



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Firefly Me Away

By Bret Funk

I recently had a little free time, a luxury I've come to appreciate more than good scotch and fine conversation. I spent my time watching a short-lived but much loved show called *Firefly*, which once aired on Fox. I capped it off with the movie *Serenity*, a full-length feature movie that ties up the loose ends left by the series' untimely demise.

Firefly is set 500 years in the future and begins several years after a war between independent worlds and the Anglo-Sino Alliance (a union of Earth's last two superpowers). The Alliance won, and the settled universe is now under their dubious control. The show follows Captain Malcolm Reynolds, a one-time soldier for the Independents and smuggler with a strong sense of morality, and his crew of mischief-making misfits in their Firefly class spaceship *Serenity*. Times are tough, and the crew has to take whatever jobs are available (not all of them strictly legal).

But *Firefly* is not a run of the mill space shoot-'em-up. This show is equal parts space opera, western, and comedy. The characters' sphere of travel revolves

around the Core Worlds, highly civilized planets with great technology and enough food, money, and prosperity for all. The farther from the Core, the more rural the planets, and the more rough and tumble the people who live on them. The dry, sandy environments are perfect for stylized western scenarios.

For me, *Firefly* is one of the greatest SF shows of all time, ranking in my book on a level with *Farscape* (and those who know me know that's quite an honor). Not only was there a novel setting, but Joss Whedon created a detailed and well-thought-out universe. Unlike most TV series, the

actors understood their characters out of the box. There was never that awkward, getting-to-know-you phase we often have to suffer through before a show hits its stride (*Star Trek: TNG* and *Babylon 5* both come to mind). Most episodes were classic caper tales (these are criminals, after all), and each member of the team had nearly an equal role in the show (no grandstanders here, just the perfect ensemble cast.) Sly wit and sarcastic humor riddle each episode, and I laughed out loud several times at something unexpectedly said or done. There was no reliance on fancy doo-dads on unscientific technology, no faster-than-light (or time) travel, no convenient explanations. Fuel, food, money were the same concerns then that they are today.

Why, then, did *Firefly* fail to make it past its first season? Well, it could be in part because Fox decided that the episodes didn't need to air in the order they were written, despite a loose arc (that one imagines would have tightened) tying episodes, events, and the characters together. They skipped the pilot completely—which explained a lot about what was going on—and in an irony to beat all ironies, aired it after they had taken the show off the air. It might also be because Fox executives decided to apply the "Family Guy" effect to this show, constantly changing the days and times it aired and then complaining that no one was watching. I caught an episode by mistake when it was running and enjoyed it, but despite a serious effort could never find it again. (This worked to my advantage, in a way, as I was able to watch ALL the episodes in the order they were intended to be seen).

If you haven't watched *Firefly*, I urge you to. If you need a reason (other than my recommendation), here are a few. With *Firefly* you get the best of both worlds—spaceships and government conspiracies, but also pistols and desperados. As C.A. Bridges points out at newsjournal-online.com, "every time you support a canceled Fox show, somewhere a network executive loses his wings." And if those aren't good enough reasons, then tune in for the preachers and whores (I'm sorry... *Companions*). Both feature prominently.

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The RPG Corner v5.1 - Designing New Races

by Doug >|< Roper of EPIC Gaming

Sooner or later, and Game Master who isn't running a game in a contemporary setting (and occasionally a few who are) is going to want to create their very own unique rank of creatures. Some do it to add their own mark on the world of Role-Play Gaming, others do it because they are tired of the old mainstays and want to breathe new life and new mystery into the genre that they game in. Others just love making things, and why make something that's just going to sit on a shelf when you can make something that will live and breathe (maybe) and become a hallmark of all your future games (probably)?

There are two ways to go about designing a new race (or a new anything really). First you can borrow from literature or history and then tweak and modify the bits that you don't like or that don't conform to the world you operate in. Or you can well and truly start from scratch, building the race up from nothing. Of the two, the second is much more difficult, requiring more forethought and research, but in my opinion this is the best way to go. Borrow a minotaur from Greek Myth and no matter how you dress it or how smart or inept you make it, it will always be a minotaur. This is fine if you want a minotaur; just remember that effort should be made to make it *your* minotaur.

If you do borrow from history there are lots of critters to choose from. Not every new, intelligent race needs to be based on the human form, either. As in the minotaur example above, history and mythology are full of creatures that can make great races to encounter in a fantasy game, and literary precedents are there for non-humanlike intelligences, Tolkien's Eagles and Spiders, and McAffrey's Dragons jump to mind right away. Game Masters can also borrow classic literary races to use in their games, jazzing them up a bit as they see fit. This method can make for much shorter hours spent setting up the new race, since so much of the work has been done for you, and really is the best idea for someone without a lot of time. However, some effort should be made in creating new features and innovations in a borrowed race. It's fine to be inspired by someone else's work, but stealing it is just plain wrong.

The alternative to borrowing, scratchbuilding your new race, will take time and energy, just like creating anything from nothing, but I stand by it as the superior method to developing new races.

To be fair, it is not very likely that your new race will be completely unlike any other race that has already been created out there in the vast pool of book, television and film sources. Similarities are bound to crop up, because as creators we tend to draw upon the best aspects of other creations we've seen, whether we realize it or not. My point is this: Game Masters (and authors) need not start over or tear down everything if they come across aspects of their creation that favor something else. It's going to happen. So long as the similarities are vague and passing, you've accomplished your goal of creating something new. If you do manage to invent a race that no one has ever seen, read about or heard about before, congratulations! Now write a book about them and go make a lot of money.

In starting from scratch, there are two ways to begin. You need to decide how this new race of people came to be in the world that you are (or have already) created. You can either decide to have them evolve their way up from simpler creatures, or decide that someone – a god, a powerful sorcerer, a mad scientist, whatever – created them and planted them on your world. (There is also the chance that this race is from another world entirely, but if you do that you still need to know how the race originated on *that* world, so there you are.)

Of the two methods, the creation route is easier. As a GM, you have only to decide what your new race will look like, what they will act like, what nifty things they can do and how they will get along with other races, and presto, there they are. The reasons behind their appearance, attitudes and aptitudes are all the same: it is the whim of their creator. This method allows you to get right into the thick of creating the details of your new race, without worrying about the whys and wherefores of each little detail.

Taking the other method, the slow crawl up the evolutionary ladder will take much longer, but will provide a richness of history for your people and allow for the perfectionists among us to explain away the reason for every detail. One can start at the very beginning, with the proto race, develop a table of physiological adaptations and social and political inventions and then let chance decide what the race will become, but this could lead to dead ends and disappointment. No one is going to want to spend several days developing a race that

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Reflecting on Fandom

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

The Fandom culture encompasses age span, economical variance, education and experiential domains. Add to that, faith/spirituality and the arts and notice barriers are few and typically man-made like ethics and language. In short, the Sci-Fi (Speculative Fiction, etc.) culture is a microcosmic sample of humanity.

Looking back on my short three years investigating Fandom, I have come to some not-so-startling conclusions. Within Fandom, the range of activities is astounding. More so now that the definition of science fiction has been bludgeoned, forced to accept genres that have nothing to do with science, only fiction. Uh, so *not* PC. Let me try *Speculative Fiction*. So, examining how Fandom reacts to this explosion of new bodies into the mix, I have to look at some of the disturbing similarities to humanity such as...The Dark and Light side. Later, I'll consider Spirituality and the Arts.

The Dark Side. Unfortunately, as in every aspect of humanity, the less-than-fine creeps out of fandom, usually in the form of coveting ownership, specifically—stealing. I could not believe it, either. How could people in my beloved sci-fi rip each other off? I have no answers. Intellectual ownership of ideas and artwork that might be ripped off is less tangible than other Dark Side activities. However, ask any dealer at a convention how much merchandise is liberated from their tables. And sadly, some of the dealers are less-than-honest—selling knock-offs—reprints, as originals, autographs that are far from original.

Collectors often tighten their lending practices because items are unreturned, and unfortunately, entire collections have been liberated from their owners. Granted, the liberators may not actually be fandom, and merely humanity that realizes certain items/selections are worth a buck or more to other collectors. But as a new acquaintance of mine balks this hardly ever occurs, (and as yet, has not returned my entire collection of vhs), it does happen.

The other side of the Dark Side of fandom has to do with power. I have little personal experience as proof, however, I've heard of backbiting, power plays and pure, self-centered, I-want-it-my-way maneuvering and manipulation. But I read enough posts on the net to know this is true—even when good things might be the results, like to help charities. In certain places in the Mid-West, some groups are well known for their heavy-handed fundraising tactics. Strong-arming others, sadly, falls within the bounds of the Dark Side.

The Light Side. Fandom abounds with stories (personal examples and posts) of how they help each other. Whether helping a member of your RPG group move to a new home to providing childcare so parents can plan conventions. Fandom reaches to their own.

Recently, Iowa City, home of University of Iowa (my old stomping grounds) experienced a destructive tornado that ripped through housing areas very close to downtown. A quick network of fandom that included, *Cornfilk*, an Iowa filk group and a long-running RPG group in the area, attempted to locate their members who were in the path or were single and might be trapped or injured in the aftermath. Luckily, no one was injured or suffered extensive damage. But their network of IM and email was up and running as soon as power was restored.

Fandom is often seen fundraising for charities. Several groups volunteer time at PBS telethons, manning phones and being available year after year. Ditto for walk-a-thons and other charities. This isn't as self-less as it appears. Free publicity while participating or working for these events can garner free, hard-earned media coverage. So, there is a payoff.

There is a Bible verse about not letting the right hand know what the left hand is doing... one fan learned an acquaintance had had their basement flooded and in the process, her extensive, and uninsured library was ruined. This gentlefan quietly set about replacing the collections with his limited resources. Fandom humbly rises to the challenge of human suffering.

Last summer's hurricanes effected people in ways I had never imagined, including our own Bret Funk, Editor of *Illuminata* and owner of Tyrannosaurus Press Publishing. While Bret never spoke of any fandom group actually helping him, I know of several individuals, acting on their own, who assisted throughout the region. No media covered these events, but fandom, in various forms was there. Time, money, labor—fandom was quietly represented. All walks of life, economic backgrounds, nationalities... boundaries fell. Humanity wins because of the Light fandom carries with it. Not only with a passion for science fiction/speculative fiction, but in relationships—many that have endured decades.

On an individual basis, the Light of fandom teachers and heals. As a therapist, I am often reminded of the accepting nature of fans/fandom for those with disabilities—mental and physical. The “unconditional positive regard” of many groups allows for

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The Writer's Block: Writing Your Past

Writers find their inspiration from many sources but none are more important than their own childhoods. In a previous column I talked about keeping a journal to write down one's childhood memories before they fade with time. I've been doing that myself for quite a few years, and there are markets out there for work based upon these kinds of experiences. A couple of years back I completed one such piece and managed to sell it to *Delasaint's, Southern Writing With An Edge*. It was called "When Electricity Came To Arkansas," and I thought it might be more instructive to run the actual essay here than it would be to just tell you about it. At the least it may serve as a model for how such a piece could be constructed. I hope you enjoy.

WHEN ELECTRICITY CAME TO ARKANSAS

My brother is as tough as a leather biscuit. I know because he proved it to me on a late, lazy, country afternoon back in 1973. I was fourteen; he was seventeen. My brother—we called him Pabe—and I used to have macho contests to see who was the toughest. He always won—whether it was seeing who could eat the most jalapeno peppers, or who could catch the biggest chicken snake and play whip with it. Then came the summer of the electric fence.

On our farm we raised cattle, and to keep them out of the garden our dad often resorted to stringing a length of electric wire around the vegetable patch. On this one particular day, Pabe dared me to touch that fence. I told him that I would if he would, and that I'd hold on longer than he did. He gave me a sneer that I figured he'd practiced in front of the mirror and wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans. Then he reached out and "took hold" of that fence. I heard him grunt and saw his face get all twisted and crimson, and in about ten seconds he let go. I know because we both counted.

Now, Pabe had just beaten me a little earlier in an extremely important thing by licking twenty-five of mom's fresh chocolate coconut cookies while I'd only been able to lick fifteen. That meant he'd get to eat twenty-five and I'd eat fifteen, because neither of us would eat what the other licked, which was the point of the licking in the first place.

But because Pabe had beaten me out of some cookies, I was determined not to let him win a second time in the same day. I approached the fence nervously, dried my hands as my brother had done, and latched onto the wire with one swift movement. It felt like a swarm of bumblebees had crawled under the skin at my wrists and were beating their wings wildly trying to escape through my shoulders.

But I'd felt worse. Daddy's spankings were a whole lot worse. I held on and counted, and at twelve, a good two seconds longer than Pabe's record, I let go of the wire and looked up at my brother with my own practiced sneer.

My triumph was short lived, however. Pabe would never accept defeat from his little brother. And after that day I gave up challenging him ever again, something I've held to until the present.

"Tain't nothing," he said. "I dare you to try this."

Then Pabe dropped his trousers and urinated on that thin little electric wire. I don't think he expected to get quite what he got. I remember the sizzle and the strangled scream. I remember wondering if he'd ever have kids.

Well, today my brother has two. Tough as he is, I'm almost certain they're his.

Blood and Chocolate

Annette Curtis Klause

Random House, 1997

\$6.50, Mass Market, 264 pgs.

ISBN: 00440226686

Review by Destiny Boddy

Young Vivian Gandillon is trying to adjust to a new town and the loss of her father. Though her story is sad it is not highly unusual. But what happens when you add in the fact that her father was the late leader of one of the few remaining wolf packs, she is coming of age in her supernatural society, and is expected to take a mate...soon.

Things are made worse when she is the only young female in the pack and the only available males are the ones responsible for her father's death. Now I don't know about you but I think I would have a little anger and resentment to direct at those males.

Annette Curtis Klause's novel *Blood and Chocolate* is an involving and enthralling supernatural thriller. Annette Klause sets a fantasy world in the mist of our present one and carries us through to the last page in suspense, thought, and speculation. *Blood and Chocolate* is laced with romance, murder, and supernatural thrills. I for one applaud Annette Klause's ability to combine so many emotions and themes into one single plotline.

Blood and Chocolate is targeted for the young adult audience and though it addresses topics such as murder and has quite a bit of sexually content, Annette Klause handled these scenes with these elements well. Her plot is well developed and keeps the reader involved with out dragging in areas or containing nonstop action with out lending to the story line. The pacing is nearly perfect and every detail lens itself to

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the story's ending.

The characters were all vividly portrayed. Annette Klause uses great descriptive detail to highlight the characters and various settings. I did find Vivian Gandillon, the main character, to be a little more vindictive and lacking of some qualities than I would like to see in a main character. Though that is just me and my opinion, but Vivian is a character worthy of remembering.

All and all I would had to announce Annette Klause's *Blood and Chocolate* to be, a catching, well developed, and memorable portrait of a young werewolf's coming of age in a rough and tough situation. *Blood and Chocolate* doesn't put a new spin on the usual view and thoughts everyone acquires for the usual werewolf novel but it's definitely unique and sets its own limits.

Wolf Hunting

Jane Lindskold

Tor, Apr 2006

\$27.95, Hardcover, 528 pgs.

ISBN 0765312883

Review by Harriet Klausner

The jaguar oracle Truth sends a message to Firekeeper, the female raised by wolves, to help her regain her sanity lost in a recent battle (*Wolf Captured*). Though her wolf developed senses warn her not to go and keep avoiding danger, Firekeeper also has a feral inquisitiveness that overwhelms her internal alarm system. She cannot resist the lure of Truth's quest.

Her wolf companion Blind Seer is at her side as his her new collaborator, Darian Carter of Liglim on the journey to bring Truth back to her senses. However, the trek proves odd and dangerous as the trio also must first find out how to remove the voice inside the oracle's head if they are to bring her back her senses, but to achieve the former requires that they learn who has manifested inside Truth's brain and are they manipulating the oracle and Firekeeper and her allies.

The fifth Firekeeper Wolf tale is the best of a solid fantasy series due to a thrilling action-packed straightforward (less subplots) story line with much more enchanting interrelationships between humans and wise animals. The heroine continues to learn though she feels more comfortable still with her wolf friends. Fans of Jane Lindskold will appreciate this strong saga that can stand alone though is enhanced by having read the previous quartet so that one can understand the world better and to see how far Firekeeper has come in her human venture.

Eragon (Inheritance Trilogy, 1)

Christopher Paolini

Knopf, Aug 2003

\$18.95, Hardcover, 544pgs

ISBN: 0375826688

Review by Erik Goodwyn

Eragon: A dragon and his boy.

Eragon—named I suppose by iterating the first letter of "Dragon" (perhaps he will name his sons "Fragon" and "Gragon")--is the latest hit fantasy series on the young adult market since Harry...nah, I'm not going to say that. But it is scheduled to be released as a movie in December of this year, ergo it must be pretty popular. It is written by Christopher Paolini, touted as some kind of "wonderboy" primarily because he published his novel while still in his tweens, though the fact that his parents published it privately and are themselves established firmly within the writing field should not invoke any cynical thoughts within you since you are such a Gentle Reader.

The story is about a farm boy who discovers a magical egg that turns out to be a dragon's egg. The dragon hatches and makes an instant bond with him--signifying that he is destined to be a Dragon Rider (great lords whose greatness is long since passed, gosh darn it), but something is rotten in Alagaesia: the evil emperor Galbatorix, himself a fallen Dragon Rider, is hunting for Eragon so as to squelch any competition. Eragon naturally then goes on an Epic Quest (there's that word posing as an adjective again) to defeat Galbatorix and restore peace to the land. Thus the seemingly insignificant boy rises from out of obscurity to challenge the overlord of evil.

Any of this sound familiar yet? There's more. Along the way Eragon is trained by Brom, a wise mentor who seems to know everything except what always happens to mentors in stories like this, and he is pursued by the Ra'zac, cloaked creatures with diabolical powers that are loyal servants of the evil emperor, as well as hordes of orcs--oops, I mean Urgals.

Boy, if only I could get away with some of the stuff Paolini gets away with here. Now don't get me wrong, I actually liked Eragon. Sort of. The problem is I could never quite shake the feeling that I had already read it, and that was while I was reading it. It's a pleasant little fantasy, all told: nicely put together, proficiently written and fairly well thought out. It is quite inoffensive--and why not? It's like a classic song

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played with different instruments. It's still a great song, after all. The problem came in sustaining my interest, since I was never surprised by anything that happened. Not even a little.

The star of the show is really Saphira (the dragon on the cover), and I hope in future installments of this trilogy that Paolini will write more for her to do than what she does here, which is follow Eragon across the lands waxing wise and cracking wise. There is a tremendous potential for her as a character--she's a freaking *dragon* for crying out loud. But none of the mystery and awe that such a beast should inspire is here. It's more like she is his sidekick who can fly. The majority of the character development (perhaps more accurately described as character *redevelopment*) is devoted to the young Eragon. Or was it Luke Skywalker. Give me a second, it'll come to me.

Another problem is the magic—there are an awful lot of times when Eragon gets into jams that he solves by using the “hey let's just use magic” technique, which is fine, except that I was often left wondering just what the limits of his abilities were, if any. Not to mention this somewhat mundane approach robs the story of suspense, since you know that somewhere, somehow, magic is likely to save the day. This applies even when Paolini has constructed a more satisfying solution to the problems he poses his characters. He's getting in his own way.

The result is a story that starts off well and ends with a fun and exciting finish, but the journey to get from A to B seems to take forever. It makes me wonder if his parents read Harry Potter or just heard about it.

Bridge of Dreams

Chaz Brenchley

Ace, May 2006

\$24.95, Hardcover, 416 pgs.

ISBN 0441013244

Review by Harriet Klausner

The city of Sund thought its walls made it impregnable and the use of water magic made it a very special place to live. In a day, what took thousands of years to create was broken by the Marasi who created a magical bridge that scaled the walls and let the army in. Now Sund is a place of occupation where magic is outlawed and the bridge is constantly replenished by the dreams of children who eventually die.

In Sund, Issel, liar, thief, con-man and water seller has the raw water magic in his blood though he doesn't

know how to use it. He is taken in by a teacher who runs a school where the children learn how to use the magic so their heritage will not die. There are rebels who want to find a way to throw out the Marasi from the city and Issel lights a spark of rebellion in the population with an action he takes. The occupiers torture and kill many of the Sund and put their bodies on display. Issel uses his magic to form a new kind of weapon and with the Marasi government in turmoil; the Sund just might have a chance of getting the occupiers out if his life and keeping them out.

This stand alone book by the author of the *Outremer* novels is an exciting fantasy thriller about an occupied city and how the people who live there cope with being under the harsh thumbs of their rulers. The protagonist is an unlikely hero more of a criminal than a savior yet against his will he is taught the gentler emotions and becomes a person readers will care for and admire. Chaz Brenchley is a brilliant world builder who is a master storyteller.

Crystal Dragon: A Liaden Universe Novel

Sharon Lee and Steve Miller

Meisha Merlin, 2006

\$25.95, Hardcover, 359 pgs.

ISBN 1-59222-087-8

Review by D. L. Parker

Some rare writers burst upon the literary galaxy with a voice uniquely their own. Some of these original voices are so seductive that they found their own genres. Was Dashiell Hammett the seminal inspiration of the noir detective genre? Perhaps, but Raymond Chandler and Ross MacDonald and Robert Parker and many others added their illustrious voices to the choir. What a glorious oratorio it became.

In science fiction, too, a few groundbreaking authors established voices powerful enough to dominate others that followed. I suppose I can't really hold Tolkien accountable for all the fantasies of Elves and Dwarves and Trolls that came after. *He* wrote a great story, and it's not fair to hold his feet to the fire, even if I've thought of it more than once, for those endless inferior imitations. Jack Vance has had his stylistic imitators too, though none of them entirely successful, to my mind. I could find other examples easily enough.

My point is, though, that whether these idiosyncratic originals have greater talent than their successors or not, those that follow in their footsteps *owe them a debt*. I think it should be acknowledged.

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I wasn't very far into '*Crystal Dragon*' when its ancestry became clear. Lee and Miller walk right in the footsteps of C. J. Cherryh. There was the typical political density of the plot, expressed in the multiple players and intersecting story lines of Cherryh's (typically later) works; there was the unique prose styling, nearly as identifiable as a fingerprint. I turned back to the beginning of '*Crystal Dragon*' to look at the acknowledgements, but in vain. There was no familiar name there.

If you haven't read any other stories in the authors' '*Liaden Universe*' before, you may, like me, find '*Crystal Dragon*' hard to dive into as your first experience. We have two intersecting story lines. The first (and most confusing, for the novice) concerns two mysterious soldiers of the alien Iloheen. The pair (she and he, of course: there's a love story here, though it's scanted) rebel against their masters, a rather risky business. The Iloheen are, for reasons that never became clear to me in this story, 'decrystallizing' the galaxy (shades of another work, J. G. Ballard's '*The Crystal World*' -- itself one of the strangest masterworks of the speculative fiction genre. If you are a serious and literate reader, I highly recommend it).

As the Iloheen might quip, assuming they had a sense of humor (which they don't, clearly), *Entropy Happens*; only, as I noted, I couldn't figure out exactly *why* the Iloheen were hell-bent on causing it, from this story. I just had to take it that the Iloheen were Big Mysterious Baddies bent on destruction of the universe, and plain ol' pure Evil was their motivation (never a very satisfactory one, to be sure. Even the Devil had more reasons than that).

On the other side of the battle-line, of course, we have humans, in a Cherryh-like variety of natural and genetically (Series or Batch) engineered versions. A tough-talking female pilot named Cantra (no lion's tail, though) and a genetically improved M Series soldier, her co-pilot and lover Jela, have a mission. *Somewhere* on the world of Landofmist there's a scholar-scientist who may hold the key to understanding the Iloheen's steadily advancing wave of "nothingness".

But to find the scientist, Jela and Cantra have to infiltrate an insular and decidedly knife-happy society of dueling scholars. To accomplish this, Cantra does more than put on a disguise; she creates her cover from the inside out, so to speak, and becomes a somewhat inept and foolish scholar herself. She doesn't even remember her old persona.

That's too bad, because when one of those bloodthirsty scholars challenges Cantra, she can't

remember how to *fight*, either... and her companion Jela is about to become decommissioned at the ripe old age of forty-something. *Decommissioned* (shades of Cherryh, again, in use of the pre-programmed genetic trigger) means *dead, kaput*. Things aren't looking good!

I have a couple words of advice for Mr. Miller and his co-author Ms. Lee. First, *move the glossary of characters from the end of the book to the front*. I didn't discover it until I'd finished the story, and it did me no good then. Second, as C. J. Cherryh often does for her more complicated serials, *supply the reader a synopsis of the preceding books*. It doesn't have to be long, but it may save a diligent reader from being at sea for enough pages to inspire them to put down the book in despair.

Lastly, *pay your debts*. I don't know entirely why this book felt so derivative, but it did. The authors' story involved me (after that initial tough start), and I'd like to read others in the series, in spite of the sketchiness of the villains and their actions (how does one '*de-crystallize*' a star, by the way? It felt like an idea that not been thought through, somehow). But the echoes of those other voices nagged me to the end.

Maybe C. J. Cherryh (and I think, possibly, J. G. Ballard) don't care. It's inescapable that even the best writers are influenced by others (and sometimes, those literary references can add depth). If you're good, or more to the point, if you're *profitable*, *someone* is going to imitate you. Dan Brown should know. Every hack writer in the world now hopes for his own gazillion weeks on the *NY Times Best Seller List* with his very own religious-themed pap. Watch for David and Bath Sheba in their own soap opera! It's on its way, you can bet.

But Gene Wolfe, one of the most unique and honored voices in the genre, didn't fail to pay tribute to another voice in his recent '*Wizard Knight*' series. You'll see his thanks to the French-Canadian author Meynard in the Acknowledgements. If Ms. Lee, an exalted former director, vice-president, and president of the Science Fiction Writers of America, ever reads this, she will no doubt think *what does that dumb reviewer know?* Perhaps I hold her to a higher and somewhat unjust standard for the very oversight she once held of the genre. Or perhaps I think it might just have been... mannerly.

I am not a speed reader. I am a speed understander.

— Isaac Asimov

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Broken

Kelley Armstrong

Bantam, May 2006

\$6.99, Mass Market, 464 pgs.

ISBN: 0553588184

Review by Harriet Klausner

She is the only female werewolf in existence and she is pregnant by her werewolf lover; something that has never happened before. The men in Elena Michaels' pack are smothering her in their need to keep her safe and protected; she understands their motives, but could use some action in her life. That occurs when half-demon Xavier Reese asks her to steal the letter "From Hell" supposedly written by Jack the Ripper. In return Xavier will tell her where a rogue werewolf is hiding.

The pack believes they can accomplish the theft with no danger to Elena so they travel to sorcerer Patrick Shanahan's Toronto home where the letter is located. They pull off the caper without a hitch but disaster happens when Elena's blood from an insect bite drips on the letter opening a dimensional portal. Two zombies enter from the other side bringing cholera to Toronto, contaminating the water supply and spreading other diseases. The sorcerer directs his zombies to kidnap Elena, who realizes she must find the practitioner causing the havoc that threatens her babies, pack and Toronto.

The Women of the Other World story that started with *Bitten* and continued with *Stolen* comes to a heartwarming conclusion in *Broken*. Elena is very happy with Clay and considers her pack as her family. Kelley Armstrong writes a fanatic urban fantasy filled with romance and mystery that will satiate fans of three genres. Nobody will guess the identity of the villain though that person is in plain sight for Monday morning quarterbacks. That is just part of the charm of this spellbinding, magical and delightful tale and miniseries.

Druid's Sword

Sara Douglass

Tor, May 2006

\$27.95, Hardcover, 606 pgs.

ISBN: 0765305437

Review by Harriet Klausner

The Troy Game, a work of sorcery that is supposed to protect a city, has taken on a life of its own in the form of a woman known as Catling. She wants to complete the game and now that the creator Major Jack Skelton, who has been reincarnated through several lifetimes, has returned to London that can now happen. Jack, once known as Brutus and who saw Troy fall, knows that if he finishes the game, The Land of Faerie and Great Britain will be under her evil rule.

Other people reincarnated in this lifetime (the fall of 1939) that are part of the game include Jack's former wife Norah and his one-time enemy Asterion the Minotaur now known as Weyland Orr. While Jack searches for a weakness in the game he notices a shadow hanging over London's skies that only Norah and Waylin's daughter Grace can also see. Jack finds himself very attracted to Grace in a way he never was with her mother but Catling has put a hex on Grace causing her great pain at certain intervals to insure they will complete the Game. The shadow represents a new player in the land, one that Grace knows intimately but whose identity will shock her and Jack as neither is sure of its true motives. If they guess wrong, the lands of two realms are doomed.

In the conclusion to the Troy Game Saga, Sara Douglass ties up all the loose ends, and gives readers a satisfying conclusion to one of the best historical fantasy sagas to come along in ages. Brutus aka Jack is finally at piece after almost four millennia of turmoil and the audience will like the man he has become. Great characterizations, a sense of continuity from the other three books in this series and a great storyline make *Druid's Sword* worthy of a place on the best seller list.

Reviews

Seeker

Jack McDevitt

Penguin, 2005

\$24.95, Hardcover, 355pgs

ISBN 0-441-01329-5

Review by D. L. Parker

Any of you remember Mycroft Holmes? He was the 'smarter than his brother Sherlock' genius who solved crimes while sitting, most of the time, on his vast-as-a-whale duff. Eventually this early avatar of the corpulent genius turned into the more famous and equally corpulent Nero Wolfe and his much-tried assistant Archie. Archie was the legman, the lesser light who gathered the necessary physical evidence and did the running-around. This allowed Wolfe to solve the crime in his usual spectacularly logical fashion from the comfort of his size XXL easy chair.

In Jack McDevitt's new story, 'Seeker', we have another classic mystery. We're looking for a long-lost treasure, and the long-suffering Chase is the legman (woman, actually). Her boss, antiquities dealer Alex Benedict, plays the role of the brain. (He's *not* fat, which, if I wanted to quibble, tampers with the tradition, but I'm not stuffy).

Yes, it's an old formula, but it hasn't lost its charm, not even nearly ten thousand years into the future of humanity. Chase and her boss are hot on the hunt of souvenirs they can market to the antiquities business. With a clearly tongue-in-cheek wink at the broken ears and armless torsos of Greek and Roman time that sell so well in our own day, Chase and Alec market cups, towels, old clothing, old electronic equipment, and myriad other commonplace objects that have been touched by the gold of time. Derelict ships, decrepit space stations, abandoned colonies and their contents are all fair game. The everyday flotsam of other ages finds itself on an unfamiliar pedestal. Warhol would surely have approved. His Campbell Soup Tins would have been worth a king's ransom.

Chase and Alex are offered a seemingly unremarkable ceramic cup with a questionable provenance. But there's an eagle on the cup, and strange lettering they translate as long-lost English. There's reason to believe the cup came from a ship that disappeared nine thousand years ago. It's the *Seeker*, an enormous ship that carried nearly a thousand passengers to a mysterious hidden colony, Margolia. Over the years, Margolia has become a mythic lost Atlantis. Its colonists fled an oppressive America to freedom (in another of McDevitt's tongue-in-cheeks,

not one I liked this time, the America of our own near future becomes a nasty totalitarian theocracy, and China the last free democracy on Earth. *China?* Must be a first for *anything*, we'll presume. I do get a little tired of reading these not-so-subtle jabs against the Great U. S. of A., especially from fellow Americans).

Chase and Alex begin the arduous work of tracing the cup's origin. The trail leads them through an angry ex-girlfriend and her petty thief boyfriend to a pair of long dead explorers who apparently kept their mouths shut just a little too long about the fabulous find they intended to keep for themselves. The explorers took the secret to their grave, and Chase, well named it appears, has to hunt half the known universe to follow the trail. In the meantime, competitors dog their heels, as well as unknown others with more sinister intentions than greed. And once Chase and Alex at last find the wreck of the *Seeker*, the mystery has only *begun* to unfold...

This is an engaging mystery in the form of a classic treasure (or Lost Race) hunt. If you're looking for sociological science fiction, you won't find it here; the humans of McDevitt's time could be your next-door neighbors (before we all turn into those hideous American zealots McDevitt foretells, I mean). We're not smarter; nine thousand years into the future, McDevitt's dispersed humans are still swearing by God and getting married and divorced and picking up good-looking members of the opposite sex in bars. Crime, too, hasn't gone away, and the penalties for the plenteous assaults and robberies committed against our duo in this story seem a little ineffective (even to the eventual personality re-programming that takes cares of those who just *can't* leave crime alone, even after all the hand-slaps). In a way the very familiarity of the setting is part of the book's charm.

Alex himself makes a fair Nero Wolfe archetype, more distinct, as is probably fitting, than his sketchier Archie-archetype, the much put-upon Chase, who narrates the story without really involving us too deeply in her emotional life. There's some great astrophysics stuff for those who enjoy it. But the fun of this plot and clue-driven story is in the digging our pair does, even if I could see the eventual climax of this story coming a mile off. Nor was the uncovering of the villains the whammy the author may have hoped for either, at least for me. Some villains are impressive. Others are just... excuse me... windy.

But I enjoyed the story, and I'll look for more of Alex's adventures now. Classic follow-the-next-clue mysteries, whether they're nine thousand years in the future or Victorian, are fine by me. Check it out!

Reviews

Silent Hill

by Terry Crotinger and Scott Maehner

Silent Hill is a deliciously disturbing flick based on the four video games with the same name. Scott, my science fiction mentor and buddy, has been coaching me on these games for two years, so I had an inside track. Or so I thought. While the movie is based on the games, Scott felt the plot deviated too much from the video game(s).

I liked the movie, though I don't care for horror shows, books, or flicks (Buffy, excluded). I was prepared for the violence, which may be one reason I stayed through the entire movie. Graphically, I was overjoyed to see such excellent work. Having recently studied special effects helped me pick out various techniques. The sfx guys did a marvelous job with only two, two-three second blunders. And I still can't tell if the ash falling from the sky is a physical or CGI effect. I think CGI, Scott thinks real. That's how good it was!

The producer hooked us from the opening scene, and you just know that even though it seems pretty tame for a bit, it won't be. Silent Hill has abrupt stops, jarring startle reactions and just when you think it's okay to relax... well, you can't. That bump and jar definitely reminded me of a video game. Accomplishing this with cinema was a surprising bonus.

Have I mentioned the sound effects? Home theatre watchers will appreciate this when it comes out on DVD. The theatre effects grab you on a subconscious level until you realize what you see on the screen is not making the hair on your arms prickle, it's the sound—heart pounding bass, almost below normal decibel level, intense and subtle, mixed with siren—blaring mid-range. Sound is often over-focused and jaw clenching—timbre most brass players try to avoid works seductively on the ear. Watching Silent Hill was a mental and physical workout—and I felt it the next morning in indescribable nuances that I can only attribute to the night before.

Scott, on the other hand, liked the movie, but had some definite displeasure with the plot, since

it rambled away from the video game's premise.

The Game: It was such a lovely little background premise in the videogame. Wheels within wheels. A man's quest to find his adopted daughter, and instead finding out more than he ever wanted to know about the circumstances that caused his daughter to come to him. A cult that had taken on the trappings of Christianity, a mother, Dahlia Gillespie who conceived a daughter, and then burnt her horribly to bring forth the god of the town/area. Dahlia, the evil that called forth evil, uses an innocent to trap her now "whole again" daughter, brings the evil into the world. Father slays demon...or Alessa, roll credits.

The Movie: Dahlia's the victim, from McCarthyism, and religious fanaticism/intolerance that makes "The Crucible" look like a weenie roast. And of course, Christabella's one line about "drawing a line in the sand" which really just needed a blinking "political commentary here" sign to be any more obvious. Christopher Gans gives an entire auto body shop's worth of fan service. A lot of the same camera angles, events, and the like are as straight out of the game as you can pluck. The one bit of the revised theology that I did like was that the demon showed up at Alessa's bedside and offered vengeance. And Alessa, rather symbolically, gives the demon the chance to make a bit of hell on earth. So for a lot of the movie, they got it right...although, I don't know how Cybil can sneak up on anyone in those creaky leather pants. You see a lot of your favorite monsters brought to horrid CGI-enhanced life. And the final reckoning makes Hellraiser's Pinhead look unimaginative by comparison. I think the little girl actress got the best lines of any of them, being victim/demon/accused witch-child. Alice Krieger would have been spot-on casting for Dahlia, but was just as slimily evil as Christabella. I hate to say it, but the game still trumps the movie, though it was cool to hear Akira's music used in the background and all around. He's a big part of Silent Hill's success.

So from actual game-player to arm-chair critic, Silent Hill is an adventure to see, hear, and experience.

RPG Corner (con't)

just dies out, or doesn't go anywhere. To correct this, I recommend cheating (you're a Game Master, cheating should not be totally foreign to you). Go ahead and design the finished product, just like you want it, then reverse engineer it and explain why each of the details exists, and what evolutionary leap or environmental factor contributed to it. Remember that in an evolutionary process, form follows function, but by going in reverse, we can start with the form that we want, and explain it after, so long as the reason behind it is sound. For example, let's assume that a Game Master wants to have a race of humanoids with extremely long, powerful arms...say twice the length of a man's arm. That's an interesting detail, but why is it there? Two environmental reasons I can think of right away. During formative years, the race were tree dwellers, but were too heavy to reach the best fruits, which grow high in the canopy. The race developed long, muscular arms to reach the fruits, and to move around. Or, they lived on the ground, amidst rabbits and marmots and creatures like that, which live in burrows. Not being quick enough to catch them, the race began hunting them in their burrows, reaching deep into the holes to ferret out or catch prey. There are as many reasons as you can think of... just make sure to keep the environmental conditions consistent. I'm not saying that the conditions of the setting should be the same now as they were when the race was developing, but I am saying that you shouldn't have any radical shifts in the environment of a local region that aren't reflected in the history of that area. Don't create a massive, long term drought in a small area to promote a greater capacity to endure thirst, and then decide that there is a forest there with trees thousands of years old. A drought long enough to cause an evolutionary change across and entire population would surely kill off any forest.

Remember that social evolution matches physiological development. Family units, tribes, villages and greater civilizations will match the physical limitations and advantages of your new race. I'm out of space for this month, but next time I'll present a list of elements to consider when developing a new race, and offer a lesson on the evolution and development of cultures to help out with the creative process.

Fandom (con't)

experimentation with social blunders and, well, social skills. This is not blind, enabling, instant acceptance. I've often witnessed the forgiving nature of fandom when this occurs, and mostly a gentle rebuke and explanation where needed. Mostly, though not always. The Dark Side still lurks in thoughtless, unfiltered comments and deeds. But, from my experience so far, the balance stays on the Light Side.

Next month, I'll illuminate two other facets of Fandom: Spirituality and the Arts.

As an addendum to this article, I should not that fandom across the Gulf Coast was mobilized both during and after Hurricane Katrina. Not only was a network quickly established to locate members and/or assure others that you were OK, but various fan groups throughout the region (and across the world) came together to help restore some of what was lost. I and my family were beneficiaries of both a large and well-stocked post-Katrina care package, and a separate, thoughtful array of Christmas presents (mostly for our new son) that arrived with a note saying that even though this year had been tough, we had friends who wanted to make our Christmas a special one. Terry's article shamed me into what I should have done months ago: thanking fandom publicly for its thoughtfulness.

Bret Funk
Editor in Chief

What we get from science fiction—what keeps us reading it, in spite of our doubts and occasional disgust—is not different from the thing that makes mainstream stories rewarding, but only expressed differently. We live on a minute island of known things. Our undiminished wonder at the mystery which surrounds us is what makes us human. In science fiction we can approach that mystery, not in small, everyday symbols, but in bigger ones of space and time

— Damon Knight