

Visions of Paradise #145



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Robert Michael Sabella

E-mail bsabella@optonline.net

Personal blog: <http://adamosf.blogspot.com/>

Sfnal blog: <http://visionsofparadise.blogspot.com/>

Available online at <http://efanzines.com/>

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Artwork

José Sánchez ... cover

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Out of the Depths

As usual, there has been much discussion about the recent Hugo Awards and, also as usual, I have my own observations about them. The *Best Novel* win is not particularly surprising as a battle of the Neil/Neals. Neal Stephenson's **Anathem** and Neil Gaiman's **The Graveyard Book** were the heavy favorites in this category, in spite of the fact that Cory Doctorow's **Little Brother** easily had the most nominations. The group of fans who nominate for the Hugos are not the same group who vote for the winner, and it is easier for a core group of fanatics to nominate their favorite author than it is to actually win the award. Thus John Scalzi and Charles Stross make the ballot virtually each year, but neither has the broad support to actually be contenders in this category.

I think two factors led to Gaiman's surprisingly easy win: his novel is more accessible to the typical reader, and his personality makes him a more popular person than Stephenson. Those are two important factors in the annual Best Novel race, perhaps **the** most important factors, and so while Stephenson's was far and away the most critically-acclaimed novel of the year, it had many detractors as well, while Gaiman's novel appealed to practically everybody.

It is also important to consider the popularity of fantasy versus science fiction nowadays. The fact that the number of fantasy books being published almost outnumber the number of sf books two-to-one nowadays indicates the popularity of the genre, and that is seemingly reflected in the Hugo voting as well. In this decade, there have been 9 Hugo Award Best Novel winners, 5 of them outright fantasies (**The Graveyard Book**, **Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell**, **Paladin of Souls**, **American Gods** and **Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire**), while only 3 have been outright sf (**Rainbows End**, **Spin** and **Hominids**) and one (**The Yiddish Policemen's Union**) was a noir alternate history which could easily fall into either the fantasy or sf category.

There were no surprises in the short fiction categories, which is itself surprising in a convention held outside the United States, since the most unexpected winners usually come in other countries. Nancy Kress (Best Novella "The Erdmann Nexus"), Elizabeth Bear (Best Novelette "Shoggoths in Bloom") and Ted Chiang (Best Short Story "Exhalation") are all repeat winners, the latter two having now won in consecutive years. I thought the out-of-country location of the worldcon might lend itself to a slightly out-of-the-mainstream winner such as John Kessel's acclaimed "Pride and Prometheus" (which earned second place for Best Novelette).

Much of the discussion following the worldcon has centered on the Fan Awards, but my philosophy has always been that diversity in those winners is definitely a very good thing. While such perennial winners as **Locus**, Dave Langford, and **File 770** are surely the most popular entries in their categories (and arguably the best as well), is it necessary to remind fandom of that year after year after year? I was actually pleased at the number of winners this year who asked their names to be withdrawn from their categories next year. It is a good trend. I read neither *Electric Velocipede* nor **Weird Tales**, so I do not know if they are the best fanzine and semi-prozine respectively, but their wins do open up the categories for other potential nominees in the future, and that is a good thing. There is no guarantee that this diversity will continue when the worldcon returns to the United States, but occasional diversity is better than none at all.

The Passing Scene

The last week of summer vacation was a busy one. One afternoon George (my sf buddy Physics teacher) and Nancy (our carpooler) came for lunch, so I made homemade Sicilian pizza. The next night we went to a Chinese buffet with 8 other people to celebrate Denise's 67th birthday. That sounds so old, but Jean and I are only a half-dozen years behind, alas. ;

The next day Mary, Adrienne and her year-old son Jack came for lunch. Jean made ham-and-cheese loaves. I really miss talking to Adrienne every day at school, although now we talk on the phone about once a month. She was my right-hand person running the department, and I had assumed she would eventually replace me as lead teacher. That will not happen now that she will almost certainly stay home as a full-time mother.

I also had several appointments that week, including my regular doctor for a routine checkup, and a visit to the county Transfer Station where I brought a bunch of old computer parts. While I was at the transfer station I saw a photographer for the **Daily Record** who took my picture and got my phone number, then when I got home a reporter phoned me to discuss my bringing my electronics to the transfer station where presumably it will be recycled. That sure sounded like a boring article to me. A week later, several people at school told me that they saw my picture on the front page of the **Daily Record**, as well as an interview with me taken at the transfer station. Front page?!? What a dubious claim to fame.

The total number of books in my collection has actually decreased a bit this year, which is good. So far I have shipped 17 books out to *Paperback Swap* members, while I have put another 20 books in the basement (in preparation of either eventually shipping to *PS* members or donating them to Shop-Rite, which is collecting used books for sale). I have received 20 books from *PS* members and bought 11 books, for a cumulative total of -6 books. This has not happened since the last time I culled books from my collection several years ago.

As usual, the first two weeks of school were exhausting. Teaching is so physically demanding there is no way a teacher can be prepared to be on our feet all day after having a much easier schedule during the summer. My classes seem nice so far. Already students have been coming to the Math Lab, including several sophomores for extra help as well as visits from last year's students Wei, Nicole, Sanaa and Liu.

The first weekend of school I went to Jessica Shah's *Classical Indian Dance* debut with two other teachers Maria and Damaris. It was nearly three hours long, and Jessica must have been exhausted, but she was exceptional. I told her afterwards that now she must do a solo dance at my annual *Indian Culture Club* show. Since she danced in it last year, which is where we got friendly since she was not my student until this year, she immediately agreed.

After the dance was a buffer dinner of Indian food outside on the patio. Since it had been raining most of the day though, the tables were all wet in the rain, so I stood with Damaris and her daughter Raquel and ate a plate of delicious Indian food. Then we visited Jessica briefly before leaving. Overall, I had a good time.

Friday after the first five-day week of school we celebrated surviving by going to Charley Brown's for dinner. I particularly like their salad bar, which is one of the best of any area restaurant (the chicken liver alone makes it worthwhile).

My second year teacher Briane is a wonderful teacher who reminds me of Adrienne with her potential. Friday afternoon after school she had three wisdom teeth removed, spending the next two days recovering before returning to school Monday. By mid-week her jaw was bothering her so much from talking all day and putting stress on it that Jean and I convinced her to stay home one day and rest her jaw. Fortunately, she took our advice and she said she felt better when she returned.

We had our usual three-day Yom Kippur weekend, so Saturday we went with our friends Frank (the photographer with whom I am currently collaborating on a book) & Marilyn to the Sculpture Garden in Princeton. We have been there before with Fei Fei, but it is such a spectacular place it was worth seeing again. The best parts are the recreations of famous paintings in sculpture form, and the half-dozen peacocks which strut around the grounds. While none of them showed us their full plumage as one did last time, they were still worth watching. We saw a mother peahen with her baby, and a white albino peacock which always trailed away from the main pack, which might mean it was a bit of an outcast because of its lack of coloring. That was sad.



Wondrous Stories

Last summer when I inventoried my collection, one of the first things I noticed was how few books I had by Arthur C. Clarke. I immediately researched his output and added 9 of his books to my *wish list*. Last month I was browsing through a used book store while on vacation, and I saw a copy of **A Fall of Moondust**, one of Clarke's most acclaimed novels. I am pleased that I bought it, since it was a very good book.

Normally I am not a fan of problem-solving stories, especially one whose premise is basically a novelette expanded to novel-length, but this novel hooked me totally. The plot was simple: a tourist bus taking 20 people across the surface of the Moon happens to be crossing a dust-filled crater when a minor moonquake takes place and traps the bus beneath the surface. Although the loss of transmission between the bus and its station reveals that the bus is in trouble, nobody knows precisely where it was lost.

This is not a very long novel, 215 pages in paperback, so it does not drag on unnecessarily.

There are three main foci to it: the interaction between the stranded tourists as their emotions run the gamut from despair to hopefulness and back again several times; the attempts to first locate them and then to rescue them; the emotional states of the various people involved in the rescue or on the periphery of it. Clarke's writing is very low-key, reminiscent of Kim Stanley Robinson in a later generation, so while the novel is basically a thriller, it did not raise my emotions to a manipulated feverish pitch as most thrillers attempt to do, but rather kept me interested in reading on, anxious to see how the tourists would eventually be rescued.

While **A Fall of Moondust** was not a classic, it was very enjoyable reading and encouraged me to read more vintage Arthur C. Clarke science fiction.

*

While **Galaxy** was my favorite magazine as a teenager, it lost my loyalty after Frederik Pohl passed the editorial baton to the much-inferior Ejler Jakobsson. Soon thereafter I started reading Edward Ferman's **Fantasy & Science Fiction**, and while it did not offer the same variety of future fiction, tending to lean more towards fantasy and contemporary sf, it was still a damned good magazine which never failed to entertain me.

I stopped buying **F&SF** during Kathryn Kristine Rusch's editorship, partly because reading prozines was proving too time-consuming so I gave up all my subscriptions in the mid-1990s, but also because I felt the magazine had declined during her tenure. When Gordon Van Gelder took over the reins, I began buying it occasionally, liking it as much as I did during Ferman's years, and ultimately renewing my subscription to it.

Recently **F&SF** celebrated its 60th anniversary, so Van Gelder compiled **The Very Best of Fantasy & Science Fiction**. Obviously, as he states in the editorial, it would be impossible to print *all* the best fiction from 60 years of a very-highly regarded magazine, so Van Gelder does not even try to do so. In effect, this 473-page anthology is more of a sampler of what **F&SF** has been about for six decades than an attempt to include its *very* best stories. For me, who has probably read all of the most famous stories in the magazine, there probably would have been no reason to buy the book if it really lived up to its title. As it is, only 7 of the 23 stories were published between 1970 and 1995, my subscription years, while several others are famous stories which I have read elsewhere.

Van Gelder avoided many of the overly-familiar classics in favor of lesser-known stories by the same authors. Thus Alfred Bester's "The Pi Man" and "Fondly Fahrenheit" are passed up for "Of Time and Third Avenue." He skipped Roger Zelazny's "A Rose For Ecclesiastes"—perhaps my favorite sf short story ever published—and "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth" in favor of another story which many readers might have missed, "This Moment of the Storm." Nor does he include any of the three novellas which became **A Canticle For Leibowitz**, even though the first novella might well have been the very best story ever included in **F&SF**.

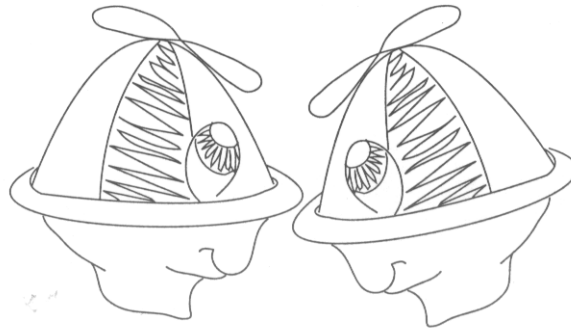
So the book was worth reading for the stories which I had not read previously—such as several of the pre-1970 lesser-known stories, or Ted Chiang's recent award-winner "The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate" which shows him at the very top of his form—as well as a chance to reread a

few classics which I have not read in several decades.

In the latter category is Daniel Keyes' renowned "Flowers for Algernon." Van Gelder called this story his "all-time favorite f&sf story." Even having read it 40 years ago, and the novelization as well, I had forgotten how moving it is, both in how Charlie recalls his past when he becomes super-intelligent, and, of course, for its very moving ending (which I will not reveal in case one of you readers has not read the story before). If you have not read "Flowers for Algernon" in as many decades as me, then this anthology is worthwhile just for the pleasure of rereading it.

Other highlights include William Tenn's musings on racism "Eastwood Ho!", Kurt Vonnegut's sharp satire "Harrison Bergeron," James Tiptree's "The Women Men Don't See," Stephen King's "The Gunslinger" (first story in his 7-book cycle), Ursula K Le Guin's "Solitude" and Peter Beagle's "Two Hearts." True there were a few strange choices in the book, stories such as Michael Swanwick's "Mother Grasshopper" and M. Rickert's "Journey Into the Kingdom," which were pleasant reading but hardly qualified as among the best stories of the year, much less of 60 years of **F&SF**.

Overall though, I cannot picture any fan of either fantasy or science fiction not liking this book. Perhaps the only reason to stay away is if you have all the stories in it already. But if, like me, several of them are missing from your collection, what are you waiting for? Buy it.



Halcyon Days

I apologies to Sheryl for misplacing the following letters which should have appeared in my previous installment of *Halcyon Days*.

Sheryl Birkhead

25509 Jonnie Court / Gaithersburg, MD 20882

April 30, 2009

IF I try to go back to the time in my life that you mention, my family had moved to a closed community. Everyone was related to everyone else. We were outsiders. Not long after we moved, we had a house fire. My Mom tried to catch us at school, but missed us, and we got off the bus to the smoking ruins. No one came to help. That pretty much set things up for years to

come. The never fitting-in has been a lifetime feeling. Yeah, so I (also) read voraciously.

I know there are people who don't actually have any books, but I cannot truly understand it.

When you retire, is it possible to "come back" as an aide to help where you are needed, but the hours you want? Yeah, I know this would almost certainly mean you would not work with the top students, but it might be rewarding and keep your hand in. Just a thought.

I've seen two or three of the *Brother Cadfael* episodes on TV, and once I get my current list of Netflix movies seen, I intend to add them to it.

Alexander Slate—okay, you had pest control, but what about the bedding? Just curious.

Lloyd Penney mentions the Hugos. This year's list of nominations in the fan categories (those are the only ones in which I feel even vaguely qualified—and less so each year!) produced names and titles which are new to me. So, getting even further and further out of the fannish mainstream—which may or may not be a good thing.

I was a bit curious about sites such as *Facebook*. If I remember correctly, you have to sign up in order to go in and look around. I am already signed up for far too many sites—most of which I never did—but somehow there is spillover to them. So, I just backed out and went my electronic way.

I wanted to be a teacher, but figured I would never be able to get up in front of a class and teach. I did. I still enjoy teaching, but with my volunteer veterinary crew I try to teach those who are there because they want to go into veterinary medicine differently than those there just to help out. This way I get a modified 1-to-1 interaction. I am gambling that the motivation is a true desire to learn and not a goal of a good grade—with no testing (per se) I have no way of knowing if I succeed or not. I have some feelings but...

When I lived on the farm, we had very few *trick or treaters* because of the road situation—no sidewalks and very narrow roads. At my current home in a cul-de-sac, I get at least 40 or 50, and most arrive in groups. This is a small development of about 20 homes, so I seriously doubt that the kids all come from the houses here—guess we import them!

I always liked the *Retief* stories—but I have not revisited them in a long time and might feel differently about them as an adult.

I have yet to visit an *Olive Garden* since there are not any nearby. Sounds delicious and I can usually find plenty to eat (vegetarian) from an Italian food menu.

Of the stories you mention, I recall both *Pern* and *Darkover* with great fondness—think I have most of the two series sitting on the pb shelves.

Hmm—pardon my ignorance, but **Brad Foster's** cover for #137—I am trying to remember what movie it was that I saw, located in South America, that had the skeleton theme for some fete. I

really should know...

Just checking to ask—are you mailing zines to **Terry Jeeves**? I note his fillos and think he would get a kick out of reading about the day-to-day happenings over here.

Ah—the joke on the back of #137—I am trying (in vain, I fear) to remember what TV show (had to be some sort of police show, I believe) had that joke spoken.

[School politics—too touchy to explain here—might prevent me from returning when I retire, but it is definitely something I would consider.

[Terry Jeeves is still on my very small paper mailing list. A few months ago he sent me an envelope filled with drawings, so he will still be appearing in **VoP** for awhile.]

Sheryl Birkhead

July 10, 2009

When I first got into fandom, I entered via the N3F. One of the things they had going then was *round robin* letters. If I remember correctly, I was involved in three or four: each recipient made a contribution, made comments on the contribution immediately before their own, and sent it on to the next name on the list. I suspect that, mainly because I do not remember any specifics, none of the ones I knew about ever had a chance at publication. Ah yes, I would imagine most of us have tried for publication at one time or another...to some degree.

I too subscribed to a bunch of prozines for awhile. I let them all lapse when prices went up, my time for reading them reduced substantially, and I found I no longer was all that interested in **every** story (and in some cases—none) in some issues. However, at that time, the local library subscribed to the prozines and I could just drop by and read what I wanted. They stopped those subscriptions a long time ago—and I just never re-subbed to fill in the breach.

I started out listening to the radio in the car. I am not a music person—I like it, but am not actually into it and have **very** few cds or records. When I found audio books at the library, I made the transition quickly. This way I have *something* to listen to—of my own choosing. I imagine that if I really got into music, I would be able to find at least a few stations that aired whatever type of music I select. Obviously that same solution does **not** exist for audio books. Give that, if you are a music person, spend a fair amount of time driving, then the type of subscription you had makes sense (and I avoided the impulse to type cents). On the other hand, it would see that you would be able to find free stations that mainly play whatever music you enjoy—but I have no idea if the satellite listening is pure music or if it is of paid stations.

I have *myofascial pain syndrome*. The physical therapists and pain physicians I have dealt with all recommend at least monthly massages. If money were no object, I might follow through on that. I did this for a few years and all that it did was try to prevent progression. Anyone hearing that I (at that time) got a weekly massage thought I was just plain lucky—not so. Each massage was extremely painful—usually ending up in tears. I kept hoping that eventually it would help—

but when I finally admitted that it never was going to, I stopped going. I never have had a massage that was enjoyable or pleasant! Based on what everyone else seems to be saying about massages in general, I hope you may find a way to have one periodically.

Wow—you are now OE of FAPA—congrats (if that is the correct wish). I have seen a few of the mailings and, well, whew!

For westerns, I always enjoyed *Zane Grey* and, as you mention, *Louis L'Amour*. I haven't read any in a long time.

Since I have no chance to attend a Worldcon, I have a supporting membership, but actually do not know the date this year. I am so used to its being held over the Labor Day weekend that I have lost contact with the changes that each con has been making lately. I will be curious to see the list of winners when they are announced...and whatever the concom chooses to send those of us with only the supporting memberships. I had **hoped** to be able to take advantage of the nominated fiction that was put online, but...well, with my lack of computer/internet capability, that rapidly became an impossibility. So much for really being able to vote intelligently. That translates that I only voted in those categories in which I had any experience, but I lost out on a lot of opportunities!

Seeing **Tom Sadler**'s piece reminds me—Tom recently broke his leg above the ankle and had to have surgery...think he had the cast removed a short while ago—hope everything went well!

Interesting that you mention your orthotic. The chiropractor (stopped going several years ago when my GP gave me an ultimatum—in her residency she had seen multiple patients come in with herniated discs from incorrect manipulation and she said choose—him or her...) made measurements and gave me a small one for my foot. When I went to one of the pain specialists, he watched my stride and gait with and without the orthotic and told me to stop using it—that even that slight change was throwing my gait off enough that muscles were out of alignment. Sheesh—can't win.

Condolences on the passing of Misty.

I hope **Julia Morgan-Scott** manages to continue fanart—but burning out is a good reason to stop. Her artwork has graced many zines and her absence will be felt. Heartfelt thanks to her for brightening up the zine scene.

[I too participated in round-robin letters when I first entered fandom through N3F, but after 40 years I do not even remember the names of the other participants. How sad is that!

[I chose not to renew the Sirius subscription which came with my car, but I use my son's subscription to listen to it via my computer. I split the cost with him, so it is cheaper that way, and since I spend considerably more time on the computer than in the car, it is cost-effective.]

On the Lighter Side

Jokes by Robert Kennedy

A little boy, in one of those curious moods, began quizzing his mother one afternoon. "Mommy, will you tell me how old you are?"

"No," she replied. "How old I am is nobody's business but mine."

"Then Mommy," the child continued, "tell me how tall you are and how many pounds you weigh."

"No," Mommy said. "How tall I am and how much I weigh is nobody's business but mine."

"Mommy," the boy said, persisting, "tell me why you and daddy got divorced."

"No," Mommy said. "Why I got divorced is nobody's business but mine."

Later, one of the boy's friends told him to look at his mother's driver's license, because it had that information on it.

Later he told his mother, "You are 34 years old. You're 5 feet 6 inches tall, and you weigh 138 pounds."

"Well, smarty," she asked, "then why did I get divorced?"

"Because you got an 'F' in sex."

*

At an annual Bosses Night dinner in Helena, Montana, where legal secretaries sponsored their lawyer bosses, it was time to announce the Boss of the Year.

The master of ceremonies began: "First of all, our winner is a graduate of the University of Montana. So that already eliminates some of you as candidates."

"Our winner also is a partner in a downtown Helena law firm. That eliminates some more of you."

"Our nominee is honest, upright, dedicated..."

A voice from the audience cut in: "Well, there go the rest of us!"

*

A husband takes his wife to play her first game of golf. Of course, the wife promptly hacked her first shot right through the window of the biggest house adjacent to the course.

The husband cringed, 'I warned you to be careful! Now we'll have to go up there, find the owner, apologize and see how much your lousy drive is going to cost us.'

So the couple walked up to the house and knocked on the door. A warm voice said, 'Come on in.'

When they opened the door they saw the damage that was done: glass was all over the place, and a broken antique bottle was lying on its side near the pieces of window glass.

A man reclining on the couch asked, 'Are you the people that broke my window?'

'Uh...yeah! , sir. We're sure sorry about that,' the husband replied.

'Oh, no apology is necessary. Actually I want to thank you. You see, I'm a genie, and I've been trapped in that bottle for a thousand years. Now that you've released me, I'm allowed to grant three wishes. I'll give you each one wish, but if you don't mind, I'll keep the last one for myself.'

Wow, that's great!' the husband said. He pondered a moment and blurted out, 'I'd like a million dollars a year for the rest of my life.'

'No problem,' said the genie 'You've got it, it's the least I can do. And I'll guarantee you a long, healthy life!'

'And now you, young lady, what do you want?' the genie asked.

'I'd like to own a gorgeous home complete with servants in every country in the world,' she said.

'Consider it done,' the genie said. 'And your homes will always be safe from fire, burglary and natural disasters!'

'And now,' the couple asked in unison, 'what's your wish, genie?'

'Well, since I've been trapped in that bottle, and haven't been with a woman in more than a thousand years, my wish is to have sex with your wife'

The husband looked at his wife and said, 'Gee, honey, you know we both now have a fortune, and all those houses. What do you think?'

She mulled it over for a few moments and said, 'You know, you're right.

Considering our good fortune, I guess I wouldn't mind, but what about you, honey?'

You know I love you sweetheart,' said the husband. 'I'd do the same for you!'

So the genie and the woman went upstairs where they spent the rest of the afternoon enjoying each other. The genie was insatiable. After about three hours of non-stop sex, the genie rolled over and looked directly into her eyes and asked, 'How old are you and your husband?'

'Why, we're both 35,' she responded breathlessly. 'No kidding,' he said. 'Thirty-five years old and both of you still believe in genies?'