

SELECTED ARTICLES FROM

# CANARY FEVER: REVIEWS

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Listen very carefully. I will say this only once. It is I, Le Clerc! *Canary Fever: Reviews* is the fourth book of this sort. *Strokes: Essays and Reviews 1966-1986* (Brooklyn: Serconia Press, 1988) presented a range of reviews, plus some essays, from what now seems long ago; *Look at the Evidence: Essays and Reviews* (Seattle: Serconia Press, dated 1995 but 1996), did the same for the years 1987-1993, which also does not seem yesterday; and *Scores: Reviews 1993-2003* (Harold Wood, Essex: Beccon Publications, 2003) carried on similarly, though, as its title indicates, essays written during those years were omitted; essays written since 2003 have also been held back. In the introduction to *Scores*, I said I hoped to publish some of these independent pieces in a book to be called *The Darkening Garden*. I did like that title, and used it, but *The Darkening Garden: A Short Lexicon of Horror* (Seattle: Payseur & Schmidt, 2006) differs from the book originally to be given that title in that it is an entirely different book. I may find all this more interesting than you do.

Here we go again. The title of the current collection is taken from a piece not included in the current collection: "Canaries in the Coal Mine", an address given at SUNY New Paltz in early 2004 and published – in two substantially different versions – as "Canary Fever" in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* (vol.15,#3, Fall 2004) and later in *Shawangunk Review* (Vol XVI, Spring 2005). This talk focused on a particular kind of Recognition that I thought distinguished the literatures of fantastika from other categories: "the melodramatic gaze of the fantastic, into horrors of futurity or otherworlds that are healable, is, in the end, a gaze at the world itself . . . . This gaze is the gaze of Recognition of the canary in the coal mine when the air changes."

So the title of this book is a shorthand assertion that the literatures of fantastika – those literatures in which Story is literal and cannot therefore metaphorize the planet – are fevered by the fever of the world. Everything assembled in *Canary Fever* has been written in that assumption, and can be understood to argue the case, sometimes implicitly, sometimes out loud. It is understood that "canary fever" can also refer to book reviewers with hyperventilation problems.

I need to acknowledge again a frequent borrowing. Here is the opening sentence of John Le Carré's *The Russia House* (1989):

In a broad Moscow street not two hundred yards from the Leningrad station, on the upper floor of an ornate and hideous hotel built by Stalin in the style known to Muscovites as Empire During the Plague, the British Council's first ever audio fair for the teaching of the English language and the spread of British culture was grinding to its excruciating end.

I've no idea if Muscovites actually ever used that phrase, or if Le Carré made it up:

but I do know for sure that some version of the tag – “X During the Plague” – has become an ostinato that drives more sentences I write than Stalin had hot flashes. In the Western world since 1950 or so, as far as architecture and urban planning are concerned, Plague does not entirely refer to the metastatic decayed Modernism that governed the design of all those rust-streaked municipal slums that are finally, after almost half a century, being demolished everywhere: though not before their builders managed first to destroy huge legacies of urban wisdom about living in cities worldwide. When I use the phrase I am also thinking of modern Horror: of the willed amnesias of the Western world after 1945; of the desolating *absence* at the heart of the cenotaphic “monuments” we have constructed with such great self-despite to vacate ourselves within. As far as the Plague is concerned, the difference between a mushroom cloud and a shopping mall is a matter of degree: for both create vacuums. I’ve written about all of this repeatedly in essays published elsewhere, some of which I hope to assemble fairly soon in a collection not to be called *The Darkening Garden*.

*Canary Fever* is in five parts. Parts One and Two assemble linked reviews on two authors, John Crowley and Michael Moorcock, each of whom recently completed a vast novel it took decades to write. Part Three assembles a small number of reviews from between 1988 and 1999 that I had lost track of. Part Four, which comprises the bulk of the book, assembles reviews (but not every review) written between the middle of 2003 and October 2008. Nothing else is included, so that the 350 or so pages of this section comprises a loose coal-face chronicle of books published during those five years. Part Five puts into one place a few pieces – including two I was compelled by circumstances to write – about Thomas M Disch. *Canary Fever* is dedicated to him.

I want to thank the editors who asked me for stuff and then got it. Michael Dirda and Rachel Shea of the *Washington Post*. Boyd Tonkin of the *New Statesman*. Andy Cox and Sandy Auden and Paul Raven of *Interzone*. David G Hartwell and Kevin J Maroney of the *New York Review of Books*. Niall Harrison of *Strange Horizons*. Diana Gower and James Fergusson of the *Independent*. The editors of the *Guardian*. Charles N Brown of *Locus*. Eileen Gunn of *The Infinite Matrix*. And most of all – partly because I’ve driven them crazy more often than any other editors in this list; partly because they have continued to seem entirely willing to suffer all the impositions that a deadline surfer imposes on the world – Scott Edelman and Brian Murphy of *SciFi Weekly [now SciFi Wire]*.

I want to thank Roger Robinson again, who will make these words into a house, and Andrew Robinson for cover production. I want to thank Leigh Kennedy Priest, who will sort out the house that Roger made from the words I passed. Over and above being able to talk with them about these things, I am glad to be here in order to thank Judith Clute and to thank Liz Hand. It is good to be home.

Any gathering of this sort is a kind of wayzgoose, a feast in the sun for relicts – for these assembled pieces of one’s life in print, all scrubbed behind the ears. Some sombreness does infect the mind, naturally: but perhaps any harvest this century is late harvest. The summer had been long. I figure we could meet again by candle light?

16 December 2008

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## Croaked

- SFW #325 (14 July 2003) -

*Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood

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It was good luck that I began to read Margaret Atwood's new sf novel on an international flight, because there was little else to do, seven miles above Newfoundland, with 200 pages of arthritic backstory already caught in the throat, no end in sight and hardly a glimpse of *Oryx*, except to continue turning the page. So the book remained open, and we reached page 216, and Atwood, who had clearly been taking the capsules, suddenly calmed down enough to begin to tell the archaic First SF story she had been pretending she was never going to have to bend her brow to, even though she never does leave backstory till the last few pages (see below for comments on *trahison des clercs*). *Oryx and Crake* (Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart, 2003) may be the kind of sf contemporary writers stopped committing to print after 1970 or so, and Atwood may have told her ancient tale in a priggish atonal drone that sounded rather, as P G Wodehouse once said long ago, "like an Englishman about to talk French" – but hey, she got to the end, and so did the reader. With a bump and a grind and a whine of great engines in reverse, we did all land safely, after a fashion.

*Trahison des clercs* is a term which has escaped the narrow political intentions of its coiner, the rightwing theologian Julien Benda, and is now commonly used to describe almost any sort of intellectual treachery on the part of that class – the "clercs" or clerisy, the guardians and disseminators of higher culture – one of whose obligations is to *tell the truth*. It may be a bit high-sounding to describe what Margaret Atwood has said about *Oryx and Crake* in various interviews as manifestations of the *trahison des clercs*; but, in their own small priggish way, these interviews are, in fact, pretty offensive. In an extremely well-argued *Locus* review of *Oryx and Crake*, Gary K Wolfe speaks of Atwood's claims – that she does not write sf; that *Oryx and Crake* is not sf at all because sf is "about spaceships" and squiggly things; and that she writes "speculative fiction" instead, though without mentioning Robert A Heinlein, who first used that term half a century ago – as quite possibly representing a natural aversion to the less attractive aspects of genre marketing: that "she's not demeaning the SF market so much as protecting the Atwood market." I believe Wolfe's comments are highly plausible, and may well have pinpointed her motives.

But words do have consequences, even words Atwood may well have taken down verbatim from her publisher and parroted. Mercenary or not, Atwood's attempt to ringfence her novel from the long conversation of works it takes its substance from constitutes a palpable and conscious slur on honest discourse; nor would it be enough to say that the matter was of little moment: for every slurry at the coal-face of discourse damages the fragile world the clerisy should be honour-bound to defend: even small untruths about minor forms of literature are untruths that dirty the world. More to the final point of this review, it is further possible to claim that, the more the denial structure

of what she has been saying exposes some genuine interior occlusion of intellect, the easier it is to explain some of the abjectly bad bits of *Oryx and Crake*, the sclerotic exiguity of its backstory (as though the author had had a fit of amnesia), the miserly belatedness of the future it depicts (as though she could find no Now to parlay with).

We do not ever find out exactly when *Oryx and Crake*'s protagonist, who calls himself Snowman, begins to try to put in order his memories of watching other people cause the end of the rest of the human race (on extremely time-honoured sf lines), but one's best guess is that he (his name is short for Abominable Snowman) may have begun ruminating only a few months after the climax of the novel (everything that really happens in *Oryx and Crake* happens in backstory, and is distanced into a kind of weakly ironized hearsay legend). So the deserted, ruined world Snowman walks through may exist only thirty or forty years into our future. Certainly it's the case that his memories of his early life sound as though Atwood conceives of him as growing up round about 2010, somewhere on the eastern seaboard of North America, though locations are left as unspecific as the years. The only city given a name is New York, though by the moment of final collapse the city is known (lame) as New New York, presumably because of the upheavals caused by the rising sea (Atwood never specifies). And it is here, in her descriptions of the world Snowman experiences as a child, that we begin to sense the costs to Atwood's text of her occluded take on what she is actually writing.

Young Snowman grows up in a company-town gated community surrounded by "pleeblands" (an astonishingly inept formulation, which might have been marginally improved, and certainly made easier to subvocalize, had she spelled it plebelands, which is what she *means* to say), where all the non-privileged live in squalid tenements. His family is dysfunctional. Dad commutes daily to his job with an ominous biotech firm, Ma becomes increasingly rancid from disuse, and Snowman sneaks peeks at the Net with his schoolmate, the brilliant young Crake, whom he adores. The general satire on consumption-based admass capitalism, replete with some very wooden fake brand names, reminds one of Kurt Vonnegut or Frederik Pohl or Shepherd Mead making extremely sharp satirical points about 1955 *in 1955*; fatally, *Oryx and Crake* does not homage any more recent satirical take on modern life. The dysfunctional nuclear family – no twenty-first century extendedness here – reminds one of Sloan Wilson, or Rock Hudson before he came out. The gated communities (to be more specific) are pale shadows of the "keeps" adumbrated in the 1940s by Henry Kuttner and C L Moore and brought brilliantly up to date in *The Song of the Earth* (2001) by Hugh Nissensen – a writer, like Atwood, not usually associated with sf; but one, unlike Atwood, who honours his sources, and does the kind of homework any sf writer needs to master (we will return to homework in a minute). The pleeblands are out of any of a dozen Ace Doubles from around 1960, maybe by John Brunner or Robert Silverberg or Philip K Dick when they were beating pulp between spasms of genius. And Atwood's vision of the future of the Internet has to be experienced to be believed:

When they weren't playing [seriously old-fashioned computer] games they'd surf the Net – drop in on old favourites, see what was new. They'd watch open-heart surgery in live time, or else the Noodie News . . . . Or they'd watch animal

snuff sites, Felicia's Frog Squash and the like . . . . Or they'd watch dirtysock-puppets.com, a current-affairs show about world political leaders . . . . Or they might watch hedsoff.com, which played live coverage of executions . . . . Shortcircuit.com, brainfrizz.com, and deathrowlive.com were the best; they showed electrocutions and lethal injections . . . .

"What is this shit?" said Crake. "Channel change!"

And so on, and it becomes increasingly clear that Atwood's got something deeply wrong here – that she's been satirizing yesterday in the language of the day before yesterday, 1990 in the language of 1960. Over and above the triteness of her sci-fi-ish potshots at content, this belatedness is most obvious in her attempts to describe how the internet works, how the new medium shapes the message (to quote an old Canadian), for it is pretty clear she is not describing the internet at all in these passages. She is describing *cable television*.

So, in the end, Atwood is absolutely correct when she claims not to be writing sf, if by sf in this context we are meant to understand works set in the near future by writers like Bruce Sterling or Brian Stableford or Ted Chiang or Terry Bisson or William Gibson or Neal Stephenson or David Marusek – or Don DeLillo, whose brilliant, savagely misunderstood *Cosmopolis* (2003), though set in 2000, occupies an information-radiated world far closer to the fractal edge of the actual present tense than Atwood's wooden-tongued, pretentiously undated metaphorical *Next*. Locked away from the world by her patent disinclination to attempt to learn how the twenty-first century has been made storyable by writers who have spent their careers learning to do so, Atwood is *of course* not writing contemporary sf about the near future, which is one of the most difficult and hard-to-master regions of the imagination any writer can tackle, now that the human race has become isomorphous with the data that iterate the real. It is clear she has no intention of bathing in that tiderace; what Atwood is in fact writing is sci-fi as envisioned by Hollywood. Her sisters and brothers of the cloth are not Sterling or Stephenson but the beleaguered souls who novelize *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* in obedience to Bibles that constrain them to a view of the world as deeply retro as the world we encounter in *Oryx and Crake*, as the world Christopher Walken's son encounters in *Blast from the Past*.

Most of the worst examples of occlusion and denial cluster in the first hundred or so pages of the novel, during the course of which we begin to find out for sure what most of us had surmised through our initial frame-story encounter with Snowman and his perceptions: something or someone is about to pull the plug on homo sapiens. Who can it be? Surely not a typical sci-fi villain out of the dark ages! Read on! The story progresses through the years. The world-class genius Crake has matriculated into the Watson-Crick Institute, where he is given everything from lab space to whores, while the far less intelligent Snowman (whose real name is Jimmy) goes to the Martha Graham Academy in New York, which is limned in colours evocative of Thomas M Disch's great *On Wings of Song* (1979). There are some genuinely good jokes, which Atwood clearly makes on those occasions when she is able to forget what she is refusing to admit. And then, round about page 216 (in all English-language editions), flashes of creative concern – like heat lightning in the Sahara – begin to animate the text. And there are the Crakers.

We had met them early on (in the Snowman's frame-story), but it is really only in retrospect that we begin to find them very germane. They turn out to be a genecraftured race of post-humans that Crake has designed as inheritors of the earth (yes, inheritors, read on). They are passive and peaceful; a Craker female will enter oestrus only every eighteen months or so, at which point a small Morris dance of males uplifts penises together in a kind of Mexican Wave, and shepherds her into a handy alcove where, one at a time, they all blamelessly couple; they are vegetarian; they do not have any use for words; they are smooth outside and smooth inside. They have been created by Crake in order to replace the human race he is in the process of destroying through a viral plague he has engineered and transmits world-wide because he is dissatisfied with folk. There a possible homage here to *La Jetée* (1962), from which *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) was made; or perhaps to James Tiptree Jr's "The Last Flight of Doctor Ain" (1972). (We now skip some narrative sequences during which Atwood clearly continues not to understand how *pulpish* it is to entrust the fate of the entire world to the god/devil hands of one highlighted super scientist out of Ray Cummings: which is to say, those who do not understand sf are fated to repeat it.) As the novel moves up to a point where the frame story can lock its jaws together, we see Snowman begin to act as a kind of pro tem God/Moses/Messenger for the Crakers, and the novel closes at a moment of narrative suspension: for it is not at all clear to him that they will survive their inevitable encounters with other humans less tender-hearted than he is.

For Snowman is not the only survivor of Crake's double-pronged assault upon the world (I have not by the way forgotten Oryx any more than Atwood seems to have for most of the book; she is a young whore from an unnamed Far Eastern country, rather like the protagonists of two or three of Geoff Ryman's early novels about young girls growing up in utterly cruel worlds transformed by genetic engineering [*each one of them better than Oryx and Crake*. 2008]; she is Crake's special woman; she becomes Snowman's lover for a while; there is little more to say). Other humans as well as Snowman have proved immune to Crake's pulp plague. We meet these humans at the end of the tale. We do not really know what to make of them, and before we can hazard much of a guess, Atwood shuts her book with a slingshot.

There were certain moments of recovery. The devastated catastrophe-ridden world Crake has wiped clear of humanity is pungently described. Snowman's solitary life in this new desert, as recounted in the frame story that surrounds the ignoramus retro junk, is sharply imagined. Oryx is rendered in terms that hauntingly evoke a beauty of being clearly beyond the understanding of anyone in the text, or for that matter of the airless penetralia of the text itself, which cannot allow too much reality into its cod-dystopian remit, into its sci-fi-in-bondage gaze upwards from the deep past toward the aged props of merely yesterday. Like some fossil skull, *Oryx and Crake* does shine moistly for an instant or two under the tap, when its author forgets her dignity, before her opus falls back into the sands of time, which cover it. When we shut the book, it is as though it had never been.



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## Trout Fishing in America

- SFW #341 (3 November 2003) -

*A Star Above It* by Chad Oliver

*Far From This Earth* by Chad Oliver

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Chad Oliver was a large man who loved largely, as his friends attested after he died of cancer, he was a smoker, his stories are full of smoke. He loved his family, his companions, his students, his readers; he loved his pipes; he loved the trout streams he fished (some of them still exist) and the mountains they incanted; he loved the sf of the 1930s and 1940s, which he grew up reading, and whose narrative values he carried on into his own work; he loved his profession, which was anthropology; he loved the country, which he understood, more than the city, which he clearly did not; he loved the sand and soil and water of the world itself. This was perhaps an odd passion for a writer who began to publish sf in 1950, back in the glory days, the Outward Bound days, when the only other significant writers in the field with anything like a similar focus on the texture of things were probably Clifford D Simak and Ray Bradbury. But Bradbury really kind of hated sf, and the hothouse desiderium of his take on the world was precisely not Oliver's, for the world Oliver loved was before his eyes; and Simak's lovers of the earth were more likely to be farmers than professionals trained to understand what they cherished. Oliver was actually comfortable as an sf writer (his few attempts at fantasy are slick and hammy); and for the short decade of his creative prime, before he began to possum-trot between teaching and writing because his career at the University of Texas had taken off, he wrote as though he believed that simultaneously to love the earth and to love the future was to utter two sentences with but a single heart. For a while, he acted as though his job, his art, his planet, and his species shared the same address.

It is perhaps for this reason that Chad Oliver, who would have been only seventy-five years old in 2003, seems to come from a world which – as I said in an obituary appreciation for *Locus* in 1993 – “now seems impossibly distant . . . , [adding that he] was a figure of the past not only because he made sense of the paranoia of a decade [the 1950s] now distant, but also because he felt at home, without terrors, in the soil of America.”

*A Star Above It* and *Far From This Earth* (both Framingham, Massachusetts: The NESFA Press, 2003) – handily assembled for NESFA by Priscilla Olson – do nothing to dispel this vertigo, this sense of time abyss between now and then (seventeen of the forty stories collected here were first published between 1950 and 1955). Nor do the few later stories included – anything from after 1970 or so – dispel the eeriness. Oliver's latterday discomfort with the sf modes of explanation of his younger years, and his general cultural despair, are embarrassingly evident in “King of the Hill,” which he wrote for Harlan Ellison's *Again, Dangerous Visions* (anth 1972), a tale which sounds as though he were trying to stick out his tongue like Ellison. The plot – the world's richest man, disgusted by homo sapiens's destruction of the world and all its sibling species, uplifts a family of mutant raccoons to a habitat on Titan, where they may learn to treasure life – is desperate.

The very last stories collected here – each volume moves crabwise from early to late – are even more despairing; but do work powerfully as fiction. “A Lake of Summer,” which may be his last story, homages Ray Bradbury (it was written for a 1991 anthology called *The Bradbury Chronicles*), but without a touch of consolation. There is some consolation in “Old Four-Eyes” (first published in *Synergy 4*, an 1989 anthology edited by George Zebrowski, whom Olsen thanks in her Acknowledgements for persuading her to put these collections together), but the despair is deep: one of the last survivors of a raccoon-like wainscot species on Earth reveals herself to a compassionate human at the end of his own tether (the setting is contemporary) as developers rape the Earth around him. The two find an enclave, and hide in it, for a while.

But stories like this are not the heart of these two books; for they are tragedies of a disintegrating world that could no longer, in 1990, be addressed by sane arguments articulated through plots that generated single outcomes from single premises, after the fashion of the Thought Experiments typical of the sf Oliver grew up loving. To reach the heart of *A Star Above It* and *Far From This Earth*, we need to go back a long ways. We need to remember ourselves as we once were: reading a tale like “Blood’s A Rover” (1952 *Astounding*) as though it imparted a lesson in how the world actually might work. In this story, a human anthropologist leaves his wife and family – as always in Oliver, the primacy of the nuclear family is never challenged, here or on other planets; men work and think and return to their women, who raise kids and cook and gossip, which is nothing like doing network – again and again to go on missions to other planets, where it is their job to “uplift” “primitive” cultures – all of them humanoid – along the high technology road to true “civilization.” In the end, the Oliver hero discovers that humans from other planets are doing the same to/for the humans of Earth. In this case, uplift works; in other stories, as for instance in the quite remarkably moving “Guardian Spirit” (1958 *Fantasy and Science Fiction*), there is a sting in the tail of uplift. But always in these tales it turns out to be, as it were, one thing or another. Something works, or it doesn’t. Something is good, or it is bad. Love works, love is good.

It makes one long to be there again, to be able to learn that sort of thing again. There may be no series in Oliver’s work, no *Our Town*-like Stage Manager linking what we’re told into a meta-tale; but there is certainly a sense of narratage, a sense that Oliver is telling us stories within the frame of some forum: that we are all sharing love and lessons together, in a world simple and stable enough to permit their transmissal. Readers half a century on, after absorbing a couple dozen of the tales assembled in these two volumes, may well guess in advance what is going to happen – an Oliver story will demonstrate the value and integrity of different ways of life; it will demonstrate the high cost of attempting to “guide” more “primitive” societies in the “right” direction, though it will be able to measure that cost – but we guess not because Oliver is slipping us the wink, and not because we are superior (the way readers in tales employing dramatic irony are superior: Oliver never published in *Galaxy*); we guess because we remember.

We remember (or if we are too young to remember, we re-imagine) what it felt like when the world, the tale and the devil occupied a level playing field in the pages of sf, long ago, when right questions obtained right answers, when the sweet-smelling world unpacked like spring to these tales of love, long before the trout began to steam.

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## Incipit Rising

– *New York Review of Science Fiction* #204 (August 2005) –

***Succession: The Risen Empire*** by Scott Westerfeld

***Succession: The Killing of Worlds*** by Scott Westerfeld

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There is something about a two-volume space opera which features an undead Emperor who has ruled eighty planets unchangingly for 1500 years but which does not mention zombies that warms the heart. Scott Westerfeld's two-volume *SUCCESSION* (New York: Tor, 2003) also traces the brilliant combat manoeuvres of the gaunt gruff beloved introspective Captain of a undersized but invincible fighting ship who has fallen in love despite the profound emotional reticence built into his psyche by his birth and upbringing on a planet dominated by a warrior caste of whom he's one, and does not mention either Captain Hornblower or a Dorsai, and this too is good. It is pretty clear that Westerfeld does not mention the many incipits of this sort that channel *SUCCESSION*'s superb route to quasi-climax because he expects his readers to recognize them; as a form, space opera is (after all) more dependent upon – and profits more from – precedents than perhaps any other sizeable genre or subgenre of popular literature. A good space opera – and *SUCCESSION* is considerably better than good – splices the ropes we know. Westerfeld gives us the credit for knowing the ropes of *SUCCESSION*.

Or so it seems. 1500 years before the tale begins, a man attempting to cure his sister of a fatal illness discovers/invents a symbiont which will maintain immortal sentience in humans (though only if they die first), and becomes ruler of what will soon be called the Risen Empire on the strength of his promise to bestow something like Valhalla upon the deserving few selected for treatment. A priestly caste of undead known as the Apparatus, deeply conditioned to do the Emperor's bidding, maintains orthodoxy by peregrinating back and forth among the quasi-autonomous planets of the Empire, where they lubricate through their example an almost universal loyalty to an order of things dominated by the hope of eternal sentience; we meet prelates of the Apparatus, military men and women (gender seems not to be an issue anywhere in any of the societies sketched out in *SUCCESSION*), politicians and samples of the trillions of humans who live and work and, most of them, die on the eighty planets of the imperium. Just like the backcloth cast of most space operas, they do mob work, victims of atrocity work, service industry workers work, easily swayed voters work, husband work, wife work, spear carrier work. It is just trillions of folk as normal.

FTL speeds are impossible, which means that for those who are undead but must travel time is the enemy, the old Time Thief; but by virtue of "entangled quanta" – a term which describes a device which allows instant interstellar communications between one quantum nest and its twin quintessentially-identical physically-transported doppelganger quantum nest (or what) on some other planet or spaceship lightyears away (I am very definitely open to correction in matters of super-science) – everyone knows instantly

what everyone else is doing, which means that the plot knows too and, freed from Einstein, can hop joyfully back and forth across the parsecs towards climax. The two main protagonists, who are also lovers, are lightyears apart, and never meet in the narrative present of the tale – though everything does depend, in the end, on their communicating properly, which (I totally don't divulge any great secret) they do.

The novel itself jumps right into medias res, generating a spiffy you-are-there technothrillerish aura of doublespeak knowingness about impossible weapons at the very verge of the describable in the hands of an elite few expert enough to wield them on a mission impossible and stuff, which is fine for starters. On the planet of Legis the Emperor's sister, the Child Empress – the “Reason” for Empire itself (see second paragraph of review da capo) – has been taken hostage by the invading Rix, a suprahuman race governed by an insatiable need to bring AI to all inhabited planets. Gaunt gruff Captain Laurent Zai sends a remote-control flight of minute drones down to Legis to penetrate the Palace where the Child is being held, and we're off. Much of the next 600 pages will be given over to some of the neatest, most kinetically exact, clearest-written hi-tech action I've yet come across. (The battle between Zai's Lynch and a much vaster Rix dreadnought is a sustained tour-de-force, and it's easy to forgive Westerfeld's spending almost half of *The Killing of Worlds* on that which he may believe, half correctly, he does best.) The Child Empress is almost saved by Zai's drones, but in the end is assassinated by an Adept of the Apparatus (an undead guy, see above), who had forced himself into a later stage of the mission; he has done so in order to keep the Emperor's Secret, which the Child Empress somehow embodies, from exposure. But he assassinates her too late to save the Emperor's bacon. The Rixian compound mind which has taken over everything connected to anything electric on Legis has already analyzed her Secret-bearing innards, and knows All. It is only a matter of time (as the experienced reader will realize, and nobody is going to get through SUCCESSION unless they are already experienced) before the cat is out of the bag. The rest of the novel will surely revolve – in the event it does – around the McGuffin or not-McGuffin, let the reader choose, of the Emperor's Secret.

The apparent failure of his mission, which (though he has been betrayed) he deems to be an Error of Blood, induces Gaunt Gruff to contemplate seppuku, as his rank demands; but (it is here the novel becomes much more than kinetically interesting) he receives a one-word message from his lover, the sexy high-empathy liberal politician Senator Nara Oxham, who back on the capital planet has smelled a rat (i.e. an Adept of the Apparatus) and and in any case loves him passionately; the message is: “DON'T.”

And he doesn't. We witness here the collapse of one stout military-sf trope, a particularly otiose rigmarole involving suicidal rectitude, particularly attractive to rightwing military sf writers who specialize in officer classes. Everything in Succession now on hinges on that one moment transfigured out of romance fiction. Gaunt Gruff's turning on a dime into a person in another book (which turns out magically to be this book) is neatly mirrored by a similar transformation on the part of a surviving Rix commando, who has fallen in love with a woman she had captured in order to prosecute her mission (this is very complicated stuff, everything is complicated, read the book for a remarkably lucid unpacking of storylines that synopsis would tangle into noise), and allows herself to

survive capture, as much a violation of protocol as Gaunt Gruff's refusing of an Error of Blood, and which also changes the world. Two butterflies have refused to die. Empires fall. SUCCESSION, which began as a space-war procedural full of gear talk, has turned into something far more suspenseful: a drama in which the transformative potency of broad-gauge romantic love between two people brings – like some embrangled quanta gone nova – truth to the worlds. This (for readers like myself) is having your cake and eating it.

As SUCCESSION draws to the very satisfactory structural click of its closing scene [*its author is almost as good as Dan Simmons at Plot-Contortion Management in High Modern Space Opera 2008*], we are reminded that Westerfeld has clearly intended his tale to work as an introductory story-arc to what could be something pretty vast. Very little, after all, has actually happened. The Emperor's Secret has been divulged, and Civil War is nigh among the Eighty Planets (but only nigh). The compound mind of the planet Legis has migrated to a vast infinitely malleable palimpsest in space, which transubstantiates to the rhythm of its thoughts, and which has been “captured” by the *Lynx*; and begins a dialogue (via the love-smitten Rix commando) with Captain (“Gaunt Gruff”) Zai, as *Lynx* and lens or living planet begin the long trek homeward (but they have only begun the trip: hazards loom). Realtime live kisses will be exchanged in due course, we trust, and trillions of extras will have to find new work, for certain. Everything at the end of this tale climaxes the engendering “DON'T”; but the sum of the parts of the end of this tale is, in a way, nothing more than an incipit for the next.

It is to be hoped that Scott Westerfeld can bring home the prize he has gained. [*no sign yet 2008*]

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## Book of Deaths

– SFW #485 (6 August 2006) –

*James Tiptree, Jr: the Double Life of Alice B Sheldon* by Julie Phillips

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It is a necessary title, but it was not a double life. It was a single life redoubled, repeatedly. Some of the disguises assumed by the woman whose name at birth was Mary Hastings Bradley were poisonous to her and others, some were casual wear, and the one we all know – James Tiptree, Jr – was a skyhook, which uplifted for a while this savagely self-torturing genius out of her element into the air of the world: plugged her into the air of the world and she spoke to us. It is one very considerable achievement of Julie Phillips’s *James Tiptree, Jr: the Double Life of Alice B Sheldon* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2006), possibly the finest literary biography I’ve ever encountered, that we never lose track of Alice, even when Tiptree’s incandescent though spaniel gregariousness is at its pitch, or when we are most caught up in the thanatopic *inerrancy* of his greatest fiction; we never lose track of the cosseted rich child from Chicago whose parents jointly (though it was Alice’s mother, the already well-known writer Mary Hastings Bradley, who first and forever cursed her daughter with a life she could not give a name to) had already given her a new name to cover her face with by the age of six. That new name – the first of many – was also Alice, but an Alice very much in the public eye: Alice in Wonderland.

In August 1921, her parents took her to Africa on safari; they did not return until March 1922. Because the safari did in fact come close to unknown territory, because the Bradleys were conspicuous members of society, and because their daughter was so young, the trip made national news. Phillips, whose research into Alice’s early years seems impeccable, notes a picture of her in the *New York Times* captioned “Youngest Explorer of Darkest Africa . . . the First White Child Ever Seen by the Pigmy Tribes”: so one of the dilemmas that afflicted Bradley/Sheldon/Tiptree in later years – how to be secret in a world that exhibits you *falsely* – had already locked into place by 1922. Alice’s experiences in Africa were, unsurprisingly, hugely more permanent (and clearly more terrible) than her insouciant radio-mouth dervish of a mother could rightly contemplate: the physical presence everywhere of death; the hellishness of human behaviour against its species and against the world; the proleptic passiveness of the experience of being a wee female husbanded on a litter through the intolerable variousness of the real, which she was forbidden to touch (except when a corpse was stored under her bed); and having to act a role insisted upon by parents and pigmies alike.

Mary Hastings Bradley’s book for children about the safari, *Alice in Jungleland* (1926), is swift, unctuous, unrelenting, a devastating cage of impersonation to fasten over a young psyche. Clearly it was anything but an easy cage to unlock – just before her first, exorbitantly dysfunctional marriage, Alice was still being referred to in public as Alice in Wonderland – if for no other reason than that her incarceration was so public. There were Bradley’s own books (at least one book for adults came out of the trip); and there were the ethnographic explorations conducted, and photographed, by their companion,

Carl Akeley, whose shot of a dead gorilla “standing upright, beating its breast” became, as Phillips says, “Americans’ idea of how gorillas look”, and certainly gave King Kong his characteristic expression. From the get-go, then, Alice lived in an exposed world, one in which her every move was likely to be reported in society pages or gossip columns. She lived as an impostor.

The rest of the story is by no means a short one, or easy to tell, but Phillips clearly understands that the dramas of the life (the ashen silences, the manias, the suicide attempt(s), the programmatic promiscuities with men and women, the profound infatuations, the drunks, the drugs, the flip-flops, the painting, the writing, the terrible rage at being a woman whose words were *inherently* less interesting and less real than any man’s, the rage against women for letting men, us blinded shouters in the night, do it to them) are far more than neurotic scrawls on the tapestry of years: that they are a Passion. Most of us know the final act: that in May 1987 Alli murdered her 84-year-old husband, Ting Sheldon, who was blind but hale, and then killed herself, though not before telephoning Ting’s son by an earlier marriage and telling him what she’d done: the most nakedly exposed utterance it may be that Alli ever made to another person being her last.

Long before this point in her narrative, Phillips has wisely begun to refer to Alice as Alli, her favourite nickname, which was invented by Ting’s mother around 1946; and to James Tiptree, Jr. as Tip, the nickname he used in correspondence or when signing books to the friends he made by mail, most of whom he would never meet in person. It is convenient to use these names, and to think that it is Alli whose parents take her back to Africa twice more, the last trip searing the minds of all concerned with images of the destruction of the Africa they’d “discovered” only a decade earlier, translating the past – and Alli’s childhood – into an indelible absence.

So it is Alli who ricochets through school after school, overcharming her peers (or hiding from them in dead silence), already beginning to suffer the harrowing sign-changes in mood and behaviour later to be diagnosed as cyclothymia. It is Alli who undergoes a formal coming out as a debutante (reported in the press), and who immediately marries a young man as dysfunctional as she is, embarking with him on an extraordinary half decade of sex and drink and demolition, as Alice Davey. (They meet Ed Ricketts, “Doc” in John Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row*, and she strips off to shower in his single room before strangers.) It is Alli who becomes a more than competent painter (her first illustrations appear in *Alice in Jungleground*) but who never opened herself naked to utter: how could she, being a woman? a man may make an utterance, a woman can only make a woman’s utterance: simultaneously exposed and hidden, importunating the real world, secretly *small* inside the mask: a raccoon. (Alli does several nude self-portraits: brazenly invisible.) It is Alli in 1941 who becomes an art critic as Alice Bradley Davey for the *Chicago Sun* and cuts off her long Alice in Wonderland hair and then quits. It is Alli who joins the WAACs (later the WACs) and becomes an officer, and then (after one of her intensely epiphanic immersions in formal learning: she was terrifyingly intelligent at everything she did, not just painting or writing or laying the groundwork for her own death: her suicide note was dated 13 September 1979) she becomes professionally

competent at the interpretation of aerial reconnaissance photos, a competence which takes her to Washington, and eventually to Colonel Huntington “Ting” Sheldon, and Europe just after the War ends, though the suicide of the culture of the West seems to take forever: it is a suicide central to Tiptree’s work. It is Alli who marries the fractured, clinically reticent, unflappable Ting: for Alice Bradley Sheldon, it’s as perfect a marriage as could be imagined: though the sex sucks (he has to get drunk first), and their relationship is declaredly open, she sleeps around a lot less after the mid 1940s, and eventually (Phillips seems to think) stops entirely.

All the while she keeps a journal whose brilliance is only matched by her letters (and by Tiptree in his oxygen-rich male pomp, where every word counts, like Rimbaud’s). There is no way to capture the uncanny *presentness* of everything she wrote or he did (Phillips calls Tip “he”, a convention that works very well), in the compass of a review: but if the life itself had not revealed itself to have been so extraordinary, and if that life had never led her to the skyhook of Tiptree, then her journal and letters would themselves justify a biography. What they could tell us alone was that Alli’s cruciform life – each of her guises a body English of the Stations – was exemplary of the turmoil and stress and despair of the attempt to be a woman and a human simultaneously, as she says in her journal around 1955:

I blurt out bits or go into kind of abstract rodomontades, and I demonstrate tension and hostility all around at times, but I keep “me” covered with a pretty heavy blanket of silence as a defence against being reduced to edible infancy ... (They all agree that dear Alice who is so talented is terribly tense and upset and Our little girl and My dear Wife presents problems but everything is going to work out all right and We are all so mature. p174-75

Or, in a letter of 1954:

A proper woman accepts nothing from the male world without putting it to the test of the Emperor’s clothes . . . . That way much error is avoided, but the resulting thought always strikes the conventional man as peculiarly uneasy-making. . . ; he has a sneaking suspicion the pillars of society are being regarded with levity. So they are – except that they are only funny if you have a strong stomach. Most women have . . . . We are strangers; we write as individual captive Martians. p193

There is more and more of the external life, of course: the four years running a chicken farm with Ting; the three years at CIA doing the kind of photointelligence work she’d mastered during World War Two; the friendship with Rudolf Arnheim (born 1904 and, as of this writing, still alive [*Arnheim died in 2007*]), who shaped her life-long obsession with the relationship between vision and aesthetics, as an indirect consequence of which she took a PhD in 1967 (and became Dr Alice B Sheldon, a name she used once in a while). There is more of this but it is the same: brilliant assaults on the daylight “masculine” world, anguished exposure to the sun.

Meanwhile she had been writing: “The Lucky Ones”, a quasi-fictional tale about her experiences in Occupied Europe, as by Alice Bradley, was published in the *New Yorker* in 1946; she wrote an unpublished sf story as by Ann Terry; and then, during the high



occasioned by the gaining of the PhD, she composed the first stories which would be published as by James Tiptree, Jr., "Birth of a Salesman" (1968 *Analog*) and "Fault" (1968 *Fantastic*). Two things can be said about these first publications: Alli had been reading sf for decades, and knew its manoeuvres backwards and forwards; but at the same time, her first few sf tales are not Tiptree stories.

Then it all changed. The story is familiar enough, and Phillips takes it as true, which it almost certainly is (to a point). Alli and Ting are shopping in town. Alli needs a pseudonym for the stories she's about to put in the mail. She sees a jar of Tiptree Jam, and says "James Tiptree". Ting says "Junior." So far so good. Good, simple joke: except that nothing in Alli's life was ever just a joke, or simple. She seems more *retentive* of the meaning and shape of every aspect of her life than anyone I have ever encountered, in life or print (Severian excepted, maybe). The reason that her life is so fascinating, over and above the fact it's intrinsically pretty extraordinary, is that every minute of it *continues to mean* the person who is Alli. So I don't think James Tiptree, Jr remained a joke for more than a few minutes; and very specifically I don't think Alli's subsequent use of "Tip" as a nickname could have persisted for any length of time, if indeed it wasn't actually created with an association already in mind. I think "Tiptree" must have been instantly or very soon aware that, for someone already known as "Alice in Wonderland", the name "Tip" is a declaration of Tiptree's true identity: "Tip" being of course the ensorcelled young boy in L Frank Baum's *Ozma of Oz* (1907) who is in "reality" Princess Ozma of Oz. Ozma may not be quite as well-known world-wide as Alice, but in 1920s America the Oz books were both hugely popular and mildly transgressive (the hatred librarians felt for Baum and his workshy cross-dressing colour-coded utopia has been well attested). When Tiptree signed himself "Tip" I think he was clearly indicating that he was a woman in disguise. I think he may have also been saying he was a princess in bondage. SOS.

What anyone knows who has read Tiptree is what it is like to read Tiptree; what anyone knows who tries to describe Tiptree is how hard it is to anatomize flame. Tiptree burning to ash, over the five years he plummeted like Satan into our heads, burns criticism to ash. My own best try at trying to characterize his work came after six months of intense reading; it was published as the Introduction to *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever* (1990), a best-of collection put together by Jim Turner and Alli in the last years of her life, after Tiptree had died in agony, and has the advantage of having been written after her death [*it is reprinted in Look at the Evidence, p447-453*]. What this piece clearly lacks is any real awareness of the details of the real life; any sense that the whole of that life, for Alli/Tip, was a Theatre of Memory.

We can remember what it was like to read Tiptree; what we cannot have known until now was anything but the merest hint of the intensity of Alli's investiture in Tip: that his male owner voice, which had been caught in her throat for half a century, now released – for the first time – the human within. What Phillips goes on to demonstrate, in the last 100 pages of her book, pages which I found intensely painful to read, was how soon the fissures began to show, how deeply exhausted Alli became, as the Tip who secretly surrounded her demanded more and more posturing. (Her invention of Raccoona Sheldon, a second pseudonym to impersonate, seems to have done her nothing but

psychic harm.) Something was going to have to die here. In 1976, Alli's omnivorous mother finally died at ninety-three, and almost immediately she wrote as Raccoona the last great Tiptree story, "The Screwfly Solution" (1977 *Analog*). But Tip had told too many people of the death of his mother, whom he identified as an African explorer. The link was all too easy to make, and several of her correspondents seem to have begun almost immediately to suspect the truth. The day Tip posted "Screwfly" off he received a letter asking if he was Alice Sheldon.

The correspondence back and forth between Tip and two or three of her friends – Ursula K Le Guin and Joanna Russ are those whose letters are most tellingly quoted in this book – always seem to have begun fawningly on Tip's part (like Alli, he could be grotesquely effusive in his giving of praise), but to have moved into a meeting of minds at their most intimate: except Tip was a lie. Russ was clearly very close to assuming Tip was female (given the huge amount of repositioning hindsight generated by his unveiling, it was perhaps unwise of Phillips to assume that oral recollections of others whose doubts about Tiptree's sex had not actually been put on record before November 1976 should be given much credence). Le Guin expressed huge surprise and joy at Alli's first letter to her confessing all; the magisterial warm-heartedness of her response gives some hint that Le Guin may have sensed immediately that something more than a nom de plume was being shed. What was really happening was that Tiptree – like all his protagonists, who all escape the mortal coil with a single bound, and who all die – was himself literally dying. After November 1976, all the sound of Tip was dead. Whoever signed the later stories (they were usually as by Tiptree), Tip did not write them, because he was dead; and Alli could not write them, because she could not *make him up*.

She lived another decade, drugged to her eyeballs half the time; in 1976, she had herself "recorded using Seconal, phenobarbital, Dexedrine [this for decades], Compazine, codeine, Percodan, Valium, Demerol, and Numorphan." This list presumably lengthened. But (though she was terrified of meeting people) she dazzled everyone she met. She endured heart attacks and arthritis and who knows what else. She survived until all her names were gone, and in the ashes wrote endit.

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## Aubade, Poor Dad

- SFW #501 (27 November 2006) -

- NYRSF #221 (January 2007) [revised] -

*Against the Day* by Thomas Pynchon

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The day that ends the dream of Thomas Pynchon is the same old day of V. It is also the screaming across the sky in *Gravity's Rainbow*; and the future it would be death to enter after leaving *Vineland*; and the blistering echolalia from within the Hollow Earth, the drum roll of the Disappeared which tells the penetrant heroes of *Mason & Dixon* that what stains the world you rape stains you. There is nothing newer than this in the hundreds of thousands of words that make up the latest and most Pynchonesque novel yet by America's greatest Fool writer, except for the fact that it is all over now. *Against the Day* (New York: Penguin, 2006) - which begins intoxicatedly at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 and terminates in the "terrible cloudlessness" of the aftermath years begat upon us by World War One, in the years that Pynchon calls "Hell" - is an aubade against the coming of the twentieth century. Like any aubade it is written in the knowledge that, in the end, Time wins (Pynchon capitalizes Time lots). When the novel stops, leaving a few survivors in alternate worlds to cultivate their gardens in peace as long as they do not come back, our bridges have all been burnt, and there is nothing more to tell.

It is an immense book, and it is full of noise. Every single page counts for something, though hundreds of pages introduce narrative schticks that expire almost instantly when lit, so that the reader cannot know which insight, which brilliant phrase or tour de force riff, will entail the kind of story consequence - and then? and then? - that we as readers and critics are properly trained to attempt to trust and trace. But whether or not it is entirely tolerable - I know that I for one missed whole tranches of import in the unforgivingly incessant half-drowned packrat rataplan of the whole - what is clear is that the occluded waves of unfolding of story and implication in the book are intended. The innumerable pages of *Against the Day* mulch together like a great tidal cud, and dozens - actually hundreds - of named characters appear and disappear according to what one might call peristaltic imperatives: a kind of Mexican Wave. For an instant we see them, and then they are engulfed again, before their act is completed, not to reappear (if at all) for hundreds of pages maybe. But we saw them, and we were meant to.

Over and above a growing awareness that these waves of story are indeed heading somewhere, what saves one's readerly sanity in the middle of these 450,000 words may be the fact that every figure in the book is immediately *recognizable*; I think that without exception every single one can be initially identified as having been configured in terms of some genre or other of popular fiction, as it was written before the end of World War One. These genres include the Western, from Edward S Ellis to Bret Harte to Jack London; boy's adventure fiction, from the Airship Boys tale to Horatio Alger; the Dime Novel in

general; the British school story in general and the *Zuleika Dobson* British-school-story-for-older-boys femme-fatale tale in particular; the future war novel; the Lost Race novel; the Symmesian Hollow Earth tale; the Tibetan Llama or Shangri-La thriller; the Vernean Extraordinary Journey; the Wellsian scientific romance; the Invention tale and its close cousin the Edisonade; the European spy romance thriller à la E Phillips Oppenheim; the World-Island spy thriller à la John Buchan; the mildly sadomasochistic soft porn tale as published by the likes of Charles Carrington in Paris around the turn of the century. Not to mention the large number of utopias influenced by Edward Bellamy and William Morris, both of whom ghost the book.

Due to Pynchon's fully earned iconic status as great American writer and Zeitgeist voice, *Against the Day* has already been widely reviewed in the general press, and various versions of the list of popular genres given above have appeared in some of these notices. There's a problem, though. Non-genre critics seem generally to presume that Pynchon accessed this material more or less raw, that *Against the Day* represents a direct and unfiltered mining of prelapsarian ore; and that therefore the *tonality* of the book – its doom-haunted desiderium – is in itself uniquely or even particularly Pynchonesque. Given the depth and compass of his conversation with a vast range of previous writers and genres, however, as well as the fact that over the past forty-five years his own works have become an integral part of that conversation, I suspect Pynchon himself would feel uneasy with any critical presumption that his grasp of previous genres was anything like that simpleminded.

The intervening filter is, of course, the literatures of the fantastic as they actually exist. We needn't rehearse the obvious at great length here – that for the last fifty years or so, sf and fantasy has increasingly focused on our pre-World War One past through steampunk and the gaslight romance, through a huge proliferation of pastiches of earlier genres, through that form of the alternate history which gives habitation to escapees from the charnel house, through the boom in time travel tales back to a past that needs *preserving*, and through Michael Moorcock's creation of the literary device of the multiverse in order to give lebensraum to various otherwise incompatible genres and tales within the pages of one book – but we should say that *Against the Day* honourably adds to that conversation. It is a pure science fiction novel of these latter days of sorting.

Moorcock – or some ghostly afflatus of Moorcock now so widely disseminated through the field that his name can easily be forgotten – is perhaps the main figure here. We're thinking (ware list!) of his Airship Boys tales; of his recursive desiderium-drenched proto-steampunk Edwardian sf novels which posit routes into futures less dreadful than the one we got; of the Europe Between the Wars tales, full of iconic figures whose intertwining discourses on the states of the worlds allow the inference that each history of the world is a failed experiment in avoiding the inevitable War just like the last one; of the multiverse itself, a topology best articulated in the long CORNELIUS and VON BEK series, through characters who "bilocate" into impossible self-haunting versions of themselves, and occupy worlds whose storylines nest inside one other like matryoshka dolls, and meet in restaurants on lamplit promenades which may exist in more than one glamour of Venice at a time; of the recurring figures

who occupy the multiverse: the Temporal Adventuress, the plucky hero and the flaneur, the louche spy, the utopist, the bewildered army officer, the magi and the bandits out of Asia; and of the COLONEL PYAT novels [see above, p22-32] – in reality one vast novel longer than *Against the Day* and sometimes almost as walkabout – whose appalling anti-hero traverses Russia and the rest of Europe, Asia and Asia Minor, Africa and 1920s Hollywood, then France and Mussolini's Italy and Nazi Germany, just as though the world were a stage upon which he was destined to encounter and re-encounter a vast array of exemplary figures who join him from behind the arras of the world whenever they are called for – as though life were a kind of *pantomime* – a Commedia dell'Arte troupe he constantly betrays while constantly speculating *wrongly* about his relationship to the fate of the planet. All of this, which makes up almost the whole range of Moorcock's oeuvre with the exception of his heroic fantasies, centrally impacts upon attempts of writers of the literatures of the fantastic to come to terms with the stories that gave us all sustenance before they received the fatal wound so long ago – around the time of World War One. Moorcock's work, and the work of his cohorts, is a kind of multi-dimensional map to the past of genre before we lived in Hell, inscribed in tongues on vellum, eyekicks galore. *Against the Day* gazes through this vellum.

There is more of course to Pynchon's range of reference than these recursions. His grasp of the sciences and pseudo-sciences of the late nineteenth century is far more extensive than Moorcock's, or maybe anyone's; he is deeply attuned to both the myth and realities of the American West, the dreamed West which is both arcadia and utopia; he conveys sense of place with such astonishing intensity that his Chicago and New York and London and Venice and places east seem too dense for one world to hold them, for his descriptions of cities read like descriptions of their absolute substance, the theotetos or God-salt of the theologians; and the whole of his oeuvre could be understood as a chronicle of the war between anarchism and history – between slaves and owners, between enclaves that hold our heart's desire and the corporate world that makes offers we can't refuse, between science that tells us how to escape and Technos, between eros and aporia – with the famous Pynchon conspiracies weaving webs of Maya between these opposing poles.

All of which may sound more like the diagnosis of a disease burden than of the underpinnings of a novel, and there are times when it costs like sickness to continue to read *Against the Day*. Finishing the book is like getting well. Every trope and turn out of the literature of an entire century is imagined and re-imagined in the great gut of the seemingly perpetual *digestion* of Pynchon's telling, in which the cast appears and disappears (as I've already suggested) like fish in a tidal rip. Except for the fact that he brings most of them back to continue trouping their colorations, one could almost describe *Against the Day* as a prose version of Luis Buñuel's *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974), a film which claims (among other things) that human beings understand the genres that tie them about as well as an ostrich understands Auschwitz. *Against the Day* is huger and almost certainly more disorganized than anything Buñuel could tolerate. Maybe one should say rather that Pynchon's vast lament is a bit like *The Phantom of*

*Liberty* as written by Eugene Sue.

All the same, at least four story clusters might be sketched in. They flow together, separate, knot and vanish into thin air; but they can be followed.

1) The Airship Boys cluster, which is told in a boys' adventure idiom. We first meet the Chums of Chance, a team of five plucky lads who man the airship *Inconvenience*, at the Chicago World's Fair. Under the orders of an unseen directorate which gradually becomes less substantial as the years pass and history darkens, the Chums perform feats of rescue and surveillance and exploration typical of their breed. The world ages, but they do not seem to, though their ship grows steadily larger around them; by the end of the novel, it seems huge enough – like the ship in Gene Wolfe's *The Urth of the New Sun* (1987) – to cause a partial eclipse when it passes between sun and earth. As with most Airship Boys, the vector is utopian: through clean living and industry and learning, through the sanitizing uplift of their own example, they will create a better world, a pax aeronautica. In *Against the Day*, as they become increasingly counterfactual to the world below, the intensity of that vector becomes *transcendental*: they begin to leave us, though they visit once in a while to help. En route, they are privy to the discovery that the crystalline substance known as Iceland spar has a quality of doubling the “sub-structure of reality”, creating a palimpsest of worlds, along the verges of one of which the Chums watch as a “guardian spirit” – or maybe the primordial god Buri – or maybe something nuclear brought to fusion by a convergence of worlds – is hauled south to New York, more or less exactly one century before 11 September 2001; and destroys Manhattan in a world not quite ours. The Chums then begin their search for Shambhala, or Shangri-La, undergoing various sf adventures (including travel in a ship which sails beneath the Sahara) until finally, in the final pages of the book, they find a group of girls with artificial wings whom they marry en masse, as in any Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. Boys and girls, now connubially linked, escape at last on the very final page.

2) The Western Revenge cluster, which is told through an array of dream-demotic narrative voices; sometimes I heard echoes of Larry McMurtry, a fellow spelunker out of Pynchon's world. A union organizer (who is an anarchist at heart) named Webb Traverse spends his spare time as “the Kieselguhr Kid” blowing up railway lines. Suspected of this, he is brutally murdered by two thugs in the employ of the stage-villain plutocrat Scarsdale Vibe. Webb's four children are expected to avenge their father. The three sons (a flim-flam man, a mathematician, and a reluctant revolutionary who spends much of the novel in Mexico) appear and disappear dozens of times throughout *Against the Day*, testing the world for us according to their lights, and mostly falling in and out of love. (The sexual activity level of the book is extremely high, and often anomalously explicit, as far far as the popular genres of the time are concerned. Much of this sex is casual, in the sense that the perps soon separate, but almost all of the sex is meant. It is even more anomalous – in terms of the genres Pynchon is accessing – that women are clearly more sophisticated about sex than their men, and perfectly frank about their knowledgableness. In the end, moreover, even the most “promiscuous” of them find secure niches with men of their choice, though choice men are rare. The end result of this escape from genre stricture is an intermittent sense that the stays of the world have themselves loosened, a

hint that some partial escape from Hell may be possible.) Webb's daughter goes off with one of the murderers, which anecdotalizes the plotting of this cluster for a few hundred pages or more; but in the end, more or less inadvertently, or at the hands of others, justice is done, sotto voce. But any solace or repose the Traverse family gains is essentially melodramatic: subject to some flick of the conjuror's wrist: as the youngest son says, "We're all just night-riders here miles up a posted trail." They could be potted any time. The West as portal to Utopia, the free life their father dreamed of so unrealistically, has been shut down.

3) The Geek Eccentric Scientist cluster, which is told in an amalgam of styles. Pynchon knows too much science, and is clearly too indifferent to the costs of mixing good and bad scientific speculations into one narrative mix, for readers easily to appreciate what may be a remarkable flow of nuanced BigThink and subcutaneously hilarious jape. It was enough for me to understand that – somewhere deep in every paragraph of unquotably weirdish speculation – someone was trying to understand the physics and mathematics of the refraction of reality into multiple alternates. (And other stuff.) The Chums (as we've seen) get a gander at a lot of this, and are duly bilocated into Paradise. But the world-reality that will close down these festivals with the onset of World War One is increasingly hard to relocate out of. Although the cast of *Against the Day* is haunted by mirrors and ghosts and doubles and castles in the sky (sometimes these are just the Chums) and maps which show the Way if gazed at through Iceland spar, there is an increasing sense that the game is up, that "the invasion of Time into a timeless world" is a "Transgression" which cannot be stanchied. Though the great (historical) Tunguska Event in Siberia in 1908 that "jolted the axes of Creation" awakes longing anticipation of some shudder in the loins of another world birthing, there is no Conceptual Breakthrough available. Nothing that the mad crew of Scientists comes up with can save the "World-Island" for the game of story. They all shrivel into babble, two feet short of the well.

4) The Flaneur Spy Adventuress cluster, told in any style that comes to hand, from the shilling shocker to Huysmans. This cluster gradually takes over from the Western cluster, which dominates the first half of *Against the Day*; correspondingly, the second half of the book takes place mostly in Europe and Asia. Most of the troupe in this part of the show – the gay spy flaneur down from Oxford, the Theosophists, the Adventuress from the mysterious East with a taste in sadism, and all their lovers and owners and torturers – escape into enclaves as the overarching aubade of the big book they are nodules of, the big book whose ultimate task is to *dry up*, continues to sharpen its claws. Typically, every enclave is moist with sex. As we've noted, without quite seeming to admit it Pynchon gives the sexually adventurous members of his troupe – who seem as close to his heart as anarchists – some holes to hide in as the world locks into desert out here.

Hundreds of characters, but hardly individualizable in your half-nightmares that you will be reading *Against the Day* for ever. They flicker in and out of view as though lit from behind. The set pieces drown them out. The movement of the book as a whole drowns them in incessant perturbation. They drown each other in talk, which may go on for pages until a spasm of peristalsis washes them away for a hundred thousand words, but often they cannot stretch to fill the gap: by the time they return, we have lost them.

And they drown in all the genres they take their sustenance from, because – except for the flood of sex that falleth from their Author like manna from heaven – they are ultimately *obedient*.

But of course that is the point of this great grotesque swaybacked desiccating book about the victory of Time against our single sad Earth. The hundreds of figures who jam into *Against the Day* are not in fact characters at all, because Pynchon has evacuated his book of that degree of hope. They are *utterands*: people-shaped utterances who illuminate the stories of the old world that their Author has placed before us in funeral array; they are codes to spell his book with. That is why Pynchon has them break again and again into songs about the roles they play: because they are being sung through. And because that book is about the death of the stories we used to tell, its utterands are bound to the stake of that telling. They are like lovers in the radium glare of dawn, singing the terminal verse of the aubade. Before we shut the last page, the day has blown them out.



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## Clock Whisperer, Clock Treks

– SFW #538 (6 August 2007)

*Mainspring* by Jay Lake

– from the *Washington Post* (July 2007) –

*Escapement* by Jay Lake

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If there ever was a book that had to run on time, *Mainspring* (New York: Tor, 2007) is that book. Every page of Jay Lake’s new novel is either a little behind the beat, or spot on, or overwound: for it is the nature of the Story beast he has set in motion to work only if it keeps in step.

We begin around the year 1900 in an alternate world constructed along lines that combine a parody of Newtonian physics and steampunk. This world is attached by an geared ring around the equator to an orbital track in the not so high heavens, around which we roll, like an orrery constructed out of solid planet. The world literally runs on clockwork. (The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data ineffably locates this novel under the heading “Solar system – fiction”, just the kind of cackhand sort-by-size-of-marble Syntopicon-infected cod platonism that no genuine scholar *ever makes sense of*, but which governs the cataloguing practice of professional librarians everywhere, and fits hand-in-glove with the abject scientism of the MLA.) In this alternate world, America is under the rule of Great Britain; the first industrial revolution has hardly occurred, though “electrick” devices are beginning to be found in larger cities; New England, where the action begins, retains the straitlaced and punitive culture of its founding, though the seams are beginning to crack.

The first pages of *Mainspring* have the almost hypersonic austerity of the first pages of a typical Gene Wolfe novel. A young clockmaker’s apprentice named Hethor (a name right out of *The Book of the New Sun*, significantly that of the sailor who turns out not to be a human with mechanical parts but a robot with human parts) [*wrong: Wolfe’s Hethor is a sailor, a traveller, a climber through the clockwork mirrors of Time; but he is not a robot. 2008*] is awakened in the night by the angel Gabriel, who tells him that the Key Perilous which winds the world up has been lost, and that it will be his task (for the rest of the novel) to seek for the Key and to do what must be done with it:

“The Mainspring of the world winds down,” the angel continued. “Only a man, created in the image of the Tetragrammaton, can set it right. Only you, Hethor.”

That last sentence may be directed a bit more to the Young Adult market that Wolfe usually manages but “the image of the Tetragrammaton” is as loaded as any Wolfe reference to God stuff.

In any case, Silk-like, Hethor obeys the voice of the god within his ears: though melodramatic travails hamper him for a hundred pages or so, he never really wavers from the task of fulfilling his destiny, according to the dictates of his special nature (the origins

of which are left unexplained, though we are told that he is somehow able actually to hear the clockwork within the world, and is able to hear it gradually running down). Aided by what seems to be a freemasonry of supporters (we are never told more), he gets to Boston, but after declaring his mission to the British Viceroy in the presence of the mysterious William of Ghent, the latter casts him into a dungeon, from which he is rescued/shanghaied, finding himself southward bound on Her Imperial Majesty's Ship of the Air *Bassett*, a beautifully rendered dream of steampunk technology, saturated with detail, striated, odorous, technicolor; and manned by a crew straight out of C S Forester and Sons. The clockwork orrery world as a whole is of course Lake's biggest think in *Mainspring*, but *Bassett* is his most beguiling, though (strangely) the principles by which it operates have nothing to do with clockwork.

But it is only after the first hundred pages that *Bassett* comes into her own, dragging the novel with her. Suddenly Lake seems to forget that he's delineating the growing-pain ho-hums of a juvenile prot and almost viscerally opens his keyboard to the world he has created. Eventually the *Bassett* reaches the great equatorial ring (from the surface of the Earth it presents as an enormous bestriding Wall) which bears the orrery Gears, and we reach the imaginative heart of the tale. Vertical cities – almost all abandoned – adhere dizzily to cliffs angled from the great Wall, tiny figurines turn out, on closer inspection, to be vast edifices carved out of rock into the shape of inhuman giants, whose heads turn impassively to gaze upon insect humanity; for quite a few pages, we find ourselves inhabiting something like a Big Planet built sideways, or a Ringworld, or a World Ship. For quite a few pages, Lake gives us time to contemplate the possible nature of the world whose veins we can touch now: is *Mainspring* in fact *actually* set in a World Ship (like Wolfe's Whorl but larger), or in a Pocket Universe (a thought experiment on the part of some Ancient Race, like one of Philip Jose Farmer's, a joke universe of the gods), or in a genuine alternate history (with a jonbar point to explain the divergence for our own universe), or what? Hethor climbs the Wall, and is solaced by an Elder with Eastern Wisdom at his Beck, and gets to the other side, and slides off, falling miles downwards but winged men save him before he impacts the world again, and so forth. This is genuinely elated narrative writing; the enriched palate of the telling of the entire middle third of the book makes it seem, for as long as it lasts, that some revelation may be at hand.

It may have been too much to ask. To have brought *Mainspring* off wholly successfully, Lake would have had to have introduced some genuinely surprising revelation as to the structure of his clockwork enterprise; but his bag contains no such trick. Hethor's discovery of the exquisite tribe of "correct people", jungle dwellers in Green Mansions whose Rima figure he falls in love with and has great sex with (her intercrural scent is flowers), moves beautifully in its space: but does not turn the plot. The last third of the novel all too readily repeats pleasures and miseries Hethor has already experienced, and the conundrums underlying his quest are solved – I'm afraid pretty predictably – in the deeply American realization that the true Tetragrammaton is Within You: that Hethor carries the Key Perilous in his heart, in fact it *is* his heart. After an excitingly described descent into what turns out to be a not quite Symmesian Hollow Earth, the mainspring gets rewound, as we kind of knew was going to happen. And Earth

tocks ticketyboo again.

Here and there, though, we'd been given hints of a far more taxing and memorable *argument*, and maybe we missed the point somewhere; or maybe Lake lost sight of the bouncing ball [*but see below 2008*]. It had been clear from the get-go – the Wolfen angel with its world-transformative message was only one of the cues – that young Hethor was not so much the protagonist of a tale as he was its Pilgrim. Though they are always given an edge over their companions, protagonists of adventure stories are normally intrinsicate with the reality of the world whose story-rules they bend just enough to win; Hethor's pilgrimage through Mainspring, on the other hand, is inherently the Pilgrim's Progress of a Being of Greater Density through a world of snare and illusion, whose rules do not govern him in the end. Hethor *knows* – rightly – that he is destined to move through the contingencies of that world toward his destiny, regardless of the plot-twists and anguishes that seem to bar his course; he *knows* – again rightly – that the very implausibility of the near escapes and convenient coincidences and guru sessions that mark his course are themselves – *because they are contrived* to be so – a mark of the truth of his special nature.

For most of *Mainspring* this works very neatly: the more unlikely Hethor's story becomes, the more it is confirmed to be the true Stations of the Cross story of the book. But the last fifty pages of the tale are very nearly disastrous, because Lake (who may be too secular a writer to give final breath to Holy Writ) simply allows its two-fold structure to lapse. The True Story – the immeasurably dense anagoge pearl within the secular hoo-hah – simply peters out. The world is saved, sure: but what world? how the Saviour? who the mapper of the Path he trod? Beats me, says Mr Lake, and shuts the page.

In the end, *Mainspring* – for all its hallucinatory visual intensities and for all the fun of the Progress it traces – simply unwinds. In the end, for all the skill and joy he deploys, Lake simply doesn't stand his watch.

*[I thought I should include the capsule review reprinted below. It was first published in the Washington Post Book World – a section of that great newspaper sadly reduced since the days when editors like Michael Dirda could allow people like myself to decide how much of a column might be spent on an individual book, according to literary need. I reprint this short notice here not for its worth, as it is too short to do much, but as what one might call an apology of the canary, a confession that the coverage of Mainspring above failed to detect Lake's full strategy in terminating the tale in a dying fall. Tor may have given its first readers no hint that Mainspring was volume one of a trilogy, but I think I should have at least suspected this was the case. Whatever, these two reviews, placed together, now wave futurewards 2008]*

*Escapement* (New York: Tor, 2008) is a complex bridge joining *Mainspring*, the first volume of Jay Lake's GEARED EARTH sequence, to some climactic sequel or sequels. The underlying concept of gearing comes out of Steampunk, a term used to describe stories set in an alternate nineteenth century, where science and mechanics work differently, and (usually) there is some chance that World War One will not spoil the game in the end. The rigid physics that govern Lake's solar system are *literally* visible in the heavens: because

the planets revolve on actual gears. A vast one-hundred-mile high wall girds Earth's equator, the top of which comprises a vast gearing, so that the planet can climb its orbit like a several trillion ton funicular.

Three characters – the two more important of them being women, each of them believably indomitable and triumphant in an hierarchical world run by men – criss-cross the northern hemisphere of this bifurcated Earth on quests Lake has no intention of explaining until the next volume. One of the women is an unlettered but conspicuously brilliant Newton-figure; the other woman is a librarian with a radical social conscience; the man is a bluff sailor who does the kind of plot-advancing things one might expect of a bluff sailor in Dickens or Dumas. It is no joke to say that the constantly intersecting paths of these three are highly geared. Nor is it a joke to say that, caught in the inexorable pacing that his story and his world demand, Lake can be a bit overdetailed in his clocking of some of the less intoxicated movements of this very long novel.

But the delight is in what's seen en route; Lake has configured his world-dominating Empires, one British, the other Chinese, with huge and devoted attention, down to the last detail. The delight of the next volume – that there will be one is prefigured with unrelenting clarity in *Escapement's* final pages – should be the discovery that the destination adds up.

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## Tomgod

– SFW #582 (9 June 2008) –

*The Word of God; Or, Holy Writ Rewritten* by Thomas M Disch

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Here we go again, Candour time [see review of *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of in Scores*, p210-212]. I've reviewed Thomas M Disch before and expect – *Deo volente* – to do so again. Just like last time, Disch's newest volume comes with a blurb from me. Because it was composed this time round without my having read the book – this being entirely consistent with the sleight-of-hand metafictionality of *The Word of God; Or, Holy Writ Rewritten* (San Francisco, CA: Tachyon Publications, 2008), as its author carefully explained it to me, in gleefully misleading detail – there is perhaps less one must be candid about this time. And I have already put it on record that I've known Disch for nearly half a century.

But there's another reason for mixing a confession of personal knowledge into the body of this short review I'm embarking upon, where some attempt will be made – as is normal in the review job – to convey some sense of the readerly experience of entering Disch's latest book; and this is the reason: in its 175 pages *The Word of God* constructs a more complex relationship between the reader and what is read, between the implied author and the real author and the implied reader and the real person with tired eyes staying awake and laughing hard and continuing to read, between reportage and fictionality, between text and pretext, than any book I can remember encountering. *The Word of God* is matryoshka, but with no fixed relationship or repose obtaining between the innermost and the outermost doll: so it is more than simply matryoshka, it is as though the dolls were being *shuffled* like a deck of cards, with each doll governing the episteme in turn until – presto chango – another doll eats it inside another doll eating the other doll. Central to all of this is a constant sleight-of-hand, faster than the eye of reading, between real and not real. The book is a memoir and a novel at the same time; spoof and jeremiad; reportage and alternate world fantasy; the confessional chrestomathy of a lonely man and the card-sharpness of a devilish fine grinning God guy, all at the same time. It is a parable of the making of the work of art; it is the work of art. It is a closed fist and it is a naked open hand, which would shake yours: it says *noli me tangere* and it says touch me please. It is no one on this planet, it is Mr Disch. It is a beggar, it is Tom. All this.

It depends on who reads it.

The reader who knows the man almost certainly knows two men at least: Thomas M Disch (an embittered sf writer of great gifts and energy who is hardly published in 2008) and Tom Disch (a highly respected poet who who has been climaxing his long career with a vast surge of work, hundreds of poems to date, all written since the death of his partner, Charles Naylor, in September 2005, a death prefigured in passages of *The Word of God*, which is set – those parts of the book which can be described as being “set” – over the months preceding Naylor's death). These two versions of Disch are real enough, in a way,

though both are rhetorical figures, presentations of self. But the reader who knows these versions of the man has at least these grounds to begin *The Word of God* with. The reader who does not know any Disch in the flesh has only the impurities of text to guide her. More intensely than almost any text I can think of, this means that readers in the personal know and ideal readers will be stepping into two different rivers, neither of which is ever the same river twice.

There is, all the same, all caveats understood, a thread of story to hold onto. We will not be able of course to access the whole of the dancing matryoshka hurricano within and without the text of *The Word of God*, but we can gain an occasional view of the storm, so let us go quickly.

Tom Disch and/or Thomas M Disch come to the understanding that he or they are divine. We will call them him. This slow but all-encompassing flash of awareness of godhood retrofits Tom/Thomas's entire life into a new story, whose details are carapacially the same as those that have dogged the mortal writer, now nearing 65, in New York, with a dying partner, and a career that is not healthy; but touched with inner divinity, those details become kenosis. We now learn that much of Tom's previous work can now be understood as utterances to himself as god, and as utterances of the god. We are given examples – poems, aphorisms, stories. We reread emblazoned in godlight a beautiful poem, “The Moon on the Crest of the New-Fallen Snow”, originally published in *The Paris Review* in 1995, and repeated here in full; the Moon itself, who is alive or not alive, speaks from its coign of vantage:

Pain

Has its place – and pity, too – but it is not here.

Here all is calm and cold and luminous.

The snow has smoothed over the tracks of the deer.

Tom Disch himself, now that he is god (those who know the man may say he was always like this), now tells us he now understands that “the kind of lustre I do cast at my best is like the moon's in [Clement] Moore's poem, a lustre of midday – even though in fact it's actually night.” As a description of the cool unblinking gaze of the implied author of Thomas M Disch best books, from *Camp Concentration* (1968) and *334* (1972) through *On Wings of Song* (1979) on to *The Priest: A Gothic Romance* (1994), this seems very nearly perfect. God, who is the artist who writes the books, knows exactly who that artist is. It is godly to know oneself. It is religion to pass it on.

But Tom is not much interested in creating a formal structure of reverence (though one voice that speaks in *The Word of God* suggests it would be good if his professional colleagues had a better understanding of the world he creates); he does, however, allow himself a moment or two of threateningly Pentateuchal hilarity:

No booze, no pot, no sex, no swine:

I have decreed them all taboo.

My words will be your only wine,

The thought of me your honeydew.

All other thoughts you will eschew.

You'll call yourself a Thomasite

And hymn my praise with loud yahoo.

A new religion starts tonight.

But of course it doesn't.

After a short episode in which Jesus (one of Tom's Versions) goes down to earth to watch Mel Gibson in *The Passion of the Christ* (it affrights him), we segue back in time to Minneapolis in 1939, where a mysterious stranger, who turns out to be the real Thomas Mann in regal exile, visiting preWar Minneapolis, magisterially decides he would like to sleep with the young woman who (as we learn) will be giving birth to Thomas M Disch in about nine months. In Hell, meanwhile, Philip K Dick – whose real-life belief that Thomas M Disch was a Communist agent has been well documented, his 1974 letter to the FBI denouncing Tom now being a matter of public record – has been reverted into the body of a 12 year old kid, and is given the task of resurrecting himself back in 1939 and there assassinating Mann before he can become Tom's father. Beyond stirring up the deicide stakes, this event will so grieve and discombobulate Franklin Delano Roosevelt that in his depression he will fail to engage America in World War Two, which the allies will then lose, and *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), which Tom's Dick is sufficiently demented to think describes a genuine Hitler Wins world, will come true.

Dick is thwarted by our god.

Meanwhile – lest we think The Word of God can be described in terms of cheap shots – Tom reprints his extremely moving “Ode on the Death of Philip K Dick”, first published in the *Washington Post Book World* in 1982 (it is one of the finer public poems published in the last century). Meanwhile, back in Hell, Rebecca West lectures traitors on tactics. Meanwhile, Joycelin Schragar (from several Thomas M Disch stories published over many years) has shacked up with ta recrudescant Philip K Dick in the year 2000, from which coign they observe the hellish outcome of that year's presidential election. En passant, throughout, Thomas M Disch (because god can or must) says insulting things about Christians, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists, about the hypocrisies and unimaginable cruelties of the faithful. He is scathing about Creationism, about anti-abortionists who kill human beings, about Muslims who expect a place in paradise as a reward for toppling great buildings and killing human beings. And he is scathing in general about our mortal planetary peril:

*Of course* the snows will melt from Kilimanjaro, from the Alps and Andes  
and both the poles, and whales and penguins will become extinct, and so, in  
due course, will we.

But meanwhile. Meanwhile.

The stories and the poems and the diatribes and the jokes (some extremely funny) and the alternate world fantasy in Hell and Minneapolis continue to intertwine, weaving the book together and tearing it apart. The joining together is obvious, a wave of the god, a woofing of disparate anguishes and spoofs into one particoloured magic carpet, all threaded together by the Dick/Mann tale. The tearing apart is maybe less obvious, but perhaps inevitable: *The Word of God* is what it almost certainly had to be: a jarring japery of impossibles, a text that must be read so fast you don't fall through into the eddies of all the gravities uttered here: altogether too many kinds of material in one book for

mortal readers to gather together (but that is the Book that is intended), every bit of the text claimjumping every other bit.

But when we reach the end of *The Word of God* we realize that its author certainly must have known that his tale could only gain sufficient heft to exist precisely by dizzying us with speed, like some calliope on thin ice careening down the pages toward the last word. The speedlines of this passage blur our eyes. We laugh or we do not, but we cannot stop. It can only be a matter of time before we sink through the rotten ice into bad waters.

But hey (says god, or some writer at the end of his tether and ours), we know all that jazz. We all know it will end in tears. But we did not write our Book to say goodbye, or not quite. So

if there is no immediate necessity . . . if there are still groceries in the stores and fuel in the tank, if there are great old movies on DVD that one hasn't seen or has only a gossamer memory of, why then, why worry, what's the hurry, have another drink before you go.

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### “On Tom Disch”

– *Yorcon 2* (Yorcon, 1981) ed. Alan Dorey –

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Behind the New York Public Library, at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street in Manhattan, there is a small park which papers over an underground storage complex for the Library itself, row upon row of books tunnelling downward into the hard New York rock, labyrinths of arcana downwards to the Minotaur, to the salt lick. As I walked through this small humid formal park in the wet dusk under tree silhouettes and skyscrapers, on a late afternoon in 1961, the gravel beneath the feet seemed to thrum with premonitions I had no key to yet, as though I were tickling the open palm of the secret heart of Manhattan. It was here I met Tom Disch for the first time. Later it seemed right.

But even then, in the autumn of 1961, he seemed instinct with Manhattan; from the first I felt the envious complicity of trespass, not being native at all. I was too vain to wear glasses, so he came sliding into my field of vision like the moon rising through wet elms, head lifted back, hand raised in greeting or admonition, a very *proscenium* person even then, admirably conscious of the boundaries and the tempo of the scene, and prepared to make ad libs. We spoke together. He said we were in the same class at NYU, J Max Patrick's course in utopias, that he had noticed me. I remembered him then, his high smooth melismatic voice hot off the press, as though what he was about to reveal to the class comprised unbound galleys for your eyes only; a scoop. And often it was. Already he worked hard; already work underlaid it all. He seemed to *think* constantly, though sometimes in order to keep the presses running. He was the most intelligent man I had ever met. He had the feverish articulate nerve for the cognitive jugular beneath the



skin, for thought reified in serried exempla, of an eighteenth century figure like Candide sea-changed for the dark, because his taste (I thought) was for the horrors of the thing itself, for the pits beneath this Manhattan he had moved into, like a fish into water, at last. And when he found himself on the bleak penepplain of the day (as I thought [*I used to say penepplain a lot* 2008]), he had to create: scenes, friends, entanglements, hints of the jugular within, sometimes out of whole cloth: and of course, even then, fiction.

This may not all have been clear at first glance.

We went and had coffee. His manners were atrocious. He was clumsy, gauche, edgy, glaucous; he would enter a restaurant like some fledgling lawyer approaching a hostile witness for the first time, in a life-or-death case. Tall, ungainly, self-obsessed, not always on the right edge of paranoia about the urban world he already seemed to understand so well in theory, he had an awful tendency to victimize the victims: waiters, conductors, anyone who represented authority and sanctions as long as they were themselves as powerless as he (in 1961, fresh from inland America and from dire experiences in the Army) must have felt himself to be, unless he won the case. But it didn't much matter. From the first there was the flow of talk; and from the very first, it felt as though he meant it. If he had an idea, he would use it, shape it, turn the wheels of the world with it. The first of my journal entries to refer to him, dated 3 November 1961, is typical enough:

From Tom Disch, not to be exploited. John D Rockefeller meets the roaring abysmal beast. The above phrase a code. Viz as correlative, the shanghaied man of horrors.

God knows what it meant. [*I think it might have meant something like "The Asian Shore", though years before it got written* 2008] I wrote the phrase down and soon forgot all about it. But I was shit lazy. Tom was not. There were other differences too, but even then we had a sense, Pamela Zoline and I, that he would continue, Tom would, that he had a purchase on the brain-fevers we all felt privy to then, being extremely young.

We became friends. He lived south of Houston Street, near the Holland Tunnel. There were cockroaches in his dark rooms. We collaborated on an article for the New York University newspaper [*"The Gallatin Plan: or, the Coming Triumph of Bureaucracy", in Counterpoint: a Journal of Political and Social Thought (Spring, 1962)* 2008]. I sloped into graduation; he quit. In the summer of 1962 he and Pamela and I saw Georges Franju's *Eyes Without a Face* (1959). It was called *The Horror Chamber of Dr Faustus* then. We sat through it twice. God. In the autumn of 1962 we arranged to share an apartment on Riverside Drive, overlooking the Hudson River. This lasted for a year. Pamela and I were living together. Tom had a relationship in its dying fall with a ballet dancer named (I think) Barbara or Judy. He had already sold his first science fiction story to Cele Goldsmith, and was beginning to see the shape of the future, though he still had some kind of job, in Brooklyn I think. There was a lot of moaning. My journal is claustrophobic; the elements of comedy in it are clearly unintentional. "26 December 1962. Tom stayed home for no reason and will probably be fired, and I've no idea how I'll support the rent and the repayments at the same time." "30 December 1962. Tom conducting his ghoul-party tomorrow: dressed in provant purple, imperator of the

incubi.” “2 January 1963. Tom hasn’t gone to work today, for he is depressed; and he will be fired.” “19 January 1963. Took Tom’s IQ test today; got 3 more wrong than he did – 7 wrong out of 190, very good, Tom told me.” The work continued:

19 April 1963

Tom is home today too, about as sick as I am, reads my *New Yorker* now in the other room with his staccato hilarity. He is one-third through his novel, the idea of which is solid: in 1988 or 9 the world, having gone through a Terror of almost-war for a year, has gone askew in the following way: each year in the USA a Referendum is held, originally called by an earlier government as an object lesson; the question it puts up to vote is whether or not this year the bombs shall be unleashed on us. The object lesson backfires, as in the first vote 37% voted yes: the thrill of playing with fire; the malaise actual.

Industry having grown up about death, the hero of the novel is an executive in The Big Trick, an organization of large influence that organizes mass suicides.

The year the novel starts the vote is down to no, 50.4%

After a year we all moved. A decade and a half ago, I thought Tom’s short story, “Slaves”, was a bit *insensitive*. I don’t now. [*all of us were in the story; it reads a lot better and more lovingly accurate (to me) today than it did when I first saw it in 1963 2008*]. It is something made. Therefore it paces you. Like the albino alligators beneath the skin, it paces you. Pamela had left on a liner for England. I fled south to board a Caribbean freighter and work on it. “23 September 1963. Tom came to Idlewild in the Imperial [*a vast Chrysler, a company car 2008*] with Mother and Father; each person I looked upon, each thing, was for the last time. I have been robotic, glaring backward at happened events like a Caliban out of Faulkner.” Tom remained in the Manhattan he was shaping to his instinct, which is in 334 and *On Wings of Song*. With regard to the salt-lick near the deep pure water that all creative writers must aspire to find: some of us stay up here on dry land haunted by silhouettes of unnamed trees, dying synapses, and never reach the shared pool; some go through long hegiras before the waterworks are found; some were drenched in blood at birth, and are called Minotaur.

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### “Thomas M Disch (1940–2008)”

– *The Independent* (July 2008) –

obituary

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The death of the American writer Thomas M Disch, by his own hand, on the Fourth of July, was the last act of a drama that had been unfolding in public for several years. As the author of a large number of death-haunted science fiction novels and stories, and of several Gothic tales which treat modern America as a land of the dead, and of a huge body of poetry much of which danced with death in deliberately formal measure, Disch could from the first have been described as a writer well versed in terminus. But the

personal disasters he suffered in the twenty-first century, which he gave permanent shape to in the large number of poems he published on his LiveJournal after 2005, raised this dialogue with death to a new intensity; to put an end to his life, as he spoke frequently of doing, was to cap that life in his own way, was to demonstrate that he really had meant what he had been saying over the forty-five years of his prolific career.

From the publication of his first poems and stories in 1962, a central theme could be discerned within the most various kinds of work: a passionate conviction that the desolateness of the human condition could only be “figured” through art, it did not much matter what (Disch was also a seriously bad painter); what was important was to make sense of the bad deal we had been handed as a species. Perhaps the cleverest of all the clever titles he affixed to his many volumes of poetry was *The Right Way to Figure Plumbing* (1972). To figure things right, for Disch, was to treat death as a game, deadly of course, but beautiful. For Disch, in the end, death was only sensible if you figured it out yourself.

These intuitions, certainly bleak enough, were articulated all the same in a tone of almost unearthly high spirits: wry, mellifluous, formally exact, wickedly intimate, camp, deadly serious, surreal, unrelenting. A science fiction novel like *Camp Concentration* (1968), or one of his 150+ stories like “The Asian Shore” (1970), or a children’s fable like *The Brave Little Toaster* (1986), which became a Disney animated feature, or any of the extremely numerous poems (many not yet published) mostly written as by Tom Disch, or the critical essays in *The Nation* and elsewhere, or any of the opera librettos: anything he wrote was instantly identifiable. The series of original theme anthologies he edited in the 1970s, beginning with *The Ruins of Earth* (1971), was assembled with biting cogency. Perhaps one of the reasons he never achieved the very wide fame his readers assumed from the first he might be heir to was that the Disch voice took no prisoners: it was a voice one agreed with, or it dismissed you.

Thomas Michael Disch was born in Des Moines, Iowa, just before World War Two, and was raised Catholic in Minnesota. His father was a door-to-door salesman; he became close to his four siblings (who survive him) only after he left Minneapolis for New York. He had volunteered for military service in his late teens, but was soon given a medical discharge. In Manhattan he attended but did not graduate from Cooper Union and New York University, where I first met him. As soon as he sold his first story, to the perceptive science fiction editor Cele Goldsmith, he became freelance, and supported himself almost solely through his writing from that point, never taking a university post.

Along with Samuel R Delany, Ursula K Le Guin and Roger Zelazny, Disch was soon thought of as representing a new hope for American science fiction; in their hands, it was hoped, the genre could finally be recognized as shaping valid responses to the world at large, rather than as a form of escapist entertainment or increasingly simpleminded future-advocacy. But by the time he published his first novel – *The Genocides* (1965), in which Earth is harvested by aliens totally indifferent to the fact that their actions are exterminating the human race – Disch had already begun to wander, ending up in 1965 London, where Michael Moorcock’s *New Worlds* was beginning to agitate for adult, modernist, unforgivingly experimental speculative fiction. Disch’s response was partial:

*Camp Concentration*, first published in *New Worlds* and still his most famous novel, describes, in an intense iteration of his already unmistakable voice, a concentration camp run by the American military who are subjecting its inmates to fatal doses of a drug that induces a mutated syphilis designed to increase intelligence so that war may be better waged. The echoes of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947) are clear and deliberate. The novel won some plaudits but no honours from the science fiction community, which from the first could not tolerate Disch's corrosive disdain for the technocentric uplift typical of "normal" science fiction, and for anything that seemed to him to pander to the immaturity of most genre fiction. Later, in the first of his critical studies of science fiction, *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (1998), he deepened the insult by arguing that the genre was actually a form of children's literature. Oddly perhaps, the only awards Disch ever received from the community – a Hugo Award and a Locus Award – were given for this assault. A second study, *On SF* (2005), is similarly ruthless.

By 1970, Disch had returned to Manhattan, where he lived the rest of his life with his partner, Charles Naylor, who died in 2005. He had been publishing poetry very widely, and by the 1970s there were many readers of Tom Disch who knew nothing of the prose writer Thomas M Disch. His poetry is technically conservative though often formally daring; his subject matters run from public poems (an uncommon focus) to the confessional; the wit is always evident, and the voice, and the drumbeat of death; he is perhaps one of the very best second rank poets of the later twentieth century in America: as savagely civil as Anthony Hecht, as copious as Albert Goldbarth, as supple as Richard Howard. Meanwhile, he published in *334* (1972), a formally demanding but ultimately extremely moving portrait of non-heroic life in a desolate near-future New York (334 is the address of an apartment block) riddled by a disease that "represents the auto-intoxication of the human race in an environment ever more hostile to the existence of life." And in *On Wings of Song* (1979), he published what has come to be recognized as perhaps his best single novel: it depicts the life of an earnest but not very successful artist in an even less habitable New York; the interplay here between a life dedicated to art (even mediocre art), and the unstoppable degradation of America into a land raddled by starvation (spiritual and physical) and malls, is utterly melancholy, but hilarious, too.

The next decade or so saw no falling off in quantity or quality, though the unresponsiveness of the science fiction world inclined Disch to explore other modes. He had already written a classic Gothic novel, *Clara Reeve* (1975); he began the SUPERNATURAL MINNESOTA sequence of thematically connected metaphysical horror tales with *The Businessman* (1984), which features a loving portrait of John Berryman, one of the few American poets Disch would acknowledge as his superior; the most savage of the four, and the most devastating analysis of Minnesota culture, was *The Priest: A Gothic Romance* (1994), in which Catholic priests abduct pregnant teenagers and kill them. He also began to publish art, poetry and theatre criticism, much of this work being assembled in books like *The Castle of Indolence* (1995) and *The Castle of Perseverance: Job Opportunities in Contemporary Poetry* (2002). He also designed a computer game called *Amnesia* (1986).

During these years, he grew into himself physically, both in mass, as he became increasingly heavy, but also in gravitas, as his presence became increasingly formidable. Tall and bald, he would bear down colossus-like upon his visitor, and though his voice was flute-high he spoke in passages so laced with self-aware gist and wry sapience that a seminar seemed in the offing. But almost always the lecture would become, sometimes very suddenly, hilarious. To him everything that humans did about things that mattered – from God to sex, from the Pope to the sestina – was so ultimately silly that it had finally to be conveyed as gossip, uttered with high good cheer. The heart of Tom Disch in person, gossiping profoundly about the world and its makings, was glee.

But the shades – he would have excoriated any use of that cliché, unless it also referred mockingly to ghosts – were drawing in. He had published dozens of books, but felt, it may be wrongly, that his publishers were drawing away. In the early 2000s, the flat he and Naylor had lived in from the 1970s was almost destroyed by a fire that spread from the flat below, and his library was very severely damaged. His health had already begun to decline. Naylor died in September 2005 after a long and difficult illness. Within weeks of his death, eviction proceedings were begun against Disch; though the first notice as thrown out of court, the landlord soon tried again, in an action still pending at Disch's death. The country house he habitually spent part of the year in was nearly destroyed by mould that mutilated most of what Naylor had bequeathed him. The diabetes and sciatica and knee problems and other disabilities intensified. All these matters, via the LiveJournal, became in themselves a form of theatre. At the same time, Disch published *The Word of God; Or, Holy Writ Rewritten* (2008), a thoroughly wicked jape on God, religion, America, the figure of the artist, and not least himself (in this tale he denies, “unconvincingly”, the rumour that he is Thomas Mann's illegitimate son: Mann was in fact a visitor to Minneapolis in the summer of 1939). At least five more books are in production.

Late this spring, however, Disch made it clear that the flood of poetry was beginning to ebb, and that, after nearly half a century of ceaseless fertility, his voice was drying. This final loss, he made sure we understood, was not to be tolerated.

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## “Remembering Tom Disch”

– Locus #571 (August 2008) –

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Tom and Pamela Zoline and I are living in an apartment overlooking the Hudson River, in 1962 and 1963. In the dark, Tom plays a precious lp he has brought out his stone age childhood in Minnesota, where music had given him hints of the light of a world beyond. It is Shostakovich's Third String Quartet. Tom is an autodidact, and mispronounces Shostakovich, along with many other names and words he has come to love through mouthing them aloud in utter solitude. But there is something I soon learn: that what Tom mispronounces may well be what the rest of us have never heard of.

Thomas M Disch does not remain silent in the face of that which cannot be said. His lower countenance is shaped like smiling in the half-dark over the Hudson, but his eyes, which do not blink, are very cold. He is looking straight at the art of the making of the world.

It is late 1964. I'm living with Judith by now, in Toronto. Pamela and Tom come to visit, possibly with some thought of extricating me from the provinces. It is a long day. We go through the stuff of our young lives. It is dusk. We are standing on the curb of a broad boulevard. The light turns green. Suddenly Tom enwraps us in his great heavy arms, holds us for a beat, then breaks into song, his voice as high as a vast canary's. "It's Been a Hard Day's Night", he sings, guiding us into the avenue, across the Yellow Brick Road, into the next world.

In Rome, in 1974, Tom and Charlie take us to the opera. It is Wagner's *Parsifal*. In a darkness broken only by flickers of light from the stage, I cannot see Tom move or breathe. His eyes are as unblinking as Greek marble, and very cold. He is eating Wagner.

Sometime later, somewhere else, I finally recognize the sound Tom makes – a gut-hit joyous half-sung *Oh!!* – when he sees just how the world works at last, or when he is finally able to pronounce the central word of a poem he's writing. The sound Tom makes is the sound Don Giovanni makes when he shakes the hand of the Commendatore in the opera by Mozart, a thrill of recognition that will be the death of him.

In late February 2006, in Barryville, after mould has destroyed his country house, Tom is trying to scrape gunge off a stack of Charlie's much beloved operas, vinyl albums that had remained immaculate while Charlie was alive. He moves out of sight in the darkened rooms, but it is possible to echolocate him as he walks through the ruined house, for he is uttering a single sound, again and again. "*Oh!!*" he cries.

It is June 2008, we are talking on the telephone. I've not yet turned the music down. Tom asks me what I'm listening to. It is some modernish American composer I'm not really getting along with, probably Gunther Schuller. "Ah", Tom says. "John", he says, "don't you really think it's about time we *arrived*?" We talk about other things. There is a pause. Tom has thought of something. This causes him to say what he always says when he discovers the beat of the world. "*Oh!!*" cries Tom. He laughs himself silly. It was goodbye.