

## **PROBE 140**

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# PROBE 140

March 2009

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I have to say that I have been interested in Quantum Physics since I heard the term many years ago. As an adolescent the idea of very small particles intrigued me. I read a story many years ago, in a collection of Golden Age stories edited by Isaac Asimov. I can't remember the author but the story was on a similar theme to "The Incredible Shrinking Man", but this story did not leave us as he shrunk down to invisibility.



Rather it took us to another level to another level and as the protagonist shrank out of our Universe he became a very large being in a smaller Universe. That is as it may be but I have been reading a good deal of "popular" literature on the state of how Physicists think our world may actually be constructed. A while ago I read a book by a Japanese Physicist named Michio Kaku. I don't claim to understand all that he says but find the idea of there being many dimensions that we cannot even perceive tantalizing. It now appears that I need to try to comprehend "String Theory" as well. Basic to this seems to be the difference between Euclidian and Spherical geometry. We've been to a couple of lectures where the lecturer tried to show with diagrams the difference between the two and to explain how, in Einstein's Relativity Gravity is not a force as such but a function of the sum of the angles in a triangle. Not an easy concept to clarify.

Two weeks ago we were extremely lucky to attend a packed-out lecture by Dr Robert de Mello Koch, a Professor of Physics at the University of the Witwatersrand. He had a very novel way of demonstrating the difference between Euclidian and Spherical geometry. He had a number of balls, which he said had been donated by his young son. On the balls he had placed lines of black tape. There was a line of tape around the "equator" and lines of tape making triangles, using the "equator" as the base of the triangles. On the spherical surface of the ball we were actually able to see that the angles no longer added up to 180 degrees. He also had an ordinary rectangular box. When the triangles were on a flat surface of the box they added up to 180 degrees but as soon as they started on one side and then went around a corner there were too many degrees. For the first time I was actually able to visualize something I have been trying to understand for many years. He then went on to talk about "String Theory" and "open" and "closed" strings and p-branes and d-branes and black holes and many other wonderful things. He assured us that the mathematics of "String Theory" seems to validate it. So now that I am able to visualize the wonders of the geometry of a curved surface I have a new and fascinating theory to spend years trying to understand. Is Life not wonderful!

# NOVA 2008

Andrew Jamieson

In the General category the top 10 stories were:

|                      |                             |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Andrew Salomon       | Mister Doorway              |
| Bernard Mathey       | The Setting of Sins         |
| Dave Sevitz          | Safer This Way              |
| David Sykes          | Prisoner                    |
| Gary Kuyper          | The Devil's Little Tadpoles |
| Jeff Glazier         | The Levels                  |
| Maya Surya Pillay    | And We Wrote With Stars     |
| Nicole Roughley      | Stealing Hearts             |
| Patrick Coyne        | Nadia                       |
| Ruby Heloise Rollins | Seeds                       |

First Place : Nadia by Patrick Coyne

Second Place : Stealing Hearts by Nicole Roughley

Third Place : The Levels by Jeff Glazier

In the SA category the top 8 stories were:

|                      |                         |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Amy Power Jansen     | Jo'burg's Red Alert     |
| Anthony Morris       | Rugby Renegade          |
| Arthur P. S. Howe    | The Pick-Up             |
| James Hallinan       | Iceman                  |
| John Yarrow          | Watermarks              |
| Michael James Mellor | The Secret of Perpetual |
| Nicholas Wood        | Thirstlands             |
| Terry White          | Howzit                  |

First Place : Iceman by James Hallinan

First Place : Watermarks by John Yarrow

Third Place : Thirstlands by Nicholas Wood

## **Nova 2008 General Section**

Final Judge Professor Gerald Gaylard's Comments

I was delighted to judge this year's crop of stories which I'm even more delighted to report were of a much higher standard than the ones I judged some five or so years ago. Indeed,

there are no real howlers here, and that is a very real achievement, so well done to all the writers and selectors concerned. Moreover, the standard of the top few were such that selecting a winner was difficult, even unpleasurably difficult; I have simply done my best without apology for personal bias. Finally, I just want to generally note two things which may be of interest to all the writers concerned. The first is from dual Booker prize winning author of scabrous and hilarious magical realism, Salman Rushdie, who noted that the “Third World” nation, and depictions thereof, often failed because it was “incompletely imagined”. Secondly, Tolkien and other writers have noted the importance of the ur-story, or story behind the story, and of course he was a master at imagining that bigger story within which his novels were set. His stories make sense and are so compelling because they are internally coherent, allowing the reader to achieve immersion. So if I have one thing to say to all of these writers it is simply this: in order to write a convincing and immersive piece of sf or fantasy (or anything else for that matter) it is vital to completely imagine the bigger story within which the narrative occurs. I can’t help adding that scrupulous editing always helps advance your cause ☺.

Now on to the winners. The top three stories more or less select themselves: “Stealing Hearts”, “The Levels” and “Nadia”. All of these stories are interesting, well-written and have that extra “X factor” to differentiate them from their peers. I award third prize to “The Levels” for its witty scenario which consigns Agatha Christie to hell; a wonderful story with some ethical bite and a soupçon of delicious schadenfreude. Second place goes to “Stealing Hearts” primarily for its contemporary relevance in terms of both crime and technologies of the body; it lingers on in the mind. First place goes to “Nadia”, an apparently flimsy story but one that packs a punch in that its ending reflects on the process of making art and on consciousness. It is also, despite its kitsch, a perfectly plotted short story in the sense that its scenario (or bigger story) is quickly established and convincing (the author is not too ambitious; I love the suggestion that future evolution may be more in terms of consciousness than technology), it builds to a climax that begs questions and its conclusion is fully circular and returns us to the beginning but with a new understanding. In other words, “Nadia” is really well technically executed. And perhaps more importantly, it is funny. Tinkerbell anyone? A fillip: I want to give a special commendation to “Mister Doorway”, in many ways the best-written story here with a wonderful noir atmosphere which will appeal to fans of Philip K. Dick (which I hope is everyone here). Unfortunately, the lack of a substantial motive and explanation for the story, whilst perhaps true to life, robs the story of some force.

## Story Comments

**“The Devil’s Little Tadpoles”** Fun vampyr story but rather clichéd and genre-bound in its overwrought Gothicism’s. Also the vampire creature is somewhat arbitrary as it has no history; hence the story is incompletely imagined.

**“The Setting of Sins”** A very weird story indeed, to the extent that I fear for the mental health of its author. In some archaic past human-like creatures attempt to climb out of pre-tribal mores and superstitions; one of them becomes a messiah figure with disturbingly

fascist ubermensch overtones as he is murderous and self-justifying. Quite what this story means is not clear.

**“Prisoner”** An odd story about a prisoner of a people called terrans who is manipulated by them into helping his people. The story doesn’t really make sense as not enough context or motivation is given to explain it; perhaps it is a trifle overambitious?

**“Stealing Hearts”** A good story with contemporary relevance about organ doning and theft also asking questions about the spirit of the law as opposed to the letter of the law. It could have been more evocatively descriptive and might have given a clearer understanding of why the millionaire character commits suicide and then donates his organ.

**“Seeds”** An amusing spoof on alien abduction stories which is entertaining in its silliness but remains a trifle; somewhat shallow.

**“The Levels”** Dante meets Agatha Christie in hell. A clever and fun story about karma; “why weren’t we better people?” indeed.

**“Safer This Way”** A time travel story set in Joburg about sending stock market information back from the future. A fun story with nice local colour, but it is marred by seriously unacceptable expression and riddled with errors. Moreover, its plot does not quite add up either.

**“Mister Doorway”** Gun for hire interplanetary assassination story which is really well written; certainly the most eloquent story on offer here which evokes atmosphere nicely and is interestingly partly set in India. However, the story is primarily atmospheric and lacks some motive and explanation, it is incompletely conceived.

**“And We Wrote with Stars”**

Cute vampire story in which the vampire returns to her birthplace once killed, but the question of what made her vampiric remains unanswered and hence frustrating. This story is quite atmospheric, but trades on genre cliché and is also incompletely conceived.

**“Nadia”** A cute story about future writers who manifest their muses (here musettes) as fairies, but these creatures allow stories to get out of hand. I like this concept because good writers tend to allow their characters enough freedom to be like people i.e. – do or say something out of character. On the minus side, the story verges on kitsch and the climax does not really make sense of the issue of tragedy versus comedy that it raises. Good self-reflexive ending.

## **Nova 2008 South African Section**

Final Judge Arthur Goldstuck’s Comments

1<sup>st</sup>: tie between Iceman and Watermarks

3<sup>rd</sup>: Thirstlands

Narrowly missed out: Rugby Renegade and Joburg’s Red Alert

The two winners were both scenarios, but fascinating ones. Both were original, and their style and grammar stood out. If Watermarks had had a more substantial plot, it would have been an easy winner, but both could both be taken a lot further with real stories and real tension.



Brief comments: Despite an abundant absence (please forgive the oxymoron) of plots, the ideas were all fairly original, and there were some fun concepts, such as the out-of-control boerewors “virus” in The Secret of Perpetual Boerewors, which didn’t make the cut due to severe flaws in the telling or the tale. Pick-up was terribly short on plot and motivation, but reasonably well-told. Howzit was highly original, but entirely lacking in plot and tension.

Special mention should go to Rugby Renegade, which was by far the most interesting and original story, with the greatest potential to be taken further. However, it glossed over key plot issues, not to mention being written as an article instead of a story. A core flaw, especially given how far we have come as a country, was its subconscious (I assume) racism (the gorilla is allowed to play as a “development player” and as being “previously disadvantaged” – this equates black people with apes, an ancient racist stereotype). The author should rework the story with greater clarity of the rules of sports (which certainly do not allow animals) and how these are changed, and with greater sensitivity to racial tolerance. The climax is quite beautiful, but the rest does not live up to it. Also far too much historic telling instead of story-telling showing.

That story also stood out by not being apocalyptic. Almost every other story portrayed a devastated future. This suggests that, as last year, writers aren’t stretching their imaginations enough. Also, most stories were written in the style of a history rather than a story. This is a key issue that Dave Freer also raised in last year’s judging of the main section in Probe 136: show us what’s happening, don’t tell us what happened. My mantra in that context is: give us stories, not scenarios. And give us tension!

## *Magazines Received*

**Ethel The Aardvark**      The Melbourne Science Fiction Club. P.O. box 212  
World Trade Centre Melbourne, VIC 8005 Australia

137    August – September 2008  
138    October – November 2008  
139    December 2008 – January 2009  
140    February - March 2009

**Opuntia.**    Dale Spiers      P.O.Box 6830 Calgary, Alberta Canada, TP2 3ET  
66A    September 2008  
66B    October 2008  
67.1    February 2009

**Vanamonde.** John Hertz.    235    Corondo St No. 409, Los Angeles. CA 90027 USA

758 - 762    December 4, 2007 – December 31, 2007  
773 - 777    March 18, 2008 – April 14 2008

# Nova 2008 General Section

## Winner.

# Nadia Patrick Coyne

‘Put me in a story! Put me in a story!’ The crowd of pleading musettes swarmed about Ben’s head before he had even settled down at his keyboard. He looked round ruefully. They seemed to sense when you had an idea for a drama-novella. Yes, you’d need them later on to bring your story to life – they knew it and you knew it - but right now, they were a nuisance.

‘Just buzz off, musies,’ Ben said, switching on his composer and good-humouredly threatening to swat them out of the way. ‘I’m trying to sort out a few ideas, okay?’

With an exaggerated wail of disappointment the musettes left, presumably to try their luck with another writer. All except one. Ben looked up and saw that she was perching on the frame of the composer’s 3-D screen. She had long, golden hair and was dressed in gauzy blue.

Don’t send me away,’ she said, pouting charmingly. ‘I won’t be a nuisance.’

‘You’re new round here, aren’t you?’ he said

‘Yes, my name’s Nadia. I’m tired of Comedy writers. I thought I’d try muse-ing you.’

Why me?’

She crossed her shapely legs. ‘You’re different. You write sad, historical romances, don’t you?’

‘Stay and see - if you want to. But don’t interrupt.’ Ben started to create the setting in the 3-D field, and then realised that Nadia was on his shoulder, looking into the picture with intense interest.

‘Okay, here’s the background,’ he said. ‘The story’s set in a restored mediaeval castle...’ Ben completed the castle, then froze the picture. He blinked, and saw that Nadia was back on the frame of the 3-D screen, sitting facing him. ‘Characters... There’s the daughter of the house, beautiful Sandra – ‘

‘Call her Cassandra,’ said Nadia. ‘Sounds more – intriguing.’

It crossed Ben’s mind that Nadia’s style of ‘muse-ing’ might be different from any he had known before. ‘All right, if you must – Cassandra. Now, I thought ‘ -

‘Of course, I’ll be Cassandra.’

Ben said: ‘Look, let’s leave casting for now. I’m busy with characters and plot.’ He saw her expression, and sighed. ‘All right! You can be Cassandra. You’re the type I had in mind, anyway.’

Nadia gave him a dazzling smile.



‘Uh, now – Cassandra’s father is Roderick Lepage, enormously rich, dotes on his daughter.’

Nadia said: ‘A big man? Overweight? I know just the musette guy for that part...’

‘Later, Nadia! Her mother is Eleanore, a quiet little woman, doesn’t have a big part in the story. Cassandra is engaged to be married to Carl Bruckner, a young entrepreneur’ -

‘Tall and blond?’ On the screen top, Nadia stood up gracefully to her full height of twelve and a half centimetres and held her hand above her head. ‘This high?’

‘Yes!... Then, Vance Matek, swarthy and fifty-ish, is the head of a small gang which plans to abduct Cassandra and hold her to ransom. His assistant is Leila Gorodin, who’s attractive but full of hatred for Cassandra, because, because – ‘

Nadia said: ‘ – because she once had an affaire with Carl, and still loves him!’

Ben looked surprised. ‘Er, yes, that’s what I had in mind... Now, we’re setting the scene and drawing characters. Later we put a twist or two into the story.’

Nadia was now reclining in classic pose on her side, with her head supported on one arm. ‘Tell me about the twists,’ she said.

‘No, I can’t do that,’ said Ben stiffly. ‘It’s not a good thing to give away too much of the plot at first.’ Actually, the twists and the ending were still unclear in his mind. Nadia gave a secret smile as if she knew this very well. As Ben began typing his dialogue, she swooped back on to his shoulder where she sat, gazing into the screen, muttering the words to herself and occasionally whispering suggestions into Ben’s ear.

So, the familiar routine of writing a drama-novella settled into place – with an important difference. Every day as Ben switched on the composer, Nadia appeared. Sometimes she brought along other musettes who would read some lines of dialogue, and then she would shoo them away and discuss their performances with Ben. As the days passed, Ben found that he was enjoying writing more than he had ever done before. Full of beguiling humour, Nadia was a delightful, if unpredictable, part of the scene. She apparently knew all about his idiosyncrasies in advance. He thought she seemed to possess some of the supernatural powers traditionally attributed to these tiny life-forms. Ben remembered the historical research he had done on musettes. Amazingly, it seemed that long ago, writers had to work entirely on their own, without the help of musettes! It was true that in ancient times creative artists fancied they had help from the ‘Muses’, the so-called goddesses of the liberal arts. But, as Ben had found, it had been only in recent times, in the aftermath of their enormous technical advances, that humans had made the quantum leap and developed their mental powers to the extent of an awareness far beyond their five senses. Now, musettes were simply part of one’s everyday life. Ben looked at Nadia, kneeling decoratively at the right-hand end of his keyboard where she could see both his face and the screen whenever she wanted to. Perhaps she had a magical influence on the progress of the work? Anyway, he was falling under her spell, that was for sure. He had never been successful with girls. He knew very well

that he was incredibly shy and tended to become tongue-tied when in their company. But he had never had any trouble in conversations with the musettes, and Nadia was the easiest of them all to talk to. She was also, in miniature, stunningly easy on the eye. It was now that they had their first difference of opinion. They had reached the point where Ben, with Nadia's help, had chosen the musette actors. He had created all the background settings, had written the scrolling-text narration, and had mapped out the alternatives for the final scene. Nadia wanted them to get on with the run-through at once. He wanted to tie up the climax first.

Nadia said: 'Ben, you don't have to worry. It often happens that the story falls into place as it goes along.'

Ben pulled a face. 'Huh! And then the characters take charge of my plot? No way!'

'It could be the best way,' said Nadia, in a neutral tone.

Ben looked at her. She seemed surprisingly offhand about it. Until now, she had either been passionately in favour of a plan, or the opposite. 'Okay,' he said, 'we'll give it a try, your way.'

Ben informed the Drama-novella Council that he was ready to do a first run-through of the drama, and he got their go-ahead. Their Crit-panel would view his production on the huge 3-D screen which the Council used, and after comparing notes, would announce their findings. If his drama measured up to their high standards, they would give it the green light for world-wide distribution. If it didn't, they would kill it.

Ben checked with Nadia that the cast were all waiting in the wings. Then he warmed up his small 3-D field, saw the

turrets of Castle Lepage zoom into view, and pressed the master switch for the merging and recording to begin.

Nadia, in her role as Cassandra, was leaning over the battlements, gazing into the distance. Her mother, Eleanore, joined her.

'Cassandra darling, did Carl say why he was coming?'

'No, only that he had something very important to tell me.'

Eleanore smiled. 'When a fiancé says that, it sounds exciting.'

With her eyes fixed on the driveway, Cassandra said: 'Mummy, he sounded worried. Or even – scared. He – oh, surely he'll be coming soon.' She put a pair of binoculars up to her eyes. The screen changed to indicate what Cassandra was seeing through the powerful lenses. Two people appeared, walking along the driveway. Cassandra breathed: 'It's Carl!' His companion was a girl with dark hair and, even at this distance, a perfect figure. They seemed to be arguing. Finally the girl kissed him, and walked back the way they had come. Carl waited indecisively until she was out of sight, then walked slowly on towards the castle.

Nadia, as Cassandra, shivered, and said to the musette actress playing her mother: 'Mummy, I have a terrible feeling that my life has changed for ever – and for the worse.'

As the story progressed, it became clear that Vance Matek, master criminal, plotted to abduct Cassandra and hold her to ransom.

As the pace picked up, Ben noticed that the cast weren't always saying the words he had written. And the musette playing the part of Leila was coming

across as a far more evil character than he had envisaged. Things were getting out of hand. Ben felt as if he was on a nightmarish roller coaster.

At a moment when Nadia wasn't appearing on-screen Ben beckoned her over. 'Nadia! What's going on?' he whispered. 'They're not sticking to the script. Let's freeze the recording. I want to run over the options for the end of the story.'

Nadia sat on his wrist and softly touched his hand as if to prevent him from working the pause button. 'Ben,' she said, 'your story's going well. Don't freeze it. Just let it develop.'

He hissed: 'The way it's developing now, it looks as if Cassandra's in big danger. She – you – could get killed.'

Nadia looked at him enigmatically. 'If that's the way it has to be...'

Ben ran his fingers through his hair. 'But... but... you know very well that when musettes get killed in drama-novellas, it's temporarily for real. If the Council don't like my production, they'll kill it instantly... So, any musette who's died in the story will be written off!' His voice was husky. 'Then I'll never, ever see you again...'

Nadia flitted to his shoulder and kissed his cheek, her lips as soft as a moth's wings. 'Ben,' she urged, 'you must believe that the council's going to approve your drama! So – even if Cassandra dies in the action, I'll get a new lease of life, and we'll be able to do many more stories together - for the whole world to see!' She glanced at the action in the 3-D field. 'Oh, I'm on now.' She turned and gave him a searching look. 'Bye!'

The climax was getting near. The ransom for Cassandra had been demanded by the gang-boss, Vatek. Her father had arranged for the police to be in hiding when the ransom was handed over. Leila was lying hidden nearby. The police opened fire on the gang. Under cover of the cross-fire, Leila fired at Cassandra, mortally wounding her. Carl turned and realised who had done it. Before she died, Cassandra saw Carl fire at Leila and kill her instantly. Twist, and double-twist. For the reader, unexpected. For Ben, it was devastating. A cold hand seemed to grip his heart.

The drama-novella wound to a close. As the final words of his text scrolled upwards, Ben faded down the music and pressed 'stop'.

He stared unseeingly at the blank screen. All the musette-actors had vanished. An hour had passed, with still no news. Ben tried his best to be confident that Nadia had known what she was talking about, that the Council wouldn't kill his production. But now a grim pessimism began to envelop him. If they had approved his drama, surely he would have heard something by now? Head on hands, he gazed numbly at the dull gray pattern of his keyboard, seeing only a lonely future stretching in front of him like a prison sentence. Then he felt something tickle his neck, and there seemed to be the touch of a butterfly's wing on his cheek. Looking up, he thought he must be dreaming: reflected in the screen was a familiar little blue-clad figure, sitting on his shoulder.

A well-known voice said softly into his ear: 'Put me in a story?'

# Winner of the 2008 Mini Radio Play Competition - Gary Kuyper

Presenting a single mini-episode from an exciting radio drama series:

## *The Adventures of Captain Max Power of the Intergalactic Police*

### CAST:

**Captain Max Power:** A member of the Intergalactic Police - Special Unit. A no-nonsense man who takes his job seriously. Capable of using both brains and brawn to get out of tight situations.

Speaks with a strong proud confident manly tone of voice.

**K9:** One of many robo-mutts built especially for Interpol by Professor Fuzzy Logic. A fortunate accident endowed him with A.I. (Artificial Intelligence) as well as H-I.Q. (Human-like qualities). Serves as Max Power's faithful sidekick and friend.

Speaks with a stunted electronic tone accompanied by beeps and buzzes.

**Cookie Fortuna:** Max Power's lovely oriental love interest. An expert in martial arts.

Speaks with an oriental accent.

**Major Disaster:** Once a loyal member of the Intergalactic Police. A freak accident changed him into an evil genius bent on ruling the galaxy. The accident also changed him into something *not* human. He hides his new features behind a hooded cloak and mask.

Speaks in an educated, but conceited and calculated tone of voice.

**Ms. D. Meaner:** Major Disaster's evil sidekick. She carries out the physical requirements of the Major's nefarious plans.

Speaks with a calm sultry vampish tone.

(Not featured in this particular episode).

**Professor Fuzzy Logic:** An elderly eccentric absent-minded, but brilliant scientist, as well as a respected member on the top board of the Intergalactic Police.

Speaks with a slight shaky nasal twang.

(Not featured in this particular episode).

The Narrator: Introduces and ends each episode. Speaks in a serious yet excited tone.

## THE STORY

Sound effects: Introductory theme music.

Narrator: Welcome to another exciting mini-episode of **CAPTAIN MAX POWER OF THE INTERGALACTIC POLICE!**

Sound effects: Dramatic theme music.

Narrator: Last time Captain Max and his trusty robo-mutt K9 had not only managed to remove the *positronic resonator* from the evil Major Disaster's death ray device, thwarting the terrible plot to destroy earth, but they had also managed to rescue the lovely Cookie Fortuna from certain death at the hands of Ms. D. Meaner's indestructible Lava Soldiers. Then, stealing one of the Major's own spaceships, they had made a daring escape from Volcania.

Sound effects: Woosh and hum of the interior of a spaceship.

Cookie Fortuna: We did it Max! We've gotten away safely!

K9: Well done everyone! Arf! Arf!

Max Power: I'm not sure this is the right time to be polishing our medals, K9! Something's not right!

K9: What do you mean, Max?

Max Power: Our escape was just... too easy! It was almost as if the *Major...allowed* us to escape!

Sound Effects: Beeping of viewscreen.

Major Disaster: Your assumptions are quite correct, my dear Captain!

Cookie Fortuna: Max! The viewscreen! It's Major Disaster!

Max Power: *Disaster!* What do you want?

Major Disaster: The positronic resonator, of course. Return it to me unharmed and I will allow you a safe journey back to earth.

Max Power: You take me for a fool? You would then be able to destroy the earth! If you want the resonator, come and get it!

Major Disaster: That, my dear captain, will not be necessary. It was foolish to steal one of *my* spaceships. Because now by simply pushing this button. . .

Sound effects: Beeping sound.

Major Disaster: ...I am able to do this! (Evil laugh).

K9: Max! I have lost control of the ship! It is changing course!

Max Power: You must regain control before we reach Volcania!

Major Disaster: Fool! I have no intention of bringing you back to Volcania. I have set the ship to crash into the nearest planet. (Evil laugh).

Max Power: You're going to destroy your ship to kill us? What about the resonator?

Major Disaster: The reason for destroying earth is because of *you*, Max Power!

Max Power: What! You still blame me for that unfortunate accident? It was your own foolishness that turned you into the... the... the thing you've become!



Major Disaster: No! It was *you!* You and your infernal meddling! And I'll not rest until the day I finally destroy the great Captain Maximillian Power!

K9: Max! We've entered the planet's atmosphere!

Max Power: K9, you've got to regain control before it's too late!

K9: There is not enough time! You need to find another solution! In the meantime I will send Professor Fuzzy Logic a distress signal at Earth Headquarters. (Howls).

Cookie Fortuna: Max! What are we going to do?

Max Power: Fear not fair Cookie, I have a plan!

Major Disaster: It's *already* too late, Max Power! You are all doomed! (Evil laugh)

Sound effects: Sound of spaceship plummeting.

Cookie Fortuna: (Screams).

Sound effects: Dramatic theme music

Narrator: Will Max Power escape certain death? Find out tomorrow when you tune into another exciting mini-episode of the adventures of *Captain Max Power of the Intergalactic Police!*

Sound effects: Dramatic theme music





# No, I Was Not the Prime Minister of Serbia

## The Zoran Zivkovic Interview

Michael Lohr

Simply stated Zoran Zivkovic is one of the most visionary and talented speculative fiction novelists in the world. Of novelists whose mother tongue is not English, Zoran is without a doubt head and shoulders above the competition. Among his European contemporaries, his work is true literature and holds up to any challenger. Unlike some of his older, more well established British contemporaries who slip money under the table to get their self aggrandizing slop praised by stiff, upper lip editors all the while suffering from a massive case of J.K. Rowling envy.

A native of Belgrade, Serbia and a survivor of the brutal, Bosnian genocide wars of the 1990s, Zoran is a tempest of creative energy rising forth from a singularity of nihilism. He is a graduate of the University of Belgrade where he earned his bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees. His master's thesis was on the "anthropomorphism and the motif of the first contact in the writings of Arthur C. Clarke." His doctoral dissertation discussed the "appearance of science fiction as a genre of artistic prose." This dissertation is available to the public via in Zivkovic's Contemporaries of the Future anthology.

In 1982, Zivkovic founded the Polaris imprint, Yugoslavia's first privately-owned science fiction publishing house. Through this publishing house he has released over one-hundred novels, each one a vibrant reading experience, if you can read Serbian Cyrillic script. Some of his novels that can be read in English are The Fourth Circle, The Writer, Seven Touches of Music and The Bridge. His novel The Book, which was written during some of the heaviest bombardment of Belgrade, was nominated for one of the most prestigious, mainstream European literary awards, the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. His novella, The Library, was also nominated for this award and it won the World Fantasy Award for Best Novella.

Zoran is also an accomplished nonfiction writer having composed several tomes of science fiction knowledge including Essays of Science Fiction, the illustrated, two volume Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and the treatise on the cultural and social impact of humanity's initial contact with an alien species entitled, First Contact. He's also successfully worn the hat of editor with the award winning anthology, The Devil of Brisbane. He's even tried his hand at being a TV star. In the 1980s, Zoran hosted and wrote the scripts for television series, "The Starry Screen" – which was a show focused on science fiction cinema. These episodes later inspired a collection critical essays published under the same title. In 2005, Belgrade TV station Studio B produced "The Collector" a fantasy series based upon his short stories. In 2006, Zoran was honored with the Isidora Sekulic Award for his novel The Bridge. This mainstream literary award is named after one of the greatest Serbian female writers and essayists of the 20th century, Isidora Sekulic.

The Bridge was previously short-listed for the NIN Award – Serbia's major literary award. The UK limited edition of The Bridge will be published before the end of the year by PS Publishing.

Although Zoran has met the former Serbian Prime Minister of the same name, he is not a politician. His only political concerns these days are promoting literacy, the humanities, peace studies and multicultural understanding. Hmm, actually he would be the perfect person to be the Serbian Prime Minister, or even an arts representative to the United Nations.

**ML:** As a heralded international science fiction and fantasy novelist and supporter of the genre in general, do you feel that speculative fiction, or fiction in general, as a medium can change the way people look at the world?

**ZZ:** By all means. Reading fiction in general, any kind of fiction, good fiction, enables readers to see the world from a new, different, often better perspective. Alas, people tend to read less and less in the contemporary world. That is probably one of the reasons why the world is becoming more and more of an unpleasant place.

**ML:** Is there any epigrammatic political Diaspora you are attempting to disseminate with your fiction novels; concepts like the value of love, democracy, individualism, anarchy?

**ZZ:** No. If there are any values in what I write they are strictly literary, aesthetical. In my humble view, any other expectation from literature would be fundamentally wrong. There are other areas where the concepts you listed would be far more appropriate.

**ML:** How did you get involved in writing novels? What motivated you to start writing?

**ZZ:** An irresistible urge. I did not start to write fiction until I was 45. I now see the first four and a half decades of my life as a preparation period. Everything that I previously read, learned and experienced had accumulated somewhere in my subconscious. When a critical mass eventually gathered there, it erupted, creating my first novel The Fourth Circle and then fourteen more books of fiction in the following fourteen years.

**ML:** In your opinion, what is the most important, quintessential science fiction or fantasy? novel ever published? Why?

**ZZ:** I don't think such a novel exists. There are many excellent novels and each of them has contributed in its own way to the enormously rich heritage of fantastical literature. To favor only one of them would be greatly unfair toward the others.

**ML:** Why, after success with writing science fiction novels, did you begin writing fantasy novels exclusively? Do you have the desire to return to the science fiction medium at some point in the future?

**ZZ:** I have never written science fiction or fantasy novels. I've always considered my works just novels (or mosaic novels), without any prefixes. These prefixes, invented by the publishing industry, are both limiting and misleading. I would rather be free of any "industrial" limitations and obligations.

**ML:** Have you ever considered writing a novel void of magical realism and fantastic elements?

**ZZ:** I don't mull over what I write. I make no plans about it. I just follow the dictates of my subconscious where all my fiction originates. I have written a few works void of fantastic elements. The Book and The Writer are two examples.

**ML:** Did you ever receive hate mail meant for the former Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Zivkovic? Have you experienced any bizarre situations due to the both of you sharing the same name?

**ZZ:** I have received a few angry emails, but, interestingly enough, far more interview requests. These were very tempting situations...☺

**ML:** You've been favorably compared to Jorge Luis Borges, Frank Kafka and Stanislaw Lem. Are you comfortable with such comparisons?

**ZZ:** I feel extremely honored to be compared to such luminaries. I humbly hope I deserve their company...

**ML:** What happened to your Polaris publishing house project? What had been the most popular novels published by Polaris?

**ZZ:** Polaris has been dead for nearly a decade now. I canceled it after turning fifty, because I couldn't handle the parallel slalom anymore. I had to choose between being a publisher and a writer, because I lacked time and energy to be both at the same time. I chose the latter and I didn't regret it. The absolute best-seller of all Polaris books was Stephen Hawking's A Brief History of Time.

**ML:** What is your definition of meaningful literature?

**ZZ:** It is hard to define good literature briefly, even for someone with a formal degree in the theory of literature. On the other hand, it's easy to tell great literature when you see it. Let me give you a few examples from recent times: Saramago's The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis, Eco's Baudolino, Pamuk's The White Castle, Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Yellin's The Genizah at the House of Shepher...

**ML:** You received a Master's degree (and a Ph.D.) from the University of Belgrade with a thesis focusing on the "Anthropomorphism and the motif of first contact in the SF stories of [science fiction legend] Arthur C. Clarke." How do you believe our first contact will actually take place? Do you believe that extraterrestrials have visited us at least once in our ancient past?

**ZZ:** The older and more experienced I get, the more I am convinced that we are alone in the Universe. This outcome isn't necessarily bad. It should teach us the virtue of responsibility...

**ML:** My personal favorite novel that you've written thus far is the short collection, Seven Touches of Music (The Fourth Circle is a close second). Is there a particular message that you were attempting to distill with this novel?

**ZZ:** The same thing happened with Seven Touches of Music as with all my other books. One morning back in 2001, I woke up and there it was, on the surface of my conscious, although with its roots deep in my subconscious. I just started to write it, trying to type as soon as I could in order to satisfy the impatient reader in me. I always experience that kind of personality split. While I am writing, I am at the same time both a subconscious writer

and a conscious reader. So, there were no messages I wanted to distill or any rational motivation. I wrote Seven Touches of Music just because it was the right time for me to do that. There was no premeditation whatsoever...

**ML:** What was your primary objective for writing your rather unique short novel, The

Writer? Is there any particular social message that you were attempting to convey?

**ZZ:** Again, I never try to convey any message with my prose. The Writer was written in just two weeks back in 1996, while I was with my family on vacation in Malta. It was very hot there and I never could stand being in the sun very long, so contrary to my wife and our twin sons who are much more enduring in this regard, I spent most of the daily hours in our hotel lobby. Very soon upon our arrival I discovered that it was an ideal ambiance for writing, even if I didn't have a laptop at that time. But fortunately a pen and a notebook were easily available — and the rest is history...

**ML:** How have all the years of war and conflict in the Balkans region affected your writing? I mean to say, being surrounded by darkness and death, how did this influence your muse?

**ZZ:** There was no war in Belgrade, where I lived (and am still living), except for the 77 days (and nights) of the NATO campaign against my country in the spring of 1999, when I almost got killed during the bombing of the Chinese Embassy that happened to be located just across the street. Curiously enough, my only piece of fiction motivated by the war originated precisely during that period, although in an unusual way. I wrote my most comical novel so far — The Book — as a kind of vital reaction toward the death and destruction that was all around me.

**ML:** Have you experienced frustration when writing a story in the Serbian language and then when translated, say into English or French, noticed that its intonation was lost? Has the true message or meaning of your story ever gotten lost in translation?

**ZZ:** I am extremely fortunate to have a perfect English translator, Mrs. Alice Copple-Tošić, an American lady, very knowledgeable in Serbian. She has translated all but two of my fifteen prose books so far. We are such a perfect tandem that I should actually consider her my co-author when it comes to the English versions of my books. So far, Alice has received nothing but compliments from the native English speakers who read my books in her translations. As for other languages, I can only hope and pray that the translations are as accurate and beautiful as my English translations...

**ML:** Literary pundits in America always opine for the next great American novel. What in your opinion is the greatest European novel? I mean there are many that could qualify including Albert Camus' The Plague, Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses and Tolstoy's War and Peace, but what in your opinion constitutes the greatest novel written by a European hand?

**ZZ:** There are many great European novels. I listed some of them earlier. If I had to choose the most important novel in the European history of literature, then it would be Cervantes' masterpiece Don Quixote. If you asked me to explain why, I would take the liberty of suggesting that you read Milan Kundera's magnificent collection of essays The

Art of the Novel. All answers are there.

**ML:** I read where someone called you the best, non-English language science fiction novelist writing today. Do you take this as a compliment or do you see this comment as more like someone saying you're the best Serbian novelist, instead of someone just stating that you're one of the most intriguing writers anywhere in the world?

**ZZ:** The first is an undeserved and imprecise compliment. First, as I explained earlier, I don't consider myself a science fiction writer. Second, we have no idea what's available outside the English language area if it isn't translated into English. A correct version of the first compliment would be that I am one of the most translated and published non-English language author of fantastical fiction in the US and UK. The second compliment makes me blush...

**ML:** Is there a literary movement afoot right now that interests you or do you stay away from trends and focus only on your own work? What was your opinion of Steampunk and what is your opinion of horror literature?

**ZZ:** I do my best to stay away from trends and literary movements. However avant-garde they might be in the beginning, they all tend eventually to be limiting and rigid. I must confess, risking to disappoint many people, that I am not very fond of horror in literature. Mostly because there is so much horror outside literature...

**ML:** You once stated, "My artistic universe isn't an idyllic place, inhabited only by ideal beings. In some ways it's much more like Hell than Heaven. But Hell mostly for the artist himself." That is a very deep statement. Would you care to elaborate?

**ZZ:** Oh, well, I think I have already written the best possible elaboration. Anything that I might say now in this regard would be far behind what can be found in my mosaic novel Time Gifts.

**ML:** You have a great relationship with Interzone magazine. Do you feel they were seminal in getting your fiction before the English-speaking world?

**ZZ:** By all means! My Interzone period that lasted three years in the early 2000s during which as many as 19 stories of mine were published, was really essential for introducing my writing to English speaking readers. I will remain eternally grateful to David Pringle for the chance he kindly gave me...

**ML:** Based upon your short story in your collection, Impossible Stories, do you have a fascination about the death of Albert Einstein? Jim Morrison is the death that most intrigues me. But I'm not going to touch the story you wrote about the sex life of scientist Stephen Hawking 😊

**ZZ:** It wasn't the death of Albert Einstein itself that fascinated me but what happened just prior to it. Allegedly, Einstein spent the last hour of his life speaking German to his nurse who didn't understand a single word of it. It might have been just the gibberish of a dying old man, but also the revelation of the ultimate cosmic truths. We'll never know. That paradoxical uncertainty is the very foundation on which my mosaic novel Seven Touches of Music is based. As for Stephen Hawking's sex life, it should be considered within the context of my novel The Fourth Circle to avoid the temptation of wrongly interpreting it as



a kind of pornography...

**ML:** You rarely cast a character as evil, and violence is not common in your novels. Have you ever begun to write something and then stopped after deciding that the material was too controversial?

**ZZ:** There is no violence in my fiction simply because there is no violence in my life. I am an extremely non-violent man and I feel the greatest possible aversion towards any kind of violence, physical or other. There has never been any reason to stop writing something because of too much violence in it because I've never started anything similar.

**ML:** I know you're a big football fan. Do you think David Beckham's signing with the US Major League Soccer team the Los Angeles Galaxy will be the beginning of a major "star" shift in the football world. Will there be more defections to the US league?

**ZZ:** I should hope so! Although I am generally considered not a very successful prophet, I would dare to predict that in a mere twenty years the US soccer national team will play in the world cup finals. Hopefully against Serbia. Let the better team win then...

I want to thank Zoran for taking the time out of his busy schedule to sit down and discuss a plethora of topics of interest to both the literary and international community. To learn more about Zoran firsthand, go to his official website, <http://www.zoranzivkovic.com/>. You can also find Zoran at the Internet Speculative Fiction Database <http://www.isfdb.org/>. You can also go to the Fantastic Metropolis website <http://www.fantasticmetropolis.com/> and read an excerpt from Zoran's master thesis, focusing on the "motif of the first contact in the writings of Arthur C. Clarke." You can also access his article "Utopia in the novel Childhood's End by Arthur C. Clarke.

Zoran is a rare breed. He's a Renaissance man, an entrepreneur and a futurist. This world could use a few more people like him. And on a final thought, Zoran, this brilliant individual who has seen life from all its blunt force spectrums, who has worked as a researcher, translator, TV personality and business man, once said that as a life philosophy, he "tries to resist the destructive force of *thanatos* with laughter." I couldn't concur more so.

Michael Lohr is a professional journalist, outdoorsman, treasure hunter and adventurer. His writing has appeared in such diverse magazines as, Outside Magazine, Southern Living, Cowboys & Indians, Sailing World, Caribbean Travel & Life, Canoe & Kayaking, Outdoor Life, and Adventure Sports, to name a few. He contributes regularly to Bluegrass Unlimited magazine and Persimmon Hill, the Journal of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, and also had a few dabblings published in Rolling Stone and Esquire.

His webpage can be found at: [http://www.internet.is/artist/writer/michael\\_lohr.htm](http://www.internet.is/artist/writer/michael_lohr.htm)



# Letter of Comment

1706-24 Eva Rd.  
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January 6, 2008

Dear SFSAns:

I've been sent quite a Christmas present...issues 137 and 138 of Probe, and with full colour covers, too. Very nice, and many thanks. I hope to at least start to pay back your generosity with a letter on the contents of the two issues.

137...Hello, Gail. I look forward to SFSA's 40th anniversary celebrations next year. The Melbourne club may be 55 years old, but the LASFS in Los Angeles will mark 75 years this coming October. I notice many clubs that are celebrations substantial birthdays, but few clubs that are relatively new.

The story Mrs. Moses is not so much science fiction, but written-out wish fulfillment. Those of us who see effects of climate change on the world around us certainly know about the droughts that affect Australia. If only it were as simple of stick your finger into the earth or a rock to draw forth water. Perhaps it's more magic fiction than anything else.

Lois McMaster Bujold's interview made me smile, especially about tree novels being mortgage money and e-books being pizza money. In spite of e-books and e-zines, we are still old-fashioned enough to want something physical for money paid, or something physical to hold. Paper zines get the desired response, and paper novels are collectibles. Electronic versions of each seem to have little perceived value. People don't want to pay for an e-version of a novel, but don't mind putting down the money for a physical version. Paper zines get response, and e-zines don't get much response at all.

138...Interesting to see that you've got a Star Trek club now. There's a couple of Trek clubs in Toronto, but at one point, there must have been a dozen or more, connected with Starfleet, Starfleet International, KAG, a Romulan group, and a few other clubs who really wanted to control local Trek fandom. Whether there will be any more clubs in Toronto when the next Star Trek movie comes out, I don't know.

Greetings to Tex! I'm all set to turn 50, but I never left fandom. There was always the time and money, mostly because we never had kids, or bought a house. As a result, both Yvonne and I have been involved in fandom 30+ years each.

I had read a while ago that Lois McMaster Bujold had based her Miles Vorkosigan books on Trek fan fiction she'd written some years ago, and that Vorkosigan was originally a Klingon. I'm not sure this is true, but I am certain she'd never admit it.

I should wrap up...there's a lot of good writing here, and a lot of book reviews, but not much to say on them. I'll do better next time, with luck. Take care, and see you when the next Probes arrive.

Yours, Lloyd Penney.



## Books Received

### **PanMacmillan**

The Ancient - R.A. Salvatore

The Secret War - M.F.W Curran

### **Jonathan Ball**

Graceling - Kirsten Cashore

# *Nova 2008 S.A. Section*

## *Joint Winner.*

### *Watermarks*

Chester woke without legs. The flaps of his pants hung over either side of the hammock.

There was no pain. His dreams of Vivian and their little house in Velddrif had been undisturbed. The hammock - its webbing and cords still redolent with the brine of the Western Cape - soothed the first stirrings of alarm.

Crazy.

He slipped back into asleep.

The recess within the duty room was dim; the first tendrils of gloaming limned the bars on the window overhead. It was summer in Phalaborwa, which meant the sun rose before 06h00. He still had time before he rotated the guards and their weapons at 06h30, and handed over the station to his relief another half hour later. His eyes rolled to meet the fall of his eyelids. The weight of sleep drew him deep into the moist warm pillow.

Chester opened his eyes and gazed down the length of his body.

An icy current of disquiet rippled through his belly.

Behind the chipboard partition there was silence.

"Sergeant?" he called. Sergeant Malherbe, his guard commander, should have been manning the duty desk behind the partition.

Nothing.

### *John Yarrow*

the netting. He had slept on his back with his legs dangling out and earthward. The position helped ventilate the hammock in the night heat. Where his upper legs narrowed towards the absent kneecaps, the faded material dropped perpendicular to the ground like windsocks in a dead calm.

He could not feel his feet.

Chester tried to straighten his legs.

Nothing happened -but for a sudden turbulence in his chest, a parched constriction in his throat.

Gripping both sides of his hammock, he pulled himself upright as if doused in cold water. The action was awkward, his body not accustomed to the lack of drag caused by his lower limbs. The movement drew both thighs towards his belly. Unanchored, off-balance, his torso folded like a clasp knife.

Lieutenant Chester Hendricks moaned softly.

He sucked in breath.

"Sergeant!"

There should have been the idle chatter of gate guards outside, the acrid waft of cigarette smoke, doors opening and closing. Not even the whining grumble of a vehicle travelling between the base and the Kruger National Park marred the eerie peace of the duty room, of this strange disembodied world.

He patted the domes of each stump, cupped the fat ends; the undersides were dry. The flesh of his truncated legs did not feel the contact of his fingers.

Panting, Chester wrung the loose cloth between his fists.

Objects, soft and whispering, ruffled onto the floor below him. He twisted and looked over the sides of the hammock.

For a moment his sanity wavered, expecting to behold his severed legs lying in pools of dried blood.

Instead, unimpeded by his calves and feet, his heavy socks had fallen from the ends of the pants onto the tiles of the duty room. Absently, he hauled the trouser legs onto his lap. The garters sewn into each hem retained their simple bowknots. Outside, a dog screamed.

He had never heard a dog scream before. A gargling howl - panicked yelps - ripped through the stillness.

He sat frozen.

Had a predator broken out of the Park again?

No.

It was worse, far worse. He knew it with a visceral certainty. Chester felt his heart pound against his ribcage, his diaphragm trembling as he started to hyperventilate.

For a moment, he almost succumbed to the denial offered by the hammock.

Go back. Go back to the safe harbour of slumber. He felt a savage panic rise within him; a black squall of insanity loomed in the compass points of his brain. Chester began to pant. His vision fixed in desperation upon the ceiling and traced the reassuring reality of the corrugated metal panels.

An image of his father surfaced through the psychotic surf in his mind: a fierce brown man with grapnels for hands and

teeth shattered by a parted cable, a man whose fishing boat and every other possession had been earned from years of toil on the cold Benguela current.

Chester could picture his father's small defiant figure in the wheelhouse of his beloved Sarie, glaring back at his only son - the soldier, the officer.

Turn to windward, Chezzie. Face the storm and you'll be all right.

He confronted the madness. His mind cleared.

Surrounding him and the fenced security compound were platoons of off-duty personnel and an outpost of military police. Someone else must surely be checking what was happening. Skipper Hendricks's son was in personal command of some fifteen guards and roving pickets. In his capacity as officer-on-duty, Lieutenant Hendricks effectively commanded the entire battalion.

Where the hell was Malherbe? Chester had done more than his share last night; he'd allowed the sergeant to retire early during the 18h00 change of the guard, to sleep undisturbed until midnight when the pair had formally handed over the duty room and Chester had gone to his hammock.

He took a deep breath and knotted the empty legs of his pants. The hammock was strung in the corner of the recess, rigged from the grid of metal beams that supported the roof. He always brought the hammock on duty. The officer's bunk consisted of an ancient wafer of sponge on a worn wire frame and was as hard as a stone pallet. The bed lay at an angle below, flush against the near wall.

Chester gripped a cluster of ropes with both hands and swung his lower body out into space. He released his hold, lifting

both thighs to take the landing on his hamstrings and buttocks. His body landed on the bed, bounced, and toppled backwards.

Jesus!

The loss of his legs had relocated his centre of gravity. Despite a regimen of morning runs and evening gym, he realised his new handicap demanded the honing of neglected muscles, a fresh coordination of basic movements.

Twisting in the air, he hit the ground and rolled on one shoulder.

He lay on his back for a few moments; then, thrusting the pants down over his hips, he wriggled his thighs free.

The planes of flesh that had once been living tissue, bone and muscle - all concealed within a casing of skin and fat - were now padded with dull callus. He ran his fingers over the stiff and abrasive substance. The muscle yielded to pressure, but no blood flushed around the points of his probing fingers. He could feel the rods of femoral bone behind the thick sheath of scar tissue.

The squall, one of those Antarctic-born howlers that had terrified him as a youngster on his father's fishing boat, raved behind his eyes.

Ride it out, Chezzie, his father whispered. He fought off the feverish giggle clawing at the base of his throat, the hot tears that bubbled in the corners of his eyes.

Slowly, he drew on the pants and retrieved the olive web belt and blouse from the bed.

Around the partition, a discarded uniform sprawled on the chair behind the desk. A beret, infantry green, lay on top of the blouse. Two boots stood primly beneath the desk, toes pointed outward as though worn by an invisible man.

Chester Hendricks propped himself on both elbows and dragged his body closer. He noted the buttoned fly, the dog tags twisted on the shirt collar. A sergeant's brassard of three stripes nestled in the nearest sleeve of the blouse.

He crawled around the desk and stared down the still corridor. Leaning forward, he swung his body between both braced arms.

At the guardroom doorway, he ignored the missing soldier's sleepwear and T-shirt lying in front of him.

A man's figure was perfectly traced on the door's wooden surface. He ran one hand over the fine hairs on the bare legs and the intricate contours of the calf muscles. No details vitalised the outlines of the man's clothing. Above the neckline of the T-shirt, the watermark of Rifleman Selolo's ghostly face was stern and preoccupied.

The image suggested Selolo's last movement - a stride through the open entrance.

Chester ran his hand over the silvery intaglio, and it vanished upon contact. Inside the guardroom, uniforms were hung or folded next to each bunk, the sleeping bags deflated. Some of the pillows had cavities in the middle where tired heads had once slept. Chester swung to the remains of every bed. On the brown sheets, the fine watermarks of bare skin, hair and identity of each missing sleeper were faithfully superimposed. Corporal Thanjekwayo, Rifleman Maluleke...the others he didn't know by name. The faces of the known and nameless vanished together beneath his touch.

Outside in the forecourt, the morning breeze played with an overturned helmet.

A clipboard protruded from beneath a heap of camouflaged blouse and belted pants. The boots of one missing guard straddled a rifle; all three objects pointed at a stalled car.

The hatchback must have arrived during the night while he was asleep. Its beams would have been on, the engine running. A woman's head lay on the ground next to the driver's door.

Make that half a head.

Chester registered the shining tresses, the lipstick visible on the remaining halves of each lip, the faint eye shadow brushed over drunken eyelids.

The plane of cleavage sliced down and diagonally from a point above her left ear, bisected her open mouth and exited through the point of her chin. The trauma had been cauterised in the same way as his stumps.

A cup of padded leather sat on the ground between the uniform and clipboard.

Chester pictured one soldier registering the visitor's particulars, the other guard confronting the bonnet of the car and pointing his rifle at the ground between his

boots and the grille. Standard procedure.

The guard with the clipboard scribbles down her name while standing by the side-mirror; the woman cocks her head out the open window to look up at him. She is impatient to enter the unit. The point of her elbow, clothed in a leather jacket sleeve, pokes over the rim of the car's open window.

Appalled tears rolled down his face.

Then something happened.

Something...

He couldn't seize the concept. It hung out of range of his comprehension, clamouring like a distant child in distress.

Movement through the western fence flickered through the skein of moisture blurring his vision. On the barren verge, a mangy dog worried at something on the ground. Stimulated by a wild joy, Chester started to lever his way towards the high fencing.

He stopped.

The dog's hindquarters were sloped and shaggy, the matted pelt in moult and revealing patches of shocking green. The rear legs were hooped in alternate shades of black and red. The heavy shoulders twitched and wrenched at the bloody object on the ground, which flopped and rolled. The carcass was that of Major Calitz's dog, Suzie, the guards' favourite visitor. The Labrador's muzzle hung obscenely agape.

A long tubular neck unfurled from the killer's hidden forequarters and lifted into the air. The wedge-shaped head pivoted at the tip of the gory periscope and revealed pus-coloured eyes. A pouch of leathery skin dangled from its face.

Lips, Chester realised.

Tallow eyes locked onto Chester. Its body wheeled beneath and around the hub of unmoving neck and head. Chester glimpsed the jagged purse of Suzie's eviscerated abdomen.

From the blood that painted the thing's neck, it must have burrowed its head all the way into the pet's body.

The creature's eyes narrowed. Leathery lips rolled back to reveal a snarl of fangs. It began to trot towards him, its rigid neck extended like a divining rod. Just like a tail, Chester thought, for balance.

He watched, fascinated, as it clattered against the fence and reeled back, fangs clacking together like castanets.



Chester felt a rill of warm fluid run down his inner thighs. His arms were stiff and ungainly as he twisted around. The flesh on his back cringed under the alien's scrutiny.

He reached the inner gate of the security block; his ears reverberated to the rhythm of four-legged pursuit. Chester shoved the bolt across the gate and snapped home the padlock.

The alien beat against the gate. Chester made his ape-like way to the duty room. Afternoon. All the station's instruments - the radios, telephones, everything - were working, but nobody answered. He had called every number on his mobile's phonebook. The television was a screen of static; none of the radio frequencies captured live transmission.

Chester sat with his back to the weapons' safe. A semi-automatic pistol hung from a lanyard around his neck. Thick gloves covered his hands, and he'd fashioned a makeshift seat from the sponge mattress and strips of army blanket.

An R4 assault rifle, its stock folded, was slung across his back.

The power went off.

A red moon bloodied the infected planet. As though the dark were a living Babel, and the shadows a vanguard of some banshee army, the cacophony crept across the earth in time with the dying of the light. Emanating from the married quarters, the distant howling of starving dogs ceased as abruptly as the first alien screech lacerated the twilight.

Bedlam followed. Lunatic voices emitted sounds to which no man had ever put a name. It drove Chester between the desk and the massive weapons' safe, clutching the pistol against his breastbone.

A slaver's snarl brushed across the outer surface of the compound door. Chester felt the temperature of his body plummet, his skin break out in gooseflesh.

The door vibrated and grated under the rub of a scaled hide. Tentative sniffs of something big and inquisitive behind the flimsy door caused Chester's eyes to goggle in the murk. The sniffs ceased. For long seconds, he heard the wooden surface being licked, the sodden strokes unmistakable. The door rattled on its hinges.

The licking stopped in mid-stroke.

Immersed in the dark, his crippled body began to tremble.

Boom, duh-boom.

Chester flinched under the impact of a pounding tread. The southern side of the compound fence convulsed and squeaked. He heard the staccato twang of individual strands as they snapped. High-pitched hooting revolved around the air above the roof; Chester imagined a frenzy of airborne creatures circling the head of an unseen behemoth. Bipedal, gargantuan strides stomped into the unit, heading east.

Outside, the night gibbered and crooned. Earthling birdsong cheered the dawn. The raucous salute of a plover made Chester's chest hitch.

He had consumed as much as he could from the guards' depleted ration packs; water he had obtained from the officer's bathroom.

His hands performed a rapid equipment check. The sickbay's keys were in the left breast pouch of the battle-jacket along with a utility knife, torch and lighter.

Chester levered himself into the sunlight, taking the path that led to the rear of the

security compound. He glanced at the woman's car without expression.

The cloven head was gone.

Around the corner, the southern line of fencing was mangled as though a giant hand had pressed down on it from above, then twisted it from its moorings. Past the fence, two walls of the squash court had collapsed into rubble.

The scent of dewy grass smelt wonderful. No music thumped from the training barracks; the washing of dead men fluttered on the lines like the flags of a forgotten civilisation. He picked his way through the trees flanking the parade ground, and watched out for stones and wire shrapnel. It was slow but quiet progress. Lifting his stumps high, the only sound of his passage was the soft press of his cushioned hands and rump on the grass. The suspense was agony; his eyes ached with tension. Runnels of sweat trickled beneath his shirt and the laden battle-jacket.

Then again, anything was better than holing up forever in the duty room. Every alternative had demanded the undertaking of this first awful risk.

He reached the road adjacent to the sports field. Huge piles of dung punctuated the obstacle course. The high rampart was toppled onto its side, the wooden slats smashed into splinters. Beyond the line of trees and watchtowers marking the unit's southern boundary, pillars of smoke signaled the location of Phalaborwa.

He passed a military police pick-up, its cab stamped into the ground. The bonnet and loadbox curled upward like the edges of a singed paper sheet.

He stopped to adjust the weight of the battle-jacket. Already his shoulders and

wrists ached. Through the padding of his makeshift seat, the ground had scraped the virgin skin of his buttocks and upper thighs.

He looked up.

An impala floated across the road.

It was dead, he saw, a corpse that hovered about two metres above the ground. Its neck lolled in a boneless arch, long stiff legs jabbing the sky. The air around it teemed with fine silvery objects, as though the carcass were trapped in a computer-generated mirage. A mechanical drone emanated from the aerial disturbance.

Phut.

A robust grasshopper, or so he thought, landed on the street ahead. Long curved antennae extended from its bony head, their roots set between black compound eyes. Its thorax and abdomen combined to form a sturdy dowel-shaped body. Chester noted the back-bent hind-legs that alone supported the weight of the insect; the elevated forelimbs were compact rods tipped with vicious curling hooks.

Behind the creature, the impala ascended, buoyed clear of the buildings and the ground below. As the dead gazelle rose, the drone heightened in pitch and became a savage arpeggio. Chester watched the carcass begin to disintegrate in mid-air.

The Swarm feasted.

Chester held his breath and began to move.

He circled the scout, wincing at every soft whisper of cloth against cloth, every soft impact of flesh upon tarmac. At the sickbay doors, he removed the tagged keys from the canvas pouch - the metallic jangle caused him to bare his teeth.

Both hands shook as he double-checked the word written on the yellow tag of one key.

#### MAIN ENTRANCE.

With his other hand, he gripped one of the barred handles and pulled himself up to reach the keyhole.

The key slid into the slot.

Tumblers clicked and his lungs remembered how to respire, his heart to pump.

The Swarm signaled its awareness of his existence with a wild saw of sound. He heard parts of the impala splash onto the ground behind him.

Chester jammed the key into his mouth, levered open the door with one stump and both forearms, and dragged himself inside. He swatted the door closed behind him. Before he could regain his breath, the door shuddered under the rapid beat of the assault of a thousand tiny bodies. He managed another one-armed pull-up and locked the door.

Chester spent two blessed hours in the clinic. The roof and walls were made of thick concrete. Heavy windowless doors interrupted the sterile corridors.

The worst part of his entry into the sickbay was forcing open the passageway doors. Without the drive of his legs, he had to claw his way through each one using the extended stock of the assault rifle, and wriggle his shoulders and hips through every gap in order to reach the next length of corridor beyond.

Another complication was the lack of light. His attempts at wedging the torch into his battle-jacket failed; the wayward beam either lolled downwards or fell out of his webbing altogether.

In his mouth, then. His jaw and teeth were throbbing by the time he found the storeroom behind the reception area. Three collapsed wheelchairs leaned against the far wall between two metal cabinets. Chester crawled forward and grabbed the nearest one. Like a camping chair, it took outward pressure upon both armrests to snap it into position. He figured out how to lock the wheels before attempting to haul himself into the seat. The canvas seat felt marvelous under his buttocks, the rims like the steering wheel of a Ferrari.

He shrugged off his battle-jacket and let the sweat evaporate off his body. The loss of air-conditioning and fresh air had turned the building into an airless sauna. He ate his rations slowly and drained a gorgeous energy drink he'd found in the refrigerator, the liquid still cool in spite of the loss of power.

After his meal, he re-stowed his battle-jacket and draped over the back of the chair a medical kit bulging with surgical implements, dressings, and antibiotics from the pharmacy.

It was time to leave. Stasis was danger, the breeding ground for insanity.

Wait. Behind the reception desk, he found the battalion's telephone directory, and paged to the "B" section.

One name. One address.

Through the key hole of the sickbay door, the barren street shimmered in the summer heat.

Chester opened the door and went outside. The chair was stiff and stupid beneath his hands - his progress slow, awkward. His life was becoming a desperate lesson in coordination.

He left the bunch of keys suspended from the inner lock.

You never know. In the future, some other human traveler might have need of sanctuary.

General De Wet Street. Number 29.

The house was as desolate as the rows of denuded military houses flanking each side of the street. The windows were blank and dispassionate - lenses worn by the blind.

The front door was locked. Chester didn't bother to knock. He wheeled around the empty house on an asphalt track to the rear. The kitchen door was open, probably to let in the night breezes of an Mpumalanga summer.

The house belonged to Johan Buys, the battalion's switchboard operator and a paraplegic. Once a field engineer in the Border War, Buys had been partially paralysed by a landmine explosion in Angola.

He found Buys's big Mercedes-Benz in the garage, its tank three quarters full. He loaded the kitted cruiser with supplies from the larder and work-shed. Apart from the modified car, the grand prize was Buys's modern wheelchair. Lightweight and contoured with heavy padding for prolonged use, it stood in the customised bathroom next to the tub.

No silvery watermark shimmered on the still surface of the murky bathwater.

Chester felt no horror as he drained the tub and filled it again with fresh water.

Tears mingled with the suds as he soaked.

Someone knocked on the front door, the sound a deliberate summons.

Chester was dressing after his bath. The exertion of hauling himself out of the tub and into the chair had untapped fresh sweat from his scalp and armpits.

The knock came again. Chester's fingers clenched on the buttons of his blouse.

"Sir?"

The solitary voice of a young Army brat. Chester's throat produced a soft choking sound. Another boyish call unlocked his fingers from the heavy buttons and thrust them towards the wheelchair's rims. He powered out of the bathroom, his forearms and shoulders pumping the chair down the corridor.

Another sound on the other side of the door.

Feet, running away.

Tears, familiar company to him now, burst from Chester's eyes.

He tilted his head back and screamed.

"Wait!"

Mandla Mphela was seven years old, yet his face had lost its sheen - the glossy fat of youth. The boy's dull walnut eyes rested on Chester's right hand as it stirred and thickened the steaming maize meal into a stiff white pap.

Other than his name, Chester knew little about the boy. Mandla's father had been a sergeant at the quartermaster's store. Between shifts, he'd booze till late at night and beat his family before bed. Two nights before - a Friday night - Mandla had hidden from his father in the dog kennel and spent the night there. He'd awoken to find the world altered, and his family erased. When the monsters came that second sunset, the boy had hidden in the oven until dawn.

In the sunny kitchen, Chester lifted the pot off Buys's camping stove and scooped a glob of pap onto the boy's plate.

Hurriedly, he replaced the lid and switched off the gas, wary of the scent of cooked food. Chester watched the boy spoon gargantuan mouthfuls of pap into

his mouth. Mandla's account had discouraged any questions: slurred packages of three to four whispered words at a time, as though the kid found speech foreign and exhausting. Instead of pressing the boy further, Chester talked of his own experiences. Chester sanitised his narrative of graphic detail. Mandla needed to know the situation, but not all the horror it implied. Doom lurked in the details.

The boy's eyes were glazing as his belly filled.

"We were lucky," Chester said, approaching the conclusion of his tale. Bovine intelligence flickered in the kid's face.

"I reckon the device swept the entire town - " the world

" - and took everybody in it," Chester said.

"Its beam was programmed to lock onto people in everyday settings, like a search programme on a computer, but the calibrations weren't perfect - they didn't cover all the variables of human behaviour."

Mandla's expression transmitted a question through another mouthful of pap.

"A man hangs from the ceiling, asleep in a strip of cloth," Chester continued. "A boy hides in a dog kennel...People aren't supposed to be there, to do that. Those picked up near a hard surface left watermarks behind - like the tracing of your mother on the laundry wall. Others, like the woman in the car and me, were only partially ID'ed..."

He inhaled deeply.

"The woman died and I lived."

"Are all the people dead?" Mandla's voice was twisted with ambivalence. Chester realised that the boy, stunned as he was, did not want his father to return.

"I don't know," he said truthfully. He couldn't get his head around all the implications of his theory.

A hammock and a kennel, the alien extraterrestrials he had seen and heard (none of which could possess the wits to design or operate such a lethal piece of technology) - they were his only real clues.

He would have to wait until night fell once more.

The beam, he thought, might sweep a park and snaffle every person sitting on a bench, everyone on the playground rides - even the man in the hotdog stand - but it might miss the little girl climbing the big oak tree.

And, it had a positive side. There might be other survivors. Maybe, just maybe, Vivian and their unborn child might yet be alive in the Cape, two thousand kilometres away. The thought made his chest hitch, as though he'd heard birdsong.

"Will the beam come back?"

Before Chester could answer, the boy swallowed the last scrap of maize and his gaunt face went slack. Chester rolled around the corners of the kitchen table and caught Mandla's boneless body as it toppled off the chair. He drew the sleeping boy onto his lap.

Chester rolled out of the sunny kitchen and into the garage, toward the passenger side of the Merc.

Chester left the base and turned onto the long road heading westward towards Tzaneen. Cycad country. He considered stopping in a parking lot to siphon fuel from the deserted vehicles, but the day was fading, and he feared what the night would bring. There would be stalled cars



in the road. Seats jumbled with clothing, assorted keys hanging in the ignition. On the flat stretch leaving Phalaborwa, an elephant straddled both two lanes of tarmac. Like an imperious sailing ship, maybe a galleon or a caravel with her broad bow of a skull, she stood magnificent and alone on the ebb of her own journey. Horrible talon marks sliced her from the humped withers to the pinch behind her ribcage; the injuries were dried tramlines, abuzz with flies.

She seemed to be reflecting upon the afternoon, her trunk suspended like a broken bowsprit; her posture was contemplative, her eyes fierce and without malice. She faced the spires of ancient rock that preceded the expanse of veld to the north and the far Mediterranean beyond.

Chester stared back and felt like leaning out and talking to her - native to native, earthling to earthling.

Her brown eyes gazed at him from beneath long lashes. She snorted softly through her trunk. He raised one hand to her, palm outward. Her movements were soundless and smooth as she drifted off the ribbon of road into the scend of furze. In forward drive, he accelerated towards the woodlands of Tzaneen.

An hour before dark, he pulled into an isolated petrol station on the flanks of a fir plantation. He rolled the cruiser to a stop behind the building and out of sight of the road. From the slope of the gorge, his

view of the southern sky above the opposite ridge was unimpeded. Fear, his Siamese twin, made Chester's hands tremble as he switched off the ignition. The oval face and gravid figure of his wife lay on the horizon of the dashboard, her photograph as ephemeral as a watermark in the twilight. The boy shivered in his sleep, and muttered something, the sound faint and shrill.

Chester placed his food wrappings in a plastic bag and knotted it. No scent of food must escape the car. The day was dying again. Chester shuddered to think what creatures stalked the surrounding forest.

Since waking without legs in a world of watermarks, he had already completed a significant journey, a prelude to the days of hunting ahead.

He cleaned his rifle in the fading light and watched the sun seek the cover of the trees.

The air was clear in the highlands. Chester got his answer when Achernar penetrated the twilight high in the south. The night sky lived. Outlined in harmless fire, a massive torpedo dwarfed the Moon; argent satellites orbited the black, obscuring the distant constellations he had memorised as a boy on the open sea while aboard his father's boat.

He lowered the forgotten rifle onto his lap. As the boy slept, Chester watched the alien sky and waited for the sun to return.



# Book Reviews Ian Jamieson

## **Prador Moon - Neal Asher**

Pan Mcmillan - R99.00

Somewhen in the dim and distant past, when I first started reading adult books it was easy to read one book a night (this was before television). The books were short, maybe two hundred pages, and authors normally wrote series, or different stories about one character. Today authors write long novels and particularly in the Fantasy field they write series of three or even ten books, which tome can be a total pain.

After centuries of expansion Mankind has finally met another intelligent species. The Prador (a shortened form of Predator) are huge crab-like carnivores with an extremely nasty attitude and a taste for human flesh. Two of their dreadnoughts are advancing from their star systems destroying everything in their paths. The Polity Collective does not yet have the weaponry to stop them. Moria Salem and Jebel U-cap Krong (the U-cap means up close and personal) have to join forces to defeat what is surely only the first attempt of the Prador to destroy mankind.

Suspend logic at the first page (why only two Prador warships and where do all their warrior war drones come from?)

Prador Moon is a short (about 220 pages) very readable science fiction action adventure which can, and should be read at one sitting.

## **The Gabble and other stories - Neal Asher**

Pan Macmillan – R169.00

While the old hard cover novels would generally last a good deal longer than a soft cover book, I always found them too heavy as I do most of my reading in bed, and trying to hold one up for long hours became quite a chore.

The modern C-format, although as large as a hard cover, is much lighter as it has a soft cover, and is also of good quality as it is easy to keep open. The quality of these ten short stories easily matches the quality of the book. All of the stories are based round the ideas of Neal Asher's Polity, that era where A.I.'s rule, benignly, an alliance of humanity spanning the galaxy. From an immortal human to various monsters and/or aliens – which one is the gabbleduck? – to bizarre and intriguing planets which are all almost impossible to live on, this is Neal Asher at his best.

Read and enjoy.

## **The Riven Kingdom - Karen Miller Book 2 of Godspeaker**

Penguin – R140.00

Here is South Africa Soap Opera comes in many of the official languages and usually with English subtitles (although it is strange to see English subtitles below spoken English, I suppose it's just to help the continuity) My wife tells me, (I never watch these programs of

course) that they all follow the same basic format of love and hate, sex and betrayal, friendship and backstabbing and occasional humour, and very occasional death. In the Riven Kingdom, Karen Miller manages to fit in all of the above. Not to say that this is only Soap Opera, as religion, magic and ghosts have their say as well. The King is dead (Long live the King) and his daughter is forced to flee to avoid falling into the clutches of the church to escape being married to an unwanted suitor. A toymaker, a physician and an unusual warrior are her only hope of survival --- need I say more? A well written, fairly enjoyable, if slightly overlong fantasy novel.

### **Norman - William Nicholson Book 3 of "The Noble Warriors" Trilogy**

Penguin - R100.00

Seeker is a hunter, and when he finds the lost two Savaners, he will kill them

Morning Star is one of the last of the Noble Warriors.

Caressa is a warrior woman who becomes the first ever Great Jahan of the Orlan nation.

Joy boy brings happiness to everyone he meets, and in so doing is building a huge tribe.

This is Nicholson's sixth book and if the others are anything like it I have no idea why he was ever published. It is badly written, stilted and has nothing new in it.

I stopped reading halfway through. Although there is no written indication that this is not an adult book, I believe it is written for children or teenagers. One of the reviews of a previous book mentions "great ten characters", and another review is by National Geographic Kids. If you are not a teenager, or even if you are, leave it alone.

### **The Last Watch - Sergei Lukyanenko**

(Translated by Andrew Bromfield) Random House - R195.00

With one of the highest murder rates in the world and a road kill rate which is in the top five here in South Africa it is always a pleasure to read a book where the deaths are designed to entertain.

This is a follow-up to the Night Watch Trilogy (which I have not yet read) in which the Others are normal looking humans who have supernatural powers and can enter the Twilight, seven levels of a world which exists parallel to our own.

Of course some are attracted to the dark side, and some to the light, or there wouldn't be much of a story.

Anton Gorodetsky, the hero of the previous novels, is now a Higher Magician, and can visit most of the levels.

A trio of unlicensed Others are hunting for the fabled treasure of Merlin, supposedly hidden on the seventh (or is it the sixth?) level. They will stop at nothing to achieve their aims and Anton has to use both dark and light forces to stop them.

An interesting book which is well written and well translated. There are one or two slightly stilted sections but they do not detract from what is a very entertaining read.

### **The Secret War M.F.W. Curran**

Pan Macmillan

A long time ago in a Galaxy far, far away, well not exactly. But more than 50 years ago, when I started high school one of the classes I had to attend was woodwork. Only once a week as I recall but in my last year as a final project, myself and my classmates each made a small table (three legged of course). When they were finished and stained and presented to our parents they were so happy with them. When I got round to examining mine properly some twenty years later, I could see it for what it was, a first attempt. It was ok, but nothing special or exciting.

This, M.F.W. Curran's first novel, reminds me of that table. Captain William Saxon and his adopted brother, Lieutenant Kieran Haste have survived the Battle of Waterloo, only to find that mankind has been caught up amongst the everlasting struggle between good and evil, and they are now personally involved.

With the forces of the Vatican on one side and the evil Count Ordrane (? the devil) on the other, the friends must fight for their lives against ruthless adversaries.

The poor quality of the writing, the number of inconsistencies in the narrative, (and the fact that this is book One of a series) make this a book which requires a strong editor, who is not evident at all, to make it far more enjoyable and readable. I am sure you can find something better to read.

### **Graceling - Kristen Cashore**

Jonathan Ball – R214.95

These days there is so much information readily available, either through the Internet, or by talking to people, visiting clubs that I find it quite amazing that a first time author like Kristen Cashore can spend so much time describing actions that she has little or no knowledge about.

In the fantasy land of the Seven Kingdoms, Katsa is one of the few who is born with an exceptional skill, called a "Grace", highlighted by the fact that she has contrasting coloured eyes. Katsa is a killer, with the talent of beating any seven or eight trained men at a time. However she eventually decides to stop being a killer and sets off on a quest and so on and on.

This author can write, but her scenes of action and of weaponry are, to be polite, nonsensical. On top of this it is a love story. (One review on the back cover does indeed describe it as "An exquisitely drawn romance!!")

And why does a book costing 10 pounds in the UK cost R214.94 in S.A?

Give it a miss.

## Magazine Review Ian Jamieson

### **Something Wicked --Issue No 8 – Nov 08 – Jan 09**

Science Fiction and Horror Magazine

Having been a Science Fiction fan for more than forty years I have occasionally argued, especially with my wife, that Horror, by its very nature, is a part of Science Fiction, and is

not a separate genre. It looks as if Joe Vaz, editor of **Something Wicked** agrees with me. I also find it quite amazing that a magazine like this can actually survive here in South Africa, never mind appear to thrive. I only recently heard about it and this is the first copy I have read.

It has thirteen stories, three interviews, three articles, two game and three movie reviews (why no book reviews?) and of course a short, if somewhat self indulgent, editorial.

I won't bore you with details of all the stories but they range from standard horror, werewolves and being trapped in an unfinished building, to basic hard core SF, future warriors, to a couple of oddities, one concerning a Russian river.

The articles and interviews were excellent, although the article on a woman SF author was far too short and I hope that there are more articles forthcoming.

A couple of minor points: the front cover picture was difficult to see clearly until I saw it inside, the inside front cover was a bit cluttered, and information on the inside back page on the artist Genevieve Terblanche was illegible as it was black writing on a dark grey background.

Horror of dark SF is not my forte but as the editor says "(you) may not love them all, but there are gems in here for everyone."

All the stories, and articles are exceptionally well written and the editor Joe Vaz, deserves a huge pat on the back for an outstanding magazine, both for entertainment and value for money.

## DECEMBER SOCIAL



In a Circle: Trevor Derry, Liz Simmonds, Ilse Von Willich, AL Du Pisani, Carla Martins, Gail Jamieson, Ian Jamieson, Simone Putterman, Franz Tomasek



# ***Nova 2008 S.A. Section***

## ***Joint Winner.***

### ***ICEMAN JABU HALINAN***

The tornado had swept across the Cape Flats, tearing through the townships in a swirl of destruction worse than any shack fire, dissipating where it struck the mountains near Sir Lowry's Pass. Teams of volunteers and disaster officials were sifting through the wreckage alongside locals, searching for valuables and anything salvageable, as well as survivors and bodies. It was not Keith Winters' task to help these selfless few in their efforts; he was merely here to interview survivors and to collect information for The Capetonian daily newspaper for which he worked, but he had discovered through experience that people were always far more willing to be interviewed by someone who they felt shared their views on how the world should be run. Winters did not share their desire to assist those less fortunate, considering them to be naïve – in his mind, his view was justified by the events unfolding around them. It was not yet past ten in the morning, and already more than twenty fights had broken out over the ownership of various pieces of shack, as well as multiple accusations against those suspected of looting in the early morning hours after the tornado had past. He knew that there would be few willing to agree openly with his opinion on such matters, but nevertheless, he was firm in his belief that

any community incapable of controlling their criminal elements was undeserving

of assistance. He had gotten into various arguments with his more liberal newspaper friends on this subject.

Lifting a large, battered sheet of asbestos, his hands safely sheathed in yellow kitchen gloves, he was conscious of a certain grudging admiration for those around him. In his interviews he had come to the conclusion that naivety was perhaps a prerequisite for a more valuable trait, selflessness. The thankless generosity enshrined by these volunteers was increasingly rare in the modern world; altruism, while often beneficial to those less fortunate, was no substitute. There were no conditions to their assistance, no awards or accolades, no public approval ratings in need of a boost – in fact, the only thing these men and women were likely to receive was a mention in his paper, and that was where he came in. It was his task to record these nearly insignificant deeds for posterity.

His phone vibrated gently in his shirt pocket. Setting the piece of asbestos aside, he pulled off the gloves and took out his phone. Snapping wafer-thin flexible screen over his wrist to accept the call, he answered politely – it was his editor.

Her voice rang with a note of relief



over the connection. "Keith! Thank God. We need someone to write a short article on the military unit returned from Antarctica. They're at Ysterplaat Airforce Base. Do you think you could have it done by tomorrow? I want it to run in Friday's edition, fourth page."

To Winters' ear, Julia Levinson seemed surprisingly emotional, given her reputation as being extremely passive under pressure. It could be personal problems. He didn't need the extra work, but this wasn't exactly a request.

"I'll do it. When was the interview set for?"

"Three o'clock, at the base."

"Great. I'll see to it."

"Good; and if you must put social comment into your tornado article, do, just don't mention global warming. Cheers; good luck!"

"Chow."

Winters tapped the phone's screen to disconnect the call. He liked his attractive, snappy, blonde sub-editor. They had shifted to first name status at an office party last Christmas, before she had become the Local News Sub-Editor – his boss. Their relationship had never matured; her elevation had put an end to the likelihood of that.

He now had work to do. Two stories, not to mention the interview with the soldiers; it would take him the rest of the day. He had seen enough here, and, handing in his gloves with a word of thanks to the supervisor, he returned to his car, which was parked on the outskirts of the township, watched over by three parking attendants. With another word of thanks, he handed over five rand to each, and then got into his car. He removed the

phone from his wrist, snapping it over the steering wheel.

The road from the township was rutted and potholed, and it was a relief when he reached the rail-road. Mounting the tarmac, he paused on the siding, switching drives from road/off-road to rail. Rail-cars had been invented in Japan, and the idea had been snatched up by many major cities. In Cape Town rails had been placed on all the major roads. All cars joining the rail-road surrendered their controls, giving their destination to a guidance system, which shuttled traffic far more efficiently, preventing traffic jams and pedestrian deaths even in rush-hour. The rails saved fuel, and the impact of the large amounts of electricity used was alleviated when one considered that traffic lights had gone out of use, except as pedestrian crossings. Winters approved of the rail-roads, and was smiling happily, lying back in his chair with his arms behind his head, as his Toyota Katana swept onto the N1, which was not particularly crowded at this time of the morning. The car raced at one hundred and fifty km/h towards Cape Town. Winters was going back to the office; he needed to collect several things before he could complete the tornado story and head to Ysterplaat for the interview.

\*

Father Angelo made the Sign of the Cross reverently before exiting his small Muizenberg church. Preparations for Holy Mass seemed to become more complicated every day as his congregation grew. The threat of plague, a disease far beyond mere medicine, had

seen many passive Catholics, along with large numbers of agnostics and atheists, suddenly become ardent believers in the Word of God. Angelo felt slightly uneasy at the thought that outside events, and not the efforts of the Holy Church, had engineered this resurgence of belief. It offended his pride in humanity, that they could be so pathetically opportunistic – were it not for the plague, most of his new-found flock would still be casting dubious aspersions on the Church. He felt the moral conundrum of the plague very personally – the takings on the collection plate had swollen, yet he could not bring himself to thank God, not while the cause of this bounty was shattering lives, families and societies throughout Africa.

The resurgence of faith had truly begun when the plague had started appearing in southern Africa. Initially sweeping west out of its source in the Central African Republic, the ‘Iceman’ Plague, had doubled back on itself, turning southwards in an unstoppable drive to the bottom of Africa. Angelo remembered vividly the images captured by suicidal television crews, who had given their lives to ensure that the entire world would see the symptoms and effects of the plague. The stiffening of the spine, locking the head in place, was the first symptom. The eyes of the sufferers, like trapped animals, as they realised they were soon to die, rolled in their heads, as if seeking to escape the fate of the rest of the body. Bodily extremities followed, shuddering and shaking in a desperate attempt to retain mobility before succumbing to the paralytic embrace of the disease. This did not kill the patient;

an American clinic in Gabon had discovered that the paralysis wore off after a three week period, yet it invariably became impossible to prevent the disease from striking down those who sought to provide assistance, and those affected by the disease usually died horribly from dehydration, although starvation and asphyxiation were also common. Forty cases had been found to have survived out of hundreds of millions; of those, thirty-three were permanently afflicted by dementia.

Had Father Angelo been a man given to idle speculation, he might have considered, as many others had, what an amazing biological weapon this plague was.

Yet he had other, more pressing issues to address. The church needed to be run efficiently, and he needed to be on call for confessions – another facet of the religious experience long neglected by the parishioners that was now coming, worryingly, back into fashion. People were afraid; while the plague was supposedly quarantined in Kimberley and its surrounds, Angelo knew it would take little more than an announcement that a case of Iceman had occurred in the Western Cape, and riots would start. He would therefore respond in the only way he knew how; he would pray, and help others to pray, and perhaps, with a dint of effort, slow the panic that was rising like Jonah’s Whale from the depths of Capetonian souls.

\*

Spinning at the roaring sound of a truck coming around the winding road through

Ysterplaat Airforce Base, Captain Jan Swart of the 3<sup>rd</sup> South African Icefield Division was barely fast enough to get out of the way before the truck blasted past in a gust of air and exhaust fumes. Swearing violently in Afrikaans, he turned back to his squad, glaring at the fourteen ragged, half-suited Antarctic veterans who were one and all struggling to contain their laughter. A second truck came roaring past.

“*Nou*, we are going to be remaining here while the rest of the military evacuates the important peoples. We may also need to remain in the city to ensure quarantine and peace. Questions?”

One of his coloured soldiers – there were two in the squad – lifted a hand.

“What about the disease? Won’t we get it?”

“The suits are equipped with the latest filter technology. We’ll be fine, as long as the suits are sealed. It means that we’ll be smelly and uncomfortable, but it’s better than becoming Icemen.”

A British ex-patriot, Robert Smith, put up his hand.

“How long are we going to be around here for?”

“The mission is expected to last up to two months. Three cargo planes with hermetic sealing are being flown from Antarctica. They will be our bases. We are also being sent various weapon systems, just in case.”

The squad exchanged glances, and then Sibuti Malenga spoke up.

“Just in case of what?”

“Riots, heavily armed looters or mobs. There was a case reported from Angola by the police in Luanda, before that all went quiet, where civilians

barricaded themselves in an apartment block, using it as a base from which they could commit criminal acts – shooting at pedestrians and cars, setting off bombs, prostitution, rioting, forming vigilante groups to slaughter anyone they suspect of being a threat to them – and that includes authority. People go crazy when they get scared. This is not going to be fun.”

There was a roar as three jets hurtled overhead, flying out of Cape Town International.

“*Nou*, Base One is outside the Green Point Stadium. Sergeant Van Horst, Corporal Malenga, Privates Barends, Lunge and Thabe; that is your base of operations. The plane will be transported there as soon as the wings have been removed. Sergeant Baden, Corporal Lambebe, Privates Smith, Carelse, Kibane; you are in Base Two; Southern Suburbs. Your plane will be outside Longbeach Mall, Noordhoek. Base Three will be under my command; our plane will be on the coast road north of Muizenberg. All planes will be in satellite and secure landline communication; all major operations will require my permission. If by some disaster you are unable to contact me, operations will naturally be at your discretion. Most weapons systems will remain at Ysterplaat. Foot and bakkie patrols in your immediate area must be undertaken. Try to conserve fuel; petrol stations have been ordered to stop sales immediately, but I doubt they’ll comply. Most people will be evacuating the city when the announcement of the plague’s proximity is made in three days time, and they’ll suck the petrol stations dry.”

The captain turned away for a moment, struck suddenly by the magnitude of what his squad would soon be facing, then he turned back to his squad, a look of pained concentration on his face.

“Hoeveel van julle het families in Kaap Stad?”

Six hands; and the ravages of fear suddenly appeared on the faces of these hardened veterans.

“They will be evacuated by the navy. You are to phone them tomorrow – no leave will be allowed. They must report to the Simon’s Town Naval Base. They are not permitted to notify friends; only family. If it is found that they have disobeyed this order, they will be refused evacuation.”

The captain averted his eyes at this. The realities of any evacuation on this scale were incredibly harsh. He dismissed the squad with a wave, sending them on their way to perform their numerous duties, lost in his own thoughts and regrets. The fighting in Antarctica had prevented his elites, his ‘Icefield Warriors’, as the press had named them, from returning home to assist with the crisis swiftly unfolding in South Africa until an armistice had been signed. In the meantime, Captain Jan Swart’s family had been living in Kimberley. He had heard, on his flight out of Antarctica, that his family were missing, presumed dead in the plague-ravaged suburbs of the town. Biological statues rotting somewhere under the Karoo sun.

\*

Winters had left his car just inside the airbase gates. The guards, usually looking

bored at their posts by the traffic-boom, were nowhere to be seen. The base itself was a hive of activity, with trucks and lorries everywhere. He spied the man he was looking for, Captain Swart of the Icefield Warriors. His face was instantly recognisable, even from this distance, from the innumerable photographs of the ‘South African hero’ that had appeared periodically in newspapers, magazines, even on television. Leaning up against the chassis of a shattered Canadian Inuit-class tank; smiling jadedly at the camera during the Antarctic day; a flare-lit figure with his helmet off, running through the Antarctic night to repel a Russian assault on the base; and, perhaps the most iconic image of all, a short video clip which had made history for the number of hits it had had on YouTube. Swart, suited up, no more than a white figure charging through the sunlit snow, hurled skywards by the blast from an artillery shell fired from the Molodezhnaya Station, falling back to the earth, his suited charred black, only to rise once more to hurtle into the Vostok Station, the camera zooming in to see Swart, his helmet gone, launch a small forearm-stinger rocket into the doorway, clambering over the wreckage into the airlock and thence into the building itself, human enemies being a lesser evil than the biting cold of the south pole. Swart had nearly lost his nose after that episode, earning him a full six months of leave. Although Winters was far from being a man of war, his respect for the veteran captain, whose family had been killed by the plague in Kimberley, knew no bounds.

From where he stood, Winters thought the captain looked slightly at a

loss. He hurried over, narrowly avoiding being run over by a tank.

“Captain Swart! Captain! Keith Winters of The Capetonian. I’d like to ask you a few questions if I may.”

The man looked at him quizzically, and then turned away, taking a pair of sunglasses out of his pocket and putting them on.

“Nee, niks vrae.”

Winter drew up sharply.

“I have permission – that is to say, my newspaper has permission – to conduct an interview with you. Permission from you yourself, in fact.”

Swart seemed to waver for a moment, then; “Ja, alright. I remember. *Engels of Afrikaans?*”

“English, please. Would you like to go elsewhere? This is a rather noisy area.”

An hour later, Winters drove away from one of the most baffling interviews of his life. The captain had seemed strangely morbid, particularly his final farewell remark; “Enjoy every hour, Keith, for it will never happen again.” Winters knew that Swart’s tragic loss might have led to a certain degree of depression, yet there was more to it. Swart had been trying to tell him something without actually stating it directly.

His car pulled up outside his office building moments later. He waited outside, pondering his life, the state of the world and Swart’s words.

Then he went home.

\*

The wingless plane, a long, stunted-

looking cigar, settled on its base with a satisfyingly secure thud. Swart was please with the progress that had been achieved. The Announcement would occur tomorrow afternoon, 12:00 hrs, and already all three bases were up and running. Questions had been asked, naturally, and had been answered with stern silence. Suggestions ‘leaked’ to the press that the Antarctic talks were failing had provided a useful distraction to the Iceman Issue, and, besides a few sceptical statements on various low-key blogs, the wingless planes had mostly stayed out of the news, and their appearance had not been connected with the Iceman Plague.

The various sub-squads would be in position by nightfall. Supplies were on their way. They would soon be fully prepared to meet the hordes of panicking people that would surely rise the following afternoon. Swart was pleased, yes, yet an uneasy coil of worry – fear, even – was shifting in his insides. For on the morrow, innocent people would die.

He didn’t find his interview in The Capetonian. Instead, there was a mention that Keith Winters had quit, and, for a moment, just a moment, Swart wished that he too could have chosen that path. The withdrawal from a society that was soon to die. But soldiers, like policemen and firemen, often find themselves marching to counter the acts of the wicked.

And there is no peace for the wicked.

\*

Strange things had been happening all



day, indeed, they had been happening last night as well. First, that wingless plane had been brought through Muizenberg and left in a seaside car park to the north. Then, in the evening – a Friday evening, no less – the rail-road network had shut down, and civilians had been advised to remain at home, yet Father Angelo had distinctly seen dark vehicles rumbling silently past his church. The radio said that there were convoys of unmarked trucks in the townships, guarded by South African National Defense Force troops, and that shops had been ordered to remain open throughout the day. Strangest of all were the constant references to a news release that would be broadcast on all networks at precisely 12:00 that day, to which all citizens of Cape Town were obliged to listen. The national press was having a field day, conjuring up images of an expected Canadian attack on Cape Town; of a government crack-down on crime in the townships in which SANDF was involved; and last, but by no means least, of the Iceman Plague, sweeping down like some dark host from on high to blight the Table Mountain.

Father Angelo had brought out the old radio from his lodgings and taken it into the church, inviting his parishioners to come in to hear the (probably bad) news, and then seek solace in prayer. He felt mildly useless; this was all he could do, yet it seemed painfully inefficient. He could only wait.

At most times, he felt, this was all any man could do.

*“People of Cape Town,”* a hard, computerised voice. Not the mayor, nor

the premier, nor the president, but a machine, as mindless as a bell tolling out a death knell. Perhaps, on the other hand, no human could possibly read such a statement without breaking up, collapsing into despair and anguish. *“what you are about to hear contains grave news for all. It is recommended, therefore, that you remove your children from the vicinity of your radio or television set.”* On television, a South African flag waving at half mast – a familiar image from the Antarctic war. *“Three days ago, the Iceman Plague broke out of the quarantine around Kimberley, and it has been travelling south-west since then. There is no way of stopping it, and, as you all know, there is as yet no cure. It is therefore suggested that you remain in your homes for the duration of the plague’s course. You will naturally be kept informed via television and radio. Extra supplies have been sent to Cape Town and are available from the shops nearest to you; however, we ask that you conduct yourself in a civilised manner. Rioting and looting will be met by the full force of the law enforcement services, which will remain active throughout the duration of this crisis. All essential services will remain active, although the rail-road will be shut down as of midnight on Monday. A window period of two days is therefore open to all those who have the desire and means to evacuate, although neither the Cape Town City Council nor the South African Government will guarantee the safety of any property left unattended in the City of Cape Town. For those who elect to remain in the city, everything possible will be done to ensure your survival. Furthermore, the Icefield Warriors are*

*remaining in Cape Town, at their new bases in Green Point, Muizenberg and Noordhoek. They are there to help you in any way you may need. A call centre has been set up to field requests for assistance. The number for this call centre is 123. Repeat; 123. Food will be distributed in townships by SANDF forces. We ask again that you behave in a civilised manner as befits your dignity as South Africans, and that you never let despair consume you, remaining hopeful and brave, secure in the knowledge that all things, even plague, pass. May God bless and keep you all."* Repeated in Afrikaans, Xhosa and Zulu, in the same cold machine voice.

The Announcement took Cape Town by storm. All roads leaving the city were jammed, even with the rail-roads in operation. Trains leaving the city were packed, and food shops were the epicentres of massive queues, items disappearing from the shelves. Storerooms were laid open, and the queues wore their way through, emptying them in minutes. In the townships, the doors of the unmarked trucks were thrown open, and the distribution of tons of food-aid began. By mid-afternoon, the crowds outside the shops were becoming restless. The food distribution in the townships had ended, the trucks joining the streams of vehicles on the rail-roads out of the city, and the weight of the disadvantaged was tipping the balance between patience and rioting. By the evening, Father Angelo, whose church had almost emptied very shortly after the Announcement, gave a mass to a crowd so large it didn't even fit into the church.

Riots had sparked off across the Cape, and it was believed that over three hundred people had died in the various conflagrations. Angelo had seen Icefield Warriors locking arms in front of the local Spar, their fearsome reputation and the impersonal, white, droid-like quality of their suits holding the hordes back. Elsewhere, mere policemen, forever battling the complete lack of respect the community held for them, had broke and run, fleeing to their families, desperate to spend what might be their last hours in the arms of their loved ones. The largest loss of life had been at Simon's Town Naval Base, where the navy had refused to evacuate those families not affiliated to members of the navy. When the crowds had seen the ships moving slowly away from the docks, they had stormed the base, slaughtering the few cadets unable to get onto their ships in time. The streaming mass of humanity had only broken and run after the SAS *Agulhas* had fired a round into the air, mere metres above their heads. The navy had also watched over the vessels in the fishing harbour at Kalk Bay, providing fuel to those boats deemed seaworthy enough to survive the journey to Port Elizabeth and Umtata in the Eastern Cape. All in all, despite the numerous flare-ups of violence, the day had been one of civility and heroism. Father Angelo was slightly less optimistic about the days to come. Somehow he found that he could not imagine himself dying, certainly not of the Iceman Plague. It seemed too artificial, to contrived.

Most things do, though, when you think long enough about them.

\*

Things had quieted down, generally, after the first few days. People seemed to have disappeared, to die either alone and unseen, or with their families. The plague had struck the outlying Cape Flats townships four days after the Announcement. That night, across the Cape, AIDS had, in one fell swoop, been wiped out. The Iceman Plague always took those afflicted by the virus first, their weakened immune systems collapsing shockingly fast. They froze jerkily where they stood, caught like flies in amber while going about their daily lives, their faces masks of horror as they realised what was happening to them. It was these macabre statues appearing in the streets that had driven people into their homes: the plague spread from these early victims, striking those in the vicinity. Swart and his squad had conducted pick-up sweeps, collecting the bodies (once caught, AIDS-related Iceman cases died incredibly fast) and burying them in mass graves. Yet, a mere six days after the Announcement, this duty had become too great. The frozen living were now numerically greater than the dead; hospitals were having trouble coping – two had been closed when the plague struck the staff, despite their protective clothing. The police, vital to stem the violence that might arise, had disappeared. Stations were inhabited by bergies and the homeless. Accidents on the now unmonitored roads had claimed many lives; most road travel had stopped. The Icefield Warriors had converged on an apartment in the city bowl, using anti-tank guns to smash up a criminal gang that had appropriated it, and they had also fired on a mob – real bullets – that had been threatening to overturn the Green

Point plane-base. All the Warriors were exhausted, horribly uncomfortable after spending so long in their suits – their longest Antarctic mission had been four days.

Winters had been found in his Lakeside home by Swart's lieutenant, dead. He had committed suicide, a sleeping pill overdose. The option he had taken had been a common one – life became pathetically unimportant when one's world was falling apart. Perhaps, Swart had thought, his mood darkened by the perceived failure of a man he had developed a certain degree of respect for, Winters had considered suicide a more dignified death than plague. Either way, he was dead; and unless Swart elected to follow Winters' course, there was no way of asking him any questions. Yet Swart had no intention of dying. He had, by now, survived three weeks of post-Announcement chaos. Four Icefield Warriors had died; three killed by rioters and one killed by plague. Corporal Sibuti Malenga had foolishly removed his helmet, standing high above the city on Devil's Peak, for a breath of fresh air. That breath had killed him.

Perhaps it was a soldier-thing, this need to survive, despite a complete lack of realistic reasons for his stubbornness. Perhaps it was habit, born of years of practice, years when he had in truth had a reason for survival. Either way, Captain Jan Swart would... persist. He was already an Iceman – he had come painfully close to dying so many times in Antarctica; a mere plague would not destroy him.

\*

Father Angelo stood on Muizenberg Beach looking out to sea. The wind was high and the breakers were being blown back on themselves, roiling swathes of white outlined against the darkening sea and sky. His congregation was lost, his church empty. The last stalwarts had fled back to their homes and his daily masses were gone. Standing tall at the top of the beach, his bare feet in the sands, he wore his priestly robes; they flapped in the wind, askew, his graying hair swept into an unnatural parting by the damp gusts. He had lost his fear, of the plague, of rioters, of dying. His pride, his complacency, his self were blowing in the wind, lifted ever further away, up into the grey clouds. Yet something, deep inside, kept him warm, insulating him from the biting cold of the approaching storm.

Authority was gone; its sceptre, the Icefield Warrior squad, had retreated, their base smashed by the relentless sieges, to a safer post in the valley beyond the Silvermine Mountains. Riots, sweeping up and down the roads to converge on the Icefield Warriors' base, had left streams of bloody corpses, for Authority had not surrendered easily. A horrible sense of pathos had overcome Father Angelo, for he had watched from the stained-glass

windows of his church and noted; even when not under fire, a stream of shrieking statues were left behind the howling mass that heaved like some leviathan in pain, cursing the skies for their misfortune to be taken by the slow impersonal plague, rather than the fire and ice of the missiles, shells and bullets of Authority.

He had come out from his sacred sanctum to this now desolate shore in search of something to alleviate the constriction in his chest. He knew what it was, the early signs of the plague. It did not even weaken the body before it killed it, slipping past the wide-eyed immune system to smash life itself. His neck would not move, and, his gaze locked on the tiny, dark lighthouse standing lonely in the bay. He raised his arms, reaching out, perhaps in supplication, perhaps in salute, to the overwhelming power that was reaching out a cold hand to take his life. For he had not joined the barbarism of the rioters or the opportunism of the looters. The warmth in his chest was that strangest of fires; Father Angelo kept his religion within him, set in his dying core in a way it had never been in life.

See him now where he stands, a saluting sentinel against the rising storm on the seas of night.

## Book Reviews

## Gail Jamieson

**Cybele's Secret - Juliet Marillier**  
Panmacmillan

This book is set in the same milieu Juliet Marillier's earlier novel "Wildwood Dancing", but except for some references to the past it stands alone.



Seventeen year old Paula is accompanying her father Teodor, a trader in ancient artefacts, to the East in search of a mysterious artefact known only to them as "Cybele's Gift. Teodor believes that if they can obtain this prize it will make their fortune. Paula is a scholar of some note and has, if not forgotten at least put aside the desire to find the Other Kingdom that she and her sisters had visited as children and where her oldest sister had gone to

live with her elven lover.

As Paula needs a chaperone, Teodor hires a mysterious young man named Stoyan to protect her and to accompany her about the city. She meets up with a woman named Irene who projects a savoir-faire that is very alluring to Paula. But she has a hidden agenda. Then there is also Duarte, another trader who seems, at least on the surface to be rather unscrupulous but who Paula finds unsettlingly attractive.

Cybele's Gift also turns out to be rather more elusive than they had hoped and Paula, Stoyan, and Duarte must follow it back to its origins, coming into fleeting contact with her absent sister along the way.

This novel is enjoyable fantasy and Juliet Marillier writes with great fluency. I found that I enjoyed the first novel more but this one was still entertaining. I'm sure that there will be more as we still need to find out Paula's other sisters.

## **Thunder Moon - Lori Handeland**

Pan Macmillan

Grace McDaniel is the sheriff of Lake Bluff. She has some Cherokee blood in her genes and is fully taken up with small town life. After a freak storm a stranger arrives in town. He is a modern doctor who also uses traditional Native American medicine. Grace is very suspicious of his intentions and surprises herself by becoming involved with him on a very physical level.

At the same time there is a vicious killer preying on the citizens of Lake Bluff and Ian Walker, the stranger, knows more than he is willing to share with her. At first the old and weak are targeted but soon younger victims start to die.

Ian and Grace must work together to track down the killer. I won't be giving too much away when I mention that werewolves are involved.

I enjoyed this novel and see that Lori Handeland has written a number of others, all with a "moon" in the title. There are some references to things that have happened in previous novels but enough is stated that you do not need to have read any of them. I think that I will look out for them.

The blurb describes it as a romantic suspense novel but I think that this does not do it justice. Read it for yourself and see.



# Runner-up in the 2008 Mini Radio Play Competition – Ruby Rollins

## BLACK CLOUD

### THE CHARACTERS:

**SEAN:** Young father - a farmer - father of Simon, husband of Mary. (Image to be conveyed: average guy who has opted out of city living to enjoy life in the countryside - boyish looks - friendly sounding voice and personality).

**MARY:** Young, concerned mother. She is quiet spoken but her voice rises with panic as the story unfolds. (Image to be conveyed: pretty, motherly, relaxed and uncomplicated person).

**SIMON:** 5 year old boy with a slightly husky voice. (Image to be conveyed: clever sounding, sweet, unspoiled child)

**TV ANNOUNCER:** (The first announcer is not actually saying anything - it is merely a female voice in the background.) The second, who interrupts her (this one) has a clear, rather grating sounding, nasal voice.

**POLICE INSPECTOR:** middle-aged man, abrupt, serious sounding voice.

### SOUND EFFECTS:

Most of these are simple for e.g. the sound of footsteps on a wooden floor - grass crunching underfoot etc. The noise that the UFO makes would be similar to a fan combined with electrical charges gradually increasing in volume.

## THE PLAY:

### SCENE 1 OF 3

(MUSIC: SCENE 1 OPENS WITH A VERY SIMPLE CHILDREN'S TUNE PLAYED ON A PIANO, OR TOY PIANO - TO MAKE THE LISTENER AWARE OF THE CHILD)  
(MUSIC FADES).

(SOUND OF A SMALL CHILD RUNNING ACROSS A WOODEN FLOOR. TV

ANNOUNCER TALKING IN THE BACKGROUND).

SIMON: (LOUDLY) Mom! Dad! Wake up! It's on the TV! Something has crashed! Get up NOW! Come to the TV room - you have to come and see.

(BED CREAKS)

SEAN: (SLEEPILY) Why are you up so early Simon? What has crashed?

MARY: (SLEEPILY - SLIGHTLY ANNOYED) Simon! It is 6 am! Why are you up? It's Sunday morning. Daddy and I don't want to get up this early.

SEAN: (IN A HUSHED VOICE TO MARY) He probably saw something on the children's channel. I'll go and check it out anyway...

SEAN: (TO SIMON) Come Tiger, let's go and have a look.  
(SEAN AND SIMON'S VOICES START TO FADE AS THEY LEAVE THE ROOM  
CHATting. A FEW SECONDS LATER SEAN IS SHOUTING FROM THE TV ROOM)  
SEAN: Mary! Come here quickly! You are not going to believe this!  
(A TIRED SIGH FROM MARY AND THE SOUND OF MARY WALKING AND

APPROACHING THE TV ROOM WHERE A FEMALE ANNOUNCER IS TALKING IN THE  
BACKGROUND - THE LISTENER CAN'T ACTUALLY HEAR THE WORDS)

(NEW) ANNOUNCER: (INTERRUPTING PROGRAM) Reports of an alleged UFO crash in  
a field on a farm near Summerberg in the Western Cape remain unsubstantiated. We are  
now crossing live to the breakfast channel where we will be interviewing singer /  
songwriter... (ANNOUNCER'S VOICE FADES INTO THE BACKGROUND).

SEAN: (IN AN IRRITATED TONE OF VOICE) They were hot on the story of the crash  
when this idiot announcer cut in.

MARY: Did they mention where the field was?

SEAN: No - only that it was on a farm near the old airfield.

MARY: Well why don't we get dressed and take a walk - after all it sounds as if it has practically landed on our doorstep.

SEAN: Listen! What is that?

(NOISES OUTSIDE THEIR HOUSE - SOUNDS OF A SIREN IN THE FAR DISTANCE,  
POLICE RADIOS AND MEN TALKING.)

MARY: (IN A SHAKY VOICE) Sean! Come and take a look out of the window.

SIMON: What is it Mom?

MARY: (COMPLETELY AMAZED) I don't know Darling!

SEAN: (AMAZED) It looks as if it is made of liquid silver. What the hell is that thing?

MARY: And look - those policemen are staying well back. Sean, I don't like this...

SEAN: (TO SIMON) (SPEAKING GENTLY) Simon, your Mother and I are going to  
take a walk over to that policeman out there to ask him what is going on. I want you to  
remain here in the house. You can stand here at the window and watch us. We will be  
back soon. Do you understand?

SIMON: (A LITTLE NERVOUSLY) OK Dad but please don't be long.

(MUSIC: A SOFT SLIGHTLY SINISTER SOUNDING ORCHESTRAL PIECE)

(MUSIC FADES TO NEXT SCENE -

SCENE 2 OF 3

(WHICH OPENS WITH: THE SOUND OF GRASS CRUNCHING UNDERFOOT AS SEAN  
AND MARY WALK.. IN THE BACKGROUND IS THE SOUND OF MEN TALKING AND  
POLICE RADIOS.)

POLICE INSPECTOR: Sir! Would you and your wife please stay back. Nobody may enter  
this area.

SEAN: I think we have a right to know what is going on Inspector - it is after all our field.

MARY: What is that thing?

POLICE INSPECTOR: We have no idea. But we have been asked to keep the public out ... (VOICE FADES AND THEN HESITATES AND HE SAYS WITH COMPLETE CONFUSION:) What the ... look up there ... what the devil is that?

MARY: (PANIC RISING IN HER VOICE) Oh my gosh! Look at the cloud! Sean! Sean! What is happening - it's coming down fast. Sean! Where are you! I can't see anything! Everything's black around me!

SEAN: (SHOUTING FROM A SHORT DISTANCE) Mary don't move - I don't know what is happening... this black mist... it's so thick... stay where you are. (SOUNDS OF POLICEMEN'S VOICES SHOUTING IN THE DISTANCE AND A STRANGE SWISHING AND ELECTRICAL CRACKLING NOISE - SWISHING GETTING LOUDER).

MARY: (VERY UPSET NOW) Sean! Where are you? Can you see me? What is that noise?

(PIECE OF MUSIC: DRAMATIC SOUNDING SHORT BURSTS BUT FADES QUICKLY...)

SEAN: (SHOUTING FROM THE DISTANCE) There, the mist is lifting - stay calm Honey - I'm right here... Will you look at that - the saucer - it's gone! It left in the cloud!

MARY: (SUDDENLY SHOUTING OUT IN HORROR) SIMON! OH NO - SIMON! We have to get back to the house Sean! He must be terrified!

MUSIC: AGAIN A FEW SHORT JARRING BARS

(SOUND OF SEAN AND MARY RUNNING AND THEN OPENING THE HOUSE'S DOOR).

MARY: SIMON! SIMON! Are you alright?

(SILENCE)

SEAN: (EDGY) Simon?

MARY: SIMONNNNNnnnn

THE SCENE ENDS ON THIS DRAMATIC NOTE -

MUSIC: A SERIES OF SHARP, JARRING CELLO CHORDS

SCENE 3 BEGINS AFTER A SHORT SILENCE...

### **SCENE 3 OF 3**

(SOUND OF TV GRADUALLY BECOMING LOUDER UNTIL WE HEAR THE ANNOUNCER'S VOICE AGAIN)

ANNOUNCER: A young boy went missing from his home in Summerberg in the early hours of this morning when a thick mist descended on the town. Anyone who can offer any information can call 0800 67643... . (HIS VOICE SLOWLY FADES OUT AS HE SAYS THE TELEPHONE NUMBER).

# Nova 2008 General Section Second Place

## Stealing Hearts Nicole Roughley

Jake carefully punched the code into the refrigerated safe that held the man's organs. He had paid off the mark's butler to supply the code. It could go one of two ways. The butler could have given him the right combination and Jake would be able to take the heart and disappear without a trace. He could also be screwed and the police would respond to the alarm and throw his desperate butt in jail. The latter was not an option he could consider. If he failed, his wife died.

The safe door clicked open and the rush of cold air soothed Jake's perspiring forehead. The organs sat in their containers in a neat row, all perfectly preserved in Salac in the same condition they had been the day that they were cloned from the owner's tissue. The valves of the heart were pink and pristine. He had chosen his mark carefully. The billionaire didn't have a hint of disease in his medical history so his cloned organs would be clean as well, unlike those of his gasping, blue-lipped wife. The lungs would fetch a pretty pay packet on the thriving market for stolen organs but Jake wasn't there to make money. He had never thought he would find himself with his hands around the stolen organs of some wealthy sod again but it was different this time. Alison needed him and he could not let her down. If there had ever been a matter of life and death that

warranted his returning to a life of crime, this was it.

"I suggest you put that down and back away from the safe." Jake almost dropped the heart. Damn, he thought, the butler had screwed him after all; he had been told the house would be empty. Jake slowly turned toward the voice, still holding the man's organ in his hand. The study was dark and the dim light from the refrigerator reflected lightly off the man's sterling silver cuff links. Manny Bowman. Jake knew it was him without seeing his face. "I said, put the heart down." It was a voice you didn't disobey whether you had been caught red-handed or not. Jake understood how he not noticed his presence when he had entered the study. Bowman's desk was hidden behind a large decorative column. Why was the old nutter sitting there in the dark?

Bowman flicked on his desk lamp. How the skinny runt that stood before him had evaded his top-notch security system was the least of his concerns. What the hell did this man want with his heart? For a moment, all the troubles that had brought him to be sitting at his desk in the dark faded and he focused on this one, final mystery. The man looked as though he may be some type of career criminal. He had a cat-like leanness to him and Bowman noticed how his black eyes

managed to dart around the room and focus on him simultaneously. He had heard of men such as this. Organ thieves. They preyed specifically on wealthy individuals that were able to afford to clone their organs.

While the man seemed to be summing him up, Jake was strategising the quickest exit. He would risk grabbing the heart off the shelf he had rested it on. It was all or nothing. Jake's eyes fell on an object on the desk in front of Bowman. A revolver, he hadn't seen it before and its presence changed the stacking of odds.

"Are you worried that I am going to shoot you?" Bowman understood Jake's expression and noticed the direction of his gaze.

"No." Jake lied. Bowman had a reputation of being a ruthless businessman. He probably wouldn't think twice about putting a bullet in the head of a thief.

"Sit." Jake didn't understand but obeyed. "I can't have your brains splattered all over my expensive tapestries can I?" He nodded at the wall and Jake hoped he had a sick sense of humour. "The chair would be easier to get rid of." Jake assumed his practiced poker stare - show no weakness - it was the only way you survived in the criminal world.

Jake kept one eye on the revolver and the other on Bowman as he pulled a packet of cigarettes from the desk drawer and lit one, drawing the smoke through his mouth and out his nostril like a snake. "Those things will kill you." Jake said, desperate to break the silence. Bowman snorted.

"Well luckily I've got a spare pair of lungs."

"Lucky for you." Jake agreed completely befuddled by this odd old man that could have sounded the alarm but hadn't and probably should have shot him by now but was smoking instead.

"So how much would you get for that?" He nodded toward the heart sitting obscenely out of place next to three books on economics.

"Under normal circumstances, around three hundred thousand." Jake realised that he had no other choice but to play along.

"And what type of circumstance is this?"

"Well firstly, I've clearly been caught," Jake sat back hoping to look casual and wishing his hands would stop shaking, "and secondly, I wasn't planning on selling it."

Bowman finished his cigarette and stubbed it out in an ashtray that Jake could fence for a month's rent.

It was a slow realisation but one that hit Jake like a steam train all the same. A bottle of bourbon, three-quarters empty, which had clearly been drunk without a glass; a single sheet of paper laying in clear view with Bowman's scrawl on it and then there was the revolver which Jake realised was never meant for him. The only life that Bowman was planning on taking that night was his own. They sat in silence for several long minutes before Jake felt compelled to break the silence. "Something must be pretty bad to get to that?" He glanced at the gun and Bowman acknowledged Jake's powers of observation with a small smile. "It's about as bad as it's going to get." A man of few words in normal circumstances the business tycoon was not about to spill the beans to a common



thief. He changed lanes. "So, as I see it, we have two options here: number one – you insist on trying to leave my premises with my heart and I call the police or shoot you if I feel like it; or number two – you get up and leave without my heart and without arrest."

"You would let me just walk out of here?"

It wasn't Jake's best option but it would be better than sitting in jail while his wife died.

"I don't see why not. My housekeeper is a rather stern lady and I would hate to have to tell her to clear your blood from the floor and government organisations aren't exactly my favourite people at the moment so I don't see why I should hand them a freebie for their jail cells."

Jake rose and walked toward the heart, "I'll just put this away for you." Bowman smiled. Jake kept one eye on the revolver and another on the study door as he headed toward it.

"Your name?" Jake started thinking that he had almost been home-free. "Why?" "Because I hold all the cards here and I want to know your name."

"Jake Collins" With that he allowed no further questioning as he carefully retraced his entry steps to exit the property unseen.

Jake was already walking the streets near his own home when the ambulance arrived at the Bowman residence. The maid had heard a single gunshot. By the time the paramedics entered the darkened study Manny Bowman was beyond repair.

Jake placed his fingertip on the identification pad to enter the hospital wing that was now so familiar to him. His

wife had occupied Room 206 for the last six weeks and as her condition had no hope for improvement without transplant, she would probably remain there until her death. Jake didn't want to think about her being gone as he watched her sleep. The low concentrations of oxygen in her blood meant that she was only conscious for a few minutes at a time. Jake had not slept since he had left the Bowman house the night before and he yearned for the peaceful slumber that came so easily to his wife.

A nurse entered and nodded at Jake. She silently punched his wife's vitals into a PDA and started to leave the room. "How long?" Jake's voice box rasped the question into the dead air.

"Before the end?" The nurse was accustomed to such questions. "It depends, Mr. Collins, unfortunately, as you know, in situations where spares are not available there is not much the hospital can do." He nodded, having known the answer yet hoping if he phrased it differently from the one thousand other occasions he had asked then perhaps a miraculous new answer would emerge. "We will try to keep her as comfortable as possible but you should prepare yourself for her to go in the next few days."

'Days', 'Spares' – the words were alien and yet frighteningly familiar. The lack of each meant a quicker exit. Alison had changed his path in the world. She had saved him from the pathetic, selfish existence he had once lived and now that the tables were turned, he was completely helpless to return the favour. It was too late to find a new mark now. The

research alone took weeks, the planning and infiltration of the mark's premises even longer. Alison had days, not weeks.

Jake visited the hospital canteen later that morning for coffee. The morning newspapers flashed across the LCD screens mounted on each table.

*Billionaire Export Tycoon Commits Suicide* – the headline pushed Jake's mental haze aside momentarily as he reached for the screen's remote and paged through the story.

Billionaire shipping tycoon, Manny Bowman, was found dead in his study yesterday evening with an, apparently, self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. The story continued with news that had been uncovered that morning regarding Bowman's business activities.

Bowman's suicide coincides with the discovery that his export business, *WorldShip*, was suffering tremendous losses and is expected to liquidate within the next few days.

So that was Bowman's world shattering problem, Jake thought, the old fart's business was going under and he couldn't handle the failure. The irony was that a man who had held the world in his hands could not handle a bad day at the office but Jake, who was about as far from a success story as one could imagine, had to watch his wife suffer and die without the thought of suicide entering his head. Anger rose within Jake as he realised that Bowman's organs would be destroyed now and wasted. It had been big businesses like *WorldShip* that had voted to have organ donation abolished as it was too taxing on government coffers but the new system worked only for those that had instituted it.

Nurse Paley had been on staff in the ICU for twenty years. She had seen the abolishment of organ donation and detested the wealthy minority that had benefited financially from the new cloning centres whilst the poor majority died of organ failure without hope. She had been attending to Alison Collins since her admission and recognised the rapid deterioration that she had undergone in the past few days. Death was walking a tight circle around her wilting body, a hunter prodding and poking its prey before pouncing. She had seen Jake Collins enter the canteen earlier and wondered if he realised that his wife could die in the time that it took to make a cup of coffee. Paley was standing behind the admissions desk when the call came in. "Nurse, I think you should speak to this man." The receptionist held out the receiver looking more than a little perturbed.

"Nurse Paley, how may I help you?"

"You have a patient there by the name of Collins?" The voice was clipped and business-like.

"Yes, we do, may I ask what this is regarding?"

"A helicopter will be landing on your heli-pad in half an hour. The package inside belongs to this patient, make sure she gets it." Paley was beyond confused.

"May I ask who I am speaking with please?" She listened for a few moments to the man's explanation and then replaced the receiver with a quick inhalation.

"Get the crew to clear the heli-pad." She barked at the receptionist before scurrying down the hallway.

Jake returned to his wife's room half an hour later. It was empty. His breathing stopped and the world stopped on its axis. He lunged toward the door with jelly legs and collapsed on his knees in the hallway. "Where is she?" His voice rose much higher than hospital etiquette allowed. "Where the hell is my wife? You can't take her away from me like this!" A set of strong, able arms supported him to a chair. Nurse Paley held his shoulders as his wild eyes threatened to overtake his face.

"I am sorry to frighten you like this, Mr. Collins." He had no time for polite apologies.

"Where is she?"

"She is in the operating theatre. The doctors are operating on her right now."

"What for? She hasn't the strength; you're going to kill her!" Jake shook off the nurse's hold and started down the corridor toward where he thought the operating theatres may be.

"No Mr. Collins," Nurse Paley shouted after him, attracting odd glances from patients and staff milling in the hallway, "they are going to save her. We have a heart."

"What do you mean? A heart? From where?" Jake slowly returned to where the nurse was standing.

"I received a call this morning from an assistant to the late Manny Bowman. Apparently the old man mentioned your name in his suicide note. His assistant did some research and traced you and Alison here." Nurse Paley recognised the look on Jake's face as the way she had felt thirty minutes before. The notion of a wealthy person leaving his heart, of all

things, to a random person was unheard of.

"But..." Jake considered his words carefully not wanting to stir trouble in a pot that was ready to boil over. "organ donation is illegal." The nurse smiled. "Yes but bequeathing property in, what could be considered, a final will and testament is not. And by law cloned organs are considered the property of the tissue donor and his to bequeath as he wishes." Paley could not help but feel a sense of satisfaction at the turn of events. The law had worked against itself thanks to the cleverness of a rich old man who, in his last hours, had sought to place a knife in the back of the system he had reaped fruit from all his life. "The note said that the heart was to be your property and you should do with it as you saw fit. We thought that you may want to give it to your wife."

Jake found that he had fallen back into the chair beneath him. His world had managed to realign itself and fall into utter confusion at the same time. Bowman had spent his last moments with a man that had breached his security and sought to steal from him. Jake would never know what had initiated the man's act of kindness. Had he seen the sheer desperation that Jake had so desperately tried to hide and sensed that a matter of life and death was at hand? Or had it simply been a practiced tyrant playing one last power game before the curtains closed? Jake would never be completely certain but, with his wife on the road to recovery, the answer was immaterial.

# What Makes Us Human? A Lecture delivered by Andre Croucamp



Andre Croucamp, Deirdre Byrne, Ian Jamieson, Gavin Kreuter

This talk was described as "a random excursion through Physics, Chemistry, Cosmology and Evolution".

This very lively and interesting discourse was accompanied by a very entertaining power point presentation. We were invited to decide for ourselves what makes us different from other species which inhabit our planet. We weren't surprised to see how closely we are related to the Chimpanzee and some of the great apes, but were intrigued to see how much genetic material we share with the common house fly and even the trees that

green our environment. Andre has a M.A. in Archaeology and also has Theology qualifications and had time permitted I would have liked to question his thoughts on Mysticism.

His talk was given in a crisp, clear and very understandable manner which made for a very pleasing afternoon's entertainment.

We then watched a "documentary" on life on another planet - the ideas of a set of invited scientists and biologists on possible alien life. I was a little disappointed to see how much it had in common with life on Earth but it was interesting nevertheless.

Later a group of us headed out to the local "Mike's Kitchen" and had a most enjoyable supper and continued with our usual Science Fictional conversations.

## AGM 2009

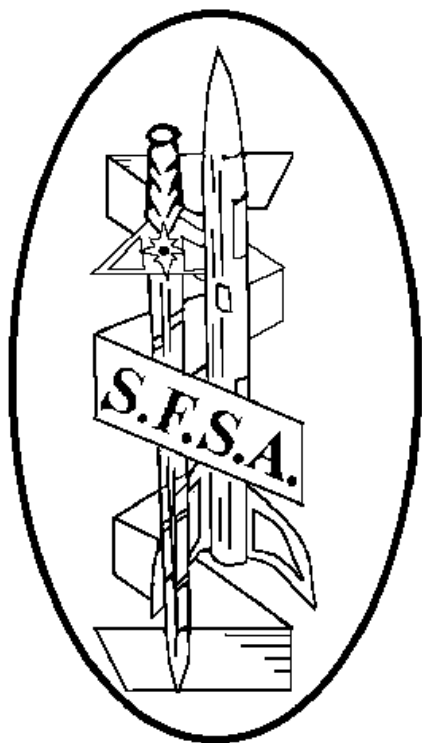




Barrett Brick

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**The Best of South African Science Fiction Volume Three is now available.**

The stories in this collection have been selected by the Editor, Liz Simmonds, from winners and finalists of the Nova short story competition that were published in PROBE from 1986 to 1991. It includes seventeen stories, from South African Web fundi, Arthur Goldstuck to one from the Editor herself. The foreword is by Dave Freer, probably the most successful South African SF author, whose collaborations with Mercedes Lackey and Eric Flint have been published by Baen Books.

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