



Science-Fiction Fanzine

Vol. XVI, No. 5; May, 2004

The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

Convention (Bidyon) after Shavout which will concentrate on SF literature and SF writing. GoH is author Paul Kearney from Ireland. All details at this site (in Hebrew): http://www.sf-f.org.il/story_612



כנס ספרות ספקולטיבית

האגודה הישראלית למדע בדיוני ולפנטסיה שמחה להכריז על כנס **בְּדִיוֹן! 2004** הכנס יתמקד בספרות מד"ב ופנטסיה, ויכלול הרצאות של סופרים, עורכים, מתרגמים ואנשי אקדמיה העוסקים בתחום, ביניהם גיל הראבן, נורית זרחי, ד"ר עמנואל לוטם, פרופ' נחמן בן יהודה וד"ר אילנה גומל.

אורח הכבוד של הכנס הוא הסופר האירי **פול קארני**, מחבר סדרת הפנטסיה המצליחה "ממלכות האל".

הכנס יתקיים ביום חמישי, 27/5/2004, ב**אולם מופת**, ברחוב הרצל 31 (פינת רחוב קריניצי) ברמת גן.

More information is available (in Hebrew) at the Society's site: <http://www.sf-f.org.il>

HELP! *CyberCozen* Needs Material!

Once every few years (during the 15 years I have been publishing *CyberCozen*) I ask readers to help out by contributing material. I'm looking for commentary, jokes, interesting quotes, book and film reviews, and very short stories. Mostly I want stuff in ENGLISH. Since the Israeli Society for sf and Fantasy has its own publication in Hebrew ("The Tenth Dimension"), and there is an sf/fantasy magazine in Hebrew ("Halomot B'Aspamia"), and numerous internet sites in Hebrew, I prefer to provide a platform for original Israeli sf/fantasy thought in English.

Note that I have a special problem these last couple years. I used to work in Tel Aviv, and go there on the bus, and later on the train, every day. I used that time to read a lot of sf. Since I am now **retired**, I rarely go to Tel Aviv, and that makes it less automatic to read sf. In addition I have a special problem this last year. Since last fall, I have been studying **neurobiology** in a systematic way. I read books and articles on the subject. I go to hear lectures and sit in on courses. I see myself as an unofficial student of neurobiology. This is a nice way to reshape my life as a retired person, giving myself something to do which I rather enjoy.

Studying neurobiology doesn't leave me much time to read sf. For example, last week I took the train to Tel Aviv. Instead of reading sf on the way there and back, I read an article entitled, "Cellular Aspects of Callosal Connections and Their Development", by Innocenti, et al. (1995). This article is not only science, it may in part even be fiction, as the author quarrels with Ringo, et al.'s suggestion that "interhemispheric conduction delays increase progressively with brain size, and that this may favor the emergence of cerebral lateralization [which is found only in humans]". So either Ringo, et al., are wrong, and therefore writing fictional science (נידע בדיוני), or it is Innocenti, et al., who are writing fictional science. Fascinating! You see why I need your help?

Short Book Reviews by Lavie Tidhar

Altered Carbon just scooped the Phillip K Dick award and *The Skinner* was just published in the US, where it's getting rave reviews:

Altered Carbon by Richard Morgan

Del Rey (US) 2003, paperback, 384 pages

Gollancz (UK) 2002, hardcover, 400 pages

Reviewed by **Lavie Tidhar**

Philip Marlowe, it would seem, is having a busy time lately.

The mean streets of Los Angeles, the cops and the crooks, the mysterious blonde and the private dick: all appear to have taken over the science fiction novel in recent years. Peter Hamilton did it with the Greg Mandel novels; Alastair Reynolds toyed with it in *Chasm City*; Paul McAuley set it in a near-future London, and Jon Courtney Grimwood transferred it to the alternative-history setting of *Pashazade*.

Enter Takeshi Lev Kovacs: a highly trained UN Envoy, soldier for hire, a man wanted on half a dozen worlds – and the latest re-incarnation of Philip Marlowe. Kovacs is needlecast across the light years to old Earth, given the stored body of an ex-policeman, and asked to solve a murder by the victim himself.

In a world where personalities are routinely stored, and transferred between bodies, into virtual space or across the light years, Laurens Bancroft is convinced he has not killed himself, regardless of the evidence.

Kovacs is drawn against his will into an investigation everyone, it seems, wants to see closed and forgotten. Shot at, beaten, threatened and tortured, he will stop at nothing to get to the truth.

Along the way, we are granted glimpses of this future world: Martian artifacts, colony worlds with oppressive regimes of Moslem fundamentalists or Japanese Yakuza gangs; the meths elite – short for Methuselah – the powerful people who have lived for hundreds of years in a multiplicity of bodies; a world where Real Death is rare, but very real.

The main premise of the novel is that ability to store and transfer personalities, and the world depicted is extrapolated from that premise. What surprised me, however, is how well the novel works as a murder mystery while being almost devoid of original SF concepts. This is, purely, a Raymond Chandler novel – with the tough yet kind detective, the sexy and alluring blonde, the corrupt politicians and the local thugs – updated with designer drugs, powerful guns and plenty of sex. Its greatest SF influence is obviously cyberpunk, with plenty of talk about hacking into systems, installing viruses, running AIs and the rest of the jargon. Strip away those superficial elements, however, and you are left with the 1940s swarming over your head.

That is not to say I didn't like the novel. *Altered Carbon* is fast and furious, moving at the speed of bullets, at times tender, at times violent, and with a compelling mystery at its heart. Cyberpunk fans would find enough here to satisfy them, while anyone, like myself, who likes his private eyes tough, wise-cracking and with a buried heart of gold, will find plenty to enjoy here while sitting at the edge of their seats to find out who-dun-it.

An enjoyable and unpredictable thriller-mystery with gadgets, coupled with an interesting science fiction premise, *Altered Carbon* is well-written and exciting, while ultimately formulaic. Make no mistake, though – Richard Morgan delivers the goods, and I challenge you to discover the murderer before Kovacs, if you can.

The Skinner by Neal Asher

Tor (US) 2004, Hardcover, 480 pages

Macmillan (UK) 2002, trade paperback, 480 pages

Reviewed by **Lavie Tidhar**

I must confess I had not read Neal Asher's work so far. I have certainly been aware of him, from his various small-press and magazine appearances, to his first full-length novel *Gridlinked* last year, and so it was a pleasant surprise to discover just how good *The Skinner* is. In fact, I suspect many people like myself are going to discover Asher in the next few months, as the novel is now published in the States.

Asher weaves together a web of a new mythology, made of the strands of science fiction stories that have become parts of a cultural make-up for a generation of fans; a background that he obviously cherishes and which should speak directly to his readers. Echoes of Cordwainer Smith's *Norstrilia*, Roger Zelazny's *Mars* or Larry Niven's *Known Space* are invoked without dominating the story, which has enough devices, gadgets, violence and aliens that they seem, at times, to spill off the edges of the page.

The Skinner is a story of the planet Spatterjay: wild, inhospitable to the extreme, deadly, an ocean world whose human inhabitants are near immortals, where giant leeches swarm in the water and on land, and nature has a sharp edge...

It is also the story of three travelers whose paths cross on this deadly planet. Janer, an agent of a hornet hive mind; Sable Keech, a seven hundred years old dead man walking with a grudge to settle; and Erlin, for whom immortality is proving to be a burden and who is seeking the help of an ancient Captain in order to ease her, for lack of a better term, mid-second-century crisis.

Asher creates a wonderfully realized, self-sustained world. I particularly found the characters of the Old Captains, those ancient immortals who have lived on Spatterjay for centuries and who have become nearly indestructible, to be compellingly drawn, while the cheeky drones, reminiscent of Iain M. Banks' Contact drones, provide moments

of comedy throughout a fast-paced and utterly enjoyable narrative. In addition, Wind Cheater, a member of the local life forms, is particularly endearing as an entrepreneuring character who begins to re-think the usual relationships between colonized and colonizers....

The story centers around the hunt for Spatterjay Hoop, a legendary criminal who controlled the planet for many years, and who now apparently roams the far isles, a monster who captures unwary travelers and literally takes their skin off – and who’s head is rumored to be kept in a box on board an Old Captain’s boat. Yes, losing your skin, or your head, is not a permanent affliction on this here planet, but things soon heat up much more when a ship full of deadly Prador arrives in the system, and the race to find Hoop begins.

As far as I am concerned, *The Skinner* is Neal Asher’s ticket to the big league, and a more than possible nominee for the Hugo. It is Inventive, suspenseful and gripping – and highly recommended.

Short Book Review by Aharon Sheer

Lest Darkness Fall by L. Sprague de Camp (1939, 1941, 1949), 233 pages.

Recommended by Harry Turtledove. Parallel history author Harry Turtledove, in an interview in *LOCUS*, said that reading this book made him a historian. It seems he was an undergraduate student studying science when he read *Lest Darkness Fall*. He immediately switched his major to history, eventually got a doctorate in history, and became a writer of parallel history stories.

I found this book quite entertaining, fast moving and exciting. First, here is the author’s explanation of the scientific basis for travel backwards in time:

“...all these people who just disappear, they have slipped back down ... [the] trunk of the tree of time. When they stop slipping, they are back in some former time. But as soon as they do anything, they change all subsequent history. ... The trunk continues to exist. But a new branch starts out where they have come to rest. It has to, otherwise we would all disappear, because history would have changed and our parents might not have met.

“We continue to exist, but another history has been started. Perhaps there are many such, all existing somewhere. Maybe, they aren’t much different from ours. Maybe the man comes to rest in the middle of the ocean. So what? The fish eat him, and things go on as before. Or they think he is mad, and shut him up or kill him. Again, not much difference. But suppose he becomes a king or a duce? What then?

“*Presto*, we have a new history!” p. 1-2

I must say this explanation of time-travel, written in 1939, sounds much like something I read a physicist say a year or two ago.

The hero, Martin Padway, is an archeologist, with a good knowledge of Italian history, who has been involved in archeological digs in Italy. And suddenly he slips back in time and finds himself in Rome in 535 AD. He’s read the historians of that time in the original language, has a pretty good knowledge of Latin, but it will take him some time to make good on a day to day basis, to say the least. Many of the things in his pockets are not going to be too useful: Italian bank notes, an Illinois driver’s license, keys. On the other hand, “his pen, pencil, and lighter would be useful as long as ink, leads, and lighter

fuel held out.” (p. 12) And he certainly wants to hang on to his pocketknife and mechanical watch. What he can try is to get some money for the metal in his coins. You get the idea.

Well, Martin is quick-witted, and he knows a lot of things that local people don't know – if he can just survive long enough. Among the things he manages to do in the course of this book is to introduce Arabic numerals for bookkeeping (much more efficient than using Roman numerals), invent the printing press (the Romans are pretty literate people, so all he has to do is invent movable type, printing ink, and paper, so he'll have customers), the telescope (they are good glass workers), the signal telegraph (used in conjunction with the telescope for fast communication, especially in war time). Etc. I found this part of the book the most fun, even if rather unlikely.

Martin has to be careful not to get involved in religious conflicts. The Italian peninsula is filled with various Christian sects, and each one hates all the others. Martin assures each new confidant that in his distant country of America, he is a Congregationalist, which is very much like Arianism, or Orthodoxy, or Nestorianism (or whatever his confidant happens to believe in).

In later parts of the book Martin takes advantage of his knowledge of the writings of current historians to do a little predicting of the future, and gets himself involved in trying to save civilization from the invasions of the barbarians. And indeed, he becomes the confidant of the king of the Goths, whom he cleverly manipulates. And he becomes a great general, training armies in new fighting techniques and leading them into battle. I found this part of the book, with all its battles, less satisfying.

At the end of the book, Martin is trying to get shipbuilders to build a new kind of ship that will sail west – to America.

And finally, in this world Martin will try to prevent the overrun of the East by the Muslims. He sends off a letter to “his Radiant Clemency Flavius Anicius Justinian, Emperor of the Romans”:

“Furthermore, our slight ability to foresee the future informs us that in about thirty years there will be born in Arabia a man named Mohammed, who, preaching a heretical religion, will, unless stopped, instigate a great wave of barbarian conquest, subverting the rule both of the Persian Kingdom and the East Roman Empire. We respectfully urge the desirability of securing control of the Arabian Peninsula forthwith, that this calamity shall be stopped at the source.” p. 230.

Martin feels, at the end of the book, that he has staved off the Dark Ages in the new branch of the trunk of time into which he has slipped. Darkness will not fall.

From Grolier Science Fiction: “In his headnote to the [original] version, regrettably omitted from the book, de Camp in scholarly fashion listed his sources: Cassiodorus (who figures as a character in the story), Procopius of Caesarea, Gibbon, Bury; the author's meticulous care in this regard breathes life into what is by all odds de Camp's finest book.”

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