



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Superman Returns

by Erik Goodwyn

A sequel is a fascinating thing, really. A basically stand alone story can be completely altered by the preexisting notions previous stories bring to it. Superman Returns, for example, is heavily influenced by its predecessors, Superman: the Movie (1978) and Superman II (1980). Wisely disregarding Supermans 3 and 4, Director Brian Singer continues where Richard Lester left of over 20 years ago--yeah, that's right *two decades*--adding another action-packed story about the Man of Steel and hurtling forward where the older movies left off, barely missing a beat.

It is fascinating to observe how the new movie struggles with the shadow of these two neo-classics, as both Superman 1 and 2 are considered paragons of the 'comic-book' movie. Superman Returns pays heavy homage to the originals, including stock footage of Marlon Brando as Jor-

El, Brandon Routh doing his best Christopher Reeve imitation as Clark Kent, Lois Lane misspelling things, and a few character catch-phrases snatched from the old movies, not to mention much of the plot elements.

On its own, Superman Returns would probably be considered an instant classic. What Singer and company have accomplished, therefore, should be commended highly. It was nearly foolhardy to attempt it, after all, most writers and directors would probably

simply started over *a la* Batman Begins (who strongly trounced its predecessors but had much weaker competition). Instead, Singer puts Brandon Routh and Kate Bosworth up on the screen, practically daring the viewers to compare them to Christopher Reeve and Margot Kidder. They acquit themselves admirably, but there are noticable differences.

Routh's take on Supes is quite a bit more subdued and melancholy, which makes this movie a bit less fun, but a bit more powerful in exchange. Gone are the enjoyable but mostly campy moments, replaced with what I think is a deeper understanding of what it must be truly like to be the god-like Man of Steel. Critics who have panned the movie, saying it is empty spectacle and devoid of the charm of the originals missed this shift in story style. They would be well served to take another look.

The origins of the Superman tale is, after all, ancient and archetypal, revised for the 20th century (and beyond). Superman Returns knows this, and explores the depths of this tale that is roted in the ancient Greek tale of Heracles, and reinforced by powerful imagery from Judeo-Christian mythology. It might be easy to miss: images of Superman's loneliness as he gazes down at the world, struggling with the rejection of those who simultaneously plea for him to be their savior, or the conspicuous pose he takes as he sacrifices himself by hurling the giant kryptonite-infected city into space before falling to his doom. And his tenderness toward a new and surprising character, whose relationship to Superman might have been dreamt up by Homer.

This is a deep Superman. This is what Superman is truly about. I can't wait to see more.

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RPG Corner v5.3: Co-Running Games

by Doug >!< Roper of EPIC Gaming

This past Fourth of July, I was spending the holiday at the home of a very good friend of mine. This friend is the reason I became involved with RPGs to begin with. He and I stumbled over them one summer and were instantly hooked. We gamed together almost non stop for the next twelve or so years. He ran games for me, I ran games for him, and finally in a seemingly natural move we began to run a game together. Keep in mind that my friend and I had our formative experiences with RPGs with one another. We had gamed together for years, and we were quite alike in attitudes and perspectives on gaming, so you may assume that the game we ran together went swimmingly.

If it had I wouldn't have a column.

I think that the game was fun for the players more often than not, but the running of it dragged our friendship over some pretty sharp terrain. I am very happy to report that we are still good friends and have moved past the unpleasantness of that year to the point where we can now (many years later) poke fun at each other about it. As we sat last week and talked about this and that, I was pummeled by waves of nostalgia and a longing to share my great story with him and get his help. Of course as I thought about it, I knew I couldn't share my game with him from that perspective. I know now that we have a similar, though not identical view of the setting in which we based our game, and that the differences that drove us apart then would do the same again now. We probably just wouldn't get as snippy with one another about it now. Then again we might.

Anyways, the whole reason for that long preface was to introduce my column for this month, on co-running an RPG.

Co-running, like Communism, is a wonderful idea on paper but is very hard to pull off. Still, the allure of having a partner to share the burdens of Game Mastering with is very strong. With a fully equal GM, you can do twice as much, you can involve multiple NPCs in a scene (a rare treasure indeed), and I think most importantly of all, you have a person to help you develop the game, troubleshoot and maybe even play-test new systems, and someone to offer you new ideas and directions when you become bogged down. That fresh perspective can be worth its weight in gold. So much of writers block can be solved just by talking about the problems that it makes one wonder why there aren't more books co-authored. Well the fact that there aren't more co-authored books might tip you off that there are some hidden dangers and stresses that

make co-authoring too much to handle.

As I explained earlier, my friend and I were so alike in so many ways that it confused and frustrated me that he would choose to do something one way, where I would clearly have done it another. I was younger and far less experienced then, and I know now that it isn't the past that will define whether or not a GMing partnership will work, it is the future. The most basic requirement for the partnership to work is the cohesiveness of the vision of the game's direction. Without a shared vision of where the game is going, the GMs may begin to compete with one another to push the game in the direction that they favor, and this can only hurt the players and the experience as a whole. Maintaining that singleness of vision is a tremendous investment of time and energy.

The problem here is that as time goes on and people change, so does their vision. The ultimate story that I want to tell today may be different a week from now. As time passes and each of the GMs become more comfortable, they may each want to create some thing unique to them. Over time that desire can grow to destructive levels, as each GM tries to push for their interpretation of "the vision" to be the official one, and lead to unpleasant confrontations and possibly the end of the game or worse. This is essentially what happened to my friend and me. As we neared the end of the game we were running, it became clear that we each had a strong idea about where we wanted to take the game, and it wasn't in the same direction. We tried to lay groundwork for the new directions over each others groundwork, and of course tensions rose and the partnership dissolved.

The advantages of a second GM can be had if you have a good friend who shares your interest in the hobby, but doesn't want to run with you. Sometimes this is found with an assistant GM, sometimes called an XO or a First Mate. This is a position for a person who is not playing in the game, but isn't running it either. The XO is there to help the GM by doing whatever needs to be done, be it playing NPCs, updating character sheets, even creating scenarios and such, but there really must be a single GM. Without that concentration of direction, the game can wander and contradict itself. Development is one thing, and may involve a bunch of people, (in fact, you are blessed if you can find someone to help develop a Role Playing Game with you) but the execution of a successful game requires one voice, and one voice alone.

Conventions: Fandom Reveals Herself (Part I)

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

Cons (conventions) have a certain culture that applies to that weekend only and each exudes its own flair, but there are similarities. From WorldCon to ___ (name your local con here), newcomers might be overwhelmed—fandom exhibit an amazing amount of vitality. They party, stay up all night, play, game (rpg), drink, sing and dance (and other activities that can be left to the imagination—more than a few children have been convention conceived). It's bright and loud, sometimes bawdy, often inappropriate for children. Conventions celebrate science fiction and her creatures/creations as no other group or activity can. And hopefully, somewhere on the list of "things to do before I die", attending a con is somewhere on it.

Why? Fandom comes together with in-jokes, education, laughter, art, expression, and they share. It is the sharing that makes a good con. While the topics and panels are informative and heady debates can arise about who has better weapons (Romulans or Federation?), it is the mutual proximity of multi-minded people intentionally gathered in one place from all levels, cultures, educational backgrounds, economic stratum (sound familiar?) that meld, if just for the day or weekend, that make conventions a "must see" at least once in a lifetime. Even a Star Trek convention has merit (been to several, I can say that). Let's face it, if you've never seen a fan in a homemade Star Fleet uniform, you won't have missed too much, but the fun you can have at the office after having witnessed—and brought pictures from—such an event is one of those things you will always remember. (And a good outfit—complete with intricate makeup, priceless!) However, for the novice or newbie, some things to be aware of before you pay that entrance fee might help enhance your enjoyment. Or avoid them altogether.

Cons are not for the socially anxious or (and I use this kindly) the strict/primitively religious.

Some personal expression will be in evidence before you get too far in the door. If booze is served, surprisingly, there will be participants who attend only to get plastered (Drink-A-Con). You'll know you've ended up at one by the end of the first evening. There will be costumes that are *not even* suggestive, especially if it is an anime related con or they have masquerades or cosplays—usually on Saturday night. And you will find groups, cults, sects, etc, that flagrantly broadcast beliefs that are likely *not yours* who are there to enjoy the experience and exercise their right to free speech.

Caveat: Observe, keep negative comments to yourself or limited to your immediate friends and look for fun you can enjoy on the weekend's menu. Give them a wide berth and no eye contact. Try not to frown. Frowning fandom is not so fun.

General activities you can expect range from parody to hard science.

This depends on the kind of con you attend. A writer's workshop will differ widely from a comic convention. If you've stumbled into a filking convention, you can expect music 24/7. Ditto for an anime con—24/7 of costumes and purple hair. A more technological convention will have cool gadgets and likely, lots of panels, exhibits and demonstrations. Demonstrations and workshops are usually well tolerated by everyone. At one con, a cameraman from a local television station gave a demonstration on how to make a simple stop-motion 20 second film clip and then had all kinds of equipment to allow people to try it themselves! It was family oriented and fun for everyone—a refreshing twist to sitting and sitting and (listening) and sitting...

There might be concerts and filking, karaoke, dances (belly dancing and "other") and ceremonies (the Chocolate Ritual is rather amusing) that pique the imagination and allow direct participation.

Exhibits, panels, forums, and workshops.

Exhibits are usually free; the best time to utilize them is while waiting for something to start. However, it's a wicked tradition that they be located as far away from the main events as humanly possible—because of the value or nature of the exhibit?? No one knows. You will get your blood going as you thread your way to these activities, but they are usually worth the time.

Panels and forums are similar to each other in nature. Some cons have panels set up by subject, usually with a person of merit to officiate and a few minor/local celebs/experts to assist. Topics are discussed by the panel and often take questions from the floor/audience after they've pontificated for most of the allotted time. Forums are similar but may be totally audience driven. Typical panels/forums are entertainment driven: (think Stargate, Star Trek, Doctor Who), centered around celebrities or characters from these shows (Amanda Tapping/Major Carter, Leonard Nimoy/Spock, Billie Piper/Rose). However, producers, special effects artists or writers give panels, so not *all* panels/forums center

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The Writer's Block: Blogging Pros and Cons

by Charles Gramlich

I started a "blog" a few weeks back. It's called "Razored Zen," and is subtitled "A Writer's Journal." It's online at <http://charlesgramlich.blogspot.com/>

For those (very few) of you who don't know what a blog is, it's a personal journal that is published online where anyone can see it and comment on it. An advantage to having it online is that it's easy to insert pictures along with the words. A disadvantage is that you'd better be careful what you say. Hasty words can bite you good and hard, and keep on biting for years to come.

Yet, there are blogs everywhere on the internet these days. Some are funny, some serious. A lot of them are put up by young folks, and I'll tell you right now that many of them are...boring. I don't often care what some perfect stranger had for lunch yesterday, or what lame movie they snored their way through. Most people's day to day lives, including my own, just aren't very fascinating.

So why did I start my own? Well, I thought it *might* help me with my writing, both the actual practice of putting words on the page, and the much harder task of trying to promote my work. So far, I have enough evidence to evaluate the first stage, the direct affect on my writing. Whether it's helped me promote my work is another matter.

I had actually been thinking about starting a blog for months before I did it. One reason I hesitated was out of fear that the blog would cut into my writing time. That fear turned out to be foolishness. Far from slowing me down, the blog kicked me out of a lazy rut I'd fallen into in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and it energized my writing like the morning's first shot of hooch energizes a drunk.

I'd forgotten, or was at least neglecting, a cardinal rule of writing, "thou shalt write every day." If I didn't have a project due, I didn't write. I let myself watch TV, that great killer of minds. But now I start each day with a blog entry, and once my fingers are on the keyboard they pick up a momentum that keeps them moving. And the ideas for projects began coming fast and wild as the need for blog-fodder made me reexamine my writing world. This column has been one beneficiary. Almost all of my recent column ideas evolved from my blog, and for the first time in over a year I'm actually ahead on columns.

The blog also reminded me that the discipline to "put butt in chair" is the secret to finishing writing projects. That alone has made it worthwhile for me.

But what about "promoting my work?" I don't yet know whether it's helped me or not. I've made sure to try and keep the focus on writing rather than let the journal deteriorate into my personal gossip column. I've tried to offer advice on writing to those who might be interested in the field but who don't feel comfortable in it yet. I think a blog is only going to work to help someone's career if they *give* the reader something of value for visiting, whether that something be information or entertainment. I'm trying, I'm writing, I'm waiting to be discovered by those who can help my career.

In the meantime, I'm having fun and getting a lot of writing practice. And I'm producing polished material. If you'd like to start a blog, it's amazingly easy. Along with several other authors I know, I set mine up at blogspot.com; it took me about ten minutes to get comfortable with it. But there are plenty of blog sites online that will take the hard work of formatting out of the process for you. All you have to do is write.

Conventions (con't)

around the entertainment industry. They may be about hard science, publishing, or graphic art production. Cons are a smorgasbord—so enjoy. And, because someone has to pay for the con, there might be...

Auctions and Art Shows.

If an auction is held, it is for a local cause and funds raised go back to the community, not to just gain money for the coffers of the organization hosting it—ask if it's important to you where the money might go. Ditto for an art show. Often money raised by the selling of the art is also donated (or goes to the artist to further their efforts). It is the con entry fee that help pay for the building, security or the GoH's transportation. Special interest booth fees and dealer's rooms also generate cash flow for con expenses.

Conventions are too much fun! There are even Con-A-Thon junkies who live from con to con—next weekend they'll attend a different con or pine because they can't. Next month will highlight some of the more intimate things to be aware of like room parties, security issues and merchandise! There are also terms many cons use that won't be listed in the program guide, like GoH. What's available in your area? Maybe it's time to treat yourself to a memorable, crazy, let-your-hair-down, Relax-A-Con!

Reviews

Blood and Iron

Elizabeth Bear

Roc, Jul 2006

\$14.00

ISBN 0451460928

Review by Harriet Klausner

A changeling, Seeker, once known as Elaine Andraste, travels to the soulless Mebd queen of the Daoine Sidhe in a quest to meet her peers and persuade them to return with her to the Faerie court. At the Daoine Sidhe court, Seeker and her companions entertain the Mebd queen, who has been known to abduct human children for her majesty. The Mebd queen assigns Seeker to find the latest reincarnation of Merlin and bring him to her so that she can win his heart and his loyalty if she wants her son Ian freed from his sudden captivity.

Seeker understands that if the dangerous Prometheus Club members gain control over Merlin, the fairy realm could be destroyed. She and her compatriots must travel to New York City to locate non-believer, college professor Carel Bierce. However, the first ever female Merlin does not believe in the Fae nor the Prometheans as physics is her magic. That is until she begins seeing and doing the impossible.

This is a complex fantasy filled with action, deep characterizations, and incredible twists to include Professor Bierce being female. The story line is fast-paced as backstabbing and Machiavellian maneuvers in the Faerie court and the Prometheus Club are the norm. Seeker is a great protagonist whose quest seems impossible to achieve with the most difficult obstacle being the obstinate professor. Modern era fantasy readers will enjoy this strong Promethean Age tale.

The Hobbits are just rustic English people, made small in size because it reflects the generally small reach of their imagination.

— J.R.R. Tolkien

Glasshouse

Charles Stross

Ace, Jul 2006

\$24.95

ISBN 0441014038

Review by Harriet Klausner

In the twenty-seventh century the Censorship Wars that released the destructive Curious Yellow virus destroying the wormhole gates that connected humanity throughout the universe has finally ended. However, though the cosmos wide civil war is over the impact on millions perhaps billions remain strong and will continue to affect everyone involved as t demobilizing the armed forces begins in earnest.

Many like Robin wake up one day to realize that they have had their wartime activities erased from their memories. Robin assumes he had a mind wipe to forget the atrocities. However, he changes his mind when someone tries to kill him because he assumes that the enemy believes he retained certain war year memories that his unknown adversary wants permanently eradicated with his death. Needing time to clear his thoughts and remain safe, Robin enlists in the Glasshouse reenactment experiment to recreate Earth's darkest era, the mid to late twentieth and early to mid twenty-first centuries. Robin is cast as one of humanity's most scorned vocations, a suburban housewife. He begins to slowly grasp why someone wants him dead and that the Glasshouse converted prison that locked away mentally disturbed war criminals now hosts spies and soldiers not friendly to a suburban housewife starting to remember.

This is an incredible science fiction novel that will receive plenty of accolades and make the short list as one of the top genre novels of the year. Robin is a fabulous protagonist struggling against a mysterious foe who seems always a step ahead of him in their cat and mouse encounters. The story line is action-packed but goes deep into the psyche of person using futuristic cultural anthropologic satire to jab at modern day concepts. Fans know Charles Stross is a superb author, but as good as *Accelerando* the Singularity tales are, *Glasshouse* is his best work to date.

Reviews

Eldest

Christopher Paolini

Knopf Books, August 2005

ISBN: 037582670X

Review by Terry Crotinger

Eldest, the second book in what is being called the Inheritance Trilogy, continues the saga of dragon and rider trying to save the good people of *Alagaesia*, and finds allies with some of the not-so-nice creatures who've been betrayed and enslaved by the current King. *Eldest* is a fantasy, mystery, love story, epic and coming-of-age offering that readers are flocking to. Even my internist and her family is reading this (I find out while lying on the exam table), and like the rest of us, eagerly waiting for the conclusion, *Inheritance*.

Christopher Paolini has become (not becoming) an icon to the self-starter and home-schooled crowd and has a fairly vivacious fan club on the internet. He has amazed us, going from home schooled good-boy to published author, a feat accomplished before the hair on his face was able to toughen up. He can't even legally drink in some states. At the tender age of twenty, he's not just "published", he's being mass-marketed in several countries. Besides the books (hardbacks and paperbacks), interviews are available on the internet as well as posters, websites and even a watch that has it's own tin that are available to entice the buyer to be loyal to this author—not like that's a problem. Nowhere near the scale of Harry Potter gizmos and gadgets, which would be inappropriate given the fact the second book, *Eldest*, is only a year old. First book, *Aragon*, is already a movie and should have been released last month; now it looks like Fox will release it around Christmas. The trailers should be out after all the Superman hype is over. This author is *that* good.

The second book of his trilogy, *Eldest*, continues to show a bit of inexperienced writing, but is soon forgotten. As with *Aragon*, it seemed easy to spot a young writer until the reader closes the back cover—we become unaware that a young adult/teenager composed the epic. Some awkward literary moments occur, but not enough to spoil the tale. With *Eldest*, Mr. Paolini continues to improve his writing style, but then, he's got a wealth of professionals behind him now (Knopf and Random House), not just his home school friends and family who assisted with editing *Aragon*. One of the refreshing things about *Eldest* is that Mr. Paolini keeps reader frustration low—tying up loose

ends by the end of the book. There is the traditional cliffhanger that will, hopefully, be completed with the publication of *Inheritance*.

What really indicates a winner with Mr. Paolini besides a movie of your very first published book? At least on a collector level, a Boxed Set of *Aragon* and *Eldest* is a good start. But the clincher—an original (remember that his first edition was self-published), signed copy of *Aragon* offered on eBay for \$200.00.

The Mirror Prince

Violette Malan

Daw, Jul 2006

\$15.00, 320 pgs.

ISBN: 0756403391

Review by Harriet Klasuner

He has lived for almost a thousand years, having his identity changed when the memories start to break apart. In his present incarnation he is Toronto history professor Max Ravenhill hoping to obtain tenure. However, he will soon learn that he is not even human but instead a Rider (faerie folk) who as the Prince Guardian lost in a civil war and exiled to live endless lives amidst mankind.

While in exile, his memories and his dra'aj (magic) were stripped from him by the Dreamer of Time. Now known as the Basilisk Prince, the Dreamer intends to become the High Prince by possessing the Talismans his enemy hid from him. That is why it's time to bring Max to the Land—so the Basillik Prince can make him reveal his hiding place. Max is no longer an easy target and Cassandra, who has been at his side through each reincarnation, will not allow anyone to harm him while she envisions a second civil war between the royal faeries which is what will happen if Max loses to the man he once considered a friend

The Mirror Prince is a spellbinding stand alone fantasy that enchants and resonates with readers who feel and fear for the bewildered beguiling hero. Fans will root for him to defeat his adversary in the anticipated confrontational rematch (this is a fantasy so no surprise there). The spell cast by Violette Malan enables her audience to believe that faerie exist in a realm where evil and good skirmish endlessly with collateral damage on our plane.

Reviews

Old Twentieth

Joe Haldeman

Ace, 2005

\$24.95, Hardcover, 257pgs

Review by Danielle Parker

There are authors who write about war as one gung-ho, testosterone-doped, pubescent high. But for those of us who don't get into shoot-'em-up now that we're past our fondness for plastic light-sabers, there is Joe Haldeman. Perhaps his experience in a thoroughly ambiguous war (Mr. Haldeman is a Vietnam veteran) provided him with the raw material he shapes into the universal experience of war, on both a physical and metaphysical level. Joe Haldeman writes war stories for grown-ups.

The references to war in "Old Twentieth" are more oblique than they are in most Haldeman stories. The war is over, in fact, and the survivors are living with the consequences. There doesn't seem to be much in the way of consequence, other than Happily Ever After, when the story opens. The war to end all wars was apparently a class struggle. The rich bought themselves immortality with the Becker-Cendrek Process. The unwashed masses weren't so lucky. Lot 92 killed them all off, cities at a time. No one's left now but those rich genocidal immortals.

Forever must be boring. Maybe death gave life spice. Whatever the reason, those rich immortals can't stay away from the old twentieth century, in the form of a time-travel simulation created by a sophisticated artificial intelligence. Managing the simulation is Jacob Brewer's job: he's the chief virtual reality engineer on a starship headed on a thousand-year voyage to the star Beta Hydrii. Since its crew and passengers don't die, they can face their long trip with a shrug, so long as they have that time-travel simulation to while away their journey.

But something goes wrong, of course. Immortals begin to die in the time-travel simulation. The artificial intelligence pulls a HAL and starts talking about its need for constant input. Feed me, feed me. Sound familiar? Maybe it's all too familiar,

for many readers, including myself. Still, it's done with Haldeman's usual depth of character and subtle, understated prose. As someone once pointed out, all the stories have been told, it's just how they're told that matters.

This story isn't for those of you who like clear-cut endings. To say "Old Twentieth" ends ambiguously is to put it mildly. Is Jacob Brewer dead or alive? Is anything that the self-confessed, lying-capable A.I. presents to its captive subjects true? Are the deaths just failures in the Becker-Cendrek Process, or is the A. I. a murderer? Who can tell? As a witty reader in one of the Amazon.com reviews noted, at the end he was "scratching [his] chimp-like head" and trying to figure out what really happened.

"Old Twentieth" works under two fairly heavy handicaps. The first is that most of it is been-there, done-that, and in speculative fiction, which is at its best idea driven, that's a particular handicap. The second handicap is that, while the protagonist is fully fleshed and sympathetic, the background scenario (genocide of those unlucky poor) was so much in my mind I had trouble caring about these mostly-conscience-free immortals. If their world tumbles around them because they can't give up their addictive virtual realities or because their miracle medical cure fails, who cares? They didn't get as good as they gave. Haldeman's descriptions of a Portland stinking with the bodies of the dead must have been a little too effective for this reader.

Still, it's a pleasure to read prose written in such an understated, deceptively simple style. This is certainly not Haldeman at his best, but where he falls short, many other writers could but hope to reach. Check it out!

Illuminations SF Writing Contest 2006

We are now accepting entries into our 2006 writing contest. All submissions scoring in the top 20th percentile will be guaranteed inclusion in the next Beacons of Tomorrow anthology, and the top scoring submission will win a \$25 cash prize. Please visit <http://tyrannosauruspress.com/Illuminata/Illuminations.html> for details.

Reviews

The Blood Knight

Greg Keyes

Del Rey, Jul 2006

\$25.95

ISBN: 0345440684

Review by Harriet Klausner

King William Dare of Crotheny is dead, murdered by his kin Robert, who holds the monarch's widow Muriele prisoner. The late ruler's daughter Princess Anne flees from her undead Uncle Robert. The kingdom is now ruled by insanity and death as the darkest of magic spreads its lethal web across the beleaguered landscape. The demonic race is back to re-enslave the descendents of Virginia Dare and her lost colony of Roanoke followers.

Princess Anne's attempts to remain free fail when monks catch her in her quest to start the counter revolt against her uncle. Her hope resides with her allies, but they too struggle with life and death confrontations. Sir Neil knows he leads his knights into certain death in battle, but that might be a boon compared to Leoffrey, Stephen and Aspar who separately face horrors never seen before like Robert's maniacal wrath, his even crazier allies, and the Waurm. This may be the bleakest moment for The Kingdoms of Thorn and Bone in over two millennia, perhaps since Genia Dare led the successful revolt against the god-like Stasloi slavers.

The Blood Knight is an excellent epic fantasy that will be on the short lists of sub-genre fans as one of the best novels of the year. The story line is action-packed (perhaps too much so as scenes shift quickly between the heroes and villains) from the first rejected rose through incredible intermediate subplots of magical and mundane duels and battles until the final confrontation between good and evil. There are many shockers in this high fantasy, including the deaths of a hero. This will keep the audience on alert status as Greg Keyes is in top form. Though somewhat a stand alone, newcomers would be better suited reading the first two tales (see *The Briar King* and *The Charnel Prince*) to add to the tasty mix of a superb tale.

The Swarm

Frank Schatzing

HarperCollins, May 2006

\$24.95

ISBN: 0060813261

Review by Harriet Klausner

In the first week of March off Trondheim, Norway research scientist Dr. Sigur Johanson notices that polychaetes have been found in a methane environment particularly harsh for that species; these bristleworms should never have survived let alone multiply into a colony of millions in Norwegian continental shelf.

By the twelfth of March, marine biologist Dr. Leon Anawak wonders why the whales he has watched for years are two weeks late on their annual migration along Vancouver Island. Not long afterward, Leon learns that four different species of whales attacked—with military precision—a cargo ship and two tugboats towing it. Leon scoffs at the report as these whales do not cohabitate.

Other sea-related incidents occur as crabs poison Long Island's water supply, and in Paris lobsters explode like suicidal bombers while deadly bacteria enters the drinking water. World leaders become concerned that the worms will disturb oil deposits on the North Sea Shelf. Scientists struggle to understand why and how the seven seas seem to be taking back the world. When the North Sea Shelf collapses from the burrowing worms, thousands of Europeans die leading to an international panic. Scientists discover the intelligent Yrr are enacting revenge for the environmental abuse that humanity has wrecked upon their ecological system deep in inner earth. War is now with the losing species cleansed from this orb.

Reminiscent of the 1950s environmental horror movies and the works of HG Wells, *The Swarm* is a terrific science fiction thriller. The action-packed story line contains insightful interwoven scientific explanation that is easy to comprehend leading to a powerful cautionary tale that brings Rachel Carson's warnings of *The Silent Spring* into the twenty first century. Though the intelligent design crowd will scream bush level fiction, readers will appreciate this deep tale wondering *What's Going On?*

Reviews

Pirates of the Carribean: Dead Man's Chest

Review by Erik Goodwyn

I have a philosophy about movies: I think you should meet a film where it lives. What I mean is that people don't always go to the movies looking for the same thing. Sometimes we want to be amazed. Sometimes we want to be moved deeply. Sometimes we want to be challenged. But sometimes, in fact often, we just want to have a rollicking good time. These last kinds of movies are pooh-pooed by "serious" movie critics as mere popcorn fluff: not worthy of the attention of the "discriminating" moviegoer. I think these critics (who often complain bitterly that movies like 'Pirates' are immune to criticism are seriously mistaken about why everyday folks like us go to the movies.

But despite this criticism I think the success or failure of a story should be gauged against what it is trying to do, after all not every movie can be Citizen Kane--nor should it be. The point of all this is that these "popcorn movies" can be done well, and 'Pirates' is case and point. It is *a lot* of fun. Yes, the plot is utterly preposterous, and the character development pretty minimal and one-dimensional. But gosh darn it, I didn't care, and after reading some of the lukewarm reviews it garnered, I wanted to shout to the heavens, "don't you guys get it? Gritty realism and deep character study isn't the point of a pirate movie!" I refrained, you will be pleased to know.

Perhaps it could be that I simply love this kind of stuff--swashbuckling pirates, treasure chests, sea monsters, cannibals. I just love it, probably because my grandmother told me long ago that one of the Goodwyns actually was a pirate and imprisoned for 2 years in the Castillo De San Marcos in St. Augustine Florida--true story. Thus my enjoyment of the first and now second of these movies is quite irrational. Sue me. Nevertheless, Gore Verbinski delivers a movie that is actually more outrageous, more bizarre, more action packed and more hilarious than the original 'Pirates', and that, friends, *is saying something*.

Almost all the original cast has returned for this outing, and like the first, Johnny Depp stands out with his Keith Richards-inspired, clumsy, clever and delightfully strange Captain Jack Sparrow. New on the scene is Bill Nighy as the utterly weird Davy Jones, captian of the Flying Dutchman, who helms the crew of some really bizarre pirates that pretty much defy description. Also returning is the dependable Orlando Bloom as Will Turner, and a host of other secondary characters you will recognize from the first outing.

Keira Knightly, who looks like she stepped off the pages of a fashion magazine, and that is not a compliment, turns out another bland performance as Elizabeth Swann--but I can't entirely blame her, since women in blockbuster movies like this always seem to get the 'token female love interest who is better seen than heard' treatment rather than any type of genuine character sketching (I always thought Miranda Otto--who played Eowyn--would have been a spunkier and more suitable choice, and if you don't know who Eowyn is, what are you doing reading this e-zine?). Another quibble is that like the previous movie, this one goes on a bit too long, but there is so much comedy and adventure to enjoy I only noticed it in passing.

These characters swash buckles from one outrageous adventure to another, each ridiculous scene outdoing the previous one, and there are plenty of surprises, which in a story like this is pretty hard to do, let's face it. Verbinski and writers Ted Elliot and Terry Rossio know what kind of movie this is and never take themselves too seriously, in fact they put some new spins on adventure movie cliches that are really side-splitting--so much so I wouldn't dare reveal them.

In the end, *Pirates of the Carribean: Dead Man's Chest* ends up being more than one might expect from a sure-to-profit-zillions sequel to the extremely lucrative "Curse of the Black Pearl". But rather than just churn out a retread, Verbinski and company spin a damn good yarn and even one-up themselves as a result. In fact I might call it popcorn mastery. Nah, that's too corny.