author also approaches the agency’s handling of vampires, evil wizards, curses, and other manifestations of the Dark side in a tongue-in-cheek manner, allowing for a self-conscious revision of these timeworn tropes. Various confrontations between Night Watch agents, Day Watch agents (their Dark counterpart), and the fantastic beings whose behavior they must regulate, lend forward momentum to the narrative, which includes some gripping action. Of greater significance, perhaps, for the academic reader is the novel’s approach to the problem of good versus evil, as this plays out between the often bureaucratic agencies enforcing the Treaty. At once a comment upon the Cold War as meaningless stalemate, as well as an exploration of the need to move beyond it, Night Watch aligns itself perhaps with a general movement in post-Soviet Russian SF observed by Vitelii Kaplan beginning in the early 1990s, in which “authors
shifted their attention to the present—to the ‘ordinary man’ cast out of the former system of ethical coordinates into the jungle of the present” (90).

While on the one hand, Gorodetsky is an “Everyman” continually grappling with his humanistic desire to do what is right and help others, balancing the immediate individual benefit of his actions against the longterm needs of the common good. On the other hand, he is technically not human, for the Night Watch employs only “Others”—post-human beings with various “supernatural” powers. Although they live and intervene in human society, the fact of their Otherness must remain secret. In the novel, assessments of the accuracy or inaccuracy of human belief, the measures taken to veil human memories of encounters with Others, and Others’ efforts to recruit humans with extraordinary abilities into the forces of Dark or Light (abiding by or breaking the various rules of the Treaty regarding such action), all serve to histoncize the fantastic and offer a meta-narrative commentary upon the act of creating a fantastic text which reveals the changing shape of the genre’s tropes. An illustrative example of this occurs as Anton attempts to help a teenager, Egor, who witnesses the destruction of a vampire, experiencing it as something “just like in the movies” (75). The fearful youth actually consults his memory of vampire films for a means of protecting himself, adding his assessment of each film’s reliability: “Dracula, Dead and Loving It... no, that was comedy. Once Bitten—absolute garbage...” (76). When Egor finally recalls the traditional amulets of cross, garlic, and “poplar wood” (77), Anton’s response revises the traditional vampire story, moving it into a contemporary context: “Oh, kid, if only everything in this world were that easy. Silver won’t save you, or poplar wood, or the holy cross. It’s life against death, love against hate... and power against power, because power has no moral categories” (84-85).

The problem of power is, of course, central to the text’s compelling philosophical engagement with the battle between good and evil explored through its depiction as a stalemate regulated in a bureaucratic fashion. While the overt realpolitik message with which Anton is indoctrinated as a member of the Night Watch comes down to power, a utopian hope yet lingers. Indeed, intrigues to upset the carefully regulated balance of power motivate the novel’s plot, which maintains suspense as Gorodetsky must follow the trail of clues that finally reveal at the novel’s conclusion just which side has broken the Treaty to initiate a new battle.

In its utopian/dystopian elements, Night Watch wedds itself to a long tradition of Soviet and Russian SF (a form apparently defined much more broadly than here in the U. S.) and sets up its running commentary upon Russian and world history. Contemplating the possibility of war, Anton asks his partner, “A new revolution?” A representative of the party line, she responds: “We didn’t want the last one. It was all supposed to happen almost completely without bloodshed. You understand: We can win only through ordinary people. When they become enlightened, when their spirit is uplifted. Communism was a wonderfully well-calculated system [...]” (398-9). Zabulon, a powerful Dark wizard, though, throws back in the Light agents’ face the record of history, a record often consulted by anti-utopians from Orwell on:

In the last hundred years the forces of Light have launched three global experiments. The revolution in Russia. The Second World War. And now this project. [...] Social models are developed that should eventually—at the cost of massive upheavals and immense bloodshed—create the ideal society. [...] First there was internationalism and communism—those didn’t work. Then there was national socialism. Another mistake? You put your heads together and examined the result. Then you sighed, wiped the slates clean, and started experimenting all over again.

What can the fate of humanity be, the novel seems to suggest here, if it is the very forces of Light repeatedly leading us to disaster?

So closely tied to the utopian projects of both the Enlightenment and communisim, it is not surprising that the history of science fiction and fantasy in Russia has been interpreted as following a cyclical pattern of boom and bust, with its loss of dynamic force corresponding precisely with periods of greater state authoritarianism (Yershov, Suvin, Nudelman, Gomel, Heller). Clearly, Lukyanenko’s work takes part in the post-Soviet boom in SF, although, as in the West, “hard” SF appears currently overshadowed by fantasy, as Elana Gomel asserts (437). I hope that the success of Lukyanenko’s trilogy (Day Watch, 2006 and Twilight Watch, 2007 are also available) will lead to the appearance of yet more Russian works in English. Certainly his translator, Andrew Bromfield, has made an admirable contribution, facilitating access to Russian writers of genre and slipstream fiction, including the historical mysteries of Boris Akunin, the satire of Vladimir Voinovich, and the genre-bending works of Viktor Pelevin. Given recent trends in Moscow, such as the stoppage of FM broadcasts of BBC-Radio, the unsolved murder of Anna Politkovskaya, and a number of “disappeared” journalists like Maksim Maximov...
in St. Petersburg, I wonder though if just as we become aware of it in the West, Russian SF will face yet another
downturn.

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