



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

T-Press News and World Report

By Bret Funk

There are some exciting developments in the works here at Tyrannosaurus Press, and I wanted to devote my space this edition to highlighting some of our upcoming projects and solicit some feedback from our readership as we strive to keep pace with the rapidly-changing world of publishing.

First of all, to fans of the Boundary's Fall series, I wish to extend a sincere apology. I know how frustrated I've been with authors who take years to release the next book in their series. All I can say in my defense is that following Katrina, it took me a full year before the desire to write really returned, and by that time I had two small children, each of whom get preferential access to my free time, and a full time job that is far more effective at putting food on the table than my current writing endeavors.

However, I am within pages of having a finished rough draft, at which point I can begin the process of editing. If all goes well, I hope to have a finished product ready in summer/fall of 2010, and perhaps a downloadable version before then, for those of you who just can't wait any longer.

In other book news, sales of Aaron Drown's *A Mage of None Magic* have remained strong. Even better, it has received some praise from various critical circles, including Midwest Book Review, Library Journal, and a number of independent reviewers. If you haven't ordered a copy yet, I highly recommend it. Not only is it a good read, it's only through the support of our readership that we can continue to do what we do.

As we move toward the new decade (it's not here yet... no calendar starts in year 0), T-Press is hoping to extend itself into some of the new opportunities available in the world of publishing. Unlike many long-established entities, we believe that the future of publishing lies in embracing new technologies and distribution models, and not in trying to stifle them. Our first adventure has been agreeing to allow our digital titles to be printed on the "Espresso Book Machines", tiny digital presses that can be set up anywhere and which can produce any book in their libraries in a matter of minutes. There are only a few thousand of these devices worldwide at present, but it is rumored that many big box retailers are looking into incorporating these devices in the near future, as it would allow their shoppers access to a far greater selection of books than could fit on the shelves of even the largest bookstore.

Our big project for 2010 (time, as always, permitting) will be the preparation and release of our titles into ebook formats. We feel that e-reader technology and popularity has finally reached the point where we can no longer consider the ebook market as a secondary project. *A Mage of None Magic* will be our test book, and we hope to have it available on a variety of readers before the beginning of summer. Depending on our success setting it up, the Beacons anthologies will follow, and finally the books of the Boundary's Fall series, hopefully in time for a release to coincide with the publication of *Forge of Faith*.

The Illuminata itself may not be immune to further digitization. As the year goes by, we are going to look into ways of making the Illuminata purely digital, foregoing our current looks-like-a-print-magazine-but-tastes-like-a-digital-file format. Here we are soliciting reader comments and suggestions: how best would you like to receive the Illuminata, and what recommendations for online forums do you have?

Of course, finding a new way to publish the Illuminata will take a back seat to the other projects

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The Pleasure of Turning A Page

by Terry Crotinger/montanasings

Imagine my dismay when I caught a Charlie Rose interview with Jason Epstein discussing the future of publishing. Who is Mr. Epstein? He is the Editorial Director of Random House. You know Random House—one of the top publishing houses in the world.

The predication of Jason Epstein (January 11, 2010, PBS) is that books will no longer be sold like, well, books. “The industry needs to be reconstituted and that’s going to be at the expense of the existing industry.” He said he has “...developed a business based on a machine like an ATM that receives a digital file from anywhere, and prints it as a quality paperback book in a matter of minutes.” Epstein’s print-on-demand (POD) kiosk is an interesting idea. “I think that will be one of the ways the book business will survive in the future.”

On the future of digital aka e-books he says...

“I think the future publishing company will consist of a handful of like-minded editors. They needn’t be in one room or the same city. They’ll tend to be specialized. They’ll publish books they know a lot about, what ever that happens to be. And they will post it on websites of related interests.”

Between POD and e-books, how will this effect the major chains? I can’t even imagine how a book signing would work!

“I don’t think we’re losing anything [by not publishing the traditional way]. I think we, we’re not losing what publishing has always been about, storytelling. People do this, that’s instinctive, they can’t stop doing it, we’re doing it right now. That will continue. Except the way of distributing that will be different.”

I remember hearing a statistic—years ago—that the price of a paperback would be 8-10 bucks. At the time, they averaged 4. Twice the price? Ludicrous! I am living in my own future—the price is as predicted.

The mere act of reading print on wood pulp (typically .50) now costs a buck for the not-even-a-big-city-rag Daily Disappointment. Disheartening, it is. I’m old school. I like to hold something and turn pages. I fear little children will be deprived of repetitive eye-hand coordination.

Must fairy-tales be read at bedside with a plastic device? One of the best parts of fairy-tales are the lithographs. How about pictures? How does that work via e-reader?

Artists? Knowing your work will be scanned and uploaded (and downloaded) may be flattering, but will your work lose the nuances of being on a one-dimensional surface if it can only be seen digitally?

I admit, when I was exposed to my first e-reader, it was the coolest idea! But staring at computer became tedious, caused eye-strain and varicose veins. Now, with laptop in lap, relaxing on the old couch with a good read is... heavy and awkward.

I do not own a portable reader. Funny that. In my own novel, the characters use them with abandon. But the novel is futuristic in nature (sci fi, science fiction, syfy—take your pick). Is life catching up with art?

When I publish my novel, I considered various methods and media, including e-books but decided on POD—due to the limited interest of the subject. However, I fear reconsideration is in order.

The irony is not lost, gentle reader as you read with bated breath every word in this newsletter...

While technology is a wonderful beast, its frequent changes, updates, “new and improved” keep me frazzled. Watching my budget try to accommodate all the fun has resulted in a cupboard where generic mac n cheese boxes reside. Is there a breaking point? Will the sacred Library become a relic of the past? Will the reader’s circle be a Kindle-Klatch? How long can we expect to see the lights on, or will they fade in our memory like the red railroad lanterns on a Caboose?

Economically speaking, how will e-readers shake the industries associated with printing and marketing? If armed with our trusty laptops and unlimited wifi, will we need bookstores or Libraries (school, public and private)? It seems a slow start, but apparently, if Mr. Epstein is correct, the e-reader may outlive Johannes Gutenberg’s gift to the world. In fact, he predicts the digital age allows downloading the entire Beijing Library with a simple mouse-click.

Fandom as a group has mixed reactions. Unsurprisingly, those associated with the scared Library are dismayed; those embracing technologies’ latest and greatest crowd the net and BestBuy with aplomb. People like me alternate between weeping for what is familiar that may disappear and whooping with nerdy joy.

The introduction of the e-book brings positive changes. While still slow (and costly) to catch on, e-readers in the classroom perk interest in the art of reading. If the software was available (it isn’t yet), students with learning disabilities can utilize and customize their reader with various colored filters. Words that scroll across (also up/down) the surface help dyslexic readers understand content. Altering print size is essential for people with visual issues.

Con’t on page 3

Apocalypse in Science Fiction

by Joe Vadalma

One of the most reoccurring themes in science fiction is the end of the world, or at least the end of civilization. It is not surprising since there are many ways that this could actually come about. Also, prophets have been predicting catastrophic disasters from the time men learned to speak to each other. Two popular ones lately are global warming and an asteroid strike. So we have a choice of drowning when the ice caps melt or being smashed to atoms by a big rock.

For a while, when a few people caught bird flu in Asia, pandemics were all the rage. In the latter half of the twentieth century, everyone was betting on an all-out atomic war, but that fizzled when the cold war ended. Recently, I read article about a scientist who said we could all die from a burst of gamma ray radiation from a nearby supernova explosion. As the clock struck midnight ushering in the year 2000, all the computers were supposed go mad because they only had the last two digits of the year and could not distinguish between the twentieth and twenty-first century (which to some people did not start until 2001 anyway.)

Anyway, science fiction authors love to write about Armageddon of one sort or other. Here are some of my personal favorites. There are two by John Brunner. The first is *Stand on Zanzibar* where civilization is brought to an end because of overpopulation. Overpopulation as threat seems to be no longer in vogue. I guess because there are so many ways of dealing with overpopulation. For example, nuke the excess or give everybody a gun and give them leave to hunt and kill everybody they hate.

The second book by Brunner is *The Sheep Look Up* which is about pollution. We are pretty certain that is the most likely end that we face.

There are many atomic war novels. These were especially popular during the cold war years. The funniest was the movie *Doctor Strangelove*, where a deranged general starts world war three because of his erectile dysfunction. I also like the novel *On the Beach* by Nevil Schute, which was also made into a good movie. In this novel, the last people on earth after an atomic war are living in Australia waiting to die from the radioactivity produced by all those hydrogen bombs going off. Probably my all time favorite about a post apocalyptic world is *Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter Miller where a monk finds an artifact from our civilization after civilization has returned to the dark ages.

One of the more interesting ways that the human race comes to an end is a little known book called *The*

Black Corridor by Michael Moorcock. In this short novel, bigotry runs wild so that everyone kills everyone else that is different from himself or herself. It's a real chiller. I got goose bumps reading it.

Invasions by aliens is another possibility that could end the human race. My favorite is *Footfall* by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, where the invaders look like elephants.

An old movie that's fun is *When Worlds Collide* where a group of scientists and a chosen few race to build a spaceship to escape from a collusion between earth and another planet. The one thing I never quite understood was where the planet they were headed for was located

I liked TV miniseries *The Stand* by Stephen King as the survivors of a pandemic meet up at the cabin of an old woman and go fight the devil in Las Vegas.

Of course there are many more great science fiction novels and stories about the Apocalypse, but those were some of my personal favorites, because they each have a slightly odd slant to the end of the world.

I have written one novel about Armageddon myself. It is called *Morgaine and Armageddon* and has a lot of stuff in it based loosely on *The Book of Revelations* of the *Christian Bible*. If you are interested, it is in eBook format and can be obtained from Renaissance Ebooks, www.pageturneredition.com or Fictionwise Ebooks, www.fictionwise.com.

Turning A Page (con't)

When the costs are more reasonable, so will the software that can provide instant dictionary, thesaurus, and pronunciation assistance. Those with sight issues can hear the words as a type of reader-for-the-Blind. (Will e-readers put that group out of business?) But very few e-readers have audio or customization capability; only a few readers have a dictionary as a standard application.

Mr. Epstein predicts significant changes will occur in the next five years, like his POD kiosks. E-Reader developers better implement more access/features. But these devices aren't going away like the Beta video tapes.

Little House On The e-reader? Perhaps. But please, give me a good old-fashioned Dick and Jane book. Even Mr. Epstein states he prefers to have a real book in his hands!

To watch the interview: <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/10804>

Evolution of a Genre

by Charles Gramlich

I hear it often from writers and editors. A genre has to evolve or it dies. I have to ask why? I doubt the people who make this statement are really thinking about what they're saying. They often just seem to be parroting something they've heard elsewhere. The statement itself is full of holes.

First, evolution is a poor concept to use for literature. The folks I've seen using it seem to imply that: 1) change is the natural state of both living things and literature, and that 2) living things and literature both get better as they change. Neither of these statements is true where biological evolution is concerned.

Many species of crocodiles have remained virtually unchanged for 65 million years, or more. Some turtles haven't changed since the Triassic, 200+ million years ago. Living things don't change unless there is a need to, as when there is a dramatic shift in their environments.

Also, evolution does not imply progress, though many people *think* it does. Living things don't get "better" in any global sense as they evolve. A species adapts to an environment and may be better suited for that environment than its ancestors, but if the environment changes all those great adaptations are no longer helpful. They may actually become a hindrance. Dinosaurs were highly evolved, and they died out anyway.

Even if evolution were a reasonable analogy for literature, I still wouldn't understand why it is taken as a given that things must change. Why must they?

I knew and respected Karl Edward Wagner, who was both a fine writer and editor, but he once said something that seemed to me to be absolute nonsense. He was speaking as an editor about how he wouldn't buy heroic fantasy stories that were too similar in style and concept to those he'd seen published before. He said: "It doesn't matter how well such stories are written; it doesn't even matter that the author may be a far better writer than Howard or Tolkien..." That's just wrong; it certainly does matter to readers.

Now, I imagine most writers would tire of churning out story after story about how Chayne the Barbarian beats the sorcerer of the day. And I can see how most editors would get to the point where they hated to see another Chayne story cross their desk. That's fine.

But a young reader just doesn't have the same history. When they pick up that first fantasy novel it matters *very* much what they get. They don't care if

the ideas are new evolutions in the field. Everything is new to them. They *do* care if the story makes sense to them, if it touches their hearts and imaginations. And they *do* care whether or not the writer is good, even if their tastes aren't sophisticated (sometimes you can read "Jaded"). You also hear a lot these days about how the younger generation just doesn't read. I have to wonder if maybe we writers have "evolved" so far we've left the readers behind.

I'm fifty-one years old and, personally, if there is anyone out there who can write about wandering barbarian warriors better than Howard, then I want *desperately* to read them. If someone can do interplanetary adventure better than Burroughs then I will trade in my collection of "new idea" books in a blink to get hold of some.

One statement about literature that I believe *is* true is, "The story's the thing." I might revise Karl Wagner's statement to read: it doesn't matter how literate a writer's prose is or even how good of a writer he or she is; it matters whether the story connects to readers.

Finally, I'd also like to know what we do if a writer's best strengths lie exactly in those areas that have been mined before. Should he or she have to write something different merely because the basic concept has been done before? The rest of the world doesn't work this way. Nobody spends their time developing five-legged chairs just because three- and four-legged ones have already "been done."

I'm not advocating that literature of any kind should remain constantly static. There is nothing wrong with change either. But change should have a reason to take place. And change doesn't have to eliminate that which was good that went before.

Here, the way evolution *really* works might *be* a good analogy. Evolution often occurs when one group splits off from another and then evolves in isolation into a new species. This does not cause all members of the original population to suddenly drop dead. In fact, the new species and the old are likely to coexist for thousands, if not millions, of years.

Why can't we, then, have both traditional westerns and new wave westerns? Why can't we have traditional romances and paranormal ones? Why can't we have some new writers writing traditional heroic fantasy stories while others experiment with new approaches? Why must we have change for change's sake?

What do you think?

In my estimation, the most mysterious force in the universe is gravity. For one thing it, it works at distance in a vacuum. Although it weakens over long distances, yet an object, let us say another galaxy millions of lightyears away, does have an effect upon our earth. Albert Einstein proposed that where a lot of matter, such as our earth or a galaxy, are clumped together, the universe made a kind of a dent in the fabric of the universe. But what does this mean exactly? How can nothingness have a dent in it? Others have proposed the graviton, a particle that carries gravity with it like a photon carries light. But there is no experimental evidence for the graviton as far as I know.

According to the theory of relativity, gravitation arises out of spacetime being curved by the presence of mass, and is not a force. In quantum theories, either the graviton is the carrier of the gravitational force, or time-space itself is envisioned as discrete in nature, or both. As you can see, even the current theories do not agree as to the nature of gravity. There are some modern theories, such as string theory or M theory, that propose a theory that supercedes the other two and resolves their conflicts. I've read about these theories in Scientific American and certain science-oriented web sites. The more I read the more confused I get. Either the theories are so complicated that you have to be a mathematician and a physicist to understand them, or the people who write about them for the general public are not explaining them in ways that make them comprehensible to even the scientifically oriented layman. For example, in string theory, there are these loops which exist in ten dimensions, but of what do they consist and what are these other dimension? I can imagine a fourth and even a fifth dimension if time is the fourth, but after that I'm lost.

Another thing that puzzles me. Physicist and cosmologists say that gravity is propagated at the speed of light. Yet, I have not heard of experiments that prove this. It seems to me that some things would be different if gravity propagates instantaneously or at the speed of light or lower. For example, the planet Jupiter exerts a tremendous gravitational pull on other planets. Could this influence not be measured to enough accuracy to measure the speed of gravitational propagation?

One of the strangest thing about gravity is the existence of black holes. A black hole occurs when enough matter is gathered in one place so that the force of gravity becomes so strong that nothing can escape

from its pull not even light. Black holes have strange properties.

The "surface" of a black hole is the so-called event horizon, an imaginary surface surrounding the mass of the black hole. At the event horizon, the escape velocity is equal to the speed of light. Thus, anything inside the event horizon, including a photon, is prevented from escaping across the event horizon by the extremely strong gravitational field. Particles from outside this region can fall in, cross the event horizon, and are never be able to leave.

Objects in a gravitational field experience a slowing down of time, called time dilation. Near the event horizon, the time dilation increases rapidly. To the distant observer, a falling object's movement slows down, approaching but never reaching the event horizon.

Spacetime inside the event horizon of an uncharged non-rotating black hole is peculiar in that the singularity is in every observer's future, so all particles within the event horizon move inexorably towards it. Once an object is inside the event horizon, its time-line contains an end-point to time itself, and no possible world lines come back out through the event horizon.

T-Press News (con't)

listed above, and to whatever other little surprises life throws on the road before us. The way we do it now is a bit cumbersome at times, but it is familiar, and no one has to spend any time figuring out why something isn't working... We've been doing it long enough to know how all the pieces fit. But complacency leads to stagnation, and we want to keep everything fresh.

T-Press is developing a small online presence. We do have an at-present infrequently-updated Facebook page, and we encourage fans of our books and the *Illuminata* to become fans. We also have all of our authors and books listed at Goodreads.com, which we find to be an excellent resource for connecting readers to authors, and to each other. So, we encourage our readers to become fans of our books and authors there as well. Social Media is not our strongest suit at the moment, but as we increase our online presence in the months to come, we hope to see that change.

As always, I look forward to feedback and comments from our readers and fans. Let me know where you would like to see the *Illuminata* go in the years to come.

Thank you for sticking with me all these years.

Reviews

Blindsight

Peter Watts

Tom Doherty, 2006

ISBN-13: 978-0-7653-1964-7

374 pages

Review by Daniele Parker

I always feel a bit bad when an author lays out his premises in his book like he's working a Bach fugue—layering, developing, reinforcing his themes with character, plot, and analogy, industriously pumping the pedals up to the all-stops-out booming climax—and then I fast-forward his thundering edifice down to a sound-bite for a one-page book review. Oh deflation.

But when a book's about ideas, you've *got* to talk about the ideas in the review. So sorry, Mr. Watts. 374 pages for you, and one for me. So if I miss a few notes, fumble a few points, you can forgive me.

Blindsight belongs to the venerable science fiction genre of First Contact stories. One evening, alien machines visit the Earth and snap-shot the entire planet from orbit. Then they self-destruct before anyone can inspect them, but Earth soon learns a message has gone out to someone... or something. When the transmitter is discovered, and found to be a decoy, Earth sends out an investigative team to track down the real aliens.

It's slow going before the showdown, because there's no magic faster-than-light in this future. The team gets a splice of vampire gene and a predatory vampire captain to help them survive their years-long cold sleep, and when they wake up, they're face-to-face with a mysterious solo gas giant. The aliens are headed our way, and the team has to figure out what they are, what they want, and maybe save Earth.

That's the classically simple premise, but this is far from a simple book. *Blindsight* was nearly too freighted with ideas to wade through at times. But like the best science fiction, the mirror Watts holds up is focused on humanity as much as it is on the alien.

I give the author credit for taking on some unusually daring questions in his work. Some of his questions include *what is the nature of consciousness* and, more important, *what is its value?* Is self-awareness a survival trait, or is it an evolutionary dead-end? If we meet intelligent aliens, will they *think*? Will they be something completely different from our own self-aware, gene and DNA-based model?

Throughout the book the author tinkers with the whole concept of *mind* and *self-awareness*.

The protagonist of the story, Siri Keeton, has a surgically-damaged brain which precludes him from understanding his fellow humans in the normal sense. The vampire captain is an utterly cold cannibalistic predator and savant. The linguist has split her brain into four (or more) personas. Bates, the military expert, spreads her consciousness thin to control her robotic soldiers. Another scientist on the team has re-wired his entire sensory circuitry so he can taste what he sees, feel what he hears.

Then there's the protagonist's smothering mother, who downloads herself into a virtual Heaven, and his girlfriend, who insists on experiencing life in the polar opposite of touch-my-sweaty-flesh (but can't resist tinkering with her boyfriend's mind, either). And the aliens, in turn, play various hallucinatory and tricky mind games with the investigative team.

An untouched frontier of science even in our day is an understanding of the true nature of consciousness. How we form subjective self-awareness is too elusive to fully grasp. The mind seems more than the sum of its physical parts.

But every day now, we're poking the brain with a stick. The author points out in his notes that "...*Sony has already patented a machine that uses ultrasonics to implant 'sensory experiences' directly in the brain. They're calling it an entertainment device with massive applications for future gaming. Uh-huh. And if you can place sights and sounds into someone's head from a distance, why not plant political beliefs and the irresistible desire for a certain brand of beer while you're at it?*" Are you getting queasy yet?

In the modern day we look at science and religion as two polar opposites with nothing in common. Mutual scorn rules.

But Science operating without moral and ethical constraints may be a more frightening scenario for the future than the past sins of faith. It's not enough to say *in the name of pure science* or *we do it because we can*. Religion exists for many reasons, and attempts to figure out *what we should do* (or *what we shouldn't do*) for our own good are two of the better reasons.

We brought to life the atomic bomb, nerve gas and heroin in the name of scientific investigation. Where do we go next? I can't help but hope a lot of scientists are on their knees praying to some kind of Deity that what we do in the future in the name of scientific advancement won't be worse than what we've already done to ourselves. Sony, are you listening?

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 the first a series which already has, so far as I know, at least three books ('Cast in Courtligh' 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.

Consider Phlebas

Iain M. Banks

Orbit, 1987

ISBN 978-0-316-00538-8

Trade paperback, \$12.99

527 pages

Review by D. L. Parker

Any of you in the mood to straddle one of the giant red Chinese firecrackers, light the fuse behind your behind and roar through giant spaceships in a *Millennium Falcon* through the *Death Star* riff (blasting to shreds bystanders and police pursuit vessels en route)? Or, how about a hand-to-hand fight to the death between pirates, with all the gasps, crotch-slams, wrenched limbs, and slips in attendant blood? *Too tame?* How about an escape from a grossly fat cannibal who shreds his living victims using shark-like artificial fangs? *Now* are you in the mood?

Don't, as I did, finish Bank's *Consider Phlebas* just before bedtime. The story is not conducive to rest. Not to mention everyone, except a couple minor characters, dies a gory death, so you won't go to bed happy. The book's got a train wreck in it (I speak literally), and it is, more or less, a lengthy, prolonged train wreck of a story.

Horza, the shape-changing humanoid assassin used by the alien Idirans against the mostly human/A. I. Culture, careens from one tooth-and-nail struggle to the next. The anti-hero's on the side

Reviews

of the bad guys, but to give Banks due credit, he made me care enough about his villain to keep reading. At 500+ pages and late at night, that was quite an accomplishment. Of course I said there's a *real* train wreck at the end—so don't get too attached to any of the characters.

One of the Culture's fabulous A. I. Minds has taken refuge after a battle on an alien world protected by a super-advanced non-corporeal species. These particular aliens aren't involved in the human-Idiran war, but neither combatant particularly wants to tick them off.

But the chance to grab a Culture Mind is too much temptation for the Idirans. Horza is dispatched, runs into serious difficulties, spends most of the story blasting right and left en route, and finally gets to his target to find out the Idirans sent in a team already—and the fanatic A team on the spot wasn't told Horza was their ally.

You can read this book purely for the bam, slam, bash, crash, and explosions, which Banks does a fine job with, for the most part. It's easy to sneer at action adventure but hard to write it *well*: I should know, I've tried. And Banks manages to keep Horza a real character during the joyride. Not many writers could do that.

There's some deeper stuff in here for those who catch their breath enough to pay attention. The Idirans resemble, to a wincing degree, Islam at the height of its militaristic, religion-fueled expansion.

The Culture, on the other hand, too much resembles touchy-feely, pleasure-seeking, self-actualizing, American melting-pot inclusiveness (without religion, which is simply considered ridiculous. Banks doesn't miss a chance to make that point). Oh wow, *somebody* admires us. Baptists, Pentecostals, and Catholics removed, that is.

A few aspects of this story irritated me exceedingly. The egregious incident with the repellent cannibal, self-made god of his little island and his starving sick slaves, was the worst. This trumped-up gory digression hit us once again with Banks' religion-is-nuts theme. (We got that point already, thanks). Nor was I fond of the ending. Be warned: some of you will chuck the book across the room.

The best advice is to enjoy the ride. What a wild ride it is! You'll be out of breath trying to keep up. Just skip the cannibal, and enjoy the explosions.

Harp, Pipe, & Symphony

Paul di Filippo

Dorchester Publishing, 2004

ISBN-10: 0-8439-6070-1

288 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

I remember Paul di Filippo from a few hilarious, slightly bawdy short stories read years back. One depicted the "smart" household of the future and the naughty things an intelligent Aeron chair gone rogue could do to, or maybe *for*, its owner. Of course, it's probably best not to be in the kitchen when a smart house decides to party, but it was a hilariously funny story all the same. So when I finally saw Mr. di Filippo's name on a novel, I had to snatch it up.

How surprised I was to find I had a morality play in my hand instead of something bawdy. A morality play by any other name is usually a fairy tale. What *are* fairy tales, for the most part, but poor-but-good-gets-rewarded, bad-and-spoiled-meets-its-just-desserts?

But oh *dear*. If the Brothers Grimm had read Mr. di Filippo's fairy tale, the brothers would have had an apoplexy. No doubt they spin in their grave at the mention of Mr. di Filippo's name. Good Gets Reward, Bad Get Punished, got cut off at its knees.

Mr di Filippo's fairy tale owes more to Shelley's *Queen Mab* than to the worthy brothers. Shelley the atheist, I mean. But I'm not quite there with my analogy, still. Maybe Mr. di Filippo's fairy tale fits Bakunin more closely. You know: if God *did* exist, we'd have to abolish Him. *No Gods, No Masters*, to quote the title of my favorite anthology of anarchist doctrines (I believe in reading the Devil's Dictionary, just to know what he's up to). *Do What Thou Wilt* is the end of the Law. Talk about knocking Grimm off its moral pedestal.

Mr. di Filippo's fairy tales follows Thomas Rhymer (a fairy tale variant of the more famous Tam Lin, about a mortal man spirited off to Elfland). Young Thomas is an only son living with his widowed mother in a peasant cottage. Tom has one book he treasures more than the family Bible (which he doesn't seem to treasure), and that's Dante's *Divine Comedy*. You'll get it by the end of the book, believe me.

So on a dark and stormy night (of course) someone raps on the door. To his shock, Thomas sees a wild-haired version of himself when he opens the door. He naturally slams the door on this frightening apparition.

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But Thomas still can't get a good night's sleep. No sooner do son and mother lie down under their musty coverlets than a red-armored lot of supernatural bandits show up to torch the cottage, kill the sheep, and string up the inhabitants.

Thomas and Mother escape in the woods. The red bandits depart, job done, and a second set of supernatural visitors arrive on their heels, these in black armor. Foolish Thomas and Ma come forth to beg for help. They get it, *sort of*: Mother gets pressed in the mud to pray until she catches her death of the damp. Mom expires, and orphaned Thomas sets off to find his fortune in the world.

Only Queen Mab finds him first. In the company of two obvious moral archetypes, rascally cheat Natty and glum preacher Nathan, Thomas embarks on Queen Mab's quest. The first adventure takes him to the bestial murderous red men, who represent self pleasure and all kinds of fleshy wickedness. The second takes him to the gloomy black-and-whites, who are, of course, also all kinds of wickedness, the kind that flourishes in Puritan churches of the witch-burning variety. Two sides of the same coin, is Mr. di Filippo's point.

Now, I give any writer who bothers to ponder moral and ethical points a lot of credit. The author didn't stick to the usual chop-chop sword fights or vampire Sex God porn scenes. Good for him.

But I confess, when I finished Mr. di Filippo's morality play, I was so fumed and frustrated, I wanted to buttonhole the man. I entertained fantasies of ferreting out his email address and framing my rebuttal. Probably all six pages of it.

That's the problem with reading books that argue ethical or moral issues, of course. You're listening to a one-way argument. It's like the prosecution laying out all the damning points while you sit in the dock, disallowed a defense lawyer or even a chance for rebuttal. Someone else gets to do all the talking, and you're muzzled, and if you're an argumentative, opinionated soul, *choking* on it.

I can't expound in too much detail without doing Mr. di Filippo the disservice of a spoiler. But let me say this much. Mr. di Filippo's morality play compares Good and Evil and seems to tell us they're the same thing. Of course, the Good and Evil in this exposition are indeed the same thing, and that's Evil, *not* Good. So knock that leg out from under the table. *Crash*.

Do As Thou Wilt as the only moral compass might work for *me*, but I'm sure everyone else would disagree. The trouble is, someone's *Do As I Will* always turns into someone else's *Do As I Tell You*. You say no? Come

here, I could use someone to cook my breakfast. I *hate* looking at an egg on my plate that I've first seen in the raw. While you're at this *Do As I Tell You*, you can take care of my dirty laundry, too.

You can try reading this book as a simple fairy tale (with a few Grimm graphic scenes) if you like. But the moral points are too bang-head to miss. You might say, "Cool, man! I go for that!" Or you might disagree with them.

But it's true, Bakunin (or Crowley) still inspire. Come to think of it, I know plenty of *Do As I Tell You* believers who interfere in *my* everyday life. I just don't think of them as *heroes*. So read Mr. di Filippo's sly fairy tale and tell me what *you* think.

City of Souls (Zodiac, 4)

Vicki Pettersson

978-0061456787, \$7.99, Eos Publishing

Review by Rachel Olivier

In the fourth book of the Zodiac series, Vicki Pettersson once again pits Jo Archer not only against her own father, the Tulpa, but pretty much against everyone else in her life as well as she tries to figure out how to keep a young girl from dying. In *City of Souls*, Jo must face a series of life changing events and decisions, just as she has in the first three books. However, in *City of Souls*, these decisions and events feel more "adult." Not that they're more or less dramatic or life-threatening. But whether the events have been brought on by decisions Jo made in her past or appear to come at her via Fate, they are much more "grown-up" in theme. The vestiges of whiny, angst/anger-filled teenager Jo are being burned out of her as she is forced to see, more than normal, how gray real life is – black and white do not truly exist. While the Tulpa is the accepted villain of the piece, for example, Warren, her Troop Leader, feels more and more like the true betrayer.

I liked this story. I liked the tough choices that Pettersson is making as a writer and I hope she continues to make them. Personally, I would like to see Jo Archer not only kick the Tulpa's ass, but also kick Warren's ass and take over the Las Vegas troop. But I think it is refreshing to see an adult woman heroine making adult decisions and not knee jerk adolescent reactions. I'm not sure if that is what is in store for our heroine. Others will point out that Eos Publishing might be more interested in making sure this heroine gets her hero love interest and the 10 happy babies that romance readers crave by the end of the series. We'll have to wait for the next book to come out to see what direction Pettersson takes with Jo's life.

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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 Marine

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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.

SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.

— Darko Suvin

Necropath

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!

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New Amsterdam

Elizabeth Bear

Subterranean Press, 2007, 267 pgs

ISBN-10: 978-1-59606-163-7

Review by Danielle Parker

If you go to a sci fi con, among the left-over Renaissance Faire costumes and the Goths, you'll see the more stylish devotees of steam punk. The women may wear one of those lovely white Victorian blouses and ladylike leather boots. I've seen fewer male fans of the style, and so far, thank heaven, no handlebar mustaches. But handlebar mustaches and sideburns may affront my eyes in the future. Steam punk's up and coming.

OK, exactly what *is* steam punk? A riff on Victorian, obviously. This was the era when the future arrived. Electricity and the whole concept of the machine; mad scientists and Captain Nemo. The Mysterious Island and invaders from Mars. Scientific boundaries expanding without visible limit. An era when men could believe in death rays and trips to the Moon. True, the atomic bomb hadn't yet appeared to truly scare the pants off them. So it was an era of optimism unless you were Tiny Tim.

When a book starts out with a zeppelin (hydrogen fueled, no less) and vampires, we know we're in an alternate 19th century. Elizabeth Bear's *New Amsterdam* is a collection of short stories featuring the Great Detective (presumptuously usurping Sherlock's title), Don Sebastian de Ulloa, and his partner, Lady Abigail Irene Garrett.

Don Sebastian is the vampire, a somewhat frail and gentle Chelsea Quinn Yarbo style blood sucker who does not kill his victims. Lady Abigail is the Crown sorceress and detective who has an un-Victorian penchant for love affairs. Power's the aphrodisiac: she doesn't go for the hunky janitors. Princes, Dukes and vampires are more her thing.

Besides the usual sorceries, possessions, and gruesome murders investigated by Lady Abigail and her considerate lover Sebastian, we have a backdrop of American colonies struggling to be free of the arrogant British. Lady Abigail's not a believer until she's shafted by her ruthless lover the Duke (the assignments could get difficult to juggle. And wow! She's fifty. I admire this woman). Lady Abigail used to appreciate the Duke for that very quality of tough, but of course the aphrodisiac of power is never so pretty when one's own head is lined up in the sights. Bye-bye, God Save

the King. Hell hath no fury, as they say, though in this case, old-fashioned British honor's at stake.

So Lady Abigail, Don Sebastian, and the members of Sebastian's vampire "court"—pretty blonde Jack and Phoebe the Boston authoress—do a Benjamin Franklin and travel to Paris to win help for the patriots. Of course, to do *that*, they have a supernatural mystery to solve. Nothing's free in life, even in Paris.

I'm still looking for a steam punk book that gives the genre the boost into the stratosphere it needs. *New Amsterdam* is enjoyable but won't do the trick. The episodic approach of the book and the switching viewpoints make it easy to read but also easy to put down.

Still, the genre begins to fascinate me. I've got an idea for my own next book... how does mad rampaging steam trains sound? Oh. OK... I'm still working on it.

The New Encyclopedia of the Occult

John Michael Greer

Llewellyn Publications, 2007

ISBN 13: 978-1-56718-336-8

531 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

I once picked up a scholarly religious encyclopedia whose collective authors pursed their lips and looked aslant at their subject. They leavened their scholarly opinions on religious miracles with thoroughly modern scientific skepticism.

I suspect when they told of the walls of Jericho and their famous collapse, they considered various scientific theories on how this *might* have happened, sans Godly intervention. If some Biblical place, person, or event didn't have physical proof of existence, such should be, and often was, duly noted. I think they stopped short of calling all prophets delusional nuts, but I did suspect the thought was *somewhere* in the back of their minds. They were just too tactful to trot out the actual clinical diagnoses.

Needless to say, this high-minded skepticism was annoying. I *did* want to know historical and archeological findings of the modern day. But I *didn't* really care for the approach that there must be a scientific explanation for every miracle (or merely a delusional nut somewhere). I suppose I was looking for an attitude between breathless wide-eyed literalism and Doubting Thomas prove-it-or-else.

Ah, but for a little of that wonderful scientific doubt in modern occult works! In the course of my research for my second novel, I picked up books that claimed,

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straight-faced, Tarot card divination harked back to the ancient Egyptians, in spite of the fact the first decks known date only to the 14th or 15th century. Just about every occult society that has ever existed has invented a mystical origin (Egyptian and Eastern being favorites, and of course, there's always King Solomon). But a cursory check of their *actual* history reveals no more than the vivid imagination of their founding fathers.

And there just didn't seem to be any work on the occult which combined a scholarly truthfulness with an open mind. That is, until I found Mr. Greer's work, *The New Encyclopedia of the Occult*.

Unlike the collection of doctorate-decorated agnostics who wrote my Biblical encyclopedia, Mr. Greer is an actual practitioner in the Western occult tradition, so he doesn't sneer at his subject. But he's also that rarity in the occult world, a clear-eyed historian with a wry appreciation of the foibles of human nature.

I bought the book to research a few topics for my second novel, but I ended up reading it cover-to-cover. What a colorful history modern occult societies have! Few soap operas encompass the scope of their founders' spite, power struggles and rivalries; no science fiction could match the depth of their invention. Greer's work is far from an expose, but he doesn't skimp on the colorful facts. Yet he writes with humor and sympathy. It's a rare balance.

If you're researching, or simply interested in, any topic related to Western mysticism, from Greek, Hebrew, Gnostic, pagan, Christian and Celtic to modern-day Scientology or dowsing, this is the book for you. Greer covers historical figures and occult societies, occult terms (quick: define *cledomancy* for me), occult theories, Platonic theory... you name it.

And it's just fun to read. Did you know the Elizabethan John Dee invented a language to summon angels? You can judge for yourself whether he ever succeeded, but his history is just one of the fascinating stories in this book.

Greer's encyclopedia is, however, seriously short of depth in Eastern occult related topics. I hope he expands his encyclopedia to include more of the Eastern traditions in future releases.

But still, his current work remains an unsurpassed overview of the Western occult traditions and a fun read on its own. Go for it.

P. S. While we're on the topic of the occult, another work I recommend is the multipart series *The Occult History of the Third Reich*. It's a sobering look at the occult underpinnings of what may be the most successful

black magic cult in history (available in DVD or as a book of the same title).

Then while you're at it, throw in Paul Roland's *The Nazis and the Occult: The Dark Forces Unleashed by the Third Reich* and (as a sobering companion book) Ladislav Fajst's ground-breaking *Aftermath: Martin Bormann and the Fourth Reich*. The last is now difficult to find, but read it if you can get your hands on a copy.

Merry, Merry Ghost

Carolyn Hart

Book 2 of the Bailey Ruth Mysteries

978-0060874377

\$15.99

William Morrow Publishing

Review by Rachel Olivier

This is the second of the Bailey Ruth Mysteries, a cross-genre mystery series written by Carolyn Hart. Bailey Ruth is a woman who died at sea while on a boat with her husband sometime in the past. I got the feeling it was sometime in the 1980s or 90s. These days Bailey Ruth spends her time in Heaven trying to be useful. She was an active community member in her small town in Oklahoma and she wants to be active in Paradise as well. Enter Wiggins, who sends souls down to Earth to help when humans need a push in the right direction or pull from the brink of the wrong direction.

In the first book, Bailey Ruth is sent down to help a relative but breaks a number of rules while she is on the earthly plane. In the second book, Wiggins comes back to her, despite his misgivings, because people in her hometown are again reaching a crisis and will need some divine help to create the right outcome for all involved. It is Christmas a little boy, who has lost both parents, is dropped off on a door step of his extended family, who don't even know he exists. In fact, his very existence is a threat to them because it means that they possibly could inherit much less than they would if he had never showed up. Enter Bailey Ruth, who has been asked to watch over him until he is settled and safe. Only, she's supposed to be watching over his grandmother as well. Between one thing and another, Bailey Ruth gets distracted and the grandmother is murdered before she can change her will and make sure her newfound grandson is set. It is up to Bailey Ruth to set things right as she creatively figures out nudge the humans in the right directions to solve the crime and protect a little boy at the same time.

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This was a pleasant Christmas treat to read. While it had the relaxing atmosphere of an English cozy murder mystery, it also had the other elements I look for in a fun book – fantasy elements, characters I care about, and no excessive use of sex or violence or horror (not that I don't enjoy those things, but it's nice when they aren't pushed into one's face). If you're looking for a book that will push both the mystery buttons and the scifi/fantasy buttons in your brain, then I recommend this one. It's a nice speculative fiction vacation from some of the overly serious works out there.

The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are the things you get ashamed of because words diminish your feelings - words shrink things that seem timeless when they are in your head to no more than living size when they are brought out.

— Stephen King

The Automatic Detective

A. Lee Martinez

Tor, 2008

ISBN-10: 0-7653-5794-1

317 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

What makes comic books one of the more addictive creations in existence? They stand somewhere between a book and a movie, those colorful pages with their little bubbles of dialog. I suspect most of us go through a stage of absolute comic book addiction, and some of us never get out of it.

In fact, it's probably a good guess that Japan consumes more comics than books. Of course they call them *graphic novels* now, but they're still comics. My addiction was in the fourth grade, and while I never liked Superman (I preferred nerdy Clark Kent), I ate up Batman. If my source, a neighbor kid, hadn't dried up, I might be reading them still.

The Automatic Detective is a comic book short of the pictures. That really annoyed me when I read it. Here was the perfect comic book adventure, the bang-up battles, the seven-foot hero, the clichés coming thick but still tongue-in-cheek, and nary a picture but on the

cover. True, the cover *is* lurid enough, but who's the brunette? Didn't anyone tell that artist blondes are the classics in detective novels? The author knows. He's got blondes in the book. Why didn't someone take that artist aside and explain what a faux pas he made with his brunette? Though he did get the bust correct. And you don't want to know this cup size. They do make supersized in more than fast food meals.

As you might guess, *The Automatic Detective* is a comic book in prose. The trench coat wearing dick is Mack Megatron, a seven-foot metal bot striving to earn proper citizenship in Empire City. He's a probational citizen, since he was originally designed by a mad scientist to Ravage and Conquer the World. Having Free Will, however, Mack overcame his blood lust and tries to be good boy (though he still needs therapeutic smashing and bashing sessions). Just a little more good behavior, and he'll be a full-fledged citizen. If he can just *hang* on and conquer those urges...

But there's still a need for a bot who likes to smash and bash in Empire City. Mack's next door neighbors are visited by a thug. Mack tries to intervene, but the frightened family shoo him off. Then Ma, Pa, the little boy and the little girl vanish.

But little April is a clairvoyant who gets glimpses of the future. She manages to pass Mack a note. *Find us*, it says.

No self-respecting soft-hearted metal monster could resist such a plea. Soon Mack's on the lam from his cab driver job, on the hunt for the thug and his killer drone friends. Aliens pop up, and lustful blondes too (though this blonde lusts for Mack's technology). Mack enlists the aid of his gorilla friend (take gorilla literally here), not to mention a tough but sympathetic cop, and soon the blood, the bits of metal, and the clichés fly. Mack, Savior of the World! He even wins that citizenship.

As you tell, this is a light hearted book which doesn't take itself too seriously. I'm not sure there's a single cliché of the pulp detective genre the author doesn't take in vain, but it's intentional fun. Yes, Mack gets a trench coat. Yes, Mack gets the blonde girl (though since he's metal and she's flesh and blood, I rather scratch my head over how this romance will work out in the long term). Yes, Mack gets plenty of outlet for his smash and bash. It really should have been in a comic book.

But read it for fun, and picture those bright colorful pages as they should be seen—with the little bubbles of dialog hovering by their mouths. Ah, the joy of comic books!

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The Man with the Golden Torc

Simon R. Green

2007, Roc

ISBN-13: 978-0-451-46145-2

393 Pages

Review by Danielle Parker

If I had to create a Simon R. Green alphabet, we would start, of course, with *A for Action* (although it could equally be *A for Attitude*, or *A for Anti-Establishment*), *B for Bam!* onward to *W for Wham!*, and, of course, *Z for Zombies*.

You might gather from this (especially if you've read Green's unique and somewhat better *Nightside* series) that there's plenty of slash, smash, crash, and burn in his work. His heroes have not just a chip on their muscular shoulders, but a whole mountain. They're *always* rebels. That's because whatever represents the Establishment in Green's novels is always hypocritical and hollow, masquerading as Good while in fact thoroughly Bad. The Bad Guys in Green's novels are really the Good Guys. Are you confused yet?

Green can, of course, carry this Good-is-Bad, Bad-is-Good switch much too far. In "The Man with the Golden Torc", we have Jack the Ripper (I ask you, *Jack the Ripper?*!) fighting on the side of the Good Guys. I should say, old Jack fights for the Bad Guys who are really the Good Guys. I'm afraid this didn't just stretch my envelope of belief. It burst the molecular structure of it into ten thousand little pieces. *Jackie Boy*, I never knew you were so sadly misunderstood. You're just a poor lonely laddie who likes to play with entrails.

But Green's enthusiastic embrace of the oddball, the bizarre, and the misunderstood rebel aside, his books are usually fun. They mix wildly colorful characters with black humor and horror; attitude with action; irreverence (downright blasphemy, even) with a rather touching affection for the iconoclastic rebel. The heroes are really romantics masquerading as cynics. They come right in the end, in spite of the company they keep (though I advise Eddie Drood, the hero of "The Man with the Golden Torc", to stay away from Jack in sequels).

As the story opens, we find Eddie, scion and agent of the Drood (deriving from "Druid") family, doing his job. His job, and the self-appointed mission

of the whole family since time immemorial, is Smash Bad Guys. Of course, Eddie *looves* his work.

Eddie's a bit of a rebel as the book opens, but not much of one (he *is* fond of clothes that say *Attitude*, like leather jackets, but that's about it. Why not safety pins in the nose, and pink mohawks, I ask you? As I said, his heart isn't really into the rebel deal, at least not yet). In fact, when the Drood Matriarch says Here's One for Smashing, Eddie goes right out without question and does the deed. Mommy Drood must know best. *Bam! Wham! SMASH!* Eddie's got plenty of fancy toys to help with the job, and of course, there's always the Drood super weapon – a gold torc that can turn into golden Super Armor.

But something goes terribly wrong in Eddie's fashion-rebel world. He's set up for an ambush while supposedly transporting a precious family heirloom, a mystic supernaturally powered diamond called the Soul of Albion, to a safe place. Everything but the kitchen sink tries to whack him en route. He has to fight off the whole caboodle: elves and dragons, UFOs, CARnivores (cars gone feral), and... well, there's too long of a list to mention here. More *bam, wham, smash*. Eddie finds out it was all a trick anyway -- he was never given the diamond. The box is EMPTY!

Without a doubt, Eddie's on the official Drood Bad Guys list. Now's he's a *real* rebel, not just a leather jacket one. Drood Mommy won't say what made him the black sheep, and his super-agent, Bondian-cool Uncle's gunning for him, as well as various spiteful cousins.

What's Eddie to do? He turns to the Bad Guys for help (Jack, a witch, a sort of neo-fascist lot, and other colorful characters). What deep, dark, dirty secret is the Family hiding? (Remember, the Establishment ALWAYS has a deep, dark, dirty secret in a Green novel). Is there a traitor in the Family? Has Eddie been on the wrong side all along? Did he *really* misunderstand poor lonely Jackie?

It comes right in the end, of course. You know that. In fact, if you've read Green's *Nightside* series, you just about know from page one how this is going to work out: the author has his fixations. But the ride's still wild enough to be fun. Get on board!

Reviews

The New Space Opera

Edited by Gardner Dozois and Jonathan Strahan

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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. I like that about an editor.

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 sniffled at the start of the scene, and by the last throb, couldn't pretend he had a cold any longer. He was frankly bawling.

So Dozois and I are in agreement on at least what *defines* space opera. Space opera's been around long enough that Dozois can quote Wilson Tucker's sneering 1941 definition of "the hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn space-ship yarn". But then, as Dozois points out, along came Jack Vance, Poul Anderson, A. E. van Vogt, and many other worthy stars, who painted the genre with 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 Tiamaat*). 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*. And the most space operatic in the collection, that tale of the dreamer who brings a musical *Maelstrom* to Mars.

For again, what is opera, if not emotion and pathos 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 often confuse *scientific scope* with *emotional scope*. It's as if the original space opera were writ in lurid color; Dozois' New Space Opera in black, white and grayscale. That over-the-top zest is mostly missing.

But one or two of the stories in this collection get space opera right. And though most don't make it as true space opera to my mind, the collection is still excellent. Highly recommended. Get it.