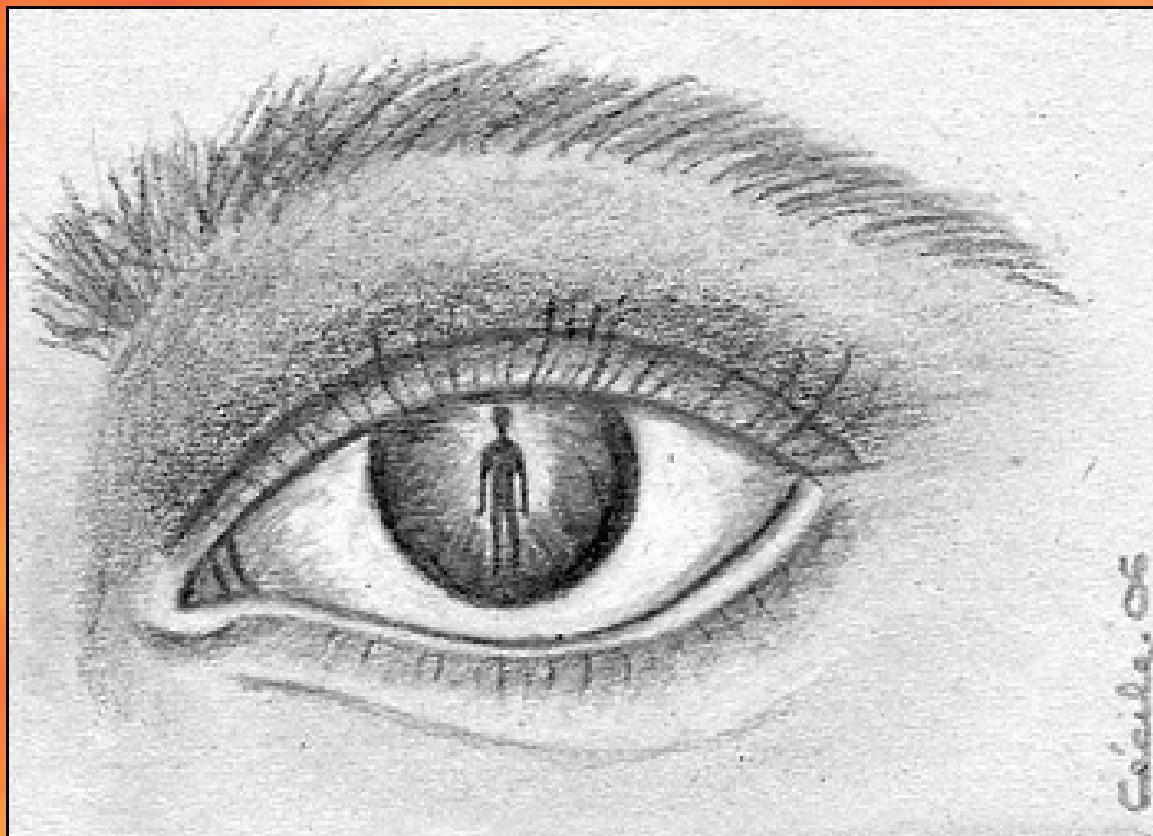


The Future Fire

Speculative Fiction, Cyberpunk, Dark Fantasy

Issue 2006.06

ISSN: 1746-1839



© 2006
Cécile Matthey

Cover Art: Cécile Matthey (c) 2006

Fiction by:

J. W. Bennett

Tom Lichtenberg

Thoughts on the Death of Cyberpunk

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

The Future Fire: Issue 2006.07

The meek ain't gonna inherit shit

Larry Love

Table of Contents:

Fiction

J.W. Bennett 'Half Light House' (3)

Tom Lichtenberg 'Deadline' (6)

Nonfiction

Djibril 'Grossly Exaggerated: Thoughts on the death of Cyberpunk' (8)

Reviews (9)

Cover Art: Cécile Matthey (c) 2006

Issue 2006.06 of the *Future Fire* (due in May 2006) was delayed due to a combination of technical and administrative reasons. We ran a couple of reviews as they came out—to keep it fresh—but the full magazine is only now available. We think it was worth the wait. A couple of fun stories: Tom Lichtenberg's dark 'Deadline', and a return from J. W. Bennett with the very poetic, sensual, and creepy 'Half Light House'. (We also have professional-standard artwork for both stories for the first time: many thanks to Chris Cartwright and Cécile Matthey for some lovely work.)

These are both great stories, and fully within the *Future Fire* brief, but now we've gone over six months without accepting a "hard-SF" or Cyberpunk piece. So I have been thinking about this problem again, and some of my thoughts can be found in a short piece in the non-fiction section under 'Grossly Exaggerated'; I'd like this to kick off discussion and debate, but I'm not sure what the venue for this would be? There is good short Cyberpunk out there—most notably published in *Neometropolis* magazine, for example—but there isn't *much*. (And the Cyberpunkchat message board sadly closed down last year.)

Anyway, we're here now. Enjoy the stories.

Please accept our apologies for this severe delay and any inconvenience it may have caused for your journey.

August 2006

The Future Fire (c) 2006

ISSN: 1746-1839

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

Fiction submissions: fiction@futurefire.net

Articles and reviews: nonfiction@futurefire.net

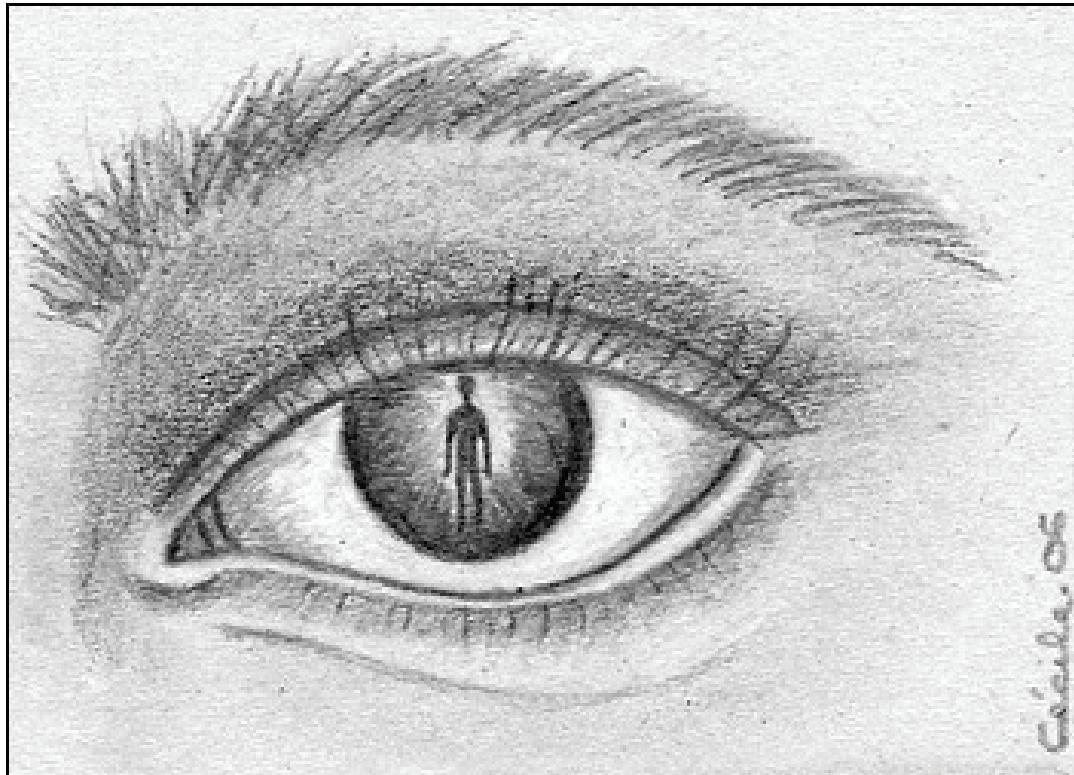
See submission guidelines at

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

'Half Light House'

By J.W. Bennett

Artwork (c) 2006 by Cécile Matthey



(For G.F. Not forgotten.)

Dark gables. Shadowed eaves. A man with a suitcase standing on the kerb.

Rain. Oceans of it. A leaden sheet to mask the world. Polished shoes in puddles. He pays the taxi fare. A smile that dies before it reaches the eyes and an ungracious 'thank you' in return. Welcome to England. Welcome home.

The sound of a leaf-throttled drain. The taxi swims away. His footsteps cross the street. A haiku on the air. A pause. Then mounting the steps to Half Light. One. Two. Three. They echo in the porch like a funeral drum. And so they should. So they should.

On the sanctuary of the porch, a reflection. It seems as though this is all there is. Three steps. Two Georgian pillars. A universe of falling water – and himself. The man once known as Lucas. The man *still* known as Lucas, though nobody really acknowledges it anymore. If he had friends, they would call him Luke. Surely. But he has no friends. People don't know him. Sometimes, he wonders if he is alive.

A door. A key. A dusty hall beyond.
And then, nostalgia.

Ten years to the day. When his tongue could stand the taste of gin. When his cock still got hard for magazines. Ten years to the day. When his patience could withstand small talk. When his eyes held a secret he didn't even know. A certain light only his mother and Falcon could see.

There are powerful dreams in there, his mother had told him when Lucas was nine.

Your eyes are funny. Falcon. In bed. The first time they made love. He was twenty-three. Ten years to the day.

I've never been like other men. Lucas knows this as he hangs up his coat and puts the suitcase down. Clunk. Drip. Sniff. *I never bloody wanted to be*.

And Falcon again. Always Falcon, with his colourless eyes and remarkable smile.

Thank God you're not, Luke. Thank God. If you're foolish enough to believe in Him.

Luke remembers lying naked in candlelight, perhaps on tarpaulin, perhaps not. Tracing a line on Falcon. Thigh to navel. To nipple, which he kisses. To navel again, then to cock. Falcon's exquisite cock. Always

eady at a touch.

Luke shakes his head. The living room. Furniture draped in sheets. Piles of newspapers. Dust. All these sights create the memory. *Living room. A strange expression. As if all the other rooms are dead. He catches the sob in his throat. Swallows it. Moves into the kitchen. He will not cry over sex. Love maybe, if he can recall it. Only love.*

The kitchen. This is where he first met Falcon. Falcon the Artist. Falcon the Beautiful. Falcon the Dream Snatcher. Falcon the Whore. So many Falcons. A veritable flock. He may as well have been a Tarot deck. And that's what Falcon was doing, wasn't it? That day. The day Lucas set foot in Half Light House and left himself behind.

Do you play?

It's a Tarot deck.

Yes. Do you play?

I thought. Well. It isn't a game.

(*Laughter. Sudden honey.*)

You are new here. For sure.

Yes. My name is.

Luke. I know. I'm Falcon.

Falcon?

Yes. Do you play?

But.

(*Laughter again. The kind of storm you want to get caught in.*)

Luke. It's fate. Fate is a game, if anything is.

I.

Sit. I will read.

But.

Do you *play*?

Now. A scarred kitchen table. Then. Smooth mahogany.

Now. Luke sits alone and strokes the wood. Then. Luke sits down. There is no handshake. No other chat. Just his destiny being read by a total stranger.

The Tower. Beware a betrayal.

The Lovers. Possibly from a lover.

The Fool. Possibly from *yourself*.

Falcon's colourless eyes and archer's bow lips. Is that a pout? A smile? Hard to tell. Like everything was.

Back then.

Now. Luke gets up. He can call himself Luke in Half Light. It's ok. The house knows him by that name. He walks into the garden. The ghost of a glass of wine in his hand. The sycamore tree. Falcon is standing a little too close. Maybe because he is taller. Maybe not. Luke moved into his room and paid the rent a week ago. Luke needs a job. Luke has come here to the town by the sea to search for – what? Yes, that was it. For (love) change. Luke needs change. He also needs Fal-

con to stop looking at him like that.

A sip of wine. A slant of the head.

Do you have a lover? Falcon makes it sound like an accusation.

No.

A pretty boy like you?

It's life.

Don't shrug.

What?

It *isn't* life.

Ok...

Luke.

Yes?

What do you want in a lover?

(*Awkward laughter.*)

I don't know.

Dream it up. Tell me.

Why?

So I know what to become.

(*Awkward silence.*)

Falcon. I'm not. I don't. I'm sorry.

I know. It's wrong. Against nature. God. The known laws of fucking everything.

You're bitter.

You're *lying*.

Please. Don't touch me there.

Kiss me.

I.

Kiss me.

But.

They kissed. A doorway opened. And later, flesh. Now. Luke has climbed the stairs and stands in the bedroom door. The paint is flaking on the doorframe and the room is empty. Bare boards. No light bulb. Then. Luke stands uncertainly in the bedroom door. Red paint. Pink light. He has never been in Falcon's room before. He has never touched a man before. Now. He leans against the frame. A sigh. A tear. Back then there was a different kind of sigh. His cock was in Falcon's mouth.

Later, a cigarette. Shared. A cliché, but a good one. Luke is lying naked on the bed, tracing lines. He is trying to shake a feeling. The feeling won't leave him be. When he came, he thought the ground would open up and Hell would swallow him. It didn't.

I once heard. Luke hardly dares to say it.

Yes?

I once heard that.

Yes.

Someone told me.

Your father.

What?

Luke. Your father told you that to fuck like this is black magic.

How did you?

I can see it in your eyes.

But.

Your eyes are funny.

I.

Kiss me.

The memories are clear. Until he stepped into Half Light, he remembered nothing. Only a whisper. A rumour of something missing. Something stolen.

Now. Luke sits on the floor. He notices an old cigar box in one corner and crawls to get it. Then. He sees himself in a mirror of the pose. Naked. The last time they made love. Did he ever wear clothes in this room? No. Luke doesn't think so.

Falcon is speaking again. This is a month later in before-land. Luke is sore. He wonders if Falcon needs him. Is bored of him. Either of these.

I have given you truth. See?

That's your cock, Falc.

Yes. Truth.

I don't understand.

You don't need to. I want. I want something in exchange.

Here we go.

No.

You want my love. I don't know if I.

Hush.

(*Those colourless eyes. An ocean you want to drown in.*)

You don't want my love?

No Luke.

But.

I want the dreams.

What?

Your dreams.

I.

All of them.

Why?

To use. You go on now. If you can't give me that. You go on.

I don't understand.

No. They never do.

That last week. Falcon's scowl. Falcon's coldness. Until the last night ten years ago. In the living room where a part of Luke died. Fire in the grate. Jewels sparkling on Falcon's timeless face. Luke reached. Falcon withdrew.

I can't bear to do this. I have to touch you.

You are selfish.

No. I will. I will.

You will what?

Give you my dreams.

(*Laughter. A lightning bolt you hope will strike you.*)

Come here.

It's that simple?

Kiss me.

I.

Kiss me.

Then Falcon was gone. Life turned grey.

Joyless jobs. Speaking in crowds. Not being heard. Smiling at strangers. Frowns in return. Leaving Half Light. Leaving the town by the sea. The stint in Amsterdam. The accident. The hospital. His best friend's death. Ten years! And all the time he was a shadow. Feeling nothing. Touching nothing. Tasting nothing. Fading. Fading. Faded.

Then the letter from Falcon. Three days ago.

I'm sorry. Go back to Half Light. Go back.

Now. Luke opens the cigar box. There is nothing inside but a note.

An absolution in twelve elegantly lettered words.

Your dreams are good. I give them back. Thanks for playing. Falcon.

A rush of light that isn't quite light.

A tingle in his chest and groin.

Then the sobbing comes for real. Luke wonders how much of himself he has spent in this room. In Half Light House. It's stopped raining. It's raining inside again. This time it's good. This time it's wonderful. This time it's love.



'Deadline'
By Tom Lichtenberg

Artwork (c) 2006 by Chris Cartwright



This couple lived like an item on the shelf, like a buy one get one free. You want to talk to him? You have to clear it with her. You want to talk to her? You'd better see him first. You want one of them for anything, you get the other one too. They were wrapped around each other like the childproof plastic you can't cut off a jar with a knife. Dave and Darcy. Darcy and Dave. I'm Darcy this is Dave. I'm Dave she's Darcy. How you doing? We're great.

They were always great. They found bargains that you wouldn't believe. You know how much we paid for this? Always the we. We were in Mexico once. One time when we. The other day we. We drove to. They told us we had to.

There was a time before Dave for Darcy, and a time before Darcy for Dave. A Neolithic era, lost in the pile of receipts they never discarded (you never know), but, they will tell you, one at a time or in unison, our lives really began at the moment we met.

At a Photomat, of all places. Her car was stalled at the booth. He gave her a start. In every sense of the word. From the moment I saw him I knew, she says, in a rare first-person moment. She was like an angel, he agrees. Then together, in the sickening sweetness they combine and form their own little well-worn slogan;

even angels need a jump sometimes hee hee. You want to look away.

Never before have the hash browns seemed so appealing, or so interesting in the way they appear on the plate, all those strings of potatoes combined in such unique and golden brown patterns. Darcy and Dave are still talking. One day we. We thought it was. Nobody told us hee hee. You wonder who invented the hash brown, who perfected the art or science, whichever it is.

Outside the diner the icy rain is still falling, heavy and hard. If you'd stopped in Talusa like your body had told you, you wouldn't even be here now, but cozy in a soft and sinking mattress in that motel you noticed off the road. You'd be watching the local weatherman tell you all about this storm, but no, the boss remembered your cell phone number and reminded you of your deadline.

More coffee? Please. Thank you. None for us, no thanks. We've had enough. They take a deep breath. One of them will launch into the next obligatory segment. It was him. Something about a dog that got lost, that jumped off a truck and found its way home. Remarkable, isn't it? How everything knows where it truly belongs. We had a dog once, you know. So sad.

Hit by lightning, he was, the poor little guy. Sparky. That's what we named him. A moment of silence. Then a sigh. It was her. Well, at least that won't happen again hee hee! You know what they say about lightning.

You do know what they say about lightning. You've said it yourself sometimes, even though you know better. Better than to say such things. Better than to pretend to know such things. You play with your food and notice, with a little astonishment perhaps, that even the writing on a packet of jam can be the most interesting thing in the world at a time like this.

You're running late, but it's out of your hands. You came in from the cold. You found the last seat. They were kind, and generous enough to wave you over, share their space, signal the waitress, smile and smile. They had no idea who you are. I'm Darcy he's Dave. We're Dave and Darcy. How many times did they tell you? And how many times did they ask you your name, and afterwards it was, Steve is it? pleased to meetcha. Mike is it? How you been? Ron is it? Darcy's got a brother named Ron.

They know what it's like to be on the road, to live out of a suitcase, away from your friends and family for weeks at a time. They're on their way to a conference. Franchise opportunities. They've been very successful. No, they've been fortunate. Blessed, they would say. Thank God.

Uniform shoes. Did you hear that correctly? Yes, they repeated it. Oh, shoes that go with uniforms. Yes,

you can see how that could be quite the lucrative market. Can't have a uniform without the shoes. Yes, all kinds of uniforms, all kinds of shoes. No size too small. No size too big. After all, every size is somebody's size hee hee.

Yes, they probably are plastic flowers on the table. Amazing what they can do with plastic flowers these days. You're stalling, and you know it. After all, they're Darcy and Dave. He's Dave, she's Darcy. You don't want to have anything to do with this, don't want to go through with it. You've got your job and it's got nothing to do with uniforms or shoes. Better to sit here and marvel, and wonder, and shudder at the awesome task that's facing you. But you have a deadline.

You know you have to go outside. And heaven knows your car won't start. And it's been written that you'll need their help. And Ron is it? Darcy's got a brother named Ron. We'd be glad to help. Just let us bring the car around. You stay right where you are. No, no, it's not a problem. We're happy to. Anything we can do.

They'll bring the car around. And Dave, it'll be Dave, will grab the cables from the trunk, and Darcy, it'll be Darcy, who'll remain, alone, behind the wheel, and you, it'll be you who stands back, lets it happen. It may be that lightning doesn't strike twice, but when he's standing in a puddle in the freezing rain and he has the cables in his grip, and then the merest little spark. And you know who you are, and that even angels need a jump sometimes. Hee hee.

(c) 2006 Tom Lichtenberg

Non-fiction

'Grossly Exaggerated'

by Djibril

Thoughts on the Death of Cyberpunk

'Cyberpunk' is the name of a sub-genre created to incorporate the seminal works of William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and a generation of pre-Worldwide Web science fiction writers whose stories inhabit a dark future populated by virtual realities, artificial intelligences, desperate hackers, man-machine hybrids, life-changing technology, ruthless corporations, and dystopic regimes. This was a future with frightening possibilities for subtle totalitarianism or rampant consumerism, and with heroes who were individualistic, intelligent, and plugged-in members of technologically-savvy underclass.

This was perhaps a natural development for science fiction in a decade during which computers caught the public imagination for the first time; when the first personal computers became affordable, and began to be used in primary schools; when viruses became a tangible threat to information integrity; and when hackers could steal millions, and be given equally brutal prison sentences for bringing down the FBI network or circulating pirated, harmless software manuals from a telco. Everybody had heard of computers, and networks, and hackers, but only an élite few understood what any of these really meant.

But is that really all that Cyberpunk is: Science Fiction with computers at centre stage? That would not be enough to define a sub-genre any more, because science fiction has always included an interest in future technology, and computers are the most paradigm-changing technology around at the moment. Nor are the dystopic elements and the cowboy protagonists anything especially new in science fiction: Dick and Ellison have been doing this sort of thing for decades. (Not that precedent disqualifies a brand of literature from sub-genre status; as with the Mundane SF movement of recent years, authors and works can be retrospectively assigned generic titles if they fit.)

I read cyberpunk because the computing and internet technologies that are the staple diet of that subgenre are those that really *are* changing faster than most of us can keep up with them, and are changing the rest of the world around them unrecognisably. It may be that the internet will not turn into Gibson's matrix, but it's fascinating to be able to explore the possibilities for individuals, for cultures, for corporate entities, for the mass media, and for government of the sort of changes in paradigm that these technologies will force. And cyberpunk (at least the form of the subgenre that came into being in the 1980s) lends itself very well to social observational SF, especially observation of the marginal in

society, the hacker, the dissident, the blogger, the radical. I could say many of the same things about why I like eco-SF, or "Mundane" SF, because the science is science that matters, and the people are people here on Earth, and the issues are those that are worth exploring, both in terms of social observation and of poetic representation.

According to the Wikipedia entry (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyberpunk>), Cyberpunk became science fiction that critics could engage with. In other words, for a while there was a sub-genre that was simultaneously accepted within science fiction and within serious literature. This is an important point, and an important observation in the study of science fictional literary criticism, but it does not tell us much about what Cyberpunk is or whether it still exists.

Is it the case, therefore, that Cyberpunk was only a sub-genre when it was new, when it was special, when it was taken seriously by the world outside of fandom? Before everybody jumped on the bandwagon, and the founders hastily jumped off, announcing themselves "post-Cyberpunks"? If it is no longer a sub-genre, what is it now, and what are those people writing who are still on the bandwagon?

For Richard Morgan, Cory Doctorow, Charles Stross, Neal Stephenson, and many others still write fiction with the trappings of Cyberpunk, the computer technology that transcends human intelligence, life, and culture; the maverick, misfit protagonists; and the social awareness of exaggerated forms of consumer society (not all with the same political or social agendas, to be sure). So are they writing Cyberpunk, or just science fiction? Are we doing science fiction a disservice by fencing off part of its natural territory in this way?

Is the Cyberpunk label any more a sub-genre of science fiction than simply a way for a reader or venue to say, "I like SF to be", say, dark, dystopian, with real, or lowlife, protagonists rather than élite heroes? And even if it is just such a label, is it not fair enough to say "I want to read Cyberpunk"? I want to read about our plugged-in future...

Is not all SF fiction of the future? And is not the future obviously a cybernetic one? Is it not now obvious that computers will change our social, cultural, political, economic, and biological lives more than space travel, FTL drives, alien contact, or hi-tech weaponry? Potentially the only things likely to have as profound an impact on the world are biological engineering and environmental catastrophe.

So is that it: Cyberpunk is a way of saying "I like

IT-sf more than eco-sf or biotech-sf"? (And "I like my protagonists to be cowboys and junkies, not princes and officers"?) And if so, is it a sub-genre, or just a flavour? Is it a branch of science fiction, or of politico-economic speculation? Is it a movement in its own right, with reasons and arguments to justify its own existence, or does it just exist by virtue of the writing that appears in the genre?

In a recent interview, Cory Doctorow said that

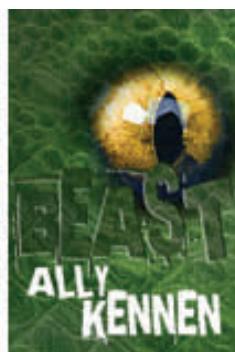
anyone who writes about a future in which bits of information are not easier to copy has no business calling what they write science fiction. Are we all Cyber-punks now? Is it just so pointless to talk about a sub-genre any more because all science fiction potentially lives in what used to be the cyber ghetto?

And then is it dead, or has it taken over the world?

Reviews

Ally Kennen, *Beast*. Scholastic Children's Books, 2006. Pp. 247. ISBN 0439951046. £6.99.

Reviewed by Djibril.



This book, targeted at a young adult or teenage readership (12+ according to the cover), is the debut novel by British author and musician Ally Kennen. It is narrated by Stephen, a troubled boy of seventeen from a violent, unstable, and now broken home, who lives with a foster family who are also slightly dysfunctional (at least as far as he is concerned). In particular the foster-sister, Carol, has taken as her mission in life to make his time with them as difficult as possible—Carol is one of the strongest characters in the book, simultaneously the human villain of the piece (although Stephen's destitute father is a close contender), and very believable as a younger sister, with the ambivalent jealousy/craving for attention that leads to her almost incredibly hostile words and behaviour. She is not Stephen's biggest problem, however, since he is resigned to not being trusted by his foster family and eventually being thrown out once he is old enough to no longer be the responsibility of the social services. His real nemesis is the Beast of the title.

At first neither described nor named, the Beast is a formless, terrifying, predatory monster that Stephen has cared for since it was a baby, and who lives in a cage hidden near the reservoir. He feeds it whenever he dares to get away, and with whatever meat he can

find or afford: stolen poultry, roadkill, whole pigs. But the Beast is growing both in size and in appetite, and Stephen fears that the cage may not be able to hold it for much longer. What will happen then is his darkest nightmare, with the English countryside becoming a hunting ground, innocent people slaughtered, and himself stalked across the country and finally devoured by the monster he has created. He cannot think of any way to rid himself of the Beast except to kill it, an option that hurts the part of him that has developed paternal feelings toward the creature he has raised since infancy.

The character of Stephen himself is strongly sketched. He is clearly intelligent, but crippled in this regard by a patchy formal education and the usual delinquent distrust of book-learning; he shows embarrassment at his own interest in biological or geographical matters, at one point even apologising to the reader: "Sorry, I find stuff like this interesting" (55). Like any teenager he tries to be cockily confident (but sometimes comes across as petulant, and hates himself when that happens), is awkward with girls, and can become aggressive when challenged or disbelieved, but he is at heart a gentle, generous soul. The story opens with that clichéd stock of the children's novel, the list of "ten worst things I have ever done" that reads like an extract from Stephen's journal (if he were literate enough to keep one), and includes serious crimes like theft and arson, adolescent revenge ("perversion" and "biohazard sabotage"), to murder, the crime he has not yet committed but plans to do so (the victim being his Beast). On the whole Stephen's voice is very convincing, with casual and crude notes to keep him real, but soft enough to remain readable and likeable. There are only a couple of minor exceptions where he uses words or expressions perhaps too sophisticated for his character, but these do not really jar.

For a story with such dark undertones, this novel ends with a trace of hope. His encounter with and care for the growing Beast seems to have provided the neglected Stephen with some maturity, with an experi-

ence of what it is to be responsible for a child: an example of parenting which he has conspicuously not been given either by his own parents or by those provided for him by the foster care agency. We may imagine from the final scenes, that he has learnt enough from this experience, and that Stephen may grow up at least somewhat less broken than so many displaced children like him.

In summary, this novel is a well-crafted work of prose, which covers both fantastic events and all-too-real horrors with an unexpected lightness of touch.

This very elegant use of tone both makes the book accessible in a way that the hard subject matter alone might not have, and perhaps unfortunately, potentially leaves readers with the impression that what they have read is more lightweight and forgettable than it deserves to be. (The subtlety of the ending may have a similar effect by its refusal to be glamorous and sensational.) Nevertheless, this is a very impressive debut novel, an excellent read, and a promising start to the career of a new young writer.

**Sophia McDougall, *Romanitas*. 2005. Orion Books.
Pp. 588+. ISBN 0752877097. £6.99**

Reviewed by Djibril

This sweeping, ambitious book is the debut novel by British writer and poet McDougall, and the first part of a planned trilogy. It is an alternative history on the grandest scale: the point of departure from our own timeline is the death of the Roman Emperor Pertinax in 192 CE (945 AUC). As Pertinax survived the assassination attempt in this timeline, he was never succeeded by the much-maligned Septimius Severus, and instead reformed the Senate, the Pretorians, and the Empire so successfully that Rome never declined and fell, and two thousand years later the Empire is still dominating the world (including Africa, much of Asia, and most of the Americas). The history of the Roman Empire which is presented as an appendix to this volume is of interest to Roman historians as well as alternative history aficionados.

Marcus Novius Faustus is the son of the murdered heir to the Roman Empire; his closeness to the throne and his own controversial attitude to slavery (in a world in which abolition seems never to have been mooted), puts his life in danger. Sulien is a slave, a talented doctor with strange powers of healing—again we see how different the world of the novel is from our own by the lack of damning superstition at this power—who has been falsely accused of rape and therefore summarily sentenced to death. Una is his sister, slightly pathological and psycho-sensitive, a slave-girl damaged by her experiences which are never fully described to us. She uses her abilities to rescue Sulien from the brink of a cruel crucifixion. All three protagonists are soon fleeing across Europe seeking a legendary slave sanctuary, and it is a matter of time before their paths, and their fates, cross.

The focus of the novel, therefore, as so often in alternative history tales, is on one aspect of the Roman Empire that we identify as different to our own culture: in this case slavery. It is hard to imagine that the Empire would have evolved over two thousand years without attitudes to this practice changing significantly, but okay, this is speculative fiction, and this is the aspect of society that the author has chosen to focus on. The picture of world politics is also interesting,

with a powerful Japanese empire in the east the only threat to Roman world hegemony—although there is little sign of the Roman absorption of, for example, Indian, African, or American culture. The internal politics of the Empire is nicely drawn, with examples of hypocrisy, political face-saving, the occasional powerlessness even of the absolute emperor, and the power of corrupt multinational corporations, as in our own world and no doubt ancient Rome itself. The different mores and values of Pagan Rome are well-illustrated, and refreshingly lightly handled (the lack of superstitious condemnation of Sulien and Una's powers being a fine example; this is just never mentioned). The occasional nod to monotheism—and the unnecessary (even if dismissive) reference to Christianity—are only slightly distracting.

This is a long book, and progress is sometimes slow. It takes a while to get to know the characters—and even longer to like them. But with persistence the characters become both sympathetic and convincing. What may early in the book seem like structural problems and loose ends are mostly tied up by the closing chapters—a process that is in turns satisfying and over the top. The protagonists often bumble through almost by chance rather than executing plans expertly; this comes across as more realistic than having infallible heroes, but the rôle of luck is sometimes a little too much for credibility.

There are also some very real technical problems with the writing in this novel: the prose is not always as smooth and readable as one might expect from a volume that has received the attentions of a professional publisher and editor. The most troubling feature is the author's propensity for head-hopping: the point-of-view character sometimes changes even in mid-paragraph, often in quick succession. This is distracting enough at the best of times, but when some characters are effectively psychic it can be seriously disorienting.

On the whole, however, this is a very good book with some structural and stylistic flaws (but do we not prefer flawed genius to flawless mediocrity?). I feel it is certainly worth following up the sequels for the continuation of the saga.

Neil Williamson, *The Ephemera*. 2006. Elastic Press. Pp. 217. ISBN 0954881265. £5.99

Reviewed by Djibril

This latest collection from the growing stable of Elastic Press features sixteen impressively varied short stories, published over the last ten years in such venues as *The Third Alternative*, *Interzone*, and other small press titles. One story is previously unpublished. The literary range covered by Williamson between these covers is very wide—both in terms of genre and mood and style—but almost all of them are somewhere between good and excellent in quality. As a collection, consequently, this is far more readable cover-to-cover than most.

It is fair to say that one or two of the pieces in this volume did not really work for me. 'Well Tempered', for example, is the story of a precocious and difficult (though not exceptionally so) nine year-old girl, and an odd but spookily successful piano teacher who gets her under control; I feel I may have missed the point of this story. 'Sins of the Father', on the other hand, is the story of a career criminal hiking through the jungles of Borneo in search of his son and in the company of an old army comrade who is a Ghurkha. There is a stolen artefact, a mysterious *torus*, and a group who may be aliens or a spiritual cult (or both) looking for it. The climax of the tale is marred by sentimentalism and a sense of almost sacred guilt that left this reader cold. But only two disappointing stories in a collection this size is really not bad at all.

Perhaps half a dozen stories have good science-fictional themes and tone, and are all excellent examples of their genre. 'The Euonymist', for example, is the story of a professional namer who travels the galaxy giving good names to newly discovered items or species, and who discovers an alien plant growing in his mother's garden in Scotland. The story addresses the politics of naming on several levels; it is no coincidence that Scots is considered a dead language in this future universe. 'The Bone Farmer' is the story of a world riven by a particularly unpleasant plague; a man who somehow knows himself to be doomed flees from his terrified, isolated community with his dying daughter. They meet a man who may just be able to help them, the custodian of the bone sculptures, "witnesses", the remains of plague victims past. In 'The Bennie and the Bonobo' an ambitious entrepreneur meets a time-travelling, genetically engineered Bonobo who shows him the one, rare future of the multiple possible universes in which his invention proves to be successful. 'A

Horse in a Drifting Light' is a short, allegorical piece about a world in which we all work from home, where we are all passengers, never drivers. It is not clear why the freedom the narrator so longs for in driving can not be achieved also by walking (a more sustainable practice in this ecologically sensitive world) but the image of the chrome-skinned horse that comes to represent the artificial world is a beautiful one.

A handful of stories are of a more laid-back genre, set in a world closer to our own but with speculative or supernatural elements. It is in these pieces that Williamson's lightness of touch and charming writing style come across most effectively. The opening story, 'Shine, Alone After the Setting of the Sun', for example, is a homely piece about a jobbing musician and her pregnant lover, an artist, who comes out of a spell of depression to create a new, almost miraculous mosaic. There is an underlying tone of tragedy throughout this moving piece, but one that constantly retains a sense of hope and optimism with the world. In 'Cages' we meet an old man who lives in a dilapidated high-rise with his dying canary; the image throughout is of concentric cages: the bird's, the old man's, the whole of our life, and the glum suspicion that even after death our souls carry on in the manner in which we lived. 'Harrowfield', on the other hand, is one of the most charming, old-fashioned pieces in this collection, a story of two antiquarian book-dealers working through the private library of a recently deceased occultist. This is a ghost story with elements of tragic love, black magic, and rich characters—the most one-dimensional of which is the narrator, perhaps typical of the nineteenth century style this tale is harking back to. 'Hard to do', originally published in the excellent *Not One Of Us* magazine, is a story which is reminiscent in some ways of the first story in the volume: a woman is at home waiting for her lover. It is clear that something is looming over her, although the reader has to gradually decide if she is dying, if the couple are falling apart, or if she is literally an ephemeral being, doomed to live only 500 days in this incarnation. One of the most harrowing, emotional pieces in the collection.

The variety of pieces in this collection makes it difficult to say anything general in conclusion to a review such as this, except to remark upon the talent and versatility of the author, and hope that more from his pen comes our way soon.

Lynda Williams, *The Lorel Experiment: the story of Sevolite origins*. 2005. Fandom Press. Pp 80. ISBN 1590920619. CAN\$ 13.99

Reviewed by Simon Mahony

This engaging novella is one of a series that provides the historical background to the goings on in the Okal Rel Universe (set in our own future)—the original creation of Lynda Williams but now a part of the collaborative Shared Universe Project. Set in a time we would recognise this tale traces the origins of the bio-engineered Sevolite race—invaluable as pilots in a later age of space travel and who come to dominate a post-apocalypse Earth.

In a world where the hopes and dreams of a united humanity have been dashed by the collapse of the space colonisation programme, Dr Lorel and his wife, after moving their company Self Evolved Limited (the origin of the acronym Se-vol-ite) from New York, with its prohibitive laws on genetic research to the relative safety of France, give fresh hope. Hope to parents that they might be selected to have a 'self-evolved' child—a gift to the world. The Lorel Experiment offered enhancement of the child such that Lorels would be "Healthier, wiser, more intelligent" (16) with concern for their fellow man—an advanced specimen rather than simply the result of "child-sculpting" practiced by their competitors with their "patented gene sequences" (15).

The story is told through two generations of Lorels: Amanda ("worthy of love") an early or first generation Lorel, and her struggle to be 'normal'; her daughter Sandrine ("defender of mankind"), conceived with Peter, a 'patent-child'—a sensitively bioengineered improvement on the human genome. In the closing pages we meet Sandrine's hope for the future in her own children, Cyril ("lordly") and Amanda (named in memory of her grandmother's struggles). The author shows skill and sensitivity in developing the main characters, allowing the reader to recognise and identify feelings and concerns.

Where does the future of Humankind lie: natural selection, bio-engineering or a combination of both—with always the unexpected thrown in for good measure? In this well written and paced novella Williams has resisted the temptation to give her attested fans a simple description of events explaining how things have come to be and instead raises interesting and relevant issues—ones that deeply affect and touch many of us today. Gene therapy, stem cell and embryonic research are emotive issues but ones that need to be addressed head-on rather than avoided with politi-

cal debate.

Deeply felt and dark feelings of prejudice are raised and questioned as are those of truth and openness. All children growing up strive to be 'normal', not wanting to be singled out as different and marginalised by an unthinking society. Prejudice against Lorels is fuelled by unconsidered actions by 'patents' where enhanced attributes were not necessarily moderated with added intelligence. There is talk of the development of a 'racially sensitive bio-weapon' (34) and to plagues coming from Asia and the East. The United Nations passes the UN 'International Declaration on the Sanctity of Man' (35) prohibiting future tampering with humankind except to prevent known genetic diseases. All this turns full circle and 'enhanced' humans eventually attract sympathy as a minority group; so they do with this reader until certain questionable plans for mankind are ultimately revealed.

Damien whose presence is felt throughout the book—the only Lorel etymon the author omits (from the Greek, 'to tame' but forever associated through Hollywood with the ambivalent antichrist or messiah)—creates a new slave species of short-lived flesh and blood robots that mimic humans to meet the need for space pilots and with commercial spin-offs for specific tasks. The sevolites start off as servants not masters—a new species created while human genome remains sacrosanct; a manufactured slave/servant class; "a crop" (51) with built in obsolescence. The readers' sympathy turns from Damien and his blind fascism but stays with Sandrine and her more moderate agenda based around her daughter, conceived naturally while he was perfecting the DNA cocktail for his male (able to spread genes more widely) version of Homo Superior and worthy successor—his heir to the development off-world, unfettered by restrictions, that would return sevolites as masters.

But do Damien's plans take into account the element of chance: to what extent will the engineered son be influenced by his 'natural' older sister? What is the ultimate role of these new superior humans? What gifts would be needed in superior humans? The dream of perfecting Homo Superior is not a new one but one that advances in technology in our own time suggest might become a possibility—but which path is the correct one to reach that end? Readers of the Okal Rel series may know how the sevolites fare in the times ahead but will I am sure still be provoked by this novella. Prejudice, here as always, grows from fear and a lack of understanding.

***V for Vendetta*, Dir. James McTeigue**

Warner Brothers

Starring: Hugo Weaving, Natalie Portman, John Hurt, Stephen Rea

Reviewed by Jehoshaphat

The directorial debut for James McTeigue, *V for Vendetta* is a film based on the *V for Vendetta* comics published by Vertigo. The film is set in the near future and Britain is governed by a regime not unlike the Party from George Orwell's *1984*. The story centres on Eve (Portman), who has suffered the loss of her parents to the authorities and her brother to a biological attack by terrorists. She meets V, a man who has concealed himself with a Guy Fawkes mask. Eve befriends V after he saves her life, and is embroiled in his attempts to murder key individuals who are responsible for cruel and lethal experiments on live human subjects, of whom V is the only survivor.

The film is well directed, authentic and captivating—at least from a visual perspective. It nestles itself into the audiences' attention by combining the most memorable (if not the best) parts of Orwell's masterpiece with an atmosphere which is very familiar to Londoners. This is a very modern day *1984*, at least in part, and that works extremely well. The themes and issues that are raised are thought provoking and shamelessly, if not blatantly thrown at the audience, in the first half of the film.

However, the film does not maintain its attention grabbing allure much beyond the first half. It very quickly starts to be unravelled from a well developed and beautifully crafted world, and descends into a very dark and insular exploration of the limits to which human endurance can be pushed, as Eve is tortured to confess her knowledge about the 'terrorist' V, which she does not do. The experience she undergoes turns Eve into a free thinker—or so the screenwriters were trying to portray. What happens is, while heart rending and emotionally intense, a very bizarre and ultimately flaccid result—interest is quickly lost in the enigmatic

character of V, and the unimaginative and unassuming Eve, as they both turn into mindless facilitators of a plot which has lost its path and broken from its routes. Surprisingly, Portman does not manage to portray the character of Eve in terms of the change in personality after her torture, to her acceptance of the part she plays in V's plan. Interest in V plummets because he turns into an all out action hero, and fulfils his plan.

The last quarter of the film left this viewer with a feeling of boredom. There are several briefing sessions by Chancellor Sutler throughout the film, where his face appears before his main advisors on a vast screen. These scenes are well shot and the cast, especially John Hurt, are superb in each of their roles. In the last quarter of the film, these scenes are so frequent and repetitive that they become tiresome. The destruction of the Houses of Parliament at the end is pointless, and at the very worst, a gimmick, as V's plan has succeeded already.

This is an important film in many respects, but ultimately, it appears that the writers have believed the hype that they seem to be criticising. At any rate, the interpretation of the ending of the film would seem to suggest that. This film starts off brilliantly, but for all of its beautiful effects, acting talent and potential, ends up feeling empty and even pointless. If Orwell is to be treated in this way, the reinterpretation of the themes he tackles needs to try and equal, if not surpass his conclusions. *V for Vendetta* borrows much, and amounts to little. That is not to say it is without its moments, and special mention needs to go to Stephen Rea for his character's laid back, gentle and humorous portrayal, and Stephen Fry for a charming cameo.



futurefire.net