

## PROBE 142

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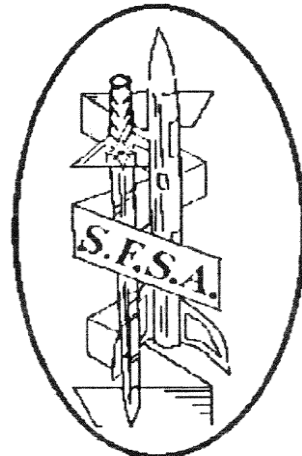
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# PROBE 142

September 2009

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As SFSA enters its 41<sup>st</sup> year we, the committee are wondering what we can do to get members, and non-members to join us at our monthly meetings. Over the past year we have had some (we think) very interesting meetings. And yet, they have mostly been rather poorly attended.

We have held a “Forgotten Classics” day and

showed the original “Village of the Damned”, “Things to Come”, “The Thing from Outer Space” and “The 7<sup>th</sup> Voyage of Sinbad”. At our Annual Con we tried to find movies that not many people would have seen and showed “Delicatessen”, “Alice”, “2146” and “Open Your Eyes”(some with subtitles). I must admit that the shorts the men wore in “Things to Come” might have put some people off but still we expected a bigger turnout.

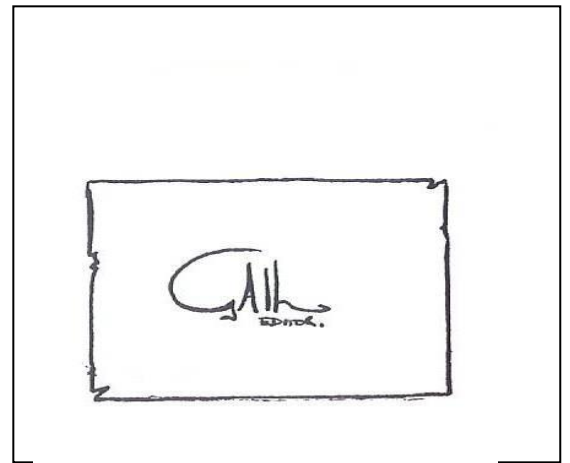
We have had a great variety of speakers, mostly on science fiction, but following the tenet that the speaker is more important than the topic, we have also had some non-SF topics. We had Professor Tim Carter who spoke on “When Science Fiction becomes Science Fact”; Dr Lucinda Backwell on “Neolithic Bone Tools; Professor Lesley Cornish on “How Strong Materials can save the world”; Pippa Stalker Tshabalala on “Stepping over the Threshold in Video Games”; Roger Wanless on “Ancient Crete and Bob Tait on “How SA (and the rest of the world) needs to change its energy sources in the future”

We’ve also had a couple of great “Discussion Groups” organized by Gavin Kreuter. For example, we split into groups and looked at the pictures that tried to debunk the 1969 Moon landings and had to report back on why we thought they had actually taken place. I don’t think any of us will forget Gio’s comment: “The American government wouldn’t lie to us!”

We’ve had great quality, interesting speakers and many of them have spoken to very small audiences. None, so far, have complained about this and I think this may be because we have had really interesting discussions with them after their talks. But it seems a pity that more people don’t come along to listen. I send out email notices to almost 200 people and though some of them are overseas or spread around the country it still seems that it is mostly the same bunch of people who turn up, with the occasional new face, who sometimes stays or more often disappears, never to be seen again. We also send notices out to the local newspapers.

I know that we often compete with sporting events but when we think of clubs in other countries who sometimes meet every week, we wonder if we’re doing something wrong.

If anyone has any ideas please contact us.



# LETTERS

**Tex Cooper**

**Pretoria**

The Case of the Missing Probes.  
A Hemlock Shomes Mystery.

Before we begin, a competition. Life membership to the person who correctly identifies the solution. You have 10 seconds... Sorry no luck. I'll just have to explain.

At the beginning of SFSA, we produced Newsletters 1, 2, 3, and possibly 4, but I'm not sure about 4. However in the last of the newsletters, there was a competition to select a name for the Official magazine of SFSA.

Members submitted their nominations and a list of all the name was drawn up. Members were then asked to vote for their top three names. This was to ensure that the most popular name was selected.

Voting was as follows. Each name that was nominated as first got three points. The second nomination got two points. The third got one point. All the points were tallied and the most popular name was selected, hence PROBE.

Now we come to the mystery. By dint of backward reengineering, Newsletter One should, under the new regime should have been Probe Volume 1 Number 1. Newsletter Two would then be Probe Volume 1 Number 2.

When the new name was used, because Volume 1 was used, theoretically, the new Probe became Volume 2 Number 1.

I say, Shomes that is deuced brilliant.  
Elementary my dear Whats On.

Your logic is impeccable, Captain.  
Why, thank you Spook.



Say it with flowers -  
give her a Triffid.

## Philip Machanick

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<http://opinion-nation.blogspot.com/>

It was great to read Probe 141, the 40th anniversary issue. I first stumbled on SFSA as did many others through seeing a letter to the editor in a Sunday paper advertising the writing contest. That would have been some time in the 1970s, when I was still in high school, in distant Port Shepstone in Natal (now kwaZulu-Natal). It's good to see guest editorials from so many past editors. I know from my own experience of running an academic society that the real measure of success of your tenure is not what you achieved, but that it goes on after you stepped down. What can be done now with the advantages of electronic copy and paste and page layout is a huge step away from the early editions with Roneo and, later, manual paste-up for litho printing. The new technologies bring their own risks, like spelling checking that fails to catch context errors (you can tell the age of the writer by this; people who write "your" instead of "you're" grew up relying on a word processor to correct typos. Has the book "Eats Shoots and Leaves" made it to SA? It's a fun read about how punctuation can so easily be abused and misused.

Have you thought of getting an ISSN for Probe to make it more official? After 40 years, it is plausible to call it a regular periodical (and a pretty incredible achievement at that).

Are any of you planning on showing up for AussiCon4 (<http://www.aussiecon4.org.au/>) in Melbourne next year? Of course you are. If you can fit in a side trip (and I haven't since moved), feel free to drop by to Brisbane, a mere 1,685 km away – a small detour by the standards of this ridiculously huge country.

Despite the fact that there is an Australian Science Fiction Foundation, I'm a bit disappointed to find that there is only a Trekkies club in Brisbane, as far as I can tell. Maybe I should look into launching a Queensland club. Clearly this is why Brisbane is not hosting WorldCon. Melbourne even has gay and lesbian SF club (why would this need to be a separate activity?). As far as I can tell all 4 Aussie Cons have been in Melbourne, illustrating the value of a wide local fan base – though no doubt each time there's a local WorldCon it adds to the existing base.

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Dear Gail

Just a quick note to congratulate you all on *Probe's* 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. What an achievement. According to my records, after *Contrast/New Contrast*, *New Coin* and *English Alive*, *Probe* is the longest-running literary magazine in South Africa. And if you consider that *Contrast* and *Upstream* amalgamated only in 1990 to become *New Contrast*, then you are actually the 3<sup>rd</sup> longest-running. Perhaps you should mention this in the next issue?

I do think that this is worth a mention in your next edition, but you don't need to mention me!! UNLESS you want a picture of me holding NELM's just-about-complete set? However, the point is that so many literary journals are coming and going these days and other than *Something Wicked* (which publishes SF and horror) and which is going digital after 9 issues (in order to keep publishing), *Probe* is the only one dedicated to SF, so is definitely filling a big gap. In today's economic climate and without being linked to an external organisation such as a university, you all can really be proud of yourselves.

I should clarify that *Probe* is the 3<sup>rd</sup> longest running of the English literary magazines in South Africa. We don't keep the Afrikaans ones so I couldn't tell you about those.

**Lloyd Penney.**  
**Canada**

Dear SFSAns:

Issues 139 and 140 of *Probe* have finally made their way to my mailbox, and I should get a letter of comment off to you as soon as possible. Good thing e-mail speeds things up, it's a big world...

139...Full colour, glossy paper, great art work...you definitely had a beneficiary there, and good for him or her to financing this, it looks great. And, good artwork, full colour again, makes the whole issue stand out.

Mindreader is a good story, perhaps a near-future story with typical implications for

scientists who think they are a distance away from any group, military or political, that provides funding for any research. In the long run, any money given to anyone means a return is expected, mostly to satisfy shareholders, and anyone who believes otherwise is naïve. And, anyone who gets in the way, even children, will be trodden underfoot.

Dragonfly was a little difficult for me to get through, but it is proof that no matter how bad life can get, how far down in the gutter you may be, there is often something left inside you that will lift you away from your plight. Some may not like the implication of gay sex or rape, but most people are open-minded enough these days.

I've met Spider Robinson a few times, and we've always had a good time. Spider will often have a singalong in the con suite or similar open area, and we'll belt out Beatles tunes.

Always fun, and he's always accessible. I am not sure that Spider and Jeanne were at the Worldcon in Montréal this year; I didn't see them anywhere, and not on the list of panelists.

The Last Man...the Institute of Further Human Development reminds me of a new movie coming up. I have seen no title, but the trailer shown looks like a commercial for the Institute of Human Continuation, which I think alludes to humanity leaving the earth, and a lottery being held to see who gets to go to the stars. Whether actual human beings will go, or just the human genome, no one is sure. Would we ever experiment with our own genome so that we could create an Overpeople or superior species? We're not experienced enough to create a new genome without making serious mistakes, and we're too religious as a whole to allow such new beings to exist without wondering about their souls. I wasn't quite sure I understood the First Death, unless it was simply a period of illness.

140...I do like the idea of miniature muses swarming around your head, trying to give you ideas, and a fresh new muse arrives with some fresh, new ideas. How many fans have asked their favorite authors to put them in a story?

I like radio plays because I remember hearing radio plays late at night on distant stations on the AM band. These days, I like them because I am trying my best to become a voice actor, and would love to turn pro. I have done one old-time radio show for a student, and her efforts were never released, and I have an audition with the Radio Vault, and I might be able to get on with them, and do this kind of thing as part of a group. With North American radio now being mostly music and chat, I miss the radio plays and dramas.

I read the two joint winners, Watermarks and Iceman, and I really can't offer any remarks, but congratulations to both the authors on a couple of entertaining stories. I wish I could give some cogent criticism.

Were there fans from South Africa at the Montréal Worldcon? We had a great time there, and we even got to hand out a Hugo award at the big ceremony. A wonderful time, and if you were there, it was one of the best Worldcons I'd been to in some time. I will find an e-mail address to rush this letter to, and I don't know when I'll hear from you again...as our summer finishes up, yours will start up soon, so enjoy your season, and I will look for more issues.

# Movie Review      Gwen Watkins

## DISTRICT 9

Last week's media preview of District 9, the new South African sci-fi film, left most of us quite shattered. Not expecting such a performance or to be so engrossed, the film may draw on recognised genres but it delivers the shock and uncomfortable recognition that Paul Verhoeven used to deliver. The film is deservedly gaining credit internationally but in South Africa it may well be greeted with uncomfortable reactions – the film unashamedly draws on our past and current view of species different to our perception of what is human and how we treat them.

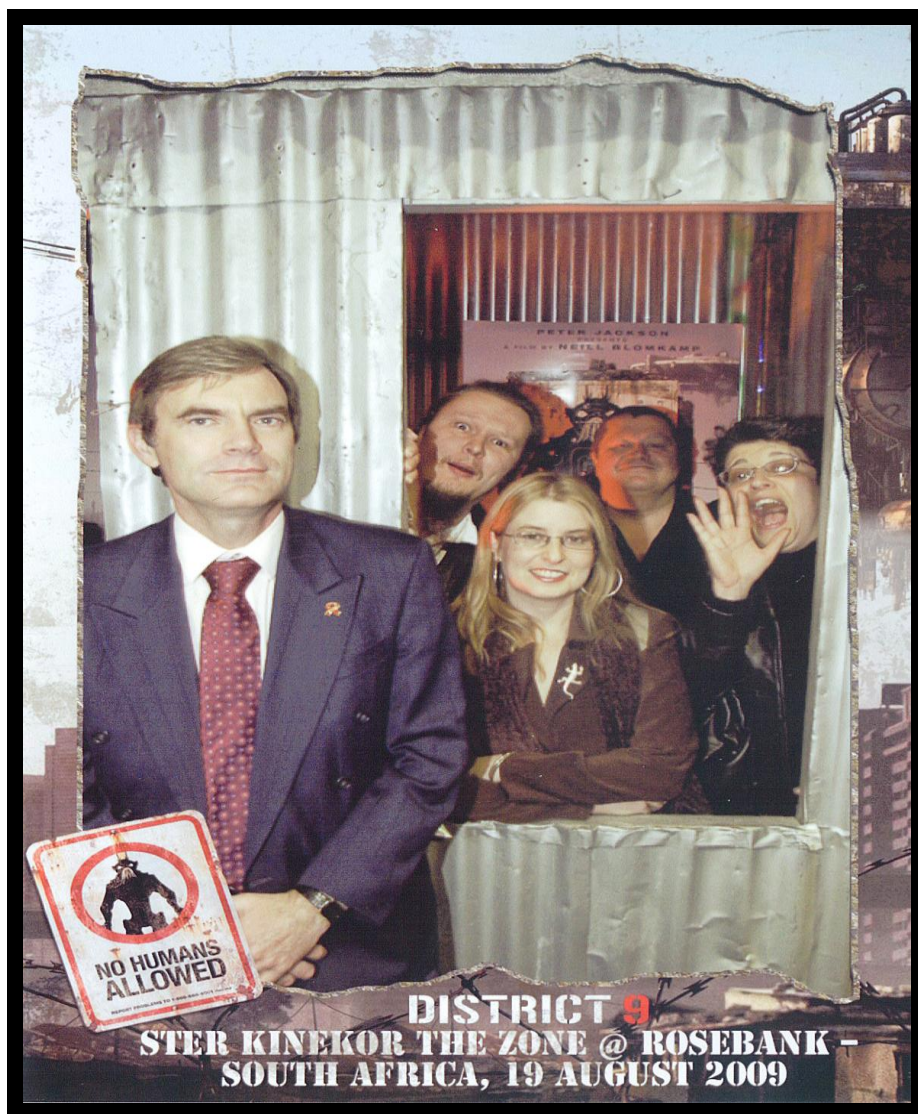
The plot seems simple enough; an alien force has landed in Johannesburg 20 years ago and, producing neither useful technology nor annihilation, has camped on the outskirts of the city, forming eventually a slum. The Multi-National United (MNU), a private corporation, runs the slum and now has been charged with removing all the aliens to a new camp much further from the city. Enter the most unlikely hero – picture your average small bank branch manager and you have Wikus van der Merwe (portrayed by Sharlto Copley). His job is to knock on doors and get the aliens to sign an agreement to be evicted. Some of the 'prawns,' as they are so charmingly called, refuse, some get violent and some clearly don't understand but he works his way through the camp like a true bureaucrat, until he meets Christopher Johnson and his son little CJ, aliens who have assumed human names as required to fit into the society in which they find themselves. Wikus is accidentally sprayed with a contaminant and then during an exchange with an alien, injured as well. Now infected with alien DNA, he holds the key to MNU's need to make alien technology work and, faced with no mercy from humans or MNU forces, he flees into District 9 as the only place where he can try to survive and make sense of his calamity. His disintegration from a happy family man into a hunted outcast and his integration into violence is a moving experience and the introduction of Nigerian gangsters and psychotic MNU enforcers makes it all too real.

The film is presented often as a newsreel or documentary footage and, by interspersing actual SABC footage, adds to the horribly real feeling of the film. This is far truer as to the way humans would deal with aliens – no cute ET moments or Independence Day mayhem – just grim township life on the edge of a dump.

Neill Blomkamp, the South African born director, has spent many years in Canada as a visual effects artist and director of award winning ads, short films and was recognised as

one of the Top 5 Directors to Watch at the First Board Awards, featured in the Saatchi & Saatchi New Directors Showcase at Cannes.

The producer, Peter Jackson, is world renowned for his directing of the Lord of the Rings trilogy and he is quoted as saying “Neill Blomkamp is a terrifically exciting young director. We were considering a production of *Halo* based on the video game. That movie never happened but we loved working with Neill so much that when he pitched us *District 9*, we decided it would be fun to turn his idea into a feature film.”



Seen at the preview: --  
SFSA members --  
(left to right)  
Franz Tomasek  
Gustav Bertram  
Simone Puterman  
Gavin Kreuiter  
Carla Martins

# Nova 2008 Finalist General Section

## The Devil's Little Tadpoles

### Gary Kuyper

Twice a day, without fail, we would pray to the good Lord above for His divine protection. Once just before the sun would set – We prithee safeguard us sinners through the long dark night. And again just after sunrise – We thankee Lord for preserving our souls whole till morn. Of course, we hadn't always been such a devout family, but time and circumstance can make a pious person out of just about any man.

I remember Father John Partridge joking, "Ye'll be 'ard-pressed ta find a single agnostic aboard a sinkin' ship."

I piled a large bundle of kindling against the door. The kindling was damp, but I coaxed it along with a soaking of lamp oil from a small barrel I had brought along especially for such an emergency. I waited until the flames crackled brightly before adding more wood and oil. It hissed and spat. The door began to blacken and steam. It too was damp and would take some time to burn through. I walked back up the long flight of carved stone steps into the scattered sunlight. The sun had moved behind the dripping forest, but there would still be a few hours of sunlight left. Enough time to breach the door and destroy the vile creature that dwelt within.

I returned to my horse and removed a large bottle of wine from the saddlebag and uncorked the stopper.

Wait! Did I not need to have the full use of all my faculties?

I held out a flat hand, fingers spread. It shook.

Was it dread? Excitement? Both?

Some say alcohol imparts courage.

Others claim it merely dampens the fear. Either way, I could use a little. Besides, I had been weaned on my father's special vintage.

I placed the bottle against my cold lips and lifted the rear end high. I gazed dully at the azure sky. The many weeks of rain seemed to be retreating at last.

By the time I returned the bottle to an upright position, I had quaffed at least half the contents.

I dragged a clenched fist across my mouth and looked thoughtfully at the wet stain on the back of my pale hand. Blood on...on the throat of a delicate young neck. I scrunched my eyes and clenched my teeth. That horrible vision would remain forever. Strange, I'm not sure I had seen blood that awful night. One thing I am sure of, what I saw was not human. Perhaps it had once been a man, but no more.

Poor Will, always unlucky. Two years older, he had gone through life falling prey to every malady that happened to stroke its long delicate fingers across our village. He had been lucky enough to survive it all, but it had left him a thin pale weakened creature.

My parents had placed his bed beneath the large window. The lad jus' needs plenty a fresh air, tha' be all. It'll do him a world o' good.

I'm not sure if it was my brother's muffled whimpering that awoke me, or the heady odour of wet rotting vegetation.

What I saw would rob me forever of the deep unworried sleep I had always enjoyed.

I often wished I had never awakened that night. An empty bed in the morning. Will had simply run away to join some traveling carnival as he had often threatened to do after a good lashing from father.

Will would be sorely missed, but sleep would be untroubled.

Destiny, unfortunately, dealt me a different hand.

The thing...creature...beast...demon...devil leaned over the low window sill, its large head resting heavily upon my brother's neck and chest. It must have sensed my movement. It rapidly withdrew staring towards me with enormous golden eyes. Orbs that sat high upon the face instead of in them. I am not sure if its eyes were truly yellow or simply a reflection of the full moon that had appeared from behind the night's fading storm clouds.

Earlier, Will and I had both sat on his bed watching the wonderful display of lightning and downpour. Our cottage had a wide

gutter area so that the rain fell some distance from the window. We loved the storms. Especially the big bright noisy ones.

Although most grapes prefer a drier climate, the special blood-red berry that my father cultivated in his orchards, thrived here.

Mother hated the storms. She had closed our window then hurried off to shiver in my father's strong yet tender embrace. She would not return till morning. No sooner had she hastily departed that we both scrambled for the large wooden shutters, giggling in our excitement.

The creature had stared unblinkingly towards me. It undoubtedly sought some form of proof that I was aware of its presence. Could it see beyond the silvery cast into the shadow where I lay? I closed my eyes lightly. Tightly would have been a dead giveaway. I had learned that when trying to fool my mother.

I held my breath and heard my heart beating loudly and furiously. The beast would hear it...and the absence of my breath and know that I feigned sleep. I exhaled slowly and opened eyes slightly. The demon had yet failed to remove its dreadful gaze.

I overcame an incredible desire to close my eyes and never open them again. The devil once more returned its attention to my brother.

Only now did I notice that Will was awake. He stared up terrified, yet unable to move. It seemed as though he was trying to scream but only a soft wheezing could be heard.

The beast lowered its head as a large gelatinous mass oozed from its mouth.

This was more than any ten year old lad could endure. I screamed.

I screamed loud and I screamed long. I did not stop until my parents were shaking me. After that I sobbed uncontrollably. In the time taken for my mother and father to reach our room, the creature had effortlessly lifted my brother through the window and then seemingly lifted into the air. The wet earth beneath the window had most certainly been disturbed by someone or something, yet there were no tracks leading to or from the area.

The villagers, and I suspect my parents too, had thought the account to be the delirious ravings of some child's waking nightmare. Not even when René Baptiste, the leatherworker's son vanished did they imagine the cause to be some non-human entity.

It was only when the Cooper's daughter, Rachel vanished that they began to suspect an awful truth behind the disappearances. Her mother had sent her with supper to her father's barrel-making workshop. He had been working late due to an unexpected downpour that had spoilt some slats inadvertently left in the open. The swollen wood would be impossible to use until it had lost the excessive moisture.

He had heard her scream. Rushed outside the large wooden doors. Something vanished around the side of the workshop. Something that was carrying his daughter. It took him a moment to reach the corner of the shed, but there was nothing. Nothing, except a large wicker basket lying on its side. Beside it lay his supper strewn out upon the black mud.

A meeting was called. The whole village turned up. They asked Mister Cooper what he had seen. It had happened too fast. Something big. Maybe black. Maybe green. Too dark to tell. One thing was certain, it was no animal he had ever seen and it certainly had not been human. Then they all looked at me and my mother started to cry. I heard someone whisper wampyre. People crossed themselves.

After that, the villagers would no longer go about doing business after dark, unless accompanied by at least two cohorts. Weapons were carried by all and at all times. Windows and doors were securely bolted and fastened after sundown. The number of hanging crucifixes grew substantially. In some houses not a single wall remained barren. Even the alehouse had a couple over the large hearth. Bertrand Smith, the local metalworker had a difficult task keeping up with demands for instruments of both physical and spiritual protection. And, of course, Father John Partridge was thrilled about the increase in the numbers at Sunday mass.

Slowly but surely time passed. Long periods during which no unfortunate incident would occur. People would become less cautious and more careless. And so the creature would return to remind us of our religious obligations. And then time would pass again.

As far as I can tell, Will had been the first. It had all begun just over eight years ago. All this time I had lived in constant fear. But fear, like the handle of an axe, at first causes painful blisters, but later with excessive use forms tough unfeeling

callouses that protect hands from further harm.

When you live in constant dread long enough, you wake up one morning and the fear has been replaced with hate; and the hate fuels a passion for revenge. Of course, my journey of retribution would not have taken place if it had not first been preceded by an unexpected voyage of discovery and enlightenment.

As the years strengthened me physically, so too they fortified me mentally. I quickly learned the wine-making trade and at sixteen I knew the secret of my father's special vintage. It was also during this year that my father entrusted to me the delivery rounds beyond our village's borders.

I also expect the fact that a fully loaded cart could move effortlessly, from sunup to sundown, between villages had been a deciding factor. Besides, my father had been witness to the sheer terror upon my young face; he knew I would take no unnecessary risks.

So it happened that I would spend a week or two away from home, traveling from village to village, spending the evenings in the local establishments that accommodated the weary and wary traveler.

It was during these times that I began to gather a wealth of knowledge. Not only of the world in general, but most importantly of the vile creature's activities.

Most of the villages that lay within the wide river gorge that eventually became our own valley, had experienced similar attacks. Communities further downstream where the river twisted away from the mountains towards the dry open planes, as well as those areas higher up, were

seldom if ever to report incidents. In fact, they considered us valley-dwellers to be somewhat superstitious fools.

I was having an early supper at one of the alehouses I often frequented when I noticed that the wall farthest from the hearth had a new addition. It had been covered in an array of scribblings and diagrams. I went over for a closer examination.

"Admiring my handiwork?"

The lad in the half-light was probably four or five years my senior. He sat, feet up on a table, leaning against one of the large wooden poles.

"What be it?" I frowned.

He closed a large volume book on his lap. "A map." He walked over to the wall and waved a proud hand across it. "A map of the entire surrounding area for about twenty five miles in all directions." My frown deepened. "I was commissioned by the Crown to chart this entire area. The alehouse keeper heard I was a qualified cartographer and requested a special favour. Felt it would be of great use to the many passing travelers. Ergo increase clientele."

"Wha' be this 'ere sickle-shape?" I pointed to the centre.

"More omega-shaped actually." My frown prevailed. "That is the great river that runs through this damnable moist valley of yours."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed. "I know the valley curves, but to such a degree? Why, ye've got it almos' to a full circle."

He looked insulted. "Some of these mountains and forests have been a little guess work. You know, places impossible to traverse. There is a well established road all along the river. I took

many readings. Many. Trust me, your river is most accurately depicted. The map is not yet complete. Yet much to add.”

I told him the name of my village. He squinted at the map, and after some deliberation he pointed to a spot near the edge of the...omega-shape. “I would guess about there.”

“I guess so. We’re right where the river loses its straight course and begins to curve into the mountain.” I studied the map carefully. “Wha’s tha’?” I indicated to a large cross in the centre of the incomplete circle. “A graveyard?”

“An abandoned Benedictine monastery. There is a graveyard as well.”

“Monastery? Impossible! There’s nary a roadway up the sheer walls o’ the great river.”

“Used to be.” He pointed to the left of the curve. “Here, about ten, twelve miles from your village. Probably collapsed from the excessive downpours. You can see the remaining portion of road clearly from the top.”

“You’ve been...?” He nodded. “How?” He moved a finger between the gap that would have completed the circle.

“Through here. Not the most pleasant of excursions I guarantee. Thick forest and black sucking marshland. Leeches near drained my poor mount. No secret why the place was abandoned after the roadway collapsed. I must admit though, it becomes more agreeable at the summit. Still damp, but solid. And a rather splendid view of most of the gorge and valley.”

In the years that followed, I made a point to sit close to the map where I could study my progress of distributing my father’s liquor. The completed map had increased

considerably in detail. All villages and their names had been added in neat painted type. I would sometimes place a finger on my village and slowly follow the course I had taken, and then plot the route I would travel at first light. I silently mouthed the name of each village as my finger went over it. The scale of the map was highly accurate, and I would use a piece of string to work out distances by bending it along the curved lines of the roads. I was delighted to find I knew every village. I was more elated when realizing my father did business with them all. I plucked out a small leather-bound notebook containing their names and orders placed over the past two years. I was enjoying to toy with the idea to see which villages had ordered the most wine, and whether their geographical positioning had any bearing on their consumption rate, when I noticed the other marks I had made beside each name.

I was feeling good at the time and was upset to be reminded of their meaning. Each mark signified the tears and pain of some family; the loss of a child to a fiendish non-human abductor. Then it struck me! I could do the same on the map with these marks.

The alehouse keeper glanced my way a few times, but he was used to me always studying and measuring his map. I believe he actually enjoyed the fact that at least someone was putting it to good use. I don’t think he would have been pleased to find that I was making small charcoal marks next to many of the villages. When I had finished, I had an answer for which I had long sought after. I knew where to find the monster.

The villages at the point where the omega shape straightened, this included my village, had the highest incidences. The numbers diminished towards the apex of the circle. In fact, the village that lay on the top most curve of the circle did not have a single black mark next to its name. I was now certain of two things. The devil resided in the abandoned monastery, and the creature, whatever it was, was incapable of flight.

I planned the trip allowing myself sufficient daylight to complete the terrible task. I shall not bore you with the repulsive details of my arduous journey through the forest and marshland, suffice to say that it was most unpleasant.

I arrived later than intended.

I was surprised to find the monastery in a reasonable condition. Not dilapidated as most abandoned structures tend to become.

The only, and quite dominating factor, was the way in which the moss had imitated most of the buildings.

To explain, this was not the type of moss that grows thickly upon moist jagged rock. This variation allowed stone to absorb it, and then somehow became that very same stone, emulating it to perfection.

The monastery was a large moist-green living entity. Needless to say, I felt uneasy to enter the place. A thought of being swallowed alive passed through my mind. I searched it from top to bottom.

Although I was unsure of exactly what I sought, I do know that I found nothing...ominous. I did discover one thing of peculiar interest though.

In the wing of one of the large transepts, I found an enormous octagonal-shaped sunken pool. It had probably once been

an immaculate structure. Constructed mainly from white marble and having a large heavy baldachin supported above it by eight smooth columns. The walls about it had been covered in frescoes that were once probably angels, but were now mostly black algae. The same was true of the mosaic-patterned floor that spread out from the edges of the dark grimy water.

I overheard Father John Partridge talking to a couple whose child would be baptized the following Sunday. "Did ye know tha' some churches once contained deep pools so tha' they could perform total immersion? They believed baptism to be a symbolic form of burial. In other words, ye die to yer old way of life and arise out of the water a new person, free of the bondage of sin." The couple had seemed perplexed. "Ah, now dinna be a frettin' yerselves none, I'll only be sprinklin' a few drops o' cold water upon the wee laddie's fore'ead." The couple had breathed a sigh of relief.

The depth of the pool was uncertain. The black stagnant liquid that was all but encrusted in a layer of slime and rotting vegetation protected that secret. Although I had found no physical evidence, there was one thing that convinced me that I had found the beast's unholy lair. Its stench was undeniably prevalent.

I went outside again and found the graveyard. Still nothing. Walking about the outside of the large cathedral-like structure I finally found hope. Stairs that descended at a most treacherous angle beneath the building

and were finally blocked by a door of wrought iron and wood. The iron had been fashioned into heart-shaped leaves and clusters of grapes.

“Of course!” I muttered angrily to myself. “I of all people should have realized. A wine cellar!”

Where else safer for a creature that fears the sun, but in a place that is cool, damp and never sees the light of day. I had wasted a good deal of precious sunlight searching improbable hideaways.

I placed a well-aimed kick against the smoldering door. It immediately gave way in a shower of sparks and crumbling black timber.

The stairs continued their descent on the other side.

I fashioned a torch from rags and oil, ignited it and tossed it into the darkness below.

I saw liquid just before it was extinguished in a hiss and sizzle.

I made a second torch, removed the pistol from my belt and checked that the long cylindrical pole that I had filed to a sharpened point was secure. Secure but easily removable if required.

I moved cautiously down the stairs until I reached the cellar floor. It was flooded to waist –depth. The water was unpleasantly chilling as I moved along a broad passage that was cut into the very rock. I passed several narrower passageways that branched off to the left and right of the main passage before coming to another wider stairway that ascended out of the water and into a small chamber.

I cursed to find the small room empty and no doorway leading out except the one I had entered. I backtracked down the stairs and became aware of the incessant

plopping wetness echoing through the long dark passages like a moist pink tongue forced through moist pink lips. I lifted the torch high and noticed that the ceiling above was covered in a vast array of nodules that had formed through the constant seepage. The rain had slowly filtered down through the soil and stone bringing with it a white substance that dripped from the hardened nipples like some macabre mother’s milk.

I began to doubt my analysis. Would any intelligent creature make its lair in such an uninviting place?

My mind was entertaining this new logic when I noticed a disturbance in the cloudy water to my left. Something dark and dome-shaped broke the surface. At first I thought it to be a turtle, but it continued to rise so that I discerned it to be a blackened skull and face. The eyes opened, reflecting the yellow glow of the torch. It continued to rise until it stood upright.

Surely this was not the same creature that I had seen outside the bedroom window that fateful night. It seemed pathetic; diminished.

It advanced slowly holding out thin fingers upon the air. I aimed my weapon square at the dripping face. The wine had not helped. My hand shook.

And then the creature spoke. It hissed as if struggling to use lungs that had not sucked air in ages or forced that air past vocal cords in an eternity.

“Kill me,” it whispered. “Please, kill me.” No second invitation was necessary. A spark, a splutter and then...nothing. The powder had gotten wet. I threw the pistol aside cursing.

The thing continued to advance. I kicked it in the chest. It fell back and disappeared beneath the murky surface.

I used the opportunity to remove the long metal spike from my belt.

The creature remained submerged. I cursed again. It could probably move swiftly and unseen beneath the foul liquid. I hastily moved backwards onto the steps, studying the slow gentle undulating surface for movement of a more violent or deviant nature.

There it was. At the very place it had vanished. Rising slowly as it had done before.

I placed the torch upon the steps. Then, shorter than a spear but longer than a sword, I gripped the spike tightly with both hands.

This time I advanced. I unerringly plunged the spike into the slime-caked chest. It went in easily and deep into soft spongy flesh. Deep enough to know that the point was protruding a good distance out its back.

I would not allow it to hide beneath the safety of the water again.

I lifted and swung around so that it flew from the weapon and landed with a sickening thud upon the stairway.

I raised the spike high moving forward for another strike, but I could see by the large gaping wound that it was unnecessary.

The creature spoke again.

Before, I had found its voice to be somewhat unsettling, but now it spoke words that turned my blood to ice.

“Thankee Alex, you have freed me from the devil’s vile grip a’ long last.” The creature knew my name. “But now it knows ye be here, for we are all a part of it by some strange supernatural means. That same means it uses to feed upon us.

Feasting not upon flesh and blood, but gorging itself upon our very life-forces, our...souls.” The more it spoke, the more familiar its voice became. Until at last my legs could no longer support their own quivering mass.

I fell upon my knees and wept like a child. “Oh God, Will, what have I done? I have murdered ye! I have done away with my own dear brother.”

He shook his head slowly and smiled.

“Weep not, dear Alex. In truth, I died a long time ago. You have but accomplished what we are unable to do ourselves...released me from this miserable hell. You must do the rest of us as well. Destroy us and you will weaken it. No longer able to feed, perhaps it too will die?”

“Us? It?”

“René, Rachel, Stephan,...near thirty. All down here ‘neath this silent wetness. Preserved for one purpose only. To try appease its insatiable appetite. Alex, I beg ye.” Just before closing his eyes forever, he pointed upwards. “It...stay away from the pool...too dangerous...too powerful...do not even enter the building.”

I picked up what had once been Will and retrieved the torch. I would give him a decent burial in the graveyard. I turned and was horror struck.

A dozen or more creatures, black and greasy like my brother, lumbered towards me repeating. “Please kill me, too.”

I held the torch out. Apart from shielding their eyes slightly, it made little deterrent upon their advance. I released Will and reached for the spike. In my anxiousness, the torch slipped from my grasp. There was a hiss and sputter. I was surrounded

by a choking blackness, thick enough to be slit by a barber's cutthroat.

My nerves had near been shredded by the time I found the entrance. I rushed up the stairs, found my mount and downed the remainder of the wine.

When calmness had restored to my quaking frame, I checked the sun. It would not set for another half hour yet. I was safe if I moved swiftly.

I hastily fashioned another torch.

Spike in right hand, torch in left, and the small barrel under my arm I walked boldly into the cathedral-like building.

I was halfway up the aisle, approaching the transept, when I noticed the large puddle of water that had not been there during my earlier search. From the smell I knew that the creature had left the pool.

My eyes darted about the darkening building. I almost missed it, as it sat still and crouched upon the confessional booth.

Protruding eyes glared menacingly from atop its large head. This was assuredly the same creature that had abducted Will. It seemed upset to have been discovered. It regurgitated foul breath before propelling itself over my head using long powerful hind legs.

I whirled in time to see that gelatinous mass spew out of its large mouth. I instinctively moved my hand in front of my face. I felt a tacky adhesive sensation about my hand and the torch went flying. The creature had somehow plucked it from my grip and it now dangled from a curled tongue in front of its maw.

More from desperation than any carefully planned attack, I hurled the barrel.

This time the creature reacted instinctively placing a webbed hand in the path of the

projectile. The barrel shattered against a slick forearm. A moment later the lamp oil ignited.

A bright ball of shrieking flame bounded over me, crashed clumsily into some pews, then disappeared into the transept. I heard the splash and hiss. "Damnation!" I cursed and rushed in brandishing the spike. I tried to grip it with both hands but found that my left hand had become numb.

The creature had poisoned me as it had grabbed the torch. The toxin was powerful and fast. I felt its affects spread up my arm. Soon it would be in my shoulder, then neck and finally my head. At that point total paralysis would set in. The fiend would return at its leisure to replace the loss of my brother.

Too late to run and hide, I should leap into the pool to strike a deathblow. No, even injured, the creature would be too powerful. Perhaps I should fall upon my own weapon. Death would be a far better fate than the wine cellar.

I looked about the chamber frantically for an answer. The angels smiled down mockingly. But no, they were showing the way out. The plan was so simple that I actually laughed out loud.

I ran and jumped with both feet against the nearest column. It did not need a second coaxing.

The mortar holding the pillar in place had softened under the constant barrage of dampness. The column collapsed, as did the massive structure it supported. The baldachin fell loud and hard into the fetid water.

By first light the toxin had worn off, leaving me with no more than a slight headache.

The creature, demonspawn or aberration of nature, was dead.

I did not have to see its crushed carcass beneath the rubble to know that it had been destroyed.

How so you may ask?

Two reasons. Firstly, no more abductions were ever again reported in or near our village. Secondly, I somehow gained enough nerve to return to the wine cellar, knowing I could never rest until Will rested beneath holy soil. Besides, I needed to recover my father's costly pistol.

I found the wretched children dead or dying.

The unnatural invisible umbilical cords binding them to the creature had been severed. Like some parasite in a symbiotic relationship, as they nourished

his unholy appetite, so too it had sustained them.

I never told a living soul about the incident. Perhaps I realized that our village had suffered enough disturbing anecdotes, or perhaps it was to retain the status quo. After all, as Father John Partridge would say, "A bit o' God-fearing does a world o' good."

Though I knew for certain that the beast was destroyed, I continued to make sure all doors and windows were secure before bedding down each night.

Why you may ask?

Two reasons. Firstly, a thought prevailed: If there was one, why not more? Secondly, as Father John Partridge would often say, "We dinna want to be temptin' the Devil, now do we?"

## Books Received

### **PanMacmillan**

Liz Williams **Winterstrike** Tor R110.00

Tim Stretton **The Dog of the North** Tor R120.00

MarkCharon **Nights of Villjamur** - Book 1. The Legends of the Red Sun

Alan Campbell **Iron Angel** Book 2. The Deepgate Codex

R.A. Salvatore **Saga of the First King**

R. A. Salvatore **The Highwayman**

Tim Severn **Sea Robber** (not SF or Fantasy)

### **Penguin**

K. E. Mills **Witches Incorporated** Rogue Agent . Book 2

Jim Butcher **The Codex Alera** **Book 2** **Academ's Fury**

Jim Butcher **The Codex Alera** **Book 3** **Cursor's Fury**

Christopher Ranson **The Birthing House**

Marie Brennan **In Ashes** **Lie**

# Book Review - Gerhard Hope

## The City and the City

### China Miéville

My definition of a good writer is a simple one: it is someone who does not necessarily follow up a successful novel with a continuation, or a novel set in the same universe etc. Writers who love to experiment with form and genre are always the most interesting to follow, simply because they keep readers and the market on their toes.

Of course, many people do not like to be challenged, and prefer their reading to be safe and pleasurable. Unfortunately, publishers tend to believe this as well, which is why mediocre writers like Stephanie Meyer acquire a cult-like status. Thank heavens therefore for frustrating, infuriating, opaque, rambunctious, tendentious and sheer gobsmackingly brilliant writers like Miéville.

From the outset, let me say that *The City and the City* is not going to endear itself to fans of the sprawling canvases of *Perdido Street Station* and *The Scar*. It is much closer to *Iron Council* in its political tone, but it is a much more claustrophobic, painstaking novel that reads bizarrely as if it was written at the height of the Cold War and teleported automatically to the here and now.

Here I have to add a stern remonstrance for the copy editor: there are some appallingly badly edited bits that intrude by throwing one forcibly out of Miéville's world. Maybe being a journalist I am more sensitive to editing infractions than the average reader, but an editor should not be afraid to wield a red pen when a writer becomes hackneyed and repetitive. Even Miéville.

I got the feeling that Miéville is not that used to the shorter form. His previous novels were real doorstoppers, and there are places in *The City and the City* where one feels he is ad libbing simply to increase the word count. Which is a real pity, for it detracts from what he has achieved here, which is one of the most interesting 'genre' novels I have read in ages. (I use the parentheses deliberately, for one of his fine achievements here is to defuse/diffuse the concept of genre to such an extent that (a) one does not really know *what* you are reading, often from one page to the next, and (b) you feel genuine readerly excitement at encountering something radically new and different. This leads Neil Gaiman to remark unhelpfully in a cover blurb about 'fiction for the new century', which is actually a pretty accurate non-description ...

Which is a tall order for a humdrum police procedural. Yes, this is a crime thriller, along the lines of what Jonathan Kellerman and Jeffrey Deaver churn out. These novels begin with a crime, introduce a hard-boiled police detective or forensics expert (usually with a very complicated personal life) and then proceed to peel back the onion-like layers of said crime (usually in voice-over).

So maybe Miéville uses the crime template to pose a Bigger Picture and ask a lot of penetrating questions about the Human Condition? Mmm, not really. He has obviously done his research when it comes to police procedurals, and this is where the painstaking aspect of *The City and the City* comes into play: he focuses on the minutiae of his imagined crime to an exhausting extent, pursuing a trail of sometimes irritatingly oblique clues to the traditional end – the apprehension of a criminal. Justice triumphs, and civilisation is upheld.

Why then, if the simple plot mechanics are so mundane, does this come across as such a deeply subversive novel? That when you turn the last page, you quickly look over your shoulder as if you are being watched? To have this feeling persist for days afterwards, as your sense of perception seems to shift unpredictably between what is real and what, seemingly, has been hidden deliberately?

I really do not know. I used to get a similar feeling from reading HP Lovecraft, but then it was more of a pleasurable frisson of having your world crack open like an egg and the contents being devoured by celestial monsters. Ooh, death and destruction! No, *The City and the City* is deeply disturbing, but in an elusive and elliptical fashion that creeps up on you. I really felt *tainted* after reading this, as if my mind was a teabag and had been immersed in dank water.

As to the plot: Inspector Tyador Borlú of the Extreme Crime Squad and Constable Lizbyet Corwi are tasked to investigate the murder of a young woman in Bészl, whose mutilated body is dumped in a grungy industrial area. Bészl is a typically grimy, Cold War type city, filled with meandering, shadow-filled streets and murky buildings leering out of the gloom. Miéville is an incredibly evocative writer, and brings Bészl to life effortlessly in all its seedy glory. The city comes across as a weird combination of Gorky Park and Blade Runner, and is quickly established as an integral character in the novel itself. (It is this foregrounding of place that marks it firmly as SF, as a novel of ideas). You can smell the place, feel it and hear it. And you quickly get to fall in love with it quirky, dirty vibrancy.

At which point Miéville pulls the rug unceremoniously from under the reader's feet. It transpires that the young woman could have been murdered in the neighbouring city of Ul Qoma, which not only places it out of her jurisdiction, but catapults the crime onto a much bigger political stage.

You see, Ul Qoma is not your typical neighbour. It inhabits the *exact* same space and time as Bészl. And each city denies the existence of the other. Citizens of either city state are taught since birth to 'unsee' those elements of the unspeakable that manage to intrude on everyday reality – or they face the unmentionable wrath of Breach, the ultimate border patrol.

However, Borlú is soon granted permission to investigate the crime in Ul Qoma, which forces the reader to 'unsee' the familiar Bészl along with our protagonist, and perceive it from a totally alien perspective. Miéville handles this shift in perception from the familiar to the strange with deft brilliance.

It is this that gives the reader such pleasure, and what makes this such a remarkably

acute novel. We are all familiar with narrative subversion and genre-bending. Miéville concretises these ideas with his city-and-the-city idea. He makes them totally tangible ... and then the fun begins, as he sees what he can construct from such building blocks.

Our murdered woman was an archaeology student, working at a dig that had brought evidence to light of an era predating both Bészl and Ul Qoma. Plus there are rumours of a *third* city, existing somewhere in a complicated interface. Throw in various disgruntled political factions, not to mention the mysteriously elusive and all-encompassing Breach, and you have a heady mix of intrigue and ideas.

I suppose the ending is a bit too prosaic and indefinite. One could only imagine what a writer like Stephen Baxter would have done with the element of transcendence that Miéville conjures as a shimmering possibility, and then discards as the 'real' world crashes in. The novel does not so much end as taper off, but that is a fitting Cold War coda, unsatisfying as it is to the modern sensibility, which is so used to conspiracy theories and meta narratives that even 'meaning' itself has to be defined. (We can blame The X-Files and Dan Brown for that.)

That this novel is SF is fairly undisputable to my mind, though not the Hollywood SF of gratuitously over-extended action sequences in quixotic environments (where the foregrounding exists only to be blown up by the hero). It is rather a classic, pure kind of SF that will surely get the nod of such well-known genre theorists as Samuel R. Delany and Darko Suvin.

This is not to suggest that the novel is boring in a dry, dusty, academic way. The well-oiled plot fairly rattles along its preordained track, and it is indeed a 'quick' read (though I found myself rereading and cross-referencing quite a lot as the true deviousness of Miéville's intent unfurled like wisps of slow smoke.)

Unfortunately, it is highly likely that the majority of SF readers will dismiss this as an unsuccessful fantasy take on the detective novel, with not enough of a fantasy element. Readers who enjoyed the fantastic foregrounding of the New Crobuzon work are likely to be dumbfounded and eventually bored silly by this fussy little novel that meanders along such a crooked path, and really does not get very far in the end – heck, only to the next city, which already exists on top of the current one. So the question of narrative distance itself is moot.

Or is it? This is one of the strangest, and yet most prosaic, genre novels I have read in a long, long time. It is likely to become a modern classic, and marks a deserved consolidation of Miéville's reputation as one of the most influential SF writers at work today. Heck, American letters as whole, why be modest? And here's hoping that his next novel is something totally different ...



# Nova 2008 3rd Place

## S.A Section

### THIRSTLANDS -- NICK WOOD

October 2008

One thing I knew for sure; the rains were late here too.

I scanned the ridge of grey rock towering off to my left – there was no vast, unified surge of water pouring over the edge as I remembered only five years ago – just sparse, thin water curtains dropping from the escarpment into the sludgy green river over a hundred metres below me. Gone was the towering spray of vapour above, no water-cloud sweeping overhead. Deep in the wooded Batoko Gorge, the sluggish river struggled on through the trees. Good old Queen Vic – although she was long dust, her namesake waterfall here in Zambia was drying quickly too – this was no longer ‘Mosi-oa-Tunya’ either, no ‘Smoke-That-Thunders’.

‘Record,’ I said reluctantly, closing my right eye simultaneously to activate my neural cam. *Du Preez is going to hate this.*

A black-uniformed guard with an AK strapped across his shoulder stood nearby, clicking on his digital palm-slate. The payment request bleeped in my cochlea; with a muttered command, I sent the amount in Chinese *yuan* from the Office account in my head.

*No, Du Preez is going to go absolutely mad, absolutely bedonered about this.* The guard moved on, accosting a young black man with an antiquated mobile

phone cam. There were only five other people circling the viewing platform; none jostling for a view. I licked my lips, ever thirsty as usual.

*<Is that all it is now? What a fokkin’ waste of time and money!>*

Hell, I had no idea the Boss had joined me, watching through my eyes like a mind-parasite, tickling my cochlea with his electronic croak.

So I closed my eyes. In the reddish darkness of my interior eyelids I could make out a green light flicking on the right, virtually projected by Cyril ‘the Rig’s’ neural cybernetics. The Office was online, the bloody Boss in.

But there was still only a dull red glow behind my left eye-lid. *Where are you, Lizette? What are you doing right now...and are you okay? You must know I hate having to leave you; but I’ve got to pay the bills, especially the damn water. <So what happened about the fokkin’ rain forecast and the Vic` Falls deluge that we flew you out for?>*

“Blown away, I think, gone.”

I spat the words out with resentment, each one drying my mouth further. Eyes closed, a faint tingle of water from the ‘Falls sprayed onto my cheeks – a tantalising tickle onto my dry protruding tongue. I pulled my tongue in before the sun could burn it into biltong steak. The water from my hip-flask sizzled sweetly for

a brief moment as I swigged greedily, but then the ever-present tongue-throat ache was back.

Always thirsty, I took a final frustrated gulp and opened my eyes. I stretched my arms and fingers across the wooden railings of the viewing platform, but I couldn't feel any more faint spray. The sky was becoming darker blue – still clear, the bloating red sun dropping onto the horizon.

*No, there was no 'smoke that thunders', no constantly roiling crash of water anymore – all that's left is an anaemic spattering of water, me, and a few other tourists scanning the ridge for a riverine surge that would never come.*

Beyond, the surrounding green GM bio-fuel fields stretch to the horizon, leeching the river. Over the horizon, in slums on the outskirts of Livingstone, I'd heard there were crowds of desperate thirsty, probably starving, people gathering to watch their food shipped overseas as bio-fuels for SUVs and military tanks. I had taken the long way round to avoid the sight, so I don't know if that's the case for sure - or if it's yet another web-myth. I'm not sure if even Cyril could tell me; I'd heard FuelCorps had censored the overhead sats. Anyway, there's no market for video clips of *that* sort of thing anymore, not even from the last of the official news agencies.

*<Hell man, I'm off to ask Bongani how we can jack up your visuals on your clips to see if we can get any of our online Avatar subscribers to pay for them. Not even our Chinese Stanley will want to meet Livingstone with the crappy shots you got there. Du Preez out.>*

Ach ja, shit, and the Boss too, of course. I winced at the sharpness of his tone in my

ear. I had no energy to reply – he never waits for one anyhow - and swigged another guilty sip.

There was a bleep in my cochlea – a *wifi* neural kit was requesting contact. I ignored it; it wasn't Lizette.

"Hey – have you got the latest C-20 model?"

I looked at a man in the khaki Smart safari-suit, skin reddened by the sun, despite the generous smears of what looked like factor 100 white sun-block. His accent was vaguely Pan-European, the wispy greying hair underneath his dripping pith helmet disguising its original colour. He grinned at me and tapped his head. I've had the latest C-20 model inserted, no need for vocal commands, it's all thought operated."

"Mine's an old C-12 model," I said, scanning past him, along the escarpment and eastwards to the vast maize fields below, which looked as if they were encircling and attacking the shrinking strip of green riverine bush and trees. Perhaps I'd edit the clip later; momentarily too embarrassed to audibly cut my shoot. The man went on talking, breathing hot meat and beer onto me and I wondered briefly whether he'd heroically Safari-Shot drugged meat before eating it: "My Rig's compatible with the latest web-designs from China and is wired into the optic nerve for six-factor zoom capability." "That's good to hear, I'm afraid mine just does a job."

It was then that I saw them, scattered on the edge of the trees, as if they'd died seeking cover from encroaching razor-wire. I knew the Boss would kill me, but I had to keep filming – it was the biggest elephant graveyard I'd ever seen and it

had been months since *anyone* had last seen an elephant. Huge piles of bones, like stranded and stripped hull-wrecks of ships, some of them arching their white curves in neatly laid out patches – as if their death had been calm, deliberate and careful to acknowledge an individual, elephantine space for dying.

*Jan du Preez may only want Live Game – me, I take what I can get.*

The man turned to follow my gaze and grumbled with disappointment: “Bugger – just bloody bones, I thought you’d seen some *real* wildlife for a change. Did you know the C-20 also has full amygdala-hippocampal wiring that allows synchronous ninety three percent recall of emotion?”

“Really?” I looked back at him. For the past few years it felt as if my own feelings were desiccating; the barest husks of what they had been – what must it be like to pull out old video clips saturated with the original feelings, rich and raw with young emotional blood? It’s been over two decades since Lizette and I had watched hand-held video-clips of us and baby Mark, now three years gone to an accountancy career in Oz. Three years on from the hijacking that left him without a car outside our gates, but crying with gratitude he was alive, physically unharmed. Three years since I’ve been too scared to walk outside the house but weirdly okay to travel to so many other places. It’s been only two years though, since Du Preez contributed to the Rig in my head – to ‘Cyril’, who has helped to sharpen and hold my most recent memories.

Still, I’ve been thirsty ever since. I’m sure they bugged up my thirst centre at the same time they did the Rig neurosurgery

– but the insurance disclaimers had been twelve pages long, the surgeons in denial. The man opened his mouth again; sweat dripped off the end of his nose, as if his Smart Suit struggled to adequately regulate his temperature. I couldn’t resist a brief smile at the sight, but turned away, not wishing to say goodbye. Maybe old feelings should be left alone after all, left to dry and wither like fallen leaves.

“Command – cut!” I muttered.

*So his Rig was better (bigger) than mine...big bloody deal. He’s not an African, just an effete tourist in a harsh land his skin can’t deal with, filtering it through his foreign money, fancy implants and clever clothes.*

*...And me...?*

Red blinked behind both my eyelids when I shut my eyes, so I let Cyril randomly cycle a babble of blogs over me as I headed back to the car-park, the public toilet, and the chilly airport hotel, before the early morning flight home.

Home... and Liz.

\*\*\*

The last kay home is always the longest, so I tried to coax more speed out of the car’s electrics. The time, though, seemed to drag on for an eternity, inching past corrugated iron shacks. There were people milling on the right of the road on the approach into Dingane Stad – mainly men, concentrated near a bridge overpass, no doubt jostling in hope to be picked up by passing bakkies or trucks for a desperate day’s work.

One old man near the road held out pale palms to me – but I’ve always avoided paternalistic gifts and dependency; this is Africa. I kept my windshields up, my doors locked.

The fields on the hill were brittle brown and eaten to dust by scraggly herds of cattle, watched by boys with sticks in hands, with shoulder-strapped and cocked Chinese P.L.A. T-74's, that looked in danger of blowing off their legs.

*No, still definitely no rains here either – shit man, we're lucky we have our secret back-up, Lizette; a hedge against the soaring costs of privatised water*

My eyes blinked heavily with the alternating early morning sunlight and the spidery-web shadows of overhead pirate cables snaking down from Council Electric grids and pylons into the shacks along the roadside. The cables will be cut by officials come sunset tonight and will have sprung-back magically by tomorrow morning. Crazy, man, absolutely bedonered, holding an impoverished community to electric ransom, when there's so much sun for free.

My car was on auto as it turned into the long and bumpy drive past neighbouring sugar-cane fields up to our small-holding, an old disused farmhouse we'd bought at a financial stretch called 'Cope's Folly'...in search of a 'simpler' semi-rural lifestyle. Hah.

I closed my eyes and sent yet another desperate message, almost a plea: *<I'm home, Lizette.>*

The red light under my left lid continued to ache for moments.

And then flickered green: *<About bledy time, Mister Graham bledy Mason.>*

Relief flooded me. *So she's still pissed off with me. That's something, at least.*

The black electrified gates swung open to the car's emitted password.

Liz was waiting, arms crossed, gum-booted and dishevelled in loose and dirty clothes, glowering. There was a barrow of

carrots next to her – a good looking bunch, so no doubt due to go to the neighbouring township Co-op, as she's done ever since we moved here and she started growing food.

We pecked cheeks warily, eye contact tentative, and I'm awkward with a complex mix of feelings. Lizette's a big-boned woman, dark of skin, with wild woolly hair that she shoves back with a red Alice-band. Her black hair was greying quickly now, which she almost flaunts with a twist of her band – her brown eyes are lovely, I gave her a furtive glance, even when she's angry. But the anger seemed to have dimmed, she was almost...anxious?

*It's not like her to be fearful – she still drives herself alone into the township when I'm away, despite what I always tell her about the dangers. Nah, I must be wrong. She can't be nervous, not Lizzie.*

She wheeled the barrow off to pack the carrots away in the shed. I stepped inside and through to the hot sunken lounge, with its big AG ('almost green') Aircon against the far wall. My presence tripped the air-conditioner switch with a 'click'; whirring on. The web-portal was tucked away discreetly in the corner as she'd insisted when I'd had it installed for her, but the controls were on red, as if constantly locked, unused. But she'd sent me that response just before I arrived – and a new decorative screen-saver spiralled, a fuzzy grainy floating picture, hard to make out as I walked through to the kitchen to make cheese sandwiches for us and to grab a drink of water.

She was waiting on the single chair when I came back and she took the plate with thanks, putting it on the side table, as if not hungry. I sat on the couch opposite. She looked at the floor. *Oh no man, was*

*this going to be another rehash of the argument we'd had before I'd left? 'Why can't you demand to stay on local assignments, you've never been able to stand up to Du Preez, blah, blah, blah...'*

"It looks like the garden's been productive despite the lack of rain," I said, breaking the silence, but putting my cheese sandwich down, suddenly not hungry myself.

She looked up at me and smiled. "Yes, our solar well-pump has helped, although I've been careful not to let the well drop below three quarters."

I smiled back, relieved to see her relax. "A bloody God-send that was, you calling in the surveyor – you've always had damn good intuition, Lizzie."

She grimaced and stood up, pacing restlessly over to the web-portal. *What the hell did I say? Must be the swear words – she hated me swearing, never gets used to it, keen Church-goer and all – 'bledy' was the worst of it from her and even that had only arrived these past few years.*

Her dark eyes brimmed with tears when she turned to face me. She leaned against the thin computer screen and the floating screen-saver froze and sharpened beneath the touch of her fingers. It was a picture of a little barefooted black girl in a broken yellow grimy dress, looking up at the screen, face taut with pain... And it looked like it had been snapped from the CCTV on our outside gate.

"Her name's Thandi," Lizette said, "She came here yesterday morning after you left – her tongue was so thick she couldn't drink. She was dying of thirst, Graham. Dying, man, vrek, out on her little feet, true's God. I didn't know things were this bad! She's just seven years old, Graham, but I had to dribble the water down her

throat; her tongue was almost choking her."

"So you gave her tap water, or water from the fridge," I said, standing up.

She shook her head: "Nee, Graham, I gave her water from our emergency supply and called the village Traditional Leader to tell him about it and to find her mom – there are others like her, just down the bledy road, man. So I told T.L. Dumisane and said we could spare them ongoing three-quarters of our well supply..."

"Ach shit man, Lizzie, you didn't, did you - that's *ours!* Why the hell didn't you ask me first? You've had free access to my head for three years now. And why didn't you return my calls or let me know you were okay at least?"

"It's hardly free," she snorted, "I can only hear what you *choose* to tell me – and what would *you* have done and said, Mister Graham Mason?" She stood up tall and focused, as if suddenly sure of herself.

I hesitated, but just for a moment: "I'd have given her water from the fridge and told you to keep quiet about the well – you know we have to keep this a secret for our own safety, otherwise we'll be the target of every Water-Bandit and tsotsi in Kwazulu-Natal!"

"See, I knew you'd say that and I hate arguing when I can't see your face. I knew calling you would end up in a fight – I'm sorry I ended up saying nothing and worrying you, but I had to make this decision on my own. Dumisane is a good man, hy sal niks se nie... and there's no way I can live here with children dying just down the road...no ffff..." She clamped her mouth with her hand and took a

breath before releasing it and finishing through clenched teeth: ‘No... way!’ Lizette *never* swears – and only reverts to Afrikaans when she’s absolutely distraught – she seemed to crumple slightly, clutching at herself, sobbing. The little yellow-dressed girl fuzzed over and spiralled randomly across the screen. Of course... she’d always wanted a little girl too.

My anger emptied into a desperate sense of helplessness. I hovered for moments and then stepped forward to coax her to turn towards the screen. I could send her comforting emoti-messages from LoveandPeace Dotcom that should help soothe and calm her.

Her eyes froze me though – her dark, lovely, lined but frighteningly fierce eyes. I knew then with some weird certainty that if I tried touching her, turning her towards the computer screen, she would scream, hit and kick me towards the outside door and gate. Beyond that, I could see that there was no returning in her eyes.

My arms hung in frigid confusion as tears streamed from her blazing eyes.

Shit, what else was there to do? I could only reach out to hold her, awkwardly wrapping my arms around her taut, trembling body.

Her arms were rigid, almost pushing at me for moments but then she seemed to suddenly let go and the sobs strangled in her throat; her hair was thick and tickly in my face; my own eyes stinging from a sudden bite of emotion. I could smell the coconut fragrance in her hair and remembered it had been her favourite shampoo when we’d first met almost thirty years ago. Hell man, it must be *years* since we’d last really held each other. Since Mark had left.

“Come,” she said, pushing me away but then taking my hand in hers, my shirt sleeve wiping her wet face.

She pulled me forwards.

*Oh...right...so she’s not taking me out to see how the veggie patch has grown.*

Dear God, I’d almost forgotten how much of a woman she was.

And, in the end – despite my constant thirst – I wasn’t nearly as dry as I feared I might be, either.

\*\*\*

I left her sleeping.

Face relaxed, serene, dark hair thickly splashed over an oversized yellow pillow, she lay on her back, a soft snore issuing from her nose. It hurt to watch her and I felt strangely guilty to stare - weird man, we’d been together so long - so I rolled over quietly and pulled on trousers and shirt, making my way through to the front door.

The door flickered and dallied while it de-armed, so I toyed with the idea of getting a drink of water from the kitchen... No, a dry mouth never killed anyone in the short term. I scanned the weapon rack behind the door, eventually inserting a taser-rod into my belt, before clicking the electric gate open in the outside wall.

The dry mid-afternoon heat carried little of the past summer humidity in the air. I breathed a set of ten deep breaths to quell my panic and then stepped with jellied legs through the gate, clicking it closed behind me.

As the gate clanged shut, I noted a red sports car parked beneath an ancient oak across the road, its driver in shadow. No time to re-open the gate – it would just expose the house and Lizzie. So I deactivated the fence charge, rammed the hand-panel deep into my trouser pocket

and backed against the gate, hauling out the taser. Shit, I should have gone for the gun instead. ]

The car door opened and a young black woman stood up, her arms akimbo, hands empty – dressed in workmanlike blue overalls, duffle-bag strapped over her shoulders, hair cropped squarely close to her head: “Kunjani, Mister Mason, I’m here about your wate

They certainly hadn’t wasted any time; things *must* be pretty desperate in the township

“Ngiyaphila, unjani wena?” I replied, easing the taser into my belt.

“I am well too,” she smiled with a slight twist to her mouth; I wondered whether she toyed with the idea of testing my paltry isiZulu – but thankfully her next words were in English: “I’m Busisiwe Mchunu, a hydro-geologist for the FreeFlow Corporation. However, I reserve room for a little private freelance work in the services of my community; strictly off the record, you understand.”

“Oh,” I said, with an African handshake of palm, thumbs grip, palm again: “Graham Mason, pleased to meet you – and of course I understand.” *Wow, strong grip.*

“I’m here to survey the underground water on your land – of course, *before* the white man, all of this land was ours anyway.”

Oh,” I said, “Is that a...veiled threat?”

She chuckled: “Don’t be so paranoid, Mister Mason, we amaZulu don’t veil our threats. It’s just an historical observation. Your wife looks out for us, so we’ve looked out for you.”

“Hello!” Lizette leant against the inside of the gate, back in grubby track-pants and shirt. “Who’re you?”

“I’m Chief Dumisane’s water rep, Mizz Basson,” said Busisiwe, walking across: “Just call me Busisiwe.”

“Pleased to meet you, Busisiwe, I’m Lizette”. They shook hands through the gate.

Lizette smiled as I gave her the controls. She rattled off a fluent phrase of what sounded like welcoming isiZulu for Busisiwe, who responded with obvious delight. I could tell they’d probably get on like a shack on fire.

“I’m just going for a walk,” I told them.

Lizette looked surprised as the gate opened: “Be careful, Graham.”

*Yes, I do remember this was the path on which Mark was robbed and stabbed in the face; I have replayed his scarred face so many times in my head. But I know I need to do this, if I can.*

It’s a short walk, but every step felt heavy, my legs stiff in anticipation of someone leaping out at me from behind the tall stalks of sugar-cane densely spearing both sides of the foot-path. The path bent sharply to the right as it had when I’d last walked it with Lizette four years ago, dipping down into the valley with an expansive view of the city, skyscrapers strutting their stuff against the clear sky; no fires today.

There, beside the path, lay the cracked and uneven boulder Lizzie and I had rested on, after we’d agreed to buy the small holding. My bum warmed as I sat down, the disarmed taser-rod stabbing into the small of my back. Around the city lay blackened Midland hill-tops, informally marking the southern perimeter of the Umgeni Valley. Dingane Stad, ‘Sleepy Hollow’ as it had once been known, or Pietermaritzburg by the white Afrikaners.

'Switch off.' The Rig fell absolutely silent, no lights blinked inside my eyelids, just the red constant heat of the mid-morning sun filtering through my eyelid blood-vessels.

It'd been two years since I'd been absolutely alone. Two years since the implant and I'd last been quiet in my head, cut off from the electric pulse of the world. Here, there were no hovering voices, no Cyril, just my own solitary thoughts. My shirt trickled with sweat and with my thumb I killed the black Matabele ant biting my shin. It gave off an acidic stink as it died and I stood up quickly, but there was no nearby swarm, no nest hiding under the rock.

*This is a hard place to be, but all I know right now is that this is where I want to die... this is where I want to lay down my bones, just like the elephants. Why? I have no bloody idea. Maybe it's to do with the light on the hills, or perhaps just the bite and smell of an ant.* The thoughts circled my brain, trapped and private, no place to go.

Still, as I walked the path home, my steps felt somehow lighter, looser, but never quite tension free.

'Switch on,' I said, as if re-arming myself for the world.

*<Hey, where the hell you been? You must upload your video-clips from Vic' Falls for the day!>*

*That bastard Du Preez.* I glanced at my watch, it was after four. *<Work's over, I'll do it tomorrow.>*

*<You'll do it now! Jeez man, I've heard of sleeping on the job, but you just took the bledy cake on that one earlier with your wife.>* *Shit, I must have forgotten to switch off, swept up in the day's events and he had just...watched?*

*<Did you?>* I asked.

No answer, but he must know what I was asking. *<Damn you, Du Preez, cut Office.>*

I stopped to take several slow and deep breaths, thirsty as hell.

Around the last bend, Lizette and Busisiwe were standing in the shade by Busisiwe's car and turned to me as I approached.

Lizette shook her head.

I looked at Busisiwe. "It's a shallow fresh-water aquifer," she said. "It's also pretty small – I don't think it will last long, unless we get more rainfall."

Lizette looked at me.

*This is Africa, I wanted to tell her, doing this may salve our conscience in the short term, but will solve nothing in the long term.*

I could tell in her eyes she knew what I was thinking, even without the direct link with Cyril that I'd pressed her so long to get, in the hope that it might bring us closer. I could also see resignation and uncertainty – for us; and all we had tried to build – and, despite this morning, I could also see a fear of the end for us in her eyes.

I opened my mouth, knowing my next words could finish everything.

I turned to look at Busisiwe. "Okay," I said, "We'll help."

"Ngiyabonga," she said.

Lizette put her arm through mine. Skin on skin will do me.

*I'll take this moment.* I couldn't be sure how long it would last. All I knew for certain was that I wasn't ready for some endings and that the rains were late. *Bloody weird, but I'm not quite so thirsty anymore either. Long may this last too.*

## **Best Served Cold**

**Joe Abercrombie**

The title says it all! Monza Murcatto is a professional mercenary, feared and hated by her enemies, loved and revered by her employer and his people. But she is too popular.

Grand Duke Orso has her stabbed, thrown down a mountainside, and left for dead. She survives. And now seven men must die. Aided by an unusual bunch of allies, what else, she sets out on her quest. Will she succeed? What do you think?

Abercrombie is a fantasy writer who can really write. Delightfully twisted and evil, and there's a fat vein of cynicism and dark humour throughout. The action is fast and violent and at all times extremely bloodthirsty. The characters are sharply drawn and realistic and above all brutal.

He is a natural author.

This is an excellent book.

Read and enjoy.

## **Iron Angel. Book Two of "The Deepgate Codex"**

**Alan Campbell**

The city of Deepgate is in ruins. Rachel and the angel Dill are dragged off to the torture chambers of the Spine Temple, now hanging upside down above the abyss. They escape and head for what they presume is safety.

The war between good and evil, between the gods of heaven and those of hell (and those in between) is reaching a climax.

And then the book just stops.

Campbell has one of the most vivid imaginations I have come across in a long time; a decaying city, original characters, weird beings, undead armies, living gods, and excellent writing. This should have been a book to explore and enjoy. Unfortunately the author cannot seem to stop himself describing everything in excruciating detail, and I mean *Everything*.

I found it a bore.

## **The Legends of the Red Sun Book Two of "Nights of Villjamur"**

**M.C. Newton**

The long winter is coming, a short ice age that is driving thousands to take shelter in the ancient city of Villjamur, but the city cannot cope and most are forced to take shelter outside its walls.

Robbery, violence, and death are becoming more and more prevalent. When the Emperor suddenly commits suicide, his eldest daughter is forced to return to take over the Jamur society, but the evil councillor has other plans and prepares to make his move to take over. Jeryd is a senior investigator charged with solving a series of murders of highly placed councillors. Randur, a con artist, has managed to become an instructor to Eir, the Emperors youngest daughter, And, ah yes, the Cultists, who hate one another, and use ancient technology for their own ends are also in the mix.

And this is only the beginning of the long winter.

An interesting and enjoyable enough book, but with major flaws in some of the basic premises; as an example, the city is already short of fuel for heating, so how could they hope to survive.

## **Annals of Mondia – The Dog of the North**

**T. Stretton**

If there were no fighting or warfare in a Fantasy novel, would it still be fantasy?

The city of Croad has long been a centre of peace and prosperity under its strict Lord Thame. A young boy, Arren, is taken under the Lord's wing and begins a steady rise to fame and knighthood.

Running parallel to the boy's story is the story of Beauceron, a mercenary captain who has been outlawed from Croad. He has one aim in life: to capture the city and bring its people to their knees.

Two separate tales of love and hate, intrigue and betrayal, and of course sorcery and warfare.

Hardly spellbinding stuff, but readable enuff.

## **Magazines Received**

**Opuntia.** Dale Spiers P.O.Box 6830 Calgary, Alberta Canada, TP2 3ET  
67.1E Victoria Day 2009  
67.1F June 2009  
67.3 Canada Day 2009  
67.5 July 2009

**Vanamonde.** John Hertz. 235 Corondo St No. 409, Los Angeles. CA 90027  
USA  
783 – 787 27 May - 24 June 2008

**Ethel the Aardvark.** Melbourne Science Fiction Club. P.O. Box 212, World Trade  
Centre, Melbourne, 8005, Victoria, Australia.

141 April – May 2009

142 June – July 2009

# Nova 2008 Finalist

## S.A. Section

### HOWZIT - TERRY WHITE

“

Howzit,” I said, “do you like Zombies?”  
“On toast, or with a light salad?” she replied, her eyes glinting in her dark face.  
“Ha, ha, not funny” I replied. “What’s your name?” I shifted my lightsword so that I could sit with my back to the grubby wall. She crouched down next to me – two soldiers in typical on-duty pose.

“Rhodes,” she said. It seems that both our parents had gone through a phase of naming children after historical South African figures.

“My name is Shaka.”

“Hello Shaka,” she looked at me, probably seeing a bulk-issue soldier – helmet with HUD, armour-flex camo-bodice and of course the regulation clunky boots.

“But seriously, what’s not to like about Zombies? They crumble at the touch of coherent Ag-light. You couldn’t even scrape up the dust to fit onto a piece of toast even if you wanted to. They don’t smell, litter, leave droppings, or even make a noise. The perfect neighbours really.”

She was right of course. These beasties were no trouble. I wondered why they needed killing at all. They didn’t ever seem to attack anyone; they just

shambled along their own on their unfathomable mission. Of course, if one bumped into you, you would be dead pretty quickly, but they were easy to avoid. And it was our job to keep the streets clear of them; a simple swish of coherent silver laser-light would cause them to crumble without a sound.

It seemed like a strange war we were fighting – a war with no aggressors, and a really fragile enemy. It made being a soldier a bit too simple if you ask me. Ah well, mustn’t grumble. This was an effortless billet by comparison with some I had been in.

There was no communication between us and the Zombies, just the occasional accident where a human was touched, and of course plenty of disposals of these shambling wrecks. We didn’t know why we were fighting them other than they were dangerous to touch.

A Zombie appeared at the top of the street and began its three-legged amble towards us. No rush – it would take a few minutes to get here.

“Let’s follow this one!” I stood up.

“You have that much time?” she glanced up at me, “I mean we could wander

around after this thing for days without finding out where it's going."

"Do you have an urgent appointment elsewhere then?" I grinned at her, "let's follow for a while and just see."

"Why not?" she stood up, "I only have to

be back at the barracks by dawn."

The Zombie shuffled closer, its strange gait accentuating its oddness – of the three legs, two always stayed on the ground causing its body to describe a circular path as it rocked forward. Above the legs was a conical torso, with something like a flower for a head – if it was bright orange, I'd describe it as a traffic cone with legs, but of course it was much larger, pale purple, moved... and killed – not like a traffic cone at all really.

"Do you think it's going to the cemetery, being a Zombie and all?" Rhodes asked.

"Nah," I stopped and lit a reefer, "that would be way too obvious. Maybe it's going to the corner caff for some slap chips".

She looked at me quizzically.

"Well," I said, "it's as good a reason for an evening stroll as any hey?"

She entered the spirit of the thing: "I scheme it's going to the drive-in... catch a horror movie you know?"

The Zombie turned a corner, disappeared from sight.

"It's gone!" she exclaimed as we caught up.

"Can't be," I replied, "it was here seconds ago." I drew my lightsword and looked around. "There must be a manhole cover or grating or hidden door or something."

We found nothing.

Now this was interesting. Come to think of it, I had never seen where the Zombies went. We just blasted them.

"Let's find another," I said as I walked up the street towards a lonely lamp.

After waiting about five minutes, we saw another Zombie in the distance. We hurried to catch up.

This time we stayed close. It ignored us as usual, and when it turned a corner we were within touching distance of it. And it carried on shambling down the road.

Perhaps at the next corner it would disappear. It didn't. But if it carried on like this, always turning right at corners, we would be walking round the block all night. And for an hour that's all we did, walking the same path round the building. After a while I said to Rhodes: "Let's drop back when it turns the next corner." When we came round the bend after losing sight of it for perhaps three seconds, it had gone.

"Weirder and weirder!" I stopped, and lit another reefer. On a hunch I turned round and went back the way we had come. We circumnavigated the block completely but the thing hadn't skipped behind us.

Rhodes sat down, and pulled out a ration pack: "The facts before the court, m'lord, are that Zombies wonder around, kill anyone they touch, and disappear when you lose sight of them. Is there any further evidence for us to consider, before I give my verdict?"

"Nope," I said, "It's a mystery. What is the court's verdict?"

Rhodes stopped chewing, and stared out towards Table Mountain: "It's a mystery," she said, and had the grace to look sheepish.

"How about if we try to tag one?" I said. I have an RFID tag here, with a touch of superglue at the end of a stick, and bob's your uncle."

She nodded her assent: "Beats walking the beat." We found another Zombie and,

using a piece of stiff wire, attached an RFID tag to its back. I turned on my wrist monitor, and we saw its signal moving away from us. We waited until it turned the corner. The signal suddenly stopped. I groaned: “We tagged the Zombie. It disappears. And so does the tag. Just like the humans who touch one. Let’s tag another, and kill it – then see what happens to the tag.”

Rhodes looked past me, “Well there’s your baby, so this should be simple.” I turned round to see yet another Zombie shuffling towards us.

We tagged the beast, I slashed it with Ag-light and it crumbled. The tag disappeared, and so did its signal on my monitor.

“My brain hurts,” I began to pace. “Let the court consider the facts of the case.”

She snorted, “What facts?”

“The Zombies have been reported for how long now? Three years?” She nodded.

“So what happened three years ago?” I asked.

Her frown cleared as she exclaimed, “The lights in the sky! One arrived three years ago east of Rustenburg. Then every few weeks one would split off and move over a city and stay there. Now there’s one over each city within 1500 k’s of Rustenburg. They are spreading, but can’t seem to cross oceans. We can’t seem to touch them or communicate with them.”

“The lights in the sky indeed, m’lord” I looked upwards involuntarily, and there it was - a pale green mist centred above Cape Town. “The first question is why did the first one appear east of Rustenburg? I mean there’s buggers-all there but some game-farms. “

“Now, now, let’s not be jealous just because you can’t afford a farm,” said

Rhodes. “The real question to ask is: What is unique in the world about the bushveld?”

I looked at her bemused: “Braaivleis, rugby, kudus, and a whole bunch of thorns, are about all, I reckon.”

Rhodes suddenly brightened. “Got it!” she

said, “the Bushveld Igneous Complex!”

“The Bossies Ignatious what?” I said.

“The Bushveld Igneous Complex. It’s unique.” She entered lecture mode. “It’s a 500km wide basin of platinum, chrome, palladium and all sorts of other goodies, to put it in its simplest terms – nothing else like it in the world.”

I stared at her for like about a minute before I said: “And?”

She adopted a legal pose: “OK, m’lord. If the court will permit I will postulate my theory, although it is, as I say, only a theory, and should not be construed...”

“Get on with it woman!” I interrupted.

“Ahem,” she paused for effect, “we know that the Bushveld Igneous Complex – did I say it was unique to South Africa? – is a basin with high concentrations of platinum, palladium, and chrome.” An elfish grin crossed her face: “Like only about 80% of the platinum, palladium and chrome in the world! “

“Now for my theory: What if this metal-rich basin acts as a bloody great parabolic reflector? What if it’s not natural, but was placed there to draw the light to that one spot on earth? And then, what if, once on earth, the light could replicate over cities, if there was enough metal, like cars and stuff?” She paused for breath: “What if indeed!” as she became more excited by her theory.

“How do you know this stuff?” I asked.

“Elementary Geology 101 – did it at varsity,” she smiled smugly.

“Alright,” I said, “let’s assume you’re right. What has any of this to do with Zombies?”

“Well,” she drew breath, “Zombies only appear where there are lights in the sky, not so?”

“I didn’t know that.”

“It’s true,” she said. “So if we assume that these lights had something to do with the Zombie arrival, then let us move onto the next fact. They kill humans on touch, yet do not seem malicious. It’s almost as if humans are not an issue to them.”

“Then they walk in circles, if the court will pardon the loose interpretation,” she scratched her head, “and they disappear, or we kill them, or they kill us.”

I interrupted her: “What if they don’t kill us? What if we just disappear like them?”

“And that’s not killing us?” Rhodes said, “We kill them and they kill us. End of story.”

“Or we make them disappear, and they make us disappear!”

“Where to?” she cried. “It’s still death, surely!” She was becoming agitated.

I lit another reefer and stared out towards the bay. The wind was picking up and I could see the lights of many ships about a kilometre out. “The court now must consider this conundrum,” I puffed on my toke.

“You smoke a lot of those,” she remarked, calming down.

I chose to see this as constructive criticism as I thought aloud: “If the court will allow us take another tack - What have they given us?”

“Nothing,” Rhodes replied, “they may just be killing us... or disappearing us, or whatever.”

“Ah, but they have given us something,” I exclaimed. “We had to develop these silver coherent-light swords – that’s a new development.” I suddenly had a thought, and pointed my lightsword at the dimly-lit green mist above our heads. I hit the switch.

A Zombie appeared next to me, and began shuffling off down the road.

“Juslaik,” Rhodes shouted, “What did you do?”

“I pointed the lightsword at the light in the sky, and created a Zombie,” I stared at her. “I do believe we are communicating with the cloud!”

“Now what if I touched that Zombie?” I motioned towards the back of the shambling wreck, now some 15 metres from us.

“You would die!” she cried.

“Or disappear,” I responded. “What if this is some form of travel?”

“You want to risk it?” she said, folding her arms across her chest.

“If the court would allow,” I said slowly, “I will now conduct a little life-or-death experiment,” and I walked off after the Zombie. Maybe it was the reefers, but I felt relaxed and confident.

I touched the beast.

There was no flash, no tunnel of light, no sensation of movement, but when I looked around I saw that I was nowhere that I had ever been before – I was on a grassy plain, with a winding river flowing down from distant snow-capped mountains. The air smelled as fresh as I had ever known. My monitor started beeping – nearby there were two RFID tags.

About three kilometres away I could see a village.

I was about to move off in its direction when I heard Rhodes' voice behind me: "Shaka. Wait for me!"

"How did you get here?"

"Same as you – pointed my lightsword at the green mist, a Zombie appeared, I touched it, and howzit my China?" She smiled: "We can't go back, you know, so you're stuck with me."

"Suits me," I grinned, "welcome to my world."

We took about half an hour to walk to the

village.

"Oh hello!" shouted someone from the village, just arrived from Cape Town? Come and have a drink, and we'll fill you in. My name's Nelson."

Over a cold home-brewed beer, Nelson and several other Capetonians explained that they had been there from three years or less. They were of course the "Zombie-touched" missing people.

The first settlers had found it hard. But because some had tools and implements on them when they had been transported here, they were able to fish and hunt, and had domesticated the local bovine-like animal – they called them cows, for a lack of a more imaginative descriptor. There were fields of grain to the north of the

village that made good bread, and the vegetables that they had found were there were no flush toilets yet, but they had made themselves comfortable.

I asked if we were all from Cape Town, and they told me that a party from Joburg had trekked in a few weeks ago, surprising the hell out of them." Nelson smiled: "Bloody Joburgers, "always invading Cape Town for the hols."

I stood up, "So, m'lord, if it pleases the court: It appears that anyone touching a Zombie on earth is transported to a geographically similar place, albeit on what appears to be a different planet." Rhodes laughed, but everyone else looked puzzled. "Private joke," I mumbled. "We're settlers, in a new land," Nelson said, and everyone nodded. "It seems that the Zombies are helping us move. I imagine that once we have outgrown this place the lights in the sky will appear again, and the Zombies will start walking again."

"Perfect neighbours," I said. Rhodes smiled again. "In the mean-time we can start from scratch."

"Let's call this The New South Africa."



## Searching for Scottish Ghosts, Stardust and Causality Violations: The Charles Stross Interview

by Michael Lohr

It was a pleasure to interview Charles, um...sorry, Charlie Stross. He is a writer of great vision and aptitude, so much so that at times it's uncanny. He is a man of a million ideas, each one percolating and burning synapses like a thousand lightning bolts going off simultaneously. And from the depths of this creative firestorm he has spawned some excellent tales.

Charlie's a part of a new wave of British science fiction writers whose focus is on a combination of hard science fiction and space opera. He's been published in such seminal magazines as *Asimov's* and *Interzone*. Several of his novels and novellas such as *Singularity Sky*, *Lobsters* and *Nightfall* have been nominated for Nebula, Hugo, Sturgeon and BSFA awards. His novella *The Concrete Jungle* won the Hugo award last year. He's also written several role-playing articles for *White Dwarf*. He and Cory Doctorow even co-wrote a collection of short stories entitled *The Rapture of the Nerds*.

His novel *Accelerando* won the 2006 Locus Award for best science fiction novel, was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for the year's best science fiction novel, and was on the final ballot for the Hugo Award in the best novel category. *Glasshouse* won the 2007 Prometheus Award and was on the final ballot for the Hugo Award in the best novel category. His novella *Missile Gap* won the 2007 Locus Award for best novella and most recently he was awarded the Edward E. Smith Memorial Award in 2008.

His latest novel is the international bestselling Saturn's Children. He's also started a new series with the release of Halting State (a 2008 Hugo Award nominee), a novel that regales the reader with speculative technology minutia involving quantum computing, onion routing, TCP/IP routing, cryptography, MMORPGs and virtual worlds. The highly anticipated sequel to Halting State entitled 419 is due for release in 2010. He's also been busy with his other titles including The Merchant's War for his Merchant Princes series. In addition, he's written two sequels, The Revolution Business, forthcoming in late Spring 2009 and The Trade of Queens, forthcoming in 2010. He also completed another Bob Howard - Laundry series novel in 2008 entitled, Down of the Farm. This series combines elements of hard science fiction, Lovecraftian horror with the classic British spy thriller, ala Ian Fleming's James Bond meets Dr. Who.

**ML:** How did you find yourself becoming involved in the world of science fiction?

**CS:** I've been reading SF since virtually as soon as I learned to use the public library -- I think I was five years old when I figure ran across Andre Norton's books -- and so it was a logical progression to begin writing it myself. (It took me a bit longer to run across SF fandom, but I wandered into my first SF convention around the time I turned 20.)

**ML:** In the past your work has been compared to Bruce Sterling, among others and esteemed science fiction editor Gardner Dozois deemed you one of the best new SF writers to emerge in years. Do comparisons and accolades of that nature motivate you or are they a bit intimidating?

**CS:** It's very intimidating! Especially, as it started about fifteen years after I first sold a short story, and quite abruptly at that. On the other hand, I suspect all of the most-esteemed authors in the field have been there: at one moment they're just somebody slaving away over a typewriter or word processor, and the next minute they're surrounded by hordes of adoring nubile groupies. (Actually, if you want the adoring nubile groupies you need to pick a different profession. Writing is what you go into if you want to still have a career when the groupies have figured out you're a bit on the old side.)

The oddest sensation is meeting fans who're familiar with your work and feel as if they know you, but who you've never met. They often behave unconsciously as if there's a pre-existing relationship as they try to start a conversation, rather than introducing themselves to a stranger, and you find yourself racking your brain furiously, trying to figure out where you've met this person before and what their name is! It's sort of the opposite of deja vu.

**ML:** Please tell us about your award winning novels [The Clan Corporate](#) and [Glasshouse](#)?

**CS:** First things first: "The Clan Corporate" is the third book in an ongoing series, [Merchant Princes](#) that started with [The Family Trade](#) and [The Hidden Family](#). There are more in the

pipeline. These books are stylistically different from the hardcore SF I'm publishing via Ace, in that rather than being fixated with future technologies and space exploration and so forth -- the traditional trappings of hard SF -- they focus on social change and a collision between alien cultures. The basic premise is an old one. A group of people has the ability to travel between our world and one or more parallel universes; a stranger falls among them; skulduggery and politics ensue. But there's a lot more going on than meets the eye in the first couple of books. Indeed The Clan Corporate marks the point at which the earlier, naive treatment of some rather prickly issues (such as political and economic transfers between wildly different systems) is shown up as a red herring and the *real* critique of empire begins. With, for instance, the US government circa 2002, in the thick of the War on Terror and getting their hands on the ability to explore parallel universes.

Glasshouse is, in contrast, about as far away from that as it's possible to get. Set some five centuries after the time where Accelerando finishes, it's basically a psychological thriller among the posthumans. If your mind can be uploaded and copied into another body, and if your memories can be edited, then who are you? And if you think that a long time ago, in another body, you might have committed atrocities -- but you can no longer remember anything about it -- what does that make you? Robin, the protagonist of Glasshouse, is damaged: he's emerging from personality surgery thirty years after the end of a vicious civil war with huge holes in his memory, and someone is trying to kill him. What's worse, his earlier self has left him messages. But he can't be sure they're not lying...

**ML:** What was the creative motivation behind your character Wednesday Shadowmist from your novel, Iron Sunrise?

**CS:** Simple: I wanted a deracinated, alienated, teenage heroine to go walkabout and tackle the Space Nazis. The original elevator pitch for Iron Sunrise was "teenage Goth chick and her talking cat versus the space Nazis" but the talking cat got dropped from the second draft.

**ML:** You've been accused of writing leftist political commentary reminiscent of Ken MacLeod, do you agree with this assessment?

**CS:** I'm actually a traditional, politically middle-of-the-road Brit who votes for a mainstream political party (the Liberal Democrats), and who's scratching his head in perplexity at the way politics has gone veering off in a rightward direction since 1979. If we momentarily accept the new topsy-turvy world in which the likes of Tony Blair can be portrayed as "left wing" or even "centrist" in any meaningful sense of the world, then yes, I suppose I've been left standing and I'm now on the left. But I don't really accept that the hijacking of the post-WW2 social democratic European consensus by a bunch of born-again corporatists was either a good thing, or inevitable, so.

What I will state, firmly and in public, is that politics is a whole lot more complex than simplistic labels ("left wing" and "right wing," "liberal" and "conservative") imply. And it's also a whole lot more interesting. Back in the 19th century, for example, the entire bipolar political dialectic that dominated the Victorian scene was between the Benthamite utilitarian social engineers and the Liberals -- which is to say, the group who today are trying to rebadge themselves as "Libertarians". Yes, Libertarianism has been tried before, as the main political ideology of a superpower. And it was found wanting. Both groups were also at odds with the Chartists, who were seen as revolutionary radicals...and yet, the Chartist agenda actually triumphed to the point where today to question it is to label yourself as a way-out-there weirdo, although the movement itself is largely forgotten.

If we can recognize just how far the political universe of discourse has shifted in just a century, then doesn't it make sense to also speculate about where it might end up a century hence?

**ML:** I've enjoyed your collaborative stories with Cory Doctorow and some of your writing has even been compared to his, did you enjoy this coupling and do you have any collaborative projects planned with him in the future? Maybe a sequel to The Rapture of the Nerds?

**CS:** Collaborating with Cory varies between playing a fun game of table tennis and pulling each other's teeth without benefit of anesthesia. We bounce ideas and chunks of story back and forth until they begin to mesh together. I don't know when we're going to find the time to do some more work together -- both of us are busy right now -- but we're both keen on the idea, and it's possible we may even get it together to work on a novel one of these days.

**ML:** You earned a degree in pharmacology; have you ever found the occasion to use this knowledge in your fiction?

**CS:** Pharmacy, not pharmacology. It's like the difference between mechanical engineering and physics. It's useful to have a grounding in biochemistry, pharmacology, and the biological sciences, and it's surprising to note how badly they're often treated in SF, but I don't think I've made overt use of that background in the same way I have with computer science. I subsequently did a computer science degree and worked in the IT industry for some years.

**ML:** I read that you published role-playing game articles for White Dwarf magazine and was an avid Dungeons & Dragons player. When you have the time, do you still play?

**CS:** Nope, I pretty much gave up when I went to university. Doesn't stop me playing online games such as *Neverwinter Nights* -- although I try to keep the time I spend on them under control!

**ML:** Your novel Accelerando was recently published by Ace publishers in the US, but it originally appeared as a series of nine short stories in Asimov's. Accelerando attempts to map humanity's transhuman evolution across the expanse of this new century. Could you elaborate further on this concept? And what about the Fermi Paradox?

**CS:** Accelerando was written as a series of stories, but with an overall novel-length story arc in mind virtually from the start (to trace three generations of a family, and follow them through a singularity). And it was also written as a kind of experiment. After Vernor Vinge articulated the idea of the singularity back in the late 80s/early 90s, the conventional wisdom for some years was that this was impossible to write about. But from 1995 onwards, I was working in the web industry and then for a successful dot.com, and things were moving *really* fast -- outrageously fast. The dot.com, for example, went from two guys writing code in an office in Edinburgh and another guy selling it in London, to forty people in a company on three sites going public on AIM (the London equivalent of NASDAQ) in just forty-two months. At one point I was seeing 30% compound growth *per month* in the workload my code was having to support. When you're in that kind of environment, you begin to think crazy thoughts about the rate of change, and it acquires a tangible presence: you begin to factor ongoing acceleration into all your plans. Once I got the idea of following the human onlookers (rather than trying to chart the internal machinations of AIs experiencing a singularity) it fell into place that you *could* write about a singularity. And, yes, this is the last singularity novel I plan to write.

The Fermi paradox is another high concept idea that doesn't get anything like enough air play in SF. One of the problems we've been left with, the heritage of the adventure genres that predate modern SF's emergence in the 1920s, is the idea of interstellar travel. The distances involved are huge...but so are the time scales. If interstellar travel is possible, and if intelligent life is not unique to this planet, then we should by rights have been visited by aliens not once but thousands of times over the past few billion years. So where, as Enrico Fermi asked, are they?

One answer is: space is vast, and intelligent tool-using life short-lived. We have no evidence that the life expectancy of a machine-building civilization exceeds five hundred years before some sort of catastrophic collapse overcomes it. Another is: they find somewhere better to go. Deep space is inaccessible but deep time may be another matter.

The pet theory I played with in Accelerando was that the stumbling block would be bandwidth. By the time interstellar travel becomes practical, the entities contemplating it will be software-based and running much faster than the sluggish rate enforced by our laughable dependence on electrochemistry and peptides held in place by hydrogen bonds. Humans are much less adapted to space travel than software. But there's a cost associated with this, which is that if you can get as much thinking done in a year as a meat-body does in a century, then even if you can travel at half the speed of light, a light

year is a distance that will *subjectively* take you two hundred years to cross. A software intelligence may have access to a whole bunch of techniques that we can't envisage -- but it's still going to have real trouble staying up to date with events back home if it goes on a journey lasting subjective millennia. Especially as the computational capabilities available to it will be restricted by the matter and energy available to the payload of a starship. If the corollary of a singularity-type event is that interstellar distances suddenly look much more daunting, then that's one possible answer to Fermi's paradox.

**ML:** One critic and I apologize for using that word here, accused you of writing futuristic hard science fiction with far too many modern clichés. What is your response to this criticism?

**CS:** This is a criticism that's been applied to Singularity Sky and Iron Sunrise, and I know where the critics are coming from. I think it's a straw man argument. A straw man argument is, in its modern context, what you get when party A defines party B's position on a subject in such terms that it's easy to knock it down. Which is an interesting definition in its own right, because it has evolved very little since the early 18th century, when the term first came into widespread use. This following the practice of professional paid perjurers (or *straw men* -- so called because they could be found waiting outside the Old Bailey in London with a piece of straw in their belt buckle as a discreet sign) who would take money to provide an accused criminal with an alibi.

Just because we're dealing with a shiny new future, it does not follow that the present (or the past) has gone away. Especially in a shiny new future populated in part by crumbly retreads who were born during the 21st century.

The flipside of this criticism has, I should note, been applied to Neal Stephenson (especially acutely in the case of his Baroque Cycle). It's more obviously bogus when you start accusing a modern writer of using modern language in an historical novel, because if you take the argument to its logical conclusion you end up condemning authors of historical fiction who, say, write about the Wars of the Roses without using Norman French, or who write thrillers set in ancient Rome but who don't write in Latin. Any work of fiction written for today's readers must to some extent engage with their world-view and understanding. The further you stray from that world-view, the more alien your worlds will seem -- but the smaller you will make the audience who can appreciate it.

**ML:** You live in Scotland in a flat that you said is older than the state of Texas, any ghosts or odd activity to speak of there?

**CS:** Nope, no ghosts. (Actually, the flat turns out to be younger than Texas -- although the plans for the development it's part of are older.) I mention this semi-jokingly, because it illustrates the old joke: "to an Englishman, a hundred miles is a long distance -- to an American, a hundred years is a long time." I live in a city where there's a large area

known as the New Town, because it was built in the mid-eighteenth century (The Old Town is mediaeval). If you're writing for people who aren't used to living on the bones of an ancient civilization, you can use that kind of background for pleasure and profit in your writing, or at least for atmosphere.

**ML:** So what is this Scottish Socialist SF Cabal that you've been accused of being a member of? Is it anything like the Irish Libertarian Historical Fantasy Unionists?

**CS:** I'm not really socialist; I'm a boringly middle-of-the-road Liberal Democrat voter, a party that until very recently used to be considered to be right in the middle of British politics, between the Conservatives and the Labour Party. (Then politics here turned post-modern...it's confusing, so I'll skip over it.) On the other hand, the whole universe of British politics is a long way to the left of American politics (or rather, US politics is w-a-y to the right of every other developed nation) so I can play the socialist firebrand agitator for that part of the peanut gallery who care about such things.

And it can be argued that I'm not really Scottish; I've lived here for a decade, but I was born south of the border and if you want to pin my ethnicity down the nearest you'll get is "middle-European Jewish cosmopolitan transplant to Yorkshire." Which is, let's face it, not your traditional Scottish ethnicity.

But I sometimes go to the pub with Ken MacLeod and Iain Banks. And there's feedback -- a dialog of ideas, I guess -- among SF authors in general, and I'm guilty of riffing off of some of Ken's ideas (and vice versa, I think).

**ML:** I think to a degree every artist, regardless of the medium, be it painting, poetry, fiction, sculpture, movies or whatever, rips someone off from time to time. It's the nature of the beast, so-to-speak.

**ML:** It has been said that science fiction writers are notoriously bad at accurately predicting the future, but what about interpreting the past?

**CS:** That, I think, is a question for Neal Stephenson. Whose master work, the Baroque Cycle, does exactly that with stupefying brilliance and economy.

The past is definitely an alien world, populated by people whose fundamental views of the way their world works is utterly different from our own. People who were not stupid, or foolish or even necessarily misguided -- but for whom things were simply unimaginably different. Stephenson did something truly prodigious in his application of science fictional world-building techniques to a historical epoch -- the period of about sixty years that gave birth to the enlightenment and the modern system of the world -- and I think the implications will be sinking into the SF zeitgeist for years to come.

Meanwhile, I think it's fair to say that SF writers who try to invent futures or alien societies in ignorance of history do both themselves and their readers a disservice. SF is all too often merely the reflection of today's preoccupations and neuroses on the silver screen of the future -- adding a chunk of historical perspective makes the moving pictures somehow feel more three-dimensional (and a whole lot weirder).

**ML:** Your novel, Singularity Sky, one American reviewer said that you were essentially retelling the Russo-Japanese War. Is that true?

**CS:** Partially: the journey of the New Republic's fleet to Rochard's World was, in some measure, a re-telling of the voyage of the Russian Baltic Fleet from Libau to Tsushima in 1905-06. It was then, and remains today, the longest naval cruise in military history, one of the most impressive, quixotic and just plain \*stupid\* expeditions ever.

To recap: in 1905 when the Russo-Japanese war broke out, the Russian far eastern fleet was sunk rapidly by the Japanese, who then besieged Port Arthur. The Russians sent their Baltic fleet, a collection of semi-seaworthy clunkers crewed by conscript peasants (many of whom had never seen the sea before) to steam the long way around Europe and Africa, across the Indian Ocean, and to the Sea of Japan to lift the siege. That's a mere 20,000 miles aboard coal-burning 1880's vintage steamers that in some cases were barely sea-worthy. While crossing the North Sea, they mistook the British Hull trawler fleet for Japanese torpedo boats and nearly started a war with Great Britain; they holed up in Madagascar for eight months while Tsarist agents raked South America for second-hand battleships to buttress the fleet, sailors went mad and died raving, and destroyers were overrun by monkeys. In the course of the voyage they perfected the technique of re-coaling at sea, refueling their ships 30 times en route and burning half a million tons of coal. It was by any estimate an epic voyage...but when they finally entered the straits of Tsushima, they were spotted by Admiral Togo's fleet and wiped out in the most one-sided naval engagement since the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

This aspect of the book was, to some extent, the result of my extreme irritation with the "Napoleonics in space" sub-genre of space opera -- the variety in which huge fleets of space battleships, equipped and trained to curiously similar levels, duke it out in traditional style. I just wanted to point out that in a real conflict between interstellar civilizations, your Napoleonic navy would be as likely to run up against the equivalent of dug-out canoes or a nuclear ballistic missile submarine. Alas, it suffered the drawback of an all-too-predictable ending (I'm not going to do \*that\* again if I can help it).

**ML:** I heard you're a bit of connoisseur when it comes to microbrewery beer? Ever try the oyster beer made at Bushy's Pub & Brewery on the Isle of Man?

**CS:** I'm not the beer expert -- that's my wife's specialty (She has on occasion worked as a brewer at a local microbrewery here in Scotland that now is sadly defunct). There are so many species of real ale in the UK that I'd be risking death from alcoholism if I attempted to sample them all. Having said that, I've got something of a weakness for IPAs (the British variety, basically a highly-hopped bitter that's been stored somewhere warm for several months, not the much more elaborately spiced American varieties) and for continental Weiss biers.

**ML:** You've written extensively on the concept of the Vingean Singularity, where the rate of technological advancement occurs so rapidly that the future cannot be predicted. Do you think we are currently being affected as a culture by this theorem?

**CS:** I'm not sure. Despite having written about the singularity, I remain an agnostic about whether it's actually a possibility. I've worked in a field where any attempts at developing a business roadmap more than 36 months in the future was considered blue-sky speculation, but that doesn't extrapolate to cover the rest of our culture.

What I *can* see happening is this: today, for about a month's average wage (for a worker in the developed world) you can, in 48 hours, travel to the antipodes. Back up 200 years to 1805 and for about the same amount of money you could, in the same amount of time, travel across the English home counties or, maybe, Massachusetts or one of the other original New England states.

The entire world has been squeezed down to the size of a small state or a couple of counties circa 1805. And that's just travel-in-the-flesh; communications have made the world even smaller.

One of the projects Google are pouring a lot of money into is machine translation, using huge corpuses of translated text to come up with probabilistic based phrase-level conversions rather than the more traditional parser and lexical analyzer based systems. If and when this pays off (and there's a huge amount of money riding on it) the implications are explosive. Hitherto we've only had access to that part of the world information sphere that someone was willing to pay a human to translate (or that we could read for ourselves, or someone was willing to translate for free). Along with things like the proposed \$100 universal laptop for kids everywhere, and the \$10 third world cell phone, this is going to change things more than we can imagine. The English-speaking world has a huge and powerful collective media culture but it's still only about a tenth of the planet's potential media culture; the rest simply isn't joined up yet. Useful machine translation is going to have more of an impact than the internet (into which it will be woven).

Another thing to note: the rise of massively multiplayer online role-playing games. These are the first networked, distributed, multi- person virtual reality environments to be

commercially successful. And some of them have now hit the million user mark.

In a decade's time, our cell phones will contain processors as powerful as today's high end gaming computers. We'll be expecting wifi-level data rates on our phones for free (while the \*real\* broadband at home will exceed the sensory bandwidth of your nervous system), and we'll be grappling with new technologies such as ubiquitous location services.

This is the stuff Vernor Vinge is currently writing about. His next novel, Rainbows End, is due out next April -- highly recommended, and it's what I'll be writing about in my next-but-one SF novel, Halting State, due in 2007. I'm pretty sure that the world in 2015 is going to be much more disturbingly different from 2005 than 2005 is from 1995. And that's saying a lot.

**ML:** How do you feel about the current state of science fiction? Are there any writers that stand out in your mind as breaking new ground and elevating the genre as a whole? Any particular novels out there, other than your own, that you feel deserve attention?

**CS:** SF is alive and kicking; whether it remains relevant to the human condition is a topic I'll leave to the critics, thanks.

One warning I should give is that I am not current on my reading. Writing takes up a lot of time, and when you've spent all day slaving over a hot word processor you don't tend to want to relax by reading something challenging in your own field.

Important novels folks need to read: Rainbows End by Vernor Vinge stands out as the most interesting near-future treatment I've read recently. Then there's Counting Heads by David Marusek, which is gathering a huge buzz and for good reasons -- it's another near-future novel (set about 200 years hence) that explores issues of identity and reality in a post-nanotechnology, post-human world. If I'm going to round this out to a trilogy, there's Lady of Mazes by Karl Schroeder; another fascinating look at a future in which our perceptions of the surrounding reality are subject to edited, and some ideas about what that might mean.

And if you're looking for insanely great world-building and the big ideas that define civilizations, Neal Stephenson's huge trilogy is the place to go.

Charlie, it's been a pleasure talking with you. If you want to learn more about Charlie and his novels go to his homepage: <http://www.antipope.org/charlie/> or go to his blog at <http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/index.html>.

You can also check out Charlie's novel, Accelerando, which has been released as a free ebook under Creative Common license at <http://www.accelerando.org/>. A collection of his

short fiction can be found at [http://www.freesfonline.de/authors/Charles\\_Stross.html](http://www.freesfonline.de/authors/Charles_Stross.html)

Charlie's short story *Rogue Farm* has been made into a machinima film. Go to <http://roguefarm.com/> to learn more.

When next we visit with Charlie Stross we'll be getting tanked up on a couple of bottles of expensive Isle of Jura whisky and attacking Swiss tourists with haggis pies as they attend the annual Edinburgh Marching Bagpipe Tattoo. Don't wait up...👤

# Nova 2008 Finalist General Section

## The Seeds Ruby Rollins

In the greenhouse, a sudden breeze set the windchimes tinkling which in turn, to the relief of the black dog, startled her master out of his trance. Jesse had watched Oliver standing in one position for a full five minutes with the watering can tipped at a precarious angle in his hand. It was not so much a trance Oliver was in as it was a concentrated attempt at recalling the dream he had had the night before. As with most dreams this one could only be recollected in fleeting images. Something about those fleeting images though, was extremely disturbing. What was even more disturbing was the perseveration: a monotonous voice in his head repeating the same sentence over and over again: "***you will know what to do.***"

The Border collie rose from her seated position, anticipating that her master would now hopefully finish whatever it

had a lot of catching up to do now that his brief love affair with Linda had ended. It had only been two weeks and in that short space of time he had met what he had been under the illusion was the girl of his dreams, fallen hopelessly in love, been cheated on and felt as if he had been stabbed through the heart and dumped on the garbage heap. A lot could happen in a space of just two weeks to a man's

emotions and a lot too could happen to his surroundings. The house had not been cleaned during those two weeks, his washing and the dishes had piled up, the garden needed watering, the orchids in the greenhouse needed attention and even poor Jesse had suffered during those two weeks of madness. On two occasions he had done the unforgivable: neglected to feed her and as he now walked towards the back door

he noticed with rising guilt that the bottom of Jesse's usually crystal clear water bowl was lined with a sandy layer of greenish-brown sediment.

Oliver put his hand to his neck. Something was not right. There was a lump where there hadn't been a lump before. He decided he would have to pop in and see Janet.

Dr. Janet Crusoe had known Oliver since they had attended primary school together in Cape Town. Janet, a large, comfortable, matronly woman exclaimed as she gave him a bear hug: "What have you been doing all this time?" It's been over a year since I last saw you!"

"I've been busy being healthy," he laughed. "No need to come and see you guys but I do apologise for not calling to say hello. It had been one thing or another - you know how it goes."

"Yeah yeah excuses," she said teasingly. "So what's troubling you?"

"Well apart from having a lump in my neck I think I'm going schizo," he replied.

"Sounds terribly serious," she said trying not to smile. "Let's have a look."

As she ran her fingers over his neck she agreed that there was indeed something there. It felt like a foreign object though, not a swelling. At last she spoke:

"I think there is something in there Oliver. Quite honestly it feels like a piece of round metal - a pellet or something. Has someone shot you lately?"

"Not that I can recall," answered Oliver dryly. "But personally I feel that it should come out."

"I don't know if that will be necessary," she replied.

*"You will know what to do..."*

**"TAKE IT OUT!"**

Janet was startled by the sudden abrupt change in his tone of voice. Puzzled, she frowned at him and said acidly: "what was that you saying earlier about schizophrenia?"

"Sorry Janet." He winced as he realised how rude his response must have sounded. The words had simply rolled out before he had thought them through. In an attempt to lighten up the mood again he said: "I was joking about that bit - but honestly Janet, this thing is bugging me. I would really rather you took it out."

It was a simple procedure as the 'pellet' was lodged directly beneath the epidermis. A few minutes later after a small local anaesthetic injection, a tiny incision and a quick probe with a pair of tweezers, the object lay on a piece of white gauze at the bottom of a kidney bowl. Janet, after sticking down an adhesive surgical plaster over the small wound, picked up the object with a pair of tweezers and held the tiny metal ball up to the light.

"It looks like a BB gun pellet," she exclaimed. "It must be - what else could it be?"

"Well I have no idea how it could have got there. Perhaps it's been floating around my body since childhood and worked its way to the surface."

"It's possible," she said still frowning as she squinted at the object.

"Well, I guess we will never know." She was about to toss it back into the bowl when Oliver again over-reacted.

"Give it to me!" he said a little too loudly. "Don't throw it away; I want it!"

This time Janet took on a more serious tone: "Oliver what is troubling you?"

He came out with it all then: the bad dreams, the voice in his head, the failed love affair, the untidy house in need of cleaning, Jesse's dirty water bowl. For the first time in days he broke down and had a good cry about it all.

"Well I'm not surprised you are hearing voices," she said gently after a time when he had recovered his composure. "You are suffering from stress and a broken heart. I'm going to prescribe something for you - a mild sedative to take for a few days. It won't cure the pain but it will take the edge off things. You also need to get more sleep so I am giving you a sleeping pill as well. I want you to promise me you will come back in a week's time so we can see how you are doing then."

"Thank you Janet," he said as he rose to leave. "I'll be in touch in a week."

As he walked down the corridor towards the waiting room again she noticed that he had the metal ball firmly clenched in his hand.

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He tackled the dishes first, setting the 'container' as he now called it down on the kitchen windowsill. He knew it contained something. How he knew it though was a mystery.

***"You will know what to do."***

Perhaps one of the sedatives would make the bloody voices go away. He opened the packet he had picked up at the pharmacy on his way home.

***"You will know what to do."***

It took about ten minutes to kick in but it definitely, as Janet had said it would, 'took the edge off things'. The voice in his head was, for the first time in days, silent at last.

The dishes washed, dried and packed away, he fed Jesse, scrubbed the moss off her water bowl, filled it with fresh water and set it down carefully on the back porch. He caught a flash of light out of the corner of his eye. Against a red sky the sun was going down and the light reflected sharply off the metal ball lying on the windowsill. A pot of soup was bubbling away cheerfully on the stove and at last Oliver felt that he was ready. Seated at the kitchen table he picked up the object. He had seen something like it before but no matter how hard he wracked his brains he could not remember where or when it had been.

His fingers found the position easily and as he pressed it he knew that it would open, and it did. A few tiny grains fell from the ball onto the white tablecloth. They were minute and he knew instinctively what they were. But, his reactive mind took over and told him to fetch the microscope.

The old school microscope set up on the kitchen table; one of the grains between two slides of glass; all it took was one glance to confirm what he already knew: lying before him was a tiny seed.

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Jesse woke her early by tugging at his pyjama sleeve as was her usual tactic for getting him up and out of bed. He felt unusually clear-headed and wide-awake. He had things to do and he was eager to get started.

By midday the work was completed and he stood back a little distance from the patch of ground, resting on his spade and admiring his efforts. There were ten in all and he had planted them in two rows at two-meter intervals. Somehow, he knew the plants would be large. He wondered what they would look like; wondered if they would bear fruit or flowers. "You dig them up and your days are numbered," he affectionately turned to Jesse but to his surprise she was standing a little distance off watching him cautiously.

Three weeks later, having almost given up on the seeds he was rewarded one morning with ten green shoots pushing their way up through the dark soil. A couple more weeks and they had grown

into small plants each resembling the top of a pineapple. Jesse continued with her strange behaviour - staying as far away from the patch of soil as she could; observing him from a distance when he pulled up the weeds around the plants. Day by day the plants flourished. At a height of one meter they suddenly ceased growing any further. He broke off a leaf and found that the pungent aroma emanating from the thick, yellow sap that dripped from it was nauseating. He had never smelled anything like it before and he refrained from sniffing at it again. At last he decided that the time had come to call in the botany experts. But first, he decided, he would call Janet.

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*... 'But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die'...*

Oliver angrily tossed aside the biblical pamphlet he had picked up in an attempt to blot out Janet's presence. They'd had a furious argument in the car on the way to the psychiatrist's rooms. He regretted ever having made the call to her earlier that day. He watched her from his peripheral vision. She was sitting two chairs away, biting her bottom lip and staring intently at a magazine in front of her. She had in fact read the entire page of the article in the woman's magazine (she had grabbed the closest one when they walked in) without taking in one word of what she was reading. She was seriously worried about Oliver. His behaviour was way out of line. She thought back over the events of the past couple of hours and wondered if she had perhaps been a little too hard on him.

It had begun with a phone call. His voice had sounded a little too excitable for her liking as he launched into his tale:

“Remember that BB gun pellet you took out of my neck? Well you’re not going to believe it! It was some kind of implant! Contained seeds ... planted them ... they’ve come up! Janet this is mind-blowing stuff. You have to come over here right now.”

Her first thought was that Oliver was on drugs. Her old friend, that calm, sweet boy every girl in the school had had a crush on, had turned into a raving lunatic. She remembered the word schizophrenia creeping into an earlier conversation. Had she perhaps overlooked something; some mental disorder? She decided she had better go over and take a look.

He was waiting at the gate when she arrived.

“What took you so long?” were his first breathless words.

“Oliver! Calm down for goodness sake. What is wrong with you?” she asked as she locked her car. She noticed that the Border collie Jesse lay miserably watching them from a distance as they made their way through the garden until they reached the patch. Oliver was rubbing his hands in anticipation. “Well?” he said. “So what do you say now!”

“Pineapple plants! Is that what you called me out here to see?”

“Pineapple plants? PINEAPPLE PLANTS!” he yelled. He marched up to one of the plants ripping off a leaf and thrusting it under her nose.

“Does that smell like a pineapple plant to you?” he asked.

She reeled backwards as the dreadful smell assaulted her nostrils.

“Ok! Ok!” she relented; “so they are not pineapples but they are also not bloody Triffids from Mars. I am very sorry Oliver but...” she stopped abruptly. He had his hands clasped to his ears; a look of sheer horror crossing his face as he exclaimed: “I’ve remembered! I’ve remembered how it got into my neck!”

A more down-to-earth person than Janet one would be hard pressed to find and the story which Oliver told her was not one she cared to listen to but under the circumstances she had no option. A typical alien abduction story it was too, of the ilk that he could have read about in one of thousands of science fiction stories. All the clichéd elements were there: the missing time; the presence of something in the room; rising/floating upwards through the night air; the circular room with its seamless walls; the Grey’s with their strange eyes; the fear and, the climax: the dreadful crunching sound that the sharp object made as it was thrust through his flesh imbedding the implant in his neck.

A bunch of utter tripe as far as Janet was concerned. She decided then and there that what Oliver needed and needed fast was a good psychiatrist.

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That very same morning Linda Griffon had had a serious re-think about her relationship with Oliver Wilson. Her new boyfriend had left her and alone now, feeling very sorry for herself, she decided that she had made a terrible mistake; one she planned to rectify that same day.

Dressed in her tightest jeans and highest heeled shoes she pulled up outside Oliver's house, a peace offering of a box of Belgium chocolates clutched tightly in her hand. As she opened the gate, to her surprise a black shadow darted past her at high speed and ran off down the street.

"Jesse!" she yelled; "Jesse!"

"Oh damn it. That is all I needed," she muttered.

By now Jesse had turned the corner and had disappeared from sight. Linda decided to ignore the situation. She was sure the stupid mutt would find its way back home. She had more important things on her mind.

There was no reply at the front door. Annoyed now, she tottered down the driveway and peered in at the garage window. Oliver's car was there but where was he?

"The back garden," she thought, "that's where he'll be."

Opening the little gate to the garden she walked towards the greenhouse. It was then that something, some movement, caught her eye. There were piles of uprooted plants scattered untidily about

the garden. No, these were not plants, what they were were the skeletons of what had once been plants. Something had stripped them down to the bare fibre. It was then that she saw what had done the damage. She tried to run but it was too late. The ten gigantic, fat, dark grey grubs free at last from the plants whose seeds had housed their eggs whose foul smelling, yolk-like sap had provided their first nourishment, were moving hungrily in her direction, eager to get to the next stage of their metamorphosis. She had no time to flee. They pounced on their victim before she had taken three paces. Soon all that was left of Linda Griffon was the cellophane wrapper of the box of Belgium chocolates she had carried.

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Arriving home after the visit to psychiatrist, Oliver was surprised to find Jesse sitting shivering on the pavement outside the gate.

"What's the matter girl?"

He went down on his haunches, taking her face between his hands. She was terrified.

"Come, let's get you some food," he said gently but not even the magic word 'food' could make Jesse move. Eventually he gave it up and opened the car door. She hopped inside and cringed down on the floor below the back seat. He decided to leave her there for now – at least she was safe and couldn't run away.

For the first time Oliver felt alarmed. Obviously something inside the house or garden was the cause of Jesse's panic attack. From the boot of his car he extracted his only weapon – a cricket bat. He opened the gate and walked up to the

front door. Turning the key he walked inside. Everything appeared to be as it was before he had gone out. On the kitchen table the cups from which he and Janet had drunk tea were still there, exactly as they had left them. Cautiously he opened the back door and slowly walked outside. He gasped at the chaos that lay before him. All his plants had been uprooted and damaged. His first reaction was one of anger. Someone or something had wrecked his garden. There was not a single plant that had not been ripped to shreds. Something crackled as the wind lifted a chocolate wrapper depositing it at his feet. He picked it up. There was something red on the wrapper that looked like blood. Uneasy now Oliver walked on, tightly clasping the cricket bat. Whatever it was that had done the damage it didn't appear to be around anymore. The 'Triffids', as Janet had called them, had been uprooted and appeared to have disintegrated; his only evidence destroyed. What was left of them was emitting a bad smell and they appeared to be rotting before his very eyes and turning into piles of brown slush. "The greenhouse!" he thought. "That must be where the culprit is hiding." Of course Oliver imagined the destruction had been caused by a vandal who had simply walked onto his property and wrecked his garden. He noticed the damaged greenhouse door. The entire door had been smashed. The glass shards lay scattered about perilously on the ground.

"Perhaps it's time to call in the police," he thought to himself but his curiosity got the better of him and he cautiously entered the greenhouse. There was nothing there

that had escaped being eaten. Empty pots and seed containers lay strewn about the floor and then he saw it: a piece of yellow string hanging down from the ceiling. It was blowing about in the breeze and had brushed against his cheek. Following the string upwards with his eyes he could not believe what he saw. They were enormous and they were spinning cocoons. Like giant silkworms they had fixed their silken threads to the ceiling and rafters and he had caught them at about the halfway stage of their spinning. He counted them. There were ten. Oliver ran back to the house. They must be protected at all costs!

The voice in his head was shouting new words at him now – repeating over and over again: "*The cycle must be completed.*"

As he ran into the kitchen he ran straight into Janet who, upon finding the front door ajar, had made her way to the kitchen. She had decided to drop in, to check on Oliver and also to apologise for her part in the argument they had had earlier that day.

"Janet! You have to see them! They've spun!" He had a wild look in his eyes. Flecks of foam had formed in the corners of his mouth such was his excitement. She listened in horror to his words. "Come and have a look! In the greenhouse... we have to seal the door... they must not get cold ... must be protected." On and on he rambled and she followed him out to the greenhouse, horrified as she took in the wrecked garden; horrified at the damage he had done in his demented state of mind. He

seemed completely oblivious to the chaos around him. For the first time her apprehension turned to certain fear. She was afraid not just for Oliver but for herself. "What on earth has happened here?" she thought.

Then they entered the greenhouse and he pointed upwards. Nothing could have prepared Janet for the sight that met her eyes. And she knew at last that Oliver had been telling the truth all along; knew also in that instant that her survival depended on acting fast. Something would have to be done and soon.

"*You must not let anyone stand in our way!*" The voice echoed loudly in his head. Oliver turned his eyes on Janet and shouted: "You may not touch them!"

"I'm not going to do anything to them Oliver," she said, her voice quivering a little.

"*She's lying!*" They were communicating to him from their cocoons.

"You're lying," echoed Oliver. "You want to destroy them, don't you?"

She knew now that somehow they were communicating with him; picking up on her thoughts. There was no time to try and figure it out. She knew only one thing - she had to control her thoughts. She placed in her mind the image of helping Oliver seal the door; of the two of them protecting the cocoons. It worked. Oliver seemed to calm down.

"You will have to help me," she said. "There's a tarpaulin in the boot of my car. We can seal the doorway with it and then

they will be safe. No harm will come to them then."

He seemed reluctant to move but eventually he relented and walked ahead of her up to the side gate of the garden. She had had the presence of mind to put it in her bag earlier. Disturbed by her friend's erratic behaviour she had decided to take with her some form of protection. She extracted the small syringe from its plastic packet and held it tightly behind her back. Oliver fumbled with the gate and she used the moment to strike, jabbing the needle deeply into the flesh of his left buttock. It took a second or two for the sedative to kick in but eventually it did and he dropped like a wounded buck. Now she knew she would have to work quickly. She dragged Oliver into the house and into one of the bedrooms inside, locking the door behind her. Then she ran to the garage and after a brief but frantic search found what she sought. Carefully carrying the heavy can of petrol she raced to the greenhouse. They had almost completed their spinning cycle and through the thick silk she could see the outline of the worms' bodies moving rapidly from side to side; growing smaller and weaker as they spun.

First she poured petrol onto the shelves, benches and wooden floor and lastly she filled the watering can with what was left. This she poured onto the lower portions of those cocoons that she could reach. She then walked backwards and through the door into the garden, leaving a thin trail of petrol on the ground to a distance well off from the greenhouse. Taking her lighter from her pocket she lit the fuse. She

prayed that the neighbours would not notice too soon and alert the fire brigade.

From the kitchen window she watched the fire with a racing heart. It did not take long and most disturbing of all were the high pitched squeals that emanated from the inferno. At last it was over and she knew that nothing could have survived the fire. There was very little left of the greenhouse by the time the fire brigade (alerted by a caring neighbour) arrived at the door. All that remained was a pile of burned wood and blackened shards of glass and she could safely turn the firemen away with the story that it was just

an old shed of no use to anyone that had burned down.

She opened the door to the room where Oliver still lay. Half awake now he drowsily called to her: "Please bring me some water Janet, I must have passed out. I've been having the weirdest dreams." He scratched absentmindedly at an itchy spot on his arm where he had become aware of a small lump. "Oh and Jesse's locked in my car. Something frightened her earlier," he continued. He again rubbed at the small swelling before continuing: "Please fetch her in. And Janet, I think something is burning."

## Book Reviews

## Gail Jamieson

### Winterstrike

#### Liz Williams

Winterstrike takes pride in being the foremost city of a far distant future Mars. Society has changed. It has become a Matriarchy. In fact the only men left on Mars are the "remnants", whom we find out very little about, except that they are anathema and any women who even speaks to one of them may find herself shorn of all her privileges and even her basic freedom.

Daughters are vat grown and families all have a similar look.

Essegi must search for her "shorn" sister who has inexplicably disappeared and bring her back to her imprisonment before their mother can be inducted into the ruling Matriarchy without shame.

Her cousin Hestia is a spy, currently observing the second city Caud.

Many of the inhabitants of Mars have "changed" and in effect have become different species.

Hestia has to travel to Earth, which has also become unrecognisable, but is also ruled by women. Men, however are still part of society.

Liz Williams, as usual, creates a story that is deep and many layered. Her characters are complex and convoluted. One of the reviews quoted in front of the book "can't wait for the sequel", but I find this a complete story.

I admit I would not be sorry to find out more about this complex society with its strange inhabitants so I'll keep an eye out for any future sequels.

This novel is well worth reading.

## **Vlad – The Last Confession**

**C.C. Humphreys**

This book is subtitled “The Epic Novel of the true Dracula”

This very dark, though entertaining novel, claims to be the true story of the man we know as Count Dracula.

Older son of count Dracul, the “a” added to denote son of, Vlad is not a vampire at all but a man who spent much of his youth as a hostage, for his father’s good behavior, in Turkey. The Turks are the people from whom he learned the technique by whose name he became known. – “The Impaler” . This horrific method of torture was used by the Turks to keep whole populations in check and Vlad himself used it for the same purpose, to torture and punish his enemies, of whom he had many.

It is also the story of the one woman he loved and finally betrayed, Ilona. Also of his one true friend, Ion, who in turn betrayed him.

Vlad lives in a world in which no one can trust anyone else and all seek to turn every incident to their own advantage.

This tale is told by the people who knew him, those who loved him and those who defeated him.

In all a sad story of the life of a man who according to legend improved the way in which the people he ruled lived; who slaughtered his enemies en mass. A troubled tyrant whose head was finally sent to the Sultan of the Turks who allowed it to rot on the walls of Constantinople.

Not a pleasant book to read but one which gives an idea of how the man, Vlad Dracula, may have lived his life.

## **Lavinia**

**Ursula K. Le Guin**

In Vergil’s “The Aeneid” the Italian Princess who will marry the Trojan hero Aeneas is hardly mentioned and does not even say a word.

But Ursula Le Guin has given her a voice. She tells us the tale of Lavinia, daughter of King Latinus and creates a life for her for our enjoyment.

Lavinia actually narrates her story and we are introduced to her as a child who survives a fever which carries off her two younger brothers and leaves her mother forever cast down in grief.

She helps her father with the ritual service to their gods and it is through this service that she becomes aware of what her future holds.

In fleeing to the forest bower, in which she praises the gods, to try and avoid becoming the wife of a prince she does not love, she finds the ghost of a poet, presumably Vergil, and he tells her of the Prince Aeneas. The poet is dying on a ship and does not think he will ever return home.

Over a number of visits to the forest she discovers more about her future than she actually wishes to know. She will become the wife of Aeneas for what will be for her a woefully short period of time.

Le Guin, as usual spins a compelling story as we follow Lavinia all through her life. She does not sugar coat the battle scenes between the Trojans and the Italians but in all the story is one of love and devotion.

As usual with Le Guin, this one comes highly recommended.

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