

# SOME FANTASTIC

Issue #9, Summer, 2006  
Vol. 2, No. 4

<http://www.somefantastic.us/>  
ISSN # 1555-2241

## Features

- An Interview with John Scalzi, by Matthew Appleton 1
- Companions, Criminals, Soldiers and Psychos: The Portrayal of Gender Identity in *Firefly*, by Megan Baxter 7
- Two Travelers' Tales: *Logan's Run* and *The Island*, by J.G. Stinson 11
- A Science Fiction/Fandom Abecedary, by Steven H Silver 25

## Book/Graphic Novel Reviews

- The James Tiptree Award Anthology 2*, edited by Karen Joy Fowler, Pat Murphy, Debbie Notkin, & Jeffrey D. Smith, reviewed by Rose Fox 15
- Beyond Armageddon*, edited by Walter M. Miller, Jr. & Martin H. Greenberg, reviewed by Matthew Appleton 17
- Triquorum One*, edited by Chris Teague, reviewed by Mario Guslandi 30
- Charlie Huston's *Already Dead*, reviewed by Chris Elliot 31
- Rob Thurman's *Nightlife*, reviewed by Matthew Appleton 33
- Ian McDonald's *River of Gods*, reviewed by Jessica Darago 41
- Y: The Last Man—Paper Dolls, Volume 7*, reviewed by Hawk 43
- David Marusek's *Counting Heads*, reviewed by Sara K. Ellis 45
- Jeffrey Ford's *The Empire of Ice Cream* and George Zebrowski's *Black Pockets and Other Dark Thoughts*, reviewed by Danny Adams 46
- Wilmar Shiras's *Children of the Atom*, reviewed by Matthew Appleton 49

## DVD Reviews

- MirrorMask*, reviewed by Richard Fuller 20
- Howl's Moving Castle*, reviewed by Edna Stumpf 23
- Natural City*, reviewed by Christopher J. Garcia 35
- The Fog*, reviewed by Sara K. Ellis 37
- Half Light*, reviewed by Alex Esten 39

## An Interview with John Scalzi

by Matthew Appleton

Born in 1969, John Scalzi's first job out of college was as a film critic at the Fresno Bee newspaper in California, and he has worked as a writer ever since. Since then he's "done pretty much everything, from the previously-mentioned film reviews to corporate brochures to books." In 1998, he began working as a full-time freelance writer, which he calls "both fun and occasionally panic-inducing."

He writes both fiction and non-fiction. His debut novel, *Old Man's War*, was nominated for the Hugo Award, and at the same time he was nominated for the Campbell Award for Best New Science Fiction Author. *Old Man's War* was also the runner-up for the 2006 Locus Award for Best First Novel.

John has since written a signed, limited-edition chapbook, "Questions for a Soldier," which continues the narrative of *Old Man's War*, and *The Ghost Brigades*, a novel set in the universe of *Old Man's War*. His fiction output includes *Agent to the Stars*, a standalone novel available as a free download on his website, [www.scalzi.com](http://www.scalzi.com). He has also published a number of non-fiction works: *The Rough Guide to Money Online*, *The Rough Guide to the Universe*, *The Book of the Dumb*, *The Book of the Dumb 2*, and—most notably for genre fans—*The Rough Guide to Sci-Fi Movies*.

John's next stand alone novel, *The Android's Dream* is due out this fall from Tor Books, and an additional *Old Man's* novel, *The Last Colony*, is due out in 2007. He lives in the small rural town of Bradford, Ohio with his wife Kristine, his daughter Athena and their pets Kodi, Lopsided Cat and Ghlaghghee (pronounced "fluffy"). You can read his blog at [www.scalzi.com/whatever](http://www.scalzi.com/whatever).

**Matthew Appleton:** *When did your love of science fiction first take hold, and what authors or movies in particular initially grabbed your attention and imagination?*

**John Scalzi:** Like most people who are my age or thereabouts (I'm 37), on the movie-side, *Star Wars* did it for me; all those lasers and lightsabers and the Death Star going bang—as an eight-year-old, it doesn't get much better than that. For authors I think I also had a fairly typical SF experience, which was that I got hold of various Heinlein juveniles (I think *Farmer in the Sky* was the first one I read), and short of chugged along from there. Interestingly, my first real interest in science fiction television was not *Star Trek*—I never much liked the original series to tell you the truth—but *Space: 1999* and then the original *Battlestar Galactica*.

Having said that, I'll tell you that my first encounter with space was not science fiction, but science. By the time I read science fiction I was already deeply in love with astronomy; I read my first astronomy book when I was five and by the time I had gotten to science fiction I could already tell you about all the planets. I think this predisposed me to read SF. So while science fiction is famously a "gateway" for its readers to become interested in science, for me it was the other way around.

*You stated in your interview with Strange Horizons that John Perry is partially your "Mary Sue." Given that, how closely do your opinions of war actually mirror his?*

To be clear, I was being sarcastic when I said that in that interview. A lot of people assume John Perry is my Mary Sue, and that's not unreasonable because his name is John, he's from Ohio, he's a writer and, in fact, he starts the book in my home town. But all that is due to my own personal laziness as a writer, not a desire to inject myself into the character (and anyway, I'm originally from California). John Perry's personality is not mine—he's rather more patient and clear-headed than I am, and he's also more accepting of the nature of the universe he's been put into than I would be.

If there's a character in either *Old Man's War* or *The Ghost Brigades* that I am most like, it would be Harry Wilson, who is sarcastic, pedantic (in a hopefully charming way) and more than a little suspicious of the world he's in. But of course, he can't be a Mary Sue because in neither book is he the main character. I'm resigned to people thinking John Perry is my Mary Sue, and I have only myself and my laziness to blame for it. But in point of fact: he ain't me, folks.

In terms of John Perry's point of view about war, well, the book makes it pretty clear he's something of a squishy liberal about war before he signs up, and he's not particularly enamored of

war once he's in it, although he seems to accept the rationale for war given to him by the Colonial Defense Forces. Personally, I'm less squishy about war than I've made John Perry be, but I'm also simultaneously less willing to accept the line of reasoning provided by those who prosecute war.

In the real world, an example of this would have been my position on the current Iraq war: I didn't think it was necessary for us to invade Iraq when we did, but I was not opposed to it, either,



for my own personal reasons (centering on the fact that Saddam should have been relieved of power a dozen years prior). I thought the toppling of Saddam's regime was brilliantly done; I think everything since then has been something of a disaster, and it's clear those who got us into the war had no plan outside of "topple Saddam, be greeted by flowers." This appalls me; if we're going to put our soldiers on the line, we need to do so with a plan that reflects reality. In short, I think I may be more bloody-minded and critical than John Perry, in a number of ways.

*Since the invasion of Iraq, I know I tend to read any new novel featuring military through a prism of the events of the past few years. Were you tempted to give voice to any of your own views through any of the characters in either *Old Man's War* or *Ghost Brigades*, or did you find it easy to withhold any pedantic viewpoints you may harbor?*

I haven't written anything that would map precisely to my thoughts on the war in Iraq, primarily because it's not pertinent to the stories I'm telling in those books—the universe of the *Old Man* books doesn't work like our current one does, and the political or military logic of that universe won't necessarily work in this one (or vice versa). Nor am I really interested in trying to make the politics of this world dovetail into the politics of the universe I'm writing; that's more work than I want to do, for a result whose value I see as dubious.

Now, I think it's possible to see some of my general attitudes about war reflected in my writing, and I don't doubt that people will see parallels between what I write in the books and what my personal opinions may be, and likewise see parallels to the current world situation in the worlds I create. I don't have any problem with this; I think it's interesting to read people's perspectives on my work. But people will read into things what they want to, regardless of my intent and purpose. After *Old Man's War* came out, one reviewer noted it was a book that could only have been written after 9/11. Well, in fact, the book was 95% written before 9/11, and the stuff written afterward was not primarily focused on struggle. It happens that *OMW* was well-suited for a post-9/11 point of view, but it's largely coincidence.

*I found that "Questions for a Soldier" gave nice additional insight into Perry's character. Did elements that didn't survive the final edit of Old Man's War make their way into the interview that makes up the "Questions" chapbook?*

Not really. The scene in "Questions" featuring the large worms was something I had rolling around in my mind before I started writing *Old Man's War*, but it was never written down when I was putting the book together. *Old Man's War* went to my editor almost exactly as it was published; the editing process consisted of changing about 20 words in three sentences in the book.

What "Questions" is, is a way to address some of the questions and criticisms that cropped up after people read *Old Man's War*; in other words, it's designed to offer insight and back story, and also to let readers know that the people who inhabit the "Old Man" universe are aware to a greater or lesser extent of the political and social ramifications of their society being constructed as it is (i.e., they're not stupid).

It helped that I wrote "Questions" after I wrote *The Ghost Brigades*, so I could use the story as a little bit of a bridge between *Old Man's War* and that book. It will also inform *The Last Colony*, which I am writing now.

*How long after reviewers started picking up on the similarities between Old Man's War and The Forever War did it take you to read The Forever War for yourself, and what was your reac-*

*tion to it? I assume it was a little more complex than the one offered by the Ghost Brigades in The Ghost Brigades.*

I read it last summer, as I was writing *The Ghost Brigades*. I read it after I met Joe and Gay Haldeman at Interaction (the 2005 Worldcon in Glasgow). Gay had read *Old Man's War* and was very gracious to me about the book, and Joe admitted he hadn't had time to read my book. I told him not to worry, I hadn't had time to read his, either, and we had a nice laugh about it.

At this point there's little I could add to the analysis and commentary concerning the book; it's rightfully a classic of the genre and an essential part of the conversation that science fiction has about war. I do find it interesting that so many people think *Old Man's War* is additional commentary on *Forever War*; it can't be, because I hadn't read the book (*The Ghost Brigades* was likewise largely done when I read *Forever War*, so it's not really a commentary on it either). Why I think people have been kind enough to lump the *Old Man* books with Haldeman's books (and with Heinlein's) is that in all these books, war is the setting, but the story is about the characters and what war does to them, and what it makes of them and takes from them.

Having said that, I strongly suspect Joe Haldeman was making a concrete point about war when he wrote *Forever War*. My own aims with *OMW* and *TGB* were more modest: I wanted to write entertaining books, and I wanted to write something publishable, and I want the books to be consistent with the universe they frame; my own thoughts about war are subordinate to those aims. This perhaps opens up *OMW* and *TGB* to the criticism that they are in some way inauthentic (bolstered by the fact that I have not served in the military, whereas both Haldeman and Heinlein have), but naturally I can't really worry about that. I try to tell a good story, and other people can handle the analysis.

*How has your previous writing experience impacted the editing process for your novels?*

None of my novels to this point have required much editing after they had been turned in. If you were to take the edits across my four completed novels and cut and paste them into a single docu-

ment, I suspect the document would be about a page long.

There are reasons for this. The first is that I had a decade of experience writing copy for newspapers and magazines before I began writing novels; I had thousands of columns and articles to practice hitting the writing mark on deadline. The second is that I was also a professional critic (mostly of films but also occasionally of books); spending several years of your life studying how people construct stories helps you when you create your own. The third is that I also spent time as an editor, which means that my tolerance for crappy writing—even my own—is pretty damn low. I don't let other people see writing I don't deem worthy, which I think may relieve my editors. The fourth is that I have good relationships with my editors, which means that I know what they want from me, and they know what I'm planning to do. The fifth is that I had written four non-fiction books before I wrote *The Ghost Brigades*. Writing books and working with editors was something I had been doing for a while by then.

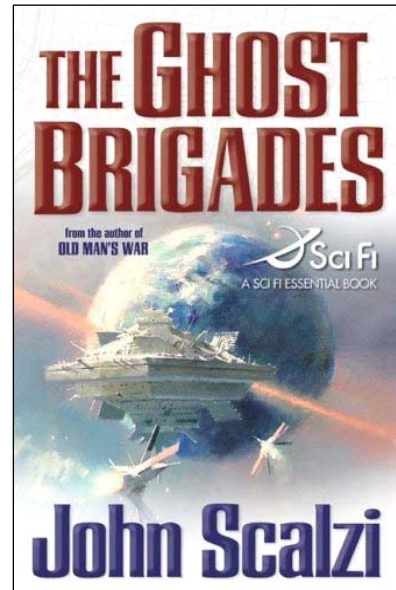
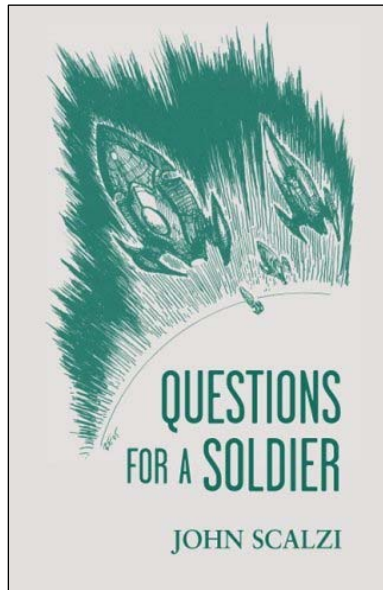
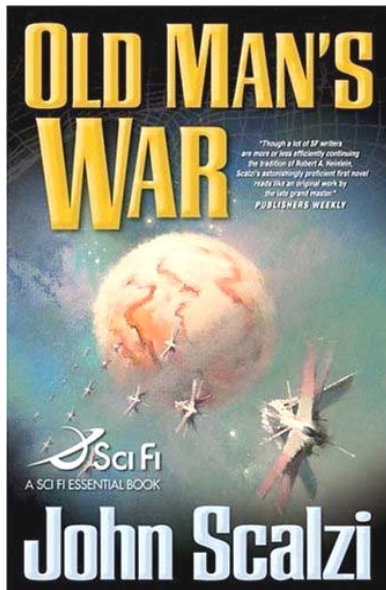
I'm happy that I've been so far able to hit the editing mark, but I don't pretend that one day one of my editors won't come to me and say "we've got a problem." When that happens, it'll be time to edit. The goal is to make a good book, not worry that my record of not being heavily edited is coming to an end.

***Getting back to how much you put yourself in your work, what aspects of your relationship with your daughter did you work into *The Ghost Brigades*?***

Some, but not a lot. What having a child does is give me as a writer an emotional connection to what the characters in *The Ghost Brigades* feel about the child in the story (I'm tiptoe-ing around stuff here because there's definite spoiler potential, and I want to avoid giving away anything important). One of the things I find interesting in the response I've gotten to *The Ghost Brigades* is that I think readers who are parents get an extra layer of emotional investment in the book, just as the readers who are married get an emotional investment in *Old Man's War*.

Where having a child of my own came in handy, actually, was in modeling the social behavior of the members of the Ghost Brigades—their emotional and social responses are immature as a consequence of being so very young, and the challenge is to model that while at the same time keeping them adults. I spend a lot of time watching my child react to things and then try to build that up and out. Kids are both very direct and also very sophisticated in their emotional and social lives (or, at least, my kid is), and that was very helpful to see when writing the book.

***At the risk of sounding a little dense, it wasn't until after I wrote my own review of *The Ghost Brigades* that I realized how the *Colonial Defense****



*Forces uniforms, in conjunction with the bio-engineered bodies, worked as an updated version of Heinlein's battlesuits from Starship Troopers. Was this your intent?*

Not really. The intent was to create something that would be useful in the universe I had created, and fun for the readers to picture in their heads. It was not intended as a consonant variation on Heinlein's power suits. I've made no bones about the fact *Old Man's War* was in many ways inspired by and patterned after *Starship Troopers*, but that inspiration and patterning only goes so far. Eventually I had to make up some stuff on my own.

*When giving names to the new outer space special forces in The Ghost Brigades, did you just randomly pick a few famous SF authors or did you have reasons behind your choices?*

Largely I wanted names SF readers would recognize, although in the case of the special forces soldier named Stross, well, Charlie Stross is a friend of mine and I thought it'd be fun to drop him in.

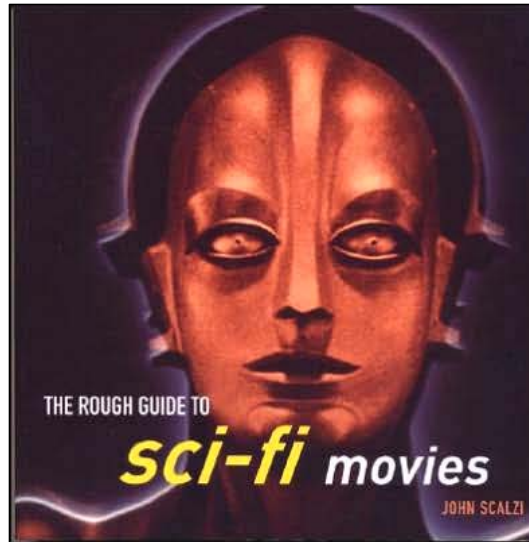
*You've mentioned that The Last Colony, the next book in the Old Man's War universe, will include characters from the previous two books, but will work as a stand-alone as well. Without giving too much away, does this mean the familiar characters will once again serve mostly in support roles or will one (or more) of them take a more prominent role in Last Colony?*

My expectation at this point is that John Perry and Jane Sagan will have leading roles in the next book, although I have plans for characters who are equally important in the overall scheme of the book. I could tell you more but then I would have to kill you, or at least bury you in a dark hole until the book's release date. And I don't think you would want that.

*It's pretty obvious in your work, including The Rough Guide to Sci-Fi Movies, that you love*

*both SF and sci-fi. If approached, do you see yourself writing a media tie-in? Either way, is there a sci-fi universe that you'd be tempted to work with if given the opportunity?*

I've been approached to write media tie-ins and I've turned them down to this point. This is for both creative and business reasons: right now I think my time is better spent writing my own



stuff, and also, I think it would probably drive me up a blankety-blank wall to have to color within the lines of media tie-in property. I don't think I would enjoy having to refer to a "bible" every time I wanted to have a character do something significant. At this point I can't think of any tie-in universe I'd be interested in spending time in, although I suppose if someone wanted to offer me stupid, stupid amounts

of money to change my mind I might be willing to listen. But ultimately I don't think they would like the conditions I would want to set for my participation (which would sum up to: they let me write what I want to write and don't bother me about it). There are other writers as good as I who would be potentially less difficult.

Having said that I think I need to be clear that my personal disinclination to play in a media tie-in universe is not a snobbery thing—there are any number of really fine writers who are happy to do tie-in novels, because it's not a bad gig if you can follow the rules, and because some of these writers are real fans of the property and are really stoked to write dialogue for Spock or Yoda or Mal or whomever. Snobbery is stupid and good writing is where you find it. If someone writes a really stellar *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* book, good for them.

If someone really wanted me to write a tie-in, I would tell them that my models for writing a tie-in would be William Kotzwinkle's adaptation of *ET*, Orson Scott Card's adaptation of *The Abyss*, and John Ford's *Star Trek* novel *How Much for Just the Planet?* If they were not willing to ac-

cept that my tie-in would be like these, they shouldn't hire me at all. I suspect that would thin out the herd substantially.

**The Rough Guide to Sci-Fi Movies lists hundreds of movies and television shows. At any point in the process of watching all these productions, say after watching three-or-four in row that matched the quality of *Beginning of the End* or *Resident Evil*, did you start reaching for MST3K episodes in order to preserve your sanity?**

Well, I've been a film and DVD reviewer for many years, so I've been seeing a high volume of filmed crap for a very long time. I've had time to develop coping mechanisms. Also, for a lot of these films, I had already seen them and had extensive notes from those previous encounters, so I would watch far less SF crap in a short period of time than you might expect. This is a good thing, at least for my sanity.

**Your forthcoming novel, due out in October, is called *The Android's Dream*. In your interview with SCI FI Weekly you mention it involves sheep as a major plot point. Can one assume that this book is, in part, inspired by *Do Android's Dream of Electric Sheep?* or did you just like the idea of making a play on the title of Philip K. Dick's classic?**

One should not assume the book is inspired by PKD, because if one does, one is almost certainly going to be confused by the actual novel. PKD was a far more deeply weird writer and human than I am; I would not pretend to emulate him. The title is what it is because the story does indeed involve sheep, and as long as it *did* involve sheep, I thought it would be fun to give a salute to a master of the SF form.

**I probably used the wrong word with "inspired." What I meant is can we expect other allusions and/or references to Dick and DADoES—and maybe even other SF works—in the novel? (Without giving anything substantial away—I want to avoid that dark hole you mentioned.)**

With Dick, not really. PKD is an undisputed master of SF, but generally he's not my cup of tea, so any additional allusions to him are likely to be wholly unintentional. There are little SF shout-outs in the book that people who are versed in science fiction will probably enjoy, but there's nothing that is plot-critical that relies on genre in-jokes. The book is meant to be accessible to everyone, and too many in-jokes can spoil that.

**Most of your work thus far has been in book form. Can we expect to see any additional forays into short fiction?**

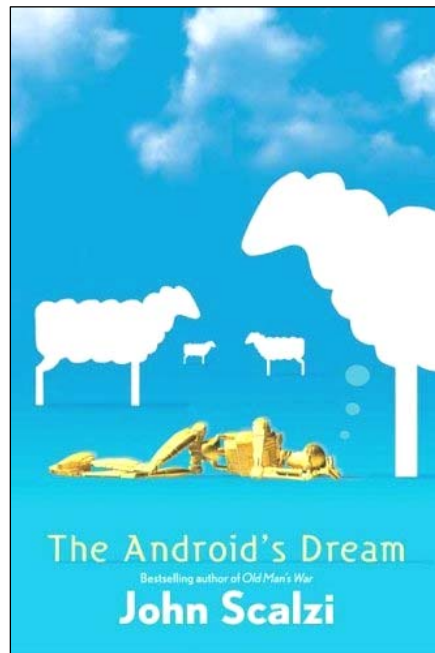
Some—I have a few things I'm working on—but overall it's likely to remain a low priority, for

practical and/or mercenary reasons. Which is to say that short fiction generally pays crap, and I am a full-time writer with a mortgage and family, so the time/effort that would go to short fiction is more profitably spent writing non-fiction magazine and newspaper articles or in corporate consulting, all of which remunerates me far more profitably than short fiction. I will write short fiction on request (i.e., if the sale is made prior to the writing) but I generally don't have the time at this point to write on spec.

Also—and yes, I realize this makes me sound like a dick—if

I am going to write short fiction on spec, I'm really rather more likely to put it up on my personal Web site than to shovel it around from magazine to magazine looking for a sale, because the money involved in short fiction, for me, isn't worth the hassle of submitting and resubmitting, and my personal Web site is well-trafficked enough that it suits my need for exposure.

The irony about short fiction is that it is best suited to writers who have other means of primary income. A writer with a day job can spend time working on short fiction because his or her financial needs are being served in other ways, whereas a full-time freelance writer has to look out for the bills first. This is not a value judgment



in terms of writers; some of science fiction's best writers today are short story writers, and this would be a poorer universe if, for example, someone like Ted Chiang were not writing short stories in it. It's merely saying that short stories—like all writing—take time and care, and that time and care is best provided without the specter of bills hanging about.

*One last question, just for goofy fun: which Star Trek species (aside from the Founders/Changelings) do you think would give the CDF the most trouble and why?*

Tribbles, of course. The CDF has no weapon for cuteness.

*Thank you for your time.*

---

## Companions, Criminals, Soldiers and Psychos: The Portrayal of Gender Identity in *Firefly*

by Megan Baxter

The genesis of this paper resulted from my irritation at an offhanded remark about the movie *Serenity* I came across on the internet—someone who said that they didn't like what the movie had done to Kaylee because it had "made her into a slut." The presumption that Kaylee having any sexuality at all automatically made her a slut infuriated me and started me thinking about the portrayal of female sexuality in the *Firefly* universe. The *Firefly* universe, and in particular the four main female characters, offers a perspective on female sexuality unlike much of what has been seen on mainstream television, in Westerns, or even on many science fiction shows (although in this area, at least, shows like the new *Battlestar Galactica*, a few of the more recent *Star Trek* incarnations, as well *Birds of Prey*, have allowed women to step out of gendered caring or service-related roles).

Each one of the main female characters presents a challenge to the many ways in which popular culture commonly portrays women. Zoe is first and foremost a soldier, the one person on *Serenity* who would normally follow orders without question. She is also the only married woman on the boat, with a husband who claims that she could "kill me with her pinky,"<sup>1</sup> and who is fre-

quently referred to on alternate audio commentaries as an Amazon. As a soldier, she is shown to be professional and deadly. On the other hand, although at first glance she looks as if she might be the least maternal of the women, Zoe is the only female character who expresses a desire to become a mother, no matter what her occupation (which she clearly does not intend to give up even if she has a baby).<sup>2,3</sup>



Her competence and skill as a warrior does not impede other characters' perception of her as a sexual being, as shown in "Shindig," when Zoe expresses a desire for a slinky dress, and both Wash and Jayne immediately chime in with offers to buy her one.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the series, when seen on the bridge, there is almost always some kind of physical contact between Wash and Zoe, often initiated by Zoe. Both Zoe and Wash initiate sexual activity in their relationship, one side of which can be seen in the pilot episode in which Zoe asks Mal to take over the piloting as she needs "this man to tear all my clothes off."<sup>5</sup> Although Zoe looks intensely irritated at Saffron, Mal Reynold's supposed bride, when she suggests that Zoe doesn't care for Wash because she doesn't cook for him,<sup>6</sup> she does on occasion make "wife soup," and at the end of

“War Stories,” it is Wash who swats her on the behind as they leave for their cabin.<sup>7</sup> We frequently see her in bed with her husband, and at one point, she is the one who falls asleep right after sex, which on the commentary for the episode, the writer for “Shindig,” Jane Espenson, says she did deliberately to break the convention in which the man falls asleep immediately after sex instead of the woman.<sup>8</sup>

But in one of the most iconoclastic moments of *Firefly*, Zoe is faced with the very old literary trope of choosing between her love and her duty, represented by the bodies of Wash and Mal after they are kidnapped by Nisga. At its very heart, this is an inversion of traditional gender roles, as a woman being asked to make the choice is rarely seen. The dramatic convention for this type of dilemma is normally accompanied by some communication of how difficult the choice is for the character. But during “War Stories,” when asked to choose, Zoe points to Wash before the question is yet fully uttered, and when looked at in surprise, says “I’m sorry. You were going to ask me to choose, right?”<sup>9</sup> Zoe acts with her own characteristic clarity, which is surprising given the strength of the literary device with which she is presented, and also because women are not normally presented as so direct and unemotional when confronted with what convention tells us should be the most difficult decision of her life. The result seems to alleviate Wash’s concerns that there are “too many husbands” in their marriage. It is unusual to see women characters on television be as strong and decisive as Zoe is, and if they are, it is normally communicated to the audience through a more masculinized appearance, to which Zoe, although dressed almost universally in utilitarian clothes, does not conform.<sup>10</sup> Femininity also seems to be the wrong word for describing her

appearance—she looks like a strong, sexual woman, and the show makes no apologies for any part of that. In addition, her unhesitating choice of her husband over her captain is also a unique way for the writers to reinforce the strength of one of their female characters.

River, on the other hand, is also revealed through the show to be a strong physical presence, but is also the most fragile of the characters. Rape is a frequent theme of the show, and in many ways, River’s condition can be understood as the result of frequent surgical violations. It is not until she can reveal during *Serenity*<sup>11</sup> the secret that she carries that she appears to be able to reintegrate herself. Indeed, she herself is never directly threatened with rape, unlike both Kaylee and Simon, who are threatened with Kaylee’s rape in “Objects in Space,” while notably, Inara, the prostitute, is not. Patriarchal violence against women is a major theme in the episode “Heart of Gold,” embodied by the issue of ownership of a pregnant woman’s child, and the symbolic violence done to the woman who betrays the whorehouse when she is forced to perform oral sex in front of a mob of men. The Reavers, however, are the most frequent embodiment of rapists, and part of their particular threat may indeed stem from the belief that they rape both men and women.<sup>12</sup>

River is largely presented without sexuality, and is in many ways the most virginal character on *Firefly*. Even a deleted scene from “Our Mrs. Reynolds” in which River tells Book that he should marry her to her brother Simon, and the end of which she claims she’s “in the family way” (by stuffing a pillow up her dress) curiously does not read as the result of any possibility of incest. That the virgin is far from innocent, and also, perhaps, the deadliest person on the ship, is a distinct departure from representations of female sexuality.

On the other hand, the character whom I think most people would regard as having the qualities commonly associated with virginity is Kaylee, who is sweet, innocent, and always wears her heart on her sleeve. As shown in my opening paragraph, this seems





to have been enough to convince some that this meant that she was sexually inexperienced, and her comment in *Serenity* that it had been a year since she'd anything "twixt my nethers as weren't run on batteries," as well as the eventual consummation of her relationship with the character of Simon was enough to reframe her for some as a slut. Perhaps one of the most important things this can tell us is that media portrayal of female masturbation and sexual activity outside marriage is still frequently read as a condition for "sluthood." However, it also tells us that the person who called Kaylee a slut had either missed many episodes of *Firefly*, or had unconsciously edited parts of them out of his recollection of the show.

Kaylee is almost always what Jewel Staite, the actor who portrayed her, called in an alternate audio commentary, "boy crazy."<sup>13</sup> From the very beginning of the series, she makes it quite clear that she desires Simon and is always interested in Inara's sexual exploits. Indeed, when we discover how Kaylee first came aboard *Serenity* in "Out of Gas," she is discovered by Mal having sex with his mechanic.<sup>14</sup> Kaylee's interest in Simon is more than apparent, and equally apparent is her desire for that interest to manifest itself sexually. Viewers seem to be as protective of her "virtue" as Simon is, such as in the episode "Jaynestown" wherein he wakes up with Kaylee in his arms and insists to the captain that not only did nothing happen, that he would "never, not with Kaylee."<sup>15</sup> The character herself does not want this kind of protection, and neither Simon nor the some of the viewers know how to cope with that. Although Kaylee is taken to heart by many viewers, she is also perhaps the most challenging to fit into pre-existing categories. Her mechanical aptitude, sexual appetite, and emotional openness and vulnerability create a complex character not easy slotted into roles traditionally gendered as female.

Inara's role as resident Companion is also an interesting inversion of the tropes surrounding prostitution. From the first episodes, the writers of *Firefly* are quick to establish and reaffirm that as a Companion, she is the only truly respectable member of the crew, and indeed one whose influence can be used quite widely, whether by rescuing Mal and Zoe from possible arrest, or stripping one of



her clients of the privilege of ever associating with a Companion again.<sup>16</sup> In that episode, "Shindig," her client attempts through the episode to assert his claim to ownership of her, even if only temporarily, and tries to extend that privilege indefinitely by offering to set her up as his permanent Companion. Inara chooses instead the freedom offered to Companions by continuing to travel. However, there are suggestions that most Companions do not necessarily travel as Inara does, although from the series, traveling Companions seem to be in great demand. In "Heart of Gold," the character Mandy expresses surprise that Inara ever left the House where she was living where she had had the potential to become the "house priestess".<sup>17</sup> However, no one else ever expresses surprise that a Companion should travel at all.

Companionhood seems to be highly regulated and run exclusively by women, if Mandy's comment in "Heart of Gold" that the frontier is where "they let the men run the houses" can be inverted to mean that on the inner planets, they are female-controlled.<sup>18</sup> The frontier planet where the Heart of Gold whorehouse (explicitly stated to not be populated by Companions) is perhaps the most patriarchal planet visited during the duration of the show, although the world on which Saffron claims she was married to Mal Reynolds as payment for services may come close. (However, as a conwoman as well as prior Companion herself, she may be lying entirely.) It is run by one man whom Mandy claims keeps everyone destitute and without a true community so he can "play cowboy," and his dream play world includes ownership of women's bodies, as shown by his insistence he owns the unborn child of one of the prostitutes, and displayed by his act of possession of



the body of the prostitute who betrays the others when he makes her to perform public oral sex. The Heart of Gold, although not staffed by Companions, is seen as a place of relative enlightenment and true community run by women.

However, sexuality as power wielded by Companions for prestige and financial gain is not uncomplicated, as the character of Inara shows. Although respected in elite society, her profession, but not her person, is the frequent recipient of insults from Mal Reynolds, which he says differentiates him from the client who thinks he owns her.<sup>19</sup> Having personal sexual relationships outside of her clientele seems to be generally barred by the Guild of Companions. This issue is never resolved in the series, as she and Mal Reynolds obviously have feelings for each other, but never act on them, with the exception of a frenzied kiss in "Our Mrs. Reynolds" that Mal doesn't remember.<sup>20</sup> In this way, although selling sex is not condemned, it is shown to cause complications that may eventually lead to inner turmoil for Inara.

Sexuality is never a simple issue for the women of *Firefly*, but it is often expressed in unusual and convention-breaking ways. With the exception of River, all the women participate actively in sex, claiming it as a site under their own control. The breaking of female sexual convention was embraced by some viewers, and interpreted negatively by others, but it was never relegated to the background or ignored.

#### Notes/Sources

1. Joss Whedon, *Firefly*, "Our Mrs. Reynolds," original American airdate: October 4, 2002.
2. Brett Matthews, *Firefly*, "Heart of Gold," original American airdate: October 21, 2004.

3. Joss Whedon, *Firefly*, "Objects in Space," original American airdate: December 13, 2002.
4. Jane Epperson, *Firefly*, "Shindig," original American airdate: November 1, 2002.
5. Joss Whedon, *Firefly*, "Serenity: Part 1 & 2," original American airdate: December 20, 2002.
6. Joss Whedon, *Firefly*, "Our Mrs. Reynolds," original American airdate: October 4, 2002.
7. Cheryl Cain, *Firefly*, "War Stories," original American airdate: December 6, 2002.
8. Jane Epperson, *Firefly*, "Shindig" (alternate audio DVD commentary), original American airdate: November 1, 2002. We also see Zoe and Wash in bed together during "Objects in Space."
9. Cheryl Cain, *Firefly*, "War Stories," original American airdate: December 6, 2002.
10. Tasha Yar in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and Starbuck in the new *Battlestar Galactica* are strong military women, but whose appearance performs that identity through short hair and muscular appearance.
11. *Serenity*. Dir. Joss Whedon. 2005, Universal Pictures.
12. Joss Whedon, *Firefly*, "Serenity: Part 1 & 2," original American airdate: December 20, 2002.
13. Joss Whedon & Tim Minear, *Firefly*, "The Message," original American airdate: October 14, 2004.
14. Tim Minear, *Firefly*, "Out of Gas," original American airdate: October 25, 2002.
15. Ben Edlund, *Firefly*, "Jaynestown," original American airdate: October 18, 2002.
16. Jane Epperson, *Firefly*, "Shindig," original American airdate: November 1, 2002.
17. Brett Matthews, *Firefly*, "Heart of Gold," original American airdate: October 21, 2004.
18. Ibid.
19. Jane Epperson, *Firefly*, "Shindig," original American airdate: November 1, 2002.
20. Joss Whedon, *Firefly*, "Our Mrs. Reynolds," original American airdate: October 4, 2002.

*Megan Baxter is working on her Master's Degree in History at Queen's University. When not buried under a book avalanche, she indulges in many different nerdy pursuits."*

## Two Travelers' Tales: *Logan's Run* and *The Island*

by J.G. Stinson

When I first read the back of the DVD box for *The Island* at my local video store, I was disappointed. "Looks like a *Logan's Run* clone," I muttered, and reshelved the box. At the time, I thought I'd prefer to watch *Logan's Run* (one of my favorite sci-fi movies) again instead of renting *The Island*, and I probably would have if I could have found a copy that day. But I got to thinking about *The Island* and decided I really should watch it at least once, to compare it to *Logan's Run* and see if it held up. So I rented the DVD and watched it. I was pleasantly surprised.

The setting is Earth after some kind of unspecified global contamination. People are "rescued" from outside and brought into a contained, underground high-rise city to live and work and, if they're lucky, win the Lottery and a trip to the Island—the only contaminant-free open area left on Earth. (Now there's a bounce-out from suspension of disbelief: How can there be only one contaminant-free, uncontained area?) Audio and video monitoring of the city's population is 24/7 via bracelets placed on residents' wrists and with cameras. The first clue we get that the people here might not be human as we know the term is how they're named (similar to the names of city residents in *Logan's Run*), and as we watch Ewan McGregor's character wake, dress and report for work, that itch in the brain that says something isn't quite right intensifies.

Lincoln Six Echo (McGregor) questions everything. He and Jordan Two Delta (Scarlett Johansson) have formed a friendship restricted by

"proximity" laws that prohibit close physical contact. Lincoln visits his friend McCord (Steve Buscemi) in the IT department, having as an excuse a directive by a supervisor to fetch tech support for a wonky computer station in the work area. The supervisor gives him a key to access the area where McCord works, but foolishly never asks for it back. That's a vital plot point, and unfortunately one that will likely kick a viewer out of the story and into reality when it's noted.

While visiting McCord, Lincoln Six Echo finds a moth—an impossibility, if what the city residents have been told is true. So he captures the moth and takes it back to his apartment, and later tells Jordan about it. Of course, with all that nice monitoring equipment in place, the people who run the city (especially Dr. Merrick [Sean Bean], its founder and the head honcho of the company that runs the place and supplies much of the technology that keeps it going) have noticed that Lincoln Six Echo is not like everyone else, and steps are taken to minimize his influence on his fellow residents, particularly Jordan Two Delta, with whom he's become a bit too close. That "problem" is solved when Jordan wins the Lottery.

Lincoln Six Echo wishes her well, and later releases the moth where he found it, and follows it up a shaft (with stairs) to a ceiling, where he pushes up a panel and emerges from the floor of a white corridor. He goes exploring. In a particularly chilling scene, he witnesses a woman giving birth, and in horror watches as the doctor injects the woman's IV tube with a clear liquid from a



### *The Island*

**DVD Release Date:** December, 2005  
**Starring:** Ewan McGregor, Scarlett Johansson, Djimon Hounsou, Sean Bean & Steve Buscemi  
**Director:** Michael Bay  
**Screenwriters:** Caspian Tredwell-Owen, Alex Kurtzman & Roberto Orci, based on a story by Caspian Tredwell-Owen  
**Rated:** PG-13  
**Studio:** Dreamworks Video  
**Special Features:** Commentary by Michael Bay; "The Future in Action" featurette.

syringe and she dies, rather unpleasantly (but not in a gory way). The nurse in attendance looks concerned and sad as she holds her victim's feet in the stirrups of the birthing table—that's the scary bit. The nurse later takes the baby to a waiting room and a man and woman who are thrilled to see the infant. They should be: they're her new parents. More bells should be going off in the viewer's mind at this point.

Lincoln runs off, terrified, and is caught in the ruckus surrounding the sudden departure of a patient from a nearby operating room. It's the previous Lottery winner—he's trying to escape the doctor who's going to harvest his liver for transplantation. (This echoes the Robin Cook film *Coma*,<sup>1</sup> where organ farming is used. In that story, organs are obtained from patients in a hospital who were induced into coma in order to provide transplantable body parts for sale.)

So why is Dr. Merrick in the business of cloning humans for organ transplants and using women as baby factories? For the same reason as the doctor in *Coma* did it: for the almighty dollar.

Lincoln goes to Jordan's apartment after escaping city security in the white corridor, grabs her arm with a no-time-to-explain-just-trust-me line (and she does), and they run off to the city sector labeled R6 (McCord's area) via Lincoln's supervisor's key. City security is still chasing them. Funny how inept they get when the movie's lead characters are on the run.

They eventually find a way to the surface and go exploring. Black helicopters follow them; those

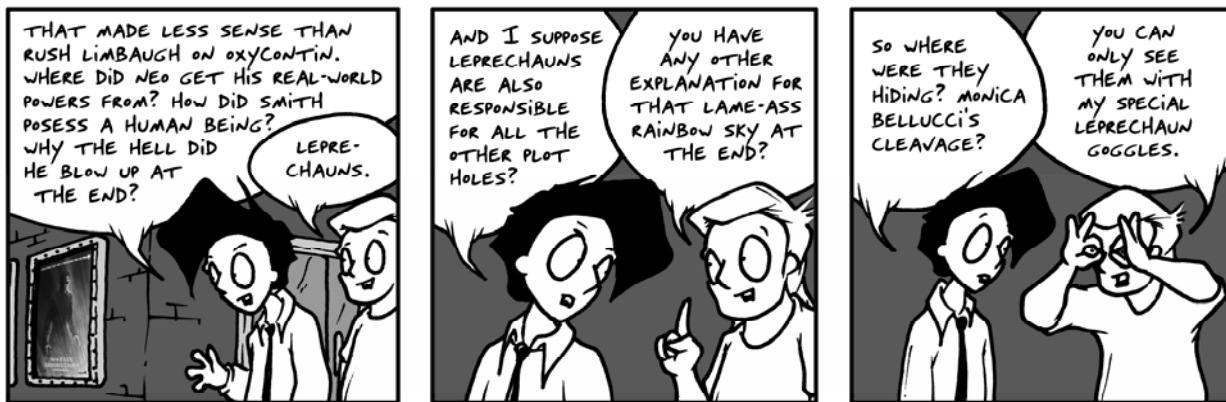
choppers belong to Albert Laurent (Djimon Hounsou), a honcho from Blackhawk Security called in by Dr. Merrick to find Lincoln and Jordan.

Merrick tells Laurent the contamination is a false story to curb curiosity; the products (the city residents) are conditioned (via psychological conditioning by audio-video devices) against violence and aggression, and their sex drives are supposed to be removed altogether. They live and work at the Merrick Institute, keeping the cloning operation going but not knowing the purpose of their individual duties ("Where do the tubes go?" Lincoln asks one of his co-workers, and we get to see where they go). They're educated to the level of 15-year-old humans, which makes for some comic relief when Lincoln and Jordan are out in the "real world."

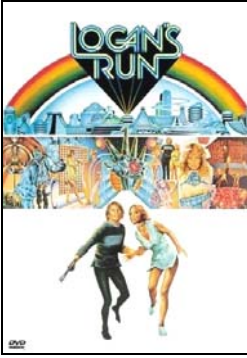
Something called the Eugenics Laws of 2050 are mentioned in passing but never described—not a cool thing to do. The "products" of the Merrick Institute are called agnates; they begin as an organic frame and are grown to adulthood in 12 months. They're supposed to be maintained in a vegetative state, but as we've already seen by this point, they aren't; as Merrick explains to Laurent, no human experience for the clones equals organ failure.

When we see Lincoln and Jordan again, they've decided to try to find McCord, to ask his help in their plan to tell the world about Merrick's evil empire. They locate the Aces & Spades Bar (advertised on a box of matches Lincoln found in McCord's office earlier) via road signs, and do indeed find McCord. He takes them to his home, where they meet his significant other, Susie, and

## Goats: The Comic Strip by Jonathan Rosenberg



goats: the comic strip nov. 7, 2003 <http://www.goats.com> [jon@goats.com](mailto:jon@goats.com) ©2003 jonathan rosenberg. all rights reserved



## Logan's Run

<b>DVD Release Date:</b>	June, 2004
<b>Starring:</b>	Michael York, Richard Jordan, Jenny Agutter, Roscoe Lee Browne, Farrah Fawcett & Peter Usitnov
<b>Director:</b>	Michael Anderson
<b>Screenwriters:</b>	William F. Nolan, George Clayton Johnson & David Zelag Goodman
<b>Rated:</b>	PG
<b>Studio:</b>	Warner Home Video
<b>Special Features:</b>	Audio Commentary by Michael Anderson, Michael York and Costume Designer Bill Thomas; Behind-the-scenes featurette; Trailer.

the Info Dump proceeds.

The “products” are clones of people who pay to have them grown (Lincoln’s “Sponsor” coughed up five million bucks) and maintained in the event the sponsor needs one of their “parts.” The general public knows nothing about this program as it’s available only to the very rich and influential. Lincoln and Jordan want to tell the world about their plight; McCord tries to discourage them but fails, and helps them as much as he can. He gets them train tickets to L.A., where Lincoln’s sponsor Tom Lincoln lives, and of course McCord gets killed and the chase is on.

One might assume Lincoln and Jordan got all their chase savvy from the virtual-reality games they enjoyed playing as Institute residents (seems they prefer a knockoff of *Mortal Kombat*). Still, it’s a very slender thread of logical progression; it would have been a stronger one if they’d been shown practicing such maneuvers in some sort of game environment.

Stuff That Bugs Me, or More Ways to Tank Suspension of Disbelief:

1. The movie uses trains and trucks that move through the air but there are still cars on the ground—with combustion engines (as per the sound FX—I’ve heard electric cars and they don’t sound the same).
2. The doctors still use syringes—whatever happened to the auto-injectors the Army used on me in Basic Training in 1980? They should have been in widespread use by now, unless they were defective in some way.

3. If nature will out, as some scientists theorize (and chaos theory proponent Malcolm from *Jurassic Park* believes), then why is Lincoln the only one who’s questioned life at the institute until the time of the movie’s events? Other minor characters are shown questioning *some* aspects of their lives, but none as comprehensively as Lincoln and not until much later in the film.
4. Who the hell under age 30 knows who Chatty Cathy *is*?
5. How good is a security company that fails to frisk a prisoner before transport?

It’s probably not a spoiler to note that Laurent turns out to have a heart—and a conscience. He’d be too stereotypical a villain otherwise, and that role is reserved for Dr. Merrick anyway. Playing Merrick must have been a let-down for Bean, after his star turn as Boromir in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Steve Buscemi is always a joy to watch, and Ewan Macgregor is fast becoming a well-rounded actor (for something completely different, check him out in *Velvet Goldmine*—if all you’ve seen of him is the *Star Wars* movies, that one will blow your mind), as is Scarlett Johansson (especially in the sumptuous *Girl With the Pearl Earring*). Sean Bean does his best with a two-dimensional role, and Djimon Hounsou makes Laurent into a likeable character.

Overall, *The Island* is an entertaining film, though just barely SF.

---

*Logan’s Run* is much more firmly set in the future. The environment, the clothes, the way of

speaking, the activities are all SF-nal from the get-go. John Brosnan and Peter Nicholls have called this film “sluggish” and “a bland affair” which lacks the liveliness of its source material.<sup>2</sup> I wonder if we watched the same film.

In 2274, Logan Five is a Sandman in the domed city where the remainder of humanity lives, supposedly protected from the devastation outside (caused by war, over-population and pollution). Everyone in the city has a crystal implanted in the left palm, and the crystal glows green until they reach their 30th year of life: then it turns red, and they must enter Carousel. This conceit is a reflection of a slogan of the times in which the film was made, “Never trust anyone over 30.”

Carousel is a ceremony where the participants are supposed to be uplifted in some fashion from their lives, but it’s actually a stylized, government sponsored suicide rite and population-control program. There are no children in the city, either, though the residents are certainly allowed to engage in sex if they choose (indeed, given the shops and clubs shown during the film, one might say they’re encouraged in it).

Sandmen are the security force of the city. They’re needed because there are people called Runners who must be pursued and neutralized. Runners, as you may have already guessed, are people who decide to try their chances at escape instead of Carousel.

The society in *Logan’s Run* is also youth-focused, as was U.S. culture in the 1970s (and still is today). The city has shops where cosmetic surgery is quickly and easily accomplished with lasers and computers, on any part of the body. Apart from the Sandmen and the shop clerks, no one seems to be employed in anything but eating, sleeping and having fun. In the light of logic, this ought to kill suspension of disbelief; but in the light of youthful thinking, wouldn’t we all want to live in a place like this?

The problem with the city, however, is that one loses freedom of choice for important things like how long one can live and whether to have children or not. There’s no mention of birth-control devices, so one could assume that there’s something in the water or food that keeps the women from getting pregnant. For those who are dissatisfied with their lives, there’s a rumor of a

place called Sanctuary, where one can live as long as one chooses.

Logan Five meets Jessica Six one evening during a social outing, and he asks her about the ank necklace she’s wearing. He later finds out from the city computer that it’s a secret symbol of the Sanctuary underground. Logan is instructed by the computer to investigate the Sanctuary rumors and to infiltrate any group of Runners that he can, in order to find Sanctuary.

When Jessica gives him the opportunity, Logan goes with her as a Runner, and they’re pursued by his Sandman partner, Francis Seven. What they find isn’t Sanctuary, and on their journey, Logan’s mind is changed about what’s really going on. He and Jessica, like Lincoln and Jordan, decide to return to the city and tell their co-residents what’s really going on. During an interrogation by the city computer, Logan manages to confuse it with fuzzy logic and make it crash, so that he and Jessica can show the others how to get outside and discover the real world for themselves.

There are a lot of parallels between these two movies, and anyone who’s seen them both will likely recognize them: The male and female lead characters, the post-apocalyptic setting, the domed or contained city, the utopia that becomes a dystopia, the need to escape, the need to expose what one sees as evil or shameful, freeing one’s fellow prisoners from their utopian confinement, and so on. No mention of the Nolan/Johnson novel is made in the credits for *The Island*, so one might assume that Caspian Tredwell-Owen (doesn’t that sound like a made-up name?) never read it. I had to wonder whether Nolan, Johnson or their heirs have seen *The Island* and considered whether it infringed on the novel’s copyright.

Those who’ve never seen *Logan’s Run* or read the novel on which it’s based but have read a lot of SF may enjoy *The Island* more as an action-adventure film. Having seen both, I still prefer *Logan’s Run* for having a more SF-nal setting and plot all around, but the acting in *The Island* is a bit better. Rent both and decide for yourself.

#### End Notes:

1. *Coma*. Dir Michael Crichton. 1978, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).

2. Clute, John and Peter Nicholls, eds. "Logan's Run," *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York: 1995, p. 728.

*J.G. Stinson has read SF for over 30 years. Her reviews and essays can be found in Strange Horizons,*

*The New York Review of Science Fiction, The Internet Review of Science Fiction, and various fanzines less frequently, including her own Peregrine Nations (which can be downloaded at [www.efanzines.com](http://www.efanzines.com)). She lives in northern Michigan with her son, two dogs and a frightfully large collection of empty boxes.*

---

## **Book Review: *The James Tiptree Award Anthology 2*, edited by Karen Joy Fowler, Pat Murphy, Debbie Notkin, & Jeffrey D. Smith**

*Reviewed by Rose Fox*

At first blush, there seems nothing so nebulous as a "best" award. What is "best"? How could one possibly get more subjective? But then the James Tiptree Award comes along with the intention of lauding (or at least spotlighting) works that "explore and expand our notion of gender," and that turns out to be arguably even more vague than "best." To be best, something must first be good, i.e. must fail to fall into Sturgeon's famous 90%. The judges for the James Tiptree Award make no such requirement of the works they name on the short list and long list, nor even of those that win the award itself. The controversy over this year's long list including a half-finished piece of male-impregnation fanfic has made that abundantly clear.

This deliberate lassitude around considerations of quality has made for award-winners that are, as Debbie Notkin writes in the slightly rambling and self-congratulatory introduction to this second Tiptree Award collection, "delightfully all over the map" (p. ix). So too is the anthology, which contains only three winners; or rather, one winning story, Raphael Carter's "Congenital Agensis of Gender Ideation by K.N. Sirsi and Sandra Botkin" (1998), and excerpts from 2004's winning novels, Joe Haldeman's *Camouflage* and Johanna Sinisalo's *Not Before Sundown* (also known as *Troll: A Love Story*). The rest are selections from the 2004 shortlist and a couple of bonuses from past years: Jonathan Lethem's "Five Fucks" from 1996 and Ursula K. Le Guin's "A Fisherman of the Inland Sea" from 1994. Why these works were deemed worthy of inclusion

and others were not is never made entirely clear; for all the reader can tell, they might be the only ones for which reprint rights could be obtained. "The main point of the Tiptree Award is not to provide answers—but rather to raise questions," writes Notkin (p. xvi). This anthology certainly does its part to meet that purpose, though the result may not be as consciousness-raising as the judges or writers would prefer.

The most compelling pieces of writing in this collection are nonfiction. Nalo Hopkinson's "Looking for Clues" is deeply moving, rich with personal detail and emotion; Gwyneth Jones's "The Brains of Female Hyena Twins" is slightly scattered but nonetheless quite entertaining. Also notable is the opening essay by Julie Phillips, biographer of James Tiptree, Jr. and thereby of Alice Sheldon (or perhaps the other way around). In "Talking Too Much: About James Tiptree, Jr.," Phillips sheds some much-needed light on Sheldon's life, particularly the 51 years before she first took up her pseudonymous pen. The biographical pages make a lovely introduction to an excerpted letter from Sheldon to her longtime friend Rudolf Arnheim, in which she does her earnest best to explain what it was like for her to be working in a field dominated by men (not for the first time; she refers at one point to attempting to become a teacher and being told, "We have too many women already" [p. 11]) and the experience of writing itself. Female and feminist writers, who make up the bulk of the market for this anthology, will be particularly intrigued.

Sheldon is a hard act to follow, but Raphael Carter does his best and more or less succeeds. "Congenital Ideation" is written as an academic paper exploring the experiences of people whose innate perception of gender is far outside the norm. These *genagnosics* are described as being unable to correctly assign gendered pronouns to people, leading to such humorous moments as describing Arnold Schwarzenegger as "she" and Meryl Streep as "he." A pair of twins who have the gene linked to genagnosia is then found, but rather than being unable to discern gender, they break it down into 22 different categories based on a range of physical and psychological factors, from post-menopausal women to people who simply think of themselves as androgynous. These ideas are interesting in themselves, but the real heart of the story is the reaction of the researchers and their assistants when confronted by such deviation from what they regard as a fundamental way of approaching the world. Although the conclusion stumbles slightly, the piece is on the whole very solid.

The two novel excerpts strike a good balance between demonstrating their award-worthiness and encouraging the reader to hunt down the full text. Joe Haldeman's shapeshifting aliens in *Camouflage* have morals as fluid and malleable as their bodies, or perhaps as nonexistent as any sense of their "correct" shape; this renders them difficult to connect with or regard sympathetically, and the reader ends up viewing them with anthropological curiosity (much as they view human beings, which perhaps is the point). While that's interesting for a while, it's hard to imagine it holding one's attention for the duration of an entire novel.

---

***The James Tiptree Award Anthology 2: Sex, the Future, & Chocolate Chip Cookies***

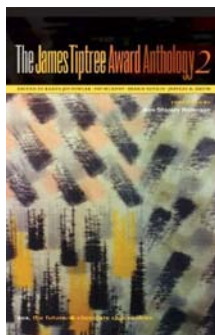
**Editors:** Karen Joy Fowler, Pat Murphy, Debbie Notkin, & Jeffrey D. Smith

**ISBN:** 1892391317

**Publisher:** Tachyon Publications

**Release date:** Nov., 2005

\$14.95, 280 pages,  
trade paperback



In *Not Before Sundown*, Johanna Sinisalo's writing is lyrical and lovely as always, so the excerpts from the novel make for a welcome respite: here are characters, human and nonhuman alike, who immediately engage curiosity and sympathy. Miguel's failed romantic relationships are clearly echoed in his stumbling efforts to take care of the half-grown troll that he rescues from a gang of thugs, and the eighteen pages detailing the beginning of their time together are over all too soon. Unfortunately, it's downhill from here.

"The Gift," L. Timmel Duchamp's tale of a planet with unusual ideas about gender, sexuality, and purity, is raw and harsh. What sympathy we have for the main character, a travel critic named Florentine who falls in love and then attempts (in a severe caricature of the woman who wants to fix her boyfriend for his own good) to claim that her selfishness is altruism, is pretty thoroughly lost by about halfway through. Unfortunately, none of the others take up the slack. Alain, Florentine's love interest, is somewhere between insipid and simply distant, and his mother Magdalene is controlling and shrill. Eileen Gunn and Leslie What continue this theme in "Nirvana High," losing the uphill battle to find anything likeable in a class of bored, bitter teenagers whose smarts and skills far outstrip those of most of their teachers, and Jonathan Lethem's "Five Fucks" rounds it off with a story of two people who, despite their knowledge that every sex act brings them closer to brutality, keep going back for more until they both become literal grunting savages. By the time the end of this litany of disgruntlement is reached, one wonders whether anyone ever explores or expands gender via people who exhibit any degree of caring for someone other than themselves. "Kissing Frogs," Jaye Lawrence's sweet little postscript of a fairy tale, drives the point home with two very discontented and frustrated protagonists, a formerly-royal frog and a lovelorn transvestite, who nonetheless manage to be entirely sympathetic and find some measure of happiness in their kindness to each other.

Award anthologies are rarely great anthologies, especially when the award is based on something other than quality. It's too easy to be heavy-handed. Notkin insists that it's fine if readers dis-



agree with the editors or even hate the selections, but then to prove the point she and the other editors seem to have made a real effort to find pieces that it's easy to hate. To make matters worse, they then talk about how wonderful the stories are, prefacing each one with an editorial note that all but tells the reader how to think: "The Gift" is labeled "very intense, and moving," Carol Emshwiller's "All of Us Can Almost..." is, we are helpfully informed, "very funny," and "Five Fucks" is described with three plot-distilling (and nearly plot-spoiling) sentences that all say the same thing in different ways. This is the worst sort of condescension to both the stories—which should, one assumes, be able to stand on their own—and the readers, and it thoroughly undermines the idea that the anthology will encourage people to think for themselves. If it doesn't matter whether we enjoy the stories, why do the editors go out of their ways to assure us that we're having a good time?

Sheldon's letter to Arnheim is oddly labeled as being written by Tiptree, though it makes references to the author being female and is clearly from "Alli" rather than "Tip." Is this conflation of author and pseudonym—just as Phillips has finished drawing some clear and intriguing distinctions between them—an unintentional one, or an attempt to honor Sheldon's history of being published as Tiptree? This is just one of many instances where it's unclear whether the confusion or obfuscation is intentional on the part of the au-

thors and editors who contributed to this volume. The recent rise of slipstream, the New Weird, and other genre-benders has demonstrated conclusively that a lot of readers quite like confusion and obfuscation, and perhaps in this case it's meant to play up the confusion many people feel around gender and the obfuscation that those who don't fit into societal norms often feel bound to undergo. If that's the case, however, it falls notably short.

Rather than blurring society's firmly-drawn lines and permitting the reader to transcend them, the flailing vagueness and self-conscious grit of most of the included stories blur only the stories themselves. They may inspire questions, but they fail to inspire *useful* questions, meeting the letter of the law but never quite matching its admittedly high-reaching spirit. This is why Jones and Hopkinson's essays stand out from the crowd of sly, clever, sometimes murky stories: they are stark, straightforward, and bluntly honest. There are no metaphors; there is no—you should excuse the expression—pussyfooting around. "We—all of us—are real," Hopkinson says earnestly (p. 118), and it seems likely that both Sheldon and Tiptree would agree. One can only hope to see less occlusion and more realness in future Tiptree Award winners and collections.

*Rose Fox is the result of a genetic experiment to create the perfect writer. Having escaped from the laboratory, she now roams the streets of New York, looking for inspiration in gutters and rainbows.*

---

## **Book Review: *Beyond Armageddon*, edited by Walter M. Miller, Jr. & Martin H. Greenberg**

*Reviewed by Matthew Appleton*

I believe that it's difficult for those young enough not to remember the Soviet Union to truly appreciate what it was like growing up in the Cold War era—especially for those of us whose childhood coincided with the Reagan years. I'm not trying to belittle the experience of the Baby Boomers as they too grew up with the threat of nuclear war, but I feel that for my generation the eerie, terrifying threat was even worse. The Baby Boom-

ers grew up in an environment that told them that one could survive such a war; Generation X understood that bomb shelters and crouching under your desk at school, holding a piece of paper over your head would do nothing to help you. If it came, a nuclear war would wipe us out.

For Baby Boomers and Generation Xers alike, the threat of a nuclear explosion still has a tremendous pull. The current Bush administration at-

tempted to leverage those long-buried fears into support for its policies when it first raised the specter of Iraq gaining nuclear weapons as a pretense for invasion. Because of its success, they went to the well a second time during the current saber-rattling regarding Iran, saying that there were keeping all military options available. Thus, the current political climate makes the Bison Books's reissue of Walter M. Miller, Jr. and Martin H. Greenberg's anthology *Beyond Armageddon* very timely indeed.

Originally released at the start of Reagan's second term in 1985, *Beyond Armageddon* is a thoughtfully crafted theme anthology centered upon the next Great War. As with many anthologies his name appears on, most of Greenberg's contribution to the collection consisted solely in doing the work necessary to secure the necessary various rights to the works within; Miller actually exerted most of the editorial control—a point he makes in the introduction so that people upset by his selections or comments leave Greenberg alone. Not content with just picking great SF that fits in the overriding theme, Miller took the idea an initial step further by ordering the stories in a manner that chronicles humankind in the buildup to "Megawar" (his term for the war that ends human civilization as we know it), the war itself, the aftermath and our attempts to recover and rebuild.

Miller then provides further structure to the anthology by selecting stories that demonstrate the folly of overemphasizing reason in certain situations. To wit, many of his selections feature instances where "the use of reason is so inappropriate as to be either laughably or criminally insane, and that we need to learn to sacrifice reason when it's crazy to be rationale." (p. xxii) This anthology was, after all, compiled in 1985 when notions as a "winnable" nuclear war still thrived in spite of the opinions of the scientific community. When reading *Beyond Armageddon* today, one must conveniently forget the current theory that a nuclear war would ignite nuclear winter and wipe out all life on the planet. Many of these stories rely on the idea that somehow life will continue, in some fashion, afterwards.

It's also important to recall that in 1985, America's military interests weren't focused on the Middle East, as they are today. Thus, Miller's opening

selection for the anthology, Lucius Shepard's "Salvador," fits right in as a kind of pre-Megawar backdrop for the rest of the collection. Looking at the world during the time Shepard wrote the story, it's easy to see why he chose Salvador as the setting. At that time, the superpowers allocated numerous resources to Central America, where CIA-backed forces battling Soviet-backed forces for control of various regimes throughout the area. Shepard's deft use of magic realism works very nicely in this story about dealing with the post-traumatic stress disorder that ultimately results from forcing oneself to deny the humanity of anyone who is other in a combat setting where you cannot distinguish enemy from civilian. It's the type of story that today could easily be revised with a setting somewhere in the Middle East and could make the same point about how we as a society are failing our combat veterans when try to assimilate back into society.

Norman Spinrad's "The Big Flash" is another story whose timelessness clearly shows through. In it, the government uses a proto-heavy metal band called The Four Horsemen to change public opinion about using nuclear weapons to win a war in Asia. The band succeeds beyond the government's wildest dreams, much to the detriment of virtually everyone. Once again, it's hard not to recall George W. Bush's use of the Nuclear Boogie Man in his handling of the situations in Iraq and Iran.

Ward Moore's "Lot," a modern update of the Biblical story, follows Spinrad's tale. In Moore's take, Mr. Jimmon (Moore refers to him solely in this manner) is a man on a mission: to save himself and his family in the immediate aftermath of a nuclear exchange. While trying to force his way through the gridlock and get them to his predetermined safe area, Mr. Jimmon slowly comes to the conclusion that certain members of his family will never manage to survive in this new world. Given the original ending of the story, the ending isn't much of a surprise. However, the cold-heartedness of Mr. Jimmon's reasoning is exactly the same type of overemphasizing of reason that Miller rallies against in his introduction. Clearly, while Mr. Jimmon may be improving the survival odds for some (notably himself), in making his decision he shows the same lack of humanity as

those who started the war. Yet, you can just as easily conclude that Mr. Jimmon's decision allowed the best chances of survival for those most inclined to survive in the first place. How one chooses to read the story might say a lot about his/her own tendencies when using reason.

Yet, the choices may not seem so easy a few years into the aftermath. Poul Anderson's "Tomorrow's Children" shows a world trying to exhume itself from a war waged with virtually every type of weapon imaginable, including bacteriological and biological. The surviving members of the United States government are trying to ascertain what needs to be done in order to rebuild the nation-state. Written in 1947, the rebuilding of Europe was clearly on Anderson's mind when he wrote this. While the ultimate fate of the nation concerns the government, the story's true pathos lies in its depiction of where the human race is headed biologically. The high rate of genetic defects among the children born post-Megawar shows that homo sapiens won't survive. If humankind does manage to hold on, it will be a new species borne out of the fallout from the war. However, its dark conclusion gives little hope that this will actually happen.

In "Heirs Apparent," Robert Abernathy posits that Megawar would bring the return of a much older conflict not experienced by humankind in centuries: Civilization vs. Nomadism. Again, the story falls nicely into Miller's exploration of too heavily upon reason. This time a former Soviet soldier, Bogomazov, stumbles across a self-sufficient Siberian town while trekking across the remnants of his former state. Surprisingly, an American who crash-landed there during the war is now assisting the town, which causes Bogomazov to immediately fall back into the pre-war ways of thinking in regards to capitalism vs. communism. Unfortunately, in this new world neither system will work because they both rely so heavily upon a civilized infrastructure to survive. Some possible Cold War bias on the author's part does show through—the American figures this out, but the Soviet insists upon his system right up to the bitter end of the town—but a return to Nomadism after such a conflict makes more sense than trying to restore the Civilization that made such a conflict possible.

While some stories make bold statements about how humanity might recover from a Megawar, others offer more a more personal take on the aftermath. Edgar Pangborn's "A Master of Babylon" features an aging former concert pianist who inadvertently loses everything when he tries to maintain a connection with the first humans he encounters in years. In "Day at the Beach," Carol Emshwiller tells a story about a family trying to regain a small bit of pre-war normalcy in a world hostile to the idea of taking the smallest amount of recreation time, especially when you have a four-year-old. Just finding ways to just deal with pre-Megawar memories may be more the rule though for most, an idea explored by Robert Sheckley in his very *Twilight Zone*-esque "Store of the Worlds" and Ray Bradbury's "To the Chicago Abyss," with two very different results.

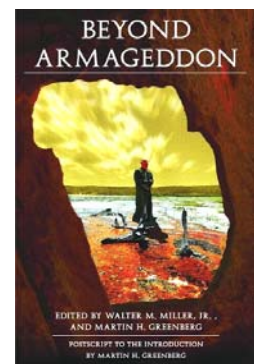
Miller also includes two stories that minimize the focus on humankind. Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains" (which immediately precedes "To the Chicago Abyss" as Miller thought they nicely characterized two different ways looking at material items in the Megawar context) remains a powerful poetic look at the fate of a fully automated residence that manages to survive a nearby nuclear blast. In fact, within the context of the *Beyond Armageddon* collection the story achieves a greater emotional impact than it manages as a part of his *Martian Chronicles* collection. In "If I Forget Thee, Oh Earth...," Arthur C. Clarke's beautifully describes a trek across an alien landscape. Unfortunately, the concluding sentence of the story loses much of its impact as by the very nature of the anthology we can guess which surface the narrator is likely navigating. Conversely, Clarke's descrip-

---

### *Beyond Armageddon*

**Editors:** Walter M. Miller, Jr.  
& Martin H. Greenberg  
**ISBN:** 0803283156  
**Publisher:** Bison Books  
**Release date:** May, 2006

\$16.95, 387 pages,  
trade paperback



tion of the foreign terrain in question is incredibly impressively given he wrote the story in 1951.

Harlan Ellison follows Clarke's tale with the penultimate story in the collection, "A Boy and His Dog." This completely brutal and amoralistic world, with its intriguing re-imagining of the Eloi and Morlocks from H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, shows that a Megawar ultimately means an end to humanity. Those who try to scabble out a meager existence on what's left of the surface world become nothing more than wild dogs—indeed, in this story the genetically-modified dogs are actually smarter than the humans—while those who retreat underground and try to entomb themselves in an idealized, imagined early 20<sup>th</sup> century utopia are in fact completely sterile and unable to propagate the species.

But at least it's a human future. Miller closes the collection with Jim Aikin's "My Life in the Jungle," where our unnamed narrator is a former mathematics professor who unexplainably finds himself in the body of a primate and as part of a tribe. As the story evolves, we discover that the constant battles between his tribes and all the others in the area are destroying the ecosystem and removing all available means of sustenance. The cycle of violence becomes increasingly brutal and none seem to care about the destruction of the en-

vironment. It's a cautionary tale that seems to point at where humankind itself is headed if we don't stop fighting amongst ourselves. However, as the conclusion to this collection, it's hard not to read this as Miller thinking that this might just be our very fate.

In the end, *Beyond Armageddon* is a wonderful snapshot of America's nuclear fears during the Cold War era. Amazingly, Miller manages to achieve a fix-up novel of sorts—a very jarring one, mind you—that takes you through the early stages of a Megawar through the end of humankind. Although a couple stories fit rather awkwardly into the collection—in particular, Michael Swanwick's "The Feast of St. Janis" feels more like a story set in the universe of his *In the Drift* fix-up novel than like a post-Megawar story—overall, there isn't a bad story in the bunch. The depressing tone and imagery of many of the stories may make this a book better read in portions, but it's certainly far better that we confront our worst fears regarding our ability to destroy ourselves solely on the printed page.

*Matthew Appleton is the Editor of Some Fantastic and is utterly dismayed that there are people in the U.S. government today who feel that nuclear weapons, of any type, are a viable option in warfare.*

---

## DVD Review: *MirrorMask*

*Reviewed by Richard Fuller*

When you watch a motion picture for the first time, how long should it take to see what the story is? Five minutes? Ten? Fifteen? If any longer, you'll probably want to hike your eyes up the aisle and demand your money back.

As I began watching *MirrorMask*—a free DVD, fortunately—I was confused by the way collage art work sort of drifted into some real circus people and then kind of wandered into arty credits floating by and then back to collage and then people and...

And my eyeballs wondered: what's the story?

As writer-director Dave McKean and co-writer Neil Gaiman annotate their first feature-length—uh, collection of arty collages, they don't

talk about story. They call it a fantasy. Here's a definition from my *American Heritage Dictionary*:

**fantasy**, *n.* ... 4a. Literary or dramatic fiction characterized by highly fanciful or super-natural elements.

No mention of story there either. But *MirrorMask* is certainly full of highly fanciful and super-natural art work and CGI. You see fish that fly through the air, spiders with a huge single eye, a tall figure with a human mouth and a body made of books, a mammoth woman's head with tentacles sticking out on all sides.

You're wondering: Is there something that connects these fanciful images?

This fantasy tour through a surrealistic museum of collages, which begins about 18-plus minutes into the movie, is apparently the dream world of 15-year-old Helena (Stephanie Leonidas). She's accompanied by mask-wearing Valentine (Jason Barry). He says she can be the brave volunteer, whatever that means. He also says he needs a juggler and Helena can juggle, but the movie is too busy juggling weird things for any circusy asides. Did Valentine work in a fantasy circus?

They're certainly an Odd Couple as they each fly off on top of a book and into a series of strange locales and thingies with creature bodies and human faces. You don't see the real Valentine until after the end of the dream, about 94-plus minutes into the picture, when he applies for a job in her family's circus. Will he and Helena become a couple? That's implied. But there is no Romance in this picture's world. More strongly implied throughout the film's curious journey is the difficult relationship between a mother and a troubled 15-year-old daughter.

As the picture begins, you see a white sock pop up into the frame. It's wearing a black crown, has black circles for eyes and a black line nose. You hear a girl with an English accent. (I had a hard time understanding much of the dialogue, constantly rewinding and turning up the sound. The girl refers to her illustrations all over the bedroom wall as "drawer-ings." Blimey!)

"I'm queen of the city," her voiceover for white sock says, "of the tower and queen of the small squiggly things."

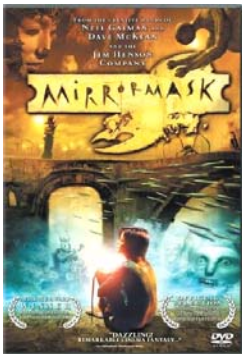
Then a black sock pops up and insists, "But I am queen of evil. You cannot escape my cunning use of black magic." And the black sock uses a black pen to squiggle on the white sock's face. The filmmakers say these socks are an homage to the late Jim Henson and his Muppet world. The Henson Co. produced their movie.

When the camera pulls back, you see an upside down Helena (is she ever!) lying on her bed wearing those socks. And I didn't believe her feet really did what we saw. One of the filmmakers (Dave McKeen?) says his hand was in the black sock. What's supposed to be real at this point is circusy fake, then. About the Good white sock versus the Evil black one? The filmmakers say their picture isn't about Good and Evil. Why begin the movie with those bloody socks and that voiceover, then? You wonder, from their annotation, if the director and writer really knew what they were doing in their first feature movie

Before she goes to sleep (which you're never shown), you see surly Helena angry with her mother (Gina McKee). Mom's been selling tickets to the Campbell Family Circus. Note: there's a large audience outside the tent and will be inside. Daughter diddles in her room covered with those drawings, including some "floating" fish.

Mom tells bratty kid that Dad (Rob Brydon) keeps the circus running on "charm and peanuts." Is that why they live in a gritty, worn-out high rise that looks condemned? But the audience we see is big, contradicting Mom's statement about living on "peanuts."

Mom wants the kid to join the real world and come to work, saying, "You'll be the death of me."



**MirrorMask**

**DVD Release Date:** February, 2006

**Starring:** Jason Barry, Rob Brydon, Stephanie Leonidas, Gina McKee, Dora Bryan & Stephen Fry

**Director:** Dave McKeon

**Screenwriter:** Neil Gaiman, based on a story by Neil Gaiman & Dave McKeon

**Rated:** PG

**Studio:** Sony Pictures

**Special Features:** "Day 16: A Time-Lapse Video of One Day On-Set;" "Neil Talks: A Conversation with Neil Gaiman;" "ComicCon 2003: a Q&A session;" "Behind The Scenes with Dave McKeen;" "Flight of the Monkeybirds" featurette; "Off-Set," making-of featurette.

Nasty daughter says, "I wish I was." Teary Mom leaves. Note: this scene is shown in what looks like a split-screen, Mom on left outside her daughter's room, Helena on the right in what seems to be a trailer near the circus. Because they're shown both separated and divided in this two-shot, the visual implication is that they're also "joined" in spite of the hassle. Movies constantly use this kind of two-shot to "say" two conflicted characters are connected emotionally.

While trying to put on a gorilla costume, Mom collapses. She's taken by ambulance to a hospital where she'll have a life-threatening operation. Helena doesn't know this as she visits Mom and apologizes for her remark. They do lovey-dovey.

But before that operation and the inevitable "movie" result, you see Helena in her bed and anticipate the inevitable "movie" dream. It begins as she steps out onto a gritty balcony overlooking Brighton Beach. A masked guy plays a violin. Guy suddenly disintegrates into what the filmmakers call "carbonization." The masked Valentine throws something sparkly at a door, and he and Helena fly through it on books.

During their arty trip, Helena sees two versions of her Mom (i.e., white sock versus black sock). The good queen wears a blonde wig and is lying down. Is she asleep or dead? The bad queen has dark hair and appears as that gigantic head and then as a real person serving Helena a meal at a long table, even offering ice cream. Is it evil-flavored?

Helena also often looks through a window into her own bedroom to see herself. One time she seems to be arguing with her Dad. Another time she's with someone else. Don't ask. I'm clueless.

After meeting a creature with a human face the filmmakers call a sphinx, Helena and Valentine "feed" it with books. Then she's arrested by "cops" who have beaky faces and long, spindly legs. They carry her within those legs past a window with the other Helena inside asleep, taking her to a man who looks like her Dad. He wears a broken metal mask that the filmmakers agree wasn't good. Looks dangerous. This character is supposed to be Prime Minister. Meaning? How would anyone know? Yo, clueless filmmakers!

Included in the arty tour:

- The City of Light and across the border the Land of Shadows (O, no! Not Good and Evil, O filmmakers!)
- The Library with that critter built of books and lots of flying paperbacks.
- Two giant creatures joined at the belly (Mom and Dad!?) and floating in a large room filled with circular staircases—and one of them holding a glowing box with a key!
- A trip up more stairs than the ones leading to heaven.
- A bunch of critters with long beaks—who talk!
- More evil black birds zooming about than Hitchcock ever hired.
- A kiosk with keyholes all around it.
- That MirrorMask.
- Finding the good queen (i.e., finally loving her Mom)

Is there a "logical" narrative in this dream world? Or could various events/meetings be moved about in the picture without altering its "meaning"? Or some of them even cut?

When reviewing books, I was advised to be kind when writing about a first novel because it was a beginning, a trial-and-error experience. Should I be kind to *MirrorMask* because it's a first feature-length movie by its creators?

But as Dave McKean and Neil Gaiman say during their long ramble before a comic book audience, they've known each other for 17 years. Both have created many short movies, illustrated books and graphic novels. They're not beginners.

But they do not know how to begin their movie and make clear to an audience that Helena and her parents are real, even if their job is putting on fantasy acts. You learn so little about all three, other than Helena's anger, that they're totally "flat" as characters. The filmmakers seem obsessed with blurring real and fantasy without making it clear that this is possibly their theme. And I'm not sure it is.

Their aesthetic confusion is probably why the \$4,000,000 picture grossed only \$864,959 in the U.S. Flopped, that is.

The main actors all seem to be good, although why would Jason Barry play a part where his face isn't seen until near the end? Most actors sell themselves and their careers on their faces. The filmmakers tell us Jason was in *Titanic*. I don't remember him and wish I could forget ever having seen that sinker—uh, stinker.

The camera really loves attractive Gina McKee in all three of her parts: Mom, Queen of Light, Queen of Darkness. Rob Brydon is blandly okay as Dad and Prime Minister. Stephanie Leonidas seems to be Helena's age so it's easy for her to play a girl with teenager-itis. I did wonder, though, about the constant hair hanging over her face. Does this "mean" she's hiding from herself or is it just the usual movie hairdresser's cliché?

The DVD extras are a roundup of the usual clichés: interviews with filmmakers, cast and crew. No one offers much insight into what *MirrorMask* supposedly means. Neal says, "I knew how to write a comic strip. I knew that his [Dave's] storytelling ability was better than mine." See the above

gross for their collective storytelling grade.

Dave says the short story is a great medium. Why didn't they make a short film, then? He says the drawings on Helena's wall define her world. "so it should look fake." Hmm.

Executive Producer Lisa Henson, Jim Henson's widow, wanted Dave to direct a feature-length fantasy film. Wonder what she thought of that gross?

Jason Barry says, "It was very theatrical, which is a contradiction in terms because it's theatrical on film." Which means the picture's arty art "overacts." Maybe Jason should stop making lousy pictures and become a movie critic. In *MirrorMask*, though, he'd be a movie "cricket."

*Richard Fuller was Philadelphia Magazine's film critic for over twenty years. He was The Philadelphia Inquirer's book columnist and reviewer for over thirty years. He also taught film and review-writing courses at several universities.*

---

## DVD Review: *Howl's Moving Castle*

*Reviewed by Edna Stumpf*

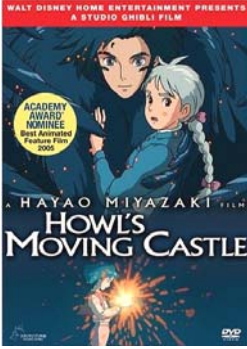
Just as graphic novels seem to be catching up with "real" novels in terms of quality and respectability (or maybe actual novels are regressing—thank you, Dan Brown) animated films are closing in on the conventional sort. One hint of this is that Jean Simmons and Lauren Bacall are doing voice-synchs. Another is a single, magical name: Hayao Miyazaki.

Disney Studios has closed a deal with Japan's Studio Ghibli to distribute the DVDs of eight revoiced Miyazaki films. They all reward watching. Some, with their resourceful girl-power characters and eye-capturing art, make you happy that not only the DVD but the motion picture itself were invented. The best-known is probably *Spirited Away*, which won the 2001 Academy Award for best animated film. Though its young heroine is drawn as a Westerner and of course speaks expensively translated English, its Japanese origin is evident throughout. Manga enthusiasts were

ready to receive it, and a much larger international market of adults brought their kids out for an intergenerational experience.

With this latest film—and I believe best of Miyazaki's fantasies for "kids of all ages," as the Disney flacks used to say—the response has not been so great. "Only" \$4.5 million in US box office sales. I don't care. *Howl's Moving Castle* is just fab. Maybe I think it's his best because, after three viewings, I'm still blissfully noticing influences from the traditions of Anglo-American "steampunk" SF, Japanese Noh Theater and the venerable, universal tale of faerie. If we're destined to go global, this is going in style.

One origin of *Howl's Moving Castle* is a novel for young adults by the excellent Welsh writer Diana Wynne Jones. It also is entitled *Howl's Moving Castle*. And lest somebody try on with you the wormy chestnut "the book is always better," let me just say: nope. The book, idiosyncratic and enchant-



### *Howl's Moving Castle*

**DVD Release Date:** March, 2006  
**Starring:** Christian Bale, Lauren Bacall, Jean Simmons, Blythe Danner & Billy Crystal (English voiceover for DVD)  
**Director:** Hayao Miyazaki  
**Screenwriters:** Hayao Miyazaki, based on a novel by Diana Wynne Jones  
**Rated:** PG  
**Studio:** Walt Disney Home Entertainment  
**Special Features:** "Behind the Microphone" featurette; Interview with Pixar Animation Studios Director, Pete Docter; Storyboards; Trailers; "Hayao Miyazaki visits Pixar Animation Studios" featurette.

ing in its own way, has a confusing assortment of characters—several of whom command so little reader identification that their final fate doesn't have much emotional impact. Downsized, and good riddance. And in the book, Howl, the wizardly romantic hero, goes to Wales. This is perhaps one Alternate Universe (AU) too many, even for the film's ideal viewers, trained as they are in the now-popular AU concept by long exposure to sci-fi plus years of channel-surfing. Wales makes no appearance in the Miyazaki version, though not through anti-Western bias.

The setting of this tale of love, war and coming-of-age is gorgeous and detailed and worldwide as to influence. Victorian England is represented in the drab gowns worn by discontented young Sophie Hatter, as well as the flowery hats she trims for customers. More Mittel Europe are the caped uniforms worn by soldiers of the realm who when not waging war are making trouble on the streets. Their harrassing of Sophie introduces Howl as a dashing protector. Who can fly, and who teaches Sophie.

Back in her shop, Sophie is insulted by a condescending customer with an enormous neck, a witch who is jealous of Howl's attentions and who inflicts Sophie with an aging spell. Suddenly our heroine is eighty years old and on the road, only to find shelter—with the guidance of a speechless but crafty scarecrow—in the castle of Howl himself. This eponymous ambulatory residence—think Baba Yaga's chicken-legged hut imagined by Terry Gilliam—is staffed by a defensive but cute kid wizard-trainee named Markl who is obviously in need of a grandmother. Also residing in the castle, a fire demon named Crucifer who provides the house-

hold with energy and would like to be authoritative but who is, as voiced by Billy Crystal, even cuter.

So Grandma Sophie becomes the cleaning lady in Howl's Moving Castle and begins her journey to adulthood and recovered youth. Enigmatically accepted by Wizard Howl—who is ear-ringed and epicene in the style of a spoiled rock star—she proves her value by banishing his sticky depressions and quite literally mopping up. When Howl is summoned to the King's palace to report for war duty, he hides in his bedroom. The Moving Castle has several magic exits, and Howl makes wizard's wages in two towns (though not the Waste, where he challenges warplanes as a bird-monster and from which he returns depleted), but he has been called to fulfill his oath under two names.

Howl wants his mommy.

Fortunately, Sophie is there to fill the role of Mom Pendragon! (Here is a wizard's name to conjure with.) Off to the King's palace—a Versailles lookalike—she encounters a little dog, a familiar witch with a huge neck and a head wizard named Madame Suliman. She also recovers a badly needed ability to fly.

It is getting confusing. I know, I know. Let me reassure you that the film is every bit as confusing. But it is so gloriously worth it. Life lesson. There is nothing better than being taken on a mysterious journey by an artist much smarter than you are. Mr. Miyazaki—or MiyazakiSan, as Pixar Honcho John Lasseter calls him in the schmaltzy DVD extra—has some points of view to... imply. Arguments to... inspire though tactfully not engage in. Thoughts to... plant as subtly and effectively as are the flowers Howl provides for Sophie in the pas-



toral AU they walk through while they are falling in love.

As we exit the dream state induced by this tale of wonders, we have themes to ponder. How wonderful that as Sophie passionately responds to the adventure of her life she periodically—and finally—becomes young again. How wonderful that the fate of a girl-child should matter so to an artist from the land that gave us the geisha. How wonderful that we are so interested in Sophie's inner life that the terrifying imagery of war takes us by surprise. For though the warships are hideously decorative and their cargo peculiarly avian, the violence in *Howl's Moving Castle* is pure Twentieth Century. Miyazaki was a child when Hiroshima was bombed in 1945.

Those of us who grew up on television's standard Itchy-'n-Scratchy cartooning, after we adjust to HMC's novelistic, two-hour length, must also accept a blurring of the lines of good-'n-evil. Sophie's beloved mother proves weak. The Witch of the Waste, who begins as a tough, Disneyesque villainess of a certain age, segues into a pathetic but redeemable state. Cowardly Howl grows up. Sophie grows up and simultaneously moves backward in time to meet him. The bombs stop on Madame Suliman's unexpected order, but stars continue picturesquely to fall. Though the ending is a bit busy and contrived, the magical effect is strong and moving and leads you to the rewatch.

Technologically, *Howl's Moving Castle* is so exquisitely crafted and colored that there are moments when you forget you're watching ani-

mation (no more, according to the creator, than ten per cent CGI). The DVD extras include interviews with Pixar producer Lasseter and his henchman, actor director and script-tinkerer Pete Docter. Both acquit themselves like burbling fans but we forgive them. They did their jobs and they allow us a glimpse of Mr. Miyazaki taking a bashful bow at a screening.

There are some nice observations of the iconic Hollywoodites Simmons and Bacall as they clear their throats and attack their characters. ("I was born to do despicable," Bacall is reported to have said when first introduced to the Witch of the Waste.) Emily Mortimer as the young Sophie and Christian Bale as Howl are fine but... young. They just can't compete. And doesn't that say something about the Japanese reverence for the old. (Billy Crystal is also fine; and always cute.)

The most original offering on this two-disc set is a chance to experience the entire story via dialogue and storyboard alone. This version cannot be accessed by chapter, but for admirers of the less-is-more mode of Asian drawing a whole additional dream is waiting.

MiyazakiSan threatens to retire after every project. We have the option to disbelieve. By American standards he is old. But he is a Japanese master craftsman, and therefore in his prime.

*Edna Stumpf was a regular Philadelphia Inquirer book reviewer for over 25 years, often writing about science fiction. She also guest-lectured for science fiction film courses.*

---

## A Science Fiction/Fandom Abecedary

by Steven H Silver

**A**n abecedary article is an essay in which each paragraph starts with a subsequent letter of the alphabet. In this particular case, each of the paragraphs (past this initial one) will relate to some aspect of science fiction or fandom, but each paragraph will also stand on its own as a little mini-essay.

**B**efore there were the Killer Bs of Bear, Benford, and Brin, there was Ray Bradbury.

Bradbury's style of science fiction is about as far as you can get from the Killer Bs and still be considered the same genre. While Bear, Benford and Brin use their fiction to extrapolate where science may take the human race, Bradbury uses the tropes of science fiction to focus more closely on humanity. In many ways, Bradbury uses science fiction the way Kurt Vonnegut uses it. It forms a back drop to the story he is telling and the plau-

sibility of his science comes in far behind the exigencies of his story.

“Cosmos” conjures images of Carl Sagan talking about the universe. But long before Sagan’s 13-part miniseries aired on PBS in 1980, “Cosmos” was the name of a collaborative serial which ran in *Science Fiction Digest* and *Fantasy Magazine*. Beginning in the July, 1933 issue of *Science Fiction Digest*, with a piece by Ralph Milne Farley, the series continued until December, 1934 when it was completed by Edmond Hamilton. In the middle of the run, the magazine changed names to *Fantasy Magazine* in January 1934. Many years later, in the 1970s, Forrest J. Ackerman reprinted the series in the Perry Rhodan books published by Ace, in volumes 32-60. The eighteen authors who participated in the round-robin were, in order: Ralph Milne Farley, David H. Keller, M. D., Arthur J. Burks, Bob Olson, Francis Flagg, John W. Campbell, Rae Winters, Otis Adalbert Kline, E. Hoffman Price, Abner J. Gelula, Ray Palmer, A. Merritt, J. Harvey Haggard, E.E. “Doc” Smith, P. Schuyler Miller, L.A. Eshbach, Eando Binder, and Edmond Hamilton.

DAW Books was the first sciSF publisher I was aware of as such. This was probably aided by the fact that at the time, all of their spines were yellow with black (sometimes red) lettering. This was a color scheme which began with their first book, Andre Norton’s *Spell of the Witch World*. Founded by Donald A. Wollheim, DAW also numbered their books and, as I write this, they are currently up to 1370, Denise Little’s anthology *Hags, Sirens and Other Bad Girls of Fantasy*. In 2003, DAW published three anthologies I edited, *Wonderous Beginnings*, *Magical Beginnings*, and *Horrible*

*Beginnings*, each of which reprinted the first published stories by science fiction, fantasy or horror authors (their numbers were 1245, 1248, and 1250). At that time, I discovered there was no on-line list of DAW Books by collector’s number and so I created one, which can be found at [www.sfsite.com/~silverag/daw1-100.html](http://www.sfsite.com/~silverag/daw1-100.html) (and subsequent pages). I strongly pushed for them to publish my books with a retro-yellow DAW spine, but did not prevail (probably for the best) and the books have black spines.

Eric Iverson was the first pseudonym used by Harry Turtledove when he began to be published. The name was foisted off on him when he sold his first novels to Belmont Tower Books because his editor thought he needed a more Nordic sounding name. Once used, Turtledove continued to publish using that name for about seven years, when he began using his own name in early 1984. The name appeared spelled multiple ways in the two books published by Belmont Towers, appearing as Eric Iverson on the cover, but as Erik Iverson on the title page of *Werenight*.

Fanzines have been a staple of science fiction since *The Comet* was published by the Science Correspondence Club in Chicago in 1930 and edited by Ray Palmer. The term, itself, wouldn’t come about for another ten years when Russ Chauvenet coined it for the October 1940 issue of *Detours*. While there has been some debate of late as to whether fanzines are dying in the face of the internet, Usenet, and blogs, a strong case can be made that fanzines are simply evolving to take advantage of the new technology. While computers and .pdfs may not have the same high-inducing mystique of the traditional Gestetner, they are much more cost effective and have the potential of reaching a much wider and broader audience.

Golems are creatures from Jewish folklore. The most famous story of the golem dating back to the eighteenth century, is set in the sixteenth century when Rabbi Judah Lowé of Prague was said to have created a golem to protect Czech Jews from the predations of Emperor Rudolf II. Created from mud or clay, the legend of the golem clearly has its basis in the first chapter of Genesis, when G-d created Adam from clay. According to legend, Rabbi Lowé wrote the Hebrew word



©2005, Alexis Gilliland

“Emes” (Truth) on the golem’s forehead. When the first letter was erased, resulted in the word “Meis” (Death), the golem ceased to exist. Golems still find their way into literature, such as Terry Pratchett’s *Feet of Clay*, but perhaps the most famous golem-like creature is the creature from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, although it was created from a reanimated corpse rather than clay.

**H**umor is notoriously difficult to write, yet the SF field has been blessed with numerous authors who can write stories which can evoke everything from a sly grin to a full belly laugh. While the most well known practitioners may be Robert Sheckley and Terry Pratchett, the names William Tenn, Tom Holt, Douglas Adams, and Robert Rankin, among others, should be noted. One of the more recent additions to the pantheon of humorists of the fantastic is Christopher Moore (a review of *A Dirty Job* appears in the Spring issue of *Some Fantastic*). While his masterpiece to date is the satirical religious novel *Lamb*, all of his works cause me to laugh out loud and are highly recommended.

**I**SFiC is the parent organization which runs Windycon and Picnicon in the Chicago area. Founded in the early seventies with a board of directors that included Mike Resnick, ISFiC has 32 Windycons with the 33rd one scheduled for this November. In July, ISFiC hosts a relaxacon, Picnicon. This one event gets fans out of the hotels and into forest preserves or parks to purge us of our natural pallor. For several years, ISFiC has sponsored a new writer’s contest, won in its first year by Richard Chwedyk, who went on to win the Nebula Award for his story “Brontë’s Egg.” ISFiC’s most recent endeavor is ISFiC Press, which is scheduled to publish its fourth book, *Worldcon Guest of Honor Speeches*, edited by Resnick and Joe Siclari, in August, 2006. (Disclaimer: I’ve been on the ISFiC Board since 1998 and am the publisher of ISFiC Press.)

**J**ules Verne, along with H.G. Wells, is considered by many to be one of the fathers of science fiction. Living in a world in which explorers were traveling to the ends of the Earth and learning about new lands, Verne’s voyages extraordinaire used futuristic inventions to ease the exploration of the world—whether it involved a submarine (*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, 1870),



©2004, Alexis Gilliland

bullets (*From the Earth to the Moon*, 1870) or a balloon (*Five Weeks in a Balloon*, 1863). Many of Verne’s stories eschewed scientific invention and merely are explorations, yet use the scientific method, such as *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1863). While many think of Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873) as SF, Verne’s entire point in writing the fictitious travelogue of Phileas Fogg was that it was, in fact, possible to make the described journey in the prescribed time using the technology of the time. It wasn’t really until Philip José Farmer got his hands on the story in 1973 with *The Other Log of Phileas Fogg* that the story became SF.

**K**elvin Throop is a recurring “character” who appeared in the pages of *Analog* in from the sixties. Beginning in July 1964 when R.A.J. Phillips published “A Day in the Life of Kelvin Throop” and seeing his most recent appearance as the author of “Do Unto Others” in June 2004, Throop is mostly known for his witticisms, which have often appeared as space fillers at the ends of stories.

**L**asers are the weapons of choice in the future. Usually (but not always) based on a gun design, lasers fire concentrated beams of light which do burning damage when they hit. Contrary to the laws of physics, lasers fired in a vacuum can be seen from the side although there should be no light dispersion. They also frequently make noise in a vacuum, at least in sci-fi films. For some reason, lasers are generally not used for peaceful means in science fiction, instead being relegated to the role of an advanced weapons system.

**M**ythology is the series of legends belonging to just about every culture on Earth



©2003, Alexis Gilliland

which attempts to explain not only the unknown aspects of the world, but also serves to collate the deeds of the culture's heroes. In modern fantasy writing, mythology often plays a role in providing a basis for stories which are familiar to many of the readers while at the same time tweaking them to create something new. Perhaps the mythology most often used by fantasy authors, at least recently, is the mythology of King Arthur, created by the French in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Similarly, Greek and Celtic mythology have long played an important role in fantasy fiction, but every now and then an author looks to the mythologies of other cultures, and is seen as offering a fresh voice in fantasy.

**N**ebulae, which give their names to one of the major science fiction awards, are the clouds of interstellar gas which indicate where stars are forming. They are also, just to make things more interesting, the clouds of interstellar gas which indicate where stars have died. Cataloged first by Charles Messier in the eighteenth century (he included galaxies), they were later re-catalogued and expanded as the New General Catalogue. The launching of the Hubble Space Telescope in 1990 aboard the space shuttle Discovery and the ability to enhance its pictures using computers has resulted in some of the most amazingly striking and beautiful photographs in the history of astronomy.

**O**uroboros, or the world serpent, is perhaps best known in science fiction circles from E.R. Eddison's 1922 novel *The Worm Ouroboros*, but the legend of the snake that swallows its tale is much older. Stories of the ouroboros date back to the Egyptians living in the sixteenth century B.C.E.

Centuries later, stories of the creature passed into the Hellenic world where the Greeks gave it the name *ouroboros* (οὐροβόρος) or tail-devourer. Perhaps the most famous example of the ouroboros is *Jörmungandr*, the Midgard Serpent of Norse myth. The son of Loki, *Jörmungandr* was thrown into the sea by Odin. He continued to grow until he encircled the earth and swallowed his own tail. In these stories, *Jörmungandr* had three encounters with Thor. In the first, he appeared as a cat and Thor had to try to lift him. In the second, Thor tried to catch the serpent using an oxhead as bait. Finally, the two met in Ragnarok, where Thor killed *Jörmungandr* before succumbing to the serpents venom.

**P**hysics is to SF what mythology is to fantasy. Many stories use as a basis, or at least pay lip service, to the laws of physics and extrapolations from the laws of physics. Despite this, there are certain areas where science fiction routinely has no regard for the physical universe, but those areas are permitted (one such being faster-than-light travel). Many SF writers are, in fact, physicists (such as Gregory Benford) and science heavily suffuses their writing. The best of the physicist authors know when to ignore the hard and fast rules of science in order to present a good story, plot, or characterizations while realizing that once they've established a science fictional universe (see *World-Building*, below) that follows the laws of physics, too much or too blatant disregard of those laws will drop the reader out of the story.

**Q**.E.D. was an extremely short lived television series starring Sam Waterston. Named for Waterston's character, Quentin E. Deverill, it ran for six whole episodes in 1982 and focused on an American professor living in Edwardian London. The six episodes saw Deverill creating steampunk versions of many later inventions. In the few episodes that were made, Deverill matched wits with his nemesis Dr. Stefan Kilkiss (portrayed by Julian Glover). Not currently available on video or DVD, I remember the episodes being quite enjoyable and in many ways reminiscent of the 1965 film "The Great Race" (in fact, the second episode was entitled "The Great Motor Race").

**R**obin Hood is the featured character in many stories, most of which might show familiarity with the Errol Flynn film *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, but not with history. Since Sir Walter Scott wrote *Ivanhoe* in 1819 and set the Robin Hood legend against the reign of King Richard I, that has been the favored setting for Robin Hood. In Robin's initial appearance in the 1377 poem *Piers Ploughman*, there is simply the reference "I ken 'rimes of Robin Hood," which places him as some sort of folk hero. Perhaps the most intelligent imagining of the Robin Hood legend was done in 1991, when Parke Godwin wrote *Sherwood*, which placed Robin as a Saxon hold out against William the Conqueror. While the Saxon-Norman conflict in the Robin Hood legend dates at least as far back as *Ivanhoe*, it fits much better into a story set shortly after the Norman Conquest rather than more than two-centuries after the Conquest (although there was still Saxon-Norman tension at that time).

**S**eries are often denigrated in science fiction and fantasy as a rehash of what has been done before. In fact there are different types of series. On the one hand, there are series which are planned out ahead of time. These are essentially a single extremely long book which must be broken up into volumes in order to make their publication possible. On the other hand, there are open-ended series which start out as a single book and the author keeps adding to them. Each type has strengths and weaknesses and there are good and bad examples of both.

**T**rans-Atlantic Fan Fund (TAFF) is the oldest of the Fan Funds, developed to help fans from one area travel to another. The precursor to TAFF was a collection to allow legendary fan writer Walt Willis to come to the United States in 1952. Each year, TAFF (and other fan funds) raise money through the sale of 'zines, auctions, and payment for voting rights. The money raised is used to send fans from Europe to North America (or vice versa) and North America to Australia (DUFF), or from Eastern to Western Canada. The purpose is to allow fans who otherwise wouldn't have a chance to meet face to face to get to know each other. The various fan funds are well worth supporting, whether you

actually run or not. David Langford (TAFF delegate in 1980) keeps a page of TAFF history at [www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/SF-Archives/Taff/taffhist.html](http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/SF-Archives/Taff/taffhist.html).

**U**nEarth was a magazine which lasted for only two years in the late 1970s. John M. Landsberg and Jonathan Ostrowsky-Lantz, the editors of *UnEarth*, gave themselves the task of discovering new talent and reprinting the first sales by established authors such as Harlan Ellison, Hal Clement, Algis Budrys, Kate Wilhelm, and more. Some of the authors who were discovered by unearth include James P. Blaylock, William Gibson, and Craig Shaw Gardner. In 1995, Landsberg announced that he had near-mint condition copies of each of the eight issues.

**V**ampires are the most widely used supernatural creature in speculative fiction, most likely surpassing such traditional creatures as dragons. While the most famous vampire remains Count Dracula, he was not the first (see John Polidori's *The Vampyr* for the first literary vampire). Dracula, however, provides the model for all vampires which have come after him, including Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's Count Saint-Germain or Kim Newman's Geneviève Dieudonné. One reason for this is that Bram Stoker was so successful in his depiction of Dracula (and the book is so much better than any of the film adaptations) that the rules Stoker established for vampires has sunk into the Jungian consciousness. Any post-Dracula vampire must either follow Stoker's rules or explain why they aren't. Many post-Stoker vampires, however, are much more sympathetic than Stoker's creation. In Yarbro's series, the vampire is



©2005, Alexis Gilliland

shown as being much more human than his villainous human adversaries. Other vampires seem to be of use primarily to serve the sexual fantasies of the stories' protagonists, if not their authors.

**W**orld-Building is perhaps one of the most necessary skills a science fiction or fantasy author can have, and yet it is all too often glossed over. In order to allow the reader to fully suspend his or her disbelief, the world in which a story is set must not only be internally consistent, but it also must be consistent with the world in which the reader dwells. While the greatest of world builders, such as the late, lamented Hal Clement, can create worlds in which nothing is as we might expect, too many authors seem to take a haphazard stab at creating their worlds, just slapping together whatever neat ideas they have. This is, perhaps, most prevalent when authors start pulling from different historical periods and cultures without concern for how things fit together.

**X**enomorphs tend to feature more heavily in sci-fi than SF, although they are represented in both. A xenomorph is a creature which can appear in other shapes. Used most amusingly in the radio version of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* where Douglas Adams introduced the rapidly evolving Haggunenons. Xenomorphs are also often seen in B-movies to heighten the tension or, more seriously, to raise paranoid questions about the "Other" masquerading as "Us."

**Y**oung *Sherlock Holmes* was a movie which seems to be almost forgotten, although it is of interest for at least two reasons. Produced by Steven Spielberg in 1984 and starring Nicholas

Rowe as Holmes and Alan Cox as Watson, the film postulates the two men meeting as boys in a British public school and facing an evil cult with a giant pyramid in the sewers of London. The first noteworthy thing about the film is that it saw the first use of completely CGI-generated character in the creation of a stained glass window knight that came to life to attack Holmes and Watson (animated by Pixar). The other item of note about the film is that it was written by Christopher Columbus, who went on to direct the first two *Harry Potter* films. I would love to write an article (or better yet commission one from someone with a greater background in the British public school system) about the similarities and differences of the schools shown in the two films.

**Z**arquon was a holy prophet introduced to the world in "Fit the Fifth" of the original *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* radio series. At the very last moment, he appears at Milliway's to make good on his promise of a second coming. Portrayed by Anthony Sharp on radio, the role was later recreated by Colin Bennett in the television series. Later, he was voiced by William Franklyn in *The Quintessential Phase* radio series.

*Steven H Silver is a fivetime Hugo Nominee for Best Fan Writer and the editor of the anthologies Wondrous Beginnings, Magical Beginnings, and Horrible Beginnings. He is the publisher of ISFiC Press. In addition to maintaining several bibliographies and the Harry Turtledove website, Steven is heavily involved in convention running and publishes the fanzine Argentus.*

---

## Book Review: *Triquorum One*, edited by Chris Teague

*Reviewed by Mario Guslandi*

What is the best format for horror, fantasy and SF is a matter of debate. Publishers and writers seem to prefer the novel, I suspect for commercial reasons. To me the short story is the best length for hosting genres where suspension of disbelief is an essential component, but I admit that sometimes a tale is too short to allow the author to fully develop a character or a plot.

Novellas and novelettes then may represent the right compromise and with this notion in mind Chris Teague's Pendragon Press, a small but very active UK imprint, is launching a series of trade paperbacks featuring three novelettes from different speculative fiction authors. The first anthology, introduced by Paul Di Filippo, includes (in alphabetical order) Allen Ashley, John Grant and Lavie Tidhar.

---

### *Triquorum One*

**Editor:** Chris Teague  
**ASIN:** 0953859878  
**Publisher:** Pendragon Press  
**Release date:** April, 2006

£5.99, 130 pages,  
trade paperback



---

In Ashley's "The Interlopers" a man's apartment is continuously visited by a couple of intruders, at first rather elusive then getting gradually more substantial and bold. Conversely the apartment's legitimate resident becomes less and less substantial to the point of almost fading away. Although the final part, when the plot's denouement is already in plain view, could have been shortened a bit, the story remains a strong lesson about life's ambiguity and frailty, quite remarkable for its alienating and up-setting nature.

John Grant (aka Paul Barnett) contributes "The Thirty-Million-Day Dance Card" where an aged former diplomat on his death bed reminisces about the various women he loved during his lifetime. Being—much to my shame—scarcely familiar with Grant's fictional work I was extremely

impressed by his exceptional ability as a storyteller which made me read the whole novella in one go. In the beginning just a lovely mainstream piece of fiction, the story gets suddenly darker in the last pages when the supernatural element bursts in, an outstanding example of great narrative talent.

Tidhar's "The Dream Chair" is aptly entitled, having in fact the insubstantiality of a dream, where the poet Walt Whitman is summoned to Paris by Robert-Houdin to try a new invention. Whitman's surreal journey (not much different from the delirium of an acid trip) leads him to brief encounters with Dylan Thomas and Lewis Carroll, a fleeting homosexual experience and other implausible escapades.

While a *Triquorum Two* is already announced (at the moment the contributors' names remain secret), I suggest you hurry up and get a copy of the present volume before it goes out of print. It's inexpensive good reading and Grant's novella alone is worth the price of the purchase.

*Mario Guslandi lives in Milan, Italy and is most likely the only Italian who regularly reads (and reviews) dark fiction in English, he's written reviews for a number of genre websites such as Emerald City, The Agony Column, Infinity Plus, The SF Site and Horrorworld.*

---

## **Book Review: *Already Dead*, by Charlie Huston**

*Reviewed by Chris Elliot*

I've always had a vexing relationship with written horror. For me, horror has always been best experienced in the visual media (film, television, animation) with all the creepy musical accompaniments that offers, or a near second, in the quasi-visual media (graphic novels, comics), rather than strictly through prose. The nearest I've come to complete joy in the horrific in fiction has been in those novels or stories that explore it through other generic conventions (say, the mystery form, like any number of Arthur Conan Doyle's Holmes novellas and short stories, the "Hound of the Baskerville's" being the high water

mark; or any of Poe's psychologically infused narratives). But for vampires, mummies, and the like, I've tended to avoid the written word in favor of visual representations. To get me to pick up a horror novel, I usually need an initial hook that'll pull me in; something to get me started and get me past my entrenched, and I'm sure all-too-parochial, preconceptions.

Charlie Huston's *Already Dead* is exactly what the doctor ordered in that regard. Here is a horror novel with a very solid non-horror hook: a novel dealing with a traditional horror theme (vampirism) set in a contemporary setting (New York

City), but focused through the lens of the hard-boiled street-smart conventions of the noir American detective novel. It's protagonist, Joe Pitt, lives in the realm of street urchins cracking wise, sultry hard-drinking rich dames looking for a little bit more than just some nosing around from the brooding shamus they hire, double-crossing informants, and "missing persons" (the uber-plot device of all detective story plot-devices). And, yes, Joe is one of those typically taciturn detectives, forced by events both beyond and within his control to take "that job," the one he knows no matter what is going to lead to something bad, really bad... like *Chinatown* bad. In this respect, Joe walks in the worn at the heels gum-shoe foot-steps of Sam Spade, Phillip Marlow, Jake Gittes, and all the rest of them: haunted ruminators on the human condition, weighed down by pasts that won't go away and by the mean streets of an urban jungle that seems intent on smacking them down in the most existential of fashions.

In *Already Dead*, the past that won't go away is, well, the fact that Joe is a vampire with a pretty strong need to drink blood on a fairly regular basis. And the "missing person" is Amanda Horde, daughter of rich and jaded trophy wife, Marilee Ann Horde, and all-too-nurturing daddy doctor, Dale Edward Horde. Joe is commissioned mostly against his will (see vampire clan favors and politics below) to search for Amanda, a teenager who's at one and the same time just bored enough and just desperate enough with her already-has-everything lifestyle and her dysfunctional parents to find slumming in the streets with the junkies and the waifs a kind of refreshing "on the cheap" subterranean New York City version of summer

camp (all the cool super-rich kids are doing it). Problem is she seems to have checked out of the home scene for a bit too long this time, to the point that her absence has managed to register with more than usual effect in her mother's booze addled consciousness. So, it's Joe on the hunt, and the story-arc is on its way.

There's nothing at all new in this series of plot devices and the reader shouldn't expect anything too innovative at this level of story. That's okay, though, because they mostly just form a convenient armature upon which Huston can work his prose magic. Huston has a real feel for describing the New York City street-scene and for character dialogue, and while the narrative conventions he uses to structure that dialogue are at least as old as a pulp novel from the 1930s, his words don't feel worn out or tired. Everything tends to ring true. When characters speak, what they say doesn't sound fake or hackneyed and there's a real energized quality to their voices: they feel like the types of hard-on-their-luck wannabe players that you might meet in 2006 in certain parts of New York City on a hot summer afternoon... except in the world of *Already Dead*, you'd probably be most likely to meet them after evading a "shambler" or two intent on eating your brains.

This is, after all, also a story embedded within the horror world. So instead of the usual police/crime syndicate turf-wars landscape, this missing person story is mapped out on a landscape of the paranormal. In *Already Dead*, this amounts to an assumed history of competing vampire clans fighting over and staking claims to portions of the grid-like turf of New York City. There's the old school and long entrenched "Coalition" (think staid though vicious Victorian power-brokers); the post-60s hippy/anarchist/feminist/trans-gender "Society," with their leftist politics (it's "VOZ," as in "Victims of Zombification," not zombies, thank you); the black panther-like "Hood;" and the biker gang "Dusters." As Joe knows and helpfully narrates to the reader: you help one of these vampire clans at the expense of pissing off another one; you provide a favor for one group only by ending up owing another one to another group.

Not surprisingly, it's within this vampire clan

---

### **Already Dead**

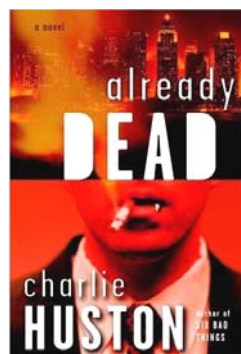
**Author:** Charlie Huston

**ISBN:** 034547824X

**Publisher:** Del Ray

**Release date:** Dec., 2005

\$12.95, 268 pages,  
trade paperback





level of plot that Huston manages to delve most interestingly into the vampire side of Joe Pitt's daily existence. Here we find out a few of the ins and outs of being a free agent vampire in the unstable political equilibrium of New York City vampire clan politics. Because of the give and take of the obligations and favors system, Joe finds himself perennially caught in the middle. In *Already Dead*, this complicated exchange system ends up with our protagonist losing a certain much-needed stash of blood, which in turn leads to a well-rendered and satisfyingly graphic scene involving what happens to Joe, and the unfortunate others around him, when the virus in his body doesn't get the blood it needs when it finally really needs it. As an interesting side-note, vampirism is represented here as a viral infection rather than as some kind of occult transfiguration; which may lead the reader, logically enough, to ancillary considerations on how our fears have shifted over the history of the vampire mythos – it's all about biological contamination in *Already Dead*.

The introduction of the clan sub-plot and all the assumed clan history makes it pretty clear that *Already Dead* is likely just the initial salvo in a soon

to be series of similar Joe Pitt novels set in the same cityscape with many of the same cast of supporting characters. As if in preparation for this, Huston takes the time to develop several key supporting players just enough, and leaves certain tangential plot lines dangling tantalizingly open and undeveloped by book's end (see, in particular, the Enclave and Evie threads just waiting for development), to leave the reader gagging for more beyond its relatively short, though sharp and tight 268 pages.

*Already Dead* won't shake the foundations of the detective or vampire fiction landscapes, but through the skilled intermingling of those two genres Huston presents a group of smartly drawn characters situated within a contemporary horror landscape all wrapped up in a hip, urban-worldly prose style that has me, at least, looking forward (with any luck) to seeing further developments in future.

*Chris Elliot has written film and television reviews for Popmatters.com. He currently lives in Northern Virginia with his ever increasing collection of anime soundtracks.*

---

## **Book Review: *Nightlife*, by Rob Thurman**

*Reviewed by Matthew Appleton*

I'm not a regular reader of fantasy, horror or their misbegotten brethren published under the "dark fantasy" euphemism, but it seems that a wave of a particular hybrid of fantasy and horror is showing up increasingly in the SF bookshelves. These works—usually set in the present somewhere in or near a metropolis—posit a world where various mythical creatures, both benign and hostile toward humankind, today live in the world around us, and the majority of humanity is completely oblivious to them. During a visit to your local bookstore, you will find a number of active series and standalones using such a scenario and employing the scenario with various degrees of affect. It's this particular crowded subgenre of horror that Rob Thurman chose to use in his debut novel, *Nightlife*.

In *Nightlife*, Thurman introduces to Cal Leandros and his older half-brother Niko. Cal is only

half-human, the product of his mother mating with a nightmarish creature that he and his brother call Grendels. Unfortunately for Cal, who in almost every way looks human, the Auphe (whom Niko termed "Grendels" when they were both kids and are actually "elves" of a kind, but not in the manner J.R.R. Tolkien described them) harbor specific plans for him and during his teen years they managed to capture him and transport him back to their world. As their mother died during the kidnapping and they have no other family, Niko kept vigil at the spot where Cal disappeared and is paid for his perseverance when Cal returns through an interdimensional portal a few days later. However, during that time Cal aged two years and retains no memory of what happened during his captivity.

In the years since the incident, Niko and Cal have managed to avoid further contact with the

Grendels and have found themselves in a relatively stable existence living in Manhattan, where the number of supernatural creatures seems much lower than in rural areas. That doesn't mean that such beings don't live in New York—there are vampires, trolls, boggles and werewolves (just to name a few—but for the most part they show little desire or inclination to harm Niko or Cal. However, the slight sense of security they do feel is shattered when Niko encounters a Grendel while in Central Park. They soon find out nearly every Grendel in existence is now in the city, and they intend to finish what they started when they first kidnapped Cal: use him as a means of destroying most of humanity.

The heart of this novel is the relationship between Niko and Cal. Five years older than Cal, Niko actually acts as more of a guardian than big brother. Niko regularly trains and constantly seeks to learn additional methods of combat, and he has assembled a library that provides information on just about any preternatural race that might attack either of them. He attempts to train Cal and teach him all he's learned, but despite his previous ordeal, Cal shows only marginal interest in learning from Niko. In fact, Cal is a stereotypical lackadaisical slacker who is trying to get through life with as little effort as possible.

In addition, Niko practically abandoned any idea of living his own life. Because they need to live their lives in a very low-profile manner, Cal and Niko have formed no real friendships or relationships (romantic or otherwise) with anyone.

Beyond their clothes, the library Niko has assembled and a small arsenal of weapons they own, they have no real worldly possessions. In essence, they only possess what's essential for their survival. While familial ties are important—especially when your little brother is the only family you have in the world—I'm certain that plenty of people in Niko's situation would choose not to make the sacrifices he made.

At the same time, they still manage to behave much like brothers. The two of them frequently try to get on each other's nerves, one up each other and engage in verbal sparring and horseplay. They also engage in heated disagreements and hold grudges. In essence, even though they only have each other, they still engage in the type of behavior often seen in sibling rivalry.

While their relationship provides a center to the novel, *Nightlife* isn't necessarily a novel about brothers. In fact, *Nightlife* is mostly an action novel. With the exception of a giant info-dump provided by Robin Goodfellow—an undercover satyr who owns a used car lot in Brooklyn, befriends the Leandros brothers and helps them as they attempt to deal with the Auphe threat—most of the time the characters are busily trying to stay one step ahead of their pursuers while trying to ascertain their motives and handling other preternatural threats as they appear. (Just as an aside, Thurman handles the info-dump quite well, using it to simultaneously reveal quite a bit about Goodfellow's personality.) When the action does let up, it's usually because Nike and Cal have retreated

## Goats: The Comic Strip by Jonathan Rosenberg



goats: the comic strip jan. 17, 2006 <http://www.goats.com> [jon@goats.com](mailto:jon@goats.com) ©2006 jonathan rosenberg. all rights reserved

so that they can rest and recuperate.

Thurman employs a few other nice touches during the narrative. *Nightlife* is told in the first person through Cal, and at one point during the novel when Cal is possessed Thurman nicely handles the change in narrator voice. Furthermore, the cast of non-humans is just as morally complex as humanity itself. As a group, they occupy a spectrum that goes from downright hostile and antagonistic towards humankind (the Auphe) to desiring their presence (Robin Goodfellow). Even within species there exists a mixture of attitudes; werewolves, for example, can be antagonistic or friendly towards humans, depending on their personal feelings. And while we only see one vampire in the course of events, she wishes to maintain a congenial relationship with humans and actually ingests a supplement that suppresses her urge for human blood. However, it's insinuated that other vampires in the world aren't as accommodating as her.

Although the author's website states a sequel, *Moonshine*, is scheduled for a March, 2007 release, *Nightlife* works well as a stand-alone novel. All the major plot points are dealt with, and the conclusion suggests the threat our protagonists faced is completely resolved. However, this is a world inhabited

---

### **Nightlife**

**Author:** Rob Thurman  
**ISBN:** 0451460758  
**Publisher:** Roc  
**Release date:** March, 2006

\$6.99, 339 pages,  
paperback



---

by plenty of preternatural characters, and Niko and Cal certainly managed to make a few enemies over the course of the novel. Besides, even though it's marketed as fantasy, *Nightlife* is really a horror novel, and anyone who came of age since the original *Friday the 13th* knows that no matter how things appear, sequels are always possible.

Overall, *Nightlife* is a solid first novel. Thurman shows a nice ability to mix horror with moments of levity. The characters show the type of growth and change you'd expect from individuals who experience the type of challenges presented by an antagonist such as the Auphe and their hired help. It will be interesting to see if Thurman shows the same type of growth as a writer in *Moonshine*.

---

## **DVD Review: *Natural City***

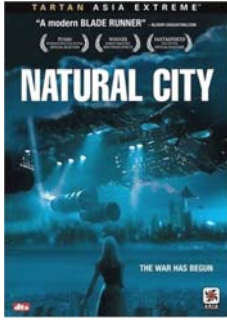
*Reviewed by Christopher J. Garcia*

I watched *Blade Runner* as the 3,600<sup>th</sup> movie I ever crossed off my copy of the *Video Hounds Guide*. I was hoping to save it for number 5K, but I figured I had to see it before I did a panel about 1980s sci-fi films. I recently rewatched it—the original as-seen-in-theatres release, and it was even better than the Director's Cut. It was one of those movies that could really change a person's view on sci-fi, movies, and really what it means to be human—a great film that spawned dozens of imitations.

One of those is *Natural City*, and that's both a compliment and a knock. There's little in *Natural City* that we haven't seen before in a hundred different films of the last two decades. That's not true, there are so many visuals that are original

that you can easily miss the subtitles. I almost wished for one of those bad dubs so that I could have gotten even more into the visuals without missing the dialog. But scattered throughout the film are visual references to *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, *Starship Troopers*, *The Matrix*, just about every major American sci-fi hit and the films of Hong Kong legends like Jet Li and John Woo.

Maybe that was done on purpose as a way of saying that Korean filmmakers are the new thing, replacing our stodgy US, Chinese and British filmmakers and setting up their own Renaissance. The over-the-credits sequence seems to say that. We're shown a 3D circuit diagram with all the writing on the chips initially in English letters and numbers



## Natural City

**DVD Release Date:** April, 2006  
**Starring:** Ji-tae Yu, Jae-un Lee, Rin Seo, Eun-pyo Jeong, & Doo-hong Jung  
**Director:** Byung-chun Min  
**Screenwriters:** Byung-chun Min  
**Rated:** R  
**Studio:** Tartan Video  
**Special Features:** "The Story of *Natural City*" featurette; deleted scenes cast interviews; trailers

only to be replaced with the Korean credits. That's a theme for the entire film. It's the first salvo in the battle to make Korea the new world sci-fi center. I'm not sure if they will succeed with *Natural City* though. Maybe this is one of those battles that you can lose because it fires up the later fights.

The film is straight-forward enough. We're told that Ria, a cyborg who is set to expire in less than three days, has been with R for almost two years entirely in text over a black screen. Nice touch, especially since it leads us into a fantasy world. R is a member of a cyborg hunting squad, like the one that Deckard is assigned to in *Blade Runner*, only with outfits out of Robert Heinlein's most militaristic fetish dream. R wants to stay with Ria forever, but that requires the kidnapping of DNA which happens to be in a prostitute. The whole thing runs R into Noma, the head of the cyborg hunting group. Noma starts to get hotter on R's tail as the film goes on, though not in the way that Edward G. Robinson works his way to Fred McMurray in *Double Indemnity*. Sadly, the plot gets muddled and towards the end you're just watching for the next breathtaking fight or visual.

The cyborgs are there to be ultra-powerful things that kill people left and right and allow Noma and R to look like bad asses who are the only ones who can hang with the 'borgs. It's a traditional problem in these sorts of movies, but here it's most obvious and it hurts the overall film. How often does that happen in American sci-fi? All the time in the old days, but rarely now and us critical types usually harp on it heavily.

The look of the film is amazing. There are beautiful simulation effects that slap you in the optic nerve and there are fantastic scenarios

where girls in leotards dance around turntables and nightclubs where people dress like it's 1950. There are battles and great moments in shoot-out history. When a group goes to take out a couple of cyborgs, and end up with poochscrew of nearly epic proportions, the whole event just lights up the screen like a Julia Roberts smile... drenched in blood.

The thing that struck me most wasn't the fighting, or the incredible art and set direction, or even the complex storyline. It was the way everyone was presented. It was like sci-fi of the 1950s; everyone was exactly what you thought they'd be and they played those roles to the letter. The rogue cop, the hard-nosed chief, the dame with legs down to her shoes, they're all there, but they all feel like flat characters that have been lightly painted over to give them the illusion of depth. There's romance, all done very much by the book, and there's action, which just freakin' rocks, and there's a Western digging up through too. The Noir elements aren't really Noir, though. They're *Blade Runner*.

I'm not going to say that *Natural City* isn't worth watching, it certainly is, but if you're watching it to see what the next thing in science fiction film will be, plan to be disappointed. If you wanna see 'plosions and fightin' and the best special effects this side of Paul McCrane getting splashed across the windshield in *Robocop*, *Natural City* is a way to go.

*Christopher J. Garcia edits The Drink Tank on eFanzines.com and is a writer, filmmaker and historian from San Jose, CA. He has had work appear a bunch of places a bunch of times and he is damn proud of it.*

## DVD Review: *The Fog* (2005)

Reviewed by Sara K. Ellis

One Friday night in 1980, my sister made me enormously happy. She was working a few blocks away at the Bagdad, a once glorious vaudeville theater that had been gutted into a triplex by its then hillbilly management.

"You want to come up for *The Fog* premiere? I can get you in," she said.

I didn't know much about it, only that it was the latest offering from John Carpenter, a director whose previous offering, *Halloween*, had turned me into an insomniac, but for Portland kids, especially those whose prude parents didn't block them from PG and R ratings, the speed at which one took in the latest blockbusters proffered bragging rights. Mondays would play themselves out at the pencil sharpener, that grade school version of the water cooler where we would line up and discuss our weekend forays into an adulthood loaded with car chases and the liberal use of the word "balls." For those who were otherwise undistinguished by athletic ability or a proper count of Britannia jeans, knowledge of the "backseat scenes" in *Saturday Night Fever*, or just why Carrie White had been told to "plug it up" helped set us apart from uncorrupted classmates whose mentions of *Pete's Dragon* could never hope to attain our heights of potty-mouth sophistication. *The Fog*, I anticipated, would keep me atop the shaving pile for at least a month.

Carpenter's latest, however, was definitely no blockbuster, and within three seconds of our arrival, I knew that its premiere would by no means entail the red carpet treatment enjoyed by *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, when Michael Douglas had come to present it years earlier. My sister, I realized, had really meant a sneak preview, and, as much as I craned my neck, hoping that the shel-lacked blond matron in front of me was Janet Leigh, the closest I got to a celebrity sighting was an overweight local disc jockey whose name, which started with Dancin', could have only implied the lithe steps of a sumo wrestler were he to drop a rock on his foot and hop blindly into a nest of yellow jackets. After plugging a local King's Table, the D.J. promised even more scares, if only

we would "stick around after the credits rolled." They did, we did, and the lights went up to reveal a bowl of dry ice holding the exit door ajar, over which hopped a Hefty bag-shrouded theater employee to drag our host back to his local FM hell-hole. A few in the audience started gamely, but most just used the extra adrenalin to lurch butt from seat and file out with all the enthusiasm of our onscreen leper colony.

But while the premiere wasn't exactly a red carpet event, the film itself was far from disappointing. I had gone anticipating another slasher picture; what I got, and what Carpenter has, for better or worse, provided consistently over the years was a complete surprise; a departure not only from his previous films, but from Hitchcock's *The Birds*, to which *The Fog* played *homage*.

Which why, at the risk of sounding like a crotchety old sea dog, the 2005 remake, directed by Rupert Wainright, with a screenplay by Cooper Layne, is such a unwieldy fiasco: a screaming display of ignorance about what made its predecessor(s)—Hitchcock, Carpenter, you name it—work.

Hitchcock's ability to maintain suspense despite his constant use of the cringe-inducing rear projection, and in this case, Carpenter's disco era lighting, are clear evidence that better special effects do not make for better scares. Personally, I was hoping to avoid this subject, as bringing it up now seems as futile as telling Hans Zimmer to mellow out on the keyboard, but Wainright has made this impossible. Certainly, had other elements in the original not worked so well, Carpenter's fog might have easily announced Mitzi Gaynor as it did a boatload of sea wraiths. But back then it was enough that it accomplishes four things: glow, move against the wind, have hooks pop out of it at inopportune times, and most importantly, remain silent. It's no wonder that in this version our lighthouse D.J. (Selma Blair) spins corporate rock to predecessor Adrienne Barbeau's jazz, for our new fog is ear-splitting, rolling into town like some bastard combination of dental suction tube and Margaret Cho's rendition of a pussy cyclone. Without all of that deaf-

ening emo, our soon-to-be-slaughtered teens would have caught on and left town before the previews ended, and when it comes to the wraiths themselves, while Carpenter may have stooped to the era's proclivity for Freaky Flashers, Wainright's digitized counterparts need to beg their jobs back from whatever Chuck E. Cheese has laid them off.

To reiterate, special effects can do little for a film when technique is entirely lost on its director, whose British accent does not belie anything near a Hitchcockian sensibility. Wainright's idea of building tension in a scene is to cut numbingly back and forth between jiggling sharp object and jiggling teenager, until the sheer exhaustion of probabilities forces the two to meet. These are not supernatural forces at work, but an all-too-bloated ego matched by an equally bloated budget. Where events in Carpenter's film escalated, building on the dread of approaching nightfall, Wainright topples from cheap shock to ho-hum augury: a skeletal hand in the sand to a gold watch; a spontaneously combusting antique mirror to shorted computer screen. And this one step forward, two-steps-back approach does not merely indicate a lack of technique, but even more problematically, a lack of consideration for the film's female characters.

Despite one dorky and very gratuitous shower scene—in which we desperately beg for more steam, if not fog—this new version is a distant port from its freewheeling '70s original. Back then it was possible for character, Elizabeth (Jamie Lee Curtis) to both hitchhike and sleep with a total stranger (Tom Atkins) because she felt like it. Now a proper back-story must be in place be-

fore their successors (Maggie Grace and Tom Welling) can hit the showers—they're old lovers who've been separated by her pesky independence. Curtis's Elizabeth, albeit a much smaller role, was a woman who controlled her own destiny, but in a misguided attempt to add depth to the character, Layne has tied her to a supernatural destiny, marrying her off to a crusty old ghost by film's end. Thanks Coop! Layne does this same trick in enhancing the role of the town official, originally played by Curtis's real life mother, Janet Leigh, by making her Elizabeth's mom. It's too bad that the scenes establishing this relationship do little more than show powerful women as really bad mothers.

The most egregious fumble Layne makes, however, is his decision to remove D.J. Stevie Wayne's centrality to the plot. In the original, Wayne (Carpenter's then wife, Adrienne Barbeau) was the engine that kept both the story and characters, moving throughout the film. It was from her vantage point in a lighthouse, that we witnessed the fog's approach, and it was Wayne who put the pieces together and warned the townspeople over the airwaves. Wayne, in Carpenter's film, was also an unapologetic single mother; other than the ill-fated Dan the weatherman, there were no men trying to rescue or make her respectable by film's end, as is the case with Welling and Blair.

Michel Chion, in his book *La Voix Au Cinema*, argues that it is the separation between men and women that works as a central motif in Carpenter's film. The panoptic power of Wayne's voice is the disembodied force that links the film's disparate characters, and does battle with the equally



### *The Fog (2005)*

**DVD Release Date:** January, 2006  
**Starring:** Tom Welling, Maggie Grace, Selma Blair, DeRay Davis & Kenneth Welsh  
**Director:** Rupert Wainwright  
**Screenwriter:** Cooper Layne, based on an original screenplay by John Carpenter & Debra Hill  
**Rated:** PG-13  
**Studio:** Sony Pictures  
**Special Features:** Commentary by director Rupert Wainwright; "Remaking a Horror Classic" featurette; "Making of Special Effects" featurette; Deleted scenes with optional commentary.

ephemeral fog. Rather than fighting the encroaching demons, however, Wayne must show proper penitence by freaking out like your average horror bimbo and leaving the lighthouse to find her son: and all this for another shallow special effects piece in which she is forced to swim with denizens from the Haunted Mansion. Once again, by adding *cliché* and reducing the anomie of Elizabeth, Nick, and Stevie to a love triangle, Layne solves that dastardly single-mother problem and simultaneously excises the engine of the plot.

The social backwardness of this picture is certainly not intentional. Layne and Wainright are too ignorant of their medium to even know what a male-gaze is, much less enforce one. The interviews in the DVD's special features are proof: they've nothing to discuss, no inspirations to reference other than their own muddled contriv-

ances. Watching them speak is like being held captive audience by the shop class bully while he explains his method for baking Shrinky Dinks: "First I preheated the oven, then I painted inside the lines, then I put the thing in and watched it shrivel into a mangled kernel of its former self." That, sadly, would be too generous, and it is disconcerting to see Carpenter disparage the original film in another interview. I'd like to think that he's just being modest, but more than likely, he's showing up his unworthy heirs by demonstrating the humility and self-criticism of a real craftsman.

*Sara K. Ellis recently repatriated after 13 years of Tokyo trains. She now lives behind the Orange curtain where she co-publishes the reverse culture-shock 'zine, The Bleeder.*

---

## DVD Review: *Half Light*

*Reviewed by Alex Esten*

So what happens after an actress's career fizzles out as she stars in annoying, stupid and unnecessary sequels to a mediocre film "remake" of a mediocre eye-candy 1970s TV show, or after said actress hooks up with a younger, quasi-hunky, entirely goofy-looking A-list celebrity who has a functional future ahead of him in Hollywood, or even after said actress can no longer use the *Disclosure/Striptease* B-movie schlock/fan-service as a type of bartering currency to repair her ailing fan favor? In Demi Moore's case, *Half Light* is what happens—or doesn't happen if it happens to be a particularly bland direct-to-video horror movie. And it's very, very bland.

To describe the strange entity that has replaced a coherent plot in *Half Light*, I'm inclined to quote Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice*, when Alec Baldwin is trying to decipher *The Handbook for the Recently Deceased*, noting how it "reads like stereo instructions." I feel that's an appropriate parallel, because *Half Light* itself resembles stereo instructions, and I have a hunch that the writer/director of this movie has never taken a screenwriting course, instead relying on the stereo instruction

equivalent of Do-It-Yourself screenwriting books found at the bottom of the racks in a Border's or Barnes and Noble.

That's not to say *Half Light* is bad, although most would certainly reach that conclusion, and I'd usually agree with them. The writing is very flat; it has no punch, no pizzazz. It definitely just plods along... it sits on itself, and it becomes painful at times. The guys know what I'm talking about regarding the pain of sitting on ourselves. It isn't fun, just like *Half Light*.

The cinematography is average at best, the only saving grace of each frame being the fairly beautiful Irish landscapes of the film. But then again, much of the film is muted grays, so those usually gorgeous visuals ultimately glob into this overpowering gray color theme. I wish I could say the visuals redeem this movie... but I'm not a good enough liar. The poor man's CGI lighthouse is distracting and out-of-place in this film, as well. I'd expect that (unintentional) style in Tim Burton's *Big Fish* or in particular Monty Python flicks (the animation shorts, anyone?). Here, however, a badly rendered Dr. Seuss lighthouse looks messy.



## *Half Light*

<b>DVD Release Date:</b>	January, 2006
<b>Starring:</b>	Demi Moore, Hans Matheson, Henry Ian Cusick, James Cosmo, Kate Isitt & Therese Bradley
<b>Director:</b>	Craig Rosenberg
<b>Screenwriters:</b>	Craig Rosenberg
<b>Rated:</b>	R
<b>Studio:</b>	First Look Pictures
<b>Special Features:</b>	None.

In fact, most of the film is a jumbled mess. There is zero consistency throughout, especially regarding the story—if a discernible story had been established, I missed it entirely, like most of the audience, I'd expect. *Half Light* begins as a tragedy. Demi Moore's son drowns because she didn't lock a gate, and didn't check on him while he was playing outside... near their rowboats. There's some mild intercutting between Demi making dinner and her son, so occasionally, we get parallel action occurring.

But there's no emotional investment. I know I didn't care about the son. Realistically, who would? He has barely had a few minutes of screen-time after the opening credits, and the director felt it more necessary to focus on Demi and her boyfriend than to manipulate the audience to elicit the kind of sympathy and emotion necessary for the hauntings that come later (incidentally, most of the hauntings are incredibly weak). We needed to *feel* why the loss of her son was going to drive her to some remote fishing town in Ireland. We needed to *feel* the relationship between Demi and her son... because it's only a loss when there's something to lose in the first place, and the movie fails to establish anything to lose. And yet, Demi is so grief and guilt-stricken that she flees to this coastal town.

Then the scary things start happening, and the movie begins to pick up a little bit. There were moments when I became genuinely interested in what was going to happen next, because there are some genuinely solid creepy parts of this movie. At one point, Demi is looking in a mirror, with her arms folded across her chest. There is a pause, and then her reflection moves, brushing its hair with its hand. The rest of the movie needed to be like this.

Unfortunately, it doesn't get better. After the spirit of her dead son tries to drown her (which was actually fairly interesting), then tries to strangle her after she wakes up from the drowning nightmare, Demi is so strained and unnerved that she leaps into bed with this cute Irishman she's been flirting with after moving to this town. As much as I'd rather not say it, seeing Demi Moore get "back in the saddle again," so to speak, made me feel much more comfortable, because that's the Demi Moore we know and love: the *Disclosure* whore. But then again, the love scene has absolutely nothing to offer. We see a minimal amount of skin (unheard of in a Demi flick), the kisses seem forced, and it just lacks the tingle-factor of *Disclosure*. So ultimately, it's a contrived romance between two unsympathetic characters that have zero chemistry... which makes me all the more convinced the love scene was fan-service, and mediocre fan-service at that.

If the random *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* B-movie plot developments/sex scenes weren't bad enough, the movie stumbles its way to another complication. The cute Irishman may be dead. Demi was going to meet him at a party in town. When he doesn't show up, she asks around. He's been dead for years, she's told, and he's buried in the cemetery. The lighthouse that he operates has been nonfunctional for a while, and she shouldn't go there, because it's haunted by vengeful spirits of long-dead townsfolk who met their ends in very brutal murders involving meat hooks, chains, balconies overlooking a rocky shoreline, and so on.

Apparently his ghost wants to kill Demi, which is the perfect explanation why he's comforting her throughout the movie, listening to her, etc. Of course, the town psychic is telling her that, and



this is the same town psychic who told her that her dead son is trying to protect/save her from death... even though I assume that attempted strangulation and dragging your mother down into the water are usually indicative of more homicidal tendencies than altruistic. But hey, I'm not the psychic here. I'm just a reviewer with common sense and a degree in English.

Normally, I'd be inclined to explain how the rest of the movie falls apart, but... I don't think I could do it justice. The movie goes from family death tragedy to haunting trauma to love story back to haunting trauma, to psychological thriller, then to psychological haunting thriller, then murder mystery, then it has hints of some town-wide conspiracy at the very end. It's entirely *MST3K* fodder. Pity *MST3K* doesn't have new episodes anymore, actually, because *Half Light* would be perfect for the show; it might actually become enjoyable with smart-ass comments. That's probably

why I didn't enjoy it. I didn't watch it with my smart-ass, nerdy friends.

Generally, you should avoid this movie like the plague. There are no special features to attract viewers, the movie is half-assed, the writing clunks, the plot is a mess, and Demi Moore is pretty disappointing. If you do a *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* night with your friends, try *Half Light*. But then again, you could just do a Sylvester Stallone/Arnold Schwarzenegger marathon and have even more fun. In fact, I guess that's testament to how awful *Half Light* is: I'd rather watch *Cliffhanger*, *Demolition Man*, or *Commando*. Sly Stallone tells us that "Nothing is over!" in *Rambo: First Blood*. But something is almost certainly over: the careers of everyone who participated in *Half Light*.

*Alex Esten is a recent graduate of Rutgers University-Camden and is looking for a job that will put his English degree to good use.*

---

## Book Review: *River of Gods*, by Ian McDonald

*Reviewed by Jessica Darago*

Cyberpunk has some elements we've all come to expect. We anticipate a noir-ish plot, complete with a femme fatale (who may or may not be a cyborg), various quirky underworld goons, and a badly dressed hero who just wants a drink. There is typically A Vast Conspiracy of some sort. Of course, some time is spent in a virtual reality, and there's almost always some mention of humans being gods to computers.

If you're looking for a novel that fits the formula, *River of Gods* does not disappoint. One hundred years after India's modern independence—though the novel has less to do with the centennial than the jacket copy would have you believe—the nation has fractured into three overpopulated, technologically advanced, pop-culture-obsessed states, a situation easily envisioned from a Westerner's cursory knowledge of the Kashmir conflict, global warming, business process outsourcing, and Bollywood.

India has split into multiple states along ethnic, economic, and political/religious lines, but all

of the citizens have one common need: more water. The monsoons have failed for three years running. The subcontinent is dying of thirst. And former fellow countrymen are ready to go to war for it.

Meanwhile, the Indian states have become the software-producing powerhouse that we all currently expect it to become. Varanasi, the nation where most of the action takes place, in particular has become the Seattle of artificial intelligence—phoneticized into "aeai." As hackers have been to the rise of the internet, so rogues—aeais that have grown too willful and independent of their masters, or been specifically created to be so—wreak havoc with the software systems of the future.

And among those aeais are celebrities: soap opera characters which are given secondary programming to believe that they have actual lives outside the soap—"They're just software that believes it's another kind of software... Celebrity has never been about what's real. But it's nice to pretend."—and who inspire such nationwide fannish

frenzy as would startle a *Harry Potter* fangirl, with not dozens but thousands of fans camping outside server farms for sweeps, and literal riots taking place when a broadcast is interrupted. Much more of the population cares about the fake lives of aeais than the real lives around them.

The novel follows the lives of over a dozen characters—another point on which the dust jacket misleads us—as they navigate the political and technological minefield McDonald has created from these elements. Some are stock cybernoir: the thug with delusions of grandeur, the straight-edge cop whose personal life is on the rocks, a burnt-out scientist hiding under an assumed name. Others emerge from soap operas: the naïve, neglected trophy wife and the servant who carries a torch for her; the plucky girl journalist and her celebrity interviewee; the politician and his forbidden love. Now add a psychic, a mathematician, stand-up comic, a plastic surgeon, a prime minister, a terrorist kingpin, a guru, and a host of bosses, bad guys, sidekicks, and lovers (ex- and otherwise), and you start to get an idea of the daunting task of keeping up with who’s who and who wants what that McDonald has set forth for the reader. This is *not* a beach read, folks. It’s not a novel you can read one chapter at a time before bed. McDonald helpfully includes a glossary and even a soundtrack listing; he also should have included a mechanical pencil and flow charts.

If you’re looking for something dense and complicated, a book that stretches your brain in four directions at once, this may be the novel for you. To a certain extent, the overpopulation (four or five characters could easily be abolished without doing violence to the plot) is camouflage for a straightforward story about a race war: human

intelligence vs. artificial intelligence. How satisfying you find the book will depend on how much you like red herrings; if, like me, you like mysteries because you like solving them, your talent for identifying and discarding extraneous information will be put to the test. Make no mistake: this book is 20% plot, 80% atmosphere.

But atmosphere is one of the reasons people read SF. Speculation about what might be is the genre’s reason for being. The India of 2047 presented here is not merely exotic; it is charming, frightening, intriguing, and repulsive in turns—many, many turns—and is, to this *firengi*, utterly convincing. And McDonald has done something else so rarely seen in the subgenre: he has written beautiful, sensuous prose. The novel opens with classic noir imagery and rhythm:

“The body turns in the stream. Where the new bridge crosses the Ganga, garlands of sticks and plastic snag around the footings, rafts of river flotsam... Shiv takes a long draw on his cigarette. Holy Ganga. You have attained moksha... He watches the body out of sight, then flicks his cigarette into the night in an arc of red sparks and wades back towards where the Merc stands axle-deep in the river.”

The setting is alien but the sound is utterly familiar. Then, within a few pages, the voice has shifted almost imperceptibly into another idiom:

“First there was Kashi: firstborn of cities; sister of Babylon and Thebes and survivor of both; city of light where Jyotirlinga of Siva, the divine generative energy, burst from the earth in a pillar of radiance. Then it became Varanasi; holiest of cities, consort of the Goddess Ganga, city of death and pilgrims, enduring through empires and kingdoms and Rajs and great nation, flowing through time as its river flows through the great plain of northern India...”

The prose walks this wavering line between noir and folklore, gritty “realism” and hypnotic fantasy, throughout the novel and never misses a beat. The

---

### *River of Gods*

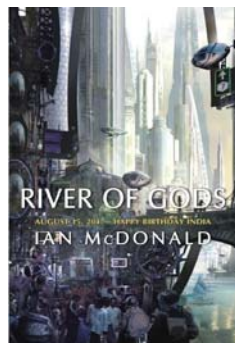
**Author:** Ian McDonald

**ISBN:** 1591024366

**Publisher:** Pyr

**Release date:** March, 2006

\$25.00, 597 pages,  
hardcover



species blend as well, when factories become temples, Avatars become avatars, and sacred earth becomes the filth of corruption. The style seduces and confuses and, like the crowded stage, does its best to distract the reader from the fact that this plot is nothing we haven't seen before.

As the writing, so the novel: *River of Gods* is neither one thing nor another, neither a success nor a failure, but a curious blend of good execution and bad, clever reveals and frustrating distractions, interesting elements and a tired plot. If

you are a devotee of cyberpunk, it's a worthy edition to your library. But if man vs. computer is not your cup of chai, it's best to let this one float away in Mother Ganga's welcoming arms.

*Jessica Darago is a writer and editor who lives and works in Northern Virginia. Her novella A Compelling Yarn was shortlisted for the 2005 3-Day Novel Competition, thus demonstrating her unhealthy passion for deadlines.*

---

## Graphic Novel Review: *Y: The Last Man—Paper Dolls, Volume 7*, written by Brian K. Vaughn, illustrated by Pia Guerra & Goran Sudzuka *Reviewed by Hawk*

*"I wouldn't [touch/talk/work/sleep] with you if you were the last man on Earth!"*

Women, have you ever thought about what it would be like if all the males left tomorrow? Men, have you wondered how women would get along without any males around? In Brian K. Vaughn's (*Ex Machina, Runaways, Ultimate X-men*) and Pia Guerra's Eisner-winning and Harvey Award-nominated series, *Y: The Last Man* these questions are intimately explored.

*Y: The Last Man—Paper Dolls* reprints issues 37-42 of the comic series. Three-plus years after the mysterious plague killed all creatures on Earth with a Y chromosome except for Yorick Brown and his capuchin monkey Ampersand, no one is much closer to a cure to the plague. What US government operative Agent 355, biochemist Dr Allison Mann, and Yorick know is that his capuchin is immune, and that immunity's somehow been passed onto Yorick. Unfortunately for all concerned, Ampersand has

been kidnapped by a mysterious Japanese samurai and taken by boat to an unknown fate in Japan.

*Paper Dolls* splits its time between moving the plot forward with both the search for Ampersand as well as Yorick's Australian-based fiancée Beth, as well as exploring the motivations behind both



Yorick's merry-band of world-savers and the capuchin-nappers. More details are discovered, in an action-packed chapter, about the background of Agent 355, Yorick's erstwhile protector. In addition, we are able to see more of this mysterious Japanese "Doctor M" who had the samurai kidnap Ampersand.

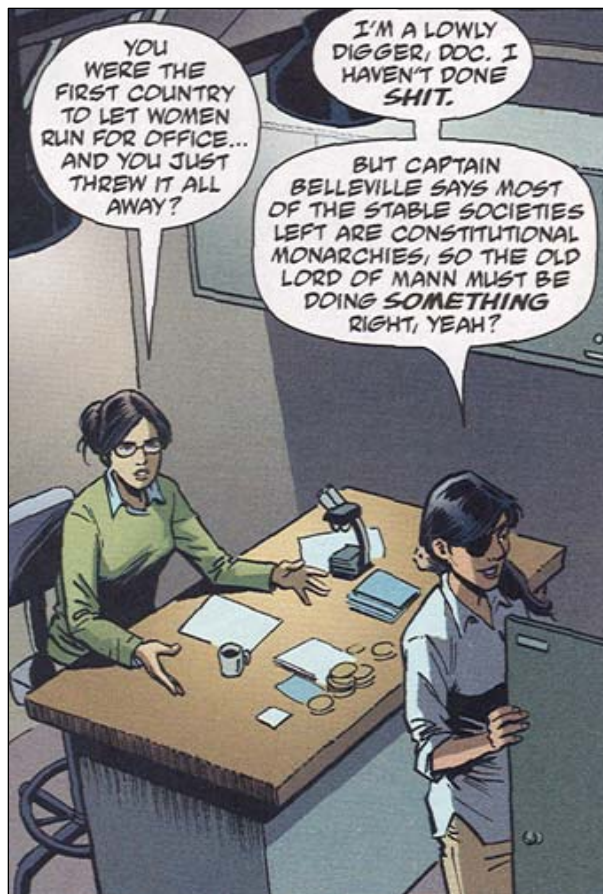
On the whole, this trade is a fun, rollicking, ride that is hard to put down. The storylines keep one invested, and Vaughn's style is different enough that one doesn't feel as if this is the same story, rewritten by yet another comic book writer.

Vaughn's not afraid to pull punches. He explores various potential hot-button topics such as

religion and environmentalism, while managing to not espouse a personal view. How would the Catholic Church handle a world where there are no men? How would the death of approximately half of the world's people affect the amount of light & air pollution one needs to deal with? As is pointed out, "With so many factories closing up shop and so few trees getting cut down, the sky is clearer than it's been in a century, probably."

Additionally, he's willing to portray the various women one sees as actual people, with foibles, rather than as a monolithic block. Women, like everyone else, have ingrained habits that they can't easily kick. In a post-male world, why would a woman still wear a Burqa? Dye her hair to look attractive to the opposite sex? These are habits of a lifetime that even life-shattering events can't always change. Sometimes, in an upside-down world, one needs something to cling to that which recalls the past.

As in *Ex Machina*, Brian Vaughn's writing goes back and forth between the present and the past, using banners such as "The HMAS Williamson,



Now" or "Yokogata, Japan, Five Years Ago" to date where the segment is from. He has used this feature to great effect in previous volumes, as well as his other writings, to easily present relevant storyline information. In this volume, the banner-ing is not used to such good effect.

There are certain scenes where it's obvious that a section is from a past event; however, it is not labeled as such which makes it difficult to tell the timeframe of the particular scene. While this does not make the book less legible, it does make it less easily comprehensible. For example, we jump from the banner of "Yokogata, Japan, Five Years Ago" to a segment on LaGuardia airport, which is obviously from the same timeframe. Next, the book jumps to a scene on Yorick receiving his monkey, which, again, is obviously from the same time frame. Considering how these scenes about past actions, locations, and people jump around, it would be easier to follow if there were more explanations of when & where everyone is in the scenes.

The question of who is "Doctor M" and why she wants Ampersand has been an ongoing theme since early in the series. It's unclear how hard Vaughn has been working to keep her identity hidden, as it's been patently obvious for quite some time who the good Doctor is. While it's no fun to have a mystery just blurted out, it would have been more interesting if this subplot were either subtler, or already ended. It's cruel to keep dragging it out when the ending is patently obvious.

Pia Guerra, a penciler who's big break was *Y: The Last Man* deftly illustrates this award-winning series. A perennial problem in comics is matching the style and quality of the pencils to the writing. How often have bad pencils killed good writing and vice versa? Despite this being Guerra's first big break in the industry, her penciling is superb.

In other books, it is many times impossible to tell who a character is supposed to be, except for possibly the clothes that they wear or the color of their hair. The renditions look all too similar. Pia Guerra, by contrast, has a very tight hold on how to draw faces and facial expressions, and is able to articulate everything from sorrow to joy to anger to shock without missing a beat. Her people and background's are realistic and vibrant.

On occasion her pencils aren't quite up to par. On page 80, various panels with Yorick's sister, Hero, has her face being squarer than is normal. In addition, when she does longer distance shots, such as on page 81, she skimps on detail for simplicity's sake. However, on the whole, these are minor quibbles that don't actually detract from the full-bodied drawings that Guerra puts forth.

On the whole, this series is a must-read. While it is best to start from *Volume 1*, this volume is still comprehensible without having read the rest of the series. Like many ongoing comic series, the issues can be read at various levels of understanding. There's something there for the readers who have been around from the beginning and can explain to one exactly what the small side piece in issue 41, page 2, panel 8 was referring back to from issue 3, page 4, panel 5, as well as newcomers just looking for a good read.

*Y: The Last Man* is planned out as a finite series, ending with issue 60 sometime in 2007. While

---

***Y: The Last Man—Paper Dolls, Volume 7***

**Writer:** Brian K. Vaughn  
**Illustrators:** Pia Guerra & Goran Sudzuka  
**ISBN:** 1401210090  
**Publisher:** Vertigo  
**Release date:** May, 2006

\$14.99, 144 pages,  
trade paperback



---

Vertigo does not rate their books, this one should have a parental advisory for full nudity (both male and female), foul language, and violence.

*Hawk lives in California with her boyfriend where she spends almost too much of her time reading comics. When not fulfilling her addiction, she can be found reading books, hiking, writing adventures for her gaming group, or enjoying non-computer gaming.*

---

## **Book Review: *Counting Heads*, by David Marusek**

*Reviewed by Sara K. Ellis*

When David Marusek's debut novel *Counting Heads* was released, it seemed to receive far less attention than its *New York Times* critic, Dave Izkoff, whose review of the book aroused the ire of the blogosphere with its plea for science fiction to be less "geeky." Izkoff, who bemoaned SF's inability to make him socially acceptable among an imaginary subway contingent of James Frey readers, compared *Counting Heads* to an instruction booklet: "If you were to immerse yourself in most of the sci-fi being published these days, you would probably enjoy it as much as one enjoys reading a biology textbook or a stereo manual." A little harsh, and in this case, inaccurate. For while the world Marusek has created is certainly overwhelming; spattered with DNA tasting slugs, surveillance bees, and anti-nano grease, the details themselves are far from dull. The problem is, at the risk of sounding like Emperor Joseph II, that there are far too many of them, and far too many devils. We

spend more time considering the ramifications of a visceral response probe (potty plug) than we do the character in whom it's being inserted. With few exceptions, the novel's characters all suffer from the inability to stand out from their baroque surroundings, and reading them is like squinting at subtitles when there's a blizzard on the screen.

The vignettes, however, are dazzling and provide enough societal commentary to make up for this lack. In particular, I enjoyed Marusek's descriptions of a "soup-pot," to which the underprivileged members of a communal living arrangement contribute points rather than food. The E-Pluribus Everyperson, a morphing corporate symbol and nod to the scramble suit in Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*, is Marusek's answer to Dreiser's America:

"The Everyperson was one of the most familiar logos in the United Democracies and this was its full on version. It morphed rap-

---

### **Counting Heads**

**Author:** David Marusek  
**ISBN:** 0765312670  
**Publisher:** Tor  
**Release date:** October, 2005

\$24.95, 336 pages,  
hardcover



---

idly and continuously, changing its sex, age, ethnicity, facial features, hair, and clothing into every conceivable combination. People said that if you gazed at it long enough you'd eventually see all fifteen billion inhabitants of Earth. Everyone but yourself... People said that if you gazed at it long enough, you'd see all the people you might have become if only you had made the right decisions or had better timing, connections, or luck."

But one must wonder about Marusek's decision to start us off from the perspective of its wealthiest characters, certainly an opportunity to reveal the world he has created in all of its slug-tasting, bee-flitting glory, but there's little urgency in this beginning, even when its shallow protagonist is tossed out on his newly defective genes. When Samson Harger is brought low, even Marusek dumps him unceremoniously for characters who prove to be less and more interesting: a decades old prepubescent and a pair of worker clones who feel as real as any married couple today.

To enjoy the book then, it's probably best to see it as a series of amazing set pieces, and worry less about how the whole narrative holds together. Like its decapitated title character, Marusek's novel feels like a combination of severed parts that could probably survive on their own, even if the author didn't feel the need to haphazardly stitch them together. As god-awful cliché as this sounds, I hope that Marusek's next outing will also factor in some heart.

---

## **Book Reviews: *The Empire of Ice Cream*, by Jeffrey Ford, & *Black Pockets and Other Dark Thoughts*, by George Zebrowski**

*Reviewed by Danny Adams*

OK, I'll admit it: when I was first asked to do a double review of *The Empire of Ice Cream* and *Black Pockets*, I was immediately tempted to surrender to clichés and shallowness. A cliché in the respect of making this review a "light versus dark" piece, Ford's "light" to Zebrowski's "dark." And shallow because I should have known better—that any stories by those two solid authors could be so easily dealt with, categorized, explained away. If I could have done so then neither of them would have risen to the level of prominence they've achieved, and the stories in both anthologies certainly wouldn't have lingered in my mind the way they have, nagging me with questions and prodding me not to look away from the questions and conclusions many of them induced.

That said, however, I will also admit that both authors described their work to me with passages from their own stories. In Ford's case, take the

character in his story "Jupiter's Skull" who is letting a recently-remembered story spill from her lips: she describes the procession of the tale as "like a magician pulling scarves from his pockets." Even the most seasoned veteran of magic shows can never be completely sure of what that long chain of colorful cloth will bring forth at its end; lesser magicians may finish with just another scarf, but a master may climax with an exotic animal, or a ball of fire, or a flash of light, or anything else the human imagination can conjure to astound the watcher. Yet even this description is shallow in comparison with Ford's craftsmanship—he holds us with the meat of the story as it proceeds along one fantastic scarf after the other, but the endings aren't just for thrills or entertainment, but leave us behind either with nagging questions, or something more indefinable, be it an unsettled disturbance or a vague satisfied pleasure.

For instance, the opening story, “The Annals of Eelin-Ok,” gives every indication of being a simple light-hearted fantasy. The opening narrator builds for us what sounds like a cute idea, a miniscule fairy creature called Twilmish who only comes into being when the right sort of sand castle is made, and then it lives and dies in the brief space between the tides, finally perishing when the ocean waves claim its home. In the hands of a less experienced writer this could have become just a nice little tale that barely scratched the surface of its own cleverness, enjoyed well enough and then forgotten. Once the introduction is finished, however, Ford astounds us with sudden unexpected depth: in that brief space of time Eelin-Ok is allotted a life we follow him from birth (including his almost instantaneous self-awareness and widespread knowledge) to the coming of the tides, joining him in his curiosity about his world, his courage in the realization of the coming end of his life, and even the love he feels for another fairy creature, Meiwa, along with the bond he comes to share with her son. We know all along that the story will end with Eelin-Ok’s death, which in Ford’s hands makes his life so much the richer, his battles more desperate, and his memory more enduring.

It’s often been said that in the hands of a master, even an old idea can be shaped into something brand new and wonderful. Ford demonstrates this for us in the book’s title story, which chronicles the life of a character named William who has a condition called synesthesia, which mixes the senses until the boundaries between them are blurred into nonexistence. The example he gives at the beginning of the story tells us that while he can smell extinguished birthday candles, for him “their aroma is superseded by a sound like the drawing of a bow across the bass string of a violin.” He adds, “Likewise, the notes of an acoustic guitar appear before my eyes as a golden rain, falling from a height just above my head only to vanish at the level of my solar plexus.” But unlike most people who enjoy/suffer from synesthesia (a real condition, by the way), whenever he drinks coffee or eats something coffee-flavored, he also sees a girl named Anna. Ultimately they are able to speak to one another—then not only do William’s senses blur, but also his certainty of exist-

ence. Is he real, or nothing more than a product of Anna’s own synesthesia? The idea fueling the story is old, but the power of Ford’s writing brings a new (dare I say it?—a *sensory*) tang to breath new life, color, and tone into it.

There *is* one story in the collection about light—or so you might believe from the title and the opening pages. “A Man of Light” is centered around an artist named Larchcroft, who has become world famous for his seemingly miraculous creations of light. Ford’s descriptive powers in describing Larchcroft’s successes are briefly used but enough to let gleaming visions of light dance in your mind. Even Larchcroft’s short explanations of his craft are lyrical:

“The light acoustics in the room, if we can call them that—the barren space, the grayness of the floor, the height of the ceiling, out mass, and of course, the glow of the chandelier, soft as liquid fire—conspire to make all but my head invisible against the background. But when Hoates plays his cello on the floor above, positioned directly over the chandelier, the vibration of the instrument travels through the ceiling and is picked up by the crystal pendants, which vibrate ever so slightly, altering the consistency of the light field...”

I said that you might initially believe the story is about light. Moreso it is about darkness and the creatures (literal and otherwise) of different varieties inhabiting it. By the time the narrator learns this truth, they are already well on their way to claiming and overwhelming him, and the reader

---

***The Empire of Ice Cream***

**Author:** Jeffrey Ford

**ISBN:** 1930846398

**Publisher:** Golden Gryphon Press

**Release date:** April, 2006

\$24.95, 300 pages, hardcover



along with the narrator both will morbidly marvel that they did not see them approaching.

Each story in the collection is as different from the other as can be, but will still manage to draw in most readers as tales engagingly told. The title character in “Boatman’s Holiday” is none other than the fiendish ferryman Charon himself, though not so fiendish as he might appear (unless provoked)—who in fact is searching for something beyond Hell, on that day every century or so when he gets a vacation. “Botch Town” put me in mind of a speculative Spoon River, albeit placed in the town while all of its inhabitants were still alive and up to the things they were known for. “The Weight of Words”... well, the only thing I can say about it is that I’ve rarely read a story as carefully as I did this one, because Ford instilled in me a need to try searching and scanning the text even as I read to see if there was something, somewhere—a subliminal word or phrase, perhaps—that I was missing though it was right below my eyes.

In a nice touch (though admittedly I’m biased since I always enjoy such things), Ford provides commentaries as miniature epilogues of each story.

George Zebrowski likewise provided me a good opening description of *Black Pockets*: the POV character in his story “The Wish in the Fear” says of his dark dreams:

“...But the more frightening possibility was that a series of ordinary, even logical steps might lead to (his end) surreptitiously, remaining concealed until it was too late. He suspected that there was some train of events that might make it happen, some arcane dovetailing of circumstances that would make it come out that way, or

even worse, convince him that it was the necessary thing to do.”

Such a way of telling stories, of course, runs the risk that the tale will be ham-handed, too reliant on coincidences, or disallow the possibility of the protagonist being an active participant in the events rather than meekly being swept along by them. Fortunately, Zebrowski is more than seasoned enough to recognize this trap and he avoids it deftly; the most horrific circumstances seem coldly logical, perhaps even unavoidable—in retrospect—yet never forced, unless the characters “force” them by acting.

When I was first asked to review this book I balked; horror is not my usual read, and much of what I have read held little appeal for me. But in many of Zebrowski’s stories the horror is subtle, or not in a place you would expect, or it doesn’t strike you until the story slams you with its ending. In any case, it isn’t your traditional horror, but the effects may be no less chilling for all that.

One of the best examples of this fiddling around with the genre is his story “My First World.” On the surface it appears to be a SF story in the best tradition of wonder: the protagonist is a 21-year-old who is only now beginning to learn the true nature of his world, a carved-out meteor fashioned into a jail for his and his friends’ parents five decades before. Here, the horror has happened offstage, decades before his birth: violent revolutions, betrayals of the revolutionaries, and their myriad tortures before sentenced to a wide orbit around the sun. And yet the horror becomes the catalyst for a new wonder-filled human society that promises the long-term survival of the species.

In other stories, a short-term horror becomes the means to save oneself from something more dreadful. The short-short “Earth Around His Bones” is almost more of a vignette than a full-fledged story, yet packs a great deal of nightmare into its small space. The protagonist of this tale endures, second-hand, another’s ongoing nightmare yet ultimately (though he doesn’t realize it at the time) this spares him from the same fate.

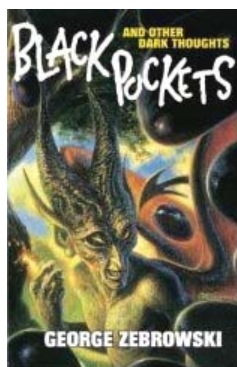
The “political horror” stories “I Walked With Fidel” and “General Jarulzelski at the Zoo” are

---

***Black Pockets and  
Other Dark Thoughts***

**Author:** George Zebrowski  
**ISBN:** 1930846401  
**Publisher:** Golden  
Gryphon Press  
**Release date:** May, 2006

\$24.95, 310 pages,  
hardcover





effective demonstrations of the horrors despotic political regimes can slam down on their societies. In "Fidel," the Cuban dictator has become a zombie who is forced to entertain people by answering their challenges to answer for his decades of repression. In "General," the ruler of Communist Poland is forced to endure occasional flashes of the starvation pangs the animals are suffering as if trading places with the animals themselves, until, locked away in the virtual cage of his own office, he endures a hungry epiphany.

The book is divided into three categories, its horrors growing increasingly deep and subtle with each advance: "Personal Terrors" brings us the immediate horror of the surface. "Political Horrors" spreads it out through society (though remaining on a personal level), diluting nothing in the spreading. And then comes "Metaphysical Fears," which asks greater questions such as the nature of Christ, the source of creativity, and the impact of humanity on the universe... and with greater questioning comes greater consequences in the answering. The concluding story, "Lords of Imagination," manages to combine the narrator's own personal horror (as the editor of a SF magazine who witnesses the probable death of science fiction) against the backdrop of the potential devastation that could follow humanity's—more specifically, his—unleashing on the universe just how dark our imaginations and creativity can be.

(And Zebrowski discusses his stories in the afterword, which of course pleased me.)

Not all of Zebrowski's stories are "complete"—that is, without traditional endings as such (or textured that way), and the reader is often left hanging. But as the author points out in his afterword, this was intentional, geared towards a specific effect which he usually achieved: "...Pascal's terror of endlessness, the infinities that he saw lurking at every window. ... A story is a well polished piece of infinity with the illusory fence around it, and you wouldn't want to get to the end of what exists outside that fence." Zebrowski's work often does leave you hanging, but with that unsettled certainty that you very likely don't want to go any farther.

Which, strangely, in Zebrowski's case, is morbidly satisfying.

*Danny Adams is the author of two forthcoming short novels: The City Beyond Play, co-authored with Philip Jose Farmer and scheduled to appear from PS Publishing at the end of 2006; and Village of One Thousand Cranes, appearing as a limited edition from Papaveria Press in the summer of 2006. In addition, his shorter works have appeared or are forthcoming in magazines such as Abyss & Apex, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, The Mount Zion Speculative Fiction Review, Mythic Delirium, Not One Of Us, Star\*Line, Strange Horizons, and Weird Tales. He and his wife Laurie live deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia with four cats who never fail to provide thrilling wonders, dangerous adventures, and chilling perils!*

---

## **Book Review: *Children of the Atom*, by Wilmar Shiras**

*Reviewed by Matthew Appleton*

There's actually a backstory for this review, so please indulge me as I take part in the long-standing SF tradition of using an infodump.

Back in April, my friend Keith and I visited a local used book shop, as we frequently do. At the time, the store was running a sale on old SF paperbacks for a buck apiece. We decided to go through the stacks, and independently decided to go through them with the same plan in mind: find and purchase the books with the most garish cover art

or ridiculous cover copy. I understand that styles and tastes differ over time, thus necessitating changes in marketing, but that didn't make certain books on those shelves any less hysterical.

One of the books that ended up in my stack was Wilmar Shiras's *Children of the Atom*. This particular printing, which I believe is the 1959 Avon printing, made my stack for two reasons: one, I found the cover enticement, "The race created when the atom went wrong," amusingly over-the-

top in an ominous way, and, two, the modern art composition of the cover illustration, while not necessarily garish, certainly caught my eye in a way that most cover illustrations (past or present) don't.

Within weeks of purchasing it, it came to my attention that Red Jacket Press released a limited edition facsimile of the 1953 Gnome Press printing, complete with a protective slipcase. Now, I like to believe I harbor a pretty good grasp of SF history, but I was left wondering why this novel, which I didn't remember previously encountering in any fashion, was receiving such lush treatment. Almost immediately, I started researching this novel, and found out that Ben Bova's *Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Vol. 2B* included "In Hiding," which serves as opening chapter of *Children of the Atom*. Certainly, my memory needed refreshing—that anthology served as one of the textbooks to the SF course I took in college, and once I started the story, I recalled reading it previously.

Then, I discovered that in 2002 the Science Fiction Book Club placed the novel on its "Most Significant SF & Fantasy Books of the Last 50 Years." Again, I was amazed at not remembering this title despite seeing the list and commenting on it in my blog when it came out. I followed this discovery by wondering why the SFBC hadn't put out their own edition yet (as they have with other books on their list), but left that question for another day.

My interest in the novel now piqued, I acquired a copy of the new Red Jacket Press edition to see if the book deserved the full special edition treatment. Besides, although the paperback in my possession appeared to be in good enough condition to handle another reading, I've previously encountered other paperbacks of similar vintage and condition that didn't survive just one more reading.

I'm glad I made the effort.

In *Children of the Atom*, Shiras starts by introducing the reader to Timothy Paul, a 13-year-old whose vaguely odd behavior convinces his teacher to send him to a psychiatrist, Dr. Peter Welles, to see if there might be something wrong with him. In the course of examining him he learns that Timothy is an orphan whose parents succumbed to the long-term effects from an explosion at an atomic weapons facility where they both worked. After numerous sessions, Welles eventually discovers that Tim is actually a super genius and that his odd behavior results from his trying to conform as best as possible to the rules set by his grandparents regarding his behavior and those established by his peers. As he researches the incident that ultimately killed his parents, Welles discovers that Timothy's intelligence is also likely the result of the explosion (whether he was in utero or conceived after the blast is not entirely clear) and that other children like Timothy must be scattered throughout the country.

The rest of the novel, a fix-up of five stories originally published mostly in *Astounding Science Fiction*, concerns Welles's efforts to gather those children into a school for the gifted created especially for them. As can be expected, Welles encounters obstacles along the way, ranging from difficulties with the children themselves all the way to public hostility to the school he's creating.

Reading *Children of the Atom*, it's easy to see why it resonated the way it did with SF readers of the time. Much like with Jommy Cross in A.E. van Vogt's *Slan*, readers can readily identify with Timothy or any of the other children in the novel. Their high intelligence and social ostracism mirrors the type of adolescence experienced during those years by those in SF fandom. Timothy's use of hidden messages placed in ads in magazines is reminiscent of how SF fans found each other through the letters pages of the pulps back in the '30s and early '40s. Finally, the sense of belonging and finding your *real* peers that the children share as they meet each other is certainly evocative of the formation of the first SF fan clubs.

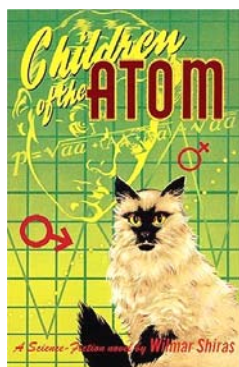
Another interesting aspect of *Children of the Atom* is the possibility it inspired Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in their creation of the X-Men. On its website, Red Jacket Press mentions this in the marketing for

---

### *Children of the Atom*

**Author:** Wilmar H. Shiras  
**ISBN:** 0974889504  
**Publisher:** Red Jacket Press  
**Release date:** June, 2006

\$39.95, 224 pages,  
hardcover in slipcase



the book. Certainly, the parallels exist—the children are in fact mutants, both the children and X-Men are estranged from society and attend a special school, headed by a Ph.D., created especially for them and they both face hostility from the general public. The fact that Marvel used the phrase “Children of the Atom” in conjunction with one X-Men comic line and with an X-Men video game certainly helps to accentuate those parallels. However, as Red Jacket Press acknowledges, the possibility that *Children of the Atom* inspired Lee and Kirby has never been confirmed.

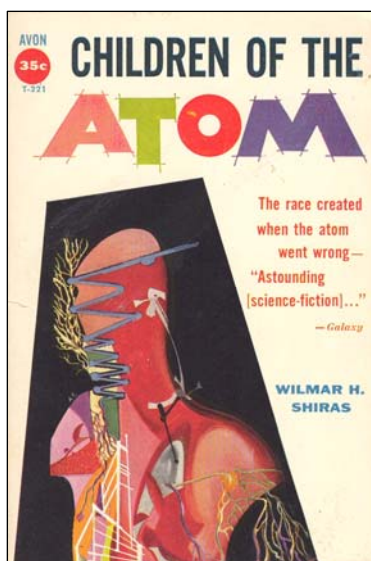
However, neither the X-Men parallels nor the way *Children of the Atom* allowed readers to identify with the characters fascinated me as much as the novel’s ending. Seeing that their isolation from the rest of society causes a potential problem, the children decide to find a way to partially re-integrate with society so as to make themselves appear less threatening. This comes after a television preacher goes on the air calling the children “a monstrous mutation” who “walk the world and plot your death and mine!” While fear of the unknown is at play, much of his speech denouncing the children and their school is characteristic of the strain of anti-intellectualism common in the United States. While their reintegration might alleviate their fears that they’re dangerous mutants, I find it hard to believe that it will allow them to overcome the fears of their intellect that will inevitably occur—especially as they get older and more successful, which some of them already are. Indeed, Nancy Kress’s treatment of a society of super geniuses living among “normal” humans in her *Beggars* series strikes me as far more plausible.

Yet, as interesting as the book is, the ending is not its only flaw. The children seem to grapple with their various social deficiencies a little too enthusiastically and a little too easily—yes, they are super geniuses, which means that they might actually possess a greater capacity for self-improvement, but they are all also embarking on their teen years. The children also engage in a lot of intellectual discus-

sion regarding philosophy, poetry, psychology and literature. While it serves to illustrate just how smart the teens are, it also slows the narrative quite a bit. Beyond the characters, the fact that *Children of the Atom* is a fix-up novel really shows. With the exception of “In Hiding,” none of my anthologies contain any of the other short stories that compose the novel. Therefore, I couldn’t check to see what changes were made to unify the stories. However, it wouldn’t surprise me to find out that very few, if any, occurred.

A review of this edition wouldn’t be complete without a look at the book itself. Red Jacket has done an amazing job with their facsimile of the original Gnome Press edition. The paper is a higher quality than you see in most hard-covers today, and great care was taken to make a clean copy of the printing plates. The dust jacket, designed Frank Kelly Freas, incorporates elements from the novel in an interesting design, which is duplicated on the slipcase. A lot of care went into this edition, which actually *feels* as solid as it looks.

In all, the Red Jacket edition of *Children of the Atom* is a welcome edition to any SF fan’s library. While the story is slightly dated in a few spots (what SF more than 40 years old isn’t?), with a few minor changes, it’s also a book that could just as easily been written today. The \$40 price tag seems a bit steep, but I guarantee you it will last longer than any copy of the 1959 Avon paperback edition you might find at a local used book store.



The 1959 Avon Paperback cover

---

## LETTERS OF COMMENT

I have a confession to make to you: for quite a few months now, I have been enjoying your ‘zine. Even though it is more on the sercon side of things for my tastes, I have come to appreciate what it is you are doing. By providing reviews of current books, movies, and interviews with writers—like the most recent issue’s with Karen Traviss—you are definitely providing a service to science fiction fans like me who simply don’t have the time to keep up with reading EVERYTHING that is being published nowadays. For this, I thank you.

By the way, allow me to compliment you on the neatness and clarity of your layout. *Some Fantastic* is very easy to read because of your attention to detail. My aging fannish eyes thank you. You have done an excellent job of making your zine visually pleasing and readable. Good job, sir.

To wrap this up, since your fanzine is mostly review-oriented, if I get the urge to read a current science fiction or fantasy book, I will keep you in mind as an outlet.

**All the best,  
John Purcell  
jpurcell54@earthlink.net**

**Editor's Reply:** *In lieu of a proper Editorial (due in part to a lack of available space in this issue), thanks for your kind words about Some Fantastic. A lot of work goes into the layout. One of the things that occurred to me about distributing a 'zine in PDF format is that there's no need to condense the text as much as possible to save on printing costs (however, having said that, I actually produce a very small print run of proper saddle-bound b&w copies for distribution to contributors and close friends). I know I'm not the first to realize this, but understanding that meant that I could do the layout in a font size that's easy on the eyes for everyone. I think some people fall into the trap of thinking that the electronic format means they can get wildly creative with layout and design (sometimes even garish), though sometimes less is more.*

*I don't know if I'm really providing that big a service. These days there's an embarrassment of riches in terms of online review sites—SF Site, SF Revu, SF Weekly & Infinity Plus all immediately come to mind. However, I hope that I am doing something different in that an issue of Some Fantastic is meant to be taken as a unified whole rather than just a series of SF-related articles grouped together on a website. Cheryl Morgan's Emerald City is similar to what I do (although it's published on a much more frequent basis), but I hope that my 'zine is a somehow both a little more eclectic and inclusive in what I'm willing to print.*

---

Hello there—big fan of the 'zine, and am greatly looking forward to future issues.

But whilst reading Alex Esten's review of *Revenge of the Sith* (and the resulting DVD), he misinterpreted a couple of the issues raised in the film, which colored the final outcome of the review very slightly:

1. Darth Plagueis was, in fact, Palpatine/Sidious's Sith Master, per George Lucas (who had Matthew Stover use this in his novelization of the film), and Sidious never truly learnt Plagueis's secret to eternal life.
2. Nor would it have resulted in Sidious attaining a "blue glowy" state after death, since Lucas has stated that this can only be achieved via releasing all physical attachments to the corporeal world, and not binding himself to it, as Pal-

patine later does with the clone-bodies. (Qui-Gon hit upon it; Darth Plagueis did not.) Palpatine's spirit could still remain behind in corrupted form, (as per the Knights of the Old Republic games, likewise cited by Mr. Esten in his review), but it does not contradict the Expanded Universe in any fashion.

3. Much more minor, but that one Jedi Youngling didn't technically "save" Bail Organa's life—he was already walking back to his speeder, almost ready to take off, when the kid made a dash for his craft, which is when the firefight itself broke out. (If anything, he likely put him at greater risk, for having witnessed the killing in the first place.)

Anyways, again, great publication and review, and keep up the good work—I've already hooked a few other folks into reading it.

**Best,  
Josh Ehrnwald  
jjehrnwa@yahoo.com**

---

## SOME FANTASTIC

Editor . . . . . Matthew Appleton  
Associate Editor . . . . . Cheryl Appleton

Regular Contributors: Danny Adams, Caroline-Isabelle Caron, Jessica Darago, Chris Elliot, Sara K. Ellis, Alex Esten, Richard Fuller, Christopher J. Garcia, Mario Guslandi, Hawk, Steven H Silver, Edna Stumpf.

*Some Fantastic* is a quarterly, critical eZine with issues published in January, April, July and October. Special, unscheduled issues may also appear. All submissions and letters are welcome via snail mail or email at:

*Some Fantastic*  
c/o Matthew Appleton  
3762 Sudley Ford Court  
Fairfax, VA 22033  
mattapp@gmail.com

When making your submission, please make sure to include both your snail mail and email addresses. Print copies are mailed to all whose work (regardless of length) appears in the given issue.

Bylined articles and comics are the copyright of the credited authors and artists. All other written content is © 2006 by Matthew Appleton, except where otherwise noted. All rights reserved under a Creative Commons License. For more information, please visit the website.

Distribution is primarily via PDF and is free. However, if you wish to receive a saddle-bound version (sorry, these are in black and white only), please mail a check made out to "Matthew Appleton" for \$5.00 US or send "the usual" to the address above. Payment can also be made via PayPal to the email address above. Donations are welcome. This is a non-profit venture.

2ND "PRINTING"