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The Revolution Will Not Be Podcast: Doctorow, Heinlein and the Pragmatics of Rebellion

by Jessica Darago

Robert A. Heinlein is widely known not only as a fiction writer but also as an outspoken libertarian and champion of civil and individual rights. His Hugo-winning 1967 novel, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, reads as much like a political manifesto as like a story. This chronicle of the Lunar colonists' fight for independence from a tyrannical Earth-based Authority could even be read as a manual on How to Run a Revolution in Five Easy Steps. For example, Step One is "Make friends with the self-aware supercomputer that controls all of the financial, communications, and life-support systems on the planet."

...

So much for a manual.

Heinlein has long had a reputation for accurate predictions about technological development; reading *Moon* from the vantage of 2008, one wonders how the hell he got it. His novels depict a world (later retconned into the "LaCroix" parallel timeline, named for that world's first visitor to the Moon; our timeline is, of course, designated "Armstrong") where space travel flourished but computer technology floundered: no microprocessors, no personal computers, no cellular phones, no digital media whatsoever (There's one amusing scene where the lack of Flash is particularly felt. But let's cut the guy some slack; he did predict the answering machine.) Heinlein's computer of the future is a HOLMES IV—a solitary, vacuum-tube leviathan controlling every system "in" Luna.

"When Mike was installed in Luna, he was pure thinkum... He computed ballistics for pilotless freighters and controlled their catapult. This kept him busy less than one percent of time and Luna Authority never believed in idle hands. They kept hooking hardware into him—decision-action boxes to let him boss other computers, bank on bank of additional memories, more banks of associational neural nets, another tubful of twelve-digit random numbers, greatly augmented temporary memory. Human brain has around ten-to-the-tenth neurons. By third year, Mike had better than one and a half

times that number of neuristors.
“And woke up.”¹

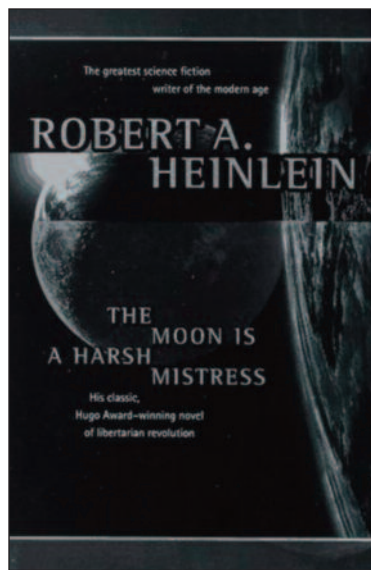
So Mike runs the moon, and Manuel is his on-call engineer and, ultimately, his first friend. After a run-in with a tall, cool blonde, Manuel learns some cold, hard facts: the Authority’s economic policies—namely, shipping millions of tons of Lunar-grown wheat down the gravity well to Earth, taking vital soil nutrients and water with it—has doomed all of Luna’s citizens to slow death by starvation. And the Authority doesn’t care. With Mike’s help, Manuel, Wyoming Knott (the aforementioned blonde), and Manuel’s old friend Professor Bernardo de la Paz set out to overthrow the Authority and, in short, save the planet. Given Heinlein’s failure of prophecy, the tools and techniques the “Committee for Free Luna” use to win Luna’s freedom (landline pay phones, print newspapers, and the like) are, to us, irrelevant, if not outright quaint.

But take careful note of Mike’s most valuable contributions to the conspiracy. It’s lovely and all that he can make the government mucky-muck’s toilet run backwards, and that he composes his own slanderous doggerel about their oppressors, and even that he creates an alter-ego figurehead for the movement—the charming and mysterious Adam Selene. But none of these is as valuable to the movement as his chokehold on Luna’s phone systems. As their movement grows, each member is assigned a private phone number—creating a phone tree that would make any PTA president bow down in awe—and through this communications network the movement becomes a living, moving, self-repairing organism. Without it, the movement could not have started, much less succeeded.

On the other hand, Marcus Yallow, the hero-narrator of Cory Doctorow’s *Little Brother*, has quite the opposite set of resources. Living in present-day (or so near in the future as to be technologically meaningless) San Francisco, Marcus and his band of revolutionaries are typical American teens (of the subtype hacker-geek). Their cell phones are their oxygen; they spend as much if not more of their lives

online than off. Their complaisant, upper-middle-class lives are violently disrupted by a terrorist attack that destroys the Bay Bridge and Tunnel. Marcus and his three best friends are arrested for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time and endure a Guantanamo Bay-like nightmare from which one of them, Darryl, never returns.

Rather than instilling the intended fear, the experience ignites Marcus’s nascent political self. Unable to rescue Darryl, Marcus turns the fuel of his anger against the monstrous “PATRIOT Act II,” which gives the U.S. Federal government the unlimited right to access your personal data and monitor your actions and communications at any time without warrant or probable cause. Soon, Marcus finds his own laptop bugged—apparently, the Feds haven’t forgotten him. So, in the absence of a friendly neighborhood A.I., Marcus builds his own silicon best friend: the Xnet.



“[T]he Universal was the first Xbox that Microsoft decided to give away for free...

“... Naturally, there were countermeasures to make sure you only played games from companies that had bought licenses from Microsoft to make them.

“Hackers blow through those countermeasures. The Xbox was cracked by a kid from MIT...

“... Soon there were dozens of alternate operating systems for the Xbox Universal. My favorite was ParanoidXbox, a flavor of ParanoidLinux. ParanoidLinux is an operating system that assumes that its operator is under assault from the government... and it does everything it can to keep your communications and documents a secret...

“... When you combined it all, you had a free console full of free games that could get you free Internet access.

“And the best part—as far as I was concerned—was that ParanoidXbox is *paranoid*. Every bit that went over the air was scrambled to within an inch of its life. You could

wiretap it all you wanted, but you'd never figure out who was talking, what they were talking about, or who they were talking to. Anonymous web, email, and IM. Just what I needed."²

Marcus pimps the OS to all his gamer friends, and soon there is a completely secure, completely free Internet running parallel to our own—just like the Loonies' phone system. Where the Lunar conspiracy was kept safe from infiltration by Mike's foolproof loyalty, Marcus and his comrades create a "web of trust" using public-key cryptography. I'll spare you the details—because Doctrow does not— but, in short, they encrypt all their correspondence with a military-grade dual-digital-signature system that is, at this time, nearly impossible to crack.

The Xnet may lack Mike's charms (and predilection for bad jokes), but it's a glimpse of something that *could be*—that frankly, most likely *will be*, out of Sweden if not the U.S.—not in the distant future but before the end of the decade. (In fact, according to group blog boingboing.net, to which Doctrow is a regular contributor, ParanoidLinux will soon be a reality.³ Ubuntu... Hardy? You're on notice.)

However, unlike Mike, the Xnet doesn't control water and power, sewage and air, phones and finances. Marcus et al. can't (well, perhaps they can, but they don't) use Xnet access the government's secret files and conduct counterintelligence like Mike does. But the with Xnet, like all distributed networks (and indeed, like the cell system Manuel "invents" for the conspiracy), it's decentralization and redundancy are part of its security. Take out one node, the Xnet lives on; Mike is not so lucky. What Marcus and friends sacrifice in power, they make up for in freedom—which is actually a pretty neat summary of *Little Brother's* politics.

Read both novels successively—or in parallel, if you're up for a challenge—and a host of other similarities of theme, plot, and structure will present themselves. You've got a pair of first-person narrator, "everyman" heroes, and both books emphasize the

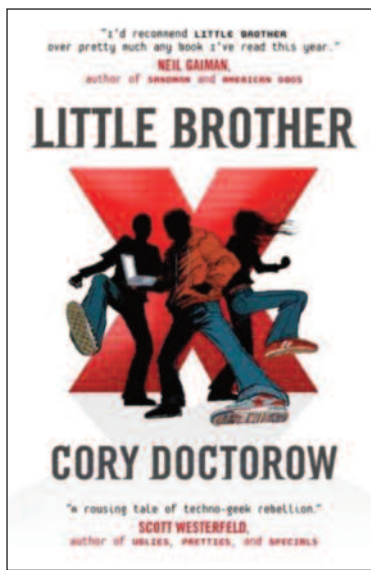
value and importance of family—whatever form "family" may take. Perhaps most significantly, both novels place a high value on intelligence, critical thinking, and free will, but not necessarily in the way you'd expect. Unlike Heinlein's usual band of *ubermenschen*, *Moon's* heroes are a motley crew: the aging, frail Prof, apolitical homebody Manuel, the childlike Mike, and the wounded, heartbroken Wyoming. There's not a drop of real political authority influence among them. Similarly, *Little Brother's* kids are... kids, as disenfranchised and frustrated as any adolescents in history. It both books, it is their combined strengths, varied talents and resources, and—most importantly—integrity that makes them more than

the sum of their parts. At the risk of infecting this 'zine, again, with icky girl stuff, both books ultimately champion the power of friendship, of love.

Of course, some of the books' similarities are less fortunate. Heinlein is one of the Grand Masters of American "Golden Age" science fiction—and we all know what that means. *Moon's* narrative grinds to a halt with regrettable frequency while this, that, or the other lecture on science or politics is delivered. In *Little Brother*, Doctrow is perhaps more old-school than is aesthetically pleasing. He spares us the political

rants, delivering the message more appropriately as pieces of plot, but some of the more, er, *nuanced* descriptions of cryptography and network infrastructure might have been more welcome in an appendix. And if I may once more flaunt my abundance of X-chromosomes, it's disheartening to see, 40 years on, another heroine who begins the novel as a proactive, independent character reduced to little more than a trophy (or, worse, a damsel in distress), proof of the hero's worth. To be fair, this trope is hardly exclusive to Doctrow, or even to straight male writers (Russell T. Davis and J. K. Rowling, I'm looking at *you*), and is probably as much a function of the tight first-person perspective as anything else. The parallels, if you're looking for them (and perhaps even if you're not), are undeniable; *Moon* and *Little Brother* come from the same root stock.

At this point, you're probably thinking, "Great.



Why do I care?"

Allow me to explain.

Think about Heinlein—his work, his reputation, his politics. He's a conservative icon, a libertarian saint. He was a scientist and a military man, a by-your-bootstraps rugged individualist who wrote again and again of the right—no, the obligation—of free people to defend their liberties with their lives. With all due respect to the late Mr. Heston (and you may decide for yourself how much is due), a better NRA poster boy could not be imagined. And yet... And yet...

Think about Doctorow—and if you don't know his reputation, hike thee to boingboing.net or his personal blog, craphound.com, and acquaint yourself. Think about his socialist upbringing, his history of civil disobedience, his professional association with the United Nations that Heinlein so feared and despised. You wouldn't expect his politics to ever intersect with Heinlein's. And yet... And yet...

Could it be that a mid-20th-century conservative and an early-21st-century liberal share an ideology? Forget the categories. Forget the lines. Forget the Red States. Forget the Blue. Look at the stories. Look at the message. In both novels, the most valuable weapon in the resistance's arsenal is *the ability to ensure the flow and security of information*. Knowledge and the means to share it are for both writers the ul-

timate guarantors of liberty.

Now look around you. Forget "the liberal media." Forget Rupert Murdoch. Forget the blogosphere. Look at FISA and its amendments. Look at "net neutrality." Look at what we stand to lose.

What would you give to preserve it?

Endnotes

1. Heinlein, Robert. *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. New York, NY: Tor Books, ISBN 0-312-86176-1, 1966; p. 12.
2. Doctorow, Cory. *Little Brother*. New York, NY: Tor Teen Books, ISBN 0-7653-1985-3, 2008; pp. 86-88. Free electronic edition of the book is available at <http://craphound.com/little-brother/download>.
3. Doctorow, Cory. "Little Brother's ParanoidLinux now under development." *BoingBoing*, 5 June, 2008. 28 June 2008 <http://www.boingboing.net/2008/06/05/little-brothers-para.html>. See also the project's home page, <http://www.paranoidlinux.org>.

Jessica Darago needs to come up with a new bio now that she's one of the editors for Some Fantastic. Either that, or she can use the some boring mini-bio that Matthew usually uses. Her choice.

Commentary: Regular Fantasy, Urban Fantasy, and Real Magic

by *Caroline Isabelle-Caron*

It may come as a surprise to most readers of *Some Fantastic*, though not at all to those who know me, that I don't particularly care for fantasy. In fact, most fantasy gets on my nerves. It's not because I'm a historian and I know that the Middle Ages weren't "like that"—I'm pretty sure most people who read fantasy know that too. I simply don't like mainstream fantasy. I don't like the more and more common derivatives of role-playing games, or the incessant rehashing of Tolkien or Arthurian tropes. I like even less the sad and tragic tale of that poor orphan girl, the last in the line of the fallen true kings of a conquered kingdom, of whom a prophecy has foretold the return after several dif-

ficult trials. You recognize the type? How many times has this story been told? BORING! I also rarely like the kind of fantasy that aims to be more "realistic," where elves and faeries are more in tune with received folklore and that usually read like all the other novels of the type written since the 1930s. Faeries that read like all the other faeries I've read about a hundred times put me to sleep. In a bad way.

I often like urban fantasy better, though not always. Urban fantasy that is really the same as "pastoral" fantasy, but with concrete buildings, bores me just as much. Substituting cars for horses and replacing swords with guns will not make it more interesting to me. It's more likely

I'll resent the author for having attempted it. I have absolutely nothing against faeries, elves, vampires, demons, and whatnot in an urban setting. As a rule, cities are more interesting to me. They are even better with spirits in them. However, if, for example, the faeries live in a world that is parallel but separate from our urban realm and that faery realm has not changed one iota in millennia, while ours has? I tune out. I do not buy that.

That is why I enjoyed Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* so much. For me, that is what urban fantasy should be like. Yes, I think this novel is urban fantasy, though it's "historical" urban fantasy. The story is set in an industrializing Britain; London is as wonderful, lugubrious, and dirty as it was in the 19th century, and so are the smaller industrial towns. The countryside is already firmly entrenched in commercial farming. The Napoleonic Wars are the same, as barbaric and bloody as they were then. Simply, there is magic, British magic at that, and there are faeries, as British as the humans who surround them. The humans of the novel live in the real 19th century, with all its contemporary transformations. So do the faeries; their world has changed with the passage of time, and it is changing then, too. The industrializing world of the humans has an effect on British magic and on the faeries, just like their world and their magic can have an effect on the human world.

If our world, the human world, has changed over the centuries through urbanization and industrialization, why should the faery world, which crosses and overlaps ours, not have changed at all? We have changed our world, irrevocably, but we have not had any effect on the faery world? While they had an effect on ours? I cannot accept that. This is why I cannot wait to see *Hellboy II*. I know Guillermo del Toro sees things in a very similar way to me.

I have been thinking a lot about these things in the past few weeks. Much of this is emanating from an ongoing discussion with author Jo Wal-

ton. It was also influenced by the reflections derived from a few panels I participated in at the last Boréal convention in Montréal in early May. Jo is currently working on a new novel. I will not give away any details, but let me just say that she has gotten me very interested in the topic at hand. She is reflecting on the urban and industrial world and the place of magic in it. I find what she has to say fascinating. When we last had dinner, she wondered what coal was to faeries. To us, it is fuel. But to them, what do those past leaves, trees, and animals, compressed in time, by time, truly mean? Her question haunts me. Literally. I cannot wait to see the answer that she has found.¹

These days, I'm thinking a lot about magic in the urban world, too. For me, the city is a lot more magical than nature or the countryside. I know this is counterintuitive for most people, but I think I'm in the right. Nature is alive; there is nothing magical about that. It's life, not magic. On the other hand, the city does not, cannot exist without us. It can only exist if we are in it. We give the city life. How magical is that? Nature kills the city. If we are not in it, nature takes over and the city dies. Is that not magic, that we give it life by simply being there? What does it give us back?

This idea haunts me and my dreams these days, to the point of interfering with my own writing. I may have to put aside the *Sprawling Novel of Doom* and work on this instead. It may be Jo's fault. It's probably Montréal's fault; its concrete, its cement, its asphalt call to me. I close my eyes and think of this city, and I can hear the magic blown in the wind. You know when the wind catches a corner of a building and twirls and takes a few ruffled leaves and papers into a dance? That's magic. When, early in the morning, downtown, before people come in for the working day, when the sun is not quite up yet and the traffic noise is still only a faint rumble in the distance? The buildings breathe their first breath of the day. The city is awaking before its humans start their day. That's magic

to me. When we walk in the city, its sidewalks tell us where to go. You know what I mean: we are all a little lost when we suddenly get to a street with no sidewalks; where are we going to walk? That is city magic. The city guides our steps. It channels our traffic. It tells us where to go. Paris is magic like that, too, with its impossibly yellow soil coming through the cracks in the pavement, no matter how much cement humans pour over it. Paris's foundations are yellow. I miss Paris, too.

Real magic is spread by the city wind. I am certain of that.

Endnote:

1. In the meantime, you should all go read Jo Walton's novels, especially the *Farthing* trilogy, the third volume of which comes out next September. It's uchronia, not fantasy, and it's great!

Caroline-Isabelle Caron is a history professor taking a sabbatical year off. So whatever is happening at the university at which she works, she does not care much.

Just Imagine; A Look at the Lost Sci-Fi Classic

by Steven H Silver

The most famous of the early science fiction films is Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), followed closely by Georges Méliès's *Le Voyage Dans la Lune* (1902). However, there is another, lesser-known early science fiction film that was just as ground-breaking as those two films. In 1930, David Butler directed *Just Imagine*, which has the distinction of being not only the first science fiction talkie, but also the first science fiction musical. For many years, the film was thought to be lost, until an audit of the Fox vaults turned up a copy in 1970.

Just Imagine starred El Brendel (né Elmer Goodfellow Brendle) as Single O, a man from 1930 who has awoken in the far future year of 1980 and is given a tour of this brave new world where names have been replaced by letter/number combinations. While this does strike us as silly, compare it to Hugo Gerns-

back's 1925 novel *Ralph 124C 41+*, in which surnames have been replaced by number combinations.

El Brendel was a vaudeville comedian whose particular schtick was to imitate an exaggerated Swedish accent, although he was born in Philadelphia. This type of thing was common in those days, and vaudevillians often carried their accents into films, perhaps the most notable example being Chico Marx and his faux Italian accent (Groucho Marx had given up his faux-German accent during World War I). In *Just Imagine*, Brendel carried his accent over to his character, including his catch phrase, which survives to this day: "Yumpin' Yimminy!"

While Brendel is largely forgotten today (he also had a role in the 1927 film *Wings*, which won the first Academy Award), at least one of his co-stars in *Just Imagine* went on to create a name for herself:



Just Imagine

Original Release Date: November, 1930 (no DVD or VHS release)
Starring: El Brendel, Maureen O'Sullivan, John Garrick, Marjorie White & Frank Albertson
Director: David Butler
Screenwriter: Buddy G. DeSylva, Lew Brown & Ray Henderson
Rated: NR
Studio: Fox Film Corporation

Maureen O'Sullivan, in one of her first films, portrays LN-18. Two years later, O'Sullivan would appear as Jane Parker in *Tarzan the Ape Man* opposite Johnny Weismuller.

Just Imagine was nominated for a single Academy Award, Best Art Direction, for Stephen Goosson and Ralph Hammeras in recognition of their use of early rear-projection technology. The men lost the award to Max Rée for his work on the western *Cimarron*.

The world of 1980 as depicted in the film is, of course, little like the actual world of 1980. However, it does incorporate many of the tropes common to later science fiction films as well as the stories that were appearing in *Amazing*, *Astounding*, and several other genre magazines. The city was filled with 250-story skyscrapers (for comparison, Taipei 101 has 101 stories and the Sears Tower has 110 stories), flying cars, naturally, as well as rockets and roof-top landing fields, and food in a capsule. Most of these innovations were played for laughs, with El Brendel repeatedly commenting that he prefers the old ways.

El Brendel's character is not the only thing that doesn't sit right with modern viewers. The pacing is odd, with many slow areas. Apparently, this is sometimes a pause to allow the audience to laugh without stepping on the next line. Other times it may just be chalked up to the poor film editing, writing, and direction of the movie. Another feature that exacerbates the strange pacing is the fact that early sound movies often did not include incidental music. When there is no dialogue, the films, including *Just Imagine*, are eerily silent.

Maureen O'Sullivan provides a good indication of how the material affects an actor's appearance in a film. A comparison between her role in *Just Imagine* and another musical comedy only seven years later in *A Day at the Races* shows how important direction and script are. While a sustainable case can be made that film-making, especially talkies, made enormous advances in the seven years between those two films, a look at another musical comedy from 1930, *Animal Crackers*, shows that directors in 1930 *could* create lasting comedy. (*Just Imagine* does compare more favorably, but still falls short, of 1929's *The Cocoanuts*).

As stated previously, in the far future year of 1980 people are provided with letter-number combinations rather than names. Our hero is J-21 (John Garrick), who is waiting to hear if he will be allowed

to marry his sweetheart, LN-18 (Maureen O'Sullivan). To while away the time, J-21 and his pal, RT-42 (Frank Albertson) go to a laboratory to watch a scientist re-animate a man who was struck by lightning in 1930. The old-timer, quickly dubbed Single O (El Brendel). Single O provides the fish-out-of-water character that allows Butler to give a tour of the future to the audience.

Once J-21 receives word that he is not to marry LN-18, the action shifts. He is given the opportunity to reverse the decision if he (and friends RT-42 and Single O) travel to Mars, providing an even larger fish-out-of-water setting as the three make the voyage to the Red Planet to witness another strange civilization, which seems to have many parallels with the primitive culture that theater-goers would encounter three years later in *King Kong*.

Naturally, in the end, J-21 wins the girl and Single O is reunited with one of his surviving family, now old enough to be his own grandfather.

As noted, the film was a musical, including seven musical numbers. While many musicals from the period re-used popular songs, six of the pieces included in *Just Imagine* were written for the film by Buddy G. DeSylva, Lew Brown, and Ray Henderson. These include "Old-Fashioned Girl," "Mothers Ought to Tell Their Daughters," "You Are the Melody," and others. None of these songs approached the popularity of their most famous composition, "Sweet Georgia Brown." The only re-used song is a partial performance of the 1903 song "You're the Flower of My Heart, Sweet Adeline," by Harry Armstrong and Richard H. Gerard.

Generally, these musical numbers stop the film dead in its tracks, although the general pace of the movie is not particularly fast moving in any event.



Unlike many other musicals, both before and since, the songs do nothing to advance the plot, and those few plot-driven sequences, such as the dance of the Martians, just seem to drag on for an eternity, making one almost envy Single O the fifty years he spent dead.

The humor of the film is also dated, some of it based on El Brendel's vaudeville act, some of it an attempt to be topical, little of it managing to remain humorous seventy-eight years after the film was released to theaters. The humor in the film can be summed up by a discussion that comes when the three intrepid explorers are on Mars, watching an interminable dance sequence from their prison cell:

Single O: Who is that fellow?

RT-42: He's an idol.

Single O: He's idle? With all those women?

About the only actor in the film who shows any signs of comedic talent is Marjorie White, as D-6, RT-42's girlfriend, although her baby-girl voice, so typ-

ical of actresses in the early days of talkies, grates. (White, incidentally, only appeared in sixteen films before she was killed in a car accident in 1935.)

Seen from the far-distant year of 2008, *Just Imagine* is a quaint relic. It is notable for being the first science fiction talkie, less so for being the first science fiction musical. Several of its sets and props were later re-used in the Buster Crabbe *Flash Gordon* serials, beginning in 1936. Although *Just Imagine* has never been released on DVD or videotape (remember that ancient technology? It was available in the futuristic year of 1980), it runs on occasion on various cable television stations.

Steven H Silver is a eight-time Hugo Nominee for Best Fan Writer and the Editor of the anthologies Wondrous Beginnings, Magical Beginnings, and Horrible Beginnings. He is the publisher of ISFiC Press. In addition to maintaining several bibliographies and the Harry Turtledove website, Steven is heavily involved in convention planning and publishes the fanzine Argentus.

Planet Terror, Extended and Unrated Two-Disc Special Edition

DVD Review by Richard Fuller

I can read your mind like an invader of the brain from that planet full of scares! You're thinking that any movie with such a silly title is either:

- A Sci Fi Channel *original*—a thumb-sucker aimed at 12-year-old boys and co-starring Tits&Ass,
- A Spike Channel *unoriginal* aimed at 10-year-old male pinkie-suckers and *starring* Ass'n'Tits,
- A Golden Oldie (1950s and '60s) Roger Corman quickie, filmed in two-and-a-half days on a budget of \$14.95 and starring the fiftieth clone of Jack Nicholson—with hair finally guaranteed *not* to fall out(!), or
- A Japanese horror flick with—as always—the worst dubbed voices on spooky Earth.

In addition, this movie almost certainly features:

- A running time of 71 minutes (and no

closing credits listing 800 names and lasting 10-plus minutes but instead a wonderfully brief two-wor-der: *The End*) but *feeling* (to your aching butt) like four hours, and

- Cinematography worse than the two-color process way back in the Cave Man/Woman days.

Let's check out *Planet Terror's* DVD cover for clues, hints, promises, whatever.

Although the cover looks worn, dog-eared, and older than Cave folk, this "Extended and Unrated" DVD is brand (spanking!) new. Did this artfully "antique" cover time travel from long before Roger Corman made D-plus flicks on Z budgets? Or does the cover imply (or, tee-hee, *subtext*) that you're about to visit a sendup of the old flickeroos that always traveled in pairs at theaters with ancient gum and crumbs of Cave Couple popcorn on the floors?

That doggy-eared cover is a hint of how the enclosed DVD/movie (plus a violent, silly preview) looks: scratchy, faded colors, even a missing reel so

you don't see a guy and gal doin' humpty-dumpty. It's a time-traveling "antique" homage/sendup. You *went* to them to be bummed out, as I and my college classmates did on Sunday nights: we wanted a see a flick we *loved* hating.

The top cover credit reads "Grindhouse Presents." I've seen lots of lousy double-headers at miserable theaters, but none of the old Grindhouses. But isn't cruddy just *cruddy* no matter the decade? Or did the French also invent *auteur* cruddy?

Speaking of which, the next line auteurs: "Robert Rodriguez's," and then below that the movie's title and finally a quote: "An instant classic." (You'll need a magnifying glass to read who drooled that.)

Dominating the cover is a pretty gal. She's in the center with wind-blown hair, her body mostly exposed. On her right are a guy and gal, on her left two dudes (one of them Bruce Willis in a beret, for *auteur's* sake!). Note that guys outnumber gals three to two, as usual in this Boys' Club medium. But here's the visual grabber: most of the lead gal's right leg is missing and replaced with a machine gun.

Is she going to take on The Wild Bunch with that rattler of a gam? Is it a rat-tat-tat metaphor promising a Loony Tunes-esque Bonnie'n'Clyde flick? Should I just watch, drink in hand, instead of reviewing somethin' meant only to be viewed while brewed? And should *you* be reviewing my piece, giving it two legs down? Or kindly offering a leg up?

Instead of a review, call this a bemuse. Give the flicker the subtitle *Round Up the Usual Cliches*. As:

- Zombies, for George A. Romero sake!

- A couple that once split now getting back together—to kick zombie asses! Played by screen stealers Rose McGowan (with that machine-gun leg) and Freddy Rodríguez (*Six Feet Under*), who's not related to the auteur.
- A mutually hating married couple (Josh Brolin and Marley Shelton) who are doctors. Guess who turns zombie-esque? (Aside: they have a son—played by the director's seven-year-old boy Rebel—who shoots himself in the released movie version but lives in the extra footage directed by Dad. Does that make his son *part* zombie? If so, Dad, change his first name, for James Dean sake! And oh: Dad's other three sons are Rocket, Racer, and Rogue, for *oh!* sake. They're probably all toileted-off for not being in his flick.)
- Zillions of zombies being scene-chewingly killed and spilling enough blood to turn every theater into Lake Shining.

About that machine-gun leg: You first see Rose McGowan, aka Cherry, dancing in a joint called (think what guys scream during the cliché chase) *Go Go Go* and possessing two gorgeous human legs. During that dance, Cherry leans close to her mirror image... and licks it! (Listen, bemused, to the writer-director-auteur as he annotates his movie—and that particular bit. Think the *L Word*.) Cherry also *cries* as she sex-dances. This boo-hoo-ha! of a movie sticks its rat-tat-tat into every movie cliché ever wit-

Planet Terror, Extended and Unrated Two-Disc Edition



DVD Release Date: October, 2007
Starring: Rose McGowan, Freddy Rodríguez, Josh Brolin, Jeff Fahey, Bruce Willis, Michael Biehn, & Marley Shelton
Director: Robert Rodriguez
Screenwriter: Robert Rodriguez
Rated: NR (original theatrical version rated R)
Number of Discs: 2
Studio: The Weinstein Company
Special Features: Audio commentary by writer/director Robert Rodriguez; audience screening track; *Planet Terror* international trailer; featurettes: "10-Minute Film School"; "The Badass Babes of *Planet Terror*"; "The Guys of *Planet Terror*"; "Casting Robert Rodriguez's Son Rebel"; "Sickos, Bullets and Explosions: The Stunts of *Planet Terror*"; & "The Friend, the Doctor and the Real Estate Agent."

nessed... or heard. Recall scenes of macho guys forever challenging each other about the size of their balls. The great laid-back, intense Naveen Andrews (*Lost*) says to a testicle challenger, "I also want your balls." After Naveen throws a large cutter to the guy, he protests, "I'm really quite attached to them." Naveen nods to his nip-tuck buddies, who clip-clip. A testicle flies through the air and onto the ground. Naveen touches it delicately with a foot and then shoots the screaming, operatic castrato. Another buddy holds a huge jar of balls.

Soldier Bruce Willis then confronts Naveen about an empty cage. Three of Naveen's thingieys have apparently escaped. "Where's the shit?" Bruce toilet-cliches. (Note: the writer-director-*auteur* informs us Bruce isn't listed in the opening credits. Call him Bruce Anus.) Bruce then claims, "I've got you by the balls." And his face starts blistering. And Naveen shoots some gizmos that immediately emit smoke, guys lurch through that smoke with blistering, bloody faces—and everyone starts shooting!

And all you guys watching this over-the-topper are knee-squeezing your terrorized testicles and clutching a huge roll of toilet paper while gals point and scream at you. They don't need to play

femmes fatales and do the old nip-tucky because the film's *auteur* is behind the scene-chewing as a male nip-fatale. Smirking? Sucking a thumb.

Jeff Fahey (who plays a pilot in the recent season of *Lost*) runs a joint called *The Bone Shack* and is obsessed with inventing a unique barbecue sauce. He finally does, co-starring his own blood. His brother (Michael Biehn) is the small-town Texas sheriff who keeps refusing to give prisoner Freddy Rodríguez a gun. When he finally does, Freddy and Bonnie Cherry rooty-toot-toot those zombies like holy Hades. Rounding up the usual Toppers are twin nieces of the director who play twin babysitters and car bashers.

Casting aside: the *auteur* also puts Quentin Tarantino in a part that requires him to die—oh, seems like four or five times. Quentin and Robert are long-time buddies and partners (the Grindhouse theatrical release includes *Death Proof*, a flick by Quentin). Consider them Siamese Teenage-Twins joined at the sickbone. For me, Mel Brooks and Woody Allen were once tied for Worst Place as writer-directors casting their lousy acting selves in their movies. Then along came Quentin. Lousy? Even while being interviewed, Quentin waves his arms and flaps his flipper lips as if high on drugs from a terrorist planet. He belongs in a Bugs Bunny cartoon with that great rabbit flipping those lips with a carrot. As a would-be actor, Quentin belongs in a rubber room in a galaxy far, far aside.

Another aside: this "Extended and Unrated" version, like the original Grindhouse release, is also sort of a double-header, including two DVDs. Here's the lineup on the second one:

- "10-Minute Film School" (11:52): Rodríguez says his picture includes about 450 special effects, including Rose's leg—with no trigger!
- "The Badass Babes of *Planet Terror*" (11:50): They're supposed to be sexy *and* romantic. Gosh. Up with those heart-strings!
- "The Guys of *Planet Terror*" (16:32): Well, you know.
- "Casting Robert Rodriguez's Son Rebel" (5:34): Don't fast-forward through this interesting shortie about the director's son. Interesting info about the gun Rebel



uses to—uh, shoot himself.

- “Sickos, Bullets and Explosions: The Stunts of *Planet Terror*” (13:18): Sickos? Holy Charlton Moses!
- “The Friend, the Doctor and the Real Estate Agent” (6:42): You meet friends of the director he cast in his movie. He tells the doc to talk like “himself.” Well done, *auteur*.

Back to the first DVD. There are two showings of the flick with different “soundtracks.” The one with an audience distantly cackling throughout is a skipper. I listened for about 15 minutes until those cackles put me to sleep. I way prefer the version of the *auteur* annotating. His birth date indicates he’s 40, but a friend claims he’s 14. Call him Bobby. But never once, during his interesting comments, did I hear him suck his thumb or pinkie.

Soon after watching the DVD, I saw Rose McGowan on the great TCM Channel with host Robert Osborne, who seems to have seen every movie ever made on this curious planet. Smart, articulate Rose was picking *The Essentials*: i.e., Serious, Important, Historical *films*, not mere movies. Neither of them mentioned her movie made on yet another weird

planet. And, of course, she never even hinted that, during the movie shoot, she became “involved” with Bobby, who was then separated “amicably” from his wife.

In keeping with planets and clichés, consider Rose from Venus and Bobby from Mars. But all you helpless, hopeless voyeurs have to wonder what happens when they align in bed. For one thing—make that five—Bobby’s flick gives him film credits as writer, director, editor, music composer, and director of photography. *The Five Faces of Bobby*, for multiple personality’s sake? Which one goes to bed with Rose? A different one each week night? *All* of them, for ménage à sextet? Guaranteeing multiple orgasms? Does Rose take off Cherry’s machine-gun leg? She’d better, considering Cherry’s hair trigger. This could turn into a machine-gun wedding. Can you imagine Mr. S. Freud’s first question about their colliding planets? “Try to remember, Rose and Bobby, about your first planet error.”

Richard Fuller was Philadelphia Magazine’s film critic for over twenty years. He was The Philadelphia Inquirer’s book columnist and reviewer for over thirty years. He also taught film and review-writing courses at several universities.

The New Space Opera, edited by Garner Dozois & Jonathan Strahan

Book Review by Danny Adams

Despite the best efforts of certain recent anthologies, “Space Opera” is still a term used to invoke visions of bloated purple prose and overblown epics of ludicrous proportions; sometimes it’s also used as a way to disparage old-time science fiction in general. But the disparaging connotations seem to finally be on their way out. Maybe Dozois and Strahan throwing their own considerable editing skills into the mix will be the tipping point.

“Space Opera” as defined nowadays can be epic and filled with adventure, though (thankfully) not lacking in characterization or plot as its predecessors arguably were in decades past. Writers of 21st-century space opera stories are obviously out to retain the element of star-spanning fun and wonder or the awe of a well-done epic. *The New Space Opera* provides the best of all of these elements—starting with a fantastic historical introduction to the genre.

The first story, Gwyenth Jones’ “Saving Tiamat,” is a well-drawn example of just how different an alien culture can be, despite our similarities: in this case, one alien race eating another isn’t considered murder so much as an insult, because “it was only the poor, the weak-minded, and the disadvantaged who ended up on a plate.” This sets off an interstellar incident in which the narrator, Debra, fights to save the female alien title character against the backdrop of hostilities and cultural prejudice—including her own culture. But when cultures clash, something an alien might find helpful could be something that will trouble your soul for the rest of your life, and Jones does a smashingly good job portraying how winning and losing are often shades of the same color.

Robert Reed’s “Hatch” refers to a birthing (of sorts) rather than a doorway, despite the fact that the

story takes place aboard a Great Ship heading out of the Milky Way—or rather, *outside* of the ship. Thousands of years before the story begins, a behemoth of a creature called the Polypond found the Great Ship and attacked it, all but ruining it. A number of survivors of the attack, now stuck outside the ship, managed to cobble together an existence there. A thousand years later, a child of an important survivor named Peregrine is a raider who—along with an alien friend named Hawking—collects “material” from the spawn hatched by the Polypond. Simply put, there’s far too much going on in this story for any simple review, and everything has a far greater depth than first appears, but what could have been a mish-mash of everything-*with-the-kitchen-sink* is lithely puzzled out by Reed’s narrator. This story, more than many others in the collection, has an *epic* feel about it, but it is all carefully drawn through the perceptions of one man who is willing to take as much time as necessary to figure out what is really going on (sometimes literally) beneath the surface.

War has been an element of science fiction stories since the beginning of the genre, but building peace in the aftermath of war has been touched upon more rarely. In Paul J. McAuley’s “Winning the Peace,” we see that while war is often a brutally straightforward process, the peace afterward can be every bit as brutal but hardly straightforward. Carver White was on the war’s losing side and is now an indentured servant to the victors, complete with a “Judas Bridge,” a slave collar-like device, capable of inflicting severe pain if he disobeys or gets rebellious. Enter one Mr. Kanza, a would-be magnate who needs a big score to keep his creditors off his back—and thinks he has found it in the form of an Elder Culture artifact, if it is in fact an artifact. He needs Carver to gain it but begins Carver’s employ-

ment with a lie that hits home... and the web of deception only gets more tangled from there. The story stays tense throughout as Carver navigates the web with the threats of death or enslavement constantly dogging his heels. He places his trust first in an alien whose race (like many others) has made a habit of swindling humankind... and then, as the title implies, places trust again in someone who had once, not so long ago, been an enemy. McAuley’s writing style is like a series of quick hammer blows, increasing in intensity as they keep pounding; his writing is compact in form and expansive in implications; and even the ending of the story, breathless though the reader may be by that point, makes one want to take a deep breath and plunge in again.

“Minla’s Flowers” by Alistair Reynolds starts out with a single, simple sentence—“Mission interrupted”—that sets in motion a chain of events covering decades and a world on the edge of destruction, all from the perspective of one traveler named Merlin who misses years at a time due to remaining in a state called “frostwatch.” “If I’m going to be any help to you,” he says, “I have to see this whole thing out.” And so he does—decade after decade, as a little girl who captures his heart at the beginning—Minla—grows to young womanhood, then middle age, coming into greater and greater power as time passes. Her flowers start off innocently enough, but by the story’s end become something dark with horrible consequences for her world. Yet she is never anything less than believable and is almost sympathetic during her world’s worst times. The conclusion of the story is space opera at its best.

“Splinters of Glass” by Mary Rosenblum is action-packed, with diverse elements that include forbidden technology, a thinking creature humans call “moss” that is neither plant nor animal, and an assassin chasing his quarry through caverns carved out beneath miles of ice on Europa—all while maintaining a hard SF edge as sharp as the edges and fragments Rosenblum describes in one especially recently formed cave. When the story reaches its fastest clip, it leaves the reader feeling breathless, just as her descriptions of the under-ice world make one feel as if you can see your breath fogging in front of you while you read. Overall it’s the most intelligent roller-coaster ride I’ve been on in awhile.

Stephen Baxter’s “Remembrance” is a story set in his Xeelee cycle, though it’s the Squeem—an alien

The New Space Opera

Editors: Gardner Dozois & Jonathan Strahan

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race that conquers our solar system for a time—that provide the focus of the story. Baxter twists the idea of space opera around, though: instead of the events unfolding as you read, the narrator is an old man who relates a tale about the Squeem occupation of Earth in years past. The tale is a horrific recounting of Squeem vengeance against human resistance, which Baxter details with flair even through the often-uncertain vehicle of dialogue and flashback. It is a vengeance that nobody remembers, by design—for the knowledge of it had been devastating to our species, just as Baxter’s supposed simplicity of narrative itself is devastating as he reveals the event. That climax is visceral storytelling at its best.

“The Emperor and the Maula” by Robert Silverberg is a colorful retelling of *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, although in this case the beautiful storyteller, Laylah Walis, moves to position herself as Scheherazade not to be the wife of Shahryar (who in this reimagining is an alien emperor controlling Earth from his distant homeworld), but to strike a blow on behalf of her enslaved species. Her tales are not separate stories in themselves, but each night she gives a new installment to her life story and how she came to be bold enough to come to the alien homeworld. The emperor himself, Ryah VII, is intrigued enough by her to let her keep going on night after night rather than ordering her mandatory execution. The ending won’t come as much of a surprise, particularly if you’re at all familiar with the original. But this master who was publishing when the original space opera was still in its heyday keeps his rendition entertaining throughout.

“Art of War” by Nancy Kress tells of a different kind of soldier, or one who would be a different kind: a soldier who repatriates artifacts stolen and stored by an alien race, especially when those artifacts are artworks. Sometimes the artifacts are worthless in human terms, but often they are priceless masterpieces; the aliens, the Teli, either can’t tell the difference or have their own notions of worth. Whatever the answer, the soldier—an art historian for the military named Porter—encounters resistance from his own military that is far greater than offered by any aliens; he runs up against military men (and women) who care nothing for art, only combat. Even the argument that the art may have been taken so the Teli might learn something significant about humanity falls on deaf ears. The story is woven lightly

at first and begins to tighten little by little as Porter begins to make what he believes is a discovery about the nature of the Teli... and one that will most likely be ignored by the Earth brass, to the tragic detriment of both races. Kress’ prose feels like a boat sailing over waters going from smooth to increasingly dangerous rapids, where realization of what is happening comes too late to turn around.

Dan Simmons’ “Muse of Fire” is the final and crowning piece of the anthology. Most of humanity has been enslaved and scattered throughout the stars, with Earth relegated to being a graveyard world—but our narrator, Wilbr, and his companions possess some small measure of freedom as performers traveling the planets where humans live and labor. They are permitted to do this by the Archons, the rulers, who occasionally watch the plays but rarely react. Human society has been under the Archons’ control so deeply for so long that they have become divine figures in human religion—but as it happens, they have masters, and their masters have masters... and the thespian crew of the *Muse of Fire*

This Date in Alternate History: August 19, 1994

By Matthew Appleton

August 19, 1994, was the day that the space-time continuum actually fell apart. Oddly, it fell apart in reverse fashion, making the past flexible, easily changeable, and continuing to unceasingly mutate. The fluctuations grow ever more severe the further back in recorded history. The future, however, became now irrevocably fixed on a straight-line path with no hope of deviation. For a brief, unsettling moment, everyone on Earth became aware of this unsettling and disturbing truth. As the facts of the past changed, so did our memories and our recorded history.

Only a few unfortunate souls did not experience the virtually instantaneous collective amnesia that overcame humankind in an effort to protect its own sanity. Those individuals are the only ones who see these changes, and when they try to tell people about them, their words, both written and verbal, are immediately forgotten—overwritten by the fluid shifting of past timelines.

With the exception of those forelorn souls who know the truth, the only sign that something happened on that evening is the unsettling feeling that everyone, feels when reminded of August 19, 1994. Something happened on that night, but no one can recall exactly what it was.

has been charged with performing plays for all of them, one right after the other, with practically no time in between to rest and prepare. At stake is the survival of humanity itself. If they fail, all humans everywhere will be lost.

“Muse of Fire” is masterfully done: when the players are exhausted, the reader feels the aches of their fatigue. When they argue about who should get what part in the next play, the reader shares Wilbr’s frustration and prejudices. As they perform for each increasingly powerful race, there is terror in the awe while breath is held through each new performance—and often longer, since the aliens do not always react in any way humans can discern. It’s a common trope but hard thing to pull off, incorporating Shakespeare into a story—particularly when the characters are a theatrical troupe.

But Simmons handles it so skillfully, building and building the pressure on both characters and

readers, that you may very well be left wondering at the conclusion of the story—at the end of this anthology entire, really—why anyone would still want to use the term “space opera” to be synonymous with bad science fiction.

*Danny Adams is the author of the short novel The City Beyond Play, co-authored with Philip Jose Farmer and available for purchase from PS Publishing. In addition, his shorter works have appeared or are forthcoming in magazines such as Abyss & Apex, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, The Mount Zion Speculative Fiction Review, Mythic Delirium, Not One Of Us, Star*Line, Strange Horizons and Weird Tales. He and his wife Laurie live deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia with four cats who never fail to provide thrilling wonders, dangerous adventures, and chilling perils!*

The New Weird, edited by Ann Vandermeer & Jeff Vandermeer

Book Review by Edna Stumpf

Y’know, it seems that ever since I was born, SF people have been arguing definitions. Well—at least ever since I used to steal my Dad’s issues of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* back in the day. Remember the one with the funny face in the *F*? When did they retire that?

First, it was “What is science fiction? Some of it isn’t scientific. Some of it isn’t fictional. Maybe we need a new name.” “Speculative fabulation” was my favorite. And the “New Wave.” The early ‘70s. Such excitement.

Since then, you may have noticed, little brother fantasy has done some body-building and territorial expansion at your local bookstore. Once a slender, acquired taste fellow-traveling with kiddie lit and the time-honored ghostly tale, it has, since the Tolkien Event of the ‘60s, become synonymous with the multi-volume series set in detailed alternate universes with pre-modern cultures. “Epic” or “heroic” fantasy is, I believe, the approved designation. (No one who actually reads Robert Jordan, George R.R. Martin, or Joe Abercrombie would ever confuse one of them with J.R.R. Tolkien. But I think there’s a pesky Critics’ Union bylaw that you can’t mention fantasy without alluding to the Founder of the Feast.)

So now, somewhat in reaction to this, there are

fresh arguments and spiffy new names. “Magic Realism,” imported from the high-culture folks. “Science Fantasy”: a handy portmanteau. “Slipstream,” which I picked up recently and to me has something to do with the fact that brand-name mainstream writers—Vonnegut, Margaret Atwood, Martin Amis—have been borrowing genre tropes or a generally surrealistic mood and rendering the genre boundaries porous. And some of the more literary fantasy authors—Elizabeth Hand, Karen Joy Fowler—have been sliding the other direction under cover of confusion and claiming space in General Fiction.

Bringing us to the “New Weird.” Not only the name of this collection, it’s a fictional movement of sorts that you may not have heard of and that you may never feel the necessity of hearing of, since some niche writers’-club members somewhere are probably crafting a new term as I type. But let’s focus on its 15 minutes of fame.

Most authors who appear in this book write pretty good prose. Some eloquently argue the definition of New Weird. Some deny that they write it, also eloquently. As the buyer of this mixed blessing of a book, you get to pick, choose, judge.

You’re not going to get a definition without earning it by reading at least some of the “Symposium”

essays on the subject provided here. I will, however, give you a hint. *The New Weird* is full of killers, monsters, decaying flesh and infrastructures, neurosis, psychosis, ichors. If you don't like these things, I'd suggest a nice Charles DeLint.

The old man of this tome is probably Michael Moorcock, a writer (and influential editor) who once made minor history by, in *Elric of Melniboné*, introducing Conan the Barbarian to Existentialism. His "Crossing to Cambodia" (1979) is a bleak war fable harking back to the bleak days of Vietnam War resistance. Clive Barker, also a writer of longevity, is represented by his "In the Hills, the Cities," one of the earliest and most exhilarating things he ever produced. The metaphoric rivalry of European villages becomes grossly literal. Nope: can't explain it; can't forget it.

M. John Harrison and Kathe Koja are two more names you've heard and learned to respect. The first presents the image of a woman with an insect's head ("The Luck in the Head," 1984), the second that of a rejected lover rotting against a back fence ("The Neglected Garden," 1991). They both write exquisitely. Almost everything in *The New Weird* is reprinted. The editors position their selection of stories by demonstrating that the roots of the brand go far back in time as well as dangerously deep into the psyche. Of the newer writers, you might have heard of Jeffrey Ford and *certainly* of China Mieville, the heavy-hitter of this evanescent movement whose *Perdido Street Station* generated in 2000 an electric buzz that still reverberates among those who pay attention. Mieville's contribution, "Jack," is a cheerful though sinister riff on Robin Hood and is actually one of the easier to read pieces in this shading-to-dark volume. Some of these tales stun with their sheer, impenetrable bravado (Steph Swainston's "The Ride of the Gabbleratchet," ripped from her novel *The Modern World*) and some with the sheer transgressiveness of their subject matter. Alistair Rennie's "The Gutter Sees the Light That Never Shines" contains, by contrast with its poetical title, several appalling sociopaths interacting with nasty bodily fluids. Ugly stuff, and not worth the effort. Consider this a warning. Too late for me.

The Symposium essays contain various brainy though occasionally self-serving comments on the *New Weird*. What is it, if we're talking genres? The "mix and medley of fantasy, horror, and science fic-

tion." Where did it come from? H.P. Lovecraft and Gormenghast creator Mervyn Peake are mentioned repeatedly as influences, as well as Moorcock, the resurging New Wave, and, of course, the old *Weird Tales* mag. Another way of answering the question: out of England and Australia, predominantly, and out of the little magazines and specialty presses. (Co-editor Ann Vandermeer runs *The Silver Web* magazine. Her husband is the author of the multiple-award-winning *City of Saints and Madmen*; the very title shrieks *New Weird*.) You will find *City of Saints and Madmen*, *Perdido Street Station*, and Hal Duncan's *Vellum* on chain-store bookshelves. The work of many other Weirders, not so much.

You catch a bit of attitude from these symposiasts: an edgy, argumentative determination to own their niche rather than have it defined and limited by market forces. Swainston states that "the *New Weird* is a wonderful development in literary fantasy fiction.... it is vivid and it is clever. [It] is a kick-back against jaded heroic fantasy which has been the only staple for far too long." She goes on to kid M. John Harrison—"how many revolutions have you been part of?"—and he continues the on-line discussion with, "If I don't throw my hat in the ring, write a preface, do a guest editorial here, write a review in the *Guardian* there, then I'm leaving it to Michael Moorcock or David Hartwell to describe what I (and the British authors I admire) write.... There's a war going on.... It's the struggle to name."

Let's leave them to their struggle. Readers know the true struggle is the search for the good stuff, whatever it's called. *New Weirders* are fortunate in their champion; even those who have taken against Harrison's elusive Viriconium world-building admit that the man has never written an ungraceful phrase. *The New Weird*, however deliberately unpleasant its material, is also deliberately literary. Most of these

The New Weird

Editors: Ann Vandermeer & Jeff Vandermeer

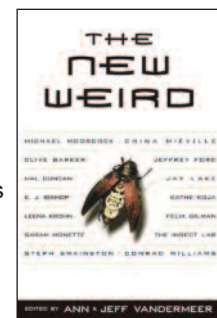
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writers are quite able to spin ugliness into beauty. This collection is full of good stuff, stuff that has been hacked out of the raw ore of the rawest sorts of existence and proficiently polished. If you would like to test the waters before taking the plunge, there's a long piece of fiction—called "Festival Lives"—that combines serially the work of seven, count them, writers: Paul Di Filippo, Cat Rambo, Sarah Monette, Daniel Abraham, Felix Gilman, Hal Duncan, Conrad Williams. They meld well. Try this "Laboratory" piece and discover an imaginative laborer or two who work in fields beyond those you know.

The worst thing you can say about *The New Weird* is that it's almost all reprint (though if it's new to you...). The second worst is that, as often happens

in theme compilations, the wealth of epiphanies tend to confuse and overload the reader's emotional response. This is especially true, of course, when we're dealing in monsters, atrocities and ichors. Last, a personal nit: no Kelly Link?

If you buy, take your time. Put *The New Weird* on your shelf and dip into it for pleasure and education. As we move toward the next big thing, it may become a chunk of history.

Edna Stumpf was a regular Philadelphia Inquirer book reviewer for over 25 years, often writing about science fiction. She also guest-lectured for science fiction film courses.

The Boys, Volume Two: Get Some, written by Garth Ennis, illustrated by Darick Robertson & Peter Snejbjerg

Graphic Novel Review by Hawk

There are the good guys, and then there are the good guys. The first protect us from the villains. In *The Boys, Volume Two: Get Some*, Garth Ennis (*The Authority, Preacher, The Punisher*) and co-creator/illustrator Darick Robertson (*Justice League, New Warriors, Transmetropolitan*) introduce us to the second type. Meet The Boys—Billy Butcher, Mother's Milk, The Female, The Frenchman, and Wee Hughie, the good guys who protect us from the good guys.

The Boys work with the CIA, as well as others, policing the superheroes (a.k.a. supes) that have crossed the line. Like Swingwing and Tek-Knight—one of whom might or might not be involved in the murder of an 18-year-old gay man. The other has lost control of his sex drive and is jumping almost every-

thing in sight.

Or how about when The Boys go to Russia on CIA Director Rayner's behest? Wee Hughie and the retired Russian superhero/cop-turned-barkeep Love Sausage get together for "Is titantic team-up, yes? Together for first time ever?" after the rest of The Boys are taken out of the game by Russian mobsters.

The Boys, Volume Two: Get Some is mostly about Wee Hughie finding his role in the group. Billy Butcher is the leader; The Frenchman will track down whomever you need, like a dog, and then enjoy every minute helping The Female rip their enemies into shreds; and Mothers Milk... well, other than finding out he's ex-military, a beer snob, and has no compunctions about killing enemies as warranted, we don't see or hear much from him.

The trade starts out with the seventh issue of *The Boys*, and Ennis does not bother trying to recap to bring new readers up to speed. We start at the beginning of a new case, knowing Wee Hughie is the new kid on the block; however, we don't know anything else. While Ennis does draw on some comic archetypes—Tek-Knight and Swingwing are obviously based from DC Comic's Batman and Nightwing—not much else is obvious. While most of the plot can be picked up in context, the character backgrounds remain dense and hard to follow for one who has not read the previous issues. We're

The Boys, Volume 2: Get Some

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Illustrators: Darick Robertson
& Peter Snejbjerg
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obviously supposed to know why Wee Hughie is paranoid about hurting non-supes—Likewise, Billy being out of the game for some time is obviously not news to the characters populating this world. However, we, as readers, cannot pick up any of this continuity background in context.

In addition, if you don't want to read swearing, violence, graphic violence, even more graphic violence, sexual innuendo, sex, and racist, ethnic, and/or sexual slurs—don't come and visit *The Boys*. I would be hard-pressed to find a page that wouldn't offend someone. The Boys are hardcore, and Ennis reflects this in their actions, language, and casual brutality.

Darick Roberts, with co-illustrator Peter Snejbjerg (issues 13 and 14), are terrific artists. Whether they are introducing us to our first look at Wee Hughie (who's unwitting model was actor and comedian Simon Pegg), the Tek-Knight's Tek Cave, or copious amounts of violence on the streets of Moscow, the art is top of the line. I prefer my art realistic and popping from the page. Robertson and Snejbjerg aptly fill both of these requirements.

On the whole, I am not a fan of gratuitous, over-the-top violence in my comics. Violence is stock-in-trade for superhero books; however, there's seeing Wonder Woman take down a foe by overpowering them, and then there's seeing the blood spatters from Love Sausage killing two men with one blow from



each fist. I prefer my violence less... Technicolor-vivid and gory.

However, if you're not easily offended and don't mind not understanding the back story (or are willing to pick up Volume One first), *The Boys, Volume Two: Get Some* can be a fun read. Just make sure to keep it away from the youngsters. Seriously.

The Boys, Volume Two: Get Some is published by Dynamic Entertainment. It is rated M (suggested for mature readers) and it certainly has earned that rating.

Hawk lives in California with her husband where she spends almost too much of her time reading comics. When not fulfilling her addiction, she can be found reading books, hiking, researching, or enjoying non-computer gaming.

Stargate: The Ark of Truth

DVD Review by Caroline Isabelle-Caron

I was pretty excited when I heard *Stargate SG-1* was going to continue past its final 10th season in the form of direct-to-DVD movies. It had worked reasonably well for *Babylon 5* and its spin-offs. Considering how consistently good *SG-1* had been, with rather few absolutely terrible episodes, I was ever so hopeful that its continuation in movie form was going to be interesting.

Stargate: Ark of Truth is that: interesting. It is a greatly flawed, frankly awkward movie. It contains all the good elements that had made the series worthwhile, with the noticeable exception of Richard Dean Anderson (Jack O'Neill). Both those elements are stretched to within an inch of their lives. *Ark of Truth*, simply, would have been a very good 72-

minute episode, which would have stretched to 90 minutes with ads on television. Sadly, the makers of *SG-1* decided to fill the whole thing to 96 minutes. The result is unfortunate. Very unfortunate.

Fans of the show have enjoyed its propensity to self-satire. Episodes, especially those featuring Richard Dean Anderson, poked fun at themselves at least in one scene. The hundredth episode ("Wormhole X-treme!") and the hysterically funny two-hundredth episode ("200") are particularly notable for this. The latter spoofs the entire genre, each act poking fun at every cliché, every trope, every trick, every stereotype found in sci-fi television and movies: *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Thunderbirds*, zombies, bad science, illogical plot twists, among others. They also didn't

forget to mock the series's own flaws and tropes. This indicated that the creators of *SG-1* were aware of those pitfalls and attempted to go slightly beyond them, while keeping their tongues firmly in cheek.

So why is it that the ever-regenerating Replicators and (gasp!) zombies (ok, just one) make an appearance in *Ark of Truth*? Simple. To fill the additional 24 minutes required to create a movie out of a 72-minute episode. There was a need to put our heroes in peril for an additional 24 minutes to prevent them from finding and using the eponymous Ark of Truth. So we get Replicators, a nasty NID plant, and a zombie. Take out those elements, and their related dialogue, and we get a quite good episode, on par with the average episodes of the series, say, in season nine. But, unlike ads, those elements cannot be skipped.

The acting direction seems loose as well. Whereas in the series, some overacting by all the actors helped move the satire along, here some actors play close to the vest and others, like Michael Shanks (Daniel Jackson), overact even more than usual. It is as if they were not playing together at all. The extras inform us that they really weren't. *Ark of Truth* was shot in conjunction with the second *SG-1* movie, *Continuum*, and many of the actors had to switch between the two sets in any given week. Claudia Black (Vala Mal Doran) was going through a very difficult pregnancy. Shanks and Christopher Judge (Teal'c) were simply being difficult. Additionally, an entire segment of *Continuum* was being shot on an Alaskan ice-sheet in the middle of winter. I have a sense that *Continuum*, due to its complexity, is going to be better than *Ark of Truth*, simply because it required more

attention from all involved in its development. We will be able to tell on July 29th, when *Continuum* is released on DVD.

Another issue will certainly irk all French-speaking *SG-1* fans in North America. The Region 1 DVD of *Ark of Truth* provides a French-language track recorded in Montréal. That in and of itself should not be an issue, were it not for the fact that the entire *SG-1* series was dubbed in France. In short, the French voices on the DVD sound wrong. The dubbing is quite good, but it plain sounds wrong.

Ark of Truth is disappointing. It is sloppy in a way fans would never have expected from *SG-1*. It was obviously put together quickly, considering all its flaws, and the extras only press this point further. The 2007 ComicCon *Ark of Truth* panel is quite fun, as you would expect from something hosted by the always hilarious Gary Jones (Sgt. Walter Harriman, a.k.a. the Gate Guy). However, the short "making-of" featurette and the 12-minute prelude (a summarization of seasons nine and ten are not particularly engaging, especially for the long-time *SG-1* fan. The audio commentary, featuring creator-producer-director Robert C. Cooper, director of photography Peter Woeste, and Christopher Judge, is at times interesting, at times very funny, and provides tons of trivia, but it is not a must-listen, even for the fan.

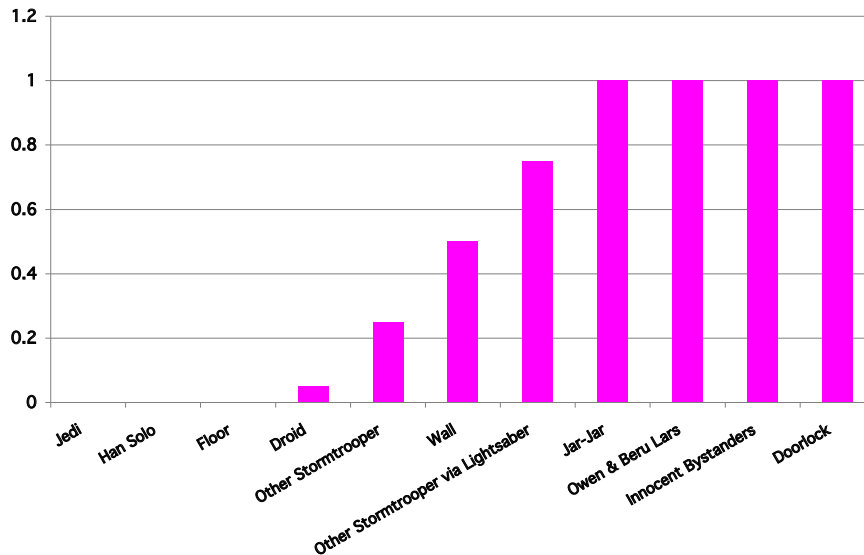
Overall, fans of the series will want to watch *Stargate: Ark of Truth*. I don't regret seeing it. Those less familiar with the series would do better to rent the series's box sets and watch through every episode. They will get a great viewing experience. *Ark of Truth* is a rental, but not a buy. Thankfully, *Continuum* promises to be better.



Stargate: The Ark of Truth

DVD Release Date:	March, 2008
Starring:	Ben Browder, Amanda Tapping, Christopher Judge, Michael Shanks & Claudia Black
Director:	Robert C. Cooper
Screenwriter:	Robert C. Cooper
Rated:	NR
Number of Discs:	1
Studio:	MGM (Video & DVD)
Special Features:	Audio commentary with writer/director Robert C. Cooper, cinematographer Peter Woeste and Christopher Judge; featurettes: "The Road Taken: Prelude to <i>The Ark of Truth</i> "; <i>Stargate SG-1</i> at Comic Con; & "Uncovering the <i>Ark of Truth</i> "; trailers for additional 20th Century Fox/MGM releases.

The Likelihood of Imperial Stormtroopers Hitting Any Given Target (0.0 - 1.0)



©2008, Rebecca Pinski; This graph originally appeared on GraphJam (GraphJam.com), on Apr. 18, 2008

LETTER OF COMMENT

Your little editorial at the end of Issue #14 got me to thinking about the current state of science fiction.

Personally, I don't think it's dead, but merely going through another publishing cycle. At the moment blockbuster fantasy and adventure movies are pushing sales of those kinds of books; those genres have always been more popular than science fiction in terms of sales, and right now fantasy/adventure books are selling very well. I see my students reading lots of these before and after class, which makes me smile because I like to see students reading anything lately instead of always gabbing and/or texting away on their cell phones.

Science fiction book publishing and sales rates will go up again, most likely in tandem with the next big sci-fi movie epic. Remember what happened in the late '70s after *Star Wars* and *ET* hit, plus the *Star Trek* movies? It will happen again. Right now, if you think of book publishing and sales as a wave, the SF publishing market is in a trough. It will rise again.

In the meantime, thank you for another fine issue, and I hope you have a great summer.

All the best,
John Purcell
Askance
j_purcell54@yahoo.com

Having never really seen or knowingly experienced a trough in the typical up-and-down cycles of SF publishing, it's a little harder for me to just accept that this is just another one of those valleys. I certainly don't think SF publishing is dying, but it's hard for me to accept that this isn't something different. I know others have said something

Editorial: The Future Ain't What it Used to Be

It seems to me that we are rapidly approaching (if not already at) a turning point in human history. The run-up in energy and food prices over the past few years suggest that we are finally hitting the upper limits of Earth's capacity to sustain human life. It's been a long time coming—SF writers have been writing stories about the eventuality of this since for over 40 years now. Nonetheless, it surprises me just how unprepared we as a society are for this moment.

I won't get into a political rant about what I think needs to be done to deal with the challenges that peak oil, degradation of the environment, and global climate change present, because I'm not interested in getting into that particular debate at this time. (Suffice it to say that I am a proud liberal, so you can correctly extrapolate approximately 80% of what I think we should do to do get out of this mess.) Regardless of the solutions we employ and the success of them, I think it's safe to assume that how we—and by "we" I mean all of humankind—live life at the end of this century will bear little resemblance to the types of futures frequently presented by SF writers.

This is nothing new, of course. The genre is old enough to have undergone a few different revisions in how it collectively depicts where the human race is headed. For those of us who love the realism embodied by hard SF, for the most part these shifts are welcome. Notions of galactic empires and American Manifest

(continued on next page)

Editorial: Our Fluctuating Future

(continued from previous page)

Destiny in space fit as well today as do Jim Crow laws (not equivocating these notions, mind you; just stating that they are equally archaic).

As for the sci-fi and SF of my youth, my formative teen years coincided with both cyberpunk and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and at the time both futures seemed plausible. It could be that I'm just getting more pessimistic as I get older, but thanks to those aforementioned challenges facing us, I find it increasingly difficult to believe that humankind will continue to advance during the coming decades. (Yes, I know that even in the *Star Trek* universe, humankind had a very ugly 21st century—I'm thinking on different terms here.) It seems to me that over the coming decades we will face a period of intense difficulty and change that will radically redirect how we continue to live—or even just survive—on this planet.

Of course, this viewpoint may just be a product of my generation's (Generation X's) experiences. The fact is that our age group collectively has no real memory of economic hard times—only the oldest of us have a solid memory of the last difficult recession, which took place over 25 years ago—and the type of true economic hardship that some economists predict is coming (i.e., the worst since the Great Depression) is incredibly difficult to envision. Under such circumstances, overreaction is certainly possible—in fact, very likely to happen.

Yet, based on what I read, SF writers are also becoming less upbeat about the future. Admittedly, I don't read half as much new fiction as I would like to read (so it's certainly possible I'm not getting a true representative sample), but it seems that the futures offered by today's writers also show an increasing levels of pessimism regarding our ability to fix the problems we have created and/or ignored for far too long. Is this a realistic assessment, or is this also an overreaction?

As always, the futures depicted in SF and sci-fi change as our understanding of the obstacles we face change. It will be interesting to see which directions the genre collectively decides to take us in our always uncertain future.

Other than the fact that this issue is going online a week late, the new bimonthly publishing schedule seems to be working well thus far. The one thing that we could always use more of is book reviews. If you think you might be interested in getting free books in return for your written opinion on some of the ones you receive, please feel free to contact me at mattapp@gmail.com to discuss becoming a contributor to *Some Fantastic*.

— Matthew Appleton

similar to this many times before, but I do think that we are finally seeing the affect of a graying fanbase at play. That more than anything has me wondering if we are seeing the amount of new material declining—with the explosion in entertainment options over the past 30 years, the genre isn't replenishing it's fan base the way it once did.

Beyond that, I wonder too if there's another element at play: I think in the U.S. especially there's a growing sense of pessimism in the future, and it doesn't bode well for SF. Thanks to New Wave, Cyberpunk and other literary sensibilities that have infused the genre over the past 40 years, SF doesn't paint the optimistic, forward-moving future it once did. In my opinion, this realism is certainly a wonderful thing. However, it's very hard to see much to be optimistic about in the coming years, and I just don't see people turning to SF as a form of escapism the way they had back in the Golden Age of SF. As SF grew up, it lost of some the spirit that we can overcome just about anything in the future—not all of it, mind you, but enough of it that pessimistic and anti-utopian depictions of the future seem to compete rather readily with more positive outlooks for humankind.

What to expect from the future has actually been weighing heavily on my mind as of late. I have a lot more to say about this in the Editorial to this issue.

— Matthew

SOME FANTASTIC

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