

# PROMETHEUS

## The Probability Broach: The Graphic Novel



### 2005 Prometheus Award Nominees

Reviews of books by Bruce Balfour, Ken MacLeod, F. Paul Wilson, Mark Tier & Martin H. Greenberg, Jasper Fforde, William Gibson, Michael Z. Williamson



The newsletter of the  
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# R E V I E W S

**Neuromancer**

By William Gibson

Ace Books, 2004: \$25

Reviewed by Michael Grossberg

Science fiction doesn't have to predict the future accurately to be visionary, but it helps.

In **Neuromancer**, first published in 1984, William Gibson wove a glitteringly dark web of words that seduced readers with a plausible vision of artificial intelligence and the emerging world wide Web—where the boundaries between body and machine have been irrevocably blurred.

The 20th anniversary edition, which includes an amusing afterword by sci-fi writer Jack Womack about Gibson's explosive impact on the "cyberpunk" movement, confirms **Neuromancer** as one of the past generation's most influential books.

More than any other author, Gibson became the godfather of the Internet, which his novel foreshadowed as a virtual-reality arena where hackers, joyriders, entrepreneurs and outlaws can prosper—or die.

His gritty dystopian adventure—cascading through a computerized virtual-reality network for crime, punishment, redemption, fun and profit—boasts one of the great opening lines in sci-fi history: "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." (Gibson second-guesses that line in his self-deprecating new introduction, which apologizes to readers too young to be familiar with the sight of 1950s-era TV static.)

So what if Gibson confesses in the introduction that he didn't anticipate the ubiquity of cell phones or the collapse of the Soviet Union, which now arguably makes his novel seem more

Cover and back page art: Panels from **The Probability Broach: The Graphic Novel**. Reprinted with permission from the artist, Scott Bieser.

like an alternate-reality fiction.

Nobody's perfect.

Gibson did foresee the pulsating-pixel shape of things to come in this landmark work, which blends adventure, romance, murder, mystery, conspiracy, sex, drugs, rock 'n roll and dystopian fable.

With its pell-mell pacing and surreal intensity, **Neuromancer** was the first book to win sci-fi's triple crown: the Hugo, Nebula and Philip K. Dick awards.

A clue to its enduring appeal can be found within the title, which contains the word "romance." Despite Gibson's gritty tone and cautionary slant, **Neuromancer** revels in its romance with technology—especially the possibilities of blending between man and machine.

Gibson also brilliantly explores the complex interface between technology and psychology, politics and culture in his suspenseful story of Case, a "console cowboy" exiled from a virtual-reality Internet by a revengeful employer's maiming surgery.

Surviving by his impaired wits in a drug-infested Asian ghetto, Case is tempted by the possibility of escaping the "prison of one's flesh" and reinhabiting the Web when he meets Molly, a beautiful hired assassin whose caress is dangerous because of the scalpel blades that slide from beneath her burgundy nails. Talk about a femme fatale.

Beyond its cool characters and absorbing story, the novel has endured because of the "neon shudder" of Gibson's language. Even as human an act as sexual climax assumes an almost alien glow, "flaring blue in a timeless space, a vastness like the matrix, where the faces were shredded and blown away down hurricane corridors."

Gibson's later novels—including **Count Zero**, **Mona Lisa Overdrive**, **Burning Chrome**, **Virtual Light** and most recently, **Pattern Recognition**—follow in the kaleidoscopic footsteps of **Neuromancer** but don't approach its visceral impact.

The stream-of-consciousness style owes something to Prometheus Hall of Fame award-winner Alfred Bester (**The Stars My Destination**, **The Demolished**

Man), while the vivid street slang approaches the gang argot of Anthony Burgess' **A Clockwork Orange**, a Hall of Fame finalist in recent years.

Nor did Gibson invent the now-exhausted term of "cyberpunk," a literary style and movement that perhaps generated more hype, debate and misinterpretation than any other sci-fi trend of the past generation.

Meanwhile, his distinctive vision was inverted and vulgarized by *The Matrix* film trilogy, which demonized the Web as something to escape from.

Much of **Neuromancer's** visual and verbal vocabulary would be reflected and developed in the works of Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, Lewis Shiner, Victor Milan (a Prometheus Award winner for **The Cybernetic Samurai**) and Neal Stephenson (a Prometheus finalist in recent years for **Cryptonomicon** and up for consideration this year for the latest prequel novels in his Baroque Cycle), among others. (Vernor Vinge, another Prometheus winner, also deserves credit for predicting the Internet, for his novella "True Names" predates **Neuromancer**.)

Two decades later, though, the cyberpunk "movement" is all but dead. Nevertheless, long live **Neuromancer**. (This is an expanded and revised review that appeared in The Columbus Dispatch.)

### Freehold

By Michael Z. Williamson

BAEN, 2004: \$6.99

ISBN: 0743471792

Reviewed by Fran Van Cleave

**Freehold** starts out promisingly, with the heroine, Sgt. Kendra Pacelli, going AWOL from her U.N. Peacekeepers unit to the Freehold of Grainne after being unjustly accused of theft. She discovers life as a truly free human being: economically tough, full of disconcerting moments, and lots of fun in bed with both sexes. So far, so good.

Though Williamson is hardly in Stephenson's class as a writer, he tells the story competently from a libertarian viewpoint—until he gets to the war between the Freehold and the U.N.-ruled

Earth. Kendra joins the Freehold military, and here Williamson turns neo-con.

First, on the military training, which most of the time seems designed to contemporary specifications for people with little self-discipline. No, the drill sergeant doesn't spray the troops with tear gas and make them sing the Marine's Hymn, but he comes insultingly close. Second, when they finally go to war—about a hundred pages later—Kendra and her fellow freedom fighters find themselves torturing prisoners for information.

Apart from the fairly obvious point that this is not libertarian, and an extremely unreliable way to obtain factual information, is this something people will be "forced" to do hundreds of years in the future? When we have ships spanning lightyears in a week, won't we have better truth-detection than torture? Actually, I would argue that we have better truth-detection than that now. It's called drugs and brain-scans. So this is worse than a failure of imagination, it's either willful ignorance, or a shameful attempt to justify inhumane treatment with an expired utilitarian argument.

And if you think that's bad, wait till you get to the part about Freehold nuking Minnesota, along with other parts of the world. The reason? A weak plot device to ratchet up suspense, married to the pathetic logic that nobody on Earth overthrew these grasping socialist rulers, so therefore everyone remaining on Earth shares equally in the guilt of their evil behavior. So we can nuke them all with impunity. Interestingly, those settlers who left Earth for Freehold because they couldn't overthrow the grasping socialist rulers seem to see no logical contradiction here.

Finally, the "Freehold's" awarding of medals at the end of the book, rather than land or other real property for heroic behavior, is inextricably mired in the concepts of Napoleonic empire.

Hell will freeze over before I vote for this neo-con fantasy.



### The Well of Lost Plots

By Jasper Fforde

Viking, 2003

ISBN 0-670-03289-1

Reviewed by Anders Monsen

Jasper Fforde's **The Well of Lost Plots (TWOLP)** is the third novel in his Thursday Next literary detective series. Readers who pick up this book as their first foray into the world of Fforde will find the going rough and confusing. Experienced Ffordians will find **TWOLP** amusing and inventive, adding new layers to an already unique world.

Following on the heels of **The Eyre Affair** (2001) and **Lost in a Good Book** (2002), **TWOLP** finds Next hiding inside a book on a character exchange program. Next's book-jumping skills first surfaced in **The Eyre Affair**, a wonderfully humorous first novel. Fforde added to this alternate world in the sequel, **Lost in a Good Book**, where Next moved deeper into the realities of fiction. She joined Jurisdiction, which polices the BookWorld. **TWOLP** delves further into the alternate reality of BookWorld, where literary characters are real and operate with motives that sometimes deviate from the expectations of the books' readers.

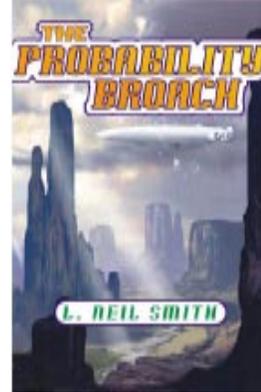
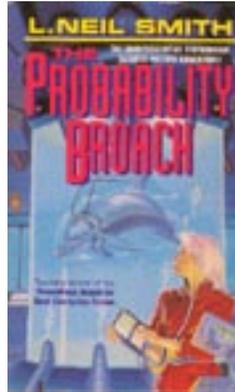
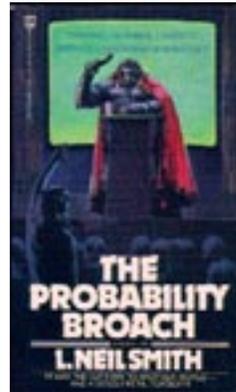
There's little here that directly deals with liberty except for the meandering quest to discover who's killing fictional characters and threatening Next's life in BookWorld. Throughout this investigation Next uncovers a possible link behind the upgrade to the next Book Operating System to UltraWord™.

Billed as a solution to the demise of original fiction by adding a new sensory literary experience, UltraWord™ is revealed instead as "the power to change everything" in fiction. As the architect of this idea states, "I get one hundred percent control...No more Well of Lost Plots, no more Generics, no more Council, no more strikes by disgruntled nursery rhyme workers...No more authors." And Next's analysis of this? Why, the quality of the books will suffer. Art will vanish, and look no difference from a paint factory or manufactured goods.

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# The Probability Broach: The Graphic Novel

Written by  
L. Neil Smith & Scott Bieser  
Big Head Press  
2004: \$19.95  
ISBN 0-9743814-1-1  
*Reviewed by Anders Monsen*



L. Neil Smith's 1980 novel, **The Probability Broach**, stands as the archetype for libertarian utopian fiction. Political elements were not new to sf, but Smith stepped out of the traditional sf narrative by creating an individualist anarchist's dreamland. His novel took a no-holds-barred look at the possibilities of a society unfettered by regulations, yet not devoid of order or legal institutions.

Sixteen years after the first edition, Tor reprinted **The Probability Broach**, first as a paperback, then a few years again as a trade paperback with a superb new cover, to coincide with the hard cover publication of its sequel, **The American Zone** (2001).

And now, after more than two years in the making, this classic work of fiction makes its debut as a graphic novel in a way that extends Smith's vision in living color. Artist Scott Bieser has converted nearly 300 pages of dialog-heavy text into a wondrous world of visual humor and power that is sure to be read again and again by both fans of the original novel and newcomers to Smith's world.

The graphic novel version of **The Probability Broach** follows the same narrative trail as the original book. Lieutenant Win Bear is a tough-luck cop in 1987 Denver, his world beset by food and power shortages, government intruding into every aspect of the people's daily lives.

Working on the case of a slain scientist, Vaughn Meiss, Bear stumbles into an alternate world, where history took a sideways path during the Whiskey Rebellion, and calls itself the North American Confederacy. Before Bear

has gained an understanding of how this world differs from his own, he is attacked and nearly killed. We later learn these attackers were the henchmen of the people in Bear's world who killed Meiss. Armed with new-found friends and lots of bullets, Bear and company take on these enemies.

Bieser's draws Bear's world in muted sepia tones, while the North American Confederacy's colors are rich and vibrant. This is no mere affectation, but

achieves its goal of setting the mood and values of the two societies. Like movie directors coloring the light for effect and narrative purpose, Bieser employs color, tone of voice, and facial expressions to differentiate the two worlds.

Win Bear discovers another Edward Bear, who like himself is employed in law enforcement, but runs his own company. Smith's ability to sketch colorful, three dimensional characters gives us the wonderful Lucy Kropotkin, an at times

## Sketching Liberty: The Graphic Novel

In 1991 a graphic novel nearly claimed the Prometheus Award. **V for Vendetta**, written by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, portrays a grim and totalitarian world, opposed by one person—the masked man known as V. The artwork in **V for Vendetta** is stark and visceral. While there are few explicitly libertarian graphic novels or comic books, this book and others contain ideas of liberty worth exploring.

**Batman: The Dark Knight Returns**, by Frank Miller, shows a darker side of the caped crusader. A grim decline in morality grips the world. Compassionate psychologists replace crime fighters in dealing with criminals, and Superman is an agent of the state. Against this world stands an aging, bitter Batman. Aided by a new, and female, Robin, the battle against evil becomes a crusade.

**Watchmen**, by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, is of interest in the depictions of the rise and fall of superheroes, and the lure of absolute power. The theme now is somewhat worn twenty years later, but in its time **Watchmen** was highly original. No doubt there are other book also worthy of mention.

The graphic novel is a work of dual effort. In fiction where only words appear, the reader creates images in his mind from the text. In movies these images are created for the viewer. In the graphic novel the writer must decide upon the greatest effect: the art, the text, or both. The graphic novel has potential as a source of entertainment blended with ideas on liberty. Imagine the power of Ayn Rand's **Anthem** as a graphic novel, or the future emergence of original works of liberty in the comic form.

cantankerous but always passionate defender of liberty. Other main characters include the healer Clarissa Olson, who becomes Bear's love interest, and the scientists who created the Broach that sent Bear into their world: super-sexy Dora Jayne "Deejay" Thorens, and a porpoise known as Ooloorie Eckicheck P'Wheet.

We encounter the evil Hamiltonian Manfred von Richthofen, living in Laporte under his new name, John Jay Madison, as well as his henchman from Bear's world, the sinister Homeland Security Policeman Oscar Burgess.

Smith has drawn the ire of non-libertarians and some libertarians alike in his implacable and relentless focus on the right to bear arms and use of these arms in self-defense as the way to bring about and maintain a free society. Someone once wrote, "an armed society is a polite society." Much like Henry David Thoreau subverted Thomas Jefferson by changing his statement, "That government is best which governs the least," into "That government is best which governs not at all," Smith brought about his peaceful society by arming every member of that society, including young children.

To Win Bear, a cop used to seeing heavy hardware only on the hips of fellow cops, this society is disconcerting. Yet he warms quickly to the gun-toting anarchists who rescued and healed him, and discovers that perhaps there is something to their philosophy after all. There are moments in the original book where debate takes over the narrative, where Smith's passion for liberty and hatred of the state and its minions slow down the pace. In **TPB: TGN**, dialog like this often crowds the panels, Clarissa Olson still has her John Galt moment, and the Congress scene still drags somewhat.

It's somewhat disconcerting to see virtually every character lighting up various forms of tobacco at every opportunity. The medical technology of the NAC appears to have solved all the health related aspects of tobacco, but

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## An Incredible Movie Experience

### *The Incredibles*

Written and Directed by Brad Bird  
Pixar Productions/Disney, 2004  
Reviewed by Anders Monsen

With its latest movie, *The Incredibles*, Pixar Animations Studios once again demonstrates the power of craft and creativity in the animated movie world. The company that began its feature length movie life with classic toys childhood brought to life, and showed us a jaw-dropping slow zoom toward an island in *A Bug's Life*, has moved from the world of toys (*Toy Story* and *Toy Story 2*), animated bugs, imaginary creatures (*Monsters, Inc.*), and sea life (*Finding Nemo*) to that of people.

*The Incredibles* was written and directed by Brad Bird, best known for creating the wonderful animated movie, *The Iron Giant* (1999), where a young boy in the 1950s befriends a powerful alien robot that a paranoid government agent seeks to destroy. *The Iron Giant* never attained much popular success, and Pixar hired Bird shortly thereafter.

Animated movies often perceived as entertainment for children. Adults who see animated movies often attend the shows with their kids. Bird seems to discard this view. *The Iron Giant* portrays the narrow-mindedness and paranoia of governments and their minions. *The Incredibles* offers an intensity and intelligence rarely seen in animated films.

The animated action is so fluid and real, it's hardly a coincidence that the movie was a best movie nominee (motion picture —musical or comedy) for the Golden Globe Awards, alongside live action movies like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Sideways*.

In *The Incredibles*, super-heroes have been forced into hiding among normal people. Beset by lawsuits from people who don't want to be saved, or who are hurt when superheroes save their lives,

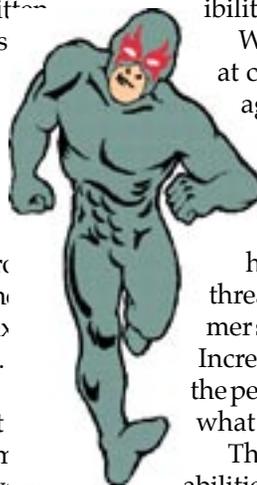
they're all been retired, sent into witness protection programs, and ceased their daring do life style.

Foremost of the once-admired superheroes is Mr. Incredible (Craig T. Nelson), endowed with superhuman strength. When forced into retirement he becomes Bob Parr, an insurance agent boxed in by rules and small spaces. His frustration is palpable, but out of love for his wife, the former Elastigirl (Holly Hunter), and his three kids, he lives his life of quiet desperation. The two oldest children, Violet and Dashiell, aka 'Dash,' also have superpowers. Whereas young Dash chafes under not being able to use his super speed, the shy teenager Violet tries to hide not just her powers (invisibility), but her physical person.

When Mr. Incredible gets a chance at covertly using his superpowers again, he jumps at the opportunity. Keeping this secret from his wife proves more difficult, and when she suspects he's having an affair she follows him, only to discover a darker threat. Someone is killing off the former super-heroes, one by one. Can the Incredibles save the day and defeat the person behind these murders, and what is the ultimate goal?

The question of merit and special abilities is one of the movie's prime themes. What does it mean to be special? Should you use your special abilities, and suffer slings and arrows when you stand out from the crowd, where you feel their envy and anger? At what cost? Merit certainly is lauded as a value, but the Incredibles do not see themselves as superior; they simply seek to use what they're given.

Watching this movie I almost forgot these were not real people. Special effects has come a long way, as movies such as *X-Men* and the forthcoming *Fantastic Four* demonstrate. The abilities used by the super heroes in *The Incredibles* could just as easily have been replicated with real humans. This is a movie going experience for both young and old alike.



# Prometheus Awards nominations

—Michael Grossberg

LFS members are invited to nominate a work for this year's Prometheus Awards. All current LFS members have the privilege of nominating works for any of our awards.

The LFS is looking for worthy candidates in two annual categories: Best Novel, Best Classic Fiction (Hall of Fame) and also in our occasional Special Awards category (which covers anthologies, lifetime achievement and other achievements that fall outside the scope of our two annual categories.)

The deadline to submit awards nominations to the awards committee chairs is February 15, 2005. If you are aware of worthy candidates now, please notify us immediately.

Warning: As always, there is no guarantee that a last-minute nominations made around February 15, will arrive in time for the committees to have adequate time to obtain and review the nominee before our voting deadlines. Especially this year, since our annual awards are usually announced at the Worldcons but this year's Worldcon will be a month earlier (August 4-8, Glasgow, Scotland), we want to make sure that all LFS members have the usual three months to obtain and read (or view) the finalists before voting for the winners.

The eligibility rules:

- Works may be nominated for the Hall of Fame category if they were first published or broadcast more than five years

## Prometheus Award Best Novel Nominees

(alphabetized by author)

- **State of Fear**, by Michael Crichton (Harper Collins)
- **For Us the Living**, by Robert Heinlein (Scribner Books)
- **Anarquía**, by Brad Linaweaver (Sense of Wonder Press)
- **Newton's Wake**, by Ken MacLeod (TOR Books)
- **Marque and Reprisal**, by Elizabeth Moon (Del Rey)
- **Hostile Takeover**, by Susan Schwartz (TOR Books)
- **Coyote Rising**, by Allen Steele (Ace Books)
- **The Confusion**, by Neal Stephenson (Morrow)
- **The System of the World**, by Neal Stephenson (Morrow)
- **Iron Sunrise**, by Charlie Stross (Ace Books)
- **Freehold**, by Michael Z. Williamson (Baen Books)
- **Crisscross**, by F. Paul Wilson (TOR Books)
- **Last Guardian of Everness**, by John Wright (TOR Books)

ago. This category is open to many things: novels, novellas, short stories, trilogies, series, anthologies, plays, poems, comic books, films, TV episodes and TV series.

- Only novels may be nominated for the Best Novel category. The award is limited to novels published in English during 2004, or during the two previous months (November/December 2003) if previously overlooked.

- To nominate a novel for the Best Novel category, send the title, author, publisher and a short statement (or review) describing why you're nominating it to LFS Best Novel judging committee chair, Michael Grossberg (mikegrossb@aol.com, 614-236-5040).

- To nominate something or someone for our Special Award, a bit more is required. Send a short nominating statement identifying the nominee and why the nominee deserves this rare honor, to LFS Board President Chris Hibbert (hibbertc@pacbell.net).

- To nominate something for the Hall of Fame, send the title, author and a description of the type of work (novel, story, film, TV episode, etc.) to the LFS Hall of Fame judging committee chair, Lynn Maners (lmaners@dakotacom.net).

No Special Award nominations have been received yet this year. The lists of nominated works in the Best Novel and Hall of Fame categories (as of January 5) appear below.

## Prometheus Award Hall of Fame Nominees

(alphabetized by title, with first publication or broadcast date)

- **The Artifact**, novel (1990) by Michael Gear
- "As Easy as ABC," short story (1912) by Rudyard Kipling
- **Back in the USSA**, novel (1997) by Eugene Byrne and Kim Newman
- **The Book of Merlyn**, novel (1977) by T.H. White
- **It Can't Happen Here**, novel (1936) by Sinclair Lewis
- **A Clockwork Orange**, novel (1963) by Anthony Burgess
- **Let Us Prey**, novel (1992) by Bill Branon
- **The Man Who Fell to Earth**, feature film (1976) starring David Bowie
- **That Hideous Strength**, novel (1965) by C. S. Lewis
- **The Lord of the Rings**, trilogy of novels (1954) by J. R. Tolkien
- **The Second Civil War**, HBO Home Video movie (1997)
- **A Time of Changes**, novel (1971) by Robert Silverberg
- **V for Vendetta**, graphic novel (1997) by Alan Moore
- **We the Living**, feature film (1942) of Ayn Rand's novel
- **The Weapon Shops of Isher**, novel (1951) by A. E. van Vogt

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## Brief Glimpses of Freedom: SF Anthologies and Liberty

### Give Me Liberty

By Mark Tier and  
Martin H. Greenberg  
BAEN, 2003: \$7.99  
ISBN 0-7434-3585-0

### Visions of Liberty

By Mark Tier and  
Martin H. Greenberg  
BAEN, 2004: \$6.99  
ISBN 0-7434-8838-5

*Reviewed by Max Jahr*

Much like exotic creatures of the wild, libertarian short stories rarely appear in the public eye. The first collection of libertarian sf stories appeared in 1980 (**The Survival of Freedom**, edited by Jerry Pournelle and John F. Carr), while the second such collection came forth nearly twenty years later in 1997 (**Free Space**, edited by Ed Kramer and Brad Linaweaver). The latter's rarity was noted by the Libertarian Futurist Society, which recognized **Free Space** with a Special Award in 1998. And now, only a few years later, we get not one but two libertarian sf anthologies.

**Give Me Liberty** collects eight classic works, the most recent of which is Vernor Vinge's "The Ungoverned," and the rest dating from the 1950s and 1960s. Co-editor Mark Tier describes the book in his introduction as "a book full of favorites," yet from my perspective only half of these stories would fill my book of favorites. Certainly, "The Ungoverned" fits this bill. The story falls into the same future universe as Vinge's

novels, **The Peace War** and **Marooned in Realtime**. The free state of Kansas is invaded by the statist Republic of New Mexico, and a group of protection service employees (including a representative of the Michigan State Police, also a free market protection group) must defend their clients and thwart the invasion. Re-reading the story (yet again), made me realize the timelessness of this work.

Of the other stories in **Give Me Liberty**, three of these make the book worthwhile. Eric Frank Russell's "And Then There Were None" highlights a society deeply grounded in the civil disobedience theories of Ghandi. It's an amusing tale, and we all should take to heart the simple words, "I won't." A. E. van Vogt's "The Weapon Shop" will cheer the hearts of all Second Amendment purists. A shop arrives overnight in a small town, advertising its wares with this simple sign: "The right to buy weapons is the right to be free." No different from our current society, this offends and riles a good portion of the populace, including Fara, a devoted loyalist to the empress, and hard-working bourgeois owner of a manufacturing shop. His battle with the weapon shop leads him to a harsh but honest voyage of discovery.

Another excellent tale, showing how crooked politicians scheme to take over desirable property, is related in Lloyd Biggle, Jr.'s "Monument." At first this seems like a Christopher Columbus tale, where advanced invaders arrive and grab land from the simple natives. However, the story is bigger and more complex than this, as the natives work hard, but within the rules of nonaggression, to retain their land (yet not necessarily their way of life).

The other four stories are, in my opinion, not as strong, nor as libertarian. Christopher Anvil's "Gadget vs. Trend" is related in snippets from news-clippings. It's dry and one-dimensional, relating how a radical new invention granted incredible powers to individuals, who now could oppose anything the state threw at them. The story ends

with a twist that might be perceived as humorous, but on the whole achieves little. Murray Leinster's "Historical Note" is somewhat similar: a new invention brings about revolution behind the Iron Curtain of the Soviet Union. Much in the same manner, Frank Herbert's "Committee of the Whole" also centers around a radical invention, a super-gun with enormous power (for good and evil), the plans of which are distributed world-wide and outside government control, to the horror and anger of a Senate Committee. These three stories explore the effects of one major invention, in a traditional sf-like "what if?" scenario. Grim reality casts doubt on the efficacy of such inventions in securing liberty, which instead must come from within individuals, not their tools.

The last story in **Give Me Liberty** is a nicely written but somewhat out of place tale. "Second Game," by Katherine MacLean and Charles de Vet, opposes two different planetary species and cultures. One is the expanding human culture, which attempts to contact the reclusive culture of an alien warrior culture planet. The savage power of the latter implies defeat of the former in battle, but the warrior culture has a major flaw that appears to spell their eventual doom and defeat.

The second recent libertarian sf anthology in question, **Visions of Liberty**, collects mainly newer fiction by more current authors. Interestingly enough, I find this book far weaker than the former. Hardly a single story stands out as memorable, and two are blatantly offensive, unless they merely misunderstand the meaning of liberty.

Most of the stories use the plot device of a narrator cast upon foreign shores who has the culture and philosophy of this new place explained by guides and natives. This is the case in James P. Hogan's "The Colonizing of Tharle," Jack Williamson's "Devil's Star," Lloyd

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—*Brief Glimpses, continued from page 7*

Biggle, Jr.'s "The Unnullified World," Jane Lindsfold's "Pakeha," Mike Resnick & Tobias S. Bucknell's "The Shackles of Freedom," and Robert J. Sawyer's "The Right's Tough." That's six of the nine stories all using the same basic plot device to introduce us to their version of free worlds.

What then of these free worlds? Biggle's "Unnullified World" deals with asocial behavior, and how a free world reacts. Instead of a lengthy jail sentence or capital punishment, the offender is simply shut out from society. This option gives the offender an opportunity to reform or die. This same method was alluded to in Russell's story "And Then There Were None," as well as Linsfold's "Pakeha." In the latter story, hope and forgiveness shows us a side not present in the other two stories. While the same methods are key to both "The Unnullified World" and "Pakeha," their tone and voice are quite different: rough and sharp in the former, more gentle in the latter.

Sawyer's "The Right's Tough" also employs this method, though is too short to shed much light on its implications. A group of astronauts return to Earth after a long voyage to find that society now uses a new system of instant reputation points. Updates along this point-scale govern behavior and social cooperation, and is quite alien to these astronauts. No one explains this to them upon their arrival, and they fail to blend into this society, eventually sending them back into space and the unknown.

Williamson's "Devil's Star," on the other hand, seems a peculiar throw-back to the days of pulp. The characters are one-dimensional and the writing and dialog rough and unpolished, almost juvenile. This tale of a spy for the totalitarian world forces intent on invading a renegade planet seems like Soviet

propaganda fiction. Along with "The Shackles of Freedom," they form the weakest stories of the book. Whereas "Devil's Star" simply is poorly written, Resnick and Bucknell pervert the meaning liberty in "Shackles." A young doctor arrives on a planet settled by apparent Amish farmers, who see every event as pre-ordained by God, and thus medicine cannot replace prayer. But, by God, they sure have the freedom to let people die when medicine can save them. Where are the shackles? In the culture that submerges people's minds so that they cannot leave to save themselves? I fail to see how it belongs in an anthology on the future of liberty.

Hogan's "The Colonizing of Tharle," is a decently written story, but seems simply an echo of his much better novel, **The Voyage to Yesterday**. A group of settlers with ties to Earth is visited years later by a space ship, found lacking of all central government, and taken over. They respond by absorbing the brightest minds, and react to force by unveiling a well-hidden super weapon.

The three remaining stories in **Give Me Liberty**, Brad Linaweaver's "A Reception at the Anarchist Embassy," Michael A. Stackpole's "According to Their Needs," and Mark Tier's "Renegade," deal more from within their worlds.

Stackpole's story deals with solving a murder on a world where computers rule the social order by finding what motivates people, and catering environments best suited to this. It's a nice story, but if the idea of such a computer is meant to be a creepy warning of abandoning control of one's life, the story's ending seems to undermine this.

Linaweaver's entry contains some slapstick humor, with two bickering twins loosely based on the real-life peculiarities of Sam Konkin, but all amusement aside, the story never really moves beyond this one line joke.

In the last story, co-editor Tier steps out from behind his non-fiction introductions to these anthologies, with a work

of his own fiction. Told in the style of a hardboiled detective story, "Renegade" deals with how law enforcement agents in a non-government society might go about capturing a criminal on the run. The story flows well, though the characters are sacrificed, and the two main detectives seem interchangeable.

And so, what is the fate of the libertarian short story? If these two books tell us anything, the past looks bright and the future grim. Where are the modern path breakers, the soothsayers of liberty? Not in **Visions of Liberty**. While it's encouraging to see this type of anthology being published, the immediate results are mixed and disheartening.

#### *New Libertarian Redux: The Science Fiction Issue*

Perhaps the first true libertarian sf anthology, editor Samuel Edward Konkin III brought together hard core libertarian authors in a special fiction edition of his *New Libertarian* magazine in 1990.

Sixth authors (Robert Shea, Robert Anton Wilson, Brad Linaweaver, Victor Koman, J. Neil Schulman, and L. Neil Smith) contribute to the shared story, "The Prometheus Meltdown," subtitled "A Tribute to Robert A. Heinlein." L. Neil Smith and Øyvind Myhre contribute additional short stories. The issue contains features and tributes to Heinlein, and there's a wonderful color cover of Heinlein and a spaceship.

This issue of *New Libertarian* long ago went out of print. Should you come across a copy for sale, its an investment well worth making. This special science ficiton issue whould be a part of all libertians' library, and is major part of Sam Konkin's legacy.



—Reviews, continued from page 3

Yet is this a battle cry for liberty? In some ways, yes. Thursday Next seems to chafe under the constraints of fiction. She alters book-endings and encourages independent thinking among fictional characters.

**The Well of Lost Plots** weaves a wonderful story along with meta-fictional commentary on how novels are created, progress, and die. Puns and analogies to real-world details abound. The pace often meanders and seems agonizingly slow. As series, there is a great deal of potential in the world of Thursday Next, which mixes fiction and reality (inside a work of fiction in itself) with wild abandon. However, few readers will grasp the fullness of Fforde's world if they first arrive with this book as its introduction. One should read **The Eyre Affair** first, which stands as a remarkably fresh work of fiction.

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### **Newton's Wake: A Space Opera**

By Ken MacLeod

Tor Books, 2004, \$24.95

ISBN: 0-7653-0503-8

*Reviewed by William H. Stoddard*

Over the past decade and a bit, a new recurring theme has emerged in science fiction: the Avoided Singularity. This is one of the major elements in Ken MacLeod's new novel.

Vernor Vinge's early fiction worked out the idea that advancing technology would eventually create superhuman intelligence, either by enhancing human brains and minds, or by creating better digital minds. But actually writing about worlds that contain such intelligence is arguably impossible. John W. Campbell used to warn his writers that no one could write about a superhuman mind convincingly, because such a mind was necessarily beyond human understanding or empathy. An entire society ("civilization" may not be an applicable word) of such minds could not be used as a setting for fiction in any meaningful way. Vinge coined the term "the Singularity" for the possible future emergence of such a society, by

analogy with the singularities at the centers of black holes. If this is true, than the old science fictional project, the realistic description of future societies, is impossible to carry out.

Vinge's later books, **A Fire upon the Deep** and **A Deepness in the Sky**, took up an alternative approach: writing fiction in a setting where the Singularity either was not attained, or was attained somewhere else, comfortably offstage. Other writers have done the same, including Charles Stross, in **Singularity Sky** and his new **Iron Sunrise**—and, and Ken MacLeod, especially in his latest book. The result is somewhat akin to E. E. Smith's Lensman novels, where the superhumanly intelligent Arisians are kept offstage most of the time, occasionally acting as plot enablers but not fully revealing themselves; in fact, the goal of this approach is to create space opera—but a space opera of ideas as well as of action. Surprisingly and pleasantly often, those ideas often include a version of libertarianism.

**Newton's Wake** is set in the aftermath of the Hard Rapture, a disastrous war that followed the occurrence of a singularity on Earth, but left behind human societies scattered through the galaxy. One of these human groups, the Carlyles, are entrepreneurs trading in a disturbing sort of merchandise: digital records of human personalities. The plot of this novel traces the consequences of one of their expeditions finding more than they bargained for. Its working out produces a story filled with both amazing technology and violent conflict—enough of both to more than justify MacLeod's subtitle.

This book also shows us MacLeod's mind at play, notably in his portrayal of future societies. There is, for example, the playwright on one of his future societies, who specializes in grand historical dramas in the Shakespearean style about events of the 20th and 21st centuries, such as a portrayal of the fall of the Soviet Union in blank verse, with Leonid Brezhnev as a tragic hero. Other scenes show the protagonist encountering a society that has adopted most of the business practices of free-market capitalism as socialist doctrine, while still invoking Marx and Mao to justify them. A fine set

piece has two singers portraying human beings as the Lovecraftian horrors of a machine world:

That does not sleep which dreams in the deep.

We're the Great Old Ones now!

There isn't as much intellectual substance in this book as MacLeod's previously published series; readers of those two series won't find many ideas they haven't seen before. **Newton's Wake** is effectively Kenneth MacLeod Lite. It is, as it says, a space opera. But, precisely because of that, it may serve very well to bring a larger audience to MacLeod's writing, and to what's being called "new space opera." It has the true MacLeod flavor with a lot of froth. Read it when you're in the mood for entertainment; you'll find it here.

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### **Prometheus Road**

By Bruce Balfour

Ace Books, 2004, \$6.99

ISBN 0-441-01221-3

*Reviewed by David Wayland*

Bruce Balfour's background lies in the computer gaming industry, something that strongly shows through in his third and most recent novel, **Prometheus Road**. Set in the near future, this novel delineates a world much like the future of **The Terminator** and other techno-fear scenarios; one day, that which we create (robots, artificial intelligence) will turn upon us and enslave or destroy us.

In **Prometheus Road** humans created AIs which realized that humanity was incapable of managing its own affairs. These AIs destroyed the cities on the US Pacific edge, such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, and made everything west of Las Vegas off limits. The remaining pockets of humanity on the West Coast they carefully control and change into small farming communities, where independent thinking is punished, and access to technology severely limited.

Tom Eliot is a teenager fascinated with the technology of bygone times. He spends his free time trying to explore the

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ruins in the forbidden zone to find artifacts. When he is discovered, his family is obliterated by the region's governing AI. It seems that Tom possesses a special quality, something the AIs fear and are desperate to destroy. For years his family hid behind normalcy, but Tom's natural curiosity now endangers everything.

A hermit known as Magnus, who seems to know much about the workings of the AIs and how to evade their sniffers, rescues Tom. Magnus seeks to teach Tom how to walk the Prometheus Road, which appears to be a direct link into the AI virtual reality world. Danger stalks this road, and Tom's naiveté sends him and his new found friends into deadly encounters with the AIs.

In a plot that seems to mirror *The Matrix* (another tale of technology turning upon its masters), Tom must confront the AIs inside their world. Which side will succeed? Is it possible to broker a truce between the humans and the AIs, or must one or the other be destroyed?

**Prometheus Road** breaks no new ground, and the behavior of Tom Eliot chafed my sensibilities throughout the novel. He seems to never learn from his mistakes, and displays little common sense. The key to the road which Tom must walk never really becomes clear, and the climactic battle and environs of the AI virtual reality bears a strong semblance to current video games. In many ways this book was a disappointment, despite the interesting title.

## Classified

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### Crisscross

By F. Paul Wilson

Gauntlet Publications/Tor Forge, 2004

Reviewed by Anders Monsen

**Crisscross** is F. Paul Wilson's eighth Repairman Jack novel. The series began with **The Tomb**, first published in the early 1980s. Nearly two decades passed before another novel, however Jack never went away. He re-appeared in occasional short stories in a variety of anthologies. Then, 14 years later the official sequel, **Legacies** (1998), appeared. Wilson cleaned up the original to wash away the years and early 80s references. Repairman Jack stands as the most through-going libertarian character in fiction; he lives outside the state's laws and regulations and adheres to a strict code of ethics.

There's a the human and supernatural element in the RP stories. Jack deals with real monsters (human and otherwise), as well as forces of evil known as the Otherness. In the years between the original RP novel and **Legacies**, Wilson wrote several novels dealing with an entity known as the adversary. These books, as well some short stories and another novel, **The Touch**, later merged into what Wilson calls the Adversary Cycle. In terms of fictional narrative, the world will end in **Nightworld**, which looms in Jack's near future. In the meantime, Wilson fills in more of Jack's life leading up to the final battle. Each such chapter results in a new Repairman Jack novel, at the pace of about one novel per year.

The title of the novel refers to a pattern of lines in a map that Jack discovers has ominous implications for humanity, and also how two apparently separate jobs that Jack undertakes seem to converge and cross. After visiting his father in Florida (covered in the previous RJ novel, **Gateways**), Jack is back on his home ground, New York City. He is contacted about a simple fix-it job. A blackmailer threatens the life and future of a woman, who asks Jack to secure the photos hanging over her head. The job unravels disastrously, but Jack sees justice through to the end.

Another jobs crops up at the same time. An old woman hires Jack to discover the whereabouts of her son, who

joined a cult some years ago. This cult, which goes under the name Dormentalism, and might be seen as a riff on Scientology, with its emphasis on being instructed into higher levels of thought through loyalty and financial sacrifice, and eagerness to attack any person who criticizes the church, including former members and journalists.

This Dormentalist group currently is led by Luther Brady, whom Jack discovers working on a secret project connected to the Otherness: planting strange columns in nexus points highlighted on a map of the earth. Once these points all are activated, they will spark the return of the Adversary.

Jack learns more about this future enemy, the supernatural being known as Rashalom (who played key roles in **The Keep**, and the original Adversary trilogy (**Reborn**, **Reprisal**, and **Nightworld**), from the woman who hired him to investigate the cult, a woman who seems to belong to the same group as the old woman Jack met in **Gateways**. According to these people, Jack is an ally in the fight against the Adversary. Jack dislikes any hint that his life may be outside his control. But although he must satisfy a greater need, there's still time for Jack to settle some personal scores.

**Crisscross** is a superb novel, combining elements of the detective genre, thriller, horror, and exposé, all wrapped up in rich individualist colors. Hero or anti-hero? Jack is both, and renders the label almost useless.

The books arrive via an unusual publication history. The first editions appear courtesy of Gauntlet Press ([www.gauntletpress.com](http://www.gauntletpress.com)), a superb Colorado-based small press publisher. For around \$50 you get a limited edition, signed by the author, several months ahead of the mass market hardcover. Recent books also have included a small chapbook outline of the novel, a window into Wilson's creative. Some months after the Gauntlet Press edition, Tor/Forge releases a nicely packaged mass market hardcover, and some time after that, the paperback edition. Rabid Repairman Jack fans can look forward to July, when Gauntlet releases the ninth RJ novel, **Infernal**. But order quickly: the 450 numbered edition is almost sold out.

## Martial Arts Movies and Freedom—Movie Review

### *The House of Flying Daggers*

Directed by Zhang Yimou  
 Starring: Ziyi Zhang, Andy Lau,  
 Takeshi Kineshiro  
 Sony Pictures Classics, 2004  
 Reviewed by Anders Monsen

Martial arts movies usually are dismissed by critics as little more than chop socky revenge dramas. Poorly dubbed 1970s movies have gained fame and legend for oft-parodied bad translations and contorted facial gestures. The recent success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Hero* (2004) owe much to the infusion of mainstream directors to the martial arts world. The approach by directors such as Oscar nominees Ang Lee (*Crouching Tiger*) and Zhang Yimou (*Hero*, *The House of Flying Daggers*) extend the story-telling aspect of action-centric martial arts movies, while also refining their style and look.

*The House of Flying Daggers* opens with two police captains (Takeshi Kineshiro and Andy Lau) tasked with tracking down the new leader of a rebel group called the House of Flying Daggers. They follow rumors that the new blind dancer at a local brothel might be the daughter of the old leader, whom they helped find and kill. They arrest this girl, Mei, played by the incomparable Ziyi Zhang. In a ploy to gain her trust, and perhaps lead them to the Flying Daggers' headquarters, Captain Jin (Kineshiro) "breaks" her out of prison. In order to prove himself Jin must reluctantly kill members of the security forces who pursue them.

Jin slips away from time to time and reports to Captain Leo (Lau) as Jin and Mei head north. When they finally meet up with the Flying Daggers we discover hidden motives and identities. The three days together spent by Jin and Mei forged a fateful relationship with terrible consequences. The choices that each of the three characters must face will determine not only their future and their own lives,

but also the lives of their pledged social and amorous allegiances. The climactic battle—a core feature of martial arts movies—spans seasons from fall to winter, like the battle of ancient gods.

The music, color, and pacing of the movie makes you forget you are watching a period piece from China. Yes, there's wire-work and flying through bamboo forests, but these tricks never trump the story or the characters.

The implications of this movie to liberty and culture are two-fold. In the element of plot this movie sets up a

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"[A] lot of the martial arts tradition is based on a code of conduct. They have their rules of the game and all the fighting and revenge has to be in accordance with it. However here, we have a girl that betrays her code of ethics for love, pointing to a larger rebelliousness and an individualistic freedom."

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confrontation between government and an underground group that opposes the current regime's corrupt ways. The movie also explores constraints and rebellious conflict within the group itself, with an autocratic leader and harsh rules of conduct and obedience. Director Zhang Yimou stated in a recent interview:

"The film itself is a betrayal of traditional martial arts films, because a lot of the martial arts tradition is based on a code of conduct. They have their rules of the game and all the fighting and revenge has to be in accordance with it. However here, we have a girl that betrays her code of ethics for love, pointing to a larger rebelliousness and an individualistic freedom. In the West, when you're watching this, you might not think of it as anything unique or special. In China, it's actually something very different from other martial arts, films because these are

values that aren't usually espoused in the genre."

The second implication in terms of liberty is the source of the movie. China, after all, is a totalitarian communist country, severely limiting speech and conduct. Imagine being an American director dealing with this. In the same interview, Zimou alluded to what's involved:

"There is a censorship in place, and you have to submit the screenplay and then the finished film for approval to the government censors. With films like *House of Flying Daggers* and *Hero*, which are both classical costume dramas set in the past, there isn't much of a problem because there's nothing really dealing with contemporary society that they would deem inappropriate or too sensitive. Usually, these things go fairly smoothly since martial arts films are a very big genre in China with not too many subversive elements."

On another note, thankfully, *Daggers* is distributed by Sony Pictures Classics, not Miramax. Miramax butchers the American versions of Chinese movies in the editing room. They delayed the American versions of *Shaolin Soccer* and *Hero*, both major cinematic box office successes in China, by two years. The American version of the former ended up a shell of its former self; view both versions on DVD and witness the horror.

Fans of the Hong Kong (and Chinese) martial arts movie genre long have bemoaned this heavy-handedness. Such movies need to be seen as intended by the director in the original format, in order to truly understand and appreciate the form. Given the relatively quick US release of *Flying Daggers* following its Asian distribution, it seems that Sony Pictures Classics embraced this belief.

I had great expectations before seeing *House of Flying Daggers*. The movie succeeds on every level. If you seek adventure, suspense, heartrending emotion, and superb fighting scenes, go see

—*Probability Broach*, continued from page 5

does that include the bad smell that lingers around smokers? I suppose, since governments everywhere wage yet another War on Something—in this instance: tobacco—smoking has become an act of defiance.

Bieser imbues Bear with numerous and hilarious facial expressions. Even Bear's hat takes on a distinct personality, and accompanies him virtually everywhere. **The Probability Broach** derives much of its success and appreciation not just from creating a believable, and in some regards desirable, libertarian utopia, but also through its very human characters. True, they tend to talk a lot, but they all share a passion for life and liberty.

Inside jokes abound in the book. The intruder who nearly stabs Win at Ed's house, Tricky Dick Milhous (aka Richard Nixon), slimes his way onto the pages with great effect. But wait, is that Jimmy Carter at the Continental Congress, selling "Peanuts! Pinons, Frahd grasshoppahs?" Smith makes at least one cameo appearance, in the bottom right corner of

page 139 as a spectator at this self-same Congressional gathering; a painting on Lucy's wall matches Bieser's cover of Smith's non-fiction collection of essays, **Lever Action**. Friends of Smith appear as store-names, and even characters. Former *The Libertarian Enterprise* editor Dan Weiner replaces Jimmy Valentine in the safe and vault scene from the original book (though the last name on the sign is spelled Wiener). Kerry Pearson, to whose memory the book is dedicated, appears onboard the dirigible *The San Francisco Palace*, where we also briefly see Kent and Fran Van Cleave. There are countless other such details, which add elements of interest to some people, and never really detract from the story.

This graphic novel incarnation of **The Probability Broach** will delight and amuse you once again. Liberty needs its passionate defenders, the people who are willing to throw all their creative effort into the fight for freedoms. You may not agree with everything Smith presents in his version of a free society, but I would take the North American Confederacy over our present option any day. Three cheers for Bieser and Smith.



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