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Features/Featurettes

- | | |
|--|----|
| An Interview with Karen Traviss,
by Matthew Appleton | 1 |
| <i>Evangelion</i> & the Hikikomori
Phenomenon, by Sara K. Ellis | 8 |
| The Problem of Sodor and its
Animatronic Trains, by Cheryl Appleton | 17 |
| Sci-Fi Geeks Versus Football
Morons, by Danny Adams | 23 |
| The Dagobah Conundrum,
by Matthew Appleton | 50 |

Book Reviews

- | | |
|---|----|
| <i>Ultimate Iron Man</i> , Vol. 1 (graphic
novel), reviewed by Hawk | 18 |
| <i>The Mammoth Book of Best New
Horror #16</i> , edited by Stephen Jones,
reviewed by Mario Guslandi | 21 |
| Lucius Shepard's <i>A Handbook of
American Prayer</i> , reviewed by
Matthew Appleton | 26 |
| <i>Futureshocks</i> , edited by Lou Anders,
reviewed by Christopher Garcia | 32 |
| Justina Robson's <i>Silver Screen</i> ,
reviewed by Chris Elliot | 33 |
| <i>Adventure</i> , Vol. 1, edited by Chris
Roberson, reviewed by Danny Adams | 42 |
| Octavia E. Butler's <i>Fledgling</i> ,
reviewed by Sara K. Ellis | 45 |
| Christopher Moore's <i>A Dirty Job</i> ,
Reviewed by Steven H Silver | 55 |
| John Scalzi's <i>The Ghost Brigades</i> ,
reviewed by Matthew Appleton | 56 |

DVD Reviews

- | | |
|---|----|
| <i>Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy</i> ,
reviewed by Caroline-Isabelle Caron
& Stéphane Vermette | 15 |
| <i>Death Race 2000 – Special Edition</i> ,
reviewed by Christopher Garcia | 22 |
| <i>Tim Burton's Corpse Bride</i> ,
reviewed by Edna Stumpf | 25 |
| <i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i> ,
reviewed by Richard Fuller | 29 |
| <i>Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the
Were-Rabbit</i> , reviewed by
Caroline-Isabelle Caron | 35 |
| <i>King Kong – Collector's Edition</i>
(1933), reviewed by Alex Esten | 39 |
| <i>Star Wars III: The Revenge of the
Sith</i> , reviewed by Alex Esten | 47 |

An Interview with Karen Traviss

by Matthew Appleton

Before embarking on a career as a science fiction writer, Karen Traviss worked as a journalist, an advertising copywriter, a media liaison officer for the police, a journalism lecturer, a public relations manager and a defense correspondent. She was also a reservist in the UK Territorial Army and Royal Naval Auxiliary Service. Her debut novel, *City of Pearl*, was a finalist for both the John W. Campbell Memorial Award and the Philip K. Dick Award. The two sequels, *Crossing the Line* and *The World Before*, have both received critical acclaim as well. The fourth novel in the Wess'har series, *Matriarch*, is due out in October.

She has also written a couple Star Wars tie-in novels, *Republic Commando: Triple Zero* and, more recently, *Republic Commando: Hard Contact*, which arrived at American bookstores at the end of February. Her next Star Wars novel, *Legacy of the Force: Bloodlines*, is due out in August.

She is a full-time novelist and currently resides in Devizes, United Kingdom (just north of Stonehenge for those of you outside the UK). You can find her website at www.karentraviss.com and her blog at karentraviss.livejournal.com.

MA: What influenced you to decide to finally start writing science fiction? You mentioned in an interview with the BSFA critical magazine *Vector* that the television show *A for Andromeda* started you on science fiction when you were a child, but you didn't start writing SF until well after you established yourself in other careers.

KT: I was only interested in SF: simple as that really. You know the story about the career development guy who put me on the road to novels, so I won't bore you with that. Obviously my fascination with SF goes back a very long way, but as an adult it took on a new dimension for me as a writer: I'm a journalist by background, and the classic journalist approach is often "What if?" SF is the ultimate "what if" genre. There's absolutely nothing you can't examine in that framework. It's a very broad canvas, and it covers so many sub-genres that you have no limits.

My writer buddy Sean Baggaley, who's half-Italian, has a very different take on genre based on the Italian approach to fiction, and he thinks SF is a total misnomer, like shelving titles by the location—books set in Scotland, books set in France—because that's not actually the genre, but the setting. He says SF is a setting, and I tend to agree with him—there's

thrillers, romances, detective novels, and just about any of the other genres existing within SF. I write military techno-thrillers and political thrillers and whatever, but in a SF setting.

I write “people” books—they’re all utterly reliant on characters, and that’s the sort of work you can only really do properly when you’ve lived a bit, so I felt I knew a lot more about human dynamics and psychology after I’d got a fair few miles of life experience on my clock.

The only other thing I’d write would be military—small elite unit, as it’s known in the trade. I like military. I’m a navy girl at heart, but I can be as tri-service as the next person!

City of Pearl garnered far more critical acclaim than most other first novels. Were the award nominations and citations surprising, and how did they affect your work, if at all?

I’m not dismissing awards, and it’s nice that folks nominate my books, but it had no impact on me at all: not me, nor my work. And I’m not sure how awards can impact you, except with a big prize, or if you like awards and they validate your self-esteem. Most awards don’t seem to make any difference to your sales, and sales is what it’s all about—not only to earn a living, but if you’re a storyteller like me, you want a big audience to react to you and for you to interact with. (Which is why I love writing *Star Wars* books so much: big, enthusiastic readership who talks to you and debate with you and give the books a life of their own.)

I have seen some people changed by awards, but it tends to be in a rather negative way: the folks who think they’ve become Important Writers with something to teach the masses and mighty concepts to lay upon the world. You can take awards way too seriously, and end up looking a right dickhead, to be frank.

Again, this is the crabby journalist in me, but awards don’t relate to what makes me write. They’re in a parallel universe for me. I’m a story-

teller, because writing is a medium for me, not an end in itself. I happen to tell stories by writing. I can tell stories other ways, but right now, I write them.

In your biography, you state that in addition to serving in two different branches of the military you previously worked as a journalist, a public relations manager and a media liaison officer for the police. What elements from these experiences did you work into the Wess’har novels?

I was a reservist in humble roles, and I like to make that very clear at the outset, because the wild rumors that fly round about my military career are hilarious—no, folks, I was never in the SAS; or a fighter pilot; or MI5. My main career was journalism, and I spent a few years as a defense correspondent, which was priceless technical and

political experience. Politics is a big chunk of a news journalist’s life too, and I did work in political PR, which was also fabulous training for being a novelist. It was fun working for the police, but most journalists work cheek by jowl with police for some part of their careers anyway, so it was just a different take on that. What all these jobs gave me was scenarios and technical detail.

Readers always say, “Oh, all the interesting people you meet must be useful for the

books...” But, they’re not. I never use real people for characters. Apart from the fact that the whole point of my fiction is to build new characters, real people just aren’t built right or stylized enough to use in novels. Many writers will disagree loudly with me about that, but it’s anathema to me: I want to explore a new mind that I’ve never seen before. I don’t want me in the book, or my friends and neighbors and colleagues. I want fresh meat.

In *Crossing the Line*, you had Eddie reference an incident during the Falklands War which involved the HMS *Conqueror*. Was it an incident that you were somehow involved with, or was it just something that you felt was very germane to the story?



No. I knew a guy who was serving in *Conqueror* when she sunk the *Belgrano*, but that had nothing to do with my reason for using it. It was just a very good trigger for Eddie to slip a “this is a big row” tip past the government watchdogs. It was a code. But yes, the Falklands War is very important to me, for personal reasons which are just too long and complex to go into here, and because it’s a war that’s compact enough to be analyzed fully, and because of the role of the media and the individual journalist in the business of war, which was very visible in that conflict.

It seemed that after constant escalation of the situation, you spend much of *The World Before* sorting out the relationships and repositioning the chess pieces before the next exchange takes place.

This is a six-book series. It basically goes: One and Two are action, Three and Four are moving the pieces and arranging the board, and Five and Six are consequences. In individual books, my structure tends to be a long-strand build-up, positioning pieces, with a sudden acceleration into a big, fast end.

You’ve stated in previous interviews that none of your characters are vessels for your ideas. However, throughout the Wess’har novels, characters from every species, including human-kind, have negative things to say about humanity. It almost feels as though while you want the readers to route for Shan, Eddie and Ade, you are also presenting homo sapiens as the least honorable species in the conflict. Are you making a statement about individuals and the societies in which they function?

No, I don’t make statements. I report, remember. I think some people rarely see humans portrayed other than as *numero uno* top of the food chain good guys, so the culture shock they get is noticeable to them. That’s what it’s all about when you read a book: you’re often mostly struck by what you disagree with, because what you agree with is invisible to you.

There’s a big assumption in your question, though: who says I want the reader to root for Shan, Eddie, or anyone? I don’t. But that tells me who you’re rooting for. And people root for different characters—Lindsay has her following, as does

Rayat. People project their own politics and feelings onto fiction, especially quite neutral fiction like mine. (If you don’t think it’s neutral, take a look—all the characters get their say. It’s whatever you want to believe it is.) That’s what fiction is partly there for—identity and resonance for the reader.

I’ve said before that I know this is happening with some readers because they tell me what “message” I’m trying to send—and then they all tell me radically different things. I admit I laugh when I see the “she’s a vegan propagandist” type of review, because that just tells me that the vegan debate in the books has hit a raw nerve with a reader. I’m not even remotely vegan, I can assure you. (And I do get a bit irked when people claim to know my beliefs and soul, and castigate me for them—and then get it totally wrong!)

It’s just a story. It’s not me.

One aspect of literary theory states that writers cannot keep themselves out of their books, no matter how hard they try.

Yes, of course we all filter through our own brains. I only know the color blue that I can see: what I can’t see for myself, I have to ask others to describe to me, and try to find common ground that interprets it for me. That’s the same argument as asking if we can truly write the alien experience: if it’s that alien, we have no common reference point. The interface between writer and subject is the same.

But to assume everyone is just Mary Sue-ing is incredibly simplistic, and doesn’t stand up to examination. I tell readers how I work. I explain—on my website, in my LJ, whenever I meet them—what that filter is, so they can factor it in: mine is wanting to walk in another’s shoes, just to see what it feels like, and to invert what’s assumed. I show them my lens, so to speak. Nothing is hidden. I tell them what I set out to do. Like I said, I know this works, because of the huge variation in interpretations from readers. Empirical evidence. They can’t all be right. Therefore it comes from them, not from me. That’s what fiction is: it’s both a mirror and a magnifying glass, albeit a steered experience.

During the first novel, I got a sense that you were addressing as many different issues as possible just in case you never got to publish the

sequel. Is this the case, or were you just trying to establish that all these issues—i.e., environmental protection, reproductive rights, justice, terrorism, longevity, animal rights, religion, and power & responsibility—would continue to be addressed throughout the series?

I set this up as a six book series, and you need a lot of meat at the start to carry on a genuine six-part story with one continuous arc rather than a sequence of six related standalones. They're all one issue, actually: where you draw lines. The Us and Not Us, the Okay and Too Far, and so on. I have a terrific reader who teaches at MIT who told me that all my work—yes, that includes *Star Wars* too—was about the politics of identity, which was brilliant, because I didn't have a label for it, and John gave me one. Very useful insight for me.

I did also try to ensure that the book could be read by as wide an audience as possible. That's what I mean when I say "designed" by marketing principles. I wanted to reach all demographics—not just to sell, although I'm a business first and foremost, but because I wanted any reader to be able to take something away from the books—so you can read them as thrillers, romances, straight SF, war stories, or political parables, or philosophical debate. Everyone gets something different out of them. I have readers in every age group (I don't think the wess'har books are suitable for youngsters, but many do read them) and—very important to me, this one—all levels of educational attainment. I want to include readers, not shut them out.

In a brief email exchange we had before this interview, you mentioned that many romance readers have latched on to the relationships in the Wess'har wars. In particular, what type of feedback have readers given you in regards to the changing dynamics between Aras and Shan when Ade entered into the relationship?

Well, plenty of readers wanted Shan and Aras to live happily ever after. Or Shan and Ade. Ade was very popular with men and women, and lots of folk wanted to see them all happy together. It's not romance in the sense most people think of it, but it's definitely about relationships. I don't sugar-coat them; they're pretty raw and painful relationships. But men relate to those scenes as

much as women do. "Honest" is what one male reader called them.

You say it's not romance in the sense that most people think of it—neither is polyamory. Is their relationship an exploration of that type of romance?

I didn't realize I did this until a friend who's an academic and a critic pointed out why I had acquired so many readers from diverse sexual preferences. I was simply looking at a different biology that had a polyandrous element, and then wondering how humans—possessive and sexually jealous—would fit in with that. I was more interested in what was emerging about ownership, which has parallels with exploitation of resources in many ways. So I got to the same destination from a totally different starting point. And that seems to be the story of my life: I reinvent wheels all the time, because I have to find stuff out for myself. It's partly lack of education in some areas, partly mistrust of everything that moves, and partly curiosity about how things work. I like deconstructing everything, from thought to car engines.

Without giving too much away, can we expect the action in future Wess'har novels to shift more toward Earth, or is this series basically going to remain in the Bezer'ej system?

Oh, it's a long distance series... watch this space... And don't go back for the cat.

Given Shan's near-death experience, is it safe to assume that we haven't seen the last of Rayat and/or Lindsay?

That's a spoiler! *gasp* Wait and see...

In the same interview with *Vector* that I referenced earlier, you mentioned that you've been known to introduce yourself as a right-winger when the panel topic is political in nature. After reading the Wess'har novels, you actually sound like you're what many Americans would describe as far-left, and that's by the standards of what passes for the American Left these days (and leaves Bush out of the equation). Have you had any feedback from Americans calling your work socialist, and are you still introducing yourself as a right-winger?

I think you're still equating the books with my politics, and that's way off beam. The books are not polemic. They are reportage. The politics you

think you see—and each reader sees something different, believe me—are the politics of the characters, and the characters are not me. I can't stress this enough. I can keep my politics out of my books, simply because I was trained to stand back as a journalist, and then I spent ten years in a politically restricted post. I can put my beliefs and opinions in a sealed box while I work. And for me the greatest pleasure in writing is to put myself in the head of a character who's totally different to me and see the world as they see it—that's exciting, and it can be awful and disturbing as well. Even characters who would disgust me in real life are an interesting experience.

No American has ever mistaken me for a lefty—except you! (No, wait: I do recall a certain SF writer thinking I was a Marxist, which got big laughs all round.)

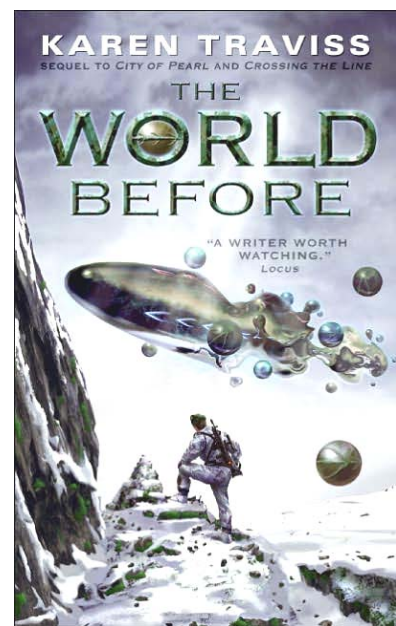
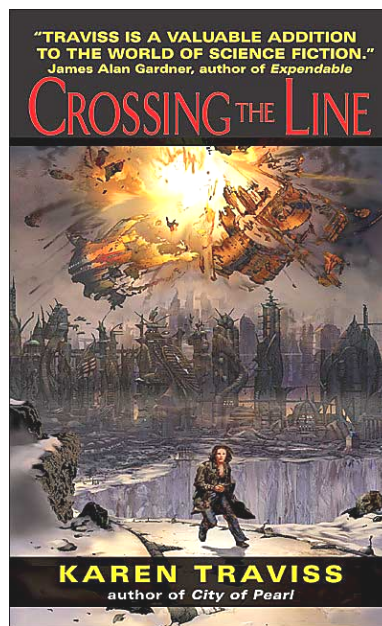
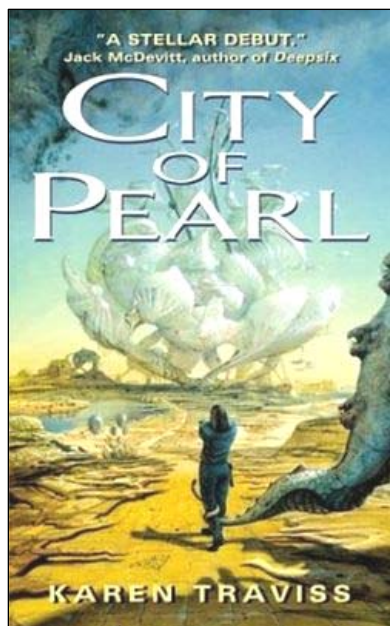
That's interesting, but then you're assuming I'm writing polemic and that the books are me. (Don't get me wrong: polemic has its place. I just don't happen to write it.) Bear in mind that politics was part of my job for three decades one way and another. I'm very political—not party political, because all the parties are crap, but I see the world with a political filter. Most Americans call me a libertarian when I tell them what I really think.

Well, given the way the government has handled civil liberties over the past few years,

some libertarians in the U.S. are starting to align themselves more frequently with the American left as opposed to the American right.

That's interesting. To be honest, you'll have a hard job finding a comfortable label for me, but I wish someone could. In the U.K., I'm right-wing (not New Labour right, which is terrifying right now, and getting more alarming each week.) Now you see the gulf between what the reader thinks they see in the books, and what I actually think. Equating a critical approach to business with left wing is probably too simplistic an analysis in today's politics. There is no longer any serious ideology of the left and right that I can see in the mainstream political life of the U.K. or the U.S.

I think the axis for the world we now live in is liberal-coercive, not left-right. If you know anything about U.K. politics, you'll be boggled by the spectacle of a Labour government which is the furthest right-wing government (in the old sense) we've ever seen. Well to the right of Thatcher: but folks forget she wasn't a true Conservative, but more a "Manchester free trade liberal." The labels mean nothing. There isn't a single socialist policy that I can see in today's New Labour. I have no idea what my own party, the Conservatives, stand for any longer, and as for the Lib Dems—your guess is as good as mine. I've worked for administrations of all three parties, and coalitions, and it's



been educational to say the least.

I agree that readers can often read different things into the text of any story. Although you state you are just reporting, would you agree that reporters can present the facts in a manner that leads the reader to a particular conclusion? The quote opening Chapter One of *The World Before* comes to mind as I ask this question. The Federal European Union's dismissal of Commander Neville as a responsible rogue agent which makes no mention of Rayat, even though he was behind the nuclear device, seems like a blatant parallel with the Bush administration's adamant statement that they don't condone torture even though US troops were committing it at Abu Ghraib and the lack of punishment (thus far) of those in the command structure.

Blatant? You see parallels that aren't there because you're looking with an American eye: this is a simple choice. The scapegoating of Lindsay Neville and the Royal Marines is done because no government is going to use a spook as a bargaining chip in this scenario. Would you say, "Look, we also have a spy on your turf, and we're going to hand him over too..."? You'd be crazy. Push comes to shove in a situation like that, and you'll offer up your lowest value assets—in this case, a naval commander who won't be missed, and six expendable troops. Rayat has a key mission. The FEU hopes that the wess'har will be placated by the sacrifice and they can retrieve Rayat or his data or both in due course. That's all there is. It's the math of diplomacy.

That's not actually about reporting. But yes; throughout the whole wess'har series, the impact of what is reported and not reported is absolutely central to the plot. It drives Eddie Michallat nuts, and he's worrying what he's personally responsible for in terms of how third parties react to his news, whether he's filtering, exaggerating, concealing—and then he sets that against an even more complex background of how the wess'har

handle information, and he's in permanent agony over reporting decisions.

He moves from one pole to the other and back again; he's eaten up by fears of "taking sides," and then he has to ask whether *not* taking sides is appropriate when he's part of the process and the events anyway. I simply can't imagine anything worse for a journalist, and Eddie ends up at one point referring to quantum reporting—that the act of observation alone changes the outcome of events. I've seen both sides of that, as a journalist wondering if I'm stoking a situation by covering it, and also as someone trying to manage a volatile situation during and after a major riot, in which I was trying to keep journalists out of the area because their presence was sparking more unrest. It's an impossible call. All I can do in the series is watch Eddie go through that process, hope the reader follows each stage and asks themselves questions about it,

and then maybe reaches their own conclusion—because I still haven't, and I was a working journalist for a very long time, and I wrote the damn series, and I *still* have no benchmark!

While you state the books are not polemic, there is a long history of such work in SF. Some of novels and short stories, such as Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, have inspired multiple works in response. Have you encountered any novels that made you consider writing a polemic book as a retort?

Polemic has its place. I just don't write it because it's alien to my professional culture. I also don't read: I'm notoriously badly read. I thought I read a lot as a kid until that same academic buddy spent some time asking me if I'd read this book or that, and gently told me that I hadn't read much at all. And she was right. I come from a very blue-collar background where novels were not part of the fabric of life: TV, radio, films and comics were. I was very literate in the sense that was exposed to language very early via non-fiction, read newspapers from an early age, and so developed facility



with language, but I am *so* not a reader. Having said that, some things do move me to a strong counter response—films like *Independence Day*!

This is purely personal, and I have no right to judge the worth of a film, but I wanted to lob a brick through the TV when I saw *ID* because it was such crud. Forget the crappy computer virus plot device, when my Mac couldn't even swap files with my PC: it was the stench of xenophobia. Ditto *Signs*—the plot hole about aliens who can't tolerate water coming to a planet that's mostly bloody wet was bad enough, but again I saw xenophobia bubbling through it all. Just my take: I have no doubt that the filmmakers didn't even intend that, and it as just a classic pair of alien invasion romps, and I was seeing the films through my own filter. But, even with that intellectual detachment, and knowing how what *I* write is seen in very different and usually conflicting ways by readers, I still wanted some hardware violence to vent my spleen!

You recently posted on Amazon.com and then at Emerald City rather vehement defenses of your work on the Star Wars novels. To be honest with you, for the most part I don't read tie-ins or shared universe material (such as Larry Niven's *Man-Kzin* universe). I'm not trying to make a value judgment (after all, this publication covers both SF and sci-fi), but can you understand why many SF readers harbor an aversion to tie-ins?

I come from Portsmouth. So did Charles Dickens. He was the soap opera hack of his day, and the irony of his literary status is never lost on us.

I think I know what the anti-media mindset is, but does that understand it? Understanding implies some sympathy. Sorry, but the attitude to books is hard to separate from an attitude to those who read them. Literature as we understand it is not an absolute but a set of norms peculiar to one sector of our culture: it's middle class. I challenge anyone to come up with truly objective criteria for quality in fiction: and I mean objective—definable, quantifiable, measurable and repeatable. Can't be done. So all I

hear when someone says, "This is fine literature" is "My little tribe says you should like this."

Why? I can't see any objective reason. The benchmarks of literature with a cap "L" are culturally biased. Now, how do I get from there—and that's bad enough, saying that quality benchmarks are the taste of a small elite foisted on a wider population in the guise of an intrinsic measure of quality—to the idea that rubbishing books is actually rubbishing readers? Like this argument, heavily edited but repeated to the point of nausea:

Litsnob: "That media series is rubbish."

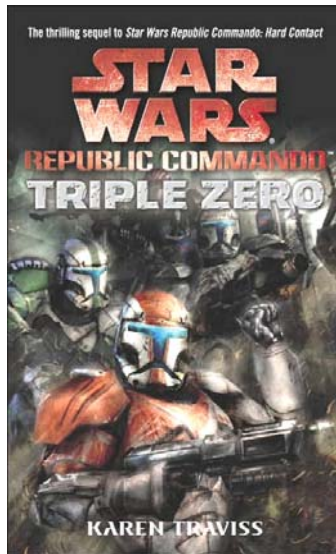
KT: "Well, lots more people buy that than buy your books, and they do have a choice of both."

Litsnob: "Well, people will buy anything."

Hello? What does that mean? That the media reader is too stupid to know any better? That they're willfully ignoring the mighty tome of the litsnob? That if they were educated, they'd see the light and stop buying the media books? All that is a judgment about human beings, not about the books they read, and I loathe that attitude. If anyone is going to leap in there and say, "No, it's the books that are bad" I have to demand that you prove to me *why* those books are bad. Because I still hear the suggestion that the majority of people have no taste, and so *their views don't matter*.

I don't believe anyone can come up with a rigorous definition of quality in fiction. All they can do is try to justify their taste, which is as valid as trying to convince me that I should like the flavor of liver. The only definition of a good book is one that *you* like. The only definably bad book is one made up of blank pages—and even then you can use it as a notebook.

Ask yourself, too, why media franchises become popular. It's not because people are fed them on a plate. Trust me, many companies have tried to market a new universe hoping to make it



into a *Trek* or a *Star Wars*, and *failed*. People can't be coerced into creating media phenomena by carpet-bombing; they respond to these franchises because they answer an age-old need in the human psyche for archetypal myth. Humans need stories they can interact with. And at the end of the day, you're looking at an equally valid culture that simply prefers a different kind of storytelling to the literary model, and is also experiencing that myth through a wide variety of media. Yes, this will choke the literati on their lattes: comics and games and movies are as equally valid as books.

So... on a more personal note, any of my readers who say they like my wess'har series but won't even try my *Star Wars* books is showing me they have a closed mind, and that they're prejudging *me*. Every media book is different: my SW books are not like Matt Stover's or Tim Zahn's, because Matt and Tim and I are radically different writers. We were hired to bring our individual flavor to the books, not to make them all the same. They're not cookie-cutter fiction, and I even get angry reactions from a small number of SW fans who argue that my books don't even "feel" like *Star Wars*. That's how diverse the output is.

I put everything I've got into those books, and I'm proud of them, because they give me pleasure in the writing, and they give *Star Wars* fans pleasure and a lot of material for heated debate in the reading. If you try them and don't like them, that's fine: it's a matter of taste, and you've at least had a look. But if you use the media label as a kind of disqualifier to avoid them, I'm not sympathetic at

all. It speaks of prejudice, and I'm cranky as hell about that.

Are there any other sci-fi universes, British or American, which you'd like to use as a setting for a novel?

None, alas. But I do get an iconoclastic urge to do some crossover spoofs. I do love parody!

The universes that I love best, though, are ones I wouldn't want to touch for fear of spoiling them. *Star Cops*—Chris Boucher, sir, I stand in awe you—is still a wonderful, smart, sharp series; *Futurama* is affectionate and savage at the same time; and *Babylon 5* was part of my life for too many years, so much so that I'm even wary of rewatching the DVDs for fear that a few years of creating SF for a living will have ruined the magic for me.

No, I'll leave well alone. It's enough that the BBC did a remake of *A For Andromeda*, and brought back my very first experience of that sense of wonder that I felt at five years old.

Do you see yourself writing SF for some time or do you think your occupational wanderlust will eventually take you in other directions as a writer?

I'll write my own SF and *Star Wars* as long as readers buy the books. It's my job. I've been asked if I'm willing to do straight military techno-thrillers, and I would do that happily too. The only writing jobs I haven't done are radio drama and screenplay—but I hear too many horror stories about screenwriting from colleagues, and I'll give that a miss thanks. I'd love to do a spot of radio drama, though, probably SF.

Hot Pockets of Resistance: *Evangelion* & the Hikikomori Phenomenon

by Sara K. Ellis

If *Astro Boy* reflected Japan's push for technological progress and a wish-fulfillment fantasy of a passive, model minority, then the angst-ridden characters in the 1995 anime series *Neon Genesis: Evangelion* seemed to mirror the nation's reality. The nation's birthrate was spiraling downward.¹ Horrifying incidents of suicide,² bullying,³ and murder⁴ were the results of years of

martial conformity in Japanese schools,⁵ while many children and young adults alike were choosing to opt out entirely—not only from school or the company, but Japanese society itself.

The year that *Evangelion*, a *mecha* (giant robotic armor) series, debuted to less-than-stellar ratings on Japanese television screens⁶ was also a

time in which the problem of *hikikomori* (social withdrawal) was beginning to grow into a widespread phenomenon. The family relationships in the series, and the protagonist's mixture of ambivalence and dependency toward his mecha, are a metaphor for the psychological process of *hikikomori* and the societal pressures placed on young people, to whom the constant advances in virtual and home entertainment technology have become such tempting escape routes.

Despite its initial low ratings, *Evangelion's* realism and angst-ridden characters soon caught on with a large segment of the population. By the time the series had resurrected itself in 1997, with the release of a pyrotechnic theatrical climax—denied in the original due to budgetary reasons—reruns and word of mouth had made it the final point on a triad of sci-fi anime classics that were embraced by the mainstream.⁷ *Uchusenkan Yamato* (1974-5, released in the U.S. as *Star Blazers*), *Gundam* (1979-80), and *Evangelion*, argues critic Minako Saito, became archetypes of their respective decades: a likeness that enabled them to “break through the previous, widespread notion of anime as ‘kids stuff.’”⁸

Evangelion, with its inward-facing pessimism and rejection of groupthink would distinguish itself as a revolutionary post-bubble epic. While *Yamato* and the original *Gundam* series were populated by can-do manly men, or what Saito refers to in the case of *Yamato*, as an intergalactic “high school baseball team,”⁹ *Evangelion's* protagonist was a skinny adolescent named Shinji Ikari, whose key to fighting off an alien and possibly biblical apocalypse lay in his ability to navigate the scarred topography of his own psyche.¹⁰

Shinji Ikari was the perfect icon of despondency for a decade that saw a prolonged recession, a devastating earthquake, and horrific acts of terrorism committed by its own citizens, some of whom the nation had thought to be their “best and brightest.”¹¹ It was one of the few television offerings to veer thematically from the same old ‘*ganbar-ism*’ (fighting spirit¹²) that had pounded the nation into an economic and cultural nadir embodied in the teeny bopper ensemble Morning Musume,¹³ whose answer to downsizing was “Japan’s future is wow-wow-wow-wow!”¹⁴

With its dysfunctional family, sexual angst, and blatant ambivalence about saving the world, *Evangelion* was not only a radical turnaround to the usual fare of mindless entertainment, but, as Susan Napier observes, even the mecha anime sub genre to which it belonged. The mecha genre, an offshoot of *Astro Boy's* cuddly robot, featured human beings, mainly young men, in giant robot armor, which empowered them by turning them into virtual fighting machines. Yet, as Napier states, Shinji is less than happy about his newfound strength:

This subversive tone is established early in the first and second episodes. Perhaps the most obvious difference that helps set the tone is Shinji’s attitude toward his mecha... Shinji looks on his augmented self with absolute loathing. He seems agonizingly reluctant, a far cry from the willing body-metal fusion on the part of more conventional protagonists.¹⁵

In many ways, Shinji’s fictional journey is one of saving the world through self-acceptance. Yet, his story, like the surging numbers of *hikikomori* cases appearing in Japan, also revealed the pitfalls and siren songs of a society that is not quite ready to allow its individuals to live and let live. As portrayed in the series, Shinji has much to share with the 600,000 to 1,000,000 young people, predominantly males, who have been holing up in their rooms for the past two decades:¹⁶ pressure from the older generation, a sense of abandonment and betrayal, a reliance on the virtual, and a mystique





that has surrounded the recluse since Kobo Daishi went into religious seclusion in 792.¹⁷

Set fifteen years after the visit of the angel Adam, whose crash landing to Earth raised the sea levels and wiped out two-thirds of the population, scientists working for an organization called NERV have now cloned giant biomechanical beings (EVAs) from the wreckage that can only be piloted by children born nine months after the impact. Now, in the year 2015, this small group of teenagers is humanity's last hope of defense against the remaining fifteen angels that are en route to destroy the planet. Shinji Ikari, the son of NERV director Gendou Ikari, is one of these kids. Abandoned as a small child after the mysterious disappearance of his mother, he is mystified by his father's summons, and harshly disappointed when Gendou brusquely orders him to pilot his creation. "You're necessary," Gendou says, "That's why I called you."

Shinji's reluctance to become another one of his father's instruments can be seen as a precise metaphor for the post-bubble generation, who, having witnessed their parents' sacrifices, and having surrendered much of their youth to examination hell, are no longer willing to participate.

While the son versus father storyline, containing a protagonist biologically determined as one of a 'chosen few' is certainly a well-worn mythological device, the small numbers of eligible children is also allegorical for the enormous pressures placed on younger members of a dwindling population.¹⁸ Shinji, Rei, Asuka, Toji, and later, Kaworu are a prismatic representation

of the competitive but nevertheless passive characteristics desired by the system. Shinji is spineless, while Asuka, as Saito observes, has the "strong-willed presence of an idol;"¹⁹ her pluck is appropriated and thus remains within the confines of the existing power structure. The same can be argued for Toji Suzuhara, the jock with a heart of gold, while Rei and Kaworu betoken an extreme of passivity and self-sacrifice: Rei has been cloned specifically for the project, while Kaworu—later revealed as an angel—surrenders his life to save humanity. Indeed, argues Napier, the protective shells of the EVA units belie the system in provoking a sense of rivalry that cuts off relevant communication:

Shielded in their EVA armor, Asuka, Shinji, and Rei are incapable of any meaningful interaction beyond competitiveness in combat and the occasional bleak foray into sexual experimentation... This theme of competition can be seen as having links with the heavy pressures that Japanese society places on its citizens.²⁰

It is no surprise then, that the one child who is not tapped as a potential pilot is Kensuke Aida. Aida, being the series' resident military geek, is also the only character insightful enough for potential dissent. It is Aida, who thanks to his curiosity and technical wizardry gains access to NERV's secrets. Unlike Shinji, Aida would love to suit up and fight the Angels—at one point even begging for the privilege—but like the philologist Syme in Orwell's *1984*, or the 'otaku' in Japanese society itself, Aida is seen as too smart for the common good.

Shinji's feelings of revulsion toward his mecha are also revelatory of the system's pressures to conform. In order to save the world, he must literally suit up in a monstrous metallic constraint, synchronize his mind and body with the EVA, and thus aligns with the aims of his father and the organization. Koichiro Asega, whose psychological study of *Evangelion* was published in 1997, states that the mecha genre is often symbolic of the burden of parent-child expectations:

For what is in reality an immature and powerless boy, piloting a robot is to be forced, regardless of one's will, into a situation where he has no choice but to play out an adult social role, as expected by his inventor/commander (father), thus he is forced to overreach himself. To paraphrase Carl Jung, to wear robot armor is to perform in the persona expected by adults.²¹

Thus, the mecha armor becomes a powerful amalgamation of the 'suit' and its accompanying societal burdens: Suit up or get out, or as Gendou puts it "If you're not going to pilot, go home!"

Shinji is not the first to be sacrificed to his father's work: the real sense of abandonment, the one he cannot get over, stems from the disappearance of his mother, Yui, who during an experiment fused with Shinji's EVA unit. Asega argues that as Yui did not die an "accidental death" but instead merged with machine, Shinji has been denied the normal grieving process that leads to the acceptance of loss:

At this point if Yui were truly dead, Shinji would have gone through the process of seeing her injured body, cremating her bones in a funeral, and gradually come to accept that his mother was dead, a process that Freud referred to as a 'lost object.' To the contrary, however, the disappearance of Shinji's mother has planted in Shinji the far more terrifying feeling of 'My mother has abandoned me and gone off somewhere.'²²

As is the case with Shinji, the problem of hikikomori is usually set in motion by bullying, betrayal, or abandonment, all three of which Gendou (and Yui, involuntarily) has inflicted upon his own son.²³ Yet, for hikikomori, as in Shinji's case, the shock of abandonment alone is usually not enough to keep these young people in their cocoons. Domestic preconditions, such as affluence, technology, and over-indulgent parents are also blamed for enabling such long-term seclusion.

"In the past," writes journalist Jonathan Watts, "such unproductive behavior for those of the working age would have prompted many to be kicked out of their houses, but today's Japan is so rich that millions of parents are happy to allow their children to remain at home until their thirties—a trend that has prompted the widely used expression 'parasite singles.'"²⁴ Nevertheless, it can be argued that proponents of the affluence argument are often advocates of the very system that drives these young men into seclusion. Sociologist Masahiro Yamada, who coined the above term, touts it in the press mainly with regard to young women whom he admonishes for not marrying and producing babies.²⁵ Even rightist-sounding parents of recluses, such as Masahisa Okuyama, grouse that the parents of hikikomori are the type of "people who read *The Asahi Shimbun* (Japan's version of *The Guardian*)."²⁶

The womb-like cockpit of his EVA unit, that contains his mother's presence, sharply parallels the mothering mentality being blamed for the phenomenon. Concurrently, Gendou's spooky composure with regard to sacrificing his wife and son point to corporate loyalty over familial devotion at all costs. "The ideological conclusion" as observed by Karel Van Wolferen, is "that work units and not families, are the basic building blocks of Japanese society."²⁷ Thus, piloting the EVAs becomes symbolic of the causes of hikikomori syndrome, as argued by competing rightist and leftist influences.

In *Evangelion*, the mecha armor becomes symbolic of our growing dependence upon virtual



interaction. Hikikomori is not only caused by the competing polls of unforgiving conformity and 'lefty' overindulgence, but like the EVA itself, which stands between Shinji and his angels/demons, the increasing presence of virtual reality—as TV, the internet, and video games—gives the recluse an all too easily accessible go-between. Author Ryu Murakami argues that hikikomori is representative of the paradox that ensnares Japanese society, one that, while worried about social withdrawal, nevertheless welcomes the Sony PlayStation:

Technology like that has made it possible to produce animated movies and graphics, as well as conduct commercial transactions, without ever stepping out of the house... this malfunctioning of communication has nothing to do with Japan's "uniqueness," some essence inherent in its history or tradition that sets it apart from other nations. The cause of the malfunctioning is more simple. It is the fact that by the 1970s we had already achieved the national goal... when that goal was attained we lost much of the motivating force that had knit the nation so tightly together.²⁸

While Murakami is to be applauded for refusing to fall back on the myth of Japanese uniqueness, he overlooks one distinctive aspect of behavior that is often observed by outsiders: the historical reliance on the go-between in nearly every situation with regard to business, social institutions such as marriage, and of course foreigners (or "*gaijin* handlers" as they are often derisively referred to by Japan's foreign residents).²⁹ In Japan, the middleman is an entity unto its own and, rather than shying away from the foreign, it is indeed possible that the hikikomori is taking this well-known cultural trait to its next logical step by using virtual reality as a buffer against the largely unquestioned and absurdly militarized life proscribed by both school and company.

It is in the final, much maligned two episodes of the series, where this virtual reliance is highlighted. In episodes twenty-five and twenty-six, in which each character undergoes a form of psycho-

analysis, Shinji must learn to come out of his literal and figurative shell and live in the world minus his EVA unit. The final episode ends with Shinji re-imagining himself and the other characters leading an ordinary existence: Shinji and Asuka excitedly rush off to school and are greeted by their new teacher, Misato, who teases Shinji and Asuka about their budding romance to the delight of the class. Napier calls this fantasy world a "self reflexive version of an animated high school sex comedy that proves to (Shinji) that there are many directions his anime life could go;" thus, agreeing with Toru Endo's straightforward assessment of the series as a "sexual coming of age story."³⁰

But, if anything these scenes are closer to the kind of very mainstream and downright cheesy teen drama to which *Evangelion* is a foil. That Shinji has an epiphanic reaction to this drivel could be taken as an inside joke, had director Hideki Anno not suffered a nervous breakdown halfway through the production.³¹ What is clear, however, is that the final two episodes act as a negation of the social problems alluded to in the previous episodes, as Shinji stepping out onto a globe, is greeted and summarily lectured by the entire cast of characters:

Makoto Hyuga: "It's your mind which takes reality and separates it into what is bad and hateful."

Shigeru Aoba: "It is only the mind which separates reality from the truth."

Maya Ibuki: "Your view of reality changes your perception of its nature. It is all literally, a matter of perspective."

After this barrage of "I'm OK, You're OK," Shinji joyfully responds "I am worth living here!" to resounding applause from the people with whom he'd previously shared complicated and adversarial relationships, including Gendou, whom he "thanks." The onus on Shinji, to change his own perspective rather than rebel or withdraw, is indicative of the sanctioned forms of psychotherapy that Van Wolferen observes are pressed upon those individuals who "against all odds" nevertheless question their environment:

Japanese clinical treatments for socio-genic psychological disorders, such as Morita and Naikan therapies, suppress the human hankering to establish one's identity as an individual. Patients are led to alter their attitudes toward the outside world, rather than to come to terms with themselves. 'Healing' begins when they empty their minds of personal ways of reasoning and personal emotions.³²

The series conclusion is as insidiously rendered as the "It's not your fault" scene in *Good Will Hunting*³³ where Robin Williams magically hugs away two decades of social inequality and abuse, thus convincing his genius patient to assimilate via corporate job offers, a wealthy girlfriend, and the film's morally sanctioned estrangement from his working-class friends. As manga critic Eiji Ootsuka observes, the entire scene stinks of a "self-realization seminar:" a repetition of the structure of a "rite of passage ritual as a form of psychiatric training...which encompasses a process of 'separation-shift-integration.'"³⁴ "The point of such seminars," says Ootsuka, "is the substitution of the community to which participants are to return to after the seminar, which is why once the participant is removed from the seminar, the 'self-realization' effects disappear."³⁵ Although Ootsuka doubts that Hideki Anno has participated in such a seminar, he believes that the director's unconscious rendering of the seminar structure in his conclusion is a form of cynical proof that the self-actualizing bildungsroman of our era can only be achieved through the structure of the substituted community.³⁶

Like many self-proclaimed 'otaku,' Ootsuka provides an important form of resistance in the refusal to lend credibility to the existence of such a community: "In our age, lacking a small community as a presupposition of rites of passage, the procedure in which only the rite of passage process is simulated seemed wrong to me."³⁷ The false rites of passage in Japanese society, coming of age day, weddings, and job hunting that keep everyone going through life at an orderly, almost seasonal pace, are reflected in Shinji's welcome cere-

mony into the group, and are symptomatic of Benedict Anderson's definition of nationalism as a "deep horizontal comradeship" that is imagined as sovereign precisely because it matured at a point in its history when freedom was a rare and precious ideal.³⁸

Shinji's epiphany in the original series, and its rejection by many of its fans can be seen as two sides of Japan's right-left dilemma. The right offers unquestioning submission to an unforgiving corporate machine, while the left can only offer a comfortable avoidance of it. Neither option, however, offers a solution to the multitude of problems facing a society still very much at odds with the concept of individual autonomy.

Thus, as Ootsuka notes, *Evangelion* reflects the psychological process of hikikomori as an avoidance of social coercion without the alternative of resistance: "While thoroughly evading the pressure that tries to make you a subject (robot) even though one cannot run away anywhere, in that sense, *Evangelion* reflects correctly the psychological process of hikikomori." The revolution will be televised, but only on the bedroom set.

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- Sara K. Ellis recently repatriated after 13 years of Tokyo trains. She now lives behind the Orange curtain where she co-publishes the reverse culture-shock zine, The Bleeder.

DVD Review: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

by Caroline-Isabelle Caron and Stéphane Vermette

CIC: So, did you like it?

SV: Meh... Yes, but it was a bit difficult to follow. I bet it's easier to understand if you've read the book.

Well, there are a couple of scenes from the second book actually, the sequence on the Vagon planet especially.

The one where people get slapped in the face if they think?

Yup.

That part was hilarious. But overall, the movie feels more like a series of very good vignettes, put together with little overall narrative structure tying the tableaux together. Sometimes, I felt a little bit like the guy...

Arthur Dent, played by Martin Freeman?

Whatever. I felt like him sometimes, I didn't understand what was going on either!

It makes sense that it was filmed that way considering the books are somewhat disjointed too. Besides, the books themselves are based on a BBC radio series that Douglas Adams wrote first, which are a series of vignettes too. The whole thing is episodic.

Doesn't necessarily make a very good movie. It's a very funny movie, and some parts are great, but there is not *one* story, *one* plot. I also think it's probably funnier if you're British.

I'm sure it is! The book, and especially the movie, are obvious critiques of bureaucracy in Britain. Again the whole scene on Vogsphere, looking for the right form and having it stamped by the right person. The sheer ineffectiveness of the whole organization!

"I'll handle this. I'm British. I know how to queue!"

Exactly! A house gets destroyed to let pass a new highway, the same way the planet gets destroyed to let pass a new interstellar highway. The stupidity, the inhumanity of the decisions is the same. The blind relentlessness of the administration, be it British or Vagon, is the same.

They take a one-hour lunch break in the middle of an emergency!

Vagon efficiency at its best!

Didn't it make you think of *Red Dwarf*?

No. Not really. Then again, I think that any British science fiction comedy is always going to be compared to *Red Dwarf* in North America. It's so well known, people automatically think of it, whether it's justified or not. I think *Red Dwarf* spoiled it for all other sci-fi comedies from Britain.

You would know. I only know *Red Dwarf*.

Case in point.

It's just that Arthur Dent, who's supposed to be the hero, is a total loser with a little life and his little house and no ambition to go anywhere or explore anything. He turns down Trillian's offer to go to Mozambique. He follows Ford only because he is swept up in the nick of time before Earth is destroyed. He is the ultimate reactive character. The only time he becomes a "take charge" kind of guy is when they have to wait in line on the Vagon planet! He takes charge of the waiting!

I wouldn't say that he's a loser. He does have pretty small preoccupations, especially compared to Trillian's sense of adventure. He is ultimately in the universe only to try to understand the meaning of life the universe and everything. Still he does know what adventure is. He's just scared to go for it. He is very tempted when Trillian wants to go to Mozambique, and he is very attracted to her, but he does not think it's in the stars for him to live this adventure. Still what attracts him in Trillian is her sense of adventure.

Who plays her? I've seen her before.

Zoey Deschanel

Yes! I know! She did a *Frasier* episode I saw last week.

So she's not really well known.

No, but the guy who played Arthur Dent...

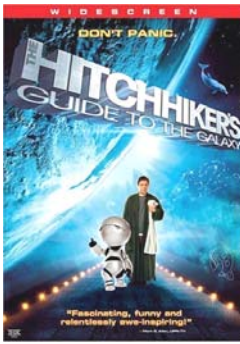
Martin Freeman...

Wasn't he in *Love Actually*?

Yes he was. And in *Shawn of the Dead* too, but it was a small part. He's mostly known for his stuff on British television.

Now the guy who plays the President of the Galaxy is famous.

Sam Rockwell.



DVD Release Date: September, 2005
Starring: Bill Bailey, Anna Chancellor, Warwick Davis, Sam Rockwell, Mos Def & Zooey Deschanel
Director: Garth Jennings
Screenwriters: Douglas Adams & Karey Kirkpatrick, based on material by Douglas Adams
Rated: PG
Studio: Touchstone/Disney
Special Features: Commentary by executive producer and Douglas Adams's colleague Sean Solle; Deleted scenes; Fake deleted scenes; "The Making of The *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*"; Additional Guide Entry; Sing-Along; Set-top game: Marvin's Hangman.

That's his name?

That's what the credits say. Sam Rockwell ... Zaphod Beeblebrox

I've seen him loads of places.

You rented *Matchstick Men* last week. He's in it. Most importantly he plays my favorite, Guy Fleegman on *Galaxy Quest*.

Alan Rickman voices Marvin the robot. Sorry: the Paranoid Android.

And we love him for it. Did you know that we actually get to see the original Marvin from the BBC mini-series?

When?

When they're in line on the Vogon planet. Dent notices him and gives him a weird look. Oh, and the guy who played Dent originally in the series, Simon Jones, plays the "answering machine" on Magrathea.

Did you see all this in the extras?

No. I've read all this online. There is very little trivia in the extras. Oh, and the guy who actually plays Marvin in the costume is the guy who played Willow in the movie of the same name in 1988.

I don't think the movie will be remembered for as long as we remember Willow. I don't think it's that genius. It's just too disjointed. The president is a freak, the robot is suffering from depression, the Vogons are disgusting, but it doesn't add up.

I thought there was a lot of interesting if underhanded critique in the movie. Not only against British governance and bureaucracy, and Americans (since the Zaphod has an American accent) but also on organized religion.

Yeah, about that, I thought it was a little facile. John Malkovich plays... what's his name... Humma Kavula, who decided that since he could

not be president of the galaxy, he was going to be a religious leader. His religion is ridiculous and inane, and no one notices, except maybe Arthur and Trillian, who give each other odds looks. It's just too easy to blast religion like that.

It's a movie.

...

You know that Humma Kavula is the only character that was created for the movie? He's not in the book. Douglas Adams created that character just for the movie.

That's good. Was he involved in the movie all the way?

All the way up to his death. He died in 2002. But it took 24 years for the movie to be made, so Adams and a slew of people worked on the movie. He never saw it made though.

Do you think he knew they were going to have an entire sequence with knitted dolls? That is by far my favorite part of the movie.

You were certainly laughing your butt off when knitted-Dent was barfing yarn.

Hysterically funny!

The whole look of the movie is great.

Yes. The ship, *Heart of Gold*, is really cool! This futuristic look, it seems they deliberately tried to make it look like futuristic 1970s, with spheres and tubes, all white plastic. The costumes are very glam, in the case of Zaphod, pretty glam rock... hair! And yet, Ford and Arthur are dressed normally throughout. Well, Ford is at least, since Dent is in a bathrobe.

I love what they did with the Guide itself.

Me too. Mostly because it gave the movie some structure. The narrator, hmm, Stephen Fry... Really? Wow! Anyway, the narrator of the Guide helps to bring the plot along and explains what

the Guide is in the first place. The movie makes more sense because so much of it relies on the Guide explaining. Otherwise, things would be going way too fast. That's why it's so surprising that the opening sequence with the dolphins is this long. It eats up something like five minutes. No matter how great it is.

It is a great song! Wonderful opening, if a little disconcerting.

I want to listen to the song again. The extras on this DVD include a sing along.

Wait! Look at the screen. That's what I meant about loving what they did with the Guide. The interface is really cool and it feels real enough that the entire DVD menus can use it. It's a seamless colorful design. The entire DVD is like a part of the Guide itself.

I am disappointed that there is only one extra Guide entry on the DVD, about God. It's funny, but I would have hoped for more.

In a way, the end credits are also an entry.

True, but I do feel a little cheated. On top of that, the DVD does not have a booklet, just a simple fact sheet. The Marvin's Hangman game is pretty funny, but after a couple of times, I bet it gets repetitive.

At least there are deleted scenes, and even fake deleted seems! Why only two of those? I

feel cheated for that! There are two audio commentaries too.

We all know how you feel about those!

True, but at least this time, one is actually interesting! By Sean Solle, who is Executive Producer, but also Douglas Adams's friend, and here he talks about what was Adams's vision for the movie. Pretty interesting, since no one can ask Adams what he thinks anymore. I'm going to watch the "Making Of" featurette now.

That's my cue. I hate those things.

I know. Well, thank you for watching it with me. Do you want me to keep the DVD after I'm done with my review for *Some Fantastic*, or should we give it to Anik and Philippe?

Keep it! It's a keeper. The DVD extras may be a little thin, but the movie is funny. I'll watch it again. I'm sure I'll get it more the second time around.

'kay! You're off playing on your computer?

Yep.

Dweeb.

Geek.

42!

Caroline-Isabelle Caron and Stéphane Vermette are married. Their favorite pastimes include loudly discussing Buddhist minutia in crowded city buses.

The Problem of Sodor and its Animatronic Trains

by Cheryl Appleton

So, I've become a connoisseur (actually, a connoisseuse, technically, I guess) of fine vintage *Thomas the Tank Engine and Friends* episodes. My two-year-old son is perfectly obsessed, and pumps his arm and shouts "Choo-choo!" at the top of his lungs repeatedly. I'm happy that he's found a hero other than four colorful Australian nearly middle-aged men dancing and singing with a pirate. But, I still have my concerns:

1. On the *Thomas Comes to Breakfast* DVD, there is a menu option titled "Fun and Games Shed." That just sounds suspect. End of sentence.

2. There is nary an episode where the trains don't crash. They crash into each



other, into lakes, into buildings, off of bridges... During the episode called "Thomas Comes to Breakfast," Thomas doesn't sacht in for some waffles and mimosa, he crashes through a frickin' wall and takes out the breakfast table. "Thomas Comes to Breakfast" my ass; it should be "Thomas Pulverizes Mom's Quiche Lorraine." Even better is Mom's reaction: "You naughty engine! Now I have to cook breakfast all over again!" Not for nuthin', but I think she needs to sort out her priorities. A train has just crashed into the kitchen. I think breakfast is over for today, lady.

3. The trains have faces; faces with expressions. That's just creepy. Of course, I suppose there must be some personification for children to identify with the characters, but I start seeing faces on inanimate objects—I start thinking I need to up my meds.
4. The island's name is Sodor, which if you hadn't noticed sounds scarily like one of the cities in *Lord of the Rings*.

5. These trains are *mean*. They are constantly playing tricks on one another or insulting each other. "Edward is a useless old steam-pot," or "Pop goes the Diesel," or "Percy dresses like a little girl by the light of the full moon and swishes his dress from side to side." Okay, I made that last one up, but I'll bet there's something like it in there somewhere. They do get sent to time-out for being naughty little engines, so I suppose that's something.

There are others, but I can't think of them right now. I suppose they're harmless, and I need to keep in mind that they're not for me—I'm not supposed to understand them. Still, I'm going to be keeping my eye on them... Because I'm almost sure that they're up to no good.

Cheryl Appleton lives in northern Virginia with her son, husband and two cats. She feels it's her duty to sound the alarm about the insidious forces threatening to corrupt our youth.

Graphic Novel Review: *Ultimate Iron Man, Volume 1*

By Hawk

Most readers know Orson Scott Card as the eminent writer of such books as *Ender's Game*, his *Tales of Alvin Maker* series, or his *Homecoming* series. Many readers may not know that in 2005 he teamed up with Marvel Comics and noted comic artist Andy Kubert (1602, *Captain America*, *Ultimate X-Men*) to recreate the character of *Iron Man* for Marvel's Ultimate Universe.

For non-comic fans, Marvel's Ultimate Universe is a reimagining—a revamping, if you will—of their long-term heroes and storylines into something that is accessible to today's readers. You haven't read *X-Men* since the beginning? You got lost when Spiderman was first cloned? You have no clue what people mean when they mention "Unadjectived" X-men? None of these are a problem. Marvel has a whole new "universe" of books where Peter Parker

(a.k.a. Spiderman) is a teenager dealing with teenager angst while trying to deal with his problems; the X-men are the current students at Xavier's School for Gifted Children; etc. These books are supposed to be easy entry for new readers.

Card's *Ultimate Iron Man* is exactly that. While I know some Iron Man history, being a longtime comics reader, the character has never been one that intrigues me. While I have read books that have Iron Man as a member (*Avengers*, *Ultimates*), I have never read a series before where Iron Man was the main character; nor did I ever want to. Orson Scott Card has done a beautiful job, however, of taking a young Antonio (Tony) Stark from pre-conception through his early formative years, creating his own new mythos for the character while retaining much of the original character background.

The book starts before Tony's birth with his father, Howard Stark, enticing his mother, Maria Cerrera (a premier geneticist) to work at Stark Defense Corporation on its new bio-armor project. They eventually marry, and while pregnant with Tony, Maria becomes infected with an engineered virus which causes her to constantly regenerate nerve & brain tissue. It's an incredibly painful process that eventually drives her insane. The infection changes Tony's genetics, causing him to grow "undifferentiated neural tissue" throughout his entire body. This tissue acts "[a]s if his whole body is brain. Greater mental capacity. Quicker. Like no human in history."

The rest of the miniseries covers Tony growing up as a super-smart child. The family is constantly on the run as Stark's rival, Zebediah Stane, wants the information on how to recreate Stark's bio-armor. This bio-armor is a liquid that is rubbed into the skin. It protects one from anything trying to harm the person – so long as it's not worn too long, as it constantly eats away at the outer layer of dermatitis and one does not mind being bright blue. This armor is young Tony's salvation. His skin is too sensitive to be exposed to the outside world and his "weird" powers allow him to constantly regenerate his skin, along with other body parts.

Like in his other series, Card shows he understands how to write young children and creates a believable childhood for a child who is, literally, too smart for his own good with a father who can manage to do anything needed to protect what remains of his family.

That is not to say that there are no shortcomings in Card's writing. It is no secret that he is a devout Mormon, and that shows throughout this series via names (Zebediah, Obadiah) and his lecture in the last issue about the potential evil effects of alcohol on Tony. While it makes sense that it's not best for Tony to drink alcohol due to the nature of his brain tissue, the lecture is more standard rote-ness on the evils of drink than a true reason why Tony—in specific—should never imbibe. It is no surprise to anyone who reads comics that the adult Tony Stark, in both the mainstream and Ultimate universes, was/is an alcoholic. However, I would have preferred Card to tailor Si Ma's (a friend & helper to the family) lecture to something less banal than "it makes you judgment impaired and you can't even tell because you're judgment impaired."

There was one poignant scene where we are shown Tony's regenerative powers due to the loss of part of his foot. Unfortunately, this scene makes no sense as to why half of his foot broke off when he kicked a kidnapper in the groin. We're told that Tony sliced off his own foot; yet, the art and the text do not match up with this idea. It is unclear if the confusion comes from Kubert's art improperly showing the reader Tony's actions or if there was a change as to why Tony partially lost his foot, and the script was not properly changed to reflect this new information.

Unlike "traditional" books, in comics a book cannot be judged on the merits of the storyline alone. The penciler—the one who draws the base art that others then ink & color—is responsible for half the enjoyment of the story. The art must com-

Goats: The Comic Strip *by Jonathan Rosenberg*



goats: the comic strip may 26, 2004 <http://www.goats.com> jon@goats.com ©2004 jonathan rosenberg. all rights reserved

plement the adroitness of a well-written story, and vice-versa. Like anywhere else, Sturgeon's Law comes into play and it is sad that many great comic authors' work cannot be properly appreciated due to the lack of skill of their counterparts.

That, however, is not the case with *Ultimate Iron Man*. Andy Kubert, son of famous comic penciler Joe Kubert & brother to Adam Kubert (another highly skilled comic penciler) is one of the top talents in comics these days, and he most capably pencils this excellent story. Unlike many manga- and anime-influenced American artists, Andy's pencils are crisp, clear and anatomically correct. Even when he is drawing the most outlandish ideas, one can see exactly how real they could be, as Andy's art is grounded in reality.

His facial expressions are superb—easily complementing and conveying Card's minimalist prose to the reader. I especially enjoyed the scene where Tony and James Rhodes (Tony's first real friend close to his own age) are working through their misunderstandings. Rhode's comments "Stop thinking you know anything about me because I'm black!" with Tony's response of "I know that you like watermelon, you dance real funky, and you can slam-dunk a basketball." This prose could easily be taken out of context as racist slurs until one sees the impossibly wide grin on Tony's face conveying his knowledge of the absurdness of the entire situation.

Mark Bagley (*Amazing Spiderman*, *New Warriors*, *Thunderbolts*, *Ultimate Spiderman*) joins Andy Kubert for the last chapter of this trade (issue 5), and the change in style is obvious. While I've always enjoyed Bagley's style, it is disconcerting seeing Ultimate Spiderman art—specifically the facial struc-

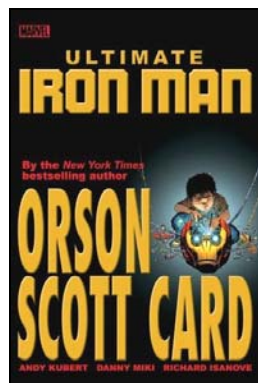
ture of Peter Parker—suddenly appearing on a teenaged Tony Stark. While Bagley is quite talented as an artist, I have noticed a disturbing trend where his young brunette boys all have a close resemblance to the Ultimate version of Peter Parker. As much as I enjoy how he draws Peter, I do not wish all of his characters to look exactly alike. Good variety is the spice of life, and keeps readers from becoming bored and thinking that they have seen everything that's being shown them before.

The trade of *Ultimate Iron Man* includes as a bonus many of Andy's rough pencil drafts for the first chapter of the book as well as for various covers (some of which were never used for the original issues). Additionally, Card's "rough cut" script for *Ultimate Iron Man* #1 is included in the back, and one can see where Card's vision and Andy's skills meshed together so well. There are also two summary pages: one discusses the older Tony Stark as seen in the *Ultimates*, and the other discusses the storylines in the *Ultimates*. Be warned that both summaries have major spoilers for the current storylines running through the *Ultimates* book.

On the whole, I highly recommend this series to anyone, whether they traditionally enjoy comics or not. This series starts from the beginning, with no prior knowledge of the characters being needed (consider that Card started writing the series with no knowledge of the characters), yet with nods to those who have enjoyed the previous characterization of Tony Stark and his circle of friends & family.

Ultimate Iron Man, Volume 1, reprints the first five-issue mini-series of the *Ultimate Iron Man* series. There is a second five-issue mini-series planned for 2006. These issues are not yet listed for shipping on Marvel's website. Marvel has rated this series as "Parental Advisory" which means it is recommended for anyone 15 and over due to more mature themes/graphic imagery. In the case of this book, that would include a small handful of swear words, depictions of loss of body parts, as well as other acts of violence.

Hawk lives in California with her boyfriend where she spends almost too much of her time reading comics. When not fulfilling her addiction, she can be found reading books, hiking, writing adventures for her gaming group, or enjoying non-computer gaming.



Author: Orson Scott Card
Artists: Andy Kubert, Danni Mikki, Richard Isanove
ISBN: 078512151X
Publisher: Marvel Comics
Release date: March, 2005

\$19.99, 136 pages, hardcover

Book Review: *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror # 16*

by Mario Guslandi

If short story anthologies, which are usually mixed bags of styles, themes and atmospheres, represent a constant challenge for the book reviewer, imagine how hard it is to comment upon the annual Stephen Jones' volume collecting what is supposed to be the year's "best." Honored more than once with various genre awards, *Best New Horror*—like its American counterpart, Ellen Datlow's *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*—is bound to always generate debate and recriminations.

Should a book assembled by picking up the best stories initially selected by other book and magazine editors be allowed to enter the final ballot of any literary award (let alone be elected as a winner)? I think not, but the matter is open to discussion. More importantly, can anyone assume the right to judge what is really "the best" based on his own taste, preferences and bias? Again, I think not, no matter how expert and reliable the editor can be. Yet, the tradition goes on, year after year.

So, does the current volume represent the best of 2004 in horror fiction? Hardly.

Oddly enough, Jones seems to privilege stories with no discernible plot and with implausible dialogues (at least for sober people). Moreover, he's known to have the disreputable habit of including stories written by his long-time cronies—never mind if their production in that particular year was good, bad or just fair. Thus, unfailingly, and this volume is no exception, you'll find a piece by the horror icon Ramsey Campbell, whose production is of extremely variable quality, and by the prolific Kim Newman, whose fiction is the literary equivalent of sometimes enjoyable but always disposable pop-art and junk food (no offense meant, you're entitled to like both).

The third, long-time friend of Jones is, fortunately, Michael Marshall Smith, an excellent writer who actually deserves his frequent appearances in *Best New Horror*. The tale included in this edition, "This Is Now," is another beautiful, multilayered piece blending several themes such as male friendship, the pain of growing up, the melancholy of life and, most of all, the horror that sur-

rounds our existence, here represented by a wire fence splitting a forest asunder.

On the other hand one cannot but wonder why Jones, having singled out a group of superb anthologies such as the award-winning *Acquainted With the Night*, John Pelan's *A Walk On the Dark Side*, and the Hot Blood volume *Strange Bedfellows*—all of which contain several outstanding tales displaying good storytelling, original plots, credible dialogues and believable characters—selected a few ordinary, unmemorable stores to be forgotten by the reader as soon as he turns the last page

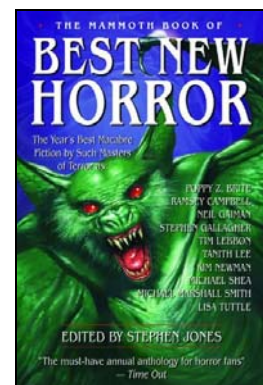
Similarly, after totally ignoring for years the excellent British duo L.H. Maynard & M.P.N. Sims, Jones has finally taken notice of their work after the appearance of their latest collection, *Falling into Heaven*. The book includes many splendid stories, showing a great craftsmanship in dealing with a variety of dark subjects. Incredibly, Jones has selected the weakest story from the collection, "Flour White and Spindle Thin," an ordinary tale about a childless marriage that is just not up to the level of the rest of the book.

Is it just a matter of taste? Perhaps, but personal taste is a very defective yardstick to measure what is definitely "the best."

Having pointed out what's wrong in the book (but I won't mention any other names), I must add that the menu doesn't feature only tasteless food, but also a few delectable dishes able to satisfy anyone's taste. For instance, Neil Gaiman's "Forbidden Brides..."—the opening story in *Best New Hor-*

Editor: Stephen Jones
ISBN: 0786716002
Publisher: Carrol & Graf
Release date: October, 2005

\$13.95, 136 pages,
trade paperback



ror—is a wonderful, delightful mix of gothic clichés imbued with the right dose of humor. Stephen Gallagher provides “Restraint,” a tense, dark tale endowed with a vivid, movie-like character, where an unforgiving father reaches out from beyond the grave to claim his pray.

“Israbel” by Tanith Lee is the fascinating portrait of a seductive female vampire. The time-honored subject is skillfully revisited by the author who contrives to create a veritable femme fatale with uncommon ability. In Tim Lebbon’s “Remnants” a man living a boring life is summoned by an old friend and gets involved in the discovery of a dead city buried under the Ethiopian desert. The powerful storytelling makes the journey into the city a hallucinatory reading experience.

Finally Lisa Tuttle’s extraordinary novelette *My Death*, describes how a woman writer becomes obsessed with the project of writing the biography of an obscure, fellow female author. As the story proceeds the mysterious link between the two women becomes increasingly disquieting. Tuttle’s effective, smooth narrative puts to shame many of the authors featured in this anthology.

But, then, why not buy *My Death* by itself and forget about this one?

Mario Guslandi lives in Milan, Italy and is most likely the only Italian who regularly reads (and reviews) dark fiction in English, he’s written reviews for a number of genre websites such as Emerald City, The Agony Column, Infinity Plus, The SF Site and Horrorworld.

DVD Review: *Death Race 2000 – Special Edition*

By Christopher J. Garcia

I’ve seen thousands of movies. Every year I see a couple of hundred more features and documentaries along with perhaps a thousand short films. There aren’t a lot that I return to on a yearly basis, maybe two dozen. There are the ones that you have to rewatch or you lose all cred (*Casablanca*, *Citizen Kane*, the original *Star Wars* trilogy) and those that you watch again and again to remind yourself of those special moments (*Beach Babes From Beyond*, *Donovan’s Brain*, *Triumph of the Will*) and each of those are films that matter to me. Rarely do the Powers That Be deem it important to re-release one of my all-time classics, but this one they’ve done it.

Death Race 2000.

In the 1970s, Roger Corman was making low-budget films that would do strong box office. Films like *Bloody Mama* were making Corman rich and allowing him to make more films. In 1975, Corman produced *Death Race 2000*, based on the short story “The Racer” by Ib Melchoir, the story of a Trans-American race where the points are tallied not only for speed between check-points, but for killing people of various ages and point values.

Yeah, it’s that kind of movie.

The basic story is that America has become a more-or-less totalitarian state that circles the globe. To keep the masses entertained, Mr. President inaugurated the Death Race; a race from New York to New Los Angeles where spectators are expendable and the ratings are huge. While the death toll isn’t just counted in the bodies of those the racers kill, but in the deaths of the racers as well. Like the gladiators of old, the surviving racers become heroes. The biggest hero of the people is two-time winner Frankenstein, played by David Carradine in a leather jumpsuit with a latex mask. His biggest rival is Machine-Gun Viterbo, played by a pre-Rocky Sylvester Stallone. All the performances are bombastic, but it’s just what this movie requires. There’s gratuitous nudity, great scenes of violence and lots of racing. There’s a scene of a guy playing matador to one of the cars, which is silly and fun, as well as a scene of a woman sacrificing herself to one of the racers. This is not a story of complexity; it is a story that is as obvious as the front end that pokes through one of the casualties.

As the race goes on, we discover that there is an underground resistance which wants to destroy



DVD Release Date: December, 2005
Starring: David Carradine, Simone Griffeth, Sylvester Stallone, Mary Woronov & Roberta Collins
Director: Paul Bartel
Screenwriters: Robert Thom & Charles B. Griffith, based on a story by Ib Melchior
Rated: R
Studio: Walt Disney Video
Special Features: Commentary by Roger Corman and Mary Woronov; *Playing the Game: Looking Back at Death Race 2000*; Original theatrical trailer.

the race and overthrow Mr. President. At the same time, it's apparent that some of the racers have their own agenda.

While the package for the new Special Edition touts it as a Roger Corman film, really it's all about director Paul Bartel. Bartel isn't a household name, but his works like *Eating Raoul* and *Lust in the Dust* are non-subtle works of a near minimalist genius. His handiwork on *Death Race 2000* is evident in every line. Bartel's signature style is there, at times muting the Corman influence and giving the final product a less raging anger. Any depth to *Death Race 2000* is from Bartel, not Melchoir or Corman.

There aren't many special features, but the short documentary on the making of the film is fairly good. While not as special as many of the same kind of featurettes, I did enjoy listening to Corman talk about the process of making the film and especially about the cars they used. There are also interviews with several of the actors, including the highly underrated Martin Kove (*Karate Kid*). There's also the original trailer, though it's not the one I remember seeing at Trailer Park at the 2000 BayCon nor the one featured at the Pyschotronic

Film Festival. I actually liked this one better than either of the other ones I've seen. The commentary is actually rather weak; it's Corman and actress Mary Woronov, and they provide interesting commentary, but there were many people I'd rather have heard from (Bartel, though he passed away in 2000, Stallone, Carradine, cinematographer Tak Fujimoto, or even actor Fred Grady). It's not bad—it just comes off a little insignificant.

There's a certain type of person who would like *Death Race 2000*. If you've watched *Rocky Horror* more than twenty times, you're likely one of them. If you watch early Robert Altman films and can't help but call out the worst of the films that the actors would go on to make, then you must buy *Death Race 2000*. If you prefer *It Came From Hollywood* to *It Happened One Night*, then you already own it so just watch it again.

Christopher J. Garcia edits The Drink Tank on eFanzines.com and is a writer, filmmaker and historian from San Jose, CA. He has had work appear a bunch of places a bunch of times and he is damn proud of it.

Sci-Fi Geeks Versus Football Morons

by Danny Adams

Following Super Bowl Sunday, I thought again about the social disparities between being a sci-fi fan (and I do mean to use Forry's abbreviation there) versus being a Football fan. For example, if I dress in sci-fi garb and stand in a long line to get tickets to a movie every three years or so, people call me childish. But if I

dress up as an animal or go topless and paint my gut different colors and draw eyes around my nipples and wait in long lines to go to a football game every week during the season, I'm called dedicated. (Oddly enough, Sci-Fi Geeks—including me—never complain when women paint their abdomens.)

Or, for instance, how people make fun of the skimpy outfits often worn by women in Sci-Fi movies and call them demeaning while slobbering over their TV sets when the cheerleaders come out wearing miniskirts in the middle of winter.

I finally decided to ponder the contrasts and similarities between the extremes of these two animals: the **Sci-Fi Geeks** and the **Football Morons**. I am, of course, one of the former, so this list may be a wee bit biased. I should state that it's not the Football Fans I have a problem with, just the Morons. Nevertheless, I'm sure there will be enough material to offend practically everybody.

Sci-Fi Geeks love keeping up with science and new technological discoveries and can engage you in knowledgeable conversations about them. **Football Morons** think he who controls the remote control is God, and are proud of the fact that they know lighter fluid helps start fires in their grill.

Sci-Fi Geeks wonder why they can never get any writing done and don't connect this with the fact that they're watching their DVDs of Season 5 of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* for the eighth time. **Football Morons** don't pay much attention to spending six hours in front of the TV on Game Day because they think books are for wimps.

Sci-Fi Geeks often have a hard time finding mates. **Football Morons** forget they have a mate every Game Day unless their base instincts tell them the mate will make them sammiches.

Sci-Fi Geeks know that American beer is bad, and are willing to drink it, but prefer Dr. Pepper. **Football Geeks** don't even realize beer has a taste as long as there's enough of it. Particularly if their mates keep the kegs rolling in.

Sci-Fi Geeks worship actors who make millions of dollars and excuse their heroes' real-life crimes because "The Captain would never do something like that!" **Football Morons** worship players who make millions of dollars and excuse their heroes' real-life crimes just as long as they can still play on Sunday, or if they can't.

Sci-Fi Geeks can relate useless trivia about movies and TV shows that nobody else cares about. **Football Morons** can relate useless statistics about players and games that nobody else cares about.

Sci-Fi Geeks yell at the TV when a Borg ship gets blown up. **Football Morons** yell at the TV and each other when there's a good touchdown, a good play, a bad play, a bad call, a good call, a call that moves the ball, when the ball moves on the field, when the chili-cheese nachos are ready, when the cheerleaders come out on the field, when the cheerleaders leave the field, when somebody belches, when somebody farts, when there's a beer commercial, when somebody farts during a beer commercial, when each Moron shows up, when each Moron leaves, when the phone rings, when They've Got Mail, when the season stats come up, when the sun goes down, when another player is carried off the field, when Marcus Vick gets arrested again, when somebody displays his orange-painted beer belly, when there are good-looking women in shorts at the tailgate parties, and when they can't get to the end of this paragraph because it contained too many big words, like "contained" and "paragraph" and "words."

When the Good Guy wins in a sci-fi movie, the **Sci-Fi Geeks** clap at the end. When the Favorite Team wins a game, the **Football Morons** tear down goalposts, set fire to buildings, turn over cars, and steal DVD players from local electronics stores.

Sci-Fi Geeks think football was better before padding. **Football Morons** think sci-fi was better when the heroes still wore helmets.

Danny Adams was born on a volcanic island in the Aleutians to a clan of passive Inuit, hence his plethora of stories about ill-tempered characters who take out their aggressions in strange and wonderful ways. When editors are not brow-beating him to submit his essays on time, Danny likes to tutor the robot wired to Isaac Asimov's brain, as well as perfecting the clones of Robert A. Heinlein he is sending to Iraq and Afghanistan.

DVD Review: *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride*

by Edna Stumpf

Tim Burton, you get the feeling, has been designated by Hollywood as a “free spirit.” This means he looks and dresses even weirder than the “creative talent.” It also means he has had more than his share of professional tussles. Fortunately, although he may resemble a mouse more than he does a lion, he’s won the lion’s share of those.

We’re the proof. We are the fan-base who feel superior to those who have never heard of *Frankenweenie*. We cried over *Edward Scissorhands*, maintained that the Weirdmeister knew what he was doing when he cast Mr. Mom as *Batman*. We relish Burton’s enthusiasm for black-and-white photography, a retro technology. We loyally ignore the giant misstep of *Planet of the Apes* and focus on the terrific set design of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* so we don’t have to wonder who the hell Johnny Depp was channeling.

We are niche market and proud. And we understand that sometimes Hollywood wins.

Not this time. If ever there was a jewel in Tim Burton’s tiara of weirdness, it’s *Corpse Bride*. This is a romantic comedy-ghost story-period piece: sort of a combination of *My Best Friend’s Wedding* with *Sense and Sensibility*, as re-imagined by the Brothers Grimm. And all the parts are played by *the cutest puppets in the world*. No one else could possibly have created this; only Tim and his crew of nerd-geniuses.

The story is simple. A wealthy fishmonger couple (the Van Dorts) is marrying their son to the daughter of impoverished aristocrats (the Everglots). It’s a barely cosmeticized financial deal, and everyone involved is horrible except for Victor

and Victoria, who are sweet, and who fall in love when left alone for thirty seconds in the music room. Then Victor proceeds to screw up the wedding rehearsal in the worst way and is banished to a handy nearby forest to bone up on his marriage lines, *bone* being the operative word.

As Victor triumphs over a tied tongue, the wedding ring somehow ends up on the skeletal finger of a jilted murder victim (Emily is her name). She, thrilled by this unexpected new chance at matrimony, whisks Victor off to underworld adventures involving singing, dancing, a reunion with his dead dog Scraps and a maggot who talks like Peter Lorre.

Okay, so the story isn’t simple. It’s satisfyingly complicated in a way that Burton projects sometimes aren’t. It extracts delicious jokes from the collision of romantic triangle with horror flick and moments of lyrical poignance as poor Emily—inexplicably both seductive and decaying—realizes that Victor’s rapidly palpitating heart is promised elsewhere. “I thought things were going so well,” she mourns, as her friends the maggot and the Black Widow assure her that she has a great personality.

Pluses: a lovely palette, contrasting the dreary neutrals of the quasi-Victorian society where the breathers live to a brightly colored barroom bash of an afterlife. A lovely Danny Elfman score: high-kicking skeletons doing an expository “Bojangles” number and Victor and Emily sharing a Chopin-esque piano duet as they—almost—achieve a sentimental moment.

Fabulous tech: the puppets, with their trade-



DVD Release Date: December, 2005
Starring: Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter, Emily Watson, Tracey Ullman, Paul Whitehouse & Joanna Lumley
Directors: Tim Burton & Mike Johnson
Screenwriters: John August, Pamela Pettler & Caroline Thompson
Rated: PG
Studio: Warner Home Video
Special Features: *Inside the Two Worlds; Danny Elfman Interprets the Two Worlds; The Animators: The Breath of Life; Tim Burton: Dark vs. Light; Voices from the Underworld; Making Puppets Tick; The Voices Behind the Voice; Corpse Bride pre-production galleries; Theatrical trailer.*

mark anorexic bodies and touchingly expressive faces, justify the how-we-did-it and why-we-love-stop-motion chatter on the DVD extras. Yes, we do care how and why. It's miraculous that stop-motion as a cinematic mode has not been stopped in its tracks, that computer technology has enabled its effects rather than replaced them. And we are charmed by the veteran actors who obviously enjoy sending out their voices while leaving their faces at home. Helena Bonham Carter muses that it's nice to act without worrying about how she looks. Why should she—apart from the fact that she's living with the director—when hundreds of craftspeople are turning out a total of fourteen corpse brides with every gear and hair and swirl of veil in place.

Corpse Bride employs imagery we normally think of as scary. I'm going to take a stand here

and say that it's suitable for children. It's better, in fact, than Disney's rollicking big-budget animations, which rely on seemingly harmless sexual innuendo as a way of co-opting moms and dads. There's no sex in *Bride*, just romance and icky body parts—which kids love and welcome as an antidote to their entirely normal fear of death.

One of the sweetest of several sweet moments in this movie occurs when a little boy stares wide-eyed at what looks like a terrifying invasion from the underworld. Then he runs to embrace his dead granddad.

Give *Corpse Bride* a big hug.

Edna Stumpf was a regular Philadelphia Inquirer book reviewer for over 25 years, often writing about science fiction. She also guest-lectured for science fiction film courses.

Book Review: *A Handbook of American Prayer*

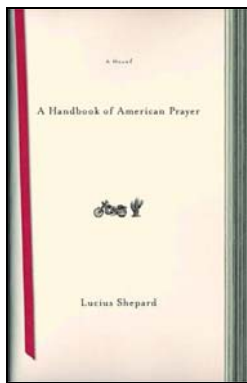
by Matthew Appleton

One of the more fascinating things about reading Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* was that it lacked an examination of the American collective psyche in regards to religion and faith. Mind you, that kind of detail wasn't really necessary given the particulars of the book; after all, the events transpired largely outside the purview of the general populace. However, America seems to give its religious leaders—in particular those who represent the so-called “religious right”—a much greater say in its public affairs than do most other industrialized nations. The popularity of books such as *The Celestine Prophecy*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Last Temptation of Christ*, and the *Left Behind* series only serves to show just how much Americans love overtly religious fiction.

The SF world is no exception. James Blish's *A Case of Conscience*, James Morrow's *Godhead Trilogy* and *Only Begotten Daughter*, the afore-mentioned *American Gods*, and Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* represent just a smattering of the SF that addresses religion and faith. Yet, none of those novels tackled religion and faith in America the way that Lucius Shepard does in his recent novel, *A Handbook of American Prayer*.

Handbook really serves the title of two books: one, the name of Shepard's novel, and two, the name of a book written by Wardlin Scott, Shepard's protagonist. Wardlin is a convicted felon (not unlike Shadow from *American Gods*) who discovers the power of prayer after getting assaulted in a stairwell and left for dead while in prison. After much contemplation, he realizes that some mysterious deity or force answers his prayers because of the manner in which he writes and the fervency with which he makes them. When his methods—which he dubs “prayerstyle”—start working for other inmates as well, Wardlin starts down the path of redemption, love and success.

Actually, love and success only happen after he starts praying for them for himself. He meets his eventual wife through a classified ad, and when he submits a book compiled from the prayers he wrote for himself and others while in prison to a publisher, it becomes a surprise bestseller. Soon, Wardlin finds himself under the glare of the media, at odds with a televangelist, running from his self-proclaimed acolytes and dealing with Darren, an individual who might be the flesh-and-blood incarnation of “The



Author: Lucius Shepard
ISBN: 1560257938
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\$14.95, 263 pages,
trade paperback

Lord of Darkness”—a god/deity he inadvertently created in one of his early prayers and whom he addresses either explicitly or implicitly in almost all the prayers he composes for himself.

These ordeals materialize while Wardlin crosses the country during his first and only book tour. The Wardlinites—those who feel he has created a new religion with prayerstyle—present him with his first obstacle. Wardlin attempts to show them the proper way to compose their prayers, and insists that this is not a new religion but rather a way to properly focus your prayers so that they will be answered. As expected, the Wardlinites ignore his admonition. Furthermore, at an appearance in Chicago he tells them that prayer isn't enough, that you must also work toward your desired goal in order for the prayer to work. While doing so, he starts spouting self-help platitudes and makes the mistake of stating, “You don't need Jesus.” While he quickly clarifies and expands upon that, he has provided his nay-sayers with words to use against him.

That same evening, Wardlin first finds his words used against him while debating Monroe Treat on *Larry King Live*. Almost immediately, Treat, an amalgamation of all the excesses televangelists represent, tries twisting his words and accuses him of turning people away from the Christian faith. However, Treat ultimately overreaches during the verbal sparring and Wardlin ends up humiliating him so badly that most nationally known televangelists denounce him as not representative of their beliefs. It's an interesting and unexpected twist—I know that when I read the “You don't need Jesus” statement I was expecting Ward-

lin to experience something similar to what John Lennon went through after he stated the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. Yet, Shepard decided not to take that route with the story.

Treat's humiliation only steels his resolve to somehow topple Wardlin from the high esteem the public has for him. As his threats increase, Wardlin finds himself again turning to Darren/Lord of Darkness for help. Interestingly, Darren finds it difficult to believe that the two are the same individual. Part of it is because he cannot convince himself that prayerstyle *really* works and is responsible for its success. He also wants desperately to rationalize Darren away as a crazed Wardlinite who is trying to take advantage of him. It doesn't help any that Darren tells Wardlin that Treat has gone mad, will try to kill him, and that the only way to stop Treat is to kill him first.

Ultimately, as Darren predicted, Treat does make such a move. A drug-induced haze through which Wardlin experiences the climatic events makes it hard to discern what exactly is transpiring, but in the end Wardlin decides that Darren and the Lord of Darkness are the same being. However, once the conflict ends, Wardlin finds himself defying the Lord of Darkness and is left to ponder the fact that he might have angered the very being who answered all his prayers:

“The detonation shocked my heart. I had heartily offended a god in whom I only believed at times such as these, and the fear that there would be spiritual consequences for what I had done stabbed into me, and I was certain it left a single black-red droplet to seed a tumor in my flesh that could never be excised... Or maybe not.” (p. 253)

It's not the only religious contemplation Wardlin experiences at the end of the novel. While he is slow in coming to the realization, Wardlin eventually notices that he only turns to the Lord of Darkness when in dire need, such as when he's in jail or when his life is on the line, thus recalling the old adage that there are no atheists in prison or in foxholes.

Wardlin's contemplation over angering the Lord of Darkness is also noteworthy for the poetics behind the language he employs in many of his prayers

throughout the book. In other words, the character of the person for whom Wardlin writes the prayer dictates its style. When writing a prayer for a fellow inmate, the first line, “The pig-nosed daughter of Genevieve Sharp hates me,” almost reeks of the bluntness and straightforwardness of his feelings. When writing a prayer for increased business for an insurance salesman, Wardlin supplies a prayer filled with technical jargon and enough clauses to cover just about any loophole that might allow success to slip away. Only when in contemplation or writing a prayer for himself does Wardlin use language such as “a single black-red droplet to seed a tumor.”

Handbook also works as meditation on how Americans generally go about their prayer. In almost every instance where we see the text of a prayer—which are scattered throughout the novel—the desires are almost universally the same: love, (monetary) success and revenge. The fact that Wardlin states very early in the novel that we’re all sociopaths of a sort makes the universality of the those desires somewhat disturbing. While Wardlin makes the point of stating that prayerstyle is a selfish act, it’s interesting to see that we see no examples of anyone praying to help another individual. Along the way we touch upon the issue of personal faith and how hard it is for some to maintain in a world that demands rationality. On the flip side, through the Wardlinites, Shepard also shows how easy it is for some to believe in a new system of faith and how much people want to believe in something greater.

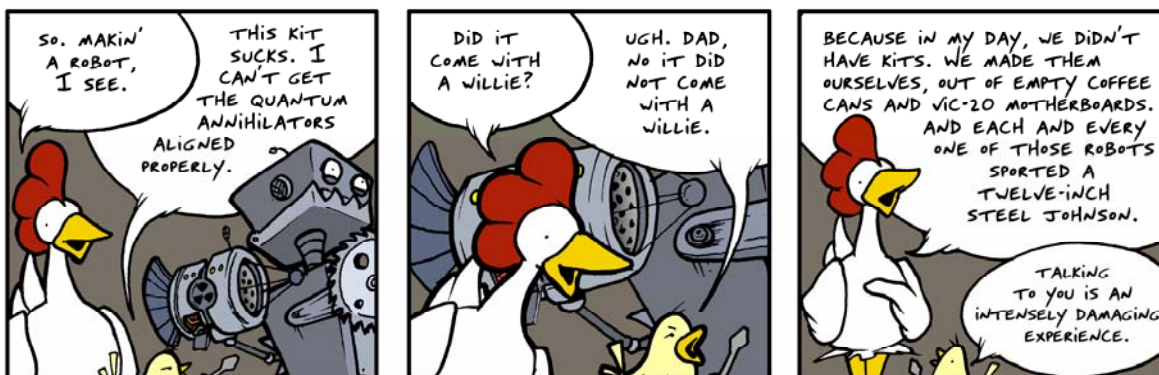
While Shepard presents the religious aspects of Wardlin’s story—told in the first person—with a certain gravitas, he does inject a twisted sense of

humor into the novel. For instance, at one point on the book tour, Wardlin gets the chance to meet Roger Ebert, and the first thing he wants to do is punch him out for recommending so many terrible movies while he marked time in prison. Shepard also provides an in-joke for the SF crowd: after the major conflicts come to their conclusion and Wardlin tries to progress to the next stage of his life, he wryly notes, “I was revered, and, yea, virtually worshipped at a thousand Web site shrines. L. Ron Hubbard was not so loved.” Unfortunately, Tom Cruise’s recent antics and very vocal praise for Scientology and its methods render rather implausible a rather sly anecdote mentioning him.

Brush with celebrity status and all its implications aside, it’s hard not to sympathize with Wardlin Scott as his journey ends. He’s a man who has made mistakes and ultimately wishes for a better life. When he achieves those goals after thoughtful prayer, he’s left pondering how much of the success is due to his own efforts and how much to the prayer. He must come to terms with what he believes and find his own path through moral conflicts that provide no easy solution. While Gaiman wrote about a group of gods attempting to maintain or expand their domain over the Earth, Shepard has written a much more personal introspection regarding faith in America—one that anyone who has struggled with matters of faith can relate to.

Matthew Appleton is the editor of Some Fantastic and is happy with the peace he’s made with the supernatural entities (or lack thereof) that guide and influence events on Earth and in his own life.

Goats: The Comic Strip by Jonathan Rosenberg



goats: the comic strip jan. 26, 2004 <http://www.goats.com> jon@goats.com ©2004 jonathan rosenberg. all rights reserved

DVD Review: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* – Two-Disc Deluxe Edition

by Richard Fuller

To genius or not to genius seems to be the aesthetic subtext of Tim Burton, filmmaker from another galaxy, as he makes each of his movies. They cause much turmoil in our solar system. My wife, a/k/a Ms. Venus, often collides with me, Mr. Mars, over those pictures. She likes Burton's debut movie, *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* (1985), while I consider it a small wheeze.

The first Burton film I saw was *Beetlejuice* (1988), his second feature-length picture. (Sometimes that title is two words!) I vowed from then on to see *every* movie ever directed by this quirky genius. Ms. Venus also loves it.

Okay, let's get the Mars-Venus donnybrook crossed. We both like *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992), although I think Michael Keaton, awesome as Beetlejuice, is miscast as Bruce Wayne/Batman. Huge Keaton disagreement with Ms. Venus. She likes *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) while I wonder (snicker-snicker) how he goes to the bathroom without scissoring himself into a her. Ms. V. likes *Ed Wood* (1994). I think it's too long and has no style/tone. We both love *Mars Attacks!* (1996), both slept through *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) and both skipped the no-need-to-exist remake *Planet of the Apes* (2001). She claims to like *Big Fish* (2003) but can't remember it. I do, alas.

Burton usually attaches himself, like an aesthetic Siamese Twin, to genius film composer Danny Elfman. This piece of Simesian historical movie data intrigues me: *Beetlejuice* was shown to an audience without Elfman's wonderfully quirky music and *no one liked the picture!* Then it was shown to another audience *with* the music and...*everyone loved it!* I went back and replayed the movie, turning the sound down, and tried to imagine not liking the picture. Im-poss-a-bull! The visuals are enchanting, seductive and woo me right into a picture made—and, yes, scored by a genius when you turn the sound back up—by a genius.

The point: I loved the movie *with* the music and could never de-compose that experience. The

next point: movies are made by armies of talent with the director as the general. Dare I even whisper it? *Whispering*: The DVD extras about armies making *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) are more interesting than the movie.

Why? Most moviegoers, whether or not they admit it to others, ask themselves (about 10 or 15 minutes into a picture): Do I want to spend time with these characters?

Mind, it's not a matter of liking the characters. Harry Lime (Orson Welles best movie performance?) in *The Third Man* is a monster but he seduces every viewer with about 10 minutes screen time. Many villains swipe their movies because the good guy too often is boring, like Joseph Cotten's Holly Martins in *The Third Man*.

You first meet the movie title's Chocolate Factory (the most intriguing, if kind of baddish, character in the picture) during the credits (4 minutes 12 seconds) as five golden tickets are packed into candy bars and then shipped off to London, New York, Cairo and Tokyo. Those tickets "invite" the winners to visit the factory. As the credits end, the visuals are bleak with bits of snow. You see a little boy standing on a sidewalk.

A voiceover informs: "This is the story of an ordinary boy named Charlie Bucket." Is that last name supposed to be a nudge-nudge wink-wink? Truth? From the voiceover, I couldn't tell what the kid's last name was; I got the names from IMDB.com.

Ordinary? Charlie is played by Freddie Highmore, one of the best kid actors in the history of movies. His collapsing German Expressionist house, with tilts everywhere, might make you think of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919). His parents are lovable and poor, his four grandparents all sleeping in the same bed, two at either end, legs aimed toward the middle. Think Charles Dickens—nudge-nudge wink-wink. Are we in England? Charlie finds an American 10-dollar-bill in the snow. America, then? Call it Fable Town, Anywhere. Charlie's father works in a



DVD Release Date: November, 2005
Starring: Johnny Deep, Freddie Highmore, David Kelley, Helena Bonham Carter, Deep Roy, Christopher Lee & Julia Winter
Director: Tim Burton
Screenwriter: John August, based on a book by Roald Dahl
Rated: PG
Studio: Warner Home Video
Special Features: *The Fantastic Mr. Dahl*; Challenges: Oompa-Loompa Dance Machine, The Inventing Machine, The Bad Nut, Search for the Golden Ticket; *Attack of the Squirrels*; Five making-of featurettes; *Becoming Oompa-Loompa*; Pack of five limited-edition trading cards.

toothpaste factory but is fired when a robotic device *he* invented does his job in place of him. This family hardly has enough to eat. And that factory is just up a longish street of row houses? Long ago, one of Charlie's grandfathers, Grandpa Joe (the great David Kelly), worked in the factory. Laid off when it was closed.

Still, Charlie is the buckiest—uh, luckiest boy in the entire world. "He just didn't know it yet," Voiceover promises. And we're hardly five minutes in. Gosh, have you already guessed he'll win a golden ticket? But Charlie/Freddie's sweet loveliness won't carry this movie. *Any* movie. Sweetness wears out in about nine minutes. Movies need dramatic conflict to keep audiences in their seats.

Meet four golden ticket winners who are so obnoxious you want them... dead? In its weird way, this movie *does* "kill" them off.

1. **Augustus Gloop** (Philip Wiegratz), a big-little German fatty who's so relentless about ramming food into his mouth (think Homer Simpson... *how I'd rather be with him!*) that much of it smears over his Porky Pig face. He's even taken a bite out of his golden ticket. Is Gloop funny? Maybe to little oinky boys who love fart jokes—and love to hate. (For the last, see number four below.)
2. **Veruca Salt** (Julia Winter). Her super-rich English father (James Fox) has bought thousands of chocolate bars so his spoiled brat daughter will win a golden ticket. "Where's my golden

ticket?" brat demands. "I want my golden ticket!" When he finally hands it to her, she says, "Daddy? I want another pony." What other kid on this planet would want to spend *any* time with this totally self-centered creep other than...

3. **Violet Beauregarde** (AnnaSophia Robb) who loves to kick others for sport and has the trophies to prove it. She also chews gum for months to win, win, *win!* An old woman watching Violet on TV says, "What a beastly girl." Too kind, geezer lady!
4. **Mike Teavee** (Jordan Fry) is a violent little boy who watches violent games on TV as he shoots and "kills" characters and screams, "Die, die, die!" Notice his nudge-nudge wink-wink last name.

Mike focuses one's negative feelings about these four petit monsters. But would you want to take your wee ones to a movie that evokes hatred for this quartet of cretins?

In a slithery, sinister way it gets worse. The person who's given out those tickets will also guide the kids and one parent each (wonderful Grandpa Joe with Charlie) through the factory. He's owner Willy Wonka (Johnny Depp) and he would make Sigmund Freud whoop. Willy veils his sickness behind teeth so glisteningly fake and smiling insincerely that only a dentist, or casting director, would admire them.

Turns out his father—yes, a dentist!—was Dr. Wonka (played by the King of Creepy, Christo-

pher Lee), who forced his young son wear a metallic face mask and braces that would make the Man in the Iron Mask feel free. The evil doctor wouldn't allow his kid to eat candy. So of course the kid grows up into a candy addict and starts that factory. Then, he closes it when spies steal his candy formulas and sell them to competitors. And *then* he hires these very strange little people all named Oompa Loompa (and all played by Deep Roy) to work his factory. One is them is his therapist. Siggie Oompa Loompa?

Dare I say it? Well, *whisper*: the first time I watched this DVD, I wanted either to fast-forward through it or shut it down. Period. This is a Tim Burton miss that cost about \$150,000,000 to make!

Maybe I need Sigmund Freud: When I watched the second disc with extras about the making of this torturous viewing, I wanted to see the movie!

Consider the enchanting nine-plus minute *Attack of the Squirrels* about how human beings trained those seductive little critters with bushy tails to line up in front of trays, open walnuts, *not* eat the fake nuts inside but drop them into a tray. And *finally*, bless 'em, attack that brat Veruca when she invades their space and Willy Wonka shouts after her, "Don't touch that squirrel's nuts!" Yeah, a real family flick. The bushies all came from squirrel rescues in England. Blimey, they don't talk while that limey brat won't shut up! Until those blessed squirrels leap up on her and drag her to a hole that leads to a garbage dump, the flick's form of "killing" her. (Note: some of the bushies are CGI.)

Fantastic Mr. Dahl is about the author of children's books and the one made into a movie by Tim Burton. We're told that Dahl had a folk-tale morality with a black-and-white sense of good and evil. He liked to scare wee ones, including his relatives. His onscreen children are smiley as they read from his tales. What a child wants and deserves is a parent who's sparky. I've never read anything by Dahl, never will.

Becoming Oompa-Loompa Note: the IMDB.com source does not include a hyphen in that name. All of these characters are played by Deep Roy, who seems less than four feet tall and is from Nairobi, Kenya. "It was a real cool idea," says Roy

of the picture. "I had to learn how to sing and dance," he says, adding, "I can't hold a tune."

Roy learned how to sing and dance well but... I enjoyed this brief documentary a lot more than any of those numbers, which seemed mechanically—and predictably, after the first one—attached to the four "disappearances." Elfman's music does not genius.

The best "character" is the factory. As Tim Burton notes, entering the factory where you see the magical chocolate waterfall is like entering Oz and its seductive world of color. The enchanting documentary about its creation makes you want to see the movie!

Where, then, did things go wrong? I suspect with the book. Burton said he and his crew tried to "be as true to the book as we could be." And include those four torture-to-spend-time-with monsters? Actress AnnaSophia Robb said of her kick-boxer creep, "It's fun to play a mean person." But not spend much time with in a movie, kiddo.

Burton released two films in 2005. The other is a most quirky little masterpiece called *Time Burton's Corpse Bride* which my wife, Ms. Venus, picked first. I picked second... and ended up last! I'm suing *my* bride for a divorce and demanding custody of *Corpse Bride*. I've ordered a coffin that sleeps two. Ex-bride will get full-time custody of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Which she doesn't like! Plus lots of pimple cream for all that candy.

Richard Fuller was Philadelphia Magazine's film critic for over twenty years. He was The Philadelphia Inquirer's book columnist and reviewer for over thirty years. He also taught film and review-writing courses at several universities.



Book Review: *Futureshocks*

by Christopher J. Garcia

"The best possible future is one that is far more similar to the present than it is dissimilar." — Chris Garcia at some Con or another in 2005

Lou Anders is a good man. He edited *Live Without A Net* and now he's dropped on us *Future-shocks*, a wonderful collection of writers taking a swing at Tofler's theory of future shock; that unease caused by the continuing change in the level of technology. It's a great field to let some of the best minds in speculative fiction run wild. While not all the stories work for me, most of them are strong and all of them had me thinking.

Let me start off with one thing: I'm a fiscal conservative/social liberal. With that view, many of the stories seem far too extreme and not realistic to my eyes. The one that seemed to go further into the realm of no-freakin' way was "Absalom's Mother" by Louise Marley. It's basically a story where the US becomes so paranoid that they enlist even young children to become serious warriors in the fight against those famous "enemies of America." The story really deals with protesting mothers who offer themselves in the place of their children. It's one of those stories that just didn't work for me despite being easily the most powerfully written story in the work.

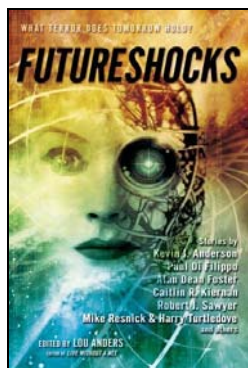
Two of my favorite writers are in the mix too. Alexander Irvine (*A Scattering of Jades*) gives us another story that takes our current administration to the extreme in "Homosexuals Damned, Film at

Eleven." It's not the best story in the collection, though it's written with the typical Irvine style, but the point is hammered home strongly. Howard Hendrix gives us "All's Well at World's End," a tale of a world on the edge. It felt very much like the best of the Cold War-era SF, only this one is deeper in the abstract way the real world deals with itself when faced with annihilation. It's not quite at the level of many of Howard's work, but it's still interesting and has all the things that I love about a Hendrix story.

Another favorite author that delivers a story that rocks us around the bend is Paul di Filippo's "Shuteye For the Timebroker." It's a story that looks at a world where sleep can be stopped... if you can afford the anti-sleep drugs. The main character, Cedric Swann, loses everything and *has* to sleep. It's a hilarious way to open the anthology and it combines all of those things that you expect from Paul. "The Engines of Arcadia" by Sean McMullen might be the best story for me: a tale that skewers the politically-correct vegetarian way of life. It's a story of hedonism when a traveler from a Totalitarian regime flees and lands in a pleasure-first Utopia. Yeah, it felt slightly played, but the writing and McMullen's take on the world were both highly entertaining.

Oddly, the authors that I don't regularly enjoy, Kevin J. Anderson, Alan Dean Foster and Robert Metzger, all put out stories that didn't annoy me at all. In fact, Anderson's "Job Qualifications" is a strong story with a lot to like about it. Foster's "The Man Who Knew Too Much" is good too, and God help me I never thought I'd say that. It's a story of knowledge addiction in a world where you can beam books. It felt a lot like a Lenny Bruce set in his post-Court Case days: almost tragicomic and it's obvious that Foster has a handle on what makes one an addict. "The Cartesian Theater" by Robert Charles Wilson is great story, and I didn't even think that I was reading a Wilson story for a second.

There's so much here to enjoy, even when things aren't making contact with every swing. Robert J. Sawyer's "Flashes" is very good, but it



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certainly falls apart a bit towards the end. Chris Roberson's "Contagion" almost pulls it all the way off with a tale of people being used as compensated virus carriers. The only way it falls short is that it seems to start with an idea that's so strong and takes it in a direction that I wasn't into.

The best of the stories was from Mike Resnick and Harry Turtledove, a pair of writers for whom I have nothing but respect. "Before the Beginning" is probably the least serious take in the entire anthology. In the Resnick-Turtledove world, they've developed a 'time-viewer' that allows cops to look at various points in history, nominally to solve crimes. They go and debunk all the things that I think are awesome (UFOs for example) and scientists figure out that they can look at a period before Creation, which would mean that they should

be able to see the face of the Creator. Well, it doesn't work. It's a fun little story, a good laugh and a more entertaining story than anything else in the anthology.

The stories here all hang together in a way that makes you think. While things start out fast, they do weigh a bit, especially when the middle of the anthology gets a little overly-political for me, especially following the endlessly amusing Resnick-Turtledove opus. It ends well too, which left me with a good feeling. I'd say that all even the weakest story in *Futureshocks* is stronger than anything I read in any of the big fiction mags. I'd say that your enjoyment will at least partly depend on your political persuasion, but there's nothing but good writing here.

Book Review: *Silver Screen*

by *Chris Elliot*

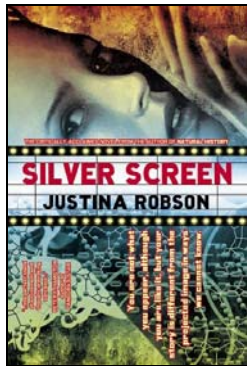
The creeping suspicion that the tools and machines we humans create might one day look in the metaphorical mirror and decide that they're no longer quite as interested as before in blindly following the commands of their "carbon-based life-form" overlords is about as basic and primal a plot device as one is likely to find in science fiction. Its iterations are manifold in the history of the genre (*Metropolis*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Blade Runner*, to name just a few paradigmatic examples off the top of my head—quantities more could be listed). It's well-traveled territory, and it's safe to say that the number of available unique plot-lines is somewhat limited at this point.

It's into this cluttered sub-genre of science fiction that Justina Robson leads us in her novel, *Silver Screen*. Set in a near future Earth in which huge transnational corporations, through their incredibly advanced and powerful AIs, run much of the day-to-day operations of the world—building infrastructure, schooling children, deciding who or what will live or continue to exist—Robson unwinds a story that is intensely personal and politically and philosophically interesting.

The story centers around the protagonist and narrator, Anjuli O'Connell, introverted and over-

weight prodigy with a flawless photographic memory who we find at the beginning of the novel ensconced in a corporate-owned boarding school—really a breeding ground for future corporate employees—with equally brilliant children. It's here at the corporate boarding school that the reader is introduced to another important character, the at once destructive and brilliant Roy Croft. As well, the reader is introduced—in the form of a protracted school yard intellectual rumble between Roy and several upper-classmen—to some of the larger questions at play in the novel: What defines "life"? Are we (humans) the masters of our fate or subject to the will of some greater power? Can the tools we make (for example, AIs) achieve sentience and is that a good thing?

Silver Screen quickly moves forward from this brief back-history to its near-future present. Anjuli—now employed as an artificial intelligence psychologist of sorts at the mega transnational corporation, OptiNet—monitors and communicates with OptiNet's massively complex AI, 901 (so named because it's the 901st progressively more advanced and self-sufficient version of the original AI). Here in the second chapter, Robson, in a rush of sudden but deftly introduced plot



Author: Justina Robson
ISBN: 1591023386
Publisher: Pyr
Release date: October, 2005
(originally © 1999)

\$15.00, 383 pages,
trade paperback

thickeners, firmly places the story on its narrative tracks. Roy, now Anjuli's OptiNet colleague and professed AI liberationist, commits suicide, perhaps in the interest of setting in motion events that might lead to political recognition of, and the eventual granting of traditionally human rights to, AIs. 901, it is discovered, may have the potential and the will to act "erratically" (i.e., on its own behalf and in its own self-interest). Anjuli displays a special, almost human, closeness in her interactions and communications with 901 that hint at the fact that even if she doesn't consciously consider 901 sentient, she nonetheless unconsciously treats it as a sentient being. Finally, OptiNet's coldly practical corporate drive for self-preservation at any and all costs begins to hover at the edges of the action as a very real threat. Throughout the rest of the novel, the ramifications of these several plot elements interweave together forming a series of progressively more fraught and dangerous complications for Anjuli as she struggles not only to understand Roy's death (either to help 901 achieve a some kind of freedom from OptiNet or as the whim of a self-absorbed genius, perhaps) but also to unravel the true nature of 901 and, maybe, to help it and herself escape OptiNet's merciless control.

This is to give away nothing particularly secret or sensitive in terms of the story or its narrative trajectory. Discovering the details of the case, as it were, serve largely in *Silver Screen* as the necessary bases for following Anjuli along on her trek of personal discovery and self-awareness. Why did Roy do what he did? Is 901 self-aware? What will OptiNet do? Robson is at her best here working on this subjective terrain. Told almost

completely from Anjuli's first-person perspective (with only one short chapter oddly devoted to another character's perspective), Robson manages to infuse *Silver Screen* with a poignant and very real feeling of humaneness. Anjuli is a satisfyingly flawed person: subject to her own personal misgivings about herself, over-eating to compensate for any number of typical and normal human emotional and intellectual problems. She's weighed-down with a host of personal concerns with which readers can empathize at a basic day-to-day level of existence. Robson seems intent on showing the world may be controlled by corporations, friends may play insanely fatal end games with their own lives, and AIs may be on the verge of making the leap to sentience, but the singularly individual and subjective quality of our interaction with this new landscape is largely unchanged from our own present.

Robson displays a comfortable ease writing through this personal voice and there's real pleasure to be had in simply following along on Anjuli's shoulder, listening to her mediate the events circling around (and threatening to engulf) her through the lens of her own personal history and perspective on the world. Thus, sequences of technical exposition—as when Robson must coherently lay out how Anjuli can mechanically share the mental space of her on-again/off-again lover, Augustine, while he himself rides within an "intelligent" cybernetic suit of body armor (a descriptive task which is no small feat to accomplish)—become not only opportunities to pleasantly marvel at Robson's talent for rendering interesting science fictional concepts, but also moments of deeply affecting character development. In the example here, we learn as much about the depths of misunderstanding between Anjuli and Augustine, and their failure to understand or really connect with each other, as we do about the technical manner in which this very personal shared consciousness is affected.

While this narrative technique produces some of the most powerful moments in the *Silver Screen*, it also creates some side-effects which Robson seems not quite capable of, or not quite interested enough in, ameliorating. For all the personal qualities to the story, there are still the loose ends to be

dealt with regarding 901 and its evolution (or not) to consciousness and the ancillary mystery of sorts concerning Roy's death and his ultimate fate, both of which require resolving by story's end. Caught up in the intricate description of Anjuli's internal struggle to deal with the events happening around her, Robson appears a bit lost as to how to perform this additional closure in as equally satisfying a fashion. Consequently, the last chapter of the novel, which is largely about tying up these loose ends seems tacked on, an afterthought which while offering a very clear and definite resolution to at least one half of the 901 and Roy story, does so in an almost deus ex machine fashion.

Also a little frustrating is Robson's use of cinematic references throughout the novel. The title, *Silver Screen*, signals to the reader from the very opening of the front cover of this book, that film (films themselves, the visual consumption of film, film stars, whatever) will hold some sort of centrally important symbolic function in the action that unfolds. And, for her part, Robson does explicitly drop-in references to certain films during the course of the novel—901 frequently uses a holographic technology to take on the personas of characters from famous films as one method to communicate with Anjuli; and cinema itself, the very act of watching a film, is represented in several important sequences in the novel. But the overall import of these moments does not achieve

any sort of symbolic critical mass. The references are interesting, 901's choices of what characters to inhabit do add nuance to those particular sequences in the novel in which they occur, but the overall effect does not cause one to pause and say, "Oh, my understanding of this novel has been qualitatively altered by these cinematic references." And one expects a reaction somewhere along those lines when one picks up a book titled *Silver Screen*.

But those are really only minor quibbles in an otherwise fine science fiction ride. Robson has managed in *Silver Screen* to take a well-explored, tried-and-true sub-genre of SF and reinterpret it through a personal landscape (Anjuli's) that is nuanced and three-dimensional and ultimately quite worth sharing. This is a novel that will strongly appeal to those readers of science fiction (and I'm one of them) who are as interested in fully imagined and rendered inner-spaces (i.e., characters' minds) as they are with fully imagined and rendered science fictional landscapes. And, if you like the latter more than the former of those two, you'll probably enjoy *Silver Screen* just as well.

Chris Elliot has written film and television reviews for Popmatters.com. He currently lives in Northern Virginia with his ever increasing collection of anime soundtracks.

DVD Review: *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*

by Caroline-Isabelle Caron

Cheese-obsessed, über-Englishman Wallace lives with his completely devoted and Tolstoy-reading dog Gromit. Together they build and test the most ridiculous inventions to make their lives easier, usually with unfortunate results. The plasticene world of Wallace and Gromit is set in a small-town in the North of England, where jobs and entertainment are scarce. Thankfully, Wallace and Gromit are there to entertain us.

There is no denying it: I am a huge Wallace & Gromit fan. I fell in love with the human-canine team when I first saw the 30-minute stop-motion

short "A Grand Day Out" on CBC television in 1990. That dog! That guy! Is the moon really made of cheese? This insane product of writer/director Nick Park's twisted mind stole my heart on the spot. When I learned that it had taken Park over five years to make, in his basement, molding plasticene, shooting a frame of film at a time, I was blown away. He had only been able to fully finish it when he joined Aardman Animations in 1985, to finally release it in 1989. That year, it was nominated for an Academy Award for best short. Why it did not win it is a mystery on which I still pon-

der. Of course, when I saw his next short, “The Wrong Trousers,” in 1993, I was thrilled. With hardly any dialogue, this short created one of the best movie villains ever devised: a penguin! His third short, “A Close Shave,” came out in 1995 and did not disappoint. There may not have been penguins in that one, but the sheep were worth it. So cute! So hysterically funny! Both “Trousers” and “Shave” deservedly won the Oscar for best short.

Suffice it to say that I loved *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*. As the first feature-length Wallace & Gromit, it is a resounding success. It is a fun, fun, fun movie. The execution is excellent. The jokes are well-timed and effective, and the film deserved the Oscar for Best Animated feature it won in 2005. Park, who co-directed with Steve Box and co-wrote with Mark Burton and Bob Baker, did a wonderful job. Wallace is as cracked as ever and Gromit is ever the sane and loyal one. Veteran British actor Peter Sallis reprises his role as Wallace’s voice with aplomb.

Wallace and Gromit have not changed much since we last saw them. Wallace did gain a few pounds from too much cheese and crackers, so Gromit has put him on a vegetarian diet. The pair converted their business from window washing to humane and safe pest control (their business is now known as Anti-Pesto), and now their neighbors call upon them to guard their vegetables in preparation for the annual Giant Vegetable Competition at Tottington Hall. Having once saved sheep from certain demise, it is now the prize-winning produce of the town of Wigan they must protect. The town’s gardens are being ravaged nightly by a mysterious giant creature. A monster; the legendary Were-Rabbit.

Unlike the previous shorts, this movie features a host of new characters: citizens of the town that interact with the pair. Wigan is not a closed universe anymore; Wallace has neighbors, and he has clients. In the face of vegetable destruction, the town meets at the local church. *The Curse of the*

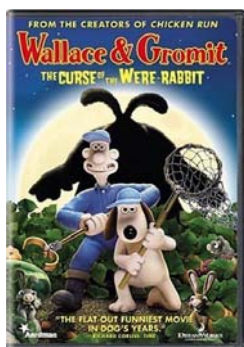
Were-Rabbit presents a complex social environment—an important change from what we are used to seeing in this franchise as it changes the entire dynamic and pace of story. Wallace and Gromit are not alone in this adventure, and for the first time their foe is a human being. Lord Victor Quartermaine (voiced by Ralph Fiennes), hunter extraordinaire, and his faithful dog Phillip, are intent on killing all the rabbits on the grounds of Tottington Hall and putting a definitive end to the ravages of the Were-Rabbit. He is equally intent on wooing Lady Campanula Tottington (“Totty” for her friends, and voiced by Helena Bonham Carter) and capturing her fortune. However, she would rather let the more humane Anti-Pesto deal with these threats. Of course, the appearance of the Were-Rabbit is entirely Wallace’s fault.



One of the main characteristics of Wallace and Gromit films is their obvious homage to 1940s and 1950s genre movies. “A Grand Day Out” recalled a slew of mad scientists and space adventures. “The Wrong Trousers” and “A Close Shave” obviously copied mystery movies and classic capers. This time, it is mid-century mon-

ster and horror films that Nick Park and Steve Box focus on. From the opening credits to the special effects, including some CGI, we are reminded of those movies shown on early Sunday morning television. The excellent audio-commentary—excellent because neither Park nor Box speak over the important scenes and punch lines—explains the exact process of the construction and filming of the movie, the writing and tightening of the script, and the elaboration of the plot.

What becomes rapidly clear is that, unlike the first three shorts, this feature is the result of a very large team. Since the 1990s, Aardman Animations has grown to become a major production company, specializing in advertising and various animated shorts. There are over a dozen departments, including one entirely devoted to modeling which



DVD Release Date: February, 2006
Starring: Peter Sallis, Ralph Fiennes, Helena Bonham Carter, Peter Kay & Nicholas Smith
Directors: Steve Box & Nick Park
Screenwriter: Bob Baker, Steve Box & Mark Burton
Rated: G
Studio: Dreamworks Video
Special Features: Commentary by Steve Box & Nick Park; "How To Build a Bunny;" "Stage Fright," with optional commentary; Cracking Contraptions: "The Snoozatron," "The 525 CrackerVac" & "Shopper 13;" Deleted scenes with optional commentary; "Behind the scenes of *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*," "How Wallace & Gromit Went to Hollywood;" Production art/photo gallery; Games; & Printables.

houses hundreds of employees, from set and mat painters to plasticene modelers. For the making of *Were-Rabbit*, some modelers even specialized in making only vegetables for two whole years. Aardman's development is mostly due to its association with Dreamworks. The American major now distributes most of Aardman's production and has a five-feature deal with the British animators. *Were-Rabbit* is the second of these films. The first, *Chicken Run* (2000), is purported to be the most successful animated feature ever made. The expertise and techniques developed for this "not-a-chick-flick" were easily transferred to the Wallace and Gromit universe, though not without some practice first.

In 2002, realizing that it had been away from the pair for quite some time, Aardman set forth in the creation of ten three-minute Wallace and Gromit shorts as a warm-up to the feature, entitled Cracking Contraptions. These hilarious clips presenting Wallace's idiotic inventions were shown randomly throughout the BBC1 schedule during the 2002-03 festive season. Sadly, only three of the ten shorts are found on the *Were-Rabbit* DVD, though "The Snoozatron" (the funniest by far) is included. It will make me snicker at odd moments for months ahead; a must-see if there ever was one! The Cracking Contraptions project also aimed at making the creative work at Aardman more collaborative, giving more autonomy to animators in script and scene creation, for instance. This too was transferred to the feature project.

The result is a film that is highly enjoyable and that contains enough levels for all family

members to roll off the floor laughing. The best scenes are those featuring the rabbits themselves, especially those captured by Wallace and Gromit and housed in their basement. These scenes border on genius. They are the best in construction and in composition and easily equal those featuring the sheep in "Trousers." The rabbits are simply adorable; they have life and personality and each is different. One entire additional feature is devoted to the making of the little critters ("How to Build a Bunny"). Though our heroes catch individual rabbits with an extendable claw, a field of rabbits deserves the employ of the Bun-Vac 6000: an enormous collapsible vacuum cleaner that sucks the rabbits right out of the ground, capable of a 125 rpm (rabbits per minute). The captured rabbits, floating as if in the vacuum of space (they think they are in the afterlife), are frankly distracting from the action taking place in front of them. They steal the show, especially the one named Hunch.

Unlike in *Chicken Run*, the animation here is intentionally not perfect. Whereas the fingerprints, dents and dust marks were erased digitally in the former, the models here are not as slick and smooth. There are some mistakes left purposefully for the audience to see. This both ties the feature to the previous shorts and reminds the audience that indeed this is all handmade stop-motion animation. The obvious comparison to the other major stop-motion feature of 2005 is favorable to Aardman's work. *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride*, though arguably a good movie, is simply not as engrossing as *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*. Though both attempt homage to classic horror, *Corpse Bride* falls

flat for its lack of levity. There is no lightness in Burton's film, even in the color-filled underworld. Park and Box took the other route; instead of copying the genre, they placed their tongue firmly in cheek and showed their warm affection for those old films. Warmth, indeed, is the greatest characteristic of *Were-Rabbit*. It truly aims at making the audience feel good.

Were-Rabbit is not a perfect movie. There are a few issues here and there, though very minor and which mostly have to do with pacing. The movie seems to be missing a scene or two, while a couple of scenes seem to run on a little longer than they should. At times, therefore, a few scenes are not as tight as they could have been. In fact, the action really only begins after about twenty minutes of set-up, something Park and Box readily admit to in the audio commentary. The other issues are that of the villain and the monster. Quartermaine is such a pompous ass that he never appears to be an effective threat. Both "Trousers" and "Shave" had given the pair formidable foes that could only be thwarted at the last minute with a modicum of chance. Here, Quartermaine is a poor adversary for Wallace, even if his dog Phillip is a better match for Gromit. The same ineffectiveness is found in the *Were-Rabbit* itself. We know from the start that it is Wallace's fault. The only point in question is the actual identity of the victim of these transformations. Additionally, we learn of that identity a rather long time before the end, making the denouement longer than it would have been in a classic horror film. Nevertheless, this paragraph is only nitpicking. None of these issues truly take away from the thorough enjoyment of the feature.

The sparseness of the DVD packaging does, though. Opening the case, I was thoroughly disappointed by the total absence of a booklet, or even a simple chapter list. The DVD itself nevertheless contains a fair amount of extras, though fewer than those we expect from a major genre movie these days. The menus feature scenes and music from the movie and are easily navigable. The deleted scenes and commentary are interesting and the feature "A Day in the Life at Aardman" very informative (though a visit to their website, www.aardman.com, is more interesting

in my opinion). "The Family Album" lets us take a look at all the pictures, posters and signs in the scenes' background, as well as storyboards and behind the scenes photos.

Two extra features, "How Wallace & Gromit Went to Hollywood" and "Behind the Scenes of *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*," offer information about the stop-motion process and working at Aardman. However, they could not be any more different. The first is a product of Aardman Animation itself, explaining the groundbreaking association between the British company and Dreamworks. It is humorous and light, but also subtle in its promotion intent. The latter is a bombastic and shameless Dreamworks promo piece that does not provide much insight other than an enticement to see a movie that has already been purchased. In short, as an extra, the latter feature is useless. Another useless extra is the Aardman short "Stage Fright" (1997), produced by Nick Park, but written and directed by Steve Box. To be frank, it's not very good. Told in flashback, it shows the sad downfall of a stage juggler and his dog act in the advent of movies. I was bored after three minutes.

In the "DWK" section, in addition to the three Cracking Contraptions, we find a few games and activities, obviously aimed at children. "Victor Quartermaine's Guide to Cool" is hilarious, largely due to Ralph Fiennes's voice, which inches that much closer to raving lunacy. "Style with Lady Tottington" is a cute paper doll game, but not much more. "The Anti-Pesto S.W.A.T. Team" is a remote control game that will interest younger children, but will become boring rather quickly. Finally, there is a DVD-ROM section that, yet again, discriminates against Macs.

I wholeheartedly recommend the purchase of this DVD, though I suggest that you buy it in conjunction with *Wallace & Gromit in Three Amazing Adventures* (which Amazon let's you do at a discount), because not only will you then get the three previous shorts, you will also have all ten Cracking Contraptions, which are worth the price alone. While watching our heroes, you will enjoy getting all the references to classic genre movies. Your children will just love the stories and want a dog just like Gromit for Christmas. It's well worth it.

DVD Review: *King Kong – Collector’s Edition* (1933)

by Alex Esten

When I watch a film and find myself unable to pluck out more than one or two “deeper” ideas or themes in it, my first reaction is that there’s something wrong with me. I’ve been doing interpretation and text analysis for years now, so it’s very odd and almost disconcerting when I can’t go deeper than a few layers in a review or a research paper. Usually, I cannot avoid discussing themes and social commentaries in a novel or film. My previous reviews for *Some Fantastic*, for example, have always been more interpretations and examinations than actual reviews. I’m just more comfortable with getting into a work and seeing how its themes and characters work together to tell the story. With the 1933 original *King Kong*, however, I can’t see myself writing pages about the subtleties of the movie... because there are very few subtleties.

It’s a sign of the times, I suppose. *King Kong* was released in an era when movies were still in their infancy, essentially (although one could make the case that film today is still pretty juvenile and childish). There was more technical experimentation and innovation than attention given to plot and characters. As complex and challenging as Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* was, the star of that film was not the suppression of the proletariat. Perhaps our jaded society dulls the themes of *Metropolis*; today, we don’t have such squalid working conditions—or at least, not to the extent to warrant films about them it seems. There are sweatshops of all types in Asia, but we rarely, if at all, even hear about them on any one of the dozens of 24-hour news networks. So we basically don’t care. If we don’t see something, it doesn’t matter.

I think that’s why *Metropolis* was so influential: Hollywood filmmakers didn’t care about the

story behind the film. They only saw that Lang and his contemporaries were making films with a technical achievement that far surpassed anything Hollywood was churning out at the time. *Metropolis* didn’t make a big splash because it “felt for the workers.” It made a big splash because Lang had multiple layers of action going on in a single shot. He had biplanes, trains, pedestrians in the foreground, skyscrapers in the background, and congested freeways.

King Kong is similar. Its plot is neither new nor revolutionary for its time. Fay Wray’s character really does nothing more than scream the entire time. Incidentally, I wonder if Ann Darrow had even a paragraph’s worth of dialogue in the film. The film’s pacing is very quick. The time spent in New York City does not exceed a total of twenty minutes, because we are given all of the information we need within a few exchanges between the main characters.

To the film’s credit, this is something we rarely see in films of the 1930s. Most films barely tried to disguise the exposition, and when they did, it felt forced. *The Wolf Man* is a perfect example. It’s a good film, and a fun one, but the writing and pacing are pretty dreadful. And I think that’s why *King Kong* works. It doesn’t give the plot too much attention. Since the real fun begins when the characters start getting eaten, maimed, killed, stomped, torn apart, etc. on Skull Island, it makes perfect sense to speed through the first few scenes of the film, and to ignore establishing any deeper meanings or themes. After all, when you have a film that’s conceived as a pure adventure picture, you don’t need an examination of greed, manipulation, and human nature. That’s one reason why Peter Jackson’s remake is so flawed: because the story of *King Kong* was never about an a-hole



movie producer. We watch *Kong* for one reason and one reason only: to see silly humans being eaten by really nasty prehistoric beasts, or as a friend of mine puts it, "To see a giant monkey pound the crap out of stuff."

The technical achievement of the film is the reason why we can watch the movie over and over again and never get tired of seeing those tiny little ants getting stomped. The stop motion animation is done so well that barring different resolutions, it's almost a seamless matte job. Certainly, our perception today is sharper than audiences in the '30s, so we may not be as impressed by the technical finesse, since CG can do basically anything these days. But even as dated as the techniques are, the matting, stop-motion, and quasi-utilization of blue screens are still remarkably advanced.

Also worth mentioning is how stop-motion animation is quickly becoming something of a "lost art." Only Tim Burton has used it extensively in "mainstream" Hollywood (though Burton is not exactly mainstream, even today), and where stop-motion could be used to a tremendous effect in the Sci-Fi channel made-for-TV movie fodder, we're instead given lame CGI (Bruce Campbell's *Alien Apocalypse*, I'm looking at you, even though the lame CGI was intentional.). The "Lost Art" of stop-motion animation becomes particularly obvious when Peter Jackson's studio has difficulty recreating stop-motion for their "Spider Pit" sequence in the special features. While the main film is certainly entertaining, there's something stirring about seeing a scraggly New Zealand director and his team fumbling with stop-motion models as

they attempt to "live-up" to the work of Willis O'Brien from the early 1930s.

The difficulties experienced by Jackson and company are testament to the technical wizardry of the 1930s Kong crew. The finished animation from Jackson is certainly stop-motion, but it simply lacks the magic of O'Brien's craft. In fact, Peter Jackson's efforts to pay homage to O'Brien and the technical merits of *King Kong* echo the sentiment that nobody cares about the original because of deeper meanings or profound social commentary. *King Kong* is an adventure movie with fantastic special effects.

When I saw the original back when I was five years old, I didn't care about the love story, and I certainly didn't care that Ann was all alone in the world, nor did I care that Carl Denham was under quite a bit of pressure from his producers. All I cared about was King Kong smashing things, and how real he looked while doing it. That's part of the magic, I think. There probably isn't a five-year-old around who wouldn't have fun watching King Kong, or who wouldn't get a bit scared during some of the more intense moments. And as dated as the special effects may seem sometimes, they're still brutally effective, even when the audience doesn't place themselves back in the early 1930s. Whether the audience is five or in their late eighties, King Kong is still amazing, and it's aged incredibly well.

This is partly due to the fantastic print. The film has really never looked better. What was too grainy, too dark, or entirely washed-out in earlier prints, is almost perfect on this DVD. One of the



DVD Release Date:	November, 2005
Starring:	Fay Wray, Robert Armstrong, Bruce Cabot, Frank Reicher & Sam Hardy
Directors:	Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack
Screenwriters:	James Ashmore Creelman & Ruth Rose
Rated:	Not rated
Studio:	Turner Home Entertainment
Special Features:	Commentary by visual effects veterans Ray Harryhausen and Ken Ralston, with interpolated interviews excerpts of Merian C. Cooper and Fay Wray; Collectible tin packaging; 20-page reproduction of original 1933 souvenir program; King Kong memorable scenes postcards; Vintage King Kong poster mail-in offer; <i>I'm King Kong!: The Exploits of Merian C. Cooper</i> documentary; Merian C. Cooper Movies Trailer Gallery; <i>RKO Production 601: The Making of Kong, Eighth Wonder of the World</i> – 7-part documentary; & Creation Test Footage with Commentary by Ray Harryhausen.

most infamous low-quality shots in the original was the shot of the harbor after the opening credits. So much of the frame was so dark and dingy that the New York City skyline blended completely with both the water and the night sky. Now, however, we can actually see individual lights from the windows in the skyscrapers, the tugboat in the foreground is no longer obscured by “fog,” and Denham’s ship is crystal clear. The shot used to be nothing more than an overly dark frame of something that resembled a harbor in New York. In this print, however, it finally is an establishing shot.

The rest of the film is no different. The conversation between Denham, Driscoll, Captain Englehorn, and Weston, Denham’s theatrical agent, comes through clear, with none of the scratches and pops of earlier editions, and the scene looks spectacular. Driscoll’s black uniform no longer bleeds into the brighter walls behind him, and Weston’s jacket finally has clearly defined buttons. Denham’s slicked-back hair *shines*.

Aboard the ship, as Denham & Company are heading to Skull Island, any fog or early morning haze we see is now intentional fog or early morning haze, instead of just blurry or degraded footage. The hand-written labels on Denham’s map are now legible. For the chauvinists in the audience, the higher quality print also means that it’s much easier to tell Fay Wray wasn’t wearing a bra through much of the film, particularly in the Beauty costume during the film tests on the deck of the ship.

The rest of the film is just as gorgeous as Fay Wray. Skull Island looks spectacular. Kong has much more fur definition than before; the natives are much cleaner and crisper, especially in the composite footage when Kong takes Ann during the sacrifice scene. The natives on the wall are not blurry. It’s absolutely breathtaking.

The matting during and after the log sequence is vastly improved, though Kong’s hand still brushes into the miniature projection screen when he’s reaching down to grab Bruce Cabot. It’s a technical hiccup that was fairly apparent in the previous prints, but it’s much more pronounced now, due to the higher quality edition. It doesn’t detract from the film, though, because

catching it still requires a sharp eye, and seeing the screen shake is more endearing than disappointing, because had it happened in CGI, we wouldn’t be so forgiving. The reason we see that wobble of the miniature screen is because it wasn’t a blue screen. It was an actual miniature projection screen built into the stop-motion set, and as such, behaved like part of the stop-motion set. It’s similar to why Kong’s fur moves. As the animators moved the Kong model for each frame of animation, their fingers pressed the hair down in different places, so when the animation was put together, his fur looked like it was blowing in the wind. Again, I don’t think the film is worse off because of this. If anything, the unintended side effects of pioneering a new technology are all the more impressive.

It’s only fitting that nearly all of the special features focus on the technical achievements of *King Kong*. Whether it’s documentaries and interviews about Willis O’Brien, or analyses of the set designs, or examining how portions of O’Brien’s pet project, *Creation*, were adapted into *King Kong*, the star of the film is always technical in nature. There are 30-minute segments that specifically focus on the construction of the stop-motion Kong armature. Because behind-the-scenes footage was completely forbidden on the original set, there is very little documentation of the process, which is terribly unfortunate. Hearing O’Brien explaining what he was doing as he was doing it on-set would be an incredible resource for filmmakers everywhere, especially those involved in special effects, like Peter Jackson and his Weta studios.

I find myself respecting Jackson much more than I ever have before after watching his contributions to the special features on the second disc. He is truly dedicated to preserving the art of O’Brien’s work. While his remake uses CG, he is a stop-motion fanatic in the documentaries. He and his crew attempt to re-create the stop-motion animation of Kong from various points in the film, but only for posterity’s sake. The results are fantastic. They utilize matte paintings, glass panels, and even actual cameras used by O’Brien back in the 1930s. Their “Lost Spider Pit” sequence is also stunning.

This absolutely is a must-buy DVD set. There are no differences, DVD content-wise, between the regular Special Edition and Collector's Edition, so most fans will be happy with the Special Edition. The Collector's is more for the Kong enthusiast, since it features miniature re-prints of the original posters, advertisements, and the playbill from the film's premiere. But no matter which edition, it's entirely worth it.

The main film has not lost any of the magic over the years, it's a nearly flawless print, the sound quality is astounding, and rarely have I seen a supplement that could be sold on its own—in fact, I've never seen a special features package that would be worth purchasing alone. *King Kong's* is the most insightful and revealing behind-the-scenes material I've explored in a

long time. There are absolutely no dull moments in the documentaries, those interviewed always have something interesting to say, each and every anecdote is relevant, and the biography of Merian C. Cooper provides an unprecedented window into the life that inspired Carl Denham's gung-ho movie producer character. Ray Harryhausen's commentary track has some great moments, as well. *King Kong* has been given the deluxe treatment for its first official DVD release, which goes a long way in enabling me to forgive its DVD absence.

Alex Esten is a fourth-year English Major in the College of Arts & Sciences at Rutgers University-Camden.

Book Review: *Adventure, Vol. 1*

by *Danny Adams*

Pulp lovers around the world awaken! Adventure awaits you on lost islands in the Amazon and beneath freezing oceans on alien worlds! In Middle Eastern deserts, Mexican forests, high-flying biplanes with English aces fighting Gerry's zeppelins, even in ancient Rome and what lies in the realms beyond death!

Now that, I hope, my sensationalist opening has nabbed you attention...

Pulp speculative fiction is making a comeback—if not necessarily with a big smash yet, then rolling ahead like a good steam-powered train picking up speed and power as it rolls through high canyon tracks. As Chris Roberson points out in his introduction to what promises to be only the first volume of *Adventure*, other books have recently appeared with the pulp themes: in particular his introduction points to Michael Chabon's *McSweeney's* books as well as Jay Lake's and David Moles' *All-Star Zeppelin Adventure Stories*. Though Roberson didn't say so, one could also point out the resurgence of interest in old SF magazines like *Astounding*—especially before John W. Campbell took the helm and the magazine counted luminaries like Raymond Z. Gallun among its most popular writers—and the works of

the most famous of modern pulp SF writers, Philip Jose Farmer.

But what is pulp?

Many people nowadays think of it in terms of its original negative qualities, such as stilted dialogue and cardboard characters—not to mention the helpless women who were only good as a trophy to hang off of the hero's elbow once he'd rescued her. But Roberson hits the nail on the head with what he considers the most important definition of all: pulp is about adventure.

In his introduction, Roberson worries that genre fiction—and by this he includes other genres such as mystery—"has expended so much energy and enthusiasm in past decades growing beyond its pulp roots that it risks losing the good along with the bad. Out with two-dimensional characters, wooden dialogue, and creaking plots, to which no one can object; but too often with them also goes action, peril, and—yes—adventure."

Roberson sees adventure (and action and peril) not as a genre in itself but a "mode." "Not a type of story, but an approach to storytelling," he tells us. "In the pages that follow are stories from many genres—mystery, science fiction, horror,

western, historical, et cetera, et al.—but a common thread runs through them all: each is a stirring yarn, well told. Sophistication and action, entertainment and quality. Or, to put it another way...

“Adventure.”

What follows are seventeen “all-new terrific tales” from writers at the top of their fields, including Michael Moorcock, Kage Baker, Mike Resnick, Lou Anders, Paul Di Filippo, and others. Some of the fare has a straight up genre tag such as historical mystery. Others—some of the most fun, in fact—take an old pulp theme and turn it on its head.

The first story in the collection, Mike Resnick’s “Island of Annoyed Souls,” does just that: in this case, it’s an adventure through the deepest, darkest Amazon, one of the most ubiquitous settings in the old pulps. Reverend Lucifer Jones is ostensibly searching for a place to build a tabernacle when he encounters first a talking dog (named Ramon), then a talking moose (Miguel), and finally a highly sensitive lady elephant named Felicity. These are all the creation of a mad scientist (yet another venerable pulp trope) named Dr. Septimus Mirbeau, whom all of the animals hate, and yet he is under their protection for a reason that—well, a reason you will discover when you read the story. And of course, Jones is forbidden to leave the island. For what nefarious purpose were the animals created? Will Jones be able to escape with his life? These and other questions are answered in this fun and stirring tale...

Michael Moorcock picks up the light-hearted thrilling peril thread with his story “Dogfight Donovan’s Day Off,” a tribute to the 1950s comics he wrote that were set among the Knights of the air during the First World War. Donovan is a young, heroic English flying ace who loves getting up in his plane and shooting at Gerrys, the Germans, who are, he admits with no hesitation, every bit as heroic and chivalrous as he is. In fact, when Donovan is shot down in German territory, his German knight counterpart, the noble flyer Gerhardt von Bek, treats him to dinner and tea and then releases him back to the British.

But all is not well in the world of early 20th century chivalry. Their type of warfare is on its way out, they are assured by the martinet air leader

Manfred von Schlappen, whom we discover is in charge of the zeppelins about to bomb England. Furthermore, the twin submarines U-666 and U-668 are harassing the stalwart Brits, and the war is going poorly for Mother England. It falls into Donovan’s hands to save the Realm from the German peril. See him go against the withering fire from a zeppelin’s machine gun! See him leap valiantly from his burning plane from thousands of feet up without a parachute! The only thing between London’s survival and its destruction is the courage of one daring pilot named Dogfight Donovan...

“The Bridge of Teeth” by Mark Finn leads us on a mystical quest into the deepest jungles of Mexico in 1994, where Sam Bowen is on a quest for a shaman named Joachim Tlomec, whom Bowen thinks possesses the secrets to a magical item called Solomon’s Disk. Tlomec decides to take on the persistent Bowen as an apprentice, but warns him that there are dark powers everywhere and that one misstep on his first adventure with the shaman can lead to being lost in the darkness forever. Here the perils are all supernatural and waged in other planes of existence that Bowen can hardly begin to imagine. The prose is often so laid back in describing the supernatural it almost reminds the reader of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Zombies! Magical bridges across vast chasms! Will Bowen survive? And even if he does, will he ever be the same...?

“Ghulistan Bust Out,” by Chris Nakashima-Brown, is not only an adventure story that is a tribute to the pulps, but also a tribute to Robert Howard’s modern adventure stories set in Afghanistan—which he called “Ghulistan,” the Land of Ghouls, around a character named Francis X.

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Books

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Gordon, a.k.a. El Bolak. In this case, the adventurer is a young fellow who wants to set a movie in this perilous place, and the warriors accompanying him are soldiers of the U.S. military. They are, of course, captured by the death-dealing warriors native to the region, men who are either terrorists or sympathetic to the terrorists' anti-Western cause. Nakashima-Brown's prose is so electric you feel as if you're on a wild, extra-bumpy ride throughout the course of the story. See our hero thrown against a weird magical beast who can consume him in a way that threatens every man, woman, and child in Western civilization!

And while scientists discovering a Lost World filled with prehistoric creatures in deepest Africa or the jungles of a Pacific island was a common theme in the old pulps, O'Neil de Noux's story "The Silence of the Sea" takes this one step farther: the prehistoric "lost world" is actually a literal world, an Earth-like planet called Octavian, filled with a richer variety of colors than Earth ever knew but possessing a parallel evolution that allowed for dinosaurs to develop and thrive. John Joseph "Buck" Andre is for all intents and purposes alone on this world, naming places and taking notes about them until the cartographic satellites can arrive and begin to create maps. His only companions are a dog named Rhett, a mare named Cocoa, and a mule named Charcoal. As Roberson says, Jack London fans will appreciate this story for the connection that Buck has with his animals. In the beginning of the story he is eager to be the first human to ever see a tyrannosaurus. Like many of London's protagonists, he will soon learn

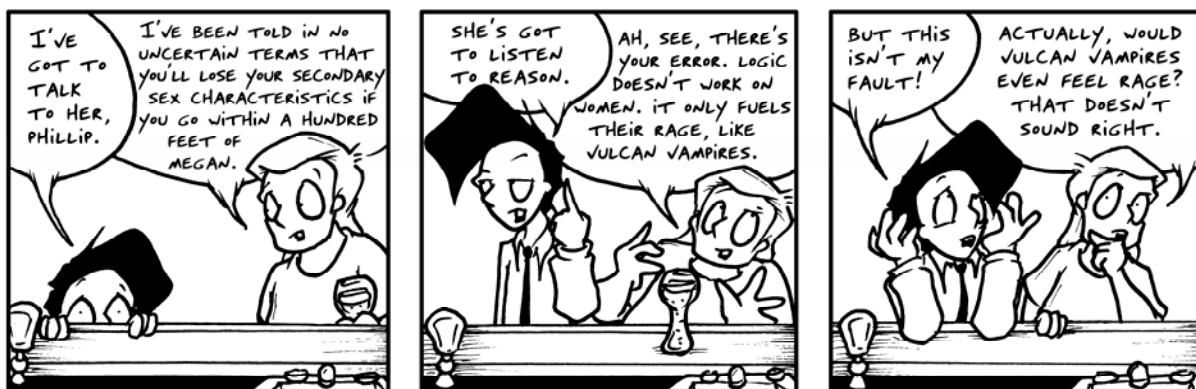
not only can a wild land turn on you in the space of a heartbeat, but also that the need to explore and discover new things is a compelling force even after the hammer of tragedy...

Some of the stories in *Adventure* may cause you to wonder how they found a place in the anthology because the actual "adventure" seems lacking. At least on the surface—but they still share the common theme of peril, or a character discovering wellsprings of courage he or she never knew existed until enduring some trial or hardship. Paul Di Filippo's "Eel Pie Stall" takes place primarily after a lady named Tansy Bynum has committed suicide; Di Filippo calls it his "bardo fiction" story, named "after the Tibetan term for the period of 49 days after death in which the soul wanders through a visionary landscape before ultimately being reincarnated in a new form." Tansy endures her 49 days as well as a visionary landscape that makes you earn your rebirth—an ultimate form of peril, as it were.

"Lost Time," by John Meaney, is set deep in a cold alien ocean in a broken shuttlecraft where huddles the dying figure of Rekka, a lady whose story is told primarily in flashbacks. Peril again—the ship is destroyed, likewise her only companion (an AI named Ann-Elise), and the ocean is about to claim her. *Adventure* finds her, however, in the presence of a massive alien creature she encounters after the shuttlecraft finally succumbs to the pressures of the sea.

Michael Kurland's "Four Hundred Slaves" is a straight-up historical mystery set in Rome circa AD 75 with the part of Sherlock Holmes por-

Goats: The Comic Strip by Jonathan Rosenberg



goats: the comic strip aug. 1, 2003 <http://www.goats.com> jon@goats.com ©2003 jonathan rosenberg. all rights reserved

trayed by the ancient Roman orator Marcus Fabius Quintillianus, and the part of Watson by one Plautus Maximilianus Aureus, Quintillianus's pupil and scribe. The murder is straightforward enough: a Roman senator was apparently knocked off by one of his trusted slaves. However, because of the victim's high position in society, the Senate wants to make an example of the murder and invoke an old law where if one slave killed his master, all of the master's slaves were executed—a law meant to discourage slave uprisings. So here we have not only one probably-innocent man on the brink of death, but no less than four hundred innocent men, women, and children who face crucifixion, the slaves' penalty for murder. (Quintillianus, better known to modern audiences as Quintillian, was a real figure, and wrote a number of books on oratory that have not only survived to the present day—Kurland drew on them for some of his material—but are also still studied and highly regarded. Kurland writes him with a sophisticated wit that fits well with a high-born Roman intellect.)

There are of course many more I could not detail in this review, notably Kim Newman's "Richard Riddle, Boy Detective In 'The Case of the French Spy'" and Kage Baker's "The Unfortunate Gytt." No matter what thrilling adventure or daunting peril you encounter here, however, you can always keep close to your chest the certain

knowledge that your authors are sure-handed guides who will take you to unfolding regions you didn't expect or literary races whipping you in and out of danger as deftly as a roller-coaster.

Adventure, Vol. 1 is a promising start to what will hopefully become a long-lived series, as well as a beacon to adventure lovers that good pulp is easier to hunt down than it used to be. In fact, heck, you don't need to love pulp to love this book—you just need to enjoy having fun and being taken for a wild ride. There are adventures to be found a-plenty between these covers, for those willing to dive in and grab for them!

*Danny Adams is the author of two forthcoming short novels: The City Beyond Play, co-authored with Philip Jose Farmer and scheduled to appear from PS Publishing at the end of 2006; and Village of One Thousand Cranes, appearing as a limited edition from Papaveria Press in the summer of 2006. In addition, his shorter works have appeared or are forthcoming in magazines such as Abyss & Apex, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, The Mount Zion Speculative Fiction Review, Mythic Delirium, Not One Of Us, Star*Line, Strange Horizons, and Weird Tales. He and his wife Laurie live deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia with four cats who never fail to provide thrilling wonders, dangerous adventures, and chilling perils!*

Book Review: *Fledgling*

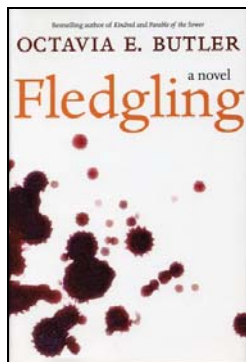
by Sara K. Ellis

I'm not going to reveal the last line of Octavia E. Butler's *Fledgling*, but it's not hard to guess that those two words will have a stronger significance in light of their author's untimely death last February; not to mention a now unrealizable promise of a future for a protagonist who still had hundreds of years—and in our reality, hundreds of more pages—to go.

Butler's last novel has also reanimated a genre that arguably was sadly close to burning itself out: the vampire novel. By keeping a sharp incisor between her characters and the cliché of worldly and

world weary immortals, Butler has created new life for her "Ina," as biologically sound beings boasting of impressive but less-than-eternal life spans, and behavior, that compared with their fictional predecessors, is as calm and as practical as the Amish.

When it comes to sex with their own kind, the Ina are a South Dakota legislature's dream: their romps, while certainly enjoyed, are strictly for procreation. Yet, when it comes to that other thing, oft touted by civil-rights dismantling social conservatives as the glue of a strong society, Butler



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ISBN: 1583226907
Publisher: Seven Stories Press
Release date: Sept., 2005

\$24.95, 352 pages,
hardcover

thankfully and joyously break every taboo in the book. Unlike the vampires of folklore, the Ina do not regularly prowl the streets in search of their nightly sustenance, but more peacefully, amass a “family” of human symbionts, old and young, male and female, who supply their host with those two great needs: food and sex. In return, the symbionts while not becoming vampires are given longevity and a boosted immune system. One almost has visions of Lorne Greene: “My symbiont Joe is 150 years old, but that’s 300 hundred years to you and me.” No joke. By placing the Ina/symbiont power relationship within close proximity to that of human and pet, Butler creates a problematic web that forces even the most relaxed among us to rethink our ideas about love, sex, and dependence.

After being bitten several times, the human symbionts become addicted to Ina saliva, which has a euphoric and passivity inducing affect, and all relationships, no matter the initial sexual orientation of the symbiont, eventually turn erotic. Yet, to the eyes of human outsiders, Butler’s protagonist, Shori Matthews, is a prepubescent girl. So, while we understand Shori to be the dominant family member, Butler forces us to visualize the opposite, creating within the reader a trompe-l’oeil of sexual mores.

The Ina may live apart from humanity to

avoid detection, yet their closeness to their food source disallows the hackneyed portrayal of the vampire as a brooding loner. They do not wander the world, bemoaning their lack of an authoritative origin, and Butler does not provide one. Like their symbionts, the Ina have many theories, some seemingly rational, some crackpot; but life goes on. “There’s a recently developed belief among some of our younger people,” one of the characters tells Shori, “that the Ina landed here from another world thousands of years ago. I think it’s nonsense, but who knows.” *Fledgling* gratefully stays focused on Shori, who awakens burnt and bloodied in the charred ruins of her family’s home with no memories of her origins, or the people responsible for the disaster.

And here’s another point on which Butler’s novel differs from other vampire novels: while many writers of the genre strew the grungier realities of the body in a supernatural talc—Anne Rice leaves them ethereal and sexless after one final transformative bowel movement—Butler uses the Ina’s heightened senses to relate smells, tastes, and tactile sensations in surprisingly un-sexy terms. The act of biting itself is rendered in gory, unglamorous detail: “I stared down at the bleeding marks I’d made on his hand, and suddenly I was unable to think about anything else. I ducked my head and licked away the blood, licked the wound I had made.” This departure from aerie-fairy vampirism is what transports the reader rather violently into amnesiac Matthew’s world, while strengthening the sense of danger in the novel.

While certainly pragmatic, the Ina community is neither idealized nor stable. An ugly side is revealed when Matthews learns more about her origins and the bigoted reaction to her otherness that has inspired the violence against her. Her decision to bring that ugliness to light will transform the community as well as her position within it.

While the novel works as a self-contained

“Nitwit ideas are for emergencies. You use them when you’ve got nothing else to try. If they work, they go in the Book. Otherwise you follow the book, which is largely a collection of nitwit ideas that worked.”

— Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle, *The Mote in God’s Eye*

story, there can be no getting around the fact that to read *Fledgling* now is also to experience a feeling of lost potential for Matthews and the genre that Butler has resuscitated from a moping stupor. With Butler's life cut short, we have lost not only a

great writer, but also Shori's future and the unanswered questions surrounding her past. Yet, what better way than irresolution to keep both Matthews and her creator alive in our memories?

DVD Review: *Star Wars III: The Revenge of the Sith*

by Alex Esten

I should issue two disclaimers.

First, I'm not a fan of the Jedi. I find most of their methods and philosophies to be dull and irrelevant, and their approach is little more than completely outdated. They are, by most standards, useless in the purest sense of the word. The Jedi are completely ineffectual through much of the Saga, their "mind your emotions" mantra in fact causing more trouble than it's worth. In fact, "mind your emotions" castrates the effectiveness of Jedi in combat. Rarely, if at all, have we ever seen members of the Jedi Order stand victorious in a lightsaber duel with a Sith warrior.

In *The Phantom Menace*, Qui-Gon is run-through by Darth Maul. *Attack of the Clones* features Count Dooku outmaneuvering not one, not two, but *three* "senior" Jedi. It's obvious that Obi-Wan is having trouble keeping up with Darth Vader in *A New Hope*. There's no question in *Empire Strikes Back* as to which character is the winner in the duel between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker in Cloud City. In *Return of the Jedi*, the only way Luke is able to best Darth Vader is by—you guessed it—embracing his emotions. To me, this trend is indicative of one thing: for all of their posturing, the Jedi actually know very little regarding conflict management. 99% of the time, a dedicated Sith will always have the advantage, because they utilize far more abilities and powers than the Jedi ever will allow themselves to.

Second, due to my Sith preference, I come into Episode III nearly completely biased, as I am routinely disgusted by the incompetence of the Jedi throughout the Saga. I see Episode III as only one thing: it is where the Jedi are proven wrong—dead wrong (lame pun intended). Episode III is their ultimate wake-up call, enforcing the severe consequences of their provincial and narrow-minded

viewpoint. In many ways, *Revenge of the Sith* breaks the ego of the Jedi Council.

One could say that because of this, Episode III represents the "purest" vision of *Star Wars* we've ever seen. After all, whereas the other films in the Saga have featured Jedi suffering at the hands of Sith, Episode III takes it to a level that is almost uncomfortable for some (though I was giggling like a little schoolgirl during most of the Order 66 sequence, more on this later). We've seen Jedi death before, but nothing like this. *Revenge of the Sith* is both a radical departure from the Saga, and at the same time, it functions as the ultimate culmination of thirty years' worth of ideas and character development; the film is just not another Prequel. While some could argue it suffers for that apparent thematic conflict, I think it is much more appropriate to describe it as "uneven." It's uneven for a few different reasons.

One, the performances are distracting. When the acting is good, it's fantastic, but when it's lousy, it's almost unwatchable. If we consider *Star Wars* to be something of a Shakespearean tragedy, it's strikingly clear which actors in the cast are classically trained thespians.

Ian McDiarmid, for example, has perfected his Darth Sidious. He played Palpatine in the Original Trilogy, and he's only gotten better since. McDiarmid knows that Palpatine is the Iago of *Star Wars*, and he knows how to play that particular role. He's had experience with that "high dramatic" style, and if it weren't for Ian, the Prequels, and to a lesser extent, the Saga in its entirety, would be coffee table coaster fodder around the world.

The same cannot be said for the rest of the cast. While most of the actors have "grown into" their roles, lousy dialogue is still lousy dialogue. Watching Samuel L. Jackson and Ewan McGregor,

both *extraordinarily* talented actors in their own rights, struggle with the turgid Jedi discourse is downright painful. Here are Jules Winnfield and Edward Bloom (McGregor played the younger Ed Bloom in Tim Burton's *Big Fish*) having to make "I sense a plot to overthrow the Senate" sound convincing. We're all well aware of how awful certain scenes between Hayden Christensen and Natalie Portman were as well. I think most of us are still trying to forget such timeless exchanges that gave us "No, it's because I'm so in love with you" and "So love has blinded you."

It's that kind of dialogue that gets me wondering what George Lucas is doing... and which characters he actually has more fun writing for. Given how uneven the quality is in Episode III and in the Saga itself, I find myself doubting Lucas' claims that the Jedi hold the viewpoint he most agrees with. If that were the case, we would not be tortured with "I sense a plot to overthrow the Senate." If Lucas actually favored the Jedi, their dialogue would not be meaningless exposition, or absolutely trite and annoying lovey-dovey "romance." Yoda would be a sympathetic character, instead of a short and malformed, hairy unlovable stump of a Jedi Master, and Samuel L. Jackson would be busting out his best Jules Winnfield, swinging around a lightsaber with a very special inscription on the hilt (and the *Pulp Fiction* fans out there know what that inscription would be). Mace Windu would never sit there and appear brooding.

Yet, that is all the Jedi do throughout most of the Prequels: sit there and furrow their brows in

discussion. It is only in Episode III do any of them stand-up and fight for anything. Only when they face ultimate annihilation do they fight "the good fight." But at that point in the films, it's too late, and the Sith have already won. Yoda finds himself on the receiving end of a Force-powered back-handed slap in his duel with Palpatine in the Senate Chambers, and Obi-Wan doesn't even have the heart to finish the job when Anakin is laying there, cooked extra-crispy. The Jedi make all the wrong decisions, make all the mistakes, and their misguided ideologies lose them everything... even the galaxy itself.

If this is supposed to make me sympathetic to their plight, it fails miserably. Lucas attempts to juxtapose the Sith philosophies against the Jedi ones, and outside of the films, he presents a case that the temptation of the Sith must be resisted, that while the Jedi may not go about things in the most effective manner, their ends are noble and logical. Most fans have parroted this to an absurd degree, but my biggest problem with that stance is how the films themselves directly contradict it.

This is the second reason why Episode III is so uneven. Despite what Lucas claims, he either more closely identifies with the Sith and their philosophies, which would explain why there is so much more attention given to Palpatine's dialogue throughout the six films, or Lucas is playing some sort of game with the audience, giving the Saga an almost meta-film quality, purposely writing the Jedi as complete morons and Palpatine himself as Milton's Satan, in an attempt to test the audience



DVD Release Date:	November, 2005
Starring:	Ewan McGregor, Natalie Portman, Hayden Christensen, Ian McDiarmid & Samuel L. Jackson
Director:	George Lucas
Screenwriter:	George Lucas
Rated:	PG-13
Studio:	20th Century Fox
Special Features:	Commentary by writer-director George Lucas, producer Rick McCallum, animation director Rob Coleman, and ILM visual effects supervisors John Knoll and Roger Guyett; Exclusive deleted scenes with introductions by George Lucas and Rick McCallum; "Within a Minute," documentary film about the making of the Mustafar battle; "The Chosen One" featurette: George Lucas traces the myth of Darth Vader through episodes 1-6; It's All for Real: The Stunts of Episode III; Collection of Lucasfilm's web documentaries; Star Wars Battlefront II trailer and Xbox game demo; Star Wars Empire at War PC game trailer; "A Hero Falls" music video; Trailers and TV spots; Never-before-seen production photo gallery; & DVD-ROM.



in similar ways to the actual characters. We see a much more compelling and convincing Sith argument encouraging us to embrace our emotions for power; we see the Jedi's utter incompetence and arrogance but also hints of noble goals. But we have to choose between emotional temptation and a quasi-intellectual point of view.

Realistically, I believe it's more the former than the latter. Lucas rarely demonstrates the creativity or authorial prowess necessary to manage such a manipulative style of storytelling. Largely, he lacks the ear for dialogue—that much is clear with Anakin and Padme. That dialogue is not intentionally bad; Lucas honestly believes it's good dialogue. He lacks an insight for appropriate characterization, writing the Jedi to seem torn and perturbed, yet they come actually across as nothing more than weak, indecisive, stubborn little children.

So what does this mean for the Saga itself, since Lucas' goal, apparently, was to use the Prequels to “re-write” *Star Wars*, and given that Lucas has taken such a drastic revisionist stance with regards to the Original Trilogy, altering scenes that never needed to be altered in the first place?

It means that there can be no question in anyone's mind anymore as to who the real brains are in *Star Wars*. Even when the idea of Sith superiority (or Jedi inferiority) only has a fleeting implication in *Empire Strikes Back*, that fleeting implication just became the fundamental core of the six films.

Time and time again in discussions with friends of mine, I've raised the point that never in the Original Trilogy (OT) do we hear about the

Dark Side clouding perceptions. The only notable conversation about the Dark Side of the Force is in *Empire Strikes Back*, when Yoda tells Luke the Dark Side is only faster and more seductive. If the Prequels are indeed a “re-write” of the OT, then the Dark Side certainly is capable of clouding perceptions, but this would present a significant contradiction between the NT (New Trilogy) and the OT, seeing as how no Jedi in the OT ever mention it, even though “The Dark Side clouds things” was one of the Jedi Council's favorite catchphrases in the Prequels. The fact that we don't hear that mantra from post-Lapsarian Jedi dialogue is tremendously important. Yoda and Obi-Wan have been in exile on Dagobah and Tatooine, respectively, for roughly twenty years when the story begins in *A New Hope*. They both have had plenty of time to reflect on the events that preceded the OT.

Obi-Wan certainly has had time to think about what “point of view” means and how it applies to the NT. He first heard the phrase from Qui-Gon Jinn, a Jedi who challenged the very ideologies of the Jedi Order. Later he heard “point of view” from Count Dooku. Dooku was, like Qui-Gon, a (former) Jedi who disagreed with the strict codes of the Order. Anakin repeats the phrase in Episode III, because he heard it from Palpatine, who again, challenges the methods of the Jedi Order, though not as overtly as Qui-Gon (and with good reason!).

If what Obi-Wan tells Luke in *Return of the Jedi* is accurate, that the “truths [one] clings to depend greatly upon [one's] point of view,” does that not

The Dagobah Conundrum

by Matthew Appleton

A few months ago, an acquaintance wrote the following on her Live Journal page:

Okay, so I'm still a *Star Wars* geek, even if I'm not a fanatic anymore.

I have been watching all the DVDs in chronological order this week. I'm up to *Empire Strikes Back*; it's at the part where Obi-Wan's ghost and Yoda are talking about Luke and how he is the last hope. At the end, Yoda says, "No, there is another..." in reference to Leia.

What... what... WHAT? Obi-Wan knew there were twin babies! The ending of Episode III very clearly showed that! This doesn't make sense to me..."

A few of the responders cobbled together the basic theory that either Obi-Wan just momentarily forgot about Leia or he felt that she wasn't a viable option. It's very likely that Kenobi didn't think the force was strong enough with Leia to believe she might be of help, and at the point Yoda makes his comment she's even older than Luke when he first started training under Ben. Thus, even if Ben knew the force was strong enough, maybe he felt that she was too old to begin training; even if she started the second Luke left Dagobah. Of course, it's possible that he too suspected that Leia was in trouble on Cloud City, which added another strike against her as another potential savior from the Empire.

Another, far more outlandish possibility is that Obi-Wan has no idea whom Yoda is talking about and is wondering if the shriveled old muppet is developing Alzheimer's. When Yoda states, "There is another," he never actually says who the other is. Of course, we the audience all jump to the conclusion that it's Leia, but he never actually says her name at any point in the narrative. There's the chance—although there's nothing else in the text of movies to suggest it—that somewhere out in the galaxy there's one more aging Jedi who escaped the carnage in Episode III or one last potential Jedi recruit that Yoda is aware of and who could stop Vader if recruited. The theory has nothing to back it up, but it does forgive Ben's not thinking of Leia.

Finally, there's theory three: Yoda suspects Vader can be turned back to the good side and thus help defeat the Emperor, but needs the proper encouragement—which of course is exactly what happens, and also nicely ties the whole thing back into the prophecy that he might be the one who would eventually restore balance to the Force.

Somehow, though, I doubt Lucas thought of all this back during the writing of the script for *Empire*.

portray a radically different reaction to the "Dark Side clouds things" mantra of the NT Jedi Council? In the Prequels, the Jedi Council repeated that mantra as if it were truth. The Jedi point of view of the NT was that the Jedi Order was basically infallible, which means they could never be wrong, and certainly any failure on their parts had to have been due to some external forces. But isn't truth dependent upon one's point of view? So this means it's entirely possible the Dark Side wasn't clouding anything in the NT, and the Jedi are entirely to blame. And if the Jedi are entirely to blame, then this certainly explains the sudden and new-found notes of humility we see in Yoda and Obi-Wan in the OT.

These inconsistencies and thematic re-mythologizing are why Episode III is both the best and the worst thing to happen to *Star Wars*. On one hand, Episode III completes the story of Darth Vader, and we finally get to see the moment of the Fall. "Order 66" (where Sidious orders the clones to kill all the Jedi) is an absolutely stunning sequence, and one can see how Lucas' friendship with Francis Ford Coppola has influenced his filmmaking. The assassination scenes of Order 66 are, at times, very *Apocalypse Now*-esque, and certainly we've seen similar techniques in *The Godfather*. I found that while not as graphic, the assassination of Aayla Secura (the blue Twi'lek Jedi) bears a peculiar resemblance to Sonny Corleone's dramatic conclusion. Order 66 provides some of the most fun in Episode III, especially for Sith fans such as Yours Truly.

Granted, some of it was difficult to watch sometimes (the "Youngling" Padawan saving the life of Bail Organa, for example, was a bit uncomfortable), because I knew I shouldn't be enjoying watching the extermination of Jedi that were more exterior to the poor decisions of the primary Council members, but at that point, as far as I was concerned, the Jedi Order that stayed together deserved to die together. The herd cattle mentality—that pervading and misguided belief that solidarity and unity must be preserved—is what none of the Jedi (barring Qui-Gon and Count Dooku) fought against, so it is perfectly reasonable the herd is slaughtered at the same time. And considering how the Jedi really did walk right into their death like

cattle being herded into a slaughterhouse, a paraphrasing of a popular expression seems appropriate: “Live by the herd, die by the herd.”

Episode III is important because not only do we see the Jedi pay for their mistakes, but we also finally sit down and have an actual conversation with a Sith Lord, and in a socialite, high-society setting, as opposed to the throne rooms or observation decks of other episodes. There is no taunting, no vitriol, none of the hiss we hear from Palpatine in *Return of the Jedi*. The conversation between Anakin and Palpatine during the opera (jokingly labeled as “Squid Lake” by the development team) in Episode III is critically significant, because not only does it establish—rather, *reinforce*—the idea of “point of view,” it also greatly expands upon the audience’s perception of the Sith. If left to a Jedi, the story of the Sith is far from tragic or meaningful. The Sith are just evil, seeking to exploit the Force, and as long as there are Sith in the galaxy, the Force will never be balanced (an idea that incidentally is a total fallacy).

To hear Palpatine tell the story, however, the Sith are not maniacally evil. They explore more of the Force than the Jedi permit themselves to. In order to understand the Force, Palpatine says, one must experience the fullest range of the Force as possible. This is a perfectly reasonable argument, and it has tremendous relevance today. Given how much social anxiety and fear today is based on misunderstandings and limited perceptions, Palpatine’s philosophy is a very healthy viewpoint. That’s not to say there is nothing to fear in modern society, but generally, people fear what they don’t understand, what they have no previous experience with, and rarely does that benefit them. It doesn’t benefit the Jedi, either.

While Palpatine could be fabricating or exaggerating the story of Darth Plagueis the Wise, his purpose for mentioning it is to show Anakin that the Dark Side of the Force is not all about killing and selfishness, contrary to what some Jedi would lead him to believe. Darth Plagueis, so the story goes, was an ancient Sith Lord

who discovered the ability to create life. He could save those he loved from death. His motives for using this power weren’t entirely altruistic, of course, because he also tried to use this power for himself. Unfortunately, shortly after he taught his apprentice everything he knew, his apprentice killed him, keeping with ancient Sith doctrine (The Rule of Two, a decree by Darth Bane, stating there can only be a Master and an Apprentice). Palpatine comments on the irony, noting how Darth Plagueis could save those around him, but was unable to save himself.

Incidentally, that conversation has sparked some debate among fans. Some believe that Palpatine was Plagueis’ apprentice, while others claim the story of Plagueis was a few generations (or even millennia) before Palpatine’s time. I agree more with the latter interpretation, because Palpatine does not appear to know Plagueis’s techniques: “To cheat death, only one has mastered, but together, we can find a way.” If he were Plagueis’s apprentice, he would already have that knowledge. Interestingly enough, no matter what fans conclude regarding the identity of Plagueis’s apprentice, there is yet another question: what did Plagueis know?

Some theorize that his techniques are the basis for Palpatine’s “spirit” in the Expanded Universe (EU) tie-ins set after *Return of the Jedi*. Palpatine cheats death, some argue, by forcing his spirit into clone bodies or through possession of the living. If he fails to re-enter the physical realm, then his spirit will fade away, because Dark Side users cannot re-join the Force after they die. Apparently, attaining an eternal Force Spirit (the “blue glowies” of Obi-Wan, Yoda, etc) is strictly a Light Side technique. This seems plausible, as Anakin



transforms into his Force Spirit when he is redeemed at the end of *Jedi*, but *Sith* ultimately undermines that interpretation.

Near the end of the film, it is revealed that the Force Spirit ability is a technique that has to be learned. Obi-Wan has a Force Spirit in the OT because Yoda instructed him, and Yoda knows of the Order of the Whills through the deceased Qui-Gon Jinn. If Order of the Whills must be learned, then presumably anyone possessing a Force Spirit—including Anakin—had learned it from someone or somewhere. But there is no possibility Anakin could have learned it from a Light Side Jedi. So we have to ask ourselves, who could he have learned it from? Who was his very last master before his death in *Jedi*? Palpatine.

If Palpatine proposed that he and Anakin work together to unlock the lost secrets of Darth Plagueis, and Anakin apparently has discovered how to attain a Force Spirit, it is only logical to conclude that Palpatine also will have an immortal “blue glowy” after death. This is incredibly hazardous for the post-*Jedi* EU, because nearly all of the EU novels that deal with Palpatine’s supernatural haunting of younger Jedi depend on the interpretation that Palpatine could never acquire a Force Spirit. This is an interpretation of the films that is shattered by *Revenge of the Sith*, because even though Lucas attempts to reconcile the films and the EU, he ultimately drives them apart even further, which only re-enforces the idea that the whole Saga has spun out of his control.

This is yet another reason why *Revenge of the Sith* is both the best and the worst thing to happen to Star Wars. For the strict canonist, like Yours Truly, Episode III’s upheaval of a major foundation for the EU is superb. The film further validates the theories and interpretations that slowly but surely chip away at the EU materials. I tend to view the EU as a gigantic sweater. If one pulls at the right strings, the entire thing starts to unravel. With Episode III, the sweater is really starting to unravel.

But for those who consider the EU as part of official Star Wars canon, or reliable source material at the very least, however, these retroactive changes (called retroactive continuity) are incredibly detrimental. One theory pointing to the proph-

ecy of the Chosen One as reconciling the contradictory nature of the Force Spirit topic, noting we are told in *The Phantom Menace* that Anakin does not have a biological father, a product of what is essentially an immaculate conception born through the Force, and as such, re-joining the Force (acquiring a Force Spirit) after fulfilling the prophecy (bringing balance to the Force) would make perfect sense. There is another theory I’ve read that suggests Obi-Wan and Yoda “brought Anakin over” after he was redeemed, but between these two interpretations, I find the “child of the Force” theory to be much more plausible—or at least much more insightful.

However, it’s only insightful if Anakin actually balanced the Force when he threw Palpatine into the Death Star reactor core in *Return of the Jedi*. Lucas’ definition of balance in Star Wars basically amounts to “No More Sith.” According to him, the Sith imbalance the galaxy because they exploit power and let nothing stand in their way. They do not care about consequences. They treat others as a means to an end. To them, the Force is a weapon, rather than a tool. With Sith present, there can never be harmony in the galaxy and the Force.

The problem with that idea is that Sith are merely symptoms of the Dark Side. If the Dark Side were a viral infection, for example, the Sith would be skin blisters. It’s never the other way around. Sith, like Jedi, are completely superficial manifestations when it comes to the Force, and as such, even when all of the Sith in the galaxy are purged from existence, the Force (and the Dark Side) will still exist. And as long as there is the Dark Side, there will always be Sith. When a Jedi explores the tombs of ancient Sith Lords, places that are strong with the Dark Side of the Force, there is a significant probability that Jedi will not exit that tomb as pure as when he or she entered.

This is a constant throughout the entire Saga, both in the films and in the EU. We see it happen in *Empire Strikes Back*, with Luke’s failure in the cave. He exits the cave considerably darker than when he entered because he could not resist the pull of the Dark Side, even though the Dark Side presence there was nowhere near as strong as it was in the tombs of Freedon Nadd or Naga Sadow

in the *Knights of the Old Republic* videogame series on Xbox.

The Sith have a history of several millennia, just like the Jedi. There have been thousands of Sith warriors, and plenty of Sith Lords. Eliminating Palpatine, a single Sith Lord, is not going to eradicate all Sith, and it certainly isn't going to bring balance to the Force, considering the long-standing Sith history. Common sense dictates that Palpatine is not the last Sith in the galaxy, despite the Rule of Two.

This means that Anakin is not the Chosen One, because he does not bring balance to the Force, because he only destroys one Sith. If he were to truly balance the Force, he would reach out through the Force and eradicate all Force Sensitive individuals connected to it, like Darth Nihilus does in *Knights of the Old Republic II*.

But perhaps the Force is balanced because Sith are no longer ruling the galaxy. Power is no longer skewed to one side. The oppressive government is overthrown, the people are free, and the revolutionaries are now guiding the New Republic. How is this balance? The galaxy is not free. The Rebellion has merely replaced one ruling party with another. It's still an uncontested government. That is not balance. It's bureaucratic trickery. Replacing governments is not establishing balance.

True balance is the fact that the government *can* be replaced. It's give-and-take. The entire Saga and its history have always been balanced, because control of the galaxy goes through alternating periods of Sith and Jedi rule. When the Jedi become stagnant, the Sith are right there to capitalize on that stagnancy. When the Sith usurp power, it's only a matter of time until a few Jedi overthrow them. Then the process begins again, just like it should after *Return of the Jedi*. That push-and-pull is balance. Killing a lone Sith Lord is not.

If Anakin is not the Chosen One, because he never fulfills the prophecy, he cannot re-join the Force and acquire a Force Spirit even though he was born out of the Force and some believe he'd be able to return to it. And if there is no other theory to explain his Force Spirit at the end, then he must have acquired the technique during his apprenticeship to Palpatine.

Plot-wise, as it relates to the rest of the Saga, Episode III is a train wreck. It's not a bad film, but I couldn't in good conscience recommend it to anyone except fans of the series. And even then, I could only recommend it to the die-hard fans. But I think the die-hard fans won't even enjoy most of

it. Granted, most of the die-hards wait in line for days before the premieres, for "just a taste of George Lucas' table scraps," to quote Triumph the Insult Comic Dog, but while many of them delude themselves into enjoying Episodes I and II, I think even they would feel slighted by *Revenge of the Sith*. Quality-wise, it's marginally better than the first two Prequels, but *Ed Wood* was better than the other Prequels, and that's not saying much. But the only saving grace of Episode III, I think, is being the money-



shot of Star Wars. Witnessing the fall of the Old Republic, the transformation into the Imperial Empire, and Anakin's final transformation into Darth Vader are what fans have wanted to see for years. And while it's regrettable the actual film doesn't justify the DVD purchase, I think there are enough gems in the Special Features to balance a less than spectacular film.

It certainly isn't the main attraction on the second disc, but for buyers who fancy themselves videogamers, popping Disc Two into an Xbox unlocks a really nice playable demo of *Star Wars: Battlefront II*, the sequel to the critically acclaimed *Star Wars: Battlefront* from Pandemic Studios. *Battlefront II* goes in a fantastic direction for *Star Wars*

games because other *Star Wars* games have placed the player into a main character from the films, which can get dull after a while.

Battlefront, however, turns the player into Stormtroopers and Rebel Marksmen—the grunts of the battlefield. It's a fantastic concept that works very well in the *Star Wars* universe because *Star Wars* has the kinds of epic battles that easily translate into soldier-to-soldier combat in a 3rd person or 1st person perspective. At the beginning of each battle, players choose a side, either the Empire or Rebellion for the Galactic Civil War, or the Republic (Clone Troopers) or Separatists (Droids) for the Clone War campaign.

When the battle begins, there's usually a mad rush for the TIE Fighters, X-Wings, Snowspeeders, AT-STs, AT-ATs, and Speederbikes. Each vehicle handles differently, which more fully immerses the player. The TIEs and X-Wings are very squirrely, the Snowspeeders are able to drift and players are able to sit in the gunner's seat for some good harpoon action. Piloting an AT-ST or AT-AT is an amazing experience, especially the AT-AT. The demo is limited, because it's a demo, but it still has a nice flavor to it. There's something to be said about playing as Obi-Wan Kenobi, slicing into enemies with a lightsaber and Force Pushing droids around.

Also on Disc Two are a series of close to a dozen web documentaries about different aspects of Episode III's development. Some of these "webisodes" are very interesting, while some are fairly dry and bland. I really enjoyed the looks at the creature design, especially for General Grievous. All of the different pieces of Grievous concept art pinned on the evaluation wall are quite stunning.

The influences are so varied, too; in some concepts, there's a very industrial, steam engine-esque

feel. In others, there's an almost Norse Berserker warrior in there. One of the artists has an odd sense of humor, sketching Grievous as a demonic-looking child on a hover-throne. What's interesting about the process is that the design Lucas approved was a last-minute idea. The artist did a quick sketch of the character from a few different angles, and Lucas almost immediately signed off on it. It's a fascinating documentary because it's actually relevant to the film's dynamic.

The webisode about C3PO's "moment to shine" was also one of the better documentaries. For many cast and crew members, Lucas included, the appearance of C3PO is really what completed the circle. I'd expect R2D2 or even Yoda, but I guess there's something about C3PO that's iconic of *Star Wars* in general.

Ian McDiarmid's webisode chronicling his transformation into Darth Sidious is breathtaking because he's Ian McDiarmid, the backbone of the Saga.

There's some good stuff in the actual longer documentaries, though again, most of it is pretty dry, so the only noteworthy material I've found was *The Chosen One*. It explores the "making of the myth," as it were, some behind-the-scenes looks at the final duel, Anakin's roast, etc.

Other than what I've mentioned, though, the Special Features are *very* dry. The commentary isn't worth listening to, because Lucas doesn't know what commentary is used for, nor does he know when to shut-up (I suppose I suffer from a similar affliction!). He and his crew talk over the important bits of dialogue in the film, and this would have been forgivable had they actually been giving us information we couldn't have gathered from the film itself. Cast and crew commentary should be used to reveal insights into the

film's production that a few viewings wouldn't be able to. The commentary to Episode III completely flaunts that principle. For an example of proper commentary, see *Shaun of the Dead*.

Honestly, it's unusual but not surprising the special features are uneven, given how jumbled the main film is. In a weird way, the



special features complete the package of *Revenge of the Sith*. It's a total package of a DVD, because tone-wise, it's all the same: there's a bizarre, quirky imbalance going on between the good and the bad, between insightful dialogue and lame George Lucas ramblings, and between fantastic behind-the-scenes documentaries and looks at

Wookiee costume construction that really has no redeeming value whatsoever. If you can look past those faults, I think you'll have a pretty good time with Episode III, but my advice to the non-die-hards is to pace yourself, because it's easy to burn-out quickly.

Book Review: *A Dirty Job*

by *Steven H Silver*

Death stalks the streets of San Francisco in Christopher Moore's latest novel, *A Dirty Job*. This isn't a metaphor, as when Moore subjected San Francisco to vampires in *Bloodsucking Fiends*, but a statement of fact, although it doesn't quite go far enough. In *A Dirty Job*, the streets (and sewers) of San Francisco play host to Death, Death Merchants, demons, zombified squirrels, and a pair of four hundred pound Hell Hounds.

As may be indicated by the above listed contents, *A Dirty Job* is a humorous novel of the sort one might find from Terry Pratchett, Tom Holt, or any of a number of other humorous fantastists. In fact, all of Moore's novels rank among the best in the field and if you have not yet made his acquaintance, you have nearly 2,900 pages of humor to enjoy. But for now, we're discussing his most recent book.

Charlie Asher only becomes aware that Death is in San Francisco when he sees a strange black man wearing mint green clothing standing over his wife, Rachel, who has just given birth to their daughter, Sophie. The man, surprised that Charlie can see him, tells Charlie that Rachel has died. While this may not seem a good starting point for a humorous novel, Moore makes it work with a combination of situational humor and jokes.

Raising Sophie as a single father—although with the assistance of his lesbian sister, Jane; the part-time help at his second-hand store: Lily, the Goth high school student and Ray, the former cop who worked for Charlie; and his tenants, Mrs. Ling and Mrs. Korjev—again is not the sort of plot which readily lends itself to humor. Nevertheless, as Sophie grows and Charlie attempts to deal with the oddities which seem to surround

her, Moore brings his own off-beat sense of humor to the novel in a way which has the reader laughing out loud.

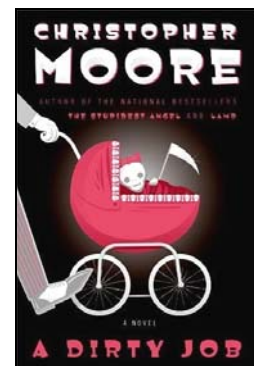
Each of Moore's supporting characters have their own quirks which make them memorable, from Ray's attempts to find an actual Filipino woman over the internet instead of gay men to Mrs. Ling's constant quest for additions to her diet. While each of these characters can be identified by their foibles, Moore also infuses them all with a humanity which makes them come to life.

Eventually, Charlie realizes that, like the stranger he saw over Rachel's maternity/death bed, he also is tied in some way to death. This is not a realization which came easily to Charlie, especially since the instruction manual he was sent went missing. Moore applies all the humor which can occur when one gets acclimatized to a new job to Charlie's new vocation, although he removes all possibility of Charlie getting help from co-workers.

Charlie Asher grew out of research Moore did for an earlier novel, *Fluke*. While researching that novel, about whales off the coast of Hawaii,

Author: Christopher Moore
ISBN: 0060590270
Publisher: William Morrow
Release date: March, 2006

\$24.95, 400 pages,
hardcover



Moore learned about the idea of a Beta male in the animal kingdom and began to apply the information he learned to human beings. His explanations for the role of the Human Beta Male and for the survival of its genes is among the funniest, and possibly most true, portions of *A Dirty Job*.

While the humor is in high gear from the first page of the novel, it does take a little while before the plot hits high gear, with Orcus, the Roman god of death, and the Morrigan, his Celtic minion, living in the sewers beneath San Francisco waiting for their chance to take over the world. When they realize that Charlie is only stumbling along without any real guidance, they see it as their chance to bring their plans to fruition.

A Dirty Job doesn't manage to maintain its pace throughout. When Moore introduces Audrey and her dressed squirrels, it is almost as if he has added one too many unbelievable things into the mix. The ideas and the humor are just as vibrant, but the plot goes just a little too far. The overall plot of the novel is strong enough to overcome this momentary set back and Audrey, if not the squirrels, proves interesting and important.

Although Moore has been touted as the next great thing since his first novel, *Practical Demon-keeping*, appeared in 1992, and he appeared to really hit his stride with *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal* in 2002, amazingly enough, *A Dirty Job* is his first novel to hit the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Reading it, or any of his eight previous novels, will quickly show that he is not just a humorous, but a novelist with a keen insight into human behavior.

Despite the admittedly strange situation all the characters find themselves in, each one has

their own motivation for doing what they do. They all come to life in a manner where there actions are reasonably predictable in any normal situation, although Moore feels no compunction to place any of them into a normal situation. When he does, as when Charlie is walking his daughter's dogs on Nob Hill, Moore quickly introduces humor to make sure the reader knows he owns the situation.

Moore ultimately brings the novel to a satisfying conclusion, mixing humor and pathos in just the right quantities to bring the novel back to its roots in reality. The fact that Moore can tie his world of demons and Death in to the world in which we all live demonstrates his talent as an author and a fantasist. His ability to make his world funny even as Death stalks the streets puts him at the forefront of humorists, ranking with Terry Pratchett, whose *Mort* did a similar thing, although in a very different setting, Carl Hiaasen, or Kinky Friedman.

Each of Moore's works are satisfying as fiction and for the quirky worldview they espouse. His Death-filled San Francisco provides a satirical look multiculturalism and at the way Americans deal with death. His points are neatly couched in his humor and while reading *A Dirty Job* take a back seat to all the things which make a novel entertaining.

Steven H Silver is a five-time Hugo Nominee for Best Fan Writer and the editor of the anthologies Wondrous Beginnings, Magical Beginnings, and Horrible Beginnings. He is the publisher of ISFiC Press. In addition to maintaining several bibliographies and the Harry Turtledove website, Steven is heavily involved in convention running and publishes the fanzine Argentus.

Book Review: *The Ghost Brigades* **by Matthew Appleton**

Although he didn't know it when writing *The Ghost Brigades*, John Scalzi now finds himself in the envious position of having to meet lofty expectations after fans made his debut novel, *Old Man's War*, a recently announced finalist for the

Hugo Award. To be sure, Scalzi is not the first SF writer to find himself in this scenario—Suzanne Clarke, who has not yet released a follow-up, found herself in the same position just last year thanks to *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. Nor was

Old Man's War as wildly successful as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, which pretty much swept every major award SF had to offer. However, neither of these examples lessens Scalzi's accomplishment or lowers the anticipation for *The Ghost Brigades*.

Enough preamble... Did Scalzi deliver a worthy sequel to *Old Man's War*?

Absolutely.

Actually, *The Ghost Brigades* isn't a sequel in the sense that many SF readers are accustomed. Back in December, Scalzi released a 28-page chapbook, *Questions for a Soldier*, which continued the story of John Perry, the protagonist of *Old Man's War*, past the closing of the novel. Yes, it's a novella, but is a direct sequel that picks up where *OMW* ended. More importantly, *Ghost Brigades* only includes a few supporting characters from *OMW*, making more of a novel set in the universe of *OMW* rather than a direct sequel. I may be splitting hairs, but in my mind this is a discernable difference.

Ironically, even though it's better categorized as set in the universe of *OMW*, the early chapters of *The Ghost Brigades* include the type of info-dump that you normally see in sequels. However, these portions of narrative actually provide all new information to the readers, thus making the text somewhat different from the usual back story filler. In *OMW*, this back story—which chronicles the beginning of human expansion into space, the founding of the Colonial Defense Forces, the reasons why the CDF operates the way it does, and the eventual formation of the Ghost Brigades—was both largely irrelevant to the plot and outside the narrative purview of John Perry. However, that information is vital to the plot of *Ghost Brigades* and its protagonist, Jerad Dirac.

For those not familiar with *OMW*, the Ghost Brigades are the special forces of the CDF, the military organization defending Earth and its colonies from the numerous hostile lifeforms inhabiting the galaxy. The Brigades are composed of soldiers cloned from deceased individuals who signed a letter of intent to enlist in the regular CDF but died before actually joining. They are essentially created with the sole purpose of defending humanity and because of their segregation from

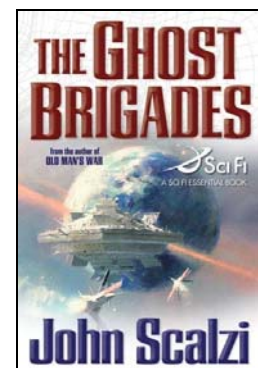
the regular forces, referred to as the "Realborn," they feel uncomfortable in their presences and vice versa. As a result, Brigade members know no other life, and most choose to sign up for another tour when their initial, mandatory ten-year enlistment ends.

Yet, even among the Ghost Brigades, Jerad Dirac differs greatly. Unlike the others, during his "birth" the CDF implanted the memories of Charles Boutin, a military scientist who turned traitor and is now working for a new coalition of aliens that can easily overwhelm the CDF. The CDF attempted this unusual procedure in the hopes of getting access to those memories so that they can apprehend Boutin and potentially stop the coalition before it starts its offensive. Unfortunately, the experimental procedure did not work as hoped, and when it appears that Dirac lacks the ability to access Boutin's memories, he is placed in the Ghost Brigades so as to not waste the body. Not without a shred of hope, those who authorized the experiment keep tabs on him in case he does find a way to access them. Thanks to the copy on the dust jacket, it comes as no surprise that Dirac eventually manages to make that breakthrough, and the CDF and the Ghost Brigades spring into action.

Because we know ahead of time that Dirac will make that breakthrough, we are able to see signs that the implantation will eventually prove successful, even though the CDF is unsure of whether it really took hold or not. Dirac takes to understanding humor more quickly than most of his fellow Green Brigaders—side note: how is it that Data's struggle with humor in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* has become such a defining human characteris-

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hardcover



tic in so much SF?—and he’s more likely to come up with original, adaptive ideas than others in his platoon. Based on his sporadic interactions with the Realborn, Dirac also appears somewhat more at ease than other Brigaders when dealing with them. Before he’s able to access Boutin’s memories, it certainly seems like his subconscious is able to tap into them and make it easier for him to function more like a Realborn would.

However, harboring those memories carries a huge downside as well: the CDF fears that when Dirac can fully access them that he will become Boutin and then they will have a traitor in a supersoldier’s body in their midst. As a result, his watchers harbor a fear that if and when he does breakthrough to Boutin’s consciousness Dirac won’t actually help them. However, because they have no other way to ascertain where Boutin himself is, they have no choice but to let this experiment run its course. Thus, an important theme to the novel is the question of identity and how one’s personality forms. The old “nature versus nurture” debate inevitably comes into play, and Scalzi does an interesting job of making it somewhat unclear just whom Dirac really is and where loyalties lie once Boutin’s memories and personality surface and integrate into his persona.

In addition to exploring what shapes and drives us as individuals, Scalzi also examines prejudices and group mentality. As stated before, the Realborn have a hard time interacting with members of the Green Brigades. Part of this is because the Realborn don’t view Dirac and his fellow soldiers as fully human, and part of it is a *Frankenstein*-inspired fear of their genetic creation (more on *Frankenstein* later). Conversely, the Green Brigaders feel that Realborn are frustratingly slow and think the way that they mature and find a purpose in life is woefully inefficient. It’s as if Scalzi is suggesting that such prejudices are almost a part of human nature—harboring them is very natural. Assuringly, Scalzi also shows through Dirac’s interaction with some Realborn that one can overcome such prejudices.

While examining the human mentality, Scalzi does a number of other interesting things. While the back story provides information necessary to *Ghost Brigades*, it also provides answers to some of

the questions some readers had about *OMW*, such as why the CDF only recruits the elderly, why Earth itself seems not much further technologically advanced than it is now at the beginning of the 21st century and why only people from developing nations on Earth are allowed to emigrate to the colonies. This info-dump also explains why the Ghost Brigades were formed and why the CDF employs them in such a fashion. In other words, reading *Ghost Brigades* makes it easier to understand some of what happens in *OMW*.

As he fills in the details to this particular vision of the future, Scalzi also takes the time to pander to his SF audience and insert some SF commentary of his own. It starts during basic training when Dirac and his fellow newly created Brigaders are told to read *Frankenstein* as a way of understanding why the Realborn fear them. They ultimately use Shelley’s novel as a launching point for an exploration of how humankind views created beings such as themselves. Most works, such as the *Terminator* films, Asimov’s robot novels and Heinlein’s *Friday*, receive mention only in passing, but a few works in particular get the notice from the Green Brigaders: *The Forever War*, *War of the Worlds*, *Ender’s Game*, *Starship Troopers* (both the movie and the novel) and *Star Wars*. In each of these instances, Scalzi shows how they responded, giving at least one key reaction or conclusion the group formed after encountering them. The SF references don’t end there though. As the novel unfolds, we encounter a new type of human genetically designed to live in space, and we find out that all these individuals are given the last name of science fiction authors.

If there’s a weakness to the novel, it comes in the form of Jane Sagan. [Warning: the following paragraph is a spoiler for those who have not yet read *Old Man’s War*.] She was the Ghost Brigader who figured most prominently in *OMW*, and because of the ending of that novel, we know that she eventually serves out her initial 10-year term and then retires to forge a new life with John Perry. She leads the team that is sent to retrieve Boutin, and as a result, the climax of the novel suffers from a flaw shared by most episodic entertainment: we know that whatever happens, she’s getting out alive. Furthermore, Scalzi structures the

climax in a manner that pretty much assures us that if Sagan survives then some sort of positive resolution occurs. On the other hand, Sagan serves as the major link tying *Old Man's War* and *Ghost Brigades* together, and any time you have a sequel, it's comforting as a reader to recognize at least one character from the previous work.

As stated previously, *The Ghost Brigades* is absolutely a worthy sequel to *Old Man's War*. Aside from stroking the ego of SF fans, Scalzi writes an entertaining tale filled with questions of identity (both group and individual), pre-determination,

and morality. However, he doesn't allow discussions of those concepts slow the pacing of the novel down and the action in the novel never really slows down once Dirac leaves training for the hostile galaxy he must combat. Along the way, Scalzi makes interesting use of some standard SF tropes—and names the authors from whom he liberally borrowed in the Acknowledgements section—and manages to include a couple interesting twists and surprises. Above all, *The Ghost Brigades* is an entertaining novel that points to a continued bright future for Scalzi as an SF author of note.

LETTER OF COMMENT

Some Fantastic remains one of the truly great sercons that are out there. There's *Emerald City*, which doesn't have those great leader articles that *SF* opens with, and there's *Meta* by Geneva Melzack that comes close too.

Opening with an interview is a smart move, but opening with an interview with a guy who is best known for his short works is a master stroke. I can say that I've read a few pieces of his short stuff, mostly on BART trains while taking one of my rare trips to San Francisco when I always buy a copy of *F&SF*. I'd love to hear the epic poem set for four voices.

The Factwhore Proposition is one of the truly great titles of all-time, right up there with Vonnegut's *The Great Space Fuck*.

When I first saw the cover for *Carpe Demon*, I instantly assumed it was a new Christopher Moore book. I mean, look at it! It's so obviously a Moore work. Still, the review makes it sound very different from Chris' works, which I love.

Goats made me laugh a lot. I watched the *Aristocrats* the other day, the documentary about the dirty joke that 100 different comedians tell, and the punch line, following as much filth, sleaze and slime as can be filled into the space of the telling of a family act, is "Hey, that's some act. What do you call it?" "The Aristocrats!" One of the comedians then said in his updated version, the agent comes back with "Are you married to the Aristocrats name?" That just reminded me of it. Hell as an attraction hasn't gotten much play since Dante popped on by. Some would say its tourist status was last big in the Greek/Roman era.

Genevieve, my Ex and mother of Evelyn (aka The Little One), loves Terry Pratchett and said that she like *Thud!* a lot, but noticed the errors in the printing. I've never read any Pratchett (save for a couple of shorts) and I met him a couple of times and he was really nice. He also looks exactly like one of my co-workers' husband and the photo of the two of them together shows how similar they appear.

Editorial: Odds and Ends

This time last year, I found myself in the fortunate position of possessing more material than I normally have when putting an issue together. I decided to split the material into two issues, first a regularly scheduled issue of average size and then a month later a smaller, unscheduled supplemental issue. Through the first 1½ years of publication, that was the only time I was blessed with such a bounty of reviews and features... Until now.

Thanks in no small part to a number of new people who volunteered to write for *Some Fantastic*, I ended up with the articles that make up this 60-page installment. I played with the idea of splitting the issue into two as I did last year, but then I decided that I would enjoy putting out an issue that's nearly twice the size of a regular issue much more. Hopefully, in the future we'll see more from the new faces appearing in this issue and that the average page count of *Some Fantastic* will remain larger than it has been to date.

If that does become the case, then it's time to find a better layout program. I put together all the issues thus far, including this one, using Microsoft Word. Not so bad if you're talking about a small newsletter, but a 60-page 'zine with inset tables, images and text boxes... oh, the humanity. It's like cutting a two-acre lawn with just an old-fashioned, purely manual push-mower: yeah, it can be done, but it's going to kick your ass and leave lots of green stains all over your shoes while you're at it. Hopefully, I will find the cash to pick up iWorks sometime soon (InDesign and QuarkXPress are way out of my price range) so that I can become proficient enough with it in time for the Summer issue.

Unfortunately, I didn't receive as many responses to the First Annual *Some Fantastic* Reader's Poll as

(continued on next page)

I loved *Batman Begins*. There was a lot of great acting and even better cinematography. That's what happens when you put a great director of straight films in with a solid archetypal character and let him make a good story of it. It is a slight bit performance heavy, with Cillian Murphy and Tom Willerson both going a tad over the top, but neither detracted from the film. In fact, Murphy took what could have been a minor role and turned it into something memorable. He's gonna be a big star. I

Editorial

(continued from page 59)

I hoped I would. In fact, only three people responded. With such a meager response, other than listing the winners of the two signed Kim Stanley Robinson paperbacks, there's really nothing else to report. So, without further ado, the winners are Keith Dowling from Philadelphia, PA and Wendy Stengel from Washington, DC. Keith is receiving the *The Years of Rice and Salt* paperback and Wendy is receiving *40 Signs of Rain*.

I had already planned to run a review of *Fledgling* before Octavia E. Butler passed away, and the fact that it will be both the first and last of her novels reviewed in these pages is disheartening. I first encountered her work when the SFBC released her *Lilith's Brood* series in an omnibus titled *Xenogenesis* while I was in high school, and that book has survived each of the occasional cullings I sometimes undertake to keep my collection from taking over my living room. I also met her briefly at a book signing after she made a speaking appearance at the Smithsonian this past fall, and she was very engaging in my brief interaction with her. She is the first big name SF writer I met in person to pass away, and like so many others, I am saddened to hear her voice silenced.

Finally, just after the Winter issue was published, William Lutz, a former college professor of mine, directed my attention to Murray Leinster's "A Logic Named Joe" and suggested I re-read it. Damn, the terminology is all askew and the dialog is a type of horribly dated 1940's New York slang, but otherwise it amazingly anticipates the Internet age and all the issues regarding access to information and privacy that came with it. Usually, modern technological advances hobble Golden Age era SF (look no further than the opening chapter of Leinster's *The Forgotten Planet* for a particularly cringe-worthy example), but in this case the story is more than strong enough to overcome those flaws. You should find a copy and read it when you get the chance.

—Matthew

love Christian Bale, and here he was at his walking the razor best.

I kinda wish the "Economics of The Wizarding World" was the lead article. It's one of those stories that *Some Fantastic* runs that few other zines would think to print and that are very entertaining and enlightening. I think there's a definite anti-Marxist lean to all of the ways presented in *Harry Potter*. The existence of a servant class (the House Elf), the obvious upper-class (Malfoys, Blacks, etc) and the lack of obvious wizarding dispersal structures all point to a more-or-less capitalist concept for the wizarding world, though certainly one based on precious metals. It's best equated to the US before the Civil War, I'd imagine.

Infinity Crisis seems to have either tied up the loose ends that came from *Zero Hour* and the unexplained portions of *Crisis*, or it opened up new ones. It's hard to tell. All I care about is Earth C-Plus returning so that I can get Capt. Carrot and His Amazing Zoo Crew back for more adventures.

Good stuff!

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SOME FANTASTIC

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