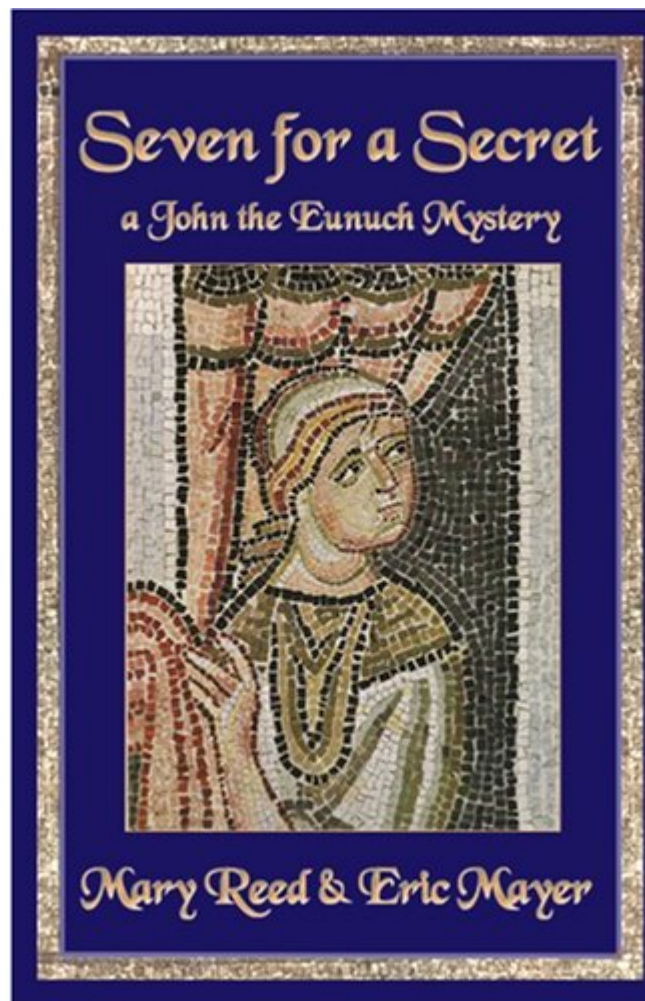


# VISIONS OF PARADISE #132



# Visions of Paradise #132

## Contents

Out of the Depths.....	page 3
<i>Hugo results</i>	
Imagining the Past.....	page 4
<i>Article by Eric Mayer</i>	
The Passing Scene.....	page 7
<i>August 2008</i>	
Wondrous Stories .....	page 11
<i>Roma - One For Sorrow</i>	
Listmania.....	page 13
<i>Nebula Award winners - Best Novella</i>	
On the Lighter Side.....	page 15

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# Out of the Depths

Some observations on the Hugo nominations and awards:

John Scalzi's **The Last Colony** came in 4<sup>th</sup> in nominations for Best Novel but was a close runnerup for the Hugo itself. He also dominated both the nominations and the voting for the Best Fanwriter Hugo. I wonder which is the driving force in Scalzi's case. Does his popularity as a blogger carry over to votes for Best Novel, or vice versa? I suspect the former.

**The Yiddish Policemen's Union** was my favorite novel of 2007, and Michael Chabon is one of my favorite writers, so I was pleased that it backed up its Nebula win with a Hugo win.

Connie Willis' "All Seated on the Ground" was not selected for any of the science fiction Best-of-the-Year anthologies. At first I thought it might have been a fantasy story, but its review at BestScienceFictionStories.com describes it as pure sf. I wonder if it deserved its Hugo Award for Best Novella or did it win based purely on Willis' personal popularity?

Ted Chiang's "The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate" and Elisabeth Bear's "Tideline" dominated both the nominations and Hugo voting for Best Novelette and Best Short Story respectively. I guess that makes them the most popular 2 sf stories of 2007, and I anxiously look forward to reading them in Gardner Dozois' **Year's Best Science Fiction**.

I was pleased that **Brave New World: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction** won Best Related Book for a purely selfish reason: I am mentioned in the book as the earliest known user of the word "sfnal". I really do not recall whether I invented the word or saw it previously when I first began using it nearly 30 years ago, but I like the recognition. ☺

Gordon Van Gelder is a deserving winner of Best Editor–Short Form. I wish his personal popularity would translate into an increase in circulation for **F&SF**. I ashamedly admit I do not subscribe to it since I do not have time to read monthly magazines. I do buy their annual double-issue though.

I have never heard of Mary Robinette Kowal, the winner of the John W. Campbell Award as Best New Writer. When I googled her name, I learned she is "a professional puppeteer who moonlights as a writer." Her writing credits seem fairly skimpy, so I wonder whether she won the award for her writing or because the voters enjoyed her puppetry?

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Sad news: Dave Langford reported in **Ansible** 254 (September 2008) that "Terry Jeeves's wife Val died in late August despite the apparent success of her July cancer operation. All sympathy to Terry, who is unable to cope alone and may have to remain in care."

Terry is a good friend who was very excited in his July 28 letter: "Great news !! Val is coming out of hull hospital at the end of next week. She will be taken to scarborough hospital and I will be able to go and visit her." My condolences to him and I pray he will be able to cope with his loss.

# Imagining the Past

*by Eric Mayer*

My wife, Mary Reed, and I co-author the "John the Lord Chamberlain" mysteries set in sixth century Constantinople. Historical novels might seem like an odd choice for a couple of sf fans who grew up reading that crazy Buck Rogers stuff. However, writing about the future is in many ways similar to writing about the past.

That was brought to my attention shortly after our first novel (**One For Sorrow**) came out when I got up the nerve to appear on a convention panel. The Deadly Ink organizers stuck me between two established authors, Roberta Rogow who employed Lewis Carroll and Arthur Conan Doyle as detectives and April Kihlstrom who blended murder and Regency romance. Hermit that I am, I was longing for my cave and desperately groping to say something intelligent – preferably something that didn't contain the phrase "you know" – when an audience member asked how we handled descriptions of our eras.

Finally, a query I could answer. And in a pleasingly unexpected way, I figured. Thanks to our sf backgrounds, Mary and I set our scenes in the manner I associate with Robert Heinlein. We drop readers smack into the middle of Constantinople and let them gradually find their way while walking the colonnaded streets with characters who are at home there. We avoid intrusive blocks of explanation and don't force people to discuss things they would take for granted. As I was buffing up this spiffy reply, April Kihlstrom remarked that when it came to writing settings her model was Robert Heinlein. Roberta Rogow promptly agreed. Not surprising, it turned out, since she was a fan and a filksinger.

There is a reason why so many people like to read and write both mysteries and science fiction. The two genres share a focus on the intellectual, the solving of a murder puzzle or a scientific problem. They may involve exploration, to uncover clues and motives or the secrets of an alien society. And perhaps most importantly, historicals and science fiction – at least that set in the future – both take place in a world other than the one we live in.

Often the time and place is itself a major character. Is our protagonist John, secret Mithran, former mercenary, advisor to Emperor Justinian, or is our protagonist the city with its palaces and pillar saints, an architectural recreation of pagan Rome but one where crosses rise from the rooftops overlooking the forums?

The Byzantine Roman Empire has fascinated me ever since I found out about it, long after my school days ended. The Byzantines were peripheral to the history of western civilization we were taught. As a child I was fascinated by the Roman Empire. But that had ended in 476, we were told. Rome had fallen never to rise again.

Since my head was already filled to bursting with all the science fiction I'd read, I couldn't help wondering "what if"? What if Rome hadn't fallen? What if the 82nd Airborne had parachuted in and sent those illiterate barbarians scuttling back to darkest Europe? What if Rome had regained its glory and marched on?

As I later discovered, to my delight, Rome had marched on, for nearly another millennium. In fact, the eastern part of the empire had eclipsed the western long before the Goths conquered the Italian peninsula. By the time Rome fell it wasn't even the capital. That honor belonged to Constantinople. Roman institutions continued in the east. The Byzantines called themselves Romans, unaware of the misleading name that would be popularized by Victorians with axes to grind many hundreds of years later.

But this Rome, sitting on the cusp of the classical and medieval worlds, was the sort of Rome an sf writer might have imagined while pondering "what if". A formerly pagan empire which had embraced Christianity as the state religion, where the Church of the Holy Wisdom, erected to glorify the Christian god, looked out toward the Roman Baths of Zeuxippus and the Hippodrome racetrack modeled on the Circus Maximus. Sixth century Constantinople is a strange alternative history which happens to be true.

To me the setting was intriguing and enticing as any Barsoom. And like Barsoom it offered the advantage that no one had ever been there to contradict a writer's impressions. No one alive today, that is. Unlike Barsoom, Constantinople was a real place where people actually lived and a few left records.

The disadvantage to historical settings as opposed to science fictional ones is that the writer doesn't get to make it all up. If you get the facts wrong someone, somewhere, is sure to call your bluff. More importantly, it is dishonest to claim to be writing a "historical" if, in effect, you are writing sf or fantasy by ignoring what's known whenever it suits your purpose. On the other hand, historical facts offer a convenient framework and the built-in interest of being true. Many readers are happy to learn about another time, whether or not the story grips them.

Mary and I are picky about our facts. Though most of our research is done on the Internet, we usually stick to university sites and try to locate two independent sources to confirm anything that seems questionable. Since the study of the later Roman Empire is popular in academia, even if the era hasn't caught the public's imagination, there are many scholarly papers available. And if you can't find what you need to know in the literature, professors usually post their email addresses on their websites and are generally pleased to answer queries.

If possible, we peruse contemporary accounts, though we need translations since neither of us can read ancient Greek or Latin. Writers back then did not go in for the sorts of descriptions we prefer today but you can often find useful details about everyday life mentioned in passing, in unexpected sources like saints' lives or legal codes.

Writing an accurate historical can be exhausting and time-consuming because nothing can be taken for granted. A character can't open a door before the hardware is checked and verified. We once nearly had a street performer juggling cabbages until our research revealed that the Romans did not possess the types of cabbages which formed round, hard heads. Roman cabbages consisted of loosely-bunched leaves which would have been very difficult to juggle. The fellow ended up juggling melons. Roman melons could be juggled since, as we learned, they were fist-sized.

Keeping to the facts still leaves plenty of room for invention because a little research, especially reading the footnotes, reveals that historians don't know quite as much as it appears. What looks like a detailed drawing often turns out, on examination, to be a few scattered dots of facts which the historian has connected into a coherent pattern based on general expertise and personal theories. Another historian might connect those same dots into an altogether different picture.

Original source material can be just as untrustworthy. Consider Procopius who, while in Justinian's service, wrote panegyrics to the emperor but in his posthumously discovered *Secret History* excoriated him as a rapacious demon without a face.

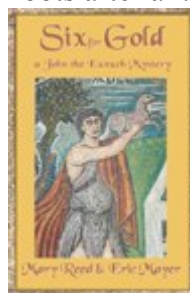
Also, historical records are spotty. Our knowledge is limited to what little has by chance survived. During the life of Justinian, Cassiodorus wrote a massive Gothic History. Strangely, the whole twelve volumes have vanished but we still have a short abridgment, *The Gettica*, by Jordanes.

Finally, in the case of our setting, most of whatever ruins remain of sixth century Constantinople are buried far beneath modern Istanbul. Today we can see only scattered buildings and monuments. The appearance of the Great Palace where the emperor lived is nothing more than airy academic conjecture. The very location of famous structures is a matter of debate. Over the past century or so the shifting winds of academic opinion have blown the Palace of Antiochus up and down and back and forth across the main thoroughfare known as the Mese.

Mary and I are quite happy to fill in all these gaps as we see fit. We like to argue that we are storytellers and while historians must prove what they say is true, historical writers are allowed to say just about anything that can't be proved false.

So we have, for example, imagined chess (called Satranj then) being imported from the east a half century or so before there is any account of it in Roman lands. And so what if no such thing was recorded? If an important twelve volume history could be lost, why would anyone expect us to still have a record of one elderly philosopher who enjoyed chess? Likewise we have extrapolated automatons, based on much earlier work by Hiero of Alexandria. There are the victims who seem to spontaneously combust, not to mention a magical whale, fortune-telling goats, the maze of a snake god, and a mysterious old man who is probably a fraud, but then again, might be a ghost.

No, we write mysteries but they aren't exactly gritty police procedurals. Maybe we haven't moved very far from our science fiction roots after all.



# The Passing Scene

August 2008

More summer eating:

- Alan and Denise came to the pool one day and we ordered supper at Frank's Pizza. Jean and Andy had stromboli's; I had a chicken roll (which was basically a stromboli without the sausage); Alan and Denise split a veal parmigiana sub and a meatball sub. Afterwards we came home and chatted for several enjoyable hours;
- A friend of ours John had a barbecue for his family and friends, with *tons* of food, some of it catered and some of it home-made: eggplant parmigiana, sausage & pepper, chicken marsala, cheeseburgers, numerous salads, and several great desserts. John and his older brother Joe are both crazy, which added to the fun of the afternoon. My photographer friend Frank and I spent some time going through pictures for our book;
- Jean, Andy and I went to a fairly expensive steak house for my birthday meal, using a \$75.00 gift certificate the restaurant gave Andy for recommending the restaurant to hotel patrons. Jean and I had sirloin tips and shrimp, while Andy had grilled salmon. With tip it cost \$78.00, so it was a very economical meal;
- Adrienne came for lunch with her baby Jack. We made zucchini quiche, zucchini bread, pasta salad and vegetable salad, and spent several hours chatting. I will miss Adrienne a lot since she is taking the entire year off with her baby;
- Damaris and her family came for dinner. I made baked ziti and garlic bread, probably not the ideal menu since Damaris has high cholesterol and needs to improve both her diet and her exercise. We had a very nice time though, and her kids are delightful, although our cat Tiger was terrified of two-year old Jacob;
- We had so much leftover ziti that Alan and Denise came the next night to help us eat it.

Mark officially ended his first year working in Parsippany and now is traveling into NYC everyday, with occasional days in Newark which is about half the distance, since he needs one train to Newark but two trains and a subway into the NYC office.

We finally saw *The Dark Knight* and it was faithful to the **Batman** comics, especially the classic **The Killing Joke**, by Alan Moore. The personalities of Bruce Wayne, the Joker, and Harvey Dent were very well done, and I definitely intend to reread the graphic novel.

I have been playing Scrabble at Facebook with Marwa and Rabbit, and while the games have been fun, they have been gateways into spending a lot more time chatting with two of my favorite former students.

My conversations with Rabbit have been very interesting since we usually discuss history and science, rather than slice-of-life conversations. She is interested in Fei Fei's research into computer vision, so I sent her a link to 2 video interviews with Fei Fei discussing her research. If anybody else is interested in learning a bit about Fei Fei's research, go to [http://videlectures.net/fei\\_fei\\_li/](http://videlectures.net/fei_fei_li/)

I have begun the monumental task of inventorying all my books. I will probably tally the fiction

and nonfiction separately, and I am not rushing to finish. If it takes a year, so be it. I have begun reading **Buddha**, by Karen Armstrong, since I want Buddhism to be the predominant religion in my future history but my knowledge of it is fairly skimpy right now.

For my birthday Andy and Mark bought me the 11<sup>th</sup> season dvd of *M\*A\*S\*H* and Willie Nile's cd *Beautiful Wreck of the World*. Jean got me clothes, which is all right since I rarely buy any myself.

\*

We took a week's vacation at Wildwood, one of the southernmost points on the Jersey shore. Because of its relative distance compared to other shore locations, it is much less congested and a much prettier area.

Jean, Mark, Kate and I drove to Wildwood on **Saturday, 8/17**. We stayed in a condo two blocks from the boardwalk bordering an oceanfront beach so large it takes about a half-mile walk to actually reach the ocean. The condo itself had one bedroom with 2 double beds, but it was adequate. The condo's pool was also small, which disappointed Jean who likes doing laps for exercise.

After eating a light supper at the restaurant across the street from the condo (I had a corned beef, swiss cheese and cole slaw sandwich on rye bread), we went to the boardwalk which was huge and crowded with both people and booths. We walked the boardwalk every night, usually eating supper there since there are many interesting restaurants on it. Afterwards we generally returned to the condo and watched the Olympics until they ended around midnight.

I began **Sunday, 8/18** by taking a long, brisk walk on the boardwalk which was crowded with people walking, running, biking, or eating breakfast. It was a pleasant walk which I repeated each day of vacation. Jean and I usually went to the pool every morning for an hour, and again in the evening. Sunday morning we walked to a used bookstore where I succumbed and bought two books: Roger Zelazny's last published novel (in collaboration with his wife Jane Lindskold who completed it after he died) **Donnerjack**; and Larry Niven's collection of Gil "The Arm" Hamilton sf mysteries **Flatlander**.

Because Jean's knee was bothering her today—as it did on and off the entire summer—we did not go to the ocean with Mark and Kate. We ate supper at a nearby buffet restaurant which was good, then went to Morey's Pier on the boardwalk (one of 4 piers on it) to watch the annual "rubber duckie race" on the lazy river. This was a fundraiser in which people "purchased" a duck for \$5.00 and won prizes based on how well the duck finished. It was hilarious watching thousands of rubber ducks floating down the river.

**Monday, 8/19**, we visited Cape May, a really nice town. We saw the historic lighthouse and spent time on the beach near the World War 2 bunker which was built to protect the Jersey shore from a possible German submarine invasion (which never happened). We browsed the town's many shops, and I had a bbq chicken sandwich for lunch. We also stopped at a Kohl's Custard stand where I had peanut butter and chocolate swirl, while Jean had chocolate and mint swirl. While Mark and Kate went to a Mexican restaurant for supper, Jean and I returned to the



boardwalk where we ate at Olympia restaurant which offered a combination of Italian and Greek food. We both had a huge salad, then I had a meatball sub and Jean had a slice of pizza. As in Ocean City, MD, all our waitresses on the boardwalk were Russian girls who attend college in this country and stay during the summer.

**Tuesday, 8/20**, we spent the morning at the ocean where Jean, Kate and Mark swam and “boogy-boarded” in the waves while I walked in the waves along the beach. We went to lunch at a very nice restaurant whose menu was trendy but interesting. I settled for the mundane though and ordered a chef salad and sweet potato fries. In the afternoon we stopped at Laura’s Fudge, since Kate loves candy. I bought a box of white chocolate peanut butter sticks. \*yummy\* At night we walked the boardwalk as usual, and I ate a slice of pizza and a delicious-but-huge hand-rolled pretzel.

**Wednesday, 8/20**, we went to a fairly good buffet breakfast, then Jean and I walked along the beach north of the boardwalk. It was equally nice there, but less crowded because of being away from the boardwalk. It is no wonder people from northern N.J. travel so far to the Wildwoods for vacation. The four of us returned to the boardwalk for lunch at Stewart’s Root Beer, where I had a cheeseburger, and we shared a basket of fries and onion rings.

Mark and Kate left in the afternoon to go home, since they only took 3 days off from work for the trip. While Jean and I were sitting by the pool, we were inundated by sparrows chirping at us to feed them. Obviously they are used to being fed by people, so I got a slice of bread in our condo for them.

**Thursday, 8/21**, we drove through Stone Harbor and Avalon, two pretty towns on the island north of Wildwood which are incredibly expensive. We saw realty ads for small houses costing over \$1 million. We drove to the Cape May Zoo, which was really nice with free admission. On the way back we stopped in Stone Harbor at a little shop *Peace a Pizza* which had a gorgeous view of the bay. I ate eggplant pizza and Jean had veggie pizza, and we also had delicious garlic breadsticks. Later we walked through shops and I found a bookstore where I bought **Showcase Presents: Green Lantern**, vol. 3.

Andy arrived at 3:00 am on **Friday, 8/22**, driving to Wildwood after he finished work Thursday night at 11 pm. He woke at noon, so we went to the restaurant across the street for lunch, where I had a huge salad and a turkey club sandwich. I noticed this morning that many families in the condos around us cooked most of their meals, while we were lazy and ate most of our lunches and all our dinners out. But we would not have done so years ago when the boys were younger and Jean was not working fulltime, so I guess we have earned the right to be a bit self-indulgent.

After lunch we went to the pool first, then to the ocean. We ate dinner on the boardwalk at Texas BBQ where I had a ribs and chicken platter and Andy had a beef brisket and ribs platter, while Jean had a bison burger. Then we walked the boardwalk until their fireworks at 10:30 pm. Sitting on the beach right under the fireworks was spectacular.

**Saturday, 8/23**, we left Wildwood at 10:30 am, driving up the coast to Atlantic City where we walked their boardwalk and spent time in Tropicana Casino before driving home. We got home

at 6:30 pm where we began the typical chores upon returning from vacation: unpacking, doing laundry, catching up on mail and email. But it was a really fun week and I hope to go back to Wildwood in the future.

\*

Every year I have a Cabinet Meeting at school near the end of August, an abrupt reminder that school looms ahead shortly. The meeting was mostly boring as usual, except for a surprise announcement by the assistant principal that plaques for all six Distinguished Faculty winners in the 50 years of the school's history have been placed on the wall in the main corridor for everybody to admire. I am one of those fortunate winners anticipating lots of egoboo this upcoming year.

Tropical Storm Fay settled over Melbourne, Florida, last week and dumped nearly 30" of rain on it. When I phoned Uncle Bill on his birthday he told me that my cousin Rita and her husband Richard were preparing for water in their house. When I phoned and spoke with Richard he told me that water filled their yard and garage, but stopped a few inches short of the house just as the rain stopped. That was fortunate for them. Not surprisingly, after several decades of hurricanes and hot weather, they hope to move to North Carolina when they eventually retire. That will be within visiting distance for us, which would be nice.

Jean and I watched Barack Obama's acceptance speech at the Democratic convention with Alan and Denise. It was an impressive speech. Obama definitely has both charisma and leadership and, even with his lack of experience, is a better choice for president than John McCain who has been George W. Bush's biggest supporter the past eight years and plans to continue many disastrous Republican policies.

One of the headlines on CNN.com recently asked "Has John McCain lost his mind?" After the Republicans have been challenging Obama for his lack of experience in national and foreign affairs, McCain selected a vice-presidential running mate with no experience beyond Alaska, and only for two years on a statewide level there. Not to mention several skeletons in her closet. What was he possibly thinking?

Alan's son-in-law is a master hacker who has downloaded the original *Star Trek* series on dvd for Alan. Alan tested it on my computer where it runs fine, so he will burn copies for me. Now Alan has asked him for all the other *Star Trek* series: *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, *Explorer* and *Enterprise*, after which Alan will burn copies for me as well.

My former student Marwa is attending Swedish massage school and she needs to do a certain number of massages as part of her requirement. So recently she came and gave both Jean and me massages, which felt wonderful. If Andy were not working during the day, he would have gotten one too. When we were on the Boardwalk in Atlantic City, he saw a Chinese massage store, so he went in and got one.

# Wondrous Stories

Regular readers of **VoP** know that Steven Saylor is one of my favorite writers. His *Roma Sub Rosa* series of historical are superb historical fiction mainly devoted to exploring various aspects of the Roman world during the era of Julius Caesar, with the mysteries themselves little more than excuses to examine such locales as Alexandria during Caesar's famous dalliance with Cleopatra (**The Judgment of Caesar**) and the Greek city of Massilia (**Last Seen in Massilia**), later known as Marseilles.

In **Roma** Saylor has undertaken a massive task: an epic novel of the entire history of the Roman Republic without using the crutch of a mystery. The book contains 11 novelette-length chapters, the first of which is set in 1000 B.C. before Rome was even a trading village, and the last in 1B.C. after the assassination of Julius Caesar.

Saylor's intent in the early chapters seems to be threefold: showing the origins of various Roman legends; showing the development of Roman rituals and traditions; and describing life at various points in Rome's history.

The opening portion "A Demigod Passes Through" involves a traveler who saves the traders living in the area of the Seven Hills from a monster who has been preying on their animals and children. The traveler is believed to be the famous Greek demigod Hercules, who becomes the first and greatest hero of the Roman people.

"The Twins" takes place when the trading site is slowly growing into the city of Roma. The two twin boys Romulus and Remus are foundlings discovered by a swineherd whose wife is viciously referred to as a she-wolf behind her back. They become the most powerful men in Roma after leading a group of malcontents against a neighboring village of Alba, after which Romulus takes the deposed king's crown and names himself the first king of Roma.

In subsequent chapters, Saylor shows us the rebellion of Coriolanus, the Decemvirs writing the Twelve Tables (including the disgrace of Appius Claudius), the occupation of Roma by the Goths in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the building of the Appian Way, the defeat of Hannibal by Scipio Africanus, the rise and fall of the Brothers Gracchi, the brutal reign of the dictator Sulla, and the rise to power of Gaius Julius Caesar.

Although Rome's history was filled with violence, very little of it is portrayed in the book. Instead events are filtered through the eyes and prejudices of Roman citizens in the city itself. Much emphasis is placed on the power struggle between the patricians, Senate and consul on one hand versus the plebians and tribunes on the other, with both religion and violence never far beneath the surface of Roman life.

Each chapter is an individual story with characters who reflect the attitudes of their time and class with no attempts to reflect 21<sup>st</sup> century standards. As in his mysteries, Saylor's history remains authentic while showing creative origins for many Roman myths and legends. The individual stories are as strong as Saylor's mysteries, and their novelette length are both a

strength (allowing Saylor to concentrate on each event without the need for numerous sub-plots or extraneous mysteries) and a weakness (since there is so much that can be shown at each Roman era, but not sufficient room in a novelette to do so).

**Roma** is a strong book which encourages me to find even more of Saylor's historical mysteries.

\*

Historical mysteries have become very popular in recent years, spurred partly by the success of Ellis Peters' *Brother Cadfael* series. Such novels tend to fall into two types: those in which the historical setting is merely intended to give a bit of color to an otherwise ordinary mystery; and those which are true historical novels with the mystery as another plot device. Not being a huge fan of genre mysteries, I gravitate towards the latter type, highlighted by Steven Saylor's superb *Roma Sub Rosa* mysteries. I rarely care about the solution to the mystery itself, so the book had better appeal to me as historical fiction if I am going to enjoy reading it at all.

Mary Reed and Eric Mayer's *John the Eunuch* series is an example of the latter type of historical mystery, and **One for Sorrow**, the opening novel in the series, is as much concerned with establishing the city of Constantinople during the 6<sup>th</sup> century reign of Emperor Justinian as it is with the murder itself. Its first chapter sets the tone, a scene set in the Hippodrome which deftly show the similarities between Constantinople and Rome, the citizens even calling themselves "Romans." With no lecturing or exposition, we are almost immediately immersed in the city with crowds cheering over cruelties and threats of blood-letting, pots of night soil dropped from windows, and threats of violence lurking in every shadowed alleyway. We are also introduced to a fascinating cast of characters:

- John, Lord Chamberlain to Emperor Justinian, who is commonly known as "John the Eunuch" for obvious reasons;
- old soothsayer Ahasuerus to whom members of Justinian's court go secretly for readings since fortune-telling is frowned upon by the Christian emperor;
- Leukos, another member of Justinian's inner circle who is a close friend of John and the murderer's first victim.
- Cornelia, John's lover from his pre-eunuch days, whom he has not seen since out of fear of what he has become;
- Europa, Cornelia's daughter, who is revealed early in the book to be John's daughter as well;
- Thomas, a knight emissary from the king of Britania who is seeking the Holy Grail in Constantinople;
- Isis, who runs a high-class brothel which services many members of the emperor's court;
- Breta, the very young courtesan who attracts the interest of both Thomas and John's friend Felix, but who very early in the book becomes the murderer's second victim;

The murders occur early in the novel, followed shortly by Justinian's directive that John solve it, followed shortly afterwards by another directive for John to stop investigating. As any good detective does, John continues to investigate, leading the reader through the dark and dangerous streets of Constantinople where we encounter Isis's brothel, an innkeeper and his shrewish wife,

and the aging patriarch of Constantinople who has an inexplicable interest both in the solution of the murder and the soothsayer. We also meet the imperious emperor Justinian himself and his self-important wife. We learn in specific detail how and why John became a eunuch, perhaps the goriest scene in the book. We witness rituals of the religion of Mithra, which predated Christianity in the Roman Empire although sharing several important similarities, and which survives mostly through the beliefs of soldiers, since it is a male-only religion.

I thoroughly enjoyed the tour of Constantinople and its inhabitants, and look forward to seeing them again and learning more about them as the series continues. In truth, I was not enamored by the mystery itself whose solution seemed a bit contrived (but solutions to mysteries almost always seem contrived to me, so take that complaint with a large grain of salt).

**One for Sorrow** is good historical fiction about a fascinating era in western history which is often overlooked in the modern fascination for the “dark ages” which gripped much, but not all, of Europe. It is recommended to fans of historical fiction.

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## Listmania

You like novellas? We got novellas! Here are the winners of the Nebula Awards for Best Novella from their beginnings in 1966 through this year’s winners. Happy reading!

<i>Year</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Author</i>
2008	Fountain of Age	Nancy Kress
2007	Burn	James Patrick Kelly
2006	Magic for Beginners	Kelly Link
2005	The Green Leopard Plague	Walter Jon Williams
2004	Coraline	Neil Gaiman
2003	Bronte's Egg	Richard Chwedyk
2002	The Ultimate Earth	Jack Williamson
2001	Goddesses	Linda Nagata
2000	Story of Your Life	Ted Chiang
1999	Reading the Bones	Sheila Finch
1998	Abandon in Place	Jerry Oltion

1997	Da Vinci Rising	Jack Dann
1996	Last Summer at Mars Hill	Elizabeth Hand
1995	Seven Views of Olduvai Gorge	Mike Resnick
1994	The Night We Buried Road Dog	Jack Cady
1993	City of Truth	James Morrow
1992	Beggars in Spain	Nancy Kress
1991	The Hemingway Hoax	Joe Haldeman
1990	The Mountains of Mourning	Lois McMaster Bujold
1989	The Last of the Winnebagos	Connie Willis
1988	The Blind Geometer	Kim Stanley Robinson
1987	R&R	Lucius Shepard
1986	Sailing to Byzantium	Robert Silverberg
1985	PRESS ENTER[]	John Varley
1984	Hardfought	Greg Bear
1983	Another Orphan	John Kessel
1982	The Saturn Game	Poul Anderson
1981	Unicorn Tapestry	Suzy McKee Charnas
1980	Enemy Mine	Barry B. Longyear
1979	The Persistence of Vision	John Varley
1978	Stardance	Spider Robinson & Jeanne Robinson
1977	Houston, Houston, Do You Read?	James Tiptree, Jr.
1976	Home Is the Hangman	Roger Zelazny
1975	Born with the Dead	Robert Silverberg
1974	The Death of Doctor Island	Gene Wolfe
1973	A Meeting with Medusa	Arthur C. Clarke

1972	The Missing Man	Katherine MacLean
1971	Ill Met in Lankhmar	Fritz Leiber
1970	A Boy and His Dog	Harlan Ellison
1969	Dragonrider	Anne McCaffrey
1968	Behold the Man	Michael Moorcock
1967	The Last Castle	Jack Vance
1966	The Saliva Tree He Who Shapes	Brian W. Aldiss Roger Zelazny

My favorite novellas not on the list are “Nightwings,” by Robert Silverberg, “The Star Pit,” by Samuel R. Delany, “The Girl Who Was Plugged In,” by James Tiptree, Jr., “April Fool’s Day Forever,” by Kate Wilhelm, and “Her Habiline Husband,” by Michael Bishop.

\*

## On the Lighter Side

A man was sitting on the edge of the bed, observing his wife, looking at herself in the mirror. Since her birthday was not far off he asked what she'd like to have for her birthday.

"I'd like to be six again", she replied, still looking in the mirror.

On the morning of her birthday, he arose early, made her a nice big bowl of Lucky Charms, and then took her to Six Flags theme park. What a day! He put her on every ride in the park; the Death Slide, the Wall of Fear, the Screaming Monster Roller Coaster, everything there was. Five hours later they staggered out of the theme park. Her head was reeling and her stomach felt upside down.

He then took her to a McDonald's where he ordered her a Happy Meal with extra fries and a chocolate shake. Then it was off to a movie, popcorn, a soda pop, and her favorite candy, M&M's. What a fabulous adventure! Finally she wobbled home with her husband and collapsed into bed exhausted.

He leaned over his wife with a big smile and lovingly asked, "Well dear, what was it like being six again??"

Her eyes slowly opened and her expression changed , "I meant my dress size, you dumb ass!"

\*

It was a sunny morning, a little before 8am, on the first hole of a busy golf course, and I was beginning my pre-shot routine,

Visualizing my upcoming shot when a piercing voice came over the clubhouse loud speaker, "Would the gentleman on the woman's tee please back up to the men's tee!"

I could feel every eye on the course looking at me. I was still deep in my routine, seemingly impervious to the interruption.

Again the announcement, "Would the man on the woman's tee please back up to the men's tee!"

I simply ignored the guy and kept concentrating, when once more the man yelled, "Would the man on the woman's tee please back up to the men's tee!"

I finally stopped, turned, cupped my hands and shouted back.... "Would the idiot with the microphone kindly keep quiet and let me play my second shot!"

\*

A cabbie picks up a nun. She gets into the cab, and notices that the VERY handsome cab driver won't stop staring at her. She asks him why he is staring.

He replies, 'I have a question to ask you but I don't want to offend you.'

She answers, 'My son, you cannot offend me. When you're as old as I am and have been a nun as long as I have, you get a chance to see and hear just about everything. I'm sure that there's nothing you could say or ask that I would find offensive.'

'Well, I've always had a fantasy to have a nun kiss me.'

She responds, 'Well, let's see what we can do about that: #1, you have to be single and #2, you must be Catholic.'

The cab driver is very excited and says, 'Yes, I'm single and Catholic!'

'OK,' the nun says. 'Pull into the next alley.'

The nun fulfills his fantasy with a kiss that would make a hooker blush. But when they get back on the road, the cab driver starts crying.

'My dear child,' says the nun, 'why are you crying?'

'Forgive me but I've sinned. I lied and I must confess. I'm married and I'm Jewish.'

The nun says, 'That's OK. My name is Kevin and I'm going to a Halloween party.'

\*

If Yoko Ono married Sonny Bono, she'd be Yoko Ono Bono.

If Dolly Parton married Salvador Dali, she'd be Dolly Dali.

If Oprah Winfrey married Depak Chopra, she'd be Oprah Chopra.

If Cat Stevens married Snoop Doggy Dogg, he'd be Cat Doggy Dogg.

If Olivia Newton-John married Wayne Newton, then divorced him to marry Elton John, she'd be Olivia Newton-John Newton John.

If Sondra Locke married Elliott Ness, then divorced him to marry Herman Munster, she'd become Sondra Locke Ness Munster.