Visions of Paradise

#112: Wondrous Stories

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Wondrous Stories

In his editorial for Forbidden Planets, editor Marvin Kaye mentions that this is the 27th anthology he has edited for the Science Fiction Book Club since 1970, but this is the first one I have bought for a simple reason: all the previous ones were fantasy. This book is the most recent collection of original novellas published by the SFBC. Previously I have bought and enjoyed Robert Silverberg's **Between Worlds**, Mike Resnick's **Down These Dark Spaceways**, and Gardner Dozois' **One Million A.D.** Each of the previous volumes have featured one or two exceptional stories, with the others all ranging between good and very good. I had no reason to expect this volume would be any less interesting, nor was I disappointed.

It seems inevitable that a Robert Reed novella would be one of the highlights of the book, since his masterful "Good Mountain" was the best story in **One Million A.D.** and his "Camouflage" was one of the highlights of **Down These Dark Spaceways**. Reading a Robert Reed story is virtually a guarantee you will get a creative, well-plotted story, often a memorable one as well. How he keeps turning out such a constant stream of top-notch stories is amazing to me, as is the fact that he has never received a major award for any of his stories. He has not even had as many nominees as many lesser writers, a total of 5 Hugo nominations, a single Nebula nomination, 2 John W. Campbell finalists, and a single World Fantasy nomination. He has done better with the **Locus** poll, making the final list 40 times, but even there he has been underrated since he has never finished higher than a 5th place finish.

Reed's "Rococo" is a Great Ship story–which is where he does some of his very best stuff, such as the amazing "Marrow" and "The Remoras"–but instead of being set exclusively <u>on</u> the Great Ship, this is a story about its discovery and one of the alien races which petition for space on the ship. It tells the story of a woman Aasleen and her brother Rococo who is beloved by everybody on the Great Ship, until he abruptly and mysteriously tries to land on a forbidden world and she is sent to bring him back. The plot itself is interesting, but the story's strength is the alien world Chaos and its various races, particularly the Scypha. Reed fans will not be disappointed by this story.

Jack McDevitt has also appeared in several of these SFBC volumes but, unlike Reed, he has not done his very best stuff in them. "Kaminsky at War" questions the Prime Directive of much classic SF, including the various **Star Trek** series. Kaminsky is an anthropologist on a space ship studying a world inhabited by particularly violent natives. The comparisons to 20th and 21st century humans are fairly obvious in the story. After observing a particularly brutal slaughter, Kaminsky can no longer accept the Protocol and sets out to do whatever he can to end the slaughter. The story is interesting reading, but it is primarily a wish fulfilment story, with a wish fulfilment ending, and is somewhat less successful than other stories in the book.

Julie Czerneda has garnered popularity in recent years with several series of biologically-based sf adventures, none of which I have read. But her popularity among both readers and critics has encouraged me to read some of her stuff, so I was glad to see her story "No Place Like Home" here. It tells the story of a humanoid race who have lived in spacecraft for so many generations

they have no knowledge of their legendary homeworld. So their craft travel from world to world seeking their homeworld. Rather than send boarding parties to the various planets, the ships contain a group of "walkers" who travel to the planets vicariously through a link with cloned Avatars. The story is told through the point of view of Walker Drewe who grows interested in the technology behind the creation of the Avatars, so that she and the reader learn the biology behind it simultaneously.

One story I did not like at all was Alan Dean Foster's "Midworld." The introduction describes Midworld as *so full of dangerous life-forms that no one in her or his right mind would ever venture to explore it."* So the first eight pages of the story consist of a team of 4 men who come to Midworld to seek a missing scientist on its surface first discussing the planet with an expert on the planet's dangers. Those 8 pages consist of the 4 men ridiculing the expert while struggling to repress their laughter at his warnings about the planet's dangers. The remaining 37 pages of the story consist of those 4 men traversing the planet as one-by-one the planet's indigenous lifeforms kill them. That's it. There is a not very successful at sense of wonder at the planet's vegetation and subhuman lifeforms. I'm not sure what the purpose of this story was.

Comparing Foster's story with Nancy Kress' "JQ211F and Holding" only illuminates the weaknesses of Foster's story more. Kress creates a world even more inhospitable than Foster's, one that has been recently discovered by a scientist who has proven without shadow of a doubt that that world is the source of all life in the galaxy, life which then spread via panspermia to other worlds. Another scientist on the small ship is a devout Christian who believes the world is Hell. The story combines the scientists' search for primordial life on the world with the Christian who seeks her own unannounced agenda there. This is a typically-strong Kress story, albeit one which does not stand up to deep philosophical thought.

Not surprisingly, Allan Steele's "Walking Star" is a very traditional story about a field guide on a somewhat-hostile world–although nowhere near as hostile as Kress' and Foster's worlds–who is hired by a rich man to seek one of his former employees and close friend who has abandoned his job apparently under the spell of a strong native drug. Typical of 50s type stories, the missing man harbors deeper secrets than mere drugs, so the story packs an unexpected, and somewhat dire, ending. Pleasant reading although less-thought-provoking than Kress' story.

Overall, this is a slightly weaker volume than either Silverberg's **Between Worlds** or Dozois' **One Million A.D.** I would rate one story as superb (Reed's "Rococo"), two better-than-average (Kress and Czerneda) and two worthwhile (McDevitt and Steele). That's not a bad percentage.

*

I wanted some lighter reading for the plane flight to Orlando, so I selected Poul Anderson's classic novel The High Crusade, which I have not read in thirty years. The opening scene could have been straight out of *Star Trek* (although the novel preceded the tv series by about 6 years). A spacecraft lands on a world inhabited by intelligent beings living in a feudal society. As the ship descends, thousands of natives gather around the ship. A door in the side of the ship opens, and a landing crew descends the ramp, each member holding a ray-gun in their hand.

With their superior technology and firepower, the spacemen feel absolutely no threat from the

natives, so much so that one of them casually shoots and kills a threatening native. Immediately the thousands of natives, who are actually members of a well-trained army, let fly a volley of thousands of arrows which immediately riddle and kill each member of the landing party.

The native army quickly enter the ship through the ramp and destroy the entire crew of the ship.

The planet is Earth, and the native army is led by Sir Roger de Tourneville who was bringing them into battle. Instead the ship leads them to the intergalactic empire of the Wersgorix where they prove that a highly-advanced technology is not necessarily safe against warriors of a considerably less-advanced culture, a fact which has been illustrated in countries such as Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq over the past half-century, all wars which occurred after **The High Crusade** was written. One of Anderson's tenets here is that simpler does not necessarily mean stupid, a tenet which recent history has certainly validated.

Much of the book is tongue-in-cheek, and the reader certainly needs to suspend his or her disbelief at how easily the feudal warriors succeed in many instances. But the book is never boring, and never so outrageous as to be frustrating. It was very good light reading.

*

When I started reading science fiction in the 1960s, I was not a big fan of "old" space opera which, much as Bob Tucker defined it, consisted of pulpish adventures with few redeeming values other than the ability to pass a few light hours reading. But gradually that definition evolved into "new" space opera which contains elements which definitely appeal to me. Space opera has come to represent the most expansive type of science fiction, ranging across solar systems and even galaxies, involving colorful future humans and aliens, as well as exotic worlds and cultures, both human and alien. At its best space opera provides more sense of wonder than any other forms of sf; at its worst it is pre-occupied with space wars and battle scenes, which do not particularly appeal to me. But when the wars remain in the background, or are nonexistent in the story, space opera can be truly exhilarating, especially in the hands of writes who care about the human element as much as they do about the wondrous element.

This past summer I read Alastair Reynold's *Galactic North* trilogy (reviewed here in #107) which was truly wonderful. Its only weakness was being a bit light on characterization, but how many writers truly handle both ends of the sf spectrum equally well? That trilogy convinced me to seek out more "new" space opera, so I bought David Hartwell & Kathryn Cramer's The Space Opera Renaissance, their latest huge overview of the science fiction field (following such books as **The Ascent of Wonder, The Science Fiction Century** and **The World Treasury of Science Fiction**). This latest thousand page book begins with dinosaurs such as Edmond Hamilton and Jack Williamson, but quickly moves into the 60s with Cordwainer Smith and Samuel Delany and progresses from there to the current stars of "new" space opera.

The first story I read was Iain Banks' "A Gift From the Culture," since I have read so many positive comments about his space opera being both literary and thought-provoking in addition

to being expansive and wondrous (sounds like everything I would like, doesn't it?). This was a strong story without any space battle in its pages. Besides being exceptionally well-written, its main character was both well-defined and sympathetic. The basic situation involved his being mired in such deep gambling debts that he is offered a dire choice: destroy an arriving spacecraft containing an important general and ambassador from the Culture or serious damage will be done both to the protagonist and to his lover.

The story's ending was a bit predictable, and seemed somewhat of a literary trick of following the logical conclusion rather than doing something unexpected, but the story's merits overall affirmed my decision to dip into Banks' *Culture* novels sometime.

Another good story was David Brin's "Temptation," an Uplift story about a group of dolphins who settle on a forbidden world along with several other races. Although much of the Uplift series are indeed space operas, this story is exclusively a planetary romance since it never leaves the surface of one world. This is the same trick Hartwell used in **The Ascent of Wonder**, where he defined "hard sf" so broadly as to include stories which were not hard sf by any reasonable definition. At the time I stated that I had no problem with Hartwell's porous definition since the stories were all good reading, and I have the same opinion with his sneakiness in this volume.

I have always had a problem with Lois McMaster Bujold's *Miles Vorkosigan* stories. I read the first five books in the series, but never accepted them on the same level as her rabid fans who selected 3 of them as Hugo-winning novels. My main complaints–which admittedly are purely personal–are that they are basically military sf, which I generally do not enjoy, and Miles himself is a fairly unlikeable main character. He is far too smug, bordering on arrogance at times, and he always succeeds fairly easily due to his innate superiority to the people with whom he interacts (excepting his even more superior parents).

That being said, "The Weatherman" was a fairly enjoyable story (which, like "Temptation," was not space opera at all; in fact, in his introduction Hartwell describes it as a "planetary romance type of space opera," which is cheating with his definition) about young Miles' first adventure as an ensign. In spite of his family's royal status, second only to that of the emperor, Miles is still required to work his way up the military ladder by serving on an arctic post as a meteorology officer interacting with minority officers who resent his authority, and a commanding general who is borderline insane. This was a pleasant story, although if Hartwell's intent is truly to show the very best that space opera (or planetary romance) has to offer, this was probably not the best selection he could have made. Considering the overwhelming popularity of Bujold's novels though, I guess he felt obligated to offer one of her rare short fictions as an example.

For me there were two highlights in **The Space Opera Renaissance**. The first was a mid-60s story written by one of my very favorite authors from that era, Samuel R. Delany. "Empire Star" was one of his earliest stories, a short novel originally published as half of an Ace double paperback. It is the tale of Comet Jo, an uneducated boy on a simple, low-tech world, who finds an intelligent jewel which he must deliver along with an important message to Empire Star, which is the heart of the galactic empire. However, Jo has no idea what the message is or to whom he must deliver it.

This story features all the hallmarks of early Delany: it is basically a quest novel combined with the coming of age of its young protagonist. Reading it, and most early Delany, I cannot help wondering what the author himself was seeking during the years he was repeating this motif in his novels. As Jo travels to Empire Star, he begins growing intellectually, from "simplex" at the story's outset to "multiplex" as he begins questioning people and examining situations from various viewpoints. Not surprisingly, as Jo becomes multiplex, so does the story. What began as a straightforward quest soon develops overlapping strands which weave together like a spider's web. Unlike "A Gift From the Culture," the story's ending is both surprising and satisfying.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the story were the Lll, a race who serve as slaves in the empire. To protect them, the Lll are altered so that anybody who enters their presence feels an overwhelming sadness. One of the strongest scenes in "Empire Star" is when Jo and another "shuttle bum" are assigned to play music for 7 Lll slaves for an hour to entertain them while they are being transported to a distant planet. Jo basically cries from sadness through the entire concert, at the end leaving emotionally drained from the experience.

Even more traumatic is owning Lll slaves, since the sadness is both more powerful and increases geometrically the more slaves one owns. Delany shows the effect this has on San Severina, one of the story's main characters who owns the 7 Lll slaves.

Reading "Empire Star," I was impressed both by the fact that such a multi-faceted story was written by a twenty-year old youth, and also at how it more resembled a late 90s "new" space opera than the simpler stuff being published in the early 60s. It reinforced my long-held belief that Delany was one of the most talented writers science fiction has ever known. What a shame that his fiction voice has been mostly silent the past 20 years, after he reinvented sword & sorcery with his *Neveryôna* series in much the same way "Empire Star" and its successors **Babel-17** and **Nova** reinvented space opera.

The other highlight was Robert Reed's shamefully underrated novella "The Remoras," my favorite of his excellent Great Ship stories. This was the first Great Ship story ever published, and thus it is filled with the expansiveness and wonder of the planet-sized ship circumnavigating the entire Milky Way, filled with beings from numerous races, both humanoid and nonhumanoid. The Remoras are millions of humans who live on the surface of the Great Ship, exposed to the radiation of space and the ship's engines, mutating with cancers but through inherited experience able to control the mutations so that they become almost changelings.

"The Remoras" is the story of Quee Lee, an immortal who has grown tired with the sameness of life. She befriends Orleans, a Remora, and begins spending time with him exploring the surface of the ship. Through her we learn about the strange and wondrous exoticism of the Remoras, and we are not surprised when they offer Quee Lee an opportunity at minimal risk but great expense to become like a Remora temporarily.

"The Remoras" is a story both about the Great Ship and about being even more different in a society of many differences. The influences of Delany are apparent in the story, but where Delany embraces differentness in all his characters, Reed centers his story on the largely-

ordinary Quee Lee so that we the reader experience the differentness of the Remoras through her eyes and prejudices. Much as I enjoy Reed's entire Great Ship series, no subsequent story has ever moved or excited me as much as this first one did.

*

It would be unfair for me to review Jack McDevitt's Seeker without expressing how predisposed I was to enjoy this book. I absolutely love historical novels, especially those set in the far-future whose history they explore is actually our future rather than our past. Robert Silverberg's **Nightwings** and Alastair Reynolds' *Conjoiner-Inhibitor* series are prime examples of this type of story. I also enjoy historical mysteries, by which I do not mean crime mysteries set in historical times (such as Brother Cadfael and all his imitators in Egypt/Rome/the Middle Ages, etc.), but stories of historians or anthropologists or archaeologists trying to uncover the secrets behind some historical mystery/legend/whatever. The prototype of this type story is Josephine Tey's classic **Daughter of Time** and, well, the first two series in Jack McDevitt's *Alex Benedict* series, **A Talent for War** and **Polaris**.

In my review of **Polaris** (**VoP** #104), I said...

> *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.*

...so anything less than a positive review of this novel would be the equivalent of a scathing review. But that's not going to happen. **Seeker** is even better than **Polaris**. It begins simply when a client brings an antique cup to antiquities dealers Alex Benedict and Chase Kolpath (the latter is the narrator of all the books in the series). They discover it was from the famous missing spaceship *Seeker* which millennia ago carried hundreds of rich malcontents unhappy with Earth's restrictive government to a distant colony which "even God couldn't find." And for nine thousand years nobody has found it, so that common perception is the colony is a legend which does not actually exist.

Seeker begins with Benedict and Chase's attempts to find the spaceship and, when they do (which is not a spoiler since it occurs fairly early in the book), their subsequent attempts to find the legendary colony of Margolia. One of the book's highlights, perhaps the highlight, was Chase's visit to the homeworld of the Mutes, the only alien race so far discovered by humans. McDevitt gives a very thought-provoking look at how difficult it is to co-exist with beings so different from oneself. Consider the following paragraph:

> *Another aspect of spending time with the Mutes is that they don't talk. You're in a room with more than twenty people, and they're all sitting quietly looking at one another. And nobody is saying anything.*

Or the following sequence when Chase communicates with a Mute through passing a notebook back and forth (Frank is her name for the Mute, not his personal designation for himself):

I asked Frank whether it wasn't distracting to be constantly experiencing a flow of thought and emotions from others.

"I can't imagine life without it," he explained. "I'd be cut off." His red eyes focused on me. "Don't you feel isolated? Alone?"

And later...

"We can't hide from what we think," Frank told me on the second day. "Or what we feel. And we know that. My understanding is that humans aren't always honest, even with themselves. I don't understand how that could be, but it's a fascinating concept.

The novel actually contains a series of mysteries, with the discovery of Seeker leading to the search for Margolia which leads to another mystery which I should not reveal. There is a minimal amount of skullduggery as a group opposed to what they consider robbing the past tries to stop Benedict and Chase's efforts. That was probably unnecessary to the book, but I guess mystery writers cannot resist a bit of the thriller. Alastair Reynolds fell prey to the same weakness in his series, and they were generally the weakest parts of his books as well.

The wonder of exploration and discovery permeate **Seeker**, as does future history. And its ending is one of those "stand up and cheer" moments which would play so well if this were a movie (which I hope it never becomes, since a filmmaker is sure to play up the skullduggery at the expense of the more thoughtful mysteries). It has almost everything I enjoy in far-future science fiction with the exception of outstanding characterization. Considering the book's numerous other strengths, I really did not miss that aspect at all. I will end this review by editing a bit the same statement with which I ended my review of **Polaris:**

I already have 6 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.

*

Stephen Baxter has the reputation of creating the fullest future history of any current science fiction writer. I have read a handful of his short stories and novellas in various best-of-the-year volumes, and they have been without exception excellent. So when Resplendent, a huge collection of his *Xeelee* short fiction, was published in England, I decided this was a good time to start reading his fiction in book form before trying one of his multi-volume series, which is never a good commitment to make with an author with whom I have limited experience.

Resplendent has verified my initial impression that Baxter is a fine storyteller with a strong sense of wonder and

thought-provoking ideas. There is not a bad story in this 600+ page collection, and several of them are superb.

The first section *Resurgence* contains 4 stories about the Qax domination of Earth. This alien race attempts to eliminate all human culture and history, forcing all humans into "cadres" whose only loyalties lie to the Qax themselves. The exceptions are the immortal Pharoahs who carry out the Qax directives and their underling *jasofts* who are basically bureaucrats.

The first story "Cadre Siblings" shows life under the Qax. "Conurbation 2473" shows the typical human reaction to their suppressive dictators suddenly fleeing Earth, leaving Earthlings free for the first time in centuries. Rather than banding together to rebuild society, humans fight among themselves for dominance (such as what takes place virtually everywhere in the world nowadays). The best story of this group is "Reality Dust," the story of a group of free humans pursuing fleeing Renegades to a moon of Jupiter where they find amazing scientific research taking place.

The next section *The War with the Ghosts* shows episodes from the millennia-long war between humans and a symbiotic race known as the Silver Ghosts. It is hard throughout this section to consider humans as anything but the villains of the war. The Ghosts are an advanced, peaceful race whose scientific knowledge far outshines that of humans. They have no interest in warfare, but their civilization stands in the path of humanity's Third Expansion.

Consider the following exchange from "The Cold Sink" between a human and a Ghost ambassador which took place prior to the war:

> *"You see this place as a bolt-hole? What are you hiding from?"*
>
> *"You," said the Ambassador.*
>
> *That took him aback.*
>
> *"Jack Raoul, your Expansion is already expanding exponentially. We are in your way." Raoul had heard this said. The Ghosts' home range lay between mankind and the rich fields of the Galaxy's core, and the Expansion was pressing.*
>
> *But he protested, "It's a big Galaxy. It's not even as if we are fighting over the same kinds of territory, or resources. Ghosts are adapted to the cold and dark, humans to deep gravity wells. There is room for all of us."*
>
> *"That is true," said the Ambassador. "But irrelevant. Your expansion is fueled by ideology as much as by resource acquisition–and it is not an ideology that preaches of sharing."*

And the following discussion from "On the Orion Line":

> *He said to me, "You see , child, as long as explorers and the mining fleets and the colony ships are pushing outwards, as long as the Third Expansion is growing, our economy*

works. But the system is utterly dependent on continual conquest. From virgin stars the riches can continue to flow inwards, into the older, mined-out systems, feeding a vast horde of humanity who have become more populous than the stars themselves. But as soon as that growth falters..."

Jeru was silent.

I understood some of this. This was a war of colonisation, of world-building. For a thousand years we had expanded steadily from star to star, using the resources of one system to explore, terraform and populate the worlds of the next. With too deep a break in that chain of exploitation, the enterprise broke down.

Baxter's carefully-thought out future history is not the traditional sfnal one of mankind's great expansion through the galaxy, exploring, colonizing and dealing with alien races as equals. Instead Baxter looks at our history, at humanity's tendency toward greed and self-aggrandizement, and he envisions a future built on the same self-interest and arrogance. It makes for a thoughtful series of stories, but what it does not lend itself to is great heroes of the type found in the future history of, say, Poul Anderson, whose Nicholas Van Rijn is positively heroic by comparison.

After the war with the Ghosts ends, the human expansion continues, eventually bringing them into conflict with the *Xeelee*, a much older and more powerful race. In fact, the title of the book's last section *The Fall of Mankind* gives some indication of how this war will ultimately end.

When I began reading **Resplendent**, in the back of my head was the image of Poul Anderson and his future histories about the *Polesotechnic League* and its successor *Terran Empire*. But as I got further into the book, I saw familiarities to another hard science fiction writer one generation later than Anderson, that being Larry Niven's *Known Space* series. This image became most noticeable when I reached "Lakes of Light" and its image of a spherical world enclosing a group of suns where life exists on the outside surface of the sphere. This was a truly wondrous concept akin to Niven's *Ringworld*, and Baxter carried it off very well.

Baxter is very fond of wondrous images of the future, and one of his best are the giant Spline, living spaceships which early on co-exist with humans before becoming totally subservient to them in later millennia. These creatures are explored in depth in "Breeding Ground," in which a group of survivors of a space battle are trapped inside one of the giant creatures as it returns to its home world.

For me, **Resplendent** reaches its peak in "The Chop Line," a story set in 20,424 A.D. in the midst of the war with the *Xeelee* when it has entered a new phase involving *time slips*. The point of view character is a young female ensign on a Spline which has rescued another battered Spline which turns out to be one which is not even in military service yet at the time of the story, but will be two decades in the future. The wounded ship has engaged in a battle which, at the moment of its defeat, somehow slipped through time into the past. The ensign is stunned to recognize the ship's captain whose "face seemed oddly reversed, as if she was a mirror image of what I was used to."

One of the story's finest scenes is when the captain is showing her younger self the injured Spline:

> *I knew where I was. "This is the hyperdrive chamber."*
>
> *"Yes." She reached up and stroked fibres. "Magnificent, isn't it? I remember when I first saw a Spline hyperdrive muscle–"*
>
> *"Of course you remember."*
>
> *"What?"*
>
> *"Because it's <u>now</u>. This is <u>my</u> first time seeing this. And I'm <u>you</u>." Some day, I thought gloomily, I would inevitably find myself standing on the other side of this room, looking back at my own face.*

It seems that in engaging in the battle which inflicted grievous injury on a *Xeelee* site as well as on the ship itself, the captain had violated a retreat order to do so. And now the navy was ordering the captain to be placed under inquiry, with her prosecuting advocate the young ensign destined to grow into her in twenty years.

"The Chop Line" is the most thought-provoking story in the book, partly for its insight into future paradoxes, but mostly for its glimpse at the logic of warfare in which both sides have the ability to forecast future scenarios and probabilities. Consider the following exchange in which one character learns that he is destined to die on the ship returning from future battle into the present:

> *Tarco said apprehensively, "Sir, please–<u>what about me</u>?"*
>
> *Gravely, Dakk handed him a data disk.*
>
> *"Hey, buttface," he said, reading. "You make me your exec. How about that. Maybe it was a bad year in the draft."*
>
> *I didn't feel like laughing. "Read it all."*
>
> *"I know what it says." His broad face was relaxed.*
>
> *"You don't make it home. That's what it says, doesn't it? <u>You're going to die out there</u>, in the Fog."*
>
> *He actually smiled. "I've been anticipating this since the <u>Torch</u> came into port. Haven't you?"*
>
> *My mouth opened and closed, as if I was a swordtail fish in the belly of a Spline. "Call me unimaginative," I said. "How can you accept this assignment, <u>knowing it's going to kill you</u>?"*

He seemed puzzled. "What else would I do?"

"The Chop Line" illustrates most of what I believe great science fiction should be: while simultaneously exploring a fully-realized future world involving believable, thinking human beings, it raises questions which need to be answered both by the story's characters and also by the reader as well. It is the highlight of this entire book, and certainly one of my favorite sf stories of the current decade.

"Riding the Rock" illustrates several of Stephen Baxter's philosophical premises for the entire *Xeelee* sequence: the importance of means versus ends, the natural conflict between devotion to the doctrine of human expansion and the need to balance practicality with philosophy. This story takes place during the war against the Xeelee, on the farthest edge of human expansion, away from the decision-making centers, where absolute control is necessarily more flexible, especially since all the humans in this region, whether soldiers or settlers from the previous Second Expansion, are fodder for the war against the enemy. Read the following explanation from one of the Commissaries visiting that edge:

> *"Ideally all human beings, across the Galaxy, would think exactly the same thought at every moment; that is what we must ultimately strive for. But out here on the fringe of the Expansion, where resources are limited, things are–looser. The three million inhabitants here have been left to their own devices–such as their own peculiar form of government, which lapsed into a kind of monarchy. The war against the Xeelee is a priority over cleansing the minds of a few fisher-folk on a dirt ball like this."*

"Riding the Rock" also illustrates the horrors of war in the needs for regimentation and preparing children to become part of the totalitarian machine:

> *"Even in the face of violence a child's social and moral concepts are surprisingly resilient; it takes a year or more before such things as family bonds are finally broken. After that the child crosses an inner threshold. Her sense of loyalty–why, her sense of <u>self</u>–becomes entwined not with he family but with the regime. And, of course, the first experience of combat itself is the final threshold. After that, with all she has seen and done, she cannot go home. She has been reborn. She doesn't even <u>want</u> to be anywhere else.*

This is a chilling story in its depiction of total devotion to war, even a war which Baxter reminds us from story to story is meaningless both in its causes and in its ultimate goals.

"Mayflower II" is a story I reviewed when it appeared in Jonathan Strahan's **Best Short Novels 2005.** I said about it then,

> "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 the millennia. We watch the society

> alter, and the very intellectual level of the people erode, as the near-immortal protagonist himself watches it, knowing he is largely helpless to do anything about it, yet still make whatever small nudges he can to maintain the ship's goal. A strong, interesting, thoughtful story, which probably would have benefitted from being longer and somewhat more in-depth.

"Between Worlds" was the title novella of Robert Silverberg's original anthology of that name, which I also reviewed and said:

> "Between Worlds" takes place after a galactic war when a virtual representation of a thousand year old messiah becomes a negotiator with a war refugee who sneaked a bomb onto a spacecraft, demanding that she be returned to her homeworld to see a daughter who, according to all records, never existed. Baxter ranks with Alastair Reynolds as the best storytellers among the newer hard-science writers, and this is a strong story from him. The story contains enough strangeness to feel futuristic, including spiked, intelligent ships such as the strangely-named *Ask Politely*, climaxed by the huge swarming of ships.
>
> The characters are also fascinating, especially the virtual Poole and Futurity's Dream, the religious acolyte who is the main viewpoint character of the story. Like the Silverberg story, the climax is both unexpected but believable.

The last story in the book, "The Siege of Earth," is a fitting coda for the entire *Xeelee* series. Set one million years in the future, it shows the final attempt by the ancient Pharaohs to save Earth from their relentless enemies. Not so much story as a travelogue, it brings a fitting symmetry to the series as it relates back to the earliest stories in it.

Overall, **Resplendent** is one of the finest single-author collections I have ever read. It offers most of what I expect in great science fiction but find far too seldom: a well-developed future history and a wondrous vision vast in scope yet grounded in well-developed stories based on human interest. There are some minor weaknesses. The writing is satisfactory, if not exciting itself, and the characterization does tend to a bit of sameness (for example, many of the stories feature naive young protagonists barely out of their teens struggling against older, rigid leaders). But the incredible ideas and their development make the entire series, and most of the stories, absolutely splendid.

What makes this collection even more exciting is that it is actually a framework for Stephen Baxter's *Destiny's Children* trilogy, whose three novels explore the same future history by filling in different segments of the future than these stories do. I am anxious to read that trilogy, and hope that my high aspirations for it–expecting it to be even better than Alastair Reynold's *Conjoiners-Inhibitors* trilogy–do not set a bar which is impossible to achieve. But the thrill of finding that out should be joyous indeed.

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Tidbits

Jean and I had one blockbuster certificate for a free video left, so we decided to use it before it expired Christmas Day. However, I forgot to check my list of *Recommended Movies* before leaving home–so why the heck do I keep the darned list anyway if I don't use it?–and when we got to Blockbuster we did not see a single movie on the wall of new releases that looked interesting. We browsed the archives section without luck either, so we finally settled on **The DaVinci Code**.

I never had <u>any</u> interest in reading **The DaVinci Code** for several reasons: I do not like thrillers whose main plot motivations are murders, would-be murders, and fast-paced pursuits; I am very interested in history but what I have read about Dan Brown's misuse of historical facts totally turned me off.

However, **The DaVinci Code** was incredibly popular, and seemingly every reader in the country other than myself enjoyed it, including several people whose judgments I trust. So I did have a bit of interest in seeing exactly what the book had to offer, and whether my opinions agree with those people's opinions at all (and, in a peripheral way, how far out of the mainstream of reading taste I actually am). But while I could never bring myself to invest hours in a book which is basically a thriller, I have considerably lower standards for movies than I do for books. For me, books are a passion, while movies are merely entertainments.

Overall, **The DaVinci Code** was a mixed bag. I could have done without all the thriller aspects (the car-in-reverse chase scene, the murderous albino monk, the Opus Dei versus Priory of Sion subplot, the French police officer's relentless pursuit of the heroes) because the historical mystery was sufficient to carry my interest. The solution to solving the mystery was more *deus ex machina* than playing fair ("Look, here's a mysterious key!" "Wow! We are the heirs to a cryptex"). And I cringed every time Dan Brown twisted historical facts for his own purposes. But the movie was entertaining, and I was actually hoping to learn the identities of the "teacher" (which I did not guess) and the "heir" (which both Jean and I guessed correctly).

More importantly, I got one bonus out of watching **The DaVinci Code**. One of my historical interests is classical Roman history and the development of Christianity. This is not primarily for religious purposes though. I attended Catholic schools my entire life, even taught in one for six years, and in those schools I received a greatly-skewed background in Christian history as determined by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church is a powerful political structure which is as concerned with pushing its own agenda as any political structure invariably is. For decades I have heard of the Gospel of Thomas and other Gnostic Gospels which were repressed by the early Church, but I know relatively little about any of them. Thus I have always been interested in learning more of the facts behind Christianity than was taught in Catholic schools.

Last summer I read and enjoyed **Conclave**, a history of the papacy and, especially, papal elections. My *Recommended Nonfiction* list includes books by biblical scholars Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels. Now I have a bit more incentive to buy and read some of those books. Maybe someday I'll have a review of one of them here.

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Listomania

I have been preaching a lot recently about the wonders of future history as a sub-genre of science fiction. This includes "new" space opera (the modern definition of it as sf set in the wilds of outer space) and planetary romances (see the recent **VoP #109** for more on that) and other far-future sf.

So it seems only fitting that this month's list should be a *Primer of Future History SF* as examples of how wondrous and exciting far-future sf can be. Most of these far-future novels have been written since 1960 since those are the years I have been an active reader of sf. The list is in roughly chronological order.

City	Clifford D. Simak
The Stars My Destination	Alfred Bester
Polesotechnic League series	Poul Anderson
Demon Princes series	Jack Vance
Lord of Light	Roger Zelazny
Nightwings	Robert Silverberg
Nova	Samuel R. Delany
Norstrilia	Cordwainer Smith
The Left Hand of Darkness	Ursula K Le Guin
Ringworld	Larry Niven
Gaea series	John Varley
Gateway series	Frederik Pohl
Darkover series	Marion Zimmer Bradley
Brothers of Earth	C.J. Cherryh
Galactic Center series	Gregory Benford
Dying of the Light	George R.R. Martin
Speaker for the Dead	Orson Scott Card
Grass	Sherri S. Tepper
Hyperion cantos	Dan Simmons
Alex Benedict series	Jack McDevitt

Galactic North trilogy	Alastair Reynolds
Resplendent	Stephen Baxter

Feel free to add any suggestions to the above list. It is certainly not intended to be definitive.

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 /http://www.efanzines.com / genzine

As the Crow Flies / Frank Denton / 14654 - 8th Ave. S.W., Seattle, WA 98166 / personalzine

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

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 genzine

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

In a Prior Lifetime / John Purcell / http://www.efanzines.com / online personalzine

It Goes on the Shelf / Ned Brooks / 4817 Dean Lane, Lilburn, GA 30047-4720 / book reviews

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

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

Pablo Lennis / John Thiel / 30 N. 19th St., Lafayette, IN 47904 / fan fiction

Peregrine Nations / Janine Stinson / http://www.efanzines.com / PO Box 248, Eastlake, MI 49626-0248 / genzine

The Resplendent Fool / Tom Sadler / 422 W. Maple Ave, Adrian, MI 49221-1627 / return of a long-dormant genzine

Scratch Pad / Bruce Gillespie / http://www.efanzines.com / 59 Keele Street, Collingwood VIC 3066 / personalzine

Some Fantastic / Matthew Appleton **/** http://www.somefantastic.us/ online zine devoted to f&sf

Steam Engine Time / Bruce Gillespie and Janine Stinson / http://www.efanzines.com / P.O. Box 248, Eastlake, MI 49626-0248 / genzine with lots of reviews

Trial and Air / Michael W. Waite / 105 West Ainsworth, Ypsilanti, MI 48197-5336 / gorgeous genzine

Vanamonde / John Hertz / 236 S. Coronado St., No 409, Los Angeles, CA 90057 / APAzine

The Lighter Side

The following joke was sent me by Robert Kennedy:

A sweet young thing thought she might have some fun with a stiff-looking military man at a cocktail party, so she walked over and asked him when was the last time he had had sex.

"1956," was his immediate reply.

"No wonder you look so uptight!" she exclaimed. "Honey, you need to get out more."

"I'm not sure I understand you," he answered, glancing at his watch. "It's only 2014 now."

*

A lawyer and a blonde woman were sitting next to each other on a long flight from L.A. to New York. The lawyer leans over to her and asks if she would like to play a fun game.

The blonde is tired and just wants to take a nap, so she politely declines and rolls over to the window to catch a few winks. The lawyer persists, saying that the game is really easy and a lot of fun.

He explains how the game works. “I ask you a question, and if you don't know the answer, you pay me, and vice-versa.” Again the blonde politely declines and tries to get some sleep.

The lawyer figures he's pretty smart and since his opponent is a blonde he will easily win the match, so he makes another offer. “Okay, how about this? If you don't know the answer you pay me only $5, but if I don't know the answer, I will pay you $500.”

This catches the blonde's attention and, figuring that there will be no end to this torment unless she plays, she agrees to play the game.

The lawyer asks the first question. "What's the distance from the earth to the moon?"

The blonde doesn't say a word, reaches in to her purse, pulls out a five-dollar bill, and hands it to the lawyer.

Now, it's the blonde's turn. She asks the lawyer, "What goes up a hill with three legs, and comes down with four?"

The lawyer looks at her with a puzzled look. He takes out his laptop computer and searches all his references. He taps into the Air-phone with his modem and searches the Internet and even the Library of Congress. Frustrated he sends E-mails to all his co-workers and friends he knows. All to no avail.

After over an hour of searching for the answer he finally gives up. He wakes the blonde and hands her $500.

The blonde politely takes the $500 and turns away to get back to sleep. The lawyer is more than a little frustrated. He can't believe he's been outsmarted by a blonde. He wakes the blonde again and asks, "Well, so what goes up a hill with three legs and comes down with four?"

The blonde reaches into her purse, hands the lawyer $5, and goes back to sleep.

*

A man's dentures were bothering him. They had become all pitted and scarred. "What have you been eating?" asked his dentist.

"Hollandaise sauce," the man replied. "And no matter what you say, I'm not giving it up."

"Okay," the dentist said. "I'll make you new plates out of chrome. Everyone knows that there's no plates like chrome for the hollandaise."

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Question: What is the difference between a dead snake lying in the road and a dead lawyer lying in the road?
Answer: There are skid marks in front of the snake.

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Question: How can you tell when an elephant is getting ready to charge?
Answer: He takes out his credit card.