

The Future Fire

Speculative Fiction and Dark Fantasy

Issue 2005.02

ISSN: 1746-1839



Fiction by Terry Gates-Grimwood

Distributed free on the web at <http://futurefire.net>

The Future Fire: Issue 2005.02

New Writing in Speculative Fiction and Dark Fantasy

To invent stories about a world other than this one has no meaning at all, unless an instinct of slander, belittling, and suspicion against life is strong in us: in that case, we avenge ourselves against life with a phantasmagoria of another, a better life.

(F. Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*)

Contents

- 2. Contents and editorial
- 3. 'What the Dead Are For', Terry Gates-Grimwood (fiction)
- 12. Parallel review of *Solaris*, 3 versions, by Djibril
- 17. Book reviews
- 32. Film reviews

Contact *The Future Fire*

ISSN: 1746-1839

See Submission Guidelines online at:

<http://futurefire.net/about/contrib.html>

Fiction submissions: fiction@futurefire.net

Article and review proposals:

nonfiction@futurefire.net

Other Enquiries: editor@futurefire.net

The magazine retains non-exclusive rights for this publication only, and to all formatting and layout; all other rights have been asserted by and remain with the individual authors and artists.

Well, we've survived into a second issue—we must be doing something right! Many thanks to everyone who has helped with this achievement, whether you have contributed writing, given editorial assistance and advice, or helped to publicise the site by listing us on your website, circulating to a message board, or handing out cards and flyers at events. We should stress, however, that there is still very much room for growth: while we have no intention of compromising on quality, we will be happy to see more stories, more articles, and as many reviews as we can fit into the bandwidth.

A good mix of stuff this quarter: although the fiction still seems to be leaning toward the dark rather than the utopian. Whether this will become a trend or is an early blip remains to be seen. Come in, and taste our fine wares for yourself. If you like it, why not let us know, or even have a shot at writing something yourself?

Djibril, general editor
April 2005

2

Ixthus, fiction editor

'What the Dead Are For', Terry Gates-Grimwood



Heaven, it seemed, was a graveyard, a vast hillside necropolis, a cityscape of a million, million tombstones that stretched away and out of sight to the left and to the right.

The funereal slope itself swept down to a river-edged strip of lush forest, beyond that was a monotonous ochre plain. Beyond the plain were mountains. There was no sign of God, or of any angels, prophets, or even the humblest doorkeeper in the House of the Lord. And except for a relentless wind-sigh, there was silence.

A man of lesser faith than Pastor Robert "Bob" Williamson, freshly resurrected and brushing grave-sand from his Sunday Preaching suit, might have wondered if this was that Other Place. But Williamson's convictions were strong. He had claimed Jesus as his saviour when he was nine years old and was sure of his Heavenly Reward. Hell was for the unbeliever and idolater and he certainly wasn't one of those.

Fully dusted, Williamson straightened his tie, tucked his Bible under his arm and wondered what he was supposed to do now. There was no sign, no guiding light, only an impassive, brown-stained sky and that eternal breeze gusting between the tombstones and troubling the dusty sand.

Williamson considered the forest, and the river, which shimmered with seductive promises of rest and ease—

And wrenched himself about to face the hill. Sixty-one years in the Good Fight had taught Williamson to beware of anything that shimmered and promised ease. The hard, narrow way was always best. So he stood rock still and, as the wind sprinkled dust in his face, traced the tombstone-fanged slope to its distant crest.

Now that was a narrow, hard way, which meant it must be the Right Way, the path to the Celestial City, the New Jerusalem.

Williamson began his ascent.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered and, even in death, handsome man. His jaw was square, his silver hair leonine. A heart attack had brought him to this place but, apart from that one fatal flaw, he had been fit and healthy. His progress here, however, was slow. The soft sand made walking difficult.

A cry for help stopped him, the voice old and querulous. Not wanting to pass by on the other side, Williamson left the narrow way and after a brief search came upon an empty grave guarded by a tilted, wind-scoured headstone. A figure in a dark, tattered dress lay at the bottom, struggling feebly among the remains of a broken coffin.

"Are you okay?" Williamson asked.

"Why the hell should I be okay?" the figure answered. "Jest fallen into some-one's grave and can't git out."

The woman looked up and Williamson felt the first breath of panic. Her face was mostly skull. One eye stared hugely from its bony socket. She was badly hurt and he didn't know any emergency aid.

"Hey, fella, you gonna help me or stand there gawkin' fer the rest of the day?"

"Sure, sorry, here give me your hand." Williamson dropped to his knees, reached down into the grave and felt bony fingers close about his own. Her flesh was dust-dry. When he pulled, that flesh slid horribly over bone in a way that flesh should never slide.

"Not so hard you damned idiot. You'll pull ma hand clean off."

Williamson mumbled his apologies, then got a grip on her arm. The old lady wasn't heavy. In fact she was *too* light. Williamson scooped her up as best he could, and finally managed to wrestle her to freedom. She felt like a mouldering sack of bones and when Williamson had settled her against the nearest convenient tombstone, he saw that she *was* a mouldering sack of bones. Tatters of cloth and flesh hung from her gaunt frame.

"What're you starin' at?" she demanded. "Never sin a dead person before?" She cackled, the sound obscene. "Take a look in a mirror fella, and you'll have sin two in one day."

"Is this Heaven?" Williamson asked.

"Heaven? What would an unrepentant old whore like me be doin' in a nice place like that?"

She had a point. Maybe, then, this was some kind of turnpike in eternity, where the sheep and goats were sorted. Odd, Williamson mused, that scripture doesn't mention it, unless it got missed when they translated the original Greek and Hebrew. And if they got *that* wrong...

"Fact is," the old woman said. "This is Mars."

"Mars? This can't be Mars—"

"See that there star up there?"

Williamson followed her skeletal, sky-aimed finger. The light was fading and the first stars were alight. One was brighter, and bluer than the rest.

"That's Earth. Looks nice don't it, twinkling away up there."

"No, no, you're wrong." Panicked and angry, Williamson opened his Bible. "Look, it says here -".

"Don't care what it says in there. *Mars* is where the dead go." She folded her arms and cocked her head on one side. What skin remained was darkened and stretched tight over her skull. The eye in the denuded half glared fiercely. "Now you listen to me fella," she said firmly. "I fell into that there grave because I spied you toilin' up this hill when you should be joinin' the rest of the dead folks in those woods. *That's* where we're supposed to rest from life's labours and wait for our time. I was comin' to warn you like I warn all the other fools that try climbin' their way to Heaven or Valhalla or Nirvana or wherever the hell they think they're goin'"

Aha, so now the truth was out. "Bob" Williamson, former Pastor of Hartville County Evangelical Church drew himself to his full height and roared; "Get thee behind me Satan!"

"Ah, quit that. I ain't Satan no more'n you are. Feel that breeze? It's a beautiful thing, that breeze. When your time comes it blows your dust to the stars. It's what the dead are for, see, to feed the livin'."

"But I've been saved by the blood of Christ. Heaven is my Home, not the stars."

"Look, fella, it's dangerous up there. Lot of folk'll stop at nothin' to reach their heaven, or stay alive here forever. They turn to Stealin' and Stealers ain't nice things to meet."

Williamson straightened himself, squared his shoulders and jugged his jaw. "I will not give up the fight. I, madam, am bound for the bosom of the Saviour."

"You'll be back," the old lady called out as Williamson strode onwards to Glory. "Even if the wind has to blow you!"

†

The graveyard was not entirely Christian. Crosses mingled with Stars of David and Islamic crescent moons. There were the remains of pyres too, some long cooled, others smoking, and in the distance, one blazed brightly. At one point, Williamson came upon the charred remains of an ancient-looking ship beached amongst the mausoleums and weeping angels. He noticed cave entrances with rolled away stones and as he progressed up the slope, the distant tip of something that could have been a pyramid appeared over the shoulder of the hill. Well, cosmopolitan it might be, but only one set of people would be welcome in the Father's House. And, praise God, he was part of that set.

Meeting the old woman had disturbed him, however, because she was obviously undergoing the physical dissolution of the dead, a dry, mummified kind of dissolution. She had talked of dust and it looked like that's what you became if you didn't make it up this hill in time.

Night came quickly and two small moons rose to spill silver onto the harsh

landscape. The sky blazed with stars, but it was that troubling sapphire orb that drew Williamson's eye and transfixed him for long moments.



"Don't give into it my friend," came a soft, heavily accented voice. Williamson turned to see a slight-built figure struggling towards him from amongst the tombstones. He held out his hand. "Pastor Robert Williamson," Williamson said. "Please to meet you sir."

"Jamal Khalib." Jamal's handshake was strong, sincere. Bones moved alarmingly beneath the skin and Williamson was glad of the dark because he had no wish to see anymore dissolution tonight.

"A word of wisdom to a fellow traveller," Jamal continued. "Keep your eye on Paradise, not Earth."

"Amen to that Mr Khalib."

"Ah, but she is beautiful don't you think?"

"Heaven will be better. Are you on the road to Heaven Mr Khalib?"

"I am. Soon I will look upon the face of Allah."

Allah? Not Jesus Christ? Words failed Williamson. Not many Hartville County folk had worshipped Allah. And besides, worshippers of Allah were damned weren't they? Awkwardly, Williamson cleared his throat and made his excuses.

"But it is not safe to travel alone," Jamal said.

"I'm sorry," Williamson answered. "But our paths are too far apart." And I don't want to be there when the Lord casts you into the Outer Darkness, he added silently.

"The paths of the faithful are never far apart. If you must go, go in peace."

"Uh... Thank... thank you Mr Khalib. God bless you. I'll pray for you."

Williamson strode away, then stopped. He glanced back to see the shadow named Jamal shuffling torturously from tombstone to tombstone. For a moment, Williamson was torn. Surely it was his Christian duty to help his fellow man. But hadn't he spent a lifetime doing just that? And did this actually count as lifetime? He sighed, and slowly, wearily returned to the narrow way. Surely there was nothing he could do for Jamal now. The man had chosen the false path of Islam. Better for him to crumble to dust than face God's judgement.

And on blew the wind. A caressing, softly whispering wind. A wind that curled itself about Williamson's soul and slid, electric, over his failing flesh. A wind that urged him to rest, to lie down and wait.

In the morning, just after sunrise, there were screams.

It turned out that they belonged to a young, fair-haired, women clutching a bundle of rags and huddled against the flank of an elaborate, angel-covered mausoleum. There was a second woman, black, elegant, all-but naked and brandishing an arm-length bone at a man with mismatched limbs and patchwork skin.

Stolen skin.

Wondering why he'd again strayed from his path to become embroiled in the affairs of the unregenerate, Williamson weighed a large rock in his right fist. He didn't remember picking it up. He only knew that he had to act, now, quickly. He lifted his arm, the movement slowed and laboured, as if he was moving through the sludge of a bad dream.

The man, the *Stealer*, darted in. The black woman struck out awkwardly with the bone club. The man ducked under her swing and grabbed her wrist. The bone fell from her hand. The Stealer hit her and she crumpled to the ground, hands over her face. The fair woman's screams became a hysterical shriek as the Stealer grabbed at one of the black woman's legs and began yanking and twisting.

"Here!" yelled Williamson, his voice more rasp than shout. The Stealer spun round and Williamson threw the rock, as hard as his weakening arm would allow. Baseball had been his idolatry. Shards of stolen flesh and rotting skull fountained. The Stealer lurched backwards, but didn't fall. Instead he picked up a rock of his own.

"Mind your own damn business," he snarled as he bore down on Williamson, who backed away, hunting desperately for another missile. Then it was too late because he was down and the Stealer was pounding at his face and chest with his rock. Williamson covered his head, felt ribs crack, flesh split. "Mind-your-own-damned-bus-i-ness" the Stealer chanted in time to each blow.

Then reared, twisted away from his work and staggered off to one side. Williamson heard the dull thud-thudding of rocks on flesh. He lifted himself awkwardly onto his elbows in time to see the Stealer retreat under a hail of stones hurled by the black woman and a gleamingly bald, middle-aged man with spectacles and a viciously accurate delivery.

A moment later, the man was offering Williamson a helping hand. As he accepted it Williamson saw that his own had begun to wither. His rescuer's was pretty much intact. In fact the man himself showed little sign of deterioration. Newly dead, Williamson presumed.

"The name's Letterman," the man said brightly, handing Williamson the bible he'd dropped during the fight. "And I'm real pleased to meet a fellow born again Christian. Praise the Lord."

Williamson returned the introduction, Praise the Lord excluded. That kind of religious exuberance was unfashionable in Hartville County.

"I was feeling lonely," Letterman said. "I mean, there's plenty of folk around, but you can't be too sure who you're hitching up with. Breaks my heart the way

most of them are fooling themselves into thinking there'll be a place for them in Glory. I mean, take the lady over there, that African Voodoo worshipper or whatever. I'm real sorry, but Jesus isn't going to let Voodoo worshippers into Heaven."

Williamson heard himself agree as he probed at his chest. Ribs were broken, but, disturbingly, there was no pain. Letterman's Lord-Praising monologue gushed on, his narrow certainties suddenly as discomfiting to Williamson as his injuries, because he realised that this was how *he* would have sounded back on Earth.

Excusing himself, he set off to offer what help he could to the two women.

"Be careful," Letterman warned, making no move to follow.

That Voodoo worshipper was old, her abdomen a hollow curve, her flesh withered and peeling. Bones showed through in places. She said nothing but smiled her thanks to Williamson as he crouched beside her companion, whose face, though wrinkled was mostly intact. Her yellow hair was falling out in handfuls, however. The bundle she clutched so tightly mewled. Startled, Williamson realised that it hid a baby.

"How... How are you?" The question was lame but Williamson couldn't think of a better one.

"Fine now Father," she said. Her accent was Irish American, or perhaps just Irish. "Thank you for being so brave."

"I'm Pas...I'm Bob." They shook hands and the woman named herself as Kathleen.

"This is David," she said gazing at the bundle. "My little David." She paused, studied Williamson carefully. "Will you hear my confession?"

"I'm sorry. I'm a Protestant Minister. We don't hold with confession, not to a priest anyhow... To Jesus, yes, but never to a priest."

"You don't understand. I've committed terrible sins and I'm scared of what the Blessed Lord will do when I meet Him."

"He'll judge you fairly Kathleen."

"But my sin is mortal. I took my own life."

Williamson reached for the woman's hand. "I'm so sorry... I..."

"How could I live, after what I did? I couldn't bring that shame on my family or myself..."

"But this is the twenty-first century Kathleen. Surely no one would have thrown you out onto the streets." Wouldn't they? And what if one of *my* daughters had announced that she was pregnant? How would my standing as a Pro-Life Pastor have been? The man who presumes to lead a church but cannot lead his own family.

David whimpered again. Kathleen uncovered his head and Williamson saw a tiny, curled creature. An umbilical looped from its navel down into the front of Kathleen's pale yellow dress. Kathleen shushed the child, then began a quiet weeping of her own. "I'm frightened. I need to confess. I need a priest or I'll be damned—"

"Okay," Williamson said gently. "It's alright. I'll take your confession. Just tell me what I'm supposed to say."

†

"I hope you don't mind me asking?" Letterman said a few hours later as he and Williamson trudged on through the graveyard. "But did I hear you taking a confession? I mean, I'm sure I'm wrong, but it's been bothering me Pastor."

Williamson limping now, and finding it harder to stand up straight didn't answer right away. He lifted his face to the wind and not for the first time wanted to give in to it. Then, from deep inside, the fire that was Pastor Robert "Bob" Williamson raged back at his weakness.

"Yes," he said at last. "Yes I did."

"But..." Letterman stopped in his tracks. "*A confession?*"

"I'm sure the Lord understands."

"I'm sure He doesn't. Frankly, I'm worried about you Pastor. God's a consuming fire, Praise the Lord. He spews the lukewarm believer out of His mouth. This isn't about understanding—"

"Yes, I know."

"Look, between you and me, I think we should walk a little faster, leave those two ladies behind. They're a bad influence. They're dangerous. You know, 'silly women, laden with lusts,'"

"You can go on ahead if you like," Williamson said.

"Hey, no offence. But we need to be careful. We've come this far, Praise the Lord, we don't want to fall now."

Williamson held his peace.

†

Night fell. Stars burned. Phobos and Deimos rained silver and Earth smiled her sapphire smile. Williamson was glad of the concealment. He had glimpsed bone through the back of his hands. The landscape of his face, visited by touch only, was angular, withered and unfamiliar.

Letterman sang hymns, and prayed, but didn't talk much. The first wrinkles were showing, and there was discolouration on his once gleaming scalp. The women had caught up. David mewled and Kathleen cooed comfort. This night was noisier than last night. There were shouts of hallelujah, songs, some Christian, others not. There was rejoicing and there was fear.

Let me have you, whispered the wind from the stars. I am what the dead are for.

The night moved, in a way that unnerved Williamson. Until he was sure that their party was being stalked, convinced by glimpses, noises and trespassing shadows. He peered into the darkness that pooled between the silver moon-splashes. He picked up a rock.

"Not much further," he called to the women. To where? he asked himself silently. *My Reward and your damnation?*

He set his eyes on the crest of the hill, on putting one crumbling foot in front

of the other, each step, a distance covered. The twin moons raced for the horizon. Earth slid through her blue arc -

They came, in a flurry of violent, night-blurred motion, figures bursting from behind the tombstones. Not shadow or illusion.

Stealers.

Folding swiftly about the women. Screaming started.

Williamson shouted for help, but his voice was a torn rag. He stumbled towards the melee, hesitated. "Letterman!" he scraped. "Help me! Letterman!"

Letterman didn't move, but remained a shape in the dark. He was shouting warnings that were blotted out by the roar of Williamson's panic and rage. Then, with a yell of triumph,

one of the Stealers lifted something high. It looked like an arm. Williamson howled out his despair and hurled the rock. There was a snarl of anger, a shape detached itself, lurched towards him. Williamson staggered forward to meet it.

There was an impact, flesh on flesh. Williamson stumbled backwards, sensing that more things were broken. The Stealer rushed in again, another blow, cracking his skull, jarring the world. No pain though, just sensation.

Rocks sliced past him. His attacker went down, and swore loudly as it scuttled in retreat and merged, once more, with the roiling shadow-mass and the screams. Williamson looked back up the hill, Letterman was no longer alone. People were coming. "Hey!" Williamson shouted. "We have to help them! Please..."

But they hauled him away, back up the hill. He struggled and sobbed sluggish tears until the screams grew quiet with distance. Prayer, they said, was all they could offer now.

After a while, Williamson couldn't hear the screams at all. There was nothing but the prayers and hymns of his rescuers, and Letterman's "Praise the Lords" which had become a litany, a rhythm for each footfall of that final ascent toward the crest of the hill. From somewhere off to the right someone cried "Allah Akbhar!" From the left someone said "Hail Mary full of Grace."

"Praise the Lord!" responded Letterman defiantly. His new found comrades joined in. Letterman's spectacles were long gone, his face was the dried mask of a mummified corpse. Mine must be worse, Williamson mused. Bared skull and dried parchment. I'm trailing dust, seeding the wind from the stars.

Close now, a few more steps and he would crest the hill and perhaps see Glory, the Celestial City. Oh the sight of it, oh the ecstasy.



And the horror...

Whose was it, that heaven, if it even existed? Jamal's Paradise, Kathleen's kingdom of terror and shame, the Voodoo worshipper's demon pit? His own and Letterman's exclusive celestial country club?

Williamson stopped. "No," he said. "No, I don't want it. Not a heaven like that, whoever it belongs to."

"What're you talking about Pastor?" Letterman demanded. "It's our Reward."

"Reward? For what? It isn't what the dead are for."

"Pastor! Hey Pastor, we're nearly there, Praise the Lord we're nearly there!"

But Williamson was already shambling downhill towards the upper reaches of the graveyard. He knew he would never reach the forest and the shimmering, sparkling river, but he *would* reach the stars.

Solaris: Lem (1961), Tarkovsky (1972), and Soderbergh (2002)

Comments by Djibril

For those who still need introduction to the plot of *Solaris*—broadly adhered to by all three versions discussed here—the story begins with the arrival of psychologist Kris Kelvin on the research station orbiting the ocean planet Solaris. Kelvin soon learns that the station is haunted, not by spirits or demons, but by characters from the researchers' memories. His own visitor is his dead wife, Rhexya, or a very convincing simulacrum of her, seemingly sucked straight from his mind. The tragic dilemma of this story is in the conflict between the researchers' need to understand the mechanics of these intruders so as to defend the station from them, and Kelvin's longing and the desire aroused by the recovery—however artificial—of someone so dear who was lost.

Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris*. 1961 (trans J. Kilmartin & S. Cox 1970). Pp. ISBN 0571219721. £6.99. (US: ISBN 0156027607. \$13.00.)

Lem's *Solaris*, published in Polish in 1961, is a rather short novel with a simple structure: it could almost be a short story, or perhaps novella. At 214 pages (in the English translation) it is too long to be a novella, of course, but there are long sections of scientific, philosophical, and emotional theorising that act as padding rather than adding complexity to the plot or moving the story forward. I say this as though it were a flaw, and it does actually slow the book down, but these discussions are not altogether without interest themselves: it is the serious implications of new discoveries or inventions on human knowledge and experience that make great SF truly speculative. Both the approach to science and to the love story are worthy of further discussion here.

Early in the book Lem subjects his readers to discussions of physics that frankly border on the tedious. Forty-five years after being written, they are also dated and at times unconvincing. The fact that the periodical "info-dumps" occurring in this novel are well-justified by taking place during Kelvin's visit to the station library where he is trying to figure out what is going on, only slightly mitigate the occasional slowness. Other expositions are more successful, however: for instance, Lem's forays into astrobiology are inspired. The descriptions of the sentient ocean made up of unearthly gases, liquids and plasma taking wildly, utterly unrecognisable alien forms are almost Lovecraftian in their inventive, astonishing detail. Given the temptation to make aliens anthropomorphic or at least zoomorphic, compounded by the fact we humans communicate what we see in familiar terms, it is impressive how Lem has constructed the ocean's alienness in so convincing and intelligent a manner. Descriptions of future academia also arise during these visits to the library, and Lem's approach to the scholarship of Solarist studies is at once insightful, cynical, and amusing, riddled with Borgesian inventions like the *Little Apocrypha*, an obscure collection of crackpot theories and suppressed reports, which, of course, transpires to contain more useful information than any self-respecting mainstream Solarist scholar could ever admit.

This science fiction novel explores in an abstract sense the theme of space explo-

ration and colonisation, and the universal human instinct embodied in this adventure. It is telling that in outer space, while search for intelligent alien life, the living ocean is not recognised as intelligent or sentient until it is able to reflect ourselves back to us, in the shapes in its plasma surface, and finally by projecting neutrino-powered versions of our innermost memories. Are we humans really so self-centred that we would not recognise as worthy an alien that was basically unlike ourselves? Lem is almost certainly right.

The heart of the book really is the complex love story between Kelvin and the simulacrum of his dead wife Rheya. The story is tragic, and our protagonist no squeaky-clean hero: the real Rheya committed suicide when Kelvin left her, dismissing her threats to harm herself as mere attention-seeking. He has lived with the guilt ever since. The simulacrum even appears bearing the pin-prick scar of the needle with which she injected herself with a poison from his lab. Kelvin is painfully aware that the new Rheya is an illusion and their love unreal, yet his longing, his grief, and his guilt make it almost impossible for him to reject her. Eventually, he comes to love Rheya not only despite, but almost because of her true nature; as a simulacrum, her love for him is neither voluntary nor conditional. With painful irony, Kelvin's love develops in time with Rheya's mounting awareness of her own unreal nature, and misery at the knowledge that she is not the real Rheya. This internal torment, and the desperate knowledge that even if he accepts her for what she is, they can never have a real future together as her very essence is intimately tied to the matter of the alien, sentient ocean, leads her to commit suicide again. Kelvin ends the book in quiet despair, certain that he will never truly love a real woman again; we can only wonder if his unrealistic expectations led to the failure of his marriage in the first place. All of this is portrayed compassionately, convincingly, and with aching sensitivity.

This is a book written in Poland in 1961, at the heart of the communist era; perhaps inevitably the central themes are universal rather than political or topical and so have not dated. Some might say that the tone is dry to modern tastes, and some of the slower passages make hard reading, but *Solaris* is a short book and never has the chance, to my mind at least, to be boring. Both the big themes, and the little details of speculative astrobiology, are entertainingly and expertly explored.

Сол̄ѳпӯѳ̄ (*Solyaris*) (1972), Dir. Andrei Tarkovsky

Mosfilm / Unit Four

Starring: Donatas Banionis, Natalya Bondarchuk, Jüri Järvet

Tarkovsky's *Сол̄ѳпӯѳ̄* does a remarkably good job of translating Lem's story to the big screen—although Lem himself was famously unimpressed. The legendary Soviet director, whose masterpieces include the gruelling Second World War story *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) and the dystopic future epic *Stalker* (1979), gave us another treat in this film. Like many of his works it is languidly paced and dark, taking its time to build atmosphere with grey skies and delapidated surroundings,

while characters stare in stoic pain, and speak in laconic understatement, rather than filling the ears with heartfelt cries or Hollywoodesque wisecracks. In this case, much of the scene-setting is achieved by taking Lem's several info-dumps and scientific theories and transporting them into a wholly new scene at the beginning of the story, where Kelvin's father introduces him to the discredited Burton (whose reports appear in the *Little Apocrypha* in the novel). This new story element also allows Tarkovsky to introduce a new level of pathos into the story, in that Kelvin bids farewell to his parents for what he knows to be the last time; it is not clear how long the trip to Solyaris will take, but clearly it is longer than they can be expected to live. Hence we are over 40 minutes into the film before Kelvin leaves Earth, and nearly 70 minutes before we are introduced to his ressurected wife (named Hari in this version).

This Kelvin is not a glamorous movie hero with the looks and cool of a Clooney; Banionis was nearly fifty when he played this role, and spends most of the film with a surly look on his face. For his arrival on the station, Kelvin is clad in a leather jacket, big black biker boots, and trousers with some kind of webbed material down the sides; he soon changes into a space suit, and thence forth wears a nondescript white casual outfit. Bondarchuk on the other hand is glamorous and beautiful as the tragic Hari; her dark eyes often moist, she projects well the inner angst of a woman who realises from the start that all is not as it should be, and the realisation that it is she herself who is not what she seems. When it comes to the scenes where she does violence to herself, her physical suffering is very intense, and Kelvin's stoicism seems cold and almost perverse in comparison. Her successful suicide is off-scene, as in Lem.

Tarkovsky presents his early 70s Soviet audience with a world of science fiction tropes and clichés. The futuristic city Kelvin drives through before he leaves Earth is filmed in Tokyo, and seems not particularly spectacular to a modern (western) audience. Rather than the books and notes containing information that are so important in the novel, the film has this information conveyed via video recordings on huge screens, and even telephone conversations take place on and through these screens. The inside of the space station, however, is dirty, barren, and decrepit, with futuristic surfaces and angles, but all in a state of disrepair.

Where at the end of Lem's novel Kelvin described his depression and his realisation that he could never regain his lost love for Rheya, Tarkovsky cannot have his taciturn protagonist explain in such a way. Instead he returns to the theme of Kelvin's parents which he introduced at the start of the film, and takes us to a later stage of the sentient ocean's development, where it recreates the home Kelvin has left behind him. There is a nod to Dadaist cinema when we see it raining inside the father's house while it is sunny outside, and then Kelvin again proves unable to resist the nostalgia of embracing someone he has lost: he falls to his knees to embrace his father, much the same as he did Hari earlier—in lieu of helping when she was arguing with Snaut and Sartorius in the library. Thus the taciturn, expressionless Kelvin ends the film in an utterly pathetic pose, lost, and throwing himself

into what he knows is only an illusion of home. As the scientists recognise during their discussion in the library, humanity has explored outer space but is still looking for home.

***Solaris* (2002), Dir. Stephen Soderbergh**

Twentieth Century Fox / Lightstorm Entertainment

Starring: George Clooney, Natascha McElhone, Viola Davis, Jeremy Davies

The director Steven Soderbergh has always been known to alternate between serious and inventive films (*The Limey*, *Traffic*) with more popular, if by no means brainless, fare (*Erin Brockovich*, *Ocean's Eleven*). The former are usually quite excellent, while the latter demonstrate a skill behind the camera and a smooth, unerring touch that does not always find its way into the better films. It is hard to decide in which category the current film should be filed: its execution is well-planned and very polished; the subject matter is serious but lightly handled. One cannot help but feel that the science fiction genre was what doomed it to a "popular" label. (Clooney, on the other hand, who has recently delivered some excellent roles, seems to have phoned-in his performance in this move, which is competent but uninspired.)

Soderbergh sets the scene in his film with a short introductory sequence in which we learn that Clooney's Kelvin (a) is a psychotherapist, and (b) has lost his wife (a slightly manic but so far silent McElhone). This sequence is set in a world where the insides of buildings are clean, uncluttered, sterile, and spartan, where outside it seems to rain all the time, and clothing is functional, mostly black raincoats and plastic headgear. It is not obviously futuristic, except for the occasional transparent plasma screen and electronic sliding doors. In only eight minutes of theatre time, Kelvin has left Earth to investigate the loss of contact with the crew of the ship orbiting Solaris; we never learn exactly what happened to the "security unit" who preceded him.

The characters of the twitchy, inarticulate Snow (Davies), and sullen, obsessive physicist Gordon (Davis) are not as inscrutable as either Lem's or Tarkovsky's Snaut and Sartorius; they tell us what they fear and why they chose not to flee Solaris when the phenomena started. On the other hand we never meet their "visitors", not even in fleeting glimpses or shadows (until Snow turns out to be his own "visitor", in perhaps the most nonsensical twist of the movie). Nor is Kelvin the taciturn, tortured protagonist of the Soviet film, but rather a smooth-talking therapist with desperation in his voice who by turns commands and pleads with Rheya not to kill herself. Rheya's torment is not so much existential as predestined, she tells Kelvin she is only suicidal because he remembers her that way; I found this made her character far less engaging, since there was no reason for her suffering to empathise with or understand, although it highlights Kelvin's desperation. Most of the back story is told in dreams, as Kelvin lies asleep or fevered, or as Rheya stares out of the window at the shifting pink mists of Solaris and recalls memories that she knows are not her own.

I found it amusing to try to decide whether Soderbergh thought he was remaking Tarkovsky's classic movie, or filming Lem's novel anew. In the end, the American director has taken so many liberties with the story—as is absolutely his right—that it is almost meaningless to ask which plotline he took as his starting point. Almost all the physics and astrobiology is absent from this film: there is no mention of Solaris' "colloidal mists" or "symmetriads"; only cursory mention of the subatomic make-up of the "visitors", and no acknowledgement of the history of scholarship in Solaristics. Instead this is a human drama of Kelvin's disturbed relationship with his depressive wife whom he has already lost once, and his need for redemption at having underestimated her threat to herself. At the end of the film, Soderbergh follows Tarkovsky's lead by having Kelvin stay on Solaris (although in far more dramatic circumstances as the planet's expanding gravitational field pulls the space ship in from its orbit) and have his dreams fulfilled again by living in an illusion without the flaws of the first attempt, all his mistakes forgiven. (I could not help but wonder whether the notoriously capricious preview audiences demanded a happier ending than the director first shot, or if the normally reliable Soderbergh always intended to leave us on this note of sanctimonious drivel.)

Conclusions

I have tried thus far to discuss both the book and the two films as works of art in their own rights, rather than as reinterpretations of one another whose success or otherwise rest on their fidelity to a "true" source. It is, however, notable that both the films have managed to remain unusually close both to their predecessors and to Lem's novel. It would not have been surprising, if one thinks for example of the creative license exercised by Ridley Scott when he turned a PK Dick novel into *Blade Runner* (1982), that a so-called adaptation of *Solaris* in twenty-first century Hollywood should turn out to resemble the story and tone of, say, *Event Horizon* (1997), also a story set on a space craft, featuring terrors drawn straight from the crew's subconscious memories and fears. The differences in detail and motivation between the book and the films, which Stanislaw Lem has so vocally denounced, should not obscure this uncommon faithfulness. The most striking difference, to my mind, is that in neither film is the ocean of Solaris a character, in the way that it is in the novel. Both films sideline the issue of xenobiology and alien contact, making this wholly a story of human interactions and experiences.

Science fiction often tells the story of how a predicted or imagined technological or cultural change has a profound effect on the world, on our lives, and on the relationships of people to one another and to that technology. All three of the *Solaris* stories make the living ocean into an instantiated metaphor for human psychology, showing how Kelvin suffers because he is trying to live through his memories, holding onto unrealistic dreams. Inability to move on after a loss is a form of dishonesty—although dishonesty only to oneself—and relationships can not work without admission and acceptance of both past events and current problems. The science fiction, interesting as it is in its own right, is always a backdrop to the very human drama of the main characters.

Book Reviews

Three Whispers of Wickedness chapbooks (D-Press) Reviewed by Djibril

These chapbooks, printed on plain copy paper in black and white, and folded into A5 stapled booklet form with card covers, are a triumph of low-budget publishing, with quality content rather than glossy presentation. The simple format should not be taken as a sign of low standards: the editor D has done a good job, both in selecting authors to showcase in this way, and in effective proofing and typesetting. Any aspiring horror writer could do far worse than to make their *début* in this imprint.

Mark Howard Jones, *Night Country*, illustrated by Marcia Borell

This title contains four short stories that range from the flippant, through disturbing, to quite obscure; there is, in my view, a clean fifty-fifty split between excellent and the passable. Artwork is basic, but effective, having the appearance of watercolour or charcoal work that has been scanned in monochrome and printed or xeroxed; the portrait of the flaming-haired girl accompanying the third story stands out as the nicest piece.

The first story, 'A Blue Room With One Window', is a short piece with little plot: a young lodger awakes to find himself breathing water, panics, then comes to terms with his new ability until he learns that it has a downside. This has the feel of a fantasy, or perhaps rather a nightmare, with shades of Kafka; but the twist struck me as a little glib, even flippant. A fair, light-hearted opener for the collection.

Next comes the darkest story here, 'Cicatrice Mistress', an extremely disturbing story about art and magic, domination and death, blackmail and betrayal. The villain of the piece reveals that the protagonist, the painter Jake, has a secret about as dark as you can imagine, which makes it challenging for the reader to find someone to sympathise with. There is blood and horror aplenty in this inventive and chilling tale.

'Burning Sian' is a denser piece that I found difficult to interpret. It contains seemingly disjointed thoughts and conversations of the titular Sian, whose head appears to be on fire (this burning must be psychotic or metaphorical, if not metaphysical, since it seems to go on for years); one other character includes a painter named Jake, who may (or I suppose may not, since he has no identifying features) be the same character from the previous story. I wonder if the broken paragraphs are meant to reflect the narrator's madness or represent some kind of prose poem?

The final piece is another dark and unsettling story, 'The Song of Sorrow', with an ambivalent protagonist and a readership drawn in and implicated in the horror. Ant is a teenage schoolboy, with a repressive father bordering on violence, and no interest in classes. Rather he is obsessed with history and with reading, a pursuit that his father quashes. We can not help but empathise with this boy, but then have to watch with a growing sense of unease as we learn of his flawed understanding of morality and his obsession with human sacrifice. We cannot condemn him as a monster, therefore, when he starts to lose his grip.

I shall certainly watch out for Mr Jones' writing in the future.

John Dodds, *Gameplayers*, illustrated by Laura Cameron Jackson

This book contains three stories, all of fairly even standard and quality, none of

them either deeply fantastic or terribly dark. Artwork is clear and unpretentious, not particularly imaginative, and not too distracting from the text. Two of the four drawings are of a bunch of keys, for some reason; the cover image featuring a combination of chess pieces on a snakes-and-ladders board is technically very good.

'Freeloader' is the story of three housemates whose life is disrupted by the arrival in their home of Brady, a seemingly chameleonic figure whom they seem to know but cannot place. While not immediately offensive, Brady insinuates himself into their lives and tensions soon mount all around him. Neither the characters nor for that matter the readers can quite pin the blame for what happens on the free-loader, but he does seem to make a habit of getting something for nothing out of people. A spooky tale, and one which will fill most people with an uncomfortable sense of familiarity.

'Levitation' could almost be described as a domestic suspense thriller with supernatural overtones. Katya is a Polish-born but fully naturalised immigrant, now widowed, who sells dried flower arrangements to gift shops and looks after her cantankerous, semi-paralysed mother who plays solitaire obsessively and is addicted to Coca Cola. Since childhood Katya has had the almost magical ability to imbue dead things with life, but she seems reluctant to use her gift to ease the loneliness and emptiness of her life, for all her mother's urging to remember the "old ways". Warm and subtle, this story is moving and convincing in equal proportions.

The final story, 'Crossing the Border', would be a road movie (if it were a movie); the story of Harry, who is on the run with his uncomplaining wife, leading her from state to state, country to country, where he steals and gambles for a living until it is time to move on. Incapable of making a decision, all of Harry's choices are made by a tossed dice or a flipped coin, until the reappearance of his dangerous partner in crime who announces that the time has come to walk back into danger and collect their ill-gotten loot. Harry's choices have suddenly gotten much harder, but with them his ability to see his options suddenly clarifies. Perhaps not the most original concept for a story, but one nicely written and effective.

Three very competent and readable stories.

John Saxton, *Bloodshot*, illustrated by Carole Humphreys

Another wide mix of stories in the pages of this volume, ranging from the not-quite-sublime to the frankly ridiculous. The drawings illustrating these stories are really quite accomplished, both atmospheric and very skilfully drawn, although the depth of detail is sometimes more imaginative perhaps than the texts themselves demand.

The first piece is perhaps the best: 'The Shape at the Window', a story which begins with imaginary beasts formed from dark shadows around the room and at the window, by a man who is sleeping on the couch because his wife is in too much pain upstairs. The couple is consumed with grief and depression, each tortured by their own guilt and shame, and by monsters more real than the reader at first realises. A gripping, although somehow amoral, story.

'Amelia's Labyrinth' is a familiar-feeling story set at a posh boys' boarding

school in the early twentieth century. Shortly after the disappearance of a student in mysterious circumstances, George, a new boy at the school—the son of a newspaper editor who carried the story—finds himself in a peculiar bower in the wooded grounds with his new friend, a beautiful, strangely persuasive boy. Of course the woods turn out to have something to do with the missing boy, and George finds himself at the middle of it all. A nicely handled story with believable elements, but embedded in too clichéd a setting for its own good.

'The Achilles Impulse' is the first of two classically labelled stories which do not live up to their grand titles. The title in this case refers to a pretty, blonde, eight-year old girl who has a knack for manipulating the weaknesses of those around her, fulfilling their dreams in such a manner as they would never have wished for. The scene is peopled with stereotypes and cardboard cut-outs of teachers, too crudely drawn to elicit much sympathy.

The last story in this collection, 'Troilus Timon and Tiberius', is the tale of three tadpoles in a glass tank in a school classroom. It is as silly as it sounds, and sadly the whole feeble climax hangs on a cheap ethnic stereotype, which is predictable from the moment a boy is called by a recognisably French name. I'm not sure what this piece is even doing in such a volume.

Some good writing in this collection, but a couple of pieces too flippant for my taste.

These chapbooks and more can be obtained from *Whispers of Wickedness* at <http://www.ookami.co.uk/>

Richard Morgan, *Market Forces*. London: Gollancz, 2004. Pp. 469. ISBN 0575075848. £6.99 US: ISBN 0345457749. \$14.95 Reviewed by ErrantNight

Market Forces is both a racy, violent, brilliant, exciting, barn-storming light-bike ride of a sci-fi thriller, and a deadly serious, cleverly-paced, wickedly ironic but none-too-subtle indictment of the globalising profiteers who simultaneously foment conflict in the third world and suck the same victims dry for a barrel of oil or an armaments contract. Morgan has put a lot of thought into both faces of this novel: the plot, characterisation, spectacle, and surprises are near-flawless; the corporate political model behind the story is credited to a Masters in development and a page-long bibliography. This is a different world from that portrayed in *Altered Carbon* (2002) and *Broken Angels* (2003), but Morgan is fast developing into a truly masterful novelist.

Chris, a successful young businessman who has made his name in Emerging Markets and with one high-profile road kill behind him already, has been head-hunted by Shorn, a company specialising in Conflict Investment. In a world where executives ("zektiv", as angry punks from the Cordoned Zones call them) earn big money and have near-impunity in their protected world of big money and high risk, where jobs and contracts go to the man who can run his competitors off the road in brutal road-rage clashes, Chris has the bottle and the skill it takes to get ahead, but

his greatest asset is also his one weakness: his conscience. As he rises in Shorn, he makes friends and enemies in equal measure, both for his refusal to kill every punk who calls him out on the road, and for his dislike of the South American dictator his company are investing in this year. As the stakes get higher, Chris's wife is helping him find a way out that might both save his life and allow him to live with himself and his nightmares.

Like his hero, Morgan gets carried away by the visceral excitement of violence, by the joy of driving to the kill, by the power-kick of manipulating a third-world dictator or revolutionary leader for profit and career advancement. We are never allowed to forget that this mercenary business practice and lifestyle free of consequences are both evil and directly responsible for untold suffering. But we see why Chris finds it irresistible, and may even find ourselves hoping despite ourselves that he does not give it all up and sell out to the United Nations ombudsmen and his bleeding-heart father-in-law's liberal morality.

The setting is a clever, near-future Speculative Fiction England of the late mid twenty-first century, characterised not by unrecognisable technology but by the exaggeration of some of the more reprehensible traits of the media, politics, finance and social manipulation seen already in our time. The geography is suburban London, with literal razor-wire barricades marking the lines that are now mainly marked by house prices and council tax bands. Pop culture and modern history references contain just enough pre-2004 material to remind us that this is our future, but enough new names and events to make it clear that fifty or more years have passed and the world has its own lived past now. Flights to the USA land at Reagan Airport; economics students who can afford the fees study at the Thatcher Institute; the hitmen with the broadest global coverage work out of Langley.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, but be warned: if you are a globalising marteeter or a neocon sympathiser, you might find it less than indulgent.

David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*. Sceptre, 2004. Pp. 544. UK: ISBN 0340822783. £7.99; US: ISBN 0375507256. \$14.95. Reviewed by Jehoshaphat

This book narrates segments of the lives of six people, in what is effectively first person narrative. The first character is a clerk traveling to Australia on business in the mid 19th Century. His story is told through writing in his daily journal.

The second is set in a series of letters from a destitute musician to his one true love and describes the writing of his first and only successful sextet. In the course of his correspondence, he finds the published journal of the 1850's clerk.

The third is a chapter in a novel telling the story of a reporter who is tasked to expose the dangers of a new power generator after a scientist (the lover of the musician) provides her the details. This novel is set in the 1970s.

The fourth is description of an elderly publisher who, after his latest published author causes a controversy and he makes some money, is blackmailed. His only recourse is to seek out his hateful brother, who plays a ghastly trick on him to get him into hiding... This publisher is sent a manuscript of the novel described above.

This is all set in the modern day.

The fifth soul is described by a device called an Orison. It appears to be a recording device which keeps records of legal hearings. This particular hearing features a stem-cell engineered being which has been created as a worker in the fast food services industry — a "fabricant". This is obviously set in the future, where most of the West and Africa has been laid waste by radioactive pollution, culminating in "Deadlands", which are approaching the setting of this Hearing — Korea (or Neo So Corpos). A rebellion has formed against the government, which advocates a legal requirement to purchase goods. The underclasses are comprised of escaped fabricants, and refugees from abroad who have terrible radiation deformities. The ordeal of the publisher survives as a film which this wayward fabricant sees.

The sixth person is described by the narration of his story. This is set in the distant future, in a post-apocalyptic environment reminiscent of Mad Max... The Fabricant of the Korean Court Hearing is worshipped as a God in this period of time.

Mitchell adapts his style to suit not only the means of narration, but also the time period. He masters the future conversational style brilliantly, and the characters which he creates are beautifully crafted and utterly convincing. They have real depth, and there are hidden messages in all of their descriptions.

This book embodies the best of Orwell, Huxley and Greene, whilst maintaining an originality all of its own. The cleverness of the divisions of the stories is just fabulously done, and leaves you hankering for a resolution. Quite apart from anything else, I found myself desperately searching for published works of Nietzsche on my bookshelf, which are non-existent...

I thoroughly recommend that you read this for yourself—don't take my word for it!

Carloz Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*. Phoenix, 2004. Pp. 402. ISBN 0753819317. £9.99. (US: ISBN 0143034901. \$15.00.) Reviewed by Jehoshaphat

At the age of ten, Daniel Sempere is taken to a hidden library for books which are out of circulation. These lost treasures are kept out of the limelight to protect and preserve them. Daniel is invited at the age of ten in 1945 by his father to choose and retrieve a book, the *Shadow of the Wind* by Julian Carax. The boy reads this book in one night and is utterly enraptured by the story, the author and his inspiration.

The chosen book attracts a great deal of interest from associates of his father, the Barcelona Crime Squad and certain enigmatic individuals. As Daniel grows and matures, he is compelled to discover more and more about this strange book and author, sacrificing the offices of friendship with his age-peers; the book and author become a means to explore the magic of authorship, impress the objects of Daniel's emotional desire and by default, discover his sexuality, and his own place in the world as a cheeky, urbane and intelligent misfit.

Daniel's investigations and romantic trials drag him into a dangerous and dirty situation; this is a lingering affair from the past involving a similar set of misfits.

The author, Carax, is one of this group. Carax is at heart an honorable person, but obsessed with intimacy, depravity and darkness—themes he explores in his otherwise poorly received novels.

The intrigues of all the characters, atmospheric settings and local superstitions provide a frame work doused in dark intrigue; the notion of not dabbling in the unknown is alluded to, with dark speculation manifested in the suggestion of the supernatural. The themes and the character portrayals were in places underdeveloped and verging on the predictable. The portrayal of Inspector Fumero is crass. It is obvious that he is a cruel, wicked fascist, his coarse swearing was unrealistically profuse and shift from oily sychophant to terrifying bully hardly had me trembling with the ominous contrast Zafón was apparently aiming for. Other characters are too shallow and are too conveniently shoe-horned into the narrative (the eccentric friend of Daniel, de Torres, and Nooria Montfort spring to mind). Daniel's father is also too good to be true. Descriptions of the horrific and unpalatable are clinically—too clinically—delivered.

All of these are forgivable because Zafón has an older Daniel narrating his recollections, and it could be reasonably argued that the reliance on memory explains the apparent shallowness of some of the story and characters. This implies that such narratives are written with a disadvantage from the outset, or that Zafón has crafted it as such. Most likely, the text is a reasonable but rough around the edges translation into the English that I read; it suffers from 'translationese' in places.

A charming book well worth reading nonetheless, this will keep the reader interested from start to finish.

Matthew Stover, *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*. Century, 2005. Pp. 432. UK: ISBN 0712684271. £17.99; US: ISBN 0345428838. \$25.95. Reviewed by Jehoshaphat

A novelisation of the third episode of the Star Wars hexology, Stover has based the work on the story and screenplay by George Lucas (who requires no introduction). This episode deals with the inevitable destruction of the Jedi Order, rise of the Empire and baptism-of-fire of Darth Vader.

Episodes I and II set the political and ideological scene of the entire series, setting in motion the Clone Wars, a saga most fans will remember was first mentioned by Carrie Fisher as Princess Leia in Episode IV in the Late 1970s. The majority of Episode III deals with the final battles of the Clone Wars three years on, and looks at the emotional effects of this long struggle has had on the key characters and the political fibre of the Galactic Republic.

It is against this dark background that the seduction of Anakin Skywalker by the evasive Darth Sidious is set. Stover focuses on the thoughts and feelings of the young Skywalker as he revels in his superior abilities and sensitivities to the Force, while desperately hiding his forbidden marriage from his friends, peers and superiors. Anakin conceals more than just his misdemeanours his feelings are kept secret to all but one man... He is overwhelmed by terrifying, prophetic dreams, and the

fear of losing those he loves: his wife, his beloved friends and mentors Obi Wan Kenobi and the sinister Supreme Chancellor of the Republic, Palpatine. When Anakin learns of wife's pregnancy, his terror and insecurity, manifested in the form of a dragon, explodes.

Discovering that the key to saving his wife and child is in the restricted histories of the heretical Sith (a group of Dark Sorcerers who are the embodiment of evil, harnessing the more powerful Dark Side of the Force) Anakin's obsessions with this knowledge are further agitated by the hinderence introduced unwittingly by his Jedi colleagues. This causes alienation from Anakin's training and duty as a Jedi, and, more worryingly, his friends — all but Palpatine...

As the book continues to its inevitable conclusion, Anakin becomes more and more a pawn of Sidious, until he eventually chooses which side he is on, and is cursed for the rest of his days by terrible wounds. His redemption, however, is not lost as one day, he fulfills his destiny, and restores order to the Force (three films and three plus books, later).

The novel has to deal with several not entirely original themes. It remains to be seen whether Lucas has done them justice or not (I am thinking: not—but this is a review of the novelisation, and not the film). Dark images are provided in an attempt to visualise Anakin's fear, frustration, and finally rage as we are taken on a voyage through his thoughts and shown his demons. We are constantly reminded of this dragon creature that embodies the knowledge that death is inevitable; it is coming to someone he loves sooner rather than later. The image of the dragon is disappointing: a snake would have probably been more appropriate.

The Seduction and perversion of the heroic Anakin into a minion of evil is subtle and justifiable, at least to Anakin. Sidious uses the fear of losing the ones he loves to pervert Anakin, and helps to build his rage and frustration against his Jedi Masters. This seems to work reasonably well, and helps to provide a logical path to the birth of Vader. Is it desirable to have such a logical path? A tear could be shed though, as the narrative has one instance of Darth Vader trying to return to his former self, if only for the purposes of deception. When Vader proper is born, though, something interesting comes into existence from the perverted Skywalker. As he is horribly disfigured and dons the familiar mask and cloak, we can finally understand something of the beloved Darth Vader, a taste of his "twisted and evil" nature. Stover is applauded for that page and a half.

It is ultimately very difficult to feel much sympathy for Anakin. He is a cocky, arrogant brat, after all, as he was portrayed in Episode II, and seems to have failed to mature in any way. It is also difficult to get the image of Hayden Christiansen out of the mind whilst reading the book, for much the same reasons. His poor performance in Episode II will pollute any novelisation attempts of Anakin Skywalker forever. So much depends on this one character though, and Lucas just doesn't have the skill to create such a complex personality. Stover does a reasonable job of piecing together the mess of Skywalker's character.

We are also indulged in a treatment of the dangers of attachments, both from Anakin's point of view living in sin, and Kenobi's point of view, because of his at-

tachment to Anakin (it is very difficult to see why he is so attached to the brat Skywalker, but this actually works for that very reason). Kenobi manages to shed this attachment, though, at the critical moment. This element is not overdone, and is an excellent sub-plot, especially when Anakin forgets his obsession and turns on his heavily pregnant wife.

Each section of the book has a personification of Darkness, which neither resonates with any of the narrative nor adds any of the poignancy as Anakin's life is slowly destroyed by a combination of factors. The seduction of Anakin and the betrayal he both suffers and practices is predictable and hardly entirely controversial. Tricky one that, the portrayal of darkness: best left to a licence with a degree of sophistication.

A lot of the story focuses on Skywalker, perhaps precluding the sheer number of lightsabre duels, space battles and worlds visited (including Kashyyyk, home of the Wookies, (though Stover barely dwells on this) as well as Dagobah, Alderaan, Coruscant, the Lava World of Mustafar, to name but a few). Familiar characters such as Bail Organa, Mon Mothma (the founders of the rebellion) and the apologetic Captain Needa, of Episode V fame, make welcome appearances. The Jedi, however, all of them, are just plain dull. With the exception of insights into Mace Windu's persona and of Yoda's realisation that he is no master but a pupil, the loss of the Jedi is not really felt at all.

It was interesting to see how the saga pans out though, and I was left with a sense of completion as the adventures came full circle, at least for me, in this novel. Shakespeare it ain't (even though it has pretensions of examining the human condition). But it is Star Wars. The Star Wars we have been waiting for, if not for the birth of Vader, but to see how the story has come around to the Trilogy we know and love from the Prequels we love to hate...

Read it. You will get more out of Episode III from this than the film will give you, methinks. (Jar Jar Binks is also only in the book for about 10 words. 11 words too many.)

Allen Ashley, ed., *The Elastic Book of Numbers*. Elastic Press, 2005. Pp. 278. ISBN 0954881214. £6.00. Reviewed by Djibril

This is another themed anthology, on the heels of *The Alsiso Project* (2003), which I reviewed in an earlier issue of this magazine; the idea being that authors are challenged to write to a theme and may come up with more interesting or unusual work than if left entirely to their own devices. This collection is almost, but not quite, as successful as the earlier anthology, which seemed more profound and contained weightier stories: numbers are perhaps a vaguer theme, leaving more room for manoeuvre and less need for invention than the evocative name "Alsiso". However there is some excellent work in here, and again my criticisms of individual pieces probably stem from personal taste rather than deep, objective flaws.

The first item in this volume is titled '8 20 17 16 22 11 21 18 11 7 5 7', by Kay Green. This page-long entry is made up²⁴ entirely of numbers, and is a puzzle that

can be easily solved by an enterprising code-breaker—intriguing (but not so intriguing that I actually tried very hard to solve it); the solution is given at the end of the tome, and the translation of the frontispiece turns out to be little more than the solution to the code itself, which may seem pointless but is probably a deliberate paradox. (Might it not have been more fun to have the solution somewhere harder to find, such as on the press website, so that readers might be encouraged to try and solve it themselves for a little longer?)

The first two stories proper are both based on the number zero. John Lucas's 'Approaching Zero' is a story told in the form of slightly absurd diary entries, a creepy parable on the unhealthiness of our accumulation of personal possessions. As the piece progresses it becomes darker and even more unsettling, proof perhaps of how unwilling the reader is to imagine parting with his accumulated hoard. Joel Lane tells another slightly surreal tale in 'Where None is the Number', in which an unremarkable man wins a lottery sweepstake with the numbers 0000000, moving in the public eye "from zero to hero" and relentlessly back to zero.

Several pieces in this collection are based on the premise that apparently random numbers turn out to be significant (or *vice versa*). In '3:21', Eric Shapiro gives us the tragic tale of a man who becomes obsessed with numbers after the grotesque death of his wife, leading his employees unwillingly into the mission to communicate with her spirit. E. Sedia's 'Every Eight and Eleven' gives us a man whose life fills up so much with the same two numbers, that his quest for understanding leads him to a casino where he wins a prize he did not quite expect. Charles Lambert gives us a story darker than either of these two in 'The Zero Worm', in which the protagonist finds numbers being traced on his flesh by some kind of hyper-dermal parasite, and starts to lose his mind as he tries to fathom their meaning. All three of these stories feel slightly unsatisfying, promising more than they deliver.

Mysterious numbers also occur in the two most spiritual pieces in this volume: in Jeff Gardiner's '351073', a girl named Eloise after the serial number on her hospital tag when her grief-stricken father brought her home from hospital, grows up to become a guru of a numerological cult, to the clergyman father's slight dismay. Paul Evansby, in 'i' (which represents the imaginary square root of minus one, rather than the Roman numeral), uses the character of a composer and mathematician trying to compose harmonies based on complex numbers to take us to wartime Greece and to a parallel universe. Both of these stories are profound, sensitive, moving, and convincing, although they both ultimately left the reader feeling somewhat cool and without resolution at the end.

A couple of stories use numbers to explore madness of various forms. Sam Hayes's 'Sixty Thousand Pieces of Glass' tells of a young girl and her boyfriend's tragic involvement with an abusive cult of "oneness"; a very nicely written piece, combining unexpected detail with an unwaveringly straightforward viewpoint to create a strange and absorbing atmosphere. Phil Locascio's 'The Square Root of 2', on the other hand, is a well-crafted but upsetting piece narrated by a dangerously obsessive loner with a short temper. The deceptively honest first person voice is reminiscent in places of the tone of *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

(2004); but whereas in the latter tome the technique is used to bring the reader closer to understanding of an autistic child, in this story it is used merely as a means to deliver the cliché of a dangerously psychotic killer.

Some stories are numerical puzzles that border on the flippant: both Mark Patrick Lynch's 'Breach of Contract, Clause 6A' and Donald Pulker's 'Dial 1-800-To-Live' revolve around deadly puzzles that seem slightly pointless (if dangerous), and the stories are thereby weakened. On the other hand, Toiya Kristen Finley's '7:33' also features a numerical puzzle with a deadly outcome, but is a much stronger story featuring a vengeful bluesman and a young woman unwilling to lie down and be the victim. The morality of the ending was a little narrow-minded for this reader's taste. (Interestingly, this story and Sedia's offering are the only two to use what might seem the obvious trick of linking numbers and biblical chapter and verse.)

Numerology makes a more serious appearance in two stories. 'The One Millionth Smile' by Neil Williamson revolves around a book of numbers which predict to the nearest heartbeat, breath, and smile, how long a person will live. Sitting at his dying mother's bedside, a young man notices that the numbers have been tampered with, and tries to find out who has been cheating fate. A both sweet and sad story about living life to the full, about love and death, about sacrifice and growing up, which worked very well in my view. Another excellent piece is Joy Marchand's 'The Sympathy of Five', a dark parable of loss, displacement, and dependence, in which a Russian immigrant grieving for his young brother visits a notorious tattoo artist to have his memories branded on his flesh for ever; by the mystic powers of his ink drawings, the tattooist gives the young man more than he bargained for, a double edged gift.

Out of the handful of stories that use space-opera themes as parables, a couple are not so successful, but a third is excellent. Tim Lees's 'Two Moon City' is a story of a brutal, feudal civilisation of Mars, whose overt moral seems to be that even the most barbaric and totalitarian state of unwavering hopelessness is preferable to the torture that is uncertain hope, unregulated life, or social fluidity. Rosaleen Love's 'Wanderer 8' is a less glamorous tale of two Australian accidental astronauts, caught up amidst the debris of Earth which finds its way spontaneously into orbit and becomes the eighth visible celestial body. The third space-travel story, Julian Todd's 'Mine the Primes', was one of my favourite offerings to this collection: in a future where prime numbers are a once-only source of great power, mathematicians work tirelessly to discover new numbers and thus extend humanity's reach into space. Whenever a run of primes is discovered, however, the power thus gained is squandered, as though it might run out of its own accord, and so what might have been a plentiful supply of energy is drained to its limit leaving mankind on the brink of disaster. A lesson to us all.

'When We Were Five' by Marion Amott is another excellent story about an old woman who has lost her family and most of her life to the cowardly capriciousness of a corrupt Bolshevik officer, and whose revenge comes slowly but inexorably

behind her. The structure of this piece is very sound, the narrative building cleverly and with solid, atmospheric moves; vengeance is never without repercussions, and enough space is left after the climax for the beginnings of a resolution. One of the strongest stories in the anthology.

Finally, a handful of the pieces in this volume use numbers in a different way. In Neil Ayres's 'Twenty-One Again' numbers affect the structure, not the content of the piece, which is a snapshot of life in a local, run-down pub told from twenty or so different viewpoints. Ellen McAteer's '4Thoughts on Numbers' is a non-fiction piece, a few pages of pop-science speculation with references taken from the likes of the *Telegraph* and various internet news pages. It may be significant that the endnotes are numbered up to twenty, but that there are only seven reference-points in the text. The final piece in the volume, Tim Nickels and Allen Ashley's 'While We Were Sleeping, Numbers Took over the World' is a piece of what might loosely be termed numerical art or poetry: the history of the world is told through numbers, with much repetition of the letters o, n, & e in various forms. This piece is fun in places, such as the "Intermission Quiz", but I didn't really get the point, overall.

Individual criticisms aside, the quality of production and content of this volume were very high on average, and Elastic Press have once again shown that a good compilation like this is immeasurably superior to the by comparison haphazard selection of stories one would find in even the better magazines in the genre. Excellent work, and I hope many more such anthologies are in the pipeline.

Max Brooks, *The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete protection from the living dead*. UK: London: Duckworth, 2004. Pp xiv, 254. ISBN 0-7156-3318-X. £8.99. US: Three Rivers Press, 2003. Pp. 272. ISBN 1-4000-4962-8. \$12.95
Reviewed by Djibril

This useful little self-help book—modelled on the countless 'teach yourself' and special forces-style survival handbooks beloved of survivalists and adolescent boys everywhere—covers almost every conceivable detail and eventuality that might occur in the fight against zombies on any scale. In the unlikely occurrence that a deadly virus strikes, the living dead rise in your neighbourhood, and you find yourself in charge of organising a group for defence, escape, or extermination, you would probably find this book genuinely useful, as Brooks has thought of more or less everything.

The book begins with an account of the science behind zombies: the highly infectious virus *Solanum* and its ability to transform the human nervous system from the thinking, controlling mechanism it is now, to little more than a centralised organ in an undying, decomposing, essentially mindless killing machine. After detailing the physical and behavioural characteristics of the zombie, and debunking myths such as the Voodoo zombie, the Hollywood zombie, and the super-powered zombie, Brooks goes on to classify the four levels of zombie outbreak. Outbreaks of classes one and two are essentially small-scale and short-term, involving under

twenty and under a hundred zombies respectively, being very geographically localised, and lasting only a few days. Class one outbreaks are usually dealt with by local response and attract little media attention (although heroic zombie-slayers may find themselves charged with murder); the class two outbreak usually requires an organised response by local law enforcement or military, and consequently media reports are unavoidable, although probably inaccurate. A class three outbreak is bad news: there may be thousands of zombies over a wide expanse of land, and human casualties will be high. Even where military response is fast and efficient, individual zombies may survive to re-infect the population, and civilian vigilance is advised. A class four outbreak is the worst kind, where zombies in effect take over the world as humans descend into chaos, panic, and anarchy, governments fall and civilisation is all but destroyed. A whole chapter later in the book is devoted to this eventuality.

The rest of the volume is dedicated to practical advice on surviving combat with the living dead. First comes an overview section on weapons and combat techniques: it is well known, for example, that zombies can only be killed by destroying the brain, so a head-shot or decapitation, preferably followed by cremation. Brooks takes this simple rule, and runs down an impressive catalogue of weapons, listing the both advantages and impracticalities (crowbar good, flamethrower bad). The next chapters outline three very different scenarios: defending against a zombie siege; fleeing from a zombie infested territory; and leading an assault to eradicate a zombie infestation. In each case Brooks discusses terrain types to choose or avoid, modes of transport, the importance of choosing a battleground, and suggests tactics to use in the various events. All this advice is good, if sometimes a little overwhelming--this is not a book to be read the night before a zombie outbreak.

A large section follows on how to deal with the nightmare scenario that an infection exceeds the limits of a class one to three outbreak and you find yourself 'living in an undead world'. The key in this section is preparation: you have to become a survivalist, cache weapons and live in the mountains, or buy a desert island, or move to Siberia and learn to live off the environment with no human contact for a couple of generations. Here Brooks defers to the already copious literature on post-holocaust survival, only pointing out the important ways in which the existence of zombies throughout the globe will change your tactics.

Finally the last sixty-five pages of the book are given over to accounts of reported zombie attacks throughout history, starting with archaeological theories based on fossil records from 60 000 BCE, and running through the ancient and mediaeval worlds to the modern day. Accounts come from all contents, from both rural and urban areas, and vary from small scale to larger catastrophes (mostly class one or two, occasionally hinting at a class three outbreak).

Although this is a very entertaining read, it is worth asking what is the point of a book such as this. Although I have said it would be very useful in the case of a real undead assault, this scenario is perhaps marginally less likely to happen to me than that I should be the lone civilised survivor of a nuclear holocaust and have to fend for myself against fallout, the forces of nature, and desperate brigands. Clearly this book is a satire, and it is funny both in its earnestness and its close parody of such

self-help tomes and of zombie mythology generally. However the book does not contain a single actual joke (although I did laugh out loud when I spotted the several pages at the end reserved for an "outbreak journal"), and makes none of the facetious observations about cinematic cliché as appeared in *Shaun of the Dead*, for example.

One class of person who might have a very practical reason to read this book is the sci-fi/horror writer working on an idea for a zombie novel themselves. Brooks has thought of almost everything, and this book is an exercise in thinking consequences and outcomes through to their conclusion, something particularly important in as cliché-bound and irrational a genre as the zombie story. The final section is also a very rich source of scenarios involving zombie attacks, with the added bonus that many of these put zombies in unusual environments, any one of which could be expanded or adapted into a story at the very least, perhaps a novel or a whole world.

Beware however, that if you plan to write a zombie story inspired by Brooks' very inventive accounts, that any originality in your story will almost certainly be pre-empted by this work. Although I found this book quite inspiring, in fact, I think I am less likely to enter the fray myself and write a zombie novel than I might have been beforehand.

Elizabeth Hartmann, *The Truth About Fire*. Carroll & Graf, 2002. Pp. 240. ISBN 0786710217. \$24.00. Reviewed by Djibril

Hartmann is a scholar who normally writes non-fiction books and articles on women's issues, including contraception, and conditions in the developing world. This novel contains evidence of all of these interests, combined with a murder mystery and a terrifying thriller involving white-supremacist religious fanatics, terrorism, and biological warfare. Although a rather short book by some standards, this novel is an excellent demonstration of the fact that an explicit liberal agenda is not incompatible with an exciting, gripping thriller. Hartmann never preaches, nor allows her characters to do so (even the villainous 'Reverend'); she does manage to demonstrate again and again that we should not underestimate these dangerous fanatics, in particular by having the one person in her story do so who should know better.

Gillian is a professor of modern German history in a small, rural US college; she has a rebellious teenage daughter who is half-Indian, and a graduate student, Michael, who is researching a Neo-Nazi fundamentalist group called the Sons of the Shepherd, whom he suspects of murdering a Native American friend of his. Lucy is the wife of a gun-store owner and Shepherd convert, who finds herself increasingly powerless and in the clutches of the Reverend, who forces her to stay at home, coerces her to sleep with him, and recruits her to monitor surveillance tapes of Gillian and her daughter. The Sons of the Shepherd spend their time developing their links with world-wide (and particularly German and South African) neo-fascists, exploiting the financial and practical resources of their congregation, intimidating planned-parenthood clinics, and the like. The novel is narrated in alternate first and third person, following the stories of these two women (one result of which is that we easily

forget Gillian's name, since she is referred to by Lucy and the Reverend as 'the Devil-woman'). The two stories intertwine repeatedly, and finally meet in an explosive climax.

Although this story contains both biological warfare and eugenic/racist genetic research, such speculative elements are not a strong part of the plot. We follow Gillian and Michael's research as they get closer to the truth, and can only cringe at their naïveté and helplessness in the face of the ruthless and well-organised extremists. Lucy, on the other hand, starts to learn what is happening from the inside, and never underestimates how dangerous the Reverend is. Meanwhile, everyone has their own life, with their own complications and distractions.

Character development, especially of the two main female protagonists, is excellent, and the story is both gripping and moving. Lucy is coerced but not herself mean; uneducated but not stupid; lacks confidence but does not shirk responsibility. She and her rehabilitated alcoholic husband are essentially victims of a paramilitary organisation masquerading as a spiritual movement. Gillian is torn between a dozen conflicting priorities: her own academic position; Michael's research; her failing marriage; her strictly improper attraction to her own student; protecting her daughter from the ugly truth she is uncovering, and protecting her from the very real danger she is walking into. In the end, we cannot blame either of these women for even the wrong choices they make, and nor can they each other.

This novel has been largely overlooked: it is only available in most places by import from the US. But it is an excellent book, which deserves to be read not only for its important content, but because it is well-written, suspenseful, moving, and engaging. I recommend it without reservation.

Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife*. UK: Vintage, 2004. Pp. 518. ISBN 0-0994-6446-2. £6.99. US: Harvest Books, 2004. Pp. 560. ISBN 0-1560-2943-X. \$14.00. Reviewed by Djibril

The *Time Traveler's Wife* is one of those books that, despite being about time travel and featuring a protagonist with an imaginary genetic disorder, is not catalogued under Science Fiction or any other "genre", but is taken seriously by critics, is lauded by the literary press, and sits on bestseller lists for months on end. We should not hold this against it, as Niffenegger has written a truly remarkable book. Like the best writers of speculative fiction, she takes normal, real, human characters, adds a single dose of seriously bizarre *difference* to their reality, and stirs until their now totally atypical lives unfold before us inexorably, convincingly, and fascinatingly.

Henry suffers from Chrono-displacement, an apparently genetic defect that causes him occasionally—and involuntarily—to slip forward or backward in time for a short period. These events are both frightening and perilous, as he appears without clothes or shoes in any place, weather, time of time, surroundings, and in danger of being attacked, arrested or worse. But one positive side effect of these short journeys, which may last minutes ~~90~~ days, is that he meets Clare, the love of

his life and later wife, through time travel. The book is told alternately from Henry's and Clare's viewpoint, and the narrative sequence is complex. Clare first meets Henry when she is six years old and he in his thirties; Henry first meets Clare when he is twenty-eight and she twenty. The strongest strand is that of "real time", that is Clare's time and the rest of the world, but Henry's all-too-frequent diversions from this time line often alter the sequence of events.

Niffenegger sidesteps the usual cliché and logical paradoxes of timetravel by adopting a radically fatalistic approach to time: nothing that Henry does in the present or the past, or learns in the future, can change anything that he already knows to have happened. It is never explained whether this is because all of the past and future is fixed and unchangeable, or only becomes fixed once it has been seen, even by someone in the past, but this is just the way things work. To be fair, neither the science of time travel nor his genetic defect are understood by Henry himself, and so can not be explained in the book in any case, so although this authorial strategy feels a little *convenient*, it is not internally inconsistent.

In its most important essence, however, *The Time Traveler's Wife* is not a time travel adventure, but a love story, tracing the tangled strands of the tragic but tender affair and marriage of two ordinary people trapped against their own desires in an extraordinary situation. The two protagonists are flawed, human, but ultimately sympathetic characters; their relationship is by turns fun and heartbreaking: they long for a boring life, but find that complications abound. The story in the main avoids cloying sentimentality, and does not shy away either from showing Henry in all his imperfection and pain, or from the relentless progress of the narrative.

An unreservedly recommended read.

Film Reviews

2046, Dir. Kar Wai Wong

Arte / Jet Tone / Columbia

Starring: Tony Leung, Gong Li, Zhang Ziyi, Faye Wong

Reviewed by Danny Hydrus

2046 is in part a sequel to Kar Wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000), but it is not simply a continuation of the story of the doomed lovers from the earlier film. The theme of unhappy love does recur, with perhaps a lighter touch, but the central image here is of an eternal train heading toward a futuristic city called 2046, the narrator (Leung, or his fictional Japanese *alter ego*) being the only passenger ever to have made the return journey. This single feature does not exactly make *2046* a science fiction movie, but the best cinema eschews genre in any case.

Leung's character is the dejected lover of the previous film, now become somewhat of a playboy and a gambler, while earning his living as a journalist and fiction writer. In the course of the film he moves from Shanghai to Hong Kong, and from one lover to another: from the gambling 'Black Spider' (Li) and namesake of his lost love Su Li Zhen, who leaves him, via his beautiful neighbour Ling (Ziyi) who loves him, but he cannot commit to; and finally to the young writer of martial arts stories whom he becomes obsessed with but never confesses his affection for (Wong), to whom he dedicates the story '2046' which inspires her to follow her Japanese lover against her father's wishes. 2046, therefore, is both the room number of the apartment in Hong Kong where he has his affair with Ziyi (and, of course, the number of the room he shared with his married lover in *In the Mood for Love*), and the futuristic city he writes about in the story about the train with the android stewardesses, and story which symbolises his unrequited love for the young writer.

It has been pointed out that 2046 is also the year that will see the end of China's promise to maintain a 'hands off' approach to Hong Kong for fifty years after the handover of the former British colony. This date can only be symbolic for Kar Wai's audience, not the characters, since the film's action is set in the 1960s, with strikes and riots in the news forming a backdrop to the otherwise unpolitical action; ironically, some of the historical riots of this era were in fact pro-Chinese demonstrations, so the protesters may be said to have their way after all. The number was already symbolic in *In the Mood for Love*, of course (released in 2000), since the room in which the affair blossomed and failed had the same number as the date in which, one might say, "the honeymoon is over" for Hong Kong.

The main speculative fictional element of this film is the mysterious dream city of 2046, which we never see, and the train forever heading there (or back?), which we do. Periodically we see a pattern of red and white lights, as if we are moving down the inside of a tunnel with a 1960s idea of the futuristic, and later we are on the train itself, watching the Japanese protagonist who represents both Leung and his beloved's boyfriend as he tries to persuade the failing android stewardess to come away with him. Again, there is nothing in this image that could not have been envisaged by a science fiction writer in the 1960s. The musical score enhances the nostal-

gic mood: I think I detected several musical references to love stories set in Hong Kong, including a tune from *Love is a Many-Splendoured Thing* (1955).

The mood throughout this film is subdued: Leung is always either in a doomed relationship, pining for someone who barely registers his existence, or himself mistreating the one woman who does love him. It seems that he has that all-too-common personality disorder whereby he wants what he is chasing, primarily what he cannot have, and has no interest in that which is available to him. As such, we are both frustrated with the protagonist, and recognise his recurrent failed affairs that we have seen before, or perhaps even experienced ourselves. The love stories are poignant and convincing, sometimes funny, but this is no romantic slush-drama. Each of the relationships invokes pity for the emotional nomads who indulge themselves in their loneliness, misery and self-pity. Nevertheless, this is a beautiful, luxuriously paced if over-long piece of film-making which will delight anyone who has enjoyed Hong Kong cinema and the more artistic tone of quality film from around the world.

***Dead Man's Shoes*, Dir. Shane Meadows**

Film Four

Starring: Paddy Considine, Tony Kebbell, Gary Stretch

Reviewed by Djibril

This grim, dirty revenge drama, co-written by Considine and director Meadows, combines gritty realism, very dark humour and flashes of surrealism. Considine stars as the seemingly unstoppable, almost super-human Rich, an ex-soldier out for revenge against the gang of petty drug dealers who used to torment and abuse his special-needs brother (Kebbell). The gang are led by the dangerous Sonny (Stretch—the former boxer is on excellent acting form), a twisted, sadistic thug with a short fuse, who obsessively controls all those around him.

The background to the movie is a grimly realistic take on the lives of bored, deprived, rural youth in a small English town (the film was shot in the village of Matlock in Derbyshire). The drabness of deserted streets is contrasted with the craggy beauty of rocky hillsides and disused farm buildings. The antics of the losers add an element of comedy to the story, as they immerse themselves in drugs, alcohol, and pornography, as they swagger behind Sonny, their leader never far from violent outburst. But the gang are out of their depths, and their foolish horror is as amusing as their bumbling efforts—even when they start to die one by one.

But the real protagonist is Considine's surreal character Rich who moves and kills like a shadow. Rich comes and goes through locked doors, silent and unobserved; he fearlessly faces his foes in public, flashing from swaggering, urbane bravado to terrifying rage in an instant. Rich appears at a dark window wearing fatigues and a gas mask; his opening words in the movie are, "God will forgive them. I can't live with that." But he is tender towards the brother who looks up to and relies on him.

The film is shot in a mixture of present-tense action, snips of home video from Rich and his brother's childhood, and flashbacks in black and white, with blurred corners and indistinct passage of time to reflect drug-influenced experiences. Real and supernatural phenomena are mixed just as readily, and the viewer has no way to disentangle the two. As the cinematic audience, we are made to relate to the merciless, vengeful killer, even when it becomes clear his punishment is out of proportion to the crime. By the end, we don't know what to think or what outcome we would like to see.

Just as in real life, there are no easy answers, no black-and-white morality, no inescapable justice to make everything all right. An audience who like the politically correct posturing and platitudinous moralising of the Bruckheimers and Spielbergs of this industry may find this film challenging; those with more discerning tastes and realistic philosophies may enjoy one of the better films of the year.

***They Are Among Us*, Dir. Jeffrey Obrow**

Sci-Fi Channel

Starring: Alison Eastwood, Michael DiLallo, Lacey Beeman, Bruce Boxleitner, Nana Visitor

Reviewed by North

This is a TV movie, so probably has to be judged against slightly lower criteria than a theatrical release. By these standards the film fares not so badly, although readers should note from the start that were this a film I had paid money to see in a cinema, I'd probably be spitting bullets about how bad it was.

The story revolves around the teenage Daniel (DiLallo), who is days away from his eighteenth birthday, has just finished high school and is about to go away to college; everything is about to change. He and his childhood friend Devon (Beeman), however, notice other changes going on around them, a mystery that seems to involve the sinister Civic Club led by "Uncle Bob", and Daniel's parents (SF stalwarts Boxleitner and Visitor). They find a hidden box containing inexplicable objects and arcane writings that his parents have kept for years, and a local linguistics professor is unable to decypher the script (except to say that it might be "an early version of Cuneiform").

The plot thickens when a young woman called Finley (a rather manic, wide-eyed Eastwood) rolls into town, investigating a series of deaths and disappearances and an unscrupulous plastic surgeon. There is some kind of alien nest in the area, predatory non-humans on the prowl, collagen-hungry aliens paying the surgeon to give them realistic human skins, and the Civic Club planning some ominous event for Daniel's birthday.

By television standards the acting is pedestrian but competent; the effects are cheap, with blue, rubber-suited aliens and action relying on scene-cutting rather than stunts or cgi. The story was sadly thin: this is the sixth film that Obrow has both written, produced and directed in the last 25 ~~34~~ years, and while the quality of filming has

slowly risen in this time, the writing has not. There are plot holes that Finley's Air Force-father could have flown an F16 through; characters so thinly characterised that some enter and leave the story and one would barely notice. But there are believable moments, and there are moving moments (Visitor is particularly notable as the mother torn between her duty and love for her son).

While there is nothing to particularly recommend this cheap *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* remake, unless you like watching aliens and high school kids on the same screen, I have certainly seen much worse on the Sci-Fi Channel.



futurefire.net

The magazine retains non-exclusive rights for this publication only, and to all formatting and layout; all other rights have been asserted by and remain with the individual authors and artists.