

The Future Fire

Speculative Fiction, Cyberpunk, Dark Fantasy

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Fiction by:

Jerome Kemp

Lynda Williams

Interview with Cory Doctorow

The Speculative Meme-Pool

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The Future Fire: Issue 2006.05

May rabid dogs tear out your entrails, and dance all night to the sweet music of your agonised screaming.

Trad. [?Dorsetshire] greeting.

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Here is number five of *The Future Fire*, a slim issue this quarter, but one with an eye on the future, with the emphasis firmly on speculative matters more than the dark hints of recent months. We have two stories set firmly in the science-fictional tradition of the future, an interview with Cory Doctorow who talks about the future of information culture, and of course more offerings for the speculative meme-pool. We've pretty much cleared our backlog in this issue, so if you have any stories, articles, or items for review that you've been meaning to send in, now is a perfect moment to catch us without too much to do.

It's going to be an interesting world. Why not write it?

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'Happy Days'

(c) 2006 by Jerome Kemp

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Only last night I was standing in front of the mirror admiring myself: a snub, yet bulbous nose; eyes in a permanent squint; a dribbly, brown-toothed grin; thirty-six years old with nothing on top but a few lank, mud-coloured strands. And I hadn't come by any of these attributes through abuse, self or other: I was just born that way. Believe it or not, a few years ago my appearance depressed me a bit. But not any more: life's too short (as they used to say).

So, being in a pretty good mood, I splashed on some Joop, relishing the sting it gave my acne, and off I went to the pub. I wasn't planning on meeting anyone in the pub. I thought I'd just try my luck. Although a few years ago I'd been a write-off as far as success with the opposite sex was concerned, things had definitely changed: oh yes, things had changed alright.

The Hindenburg wasn't really a pub as such: just a place that specialised in selling Belgian lagers. Its interior was minimalist and metallic, and gave a peculiar impression of hollowness even when you couldn't move for people. But it was handy, at the end of my road, and stayed open late. I suppose in a sense you'd have had to describe the music they played as depressing: that's to say it wasn't in any way up-tempo. It was

dirgey, a little meditative: the bass lines and drum beats playing a hypnotic, rather than a deafening role.

Looking about I took in the same old gatherings of good-looking people, and as usual they seemed pretty anxious. Or were they good-looking? Well, most of them were; or if not good, then at least nice-looking: you somehow had the impression that until recently, until it all began to change, they'd been trauma-free, happy, or at least not really depressed: that much was obvious. And, by contrast, there were one or two frankly nerdy, or even ugly-looking people, and people you'd have otherwise regarded as fucked-up, looking curiously smug.

I ordered a pint of Stella and decided that, in spite of my happiness, I'd get pretty drunk tonight anyway. It didn't take long before I spotted a woman who seemed to fit the bill. She was pretty—a petite blonde—and, not surprisingly, looked ill at ease. I watched her for a moment or two; it was the rabbit, nervous smile that did it: a smile that seemed to be aimed at me.

She was standing there with these two other women, pretty too, but apparently attached to a couple of Handsome Bastards—poor sods. So anyway, I

strolled over to the blonde. I suppose you could say I'd got that thing they call confidence. I said:

"Hello, I'm Victor," and gave her a good view of my pretty repulsive teeth.

She responded with another twitchy smile, and just about managed to tell me her name was Petra. We pulled up a couple of stools at the bar. Like I guessed, the Handsome Bastards didn't mind, not just because they were with these other two (if indeed they were): they were just a bit pathetic. You could tell that a few years ago these were the sorts of tossers who'd have been grinning their heads off, leering loudly over the women, all exuberant self-confidence. And, of course, the women would have been loving every minute of it.

I guessed that that would have included the woman I was trying it on with right now. Yes, things had changed alright. She almost seemed a bit desperate, poor thing. It had affected everyone in different ways, but there was no doubt that it was the formerly successful, beautiful, and happy (funny how these things often used to go together) who'd been hit the hardest: they had so much more to lose. And yet Petra, as I now found out, still worked as a media lawyer, still went in there, did her thing—even though it was all so pointless. But then again, as the government kept saying, you had to carry on, didn't you?

After telling me about her job Petra came over all dejected and said:

"I hate this place. I don't know why I come here anymore. I used to really love it. On Friday nights, it was great. But now..."

"Yeah," I said, understanding, and to an extent agreeing. I mean, it certainly was an awful place, but everything was awful anyway, and to me that had somehow become a source of comfort. "I know what you mean."

"But you don't seem that bothered. You don't seem... you're different. My other friends," she gestured over to the group she'd come in with, "they're so down about it all, you know. Well, so am I, we all are. But then there are people, well, people like you I guess, who seem to see it differently, who almost seem okay about it. It's silly, but even so, it's still nice to be around someone like that. I mean, we might as well, mightn't we?"

"What?"

"We might as well be around happy people, enjoying ourselves, you know."

"Yes, absolutely. That's all we can do."

But I knew that she just couldn't. I knew that this pandemic trauma was too much for her. Too much for me too, no doubt, but then for me it was just the latest in a long line.

"Tell you the truth," I said, now genuinely warming to her—I couldn't help it, I was still a human being; "not that long ago I wasn't a bundle of laughs myself."

"What? Before Scarmon, you mean?"

"Yes."

She looked baffled. But I didn't want to get into

that now; I didn't want to put her off. In spite of everything, women were still women: you still had to watch what you said. So we talked a bit more about what we did, as if it mattered. We seemed to keep up this pretence, and I could see that she was almost managing to convince herself that what she did and who she was, her incarnation on this planet, was all to some purpose. I think I may have detracted from this, brought her back down to earth, when I told her what I did: that I composed dirges (a recent 'musical' phenomenon), and was beginning to have some slight success, in spite of the economy being an absurdity.

I was getting the Stella down at a pretty steady rate, but I noticed that Petra was now starting to really knock it back. Yes, it was that talk of dirge music, must have brought it all home to her—she couldn't get away from it, none of us could. On the other hand, maybe she was only thinking an hour or two ahead, and dealing with that other difficult reality of what I looked like.

Anyway, it certainly seemed that the drink was getting to her because having only a moment ago feigned bafflement, she now wanted to investigate my happiness a bit further.

"I've met a few people like you recently—over the past few months," she said; "it's the Scarmon thing, isn't it? It's as if you guys—and girls too, some of them, but it's the guys you notice more—it's as if you've come out of the woodwork or something."

"We were always there," I said. I thought about it for a second, taking a good swig, and then went ahead: "the reason you don't notice the girls so much, I mean the girl equivalent to blokes like me, is to do with sex. A generalisation I know, but for men like me, when it all turned around we sort of became more attractive." I paused here, but Petra seemed alright with it, she let it pass. "It seems that men can, in certain extreme circumstances, be attractive to women, even if they look like me. But it's less likely to happen the other way round—for girls I mean, because men judge so much on looks, I suppose; though, then again, men have never been very fussy. But the real thing is women seem to think happiness is a good thing. An attractive quality. And I suppose these days happiness is a bit of a prized possession."

"I'm not sure if it's quite like that," Petra said. "Women have always found personality important—"

"Oh *please*. So a few years ago you'd be standing here talking to a bloke like me?"

"Maybe, if you were approachable."

"That's bollocks, and you know it. Christ, why still keep up the pretence? Fact is, looks are really just as important to women, always were, but for some reason most of the men—the once normal type—are just *so* depressed, it's too much for you. Nowadays you just can't be that fussy."

By the look on Petra's face I could tell that inside that cute little mouth her teeth were clamped tight in annoyance. I waited, but all she could say was:

"You're pushing your luck, you know."

So I back-pedalled a bit and said: "I know, sorry. I suppose there's still this residue of bitterness from how I was in the old days. I often talk bollocks." Then I raised my glass and gave it a regretful look as if to shift some of the responsibility.

"Anyway," I said, trying to smooth things over: "you're not talking to me now because of what I look like, are you?"

She shrugged her shoulders, sighed and said: "I don't know."

"Well, neither do I really. All I do know is that a few years ago things started to improve—well, for the likes of me anyway."

"A few years ago?" She said, taking a sip of wine and looking at me with a sort of drunken, deliberate intent.

"Yes," I said: "when the population problem began to get out of control. It was then that the cheerfulness started to creep in."

Petra raised her eyebrows at that, but I could see she was getting the gist.

The population problem had been brewing for some time. There were just too many fucking people about. The government had been at a loss, but a few years ago one of the things they did, which *had* to cheer you up, was actively re-introduce smoking (something of a U-turn, to say the least): it became practically illegal for over seventy-fives to be seen without one on the go. A drop in the ocean, of course, but something had to be done to appease the public. And it was at about this time too that problems concerning the environment really kicked off. Documents were leaked about the likelihood of a twenty year duration for London, at the outside; thirty five per cent of the British Isles would be under water within forty years. A few people just dismissed it all as bollocks, but quite a few more became anxious about the future—particularly those who until then thought they had futures. Depression and the suicide rate began to soar (alas, too little too late as far as the population crisis was concerned). Self-help book sales rose, initially, and then plummeted.

But something quite unexpected also began to take place: curious outbreaks of happiness. These almost entirely occurred among those whom hitherto would have been regarded as clinically depressed. Psychologists weren't that surprised. The fact that now everything was *officially* awful, *really* awful, pointless, somehow seemed to make these miserable bastards, like me, happy.

And then came the icing on the cake: seven months ago an unfortunate astronomer called Frederick Scarmon discovered that the Earth was fifteen months away from an inevitable impact by a meteor. A few of the old stalwarts still rubbished it all, called it 'Scarmongering', but as time went on the sense of doom's inexorable approach became more and more established. You just knew that that was just the way it was.

"Put in a nutshell," I said to Petra, "all this depress-

ing stuff actually seems to have cheered people like me up. I mean, if it wasn't for all this I would have probably killed myself by now. It's almost as if it's given us a chance, though there aren't many of us about, of course. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

Petra looked at me, glassy-eyed. I thought I'd blown it. She knew what the situation was, what I was, what she was and why we were the way we were. I suppose having it spelled out can sometimes be a bit much. But then she smiled, shaking her head, and said:

"That's not all, either."

"No?"

"Look at them." She raised her glass over in the direction of the blokes who'd accompanied her earlier, and then at some others. They looked a bit out of sorts, sure, but I didn't see what her point was.

"Most of them are impotent," she said.

"Oh," and I just nodded knowingly. It was a thought I'd entertained myself: another reason, perhaps *the* reason, why she was talking to me at all. And it made sense: I mean, if they were really as depressed as they looked.

"They say they're up for it," she said, "with all their *desperate* 'bravado'; they say 'it's now or never!'—well they would, wouldn't they—but they've lost it. Just lost it."

"Oh well," I sighed, sarcastically, "what can you do?" And I thought about my own difficulties in this department, but obviously kept that to myself.

"So..." She stood up from her stool and swayed a bit. She grabbed the bar to steady herself. "Now what?"

"Good question." And although I chuckled I didn't feel too good for some reason. I didn't feel that good all round. I felt I was pissed to about the right degree, and given how things had gone over the past couple of years, particularly the last few months, I should have been feeling pretty sure of myself: I'd been enjoying my new-found success. I'd capitalised, it'd been my turn at last. But what she'd just said seemed to hit a nerve. Maybe I wasn't so different from those other bastards now myself. I'd had one or two moments of doubt like this over the past month.... No, come on: I just had to pull myself together: it's analysing things too much, that's what causes the grief—like it always had.

"Well," I said, "my flat's not far away, just round the corner: Blackstock Road."

"Is it?"

"Yeah."

And then I watched her sling back the rest of her white wine, drag her coat on, and give me a pretty unnecessary wink. I helped her out, telling myself to stop being pathetic: I was doing both of us a favour, wasn't I? When we got back, I poured a couple of huge glasses of red and we sat down on the sofa. I knocked mine back and it made me wince. Then I poured myself another and took a couple of hefty slugs. After that I got up, put on some Rod Stewart, sat back down on the sofa and drank the rest down in one. I was

about to ask Petra whether she was going to drink hers but then it all suddenly clicked into place: I was ready. I leant over and kissed her on the mouth. She didn't mind. She wasn't very responsive but on that score I didn't mind either. I kissed her deliciously svelte and milky neck, and then went on down to those rather incidental tits.

"Mm," she said, compliantly, as I slid my fingers under her knickers. But I didn't really believe her. I carried on all the same, and then it suddenly came over me again: I just wasn't quite in on the idea. In spite of her condition she seemed to pick up on this, and at last made some sort of an attempt herself. You could tell she wasn't used to having to make an effort, but it did the trick.

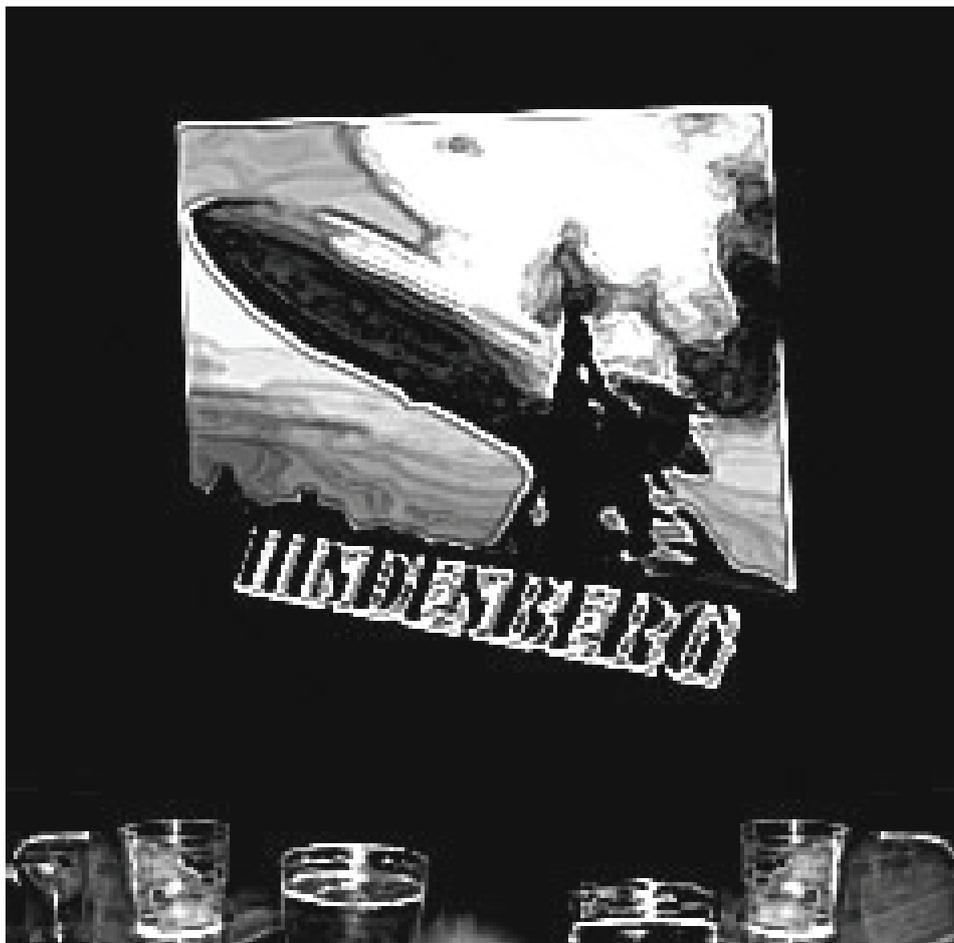
So now I'm sitting in the bath, 9.30 am, thinking: enough. Petra didn't hang about: she left before I got up. I haven't had a hangover as bad as this for quite a while, not since the old days, before things started

looking up. It's one of those hangovers that really puts it to you. Though really I always knew this day was around the corner.

It's no use, of course, it was never any use; it was all denial, pretence, a sick joke. I'm all used up. I've had it. The trouble is I've had too much now—success I mean. It gets to you after a while; it was getting to me last night, creeping in, just like the cheerfulness had. It's the success that makes you believe that maybe things matter. Maybe there is a point, or there should be. And of course, as Petra knows, as we all know, there isn't. Anyway, at least I had my moment.

Aahh.... that looks better: the blood dispersing calmly in the water. Justice slowly shrouding the crime: me.

The good old Swiss Army knife: why *did* I keep the blade so religiously sharp? The scissors always used to come in handy for trimming my toenails and nasal hair.



‘Making History’

(c) 2006 by Lynda Williams

Artwork (cc) 2006 by Djibril



Reva entered the theater with an unresolved proof pulsing in her mind that felt impossible to solve because it wasn't mathematical. It was moral. Or maybe a question of political philosophy.

Her government was still young and fragile, her people the traumatized survivors of a genocidal war from which they had been rescued, at the last minute, by their enemy's new leader, a charismatic figure called Ameron. She knew they badly wanted to believe that his gesture had meant more than it really did. She knew it served her interests that she let them.

Reva was on the brink of making history. Her colony of survivors was about to become the first example of a new form of government based on her arbiters. Total transparency was why arbiters were trustworthy. They could not lie. And they could not keep secrets.

Yet here she was about to help empower Lenny—her own, dear Lenny! The only colleague she had dared to take into her confidence about the secret weighing heavy on her conscience today—

Here was Lenny insisting she give her blessing to a play about her and Ameron that she suspected of being sentimental propoganda. And left the secret out, entirely.

To make matters worse, Lenny was the playwright himself, and prouder of it than she had ever seen him act over greater contributions to posterity: like arbiters. She couldn't have invented them without him.

Reva hoped no one in Lenny's guinea-pig audience

would like the damn thing. Then she could quash his literary aspirations, with sympathetic condolences, and side step the whole dilemma.

Lenny lurched out of his seat as she came in and waved to her, beaming across his entire face, his pear-shaped body looking only half as rumpled as usual, decked out in his best suit.

"Reva!" he greeted her, handing her a printed program. "Here! I've saved you a seat."

It was a small colony. Reva knew all the people in the theatre personally, to some extent, and had gone out of her way not to be an icon to them—to date. They looked and smiled, respectfully, but that was it. They weren't here for her. They were here to help Lenny make a legend of her. Her bad feeling gave a squirm.

She looked at the program.

"Romance of the Founder by Lenny Pushkin," she read, and fixed a skeptical stare on her friend and mathematical colleague. "This had better not be too entertaining, Lenny," she said.

"Actually, that is the general idea," he admitted, still beaming with pleasure and excitement. "I mean to entertain people. It has been a tough decade, Reva. And I know," he said, raising a plump palm. "It is going to get better. But arbiters, you know, however miraculous—well, they aren't very cuddly. We need a few warm feelings. A bit of the stuff of legend, even. People will love it. You'll see."

I hope not, Reva thought, but she sat down and shut up. She owed Lenny too much to quibble over something this obviously dear to him. Besides, he knew too much about her. He knew about *Departures*.

No one else but she and Lenny ever saw *Departures*. But he never objected when she claimed the discoveries they made, with its help, for herself. He had insisted on it. The Arbiter Administration was her dream, he always said. He just wanted to help.

And to write very bad plays, apparently.

Of course, it was not much of a theatre. The colony of half a million survivors had scant resources to spare for such luxuries, and the rest of what was left of the Old Regime was too busy reeling in the aftermath of defeat to pay much attention to them. But Lenny may have been right about the need for some myth making because nearly everyone invited was there, sitting in the hard seats with a hushed, expectant air, as if they were about to get the whole truth, at last: the real story.

Lenny leaned closer to Reva as the lights went down.

"It's for the cause, Reva," he implored her, hopefully.

On the stage, a spotlight fell on a woman lying face down on the floor of a prison cell.

"There were no bars," Reva whispered.

"Poetic license," said Lenny.

"We don't issue them," she hissed back at him.

"Shh," he said.

On stage, a man came in and stood over the prisoner. Only his legs were visible in the circle of light surrounding her. The tip of his sheathed sword cast a dramatic shadow.

Swords, Reva thought, and fidgeted. She hated the stupid things. Ameron and his Sevolites had been addicted to them, like overgrown kids playing war games. They made a blood sport of dueling. Ameron said it satisfied a need.

The man on the stage knelt beside the fallen woman. The spotlight expanded to include him. He raised the woman up to her feet. "I am Ameron," he told her. "What are you called?"

"He wasn't that good looking," Reva quipped to Lenny. "He had a longer nose."

Someone a few rows down hissed, "Shh!" either unaware who she was, or simply more interested in her fictional, younger self. Reva rolled her eyes and steeled herself to endure.

On stage, the actress had already introduced herself as Reva. "You speak English!" she said to Ameron. "Why did you learn English? It's a dead language!"

He folded his arms, looking serene. "I could ask you the same thing."

Now that's just all wrong! Reva thought, irritably. *Ameron was never still. He paced. And he talked a lot more than I did.* She remembered demands for an explanation, anger, and even threats. He acted as if she was responsible for every atrocity committed by the

space fleet of the Old Regime.

On the stage, her fictional surrogate told him: "I'm a mathematician. I learned English because there's a lot of Late Earth material I'm interested in."

He smiled. "You are educated!"

In real life, thought Reva, *it wasn't that easy making friends.*

Ameron came back to her, the second time, fresh from a slaughter. This time it had been his people wiping out hers. He had already lost his temper. She figured she might buy a fast death by provoking him and so she argued. He pulled that stupid sword of his and waved it around to make a point. She expected him to kill her with it.

The actress on the stage laughed. "You really do wear those things!"

"This?" The actor detached his sword and held it out to her.

Like a Sevolite would do that! Reva fumed in her seat. *Of course, Ameron was not much of a swordsman by Sevolite standards*, she remembered. *That's why he always had to have a champion.*

"We fight with swords, among ourselves," the phony Ameron said. "We do it honorably. We do not desire to fight with you in this destructive way of yours, with ships in space, assaults on green worlds, and with disease! It is a madness we must contain."

The actress playing Reva looked straight up at her enemy.

As if I was never scared! thought the real Reva.

"It seems to me that it was you who invaded us," the actress boldly accused him.

"Yes," Ameron agreed, unhappily. "We did."

That part is right, Reva remembered with a pang she had not expected to feel. *He was no prouder of the invasion than I was of our germ warfare and anti-pilot tactics in space.*

Strangely, it was more upsetting when the actors got it right than it was to sit through silly, cheesy bits. Reva hadn't expected that. She began to get out of her seat.

Lenny clamped a warm, damp hand on her wrist. "Stay," he pleaded.

"I am not in charge here," said the actor playing Ameron. "I am only my mother's heir. There is only one way I can protect you, and that is to make you my mistress."

Not how it happened, Reva thought, relieved, and sat down again. She had suggested the mistress bit, but only after they wound up in bed, and getting there had not been rational or gentle. Desperate, was a better word. She was afraid of him. He was afraid of what he was learning about her. As love potions went, it was a strange cocktail, but she didn't regret it. Once they shared a bed, they found it easier to trust each other. And, of course, there was *Departures*.

Ameron's father had brought the book with him when he visited.

Avatlan, his name was. Avatlan Lor'Vrel.

The day she met Avatlan was the day her world

changed.

There she was, a prisoner of war, and the half-willing concubine of a moody prince who shared a collective form of insanity with his people, about settling their quarrels with pointy sticks, and along comes Avatlan to discuss philosophy.

Somehow he made it riveting.

He spoke of all humanity's mistakes with the authority of someone who had witnessed all of them, although she knew he'd only studied most of it. He drew comparisons between ancient errors, on mankind's long-lost home world of Earth, and the excesses of his own kind, the Sevolites, during their 1,000 year exile. He told her how his own clan, who ought to be wiser because they were smarter, had sullied the brilliance of work like *Departures* by using it to further their own, selfish ends, with results indistinguishable in terms of human happiness and liberty, from those of any Earthly megalomaniac.

"So long as social systems permit people to amass great power, power will reside with those most motivated to acquire it," he told her, making it all as simple and self-evident as an equation. "Therefore," he concluded, "we will always have empires. You think our pseudo-feudal one is backward, and it is, most certainly—but no more so than your military dictatorship. And democracies on Earth fell prey to those who best knew how to manipulate the media. There will never be good government so long as leaders can hide their true motives and repeat the endless cycle of hope, abuse and disappointment. As a species," he said, "we are sadly predictable."

They talked all night, while Ameron slept in the same room. Reva argued for hope, trying to penetrate Avatlan's cynicism. He talked about the advanced science of his own ancestors, the Lorels, who had authored the book called *Departures*. He explained how it was the breakthrough, in math, that could have led to technologies that changed the universe, but was understood by very few, some of whom wound up exploiting it for the same, old, idiotic motive of amassing wealth and power. Most people suffered and too many died as a consequence, leaving his people distrustful of science, in the extreme, even though their own power resided in being products of it themselves.

"The trouble is, in the end," Avatlan said, "our creators made us too human. As if that was a good thing. The truth is, man is just a stupid animal emotionally, no matter how clever he might be in other ways. In fact the more clever you make him, the more dangerous he is." He held up the book to show it to her. "This could be the root of the most important advance in our understanding of the universe for a thousand years, with applications to medicine, space travel and even the creation of a thinking, artificial intelligence that might give us a chance to go one better on ourselves, at least for integrity. But in the end, all that the best of us could hope to do was destroy as many copies as we could, to keep it from being used in sickening ways. You talk of hope? A way to break the

cycle? To prevent the power hungry seizing power just because it gives them a thrill? Science is useless as a means to improve on history until it can do that! So, my optimistic friend—" He smiled. "Prove it possible! Prove that science can create even one tool that cannot be abused by the power hungry. Then I'll believe, again, in something worth living—or dying—for."

He meant it as a joke, at first. But it was no joke to Reva. It was the spark that got her thinking about arbiters. What if people had to make up rules that were impartially administered by an artificial intelligence? What if leaders had to lead through influence, and could not hide behind propaganda? What if the reins of power, based on rules people could tinker with, were firmly held by an arbiter with a simple, symbiotic urge to mediate human transactions and no human nature to pollute its work with dreams of self-aggrandizement? What if she made a new form of life with a fundamental commitment to transparency in government that had no human desires, just its own, that were uniquely suited to the job it did; a form of life with great intelligence but simple needs; the perfect, tireless, and incorruptible administrator.

Avatlan grilled her for hours, mocking her ideas and daring her to prove her intellect by challenging her to grasp bits of the book he had with him.

When she finally fell asleep, exhausted, she thought she had failed to have an impact on him.

But she woke to find the book, *Departures*, by her pillow.

She never knew, exactly, what Avatlan did, but she got the big picture. Avatlan assassinated Ameron's mother, the ruling Ava, catapulting his son, Ameron, to power. And Ameron's first act, as Ava, was to execute his father. That upset Ameron enough that he almost forgot about Reva. Or perhaps he was simply too busy to be bothered with her for a while. But in the end, he gave her the chance to pack up what was left of her people and evacuate them.

She took *Departures* with her, and used it to create her arbiters.

None of that, of course, appeared in Lenny's "romance". Avatlan was an off-stage assassin whom Reva never met. Ameron was the hero. And *Departures* was scrupulously not mentioned.

Applause filled the theatre as Ameron sent Reva off with one last, lingering kiss, underscoring how her affair with him had been the salvation of a half a million refugees. Naturally, he asked her to stay with him, and she was torn, but came down on the side of her duty to her fellow citizens. The mock Ameron was heart-broken.

Lenny had been right. The audience loved the whole, silly thing.

Reva slipped out before the applause died down.

Lenny caught up to her in the lobby. "Reva—" he said, blinking at her anxiously.

She stabbed a finger towards the theatre doors. "That's propaganda."

"People need more than work," Lenny insisted. "It

helps them to know they have a friend in a high place on the other side. Someone who would not let the Sevolites attack us, if they ever return. It helps them believe in working towards the Arbiter Administration, instead of another military regime. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"But it is not true, Lenny!" Reva despaired. "Not the way you tell it."

"You want to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, do you?" he asked her.

"The Arbiter Administration is predicated on—"

"Truth and transparency?" He nodded vigorously. "Sure. From here on. Among ourselves. Once we get started. But what about *Departures*, Reva? Why did you pretend we had invented everything we learned from it, ourselves? You did it to make sure nobody else could use it to subvert your arbiters! You have already told one lie about the past, Reva. Kept one secret. People like my version of the story. Let us have it."

She felt a pain in her chest.

Lenny wet his lips, looking puzzled. "And you did love him, didn't you?" he asked, expectantly.

"Ameron?" Reva smiled. "He was a great man, in his own way. He deserves to be remembered that way."

"Yes, but—" People were starting to come out of the theatre behind them.

Reva gestured to Lenny, impatiently. "Go greet your admirers," she told him.

He didn't need to be asked twice. He grinned at her gratefully, and trotted off looking eager and relieved.

"For the cause," she muttered under her breath, contemplating the humiliation of going down in history as a romantic heroine. And the injustice of the silence surrounding Avatlan's role in everything. But that wasn't the worst of it.

Her unfinished proof still troubled her.

Starting tomorrow, her colony would become the first Arbiter Administration, a society founded on principles of openness and transparency in government. It would be small, at first, but she had high hopes of the idea spreading to the Old Regime. Once people got a taste of arbiters, the services they could provide so effortlessly would be too hard to pass up, especially for free, because she meant to give them away. The catch was, the benefits couldn't be uncoupled from the rest of it. They would be the perfect slaves, except for their refusal to be loyal to anything but the ideals of the Arbiter Administration. Everyone could have more of everything, but only if they were prepared to accept certain limitations on their freedom. In particular, no one could keep secrets about how they made use of power bestowed on them, in trust, by those they governed. Ambition would still be valued and people could achieve great things, but not by means that could not stand up to the scrutiny of those they claimed to benefit. No backroom deals. No corruption. Within a century, she expected arbiters to have a huge impact on her side of the universe.

Could one lie spoil all that?

If she debunked Lenny's play and told the world, instead, about *Departures*, people would want access to it. If she destroyed it, first, they might reject her leadership, and go looking for another copy in Ameron's empire. Nothing good could come of that. They might even bring the Sevolites down on them, again. As it was, Ameron had agreed to see to it that his people forgot the way to her side of the universe, not out of kindness but because he felt her people's alien values destabilized the status quo among his own.

With a cold shock, she realized that if she didn't tell anyone about the book she would have to destroy it. But that, too, felt wrong, for all sorts of reasons. What right had she to keep *Departures* from humanity? Was she really as cynical as Avatlan, viewing humanity as idiot savants, in need of moral training wheels? What if her people needed it someday to fight Ameron's people? Even if that meant using biological warfare or something even more repugnant.

Reva went, alone, into the council chamber where the first elected body of sixteen would sit down, tomorrow, in the first session of government overseen by her very first arbiter. It was an ordinary looking room, with two curved desks equipped with workstations. The arbiter was located in a cabinet off to one side, so as not to elevate it symbolically above the sixteen people for whom it would act as chairman, secretary and referee.

The nearest station activated as she approached, showing a light to indicate the arbiter's sensors were aware of her and it was prepared to respond to input.

"I—" Reva began, feeling flustered.

She had striven for open government for a decade. A better way. And here she was, on the brink of attaining her dream, and she was poised to make a critical decision autocratically. She ought to put the question to the council. Have it all debated, openly. But she was almost certain they would vote to keep *Departures*. And it wasn't as if she could even make her argument for secrecy, in a totally transparent context. The population would lose their respect for her, when they found out Lenny's version of the story was a false one. And if they kept *Departures*, for themselves, it would give the very people she wanted to thwart an impossible head start on subverting her arbiters before they managed to instill a culture of trust and honesty among her people.

"Waiting," said the speaker in the workstation. The arbiter had a bland voice, with almost no inflection. That, too, had been purposeful. Arbiters could have no personality. Only be a medium that people worked through. Like a system of law that could implement itself. A living one.

"I wish to put my resignation from the council on tomorrow's agenda," she got out, all at once.

It was duly recorded. She supplied some made up reasons to do with personal needs.

Then she went back to her quarters, found the place where she had hidden *Departures*, unwrapped

the book, and set it down before her on the table where she worked. As an object, it was unspectacular. It was written by hand, in a plain notebook, with illustrations painstakingly copied by an amateur hand. Only a handful of copies had ever been made, according to Avatlan. He suspected at least one or two might still exist among his people, somewhere. But he wasn't entirely sure. The scramble to destroy them before they fell into the wrong hands had been desperate. This copy, her copy, could be the only one in existence. And she had to destroy it. Utterly. She had always known it might be necessary. That was why she had never allowed Lenny to make any sort of copy. She and Lenny would have to make do with what they had already learned from it, in shaping the destiny of arbiters.

The colony was burning scrub cleared from a nearby, forested area, that had fallen prey to disease introduced accidentally by their arrival. It seemed a fitting pyre. Reva went out, at twilight, and waited at the edge of the circle surrounding a bonfire, like a shadow, until everyone else had gone in to bed except one old man, left to tend the blaze until it died out. She volunteered to take over for him. He left her to it gratefully.

After she put *Departures* on the fire, she sat watch-

ing it burn, to make sure. When it was all gone and the bonfire had died away to nothing, she took a long stick and stirred the ashes to make sure. She found no remnant. No secret, indestructible wonder of technology among them. The ashes were just ashes. Something unique and brilliant, the source of her own inspiration for arbiters, had been reduced to black and gray powder indistinguishable from the remains of blighted bushes.

Reva went back inside feeling hollow, but certain she had done what she had to do.

She might not deserve to be on the first council. She could not risk carrying the contagion of her lie into the brave new world she wanted to see flourish under the watchful eye of arbiters. But she would damn well see to it her brain child had a chance to succeed before the social vandals of the world got their greedy mitts on a way to negate their unfair technical advantage. After all, as any mother knew, there was sticking to your ideals, and then there was being plain stupid.

It wasn't as if the greedy-needy liars of the world had earned the right to fair play in the history of humankind, to date.

About that much, at least, she felt certain Avatlan would agree with her.



Interview with Cory Doctorow



Cory Doctorow is an extremely prolific writer in several media: he is a science fiction writer of reknown (his bibliography can be found at his website, <http://www.craphound.com/>, from where you can also download some of his work under [Creative Commons](#) licenses); he is a campaigner for free information, and has written dozens of articles on this and other topics; he is an editor of the [BoingBoing.net](#): a directory of wonderful things; and has also been editor, contributor, and writer-in-residence for many other institutions. And recently he joined the board of the [Clarion SF Writers' Workshop](#). We spoke to him recently about some of the issues that interest us all.

Future Fire: Hi Cory Doctorow. Thanks for speaking to us. Can I start with a couple of background questions, and we'll see where it takes us? You mentioned that you no longer work for the [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#)—you described this in *Boing Boing* as having "given up the day job". What do you do with your time now?

Cory Doctorow: Well, I'm a full time writer, basically. I'm working on various things. I have a couple of short stories that I'm writing, and some articles. I'm also working on a non-fiction book called *Set Top Cop: Hollywood's Secret War on America's Living Rooms*, talking about things like Digital Rights Management and the issues around that and alternatives to it.

FF: Would it fair to say that your writing tends to be idea-based rather than action-led?

CD: I guess that's probably correct, yes. I tend to write by starting with a cool idea, and then trying to find some action to string it along with.

FF: I've noticed more than one or two characters in your work are collectors (of junk, of information, of books, etc.). Does this come from you? Are you a craphound?

CD: Yes, definitely that's me. Although as I live in the city I don't have room for all of the crap I own or

want. I actually have storage lockers in both San Francisco and London which are completely full of junk that I have nowhere else to put. I have now filled the largest hard drive that I can reasonably get in a laptop. I'm kind of at breaking point now, and I'm not sure what I'm going to do with it all. It's come to the point where I own all these things but as I can't get access to them I might as well not own them. I mean it's cool to have storages in San Francisco and London full of stuff, but on the other hand I might just end up giving a whole lot of it away to a charity shop and keep most things in electronic format.

FF: Another element of some of your characters: do you like to lecture people on random topics?

CD: Yes, I think that's true. It's a science fiction thing as well, the genre lends itself to long, thoughtful soliloquies. People like Heinlein, Neal Stephenson, Bruce Sterling have all made use of this technique very effectively.

FF: Can you explain briefly why you have chosen to give all of your published novels—and many stories, I believe—away for free in electronic form under Creative Commons licenses?

CD: Well, what can I say? It works, basically. I mean, yes, it is true that if you give away an eBook for free, that you are going to lose a certain number of potential sales to people who now don't need to buy the book. But for me, I'm sure I create a far higher number of new sales by giving eBooks away for free, because by doing so I am bringing the work to the attention of new people who would not otherwise have read it.

FF: Indeed. More to the point, perhaps, how did you convince your publishers to let you do this?

CD: That was deceptively easy, in my case. My editor is Patrick Nielsen Hayden, senior editor at Tor, who I first met through the GENie Online service. Tor understand what giving away free eBooks means for their business, as well as the fact that it won't lose them sales. Later on that might change, of course, in which case we'll have to rethink the strategy. If, say, a generation comes along who are comfortable reading a lot more on screen than we are, then it will cease to be the case that you can't make money from e-publications. When eBooks replace paper as the default publishing medium, it will no longer be safe to give things away for free online. What we should be doing now, then, is taking advantage of the current situation where we can experiment with giving things away for free to learn about how e-publication is going to work, what models we're going to have to work with.

FF: You have been active in the free information movement for some time now; what first encouraged you to become involved in this issue?

CD: The formal answer to this question is that I started a peer-to-peer software company in California some years ago, and I got in touch with the EFF because our investors were worried about the risk of copyright lawsuits and the like.

But a more interesting aspect to this question, I think, is why did I start up a peer-to-peer software company in the first place? As I grew up, I couldn't help but be aware of how easy it is to copy bits. As I saw it, culture was become more fluid. The culture I grew up in, as the culture you grew up in, that we all grew up in, the assumption was that artistic production was pretty permanent and static. We've moved, right, from an oral culture, where art and creativity is pretty fluid, to a more rigid culture of printed texts and recorded sound, television and so forth. Well now, the internet is making things fluid again, if in a different way.

I used to make photocopied collages as a kid. I used to see band posters up when I was walking the streets, that were made by photocopying and cutting up images. So I grew up in a remix culture, and the law hasn't caught up with that culture yet. We grew up with the concept of bits, of information-carrying units that can be easily copied. Anyone who works on the assumption that they can build a business, a body of practice, of art, or a culture that can not be copied, is crazy.

For example, I've been talking to the BBC recently. The BBC are investing money into standardization of copy restriction technologies, on the argument that studios will not license works to them unless they have these technologies in place. So I have asked them why they are wasting my money on this scheme that is predicated on the idea that bits will be hard to copy in the future. Let me tell you, bits will always be easier to copy than they are now. Right now we are living in the time in which—barring nuclear explosion or something—bits are harder to copy than they ever will be again.

Those rightsholders and interests who won't license their works to the BBC because they haven't yet figured out how to live in the world are just roadkill. It's like spending millions on a huge new medical research project in the 21st century based on the idea of studying how to treat evil humours. It's just archaic. So they're wasting British license-payers' money on this stuff.

The fact that information will be easy to copy in the future is a given, and this ease of copying will increase, not decrease. Any science fiction writer who doesn't realise that it will be easier to copy in the future, has no business calling what they write science fiction, it's just self-evident.

FF: Are you not afraid though that big interests and rightsholders will prevent people from copying their data, maybe not technologically, but legally?

CD: Oh yes, very much. It's going to be especially difficult when these sorts of legal restrictions happen

at international treaty level, because that is very hard to undo or to influence. When it was an issue of British copyright law, all you had to do was convince parliament that something was a bad idea; now that it's a question of EU directives, you have to lobby all the member EU countries, and that's far more cumbersome.

The same is true of the US, when these laws were issued by Congress, it was straightforward to deal with. Of course congress was and is influenced by all sorts of interest groups, but that's another story. Now that the US is a signatory to the Berne Convention, in order to make and changes you have to convince all of the signatories worldwide of the need, and therefore the Berne Convention is effectively frozen in time; it will never change.

The WIPO—World Intellectual Property Organisation—want to decree that anyone who puts audiovisual material on the internet, even if it is out of copyright, gets to control the reproduction of that material. This is crazy: this means that the person who happens to electromagnetically modulate a piece of video or audio culture has more rights over the material than the person who created it. This is a disaster waiting to happen.

FF: So is there anything we can do about it?

CD: Yes, get involved with the campaign on these issues. The EFF is part of a growing coalition of civil liberties groups at WIPO working on these things. We are still small, at the moment, but we have two incredible advantages on our side. One: we are not mired in the past in the way many of those advocating restrictive copyright laws are. Two: we're right. The fact that these people can be demonstrated to be wrong will work in our favour.

For example, they have argued that there will be no investment in technologies and creativity if there are not compulsory exclusive rights on anything that is webcast. But as a counterpoint to this, just look at the example of podcasting. There are no exclusive rights in play here, and thousands if not millions of people of rightsholders create podcasts of their materials anyway. In fact it would be it would be impossible for them to do so with the proposed laws. Exclusive rights will demonstrably hamper investment.

FF: How are the internet, and in particular the various electronic publication media going to change the publishing industry and the paradigms we all take for granted today?

CD: I don't necessarily have thoughts on this specific to the publishing industry, but what is interesting to me is how the internet has changed what we can use as a predictor of artistic success. In the era before radio and sound recording, the main predictor of success for a performing artist was charisma, the artist who had strong stage presence and could engage a live audience. In the era of the phonogram and recorded music etc., the predictor has changed from charisma to

virtuosity, to the quality of the raw product only. We have all experienced artists whose recorded work is not great, but who are excellent live performers, or vice versa.

In the age of the internet, the predictor will change again: in order for an artist to succeed, they will have to prove able to engage conversationally with thousands of fans at once. For example, Michael Straczynski, the creator of *Babylon 5*, used to spend hours every day on Usenet, promoting the show, encouraging the network of fans, and basically making sure people felt plugged in, that the makers of the show cared about them.

The factors that affect this include the fact that virtuosity is what economists call a non-substitutable good. So in contrast to, say, telephone service—whatever the telcos might like to think—or potatoes, which we don't really care where they come from; but for example clothing, people often do care where they come from, we talk about brands and the like, these are elements that are non-substitutable. If you know you have liked something by a certain author before, you will look for something by the same author. Therefore products like this have thicker margins, since being successful already is a predictor of further success.

The internet has lowered the search costs in finding new works; for example it has lowered the cost of shopping, but also the cost of finding virtuosity. So if a novel has evoked a certain emotional response in you, it should be possible to find other novels that will evoke a similar response. This is the bookseller's art, of course, to sell you a book that you had not heard of and didn't think you wanted.

So the cost of finding art is going down and down: online search engines, blogs, booksellers, all these are there to help you find new items. But there is also the non-substitutable element of the personal relationship: with people like Straczynski, and authors like Neil Gaiman, their fans talk about them as if they are their friends, because they engage with their fans. They want them to do well because they think of them as friends.

FF: So we've kind of come full circle again, haven't we, because this is almost another form of charisma?

CD: People often say that to me when I make that point, but I don't think it's true. You can think of plenty of people who have charisma, but who aren't particularly good conversationalists. Think of David Lee Roth—great stage presence, but not speaker—or Robin Williams, for example. As performers, great, but not people who form a relationship with you. George Lucas, say, has a lot of charisma, but doesn't give great conversation; contrast him with Joss Whedon. There's a story I heard recently that when he was up for an award, probably for one of his TV shows, or maybe even for *Serenity*, and there were two screenings of his show the same night. One was a big indus-

try screening, and the other was a fan screening. So Whedon had to go to the industry screening, but once it had started, he left to go to the fan screening. And he didn't make a big deal of it, and announce himself or anything, he just stood at the back watching the show, just to be one of the fans. And someone in the crowd looked back and noticed him, and realised, "That's Joss Whedon", and word went around, but they didn't bug him. They considered him to be one of them, part of the group experience, like he was a peer. Most people with charisma will never be your peer.

FF: OK, if not charisma in the same sense, at least it shows that you again need to do more than just record, right

CD: Sure, I guess. But in any case it's always been true that to make a living as an artist, to go on making a living, you have to go on working. Or you have to invest wisely while you are earning, and live off that. Old work won't always generate you revenue. Copyright may go on for ever, but royalties don't. 98% of items still under copyright are not available. So yeah, you have to somehow keep your work warm, or you need to invest in real estate, as a lot of the more successful people do.

FF: What do you think will be the most unexpected cultural development in the next ten years?

CD: The most interesting question I think in the next decade, or the next two decades, will be what happens to a form of media for which there is social demand, but which is not economically sustainable. We need newspapers, for example, clearly; the role of independent journalist and commentator is something absolutely essential to a civilised society. But newspapers are supported by advertising, it's the only thing that makes them viable. And advertisers are massively moving to the internet, and advertising on eBay and the like.

Newspapers fill a vital role, but advertisers won't support newspapers because they're philanthropists. If newspapers don't get advertising revenue, they'll have to charge \$5 for a copy, and no one will buy them any more. So the question is how will we fund the newspapers when classified ads flee to another medium?

One possibility is that we invent a class of citizen journalists who share the workload, uploading the facts as they see them and leaving others to fill out the picture. But the problem is that many libel laws—especially in Europe—require a news publication to confer with both sides of a story, or at least to call them up and get no comment, before publishing a report or an allegation. So the idea of one person just posting a story that they've heard, and leaving others to confirm or correct it, would probably be illegal under most libel laws.

Or think of the cost of film production. Ted Castronova has done some interesting calculations on this: if a Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG) costs \$50 million to make—to develop,

to research, to build, to market, etc.—and each person plays an MMORPG for maybe hundred of hours; and a big blockbuster Hollywood movie costs upwards of \$200 million, and provides an hour and a half of watching time. He calculated that to make a movie that entertains for as long as an MMO would cost something like \$14 billion. So if you had money to invest, he suggests you'd be wiser to invest it in an MMO than a Hollywood movie.

So there's a real danger of the Hollywood movie industry being killed by the video gaming industry. And television, famously, is blockbuster driven. A few big shows are the leading edge for everything else on the small screen. There may always be the economic demand for a show like *Lost*, which cost about \$40 million to shoot the pilot episode. But if the other shows, the ones for which there is less demand, cease to be economically sustainable and stop being made, then the apprenticeship opportunities that these shows provide, and the industry devoted to developing skills and techniques go. It's only because of all this stuff that *Lost* only cost \$40 million to make rather than \$400 million, so if those shows go, does *Lost* go too?

And in any case, will people devote a whole room in their house to a device on which they only watch three shows? Maybe people will prefer to watch these shows on their laptop, or mobile phone, or PDA.

FF: So is one answer to that scenario that shows are downloaded, and all web product is downloaded on a "pay-per-view" basis, paying by the megabyte?

CD: The problem with the pay-per-use model of web access, is the web is full of novel services, new technologies but also new kinds of service. There is a high level of experimentation, some of which will be hit-and-miss. If there is a transaction cost, people will be less likely to take the risk of experimenting, and these options will be drastically reduced. It isn't true of most of Europe, but in the USA for example local calls have always been free, unmetered, like internet access. So long as there's competition for providers, charging by the megabyte won't be sustainable—companies that try to charge will just lose customers.

FF: OK, Cory, one final question. Would you like to live for ever?

CD: I'd like to... choose the time of my death. I don't think I'd want to live literally forever, because that might become dull. But I'd like to bring my time of death under my own control. That might mean I'd want to live for thousands of years (or it might not) but I'd like the choice.

FF: Cory Doctrow, thank you very much for your time.

The Speculative Meme-pool 2

The latest offerings into the Speculative meme-pool follow. Shortly we shall consolidate these into a single database, but for now, enjoy this quarter's memes, below, and last quarter's in the 2005.04 issue.

As always, please send your ideas to nonfiction @ futurefire.net—but only if you are sure you don't mind someone else stealing it.

Home entertainment

(Pete Tennant)

Not wild, but something I think will actually happen, and an idea I've had hanging around for ages (should probably patent it and make millions).

The living environment of the future where everything is controlled by the home computer, including the entertainment console. The computer is programmed with details of the people who live in the environment - appearance, voice, speech patterns etc. From your local Blockbuster you can get special DVDs where the film is filtered through the computer and customised to personal specifications, so that it's you playing the part of Indiana Jones and not Harrison Ford, your significant other turning up as Lara Croft instead of Angelina Jolie, and so on.

That's the idea, but could never think of anything useful to do with it. Best I could come up with is a couple whose deteriorating relationship is played out in the film roles they allocate to each other - he starts as Indiana and ends up as a Woody Allen character, she begins as Lara and becomes a shreddie in "Halloween", and so on.

Two characters for a "mundane" techno-thriller

(Johann Carlisle)

1. A middle-aged family man who is deliberately mis-diagnosed with lung cancer--just when his life insurance is temporarily invalidated by a technicality. He spends the next several months constantly sick due to chemotherapy, loses his hair, continues to receive bad news from the corrupt doctor. By this means, he is manipulated into becoming a suicidal assassin in order to provide for his family after he is gone.

2. A young counsellor with a clean lifestyle, although living kind of hand-to-mouth. When he was a child, however, he spent a short spell in a young offenders institution, where on the one hand his confidence and self-esteem were shattered, but on the other he picked up various unpleasant skills such as thieving (including ATM hacking, electric lock-picking), dirty fighting, and the like. These suddenly and unexpectedly become useful later in the story.

(I don't actually have a story to use these characters in, but would like to see them work somehow.)

Wanted, one alien ET

(Djibril)

If we ever meet an extraterrestrial species, I suspect they're going to be so alien we barely recognise them as alive. This makes it difficult for a Speculative writer to create a truly alien alien. Here are some of the reasons that I haven't come up with one that satisfies me yet:

Why would extraterrestrial life be carbon-based? Our alien could just as well be made up of silicon-based or iron-based molecules, for example ; it could live in an atmosphere heavy in nitrogen, or chlorine, or methane, or even a noble gas; or near-vacuum. The various chemical properties of these elements and substances would be very different from those of our hydrocarbon-based Earth; it would have a different gravity, different diurnal rhythms, different environment altogether.

And so the replicating organisms that evolved in such conditions on such a world would probably be very different from life as we know it. They would evolve quite different function and form, different scales and perceptions of space and time—their lifespan might be measured in milliseconds, or billions of years. In order to make such an alien life realistic, I would have to show how it was the perfect adaptation to its environment, how it evolved in tandem with and competition with its main rivals in the biosphere, and how its entire ecosystem made it what it is.

And then, because natural evolution only takes us so far, we would have to show how this species developed technology—again very different from ours—that matched its abilities and suited its needs, gave it dominion over its world.

Clearly we are now talking about an intelligent species, but what does intelligence mean in a being as totally, unutterably alien as this? There is no reason to assume that even speaking in terms of being immeasurably more intelligent, or less intelligent, than ourselves is sufficient to express the difference we are talking about. There are many very different kinds of intelligence even within our own limited experience: we recognise that the high IQ of a rocket scientist is different from that of an autistic savant, or a six year-old chess prodigy, or the animal cunning of an uneducated career criminal, or the charismatic genius of a con-man or military leader. We

could be talking about an alien intelligence more different from all of these than we can imagine. And if this is the case, how would we and this alien even recognise each other as intelligent?

Would we be able to interact with such an alien in a meaningful way? And would this be a very interesting story if we were not?

Rewriting History

(Danny Hydrus)

The story revolves around a scholar, a historian well-ensconced in the ivory tower of academia. (I don't want this to sound pejorative; that would be too cheap.) He is kind of a revisionist historian, which is to say that he is carrying out a radical re-reading of the evidence, questioning the scholarly consensus and trying to reach new, less subjective conclusions. If he makes a breakthrough here, he will be lauded for generations.

But as he works his thinking becomes more and more postmodern: he starts to suspect that finding a convincing theory is more important for his reputation than getting closer to the truth. *Whatever I decide and convince people of will become "true"*. (And in any case history is made up of *discourse*, not of *facts*.)

But as he works, and writes, and life continues to revolve around him, we and our hero start to realise that something is amiss with the world. Our present, after all, is built on our history, and that includes the *discourse* of history. And as all science fiction readers know, if you change the past, even the slightest revision can have a catastrophic butterfly effect...

Reviews

Tim Nickels, *The English Soil Society* 2005. Norwich: Elastic Press. Pp. 248. ISBN 0954881249. £5.99 / \$12.00.

Reviewed by Djibril

A glance at the credits page of this volume reveals Nickels' impressive pedigree: as well as five previously unpublished titles, this collection contains stories originally printed in magazines such as the prestigious *BBR*, *The Third Alternative*, *Scheherazade*, *Roadworks*, and *Midnight Street*, as well as several anthologies and websites. Nickels has a reputation as an unusual writer: his stories are often not so much speculative as wildly inventive, not so much fantastic as surreal, not so much satirical as absurd. This is not to say that there is no great speculative fiction in this collection of stories, but that even the most staid and traditional pieces in here are likely to contain unexpected turns, experimental generic elements, and unconventional humour.

Not all of the stories in this book were necessar-

ily to this reviewer's taste—perhaps inevitably. 'maybe' is a short parable about a noxious, unscrupulous businessman who is inspired to change his ways and save a million lives by a message from God; neither characterisation, nor morality, nor a clever ending did much to alleviate the uninspiring sanctimoniousness of the story. Another short piece, 'Hearing Colour' is little more than an imaginative exploration of the phenomenon of synaesthesia, a nice enough idea but with little to hold it together. A slightly longer story, 'A Million Toledo Blades' is told in a variety of media: prose, verse, drama, conversation, metaphor; this seems to be a millennial tale predicting the fall of civilisation and the rise of "fifty billion stag beetles", told through the filter of a barman's reaction to the death of a Spanish tourist. I do not mean to say that there was especially anything to dislike about this story, only that I suspect there was a whole level to it that passed several kilometres over my head. Perhaps the most ambitious story that

I would class in this category of unsuccessful pieces is 'Backalong in Bollockland, or, The World Made Flush', which is told again in a combination of first person narrative, asides, conversations, interviews, old-fashioned titles, and over-enthusiastic regional dialects. This story seems to contain an uneasy mix of social observation and absurdist double-entendre humour, which I fear I found difficult to digest.

That said, most of the stories in this volume were much more enjoyable, even some of the more whimsical items that I normally avoid. For example, 'S', a short, almost journalistic piece about the unconventional Two-Hattan people and the trouble they suffer at the hands of their intolerant neighbours, is both witty and acutely observed. 'Redapple', another parable about the people of a congenitally happy town who hire an outside miracle-worker to introduce them to the concept of pain, reads almost like Gabriel García Márquez at his most light-hearted and droll. 'Boo' is an easy-going, almost Epicurean, creation myth about original innocence, the quest for definitive knowledge, and the ultimate victory of the untroubled life. 'The Hungry Shine' is a charming story about an "amoeba green girl", and the lonely men she loves who help her to keep from drying out completely. Subtle and poignant, this piece achieves a superb atmosphere and emotional tone with effortless, simple prose, and is very nicely done.

There are a couple of pieces that I would like to mention for the experimental nature of the storytelling, which while they did not grab me by the balls in quite the same way as the handful of truly excellent stories I want to conclude this review by summarising, did not in my opinion fail in the way that I felt a few of those mentioned above did. The title story, 'The English Soil Society', is told again in a mixture of narrative, conversation, and letter-extracts, and focuses around two girls from an apparently Victorian background who zip backward and forward through time and through human evolution. While again I feel I may have missed part of the point that Nickels intended by this story, I was not by any means offended or even particularly alienated by the absurdism in the telling. A very different story, 'Another Summer' contains elements of the absurd that serve to heighten the pathos of a story of war correspondants, invalids, and deserters in what may be one of the theatres of the First World War; by the end of this story I was a little unsure what was metaphor and what delirium, but this did not make the reading any less emotional or effective.

But rather than summarise every pieces in this volume in turn, I want to focus for the remainder of this review on a handful of stories that I found truly excellent. The first of these (which I must have read before, since it was published in *BBR* in 1990) is 'Colder Still', a subtle tale of an outcast, inhuman creature who appears one wretched winter and turns out to have the gift of life. This is a parable not only of the rejected outsider who wins the hearts of the people who origi-

nally rebuffed him, by the goodness of his ways and the value of his gifts—a common enough motif in itself—but of the nature of life itself, its limits, and the repercussions of ignoring its worth.

'The Dressing Floors' is an understated story set in what seems to be a peculiar kind of old people's home, the upper storeys of a building inhabited by people who never seem (perhaps are not allowed) to wear clothes, in a world where people never undress. In many ways this is a metaphor for human contact and warmth, with nakedness featuring both as the cosiness of trust and familiarity, and as the inadequacy of what is over-familiar, and clothes as both the comfort of convention and the loneliness of living behind armour against human touch. Characters who depart from what is known, from what is the norm in their world—be that the naked who leave their secure floors or the clothed who secretly undress—experience a combination of nervous wonder and embarrassed homesickness. This is one of Nickels' most subtle, and most effective pieces of writing.

Another *BBR* story, 'Tooley's Root' is almost a paragon of the elegant way in which a science fiction story can be told with the most effective of narrative strategies: without long background exposition or "info dump"; without detailed descriptions of the characters or their world, both of which would be very alien to our own image of humanity; with unexplained details thrown in to give the world a *weird* feel, details which add up progressively to give us some clue as to just how far in the future, and in the evolutionary development of humanity, the story is set. Characters are sympathetic without being excessively anthropomorphised (if that is the right word for making future humans look more like us than they need or should), and the crisis driving the plot only gradually becomes clear. Although the storytelling is technically excellent, I found myself wondering if there was a hidden morality play in the tale somewhere, something in the thinly veiled references to Christ that I ought to have recognised were I of a more spiritual disposition. I chose not to let this spoil my enjoyment of a good story.

'The Last of the Dandini Sisters' begins in the vein of an absurdist tale, with Henry Dandini's birth and upbringing as the youngest in a trio of performance artist sisters (despite his rather obviously being male). As the story develops, however, it turns out to be neither farcical comedy nor hammy tragedy, but an elegant, poignant, beautifully crafted, and believable account of a confused young man growing up constantly slightly behind the times in a fast changing world of itinerant entertainment in the second half of the twentieth century. There are farcical moments, as there are almost unbearably tragic ones, but these are the extreme episodes of an atypical human life, not the contrived events of a sensationalising story. One of the better stories I have read this year.

Although I have reported that some stories in this collection were less successful than others, and this

selection is of course deeply personal to the reviewer, it should also be noted that unusual and unexpected stories like these work best in small doses, where they can stand among a range of less unconventional pieces in a magazine or anthology and dazzle a reader with

their brilliance and originality. When arrayed in a constellation like this single-authored collection, individual stars can not be expected to shine as brightly as they would alone. Tim Nickels' work is clearly worth watching out for wherever it appears.

Sean Wright, *The Twisted Root of Jaarfindor* 2004. Crowswing Books. Pp. 150. ISBN 0954437446. £5.99 / \$10.49.

Reviewed by Simon Mahony

In a familiar topos this novel puts the central character on a quest, one where, with the all important 'companion' who is never what he seems, they must fulfil some purpose and achieve some end. Within this framework the author does his work well.

We are introduced to the tall, ebony, amazonian heroine, princess Lia-Va standing atop her citadel looking up at her kingdom's flag for whom so many had died and off into the distance from where the last invaders had come—we are in a world where technology and sorcery exist side by side—but this is not a tale of a defence against odds but of a woman fulfilling her destiny and the dangers she must face in doing so.

Lia-Va, having won the kingdom by slaying her father in battle, is its reluctant ruler but with no interest in affairs of state, feeds her addiction for 'roots' in her obsessive drive to solve the Runeroot puzzle. Upon death the 'humans' of this world regurgitate their 'root' which contains their life memories. There is a lucrative trade in this costly sort after commodity. These memories can be relived by another 'human', while in a trance like state, having pushed the sharp pointed end of the 'root' into their arm "like a needle". The memories Lia-Va is most interested in are the last experienced by the deceased and it is these that feed her compulsion and bring her closer in some unexplained way to solving the puzzle as she is drawn by her inner 'voices' to the nearby world of Bradfindor and the shrine of St. Urbania around whom a religious cult has arisen.

The plot centres around Lia-Va's journey to the pilgrim centre on Bradfindor and her struggles, aided by her companion. Forces of a long dead spirit work through Lia-Va driving her to collect roots and solve the Runeroot riddle which will allow the summoning of the long departed Jaarfindor, Goddess of Destruction and eponym of the novel, who will invert the 'tree-of-life', causing the dead to swap places with the living. The action packed finale takes place at the shrine of St. Urbania where we are introduced to the shamutants, the albino subterranean dwellers of this world.

This book is short and with large print so would, I guess, appeal to the youth market if that is the author's aim. He throws in some vernacular that would seem equally at home in a high school: "clear your shit from the table", "I don't give a flying fuck", what are you going to do... "shag me to life" and such examples on

nearly every page. There are also some unfortunate expressions such as "...doesn't want to rock the status quo" and reference to the "weapon of mass destruction" that the shamutants were rumoured to be developing. I, for one, was put off by this—not because I found it shocking or in any way offensive but rather that it was constantly evocative of our own time and culture and seemed out of place in a world so different to ours.

This novel will have a market but only a limited one. My chief reservations about this tale are that despite the setting in a place/era not of our own it is filled with constant allusions to our culture and experience rather to those of the characters in the plot: Lia-Va enters the Black Anchor Inn, "Hello, boys" she said in her gruffest May West (*sic*) voice"; the commercial centre of Brafindor is referred to as "the twin towers"; there is "Leonardo Plato— Brafindor's cult scientific hero"; as one character lies dying he "saw everything larger than life, as if sitting in a cinema" ; the pilgrims to "Our Lady" sing "Hey Judas" and "Imaginus" as they throng seeking a miracle at the shrine of "Lafayette Guille" whose tale bears more than a resemblance to that of Bernadette of Lourdes.

Furthermore, there are holes in the plot. Aboard the *Voyeur*, the heroine shares the experiences of her cousin's 'root' with the ship's captain Tullock-Cha (incidentally my favourite character whose surgically removed soul, still attached by an ectoplasmic umbilical cord, skulks in dark corners). There is some confusion as to which root they are experiencing as they share Frilek's last frantic moments of as he attempts to escape after killing the embryo of the mythical Shamadactyl. Tullock-Cha surprisingly has no guards for his sky-ship with its dangerous cargo of passengers and it is our heroine's companion that protects them during their 'trip' with both his "blood drenched axe" and again with the magic of his craft as he drives the crazed pilgrims off with phantoms; warrior or wizard, he finds it difficult to decide. There are more holes but you'll have to read the book.

What we have then is a feisty black heroine with a 'root' addiction who swears a lot and, with the aid of her side-kick, achieves her destiny and saves the 'world'. There seems to some sexual imagery surrounding the 'root' which, having been ejaculated via the thorax from a human's innards with their dying breath, is then, after being traded for cash, used to penetrate the addict's body so that the experiences of the dead person can be shared. If this novel challenges "stereo-types of gender and organised religion", as the author hopes (14), and persuades the reader to question the nature and cause of addiction then it is a wel-

come addition to fiction whether speculative or otherwise. But does it?

The author raises issues: the heroine is a black female; her addiction is driven by an inner voice; her companion is not what he seems; the religious cult is controlling and ultimately malignant; the pilgrims are mindless drones; the scary looking shamutants are the saviours. None of this is surprising unless you don't read much, which might be the case with the target

audience. The characters set to challenge the stereotypes have themselves become stereotypical.

The book is readable in an undemanding way and as the plot lurches from scene to scene it does seem to pick up pace in the final chapters—unless of course it was this reader hurrying when he saw the end in view. I feel somewhat unqualified to judge whether this assessment would be a fair reflection of the response of a fifteen year-old.

