SAMPLE REVIEWS FROM

BEARINGS

REVIEWS 1997–2001

GARY K WOLFE

Cover Art by Judith Clute
Index by Leigh Kennedy Priest

BECCON PUBLICATIONS
2010

~~ September 1997, Locus #440 ~~

Antarctica ~~ Kim Stanley Robinson
The Rise of Endymion ~~ Dan Simmons
Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman ~~ Walter M. Miller, Jr.
My Soul to Keep ~~ Tananarive Due
Saul's Death and Other Poems ~~ Joe Haldeman

Kim Stanley Robinson likes ice. In an apparent effort to come up with the coldest-sounding title in science fiction, he called one of his earliest stories "On the North Pole of Pluto" then later incorporated this into a novel called *Icehenge*; he produced a whole series of stories set in the chilly mountains of Nepal in *Escape from Kathmandu*; he introduced several of the main characters of his superb Mars trilogy in a training camp in Antarctica – and drew on elements of the Antarctic landscape in portraying the unterraformed Mars; he even spent five weeks touring Antarctica as part of the NSF Writers' and Artists' Program (a government arts program that even Newt Gingrich could love: sending them all to the South Pole). Are we surprised, then, that Robinson's first major work of fiction after the Mars trilogy is called ***Antarctica***? Or that it returns to what have become the trademark Robinsonian themes of survival, ecology, and policy debate? Or that it again takes a hostile and barren environment and finds in it an unlikely template for utopianism? Or that it is easily one of the best SF novels of the year, even though it's more accessorized by SF than governed by it? (The latter point shouldn't discourage SF readers, since as Robinson pointed out in a *Locus* interview, Antarctica is such a science fictional environment to begin with that it hardly needs embellishment.) Were *Antarctica* packaged and marketed as a mainstream bestseller (which it should be), it would quickly be hailed as a significant addition to the not-inconsiderable body of Antarctic literature, and the best work of fiction yet about the frozen continent (which it is). Viewed only as SF, it may reach only a fraction of the audience it deserves.

Set in a near future in which global warming has triggered worldwide "Extreme Weather Events" (presumably of the sort that John Barnes and Bruce Sterling have already written about, but which aren't foregrounded here), in which an international Antarctic treaty has recently been allowed to expire, and in which various governments and corporations have begun preliminary work on exploiting the continent's oil and gas reserves, *Antarctica* begins as a kind of spooky mystery: a field assistant accompanying an automated overland supply train finds himself trapped inside the cab while one of the train's vehicles is stolen, in the middle of nowhere. Later, long-lost items from earlier research

expeditions begin reappearing in unlikely places, and even a few archaeological sites are mysteriously and unofficially restored to their original condition. The hapless field assistant – referred to only as X (though he is neither as mysterious nor as existentially all-purpose as this suggests) – is one of three main characters whose recrossing paths make up the plot; the others are Valerie Kenning, a rugged and idealistic tour guide, and Wade Norton, a senatorial assistant on a fact-finding tour. Other important characters – all realized with Robinson's acute sense of dialogue and motivation – include NSF administrator Sylvia Johnston; Graham Forbes, a scientist heavily involved in the dynamicist vs. stabilist debate concerning the geological history of the ice cap; and Ta Shu, a Chinese video journalist and geomancer whose commentaries, interspersed with the main action, offer insights into Antarctic history and geography from the perspective of *feng shui*.

This geomancy business is not trivial for Robinson. Although his fiction has always dealt with large historical processes, environmental issues, and questions of appropriate technology, his grand theme – evident from the Orange County and Mars trilogies as well as the present novel – is not history, nor science, nor ecology (about which he is clearly and refreshingly passionate), but authenticity. The quest for a sense of authenticity, of "being-in-the-world" in Ta Shu's term, is what drives all his most important characters, and what informs the fascinating recapitulation of early Antarctic explorations that gives the book such a weighty historical texture. As a storyteller, Robinson takes full advantage of the narrative capital available in the soul-shattering exploits of Amundsen, Scott, Shackleton, Hillary, and Cherry-Garrard (whose classic memoir *The Worst Journey in the World* is cited both in the text and in Robinson's endnote). Valerie Kenning, frustrated at leading groups of macho yuppie adventurers determined to recreate even the most clueless historical treks, yearns for a better way to live in Antarctica, even though she knows she can never be part of the scientific (or "beaker") community. X, a former lover whom Val has recently dumped, is so frustrated by his low-level job that he joins one of the African-run oil exploration camps. And Wade Norton, discovering Antarctica for the first time, finds in its extreme environment a distillation of his own issues of freedom and responsibility. (This intense connection between environment and character, most clearly in a hazardous ice-journey that brings the characters together late in the novel, recalls nothing so much as the final third of Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*.) In contrast to these characters in search of grounding is Wade's boss, Senator Phil Chase, who barely ever touches ground as he conducts his senate business from all over the globe.

All this comes to a head when a shadowy group of ecoterrorists disrupt satellite communications and sabotage several mining camps, stranding the adventurers at a remote site with little hope of immediate salvation – until they

find themselves face to face with *another* shadowy group of would-be indigenes – a kind of Antarctic underground movement referred to by the scientific community as "ferals." (There is a wonderfully unlikely rescue by storm-tossed blimp that carries odd echoes of Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island*.) These "ferals" turn out to be the most idealistic seekers of authenticity in the book – a loosely-knit international community of unofficial settlers who want to find ways of making the continent a true home. We saw a similar group of characters, with a similar leader, in the Mars novels; in both cases, they represent the unalloyed utopianism that lurks not far beneath the surface of much of Robinson's fiction, and that he seems to believe is somehow encoded in the landscapes we inhabit.

Every Robinson novel is a compilation not only of themes but of discourses: the discourse of adventure, the discourse of history, the discourse of science, the discourse of policy. The adventure writing in *Antarctica* is often brilliant, the work of someone who knows the outdoors and knows mountaineering – and it gains resonance through Robinson's constant reminders of the haunted history of earlier exploration. Although science drives society in Antarctica as nowhere else, the scientific aspects of the book – such as the stabilist-dynamicist debate – are treated fairly lightly, and are carried by one of the weakest characters, Graham Forbes. And the policy issues, which Robinson absolutely cannot resist and which occasionally threaten his pacing like the stuck landing gears on one of his iced-up aircraft, nearly bring this novel in for a bumpy landing as well. After getting pumped by a continent-wide crisis and a thrilling trek for survival, after developing a deep sense that we understand what drives these characters, after watching the plot lines elegantly converge – in effect, after the novel is over – we're supposed to sit still for another hundred pages of affidavits and debates, complete with some pretty unlikely dialogue ("Your own brain has been overdetermined by your structural position in the global hierarchy"). Fortunately, Robinson lays out the issues in the Antarctic debate in his usual clearheaded way, and in any event we're by now so won over by the novel that we'll cut quite a bit of slack; perhaps we ought to be grateful that Robinson hasn't followed the same rhetorical strategy that sometimes led to plot-arrest in the Mars novels: gripping suspense periodically interrupted by public service announcements. In fact, much of what it took Robinson three volumes to accomplish in his Mars books is here accomplished in one, and with a tighter and more unified narrative to boot. It's rare that a novelist coming off one masterwork can so soon produce another, but *Antarctica* may well be the best novel of the best ecological novelist around.

When I was reviewing Dan Simmons's *Endymion* back in 1995, it seemed evident that only about half the novel was there, with most of the major plot revelations apparently being saved for the second half. Well, I was both wrong

and right. *Endymion*, it turns out, was *less* than half the novel – ***The Rise of Endymion*** is *enormous*, even though it moves so fast you hardly have time to complain – and it does contain most of the reversals and complications that move the plot beyond what was essentially a chase adventure in the first novel, toward the kind of epic territory that made the original Hyperion diptych such a revelation at the beginning of the decade. *The Rise of Endymion*, which continues the story of Raul Endymion and the preternaturally insightful Aenea, daughter of the Keats "cybrid" of the Hyperion novels, doesn't offer quite the same kind of second-volume unraveling that those novels displayed, but it does catapult the Endymion series into that same league, more than surpassing the expectations set up by the first novel and establishing Simmons as a grand master of the "everything you thought you knew is wrong" school of sleight-of-hand plotting. Viewed as a four-volume epic spanning three centuries and many worlds, the completed series may be the longest space opera ever written, and it may be the best. It also redefines the term "space opera" in a far more literal way: in addition to the planet-hopping chases and videogame outer-space battles, it means to stir passions in a manner worthy of Verdi.

As Simmons's series has moved further from the inaugural *Hyperion*, it has also drifted away from the Keatsian romantic mythology of that first novel. In fact, with its galaxy-spanning Technocore (a kind of colloquy of artificial intelligences that we now learn is a distant descendant of the Internet), its mysterious transformed Ousters and *more* mysterious alien powers referred to as "lions and tigers and bears," its corrupt institutional religion, its emblematic figures of Empathy and Pain (the Shrike), its mystical view of love as the binding force of the universe, and a truly spectacular villain whose name – Rhadamanth Nemes – leaves no doubt as to her mythic role, Simmons owes more to Blake's psychically violent mythology than to Keats's dreamier recasting of the Greeks.

So the romanticism that has provided the superstructure of the series is still there, if tougher and less lyrical, and it's there in the plotting as well: in scope and melodrama, Simmons's models seem to be the sweeping sentimental romances of the Victor Hugo school, but without the proletarian edge and without much worry about depth of character. (Clues to Simmons's inspirations are scattered throughout, from the Baum reference in "lions and tigers and bears" to subtle hommages to everyone from Mark Twain and Harper Lee to Teilhard de Chardin.) With such larger than life characters as Aenea, Nemes, or the cryptic android A. Bettik stripped to mythical dimensions, the human side of the narrative is left mostly to narrator Raul Endymion and the conscience-stricken priest-warrior Federico de Soya, who becomes Raul's and Aenea's ally after having pursued them throughout the entire length of *Endymion*. And Raul and Aenea's tragic love story – the grand operatic romance that soars through the center of both novels – teeters only when the comparatively dim Raul is,

perhaps once too often, unable to perceive the epic mission that is Aenea's fate, and unable to discern major revelations that the reader figures out whole chapters earlier.

The narrative picks up exactly where *Endymion* left off: fleeing the space armies of the church, Aenea and Endymion have arrived at – of all places – Frank Lloyd Wright's arts community Taliesin West, where the cybrid Wright becomes a kind of mentor for Aenea's formative years. Meanwhile, a skulduggery-drenched papal election has installed a ferocious pope, whose first encyclical is positively Hitlerian in its xenophobia (Simmons invokes the Holocaust again later in the novel, in a manner reminiscent of his basically decent use of it in *Carrion Comfort*). Fearing a prophecy (from the poet Martin Silenus's *Cantos* way back in the first novel) that Aenea represents a potential union of humanity and the collection of artificial intelligences known as the Technocore, the Church decides to consolidate its power (based on crucifix-shaped parasites that guarantee a kind of immortality) through sheer force, in what amounts to a galactic holy crusade not only to capture Aenea, but to murder everyone seen as an infidel. This leads to a harrowing slaughter of babies on one planet, and eventually turns de Soya and other key officers against their leaders. Aenea, sensing that the church forces are closing in, sends Endymion away with plans to meet later – but of course things go awry, and by the time they are reunited Endymion has suffered Promethean tortures and Aenea has aged five years – and even been married for two of them. Simmons offers up a rich variety of wonderfully realized settings: a vast orbiting "Star tree," a gas-giant world where life survives only in various cloud levels, a jungle planet, a mountain "Temple Hanging in Air" suspended from the overhang of an immense cliff. And just as the cat-and-mouse game seems won, Aenea decides to voluntarily return to the Vatican to confront – and create – her fate. By the end, we've learned why the Shrike seems so protective of Aenea, where the Technocore comes from, who the Ousters are, how the earth is saved when it seemed destroyed, how Endymion escapes from the Schrödinger's cat box where he has been condemned to die, who Aenea's mysterious husband was – in short, just about every loose thread that Simmons has left dangling over the span of four novels, plus a few he's sewn on for good measure. It's all very manipulative, gimmicky, and shamelessly sentimental (even old Martin Silenus himself is hauled out for a curtain call), but it's also a novel rich with power and passion, and an enormously satisfying conclusion to one of the major works of modern science fiction.

A few years ago, I reread with some trepidation *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, the late Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s 1959 classic of history tragically recapitulating itself over the centuries following a nuclear holocaust. The trepidation was of the sort you feel whenever you return to a book that deeply moved you in younger years,

and there were plenty of reasons to suspect it might not hold up: the novel bought into (and became the definitive treatment of) a kind of simplistic medievalism that often characterized postnuclear SF; it was structured as a kind of Santayana warning directed toward the policies of the cold war; it uneasily introduced prophetic and mystical figures into what was in other respects a carefully designed SF *mise en scene*. But the novel was even richer and wiser than I'd remembered. Many of its defects now appeared as virtues, and I came away convinced that here was one of the true classics of science fiction, and one of the first works of modern American SF whose purely literary virtues matched or outpaced its SF inventions.

So when word began circulating some years ago of the imminent appearance of a long-delayed sequel, it's only natural that the same sort of trepidation would set in. The cold war theme is hardly a vital one these days, and a classic novel which ends with the destruction of the world seems neither to need nor to invite a follow-up. But *Leibowitz* was also perhaps SF's best novel about the vocation of religion, and it is this theme that Miller returns to in ***Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman***, the novel he had nearly completed at the time of his death and which now appears with seamless finishing touches by an uncredited Terry Bisson. Set some seventy years after the middle section of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (the "Fiat Lux" or Renaissance section), the new novel is not a sequel but an interpolated story (which Miller had left plenty of room for with the 600-year gaps between the sections of his original novel). And it wisely focuses on the kinds of questions that Miller handles best: belief and action, faith and reason, the New Jerusalem vs. the New Rome.

Brother Blacktooth St. George, "Nimmy," is a Native American (or Nomad) priest seeking release from his vows at the Leibowitz Abbey. But his superior, Deacon Brownpony, wants him to continue his project of translating the works of a famous historian into the Nomad dialect, and values Nimmy's skills as an ambassador. The narrative is essentially the tale of Nimmy's spiritual growth and his gradual rise through the church hierarchy – almost despite himself – to the rank of Cardinal. (Brownpony himself eventually becomes Pope of a Catholic Church that is now centered in the Rocky Mountains.) Along the way, he has encounters with a fiery spiritual leader named Chur Hongan, a skilled warrior named Wooshin ("Axe"), the mysterious ancient Benjamin (the Wandering Jew from the earlier novel), and perhaps most importantly the "gennie" (genetically handicapped) woman AEdrea, who first seduces him, later apparently dies miscarrying his child, and emerges still later as a mystical healer. Part of Blacktooth's struggle toward identity involves reconciling his vocation as a Roman Catholic with his cultural heritage among the Nomads, whose religion derives from that of the Plains Indians and centrally involves figures like Empty Sky and the Wild Horse Woman of the title – a legendary nature-taming figure derived from a technique real women had

once used to tame wild horses. The conflict of religions, in turn, is paralleled by a growing confrontation between ecclesiastical and secular power, as the New Jerusalem moves steadily toward armed confrontation with the New Rome, in the form of Hannegan VII's despotic but prosperous government (Hannegan II was the secular ruler in the "Fiat Lux" segment of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*).

Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman shows many of the same novelistic virtues and thematic depth that helped make its predecessor a classic, but what it cannot show – almost by definition – is the kind of brilliant originality of detail that made *Canticle* a classic of *science fiction*. The unexpected wit and irony of monks illuminating what they fail to understand is a grocery list of the blessed Leibowitz, the earthy humor of some of the monks, the fascination with viewing our own world as archaeology – all seemed to lend a denseness of texture and depth of imagination to that work which exceeded what anyone had been able to do with postnuclear themes before. When some of those same incidents and character types show up here, there's no sense of revelation, no sense that we haven't quite seen anything like this before. The science fiction themes of the novel – technological progress, historical determinism, genetic mutation – thus seem far less compelling than the questions involved in reconciling the beliefs of the Empty Sky religion with those of Catholicism. But the Catholicism itself seems oddly displaced in time, as though the novel takes place in some alternate world where the "Flame Deluge" had taken place in the 1950s (which was essentially the case with the original), freezing that era's theology in place for the next six hundred years. *Saint Leibowitz* is a perfectly fine, and often moving, novel about spiritual growth and self-discovery, set in the world of a science fiction classic. But as a new work of science fiction, it's neither as compelling nor as important as we might have unrealistically hoped.

A couple of years ago, a young Miami Herald columnist named Tananarive Due produced an efficient chiller titled *The Between* which was hailed as the inaugural work of the first major African-American horror writer and which ended up on the ballot for the Bram Stoker award. *The Between* displayed a surprisingly assured voice for a first novel, but approached its supernatural content with a kind of decorous restraint, landing somewhere just this side of Mary Higgins Clark's more occult-tinged thrillers. Due's new novel, ***My Soul to Keep***, shows the same deft plotting and sharp writing, but takes more risks in playing with genre materials and moves much more definitively into the fantastic. For readers familiar with *The Between*, the contrast will seem as dramatic as, say, the contrast between Peter Straub's first two near-mainstream thrillers and the full-throttle *Ghost Story*. For many readers, there may also be echoes of Anne Rice's vampire chronicles, though Due's bad guys are not vampires, or even particularly malicious: they're simply immortals, and pretty crabby ones at that.

(There is at least one vampire-like connection, though: their godlike founder Khaldun claims to have obtained his powers by having drunk the blood of Christ.)

For the most part, Due's narrative is split between the viewpoint of Jessica Jacobs-Wolde, an investigative reporter in Miami, and that of her husband David. Much is made of the fact that David is an absolutely perfect husband – considerate, brilliant, devoted to his wife and their child Kira – and Due is well aware that according to horror's conventions of thick irony this is a waving flag to any reader older than ten. So she doesn't try to play games with us: while Jessica is left to pick up glimmerings of something going wrong (aided by some pretty tautly-stretched coincidences), we are given glimpses into David's true history. His real name, we learn, is Dawit, and he is nearly 500 years old. In 1540, he and his close friend Mahmoud journeyed to the hidden rock-hewn city of Lalibela in Abyssinia, where they met Khaldun and were initiated into a society so exclusive that it includes only fifty-nine members. The initiation, in which they received "the Living Blood" from Khaldun, guarantees immortality and invulnerability even from death-dealing wounds such as decapitation. For centuries, the brotherhood has lived unnoticed, holding mere mortals in contempt, but Dawit's adventurous life has led him to grow increasingly empathetic with suffering humanity: moving to America in 1844, he experiences first-hand the horrors of slavery and the terrifying loss of a loved one; in New Orleans in 1926 he comes to appreciate human joy as a member of a jazz band which occasionally includes Louis Armstrong. By the time he marries Jessica and has a child, he is already a dangerous renegade in the eyes of the other immortals.

Dawit's narrative is what provides *My Soul to Keep* with its interest as a fantasy novel, but Due is able to make a pretty chilling thriller out of Jessica's side of the story as well. When, unbeknowst to her, she begins to stumble upon evidence that might lead to revelations about David, her life is suddenly beset with violence: a reporter colleague is murdered, her grandfather – who knows a lot about New Orleans jazz – dies mysteriously, even the family dog dies. Due's skill as a manager of narrative is tested as she tries simultaneously to present David as a dangerous murderer in Jessica's world and a lovestruck rebel in his own. And she brings it off, wringing more than a few surprises on the way to the climactic pursuit and confrontation dictated by the formulaic nature of the novel's premise. There is at least one genuine and shocking loss in the novel, and some gracefully handled subthemes of Christian faith under duress and the ethics of immortality. *My Soul to Keep* not only fulfills the promise of Due's first novel, but moves into new (and slightly more commercial) territory, where her greatest risk is that of being invited to repeat herself, of being consumed by formula after having tamed it brilliantly. For now, she's a real find.

For several years, Joe Haldeman has been sneakily insinuating samples of his poetry into story collections, which must have absolutely thrilled marketing directors who are convinced that story collections are already unsaleable anyway. To make matters worse, Haldeman's poetry is not the kind of chirpy light verse that occasionally made its way into, say, Asimov's books, but rather serious explorations into the ways in which the more intense language of poetry can illuminate themes of science and science fiction. His interest in formal versification, rare among any poets these days, sometimes leaves us feeling pummelled by iambs – but also gives us what must be SF's only double sestina (the title poem) and one of its rare villanelles ("Houston Can You Read," an ingenious transformation of the flat radio voices of the Apollo era). Perhaps Haldeman sees in such stringent verse forms something analogous to the unyielding rules imposed on the hard SF writer.

For these reasons as well as the quality and variety of the verse, Haldeman's first poetry collection, ***Saul's Death and Other Poems***, should be of interest to SF readers. Each of the five narrative poems that begin the collection are SF stories in verse, distilling favorite Haldeman themes: war ("Saul's Death"), the space program ("Homecoming," a moving Edgar Lee Masters take on a space junky), immortality ("Fire, ice," the most fully developed tale and the longest poem in the book). "The Gift," a chilly portrait of a plugged-in utopia, even offers a thematic preview of Haldeman's new novel *Forever Peace*. About a third of the remaining lyrical poems also touch upon SF or astronomy, finding metaphorical resonance in types of stars ("The Cepheid Variable," "Carbon Star") or celebrating the Voyager and Viking programs (the latter poem, "Cold rust grit: end of dreams," ends with a line that might just as well be about Sojourner: "I'll wait until a human/ eye and brain can look around with care").

Of the remaining poems, several are tributes to beleaguered women (a bartender, an Atlantic City croupier, a strokebook model paying her way through med school), and a few obviously hit very close to home, including tributes to Hemingway and to Haldeman's father. In this latter group are a handful of modest poems, perhaps a bit reflective of Haldeman's mentor James Dickey, that absolutely glitter as evocations of places in the author's life: Iowa in "ice," Boston in "october fog," the Great Barrier Reef in "Water Spirit." Anyone interested in Haldeman as a writer will want this volume, and anyone interested in the possibilities of SF in poetry should be lunging for it.

~~ August 1998, Locus #451 ~~

Moonseed ~~ Stephen Baxter
Traces ~~ Stephen Baxter
The Alien Years ~~ Robert Silverberg
Dreaming in Smoke ~~ Tricia Sullivan

Over the past decade, Stephen Baxter has repeatedly shown himself to be an SF novelist of many virtues, of which economy is not one. After the challenging superhard SF of his early Xeelee trilogy, his novels have grown into fat, friendly behemoths, filled with fascinating operational details but structured with the architectural restraint of an Antonio Gaudi church. His last novel, *Titan*, seemed like a trilogy in one volume, until you realized that the whole thing was only part of a much larger ongoing project to reimagine and resurrect the large-scale space programs of the sixties and seventies. (In general, Big Engineering is Baxter's favorite theme, showing up in the past in his Victorian tales, in the near-present in his NASA fiction, and in the distant future in his Xeelee stories.) The NASA fiction includes a number of short stories (see below), the novels *Voyage* (an alternative history about an Apollo-type landing on Mars), *Titan* (about a one-way journey to seek life on the Jovian moon), and the new ***Moonseed***, his most unalloyed thriller to date, which suggests that the only way to really get the moon program up and running again is to wipe out the Earth – but with a *When Worlds Collide*-type advance deadline.

Baxter's method for wiping out the earth is ingeniously farfetched: the "moonseed" of the title, brought to earth imbedded in moonrocks during the Apollo program, consists of strange bacteria-sized particles with fractional electrical charges and an insatiable appetite for olivine, a silicate which makes up a good deal of the earth's crust. The novel is barely underway when Venus blows up, turning into no more than a smudge in the night sky and setting up the first of the novel's mysteries – though most readers will recognize that this is really little more than spectacular foreshadowing, since one of the rules of special effects (in fiction as well as in movies) is that you don't blow up a planet in the first reel unless you've got something *really* spectacular for the third. And Baxter does: a series of geological catastrophes that seem designed to make the summer's armageddon movies look like drivers' training films. First to get creamed is Edinburgh, where the moonseed has escaped from a lunar rock in geology lab and begun eating its way toward the Earth's mantle, popping off billion-year-dormant volcanoes along the way. Not long after, the rest of Scotland and the northern British Isles get it, as does the entire state of Washington in the U.S. Clearly, it's only a matter of time until the whole planet

is Swiss cheese, eventually sharing Venus's fate. (The manner in which the world is consumed vaguely calls to mind David Brin's 1990 environmental rabble-rouser *Earth*, in which a black hole gets loose in the mantle. But Baxter has fewer lessons to offer, and clearly can't wait to get to the next tidal wave.)

Fortunately, NASA geologist Henry Meacher, who began the novel grousing about how his plan to terraform the moon was unceremoniously shelved years earlier, still has it in his back pocket. He manages to persuade his astronaut ex-wife to pull together an emergency mission to the moon with the ostensible objective of learning what has protected that satellite from being destroyed by the moonseed – but also with the possibility of beginning the terraforming, in order to save at least part of Earth's population. Baxter's real fascination, it quickly becomes apparent, lies not so much in the question of how to save the earth as in the question of how we would mount a new moon landing program if we absolutely had to right now, using available technology. So large chunks of the novel turn right back into a Baxterian NASA technothriller, while other large chunks focus on – well, large chunks, as the earth rips apart in a series of geological disaster spectacles. There are various subplots involving journalists, cultists, geologists, the British government, a dying physicist, and a Scottish shopkeeper who falls in love with Henry, but the main action has the unlikely trio of Henry, his ex-wife, and her current Russian cosmonaut lover on a desperate and possibly suicidal moon mission to save humanity.

With its multiple viewpoints and epic cast of characters, *Moonseed*, like *Titan* before it, eventually comes to resemble three novels in one – a moon mission technothriller in keeping with Baxter's other NASA fiction, a large-scale eschatological disaster opera, and a drama of lunar colonization. That's a lot of balls to keep in the air, and sometimes Baxter gets repetitive (I counted no fewer than six occasions in which a viewpoint character thinks "maybe I'll get out of this alive after all" – and then looks up), and sometimes Baxter lets the special effects get the better of credulity (as in a lunar terraforming scene that recalls the phenomenally lamebrained ending of the film *Total Recall)*. And there's more than a grain of hokum in the idea of the Moonseed itself, despite some handwaving physics and a vague glow of mystery imparted by suggestions that it may be alive or the product of an alien technology. We all know that what it's really there for is to chew up the scenery (literally), and the mysterious "neutralizer" at the heart of the moon that somehow prevents its destruction is as arbitrary an invention as the Moonseed itself. On a number of levels, *Moonseed* is a profoundly silly book, an Irwin Allen disaster epic done up with the narrative tricks of Michener and the sensibility of Buzz Aldrin. But Baxter is so passionate an advocate for what he believes in, so ingenuous and enthusiastic a storyteller, and so clearly in awe of the figures of his own spectacular imagination (he even pauses to freak out over the Grand Canyon, before wiping it out along with everything else), that he finally sells you: in the end, *Moonseed*

is a terrific, full-featured Barnum and Bailey sideshow of an apocalypse, with plenty of buttons to push for the techs and lots of lava.

Baxter's first story collection, *Vacuum Diagrams* (reviewed here last year), was an enormously impressive collection of his "Xeelee" stories, arranged into a sweeping cosmic epic that covered most of the history of the universe. What that book did not do, with its series focus, was give us a sense of the real breadth of Baxter's short fiction. So now we have ***Traces***, a collection of 21 stories originally published between 1988 and 1997, more than half in *Interzone*, that seem to tell us a good deal about Baxter's major antecedents and the SF traditions that most interest him. As might be expected, there are alternate space programs (sometimes featuring real characters like Yuri Gagarin and Wally Schirra), Victorian *pastiches*, Clarkean fables, and alternate histories, but there are also suprising explorations of aspects of pop cultural mythology and – more important – stories that suggest the kind of excited dialogue with earlier SF that seemed common among writers who entered the field in the 1950s, but has become rare in more recent decades. Baxter offers nods not only to Wells and Clarke, his most obvious ancestors, but to Weinbaum, Godwin, Campbell, and especially Blish, whose "pantropy" stories seem a particular inspiration. Fully four of the stories here could be dropped into Blish's *The Seedling Stars* with scarcely a ripple.

The title story, which as Baxter acknowledges bears notable resemblances to Clarke's sentimental classic "The Star," concerns a church-funded expedition to explore a comet using a new quantum technology that can view the past by analyzing electron phases. The comet reveals evidence of an ancient civilization, thus shaking the church's anthropic view of the universe. It isn't really much of a story (neither was "The Star," which began as another of Clarke's gimmick-tales and ended up as SF's semi-official Christmas card), but it achieves a Clarkean sense of awestruck discovery. Surprisingly, there are few other tales which seem to owe as much to Clarke, though the Victorian-era "Journey to the King Planet" hinges on the favorite Clarke trick of having a character cross an outer-space vacuum unprotected; and only a few degrees of waggishness keep "The Droplet" – about a deranged scientist who creates a laboratory version of the Big Bang's "quagma" – from being a Clarkean "White Hart" tale.

But the most notable antecedent to some of the stories here (again acknowledged by Baxter in his notes) is Blish. The fluid environment of "Surface Tension" shows up with modifications in "Downstream," in which stranded humans adapt to a world that seems to consist of nothing but a violent, endless torrent; the adaptations are worked out with ingenuity, but it's not clear how the humans stay in one place long enough to reproduce, let alone adapt. "Inherit the Earth" also takes place in a watery world some billions of years in the future, where tentacled bottom-feeders make their way through the silt on a quest, of all things, to see the Pope (they even lug along a statue of the Virgin Mary). In "The Blood of

Angels," people have adapted to a frozen earth, and in "George and the Comet," an evolutionary parable that bears some kinship to Blish's "The Thing in the Attic," two contemporary men find themselves resurrected as lemur-like creatures in a future so distant that the sun has become a red giant. In all these stories, the settings are vivid and spectacular, but the characters merely pedestrian.

Another kind of story for which Baxter has earned a deserved reputation is the techno-alternate history, most of which involve either the actual history of manned spaceflight or earlier SF versions of spaceflight, especially Verne and Wells. Baxter's *Anti-Ice* was a delightful Wellsian pastiche, and the same miraculous substance (about as credible as Wells's cavorite) shows up in "Journey to the King Planet," in which a disgruntled Frenchman hijacks an anti-ice powered spacecraft with two unwitting visitors on board. "Columbiad," an affectionate dual tribute to modern SF's godfathers, has a cranky H.G. Wells meeting a survivor of the moonshot which, it turns out, Verne only fictionalized. Probably the best-constructed and most fully-realized story in this Victorian group is "Brigantia's Angels," which imagines that real-life Welsh inventor Bill Frost successfully began building airplanes in 1895. Moving forward a few decades, "Mittelwelt" suggests that a Germany victorious in World War I might have devoted its energies to developing a space program by the 1940s, rather than a genocidal war.

Of those stories that tweak the actual history of the postwar space race, the strongest are "Moon Six," in which shifting realities reveal a whole panoply of possible moon landings by different countries (is he suggesting that the 1960s was simply "moon landing time," no matter who did it?), and "In the MSOB," a touching portrait of an aging astronaut whose memories of walking on the moon mean nothing to a younger generation. "Pilgrim 7" has Wally Schirra caught in space when a nuclear war breaks out; except for the real character names, the idea was already overfamiliar in the 1950s. And Yuri Gagarin takes off on a one-way mission to Venus in "Zemlya," which suggests that Russian notions of glory informed the Soviet space program in ways almost alien to American astronauts (a point reiterated by Baxter's fictional Russian cosmonaut in *Moonseed*). The remaining stories are divided between clever ideas efficiently worked out (the sort of thing Clarke did often in the 1950s; see his *Reach for Tomorrow* collection), and revisitations of classic SF themes. The neat idea stories include "Darkness," which offers an ingenious new reading of Byron's famous visionary poem of that title; "No Longer Touch the Earth," which sends an alternate Hermann Goering on an Antarctic expedition to discover that – in this world – Aristotle's cosmology still holds true (Baxter's more serious point here is that such ancient paradigms could not be proved or disproved by direct observation until the first polar explorations); "Weep for the Moon," a tribute to Glenn Miller which makes a thoroughly unconvincing case of how pop music might have evolved had Miller not disappeared in 1944 (and throws in music-loving aliens to boot); and "Good

News," in which Superman, arrested and brought to trial basically for creating too much dependency, sacrifices himself to found a new religion.

Of the stories that recall earlier SF traditions, "Something for Nothing" and "The Jonah Man" follow the old *Astounding* formula of using close observation and deduction to outwit the bad guys; the former involves an alien ship with a device that apparently creates mass out of nothingness, the latter a "Cold Equations"-type scenario in which three men find themselves in a space lifeboat that will only support two. But the most interesting of these stories is interesting precisely because it is the most familiar: "In the Manner of Trees" belongs to the tradition of the seductively attractive world which has something wrong with it that only the captain can sense; this has been a chestnut at least since Stanley G. Weinbaum's "The Lotus Eaters" or James M. Schmitz's "The Pork Chop Tree," not to mention a handful of *Star Trek* episodes. Baxter constructs his puzzle well – a pretty world full of strangely feral children and stunted vegetation – and he offers a spectacular solution to the mystery, but in a sense he's merely going through the motions, writing a story he once enjoyed reading, in order to see if he can make it fresh. (He can.) There's a good deal of such going through motions in Traces, a good deal of looking back not only at earlier SF stories, but at the classic techniques of SF story construction. It wouldn't hurt if a lot of other younger writers would try going through these same motions.

For the last decade or so, in stories ranging from "The Pardoner's Tale" to last year's "Beauty in the Night," Robert Silverberg has been exploring the dynamics of one of SF's most hackneyed themes – an alien takeover of Earth – with the kind of serious-minded craft and artistry that most writers would reserve for their mainstream breakout novel. ***The Alien Years***, which is the end product of all these explorations, may be his best novel in years, filled with complexly motivated characters and carefully-constructed set-pieces that give it the flavor of the best family sagas – which is essentially what it is, tracing the responses of a single California family to an alien invasion that lasts nearly half a century. What is more surprising than the novel's mainstream virtues, however, is the almost defiantly pulpish way Silverberg presents the aliens (or "Entities") themselves: fifteen-foot-tall walking purple squids with orange spots, who early on show up at a shopping mall, snatching innocent bystanders with their tongue-like tentacles for who knows what nefarious purposes. This jarring contrast between the *Super-Science Fiction* imagery and the conscientious character development accounts for much of what makes the novel fascinating in its early chapters. Perhaps the intent is a hommage to Wells, to whom the novel is dedicated and whose *War of the Worlds* provides the obvious template (in the first chapter, it's referred to as the only science fiction book ever read by Colonel Anson Carmichael, who turns out to be the patriarch of the clan whose story this is). But Wells could better afford slimy aliens a century ago, before they were such

cartoons; today the effect is a little like *Men in Black* redone by Joyce Carol Oates.

Not that there's necessarily anything wrong with that. As the narrative unfolds in a chronology that is ominously pegged to the present ("Seven Years from Now," "Nineteen Years from Now," etc.), the novel's pulp and literary strains move toward convergence. The most moving subplot in the novel details the story of Khalid Burke, a tale of child abuse and revenge which provided last year's stunning novella "Beauty in the Night". But later, as Khalid circuitously links up with the Carmichael family (in the part of his story that takes place after the novella has ended), he becomes more a functionary of the developing main plot, as the only human to have successfully killed an alien – and the only one who knows how to. Meanwhile, the aliens give up snatching folks from mall parking lots and recede into chilling enigmas, occasionally displaying terrifying power (for example, unleashing a plague that kills half the world population after they are unsuccessfully attacked), turning whole urban populations into refugees, and conscripting slave labor for mysterious projects such as building immense walls around major cities.

Throughout all this, and through the collapse of government that accompanies the alien rule, the resistance is embodied in the successive generations of descendants of Vietnam vet Carmichael at the isolated (and strangely untouched) ranch which becomes a last redoubt of human dignity, while most of the rest of the population suffers third-world oppression or turns into collaborators (called "Borgmanns" after a nerdy European computer hacker who, in a subplot, gains immense power by acting as a go-between for the aliens' computer systems). This family saga, with its prodigal sons turning into family leaders and various crises of survival (as when a nephew is discovered dating a collaborator), takes the novel far afield from Wells, and instead takes on the flavor of various novels of wartime resistance or proto-survivalist end-of-civilization homestead epics such as George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides*. While this enables the novel to develop the heroic resonance of a multigenerational quest, it doesn't provide Silverberg with a very satisfying means to resolve his overall plot, which tends to devolve into a familiar cycle of heroism and heartbreak, with a surprisingly flat ending that nevertheless succeeds in preserving the enigmatic nature of the Entities. Still, *The Alien Years* achieves a depth and scope rare among invasion tales, and if the main strengths of the novel reside in the various novellas that make it up (and no one does novellas better than Silverberg), that's more than enough to make it a major contribution to Silverberg's mature career.

In Tricia Sullivan's first novel, *Lethe* (1995) and in her first story, "The Question Eaters" (in 1995's *Full Spectrum 5*), she revealed a fascination with alternate modes of intelligence, and with the notion of planetary consciousness. Her second novel, last year's *Someone to Watch Over Me*, turned to a somewhat more earthbound setting, but ***Dreaming in Smoke*** is very much a logical

continuation of the themes laid out in that first novel and story. It's set on the planet T'nane (why do SF writers think apostrophes sound alien?), which has turned out to be a lot less hospitable than its colonists had been led to believe based on earlier reports. They're forced to survive in sealed enclosures, trying to figure out how they can alter the atmosphere to provide sufficient oxygen for long-run survival. The most interesting feature of T'nane is a substance called "luma," an "indigenous biological structure" made up of native micro-organisms. Ganesh, the artificial intelligence which sustains the human colony, has figured out a way to control the luma, with the result that it seems to function something like an organic nanotech – or perhaps like the sentient ocean in Lem's *Solaris*. In order for the human scientists to work with Ganesh, they need "shotguns" to – well, ride shotgun while they try to solve problems by means of Dreams enhanced by the AI. The rebellious young Kalypso Deed is such a shotgun, and when she's mediating a Dream for the hopelessly boring statistician Azamat Marcsson, something goes wrong: the core memory of Ganesh becomes corrupted, threatening a systemwide crash that could endanger the colony's ability to survive. And Marcsson – who of course is much more than he seems – disappears.

Sullivan's opening chapters show an energy and inventiveness that easily matches the best elements of her first novel: the society of supervisory Mothers and working Grunts is interesting, and Kalypso is a vivid and likeable heroine, fascinated by the pop culture and historical trivia of an Earth she never knew. Once she sets off in search of Marcsson, however, she becomes much more of a hapless heroine, undergoing a series of adventures designed as ever-widening revelations about the planet and its colonists. She meets a spectral woman named Neko, one of a group of exiles who have been altered to improve their chances of survival, and eventually is taken prisoner by the apparently insane Marcsson, who plans to use her in his bizarre experiments to change the planet's biology. The ideas here continue to be interesting, but now the smart dialogue and dramatic inventiveness is supplanted by a narrative in which cruelty is represented by cutting the tail off a kitten, and in which Kalypso thinks lame thoughts like "although she was physically his captive, her mind was her own". In the final chapters, the complex solution to the planet's mystery, along with Sullivan's fascinating ideas about language, consciousness, and nature, bring the novel to a successful conclusion, but it never quite recaptures the pizzazz of its opening scenes. Sullivan remains one of the most ambitious and promising new authors of the past few years, but in *Dreaming in Smoke* she could use a little more control of both tone and pacing. Like many conceptually bold SF novels, it's a tad too fascinated with its own ideas to let the narrative flow freely. Fortunately, the ideas do pay off. Almost.

~~ March 2000, Locus #470 ~~

Revelation Space ~~ Alastair Reynolds
Infinity Beach ~~ Jack McDevitt
The Fourth World ~~ Dennis Danvers

One could make the argument that for a good part of its history, hard SF has been involved in an ongoing effort to redeem, in both literary and speculative senses, the old guilty pleasures of the swooping Doc Smith-style space opera, a form that for many readers defined that raw SF version of the sublime which in the vernacular came to be called the Sense of Wonder. For all the delights of the old formulas, they were often flawed by gaping vacancies of perception – plot-holes as huge as the galaxies that got busted, characters with the tinny voices of old 78 rpm records, cosmologies built around simplistic bull-session metaphors, scientific principles concocted for the sole purpose of getting to the end of the paragraph. In the last couple of decades, an impressive number of writers – Greg Bear, Dan Simmons, Vernor Vinge, and Stephen Baxter among them – have developed sophisticated strategies for reclaiming the wildest features of space opera without sacrificing too much in the way of human drama, coherent storytelling, or simple plausibility – and now, with big novels that seem to signal a promising millennial year for SF, both Alastair Reynolds and Jack McDevitt bid to join that company. In scope and complexity, Reynolds's ***Revelation Space*** is the more ambitious of the two, but McDevitt's *Infinity Beach* is a bit more coherent and focused in terms of both setting and character. Interestingly, both novels begin with the same puzzle: why are there apparently so few intelligent civilizations in the universe, and why haven't we run into them yet?

For Reynolds, a Welsh-born astrophysicist who has contributed with some regularity to *Interzone* over the last few years (his story "A Spy in Europa" appeared in Dozois's 1998 *Year's Best*), this question is the central mystery in a striking first novel that takes such delight in its own big-ticket inventions – artificial worlds, neutron-star computers, sentient oceans, billion-year-old wars, alien mind parasites, doomsday machines, transforming plagues, ancient cataclysms, massive starships, clones, underground cities, mysterious "shrouds" of spacetime – that it's hard to resist, even as we recognize the ways in which Reynolds shamelessly and cheerfully borrows whatever he needs from all the SF he has ever read or seen, including but not limited to Clarke, Herbert, Heinlein, Benford, Saberhagen, Baxter, Lem, Niven, Shaw, Anderson, and, one suspects, Edmond Hamilton, Jack Williamson, and Doc Smith himself. And the borrowing is not limited to the literature, either; more than three-quarters of the way

through the book, when we think we've nearly seen it all, he hauls out the gory chest-bursting scene from *Alien* and plops it nearly intact into his careening endgame narrative. The dialogue, too, often sounds awfully familiar: a starship captain trying to persuade a colony planet to give up a captive sounds like Darth Vader as she threatens to begin blowing up towns ("'Count yourselves lucky that we began with one as small as Phoenix'"), and once he's on board the crew begins to talk like B-movie outlaws ("'Let's see how witty he sounds when you've shown him the Captain . . . That'll wipe the smile off his face'"). One of the unarticulated conventions even of much modern space opera is that the patterns of human speech for eons to come was established sometime in the 1930s by the screenwriters at Republic pictures.

The captive in question is Dan Sylveste, who in the beginning of the novel is off leading an archaeological dig on the planet Resurgam while his enemies plot against him back in the main settlement on the planet. Sylveste is seeking evidence that the alien civilization that once inhabited the planet, the Amarantin, may have achieved advanced technology before being wiped out in a mysterious Event – possibly a solar flare – centuries earlier. This in turn may provide clues to the larger mystery of why the universe seems scattered with extinct civilizations, but why so few thriving ones still survive. Meanwhile, we are introduced to Ana Khouri, a professional assassin hired by a shadowy figure known as Mademoiselle to find her way to Resurgam with Sylveste as her assigned target. Pretending to be a crew member, she signs aboard a "lighthugger" commanded by Ilya Volyova, who periodically consults the bloated and metamorphosing corpse of the ship's plague-ridden captain for advice. En route, with most of the crew asleep, Volyova is forced to kill in self-defense a crew member who seems inexplicably to have gone homicidally insane. (These chapters are set some years earlier, in order to allow for the travel time to Resurgam, where the various narratives join.) By the time they arrive, Sylveste has spent years in prison, and is being further discredited by a biography being written by the daughter of his enemy, with whom he falls in love and later marries. But the political and romantic intrigues quickly take a backseat to more cosmic mysteries. Why have so many dead civilizations been discovered? What happened to Sylveste when he visited the Pattern Jugglers, a living ocean with the capacity to reprogram and expand the minds of those who swim in it? What did he learn from Philip Lascaille, nearly driven mad as the only human to survive an encounter with the "revelation space" that surrounds a bizarre alien artifact known as the "shrouds," a radically distorted pocket of space-time? What happened to a group of colonists who stole a starship and left Resurgam decades earlier, only to disappear entirely? What are the roles of the god-like figure of Amarantin myth known as the Sun Stealer, or the terrifying beings known as Inhibitors who arose in the universe following the legendary Dawn War of a billion years earlier? Most

immediately, why does the figure known as Mademoiselle fear that Sylveste's actions might lead to the destruction of all humanity?

By the last quarter of the novel, Reynolds has a lot of balls in the air, and his main task is to link all these plot lines while accelerating the narrative toward a traditionally suspenseful conclusion, with Sylveste descending into the interior of an artificial world called Cerberus, toward the secret that may explain everything, but that may also set off another universal cataclysm such as the one that destroyed the Amarantin millennia earlier. Here, as elsewhere, Reynolds has to resort to somewhat mystical language to express the scope of the revelations he wants to convey, but the central idea – that the knowledge we so desperately seek can as easily lead to destruction as to salvation – is a classic space opera dilemma. Reynolds is not above invoking some familiar old SF tropes to get his effects; in addition to the *Alien* scene, we get a healthy dose of Things Man Was Not Meant To Know attitudinizing, the notion of powerful ancient machines programmed to be fiercely inimical to organic life, puppet-master-like possession by alien entities, and the kind of last-ditch transcendentalism that Clarke always seemed to haul out after writing himself into a corner, even though Reynolds doesn't really seem to believe in it any more than Clarke did. This leads to a bit of wobbling and weaving as the narrative moves toward its spectacular climax, and Reynolds's prose is not always up to the task that his imagination sets for it, but conceptually *Revelation Space* delivers the goods, tying together its vast puzzles like a paranoid dream. Reynolds may be exploring territory similar to that which we've come most recently to associate with Stephen Baxter, but he does so in his own voice and takes his own risks. Although it's early in the year, this is certain to be one of 2000's most impressive debut novels, and one of the most significant large-scale epics of the year. It's enough to convince me that Reynolds is the next writer to watch in the long resurrection of the conceptually intelligent space opera.

Jack McDevitt, on the other hand, has been around for some time, and is not the first author who comes to mind in connection with boldly conceptual cosmic epics. Although he has always been concerned with finding expressions of the science fictional sublime, his work has earned respect more for its human drama and its obsessively driven characters than for any groundbreaking ideas. His novels may be more rotund and sentimental, but in many ways he reminds one of such expert midlist authors as Murray Leinster, much of whose work consisted of cover versions of familiar SF tropes, but who like McDevitt had a clear sense of the affective dynamics of the field, of what buttons to push and when. McDevitt's career as a novelist began with *The Hercules Text* (1986), which appeared the year after Carl Sagan's *Contact* and also concerned an alien signal

from outer space; since then he's covered alien artifacts and ecological catastrophe (in *The Engines of God*, 1994), post-holocaust settings (*Eternity Road*, 1997), hidden alien gateways to other worlds (*Ancient Shores*, 1996), and cataclysmic meteor showers (*Moonfall*, 1998 – the same year two Hollywood blockbuster movies covered this topic). His new novel, ***Infinity Beach,*** despite an evocative title on the model of *Eternity Road* and *Ancient Shores*, actually returns to the theme of *The Hercules Text,* the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence and the effects of first contact. But by the time of *Infinity Beach*, humans have already colonized other worlds and are getting pretty desperate in their attempts to send clear signals to alien civilizations: as the tale begins, physicist Kimberly Brandywine and her team are about to blow up six stars at regular intervals in the hopes that the resulting novas will draw the attention of alien races where mere radio signals have failed. It's a fairly whacked-out idea, but it's not the last one we'll see in this book, and such unlikely setpieces are principally what lend the novel more than a little flavor of space opera. But as with most of McDevitt's best work, the driving force here is not the spectacle, but the passion and integrity of his protagonist as she explores a mystery that is genuinely compelling, and laid out with considerable shrewdness and sophistication.

The mystery centers around the disappearance some 27 years earlier of Kim Brandywine's older "sister" Emily (Kim is actually a much younger clone of Emily, but grew up viewing her as a mentor). Emily, whose obsession to find intelligent alien life clearly lives on in Kim, had been part of an aborted starship mission forced to return to their home planet Greenway because of engine trouble. Shortly after returning, she somehow disappeared from a taxi en route to her hotel, and has never been seen since. A call from a favorite old college professor whose granddaughter was also on that expedition sends Kim off on a new investigation of her sister's disappearance, which has long since become fodder for all sorts of familiar-sounding crackpot conspiracy theorists. But as she tracks down surviving witnesses and records, she begins to suspect that other events around the time of Emily's disappearance may be linked to it, in particular a mysterious cataclysmic explosion called the Mount Hope Event and an increasing number of local legends about mysterious lights and apparitions in a nearby area known as Severin Woods. Mostly, however, Kim begins to suspect that Emily's starship returned to earth not because of mechanical problems, but for some far darker reason which has been erased from even the sealed records of the ship's logs. At the same time, it becomes clear that someone doesn't want the investigation to continue: Kim not only alienates some of the most influential figures on Greenway, but eventually loses her job and indirectly causes the death of a close friend.

To the extent that McDevitt maintains a balance between the well-plotted mystery, complete with long-dead corpses and elaborately faked records, and

the recurring ruminations on human loneliness that give both the novel and the character of Kimberly a degree of contemplative depth, *Infinity Beach* is among the most solid of McDevitt's novels. But it's not long before the narrative moves beyond the scope of a conspiracy investigation and turns into full-fledged space opera, with Kim and her friend Solly single-handedly stealing a starship in order to retrace Emily's earlier path and facing down amorphous genie-in-a-bottle aliens who may be hostile or simply frustrated. The usual questions of how to handle first contact are treated in the usual ways – how does one protect the earth from potentially hostile invaders, for example – although these developments, far from opening up the scope of the novel, seem almost anticlimactic after the ingenious unraveling of the mystery. The novel's real strength derives from the controlling metaphor that gives it its title, as McDevitt returns again and again to the vast sense of desolation that he suggests would accompany a final realization that there is no one else out there, a desolation echoed in the aching loss of self that Kim has long associated with her sister's disappearance. By setting the main action of the novel on the planet Greenway, with its single continent surrounded by a vast ocean, he underlines this metaphor even further. Kim's various adventures may get a bit silly, and McDevitt's aliens may seem a bit uninspired, but his evocation of one of SF's primal yearnings is genuine: something is needed to complete us, he suggests, and unless it's out there we'll never quite be whole.

Dennis Danvers is best know for his novels *Circuit of Heaven* (1998) and *End of Days* (1999), which posited the idea that most of humanity might eventually opt for problem-free immortality as software in a vast virtual reality environment known as the Bin, the creation of a god-like (or Hari Seldon-like) figure named Newman Rogers. The novels were less interested in the dynamics of software consciousness – an area much more elaborately explored by Greg Egan – than in such broad moral questions as what might constitute meaningful action in a world without mortality and suffering, or what might constitute godhood when near-godhood seems universal. Danvers's plots were also driven less by science-fictional concerns than by the conventions of romance, with *Romeo and Juliet* in particular providing a template for *Circuit of Heaven*. He's the kind of science fiction writer – and there have been a lot of them, most famously Bradbury – who never looks under the hood, who needs SFnal devices to get where he wants to go, but is not much interested in SF as such, nor in following up on the ancillary implications of his extrapolative inventions. This can work to his advantage in a novel like his new one, ***The Fourth World,*** by enabling him to keep a tight focus on an issue that is clearly of great importance to him, in this case the exploitation, poverty, and violence that continues to plague Third World nations even as industrialized society increasingly dopes itself into Web heaven. But it can also work to his disadvantage in that, despite the passionate rhetoric and the heartfelt

pleas for justice, the narrative can begin to lose its moorings in extrapolative logic and drift perilously close to absurdity. Danvers is out to convince us that there is almost no limit to the inhumanity the rich are willing to visit upon the poor and that technology, far from liberating the world's outcasts, may well drive them further into economic slavery. These are worthwhile points, but they can be undercut when what should be a gasp at the horror of the revelation instead turns into a gasp at the stupidity of the idea. It's as though we've struggled all the way up the river to Kurtz, only to discover that he's really just Goldfinger, spouting harebrained plans for enslaving the world by cornering the gold market.

Danvers sets up much of the narrative in terms of a well-developed and effectively dramatic contrast between the virtual world of the Web – where so many of the world's affluent hang out much of the time – and the gritty, smelly, humid real world of the poor and disenfranchised, as represented in particular by rural Mexican peasants dominated by local warlords and exploited by corporations from the developed world. This contrast begins to profoundly disturb Santee St. John, a CNN-style roving reporter for a virtual reality website called NewsReal which conveys, for its jaded audience, sensations as well as sights and sounds. St. John witnesses a brutal massacre in a remote Mexican village, and is startled to discover that his editors are indifferent to it and the political realities it represents. He begins, rather unrealistically, to suspect that if only he could get the plight of third-world peasants on the virtual-reality web, people worldwide might rise up in indignation and, well, do something. It's a bit hard to believe that a seasoned reporter could be this naive, but one of the odd charms about this and other Danvers novels is the unlikely innocence and idealism of even the most experienced and mature characters; there is at times almost a prissiness in his characters' thoughts and dialogue, though this tends to disappear as *The Fourth World* moves further into darkness. St. John may not be long for his job at NewsReal, but he's a good candidate for recruitment into the Zapatista cause, and that's exactly what Margaret Mayfield, another expatriate, sets out to achieve. Naturally, they fall deeply in love, and join a scheme to bootleg thousands of copies of a new nanotech interface, designed to record and transmit experience without the need of external equipment: "'We hope to shame the world into justice by installing this interface in thousands of poor *chiapanecos* and flooding the Web with their lives,'" says a virtual representation of Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos. Margaret's job is to return to the U.S. and smuggle illegal copies of the interface to St. John, who will remain in Mexico to transmit them to the peasants. But it's not long before he disappears entirely, and Margaret has to go looking for him.

Her unlikely way of doing this is to recruit Webster Webfoot, a teenage delivery truck driver who is as expert in "webkicking" as he is contemptuous of it, and who, with a cute name that sounds like a lame attempt to bring the Archie

comics up to date, is surely one of the more annoying characters in recent SF. Together they steal Webster's truck and head off to Mexico on the pretext of returning it to the manufacturer on a bogus recall engineered by Webster's VR girlfriend Starr, who lives in an orbital satellite repair station and longs to join the first colonists on a newly terraformed Mars, whose spaceship she watches being constructed in a nearby orbit. While Webster and Margaret set out in wartorn Mexico to find the missing St. John, Starr recruits a fellow worker to begin exploring her growing suspicions regarding the Mars mission. They also end up hijacking an official vehicle to explore the nearby spaceship, and what they uncover turns out to be a vast conspiracy which connects virtually everything in the plot so far, sometimes using chewing gum: the Mexican peasantry, the new VR interface, a mysterious valley full of spaceships in a remote area of northern Guatemala, St. John's disappearance, the terraforming and colonization of Mars, and a rogue Artificial Intelligence which seems to mastermind everything. It would be imprudent to reveal the exact nature of this conspiracy, but suffice to say that at least one reader was torn between breathlessness at its scope and brutality, and breathlessness at the boldness of inserting such a profoundly silly and economically unlikely idea at the climax of an otherwise serious novel. By the time we race through the final chapters, it takes a grappling hook to suspend our disbelief, even as we sincerely want to sympathize with the political message the author so deeply wants to convey.

Despite Danvers's obvious sincerity and the quotation from Zapata and Fuentes that serve as chapter epigraphs, *The Fourth World* also seems oddly guilty of the exact same sin of noninvolvement that St. John accuses his employers of: even though most of the action takes place among the Mexican *chiapanecos*, none of them are given the status of major characters, and nearly everything we see is through the eyes of a *norteamericano*: St. John, Margaret, Webster, even the crusty old expatriate Zack, who finally takes up a righteous cause after years of dissipated noninvolvement. The Zapatista movement may well want to show the world the travails of the third world first-hand, but they can't even get Danvers to do it in this novel: instead, the poor once again become nameless, statistical victims, rendered even more nameless and statistical by Danvers's mad-scientist-plot ending. More than in any of his previous novels, Danvers has a topic here worthy of his passion, and worthy of passionate attention. *The Fourth World* – the title suggests not only Mars, but the Web as well – is far more successful in its rhetoric than in its drama. Much as I would like to see more SF address the issues Danvers grapples with, his own approach wavers uncomfortably between the paternalistic and the absurd.

~~ June 2001, Locus #485 ~~

American Gods ~~ Neil Gaiman

From These Ashes: The Complete Short SF of Fredric Brown ~~ ed. by Ben Yalow, introduction by Barry Malzberg

Immodest Proposals: The Complete Science Fiction of William Tenn, Volume I ~~ ed. by James A. Mann & Mary C. Tabasko

The notion that gods, like magazines, can fade away for lack of subscribers has been a favorite trope of fantasists since long before there was anything resembling a fantasy genre. Even Milton wrote an ode about it ("On the Morning of Christ's Nativity"), and it became a central part of the underlying mythology of those authors who helped defined the darker, sardonic strain of fantasy that emerged in the early twentieth century (Machen, Blackwood, Cabell, etc.) and their heirs, from Lovecraft and his circle on the one hand to Thomas Burnett Swann, Charles de Lint, and Robert Holdstock on the other. The idea so much a convention in short fantasy fiction that, after I finished reading Neil Gaiman's ambitious and accomplished ***American Gods***, which sets itself up as a large-scale full-frontal development of the theme, I found it showing up again, by pure coincidence, in short stories in two unrelated new retrospective collections. Lester del Rey's "The Pipes of Pan" (in *The SFWA Grand Masters: Volume Three*) and Fredric Brown's "The New One" (in *From These Ashes: The Complete Short SF of Fredric Brown*). Interestingly, both stories echo the main subtheme of Gaiman's novel – namely, what happens to the old gods in an America determined to create its own new mythologies and iconographies. Knight has an unemployed Pan finding work as a jazz musician, while Brown's more jingoistic tale (written during World War II) depicts elemental spirits terrified by the emergence of a powerful new godlike figure who is unmistakably Uncle Sam. It's as though Christianity wasn't bad enough for those put-upon classical deities; now they had self-worshiping democracy to deal with as well.

Gaiman, who is a writer acutely aware of his predecessors, specifically acknowledges Cabell, Roger Zelazny, and Harlan Ellison in a brief afterword to his novel, and indeed his parade of American deities sometimes seems like a direct allusion to Ellison's description of his subject in the introduction to the 1973 *Deathbird Stories*: "the gods of the freeway, of the ghetto blacks, of the coaxial cable; the paingod and the rock god and the god of neon; the god of legal tender, the god of business-as-usual and the gods that live in city streets and slot machines." Fairly early on in the novel, Gaiman's protagonist Shadow turns on a motel TV and finds the god of television, in the form of Lucy Ricardo, addressing him directly (and lewdly); later, in a kind of summit meeting between

the old and new gods, he finds that the latter group includes the gods of railways, airplanes, and cars, and other industries both emergent and obsolescent (America is not a healthy place for gods of any sort, it turns out, since its passions are so fickle). Unlike Ellison, whose exploration of the new gods was scattered over a decade's worth of stories connected only by this broad theme, Gaiman sets out to subsume this complex struggle between rival pantheons into a single epic narrative line and, even more challenging, to incorporate into the narrative a broad, closely observed spectrum of American life from the perspective of an outsider (an Englishman living in the Midwest) who seems to have lost none of the fascination of discovery – as though a modern de Tocqueville had decided to write up his observations in the form of an Arthur Machen fantasia. Obviously, this is a novel that takes considerable risks, and what is most impressive about it is the manner in which Gaiman, whose prose has sometimes seemed overly dependent on the charm of ancestral voices, manages to keep this all in balance, and to discover a voice that is clearly his own, and determinedly under control.

Chief among these risks are the danger of becoming overly schematic, and the danger of letting the free-form myths overwhelm the novelistic aspects of the narrative. For the most part, Gaiman avoids both, although there is a tendency to play a kind of guessing game with the reader as we come to realize that major character names like Wednesday, Low Key, or Mr. Nancy are coded versions of their mythical equivalents. And much of the mythology is developed through a series of interpolated stories ranging from the experiences of a very strange hooker in Los Angeles and a mysterious cab driver in New York to episodes of prehistoric visits to America, a group of Vikings arriving centuries before Leif Erickson and, most affectingly, a pseudo-slave narrative detailing the life of a brother and sister separated after coming to America. Partly this helps to establish that the various "elder gods" in the narrative are far more multicultural – some would say more politically correct – than is usual in such tales, incorporating aspects of African and Native American folklore as well as the more familiar borrowings from Greco-Roman, Norse, and Celtic myth; partly these episodes help lend the novel the kind of panoramic texture it requires without turning the central narrative line – the tale of the ex-convict Shadow – into a passive travelogue of pop mythology. Still, one wonders if the sometimes almost arbitrary changes of scenery are in part an artifact of Gaiman's past brilliant work in the graphic novel, with its demands for visual variety and tendency (at least in Gaiman's case) toward compound narratives. (There are other moments when the graphic novel peeks through, such as when the physical manifestations of the American gods are described in terms of cartoon icons.)

This is not to suggest that Shadow doesn't get around, or that his own personal traumas fail to carry the weight of the plot. Before he is even released from prison, he learns that his beloved wife Laura has died in an auto accident,

and later that she had been having an affair with his close friend and employer, killed in the same accident. Offered employment by the mysterious Mr. Wednesday, who impossibly appears even when Shadow ends up in places where he could not possibly be traced, Shadow finds himself embroiled in a struggle between rival groups who, he comes to realize, represent the old and new gods seeking hegemony over America. Shadow, whose own more innocent idea of magic consists mostly of coin tricks, is soon fleeing all over the U.S. – to a group of Russian fortunetellers in Chicago, to a mysterious black train that might well have come out of an apocalyptic blues lyric, to Wisconsin's tourist-trap House on the Rock (where he witnesses his first conclave of gods), to a funeral parlor in Cairo, Illinois run by Egyptian deities, and eventually, in the dead of winter, to the idyllic small town of Lakeside, Wisconsin (from which he continues to make side trips to such iconic locales as Las Vegas, San Francisco, and Mount Rushmore).

But it's the setting of Lakeside, whose perfect charm is flawed only by the unexplained annual disappearances of little girls, that anchors the novel both mythically and geographically, serving at once as a frozen wasteland awaiting liberation from a hero and as an emblem of small-town America haunted by its own dark secrets. Assisted by a few allies – including his dead wife Laura, who takes on a genuine pathos as she tries to pass herself off as living – Shadow enacts the hero myth in surprisingly straightforward terms, in the process learning his own identity and mediating the war between the gods. That Gaiman can pack this much mythical freight into a fast-moving narrative without leaving the reader feeling assaulted by a blunt instrument is a tribute not only to his always considerable storytelling skills, but to a clear, controlled, and sophisticated voice that seems far more original and passionate than anything we've seen from him before. Gaiman has long been in the top rank of comic book narrative artists, but his fiction has sometimes seemed to gravitate toward solid if derivative entertainments. With American Gods, he moves persuasively into the front rank of fantasy novelists as well.

Over the past decade or so, no publisher has done a more heroic job of keeping classic short SF in print than NESFA Press, which has recently given us major retrospectives of Hal Clement, Eric Frank Russell, Charles Harness, C.M. Kornbluth, Cordwainer Smith, Anthony Boucher, and others. While some of the stories in these collections seem hopelessly dated period pieces, others are startling in their freshness and in the resonance they set up with much of the SF that has been written since. Much the same might be said of NESFA's newest offerings, ***From These Ashes: The Complete Short SF of Fredric Brown*** and ***Immodest Proposals: The Complete Science Fiction of William Tenn, Volume I*** – except that in both cases, the sheer efficiency and craft of these two writers keeps even the dated stories entertaining, often provocative, and sometimes

unnervingly prescient, not so much in their predictions as in their anticipation of later modes of SF expression. Back in the 1940s and 1950s, Brown and Tenn (along with Pohl, Kornbluth, and a handful of others) virtually defined the possibilities of humorous or satirical SF, and Brown, together with Mack Reynolds, edited the first collection of comic SF stories for Shasta in 1953 (*Science Fiction Carnival*). Delightful as the stories in that collection were, with their comical mad scientists, Dogpatch-style rustics, and literal-minded robots, they also provide a pretty clear picture of the lowbrow nature of much SF comedy of that era, and thus offer a kind of benchmark for measuring what Brown and Tenn helped to accomplish.

Brown's posthumous reputation is probably stronger in mysteries than in SF, and the only full-length study of him that I know of, Jack Seabrook's 1993 *Martians and Misplaced Clues: The Life and Work of Fredric Brown*, spends far more time on such novels as *Night of the Jabberwock* and *The Fabulous Clipjoint* than on the the more than 100 fantasy and SF stories included in *From These Ashes* (I actually count 111, but of course many of them are the famous one-pagers, and even this prolific output pales in comparison to the detective fiction Brown published in the pulps, which filled several volumes when reprinted in the 1980s). In SF, Brown tends to be remembered for those pungent short-short stories and a small handful of minor classics, such as "The Waveries," "Letter to a Phoenix," and "Arena" (which had the dual distinction of being voted into the first Science Fiction Hall of Fame anthology and providing the basis for an episode of the original *Star Trek* series). Because, perhaps, of his long training as a mystery writer, he was well-suited to construct the kind of puzzle tales that were a mainstay of Campbell's *Astounding*, but his mordant humor and cynicism made him anything but a characteristic *Astounding* contributor. "Letter to a Phoenix," for example, is a somber post-Hiroshima elegy from 1949 in the form of a letter addressed to humanity (the Phoenix of the title) from a far-future near-immortal which views the next several millennia of human history as a succession of annihilating wars and painful periods of rebirth; humanity is "the only immortal organism in the universe," but also the only one to reach "a high level of intelligence without reaching a high level of sanity."

This Twain-like nihilism lurks beneath the surface of even Brown's most famous tales. "Arena," with its one-on-one contest of champions as the deciding factor in a human-alien war, looks like a Campbellian celebration of human ingenuity until one remembers that the vastly superior aliens who stage the combat are cheerfully willing to commit genocide against the losers without regard to moral probity. Other aliens ready to enslave humanity are thwarted in "Man of Distinction" only because they make the mistake of choosing as their test subject a hopeless drunk; in "Not Yet the End" (one of the earliest of the short-shorts), they mistakenly capture monkeys instead of humans, and in "Me

and Flapjack and the Martians" it's a donkey that saves the human race. Nor does Brown place much faith in technology, which he tends to treat with an almost superstitious awe and which seldom, in his tales, moves much beyond the level of his own past experience as a linotype operator. Still, he manages to anticipate with remarkable acuity anxieties that would later become major themes in SF. "Etaoin Shrdlu" concerns a linotype machine that takes on a life of its own, making demands very much along the lines of what we would now call artificial intelligence, until its owner tricks it into inaction by feeding it Buddhist texts. In "The Angelic Angleworm," misprints caused by a faulty linotype machine in heaven result in bizarre occurrences on earth, as when "angleworm" comes out "angelworm" and produces a worm with tiny wings and a halo. It's a waggish joke, but one that might well appeal to postmodern sensibilities about language and reality.

Indeed, apart from the delights of Brown's wiry style and the nostalgia of revisiting old favorites, one of the most striking things about this collection is the number of ways in which Brown, with probably nothing much more than a deadline in mind, managed to anticipate later modes of SF and irrealism. The advertising satire that one associates with Pohl and Kornbluth in the 1950s shows up here in a 1945 story, "Pi in the Sky," in which constellations are apparently shifted to form an ad for soap. Early versions of the SF crime story show up in "Daymare," a murder mystery set on Callisto, and "Crisis, 1999," in which criminals learn to flawlessly pass lie detector tests. Aliens that consist of nothing more than electromagnetic radiation seem familiar enough today, but were nearly unheard of in 1945, when "The Waveries" was published. The existential apocalypse of "The Last Train" has an almost New Wave feel to it, and the self-reflexive textualism of "The Yehudi Principle" – a story that ingeniously, and literally, ends up writing itself – seems to anticipate all sorts of post-1960s narrative games. "The Hatchetman" is a 1951 tale with Dickian themes of identity and the kinds of ethical questions we would later see in cloning stories. And, as we noted at the beginning of this column, the idea of the old gods making way for the new shows up in "The New One," from way back in 1942. (The decision of editor Ben Yalow to simply present the stories in chronological order by year seems to me a good one, since it permits us not only to watch Brown's development in SF, but to get a sense of how remarkably early some of these modern-seeming stories really were.)

And then, of course, there are those short-shorts, which have very nearly given Brown a generic identity like Xerox ("doing a Fredric Brown" is a shorthand I've heard among writers and fans more than once). Most of these are little more than jokes involving time paradoxes, demons, and puns, and at least one of them, "The Answer," entered folklore as one of the earliest computer jokes (when all the most powerful computers are linked together and asked if

there's a god, the answer, which comes back accompanied by a lightning bolt, is "'Yes, *now* there is a God'"). But contrary to most of our memories, not all of these are simple comic vignettes; some, like "Nightmare in Blue," are meant to be disturbing in the manner of real nightmares (in this case, a father who fails to try to rescue his drowning son because of his own inability to swim watches as the boy drowns in three feet of water), while others, like "The Weapon," pack a deliberate moralistic punch: a scientist working on a superweapon is visited by a stranger, who challenges him on the question of whether humanity is mature enough for such a weapon; the scientist argues that his only responsibility is the advancement of science. When the stranger leaves, the scientist finds that he's left behind a "gift" for the scientist's severely retarded son, and thinks "*only a madman would give a loaded revolver to an idiot.*" An even slighter story, "Reconciliation," depicts a quarreling couple who reconcile just as the bombs begin to fall: "Outside in what had been the quiet night a red flower grew and yearned toward the canceled sky". Brown may never have taken his SF quite as seriously as many of his colleagues, but sentences like that suggest that he took his craft quite seriously, and that he may have a good deal more to offer us today than we think we know.

William Tenn, or Philip Klass, wrote an appreciative introduction to a 1978 reprint of Brown's *What Mad Universe*, and it seems entirely appropriate that the two premiere dark humorists of SF's golden age should have been kindred spirits of a sort. But Tenn, who produced even less at novel length in SF than Brown did (his only novel was the 1968 *Of Men and Monsters*, an awkward title that led some readers to believe it was another story collection), still had a more ambitious agenda: if Brown left a legacy of anarchic themes and narrative tricks, Tenn produced a body of longer, more complex work that looked toward a whole tradition of savagely satirical SF from Kurt Vonnegut to James Morrow and Terry Bisson. His quintessential story, which ought to be far more of a classic than it is, is "The Liberation of Earth," an antiwar parable of such uncompromising cynicism – the earth is repeatedly "liberated" by warring aliens until it is virtually destroyed – that it took three years to get published, and even then (in 1953) in a bottom-of-the-market pulp. Much the same thing happened to the equally famous "Brooklyn Project," which covers the same territory as Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder" – minuscule changes caused by time travel to the past result in enormous differences in the present – but presents the familiar material in a context of a wry satire of government secrecy and bureaucracy (this one ended up in *Planet Stories*). Hubristic government secrecy is also the satirical target of "Project Hush," in which the Army and the Navy are unaware of each other's moon shots. These stories also serve as examples of Tenn's most recurrent themes, aliens and time travel.

Unlike Brown, Tenn is fortunately still with us, and one of the pleasures of this first of two projected volumes is that the stories are accompanied by informative and pungent footnotes by the author, giving the whole thing something of the flavor of a memoir as well as a story collection. (Tenn also shows himself to have a clever critical vocabulary, referring to stories set in specific future years as "undated" or "dedated" when those years come to pass, or coining "temporal provincialisms" for SF's habit of depicting present-day behaviors, such as smoking, continuing unchanged in the future.) Instead of simple chronological order, the editors have chosen to group the stories according to five subheadings. The first, "Aliens, Aliens, Aliens," includes a complex future espionage tale, "Lisbon Cubed," "The Deserter," in which the title character is a giant suicidal alien, and two stories about variant sexuality, "Venus and the Seven Sexes" and "Party of the Two Parts" (which deals not with seven sexes, but with one, and raises the question of what might constitute pornography for an amoeba). In "The Flat-Eyed Monster," the title creature is a human who, abducted by aliens, finds he can kill them with his own fear – until the knowledge makes him fearless, and thus vulnerable. And in "The Ghost Standard" – the most recent piece in the book, dating from 1994 – a human and an alien, trapped in a situation in which only one can survive by eating the other, decide by means of a game of Ghost with the onboard computer as judge. There is a suggestion of Brown's "Arena" here, and it's surprising how often Tenn echoes the work of earlier SF writers, informing it with a wittier and more caustic sensibility. "Child's Play," for another example, echoes Kornbluth's classic "The Little Black Bag" in that its central conceit involves an artifact from the future which inadvertently falls into the hands of a contemporary failure – in this case a lawyer who receives a "Bild-A-Man" set enabling him to create life. He eventually makes a copy of himself, but faces an ironic fate when a representative from the future arrives and has to decide which of the two is the inferior copy to be disassembled.

The second group of stories, under the unsubtly Swiftian heading "Immodest Proposals," includes not only "The Liberation of Earth" and "Brooklyn Project" but "Null-P," in which a desperate yearning for normality following nuclear war leads to a culture that so worships the average that the human race begins to devolve, only to be replaced by dogs. The title is an allusion to Van Vogt's "Null-A" for non-Aristotelean logic – "Null-P" represents the rebellion against Platonic ideals of superior men – but the way the story is played out will remind many readers of Kornbluth's less elegant "The Marching Morons". Notions of natural or racial superiority are also skewered in "Eastward Ho!" a reverse-frontier tale in which whites, in a postholocaust world, find themselves oppressed by a resurgent Native American civilization and seek new opportunities by planning to return to Europe. This group of stories also shows Tenn grappling with gender

stereotypes in a way surprising for his time; both "The Masculinist Revolt" – about the rediscovery of codpieces, of all things, and "Venus is a Man's World" (in a later section) are funny and acerbic explorations of sexual roles and expectations.

The third section, "Some Odd Ones," includes appealing but less classifiable tales, such as "Wednesday's Child" (about a woman who not only regenerates organs, but eventually gives birth to herself) and "The Tenants," perhaps the most compelling fantasy tale in the collection, about two mysterious strangers who insist on renting the non-existent thirteenth floor of an office building. In violation of the fantasy aesthetic of the day, no explanation is forthcoming as to who they are or why they can gain access to a phantom floor. "Down Among the Dead Men," which like many of Tenn's less satirical work draws its power from the suffering of its characters, imagines recycled corpses serving as the crew of a spaceship.

The final two sections, "The Future" and "Out There" are also a bit vague as organizational principles, but they include some of the best and best-known stories in the collection, such as "Time in Advance," in which criminals may serve reduced prison sentences by postponing the crime until afterwards; "The Servant Problem," an unremittingly dark tale of totalitarianism; "The Sickness," in which an alien virus vastly increases human intelligence (shadows of Anderson's *Brain Wave*, though the focus here is the realization that war is absurd); and "On Venus, Have We Got a Rabbi," another of Tenn's later stories (written for Jack Dann's *Wandering Stars*), which is more purely comic in both concept and language. The most substantial single tale in the book, "Winthrop was Stubborn," returns to the time-travel theme. A group of five tourists from the present are permitted to visit the 25th century by trading places with physically similar students who want to study our time. The catch is that all five must return together, and the aging, recalcitrant Winthrop refuses, threatening to strand them all in the future. But the real irony lies in the nature of the future society, in which individual desires are so sacrosanct that nothing can be done to force Winthrop to concede. What evolves is an elegantly subtle exploration of the nature of freedom and social responsibility, cast in the form of one of Tenn's sprightly comedies. It's the sort of thing that's still far too rare in SF, and the sort of thing that SF readers and writers of today ought to be reading. Tenn was never given much recognition by the SF community when he was still actively writing, although his speech as Writer Emeritus at the 1999 Nebulas (recounted here in Connie Willis's informed and insightful introduction) gained a good deal of attention, and with any luck this new volume will keep the momentum building toward at least a minor renaissance of one of the most underappreciated writers of the 1950s.