Visions of Paradise
#106: Wondrous Stories

Contents

_\\|//-
(0-0)
----------o00--(_)--00o----------
Robert Michael Sabella / 24 Cedar Manor Court
Budd Lake, N.J. 07828-1023 / Tel: (973) 691-0733
E-mail: bsabella@optonline.net
Sfnal blog: http://visionsofparadise.blogspot.com/

Out of the Depths

"On space opera: space opera happens in space. If it's not in space, it's not space opera. Also, no, planetary romances are not space opera. They come out of a different tradition - as CHARLES completely correctly point outed to me to day. A planetary romance comes from the lost civilisation tradition, while space opera grows out of both the western and the naval action adventure. The new space opera - a group to which Westerfeld's novel clearly belongs - is "new" because it's darker, it doesn't necessarily involve the triumph of man or humanity, it has nifty new technology, and it has actual characterisation." – Jonathan Strahan from his blog http://www.jonathanstrahan.com.au/wp/

So where are the "new planetary romances?"

*

Following is an excerpt from the local **Sunday Star-Ledger** book review section in which the author was offering his personal "cheat sheet" of books which should be avoided at all costs. While I certainly don't agree with all of them, most of them are quite amusing as well as cautionary:

Any book with jacket copy that includes the words "searing," "rollicking" or "an indictment."

Any novel described as "this generation's *The Catcher in the Rye*."

The Catcher in the Rye.

Any novel likely to include rapturous descriptions of the fragrance of pomegranates.

Magical realism.

Any novel by a woman pictured wearing a hat.

Dale Peck.

Any novel blurbed by said Peck.

Any novel described as "transgressive" (i.e., Bret Easton Ellis, Gary Indiana, A.M. Homes or anyone photographed in front of graffiti).

Any mystery not written by John Harvey featuring a cat.

Any "literary" author's attempt at a mystery.

Any novel described as "in the tradition of *The Lord of the Flies*."

The Lord of the Flies.

Any book whose jacket copy contains the phrase “more than a novel/biography/history,” etc.

Similarly, any genre book whose chief claim to virtue is that it “transcends the genre,” implying that the author doesn’t have much interest in the very things you were picking it up for.

Anything described as a “parable,” particularly Eastern European.

Anything where hearty peasants occupy center stage.

Any Canadian fiction involving spinsters, peeling paint or faded curtains.

Any novel by a man pictured, in his author photo, in a bar, pool hall, or with his sleeves rolled up and his arms crossed.

Any novel with an author’s photo in which the author is looking back over his or her shoulder as if caught by surprise.

Any novel with a cover showing pastel fashion sketches or including a designer brand name in the title, or both.

Anything described as “a novel of ideas.”

Any history that contains, before the text, more than four pages of maps.

Anything described as indebted to Raymond Carver.

Raymond Carver.

Any collection of essays, criticism or collected journalism that follows hard on the heels of an author’s large, acclaimed novel.

Any techno or political thriller that trumpets its “plausibility.”

Any novel featuring a cover photo (especially black and white) of an empty dock or pond with the discarded artifacts (swimsuits, etc.) of summer vacation/childhood.

Any novel likely to be made into a movie directed by Anthony Minghella (*The English Patient, Cold Mountain*).

Anything not by William Gibson or Steve Erickson described as “Pynchonesque.”

Any new autobiography by someone you assumed was dead.

Any fat novel “laid against the 20th-century turmoil” of a Third World country you never think about.

Any novel that contains paragraphs of no more than two sentences for longer than its first three pages (an exception may be made for Marguerite Duras).

Any novel described as “Cheeveresque.”

Any novel with an exclamation point in the title.

Any Library of America or Modern Library collections of an author whose books have been sitting unread on your shelves in paperback for more than five years.

Anything with no blurbs other than those provided by people thanked in the acknowledgments or who are on the same faculty as the author.

Seven words: winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

*

Keeping the daily newspaper motif, my favorite part of the paper is the comic strips. They run the gamut from humor-challenged writers who believe that cleverness alone will carry a strip to the occasionally-funny strips, to a select few which are nearly always worthwhile reading.

So here is my list of the six comic strips which I await every day, knowing they provide more chuckles than disappointments:

- *Zits*, a look at the trials and tribulations of one teenaged boy and his two long-suffering parents. Sure it’s over-the-top at times, but more often than not I nod my head and tell Jean, “This is definitely you and Andy!”;

- *Sally Forth* is a more realistic look at family life, involving two working parents and a teenaged daughter. While *Zits* is centered around the son, this strip primarily concerns the mom, including her tribulations both at work and at home;

- *For Better or For Worse* is another extended-family saga, more realistic than both the above, but generally funnier than *Sally Forth*. The Canadian family includes a dentist father, a shop-owner mother, a married son who is a freelance writer, a single daughter who teaches native Canadians in one of the Northwest Territories, and an at-home teenager. Unlike most strips, the family has grown during its history at only slightly-less-than normal aging. This is my very favorite comic, so if your local paper does not offer this strip, demand it!

- *Rose is Red* is a surrealistic look at another family of three, more concerned with

fantasy worlds and daydreams than reality, slightly reminiscent of *Calvin and Hobbes* in its skewedness, but much gentler in its humor;

- many newer strips seem unduly influenced by *The Far Side*, concentrating on cleverness and cynicism, but forgetting that Gary Larson's major trait was his sense of humor. Many are ultimately boring, but one exception is *Pearls Before Swine*, the misadventures of a group of domesticated animals living in a condo complex. The main characters are cynical, manipulative Rat and his buddy, simple and naive Pig. Other characters include the worldly Zebra, his nemesis the clueless Crocodiles whose sole purpose is to eat as many prey as possible, and a cast of walk-on humans;

- All right, I know it is old-fashioned, and all the strips are repeats from decades ago, but I still love *Peanuts* with lovable loser Charley Brown, wise-beyond-his-years Linus who is still childish enough to display his infatuation with his blanket and, of course, Snoopy. Where would we be without Snoopy to remind us of all our foibles?

*

It is amazing how few nominees in common this year's Nebula Awards and Hugo Awards have, a situation undoubtedly caused by several factors. One is the different constituencies of the two awards, and another is the the Nebula Awards' two-year eligibility system. But for comparison purposes, it is easy enough to compare this year's Nebula nominees with the last two years' Hugo nominees.

Of the six Nebula nominees for Best Novel, only a single novel made either Hugo ballot, Susannah Clarke's **Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell**, which won last year's Hugo. Other than that, both lists are dominated, as usual, by perennial nominees (Joe Haldeman's **Camouflage** and Jack McDevitt's **Polaris** on the Nebula ballot and George R.R. Martin's **A Feast for Crows** on the Hugo), and highly-acclaimed works (Geoff Ryman's **Air,** John C. Wright's **Orphans of Chaos**, Ken MacLeod's **Learning the World**, Charles Stross' **Accelerando**, and Robert Charles Wilson's **Spin**). But there are several surprising choices, such as Terry Pratchett's **Going Postal** (since humor rarely makes award ballots) and John Scalzi's **Old Man's War** (which, if reviews are good predictors, was the choice of the diehard Heinlein fans).

Only two Nebula novella nominees made this year's Hugo list, Kelly Link's "Magic for Beginners" (which was easily the most acclaimed story at any length last year and must be considered the favorite for both awards) and perennial nominee Robert Sawyer for "Identity Theft" (which, in my opinion, was one of the weaker stories in the collection **Down These Dark Spaceways)**. Link does not seem to face a lot of heavy competition for the Nebula Award, her competition being relative-unknowns Albert Cowdrey ("The Tribes of Bela"), Bud Sparhawk ("Clay's Pride") and Paul Witcover ("Left of the Dial"). However, the Hugo ballot contains multiple award-winners James Patrick Kelly ("Burn"), and Connie Willis ("Inside Job"), as well as another critical favorite, Ian MacDonald's "The Little Goddess", so Link's chances are slimmer there.

In the novelette category, two Nebula nominees made last year's Hugo ballot, including the winner, Kelly Link's "The Faery Handbag," which I guess makes her the favorite in two Nebula categories. Newcomer Paolo Bacigalupi is on both ballots for different stories, "The People of Sand and Slag" for the Nebula, and "The Calorie Man" for the Hugo. Considering that Bacigalupi has made various best-of-the-year anthologies and award nominee lists the past few years, he is obviously a talented newcomer (and I personally loved his story "The Fluted Girl" a few years ago), but he has certainly not generated any of the buzz that other new authors have garnered in recent years. Remember the buzz surrounding Charles Stross when he first started appearing in **Asimov's** with his "Accelerando" stories?

In any case, both the Nebulas and Hugos contain several multiple award-winners to challenge Bacigalupi's twin entries. The Nebulas have Eileen Gunn & Leslie What's "Nirvana High" and James Patrick Kelly's "Men are Trouble," in addition to Link's story, and the Hugos offer Peter S. Beagle's "Two Hearts," Cory Doctorow's "I, Robot" and Howard Waldrop's "The King of Where-I-Go".

In the short story category, both the Nebula and Hugo ballots share a single story, Margo Lanagan's "Singing My Sister Down," which was one of the most acclaimed stories of 2004, but because its first U.S. publication was in 2005 it retained Hugo eligibility for another year. Based on its critical acclaim, it should be the favorite for both. The biggest name authors challenging it for the Nebula are Carol Emshwiller for "I Live With You," Nancy Kress for "My Mother, Dancing," and for the Hugos fan favorite Mike Resnick for "Down Memory Lane."

Dare I predict the winners, based entirely on critical reviews and name recognition, which is always a major factor in awards? Why not? Keep in mind that I have a poor history of success in predicting Nebula and Hugo Awards, so please refrain from laughing if I miss every winner.

Category	**Nebula prediction**	**Hugo prediction**
Best Novel	Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell	Spin
Best Novella	Magic for Beginners	Burn
Best Novelette	The Faery Handbag	The King of Where-I-Go
Best Short Story	Singing My Sister Down	Down Memory Lane

*

After a long week at school, Friday night is a time to relax. Jean and I usually go to a low-priced place to eat, Panera Bread being our favorite location. Afterwards Jean shops while I spend time browsing at a local bookstore. There are no good independent bookstores, so it is either Borders or Barnes & Noble, both of which have "superstores" in the area.

Last night Jean wanted to shop in Ledgewood, so my destination was Barnes & Noble. As usual, I started at the magazine rack next to the store entrance where I looked at the science fiction magazines. They have a fairly good selection, including **Asimov's**, **Analog, F&SF,** and **Realms of Fantasy**. All were issues I had seen before, and none particularly enticed me to buy them. Although I let my subscriptions to prozines lapse years ago (mid-90s for **Asimov's** and 2000 for **F&SF**), I still buy an occasional issue, usually double-issues since I enjoy novellas and they tend to save their best novellas for those issues.

Next I browsed the other magazines, including **National Geographic** (not an issue worth buying), **History Magazine** (whose articles are generally too short to interest me), and several Italian cooking magazines (fortunately I had just eaten supper or I might have bought one of them. ☺).

Then I went to the science fiction section where I salivated over several dozen books I would have liked to buy. The new David Hartwell **Year's Best SF #11** was there. I stopped buying that series after #3, not because of lack of interest, but because a half-dozen years ago Gardner Dozois' taste was more to my liking than Hartwell's. But recently I have been drifting more towards traditional science fiction than any time since the early 1970s, and Hartwell's book looked more enticing than it did previously. This does not mean I have lost interest in the more serious sf though, and I still intend to continue buying Dozois' book as well as Jonathan Strahan's **Best Short Novels**–the newest volume which I just received in the mail from the SFBC–so I need to be a bit selective in my buying. I've already bought 11 new sf books this year which, along with about 100 other unread books, glare at me angrily from my bookshelf every time I buy another new book. And since I tend to have moderate completist tendencies, if I buy Hartwell's #11 that will leave me with a gap between #4 - #10 which will grow to dominate my bookshelf as time passes. So it was better to ignore Hartwell for the time being.

What other sf books looked particularly good to me last night?

- Having recently read and enjoyed Greg Benford's **Beyond Infinity**, his books **The Martian Race** and **Cosm** were attractive;
- Jack McDevitt's **Infinity Beach**. I've been eying that one ever since I read **Polaris** last year;
- Alastair Reynold's books in the **Revelation Space** series, but they were easy to resist since I will read the first book this summer and do not know yet if I will enjoy it;
- Julie Czerneda's **In The Company of Others.** She is an author I have never read but whose reviews make me anxious to try one of her books;
- two *Culture* books by Iain M. Banks, another unread author who interests me;
- Silverberg's **The Alien Years**.

Next I drifted to the general fiction section–which was about four times the size of the f&sf section, where I looked exclusively at historical fiction:

- Shan Sa's novel set during the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in the early 1930s, **The Girl Who Play Go**. She also has a new acclaimed novel **Empress** about the only female emperor of China. I definitely need to read one of her books sometime;
- Bernard Cornwell's **Stonehenge** was enjoyable enough that I am anxious to read some of his other historical fiction, but <u>not</u> his Richard Sharpe seagoing adventures. Both his *Grail Trilogy* and his standalone **Gallows** were there waving at me;
- I've never read any of Rafael Sabatini's swashbuckling adventures, and they interest me mainly for his historical color rather than the adventures themselves. My main interest is **Bellarion the Fortunate** since it was the inspiration for Gordon R. Dickson's *Childe* series, but I've never seen it at a bookstore or I would have bought it long before now. Instead they had the more popular **Captain Blood** and **Scaramouche**.
- Ben Indick has piqued my interest in reading Dickens, and while I have several volumes in my collection, two books about which I have recently read favorable comments are **Bleak House** and **Our Mutual Friend**, neither of which I have;
- Barnes & Noble had a book called **The Stephen King Companion** which rated his 100 best stories. Since my favorite two Stephen King novels are **The Stand** and **The Shining**, which were ranked #2 and #3 respectively, I was naturally intrigued by their selection of **It** as #1, calling it King's *magnum opus*. That naturally caused me to add **It** to my *Recommended Reading* list. You can laugh if you wish, but that list now contains 27 sf books, 26 historical fiction, and 20 nonfiction.

So I came home last night and did some reading of Gardner Dozois' 2005 edition of **The Best Science Fiction of the Year**, specifically Kage Baker's novella "Mother Aegypt." Ah, life is grand!

*

Here is a blurb by an editor of the Quality Paperback Book Club which probably will strike as familiar a chord with many of my readers as it did with me:

Without getting too personal, I always feel like an outsider. Whether I'm with a group of strangers or surrounded by people I love and trust, I always feel a bit disconnected. Yet, when I'm reading a book I truly love, this shadow-like sense of loneliness seems to go away.

CLUNK!
*Wrong Moments in Bujold's **Barrayar***
by E.B. Frohvet

On previous occasions I have used the term "right moments" without defining what I meant. Right moments are bits of scenes, lines of dialogue, even background material, that seems at the moment so correct that you nod and think, "Yeah, that's how it would be." Right moments do not have to be literally true–we are discussing fiction here. But they have to ring true. As I once wrote in another context, "It's not the difference between truth and fiction; it's the subtler difference between verisimilitude and bullshit."

There is a perfect right moment in the last line of **Lord of the Rings**. There is one nearly as good in the last line of Le Guin's **The Beginning Place**. In both cases though you need to read the entire story to realize why it is a right moment. There is a subtle right moment, amid the clutter, in Heinlein's **Glory Road**. The protagonist Oscar Gordon encounters the poor boy Pug, who is eager to meet the Hero. Thinking he ought to make the moment memorable, Oscar fumbles among his few Earthly possessions and finds an American 25¢ piece. Showing the lad the likeness of George Washington on the obverse, he begins, "This is the father of my House..."

But there are also wrong moments, defined as "a character saying or doing something so stupid and out of character that you know the author needs it for a plot point–or has just been careless." Comedies especially tend to be built on wrong moments. In the romantic comedy *While You Were Sleeping*, the principle character Lucy (Sandra Bullock) has lots of opportunities to tell the Callahan family the truth, and fails to do so mainly because if she did, the story would end after fifteen minutes. It is done with great wit, charm, and cleverness, but the plot is propped up with stupid lies that are bound to blow up eventually.

One of the reasons I have long enjoyed the writing of Lois McMaster Bujold is that the ratio of right moments to wrong moments is generally very high. Bujold even uses deliberate wrong moments effectively, especially in the comedy **A Different Campaign**. Here, however, I want to show, not merely that there are a couple of clunking wrong moments in the author's **Barrayar**, but how they are made even more egregious in comparison to the right moments surrounding them.

Interestingly, the two wrong moments in **Barrayar** illustrates the distinction between types. One appears to have been merely carelessness. The other is manifestly a bad plot device.

A little background is necessary. Start with **Shards of Honor**. Cordelia Naismith was a ship's captain in the Betan Survey Survice: not military, but organized along quasi-military lines with uniforms and– remember this–chain of command.

The Survey was transformed to the Betan Expeditionary Force, a clearly military outfit.

As part of this, Cordelia took part in the Battle of Escobar, was captured, and eventually repatriated home. Her own escape from Beta Colony was a sensible mix of lies, bribery, and near-lethal force. Kicking the President in the nads was an accident, but nearly drowning her therapist in an aquarium was deliberate. It was, in fact, precisely a military act, the use or threat of lethal force to break the will of the enemy.

Fast forward to **Barrayar**, several months later. Cordelia is living in a society with a strong military tradition. Her husband is a semi-retired admiral, her father-in-law a retired general. Most of the people she deals with on a day-to-day basis are the old count's armsmen, or Imperial Security agents, all military men or veterans. Her own bodyguard Droushnakovi (strictly, in Russian, that probably ought to have been "Droushnakova") received military-type training, and failed at a military career only from being disqualified by gender.

Consider the scene at the end of chapter ten. Cordelia's husband Aral and father-in-law Count Piotr are in the midst of an appallingly ugly confrontation, throwing controlled insults with a precision possible only to family members. They would not waste such careful cruelty on mere strangers. Cordelia, unwilling to listen any longer, retreats to the window where she observes an aircraft flying erratically. "What's wrong with that lightflyer?...I wonder if it's full of bombs?
CLICK. The presentation of a military threat, that word "bombs", triggers a reflex in both men. Without an instant's hesitation, they drop their argument (not resolved, merely postponed in the face of a more immediate priority) and rush to her side to assess the threat. In the face of crisis, they settle immediate duties and responsibilities in two minutes and a few brusque sentences and rush off to deal with the situation. That is a right moment: confront military officers with a tactical emergency, and they will prioritize ruthlessly, put everything else aside, and act.

Another example is in chapter seventeen. Cordelia tells Droushnakovi, "Good soldiers never pass up a chance to eat or sleep. They never know how much they'll be called on to do, before the next chance." That's not merely so, it's axiomatic among soldiers. Right moment.

In the same conversation it becomes apparent that Drou is depressed, because in her first moment of actual combat she flinched. "Sergeant Bothari didn't hesitate." Well, no. Bothari may not have been 100% there, but he understood clearly the first rule of a firefight: take out the enemy.

The relevant point is that Cordelia has been defined as a character with a detailed and intimate knowledge of the military mind-set.

In chapter twelve, Cordelia and Bothari between them are personally responsible for the safety of the child-emperor Gregor Vorbarra. The are lost in the hills; enemy forces are rapidly closing in; they do not know if Major Klyeuvi will get back to them. Cordelia sets up a diversion, leading Vordarian's men to think they are hiding in an extensive cave system. This is a smart and sensible thing to do, tying up enemy forces in a useless and

frustrating exercise. Classic guerilla tactics.

They manage to reunite with Klyeuvi, who was a Ranger officer in his youth. He praises them for the intelligent diversion. Bothari grunts, “It was Lady Vorkosigan’s idea.” The old soldier says to Cordelia approvingly, “You think like a soldier, m’lady.” And her immediate reaction is: What an appalling compliment. She gets honest praise from an expert and is offended by it.

Thud. Wrong moment.

Even worse is the scene at the end of chapter fourteen and beginning of chapter fifteen. Doctor Vaagen shows up at the loyalist base asking to see Cordelia. The duty officer follows procedure, summoning her but not letting her speak to the man directly. Vaagen has suffered a beating; Cordelia screeches, “You get a medtech for that man!” Major Sircoj replies steadily that Vaagen has been triaged, his condition is not serious, and that security procedures must be followed. It is only when Aral arrives that Vaagaen is admitted, sent to the infirmary, and a surgeon summoned to check on him.

Here is the clunker: “Cordelia reflected bitterly on the nature of chain of command; all truth and reason and urgent need were not enough, apparently, to lend causal power to one outside that chain.”

What a stupid thing to think. It may seem like a minor thing, perhaps not even an error at all, to ignorant civilians. They would be utterly mistaken. Chain of command is clear, well-labeled, and exists for a purpose. It is not some arbitrary bullshit generals thought up to make life difficult for the enlisted personnel. (Military life is amply-supplied with arbitrary bullshit, but chain of command is not an example of it). Chain of command is the backbone of military discipline. The last thing George Washington told his men before the Battle of Trenton was, “Stay by your officers, for God’s sake, stay by your officers.” Without chain of command, you do not have an army; you have a mob with heavy weapons.

Cordelia of all people should know the danger of trying to jump the chain of command. She was under stress? Tough shit. That is what military training is for, so you stick to the system under stress. Especially under stress. In this case, Cordelia panicked. Major Sircoj did not and followed orders and chain of command. He was right and she was wrong, and even after the fact she fails to see how clearly she was wrong. This is an egregious wrong moment, and the author should have known better.

Wondrous Stories

Science fiction is not really a genre at all. It is an umbrella covering several types of speculative fiction past, present, and future. Perhaps my favorite of these genres is *culture building*, the examination of far-future civilizations, occasionally set on radically-changed Earths, but more often set on distant planets, with or without alien life.

This genre runs the gamut from lighter stories with their emphasis on plotting and adventure, such as Anne McCaffrey's *Pern* stories, to much more intricate explorations by writers such as C.J. Cherryh and Ursula K Le Guin with a lot of stuff inbetween, such as Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Darkover* novels and Lois McMaster Bujold's *Barrayar* series (and I'm wondering if there is any reason why all of the above authors are female?). I have read 6 *Pern* novels–the first three and the *Harper Hall of Pern* series–and enjoyed them, but I have read dozens of Cherryh/Le Guin/Bradley novels and found them much more fulfilling with their increased depth.

E.B. Frohvet is a fan of the *Liaden* series by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller. In fact, there seems to be an entire cult of fans built around this series, similar to the cults of *Darkover* and *Pern* fans. Since I know E.B. is also a Cherryh fan, and the *Laiden* novels fall into the culture-building genre, I decided to buy the first omnibus published by Meisha Merlin, **Pilot's Choice**. Recently I read the first novel in the series, Local Custom.

The Liaden are an alien race whose society is dependent on duty and obligation much moreso than Terran society. As in many C.J. Cherryh novels, **Local Custom** is primarily concerned with the interaction of Laiden and humans, and members of both societies struggling to understand the other.

The main characters are Anne Smith, a Terran professor of Liaden literature, and Er Thom yos'Galan, a Terran Master Trader who is the heir of his very rich and powerful Norval clan. Er Thom's mother Petrella is the head of the clan who believes it is time for her son and heir to participate in an arranged formal marriage for the sake of producing his own heir, while Er Thom and Anne are passionately in love. The novel's main concerns are the couple's struggles to deal with each other's cultural differences, plus Er Thom's dilemma of balancing clan obligations with his love of Anne. This situation worsens when Er Thom visits Anne for the purpose of bidding her a final good-bye and learns of the existence of their son Shan. This adds a third element since Shan is a half-breed Terran and Liaden, who may or may not acceptable to the clan as Er Thom's heir. And how would Anne feel about her son remaining behind on Liad for training rather than leaving with her?

The novel is a four-cornered struggle between Er Thom, Anne, Petrella, and Er Thom's cousin Daav, his closest friend who holds power in the family almost equal to that of Petrella. Daav supports Er Thom, but he also has the obligation of protecting the family, whose all-important prestige might be damaged by accepting Shan into it; nor can he blatantly go against the wishes of Petrella.

Local Custom reminded me of a Victorian novel of manners, since that is basically what it is, but Lee and Miller are such good storytellers that, after a slow beginning during which I feared **Local Custom** was headed in the direction of becoming a romance–a wrong assumption, thankfully–it grew steadily more interesting and the characters more starkly-defined. By the last fifty pages, the novel was so absorbing it sped along like a thriller, while still being basically a novel of manners.

The novel was not without several flaws though. Although **Local Custom** is obviously influenced by the novels of C.J. Cherryh, it is much simpler than the average Cherryh novel, never reaching the level of sophisticated culture or deft plotting and characterization that Cherryh routinely wields. In particular, the writing lacks subtlety. Er Thom and Anne Smith tend to repeat obvious facts to themselves about their cultures purely for the purpose of reminding the reader in case they missed some subtlety. Consider this exchange on pages 43-44:

The young man stopped, head tipped to one side. Then he stuck out one of his big hands in the way that Terrans did when they wanted to initiate the behavior known as "shaking hands." Inwardly, Er Thom sighed. Local custom.

He was saved from this particular bout with custom by the perpetrator himself, who lowered his hand, looking self-conscious. "Never mind. Won't do to drop Scooter, will it? I'm Jerzy Entaglia. Theater Arts. Chairman of Theater Arts, which gives you an idea of the shape the department's in."

An introduction. Very good.

A more noticeable flaw is that a large part of the suspense comes from Er Thom and Anne misunderstanding the subtleties of each other's cultures. And yet, on page 52, I encountered the following sequence about Anne Smith, who is described as a famous scholar of Liaden literature:

Liaden literature was her passion. She had read the stories of Shan el'Thrasin compulsively, addictively, scratching back along esoteric research lines for the oldest versions, sending for recordings of the famous Liaden prena'ma–the teller of tales. She knew what happened to those foolish enough to threaten a Liaden's melant'i.

If Anne is so obsessed with Liaden literature, and a scholar as well, how can she possibly be so totally ignorant in her dealings with the man she loves?

Er Thom is one of 300 Liaden Master Traders whose work, it states on page 98, *is exacting, requiring intimate knowledge of the regulations of a thousand ports of call, as well as a sure instinct for what will gain a profit at each.* Liaden Master Traders deal with Terrans extensively, making it hard to believe that Er Thom is as ignorant of Terran culture as Anne is of Liaden culture.

And yet, much of the novel's conflict arises from Anne and er Thom's inability to understand each other's cultures at all? This was not very believable.

There was also some over-the-top writing, particularly in the novel's first 50 pages when the authors seemed deliberately to give the impression they were writing what was basically a love story. An example of this is the following sequence on page 59:

She was back with him fully, fingers busy with his own clothing. "Er Thom, I need you. Quickly."

"Quickly," he agreed, and the passion built to a wave, hesitated in a pain that became ecstacy as it crashed, engulfing them entirely.

Fortunately, as I stated previously, the flaws are not so distracting as to ruin the reading experience of the novel, and they tended to fade away entirely in its second half. The main reason I discuss them is a bit of befuddlement that the authors' editors did not request a rewrite to smooth them away.

Overall, **Local Custom** was a promising first novel in the *Liaden* series, and I look forward to reading further in it.

*

If David Hartwell will be remembered for anything as an f&sf editor, it will likely be for his huge, comprehensive overviews of the fantasy and science fiction fields. My collection has some wonderful anthologies edited by Hartwell, several in collaboration with his wife Kathryn Cramer, but most of them solo: **The Science Fiction Century**, **The World Treasury of Science Fiction**, **The Dark Descent**, **Masterpieces of Fantasy and Wonder,** and **Masterpieces of Fantasy and Enchantment.**

The Ascent of Wonder is Hartwell & Cramer's overview of "hard" science fiction. It begins with three essays by Greg Benford, Cramer and Hartwell stating their thesis that hard science fiction is the heart of the genre. Readers of **VoP** know that is not a thesis I accept, since I believe that historical change is the heart of sf, with "hard" sf one of its many sub-genres. Whether one accepts Hartwell's premise is actually irrelevant though since he spreads his definition of "hard sf" so wide that seemingly half the stories in the book only qualify as "hard" under the most liberal of views. Which I a good thing, since 990 pages of pure science would probably have burnt me out sooner rather than later. But the stories in this anthology are so broad as to satisfy almost any sf reader, with the possible exception of those who exclusively read slipstream/fantasy stories.

I do not really need to review many of these stories since I suspect my readers are at least familiar with most of them, if they have not read them previously. The book opens with Ursula K Le Guin's "Nine Lives," her classic story of a cloned human struggling to survive after the sudden death of his 8 clonemates. Hartwell's brief intro tries to paint Le Guin as a "hard sf" writer, when in fact her fiction is almost exclusively concerned with

sociology and politics, which the introductions have already rejected as not as true “hard” sf as the testosterone-infused sciences of physics and chemistry.

The second story is Bob Shaw’s fabulous “Light of Other Days”, one of the most impressive premises ever, panes of glass through which light passes so slowly that a person observing the glass sees a view that is months or even years past. As all great sf writers can do, Shaw made a very touching story out of what was basically a one-punchline short.

The list of great stories goes on, some truly based on science, while others use the science as a foundation for a human interest story. Highlights include:

- “The Star,” one of Arthur C. Clarke’s two famous demolitions of the foundations of modern religion, (the other being “The Nine Billion Names of God);
- Kate Wilhelm’s tale of working scientists “The Planners”;
- Anne McCaffrey’s first Dragon story “Wyer Search” (another questionable selections as a “hard” sf tale in the book; but since these were my favorite stories in the book, I am not complaining);
- “Desertion,” perhaps Clifford D. Simak’s most touching story from his *City* sequence;
- Poul Anderson’s lyrical “Kyrie”;
- James Blish’s classic of life in a waterdrop “Surface Tension”;
- “The Pi Man,” a typical Alfred Bester romp.

There is also a rich sampling of pre-genre sf tales from such sf progenitors as Rudyard Kipling (his classic sf tale “The Night Mail”), H.G. Wells (“The Land Ironclads”), Edgar Allan Poe (“A Descent into the Maelstrom”) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (“Rappaccini’s Daughter”).

A total of 67 stories, 990 pages, running the gamut of science fiction genres, nearly ever story a worthy selection. I recommend this book highly.

Readers who enjoyed this book, especially those for whom “hard” sf is indeed the core of their particular genre, should also enjoy Hartwell’s follow-up anthology, the equally-massive **The Hard SF Renaissance**, which is due to be published this coming fall. I hope David Hartwell continues publishing these massive overviews. If I knew him personally, which I don’t, I would recommend “future history” and “world building” (including society and culture building) overviews. Now those would <u>really</u> fall into the heart of my genre.

*

The Book of Dreams is the fifth and last *Demon Princes* novel by Jack Vance, and while it was enjoyable, I could not escape the feeling that Vance was growing a little bit tired of the series himself. The plot is interesting enough as a mystery, following the same pattern of the previous volumes (Kirth Gersen seeks the identity of another of the five

master criminals responsible for invading his childhood home and slaughtering/enslaving all the inhabitants except himself and his grandfather), a criminal who hides his identity obsessively, so that the bulk of the novel consists of Gersen seeking Howard Alan Treesong's identity while making sufficient waves that Treesong himself seeks out Gersen. But that sameness of plot is a bit wearying, which Vance compensates for a bit with three encounters between Gersen and Treesong, all of which are the most interesting scenes in the novel.

What makes all five of these novel–and its predecessors **(The Face The Star King**, **The Killing Machine** and **The Palace of Love**) always interesting is the lushness and wonder of Vance's universe. At times his novels read like travelogues, filled with descriptions and tidbits that serve as gentle but regular asides that often make you forget this is a mystery you're reading. And I don't really read Vance for plot or characterization anyway, but for its color and sense of wonder.

*

Approximately one year ago I read and reviewed C.J. Cherryh **Foreigner**, the first volume in her long-running *atevi* series, and my comments on it included "...**Foreigner** finds Cherryh at the top of her form" and "In some ways, it represents the best of both styles, being a slow-paced analysis of cultures and society wrapped around a thrilling plot. C.J. Cherryh has proven to me at least that she has lost none of her edge as a writer, so I await the story's continuation in **Invader** eagerly."

I am not sure why I took a year to read the second volume, but by the time I did I needed to reread the last chapter of **Foreigner** for continuity's sake, since the first three volumes (**Invader** is followed by **Inheritor**) form one long novel much as the three *Faded Sun* books formed one novel which were originally cut for marketing purposes. Apparently, the entire *atevi* series follows this pattern of each three books forming one novel. This type of extended series is more to my liking than series such as George R.R. Martin's *Song of Fire and Ice* or Robert Jordan's *World* series which, according to the reviews, seem to be one long, endless novel over several thousand pages. At least in Cherryh's *atevi* series, I only need to read three books to complete a single storyline, rather than spend several decades waiting to see how a single intertwined plot ends. And imagine how frustrating that must be for the authors to spend seemingly their entire lives writing one novel.

Anyway, Invader is every bit as good as I hoped it would be. It is primarily a political novel, focused on Bren Cameron, the *paidhi* who serves as intermediary between the human-populated island Mosphiera and the nonhuman native *atevi* who, while humanoid in appearance, are totally nonhuman in attitude and emotional makeup.

Besides Bren, the main characters include:

- Tabini, the *aiji* of the *atevi*, which translates into English as "lord of the local association," but which more resembles a monarch who was elected by the other

lords upon the death of his father;

- Ilisidi, Tabini's grandmother who was overlooked for *aiji* twice, and resents that double slight enough to be one of Tabini's main foes whom he and Bren suspect is dealing with the rebels struggling to overthrow Tabini;

- Deana Hanks, who was passed over as *paidhi* for Bren, and represents the ultra-conserva- tive faction in the Mosphiera government; when Bren is presumed dead near the end of **Foreigner**, she is sent to Tabini by her faction, and refuses to leave when Bren shows up alive and well;

- Jago and Banici, Bren's bodyguards, whose relationship with him deepens and, in one case, veers into a direction totally unexpected by him.

Besides the political struggles between *atevi* and humans, **Invader** introduces a third element in the form of the original human spaceship returning after two hundred years. This was the colonizing starship from Earth which two centuries previous jumped into normal space and realized it was totally lost and in dire trouble. Most of the would-be colonists emigrated to the nearest habitable world, which was inhabited by the *atevi*, while the others left to find another suitable home. Now they have returned and begin negotiating both with the humans and with the *atevi* through Bren. Much of **Invader** concerns plans for the ship to send two emissaries to the planet, one to negotiate on Mosphiera, and the other with Bren and the *atevi.*

However, the civil war which always lies close to the surface worsens as the rebels, who apparently now include Hanks as their own *paidhi*, make assassi-nation attempts on either Tabini or Bren, or both, and also seem determined to interfere with the arrival of the two emissaries from space.

This might all sound like a fast-paced, action-filled adventure, but long readers of C.J. Cherryh novels realized it is anything <u>but</u> that. A typical Cherryh novel is like an onion, intended to be peeled slowly and carefully as more and more of the culture and history of the *atevi* civilization is revealed to Bren and, through him, to the reader. The entire novel is told through Bren's point of view, much of it consisting of his inner dialogue concerning all the events taking place. We learn much about the *atevi* race and their culture, and the human society on Mosphiera through Bren, but we also learn much about his emotions, thoughts, beliefs, strengths and weaknesses and, perhaps most importantly of all, the loneliness of being a *paidhi* stuck between two worlds. As he develops closer ties to the *atevi*, his actions and public words displease the conservatives back home more and more. Their displeasure at him is taken out on his family and friends who try to shield Bren from all of this by hedging whenever he speaks to them by phone.

Some of this might sound like a liberal's subtle attack on the political differences which have divided America since the disputed election of 2000, but keep in mind that **Invader** was published in 1995, before our country split into pro-Iraqi War conservatives and anti-Iraqi War liberals. Ironically though, the factions which divide the humans on Mosphiera

are a fairly accurate prediction as to what has transpired in America in the past half-decade.

Anybody who likes carefully-developed alien races, well-thought-out cultures, and a slow-paced, thought-provoking look at human-alien relations should enjoy **Invader**, and its predecessor **Foreigner**, as much as I did. I await the third volume **Inheritor** eagerly, and hopefully will not wait an entire year to finish this wonderful trilogy.

*

In his Afterword to his novel Beyond Infinity, Greg Benford comments that "Years ago...David Hartwell used the term 'transcendental adventure' and I thought...this novel might be an example." That is probably as good a description of **Beyond Infinity** as anything I can say about it beyond describing it as a thought-provoking blending of Olaf Stapledon meets Arthur C. Clarke.

The setting is a far-future Earth populated by numerous intelligent races, all of them either evolved from humans or other current inhabitants of Earth, including:

- Cley, the main character, who is considered an "Original," although she seems somewhat further advanced than 21st century humans;
- Supras, the ultimate in human evolution, who tolerate Originals as we would tolerate children;
- Seeker, who resembles a highly-involved raccoon, yet shows depths of intelligence beyond Originals and perhaps even beyond Supras.

There are two main plot threads throughout the book, the first being Cley's attempt to deal with the Supras who treat her gently and caringly, but for some reason refuse her the type of freedom she craves; the second is the mysterious threat of an interstellar entity called the Malign which killed all the remaining Originals and seems determined to eliminate Cley as well.

Seeker rescues Cley from an attack which destroys the Library of Life while killing the other Originals, then leads her on a frantic chase through a 4-D portal, which sets the tone for much of the book by involving lots of higher-dimensional mathematical speculation, and from there into near-Earth space aboard a living gargantuan spacecraft.

Along the way we learn much about the millions of years of history between our era and the setting of the book, including the history of the Malign and its nemesis, another interstellar entity known as the Multifold, both of which were apparently created by humans. We also encounter living beings such as:

- pinwheels, which are living transportation systems;
- semi-intelligent animals known as semisents;
- living gargantuan spaceships such as jonahs and leviathans;
- skysharks which live in space and prey on the gargantuan spaceships.

Once Seeker and Cley arrive in space, the novel tightens as the Supra and Malign both close in on Cley, the former to use her as part of an elaborate defense against the latter. The ultimate battle scene between the forces of good and evil certainly qualifies as transcendental adventure, and requires more than a grain of suspension of disbelief, but Benford pulls it off about as well as possible.

Overall, this was a strong novel, equal parts sense of wonder, thought-provoking, and exciting plot. It was supposedly based on Benford's earlier novella "Beyond the Fall of Night," which was written as a sequel to Arthur C. Clarke's classic "Against the Fall of Night." Not having read Clarke's novella in several decades, and never having read Benford's sequel, I cannot comment at this time on the connections. However, such lack of knowledge seemed to have no impact on my enjoyment of this splendid book.

I guess an old-timer can still show the "radical New Space Opera" writers a trick or two.

*

Tidbits

It is difficult during the school year to read a lot of "serious" fiction, so I tend to read short fiction and lighter stuff. Recently I spent some time reading old prozine serials from the 1960s and 1970s. While none of them were award-quality stuff, all were at least enjoyable. In rough order of quality, they were:

- A. Bertram Chandler's *John Grimes* serial **Edge of Night** in 1966 **Worlds of IF;** this was considerably more sophisticated than I recalled it being when I first read it;
- James Schmitz' serial **The Tuvela** in 1969 **Analog**; some of the protagonist's feats were a bit beyond belief, but the setting and aliens made this novel successful;
- Gordon R. Dickson' serial **Wolfling**, also from 1969 **Analog**. It was interesting reading, although not as thought-provoking as a major Dickson work generally is;
- James Schmitz' serial **The Lion Game**, also from Analog, one of his *Telzey* stories, which was fast-paced but tended more towards the weaknesses of *The Tuvela* without its corresponding strengths. I tend to think I would enjoy more of his *Hub* stories that were not devoted to *Telzey*.

The In-Box

Alexiad / Lisa & Joseph Major / 1409 Christy Avenue, Louisville, KY 40204-2040 / very regular reviewzine. Highly recommended.

Argentus / Steven Silver / 707 Sapling Lane, Deerfield, IL 60015-3969 / shsilver@sfsite.com /genzine

The Best of MOZ / Murray Moore / 1065 Henley Road, Mississaugua, ON L4Y 1C8 Canada / personal natter and reviews

The Blind Man's Rainbow / Melody Sherosky / P.O. Box 1557, Erie, PA 16507-0557 / www.bmrpoetry.com / poetry and art

Celtic Seasons / Rita & Richard Shader / 2593 Chapparal Drive, Melbourne, FL 32934-8275 / Scottish history and culture

Challenger / **The Zine Dump** / Guy H. Lillian III / www.challzine.net / one of the finest genzines being published, deserving of a Hugo Award

Chunga / Andy Hooper, Randy Byers, carl juarez / 1013 North 36th St., Seattle, WA 98103 / probably the most traditional fanzine currently being published; a Hugo nominee

The Drink Tank / Chris Garcia / www.efanzine.com online personalzine with aspects of a genzine

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.

Fanzine Fanatique / Keith Walker / 6 Vine Street, Lancaster, LA1 4UF England / personalzine

File 770 / Mike Glyer / 705 Valley View Ave., Monrovia, CA 01016 / fannish news and reviews

For The Clerisy / Brant Kresovich / P.O. Box 404, Getzville, NY 14068 / discussion of books

In a Prior Lifetime / John Purcell / www.efanzine.com / online personalzine

It Goes on the Shelf / Ned Brooks / 4817 Dean Lane, Lilburn, GA 30047-4720 / book reviews, mostly of obscure stuff not discussed elsewhere

The Knarley Knews / Henry Welch / 1525 16th Ave., Grafton, WI 53024-2017 / genzine;

Knarley spumes, Sue Welch travels, and Terry Jeeves' memoirs

Littlebrook / Jerry Kaufman and Susanne Tompkins / 3522 N.E. 123rd St., Seattle, WA / genzine

Opuntia / Dale Speirs / Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2P 2E7 / reviews, articles, and letters by one of the finest current fanwriters

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

The Reluctant Famulus / Tom Sadler / 422 W. Maple Ave, Adrian, MI 49221-1627 / return of a long-dormant genzine. Welcome back, Tom!

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

Steam Engine Time / Bruce Gillespie and Janine Stinson / available through http://www.efanzines.com/ / genzine with lots of reviews

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

On the Lighter Side

As the years passed, an old farmer grew weary of his wife's constantly haranguing him. The only time he got any relief was when he was out plowing with his old mule. He tried to plow a lot.One day, when he was out plowing, his wife brought him lunch in the field. He drove the old mule into the shade, sat down on a stump, and began to eat his lunch. Immediately, his wife began haranguing him again. Complain, nag, nag; it just went on and on. All of a sudden, the old mule lashed out with both hind feet; caught her smack in the back of the head; killed her dead on the spot.At the funeral several days later, the minister noticed something rather odd. When a woman mourner would approach the old farmer, he would listen for a minute, then nod his head in agreement; but when a man mourner approached him, he would listen for a minute, then shake his head in disagreement. This was so consistent, the minister decided to ask the old farmer about it. So after the funeral, the minister spoke to the old farmer, and asked him why he nodded his head and agreed with the women, but always shook his head and disagreed with all the men.The old farmer said: "Well, the women would come up and say something about

how nice my wife looked, or how pretty her dress was, so I'd nod my head in agreement.""And what about the men?" the minister asked."They wanted to know if the mule was for sale.

*

Little Georgie watched his daddy's car pass by the school playground and go into the woods. Curious, he followed the car and saw Daddy and Aunt Jane in a passionate embrace. Little Georgie found this so exciting that he could not contain himself as he ran home and started to tell his mother, "Mommy, I was at the playground and I saw Daddy's car go into the woods with Aunt Jane. I went back to have a look and he was giving Aunt Jane a big kiss, then he helped her take off her shirt. Then Aunt Jane helped Daddy take his pants off, then Aunt
Jane....." At this point Mommy cut him off and said, "Georgie, this is such an interesting story, suppose you save the rest of it for supper time. I want to see the look on Daddy's face when you tell it tonight.

At the dinner table, Mommy asked little Georgie to tell his story. Georgie started his story, "I was at the playground and I saw Daddy's car go into the woods with Aunt Jane. I went back to look and he was giving Aunt Jane a big kiss, then he helped her take off her shirt. Then Aunt Jane helped Daddy take his pants off, then Aunt Jane and Daddy started doing the same thing that Mommy and Uncle Bill used to do when Daddy was in the Army."

*

A pirate walked into a bar in Miami and the bartender said, "Hey, I haven't seen you in awhile. What happened? You look terrible.""What do you mean?" said the pirate, "I feel fine.""What about the wooden leg? You didn't have that before.""Well, we were in a battle and I got hit with a cannonball, but I'm fine now.""Well, OK, but what about that hook? What happened to your hand?""We were in another battle. I boarded a ship and got into a sword fight. My hand was cut off. I got fitted with a hook. I'm fine, really.""What about that eye patch?""Oh, one day we were at sea and a flock of birds flew over. I looked up and one of them pooped in my eye.""You're kidding," said the bartender. "You couldn't lose an eye just from some bird poop.""It was my first day with the hook."