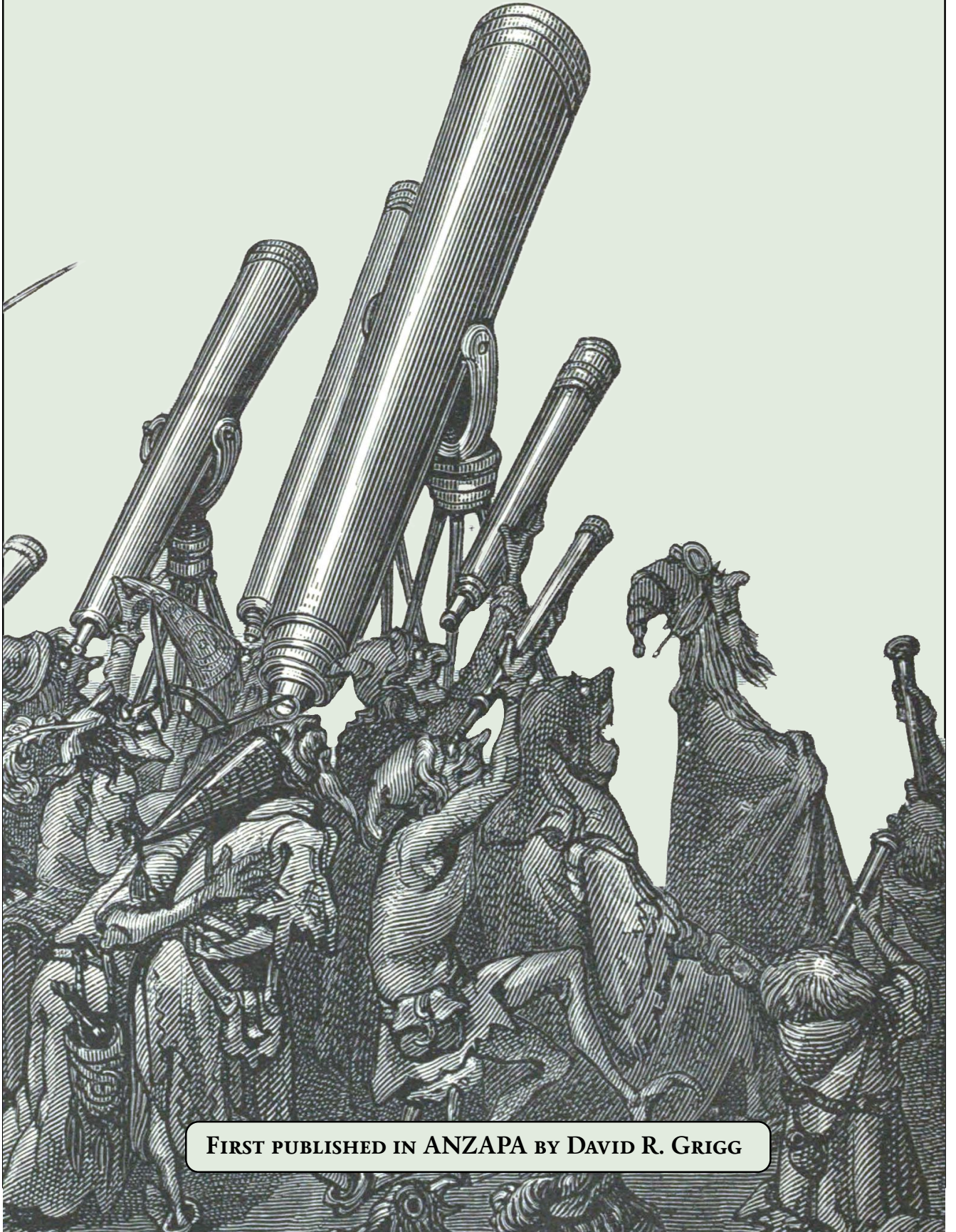


# THE MEGALOSCOPE

#2: AUGUST 2022

SPECIAL 2022 HUGO AWARDS ISSUE



FIRST PUBLISHED IN ANZAPA BY DAVID R. GRIGG



# THE MEGALOSCOPE

ISSUE #2  
AUGUST 2022

*The Megaloscope* is a fanzine from David R. Grigg, published first in ANZAPA and then available to anyone who is interested.

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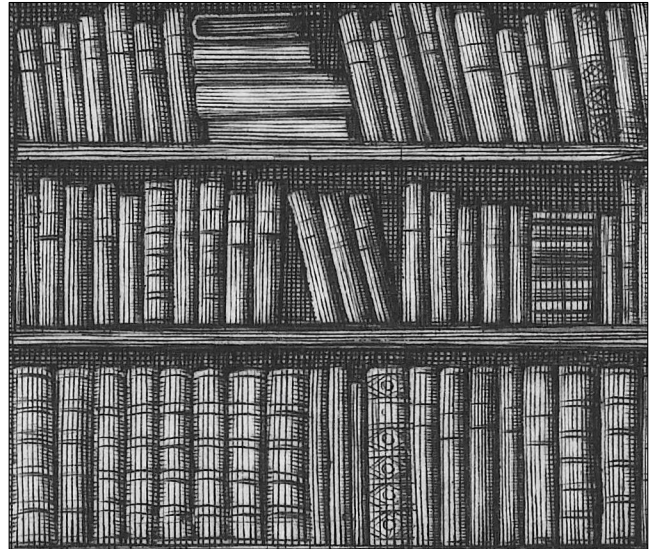
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Cover is a detail from *The Mountain in Labour* by Ernest Griset, illustrating a story in *Aesop's Fables*.  
From [oldbookillustrations.com](http://oldbookillustrations.com).

# RECENT READING



## Books read since last issue

At the time of writing, I have read 15 books since last issue, plus a *lot* of shorter fiction.

I'll deal with all the Hugo nominees first, rather than listing the works in strict chronological order in which I read them. These are just brief summaries, with links to longer reviews.

## It's Hugo Time!

Yes, it's Hugo Award season again. As always, the Hugos and associated awards will be presented at the next World SF Convention, which this year will be held in Chicago at the start of September. Voting for the Hugos will close on 11 August, so by the time you read this it will be almost too late to vote: be quick!

So a *lot* of my reading over the last two months has been these Hugo nominated works. But it hasn't comprised *all* of my recent reading by any means.

I didn't vote in the Hugos last year, but because I've been making an effort this year to read all of the nominated fiction so that Perry and I can talk about it on our [podcast](#), it seemed silly not to want to vote on the ones I liked best, so I bought a Supporting Membership to Chicon, which gets you the Hugo Voting Packet containing ebook versions of all of the nominated fiction. Great bargain.

# HUGO AWARD FICTION

## Summaries

### Hugo Nominated Short Stories

- *Mr. Death* by Alix E. Harrow
- *Proof by Induction* by José Pablo Iriarte
- *The Sin of America* by Catherynne M. Valente
- *Tangles* by Seanan McGuire
- *Unknown Number* by Blue Neustifter
- *Where Oaken Hearts Do Gather* by Sarah Pinsker

I didn't think much of any of these except the last story by Sarah Pinsker, which was structured in an interesting way and cleverly teased out a disturbing story.

[Reviews here.](#)

### Hugo Nominated Novelettes

- *Bots of the Lost Ark* by Suzanne Palmer
- *Colors of the Immortal Palette* by Caroline M. Yoachim
- *L'Esprit de L'Escalier* by Catherynne M. Valente
- *O2 Arena* by Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki
- *That Story Isn't the Story* by John Wiswell
- *Unseelie Brothers, Ltd.* by Fran Wilde

By contrast, I liked quite a few of the novelettes nominated this year. Of these, I thought the best two were the Valente and the Yoachim stories. I'll probably rank *Colors of the Immortal Palette* first, with *L'Esprit de L'Escalier* second.

[Reviews here.](#)

### Hugo Nominated Novellas

- *Across the Green Grass Fields* by Seanan McGuire
- *Elder Race* by Adrian Tchaikovsky
- *Fireheart Tiger* by Aliette de Bodard
- *The Past Is Red* by Catherynne M. Valente
- *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* by Becky Chambers
- *A Spindle Splintered* by Alix E. Harrow

I already wrote last issue about the McGuire and why it annoys me so much. Of the remainder, I definitely thought the best was the Valente and the worst (after the McGuire) was the de Bodard story.

[Reviews here.](#)

### Hugo Nominated Novels

- *A Desolation Called Peace* by Arkady Martine
- *The Galaxy, and the Ground Within* by Becky Chambers
- *Light From Uncommon Stars* by Ryka Aoki

- *A Master of Djinn* by P. Djèlí Clark
- *Project Hail Mary* by Andy Weir
- *She Who Became the Sun* by Shelley Parker-Chan

Of these, I've now read five, as listed below, all of the above except the Arkady Martine, which I've decided not to tackle as it's a sequel to a book I haven't read.

### ***A Master of Djinn* by P. Djèlí Clark**

Though this is on this year's Hugo ballot for Best Novel and actually won this year's Nebula Award, I found it a real slog to get through. Interesting setting, great concept, but the execution seems very laboured and takes forever to get anywhere. It won't be getting my vote.

[Review here.](#)

### ***The Galaxy, and the Ground Within* by Becky Chambers**

This is a lightweight piece of science fiction. Entertaining enough, in its way (certainly a lot easier to get through than *A Master of Djinn*!) but it didn't do much for me.

[Review here.](#)

### ***Light From Uncommon Stars* by Ryka Aoki**

A book with not just one but *two* completely wacky premises. I loved it. Demons, violins, donuts, starships, what more could you ask for?

[Review here](#)

*For completeness, I've included here the following two Hugo-nominated novels, though I read them last year, not recently.*

### ***She Who Became the Sun* by Shelley Parker-Chan**

I liked this a great deal. Really well-written gender-bending alternate history set in dynastic China in about the 1400s.

[Review here](#)

### ***Project Hail Mary* by Andy Weir**

OK but definitely not great technocratic SF, in which a human wakes up alone on board a starship. Why is he there, and what is his mission? For my taste, the author spends far too long explaining all the science and technology behind the solutions he implements. Entertaining but hollow.

[Review here.](#)

## Hugo Nominated Short Stories



Since Perry and I alternated which works we would discuss on the podcast, in what follows the longer pieces are for the works I discussed, with only very short notes on the ones which Perry talked about.

### **Tangles by Seanan McGuire**

I thought this was a rather uninteresting piece of fantasy. We start off with a character called Wrenn who has a companion she simply calls Six. It turns out that Six is a walking tree and Wrenn is a dryad who is able to dwell in and control certain trees with which she has some kind of magical resonance. With them, she travels between worlds in different universes/timelines (?) Six is now weary or used up and she leaves it behind on a new world, Innistrad, to look for another tree she can live in.

Cut to another POV character, Teferi, who is a wizard, who is here on Innistrad to help the locals track down a dangerous witch who is reportedly loose in the forest. Turns out, of course that the 'witch' is Wrenn. They meet up, make friends and are attacked by some kind of monster. He defeats the monster with a spell but messes it up and they have to deal with a maze of paths he's created, so they can't find their way out of the tangle; and all while Wrenn is getting weaker and weaker, not having found her special tree.

In the end it turns out that Teferi has inadvertently created a way for Wrenn to find her tree. She climbs into the tree, which thus becomes Seven, and everyone lives happily ever after. Ho-hum.

### **Unknown Number by Blue Neustifter**

So possibly the most interesting feature of this story is that it was published on Twitter, not as a series of tweets, but as a series of images, which purport to be screenshots from a mobile phone conversation in a series of texts. Well, that's interesting, yes, but I don't see how it would be

very different from presenting the same conversation as though it were a face-to-face or phone conversation. Surely the interest here can't be all about the unusual format?

Beyond that, it's a slightly touching story about someone from another timeline seeking out themselves, their doppelgänger, in this timeline to see if they changed gender, and getting some useful life advice in return. It reminded me a little of Bob Shaw's novel, *The Two Timers* which has a similar theme of someone switching timelines to try to correct a mistake they make in their own timeline.

So I put this down as OK but not outstanding. Certainly I don't think it's of the calibre that a Hugo-winner should have.

### **Where Oaken Hearts Do Gather by Sarah Pinsker**

I liked this a lot. It has an interesting structure, purporting to be a series of posts on some forum which discusses old ballads and verse. There are competing voices arguing about various aspects of a particular ballad. And we slowly start to discover that something weird must have been happening when the ballad was written, after one enthusiast visits the little English village from where it appears to originate.

Definitely the best of the short stories on this year's ballot. It will get my vote.

### **The Sin of America by Catherynne M. Valente**

I really didn't like this story much. It starts off fairly well, and is well written but it ends up seriously weird and creepy, and I don't really understand the point of it.

The core of the story is an ancient concept: the idea that one individual in a society can be chosen, either at random or specifically targeted, to atone for the sins of that society. You can see this idea coming up in many primitive societies, the idea of the "king for a day" who is then sacrificed to ensure the next harvest. It's the basis of Shirley Jackson's famous short story, "The Lottery". And of course it's the fundamental idea behind the crucifixion of Jesus, chosen to be the sacrificial Lamb of God, "who taketh away the sins of the world".

Here, the presentation is much more banal: the protagonist Ruby-Rose Martineau is eating the sin of America. Literally, somehow eating it in the form of a huge meal she's forced to consume in a local diner in the town of Sheridan. At the end, she staggers out, bloated, and then meets the kind of sticky end you would expect from knowing all these other tellings of the story.

And everybody else lives happily ever after.

Nope, didn't like it.

### **Mr. Death by Alix E. Harrow**

A lightweight but reasonably interesting story about a Death's assistant or apprentice not wanting to let the victim die (shades of Terry Pratchett's novel *Mort* though without the level of humour). I thought the ending was a bit wimpy, though.

### **Proof by Induction by José Pablo Iriarte**

I wasn't sure what the point of this story is. Love is more important than maths? I felt let down at the end.



## **Hugo Nominated Novelettes**

### **L'Esprit de L'Escalier by Catherynne M. Valente**

Considering how much I disliked "The Sin of America" by the same author, I wasn't expecting to like this. But I was wrong, I liked this one a lot. It's a clever, if depressing modernisation of the Orpheus tale.

Orpheus is a famous rock musician, living with his wife Euridice in modern-day America. Euridice is in a bad way, however, because she's dead, but has been brought back to live on Earth by Orpheus, who in this telling of the tale never looked back as they climbed up from Hades. It's this stairway, presumably, which is referenced by the title of the story which in English means "the spirit of the staircase", used figuratively by the French to describe that feeling of regret you have after thinking of the best comeback in argument, after you've left the scene. Here it's a bit more literal because the regret here is that Orpheus didn't look back at Euridice as he does in the original myth. In that myth, his looking back means she has to return to the underworld. In this telling, he didn't look back and so she returns to Earth, mobile and aware, but not alive.

Though she's back in Orpheus' house, her state as a living corpse makes his life very difficult and her existence intolerable. Late in the story she accuses him and points out that he never asked her whether she wanted to return to Earth from Hades. Like far too men dealing with women, he simply *assumed* that he knew what was best for her.

I thought this was very powerful, with a very dark sort of humour. And the points Euridice makes about her treatment by Orpheus and the breaking of the myth dig very deeply.

### **That Story Isn't the Story by John Wiswell**

This isn't a bad horror story, with something of a point to it.

We meet Anton at the point where he's filling a trash bag with his stuff, clothes and a few personal effects. He's about to leave the townhouse where he's been living with a number of other people for a long time. He's trying to escape from the owner of the place, a Mr. Bird. We quickly realise that

Mr. Bird is some kind of vampire, though his bites don't turn others into vampires, just makes them subject to his will. The bites fail to heal, and bleed copiously when Mr. Bird is near, and if he's angry.

Anton makes it out the door when Mr. Bird's car pulls up outside. If it were not for Anton's friend Grigorii, who is picking him up, Anton would be drawn back inside.

The rest of the story is about Anton's struggle not to be drawn back into Mr. Bird's house of horrors, and how his example manages to encourage the others who are living there. Anton's struggles are not without pain either to him or his friend Grigorii, and a great deal of courage is required to resist the threats Mr. Bird's acolytes make against them.

I thought this was pretty well written, and it tells an interesting story.

### **Colors of the Immortal Palette by Caroline M. Yoachim**

This would be my pick for the best of the novelettes this year. I thought it was very well written, and full of interest. It's all about art and immortality, of being an outsider, a misfit.

The first person point of view character is Mari, or properly Mariko. She's Japanese, though raised in France. As the story opens, she's working as an artist's model, and in the studio of an artist in Paris, in the late 1800s. But not just any artist. He is, it seems, immortal, perhaps a kind of vampire. This fact is no secret, and he is accepted by the other Parisian artists as just one more eccentric member of their group. Ironically, she as both a woman and an oriental, is more of an outsider than he is.

Mariko, though, isn't merely a model. She too wants to become an artist and fears she doesn't have enough time in her life to succeed, to become famous. She eventually begs the immortal artist—whose name I don't think we ever learn, it's suggested that we would recognise his name well if we knew it—she begs him to make her immortal too. He is able to do this, it seems, but at great cost to himself.

Mariko becomes immortal and tries for immortality of reknown for her art. We follow her through several periods of time, up to and beyond the modern day. Throughout, she finds it difficult to succeed in the male-dominated world of art. Until the latest period, she is better known for the nude portrait the vampire artist painted of her in the late 1800s, the portrait she was modelling for at the start of the story.

Being immortal is not without cost, of course, as Mariko realises as her close friends and the artists she knew grow old and die one by one, including her closest friend Victorine, whose loss she takes very hard.

There's a lot to this story. I was very impressed by it. It was beautifully written and will get my vote.



## **02 Arena by Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki**

Interesting enough, good concept, but I wasn't sure what the take-out message is: forget laws, just go for vigilante justice? However, it won in the Best Novelette category in the Nebula Awards, so what do I know?

## **Bots of the Lost Ark by Suzanne Palmer**

Amusing enough story, not very profound. A small bot is tasked with freeing the starship from a crowd of renegade bots.

## **Unselie Brothers, Ltd. by Fran Wilde**

A mildly amusing tale of a magical dress shop and enchanted seamstresses. dresses which take over their wearers, sometimes to fatal effect.

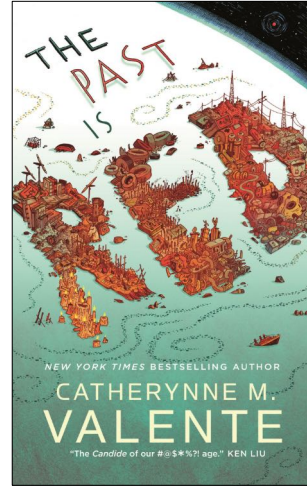


## **Hugo Nominated Novellas**

### ***Across the Green Grass Fields* by Seanan McGuire**

I already talked at length about this in the last issue. Starts very well with an engaging character facing a challenging situation... And then descends into an uninspiring fantasy. Maybe I'm being too hard on it, but I don't think so.

### ***The Past Is Red* by Catherynne M. Valente**



Definitely the best of the bunch in my opinion. I really like this one and would gladly read it again.

I was taken immediately by this story's first paragraph:

My name is Tetley Abednego and I am the most hated girl in Garbagetown. I am nineteen years old. I live alone in Candle Hole, where I was born, and have no friends except for a deformed gannet bird I've named Grape Crush and a motherless elephant seal cub I've named Big Bargains, and also the hibiscus flower that has recently decided to grow out of my roof, but I haven't named it anything yet. I love encyclopedias, a cassette I found when I was eight... plays by Mr. Shakespeare or Mr. Webster or Mr. Beckett, lipstick, Garbagetown, and my twin brother, Maruchan.

To me, this is clearly a conscious homage to the first paragraph of Shirley Jackson's wonderful novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* ("My name is Mary Kathleen Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance..."). Regardless of that, we immediately have this interesting, quirky character Tetley, and we know she lives in a peculiar place. And that's she's hated by everyone in town. There are a lot of similarities to Merricat, the narrator of Shirley Jackson's novel.

The strange place called Garbagetown, we discover, is a huge floating mass of rubbish floating on the ocean, big enough and solid enough for people to live on. Climate change has flooded the entire world, it seems, and all of what remains of humanity lives on such floating masses.<sup>1</sup>

At some point there's been the Great Sorting, in which the inhabitants have sorted out the mass of junk into logical groupings. Tetley, for example,

lives in the region called Candle Hole, where all of the candles in the garbage were collected and massed together.

So then we have to find out why Tetley is the most hated person in Garbagetown, and how she deals with that. It seems that sometime in the past she has done something terrible, or at least something that everyone except her thinks is terrible.

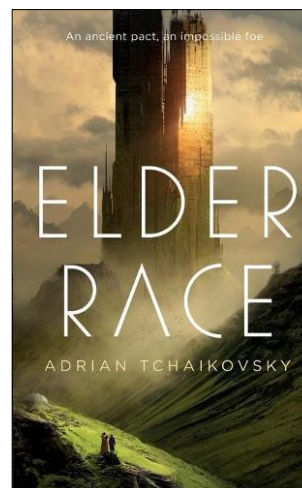
Look, I don't want to go into too much more detail. There's obviously a strong environmental message here: the survivors refer to the previous generations who wrecked the climate as simply "the Fuckwits"; not simply for their reckless burning of fossil fuels, but also because of the greed and wastefulness of the vast quantities of excessive stuff they manufactured.

Yet Garbagetown, where Tetley was born and which is the only place she has ever lived, is, she says, "the most wonderful place anybody has ever lived in the history of the world".

Tetley, like Merricat in Jackson's novel, is a fascinating character whose sad story you quickly become invested in and want to follow through her many sufferings and occasional joys. I suppose what makes her so interesting is that despite all the bad things that happen to her, she faces everything with courage and is able to remain positive and take pleasure in what she has left. It's really well written and there's plenty of wry humour and occasionally pathos such as with the sad AI device Tetley accidentally awakens, which at first thinks she is its previous owner, a teenage Korean girl, and is devastated when it finally learns better.

This will definitely get my vote for Best Novella this year.

## **Elder Race by Adrian Tchaikovsky**



This starts out as what seems to be a work of fantasy, but in fact it's a clever playing out of Arthur C. Clarke's dictum that "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

We're introduced to Lynesse, who is the fourth daughter of the Queen of a place called Lannesite. She's been climbing up a mountain with a companion to reach an ancient tower, the tower of Nyrgoth Elder. Here dwells or once dwelt a mighty wizard, and Lynesse is trying to recruit his aid to fight a demon or scourge afflicting the land. When she and her companion Esha Free Mark arrive, Lynesse is told that the wizard is sleeping, and denied the right to wake him unless she's able to prove her descent from ancient queens. This is where we first suspect we're not dealing with fantasy but science fiction, as the automated guardian of the tower takes a blood sample and presumably does a DNA test. Nyrgoth Elder is awakened.

Now the story alternates between the viewpoints of Nyrgoth and Lynesse and we find out that Nyrgoth (Nyr for short) isn't really a wizard but a scientist, an anthropologist who came to this planet centuries ago to study the people and culture. He's been in a form of deep sleep from which he awakens periodically. The other scientists left the planet a long time ago, but he was supposed to have been contacted and relieved, which hasn't happened.

The story then becomes a clever playing out of these two different viewpoints: Nyr consumed with guilt that he's interfering with something he was only ever meant to study; Lynesse baffled by why he's not blasting people with magic bolts. The author has a light touch, and there are moments of humour in this.

No need to go into any more detail, but the story plays out well as these two characters struggle to understand each other while defeating the threat which caused Lynesse to travel to Nyr's tower.

I liked this a lot, will probably rank it number 2 in the Hugo ballot.

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<sup>1</sup> You do have to suspend your disbelief a bit in reading this story: for example, the idea that there's been such a rise in sea level due to climate change that there is no dry land *anywhere*; and the complete lack of any light-speed delay indicated in a conversation with someone on another planet. But if the writing and characterisation are good enough, I'm prepared to let an author get away with this. The issue is whether such solecisms are so severe that they make you stop reading and interrupt your wilful suspension of disbelief. These didn't.

## ***A Spindle Splintered* by Alix E. Harrow**



There are some similarities between this book and *Across the Green Grass Fields* in that in both a young female character has to deal with serious problems in their real life, and in both they pass through a kind of portal into a fantasy world where they dwell for a while before returning. But I can't help feeling that *A Spindle Splintered* does a far better job of storytelling and character development.

In this one, the first-person protagonist is Zinnia Gray, who is just turning 21. She's been sick all her life, it seems, and is unlikely to live to her next birthday. She's suffering from amyloidosis, a condition in which abnormal proteins build up in a person's organs and interferes with their operation. In Zinnia's case, it seems this resulted from environmental pollution caused by a rapacious corporation.

Zinnia has also always been obsessed with the *Sleeping Beauty* story, possibly because versions of this always depict a sleeping, apparently dead beautiful girl who can be magically brought back to life. But she's very cynical about all of this. The first words in the book are:

"Sleeping Beauty is pretty much the worst fairy tale, any way you slice it. It's aimless and amoral and chauvinist as shit."

There's much more in the book in this amusing, sardonic vein. Anyway, to help celebrate her 21st, Zinnia's friend Charm organises a party in an old tower (rare in Ohio, she tells us). It's *Sleeping-Beauty*-themed of course, and she's brought along an old spinning wheel as a prop. When Zinnia pricks her finger...

She whizzes through glimpses of a multiverse of *Sleeping-Beauty*-like characters and then ends up in a tower in a castle where there's a beautiful princess right out of the fairytale. But her story isn't quite so simple... It's amusing that Zinnia's phone still works and can receive and send texts (until it runs out of charge, of course) and her friend Charm is sending WTF? messages, to which Zinnia responds "sorry babe. got spider-verse-ed into a fairy tale". That's what I mean by the sardonic humour of the whole thing.

Quite a fun story unfolds which disrupts our ideas of the original story, in which Zinnia's arrival helps the princess regain agency and control over her life without having to sleep for a hundred years.

When Zinnia finally returns to our world, she still has her terminal illness, but her multiverse experiences have at least pushed it back for a while.

I liked this novella, which I hadn't expected to do. I'll probably rank it third in this category on my Hugo ballot..

One other thing worth saying: the print version of this book makes really interesting use of Arthur Rackham's original illustrations to *Sleeping Beauty* in a collection of Grimm's fairy tales. These illustrations have been silhouetted and sometimes combined to create intriguing effects. Sample below.





## **A Psalm for the Wild-Built by Becky Chambers**



I thought that this was a pleasant-enough story, but it takes a long time to go anywhere and there's an awful lot of talking which is just the two main characters exchanging platitudes.

It's all set on what we discover is the moon of a much larger planet, but it's really pretty much indistinguishable from Earth as this fact doesn't have any real influence on the story. Centuries ago, it appears, robots as well as any electronic devices with sufficient processing power became self-aware, and quickly decided to leave humanity behind and seek their own destiny in the wilderness. Humanity then had to change itself to survive without robotic assistance and became far more environmentally aware.

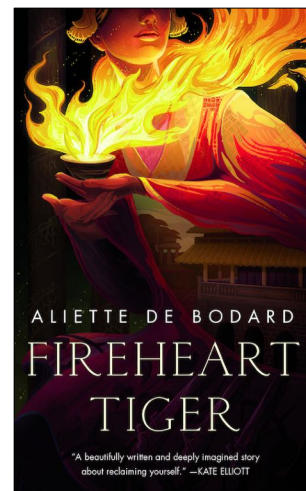
We follow the fortunes of a monk called Sibling Dex. They are gender-non-binary, you see, so we can't call them Brother or Sister Dex. Just Sibling Dex. Dex is disenchanted with their monkish life in a monastery and leaves to take up the role of a "Tea Monk".<sup>2</sup> These people are travelling monks who listen to people's woes and grumbles, give some advice and sympathy, and serve them herbal teas. Dex starts out doing a terrible job through overconfidence, but then sets to work to really learn the trade and becomes expert after a few years. But they are still dissatisfied and on a whim, Dex heads off into the wilderness where after a while they encounter a robot calling itself Mosschap. This is the first encounter between robot and human since the great departure. They spend a long time talking and exchanging observations of the world, with the robot generally having the wiser view.

And that's about it. They team up and travel together until Dex is finally convinced of their purpose in life. It was a pleasant, sometimes amusing story, but it felt lightweight.

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<sup>2</sup> I understand the reasons to use "they" and "them" etc. as gender-neutral pronouns, and it's a grave pity that English doesn't have such neutral pronouns of its own, but this approach can get very confusing at times. If we're told that "they" are heading off somewhere, does the writer mean Dex alone, or Dex and Mosschap?

## **Fireheart Tiger by Aliette de Bodard**



I really didn't like this one. I thought it was tedious in the extreme, with too much about political machinations and a weird but unconvincing love story.

We're introduced to Thanh, a younger daughter of a ruling Queen in a country which seems to be based on a medieval version of Vietnam. Thanh has recently returned from living for a few years in a neighbouring country, Ephteria, theoretically an ally but in fact a serious threat. We presume she was sent there as a kind of hostage, or surety of goodwill. She returned home after the palace in the other country was mysteriously burned to the ground. She fled the flames hand in hand with Giang, a servant girl, who subsequently vanished.

That's all background, but the bulk of the story is about the tense negotiations between Thanh's country and their perilous neighbour. Thanh is supposed to have an important role in these negotiations, but she's compromised by the fact that she had an affair with the crown princess of Ephteria, and that princess has come with the delegation and re-ignites Thanh's passion. Another complication is that Thanh inadvertently seems to keep on setting things on fire at unexpected moments.

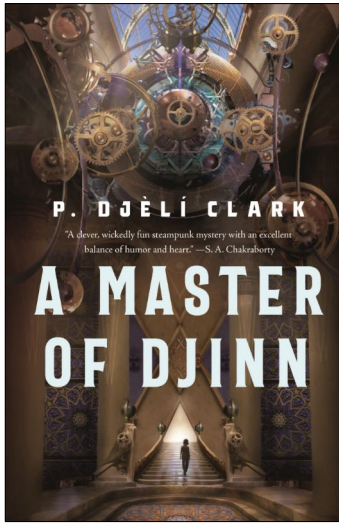
By the way, there don't seem to be any males in this world, at all, though at one point a character is described as "wearing men's clothes" so presumably men do exist, but are of no importance and kept out of sight. Regardless, all the characters in the story we encounter are female.

It turns out that Giang, the servant girl with whom Thanh fled the flames in Ephteria, isn't at all what she seemed, and the story takes a twist into fantasy.

I just couldn't get interested in all this, I'm afraid. The political manoeuvrings left me cold, and I couldn't feel much empathy for the main character.

## Hugo Nominated Novels

### *A Master of Djinn* by P. Djèlí Clark



I had high expectations of this book, based on what I'd read about its setting and concept, but I was greatly disappointed and found it hard work to get through.

The story is set in 1912 Egypt—just prior to the First World War—but in an alternate timeline where, many decades earlier, a portal has been opened into the realm of the djinn, many of whom have entered our world and live amongst humans, in some cases working alongside them, or operating businesses of their own. Djinn are beings who are all but immortal, and some of whom have immense magical power. But they also suffer from many of the failings of humans. Somehow, I'm not sure if this is meant to be connected, but we also have a bit of steampunk, or clockwork-punk in the form of mechanical servants (called “boilerplate eunuchs” for some reason), and a giant mechanical brain.

So far so good. Interesting concepts, had a lot of promise. But the execution lets it down almost completely.

It begins with a middle-aged Englishman, Archibald Portendorf, toiling up a long flight of stairs in some building in Cairo. He's bringing along some precious package to a meeting of similar Englishmen who've formed a Masonic-like society called “The Hermetic Brotherhood of Al-Jahiz”. Al-Jahiz was the 19th-Century mystic who opened the portal to the realm of the djinn. Portendorf has managed to locate the magical sword reputed to have belonged to Al-Jahiz.

This meeting however is invaded by a mysterious figure wearing a mask, declaring that he is Al-Jahiz returned. This figure seizes hold of the sword and conjures up some magic which sets the flesh of those gathered there on fire, while leaving their clothing intact, before vanishing. Everyone in the Brotherhood is dead, including Portendorf. As an aside, I really don't like books which start off by getting you invested in a character who is then despatched before the end of the first chapter.

Cut to the real protagonist of the book, Agent Fatma el-Sha'arawi of the Egyptian Ministry of Alchemy, Enchantments, and Supernatural Entities, who is tasked by the Ministry to look into the mass murder of the Brotherhood.

So the whole rest of the book details Fatma's investigation, as the purportedly resurrected Al-Jahiz starts appearing around the city and raising crowds of supporters with a message to the poor and oppressed to rise up against their masters. He is, he tells the awed crowds, Al-Jahiz, the Great Teacher, the Inventor, the Master of Djinn.

Fatma, with aid of a new assistant, Haida, and Fatma's lover Siti, spend a long time investigating, trying to work out who this imposter is—because they are certain he is an imposter—and how he obtained his powers.

And when I say “a long time”, I mean a *long* time. The book just seems to take forever to push the plotline forward. There's an immense amount of detail, some of it admittedly interesting, about Egyptian and Islamic culture and history, but it just bogs down the story as Fatma goes here and there, interviews one person after another after another or spends pages talking over matters with her associates. By the middle of the book I was really having to force myself to keep going.

I also couldn't engage with Fatma's character. We really find out very little about her other than the fact that she likes to wear a series of different elegant suits and bowler hats, seemingly a different outfit every day (I couldn't work out how she can afford this obviously extensive wardrobe on her public servant's salary) and that she has the hots for Siti.

And the crucial moment which sees the defeat of the imposter isn't through any action of Fatma, Haida or Siti but that of another character who up until this point has played a minor role.

At the end, too, things don't quite seem to add up. When I had found out who the imposter really was and what their real motives were, I thought back to the earlier parts of the book and much of it didn't make sense to me in the light of those revelations. There were also a number of troubling loose ends left dangling. What, for example, were the motives of the “Angels”—spirits who walk around in mechanical exoskeletons—who it seems engineered matters to make sure the imposter obtained a powerful magical object?

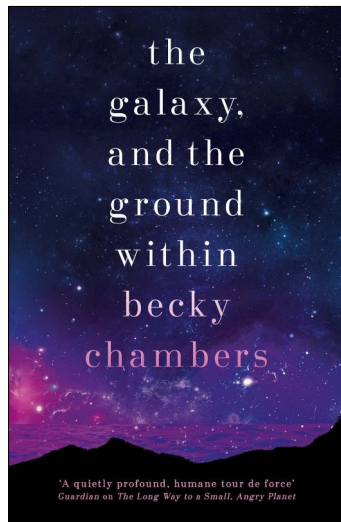
So, disappointing all round.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I was also annoyed by the author's continual use of “said-bookisms”, silly avoidances of the word “said”, eg (my italics):

“Lots of that to go around,” Fatma *assured*.  
“Agent Fatma,” the policeman *greeted*.  
“[That] would be desecration!” Harmony *melodically lectured*.

## ***The Galaxy, and the Ground Within* by Becky Chambers**



This is a mildly entertaining but ultimately lightweight piece of SF. Apparently it's the final of a four-book series called *The Wayfarers*, none of which I've read, nor am I likely to on the basis of this one.

The set-up here is an extremely familiar one, which has been used many times before, particularly in theatre and in crime fiction: a bunch of people, none of whom have met before, are stranded together in the same location for an indeterminate period without being able to leave; the story such as it is is about their personal interactions and occasional conflicts; and eventually they all depart, possibly sadder but wiser, having made friendships or enemies during their stay.

The fact that in this book all the people are purportedly different alien species with a wide variety of body types and methods of communicating, from radically different cultures doesn't change this basic set-up one jot. And that's the problem, I think.

Let me start at the beginning, though. Almost all of the action is set on a small world called Goran, which is a way-station for interstellar travellers waiting their turn to pass through wormholes to various destinations. Goran was a barren, lifeless rock with little atmosphere, but now it's crammed with hostels, brothels, bars and so on.

The various characters of the story are all staying in one hostel on the surface when a power satellite undergoing maintenance blows up and creates a cascade of orbital debris which prevents communication and any space flight. This is the equivalent in other such stories of an island's only bridge collapsing or the ferry sinking, or what have you.

So all the people in the hostel are stuck there until the mess is cleaned up, which may take several days.

And that's it. There's no other real action apart from these people talking to each other, visiting,

having meals, having arguments and so on. The closest we get to any action is when the young child of the hostel owner has a near-fatal accident which of course forces everyone there to cooperate despite their differences.

None of the people at the hostel are humans. At least we're *told* they are not humans, and get a fair amount of detail of how they differ from humans physically, and how their cultures are different and so on. But the problem is that they all speak and think *exactly like middle-class white Americans*. Even the child of the hostel host (a furry, multi-limbed marsupial-like alien) behaves and speaks exactly like an American teenager. There seems nothing the least bit alien, unusual (and therefore interesting) about any of the thinking patterns of the characters.

Here, for example, is a sample of an argument between Pei (a scaly crab-like being who communicates in colour) and Speaker (a tiny arboreal beast who breathes methane):

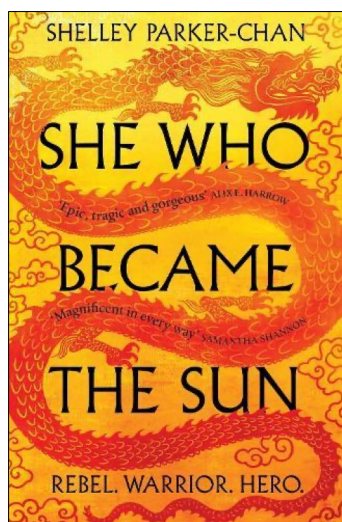
Everything about Speaker's tone and cadence was disarmingly pleasant, but Pei knew a *don't fucking insult me* stare when she saw one.

Now, really, how would that encounter be any different if it was between two middle-class American women rather than these exotic aliens?

So this was pretty much what I was thinking all through the book. But as I say, it's entertaining and pleasant enough, an easy read. Much easier than *A Master of Djinn*, that's for sure.



## ***She Who Became the Sun* by Shelley Parker-Chan**



This is the debut novel for this Australian author, and it's very good. It's historical fiction, set in China towards the close of the Yuan dynasty in the mid 1300s when China was ruled by its Mongol conquerers.

The book begins in a poor village in the middle of a devastating drought. Many people are starving to death. One of the villagers, whose wife has died, takes his son and daughter to see the local fortune-teller. The fortune teller examines the boy, whose name is Zhu Chongba, and is astonished. "This child has greatness in him... His deeds will bring a hundred generations of pride to your family name." After her father and brother have left, the younger child, the girl, timidly asks the fortune-teller about her own fate. "Nothing," says the old man.

Nothing. But when her father is killed by bandits and her brother grows listless, refuses to eat, and dies, the girl (whose name we never learn) is determined to seek his lost greatness for herself. Taking on his name and identity and pretending to be a boy, she sets off to walk to a monastery to which her brother had been promised entry as a novice.

From there, we follow the fate of "Zhu Chongba" as she is trained as a monk (still concealing her gender) and then joining the Rebel Army trying to overthrow the current rulers. Her sharp intelligence and courage leads her from one unlikely step to another to seek the greatness promised to one of that name. She finds herself in continuing bitter conflict with a Yuan general, a eunuch called Ouyang, who is secretly pursuing an agenda of his own.

The story is mostly straight historical fiction, but it does have elements of fantasy. "Zhu Chongba" can see ghosts, for example, and the rebel army locates the Prince of Radiance, a child imbued with a visible spiritual glow—"The Mandate of Heaven"—and who remembers all of his past incarnations.

I liked it a lot, though some of Zhu Chongba's actions, particularly at the end, are disturbing. Her ruthlessness in pursuit of her stolen fate is rather unsettling.

This, though, is just the first book in a projected duology. I'm looking forward to reading the second volume.

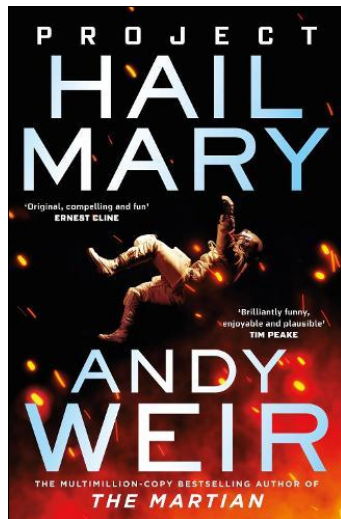
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It's worth adding here that Shelley Parker-Chan gave a fascinating talk about her book at a recent Nova Mob meeting. It was very interesting to hear about her being influenced by Chinese dramas in movies and television, as well as by her deep interest in Chinese history.

Also notable is that for a long time Parker-Chan couldn't sell the book because the "literary" publishers weren't interested due to the way it bends real history, but the sf/fantasy publishers weren't interested because it didn't include any fantasy elements (despite alternate history being an established sub-genre). So all of the business about ghosts and some of the scenes to do with the Mandate of Heaven were introduced in order to meet the publisher's demands. Still, the author did do a good job of that, and these parts don't feel "bolted on".

She also said that she and the book have been thoroughly denounced by the *China Daily* because she has dared take a revered historical leader, change their gender and mess with the timeline. She would be *persona non grata* in China, and needless to say won't be going to the Worldcon there.

## Project Hail Mary by Andy Weir



In many ways this is very similar to Weir's first book *The Martian*. Yet again we have a male protagonist stranded all by himself in a hostile environment who has to use his wits and knowledge of science to get out of it.

In this case, the protagonist is a man called Ryland Grace. He wakes up, and at first he has no idea where he is. He's alone. Except for a disembodied, very bossy AI and a couple of desiccated corpses.

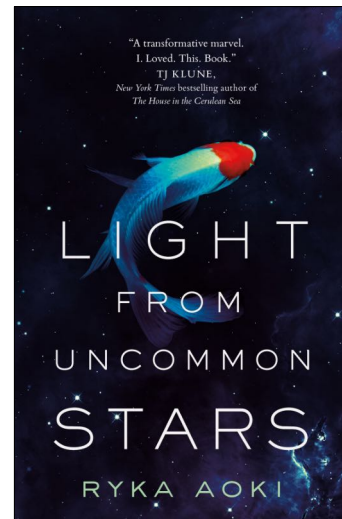
He eventually comes to understand that he and the crew are on board a spaceship and that they are on a critical mission to save humanity. Except that the rest of the crew is dead due to some failure of the deep-sleep system. He's alone.

We eventually find out what the mission is about and why Grace and the others were sent to Tau Ceti. The Solar System has become infected by a space-dwelling bacterium which is absorbing energy from the Sun. He's been awoken by the AI because the spacecraft is about to arrive.

Not long afterwards he discovers that he is in fact *not* alone. There's another spacecraft in the Tau Ceti system, but it didn't come from Earth. The alien on the other craft is also alone, with all the rest of *its* crew dead (gosh, what are the odds?). Together Grace and the alien figure out how to save mankind and alienkind. Hooray!

Look, this is entertaining enough stuff, but just as in *The Martian*, Andy Weir indulges far too much in gleeful technical explanations of how his protagonist is solving the series of problems he's faced with. I also found it impossible to engage with Ryland Grace, who doesn't appear to have much depth to his character and, as we see him in a series of flash-backs, appears incapable of developing any personal relationships until he meets up with his mirror-image alien buddy. Nothing in the book has any relation to real people or real life. Not my cup of tea.

## Light from Uncommon Stars by Ryka Aoki



This novel is based on a couple of completely wacky premises. But I *like* wacky ideas if the author can pull it off, and Aoki certainly does here. I *really* liked this novel, to my great surprise (since the capsule synopsis I read make me think I would hate it). In fact, if it weren't for my patriotic desire to vote for an Australian author in preference (Shelley Parker-Chen), I would vote for this as Best Novel in this year's Hugo Awards.

So what are these wacky premises?

Firstly, we have a Japanese virtuoso violinist, Shizuka Satomi, who, we discover, has sold her soul to Hell in order to be able to continue performing after she develops an injury to her bowing hand. But she's been granted a reprieve: if she can deliver up the souls of seven other violinists to Hell instead, she'll be released. So far, working as a violin teacher to build up students to the highest levels of performance and desire for fame, she has delivered six of her students to Hell.

Second wacky premise: a family of aliens has fled an interstellar war in a Galactic Empire and landed on Earth, where they have incorporated their spaceship into a donut shop in suburban Los Angeles, and, disguised as humans, are busily selling donuts, having bought the business from the previous owners.

Okay...

But at the start of the novel we don't know any of this. Instead we follow a teenager called Katrina Nguyen, who is running away from home, having been badly beaten by her father, to the extent of having a black eye and a broken rib. She's been abused in this way because she is a trans woman, born male but convinced that she is really female. Her Asian family can't accept this in any way and so she has had to escape.

The other thing which is important about Katrina is that she's taught herself to play violin, again largely to the disgust of her father, who has already

smashed one instrument. She arrives in Los Angeles to stay in a share house with a friend, but things aren't much better there, as the other people in the house treat her badly, too, if in different ways.

Katrina's situation is handled with great empathy and deep understanding, no doubt because the author herself is also a trans woman, and much of what happens to Katrina seems likely to have come from Ryka Aoki's own experiences. However that may be, the reader quickly develops a real sympathy and interest in Katrina's character.

But in Los Angeles, Katrina eventually comes into contact with Shizuka Satomi, who, you'll recall, is seeking the seventh and final violin student she can deliver to Hell to save her own soul.

You'd think that we'd see Shizuka as a completely evil character, but that's far from the case. She's tormented by what she's done, and her initial treatment of Katrina is gentle and kindly, eventually taking her into her own home and taking her to visit a violin repair shop to mend her violin, which has been badly damaged by the other people in the share house where she lived for a while.

There's a really nice sub-plot to do with Lucia who is the owner of the violin repair business, which is called Matia and Sons. Throughout her life she's been told that only men, only *sons*, can carry out professional violin repair work. But her grandfather and father are now dead, and her brother isn't interested in the business. However, with Shizuka's support, she begins to gain confidence in her own skills, though she isn't a *son* but a *daughter*.

Oh, and what about the aliens? Well, that's a really interesting secondary plot, too. Through circumstances which would be too lengthy to explain, Shizuka becomes a frequent customer of the donut shop and starts to become very friendly with the female owner, Lan. Who happens to be both the captain of the hidden spaceship and the mother of a small family. This friendship between Shizuka and Lan develops and eventually becomes a romantic relationship.

Look, all of this does sound wacky, but it's handled brilliantly well. You have Katrina's character arc as she is slowly taught violin and gain confidence in herself, overcoming her feelings of shame and self-disgust; you have Shizuka's very interesting character arc as she struggles with her growing love for Katrina as though she were her own child, yet knowing that she must reach a point where she'll hand Katrina over to a demon; you have the concerns of the alien Lan for her family, not all of whom are integrating well with humanity, and constant fears of being discovered by the Galactic Empire.

Will Shizuka damn Katrina's soul? Will Lan and her family of aliens survive? Will Lucia conquer her doubts and become a violin repair *maestra*? The

tension builds.

Look, as I say, I liked this all a great deal. Certainly not a book everyone will love, but I certainly did.

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## Final thoughts on the Hugos

I didn't end up reading the sixth novel nominated for this year's Hugo, *A Desolation Called Peace*, because it's a sequel to Arkady Martine's Hugo-winning novel *A Memory Called Empire*, which I haven't read. Everyone I asked told me that to understand *Desolation* I would need to have read *Empire* first. And they are both very thick books. I had a bit of a look at *Empire* but couldn't get into it, so I've decided to give them a miss, at least at the moment. Having read all of the nominated short fiction and five out of six nominated novels is pretty good going anyway, I reckon.

Sadly I've come away mostly unimpressed by the current state of the genre, at least as represented by these nominees. Are those really the best works of fiction written in the genre during 2021? Why weren't *Bewilderment* and *Cloud Cuckoo Land* nominated for Best Novel? They are by far the best SF books I read which were published that year. It will be interesting to see where they rank in the comprehensive list of works nominated by Worldcon members when it eventually comes out.

One thing I think is worth at least noting, though I don't want to dwell on it too much, is that out of the six nominated novels,<sup>4</sup> there's not a single heterosexual relationship depicted, nor for that matter a single *male* relationship of any kind. To be clear I have absolutely no problem with LGBTI+ relationships being depicted in fiction, given how many, many years such relationships were hidden away in both society and literature. But weren't we looking for an increase in *diversity*? There seems to be distinct *lack* of diversity of personal relationships in this set of Hugo-nominated novels.

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<sup>4</sup> As I haven't read all six nominees, I'm relying here on what Perry Middlemiss tells me about *A Desolation Called Peace*. You could, I suppose, argue that there's a female-alien/male-human relationship described in *The Galaxy and the Ground Within*; but even that is just talked about rather than actually occurring in the novel.



## OTHER READING

Yes, I have managed to read something other than Hugo-nominated fiction in the last couple of months, though I'm not sure how.

### Summaries:

#### ***Sea of Tranquility* by Emily St. John Mandel**

I liked this SF novel a good deal. It's by the author of *Station Eleven* and *The Glass Hotel*, both of which I also liked a lot. It has four main characters, each of whom lives in a different period of time, their stories connected by the fourth character. Cleverly done and thought-provoking.

[Review here.](#)

#### ***Wake* by Shelley Burr**

Excellent debut crime novel by an Australian author, dealing with the investigation into a 20-year old cold case of the inexplicable disappearance of a ten-year old girl in rural Australia. I'll definitely be looking out for more from this author.

[Review here.](#)

#### ***Frostquake* by Juliet Nicholson**

Really interesting non-fiction about the terrible winter of 1962-1963 in Great Britain, and about the dramatic social changes that occurred at that time. Since this was a time when I a child growing up in England (having just turned 11 years old) this book has a lot of personal interest for me.

[Review here.](#)

#### ***The Girl Savage* by Katherine Rundell**

Engaging middle-grade book about a girl growing up in Zimbabwe who is forced to leave to attend a boarding school in England.

[Review here.](#)

#### ***The Explorer* by Katherine Rundell**

Another middle-grade book by this author. This one is a pretty good adventure story of a group of children whose plane crashes into the Amazonian jungle.

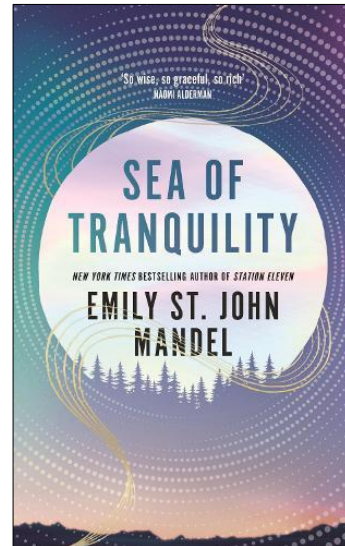
[Review here.](#)

#### ***The Circle* by Dave Eggers**

Published in 2013 but still a very effective warning and polemic, if not great as a novel.

[Review here.](#)

#### ***Sea of Tranquility* by Emily St. John Mandel**



This is a gently-paced handling of some traditional science fictional ideas with a few unexpected twists along the way. One thing which was unexpected is that it's a kind of sequel to Mandel's previous novel, *The Glass Hotel*, with some of the same characters, though that earlier novel was pretty much a work of pure realism, whereas there's no doubt that this one is SF.

The book is told in sections set in four different periods of time, each section with a different main character. It's a structure we've seen before in such books as *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell and *Cloud Cuckoo Land* by Anthony Doerr. It works well here.

We begin with Edwin St. Andrews, a young man just arriving in Canada. He's a "remittance man"—banished to the colony by his English family and given a regular but small allowance with the expectation that he will stay there. He's spoken out too boldly and critically about the British Raj in India and is thus in disgrace. Not really knowing what to make of his life, Edwin eventually finds his way north to the tiny settlement of Caiette on Vancouver Island. After a few weeks there he has a very strange experience while walking in the woods. Though it only lasts for a few seconds, he is suddenly blinded; he feels himself inside some vast space and hears strange noises: a violin being played, and then a louder, incomprehensible sound. He's unnerved by this experience and wonders about his sanity.

Then we move to the modern day with a character called Mina, who was a friend of Vincent, the protagonist of *The Glass Hotel*. As this section opens, Vincent's brother Paul is putting on a concert in which he replays some video which Vincent shot when she was young and living in Caiette. The

<sup>5</sup> There's a joke by the author I'd like to note here: the title of the book which Olive is on tour promoting, *Marienbad*, obviously references the 1961 film *Last Year at Marienbad*, which also has confused and overlapping timelines.

video shows an experience similar to that of Edwin St. Andrews many decades earlier.

A couple of hundred years later, that is, into our future, we meet an author called Olive, who lives in a colony on the Moon. At the moment, she's on Earth, on a global tour to promote her new book, *Marienbad*, which is a novel with many characters and settings but featuring a world-wide pandemic which kills millions.<sup>5</sup> This becomes highly self-referential as while she's on Earth a real pandemic is just breaking out. As she leaves Earth, Olive, too, is to experience this strange momentary shift in consciousness.

These three periods of time, and the strange experiences of Edwin, Vincent and Olive, are tied together eventually by a character from the fourth period in the book, a man called Gaspary, who also lives on the Moon, but centuries on even from Olive's time. This character's story is the only one told in the first person.

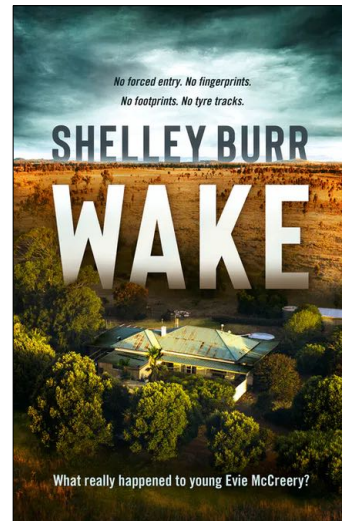
It's not giving too much away to say that time travel is involved, but also the unnerving idea that we may all be just living in some immense computer simulation of reality. And that simulation may have the occasional software glitch.

The book ends in a satisfying way with the resolution of the mysteries it poses. I thought this was all very cleverly done. Each of the four main characters of the book is well-drawn and their stories are engaging. I liked it a lot.

I do admit that I was annoyed by the technical inaccuracy of a couple of things: the suggestion that the colonies on the Moon use gravity generators to create Earth-normal gravity there is a casually thrown-away bit of nonsense science; and the lack of any light-speed delay when Olive talks to her partner on the Moon while she's on Earth..

It's worth noting that *Sea of Tranquility* was written in the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic, during an extended lockdown, and that in the book Olive undergoes just such a difficult-to-endure lockdown when she returns to the Moon.

## Wake by Shelley Burr



This is a terrific debut crime novel by an Australian author.

It opens with a woman called Mina McCreery doing some grocery shopping in a small town in rural NSW when she notices a stranger in the store who is paying her a great deal of attention. Strangers are rare: the town is out of the way and few travellers stop to buy things at the tiny general store. Uncomfortable, she heads out quickly, but he catches up with her in the street.

She knows what it will be about. At best it will be a journalist trying to pick get an interview for a story for the 20th anniversary of the mysterious abduction of Mina's twin sister, Evie, at the age of 10. At worst it may be a random individual who has been reading about the case on the Internet and wants to try out their pet theory, or worse still, accuse Mina herself of some part in the crime.

The case created a sensation at the time because Evie disappeared at night from the girls' shared bedroom, with no sign of a break-in, no fingerprints, no unusual tyre marks around their remote property. It is still unsolved.

The stranger, however, turns out to be neither a journalist nor an Internet-inspired pest. His name is Lane Holland and he says he's a private investigator who has had success in cracking cold cases. In point of fact, he hopes to solve old cases in order to earn the reward. There's a \$2 million reward outstanding on the Evie McCreery case.

Mina harshly rejects his offer to look into the case, and drives off in anger. Eventually, though, through the influence of a friend, she's persuaded to work with him.

Through the book, Mina's point of view alternates with that of Lane Holland, and we gradually start to understand that there are complexities to him: he's not just a bounty hunter, but there's something driving him to solve this particular case. Though he's made money this way in the past, he's now nearly broke and desperate, and he's deeply worried

about the well-being of his much younger sister Linnie, about to start as a student at the ANU in Canberra.

So there are two mysteries: firstly the original case as to what happened to Evie McCreery; and secondly why Lane is so emotionally invested in its solution. The author handles the slow development of answers to these mysteries in a very assured way.

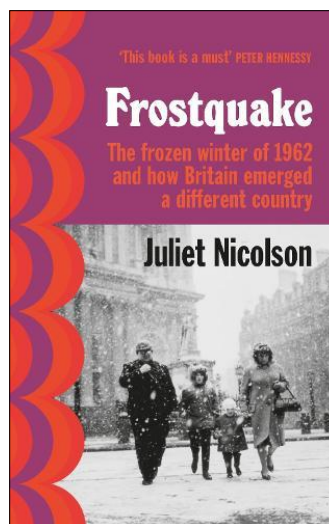
A clever technique used in the book is the inclusion of excerpts from a Reddit-like forum of people obsessed with cold cases, and the arguments back and forth between the participants, coming up with exotic theories about who abducted Evie and more importantly how. Many posters accuse Mina's mother or the wife of the farm manager or even Mina herself (though of course she was only ten years old at the time).

The closing chapters go in an unexpected direction and lead to a shattering conclusion, and a resolution I didn't see coming.

I thought this was a very impressive debut novel. The book is deeply engaging, one of those books which you are very reluctant to put down and which even when you've finished it, you think about for quite a while afterwards. The characters are really well drawn and have considerable depth, and the confident depiction of the remote rural areas and rural life of Australia is interesting in itself.

I'll definitely be keen to read anything else Shelley Burr writes.

## **Frostquake by Juliet Nicholson**



This book is subtitled: *The frozen winter of 1962 and how Britain emerged a different country.*

When I put this book on hold at the library, I had thought that it would just be a straightforward account of the bitter winter of December 1962 to March 1963. But it's much more than that: a fascinating snapshot of a country and a culture in the process of radical change, and also a semi-autobiographical account of the author's life during that period, very interesting in itself.

This period, and that winter in particular, is of direct personal interest to me, because I grew up in England and in December 1962 I was 11 years old, just about to start high school. I remember that winter in particular because one night my father, who was a telephone engineer, was trapped in some telephone exchange, unable to get home because the roads were impassable due to snow. That night, all of the electrical power failed in our neighbourhood and we therefore had no heating. My mother, my much younger brother and myself were forced to huddle close together in bed with every quilt we owned on top in order not to freeze to death. When my father finally got back the next day, my parents made up their minds to emigrate to sunny Australia, which we did less than two years later.

So reading Nicholson's account of the extremes of that winter is of obvious interest to me.

But the author also fills the book with a really well researched account of the social changes which were happening at the time. She is three years younger than myself, which makes her eight years old during the period she describes, but she has bolstered her memories with solid, well-documented research. As well as extensive footnotes, there's also an excellent index to the book.

Cultural change was in the air: the Beatles were just beginning to achieve popularity, touring the country endlessly despite the appalling weather to give live performances. One of their songs, "Please



Please Me” hit the top of the charts in February 1963. A group of housemates living in a small flat in Edith Grove, led by a young man by the name of Mick Jagger, studying at the London School of Economics, started up a band called the Rolling Stones. A contact suggested to Jagger that “if you pretend to be wicked, you’ll get rich”. So that’s what he did.

During that same winter, a folk singer called Bob Dylan was brought to England to act in a drama for the BBC. Interestingly it was the poet W. H. Auden who had seen Dylan perform in New York and who tipped off the producer. When he reached England, however, it wasn’t long before the producers realised he couldn’t act. He couldn’t really sing, either, of course, but his songs were compelling.

A great deal of this information about the early days of pop music in Britain was new to me, and thus of great interest.

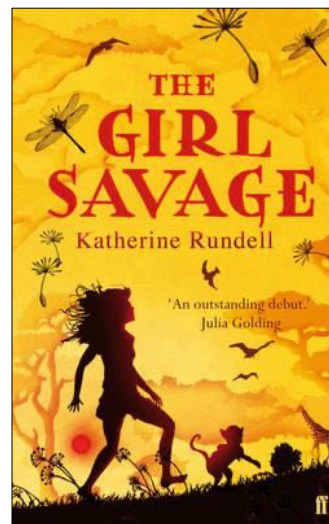
The designer Mary Quant was taking the fashion world by storm; the talented poet Sylvia Plath plunged into deep depression due to her husband Ted Hughes’ infidelity and took her own life; the Profumo Affair which led to the downfall of Harold MacMillan’s government was in full flight: at the March election, MacMillan was thrown out, the Labour Party under Harold Wilson took office and began making progressive changes.

It was a time of ferment, a very interesting period to live through, and Juliet Nicholson does a great job in tying it all together.

In addition to all of this, it turns out that the author is the granddaughter of the prominent writer Vita Sackville-West and her husband Sir Harold Nicolson, and she describes many visits to their famous garden at Sissinghurst. Vita died a few months before this book begins, and the author describes Harold’s debilitating grief at her loss.

A fascinating book, highly recommended if you have any interest in this time in Britain.

## ***The Girl Savage* by Katherine Rundell**



I bought this book for my granddaughter alongside three others by Katherine Rundell, because I’d really liked the author’s *Rooftoppers*. And of course I had to read these books before I passed them on to my granddaughter to make sure they were suitable for her age and reading level. Of course!

The protagonist of *The Girl Savage* is young Wilhelmina Silver (known by all as just “Will”), who has grown up in rural Zimbabwe on a farm where her father is the foreman. Her mother died of malaria when Will was very young, and she’s been allowed to grow up with little supervision, dressing roughly, washing infrequently, climbing trees, getting into scrapes, riding horses, speaking the native language fluently, with the farm’s native horse-boys as her closest friends. She is the “wild savage” of the title, but she loves this life and this place.

Then her father, too, succumbs to malaria and the elderly owner of the farm, Captain Browne, marries a cynical woman intent on outliving him and becoming a rich widow. It’s not long before Will and Mrs Browne are in conflict, and she’s packed off to a boarding school in England, a place she has never been. Though she’s been bought new clothes, Will burns these in furious protest. So she’s sent off in what she’s wearing and arrives in cold, damp England poorly dressed to withstand the cold weather. Arriving at the prestigious girls’ school where she’s been enrolled, she’s instantly the subject of mockery and the cruelty of other children.

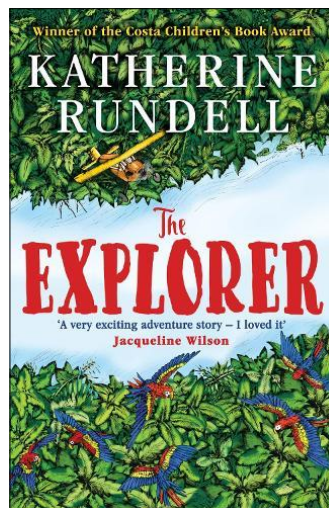
When her misery overflows, Will contrives to escape and lives the life of a fugitive on the streets, hoping somehow to find a way to return to Zimbabwe.

Will’s boldness and courage in adversity make her a compelling character, and her story is very engaging. Though this is a tough read for a child (I’ll probably wait another year before giving it to my granddaughter), the book does eventually reach an unexpectedly happy ending which seemed impossible for quite a while.

I imagine that much of this book is based on the author's own experiences, as I see from [Wikipedia](#) that she spent much of her early childhood living in Zimbabwe, where she attended school only in the mornings and never had to wear shoes. When her father, a diplomat, had to move to Belgium, Rundell by her own account suffered the same kind of culture shock that Will does in this book.

*The Girl Savage* has won or been shortlisted for several awards, either under that title or under the title *Cartwheeling in Thunderstorms*. In Britain it won the Blue Peter Book Award, the Waterstones Children's Book Prize and the Costa Children's Book Award, and in the U.S. it won the 2015 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for fiction.

## ***The Explorer* by Katherine Rundell**




Another of the books I've purchased as a gift for my granddaughter. I'll be giving it to her shortly. It does have some challenges for a young reader, though, such as a scene where the characters are forced to eat roasted tarantulas! Still, she's read the first three Harry Potter books, which have some scary bits, so I'm hoping it will be OK.

The book tells the story of the children Fred, Constantia, Lila and Max, whose small aircraft crashes into the Amazonian jungle, killing the pilot. Fred, Constantia ("Con") and Lila are all about the same age, perhaps 11 or 12. Max, Lila's brother, is much younger, perhaps four or five.

Surviving in the jungle is a steep challenge for these children, but they manage for a while, hoping for rescue which never comes. But when they find an old map in a tobacco tin, they decide to head off down the river, following the map, on a raft which Fred builds from tree limbs and vines.

What they find at the location indicated on the map isn't at all what they expected, however, and the challenges multiply.

This is a pretty good adventure story, with plenty of tension which never gets too scary, and interesting, well-researched descriptions of the Amazon rainforest and its creatures. I liked it a lot. I hope my granddaughter does, too.

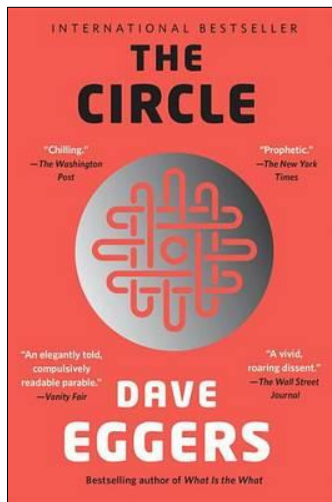


Don't forget to check out *Through the Biblioscope*, my fortnightly newsletter about my reading, as well as my monthly newsletter featuring my short fiction, *A Flash in the Pan*. You can get both delivered to your email inbox, or view them in the Substack app.

[Through the Biblioscope](#)

[A Flash in the Pan](#)

## The Circle by Dave Eggers



This novel was written about ten years ago. Given that it deals very much with social networks and powerful technology companies, you would think that by now it would be well out of date. That's not the case, however, and given when it was written I think we can say that it was extremely prescient.

The novel is meant as a warning, and it succeeds in that. In many ways it's quite disturbing, and exemplifies the phrase "the road to Hell is paved with good intentions".

The focus of the story is a huge technology corporation called The Circle, which combines a social network like Facebook and a search engine like Google with the device manufacturing capabilities of Apple, but it has much wider ambitions than any of those organisations.

We're introduced to the organisation through the experiences of young Mae Holland, who is thrilled to have landed a job at The Circle through the influence of a friend, Annie.

As she is shown around the huge campus with its incredibly good facilities for staff, we discover more and more about The Circle and what it is trying to do. I must confess that I found this part of the book a tedious slog, perhaps because we're now so familiar with these kinds of high-tech, superior quality facilities which have been developed in the real world, and therefore none of it seemed very surprising or particularly interesting.

As the book progresses, however, we see Mae being transformed from a nervous outsider into a valued employee and eventually into a whole-hearted devotee of the Circle's plans. But these plans become more and more creepy, more and more invasive, more and more dismissive of privacy concerns.

You may recall the statement attributed to Scott McNeally of Sun Microsystems in 1999: "You have no privacy. Get over it". That's certainly the philosophy of The Circle, whose motto is: ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN. To this effect,

The Circle's engineers have developed high definition miniature cameras which wirelessly connect to the Internet, broadcasting continually. They are installing millions of them all over the world, saying that they will reduce crime, terrorism and the power of autocratic states. The Circle is pushing for all politicians to go "transparent": to wear personal video cameras all of the time that broadcast their every move and every word. They are also pushing their own payment system, planning to take over most world currencies.

When they meet resistance from politicians, well that's not really a problem. The Circle controls the search engine which everyone now uses. Is it any surprise that politicians who oppose The Circle are suddenly revealed as having connections to child pornography rings, or having their secret bank accounts exposed? If you control everyone's access to information, you control *everything*.

The protagonist, Mae Holland, goes through a process with several embarrassing ups and downs, which pushes her more and more to accept all of The Circle's plans as benign, for the good of humankind, forcing her and us all to be our "better selves". And Mae's character arc is where the novel lost me. She becomes an unlikeable and annoying main character with no redeeming features and so I don't think the book works very well as a novel.

Mae continues act in ways in which she clearly shouldn't be acting, making one bad decision after another. One of those books where I want to shout at the character "don't do that, you idiot!" The more Mae accepts The Circle's philosophy, the more she drives away her parents and her old friends,

There is another plot thread in which Mae encounters a strange individual, a youngish man but with prematurely grey hair, who calls himself Kalden. She meets him at infrequent intervals at The Circle and becomes sexually involved with him, but nevertheless she can't get him to tell her exactly in what department he works or what he does there. Is he a spy or an intruder, as her friend Annie thinks? Yet security within the Circle is of course intense and there are cameras everywhere. This plot thread had the potential to be interesting and does help build some tension, but when the resolution of the mystery arrives, I felt it was pretty low key, and Mae's response to it doesn't improve our impression of her character.

Mae's devotion to the Circle's philosophy culminates in a terrible episode where she is broadcasting her life to the entire world, having gone "transparent" herself, and decides to use the power of The Circle to track down a previous lover who has tried to get away from the increasingly ubiquitous surveillance. This becomes a savage public hunt and ends with the man's suicide on camera. But even this isn't enough to sway Mae from her devotion to The Circle. She comes up with her own set of three principles, clearly echoing those of Orwell's 1984:



SECRETS ARE LIES  
SHARING IS CARING  
PRIVACY IS THEFT

These principles are then enshrined in *The Circle* and published and repeated through all of The Circle's outlets, which are many.

You could definitely argue that *The Circle* is like an inverted *1984* with the power of the State now invested in a massive corporation. But instead of the single surveillance camera inside Winston Smith's room, *The Circle* would have installed a dozen and had him wear one around his neck. But the majority of people, like Mae Holland, would welcome that, would wear those cameras voluntarily and joyfully and think that it was all for the common good.

Like *1984* and like Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, Egger's *The Circle* is a powerful polemic and a dire warning of what the future could bring.

## Summary of reading since last issue:

### Best Book Read in the Last Two Months?

*Light from Uncommon Stars* by Ryka Aoki.

### Second and Third Best?

*Wake* by Shelley Burr, an impressive debut crime novel, very well handled.

Closely followed by *Sea of Tranquility* by Emily St. John Mandel.

### Most Disappointing Book?

*A Master of Djinn* by P. Djeli Clark. I had expected to like it, but I had to force myself to finish it. I got through it only because I'll need to talk about it on our podcast alongside the other Hugo nominated novels.

### Most Unexpectedly Enjoyable?

*Light from Uncommon Stars* by Ryka Aoki.

### Book I'll Keep Thinking About Longest?

*The Circle* by Dave Eggers.

## What am I currently reading?

### *Daughters of Eve* by Nina D. Campbell

Another debut crime novel by an Australian author. Pretty good so far, though with some overly florid flourishes in the writing which I could have done without.

## What's waiting on the shelf?

- *The Devil's Bargain* by Stella Rimington: I read some of Rimington's early spy novels and quite liked them, and this one caught my eye. Rimington writes from experience, as she was the Director General of MI5 for four years in the 1990s.
- *Hovering* by Rhett Davis: this won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an unpublished manuscript in 2020 and sounds intriguing.
- Best Novel nominees for the 1969 Hugo Award: I'll be reading these for the purposes of our podcast. They include *Nova* by Samuel R. Delany, *Past Master* by R. A. Lafferty and *Stand on Zanzibar* by John Brunner.



While you're looking at books here, a reminder that I've written an SF novel myself, which you might care to have a look at.

[Details here.](#)

# RECENT VIEWING



My wife and I have been watching a fair bit more television recently than is usual. Mind you, our normal viewing is literally only a few hours in total *each week*, so calibrate your expectations accordingly. But we've found a couple of series we thought worth watching, and we've been binge-viewing them at two episodes a week!

## Capitol Crimes : YouTube



Recently I've been glued to the screen watching many hours of a terrific new television series which features a lead character with a fatal flaw. It is about the unbridled lust for power, overweening ambition, blatant nepotism, corruption, secret plotting, suspense, intimidation and ultimately the cultivation of outright violence. So far the bad guy has been winning, but the good guys are intent on bringing this nefarious character down and are slowly building their case against him by careful detective work, skilful interrogation and a patient determination of the facts.

*Succession?* No, this series is called *The Public Hearings of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*. Bit of a mouthful, that, you'd think the producers would give it a much snappier name, like *Capitol Crimes*, but who am I to judge?

So far I've watched every minute. You've probably read various summaries of it, but I seriously recommend that [you watch it all](#). The Select Committee is doing a brilliant job of laying out the case why Donald J. Trump should *never* be allowed anywhere near the levers of power ever again.

Although they may make criminal referrals, their aim, in which I think they are succeeding, is to make it clear to the American public just how premeditated the attack on the U.S. Capital was, and how hollow is Trump's Big Lie that the 2020 election was stolen. Their strategy, which is a clever one, is to mainly feature *Republicans* as witnesses, many of them Trump's close associates or White House staff, outlining how clear it was that there was no evidence of serious election fraud, how often Trump was told that, and how determined he was to ignore that inconvenient fact.

## Slow Horses : Apple TV+



My wife and I recently re-subscribed to Apple TV+ because we've been on a bit of a Tom Hiddleston kick this year, and she saw that this new series called *The Essex Serpent* was on there, featuring Hiddleston and Clare Danes.

We only managed to get through two episodes of that before giving up in disgust, the stellar cast notwithstanding. Poor writing, highly improbable situations and attitudes for the Victorian era, over-the-top dramatics.

But since we'd got Apple TV+ for the month, we went looking for something else to watch on the service and spotted *Slow Horses*, which I recalled Perry thought was pretty good (and had recommended the series of books written by Mick Herron, on which it is based). So we gave it a try and loved it. There's a second season coming, and we'll subscribe again to Apple TV+ when it arrives.

Gary Oldman stars as Jackson Lamb, the foul-mouthed, farting, generally disgusting head of a branch of MI5 in Slough House. This is the dumping ground of various spies who have stuffed up in various ways, sent to Slough House to be kept out of the way of anything important.

The show opens with young MI5 trainee River Cartwright (played by Jack Lowden) who we watch in a heart-pounding sequence making a spectacular mess of trying to stop a terrorist exploding a bomb in an underground train station. Only later do we discover that no one was actually killed, it was all just part of an in-the-field training exercise. Nevertheless, Cartwright is shunted off as a failure to Slough House.

Things start to hot up when a young man of Pakistani descent is kidnapped by a group of white supremacists, who are threatening to behead him live on the Internet. MI5 are keeping close tabs on this and trying to locate where the terrorist group is holed up. Then we start to get a plot twist or two as we discover the true motives of the "Second Chair" of MI5, Diana Taverner (played by Kristin Scott Thomas), who is playing a double game in

which Slough House is going to be blamed for any failure.

Gripping and often very funny stuff. Oldman is brilliant, as always. We liked it a lot. As I said, we'll be keen to watch the second season when it comes out (and I'll have to hunt up the books).

## Coda : Apple TV+

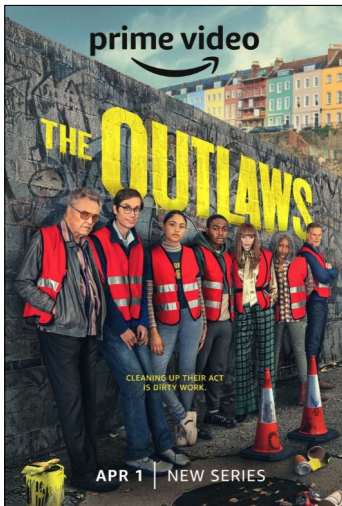


While we had access to Apple TV+ we also took the opportunity to watch *Coda*, which won this year's Oscar for Best Picture.

I don't have a lot to say about it. Pleasant, feel-good movie about the only hearing member of a deaf family. Fairly predictable in its plot, but enjoyable enough.



## The Outlaws : Amazon Prime TV



After finishing the first season of *Slow Horses* we went looking for something else to watch while we wait for the second season to drop, and I spotted this on Amazon Prime TV (which is the only streaming service I've continued to subscribe to because Prime offers other benefits).

*The Outlaws* is directed by and part-written by Stephen Merchant, who you'll probably recall from *The Office*. He is also one of the cast, alongside veteran US actor Christopher Walken and young British actors Rhianne Barreto, Gamba Cole, and others. The concept is of a group of seven strangers who have all been placed in a mandatory community service program in the city of Bristol in lieu of going to prison for various crimes.

As they half-heartedly try to clean up an old heritage building in Bristol, the group interact and get involved with each other's concerns, often very reluctantly.

Christopher Walken is great as the slightly dodderly ex-convict currently living with his daughter and her kids, to her disgust:

She tutors her five-year old daughter and teenage son: "Your grandpa is a lying, thieving, selfish old bastard. What is he?"

"Grandpa is a lying, thieving, selfish old bastard," repeats the young girl dutifully. And he is, too.

We also have an angry white conservative who is about to lose his family business; a famous TikTok celebrity with anger-management issues; a disgruntled middle-aged activist shopped for towing away a police recruitment van (with police still inside), and a gangly unsuccessful solicitor in trouble for ramming a police car while trying to escape from being charged with offending public morality.

With this scenario, an engaging plot starts to build. Young half-Pakistani Rani (played by Rhianne Barreto) befriends Christian (Gamba Cole). He is a young black man trying to keep his sister out of the

hands of a criminal gang, but who is forced by them to commit a burglary to steal the contact phone of a rival group. Rani, overhearing this plan, attempts to help, but with disastrous consequences to herself.

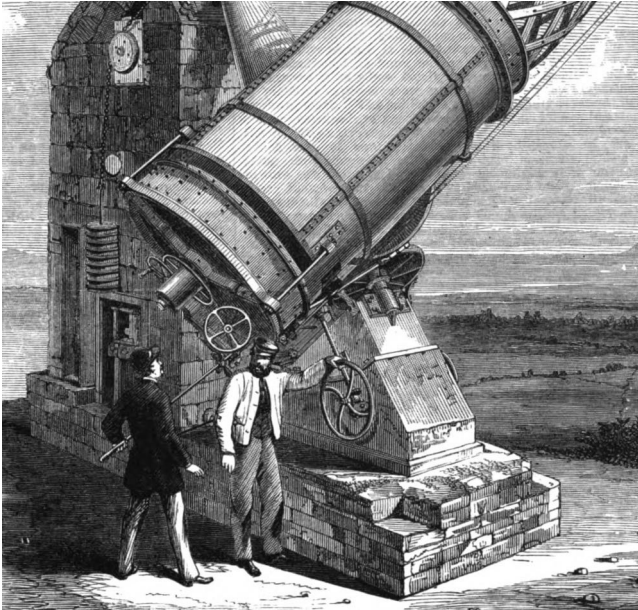
We're only half-way through the first season of this so far, but we're enjoying it. It has moments of real tension but also a lot of wry humour (as you would expect from Merchant). All good fun, and we're keenly awaiting the second season, due early August.



If you've enjoyed my reviews here, you might like to listen to Perry Middlemiss and myself discuss books, movies and TV in our podcast, *Two Chairs Talking*. It comes out every three weeks.

[Visit our website for more information.](#)

# THROUGH THE EYEPIECE



## Conversations With Readers

I should perhaps explain that I'll be including here comments both made directly on *The Megaloscope* and also any I receive on my fortnightly newsletter, *Through the Biblioscope*, as the two are tightly linked.

### David:

I wrote very briefly in issue 11 of *Through the Biblioscope* about *Project Hail Mary* by Andy Weir (one of the books nominated for Best Novel in the 2022 Hugos. I said there:

"I wasn't too impressed by it. An interesting idea, but Weir spends far too long luxuriating in explaining the technology and science behind everything (His *The Martian* suffers from the same defect)."

This triggered off a longish email back and forth with Bruce Gillespie, editor of *SF Commentary*:

### Email 12 December 2021 from Bruce Gillespie

(On *Through the Biblioscope* #11)

Needless to say, I disagree with you about *Project Hail Mary*. It's a rare book that gives me the same enjoyment as I gained when first beginning to read science fiction. In fact, there never were many SF novels that were wholly satisfying. I sent a copy of Weir's novel to Dick Jenssen (who still very much sees himself as a retired scientist) and, like me, he read it in a day or two and enjoyed it thoroughly. I kept waiting for the boring bits, but they didn't happen—it seemed to me the suspense, the ability to deliver surprises, continued to the end. Like me, Dick thought the weakest aspect was the original

premise, i.e. the way in which the solar system is supposed to be destroying itself. But when has a flimsy premise destroyed a good SF book?

As for your other books discussed this month -- I've been hesitant about ordering some of them, because of lack of time for reading. I've ordered the Olga Tokarczuk from Readings, as well as the new Alan Garner novel, *Treacle Walker*, whose existence I discovered only because of a stray comment on Facebook. There was a time when the new Alan Garner would have received a lead review in *The Age*. (Garner is in his late 80s, and promises to keep producing a novel every five or seven years.)

### David:

...despite what you say, no, I didn't like [*Project Hail Mary*] much. Perhaps I'm going off the whole SF genre to some degree. Speculative fiction and fantasy are only useful if they tell us something interesting about real people and the real world. I don't feel that Andy Weir's book does that.

I feel the same way about ... *The City We Became* by N. K. Jemisin (Nominated for [last] year's Hugo Awards). Entertaining, yes. Even enjoyable. But empty.

### Bruce:

Basically, all genre fiction (to me) is fantasy fiction. None of it has anything to do with my life, for instance. For instance, most English fiction is written from an upper middle class perspective that is entirely alien to mine. But is 'realistic' fiction realistic? That's what I've doubted for a very long time...

My feeling is that what you want from good fiction is a communication from the author's world to your own world, but those worlds are made of words of varying quality. The interest of most authors's worlds is that they are entirely alien to mine, i.e. are essentially fantasy constructs. George Turner used to point out that fiction that merely reported on the realistic facts would be intensely boring. I'm also influenced by people like Gerald Murnane, who hates the idea of 'realism' and asserts that the only good fiction is that which reports on the workings of an author's mind. That's a pretty limited viewpoint, too, but works for him and Samuel Beckett and a few other authors.

Anyway, boring SF and fantasy titles are boring (to me) not because of their subject matter but because of their boredom of their prose. Most books I pick up these days are written in exactly the same grey prose. That's why I enjoyed M. John Harrison's latest [*The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again*] so much—he's so much in love with good prose, and knows how to use the English language. And, no doubt, why you like nineteenth-century prose blockbusters, not because of what they do or don't tell us about life in the nineteenth century, but because they are written in much more interesting sentences than one finds in almost any current novels.

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Please send all comments to: david.grigg@gmail.com

[Later]: You're raising good points that readers should think about. They do arise when talking about the Andy Weir novel: bog-basic prose, which usually would put me off after a couple of pages; or a puzzle plot that did keep me going? The only way I would settle is that more and more I enjoy fiction that has no obvious arc—you just don't know where it's going. And even the last few pages of *Project Hail Mary* were surprising.

I suppose the real answer is to look at every book separately and in depth, but I just don't have time these days. I'm just glad you and Perry are reading and covering much of the current field, as I don't have the patience any more.

**David:**

I can't possibly write as eloquently about these matters as you, or George Turner or Gerald Murnane, but I disagree about realism if by that you mean "fiction that merely report[s] on the realistic facts". Well, nobody ever wrote fiction like that (or if they did, I've never read it, nor would I want to). *Of course* it would be boring, just as a photograph taken by a CCTV camera would be incredibly boring compared to exactly same scene painted by a great artist. All creative work is about interpretation and selection, of deciding what to emphasise and what to omit.

And you're wrong about why like "nineteenth-century prose blockbusters". It's not so much because of their good prose, but because they tell us about real people, regardless of the era.

I'm with Philip Pullman, who said in a speech called "Writing Fantasy Realistically":

...there isn't a character in the whole of *The Lord of the Rings* who has a tenth of the complexity, the interest, the sheer fascination, of even a fairly minor character from *Middlemarch*, such as Mary Garth. Nothing in her is arbitrary; everything is necessary and organic, by which I mean that she really does seem to have grown into life, and not to have been assembled from a kit of parts. She's *surprising*.

I'd love to quote the entire speech, which is included in his collection *Daemon Voices*. All of it resonates strongly with me.

**Bruce:**

Realism is a fraught word, because it is a recognised literary form, seen best in the novels of Americans such as Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser, and beginning with the great French writers of the twentieth century, such as Flaubert and Zola. I take this kind of realism to be prose that uses the surface details of ordinary existence in order to produce stories of dramatic strength. In other words, the realistic details serve as metaphors, but the writers rarely use the grand-sounding metaphors of Romantic fiction.

Realism is most often contrasted with Expressionism, which is the use of outward detail and poetic metaphors to tell us of the deepest

insights of the author. The only reality we read about is the reality that affects the author (or 'putative author', as Gerald Murnane likes to call him or her), not the detail of the surrounding total world. One could point to most of the major writers of the twentieth century and twenty-first century as being Expressionists rather than Realists.

And then there are fabulists, who subsume all exterior detail to the main ideas of their stories. Like realism, fabulist writing also seems to leave out the narrow viewpoint of the author. But fabulist writing also includes very poetic and metaphorical writing, such as that of Borges and Calvino.

(I would then hand the whole thing over to Tony Thomas, who was brought up in the same literary tradition as I was, so that he could tell me I have it all wrong!)

I've never been sure where genre writing fits. On the one hand, the writer is trying to provide a reassuring structure the reader can enjoy; on the other hand, most of the top genre writers want to do something new with each novel or short story. Philip Pullman solves a lot of the technical problems by concentrating mainly on the art of story-telling. Each of the three isms described above provides a different way of story-telling.

In SF, Old Wavers have always insisted that the standard SF story form is the only way to tell a good story, i.e a satisfying scientific puzzle for those readers who appreciate science. Then the New Wavers came along, adopting many of the techniques of mainstream fiction writing. But both streams seemed to re-emerge in the late 1970s. I assume there have been such divisions in other genres, especially mystery writing, but I'm much less familiar with the mystery genre.

**David:**

[Following up the discussion here after a long hiatus]

Well, "a satisfying scientific puzzle for those readers who appreciate science" is certainly a good description of *Project Hail Mary*, but to me that's nowhere near enough.

I know too little of literary criticism to know what you or they mean by "realism". However, I don't think that's what I meant that I was looking for.

However fiction is written, for it to be at least considered good if not great, I think we need to be able to recognise something of ourselves in the characters, recognise something of our own experiences in those of the story, recognise something of our own lives and environment in the world of the story. If we can't do that, however enjoyable a yarn it is, it's hollow.

That doesn't mean by any means that it has to be set in a realistic world or deal only with mundane, quotidian matters. To me the greatest SF, the greatest fantasy, uses the techniques of fabulism to tell us something surprising *about*



ourselves, and to illuminate aspects of our lives, our society, our world, in ways that would be difficult or impossible to do with straight “realistic” fiction.

[I'm sure this discussion isn't over, I look forward to hearing more on this from Bruce in future]

### **Email 15 May 2022 from Rich Lynch:**

(On *Through the Biblioscope* #21)

It was a pleasant surprise to find a new page on efanzines for *Through the Biblioscope*. In issue 21, I see that your current and recent reading intersects with mine a couple of times. Concerning Neal Stephenson's *Fall, Or, Dodge in Hell*, I didn't find it as good a read as many other novel's he's written. The most interesting sections were the ones in the real world and I mostly just skimmed the sections set in the virtual world. On the other hand, I very much enjoyed China Mieville's *The City and the City*. But I read it only after watching the four-part miniseries (which I found on Amazon Prime) that, in retrospect, seems a pretty good adaption of the novel.

These days I'm only reading maybe a couple of books each month, as my reading speed is abysmally slow and my time for reading is mostly the hour or so before bedtime. With all the hundreds of books yet to be read and given that I much prefer ebooks these days, I no doubt have a lifetime supply of unread books. But I'm obviously hoping I'm wrong!

#### **David:**

Thanks, Rich. Nice to hear from you.

A pity you think Stephenson's latest novel is not up to snuff. Maybe that was why it was on the bargain table! But I'll give it a try anyway now that I've got it.

I really liked *The City & The City* though. I'd only previously read his juvenile *Railsea*, which is well worth reading if you like that kind of fiction. I must try and get hold of more of his work. I must also check out the TV series, since I'm an Amazon Prime subscriber, though my television watching is very sporadic (like maybe an hour a week). [Update: the TV series isn't available on Prime here in Australia, darn it!]

I think we all have a lifetime supply of unread books. I certainly do, even if I only look at the ebooks I have saved away. The podcast drives a lot of my reading, as you'll gather from *Through the Biblioscope*. Its demands are inexorable, particularly at this time of year when Perry and I try to keep up with the Hugo nominees.

### **Email 23 June 2022 from “Johnny Eponymous”:**

(On *Megaloscope* #1)

Wonderful zine! I saw the name and thought to myself, 'Great name! let's give it a read' and I did and thought “Wonderful zine!” as I've said.

I love *City & the City* unreasonably much. As a crime nerd who seldom gets to read as much crime fiction as I'd like (though the continuing *Drink Tank* series on Crime Fiction is on its second leg - Crime from 1950 to 2000) I always love to see the genre combined with other genres to form a stew. China's one of my faves over-all.

The Seanan piece that's up for Novella this year is OK, as is her nominated short story. Neither are my faves, but neither really turned me off.

I just purchased that Higginbotham book on Chernobyl. My youngest is fascinated with the accident and he would be quite unhappy if I didn't get it for him. Seven year olds can be tricky.

Great stuff! Now to add to my own reading list from it!

#### **David:**

Thanks for your kind words. I'm happy that you like *The Megaloscope*.

Yes, *The City & the City* is definitely one of the best books I've read this year in any genre. I must have a look at some of his other books.

I'm probably being too hard on Seanan McGuire, but she's one of those writers who frustrates me. I think she's capable of much better work than I've seen so far. I quite liked *Every Heart a Doorway*, and some of the other *Wayward Children* series are OK, though as I've said, they always seem to need filling out at greater length.

I'm slightly mind-boggled about you giving the Chernobyl book to a seven year old, but you know best, I'm sure. I wonder what he'll make of it.

### **Email 19 June 2022 from Bruce Gillespie:**

(On *Through the Biblioscope* #24)

I'm halfway through *A Master Of Djinn* and must agree with you. Based on my reading of P Djéli Clark, I had expected a narrative with a lot of sparkle. I'm halfway through and it's still a plod. Worse still, my eyes do not like the grey type used in the paperback -- so I might give up, even halfway through.

#### **David:**

It won the Nebula, though, so what do we know?

#### **Bruce:**

No wonder I don't share Perry's (and your?) interest in the big awards in SF. Very rarely do the winners seem interesting to me, although there are always exceptions. It seems to me that the Hugo and Nebula winners in recent years have been particularly uninteresting.

So, on the one hand I'm grateful to the both of you for alerting me to books that I might not have noticed, but on the other hand I remain

determined to follow my own eccentric path through the shelves. Not that I can explore all those new books, since I don't read e-books and I can't afford 95 per cent of the books you, Perry, and Mondy recommend.

Anyway, half an hour ago I gave up on *Master Of Djinn* at page 185, which is late in a book for me. Often I don't last beyond page 60. However, I'll keep my copy and find out whether my new reading glasses make a difference. I did the eye test last week and hope to have the new lenses fitted sometime by Friday. That might make it a bit easier to get through John Wain's biography of Samuel Johnson. Good prose, interesting story, but grey type, even at 10 point, is becoming a real challenge.

Now to find a book I can really enjoy! I have boxes and boxes of them here, all still unread.

**David:**

Well, I'm only reading *A Master of Djinn* so that I can talk about it on the podcast (and subsequently in the newsletter and ANZAPA), so I'll probably force myself to finish it, though it's a definite slog. And there are other books I'd much rather be reading.

If it weren't for the podcast and Perry's keenness to talk about the Hugos, I wouldn't read any of the fiction, most of which is very unimpressive, particularly the short stories. These are not great times for the speculative fiction field, though as you say, with a few exceptions. The books I really like generally don't get nominated for the major awards.

I might try and read one or two of the other nominated novels before we talk about them on the podcast in four weeks time. I've already read *She Who Became the Sun*, which I really liked, and *Project Hail Mary*, which as you know I didn't like much. It would be good to find at least one other Hugo nominated novel which I think is any good! [Update: I've now read 5 of the 6 nominated novels, and I did find one other which I thought was good, as you'll see elsewhere in this fanzine].

**Bruce:**

We certainly agree on many things, especially many of your book recommendations and reservations. I'm a bit puzzled, though, as to what you and Perry get out of the podcast. I would hope that you receive emails-of-comment, texts-of-comment etc. I say this only because I hate the sound of my own voice so much when I've heard it on tape that I would not ever do a regular stint on a podcast.

In fact, my real breakthrough in fandom was in early 1969. I had been hanging around fans like Bangsund, Edmonds and Foyster during 1968, but just before the Easter Convention of 1969 I sent out the copies of the first issue of *SF Commentary*. Even though it was very badly typed and all the pages were faint, suddenly a whole lot of people wanted to talk to me after they had received their copies. Of course, I had to thank John Bangsund for giving

me his subscription list, so that I hit all the right people, both here and overseas, with the first issue. But suddenly I realised that I came across as quite a different person in print rather than in conversation. Not that I ever shut up, of course, just kept publishing.

But now it's a bit difficult to distribute the printed word. It's a bit hard to adapt after 50 years or more.

Thanks for the news of a new Kate Atkinson novel in *Biblioscope*. I'll put in my order to Readings.

**David:**

Well, the short answer about the podcast is that we do it because we enjoy doing it, and a few people at least seem to enjoy listening to it. That's about it!

**Email 27 June 2022 from Murray MacLachlan:**

(Following an in-person discussion)

...I am on the first chapter of Parker-Chan's novel. The writerly voice says, "you can trust me with your time". I shall.

**David:**

That is a thing, isn't it? "You can trust me with your time". That feeling that you are in competent hands and that the writer won't let you down. I felt that way when I was only a chapter or so into *The City & The City*, which I read for the first time this year.

**Murray:**

Now Mieville is a funny one. *Un Lun Dun* bored me; it read like many other London-through-a-distorting-lens novels that I've read. It wasn't just that London as a character was already familiar to me, it was that the entire novel seemed familiar.

*The City and the City* cleaned up a couple of major awards and while I thought it good, it seemed to suffer from a similar issue—that I had read it before. Jan Morris had something similar, and Borges did it better and briefer. But I will extol the virtues of its *Embassytown*, which I think is a tour de force and head and shoulders above the ruck of first-contact alien communication breakthrough through linguistics novels. Richer than, for example, [*Project Hail Mary*]. I have a pet theory that the SMOFs were embarrassed that *Embassytown* didn't win any gongs so *The City and the City* received a positive backlash, whatever one calls a positive backlash. Mind you, I've only read all books mentioned once each.

**David:**

OK, now I have to go and find a copy of *Embassytown*!

And that's all folks! See you next time.