

The Future Fire

Speculative Fiction, Cyberpunk, Dark Fantasy

Issue 2005.03

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Fiction by:

Neil Ayres

Duncan Barford

Nonfiction:

‘Winter of Our Consciousness’

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The Future Fire: Issue 2005.03

What's an order of magnitude or two between friends?

(Nathaniel Van Neumann)

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Apologies for the late running of Issue #3 of *The Future Fire*; several of our editors have been uncharacteristically incommunicado (not to say AWOL) over the summer, and there's so much work to do struggling over this scorched earth that was once our sweet home. Our fiction submissions are picking up, though, which is excellent news: many thanks to all those who offered pieces, whether or not we accepted them on this occasion.

Also this month, see our *Mirrormask* competition: Flashes of Darkness, in which you can win all sorts of promotional goodies from the new Neil Gaiman movie by sending us horror or dark fantasy flash fiction. If we get good support for this contest, we hope to hold more in the future, so please submit something!

We have plenty more material in the wings, so a new issue is due before the new year. As always, we'd be happy to hear from you, our readers, with ideas, advice, criticisms, or, of course, contributions.

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Fiction submissions: fiction@futurefire.net
Articles and reviews: nonfiction@futurefire.net
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'Letting Go'

By Neil Ayres

Artwork (cc) 2005 by Djibril



Vienna 1995

Adrian, the strictest of vegans, gracefully scored the cutthroat razor across the dog's neck. Blood pumped out for a moment before the subdued breathing ceased altogether. He and his fellow conspirator continued to work in silence, the razors shaking between dirty fingers that extended from calloused hands. On the floor the cruor converged with other effluvia to form sticky dark puddles: a vulgar cocktail of blood, tufts of matted hair, bile and diarrhoea. The last of the unlucky animals dispatched, they had perhaps ten minutes at the most to make good their escape. Adrian faltered a moment: an imagined cool wind sent an icy shiver down his sweating back. Though the dogs were all dead he heard a heavy panting. As his sight blurred Adrian thought he saw a loping, gangly canine scout the edge of his vision.

The strange image gone, his accomplice wiped the side of her blade on faded jeans before pirouetting it down into its plastic handle.

"I'm not sure how well they'll come out in this light without a flash," she noted in German, before raising the short-lens camera at her chest and snapping the scene hurriedly, without considering the composition of her shots. Adrian was not listening, but instead looked at the pale lolling tongue and charcoal gums of a dead terrier. Eventually he said:

"We should go."

Heading for the staff room, having left the girl to make her own way out, Adrian crossed paths with one of the supervisors: a self-important retired army trainer from Graz, who was at the centre for the pay and the

pay alone, a bitter subsidy to boost his pension.

"Oh oh, the ballerina. You and Carin haven't finished your barbershop duties yet, surely?"

A multitude of animal rights protests and lab break-ins served the Englishman well under pressure. "We finished putting them back in their kennels a few minutes ago, Herr Köhler."

"And the dogs up for adoption outside? I told you already Pietr is only here for the morning. No-one has gone to help him yet."

Might as well go for broke on this, Adrian decided, *It's not as if I've anything else left to lose.*

"Shit. I forgot. I'll skip break and get straight out to the yard."

"Damn right you will, dancing boy. And if you haven't finished by noon, then I guess you'll be skipping lunch too—might make up for all those years prancing around like a tranny in tights."

Adrian bit down on the inside of his lip, smiled politely and headed in the general direction of the yard, the centre's open-air rehoming pound where the less problematic dogs were housed. Rounding the corner of the fenced paddock, a lively wall of mainly tan fur shielded him from the view offered by the window of the staff-room: a grey, damp portacabin balanced above the winter sludge on four breezeblock stilts. Beneath a raucous sheet of excited barking, high-pitched yelps at one end of the vocal spectrum, the hoarse croaks of an aged Basset-cross at the other, Adrian doubled back on himself and made for the exit, inhaling for the final time the centre's pot-pourri scent of sweat, disinfectant and faeces.

London 1993

She was small, petite you might say. Five feet tall at a push, and slender: deceptive, for what she was mostly was bunched sinew and muscle, encased in a learned shell of infallible balance. Her grace was like the workings of a pocket watch: a calm and measured façade to an inner turmoil, no less perfect than the vision offered, but far more intricate. Her hair—what there was of it—was reined back in a severe bun, pinned close to her crown. From where he sat in the auditorium she was as a pale, naked ghost, the only discernible colour the flash of red at her lips. And before she noticed him she was in motion, focusing on an asterisk of light projected onto the wall by one of the spot-lamps. In mid-air her head whipped round one, two, three times: but for her, her gaze had never left the artificial star upon the wing of the stage.

She landed in a fluid motion on tiptoes like daggers and was carried across the stage by this deadly poise, this ballon, like a white spectre, the spirit of some long-legged water bird. A further elegant twist at the edge of the stage found her resting on the sole of her left foot, the right leg moved painfully slowly as she executed a *cambré*, her tiny back arching, eventually the neck exposed to the man watching her. A strand of hair that had squirmed loose from the restrictive bun during her spin kissed the polished floor as her pointed foot reached into the sky, as if a trap waiting for some unsuspecting jumping fish before it could be sprung in ambush, awaiting the telegraphed movement of the grand *jeté*.

Relaxing momentarily at this point for the first time since beginning the exercise, Melanie saw the man shift in his seat. She gently returned her body to a more usual stance.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Mister Grigori."

"Oh yeah, Luka. You must be Adrian."

Adrian nodded. "Your *étendre* was very well-executed."

"Thanks." Melanie slipped down from the stage and Adrian rose to meet her. "I'm Mel. Looks like we're going to be partners."

They shook hands, Melanie's delicate fingers framed by the newcomer's heavy grip. Her handshake was firm—again, deceptive—and there was a hint too of the energy to come. He took in her narrow almond-shaped eyes and the dense but thin eyebrows that framed them, and as their hands touched the scents of undergrowth and the thunder of adrenaline caused Adrian to look away from his new acquaintance.

"You may as well change before he gets here. Luka will want to start as soon as he arrives."

Guilt flickered briefly across Adrian's face.

"No kit?"

But it was too late even to acknowledge his error. Luka Grigori entered the hall. He stood studying the pair, leaning his thin body against the red velvet coverings of the back row seats.

"Perfect!" he hissed. "The two of you: the energy.

Perfect!"

Had he seen something in that moment, or was it coincidence alone, synchronicity latching onto his words in an attempt to own them? Either way, Luka Grigori's words proved prophetic.

"Adrian," Luka's voice was clear now, the trace of an accent detectable in his pronunciation. "Warm up, please. Give your measurements to Melanie at the end of the session and she'll have you some proper clothes for tomorrow."

Luka moved to switch on the lights; a single vast mirror filled the back of the stage.

"Get the feel of the boards. We'll be rehearsing here three times a week. The other three we'll be in the college hall with the rest of the company. Sundays are your own."

And so it was. Monday to Saturday Adrian and Melanie, under Luka's unforgiving eye, made mixed progress as the ballet's premiere performance approached. They rehearsed their pieces in reverse order in an effort—Luka insisted—that would aid their memories.

When it came to rehearse the final, opening piece, late in January, snow had settled on the rooftops of buildings and the bonnets of sleeping cars, but not on the roads or busy pavements of Brixton. Adrian had watched the flakes evaporating as they met the heat of these unforgiving surfaces.

As one hand closed around Melanie's thigh and the other clasped firm beneath a small breast, his palm feeling the rib-bones beneath the flesh, he saw the wolf, briefly. It was grey and its tongue lolled wickedly, an un-melted snow crystal on its moist nose, the nostrils of which exhaled steady plumes of winter mist. Then it was gone and Luka's voice was chastising him.

"Adrian, how many times? Bring your arm out more before the turn. *Allongé!* What is wrong with you this morning? You are like an amateur! Again. Go!"

And they did it again, and the wolf kept its distance.

Vienna 1996

"What do you mean, you didn't know? Look: it's been in all the papers. The conservatives are talking of banning the mastiff breeds altogether. Give it a few years and there won't be any dogs left in this country." Kurt swigged at his lager.

Adrian, exhausted from insomnia and nightmares when he could sleep, looked down at the monochrome picture in front of him, thankful that it wasn't colour. There were no photographs of Carin's body, only one of the mastiff and a woman, presumably a vet, standing next to it.

"But I thought she'd left. At least she told me she was going to."

"After you murdered those dogs together, you mean?"

Adrian shot his companion a dark look. "She pinned that one on you, Adie. Everyone thought you'd pissed off back to England."

"I was going to, but I got distracted. I mean I did go, but.... When did it...?"

"When was she killed? About three months ago. Do you remember Sabrina? She had a thing for our photographer, apparently; unrequited of course. Still, after the mastiff killed Carin, Sabrina shot it, and then herself, with an old chamber pistol. Fuck knows where she got it. I bet we don't see that making any of the tabloids." Kurt raised his glass and clinked it to Adrian's.

"To euthanasia," he toasted. "What you up to now, Adie? What're you doing back in the big V?"

"I'm not sure. I only got here last week. I heard Grigori and Mel are planning to get married.."

"No shit?" Kurt chinked his glass against Adrian's again. "Not being funny, but this don't quite strike me as the best place to go looking for a fresh start."

"Who mentioned anything about fresh starts?"

"Then what?"

"Would you laugh at me if I suggested the prospect of redemption?"

"Like a drain. What about your kid?"

Adrian shrugged. "I'm still paying the child support."

"Bad news, my boy. At least you're a free agent now, huh?"

An older man in a check shirt entered the bar alone and looked straight over at the two of them.

"What happened after the, you know?"

"What, you killing the dogs? Not a lot. Carin lost her bottle and threw the film away. As far as I know, we're the only peeps alive to know for sure that she was involved. I think she'd regretted suggesting the camera."

"The camera was the whole point. She was the one with the press contacts. I suppose it didn't help matters when I suggested the razorblades, but it was the only thing I could think of to separate us from the Animal Liberation crazies. I thought it would show how serious the problem was, if someone who cared enough to try and expose the horrors of no kill shelters was willing to go to such an extreme."

Kurt was far from convinced that Adrian wouldn't have known whom to contact without Carin's involvement. "Other than Köhler going apeshit, and yours truly having to spend the afternoon bagging up the sorry mess you left behind, I don't think much came of it."

"Why didn't Carin take the pictures to the press?"

A shrug in response, then, "I suppose in the long run, her unexpected demise did more for your cause than a fruit-de-loop PR stunt from militant activists was ever likely to."

"So we wasted our time."

Kurt considered a lone blonde at the bar. The older man in the shirt was out of sight.

"You put a few souls out of their misery at the very

least, Adie, which is what I intend to do right now. You've still got my mobile number, yeah? Give me a call next week. Now excuse me, but the big bad wolf is on the prowl and it's dinnertime. Woof, woof."

Adrian was left alone in the bar with a Kraut-rock soundtrack and the smack of balls on the American pool table for company, until the man from the bar, tiny and bearded up close, in his red and black checked shirt, found his way into the seat that Kurt had vacated.

"You're Adrian," he stated. It wasn't a question. "I followed you here from the hotel. Luka told me you would be coming to Vienna."

Adrian bristled. "Any friend of that asshole is no friend of mine."

"Sh, sh. Where are you English manners?" The man patted the air with down-turned palms in an attempt to pacify. "I am not a friend of Luka. More a business associate." He stopped stroking the air and extended an open hand.

Adrian stared at it. "What do you want?" he asked, bluntly.

"Luka tells me you are a great dancer. In fact, the best he has come across."

"I no longer dance. Who are you?"

"My name is Mikhail Bojik."

"A Russian, like Grigori?"

The man wiped his neglected hand on his chest. "No, I am Romanian. Though my father was from the Ukraine."

A muted cheer sounded from the pool table as the black was sunk.

"Well, Mikhail, nice as it was for you to seek me out, but it's like I say: I no longer dance."

The man, Adrian had begun to think of him as the old man, shook his head. "Tuttuttut. This is not what the wolf has been telling me. She is telling me that you are dancing night after night, in the woods, with her. You are dancing perhaps to avoid the dogs?"

Adrian rose from his chair, anger puffing up his broad chest.

The Romanian licked his lips.

Adrian stood and left the bar without another glance for the old man, failing to notice Kurt's arm round the blonde's waist, a predatory grin splitting his friend's face as the woman looked back at him with scared-doe eyes. The Romanian pawed over Adrian's half-empty glass and quaffed the remainder of the drink down in one.

Chill winter air hit him as he exited the bar, Bojik's words having stirred his memory.

London 1994

"Something weird has been happening when we dance together: I keep seeing this wolf, not running or anything, it's just sitting there in front of me."

"A grey one?"

"No, it's black. Why do you ask?"

"The same thing's been happening to me, only the wolf's grey."

Melanie slapped her hand across her fiancé's super-toned stomach. "Don't be mean. I'm serious. I don't know what to do. I'm still conscious of everything else; it's like dreaming when I'm awake. That's the best way I can put it."

"I'm serious too. The exact same thing's been happening to me since..."

"...Since the day it snowed?" She finished for him. The intercom buzzer interrupted them. "What do we do about it?" Melanie asked, reaching for the handset.

"What can we do about it?"

"Oh, hi Luka. I'll come down and let you in."

Moments after she had disappeared down the stairwell, Adrian followed his fiancée to ask her to collect the post.

He saw them there, in the cramped rectangle between the front door and bottom of the stairs. The effete Russian was practically eating Melanie's face off; his small hands were clawing her, one clutching a tiny buttock, the other a small breast.

Adrian pushed the two lovers aside, before they had even registered their error, and made his way to the nearest cash-point, a dried channel of tears adding sheen to his cheeks by the time he got there.

He arrived in Austria the same evening.

The following week a letter arrived from Melanie. It read simply:

Adrian,
I'm sorry and I'm pregnant.
Love Mel.
(PS It's yours.)

Vienna 1996

Walking through central Vienna in the bitterly cold January air, for once not tempted to shout *'This means nothing to me'*, but desperately wanting it to be true, he considered the aged Romanian's words. *She is telling me that you are dancing night after night, in the woods, with her.*

But Bojik was incorrect in one respect: Adrian was not dancing to avoid the dogs; he was dancing to try and find them again. At the time, he thought it would appease the wolf, if he freed the dogs. It was why he had taken the job in the rescue kennels of a shelter with a no kill policy, but Adrian soon regretted his decision. The life the dogs led there were torture to the wolf: it sought him out more and more during the day, whilst continuing to wrack his sleep, shivering and pitiable now, not playful in the snow.

Adrian realised he had failed. He missed Melanie and so did the wolf. Adrian wanted the dogs to have their revenge on him. He shunned the prospect of forgiveness. He wanted to free the wolf of him. He believed he had failed it, by killing the dogs; by ignoring its gifts; and he felt he'd unfairly consigned it to share with him a life of misery, without dance; without Melanie, and without their child.

But wolves and dogs abhor such concepts as

vengeance and compassion. As he walked away, Adrian knew this was what Bojik was trying to make him appreciate.

He found himself standing before one of the city's fountains and had the sense someone, or something was watching him. A snowflake drifted down to land on his shoulder. It made him think of his ex-wife, the feel of her, defying gravity between his hands.

"What do you say, one final performance?" The voice was Mikhail Bojik's.

"I'm not a dancer."

"No, you were a dancer, but not now. Now you are something more. There's nothing for you in this life, Adrian. What would you do, forget your past? Find another woman? Feel bitter envy for the rest of your days towards your wife and Luka."

"I'm not prepared to leave my world for yours, Bojik."

"What a tragedy for you if you were." Bojik looked out into the middle distance. The pair of them had wandered to the woods at the edge of the city.

"I can see you are a brave man, Adrian, as well as stubborn," the Romanian said.

The Englishman turned to follow the old man's line of sight. A big dog, maybe a wolf, vanished into the trees.

"I was brave once too, and equally stubborn. Do not make the same mistake I did."

Adrian waited to see if the wolf would come back. It didn't. "What mistake was that?" he asked eventually.

"I let the wrong one go."

Adrian was still peering into the trees, looking to see if the creature he'd glimpsed would return.

"They're not like gundogs, Adrian," Bojik said. "They don't come when you call. If you want to get them back, you have to go after them."



'Death Park'

By Duncan Barford

Artwork (cc) 2005 by Djibril



'In black again? You look like a bloody undertaker!' his father muttered.

Dominic took his seat at the breakfast table and sipped coffee until his father put down the newspaper.

'Sleep well?' the older man said.

'Where's mother?'

'Montreal. I think.'

'She said she'd be here.'

His father shrugged.

Dominic was still weak from the hospital and wasn't sure he had the strength to argue. 'I can't remember the last time this family met in the same room together.'

It wasn't quite true. They'd both visited him in hospital, smiling down, as if it made the overdose any easier to handle.

He poured more coffee, whilst his father ate a croissant in silence.

'We let you do things your own way,' the older man said at last. 'Whatever you wanted, we provided the wherewithal. Not many people are that lucky.'

Dominic pushed down his anger, aware of how

his parents vanished whenever confronted by any hint of emotion. 'You never asked what I was doing. Not once.'

His father sighed.

'I won't argue, Dom. I only wanted to say - and your mother too, if she was here - we're both relieved you're still alive. That's all.' He fingered the newspaper next to his plate. 'For Heaven's Sake! The doctor said you'd taken *triple* the fatal dose!'

Dominic smiled bitterly.

He remembered making his decision, then lying down in bed to chew the pills. His mind had felt so clean and free of thoughts. He'd kept swallowing, until he guessed it was enough. This was in the house his parents had bought near the university. He'd been due for a tutorial with his supervisor. He'd left the door downstairs unbolted.

He pushed away the coffee cup.

'I was working too hard. Getting nowhere, as usual.'

Dominic's father cleared his throat.

'If it'd been over a woman, maybe I could understand,' he said.

A black van marked 'PRIVATE AMBULANCE' turned into the Ministry, slowing as it approached the checkpoint.

Janet knew what those words meant. She was watching from the second floor, sipping coffee as her computer booted-up. She'd once had a job at an insurance firm, whose window overlooked an undertaker's yard, and all day long she'd seen vans like that. Now she noticed them all over the city. A fleet of secret taxis for the dead.

Her computer played a tinny fanfare. The time in its corner read '09:08'.

Was the van delivering, or picking up? A great deal happened inside the Ministry, most of it classified. Even for this menial desk job she'd had to sign the Official Secrets Act.

Janet smiled at her colleagues, arriving at their desks. They'd worked with her long enough to understand she didn't like talking this early. She yawned and stretched her shoulders. She'd slept in the studio again last night. Told herself it was because she needed the time to paint. But her flat no longer felt like home. Chris had moved in a month ago, and it was clear already that being 'between jobs' was his full-time occupation.

She clicked on a spreadsheet and squinted at rows of government statistics, wincing at the metallic flavour of the coffee. Bad enough having to stare all day at a screen, tired and sleazy in yesterday's blouse and skirt, without bad coffee into the bargain.

Chris was probably scratching his pubes, raiding her cupboards for breakfast.

You fool yourself you've found someone, she thought, *and then you realise you're stuck with them.*

She reminded herself of the sketches she'd been working on late into the night. She almost smelt the studio's oily tang of pigments and spirit. The idea came from a dream. She'd found herself walking up behind a man standing by a well. She'd felt the crunch of dead leaves underfoot and had breathed autumn smoke. The man was in black and looked so sad. She wanted to see what he was peering at. Whatever it was, he paid no notice of her.

The image of the well intrigued her. *A symbol for the unconscious,* she mused, *as if he's staring into himself.* She tried to visualise a perspective that would show both man and well, with its darkness in the very centre.

A growl from a revving engine snapped her attention back to the window.

Inside his checkpoint booth, a security guard shouted at the black van. Whatever he said was drowned by its noise. A second guard, on the pavement, was talking to a pretty woman. His head turned and Janet saw his smile fade.

'09:09' began to elongate. Decelerate.

The van lurched, smashing the pole that spanned the driveway and sending red and yellow fragments flying.

The pretty woman ducked. The guard she'd been

talking with stepped into the road and thrust out his arm.

Janet felt the breath leave her body as the van hit him. His white cap span off. The front wheels crushed him. But it wasn't the blood or his twisted body; it was the way his hand lay, cupping the surface of the road, that made Janet realise he was dead.

She craned forward, knocking over her mug. Her colleagues crowded to the windows, desperate to see. The van was too close now to be visible. There was a screech as it swerved, a bump as it hit something, but it kept on coming.

Janet found she had acres of space to work it all out. She watched the surviving guard reach for his phone. The pretty woman was straightening up, not understanding yet. Someone downstairs screamed. Janet was scared too - but it was an angry kind of fear. All she'd ever wanted to do was paint. Her heart stung with fury at what they'd done to the guard - *dead*, just because he'd come to work and tried to do his job.

Downstairs, the van smashed the glass doors with a biting crash. Everyone stared numbly at everybody else. She didn't know what they should do. She gripped the edge of her desk and braced as the floor blew in.

Heaving the gate shut, Dominic brushed the flakes of rust from his hands. The hem of his coat swept the gravel as he crunched up the path, between rotted stumps of what were once ornamental fountains.

After breakfast he'd found a note: 'CALLED AWAY. LAUSANNE. SORRY.'

The gardens were public, but visitors nowadays were rare. A metal signpost was the only modern feature: 'WARNING: PSYCHIC FRAGMENTS.'

Dominic glided past, ignoring the disclaimer in tiny letters underneath. Someone had attacked the metal sign, denting it all over.

His favourite bench was a decayed lump of wood, adrift in a sea of dead leaves. Arranging his coat, he sat and surveyed the degraded pathways, the empty tracks between dead flowerbeds and choked lawns. He sniffed the damp air.

Something stirred in a nearby hedge. He watched the black leaves swirl, breathless for a second. He told himself this *couldn't* be something - although, God knew, he'd be entitled - but Dominic understood that seeking out psychic fragments only made them hide.

A magpie clacked and skirled from the hedge, fleeing toward the perimeter wall.

His heartbeat returned to normal, and he forced himself to think about his thesis. *Telepathy and Dreams: a Parapsychological Study.* Was it really research, or just his sad attempt to invite something strange and exciting into his life?

His gaze fell on a distant bandstand whose roof had fallen in. As he got up and made his way toward it, he remembered his dream last night. For once, not about losing his parents at an airport, aged six; or waking up and realising he was already an old man, without hav-

ing finished his thesis. Instead, he remembered a lumbering vehicle - and something in white letters. The ghost of a word: AMBIENCE, or LANCET? Perhaps AMBIVALENCE...?

As an undergraduate he'd been taught to doubt the paranormal. But times change, and now that psychic fragments had been confirmed by empirical studies, the race was on to discover what triggered them. The observer's mind was somehow paramount...

How he'd love to be the one who discovered the answer...

Noticing that she could still think gave her confidence. Otherwise - she had no sense of where she was. No sight or feeling.

It was like that time in Chris' car, when he'd skidded at a junction and pranged the car in front. It had the same feeling of time frozen.

The thought had barely crossed her mind, but now the full memory reared up - hedges and grass reeling past the passenger window, lashed by rain. The inside of the car smelling like wet dog. Chris had been sleeping in it at night. And then she suddenly remembered: this was also the day she'd agreed to let him move in. It'd been on the way home, after the accident, when they'd both been giggly with relief.

The brakes squealed and the car began to slide. The rear of the car in front loomed up - exactly as it'd done the first time it happened. She turned to scream at Chris, whose eyes were wide, lips puckered with shock. But this time, the world continued to decelerate, until the scene was progressing so slowly it had the unreal flicker of a videotape, advancing frame by frame.

Chris sat rigidly next to her, like a waxwork.

What is this? A second chance? she wondered.

Her body felt odd - the way it feels in dreams - not a thing of flesh at all, but of imagination. Even as inwardly she decided that this time she'd turn him down, she began to wonder. The soft leather under her, and the damp blast from the window - when she concentrated on them seriously, they seemed to flux and waver.

Oh God. I'm dead, she thought. *I am dead, aren't I?*

She put a hand to her face, realising that she was unaffected by the speed that time was passing. The car in front didn't matter. Glancing at it, collision seemed even more distant.

'Like Xeno's paradox,' she thought, and the ancient, silly parable flashed through her head:

Take the distance between an archer and her target. Divide the distance in half. Divide the half in two again...

(She'd thought it stupid the very first time she heard it.)

...divide until there are infinite divisions between the arrow and the target. Now ask yourself: how can the arrow ever strike, given that it must cross infinite intervals of space?

'But the "infinite intervals" are only in the mind,' she thought. Then paused - because in her present state, suddenly Xeno didn't seem so piffling.

'What if my brain *believes* I'm here?' she wondered. 'What if it's grinding down my very last second into such fine dust, it'll feel like *forever*?'

But if this were true, she didn't have to breathe the stink of Chris' car. And her job at the Ministry no longer had a claim on her. She leant, and gently kissed Chris on the cheek. His flesh had the texture of a day-dream.

Did he miss her? Had he even turned out for the funeral?

'My studio,' she whispered, remembering the man at the well, still waiting to be painted, and marvelling that she had eternity to spend on him.

In the centre of the park a bridge shouldered a road across a cutting. Dominic wandered underneath. The spittle of weeds had stained his coat. He brooded bitterly on the silence that awaited him when he returned to his father's house.

Passing an old stone well, he was startled by an echo from its rim.

He peered down, but there was only darkness, broken by a ripple of aqueous light. Yet beneath the sound of dripping water he heard it again—scuffling. Something trapped.

An ancient black van snarled across the bridge. The grasses on the bank rustled and a woman in blouse and skirt stumbled down, her arms held high for balance as she came through the weeds.

'What are you doing here?' she challenged him.

'Just walking. I'm allowed, aren't I?'

She held his gaze sceptically and crouched by the well. Her clothes tightened against her as she bent. The uniform didn't look warm enough for autumn, and—unlike previous park-attendants he'd glimpsed—she didn't seem the outdoor type. Regretting his rudeness, he pointed with his boot: 'Something's trapped down there.'

'I don't hear anything.'

She turned around and caught him staring at her.

'Well - it's there. I heard it twice.'

She looked him over.

'Do you walk here a lot?'

'Most days.'

'Don't you know what can happen here?'

'No. Not to me, it hasn't.'

The sound came again—a slithering. This time with an undertone, almost like a groan.

'I told you!' he exclaimed.

She rose, nodding.

'You claim nothing like this has happened to you before?'

Claim? Who the hell did she think she was?

'So you really think this is *something*?' he said.

It struck him suddenly that her arrival was rather too tidy a coincidence.

'I won't get involved if you prefer it that way,' she

said, as if she'd read his thoughts.

A breeze blew along the cutting. It smelt of bark and soil. Dominic realised he'd spoken more words to this strange woman than anyone else in days. He felt as if hidden eyes were watching him. Was it the park, or had he forgotten how to talk to women?

He felt his cheeks start to burn.

'There's a chain fixed to the inside,' she said, making room so that he could kneel beside her at the rim. 'It's too heavy for me, but you could try it.'

The wind blew hair across her eyes. She flicked it away, and looked at him. 'Of course, you don't have to,' she said.

He peered down. A length of rusted links was visible for a couple of metres.

'If it really is something,' he said, 'I don't care. I've nothing to lose. I hope it changes me.'

She nodded as he gripped the chain with both hands and gave a first heave. The links grated, scattering rust.

'My God—it's heavy...'

The second time, something shifted with a loud, sucking smack.

'Don't let it slip,' she warned, 'or it'll take your fingers.'

The loop of slack grew as he pulled, thudding against a rising object.

'Whatever it is,' she said, 'you must promise you won't let go.'

She moved close to him, so that he couldn't escape her eyes.

'I won't... I promise...' he said.

She needn't have worried, because on the final heave his limbs locked in terror. The ancient bucket snagged against the well's rim and burst, scattering its contents across the grass. He threw himself back from the mess of body-parts—severed feet and fingers, bleeding. A hunk of matted hair, sprouting from a slice of scalp.

The stench of blood clutched his face. He heard blood trickling.

'*Christ!* Can't you see that?' he gagged.

'Yes,' she whispered, watching him.

With the back of his hand he wiped his mouth.

'This park - they built it over the old Ministry building that got bombed,' he gasped, bracing himself for another look. But when he turned there was only a shattered bucket.

'You saw it too,' he blinked. 'How?'

He scrambled to the well. Water glimmered at the bottom.

Another magpie broke cover, somewhere above the cutting. Its shriek distracted him for an instant. When he turned to ask her what had just happened, there was only the empty grass.

He whirled about, scanning the cutting, the bridge, the distant trees.

Confused and angry, he started to walk.

She'd disappeared just like his father!

He surveyed the bare horizon. Nothing, except a plume of bonfire smoke that drifted from a distant point, dark against grey clouds.

She must've come on purpose. She'd stood there, and had made him lift that bucket.

He stared at his trembling hands, and saw how the chain had ripped his skin. He winced, remembering again the bucket's mangled contents.

Damn it! He wasn't strong enough for this! If only she'd known what he'd been through, she'd never have made him dredge up those stinking remnants!

He'd almost reached the metal sign when the idea hit him, and in an instant changed everything. It seized him with such power, he had to lean against the post and catch his breath.

'WARNING: PSYCHIC FRAGMENTS' the familiar legend read.

Perhaps this wasn't the last time he'd see her. He hoped not, because there were questions he had to ask, now that she'd helped him to see. Already, vague ideas were forming, which he knew he had to get down on paper. The feeling of exhilaration grew stronger.

We are the angels of our own creation, he thought.



Nonfiction

Winter of Our Consciousness

Some thoughts by Djibril

About five years ago, my good friend Joseph Kaye and I were strolling one lunchtime across one of the campuses of a Californian university, deep in conversation. At the time, we had both been reading a lot of William Gibson, and on this occasion were particularly absorbed by an idea he had first explored in the short story 'Winter Market' (1986), the story in which a young disabled girl, who spends most of her life creating cyber-art, and so is online more often than not, finally decides to have her personality uploaded onto a super-powerful server so that she can continue to live in cyberspace when her body dies. (Gibson re-uses this idea in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), when he has the Count do the same thing after he dies.) Other Gibson characters have continued to function after death using recorded simulations, such as Dixie in *Neuromancer* (1984) and the Finn in *Count Zero* (1986), but it is only the Count who literally lives in Cyberspace and transfers his consciousness onto computer at the moment of death. (This theme has also been used in, for example, Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light* (1967), Greg Egan's *Permutation City* (1994), and Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon* (2002), but it was the Gibson stories that I read before coming across any of these others.)

(Digression: This discussion assumes that—as recent experiments suggest may be more and more likely—the human mind can be read and recorded in terms of the electro-chemical reactions of the physical brain. I mean neither to deny nor ignore the fact that a human being's personality, consciousness, and experience is the product of both genetic and environmental factors; that the flesh-and-blood make-up of the brain is shaped by socio-historical events as well as the personal experiences and background of the individual, including the memetic influence of everyone they have encountered, in their formative years and beyond. Nor does the human mind have conscious access to all of its memories at any one time: we are both conscious and unconscious; we are ego, superego, and id; we dream, we panic, we can be misled, and we fool ourselves. All of these essential features of the mind, memories, emotions, instincts, and impulses cannot be neglected in any mapping of consciousness, but they are all expressed by the neurophysiological make-up of the living brain.)

(I am also assuming that, for all the incredible advances in neuroscience and brain-mapping, including the astonishingly ambitious Blue Brain project sponsored by IBM, early twenty-first cen-

tury science has made but a tiny shuffling first step on the marathon course to achieving this full personality scan. But there is no reason we should consider it impossible.)

Anyway, something about this scenario was troubling me in particular. The conversation ran something like this:

Dj: But it wouldn't really be me.

JK: It would be, in every real sense, if it was a perfect representation of your consciousness and personality—it would think and act exactly like you.

Dj: Yeah, it would be exactly like me, but it wouldn't *be* me. I would be dead, and as far as I was concerned there would be nothing—I wouldn't experience what the simulation was seeing or doing.

JK: Yes, you would, because it would be you. It would have all your memories and your formulative experiences, and your consciousness.

Dj: But that doesn't make it me.

JK: Wrong! Absolutely it does.

Dj: No. I mean, you could create a perfect recording of my personality now, and switch it on while I'm still alive, and it would act exactly like me, as we've been saying, but it wouldn't be me. My awareness wouldn't suddenly switch over into the computer then, nor would I be conscious of both sets of experiences simultaneously.

JK: That wouldn't be you because you'd both have different experiences from that point on, so would become different people. That's not the scenario Gibson imagined, anyway. The simulation isn't switched on until the very moment you die, so that doesn't occur.

Dj: But that's beside the point; the point is there's no awareness transfer from me to the computer when I'm alive, so equally if it's switched on when I'm dead: from *my* point of view I'm dead, period. The point is that the computer is a copy of me—and there can be as many copies as you like—but a copy after I'm dead is still a copy.

JK: No, the two are not the same thing at all. If your consciousness is uploaded at the moment of your death, and the simulation starts running at that very instant, then the personality in the computer is absolutely, in every meaningful sense, you.

Dj: In every meaningful sense to it, sure, but not to me.

JK: It *is* you!

The conversation continued in this vein throughout lunch; ultimately we were talking at cross purposes, and we never reached a resolution.

I later learned that we were rehearsing a debate being conducted by psychologists and philosophers of consciousness today.

To summarise the argument, no doubt inadequately, as I have learned it from a review of Daniel Denning's work: some philosophers allow the possibility of an unconscious 'zombie'. A zombie would be like me in every way, having been perfectly correctly programmed to behave as I do, or as I would in any given circumstances, but it would lack the *qualia* that allows me to experience my own consciousness. (*Qualia* is a Latin term meaning something like the essential stuff of which something is constituted, so doesn't mean much more here than *je ne sais quoi*, I suppose.) The zombie therefore is not much more than an analogue of the linguistic homunculus in a box writing Chinese, or a Turing-test AI fooling a human correspondent. My zombie would be able to talk about consciousness, or even write this article, so the theory goes, but without ever feeling or experiencing as I do.

I see now that Joseph was right to say that a perfect simulation containing my uploaded memories could not—as Denning has shown—be a 'zombie'. If it truly was sophisticated enough to behave exactly as me from now on, then it must have the experience of consciousness as well as the appearance of it. It could not emulate me without partaking of *qualia*.

I still feel, however, that although it might have its own *qualia*, it would not have mine, or at best a perfect copy of mine. My experience of dying—and the ensuing non-experience of oblivion that is death—would not be altered by having a homunculus in my image. It would not mean that *I* lived on beyond death with my awareness transferred to a computer, only that a copy of me lived on beyond my own lifespan.

In what sense, then, can Gibson's (and Zelazny's *et al.*) mind-upload be said to confer immortality? If I don't live on, myself, why should I want a copy of me to do so? There may be several reasons, all deeply rooted in human desires, needs, and fears. (1) The zombie might be a comfort to my loved ones; (2) it might represent my legacy, both in the Platonic sense of intellectual work and the more emotional sense of progeny; and (3) it might represent the ultimate trusted heir.

(1) The first of these is perhaps the most banal: that the zombie might be a comfort to my loved ones after my death is not, of course, irrelevant, but it is possibly cold comfort. I don't know how comforted I would be by a homunculus—no matter how convincing—of a lost loved one. I suppose my preserved consciousness could tell people left behind all those things that I had no time to tell them when alive (especially if I died suddenly), but then again maybe I shouldn't allow my personality to live on and bore them interminably. Wouldn't the presence of an uploaded zombie make it difficult for them to let go, to grieve, to find closure?

That might not necessarily be a bad thing, I suppose, since if I am not altogether gone, my loved ones need not grieve so intensely. Are closure and 'moving

on' not just defense mechanisms, after all? If they have time to get used to my being gone, or at least available to them in a different form, it might let them come to terms more gently. I don't know, but from this perspective I'm not altogether comfortable with the idea.

(2) The second sense in which personality upload might be analogous to immortality is that of leaving behind a meaningful legacy. Even if I live a long and full life I shall almost certainly not have time to write everything I want to write; there will be stories unwritten still living in my head at the end of my life; there will be reviews, opinion articles, theories; academic papers, novels, philosophical discourses. And that's only writing: what about all the paintings I've never painted, the songs I've never composed, the games I've never designed, tricks I've never played?

We all feel the need to leave a legacy behind us; this need has been identified as stemming from fear of death. Plato argued that a man could achieve a level of immortality by leaving a child behind him: not a literal child of the flesh (although that is also worthwhile, no doubt), but a child of the mind, such as a book or philosophical teaching. The great philosopher himself has lived longer than most by virtue of his intellectual children. I'm sure if he could have uploaded his brain into a computer, rather than having to rely on the imperfect method of imposing his memes upon his pupils and successors, he would have achieved even more.

That, then, is a tempting prospect. Even if I do not feel confident that my awareness will transfer into a computer at the moment of my death, then at least having a full, working copy of my mind will mean that the important products of my experience will not be lost, and can be recorded. My intelligence can go on creating artistic representations of the hard-learned lessons of my life, sharing my feelings, continuing my modest mission to increase humanity's understanding of itself (and of each other) and reduce the suffering and conflict in the world.

On the other hand, I should like to think that if I live a long and full life, then when I come to the end of it I'll be satisfied with my allotted time. I hope I shall feel that I have achieved all I could fairly achieve, that I have laughed enough, loved enough, both taken and offered enough happiness, and that I will be able to die without regrets and without fear. How pathetically afraid of death would I have to be to try and stay alive even in the most artificial and incomplete of ways, inhuman, untouchable, alone? (But if my life is not perfect, maybe I won't be so content and satisfied. Call no man happy until he has lived his full life and died.)

There is a sense in which it could, I suppose, be argued that I cease to exist every night, when my conscious memory shuts down and my brain shuffles things around between short- and long-term memory. The "I" who wakes in the morning has more or less all of my memories, and is neuro-physiologically identical to the "I" who went to sleep, and so he behaves precisely as I would, reacts in the same way to the same stimuli as I would, and so I trust him. I do not go

to sleep every night in deadly fear of ceasing to exist, but with calm relief and relaxation. If I knew a similar copy of myself would reappear after my death, might I not lie down to die with similar happy resignation?

(3) Finally, and certainly not least significantly, is it not a form of immortality to leave an heir to carry on your unfinished work after you die? (Of course, in a sense a human life's work has to be let go: once it is released into the public domain it already does not belong to you, but to humanity. You can continue to work with it, but so can others, and if humanity is worthy of the gift, then you have to trust that they are also capable of taking the work onward without you.) But it is hard to let go completely: you would normally come to trust someone enough to take on this role through long association, after working together and talking, knowing that this person shares many of your dreams

and beliefs; that she or he has a firm grasp of what you consider to be morally right, and the courage to abide by these convictions. In short, you come to trust that this person is sufficiently like you that they may be able to do a good enough job of continuing what you were unable to finish.

What could be better, then, than having as an heir a perfectly preserved homunculus of yourself? Even if you will not be there to supervise the zombie's work, you know that it will do pretty much—nay, exactly—what you would do. True, the uploaded mind will continue to experience, learn, and evolve on its own, and so eventually will no longer be like you as you are now, but it will in any case react to and be moulded by new experiences as you would react and evolve.

And if you cannot trust yourself, whom can you trust?

Reviews

Pierre Bordage, *L'ange de l'abîme* 2005. Au Diable Vauvert. Pp. 560. ISBN 2846260664. €23.00.

Reviewed by Djibril

L'Ange de l'Abîme (Angel of the Abyss), the latest novel by prolific and fêted French science fiction novelist Pierre Bordage, is apparently the second in a trilogy, the first volume being *L'Évangile du Serpent* (Gospel of the Snake, 2002). This reviewer has not read the previous volume, but the book stands alone well; it seems unlikely that any of the protagonists appeared in the earlier novel. Indeed, important details are rehearsed periodically through the book, so that it reads almost like a serialised novel where a reader could join midway through and soon be up to speed. Far from being intrusive or patronising, this feature is reassuring in a story which is often episodic and occasionally discontinuous.

The action takes place in a future not too distant from our own time: we imagine a France some ten or twenty years in the future, when Europe has fallen under the sway of an intolerant, fundamentalist Christian, totalitarian, and brutal government which is engaged in a drawn out, incredibly bloody war against a united, fanatical Islamic world while the ostensibly neutral USA, India and China watch from the sidelines. In a blighted landscape of bomb-ruined cities and distrustful, mob-ruled villages where you can be lynched for looking a bit foreign or having an Arab name or ancestor, we meet Pibe, a thirteen year-old boy whose family have been killed by a aerial bomb, and who was recruited the same night by a gang of scavengers and thieves, and Stef, the beautiful, sixteen year-old independent scavenger who becomes his guardian angel. Alternate chapters tell of our heroes' attempts to survive in this ravaged Europe while evad-

ing the Legionaries of the Archangel, the religious military police who keep order with an iron fist and a ready trigger-finger.

For Europe is ruled in practice, if not in theory, by the Archangel Michael, a former neo-fascist Christian militant from Rumania who has risen to the top of a vast army of fanatics and swept to power across Europe—to the delight of the Vatican. While the Archangel takes refuge in his bunker deep beneath the Carpathians, a fundamentalist law holds sway over Europe: all non-Christians and non-whites (called "Osamas") are expelled or exterminated; women are subject to the often violent will of their husbands, and confined to their homes, to breed as quickly as possible; all boys are conscripted at the age of sixteen and sent to the hellish eastern front, where most die in the fruitless trench warfare that has been raging for ten years. There is no end in sight to this living hell that the world has become.

The extremely dystopic future that Bordage presents is horrifying and convincing in equal measure, although sometimes too extreme and unrelenting to swallow. There are few redeeming characters, little reflection or effective resistance, no hope even that things are better elsewhere, as the rest of the world seem to have their own problems too. But the details and the flavour of this poisoned Europe are beautifully delivered by means of the background landscape and the incidental characters. Every other chapter, between the adventures of Pibe and Stef, is a free-standing story, each connected by a single character or event, each told from a new point of view. This chain of stories occasionally becomes strained by tangential connection or coincidence, and at times is a weak counterpoint to the more engaging story of our heroes, who

are often left at a cliffhanger while we wait for their chapter to return. But ultimately these stories are what show us the true variety of human reactions to this terrible world, and the true horror of the destroyed lives that populate it.

The first independent tale in the chain is of a family who have fled the city for the relative peace of the countryside, only to be persecuted by the villagers because the mother is of Moroccan descent and the children of mixed blood: a mob attacks their house, and the father holds them off as long as he can, dying to cover his family's escape. The second story is linked by one of the men in the lynch mob, who returns home drunk to beat and rape his wife; while he is at work, his wife joins a charitable group who try to improve the lot of women, secretly providing contraceptive pills, for example, and planning occasional recreational trips to the city. The third story is of an invalid veteran of the eastern front who works as a gigolo, hired to perform public sexual acts at parties for groups of women from the country. The fourth story is about a devoutly Christian cop nicknamed "John Wayne", who is leaning on the pimp who organises these parties and planning a sting on some politicians who take part in murtherous, snuff orgies with stolen Osama children; the story ends with the tired and disillusioned John Wayne's suicide. A second cop is assigned to take over where John Wayne left off, a corrupt, filthy rich man with a beautiful, plastic wife and a lot to lose if he fails. A novelist attends one of the evil orgies out of curiosity, and is caught up in the sting. A young police officer charged with interrogating the novelist loses control and beats him to death during a torture session, and as a result is promoted to commandant of a death camp for Osamas. A young girl in the camp, barely surviving the inhuman, unsanitary, and barbaric conditions is cornered by a gang of feral inmates, and is only at the last minute rescued from rape and torture by the new commandant, who has taken a shine to her. The affair between the commandant and the Osama girl is doomed, as they are both unwilling to compromise their convictions (hers for her people, his to mass-incinerate as many of them as possible) because of their love for each other, and so the commit joint suicide. And so on and so on. About half of these stories end with the death of the protagonists, at least five of them by suicide. Most of them are tragic, and have managed to make you care.

In the main story, we see the world through the eyes of the initially naïf Pibe, who has never known another world than this, and whose only perspective on his current life are his lost family and schoolfriends. He and Stef speak to each other in a mixture of contemporary French and Verlan—the youth slang/thieves' cant in which words are turned on their heads ('verlan' itself means *l'invers*, reversed), and so a cop (flic) is a "keuf"; a woman (femme) is a "meuf"; a crazy person (fou) is "ouf"; even Stef is

nicknamed "Fesse" (buttock). (Some of this feels a little forced, but it has been a long time since this reviewer hung out in the banlieux, so perhaps is being unfair.)

On occasion the tone of the novel turns a little preachy; not so much when we are witnessing an atrocity, racial attack, or warcrime, as when a character takes voice and explains the history of the current state of the world. We are told no less than four times by different speakers (although Pibe is only told twice, and once by the surreal brothers Gog and Magog who spend their lives surfing what little remains of the satellite network on the Internet and collecting their own shit in jars of alcohol) that the Balkan wars of the late twentieth century were but a rehearsal of this newest religious conflict; that Americans are partly to blame for polarising of the world in response to the 9/11 attacks, for attributing the crime to an "axe du mal" (axis of evil) rather than the complex global problem it represented; that the US was more than willing to provoke the Islamic world into forming a united front and allowing the Europeans to spend themselves fighting it, thus simultaneously ridding itself of an enemy and a developing rival, and reasserting its hegemony over the rest of the world, including a decapitated Asia (197-8). The story of the doomed novelist above is also an opportunity for a lecture on the topic of self-censorship (131-2).

Unlunately the dénouement and climax of the story is Pibe's coming of age, as we see through his eyes the true problems of the world and possibly even some of their solutions. This is a message of hope, as a young survivor, educated in a religious school, surrounded by repression and violence, with laissez faire parents, achieves a state of sublime peace of mind that even we in relative peacetime and luxury can only aspire to. This is partly Stef's influence: she is unflappable, both in the face of adversity and when witnessing injustice to others; "Some people are just in the wrong place at the wrong time," she shrugs. She teaches Pibe to kill, both in self-defence and out of other, less obvious necessity; she also teaches him to "cease to desire ... begin to live" (399), explaining that their new state of mind is an evolution, the "negation of religion", that they are the monstrous creations of the barbaric world they live in. It is an almost Nietzschean twist that it is only when Pibe loses his desires and his fear, his jealousy and insecurity, his morality and hesitation, that he becomes truly human.

If there is a message to this novel, however, it is neither religious, psychological, or philosophical. Rather, it is a warning, stark and unsubtle, of the fundamentalist, blind, and polarised earth that we are all too close to letting the leaders of the free world bring us into. It may be blunt, in-your-face, and partisan; it may preach more than it allegorises; and it may exaggerate for effect to the point of grotesqueness—but it is a message we should not ignore.

Cory Doctorow, *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town*. 2005. Tor Books. Pp. 320. ISBN 0765312786. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Djibril

"Alan's father was a mountain, and his mother was a washing machine—he kept a roof over their heads and she kept their clothes clean. His brothers were: a dead man, a trio of nesting dolls, a fortune teller, and an island."

We are given this nutshell description of the protagonist's family background only a few pages into this enchanting novel, and it is a while before it is fully explained—that is too say, it is never quite *explained*, but we do eventually learn beyond a doubt that this is not a metaphorical description of a chauvinistic nuclear family but literal (if surreal) truth. The family live in cave on the mountain that is their father; the washing machine running on a diesel generator in one corner literally gave birth to Alan and his six brothers; his brother Billy knows the future; Craig is a mound of earth in their father's lake; Davey is a violent, psychopathic little monster, whom the other brothers killed, but has returned as a living corpse to terrorise their lives; Gerald lives inside Fred, who lives inside Ed. As if this were not confusing enough, none of the brothers have fixed names, although the first letter (A, B, C, D, etc.) is stable: the protagonist is alternately Alan, Adam, Andy, Avi, Adrian, Aaron; his second-eldest brother is Benny, Brent, Billy, Bentley...

This is an unusual book in many ways, but then Cory Doctorow is an unusual author, so we maybe should have expected that. Doctorow is a board member of the Electronic Frontier Foundation ([EFF](#)), one of the founder editors of the [BoingBoing.net](#) weblog, and has released a version of this novel for free under a [Creative Commons](#) license. This interest in the freedom of information and digital rights generally leaves a strong influence on the content of *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town*, one of the main plotlines of which involves a scheme to set up a free, anarchic, anonymous, open wireless network across the whole of Toronto, with routers built from trash and rescued computer parts. This

leaves room for debates and expositions on the subject of free speech and access to technology, descriptions of computers and boot-strapped junction boxes. This in many ways central story also serves as a backdrop for Adam's friendship with the info-anarchist Kurt; his relationship with Mimi, the mysterious winged girl next door, and her brutal, apparently all-seeing, Renfield-like boyfriend, Krishna; and his hunt for his missing, probably murdered, three youngest brothers.

Andy is an isolated character, inasmuch as he very rarely lets people close enough to him to learn his history, and the fact that he is not quite human. He has never been to a hospital (luckily he heals supernaturally fast, can grow back severed fingers, etc.), and avoids the police if possible; his ID is fake, stretching back to his first stolen library card. Despite this he is fascinated by people, spends his time observing them and trying to be as helpful as possible: he is a serial entrepreneur—has been a bookseller, antique dealer, and now wireless network distributor—whose aim is as much to train his assistants to run their own businesses as it is to turn a profit. He is the only one of his brothers to have successfully left the cave and joined human society, and he is never quite sure if this was the right thing to do. The undead Davey is never far behind him, watching, taunting, ready to torment and mutilate anything or anyone he loves.

In the end, despite its surreal background and unpredictable storylines, *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town* is a highly readable novel with engaging characters whom you care about, truly frightening villains, and tension that builds to a mounting climax that makes the last fifty pages or so almost totally un-put-downable. An excellent achievement: I can only hope that Doctorow is proved correct in his gamble to release free versions of the novel. If obscurity is a greater enemy to the writer than piracy, then this title deserves to be widely read and widely pirated (although some of us who can afford to should also pay for a copy, to be fair).

Richard Morgan, *Woken Furies* 2005. Gollancz. Pp. 400. US: ISBN 0345479718, \$24.95; UK: ISBN 057507325X, £9.99.

Reviewed by Djibril

The priest I didn't talk to at all, because I didn't want to have to hide his body afterwards.

This remarkably good novel, from former Strathclyde University lecturer Morgan who only started publishing fiction three years ago, is the sequel to both *Altered Carbon* (2002) and *Broken Angels* (2003). The first book in the series was a cyberpunk-cum-detective novel, as hard-hitting as it was hard-boiled; the second was a free-standing story, a thriller set in a war-zone and starring archaeologists

and special forces troopers, where military atrocities are committed both against the protagonists, and by them. This new title is also free-standing. We meet elite soldier, retired anti-insurgency "Envoy", jaded former revolutionary, and now tired career criminal Takeshi Kovacs for the third time, but the book does not depend on knowledge of the first two to succeed (and so nor does it info-dump background information in any quantity that would trouble a loyal reader).

The only sense in which it would be useful to have read the former books—except that they are sublimely worth reading in their own right—is that the philosophy known as Quellism will already exist

as a piece of background scenery in the reader's mind. This radical, revolutionary philosophy is one of Morgan's most prodigious creations: his previous books are scattered with Machiavellian quotations from Quellcrist Falconer, a figure somewhere between Friedrich Nietzsche and Leon Trotsky (with echos of the iconic Che Guevara). A revolutionary who died attempting a world-wide uprising a couple of centuries ago, whose message is unromantic, uncompromising, and all-encompassing, and whose writings are pithy, aphoristic, and iconoclastic. (One early poetic Quellist sentiment is paraphrased in a moment of stress: "Religion. Has it occured to anybody that every human sacrament is a cheap evasion, that the whole of human history might just be some fucking excuse for the inability to provide a decent female orgasm[?]") Kovacs is not a Quellist himself, but he is in turn associated with and influenced by followers of the maverick and dangerous anti-establishment figurehead.

In this novel Morgan gives us Kovacs working on his home planet, Harlan's World, downloaded into a temporary, artificial body, in league with organised criminals, and conducting some kind of vendetta against the patriarchs of a repressive, misogynistic religion, the New Revelation. (The imagery of the bearded priests of the New Revelation are no doubt largely based upon Islamic clerics, but Morgan makes it clear that the cultural ancestors of their particular brand of hateful, ideological repression are as much Christian as Muslim.) Harlan's World is an ocean planet, only populated on a series of island chains and archipelagos, whose population—including the corrupt, ruling Harlan clan—are constrained to the surface by the ancient orbital platforms, satellites abandoned by a lost alien race hundred of thousands of

years ago, which unerringly incinerate anything technological that tries to fly above 400 metres. On the run from the Yakuza, Kovacs lies low with a band of mercenaries hired to decommission some dangerous, AI military hardware that has been running rampant for a hundred years or more. As well as automated robotic weaponry, the uncleared zones are running with viruses and self-evolving technologies. This dangerous but anonymous respite is interrupted by two developments: one which will interest the Quellists quietly waiting for the next revolution, and one which is much more crucial to Kovacs himself. Somebody—and it can only be someone with the resources of the Harlan clan themselves—has aquired an illegal copy of his younger self and downloaded it into a new military-issue body. For reasons that are not yet clear, he and his new friends find themselves being tracked down by the ruthless, Envoy-trained Takeshi Kovacs.

The story begins racy, with action and intrigue storming onto the page from all directions, but it takes a while before there is any clear direction to the plot, and for the first hundred pages or so the reader may wonder where all this is going, if anywhere. Once the strands start to come together, however, it is soon clear where all the clues were leading, what all the loose ends were for, and that all that incidental detail which so beautifully fleshed out the very real, very dark world Kovacs lives in—was anything but incidental. There is not a gram of fat on this lean, hungry, grizzly brute of a novel.

The quote with which I opened this review was one of my favourite lines in the whole book, and a line that can be enjoyed equally both within and without its context (p. 181). Nietzsche would have loved it.

***Apex Science Fiction and Horror Digest.* Editor Jason Sizemore. Issue 1. Spring 2005. Pp. 104. ISSN 1553-7269. \$5.00.**



Reviewed by Djibril

This is a new magazine (issue 2 appeared just before the publication of this review), with a glossy cover and medium quality paper. Editorial standards are very high, and overall the magazine feels very professional. Issue one contains ten short stories (plus on flash-fiction style über-short), with quality ranging from excellent to significantly above average; the final twenty or so pages are given over to reviews, one short essay, and an interview. Artwork is understated but good, and there are several full-page advertisements.

The first story in this issue is also the longest: M.M. Buckner's 'Permutations'. This tale, which begins with a deceptive lightness of touch, tells of the crew of a geosynchronous orbital station, and how they cope when the link to Earth goes down. Permanently jacked into the station's computer, their bodies atrophied and their every need supplied by life-support systems, the solution to their problem can only be on-line and in their (virtual) interactions. Taking unex-

pected turns at several points on the way, this is an elegant, sophisticated, well-crafted story.

Another sensitive and inventive piece is Liam Rands's 'His Cross to Bear', the story of a suffering criminal on a harsh world, crucified beside the road and subjected to the scorn and aggression of his fellow-settlers. Again not all goes as expected in this story, which makes no excuses for either the sentenced man nor his judges, and moral issues are not clear cut or banal. A certain amount of background is left unexplained, but this factor probably highlights the central conflict than it causes confusion or incomprehension (although the uniformly hostile passers-by were a little hard to believe).

J. Stern's 'The Throne Room' is a tight little story that shows the FBI's reaction to the discovery of an alien artifact. The agency's cynicism, pragmatism, secrecy, and bureaucracy are well-illustrated, as are some of the real-world implications of such a discovery. Unfortunately, the whole story is told in the manner of a field agent's report to a committee of his superiors, and while the dry tone and pedantic attention to detail may be realistic in this regard, they do not make for a very entertaining read. It is fine for a five page short story, but I cannot imagine sticking with it for, say, twenty.

The worst thing about Lavie Tidhar's 'Invasion of the Zog' is the title, which is either ironic or silly (or both—I won't even consider the third possibility), but not very promising. However the story itself—short at under three sides—is effective, both spiritual and cynical in equal measure. The Zog are an amorphous alien race made up of purple snow, whose invasion of the Earth (starting on a beach in South Africa) is as unstoppable and unsettling as it is peaceful. But any change in the world's paradigm affects the economic status quo, and there are always powerful figures unwilling to let that happen.

Anna Parrish's 'PH: Only Partially Human' is a light little story about the prejudice suffered by transgenic labourers on a moon-base at the hands of their pure-blooded human co-workers. The characters are charming and slightly whimsical, the villains stereotyped and unsubtle, the plot not especially unpredictable. I enjoyed this piece until the final page, where the happy ending was suddenly sprung upon us in the space of about ten lines when a couple of pages and more tension would have served the purposes better.

Michael Simon's 'Layers' is the story, told from the point of view of a news-reader, of a medical miracle drug that suddenly goes horribly wrong. Cerebis is a drug that permanently cures all mental illness in those who take it by rewriting the surface structure of the brain; it transpires, however, that the drug will not stop at stripping away the diseased surface layer of the brain, but goes on to strip away the layers of civilisation itself. The idea behind this is either confused or confusing, as the assumption seems to be that if humans become somehow neurologically more primitive and lose their identities they will (a) revert to historical

types and take on the personalities of men like Hitler, Leonardo Da Vinci, Vlad the Impaler, Confucius; (b) become savages and descend into mob violence. I didn't find this terribly convincing.

On the other hand 'A Place in the Sun' by Doug Hewitt, is a competent, traditional SF story of human colonists encountering trouble with an alien enemy on a new world. The hero is a grouchy, slightly misanthropic tycoon, unwillingly awoken from cryo-stasis before his luxury colony has been completed, and now faced with a ruthless, equally misanthropic alien aggressor. The ending is quirky and unexpected, but a little light-hearted for my taste. Some nice scene-building, though.

One of the stronger stories in the issue is Lawrence M. Schoen's 'The Conservation of Thelos', a powerful, unpleasant story about a condemned killer who learns to harness pain—his own, and others'—to give him untold power and perception. The story is both graphic and unsettling, and tackles both metaphysical and moral issues without flinching, in a flow of dense, well-written, unstoppable prose.

Christopher Stires's 'Old World New World' is a shorter piece about a human space traveller taken prisoner by a corrupt alien government that finds his message of peace and equality dangerous to their security. An interesting idea that might have been more effective if the metaphor for humanity's tolerance and respect had been something with a little more international currency than the US Constitution (or any other single country's declaration). A pointed reminder that not all of our truths are so "self-evident".

'Allergies' is Christine W. Murphy's study in alienness, following the travels of a woman who is allergic to the natural produce of Earth, who thrives in the sterile, synthetic environment of frontier space, but suffers and sickens as soon as the comforts of home catch up with her. Perhaps ironically, given that an allergen is something the body rejects as alien, it is only in the most distant parts of space and the most alien environments that she feels comfortable. An extremely interesting story, although perhaps not the most smoothly written in the volume.

I have summarised each of the stories in this issue, but I should not neglect the delightful little piece of flash fiction with which the volume ends: Jonette Stabbert's 'Training Ground', which begins: "2504 AD. Human women still travel to planet Earth to train their small daughters. It's a dangerous place. ..."

I like the way book reviews are handled in this volume. Rather than a few dozen, paragraph-long reports of the latest paperback releases in SF and fantasy, which most magazines seem to offer, *Apex* limits itself to a small handful of titles, both fiction and non-fiction, with detailed reviews up to a couple of pages long. The essay by Gill Ainsworth on *Science Fiction—the real horror* is a similar length. It may be self-evident (!) that I find longer reviews more useful, and more of a contribution to the field than any number of short notices.

The interview with small press legend Jon Hodges discusses the man's own editorial and authoring work, and also issues of concern to the genre small press as a whole. I wish to take issue in some detail with one point he makes about "e-zines". Hodges feels that non-paying online publications (which he admits he pays little attention to himself) do the small press as a whole a disservice for two reasons: (1) that they will publish any garbage; and (2) that they give author's too much exposure, especially in the case when an early, not very good story remains in the public eye long after the author has grown beyond—and even ashamed of—it. On the first point, it is fair to say that we have all seen rubbish published on the web: nothing is to stop John Teenage Doe setting up a free website and "publishing" on it every piece of crap that he and his school-friends write, along with anything any misguided member of the public might happen to email him. No quality control. But if I find JTD's webpage, I can immediately tell the difference between that and a good magazine such as [Neometropolis](#), [Planet](#), or [Whispers of Wickedness](#). (And to be fair, I've seen plenty of crap in the printed small press, too.) The essential difference is in the cost of production: even a photocopied fanzine requires some outlay to create, not to mention to distribute. The web is cheaper, easier to access; but among those who would not be heard without the web, there are plenty who are genuinely worth hearing.

Hodges's second point is more serious, however, and it may be my academic background that leads me to disagree here. I would think that one of the essential features of any publication is the commitment to being

permanently available. Obviously small press magazine's disappear all the time (and websites do so even more often, leaving behind only a few pages in Google cache or the Internet Archive), but any serious magazine, whatever the medium, should have an ISSN and make copies available to the major deposit libraries ([Library of Congress](#), [British Library](#), [Bibliothèque nationale](#), etc.), which will archive them and keep them permanently available in case they are cited in the future—whether in an author's CV, a review, or a scholarly article. Permanent access is a feature, not a bug.

But hey, maybe I'm biased. (I should also point out that nowhere did Jon Hodges say everything on the internet was garbage.)

The *Apex Digest* looks like being a very well edited and professionally produced new magazine. If the quality of writing in the first issue is variable in places, this is probably to be expected in a print magazine in its early days: unlike a web magazine, which can afford to maintain standards by only accepting as many outstanding stories as are submitted in the three-month space between issues, a responsible print magazine has to fill 80-odd pages with stories every issue. So while a web 'zine will gradually get bigger as its reputation grows and it can choose from a wider field every issue—a print 'zine will in the same period get *better*. I have no doubt that—so long as the editors have the patience and financial support to stay afloat for a couple of years—*Apex* has everything it takes to become a most respectable and reliable small press magazine. I wish them the best of luck.

Eric Heisserer, *The Dionaea House: Correspondence from Mark Condry*. 2004. Available: online <http://www.dionaea-house.com>

Reviewed by Djibril

The Dionaea House is basically a short story told through a one-sided series of emails from Mark, the (now missing) protagonist to his worried friend, Eric, the narrator. From this perspective it is a very old-fashioned format; compare the Victorian fashion for novels in the form of diaries or correspondence. On the other hand, this is a website, that most modern of media, and so the progression from one email to the next is via a series of hyperlinks. The site also contains complementary materials, representing information gathered by the author after the email exchange ended; this layout gives a certain flexibility to the order in which the story may be consumed, the additional materials being available before, during, or after the emails have been read. Some of these materials are external to the site: they include a LiveJournal site from a young girl, for example. The site also claims to be interactive to a degree, inasmuch as the author welcomes emails from any readers who may know more

about Mark's whereabouts or the nature of the House, but this is an illusion: as far as I can tell, the site is static.

All of this gives the story a degree of verisimilitude; nowhere on the site is it explicitly revealed that this is a work of fiction, nor does Heisserer claim authorship (except in the form of a copyright statement at the bottom of the page). The site could be classed as a hoax, and a very good one: this reviewer detected no glaring inconsistencies or obvious flaws. (Except that Heisserer is a well-known scriptwriter, of course, and that the movie rights to *Dionaea* have now been sold to Warner Brothers.)

The story tells of Mark's attempts to learn the history of their old buddy Drew, who recently committed a double murder and then shot himself. He remembers how when they were younger, and Drew briefly used to hang out with their gang, the quiet, scruffy lad became strangely disturbed after staying at a cold, unsettling house owned by his father. Becoming obsessed, Mark goes on a hunt for the mysterious house, whose address he does not know, and learns more about Mark's story than he anticipated. We know from the

beginning of the site that Mark disappeared, and that the house must be involved in the story somehow, but this review is not the place to give away more than that. Suffice to say that *The Dionaea House* makes an entertaining read and is an impressive piece of construction, with all the peripheral trimmings described

above.

Go read the story, enjoy, and maybe drop Eric a line to thank him for the clever site.

View *Dionaea House* online at <http://www.dionaea-house.com/>

Sean Wright, *Dark Tales of Time and Space* 2005. King's Lynn: Crowswing Books. Pp. 150. ISBN 1905100124. £5.99 / \$10.85.

Reviewed by Amazonia

Sean Wright's second 'teenage-adult crossover' fantasy novel, *Dark Tales* features Joey Steffano, a young millionaire hip-hop artiste killed during a performance. Post-death, Joey surfaces to find himself trapped on a strange train, peopled with passengers given to gnomish pronouncements. Before his journey ends he will confront the personification of his own dark side, and find a way to achieve acceptance and forgiveness for the traumatic events of his past.

The crossover market is notoriously difficult as a target audience—success is more likely to be incidental than planned. So when Wright thanks the University of Chicago Illinois for "links to a variety of hip-hop archive sources", suspicions are raised—if you need to learn about hip-hop culture, why do it through an academic filter? Why not go out there and experience it? Indeed, why not write about something you do know? The result is only too evident: an American hip-hop track titled "Kick Arse Like a Soldier" for instance? Pur-lease.

This is the sort of bogusness that teenagers can smell from a mile off. It's a shame because when Wright gets going in the latter half of the book, his pace, writing and ideas threaten to become effective. The protracted hip-hop scene-setting doesn't even turn out to be relevant to the story; its presence appears more as a cynical attempt to ingratiate. That its description is so drawn out is symptomatic of the most irritating aspect of Wright's style: persistent over-explanation. So apparently the crossover audience needs to be told that U2 are a "stadium rock band" and that South Park and the Simpsons were "seen as con-

troversial initially". At the same time, Wright doesn't bother to explain his reference to "shamtutants", a concept from his 2004 book *The Twisted Root of Jaarfindor*—clearly he assumes a reader more familiar with his own works than global popular culture.

Along with this practice, lengthy inserts of genuine Reuters news articles, cod-writings from other journals and large chunks from Anthony Borgia's 1956 spiritualist text *Life in the World Unseen* add pointless bulk where what is needed is proper development of characterisation and narrative ideas. (What is the significance of Joey's breaking a stained glass church window as a child? What happened to his biological father? What's his relationship with the grandfather he hopes to meet at journey's end?) Copious references to pop cultural signifiers like brand names (Nike, Nokia, Coke, Pepsi) and iconic television (South Park, The Simpsons, Friends, Star Trek) operate as a poor substitute.

The overall feel of the book is as a short story padded out to short book-length, which it quite possibly is—Wright was quoted pre-publication on the [Bookloons website](#) saying that *Dark Tales* would be a "collection of short stories" which this book clearly is not, although it does attempt to present its narrative from multiple viewpoints. Its main thematic concerns—life after death and the struggle between good/light/love and evil/dark/hate—may be clichéd, but that doesn't make them less interesting to contemplate if originally and intelligently presented. However the simplistic treatment of complex moral and political issues here patronises potential readers, while baroque similes ("like a sperm free-falling after rejection by an egg") take the writing to the edge of parody. As a result, some interesting ideas become a missed opportunity.

Ursula K. LeGuin, *Left Hand of Darkness*. 1969. (Panther edition 1973.)

Reviewed by Simon Mahony

Ursula LeGuin's, *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Winner of the Hugo and Nebula Awards for the year's best S.F. novel (so it says on the cover of my 1973 reprint) has a lot to live up to as the first novel since Frank Herbert's *Dune* to win both of these prestigious awards. Had my impressions of this novel changed with the passage of time between my first reading, attested by the yellowing pages with "U.K. 35p" marked on the back cover and "12p" in scrawled biro inside the front one, and now? Certainly I had changed

in the intervening years; how would this influence the triangular relationship between writer, reader and text?

This outstanding novel is set on the freezing inhospitable world of Winter where the inhabitants cling to life in the narrow margins between the Northern and Southern glaciers. Life is harsh and errors mean certain death. Genly Ai is the 'First Mobile' or first direct contact with the inhabitants of Gethen from the 'Ekumen', not so much an empire as a league of planets and peoples (3000 nations on 83 worlds). A facilitating body (it says) set up to develop communication, trade, and harmony between its members.

The story is told, in the first person, by the two

major protagonists, Genly Ai and Estraven, Prime Minister, before his exile, of Karhide, the first kingdom of Gethen visited by Ai. Using this narrative technique their nature is gradually revealed by words and deed although more is revealed by the way they misinterpret each other. The novel is interspersed with short chapters of tales from Karhidish legend which gives the reader an additional level of background insight into Karhidish culture (and another set of tools by which to evaluate Estraven and the Karhidishers).

Other than the harsh landscape, the main obstacle facing Ai is the physical nature of the Gethenians: they are hermaphrodite. Not for them, however, the striking symbiosis of both female and male characteristics much favored by ancient sculpture; most of the time they are sexless, neither men nor women. A short cyclical period of sexuality (Kemmer, which lasts four days a month) brings them into 'heat' where they take on female physical characteristics and induce by touch the opposite sexual characteristic in a companion. Only then, and for these few days, do they become male or female sexual beings.

Throughout the book, Ai struggles with his interpretation of the Gethenian sexuality. LeGuin constantly refers to the Gethenians as 'he', using the male pronoun and other grammatical indicators, which reinforces the reader's impression (and confusion) of the Gethenians' maleness. Ai, the alien, the outsider, the off-worlder, finds great difficulty with the 'alien' nature of these people. In a conversation with Estraven he rightly notes that for other races "the heaviest single factor in one's life, is whether one's born male or female. In most societies it determines one's expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners – almost everything." In their sexless state Ai still regards these strange beings as male but with a strange and seemingly prejudiced antipathy towards any feminine aspects of their nature. Female traits are always negative; for example in Ai's early meeting with the insane king (apparently madness is a necessary quality in a King of Karhide) when the ruler laughs it is "shrilly like an angry woman," or when he is sullen "as an old she-otter in a cage."

How does society operate without the rigid distinction between the sexes? For one thing there is no war—a situation Estraven's successor Tibe seeks to change for his own advantage as he aggravates a border dispute with Orgoreyn (as sub-plot and vehicle for a display of political intrigue, stretched loyalties and an examination of the nature of patriotism). They have murders and forays into a neighbour's territory but never wars. They have no concept or language to describe such conflict just as they have none to describe men and women.

The Ekumen sees all humankind as related and coming from ancient origins on Earth. It is suggested that the Gethenian physiology might have been the result of some type of genetic experiment. An added dimension, surprisingly not suggested by the author, might be that this is the result of the Terrans' need to

adapt to the harsh climate of Winter. So much of Mankind's efforts (according to Freud) are directed towards the pursuit of sexual conquest and fulfillment that they surely would not have survived in this unforgiving environment without some sort of major change. Take sex out of the equation and what might man accomplish? An obvious reaction to this story (well it was to me on that earlier reading—the one fact that remained) but not one explored here by LeGuin.

This is a tale about loyalty and betrayal and how these two sides of the same coin are misunderstood and confused. The two main protagonists are thrown together towards the end as Estraven rescues Ai from an Orgoreyn labour camp, and they must make the long and dangerous trek across the glacier to Karhide (and relative safety, although not for Estraven). During this journey they are completely alone, sharing the confined space of the tent and the labours of dragging the sledge weighed down with tent and provisions across snow, ice and the glacier. This intimate contact brings out, for the first time, intimate discussion as they dispense with the ever-present 'shifgrethor', the pride and prestige relationship that dictates the way Gethenians relate to each other.

It is difficult not to read into the narrative the tensions of the time in which it was written. Are these the author's intentions, purely the reader's expectation, or our interactive response to the text? This is the time of the re-awakening of the women's movement in the USA after a long period of stagnation. It is the height of the cold war.

Contrast the anarchic, decentralized and flexible society of Karhide—albeit ruled over by a madman (could this too be part of the analogy?)—with the totalitarian, centralized, rigid, and linear state that is Orgoreyn: broken up into Commensalities within which "they provide all units with jobs". Karhide is rife with factionism and political intrigue, and in contrast Orgoreyn seems so appealing to Ai—at least until his incarceration and brutal treatment in the labour camp where the authorities hide him, covering their tracks with rumours of his death.

Since the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* (and many earlier foundation myths) the hero's journey is a familiar topos, in the case of SF usually from Earth to different planets. This is true here but further reading reveals that there are (like for Odysseus and Aeneas) journeys within journeys. Ai's most important journey is not from Earth to Winter but his onerous and risky journey across the wastes of ice, together with Estraven, the native. This journey across the ice reflects another: Ai's true journey into himself, his growing awareness of himself and of his relationship with Estraven. In that journey they find a closeness, a love like that between Estraven and his 'brother' (told in an inset-tale) that can never be.

Like travelers in the *Odyssey*, Ai and Estraven are granted, upon formulaic request, shelter and food from strangers; a necessary reciprocal code to maximize the chances of survival in this harsh and unforgiving land-

scape especially amongst those "who live on the edge of the edge" without which no sane person would ever venture out onto the roads buried under snow and ice.

Once Ai accepts Estraven's femininity, he begins to be able to accept his own feminine aspects which previously he had considered to be weakness and exclusively for women. He finds the courage to break the final barrier of his manly pride, to accept and even voice his vulnerability. At the moment Ai gains profound love he also loses it as Estraven dies shot down, betrayed by an apparent friend. And here he learns the price of love: love gained and love lost go hand in hand, as joy and sorrow, light and darkness. Just as they reach their goal, where they know parting must come, Ai loses what he has so painfully gained—love and intimacy with another person. After he has experienced the profundity of love he has to experience the profundity of sorrow, and emerge from both with greater knowledge. Here the reader might remark on the choice of name for LeGuin's problematic 'hero': Ai. Like the Aias of Sophocles the sound of Genly's name is "a cry of pain" and as the tragic chorus well understands, "man must suffer to be wise".

As in Taoist philosophy, light and dark are not in conflict but co-exist, each defining the other rather than struggling to eliminate each other. Both are essential for life to combine as are good and evil, positive and negative, male and female. Opposites are reconciled to achieve balance and harmony. This is the implied message of LeGuin's story. How much would we as human beings achieve if we removed the continual contest of sexuality and how greatly would our lives be enriched if we, both men and women, were allowed to feel the entire range of human emotions and not be restricted to only some of them. Human sexuality is a question of tradition and prejudice. Taoist peace and harmony may be achieved on an individual level, and indeed on a world level, if we acknowledge and cultivate the female and male principles in each of us. Thus do we become whole.

The interesting calendar where years are counted backwards and forwards from the present so that Gethenians are constantly in Year One also needs to be included here on a minor note. This also feeds into the Taoist perception of harmony where the emphasis is always on the 'now' with energies being directed here on the moment rather than on (as often is the case in Western thought) what may happen in the future. This is not to say that no thought is given to the future, or that we should live in an unrestrained, hedonistic present, but that there should be more balance between the two. We exist and can only exist in the present moment, however hard we plan and work towards an unseen future.

That to one side, LeGuin weaves an intricate tale that draws in and immerses the reader in this new and strange world of Winter. A world where a study of its inhabitants necessitates an exploration of the nature of

sexuality—loyalty, betrayal, oneness. A story teller of the highest magnitude, LeGuin rightly deserves the awards for this novel (which really should be read in mainstream literary circles as well as by genre fans), for the way in which it engages with the human condition in elegant and superbly descriptive prose. The author displays insight of both the social and political spectrum and engages the reader with both philosophical and psychological issues.

Authorial intrusion can arguably be read in the one chapter that does not fall into the earlier given categories, 'The Question of Sex'. Structured into the tale as 'field notes' from an earlier investigator (of the type that do the preliminary groundwork but do not make contact) we find in the penultimate sentence that this is a female voice, the sole female in the novel. Here there are suggestions for the peculiarities of Gethenian sexual physiology, well thought out though suitably vague descriptions of their sexual cycle, how this fits in with conventions of pair-bonding and family ties. Sex is a part of a cycle so there can be no unconsenting sex, no rape, no division into strong and weak, owner and chattel. And importantly, no war. The 'investigator' postulates the link between "continuous sexual capacity and organized social aggression" and suggests that some consider "war to be a purely masculine" activity—"a vast Rape"—although she herself is "no expert on the attractions of violence or the nature of war". No race of warring Amazons here. Or it may simply be the climate, the relentless cold that eats up all their fighting spirit. They need all their energies to survive the harshness of their surroundings. That is their war.

My only serious criticism is that in the exploration of ambisexuality the inhabitants of Gethen seem to be exclusively male (except for their negative characteristics) and hence an opportunity is lost. In addition there is no mention of same-sex relationships or attraction. We hear and meet Estraven's child but we do not see Estraven as a mother or in any other overtly 'female' role. My copy of *The Left Hand of Darkness* is 200 pages long and perhaps if LeGuin were to have addressed these issues we would have had a length more approaching *Dune* or *Lord of the Rings*, more heavy going and less accessible as a result.

This work survives the test of time and survives it well. I expect that subsequent visits when the pages fade further will also be worth the time spent. In this book LeGuin addresses issues that are timeless and intrinsically relevant to mankind. They were always there in the text and within the author; the change in the triangular relationship has been with the reader. This one is now more able to appreciate the complexities and subtleties woven within.

Tim Lees, *The Life to Come*. 2005. Elastic Press. Pp. 200. ISBN 0954881222. £5.00.

Reviewed by Johann Carlisle

If you read the independent press in the UK it is likely that you may have come across at least one of the stories in this collection before. Of the sixteen stories by Tim Lees collected herein, most appeared for the first time in *The Third Alternative*, a couple in each of *Crimewave* and *Midnight Street*, and five are previously unpublished. Judging by the consistent quality of the stories here, this is either a selection from the top quartile of Lees' work, or else everything he writes really is this good.

Several themes recur in this work: characters are earthy, real, believable. They have family problems, relationship issues, are not always articulate and successful. Often the weird, alien, or supernatural crux of the story is not the worst of their problems. Atmosphere and credible background scenarios are more important than eldritch terror or thrilling action in Lees' stories (which is not to say that they can not be eldritch or thrilling at times).

Some of the stories are set in a world much like our own. In 'Headcrimes' the narrator's mother is paranoid, bordering on the schizophrenic; her absent father is a German who moved to England after the war and never talks about his past, and the narrator herself lives alone, trying to stay in touch with both parents, remembering a childhood as a foreigner in her own country. All of which is beautifully, convincingly told. 'The Anti-Fan' is a Stephen-King-esque story (but without the melodrama) about a stand-up comedian stalked by a mysterious bully: this is a believable, unromantic vision of fame as it might be for a small-time British celebrity. 'Rif' is the story of four hippy kids trying to pull off a dope deal with some farmers in a Moroccan village: a very atmospheric evocation of their lifestyles and attitudes.

A healthy fistful of stories start from our world, but introduce something strange or alien that makes it suddenly unreal. In 'The Life to Come', the title story, the future is encroaching on the present, introducing aliens, artifacts, and monsters into our daily lives. But at the same time the protagonists are recovering from a failed relationship: the future is something they don't have; the past, they are involuntarily reliving; and their relationship is better and more civil than it was when it was real. 'Homeground' is a story with starts in a similar tone (although the protagonists are happily married): it describes a visit by aliens from another dimension of space/time, and the effect they have on the politics and economy of a small, run-down, conservative, rural town. 'The Leopard Girl' is the story of a growing, dislocated boy who becomes obsessed with the leopard-skinned girl that scavenges and hunts on the outskirts of his quiet coastal town, and who tries to protect her from the angry local farmers. But it is also the story of the boy's relationship with his sad, restless, tired father, who never lets them stay in one place for much more than a season. In 'Home in the Light' a girl

is asked out by an unsettlingly awkward alien who is desperate to fit in, and who misses his regimented, predictable home. The alien in 'Boomtime', known only as the "man from Mars", could almost be the same person, but the story is very different: this is a tale of grim realism, narrated by a wino on a downward spiral, again told with Lees' fine but relentless sensitivity.

In a similar vein are the three stories in this volume about Uncle Edward, who is introduced in 'Starlight', a tale of a boy's wonder at and admiration for his eccentric uncle (especially as compared to his stuffy and snobbish parents). His uncle's latest experiment is to concentrate starlight with a special telescope and create a living homunculus of starstuff. But the experiment is ill-conceived and careless, as always, and after a narrowly averted disaster, the story leaves you with a taste of a disappointed life, or dreams never quite fulfilled. The two other stories in this series (both previously unpublished), are less satisfying. In 'Oi', the experiment is less clear, involving the capturing of alien dreams, and the outcome slightly confusing: I was not sure this story was finished. 'Jinner and the Shambly House', on the other hand, is a stronger story set at the end of Uncle Edward's life, looking back at an incident in his childhood that led to disaster. The House in question is spooky, to be sure, and we feel the child's fear as he explores it, but it is not clear at the end what has happened, which makes the horror a little hollow.

Finally there are a few stories in this book which start in a world different from our own, although usually only in a small way. 'The God House' refers to a power station where the source of energy is the gods imprisoned within like artifacts in a museum; the narrator is described in terms of a lost pilgrim, wandering among those who worship the contained deities, but the story is also a parable of wasteful energy consumption and short-sightedness in assuming that the bountiful source will never run out. 'Up There' is a lovely little story that has the effortless inventive detail of Ted Chiang: a city high up in the air, made of ropes, bridges, and pillars, but including well-built and bolstered monuments and cathedrals, where the people believe that the air is pure and the earth the source of our fleshy, base instincts. The land-dweller who visits the air-city finds it difficult to fit in, but when he eventually leaves he suffers land-sickness, of the moral as well as the physical variety. 'Everybody's Crazy in the West' is a postmodern future where all cinema has to be real, and so Hollywood is the most dangerous place on earth. And in 'Relics', a civilised airman living with a peasant girl hunts for fragments of alien spacecraft in the seas close to her home.

The last story in the volume, 'A Specialist in Souls', is a witty pastiche written in the manner of Hemingway's Parisian memoirs. It is short—for the borrowed style could not support anything much longer—and equal parts endearing, unsettling, and amusing.

The strongest impression left with me when I put

down this volume of Lees' stories was the sensitivity to life and to detail, the sheer realism of his descriptions and his characters. If I didn't know better, I might assume that the author had in fact experience first hand what it is to be a pilgrim, a foreigner, an alien, a celebrity, a drug-dealer, a Hollywood writer, an alcoholic, a treasure-seeker, and a big-game hunter!

***Alien Abduction*, Dir. Eric Forsberg**

Asylum

Starring: Megan Lee Ethridge, Griff Furst, Marissa Morse

Reviewed by Danny Hydrus

Alien Abduction is a low-budget, low-expectation, independently produced, sci-fi/horror movie that was released straight-to-DVD. The director seems to have aimed for cheap entertainment, and this film certainly manages to shock, titillate, and amuse far more than it tells an exciting, unexpected, or original story. With references to genre films as disparate as *The Blair Witch Project* and *Driller Killer*, this title is in many ways more parody and pastiche than it is science fiction. (The production company, Asylum, gives the first clue—as does the 'hospital' that looks more like a lunatic asylum.)

From the opening shots of Miss Ethridge in shorts and a clinging t-shirt and the accompanying 'gonzo' handi-cam meta-cinematographic technique the viewer is uncertain if they've selected a sci-fi movie or a porn one. The categorization is further questioned when we meet the heroine's stereotypically blonde bimbo friend complete with fawning boyfriend—in this movie which inhabits a male fantasy land where women bend over a lot and don't wear bras.

Along come the aliens in rubber alligator suits and amid squeals and pouts the friends out on a 'camping' trip are whisked off to the circling spaceship. They awake fondling and caressing each other and the viewer sits back and waits for the anal probing to begin. But no, they're dragged into an abattoir where an alien with back-lit 'predator' like eyes rips out their innards to a chorus of shrill screams and—hooray we're saved from porn and can relax into a slasher movie. The DVD was in the right rack after all.

Abducted by aliens, this group of four friends find their memories blanked when they come to in a secret military hospital. Somewhere between prisoners and patients, they and countless other inmates are detained, brainwashed, abused, mistreated, and physically modified in the name of "debriefing". The nurses come round with the drugs trolley in a scene reminiscent of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and in the recovery room Megan meets 'The Major' with the harsh camp looks and manner of Servalan, the iconic fantasy dominatrix from *Blake's 7*. Drug therapy and bondage result in more writhing from our heroine, as seemingly on the point of orgasm she can't remember if she's in a porn or a horror movie. We have a vague wander through this 'secure' facility with unlocked doors where a patient has a food-blender attached to their cranium and flash their tits as electrodes are applied to

the head.

There really isn't much more story to it than this.

Many elements of this film are clearly designed to shock, often in an exploitative manner, and not always by any means unsuccessfully, either by unexpected jumps, by gratuitous violence or gore, or by representing morally repugnant acts. The characters are abducted by aliens very early on and violently probed, not to say eviscerated; the aliens themselves are creepy and... well... alien; there are countless scenes of torture and disfigurement at the hands not only of the aliens but of the military establishment; we see disabled and/or sick humans living in conditions reminiscent of a Victorian asylum. One of the most stomach churning scenes may be the exploitation of the alien "semen moster" in a vivisectioner's breeding programme. It is just as well that these scenes are sometimes enough to turn the stomach, because in no case would concern for a character's well-being be enough to drive the story and retain the audience's interest.

This film, it must be said, is cheap in every sense of the word. With an estimated budget of \$600 000 it is not Hollywood by any stretch of the imagination, but nor is it the cheapest independent movie I have seen recently. The special effects, although impressive in their scale, are not convincing. The characters and costume design are even worse: the short-skirted nurses' outfits were no doubt rather inspired by the need to titillate than a shortfall in the wardrobe budget, but the military uniforms were no more convincing, nor were any of the minor cast members required to act in the least, it seems. In fact the least successful character in the entire film was undoubtedly 'The Major', commanding officer of the military base, played by the consistently unimpressive Claudia Katz; I hate to be uncharitable, but in this case even the verb 'act' would be a compliment she does not deserve. The action scenes are also confusing and unconvincing: characters run or are chased through the hospital-cum-military base, alarms sound intermittently, guards are worse than useless, and random people seem to wander in and out of the action. Of course, this may all be a clue to the fact that the high-security base may not be quite what it seems.

The cheap titillation in this film does not end with the Major and the nurses' short skirts, however. The lead character (Ethridge) spends most of the film in shorts or a hospital gown with her shapely legs on show, until escaping from the food-blender she slides down a refuse chute into a sort of slimy sewer which necessitates, on forcing her way into a store room, the most unconvincing "shower scene" in cinematic history when she bares her tits and arse for a wash under

her canteen before going in search of her friends.

In the store room Megan also finds her video-cam which had been running throughout their abduction and disembowelment and so the 'plot' is revealed. Where are her scars? What is the connection between the semen-harvesting scientist and the *Slither*-type creatures that cause panic when they escape? All comes to light when, gathering the others and a 'friendly' guard (who also thought he was in a porn movie when he chanced upon our heroine slipping into her disguise), they find that this facility and the spaceship are one and the same. They no longer humans are clones grown from pods and being prepared for their return to earth. But unlike those screaming aliens from *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* these ones keep the humans alive. They "do not kill their own", as 'Major Servalan' scolds. Megan, seeing what remains of her former human self, scars and all, predictably pulls the plug in an act of euthanasia. If that is the point, that no matter how bad the aliens are they are not as bad as

humans, who are the inpatients in the asylum and why is the food-blender needed? Are these the clones that went wrong? Like the failed 'blue ribbon' kids in *Disturbing Behavior*—which also has an asylum scene not unlike that in this film—what happens to those that are less than perfect in an engineered perfect society?

It must be remembered, however, that this is an independent production, and that there is a certain style to this class of film that is worth more than the slick surface of a hundred Spielberg vomfests. It is good to see films produced outside of the big studios successfully distributed on DVD and publicised through active and dynamic companies like Asylum Pictures. This is a film with a sense of humour, that does not take itself too seriously, and that makes a game attempt to turn its shortcomings into self-deprecating pastiche (however successful or otherwise you might find this tactic). There are a few good scary effects in this movie, and some genuinely gross moments that will delight the low-budget horror fan.

Code 46, Dir. Michael Winterbottom

BBC / Revolution Films

Starring: Tim Robbins, Samantha Morton, Om Puri
Reviewed by North

This is not a rollicking action movie, but rather a subtle, sensitive, speculative-fiction look at one possible near-future of our increasingly artificial, genetically modified, test-tube society. Winterbottom keeps a fairly gentle pace throughout, unlike much of his television work and the excellent movies *Butterfly Kiss* (1995) and *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997). Like the best SF, it does not focus on dazzling technology, but the social and personal implications of the changes the technologies bring about. Some quite major social differences are quietly taken for granted in this film.

The 'Code 46' of the title is a law against incest which explicitly takes into account genetic identity rather than simply family relationships. A person with whom you have 50% genetic identity, for example, is considered your sibling, and so it is illegal to mate with them. In a world where most people were conceived in a clinic and most only know their 'nurture parents' to whom they are not necessarily genetically related, the traditionally laws and taboos concerning exogamy are inadequate. The social implications of this breakdown of the traditional family are far more wide-ranging than this little legal nicety, however, and there is little recognition of some such changes: Robbins' character still has a traditional nuclear family, for example.

William (Robbins), a virus-enhanced investigator, is in Shanghai looking into a case of insurance fraud. In an uncertain world, insurance cover has become the guiding principle behind most people's lives: the all-powerful Sphinx corporation assesses the level of risk for any purchase, journey, holiday, or event you want to attend, and decides whether the risk is acceptable. If you cannot get cover, you cannot legally travel. But

the woman behind the black market in insurance 'papeles' is Maria (Morton), with whom William becomes obsessed and eventually fall in love; bt William only has cover to stay in Shanghai twenty-four hours, and mysterious forces try to keep him and Maria apart, wiping her memory of him while she is in hospital.

The action mostly takes place in Shanghai and Jedel Ali, with a few scenes in William's home Seattle. Outside of the safe, protected cities is 'al fuera', the rest of the world where Sphinx hold no sway and nobody has cover. The near future world is indicated in several, understated details: Maria has a cloned finger after an accident; photographs are animated on little screens; people routinely hide from sunlight inside their UV screened buildings. Although English is the language of this film, the protagonists scatter their speech with occasional words or phrases in French, Spanish, Chinese; these words seem to be randomly selected ('pourquoi', 'papel', 'al fuera') rather than dependent on context or register, as might be more feasible (*cf.* the Mandarin curses in *Firefly*, for example). William is infected with a virus for empathy; other viruses allow their users to acquire a language, musical ability, or other skill.

Although the repressive future seems dystopic for most of the film, the constant mantra 'Sphinx knows best' proves correct, as people who travel on Maria's counterfeit insurance cover invariably come to avoidable, predictable harm. People have most of their freedoms taken from them, but it really is for their own good. The film neither exonerates nor condemns the totalitarian corporation, which remains pretty impersonal at all times, but does a good job of highlighting the sorts of changes—and moral dilemmas—we might expect as certain kinds of technology become more common. This lack of resolution is not terribly satisfying, but it is thought-provoking, and that may be more important.

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