



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Reading is Dead; Long Live The Literate!

By Bret Funk

In our sensationalist, story-hungry, headline grabbing world, no doubt many of you have heard about the decline of reading and the subsequent impending cataclysm to our culture, a threat to the heart of the human soul, to the very essence of what separates us from the jungle-wise but ultimately stupid chimpanzee, and the technologically proficient yet decidedly uncultured robot. Newspaper subscriptions are falling at an alarming rate, forcing one after another of our vaunted institutions into bankruptcy. Children and adults alike have no concept of literature, no desire to read. And why should they? Why waste \$6.99 and at least a whole day reading a Harry Potter book when for only a few dollars more you can get the DVD and lose only two hours of your life? We should be happy that the average high school student can still identify a book, or perhaps be more concerned about the number of trees that die each year just to turn our libraries into firetraps. The book is dead; the ebook is dying. And with their deaths the world shall descend into chaos

and fire, and the night shall be as day, and the waters will turn to blood...

Silly me, I started paraphrasing something I once read...

This round of literary alarmism was spearheaded by several studies conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts over the last decade and parroted by groups with similar agendas and political backing. The research has since been discovered by news agencies around the world, properly cleaned of substance and context, and then trumpeted from every news source to anyone willing to listen. They

would have printed it, but only a few old people and a handful of snooty elitists would have been able to comprehend the odd groupings of characters.

Like everything else in our modern day and age, if you dig beneath the "news" and look at the facts, you not only find a different story, but generally a more interesting one. The NEA studies actually produced some interesting data, with significant ramifications for our society, but in my opinion, nothing near the dire prognostications of the media.

For instance, the NEA studies show that "non-required" reading (reading done for pleasure) is down as much as 12% over similar data conducted in 1992. This data supports results found in other studies, as well as the reported decline in book purchases (and overall revenues) from major book outlets. It also coincides, quite unscientifically, with my own observations about reading. When I was younger, I remember virtually all of my friends reading something, but the number of my current friends who read is significantly lower, as is the number of young adults I meet who claim to enjoy reading books. That the number of friends in my "data set" is significantly smaller now is neither here nor there; nor should it matter that I, myself, a self-proclaimed lover of books and reading, have been struggling to finish the same book since just after Christmas. Factoring in that knowledge diminishes the sensationalistic aspect of the report, and that would just make the whole thing less appealing to the masses.

The decline of literary reading is a sad thing to be sure, for there have been, and will continue to be, great works written, stories that can soothe the soul or fire the imagination. Film and television adaptations cannot do these works justice; audio books will never replace the visceral, personal experience of reading a book yourself (regardless of whether you read it on traditional paper or modern LCDs), unfettered by the pace, emphasis, and pronunciation of the narrator. As a writer, and more particularly, as a person who hopes to one day make money from his writing, the decline of reading saddens me in a profound and financial way.

In This Edition

**Reading is Dead
Long Live the Literate!**

Game-Based Booty

**Why Asimov's Three Laws
Don't Work**

**Homeopathy and the
Conscientious Skeptic**

Reading Books on Writing

Selling Out To Cash In

Elliptical Thinking

REVIEWS

Cast in Shadow

Barrayar

Necropath

Star Trek

Key to Redemption

Web Mage

The Border

Dayworld

The New Space Opera

Game-Based Booty

by Terry Crotinger/montanasings

It started with boredom. People were bored of the board. Fandom, not satisfied with *Battleship* and other strategy games, wanted a game that required more chance, creativity, group effort—more fun! Hence was born the paper-based board game. The winning wizard of the day: *Dungeons and Dragons*. From board game to electronic media, D&D started the whole crazy fad for gaming. Older games fell behind like soggy, tired soldiers trudging to the next skirmish—a valiant effort—but just more of the same.

In the development of D&D (1973), Gary Gygax and his co-creator, David Lance Arneson (both, sadly, now in the great beyond, Gygax passing March, 2008; Arneson in April, 2009) conjured statistics and levels, and character development. The pivotal word here is: created. D&D is equivalent to the holy ground, the Genesis, the embryo of gaming. Ask the common Joe if he's heard of it, and you'll likely get an affirmative answer, though he may have no idea just what it is. The board game (paper-based game) has transformed itself in many ways. The gamer's hand cradles a mouse as well as pencil for writing in stats for using his (a)grazing mace.

Not only did "traditional" board games evolve to Atari (and PCs and Wii), another application emerged. Slink through piles of dusty boxed games in the recessed shadows of the treasure room; notice the shiny and tempting software that beckons, but stay with your goal. Bravely enter the throne room. A shiny laptop waits by the entrance; the online game poised for your cursor to log in. Pilgrim! Do not be distracted. Climb uneven stone stairs to the dais. There you will find, in dubious high regard, the book.

Decades ago, a handful of publishers experimented with "choose your own ending" adventures that gave several possible scenarios written by the author to bring closure to the story. After reading all the endings, it was either hard to choose just one, the selections so stupid and implausible they were rejected outright; or the reader perished, buried under Too Much Information. The lure of these faded, and are in fact, collector's items.

The novel, based on roll-playing game (RPG) computer or board games is nothing new. Game-based stories erupted like a birth-twin—develop the game, a story would soon follow. Some critics would say...

...It's cheap! It's the lazy author's story set in someone else's ideas. There's no creativity because the universe has been handed to the writer. Mix already established characters together, find a plot (and sub-plot and sub-plot), submit the tome to the publisher and sit back and collect royalties. Like stealing. Plagiarism.

Back up into the dungeon and take another look, starting with the plague of plagiarism. No (smart) publisher will touch the manuscript if there is no written agreement with the game's originator. Similar to Fanfic? Possibly. Bantam folk gambled with Twilight Zone tie-in books; it paid off. Star Trek/Paramount took notice. Those unsolicited manuscripts for Star Trek episodes resulted in hundreds of Official novels that sustained a fledgling Trekkie empire that survives quite nicely.

TSR (later bought out by Wizards of the Coast—WotC in 1997) published D&D. How could they ignore the story-driven nature of the game? Whether the Powers That Be had the collective "ah ha" moment or not, TSR took the chance, found the writers and began their new "campaign" into the tie-in book realm. *Dragonlance* (Tracy Hickman and Margaret Weis) RPG had a loyal following, and with fingers crossed, several novels resulted from that game from the TSR bunch. No book burnings ensued, though Fandom has differing opinions on where the wizards drew the line of acceptable vs. trash with subsequent *Dragonlance* series and spin-offs.

Soon, other publishing houses recognized the booty in expanding RPG into novels, trilogies, and series. However, when publishers tried to load their line-ups with quickly written, poor quality offerings, Fandom quickly bashed them online and at Cons.

In 2004, *EverQuest* (the game) publishers, Sony Online Entertainment/CDS Books, sought out Scott Ciencin and others, with the blessing of the game's creator, R.A. Salvatore, to develop novels based on the game's concept, taking the gamble it would be well received since EQ was a dynamite realm for gamers online. Not a bad reception, but no fireworks, either. Kudos to them for trying to fill a niche market.

Turns out it's hit/miss with RPG-based novels. Fandom has identified several hundred tie-in books that are not worth putting a match to, being discriminating readers. Well received books are carefully crafted and stay within the character/story lines of the original game. Because we Fandom are a greedy bunch, finding a good plot, book/story, game only extends our perverse pleasures, like an addiction. Word gets around about the hot and the not.

As Raymond E. Feist developed the *Riftwar Saga* series from his evening RPG adventures, it shouldn't be a surprise that his novels contain richness in character and detail. Likewise, Ian Cameron Esslemont and Steve Erickson co-created the *Malazan Empire* originally for RPG. Both are Fandom favorites, and no wonder.

Con't on page 14

Why Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics Won't Work

by Joe Vadalma

In Science Fiction, the Three Laws of Robotics are a set of three rules written by Isaac Asimov, which most robots that appear in his fiction must obey. Introduced in his 1942 short story "Runaround," the Laws state the following:

- A robot may not harm a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

A robot must obey the orders given to it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

- A robot must protect its own existence, as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

If we could actually build robots who are intelligent enough to be self-aware, would these laws actually make sense. I propose not. Take the first law. In the first place, how could the robot tell a human being from another robot that looked like a human being or from a hologram of a human being. You might say, so what. As long as the robot cannot harm a human being or anything that resembles a human being, that is all to the good. But what if a humanoid robot or hologram and a real human being are both in danger. How would the robot know which one to save? As far as that goes, if two human beings are in danger at the same time, how does a robot know which one to save. (Note: this exact situation is shown in the movie *I, Robot*. In the movie the robot made the wrong choice.)

For certain uses, a manufacturer would not want to apply the Laws in that order. For example, suppose the robots are to be used for military purposes. In this case, the Laws built into the robot might go something like this:

- A robot must obey the orders given to it by his superior officer.

- A robot must protect its own existence, and those of other soldier robots, except where such orders conflict with the First Law.

- A robot may only harm those human beings or robots designated as "The Enemy," by its superior officer and only if not under a flag of truce, surrendering or designated as "Prisoners of War."

In my novel, *The Isaac Project*, the situation of the military wanting to change the Three Laws provides part of the conflict in the book.

One error that Isaac Asimov made was that he assumed that the intelligence of the robot would somehow be in its electronic circuitry. Actually, we know now that the intelligence of a robot would more likely be in its software. This changes the situation quite a bit, since software can have errors in it that are not always detected during testing. Also, it can be modified. Depending upon how the software is installed, it might be subjected to viruses, worms, and other sorts of malicious software tricks by unscrupulous hackers, such as our computers are now.

September 1, 2009 marks the official release date of *A Mage of None Magic* by A. Christopher Drown, Tyrannosaurus Press's latest novel-length publication. Please show your support for Mr. Drown and for independent publishers by investing in your own copy, and then sharing your thoughts on the book by submitting reviews at the [T-Press website](#), or at the book's [Goodreads page](#).

A Mage of None Magic

Folklore tells how magic came to be when evil gods shattered the fabled gem known as the Heart of the Sisters. Those same stories speak of the Heart being healed and unleashing a power that will bring the end of humankind.

While traveling to begin his magical studies, young apprentice Niel suddenly finds himself at the center of the Heart's terrifying legend. Caught in a whirlwind of events that fractures the foundation of everything he's believed, Niel learns his role in the world may be far more important than he ever could have imagined, or ever would have wished.

A Mage of None Magic begins an extraordinary adventure into a perilous land where autocratic magicians manipulate an idle aristocracy, where common academia struggles for validation, and where ages of disregard the mythical refuses to be ignored any longer.

ISBN: 9780971881976

Retail Price: \$12.50

Order now from T-Press: \$8.50

Homeopathy and the Conscientious Skeptic

by Katie Picone

Homeopathy is, according to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, "a system of medical practice that treats a disease especially by the administration of minute doses of a remedy that would in healthy persons produce symptoms similar to those of the disease." In other words, a substance is diluted in a substrate (usually water, but occasionally alcohol). Then that dilution is diluted, then diluted again, and so on, and at each step of the way the mixture is shaken a certain number of times in each direction. It becomes so dilute that when they are done, in any dose there is likely not one single molecule of the original substance left. They claim that the shaking of the mixture imparts some essence of the base material to the water itself; that the very nature of the water has changed. And furthermore, that the greater the dilution, the more potent and effective the homeopathic mixture becomes. The substances that are to be diluted are chosen based on the symptoms of the condition to be cured. Like cures like, so a substance that causes nausea in well persons, taken in very small doses, will cure your stomach bug. And if you suffer from insomnia what you need is a homeopathic preparation of caffeine.

Here's why this is nonsense. It conforms to no real scientific or medical mechanism or process. In order for these treatments to be effective, one must first prove: 1 - that treating a condition with a substance that causes symptoms of that condition can cure it, 2 - that no measurable amount of the substance is necessary to cure the condition, 3 - that a "resonance" or "energy" can be left behind in water even when there is nothing else present, 4 - that this "resonance" actually exists, and 5 - that the specific method of shaking deposits the resonance in the water, which can then carry out the task of curing what ails you. Points 1 and 2 are easy to refute just through common sense and experience. If you have pink eye, would it occur to you to treat it with fresh onion juice? If you have a bad cold do you take a tablespoon of cough syrup or a tablespoon of water? After that it gets tricky because now we're delving into an area that natural science, by definition, has no relation to: the supernatural. Homeopathy relies on a belief in non-physical spiritual energy. This is the essence of magic. There are products that rely on magical principles being sold in the drugstores all over the world, sitting on the shelves right next to real medicines that have been tested and proven again and again to have beneficial effects.

And that brings me to the big strike three. In addition to being unsupported by science and completely superstitious, homeopathy has one additional drawback: there has never been a well-run clinical trial that shows that it works any better than a placebo. And that's really the key. Even if you didn't know the hows and whys of its ineffectiveness, this alone should be significant evidence to doubt the claims supporters make. But no matter how many studies are done, homeopaths keep insisting that what they do is right. That another study is needed, or that traditional clinical trials are not sufficient to test the effectiveness of homeopathy (which, by the way, is a great example of the logical fallacy: special pleading).

Having said all this, I should also point out that some products that are advertised as being homeopathic actually aren't. For example, the products that claim to prevent colds by application of a nasal swab often contain measurable amounts of zinc. The jury may still be out on whether zinc prevents or halts the early onset of colds, but that's beside the point because at least it's in the product to begin with. There is an active ingredient, which is not the case for true homeopathic treatments. (In regards to said product, a recent report stated that repeated use of it can potentially dull one's sense of smell, because zinc is a neural inhibitor. Just to be safe, don't put zinc up your nose, people.) So calling products like this "homeopathic" may be good marketing, considering how many people distrust mainstream medicine.

Some might wonder where the harm lies. Why should we care if people want to throw their money away on sugar pills? Placebos at least have some effect, right? Isn't that better than nothing? Well, here's the problem: many homeopaths advise people to replace conventional treatments with their "remedies." People with serious illnesses are not getting the help they need because they are being sold worthless products by others who are either charlatans or who have no idea what they're talking about.

So, what's the solution? Consumer education is the most important response. Second to that is holding companies accountable when they make fraudulent or misleading claims about the efficacy of their products. But neither strategy will work alone. It's something that has to happen from both sides.

If homeopathy works, then obviously the less you use it, the stronger it gets. So the best way to apply homeopathy is to not use it at all. — [Phil Plait](#)

Reading Books On Writing

by Charles Gramlich

Have you ever read a book on writing? If so, you're not alone. Selling books about writing to writers is a big market. I thought for this issue's column I might consider the works that fill that market.

Although there is certainly overlap, writing books generally fall into three primary categories. These are the "tip" books, the "cheerleaders," and the "memoirs." The "tip" books offer specific advice on how to write, such as how to develop characters, how to construct a short story, or how to build a fantasy world. The "cheerleaders" focus more on convincing the reader that they, too, can be a writer. The "memoirs" are largely autobiographical, telling how one specific famous writer got to *be* famous.

I'll state right up front that I, personally, find the tip books and the memoirs to be much more useful and interesting than the cheerleaders. I already know that I want to write and have already established my pattern of working. I'm actually reading a cheerleading type book right now called *Wild Minds: Living the Writer's Life*, by Natalie Goldberg. I'm not enjoying it. I don't really need to be told over and over that I can do it, and I don't like how the book presents writing as some kind of mystical exercise. There's nothing mystical about it. Butt in chair, hands on keyboard. That's what it's all about.

Tip books, on the other hand, often give me food for thought about my own writing, and I like the fact that you can find such books in all genres. One of my favorite "general" books about writing fiction is Lawrence Block's *Telling Lies for Fun & Profit*. Block gives a lot of practical advice and makes you laugh while he's doing it.

The best tip book for writing nonfiction that I've ever read is William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*. In fact, I rate Zinsser's book as the single best book on the topic of writing, ever. Most of his advice applies equally well to fiction as well as nonfiction.

Similarly, many writers, including Stephen King, extol the virtues of *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr., and E. B. White. There are a number of editions of this book but most writers cite the third. I keep a copy of this book both at work and at home. It's not quite a tip book, more of a "rule" book, but it's excellent.

Two excellent tip books for genre writers are Orson Scott Card's *How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy*, and the Mort Castle edited collection called *On Writing Horror*. Card has also written a more general book on

writing called *Characters & Viewpoint* that provides a virtual college course in those topics.

I also enjoy the memoir type books. Learning about the choices that other writers have made can help you make your own decisions. Be aware, though, that famous writers don't live the same lives as the rest of us do. Sometimes I think a writer who is working steadily in the mid-list, or even in the small press, can give us better advice than the famous writer because they are struggling with the same issues that we are.

The best known of the "memoir" type books is probably Stephen King's *On Writing*. I don't personally think it's the best, however, and part of that is because King has been away from the life of a struggling writer for a very long time. My favorite is *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing* by David Morrell, which combines Morrell's personal history with a lot of practical tips.

Another good memoir style book is John Gardner's *On Becoming a Novelist*, although it focuses more on the literary writer than the genre writer. A memoir book with a difference is *Storyteller* by Kate Wilhelm, which is, at least in part, a tip book combined with the story of the Clarion Writer's Workshop.

A memoir style book that was actually constructed after the writer's death is *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*. A fellow named Larry W. Phillips went through Hemingway's letters, fiction, and interviews to extract the points the great writer made about his craft. I found it very enjoyable.

There are many writing books out there and I typically read one or two a year. They're no substitute for doing your *own* writing, but I think it's often helpful to get every viewpoint that you can on this complex practice we called writing.

If you think of yourselves as helpless and ineffectual, it is certain that you will create a despotic government to be your master. The wise despot, therefore, maintains among his subjects a popular sense that they are helpless and ineffectual.

— Frank Herbert

A Look At Selling Out to Cash In

by Doug >|< Roper of EPIC Gaming

When choosing a book to read, what questions do you ask yourself? *What am I in the mood for? In the past, who has written something I like, and do they have anything new out? What are my friends reading?* These are all probably near the top of most lists. When a prospective reader is looking for something, they are quite naturally looking to satisfy their own particular wants and needs with their selection.

A commercially minded author needs to select his next endeavor much like a reader in a bookstore, by thinking about what audiences have read in the past, and looking to see if he has something up his sleeve that will appeal to his target. A budding writer looking to one day feed himself off of what he writes needs to be able to satisfy a large number of people with similar interests but individual tastes.

Just as a reader may have a specific type of book in mind when he goes to the bookstore, an author seeking to profit from his writing must be just as specific in his decisions on what to write, unless of course we are talking about an already established author, who has already created a market for his work. All they have to do is remain productive, and as long as they have a story to tell, they can sell it. This is the goal for every new writer, and it is very, very difficult to achieve that goal.

Over the past few years, I've become more cynical about writing and publishing. I think the change in perspective may be advantageous. I'm no longer wrapped up in merely telling my story, or making my points, without caring about other aspects of writing and publishing. I'm out of my non-writing "art phase" and moving into my writing "compensation phase." These days my first question after striking upon a good story idea is invariably, "*Could I sell this?*"

Does that make me a sellout? I don't believe so. If I abandoned stories that didn't really strike me as marketable in favor of ones that I was less in love with, but thought could turn a profit, then I would say yeah, I am a sellout. These "unprofitable" stories still tend to get written, but while I may be satisfied with the result, it seems as though the energy spent on the personal project could have been better applied to a revenue generating one.

I write for the same reason as most other fiction writers; because I like telling stories, and exploring other circumstances and realities. However, there is a part of me that wants to be able to succeed at writing, and that is a part that separates those who write and

write but never send anything off from those who like to collect rejection notices. Authors that send stories to magazines and websites aren't looking to write for the sheer joy of it...they want to get paid. My updated measure for success isn't necessarily how well I like the story either. I'll be measuring success in the way that most Americans do from now on...revenue.

Writing for the love of writing is gratifying and you may be very proud of your work, but if I may be blunt, you can't eat pride. Wealthy benefactors who supply clever artists with the means to produce their works no longer exist, and those of us with the drive to create must often table those desires while we earn the capital needed to survive. Nowadays for most of us, survival comes first, art second (and as an aside, I find this has reduced the quality of art being produced these days...if artists were free to create, and didn't have to worry about missing car payments or where they were going to find the cash to go to the doctor, I think we'd have much more impressive art to view, read and discuss...but I digress).

Anyone who has ever put pen to paper and done their version of "once upon a time," has daydreamed about being a successful writer, complete with the romanticized images of sipping cold iced tea on their screened-in porch over the water, while they gently compose their thoughts and turning to a well-used but faithful typewriter or computer to work on the next book, publishers already beating on the door for the first five chapters.

The lucky writer who is "discovered" and has their book published straight away is exceedingly rare as far as I know. J.K. Rowling's rags-to-riches story seems too good to be true (and I kind of believe that it is). Even if it isn't, I would certainly not wait and hope that something like that would happen to me, because the odds are heavily stacked against it. If I am going to break into writing, and end up writing for a paycheck like I want, I am going to have to work to get every advantage I can get.

To one day be able to write exactly what I want, when I want, and get paid for it, I need to ask right now, "*Can I sell this?*" I need to know if what I plan on writing appeals to a large, book buying audience, and I need to know what that audience is consuming these days. If it all happens to fall together that there are large numbers of people interested in reading what I'm interested in writing, then that is truly the best of all possible worlds and Voltaire wasn't a satirist, he

Con't on page 15

Elliptical Thinking: Kepler and His Contributions to Modern Science

by Katie Picone

Hello, fellow thinkers! I'd like to begin with some words about Johannes Kepler. Kepler was an astronomer and mathematician who lived in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. I chose him as a topic of discussion because he is an excellent example of what a scientist must be and what one must do. Kepler had a lifelong interest in astronomy and he devoted much of his career to mathematically describing the motions of the planets. Because of a strong theological background, throughout most of his life he labored under the assumption that God created the universe with a sense of geometric perfection. As such, Kepler concluded that the orbits of the planets must coincide with certain "perfect" geometric shapes. In his model, the orbits of the planets would be circular and their spacing would be orderly and rational. His primary hypothesis was that if one nested a series of polyhedrons (three-dimensional geometric solids), each circumscribed with a sphere, inside one another - six in all, for the six known planets - then by assigning a planet to each of the spheres, he could describe their movements. But no matter how he tried to apply this idea to the available data he could never make it fit what was observed in the sky.

Theoretical models weren't working. What he really needed was better observational data. Kepler's vision was weak as the result of a childhood illness so he was never able to take detailed records of the celestial movements himself. But it just so happened that not too far away there was a man who had been doing just that for approximately 38 years - the Danish nobleman and astronomer, Tycho Brahe. After hitting a couple bumps in the road Kepler eventually entered his employ and began attempting to use Tycho's observations to further refine his (Kepler's) own work. Tycho was protective of his data, so Kepler was unable to acquire complete access until after his employer's death. But when he did it it allowed him to see the universe as he never had before. He eventually realized that the mathematic perfection that he had based all his prior work on was not there.

The orbits of the planets weren't circular at all, they were elliptical. And the relation of the orbit of one planet to another didn't correspond with any aesthetically pleasing geometry. In the face of overwhelming evidence he *changed his mind to reflect his new knowledge*. And in doing so he laid a great milestone in early astronomy and physics. Although there have been others since who have provided us with the means for even more accurate calculations (Newton and Einstein particularly), Kepler's laws of planetary motion are still used today. His success is a testament to the scientific method. After almost a lifetime of conviction he was able to objectively look at the raw data before him and admit that he'd been wrong all along. And it was this admission that enabled him to achieve his life's ambition. *That's* what I mean when I say that he is an example of what a scientist must do. An adherence to the facts and a willingness to accept good evidence no matter where it leads you are absolutely critical. Preconceived notions and stubborn adherence to ideologies have no place here.

Though we currently have no intention of cancelling publication of the *Illuminata* (our old school method of self-promotion), only the most foolish of entrepreneurs are ignoring the potential of Social Networking Sites. For those of you who are interested in T-Press for more than its cutting edge ezine, here are links to a few of our alternate locations on the web:

[Tyrannosaurus Press Group \(Facebook\)](#)

[Bret Funk - Author Page \(Facebook\)](#)

[Bret Funk Page \(Goodreads\)](#)

This page is Bret's preferred page for fan comments and discussions.

[A. Christopher Drown \(Facebook\)](#)

[A. Christopher Drown \(Goodreads\)](#)

[A Mage of None Magic \(Blogspot\)](#)

Reviews

Cast in Shadow

Michelle Sagara

Luna, 2005

ISBN: 0-373-8-254-4

507 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

It's usually easiest to review the first in a series of books. So let me tell readers first off that *Cast in Shadow* is first a series which already has, so far as I know, at least three books (*Cast in Courtligh*t being the next). They're all fat books. You'll get your \$6.99 worth of reading in these books.

Kaylin is a member of the paramilitary police force Hawks who serve the Hawkmaster, one of the Lords of Law. The Hawkmaster, Lord Grammayre, is one of the five races of this fantasy world, and as you might guess, he's human, with wings (rather angelic, especially as he is prone to dispensing hugs to teary young Kaylin). There are lion-men, the Leontine; dragon-men (which includes the Emperor himself); the elf-like and wizardly Barrani; the tentacle-topped Tha'lani, who are mind-readers, and ordinary garden variety humans.

All serve the Emperor, but various lords hold semi-autonomous fiefdoms (cities). This includes the slum city where Kaylin grew up. The Barrani lord Nightshade holds this dubious prize and seems to belong to the good guys, though he does little to clean up his backyard or share the wealth. But there's more than the usual crime going on in Slumtown this time. Children marked with strange tattoos—just like Kaylin—are found murdered. While Lord Nightshade seems to turn a blind eye to his neighborhood crime for the most part, this crime may have connections with the mysterious Old Ones.

Kaylin, with her childhood companion Severn, is called into the slums to check out the mystery. But the mystery gets darker. Why do Kaylin's tattoos change with each killing? Why did Severn commit such a heinous deed in the past, one that Kaylin can't forgive or understand? What is the real nature and purpose of Tiamaris, the dragon man assigned as the third on their investigative team? And what does the Barrani lord of Nightshade *want* from young Kaylin?

This is a fast-paced and inventive book with a new set of races to liven up the fantasy. It has only one problem, which is, unfortunately, enough of a doozy I won't be picking up the rest of the series myself.

The book's... *twee* is I suppose the best word to describe it. I prefer my character relationships more realistic. Kaylin's less a policewoman than a pet or mascot. Her boss dispenses hugs and fatherly forgiveness. The gruff lion-man sergeant bares his teeth but doesn't mean it when confronted with yet another example of Kaylin's chronic tardiness, uniforms worn inside out, and habit of ruffling her colleagues' feathers (literally, in this case). She even gets away with attempting to kill a colleague right in front of her boss.

By the end of the book, this coyness had me gritting my teeth. Ah, for a boss of such indulgent paternalism in real life! I guess I'm just not cute enough to be a pet.

But if *twee* doesn't inspire you to gnashing of the teeth, the rest of the book will keep your attention. Ms. Sagara is a good fantasy world-builder. Too bad the characters are often too much fantasy to swallow.

Barrayar

Lois McMaster Bujold

ISBN: 0-671-72083-X

Paperback (October 1991)

Baen Books

Review by Terry Crotinger

Cordelia is a Terran ex-military scientist who fell in love with the enemy. After Earth conquered Barrayar, she married one of their leaders, and is now pregnant with their first child and heir of the entire political structure. Throw mid-range technology, a dash of semi-feudal state and 1950's ideology and prejudice in a blender and you'll get a taste of Barrayar culture. Cordelia struggles with the cultural nuances of her new home planet; the reader is not spared this frustration. The bullets flying over Cordelia's head, thanks to a political coup, threatens her livelihood and the health of her zygote son. One thing at least Earth inhabitants know: don't mess with the mommy. Barrayar culture is ignorant in comparison: the opposition steals Cordelia's child when it was taken from her womb and placed in an incubator/hibernator to finish growing to term. A Barrayar bad-y hasn't figured out that mom is not going to allow anyone to mess with her and hers. Staying alive and retrieving the child ensues, with friendships and cultural gleanings along the way.

Lois McMaster Bujold is no stranger to science fiction. Her novels and short stories involving Miles Vorkosigan, and his Barrayan parents are numerous. For her effort, Ms. McMaster Bujold has several Hugo

Reviews

Awards to her credit. *Barrayar*, the second book of the Vorkosigan Saga, won as well.

A word about the paperback's cover. There are at least twelve versions of the cover due to various printings. Based on the cover of the book I was given, with Cordelia in a gaudy uniform of some kind, I would not have bothered to read this—the artwork seemed disconnected to the story, much less the title. What was a *Barrayar*, anyway? At a friend's urging, I endured the cover and came to enjoy the story. There are fanfics, filk and photos/artwork based on Ms. McMaster Bujold's works. By now I should know: never judge a book by its cover!

Necropath

by Eric Brown

Solaris, 2008

ISBN-13: 978 1 84416 602 2

414 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

Have you ever wondered what it would *really* be like if we had telepathy? Unfortunately I can now recall neither the author nor the title, but a short story I read long ago dealt with that question. The lone telepath loathed all the human sewers he was forced to drink from. All the minds he met seemed nasty and dirty. He longed for another of his kind, a fellow telepath who might understand his pain and loneliness.

Then he met her. And they couldn't stand each other. They, too, were human sewers. When they saw each other in mutual reflections, they hated even more. And the persons they hated the most were themselves.

I guess it all depends on where you start from. If you're a person who hates yourself, you'll hate everyone else, too. The first person you have to love is you. It takes self-contempt to *really* sink to the bottom. If you're struggling in the muck of your own guilt and shame, the universe takes on the blackest hues of all.

Jeff Vaughan is a telepath earning a living as an investigative agent at the Bengal Spaceport. When the story opens, he's so deep in the muck of self-hate he's not seeing any glimmers of light. He's stopped pretending to be part of humanity. When people talk social niceties to him, he doesn't bother to answer. He hates any cheery or optimistic soul. He sneers at everything and everyone. He's a bitter cynic who doses himself with drugs to ease his pain. When a young beggar tries to get close to him, he bites like a wounded dog—not her, but himself.

Isolation from humanity is his secondary goal. He wants to get away from himself first. But we all know *that's* not so easy.

Two events drag Vaughan out of his self-imposed exile in loneliness, self-hate and drugs. First, the young beggar dies. Now Vaughan has a new lash for his back. Then he finds a terrified young stowaway aboard a ship from the colony Verkerk's World. He can't help a sympathetic vibe. The girl disappears. But Vaughan can't forget.

There's contraband of some kind aboard the ship too, something deliberately shielded from a telepath like Vaughan. Which means it's *alive*: but what could it be?

Vaughan's attempts to solve the mystery, assisted by Chandra, a police officer whose good-soul vibes grate Vaughan's bitter heart, lead to a trail of death. All the clues end in assassinations or, even more puzzling, suicides. Not even a telepath can read dead minds... not without paying a price Vaughan's too familiar with.

Vaughan's slow upward journey is the draw of this grim book. I won't say much about the mystery itself, except that there's a famous science fiction short story about those who answer the call of a hungry alien religion and make the pilgrimage to mountain. That same chilling short story more or less summarizes this same plot, much more succinctly. Do these acolytes find the ultimate redemption, or are they just victims of a superior Venus flytrap?

Some stories decline the corruption and fall of their protagonists (no, stop thinking of Tom Jones in that lusty BBC film!). While the downward arc can be either comic or tragic, Eric Brown's story goes the other direction. Jeff Vaughan doesn't have much direction left to him *but* up. We wish him well!

Science fiction frequently tries to imagine what life would be like on a plane as far above us as we are above savagery; its setting is often of a kind that appears to us technologically miraculous. It is thus a mode of romance with a strong tendency to myth.

— Northrup Frye

Reviews

Star Trek (2009)

J.J. Abrams, Director

Presented by Bad Robot,
Spyglass Entertainment and
Paramount Pictures

Review by Rachel V. Olivier

Let's just start out at the beginning by saying, if you're not a diehard Trek fan you will love this movie, and yes, even if you're a diehard Trek fan, you will love this movie. The first thing to remember when watching this movie is to have no expectations, and then prepare yourself for a rollercoaster ride manned by J. J. Abrams.

I am not a J. J. Abrams fan, and Abrams, admittedly, had never been into Star Trek before this. However, Abrams is a Star Wars fan and it has been said that a couple of the writers involved were also into Alias and Star Wars. So, imagine taking Star Trek TOS characters and mixing in Star Wars and Alias action scenes, and in some cases, plot points. Then you will get an idea of how this movie goes.

At the edge of the galaxy the USS Kelvin encounters a ship unlike any other anyone has seen up to that point. Huge, and looking like something made by one of the Elder Gods, it shoots first and asks for surrender and the captain later. As the crew run around frantically to make repairs and get ready to fight or fly, the captain boards the alien ship at the demand of Nero (Eric Bana) who says he is from Romulus, but not a Romulus that anyone on the Kelvin is familiar with. As the captain disembarks, he leaves command of the USS Kelvin in George Kirk's (Chris Hemsworth) hands, and Kirk's wife goes into labor.

When it's evident the captain isn't going to survive his visit to the other ship and that the intention of Nero of Romulus is to destroy the USS Kelvin, Kirk must make the decision to command everyone to abandon ship, while he stays behind on a suicide mission in a desperate attempt to stall the alien ship long enough for the crew to get away. In the last few moments before he dies in the crash, he hears his son being born, naming him Jim. And thus begins the physical and emotional rollercoaster life that James Tiberius Kirk will live from there on out.

For any Trekkie out there, you know that, according to the Trek Canon, Jim Kirk grew up in Iowa and that his father and mother both lived to ripe old ages. And while Kirk was probably a wild Mid-west farm boy, he did have the guidance of his father, and because his father was in Starfleet, a desire to join Starfleet himself one day.

With the intrusion of Nero of Romulus from the future, that life, that canon, is thrown out the window, and a parallel reality is created with Jim Kirk (played by Chris Pine) who will grow up in Iowa without the guidance of a father or the desire to join Starfleet or the Academy.

By the time Kirk's a young adult, he's not only a charmer, but he's also a troublemaker and the Enterprise is nowhere in his future. It's hard to conceive of Jim Kirk as the responsible captain of the USS Enterprise (though it's easy to see his "cowboy politics" and playboy ways from the original series). Yet, somehow, he ends up at the Starfleet Academy and the rest is one ride after another as fate makes up for lost time in trying to catch up with James T. Kirk and his crewmates Spock (Zachary Quinto), Bones (Karl Urban), and Scotty (Simon Pegg).

While watching this movie, while I was having a good time, I was wondering if, by the end of the film, this parallel reality would have caught up with the original Star Trek series. I wasn't disappointed by the end result, and it was a fun movie. In fact, if nothing else, I would say the actors playing the younger versions of Kirk, Spock, Bones, Scotty, Sulu, Chekov, and Uhura had the characters down cold. The interaction between these younger versions of the original series main characters was a joy to behold.

However, I was disappointed a little in some of the plot tricks that were pulled. I enjoy Star Wars like everyone else, but that is a separate story, and there were a few too many plot points and scenes taken from Star Wars for my liking.

Another thing I missed was the social commentary inherent in most Star Trek episodes and movies. Though there was some social commentary (and what little there was, was brought in by Leonard Nimoy's Spock Prime), there was not as much as there is normally. It was more an escapist action flick than the thoughtful stories written by Gene Roddenberry, Harlan Ellison, David Gerrold, Robert Bloch, Gene L. Coon, and many others. And it makes me wonder about our society that a movie based on a series that was known for its social commentary becomes more popular once that social commentary is removed.

Maybe I grew up on too many Twilight Zone episodes. Maybe I'm too old to appreciate the nano-attention span of younger viewers. I don't know. But it makes me wonder where we're headed.

In the meantime, watch the movie. It really is a fun ride.

Reviews

Key to Redemption

Talia Gryphon

Ace, 2008

ISBN: 978-0-461-01644-0

298 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

I went into a Barnes & Noble last night with the intent of a last huzzah before a move back to brick-and-mortar free hinterlands. Now, I haven't browsed a Barnes & Noble with serious intent to buy for years, since I mostly buy from Amazon, the History Book Club, and the Science Fiction Book Club. I wanted some brand new authors this time, and nothing beats seeing the shelves in front of you for that.

But *egad*. I stood there like one of those old fogies who spin the radio dial and panic when they don't recognize any of the songs. Where did Elvis go? Help! Where did even Madonna go?! I scarcely recognized any of the authors before me. Was Rudy Rucker hidden in here somewhere? Or even Roger Zelazny? Heinlein? Help!

But I was determined. I stood reading back covers of books for so long the cute Barnes & Noble staffer in his studious glasses came over twice to ask if he could help (maybe I missed some opportunity there. I did love his glasses).

My difficulty soon became clear. It's not that science fiction became real life and we conquered the stars. Romance conquered science fiction. If Arthur C. Clarke or Karl Schroeder were on those shelves, and I'm sure they must have been somewhere, they fought the battle in vain. Vampires, werewolves, paranormal detectives and other urban fantasies had crowded their token presence to the darker recesses.

If you can't beat them, join them. In spite of my mounting panic attack, I grabbed off the shelf finally using the classic look-at-the-cover and made off with my booty (paid for, of course). When I got home I had Talia Gryphon's *Key to Redemption* in my hand.

This book is the third of the series, but readers needn't worry. The only reason you should go to an earlier book is if you don't like the sex partner in this one. This one's got the Phantom of the Opera, and if part-gargoyles turn you off, well, look elsewhere. Oops. I forgot the vampire lover in this one. But I assume there are vampire lovers in all of the books. They're a standard.

The plot, for those who pay attention to plots while reading soft-core porn, concerns a (female)

former marine. Gillian of the soldierly cussing and butt-slapping is now a sex therapist for supernaturals (Paramortals, here).

I'll be looking closely at the pictures of any sex therapist I ever patronize, since I had no idea sex therapy works by the doctor having *sex with the patient*. Wow! (Of course, you visit therapists if you have a problem to fix, which may not include the simple ascetic, romance-free lifestyle).

Gillian has quite a list of clients (does client sound too risqué? Or appropriate?), including a supernatural moose and a Frankenstein monster. Fortunately, though these two have sex with others, it's not Gillian. Oh what a relief!

So Gillian focuses on the aforementioned Phantom of the Opera as her neediest patient. We all knew he had problems, of course. What we didn't know was the Phantom is part-gargoyle. So during treatment sessions, Gillian fortunately doesn't have to focus on the usual difficulty of, um, competence. Gargoyles are hard as rock, so they have no problem... um...

Still, she's got her difficulties. She has to juggle her steady vampire lover, who starts out jealous and huffy, but by the middle of the book is a reformed New Age blood-sucker. He's quite ok that the quickie in the alley was in the patient's best interest. I was impressed. You just can't find those understanding males in real life.

The other conflict in the story, such as it is, shows up late and is briskly dispatched by the ex-Marine and her male supporters. Jack the Ripper is another troubled soul Gillian offers to help. But as you might suspect, Jack really *likes* his sex life. He declines. Strong, wonderful, giving and compassionate as she is (the book keeps telling us so), there are some even Gillian can't save through sexual healing.

OK, we all know what this book is. Sadly, I suspect it is representative of the romantic fantasy that now swamps the shelves of my local bookstore. I sure do miss the days when hard science fiction referred to science and not anatomy.

I wouldn't mind the naughty stuff so much if the book were well-written. True, all the males in this book are fabulous hunks (most in this harem having been lovers of Gillian in previous books). Still, you'll have a hard time forming a distinct picture of these sex-machines in your head. And the book has just enough token women in it, besides the heroine, to pretend other females exist in the species. Overall, it's a Swiss cheese of clichés.

Since this book exists for titillation, I ought to rate the sex in it. I'll give it bare passing grade. That brisk

Reviews

Key To Redemption (con't)

Marine attitude of the heroine is a bit of a distraction in the bedroom (and alley). There's plenty of it, though, and you know, Gargoyles do have some interesting features...

But if you want hot stuff with really *good* writing, pick up *Outlander* by Diana Gabaldon. Or try Charlaine Harris and her *Southern Vampire* series for more light-hearted fun (vote for Eric! Down with Bill, down with Mr. Clean!). For even thicker clichés than Gryphon's book, but hotter sex, try Feehan's Carpathian vampire series.

Goodness: go out and grab at random from the shelves of Barnes and Noble. You just can't miss the sex scenes anymore.

If anyone were to force me to make a thumbnail description of the differences between SF and fantasy, I think I would say that SF looks towards an imaginary future, while fantasy, by and large, looks towards an imaginary past. Both can be entertaining. Both can possibly be, perhaps sometimes actually are, even inspiring. But as we can't change the past, and can't avoid changing the future, only one of them can be real.

— Frederick Pohl
Pohlemic, SFC, May 1992

Web Mage

Kelly McCullough

Ace, 2006

ISBN: 0-441-01425-9

310 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

Ah, the perennial teenage rebel. James Dean, like Elvis, never dies. And it's the rebel with the sweet streak I'm talking about here, not Johnny Rotten or Sid Vicious. Underneath his leather jacket this one's got something a girl can take home to Mama. He kicks over the generational traces but he's still old-fashioned enough to marry. Can any girl resist that sort of rebel, at least in his leather jacket?

Simon R. Green does guy-with-attitude-hiding-nice better than any other writer, but Kelly McCullough doesn't do a bad job, either. His rebel Ravirn is a smart-ass hacker (not maybe an endearing trait to me, since I've known a few, and one of those adolescent pranksters spiked my drink once, to unfunny results).

But the hero of *Web Mage* is a good guy deep down. His greatest talent, besides that gift for quick and dirty hacking, is ticking off his elders. That's a classic.

I don't often see many science fiction books that marry old Greek myth (you know, Furies, the Fates, various gods and goddesses) with geeky web lingo. There might well be a good reason. It takes getting used to.

But sorcery has upgraded. Instead of pronouncing those dull old Latin spells, Ravirn, whose grandmother is one of the three Fates, can rattle off even less pronounceable web-speak. Like, magically connecting to his girlfriend and fellow semi-divinity by shouting out [Cerice@shara.gob via AOL.com](mailto:Cerice@shara.gob). (Though I'd like to see him try ripping out <http://www.wondermage.trythis/14345/abradabra.com> and not stumble). Ravirn's a web mage.

He's got to save the worlds. It seems his great aunt, Atrophus, the last goddess of Fate, has messed with Free Will. The master programs are now embodied in the Fate Core. Ravirn has to do a noble deed of hacking and get into the Fate Core to find out what's wrong.

But Eris the goddess of Discord has already thrown a spanner into the spinning gears—code, I mean. When damage and death result, poor Ravirn unjustly gets the blame. Now his aunt Atrophus is sharpening her shears to cut his life short. And his grandmother Lachesis and his aunt Clotho are holding the ends of the thread.

This is a lighthearted book. Though the three grannies are supposed to be the terrors of the tale, believe me, my own grannies were far better at inducing genuine fright than these three. No chilling villains here. Ravirn's a sweet romantic under his leather jacket. His girl gets a rebel who doesn't need much reforming. When the rebel fantasizes taking his girl to Paris, she just needs to sit back and relax.

You won't remember much about this book when you put it down, but it's fast and light. Save it for when you pick up a burgers and fries and settle into your easy chair for the evening without shame. Burp! Book's gone, burger's gone, time for bed and forgotten tomorrow. But still not a bad way to spend the occasional evening.

Reviews

I know you've heard it a thousand times before. But it's true - hard work pays off. If you want to be good, you have to practice, practice, practice. If you don't love something, then don't do it.

— Ray Bradbury

The Border

Marina Fitch

Ace (January 1, 1999)

ISBN-13: 978-0441005949

Review by Terry Crotinger

Marina Fitch is hailed as “one of our best contemporary fantasists,” by K.K. Rasch, editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. It says so on the cover. However, as nicely written as *The Border* is, this is wrong on so many levels. Having an imaginary friend who may or may not be a personal saint/spiritual being does not make this work a fantasy. Technically, yes; applied, I must disagree.

The main character, Rosa is a stranded, pregnant Hispanic youth in Tijuana, Mexico. Her father and sister escaped across the border when she was much younger. Unable to cross, she and her mother remained in Mexico. Later, when Rosa's mother dies, the girl begins her plans to find a *coyote* to help smuggle her across the U.S. border into California so she can find her father and sister. With the help of a guiding spirit/mentor her father gave her before they were separated, “Luz” helps Rosa get across, telling Rosa who is safe to trust, and who is not. When Rosa doesn't listen, her chances of finding them vaporize and she is injured.

The book goes on to explain how supernatural healing/religious experiences help Rosa with the rest of her quest. Though descriptive and engaging, events are predictable and controversial. Border crossings of illegal aliens are a touchy subject for many in the Southwest. Ms. Fitch illuminates the struggles of life in Mexico for an orphaned child graphically, and probably accurately. Contrasting cultures and stereotypes seduces the reader to be loyal to Rosa. But, miracles and guiding angels don't qualify as fantasy material—religious, perhaps, but not fantasy. This book would spark up a reader's group discussion! Perhaps Ms. Fitch's other work falls into the speculative fiction/fantasy genre. In my opinion, this one does not.

Dayworld

Philip Jose Farmer

Ace (June 1988)

ISBN-13: 978-0441140015

Review by Terry Crotinger

Imagine waking up only one day a week? Ever share a dorm room with a slob who left a trail of belongings, yet you seldom saw the owner? Do seasons seem to whip by too fast? Then you've got an idea what Farmer's *Dayworld* offers, where people are stoned—placed in suspended hibernation—and only get to experience one day a week of living. Tuesday, for example is your day, every week. Only Tuesday, unless you are a Wednesday person, or a Sunday person... but you only get one day. Period. This arrangement extends life, on the other hand, if your apartment-mate the day before didn't take out their garbage, you can't wait a week to let them have the pleasure of disposing it when they wake up, because of the smell. So, there are drawbacks.

Not every person has to be stoned; some live the entire week. Some steal days other than their assigned days, such as the main character, Jeff Caird. Jeff has his life, then adds the next day, with a different persona, and the next with yet a different personality. How can he keep track with all those details from one day to the next?

Jeff is different in that an organization who keeps track of “special people” made him a special people, person, identity... it gets confusing for the reader, though Mr. Farmer is able to keep the reader updated no matter what day or who Jeff is that day.

This special organization, an underground organization, really, has many other special people to keep track of. The novel starts out with an elderly bicycle-riding “special people” berserker who is very angry with Jeff and plans to kill him. Jeff's job is to stop this person before he tells the government who is really running the country and ruining life for these “special people”.

Is Jeff brilliant? Have a multiple personality? Gold-digger with a wife (or several) for each day of the week?

Dayworld, first book in a trilogy, is fast-paced, without being rushed. For a work that is two decades old, this one is unpredictable and startling—a good read. From the author of the *Riverworld* series, his works deserve a re-read. Philip Jose Farmer passed away this year.

Reviews

The New Space Opera

Edited by Gardner Dozois and Jonathan Strahan

Harper-Collins, 2007, 515 pgs

ISBN 978-0-06-084675-6

Review by Danielle Parker

I've always enjoyed Dozois's anthologies for two reasons: his thoughtful introductions, and the fact the man has a clear sense of taste. His taste comes through in all his choices, even if it's not always what I'd have chosen to swallow. He likes what he likes, and at least he knows what that is.

So first, how do Dozois and his fellow editor Strahan define *new space opera*? Or even *space opera*. It's *romantic adventure*, according to Dozois, set in space and told on a grand scale. I think that's a good definition.

We know what opera is, whether you're a fan of Wagner or his trilling Italian rivals. It's emotion writ large, more than anything else. Did you weep the first time you listened to Mimi's dying scene in *La Boheme*? The young man behind me at the opera house did. He started to sniffle quietly at the start of the scene, and by the last throb, couldn't pretend he had a cold any longer.

So Dozois and I are in agreement on what *defines* space opera. Space opera's been around long enough Dozois quotes Wilson Tucker's sneering 1941 definition of "the hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn space-ship yarn". But then, as Dozois points out, on came Jack Vance, Poul Anderson, A. E. van Vogt, and many other worthy stars who painted the genre with a lot more luster.

Space opera suffered a drought period then until the mid-1990's, when what Dozois calls the *new space opera* appeared. The short stories in this book all reflect Dozois' choices in the genre. So how do his choices stack up against the old space opera—or his *definition* of space opera, for that matter?

I had a mixed reaction. Almost all of the stories in this collection are good. Compared to the old space opera, most tilt far more heavily on actual technology and science (reflecting the editor's tastes). I learned a bit more than I wanted to about wormholes in one case. Greg Egan's *Glory* started out with such detailed scientific geek-speak I almost skipped the entire story. But once *that* was off his chest (the presenting of his credentials, so to speak), the story finally became interesting for its human side, and I'm glad I read to the end.

But the technology rarely overwhelms, for the most part. And we've got span and scope in these stories—galaxies traversed, thousands of years speeding by, humanity as a grain of sand on the beach of the universe.

A few stories reflect the modern trend to protagonists who just aren't likeable. One is a less-than-intelligent assassin who should have done her homework (*Saving Tiamat*). A few are so strange and bizarre, who cares? (I couldn't get into Ian MacDonald's three friends, I'm sorry). Peter F. Hamilton's *Blessed by an Angel* is ugly enough to make you wince.

But then we have the protagonists who would make that soft-hearted young man sniffing over Mimi react: the romance between a young farmer and a nomadic woman, separated by far more than a stone wall; a visitor who gives a little girl flowers and endures the sorrow of seeing the sweet child become a ruthless adult; an eccentric little man who brings Edgar Allen Poe to rough-and-tumble Martian miners; a future Scheherazade telling the Emperor stories to save humanity and her own neck; a hapless Lothario whose romantic exploits and agreeability only get him into more trouble; a troupe of actors, bringing the Bard's works to the rulers of the universe.

Thus my favorites in the collection were the ones involve us in the human element: Kage Baker's *Maelstrom*; Tony Daniel's *The Valley of the Gardens*; Mary Rosenblum's *Splinters of Glass*, Kress' *Art of War*.

For again, what is opera, if not emotion writ large? The stories that work here are the same ones we've always told. Human emotions and human dilemmas. Science is only the frame around the mirror reflecting a face that eternally fascinates us.

Space opera may be tragic, it may be joyful, but it should have *feeling*. Authors in this collection once in a while confuse *scientific scope* with *emotional scope*. But the best stories in this collection get it right. Highly recommended for all science fiction readers. Hey editors, good job.

Game-Based Booty (con't)

In earlier volumes of *The Illuminata*, Doug <!-- Roper of Epic Gaming, revealed the painstaking planning required in developing a RPG including, campaign, storyboard, world and terrain, politics, customs, acquiring systems (money, bartering), characters and back story. I'm sure he has heard the random comment from gamers that their adventures and random die roll results would make for good storytelling. Scans of gamer websites and posts reveal what they want: action, good storyline, character development and plausibility. Sounds like a recipe for a good book. What would happen if Monopoly had a tie-in?

Selling Out, Cashing In (con't)

was a prophet. It's not the best of all possible worlds, though. If it were there would be no editors and agents. These people exist to take good marketable ideas and turn them into marketable products. A good writer is going to meet them at least halfway or he's not going to have much success.

I look at the really accomplished authors of fiction (who also happen to be unbelievably prolific) with truly envious eyes. I know that they probably have a security and stability in their finances that have removed the need to survive from the need to write, but I do wonder about their early careers. Did Robert Jordan, Ron Hubbard, Steven King, or Terry Brooks write that first book for the love of their genre, or of storytelling, or did they hope to turn a hobby they enjoyed into a profession they could retire from? Would it make the books they have written less enjoyable? I don't think so. I don't know that it matters why they wrote something good, so long as it was written.

I think an author's initial efforts have to be directed at marketability if the writer is serious about one day becoming a professional. I'm not saying that such a thing is easy. Quite the contrary, I believe that such a thing is next to impossible, but unless you are willing to face the inevitable rejections and trials, and unless you are strategizing and working hard to take every advantage available to you to get you foot in the publishing door, you will very likely never have an opportunity to write your hearts in comfort and security.

Reading is Dead (con't)

But does a decline in literary reading equal a decline in literacy? From the reporting, you would think so, but from the data... not so much. In fact, even though literary reading has dropped by as much as 12%, reading ability as a whole jumped in 2 out of the 3 ages groups studied in the NEA report, with the largest reported change (for the positive) among 9-year-olds. The group that fared the worst—17-year-olds—fell five points during the same period, but that five points was on a scale of 0-500, so on a "normal" test that equates to a one point drop. And of course, the study itself fails to mention one glaring fact which may severely compromise its veracity: the snapshot taken in 2007 compares 17-year-olds who developed their reading habits in a pre-Internet age to 9-year-olds who spend as much or more time staring at words on a screen than I spent staring at words in books. In fact, the NEA study (almost all NEA studies, actually)

neglects to consider screen-reading at all. Apparently, reading words printed on a monitor doesn't count as reading, and one need not be literate to do it.

Yes, the type of reading done on the Internet today is different than the type of reading I did as a child. Yes, most of the information is broken into smaller chunks. Yes, the grammar is sometimes atrocious, the spelling sometimes horrendous, and the acronyms both innumerable and virtually a language in their own right. But one must still be able to read to appreciate most of what is available on the Internet.

Perhaps the greatest irony of all, a fact completely ignored by the NEA and its proponents, is that while they continue to claim that reading and literacy are spiraling toward extinction, writing has exploded over the last decade. Book reading may have declined by as much as 20% over the last two decades, but fueled by the independent publisher movement and advances in print-on-demand technology, the number of books published has almost tripled in the last fifteen years, with 62,039 books published in the US in 1995 and 172,000 published in the US in 2005 (UNESCO research). Far fewer people may be buying newspapers than they were ten years ago, but in that same period of time, the number of bloggers has increased from 0 to more than 20 million. Add in the tweets, the product reviews, the comments on just about everything posted on the web, and the incessant Facebook status updates, and no one can deny that our population is not only capable of reading, but seemingly fond of it.

The new ways we view and process information, and the new technologies that allow everyone to express their ideas "in print" will undoubtedly result in new ways of reading, perhaps in new ways of thinking, and perhaps even in better ways of doing both. The loss of our literary tradition is certainly something to lament, and something to rally against, but to claim that our society is heading toward complete and unrecoverable illiteracy is not only misleading, it is disingenuous. The ability to read is virtually essential in our society, even if the ability to read something of substance is not. So let's worry about the current trend away from literary reading, let's encourage people young and old to explore the wealth of knowledge encased within the covers of this world's great books, but let's not skew the data to make this a fight against the wrong foe. If we do, we may find the news printed from one end of the Internet to the other:

Reading is Dead! Long Live the Literate!