

PROBE 159

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Probe is supplied to all SFFSA members and is for sale or exchange.
Contributions of all types are very welcome.

Electronic transmission is preferred, but all text should be typed.
There are no longer any limitations on the artwork supplied for *Probe* as we have shifted over to digital printing. Photographs are accepted but will be converted to grey scale. Email: gailjamieson@gmail.com
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PROBE 159

March 2014

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Editorial

What goes around comes around and it seems that PROBE has come around to me again. (Wait for the fanfare...) For the third time I find myself at the helm of PROBE. Much water has flowed under the bridge since, as a very young and naive SF fan I produced my first copy in 1978. I cringe a little when I look back at that first edition with its typo's and cut and paste (without a computer) style of production. I've come a long way since then but the club has not changed all that much. We are still looking for members and enjoying the company of other SF fans. The "Blast from the Past" will remind us of what was printed in previous



issues of PROBE.

On the subject of blasts from the past, we were delighted to meet up with one of our old members who has been living in Germany for probably around 20 years now. He was in South Africa visiting family when came along to one of our monthly meetings.

I wonder how many of you remember "PROBOT", who was/is a club mascot. He was originally designed by Louis Lambrecht, who actually made a half meter manikin. To cut a long story shorter, Kai Bosse saw PROBOT and started to produce a PROBOT cartoon which I published in PROBE for a couple of issues until Kai moved to Germany. It was Kai who attended the meeting last month and has now re-joined the club. To make the story even more interesting, he belongs to an SF group in Germany. One of other members is Stas Rosin who has been providing cover art for a number of the previous issues of PROBE, and Kai had seen one of them and so decided to see if he could look up the club on his visit to SF. Small world.....

This issue also has the first four stories from last year's Nova short story competition. I will be publishing most of the rest of the stories from the final cut in the next three issues this year.

I've also used a couple of fillers from previous issues, so if you have any artwork you would like considered for publication, please mail it to me at

probe@sffsa.org.za

Gail

NOVA 2013 Results

The South African section of the competition is sponsored and judged by Arthur Goldstuck of WorldWideWorx (<http://www.worldwideworx.com>). The general selection judge was Lauren Beukes (<http://laurenbeukes.com>).

General Section

General Section:

Place	Title	Author
1st	Unearthly Creatures	Belinda Lewis
2nd	Seduction of Lady Porcinyrr	Ken Cockcroft
2nd	The Jacket	Piers Carey

South African Section:

Place	Title	Author
1st	Doppelganger	David Platt
2nd	Exploring Otherworld Earth	Alison Smith
3rd	Graveyard Shift	Sean Harvey

The following entries made the final cut:

General Section

Title	Author
At the Crossing of the Moons	Michelle Malan
The Last War	Julia Louw
Mozie 95004030	Sal Gabier
See You Tomorrow	Sal Gabier
The Silent Age	Morne Steenkamp
Silver	Morne Steenkamp
A Woman of Light and Steel	Carmelo Rafala

South African Section

Title	Author
Feather Child	Caitlin Montgomery
Foo Fighter Hux	George Rose
The Jackal Poacher	William Mabin

The Last Dreamseer	Andre Clarke
Tell Tail Signs	Andre Clarke
There but for the Grace	Jeannie McKeown
Unconditional Love	Ken Cockcroft

Lauren Beukes's comments on the top three stories:

1st Place: **Unearthly Creatures** - Everything that's good and true about science fiction. It's well crafted, beautifully written (and one of the few stories set in Africa), and best of all surprising - a story that says something about who we are by taking something we know and twisting it around for a new perspective.

Joint second:

The Seduction of Lady Porcinyrr - A delightfully engrossing and lasciviously gross tale of alien courtship that plays with convention (and some truly terrible puns) and absolutely delivers on its ending.

The Jacket - I loved how we're thrown headfirst into this deftly-written post-war dystopia. Crisp, smart, intriguing storytelling that trusts in the reader to fill in the blanks. It felt somehow incomplete - like it should be the first chapter in a bigger piece

Magazines Received

Opuntia. Dale Speirs P.O. Box 6830 Calgary, Alberta Canada, TP2 #ET

Via email:-

Newsletter of the Middle Tennessee SF Society (aka The Nashville SF Club)

Reece Moorhead reecejbm@gmail.com

Issue 134 December 2013

Issue 135 January 2014

Issue 136 February 2014

David Langford news@ansible.co.uk

Ansible 316 November 2013

Ansible 317 December 2013

Ansible 318 January 2014

Ansible 319 February 2014

Nova 2013 1st Place General Section

Unearthly Creatures by Belinda Lewis

Aida stared out the window of the train, her forehead pressed against the glass. She protectively cradled her satchel in her lap. Inside the hard plastic shell of her bag, swathed in buttery cloth, lay the real object of her affection; a battered orb telescope. Her right hand was just inside the satchel, tensely stroking its cool, familiar surface.

Aida's parents had given her the second-hand telescope for her ninth birthday. It was bulky and scuffed and opening its orb-like casing required a specific knack. It was the best present Aida ever received.

Years ago, the week before her sixteenth birthday, Aida had packed her telescope and sleeping bag, and as many scavenged protein packs and water purifying tablets as she could into her school backpack. She left the Home where she had lived since her parents died and caught the bullet train to Nakuru, followed by an overland bus to Kericho. She then hoisted her backpack and hiked into the Mau Forest using an outernet feed integrated into her haptic jacket to steer her towards a lonely clearing.

She spent the next 3 days rationing her food and walking the perimeter of her makeshift camp, carefully not thinking about her parents.

On the evening of her birthday she wrapped her sleeping bag around her shoulders, doused her fire and turned on her telescope. Her fingers did not tremble as she coaxed the sticky mechanism to life. The telescope unwhirled and spilled light and hundreds of tiny winged sensors into the night. They fluttered like so many moths until they were properly calibrated and then began to project a silvery correlated image of the sky.

She did not notice the stiffening of her muscles in the cold as she sat hunched over the screen exploring the constellations. As she tracked their progress across the expanse Aida realised that the night sky was not a blanket pressing us to the earth, but an ocean connecting us to the stars. The last four years of loneliness eased and she decided that a life without parents, without money, without friends, need not be a life without hope; in an infinite universe there are infinite possibilities. And one day she would travel to the stars. The next day she began her return to Nairobi.

In the hard years that followed if Aida's resolve had ever wavered, which it did not, the permanent sight of the Nairobi Skyhook on the city's horizon, would have given her strength. It followed her around the city, its multicoloured lights familiar and comforting. It watched her graduate from High School. It lit her way on the electronic walkways between her apartment and night classes and intermittent casual jobs. It was the view she displayed on the 'windows' of her tiny apartment cube nestled deep inside Block 32. Aida had spent many nights studying under their virtual glow. An undergraduate qualification in Planetary Geology, a postgraduate specialisation in Exomineralogy. Additional diplomas in Emergency Medicine, Mission Operations & Geological Engineering. She'd logged thousands of hours in VR Space simulators, including sims for defunct models and those created for foreign space programs. It had taken her three years of skimping in order to save for the professional grade implants she'd needed to get her vision to the required 20/200. After that she spent all of her extra money on training in the Gravity room of a high-end gym.

Despite all of her preparations Aida struggled to find the job she was looking for. Competition was tough, and she was contending against people with old money or connections, or many hours of recreational RL space travel already under their belts. She'd considered more prosaic off world jobs; part of the maintenance crew on one of the private Orbitals hovering above her city or support staff on one of the lunar stations. In more desperate moments she had even considered the life of a Reality TV Show contestant; part of a small group of hopelessly unprepared individuals sent off on one-way missions. These groups normally didn't make it an entire year before someone in the crew lost it, often violently.

Part of the problem she had to admit was, well, her.

Perfect on paper, she had attended many a stilted, awkward interview that had resulted in her getting passed over for someone else. She found it difficult to engage with people, her nervousness misinterpreted as coldness, her enthusiasm confused with mania.

But as her breath erratically fogged up the window and her hand lovingly traced the telescope inside her bag, Aida told herself that today's interview would be different. Firstly, this was the final stage in a long laborious application program, at which she'd already excelled; academic, practical and physical exams passed with flying colours. She'd even already fulfilled all of the sim time requirements for the mission's mining exploration vessel, which must give her an advantage as it was a fairly obscure model that not many people would have bothered with without a specific objective in mind.

Secondly, she'd brought the telescope with her. Her prized possession was generally only taken out when she could escape the city to view the stars. She knew it would bring her luck.

The train was near her stop. She removed her hand from her bag to operate the exit panel indicating her desire to disembark and giving permission for the city to deduct transport credits off her account. Her personal teardrop pod lowered from the main rail and unfurled a wing-like door. Aida stepped onto the walkway, and a network of glowing lines appeared, connecting her to her previous virtually or physically visited locations. She tapped the blue line with her toe, focusing the city guide on her desired destination. Aida had been in this part of the city often, New Riverside Drive was densely populated with the glinting edges of Nairobi's most successful electronics, exploration and mining companies' head offices. After a fifteen minute walk the guiding line encircled the building in front of her and pulsed red before disappearing completely. Aida looked up at the Mars One building, its measly 4 stories in a city of MegaBlocks an ostentatious display of wealth.

The building required both a palm and retinal scan to enter. It poured reams of EULA copy onto her glasses display and insisted she blink twice to accept. She entered the first set of doors, waited for the full body scan to complete and the decontamination air jets to wash her of any nasty microbes she might be harbouring. When the second set of doors opened, the route to her interviewer's office was again fed onto her glasses. Floor guides would no doubt ruin the old world charm of all the vat leather and chrome.

Aida took slow calming breaths and tried to school her face to 'pleasant/enthusiastic' as she made her way to the third floor. A second set of biometric scans and double access doors ensured that she knew the importance of all the staff on this level, including her interviewer. She made her way to the correct office and a sensor chimed as the door automatically opened for her.

Zaman Ming flashed a magnanimous smile as he keyed his holodisplays to ambient and stepped out from behind his desk. He was good looking, very well dressed and his handshake was the perfect blend of welcoming and firm. Aida disliked him immediately.

You dislike everyone immediately, she admonished herself and dropped her hand to her satchel for comfort.

“Aida, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you in person,” Zaman said, gesturing towards a set of high back chairs.

“You too” returned Aida, with what she hoped was a warmly professional smile, and sat down.

‘I wanted to meet you today, Aida, obviously to get to know you a little better, but also because I wanted to make sure you understand how important this mission is to the Mars One Corporation. You know that this is a special year for us, of course?’

Aida nodded. Even if she hadn’t spent many hours researching the company during her application process she would have been exposed to the ‘100 Year Birthday’ holo messaging currently displayed throughout the city.

“So to celebrate we want to do something equally special, but to achieve that we need your help, don’t we?” Zaman said with another ingratiating flash of teeth. “The last time the Demikhov Comet was anywhere close to the earth, relatively speaking of course,” more teeth, “was in the late 1950s and early 1960s. And according to our scientists there’s a distinct possibility that its current eccentricity might mean a trajectory that will soon take it out of our solar system altogether. This may be our last chance to make history!” Zaman looked at Aida expectantly.

“I’m really excited to be involved in this project Mr Ming, it’s my dream job really, ” said Aida.

“I’m glad to hear it. Some of the readings we’ve gathered aren’t quite like anything we’ve seen before and this will be our first extraterrestrial silicate mining operation. We want everything to go perfectly and avoid any... unpleasantness,” said Zaman. Aida nodded again. The last Mars One mission had ended in a PR nightmare when the sole crew member had broken after months of isolation and begged to be brought home over a video feed connection. The clip of the woman’s tearful entreaty, degenerating into violent self-harm as she was refused rescue had been leaked and released on multiple news feeds. Solo missions remained the norm though; every extra person on the vessel drove costs exponentially upward.

“Are you seeing anyone at the moment Ms Chausiku?” asked Zaman.

Aida was completely thrown, this was not one of the many questions she had carefully rehearsed answers to. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair “What? Umm, no, I’m not seeing anyone.”

“When did you last go out to dinner? Or what do you do for fun with friends?”

“Er... I work a lot. I’ve started another course in Advanced Navigation... I like to read...” Aida mumbled.

“Nothing wrong with being self-sufficient is there, Aida? You know that we won’t be able to send another vessel to your location for a minimum of 3 years, probably closer to 5. You’re not going to be missing anyone’s company during that time?”

Aida thought about the nameless sea of faces she saw every day, the almost unbearable sameness of her limited interactions with people in her Block, the meaningless social pleasantries at the gym. “I think I’ll be okay,” she said.

The rest of the interview was a blur, she couldn’t focus on Zaman’s voice over the strange roaring in her ears. She clutched her telescope as tightly as she could and concentrated on making monosyllabic responses when extended silences deemed them necessary.

When Zaman stood and shook her hand to release her, Aida walked out of his office so quickly that she tripped over her own feet and stumbled into the door lintel. Her cheeks burned with shame for something she couldn’t quite articulate. *I have the job. I*

have the job, have the job, havethejob, havethejob, havethejob. A mantra chanted with each step as she made her way back to the station. She couldn't stop shaking until she entered the privacy of her pod and sat down. She wrapped her arms around herself and cried. She'd won. She was going to the stars! In the end it wasn't her rigorous studying or relentless training. It wasn't even the extra confidence brought about by her contact with the telescope. In the end she'd got the job because she was good at being alone.

Aida lay on her bed, not sleeping; her luggage, her entire life packed into the allotted 25 kilograms, silhouetted against the glowing panels of her room. She'd spent so many hours studying the Mission Plan that every time she closed her eyes it was all she could see; its coloured timelines hovering beneath her eyelids, preventing sleep. Shortly before dawn her apartment chimed her wake up call. She got up, set her luggage to follow and initiated the cube's shutdown and exit protocol. Her hand trailed almost tenderly over the wall as she let the cube scan her palm for the last time. Her biometrics would no longer allow her access to her apartment. It had never really been home, but it had been hers.

She dismissed the eager city guide that swirled around her feet as she stepped out into the early morning air. The route to the Skyhook was one she knew by heart. The sun was just beginning to highlight the city when she arrived at Access Control. The laborious and bureaucratic security measures failed to dampen the almost painful excitement that had been building inside her. She synced her luggage with the loading dock drone and joined the queue to enter the elevator shaft, the Skyhook's tether connecting her to everything she'd been working towards clearly visible above her head. She found her seat inside and the harness extended from the ceiling, locking her in place.

After the last 8 weeks of frantic preparations the slow, pendulous trip into orbit was almost anticlimactic. She only made it an hour into the journey before she became bored, called up her mission notes and began to idly flick through them. When they arrived at Space Orbital II, the wait as the tether gradually maneuvered them into position was excruciating. Aida spent as little time as possible in the Space Orbital. She retrieved her luggage, and ran all the required external systems and safety checks before eagerly retiring to the quiet, comforting safety of her new ship. Hers. She moved around, trying to absorb it fully with deep breaths and the soft touches of fingertips. She did not find its starkly lit interior bare or confining. The acceleration couch, control hub, fabricator, laboratory, and tiny sleeping/living area seemed perfect. The carefully marked containers strapped against the walls a veritable treasure trove waiting to be lovingly explored.

Less than 18 hours after leaving earth, Aida was submerged in gravity gel as the ion engines of the Mars One Wonderer IV accelerated her into space.

Thirty four days later the ship woke her up. The lights seemed a lot harsher as she sat upright and vomited blue gel in an attempt to clear her lungs. She could barely keep herself upright by the time she'd managed to fully clean herself off and get dressed. She did the bare minimum in terms of system checks and made sure she was on the correct path towards the comet. She unpacked her telescope and placed it next to her tiny bed before she curled up and slept, and did not dream.

When she came to several hours later everything felt all right again. She made sure that the Mars One Wonderer IV was on track to match the Demikhov comet's speed and begin to follow in its wake. She would be in a stable shadow course in a few of hours. She began to familiarise herself with the ship's systems and inventory. Her first task was to map the entire comet using ground penetrating radar. She prepared 3 hexapod drones, syncing them to the control hub and arming them with radar modules. Each drone was assigned to

a specially designed airlock. These airlocks would enable her to transfer samples and make changes to the sensory arrays and toolkits of the drones once they had been launched from the vessel. Next she customised the visual and haptic interfaces of the Control Hub; the glasses, jacket and gloves that would allow her to explore the comet together with the drones. Once she had completed her set-up she prepared her first meal, scanning the barcode of the optimistically labeled 'Sukuma Wiki with Ugali' protein pack so that the ship could move it from food to waste inventory. All her supplies, from food and water to spare drone modules, were carefully monitored by the ship and an updated status feed sent to the Space Orbital II Control Room approximately every 12 days. Nominally this was so that Control could monitor her consumption and intervene if she got herself into trouble. In reality rescue would only be possible after Mars One had completed the development of the next gen Wanderer Vs designed for the excavation of the Demikhov Comet. Said trouble would also have to happen in such a way that she could survive for at least 34 days until help arrived. That was assuming that her investigation showed that mining the comet was commercially viable. She suspected that if it wasn't she would be on her own no matter what happened.

Aida easily fell into a regular schedule. When she woke up she would do an hour's calisthenics exercise, eat, put on the jacket, gloves and head display, and immerse herself in the explorations of her 'spider' drones, often switching from one unit to another. The 3D holomap of the comet that they were incrementally building cast a permanent glow from one of the central displays. The next sleep cycle she would exercise, eat, and examine the mineral samples the drones had brought back in her lab. She prepared and sent progress reports to Control, and so far her results had all been promising. The comet showed high levels of silicates, plus platinum, cobalt and gold reserves. Each sample went through a series of scanners before being fed into the fabricator. Mars One was still conducting cost benefit analyses on manufacture in situ vs returning the raw materials to earth. Aida's data would help them make that decision and finalise the Wanderer V design. Hours become days became weeks; time's passing marked only by a counter in the corner of the screen under the growing red light of the holographic comet.

Aida had been on the Wanderer for just over 10 months when she discovered the anomaly. Below the ferrous crust in quadrant 7813 something was emitting a complex, low frequency radio signal. She excitedly called a second spider drone to the location to assist with the investigation. Their careful multi-jointed probings began to reveal a highly regular shape twenty meters below the surface. Aida initiated a mining blasting sequence, the drones traversing geometric patterns across the comet's surface as they mapped and laid the charges. She was creating an initial report for Control when the drones signaled that they were ready for detonation. She watched the explosions from the distance the drones had deemed safe and then eagerly maneuvered them through the dust without waiting for the solar winds to blow it off to join the comet's tail. The exposed faceted surface gleamed. When her drones had established the perimeter of the geodesic crystalline object she keyed them to return to her ship. She would need to prepare a laser coring module for the next trip.

Aida slept restlessly that cycle. Part of it was excitement. But there was something else too, a tugging sensation just before she would lose or gain consciousness; like she was inexplicably moving towards the comet.

Her laser armed drone articulated itself into position, legs bracing and fusing for stability before it began to burn into the crystal. Aida unnecessarily monitored every moment of the automated process, her eyes never leaving the drone's camera feed. The spider extracted

a cylindrical core roughly half the length of its carapace, and moved across the crystalline surface to begin another burn. It repeated the process twice more before Aida began to steer the drone back to her ship.

She impatiently waited next to the airlock until the drone was through and locked into position. She pushed the key to release the core samples. Their surfaces were awash with hundreds of glinting grey green reflections under the LED lights. Inside the shielding of the ship the crystals were humming softly.

Laika didn't remember much about the before-time. Her mother and brothers and sisters had been there and there was warm and safe. Fur against fur. Belly content with milk. Then they were gone. And there was cold and there was hunger. She had to walk far, always far. The snow hurt her paws. She was tired, leaning against a wall when she was trapped. Tight choking around her neck. She tried to bite, to stop tight choking. But she was cold and tired and her paws hurt. There was rolling moving that made her sick. There was tiny cage. The SadSmokeMan had come to her in the cage. His voice was soft, not cold or choking and he gave her rich steak to eat. He said 'хорошая собака' always 'хорошая собака.' She licked SadSmokeMan's hands. Then there was safe again. Peace. Much to eat. The cold inside her paws turned to warm. SadSmokeMan sometime stroked her 'хорошая собака.' SadSmokeMan took her to ColdNoseBurnMan. ColdNoseBurnMan was 'судеть', 'пребывание', 'нет, нет, нет,' always 'нет, нет, нет.' His hands were cold and she did not lick them.

There was food. There was warm. But she must hold still while ColdNoseBurnMan trapped her inside many layers of strangeness. There were sharp needles that made blood. The cage was very small. Sometimes they trapped her and spun her until she was sick. When she tried to run it was 'нет, плохая собака!'

Once lying, crying, her nose burning with vomit, SadSmokeMan had come to see her. He had stroked her and whispered 'хорошая собака' and very briefly pressed his face against hers. Then he went away and did not come back.

ColdNoseBurnMan trapped her in layers with many straps and ties. Another rolling, moving took her away for a long time. The cage was small again, but so bright. There was a loudness louder than anything. And a squeezing that came from everywhere. She closed her eyes and cowered, she was 'хорошая собака,' she whimpered. She tried to remember her mother. The loudness faded. Dull roaring now inside her ears. The squeezing left, but it made her sick, again and again and again. It was hot. She was trapped many straps and ties, she tried to bite them. There was no water. The hot was burning. She tried to cover her eyes with her paws, but she could not. She tried to breath but she could not. The hot was burning. She tried to breath.

Then there was white, only white and quiet. Laika was not trapped anymore. She could hear a hum from far away. Her paws did not hurt, so she walked towards it.

Aida woke gasping. She stumbled into the control centre. хорошая собака she mimicked as well as she could, the syllables strange in her mouth. 'Good dog' returned the hub, 'Russian.' Aida did not know any Russian. She had never seen a dog outside of a sim, they were owned only by the obscenely rich. Aida had to sit down until she stopped shaking.

Aida spent the rest of the cycle examining the cores. They were semi-conductive. They emitted repeating patterns of electromagnetic radiation. Their crystalline structure was more complex than anything she had ever seen before outside of man-made objects. The

humming now felt like a living thing inside her head. But she did not eject the cores from her ship.

Élise's paws and head were tied. She could not claw the burning thing on her head. It sat between her eyes and had icy claws underneath her skin. She foamed and gnashed but could not bite the pain off. A great force pressed her against the floor of the cage. A roaring filled her ears. She closed her eyes and purred, trying to block out the sound and the pain and the fear.

And then everything was gone. There was a great purring from amongst the stars. It sounded like home. She ran towards it.

Aida had stopped examining the cores. She had stopped preparing reports to send back to Control. She spent her time pouring over the history of early space travel, not its human heroes, whose names she could already recite like a mantra, but the first living creatures sent into orbit. She could hear their voices in the humming from the pieces of comet aboard her ship. They spoke of suffering and fear. They spoke of loneliness and an end to loneliness. She caught flashes of fur and flicks of tails in the dark corners of her ship. Aida began to sleep with her telescope clutched in her arms.

Gordo did not understand what the bigpinkmonkeys wanted from him. He knew that when he pulled the blue lever he got fruit and sugar cubes. He was pulling the blue lever now, even though he was strapped so tight he could barely move. He pulled the blue lever and pulled the blue lever and pulled the blue lever and pulled the blue lever. But there was no treat. And the noise and the fear and the burning did not stop.

And then they did. And he realised how silly levers were. He decided to go find out where the warm sound was coming from instead.

Aida did not know if she was travelling in the shadow of a comet of ghosts or if the comet's complex crystal heart was simply storing and emitting experience like a giant supercomputer. *In an infinite universe there are infinite possibilities.*

It was also possible that she was still alone on the ship. It was possible that she had gone completely crazy. When she slept she could feel additional weight on the bed. Fur brushed against her skin. She sometimes thought she could hear purring. It all felt real and better than real.

The Demikhov Comet had travelled the solar system for tens of thousands of years. Something inside it both a beacon and an end to loneliness. It spoke to her, just like it spoke to earth's first space explorers. It spoke of family, of pack, of a warmth that Aida could barely remember, but that could be found beneath the cold light of the stars in the icy heart of a comet.

Aida knew that if the comet was destroyed the animals would die. Or they would die again. Their ghosts or their data or *something* pushed again into loneliness. Once again sacrificed for humanity and progress. Aida did not know if she was crazy, but she knew that she didn't want that to happen. That she wouldn't let that happen.

Aida prepared a series of reports for Control. They spoke of finding increasingly low yields of key mineral and metals, and would be transmitted over many months. The ship would maintain its shadow course for a similar period and then begin a catastrophic trajectory towards the asteroid belt. She could not maintain the illusion of a boring, but essentially fruitless mission forever, but she knew she could do it until it was too late for another vessel to try to complete her mission. She could do it until they would all be safe.

It took a while to override the airlock's fail-safe's. She entered the lock with the crystal cores strapped to her back. She didn't think that her new family was limited to the small samples she had with her, but it didn't seem right to leave them on the ship all the same. Aida clutched her telescope against her chest and stepped into vacuum. She did not falter or pause. She did not close her eyes.

The Other "Dune" *By Tony Davis*

Many science fiction and fantasy fans saw the movie adaptation of Frank Herbert's bestseller "Dune" when it came out in 1984. Directed by David Lynch, starring Kyle MacLachlan (as Paul Atreides), Virginia Madsen, Jurgen Prochnow, Max von Sydow, Patrick Stewart and an over-the-top performance by Sting (as Feyd Rautha), the two-hour plus film did reasonably well in theatres.

But in the fall of 2013 in Toronto during the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) I had the pleasure of viewing the documentary "Jodorowsky's Dune", directed by Frank Pavich. This version of **Dune** has been dubbed one of the greatest sf films never made. I have no argument with this claim. (The documentary premiered at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival to good reviews.)

I knew little about this adaptation but I was aware of some spectacular artwork produced for this version by Swiss artist H.R. (**Alien**) Giger. And Alejandro Jodorowsky I was familiar with from the Mexican film writer and director's **El Topo**, a surrealist western he'd made in 1970.

Jodorowsky secured the rights in 1975 to make **Dune** after film director Arthur P. Jacobs passed away. And the often larger-than-life Jodorowsky travelled to Europe to plan his adaptation after securing funding in Hollywood.

"Jodorowsky's Dune" faithfully chronicles the director's efforts, interviewing Jodorowsky himself and many of the other proposed film's artistic staff and actors. French graphic artist Jean Giraud (Möbius) worked on the storyboards, Pink Floyd was enlisted for part of the movie score. Jodorowsky brought on board Dan O'Bannon for the special effects (his comedic **Dark Star** came out in 1975). Mike Jagger was apparently willing to star as well. He also met with painter Salvador Dali and convinced him to play the role of the emperor (with minimal dialogue because Dali wanted a huge salary for appearing).

Jodorowsky tracked down Orson Welles in Paris and met with the noted actor in a Paris restaurant and offered him a role. Welles at this time was doing little acting and declined the offer to appear in his film, so Jodorowsky then walked into the restaurant's kitchen and made a deal with the head chef to serve Welles food on set. Then he went back to Welles and told him the job included his favourite chef. Welles agreed.

And the documentary goes on to include many similar delightful anecdotes about the

director's attempts to bring the film to life.

But it wasn't meant to be. Jodorowsky's pre-production budget had already capped \$2 million of a proposed \$9m movie budget. Upon presentation of the draft and storyboards to his Hollywood backers, he was turned down and Jodorowsky's **Dune** was never made.

When the film rights lapsed in 1982, Italian filmmaker Dino de Laurentiis picked the rights and two years later **Dune** came out with David Lynch directing and writing the screenplay.

In "Jodorowsky's Dune", Jodorowsky is asked whether he'd seen the movie **Dune**. Jodorowsky explains his trepidation of seeing the movie but finally did so. He looks up at the camera, his face expressive as always, and says..."and the movie...it was terrible!" and laughs gleefully.

The documentary ends with the speculation that maybe some other director will one day take up the challenge of making Jodorowsky's version of **Dune**.

Free SF books recorded for your listening pleasure - Gavin Kreuter

While, no doubt, many people are familiar with, and indulge in, downloading pirated movies, series, music, ebooks and audiobooks, there are many legal and free resources available for download. This article concentrates on one small example: SF audiobooks.

An audiobook is a story, read aloud and recorded, for a listener's pleasure. They may be played back by a variety of devices. My preference is copying the audiobook to a CD (usually in MP3 format) so that I may listen to it in my car. This is my personal method for countering road rage that is all too familiar to many Gauteng drivers.

I am currently listening to The Green Odyssey by Philip Jose Farmer. My previous pleasure was The Foundation series by Isaac Asimov (at least, the first three books in the trilogy, which now comprises 7).

The quality of audiobooks is highly variable; well, the free ones, anyway. Some books are read by amateurs that sound as if they haven't progressed beyond primary education. Others are full-blown, professional performances by, for example, the BBC. As their (BBC Radio) production of the Foundation series was, in fact, broadcast over the radio (any of our readers remember what that is?) the quality is outstanding.

So where do we find these treasures? Once again, many websites offer free SF audiobooks. For a beginner, I recommend LibriVox. Go to librivox.org, select Browse > Fantastic Fiction > Science Fiction, and choose amongst hundreds of books. Or [google/type wiki.librivox.org/index.php/LibriVox_Short_Science_Fiction_Index](http://google/type/wiki.librivox.org/index.php/LibriVox_Short_Science_Fiction_Index) for a convenient catalogue of audiobooks with a duration of 70 minutes or less.

Nova 2013 1st Place South African Section

Doppelganger by David Platt

I

Midnight: middle of nowhere. Rain-on-roof thud-thud-thud drowns out the cries.
Van Staden, hours ago: "Do it quiet, out of town – traditional. You and three other guys."
Here we are.
That's me, Kirkhof, Botha (that's Gary not Gerhard), the rookie, call him China, and the black – Lukhanyo Mphila, long-time target. Struggle leader, revolutionary, academic (dirty word) – academically strapped to a chair now.
Blacks never learn; struggle's over since Mandela went and they converted Robben to government security/research compound.
Malan broadcast, yesterday: "It's 2023, centenary of ANC name" = make a statement.
Black kiddies, this is where it gets you: strapped to a chair in an empty room in nowhere.
Well, Paternoster. Same thing – you'd think they'd never heard of Coding in this place. All natural gene structure, no augments. Living like bloody blacks.
Anyway: (dirty) business time.

Chased him for months; promotion material.
One of two known Struggle leaders. The young one, charisma machine, apparently.
Not too charismatic with his face leaking. Mouth so swollen by now he couldn't talk if he wanted to – China went one step too far hitting him with debilitator-shot early, cut off muscle reception, sealed his fate. Rookie error – literally. Now we don't get intel – just the impact of a clandestine death.
Got him through infiltration, in a fucking hole in Mozambique. – untested biotech to lift classified MK intel. Traced a death threat on Security Minister Burger.
Me + van Staden: "Cheese"; top photo op for higher-ups.
Hero cop. Apartheid dog. I like both names equally.
Over now though, save the Wurm.
Rookie clips the crystal biosphere to Mphila's neck, miniature claws cutting miniature holds into flesh. Press down. Hiss. Wurm burrows his way from synthetic plasma sludge to bloodstream. Convulsions.
Involuntary vomit, shits his pants, not pretty, Rookie leaps away. Botha laughs – one of the meanest motherfuckers I've ever met. Good cop; better assassin.
Wurmpie writhes under the skin.
Couple years ago some UP journo poes scores video evvy of SAPS using a Wurm on some Coloured. Old lady, too; some Coon's grannie, shame man. It's messy, she struggles; guy gets money shot of her face, visible slither under the skin. Viral, obviously. Political mess, international clamp down. Fucking liberals. Faded after a few months but Wurmpie stayed in his hole more often than not since then.
Intimate this time, though. No observers. Wurm's useful to fuck with any chop-shop geneCoding before the end, reveal any suspicious augments. Just so we know what's been at play.
Sad...in a way. Months – years – of work tracking this black down and its over in hours.

But sometimes a major death is as useful as information.

'Een' – this one's codename; There is a 'Twee' – old man, technically big boss of the Struggle effort. No personal ID though – multiple possibles – and no location; judging by the state of 'Een' here staying that way.

This one's making shockwaves in world news tomorrow.

Rookie's hands shake so much trying to coax the biotech out Botha steps in: "jirre vok, meisiekind."

Hands out, crystal on skin when this big shiver, epidermal earthquake, goes through Mphila. Face melts, morphs, colour drains, one eye goes sky blue from hazel in a sec and back again. Definitely some Coding buried in there – but what?

Botha jumps, scared shitless, drops the sphere; ten grand SMASH on the damp cement. Klap him but keep eyes on Mphila. What the fuck was that? This oke's on some serious Coding – professional, not that spaza kak. Keep it cool but this is big.

More convulsions, blood from ears, nose; it's over. Fuckshit – waste. Wurm can't disrupt Coding if the tissue's dead.

Arm falls limp, A6 pad tumbles from pocket – told this thick-as-pigshit bunch of rejects to bloody search him. Mostly smudged, seems to be a time written at the top. Below it, read it aloud:

"Nat"

Wurm bursts through a cheek and dies, slowly disintegrating on the floor out of its biosphere like some whimpering dog. Rookie chunders.

"Nat". Way it's written, like an appointment = name, not adjective. Unexpected – follow up. Keep it quiet, others haven't picked that up. Again, promotion material. That crazy Coding, too. What the hell was that?

Dump him – off-road, beach dune. Fishing boats will see him coming in mid-morning, news by noon, big shit by evening. State Security Summit in 2 days – good timing.

Weird, but it's a bleak job when you hit the ones you respect.

This hero's a dead black but somehow Kirkhof's a white man; hard to fathom.

I give these blacks credit; remind me of Boer guerrillas. History repeats itself, no? Bloody poetic.

I check him; this corpse one of the last great black intellectuals left for us to fight – we're fighting biotech now, not people anymore. Shades of Cradock, '85; almost 40 years ago – me just a pikkie then.

He should've taken exile.

II

Major news as expected – bigger than expected; "renewed pressure" big. International splash and it's not even 3pm.

Not a problem. Mining and biotech big business down SA way = UN decrees but no government wants to dirty hands being wiped clean by cheap labour and lush ground for testing military tech. Apartheid is forever, hippies.

Cheap Chinese imports make it all pointless in any case. First world didn't reckon on Jintao wanting a way into Africa.

"Nat" – not much; feed it into various snitch/junkie/geneCoder sources: comes out clean.

Next step: tail Vic Matlaba (bring him in, rough him up, let him go squealing).

Vic's a parolee Coder, supplies chop-shop Code to gullible Afros looking for work-related advantages. In his pomp an MK supplier – moves a lot of shit for a lot of people. If Vic

hasn't worked for you, you're small fish. Slips us info when it's unlikely to get him killed. Doesn't slip us any this time = make it something big, could get him killed. Doesn't Code too much anymore, but tips us off. Good system, actually – we monitor the illegal stuff, pick up experiments and refine for white use.

Whites: smooth augments, übermenschen; natives: scrounge for anything they can get. Increase Godly divide between races. Eugenics in reverse.

“Baas, Coded baas.” “Not tired – I work for days.” “Sense upgrade, all clean.” – Ja right.

Tail to downtown Phillipi, Halaal butcher; in through back door.

Radio in. Brass wants us to use the Mindweb. SAPS linked through hive-mind connection augment – but analogue tech less chancy.

10 minutes. A smoke and call from wife Elana re: daughter Margie's farewell dinner tonight – “Be home early so you don't look like a bloody homeless in front of his parents.” His = Marc, boyfriend. Englishman. Liberal parents – let it go, Margie's happy. So happy she's skipping off to England with him to study.

Scope the area – you'd hardly know this is the future we're living in. Mere hints of biotech overwhelmed by dusty lower-income dwellings – hasn't changed in 5 decades. Stray quadrupeds of various species: except now there's the occasionally amateur fucked-up Coded specimen (dogs with wires trailing pathetically on the ground from jacked-up internal organs or thick technological experiments siphoning off healthy cells from entries between emaciated ribs).

Beggar sidles up next to the car, hands out prayer-style – tell him to piss off. Persistent fucker – show I'm carrying, he scurries off, dragging one leg like its lame but bulging in pantleg = some hackjob gone wrong. See what happens when you try to make yourself a white man's equal?

Back-up arrives. Storm the gate.

Inside: chop-shop – Code central. Blank cement walls, floor; kinda place that's moved in a hurry. Doors and darkies both kicked down; chaos.

BIG score: operating beds (no current patients – pity), excess Codes (soft- and hardware), accommodation rooms even – inside, natives hooked on pleasureSIMs.

Pull them out – watch them chunder as reality assaults junkie dreamlife.

Tear up main warehouse space (no sign of Vic, slippery bastard); move to accommodation corridor and through to half-hidden back/vault-type area. Big blast doors, military-grade.

Sexy Coded chick sitting outside, blissed-out addict look. Right arm = segmented tendrils snake their way limply to the ground, erupt from sick pus-lined sutures.

Botha, brute force, piece raised: “Bitch, get the fuck up!”

Me, cool: “She's a squid – see the holes in the door?”

Botha doesn't see, direct him. Insert tentacle-limb-key-things into neon compartment in centre of reinforced, half-metre-thick steel. Electric shockwave – she's too addled to notice – squiddies go taut, door hisses, beeps, unlocks. Squid augments: Coded to one 'key' – arsehole leaves her right here in the open. Muppets.

Vault contents: 1x miniature safe, guessing profit inside; 4x piles of hardware, Code-ready and waiting for human augmentees, pilfered from government facilities and med transports – these blacks abusing decent government-issue medicine for profit: political fuel for Pres. Malan.

1x software console, various Code logs lying on top – numbers indicate official-issue classified serials, highest government level. Crazy black market leaks. Holy shit.

Also +-100x articles state-issued weaponry, also serialized – official not knock-offs. Advanced. Some biotech even. Jesus Christ. State biotech is on lockdown and coded to official DNA sig – this is conspiracy/infiltration shit. Take it to the boss.

Me, Weblink to van Staden 10 minutes later, breathless: "...warehouse size, definitely some hub of...something – I want to start digging."

Van Staden, curt – smoker-rough: "Who's with you?"

"Gary Botha, Rookie, couple of your boys – Powell and Oosthuizen."

"Good, keep it quiet. You sure it's a Halaal slaghuis in Philippi?"

"I'm sure that's what it says on the doors. I'm even surer than that's not what this is.

Scrawny, two-legged black cows I don't want near my chips if it is."

"That's enough. Tell your boys if they want pensions to bury this." Bury it? Ignore, press on.

"I don't know how this is staying buried, sir. Biggest stash of government firepower I've ever seen outside HQ. On top of Spaza Coding paradise and siphoned SIM tech – pleasure suites; who knows what they're dreaming about hooked on that kak.

Could be planning some MK fantasy. Get down here. Army of press, pronto."

"How many operators?" Surprising – still no reaction to biotech seizure. Or press opportunity.

"4 or 5 staff, held for now. Possibly some minor interrogation from the Rookie earlier. What about the hardware?"

"Listen to me closely, De Wet. Fuck up the natives, whatever needs doing – get some anger out of the system, go wild, I don't care. But no arrests, no one comes in."

Um, WHAT? There's more: "And leave the hardware."

Speechless.

Spit out: "Sir? When you say 'leave' it?"

"You heard me, Lieutenant Wentzel." My surname this time in that 'fuck-you-its-final' tone they teach you when you make captain. "This is from higher than me. I'm not asking, and when I don't ask, you sure as shit don't ask. Report to me when you've had your fun."

Link disconnected.

Take it in.

Nearest black – gun right in his face, let him taste it.

"You lucky fucking bastard." Break his nose – butt over the bridge. Spurt like a Jackson Pollock on the grimy cement.

Haul him back up, out on a limb with the only thing I have left: "Who's 'Nat'? Give me something and you live."

Laugh punctuated by thick gob of blood: "Fuck you, Dutchman. Your boss says leave us alone."

"My boss says leave your shithole alone." Hit him again, crack the orbital bone. He resurfaces, droopy-eyed. "He didn't say a fucking thing about you." Flick serial clip on the barrel, piece lights up neon and scans police-ID implant in my hand. Cocks itself and whirs into readiness.

His eyes widen. Hold it for another second. Blast the ground at his knees – explodes cement chunks across his front.

"She's some chick, I don't know. Mphila's girlfriend or something!"

"Lukhanyo Mphila?"

"Ja. Or she was, before..."

Cut him off, spare the dramatics: "Is she ANC? MK? Working for who?"

"No she's a white chick. That's it, all I know!" Shakes his head – blood on my shoes.

Ah, Lukey-boy – fighting the good fight all night long.

Push on, evidence of a link to Mphila: “She ever show up here?”

“Ja, sometimes. She-.” Stops too late – damage done.

“So this was Mphila’s op? She was here with him, yes?”

He’s quiet now. It’s over.

Turn to Botha: “I want to know exactly what Lukhanyo Mphila’s connection to this place is. Have some fun with them but leave the place untouched and no deaths, accidental or otherwise.”

Confusion on his face, tell him: “From the captain. Behave.”

III

Van Staden’s late 60s but still a beast. Even talking slowly he’s red-faced and veined and involuntarily crushing his hands into fists – side-effects from some obsolete brute-strength, physical efficiency Coding back when SAPS was taking volunteers.

Me, pissed – in his office, door closed (soundproofing door too): “Who was that order from?”

“No one.”

“Bullshit, no one.”

“Might as well be – came from the shadows. You called me, I scoped it on the Sat – big red ‘fuck you’ all over. That doesn’t show up on my system unless it’s someone with bigger balls than me.”

“Still bullshit. That was one of the best-stocked Code merchants I’ve ever bloody seen. And more firepower in that vault than this station, probably. If I were command, I’d be fucking worried. Hell, I AM fucking worried. And even more that I can’t do my job. How does some Code shebeen with MK connections stay off-radar?”

Calm down – downside of our magnificent bureaucracy that keeps the blacks in their place = no point getting pissed. Pick up WP Rugby coaster and twirl it. Feel too much like snapping it and hurling it at him so put it straight back down.

Van Staden: “I’m sorry De Wet. Keep an eye on the place if you want. If I get anything good you can actually chase I’ll keep you in the know.” Nod thanks. “But your immediate future is elsewhere.” Cancel mid-nod.

“I’m busy chasing a lead, Sir.” Withhold ‘Nat’, nature of the lead.

“For the next two days you’re personal detail for Security Minister Burger.”

Kill-me-boring but promote-me-opportune so wait for the rest.

Continued: “He’s arriving for State Security Council happening on Robben in 2 days.

Delegate as you like, only requisite is travel to and from his home if he goes out and accompanying him to the island. He’s been impressed with your handling of Mphila and MK cells, asked for you personally. You’re a smart man, De Wet. Take the opportunity.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No you fucking don’t. Report to him tomorrow morning. Now go home, your wife’s already told me to send you off early.”

Shower, shit, shave and down to dinner with: family, extended family, his family. Joy unconfined. It’s the Margie Museum – every picture, every award, every everything laid out just so by Elana, looking still-sexy with subtle augments e.g. fat manager, pheromone-glands – classy internal stuff. Compare Marc’s old man with ostentatious jumper lead/electrical bypass circuits wired into his arms and chest – part of his business strategy: used cars (“The Auto Whisperer” – annoying TV ads).

Marc's been drafted to air force at Valhalla but like a true liberal he's skipping the country before his term. Open secret in the family. Disrespectful – dangling it in my face just because I said I wouldn't snitch. Margie's happy – hold onto that.

She and I = father-daughter dynamite, always been close. Top marks, private school (don't ask how I pay for it) – can't believe she's up, up and away to England but hey, more money there than here in 'global relations'.

Lucky I'm in a position to get her a Visa – most folks stuck within borders without proper official connections – no one wants SA tourism, except China if that's your idea of a holiday.

Civilized dinner, long. Part of Elana's job in international relations = subscribing to fashion of Chinese cuisine, 'spirit of international partnership'. Szechuan chicken that tastes like it's crossed the road and lost.

Machine-gun headache plaguing me, as it has late in the day for +-two months now. Fluctuating vision, muscle spasm, all sorts of shit – put it down to intensity of the job. Stay out of la-di-da conversation – jirre Englishmen can talk shit. These ones taken in for questioning several times – liberal ties.

No evidence but there's a dossier that I let slip I've seen every now and again when conversation gets too bloody friendly. Leave it unsaid tonight, though. Margie's had her own brushes with dangerous kinds of thinking, subversive 'pan-Africanism'. Another reason to be suspicious of this lot – just when we've got her back on track and thinking like a decent white girl.

Mercy at 11.15 – Margie calls it a night, they piss off.

Collapse into armchair, await nightcap Margie mixes special for me every evening since she was 12. How a 12-year-old gets the right measure of scotch to water – beyond me. Sip, think.

"Are you going to miss me, sweetheart?"

"Of course, dad." That smile. Even more annoying she'll be smiling it at that little *moffie* Marc 10000 k's away.

Watch her as she leaves. Hardly said a word to her these last few months she's been so busy with finals, extra-curricular shit I tell her to knock off but she loves too much to listen. Now she's gone. Feeling up after the nightcap. Kiss for Elana, use goodwill for a 'lovely dinner' to score points enough to go for some late-night 'sleuthing'.

Long St. chaotic-vibrant.

Enter *Bird's Nest*, whites-only bar/dodgy restaurant. Past confederate and Boer flags and assorted SA sporting memorabilia (domestic teams as long as we're still banned) to formica tables haphazardly arranged at the back against tasteful stone wall. Flash the badge – escorted straight up service stairway. 3rd floor.

Dark hookers, light clientele (cops aplenty). Hidden gem, this.

T's waiting. That or I'm lucky.

She's gorgeous - kind of gorgeous makes guys forget she's fucking them for their wallets. It's the sadness in her look; wilted rose that men are crazy to pollenate.

She's Coded, of course. You're inside and some surgical mechanism slices you downstairs (chemically soothed immediately, of course) – nerve endings 'align', she syncs bodies, feels your level of pleasure – comes when you do, and every time. Makes the experience unique, individual, like you're making her feel something special – expensive. When it gets good, occasional ripples under her skin like the surface of a lake in late summer – creeps some out but turns me on because it looks just like that damn Wurm. This job fucks you up. She's just internal though – no credit card slot like most whores.

T = Een's cousin. Or sister, whatever the blacks call their relations. Unaware of my role in the whole 'Mphila' thing. Or hers – Intel ID'd her as a possible in to him, I 'cultivated' our relationship. So what if I'm still coming back after the job is done?

It's bliss as always. Elana would never go for sex augments – says she feels 'old' now Margie's off. Spice up home life? Wouldn't be home life I suppose, I'd just need something else to escape – stick with T.

After: "Feeling a bit pleased with yourself, are you?" Perceptive.

"You can tell?"

"I know you, De Wet."

"We're all feeling good after the whole Mphila thing." Imperceptible drop, breath knocked out of her. She's well-trained – if I hadn't been looking I wouldn't have seen. Time to combine pleasure and business.

"You...you did that?"

"Not personally. But a victory for law and order is a victory for South Africa, isn't that so?"

Nothing. Change subject.

"Your Coding – where's it from? It's not government issue."

"You going to arrest me?"

"That would have consequences for my quality of life my dear." A smile, good – press. "I'm just asking. We all know MK's got its hands in some Coded pies, I'm looking."

"What do you want, officer?" Pissed off – back to rank. "You want my Code cert?"

"What would that prove? We both know that can be faked as easily as it can be bought."

Pause. Let it simmer.

"I got Coded in Eastern Cape – out of your jurisdiction."

"This isn't TV, it's South Africa my girl, everywhere's my jurisdiction. Heard anything about MK stockpiles? Code piracy? You'd tell me if you did?" Still that stony silence.

"You're smart, that's why I come here. Plenty of pretty girls out there but you're sharp enough to know the way things work."

She's biting her lip. Anger or fear? Both.

Jacket on – leave her trembling.

At the door turn back to her: "One more thing. Does the name 'Nat' mean anything to you?"

Not even a shiver. Been trained so hard not to feel I'll do better to come back next time.

"Next time I come back you'll have something for me, ne?"

IV

8am: Minister Burger's state-furnished Cape-Dutch home for his Cape Town stay.

Knock back an espresso at a corner café and walk through leafy gated suburb up to the house.

Bodyguard central – Coded 'firearms' – weaponized limbs – I'm guessing extrasensory upgrades too.

Wait for him to come down from a sat call with Pres. Malan, stand around in the sitting room, check out view of the garden – immaculate.

Stroll over to glass-topped scale-display of Robben Island. Two models: one prison years, another modern-day. Compounds, outposts, gleaming steel and wire replacing dilapidated stone and iron apartheid-chic. Only untouched building = asylum to one side, still max-sec prison for some of ANC's leaders. Maybe Mphila's lucky he escaped that.

Dark wooden desk, varnished pristine + set parallel to gaping windows. Envelope atop – leave it alone because this is Burger's pad or take a peek because, fuck it, I'm still police no matter whose house I'm in?

Police brain cells win out despite being outnumbered. Walk over. PW himself would be proud of the shade of white I assume I've just gone: creased yellow paper envelope, bound and sealed. Big black marker scrawl across top: NAT. Dolly-in + zoom-out.

Takes a minute to adjust – underneath, lower-case: “BL – Hard.”

It could be any ‘Nat’ – person or abbreviation/codename/whatever – this is a Minister's home. Still, do your job – check inside.

“Please take a seat.” Shit. Freeze-frame.

8:35 – Burger in through the outside door, must have taken a detour.

“Lieutenant Wentzel, I presume.”

“Yes, sir.” Keep it curt, professional around the suits. Mostly up-jumped *plaasboer* with an inflated sense of when to take offense. Move to sit down where he indicates. He strolls to the desk, scoops up the envelope – sits it under his arm.

Big guy, bigger than he looks in his photos. Walks like he's just woken up in someone else's house, cautious/calm. Doesn't match the lines and sunken eyes – hard being the presumptive Head of State of the most hated country on God's Earth.

No visible augments. Brain efficiency mandatory Code for govt. employees – extra 3% brain function. Insert joke here. He's silent, waits to let me do the talking. Don't trust that.

“Should we run through procedure for tomorrow, Minister?”

“No, thank you. Send it to me and I'll look it over.”

“We don't send that kind of information, Sir. Too easy for undesirables to get hold of.”

“I see. Well I wouldn't want to disrupt the way you boys do business.”

Brief him. He's more concerned with the contours of his knuckles and the backs of his hands than with security detail. Guess I'd be too if I got these kinds of briefings every time I left home. His brainchild to restore Robben and turn it into security central – probably designed every step of the process I'm describing to him.

When I get to the end: “Is that all in order, Sir?”

“Lieutenant, I trust you, honestly. Stay close and boss me around as you like and I think we'll get to the end of the conference without an incident.” Politician's smile.

Again, silence. Again, break it.

“Sir, I wanted to say thank you for requesting me for this detail. I'm grateful.” Am I?

“You've done great work recently, lieutenant. I like to meet promising members of our forces. Let's me know who I can trust.”

“I'm sorry for the, uh, fiasco with the Mphila incident.”

“Nonsense, lieutenant. You did exactly as you were meant to do.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“It is I who should be thanking you; you've done me a greater service than you know.”

Now we're back to small-talk.

“How old are you, lieutenant?”

“44.”

“Then you don't remember the 80s? The state of emergency? Mandela's death? The Blackout?”

“Some of it, sir. I was 10 when FW declared Blackout. I watched that speech on TV like everyone else. My parents never let us listen to music, watch TV, play games that weren't made-in-SA before that so I didn't really see it like other kids did.”

“Did you wonder what it was like for the blacks? That speech? Knowing the boers were finally planting the apartheid flag in the eternal earth?”

Where are we going with this? Hypotheticals and politicians, not my favourite situation.

“I can't say I did, Sir. Should I have?”

Again, that pause like he might have forgotten how to speak and I've just heard the last thing he'll ever say. "No. Why would you?" Smiles now. "But it's worth considering. One must know how the other side thinks."

Had enough of this conversation. Wait for him to pick it up.

No need, he stands and smoothes out his suit jacket, regards it like his hands earlier – like it's a newfound luxury he's keen to preserve in all its newness. Taps his head in the same staccato movement.

"My secretary tells me I have an appointment upstairs with President Malan. We've put a most vital dialogue on hold for this introduction. I'm pleased to have met you. Feel free to stay awhile."

A firm handshake, politician's smile, he exits with that envelope.

Check layout, room to room. More like a hotel than a house – luxury rooms displaying black-and-white stills of various eras and owners. Boring. What I want is that envelope.

Park across the street. Today was put away for introduction to Burger in any case so I'm unlikely to have any kind of real work to take care of.

Break out the cigs and flex my police-mandatory stamina augment. One of several SAPS-standard chemical implants designed to keep us operating more efficiently than the natives. Helps focus, perception. Like coke on steroids with no come-down.

That envelope – I need it.

Either it has nothing to do with my 'Nat' and I'm cheerfully lubing myself up for potential fuckery by invasively seizing a government minister's property while he's out on Robben Island – invariably what I'll set Botha to do – or it has everything to do with it and holy shit. Wouldn't put it past the paranoids in security ministry to devise some kind of recruitment test like this: what do you do if you suspect a senior official – test of individual initiative.

Nothing, though. Burger stays inside and neither an arrival or departure – out front at least.

9:51pm – call from home: Margie wanting to know if she can mix me my nightly or if I'm going to be home late. Daddy's little angel. Tell her 'no idea' but leave it out anyway. She seems disappointed – leaving tomorrow so I guess I am too. Would have been nice to relax together with a last drink before the trip but she'll just be frantically packing with Elana in any case.

Feeling my usual late evening sickness coming on. Headache, extreme tiredness, stomach churning. Flex my stamina augment – just wakes me up more sharply to discomfort.

Maybe I should see someone. Check my Code. Sometimes when Code outdates or some conflicting programme gets aggressive with symbiotic biotech it can get complicated. So they tell me.

INT. CAR – WHOLE FUCKING NIGHT

Lieutenant Wentzel writhes in the back like a stuck fucking pig, kicks open door several times and hurls into street, wipes the chunder on his sleeve like some glue-sniffing homeless.

Years later: Early morning sunlight turning my head into pulp.

Call in – Mindweb: not coming in today.

Grip steering wheel and trundle out into road.

Lose track of time – numbers on dashboard stop making sense.

Vision blurs – road names go flashing by without a hint of recognition.

Lush green gives way to brown, dirty brick walls and dusty unpaved roads – where am I?

Undulations across the skin of my hands that barely cling to the wheel enough to keep it from hurtling like a ship's off to infinity on one side. Or is that my malfunctioning brainstem?

Keep going until gag reflex grabs me by the throat and yanks me over to the rubble-strewn roadside. Door won't budge – maybe I've got the wrong handle – give it a major push and go falling out into billows of polluted industrial runoff.

Lie there for...

Who needs to move? Where did I need to be anyway?

A motor's whine.

Voices. Several, different races.

"Get him up."

"Yoh, he looks like shit, hey."

"Shut up and put him in the car."

Not in my head then. Lifted off the ground, propped against car roof.

"White people can't even trust their own government."

"Do you blame us?"

"Sleeping outside a minister's house – hayibo."

Laughter. Raise my head to get a look – flops over to the other side.

"At this stage one night won't make a difference, thank God. It won't right?"

"Nah, he's too far along."

"Can we please just put him in the damn car and get the fuck out of here? He's got places to be."

That's thoughtful of them.

V

Sun's weak, going down soon. Make it 5/5.30.

Feel great – frankly much more worrying than if I'd still been ill.

Who the hell did what the hell to me?

Scope surroundings: make it somewhere in Retreat – can't have gone much further from Constantia in any case.

Across the street some two-face punk is dragging one over-coded super-arm nearly along the ground. Looks 20 but make him at least 30 to have been one of that first wave of hopeful morons to attempt a full-pigment augment. Those that got anywhere near persevering through the long and painful process looked more like clowns than people.

Most abandoned it halfway. No one goes for it now. This poor kid: spread-out facial mottling ugly as fuck – you'll never be a white man, boy.

Rumour: government testers have the biotech cooked and ready but withheld for later date.

Potential for full infiltration of black elite, total transformation. Til then, I'm in work.

Debate checking this kid out for *dompas* infractions but leave it, he didn't see anything.

Several missed calls: all Elana. Check actual time: after 5. Shit.

Get Elana dialled-up and start planning excuses as I pull away and speed towards home.

DF Malan Airport: push through the throng at domestic terminal to get to international.

Much quieter, obviously. Government airlines mostly official purposes so really we're the only people here just about except the odd Latin American or Chinese or anyone from a country stupid/brazen enough to maintain diplomatic ties.

Took full force of womanly rage earlier – fair enough, I said. Toned down because Elana doesn't want Margie to leave on a bum note. Take that with open arms.

Me getting emotional here.

Daddy's little girl isn't so little anymore. *No, she's old enough to skip off to bloody England with this poof – probably never coming back.* Shut up, inner monologue. She's coming back. She's your daughter after all, isn't she?

Thought of telling her no – Security Minister Burger might not look so fondly on me for a promotion once he hears my baby girl's pissing off first chance she gets. Then again, he probably already knows. In the end we love our kids despite ourselves.

Mill around, kill time as the plane is readied.

8.20 – bureaucrat in pinstripes ushers us towards the gate. They let you know when you're flying government service.

Shake Marc's hand. Go in a little hard, eye contact that says she's-going-to-be-safe-and-sound-or-you-sure-as-pigshit-won't-be. Surprising smile back from the little shit. Maybe he does have a spine after all. Even so, don't like how chipper he is to be off. Stand in silence opposite her for as long as she'll let the moment linger.

"Don't look so sad, dad."

"You sure you don't feel like staying?"

That look. "Come on, dad."

"Okay. Just...who's going to make me a drink every night?"

"Maybe you don't need all those drinks anymore. I think you'll be fine."

Bureaucrat-boy standing tapping his right foot. All right, all right already.

"I love you."

"I love you too dad." Suddenly it's all out in the open, close to tears (both of us). "Just try to take care of yourself. Don't get in too deep."

"Not a chance."

Punch on the arm and a laugh as she prances off with him. Soon they're through the gate, on the plane, in the sky, gone.

Get home and sure as hell there's a glass of whisky waiting on the kitchen counter.

Note: *Be careful. Love Margie.*

Call at 11.40: disturbance at *Sick Dick's* off Roeland Street. Some out-of-hand activity – mixed-race presence, possible undesirable gathering, picked by local informers. 'Trouble brewing', Gary Larson-style. To me: Get down, sort it out.

Noise audible from way down Roeland. Park up close, siren on.

Red and blue flashes and it's like turning on a light in a room full of roaches – everyone hides themselves away in five seconds flat. Nothing to see here, officer.

Flash badge to 'roid-monster bouncer.

Inside, hug grimy wall round to bathroom corner. Observe.

Place packed, definitely mixed-race. Mindweb – ping station for raid-style reinforcements, wait it out.

Picture of Lukhanyo Mphila splashed across far-side wall. No respect for the work I do, these youngsters.

Music some atonal techno shit – probably banned considering crowd make-up.

Writhing, sweating, yelling mass on dance floor punctuated tastefully by gatherings of two and three against the wall or even in the midst of revel. Future miscreants with death wishes making big plans for 'civil disobedience', disguising their meetings in the crowd. Tonight's going to be fun.

Maybe it's a good thing Margie's away from this shit. Crowd she hangs out with (or used to) – this is their scene. Could have been my kid in and amongst this filth.

Sometimes I don't know how we got her back.

Watch the huddled groups planning, the arrivals and exits – case for anything useful before cavalry arrive which should be any minute.

Scan through crowd. Hard to tell where one person ends and the next begins but next to the ubiquitous Vic Matlaba...

Brain shuts off momentarily – reboot to reset the problem. Check again.

Hoodie, centre-floor, hand over his mouth. Dim light, too – every condition making it impossible to tell but that one flash. Another strobe of white light.

This time eye meets eye. No steel, not like this morning – just panic.

He disappears into bodies just as double doors fly open and cavalry ride in. Bounce off the wall – straight into mix.

Push aside obstacles, mostly people.

Gunshots near the door. Probably the Rookie. Arsehole. Screams now drowning out music – musical improvement in my books.

Arm on my bicep, pulling me round. Fist connects with face and flash my badge so he knows not to hit back.

Lost sight but only one non-bathroom door – through back into service area, no need to bust down doors busted already.

Already way into distance – fast for a 50-something desk-hugger.

Right direction for me, though – slight detour to the car but shoot off down anonymous side street as soon as engine ignites.

Bearing down on him. He can't keep this up.

Drift right to swerve left and cut him off but this black Ranger jumps the curb from out of shadow and flies at me fast enough to take off my side view mirror even though I swerve into the road he just shot out from. Screeching halt. Burger/Whoever way off me now.

Leave the Ranger and make for the house, catch him before he's home.

Wheels on the road but mind everywhere. Another either or: either I'm going completely insane or the world is. Tends to be the world. You learn that in this job – when things seem too unbelievable to be true, they generally are. It's when they're normal you worry.

Skid-stop outside. March up to square-jawed boytjie, who looks oddly familiar, sitting guard at gate. Mental note that if there's one guard visible make it at least 2 that aren't.

"I need to speak to Minister Burger."

"I'm afraid the minister is asleep, lieutenant" Indicating top floor windows, all dark.

"How do you know he's at home?"

Doesn't answer. Looks like I just won the World's Dumbest Question Award.

"Well?"

"He hasn't left, lieutenant. I've been here the since 5pm and I can tell you there's been no one in or out."

"Let me in."

Another precious minute of stalling before he just lets me in to cause whatever shit I need to cause. Hear him radioing in to someone on the inside.

Bright light silhouettes me, whites out garden. Turn to face into headlights. High-tail it back to Boytjie.

"Who's in this car?"

"No one, lieutenant. A driver."

Indicate for rolled down windows. Driver inside – similarly nondescript Afrikaner features.

No one.

Few more minutes of the answer-for-everything game, then search the car. Nothing.

No one in back, boot, under seats, inside the fucking leather.

Keep the scream inside, De Wet.

Feel stares at the back of my head walking back up towards the house.

Some 20 yards from house, light on top floor flicks on. There's Burger standing in purple/silver striped silk pyjamas, eyes squinting the squint of the recently-awakened.

Too long past the fact now in any case. No telling how long ago he could have come home, snuck upstairs, pyjamas over club-clothes. Just stand and stare. Eye to eye.

Back in the car, radio Botha.

Double orders:

- After me and Burger leave for Robben with detail tomorrow: get in, find that envelope, report back ASAFP.
- Violate T on some *dompas* infraction, Coding if he finds an angle. Make it up if that's what it takes – get whatever she knows re: Lukhanyo Mphila/underground stockpiles.

Tomorrow – find out how deep whatever this is goes. I'm done with unexplained coincidences.

VI

Mid-morning ferry to Robben.

Burger: jittery, lacking sleep from his night-time jaunt I'd say – though not sure if that's what I *want* to say. Waiting on Botha's dual report, should hear it by early afternoon.

Spruced up ferry – government transport vessel now.

On the way: 'command' implants – new issue, Coded into cabinet-members aboard – tested on arrival at security barrier. Access to codes, Codes, schedules, dossiers – Mindweb but next-level classified. Watching Burger get Coded – overwhelming, inexorable sensation of shit-about-to-go-the-fuck-down.

Take in crisp morning wind portside. Last moment of peace before battle. Or am I just being bloody dramatic?

It all blows up +-1 hour into pre-conference ass-kissing shindig – loads of distracted Afrikaners patting each other expensively on the back. Perfect time to slip away, bring down the govt.

Me in the corner watching Burger do the rounds. No dialogue – just quietly moving, observing the scene.

Only time I leave – briefing for security detail on Island layout/emergency measures. Bureaucratic technobabble, get back to event ASAP.

Moment of panic before locating him hovering shadowed in far corner. Zero-in.

Weblink bleeps inside my head startle me outside once again, against my will, leaving Burger behind. Botha. Tell him be quick + give me something good.

"Searched the house – nothing." Impossible. "Evidence of emergency clean-out, everything a bit out of place. No trace of that file."

"Look again."

"No, man. Wait for the next bit." Wait for it.

"She's his sister."

"What?"

"T – she's his actual sister. Admitted it halfway through a facial re-arrangement."

Classic Botha euphemism. "Best part though: the envelope. Found it at her place. He must have given it to her to hide."

Force speech out of my brain: "And inside?"

"Sending it now." Hear the glee in Botha's voice.

Phone vibrates, expand screen. Loads in bursts of horizontal clarity.

Know what's coming before the end: Lukhanyo Mphila and Herman Burger, ISO-off-the-charts grainy, make out unfinished construction site – night. Facing each other, handshake. “Sir?”

“Very good, Botha. I'll call if anything's up.”

Float back inside like there's someone else inside my brain.

Burger + Mphila: what kind of deal? T working for him – keeping tabs on me? Suddenly the bureaucratic hand patting me on the back for Mphila's untimely demise is gently but persistently throttling me for it.

Inside, case immediately for Burger: nowhere.

Back outside, no sign of him. Round to side door, young guard standing around.

“Did Minister Burger come out this way?” Tone lets him know to answer quick.

“He said he was going to do a round of Command Hub – inspection and test out new-issue augment. Why-”

Out-of-breath flying round back toward looming dome of Command Hub.

Flash badge at security detail at perimeter and scan my way through several checkpoints until the lobby proper.

Should've let someone know but linking up with Mindweb means splitting brain function, losing ground on Burger – wherever he is.

Up two flights to top – brainwave: upstairs simply technical maintenance, monitoring – Command Hub proper several flights belowground.

Into the abyss, then.

Slow down as darkness scoops me up (deactivated presence-sensors keep lights off – that Command augment doing its work for our 'minister'). Find a switch manually. No point keeping silent with lights strobing and flashing into life. Might as well sound a klaxon.

He's in Manual Control sentinel, unopenable glass pane between us.

Without looking up: “Almost done.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Blunt, unimaginative but sums up my thought-process.

Now he looks up. Strolls through threshold, glass panel hisses open-and-closed.

“All finished. What's on your mind, lieutenant?”

“What are you doing in here?” Get straight to the bottom of this, maybe I can still salvage it.

“This island can be a tricky place to come when you don't have an accurate layout and up-to-date access codes. Sending it to people who can use it.”

“And who were you sending a map to? Lukhanyo Mphila?” A wild statement, but maybe it'd force something out into the open.

“Close, but not quite there, as usual, lieutenant. And I thought he was dead in any case.”

That calm, challenging smile – cheeky on another face.

“You tell me, I don't know what to think any more.” Scary part is I'm not lying. “I saw the photo – you and Mphila shaking hands.”

“How?” Simple question – but he's pretending I don't see the shock in his face, hear the breath expelled in the sound. Colour drained.

Suddenly I see it, ridiculous though it is.

“Why do you care?”

He ignores the question. “Where is she?”

“In our care.” Silence. Let it sit. Then hit him with it. “Feeling a bit of brotherly anxiety for her?”

He regards me evenly. Either I've won already by figuring it out, or he has and it doesn't matter anymore. “I am indeed.”

Admission. Try to force words but they won't obey.

Eventually, simply: “Who are you?”

"We're going backwards now, lieutenant."

"I don't believe it." Not untrue.

"Well, believe it. You'll be surprised at what government ministers will be prepared to give up when promised the co-operation of the rebel groups they're fighting."

"So, what, Burger gave up top secret research? Full pigmentation augments? That's science fiction, minis-" Cut myself off, realising this man is many things, none of them a government minister.

"We're living in the future, lieutenant. All of those rumours – they exist. Of course they do. You know how this country is run. Burger was just a bit short-sighted, that's all."

"I saw Lukhanyo Mphila – *you*, as it happens – die."

"Yes, we were afraid you'd get something out of...him. But our precautions and, I assume, your overzealousness cost you genuine intel."

"That's right." As much to myself as him. "We never heard him speak. Dead before the Wurm."

"How fortunate. You managed to remove the one person who could derail the plan."

"Then I-" Say it to believe it. "I killed Burger?"

His smile = confirmation enough. Let it sink in. Bashes against the outside of my skull but 'sinking in' probably an impossibility.

"Poor Herman, we had to dose him hard with memory-augment."

Now he actually laughs – deep, throaty. I don't like this. Actually I hate this.

From outside – noises, voices, running footsteps.

He notices my distraction: "I hit a silent alarm the moment I heard you." Says this as though it's the smallest thing in the world. "One of the many benefits of the Command augment." I don't have much time before they go crazy and drag him away – after that I'll have to share him with others.

"Who's Nat?" I have to know.

He waits – lets the footsteps grow louder.

"Does it matter?"

"What do you have to lose my telling me?"

"It's not me that has something to lose." Cryptic. "In any case, you're about to see her part in all this at work."

"Where is she?"

"I imagine she's just arrived in England and settling in after a long flight. I'm sure she'll let you know."

No.

Margie.

Margaret Natalie Wentzel...

"How dare you?" Clichéd, but my brain is operating on emergency power.

"Don't pretend this game is played with honour, Lieutenant Wentzel. You know her history. And you'd have used the same weapon against me. I care about Natalie."

"Don't call her that!"

"But it's what she calls herself, to her friends. And, in any case, she was very keen to help us – me. To slip you parasitic corrupter-Code elements every night, making this moment possible." My nightcaps – why I felt so shitty the one day I didn't keep up the process. "I almost ruined the whole plan leaving that pad in my jacket pocket when I switched our clothes but you couldn't see as far as your own home."

"She wouldn't sell me out."

"Don't be so sure. But I did have to keep from her the next bit of what's about to happen."

Footsteps turn into people, descending the stairs in a wave of grey-black, firearms, yells, officialdom.

Momentary pause: the rabble gathered at the base of the stairs awaiting our standoff. Burger/Mphila: "Captain," speaking to thick-set farmboy at front of queue, "take a genescape of this man. He's an imposter. I caught him attempting an override of our perimeter outlay."

WHAT? Move quickly, but goons already halfway to me.

Grey-blackshirts moving like lightning. Raise badge – take electric stunner to upraised arm.

Ground rushes up to embrace. Connect, hard.

All this and more in a sec: arms pinned, neck exposed, tight clamp + dimly-conceived-of penetration into pulse at neck – extraction of verifiable DNA sig.

Shift weight, attempt standing – perfunctory pummel of a meaty fist against my left eye.

Stay aground.

Electronic scanners – I know that sound, designed to drain all hope from the unlucky person about to be sentenced.

"Sir," unknown goon talking to Burger/Mphila, "you, uh, wow, um, you should see this."

"Spit it out!" Our 'minister' playing the part well.

"Well, it...appears that this isn't Lieutenant Wentzel at all."

Pause for dramatic effect.

"It's...well, 'scrapper says this man is Lukhanyo Mphila."

Hard to fathom how cataclysmic horror can be cruelly tinged, just so, with such a healthy dose of irony. And me lying there still trying to work out what the hell that stockpile of government-issue firepower in that butcher is going to be for...

VII

Eternity later. Who knows how long?

Dripping sound: roof leaking rainwater onto hard stone floor.

Almost no natural light, sound of gentle night nature outside...

Come to, shake out arms: stretch cut short by cabling securing my unresponsive frame in place against the back of a steel-backed chair.

I'd say I'm in nowhere.

Open eyes.

Botha, the Rookie, Kirkhof, standing around me – grim as hell, all of them.

Try to talk – check with Botha what's happening – nervous system-fail, no words.

What the fuck have I been hit with?

The three move aside. 'Burger' strides front-and-centre.

"Now, let's see what you know, Mr. Mphila."



Nova 2013 Joint 2nd Place General Section

The Seduction of Lady Porcinyrr by Ken Cockcroft

Bachelor-Lord Agate Globulyxx, Marsek of Mygg, leaned back on his pillows and surveyed the richly appointed chamber with a deserved sense of satisfaction. No detail, however small, had been overlooked. Mistress Perfection could be a shrill, demanding harpy, but once satisfied, her munificence was boundless. A subtle toss of his head set his crown whirling and buzzing above his head; a tiny, glittering tornado that would be perfectly illuminated by the spotlight he had focussed for that very purpose. Porcinyrr could not help being impressed, he was sure.

Rapidly, and for the umpteenth time, Globulyxx scanned his mental checklist. The prelude lighting was perfect, and it would adjust itself as the evening progressed. The temperature in the chamber, as prescribed by the *Buqq*, was cool enough to be comfortable, but no more. It too would increase, in concert with his careful orchestration of the discreetly positioned fans that would promote the subtle but rapid diffusion of scent. Globulyxx suppressed a reflexive shudder of anticipation.

The food, ah, the food! Food of course, was the very heart – *the guts* – you might even say, of the whole endeavour. The old adage: '*Food maketh the Myggon*' had never rung truer. A man's choice of food gave direct access and insight into his breeding, his intellect, his character, his creativity and even his *courage*, not to mention the all-important depth of his pockets. Here too, Globulyxx had spared neither effort nor expense, and his diet over the past three days had been nothing short of spectacular, both in volume and carefully considered diversity. Sun-crust-ed carrion of Ruque, fermented foetus of the rare tree-slutth, Kaksian addled-egg topooh and the finest wild sauri smegma, harvested live from the great herds of Rotof, (Sustainable smegma, Globulyxx mused, momentarily distracted, now there's an investment opportunity!) were but four of the less humble dishes, and their effects were enhanced by copious draughts of pterosweat, spiced (of course!) with droplets of the vulnio-secretions of pregnant uirii. If the long-term foundation for the evening had been laid with rare creative flair, the ingredients he had chosen for his meals earlier that day spoke of true gustatorial genius. Here the freshness and vitality of the

ingredients, if they were to produce the desired effervescence, were essential. Thank AnkXX for the predawn gyrr-market, where many bespoke gourmet products could be collected directly from the colons of digester slaves. Ah, noble gourmalchemy!

Preparation was everything, Globulyxx thought, and his abdomen heaved and gurgled in agreement. But the eating was over. It was time to perform!

Fixing his gaze on an imaginary point high and to his left, displaying his profile to perfection, Globulyxx held his breath until his face had turned the perfect shade of mottled puce before uttering a short, barking ululation that set his multiple chins wobbling magnificently. With a confidence born of dedicated practice, Globulyxx ululated a second time, creating a counter-oscillation that threw his chins into a yo-yoing cascade of animation. Quickly, coyly, he stole a glance at the object of his desire, who, with a studied air of indifference, lazed impressively on a couch to his left.

Lady Porcinyrr, daughter of Lord Lardyxx, Grand Gutsup of Mygg, was more than impressive, Globulyxx thought, she was nothing less than magnificent. Her majestic entrance into the chamber had been closely, if covertly, observed: the way she defied the confines of her clingsuit; the way she jowled and jellied between every ponderous step. Superb! He had done his homework, of course, but her girth alone confirmed her impeccable bloodline and the wealth of her family. But there was more, much more! Almost lost amid the fleshy folds of her face, Lady Porcinyrr's tiny black eyes sparkled with a bright beadiness that only hinted at the puckish machinations within. As befitting one of high birth, her noble nose dominated her features, glistening with fresh mucous, her nostril valvae twitching with refined sensitivity. She too had taken great care with her preparatory dining, Globulyxx could sense, even at this cool temperature. Later, as the room warmed, her maidsweat and the odours of her folds and secret places would waft forth to intoxicate him! Focus, Glob! he told himself. There is a great deal at stake here. Concentrate! From deep within the folds of his robe he produced a tiny, jewel-encrusted box, smiling inwardly as he sensed Porcinyrr's heightened interest. Delicately, daintily, using only thumb and a single finger, Globulyxx flipped open the lid of the tiny box. The stench was stupendous. His crown went wild. Lady Porcinyrr's nose twitched towards him, the nostril valvae literally vibrating with anticipation. With the spatulate tip of a little finger, Globulyxx took a tiny dab of the oily brown ointment in the box, held it briefly under his nose and then, brushing aside his buzzing crown, smeared it down the length of his bony casque. Instantly the buzzing escalated into a frenzied, whining howl as each of the myriad metallic blikk-flies accelerated electron-like into the whirling orbit of the living crown, creating

iridescent whorls and spiral patterns that would last as long as the reek of the drokk he had applied. Lady Porcinyrr's nose was now, Globulyxx observed, reaching out towards him like the prehensile trunk of a truffle-snopyrr!

With a barely concealed smirk of satisfaction, Globulyxx returned the tiny box to its hidden repository. Of course Porcinyrr would recognise its contents as being of the finest blikksemdrokk available, but a lady of her refinement might even be able to identify it as the concentrated dung of the *urr-blikksem*, a tiny, isolated and inbred population of blikksems found only in the remote mountains of Urr. Reputed to have an extra molecule that heightened its already stupendously stenchful olfactory impact, *urr-blikksemdrokk* attracted only the very best of the brilliantly-hued metallic blikk-flies that made up the crowns of the super-rich nobility. The lady was indeed captivated, Globulyxx observed, even though she had managed to curb her wayward nose and restore an aura of relative insouciance. She could do nothing, however, to control the heightened colour of her skin or the slight sheen of moisture on her brow, Globulyxx noted with a little spasm of glee. So far, so good! And so much for the *hors d'oeuvres*; it was time for the next course!

Reaching down, he pressed a button at his side.

Two servants appeared almost instantly; indeed, they had been positioned outside awaiting this very summons. Taking up station next to Globulyxx, they trembled visibly and gaped open-mouthed at him – in their enthusiasm only slightly overdoing the requisite gestures of respect and submission. Cervyxx, the senior butler, placed a small, silver goblet into Lady Porcinyrr's outstretched hand. It contained, together with a cocktail of exotic juices, a secret ingredient that would mildly stimulate her olfactory nerve.

Considered naughtily illicit in some circles, and immoral, if not downright illegal in others, it was Globulyxx's only conscious infraction of the rules set out in the *Buqq. All's war in love of the fair*, Globulyxx thought, without the slightest twinge of guilt. Between his master's extended thumb and forefinger Vessikyll, the junior man, placed a thimble-sized silver vessel, filled with pungent krypp-bile. More than a mere catalyst, krypp-bile was the organic bio-spark that would finally ignite and release the awesome potential of the gastronomic opus in Globulyxx's upper gut! Timing was everything, Globulyxx thought, bringing the thimble to his lips and eyeing Lady Porcinyrr intently. *Now!* On cue, the lights dimmed and the temperature in the chamber rose significantly.

The beauty of krypp-bile, Globulyxx knew – explained in exquisite detail in the enclosed information leaflet – was that it allowed a fair degree of control, even for a novice such as he. A short time would pass without any effect at all. Indeed, this period of grace had

been engineered into the concoction to give those of faint heart (or inferior donglyrrs) the opportunity to change their minds. The enclosed phial of distilled aolta urine would effectively stop any reaction and render the potion... well, ... impotent. Globulyxx's steely resolve, fortified, if he was to be absolutely honest with himself, with a tiny dash of desperation, easily outweighed any lurking faintness of heart, while his donglyrrs had often been favourably commented upon by sundry unbiased members of his peer group. Still, this was no time for over-confidence, Globulyxx mused; it would behoove him to spend this time in the close monitoring of his gently bubbling 'inner self', as well as in an equally close scrutiny of the lovely Lady Porcinyrr.

The light in the chamber would soon be dimmed further, and then further still, relegating mere visual stimulus to its proper place in the erotico-sensual hierarchy. No time to waste, then. Globulyxx allowed his hitherto coy and slightly furtive glances to become more direct and aggressive, although stopping well short of intrusive or intimidating. Lady Porcinyrr's response was immediate and in kind, although obviously slightly muted, as befitted one of her theKth and refinement. Her tiny, berry-black eyes glinted with interest and – Globulyxx fervently hoped – a fair degree of lust. There! And again! Could he be imagining it? Trying desperately to conceal his arousal, Globulyxx leaned forward very slightly and focussed on Porcinyrr's nose and mouth. There! No mistaking it now! A very (extremely) subtle but deliberate spamzzle! By the glorious gonads of GriqKK! The delightful hussy! The splendid little minx! Although this was *definitely* not *in the Buqq*, it was certainly one *for the books*, so to speak! Inexpertly attempting to reciprocate with a spamzzle of his own, Globulyxx discovered that his nose and lips felt as numb and immobile as the buttocks of a sedentary snow-beti. This did not prevent him from observing, however, just as the lights dimmed once more, how Lady P's breast heaved, how droplets of perspiration beaded her upper lip, and how she squirmed ever so slightly in her seat!

Flopping back in the now crepuscular light, Globulyxx allowed himself a small leer of triumph. Things were going well, better than he had dared hope. Now, more than ever, was the time for focussed concentration. Follow your strategy, stick to the game-plan, he thought, allow for flexibility and creative boldness, and you will go where no Myggon has gone before! Breathing deeply, Globulyxx assessed the situation. Lady Porcinyrr was perspiring more freely: delicate, fresh tones that signalled her youth and vitality, but now and then a few molecules – the merest suggestion – of delicious, pheromone-rich maidsweat reached his nostrils. At the very limits of his perception, like elusive, ethereal

wisps of mist, Globulyxx fancied he detected hints of her deeper secrets, perhaps even the musky, primeval essence of creation itself.

Enough! No more craven vacillation; it was time! The krypp-bile had kicked in and the hitherto pleasant sense of bloatedness in Globulyxx's gut was rapidly mounting to an almost unbearable pressure. There was no going back now. Turning his head to the side to hide a frown of concentration and masking his mouth with a casual hand, Globulyxx allowed a measured amount of gas to escape his lips; a subtle, soundless eructation, perfectly executed. Well aware that true objectivity was almost impossible under these circumstances, he was nevertheless thrilled with the result. Perfect! Stupendously stenchful; well worth the effort and expense. Sitting back with a smug of satisfaction, Globulyxx waited for Porcinyrr's response. For a few moments there was nothing... His nose reacted well before his brain, retracting like the antenna of a startled eek-snail. Good GryKK! What was happening? Globulyxx sat up and peered at Porcinyrr in the gloom. Was this a joke? At a time like this? Surely not! It must have been an anomaly: a pocket of rogue gas – a calamitous bio-chemical coincidence – isolated and trapped somewhere. How unfortunate that it had chosen this moment to escape. Ah well, these things happened occasionally, even in the best of families. It wouldn't happen again. It could not. Unthinkable.

Recovering his composure, Globulyxx burped (such a delightfully evocative word; surely the mother of all onomatopohya) a second time, silently, of course, but with far more volume. Splendid, he thought, sniffing discreetly, even better than the first; *and* it would rapidly replace the lingering remains of Porcinyrr's unfortunate... accident. Eagerly, but with the slightest twinge of trepidation, Globulyxx sat back and waited.

This time his nose reared back like a sauri stallion on smeg-harvest day, his nasal valvae snapping shut with an audible *thwock!* Globulyxx's senses reeled. Swirling, sinister shapes flitted unbidden through his mind and he was obliged to suppress an urge to gag. His eyes watered. By almighty AnkXX! If this was indeed a crude jape it was not at all amusing. Briefly, Globulyxx considered summoning Cervyxx and Vessikyll to check for mischievous voyeurs and eavesdroppers, but quickly dismissed the idea. No, by GryKK, practical jest or not, he would see this through with due dignity and decorum, not to mention extreme valour. Once more he focussed on the dim outline of Porcinyrr. He could hear her rapid breathing; she was panting lightly now, and, as the ghastly remnants of her last response slowly faded, Globulyxx picked up tones of fresh maidsweat. There was no doubt, Lady Porcinyrr was highly aroused! This was no joke!

Porcinyrr's eager and confident – not to mention voluminous – response to Globulyxx's third and final (and extremely courageous) little belch left him reeling, barely conscious, gasping for breath but at the same time desperately reluctant to breathe. By the sacred Armpits of AnkXX! What had she been ingesting? What manner of olfactorily challenged oaf had prepared her food? The question was specious; the answer obvious. Only peasants, the poorest of the poor, employed underlings to prepare their food. For someone of Porcinyrr's class it was unthinkable that she would not personally select and prepare her daily cuisine. Certain conclusions were as inevitable as they were unpalatable. Alas. Porci was... there was just no getting away from it... a pygg. Now, Globulyxx was by no means a coward. Even so, a wild and instinctive urge to urge to flee almost overwhelmed him. But he was no fool either. Rapidly, and with surprising lucidity considering his condition, Globulyxx considered his only option. He could rise from his couch and leave the chamber. It had been done before – very rarely, of course – the stuff of legend and bawdy ballad. Infinitely poor form, to say the very least. He would be reviled and ostracised for the rest of his wretched life. Worse, Porcinyrrs' sisters were even bigger than she, and the ferocity of their revenge would leave more than his reputation in tatters. Furtively, Globulyxx changed position to ease a nervous tightening of his krotymm. No, Globulyxx thought, he was made of better stuff; he was Marsek of Mygg, for phuxxaque; he would see this through, by AnkXX... by the *Buqq*... and to the letter. With a sense of foreboding looming ever heavier, Globulyxx braced himself for the penultimate phase of the ritual. His gut gurgled, but this time more in apprehension than anticipation. The first three stages were mere overture: preamble, prologue and prelude... but any fool could belch. It was this next step – just short of physical consummation – that separated Mygg from... well... myce. Under normal circumstances, this lusty, lustful and lusting act would be both joyful release and self-revelation: the symbolic exposure of his inner being, his essence, his very soul. Globulyxx, however, felt only a despairing detachment. He could, and would, produce the goods, no doubt about it and Porcinyrr, he was equally confident, would be utterly smitten; overwhelmed with admiration and ardour. And then she would reply... in kind, and only Ankxx Himself knew what olfactory horrors might then be unleashed. He (assuming he survived) and Lady Porcinyrr would be officially betrothed, and consummation was - notwithstanding the threat of large, vengeful sisters – absolutely mandatory.

No matter, Globulyxx told himself. It was too late to turn back now. What was done was done. All his ingenious planning, procurement and preparation, all his selfless gorging

over the past few days, indeed, his entire life... had been with this single moment in mind. The thought of all that glorious, perfumed vapour going to waste... utterly unthinkable. Leaning to his left – the age-old technique he had practised since early adolescence – Globulyxx lifted his right buttock and focused intently on his pynktyrr. Control was everything. A soft, sibilant sigh, a slight (even sustained) susurrantion might be acceptable, but any hint of vibrato, any *overt noise*, would be absolutely ruinous. And, of course, the escape of anything other than gas at this stage and he would be publicly cauterised and staked out in the sun until he exploded.

Now the lowly pynktyrr, with its myriad tiny muscles and nerve-endings, all sensitive to the slightest nuance of pressure, temperature and texture, and working – for the most part without any supervision – in close and complex harmony, is a truly remarkable piece of bio-engineering, an evolutionary masterpiece, to say the least. But now, frowning with intense concentration, Globulyxx discovered, to his incredulous dismay, that his hitherto blind but faithful gatekeeper had chosen this, the most inopportune of all conceivable moments, to betray him. With a stubborn sentience that belied its lowly station, and in apparent alliance with his now openly cringing donglyrrs, (and we all know just how sly and manipulative a Mygg's donglyrrs can be, don't we?) Globulyxx's pynktyrr had gone on strike. (Or, in terms you might find in a less verbose and overblown piece of writing, he was simply scared shyttlyss.)

Briefly Globulyxx considered forcing the issue – after all, who was in charge here? The consequences, however, of success or failure, were equally bleak: failure could result in cauterization; success would mean... Lady Porcinyrr. A diabolical dilemma indeed. In the end Globulyxx – following the age-old Marsek political adage: '*When in doubt, do nothing*' – did just that. Bringing up the lights, and with a small sigh of defeat, Globulyxx rose to his feet and braced himself against the inevitable wrath of Lady Porcinyrr.

For a moment the good lady sat motionless, her eyes like two tiny black holes, absorbing light, reflecting none. (Globulyxx was now uncomfortably aware of his donglyrrs' frenzied attempts to burrow their way up into his hinterbody) Then, in one fluid motion, Porcinyrr rose to her feet, crossed the chamber, grabbed and lifted Globulyxx and clasped him to her heaving breast. His nose buried in the thick, tufted (but pleasantly pheromone- rich) hair of Porcinyrr's cleavage, his feet dangling in open space below the horizon of her magnificent belly, Globulyxx could hear the breath entering and exiting her mighty lungs. His life kaleidoscoped before his eyes. And then she spoke, for the first time that evening, her voice surprisingly high and... dare one say... girly?

“Oh Globulyxx, you sly devyll, holding yourself back like that! So... creative! So noble! So... *theKthy!* But no need! You had me after your very first belch! Of course we will be married! You are coming home with me tonight! And you will complete the final act of the ritual just before I consu... I mean before we consummate our love!”

Now Globulyxx, starved of air – but not theKth-laden pheromones – had an epiphany. Okay: he saw a way of salvaging this supremely stykkyy situation. Using both hands and all his waning strength, heaving back against her bosoms – not an entirely unpleasant experience – Globulyxx managed to free his head and look up into Porcinyrr’s beautiful beady black eyes... her multiple chins, actually, but go with it.

“My Lady,” he quavered, his voice an octave higher than he would have preferred, “yes, yes...of course I am yours... there was never any doubt, none at all.” Globulyxx struggled for his next breath as Porcinyrr’s grip tightened. Another octave higher, even as his donglyrrs (always ahead of the game) relaxed a little, Globulyxx gasped: “However, the good *Buqq* allows me three conditions...” (tighter still) “but I will make only two.” (even tighter)

“One: Our nuptials will take place twenty days from this date, not before.” (The average Mygg detox program took ten days, but Globulyxx was taking no chances.)

“And two: for the period preceding our marriage, and forever thereafter.... *you will let me do the cooking!*”



Books Received

Jonathan Ball

Conquest John Connolly and Jennifer Ridyard. Headline
Nothing edited by Jeremy Webb

From the author

The Wanderer in Unknown Realms John Connolly
I Live Here John Connolly

1706-24 Eva Rd. Etobicoke, ON CANADA M9C2B2 January 16, 2014

Dear SFSAns:

Happy New Year, and thank you all for a paper copy of Probe 158. I admit that I am not much of a critic of SF short stories, but each time I write to you, it's a challenge. Let's see what I can say this time around.

Carla, I completely understand about not reading enough. I don't think any of us read as much SF as we'd like. Life doesn't always allow the required time to truly get into a book. I would like to have read more, but right now, I am on another break from reading. I am just not inclined to pick up a book, although I do have two books on the go. Either I will start from scratch, or check them off my list, and go for something new with the urge returns, and I hope it will.

In spite of what I said earlier, A Leap in Faith by Beryl Ensor-Smith is just wonderful, a story straight out of The Twilight Zone, with a finale to put a shiver up your spine. Well done, and most enjoyable.

It seems we keep finding habitable exoplanets, but they seem to be slightly off the perfect combination we need for humanity to live and thrive. Are we being teased? I am hoping we find that perfect exoplanet before we make the planet we're on uninhabitable. Right now, we keep forgetting that this planet is the only one we've got.

Death and the Girl by Alex Kinmont is a real lesson for us...not to grieve when death takes a loved one, or fear death should it approach you, but to accept it as a part of life. The second part of the lesson is that the real death to be feared is that of the earth. I hope that Life personified could save this world, even if we gradually kill it.

My letter...the computerization of work continues. I am still looking for work, work that many companies do not find important to do any more. These companies want to save money by reducing their work force, but once those out of the work force are unemployed, how are they supposed to buy that company's product?

I share Sheryl's problem with technology. It is difficult to know how these things work, and those who do don't have much patience to show those who don't what's supposed to happen. I would like newer tech, but I can't afford it, and I work fine with that tech I have.

Time to get this to you, in case I get it done late. I hope your summer isn't unbearably hot the way Australia's has been. Take care, and see you next issue.

Yours, Lloyd Penney

Nova 2014 opens soon. If you missed getting a story entered last year, keep an eye on the website www.sffsa.org.za for an entry form and the rules. Maybe your story will appear in next year's PROBE

Blast from the past.... From PROBE 38 November 1978

SF'78

South Africa's First Science Fiction Convention

Our first convention was a great success. We learned a lot from it. After Tony Davis had convinced us of the viability of the project we went ahead and started to organise. After several months of frenzied activity we were ready.

We were expecting around 80 people, hoping for 150 and when we opened the doors 220 people poured in and filled the rooms to see and hear the lectures and films we had to offer. There were even members who had come from Estcourt and Port Elizabeth.

We started off with the film "Zardoz" and at the same time Mr. Barry Ronge spoke on S.F. literature. This was followed by a panel discussion. On the panel were Stan Peskin, Dick Hesom Williams and Gail Brunette.

This was followed by the film "The Time Machine" and a lecture, with slides, by Jack Bennett on Astronomy. The panel were Anton Van Doornum, John Schochot, and Ben Parker.

Everyone was then able to see "Dark Star" – a spaced out odyssey, and in my opinion the funniest SF film ever, with reasoning bombs, an adorable alien, a sultry voiced computer and a deep frozen captain thrown in for good measure.

After supper "Soylent Green" was shown and a lecture was given by Professor Nancy van Schaik on cloning. The panel for this lecture were Professor W Prozesky and Mr Plotkin, who told us of helmets for the blind which bounce signals off objects and produce a pattern which the brain can "see".

Finally the film "The Power" was shown. At the same time a lecture on "South Africa in the year 2000" was delivered by Keyan Tomaselli.

Then after everyone had left we packed up and went home ourselves with a feeling of satisfaction of having seen something that has been carefully planned become a success.

So next year we hope to have an even bigger and better Convention and with any luck we can attract twice as many people. There must be thousands of SF fans out there somewhere. We just have to let them know we exist..

G. A. Brunette

PROBE interviews John Connolly and Jennifer Ridyard

The interview was conducted by Ian and Gail Jamieson

Last year Andrea Marchesi of Jonathan Ball publishers let us know that John Connolly and Jennifer Ridyard would be in SA in January and asked us if we would like to interview them. We had been sent their first novel "Conquest" to review and so we accepted gladly. We met them at a coffee shop in Bedfordview on a hot Saturday, the 4th of January. John, from the lilt in his speech, is obviously from Ireland and we had seen from the publicity material that Jennifer had grown up in South Africa.

So our first question was, how did they get together?

Jennie, as she asked us to call her, told us that around 2001, when she was the editor of "Lifestyle", which was published in the Citizen newspaper, had interviewed John when he came to SA to publicise one of his crime novels. One thing had led to another and after a longish email relationship she had, in her own words, gone off kicking and screaming to a country where it rains incessantly.

We know that John has many novels published, many of them about an investigator called Charlie Parker and also a number of short stories on the horror side of literature. So we asked Jennie if she had previously had anything published. She said she had three manuscripts ready but that "Conquest" was her first published novel.

"Conquest" is aimed at older adolescents and has a young woman as the protagonist. We asked how their idea for a SF novel had come about. John said that SF has long been dominated by male "heroes" and so he wanted to write for young people and also wanted a female lead character, but he is a guy so he needed some help. He had the idea that his character, named Syl, would be the first of the conquering alien Illyri to be born on Earth. So he asked Jennie for her insight and the novel gradually evolved. There are another three, or possibly only two, novels in the series but they are planned and they know where the story will go. So it will depend on how the writing goes as to how long it will eventually be.

John: With crime novels one tends to assume that everyone has read MacDonald and Elmore James etc, but they really haven't. So with science fiction I would like to change the perception of new readers. Many young people do not read at all. Lines of demarcations between genres have been blurred, science fiction to fantasy to horror.

Jennie: Margaret Atwood refused to accept that what she was writing was science fiction until she actually looked at it and then had to admit that perhaps her writing did fit into the genre.

John: Science fiction is a fiction of ideas. It is naturally fertile ground for new concepts. I needed to decide how to present it, and writing, to kids at schools. I started to go to schools. When I asked the kids "how do you perceive SF?" They all answered: the future. But it is not. It is about the present. So I prepared a presentation showing clips from Metropolis, Them, Tarantula, and the original Planet of the Apes. I also showed some interviews with screen writers. The kids perceptions began to change. From their point of view, Blade Runner and Star Wars are old. Star Wars first appeared in 1977. We have them as part of our history but why would kids currently at school have seen them Kids will watch if you introduce them to these movies but they are not exposed to them as part of their upbringing. We cannot assume they have this knowledge. It is not part of the ethos of their generation

Part of the reason I go to schools is that kids do not want to read. It is an electronic generation. They don't read book reviews. They listen to word of mouth. I have to go to the schools because of what I am writing. Little ones are still enthusiastic, but teenagers

tend to be rather blasé.... visual is often better for them. Science fiction movie clips fulfill the visual need and hopefully they will go on to read the stories. When I was at school no authors ever came to visit and tell us about their writings.

We asked Jennie where her interest in science fiction had come from.

She told us that her Dad had only read SF and so that was what she started to read. Then at school she was given "The Chrysalids" by John Wyndham to read and she suddenly discovered the different Earth in the novel. At times it seemed a little alienating. Then her folks bought the visual and audio "War of the Worlds" by Jeff Wayne and she became obsessed with it. There were also other SF movies like "The Day of the Triffids."

She then saw the novel 1984 and got a copy from the book exchange. "I can't say I enjoyed it but was more intrigued by the idea of Big Brother." So science fiction often predicts what will happen but not how it will happen. Where we are going but not how we will get there. The cameras on streets in London for instance. We now accept the surveillance on the streets because of the security it affords.

John mentioned how the book 1984 was at one point deleted remotely from Kindles. This reminded us of the fireman in Fahrenheit 451 who did not put out fires but instead burned books. Jennie mentioned that she could see how ebooks could be useful for education, although they did not have one in their home.

We mentioned that John seemed to do a lot of promotional work. He said that he was fairly lucky as he enjoyed this side of the book industry. A lot of writers are intellectually isolated and find promotional work difficult to do. But you can't expect the fact that you have written a book to entitle you to have publicity just given to you. No newspaper or magazine is obliged to print book reviews, so you need to do some promotional work. It takes up time and gives you less time to write. "However I particularly enjoy the promotional work at schools."

If he looks at the books kids are forced to read at school he can understand how they can be put off. The books are mainly written by dead people. If someone told he needed to read "Hard Times" by Charles Dickens and to accept that it was relevant to life it might put him off books forever. "You need to show kids the potential of what books encompass and hope that you get a least a couple of them to read and maybe even some who will start to write."

We mentioned our short story competition and how even though we offer a critique, some people do not take advantage of it. John said he could understand this as a writer. He would not like to be told that what he had done was not good. It is almost as if it reflects on you as a person and not what you have produced.

We asked about the collaboration on "Conquest" They both said that it was hard to do and sometimes you had clash of egos, especially when you live in the same house and have to sit down at the same dinner table. It is very hard to tell someone you share your life with that you don't like what they have written.

Jenny mentioned that John writes "organically". He gets started but does not know exactly where he is going. However in collaboration you have to know where you are headed.

Jennie finds it very hard to begin but it gets better once she is going. So John gave her 14 000 words as a beginning, told her to watch the "39 Steps" and that they needed a chase in the Scottish Highlands and left her to it. She gave him back 70 000 words and he read it and said it was wrong. She said they had to stay together for the dogs.

Part of the problem was that Jennie was writing for younger readers, around 13 or 14, and John wanted to write for young people around 16 or 17 years old. It took a lot of passing back and forth to finally shave away the jolting bits and smooth over the joins. But finally the manuscript was complete.

We asked if they had approached a publisher before they started to write "Conquest". John said he had a problem with taking money for something he hadn't written yet and that a publisher could affect your experiment by looking over your shoulder. He likes to go to a publisher with a completed novel. Then they can look at it with a fresh set of eyes. He thinks deadlines are good and they give him a target. He mentioned that he always sets targets that are attainable. He would not like to be locked into hotel rooms like Douglas Adams to be forced to finish what had been started. He does not like contracts and mentioned Neil Gaiman who once looked at what the publishers were offering and seeing that the word "the" would be earning him 8 Pounds and that this resulted in him being frozen by pressure.

John believes that you need to be able to give readers what they want and that he knows that his "Charlie Parker" novels will sell "X" number of copies. "Conquest" being science fiction is always going to be a difficult sell, and you have no idea how many copies will be sold. They do not want the series to go on forever, partly because collaboration is very time consuming and he has books he wants to write and so does Jennie. The crime novels pay the mortgage and give some freedom to experiment with SF. It is a big universe and if the books sell well there is no reason not to return to the world of "Conquest". This book is better for the collaboration but was much harder to write than it would have been for a single author.

Jennie said she felt the same thing had happened when the "Harry Potter" books were translated to the screen. The screen writers had had to cut out almost all but the dialogue and try to condense the story into a nutshell.

We asked if John had tried to be a script writer. He said he had tried it and gave the money back. There were too many people involved and writers tend to be more solitary creatures. This led us to ask if any of his novels were going to be made into movies. He said that a few stories had been optioned but he was not holding his breath. They have not put down a deposit on a yacht.

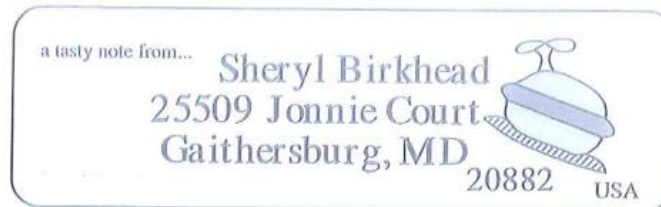
He mentioned that he was going to go back to Maine to do research and break the back of his next Parker novel. He likes to set a target and deadline so that he does not feel he is chained to his desk or laptop. We asked if he always used a computer to write with and he told us that having come from the school of journalism he had had to learn to touch type and anyway his handwriting was too slow to keep up with his thoughts. He also said that each novel was not printed out at all until the day before it had to go to the publisher. In this way he now felt that the book had reached the end and as far as he could go with it. Jennie asked us if we saw much interest in young people who read in South Africa and we had to tell her that there seemed to be much more interest in science fiction gaming. We mentioned that our short story competition was one of the reasons for the club to exist and that it encouraged people of all ages to write. John said that he also has seen a large number of books and a small number of readers. He mentioned rather tongue in cheek how they had gone off one of their neighbours whose only books were a set of Encyclopaedia Britannica and they thought this was sufficient as they were just too busy to read.

We were talking about personal libraries and they said that they only kept signed books and some non-fiction. John said that there were too many books out there that he had not read. Once read all others go into the OXFAM box.

We asked about music and he said that he listened to most types of music and often found himself looking discretely at other people's music collections and silently judging them.

We asked if he and Jennie would sign our copy of "Conquest" and they did so for us. He also kindly gave us signed limited editions of an essay entitled "I Live Here" and a novella entitled "The Wanderer in Unknown Realms"

We really enjoyed the time we spent talking to John and Jennie and wished them the best of the rest of their holiday in South Africa and we hope to get an opportunity to talk to them when they return to our shores again.



December 25, 2013 (but the odds are really good that I won't finish it today!)

Greetings that are (with any luck) still in the end of '13!

I have now slid across and tidied up a stack of zines destined for locs--and as I stare back at them, can only find 155 and 157. It would appear that another ish is around here somewhere, but I am not going to postpone this until I can find it.

My first thought, looking at the cover on #155, is that the organism (flesh and blood or otherwise) bears a resemblance porcine or perhaps a relationship to the hyena. I can't quite identify a lot of the anatomy, but that is probably just as well. The series of covers certainly is nice!

(Today is the day I put aside to watch the taped marathon of *Dr. Who* that took up over a week of the US BBC, so I am currently watching *K-9* in the background)

Hope all of you have had a nice holiday season and that the new year to come will be a good one.

Interesting to note that *a Future full of robots* is actually here as long as we define robot a bit differently than that which most fen pretty much accept. Cars are parking themselves, alerting the driver (or actually slowing to avoid) of a possible impending collision, and items overtly called robots are busily cleaning floors and rugs in some household. Heck, if you factor out self actuation, then most machinery (including the computer on which I am typing) can be show-horned into the robot category. But I know what is meant and wonder what it will do to the work force (as simple activity robots on assembly lines affected workers in those activities) when more human-like functions become commonplace. We shall see, and probably sooner rather than later.

(Dec 26--ah- didn't take long to be behind in that #158 arrived today)

Congratulations to the winners!w

The thought that intelligence may be post-biological is interesting, but (to my mind) bogs down with such mundane things as routine maintenance without the biologics to handle it. It seems to me that once cogitation become the ends and not merely the means, then content become irrelevant and hence routine care for whoever/whatever is doing the thinking becomes a distant second (at the best) place. Just a (ahem) thought.

Agh, now into the NEW YEAR- how did that happen?

Someday, if someone has time, it would be interesting to see a compilation of *Where are they now?*--of the writing winners from over the years.

The Anchorage sounds like a place just about all of us could use at some time in our lives.

I think I had better quit while I'm not too far behind. While this laptop is acting better, there are a few caveats. No battery- so it has to stay plugged in. When I am working on it, as soon as I move, the magnetic charger /power cord disconnects and (of course) the computer dies. If I happen to forget to save, it means I lost everything between saves. The huge gaping hole on its underside makes me uncomfortable, but so far it seems to work. My attempt to locate a replacement has shown I can't. the cost is just beyond me. I will need to have it repaired. I understand this means I have to live with old technology (I hope). It also means I will still have the original problem of the battery that (on these models this is, apparently, a common issue) swells and causes nasty "side effects" (yeah, been there, done that). It is irritating to have to be tethered to the cord and not move around much. I am learning to save more often, but at least now the text doesn't have a mind of its own and when I lose it, it is my own negligence (i.e. I understand why it is getting lost).

I wish I was more of a reviewer, or at least a reader who had more helpful comments to make--to try to repay all of you for the tremendous amount of work that you all put into the zine. Please understand that a lot of people enjoy the results of all your labor! *Thank you.*

A new start...a new year to bloom fannishly-- looking forward to more *probing* comments!

P.S.- love the stamps on the envelopes!

Raising Steam Terry Pratchett Random House Struik R395.00

Terry Pratchett has returned to Discworld for this new novel. Dick Simnel, who has an interesting relationship with sines and cosines, has employed his sliding rule and invented the steam engine. Lord Vetinari is not sure Discworld is ready for the steam train but even he can see the advantages of its use. Restaurateurs and even just housewives like the idea of fresh fish actually being less than a day old when it arrives on the table.

So Vetinari offers Moist von Lipwig, master of the Post Office, the Mint and the Royal Bank the opportunity of continuing to survive. It is his new job to get the train to Bonk Smaltzberg, come hell or high water. The astonished ordinary citizens of Ankh-Morpork are entranced with the new invention and are lining up and paying good money just to take a short run on Iron Girder, the name given to the new steam train engine.

Not everyone likes the idea and one of the factions of dwarves fear that it might destroy thousands of years of tradition and move violently against the laying of the railway line. But as usual sanity finally wins out and the train reaches its destination. The engine, a great clanging monster of a machine that harnesses the power of all of the elements: earth, air, fire and water, has character herself and uses her build-up of steam to protect herself. In some ways she has a magical quality about her.

I do tend to feel that Pratchett's latest books sometime come down a little heavily on the moralizing side. Pratchett's themes are the big ones: the threat and promise of change, the individual's search for meaning within their own society, and the fine moral judgments that have to be made between competing rights and freedoms. But he still writes a very entertaining novel of what can happen when you add steam to the burgeoning industrial revolution in Ankh-Morpork. Not many novels can make you smile repeatedly and occasionally laugh out loud.

Recommended

Gail

The Chronicles of the Invaders. Book I – Conquest. John Connolly and Jennifer Ridyard

John Connolly is particularly worried that today's modern youngsters are stopping reading and becoming more involved in the visual side of entertainment. To help combat this decline he regularly visits schools to talk on modern books, and also with his partner Jennifer, he has written and published Conquest, a science fiction novel. The alien humanoid Illyri have arrived through a wormhole and conquered Earth by the simple expedience of taking over computers and shutting down external services such as electricity, water and gas. After 4 days of anarchy the Illyri send out one word on Earth's computers. "Surrender". Earth does.

Now the resistance starts up in earnest.

Syl is the first Illyri to be born on Earth and for sixteen years she has felt trapped behind the walls of her father's fortress. With shocking suddenness her life changes forever when she inadvertently helps a young resistance fighter named Paul.

Suddenly she is on the run. And shortly they will find out that the real invasion is just beginning.

This is an interesting and quite thought provoking novel, although there is nothing particularly new in the plot. The two main characters are well thought out, with both good and bad points. In this first novel there is more than a hint of romance in the air, but with more of the angst usually found in series like "Twilight".

As an old codger of seventy I found it a bit difficult to be objective about a book for older teens. It is very well written and entertaining, but as an adult I felt that at times it dragged a bit.

The one major problem I have is that, as the authors themselves have confirmed, this book is mainly for teenagers and yet nowhere does it say so.

3/5

Ian

The Academy Series – The Prequel "Starhawk" - Jack McDevitt

We have met Priscilla "Hutch" Hutchins in book form several years ago, but the author has decided to take us back to her early days, when she had just attained her interstellar pilot's license. Earth is suffering from over population, pollution and dwindling resources.

To combat this efforts are being made to terraform two planets, but in the process we are killing off natural life forms. Hutch obtains work in the corporation responsible for the terraforming, and discovers her working conditions include bomb threats, sabotage, and of course clashes with her employer.

In the old pulps aliens were always trying to take over Earth, here we are the aliens. McDevitt gives us his glimpse into a near future by giving us snippets of news broadcasts. He also gives us a major insight into the character of Hutch by using notes from her diary.

This is a well written and (mainly) fast paced exciting novel.

4/5

Ian

Nothing edited by Jeremy Webb Profile Books

The subtitle to this book is "from absolute zero to cosmic oblivion – amazing insights into nothing."

And that is what it is all about. The editor has taken a large collection of previously published articles from the *New Scientist* and arranged them into a series of themes. From "Beginnings" to "Conclusions". This is a very entertaining collection which you can read from beginning to end or using the suggestions, follow topics through the themes.

We can follow the story of how man slowly began to understand that mathematics could not be complete without "zero" or see how something came from nothing in the Big Bang. Was there actually a Big Bang? How did time begin? The nothingness of anaesthetics. Where do we go when we sleep? What about zero gravity? Can we actually get to absolute zero – the ultimate in cool? How would we measure this temperature? Do the "Noble" gasses actually do nothing? The power of the "nothing" in the placebo. From wormholes to the apparent vacuum of space.....

You don't have to have a Ph.D. in physics to read this collection, but more just an enquiring mind. The collection is so arranged that you can pick it and put it down, and continue to be entertained. I am really enjoying reading it.

Highly recommended.

Gail

The Library: Thoughts in Cold Storage – Gavin Kreuter

"You want weapons? We're in a library! Books! The best weapons in the world! "

- The Doctor.

The SFFSA library is the most underutilised asset of the club. Containing over 3000 items, it comprises soft- and hard-cover books, copies of Probe, other magazines and video tapes/DVDs. Because SFFSA (nee SFSA) starting off as primarily a club of SF readers, it is not surprising that the library mainly consists of SF&F books. But there are also nonfiction books (with an SF&F theme) such as biographies (like Douglas Adams, Jack Vance) and quiz books (well, one anyway: *Red Dwarf Quiz Book*).

You can also find writing guides (*About Writing* and *The Oxford Book of Modern Science Writing*) and examinations of science in SF ("The Science of Doctor Who"). And who can resist titles like *Chicks Dig Time Lords*, or *Why Don't Penguins' Feet Freeze?*

The video collection is extremely modest, but we do have the complete Lexx series on VHS, as well as all the Star Trek movies, Back to the Future, amongst others. The DVD selection is even more modest, comprising mainly of Andrew's Anime donations (like Cowboy Bebop, and Vampire Hunter).

But, as I said, SFFSA was started by book lovers. The internet is full of "the top ... SF novels" lists, none of which (according to my unscientific, random sample of a couple) correlate with any high degree. One such list can be found at the science channel (<http://www.sciencechannel.com/sci-fi/10-sci-fi-books-of-all-time.htm>) :

- 1: Man and Machine: 'Neuromancer'
- 2: Man and Machine: 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?'
- 3: Near Future: 'Fahrenheit 451'
- 4: Near Future: 'Doomsday Book'
- 5: Alien Invasions: Ender's Game
- 6: Alien Invasions: 'Rendezvous with Rama'
- 7: Far, Far Away: 'The Foundation Trilogy'
- 8: Far, Far Away: 'Dune'
- 9: Close to Home: 'Red Mars'
- 10: Close to Home: 'Stranger in a Strange Land'

It is interesting to look at a few lists, and compare them with books in our library. I energetically started out with the intention of examining lists containing 100 novels, and quickly decided it was a fruitless (that is, if done by me) exercise. Our library catalogue may be downloaded from www.sffsa.org.za, so if any Probe reader wishes to conduct a fruitful (that is, *not* done by me) exercise, they may even persuade our Probe Editor to publish a ~~rebuttal~~ follow-up to this article. I did look at the top 20 of a couple of lists, and found 13 books in our library that were on the list at bestsciencefiction.com and 15 at scifilists.sffjazz.com/lists_books_rank1.html. Readers of the latter site voted for a revised list, which, I think, is a good starting point for a "best of..." list:

- 1 Foundation (Isaac Asimov)
- 2 Dune (Frank Herbert)
- 3 Ender's Game (Orson Scott Card)
- 4 1984 (George Orwell)
- 5 Hyperion (Dan Simmons)
- 6 The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy
- 7 The Forever War (Joe Haldeman)
- 8 Starship Troopers (Robert A. Heinlein)
- 9 2001 A Space Odyssey (Arthur C. Clarke)
- 10 Neuromancer (William Gibson)

Alert readers will note that a second 'F' was added to the original acronym, SFSA. This acknowledges the inclusion of Fantasy as a growing, if not dominating, genre enjoyed by our members. Even our logo incorporates a sword, in addition to the spaceship. This article primarily looked at SF. Next time we might also take a look at the Fantasy lists... at the Editor's (who is a Fantasy Fan) discretion of course. Our library certainly includes vast swathes (space created by the swing of a scythe?) of Fantasy books.

So if you're interested in sampling the wares of various popular SF authors of all time, the SFFSA library is a great place to go. Books may be requested via email (librarian@sffsa.org.za), and will be hand-delivered to you at our next meeting. Members who cannot make the meetings are welcome to request that books be posted to them (but will, of course, be responsible for posting them back!)

Nova 2013 2nd Place South African Section

Exploring Otherworld Earth by Alison Smith

“Ready?”

“Don’t hold my hand so tight” whined Karski

“Quiet! Stop grumbling. Everybody concentrate.” Torl began to murmur the spell that would open the portal and transport them to the Otherworld of Earth. The four kids were breathing in unison, mentally following Torl’s words, hands in hot, sweaty grasps, concentrating on the words, relaxing into the deepening vibrations that swirled round them, letting the vortex take them down, down, down, down.

“Ouch!” shrieked Karski, when the hard pavement met her bottom, and jarred her hand away from Obski’s clutching fingers. Her eyes jerked open with the impact and took in feet/shoes/legs/black skin/ blue denims/bright skirts/plastic packets/crumpled red and white cups “get UP” hissed Obski “people are staring at us – get up!” He yanked his twin up, ignoring her complaints. She lurched backwards, struggling to find her balance on the hard surface. Her legs wobbled and she was dizzy. She sucked in a deep breath and coughed as the hot, thick air assaulted her nose and lungs. It smelled alien, gritty, chemical. Nothing like the sweet, clean air of home. The thick smelly air was making her eyes water. She rubbed them with her knuckles, and peered through her matted lashes. “Look at the sky! It’s so bright! And it’s so blue ... “

They gazed upwards. “It’s so hot” said Mori slowly.

“And so noisy” added Obski.

“Is this Earth, do you think? Did you get the spell right?” said Karski turning to Torl.

Before he could answer they were shoved backwards by a group of large women, carrying lumpy cloth wrapped bundles on their heads, forging down the pavement in a phalanx, oblivious to the crowds, shouting loudly to each other.

“Look at that!” gasped Mori “I wonder what spell they’re using to balance those bundles?”

“They’re not” replied Torl tersely. He was very sensitive to Magick and could sense spells, or creatures from Otherworlds long before the twins or Mori. “This is not a place with any Magick. This is an Otherworld, remember? That’s why we came travelling. “

The kids looked around them, taking in the crowded pavement, the road filled with boxy, metal objects that moved on four wheels, filled with people. The mechanical noise from the metal people-carriers was deafening. Across the road was a large area filled with giant metal people-carriers, standing in rows. People were swarming round, shoving and jostling to enter the carriers. Vendors moved amongst the crowd, selling food, hats, clothing, shiny unidentifiable objects.

“But maybe I’m wrong ” said Torl . “Look over there”. He pointed to a woman sitting on the ground, lined up with other vendors selling fruit, vegetables, clothing.

The middle-aged woman was stout, wrapped in a bright red, white and black patterned cloth, with coloured beads threaded into the myriad little plaits that framed her square face. From across the street it was difficult to make out what she was selling. She had a cloth spread out in front of her, covered in twiggy bundles. The kids cautiously crossed the road, holding hands and shrieking when a noisy motorbike zoomed alongside them and backfired. “Ooooh “ moaned Karski “I don’t think I like this place” . Her round grey eyes were panicky, darting left and right. She was twisting her long silvery hair into a knot around her thumb. She always fiddled with her hair when she was upset.

“C’mon on” grunted her twin, towing her briskly through the crowds. “Don’t be such a baby – remember we’re ten years old now! You were the one who wanted to come, remember?”

They fought their way through the crush until they reached the woman. They stood in front of her, surveying her display of roots, herbs, small gourds, mysterious twists of paper.

“I smell Magick” murmured Torl “but its Earth Magick, not like ours at all”.

The woman peered at them through her beaded fringe of little plaits.

Torl flicked off a quick translation spell and said to the woman “Good day to you, mother. What are you selling?”

“Muti” muttered the woman, with a sidelong glance at the four kids.

“What’s? “... began Mori but was interrupted by a skinny girl, who jumped between the kids and the muti-seller.

“Hey you guys! Whatsup! Howzit! Whatcha doin? Howzit goin? Hey?” The girl fidgeted from foot to foot, as she rattled off her questions.

“C’mon you guys! Muti’s not for whiteys, you know that! haibo! Come with me! I’ll take you to Sandton, to the City, to the stores, Haibo! Ja! “

The kids instinctively clustered together. The girl's taut body energy was vibrating their magickal senses like a stinging wasp. "Uh, I'm not ... what's Sandton?" asked Torl, as the girl physically shoved them towards a white metal people-carrier.

"You don't know Sandton? Where you guys been? Where you guys from? Huh? Huh?"

"We're from Arksi" replied Torl.

"Hau! From where? That's new! sounds like Greece or something? You tourists, right? Come on, get in-get in- get in – taxi leaving now – baba, five for Sandton City – yeah!"

Just then a police helicopter swooped low over the taxi rank, rotors clattering. Nobody else paid any attention to the surveillance, but the kids instinctively ducked as they gazed upwards, stupefied by the noise and the sudden appearance of the chopper. Even Torl's face turned a paler shade of grey.

"What's *that*?" quavered Karski.

"Some sort of flying device, I suppose; if you think about it, without Magick, the people on Earth can't fly on their own like we can" said Mori thoughtfully, watching the departing chopper.

"Come, come!" scolded the sparky girl shoving them into the minibus. The stunned kids meekly crammed themselves in. Karski had to sit on Obski's lap, Mori and Torl jammed themselves into a micro space on the next seat, flanked by the frenetic girl who yelled "Me – I'm Thembi – Thembi from Bembi, haha-hha! Yeah! Let's go, let's go!"

"Auw, sisi, not so fast" reproved the guard "not so fast, we are going. Who are these young ones? Why are they such a strange colour? And who is paying?"

"I don't know - white tourists from somewhere – plenty tseheleti for me today - eh, baba, let's go before they get out of your taxi!"

She turned to Torl and demanded "Pay, you must pay! No riding for nothing, ja?" Slowly Torl reached into his neck-pouch and extracted a Planetary Federation Basic Unit.

"What's that? You can't pay with that! Tsheleti, bucks – where you coming from hey? No money in your country? No US dollar? Huh? Huh?"

Mori whispered "*Torl: this is not safe – we need to get out of here! Now!*" and she muttered a short Flash Spell, together with an Escape Spell. Instantly the taxi was filled with a blinding purple flash and a strong smell of burning. The four kids disappeared.

“Auw! Aaahh ! - what is happening?” panicky screams erupted from the taxi, along with the jumble of rapidly exiting passengers. Thembi was frozen, stunned by the flash, the noise and the departure of her victims. The guard dragged Thembi out by the scruff of her neck and shook her violently “See what you have done!”

* * *

“Where are we now?” wondered Karski, gazing round at the tall high grass, the stunted thorny trees, the bleached blue sky. She slowly swivelled full circle round, taking in the gently undulating plains, bordered by distant hazy blue hills, the lack of buildings, people, noise. A distant birdcall floated through the hot dry air, but nothing else stirred.

Finally Torl said “Mori – where did you learn that Escape Spell? Surely your School does not allow those until you are Apprenticed with a Master?”

“I – umm “ mumbled Mori, avoiding Torl’s accusatory gaze. “I have a friend who is already apprenticed, and he ...”

A fleeting shadow of disappointment passed over Torl’s face.

“Oh yes,” chipped in Obski with a knowing glance at Mori “we know who you mean, don’t we Karski, your new ..”

“Shut up you two!” snapped Mori “my friends are none of your business. And listen! Something’s coming!”

The group listened intently. “I can’t hear anything” said Torl, “but I can feel something – why is the ground vibrating? “

“I can smell something “ commented Obski.

“Yes” agreed his twin “it’s living creatures, lots of them. Maybe we should move, or hide or something, until we know what’s coming”.

“There’s nowhere to hide” said Torl surveying the endless grassy plains .

“Perhaps we should wait and see what’s coming before we use another Escape Spell – what do you say, Mori?”

“Look! Over there,” Mori pointed to the horizon where a brown stain of moving objects was flooding over the grasslands. “Those are – are “ she hesitated, trying to identify the rapidly moving objects.

“Creatures – hundreds of them – no, maybe thousands” said Torl.

Everybody shaded their eyes from the burning sunlight, and focussed on the approaching tide of animals. Dust swirled, veiling their gaze. But they could hear

the creatures snorting, feel the pounding of myriad hooves drumming on the ground.

“Aaaah” gasped Mori “ can you see those horns? Torl: we need to move, those creatures can harm us!”

But Torl was hypnotised by the sheer numbers and driving force of the migrating animals. He stared, fascinated by the heaving mass of brown bodies, tossing tails, upheld horns, the sounds, the dust.

“Torl! yelled Mori “We must move! Right now!” She shook him hard by the shoulder. He snapped out of his trance, closed his eyes, and muttered a Movement Spell.

“Where are we?” asked Obski, gazing round at the yellow plains.

“How should I know” snapped Torl “This is an Otherworld, remember? I don’t know where anything is, any more than the rest of you. I can only navigate to places that I’ve spell woven. You know that perfectly well.”

How will we get back home, then? wondered Mori, but left the worrying thought unvoiced.

”I’m thirsty” whined Karski.

“We all are”, said Mori “why don’t you try a water spell, Torl? Torl? Are you listening?”

“No,” he replied, “look over there, to the right, something’s moving. Look.”

The party strained their eyes.

“Does anybody know the Far Sight Spell?” asked Mori. They all shook their heads. “Next time we go travelling we need to make more preparations” she muttered, thinking to herself that what had started out as a daring adventure was now turning into something else entirely. Torl might be nearing his 19th Anniversary, but she was beginning to see that his leadership skills were not as well developed as his magickal abilities.

In the distance five tawny, four-legged beasts paused, heads raised, sniffing the air. Their thin tails, ending in short black tufts, switched irritably. Their heads were down, hidden by the grasses, but growling punctuated by sharp snapping noises drifted through the air.

“What are they doing?” whispered Obski.

As he spoke, the biggest animal lifted its head, and licked its chops, showing white teeth, black gums, and a smearing of reddish brown around the jaws. It grunted and returned to the scuffling mass of animals in the long grass. The scuffling turned into vigorous thrashing, loud roaring, and the kids caught glimpses of a mound of bloody bones, thin yellow flanks, upraised paws armed with huge claws.

“Look how big they are!” whispered Karski.

“Shhh! They’re feeding. They must have killed something” said Mori.

“Yes, “ agreed Obski, “good thing you got that Invisibility Spell right Torl. You’re good at this stuff. Now how about getting us something to eat ?”

Karski shaded her eyes from the blazing sun, her shoulders drooped. “I don’t like it here” she whined “ I thought it was going to be fun, exploring an Otherworld, but it’s not. I’m tired, and I’m too hot, and I’m thirsty, and the sun hurts my eyes, and I want my Clan-mother!” She burst into tears.

Obski put his arm round his twin’s shoulders. “Don’t cry” he comforted, “Torl will move us somewhere cool, where we can get a drink”. He looked hopefully at Torl.

“Right” said Torl,” everybody hold hands and think of our Home River and I’ll ...” his voice dropped as he murmured his spell chant, moving his left hand through the complex series of patterns for Movement and Water.

The kids felt the familiar swirling vibrations of Spell energy, followed by a cold, sinking sensation. Eyes jerked open, as they took in their surroundings of tall, bristly reeds, a rushing brown torrent, and what looked like knobby logs of wood moving through the water towards them. They backed further into the reeds, through the squelchy mud.

“Torl – what’re those things?” asked Mori urgently, pointing at the moving logs.

“Dunno” he replied, keeping his gaze fixed on the moving logs. “But I think they’re some sort of creature – Oh! Borl’s Beard! Look at those teeth!” he yelled, stumbling backwards into the reeds, yanking the twins with him. The kids watched in horror as the knobby logs converged on the reed bed, jaws gaping, pointed yellow teeth revealed by the long opened jaws.

“Mori – quick – your Flash spell” yelled Torl.

A creature was heaving itself out of the water, stubby legs scrabbling for purchase on the slippery reeds. Its yellow eyes gleamed, and it gave a croaking hissing sound as it advanced towards the kids.

“Now, Mori, now!” yelled Torl .

Mori’s fingers felt like stiff Uniplaz rods, as she moved through the Flash spell. A weak bang emitted from her fingers, accompanied by cascade of purple sparks. The creature ignored the Spell, and kept coming forward ever faster, its long claws scrabbling for foothold in the slippery reed bed.

Suddenly Karski let out a high-pitched wailing call, which she repeated louder and louder. The creature slowed down, shook its head, snapped its jaws shut, then halted. Obski joined in the call, followed by the two older kids. The creature backed away, thrashing its

scaly tail, slid into the water and swam away, followed instantly by the other knobbly creatures.

“Uhhh” breathed Mori, sinking down to her knees in the marshy reeds. “That was so clever of you Karski, to use the Dori Call on those creatures.”

Karski beamed. Obski clapped her on the back and said “Who would have guessed that your guard duties would save our lives on an Otherworld! All those times you’ve called and called to chase the Dori away from the Algae Ponds, huh!” he shook his head in admiration.

“Yeah, “agreed Torl “what made you think of the Dori?”

“They do sort of look the same, all those knobbly spines on their backs” said Karski slowly. She shivered.

“Well, you saved us, that’s for sure. That thing wanted to eat us” said Torl. “Come on, let’s get out of these reeds and find some shade.”

They struggled out of the marshy reed beds, up the bank, and headed for the big shady trees growing on a slight rise, which afforded a wide view of the river. They collapsed under the trees. Torl tried Spell after Spell, but all his three-year magickal training seemed to be of no use. After ten minutes of gritty effort, he managed to manifest eight round, yellow fruit onto the ground, together with a handful of curved yellow and black skinned fruit. “Sorry – best I could do” he said, “I don’t know what they eat here on Earth.” The yellow fruits produced juicy, tangy flesh under their skins, and once the kids had worked out how to peel the curved fruit, the contents proved satisfying.

“That’s better” said Obski, wiping his hands on his trousers. “I was starving”.

Mori ignored him and said “Look,“ and pointed to the horizon where a giant red ball was quickly sinking behind glorious gold and grey cloud banks, shot with crimson. The blue sky darkened, while the kids stared in amazement. “Isn’t that beautiful? I wish we had that at home. I wonder if it happens every Cycle?”

Suddenly the sun disappeared, the blue sky turned to navy, then darkness fell. With the disappearance of the light a chorus of croaks, chirrups, bird calls, distant howls, rose and fell. A high-pitched wine, followed by a sharp sting, caused Obski to slap his arm and cry “Ouch! What was that?” Insects were rising in clouds from the thick riverine vegetation and targeting the kids.

“Torl: do something!” moaned Obski. Torl moved his fingers and hummed under his breath, until they were covered in a fine reddish mist. “How’s that?” he asked.

Miraculously the insects could not penetrate the mist, and the kids thankfully sank back on the ground. They were tired – exhausted in fact, after the day’s adventures. “Oh” exclaimed Karski, “look at the stars – there are so many, and they’re so bright. Everything here on Earth is so bright: the sky, the sun, the stars. And everything is so loud too – did you notice that when we first got here?”

“Yes, you’re right” agreed Mori. “Our world is much dimmer and quieter. And we have hardly any creatures at home, look at all the creatures we’ve seen today.”

“And the people,” chipped in Karski, “they’re all so different. At Home there’s just The People, and we’re all the same – well, mostly. I mean, some of us are young and then there are the Clan Mothers, and there are the Elders, like the Magian Zorl ...” her voice trailed off. She knew she shouldn’t be speaking about Zorl, the Magian. It wasn’t a good idea to speak about any of the Magians. Except perhaps, if you were an Apprentice Mage, like Torl, but even Torl rarely mentioned the Magians. “Torl: you haven’t said much – what do you think about Earth? Are you glad we came?”

There was a long pause. Finally Torl spoke. “Maybe I should have told you, but I didn’t – I’m sorry – suppose I should have, but our visit to this Otherworld is part of my Mage Challenge, so that I can advance to the next level. If I get us back safely, I’ll become a Journeyman Mage.” He gave an embarrassed side glance towards Mori. The kids silently absorbed the information. Torl continued. “I had no idea it was going to be so dangerous, or so difficult. But I suppose that’s what tests are all about, or they wouldn’t be tests, would they?”

“Mmm” agreed Mori. “Oh, but I’m tired. Time to sleep.” Nobody argued. They spooned up together, Torl and Mori on either side of the twins, glad of the warmth in the cooling night air, glad of the company in this hostile place.

Torl woke suddenly, aware of a subdued rustling in the nearby trees, accompanied by a deep rumbling noise. He cautiously extended his magickal vision and saw six huge, bulky shapes and two much smaller shapes standing on his right, under a group of trees. The creatures emitted a powerful, deep vibration, and he could tell they were talking to each other, while grazing on fruit hidden amongst the leaves, which they were plucking with their long trunks. He narrowed his concentration and found himself sucked into an energy current swirling around the great beasts. Slowly he became aware of yet another strong energy current, circling the small herd.

The new current was a human energy, strong, purposeful, and hunting. He began to shield himself but could feel the insistent tug of the stronger energy stream, dragging him

away, far away, to ... suddenly his magical vision revealed a massive black mountain, thrusting out in a monumental basalt fold, that looked like a wave of black liquid, arrested in time and space, to form an overhang. The rock folded in long horizontal waves, with a band of grey near the lower edge. Torl focused on the grey band and below it, on the jumbled rocky hillside, he saw a small group of low dwellings, built of uneven grey stone blocks, huddling haphazardly under the rocky overhang. The black rock gleamed dull in the faint moonlight, shadowing the stone buildings. Despite the dim light Torl saw the facade of the largest building was decorated with flat hanging shapes, all with short protrusions at the rectangular corners. They looked like - what did they look like? Familiar shapes, but not-familiar shapes. He screwed up his magical vision and concentrated.

Slowly he realized that the objects were animal skins hanging against the building, their grey and fawn colours melting into the shadows. What could their purpose be? And who would hang skins on the outside of a building? Were they intended as decoration, or a talisman, or a warning?

As he pondered the question, his energy was abruptly yanked towards the building, and dragged inside. The suddenness of the attack took him by surprise, and he had no time to fortify his personal shield. He tried to move back outside, but could not. Something – or someone – was holding him fast. Before he could think what to do next, a voice echoed in his head. *At last – now I see you! What are you? Where do you come from? And who are your ancestors?*

Torl peered into the murky shadows, but saw only dim, crumpled shapes on the floor. Certainly nothing that resembled a person, or even an animal, for that matter. A harsh laugh, almost a bark, coughed out. *You cannot see me, but I can see you*, jeered the voice. He followed the sound and saw a huge oval head, with black eye slits, white painted marks on the cheekbones, a tiny round mouth – no hair, no ears, no skin. He realised it might be a carved wooden mask, but if so, where was the body supporting the mask? *You can see me now* grated the voice. *Speak! Where do you come from? and who are your ancestors?*

“I, I ..” stammered Torl “I’m a traveler, from very far away” he temporized “and I don’t know my ancestors – they’re all dead now anyway, millennia ago. What does it matter who they were?”

Yeeesss ... I know you now – you are one of the Star People, I have seen your kind before, many years ago. They also did not know their ancestors. But I showed them. And I will show you too. People must know their ancestors, and feed them, and praise them,

for it is the ancestors who keep the sun in the sky, who turn the seasons around, who send us rain and good crops, and healthy cattle, and maidens with empty wombs for our seed. Maidens ...“the raspy voice tailed off and dropped into a low cackle that made Torl’s skin creep. Yes, continued the *voice, you have two maidens with you, I see them now.*” Torl recoiled and outrage flooded his entire being. “By Borl’s Beard,” he yelled, “you will not have them!”

* * *

“Mori, Mori ! Wake UP! There’s something wrong with Torl.”Karski shook Mori violently. “Look – he’s sitting up and shouting but there’s no sound coming out of his mouth? I’m scared ...”

Mori shot up, and in the dim pre-dawn light she saw Torl’s rigid posture, his expression of horror, and his rapidly working mouth, from which no sound came.

“He’s, he’s *dream-travelling*” she said slowly. “He can’t hear us. But something’s wrong, you’re right, Karski.”

“My Clan Mother always sings the Healing Hymn when people have bad dreams” suggested Karski, “maybe we should sing to him?”

Mori had no idea what to do, but at least doing something was better than doing nothing.

“Alright” she said. The kids knelt around Torl, stretched out their arms, linked hands, so he was surrounded. Karski sang softly in her high childish voice, while Mori supplied the base line. Obski hummed along. They sang and they sang, but Torl remained frozen in his pose of horror. “I know! “ said Karski, “Clan Mother always finishes off like this“ and she broke the hand-link and pressed her palm to Torl’s heart. Instantly she was flung backward in a flash of red sparks, and then Torl slumped to the ground, back arching, eyes rolling back in their sockets, a low moan rumbling from his belly.

“Mori!” whispered Obski, urgently grabbing Mori’s arm. She looked up and gasped. They were surrounded by the herd of huge grey creatures who had formed a circle around the kids, and stood silently, apparently watching, gently flapping their huge ears, and slowly waving their long, flexible trunks. The biggest creature lifted its trunk and trumpeted loudly. The stunned kids gaped, open-mouthed. Torl’s rigid body spasmed, then relaxed and his eyelids fluttered open. “Wha? Where?” he muttered.

“Torl : lie still” hissed Mori, her eyes glued to the cordon of grey creatures, trumpeting their wild call to the skies. His eyes rolled in the direction of the sounds, and he gasped. “Our ancestors .. they saved me ..let me ..” he tried to sit up.

“No, no” ordered Mori “Lie still! Not now! Don’t move.”

Suddenly the trumpeting stopped, the creatures lowered their trunks, and backed away from the kids. Moving in a leisurely but purposeful way the creatures silently drifted back to the clump of trees where they’d spent the night, turned, and walked away in a westerly direction. The rising sun gilded their leathery grey skins as they melted into the scrubby grassland, blending into the tawny brown landscape. Within a few minutes they had vanished altogether.

Once the creatures had faded from view, Mori turned to Torl and said “I don’t know what you mean about the ancestors saving you – I think it was me and Karski singing the Clan Mothers’ Healing Hymn that brought you back from your dream travelling. What’s all this about our ancestors?”

Torl slowly raised his eyes “You wouldn’t understand” he said softly.

“So : Twins - what have you learnt from your exploration to an Otherworld?” asked the Magian, stretching out his long legs, settling back into his carved wooden chair. His left hand rhythmically rubbed his carved stave, which he planted upright on the floor, to the side of his chair.

‘Uh ..’ hesitated Obski.

“I didn’t like it” burst out Karski, “it was too hot and too bright and too noisy, and we were hungry and thirsty all the time, and we had to keep hiding from dangerous things, and I missed my Clan Mother!” she ended, her face scarlet, and her eyes brimming.

“Sometimes home is the best” agreed the Magian. “And sometimes it is better to try these expeditions when you are older” he added, turning a hard gaze on Torl, who fidgeted guiltily.

“And you Mori?” he turned his gaze, now bright and quizzical, to the girl. “Will you be joining the new Apprentices at the beginning of the New Cycle, and when you have celebrated your 16th Anniversary?”

Mori lowered her head, shuffled her feet. The seconds stretched out in uncomfortable silence.

“I – um – if I am permitted – because I know ...” her voice tailed off.

“You will be permitted” said the Magian magisterially. “You acquitted yourself well Mori, and cared for the Twins, yes, in fact, you cared for everyone forgetting danger to yourself. We need brave women like you. Yes: you will be permitted.”

Mori blushed and her face lit up. How did he know? she wondered to herself, how did he know what we did and what happened? But she kept the question to herself. One did not question the Magian.

“Torl: what have you learned?” The Magian’s face was impassive, as he studied the young man.

Torl swallowed. What to say? Where to begin?

“I knew it would be different, travelling to an Otherworld” he began, “and I knew I – we, that is – would face trials and challenges, and we did. All of us. We saw many many creatures and I realize how few we have here on Nova V and how safely we live, in our caves, with very few dangers. When we started I couldn’t believe how a world could exist without magick, just machines to do the work, but then later on I did find the Earth magick, there was a dark mage living under the shadow of a rock, he was very old, he was dangerous, and he knew about us – he called us The Star People and asked me about our ancestors. I could not answer him ... who are our ancestors? Where did we come from?” he asked, emboldened by his memories of their adventure.

The Magian sat silently for a while. Finally he drew a small object from within his robe and beckoned Torl forward. He pressed a small object into Torl’s hand and said “ When you have discovered who your ancestors are, maybe you can return one day to the Mage under the rocks, and tell him. “ His expression was enigmatic. “Go now” he ordered.

Torl opened his hand, and almost dropped the Magian’s gift. It was made of UniPlaz, cold and smooth to the touch, a replica of the Earth Mage’s oval mask - black eye slits, white painted marks on the cheekbones, a tiny round mouth, no hair, no ears.

He gasped, and looked up at the Magian, a hundred questions seething in his brain.

But the Magian had vanished.

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Book Review By: Nial Mollison

Stryders Odyssey – 2 First Contact By Steve McClure

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The sixth planet of the Great Seeding, Thetara is the third planet from a binary sun. The story continues where we left Sam and Cody in Stryders Odyssey - 1, New Beginnings. The Order was about to capture Jon and Clara, the boys' parents. With power and guidance from the Great Wynd, direction and permission from Sam, he was able to stryde his parents out of their home on planet earth and on board the SolStar now in sub-space just before the nefarious lackey's working for the Order could capture them. Now the only immediate danger is that Clara is an unrecognised crew member and we all remember Cody's life threatening and very wet moment trying to enter the SolStar without being recognised by the ships AI.

Totally awesome stuff follows, finally Sam & Cody have time to explore this amazing star ship from its zippy Tports to its quantum singularity power sources, nothing like having a black hole battery in the room next door, good for tens of thousands of years or so – no recharge needed, well unless used in the Thetaran system.....

Circular in design, 600 foot wide with seven decks that surround the arboretum, 750 foot long with engineering, maintenance and medical levels. Shuttle bay and crew accommodations, not forgetting the main bridge where the wonders of the universe present themselves to any who would ask questions of the Great Wynd. Crew compatible, the SolStar is a feat of ancient engineering being customisable to the crew complement (in the order of 1200), species, living quarters required, climate desired and even "outside views" of whatever they felt comfortable with looking at out the windows. If that didn't quite cut it, a view and access to a real live arboretum from your assigned quarters could be arranged. And when all is quiet, a vast library to find knowledge and illumination all presented in whatever language you just happen to speak, you just have to ask.

Even the medical bays full body scan can be displayed in your language of choice, although a certain amount of discretion and privacy is required when the automatic full body scan is complete as it displays a complete full body view to all present. This however, is a minor triviality when repairs to the patient's body can take mere milliseconds to complete.

Naturally our friendly, psychotic pot plants are around to illuminate all that the Great Wynd is guiding. With allies like that, enemies beware.

In a world where high-tech means wheels, gears, ropes and pulleys to control a ship powered by the wind, that flies on ground effects, where even a black hole can't survive for long without hiding in localised gaps in the ionic deluge compliments of Thetaras' binary suns. A spectacular infusion of light as the larger draws the smaller through space disgorging sub-atomic particles as they dance across the heavens. Getting back to basics is essential then on a world where using electricity just isn't practical.

There be dragons here, and making this discovery is somewhat diminished when your son is helplessly carried off by one. Jon and Clara realize there is nothing they can do about it. Unless, perhaps they can figure out how to stryde in the time it takes

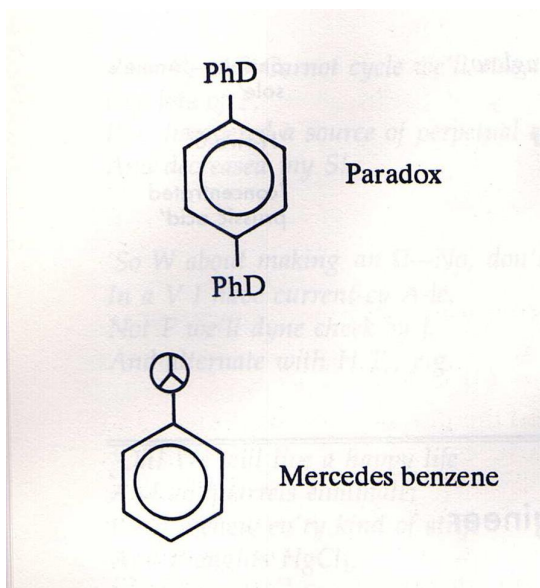
the dragons to return to their lair, but then thinking out of the box is not always possible when faced with the imminent loss of offspring. Gladly there is a Phix among the crashed shuttle crew who is able to follow, albeit at a slower pace than a dragon. Getting back to the ship is going to be much harder than simply taking a shuttle back into orbit.

And the Order has big plans for Thetara, big enough to warrant the kidnapping and incarceration of the princess, but even here the Great Wynd has orchestrated an advantage, for it is in her captors own dwelling that she will discover the key she will need to start the adventure her destiny has in store for her. A destiny that will take her much, much further than the Northern lands. But do not underestimate the Order as it has knowledge and plans to use the Thetaran idiosyncrasies to generate a portal, a portal to bring reinforcements in and take the planet and SolStar from those who call them home.

This is a refreshing story that flows perfectly from book 1, where the main characters do not have to face fear or loss at the expense of their values, but one where they listen to their hearts and put others above their own desires to reveal men, women, Phix and even dragons of good character and persistent morals. Who listen to council and have faith to do what at first seems impossible and yet leads to joy in results, reinforcing the lessons that they all work as a team far more effectively than as separate individuals.

Stepping out in faith that the guidance you are receiving is truth and will work if you do the actions required, of course if the alternative is being eaten by a dragon if you are unsuccessful, then motivation is not going to be a problem.

Wow, this is quite an adventure; I'm wrestling with myself to get some rest, but just one more chapter..... a sign of a great story indeed.....well done.



Roberta Schima