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# VISIONS of paradise

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## *Out of the Depths*

I like using the word "sfnal." It is an apt abbreviation for the phrase "science fictional," a natural contraction in the spirit of fannish writing. I have no idea when I first began using it, or whether I began abbreviating it myself or else saw it used elsewhere and merely borrowed it.

A few months ago I was searching online for reviews of **Nanking 1937**. The easiest way to do is to do a Google search under either my or Fei Fei's name. This time I used my own name and I stumbled upon the address <http://www.jessesword.com/sf/view/227>. Apparently this is a site entitled "Science Fiction Citations" whose announced purpose is "Hunting for the earliest citations of SF words". The word they

happened to be researching on this page was "sfnal."

This is the result of their search:

*Full record for sfnal adj.*

*Definition:* abbreviation for science-fictional

OED requirements: antedating 1981

*Earliest cite:* Robert Sabella in **Science Fiction Review**

*Comment:* Jeff Prucher submitted 1998 citations from Gary K. Wolfe and Faren Miller in **Locus**.

Jeff Prucher submitted a 1998 cite from Jack Dann in **Nebula Award Stories 32**.

Jeff Prucher submitted a 2002 cite from Rich Horton in **3SF**.

Jeff Prucher submitted a 1999 cite from Robert Killheffer's review column in **F&SF**.

Jeff Prucher submitted a 1994 cite from an editorial by Kristine Rusch in **F&SF**.

Jeff Prucher submitted a 1981 cite from Robert Sabella in **SF Review**.

*Last modified:* 9 March, 2005

I guess what this means is that as of last March I am the official originator of the word "sfnal." Of course, nobody realizes that except a few visitors to that website and readers of **VoP**. Until, of course, somebody finds an earlier usage than mine, at which time my official 15 minutes of not-quite-fame will come to an abrupt end.

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In the past several decades there has been a lot of talk in fandom about American prozines dying, and that talk has accelerated in recent years as their circulations have dropped to precarious, almost semi-prozine, levels. That would upset me since my sf reading career started with prozines in the 1960s, and I have long, pleasant memories of reading them.

The first prozines I read regularly were **Galaxy** and **Worlds of IF** in the mid-to-late 1960s when Frederik Pohl was their editor. **IF** was lighter reading, adventures that were more fun than lasting value. Of course there were exceptions to that, such as Robert Heinlein's **The Moon is a Harsh Mistress** and occasional short fiction as Roger Zelazny's "This Mortal Mountain" and Samuel R. Delany's "Driftglass." **Galaxy** printed the more serious fiction such as Clifford D. Simak's *Here Gather the Stars* (later retitled **Way Station**), Jack Vance's "The Dragon Masters" and "The Last Castle," and Cordwainer Smith's "The Dead Lady of Clown Town." These stories combined all the ingredients I loved in science fiction: sense of wonder, exotic far-future settings, thoughtfulness, and fascinating characters, all wrapped around a serious character-driven plot.

When Frederik Pohl quit as editor in 1969, both **Galaxy** and **IF** degenerated into clones of 1960s **Analog**: more technological stories, less exotic settings, more adventure plots. The exceptions were mostly their serials, largely because Robert Silverberg published many of his novels there, such as **A Time of Changes**, **Tower of Glass**, and **Dying Inside**.

By and large, my favorite prozine of the 1970s was **Analog**, where Ben Bova broadened the scope considerably, to some extent resembling the **Galaxy** of the 1960s more than the John W. Campbell Jr. **Analog** of that period. He published a lot of George R.R. Martin, particularly **Dying of the Light** and "A Song For Lya," as well as Roger Zelazny's "Home Is the Hangman" and Robert Silverberg's **Shadrach in the Furnace**.

Another good prozine in the 70s was Edward R. Ferman's **Fantasy & Science Fiction**. At that time it was the only major prozine which printed both fantasy and horror as well as science fiction, so perhaps one-half of each issue really appealed to my reading taste. But their science fiction was good: a lot of Michael Bishop, particularly "The White Otters of Childhood" and "The Samurai and the Willows", Robert Silverberg's **The Stochastic Man** (it seemed as if Silverberg was providing the highlights of all the prozines in that decade), and Richard Cowper's "Piper At the Gates of Dawn" and "The Custodians."

Then we came into the 1980s. I was not a fan of Stanley Schmidt's **Analog** since it returned to the technological / adventure bent of the latter Campbell years, and Edward Ferman's **F&SF** was become less interesting. The real action was taking place at **Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine** where Shawna McCarthy and Gardner Dozois raised it above the simplistic adventures of the George Scithers years and published some very serious, high quality science fiction: Connie Willis' "Fire Watch," John Varley's "Press Enter," Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild," Roger Zelazny's "Twenty-four Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai," and Lucius Shepard's "R&R."

The problem, as I saw it, was that Gardner Dozois gradually broadened the scope of **Asimov's** too much. Not content with printing the best science fiction of any prozine, he also printed pure fantasy (mostly contemporary fantasy), horror, and even an occasional mainstream experimental story. So while Asimov's represented the cutting edge of science fiction in that decade, half of each issue was generally non-SF.

And that's still where the three prozines basically still are today: Asimov's prints the most important science fiction intermingled with contemporary fantasy; **Analog** specializes in technological, and adventure fiction; **F&SF** intermingles SF, fantasy, and horror.

Several other American prozines and semi-prozines tried to fill in the gaps in the past two decades, but publishing being the risky business it is, none of them have maintained a high profile for very long. Algis Budrys' **Tomorrow Speculative Fiction** printed pure science fiction, mostly from new young writers, and tended to run the gamut of the genre. **Science Fiction Age** was a slick, multi-media affair, whose fiction started out weak and got steadily stronger before its abrupt demise. **Interzone** has been a strong magazine for many years, although its circulation has always been so low it is almost really the best of the semi-prozines.

In fact, semi-prozines are rapidly becoming the center of short fiction publishing, along with small press original anthologies and online publishing, but can they take up the slack to a larger, rather than lesser, extent? My choice for the best sf prozine currently being published is **Postscripts**, which is a quarterly zine published by PS Publishing. While it is unlikely science fiction will ever die, the real possibility exists that its future lies back in the ghetto it thought it had escaped.

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It is time for me to make my annual selections for my favorite book and album of the past year. There are no restrictions as to date of publication/release, only the best that I read or heard for the first time in the previous calendar year.

The best book I read all year was easily the first book I read last January: *The Etched City*, by K. J. Bishop. What a fabulous book it was, reminiscent of China Mieville's **Perdido Street Station** in its evocation of a strange new world. As I said in my review of it last issue, *if I were to list all the aspects of the "perfect" novel as I see it, **The Etched City** contains all of them in varying degrees. It is the type of novel which comes along too infrequently, and which I recommend wholeheartedly.*

If I were to select a runner-up for the honor, it would probably be Jack McDevitt's **Polaris**, a fabulous combination of future history and mystery.

My favorite album was Green Day's *American Idiot*, a well-constructed concept album from a band which started out as a simple punk band but have evolved into the finest rock band in America without losing any of their enthusiasm.

Runner-up here would be Richard Thompson's **Live from Austin, TX**. He is the most consistent singer-songwriter in my pantheon, and this live set demonstrates all of his strengths.

## Books of the Year

Year	Book	Author
1966	The Dream Master	Roger Zelazny
1967	Lord of Light	Roger Zelazny
1968	Nova	Samuel R. Delany
1969	Nightwings	Robert Silverberg
1970	Downward to the Earth	Robert Silverberg
1971	To Your Scattered Bodies Go	Philip Jose Farmer
1972	Dying Inside	Robert Silverberg
1973	Malevil	Robert Merle
1974	The Dispossessed	Ursula K Le Guin
1975	Ragtime	E.L. Doctorow
1976	Brothers of Earth	C.J. Cherryh
1977	Gateway	Frederik Pohl
1978	Dreamsnake	Vonda N. McIntyre
1979	The Road to Corlay	Richard Cowper
1980	The Snow Queen	Joan Vinge
1981	Downbelow Station	C.J. Cherryh
1982	No Enemy But Time	Michael Bishop
1983	The Armageddon Rag	George R.R. Martin
1984	The Wild Shore	Kim Stanley Robinson
1985	Ender's Game	Orson Scott Card
1986	Speaker for the Dead	Orson Scott Card
1987	The Shore of Women	Pamela Sargent
1988	An Alien Light	Nancy Kress
1989	Grass	Sherri S. Tepper
1990	The Fall of Hyperion	Dan Simmons
1991	Buddy Holly is Alive and Well on Ganymede	Bradley Denton

1992	Red Mars	Kim Stanley Robinson
1993	Green Mars	Kim Stanley Robinson
1994	Brittle Innings	Michael Bishop
1995	Wild Swans	Jung Chang
1996	Beloved	Toni Morrison
1997	Dream of the Red Chamber	Cao Xueqin and Gao E
1998	Ship Fever	Andrea Barrett
1999	Stones From the River	Ursula Hegi
2000	The Moon and the Sun	Vonda N. McIntyre
2001	Perdido Street Station	China Miéville
2002	An Instance of the Fingerpost	Iain Pears
2003	A Dream of Scipio	Iain Pears
2004	The Last Light of the Sun	Guy Gavriel Kay
2005	The Etched City	K.J. Bishop

## Albums of the Year

Year	Album	Artist
1967	Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band	The Beatles
1968	Bookends	Simon and Garfunkel
1969	To Our Children's Children's Children	The Moody Blues
1970	Bridge Over Troubled Water	Simon and Garfunkel
1971	The Yes Album	Yes
1972	The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust	David Bowie
1973	The Dark Side of the Moon	Pink Floyd
1974	Preservation Act 2	The Kinks
1975	Born to Run	Bruce Springsteen
1976	Turnstiles	Billy Joel
1977	Bat Out of Hell	Meat Loaf

1978	Darkness on The Edge of Town	Bruce Springsteen
1979	Damn the Torpedoes	Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers
1980	The River	Bruce Springsteen
1981	Long Distance Voyager	The Moody Blues
1982	Night and Day	Joe Jackson
1983	The Present	The Moody Blues
1984	Man on the Line	Chris de Burgh
1985	Songs from the Big Chair	Tears for Fears
1986	Graceland	Paul Simon
1987	The Joshua Tree	U2
1988	Volume One	The Traveling Wilburys
1989	Full Moon Fever	Tom Petty
1990	Stolen Moments	John Hiatt
1991	Places I Have Never Seen	Willie Nile
1992	Automatic for the People	R.E.M.
1993	Get a Grip	Aerosmith
1994	This Way Up	Chris De Burgh
1995	Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness	The Smashing Pumpkins
1996	Load	Metallica
1997	Ixnay on the Ombray	The Offspring
1998	The Philosopher's Stone	Van Morrison
1999	Quiet Revolution	Chris de Burgh
2000	All That You Leave Behind	U2
2001	Love and Theft	Bob Dylan
2002	Young, Guitar Days	Steve Forbert
2003	The Old Kit Bag	Richard Thompson
2004	Cropey	Fairport Convention
2005	American Idiot	Green Day

# *In Touch With Spirits*

## *Terry Jeeves*

Some people must think I'm a sucker, or at least I'm like the wash on the line, just waiting to be taken in. Anyway, they keep accosting me in pubs and suchlike, places with offers of free books, free love or free soul-saving. That's how I met Vishnu Ramasjudder. I had just commenced a scientific experiment involving the specific gravity of a complex liquid and had barely blown off the froth when this bewhiskered Indian geezer sat down opposite me.

He wore a black beard and on his head one of those turbans that Indian chappies wear. Leaning towards me, he produced a slip of paper from somewhere in his face fungus and handed it to me. In large black letters it said, **VISHNU RAMASJUDDER**, in smaller print came the legend, "*Medium, Seer and Occultist*" Near the bottom, in tiny print appeared '*Agent For Acme Shoe Polish*' and finally, in microscopic letters, "*Printed in Wigan*".

"Pleased to meet you, Mr.Ramasjudder", I said, "What made you pick on me?"

His eyes seemed to blaze with some hidden fire, but it could just have been cigarette smoke. "I was called to you as one in need of spirit contact from the vast beyond," said the medium, seer and occultist.

That reminded me of my pint. I removed the South end of his beard from my glass, squeezed a few surplus drops back into it and took a good swig. Something gave a jump in my throat, but it was probably just a hop.. Anyway, too late now, it had gone. So had the beer. I ordered another and asked Mr.Ramasjudder if he would care for one.

"No sahib, it is forbidden for we of the Inner Circle to allow beer past our lips. Perhaps I may have a double whisky instead, but only if it is 'Johnny White Horse, as their distillery is located at the Third Focal Point of the Great Pachyderm."

The drinks came and Mr.Ramasjudder began explaining the Inner Meaning of his Life Cycle. It proved to be a long story and several times Ramasjudder had to replenish his fuel tanks, each time at my expense. As Mr.Ramasjudder explained, another rule of his Order was that he was not allowed to touch money. By the call of "Time, Gentleman," I was beginning to see it has advantages. It was at this point that Ramasjudder invited me to accompany him to his home for a consultation with the spirit world. I could already feel a certain warmth of spirit, so I agreed.

We took a taxi (apparently his rules also barred the use of public transport) to a dingy street in the East End. Once there, Ramasjudder led me up a scruffy alleyway, through a rickety unpainted door and up a narrow stairway to his room. I was struck by his thoughtfulness for others when he insisted we go on tiptoe to avoid waking his landlady. We entered a gloomy garret lit by one small bulb. Several other rules of the Order were immediately apparent. They obviously frowned on wallpaper, laundries, washing in general and the use of any bulb larger than 15 watts. On the other hand, judging by the empty bottles, they were clearly strong supporters of glass reclamation projects, and in Ramasjudder, they had a strong adherent.

"Take a seat on the bed, oh Sahib", said the seer. Turning away from me he fiddled with something. There was the sound of pouring water and the Mystic placed a goldfish in a jam jar up on a shelf before turning and producing an oddly shaped crystal ball. "Sahib, before we use the Magic Crystal, we must first drink a glass of the true nectar blessed by the Inner Circle".

So saying, he picked up a black bottle and two empty jam jars, into each of which he poured some amber liquid. "You Sahib, are unused to the dangerous evil. forces of the Great Pachyderm and must be protected against them by the addition of this powder. Sadly, I only have enough for one of us, so I must take my chances." Saying this he unwrapped a spill of paper and poured a white powder into my jam jar.



"Now I will don my robes of Office and we will partake." He turned away to an old dressing-gown hanging on a nail and began to don it. It was at this moment a thought came to me. I couldn't let this kind, thoughtful gentleman run risks on my behalf. I must let him have the protective powder. Quick as a flash, I swapped the jam jars round.

Ramasjudder turned back, now wearing the tattered dressing-gown, picked up his jam jar and said, "Let us now drink to the Great Spirits that we may be enriched by their aid." He downed his potion and I did likewise. He made a motion over the crystal ball, almost as if he was brushing away dust and commanded me, "Look into the all-seeing globe and tell me what you can see".

I looked and was amazed. I had always thought it twaddle that anyone could see anything in a crystal ball, but I had been wrong. I could clearly see a large hole in the dirty tablecloth. I told him so. Mr. Ramasjudder had a little difficulty swallowing, but recovered and suggested I try again. He re-dusted the crystal and said slowly, "Look deep in the glass, do you feel sleepy?... you are feeling drowsy... you are falling.. asl-ee-eep". Mr. Ramasjudder fell across the table and began to snore. I was afraid for his soul at first, but then I saw he was merely sleeping soundly, so the powder must be protecting him. I lifted him onto the bed and was about to leave when I noticed a pile of pound notes sticking out from beneath his pillow. Clearly, some enemy, knowing his avoidance of money, had put them there to bring evil upon his head. Ramasjudder had risked his life for me, probably only my switching of the powder had saved him. The least I could do was to help him now. I slipped the money into my wallet and tiptoed out.

I never saw Mr. Ramasjudder again, but a few weeks later I was accosted by another bloke wearing a turbine. He said his name was Shiva Skuldujeri the Mystic Acrostic. As I said, I'm not a sucker. He drank beer, so he couldn't have been a Great Pachyderm. I bet Mr. Ramasjudder could have taught him a thing or two.

## *Wondrous Stories*

Some writers vary their style and theme from book to book, so that you never really know what to expect from them. Others tend to stay within broad (or in some case, narrow) limits, so that you generally know what a Larry Niven book will be like before you buy it, or an Anne McCaffrey book or countless other authors. Jack Vance is the latter type of writer. When you pick up a Vance novel, you expect to read a futuristic travelogue ranging across either the continents of an exotic world populated with strange beings, whether human or alien, or perhaps across the entire Gaean Reach, his name for the populated portion of space. The plot will generally be rudi-mentary, more an excuse for his protagonist's travels than anything else, and will center either on a loose mystery (what is the identity of the Demon Prince or the Grey Prince?) or a series of cons or near-cons intended to improve somebody's financial situation.

Ports of Call and its sequel Lurulu contain a bit of all the above, some of it ranging with Vance's best writing, but some not quite in that category. It begins as a mystery. When Myron Tany's rich old aunt learns of the existence of a mysterious world where a person reportedly can regain their youth, she and Myron set off in a spacecraft to find that world. Along the way, she falls under the sway of a con man, and when Myron protests she unceremoniously kicks him off the ship and continues her quest without him.

Myron becomes a crewmember on a small cargo ship and spends the rest of both books traveling Gaean Reach transporting cargo. He and his shipmates engage in a series of adventures, some of them life-threatening, others merely threatening their profits. All the crewmembers exhibit elements of Vance's classic rogues (such as Cugel the Clever, perhaps his most famous rogue), but they are basically honest, hard-working men. None of their experiences are too threatening, so that these books fall more into the enjoyable travelogue category rather than being serious adventure thrillers.

Along the way, their cargo ship takes on several semi-permanent passengers. A troupe of pilgrims carrying their sacred cargo with them are the basis of several humorous scenes, particularly in their compulsive gambling with one of the crewmembers. A troupe of entertainers led by the disreputable Montcrief, and featuring his three lookalike girls Flook, Snook and Pook, cause regular trouble due to the troupe members' mutual distrust and Montcrief's basically dishonest nature.

Both Myron and the ship's captain Maloof, besides transporting cargo, are both seeking elder relatives—Myron his aunt and Maloof his mother—who have vanished into the Gaeen Reach under the sway of lovers turned captors. Both situations are resolved as easily and—at least to the two crewmembers—effortlessly as all their other adventures. It would have been nice if they had to struggle emotionally and physically a bit more to achieve their ends, but that is not Vance's purpose, nor is it ever his purpose, except in an occasional story such as "The Last Castle" which strives to explore his characters' depths.

**Lurulu** is weaker than **Ports of Call**, and it seemed as if Vance grew tired of the book halfway through **Ports of Call**, or else he found himself coming up against some self-imposed limit. Events in **Lurulu** begin rushing halfway through, and the leisurely pace became almost an outline of events as much as descriptions of the events themselves. But because of the light, playful nature of the books, that is not so much a serious problem as merely an inconvenience, and does not take away from all its other pleasures. Overall, these books are pleasant light reading.

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China Miéville has made himself a very tough act to follow. **Perdido Street Station** might be the best f&sf novel of the new century so far, while **The Scar** was a worthy award nominee. Thus it is impossible to read **Iron Council** without having a considerably-high level of expectation. Alas, I think Miéville stubbed his toe slightly on this one.

The novel opens with a group of misfits fleeing a militia while seeking a man named Judah who himself is seeking the mysterious Iron Council. This long section contains as many unanswered questions as it does exposition: Why are they seeking him? How do they know him? Why is he fleeing? Who is the mysterious man who from a vast distance is able to whisper into the mind of Cutter—the protagonist?

After this section the novel splits into two storylines. One storyline is contemporary to the opening sequence and is set in New Crobuzon, site of **Perdido Street Station**, where a man named Ori is seeking involvement in an underground movement against the city's totalitarian government. This portion contains one outstanding scene showing Miéville at the top of his form, a theater scene commemorating a revolutionary martyr who was more likely a murderous thug.

The other storyline drifts back several decades to when Judah was involved in the creation of the Iron Council. This is the best portion of the novel, more colorful than the portions set in New Crobuzon, and also considerably more exciting. But it takes 150 pages of meandering to reach it, and it only covers 150 of the book's 550 pages. What happens afterwards is much less interesting, and spends much of its time meandering in New Crobuzon before returning to the Iron Council again.

My major complaint with **Iron Council** is that it is not sufficiently engaging. Miéville does not get into the heads of any of the characters whose motivations and personalities are virtually nonexistent the entire book. Their actions are rarely justified emotionally, so much of the book feels like Miéville is moving chess pieces across the page rather than writing a living, flowing story. For example, we know from **Perdido Street Station** that the government of New Crobuzon is evil, but that is only abstract justification for why the members of the underground wish to overthrow it. Nor does Ori's intended involvement show any basis (my notes show that page 370 was the first time Ori showed a hint of emotional depth at all). Revolutionaries always have personal motives, whether born out of personal philosophy, or from some interactions with members of the government, but as readers we need to see and understand what those motives are.

Even in the scenes of Judah and the creation of the Iron Council, while the events leading up to it reveal more of those people's motives, we still never get into their heads, so that while we understand the

incredible personal stakes they are facing, we do not truly experience the emotional reactions of any of the people involved.

On the positive side, Miéville still writes exceptionally well, so that every scene is filled with color and exotica. And since the plot is basically a thriller, the last two hundred pages do race towards two different-but-related climaxes, one in New Crobuzon itself, and one involving the Iron Council which is moving towards the city in an attempt to involve itself in the first climax. Readers who enjoy thrillers, which to me seem the prototype of chess games with minimally-developed characters anyway, might not find the lack of personal involvement in **Iron Council** a problem in the face of the exoticism and borderline-thriller plot. However, in both **Perdito Street Station** and **The Scar**, I empathized with their people, and their motivations made sense on individual bases. They were real people actually living the story rather than merely being part of the scenery, which is often the feeling I got from **Iron Council**. In both previous novels Miéville provided a full spectrum of reading experiences, exoticism with plot and real people, and I felt much of that was missing here. Were this his first novel that I read, I probably would have enjoyed its considerable strengths and interest more. But **Iron Council** does not sustain the level of his two immediately-prior novels, so its failings were more glaring in my opinion. Thus I recommend this novel with caution.

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Sean Stewart's novels deal with people struggling to survive rather than dealing with the rich and powerful, but his latest novel **Perfect Circle** goes even one step further than that, being the biography of a total loser. Everything has gone wrong in the life of William "Dead" Kennedy, much of it due to his own inability to seize control of his life. Thirty-two years old, he has just been fired from his latest low-level job, this time working as a clerk in Petco. He is divorced from his wife who lives with a former marine whose main difference from DK is that his life is firmly under control. DK has visitation rights with his twelve-year old daughter Megan every other Sunday, but it mostly consists of her counseling him, mainly with the advice, "Don't screw up, Will."

DK has one talent, which so far has been more of an emotional hindrance than a positive: he sees dead people. Yes, **Perfect Circle** is primarily a ghost story. He has seen them most of his life, and his entire largely-dysfunctional family is aware of it. Some people believe him, others think he has some loose screws upstairs—which he undoubtedly does, not because he sees ghosts, but rather as a result of seeing the ghosts.

In an attempt to make ends meet, and at the advice of his closest friend, DK places an ad in the paper announcing he is some type of clairvoyant who will examine haunted houses to determine if they are indeed inhabited by ghosts. But his first assignment for a distant cousin turns out disastrous as DK ends up shot in the chest, and the house burns down, killing the cousin.

This is followed by a long scene in the hospital, which was gripping at first but went on so endlessly it became tedious after awhile. Once DK is released, his life takes a decided turn for the worst, involving the upcoming annual family-wide reunion, his relationship with his former wife, his daughter Megan and the ex-marine, as well as the vengeful ghost of his cousin seemingly bent on avenging itself on DK for his death in the fire. At times the novel verges on soap opera, but never passes over the line totally, and Stewart manages to hold it all together for a climax that totters precariously for awhile. Ultimately, DK grows emotionally and the storyline concludes satisfactorily, but **Perfect Circle** never rises to the level of his previous novels **Mockingbird** and **Galveston**. It is more of a small novel filling in the gaps between major works. I recommend it for Stewart fans, but if you have never read him before, you should try one of the other two novels first.

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Rarely does a first author receive as much universal acclaim as Susanna Clarke did for *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, an historical fantasy set in England during the Napoleonic Wars, including this year's Hugo award as Best Novel. The novel's premise is a fascinating one: magic has mostly died out in recent

centuries, and the two title magicians are striving to revive it. But there is a lot more that Clarke is attempting here than merely telling a story.

- she is making a Dickensian attempt to examine everyday life in England during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century
- the book is primarily a character study, comparing the personalities of Mr Norrell, a totally self-absorbed man who has spent his entire life studying magic which he hugs closely to himself while wishing to be viewed as the preeminent magician of his era; and Jonathan Strange, an outgoing, exuberant, usually flighty man who wishes to bring magic to the masses
- large portions of the novel take place during Wellington's campaign against Napoleon, both in Spain and later at Waterloo, with Strange using magic to assist him against the French; here Clarke attempts to give us a detailed look at that era's war while showing how magic might be an effective—and often ineffective—weapon in warfare
- it is partly an historical mystery as Clarke slowly reveals the history of John Uskglass, the famed Raven King who simultaneously ruled both northern England and a mystical faery kingdom, and is credited with creating modern magic as it existed for hundreds of years before falling into disuse; Norrell totally rejects Uskglass as being irrelevant in modern times, while Strange, although Norrell's pupil, begins to believe otherwise
- there is a large cast of characters whom Clarke examines to various degrees, including Norrell's two "hangers-on" who take advantage of his social ineptness; Strange's wife; a faery who takes advantage of his deal with Norrell; the Duke of Wellington; the insane King of England

There are several plotlines which tend to meander through most of the book's first half, mostly involving two relationships, the one between Norrell and Strange, and the one between the faery and the poor people whose lives he totally dominates. The other plotline is the mystery of the Raven King, which is probably the most gripping part of the book, although it starts out as a few buried ideas that seem to be meaningless but grow slowly in importance as the book progresses.

The main plot of the novel, which unfolds very slowly through its nearly 800 page length, involves Norrell's Faustian deal with the faery which established his reputation as a magician to the harm of one poor woman whom Norrell resurrected early in the novel. As a result, the faery preys on three people throughout the novel, including Jonathan Strange's wife, which proves to be his big mistake as Strange determines to save his wife from the faery's clutches. The entire second half of the novel involves Strange's efforts in that regard. In the last few hundred pages, the novel's pace increases dramatically as it takes on some aspects of a thriller when Jonathan Strange learns that his wife, whom he believed dead, had actually been kidnapped to the land of faery where she is being used as a pawn of the faery. While this part is not as in-depth as the previous parts, it is exciting reading and worthwhile as part of the book's entire menu of offerings. The novel ends with a thrilling climactic scene which ties up all the loose ends satisfactorily.

Overall, **Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell** is a very slow-paced, thoughtful novel which is more expansive than it is page-turning. I recommend this novel, especially if you enjoy long, involved, detailed looks at a well-developed world which borders on both a fantasy world and a realistic historical world. While perhaps not as great as its reputation, it is still a worthwhile novel, and I would gladly read more Susanna Clarke fiction, whether in this same series or otherwise.

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Moving from historical fantasy to straight historical takes us to Robert Harris' Pompeii. As the title suggests, it is set immediately before and during the classical eruption of Mount Vesuvius. The main character is an aquarius who is trying to find the cause of a water disruption in Pompeii, a disruption which is a direct symptom of the volcanic activity.

It is obvious that Harris' writing is geared towards bestsellerdom, as this novel exhibits both some of the strengths and weaknesses of that particular "genre:". The characters are basically puppets to the plot with little, if any, depth. Nearly all them are cynical as well. Harris obviously has a downbeat view of what he considers an obviously-degraded Roman Empire, so that only 3 people show any real positive side: the aquarius, Pliny who is writing his observations of the eruption, and the daughter of a wealthy slaveowner.

The plot is actually very interesting, which is a tribute to Harris' writing since, like **Titanic**, the ending is foreordained, so the suspense is in the fate of the characters, rather than the climax of the story itself. The novel also contains some good views of the historical Rome, although at least one blatant anachronism (one character gives another the "finger" which, unless I am mistaken, first appeared during the Hundred Years' War).

Basically, all **Pompeii** needed was more character depth to make it less an obvious bestseller-type book and more of a serious historical novel. Still it was enjoyable reading and recommended, if not highly.

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**Dimensions of Sheckley** is an omnibus of 4 of his novels and one novella published by Boskone Press. It's a valuable book since the recently-deceased Sheckley is one of the sadly-forgotten giants of the 1950s. When **Galaxy** started publication, it wanted new writers who combined social awareness with science fiction, and Sheckley was the quintessential **Galaxy** writer. His wicked sense of humor led to some biting satires that were successful a lot more often than that type of story often are.

When I bought **Dimensions**, the first story I read was **Dimension of Miracles** which Mike Resnick raved about as the best story in the book, and one of the best sf novels ever. I enjoyed it, but its madcap pacing and flimsy logic did not endear itself to me as much as it did to Resnick. Its review is posted at my *VoP* blog for 8/28/04.

Recently, when I was looking for something short and lighter after the long and deep **Iron Council** and **Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell**, I decided to read Sheckley's first published novel **Immortality Inc.** Realizing that first novels are often training grounds, and that Resnick pooh-poohed this novel as well-written but ordinary, I did not expect too much of it.

Well, sometimes lowered expectations lead to the biggest surprises, because **Immortality Inc.** was an absolutely delightful novel. It was a satire, although neither particularly humorous nor the least bit madcap, but almost serious in tone.

Thomas Blaine was a normal American in 1958 when he was accidentally killed in a car crash. Miraculously, he awoke in 2110 where he had been reincarnated in a new body. The novel then follows both Blaine's adjustment to life 150 later as well as several mysteries which arise concerning his mysterious reincarnation.

Along the way Sheckley devises some wonderful aspects of 22<sup>nd</sup> century life. We encounter legal Suicides, whose ultimate form is Quarry who, wishing to die in combat, hire legally-bonded hunters to hunt them down and kill them.

We encounter legal reincarnation in which people's minds are transported into waiting bodies, sometimes sold legally, sometimes kidnapped on the black market. We meet zombies who accidentally inhabit those waiting bodies instead of passing naturally into the afterlife. Rejected by humans, they form their own society hidden deep underground.

We meet a poltergeist and watch Blaine participate in a legal hunt. Later he becomes the victim of a hunt himself as the very people who brought him to the 22<sup>nd</sup> century decide he is a liability rather than an asset and try to eliminate him.

Besides Blaine's struggles to survive, **Immortality Inc.** contains several other strong aspects. Since it is a Sheckley novel, it is also a social satire as we see how life has changed, and in many ways not changed, in 150 years. The novel also examines the mind-body relationship, as Blaine learns about the fate of the mind after the death of the body, and also how the mind is capable of inhabiting different bodies. This is a deeper philosophical aspect to the novel than I expected from Sheckley, and it only added to what I felt was a strong, multi-faceted performance, deeper and richer than **Dimension of Miracles** which was largely one-dimensional madcap satire. But, of course, that's just one person's opinion. The novel even has a surprising and effective denouement. Overall, I recommend **Immortality Inc.** very highly.

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Journey Beyond Tomorrow is a terrible title for what is basically a satirical quest novel by Robert Sheckley. Its alternate title *The Journey of Joenes* is much more fitting and I wonder why the publishers of **Dimensions of Sheckley** did not choose to use it. Actually, that is my only complaint about a clever, biting story which takes Joenes from his idyllic Pacific Island to America where he tries both to fit in with American society and also to understand it. This gives Sheckley an opportunity to skewer Congressional hearings (not surprisingly, the novel was first published in 1963 when the McCarthy hearings were still fresh in the minds of most Americans), modern psychology, Academia, modern science, governmental paranoia, Communism, cartography, and American justice (as practiced toward the rich and famous as opposed to the non-rich and non-famous).

**Journey Beyond Tomorrow** is as much a collection of satirical stories squeezed into novel format as it is a structured novel, but many of sf's finest novels fit that description, especially those from the early days when "mosaic" novels were more common. If you keep that in mind, and know what Sheckley does best, you'll enjoy this novel as much as I did. But rather than seek a copy of it used, why not buy the entire volume **Dimensions of Sheckley**? I strongly expect you won't be disappointed.

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Sometimes the boundary between historical fiction and alternate history is confused by the reader's knowledge of historical facts. British history is not my strongest area, especially events in the 17<sup>th</sup> century regarding the conflicts between the Scottish Catholic royalty leading up to the Puritan Revolution.

Thus the events in *A Sundial in a Grave: 1610* were occasionally confusing as to whether they were primarily a fictionalization of actual events, or virtual history as created by author Mary Gentle.

Not that the novel's categorization mattered much, since it was enjoyable enough to be appreciated by readers enjoying either preference.

The basic premise of **1610** is the relationship between accomplished swordsman Rochefort and his teenaged nemesis Dariole. Early in the novel, Dariole seems obsessed with tormenting Rochefort as he repeatedly humiliates him in battle, at one point even forcing him into a gratuitous homosexual act which has considerable ramifications for their subsequent relationship.

When Rochefort is forced into participating in the assassination of French King Henry of Navarre by his Medici wife Queen Marie, he flees France fearing she intends to have him killed for his knowledge of her own involvement. For reasons not quite explained, Dariole follows Rochefort to England where they become involved in an assassination attempt against King James Stuart.

At this point historical fiction, or alternate history, veers slightly into historical fantasy with the involvement of Dr. Robert Fludd, a necromancer who predicts future events quite uncannily through the use of arcane mathematics. Because of his predictions, Fludd conspires with James Stuart's son Henry to kill the king and place Henry on the throne. Fludd's predictions indicate that Rochefort will be the catalyst of James' death, which is why he forces his involvement in a second assassination attempt, at one point kidnapping Dariole and threatening his life.

A series of memorable characters join the activities, including:

- a Japanese samurai Saburu stranded in France when the ship on which he is serving as an aide to the Japanese ambassador to England flounders;
- a former nun named Caterina who is the only other surviving necromancer whose predictions counterbalances Fludd's and who believes that the assassination attempt on James Stuart must be foiled;
- Robert Cecil, British secretary of state, who is the power behind the English throne;
- James Stuart himself, whose appearance halfway through the novel signals the start of several hundred pages which are the most exciting and involving part of the novel.

For its first several hundred pages, **1610** does not flow naturally. The relationship between Rochefort and Dariole seems forced, and not totally believable. Their constant verbal and physical sparring is more the actions of enemies who should separate rather than flee from France to England together.

Rochefort's forced involvement in James Stuart's assassination attempt is more manipulation by the author than flowing naturally from the novel's previous events. And for two hundred pages, I had trouble believing in either the characters or their activities overall.

But when James Stuart arrives in the novel and the assassination attempt takes place, the entire level of the novel improves considerably. The masque in the cave, which is the setting for the assassination attempt, combines hilarity with drama. The subsequent flight of Rochefort, Dariole, Saburu and James Stuart is as gripping as it is entertaining, and Stuart's return to power is exceedingly well-done.

But just when it seems as if the novel has reached its natural conclusion, there are still two hundred pages remaining. I was wondering how much denouement could remain, when the novel takes an abrupt left-turn. Robert Fludd escapes with the aid of an unlikely ally, and Rochefort and Dariole pursue him to Japan, where the rest of the novel takes place.

This last third is nowhere near as gripping as the middle portion, but slightly more so than the first third. It is saved by the relationship between Rochefort and Dariole which has grown from confusing in the first third to engaging in the last third, a good piece of development which I had not expected Gentle to pull off successfully.

Overall, **A Sundial in a Grave: 1610** is a strong, enjoyable historical fantasy which should satisfy fans of both sides of the "fantasy" line. You will need a bit of patience in the first third, although not too much since events do move swiftly enough not to drag. It is all worthwhile for the middle portion which make the entire novel worthwhile.

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There is a right way and a wrong way to read a best-of-the-year volume. The wrong way is to assume the title is actually correct, that the contents are indeed the best stories of the year. The right way is to realize that the editor's taste is likely very different from your own, if overlapping, so what he or she considers the "best" stories might differ from how you would feel had you read as many stories as the editor did in making the selection.

So rather than assume a best-of-the-year volume is indeed a distillation of the finest stories a given year has to offer, I tend to approach it as a better-than-average issue of a prozine. Some stories will probably fall into my personal blind spot, but hopefully others will be good enough to make the volume an overall worthwhile reading experience.

And when the volume in question is devoted to novellas, which are my favorite length for science fiction

(and undoubtedly a lot of other readers too, or else why the oft-repeated statement that novellas are the best length of f&sf?), I cannot help but have a bit extra anticipation of an outstanding reading experience. Since last year's **Best Short Novels 2004**, edited by Jonathan Strahan, lived up to those expectations, why shouldn't Best Short Novels 2005 do so as well?

This year's volume began with James Patrick Kelly's "Men Are Trouble," a *noir* detective story set in a future Earth entirely without men. In my opinion, Kelly is somewhat overrated as a writer of short fiction. He's generally good, but not particularly innovative or groundbreaking at any particular aspect of writing. Rather than a top-rank master, he one of many decent journeymen who have always been the backbone of the genre. There is nothing wrong with that, but I wonder why some journeymen are accepted as such while others automatically creep into the upper ranks through frequent exposure.

In "Men Are Trouble," all men mysteriously disappeared from Earth when it was invaded by "devils" who now dominate the planet as a cross between alien invaders and unwanted but dominant visitors. Procreation occurs when women are mysteriously "seeded" by the devils, which causes a rift between youngsters who were born as a result of such seeding and old-timers who recall the days of old-fashioned sex. One of the "villains" of this story is the Catholic Church which is a bastion of old-timers determined to fight the influence of the devils (and if that is not a set-up of a name, I don't know what else it could possibly be).

The mystery is a bit confusing: why did a woman abruptly suicide the day she was married, and the same day she joined the Church? And why was the protagonist hired to solve the mystery at all? It all seemed mostly an excuse for Kelly to reveal some of the complications in his man-less world, and was not the finest story in the book.

Stephen Baxter reminds me of Poul Anderson. They both take a hard-science foundation for their stories and weave a strong plot around it, never forgetting that people are the center of any good story. Of course, Baxter is not as good overall as Anderson, but nobody else has been as good consistently in the hard-science storytelling corner of the field either, so that is not necessary a put-down of Baxter's talent. Just being compared to Poul Anderson means he is a damned good writer in my book.

Anyway, "Mayflower II" is the story of a generation ship, but it takes a different approach than most stories of that particular sub-genre usually do. It is the story of the movers and shakers of the ship and how they try to protect the ultimate goal of the ship against the inevitable degeneration of the ship's populace over several millennia. So along with the near-immortal protagonist we watch the society alter, and the intellectual level of the people erode, knowing he is helpless to do anything about it, yet still making whatever small nudges he can to keep the ship on goal. A good, interesting, thoughtful story, which probably would have benefitted from being longer and somewhat more in-depth.

Perhaps the most acclaimed novella of the past year was Bradley Denton's "Sergeant Chip," which itself raises high expectations in a reader's head, especially since Denton has already had one selections for my book-of-the-year for **Buddy Holly is Alive and Well on Ganymede**. And, let's face it, how could I resist a story told from the point of view of a dog?

"Sergeant Chip" is a military k-9 involved in a mysterious war with his master to whom he is totally loyal. Denton does a good job of showing the personality and emotions of a dog as most people see them on a regular basis: loyal to his master, friendly whenever possible, but devoted to completing every assigned task as well as possible, cheered by kind words (such as *good dog*) and friendly pats on the head. We watch Chip train with his master, fight a very confusing war alongside him, and ultimately obey his master's dying wishes to save and protect a family of innocent civilians.

My only problem with the story is that at heart it is a war story which really does not go much beyond that. A great story must examine the human heart in some depth, or raise some important philosophical speculation, or have an important moral. "Sergeant Chip" examines the canine heart, but not greatly in-depth since even a trained dog is relatively simple-minded by human standards. It does not raise any important philosophical speculations or have any moral beyond showing that a good dog is always loyal to



its master. In my opinion, this is not the best novella of the year—even if no other novella is better, since a story must rise to a certain level to be considered great—but I enjoyed reading it.

Anthropological science fiction is one of my favorite sub-genres, and the creation of alien worlds by such writers as Ursula K Le Guin, C.J. Cherryh and early Michael Bishop includes some of my favorite sf ever. Another outstanding writer in this area is Eleanor Arneson, whose novels **A Woman of the Iron People** and **Ring of Swords** and her novelette from a few years ago “The Potter of Bones” were excellent examples of anthropological sf. “The Garden: A *Hwarhath* Science Fictional Romance” is part of her ongoing examination of the *Hwarhath* people, furry, non-violent aliens whose men live primarily in space defending the planet from attack, primarily from humans with whom they have engaged in a long war, while the females stay behind and build the society. “The Garden” is the story of Akuin who is a gentle soul devoted to gardening and rejecting the male soldier society. The story is filled with discussion more than action, much of it about theoretical physics. In other hands this might have been boring or tedious, but Arneson makes it all interesting reading as it builds our knowledge of both the *hwarhath* people and their society. This story is recommended mostly for those who enjoy slow, thoughtful culture-building.

In some ways, my personal reaction to the different aspects of the f&sf genre can be summarized by my reaction to the pair of stories “The Concrete Jungle,” by Charles Stross, and “The Gorgon in the Cupboard,” by Patricia McKillip. The former story was a fast-paced thriller involving crime, action, lots of techno-babble, and mostly unlikeable people barking at one another constantly. I really tried to read it—after all, it is the recent Hugo-winner—but I just have no interest in either technology or thrillers. The latter story is much gentler and slower-paced, without any crime or threats to anybody’s life. It intertwines two stories. One is about a struggling artist who has never “broken through,” partly because the painting which he felt would be his masterwork was never finished when its subject mysteriously ran away several years ago. The other story is about that subject who is a desperate runaway, alone and poor after her return to the city following the death of her family. One glorious scene of her and her fellow vagrants gathered beneath a butcher’s awning during a rainstorm was worth the entire story.

“Gorgon” was not a perfect story. I loved Jo, the poverty-stricken subject more than Harry, who often seemed more dilettante than true artist. And the story’s fantasy element, the “gorgon in the cupboard,” occasionally seemed more a distraction than a focal point of the story. But overall this story contained people I was able to relate to, and feel empathy for, rather than Stross’ characters who seemed little more than spear-carriers for thrills and spills. Admittedly, this is largely my personal bias—after all, Stross’ story won this year’s Hugo Award for Best Novella—but presumably I am not the only sf fan who prefers the gentler, thought-provoking corner of f&sf.

The last story in the book, and traditionally the one which the editor hopes will leave the most lasting impression with the reader, is Gregory Feeley’s “Arabian Wine.” I really should have liked this story since it contained so many elements that usually appeal to me: it was a historical tale set in Renaissance Italy; it was not an action-adventure thriller at all, but rather a slow-paced tale of a Venetian merchant trying to introduce coffee into European society in hopes of earning a fortune.

My knowledge of the history of coffee is mostly nonexistent, so I assume “Arabian Wine” is in this book because of the merchant’s secondary interest in building a steam engine as well. That subplot did not really add anything to the story except give the author an excuse to create a stunning final scene to the story.

What really bothered me about this story is that it was basically boring. Most of the story’s contents consisted of the merchant and his partner in the steam engine part partaking in routine daily activities, primarily consisting of conversation between the two of them. There is no internal tension at all as he introduces coffee to several different groups of people, all of whom like it. That is the extent of most of the plot development.

Nor is the writing particularly gripping, and I did not feel enveloped in Renaissance Venice, which should have been a key component of the story. Instead it all seemed to be mundane background for a rather ordinary story.

And just when it seems as if the author has run out of ideas to forward the story, he takes a 180° turn and introduces the politics of Venice and the Catholic Church, so that the story becomes a somewhat-boring political drama.

Overall, **Best Short Novels 2005** had more good stories than weak ones, and was definitely worthwhile reading. But keep in mind that the stories I preferred might not be the same ones you prefer, depending on your areas of interest. I guess in a way, the success of this anthology depends on whether it is preferable to have a “something for everybody” anthology or a more narrowly-focused one which appeals to a niche audience. In my opinions, best-of-the-year collections should be the former if the editor is trying to be objective rather than merely pleasing himself.

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One morning I arrived at school and found 10 paperback books in my mailbox, 8 of them by Ray Bradbury, only two of which I had read previously, **The Martian Chronicles** and **The Machineries of Joy**. For some reason, although I loved both those books, I only have 2 other Bradbury books in my collection, **Fahrenheit 451** and a massive 1980 collection **The Stories of Ray Bradbury**, containing what they claimed was his 100 best stories. I enjoyed all those books, so my immediate thought was to keep the 6 Bradbury books I had not read.

But then I thought about all the unread books already in my collection, and I am not anxious to add so many books to them, so I only kept two of them—**The Illustrated Man** and **S is for Space**. Both collections contain stories from the late 40s through the mid-60s, which were probably Bradbury’s best years. The rest of the books I shared with three people at PHS who also enjoy science fiction: George, a physics teacher who recommended the series **Battlestar Gallactica** to me two years ago; my brother David who has been reading sf his whole life, although his first love is really mysteries; and Preeti, who is a student I have discussed previously in *The Passing Scene*.

That night I put aside the other collection I had been reading and immediately started *The Illustrated Man*. Keeping in mind it has been thirty years since I have read any Bradbury, except for an occasional story here and there, I really did not know if his particular brand of fiction would still have any resonance with me. Happily, and perhaps not surprisingly, the answer is definitely yes. In his prime Bradbury had the ability to write fiction which kept one foot in pure sense of wonder and the other foot in the darker side of life. While his stories are very literate, combining outstanding writing with strong characterization, the stories in this book are nowhere near the type of slipstream fiction which barely tingles the edges of genre fiction. Both his fantasy and his science fiction demonstrate pure sfnal hearts and love that many of today’s “borderline” writers, including some who have been influenced by Bradbury, do not share at all. And for somebody who has grown a bit weary of contemporary stories which are primarily mainstream with only the merest hint of f&sf, early Bradbury is a welcome tonic since it is good as literature while still being firmly sfnal.

While many of Bradbury’s stories are more vignettes than complete stories, they always have a point, and it is usually a point with a dark heart. The most famous story in the collection is probably “The Veldt,” about the two children who transfer their love for their parents to their interactive nursery. The story’s ending is obvious from the first page—or perhaps that is merely residual memory from having read the story previously—but the story still succeeds in spite of it.

Other strong stories include:

- “Kaleidoscope,” about a group of astronauts whose spaceship has been destroyed and who are all trapped in space, obviously not being rescued, and thus fated to die;
- “The Long Rain,” about a group of Earthmen trapped in the endless rain of the traditional Venus, seeking the Sun Domes where Earthlike environments have been established;
- “The Rocket Man,” which describes the lure of space that is so strong it keeps a man away from his family even while he tries desperately to keep his son away from the same life;

- “The Exiles,” which might have been the inspiration for “The Fireman,” in its description of the ghosts of famous writers such as Poe, Dickens, Bierce, who have fled to Mars after the banning of all their books on Earth;
- “The Fire Balloons,” about a group of priests relocating to Mars with the intention of saving the ancient Martians from their sins.

While **The Illustrated Man** is not as strong as **The Martian Chronicles**, it will not disappoint those who seek another fix of Bradbury fiction.

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I was predisposed to like Jack McDevitt’s *Polaris* for several reasons:

- it was a historical mystery, the type of mystery I much prefer to the detective-solves-crime type, featuring the same characters as his earlier mystery **A Talent For War** which I enjoyed tremendously;
- McDevitt’s novels are seeped in history, probably moreso than any sf writer other than Robert Silverberg;
- I have grown so tired of all the near-future, contemporary, slipstream, borderline f&sf that have taken over the genre since the Cyberpunk days of the 1980s, while future history has somewhat languished;
- Jack McDevitt is probably the finest pure storyteller currently writing in the genre.

McDevitt did not disappoint me. Antiquities dealer IAx Benedict, along with his associate Chase Kolpath, is trying to obtain artifacts from the famous *Polaris* mystery of sixty years earlier. That was a small spacecraft whose six passengers were examining the destruction of a star being destroyed by a dwarf passing directly through it. But when the *Polaris* was supposed to leave the system, it remained behind, totally out of communication with other vessels. When a rescue ship arrives, the *Polaris* is totally devoid of life. Its lifeboat and spacesuits are still intact, but it resembles the famous ocean liner *Marie Celeste* in that its passengers seemingly vanished in thin air.

In the sixty years since, the *Polaris* has become a legend, and the fact that many of its relics are being released to the public for the first time drives their value spiraling upward. When a failed assassination attempt of a despotic ruler accidentally destroys nearly all the relics except those already in Benedict’s possession, it seems like a financial windfall to him.

Except somebody starts trying to obtain all those relics, whether legally from those who have already bought them from Benedict, or illegally by breaking-and-entering. Naturally this interests Benedict and Chase’s, so they begin researching the *Polaris*. One of the novel’s highlights was Chase’s visit to a *Polaris* Society convention, which resembles a truly-skewed science fiction convention.

Then McDevitt ups the ante when somebody apparently gets nervous at Benedict and Chase’s activities and tries to kill them, not once but twice. By which time they have gathered enough information that begins to lead them toward a solution to the entire *Polaris* mystery.

This book is great storytelling that is seeped in history. Not only are the events surrounding the disappearance of the *Polaris* fascinating, but we learn tidbits about the entire history of McDevitt’s Confederation, about *outstations* which are relics of the pre-lightspeed space travel, about *Mutes*, the only alien race encountered so far, about various human cultures such as the *Kang*, which at one time were a galactic power. This combination of future and history is one of the reasons I fell in love with science fiction, and why authors such as Silverberg and McDevitt are among my personal favorite writers.

I already have 5 Jack McDevitt books in my collection, and enjoyed them all because of their combination of storytelling and history. I think the time has come to complete my McDevitt collection.

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### Tidbits

A few months ago in the pages of FAPA Fred Lerner made the comment that "New Folks' Home" is his favorite Clifford D. Simak story. Readers of **VoP** know how much I love Simak's fiction, and have done so since I discovered him in the pages of **Worlds of IF** and **Galaxy Magazine** forty years ago. So after Fred made his comment, I searched through my collections and found "New Folks' Home" in **The Best Science Fiction Stories of Clifford D. Simak**.

"New Folks' Home" is a story which might not have moved me as much when I first read it twenty years ago for personal reasons. Then I was in my thirties, both my sons were infants, and most of my life lay ahead of me. Now I am in my late fifties, my sons are both in college, and retirement is a likelihood three-to-five years down the line. So this story of old age and death has much more personal resonance than it had when I first read it.

Two longtime friends have grown old. One is dying, while the other is taking what seems likely his last canoeing/fishing trip in a wilderness area they consider almost their private reserve. On the trip the man spots a new house which was not there during their last trip a few months earlier. When he sprains his ankle on a slippery section of the river during a driving rain, he cannot walk at all, and realizes he cannot reach his car or drive to safety, so he crawls to the strange house seeking shelter.

Nobody is home, so he spends the night in what seems a suspiciously welcoming atmosphere. What follows is a mystery as he tries to determine who inhabits the house and why he seems so welcome there. This is typical Simak, so you understand halfway through the story that the ending is going to be both happy and thought-provoking, while the events are a gentle rebuke to all those thriller/ violent/action sf stories which sometimes seem to dominate a genre which deserves better. Long live Clifford D. Simak!

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I subscribe to **Postscripts**, which is an interesting semi-annual prozine by PS Publishing, who are better-known for the series of novellas they have released the past several years. The Summer 2005 issue contains several strong stories:

- "Zima Blue," by Alastair Reynolds, a far-future story of a famous artist seemingly obsessed with blank spaces of the color zima blue;
- "Beyond Mao," a collaboration between Barry Malzberg & Paul DiFilippo about a Chinese expedition to Mars;
- "Master Lao and the Flying Horror," a fantasy by Lawrence Person set in an alternate historical China;
- "The Cell," a typically-weird *Twilight Zonish* story by Zoren Zivkovic, the first of a series of four novellas to be published in **Postscripts**.

This is a fine prozine, competitive in quality with **Fantasy & Science Fiction**, which is probably the best prozine currently being published regularly.

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I do not normally read "mainstream" mystery novels in which a detective/policeman try to solve some murder, chasing clues like a jigsaw puzzle for 200+ pages until all the clues finally together in an amazing denouement. I made an exception though for *The Skull Mantra*, by Eliot Pattison, since it is set in recent Tibet and, according to the reviews, was as much about Tibetan culture and history and its relationship with China as it was a mystery. Since I have been editing Fei Fei's book about Tibet for the past year, I am interested in reading about Tibet.

I was pleased to learn that the reviews of **The Skull Mantra** were fairly accurate. It is a bitter, harsh look at life in Tibet under the heel of Chinese invaders. In the first chapter we meet a Buddhist Rinpoche, an angry Khampa who resents Han Chinese, and peace-loving Buddhists, all of whom may seem like

stereotypes, but are pretty much real people that Fei Fei met while there.

The main character is Shan, a former investigator from Beijing who was sent to a Tibetan prison camp for purely political reasons. After the discovery of a beheaded Tibetan official, Shan is summoned to the

office of the Chinese colonel in charge of the region and placed in charge of uncovering the murderer, since the official Tibetan investigator of the region was the murder victim.

I enjoyed the Tibetan experience a lot, and, at least to my amateur eyes, found it authentic. However, the mystery itself did not excite me much. Too many tentacles spreading throughout the majority of the book, until the last quarter when they all started to come together in a taut denouement. It was not as believable or as involving as the setting and people themselves were. There are three more novels in the series, but I would be more anxious to read them if the author just forgot about the mysteries themselves and concentrated exclusively on Tibet.

## *The In-Box*

**Steam Engine Time** / Bruce Gillespie and Janine Stinson / available through <http://www.efanzines.com/> / This is what you would expect of a zine co-edited by Bruce and Janine, chockful of fascinating essays and fine reviews. Highlights include Greg Benford on Stephen Hawking and the "ultimate theory of physics", Bruce on **The Best Australian Science Fiction Writing** (a fifty year retrospective anthology), and Andrew M. Butler on the British Science Fiction Boom (with Paul Brazier's "dissenting opinion"). Highly recommended for those of you who like some serious reading.

**Alexiad** / Lisa & Joseph Major / 1409 Christy Avenue, Louisville, KY 40204-2040 / lots of reviews of books, movies, and candy bars! Perhaps the best regular fanzine being published

**Argentus** / Steven H. Silver / 707 Sapling Lane, Deerfield, IL 60015-3969 / genzine whose current issue features writers with alliterative names (Stanley Schmidt, S.M. Stirling, Sherwood Smith, etc.)

**Blind Man's Rainbow** / Melody Sherosky / PO Box 18219, Denver, CO 80218-02109 / [www.bmrpoetry.com](http://www.bmrpoetry.com) / a journal of poetry and art. Some good stuff, but admittedly not to everybody's taste

**Celtic Seasons** / Rich & Rita Shader / P.O. Box 3325, Melbourne, FL 32902-3325 / gorgeous newsletter devoted to Scottish history and culture. Available for \$8.00 for six bi-monthly issues. Well worth the cost.

**Challenger / The Zine Dump** / Guy H. Lillian III / [www.challzine.net](http://www.challzine.net) / now primarily an online zine, still one of the finest fanzines being published

**Dancing and Joking** / John Hertz / 236 S. Coronado St., Los Angeles, CA / collection of fanwriting with lots of fine artwork; a fundraiser for TAFF, well worth the \$5.00 donation

**Emerald City** / Cheryl Morgan / <http://www.emcit.com> / webzine devoted to reviews; EC is now a semi-prozine and Cheryl is requesting \$12.00 per reader per year. It's worth the cost.

**File 770** / Mike Glyer / 705 Valley View Ave., Monrovia, CA 91016 / erratically-published newszine which is always well worth the wait

**For The Clerisy** / Brant Kresovich / P.O. Box 404, Getzville, NY 14068 / fascinating discussion on books of all types and genres

**It Goes on the Shelf** / Ned Brooks / 4817 Dean Lane, Lilburn, GA 30047-4720 / brief reviews of esoteric and rare books; always worthwhile reading for a bookaholic like myself.

**The Knarley Knews** / Henry Welch / 1525 16<sup>th</sup> Ave., Grafton, WI 53024-2017 / genzine; Knarley spumes, Sue Welch travels, and Terry Jeeves' memoirs. Always interesting stuff

**Peregrine Nations** / Janine Stinson / Box 431304, Big Pine Key, FL 33043-0314 / available through <http://efanzines.com/> / genzine

**The Royal Swiss Navy Gazette** / Garth Spencer / <http://www.efanzines.com/RSNG> / personalzine with lots of letters

**Southern Fandom Confederation Bulletin** / R.B. Cleary / 470 Ridge Road, Birmingham, AL 35206-2816 / clubzine with news, conreports and reviews

**Vanamonde** / John Hertz / 236 S. Coronado St., No 409, Los Angeles, CA 90057 / two-page APAzine with comments, reviews and obituaries.

## *On the Lighter Side*

A spokesperson for the U. S. Mint announced that a new fifty-cent piece was being issued to honor two great American patriots. On one side of the coin would be Teddy Roosevelt and on the other side, Nathan Hale.

Asked why two people were going to be on the same coin, the official replied, "Now, when you toss a coin you can simply call, 'Ted's or Hale's'."

A Mafia Godfather finds out that over the years his bookkeeper has screwed him for ten million bucks.

This bookkeeper happens to be deaf, so the Godfather brings along his attorney, who knows sign language.

The Godfather asks the bookkeeper, "Where is the 10 million bucks you embezzled from me?"

The attorney, using sign language, asks the book-keeper where the 10 million dollars is hidden. The bookkeeper signs back: "I don't know what you are talking about."

That's when the Godfather pulls out a 9 mm pistol, puts it to the bookkeeper's temple, cocks it, and says, "Ask him again!"

The attorney signs to the underling, "He'll kill you for sure if you don't tell him!"

The bookkeeper signs back, "OK! You win! The money is in a brown briefcase, buried behind the shed in my cousin Enzo's backyard in Queens."

The Godfather asks the attorney, "Well, what'd he say?"

The attorney replies, "He says you don't have the balls to pull the trigger."

\*

A bald man with a wooden leg gets invited to a Halloween party. He doesn't know what costume to wear to hide his head and his leg so he writes to a costume company to explain his problem.

A few days later he received a parcel with the following note:

*Dear Sir,*

*Please find enclosed a pirate's outfit. The spotted handkerchief will cover your bald head and, with your wooden leg, you will be just right as a pirate.*

*Very truly yours, Acme Costume Co.*

The man thinks this is terrible because they have emphasized his wooden leg and so he writes a letter of complaint. A week goes by and he receives another parcel and a note, which says:

*Dear Sir,*

*Please find enclosed a monk's habit. The long robe will cover your wooden leg and, with your bald head, you will really look the part.*

*Very truly yours, Acme Costume Co.*

Now the man is really upset since they have gone from emphasizing his wooden leg to emphasizing his bald head so again he writes the company another nasty letter of complaint. The next day he gets a small parcel and a note, which reads:

*Dear Sir,*

*Please find the enclosed bottle of molasses. Pour the molasses over your bald head, stick your wooden leg up your ass and go as a caramel apple.*

*Very truly yours, Acme Costume Co.*

\*

*From John Berry:*

A knight is leaving for a crusade, and leaves the key to his wife's chastity belt with his most reliable retainer Arnold, urging him to guard it with his life.

After he has been traveling for an hour or so, he hears a galloping horseman approaching, and sees it is Arnold.

"Sire," Arnold panted, "You gave me the wrong key."

\*

This guy was lonely and so he decided life would be more fun if he had a pet. So he went to the pet store and told the owner that he wanted to buy an unusual pet. After some discussion, he finally bought a centipede, which came in a little white box to use for his house. He took the box back home, found a good location for the box, and decided he would start off by taking his new pet to the bar to have a drink.

So he asked the centipede in the box, "Would you like to go to Frank's with me and have a beer?"

But there was no answer from his new pet. This bothered him a bit, but he waited a few minutes and then asked him again, "How about going to the bar and having a drink with me?"

But again, there was no answer from his new friend and pet. So he waited a few minutes more, thinking about the situation. He decided to ask him one more time; this time putting his face up against the centipede's house and shouted, "Hey! Would you like to go to Frank's place and have a drink with me?"

A little voice came out of the box: "I heard you the first time! I'm putting on my damned shoes!!!!"

\*

What with all the sadness and trauma going on in the world at the moment, it is worth reflecting on the death of a very important person which almost went unnoticed. Larry La Prise, the man who wrote "The Hokey Pokey" died peacefully at age 93.

The most traumatic part for his family was getting him into the coffin. They put his left leg in... and then the trouble started.

\*

A man staggers into an emergency room with a concussion, multiple bruises, two black eyes and a five iron wrapped tightly around his throat. Naturally, the doctor asks him what happened.

"Well, it was like this," said the man. "I was having a quiet round of golf with my wife, when at a difficult hole we both sliced our balls into a pasture of cows. We went to look for them, and while I was rooting around I noticed one of the cows had something white at its rear end. I walked over and lifted up the tail, and sure enough, there was a golf ball with my wife's monogram on it--stuck right in the middle of the cow's butt. That's when I made my big mistake".

"What did you do?" asks the doctor.

"Well, I lifted the cow's tail and yelled to my wife, 'Hey, this looks like yours!' I don't remember much after that."

\*

A man was telling his neighbor, "I just bought a new hearing aid. It cost me four thousand dollars, but it's state of the art. It's perfect."

"Really," answered the neighbor. "What kind is it?"

"Twelve thirty."

\*

Morris, an 82 year-old man went to the doctor to get a physical. A few days later the doctor saw Morris walking down the street with a gorgeous young lady on his arm. A couple of days later the doctor spoke to the man and said, "You're really doing great, aren't you?"

Morris replied, "Just doing what you said, Doctor: 'Get a hot mamma and be cheerful.' "

The Doctor said, "I didn't say that. I said you got a heart murmur. Be careful."

\*

A couple is having an argument. The husband yells, "When you die, I'm getting you a headstone that reads, 'Here Lies My Wife – Cold As Ever'."

"Yeah" she replies, "When you die, I'm getting you a headstone that reads, 'Here Lies My Husband – Stiff At Last.'"

\*

A golfer had a lifelong ambition to play one particular hole at Pebble Beach the way the pros do it. The pros drive the ball out over the water onto the green that is on a spit of land that juts out off the coast. It was something he had tried hundreds of times without success. His ball always fell short into the water.



Because of this he never used a new ball on this particular hole. He always picked out one that had a cut or a nick.

One year he went out to Pebble Beach to try again. When he came to the fateful hole, he teed up an old cut ball and said a silent prayer. Before he hit it, however, a powerful voice from above said: *Wait...Replace that old ball with a brand new ball.*

He complied, with some slight misgiving, despite the fact that the Lord seemed to be telling him he would finally achieve his lifelong ambition.

As he stepped up to the tee once more, the voice came down again: *Wait...step back...take a practice swing.*

So he stepped back and took a practice swing. The voice boomed out again, *Take another practice swing.*

He did. Silence followed. Then the voice called out again, *Put the old ball back.*

\*

Brian invited his mother over for dinner. During the course of the meal, Brian's mother could not help but keep noticing how beautiful Brian's roommate Stephanie was. Mrs. Hester had long been suspicious of Brian's relationship with his roommate, and this only made her more curious.

Over the course of the evening, watching the two together, Mrs. Hester realized there was definitely more between Brian and Stephanie than Brian ever admitted.

Seeing his mom watching them, Brian told her, "I know what you must be thinking, but I assure you Stephanie and I are just roommates."

About a week later, Stephanie came to Brian saying, "Ever since your mother came to dinner, I've been unable to find the beautiful silver gravy ladle. You don't suppose she took it, do you?"

Brian said, "Well, I doubt it, but I'll send her an e-mail just to be sure."

So he sat down and wrote: *Dear Mom, I'm not saying that you 'did' take the gravy ladle from the house, I'm not saying that you 'did not' take the gravy ladle, but the fact remains that one has been missing ever since you were here for dinner.*

Several days later, Brian received a letter from his mother that read: *Dear son, I'm not saying that you 'do' sleep with Stephanie, and I'm not saying that you 'do not' sleep with Stephanie, but the fact remains that if she was sleeping in her own bed, she would have found the gravy ladle by now.*

*Love, Mom*

\*

One day a professor gave a big test to his students. He handed out all the tests and went back to his desk to wait. Once the test was over, the students all handed the tests back in.

The professor noticed that one of the students had attached a \$100 bill to his test with a note saying, "A dollar per point." The next class the professor handed the tests back out.

This student got back his test and \$64 change.

\*

Several men are in the locker room of a golf club. A cell phone on a bench rings and a man engages the hands free speaker-function and begins to talk.

Everyone else in the room stops to listen.

MAN: "Hello"

WOMAN: "Honey, it's me. Are you at the club?"

MAN: "Yes"

WOMAN: "I am at the mall now and found this beautiful leather coat. It's only \$1,000. Is it OK if I buy it?"

MAN: "Sure,..go ahead if you like it that much."

WOMAN: "I also stopped by the Mercedes dealership and saw the new 2005 models. I saw one I really liked."

MAN: "How much?"

WOMAN: "\$90,000"

MAN: "OK, but for that price I want it with all the options."

WOMAN: "Great! Oh, and one more thing .... The house I wanted last year is back on the market. They're asking \$950,000"

MAN: "Well, then go ahead and give them an offer of 900,000. They will probably take it. If not, we can go the extra 50 thousand. It really is a pretty good price."

WOMAN: "OK. I'll see you later! I love you so much!!"

MAN: "Bye! I love you, too."

The man hangs up. The other men in the locker room are staring at him in astonishment, mouths agape..... He smiles and asks: "Anyone know who this phone belongs to?"

\*

The burglar was creeping noiselessly through the darkened home, filling his bag with various valuables. As he reached for a box of jewelry, he heard a voice say, "Jesus is watching you." Shaken, the burglar stopped. For a full minute he didn't dare breathe.

Finally, he switched on his flashlight and played it around the room but saw nothing. Convinced that it had been his imagination, he turned off the flashlight and continued in his quest for another man's wealth. He was busily unhooking a stereo set when he again heard, "Jesus is watching you." This time he nearly jumped out of his skin, he was so freaked out.

Beads of sweat popped out on his face, and as he switched the light on again, the beam shook violently from his terror. He looked about the room and noticed a bird cage in the corner. Upon closer inspection, he discovered a parrot in the cage. "Are you the one that spoke to me just now?" asked the burglar. "Yes, I am," said the parrot. "Why did you say 'Jesus is watching you'?" asked the man. "Because I felt like you needed to be warned," replied the parrot.

By this time, the man was over his fright and was more than a little irritated at this smart-mouthed parrot that had tried to scare him. "What's your name?" asked the burglar. "Moses," the parrot said. "Hah," the man said, guffawing. "What kind of people would name their parrot Moses?"

The parrot replied... "The same kind of people that would name their Rottweiler Jesus."

\*

A tourist on safari in the Sahara Desert takes a wrong turn and becomes lost. After a long morning in the hot sun, he sees a man riding toward him on a donkey.

"Please help me!" the tourist says. "I'm dying of thirst."

"I'm sorry," says the stranger, "All I have are neckties."

"Neckties?" cries the tourist. "I need water!"

"You seem like a nice man," says the peddler, "and because you're suffering I'll make you a special I normally get \$15.00 each for these ties, but I'll let you have two for \$25."

The tourist walks away in disgust. Three hours later, staggering with exhaustion and dehydration, he sees an oasis. When he finally staggers there, he finds a man wearing a tuxedo standing under a palm tree.

"Please," he asks, "Do you have any water?"

"Of course, sir," the man in the tuxedo replies. "We have plenty of water."

"Thank God! Where do I go to get some?" the tourist asks.

"The restaurant is right over there between those two trees, sir. Unfortunately, I can't let you in without a tie."