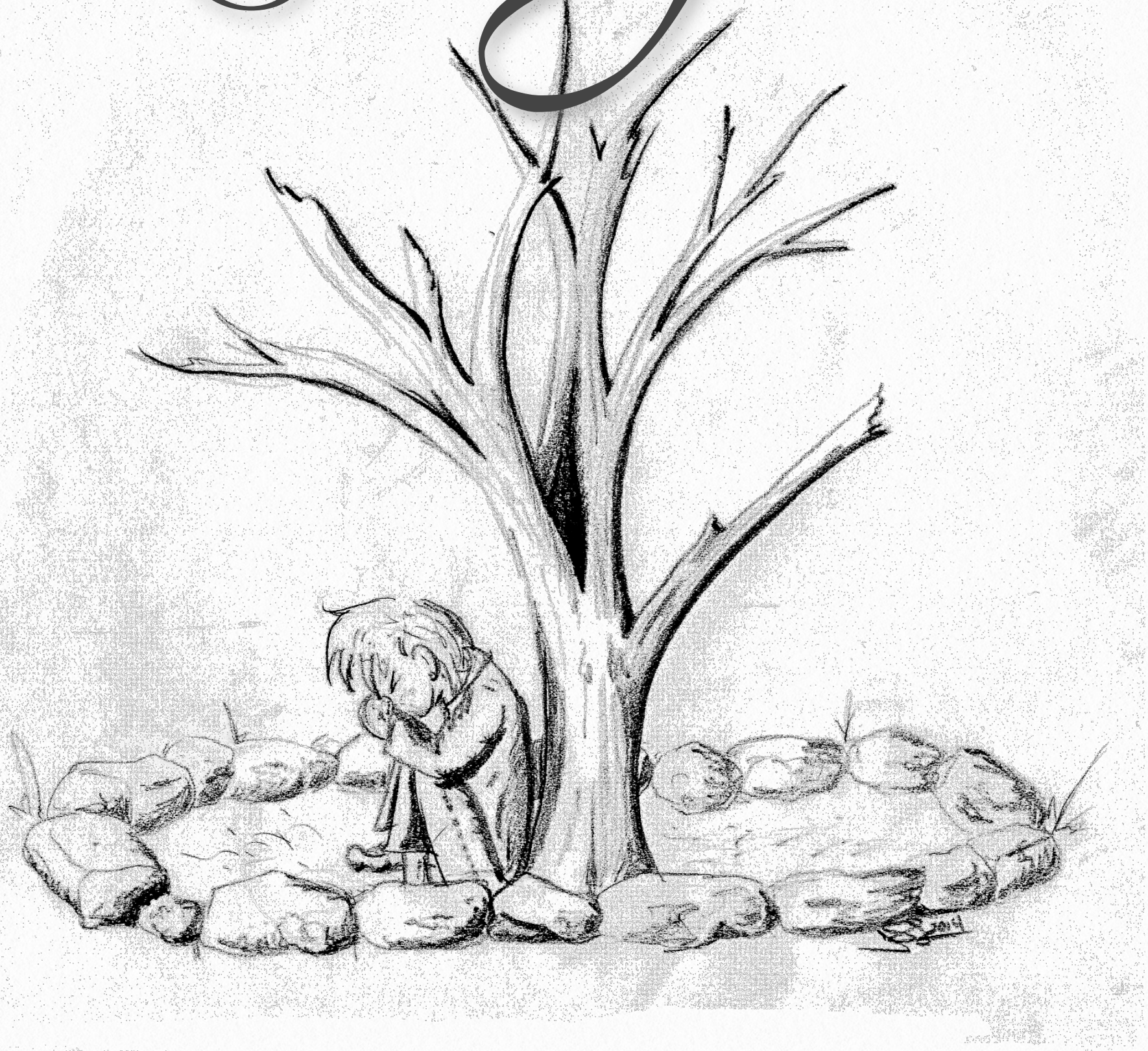
No. 3 / May 2014

Ecdysis



Masthead

Ecdysis

No. 3 / May 2014

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Some Twitter responses to a mass e-mail begging fellow SFWA members for a Nebula nomination in early January 2014.

The Value of Awards

I'll be honest: I have ambivalent feelings about awards.

On the one hand, I find awards *useful*: when so much is published in science fiction and fantasy every year, they serve to winnow the wheat from the chaff. For the past few years I've made a point of reading as many of the award nominees as possible, even if I'm not in a position to vote for them.

But on the other hand, I find awards *annoying*. Not so much the awards themselves. I don't spend time fulminating about the process, or whether the wrong works or individuals were nominated, or whether the wrong works or individuals won, as so many fans seem to do every year.

No, the problem I have with awards is how much we talk about them, and how important we make them.

Which is to say: too much and too much.

One problem with awards is that there are so many of them. By my count there are now more than thirty English-language speculative awards (by which I mean Hugos and

Nebulas and Ditmars, not individual award categories). That's double the number of awards that existed thirty years ago.

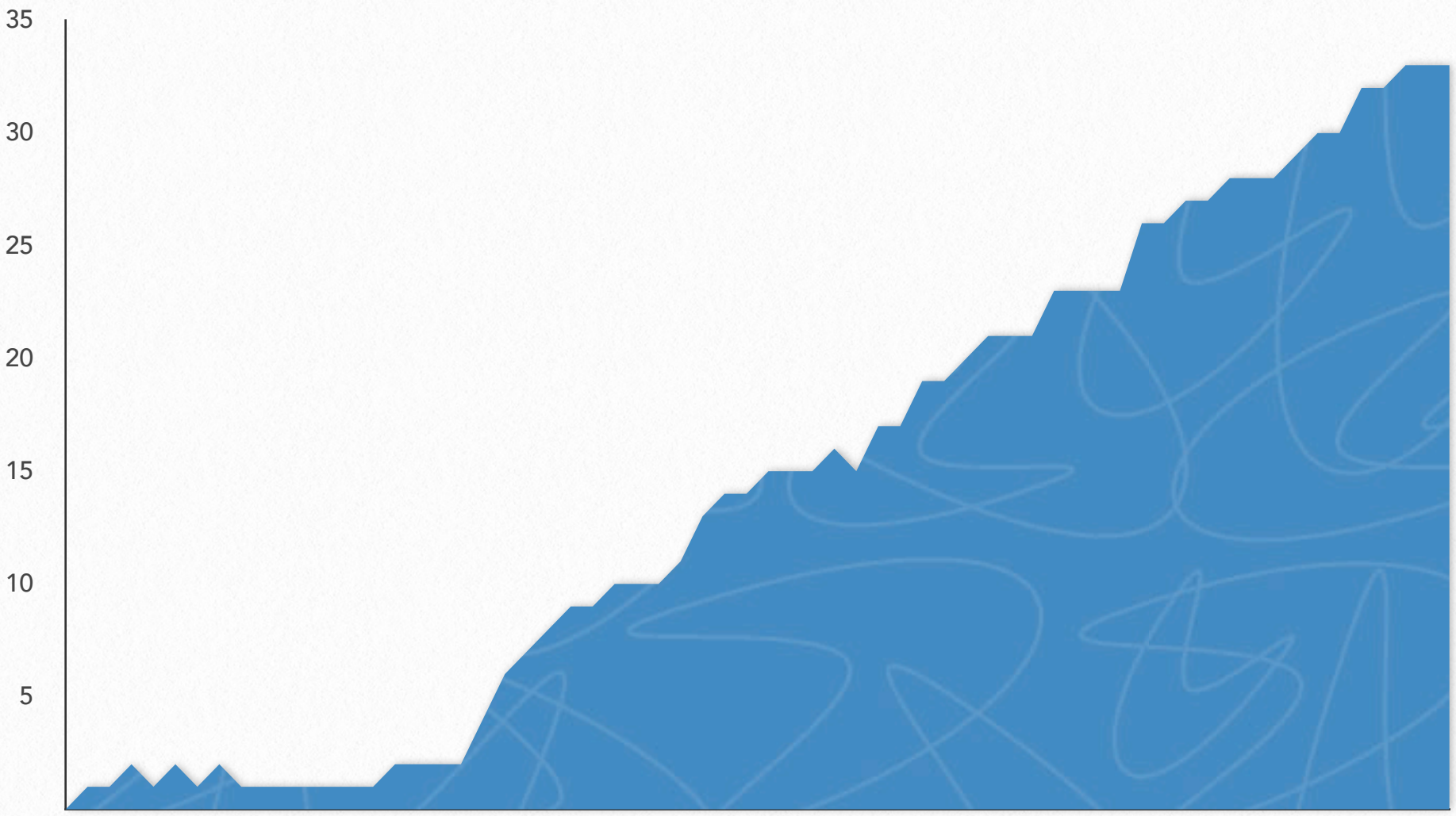
This leads to the problem with awards season, which is that it's *always* awards season. Nominations for the Nebula Awards open about two weeks after the World Fantasy Awards are handed out. In other words, there are only a couple of weeks a year when it *isn't* awards season.

This leads to a couple of things that, I'd argue, aren't always healthy for the field.

First of all, we're constantly handicapping the awards, talking about who should get nominated, who's going to win, who's going to get nominated or win and *shouldn't*, and we end up talking about PR and procedure rather than art.

And second, we end up being deluged by award consideration posts.

I need to be careful about what I mean here, because there was rather a lot of argument on this subject earlier this year. It wasn't too long ago that it was considered the nadir of taste to campaign for awards in this genre. But *campaigning* is not necessarily what we're talking about here. I don't think there's anything wrong with mentioning that your work is eligible for certain awards. (And when the time comes, you'd better believe I'll be mentioning ***Ecdysis***'s eligibility for the Best Fanzine Hugo.) Having a problem with eligibility



The rise in the number of English-language awards in the field since the 1950s.

posts is about as silly as having a problem with the indexes *Analog* and *Asimov's* publish at the end of each year for the purpose of voting in their reader's awards.

Amal El-Mohtar makes the valid point that the people most likely to be shamed into silence are precisely the people who need to step forward and speak up:

> No hand-wringing or tut-tutting about reading widely or behaving with dignity or integrity or what have you is going to end the practice of brash, confident people telling other people, often and obnoxiously, to vote for them. But, crucially, the hand-wringing and tut-tutting does have an effect: it discourages the people who already feel silenced and uncomfortable from ever talking about or taking pride in their achievements.

I believe there is a difference between *noting your eligibility* and *shameless campaigning*. And a big part of that difference is how often you do it.

When you have dozens of awards, and hundreds of eligible writers, what is perfectly acceptable—even *imperative*—for a single writer becomes a nuisance in the aggregate. It's the tragedy of the commons. If you follow dozens of writers, even if each of them makes only a single, perfectly valid post noting their eligibility for awards, it can be a bit overwhelming.

But it gets worse if a few writers start pushing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Sometimes it's passive-aggressive, promoting award nomination and voting deadlines again and again to their loyal followers without explicitly touting their own work. Sometimes it's a little more blatant:

"Nominations for the Retromingent Awards are now open! Please consider my story, 'A Mouthful of *Mesohippus*.'"

"Only five days left before nominations close for the Retromingent Awards. Don't forget: 'A Mouthful of *Mesohippus*' is eligible!"

"Last day to nominate for the Retromingents! 'A Mouthful of *Mesohippus*'! Go! Vote!"

"Thanks to all who considered my story for the Retromingent Awards. Sorry to say it didn't make the final ballot. But online voting starts next week for the Przewalski Awards!"

Rinse, repeat. Some people have less shame than others. And it doesn't take many of them to make awards season an exercise in online cacophony.

A part of this is because writers, by and large, are an insecure and needy bunch and tend to crave recognition in any form. But it's also because we glorify the life of a writer (i.e., Being a Real Writer™) so much that anything done in the service of Furthering a Writing Career, no matter how antisocial, is fair game.

And, despite their being famously dismissed as glorified bowling trophies, awards can have an impact on their book sales (though that seems to be limited to the Hugo) and on their career (which is harder to quantify). Or so they believe. (Though it does appear that winning a major award is a good

The percentage of novels that have won a major award that are in print in English right now (ebooks included).

way to ensure your novel stays in print; see the graph above.)

To be fair, it's not like writers aren't facing long odds. More science fiction and fantasy is being published than ever, in more venues than ever before, and a lot of it is quite good. No one can keep up with all the magazines and online venues publishing short fiction (I know: I've tried). The chance that something excellent and award-worthy will be overlooked is higher than it ought to be.

For example. Because more short stories are published than novelettes or novellas, because most online publications won't run longer fiction, the award-eligible pool of short stories is simply enormous compared to other categories. Last year 568 of them were nominated for the Hugo, compared with 135 novellas and 252 novelettes, but only three of those short stories were above the five percent cutoff to make the final ballot.

(I wonder how many of those 568 short stories received just one nominating vote.)

Small wonder that it seems to take an award nomination just to get noticed. Publication in a professional market just won't cut it any more. Under such circumstances, it's not hard to see how things can get real Darwinian, real fast.

But at the same time, all this online activity is probably not going to have any real effect. Adam Roberts worries that authors with larger online footprints can dominate the award nominations. I don't think he's alone in that belief. But the numbers don't exactly back that up.

Let's use Twitter followers (as of 4 April 2014, when I did the math for this) as a stand-in for the size of an author's fan base, since the numbers are public and easy to find, and compare it with the number of nominations each Hugo finalist received last year.

Note that two authors got on the final ballot without any Twitter presence at all. And while John Scalzi leads in number nominations and has the second-most Twitter followers, it's

not proportionate: Scalzi has 6.1 times as many Twitter followers as Saladin Ahmed, but had only 1.6 times the nominations.

The Hugo numbers reveal an important but overlooked truth: the nominating population is *extremely small* compared to the authors' online fan base—it's a tiny subset, one that must actively opt into nominating for an award (and pay for the privilege).

So while Brandon Sanderson has tens of thousands of social media followers, that only translated into 103 nominations in the Best Novella category: more than anyone else, to be sure, and he did eventually win, but he only had 15 more nominations than Nancy Kress, who has 40 times fewer followers on Twitter. Or to look at it another way, Nancy had one nomination for every nine Twitter followers, whereas Brandon had one nomination for every 600 followers.

Correlation? Not really.

By that logic, Neil Gaiman, with nearly *two million* Twitter followers, should dominate every non-juried genre award. I'm frankly surprised he's not on the Hugo ballot this year; I can only guess that he declined the

Name (Nominated Work)	Category	Hugo Noms	Twitter	Ratio
Ahmed, Saladin (*Throne of the Crescent Moon*)	Novel	118	9,565	1/81
Bujold, Lois McMaster (*Captain Vorpatril's Alliance*)	Novel	133	—	—
Cadigan, Pat ("The Girl-Thing Who Went Out for Sushi")	Novelette	45	3,319	1/74
De Bodard, Aliette (*On a Red Station, Drifting*)	Novella	73	4,168	1/57
De Bodard, Aliette ("Immersion")	Short Story	107	4,168	1/39
Grant, Mira (*Blackout*)	Novel	138	12,803	1/93
Grant, Mira (*San Diego 2014*)	Novella	90	12,803	1/99
Heuvelt, Thomas Olde ("The Boy Who Cast No Shadow")	Novelette	62	693	1/9
Johnson, Kij ("Mantis Wives")	Short Story	34	795	3/70
Kress, Nancy (*After the Fall, Before the Fall, During the Fall*)	Novella	88	1,497	1/9
Lake, Jay ("The Stars Do Not Lie")	Novella	78	8,904	1/99
Liu, Ken ("Mono no Aware")	Short Story	38	3,194	1/84
McGuire, Seanan ("In Sea-Salt Tears")	Novelette	54	12,803	1/237
McGuire, Seanan ("Rat-Catcher")	Novelette	45	12,803	2/569
Robinson, Kim Stanley (*2312*)	Novel	135	—	—
Sanderson, Brandon (*The Emperor's Soul*)	Novella	103	61,902	1/601
Scalzi, John (*Redshirts*)	Novel	193	58,389	2/605
Valente, Catherynne M. ("Fade to White")	Novelette	89	9,552	1/99

nomination. But as a thought experiment, if he were to get the same rate of nominations per follower as Scalzi did last year, he should have gotten more than 10,000 nominations for *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*—more, in other words, than the entire voting population of Loncon 3.

All of which is to say that the number of people likely to be influenced by a blog post touting an author's eligibility for awards is quite small. Broadcasting your award eligibility is not likely to move very many votes in your direction. Only a tiny percentage of the people you're asking to vote for you is actually capable of doing so.

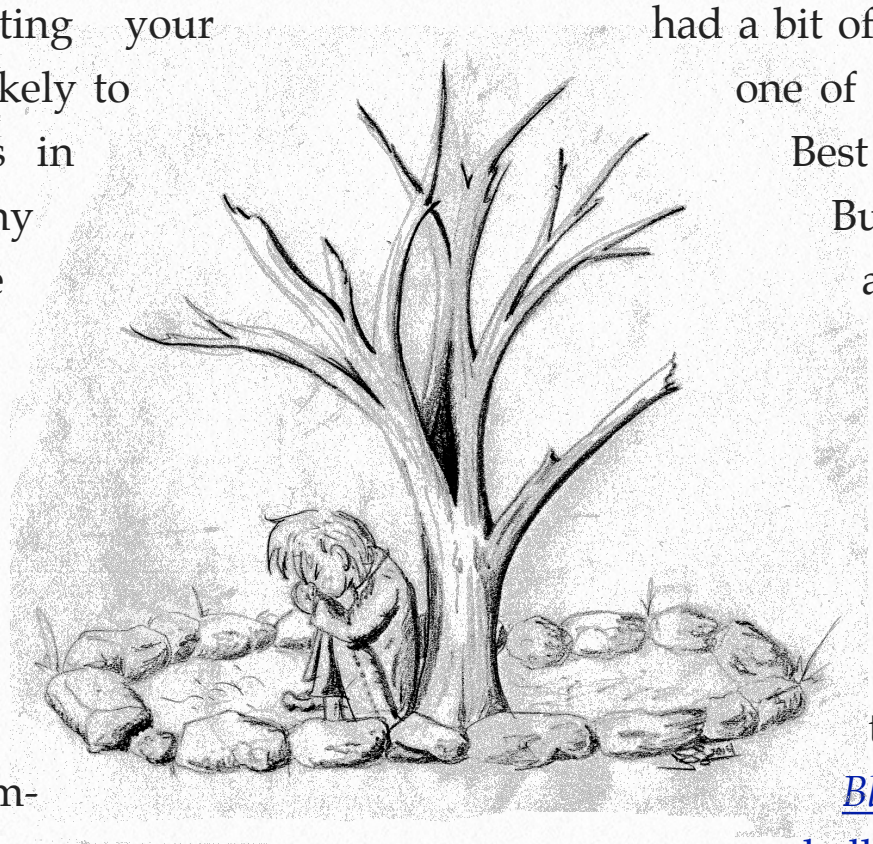
But if I'm right, you ask, then what the hell happened with the Hugos this year?

Two organized campaigns generated some controversy. One aimed to get *The Wheel of Time* (the whole damn 14-book series, not the final novel) nominated for best novel, thanks to a loophole in the WSFS rules. The other was Larry Correia's "Sad Puppies" slate, which managed to place seven of its twelve recommendations onto the final ballot, including a novelette by the noxious Vox Day.

No one actually expects anything on the "Sad Puppies" slate to win. For the participants, the long-term harm to their careers from this gratuitous eff-you in the direction of sf fans who don't share their hermetically sealed world view will vastly outweigh any short-term benefits of notoriety. I've heard people speak of "Opera Vita Æterna" as the next "Eye of Argon"; there is even talk of reading parties.

Another grievance for them to nurse.

It's relatively easy to make mischief with the nominations. Sf fans and pros have always had a bit of a nihilist streak: in 2000, one of the Nebula nominees for Best Script was a porn movie. But nominations and wins are two different things: it took fewer than 40 votes to make the Best Short Story Hugo ballot last year, but more than 600 votes to win. Whatever shenanigans took place to get L. Ron Hubbard's *Black Genesis* on the Hugo ballot in 1987, in the end it finished behind No Award.



"The Ocean at the End of the Lane"

Which is to say that these things tend to correct themselves in the final results. Meanwhile, all shenanigans like these do is debase the value of a *nomination*, not the award.

As for *The Wheel of Time*, I see a lot of people bemoaning its presence on the ballot because they see it as a juggernaut. A work like *Ancillary Justice* or *Neptune's Brood* is, they believe, too "niche" to beat out a massively

popular fantasy series, especially when the voter's packet will include ebooks of all 14 volumes: surely, an incentive for Jordan fans to sign up for supporting memberships.

I'm not so sure. Hugo voters are probably in one of the following camps: (1) those who have read all the *Wheel of Time* books and love them; (2) those who started reading the *Wheel of Time* books but gave up, disappointed, several volumes in; (3) those who haven't read the *Wheel of Time* books by conscious choice; and (4) those who haven't read the *Wheel of Time* books, but will love them when they finally do.

I suspect that the first camp might not be large enough to overcome the votes of people who gave up on the series or who have been actively avoiding it, people who are more likely to vote for No Award. Camp 4, whose existence is theoretical at best, will need to read something north of ten thousand pages of Extruded Fantasy Product in the space of two months. (*I'm* sure as hell not reading the whole damn thing.)

Don't forget that in 2012, Jo Walton's *Among Others*—surely a niche novel—beat out *A Dance with Dragons*. So don't count out Mira Grant, Ann Leckie or Charlie Stross just yet.

Not that Robert Jordan or George R. R. Martin's careers actually *need* an award. It's an odd genre that believes that an extremely financially successful work *also* needs the imprimatur of an award to attest to its value. That, more than anything else, tells us about the value of awards: we believe that a work of value *must* have an award. And that a work without an award is either not of value or of value, but unjustly treated.

We might want to consider other ways of valuing work other than through the lens of being nominated for or winning awards.

¶

This issue started out with grandiose plans, as a special look at the nature of awards in our genre: at the value of awards (as I have done in this editorial), at the Nebula nominees, and at this year's Grand Master, Chip Delany. It was maybe too ambitious: we didn't *quite* get to as many Nebula nominees as we would have liked, but the Awards Weekend is less than a week away as I write this so it's time to lock it down. As a result, this issue lacks the Uncalibrated Weird and Eccentric Silliness that I wanted each issue to have; I hope to rectify that next time.

¶

Say hello to **Zvi Gilbert**, who I managed to cajole into writing something for us this issue. With any luck I'll be able to keep cajoling him to write for us.

¶

Finally, heartfelt and joyful congratulations to ***Ecdysis***'s own **Tamara Vardomskaya**, who has been accepted to the Clarion Writer's Workshop in San Diego! I look forward to her full report when she gets back.

—Jonathan Crowe

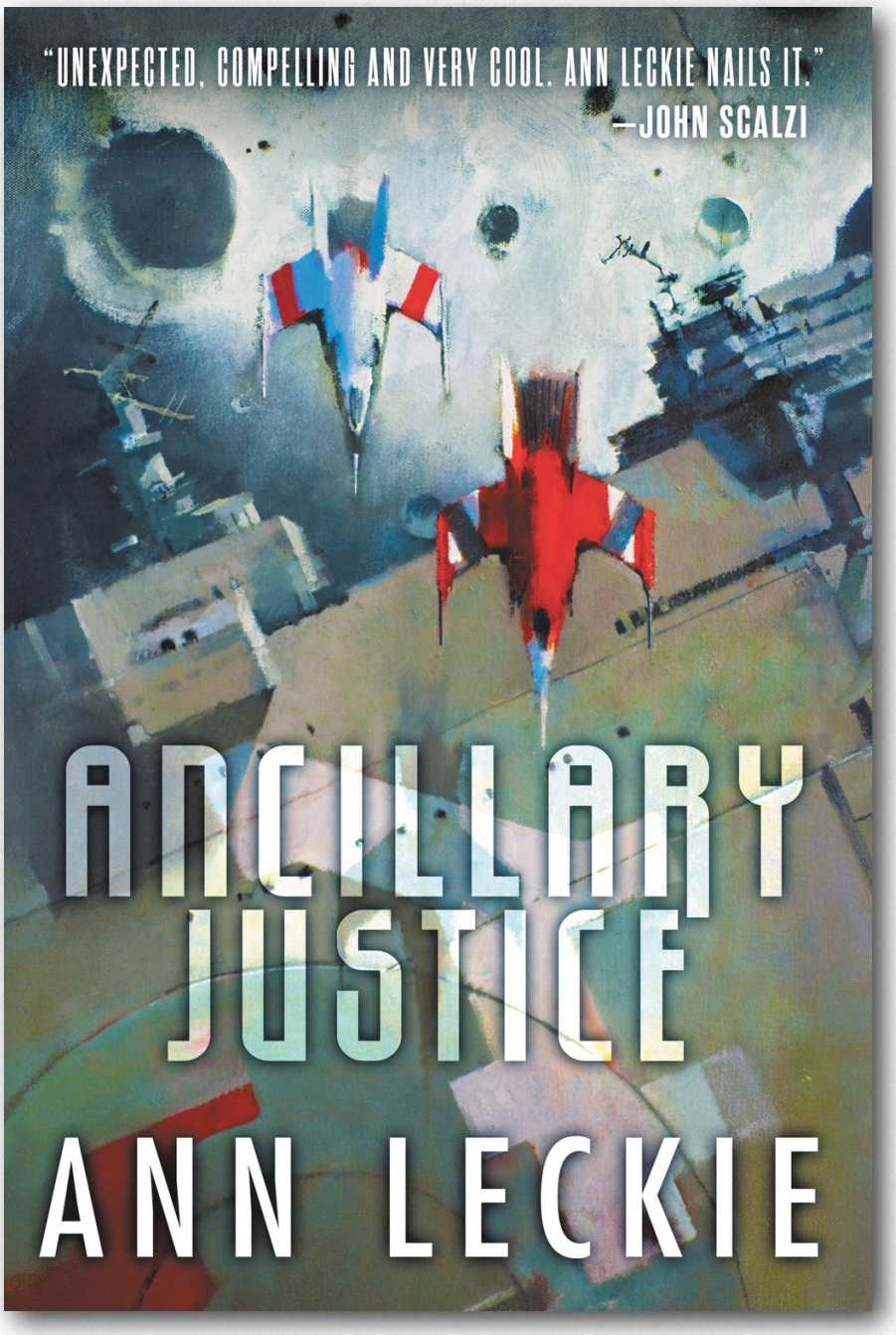
ANCILLARY JUSTICE AND ITS TRANSLATORS

I loved ***Ancillary Justice*** because of Steven Brust's Cool Theory of Literature: Ann Leckie and I find the same things Cool. Galaxy-spanning space opera and lavish planetary settings. Rebellions against injustice. Multiple minds. Medieval and shapenote singing. The problem of bilingual thinking, which very few writers other than Leckie approach head-on. And a thorny translators' problem.

What made the book so famous in gender circles is, of course, that Breq the narrator's native language lacks gender marking, and so she refers to all humans as what Leckie "translates" as "she" (parents as "mother" and children as "daughter") and gets confused as to how humans distinguish male and female. We do not actually know Breq's own biological gender from the book (Leckie has stated in a blog post that Breq has a female reproductive system).

Comparisons abound online to Ursula Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness*, where the biological-gender-shifting aliens are referred to by the narrator as "he." But I think that using this as evidence in the debate about whether the book is social-gender revolutionary misses the point of the difference between social and grammatical gender.

Okay, let's draw a distinction here, as I understand it. *Biological/psychological gender* concerns what your body is like/what your brain wants your body to be like. *Social/cultural gender* concerns how a particular culture expects people with male/female bodies to look, act and have interests differently from the other gender. And *linguistic gender* is grouping the nouns of a language into classes that have distinct patterns of agreement (on the pronouns, the verbs, the adjectives, etc.) *that are pretty much random*. A language may, by complete coincidence, toss male-bodied people in one agreement bin and female-bodied people into another (often along with vegetables, furniture and mathematical concepts), or may have some other pattern such as animate/inanimate, or not sort nouns in



any way at all, with one pronoun for all—but that has no relation whatsoever to what a society speaking it expects of men or women.

So English-speaking readers praise or complain about Leckie's linguistic-gender use of a single pronoun "she," ignoring that this is completely not new, and that what's key is her erasing of *social* gender in the Radch culture (as seen through the asexual Breq's eyes; there are hints, I think, that Radch humans interested in sex distinguish biological gender quite well, but Breq finds it as incomprehensible and unnoticeable as any other fetish she doesn't share). That is what makes it like no society on this planet. Not what pronouns her character uses; these are just a coincidental code for English readers.

If Leckie sells the Hungarian, Korean or Finnish rights for the book, translating it would be relatively easy, as these languages' pronouns never mark gender. But at the same time, the subversion of us readers wondering whether all the officers, pilots and emperors are really women or not would vanish, and the Hungarian readers would be missing much of the unique power of the book.

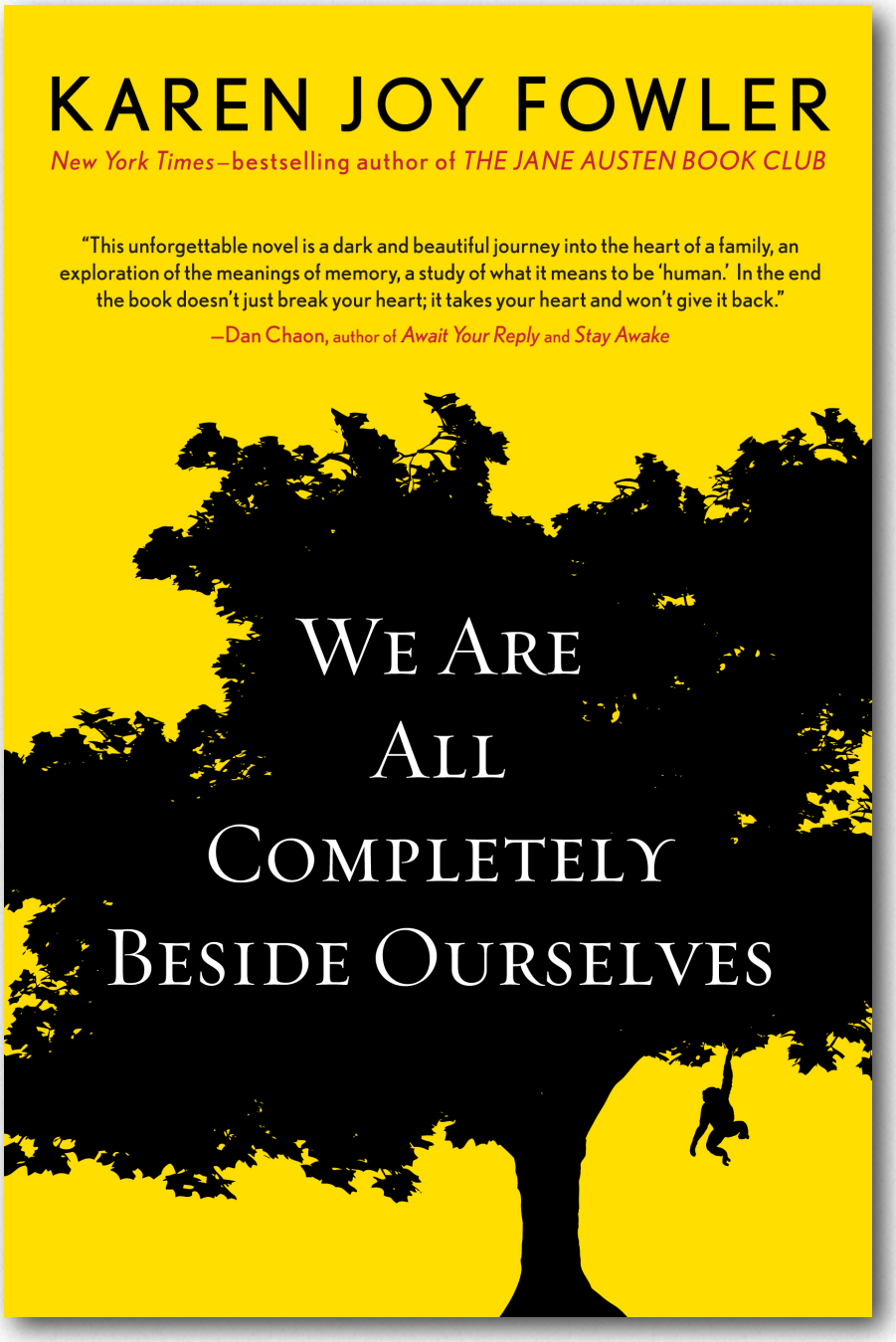
Contrariwise, for the French, Spanish or Russian rights, the translator is going to cry for help almost immediately. Not only do these languages mark every noun for gender (and most military roles are default male), but Russian marks gender on every past-tense verb. Breq telling the story while concealing her own gender would be simply impossible. Again, the spice of subverting our expectations is lost.

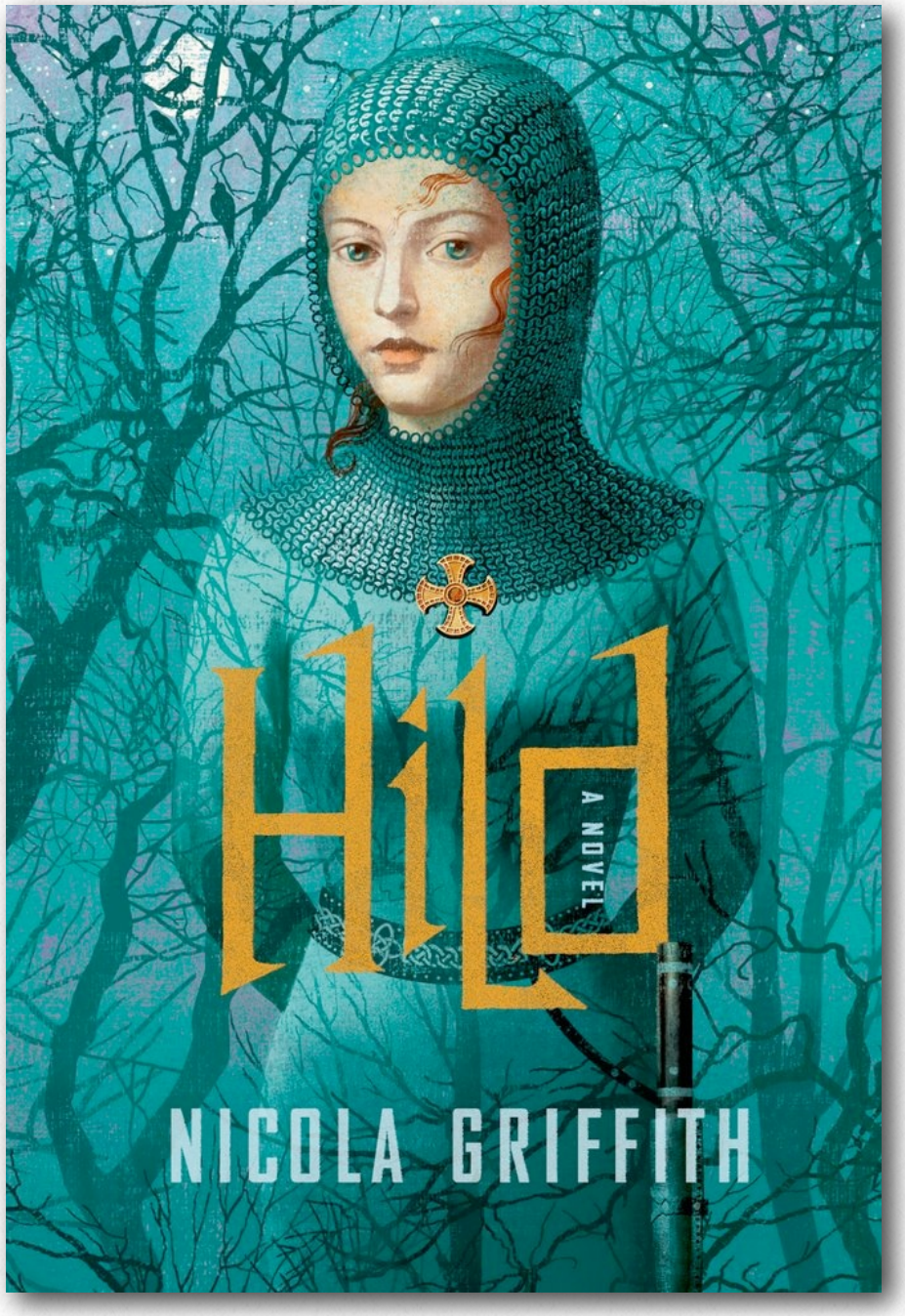
Of the world's major languages, English is actually near-unique in having gender on pronouns (most of Chinese and Japanese are out) but only ones referring to humans (German and Hindi-Urdu are out), and not on verbs (Tamil is out) . . . about the only other language I can think of is Malayalam.

So, certainly Leckie is saying something new about gender: she's telling us how anglocentric we are about it.

(But her agent should get on those Malayalam rights.)

—*Tamara Vardomskaya*





Of Genre Interest: Two Mainstream Novels

There have always been books that, while not strictly science fiction or fantasy, have been categorized as of genre interest. *Locus* includes "associational" books, usually mainstream books by genre authors, in its forthcoming books listings. Jo Walton's reviews on Tor.com (some of which are collected in *What Makes This Book So Great*) included books by George Eliot and Patrick O'Brian, as well as nonfiction like David Graeber's *Debt* or, well, anything by Francis Spufford. And at the "Nonfiction for SF/Fantasy Readers" panel I chaired at SFContario 3 in 2012, we *all* fell like wolves onto Charles C. Mann's *1491*.

Genre readers *do* read outside of genre; I think that whatever we find in genre that tick-

les our fancy, that makes us want to read the genre on a regular basis, can be found outside the genre as well.

Two novels ostensibly outside the genre have made their way onto this year's Nebula ballot: Karen Joy Fowler's ***We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves***, a novel about a child who was cross-fostered with a chimpanzee, and Nicola Griffith's ***Hild***, a biographical novel about Hilda of Whitby. They were written by sf/fantasy writers whose body of work also falls outside the genre. They were published by major publishers through mainstream imprints: *Hild*, for example, was published by Macmillan's Farrar, Straus and Giroux, not Tor. They are marketed to mainstream, not genre audiences.

So do they belong on a genre award ballot, or was room made for them because they were written by One of Us?

I'd argue that they do belong on their own merits, but for different reasons.

The affect of *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* is resolutely mainstream, and its focus is the inner life of the protagonist, Rosemary Cooke. But at its heart is a speculative core: it asks what might happen to a child who was raised with a chimpanzee—and what might happen when that chimp, a sister in all but blood and species, was taken away from her. The book examines themes of animal intelligence, animal rights, memory and guilt, but what's especially fascinating for the sf reader is the extent to which Rosemary has unconsciously taken on chimp-like personality traits.

Hild, on the other hand, is a historical novel and a fictionalized biography of a real person, but it's set in a time and place so far removed from us—seventh-century Britain—that it might well as well be another world.

One thing historical fiction and sf have in common is worldbuilding: the brick-by-brick construction of verisimilitude. An intricately constructed secondary-world fantasy novel and an intricately researched historical novel can, I suspect, send the same reader down the same rabbit hole.

Worldbuilding is probably why we file the Jean Auel novels with the science fiction and fantasy, and why Kim Stanley Robinson's *Shaman* is up for the Locus Award.

In the case of *Hild*, Griffith has had to do some extrapolation as well: there are gaps in the historical record, especially about Hild herself, that she has had to fill, and some things (for example, the role of the gemæcce) that she has had to invent. Interspersed with the strange are resonances of the familiar, such as a rhyme that I could have *sworn* was contemporary, that remind us that this is *our* world.

At the same time, it's full of Anglo-Saxon stuff that would not seem out of place on the fields of Rohan: *Hild* has the affect of a Tolkien novel, set in the real world.

In the end, though, the question is not whether or not a given book is sufficiently skiffy, but whether or not it's of interest to the genre reader. In neither of these cases is there any question of that.

—*Jonathan Crowe*

CONTRAST WITHOUT CULTURE CLASH:

The Golem and the Jinni

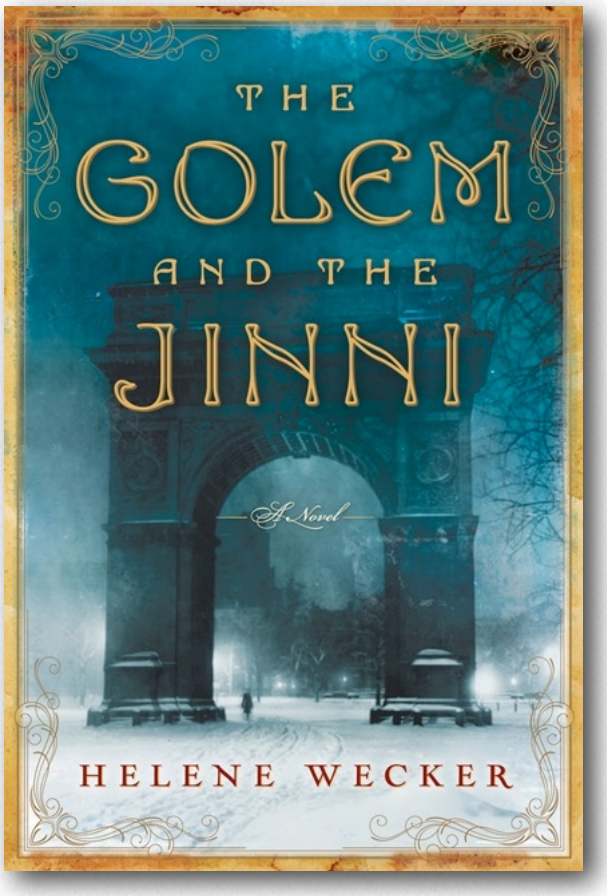
For last year's SFContario I proposed, and then attended, a panel on the immigrant experience in speculative fiction (drawing from Ken Liu's "The Paper Menagerie" and others). Although it was admittedly a biased audience, everyone in the packed room wanted more portrayals of the immigrant experience in fiction, from the stress of paperwork and learning a new language, to negotiating two cultural identities, trying to leave your past behind, or not, and having different ideas from your family of how much of the old and new cultures you want in you.

Helene Wecker's ***The Golem and the Jinni*** is a novel of immigration that we've been wishing for. Even though it is set in New York City of 1900, and emphatically of that era, Ellis Island renamings and all, it is a novel of quite timeless beauty.

It is most explicitly a novel of contrasts. The Golem and the Jinni. Earth and Fire. Sea-born and born of desert. Jewish culture and

Arabic (the majority of the latter Syrian Christians, a welcome shift of perspective for people who may unthinkingly equate Arab with Muslim, although there is a fascinating Muslim character as well). Female and male. A maker of bread and a worker of metal. One longing to serve and pass as human; the other refusing to be bound by any human foolishness. One has never had a past, while the other cannot remember a crucial section of it.

And in elegant language Wecker braids together the plot, twist after twist, flashing between characters and times, until everything fits together in an almost unbelievably perfect knot. There were times when reading it that I would sometimes wonder what this or that character was there for—but by the end, it paid off, with every character serving their purpose in the central story.



And the contrasts become greater than the sum of their parts. They do not clash in a struggle for dominance, but become something new and beautiful.

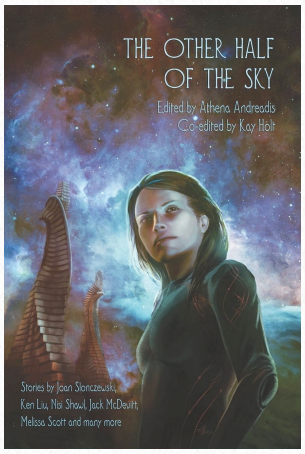
I said at that panel that what I hate most about too many culture-clash stories—indeed, what I hate most about so many culture-clash stories in real life—is that they always assume that one culture has to win and the other has to lose. Half-elves are always torn with angst over their two heritages, and children of strict Chinese parents always have to fight with them over their modern Western friends. You can't speak your home language if you want to speak English. You can't be a real American, or Canadian, if you are also *this*.

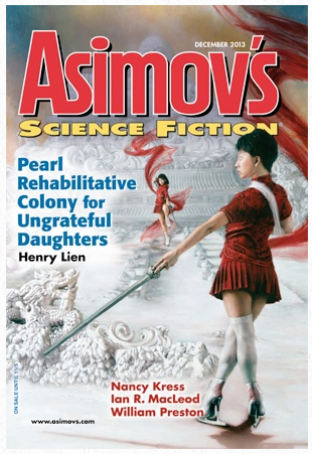
Bullshit that has destroyed reams of intangible heritage and damaged countless people's psyches.

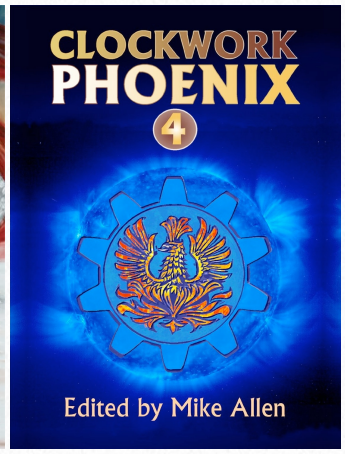
And the wonderful thing about Wecker's novel is that she doesn't buy into this lie. Her characters and cultures—Ashkenazi Jewish, Maronite Catholic and Orthodox, Syrian Muslim, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, men and women, lapsed atheists and the devout alike, Yiddish and Arabic and English, all, even the villains, drawn with love and sympathy—meet, and stay proudly themselves, and take on something new as well, and create new beautiful things, and embrace the power of *and*. The Jinni's alloyed sculptures, and the Golem's braided challahs. It's not a clash, but the best kind of immigration story.

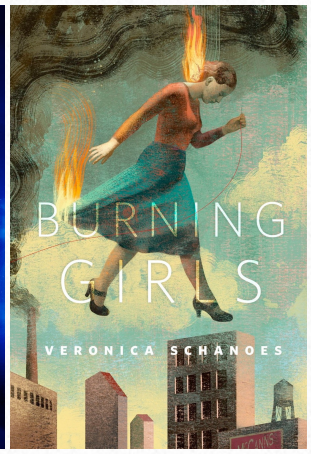
And that is why, if I were voting for the Nebulas, my vote goes to this book. I want it to become a classic. I want there to be more like it.

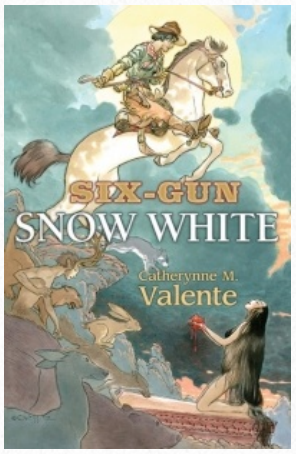
—*Tamara Vardomskaya*











2013 Nebula Short Fiction Nominees

Short Story

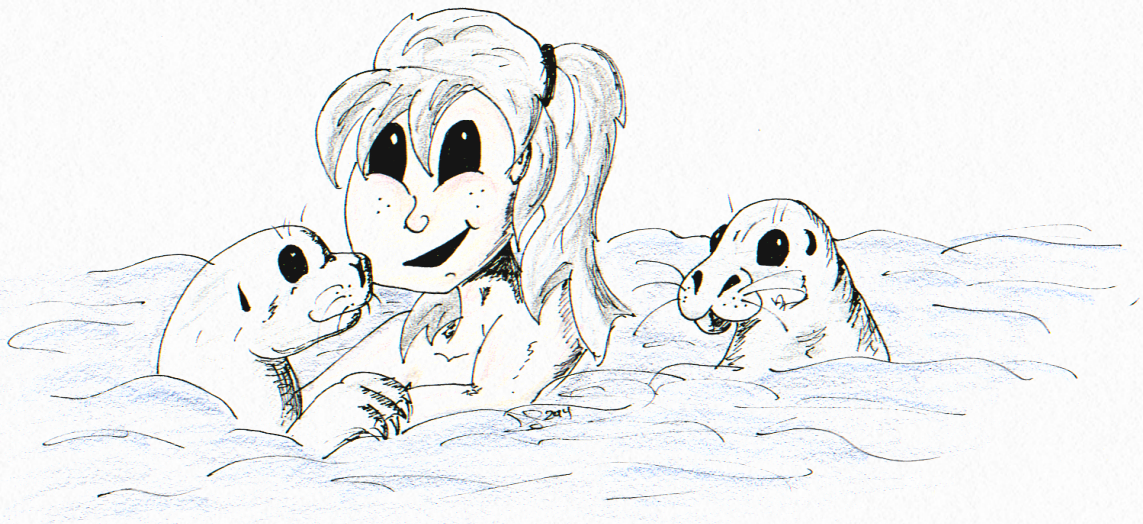
- "The Sounds of Old Earth" by Matthew Kressel (*Lightspeed*, 1/13)
- "Selkie Stories Are for Losers" by Sofia Samatar (*Strange Horizons*, 1/13)
- "Selected Program Notes from the Retrospective Exhibition of Theresa Rosenberg Latimer" by Kenneth Schneyer (*Clockwork Phoenix 4*)
- "If You Were a Dinosaur, My Love" by Rachel Swirsky (*Apex*, 3/13)
- "Alive, Alive Oh" by Sylvia Spruck Wrigley (*Lightspeed*, 6/13)

Novelette

- "Paranormal Romance" by Christopher Barzak (*Lightspeed*, 6/13)
- "The Waiting Stars" by Aliette de Bodard (*The Other Half of the Sky*)
- "They Shall Salt the Earth with Seeds of Glass" by Alaya Dawn Johnson (*Asimov's*, 1/13)
- "Pearl Rehabilitative Colony for Ungrateful Daughters" by Henry Lien (*Asimov's*, 12/13)
- "The Litigation Master and the Monkey King" by Ken Liu (*Lightspeed*, 8/13)
- "In Joy, Knowing the Abyss Behind" by Sarah Pinsker (*Strange Horizons*, 7/13)

Novella

- "Wakulla Springs" by Andy Duncan and Ellen Klages (Tor.com, 10/13)
- "The Weight of the Sunrise" by Vylar Kaftan (*Asimov's*, 2/13)
- "Annabel Lee" by Nancy Kress (*New Under the Sun*, Arc Manor/Phoenix Pick)
- "Burning Girls" by Veronica Schanoes (Tor.com, 6/13)
- "Trial of the Century" by Lawrence M. Schoen (lawrencemschoen.com, 8/13; *World Jumping*)
- *Six-Gun Snow White* by Catherynne M. Valente (Subterranean Press)



"Selkie Stories Are for Losers"

Reordering Tense and Mood

A short story, by SFWA definition, has to cram its meaning into less than 7,500 words. What we can glean from the choices of SFWA for their favourite shorts this year is that you can cram more meaning in—if you play around with time.

Although there are no time travel stories on the ballot this year, none of the six stories are told linearly. Sofia Samatar's "**Selkie Stories Are For Losers**" shifts back and forth between the protagonist's past telling about her mother, her present and her relationship with her only friend, and general statements criticizing selkie stories. Sylvia Struck Wrigley's "**Alive, Alive Oh**" jumps space and time between the narrator's recollections of Earth and her life on the new planet with her daughter. Matthew Kressel has "**The Sounds of Old Earth**" show us a grandfather's past memories interweaving with his present as the Earth's destruction looms.

And the last two stories on the ballot play not only with tense but with real versus possible mood: Kenneth Schneyer's "**Selected Program Notes from the Retrospective Exhibition of Theresa Rosenberg Latimer**" weaves together the curator's telling about Latimer's past, his or her knowledge of the present, and the SF-trained reader's conclusions that no, that's not how it was. While Rachel Swirsky's "**If You Were A Dinosaur, My Love**" nests ifs upon ifs upon ifs, striving to escape an all-too-plausible-in-our-world reality. She makes explicit in the grammar the entire underlying conceit of speculative fiction—of fiction, period: that it is all a what-if-not embedding our terrible facts.

We live our lives one instant after another, so an author's decision to tell stories in a different order is marked and relevant. In "Sounds," the choice is organic: the narrator is an old man, living in his past and facing all material objects he knows becoming nothing but memory. In "Alive," as the grieving mother narrator's tale swings back and forth, contrasting all she had in Wales with all she lost on G581, food, sea, her best friend, at last

the pendulum reaches its maximum arc as we learn her very memories and stories made her lose her daughter and there is nothing left for her. And the shifts of "Selkie" come almost every other paragraph, a troubled teenage girl trying to sort out the parallels between her lost mother and her friend/infatuation's family, the jump cuts' pace building and building until the breathless piled-on clauses of the last sentence.

Perhaps "Program Notes" is the most gimmicky of the stories, but the unusual narrative choice leaving so much to the reader made it my favourite. It's the Doctor Watson effect: the reason we love Sherlock Holmes stories is that we all think we would have noticed more, were we in the good doctor's place. But my bet would be on the wrenching irrealis of "Dinosaur" to win.

So—avoid chronological order and you too can get a Nebula?

The strong hypothesis is doubtful: among the novelette nominees this same year, several cleave quite close to events told just as they happened. However, being a writers' vote, the Nebulas more than the Hugos tend to reward the "technical merit" score and high-difficulty moves: unconventional use of time requires impeccable skill applied to fit into less than 7,500 words far more meaning than the words' compositional sum.

If it's for a good reason. Because in the end, each writer did have to do one draft after another.

—*Tamara Vardomskaya*

A Short, Sharp Shock

What must a short story do to get noticed in a brutally competitive field?

Often, by provoking a visceral response.

I've been following the Nebula nominees for four years now, and I've been struck by how often the stories resort to shock, horror and terrible things done to small children.

The 2010 Nebula ballot featured three stories that did nasty things to children: Adam-Troy Castro's "Arvies," in which the only people deemed to be alive were those who hadn't yet been born; Kij Johnson's "Ponies," a parable about the cruelty of children, seen through the eyes of the eponymous, fantastical creatures; and Felicity Shoulders's "Conditional Love," set in a medical facility for children whose genetic modifications have gone wrong. And then there was Jennifer Pelland's "Ghosts of New York," a 9/11 story in which World Trade Center jumpers experience the fall again and again in the afterlife.

I needed a hug after reading that batch of stories, let me tell you.

In 2011 the Nebula ballot had two stories about children facing experimental treatment ("Mama, We Are Zhenya, Your Son" by Tom Crosshill and "Movement" by Nancy Fulda), the creepy and powerfully flinch-inducing "Her Husband's Hands" by Adam-Troy Castro, and the tear-jerker that went on to sweep *all* the awards, "The Paper Menagerie" by Ken Liu.

It began to seem as though the road to a Nebula Award was paved with the blood and tears of small children.

Last year's ballot featured Leah Cypess's "Nanny's Day," a story in which nannies sued for custody of the children they were hired to take care of; reading it, I couldn't help but feel that my amygdala was being deliberately poked at. Some horror was present in several other nominees—the body horror of Helena Bell's "Robot" and Cat Rambo's "Five Ways to Fall in Love on Planet Porcelain," the loss of identity on multiple levels explored by the eventual winner, Aliette de Bodard's "Immersion"—but it wasn't gratuitous.

Let me be clear: provoking an emotional response is the *opposite* of a bad thing. It's what a story is supposed to do. It's when it seems gratuitous that I start pushing back.

Now it's possible that the gratuitousness I object to is only a problem in the aggregate. In other words, an individual story that delivers a gut-punch is not objectionable; it's when

"The Sounds of Old Earth"

you read five to seven stories in one sitting, each of which delivering its own gut punch, that the pattern becomes apparent.

For example, the one short story on the Nebula ballot that I read when it first came out was Rachel Swirsky's "**If You Were a Dinosaur, My Love**": at only 979 words, it was *very* short, and so I was done before I realized I had started; also, I absolutely love Rachel Swirsky's work. And of course I was gutted. And it surprised me not at all to see it on the Nebula ballot: it had provoked a strong emotional response, and, as we've seen, such stories tend to end up on the ballot. But absent the context of the rest of the ballot, I didn't have the same wearied response I'd had to previous years' stories.

It occurs to me that a short, sharp shock might well be a necessary thing.

Short stories don't have a lot of room to build character or setting, and they certainly don't have the room for plot. All they have room for is the point they're trying to make.

That doesn't mean that their point must be made directly, without subtlety, or indeed that the amygdala must be subjected to the Taser at all.

It may mean that traditional narrative may not be the right way to make that point; see, for example, Ken Schneyer's "**Selected Program Notes from the Retrospective Exhibition of Theresa Rosenberg Latimer**," told in the form of a series of descriptions of pieces of art, replete with discussion questions. It's the *opposite* of a short, sharp shock: so subtle that I'm still not quite sure what's going on here. Nor am I sure that I'm supposed to.

(For the record, I *adore* non-traditional forms of storytelling, and perk up immediately when I see an example of it.)

But, as Tamara discovered with the novelettes, the majority of the short stories on the ballot evoke the small and the personal. (I suspect this reflects the tastes of a good part of the SFWA membership: these are the sort of stories that tend to show up on the Nebula ballot but not the Hugo ballot.)

More precisely, the small and the personal are the lens through which the wonder is perceived: the existence of selkies, the loss of the Earth, the colonization of a dangerous new world through the small dramas of families and the perceptions of individuals.

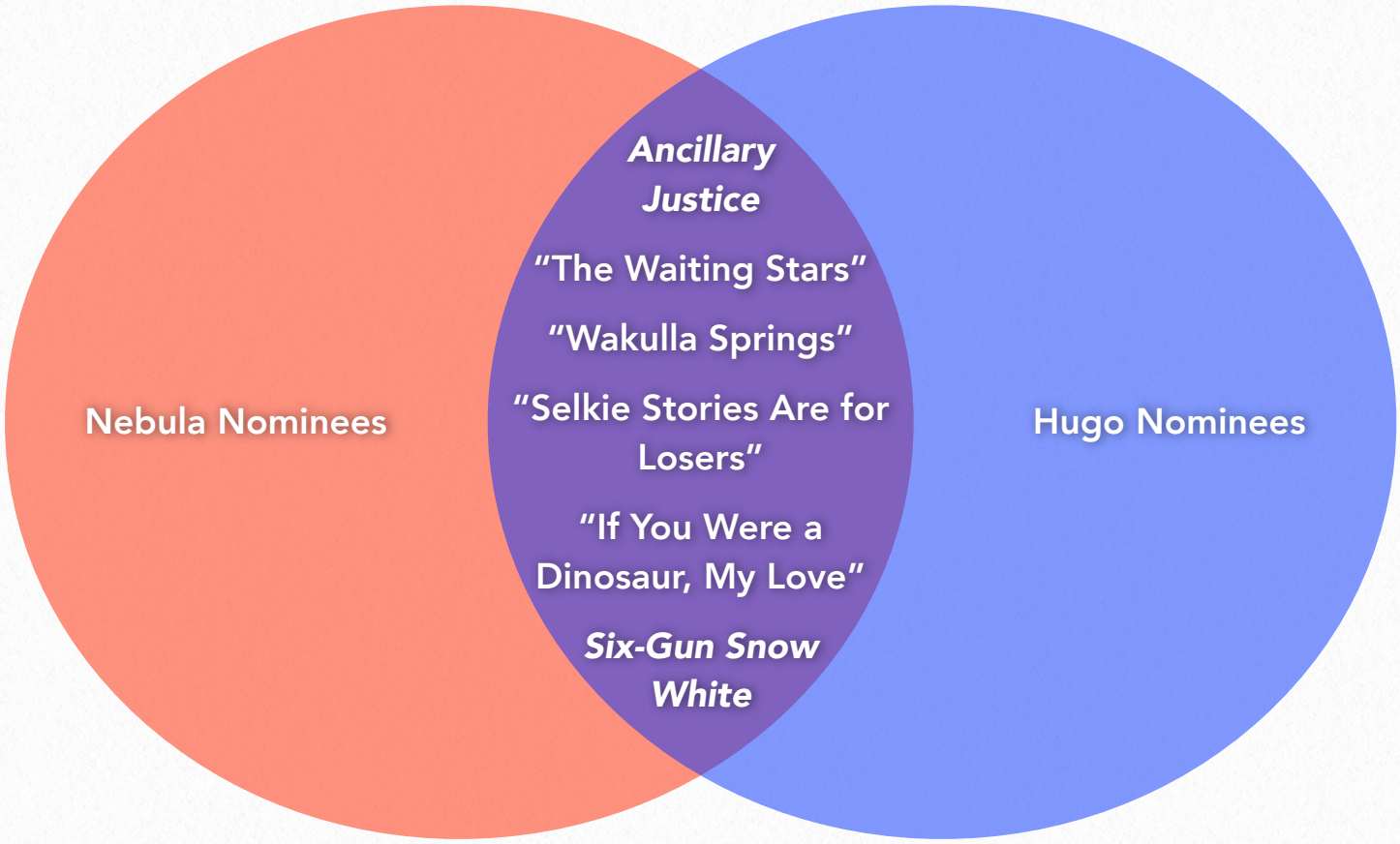
Small wonder, then, that when a short, sharp shock needs to be delivered, it is done so at that familial, personal level.

—Jonathan Crowe

A Lousy Year for Space Battles

Judging by what the SFWA members have chosen as their favourite novelettes of 2013, this is a year about small, intimate relationships. There are no world-changing sensawunda tales spun out in under 17,500 words here; every single one of the stories zooms in on one to three characters, and the main transformation is of *them*, not the world or their society.

The closest thing to a change or rebellion happens in Aliette de Bodard's "**The Waiting**



Hugo and Nebula nominee overlap

Stars," Alaya Dawn Johnson's "**They Shall Salt The Earth With Seeds of Glass**," and most of all Ken Liu's "**The Litigation Master and the Monkey King**"; in these, the actions of the lead characters *may* promise a change in the world concerned. Or may not. The Litigation Master dies not sure whether his efforts had any effect whatsoever. Bodard's Catherine and Johnson's Tris and Libby step into an uncertain future, leaving many secrets of their universes unsolved.

The three others are left with even more open questions. Sarah Pinsker's story "**In Joy, Knowing the Abyss Behind**" has very little SF in it at all, and what is there is mostly left for the reader to imagine. The novelette focuses instead on the heroine's relationship with her husband of many years.

Christopher Barzak's protagonist of "**Paranormal Romance**," the witch Sheila, is facing the same problems that many modern women face today, of a mother criticizing her lifestyle choices and trying to set her up with a lover totally wrong for her, only to have love potential come from an unexpected angle—except that Sheila herself is a love spell specialist and her ill-suited suitor is a werewolf. Although the story drops hints that there is a changing world of magic and myth becoming reality, the ending affects hardly any lives but Sheila's, and is told with light, *Sex and the City*-style humour.

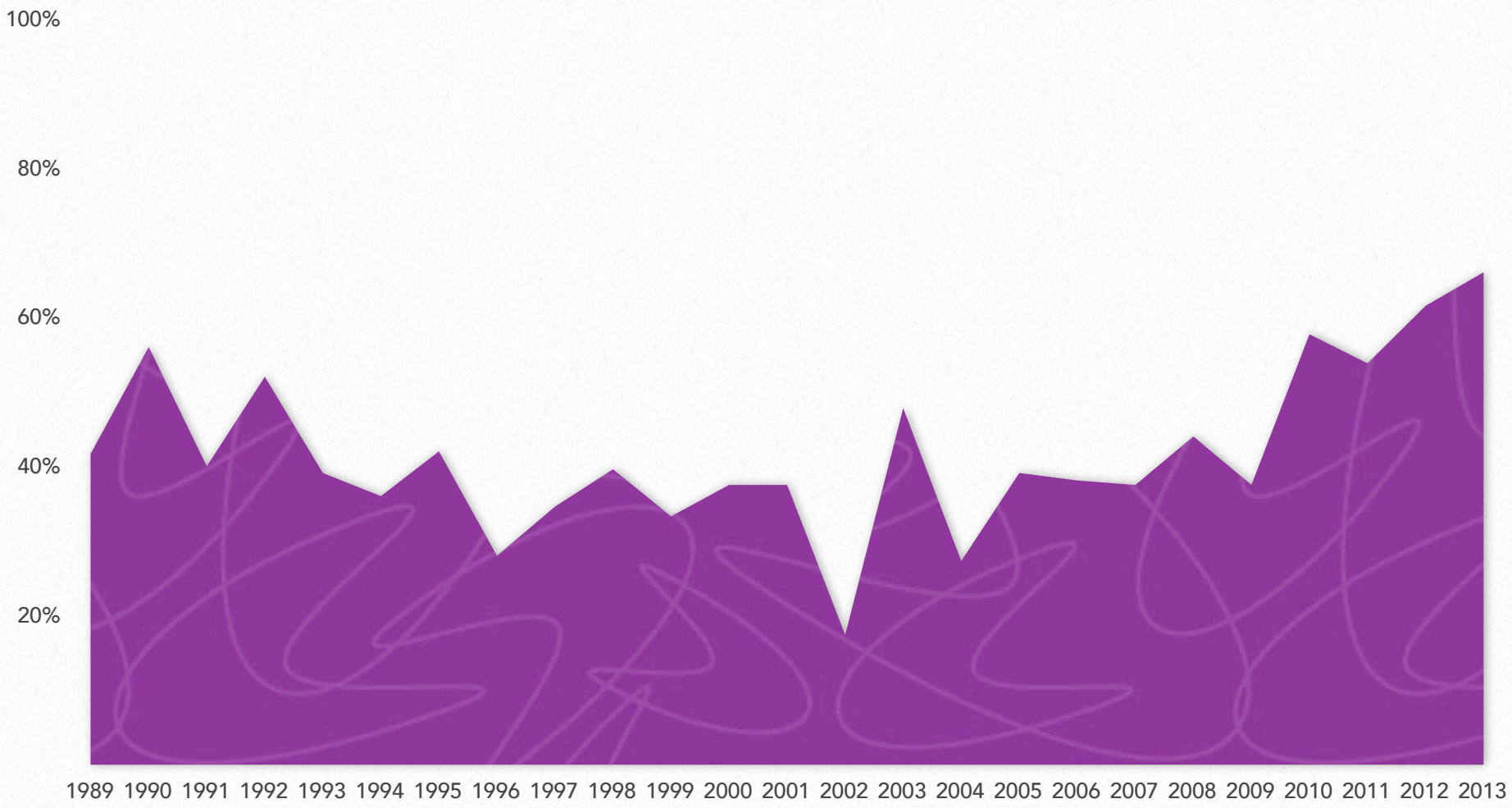
In Henry Lien's "**Pearl Rehabilitative Colony for Ungrateful Daughters**," an arrogant, self-absorbed teenager barely shows any change of her attitude, and it certainly does

not affect the external world. The chief attraction of that story is voice, and the resulting puzzle of how much of the narrator's tale is true and how much is exaggeration; she lost my suspension of disbelief at the idea that one would both work athletes for fourteen hours straight and not feed them; to quote another character in the story, "It cannot be both." Perhaps because of the narrator's voice and her presuppositions, I found the setting thin and difficult to believe, despite the glamour of its main conceit. (And I do hope his forthcoming works in that universe explain why he wantonly mixes Chinese and Japanese terms and names.) However, given several weeks to brood over it after reading all the nominated novelettes in one stretch, I found this story, taken as a whole, the most memorable.

As with the short stories, on seeing a pattern like this, I am wont to ask why. With the stereotype of science fiction being a genre of big ideas, and the stereotype of fantasy being epic with worlds hanging in the balance, why have SFWA members this year selected small, personal stories with nary a clash of armies among them, even if the expanded length of the novelette would have allowed for such scope?

With the usual disclaimer that this is just one year and one data point, I would speculate that this is a reminder that what matters most in any story is the people. And so writers who had managed to successfully craft

Women Nebula nominees, 1989–2013



real characters, memorable characters, managed to surpass those who may have gotten space battles going without us caring a whit about any of the participants.

But then, it may have just been a lousy year for space battles.

—*Tamara Vardomskaya*

The Voice of History

I mentioned last issue that, because I was trained as a historian, I have a somewhat ambiguous relationship with alternate history and historical fantasy. As must also be the case when physicists read hard sf, I have to set the plausibility bar much higher.

What, then, do I make of the Nebula novella ballot, where four of the nominees use history or alternate history to some extent?

Two of them plant fairy tales in new and different historical contexts: Veronica Schanoes's "**Burning Girls**" grafts the Rumplestiltskin fairy tale onto the very real Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, which killed 146 garment workers in March 1911; Catherynne M. Valente's ***Six-Gun Snow White*** does just what you might expect from the title: set the Snow White story in the Wild West.

The third, "**The Weight of the Sunrise**" by Vylar Kaftan, is an alternate history that focuses on an encounter between an Inca empire that never fell, and the British colonies in the throes of the American Revolution. And the fourth, "**Wakulla Springs**" by Andy Duncan and Ellen Klages, begins in the Florida of the 1930s and spans several generations.

What surprises me is how much language—dialect, diction and voice—plays a role, and how much I'm a sucker for it. For lack of a better, smarter, or more sophisticated way of putting it, history should sound, well, *historical*.

It's not just a matter of doing the research: all the research in the world won't matter if the narration and characters speak in a modern voice, or even the detached, bloodless Default Voice of Science Fiction.

It needs to *sound* authentic. Verisimilitude must extend to language. It's what makes something like Greer Gilman's *Cry Murder! In a Small Voice* both so marvellous and so infuriating: however opaque Elizabethan diction may be, it's intoxicating: like a stout you have to take in small sips.

On the other hand, alternate history written in Default Voice fails to convince: it reads like a hastily written history paper; it fails to immerse; it's a left-brain exercise.

But I'm rambling, and moreover I'm not talking about the Nebula novellas.

My point is that if "Burning Girls" didn't speak in the voice of Polish Jewish immigrants, or if "Wakulla Springs" didn't open in the voice of African American children in 1930s Florida, neither story would be as convincing or powerful. Those voices evoke memories, folklore and history: they speak about race and status, ethnicity and privilege. They don't exist in a vacuum.

(And just try and imagine *Six-Gun Snow White*—or anything else Catherynne Valente

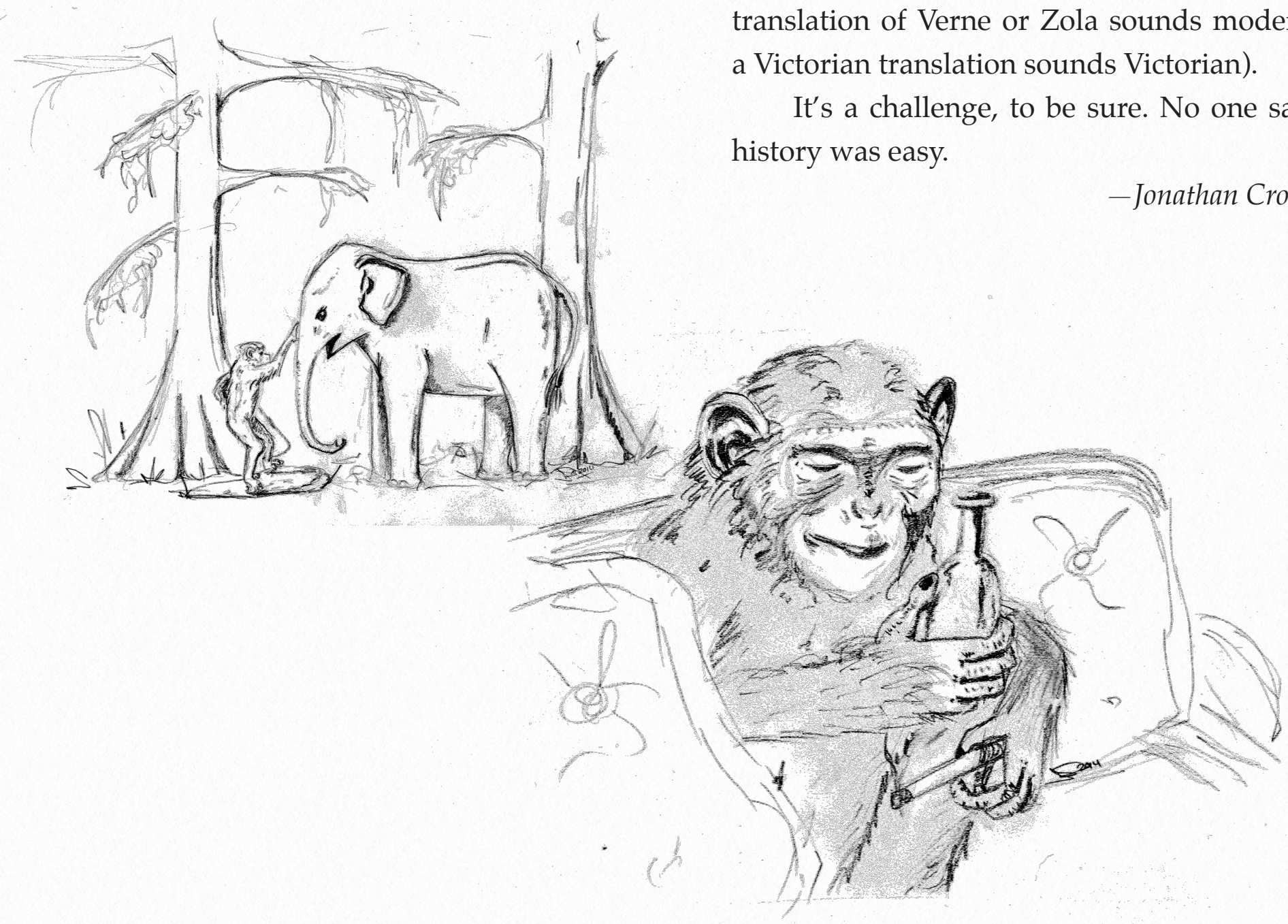
has written—in Default Voice. It's unimaginable: with Valente, voice is inextricable.)

But what happens in the absence of that voice? "The Weight of the Sunrise" is by *no* means a bad story, but its diction tacks much closer to the Default Voice. The prose is laudably clear, the story effective, but it's somehow less vivid. Is this because it's alternate history, a subgenre that has to work a lot harder for me to like it? Is it because it's an imagined non-anglophone culture? Aliette de Bodard's Xuya universe is both, but the worldbuilding is much more involved and effective, and amortized over many stories. Absent that worldbuilding, a single, standalone story must come across as as a bit thin.

Language borrows from our own cultural experiences. The problem is that it tends to privilege not only the familiar, but also English-speaking history at the expense of other cultures: we know what archaic speech and regional dialects are supposed to sound like in our native tongue (translations, in my experience, tend to sound like the period and language they're translated into: a modern translation of Verne or Zola sounds modern; a Victorian translation sounds Victorian).

It's a challenge, to be sure. No one said history was easy.

—Jonathan Crowe



"Wakulla Springs"

SAMUEL R. DELANY, SFWA GRAND MASTER

A Celebratory Constellation, version 1.0

To speak of Delany's impact on my reading life, and on my life in general, is to court hyperbole. "The single most important . . ."; "I would never have been . . . without . . .", "He taught me to . . ."

He is too all-encompassing to be merely an influence. I've been reading his work for more than 30 years, and re-reading and re-reading most of it with pleasure. His criticism has broadened my appreciation of literature and para-literature (science fiction, pornography, comics); his memoirs and social essays have offered a complex commentary on my society and my own movements through it; and his fiction has both conceptual depth and surface delights.

But mostly, he is fun to read. His prose is elegantly and profoundly worked; and the product of that labour is a sheen and rhythm that I find both beguiling and pleasurable, and that I don't think gets enough notice when discussing his work.

¶

I've thought about the first lines of this Hugo- and Nebula-winning short story many, many times.

> Lay ordinate and abscissa on the century. Then cut me a quadrant. Third quadrant if you please. ("Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones," 1968)

What metaphors, reinforcing the story's long, strange title. We can unpack them: time is considered a plane, not a line; it is graphable in co-ordinates; our path through it a two-dimensional shape. What language: unfamiliar words which have their own music: a dactyl [ordinate], an amphibrach [abscissa]. Then the metaphor twists in only the second sentence: "cut" me a quadrant, like a piece of cake.

What follows is a funny, stylish story of a thief in a future (2075) solar system, as he traces a helical path that curves and intersects, crossing the police, the criminal underground, politicians, and artists.

¶

Delany's impact on the science fiction field is also enormous, from his award-winning novels and short stories, to his critical writings about science fiction, where he came up with or amplified a number of points about how we read science fiction that now feel like established tenets: that "science fiction"—like any other genre—is a series of protocols of reading that demand training (which many people don't understand as they start to read sf); that there are margins of meaning in sentences that appear in science fiction unlike other genres (e.g., the famous line, "Her world exploded," which has both a mundane-metaphoric and science-fictional-literal meaning).

¶

In recent years, Delany has written a book called ***About Writing*** (2006) where the good seems to be the enemy of the best; that is, he doesn't seem interested in merely readable or good books and is using as a metric not whether a given work is publishable but whether anyone will want to read it in ten years.

This is intimidating.

¶

Delany writes and publishes science fiction, historical fantasy (sword and sandal type), memoirs and letters, mundane fiction, pornography, literary criticism, social critiques, and comics. Among other types and subtypes.

I hope some day someone publishes selections from his notebooks which apparently he has been keeping since he was a teenager.

¶

The front cover of ***Dhalgren*** (1975): An enormous sun looms over the wreckage of a city; silhouettes of skyscraper skeletons. Three small figures in the foreground, under a streetlight; looking cocky and dangerous.

¶

Authors I read or reconsidered after Delany's championed them in his critical writing: Theodore Sturgeon, Joanna Russ, Tom Disch, Marilyn Hacker, Vincent Czyz, Ron Silliman.

¶

I was one of *those* 15-year-olds: I read *Dhalgren* (and re-read it, and re-re-read it) and it rearranged my brain and the way I saw the world. I evangelized it to all my friends, and bought copies at the local used bookstore ("City Lights" in London, Ontario) and gave them to my nearest-and-dearest—at least the ones I thought were sufficiently "cool" (whatever that meant to me—a bookish theatre- and science-fiction-reading nerd) and who would get something out of it.

This phase lasted until my freshman year at college.

I think . . . one of my friends read it. Maybe.

¶

Over the years I've collected quite a bit of Delaniana, including some obscurities, such as a piece in the *New American Review*, the paperback anthology *Quark*, the comic book *Empire*, and so on. I am proud of having read more Delany that most. Still, I must confess: I have never been able to read Delany's early trilogy, *The Fall of the Towers*. I just bounce right off of it. It has sat on my shelf for, well, the better part of two decades.

I think I have read every other major piece of prose (and most of the minor ones, too).

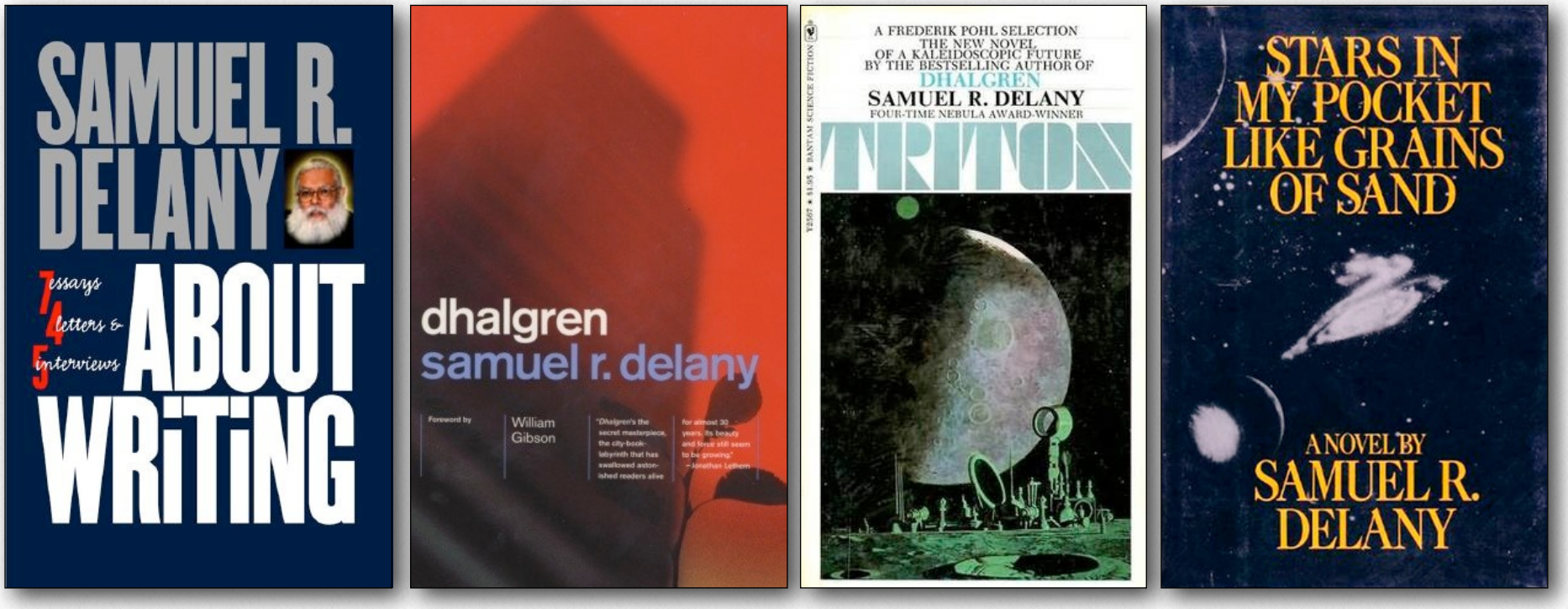
¶

I ran a mailing list on Delany's work for years. It's still active although there is little traffic currently. The most fun we ever had on the list was when an Italian gentleman was translating *Dhalgren*, and we would hash over certain difficulties in the text and how, exactly, to translate them, with the closest textual analysis, widening into discussions of the social milieu of seventies America as reflected in *Dhalgren*.

We even found some typos, which, if you know how much work Delany puts into creating an error-free text, made us feel, well, useful.

¶

I first read the novel ***Triton*** (1976), later retitled *Trouble on Triton*, when I was far too young to understand the book's feminist critique of the self-deluding (male, heterosexual) protagonist. It was easier to observe and work through the societies depicted in the novel—though I did so somewhat inchoately, not having the vocabulary—the way the free but surveillance-heavy society of Triton, with its unlicensed sectors where no laws applied,



body modification, strange styles of dress, and sexual freedom, contrasted with a glimpse of regimented, warlike Earth.

The glitter and strangeness of the text still caught and fascinated me.

It took some time and exposure to feminist ideas in university (including Russ's *Female Man*) until I understood what *Triton* was "about" and why the protagonist, Bron, was, well, an asshole. This dilemma—adolescents reading an adult novel and not understanding—is referenced by Jo Walton in *Among Others*, which made me smile with recognition.

¶

Delany is aware of the size and complexity of our single world, and can properly extrapolate to multiple worlds, at least with the textual allusiveness necessary for fiction. One would think that within the sf/f genre this would be a common trait, but it's not: too many books are (still!) written where planets —or even entire empires—are monocultures, and speak a single language (and have social structures so very much like our own).

The best sf example of this in Delany's work is ***Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*** (1984). Worlds have different cities and geosectors where they speak different languages and have different cultures and customs, and this in a universe of 6,000+ inhabited worlds full of humans and nonhuman sentients, so that the world of the story is a mosaic of cultures, cultural adaptations, customs, different denotations and connotations of language, and behaviours.

And of course it isn't, really; the complexity of this enormous universe is an illusion created by/through the text, generated in the reader's mind from a few indications in glittering prose. Few sf writers sustain the illusion as well as Delany.

¶

Delany is notorious for his belief that plot, characterization, and all the reductive ways

that people speak about fiction are abstract constructs that do not clearly get at what we experience when we read or when we write: words, one by one; words that collectively form the experience of reading. The older I get and the more I read, the more I start to understand this.

¶

> I remember then trying to explain the book [***The Mad Man*** (1994)] to an older, straight friend who knew some of Delany's SF. He looked horrified. *Why* he seemed to think *would anybody ever want to read* ***that.*** (Matthew Cheney, *The Mumpsimus*)

I have only read his pornographic works once, each (***The Mad Man***, ***Hogg***, ***Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders***, ***The Tides of Lust*** aka ***Equinox***). They can be difficult and off-putting—though the prose is often beautiful and striking—there are a lot of, well, giant cocks in various orifices, and sexual acts that are outside the comfortable, shading into the painful, the ugly, the difficult, the unpleasant, or just the strange and "disgusting." Delany bringing these acts, characters, and situations into the realm of discourse is a radical act, and the discomfort and disgust that we experience reading it is as much part of their intended effect (I believe) as the performance art of Marina Abramović, the comics of R. Crumb, the paintings of Francis Bacon.

Even in his sf, social mores are hinted at that touch on these distinctions of disgust/desire, though with appetite rather than sex. In *Nova*, one protagonist hands the other a candy that he doesn't want any more, and the other pops it into his mouth immediately and enjoys it -- something that doesn't happen in our society even between intimates. But in a world where no-one needs to eat, and sickness is mostly a thing of the past, mores have shifted. In *Stars*, the society of the protagonist eats cloned human flesh and cloned intelligent alien flesh, and are disgusted by the thought of eating a slaughtered animal, with bones inside.

¶

At age fifteen (and again at age thirty, or forty-five), *Dhalgren* opened a world of possibilities about the place of sex, stream-of-consciousness, conversation, and social dynamics in literature that seemed both artfully constructed and maximally mimetic. It's not particularly the book's notorious graphic sex scenes that were (and are) revelatory to me—though the casualness and humour within those intimate acts still resonates with me when the titillation has faded, somewhat—but how *Dhalgren* positioned the shiftings of desire and especially sexual desire within the context of daily existence, and made this work within the complex textual web of the novel. That is: desire is part and parcel of the life of (the) Kid(d) as he drifts around the city, but no more so (and no less so) outlined in words than his talks with his girlfriend, a long monologue by a famous poet, urination,

thoughts before sleep, awkward conversation at a dinner party, sitting and smoking hash, a therapist visit, or taking a bath—shifts or doublings in consciousness as experienced from moment to moment in a way that I recognize from my own experience of living and that I've rarely, if ever, seen in art.

Delany once commented on *Dhalgren* that it was a book where everything is foreground, and that seems to me the way we experience our own lives, as minute-to-minute, second-to-second, foregrounding the impulses of our own bodies, thoughts, and desires.

To capture that shift and flow in a textual artifact—and to sustain that juggling act for almost 800 pages, among the many other things that book is doing (for example, commenting on the experience of the American urban experience of the seventies with burned-out cities, rapidly changing post-counterculture gender roles, racial tensions), is an act of artistic genius that still widens my eyes and makes me shake my head.

¶

One of the greatest scenes in all of science fiction, I would put forward, is one near the beginning of the novel *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand* where almost nothing happens.

In it, a human male, Rat Korga, who has been reduced to slave status by means of a neurological process, is suddenly connected to a computer network. The process by which his thoughts and feelings are changed by the feedback loop of the computer commenting on what he is thinking (particularly his thoughts at an unconscious level, bringing his mental talk into consciousness), and the subsequent scene where he reads books for the first time (in an extremely rapid way as the computer network sends the information into his mind) -- the excitement of a series of rapidly changing and dissolving mental processes, and the gain of knowledge is delineated with painstaking detail on the page and a rush of energy and excitement.

It begins:

> A pedal voice—". . . stupid, stupid, stupid . . ."—that had begun sometime in unremembered childhood whenever he'd been asked questions he couldn't answer, that had continued whenever he'd been asked questions he'd had to answer "no," and that had finally come whenever he'd been asked any questions at all or even had to ask them, suddenly became audible. A tiny voice, still it had insisted as relentlessly (and as unobtrusively) as his own heartbeat.

There is something about this careful, precise delineation of mental states and how they change, rapidly or slowly, that resonates with me as, well, true; as well as necessary and beautiful.

¶

Delany's book-length essay of a rock-band commune in the sixties, ***Heavenly Breakfast*** (1979), is a snapshot of a very interesting time

in the counterculture—the winter of 1968 in New York.

His Hugo-winning memoir of his precocious adolescence and early adulthood, ***The Motion of Light in Water*** (1988), has the density and clarity of his best prose, while meditating on identity, art, madness, and all the complex emotions that we encounter as we grow up. As well, it is a story of colour and complexity set in and around that most complex and rich of American cities, New York, from Harlem to the Lower East Side.

¶

Delany politely but firmly insists on the complexity and diversity of race, sexuality, and gender in science fiction and literature, both in his critical works and his fiction. Living, as we do, in a racist society where it is easy not to be troubled if you are straight and/or white and/or male, and where it's often tempting to not react to the latest outrage, this quiet corrective has sat on my shoulder and whispered useful words when reading and when looking at the world.

¶

The essay ***Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*** (1999) discusses the pornographic theatres of the old, pre-Giuliani Times Square, and ramifies from that discussion to make some broader points about the social web and interclass contact through both sexual and other means within a big city. These insights have shaped my view of how my friends and I negotiate our own social contacts.

¶

Atlantis: Three Tales (1995) is an underappreciated book within Delany's oeuvre. It contains, yes, three stories of the most careful and beautiful mainstream prose in a kind of suspenseful hyperrealism. The first story is drawn from the history of Delany's family and imagines his father coming to New York for the first time from the American South, and meeting the poet Hart Crane, though that did not actually happen. The second and third stories are also hewn from the material of Delany's life: a story of modernist art and sexual drive, and a story of an encounter in Greece when Delany traveled there in his 20s.

¶

In just about every piece I read by Delany—especially most of his non-fiction—there are passages where I am confounded by the intellect on display, the observational brilliance, the casual profundity, the intricacies of the argument and the human and warm views. Delany's willingness to work at his prose, to refine every piece of it so it fits as well as it can within its sentence and within a larger argument, is why I do not hesitate in calling him a genius. Our sf genius, whom we are very lucky to have.

I have turned over and thought about pieces of his work hundreds, thousands of times. And will for the rest of my life, I suspect.

—Zvi Gilbert

The Day I Saw Delany

On January 31, I saw Samuel R. Delany give a talk to a standing-room-only audience at the University of Chicago, where he was spending the winter term as Critical Inquiry guest lecturer. A forehead like Turgenev, a beard like Tolstoy, with a smile dancing in its snowy cascade, he made sure to say hello to every individual arrival, before the flood of eager visitors made it impossible.

The audience ended up quite a varied mix, men and women (and who knows, maybe genderqueer), of all ages from early twenties to over seventy, all colours and races. I couldn't help thinking as I looked around the room that this was far more diverse than the science fiction conventions I've been to. They came for Chip Delany.

The introducer mentioned how Delany's appointment as CI guest lecturer was greeted with excitement at the unusual choice. He said that it is especially appropriate that Delany resist the series of previous CI guests, for he is a theorist of seriality; perhaps he doesn't belong in this series or any other; perhaps he belongs in many series. Delany works interstitially, in sutures and margins. Interpenetration rather than collision. The worlds he imagines are often broken. Instead of high castles in the sky, you have Nevèrÿon's Bridge of Lost Desire.

Then Delany himself took a seat behind the microphone, holding a comb-bound bundle of typed paper in refined, soft-looking hands that belied his age, and told us he was going to read us a paper "about the life of a gay black writer, me."

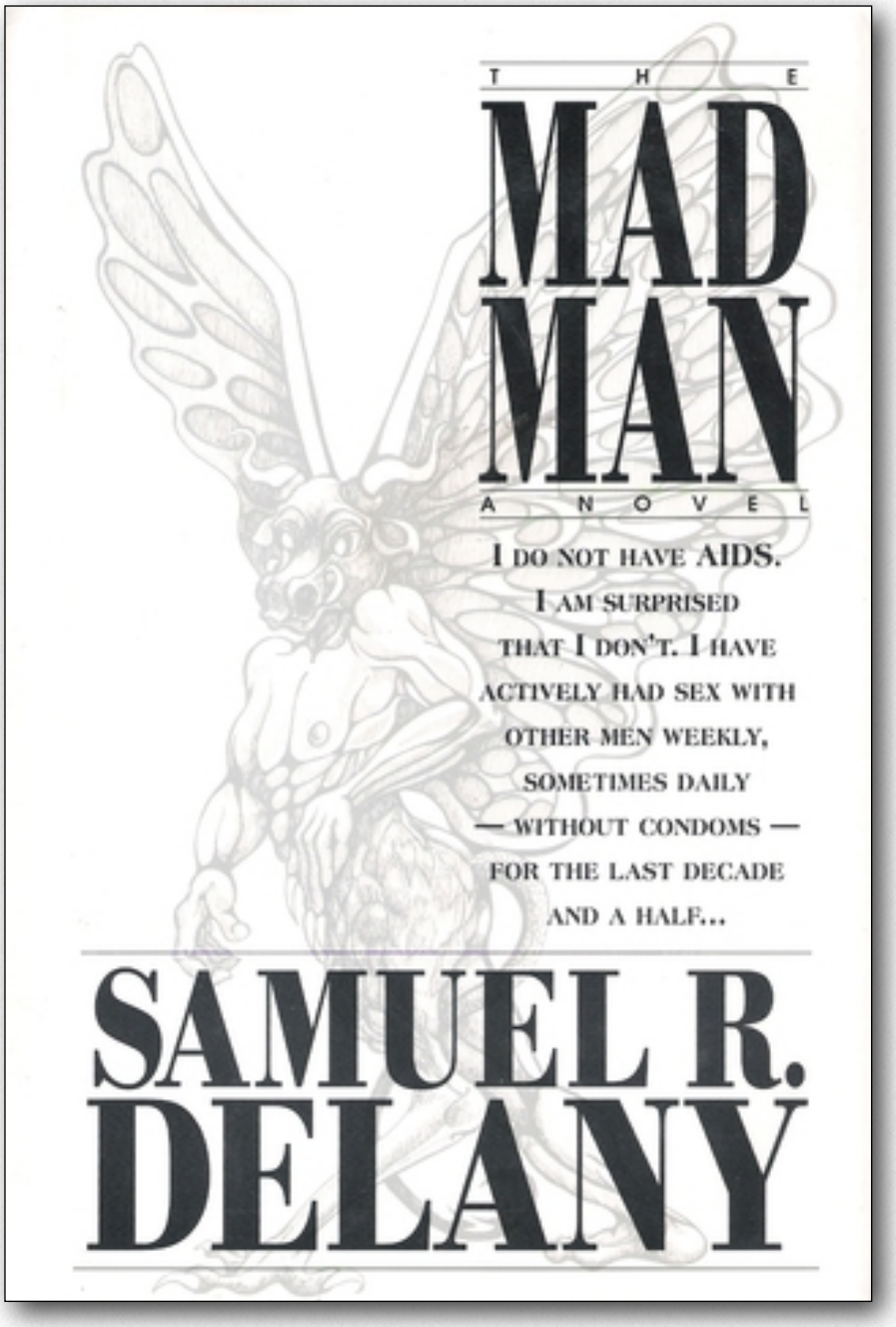
Some interview questions, he said, excite me. Some evoke uneasiness, discomfort. Not the ones about sex or other private things. What troubles me are questions about art, ones the interviewer should be answering, not asking. "What do you think will be your legacy?" "I am an artist, not a scientist, and only provisionally a scholar. What I have given you, I have no way of knowing. . . . The notion of legacy is absurd; I've seen enough change in seventy-plus years. . . . Legacy is at best a silly notion, at worst an evil one. I want my students, and my daughter, who has recently finished medical school and is married to a warm and loving husband, to become good people."

He told a story of the tour of Greece and Turkey he had done in the 1960s, with two straight male companions, who "all had a much better time than they would have if the third member of their trio had been straight." In the Tuileries gardens after midnight he met Bernard, a Senegalese medical student and son of a tribal queen, "so a genuine African

prince." In the course of a cordial affair, Bernard and his rooming-house friends provided for Delany and his travelmates a delicious dinner for six, a sheet of plywood on their knees for a table, covered with a billowing white linen tablecloth and fine china and crystal wine glasses. It was only on the way back that Delany's companion, completely oblivious to having been hit on throughout the meal, said, "That was a great dinner . . . they were all gay, weren't they?"

"None of the writing I published about that time or during that time was related to my sexual life, except as coded." That was before Stonewall; you could get into real trouble. He had many, many sexual encounters on that tour, most of them pleasant and friendly. That helped in Athens, with "the two Greek sailors my older British roommate brought home one night, who raped me," he said, almost casually (to my quiet shock and likely that of many other listeners). In context, the vast majority of his thousands of sexual encounters ranged from pleasant and helpful to at least sexually satisfying, unlike, he pointed out, heterosexual encounters which have a social script that invariably ends in breakup and betrayal.

He turned to another remembered interview question, asking what was his life like when he was writing ***The Mad Man*** (1994). At the time, he was receiving his first steady paycheck teaching at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, which produced a flurry of creative work. ("For years, I thought my ups and downs in creativity were entirely my fault. No, they had to do with how much money I had . . . apparently, I'm an artist that responds remarkably well to patronage.") He had read Harold Brodkey's "The Story of My Death," which gave medically impossible information about the author contracting AIDS, and Delany flung it across the room. Brodkey's memoir begins, "I have AIDS; I'm surprised that I do." In response, the first sentence of *The Mad Man* is "I don't have AIDS. I'm surprised that I don't."



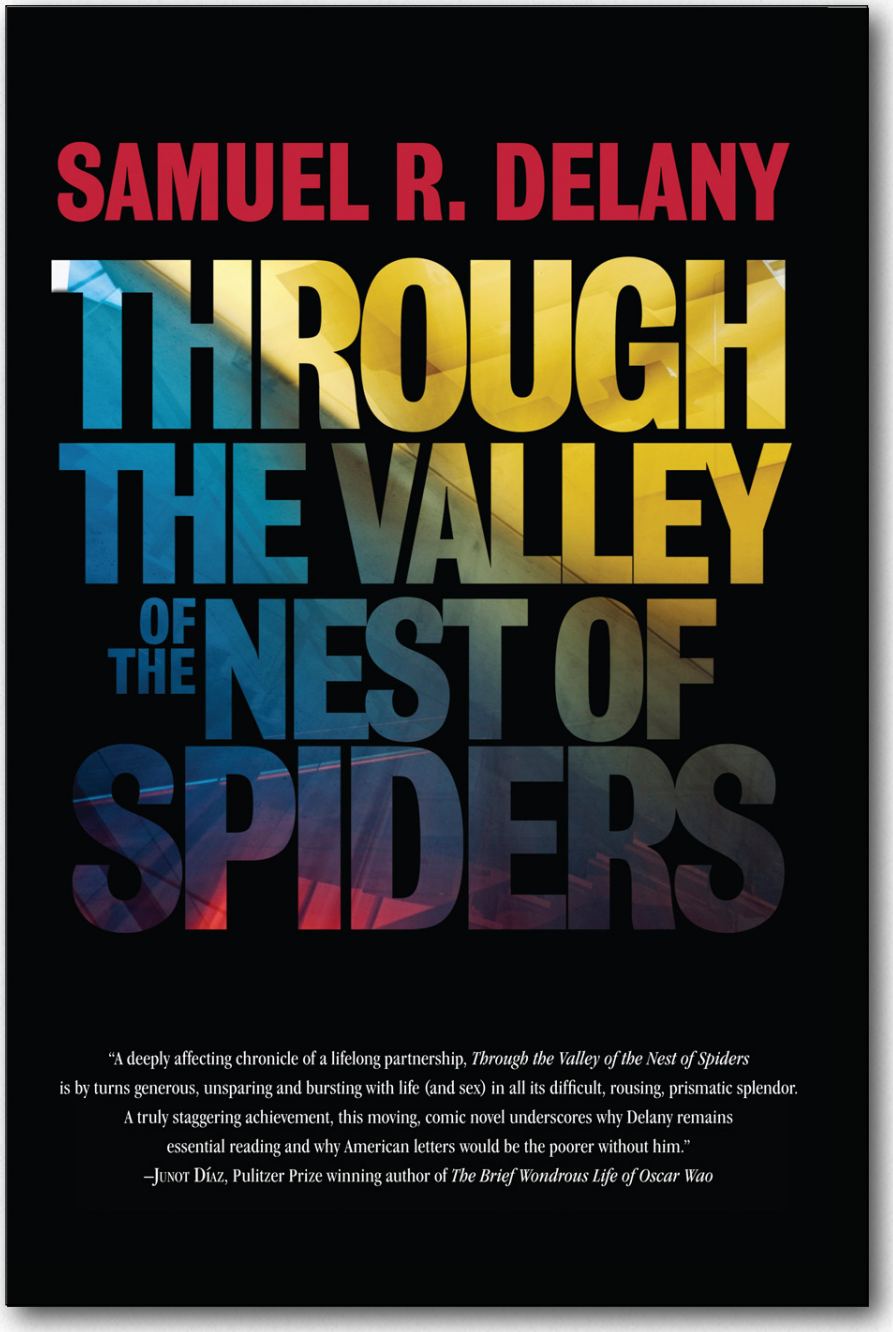
I'm a people-liker, he said in response to an audience question that avoided the "legacy" pitfall by asking about reciprocity from

his admirers. "Some writers are not; some are, 'I love humanity, but god, I hate people.' I love humanity, and I love people. I used to think, when I was young, 'Smart people are those who know the exact same stuff that I do.' I grew up and realized that 'Smart people are ones who know stuff that I don't know'—and suddenly there were no stupid people in the world. Everyone is interesting. A critique of one of my memoirs pointed out that Dennis, my partner, was homeless for six years and has no formal education, so 'What do they talk about?' I showed it to Dennis, and he replied, 'Tell him we sing show tunes together.'"

As I listened to him, I wondered whether to mention ***Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*** (2012). At Chicon 7, attending a panel with Nick Mamatas and Cat Rambo on "Putting the Personal in SF," I asked about feeling awkward writing about sex. Mamatas, with his characteristic sarcasm, replied: "Read Samuel Delany, *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spider*s. That's the bar. If you're below that, you're okay."

And then it came up when another member of the audience asked about the coded mentions of homosexuality before Stonewall: "Is the choice to write science fiction related to your impulse to code, and to your candour?"

The candour I exhibit here, Delany replied, is not about SF; it's about AIDS. Candour is post-1982—some of the writers and gay activists realized that "being secretive



about what happens to you sexually is a way to be complicit in murder . . . I can tell you that I'm really into fellatio, but I don't like anal that much, except at certain times. I don't lose a bit of my dignity if I stand up and say things like that. . . . We must throw out the notion that there is dignity to be preserved. It's a behaviour to fight the murder machine."

And that changed my whole perspective of what it means to set the bar such that if you're below it, you're ok.

I doubt I will read *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*, but I now understand better why it exists.

—*Tamara Vardomskaya*

Letters of Comment

Ecdysis *welcomes letters of comment. Send yours to ecdysis@mcwetboy.net. Letters are lightly edited to correct typos, punctuation, spelling mistakes, and the error of their ways.*

Congratulations on the first two issues of *Ecdysis*. I hope you start a revolution. As someone who adores the idea of fanzines but remains frankly unimpressed by the fanzine culture we currently have, I completely understand your desire to reclaim the form. If anime fandom can rediscover the traditional fanzine thanks to *Colony Drop*, why can't we?

I loved reading Tamara Vardomskaya's piece on Silverberg's *Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Volume 1* as I just finished reading it for the first time myself (after close to ten years in the field reviewing books and making comments that inspired affable goon Chris Garcia to describe me as "that McCalmont bastard" in your second issue). I read Silverberg's anthology after a long period of disenchantment with the field; I don't like most of the novels that win prizes, I don't like any of the short fiction that gets published and I'm deeply confused as to what it is about my fondness for the hard SF writing of Greg Egan and Stephen Baxter that's supposed to make me interested in YA fantasy novels.

Reading the anthology was a bit like the time I discovered the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini: here were stories that were not only completely different literary and commercial works published at the time, they were also radically different to the stuff you find in genre magazine today. Tamara's quite right to roll her eyes at the dodgy accents in "A Martian Odyssey" but look at the form! It's a simple road movie stringing together a series of speculative set pieces. The protagonist describes what he saw to his international colleagues who then comment upon what the protagonist saw based on their expertise in biology and engineering. These aren't characters . . . they're lenses and each lens is imbued with reserves of theoretical knowledge that bring out certain aspects of the phenomenon. I find it incredibly sad that this technique has fallen from use, forced out by the need to provide "proper" characterization and "proper" plot where "proper" is defined according to the values of an entirely different literary tradition. Watch Pasolini's *Salò* or *Porcile* and you'll discover films that are weird, incoherent, obscene and clunky because they were made to a set of aesthetic criteria that somehow never caught on. To discover golden age SF after reading a lot of contemporary SF is like discovering a secret cultural history buried beneath the New

Wave propaganda. I guess what distinguishes me from a lot of golden age SF fans is that I'm not content to read Asimov and Heinlein, I want their methods applied to the science and society of today.

Funnily enough, this is precisely why I tend to struggle with most fanzines: I don't want fanzines that are nostalgic for the age of the *Enchanted Duplicator*, I want fanzines that draw on the past only to better confront the present and if that makes me a bastard then so be it.

—Jonathan McCalmont

Is contemporary sf as monolithic as you seem to be implying? While I suspect that several forces, from market imperatives to writers' workshops, have had a homogenizing effect on the field, none of us can ever see the whole field at once. The oddball voices aren't always the most prolific, the most noticed, or the most rewarded at awards time.

Thank you for issue 2 of *Ecdysis*. No hate mail from me, I'm pleased that you're still producing your zine. Please keep it up! More comments from me begin with the next paragraph.

Seventy or more years ago, science fiction was a shared experience. There was a good chance that anyone who considered themselves a fan had read all SF books and magazines, and had seen all SF movies (and later, TV shows). Fans then has seen and read it all, and could compare notes. As time went on, that good chance got slimmer and slimmer all the time until there was no chance at all of that shared experience. The myriad of interests covered by Fandom today is great, but it also means no shared experiences between many of those groups, like filkers, furries, writers, artists, etc. When I found fandom, there was also a peer pressure to not only read SF, but to also have a copy of what you've read; otherwise, there'd be no proof you'd actually read that book. (If I had copies of all the SF I've read over the years, I'd need a bigger apartment.) As the interests spread wider apart, and become balkanized, is there any blanket community called Fandom any more? Our interest in SF has gotten to the point where we simply can't insist that anyone has read even a significant percentage of 75-80 years of the literature in this genre, or seen that same amount of movies and TV. And with the disappearance of the shared experience, I think the fandom itself may fade away, too.

I have those great SF Hall of Fame books, and as much as I enjoyed them, sufficient time has gone past that perhaps we need a new set of them to reflect the 50+ years since those originals. When I first started reading SF, I liked the anthologies, but they aren't as common as they used to be, so it may not be possible to read the best of the short stories. I think you'd enjoy Cliff Simak's works; I did because they weren't the 700+-page bloated novels you see these days. Simak's works were full and detailed stories in less than 200 pages. Simak was a pro-

fessional journalist, so he knew how to tell a story in the least number of words, and you can see he applied the same idea to his SF.

As I've picked up an interest in steampunk, I have the first two of Mike Resnick's Weird West books, but just don't have the money for newer books these days. To have famous historical characters show up on occasion in your writing reminds me of some of the more popular episodes of *Murdoch Mysteries*, which is another of my current interests.

Dinosaur erotica . . . I had heard of this, mostly because the most mystifying things show up on Facebook. We often say that whatever we can think of, someone will make some money off it, and I think this is a prime example of this.

Ah, look at that motley crew at the top of page 29. (You said "Excellent!" in your head, didn't you?) The one on the left, that Garcia fella . . . getting a loc from him means a lot, he doesn't respond to a lot of zines, usually being too busy with a ton of other projects, and his own zines, too. An excellent letter column, but no further comments from me.

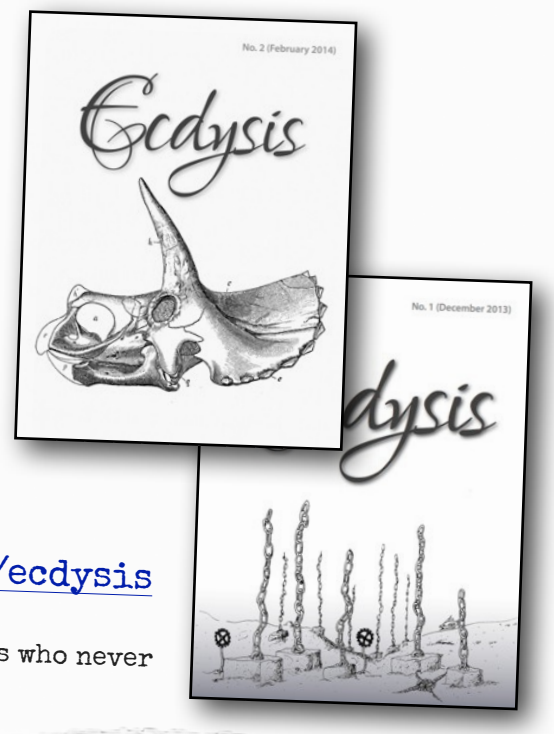
And, with that, my thanks for another issue. Please do keep them coming.

—Lloyd Penney

When I first read Piper's Little Fuzzy, *I marvelled at the economy of words; as someone who balks at multi-volume series and has a hard time with books longer than 500 pages, I appreciated that. But I don't miss the "shared experience," largely because I never actually had it: I never got much involved with fandom in my late teens and early twenties because there didn't seem to be much overlap between Winnipeg fandom at the time and the subset of science fiction of fantasy I was deeply on about back then.*

As for the photo on page 29: not that we met then, but I remember seeing you in the audience at that panel. Small world, no?

Oh, Look! Back Issues!



No. 2 (February 2014)

Reading the Science Fiction Classics! Dinosaurs!

iBooks (17.9 MB) • PDF (6.2 MB)

No. 1 (December 2013)

Clockwork Fish! Pacific Rim! Snakesploitation Movies!

iBooks (15.2 MB) • PDF (6.9 MB)

Past and future[1] issues available for download at mcwetboy.net/ecdysis

[1] Some conditions apply. Future issues only available in the future, or to time travellers who never like being told the rules.

I enjoyed *Ecdysis* #1—you've obviously put a lot of thought into what and how you want to publish, and I'm looking forward to the promised future issues.

On a technical note, I'm commenting based on the PDF version. I don't have a Mac or an iPad, so iBooks is obviously off the table as far as I'm concerned. I don't think it's just sour grapes when I say I think it's a mistake tying the primary version of your zine to one company's proprietary software. Of course, I could be wrong, and in 5 or 10 years we may find ourselves scrambling to try to convert PDFs of older zines into iBooks format. In the meantime, however, I'm very much a fan of landscape-oriented PDFs—I think it's about the closest thing we've got to a universally machine-readable, conveniently person-readable format.

But enough about format. On to content: I think you've hit the nail on the head as far as the advantages of blogs, Facebook, Twitter, etc. for spreading breaking news and the need for fanzines to find a different niche if they're to survive. I think besides the synthesis/evaluation functions you mention, another good fit for fanzines is in collection/anthologization. This can serve the purpose of extending the useful lifespan of blog posts (e.g. if you've reviewed a series of movies individually on your blog, once the series is concluded it would be good to then collect the reviews in a single issue of your fanzine) or of providing a handy guide to a fannish controversy by collecting excerpts for relevant blog posts into an article telling the whole story from blow-up to cool-off.

"The Opera of *Pacific Rim*" was brilliant. I've read a couple of other articles on opera in SF fanzines recently (there must be something in the area), one of which brought up the fannishness of opera fans and another that was more or less a straight opera review, but this was the first time I'd been called on to thing about the essential operatic nature of an SF blockbuster. I also loved Tamara's repeated injunction to "Go. Play. And do better." A phrase that I've seen repeatedly that I think is applicable here is "tyranny of realism." There's a place for realism, and there are works that benefit from the application of realism, but that doesn't mean that realism is the right tool for every dramatic problem.

I loved the Worldcon data graphs (I'm weird like that.) It's interesting how, once you know what to look for, the Australian Worldcons are obvious.

—Jason Burnett

I fully expect most people are reading **Ecdysis** *in PDF format (which was derided as a proprietary format not that long ago, if I'm not mistaken); to be honest my main interest in using the proprietary iBooks format is because the authoring tool, iBooks Author, is so damn easy to use, and because its default templates are meant for tablets, which is the target reading platform. I use my iPad in portrait mode, myself; portrait vs. landscape may well be a matter of taste.*