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## Breakfast in the Runes

- *Excessive Candour* #35, in *SFW* #141 (3 January 2000) -

### *The Book of Confluence:*

*Child of the River* by Paul J McAuley

*Ancients of Days* by Paul J McAuley

*Shrine of Stars* by Paul J McAuley

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The first thing to understand about *The Book of Confluence*, a three volume novel which is now complete, is that Paul J McAuley means every word of it, just the way an author of a single tale, we are taught to think, should. *Confluence* is one single novel, and must be read as one single novel. Its publication history in three separate volumes – *Child of the River* (London: Gollancz, 1997), *Ancients of Days* (London: Gollancz, 1998) and *Shrine of Stars* (London: Gollancz, 1999) – should now be folded in the mind into one thing, for there’s about as much point in starting *Confluence* in the middle as in starting Gene Wolfe’s *The Book of the Short Sun* with volume three, in the middle of the dark [see review above, p.248]. Anyone wishing to test this might go to Chapter 10 of *Child of the River*, “The Curators of the City of the Dead”, and read it with exceeding care.

The second thing to understand about this marvellously sustained cosmogonic romance of the far future – where whole galaxies engage in Stapledonian dances at the behest of trans-human Preservers who have created the world of Confluence in order to seed the latter days of the universe with life – is that any sense of the abiding presence in the text of Gene Wolfe is not inadvertent. McAuley has not just written a deeply felt and original story; he has also, wickedly and lovingly and intricately, created in *The Book of Confluence* an homage to the whole Wolfe oeuvre [though the Preservers themselves are more reminiscent of Larry Niven or Stephen Baxter. 2003].

Take Confluence itself. Created aeons earlier by the Preservers before they fled through a vast black hole into some other Time and Space, Confluence is a flat platform twenty times longer than it is wide, rather like a ruler, a 20,000 kilometre-long ruler with a keel, in the heart of which vast engines throb when awoken. Confluence wobbles in its orbit around a Preserver-shaped sun, a wobble which brings designer day and night to its inhabitants. Avatars or partials or aspects of the original Preservers, or their servants, until recently, have communicated through “windows” with the thousands of separate species of human-shaped beings who inhabit this planet-sized rectangular playing field. Recently, these windows – they might be described as access points to some unimaginably evolved cyberspace – have begun to fail, through war or for other reasons. The drench of theophany has begun to dry.

Readers of Wolfe's *The Book of the Long Sun* [see review above, p.140] will hear in *Confluence* a constant trickling of echoes of the Whorl – the generation starship that, in Wolfe's epic, has reached the end of its journey and has begun to malfunction. They will recognize linkages in the windows, and in the gradual loss of functions (the Great River which waters *Confluence* has begun to recede), and in the thousands of breeding colonies which inhabit each vast artifact, and in the time abysses out of which godlike voices come, and in the slow desiccation consequent upon a failure of the gods to drench. They will also recognize a perhaps more pro-found linkage: in both series, almost every named character (each novel has a lot of them) obsessively and reverently debates the nature of the world, the gods, destiny, the course of the Story of *Confluence*; in both series, the universe is understood to have been conceived – by God, or the Preservers, or the Outsider – out of Word.

What McAuley seems clearly to have understood for himself, but which he also expresses through homage to a past book embrocated in its own past books, is that any sf novel set in the far future – whether he writes it himself, or Wolfe, or Michael Moorcock, (or Stephen Baxter), or Dan Simmons, or (salute the father) Jack Vance – must treat the past as an immensity that lies too deep for tears, so profoundly deep that geography and geology have become one thing. And he has understood that great epics of the far future only partly concern themselves with the decipherment of the past, the breakfast in the runes; they are also about salvation. It's my own guess that Wolfe's *Book of the Short Sun* is all about salvation; and it's certainly the case that the closest fit between McAuley and the fathering Wolfe lies in the nature and ultimate function of their choice of protagonists, for both Wolfe's Silk and McCauley's Yama are gradually discovered to be hard gods of transfiguration: figures hotter than the books they tell.

Yama (short for Yamamanama) in *The Book of Confluence* and Patera Silk in *The Book of the Long Sun* and *The Book of the Short Sun* do of course share much; but it is, perhaps inevitably, Severian from *The Book of the New Sun* who most implacably shadows Yama's quest downriver from the great capital city of Ys to a vast ravaging war and then back again, during the course of which he finds out his true parentage, his true family, his true powers (symbolized by various iconic trinkets he gathers on the way, which turn out to be as inessential as any of the emblems Severian collects but does not actually need en route to godhood), his enemies true and false, his redemptive death and rebirth, and his bringing of salvation (or obedience to the deep will of the Preservers) to *Confluence* – not by flood as in *The Urth of the New Sun*, but through draught and dismemberment.

We meet Yama on the first page of the first volume, as an infant floating down the Great River with his dead mother (or so she seems), which is more or less exactly how we first meet Severian. He is plucked from these bulrushes by the Aedile of the local city (the parallel between *New Sun's* Nessus and *Confluence's* Ys only becomes explicit in volume two), raised, kidnapped, rescued, all in volume one. In Chapter 10 of *Child of the River* (see above) he meets an elderly couple who succour him, and

who give him more advice than he can immediately use. He attracts followers without asking that they surrender their lives to him, but they do, and he takes them, and their lives. At the end of the volume, he escapes with these companions through a vast closing gate (like the great gate that closes on the last page of *The Shadow of the Torturer*) and into Ys at last.

In the second volume, *Ancients of Days*, he undergoes various ordeals in the vast river-girt megalopolis, pursued by implacable foes whose need of him is more theological than practical; he continues his search for the origins of his bloodline and of Confluence itself, eventually returning downriver past his old home, further and further into regions of dreadful turmoil, just as Severian did. His ability to control machines mentally (especially ancient ones) grows. He is haunted by an Aspect who appears through shrine windows, and who may be him become Him. He learns that one of his godly functions is the task of infecting the blood of indigens (races not yet touchable by the Preservers' long-buried nanomachines whose function it is to jostle genes and to generate new species, perhaps for the better), which happens when they drink of his blood (resemblances to the climax of Dan Simmons's *Hyperion* sequence are evident but not profound – in both instances a blasphemous reference to the Christian High Story can be detected). He is kidnapped again and again.

The last volume, *Shrine of Stars*, carries Yama, now terribly scarred and as profoundly weary as Severian the lame, further down the Great River and over the edge of the world (resemblances to Terry Pratchett's Discworld are obvious but superficial), where the perspective expands vertiginously as we plunge through wormholes, jump interstellar gaps in the bosom of a sentient ship half as old as time, and return finally to Confluence in order to bring salvation to its thousands of species, in the nick of time.

The pleasures of the text itself are too numerous to count: the Vancian archipelago-hopping, each new "island" a new species; the sensory impact of the writing [a very high style, one might call it Muscle-Shirt Baroque, a style embraced by most of the best space opera writers mentioned here. 2003]; the profligacy of the life of Confluence, to which McAuley gives far more than lip service. And in the end, there is another joy, one which was hinted at throughout all three volumes. In a final swerve from father Wolfe – a swerve which distinguishes these two great series, but does so without insult to the earlier (and ultimately harsher and greater) epic of destiny – McAuley makes it clear that he means what he has in fact been saying throughout. Severian may be something like a god, a long magical Word uttered by the Increate; but Yama, who is something like a god, turns out in the end to be a long magical Word uttered by other human beings. *Confluence* is a secular *Book*. Severian frightens us (me, anyway). Yama is an iteration of our own blood.

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## The Aesop Trick

- *Excessive Candour* #55, in *SFW* #221 (16 July 2001) -

*Immodest Proposals* by William Tenn

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William Tenn's career demands an explanation - or perhaps we demand an explanation from it. We want to know why it stopped. The career - as a notional entity stretching through time for a while - asks us why it had to leave. I have a theory.

William Tenn, an urban Jew whose real name is Philip Klass, was born in 1920. He is alive today [he still is, June 2003]. He began writing sf while serving in World War Two, and began to publish in 1946, just before the Cold War began. From then until the mid 1960s, he was a moderately prolific author; as he wrote almost nothing but short stories and the occasional novelette, his work appeared mostly in the magazines, usually *Galaxy* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, where his witty, satirical, sharp-tongued bent found a home. He was loved.

There was also one novella, *A Lamp for Medusa* from 1951 (it only reached book form in 1968); and one novel, *Of Men and Monsters* (1968), whose title turned out to be hugely unfortunate. Coming as it did from a man known only for short work, the gathering-of-usual-suspects title of this book seemed so *obviously* that of a short story collection that when the tale was published - along with three retrospective collections from the same firm and in the same format whose titles (like *The Seven Sexes* or *The Square Root of Man*) rightly sounded like collection titles - very few people ever knew a novel had been released. There was some thought at the time (it was certainly my supposition immediately after 1968) that the near non-appearance of a long-meditated novel would have inevitably dismayed its author, and might well have explained his departure from the field. There are hints of this supposition in comments I've made in print lamenting the failure of sf to continue to interest a man of the stature of William Tenn.

But now that *Immodest Proposals* (Framingham, MA: The NESFA Press, 2001) has appeared, this thesis can take a rest. Disappointment at the invisibling of a precious novel may have daunted the man; far more important, however, from a reading or re-reading of the 33 stories here assembled, is a sense that if, after 1970, William Tenn could hardly write sf any more, it was because the world of 1970 no longer needed his particular trick.

The trick of William Tenn was Aesop.

Like Aesop - or like Evgeny Zamiatin, or the Strugatsky Brothers, or Stanislaw Lem, or Josef Nesvadba, or a hundred other twentieth century writers who lived under oppressive regimes whose owners rightly panicked at the subversive power of naked story - William Tenn, a leftwing urban Jew in Cold War America, became a master

of Aesopian concealment, using the codes of American sf to write Beast Fables about the real world, the world the commissars (or John W Campbell, Jr, or J Edgar Hoover) could not permit to be described in clear, the world of the empire of the Cold War without any clothes.

A Beast Fable, in its classic form, can be defined as a tale in which talking animals convey lessons about human nature. Those lessons can be conveyed in clear, as in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) or George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945); or they can be concealed, as in Aesop's Fables. But Beast Fables only use literal animals out of habit. By a simple *trompe l'oeil* – as in H G Wells's *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* (1928) – human beings can be seen as exemplary creatures who do not so much pretend to be us as reveal us to be Beasts. As readers, we have become accustomed to texts that must – like Wells's fantasy, or like Scott Bradfield's *Animal Planet* (1995) – be deciphered; but that are easy to decipher. At the end of the twentieth century, Aesopian Fantasy can be defined as a tale whose real meaning only seems to be concealed.

Here is an example from Tenn: “Brooklyn Project” (1948 *Planet Stories*), probably the most famous of his works which might be deemed Aesopian in a modern sense. An ominous bureaucrat announces to a set of reporters that the Brooklyn Project has succeeded. In a few minutes, “man’s first large-scale excursion into time will begin.” A reporter asks the bureaucrat about the risks that history may be modified – that amnesia may be committed upon our past. The bureaucrat makes it clear that a question of this sort is unpatriotic, and that certain scientists who’d expressed doubts on the subject had been summarily dealt with. The reporter quails into silence. The time machine begins to work, sending a kind of ball-shaped camera-eye back and forth through time in an oscillating search pattern: deep past, present, less deep past, present, and so forth. As the ball continues to ricochet, affecting the past in almost inconceivably minor ways (this is also chaos theory before the fact), everything slowly changes; but – as the reporter had feared – it is impossible to perceive this in the transformed present (because, of course, as soon as it happens it has *already happened*). After the time machine finally comes to rest, therefore, there is nothing to prevent the bureaucrat from glowing with success:

“See”, cried the thing that had been the acting secretary to the executive assistant on press relations. “See, no matter how subtly! Those who billow were wrong: we haven’t changed.” He extended fifteen purple blobs triumphantly. “Nothing has changed!”

As we’ve implied, Aesop could not be seen *pretending* to feign innocence; but things have changed over the past 2500 years. Aesop may be wiser than we are, but he’s not as *old*; and twentieth century literature, which is a literature of profound age, is packed with faux naïf texts whose inner lack of innocence is manifest. “Brooklyn Project” so obviously *pretends* to be Aesopian, so obviously expects its readers immediately to understand its political implications, which it *manifests*, that no

warden of Cold War Values could have been fooled into thinking the tale wasn't actually about what it was actually about: the condition of being American in a time of shutdown. Unsurprisingly, when Tenn delivered the manuscript to John W Campbell by hand, the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* literally threw it back at him across his desk. And every other sf magazine of the time – except, ultimately, the lowly *Planet Stories* – rejected it as well. They did not reject “Brooklyn Project” – which became one of the two or three most famous time travel stories ever told – because it was bad. They rejected it because, while pretending to conceal its “unpatriotic” message, it manifestly projected the “secret” it contains.

In most of the Aesopian tales assembled in *Immodest Proposals*, Tenn is cooler than this, and most of them (as we discover from the highly informative notes he appends to each tale) slipped easily into print. The best of them – those in this volume include “Generation of Noah” (1951 *Suspense*), “Down Among the Dead Men” (1954 *Galaxy*), “Time in Advance” (1956 *Galaxy*), “Winthrop Was Stubborn” (1957 *Galaxy*) and “The Custodian (1953 *If*) – almost invariably illuminate for us the Cold War Empire, which had no clothes. They were Beast Fables that Aesop might have told, had he been Blind Willie McTell.

After 1970, something happened. After the dissolution of the moral and political shibboleths which had earlier governed the magazines, and after he became free to write anything he wanted in clear, he could no longer find any traction in sf. The late stories published here are not Beast Fables; they are sarcasms, undisguised, side-of-the-mouth witty, casual, uninterested. I think he knew we had not, in fact, won the battle at all. I think William Tenn quite possibly thought that the “freedom” American writers began to experience to the full after 1970 was the kind of freedom Herbert Marcuse defined as “repressive tolerance”, which is the freedom to publish your dissent with only one condition: that all profit and all power remain in the hands of those who allow you to publish whatever you want to, and who do not care what you say because they are *shameless*. By 1970 or so, it may be, America became a world run by the shameless, who only pretend to care when they are exposed, because to pretend to care is a way of torturing the just – it is like jailers pretending to read documents *containing new evidence* written in blood on toilet paper by prisoners whose execution has already been fixed. Long before this understanding of freedom became axiomatic to all sane persons, William Tell had already left the building. He went on to other things. He is sorely missed. I do not think he will ever return.

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## The Cost of Living

- *Excessive Candour* #57, in *SFW* #229 (10 September 2001) -

- revised version in *Interzone* #174 (December 2001) -

*Nekropolis* by Maureen McHugh

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There are not many characters in *Nekropolis* (New York: Eos, \$24.00), but they seem thousands. *Nekropolis* is an sf novel about the people who have no faces in most sf novels, and are therefore innumerable, the people whose deaths feed the engines of world-change in sf stories about making it all new. They are the mothers with dying children, the dark-skinned servitors who hide their eyes from owners like us, the grunts, the discards, the serfs, the farmers, the cousin who turns to whoring, the little shopkeepers, the picturesque starvers who jam mean streets around the corner from the world: all those who sweat with fear when the world comes round the corner.

Unlike the protagonists of almost any sf novel, but exactly like the “extras” who populate the Third World, the protagonists of Maureen F McHugh’s fourth novel do not live in the present tense of history. As a title, *Nekropolis* implies many things about death and belatedness, but its central message may be straightforward: that although the past is a nekropolis, change (certainly change that never gets you close to the control buttons of Earth) is another death. The key word here is, perhaps, prison.

McHugh is vague about the exact time of her near-future tale, almost certainly because her several protagonists, through whose successive voices the story is told, are themselves as ignorant of the cutting edge of “progress” as an Indian peasant in 2001 talking to his aunt in England on a mobile phone. It does not matter what year *Nekropolis* is set in because the precise year of the tale – precision here being a First World concept, a necessary monitoring device if your world’s main business is to produce the future – does not interest its cast.

The setting is urban Morocco, which is part of the North Atlantic Alliance. No trade or diplomatic relations are permitted between this Alliance and the modern world – Europe and the Americas – though a good deal of smuggling of hi-tech devices is covertly encouraged. AI devices proliferate, as do virtual reality environments for the rich, and cardphones: the kind of Cargo Polynesians were reputed to long for in the nineteenth century. As in our own time, the streetwise of this Third World trade indiscriminately in Cargo, but continue to live in the shambolic nekropolis of the very same traditional world they were born into, and feed on.

*Nekropolis* is a tale of the fed upon. It is also a tale of survival.

But one thing should be made clear. Although I think I’ve fairly described the background of *Nekropolis*, that background remains almost entirely implicit; without a single polemical outcry, McHugh tells her story as we had no excuse not to understand, without being told, the point of its world-historical location.



Hariba begins. She is a 25 year old virgin who has been jessed – a mind-altering process, illegal in the First World, which renders the person so treated inherently loyal to her employer. She works for a rich restaurant owner whose wife comes to hate her. But before she is evicted from his house, she becomes involved with another servant or slave, a *harni* named Akhmim – an AI-driven humanoid whose nature commands of him a tied responsiveness to the hollow aloneness of the human condition. *Harni*, who are raised in commensal litters, find it a constant torture to be away from their kind; but humans, into whose abyssal hollowedness they rise like yeast, give them some sense of function.

After eviction from her master's house, and undergoing bonding/bondage to a new mistress, Hariba runs away from the law, returns to Nekropolis, the part of her home city where the dead were buried long ago, and where the invisibles of the new dispensation continue to live, immured in the fettering complexities of a world they do not quite have enough energy to emigrate from. Akhmim has taken over the task of narrating the tale. His bondage to Hariba – it is clear we are meant to understand how similar his bondage is to jessing – makes it impossible for him not to attempt to fill her. He wishes furthermore to have sex with her, because sex is “as close as humans ever seem to come to the merging of 'I' and 'other' – the momentary forgetfulness of separation, which isn't the same.”

But the bondage of her culture (McHugh utters no feminist arguments, but her portrait of the appalling nekropolis of constraint that women are bonded to, in her dream version of Morocco, needs no bush) keeps Hariba from sex. And the process required to terminate her jessing is making her almost fatally ill. Further sections of the story, told through her mother's and her best friend's voices, tie the two protagonists more and more tightly into the necrosis of the given; until it seems they will die.

The story of how they do not in fact die, and of the costs of their escape to Spain, constitutes the main action, quickly told, of *Nekropolis*. Once safe in Spain, Hariba and Akhmim become *evolué*, which is of course another death, another Nekropolis to inhabit. But they are surfacing, for what it's worth, they are coming to the surface of the present tense of the world. AI creatures like Akhmim are called *chimera* in Spain; he has further climbs to make, but will do so with his fellows, for his bondage to Hariba has now lessened, and they separate after fucking at last. Hariba will become an accountant. To do so, she must cut her hair. “The smooth coil of black hair” – once cut – is topologically identical to the nekropolis city she has left, the family she has abandoned, the virginity she has finally “surrendered” to Akhmim, all the betrayals of not dying.

Now she lives in the future, with us. Bon voyage.

It is a breathtaking book, whose melancholy is unrinsable; but exhilarated in its telling. The spareness of McHugh's prose, for she seems never to waste a word, fills from within, like a homo sapiens filled with Akhmim, until it all seems pregnant. Nekropolis rings like crystal, a precarious sound in a police world. But nothing can be sole or whole without being rent. Nekropolis is a book about the cost of living.