

ISSUE 8
WINTER 2019

THE BSFA REVIEW

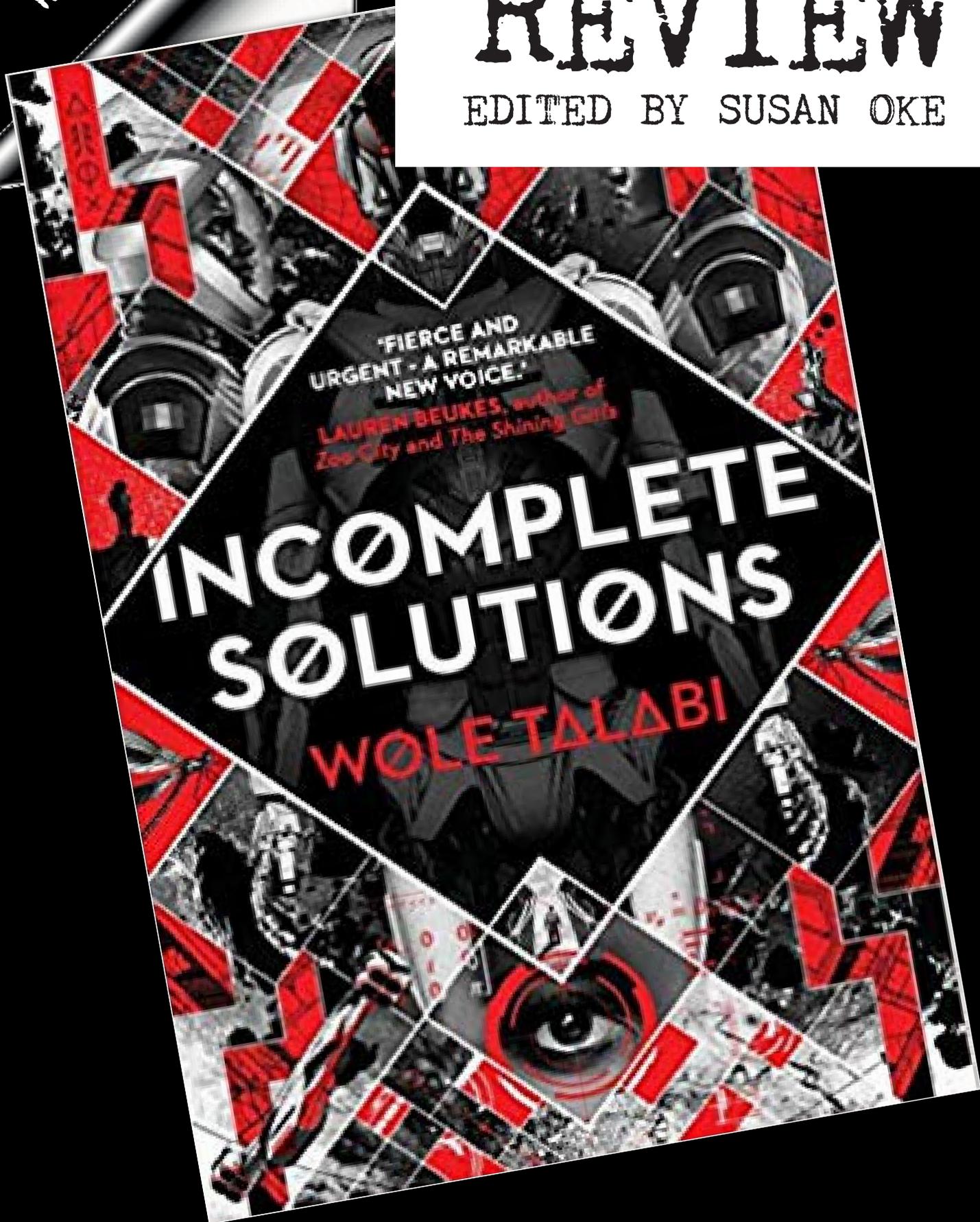
EDITED BY SUSAN OKE

'FIERCE AND
URGENT - A REMARKABLE
NEW VOICE.'

LAUREN BEUKES, author of
Zoo City and *The Shining Girls*

INCOMPLETE SOLUTIONS

WOLE TALABI





THE BSFA REVIEW

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/ VIEW FROM THE EDITOR

Well, here we are: *BSFA Review 8*. It doesn't seem that long since this new electronic format came into being. Let us know what you think. Any suggestions for additional content? Watch out for the 'Best of...' reviews that are occasionally printed in *Vector*.

Since the beginning, I've strived to present an equal balance between male and female writers and include as much diversity as it possible with the titles coming to market. This time around, I find we are woefully short of reviews of books written by women. This is partly due to the fact that we receive far more books written by men, so a disproportionate amount of these are picked up for review. If you have recently read a book written by an underrepresented group of authors and would like to recommend it for review (or, indeed, offer a review yourself), please let us know.

So, what has happened this month...?

Well, I was lucky enough to get an invite to the world premiere of 'His Dark Materials' at the BFI. Quite an event! Ice sculptures of armoured bears, the precious alethiometer and its instruction manual displayed in glass cases, guarded by serious looking young men dressed in impressive uniforms (though I did spot one trying to discretely chew a mouthful of profiterole). Yes, there was wine, there were very yummy nibbles (before and after the show) and a scattering of actors in the crowd—though some were left behind in Wales as they're busy shooting season two. And there are plans for a season three! One for each book – makes perfect sense.

The screening of the first episode of the series (due to be shown on the BBC on 3rd November... as that's pretty close, I'm guessing a lot of you may have already see it... amazing, wasn't it?) was opened by the Director of the BBC, and then of course Philip Pullman got up on the stage. It was good to hear that he was happy with and very supportive of the BBC production of his book.

Afterwards, there was a Q&A with Julie Gardner, Director of the Bad Wolf production company (named, as I'm sure you know, after a Dr Who storyline) and some of the principal actors: Ruth Wilson (Mrs Coulter), Dafne Keen (Lyra) and Clarke Peters (Master/Dr Carne) and of course the script writer, Jack Thorne. Dafne Keen revealed she wasn't sure about the 'blonde, curly-hair' of the protagonist when she first saw the script (she's portrayed in the series with straight, dark-brown hair), but the other panellists all laughingly agreed that her personality was so like Lyra that they knew instantly she was right for the role. The actors were very complimentary about the animatronics used to create their daemons; Ruth Wilson said she surprised everyone by really embracing the 'monkey' in her soul as she got to grips with her character.

Hope you all enjoyed FantasyCon in Glasgow. I should have been there, but a family illness meant I couldn't attend. Ah well, there's always next year.

Sue Oke

Arthur C. Clarke by Gary Westfahl
(The University of Illinois Press, 2018)
 Reviewed by Martin McGrath



Gary Westfahl has been a bit unlucky. After reading his *Arthur C. Clarke*—an instalment in the “Modern Masters of Science Fiction” series from The University of Illinois Press—and while I was trying to work out what to say in this review, I picked up two books. The first was *No Laughing Matter*, Anthony Cronin’s fine biography of Irish humourist Flann O’Brien. The second was *Working by Robert A. Caro*, in which America’s greatest living biographer (probably, he’s certainly its most thorough) discusses how he gets to grip with his subjects. Both helped me crystallise my sense of frustration with Westfahl’s book.

For Cronin the city of Dublin is at the heart of the story, providing not just the background to O’Brien’s life and literature but immersing the reader in the world that gave birth to them. Caro, meanwhile, describes months spent in Texas winning the trust (with his wife’s considerable help) of the women who were the backbone of the rural community in which his subject, Lyndon B. Johnson, grew up. He describes nights spent alone in the wilderness near the Johnson ranch. All done so that he might better understand the crippling poverty and loneliness of Johnson’s childhood.

By contrast, Westfahl’s book feels like an insular thing: a work that rarely steps outside the covers of Clarke’s books. Whether Westfahl is discussing Clarke’s juvenile (both senses) “indulgences in infantile humour” or the sense of impermanence (perhaps even futility) in his description of mankind’s attempts to control our environment, I never felt him get under the surface of his subject. Any author discussing Clarke is, of course, somewhat hamstrung by the fact that his personal papers remain sealed, but this book’s lack of contextual weight bothered me throughout.

It’s not that I was expecting Westfahl to ape Caro and relocate to Somerset to grasp some of what it must have been like for a young man growing up in a rural community, without a father, in the depths of the economic and political crises of the 1930s—but this must have been important in shaping Clarke’s outlook. And

so must have been the experience of being a gay man in post-war London. And of being an Englishman in self-imposed exile in Sri Lanka as his homeland declined from pre-eminent global empire to modestly influential European nation. I would argue all these experiences can be seen in Clarke’s work; indeed, give me the chance, and I can bore you at length about how Clarke—inheritor of Wells and Stapledon’s tradition of English socialist (small “s”) science fiction—is, above all else, a writer of the end of empire.

Westfahl touches on some of these things, but his prime focus is very much on the texts and on their genre trappings. There are discussions on Clarke’s predictive powers regarding technology, on whether he *really* believed in aliens, and on his attitude to space flight. There’s even a discussion on religion in which Westfahl seems determined to rescue a meaningful sympathy for religion from the scattering of polite words Clarke, a public and avowed atheist, puts into the mouths of a handful of his characters. This literalism feels parochial and I don’t think it does Clarke justice.

None of this is to deny Westfahl knows his subject. He has done his research. His familiarity with Clarke’s work (novels, short stories and ephemera) is never less than prodigious and the book’s bibliography (not just of Clarke’s fiction but including poetry, non-fiction and even selected TV appearances) is a useful addition. Sometimes Westfahl could have been less keen to demonstrate that extensive knowledge, I would have been happier with fewer lengthy lists of plot summaries, but there’s no denying that he draws out of all this some interesting insights.

However, in never straying far beyond the pages of Clarke’s published writing, and in rarely seeking to place those works in a meaningful historic or social context, Westfahl’s book provides a useful introduction to Clarke’s work without ever convincingly demonstrating why it should matter.

Incomplete Solutions by Wole Talabi
(Luna Press, 2019)
 Reviewed by Daniel Hurst

Nigerian writers are currently producing some of the most exciting work in any genre, anywhere on the globe. For readers of F&SF, the even better news is that, in one way or another, many of them are specifically focused on speculative fiction.

From the Booker-shortlisted Chigozie Obioma, whose refiguring of various myths weirds quotidian reality, to Akwaeke Emezi, whose deep background in SF thoroughly informed her repurposing of the novel in the incendiary *Freshwater*; and from Leye Adenle’s *The Beautiful Side of the Moon* to the diasporic work of Nnedi Okorafor or Tade Thompson, we are fortunate to be living through a remarkable and energising literary moment.

As the fiction editor for *The Naked Convos*, a prominent blog in the earliest days of this surge of Nigerian speculative fiction, Wole Talabi holds an important place in the story of how Nigerian writers have hacked the rules of SF to glorious effect. A nominee for the Caine Prize, and a winner of the Nommo, he has also made his name as an author in his own right. *Incomplete Solutions* is his debut collection of short fiction.

The collection is perhaps most notable for the hardness of its science fictional treatments. Many of the works I mention above have a fantastical, or at most ‘soft’ SF, bent: Emezi has even explicitly refused to accept generic definitions of her writing. Talabi is a great deal less reluctant to embrace the inheritance of science fiction, and in many ways his short stories read as old-fashioned homages to Golden Age work.

There are lots of spaceships and interstellar flight, a lot of AI and cyperpunkish trappings. The anthology’s first story features “alters”, a sort of embodiment of an individual’s “neurosocial” digital profile; its final story revolves around the Singularity. These are not pieces that eschew the familiar trappings of the science fiction short story.

Take “Drift-Flux”, for example – a story that begins with the line, “In space, no one can hear your ship explode” (p. 11). Here, terrorists rip through the Transhuman Federation—a galactic power bloc that sits alongside another named the Confederacy. Our heroes must travel to a space station to be debriefed about an attack they have witnessed; the protagonist, a pilot, will be given the opportunity to demonstrate his improbable skills in a death-defying mission. The story closes with two characters erupting “into wild, celebratory laughter” (p. 32). There’s no way around this: it’s kinda hokey.

There are, though, innovations: our priest-pilot lead, Orshio Akume, is an Idoma, and he posits his people’s cosmology as a sort of multiverse: “My people believe that death is a process of passing on to ... [another] level of existence” he explains at one point [p. 17]. In “Crocodile Ark,” meanwhile, it is Yoruba folktale that is given the speculative treatment. And in “Necessary and Sufficient Conditions”, the Anglocentrism of Talabi’s influences is fully eschewed by a world in which the piece’s antagonist has helped create an order in which “for the first time in the history of

humanity since mankind became a global community, a nation of African people are the dominant hegemony on the planet” (p. 53).

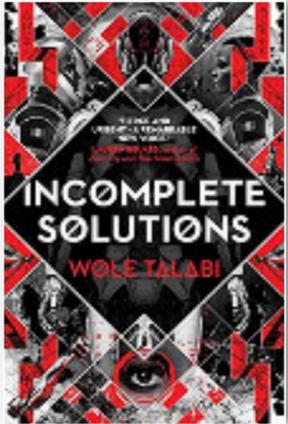
These stories, then, perform the fascinating trick of taking the sorts of conceits and gimmicks that Clarke or Gernsback may have recognised—and shifting them entirely into a different register, furnishing them with separate vocabularies and fresh philosophies. In so doing, Talabi proves conclusively that, contrary to arguments one still sees deployed with depressing regularity, SF is not a specifically American, or even Western, form; that it is a mode of fiction with the broadest possible applicability. “If you could see beyond the horizons of what is and into that amorphous realm of what will be,” Talabi begins his story, “Eye”, “what would you do with the knowledge from your sight?” (p. 186). For Talabi, the answer is “write SF”.

Incomplete Solutions is in this way an important work of science fiction. It isn’t, alas, always a beautiful piece of writing. Take that opening line from “Drift-Flux”, for example: in space, no one can hear your ship explode. Who is the addressee here? The reader? Definitely not. Quickly, she comes to understand that she is watching the ship explode, not onboard it when the conflagration occurs. Her perspective is in fact the third person POV of a character who owns a quite separate ship. This opening doesn’t so much hook us in as leave us somewhat adrift.

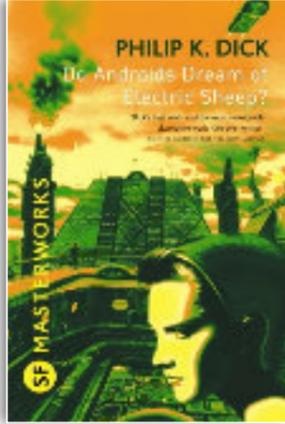
Other stories, too, struggle sometimes to express themselves. “A Certain Sort of Warm Magic” is as mundane a story as you’re likely to find in these pages, a sort of first-person bildungsroman in which the protagonist learns something about themselves—but ultimately only that “the ocean of love [was] inside and all around me” (p. 46), which seems an oddly adolescent kind of revelation on which to centre a story. The closing of “If They Can Learn”, too, strains to contain itself, this time syntactically rather than sentimentally:

And then I pull on the wet cylindrical cartridge of the BAE 7.1 neuroprocessor that is attached to his very real bioplasmium brain and disconnect the two parts that make up one of the world’s most complex, but fatally flawed, computing systems. (p. 123)

Mere elegance isn’t necessarily a requirement for high-quality prose; but nor is it always clear, in passages like these, what other effect Talabi is seeking to achieve. He wouldn’t be the first hard-ish SF author to eschew style for substance; but that is an increasingly unusual, and here not always successful, gambit in a field so increasingly confident—in large part thanks to the exciting work like *Incomplete Solutions*—of its literary value and global significance.



**Electric Dreams by Philip K. Dick
(Gollancz, 2017)
Reviewed by Nick Hubble**



Given that the electorate of both the UK and the US voted (narrowly) in 2016 in favour of some form of return to the 1950s, it seems particularly apt that a selection of Philip K. Dick's stories from that decade should provide the source material for one of 2017's high-profile television series. While the series itself is beyond the remit of this review, it is worth noting, as Adam Roberts did when reviewing it for the *Times Literary Supplement* of 20 October 2017, that despite good points it tends to suffer the consequences of over-elaborating Dick's short punchy tales. The advantage of this TV tie-in paperback from Gollancz is that, while it includes what are on the whole interesting short pieces from the writers who have adapted these tales for the screen, it allows Dick's stories the space to stand or fall on their own merits some sixty years after they were originally written.

If like me, you've read at some point in the past pretty much all of Dick's novels and the collected short stories, then it might seem as if this apparently random set of ten stories would have little new to offer. Indeed, following an initial look through the contents page, I was anticipating a set of dry runs for Dick's first really great novel, *Time Out of Joint* (1959), which anticipates a future in which the hero, Ragle Gumm, is so haunted by a desire for the 1950s that we find him living in a pocket universe set in that decade. The first story in the anthology, 'Exhibit Piece' (1953), seems to bear out this prediction, as the curator of a mid-twentieth century ranch style Californian bungalow in a futuristic 'History Agency' disappears into his own exhibit. However, neither his affectation of the accent 'of an American businessman of the Eisenhower administration' nor his penchant for colloquialisms of the period such as 'dig me?' equip him to deal with the essential Cold-War horror of a period lived under the shadow of the Hydrogen Bomb. What this and the other stories brought home to me was how the conformity of the 1950s—the white heterosexual married-with-kids world of suburban commuting and hire-purchase-fuelled consumption—was relentlessly driven by fear and repression.

Dick registers this hidden reality in a variety of ways; perhaps most movingly in 'Foster, you're dead' (1955), the story of the teenage boy who can't handle the fact that his family is the only one in town without a nuclear fallout shelter. His father knows that the production and marketing of these shelters is designed to maintain domestic consumption and yet, ultimately, he is unable to handle his son's unhappiness and so gives in. Of course, almost immediately, changes in Soviet weapon technology render the shelter obsolete and in need of an expensive update, leading to the father complaining that the company has them over a barrel because they have to keep buying or otherwise run the risk of dying: 'They always said the way to sell something was create anxiety in people'. What is particularly telling is the relief of their neighbours that, now the Fosters also have what they have, everybody is the same. While, in this case, a father surrenders to conformity for the

sake of his son, in 'The Father-Thing' (1954) a son has to fight the threat of conformity embodied by the alien form that has grown in the garden and taken over the place of his father.

Dick focuses on intergenerational familial conflict in these two stories, but more typically conformism was seen as a societal and ideological question of the time. The alien cocoons of 'The Father-Thing' are just one of a range of similar manifestations from the decade, the most famous of which being the pods in Don Siegel's 1956 film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* – adapted from Jack Finney's novel, *The Body Snatchers* (1954). It has never been clear to me when watching that film whether it's a warning about McCarthyism or Communism; and maybe its strength is that it can be taken either way. The story in *Electric Dreams* which comes closest to expressing this kind of power is 'The Hanging Stranger' (1953), in which Ed Loyce can't understand why people in his town are carrying on as normal although a dead body is hanging from the lamppost. It is another alien invasion story with a twist but as the screenwriter and director Dee Rees writes in her introduction to the story, 'obliviousness is the real alien that destroys'. Too many people just go home after work with, in the words of the story, 'their minds dead'. As Rees notes, the US presidential campaign was marked by exactly the same phenomenon of people not reacting to the body in the square right before their eyes.

Overall, therefore, *Electric Dreams* left me wondering not so much about America's desire to return to the 1950s but whether it ever left that decade in the first place. Stories such as 'The Commuter' (1953) and 'Sales Pitch' (1954) are, in their differently ways, fundamentally concerned with the difficulty of escaping from consumerist conformity into a warmer, brighter future. Sometimes Dick portrays his lower-middle-class protagonists—salesmen and store-keepers—as held back by the conformity of their wives and he is by no means immune to the casual sexism of the time. However, one story that has both a happy ending and a feminist twist, is 'Human Is' (1955), in which protagonist, Jill, finally escapes from the emotional neglect of her cold-hearted, careerist, workaholic husband, Lester, by covering up for the much nicer alien who takes over his body. Maybe there is a route out of the 1950s after all.

**Pirate Utopia by Bruce Sterling (Tachyon, 2016)
Normal by Warren Ellis (FSG Originals, 2016)
Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven**

If you ever publicly identify as a futurist, you will eventually be asked what contemporary futurism—an admittedly vague term which somehow covers everyone from tech-centric venture capital strategists and Pentagon policy wonks to Ray "Singularity" Kurzweil and the snake-oil Barnums of Silicon Valley—has to do with the proto-fascist 1920s Italian art movement of the same name. Bruce Sterling's latest novella, *Pirate Utopia*, is (in part) an attempt to answer that question.

Written in the bombastic style that animates much of Sterling's more recent short fiction, *Pirate Utopia* is populated by characters whose larger-than-lifeness is predominantly a function of their unfettered will-to-power (but also cocaine). In this alternate Adriatic, minor historical figures and allegorical types rub shoulders in Fiume, the little city at the heart of the breakaway microstate known as the Republic of Carnaro, where Futurist poets and artists work side by side with rogue military leaders and mercenary engineers to establish a proto-fascist entrepôt with its own hi-tech missile factory.

Identified by glamorous (and thus ridiculous) nicknames – "the Poet", "the Ace of Hearts", "the Art Witch" – the heroes of capital-F Futurism unwittingly slip into the narrative space occupied, in our own timeline, by the more fully developed European fascisms of the early 20th Century: Mussolini, a magazine editor, is emasculated in his office chair by Syndicalist women with single-shot handguns, while a former Austrian art student takes someone else's bullet during a failed putsch in a Bavarian beer-hall. But Carnaro is doomed not to last – for as Peter Lamborn Wilson has observed, the pirate utopia is always-already temporary and contingent; the polder cannot hold.

The arrival of "the Magician" – one Harry Houdini, squired by two USian pulp fiction pioneers – and his inviting of Lorenzo Secondari the Pirate Engineer to the States completes the story of Futurism and futurism. Both are essentially poetic movements fuelled by utopian genres of writing and the creative arts, and powered by the modernist legacy of a lust for power, velocity and creative destruction. Which is not to claim that small-f futurism is necessarily fascist, of course – but the same desires and fetishes can be found the manifestos of both, and today's self-styled "neoreactionaries" (a small but scary intellectual splinter of the *soi disant* "alt-right", fond of cool tech, racist pseudoscience and the presumed meritocracy of enlightened dictatorship) mark the ideological space where futurisms past and present overlap. Both futurism and Futurism are far less about the future than they are about a present in the perpetual process of radical sociotechnical reconfiguration, and the possibilities of power in times of flux.

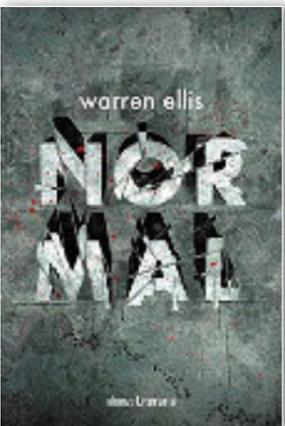
Warren Ellis's *Normal* begins with an ageing academic demanding cat gifs with menaces (assuming "menaces" can stretch to include a shank whittled from the handle of a ten-buck

toothbrush), and the story only gets darker and weirder, unfolding around a plot featuring "a missing guy, a locked-room mystery out of Agatha Christie, and a pile of insects." *Normal* Head is a retreat facility for burned out futurists – not the "woo, flying cars!!" sort of futurist, but the strategists and forecasters who have learned the truth of Nietzsche's old aphorism about gazing into the abyss, and learned it the hard way. The abyss in question is the light-cone of increasingly plausible and probable end-games facing a civilisation whose ability to generate interesting new technologies has far outpaced their ability to plan, predict or control the consequences – and speaking from beneath my own futurist's hat, I assure you it can best a basilisk when it comes to lookin' back atcha.

In contrast to the pulpy swaggerdocio of Sterling's story, *Normal* has a stark style and shape, tracing a bleakly Ballardian arc which, plotted on paper, would resemble a stock-market chart during a bank run: a justifiably and self-consciously doomed male Western professional attempts a heroic final act of self-abnegating redemption, only to reveal in doing so the even more comprehensive fuckedupness of, well, pretty much everything. Mercifully, Ellis leavens his grim prognosis with gallows humour, and with his well-tuned ear for the contemporary vernacular: you may be headed for a boot-on-a-human-face-forever sort of an ending, but you'll find yourself smiling as an academic from a rival discipline describes economics as "a speeding death kaleidoscope made of tits" – particularly if you know anything about economics. (Or about academics, for that matter.)

Taken together, these two books shine a light on the intimate but often occluded kinship between science fiction and futurism, rooted in a shared ideology and teleology. I am reminded of a recent Clute riff, in which he observes – and I paraphrase – that in "the old sf" (which is to say, roughly speaking, 20th century sf) the reward for saying 'yes!' was the future, while in "new" sf, the reward for saying 'yes!' is death; this reflects and reproduces a recent tectonic slippage in our attitude to change, and to technological change in particular. The Republic of Carnaro may be doomed in Sterling's story, but as Houdini and friends say 'yes!' to Futurism and smuggle its Promethean flame back to their homeland, they mark the beginning of a hegemonic American century – albeit one which seems to be drawing to a shuddering halt even as I type. But Adam Dearden and the other inmates of *Normal* Head, after long careers of saying 'yes, but...' to the future, suddenly find that it's too late for questions and analysis, let alone for saying 'no'.

Things being what they are, I think we're all victims of #abyssgaze to some extent ... and yet the dream of Carnaro lives on in the tax-exempt sea-steading fantasies and vaporware Martian colonies of libertarian millionaires. Perhaps, then, we could say that Futurism's greatest trick was – and still is – making the capital disappear.



Cryptozoic! by Brian Aldiss
(Gollancz SF Masterworks, 2017)
 Reviewed by Graham Andrews

If asked to name two authors who epitomized the 1960s 'New Wave' in British science fiction, I would answer: "Brian [W.] Aldiss and J. G. Ballard. Michael Moorcock once said something to the effect that, if Ballard was the leader in form, then Aldiss was the leader in style. The truth lies – as it so often does – in the mean between two extremes. Both writers led the field in form and style, in varying degrees, and from work to work. See *The Entropy Exhibition* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1983), by Colin Greenland.

Aldiss was the more 'conventional' of the two writers, at least in his early stories for *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy*. Then, inside two years, he wrote three novels that can still raise the critical temperature to boiling point – both pro and con: *An Age* (Faber & Faber, 1967: *New Worlds*, October-December, 1967); *Report on Probability A* (ditto, 1968: *New Worlds*, March, 1967); *Barefoot in the Head* (ditto, 1969: based on material published in *Impulse* and *New Worlds*, 1967-69). *Barefoot* reads like a collaboration between James Joyce, Aldous Huxley, and Leslie Charteris. *An Age* was retitled *Cryptozoic!* in the USA and UK paperback firms eventually followed suit. This Gollancz SF Masterworks edition has been long overdue, it must be said, so I'm saying it.

Cryptozoic (minus the exclamation mark) is the geological eon that represents the first 80% of terrestrial history, preceding the Cambrian period, when fossilised animal life-forms debuted in the Record of the Rocks. Pre-Cambrian would do just as well, I suppose, but *Pre-Cambrian* doesn't have the same titular ring to it – with or without an exclamation mark.

I won't go into all the twists and turns of the plot, but you can take my word as a book reviewer that it is a particularly cunning and convoluted one. To start with, Edward Bush is a mind-travelling artist who gets most of his inspiration from the past – the further back, the better for him. 'Mind travel' is accomplished by using a psychoactive drug CSG – something along the lines of LSD, no doubt – and by spending some time lying down in a

darkened room, where the physical body stays put. Mind-travellers are perforce cut off from any past worlds, but they can interact – often violently – with their fellow tempo-tourists. For instance, Bush becomes involved with a blonde biker-girl called Ann. They breathe by means of an 'air leaker' device, which can somehow draw enough molecules from the atmosphere to sustain life. Bush also takes along a tent, food, and motorcycle – that CSG is really powerful stuff, it seems!

Bush returns from jaunting through the prehistoric past to find that the UK of 2093 – which seems more like 1973, which might have been Aldiss's intention – is now the very model of a totalitarian state. After a crash course at assassin-training school, Bush is sent mind-travelling again to kill Professor Norman Silverstone, a rogue scientist whom he had known as 'Stein' back in Jurassic days. [It may or may not be coincidental that one of his commanding officers is called Captain Stanhope, like his namesake in *Journey's End*.] However, Bush joins forces with Silverstone, Ann (see above) and other rebels after being converted to the scientist's radical idea that time runs backwards instead of forwards. Utopia beckons – maybe. There's also some force called the 'Undermind' that, well, undermines mind travel and, indeed, all human life itself.

Philip K. Dick had been writing along the same retro-time lines with *Counter-Clock World* (also 1967) – not one of his better efforts, as I recall. It was an old idea – e.g. F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'Curious Case of Benjamin Button' (1922) – that had come again. And it would enjoy a comeback with *Time's Arrow* (1991), by Martin Amis – one of his better efforts, as I recall. My favourite treatment of the theme is in a short story by Fritz Leiber: 'The Man Who Never Grew Young' (1947).

Aldiss threw in the occasional wee jokey bit, to help leaven the mix. As with his mind-travelling misadventure scene with guess who: "No wonder the lackeys behind them bowed so obsequiously that their wigs almost fell off. Groaning, Bush made ineffectual efforts to roll out of the way as the Queen of England and the

Prince Consort sailed through him and he drowned beneath her ample phantom skirts."

Upon his return to 2093, Bush is sent to a Home for the Pathologically Bewildered. Dr. Alfred Frankland – a first cousin to the smoothie-chops psychiatrist in the (good) film version of *Psycho* – glibly explains to his father, James Bush (L.D.S., Dental Surgeon), that Edward "was unable to sustain the illusion of peace for long; the pressure was on him to slip back to a state of more open terror, to a paradigm of hunters and hunted, kill or be killed. The family unit construct was brutally dissolved to self-hate: he ended with a symbolic suicide, which heralded a complete abdication of reason and a return to the womb state which is the ultimate goal of incest-fixated natures. He ceased to relate. You invited these details, Mr. Bush."

As indeed he had. Bush senior wends his un-merry way home. Except: "They checked his pass at the gate and he walked through into the undistinguished street. Head down as he moved towards the bus stop, he never noticed the slight-figured girl standing watching under a tree, water dripping from her lank fair hair. She could have touched him as she passed." Is she Ann . . . second name 'Age'?

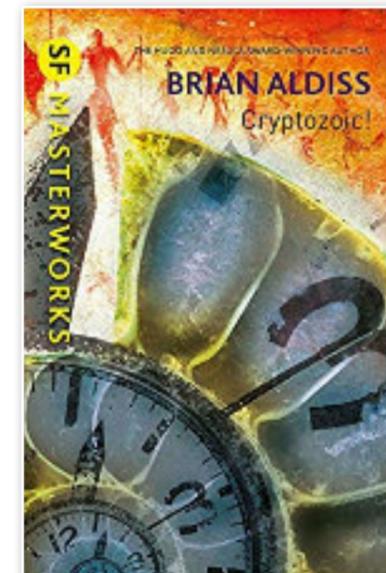
The critical reaction to *An Age/Cryptozoic!* was mostly favourable. Edmund Cooper's review in *The Sunday Times* is typical: "Well-written, evocative and disturbing . . . eminently readable." Algis Budrys, however, couldn't have disagreed more. From *Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1985):

"Aldiss's 'science' breaks down constantly. We deal with a scale of unimaginable years – from the beginning of the world to the very end – and yet in [Bush's] wanderings he occasionally cannot penetrate through a past tree, or a palace, because 'it has been there too long' to be insubstantial! He has his air leaker, but he is astonished when the Dark Woman's gang can fire gas guns into their past. He and the other mind travellers are leaving faeces stranded all over the past,

but he doesn't stop to wonder where his exhalations go, what happens to motorbike exhaust . . . and he drinks 'concentrated water'.

"There can be no quarrel with an attempt to get out of the old ruts; the world *is* chilly, few of us are heroes, and not many ideals support much weight. It was always so, but perhaps there is something more valid for fiction to do than simply to inspire . . . But this is a useless book. It tells us that the writer thinks he's clever. It even proves that he is, indeed, notionally facile, and perhaps admirable for not having gone into advertising. Really, this is what it tells us, when all the words are gone by. What a pity."

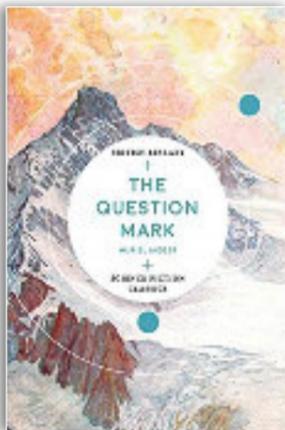
To be fair, Budrys did make some valid points about the absurdly inconsistent science and overwrought doom-and-gloominess of *Cryptozoic!* But he really should have allowed Aldiss to carry him along with the reverse-time flow. "Far out, man!" From the perceptive Introduction to this edition, by Adam Roberts: "It's a story that throws together time-travel, fights with biker gangs, drugs, casual sex, psychedelia, agonised Freudianism, crazy theories about the true nature of reality and dinosaurs into a weird and unforgettable stew." And, from me: "What more could you want?"



The Question Mark by Muriel Jaeger (British Library Science Fiction Classics, 2019)

Wild Harbour by Ian MacPherson (British Library Science Fiction Classics, 2019)

Reviewed by L J Hurst



The British Library Classics series began with detective fiction and has extended to Science Fiction. As with the detective stories it has two strands: firstly, collections of golden age short stories (Mike Ashley edits the sf series), and secondly, re-discovered novels. The sf novel series is developing at a slower rate than its crime equivalent, this time we have two novelists and two novels from different decades.

Muriel Jaeger's *The Question Mark* was published in 1926. It is the better known of these two classics, as Jaeger is discussed in depth in Brian Stableford's *Scientific Romance in Britain 1890-1950* (over thirty years old but still the best reference work on this subject). Apart from the attractive cover it comes with a facsimile of the acceptance letter from Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press and an "Introduction" by Dr Mo Moulton, as well as Muriel Jaeger's "Author's Introduction", in which she says her purpose is to "accept the Bellamy-Morris-Wells world in all essentials – with one exception; I do not and cannot accept its inhabitants". (Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* has been in the air this year as it is discussed in Dorian Lynskey's *The Ministry Of Truth*, as one of the utopias to which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a response). *The Question Mark* is known as a precursor to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, as it features an outsider discovering the flaws in a world in which there is no physical want, but in which individual psychological need cannot be satisfied, and in which some atavistic tendencies remain (murderous crimes of passion lead to the palace of euthanasia). More striking is Jaeger's recognition of different classes based on different abilities, though instead of Huxley's five (alpha to epsilon) she has only two, "Normals" and "Intellectuals".

The story is simple: Guy Martin, a bank clerk from the early twentieth century awakens to discover that he is in the future, fortunately in the house of a great scientist (one of the Intellectuals) which is shared by members of his extended family. Class is not inherited in this world and neither is intellectual ability. Guy is taken out by some of the normal members of the family to explore the new world, where nearly everyone has a power-box which can heat their home or drive their aerocycle. Guy, whose poverty in his old life made relations with women difficult, should be happy that one of his guides is Ena, who likes him tremendously. There is, though, unlike *Brave New World*, little sexual activity and it becomes clear that Ena is unhappy because there is too much love making and not enough of being "pals" (slang like this is important to the normals). As Guy has difficulty adjusting to his revival, he keeps his distance and Ena thinks this is him being a pal, though not as much of one as she would wish. *Brave New*

World takes this to a tragic end, but *The Question Mark* ends with a realistic review of Guy's old life. Who knows what he could make of the new?

Wild Harbour is a very different work: a tale of a future war and a survivor's narrative. It is also a detailed account of how to hunt, butcher and hang wild deer. Published in 1936, it is written as a broken diary of the months between May and October 1944, as a couple living in the Highlands, who refuse to be part of an unidentified war that has broken out unexpectedly, take to a cave in the Grampians.

Wild Harbour comes with even more editorial apparatus than *The Question Mark* including an "Introduction" by Timothy C Baker, original frontispiece, a large map of the area, and finally a magazine article from September 1940 by Macpherson on how he was running his farm after a year of real war (he makes no mention of his novel). The map is useful in following the activities of the couple, along with the railway line running north to south carrying increasing amounts of traffic to who-knows-where. Hugh and his wife Terry stay within a very small area – its smallness indicated by labels on the map such as "berries" and "Hugh stole turnips". Contrarily, there are other labels, "battle fought here" and "men fought here", which reveal that within mere months civilisation has broken down so much that small groups are hunting and killing rivals, with never an appearance of a foreign army let alone aircraft.

Given the limited *dramatis personae* of *Wild Harbour*, though, there is another reading possible, and that is satire on 'crisis scuttlers' (George Orwell's phrase). The couple's cave is unready, their tinned and dried foods run out quickly, and generally their new life is nasty and brutish. Macpherson died in 1944 and this is often described as his last novel, but he was not always dour and downbeat, for example co-writing *Letters from a Highland Township* in 1939 with his wife Elizabeth, a comedy about local government set in the same area as *Wild Harbour*.

There is more to *The Question Mark*, too. Mo Moulton's introduction looks forward from Jaeger and Huxley to Margaret Atwood, picking up Jaeger's own references to utopias. Guy Martin cannot time travel back to 1926, however, because of the understated but explicit Frankenstein means of his arrival. What if he is only the first?

Savant by Nik Abnett (Solaris, 2016)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

"Nik Abnett brings a most welcome new voice and vision to SF. *Savant* is a knockout!" High praise, indeed, from someone whose books and critical acumen I respect. Well, I half-agree and half-disagree with her in this case.

"She wore cotpro socks in bed in High, and woolpro socks in Low," is the (I apologize in advance) sock-it-to-you opening sentence. Metoo dislikes "the sensation of linopro on the soles of her feet" and "Tobe couldn't bear the sound of slippers slapping against it." Para 2 informs us that it is 05.30 in the morning of an ordinary day in the lives of Metoo and Tobe.

I read on, hoping that all would be made clear. Judge for yourselves. Para 3: "Service and Requisites were simple, compared with the complications Civilians endured, of checks and balances, of rations and over-supply, of real and pro. {Metoo} didn't know any more, if Civilians used anything but pro. Service was daily, since she'd been with Tobe {eponymous savant, who is having a nervous breakdown} rather than Scheduled, and Requisites fell only on mid and end days of High and Low, rather than monthly. She had not been a Civilian since she was twelve. She had not been a Civilian for more than half her life."

The background is complicated, involving a Shield of Colleges manned by Actives and Operators that – by making the Earth invisible – protects it from harm. This abrupt plunge into the action, although sanctioned by common usage, makes the first few chapters of the novel perfectly unintelligible. What is all this capital-letter talk about Masters and Students, Assistants and Companions? I've paraphrased part of Damon Knight's review of Asimov's *The End of Eternity* (see *In Search of Wonder*: first published, 1956).

To be fair, Abnett does provide some deep background: "The system had endured for two centuries, and the same pattern was employed in each of the 987 Colleges throughout the World . . . Service Central believed that survival depended on a little over half of the Colleges having an Active in residence at any given time.

There were currently 742 {bioengineered} Actives in residence with close to three hundred more in their teens" (p. 27).

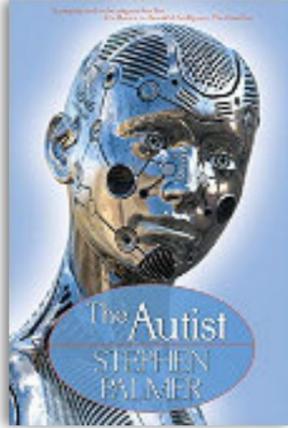
Asimov also offered his readers no signposts, forcing them to pick their way through the novel as best they could, but there was an end to the apparent eternity of persiflage. He explained everything calmly, rationally, and in a little too much detail. {Thank you again, Damon Knight.} Abnett, however, does no such elucidatory thing. I did my head in trying to find details of who was doing what to whom and why – with only a mild headache to show for it. The Colleges might form some kind of SHADO organization, as in the TV series *UFO*. Or they might not. In fact, I don't recall seeing any mention of aliens. Rebel colonists trying to bring Mother Earth to Her Knees? As good a guess as any.

To be fair, again, Abnett does provide a plot resolution, involving probability theory and what seems to be an extreme form of autism. A cross between *The Chaos Weapon*, by Colin Kapp, and Dick's *Martian Time-Slip*, if you will. But I thought it came out of nowhere and ended up back where it came from. On the credit side, I liked the retro-way people in this future century use pen and paper, chalk and blackboard, and read actual printed books. *On Probability* – the volume that helps to fire things up – has been added to my fantasy want-to-read list. Abnett also slips in some wittily-dubbed secondary characters – Named Operators Babbage and Siemens, for just two examples.

Nik Abnett could become the new A. E. van Vogt – and I mean that in a good way. The burbling blurb deserves an honourable mention: HIS MIND COULD SAVE THE WORLD . . . 1F SHE CAN SAVE HIM FROM THE HUMAN RACE.



The Autist by Stephen Palmer
(Independent, 2019)
Reviewed by Estelle Roberts



The Autist is a near future, extremely high-tech story which actually works very well at the individual level. How humans deal with an ever advancing technology which, certainly within this novel, is taking over their lives in an almost literal and political sense, is a core theme. This, combined with an examination of AI entities which are very close the Singularity, makes for a story that works on several levels.

We encounter Mary Vine, a relatively old school data detective, as she and her slightly estranged daughter travel to a now independent Scotland to attend a memorial service for a relative neither has met. Mary's detective instincts are aroused by the fact that the funeral has already taken place and was a very hurried affair to which they had not been invited. It is this mystery that starts her down the road of a much more convoluted investigation. This is hampered from the start by obvious government mistrust. This is shown in such actions as the summary removal of her passport and problems crossing the border, as predicted by Mary when she notices that there is a human guard on duty.

Meanwhile in Nigeria, Ulu, carer for her blind, and from the outside, extremely mentally impaired brother, Wombo, is planning their escape from Africa in search of a better life for him. He is actually a remarkable young man, able to perceive Virtual Reality and the systems behind it in a unique and incredible way, yet unable to navigate the real world without his sister. Mary Vine's name is given to Ulu as someone who could help them, and, on arrival in Europe, they set out to find her.

In Thailand, meanwhile, an AGI, a next level AI, has been elected Prime Minister and there has been an upsurge in violence against religious followers and places of worship, forcing many Buddhist monks and nuns to flee across the border into Cambodia. Here they establish a temple in exile and plan their next moves. Similar anti-religious activity is also taking place in Venezuela against the Catholic church. This is combined globally with a much more open, explicit attitude to public sex amongst younger people in particular.

When the three main characters meet, Mary is initially reluctant to help the siblings, but it is eventually concluded that Wombo's special connection to the virtual world could be of use to Mary in investigating events in South East Asia, and so the three set off on an arduous undercover journey to the Cambodian jungle.

The characters, like many of Palmer's, are extremely well drawn and very interesting, if sometimes unlikeable. Mary is aloof, unemotional, highly intelligent and very good at what she does. Ulu is more passionate, clever and angry, feeling burdened by the responsibility of looking after Wombo, but jealously guarding her position in his life and refusing to allow anyone else near him. The two women are similar in many ways and frequently clash during their journey, particularly over Wombo and Mary's pragmatic and unemotional attitude. The chief abbot and abbess in Cambodia appear at times almost obnoxiously superior and self-absorbed, but also very human and weighed down by their responsibilities. The driving force of most of the relationships is friction, even Mary and her daughter struggle to get on, with Mary striving to accept her daughter's job choices, even though she is not averse to using her skills where necessary. Lara, meanwhile, regards her mother as old fashioned and out of touch.

The story is very well paced as it moves between Africa, Europe and Britain, then heads to its climax in Asia, keeping the reader highly engaged throughout. The ideas around how technological advances could affect global society and politics are extremely interesting, believable and well realised.

I have thoroughly enjoyed all of Stephen Palmer's novels and would recommend this one very highly as a worthy addition to his oeuvre.

Luna: Moon Rising by Ian McDonald
(Gollancz, 2019)
Reviewed by Duncan Lawrie

I had to catch my breath after reading the summary of the previous two volumes in McDonald's *Luna* trilogy, so I may not be the most impartial of correspondents on this work.

Of course, McDonald has done the scene setting in the previous volumes and any reader who has got this far is heavily invested in at least some of the characters. But we aficionados have also seen the settlement of the moon torn up and beloved characters shuffled off stage or killed, so it still feels as if anything could happen.

This novel is the working out of the deal that Lucas Corta has made with the Devil. In the first book, there were five core families, each with their own industrial domain. Corta Helio was destroyed in a winner takes all attack and the second volume initially seemed to be a catching of breath, a rebalancing. But not for Lucas Corta. He chose to work with Earth to defeat all on the moon, and thereby re-establish his family. But the new Luna Mandate Authority wants him to be their puppet. This hardly accords with the Corta motto of "family first, family always". And, perhaps, the Cortas have more in common with those they hate in their own community than they do with the people of Earth.

It is an interesting reference to the times we live in that the worst possible outcome for the Moon is driven by "financialisation". It would seem the powers of Earth are only interested in making money – not in doing things – which contrasts with Luna's driving force of survival and family even when they appear hypercapitalist by charging for air. In the end, even "doing things" to make that profit comes higher in the Moon's hierarchy than something so simple as making money from money. There is an obvious critique of late stage capitalism in the idea that the ideal population of the Moon is zero, as long as it still makes money.

Whilst this is a clear plot driver, the joy of reading this book is that the author trusts the reader to do some of the work. Quite often, I had to stop and ponder. What did this section mean? How did the

plot get from here to there? We are not being led by the hand through the plot. Quite often, I had to stop and gasp, when I grasped the impact of a few carefully chosen words or an audacious action.

I did start to wonder if there are too many characters. Many stories are left lying loose by the end of the volume. In some cases, this is clearly, beautifully, intentional. McDonald builds up a pair of arcs in such a way that I started to think that one character was going to return from far offstage just in time to save another from doing something utterly self-destructive. But that would have been too easy. The rescuer doesn't appear, the other character does something brilliant and unexpected. The arc doesn't close within the book, but the promise is there. Like so many of the elisions in the book, there is something for our own imagined pleasure.

Still, a number of character arcs are wrapped up quite neatly, even bittersweetly, but the relationship between Earth and Moon is not settled in any meaningful way. The final portions of the book bring us back through a lot of the settings from volume one. The changes in the Moon and its society are there for all to see; these have been tumultuous years, ending with a first sight of coming maturity. But have the lessons been understood? Another thought to ponder, long after the final page is turned.



MENACE OF THE MACHINE: The Rise of AI in Classic Science Fiction edited by Mike Ashley
(British Library, 2019)
Reviewed by Graham Andrews



Q: Spot the year of first publication (+ or – 20 years):

“Day by day, however, the machines are gaining ground upon us; day by day we are becoming more subservient to them; more men are daily bound down as slaves to tend them, more men are daily devoting the energies of their whole lives to the development of mechanical life. The upshot is simply a question of time, but that the time will come when the machines will hold the real supremacy over the world and its inhabitants is what no person of a truly philosophic mind can for a moment question.”

A: It comes from an essay, ‘Darwin Among the Machines’, published in the June 1863 issue of a New Zealand magazine called *The Press*. Ascribed to ‘Cellarius’ but actually written by Samuel (Erewhon) Butler. Change ‘mechanical’ to ‘electronic’ and ‘machines’ to ‘computers’ and only the slightly archaic style would give the game away. Mike Ashley’s Introduction – nay, scholarly monograph – is full of half-forgotten facts like that. I enjoyed it even more than some of the stories, which were a tad over-familiar to an old-timer like me: ‘The Machine Stops’ (Forster); ‘The Evitable Conflict’ (Asimov); ‘Two-Handed Engine’ (Moore & Kuttner). Still good stuff, though.

The earliest anthology I know of SF stories about artificial intelligence in general as opposed to humanoid robots in particular is *Science Fiction Thinking Machines* (1954), edited by Groff Conklin. None of those stories appear in Ashley’s book, which makes it an interesting thematic companion piece.

Ashley takes a more chronological approach than Conklin, with Adeline Knapp’s ‘The Discontented Machine’ (1894) – about a machine that calls its own wildcat strike – being the earliest (and also one of the best). Along the way, we are treated to such reclaimed treasures as ‘Automata’ (S. Fowler Wright: 1929) and ‘Rex’ (Harl Vincent: 1934). J. J. Connington’s ‘Danger in the Dark Cave’ (1938) fuses Golden Age detective fiction with what would now be called AI: “My view is that once you give an organism – be it machine or anything else – the power

of appreciating stimuli and coping with them, you produce something akin to intelligent life.” With the instinct of self-preservation, and the means to fight back. ‘Efficiency’ (Perley Poore Sheehan & Robert H. Davis: 1917) is a quirky little one-act play.

For what it’s worth, my favourite selection is ‘But Who Can Replace a Man’ (1958), by the late and always to be lamented Brian W. Aldiss. I’ll leave you to decide where ‘menace’ comes into it. The most recent – comparatively speaking – story, Arthur C. Clarke’s fiendish ‘Dial F for Frankenstein’ (1964), was read and well-remembered by the young Tim (www) Berners-Lee. But the most precociously prophetic story is ‘A Logic Named Joe’ (1946) which deals with ‘logics’ (i.e. personal computers) and something called the ‘tank’ (i.e. the Internet). If you’ll pardon the slightly archaic style:

“Does it occur to you, fella, that the tank has been doin’ all the computin’ for every business office for years? It’s been handlin’ the distribution of ninety-four per cent of all telecast programs, has given out all information on weather, plane schedules; special sales, employment opportunities and news; has handled all person-to-person contacts over wires and recorded every business conversation and agreement – Listen, fella! Logics changed civilization. Logics *are* civilization! If we shut off logics, we go back to a kind of civilization we have forgotten how to run! I’m getting hysterical myself and that’s why I’m talkin’ like this! [SEXISM ALERT.] If my wife finds out my paycheck is thirty credits a week more than I told her and starts hunting for that redhead – “

But it’s all extravagant fiction – right, fella? It couldn’t possibly become cold fact tomorrow! Excuse me, fella. My logic is calling me...

Shadow Captain by Alastair Reynolds
(Gollancz, 2019)
Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

The Ness sisters have a problem. In fact they have two big ones, and a host of smaller ones.

First, in the previous book, *Revenger*, they went up against a monster, and won. She was the solar system’s most dread pirate and one does not just go up against evil like that and emerge unscathed. To bring her down, the sisters had to become what they didn’t want to be, and as this book opens almost straight after the last, they’re still living with the consequences in their own heads. And second, the good news hasn’t had time to spread. They inherited the pirate’s ship, which is easily recognisable and has a reputation of its own – the kind that makes other people shoot on sight.

So far, this could be a story from the seventeenth century Caribbean, the golden age of piracy. In fact, it’s so far in the future that the planets we know were long ago dismantled and repurposed: there is a throwaway line to the effect that we took the rubble of the eight old worlds and made millions of new worlds out of all that material, which you can’t help thinking was a little extreme, even after a consultation period that we’re told lasted several centuries. Even though it was done so long ago – further back than the currently recorded span of human history as of 2019 – the result is nicely described as leaving a lingering sense of buyer’s regret that is embedded in the psyche of the human race. Human life continues: all the small dramas of day-to-day existence continue to be played out. But with the planets gone, you can’t help wondering – what of the big questions? What challenges are left? How will the race now progress?

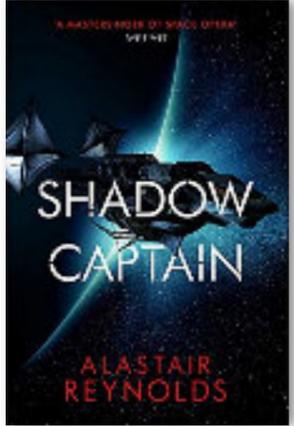
They live in habitats they have inherited from their distant ancestors, which they couldn’t possibly build now; they travel through space in lightjammers; and the only course really open to our heroes, or to anyone of spirit, is to plunder cached hordes of tech from previous civilisations. All this takes skill and perseverance and can be the setting for any number of gripping stories, like this one, but the one thing no one can do is innovate. It’s an unsustainable way to run a civilisation. But

life goes on, because – well, life goes on, and this is the world as its people know it.

Key scenes and snatches of dialogue set all this up for us, so there is no need to have read the first book. Reynolds has created a unique atmosphere here: the use of sailing ships and terminology, the old-style tech of a society very slowly going nowhere except down, and a deliberately semi-formal vernacular creates a melancholic, olde worlde atmosphere that is woven into the structure of this hi-tech milieu in a way that, say, *Firefly* tried but didn’t quite succeed to create. At the same time, the analogue steampunk vernacular suggests these are symbols for a far more sophisticated science than we have today.

The Ness sisters are sincere in their desire not to be monsters, and they tackle their problems quite logically, using the best information they have available, yet every good faith attempt to make good quite plausibly just secures them in their inherited reputation, until it gets to the point where they can quite reasonably think: well, if that’s what people think of us anyway...

The reader shares every anguished, frustrated step of the journey as they achieved all the objectives they set out to achieve at the start of the book, and yet manage to make themselves worse off than when they began. At the same time, they have a much stronger sense of purpose which will carry them as smoothly as a lightjammer with the sun behind it into book 3 of the series.



Morhelion by Dominic Dulley
(Jo Fletcher Books, 2019)
 Reviewed by Ben Jeapes



Morhelion can be read alone but it is also a direct sequel to Dulley's debut novel, *Shattermoon*. Both books together give us a Stainless Steel Rat for the twenty-first century, by someone who knows the source material well. We get both the jinks and the morality of an adventure by James Bolivar diGriz, and an awareness that the field of space opera has moved on in the nearly sixty years since the Rat made his debut. Thus our hero, Aurelia "Orry" Kent, may be a thief and a swindler but she is also strongly opposed to taking life; in fact this sentiment is shared by *Dainty Jane*, the heavily armed sentient starship she finds herself allied with. Meanwhile, we are in a well thought-out universe where not all planets are comfortable Earth-analogues, and there's enough flexibility to allow wonder and adventure, but enough regard for the laws of physics and other rules and constraints to limit our characters and mean that they can't just turn on the Infinite Improbability drive and disappear. (In fact the constraints of the FTL system – essentially, hyperspace jumps justified by quantum physics technotalk – play part of the action; I especially liked the touch that there's a checklist to run through before making a jump, and most people will need a sickbag at the ready for after.) The background to both books is a Ruritanian space empire, but whereas Harry Harrison would play it for laughs, Dulley is aware that even Ruritanians can be seriously dangerous. *Shattermoon* starts as a jape and turns very nasty, very quickly; *Morhelion* takes longer for things to go bad but that only ratchets up the tension, and they are just as serious when they do.

Both books follow a pattern, but it's a good one so why not: Orry and people close to her are involved in a Slippery Jim-type heist that goes unexpectedly but quite logically wrong, with no sense that the author is just sticking a spanner in the works to create an adventure. The failed heist then segues through an unexpected series of events, seamlessly and with perfect logic and plot continuity, into Orry having to fight very hard to protect the empire she can't stand. In *Shattermoon* this meant averting a pre-emptive strike against the imperial capital by xenocidal

aliens. That war is still going on in *Morhelion*, but on the periphery, near enough to keep the empire occupied and far away enough for people to tend to forget about it. This is where we learn the aliens aren't quite as monolithic, or indeed xenocidal, as previously thought.

Neither book has an entirely happy ending; a rigorous adherence to plot logic means Orry can't have everything. In fact, the only time the plot logic wobbles, a little, is when Orry is given a widget that will let her speak with the authority of the emperor, and promptly forgets to use it at least two times it could have been helpful, before it finally comes into its own.

Two closing thoughts, and one is about the title. *Morhelion* and *Shattermoon* are both locations in their respective novels. *Shattermoon* was much more significant to the plot and the background of the series. It is also, quite simply, a much better title: it makes you want to read more. If you haven't read the book, then *Morhelion* is ... what? A non-descriptive word put in only to keep to a theme.

On a more positive note, *Morhelion* is touted unobtrusively as The Long Game, book 2. This isn't a phrase that appears significantly in this or in the first book. The suggestion is that Dulley is playing a long game himself: no doubt the books will stack up to a satisfactory series in their own right, but meanwhile they can be enjoyed on a one-by-one basis.

Fleet Of Knives by Gareth L. Powell
(Titan Books, 2017)
 Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Following the excellent *Embers of War*, *Fleet of Knives* continues the story of *Trouble Dog*, the decommissioned Carnivore-class warship and its crew. Having managed to stop an erupting interstellar war and survived a combined attack by three of her sister ships by the skin of their collective teeth, our heroes are taking a well-earned rest. While *Trouble Dog* is repaired and refitted Sal Konstanz and her crew try to put those momentous events behind them and return to their humble role with the House of Reclamation, a sort of galactic rescue service.

Ona Sudak, the famous space poet, also survived the aborted war, but blew her cover as initiator of the xenocide that ended the *previous* interstellar war. She had been trying to leave behind the destruction she caused, but some people just won't let that kind of thing rest. Sentenced to death for the terrible crimes she committed in her previous life, Ona is resigned to her forthcoming execution. But someone else isn't quite as resigned and needs Ona's help badly enough to break her out of military prison.

And on the edge of human space, 'Lucky' Johnny Schultz suffers an outbreak of extreme misfortune while engaged in a legally questionable spot of "salvage". Something takes a bite out of his trusty ship, *Lucy's Ghost*, and Johnny and the crew of the *Lucy* need rescuing ASAP before they're overrun by space lobsters. Does the House of Reclamation have anyone they can send to help? Well, there is perhaps one ship...

And last but not least, the million-strong fleet of 5,000-year old alien warships known as the Marble Armada, waits silently. Last time we saw them, in *Embers of War*, they stopped a war from happening, but can this unstoppable force be trusted? And what are they planning to do next?

Rest assured, all four stories are connected, brought tidily together by Powell for a rumbunctious piece of old-fashioned pulp-style space opera. And, as a famous space Princess once said, "If [space opera] is all that you love, then that's what you'll receive."

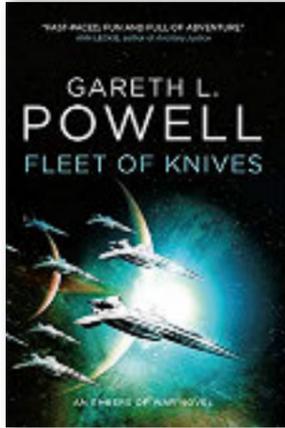
But my hopes were so much higher for this book.

Embers of War really did seem to ask valid questions about the morality of war; looking at how people (as well as canine AI cyborg spacecraft) can change and be forgiven, all the while populating a scuzzy but pyrotechnic universe with some believable characters. It tossed sf-nal standards about with gay abandon: Big Dumb Objects, blistering space battles between fleets of desperate protagonists, artificial intelligence, aliens, ravaging rays, etc. All huge fun action with a side order of big thoughtful heart that looked to be interrogating the standard tropes of space opera, so much so that I really *did* compare that book to the late Iain M. Banks.

For some reason, *Fleet of Knives* throws virtually all of that good work away in favour of a rather rushed, hackneyed plot that brings nothing new to the table. The moral dimension of *Embers* is gone, all of Ona Sudak's previous journey thrown away when she inexplicably starts making judgements that are not only questionable but entirely unnecessary to the plot – has imminent execution *really* changed her so much? And was Johnny Schultz's 'Lucky' sobriquet merely sarcasm that went over his head? He never feels like more than a cardboard cut-out of generic space trader. Even the wonderful *Trouble Dog* seems defanged of its previous bristly charm and one-liners.

Then there are the crossings of vast cosmic distances in a single page, the stereotypical technologies, weapons and plot twists that make this universe feel suddenly very small, not at all the huge, strange and mysterious setting of the previous book. Thank goodness the alien Druff characters still feel fresh and convincingly alien. But little else in *Fleet of Knives* stands out from a hundred other similar tales.

It's all a bit disappointing.

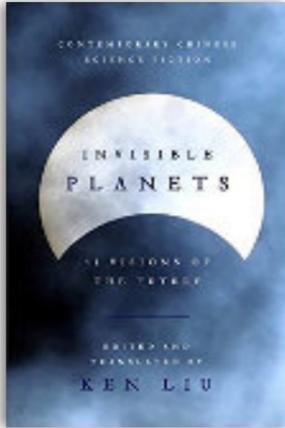


Invisible Planets: Collected Fiction

by Hannu Rajaniemi

(Gollancz, 2016)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter



Hannu Rajaniemi knows a trick or two about storytelling. The 17 short stories, one ‘neurofiction’ and 23 ‘microstories’ in *Invisible Planets*, his first collection, more than prove that.

Most of the short stories here begin with a microstory, and all of the microstories (collected at the end) are preludes to much bigger stories. What might those stories be? Well, that’s very much up to you, the reader.

What’s a microstory? It’s a very short story. Rajaniemi’s are collected within *Invisible Planets* as ‘Unused Tomorrows And Other Stories’. They began when New Media Scotland asked him to write their Twitter feed for a month back in 2008. The social media network, with its 140-character limit, ‘...struck me as a great platform for microfiction... [and] for a month, I published one Twitter story per day’ (p.238), explains Rajaniemi.

One example is ‘Bite City’: ‘Bugsy broke its fangs with brass knuckles. We sent it down wearing concrete boots. I smiled. The trench-coat hid the itching holes in my neck.’

And that’s it, that’s a microstory: pregnant with possibilities, an intriguing, fertile snapshot of far wider stories. What’s not to like?

And microstories, as I said, introduce almost every story in this collection – they’re like tiny little advertising slogans, exquisitely designed to capture your attention.

Take the short story ‘Tyche and the Ants’, which begins ‘The ants arrived on the Moon on the same day Tyche went through the secret door to give a ruby to the Magician’ (that’s 112 characters, in case you’re interested), or the opening of ‘The Jugaad Cathedral’ - ‘On the day they finally got the Cathedral’s mermaid-bone factory working, Kev told Raija he was not going to come back’ (118 characters).

I’m a copywriter in my day job and fell in love with Rajaniemi’s openings; they’re perfect, irresistible little teasers for what follows. If, after reading those opening microstories, you *don’t* want to know what a mermaid-bone factory is, or how ants got to the Moon and who the Magician is then might I respectfully suggest that science fiction is not the genre for you?

In fact, this review might be more effective if I simply repeat the first line of every story, because each of these microstories is like shooting up pure, old fashioned sense of wonder: it hits fast, blows your mind and leaves you desperate for more.

Rajaniemi tells his stories with a fairy-tale sense of people faced with almost elemental forces: strange, unknowable and often threatening; but there remain human narratives at the heart of all these tales: frailties, emotions and redemptions, all which are recognisable to humans from any age, even if the technologies on display are indistinguishable from magic.

We see fallen gods of the singularity struggling to come to terms with their returned humanity, and enhanced dogs and cats who become DJs to rescue a copy of their lost master’s brain. There are instantaneous love affairs on the streets of near-future Japan, done and dusted in just seconds; we meet a Finnish traveller whose love of Paris brings the French capital to visit him at home; an Apollo-era spacesuit haunted by its astronaut and drawn to his old love; and in a paranoid social media future of walled garden computer systems, a young man has to choose who his friends are: the smart people or the beautiful people.

There were two or three fantasy/horror stories from *Invisible Planets* that weren’t really to my taste, but your mileage may vary very well.

Favourite among my favourites in *Invisible Planets* must surely be ‘*Skywalker of Earth*’. This modern-day continuation of E.E. ‘Doc’ Smith’s Golden Age *Skylark* series starts fast and escalates faster, before bootstrapping itself into complete and utterly wonderful planet-threatening lunacy! If you prefer your spaceships the size of planets, like your scientists old-fashioned and pipe-smoking and accompanied everywhere by their pretty wives and best friends then ‘*Skywalker of Space*’ is the apotheosis of that genre.

You might not want to *live* in many of Rajaniemi’s futures, but I can certainly recommend a visit.

This is How You Lose the Time War
by Amal el-Mohtar and Max Gladstone
(Jo Fletcher Books, 2019)

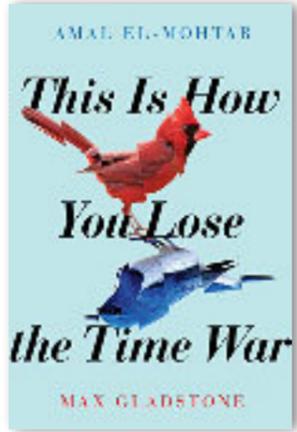
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

There’s something fascinating about the “Time War” scenario which we find in, for instance, Fritz Leiber’s *The Big Time* and the stories from the 50s and 60s published as *The Change War*, or Poul Anderson’s *Guardians of Time*. In El-Mohtar and Gladstone’s short but emotionally-packed novel we get something similar to Leiber, in which the Change War is fought by two forces, the “Spiders” and the “Snakes” who never quite reach the dynamic of “good guys” versus “bad guys”. Here, we have two agents in a battle fought throughout tangled braids of human alternate-history/parallel-worlds between the Agency and the Garden: whose characteristics—material, technological, militaristic versus organic, insidious, ruthless—become part of the conflict. Following a cataclysmic battle, the Agency operative, Red, savours her victory, and finds ambiguity in it. She picks up a letter from her Garden adversary Blue; a mocking taunt to an opponent, to which, in a sense that this is a tournament and a tease, she replies in the same vein.

And thus begins another always-fascinating scenario, the battle between two opponents in a war who come to find a kindred-spirit in the enemy: the secret-agents who find in the to-and-fro of the “game” a personal satisfaction more attractive than ideological commitment. Already there is much to like in the novel, and as Red and Blue exchange ever more ingenious letters and self-revelations after each of their confrontations, this becomes a love story playfully referencing Ghengis Khan, Atlantis, Romeo and Juliet, the poet Thomas Chatterton, Wordsworth’s “Marvellous Boy”, and the Russian Front during World War Two (or at least, versions of all these, and more.) From mocking adversaries, Red and Blue become passionate if distanced lovers. At one point, Red writes “I veer rhapsodic: my prose purples”, and there are certainly times when playfulness hovers over whimsy without (for this reader at least), ever tipping in the wrong direction. There are enough asides, mini-digressions (Naomi Mitchison’s novel *Travel Light* at one point becomes part of the conversation) and sharply-if-briefly

imagined alternative “strands” to make up a dozen novels in the Leiber/Anderson tradition, but the focus is upon the tension and teasing which never stops until it becomes clear that their superiors suspect that something is going on between their top agents, and something drastic is going to have to happen.

We know from our extra-generic reading that secret agents groom and attempt to “turn” each other. This is a novel of traps and tangles, duels and seduction, as if a writer of eighteenth-century epistolary romances had suddenly discovered Golden Age science fiction, though it is considerably sharper and more snapshot than the one and much, much more lyrical than the other. The methods with which the “letters” are written and exchanged are themselves beautifully and baroquely imagined, and worth the price of admission. But as we progress towards the inevitable denouement, there are scenes and evocations that are the distinct opposite from the cuteness and sentimentality that a brief summary of the plot might suggest. You suddenly find yourself seeing “Red” and “Blue” as characters rather than symbols in a highly literary confection, and actively *want* to see how this will work out. At this point, the authors deliver, and we find that we have been reading not a series of highly-wrought vignettes, but a carefully plotted novel. I would not be surprised to see it among the competitors for at least one major award; nor would I be particularly surprised to see it waved aside as “too clever for its own good”. So I shall come down with an opinion: this is almost certainly the best book I have read this year and one that I intend to re-read for the third time. Behind the playfulness, there’s a dark humour, an aspiration for passion, and, yes, a science-fictional inventiveness that comes along too rarely.



Entropic Angel and Other Stories

by Gareth L. Powell

(Newcon Press, 2017)

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts



There is a strain of SF that portrays a technological future that seems to be populated with people who somehow just fit comfortably into that future. The technological world provides a backdrop for a different way of being and the people who inhabit that world simply fit into it. The challenge for them comes not from the world, but the events played out within that world.

This collection gathers together some twenty short stories, from a period of just over ten years, and in the majority of the stories in this collection, characters somehow intuitively just getting the way the world operates is just not the case. The people populate these worlds, but it is often the nature of the world itself that creates the stresses of the story. These people are often struggling to understand the world they live in, just as the reader comes to understand the way that that world works. These are not futures with people conveniently slotted into them, they are big complicated places, where it's not always easy and convenient to understand a person's place in it. Often, even the most potent protagonists feel as though it is less their own gumption that propels their action, but the world they are living in doesn't really give them a choice.

The two stories 'The Last Reef', and its loose sequel 'Flotsam', show technology that gets out of the control of its creators and the impact that has on the lives of those who come across it. The reefs started out as self-repairing network hubs, but learned how to improve and enhance themselves, eventually developing self-awareness. These stories take place after the reefs have largely been brought under control, but there are people who make a living attempting to extract leftover artefacts and technology. The stories, though, focus much less on the technology of the reefs than on the lives of the people it impacts. The reefs seem to represent those factors in life that control the way we live and survive and what the technology actually is or does is less significance that the lives and feeling of the characters. In many ways, 'Flotsam' would have made a good overall title as

the characters exercise their limited control over a world that buffets them around within it. As a result of this, the characters simply feel more human, more rounded.

The two related stories of Ann Szkatula, 'Fallout' and 'The New Ships', give a strong and determined protagonist in Ann, but the action all takes place on an earth that has been impacted by the effects of a conflict that it has no part in. Being too close to the battleground can be as devastating as being drawn in as a protagonist. Especially when it's not at all clear what is actually happening within that conflict. A strong protagonist tossed around by fate. In 'Red Lights, and Rain', the notion of what constitutes a monster is questioned as a vampire hunter and her intended target don't really face off against each other, as might be expected. As the inevitable draws closer, they both explore their particular roles in the situation. The strange nature of that situation is revealed as the discussion plays out. Once again, the supposedly powerful has far less control over their situation than would be expected. When many writers might have used the scenario for an action adventure, Powell makes us understand the human impact that it has. The overall effect of this focus is that the stories are about real people having to deal with life, no matter how broken the worlds they inhabit or strange and difficult the things they need to deal with. This is a strong collection of stories, and its real strength lies in the way that the worlds and events are explored from the human angle, regardless of the technology involved.

The Plague Stones by James Brogden

(Titan Books, 2019)

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

There is a tradition in much horror fiction of the wrong-doings of centuries past enabling the unleashing of evils in the present day, usually linked to the place of that wrong-doing. Often, the effect of the evil is played out in such a way as to question the sanity of the central protagonist. Are they losing their mind, and the atmosphere engendered by the location feeding that encroaching madness, or are they really under attack from a malign force? *The Plague Stones* sets out its stall right from the very beginning, and it is made very clear that the supernatural entity faced is very real indeed.

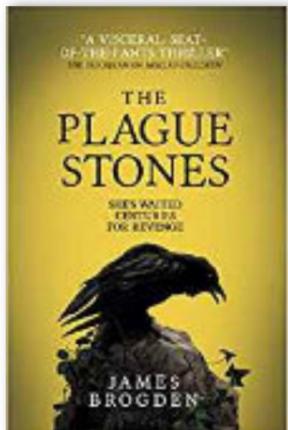
The book opens with the death of the previous guardian of the plague stones, surrounded by a committee whose role appears to be maintaining the defences against such a malign force. In this case, the angry ghost of a young 14th century plague victim named Hester. The reality of this is known only to the reader and the council of guardians. With the death of the previous guardian, and no suitable close relatives to take over, a new one must be found.

Trish Feenan's family is struggling in a tiny flat. When they leave their teenage son Toby alone for the evening, it is broken into by a masked attacker. As a result, the slightly unexpected offer of a rent-free cottage, in return for what appears to be the symbolic position of guardian becomes much more attractive. Particularly when her husband is able to be employed as an electrician for the building company run by the Council of Guardians. Inevitably, as a conscientious worker, he uncovers and questions the corner cutting at the local building site, and by implication at other building sites locally. This includes the flats where Toby's sort-of girlfriend and a good many of his classmates live. There is much foreshadowing, and when the issue of the poor quality of smoke detectors is raised and dismissed for financial reasons, the reader can be fairly sure that substandard detectors will be at the root of something major further down the line.

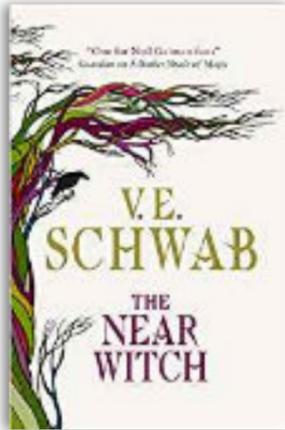
The question posed here is not 'is the monster real?', but more, is the

contemporary Council of Guardians, and one individual in particular, a greater monster, given what is done in order to continue the defence? Admittedly, Brogden does go some way to portray the utterly relentless and destructive force that is Hester. The attempts at a good number of seemingly obvious solutions are recounted, along with their failure. There is now a small town, or at least a very large village, on the area that Hester haunts, and previous failings have made it clear that Hester would not stop at killing the appointed guardian and the council members. A morality question stands firmly at the centre of the novel. Crimes of the past have unleashed something hugely destructive. The specific crimes, when shown, are particularly shocking. Now crimes of the present are being used to defend against the victim of those of the past. As one of Toby's schoolmates enters into an alliance with Hester, following the deaths of his family, history appears to be repeating itself, and now there is a price to be paid for the crimes of the present.

Those now seeking vengeance, both past and present, are very much victims. This is something that can easily get lost when confronted with their actions. Inevitably, this creates a seemingly endless cycle of vengeance. The council cannot see beyond preventing Hester escaping the confines of the plague stones. It takes the younger eyes of those only newly caught up in events, to at least try to understand that Hester might want something other than the destruction of those she sees as responsible. As those responsible are long dead, any amount of killing in the present can never satisfy her. Whilst firmly rooted in the tradition of ancient vengeance, it is never really that simple.



The Near Witch by V.E Schwab
(Titan Books, 2019)
Reviewed by David Lascelles



This is a first for me as a reviewer. Instead of something brand new to review, this is a new edition of a previously published novel. Though it is also a previously published novel I seem to have missed the first time it was released.

Which is a shame because I am sure I would have enjoyed it the first time around as much as I did now.

In this new hardback deluxe edition, published eight years after the original 2011 edition, we have not only the core story of the Near Witch but also a short story (The Ash Born Boy) and an introduction by the author. The edition is a conveniently small size for a hardback, feels very sturdily made and therefore does, in my opinion, deserve the label 'deluxe'.

The main story itself follows teenager, Lexi, the daughter of a hunter and a baker in the small village of Near. Here she must look after her younger sister while coping with her mother's depression over the death of her husband and her own feelings at losing a father. She also has to deal with the conflict of being a teenage girl who is far from interested in the typical feminine pursuits, at a time when most adults believe she should no longer be pretending to be the town's hunter, like her father, and instead be settling down to find a nice boy to marry.

Into this relatively idyllic setting, comes the boy who Lexi calls Cole, the first stranger Near has seen for a long time; and with his arrival children start disappearing. Naturally, suspicion falls on the newcomer, but Lexi is not convinced he is to blame and works to find out the truth. Her quest takes her into conflict with the rest of the village and deep into the truth of the local tales of the Near witch that have been told in the village for a long time.

The village of Near is an interesting setting for this story. The narrative is vague on the details of its location, whether it is a real world setting or a fantasy realm; it is also sketchy on the historic period the tale is set parallel to. The presence of guns indicates this is not a typical medieval fantasy, but the lack of description of them or the clothing worn

or building styles mean it is set potentially anywhere in around 400 years of history. This is no bad thing as it sort of places Near in a fairy tale environment, a mysterious realm where witches exist. Near's isolation from the rest of the world adds to this. The populace is wary of outsiders, they don't travel much, and prefer their happy, if insular, life. For all the reader knows, there could be an entire modern world out there that the folk of Near are completely unaware of. This attitude also drives the plot as it works both to compel the villagers to distrust the newcomer as much as it compels Lexi to rebel. Overall, *The Near Witch* is an entertaining, fairy tale style story.

The second part of the book, the novella 'The Ash Born Boy' promises us the revelation of the boy called Cole's life before he arrives in Near. On the one hand, this is interesting to read from the point of view of completeness, however it also does destroy some of the mystery. I feel it takes something away from the character by filling in the gaps.

In all, this book is worth investigating if, like me, you missed it first time round or you are a fan who wants a nice copy for your shelf.

The Burning House by Neil Spring
(Quercus, 2018)
Reviewed by Kate Onyett

Long ago, around the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, 'The Wickedest man Alive', AKA The Beast, AKA Aleister Crowley, shocked polite society with sex, drugs and magical practices. For a time, he lived in Boleskine House, on the shores of Loch Ness, conducting mystic experiments and generally getting a pretty satanic rep in the locality. Thus, the location for Spring's thriller.

Spring is fascinated with real-life occult occurrences; his previous books cover ghost hunters and UFO sightings. This time around he brings his tasty mixture of real-life detail and supernatural titillation to spin an exciting yarn that begins with the mysterious fire that gutted Boleskine in late 2015. This, the novel tells us, was actually no accident, but the work of Clara, a local estate agent desperate to make a sale and get Boleskine off her books. The reduction in price the fire produces brings forth the sinister Oswald, practising strange mediational habits and a rather grim obsession with all things weird and dark. As Oswald weaves a plot of blackmail around her, Clara is drawn into a world of dark rituals, death and madness that threatens to destroy the friends and the fragile life she has made for herself in the little town of Abersky.

This is a book of broken people. Clara is a survivor of domestic violence; Oswald is a monomaniac and obsessive; and Karl is an abusive husband with serious anger issues. Inghean has learning difficulties and the Second Sight; something that scares her silly. Aggie is an emotionally fractured religious zealot. Not one character in the book could be considered entirely unscathed by the slings and arrows of life's outrageous fortunes. Sometimes these characters start to feel a little cliché. They are painted in very broad strokes; their differing levels of angst the collective denominator. But in a spooky story, where the atmosphere is king, clichés are entirely acceptable. For that atmosphere, Spring wanted to make the Boleskine of his novel a character in its own right, and one as cracked as the people affected by it. The looming, glooming presence of the house and the

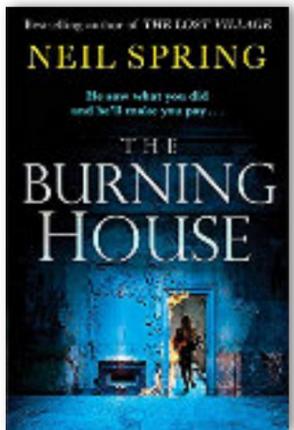
outrageous things perpetuated there make for a claustrophobic and grim impression and generate a narrative tension between the defined character types and the murky world of the 'what if'—the magic of possibility that fires the imagination.

Given that, is it possible for psychological and supernatural material to be complimentary?

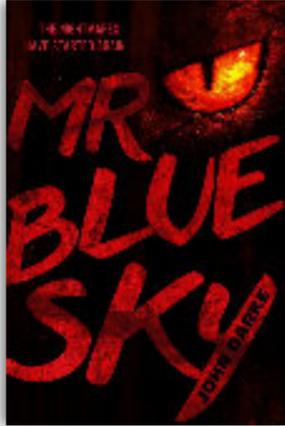
Many phenomena once attributed to magic have been explained in rational terms, and mental mysteries have been largely illuminated by psychological exploration. The supernatural and psychological merge when accoutrements of magic become powerful props for control, when used in conjunction with mental vigour applied to a susceptible subject. What Spring has done nicely illustrates how apparently contradictory themes can meet via the following through to their extremities. The extreme of 'magic' becomes as arresting as the extremes of psychology, and both produce much the same behaviours and expectations. Both of these have power over us through belief: belief generated as an overriding force in the mind of the beholder. That overriding force is, perhaps, what 'thriller' ultimately means...

A good magician uses misdirection to cover the mechanics of a trick; psychologically they manipulate expectation. A good thriller does exactly the same, and in merging ideas of psychological control and supernatural force, Spring makes the ridiculous much more credible. He teases us with a supple novel, lissom with colourful visuals and excitement, which can be read equally well both ways; entirely magical or darkly psychosomatic, as your tastes decide.

This isn't a subtle book; it's meant to be a romp. There's action, adventure, violence, hiding and hunting. It's exciting and proficiently written and a credit to its author. One for holiday reading or for enjoying by the fireside on a winter's evening.



Mr Blue Sky by John Drake
(Matador, 2019)
 Reviewed by Kate Onyett



If you go into the woods today, John Drake wants to give you a big surprise. It's bigger than a teddy bear, but just about as hairy. With the brooding orange eye glaring balefully out from the cover, you are hoping for at the very least some fun, monster-mash nonsense, or even better, a genuinely scary tale of nature's dark underbelly. I cannot say that I was entirely thrilled with the result. I suspect Drake is aiming for both, but unfortunately the uneven style of the thing lets it down.

To give some narrative context; Rebecca grew up on the Welsh coast. She and her parents lived in an old farmhouse, below which were fields of flowers leading to a dense wood that eventually gave away to a cliff-face and the sea. So far, so picturesque. But when she was still young, Rebecca's dad was killed by a mysterious ape-man whom she had befriended years before as a child. Funnily enough, no one believed her, and she has been a ball of angsty stress ever since. Adopted into her uncle's family, she moved away, and now a young woman in her thirties, she is having strange, compelling nightmares that are drawing her home again to the woods. Even more dramatically, she is going to learn that she is part of a much bigger plan, involving her, her family and shady scientific shenanigans...

Darke's influences are clear; Frankenstein, Dr Moreau and King Kong. There's a monster in the woods; but is he, in fact, a noble savage? And are the actual monsters amongst the humans around him? There are some genuinely good, romping action sequences, with 'real' monsters derived from that old trooper of a theme: science gone bonkers.

This could have been a great, campy horror-action story, and I believe such entertainment, done properly, still has much value. But in the 'sophisticating' of latter-day horror that seeks to find deeper meaning for much-loved tropes, the monsters of yesteryear have become either so deeply metaphorical that they do not actually appear, or they are presented with a knowing wink. Darke seems to want to aim for such a wink, while writing adventure, with a narrative voice that feels dated to somewhere around the

early to mid-1990s. But the whole project drops into self-parody by its uneven quality of writing. If it is *meant* to be semi-parodic, then Darke needs to ease off the earnestness.

For example: there is a plethora of clichés that could be celebrated for their pulp-fiction quality. I note the off-kilter heroine, who switch-backs from vulnerable agitation to sass. There are the baddies lurking in the shadows in trench-coat-and-Stetson get-ups, when they are not wearing old-fashioned gasmasks and generally being aggressive with guns. There are the lunatic schemes of a hidden organisation. There's a psychotic dwarf. There's a principled monster; kick-ass and morally pure.

Unfortunately, the heroine just made me want to slap some sense into her. The baddies are simply not that scary and Brain sounds more threatening when he tells Pinky they are planning to take over the world. The dwarf is criminally underused, and the monster, despite leading a life of continued abuse and neglect has somehow matured into a warrior monk.

The biggest problem occurs when earnest passages of extraneous detail are inserted. There are long, hyperbolic meanderings by Rebecca on, 'Oh, will I be *normal*? Should I have a man/ be popping out babies?', and there are reams of explanatory back-story by the head baddie and the obligatory computer nerd. And, who cares what *exact* type of gun is firing, or the *precise* nature of the disease that rendered that character infertile? For this genre, you don't need this sort of thing, and you shouldn't be including it! It tries to show what research and cleverness has been done, and it ends up sounding like a primary schooler at show-and-tell.

This could have been a total romp; a lovely, silly action flick of a book. Instead it falls over its own feet by trying to cram in too much, making the pace patchy and the characters sketchy. I hope Darke has courage of his convictions to really go for it next time and produce the pulp fiction masterwork that I am sure he could.

Sherlock Holmes and the Sussex Sea Devils
 by James Lovegrove
 (Titan Books, 2018)
 Reviewed by Nick Hubble

In this third and concluding volume of the *Cthulhu Casebooks*, we finally learn *ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn* the truth behind the suspicion that Holmes must have been subsisting on more than just 'sea air and honey' during his rural retirement beekeeping on the Sussex Downs. If the sequence title is suggestive of where the plot is eventually going to take us, the deceptively straight forward narrative *ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn* actually leads us by some diverting roundabout ways. Lovegrove adds to the fun by providing a little framing narrative of his own, before and after what is presented as Watson's manuscript, which in turn necessitates a further 'Publisher's Note' reassuring us *ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn*, not entirely convincingly, that 'James has been receiving treatment and is said to be on the road to recovery'.

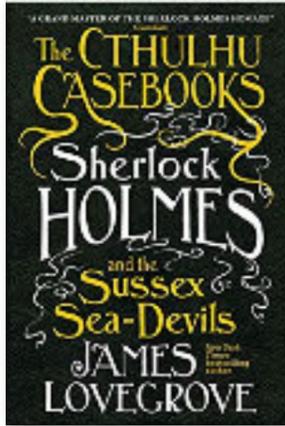
I can't help suspecting there is more than a modicum of truth behind the joking *ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn* because on the face of it Lovegrove has been pursuing something of a masochistic task in writing his Holmes novels (which also include half a dozen or so volumes that are not Lovecraft crossovers). This is because he denies himself two of the staple ways in which Holmes has been successfully resurrected: by being transported into the contemporary world or by being played for laughs. At first I was thinking *ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn* – while curled in my armchair as the wind and snow howled past outside – that writing Holmes fairly straight must be hard work and then I found myself mysteriously transported twenty pages further into the text having got entirely caught up in the narrative spell *ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn* woven by Watson's monotonic misdirection.

Fortunately, being a professionally trained academic and literary critic, well versed in the black arts of deconstruction and the secret knowledge that at the heart of meaning *ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn* there is no meaning, I quickly realised that Watson is an unreliable narrator masking Lovegrove's true purpose in *Sherlock Holmes and the Sussex Sea Devils* of writing the great Brexit novel. For example, as Baron Von Herling, the German

Ambassador tells Holmes and Watson, 'Europe is fracturing before our very eyes. Somehow we must hold the continent together before it falls apart completely'. Yet our intrepid heroes are not deceived for one second by this veneer of genial reason and so an inexorable chain reaction of events is unleashed which results in a wide-ranging traversal of the fantasy of our imperial past (including a brilliant moment when Watson boorishly blunders with a Boer). By the end of the novel, the Germans and other monsters of the night have learnt the hard way *ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu Br'xit wgah'nagl fhtagn* that the 'most tempestuous and unyielding force of nature' is indeed 'the Englishman who has been pushed past breaking point and has nothing to lose'.

Reading Lovegrove's beautiful reconstruction of late Victorian and Edwardian pulp serves as a timely reminder of just how deep some of these imperial English archetypes run. It's not that my pulse doesn't also quicken every time the game's afoot but beyond those embedded childhood reflexes there is also something melancholic about these stirring tales of derring-do: however many times we vicariously close the Hellmouth with our heroes, we know that it will always open again because it is born of the horror that we carry around inside us.

Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu Br'xit wgah'nagl fhtagn. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu Br'xit wgah'nagl fhtagn. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu Br'xit wgah'nagl fhtagn. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu Br'xit wgah'nagl fhtagn. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn.

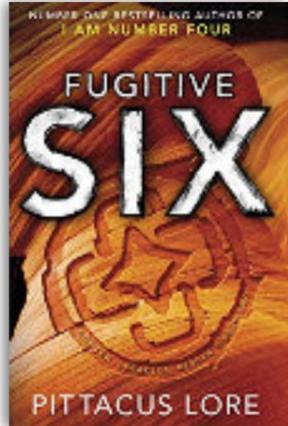


Fugitive Six: The Lorien Legacies Reborn

by Pittacus Lore

(Penguin, 2019)

Reviewed by Rsaal Firoz



Vital secrets kept from the public. The future of human society. The nature of Capitalism. These are three things the vast majority of us have, at least at some point, pondered. And why is that? Because we do not have a definitive answer to any of those three statements. Now, the human brain is a peculiar thing, for there is no intellectual wall thick enough to block out (or even try to block out) curiosity. We sapiens, as a collective species, will discuss the possible answers to these statements endlessly, no matter how distant the answer may be. So, what better than to have a book exploring (and, at least in its Universe, answering) these questions?

Fugitive Six hooks you in right from the beginning, introducing small pieces of information in order to make you ask questions, and read on in hopes of finding the answers. Description is cleverly thorough, allowing the reader to view and retain a clear, visual image of the scene. This engages the reader, allowing for the end of each chapter to intrigue them and guarantees a page-turn.

The characters are well-written, each with their own strikingly different personality, causing their interactions to be quite interesting. For example, Nigel and Taylor are good friends, despite being so dramatically different to each other. The former is rebellious, whereas the latter is quite disciplined

This world also has a dark truth, hidden behind curtains of corporations and innocent businesses: The “Legacies” (children born with special powers handed to them by their extra-terrestrial ancestors, also called the Garde) are bought and sold by billionaires, to serve their selfish purposes. This is especially interesting due to how much information regarding billionaires and C.E.Os. is kept hidden from us in the real world. Every now and then, we get a glimpse

of their true selves, through the exposing of scandals, like with Epstein or Weinstein. This makes us wonder: how much do we really know about the world we live in?

And these fictional billionaires do not just act on whims, there are entire organisations dedicated to creating a “post-Garde” anarcho-capitalist world of sorts, in which anything which can be bought and sold, will be. A disturbing and yet all too familiar scenario.

Overall, I think the story is well-written, thoughtful and, above all, thoroughly entertaining. It makes us question the social order of our own world, causing us to feel a whole new level of ignorance. And it’s fantastic. Definitely worth the read for any sci-fi enthusiast!

THE BSFA
REVIEW
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