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Winter 2011

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SFRA Review

A publication of the Science Fiction Research Association

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The *SFRA Review* encourages submissions of reviews, review essays that cover several related texts, interviews, and feature articles. Submission guidelines are available at <http://www.sfra.org/> or by inquiry to the appropriate editor. All submitters must be current SFRA members. Contact the Editors for other submissions or for correspondence.

Continuity of Leadership in Interesting Times

Doug Davis and Jason Embry

AS WE SIT to write our first editorial for this, the two hundred and ninety fifth issue of the *SFRA Review*, the rest of the world is marveling at the intensity of the popular revolutions now sweeping several of the globe's autocratic states. Social-network-fueled calls for changes of leadership are being met with tanks and thugs, and we cheer the courage of people willing to put their lives at stake for the causes of free association, workers' rights and the abolition of total state power. Meanwhile, we quietly celebrate our own transition of leadership. For once again, the executive and administrative leadership of the Science Fiction Research Association has largely changed hands—and with nary a hiccup to disturb the peace of our own congress. This smooth process of transition is the surest sign of a healthy organization.

Yet as they indicate in their editorials below, our new executive board is also caught up in the global high-tech revolutionary spirit of the 21st century. They too have grand plans to integrate new communication technologies into the workings of the SFRA and revolutionize how we as an organization conduct our daily business. It is only fitting, then, that this year's annual SFRA conference will take place on an international stage in Poland, a nation that over the past decades has experienced its own share of inspiring political transition and social change.

For our editorial part, we know that we have inherited a good publication and we desire to continue the previous editorial board's initiatives to make the *SFRA Review* a worldly space both for insightful commentary across media and for helpful feature articles that keep our membership abreast of the latest trends in science fiction media, scholarship and pedagogy. To that end, editor Jason Embry has contributed a feature article on his experience using science fiction in the remedial college writing classroom. We invite all members of the SFRA to contribute reviews, interviews and feature articles to this publication that demonstrate, always and in their own ways, that science fiction is the truest art of our global moment. ■

"Come Gather 'Round People..."

Ritch Calvin

*All that you touch
You change,
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
Is Change.
God
Is Change.*

IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S NOVEL *The Parable of the Talents*, she constructs a character and a religion that exalts the role, importance and inevitability of change. While Butler's novel, and the ideas contained therein, have not been universally accepted, they nevertheless raise the specter of change and the ways in which people, individually and collectively, might adjust to those changes.

However, I am "writing" this column in between bouts of snow shoveling. We have had a record amount of snow this month, with more expected before we close out January, 2011. While doubtless impossible to pin the snow on any one factor—La Niña, global warming, etc.—change does seem to be on the way. Climatologists now suggest that, by the year 2050, the local weather (on Long Island) will be the same as the local weather in Atlanta today. Good or bad, can't say.

What does all this have to do with science fiction and the SFRA? Well, over the past two years, the Executive Committee (Lisa Yaszek, Mack Hassler, Patrick Sharp, Adam Frisch, and I) dubbed itself the "transitional EC." We recognized (at least some of) the changes occurring—in science fiction, in academia and scholarship, in publishing, in computing and technology, and in communications. We could have continued to operate according to the extant models and methods or we could embrace the changes and attempt to incorporate them into the SFRA and the Executive Committee.

Historically, each new Executive Committee traveled to meet, often at the President's location. This year, in part because of scheduling issues, and in part because of technology, we decided to change that. We held our first EC meeting Saturday, January 22 via teleconfer-

ence. We will hold several follow-up meetings via Skype conference call. Breaking the EC meeting into a series of shorter, technologically enabled meetings allows us more flexibility. In addition, the Skype meetings will save the organization a good deal of money. And let's face it, when I take that Skype conference call via my iPhone as I sit in my back yard or wander through the store, I really will feel like the age of Dick Tracy—or Philip K. Dick—is upon us.

As the themes at the Eaton conference (February 2011) and the upcoming SFRA conference indicate, SF has become truly global—which is not to suggest that SF has not always been global. However, technological changes make production, distribution and consumption of global SF possible in new ways. We certainly hope to see you in Poland for the annual conference. Register early, for both the SFRA and for the conference. I want to remind everyone that the SFRA, in keeping with most professional and academic organizations, made a decision to require all conference participants to be members of the SFRA.

For more information, please see conference organizer Pawel Frelik's "State of the Conference" column in this issue of the Review. Finally, if money is a concern (and of course it is for nearly everyone), please look at the SFRA travel grants (located on the SFRA website). The SFRA does have an award for travel money based on need. You can only get it if you apply at <<http://www.sfra.org/node/38>>.

While it may be cliché to say so, it is true that this organization is only as strong and vital as its membership. I would like to re-iterate Lisa Yaszek's sentiment and to sincerely thank all the candidates who ran for office (Libby Ginway, James Thrall, Jim Davis, Pawel Frelik) and those who now constitute the awards committees (Gary Wolfe, Marleen Barr, Brian Attebery, Sherryl Vint, De Witt Kilgore, Neil Easterbrook, Paul Kincaid, Andy Sawyer, Joan Gordon, Jason Ellis, Susan George, Sharon Sharp, David Mead, Alfredo Suppia, and James Thrall). (Please have a look at these committees on the SFRA website, and consider whether you might be willing to serve on one of them.) We also have a dynamic team of new editors on board at the SFRA Review (Doug Davis, Jason Embry, Michael Klein, and Jim Davis). I would also like to thank personally the outgoing members of the Executive Committee, Mack Hassler and Adam Frisch. It has been an honor and privilege to serve with them, and I hope I learned some things from them!

Apart from the positions on the Executive Committee and the SFRA Review, we have created a number of new, largely technology-related positions. Matt Holtmeier continues to serve as the webmaster. The previous EC ushered in a shift to a new, Drupal-based website. Through that site, we hope to continue to innovate membership, renewals, resources, databases, and so on—send us your ideas, as well! Our media and PR director is R. Nicole Smith, who has a huge list of innovations in terms of social media. Please stay tuned for these changes. Thanks to both for their input and efforts.

Historically, the EC has brought quite a number of issues before the membership by way of the business meeting, usually held on the Sunday morning of the conference weekend. However, technology once again allows us a number of ways to change that pattern and to enable wider participation from the membership. After all, while we do usually have a good turnout for the business meetings—and appreciate all those who do attend—it is still only a fraction of the full membership. Technological tools such as Survey Monkey allow us to create a mechanism whereby we can poll the entire membership for guidance on SFRA business matters. We already have several polls in the works, so be sure to look for these on the SFRA website, the SFRA Facebook page, or via Twitter feed.

It is an exciting time; the pace of change continues to accelerate, at least until the singularity. Until that time, "Come writers and critics who prophesize with your pens...." ■

VICE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Calling All Hands

Jason W. Ellis

I WOULD LIKE to begin by saying "thank you" for electing me SFRA Vice President. As the new Vice President, I dedicate myself to growing the member rolls by expanding the membership in academia as well as fandom. I will continue the successful new media policies of Ritch Calvin, our current president and former vice president, and I will expand these in new and exciting ways. Even though the SFRA is a well-established and successful organization, we must carry our momentum forward. The SFRA has a tremendous opportunity at this time to fully implement new tools of

communication and social networking to involve more existing and future members of the organization, and I pledge myself to using these technologies in addition to tried-and-true face-to-face, mail and print methods of growing and maintaining our membership. However, I cannot do this alone. I will rely on the important work of our Publicity Director R. Nicole Smith and Web Director Matthew Holtmeier, and I will also need all hands to encourage your colleagues, students and friends to join in our work discussing, researching and teaching science fiction and fantasy across all media. This will be made even easier after new promotional materials are made available for download on sfra.org. There are other ways to get involved, too. One way is to participate in upcoming surveys that the Executive Committee will use to inform our decision-making. More importantly, I want to encourage everyone to join the discussions in Poland (sfra2011.pl) this summer as well as the online conversations on sfra.org, Facebook (search "Science Fiction Research Association), twitter.com/sfranews and our email listserv where we can continue to develop the SFRA's reputation as a helpful and professionally nurturing organization of the best and brightest in the field. It will be a pleasure working for you and with you in the coming two years. If you would like to contribute ideas or volunteer your time with recruitment, please contact me at dynamicsubspace@gmail.com. Thanks again! ■

SECRETARY'S REPORT

Minutes of the SFRA Board Meeting, January 22, 2011

Susan A. George

In attendance (via conference call):

Ritch Calvin, President

Jason Ellis, Vice President

Patrick Sharp, Treasurer

Susan A. George, Secretary

Lisa Yaszek, Immediate Past President

First meeting of new SFRA Executives

- SFRA Review—Jason Ellis suggested that all the new officers write a "note" to the membership as way of introduction. All agree it is a good idea.

- Ritch Calvin suggested we should all review the official duties and association by-laws so we can discuss

them or clarify any confusion about them.

- Jason discussed the filling of the new PR position. R. Nicole Smith is the new Publicity Director and she had become a member of SFRA. We also discussed and decided all people holding any position in SFRA have to be members and to add that to the by-laws as it is suggested but not stated.

- Lisa raised concerns about the designs for the Pioneer and Pilgrim awards because the original engraving patterns have been lost and we will need to have new ones made soon. She wondered if this executive board should deal with it. Ritch affirmed that this board should take care of the problem—there is no reason to put it off. Lisa volunteered to scan the designs and start working with Nicole on the issue.

- Ritch noted that we need to add the Publicity Director and Social Media position into the by-laws. Jason seconded the proposal.

- Lisa raised the issue of the webmaster and if that position should have a term limit as the other positions do. There was a great deal of discussion on this issue because the position requires a skill set that not many people have and if they do they don't have a lot of time to contribute. However, we have found that there are many kind and generous folks in SFRA that stay in positions longer than they would if there was a replacement. So, we decided it would be a 4 year term and the same person can run for that position more than once; that way, if the person wants to continue to do it s/he can and if s/he wants to step down s/he can gracefully.

- Ritch brought up the various award committees and the need to find replacements for them all. Basically, we are all to think about it and get back to the board about it. There was also discussion about the Student Paper Award. The committee had a hard time deciding this year and wanted to know if there could be an honorable mention in addition to the award. After discussion we decided not to establish an honorable mention, but to tell the committee if they wanted to list one they could. We agreed with Patrick, the new Treasurer, that there would be no cash award, but it would serve as a fine CV entry for students.

Financial and Membership Matters

- Patrick now has PayPal set up and working. However, PayPal does charge for the transactions and while SFRA is covering it this year, he proposed that the charge, unfortunately, should probably be passed on to the members. He suggested a \$3 fee for membership and \$1 per journal renewal and this is only for those

who use PayPal. We agreed that the executive committee would vote on the issue in Poland and fees would not apply until next year if it passes.

- Patrick also noted that in the future the transition from Treasurer to Treasurer needs to be done face-to-face. It will solve a lot of problems with the transfer of the account, paperwork, etc. The board agreed that we need to keep that in mind when the next treasurer is voted in.

- Patrick noted that membership renewal was going slowly until he put out the message on the listserve and things have picked up. He has sent the numbers and list of membership to Susan, the new secretary, and will send the latest updates by the end of the month.

- Ritch noted that early registration for the conference in Lublin, Poland is going a bit slowly and that we need to generate more interest and remind members to register as soon as possible for the coming conference. Lisa thought it might be helpful to remind members that SFRA does give grants to help scholars attend the conferences and they should apply for the Poland conference.

Other Issues

- Lisa suggested we might want to set up a wiki for conference directors and executive board members to share thoughts, pointers and suggestions about the conference and executive positions such as turning over the account to the new treasurer face-to-face. So, Ritch will talk to Matt Holtmeier about creating the wiki.

- Lisa also noted that there is not one place where all SFRA documents are stored and accessible to the organization. She suggested that the new board should consolidate, preserve and store all SFRA documents for the future.

- Jason suggested we use the listserv and SFRA Review to link to online surveys to poll the membership about the organization, its future and ability to meet members' needs.

- Ritch confirmed with Matt Holtmeier that we can create an online directory that is password protected without Drupal installation leading to transition to an electronic directory in the future. While we all felt the move to an online pdf version was the way to go, there were concerns about security issues and whether being registered for sfra.org constituted sufficient security.

- We all discussed using Skype for future meetings and to keep in touch over the year. Susan still has to set up an account and find technology allowing for it. ■

SFRA TREASURER'S REPORT

State of the Finances

Patrick B. Sharp

I have been getting up to speed on the complex job of Treasurer and am glad to report that the SFRA is in good financial shape: the organization currently has \$69,414.72 in the bank. Our membership numbers are a bit low right now—we currently have 200 members for 2011—but renewals and new membership applications are coming in every day. With the help of our webmaster Matthew Holtmeier (and the approval of the Executive Committee), we have now made it possible for members to order discounted subscriptions of *Femspec*, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, *Locus*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, and *Foundation* through the SFRA website. This has already led to a number of members ordering some of these journals for the first time. A reminder to renew was sent out over the listserv, and I am working with the Secretary on another round of mailings to members who have yet to renew. ■

ORGANIZER'S REPORT

SFRA 2011 Conference Lublin, Poland

Pawel Frelik

From July 7 through July 10, 2011, the Science Fiction Research Association will hold its annual conference in Lublin, Poland. The conference theme—"Dreams Not Only American—Science Fiction's Transatlantic Transactions"—reflects the conference venue. This is only the second SFRA conference to be held outside North America so it seems natural that we should focus on all modes and aspects of fantastic transactions between Europe and America(s). Needless to say, papers and panels on all other topics pertinent to SFRA's scope of interests are also more than welcome. The detailed call for papers is posted on the conference website.

Instead of guest writers, we have decided to host academic keynote speakers who will present lectures related to the theme of the conference. At this point, I am extremely happy to announce that two scholars

have agreed to speak in Lublin: Darko Suvin (Professor Emeritus, McGill University) and Roger Luckhurst (Birkbeck College, University of London). We may be adding a third name to the roster and the tentative titles of their lectures will be posted on the website in early spring.

Given that 2011 is also the 90th anniversary of Stanislaw Lem's birthday and the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Solaris*, we are working on integrating some Lem-related items in the program. At this time, we can promise the closed screening of the 1968 Russian television adaptation of the novel (needless to say with English subtitles) directed by Boris Nirenburg—yes, one that predates Tarkovsky's version by four years!

While it is too early to talk about the program, one difference from the previous years is that we will begin on Thursday morning (7th July), which means that attendants will probably want to arrive on Wednesday. The conference programming will continue until Saturday with the customary awards banquet on Saturday night and the SFRA business meeting on Sunday morning. On Friday, there will be no papers and sessions after lunch—we have planned a half-day excursion outside Lublin (including a visit to the one-of-the-kind-in-Poland museum of Socialist Realist art) with dinner in the evening.

Those afraid that because of the distance and the new territory (for SFRA, anyway) the logistic side of attendance may be somewhat more complicated need not fear any more. The conference website features step-by-step instructions on how to proceed with registration, including online registration and online payment of the conference fee. The site also lists conference hotels with all necessary info to make a booking. We have negotiated what I believe are very good rates for all four nights, which should at least partly offset higher costs of travel. The website also features general tips concerning getting to Lublin and we will be adding some advice and suggestions for those wanting to do some traveling in Poland before or after the conference.

This does not mean that Lublin itself has little to offer—it is a truly unique city! The eighth largest in Poland and the largest east of the Vistula, Lublin is renowned for its education and cultural life. Home to four universities and several other institutions of higher education, it is also now a candidate for the title of the European City of Culture in 2016. The results will be announced in June but Lublin is now officially shortlisted in the second round of the competition, which has already resulted in even more varied and frantic cultural activity.

Among many attractions Lublin boasts the atmospheric Old Town with numerous pubs and cafes—and there is no better place to be in summer. Big enough to offer more than one can possibly take in and small enough to retain its unique character and avoid the mad rush of a metropolis, Lublin is where you will want to be in July 2011.

Now and always—everything starts at <http://sfra2011.pl>. And you can always ask at sfra2011@gmail.com. And you can also follow us on Twitter at [@sfra2011](https://twitter.com/sfra2011).

PS. Last but not least (after all, we live in late capitalism)—the favorable exchange rate of Polish Zloty (PLN) guarantees your dollars or Euros will go a bit further. ■

ANNOUNCEMENT

Remembering Neil Barron

Robert Reginald

(Richard) Neil Barron, 76, well-known SF critic, died on Sept. 5, 2010 at Las Vegas, NV. He was born Mar. 23, 1934 in Hollywood, CA, the son of James C. Barron and Dorothy Terrell. He married Carolyn Wittsell on Aug. 19, 1978 (she died on Sept. 14, 2002). After receiving his Master's in Library Science from UC Berkeley, he worked as a librarian between 1964-70, 1972-73 and 1989-96. He also worked for World Book from 1973-88.

Barron is best known for his series of authoritative critical anthologies, *Anatomy of Wonder* (five editions, 1976-2004), which provided historical and contemporary coverage of the best works in science fiction, plus surveys of the major secondary literature (he penned many of the reviews of the secondary materials himself). He also edited *Horror Literature* (1990), *Fantasy Literature* (1990), *What Do I Read Next?* (1994), *What Fantastic Fiction Do I Read Next?* (two editions, 1998-99), and *Fantasy and Horror* (1999). He further edited the review magazine, *Science Fiction & Fantasy Book Review* (1979-80), the contents of which were published in a single book volume in 2009.

In each of these works, he demonstrated a firm and fair editorial hand, seeking to balance the opinions of his reviewers, and gaining a reputation for providing the best, most even-handed single-volume guides to fantastic literature that have yet been published. His

dispassionate voice also echoed throughout the publications of the Science Fiction Research Association, with which he was heavily involved throughout most of his life; he contributed hundreds of reviews of secondary works in the field to this organization's newsletter, and to many other journals as well. He received the Pilgrim Award from SFRA for his lifetime contributions to SF criticism in 1982.

Mary and I frequently visited Neil and Carolyn at their home in Vista, CA, until her untimely passing, and found them an ideal couple: loving, caring, and a great deal of fun. Neil's knowledge of the SF field, particularly its secondary sources, was unsurpassed; but he also displayed an encyclopedic knowledge of many other fields as well. After the publication of the Fifth Edition of *Anatomy of Wonder*, he retired from writing, cut his ties with those he had known previously, and dropped from sight. He was missed then, and will be even more missed now. Rest in peace, my old friend.

Feature 101

Genre Fiction in the (Pre)College Writing Classroom

Jason Embry

This will not come as a surprise to many of you, but students who will not read three pages for school sometimes read thousands of pages from books like the *Twilight Saga* or the Harry Potter series without being prompted. And not only will they read these books, but they will devour them. They will stay up late at night just to see what happens in the next chapter. Will Edward make Bella into his vampire mate? Will Harry find the last Horcrux and finally defeat Lord Voldemort? The suspense is palpable. The emotion is high. In some cases, the sex is imminent. But, for the reason indicated above, these same students do poorly in their high school English classes. They struggle to find relevance in Hawthorne's early America. They reject the artistry of Shakespeare because they think the language is impenetrable. They ignore the historical moment captured by Steinbeck even though it might reflect their own economic depression. Reading becomes a chore

for these students and the message and the artistry is often lost in the storm of lectures and exams. While they flail at comprehending the texts assigned in their classes, they also flounder at writing what they think about these texts, mostly because they do not think about these texts at all. This attitude promotes a mental block against writing and reading literature.

But not all literature. They freely read the popular novels that imagine the world as genre—fantastic, horrific and futuristic. More importantly, they have something to say about these texts. Their statements might need clarification and editing, but they think about these texts. They react to them. They dream about the characters in these stories. Even if their ideas are unfocused and need support, as many of them seem, most English teachers would kill to have students responding similarly to *The Scarlet Letter*, *King Lear*, or *The Grapes of Wrath*. It is probably for this reason that many teachers assign *Fahrenheit 451*, *Brave New World*, or *1984*. These texts represent visions of compelling other worlds. Not dramatizations of our past, but explorations of our future. But what about *Twilight* and *Harry Potter*? These texts, in a similar fashion, represent engaging and fantastic explorations of our possible present and what creatures might be lurking in the shadows unseen. Ultimately, these texts engage students in what might be, not what has been and this is important because this generation is a generation of dreamers. They believe that they will be American Idols, celebrity designers and sporting heroes with a conviction unequal to previous generations. Sadly, they expect, much like I did when I was younger and taking piano lessons, something magical will happen and their dreams will come true without any attempt on their part to make this happen.

My Small Problem

We are an increasingly forward-thinking, forward-looking culture and this has rubbed off on our youth. We want to believe in more than what we see. This belief manifests not in some spiritual life, oddly enough, but in the convictions that our realities will be greater than they are and they will allow us to play roles that are bigger than the roles we might naturally play. I mention all of this as a prelude to explaining my idea for teaching a Basic Composition course at a small state-funded open-access college thirty miles northeast of Atlanta, Georgia. When I was given my first ENG 0098 Basic Composition course, the one that prepares students for

ENG 0099 Pre-College Composition, I was at a loss. I had taught college composition for the previous six years at two different schools with two very different student populations and found ways to mix contemporary popular culture criticism, and sometimes science fiction, with rhetorical instruction, but I had never had to instruct an entire class of incoming freshmen on writing a coherent paragraph by the end of the semester. The design of the class was that specific. I knew that I would lose them if I used my typical approach. I needed to find some way of reaching students who probably despised English classes by now because they had such difficulty writing effectively and would likely be difficult to engage in class discussion. Even students who enjoy English have difficulty wanting to talk about writing essays. So, knowing what I know about high school students and their obsessions with Harry Potter and Bella Swan, I decided to assign the first two Young Adult (YA) Dystopian novels in a trilogy recently published by Suzanne Collins entitled *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*, respectively. The final novel of the trilogy, *Mockingjay*, was released the same day classes began in the fall of 2010. The reading level was low enough that students with reading issues would be able to keep up and the stories were engaging because they dealt with a futuristic world wracked with hunger, brutality and injustice, with a dash of adolescent cooing in the background. I thought if, as a class, we could make our way through these novels and use them as the inspiration for the weekly writing exercises, I might be able to maintain their interest long enough to help them improve their paragraph construction and move on to the Pre-College Composition course.

My Rationale

As many may know, rhetorical pedagogy has been a frenetic discipline for the last 30 years. As more and more students arrive at college ill-prepared to write correctly and effectively, composition classes have stretched and strained to find a way to appeal to their needs while engaging their minds as well. As the needs of students change from year to year and decade to decade, the first-year writing classroom has sought to meet students where they are, dangling participles, comma splices, absent transitions, unclear thesis statements, and the like. It appears that “where our students are” is sliding progressively backwards into basic usage, grammar, and development troubles. And the numbers of these sections are growing exponentially. Many com-

position teachers, frequently forced to teach first-year composition at their institutions as part of the grunt-labor force, are ill-equipped to teach the course because they have been trained in literary theory, 19th century Asian literature or Shakespeare instead of composition theory and have long since stopped thinking about how to explain writing to a novice. Or, they are graduate students who lack any skills at teaching whatsoever unless they are naturally gifted at connecting with others—another thing many academics seem to have difficulty doing. In other words, while these composition teachers may be good writers themselves, they may not have the gift for explaining how to write to others. Many of these professors spend the first few years of their composition instruction wading through rhetorical primers that blend watered-down rhetorical theory with banal articles on Title IX or the glass ceiling or the “big five”—abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, drug legalization, and gay marriage. While most professors will not fool themselves into thinking that these texts are exciting to freshmen, many will believe that students will have (or should have) opinions about these subjects and be ready and willing to draft and revise essays responding to articles on these subjects using various rhetorical strategies prescribed by the book and supported by the mildly-frustrated literary theorist in front of the class.

These literary theorists, 19th century Asian literature scholars and *King Lear* specialists are wrong. These texts do not appeal to the average college freshman. The rhetorical theory is adequate, but the supplementary texts that must affect change are either trite, superficial or beyond the cultural literacy of the average college freshman. This mismatch is problematic because many professors and editors mistakenly believe that essays written by Dave Eggers, David Sedaris and the whole Salon.com/McSweeney’s crew can be grasped, due to their wit and humor, by most people, when in fact, these authors are generally writing to an audience who they believe has already graduated from college. And articles on Kurt Cobain and Bob Dylan are so out-of-date that many students scratch their heads when confronted with these names and are simply uninterested in thinking about the impact these musicians might have had. Finally, freshmen have very few opinions about the “big five” mentioned earlier that deviate from the standard for/against positions that have been articulated by the generation before them. In my experience, first-year composition students are either bored or confused by these primers because they do

not tie the instruction clearly to the action, and somehow, despite the obvious contradiction, both bored and confused by the supplemental readings that they feel requires no action at all. They have either no opinion on these subjects and do not intend to have opinions on them in the near future, or they have opinions but have no interest in convincing the reader that they have thought through their positions carefully enough to inspire anyone to act, believing most positions are valid for the individual and whether these opinions are right or wrong should be up to someone else. Sometimes the positions are strongly felt but the simple act of stating the opinion appears sufficient to the student and supporting this opinion would be overkill.

This first-year composition dilemma should come as no surprise. Beneath the basic goals of the first-year writing course lay the desire to teach students how to think for themselves. Students often mistake this goal for a request to voice the opinions of their parents, their friends, or worse, their professors. Students believe that if they dutifully report this information, they will pass the course and move on to something that could actually get them a job. They inaccurately view the first-year composition class as a hoop that must be jumped through in order to get to the important classes which contain the vital knowledge and skills that they will need to succeed in the workplace. They do not understand that they need to learn to think, or perhaps at best, learn to think better.

For this reason, students need texts that will engage them about contemporary issues by using unconventional methods. The direct approach to these issues is perceived as boring and results in trite and superficial responses. The best way to engage first-year writing students, and even those who might be considered zero-year writing students, can be found in the dominant mode of representation today, genre fiction. Genre fiction is mercurial in its ability to approach a topic from new angles that can frequently reveal new insights to old problems. It forces the reader to draw connections between the world of the text and the world outside by situating the reader over both worlds and allowing for comparison and analysis. Genre fiction is driven by its forms, whether they are drawn from items that are recognizable or highly speculative. Finally, genre fiction is duality, signaling comparisons to our world while imagining other fantastic, futuristic or horrific worlds, and they are meant to be consumed constantly, worked over tirelessly and debated incessantly. Since its beginnings, genre fiction has sought the consumer in his/her own

turf. While literature with a capital "L" elevates, genre fiction kneels to the level of the consumer and offers itself for consumption, not just once but over and over again. Historically, the popularity of the novel came about despite the cries of outrage from the educated upper classes because the commoner could understand it and immerse himself or herself in the text. Skipping ahead several hundred years, adventure tales, space operas and horror stories found in pulp magazines of the 1930s and 1940s were generally targeted to young boys with allowances to burn and imaginations ripe for exploitation. These boys dreamed of far-off places, futuristic gadgets and supernatural creatures that they could explore, fire and defeat, respectively. Genre fiction in the pulps provided impressionable children with an escape from their everyday world. Many of these boys grew up to be soldiers, scientists and writers who were intent on living out their fictional fantasies, engaging a new generation of boys, and finally girls, just as these men had once been entertained and inspired.

While the novel and the pulps sought the people in the streets and sandlots of the world and told stories that everyday men, women and children could relate to and dream about, these texts were also educating a new echelon of the population underserved in previous generations. This new market found itself being challenged by genre fiction to think about the world and those in power in new and strange ways. Lost utopian valleys in the Himalayas became treatments of new and potentially successful governmental systems. Aliens on distant planets taught us about difference and acceptance. Monsters in the darkness became threats to our moral sensibilities or critiques of our own all-to-familiar base desires. These texts did not simply entertain; they instructed a new population by engaging in social critique with those sections of the population that were generally ignored.

It soon became clear that these modes of fiction were not self-indulgent fantasies of fictional spaces; these texts revealed the fears and dreams of a growing population of readers who longed for change and progress. Over the last five decades, fantasy, science fiction and horror have all been consumed by the general public in print, television, film, and video games. These genres are the dominant mode of social discourse today. The superhero, the alien, the wizard, and the zombie are all modern staples of storytelling that reveal more about the world as it is than about the world as we want it to be. For this reason, I believe that these texts easily reveal to students that they already understand the

social debates being waged by these texts even though they may not fully grasp the nuances that these texts supply to such debates. Instead of using articles from *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Time*, Salon.com, or any of over a hundred newspapers and popular journals that deal with the pressing social issues of today, the use of genre fiction will inspire and prompt class discussion in new, strange and surprising ways.

My Implementation

For the last four years, I have used science fiction in first-year writing courses that focus on argument and research. These classes have been modified and tweaked to account for the cultural literacies of each new group of students. While some groups brought a rich understanding of the impact of technology on contemporary society, allowing them to fully engage with the harder science fiction stories, they often felt unsatisfied by the content and direction of softer, more socially-conscious science fiction. Other groups responded more favorably to the social science fiction and felt alienated by the harder, more technical science fiction of the later periods. This trouble does not refute my position that genre fiction can be useful in engaging 21st century students in the relevant topics of the day. This inevitable hiccup only illustrates that any rhetorical pedagogy, without careful engagement and guidance, can fail the student. Genre stories in the first-year writing classroom do not need to be understood fully for the conversation to begin; only the issues raised by the stories are relevant. As a writing teacher it is vitally important that the students understand that these stories should not be treated as fiction but rather as metaphorical representations of contemporary issues or, in some cases, issues on the horizon.

Science fiction, like the other genres, can be used in the writing classroom to open the door to conversations about race relations, governmental systems, reality television, alienation, mechanization, free will, funding, ethics, morality, religion, zealotry, consumerism, parasitism, family and human relationships, progress, technology, and communication. Fantasy, science fiction and horror all deal with these issues in various ways. Fantasy and adventure tales are often rooted in the hero's journey where the main character must choose to do what is right to save the world from some kind of tyranny. Take for instance the popular *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien. In this series, the humble hobbits who live simple pastoral lives

must carry the One Ring through various regions of monsters and men to the home of the evil Sauron and destroy it in the mountain from which it was forged or the evil tyrant will enslave all of the inhabitants of Middle Earth. This story very openly confronts issues of free will, good versus evil, human relationships, slavery, corruption, personal responsibility, and the virtues and tragedies of war. All of these themes have modern day connections to our contemporary situation.

Likewise, horror fiction has maintained steady popularity for the last several decades in film and fiction, and while many might scoff at my supposition that texts like *The Twilight Saga* are horror fiction, I would argue that, more importantly, these texts, like Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, appropriate horror elements in order to remove readers from the contemporary situation so that more fruitful discussion of love, responsibility, honor, history, free will, and sexuality might be explored. All genre fiction that is speculative in nature, meaning that is not rigidly realistic, attempts to distance itself from the contemporary world so that the reader can look at the issues raised without feeling indicted by the story directly. Using this technique, zombies, vampires, aliens, and wizards become hyperbolized versions of people who exhibit certain qualities like mindlessness, eroticism, otherness, and charisma respectively. By using these genre-related tropes, authors can more effectively navigate discussions that direct and plain-dealing texts often reduce to obvious, trite or complacent conclusions and lessons.

My Verdict

But genre fiction alone cannot teach students how to write well. These stories are only designed to get students thinking about issues that surround them in unconventional ways. Rhetorical instruction must accompany these stories. My use of the YA dystopian texts was a success. My students read the books. My students talked about the plot. My students had insightful observations about poverty, relationships, oppression, hunger, and technology. And I believe they wrote better paragraphs because they were focused for the first time in years on their writing task. They had a stake in the result—not the grade—but the information. They wanted me to know they had ideas, dreams and experiences that informed their writing. Every assignment was not perfect, but they were trying, listening, adapting, and learning. And all of them became better writers. ■

Nonfiction Reviews

The Animal Fable in Science Fiction and Fantasy

Christopher Basnett

Bruce Shaw. *The Animal Fable in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010. Paper, 260 pages, \$35.00, ISBN 978-0786447831.

THIS IS A DIFFICULT BOOK to adequately describe. There is simply so much in it. The word 'encyclopedic' comes to mind. Perhaps you could think of it as a 'concise encyclopedia' because of its deceptively small size, but it ranges further and deeper than might be presupposed. The author has brilliantly condensed his research into an immensely useful and user-friendly text. Much of the material has been previously published as articles, which may account for a certain unevenness in tone and occasional repetition, but overall the presentation is well organized.

The stories included run the gamut from simple tales of childlike innocence to plots of the most bitter cruelty imaginable. Of course in most cases, it is we, not they, who are actually being portrayed. As the author shrewdly summarizes, "[a] moral point may often be better received if it comes from the jaws and snouts of cuddly domestic animals with which readers can believe themselves to more easily identify, though such beasts are not always harmless or friendly" (10).

The first chapter discusses the history of "The Beast Fable" from ancient times in the Greco-Roman world, the Middle East, and South Asia through its various adaptations and uses to the development of science fiction in the West in modern times. From this point on, the book turns primarily to Western authors but includes much more from Russia and Eastern Europe than is common. Chapter 2, "Philosophies of Laughter," reviews theories of comedy, such as Barthes' *jouissance* and the theories of Bergson, Baudelaire, Todorov, and Voltaire, focusing especially on Bakhtin and the Carnavalesque. Other authors discussed include Tolkien, Freud, Bulgakov, Cordwainer Smith, Simak, Karel Čapek, and Vladimir Propp, to name but a few. Most of the remaining chapters are organized by literary genre, in which animal narratives are utilized, e.g. short sto-

ry, novel, novella, biography, romance, satire, etc. One could envision its possible use as a textbook for a survey course on literary genres, utilizing the animal fable as a theme, as well as for a course on animal fable per se.

Chapter 6, "Author Biographies: Private Experiences and Societal Fears," delves into various social and political issues such as political oppression, war and what it means to be "human," and how various authors struggled with these through the use of the animal fable. Čapek's *War with the Newts* satirizes the rise of Nazism in neighboring Germany in 1936. Stapleton's *Sirius* is the tongue-in-cheek portrayal of war and human cruelty through the eyes of a dog in a "canine biography." In Simak's *City*, genetically engineered "Dogs" have come to inherit the Earth after the decline and demise of the human race.

In the final chapter, the author suggests a catalog "good for reading" from various genres, time periods and styles, all of which employ some variety of animal narrative. This is particularly valuable for students as guidance 'where to go from here' and why. (Would that more authors show such consideration!)

Van Ikin's Foreword should not be overlooked. It is brief but succinct, well-written and thought-provoking. There are no footnotes or appendices. Additional material is deftly handled within the main text itself. The bibliography is extensive and wide-ranging. The index is comprehensive and user-friendly.

This book is definitely recommended for a university research library. In fact, it is approachable enough for a community college or metropolitan public library. It is beautifully produced, well-edited and amazingly comprehensive, reflecting the twelve years its author spent on it. For someone interested in the topics presented, it is definitely worth the price and time invested in it. ■

Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal

Christopher Basnett

Sherryl Vint. *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal*. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2010. Cloth, 269 pages, \$95.00, ISBN 978-1846312342.

THIS IS AN INTRIGUING and enlightening book,

more academic but at-times much less approachable than Shaw's *The Animal Fable in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (reviewed above). Here, the focus is on thinking about what it means 'to be human' and how thinking about animals shapes our thinking about being human. The author's concern is that animals, "once central to human quotidian life, have steadily disappeared from human experience with the rise of modernity, whose processes of industrialisation, urbanisation, and commodification have affected animal lives as much as human ones. Twenty-first-century society is no less dependent upon animal products than was the seventeenth," the crucial difference being that animals are more "increasingly invisible" as agricultural processes become more industrial, sanitized and technologically distanced from our daily life (1).

Many of the sources included are the same as those referenced by Shaw, but to different effect. For example, Shaw referred to Čapek's *War with the Newts* (1936) as a satire on the rise of Nazism in Germany. Here, the focus is on the 'otherness' of the newts, how 'they' are not 'us,' and are therefore available for capture, enslavement, exploitation, and experimentation, much as the Jews were so treated once they were officially considered 'subhuman.'

Conversely, the third chapter, "The Animal Responds," discusses the various issues of interspecies communication not considered in Shaw's book. A particularly brilliant example is the discussion of Ian Wilson's *The Jonah Kit* (1975), in which scientists attempt to project human thought processes into the minds of a sperm whale, only to find that human language proves grossly inadequate to express and explore the perceived experiences. The results do not rule out the possibility of such interspecies communication so much as they warn us "to be attentive to differences and what they signify" (81). We may be biological cousins, but we are distant cousins.

Chapter 5, "Sapien Orientalism," discusses the consideration of the 'other' in terms of colonialism and interaction with other races and species in our history, in our science fiction, and perhaps in our future. Other chapters deal with issues of gender, domination and injustice.

This book explores in depth, with amazing insight and originality, animals as life forms truly alien to ourselves and our experiences, and then humans as animals ourselves. It alternately avoids and explores our arrogant self-definition of what it means 'to be human.' Shaw's book focuses on animal narratives and their use

in characterizing or lampooning humanity. This book focuses on the fundamental place of humanity in the world, including responsibility for ethical decision-making and a recognition of our ability to influence the ecosphere to good and bad, thus affecting all species of life regardless of our perception of their presence and importance in our daily experience. The dependence of the species is mutual.

Notes are included, by chapter, at the end. They are well-written and refer the reader to additional material for study. The Works Cited list is extensive and wide-ranging. The index is comprehensive and user-friendly.

This book is nicely produced, well-edited and comprehensive, reflecting a great deal of effort by the author to collect and synthesize the sometimes disparate material. It is a bit pricey for the average private collection, but it is definitely recommended for a university research library. ■

Fiction Reviews

The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction

Catherine Croker

Arthur B. Evans, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., Joan Gordon, Veronica Hollinger, Rob Latham, and Carol McGuirk, eds. *The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010. Cloth, 792 pages, \$85.00, ISBN 978-0819569547; Paper, 792 pages, \$39.95, ISBN 978-0819569554.

THE Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction is hefty, weighty and authoritative. Edited by the six co-editors of *Science Fiction Studies*, it culls selections from a century and a half of fiction, puts them in chronological order, and then cross-references them by numerous topics designed to get at some of the Big Topics in the genre, labeled here as Alien Encounters, Apocalypse and Postapocalypse, Artificial/Posthuman Life-forms, Computers and Virtual Reality, Evolution and Environment, Gender and Sexuality, Time Travel and Alternate History, Utopias/Dystopias, and War and Conflict.

As is the challenge of all such volumes, it perhaps tries to be everything and do everything, and consequently (and sadly), fails. That said, however, the book is still a noteworthy addition to the field by virtue of being one of the only texts actively created to act as a thorough textbook of the science fiction genre.

In the introductory essay at the front of the book, the editors explain that the volume was designed so that the selections represented “both the best and—not always the same thing—the most teachable stories in the field.” To that end, they did in fact succeed. The volume is certainly not the best such collection ever compiled, though it will do an admirable job as a textbook for students of science fiction who have no prior interest in the subject and, quite possibly, little interest in it. It contains fifty short stories and two selections from novels, each piece prefaced by a short introduction that discusses the author, context and the work in question. All too often many of these articles get quite repetitive as they mention the major players over and over again—Campbell, Heinlein, Asimov, etc. Considering the tightly knit circles that made up the genre at the time, it’s inevitable that recurring names pop up, but to the uninformed reader it could almost come across that there were, at any given time, only four or five writers of note at work. As such, readers without a prior deep knowledge or affection for science fiction may get a false picture of its history, viewing it as something rather more exclusive than the dynamic dialogue of authors, fans and (often amateur) scientists that it was. Given the number of genre histories published within the last decade alone, these omissions are notable and puzzling. If science fiction is worthy of literary study—and clearly we believe it to be so, or this tome would not exist—a more thorough grounding in its roots should be supplied for the readers.

For those teachers and students who are already well acquainted with science fiction as well as its history and study, the *Anthology* may seem to be a disappointment at first. Many of the stories have already been heavily anthologized in other collections, and more obscure selections seem to offer little that couldn’t be found elsewhere. The selection of works begins in 1844 with Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter” rather than with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in 1818. Since Shelley’s novel is often considered to be the first truly science fictional work, its absence is rather striking. The arbitrary time period of the volume, meant to cover some one hundred and fifty years, seems to have been designed with the goal of including Jules Verne’s work in the

book in mind more than anything else. The vast majority of the selections are also from the twentieth century, which is to be expected, and though evenly spread out chronologically, they are overwhelmingly drawn from the pool of American and British writers. Jules Verne, Stanislaw Lem and Greg Egan are standouts, but the lack of more international authors, particularly from Asia and Russia, is puzzling. The volume would have been vastly strengthened by the inclusion of a more diverse group of contemporary writers as well, such as Elizabeth Moon, Scott Westerfield or Joan Slonczewki, each of whom have certainly made their marks on the current consciousness of the genre.

The selection of stories was designed, as explained in the introduction, to form a picture of what the editors call science fiction’s “megatext”: the story tropes and character types we find repeated over and over again in genre works. Working chronologically, this is a great method to show authors’ engagement with the classics of the field as a form of cross-generational discussion, but in some cases this falls flat where an important text has been omitted from the volume. For instance, the *Anthology* includes James Patrick Kelly’s “Think Like a Dinosaur” from 1995, but excludes Tom Godwin’s 1954 “The Cold Equations.” Admittedly, “The Cold Equations” is one of those stories that has perhaps been over-anthologized in recent years, but considering that the volume is meant to be both an introductory and a teaching text, its absence is as puzzling as Shelley’s. The reader thus has only part of a dialogue, and presumably the teacher would have to provide Godwin’s text from another anthology—which hardly helps with the volume’s aim of providing a one-stop work as an aid to the reader.

That said, the Further Reading section at the end of the book will prove very useful to those students new to the business of genre scholarship, and may well be one of the best things about the collection. It consists of short bibliographies of both general resources as well as on specialized topics within the field, including histories, critical studies and the like. The bibliographies are up to date and reflect both classics and recent scholarship in the field. More contemporary areas of interest, such as Gender and Sexuality Studies and Cultural Studies, are listed as well. For those scholars who wish to build a research collection of studies, these bibliographies provide an excellent start. There is also a list of the major academic journals in the field that will undoubtedly be useful for those new students facing the “where do I find articles on my topic?” quandaries.

An additional resource, a Teacher's Guide is available online for download via the publisher's website. The Teacher's Guide consists of a lengthy list of useful online resources such as author websites, news and criticism gateways, and a list of databases; a profile of SF Archives and Collections across the world (reprinted from an issue of *Science Fiction Studies* which appeared earlier this year); sample discussion questions and paper and exam topics; and a sample course syllabi designed around the text. These resources will be of profound assistance to those teachers unfamiliar with the genre and its criticism. Though I am sure these materials are maintained in a digital-only format to reflect their currency, I nonetheless wish they had been included as part of an extended teacher's edition, or perhaps a smaller additional publication that could be purchased separately. A hard copy would go a long way towards helping those frazzled graduate students or lecturers confronted with teaching a course of unfamiliar material, and who may not have the time or memory to go look up the link online. There is also the question of what will happen to that resource over time—will the Teacher's Guide be online as long as the text itself is in print with the publisher? Like the digital links listed, this useful item may have a sadly transitory existence.

My final thoughts on the text are these: I would recommend the book to someone who was a neophyte to science fiction and its study along with an accompanying list of further readings, but to the knowledgeable student and scholar I would recommend various other texts in its stead. Though the volume was designed to stand on its own, its omissions are sufficiently visible that an introductory course or new reader would be better served with additional reading selections. As a source of short stories, I find those anthologies edited by David G. Hartwell like *The Ascent of Wonder* and *The Space Opera Renaissance* to be preferable for the lengthy essays included as well as the short, sharp introductory pieces that ground the selections. Use of this text can be strengthened by the use of supplementary material, such as Gunn, Barr and Candelaria's *Reading Science Fiction*, as it thoroughly covers multiple areas of current literary and theoretical debate. A great volume on the teaching of science fiction itself is Hellekson, Jacobsen, Sharp, and Yaszek's *Practicing Science Fiction: Critical Essays on Writing, Reading and Teaching the Genre*, as it discusses multiple avenues of possible scholarship as well as course creation. While a notable benefit of the *Wesleyan Anthology* is that it is

a single volume, as shown here its best feature is also its worst detractor. The field of science fiction studies has grown to the point now that it, like various other literary genres, cannot quite be served with a singular, monumental or canonical text. ■

The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack

Patrick Casey

Mark Hodder. *The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack*. Amherst, NY: Pyr (59 John Glenn Drive, Amherst, New York 14228-2119), 2010. Paper, 378 pages, \$16.00, ISBN 978-1616142407.

MARK HODDER'S debut novel, *The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack*, reads like a good film adaptation of an excellent text: the setting is fascinating and the narrative is entertaining, but the social and philosophic insights that add complexity and depth are too often given short shrift. That's not to say that the insights are entirely absent; they aren't. Instead, they are simply ushered into the background too soon after they are introduced and nearly disappear all together when they risk interfering with the action. Nonetheless, the novel remains an excellent addition into the increasingly crowded steampunk sub-genre. If anything, the novel suffers unfairly because its potential to be something even better is so readily apparent.

Like most steampunk, *Spring Heeled Jack* is set in an alternative Victorian London. Here steam powered velocipedes share London's polluted streets with bio-engineered animals, while in the pubs and academic halls a great debate about the future of society is quickly coming to a boil. On one side are the Technologists, engineers and eugenicists pushing for material progress and a more efficient society. On the other side are the Libertines, artists and authors who believe that "art, beauty, and nobility of spirit [are] more essential than material progress" (41).

Hodder places his protagonist, the always-fascinating Sir Richard Francis Burton, squarely at the center of the great debate. Burton, always an outsider in Victorian society, finds that his homeland's "current state of social instability...[suits] him" and that "he now [feels] an odd sort of empathy with the fluctuating nature of British culture" (41).

The novel begins with Burton, fresh from a trip to

Africa, preparing for a debate before the Royal Geographic Society. However, only minutes before he is to take the stage he receives news that his opponent, former friend and co-explorer John Speke, has apparently attempted suicide and will in all likelihood die. Despite the news, Burton manages an impromptu speech before the shocked society, before finding that he cannot ignore his own concerns about Speke's fate. His private concerns are soon complicated by the appearance of Spring Heeled Jack, a mysterious figure from Victorian folklore who attacks Burton all the while issuing a cryptic warning that "[t]he affair is none of your damned business" (44). Still reeling from the attack, Burton finds himself recruited by Lord Palmerston (here strangely altered by cosmetic surgeries) to uncover the mystery of Spring Heeled Jack and the 'man-wolves' which reportedly stalking citizens of London's less sanitary neighborhoods.

Throughout the novel, Hodder surrounds Burton with fascinating characters drawn from history. The best developed of the characters is, curiously, the one who may not have actually existed: Spring Heeled Jack. A sort of Victorian bogeyman, the real-life Spring Heeled Jack reportedly assaulted several women in and around London between 1837 and 1888. Each time he'd appear as a strangely garbed man with claw-like hands and a demonic appearance, and each time he would leap away with near superhuman ability before he could be caught. Whether Spring Heeled Jack was actually one man, a series of pranksters, or whether he even existed at all remains a matter of debate. Hodder takes advantage of this uncertainty to create a compelling image of a man slowly going mad from a butterfly effect of his own creation. Spring Heeled Jack's attempts to maintain the space-time continuum and his repeated insistence that his history is the 'correct' history create some of the most interesting dilemmas in the novel. Unlike Burton, Jack is not at ease with England's state of flux. To him the future is already written and the fate of England requires that he reestablish the status quo.

The other characters, though just as fascinating are, unfortunately, not as fully developed as Spring Heeled Jack. Algernon Swinburne, for instance, here presented as a Libertine dilettante and Burton protégé, suggests complex relationships between social morality, personal adventure and the Libertine philosophy, but these relationships rarely inform Swinburne's actions in the story. Instead his character is largely limited to simple barroom expositions of general Libertine philosophy and moments of comic relief. Instead, Swinburne

swings giddily from one adventure to the next, only rarely suggesting the tension between his impulse for self-destruction and his desire for beauty. Other characters suffer similar failings. Charles Darwin, one of the leading proponents of the radical Technologist philosophy, is reduced to a nearly one-dimensional villain motivated only by his own desire for scientific progress. Darwin's own real-life concerns for moral responsibility are glossed over as he and eugenicist Francis Galton craft a plan to defeat the Libertines and shape a rational future for England.

Despite these weaknesses, *Spring Heeled Jack* remains a fun and interesting read. As a text for academic study, however, its failure to live up to its full promise is frustrating. Hodder is on to something as he uses his alternative London to write large the competing tensions of Victorian England and their role in shaping modern Britain. However, he too often sacrifices this potential in favor of a streamlined plot. Fortunately, the novel ends with the promise of a sequel. With the setting and characters already established, Hodder should be able to further develop the implications of the social debate he has created and its impact on British identity.

The Dervish House

Ellen M. Rigsby

Ian McDonald. *The Dervish House*. Amherst, NY: Pyr ((59 John Glenn Drive, Amherst, New York 14228-2119), 2010. Cloth, 410 pages, \$26.00. ISBN 978 1616142049.

THE DERVISH HOUSE is set in an Istanbul of 2027 in which Turkey has become a center of nanotechnology while remaining a country living in the shadow of European imperialism. This Istanbul is a mixture of ancient buildings and artifacts overlaid with modern life. It is teaming with varieties of Islam, vestiges of Christianity and Judaism, the mixtures of businesses and commerce that any large port city has, and the emerging industry of nanotechnology. The narrative itself is four interconnected stories that we see through six characters, all of whom live or work near an old dervish house from the seventeenth century (a kind of monastery where Sufi holy men lived), repurposed into living and working quarters. The interconnected narratives are of an antiquities dealer who searches for an ancient artifact while her husband plans a financial market fraud; a young woman from a small town who finds a marketing job

with a distant cousin's nanotech startup; a troubled young man brought to Istanbul by his radical-Islamist brother who begins to see magical creatures after being in a nanotech terrorist attack on a tram car; and an older Greek economist forced into early retirement by a Turkish rival who is brought to a government think tank to help prevent future terrorist attacks. These narrative threads take the reader through the topics of technology-induced social change, the role of religion under a repressive government, the intertwined politics of nationalism and imperialism, the history of sexism, and the shape that an environment gives to the life within its boundaries.

The Dervish House has several postmodern elements, which gives the novel a lot of its feel. First, it is a "little" narrative in Jean-François Lyotard's sense, a narrative of temporary coalitions and of co-location. The narrative literally uses the device of a common location not to move from one point of view to another—McDonald uses simple section divisions for that—but to show how the lives of his characters happen to come together. There is a similar focus on location in Mieville's books set in and around New Crobuzon, and most particularly in the London of Allan Moore's graphic novel *From Hell*. But McDonald makes Istanbul many things at once to his characters. In *The Dervish House*, in the second section of the book we meet a "psychogeographer," a character who traces "how space had shaped mind and mind had shaped space through three thousand years of the Queen of Cities" (105-6). She is a minor character, but through her existence the reader is given a clue to not just pay attention to the characters, but to the intersections of the characters and their city.

Second, the narrative focuses as much on the impact of the city on its denizens as it does on the agency of its characters. The characters in the narrative serve almost as bridges between the ancient city and customs and the overlay of modern practices. The practices and traditions they keep (or not) serve as connective tissue for the city itself. The Istanbul of *The Dervish House* is not a built world, nor is it a backdrop; it is a place in which the reader can experience cultural change precisely because the city's history is still so present. The narrative does not require an omniscient narrative to explain how things were and are now because the vibe of the city elucidates the relationship of the past to the present, and the characters comment on the city the way people always comment on their environments: the weather, favorite places, trouble spots, views, etc.

There is a trade-off for locating some agency in the

city itself, in that this choice structures the plot around more than just the actions of the characters. This might make the reader feel cheated out of some narrative climax. For example, in one case the dealer of antiquities finds a legendary artifact that was lost for two centuries very quickly. The abruptness of the discovery cheats the reader of the victory of the chase to some degree. However, the scene is written this way to take the air out of the tires of the Dan Brown-style plot—that is, a plot based on some nostalgia for a past age when there were material links to some form of "truth." This is where the third link to postmodernism comes in. By making the revelation of the artifact irrelevant, McDonald offers an alternative to the meta-narrative of nostalgia. Rather than imply that the age of magic or religion is over and only available through the recovery of the "true" past, *The Dervish House* suggests that people have in themselves the ability to make what they need to adapt, unless of course they destroy themselves with nanotechnology first.

Ultimately, MacDonald's work has some kinship to the writing of Ken Macleod, not in style but in topic. Both authors are interested in the functioning of politics at a local level. But while Macleod invests in a lot of explicit political language to discuss social movements, MacDonald makes politics an implicit discourse. He locates politics in the background to discuss its social effects in the lives of his characters. His *Evolution's Shore* discusses the AIDS crisis in Africa in this way. In *The Dervish House* he explores imperialism in the context of Turkey and the Anatolian peninsula more broadly. The narrative ranges over the history of the expulsion of Istanbul's huge Greek population, Turkey's religious tensions, and its complex relationship to Europe and the EU (its relation to Europe in both a cultural and an economic sense). None of this feels extraneous to the narrative. While McDonald examines the ramifications of imperialism in *The Dervish House*, he treats these ideas from the perspectives of the characters, whether they are members of Turkey's marginalized cultures, its Brahmin or its poor. For example, he considers here what purpose Sharia law might have and why Turkish intellectuals might find it attractive (while still despising the conservatism implied by its most common application). McDonald does all this, though, in the course of the narrative, not beside it or outside it. This makes for some intense reading. But *The Dervish House* is nonetheless a fascinating, complicated delight. ■

Cinco de Mayo

Wendy Bousfield

Michael J. Martineck. *Cinco de Mayo*. Calgary: EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy (P.O. Box 1714, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2P 2L7), 2010. Paper, 280 pages, \$14.95, ISBN: 978-1894063395.

SIMULTANEOUSLY, on a near-future May 5th, everyone on earth mentally links to an “Other.” With memories common property, human pairs enter a new stage of evolution. Individuals acquire languages and practical skills and, most importantly, transcend habitual beliefs and behaviors. For example, an affluent hedonist rescues a child brutally enslaved in an Indian carpet factory. While Martineck’s fundamentally decent characters are vividly alive, the novel’s greatest weakness is its utterly flat, unbelievable villain. John McCorley is the sociopathic leader of the Aryan Brotherhood, whose members perform murders at their leader’s whim. Although McCorley’s murderousness should dominate the plot, Martineck utterly lacks Stephen King and Robert McCammon’s predilection for quirky, larger than life evildoers. The emphasis of *Cinco de Mayo*, however, is on a gigantic ethical advance: humanity’s newly found ability to empathize.

Memory tampering is an especially common trope in post-information age science fiction: Greg Egan, Michael Marshall Smith and Charles Stross, among others, explore the ethical implications of corrupting, transferring or deleting human memories as if they were computer files. Prior to *Cinco de Mayo*, Martineck published a lively YA fantasy novel, *The Misspellers* (2002), based on a similarly mechanistic view of the human mind: a boy expands his world view by inhabiting mentally a watch, computer, boat, and car. In *Cinco de Mayo*, characters achieve a compassion that Martineck suggests is absent in 21st century American society: his characters learn that human suffering is not mere media noise. ■

The Fuller Memorandum

Nolan Belk

Charles Stross. *The Fuller Memorandum*. New York: Ace, 2010. Cloth, 320 pages, \$24.95, ISBN 978-0441018673.

IN *THE FULLER MEMORANDUM*, Bob Howard must face evil demon worshipers, the Russian secret service, and the disappearance of his boss. Charles Stross’s third Laundry Files novel works like a cross between a James Bond adventure and a melodramatic horror novel in the vein of H. P. Lovecraft. In addition to Howard, the novel follows the adventures of his girlfriend, Mo, who plays a mean violin (as in the violin is mean-spirited and very powerful) and his boss Angleton, whose unexplainable existence is the mystery at the heart of the novel. With the Laundry Files, Stross is creating a series of witty, literate but ultimately insignificant novels. Although *The Fuller Memorandum* pats its reader on the back if she knows about arcane English and Russian history, odd religious practices, and even a bit of espionage behavior, the allusions never add up to more than what meets the eye. As advertised, Stross’s novel is quite entertaining reading, filled with humor and in-jokes, and it does not ask to be anything more. Ultimately, however, this reviewer fails to see how the novel adds anything of significance to Stross’s oeuvre. Therefore, *The Fuller Memorandum* belongs in the travel bag for the next plane flight rather than on the shelf as a valuable resource. ■

Media Reviews

***The Road* [film]**

Amy J. Ransom

The Road. Dir. John Hillcoat. Perf. Viggo Mortenson, Kodi Smit-McPhee, Charlize Theron, Robert Duval. Dimension Films, 2009.

IF FIDELITY TO THE ORIGINAL represents success for a film adaptation, then John Hillcoat’s interpretation of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) is a resounding success. The gritty hyper-naturalism of the postapocalyptic world through which Viggo Mortenson’s unnamed protagonist leads his son (Kodi Smit-McPhee) on a desperate and dangerous trek for survival appears vividly translated onto the screen. The film

also skillfully handles the science-fictional and gothic tropes upon which the novel was based, a terrain that McCarthy explored in his early novels and which remained only under the surface in his better-known “Western” works. *The Road* is a gripping exploration of a parent’s efforts to protect his child from harm and to keep a sense of the good alive in a world where evil reigns. It is also about his ultimate inability to avoid falling victim to the same errors that he knows brought his former world to an end.

McCarthy’s novel met with mixed reactions in the science-fiction milieu, as do most attempts by so-called mainstream writers who dabble in genre tropes. But as Michael Chabon points out in his review of the novel, the postapocalyptic form is “one of the few subgenres of science fiction, along with stories of the near future (also friendly to satirists), that may be safely attempted by a mainstream writer without incurring too much damage to his or her credentials for seriousness.” Chabon also identifies the work’s links to McCarthy’s early, essentially gothic novels, *Outer Dark* (1968) and *Child of God* (1974). In my view, McCarthy’s entire oeuvre—and this is where his genius lies—is precisely about appropriating the tropes of various popular genres and transforming them into beautiful but deeply troubling works of literature. He remains a direct inheritor of the lineage of Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and William Faulkner, writers whose central gothic elements have often been elided as they have come to form the canon of American literature. For this reason, *The Road* may be appropriate material not only for a course in science-fiction literature or film but American lit in general.

John Hillcoat accurately translates the personal and moral preoccupations of McCarthy’s novel onto the screen, along with the writer’s bleak aesthetic. As a postapocalyptic fable, the film clearly surpasses in quality other contemporary efforts such as *The Book of Eli* (2010; dir. Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes; perf. Denzel Washington, Gary Oldman) and in some aspects it rejoins the traditional origins of this subgenre of science fiction in the 1950s and 1960s Cold War bomb-scare era films such as *On the Beach* (1959; dir. Stanley Kramer; perf. Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner) or *Panic in the Year Zero* (1960; dir. Ray Milland; perf. Ray Milland, Frankie Avalon). It also partakes of elements of the horror genre with its depiction of the American family under siege, human cannibalism, sequestration and the disintegration of the social and corporeal

boundaries that allow both community and the individual to function “normally.”

As a largely visual text, the film lacks the novel’s engagement with the verbal discourses of gothic horror, such as its *mise en abyme* of the writer’s attempts to describe the indescribable. It does portray the importance of stories as both educational and as instillers of hope, as well as escape valves that allow us to leave life’s difficulties behind us, as—having fled a band of cannibalistic bandits—the father reads to his son at night. McCarthy’s work, as this film adaptation shows, however, never allows a simple escapist fantasy; it seeks to confront the reader with the horrors of life revealed in a hyper-naturalistic fashion. This film is extremely difficult to watch with all its slow-paced but relentless bleakness; for these reasons, there may be some difficulty in screening it for a class composed of students from a generation reared on intensely fast-moving action films and/or films such as the *Saw* franchise which repeatedly depict the destruction of the human body.

In addition to the genre studies approach to this film (and/or novel) suggested by my comments thus far, an analysis through the critical framework of gender studies would be useful in the pedagogical setting. Clearly, some feminist critics decry the absence of women in McCarthy’s universe; when they are present, they are often vulnerable to victimization. The film, however, is about masculinity and fatherhood; it offers a positive image of a deeply caring and committed father with an intensely close relationship to his son. At the same time, *The Road*, like much of McCarthy’s oeuvre, is about coming to terms with how past visions of masculinity expressed through power and violence are bankrupt and will lead precisely to the apocalypse he imagines and which Hillcoat’s film brings vividly to the screen.

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***Inception* [film]**

Dominick Grace

Inception. Writ. and Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Leonardo DiCaprio, Ken Watanabe, Ellen Page. Warner, 2010.

INCEPTION IS THAT RARITY, a smart (or at least clever enough to require multiple viewings to determine how smart it really is) big-budget summer blockbuster. Christopher Nolan brings intelligence and technical precision to this unusual and complex quest (or antiquest) narrative. The plot involves the recruitment of an extractor named Dom Cobb (a specialist in stealing secrets from the minds of sleeping subjects by entering their dreams) and his team of assistants (the usual, albeit well-realized cadre of helper figures essential to quests) to reverse their normal procedure by instead planting an idea in a dreamer's head. This process, "inception" rather than "extraction," gives the film its title and is only one example of many in the film's play with multiple possibilities. Inception means literally "beginning," but one can hardly fail to hear echoes of "conception," a multiply appropriate echo, since the process involves the implanting (conception) of the basic idea (a beginning) to grow into a full-blown idea (conception or concept) in the mind of the subject, as if it gestated naturally in his consciousness rather than being implanted from outside. (The film uses both seed-planting metaphors and infection metaphors—the idea as virus—to describe how ideas function.) Consequently, the story offers a reverse quest, one designed not to retrieve something but instead to leave something behind, a narrative structure that itself lends some interest to the film in the context of SF teaching given the frequency of quest narratives in the genre.

As is evident from the basic concept, the film is interested in subjectivity, in the relationship between what is real and what we perceive to be real. The slippage between reality and mental construction is insisted on from the opening of the film. The initial sequence involves Cobb's failed attempt to extract a secret from the mind of Saito (Ken Watanabe) in which the initial scenario is revealed to be a dream, which we then learn was a dream within a dream before we emerge into reality—or do we? (He fails, by the way, because his own subconscious guilt over her death manifests itself in his dreams in the form of his wife, who sets out to sabotage his plots, a central point in the main action.) Given this sequence establishing three levels of apparent reality, it is perhaps unsurprising that henceforth in the film the question of what is real is consistently problematized. The film even foregrounds the problem by making one of the key elements for these dream warriors the personal talisman they carry, its unique features known only to its carrier, so that they can tell whether they are awake or dreaming by whether their talisman

conforms to its real state or shows evidence of dream tampering (e.g. it might look right but is not quite the right weight or texture, or does not behave as it should in the real world). Cobb's talisman is a central icon in the film, almost to the film's detriment, since I suspect that many an SFRA member will be able to predict the film's final shot long before the movie ends.

The film is far from perfect. For a movie set in dreams, for instance, it offers relatively little in the way of mind-blowing spectacle. Though the film acknowledges that anything can happen in dreams and that dream-states are inherently strange (even though the strangeness becomes evident only when one looks back on the dream from the waking state), the dreams it provides hew too close to the real and even the banal. Admittedly, given the film's insistence on the problems of objective vs. subjective reality, one of its key themes would be compromised by truly dreamlike dreams; if we can really tell the difference between dream and reality when watching the film, our suspension of disbelief will be compromised. Nolan's technical preoccupations also push the whole proceeding in the direction of an exercise in mechanistic manipulation of space rather than something truly reflective of the inchoate nature of the mind, especially the dreaming mind. The mechanisms of the film are perhaps overplayed in aspects of it such as character names like Dom Cobb (which one might translate as lord spider or lord weaver) for DiCaprio's character or Ariadne for the designer of the "labyrinth" (yes, it is that obvious) dreamscapes used in the inception plot.

Nevertheless, even such overt devices are probably sophisticated by the standards of a summer blockbuster, and given the number of commentators on the film who seem to find it baffling, one can perhaps forgive Nolan for at times overgilding the lily. And to his credit, he does also provide many exhilarating moments and intellectually complex ideas, not to mention the sheer fun of puzzle-solving. As one example, one of the film's givens is that one can be wakened from the dream state by a "kick" or feeling of falling, and in the multi-leveled last act sequence of the film, such a "kick" needs to be initiated in the second level of the dream (there is a dream within a dream within a dream within a dream in the final sequence), but the character tasked with providing this kick for the dreamers finds the second-level dream suddenly deprived of gravity and must come up with a device to create the illusion of falling in zero g. It's just a minor thread, overall, but it's a delightful nod to the classic hard SF-style puzzle

story.

In short, the film provides a remarkable and very teachable array of structures, devices and tropes for discussion in the SF class, especially but arguably also in popular culture, film, and arguably even general literature classes: unconventional quest narrative; multi-leveled narrative; speculations on the nature of consciousness; problematization of the nature of reality; interesting questions for discussion (is it better to “live” a happy life in a dreamscape indistinguishable from reality or to “live” miserably in the real world?; or, if you could go to Oz, why on earth would you want to go back to Kansas?); names, props, etc. laden with symbolic portent; and so on. Inception would be especially useful to consider in relation to the work of Philip K. Dick or cyberpunk, to the Matrix films or *Videodrome* or *eXistenZ*, or anything, else, really, interested in inner space vs. “reality,” but it offers a sufficiently rich grab-bag of major SF elements to fit well into almost any SF-oriented course. ■

***Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* [film]**

Greg Conley

Scott Pilgrim vs. the World. Dir. Edgar Wright. Perf. Michael Cera. Universal Pictures, 2010.

Hey, Edgar Wright made a movie about that guy from the Plumtree song!

BRYAN LEE O'MALLEY, author of the original *Scott Pilgrim* comics, based his title character on the subject of a Plumtree song, “Scott Pilgrim.” And that’s pretty indicative of the level of intertexting the movie and the comic perform with music and pop culture. Oh, and video games.

Scott Pilgrim is a twenty-something in a land of twenty-somethings—Toronto—and when he meets Ramona Flowers he falls in love. He meets Ramona in his own dreams, as she uses his dreamspace as a shortcut around Toronto in her job delivering packages for Amazon.ca. Scott’s in a band; his ex-girlfriend is in a much more successful band, and once Scott begins to date Ramona he must defeat Ramona’s seven evil exes.

The movie does a remarkable job compressing six volumes of comics into less than two hours, but a few problems crop up. The most significant two are that Ramona has less to do in the movie, taking little part in

the final fight scene—she’s much more active and involved in the comic. Also, Scott’s less of a jerk in the movie. Through a series of revised flashbacks, over the course of the comic, we learn that, while not wholly to blame, Scott’s series of traumatizing relationships fell apart due to his lackadaisical attitude as much as anything else. So anyone wanting to look at the relationship politics of Scott and Ramona will see something a little uncomfortable—the male, wronged by a string of women, fighting for the right woman—rather than a look at how apathy can be as bad as violence in messing with someone’s life.

The story is a science fantasy of sorts: people have superpowers just because they’re vegan—you know, since vegans are better than the rest of us; Scott, with no training, fights like a martial arts expert; I already mentioned the subspace highways through people’s unconsciousness. This story isn’t deconstructing these tropes, or introducing new, fantastic nova to the realm of SF. It does examine the commonplaces with a lot of humor. In the comic, Scott clammers into Ramona’s bag, because it contains a hammerspace—like a TARDIS, but for storing weapons—and looks for a bathroom. In the movie, Scott’s band, Sex Bob-omb, use the force of their music to defeat another band, their pure punk-rock power manifesting as a giant ape that does battle with the Japanese synth-pop rivals’ Asian dragon. The scene looks like a match from the old *Rampage* games.

The video game connection explains the world of *Scott Pilgrim*. The movie’s primary SF hypothesis is, simply, what would the world be like if it were a video game? The idea drives everything from the progression of the plot, from easy exes whom Scott can air juggle with ease, all the way to villains so difficult Scott has to expend an extra life and level up just to survive. The story, in either form, never attempts to explain why these characters can do these things—with the exception of Todd, the psychic vegan. Much of it is played for humor, sure, but what’s really happening is a form of what, in a different context, critics such as Ōtsuka and Azuma have called “anime realism.” We might term it “video game realism” here. Basically, postmodern forms, in cultures brought up on the ubiquitous nature of entertainment, rely on the understanding of these forms in the audience (Azuma 56-58). Most space operas, for instance, use space ships not to estrange viewers but to remind them of something familiar—all the other SF they’ve already read and watched. *Scott Pilgrim* does the same thing, constructing a movie that uses the logic of video games. Scott is good at fighting

***Battlestar Galactica: The Plan* [film]**

Rikk Mulligan

Battlestar Galactica: The Plan. Dir. Edward James Olmos. Perf. Edward James Olmos, Michael Hogan, Tricia Helfer, Grace Park, Dean Stockwell, Michael Trucco, Aaron Douglas, Callum Keith Rennie, Rick Worthy, and Lymari Nadal. Universal Studios, 2009.

because the protagonists in video games are good at it, even if, like every version of Link in the *Legend of Zelda* series, they have never trained before the game starts. Characters level up when they learn something significant. In the movie, Scott levels up when he learns he's truly in love with Ramona, fails, dies, and uses his extra life. When he returns, he instead realizes that, while he loves Ramona, he should only fight for his own reasons, because the other person deserves it—a revelation, as before he fought because it was the only way to stay with Ramona—and levels up due to the power of “self-respect.” His different skill set allows him to defeat Gideon Graves. And he doesn't just level up. He has a bar that measures his pee. Gaming culture quantifies everything, from leveling up to bathroom breaks, and *Scott Pilgrim* captures that spirit. It portrays the whole world through the filter of the game screen.

Scott Pilgrim vs. the World isn't traditional SF, but it does present an unreal world predicated on ours. The film, with its easily digestible length, makes it perfect for anyone wanting to check out, or teach, a story that examines its own genre's structural elements. O'Malley has admitted that the plot grew, from its beginning, out of the way traditional shounen manga in Japan work (Aoki). The comic even messes with entrenched conventions—characters see and react to typical visual representations of emotions, like sound effects and manga-style excitement lines surrounding characters' heads. *Scott Pilgrim* is the poster child for the sort of entertainment that's amazing not for what it does that's new, but for how it makes us look at all the old things it's doing as though they're new. It's probably one of the first movies that understands and shows off the “everything's quantifiable” mindset of video games.

The movie's easy to watch and not too long, so it's convenient. Anyone interested in graphic novels can find even more in the comic series.

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AT DRAGONCON in 2009 Edward James Olmos told a few thousand fans that they had something to look forward to that coming October 27 when the SyFy Channel would air the *Battlestar Galactica* TV movie, *The Plan*. He told the audience that after viewing the feature they'd be driven to rewatch everything *BSG* as much of the story and many of the characters would be shown in a new light. Olmos told the audience that the film had been a rewarding challenge to direct because some of the cast had gone on to new projects and needed to be pulled back into not only their characters but also the postapocalyptic mood of humanity's genocide. Yes, the audience had seen how the series ends, but he told us we did not yet know the whole story.

In essence *The Plan* is a portion of the *Battlestar Galactica* seen through the sensor darkly, as it retells the story of the first ten months after the attack on the twelve colonies from largely Cylon perspectives. This 112-minute feature interweaves “archive” footage from the series with newly filmed scenes to braid more of the Cylons into the narrative, although the result is a bit choppy, especially when the film tries to recapture the feel of particularly dramatic episodes like “33” (episode 101). Several strands are incorporated including that of Samuel Anders's (Michael Trucco) resistance group, formed around the core of his pyramid team and numbering as many as one hundred before being ground down by the Cylons occupying Caprica. Although *The Plan* includes additional segments with all of the “final five,” it is Ander's whose is most complete. The story of a Cylon “cell” on the *Galactica* under the command of Brother Cavil “F” (Dean Stockwell) ties into specific events in the series, as well as providing the rest of the story of Cylon sleeper agent Lt. Sharon “Boomer” Valerii (Grace Park). After Boomer is activated aboard the *Galactica* she tries to sabotage the fleet's water supply and assassinate Commander Adama, but as she told Cavil F (in the Fleet), she loves not just her life among the humans but actually being human, so she is not committed to these attempts, and they fail. In a simi-

lar fashion, a Simon (Rick Worthy) who is hiding in the fleet resists Cavil F's attempts to enlist him in mass murder; when his wife, Gianna (Lymari Nadal), and daughter are threatened, he chooses to "space" himself rather than destroy the ship his family is on.

A number of other scenes gain additional segments that focus on different Sixes (Tricia Hilfer), Dorals (Matthew Bennett), Chief Tyrol (Aaron Douglas), and a Leoben (Callum Keith Rennie), but the more dynamic thread tying everything together is the tale of two Cavils. As the film begins, two Cavils discuss the impending culmination of their plan to destroy the colonies and all embedded Cylon agents including themselves. They are in a resurrection room walking among the replacement bodies for the Final Five who have been planted among the humans, but with no memory of their prior lives. The Cavils reveal their bitterness and their goal, that their "parents," the Five, share in the death of humanity—their "favored" children—and after rebirth that they beg the forgiveness of their Cylon children (led by the Cavils), the worthy successors to humanity. But in the ten months that follow, Cavil C (on *Caprica*) finds himself coming to understand not only humans but also his creators through Anders; as he gains empathy for them he comes to doubt the original goal to exterminate humanity. Aboard the *Galactica*, Cavil F grows more angry and bitter as each of his plans fail—Doral's suicide vest damages a corridor; Boomer replaces the water she wasted, and only wounds the Commander from point blank range; Simon airlocks himself rather than kill his family; Leoben becomes obsessed with Kara Thrace, Starbuck (Katee Sackhoff), and ignores Cavil; and even the last Six comes to disdain Cavil in the end. Although Cavil C had come to feel empathy for the humans by the end of his time among them, Cavil F pares away all humanity with his final act, the murder of a young boy, John, who had called him "friend."

The creators and the lead actors of *Battlestar Galactica* have always prided themselves on telling stories that incorporated contemporary issues, many of them focused on military power and governmental control. During its five-year run, the series considered the outlawing of abortion, the torture of prisoners, genocide through biological warfare, and repeatedly the theme 'that it was not enough to survive, but that life must be earned.' *The Plan* maintains this commentary in the era of Obama by continuing to ask difficult questions about executive power, despotism, military control, and post-colonialism. Anders and the resistance on *Caprica* can

be read as a metaphor for the resistance to the U.S. occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan as the Cylons stand in for the U.S. military (IEDs, Cylon control of the air, heavy weapons). But Cavil's campaign of sabotage and murder mirrors the resistance of insurgents, local warlords, and religious extremists in Iraq and Afghanistan, and with Cylons on both sides of the mirror, the critical distance becomes uncomfortably close. The *Plan* has its faults; as a stand-alone film it relies too much on the audience having seen the series to understand the scattered storylines, but in concert with select episodes it clarifies lines of power and resistance in ways that could offer fruitful discussion in an American Studies or Media Studies course that pays particular attention to the role of military power and ethnic minorities in a democracy, especially one with a postcolonial context.

***Caprica: Season 1* [tv series]**

Michael J. Klein

Caprica: Season 1.0. Perf. Eric Stoltz, Esai Morales, Magda Apanowicz, Paula Malcomson, Alessandra Torresani, Sasha Roiz and Polly Walker. Syfy, 2010. DVD. \$49.98.

TWO YEARS AGO, I had the opportunity to review the third season of the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* (*BSG*) for this publication (*SFRA Review* 286). I found the series (to that point) to be a show full of drama and intrigue, interspersed with the occasional space battle. As several of the SF series in the mid-90s had started doing, *BSG* told stories in long arcs, resisting the temptation to try to wrap up everything in a neat package at the end of forty-four minutes.

This flexibility allowed the writers to tackle numerous thematic questions, many that have been staples of SF since its infancy on television, but with greater nuance: what makes us unique as human; when, if ever, is violence an acceptable solution for resisting oppression; how does society balance religious tolerance with individual fanaticism; and should leaders suspend democratic freedoms for "the greater good"?

BSG raised these issues with just one or two story threads, intertwining them in such a way that it was impossible to separate these intrinsic questions from the storyline of the show. While season 4 of *BSG* left some fans disappointed with the choices made by ex-

ecutive producer Ronald D. Moore, most fans thought the series, as a whole, was one of the best SF shows to hit the airwaves.

Now, two years later, *BSG*'s four-year run is over. However, Syfy is presenting another of Moore's creations, *Caprica*, a spin-off of *BSG* set fifty-eight years in *BSG*'s past. While *Caprica* retains much of the structure and noir elements of its predecessor, it is much more grounded (pun intended). Instead of travelling through space, the characters of *Caprica* travel through their lives, often without taking much notice of their surroundings.

All this changes when an act of terrorism wakes them to the reality that the world of *Caprica* is not idyllic and that complacency can get you killed. This event mirrors the opening of *BSG* when the Cylons attack the twelve colonies, setting that series' events in motion. In *Caprica*, however, the attack is conducted not by machines but by humans unhappy with their government's policy banning certain monotheistic cults. This also parallels the structure set up in *BSG*: polytheistic humans versus monotheistic Cylons.

The storyline of *Caprica* focuses on two families brought together by the terrorist bombing: the Greystones and the Adamas. The Greystone's patriarch is Daniel (Eric Stoltz), a brilliant scientist contracted by the Caprican government to develop a prototype military robot that he has named a Cybernetic Life-form Node, or Cylon. Daniel has lost his daughter Zoe (Alessandra Torresani), who is as equally adept at cybernetics as her father, in the terrorist bombing. Unbeknownst to her father, Zoe has constructed a life-like avatar and kept her hidden in the holoband world, a virtual reality landscape used for escapism by Caprican youth.

The Adamas are lead by Joseph (Esai Morales), a lawyer with ties to the Caprican equivalent of the Mob, and father of William Adama, the central character of *BSG*. The Adamas are Taurons, known for their olive complexion and ritualistic tattoos, and discriminated against by Capricans who feel that most foreigners, and especially Taurons, are inferior. Joseph has lost both his wife and his daughter in the explosion. Daniel and Joseph are brought together by grief, and seek solace in trying to understand why something like this could happen.

While working to improve his Cylon prototype, Daniel discovers Zoe's avatar and brings her out of the holoband world, implanting her consciousness in his Cylon. The combination of virtual woman and machine

works temporarily, but a system error shuts down the interface, causing Daniel to believe that the Zoe avatar has been destroyed. And that's only the first episode.

By the time you read this, Syfy will have decided whether *Caprica* will live to see a second season. While that decision will come down to numbers and advertising, your decision to watch will be based on another question: is *Caprica* worth watching? For me, this question is a difficult one to answer.

You need not have watched *BSG* to "get" *Caprica*. The story holds together well enough without knowing what will come later (relatively speaking) in *BSG*. And if you are a *BSG* veteran, you know where *Caprica* will eventually end up, but it's still fun trying to figure out how it will get there. Even early on in the first season of *Caprica*, some lingering questions begin to get answered, such as how Cylons gained self-awareness and why they are monotheistic.

But ultimately, that's where the problem with *Caprica* lies. An episode of *Caprica* is an overly abundant collection of stories that often don't hang together thematically. There are so many major characters and subplots that it's virtually impossible to reach the depth of thought exhibited in *BSG*. For example, an episode may start with students at a private school fleeing from a police raid, move to Joseph Adama discussing politics and family business with his brother, a mobster who is openly gay, and conclude with a father torturing his daughters' ghost in the machine. And that's not even taking into account the virtual world the characters explore. *Caprica* may try to be too smart in tying together its story with the story to come in *BSG*. Because of this need for explanatory storytelling, sometimes there is just too much plot to take in, numbing the viewers in the process.

For example, when Daniel begins to suspect that Zoe's avatar still exists within the Cylon shell, he starts torturing the machine. As a last resort, he sets fire to the Cylon. While this will not damage the machine body, it scares Zoe, who was almost killed in a fire at a young age. Daniel knows this; that's why he chooses this form of torture to force Zoe to reveal herself to him. A scene like this should have a chilling effect on the viewer. It reminds me of any number of scenes in *BSG* where Cylons or humans were tortured by their enemies. But unlike those scenes, I felt very little watching this father/daughter drama unfold in *Caprica*. Instead of revulsion, I felt a disconnect from the characters. Such a scene might serve as a starting point in a classroom discussion about morality or ethics, but it seems forced

and artificial rather than organic.

Maybe this is what Moore and the writers of the series intended. In showing a society void of any real depth, he allows the viewers to share in kind the scarcity of emotion the characters possess. But I think that would be giving the creators of the show too much credit.

To this point, *Caprica* tries to cover too many stories without exploring the human condition in any depth. At times it's fun to watch *Caprica*; but that's not the point. If *Caprica* is to serve a similar role to the one served by *BSG*—as a means of questioning our deepest beliefs by exposing them in disconcerting and unfamiliar situations—it needs to involve the audience on a more visceral level.

Caprica is still in its infancy, with only nine shows broadcast as of early October. If Syfy decides to extend its life, *Caprica* may become as popular and sophisticated as *BSG*. Ultimately, though, the show may not have that time to mature and fulfill its potential. [Editor's note: The show was canceled on October 27, 2010, with an immediate cancellation of the run of unaired episodes of the series. The last five unaired episodes are expected to air in 2011.] ■

***Paradox* [tv series]**

Ellen M. Rigsby

Paradox. Dirs. Simon Cellan Jones, episodes 1–3, Omar Madha, episodes 4 and 5. British Broadcasting Corporation One, November 2009.

PARADOX IS A COMPELLING, albeit flawed, science fiction series produced by the BBC in 2009. Its premise is that a scientist, Dr. Christian King, who is doing satellite defense work for a corporation under government subcontract in Manchester, receives a set of images that depict a horrible train crash a few hours into the future. Dr. King calls in the police, who send a team led by Detective Inspector Rebecca Flint to investigate the origin and meaning of the images. As the first episode concludes, a second set of images is downloaded to Dr. King's computer. At the beginning of the second episode, DI Flint's team are then assigned full-time to work on the origin and purpose of the images, as well as to try to prevent the crimes the images depict from happening. They are given little in the way of cover or

material aid, other than being forbidden from telling the truth about their mission. This directive helps to cover plot holes, and would have been used to create tension between Flint's team and other police teams in Manchester had the series been continued, but mostly it leaves the viewer with the impression that the government and/or the corporation must be involved with the transmission of the images. The series explores the time travel narrative, but leaves it an open question as to how the travel happens or who is "responsible" for it, if anyone. This makes it an unusual member of this subgenre.

Paradox's time travel narrative happens as a form of data transfer, in a similar vein to that in Steven Spielberg's movie *Minority Report*. Tom Sutcliff, the radio and TV columnist for the British Independent and the blog Two Talking Monkeys, both mention this connection as well. But the purpose and outcomes of the time travel are different from that of the movie. *Minority Report's* plot needs the evil corporation to make foretelling the future possible. The movie sets up a closed loop in which the cause of the temporary human ability to see into the future is an effect of time travel. *Minority Report* brings closure to the plot by assigning agency for time travel to the corporation who forced the altered humans to do this work. It does not have to consider intention or agency as problems but rather as solutions to bring the plot to a close: the evil corporation intended to cover up for its original crime against the altered humans by framing Tom Cruise for a murder the head of the corporation committed, and Tom Cruise's character was able to punish the head of the corporation by taking away the corporation's ability to use the altered humans: problem solved. In *Paradox's* version of the time travel narrative, it is unclear whether anyone has agency over time. The viewer is never told who controls the flow of time, and the clues in the plot increasing imply that human intention and will affect time but do not control it. That is, in trying to change events in the future, we also help to cause them, though this does not preclude some others also affecting the timeline simultaneously. The narrative of time travel told in *Paradox* is not a clever time loop that explains itself away. In this way, *Paradox* has a much darker vision of human agency than does *Minority Report* and a much messier plot because of the ambiguity toward human agency that it depicts. In this way time travel in the narrative is more appropriately like the movie *Primer*, whose narrative about time travel ends with the narrator who seems to have perfect agency over time admitting that he does

not know how hard it was for an alternate version of himself to change a timeline. He is left hoping that it was not as bad as he feared it was. A longer episode run in *Paradox* might have enabled a more thorough exploration of these ideas, but also might have allowed them to be tamed into something more easily digested for a serial form, a gimmick to repeat each week. The cliffhanger ending at the end of the five-series run actually mirrors the experience of its characters who do not know what they are doing to change time, or if they are doing anything at all.

Whatever explanatory apparatus that *Paradox* does give for the physical explanation of the images from the future comes via the physicist who discovers the images on his computer, Christian King (the least subtle character name choice among a not so subtle list). Here an element of hard science fiction enters the narrative. King, mostly in the first episode, lays out the theory of the multiverse/quantum universe, in which multiple universes exist or perhaps are born from the various possible outcomes of an act. If this way of describing time is the “correct one,” then the characters are not changing the one true timeline, but are causing another causal split in which some horrible incidents are avoided for one particular time stream but perhaps not others. However, the closer one gets to feeling as though the characters have agency over time in *Paradox*, the more forcefully the role of intention challenges any easy sense of agency. DI Flint asks ever-more pointed questions about her role in what their investigations yield, but the possible answers to the team’s role in shaping the future seem to depend on what each of the character’s sense of reality is. If one’s ontology shapes future events, then there is only a limited range for causality within a given time stream surrounded by a larger subjective sphere in which events occur according to some perspectives and not others. It is rare that broadcast television takes on ideas as complex as these, and even rarer that a show stays engaged with them, even for five episodes.

As is the case sometimes with broadcast television, some of the technical aspects are lacking. There are plot holes in *Paradox*, sometimes large ones; there is some bad acting, and a tendency for the dialogue to belabor the human drama of the characters while short-changing the science fiction ideas. Interestingly, though, the effects of human drama end up being the biggest clue to what might actually be happening. The series ends on a cliffhanger—be warned, and the BBC is not making any more of these. The team’s increasing disagreement

over what is happening leads them on very different paths. That dissonance, though, reinforces the sense that they—and we—do not know what is happening when faced with evidence of time travel.

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FreakAngels

[web comic + graphic novel]

Rikk Mulligan

FreakAngels Volume 1. Warren Ellis (w), Paul Duffield (p, i). Avatar Press, November 2008.

*23 years ago, twelve strange children were born
in England at exactly the same moment.
6 years ago, the world ended.
This is the story of what happened next.*

STEAMPUNK and postapocalypse are as much about style and tone as they are subgenres of speculative fiction, and both have risen in popularity as narratives and fan communities over the past decade. *FreakAngels* combines both aesthetics in a free six-page weekly webcomic that writer Warren Ellis and illustrator Paul Duffield began offering on February 15, 2008. The first twenty-four episodes—144 pages—have been collected in graphic novel format as Volume One and as the introduction to nine of the twelve *FreakAngels* and their territory—the Whitechapel area of a flooded, postapocalyptic version of a near-future London. As of October 1, 2010, the 110th episode is available, and while this sixth story arc is almost finished Ellis has recently said that the story will continue for the foreseeable future.

The story begins with KK, a young woman with dark hair and purple eyes, who wakes up with a hangover next to an unknown boy “on the wrong side of the river.” Before she’s even managed to find her clothes she is telepathically contacted by Connor who calls her home as “a girl with a big pistol” (a shotgun, really) is walking about Whitechapel calling out for a Mark Fox who she says killed her brothers. This would be Alice, from Manchester, who serves not only to bridge the introductions of the various Angels but also as an excuse to provide limited infodumps about this wet and tattered world.

As we meet the clan we learn that the *FreakAngel*’s “package” gives each of them purple eyes, pale skin regardless of ethnic heritage, and telepathy. When the original twelve once put their minds to the same goal they “ended the world as we knew it.” Ellis plays with archetypes a bit as each Angel has a different ability or nature: KK is a genius with steam who has built a steam-powered helicopter, car and a pair of Gatting-flechette guns, and Connor is the clan’s living memory and diplomat. Karl, who wears a tin-foil cop to screen out the others, grows a garden that provides fresh food to the community; Kirk, who can manipulate his metabolism to go without food and sleep for days, watches over Whitechapel from his high tower. Luke is a bit cracked and darker than the rest as he resorts to mind controlling a former girlfriend; through him we find that Arcady, who is also “touched,” has been experimenting with seeing the future... and had seen Luke’s death although that future no longer exists after she hits him with one-second of her fifteen-year old self’s drug overdose experience. Sirkka is the hedonist and patron of a free love commune, and her lover, Jack, is the loan scrounger off on his boat, picking over through the ruins for what the community needs. We also meet Caz, the engineer of the group who manages to desalinate water for everyone, craft crossbows for defense, and improve any other nondigital technology they need. Arcady appears to be flighty—a bit like Neil Gaiman’s *Delirium* character to keep it in comics—though she does see bits of the future and can apparently teleport, something of which none of the other Angels seem aware.

In a Newsarama interview, Ellis said that the *FreakAngels* started from “one of those idle thoughts: what if the kids from the *Midwich Cuckoos* had grown up to become disaffected twentysomethings?” (Arrant). The tone of the series follows much in Ellis’s standard vein, as something closer to the adult and irreverent sto-

ries that characterize his earlier works like *Planetary*, *Transmetropolitan* and even to some extant Marvel’s slightly more mainstream *Thunderbolts* run. *FreakAngels* is Ellis’s extension of a British apocalyptic tradition that includes J.G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962) and John Wyndham’s *Day of the Triffids* (1951) and *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957), and its various interpretations in film: *The Village of the Damned* (1960), the *Children of the Damned* (1963), and the American remake, *Village of the Damned* (1995). Ellis himself, in the first *FreakAngels* interlude, traces “particularly British” disaster fiction from the recent *Survivors* TV series all the way back to Richard Jeffries’ *After London* and Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1825) (Ellis).

The *FreakAngels* also link to a number of apocalyptic comics that start with Marvel Comic’s 1970s stories of Killraven in a postconquest *War of the Worlds* storyline; the late-1970s precyberpunk *Deathlok* dystopia, and the 25th century Guardians of the Galaxy as freedom fighters against the Badoon Empire. Ellis and Duffield tie into the explosion of postapocalyptic stories of the past decade, including the andro-apocalypse of *Y: The Last Man*, *The Walking Dead*, and to some extent the collapse of America in the series *DMZ*. But *FreakAngels*, rather than turning to the zombie apocalypse or recycling World War II postnuclear tropes, blends eco-catastrophe and industrial exhaustion with the grunge and grit of a postindustrial steampunk that incorporates elements of freegan and anarchist culture...another dystopic view of the collapse of the European Union and rollback of the promises of globalism.

As a free webcomic also collected and sold as a graphic novel, *FreakAngels* offers a resource to study the digital arts and evolution of the graphic novel format and a business model that bridges both the old comic book format and business model and provides insight into its possible future. The episodes are woven into fan and creator discussions on the Whitechapel forums in a manner that extends some of the recent work of Herny Jenkins and other digital humanities scholars, those who analyze collaborative communities and fan fiction at the very least. As a story these arcs probe questions of responsibility and modernity; the metaphor may be psychic powers, but the subtexts could be read as genetically modified crops, postcolonial industrial development, and the interdependencies of global economics and the growing burden of an ever-increasing humanity on the planet itself. ■

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***Don't Look Back* [video game]**

T. S. Miller

Don't Look Back. Terry Cavanagh, 2009. Web. 24 July 2010. 11 Feb. 2011. <http://www.kongregate.com/games/TerryCavanagh/dont-look-back>.

TERRY CAVANAUGH'S flash game *Don't Look Back* is an adaptation of the universally emotive myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as a minimalist 2-D platformer in the spirit of Mega Man and Super Mario Bros., and that bare-bones description may not bode well for its inclusion in any argument about the aesthetic potential of video games as a narrative medium. Cavanagh's game, however, does not appropriate the myth for its ready-made "rescue the princess" plotline, but instead raises provocative questions about the possibilities for and limitations of video games as an art form, primarily due to its clever conversion of elements of the original story into game mechanics, resulting in a unique experience of the narrative that other media cannot replicate.

The Orpheus myth itself has been retold many times across many different media: after appearing in Ovid's epic poem the *Metamorphoses*, it furnished the story for a medieval Breton lay; became the subject of the first opera; and, in the 20th century, generated several acclaimed ballets, plays, and film adaptations. Thomas Pynchon, bringing us closer to speculative fiction proper, also invokes the myth in his postmodern opus *Gravity's Rainbow*, and we see later reworkings in Jeff VanderMeer's *Veniss Underground* and China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, as well as in graphic novel form, in that great dumping ground of Western mythology, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. Finally, although the myth

had earlier inspired a 1988 side-scrolling platformer for the NES titled *The Battle of Olympus*, an amalgam of Greco-Roman mythology that culminates in a descensus Avernus and a final battle with Hades, it is precisely this kind of video game narrative arc that *Don't Look Back* incorporates only to subvert.

The player assumes control of a nameless, faceless character first seen standing in the rain facing a pixelated tombstone, all against a simple background of dark reds and blacks. While the game offers no explanation of either the mythological backstory or the player's objective, even the least literate gamer will immediately ascertain that the initial goal is that of any platformer: keep moving towards the right. Gameplay proceeds screen by screen, rather than by scrolling; you have no lives, and are simply returned to the beginning of the current screen if "killed." On the way down to the Underworld, the game largely reproduces overfamiliar platforming conventions, with ropes to climb, pits to jump over, enemies to avoid or shoot, and various other obstacles to bypass: increasingly unrealistic fireballs, forcefields, disappearing platforms, etc.

Cavanagh's real innovations in both gameplay and the history of mythic adaptation become clear only in his handling of the return journey. As in *The Battle for Olympus* and countless other games, the player defeats a final boss and rescues the princess, but *Don't Look Back* doesn't end there: now the player must return to the surface—and without pressing that right arrow key. Even though the next few screens contain no obstacles, the player will already feel the imp-of-the-perverse temptation to turn right as Eurydice's spirit hovers behind, and the temptations quickly become very real in the context of the game world. For instance, on one screen, a rope dangles above that would allow the player to bypass more difficult obstacles, but reaching the rope would require a jump backwards. Here and elsewhere, if you move too quickly, thinking like a good platformer about how to solve the puzzle but forgetting Eurydice, you'll lose her. In other words, while the player obviously can feel no love for the sprite, the player does feel what a player feels: a desire to win the game, and Cavanagh exploits that desire by tempting the player to succumb to short-sighted impulses at the cost of long-term benefits. Herein lies the uniqueness of this adaptation: the player really does feel Orpheus's own temptation to gaze upon his beloved, but for reasons tied to the gaming experience itself. Like Orpheus, one mistake will ruin everything, one moment of weakness—or poor timing. What's more, when you inevita-

bly do turn around, the game penalizes you with a truly chilling second death rattle as Eurydice dissociates and blows away, ashes to ashes and pixels to pixels.

But then the screen restarts, and here we begin to see some of the limitations of the platformer as a medium of artistic adaptation. When you must replay a certain fiendish screen 25 or 30 times, that death rattle begins to lose its emotional impact, and, rather than contributing to the experience of the mythic narrative, the artificial, repetitive gameplay calls attention to itself as such, and accordingly distracts from rather than furthers any aesthetic effect. There remain, however, moments of cleverness to the adaptation even in the most artificial of “video game” moments, as when Orpheus first picks up his gun: weaponless and still above-ground, the first enemy the player encounters is a snake, as good mythologists will know the slayer of Eurydice. After acquiring your weapon on the next screen, you can return to the previous screen and shoot the snake dead, but the act will, of course, provide little consolation, as is probably the point. Still, how much that serpent has lost when we must describe it as an s-shaped sprite that takes three hits to kill, rather than with that sly, shockingly matter-of-fact hexameter “occidit in tulum serpentis dente recepto [she fell, struck in the heel by a serpent’s tooth]” (Met.X.10).

There is always a kind of loss or “lossiness” in converting a narrative from one medium to another; the hope is that, with the help of representational strategies unique to that medium, the adaptation can compensate by adding something new to the retold tale. Novel-to-film adaptations demonstrate this necessary loss most plainly, as editing, audio, and mise-en-scène must, for example, make up for the necessary compression of plot detail and the reduced capacity to communicate interiority. Although Cavanagh has found one creative mechanism to invigorate the myth in the new medium of online gaming, his version also suffers from a common “lossy” pitfall of narratives adapted to video game settings, namely, the conversion of Orpheus’ means of achieving his goal—charming the Underworld denizens with his music—into the ubiquitous fantasy violence of the shoot-’em-up. This is not to say that I would have preferred boss challenges more on the model of “Greek Lyre Hero,” but forcing the player to “charm” Cerberus and Hades at gunpoint seems destructive to the power of original myth, even if in toto the game itself is not.

Don’t Look Back remains most interesting as an attempt at a serious adaptation not because of the retro

graphics or the brooding ambient music, but because it manages the rare feat of incorporating aspects of the narrative into the experience of playing the game itself. In other words, what could potentially be regarded as “artistic” about the game is not restricted to cut-scenes or visuals; compare EA’s Dante’s Inferno, which has been damned with faint praise as a compelling architectonic realization of Dante’s hell. See, for example, Professor Arielle Saiber’s praise of the game’s “surface” (Gordon), or more generally Roger Ebert’s infamous remarks about the artistic aspirations of gaming, in which he concedes only that “a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience” but cannot make one “more cultured, civilized, and empathetic” (931). To be sure, Cavanagh’s adaptation never outperforms Monteverdi or exceeds the sheer pathos of the phrase “gemina nece [double death, twin murder]” (Met.X.64), and the real measure of its artistic (or not) achievement may lie in how any given player receives the platforming-temptation conceit—as simply clever, or something more. Regardless, *Don’t Look Back* remains an important object of attention for scholars interested in game studies or the “games as art” debate, as well as those interested in unconventional 21st-century adaptations of our ever-mutable myths.

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***Year Zero* [music album + video game]**

Lars Schmeink

- Nine Inch Nails. *Year Zero*. Interscope. Halo 24. 2007. 42 Entertainment. “*Year Zero* Case Study.” 42Entertainment.com. 1 Oct 2010. 11 Feb. 2011. <http://www.42entertainment.com/yearzero/>.

EVEN BEFORE industrial rock act Nine Inch Nails (NIN) released their album *Year Zero* in April 2007, an accompanying viral marketing campaign had already begun to create a buzz for the album online but also offline by February 2007. 42entertainment, a strategy

company that creates immersive entertainment for commercial products, marketed the album and developed an alternate reality game (ARG) that allowed fans to enter the narrated world of the album. An alternate reality game is an interactive puzzle-solving game that is played both on- and offline across many media with thousands of players cooperating to gather clues and thus propel the game forward. The game designers continuously manipulate and disperse clues while players all over the world try to overcome the game's challenges and solve its puzzles. The main purpose of the *Year Zero* ARG was playing the game and finding clues in order to unveil the future history described by both game and album and to collect as much information as possible on the narrated events to come.

The album describes the dystopian world of 2022, or "Year Zero," by presenting sixteen tracks, each of which is textually not much more than a momentary snapshot written from the viewpoint of one character. Through the textual vagueness of the sixteen modular songs, the narrated world of the album remains opaque unless the reader/listener also becomes a player of the ARG. Players needed to manipulate websites and email-addresses as well as find and solve offline problems. Memory sticks containing song material and cryptic files were found at concerts, spectral analysis of which revealed further websites of the game. Hidden messages on t-shirts revealed parts of the game, as did a telephone number hidden on another memory stick. Fans calling this number were directed to a specific time and location where a van handed out packages with mobile phones, which in turn were called to reveal a secret concert location. When the concert was then theatrically stormed by in-game police troops, the ARG reached its climax. By providing all of these clues, across media and national borders, the game slowly unfolded a postmodern patchwork narrative of a dystopian future in which a fundamentalist Christian U.S. has increased national security and begun surveillance of its own citizens after several terrorist attacks on Los Angeles. In this narrative world, the U.S. government has issued the addition of a drug called Parepin to the public water supply as a countermeasure against biological warfare, even though the drug also acts as a mood-dampener and psychotropic, and the population lives in constant fear of its own government. Any kind of opposition towards these measures is deemed subversion and eliminated with all means necessary. A resistance starts to develop and acts out against the oppressive regime.

Year Zero must be seen as a concept album on a dystopian future. Together with the ARG, the album provides enough indexical or encyclopedic information to assemble a future alternate history clearly within the dystopian genre traditions. The mechanism by which the 2007 reality is informed of the future reminds of the techniques used in classical utopias/dystopias, such as a historical manuscript or the record of a traveler, only inverted to reveal the future: by the use of an unidentified technology a dissident group, called The Resistance, sends information along a time shift in the internet and allows the contemporary readers/players to explore the future society. The outsider's perspective is necessary for the dystopian critical commentary to function and by playing the game and actually becoming part of it, a total immersion of the player within the game world is facilitated and allows for the decisive moment of agency to be acted out. What happens in the future is up to us in the present. The utopia/dystopia depends literally upon our actions. By incorporating the future possible world in a game as immersive and interactive as an ARG, the dystopian imagination advances from cautionary tale to directive for action. Players not only think about changing the future, they also actively participate in such a change.

The game and album together function as examples of convergence culture and cross-medialization. Without the interactive communities of Web 2.0, the game, which needed to be played simultaneously in Los Angeles, London and Tokyo, could simply not have functioned. As such, the *Year Zero* experience provides ample material for discussing the role of agency, community and social responsibility within a dystopian/utopian context. The nature of the game as dispersed on the Internet really offers tremendous possibilities for students to use and hone their research skills and experience online communities as global and self-organized. Last but not least, the thematic discussion of the *Year Zero* universe can provide students with an understanding of surveillance, loss of freedom and religious fundamentalism, and might be juxtaposed in a discussion with the thematically similar *Little Brother* by Cory Doctorow or even George Orwell's classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. ■

Announcements

Calls for Papers

Compiled by Matthew Holtheimer
and Jason Embry

Call for Papers—Conference

Title: “A Vampire, a Troll, and a Martian Walk Into a Bar..”: Current Research in Speculative Fiction (CRSF)

Conference Date: June 18, 2011

Conference Site: University of Liverpool

Topic: CRSF is a postgraduate conference designed to promote the research of speculative fictions including, but not limited to, science fiction, fantasy and horror. Our aim is to showcase some of the latest developments in this dynamic and evolving field, by providing a platform for the presentation of current research by postgraduates. The conference will also encourage the discussion of this research and the construction of crucial networks with fellow researchers. Keynote Lectures from Professor Adam Roberts (Royal Holloway, University of London) and Mr. Andy Sawyer (Director of MA in Science Fiction Studies, University of Liverpool).

Due Date: Abstracts of 300 words, for papers intended to run for twenty minutes, should be submitted to CRSF2011 AT gmail.com by April 11, 2011.

Contact: CRSF2011 AT gmail.com

Call for Papers—Conference

Title: Mythcon 42—Monsters, Marvels, and Minstrels: The Rise of Modern Medievalism

Conference Date: July 15-18, 2011

Conference Site: Albuquerque, NM

Topic: The year 2011 marks the 75th anniversary of both C.S. Lewis’ publication of *The Allegory of Love* and J.R.R. Tolkien’s lecture “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics.” To commemorate these important anniversaries, Mythcon 42 will invite reflection on the impact of these critical works and how they offer new ways to view the fantastic in earlier texts as well as how they initiated many of the approaches modern fantasy applies to its reading of the medieval. Papers from a variety of critical perspectives and disciplines are welcome.

Due Date: Paper abstracts (250 word maximum), along with contact information, should be sent to jbcroft AT ou.edu by April 15, 2011

Contact: Janet Brennan Croft, Paper Coordinator, jbcroft AT ou.edu

URL: <http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/42/>

Call for Papers—Book

Title: Brave New Teenagers: Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

Topic: We invite articles of 6,000-7,000 words for a proposed collection on Young Adult (“teen”) Dystopias. What accounts for the recent boom in YA dystopian fiction? Are young readers genuinely drawn to these dystopian landscapes, or is the success of these YA books largely a product of marketing, merchandizing, and hype? How do we account for their crossover appeal? What social and political function(s) do they fulfill? Are YA dystopias truly socially and politically progressive, or do their critiques ring hollow as they reinscribe traditional norms? How can we evaluate their literary merit and position them in literary history and in utopian studies?

Due Date: Send completed papers in Word format by July 1, 2011 to Balaka Basu, Kate Broad and Carrie Hintz at ya.dystopia AT gmail.com. At time of submission, we require papers to conform to the Chicago Manual of Style.

SFRA 2011 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Dreams Not Only American: Science Fiction's Transatlantic Transactions

Lublin, Poland July 7-10, 2011

Topic: Science fiction has become a truly global phenomenon, encompassing national and international exchanges and intersections (the status quo addressed by the Eaton Conference in February 2011). Despite its incredible variety, however, science fiction (SF) first emerged as a discrete literary practice in the United States and several European countries. Bearing in mind these origins and the fact that this is only the second SFRA conference to be held outside North America, it seems only natural that the organization's 2011 meeting should focus on all modes and aspects of SF transactions between Europe and America(s).

We invite paper and panel proposals that focus on all forms of science fiction and that address (but are not limited to) the following aspects:

** Roots – the circumstances of independent emergence of SF in Europe and America*

** History and politics of Euro-American SF transactions*

** Identity discourses and constructions – does “science fiction” mean the same in the U.S., Great Britain, France, Spain, Germany or Russia?*

** Exchanges – how have European and American science fictions influenced and inspired each other?*

** Differences – are science fictions written in America and in Europe different thematically or formally?*

** National “schools” in Europe and America – their characteristics, peculiarities and exchanges; Is Western European SF similar to that from Central and Eastern Europe? How is Canadian SF different from the texts produced in the U.S.?*

Papers and panels on all other topics pertinent to the Science Fiction Research Association's scope of interests are also welcome.

Due Date: Abstracts and proposals should be submitted by March 31st. All abstracts and proposals will be considered on a rolling basis. Please note that all presenters must be SFRA members in good standing.

Contact: Pawel Frelik (pawel.frelik AT gmail.com)

Science Fiction Research Association

www.sfra.org

The Science Fiction Research Association is the oldest professional organization for the study of science fiction and fantasy literature and film. Founded in 1970, the SFRA was organized to improve classroom teaching; to encourage and assist scholarship; and to evaluate and publicize new books and magazines dealing with fantastic literature and film, teaching methods and materials, and allied media performances. Among the membership are people from many countries—students, teachers, professors, librarians, futurologists, readers, authors, booksellers, editors, publishers, archivists, and scholars in many disciplines. Academic affiliation is not a requirement for membership. Visit the SFRA Website at <http://www.sfra.org>. For a membership application, contact the SFRA Treasurer or see the Website.

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Three issues per year. The oldest scholarly journal in the field, with critical, historical, and bibliographical articles, book reviews, letters, occasional special topic issues, and an annual index.

Science Fiction Studies

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