

PROMETHEUS

Charles Stross wins 2007 Prometheus Award for *Glasshouse*

The Libertarian Futurist Society announced the winners of the Prometheus Awards in Yokohama, Japan at the 63rd World Science Fiction Convention. Charles Stross won this year's award for Best Novel for *Glasshouse*. There was a tie for the Hall of Fame Award, with *It Can't Happen Here*, a 1936 novel by Sinclair Lewis, and "True Names," a 1981 novella by Vernor Vinge sharing the award. The Motion Picture, *V For Vendetta*, directed by James McTeigue and with screenplay by the Wachowski brothers has won a Special Award.

This is Stross's first Prometheus Best Novel Award. His *The Hidden Family* was a finalist last year, and its sequel, *The Clan Corporate* was nominated this year. *Glasshouse* takes place in the same universe as *Accelerando*, though at a much later point in its history. The themes of ubiquitous surveillance and the struggle to survive as an individual in the face of severe pressure to conform come through very clearly in this story of a distant future in which unrehabilitated war criminals use every tool at their disposal to build a society that they can control absolutely.

Sinclair Lewis shared the Best Classic Fiction Award for his warning about the rise of totalitarianism, *It Can't Happen Here*, with Vernor Vinge's classic short story, "True Names," which gave the public their first glimpse of cyberspace and showed how the struggle for control might penetrate the new medium. The motion picture *V For Vendetta* won a Special Award for effectively dramatizing the ongoing erosion of freedom in the West and the virtue of resisting tyranny with determination and hope.

The other finalists for Best Novel were: *Empire*, by Orson Scott Card; *The Ghost Brigades*, by John Scalzi; *Rainbows End*, by Vernor Vinge; and *Harbingers*, by F. Paul Wilson. The other finalists for the Hall of Fame award were: *A Clockwork Orange*, by Anthony Burgess; "As Easy as A.B.C.," by Rudyard Kipling; *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell; and *The Lord of the Rings*



trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien.

The Prometheus awards honor outstanding sf/fantasy that explores the possibilities of a free future, champions human rights (including personal and economic liberty), dramatizes the perennial conflict between individuals and coercive governments, or critiques the tragic consequences of abuse of power.

The Prometheus Best Novel Award was founded in 1979 and the LFS took over sponsorship in 1982. The award is one of the most enduring awards after the Nebula and Hugo awards, and one of the oldest fan-based awards currently in sf. Presented annually since 1982 at the World Science Fiction Convention, the Prometheus Awards include a gold coin and plaque for each of the winners.

The Hall of Fame, established in 1983, focuses on classic fiction, including novels, novellas, short stories, poems and plays.

Past Hall of Fame award winners range from Robert Heinlein and Ayn Rand to Ray Bradbury and Ursula LeGuin.

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The newsletter of the
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Farthing

By Jo Walton
Tor, 2006
Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

Farthing is something of a tour de force. It's a classic British-style murder mystery—Walton acknowledges Dorothy Sayers and Josephine Tey as inspirations—but set in an alternate history, one that apparently diverged in the 1930s. It takes place in a different 1949, one where the Nazis control the European continent and are still at war with the Communists in the east. The United States, under President Charles Lindbergh, seems to have developed its own sort of fascism, and is engaged in trade negotiations with the Japanese Empire. And Britain, after arriving at a negotiated peace with the Nazis, remains proud of its traditional liberties and of its empire. But this is also a cautionary tale about the easy downward path from freedom to tyranny.

The story starts with the discovery of a corpse at a country house owned by a leading British politician and his wife. The dead man himself was a highly regarded British politician, the man who negotiated peace terms with Hess. Suspicion falls on one of the guests—David Kahn, the son-in-law of the host and hostess. A Scotland Yard inspector is sent to supervise the investigation, and finds the case's complexities steadily increasing as he looks for more evidence. At

the same time, his superiors are pushing for a straightforward accusation and a quick arrest.

The country house could be the setting for one of Sayers's mysteries, or even one of P. G. Wodehouse's comedies. But if it's a Wodehousean story, it's one where all the characters' intelligence has been turned up several notches. And there are darker issues beneath the surface: British anti-Semitism and the criminal penalties for homosexual acts that are still in force in this timeline, as they were in the real 1949. As a Jew married to a daughter of the British aristocracy, and as a bisexual, Kahn finds himself isolated.

Saying any more than that would give away too much of the plotline, which readers ought to discover for themselves. I'll say, instead, that this is one of the most disturbing cautionary tales I've read in some time. And at the same time, it offers characters who do the right thing under terrible circumstances, and, better yet, do it for the right reasons, as when a minor character describes the political crisis that grows out of the murder as "a terrible attack upon liberty" and later says, "What you can't pay back you pay forward."

Reading *Farthing* isn't likely to make you happy. A more likely reaction is the pity and terror. Aristotle said tragedy was designed to evoke. But it's a long time since I've read so powerful a political and cultural tragedy.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Execution Channel

By Ken MacLeod

Tor, 2007

Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

An old joke about Hollywood says, “Start with an earthquake and build to a climax.” Ken MacLeod’s latest novel does something very similar: in the first few pages, the central character gets a phone call telling him that a base in Scotland leased to the United States Air Force has been destroyed by a nuclear bomb. After that, MacLeod really does carry the reader forward to an unexpected climax. As this may suggest, this is something of a thriller, set in the very near future, something of a departure for MacLeod, whose previous fiction has largely dealt with the distant future, outer space, and radical transformations of humanity by new technology. In this book, his concerns are terrorism, espionage, and the repressive policies adopted by governments in the name of opposing terrorism.

As a thriller, this book is much more in the spirit of John Le Carré than of Ian Fleming. Much of the action is cerebral; most of the characters conceal their motives and their goals from each other, and corruption is commonplace. At best, the choice appears to be to serve a lesser evil. In fact, this is a warning against the evil that governments do in the name of fighting evil.

The novel’s title refers to one of its literary devices: An Internet source that transmits images of people being put to death, all over the world. This functions like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, constantly reminding the reader of what the stakes are in this world. But it also serves as another device from Greek tragedy: At a key point, it becomes a *deus ex machina*, revealing a hidden truth that shapes the plot and transforms the characters.

At the same time, this isn’t just a straightforward extrapolation into the future. Rather, it’s an alternate history, with a departure point in the very recent past, close to the end of the second millennium. I’m not entirely sure why MacLeod made this choice, but it does enable him to make one point, one that readers of *Prometheus* will find familiar: How little difference there is between major political parties, and how ready they all are to use evil methods.

This is a cautionary tale, then; its premise is If This Goes On. About midway through, MacLeod states his theme clearly, and it’s one libertarians will sympathize with:

Tears sprang to her eyes, as they always did when the thought struck her that that particular prerogative was back: the right of the sovereign to condemn, to put to the question, without due process and for reasons

of state; that on that sore point all the Revolutions in Britain and America had been for nothing. That *America* had been for nothing; that dismayed her.

That’s not all that’s going on here; the novel’s ending is a complete surprise—even though MacLeod lays the groundwork for it by his discussion of Heim Theory. This is actually rather a good choice as a science-fictional premise: Heim’s work is fringe science, but unlike outright crackpot theories, it actually makes predictions, some of which are disturbingly accurate enough to give it a measure of literary credibility. Where many recent technothrillers have been about averted apocalypses, events that would transform the world if they became known, MacLeod shows events that do transform the world. Whether this transformation is a libertarian one seems debatable, and I’m not sure if this is a libertarian novel. Still, it certainly warns against things that libertarians also fear.

The Gladiator

By Harry Turtledove

Tor, 2007

Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

Harry Turtledove’s Crosstime Traffic series has a lot to recommend it to readers. It’s good young adult science fiction; it draws on Turtledove’s skills as an alternate historian; each book is mostly self-contained, and the limited length of books makes for a tighter narrative than Turtledove’s adult novels usually provide. For readers of *Prometheus*, the theme of trade between alternate timelines as a mutually advantageous process will have a certain natural appeal.

In *The Gladiator*, that appeal is likely to be stronger. The alternate timeline in this book doesn’t grow out of ancient Rome’s survival, or even the balkanization of North America; it derives from a Soviet victory in the Cold War, leading to a world dominated by Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism. And while Turtledove doesn’t make this a 1984ish dystopia (though there’s an ironic reference to *1984*, with a literature teacher explaining that it’s really an attack on fascism and capitalism, and that the label “English socialism” doesn’t really mean socialism, any more than “national socialism” did), he does make it clear that this is an impoverished and backward world, where life is drab at best, and the government routinely lies, suppresses dissent, and spies on people. Against this background, the suggestion that capitalism is a more attractive system takes on an understated plausibility.

Here’s where Turtledove gets creative. One of his viewpoint characters is a high school student, the son of a minor apparatchik in Milan, who’s a classic underachiever, uninterested in his studies and indifferent to political concerns. What he is enthusiastic about is games. Specifically, he loves playing a

—Continued on page 5

The Sharing Knife: The Beguilement & The Sharing Knife: Legacy

By Lois McMaster Bujold

Eos, 2006/2007

Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

Lois McMaster Bujold established her reputation by writing science fiction. An early fantasy novel, *The Spirit Ring*, attracted relatively little notice. More recently, she turned to fantasy, with the three Chalion novels (not a “trilogy” or a series, but independent stories sharing a setting). The two volumes of *The Sharing Knife* continue that turn to fantasy, with a quite different setting. They also carry another shift in Bujold’s writing further: Her fiction has always had crossover appeal to romance readers, and starting with the later Vorkosigan novels (especially *Komarr* and *A Civil Campaign*) romantic themes and relationships became a major focus of her writing, but *The Sharing Knife* could be described as a full-blown romance that happens to take place in a fantasy setting—a “paranormal romance,” as the publishing industry calls this category.

The fantastic element in this setting is a psychic sensitivity called “groundsense.” This seems to be imaginatively inspired by the Gaia Hypothesis, which views the Earth as a living entity—or, more precisely, on the scientific findings that inspired the Gaia Hypothesis, such as the difference between soil on Earth, which is pervaded with life and organic matter, and regolith on the other terrestrial planets, which has neither. Some people have groundsense, enabling them to perceive their own and each other’s bodies, other living things, and the soil itself and to do “magical” things with them. Far in the past there was a high civilization with advanced magical skills based on groundsense; the setting of *The Sharing Knife* is a postapocalyptic one, the world left behind after that civilization destroyed itself. Its main supernatural threat, called “malices,” are cancerous entities that grow out of traces of magical pollution (in both the environmentalist sense and the older ritual and tabu sense) and consume “ground”; what they leave behind is dead ground—in effect, soil returned to regolith, only to be restored slowly, from the edges in.

A threat requires countermeasures, and in this setting those are provided by the Lakewalkers, a relic of the ancient aristocracy. Fantasy readers are likely to be reminded of Tolkien’s Dunedain, not just in general concept but in many details: long lives, unusual tallness, magical talents, preservation of ancient memories, and isolation from the people they guard and protect, who tend to mistrust or even fear them. But Bujold has envisioned her “rangers” in much more ethnographic detail. To start with, where Tolkien always left the Dunedain’s economic base vague—where they got their horses, their weapons, and even their food—Bujold shows an economy suited to nomads who have to carry everything they own on horseback. For her Lakewalkers, land is not private property, but common property—in the style of ancient Roman law,

where anyone can use or pass over common property, but no one can permanently occupy or appropriate it. This concept is unsuited to farming societies, and the Lakewalkers seem to be very sophisticated hunter/gatherers rather than farmers. The majority of them support the frontline combatants who battle the malices, rather than doing battle themselves. Their kinship system is matrilineal, with descent traced from mother to daughter and from uncle to nephew, perhaps reflecting their nonownership of land—they do have the institution of marriage, though conceived as a partnership rather than as male proprietorship of women’s fertility. They also seem to be sexually sophisticated in a style that would have appalled Aragorn, accepting same-sex relationships and *ménages à trois* casually. Groundsense apparently enhances their sexual skills as well, which is an asset for characters in a romance novel.

But this wouldn’t be much of a romance without obstacles to the lovers’ happiness. Many of these come from the estrangement between the Lakewalkers and the people they defend, called simply Farmers. Farmer culture is focused on owning and working land, which is inherited patrilineally, from father to son, making legitimacy and monogamy vitally important. Farmers and Lakewalkers are capable of falling in love, sexual intercourse, and bearing each other’s children, but the clash between their marital customs ensures that most such relationships end tragically. Bujold’s plot tension comes largely from the efforts to bridge this gap. It’s tempting to describe Farmers as “conservative”—in a lot of ways they look like an analog of nineteenth century American farm communities—but in fact the Lakewalkers are every bit as conservative, and her Lakewalker hero and Farmer heroine are welcome as a couple in neither culture. Instead they have to create their own form for a lasting relationship through their own personal choices.

In a sense, the Lakewalker conservatism is aristocratic, emphasizing bloodlines and the sense of tradition and duty. But they’re a peculiar sort of aristocrats: noble men and women who don’t rule, or command armies of Farmer conscripts, or collect rents or taxes. They do consider the Farmer communities to be their own creation, part of their effort to reclaim ground blighted by malices, but rather than owning or controlling these communities, they leave them to grow by themselves, gaining benefits from them partly through voluntary trade, and partly from gifts made by Farmers they’ve saved from supernatural attacks. This seems like an idealized image of noble lineages, if an interesting one for libertarians, but at the same time it fits the hunter/gatherer lifestyle Bujold portrays. And, of course, a hero from a noble lineage falling in love with a commoner heroine is one of the classic plotlines of romance, going back at least to *Jane Eyre*.

There are some interesting speculative elements and themes in this story—along with supernatural horror, eroticism, and humor. It seems clear that Bujold has wanted to write in this style for a long time, from the tendencies of the later Vorkosigan and Chalion books; in this story she’s felt free to do so.

—*Turtledove review, continued from page 3*

board game of railroad building, set in 19th century Europe, where he can take on the role of a capitalist struggling to build the most extensive rail system and earn the money to support it—a game that can only be bought at one unusual store. Of course, it's only fantasy; no one would really want to bring back capitalism, or to be a capitalist. . . .

The other viewpoint character, a slightly older girl, is a much more successful and motivated student, and an active member of the Young Socialists' League—and, despite that, a bit of an idealist. So when she learns at a meeting that there's a proposal to denounce the game store, she wants to look into it for herself and find out if it's really dangerous or subversive, rather than condemning it without evidence. And she happens to know someone who goes there regularly. . . .

This sets Turtledove up for an ingenious plot, where his young characters have to take action that's meaningful in adult terms. Turtledove shows that meaning without ever getting preachy; he conveys the value of independent thought, of freedom of choice, and of loyalty, primarily by showing what sort of people find them attractive and what sort of people fear or hate them. And if the message isn't hard-core libertarianism—Turtledove seems to accept European-style interventionism as a valid alternative form of "capitalism"—there's still a clear sense that markets have room for those virtues, and that command economies don't: the kind of very basic contrast that could be drawn between West and East Germany, before the fall of the Soviet empire. Just before the fall of the Soviet Union, its theoreticians were starting to describe the way things really worked under communism as "actually existing socialism"; Turtledove shows a fictionalized version of actually existing socialism and invites the same conclusion that those Soviet Marxists reached in the real world, that "actually existing capitalism" is preferable. And he does so in the course of an entertaining and tightly written story with sympathetic characters. I've enjoyed all of his Crosstime Traffic books; this one I particularly recommend to fellow LFS members.

Beyond Future Shock

By Alex Alaniz, Ph.D.

Booksurge, 2005

Reviewed by Anders Monsen

Beyond Future Shock spans more than a hundred years in time, from the final days of WWI to the mid-21st century, with a brief epilogue 7,000 years later. Yet it is the first 100 years of the narrative that sees the greatest technological leap in mankind's history, and convincingly portrays both the scientific and the human aspects of life and change during these times. The main characters are a trio of kids who embrace the opportunities in an elite German high school, in the dawning of the Nazi age. While only one of these characters embraces Nazism (with grave irony given that character's ancestry, which no one save the reader ever discovers), the other two never feel the pull of this political system, and instead face terrible tragedies throughout their lives as a result.

Initially drawn together into a "three musketeers" kind of team as nine-to twelve-year-olds, they come from disparate backgrounds. Heinrich von Onsager is a young aristocrat, his pilot father killed on the second to last day of the first world war. Lise Reber is a young girl drawn to science, especially quantum mechanics. Hans Fritz, the third and youngest, a brilliant mathematician with a father who despises him, embarks on a dark journey to prove his father wrong, in the end destroying the friendship that at first saved him at school.

Alex Alaniz appears to have both a love of science and flying, and skillfully conveys that sense on paper. His characters are real, and there is little or no poetic justice in the novel. Instead, events unfold in all too crushing realism, and only brief moments of happiness for some of the characters. Much of the meat of this novel takes place between 1930 and 1945, as the three children grow into adults and seek their place in the world. Alaniz draws very sympathetic and memorable characters whose lives one cares about, and seeing the tragedies unfold at times makes for difficult reading.

As Heinrich discovers his own love of flying at the school, and falls in love with Lise, young Hans seeks a surrogate to his brutal father, and finds the SS. His soul twists into something dark and bitter, and in the end he betrays his former friends. As their world spirals into a new war, Heinrich and Lise are torn apart, not to be re-united for many decades. For as the war ends, Heinrich becomes part of an American flight testing program, while Lise is taken against her will to help the Soviet nuclear program. As the years fly by we see personal and technological change, witnessing even more tragedy for both characters. As they age into the new century, kept alive by nascent regenerative cocktails, the two former lovers find each other again, only to battle anew the dual threats of age and terror.

For as technology brings tremendous advantages, there always seems to be dark designs and devices that accompany

—*Continued on page 7*

Classifieds

The (Libertarian) Connection, open-forum since 1968. Subscribers may insert four pages/issue free, unedited. **Factsheet Five** said, "Lively interchange of point, counterpoint and comments". Eight/year, \$20. Strauss,

An Interview with Jim Lesczynski

By Rick Triplett

Rick Triplett: Science fiction author and libertarian L. Neil Smith describes your book, as the best in a quarter century. Leaving your book aside for the moment, what books have influenced you?

Jim Lesczynski: I guess Neil and I have a mutual admiration society, because many of his books are favorites of mine both for reading pleasure and polemics. My favorite Smith novels are *The Probability Broach*, *Pallas*, and *Forge of the Elders*. They're really well written, entertaining as hell, and have important messages. I'm also a big fan of Vin Suprynowicz's two nonfiction collections and *The Black Arrow*.

Libertarians are great at writing essays, articles and academic treatises, but with a few notable exceptions we're far behind in the pop culture race. I especially wanted to write something that would be accessible to "kids" in their formative years, which I thought *Pallas* did quite well. *Atlas Shrugged* is great, but most people are adults by the time they read it, and by then we have to undo all those years of socialist propaganda. I wanted to get them on the pro-freedom track before it was too late.

Other books that were a big influence on me were anything by Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut or Hunter Thompson. I always had a very strong anti-authoritarian streak, long before I knew what a libertarian was. As a kid I absolutely loved *Mad Magazine*, but kids today don't read it much, as far as I can tell. I think that basic disrespect for authority and sacred cows is about as important a value as we can possibly teach children.

RT: How would you characterize what you do in your work as a libertarian activist?

JL: I've been called by a NYC radio reporter "the Abbie Hoffman of the libertarians," and that's probably a good analogy. I'm a guerrilla activist, and I specialize in humorous stunts and street theater that make a political point. I'm probably most notorious for organizing "Guns for Tots," which was a mock toy drive where we collected toy guns and gave them to poor kids in Harlem to protest NYC's proposed toy gun ban. That got me international coverage, including two appearances on the Daily Show and several appearances on CNN. Another time I caused a small riot when I gave away free cigarettes to protest the city's tobacco tax hike. I also organized an "Unauthorized Protest" in Central Park of the Republican National Convention after Mayor Bloomberg scared off the big anti-war groups by denying them "permission to protest" in the park. And I hired a witch to put a curse on the proposed site of a taxpayer-funded football stadium. I find that having fun with political activism is the best way to be effective.

RT: Your book seems to be offered as a "juvenile"; yet, like the Heinlein juveniles, it presents several complicated ideas so clearly that I readily recommend it to adults. Did you have a target audience in mind?

JL: I definitely had a pre-teen audience in mind, although I also wanted it to be something that adults would enjoy as well. Heinlein's and Smith's juveniles were both inspirations for that, as well as the Harry Potter books. (I should also mention that I think the Harry Potter books, while not explicitly libertarian, have a generally pro-freedom/anti-authority tilt, especially *Order of the Phoenix* and *Deathly Hallows*.)

RT: I've read a lot of bad first novels, and yours is head and shoulders above them. Have you had any training or experience in writing fiction?

JL: My undergraduate degree was in Creative Writing, and I wrote a lot of short fiction during and after college, although I rarely published any of it. In my 20's, I wrote about 400 pages of a completely different novel before deciding it was crap and abandoning it. Writing fiction is a good break from being a corporate shill.

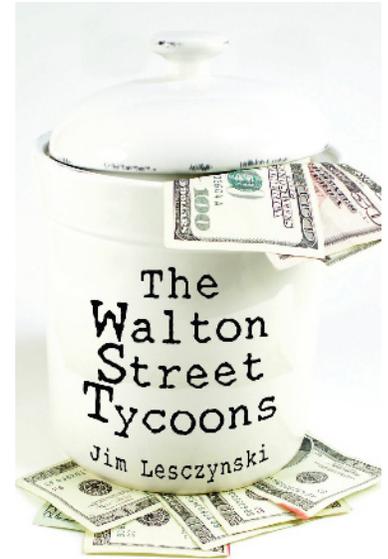
RT: What do you do for a living? How would you describe your daily life?

JL: I earn my living as a marketing manager for a financial services company. My daily life is relatively sedate, I think. I live in Manhattan and commute to work by subway. I've always been of the "work to live, not live to work" philosophy, so I usually try to get home in time to have dinner with my family and play with my kids before their bedtime. When I'm not at work or at home, I'm most often at some libertarian event or political activity.

RT: I'm assuming you either have kids or have worked with them a lot, since you portray them so well.

JL: I have three kids, but my oldest is now five, so my experiences with them didn't really help much in writing the book. I just promised myself when I was young that I would always remember that kids aren't the idiots many adults assume they are.

RT: I assigned your book to some of my students, and one of them asked whether a game played in the book, "Smear the Queer," indicated author prejudice. I said that this is the way kids talk, and that it is easy for them to echo prejudices they are too young to understand. Do you have any comment on this?



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JL: “Smear the Queer” (a.k.a. “Kill the Carrier”) was an actual game we played on my elementary school playground. That part wasn’t really meant as any sort of big message, other than to show that the protagonists are thoroughly politically incorrect.

RT: You have chosen to publish a book of fiction. Why is this? What role do you see fiction playing in forming the future?

JL: I think fiction is where big ideas are popularized and gain broad acceptance. We’ll always need intellectuals and polemicists to lay the theoretical groundwork of the movement, but we need novelists, screenwriters, and lyricists to get those ideas into the popular culture. The abolitionist movement made slow but steady progress over generations through pamphleteering, but it was the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that provided the tipping point.

RT: What do you think distinguishes your novel from other pro-freedom fiction?

JL: There are a lot of great novels that do a wonderful, terrifying job of showing the horrors of government. I love *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*, and I’m a huge fan of modern pro-freedom classics like *Unintended Consequences* and *The Black Arrow*. We do a great job of portraying the future dystopia of totalitarianism. However, there are very few novels that take the alternate approach of portraying “a future worth fight-

ing for,” as Smith describes his own work. That’s what makes Smith’s best work truly important, in my opinion, and it’s what I tried to accomplish with *The Walton Street Tycoons*. Of course, Smith’s work is pure science fiction, whereas my novel is not. There are a lot of people who just won’t read science fiction, for whatever reason, so I think it’s important to create these “libertarian utopias” in other genres.

RT: Do you think the libertarian “movement” is losing ground or making advances? What do you think is the most important thing that liberty-minded individuals can do to improve our future?

JL: I think the intellectual movement itself is advancing slowly or perhaps even in neutral, but nevertheless I remain optimistic about the future of freedom. I think the most important thing that liberty-minded individuals can do to improve our future is something that seems to come naturally, which is to embrace the technology that is making government more irrelevant every day. Technology is empowering individuals to create their own decentralized media and their own unregulated, untaxed marketplaces. The former is accelerating the dissemination of pro-freedom ideas, and the latter is making government regulation obsolete. I think Wikipedia, Craigslist and their successors will do more to bring about freedom than any politician.

RT: Thank you for taking the time to share your ideas with readers of *Prometheus*!

JL: It was my pleasure.

—*Beyond Future Shock* review, continued from page 4

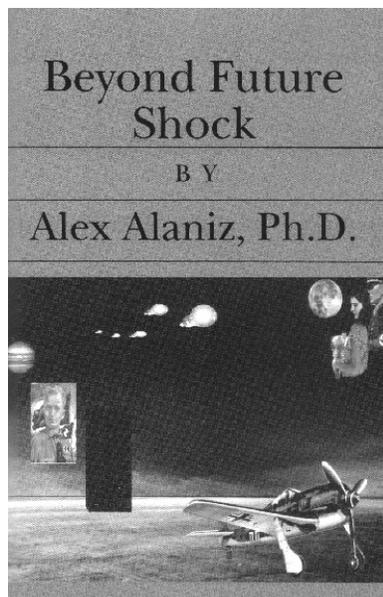
any great scientific breakthroughs. As humanity accelerates toward the Singularity, people merge with technology and rely on massive server farms to store backups. Just as zombie computers are hijacked to send spam, soon people are hijacked for similar purposes, and Heinrich and Lise look to the skies to escape Earth. But such an escape is far from easy, and the battle for resources follows them to the moon and beyond.

The prose may not always be as smooth and polished as I like, but the story certainly kept me captivated. Alaniz blends both captivating prose that moves events along with several expository pauses, or hints about future events that sometimes tears the reader away from the fact that the book is supposed to be a work of fiction. Sometimes the historical break-points succeed, such as with the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany, which brought to mind the many horrific scenes from such movies as *Schindler’s List*. Sometimes these fail, as in the aftermath of 9/11, when Baron von Onsager

rails against American dependence on foreign oil and vows to find a solution.

Beyond Future Shock grapples with the political and scientific ideas and issues of the 20th century, and far beyond, in entertaining and thoughtful ways. Occasional narrative intrusions hobble the book slightly as a pure work of fiction. It raises many key points about humanity’s past and possible future, and the motivations of individuals who commit evil acts. The book does not shy away from the fact that people change over time, and fast friends can change both instantly and over time into dire enemies. The scene in the Soviet gulag where Heinrich’s good friend slowly is molded into a staunch communist willing and able to murder small children for his cause is quite chilling.

The book appears to have been published by a small press in 2005, but is available via Amazon.com. Alaniz conveys a strong sense of belief in humanity and individuality, and this book is both an accusation of the horrors of collectivism (from the human kind as well as a possible future technological one), and the sense that the human spirit needs to be free, and that it always needs to seek new heights.



Prometheus Awards 2007—Live from Yokohama

By Fred Curtis Moulton

Nippon2007, the 65th World Science Fiction Convention was held in Yokohama from August 30th-September 3rd. This was the first occasion that the Worldcon was held in Japan and one of the relatively few occasions when it has been held in a country where English is not the primary language.

Yokohama is a wonderful city and due to its historical role as a port it is very cosmopolitan. For example it has a large Chinatown district. I found a small curry shop that served a quick and tasty beef curry when I was in a hurry for lunch. The subway system is clean and runs well. The subway ticket machines have a button which changes the display to English. Not all of the taxi drivers understand English, but if you have a map it is easy to point to your desired destination.

The main function space for the convention was the Pacifico Yokohama Convention Center with the Art Show and Dealers Area and other exhibits in the Exhibit Hall across the street. The Convention Center, Exhibit Hall and a shopping area were all connected by a walkway above street level. The subway stop had a direct connection into the shopping mall. The area around the Convention Center was new and had a much different feel than the older parts of Yokohama. The older parts of Yokohama had many narrow streets with small interesting restaurants and the ease of transportation by subway, taxi, or walking allowed both areas to be experienced.

The Japan National SF Convention was held in conjunction with Nippon2007. Any long running convention tends to develop traditions and the Japan National SF Convention and the Worldcon are no exceptions. For the most part there

was not a major conflict however there was not total integration in part due to language and culture and in part due to time. There are just not enough hours in the day to do a lot of integration.

Several people commented on the Opening Ceremonies running long due to the translation; it did not seem to be an issue to me. George Takei served as Master of Ceremonies for the Hugo Awards. Some convention panels were in English only, some in Japanese only and others had some level of translation. The dealers room had some books in Japanese and a few in English but was much smaller than would be expected in the USA. The Art Show was also much smaller. I suspect that much of this was due to the problems related to shipping items overseas.

The LFS Prometheus Awards ceremony was held on Friday and Charles Stross was present to accept his Prometheus Award for Best Novel for *Glasshouse* and to give a very fine acceptance speech discussing the novel, its themes, and how it came to be written. Attendance was lower than typical and was not a surprise since the overall con attendance was lower than usual. The final count has not been certified but appears to be less than 3,000 attending.

Overall Nippon2007 was an interesting experience. The non-Japanese fans that I spoke with appreciated the efforts to make everyone feel welcome and while there were the usual bumps that occur with any large event, I would judge the Nippon2007 as fun and exceeding expectations.

Sinclair Lewis Society accepts Hall of Fame

On behalf of the Sinclair Lewis Society, I would like to thank the Libertarian Futurist Society for recognizing the searing social critique of Sinclair Lewis in his 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*.

Lewis wrote this novel in a white heat, in about six weeks, according to his biographer Mark Schorer, because he was so concerned about the growth of fascism both in the United States and throughout the world. It is an Orwellian-type world that Lewis created as military leaders assure the public that increasing the military will result in peace and that getting rid of labor unions, immigrants, and malcontents will lead to a more democratic nation.

Although Lewis's novel focuses on American society and its imperfections, the flaws that he reveals can apply to many different countries where citizens look to others to make their country better. Paradoxically his criticisms were a mixture of love and disgust; love of his country and the people within it, and disgust at the way in which the greedy and ignorant pervert democratic ideals. The journalist Dorothy Thompson called

him "a disappointed democrat" because he truly believed in democratic ideals but despaired that people were too lazy to live up to them.

In some ways I'm sorry that the novel is receiving this recognition. The fact that Lewis's ideas about a dystopian world where fascism can grow in a supposedly democratic country because of the indifference, greed, and fears of the populace can still be as pertinent today as it was over 70 years ago is very troubling. Although the novel with its Minute Men and League of Forgotten Men is part of a very distinct time and place, Lewis's more general observations about how easy it is for a country to slide into fascism still ring true. His warnings to people everywhere that to be a good citizen is to take on an active not a passive role is still vitally important.

Novels like *It Can't Happen Here* need be read and reread and taught to others so that the dystopian nightmare that Sinclair Lewis writes of can no longer happen.

—Sally Parry for the Sinclair Lewis Society

Charles Stross: Individuality, obedience, and atrocity

I'd like to start by saying that Ken MacLeod is very sorry he couldn't be here to accept the award for the novel he didn't write this year. So he sent me instead, just to continue the tradition of Scottish socialist excellence in libertarian science fiction. Having said that, I was slightly surprised to win the award. Having seen the long list of nominees I am very surprised to win this award, because there is some excellent fiction on the list.

I think though in retrospect I can see why *Glasshouse* was of interest to the Libertarian Futurist Society, because while the politics in it is implicit rather than explicit, the focus of the novel is very much on issues of individual responsibility and identity, and how to behave in a coercive society.

One of the things that has fascinated me for some time is the study of human psychology, and in particular human obedience. What makes people behave in social contexts and carry out atrocities, or actions of great evil. For a long time we tended to believe, historically, that you can explain evil acts by assuming that the perpetrators of the acts were themselves evil. However, the first cracks in the wall, in the belief in absolute evil and the evil of evil-doers—I'm sounding like George Bush here—began probably in the 1940s, when there was an increasing recognition that many of the people who had been complicit in the worst crimes of the Nazis, for example, were in fact perfectly ordinary people who had somehow become trapped in a spiral of very extra-ordinary violence.

I'd like to mention the work of a pioneering experimental psychologist, Professor Stanley Milgram, who in the late 1950s and early 1960s conducted some experiments, which have been verified since then; they have been repeated but can no longer actually be carried out ethically. Stanley Milgram wanted to investigate whether or not you can make perfectly ordinary people commit atrocities. He came up with an interesting mechanism for testing this. The way Milgram's experiment worked, if I can just give a brief run-down of it, was you take people off the street and tell them, "We're going to pay you \$25 to participate in a psychology experiment." They're introduced to the experimenter who's wearing a white coat and carrying a clipboard, and is very much an authority figure. They're ushered into a room where there's an imposing piece of machinery with a button and dial, and there's a screen with a room behind it.

The experimenter explains to the subject, "In that room there's a fellow we're conducting an experiment on. We're going to ask him a series of questions, and when he gets them wrong, we want you to push this button which will administer an electric shock. We're experimenting on human motivation. As we turn this dial up, the severity of the shock will increase."

Now, what was actually happening here, is that a situation has been set up. The person on the other side of the screen is not being given an electric shock but is in fact an actor who is feigning pain. They're being asked some questions and they're



Charles Stross (left) and Programming Chair Fred Curtis Moulton, with the Prometheus Award that Stross won for Best Novel for *Glasshouse*.

getting some of them wrong. Each time they get one wrong, the voltage on the apparatus, the alleged voltage on the apparatus, is increased. Their screams and protests increase as well. The purpose of the experiment was to find out at what point these ordinary people, these men off the street, who have come in to do the job, will start to protest and complain to the experimenter: "You know, you're hurting this man. You can't do this."

The scariest finding of all, was that perhaps 35 to 40 percent of the people they ushered in off the street would continue to administer electric shocks in accordance with the instructions of the experimenter, to a point where they were told that it was dangerous or possibly fatal to the victim, the actor. Even more interestingly, the only correlation they found in this, was that the more educated the experimental subjects, Harvard undergraduates, were more likely to continue obeying the instructor, than ordinary working class men.

So, the first thing, the very important lesson that Milgram deduced, was that people will tend to obey instructions from authority figures, even when these instructions are quite manifestly wrong; making them do something that is quite bad; inflicting pain on another person, for no obviously apparent gain.

But, while Stanley Milgram's experiment goes some way to explaining how you can co-opt ordinary people into behaving in evil ways, there are some even more powerful and scary social psychology experiments. One of the other ones I've been quite fascinated with, which fed into the writing of the book,

—Continued on page 10

—*Charles Stross, continued from page 9*

Glasshouse, was conducted by Professor Philip Zimbardo, of Stanford University. He's an eminent psychology professor, and I believe he was lately called in to testify as an expert witness in the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse trials, in the States. Now, he conducted an experiment in the early 1970s, which was cancelled two days in—it was terminated—of a five-day run. More recently, a British television documentary attempted to replicate the experiment. Their ethics oversight, again, had to cancel it after just two days. It's a very disturbing experiment, because what it indicates is not only that people will obey instructions to commit bestial acts, but certain types of social organizations are actually toxic. That people placed in certain situations will behave increasingly abusively. Not necessarily because they are evil, but because their understanding of the situation they're in leads them to believe in certain ways, from which abuse emerges.

Now the Stanford prison study was an interesting one. Zimbardo was interested in investigating how conditions of abuse arise in prisons. So he set up a small prison with video cameras monitoring what was going on. They then picked up a bunch of volunteers, students who'd volunteered to spend two weeks living in a psychology experiment. His volunteers were randomized into two groups. One group were rounded up by police, arrested, given a prison uniform and then placed into cells. Another group—and I stress, these men were assigned to these group purely by random—were taken into the police station, issued with mirrored sunglasses and uniforms, and told they were prison guards. The striking and frightening thing about this particular experiment, where the guards were set to guard the prisoners, is that some of the worst patterns of abuse of prisoners by prison guards that are observed in real world prisons, began to emerge within 24 hours in a psychology experiment.

The experiment was terminated when Zimbardo's wife, who was another faculty member took one look at what was going on and said, "This is illegal. You could be charged with assault for this." There were some questions of serious psychological damage to the prisoners. It turns out that certain types of social organization, particularly the prisoner one, where you have the paradigm of guards with authority and prisoners who have been deprived of individuality—they were identified only by numbers, then had been deprived of privacy—this sort of power-relationship imposes behavioral constraints on human beings that drive them very strongly to behave in certain ways.

Now I began looking at this and thinking, to what extent is our behavior actually a product, not of our intentions or desires, but merely of the society we find ourselves in. So that was one of the germs of the novel, *Glasshouse*. Another—I

think I can confess at this point to being a science fiction fan, would anyone be surprised? In particular I am a fan of the American author, John Varley. I've been waiting with some interest for a novel of his, *Steel Town Blues*, which had been pre-announced sort of seven years earlier to come out. And, in 2003, much to my disappointment, his newest science fiction novel, *Red Thunder*, emerged. Rather than being the novel I had been hoping for and expecting for seven years, it was a Heinlein juvenile. Now it was admittedly a good Heinlein juvenile, but it wasn't a John Varley novel.

So I decided, "Damn it, I'm going to write a John Varley novel." One of his tropes is societies in which biological engineering and technology are so advanced that people's physical morphologies change. You can decide to go and have a sex-change over the weekend because you got bored being a man or a woman and wanted to try out the other side for a bit. Or, two arms? Not enough. I need another two arms. Go to the body shop and buy some extra arms. His works, the Eight World novels, are set in a universe sufficiently far enough away from ours, a few hundred years in the future, that this is unexceptional. That the sense of physical identity

and consistency that we have—you know, we are born into a given body and we live through it and we age and we die, but we don't change sex or skin color, or number of arms in which this fluidity of identity has been normalized in Varley's work. And I decided, if you have a universe like

this in which people are what they want to be, rather than what they are born as, what happens if you start imposing constraints along the lines of Zimbardo's prison study?

In fact, the original crude idea for what I was going to write in *Glasshouse*, was: take the Stanford prison study protocol, and apply it to gender roles, to relationships between the sexes. You take a bunch of post-humans and randomize their identity as men and women in a bizarre parody of 20th century middle America. As one friend of mine put it, "you invented *Desperate Housewives* meets *The Prisoner* in deep space."

Along the way, various other things began to occur to me. I'd sort of inverted the Stanford prison study protocol, and the idea of determinism in social relationships and how our societies affect our behavior. I'd come up with a society in which identity is somewhat fluid, and this society was emerging from a very bloody civil war. Because once you have fluidity of shape and of memory and identity, you come up with the potential for entirely new types of tyranny.

Human history so far has one very consistent constant, which is that tyranny stops at your nose. A dictator or tyrant or king can make people say things in public and do things in public but they can't affect what their subjects think about them. One of the things in *Glasshouse* is that if you contemplate

—*Continued on page 13*

Radio Freefall

By Matt Jarpe

Tor, 2007, \$24.95

Reviewed by Anders Monsen

If Bill Gates decided that having become the world's richest man from selling software was not really enough, and instead decided he wanted to take over the world, his role-model would be Walter Cheeseman, the villain in Matt Jarpe's entertaining debut novel, *Radio Freefall*. Cheeseman, head of a major computing corporation, is also the brains and driving force behind the idea of Unification, the worldwide movement to snuff out individual countries under a One World scenario. Although the novel discusses the unfolding of Unification, as well as the Nationalist opposition—whose slogan of “A world without borders is a world without choice. Celebrate diversity,” makes for an interesting idea that libertarians possibly would at first object to, as a consistent libertarian sees the concept of borders as one imposed by government, until one realizes what they are up against—but the driving force of *Radio Freefall* is the individual.

Set in the early 2030s, with a strong retro-cyberpunk feel, and with a decidedly musical bent, Jarpe strings together a story that's damn near impossible to put down once started, and it all comes down to the characters. In particular, the novel is more about two protagonists whose fates become quite entwined. One is a musician and rebel and social engineer of almost scary heights. The other is a technical wizard who had a falling out with Cheeseman over the idea that somewhere in the cyberspace is an intelligent, emergent AI with powers beyond comprehension and reach. Considering the dependent state in which humans find themselves to electronic networks in the 2030s this equivalent to an electronic despot with a mad sense of humor.

The musician in question emerges from the desert near Las Vegas carrying a guitar case and some technical know-how. There he virtually creates a band out of nothing, a disparate group of perpetually stoned, paranoid prima-donna lounge act members. Going under the pseudonym, Aqualung, he propels the group called the Snake Vendors into worldwide fame using a mood-enhancing concert device that enables him to play the crowd almost like an instrument. People flock to hear the new sound and experience the almost drug-like sensation from this device.

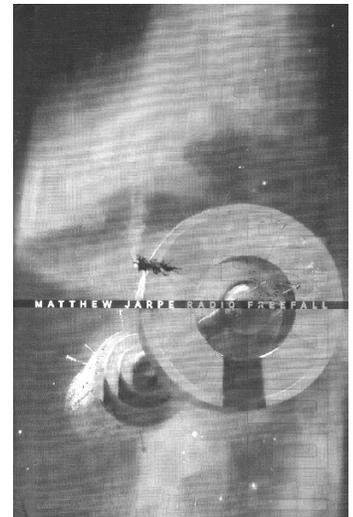
The idea of a rock 'n roll sf novel seems quite unique these days, although punk sensibility is what the young sf guns picked up and ran with in the early 1980s. By adopting the cool looks of mirrorshades and leather-jackets the cyberpunk writers and fans seemed to say, “There's more to this sf stuff than just the writing.” You don't detect any 'tude in *Radio Freefall*. Rather, the music generally harkens back to a distant age, say late 1960s, early 70s. Aqualung is basically a middle-aged guy trying to resurface after decades of hiding his real identity, which played a major role in creating the program

that replicated and birthed itself as a world wide virus, aka the Digital Carnivore. This program renders secrets and proprietary information on the web impossible, and worries quite a few people. Meanwhile AIs, who in this universe work and act just like real people, view the Digital Carnivore as a god, though there are people out there with other views.

One of these is Quin Taber, a brilliant computer programmer who once worked for Cheeseman, but after a dispute quit to form his own company. Taber is obsessed with the Digital Carnivore. He also has his own major illegal secret. He has smuggled the creation of a very special AI, one tethered only to him. Taber uses her unwavering devotion and calculating powers to track down the creator of the Digital Carnivore, and forges an uneasy truce with Aqualung.

As Taber closes in on the Digital Carnivore, his actions attract the interests of Cheeseman, who's always alert for unusual currents in the technological world. The fame of the Snake Vendors rockets Aqualung into the forefront, revealing old enemies, and sending him on the run. Seeking to find anonymity on the Moon, he lands instead on *Freefall*, an orbital station funded by Big Pharma, which has since grown to a near independent entity. Cheeseman, with the weight of almost the entire world's governmental force, sees the key to independence from the Digital Carnivore in Aqualung, and moves swiftly. Will independence prevail? And what of the near slave-like conditions for Taber's illegal and immoral AI?

Radio Freefall highlights the self-destructive behavior of many musicians who seek solace in drugs. The meat-grinder like pace of touring is famous for its excesses (sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll, as the saying goes). Few of the members of the Snake Vendors emerge unscathed. Yet the music is only part of the story. The idea of AIs emerging from smaller computer programs is an old one (see *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*). Jarpe bypasses the old question as to whether AIs have rights, and flatly assumes this, giving the case with a tethered AI an uneasy ethical dilemma. Despite the odd lack of technological change (Taber downloading songs from the net *a la* iTunes; the near-identical function of the internet 20 years in the future, whereas 20 years ago it was a radical concept), Jarpe's future is a complex place. The novel also blends light-hearted humor, and I found the mystery behind the origin of the vast intelligent virus quite compelling. Along with the political discussions of Unification, and the last stand statements of the lunar and orbital locales, I thoroughly enjoyed the book from beginning to end.



Babylon 5 The Lost Tales: Voices in the Dark

Created, written, and directed by J. Michael Straczynski
Warner Brothers, 2007

Starring Bruce Boxleitner, Tracy Scoggins, Peter Woodward

Reviewed by David Wayland

Babylon 5, a TV series that ran from 1994 through 1998, was unique in many ways, yet in the end suffered the same fate as several other good science fiction TV shows (studio pressures, season-to-season uncertainties, and the like). Unlike a show like *Firefly*, however, *B5* managed to fulfill the plan of creator J. Michael Straczynski, which was to present a visual novel spanning five years with a series of story arcs, strong character development, and a vivid future world showing the perpetual battle between good and evil, order and chaos, love and indifference. Set in the years 2258 through 2262, with 110 regular season episodes and several stand-alones of tie-in made-for-TV movies, the *B5* universe holds many attractions for libertarian sf fans; whether by accident or design, small statements like this appear from time to time.

No dictator, no invader, can hold an imprisoned population by the force of arms forever. There is no greater power in the universe than the need for freedom. Against that power governments and tyrants, and armies cannot stand. —G'Kar

Although *Babylon 5* went off the air nine years ago, plans to bring back characters from the universe have been attempted several times, and largely failed. However, in July 2007 Straczynski released a direct to DVD episode, the first in a planned anthology series, under the rubric, *Babylon 5 The Lost Tales*. Volume one is entitled *Voices in the Dark*, and re-united several characters from the show, including Bruce Boxleitner, the main character in seasons 2-4. With a running time of slightly over an hour, *Voices in the Dark* is the first of a proposed set of anthology stories, each disc containing two tales.

The first of these tales is set onboard the *Babylon 5* station, nine years after the show ended (in reality as well as fiction), in the year 2271. The station commander is still Elizabeth Lochley, promoted from Captain to Colonel, and looking somewhat older and more fatigued. It is a rather slow-moving and sparse episode, dealing with a station employee who appears to have been possessed by some malevolent entity after returning from a trip to Earth. Lochley requests the services of a priest (Roman Catholic, apparently) to perform an exorcism.

Straczynski has never been shy about including religious elements in the *B5* universe, and this episode is a meditation on faith and doubt. The priest who questions the possessing spirit is caught in a dilemma, as leaving the demon inside the man will send billions back to the pews, at the cost of the man's soul.

As a starting point for the return to *Babylon 5*, the first episode is curious at best. There are few hints of it taking place on the station, which seems quite unpopulated. The sets are minimal, and maybe five to seven different characters appear, not all of whom have speaking parts. In a pivotal scene in which Lochley and the priest walk in a chilled and noisome area near the possessed man, a Minbari walks casually by; this seems odd given the strongly religious attitudes of the Minbari people.

Whereas the first half fails utterly to create any interest, the second part is far stronger, perhaps due to the familiarity in character and tone. President Sheridan is returning to *B5*, on the 10th anniversary of the Interstellar Alliance, but must pick up a young Centari prince, third in line to the throne. Complications arise when the technomage Galen appears to Sheridan and foretells that this prince will one day ascend to the throne and start a destructive war that kills billions on Earth. Galen tells Sheridan that he must kill the prince to prevent this future, a task Sheridan finds himself reluctant to accept, but agrees it must be done. The final decision and aftermath takes a typical Sheridan turn, where he takes control of the situation. His decision leaves open many possibilities, and I'd like to see that story explored further. Although the number of characters also was relatively small in this episode, the sets were more impressive, the story tighter, and the outcome far more interesting than the debate over why a fallen angel waited a considerable number of years before hitchhiking off Earth, and why the *Babylon 5* station was the only place it could leap back into the heavens.

There are tributes on the disc to Andreas Katsulas and Richard Biggs, who played G'Kar and Dr. Franklin, respectively. Both died a few years ago, and in the episodes they are mentioned as having gone exploring "beyond the rim." Future episodes, if filmed and released, are rumored to feature some of the other characters, such as Lando Molari and Michael Garibaldi. The *B5* universe is vast, and hopefully these episodes will continue. Direct-to-DVD does bypass certain network programming rules, but also lacks the budget that allows a richer cast of characters. There's ample room for at least a dozen of these stories, if only to give us a better sense of closure.



Vernor Vinge on Hall of Fame

"The Prometheus Hall of Fame contains many wonderful and wonderfully important stories. This year, several of my all-time favorites are on the ballot. It's a special honor to be recognized in such company."

—Vernor Vinge

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

By J. K. Rowling

Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007

Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

J. K. Rowling's fifth book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, was a finalist for the 2004 Prometheus Award. I didn't vote for it. It had an all too convincing portrait of the abuses of authority; but its apparent cure for those abuses was to have the head of the Ministry of Magic realize his errors and make things better. There was no suggestion that a ministry that could abuse its authority that way had too much power to begin with, or that the problem wouldn't really be solved until that power was taken away. So, all things considered, I didn't find enough libertarian substance to the story.

Now, with the seventh and last novel available, it's possible to judge the series as a whole, and to see past novels in the context of the entire series. And while Rowling still doesn't show us a systematic reform of the entire Ministry of Magic, or a declaration of the rights of wizards, she offers some content that will be of interest to libertarians.

To start with, *Deathly Hallows* shows that the changes at the end of *Order of the Phoenix* did not solve the Ministry's problems, and that Rowling never intended them to. The Ministry now has a new man at the top, and an even worse one, whose principal goal appears to be enlisting Harry Potter in a propaganda campaign to reassure the public. And in the course of this novel's events, the Ministry proves a ready tool for outright totalitarians. Harry and his friends become the key figures in an underground resistance movement.

Equally important is the ideology put forth by the oppressors. It starts out from the distinction between mages and nonmages, or "muggles," which I found disturbing when I read the first book in the series; in this book, it's completely clear that Rowling meant it to be disturbing. Here we see it claimed that only the children of mages have true magical

ability, and that children of muggles—"mudbloods"—gained their apparent magical ability by stealing it from *real* mages. From this the Ministry of Magic concludes that they have no right to magic and must be punished for the theft—and that as part of this, they must be forced to confess to stealing their magical powers, in a process much like Stalin's show trials. The claimed theft is oddly parallel to the idea that wealthy people gained their wealth by stealing it from the working class, which invites a reading of the Ministry's ideology as a variant of socialism. It's worth remembering Karl Marx's comment that anti-Semitism was the socialism of the ignorant, in which people who resented wealth and capitalism focused their feelings on a distinct racial group. In Rowling's story, "mudbloods" become the focus of a campaign of racial hatred.

It's also worth noting that Rowling has continued to develop as a writer. In this novel, she takes some real chances, starting with not sending Harry and his two closest friends back to Hogwarts at all. This is no longer a "school story," but a story about adult concerns. Past novels have shown the deaths of a few characters—notably Cedric Digory, Sirius Black, and Albus Dumbledore—but this final novel shows multiple deaths, as part of the struggle against magical tyranny.

I wouldn't call it an entire success. The long sequence in the middle that Harry spends in hiding could have been shorter; reading it feels like reading the part of *The Lord of the Rings* where Frodo, Sam, and Gollum travel through Mordor, except that it goes on much longer. And the novel is complicated by having not one set of plot tokens, but two: the seven horcruxes in which Lord Voldemort implanted parts of his soul, which must be destroyed to defeat him, and the three deathly hallows that are needed for the final battle. Readers may find all this a bit much to keep track of. But it shows us a struggle with some real substance, and it casts a revealing new light on the events of the earlier novels. For both reasons, it's worth reading.

—Charles Stross, *continued from page 10*

the possibility of editing people's memory, you bring about the potential for a cognitive dictatorship, one in which people's memories can be forcibly edited by the government. And that has a lot of very, very unpleasant side effects.

In *Glasshouse* the polity that has emerged after a very bloody civil war, they know they have won the war, but they're not sure why the war was fought in the first place. All they know is that somebody really wanted to censor something from their history so that nobody knew what it was. And to that extent it appears to have been successful. Our protagonist has been injected into effectively a rehabilitation center or prison camp for war criminals, and ultimately it's a hall of mirrors. We are not sure whether our protagonist, Robin, is actually a war criminal, or an investigator looking into what is happening inside the rehabilitation center. All we know is that

Robin committed terrible acts before the novel begins, and at the end becomes somewhat reconciled to them. Because another side effect of being able to edit our morphology and our memories, is we can ultimately regain some aspect of control of our role in society.

If society dictates to some extent what we do, and if our position in society constrains our behavior, if you then add the ability to change our physical form and our identity, you can also change the niche into which you slot. So there is to some extent a trade-off here, and I was trying to, I guess, get to grips with the interplay between identity and responsibility in a social context in this book. At this point I'm beginning to run out of things to say about it, except thank you very much indeed for the Prometheus Award, and I'm, well, deeply flattered and somewhat taken aback.

Thank you very much indeed.

Transformers: The Movie

DreamWorks SKG, 2007

Directed by Michael Bay

Screenplay by Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman

Starring Shia LaBeouf, Megan Fox, Josh Duhamel

Transformers: The Novel

By Alan Dean Foster

Ballantine/Del Rey, 2007, \$7.99

Reviewed by Geoffrey Allan Plauché

This summer saw a blockbuster movie remake of a classic animated TV series and movie. *Transformers* retells the story of the millennia-long conflict between the Autobots and the Decepticons—both factions within a race of sentient alien machine-life forms—but this time the story is told in live action and primarily from the human perspective. Die-hard fans of the original television series and movie may not like some of the changes made to the characters and storyline, but the movie succeeds on its own merits.

As the story goes in the movie, the Energon Cube is the source of all machine life. But it has been lost. Both the Autobots and the Decepticons have come to Earth looking for it. Megatron, the leader of the Decepticons, started the civil war against the Autobots and is bent on universal domination. He is the first to track the Cube to Earth but crash lands in the process and ends up trapped in Arctic ice. The Decepticons and Autobots who follow are in a race to recover the Cube. It is interesting to note the differing methods by which each faction attempts to discover its location. The Autobots make use of the internet, namely eBay, while the Decepticons focus their efforts on hacking into the US government's computer systems for a certain piece of classified information. As it turns out, one of the main human characters, the teenager Sam Witwicky, is unknowingly in possession of an item containing the location of the Cube. His grandfather was an explorer who accidentally discovered Megatron's frozen body in the Arctic. The item in question is the deceased grandfather's spectacles, on sale by Sam on eBay, with all proceeds going towards his first-car fund. The US government, of course, covered up the discovery of Megatron. The most glaring un-libertarian aspect of the movie is that key technological innovations of the past century are attributed to government efforts at reverse engineering Megatron's techno-physiology.

There are many libertarian elements in the movie. A few key government officials and agents, particularly the Bush-like president and a certain Sector Seven secret agent, are portrayed as un-intelligent, cocky and bumbling. For the most part, saving the day is up to an odd collection of civilians. Also of note is the fact that the Autobots all choose commercial vehicles as their alternate forms, whereas the Decepticons only mimic military and police vehicles. One of my favorite moments of the movie was seeing blazoned across the side of the Decepticon imitating a police cruiser the words "To Punish and Enslave"

rather than "To Protect and Serve." Several times throughout the movie Optimus Prime, the leader of the Autobots, reminds his fellows that humans are not to be harmed, indeed, must be protected from the Decepticons, even at the expense of the Autobots' lives and the mission of retrieving the Cube. In his final battle with Megatron, Prime argues that humans must be left free to choose their own fates. As the credits roll, we are treated to an intentionally funny final scene involving Sam's parents being interviewed and exhibiting a laughably naïve trust in their government not to lie about and cover up anything like alien robots. Surely if the federal government knew of such beings, they would tell the American people! I mean, this is *America*.

I found Alan Dean Foster's *Transformers* novel to be far inferior to the movie. It lacks the energy, wit and charm of the screen version. Perhaps my disappointment in the book was inevitable given that I read it after watching the movie. However, it is not simply that the fantastic special effects and compelling performances by the movie's actors were able to breathe more life into the story than mere words could. I think I would have been disappointed in Foster's novel even if I had read it before watching the movie or never watched the movie at all. Foster doesn't simply flesh out the screen play as one might expect. He takes many liberties with it, leaving some scenes out, adding others in, changing dialogue, and so forth. None of the changes add much, if anything, of value to the story in comparison with the screen play. Quite the contrary. Foster's novel is lacking in physical character and scene description. This is perhaps a necessary evil when writing the novelization of a movie prior to the latter's completion and release. Yet Foster also delves very little into the deeper psychology of the characters that we don't get to see on the big screen but expect in a novelization. Perhaps worst of all, his novel is more plagued by Hollywood stereotypes than the Hollywood movie itself! Two of the main characters, Sam and his love interest Mikaela, both come off as far weaker, less likeable and admirable persons than they do in the movie, a testament both to the screen play and to the actors.

From a libertarian perspective, Foster's novel is also disappointing. It either lacks or significantly mutes all of the aforementioned libertarian elements of the movie. Indeed, the only mention of freedom in the novel appears midway through it and is only a sadly corrupted version of a key phrase uttered by Optimus Prime. In the movie, Prime states that "Freedom is the right of all sentient beings." Foster turns this into the New Deal-esque "Freedom from fear and all else is the right of all sentient beings."

I highly recommend the movie on both aesthetic and political grounds. Save your money and skip the novel. For those diehard fans who absolutely must see or read all things Transformers, Foster also wrote a prequel novel, *Transformers: Ghosts of Yesterday*, that may add something of value to the backstory of the movie.

Making Money

By Terry Pratchett
Harper, 2007

Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

Making Money, Terry Pratchett's new Discworld novel, is a follow-up to *Going Postal*. That novel's hero, Moist von Lipwig, sentenced to death for his career as a con man, was granted a last-minute reprieve by the Patrician of Ankh-Morpork and put in charge of the long-defunct post office. As *Making Money* starts, his revival of the post office has been so successful that he's growing hopelessly bored—just in time for the Patrician to give him a new job: running the Royal Mint and the Royal Bank. Seemingly these are private institutions, owned by one of Ankh-Morpork's wealthiest families, the Lavishes (famous for the lifestyle that's named for them)—until the widow who owns a controlling interest leaves it to her dog, Mr. Fusspoint, and appoints Lipwig as the dog's guardian, entangling him in the family's internal power struggles.

In other words, like *Going Postal*, this is a novel where the villains are rich people trying to get richer. The plot seems a little more tired this time around; where *Going Postal's* conspiracy had seized control of Ankh-Morpork's semaphore-based telecommunications system, and was running it into the ground by economizing on maintenance, *Making Money's* Lavishes seem to have no goal other than hanging onto the family money and fighting over it. The one exception is Cosmo Lavish, who, like some of Pratchett's other villains, has insane schemes against the Patrician...but literally insane, to the point where his own plans endanger him.

The novel's other thread is about Adora Belle Dearheart of the Golem Trust and her efforts to free all the world's golems. This takes her to a remote part of the Discworld, where she investigates relics of the Discworld's most ancient city, built 60,000 years ago. Pratchett eventually links this storyline back to the main one, ingeniously, but perhaps not as dramatically as usual.

In sum, this is a competent, enjoyable Discworld novel, but not one that stands out. It brings in mostly familiar characters, showing them from slightly different angles; it has a new variation on a somewhat familiar plot; it has some good jokes, but perhaps not quite as stunningly good as in earlier novels. It almost suggests that Pratchett, like his hero, has succeeded a little too well in making the Discworld a smoothly running machine.

For readers of *Prometheus*, the antislavery theme about golems will be sympathetic, as always. The treatment of money doesn't seem to endorse any particular point of view; there's some satire of people who believe in the gold standard, but also some satire of economic modeling, complete with a bizarre hydraulic simulation of Ankh-Morpork's economy—though it turns out to be based on a project that was actually carried out in the 1940s! Pratchett's story of a con man recruited by the government to protect the public against the schemes of

the wealthy won't score as many points with libertarians as his defense of freedom of the press in *The Truth*, though if we have to have a government, we certainly might wish for it to be run by someone as competent and as benevolent as Lord Vetinari. On the other hand, Lipwig's defense of his own criminal career against that of the founders of the Lavish fortune sounds oddly like the verdict in Joshua Norton's trial for insanity, which compared his record favorably with that of other kings and emperors. On the whole, though, I don't think Pratchett has given us the next Prometheus Award winner in this book.

In terms of the larger evolution of the Discworld series, though, some interesting things are going on here. As head of the bank, Lipwig finds the city of Ankh-Morpork coming to him for funds, apparently seeking to improve its infrastructure: infrastructure in the most literal sense, a new subterranean level of the city based on the dwarven technology revealed in *Thud!* Pratchett seems to be putting the Discworld through an analog of the Industrial Revolution, with a continent-wide communications net, a golem labor force, and now central banking. *Making Money* may turn out to be a big step in the development of this more serious historical theme.

Sagramanda: A Novel of Near-Future India

By Alan Dean Foster

Pyr/Prometheus Books, 2006, \$25.00

Reviewed by Geoffrey Allan Plauché

Alan Dean Foster's *Sagramanda* is a far better novel than his *Transformers*. While not especially libertarian, it is also far more so than *Transformers*. *Sagramanda* is a science fiction techno-thriller set in the near-future Indian city of the novel's title. In this, Foster's novel follows in the footsteps of Ian MacDonald's *River of Gods* and MacDonald indeed has a blurb on the back cover in praise of Foster's novel and remarking on "the growing swell of writers realizing we may be living in the Indian Century." As far as I can tell Foster does a good job of capturing the spirit and atmosphere of India.

As a science fiction novel, *Sagramanda* is replete with scientific advances and nifty technological innovations, some military but most of a civilian consumer nature—from human-piloted cow removers designed to clear the streets of sacred roadblocks (gently and humanely, of course) to holographic avatar projectors that can superimpose images over their users, programmed with the complete Kama Sutra, for both instructional and entertainment purposes. In near-future India, futuristic and ancient technology co-exist side by side. Hydrogen powered cars are commonplace, as are camels as beasts of burden still. One character wields high-tech handguns loaded with explosive rounds and neurotoxin-filled syringets while another kills with a very traditional, yet for all that still very effective, sword.

—Continued on page 16

—*Sagramanda* review, continued from page 15

As a techno-thriller, the central plot revolves around a revolutionary and potentially very profitable scientific discovery stolen from a powerful multinational corporation. We do not find out the nature of the discovery until the very end of the novel. All we know is that the scientist who stole it hopes to sell it to another multinational corporation for a huge sum and, rightly, fears for his life, for the corporation he stole the discovery from is willing to kill in order to get the information back. One of the main protagonists is that scientist, and he is a likeable and largely honorable fellow, with the glaring exception of his theft. Arguably, the scientist did not have a right to the discovery, seeing as how he was only one among others working under contract on the project for the corporation over at least a few decades. On the other hand, the multinational corporation he worked for is obviously not a completely honest or just business concern. Other major characters include the scientist's beautiful yet tough fiancée, an Untouchable; his traditionalist father, who is out to kill him for tarnishing the family name; an enterprising villager who has risen out of poverty as a successful city shopkeeper; a sociopathic, yet perversely scrupulous, company tracker/hitman; a sword-wielding serial killer sacrificing innocent locals and tourists to the goddess Kali; and, finally, a man-eating tiger.

Foster tells a fast-paced and entertaining story but, as I

noted at the outset, it is not an especially libertarian story. That the main protagonist is a thief is one reason. Another is that both government and business are shown in both positive and negative lights. Foster sees a legitimate role for government in regulating business, at least to some extent, and the city police are depicted as dutiful and efficient; on the other hand, Foster makes reference to notoriously corrupt Indian politics. It is really only in its portrayal of capitalism, business and entrepreneurship that *Sagramanda* can be considered to have any libertarian theme at all. *Sagramanda* is not an overtly political book, however. Small business appears to be shown in a better light than large multinational corporations but, again, we are not given an unambiguous picture of either as primarily good or bad. Popular entertainment and the businesses that provide it are both appreciated and criticized. Capitalism is clearly portrayed as enabling the rise out of poverty for those with the requisite ability, initiative and responsibility. Capitalism has clearly brought great prosperity to growing numbers of Indians and, for all its faults, even its excesses may only be so in the eye of the beholder.

I recommend *Sagramanda* primarily as an entertaining science fiction techno-thriller with an exotic setting, nifty technological innovations, and interesting characters. Experience the vivacious world of near-future India. Just don't expect an unambiguous or overt defense of liberty and the free market.



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