



# The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

## If 2006 Ends As Well As It Started...

By Bret Funk

As you know, 2005 wasn't exactly the most enjoyable year for those in the Gulf Coast of the U.S., Tyrannosaurus Press and myself included. We had hurricanes, floods, fights with insurance companies, fights with mortgage companies, fights with utility companies, and an ongoing fight with and between local, state and federal government which may make the actual disaster seem trivial in comparison. T-Press lost its facilities and much of its inventory, and I lost my home and most of my possessions.

But 2005 is the past, and this year is shaping up to be far more enjoyable (but hopefully not quite as 'exciting'). My personal situation, while only tangentially relevant to what I'm here to discuss, has much improved. I have a job, a home, and a new son (born at the end of October) who has brought more joy than the hurricane took. T-Press is off to a rocket of a start, having released two new titles, and the staff of the Illuminata hasn't been idle either. If you'll indulge me, I'd like to use my space this month to congratulate all concerned on their achievements.

In January, T-Press and The Illuminata released *Beacons of Tomorrow* (ISBN: 0971881995) an anthology of SF short stories. The thirteen contributing authors—winners of our Illuminations SF Writing Contest and authors who contributed short stories to the Illuminata—represent some of speculative fiction's up-and-coming creative talent. To our surprise, demand for the anthology has been high despite our shoestring budget and the relative obscurity of both the contributors and the publishing house.

March 1<sup>st</sup> saw the official release of *Jewel of Truth*

(ISBN: 0971881928), the third and long-awaited (by the half dozen or so people who've read the first two books, at least) book in my *Boundary's Fall* series. Sales of *Jewel* have started off strong, and we were surprised to earn a flattering review from *Library Journal* which we hope will boost sales of all three titles among the library market.

Both titles are available at our website and can be ordered through all major booksellers (and probably through most small booksellers as well). Autographed copies of *Jewel of Truth* can be ordered at T-Press, but if you bought your copy somewhere else and want it signed, e-mail me and we'll figure something out!

Since I presume you're reading a SF ezine because you like some form of speculative fiction, I encourage you to buy a copy of *Beacons of Tomorrow*. Everyone involved worked very hard (and *pro bono*) to make sure the anthology was published, and I can think of no greater reward for their efforts than to see sales soar. Additionally, a strong sales record for the first edition of *Beacons* will guarantee that T-Press produces additional anthologies in the coming years.

Now, on to our contributing editors! Doug Roper, in addition to his contributions to this newsletter and his help editing the anthology, published a short story and designed a book cover in 2006. Danielle Parker has published a number of stories at [Bewildering Stories \(www.bewilderingstories.com\)](http://www.bewilderingstories.com), has finished the final draft of her first novel, "The Infinite Instant", and is starting work on a second book. Garrie Keyman has had stories published in *Literary Mama* (ISBN: 1580051588) and *Cosmic Brownies* (ISBN: 0975595571). And Harriet Klausner continues to review books faster than the eye can follow.

Terry Crotinger and Charles Gramlich were not available to comment on specifics, no doubt because Terry is deep undercover researching her next hard-hitting article into the world of fandom, and Charles (as the Illuminata's most published contributor by a wide margin) is probably negotiating the release of another half dozen or so short stories.

Thank you all, contributor and reader alike, for making me feel like I've contributed something positive to the world of Speculative Fiction. Here's to many more years of success!

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# RPG Corner v4.9 - Trading Hats: GMs and Players

by Doug >!< Roper of EPIC Gaming

Most of the columns I've written for this publication have been from a GM's point of view, and that is to be expected, as a majority of my gaming life has been spent in the Big Chair, peering over my notes and handouts and running the world in which the PCs scamper about. I am a Game Master, and more than anything lately I have discovered that I want to be on the other side of the table. I want to play for a little while. Unfortunately there is something of a shortage of other Game Masters in my little collection of gamers, and I don't often have the opportunity to play.

In the instances where I have been able to get into a game, I have been careful to note the difficulties that a GM may have in giving up the unlimited power and presence of the Big Chair, and in dealing with the different styles of the new Game Master. I've also given some thought about the reverse, a long-time Player finding him or herself holding all the cards.

Information, the lack of it, the creation of it, and the dispensing of it forms the biggest difference between Players and GMs. GMs are used to knowing everything, and are used to mysteries from the "end of the book" position. The GM knows the answers to all the questions and knows the motivations to all of the NPCs and so on. The Player does not. As a result, when the GM takes on the role of the Player, there must be a period of adjustment where he relearns how to investigate, and how to track down leads and information. Some Players are very good at this, and some are not. Usually, as the party responsible for creating mysteries, GMs are much better at the aspects of investigating than a beginning player, but there is something to be said from looking at a problem from the other side. A GM turned Player may be tempted to demand an unreasonable amount of information from a source, simply because they are used to having access to that much information. GMs who play must let go of that and allow the story to unfold.

GMs new to the position may have difficulty with how and when to give out clues, and when to withhold certain tidbits. This is something that can only be learned with time and experience. Additionally, problems can arise as the new GM is forced to think on his feet, as Players ask unexpected questions or do things that are completely unfathomable. Players do that kind of stuff all the time.

Another major problem here is the new Player's attempts to "fill in the blanks" with suppositions and guesses based on how that Player as a GM would solve the problem. This is very distracting, disorienting and unfair to the new GM, as the Player may attempt to

force his suggestions on the GM. If the new GM is insecure or inexperienced, this can be disastrous as the GM turned Player basically writes the scenario from underneath the GM. This is very bad form, and a sure way to end the game prematurely.

GMs turned Players must also be aware that there will be stylistic changes to the way games are run, and that the GM turned Player's notions and inclinations on the behavior of NPCs, the availability of items and information, and the toughness of enemies and limitations of skills are no longer the norm. The new GM now controls the flow of the game as well as every other detail. GMs new to the Big Chair must come to terms with being in charge of the whole world, and that can be a large problem unless you are ready for it.

You may wonder why a GM would ever want to give up the power of the Big Chair. I mean, it doesn't seem like going back to being a Player would be much fun. More like going back to high school where you just wander the halls and wait for something cool to happen. But I personally, and I think other GMs may agree to this, really want to play. Why? Well, a GM can burnout (as I mentioned a couple of months ago) and this can help prevent that from occurring, but that's a small part of it. I think the major reason is that, the Game Master...like the dealer at a blackjack table, plays the game, but doesn't really. People play games for selfish reasons: to have fun, and to win (the occasional ego boosting game against a child notwithstanding). While winning is not the primary motivator in an RPG, victory and healthy progress are concerns that all Players want to see addressed. Show me a Player that doesn't want their characters to do well, in some capacity, and I'll show you a dirty liar. Game Masters, like blackjack dealers, show up to make sure everybody else is having a good time, and if they have a good time too, then that's great. Granted GMs are cut from different cloth than Players, and will get more enjoyment out of running a game than a regular Player, but that doesn't mean that the GM doesn't want to be selfish every now and then, to play in a game that someone else created and is manipulating, and to be able to enjoy a triumph without having to deal with Players commiserating their defeat. It's just nice to get ahead sometimes, and stay there. It's nice to operate without the responsibilities of the Big Chair. It's nice to play a game purely for fun, and to have free time during a session, instead of constantly being involved in conversations held by all of the players with a myriad of NPCs.

It's a lucky GM who finds he has the opportunity to play regularly in another's game, and such opportunities should be treasured.

# Torture Flicks are Science Fiction?

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

When I first came on board with *Illuminata* in December 2003, Bret Funk's article centered on the new connotation of what is now considered Science Fiction. This is a debate I've intentionally fostered at conventions, within discussion groups and with fandom and friends—to test this growing category of acceptable genre. So, I reason, if fantasy and horror are considered “science fiction” in the new syntax/generational definition, I shudder to think the next round of horror “reality” films might be considered sci fi as well.

Deemed “torture flicks” by the industry, or “torture porn” by Daniel Edelstein, writer for *New York Magazine* (2/6/06, nymag.com), these movies fall into the science fiction realm—in my mind, only by default. Based on the latest Hollywood offering, *Hostel*, “Horror” should be a category all by itself. We could have Horror-mild, Horror-torture, Horror-bugs, Horror-religious, Horror-fantasy, Horror-sci fi. I understand that many of the early science fiction movies were graphic and horrendous in nature; however, I'm thinking “Horror” should be excluded from science fiction as a complimentary category—there is no science, only twisted fantasy.

I've never understood why *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Friday the Thirteenth* are considered sci fi. Science does not even lurk in the background in any of these films; there is some fantasy, perhaps, and convincing special effects, but only the fictional part resembles fandom's beloved Science Fiction label. I know, Stephen King, I'm treading on hallowed ground.

**“Increasingly, producers of movies and TV series are bringing the pain to mainstream fare -- highlighting sadism, torture, brutality, and human suffering – all in the name of entertainment.” (Boston Globe, by Greg Braxton, LA Times, 2/1/06, www.boston.com)**

So I ponder further, will police departments start seeing copy-cat assaults, mutilations and kidnappings based on the T-flicks being presented as *entertainment*?

Consider the *Gor* series by John Norman, a fictional throwback to pulp fiction rags of the last century—and only 30 years old. Like Edgar Rice Burroughs, Norman's *Gor* series is considered sci fi. For the uninitiated (I've been an initiate, I don't recommend it), *Gor* is a male dominated, Conan-like world that does have some time-travel ability since they kidnap people from our time-continuum to bring to their planet. Women become slaves and sex-slaves, men become mostly just

slaves, and much more expendable. J. Norman writes his dominated women to eventually like, nay, prefer this new life-style—after a while and severe training.

In the real world, an underground movement of domination and “submissives” surfaces on the net, in unguarded moments—an example of life imitating art. The *Gor* Society is also an example of how willing men and women are to play act in a twisted game, not unlike LARPing (Live Action Role Play). The potential for human misuse is staggering.

Just how did bedroom fantasy end up as science fiction? Did I miss the fact that early pulp fiction/sci fi was often soft-porn in nature? I just didn't want to believe that Flash Gordon's side-kick, Gale, was along only for her body and revealing clothing. How did *Gor* evolve into a formal Society in the pornography BDSM culture? At first, I didn't believe what the websites were showing me, thinking I'd stumbled on someone's joke, or even a local wife-swapping clan. Until...

I met a gentleman online. This wasn't a chat room or a crude porn site. I was doing research about hydroelectric dams because I love dams, and at the time I worked for a nationally known hardware store, selling tools to government agencies, including National Parks, military installations and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. I stumbled on a website with a cut-away of a dam, and questioning one of the engineering obstacles, innocently emailed the author with my question. I was overjoyed when he responded, and we sent technical email back and forth for a week.

We branched into sci fi and our favorite authors. His was John Norman, and he asked if I'd read any of his books. When I said I had, he started getting personal—not slowly, but quite abruptly. With a name like “Terry”, he had assumed I was a male, though something must have tipped him off that I was not and he asked about surface things—where I lived, what my education was, did I have kids, was I married? He asked for a small bio. So, starting to get suspicious, I gave him a carefully crafted one. His next email asked if I was a “submissive”. A what? He explained what a submissive was and had assumed, because my signature had my name in all lower case letters, that I was one. He went on further to say that because I did not fit his weight requirements for *his* submissives, I would not qualify, and that he would no longer communicate with me. I never heard from him again.

My initial contact was so innocent, and ended up so twisted. (I do not lowercase my name anymore!) Further

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# KeyCOMmentary: Chronicles of Ignorance (Part Two)

by garrie keyman

## *A Personal Revelation on the Difference Between what Alters and what Falsters in Fantasy*

As you will perhaps recall from *Part One*, I ended last month's article by citing *linkage* as pivotal to "what alters and what falsters in fantasy," promising to explain the term's significance when we resumed our periodic Illuminata-sponsored chat-'n-spat over the woes and whims of speculative fiction.

In short, I had dubbed *linkage* the determining factor in why certain forays into the spec-fic world become for me engrossing adventures, while others – well – remain just plain gross.

What, then, is *linkage* and why does *The Chronicles of Narnia* have it when *Lord of the Rings* does not? Why did Victoria Strauss's *The Burning Land* prove totally devoid of what for me is this mysterious, essential ingredient, when two books I devoured as a child – *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and *Peter Pan* – were replete with it? And finally, why did movies like *Star Wars*, *A New Hope* and its sequels enthrall me (and why did the prequels not?) even though, by my own apparent definition of *linkage*, they should have not? Let's take a closer look.

*Dictionary.com* defines *linkage* as *the act or process of linking; the condition of being linked; a connection or relation; an association*. So, *linkage* is both a process that takes place within us as we read a novel or watch a film and it is something we continue to possess once the link is forged. In most movies and novels, I can tell you the moment *linkage* took root for me. The moment varies for everyone, but the *linkage* has to take place at some point for the reader or viewer to psychologically enter the story, to become absorbed. In *Star Wars*, the moment came for me when Luke walks outside and looks wistfully at the binary suns setting over Tatooine. Up until that point I was certainly being drawn in, but I remained on what I'll call "psychological reserve" while deciding what the movie was going to be and whether or not I would like it enough to embrace the necessary link that leads movie viewers to step inside the frame and readers to leap between the lines of novels.

For *Narnia*, the moment began to blossom when Lucy falls from the wardrobe into the snow, and came to full flower when the faun Tumnus, enchanted by Lucy – yet obviously conflicted over having met her for some as-of-yet-undisclosed reason – offers her his arm and off they traipse to have tea (bear with me,

and I'll later explain why these moments of linkage in *Star Wars* and *Narnia* are, in one sense, opposites [as in two sides of a single coin, perhaps], yet have the same result: opening a psychological door to the movie and inviting the audience in).

My personal revelation referred to in the title of this article was this: that a fantasy story must first bear the familiar and from there lead me into a new world. As a little girl, Alice was to me a familiar character: all long hair and locks, playing with ragdolls and tea sets and gazing ponderously into the looking glass. At first blush there was nothing odd about her I connected with her on the basis of simple familiarity; that is, of course, until she tumbled through the looking glass. Then everything became strange and askew. But, since the linkage had already taken place, I was able to enter the unexpected – to *suspend my disbelief* as the theatrical term goes – and enjoy the adventure as if it were my own.

*Narnia* begins much the same way. Here we have not one child, but four, all characters based in the very real world of death and displacement brought about by the Blitzkrieg. Because the adventure begins in a familiar world – our world – and linkage is forming by layers as one sympathizes with the characters' plight, the shock of falling along with Lucy into a brand new world becomes not only a longed-for but a plausible escape. Like Alice, Lucy and the others tumble into a strange and unfamiliar universe where creatures talk and the monarchy is decidedly tetched in the head.

J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* is identical in set-up, giving us the familiarity of urbanite children being tucked into bed. We are not confronted at the outset with anything unfamiliar, and so we settle into the characters quickly and easily before the fantasy begins. Notice, however, that this plot device employed by *Narnia* and *Alice* and *Peter Pan* is lacking in movies like *Lord of the Rings* or *The Matrix*. Here, we do not start with the familiar. In *Rings* the viewer is immediately immersed in an unfamiliar world, the mind left in a continual attempt to play catch-up with what is going on and why. The characters are not us; their motives and fears unclear and difficult to embrace since they are unknown to us. The loss of familiarity distances rather than draws in the viewer or reader, destroying the likelihood that a linkage will be forged: a linkage that would have allowed the audience to enter into the adventure, rather than merely observe it.

Many superheroes work for the same reason.

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## Reviews

### Orphans of Chaos

John C. Wright

Tor, 2005

\$24.95, Hardcover, 317pgs

ISBN 0-765-31131-3

Review by D. L. Parker

Once in a while, even one's dearly beloved has an off night in one's affections. Maybe he forgot to brush his teeth, and the effluence of his breath does not add to the aroma of the morning coffee; or it's that unfortunate habit he has of chatting up his chance-met former girlfriends while you stand by like the old familiar dog on the doormat, too taken-for-granted to merit an introduction (or better yet, a *snub* of The Ex). Whatever it is, there's no doubt that some days even one's Nearest and Dearest doesn't quite come up to expectations.

I couldn't figure out at first just why John C. Wright's latest series, "Orphans of Chaos", left me turning the pages hungrily (as I would do for any John C. Wright novel), but slightly less satisfied than usual by the end. What was missing?

Well, we do have glorious adventure, which goes without saying with this author. I've come to the conclusion, after the "Golden Age" trilogy and "Guardians", that few authors do cosmic adventure with quite the zest of Mr. Wright. In an interview that can be read on the Internet, Mr. Wright quotes his own love of the Golden Age writers A. E. van Vogt and Roger Zelazny. Certainly, there are similarities, in both the zestful sense of fun and adventure of Zelazny's works and in the *wow-what's-going-on* awe evoked by the van Vogt Superman stories (during their time, at least).

But the best works of John C. Wright exceed those authors in other ways. "The Last Guardians of Everness", for example, examines the dilemma of Prometheus vs. the gods... the question of humanity's right to self-determination vs. blind obedience to Heaven's decrees: that Free Will thing, in fact. True, there are a number of semi-religious discussions in "Orphans of Chaos", some of which, frankly, go on a bit too long; I turned a page over one lengthy soliloquy. But still, there's just that extra philosophic element *missing* in this one. The beloved had just a slightly *off* night.

But don't wait to go out and read the story, all the same. Perhaps to compensate for the lack of that extra philosophic (usually humanist) element that we normally see in a John C. Wright story, we get an extra

dose of suspense. In "Orphans of Chaos", we have five teenagers (barely post-pubescent) who seem to have spent their mysterious lives penned up in a school for orphans. There's just the five of them, a great vast estate and strange boundaries and just slightly peculiar personages to tend to their every need. *Why* have they been separated from other children all their lives? Why are they locked up at night, and what *is* the purpose of the strange medicines Dr. Fell prescribes them every night? How can young Victor open locks with only his mind, and little Quentin fly? Are the children themselves more than human... and why do they keep *forgetting* things?

The protagonist of the story is young Amelia, who is a spunky, smart young heroine most of the time, when she isn't panting at the idea of a spanking or bondage. There's a bit of mild public-school-style naughtiness in here, including a bottom whacking by a muscular and decidedly hunky schoolmaster. I didn't mind *that* all that much, (he is a hunk), but I'd have liked the heroine better if she'd had a little more moral fortitude. Given the choice between getting more of a spanking and giving in and groveling, she gives in and grovels good and proper, which is really pretty *weak* of her, since spanking seems to turn her on. Goodness, Mr. Wright, let's at *least* make her a *pushy* bottom.

We also have Wright's now-maybe-too-familiar combination of Greek and semi-Christian mythos. I think this worked better for me in "Guardians", in terms of awe and mystery, but "Orphans of Chaos" does it with a wonderful sense of fun. The Goddess of Love is a giddy and vain bubblehead whose beauty seems to have rotted out her brains; the Prince of Lies, the Trickster, otherwise known as Hermes, is depicted clad in bright green Lycra bicycle tights and world-wearied cynicism. The reader will enjoy working out just which myth is represented by the larger-than-life but often all-too-tawdry figures that pass on Wright's colorful stage.

But don't take the religious gloss – pagan or Christian – too seriously here: we're not talking Gene Wolfe, who truly is, first and foremost, a serious *religious* writer, to my mind. Wright's universes are more like glimpses of Fairyland: wonderful adventures and evocative descriptions and magic and awe, right over the familiar horizon.

"Orphans of Chaos", though not as great a work as Wright's earlier stories, is a lively read. It's got its own sense of slightly naughty fun, as if Wright set out this time to surprise his fans with his tongue in his cheek. Check it out!

# Reviews

## **Dusk**

**Tim Lebbon**

Bantam, Feb 2006

\$12.00, Trade

ISBN: 0553383647

Review by Harriet Klausner

The Cataclysmic War ended the reign of magic with mages fleeing for their lives. Over the next three centuries, in spite of the demise of magic as a combat tool and the thought that the Cataclysmic War was the war to end all wars, battles continue using savage mundane methods to kill or maim your adversary.

In 2208, the Year of the Black, Kosar the Thief watches the rider in red serendipitously comes to the village Trengborne. He is stunned as the stranger begins a slaughter killing the young and anyone else offering resistance even the militia while taking blows that should have left him dead. Kosar notices one teenage boy escapes up the dark hillside. That lad Rafe Baburn saw his parents and others murdered by what had to be a demon. Evidence has surfaced that magic has been rebirthed in the young; the Red Monk and his minion plan to eradicate it before the one soul possessing the skill can mature enough to use it against them. Kosar meets and teams up with A'Meer the Shantasi warrior in a search to find and protect Rafe from the Red Monk, but first must expedite him from Hope the witch.

This epic coming of age fantasy grips the audience from the moment the Thief fearfully observes the red-robed killing machine and never slows down as Kosar finds allies to protect the dying world's perhaps last hope Rafe. The exhilarating story line paints a dark gloomy Poe like atmosphere throughout especially when the adversaries take center stage. The key characters in particular the teen and his champions are unique individuals that make their realm seem even more nightmarishly real. Tim Lebbon paints the darkest *Dusk* that will have readers keeping the lights on until dawn breaks.

## **Hammer of the Earth**

**Susan Krinard**

Luna, Feb 2006

\$12.95, 400 pp.

ISBN 0373802242

Review by Harriet Klausner

Rhenna the amazon warrior with powers of air, Cian the Aliuri shapeshifter, Tehva the seer, and Nyx a woman with secrets to keep all escape from the capital city of Karchedon in the evil Arrihidaean Empire. Only Quintos stays behind because the Tiberian rebel learns that he really is the baseborn half-brother of the Emperor Nikodemos. The Emperor Nikodemos wants Quintos to prove his loyalty. However, Quintos plans to work within the Empire to break the power of the Stone and the clergy who worship it especially, the chief priest Baalshillek, who wants to control the entity in the stone and rule the world after the Emperor has conquered it.

Rhenna, Cian, and Tehva overcome many obstacles to recover the Hammer that was meant for the Godborn Cian, a Bearer who in the near future will use the weapon in the war against the Exalted, those gods who wanted more power than their peers and were encased in the stone when they lost the battle. Rhenna and Tehva with Nyx's help once again journey to the secret city of New Meroe where the prophecies are written down about the upcoming war. They also hope to find where their hidden weapons are located because they need them to defeat those who kill In the name of the Stone, their high priest and the emperor.

Susan Krinard has written another fantastic quest filled fantasy where it is hard to tell friend from foe and the protagonists are at the mercy of the various gods they come in contact with. There is plenty of action and a touch of romance in *Hammer of the Earth* but the heart of this novel lies with the characters who though they live in a fantasy world have the same qualities as readers. It will be hard to wait for the next installment in this stunning series.

# Reviews

## Od Magic

Patricia A. McKillip

Ace, 2005

\$22.95, Hardcover, 315pgs

ISBN 0-441-01248-5

Review by D. L. Parker

Some authors deliver consistent product. Whether you think Mercedes Lackey is a competent hack or a great storyteller, either one, it's for sure she delivers consistent product, and lots of it, bless her workaholic self. Pick up a William Gibson story, and you know what you get too. Terry Pratchett, whether you get his unique brand of humor or not, does the same. You can count on what you're going to get when you see the names.

Then you get those writers, like an athlete who's spent the last five years training for an Olympic one-shot, who produce one great work, and never after exceed it. Anne Rice is one. I read her groundbreaking 'Interview with a Vampire', and looked, afterwards, for something that came close. I even tried, in my innocence, something she wrote under her Anne Rampling pseudonym, and ended up chucking the book across the room in anger that such a mish-mash of kinky sex and S & M and tired porno plotting ever made it onto the shelves of *my* library. You'd have to hold a gun to my head to make me try another, now, and you told me your gun had a few empty chambers, I might risk shutting her book in your face still.

Maybe Patricia A. McKillip hasn't fallen nearly as far, but it's for sure, nothing I've read since her original fantasy classic, 'The Riddle-Master of Hed', has fulfilled its bright promise. The prose styling that has hardened into an instantly recognizable caricature of itself in her later books felt natural in her great trilogy. There was the obsession the protagonist Morgon feels for the mysterious, elusive, fascinating Deth; there was betrayal and redemption and sacrifice and ambiguity in a worthy climax to an involving journey. It was a book I bought for my permanent library shelf.

What do we have in 'Od Magic', and all too often in 'Riddle-Master's' successors, instead? We have a kind of simplistic fairy tale, actually, with a joyless we've-all-just-been-misguided, and now-that-it's-all-explained, we'll-all-be-good-again happy ending.

Where's the joy and fear and human complexity? Can we get this prose to *bleed* again? Can we get some *conviction* going here? Do bad people simply need an over-sized mama figure to rap them on the knuckles and explain the folly of their misguided, but *didn't-really-mean-it* ways, in order to be good again the rest of their life?

I wish redemption were so easy and story morals less obvious. We start out with a catalyst figure, the innocent wild-man archetype, a sorcerer who doesn't know he's got the magic. Brenden Vetch, living the noble savage life on the mountainside with his uncut hair and the plants he tends to more carefully than he does his personal bathing and clothes washing, is invited to mind the garden in the school for magicians. Od, the mysterious, immortal, and giant-sized sorceress who founded the school, issues the call herself.

Once there, of course, all that innocence can't help but act as an irritating spoke in the wheels of the smoothly controlled workings of temporal power. The king wants to know. The king's counselor, the ruthlessly realpolitik young wizard Valoren, wants to know. Who's this fellow, and *what* might he do with all that power he seems to have? Throw in a few more apparent loose cannons at the same time, in the form of a traveling magic troupe and some mysterious stone sleepers, and the king is beside himself and ready to go Stalinist. If you're not for us, you must be *against* us. What we don't know is sure to hurt us. If we can't understand it, *shoot* it.

The hit-me-in-the-face moral, and the goodness-were-just-misguided, now-we-know-better ending is a letdown. McKillip still writes prose as if it were poetry, of course, though that talent has almost become too obtrusive, to my mind. We also have a potentially intriguing character in a young woman who operates, like the man behind the curtain in the 'Wizard of Oz', half a huckster and half a magician. But this story fails of its promise, too.

So, Ms. McKillip, stop with the consciously pretty prose. Make the characters bleed and *hurt* again. Give up the fairy tales and go for broke. Don't hit us over the head with the moral of your story: humans are more complex than you think. Or at least, if you *have* to write fairy tales, let's go for Grimm as our inspiration next time, ok? A wishful fan says, *you can do it!*

# Reviews

## **Moon Called**

**Patricia Briggs**

Ace, Feb 2006

\$7.99, Mass Market, 304 pgs.

ISBN: 0441013813

Review by Harriet Klausner

In the Tri-Cities of Washington State, Mercy Thompson works in her garage on a vampire's car with her payment being no monetary fee for protection money as normally demanded by the bloodsuckers. Besides being a mechanic, Mercy has her own supernatural skills as one of the few souls who is a skinwalker, able to take the shape of a coyote. Her harmonious day ends when fifteen years old Mac, a homeless werewolf, asks for a job. She hires him.

Mercy introduces Mac to her neighbor Adam Hauptman, also a werewolf who is the alpha leader of his pack. Mac also meets several of the other top shapeshifters. Not long afterward, Mercy finds Mac's corpse on her doorsteps. She visits Adam, who is drugged and his daughter kidnapped. The alpha of all the packs the Marrok's son Samuel, a mercenary werewolf, a vampire, and Adam's pack accompany Mercy as they search for the teen. However Adams is abducted next with his friends realizing some might die in an attempt to rescue him and his daughter.

Fans of Laurel K. Hamilton and Tanya Huff are absolutely going to love *Moon Called*. The delightful heroine is not exactly ruled by raging hormones or her animal instincts as she makes human impetuous decisions to help those she cares about even if her actions place her in danger as often happens. The story line is loaded with plenty of action, but Mercy makes the plot hum as she enables the audience to feel that Patricia Brigg's fine tale is plausible, vampires, werewolves, and fae oh my.

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## **The Myth Hunters**

**Christopher Golden**

Bantam, Feb 2006

\$12.00, 384 pp.

ISBN: 0553383264

Review by Harriet Klausner

In wintry Maine lawyer Oliver Bascombe suffers from cold feet not just because he went outside in the snowy weather, but more because tomorrow he is to get married. He explains to his older sister Collette that he has doubts as he cannot think of one happily

ever after marriage though he further explains that he thinks he loves Julianna; yet wonders how can you be sure even if his fiancée is wonderful, intelligent and beautiful?

While reading *The Sea Wolf* to pass time, the outside storm smashes through his Victorian home door carrying something inside a vortex. Suddenly "the winter man" staggers from the middle of all that snow now inside Oliver's home. The newcomer pleads with his host to help him even as he informs Oliver he is known as Jack Frost and that he needs him to save his life from a deadly Myth Hunter from beyond the Veil. Ignoring his wedding, Oliver agrees. While Oliver enters the Veil on his quest to save the life of Jack Frost, his sister Collette investigates his disappearance and the murder of their father with the help of Police Detective Ted Hallowell.

This terrific fantasy grips the audience with the abrupt change from the calm of a reluctant groom pondering how he can be sure to when Frost busts through the door. The story line is action-paced but plays out with two subplots: a fantasy quest beyond the Veil and a murder mystery disappearance on mundane earth. Both work because of the strong cast that makes believers out of readers that Jack Frost, *The Myth Hunters* and the land of the fae exist.

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"It is hard - though not impossible - to think of any scenario which would, as Apollo did for the Moon, accelerate the course of history so that a Mars mission would occur as soon as it became technically feasible. What is more likely is that astronomical knowledge and engineering skills will steadily increase until, at some time in the next century, it becomes clear that a flight to Mars is a reasonable extension of current technology, largely using extant hardware. A good case can be made for going back to the Moon first, and learning how to live there....Spending extra time and money on the Moon could save many lives on the road to Mars....(and) the Moon might play a vital role in the exploration of the Solar System by providing a low-gravity base."

— Arthur C. Clarke

(*The Snows of Olympus: A Garden on Mars*, 1994)

# Reviews

## **Touched by Venom (Dragon Temple Sage, 1)**

**Janine Cross**

Roc, 2005

\$22.95, Hardcover, 353pgs

ISBN 0-451-46048-0

Review by D. L. Parker

I can't remember where I read it now, but there's some old advice about writing detective stories, particularly the hard-boiled ilk. It boils down to a simple adage. *Get your hero or heroine into hot water.* Turn up the temperature. Turn up the pressure. Dig 'em into a hole so deep, the nose doesn't show. Then... dig them out. More or less, *that's* the art of the page-turning novel.

I was reminded of that advice (kudos to anyone who can advise me where my pack-rat brain found it) when I read 'Touched by Venom'. We have a pretty ordinary kid as our heroine. She's not particularly smart; she's not particularly pretty; she's sure not noble or compassionate. Zarq is by all accounts a perfectly ordinary jill. Not so her mother, father, and elder sister, who all exhibit varying degrees of courage, unconventionality, brains or beauty lacking in our Not Quite Heroic Heroine.

But then stuff starts *happening* to Zarq, much of it triggered by her more unusual father, mother, and sibling. By the end of the book, Zarq's sunk into ravaging drug addiction; gained another monkey-on-her-back in the form of her own mother's anguished haunt; and lost her, um, external female genitals to an unspeakable form of "cleansing" called circumcision (practiced even today in Darkest, and I really mean Darkest, Africa, so I'm told). I guess I also forgot to mention the homelessness, the starvation, the loss of her beautiful sister to whoredom, the incestuous homosexual brothers, the rats after the corpses and a few other miscellaneous difficulties. To tell the truth, the loss of those, um, external female organs quite drove the rest out of my mind. And *this* is only Book One!

Zarq is a serf. She and her parents are members of a sort of pottery guild. They live, like other serfs, on the estate, or 'clutch', of a rich dragon-lord. Dragons

are power, and dragons are also divinity. Dragons are also drug -- or sex -- addictions, as their venom has a highly sensual and hallucinogenic effect on anyone it touches. Everything Zarq and her parents do support the dragon-lord and his dragons.

Zarq's mother is part aborigine, with the blood of the accursed Djimbi in her veins. The Djimbi have magic, and Zarq's mother soon gets in trouble for using it. Zarq's beautiful sister is sold into whoredom when the group falls on hard times, and Zarq's mother becomes obsessed with redeeming her lost, and best, child. If that means that Zarq the Ordinary becomes an unheeded tool in her mother's hands, well, that's a price Mom is prepared they should both pay. Then Mom dies, and fastens her soul and unrequited obsession to her unfortunate younger daughter like a leech. Poor motherless Zarq passes into the hands of a dragon-tending, knife-wielding sisterhood. *More* stuff happens...

Cross does a good job of depicting, with conviction and without information overload, Zarq's complex and different world. She does a good job with characters, too, although Zarq herself is a less-than-sympathetic figure. She really doesn't seem to give a hoot about her mother's anguished obsession with saving Zarq's elder sister. She seems to be a rather ordinary, slightly selfish girl who finds herself dipped in an acid bath of drug addiction (and bizarre sex -- those venomous dragons; no more details in a family publication, I'm afraid!). Her raging addiction in turn fuels her unnatural ambition to own her own dragons.

By the end of the book, I can well believe that there isn't *anything* Zarq wouldn't do to fulfill that goal. And that, of course, makes me a little less interested than I would be in her subsequent story. But she sure isn't ordinary anymore.

How she gets her dragons, of course, we'll find out in the sequel. Cross's first volume is a definitely dark, but involving, story. I warn you now about those graphic "circumcision" and addiction scenes... I admit it was more than Ms. Wimpy could easily stomach!

### Torture=Sci-Fi? (con't)

investigation found that a quick Google search and two clicks led me to the world of hardcore porn. It was that simple. From Sci Fi to porn is a very short path.

"Torture Flicks" have this potential for live action roll-play, I fear. submissives (the small "s" is intentional) in the *Gor Society* are willing volunteers. Kidnapped victims will not be so eager to line up for dismemberment and death. Tarnishing Science Fiction's name by allowing this kind of movie/book to stay in the sci fi genre is a slight offense in comparison to the potential for further extremes as each new psychopathic character/T-Flick is introduced as *entertainment*. As a fan of science fiction, and an advocate for the human race—I am concerned.

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### Ignorance (con't)

They are at first familiar people to whom something extraordinary happens to alter them. Think Peter Parker becoming Spiderman, for instance. In the case of Superman, he may *be* alien, but as Clark Kent he acts every bit the common man walking a recognizable metropolitan world. We have at the very least an initial linkage to *place* and to *peripheral characters*. Not so for *Lord of the Rings* or *Matrix* or for any number of other sci-fi or speculative fiction tales where not only the main characters are alien to us but so too is the setting and everything encountered.

Given these observations, it occurred to me that you might ask why then did I connect with a movie like *Star Wars*, *A New Hope*? *Star Wars* does not start out on a familiar world, nor does it introduce recognizable characters at the outset; it does the opposite of films like *Narnia* or *Harry Potter*, which lead us from the familiar into the unfamiliar. *Star Wars* holds off introducing what we recognize until Luke appears. Even though he is living on an alien world, we know this disconsolate youth as one of our own: tired of home, yearning to break free of domestic constraints yet torn by love and devotion while fearing the losses and changes inherent in leaving the security of childhood behind. Luke we can connect with. With Luke we can dare to venture into the unknown. The only real difference in a movie structured like *Star Wars* is that we leave on our adventure already knowing the world beyond will be wondrously odd and fraught with danger. It works.

So then, *linkage* is key, key for me, anyway. How about you? Have you ever thought about what features in films or novels absorb or alienate you? Click [here](#) and tell me about it. I'd love to hear from you. Maybe we can conjure up a little linkage of our own.

A revealing way of describing science fiction is to say that it is part of a literary mode which one may call "fabril". "Fabril" is the opposite of "Pastoral". But while "the pastoral" is an established and much-discussed literary mode, recognized as such since early antiquity, its dark opposite has not yet been accepted, or even named, by the law-givers of literature. Yet the opposition is a clear one. Pastoral literature is rural, nostalgic, conservative. It idealizes the past and tends to convert complexities into simplicity; its central image is the shepherd. Fabril literature (of which science fiction is now by far the most prominent genre) is overwhelmingly urban, disruptive, future-oriented, eager for novelty; its central images is the "faber", the smith or blacksmith in older usage, but now extended in science fiction to mean the creator of artefacts in general—metallic, crystalline, genetic, or even social.

— Tom Shippey  
Introduction, *The Oxford Book of Science Fiction*, (Oxford, 1992)