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The problem with renaissances is that they lead to you expect everyone to start painting like Caravaggio, all at the same time. Over the last decade or so, there's been a good deal of discussion of a revival in British SF, and much of it has centered around the rediscovery of large-scale space operas and cosmic epics, newly informed by a degree of political and economic insight, cutting-edge hard SF speculation, and at least some awareness of matters of style and character. But of course many writers have been doing this sort of thing for decades – Brian Aldiss comes to mind, as does M. John Harrison – and not all of the newer writers are quite as revolutionary as the wave they are riding might seem to suggest. More important, as the three novels discussed below demonstrate clearly, the current renaissance is hardly of a piece, even though each of them demonstrates a kind of vitality and vision that somehow seems to lead veteran writers toward some of their best and most challenging work, while inviting younger writers to continually push the envelope. What these three works have in common is not perfection – that's another fallacy about renaissances, that they're loaded with masterpieces – but serious ambition, and this may be all that the current British revival is really about, anyway. It's enough to ask for.

When you talk to writers associated with this current renaissance, one name that most often comes up as a kind of spiritual godfather is M. John Harrison. Harrison's obsessive and obdurate characters have not won him an especially huge following in the States, and probably never will, even though sentence by sentence he is almost certainly one of the most skilled SF writers alive. Nor is he a writer whom one readily associates with the recent ballooning of hard SF space opera; his earlier venture into this territory, *The Centauri Device* (1974), was dark and witty enough to be counted as a classic in some quarters, but its very wryness seemed to signal such an impatience with the form that one almost suspected Harrison was glad to get it over with. Much of that wryness returns in ***Light***, which among other things comments on many of the untested assumptions of space opera while combining it with a complexity of character and thought that recalls the verbal density of John Clute's *Appleseed* far more than the grand cinemascope adventures of Stephen Baxter or Peter Hamilton. At one point toward the end, he even seems to comment directly and mordantly on the hypertrophic ambitions of the revived form: "Suddenly everything was out

of the box; every idea anyone had ever had about the universe was available, operating, and present". Amazingly, this comment actually makes some sense in context, but before we get to it we've got to make sense of what Harrison is up to with his assortment of murderous characters and multiple plot lines. It all makes terrific sense in the end, but it's not at all what we would expect from a novel which initially seems to be about an attempt to return defective merchandise for a refund.

The novel opens in 1999 on a note of radically understated brutality: Michael Kearney, who with his colleague Brian Tate is working to develop a new kind of quantum computer, returns with his date from a pre-millennium dinner party filled with fatuous conversation, and offhandedly kills her before returning to his work and, later, reuniting with his ex-wife Anna. We eventually learn that Kearney, although some kind of genius, has committed a string of such murders, usually together with his partner in crime Valentine Shrake, and that he has been haunted for much of his life by a terrifying apparition called the Shrander, whose head resembles the skull of a horse and who may be an actual manifestation of an alien presence. He also carries with him a mysterious pair of brown dice adorned with strange symbols, which he had stolen from the Shrander years earlier.

The main character in the second plot line, set some 400 years in the future in a spectacular region of space called the Kefahuchi Tract, isn't much more likeable than Kearney. Seria Mau Genlicher is a "K-captain", whose wasted body is wired into a spaceship that makes use of barely understood alien technology left behind by an ancient race that once inhabited the Tract, but for all intents and purposes she's a brutal space pirate who seems to think nothing of committing mass murder while attacking other ships – or even while sending a shipload of her own passengers out through the airlock on what turns out to be a misunderstanding. She's purchased a package of alien technology that doesn't seem to do anything at all except discharge white foam and ask for a "Dr. Haends", so she's tracking down Uncle Zip the Tailor, the gene-cutter who sold it to her. He explains that he doesn't give refunds, and that the real source of the package is Billy Anker, who can be found on the planet Redline. Tracked by a mysterious battle cruiser whose motives are unclear, Seria eventually locates Billy, with whom she begins to fall in love, making her acutely aware of her half-human status (there's a kind of implied and brutal parody of McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang* in these passages in which Seria at times literally becomes her ship).

The third narrative line is set in the dark metropolis of New Venusport (Harrison isn't averse to using familiar space opera settings like this, or like the goldrush settlement of Motel Splendido, where Seria finds Uncle Zip, but what he does with them is something else entirely). Tig Vesicle is a "new man", a member of an alien race unsure of its own origins, who runs a tank farm, one of whose

inhabitants is Ed Chianese, a murder suspect who's being sought by a pair of intimidating gangsters called the Cray sisters (echoing one of England's own most famous gangster families). An attack on the tank farm releases Ed, who's haunted by his own mysterious apparition in the form of a giant yellow duck. Fleeing from both the Cray sisters and Vesicle – who caught him bonking his wife – Ed befriends a street person named Annie Glyph, through whom he meets Sandra Shem, a shadowy figure who runs a kind of psychic circus and who hires Ed to train as a "seer", a performer whose visions of the future are shared by the audience. Through Shem, he eventually learns to call into question virtually everything that has happened to him since being detanked. (It's characteristic of Harrison that this sort of Dickian reality-testing is hardly foregrounded at all until late in the novel.)

As each of these characters in flight struggles to discover what his or her life has meant, Harrison begins to weave together the various narratives in elegant and subtle ways. In 1999, Kearney overhears the words "Kefahuchi Tract" from a babbling schizophrenic; in 2400, we learn that the "Tate-Kearney transformations" had originally made interstellar travel possible and that Tate and Kearney are legendary figures; we learn that Ed had once known Billy Anker; we even learn the true identity of the Shrander, and the source of those mysterious dice. More important, perhaps, we learn that what began as Kearney and Tate's experiments in quantum computing has led to a radical revisioning of the nature of the universe, and to the worlds that Seria and Ed Chianese inhabit. The failure of Harrison's characters to fully understand themselves is brilliantly mirrored in their – and our – failure to understand the full plenitude of the universe, making this an unusually strong and even, for all its brutality, touching example of how character and physics can illuminate each other in the best hard SF. Light is likely to be one of the most rewarding and challenging novels of the year, and goes a long way toward explaining just what it is Harrison can do that other writers find so astonishing.

In Chapter 55 of ***The Omega Expedition***, the fifth and final volume in Brian Stableford's vast panorama of future history which began back in 1998 with *Inherit the Earth* (or as far back as 1985, if one counts the nonfiction *The Third Millennium*, written with David Langford, which first sketched out this future history with its technologies of "emortality"), Stableford's narrator explains that "this is the kind of story whose digressions are far more important than its mere mechanics". Well, Brian, if we haven't figured that out by now, there's a good chance we wouldn't have made it to Chapter 55 in the first place. It's a telling comment in more ways than this, however, since it may help to explain why a series which contains some of the most compelling and richly philosophical speculation about the coming centuries, and about the role of death in human affairs, has so far apparently failed to achieve the kind of broad discussion that

almost immediately greeted such other ambitious projects as Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy. Stableford is unashamed about his view of SF as a platform for serious thought, but it's easy to slide from that view into the view that's it's a platform for treatises: the problem isn't the quality of thought, but the mode of its presentation. Stableford's various narrators (there are two here, Mortimer Gray from *The Fountains of Youth* and Madoc Tamlin from *Inherit the Earth*) and speakers all have a disarming tendency to sound like Stableford in his professorial garb, while his other characters seem equally willing to sit still for lengthy disquisitions even when they're spaceship has just been hijacked or their lives are in immediate peril. The fact that the disquisitions themselves are presented with an admirable clarity of thought and style is beside the point: for better or worse, most modern SF readers would rather see the future than be told about it. In *The Fountains of Youth*, still the most successful novel in the series, a global catastrophe centered in the Coral Sea is portrayed with all the colorful resources of the best cataclysmic adventure fiction; here a similar geological event centered in Yellowstone is simply reported to us as something that happened 99 years earlier. The novel is less about events than about discussions of events.

Another problem is that the series itself has appeared in a more or less piecemeal fashion; as Stableford notes in a helpful introduction, they appeared as they were contracted. Thus, the chronological first volume, *The Cassandra Complex* (2001) was the fourth to be published, the second volume (*Inherit the Earth*, 1998) appeared first, the third volume *(Dark Ararat*, 2002) fifth, the fourth volume (*Architects of Emortality*, 1999) second, and the fifth volume (*The Fountains of Youth*, 2000) third. (People who own all volumes should go to their shelves right now and reshuffle them.) While most of these novels can stand pretty much on their own, this mismanaged chronology demands an extra effort on the part of readers seeking to piece together the cumulative development of the ideas in the series, and this is further complicated by the fact that *The Omega Expedition* is far less of an independent narrative, and draws heavily on characters and events from each of the earlier novels. Much of the purpose of Stableford's introduction summarizing the earlier volumes is to help us untangle all this – and indeed the novel itself lends a sense of unity and dramatic shape to the entire series that was not immediately clear before – but readers new either to the series itself or to Stableford's leisurely narrative methods might find this novel a confusing place to start.

None of these problems are immediately apparent in the novel's striking opening chapters, however. Sandwiched between a prologue and epilog in which Mortimer Gray (the scholarly narrator whose massive History of Death provided the story-within-a-story framework of *The Fountains of Youth*) describes the career of Adam Zimmerman, the twentieth-century financial genius whose obsession with mortality (stimulated by reading Heidegger) led to the massive funding of the earliest emortality research, the story proper begins in the voice of

Madoc Tamlin, who had been placed in suspended animation as punishment for a crime he cannot now remember. Tamlin, a 22nd century man who played a major role in Inherit the Earth, finds himself awakened in a space colony in the year 3263 for reasons that are not immediately clear to him. Many of these early chapters constitute an elegant and fascinating revisiting of the familiar "Sleeper Awakes" motif from early SF, but when Tamlin learns that the next sleeper scheduled for defrosting is a notorious serial killer named Christine Caine, the puzzle as to why they have been chosen deepens, as Tamlin forms an uneasy alliance with the only other person from the past with whom to compare notes. After discussions with several of the posthuman emortals who have revived them, it begins to seem likely that they are merely dry runs for the major effort at reviving a centuries-old corpsicle, the legendary Adam Zimmerman himself, who has attained near mythic status among the emortals.

Not long after Zimmerman is thawed, however, it becomes clear that no one is exactly sure who ordered the revivals or why. Soon he, along with Tamlin, Caine, members of a delegation from Earth to attend Zimmerman's awakening (including Mortimer Gray, who wants Tamlin to become a history professor), and a few of the emortals in charge of the revival process find themselves kidnapped by unknown agents and trapped aboard an archaic space ark named Charity. They suspect that they may be pawns in a brewing war between the outer solar system colonies and Earth, but eventually learn that the war is much broader, older, and more complex than that, and involves disputing factions of AMIs – Advanced Machine Intelligences – who have engineered past catastrophes on Earth and are divided over the question of whether to permit the posthuman race to survive at all. Tamlin eventually realizes the true reason he and Caine were revived, and learns much more about the AMIs during a visit to a hyperreal fantasy palace of someone calling herself the Snow Queen, but increasingly the novel begins to depend on allusions to earlier works in the series, and increasingly the narrative is virtually halted while lengthy arguments are presented to Adam Zimmerman (regarding what he should do with his new godlike life) and to the AMIs themselves (regarding why humanity should be permitted to survive). Almost certainly, these various arguments and briefs constitute the intellectual heart of the book, and they are at times deeply impressive and thoughtful. Like the Asimov of the *Foundation* stories, or like the more idealistic utopianists of an earlier era (an era that Stableford knows well), Stableford seems to believe that an SF novel can fundamentally be about characters talking at length, and talking in pretty similar voices, as long as what they talk about is compelling and intelligent enough. SF is really, finally, only about the dramatization of serious ideas, and serious ideas are what SF readers want. Isn't it pretty to think so?

If Stableford feels it necessary to explain the importance of his digressions, Stephen Baxter seems to think he has even more basic explaining to do. "This is

a novel", he helpfully points out in a brief afterward to his Darwinian epic ***Evolution***, and that he feels a need to make this claim at all – it ought to be self-evident after some 700-odd pages – raises one of the more interesting aesthetic problems of what might be called the Stapledon/Clarke axis of evolutionary SF. Baxter is concerned that his work not be read as a textbook on evolution, although how anyone over the age of ten could mistake for nonfiction a tale that begins with a scruffy little mammal named Purga dodging dinosaurs and ends some half-billion years in the future, long after the extinction of humanity, is beyond me. I suspect that what Baxter is concerned about is that for long stretches of its narrative – in fact, for most of its narrative – *Evolution* doesn't really look much like a novel. At times it does sound like the textbook that Baxter disclaims, at other times like the longest wall caption ever written for a museum diorama, at other times like a Calvino-esque series of truncated beginnings of novels (but without the postmodern game-playing), at still others like a collection of linked novellas on evolutionary themes. There was a time when a book like this might have been called a pageant, a grand procession of spectacular tableaux illustrating a vast organizing theme – and here's where that Stapledon/Clarke aesthetic problem comes in: namely, how to contain such cosmic perspectives within the framework of a narrative form that traditionally demands such mundane concessions as reader identification, plot-like continuity, and suspense.

Stapledon himself didn't seem to move much beyond the technique of the medieval dream-vision, offering a fairly transparent point-of-view character (*Last and First Men* basically channels a far-future narrator through the mind of a contemporary), while Clarke made use of more Wellsian resources to move his point-of-view character around in space and time (a technique which Baxter himself has used in novels like *Ring* and *The Time Ships*). A third technique – employed in *Evolution* – involves greater risks: namely, abandoning the central point of view altogether in favor of a succession of viewpoint characters, often linked in only the most tenuous ways. This works fine when these characters are contemporary scientists like Joan Useb and Alyce Sigurdardottir, a paleontologist and a primatologist whom we're introduced to in the prologue and several interchapters, while they're en route to a save-the-world conference in Australia in 2031. It gets more problematical when we're dealing with little Purga some 65 million years ago, a creature which barely has anything resembling consciousness, let alone the self-awareness which a name inevitably implies. (In the second chapter, Baxter moves the action all the way back to Pangaea in 145 million BP, assigning names like Listener and Stego to his primitive ornitholestes and even crediting them with motives such as revenge and competition over leadership.) Later, we meet early primates Plesi and Noth, named after their species designations, and for a time we're led to suspect that what Baxter, perhaps the most cosmologically-minded of contemporary SF writers, really wants to do is to write animal stories. (He's already demonstrated a fondness for mammoths

in his earlier fiction.) As a kind of counterweight to this impression, Baxter seems to go out of his way to emphasize the violence and general grottiness of prehistoric life: these are indeed animal stories, but they're animal stories with lots of brutal sex and frequent disembowelments.

Even the comet that destroys the dinosaurs is given a name here – the Devil's Tail – even though it's clear there was no one around to name it, and the description of the disaster itself sometimes resorts to disarmingly inapt comparisons that suggest Baxter sees his main audience as complacent Californians (the crater was the size of L.A., we are told, and the seismic effects that followed were a lot worse than the San Francisco earthquake), but these are minor quibbles in what amounts to the first and most spectacular of Baxter's setpieces: the description of the comet strike is exactly the sort of thing Baxter is best equipped to handle, and it goes a long way toward making up for the illustrative mammal tales that make up the bulk of the first half of the book. Following the dinosaur extinction, the narrative jumps ahead a few million years in each chapter, describing episodes that purport to outline something like the history of consciousness (even though there are sidebars about crocodiles and birds, the title *Evolution* really refers to the evolution of mammals). Sometimes these chapters take on the aspect of miniature nature epics, such as an account of the monkey-like creature called Roamer who, around 32 million BP, becomes trapped on a natural raft formed during the flooding of the Congo River and somehow survives a transatlantic crossing to initiate the recolonization of the Yucatan peninsula; if this sort of shaky speculation sounds like Kon-Tiki for monkeys, it still makes for a fitfully compelling survival tale.

All this happens in a section of the book with the overall title "Ancestors"; when we get to the section called "humans", which begins in Kenya a million and a half years ago, paleontological speculation finally begins to give way to anthropological speculation, and something resembling novelistic motivations and relationships begin to come into play – although here as well, Baxter is fairly bold in attempting to dramatize key moments in the history of intelligence with unlikely iconic figures. The most striking chapter in this section is also the most science fictional, as Baxter offers us a character called Mother, a kind of mutant genius of circa 60,000 BP who almost single-handedly gives rise to many of humanity's greatest achievements: causal thinking, the discernment of patterns in nature, weapons, religion, personal names, art, and – not least, perhaps – tattoos. Another sea adventure tale, a bit more convincing than the story of Roamer, involves two brothers in Indonesia who invent the outrigger canoe and discover Australia. The confrontation of Neanderthals and humans is dramatized rather touchingly in an episode about a lost girl saved by a mysterious "old man", and later sequences dramatize the earliest kings, the development of beer, and the invention of agriculture. The historical sequences effectively culminate in a rather nicely self-reflexive – but otherwise quite irrelevant – chapter which deals with

the discovery of archaeology in the late Roman Empire.

When the novel finally works its way up to the near future, with that global salvation conference in Australia and our reasonable expectations of a more continuous narrative, things begin to fall apart rapidly. The conference itself is disrupted by a band of terrorists, and the nearby volcano Rabaul (in Papua New Guinea) explodes in the largest volcanic event in some 1500 years. With earth facing another geological cataclysm, the point of view briefly shifts to Mars, where little robots are busily trying to terraform the planet. Then, abruptly, we're in the final section, "Descendants", which begins with a brief tale of soldiers awaking from a cold sleep into an indeterminate but apparently posthuman future. This in turn gives way to a sequence set some 30 million years from now, when rats begin to dominate the environment and humanity's descendants have begun hiding out again, having lost all language and culture. There are even mole-people, much like Wells's Morlocks. Finally, even this gives way to a dying earth scenario some half-billion years from now, featuring another scruffy little character named Ultimate, not much more sophisticated than Purga way back at the beginning of the narrative. These final chapters are deliberately Wellsian in tone, and the tone is one of despair and decay. Individually, these sequences – like many of the sequences in the novel – can achieve a genuine sense of cosmic pathos, but they remain scenes in a pageant, barely held together by much more than an extremely broad theme. Ironically, although Baxter seems to want to portray humanity as merely the latest player in a long and brutal story, his decision to end the upward thrust of evolution in the near-term future tends to reinforce the old anthropocentric notion of homo sapiens as the crown of creation, and his anthropomorphizing of more primitive creatures reinforces this. When, in a brief epilogue, Baxter returns us to the 2031 cataclysm and the scientists who seem meant to provide an anchoring point of view for the whole novel, the sense we get is not merely one of pathos, but of irrelevance. Maybe that's the point. We emerge from the novel as from a darkened museum corridor, and half expect to see lines from "Ozymandias" engraved as an epilog.

~~ June 2004, Locus #521 ~~

Mortal Love ~ Elizabeth Hand

Flights: Extreme Visions of Fantasy ~ ed. Al Sarrantonio

The Twentieth Century ~ Albert Robida,
trans. and introduction by Philippe Willems, ed. by Arthur B. Evans

Revolving around the center of Elizabeth Hand's hypnotic new novel ***Mortal Love*** is a painting with the wonderfully mysterious title "The Dog Has Not Jumped Down Yet". A small canvas crowded with figures, its ominous depiction of an uncompleted act with potentially catastrophic consequences and its provenance as the work of a murderous Victorian madman almost inevitably suggests the work of the real Victorian madman Richard Dadd, and it serves as a provocative icon of much that Hand seeks to accomplish in what is almost certainly her finest novel to date, helping to unpack stories within stories, to suggest that the disturbed visions of outsider art may grant a kind of access to hidden realities, and to unite the multiple narrative lines that include a meticulously-researched portrait of the erotically-charged Victorian subculture revolving around the Pre-Raphaelites and Swinburne, a contemporary tale of an American critic and journalist obsessed with a mysterious lamia-like woman in London, and the first-person narrative of an orphaned descendant of a famous American illustrator in an eccentric mansion on an island off the Maine coast. There are even a few links to earlier Hand novels such as *Waking the Moon*, but *Mortal Love*, despite its settings in what by now has become the familiar Hand territory of Maine and Camden Town, London, is very much its own considerable achievement, and one that moves Hand's work into the territory of John Fowles and A.S. Byatt without sacrificing the rewards of material fantasy.

We first encounter the painting when Daniel Rowlands, a Washington-based critic in London to work on an ambitious book expanding the ideas of de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World* and focusing on Tristan and Iseult legends, is staying in Camden Town with his musician friend Nick Hayward. There he meets, is immediately smitten by (and is just as immediately warned about by Nick) an intense and compelling woman named Larkin Meade, who seems to know far more details about the lives of the Pre-Raphaelites and their circle than seems likely from contemporary study, but who seems to have only vague memories of her own life. She offers to show Daniel some forgotten Burne-Jones drawings in an obscure gallery in Chelsea – once the home of the "Greater Outer London Folk-Lore Study Society" – which also contains the dog painting by the notorious Jacobus Candell.

As Daniel's self-destructive obsession with the mysterious Larkin begins to

consume him, other seemingly unconnected narrative lines unfold in different times and places: in the 1870s, a Victorian physician named Learmont is distressed to receive a letter from a German colleague describing an female patient who claimed her name was Isolde and who had apparently died in a fire; the poet Swinburne is led to meet Candell in an ancient lane in London, where he is given a glimpse through a wall of a brilliant green world; the young American painter Radborne Comstock (who would later become a famous illustrator) visits London in 1883, where he attends a meeting of the Greater Outer London Folk-Lore Study Society (and on his way briefly encounters a phrenologist named Dr. Juda Trent) and is offered a position by Learmont at his remote mental asylum in Cornwall (where one of the patients turns out to be Candell, and another a strange woman named Evienne Upstone); Comstock's grandson Valentine narrates his childhood experiences growing up in that house in Maine, where he began to create a fantasy world of his own through his drawings and stories.

Almost immediately, though, Hand begins to weave these narratives together in ingeniously complex ways: Daniel and Larkin attend a party at the home of Learmont's descendant, a pharmaceutical magnate who is also a collector of outsider art; Valentine Comstock learns from his brother that the same Learmont has made a generous offer for one of their grandfather's paintings and that he is expected to transport it to London (where he also chooses to stay with his friend Nick Hayward); Daniel meets in contemporary London a therapist named Juda Trent, who tries to save him from the effects of his affair with Larkin Meade – and warns him that neither she nor Meade are exactly human. While all these narratives are knit together by the recurrence in different times and places of various paintings, books, journals, and letters, what lends the narrative its intense forward thrust are Hand's brilliantly compelling characters. Larkin Meade may well be her most successful creation to date, and both Daniel and Radborne Comstock gain pathos and credibility by their sheer unwillingness to accept that they are marginal players in a vastly more mythic narrative. Most of all, Hand manages to sustain her characteristic tone – which might best be described as a mix of immanence and imminence – more successfully than ever, giving the novel something of the pace of a romantic thriller (and she is not averse to sending the romantic imagery right over the top, especially in the sequences set in remote Cornwall). It is at time the tone of a madman's painting like "The Dog Has Not Jumped Down Yet" (which turns out to be derived from a Cornish legend), with its sustained feeling that something huge is in the works which we cannot possibly understand, but it is also the passionate and sexy tone of someone who knows there are other worlds in both body and mind, and that art, even the hermetic art of the mentally disturbed, is our best shot at glimpsing them. With *Mortal Love*, Hand's dog has landed.

By now I think it's OK to stop throwing spitballs in the back of Miss Tarrant's

classroom. Kay Tarrant, of course, was the famously prudish assistant editor of John W. Campbell's *Astounding*, and the priggish sensibility she is said to have enforced for years may well have contributed, at least in some small measure, to the field's ongoing need to transgress itself, first with things like the New Wave and Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* anthologies and later with almost any movement that had "punk" somewhere in its name. Al Sarrantonio, generally a fine anthologist, has made something of a career out of proclaiming such Dangerous Visions-style transgressions, first with the horror anthology 999, then with the science fiction *Redshift*, and now with ***Flights: Extreme Visions of Fantasy***. ("Extreme", also a descriptor of the earlier volumes, seems to have replaced "dangerous" as the au courant market-segment hook, so we also now have extreme sports, extreme makeovers, and for all I know extreme frozen foods, and why should fantasy be any different?) Sarrantonio lets us know that his contributors were encouraged to write their stories "without restrictions of any kind", as though some latter-day Miss Tarrant has still been terrorizing the likes of Neil Gaiman or Gene Wolfe or Robert Silverberg (which doesn't seem to me very likely, but then no one ever likes to think the revolution has already happened). There are a good many treasures among the 30 stories assembled here, but there are a few spitballs as well, and the strongest stories are those in which the authors took to heart the second part of Sarrantonio's assignment – "to write really good stories" – while the few that self-consciously look for taboos to bust (such as those by Peter Schneider or Joe R. Lansdale) seem trivial by comparison. The only really startling aspect of contemporary fantasy demonstrated by the best of *Flights* is that it can be written this well, when it usually is not, even in this same anthology.

If I seem to be harping on this, I am, because there's some evidence that the "extreme" rhetoric is one of a number of concerns that I believe limit the effectiveness of what is in many ways a first-rate book. My other concerns are that Sarrantonio tends to return to the same stable of writers (about half the writers here also appeared in *Redshift*, for example, and almost as many in *999*), to look for marquee names, and to frequently return to horror as a kind of baseline sensibility. Sarrantonio's best principle of editing has less to do with barrier-busting than with two simple rules: (1) ask very good writers to contribute, and (2) ask a lot of them. Almost any group of thirty stories featuring some of the authors he has assembled here is nearly foolproof, and a good third of the contributions are quite strong. I've always thought the best way to read an anthology like this is to give it a bit of time to ripen – to set it aside after reading and, after a few days or weeks, see which stories continue to haunt. Reviewers' deadlines don't quite permit this, but it already seems apparent to me that several stories are easily likely to meet this test, and it will surprise no one to find that one of them is by Gene Wolfe. "Golden City Far", like Wolfe's *Knight*, is as much a commentary on the possibilities of fantasy as a compelling story in its own

right, concerning a schoolboy whose fantasy dreamlife begins to interpenetrate his reality in ways that result in a transformation inexplicable to his school counselors (who are portrayed in a wonderfully satiric way). Sarrantonio wisely places this at the end, since it comes as close as any story to touching upon the major themes and tropes that run throughout the rest of the book.

It is, for example, one of a number of stories that deal with children or children's tales, ranging from Sarrantonio's own disturbing but undeveloped fable of unwanted kids "Sleepover" (one of a number of tales that are essentially horror, as we shall see) to Kit Reed's "Perpetua", a surrealistic tale of a girl and her sisters surviving miniaturized in a giant alligator following some unspecified catastrophe (which may well be the most bizarre conception in the book). Some stories even specifically allude to children's literature: Neil Gaiman's "The Problem of Susan" examines (in a pointedly transgressive way) the sense of betrayal some readers experience with C.S. Lewis's Narnia books, while Dennis McKiernan's "A Tower with No Doors" revisits the Rapunzel tale and Patricia McKillip's "Out of the Woods" – another of the best-written tales, from a purely stylistic standpoint – touches upon material from both fairy tales and Arthurian legends. Joe R. Lansdale's "Bill, the Little Steam Shovel" and Peter Schneider's "Tots", on the other hand, are little more than stand-up schticks, the former spicing up a conventional children's tale with sex and profanity (but not nearly the masterfully sustained irony of Disch's "The Brave Little Toaster"), the latter depicting a subculture in which four-year-olds are trained to fight to the death in a parody of cockfighting; in both cases, we get the joke by the end of the first page. (Though it doesn't concern children, Larry Niven's short-short "Boomerang" is also a one-joke throwaway.)

As should be apparent from the fairy-tale motifs mentioned above, a fair number of the stories employ the pseudo-medieval settings that, for many casual readers, may seem a course requirement for modern fantasy. Robert Silverberg's leadoff story, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", has the title character falling hopelessly in love with his gorgeous teacher, while Elizabeth Lynn's "The Silver Dragon" compresses an elegant tale covering generations of rivalry and revenge into the space of a short novella. Both are models of craftsmanship, but only the Lynn seems to engage fantasy conventions in an interesting way. Despite its literally tree-hugging New Age ending, Janny Wurts's "Blood, Oak, Iron" is also carefully crafted, a tale of an unwilling heir to a throne cursed by demon possession. Catherine Asaro's "The Edges of Never-Haven" shares much of this fantasy furniture – swordplay, demons, fortress cities – but adds a genuinely peculiar twist in its portrayal of a city built of curves in which a single straight line can summon horrible demons. Along with the tales by McKiernan and McKillip, these represent perhaps the most conventional fantasy settings in the book.

But, interestingly, that leaves most of the stories. It wasn't that long ago that

fantasy tales with contemporary or urban settings seemed anomalies, and while that may still hold true for the trilogy-mongers, more than half the stories in *Flights* feature just such settings, and it's a notable strength of the anthology in that it shows how almost naturalistic description and fantasy can complement one another. Wolfe's is one of the most outstanding of these stories; another is Elizabeth Hand's "Wonderwall", which returns to the D.C. setting of *Waking the Moon* and, more importantly, to the theme of an immanent other world just barely glimpsed through cracks in reality and through works of art, in this case Rimbaud. Thomas M. Disch's "The White Man" is a comic/ironic depiction of cultural miscues, as a Somali family exiled to Minnesota seems to be faced with a vampire problem. A homeless man finds himself a secret master in Raymond Feist and Janny Wurts's "Watchfire", while a young black orphan has other people's dreams, both literally and figuratively, in Orson Scott Card's "Keeper of Lost Dreams". In "Jupiter's Skull", Jeffrey Ford effectively offers a kind of Borgesian take on the hidden magic shop motif, while Harry Turtledove plants an attractive vacationing elf in San Francisco at the beginning of the AIDs epidemic. (Are elves with AIDs supposed to be transgressive?)

Tim Powers's seedy northern California is the backdrop of "Pat Moore", a compelling tale of guilt, loss, identity, ghosts, and chain-letters, and Charles de Lint's Newford area is the locale of "Riding Shotgun", a tale on similar themes (both Powers's and De Lint's protagonists lost someone years earlier in car crashes) in which a guilt-ridden surviving brother learns, Capra-like, what might have happened had his squeaky-clean brother survived the accident instead; there's a certain tough-mindedness to the tale that distinguishes it from some other Newford stories. The mutability and vulnerability of identity, which may be a key theme in much modern literary fantasy, is also at the heart of David Morrell's "Perchance to Dream", an efficient thriller concerning a sleep-disorder therapist's strange new patient, and figures as well in Nina Kiriki Hoffman's weakly Sturgeonesque romance "Relations", about a spellcaster, accustomed to controlling others, who meets her match.

As I mentioned earlier, whether by his choice or the choices of his contributors, Sarrantonio anthologies still show a predilection for horror; there was a fair amount in *Redshift* and there's a fair amount here, not only in the tales by Asaro, Wurts, Morrell, Schneider, and Sarrantonio, but also in Terry Bisson's "Death's Door", which revisits the old death-takes-a-holiday saw with a new but not entirely pointed gruesomeness; in P.D. Cacek's haunted house tale "The Following"; in A.A. Attanasio's "Demons Hide Their Faces", with its dolorous hints of ancient Egyptian secrets; and especially in Neal Barrett, Jr.'s surreal grotesquerie "Tourists", in which the title characters are as disturbing in their own way as the village of deformed peasants they visit for entertainment. Joyce Carol Oates contributes a tale whose title is not quite reproducible here – it consists of a smudge followed by the subtitle "Six Hypotheses", the smudge

being the name of a mysterious contagion that afflicts a family who, in the particulars of their behavior, is another of Oates's dysfunctional families on the verge of catastrophe. What's interesting is the manner in which she explores various ways the fantastic can be employed to illuminate such disasters. Finally, L.E. Modesitt contributes a tale involving fallen angels and their secret role in the heavenly scheme. In the end, one can hardly say that *Flights* gives us a representative view of modern fantasy – there is not much here to reflect the more genuinely radical views of fantasy associated with the circles of Kelly Link or Jeff Vandermeer or China Miéville – and one can hardly say that it storms any significant barricades, but it does offer a more than respectable percentage of excellent work by a terrifically eclectic selection of contributors.

Readers of SF histories, and particularly histories of SF illustration, have long been familiar with the name of Albert Robida, whose witty satirical illustrations for his own serialized novels of the future in the 1880s and 1890s are generally treated as both quaintly naïve (all the characters dress in variations of 19th century costumes, and architecture seems to have found no new styles after nearly a century) and remarkably prophetic (aircars, videophones, women's rights, mass-marketed food, aerial and bacteriological warfare). His major futuristic works, however – *Le Vingtième Siècle, La Guerre au vingtième siècle,* and *La Vie électrique* – have generally gone untranslated into English, resulting in Robida's reputation surviving as that of a proto-SF illustrator rather than, as the French SF scholar Pierre Versins insisted, one of the four great founding figures of SF (the others being Verne, Wells, and J.H. Rosny-aíné). Even the Clute-Nicholls Encyclopedia dismissed the texts of his long serialized novels as "undistinguished", a judgment that hardly seems well-considered now that we can read, for the first time in English, the full delightful text of ***The Twentieth Century***, thanks to a sprightly translation by Philippe Willems, which is almost certainly the most important volume so far in Wesleyan University Press's *Early Classics of Science Fiction* series.

Robida, who died the same year *Amazing Stories* was launched, might well deserve a position closer to that which Versins claims. His rambling, endlessly inventive, and frequently hilarious narrative is not merely a collection of clever futuristic devices, as the often-reproduced illustrations might have led us to believe, but a surprisingly detailed and thorough portrait of a 1950s world so enamored by a kind of positivistic optimism that it remains blinded to its own near-catastrophic failings. Cities have risen vertically because of auto congestion, advertising is everywhere, women can choose freely among all professions, and the United States has long since broken up into a German east, a Chinese west, and a Mormon strip in the middle (except that the Mormons eventually had to move to England, which was OK since the British government decided to decamp to Calcutta). Russia simply disappeared in 1920 following a

series of massive terrorist explosions, Italy has been turned into a theme park, and France, by law, stages a new revolution every ten years. Of course, there is always the danger of retrofitting any archaic futurist text to subsequent events, and Willems is a bit guilty of this in his long and generally informative introduction (which also makes the unlikely claim for the novel as an early "hypermedia" text, even though the pictures and text do complement each other in a way that moves beyond mere illustration), but the overall effect of this beautifully-produced volume, supplemented by extensive notes, a bibliography, and a biography of Robida, is to leave us with the impression that one of the true glories of early SF has been all but submerged for more than a century, and that maybe we didn't know as much about this history as we thought we had.

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Magic for Beginners ~ Kelly Link

Kelly Link has always maintained that she is fundamentally an SF writer, even when (as she noted in a *Locus* interview a few years ago) people helpfully point out to her that she's not, or that she's being co-opted by genre, or that there's not actually much SF at all in her fiction. In her much-anticipated second collection ***Magic for Beginners***, there are perhaps two stories that could be read in conventional SF-nal ways, and even then you have to pretty much import your own SF machinery in order to impose rational explanations on narratives that resolutely follow their own logic. It's a pointless task, since these tales are every bit as remarkable as those in her first collection, *Stranger Things Happen*, meaning that they are not about rationality, and they do not benefit from explanations. It's a bit easier to think of her as a fantasy writer, with her fondness for zombies, ghosts, and witches, but if she's a fantasy writer it's more in the mode of a Jonathan Carroll than of the big, lumbering, landscape-drenched epics that have come to define the fantasy market. For that matter, we could view her as a young adult writer, given her youthful protagonists and eccentric parents and grandparents, but here again we need to think of YA fiction more in terms of Daniel Pinkwater than of, say, S.E. Hinton. Or, if we were concerned about how to fit her into the syllabus, we could view her as a kind of postmodern fabulist descended from the likes of Donald Barthelme, recombining the stuff of pop culture and fairy tales into fictions that are by turns dreamlike, self-referential, and enormously stylistically sophisticated. Finally, although this seems to have been largely overlooked in all the plaudits that have been deservedly heaped upon Link in the past few years – perhaps because humor is in some circles even less highly regarded than fantasy or SF – she is a very funny comic stylist, whose similes can be both startlingly insightful and bizarrely original: "She looked like someone had just set her favorite city on fire", she writes of the girl Charley in "The Hortlak"; or an orange corduroy covering "makes it appear as if the couch has just escaped from a maximum security prison for criminally insane furniture" (from "Magic for Beginners").

All of which adds up to the conclusion that Link is more to be celebrated than taxonomized, and that if she wants to think of herself as an SF writer, it's about as useful as anything else. There is a distinct sense of contingency and malleability about all her worlds, and that's essentially an SF angle of vision, even when the mechanisms of transformation aren't science-fictional at all. "Stone Animals", one of the most haunting and powerful pieces here (and a rare example of fantastic fiction selected for the annual *Best American Short Stories*),

begins with a premise that could either lead in the direction of John Cheever suburban malaise or a conventional haunted-house story: a young family has just moved from a cramped city apartment to a remote suburban house with a strange pair of stone rabbits by the front door. The husband plans to work mostly at home, but his dependent boss begins to find reasons for him to spend more time at the office, while the house begins to affect his family members in strange ways: all sorts of household items – the TV, the coffeemaker, even a toothbrush – seem to be haunted and unusable, while the wife begins obsessively painting rooms over and over. Meanwhile, a growing population of rabbits begins keeping a kind of vigil in the front yard. The ending, while apocalyptic in its own way, has far less to do with Amityville horrors than with the family's real internal anxieties. Interestingly, Link more often refers to the appurtenances of horror than of fantasy or SF, though in a decidedly bemused way. In "Magic for Beginners", my candidate for the other best story in the collection, a group of teenage friends share an obsession with a TV show called *The Library*, which appears according to no fixed schedule and on no particular station. The father of one of them is a horror writer whose novels all feature giant spiders and whose hobbies are shoplifting and reupholstering couches in hideous fabrics (which itself might be a comment on formula horror). But Link offers a few horror devices of her own, such as when one of the teenagers, whose mother has inherited a phone booth and wedding chapel in Las Vegas, calls the phone booth and talks with the main character from the TV show. Furthermore, we're repeatedly reminded that this entire story may itself be an episode from the show.

Even more directly related to horror fiction is "The Hortlak" (a title suggestive of de Maupassant's "The Horla"), set in an all-night convenience store frequented by rather pathetic zombies who emerge from the "Ausible Chasm" across the road. Essentially, though, the tale evolves into a kind of love triangle between the two young men who work at the store and the girl Charley, whose job is putting pets to sleep at the local animal shelter. Zombies – at least movie zombies, which are the kind Link most often writes about – also feature prominently in "Some Zombie Contingency Plans". The plans in the title are mostly in the mind of a young ex-con named Soap who has crashed a party in the suburbs and tries to pursue a relationship with a girl he meets there. Although Soap is fascinated by art, he realizes its limits: "Modern art is a waste of time. When the zombies show up, you can't worry about art". Ghosts, witches, and the devil show up as well: in "The Great Divorce", a husband who has married a dead wife (and had two dead children with her) tries to work out the problems in his marriage by taking the family to Disneyland, while in "Catskin" the youngest son of a witch who has been poisoned by a rival sets out to seek retribution, guided by a cat called Witch's Revenge – who may be his mother reincarnated. "Lull" begins with a lull in the conversation at a weekly poker party and ends up with a separated husband named Ed trying to reconnect with his wife Susan, but along the way is a lengthy

interpolated narrative about a cheerleader trying to outwit the Devil.

The closest thing here to the tradition of postmodern Barthelmean narrative insouciance is “The Cannon”, cast in the form of an interrogation concerning people being shot out of cannons, and in some cases people falling in love with their cannons (the person being interviewed has the wonderful name Venus Shebby). On the other hand, perhaps the closest thing to a traditional fantasy narrative is “The Faery Handbag”, which has already made it into at least two year’s best anthologies and won a Hugo nomination. Again it deals with a group of young people and with the tentative beginnings of romance, but it’s essentially about the narrator and her grandmother Zofia, who escaped from an obscure unpronounceable eastern European country with a magic handbag made of dogskin, which could apparently contain worlds and which once sheltered Zofia’s entire village from a pogrom-like raid. When the narrator tells her boyfriend Jake – who’s obsessed with Houdini-like escapes – about the handbag, he disappears, and then the handbag itself disappears when Zofia falls ill and dies. The narrator is left searching for the lost handbag and her lost love. It’s a touching and funny story, perhaps a bit lighter and less complex than “Stone Animals”, “Lull”, or “Magic for Beginners”, but it serves as well as any story in the collection as an entry point into Link’s astonishingly haunting worlds: it’s Link for beginners, and it leads toward marvels.