



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

SF Redux – Boldly Going Where We’ve Already Been

By Bret Funk

When fresh ideas are hard to come by, or corporate executives are leery about risking money on a new show (especially when they know they’ll pull funding before it has a chance to find an audience) the powers that be often employ a time honored tradition: they release old material and pretend it’s new.

Remakes fall into several categories. The first class of remakes (and my personal favorite) are *Reinventions*, attempts to take something from the past, capture the essence of what made it great, and then improve upon it by 1) updating it for the times and 2) taking the concept in new and bold directions.

In business class you’ll find *Homages*, nostalgic visits to yesteryear with an updated cast, but often featuring cameos from the original actors. Very often (especially outside of SF) *Homages* are humorous and sprinkled with pop culture references from the period when the original was created.

Back in coach sit the *Cash Cows*, remakes with anywhere from a cursory to an almost adequate attempt

to follow the mythos of the original, but with a lack of interest on the part of the director or funding on the part of the producer. *Cash Cows* (sadly) comprise the bulk of remakes and are likely a contributing factor to the general public’s dislike of SF.

Finally, trapped in the luggage compartment of the SF Express are two far more hated incarnations of the remake: *Posers* and *Chameleons*. *Posers* are remakes that take the name of something with a following but in truth have no (or very little) relation to the original; *Chameleons* are remakes pretending to be original ideas.

I recently began watching Sci-Fi channel’s remake of *Battlestar Galactica*. Though I initially intended to ignore the show in its entirety (I rented the series via Netflix, so my boycott of the Sci-Fi channel in retaliation for its premature cancellation of *Farscape* is still in effect) I found myself drawn to the miniseries by a combination of curiosity and nostalgia (I remember watching some of the original episodes with my Dad). I don’t remember the old show with great clarity (even though I’ve caught episodes sporadically over the years); it’s more a hodgepodge of images and audio. I have the premise down, and I remember the characters’ names and stuff like that. I think Fred Astaire guest starred on an episode. I’m neither a die hard fan nor a hardened critic.

Sitting down to watch the miniseries, I expected to find a *Cash Cow* and hoped for an *Homage*, though Sci-Fi’s recent track record had me fearing something worse. (Has anyone watched any of the movies they’ve put out recently? Even the TV Guide channel write-ups are bad enough to make me wince!). I mean, how good could this remake actually be? The Cylons look human. Starbuck, the brash cigar-smoking lothario (played by a pre A-Team Dirk Benedict) is a brash, cigar-smoking siren. Boomer, the original series’ token black male, is now Boomer, the new series’ token hot Asian chick. The Fleet may (or may not) be riddled with Cylon spies, and a human traitor (or rather, a dupe) walks among them as well.

Suffice it to say, I had low expectations, and like often happens my pessimistic outlook left me pleasantly surprised. Instead of a trite or campy *Homage*, I have been treated to a *Reinvention* of the first order. This show harkens back to the original. There are nice details only a true SF observer (and nitpicker) would notice, many references to the original show and a cameo or two by original actors, and even a CGI remake of the original Cylon (they don’t ALL look human, at least!). More importantly, the remake explores issues I don’t remember being touched upon in the original: why the Cylons really attacked, are they sentient beings deserving of rights

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ORIGINAL FICTION

**Curse of the Dog-Faced Mummy
by Danielle Parker**

I have recently discovered a short independent film, called *Roleplayed*. It was written and directed by Chad Peter, and is available for viewing at www.np2k.com. (It's pretty funny, but be warned; there's some coarse language in it.) At its heart, it is a tongue in cheek satire of Role-Playing groups and the struggles that they endure, and while it may seem to be making fun of the Role-Playing community, it is in fact addressing a couple of important problems for gamers. One is the conception about who is playing RPGs, and the other, that people aren't playing anymore. The loss of Role-Play gamers to other game formats, such as computer video games, MMORPGs (which I must stress, and will likely rant about in the future, are NOT role-playing games!) card gaming (Magic: The Gathering, Pokemon, etc.), as well as the loss of gamers in general, as people age and move on to other things. But let's look at the first issue now.

The film implies that the average role-player is a "social unfortunate," and while it was done for comic effect, it was a bit frustrating to know that most people were laughing at the gamers, instead of with the gamers who were gently poking fun at themselves. It went on to admit that gaming has produced some of the most brilliant minds in computer technology (sort of), but even the implied notion that people who game are socially inept or reclusive people who only speak in gaming vernacular and refuse to acknowledge the outside world as anything other than a distraction is something to which I take offense. My very first column for this publication dealt with that stereotype, and I tried then as I will try now to point out that while certainly some of the gamers out there are sadly introverted individuals, Role-Playing isn't the cause. In fact, I feel that good Role-Playing is a boon to the social growth of an individual.

I have used Role-Playing games as purely recreational devices, but I have also put them to work as a way to experiment with plot and character design, and as an educational tool. "How can running through a make-believe, dark tunnel to stab an equally make-believe goblin in the head possibly teach a young person anything?" I hear the skeptics ask. Well, it's not so much the details that we use as educators, but the situations, environments and character interactions that the young gamer is exposed to. The first, most important rule of using RPG's as educational tools is to have a large amount of trust in the Game Master, as well as the other players (but the GM is paramount).

Gaming with people whom you trust and feel comfortable with is vital to a good experience. If he trusts everyone, a Role-Player feels secure in stretching their performance, sinking deeper into character, and exploring new territory in the game environment. Ridicule and personal attacks will only drive a person inward, making them self conscious and destroying their ability to transcend their initial embarrassment at gaming, and is just plain rude and destructive of everyone's enjoyment of a game.

By approaching sophisticated in-game situations in different ways, an avid Role-Player can experiment with his own social interactions in similar real-life situations. For example, a low level wizard is confronted with an obviously more talented, but less gracious student at the same academy of magic. The smug boy constantly bullies and taunts the young wizard, who must overcome this obstacle or suffer for the rest of the term. Maybe that situation is too mundane for a **Social** gamer, but someone in an **Immersive** or **Actor** model of role-play would certainly enjoy the chance to interact with the bully. He would have to work hard to find a way to overcome his adversary under conditions where violence isn't an option. So sometime later, in a real life scenario, our gamer is bullied by a bigger kid at school. The gamer can look back on his gaming experience and see what behaviors he employed to overcome the fantastic obstacle as he tries to overcome this real one. The gamer can use the vehicle of the game to play all kinds of aspects of himself, and decide for himself how to handle the bully. Maybe his experiences in the game will help, if only to remind him that violence can't solve his problem. The gamer has already been educated through the game in ways to handle bullies, and he will likely not make the mistake of picking a fight and risking his safety or his academic career, since he understands already the consequences of such deeds. This example can be repeated with as many varied situations as the GM can devise, and can be applied to any real life situation to explore alternative solutions to problems, and how to handle oneself in stressful or uncommon situations.

In addition to social interaction exercises, GM's can use RPGs to teach problem solving, planning and prioritizing, important life lessons about what is and is not acceptable behavior, and cause and effect. Even large and difficult concepts like good and evil, and life and death can be broken apart and explored from the safety of the secure environment of the gaming group.

Conventions: Fandom Reveals Herself (Part II)

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

Guest of Honor or GoH is the king/queen for the weekend. Most activities will revolve around this personage. At ICON (Cedar Rapids, Iowa), the GoH has been Rusty Helvering. Rusty is an icon, a fan's fan, and ancient as dust—he'll tell you so, himself. He's been to every ICON since he helped start it 31 years ago with the Patron Saint of ICON (all bow), Joe Haldeman. His wife, Gay, even leads a panel on "How To Enjoy A Convention". A homey touch, but typical of smaller cons, and if you like smaller crowds, these fit the bill. Many smaller conventions have local (or national) celebrities that are, and always will be, close to their hearts—like Rusty and Joe. The bigger cons go for name brand, which is fine, but it's not free. You pay for them—it's called an entrance fee. If you're determined on seeing one of the ST:OS cast members, by all means, pay your fare and enjoy.

Caveat: Some of the more popular/celeb panels become quickly boring and provide little that a good teen magazine doesn't offer—other than a close-up look. You may/may not be allowed to bring cameras. And, if you don't get there early, you'll be standing on the wall, or asked to leave (something about a fire code?). Check out less sensational topics and see if you enjoy those as well. Even if you end up with a dud, the speaker/panelist will appreciate a warm body that fills the seat. Be a giver.

Con Size. If a smaller, less sensational and personal taste is more in order, attend a smaller con. Most "big cities" have cons. These are well run, about what you'd expect from a "big city". Be prepared to wait in line—long lines.

Caveat: Try some of the smaller cons. There may not be the streamlining of programming and some glitches, but there will be a personal touch and while the GoH may not be a notable, they will likely be more approachable. With most (all?) cons there may be autograph signing (with or without cost), special room parties and lots of in-jokes at this person's expense.

In-Jokes Anything to do with Monty Python, cheesy-poofs (originally from SouthPark, but a mainstay in many ConSuites), Star Trek/Wars references, cracks at a particular celeb/character (Shatner, Harrison Ford, SevenOfNine) is an in-joke.

Caveat: If you don't get the irony/joke, don't laugh too loud. It's obvious to the rest of us you're just being kind. When in doubt, ask someone around you why the comment/joke was so funny, quietly or later. Most of

the time, they'll either answer with waaay more than you wanted to know—some of these explanations are *lengthy*, or will have no idea and are as baffled as you are. In that case, ask someone who runs the con. They should be able/saavy enough to explain it to you. You'll feel good next time you catch the joke and will pat yourself profusely for taking the time to investigate. And, if you drag the person who didn't know along with you, you may have made a new friend.

Don't forget the Dealer's Room! Dealers Rooms are a culture of their own and range from money-grabbing hucksters with dubious goods that may or may not be original/authentic, to your local gal-on-the-street who spends the winter creating unusual (and possibly obscene) creations from old Barbie dolls and who just wants to have fun and make enough to be able to afford the next con.

Caveat: Dealer's rooms bring out the worst and best of fandom, so enjoy, but watch your wallet. Fans have been known to liberate merchandise as well as unattended money sources. Money from selling booths in the dealer's rooms/art displays often go to help defray costs of putting on cons.

ConSuite and refreshment time. Not all Cons have this gem, and some that do should be avoided—unless ptomaine is a welcome friend. ConSuites *used* to be for the con workers, not the general public. Slowly becoming an alternative to buying the convention center/hotel's gouged-price foods, the ConSuite is either a really nice way to let con-goers relax and keep up their glucose level (or blow it altogether) or to make money selling home-made goodies and mass-produced Nachos.

Caveat: Not all food offered should be eaten, even if it *is* free. As with picnics, *anything* with mayonnaise, cheese/cheesy dishes, and/or meat, should be suspect. If it's not noticeably cold (cool doesn't count) or more than an hour old, do not eat it. A trip to the emergency room is no fun for anybody!

Security. Usually, this is more for the celeb/GoH. Some hotels have absolutely no one watching out for your safety. Convention centers tend to require security officers in the contract, but that's no guarantee that things won't disappear if you leave your precious stuff unattended.

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The Writer's Block: Working Man's Curse

by Charles Gramlich

For those of us who don't write full time, that is for most of you who are reading this column as well as for the fellow writing it, our real jobs can be a curse on our writing lives. For example, a few weeks back I was really starting to roll on some projects, and ideas for more were foaming around me like crawfish in a boil. Then I came to work one morning to find a seventy page research proposal waiting impatiently on my desk.

I make my living teaching at Xavier University in New Orleans, and at Xavier I'm also chairperson of the committee that reviews such research projects. I had two days to read this one's seventy pages, to understand and evaluate them when they were written in scientific jargon and "proposalese," and then construct a letter requesting more information or approving the project as written.

In those same two days, however, I had to grade essays from nearly forty students in one of my classes, had to administer a test for a colleague, administer two tests for myself in two other classes, grade those two tests and one that I'd given the week before, develop a test for a class the following week, and serve as acting departmental chairperson while our regular chair was at a conference. This was in addition to the usual run of letters, studies, student questions, and the regular doses of academic bullshit; I'm not even counting around-the-home chores.

How could I possibly keep writing in the face of these hurdles? Well, the answer is that I couldn't do very much, at all. Sometimes, no matter how we resist it, the work from our regular jobs fills our cups to overflowing and every instinct to survive tells us to push our writing to the side. But even though I couldn't do what I wanted to do in writing, I could do *some* things.

I keep a folder on my computer(s) called THINGSTODO, and in it I have files labeled "ideas" and "markets." At least one of my computers is seldom far from my side, and when an idea occurs to me I open the "idea" file (if it's not already open) and jot down in a few quick sentences the basics of my thoughts. If I'm away from the computer I'll often carry a notebook with me to jot down the idea; transferring it to Microsoft Word can come later. Even if I'm busy with "work" work, I can record ideas in a few quick moments, and later when I have more leisure I can mine that file for material.

In the same way, if I find a market listing somewhere, I can jot down the online address of it or can indicate in my "market" file enough information to find it again when the time is right. For example, WD, June 06, p52 indicates *Writer's Digest* and the month and page number for a market listed in it. And, I keep these files on my desktop so that every time I start my computer they show up in my face where they won't be forgotten.

A bigger problem for *me* where "work" work is concerned, however, is that if I allow it to it can ruin the momentum that I have going on a particular writing piece. If I'm blazing along on a story and I suddenly have to leave it, even for two or three days, I tend to struggle when I finally get back to the work. It's harder to recapture the mood or style of the piece. Or worse, I've lost some of the emotional interest that I had in the project. Often, I have to read and reread the piece before I can get going again. This is bad enough with a short story, but how could anyone ever finish a novel under those circumstances?

It is this dangerous loss of momentum that *makes* me go home after work and finish at least one decent paragraph on some writing project—no matter how much toiling I did for the university that day or how tired I am. I've found that even finishing one paragraph a day can help me keep up the momentum that I've developed on an article or story. And, completed paragraphs inevitably lead to completed pages, and completed pages to completed stories /essays /books. Sometimes, all you can hope for is just to make progress. Sometimes that's enough.

A handy short definition of almost all science fiction might read: realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method.

To make this definition cover all science fiction (instead of "almost all") it is necessary only to strike out the word "future."

— Robert A. Heinlein

Reviews

Bloodstone

Barbara Campbell

Daw, August 2006

\$7.99, Mass Market, 320 pp.

ISBN 0756403553

Review by Harriet Klausner

Keirith is an apprentice shaman to the Tree-Father, and he takes joy in joining his spirit with the eagles, seeing through their eyes and feeling the power of flight. He knows that this is forbidden, ever since Morgath tried to cast out the spirit of a person. When the Tree Father catches Keirith performing the forbidden act he tells him he can no longer be his apprentice. When his father Darak finds out, the two men get into an argument, and the son uses his power to push his father away from him.

Not long after that Keirith sees raiders and warns the tribe, but he is kidnapped and transported to the Zherosi city way to the south. There he is singled out by the Pajhit (High Priest) Malaq who believes he might be the son of their long prophesized god. He is taken under the Pajhit's wing and treated like a son, but he has an enemy the Zeherosi priest Xevhan who wants to learn to use Keirith's powers and become the new Pajhit. Darak is heading to the city where his son is held but getting both of them out of there will prove impossible unless the Trickster God that Darak's wife Griane made a bargain with keeps his word.

Imagine *The Crucible Trilogy* by Sara Douglass crossed with the fantasy saga of Kate Elliott and the reader will have some idea what *Bloodstone* is all about. The main protagonist suffers and matures after being taken from his tribe and yet readers will feel he has done nothing wrong because his actions weren't evil but the law didn't recognize the different shades of gray concerning Keirith's power. Barbara Campbell proves she is no one shot wonder with the Second Trickster's novel which is ever better than Heartwood.

Freedom's Sisters

Naomi Kritzer

Bantam, August 2006

\$6.99, Mass Market, 416 pgs.

ISBN: 0553586750

Review by Harriet Klausner

Wanting to please her father Kyros, a very highly placed power in the Penelopeia Empire, Lauria catches runaway slaves. She was sent to spy on the Alashi on the steppes outside the empire because they took in runaway slaves. They also have a surplus of karentitee which the rulers of the empire, the Sisterhood of Weavers, use to bind jinn, and that stock is desperately needed because Penelopeia is running out.

When Lauria tries to free the last slave she helped capture, the slave turns her in and her father takes her to Penelopeia to be judged because she also committed the crime of freeing a bound jinn; the only known person who can do so because she has a special gate in her heart which lets her return them to their home. Her blood-sister Tamar and two others are sent out to sow discord between the Sisterhood of the Weavers, the Young sisters and a rouge element of the army to divert attention from the Alashai who the empire wants to conquer in order to take possession of karentite. When Lauria gains her freedom through her series of adventures by herself, with Tamar and her other allies, she believes she has a way of saving the empire.

What began in *Freedom's Game* and continues in *Freedom's Apprentice* comes to a glorious conclusion in *Freedom's Sisters*. In a world where women hold the power Lauria and Tamar stand out as the brave people who try to overthrow their conditioning and fight the empire on their terms. Readers will be enthralled by the adventures Tamer and Lauria undergo, separately and together as they struggle to accomplish their goal. Naomi Kritzer is a master storyteller who creates characters the audience comes to love.

Reviews

Princess at Sea

Dawn Cook

Ace, August 2006

\$7.99, Mass Market, 352 pgs.

ISBN: 0441014240

Review by Harriet Klausner

Tess, third in line to the throne at Constenopolie, is also apprentice to a player. Players are the real powers behind the throne, using the royals as chess pieces in what they consider a game of power. The magic they possess comes from venom of a Punta cat, a poison that they are able to tolerate, some better than others; darts are the players' weapon of choice against one another. Now Tess is doing nothing but acting as a mediator on the nuptial cruise of her sister the queen and her new husband.

When pirates take over the ship, Tess manages to kill three before they seize her and the royals. The pirates intend to ransom the rulers but they want vengeance for the three deaths Tess caused. They throw her into a pit with a punta cat that bites her before she escapes. In a stupor she links minds with Jeck, the captain of the king's guard, and he is able to magically heal her. When she awakens, her powers are stronger but more unpredictable and her body is producing the venom on her own so that anyone hitting her with a venom dart would probably kill her. After escaping from the pirates, she now must find a way to rescue her sister and her husband.

Dawn Cook is one of the most creative fantasists writing today. Her characters are all fully developed and totally believable, hero and villain alike. Her real talent lies in her ability to create an imaginary world with its own cultures and make the audience feel as if the place and people are real. There is enough action, adventure and romance in *Princess at Sea* to appeal to even the most discerning fantasy lover.

Shadowed by Wings

Janine Cross

Roc, Aug 2006

\$14.00

ISBN 0451460898

Review by Harriet Klausner

Seventeen years old Zarq believes it is her destiny as the Skykeeper's Daughter to become a dragonmaster. However, the Keepers of the Dragon Temple reject her request; insisting no woman has ever been or shall be a dragonmaster. She is warned to drop her pursuit or face dire consequences though she endures an abusive apprenticeship including rape and mutilation by the Dragonmaster of Clutch Re headed by Overlord Waikar Re Kratt.

While her peers treat her with contempt, Zarq searches for allegedly lost ancient documents that will prove a woman could be a Dragonmaster. If she succeeds in finding the document she would still face certain death of heresy, or worse, cold turkey withdrawal from the dragon venom that's she is addicted to. Adding to her pressure is her late mother's dragon demand that she search for her missing sister, Waivia, instead of completing an apprenticeship that will at the end still not achieve her dream of becoming one with the dragons.

This book is not for everyone as Janine Cross is vividly descriptive with the trials and tribulations that assault the young heroine as she bucks the enforced order of the Taliban like Dragon Temple. Definitely not for a weak stomach with scenes of rape, genital and other bodily mutilations, and sexual slavery that make Zarq's dragon venom addiction, forced prostitution and even bestiality seem mild. *Shadowed for Wings* is a violent XXX fantasy saga that provides a radically different look at a dragon based society than the heroic thread eaters of Pern.

Reviews

Sorcerer's Moon (Boreal Moon, 3)

Julian May

Ace, Aug 2006

\$24.95, Hardcover

ISBN: 044101383X

Review by Harriet Klausner

High Blenholme Island contains four separate kingdoms, vassal states to the sovereignty of King Conrig Ironcrown, who also rules over Cothra. When he united the island monarchies, he also dreamed of conquering the mainland, but the reality is that he is besieged on all sides leaving his present control precarious especially with the sentient amphibious Salka wanting to reclaim the island that was once belonged to them before the humans came and pushed them into a small backwater area of Moss.

His son and heir Orrion appeals to the sky beings to get him out of a political marriage so that he can wed the woman he loves. The incorporeal beings of the sky grant him his wish, but the law removes him as heir and his twin Prince Corodon replaces him as first in royal succession though he is unfit to rule; Orrion knows that. Conrig's first wife, long thought dead, proves to be alive and desperate to speak to her son Dyfrig to inform him he is the rightful ruler as neither of the twins are eligible since they are offspring of another woman who they inherited magical skills from. The Salkas are invading and the royals are divided with Conrig the only apparent person capable of bring everyone together, but he is losing his grip on reality as he thinks more of his own personal demons and his desire to conquer the mainland invasion than defending the island.

Sorcerer's Moon is the third and final book in the Boreal Moon trilogy and it ties up loose ends that were left dangling from the previous tales. Humans obtain help from the powerful skybeings especially the one condemned to live beneath the ice because he lost a civil war that has exiled many while the beaconfolk try to enslave humanity in their sick twisted game. Even with this powerful ally that may not be enough in the war with the Salka as mankind is unable to come together and another dangerous foe lurks. Julian May creates a world filled with wonder, magic and battles that seems plausible, which makes this fantasy a winner.

The Begotten: A Novel of the Gifted

Lisa T. Bergren

Berkley, Aug 2006

\$23.95, Hardcover

ISBN 0425210162

Review by Harriet Klausner

Satan thinks the time is ripe for his dominion on earth. Thus in 1339, he sends one of his most powerful followers, the Sorcerer, to wreak havoc. Dominican Father Piero realizes that the devil has begun what could be the first phase towards Armageddon. Though the Vatican would officially consider this heresy worth burning at the stake, the holy man searches for the rumored Gifted, named in a letter allegedly written by Saint Paul. The letter never became part of the canon, in hope that they can prevent the Sorcerer and his minion from succeeding.

He finds the Gifted Lady Daria D'Angelo when she saves the life of dying Church Knight Gianni de Capezzana who has brought many a sinner to their fiery death but wonders how many of those he brought to godly justice were less saintly than he. In turn the Knight pleads his loyalty to Daria. Soon near Siena, Italy the latest war between heaven and hell on earth will begin.

This is an exhilarating religious historical thriller that is a delightful fantasy rather than a Brownian clone. The story line is action-packed from the beginning as the forces of good and evil prepare for a confrontation that leaves the Vatican caught between a rock and a hard place since the Church hierarchy do not recognize the Gifted (or Saint Paul's letter) yet have no chance to stop the Sorcerer without them. Readers who appreciate a different spin will appreciate Lisa T. Bergren's superb religious medieval fantasy *The Begotten*.

Human history becomes more
and more a race between
education and catastrophe.

— H. G. Wells

Reviews

WebMage

Kelly McCullough

Ace, Aug 2006

\$6.99, Mass Market

ISBN: 0441014259

Review by Harriet Klausner

In the twenty-first century, magic has gone digital, with spells being coded on the Mweb and familiars now computers that turn into trolls and goblins. Instead of using the more dangerous chaos energy to cast a spell, powerful sorcerers program their magic, leaving it to hackers like Ravirn to find and remove the bugs so that they work properly. Ravirn is a college student who is studying to refine his skills for his family's use.

His kin is descended from the Three Fates, and he is a demideity who never ages. When his Great-Aunt Atropos asks for his help on a spell that would replace the chaos of free will with order, he refuses. She puts a spell on him that insures no one believes anything he says when he talks about his aunt's endeavor; still he plans to stop the powerful Atropos, with his only allies being his cousin with an nth degree of separation Cerice, his familiar Melchior the beautiful computer webgoblin, and a discarded webtroll. Ravirn and company have no chance against his relative, one of the Three Fates but he will die trying because free will means that much to him.

Fans who enjoy the fantasy *The Warlock In Spite of Himself* and its myriad spin-offs will thoroughly appreciate the madcap and whimsical *Webmage*. The combination of computer technology with magic spells makes for a whimsical tale of action, adventure, and romance. Ravirn is a charming hero; an idealist fighting for what he believes is worth battling for inside a comedic quirky fantasy. Kelly McCullough shows great promise as a fantasy writer and the audience will hope there is a sequel for this spellbinding book.

Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell

Susannah Clarke

Bloomsbury, 2004

\$27.95, Hardback, 782 pgs

ISBN 1-58234-416-7

Review by D. L. Parker

How frustrating the publishing business must be for those anxious money-counters risking their corporate fiscal health on the Next Big Thing. Like horse races, there's no sure winner. Consequently, they mitigate their risk. Tried-and-true cash machines, those literary engines that squat on the best-seller lists with that umpteenth sequel, are the perennial favorites.

Should they be forced to bet on a dark horse, though, those gnomish accountants who moonlight as publishers have to *really* hedge their bet. Of course, there's a tried-and-true method for this situation, too. Does the new book have anything to do with magic? Start squealing '*The next HARRY POTTER!!!*' in every marketing blurb. Is there a religious or Biblical connection? '*The next DA VINCI CODE!!!*' I don't suppose anyone in the publishing industry will divulge to me the actual rituals performed to invoke the blessing of these past two divinities. I'm convinced, all the same, that there must be *something* – some esoteric, high-tech ritual based upon, say, Freud's principle of transference – or maybe a simple rain-dance, performed in front of the icon of St. Rowling.

Since Susannah Clarke's novel, '*Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*', deals with magic, of course we are told that her work '*has the cleverness and lightness of touch of the Harry Potter series*' (I quote Amazon's official entry). Well, *ahem*, no, it doesn't. If our Gnomish Accountants cum Publishers hoped to clean out the pockets of the same audience that paid for J. K. Rowling's masterworks, I don't think they'll succeed. Do *you* know any teenagers who lust after massive 19th century tomes? Indeed, Clarke's novel reads like a mule beget out of Trollope by Le Fanu (and I wish there had been more Le Fanu in the mix).

'*Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*' is, in fact, an anachronistic oddity. It has all the disadvantages of the Victorian novel: excessive length (seven hundred and eighty-two pages – bless me, I *read* them); intrusive authorial asides; lengthy footnotes that run across multiple pages; and to top off the stack, a meandering, digressive narrative that never cranks up to full bore

Reviews

throttle. Do you think I exaggerate? Mr. Jonathan Strange of the title does not even *make an appearance* in this novel until page *two hundred and eight*.

No, no teenager is going to make it through this book. Perhaps someone realized that: if Harry Potter is not taken in vain in those proliferating marketing blurbs, poor Jane Austen *is*. Ms. Austin's heroines are, of course, such wonderful fountains of modern-day cinematic profits, whether in the beauteous blonde versions pimped by Hollywood or those uglier-but-smarter brunettes served up by BBC. You can just *feel* those gnomish accountant-publishers breaking a sweat in their desperation to connect Ms. Clarke's odd little book to your wallet!

Well, fortunately for this survivor of those seven hundred plus pages, I *have* read a number of 19th century novels, and even enjoyed a few. There are advantages to the style, of course, as well as those afore-mentioned disadvantages. Characters build slowly but thoroughly before our eyes; we have, so to speak, the literary equivalent of a long, drawn-out, formal courtship here, rather than the quickie one-night-stand of modern relationships. And in this, Ms. Clarke is successful. This heart of this book is indeed the relationship between the two title characters: fussy, petty, dry-and-dull-as-dust, vindictive, jealous Mr. Norrell and his sole professional colleague, the much more ad hoc, shoot-from-the-hip, lively Mr. Strange.

More than holding his own with our duo is the villain, the unnamed Faerie gentleman whose weathervane emotional instability and childish pettiness may be tinged with comedy, but who is no less frightening for that. The Faerie gentleman with the thistledown hair is *not* a being to offend. Magic as wielded by Mr. Norrell is a book-derived, dully academic exercise; by Mr. Strange, charmingly ad hoc and inventive; but as wielded by our spiteful, prankish, sexually pre-pubescent Faerie gentleman – glory and terror in equal parts.

Plot is not one of Ms. Clarke's strong points. We have, to summarize those seven hundred plus pages, the jousting rivalry and professional camaraderie of our two magicians; the Faerie gentleman's spiteful interventions, which Mr. Norrell and Mr. Strange slowly (and I do mean *slowly*) awaken to; finally we have a *deus ex machina* who sets things right, in the classic fashion, by first appearing on page seven hundred and fifty four and then briskly taking care of business (even if the god has to loan out a few

powers). By that time, I was already in throes of a fine old frustration with Mr. Strange for his unaccountably thick head. Perhaps Ms. Clarke will forgive me for summarizing Mr. Strange's slow progress toward enlightenment in my own little skit:

Mrs. Strange. I visited dear Lady Pole today, Jonathan, and met that strange gentleman with the thistledown hair again. How peculiar that he lives there with dear Lady Pole and Sir Walter! Do you know, he has the *oddest* thistledown hair, and the most *charming* manners, and, by the way, he wears a bright green suit. He kissed my hand most affectingly... poor dear Lady Pole, I am *sure* she must be under a spell, so listless and sad is she...

Mr. Strange. Yes, dear. I hope my article appears in tomorrow's paper. The nerve of that Norrell! You would think *his* was the only way to practice magic!

(This conversation continues, with minor variations, for quite a number of years. Mrs. Strange dies suddenly under mysterious and questionable circumstances. Mr. Strange, grief-stricken, at last evinces an interest in a new piece of petticoat. But his nouveau amour is cut short. Someone tells him his wife is NOT REALLY DEAD, but merely enchanted and spirited away).

Mr. Strange. Egads! Fire! Sorcery! *Exhume the body!* (Um, will it have decayed by this time? How many years does it take?) Help! *Villains!*

Fortunately, the god from the machine is on his way, having ridden to the rescue from his more important properties in Heaven, Hell, and Faerie. Slow-top Mr. Strange and his properly Victorian wife manage to hold out, though his spouse (who has been dancing away under the spell of the Faerie gentleman, along with poor Lady Pole and her excruciatingly careful and correct butler) has seriously sore feet. We don't, I'm afraid, ever care much about the ladies in this book, because they get short shrift: two dimensional place-holders, each and every one of them.

Ms. Clarke does do a wonderful job of depicting the relationship between the two English magicians. Her villain, too, is wonderfully depicted. I wish she had shed more light on the minor characters and paid more attention to plot... *plod* is more what she ended up with. Still, for those of you who like those 19th century tomes and enjoy that slow build-up to... well, I guess it's a climax... enjoy!

Original Fiction

I haven't much to say about the Blunt stories, except they were meant to be pure, overdone fun in the spirit of the Golden Age of Pulp, and are sons of (to various degrees) C. L. Moore, Leigh Brackett, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and other pulp greats, with one exception — I wanted a more modern protagonist, with less of the heroism of the old unrealistic pulps.

Jim Blunt is, as well, modelled somewhat after my late blond-haired, blue-eyed Uncle Jimmy, who was a longshoreman foreman among other things, and as tough of a bruiser as you'd ever want to meet - he had arms like hams and all muscle. Jimmy would be proud to be the inspiration for Jim Blunt!

- D Parker

The Curse of the Dog-Faced Mummy by Danielle Parker

"Loot," whistled Ooglia, flicking his long, forked, purple-tinged double tongues ecstatically over his set of 108 serrated teeth. "*Loot, Captain, beyond our wildest dreams!*"

The big man so addressed greeted this assertion with a skeptical grunt, but all the same, Jim Blunt, Captain of the less than reputable starship *Pig's Eye*, had to admit he was impressed. Big Ugly was First Mate of this also less than reputable crew for one reason: the alien had an insatiable lust for loot in any marketable form. And since Captain Blunt nursed some wild dreams of his own along those lines, the relationship between the ex-Earther-on-the-lam and the two meter tall purple bag on six limbs known as Ooglia had proven quite satisfactory, on the whole. Blunt had to admit, when Ooglia's eyestalks oscillated as wildly as a deep spacer's on shore leave, the loot must be pretty spectacular.

"What kind of loot?" he growled. "Those baubles you picked up on Ord's World weren't worth loading into cargo. You ain't been batting 100% lately, Ugly."

"It's a tomb, Captain," Ooglia fluted, clacking his upper set of claws in a fever of pecuniary emotions. "*An untouched alien tomb. Gold! Artifacts! Jewels! We're rich, Captain. Rich!*"

A tomb. Even as his heart accelerated to its own lustful rhythms, Captain Blunt could see the chilling effect of the words on his second crewmember. Old Andy Locke, the wizened technician who had spent most of the last five years patching *Pig's Eye* together from his junkyard of spare parts in Cargo Bay D, looked immediately stricken.

"Bad business to disturb the dead, Cap'n," he muttered, shaking his gray head uneasily. "Ain't good luck to rob a grave. What *I'd* like to know is, what did it *die* of?"

"Gross bipedal superstition," hissed the First Mate, looming over the little man so threateningly that Andy Locke shrank back in his seat. "It died of *old age*, I presume. Its body is in a gold coffin it can do quite well *without*. If you'd like to forgo *your* share—"

"That's enough, Ooglia," warned Captain Blunt, touching the stun rod clipped to his belt pointedly. "Quit clacking your claws at old Andy. Gold coffin, you said?" His bright blue eyes, striking in the deep tan of his hard face, gleamed. He rubbed his slightly bristly chin thoughtfully. "Figure we could get something for the body too," he said after a moment. "Back on Earth, I could probably sell it to some xeno-biologists...think I know a fence who could do it. Hmm." He got to his feet suddenly. The bridge of the *Pig's Eye* was not large, and between Captain Blunt's towering sinew and massive shoulders and the First Mate's rotund bulk, the little engineer felt it prudent to squeeze even deeper into his seat. Captain Blunt, rubbing his shovel-sized hands together eagerly, paid him no heed.

"But we'd better be quick about getting it on board," the captain continued. "I think that Delosian you cheated, Ugly, lost us at our last Fold, but there's no need to be foolish. It might show up with the

Original Fiction

law in tow anytime." He fixed the First Mate with a glittering eye. "How much stuff did you estimate we could load on board, Ugly?"

The alien's upper claws were already dancing over *Pig's Eye's* keyboards. "We'll have to dump Cargo Bays B and D, Captain-" ("My spare parts!" bleated Andy Locke) "-But I think we can do it in a couple of days, if we fly both shuttles concurrently."

Captain Blunt, with a nod and a touch of his finger, brutally ejected the contents of Cargo Bays B and D into space. "Load of junk anyway," he muttered. "Been slim pickings since we bolted from Delos." He ignored the heartbroken snuffles from his engineer. "You detected no life signs on your trial run, Ooglia?"

"Not a bleep on the scanner," replied the First Mate jubilantly. "Nothing but rock and dirt. You'll have to suit up, though. It's a thin atmosphere down there." The alien clicked his claws complacently. "I, of course, am much more durable than you thin-skinned bipeds. I shall not require artificial support."

"Good thing," sneered Captain Blunt. "I don't think they make a suit to fit Blob Size Twenty." He turned to his engineer. "Andy, load the second shuttle with cutting tools, grav lifts, grapples and cargo nets on the double. We'll leave you to hold down the bridge." He stabbed a finger warningly. "And don't fall asleep. You need to keep any eye out for that Delosian and its friends. I never *knew* a fly-eye could hold such a grudge--"

The First Mate snickered. In a Gargantuan, this was an alarming expression that swelled his two-meter purple bag of a body like a vacuum cleaner trying to suck up a rug. "One hundred and eighty percent profit, Captain," he fluted. "It might have had 360 sets of eyes, but none of 'em were sharp. Too bad the shipment rotted so fast. I thought it would last at least until we were out of their system."

"Yeah, well, I don't figure we'll ever buy an aging crop of Pulk fruit again. What a stink." Captain Blunt sighed. "You really hosed up Cargo Bay A, Ugly. When we're space bound again you're on cleaning detail. You just reminded me."

"My last," whistled the First Mate, following his captain down the ship's central tube. "I shall be able to return to Gargantua, Captain, and buy twelve bodacious females to groom my eyestalks. We're rich, Captain!"

"Don't count your chicks until you've got the cash in your claws," his companion replied amiably. "Take Shuttle A, Ooglia. I'll follow you down in a few minutes."

He watched with a sardonic smile as the alien obediently disappeared into the open hatch. Waiting until the small vessel had ejected, he walked over to touch the ship intercom on the wall.

"I'll be right down, Captain!" the engineer's voice called hastily out of the panel. "Just setting the sensors for full scans, sir!"

"Never mind, Andy," his captain replied. "I'll load the shuttle myself after all. You're to stay on the bridge and seal it off until I get back." He cleared his throat significantly. "Ever seen a Gargantuan in a *really* bad fever of greed before? If there were two less of this crew there'd be more of someone else's share. Get it?"

The voice out of the panel was sober. "Aye, Captain. I'll break out another stun rod and keep it handy. Watch your back."

Captain Blunt was no fool. Landing his shuttle, he steered clear of the immediate vicinity of his predecessor and settled on the opposite edge of the tomb complex. Donning his low-atmosphere protection and attaching his tools to his belt, he seized the handle of his anti-grav cart and stepped briskly outside.

The unnamed rock they orbited had looked bleak even from outer space, and from his closer vantage, the view was not improved. The dull, huge sun shone red in the dust-darkened sky. Dry rock and rusty red dirt stretched to the clouded horizon. It seemed the only structure on the entire small planet was the tomb itself. That, as Captain Blunt stared at it critically, proved to be a low, featureless dome rising just out of the ground. Before him a long sloping tunnel plunged into obdurate darkness.

Original Fiction

It was not a comforting sight. Captain Blunt drew a deep breath and fingered his stun rod. Andy Locke's superstitious drivel echoed uneasily in his mind. One could imagine such a night-black shaft leading straight down into Hades...but it was sheer foolishness to picture a five-headed dog waiting below with its fangs bared in quintuplet snarls. He scowled suddenly. No pop-eyed mobile grape was going to get the better of *him*...He started down the shaft with narrow-eyed determination.

The atmospheric pressure increased as he progressed downwards, but the smell of the long undisturbed air was unpleasant. Not even *Pig's Eye's* recycled air smelled so musty. Playing his light upon the walls, Captain Blunt viewed dog-headed painted figures enjoying what must have been the activities of their former lives. The paint was peeling with the passage of untold time, but the pictures were not comforting. The departed appeared to be equipped with sizable canine teeth and feverish red eyes, and judging by the murals, dinner on newly deceased life forms seemed to be an important aspect of their lives. Captain Blunt loosened the stun rod in his belt and walked as softly as a cat.

The slope of the tunnel was quite steep, and by the time the shaft terminated in a massive portal, Blunt estimated he was already almost fifty meters below ground. Tall dog-like guardians in gleaming gold collars stood with barring the way, their jeweled red eyes glaring back in the captain's small beam of light. The captain studied them thoughtfully.

"First job of the day," he decided. "That's gold plating or I'm a Franciscan friar." He smiled hungrily.

During the next few days, the crew of the *Pig's Eye* worked feverishly. Cargo Bays B and D were filled; Ooglia, with a mad gleam in his stalky eyes, emptied Cargo Bay C of its potentially marketable singing crystals himself. Captain Blunt, passing through crew quarters on one of his own rare periods of rest, noticed that the Gargantuan's door would not slide completely closed. A brief glance inside revealed just what he expected. Every centimeter of space was filled with dusty spoils of the alien tomb. He shook his head grimly.

"If it's going to happen, it'll be today," he warned the little engineer privately. "We've about cleaned it out. There's not much left but the mummy itself."

Andy Locke shuddered. "I don't suppose you'll heed an old man," he said mournfully. "But I'd rather we didn't have any dog-faced mummy on board. It's bad karma, Captain, bad, I tell you--"

"Stuff it, Andy," replied his commanding officer meaningfully. "If my old Granny had gone to her grave with enough gold fillings, I'd probably have disinterred her myself. Stay sealed on the bridge and don't fall asleep. Got it?"

"Aye, sir." The little man settled morosely into the command chair. Captain Blunt, observing the engineer's knobby fingers working furtively, craned his neck...he scowled. It was a nearly hairless rabbit's foot. Shaking his head, he went below.

The First Mate was just finishing unloading Shuttle A. "Oh, Captain," he fluted melodiously. "I'll need some help on this trip, sir. We've got to get the mummy on board."

"Why certainly," smiled Captain Blunt. "Amazing, it *is* our very last trip. A very fine job, Mr. Ooglia, a very fine job." He stood back politely. "After you, sir, after you."

The Gargantuan, who had been waiting for his captain to precede him up the gangway into the shuttle, clicked his claws indecisively. At last he sidled through the hatch, pressing his baglike body against the door. "It occurs to me, Captain," he warbled nervously, "that each of our shares represents a sizable sum of monies..."

"At least 1.6 million Earth Monetary Units each," said the captain, stepping cautiously on board. "That's a lot of EMUs. How much do twelve bodacious females cost, Ugly?"

The First Mate, ejecting the shuttle, giggled. "1.6 million EMUs should buy a lot more than twelve," he replied. "Why, we should both be set for life, sir. I assume Earth females are not particularly expensive...after all, not even eyestalks, sir."

Original Fiction

"You'd be surprised," said Captain Blunt, staring thoughtfully out the porthole beside him. "The last three I supported lightened my pockets considerably." He paused. "Did you mean to set us down by the east entrance, Ooglia? I thought the south tunnel was wider."

"I'm afraid not," the First Mate demurred. "This is the best route, sir. I've checked them all out. No need for concern."

"Well, well," said Captain Blunt. "I suppose I might as well see all the tunnels at least once. Such charming wall murals, especially the dining scenes. In view of your greater familiarity with this route, Mr. Ooglia...lead on!"

The honor appeared to slightly unnerve the First Mate, but after more nervous clacking of his claws, he decided it seemed to take his captain's pleasant smile at face value. Rotating one eyestalk at an awkward angle to keep his companion in view, Ooglia led the way into the tunnel.

The steep trip progressed in near silence until the massive portals came into view. Here Captain Blunt paused thoughtfully. "Excuse me," he said. "Perhaps your reverse view is distracting you...but did *your* tunnel have the same laser cross-fire booby trap that mine did in that section ahead of us?"

The Gargantuan stopped in his multiple tracks with a whistle of embarrassment. "Well, no," he replied. "Actually, there's a hidden floor panel which opens upon an acid pool-I was about to warn you, sir."

"I quite understand," said Captain Blunt, carefully probing as he advanced. Sure enough, on his third step the square he tested vanished, and a throat-burning mist wafted from below. He detoured around it carefully. "It's not every day 1.6 million EMUs hang in the balance. That's a lot of bird. Lead on, Mr. Ooglia."

Observing the tall Gargantuan veer slightly left and bend as he passed beyond the portals, Captain Blunt's keen eyes narrowed. Crouching slightly as he too veered, he waved the crowbar he held in one hand in that center space...and fell precipitously flat. A dull clunk, a sonic whistle through the air that stirred the hair on the back of his head, and he glanced up just in time to see the bolt embed itself in the stone pillar opposite as though it had been butter.

"The crossbow," the First Mate muttered in anguish. "I should have mentioned it!"

"I'm sure it just slipped your mind," said the captain, rising to his feet and brushing off his leather jerkin with equanimity. "But perhaps you haven't thought this through carefully enough, my friend. That valuable coffin weighs tons. I am quite sure it will take *both* of us to load it into the cargo bay. Savvy?"

The First Mate seemed to be thinking this through very seriously. At last he smiled, showing the 108 serrated teeth. "I quite understand," he said. "I admit, you've relieved my mind. We've shipped together for three years, Captain, but I've noticed you can be a hard and ruthless man at times. I was a little worried for my personal safety. You've set my mind at ease."

"Has it only been three years, Ooglia?" said Captain Blunt. "Odd, it seems I've known your kind forever." He paused. "Ah...the honorable deceased at last."

The small chamber had already been denuded of its other contents, but Blunt had to admit, what remained was enough to nearly strike him dumb too. His blue eyes glittering in the karat glare, he revised his estimate of EMUs upwards. The canine cousin presumed occupying that solid gold rectangle must have been longer than the speechless Gargantuan at his side, and the upper surface of it was chest height to his own considerable centimeters. The object could well be priceless.

He glanced at his companion, whose popping eyestalks were riveted by that pure yellow glow, and fingered the stun rod at his belt thoughtfully. No, it really was too heavy for one man-even one as brawny as he. With a sigh, he reached up and sharply flicked one of those hypnotized eyestalks with his thumb.

The First Mate jumped and gave a shriek of pain. "Captain!" he howled, clutching his stinging sensory organ tenderly.

Original Fiction

"Take the head end, Ugly," Captain Blunt commanded briskly. "Get those sleds in line. Together now...push the end over...*unnngh!*...hold on, it's slipping again!"

Long minutes of cursing, panting, and perspiring later, the massive object rested safely on the two yoked sleds. Ooglia, reeking of vinegary Gargantuan sweat, clutched the handle of his sled with four sets of trembling claws. "For a being with only four clawless limbs," he gasped, "You're almost as strong as a Gargantuan, Captain!"

"Thank you, Ugly," said Blunt, flexing his weary arms as he spoke. His bursting biceps had split his sleeves. "For a repulsive purple bag, you're almost as handsome as some humans yourself. Shall we wend our way homeward?"

The return journey was almost smooth. It was true that the lead sled slipped out of Ooglia's dampened claws a time or two, but Captain Blunt was nimble, and he avoided having his feet crushed...and the shuttle door, closing prematurely, only managed to mouth his shirttail. Ooglia was aghast.

"Never mind," said Blunt, worrying his shirt free of the door's powerful jaws. "3.2, I mean 1.6, million EMUs will buy a lot of shirts. Carry on, Mr. Ooglia."

They had scarcely blasted skywards when Andy Locke's agitated voice bleated out of the com. "Captain Blunt," the little engineer cried, "Ship's scans show two Delosian attack vessels UnFolding just outside orbit--"

"Plot a standby course for Earth," Captain Blunt commanded harshly. "Try to get it down to three folds or less. We'll be docked in one and a half minutes."

"Computer estimates four minutes to weapons range, sir," the engineer replied. That clattering sound could be his teeth or his fingernails. "Aye, sir. Plotting course now."

"No mistakes now, Ugly," said Blunt, watching the First Mate hunch urgently over his controls. "Guide us in smoothly."

A buzzing whine like a maddened fly burst loudly out of the com. Blunt, reading the translation scrolling below, grinned at his companion.

"Well, well," he said. "Fly-eyes has a good memory. That's a fair description of you, Ugly. Are you sure you only made us one hundred and eighty percent profit on that deal? It seems to have a personal grudge."

The vinegary odor of Gargantuan sweat had become more pronounced. "Those ships have fifty megaton warheads," he moaned. "We'll be pulp, Captain, if we can't get out of here."

Captain Blunt was still reading the scrolling translation with narrowed eyes. "I don't think so," he replied almost absently. The shuttle docked smoothly; Ooglia, for all his agitation, was still an excellent pilot. Captain Blunt sighed. He really was going to miss the avaricious squid. "They seem to have sentenced you already, Ooglia." He shook his head disapprovingly. "The punishment seems a little severe...something about yielding your bodily fluids in repayment of your crass commercial theft..."

Andy Locke's flat voice cut through the captain's musings and Ooglia's frantic docking efforts. "Captain," he said with deadly calm, "I really wish you hadn't spaced my spare parts-I'm getting a warning light on the board. I don't think we're going to be able to Fold out of here."

Captain Blunt drew his stun rod as he rose to his feet. "One problem at a time, Andy," he replied. And he winced as the rod discharged its staccato lance of energy at that broad purple back.

He stepped to the shuttle com, cutting through the continuous angry buzzing with his own unctuous baritone. "Delosian vessel *Gnath-to*...whatever. The perpetuator of the vile crime you describe will be discharged into space immediately. I suggest you tractor him in at once, if you value his bodily fluids. Mr. Ooglia belongs to a sturdy species, but he can't survive hard vacuum long. Our sincere regrets for his criminal deeds, which we are shocked to learn of from you--"

Original Fiction

The maddened whine fell temporarily silent. Captain Blunt carried out his tasks briskly, then returned to the shuttle. Wiping his dampened brow, he watched his screens intently.

The tumbling purple figure suddenly jerked, then headed purposefully toward the opening bay doors of that sinister ship. Captain Blunt, nervously tapping his fingers, saw his former First Mate vanish into its maw. A tall compound-eyed creature in a shiny suit could be glimpsed for an instant... then the bays closed. Long, tense minutes of waiting ensued; Captain Blunt tapped his fingers in a staccato rhythm.

At last, the two ships turned in eerie tandem. For several seconds they drove out of the planet's gravity well; then, a distorted whorl of disturbed space replaced their images. They had Folded.

Climbing to the bridge on slightly quivering limbs, Blunt found his chief engineer sunk gray-faced in his chair. The upholstery was flecked with small white hairs; he had clearly denuded his good luck charm in his agitation. "Bad luck, sir," Andy whimpered. "We've lost our First Mate, and we might not be able to get out of here. Never pays to rob the dead!"

Captain Blunt sat down heavily. "Stuff your dead animal in it, Andy," he said. "Looks like our exchanger has melted. I wonder how long it will take us to find that floating spare..." His hard face grew grim as he surveyed his view screens. "Start examining space debris, Mr. Locke. We need to find a certain used exchanger."

It was two months before a certain battered, patched, dented vessel limped out of Folded space into Earth orbit. Blunt, his tanned face thinned by weeks of low rations, rubbed his stubbled chin wearily as he squinted at his boards.

"Permission granted to disembark at 17:00 GMT," he read aloud in triumph. "Dinner's on me, Mr. Locke. How about dual steak and lobsters at Morton's tonight?"

The wizened engineer's pale eyes watered with emotion. "Think they'll let us in, sir?" he murmured tearfully. "What with our low water supplies, I'm not sure I can get clean by then...I hate to mention it, sir, but you stink too. I think we'd better check into a room first."

"The Ritz," smiled Captain Blunt. "2.4 million future EMUs each says they'll overlook our aromas. Pack your kit, Locke."

Even Captain Blunt, seated some hours later before the remains of a magnificent repast, had to admit that life could have its up moments. His stomach was finally assuaged, and the brandy in his glass was providing a pleasant buzz. His tall muscular figure was already attracting the coy attention of the brunette at the neighboring table, and the soft night air blew the bubbling sounds of a sax. "All that rot about bad luck," he said contemptuously to his companion, who was still unashamedly gnawing the last bits of meat on his nearly clean T-bone. "As if any dead dog-faced mummy could--"

Andy Locke looked up from his bone. Captain Blunt, struck dumb by the sudden wild terror in his engineer's face, followed the direction of his frenzied stare. Across the room, he could see a small elderly woman marching toward them. Just behind her were two large blue-clad gentlemen with conspicuous weaponry hung around their portly middles.

"That's him," she howled, pointing an accusing finger as she reached their table. "My shiftless ex-husband. I've been waiting forty-three years for this moment, Andrew Locke! You owe me 111,621.47 EMUs in back child support for Pamela, Patrick, Jazzy, and Peter...IF you still remember their names! Arrest him, officers!"

Captain Blunt, shaking his head, watched the small figure of his former engineer disappear rapidly out of sight. The two policemen were on both sides, and Andy Locke's feet were not touching the ground. He frowned thoughtfully as he lifted his brandy.

"4.8 million EMUs," he said meditatively. "But first...I need to get rid of a certain dog-faced curse. I wonder, who might want a red-eyed mummy-?"

Redux (con't)

and respect or cold killing machines, how do they manage to track the Battlestar through open space with such ease. More importance is given to some of the real world concerns of a ragtag fleet searching for a mythical 13th colony: can we get enough food, water, and fuel? What do we do with pre-holocaust prisoners and newly-captured spies? What, exactly, is a Cylon? Which is more important, the needs of the many, or the needs of the few? These and a slew of other political, religious, and philosophical conundrums are delved into throughout the first season's arc.

I finish each episode looking forward to the next. I find myself concerned about the characters and their choices, and find myself liking the portrayal of the characters far more than those in the original. What more can a remake aspire toward?

Over the next few months (this time I mean it), I'm going to delve a little deeper into the classes of remakes mentioned above. You'll hear more about BSG and other great Reinventions in next month's article.

RPG Corner (con't)

Role-Play is used as a form of therapy, as people work through the same problems from different points of view and perspectives. Gaming is part therapy, parts entertainment and escapism, and part school. It is only when a gamer becomes obsessed with the game that the social introversion can occur, and a GM worth his stripes will recognize when this is happening and move to correct it. Even in the most intense **Immersive** and **Actor** Models of Role-Play, it is important to remind everyone that the game isn't real, despite the real life lessons one can learn from it. RPGs are about fun and about socialization.

Conventions (con't)

Dead Dog Party. This is a Sunday evening, after-con party where a couple of things happen. After everything is put away, swept up, props loaded and taken back to their warehouse/rightful owners, the volunteers, con sponsors, benefactors and planners (and sometimes the GoH) eat, drink and be merry with the leftovers. Why Dead Dog? Because after everyone else has gone home and the lights go out in the ballroom, these special people are Dead Dog Tired! It takes tremendous energy planning, running and cleaning up after a convention. These people not only deserve the left-overs, they deserve a medal! (All bow.) This is their de-briefing time and often, they are already planning next year's convention.

Caveat: Volunteer, and volunteer often. Few will thank you, but you will have an insider's look on what really goes on at conventions.

Flops/Hotel Room Sharing: A time-honored tradition born of desperate people with little cash and generally frowned upon by the hotel management. If you flop somewhere, find out who actually bought the room and slip him some cash (a ten-spot is good). If something comes up missing or damaged, it's not you who the management will be billing.

Caveat: The person with the room key gets tired of being dragged away to go unlock a hotel room door so they tend to just prop the door open and take their chances. Do not leave **any** valuables in a flop (including medication). Take your treasures with you; it's a pain, but you'll have them at the end.

Children at cons.

Generally, this is not a good idea because children, 1.) will be bored because they don't understand the in-jokes, 2.) haven't read the books (okay, Harry Potter and Narnia may be exceptions) and, 3.) everyone is taller than they are. If a con is kid-friendly, then that's great, but be careful. Some cons have playrooms or game rooms and it's not uncommon for the parental unit(s) to dump the kid there and not come back for hours. A lot can happen in a few hours—accidents, missing children (who may have just walked away looking for the P.U.(s), but get side-tracked) and other darker, unpleasant things. If it's possible, take the kids to the best parts (age appropriate) and then see if Aunt Susie will watch them for the rest of the weekend. You get to enjoy yourself, and the kids? At least they'll be safe (and damn you later for abandoning them all weekend). But, at least they're safe.

Money issues. Budget yourself. There are often tons of freebies laying around on any surface that will hold them. Look for these and help yourself. (My favorite is Baen's cd full of short stories.) Save your money for auctions, dealer's room, autographs and souvenirs. Taco Bell is probably the cheapest food around, so if you can sneak out and grab the fast food, you'll save a bundle over eating at the hotel. On the other hand, if you check out the hotel/convention area restaurants, you might find a celeb hiding out. If so, make your move kindly, get your autograph and move on.

Attending conventions is a funfest and one of the most rewarding activities fandom can experience. So make that costume and have a great, safe time!