

August 23, 2006

Introductions

Welcome to SF Gospel, a new blog exploring religious ideas in science fiction (and other far-flung corners of popular culture). On this site, I will consider how theological ideas are expressed in movies, novels, TV shows, and comics, and how we can use these pop-cultural expressions of spirituality to develop a faith that is speculative, visionary, and radical. This site will be a companion to and a continuation of the project of my forthcoming book, *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*. So if you want to know what Steven Spielberg's version of *War of the Worlds* has in common with the Cathar heresy or why *Dawn of the Dead* is really about the Kingdom of Heaven, check back from time to time.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 23, 2006 at 02:29 PM | [Permalink](#)

August 23, 2006

The Last Movie

Given the title of this blog, I had hoped that my first post would be about something moderately science-fictional. However, it happens that I've been watching a lot of westerns lately, so a western is what you'll get. Well, a sort of western, anyway-- Dennis Hopper's hallucinatory 1971 meta-western, *The Last Movie*.



Hopper's notoriously disjointed follow-up to *Easy Rider* opens with a film crew shooting a western on the cheap in Peru. The film's director (Sam Fuller, arguably playing himself) runs a chaotic set, and the local priest worries about what the townspeople are learning from the Hollywood debauchery they witness during the shoot. When the film wraps, a member of the crew named Kansas (Hopper) stays behind, and the film follows him in a series of loosely-connected vignettes. The film's most powerful scenes focus on the chaos that forms in the wake of the departing film crew.

The inhabitants of the town where the film was shot literally idolize the moviemaking process, building wicker replicas of cameras, boom mikes, and lighting rigs. Using this artificial, symbolic equipment, they stage a western of their own, boiled down to the violence alone-- which they do not realize is supposed to be fake. The town's priest complains to Kansas that the town was peaceful until the film crew taught it violence. Hollywood, in *The Last Movie*, provides the temptation that leads to this fall from grace, and the resulting violence ultimately turns on Kansas.

The struggle between the village's passed and its movie-obsessed present are symbolized by two churches-- the priest's Catholic church, where the film opens, and the hollow, false-front temple on the movie set. A careful eye catches the name of this artificial church-- it is the Church of Didymos Judas Thomas, the "doubting Thomas" of John 20:24-29, but also the apostle to whom the Gospel of Thomas is attributed. The "Didymus" in Thomas's name means "twin," and this empty building is the evil twin of the lushly-decorated Catholic church. It is fitting that this building, the antithesis of the town's orthodox faith, should take the name of the most famous gnostic text.

The Last Movie is a story about the loss of innocence, and the way in which the movies facilitate the fall from grace. There's something offensive about the way this message is presented-- the camera-worshipping townspeople come across as cluelessly primitive brutes, much like island natives of *King Kong*. *The Last Movie* is about cultural

imperialism, but it can certainly be seen as an example of it, too. Nevertheless, it remains a strong statement about the ways in which violence propagates itself.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 23, 2006 at 03:15 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 30, 2006

The Prestige

I've just finished reading Christopher Priest's *The Prestige*, the [movie adaptation](#) of which will be the [second](#) film about stage magicians to open this fall. If you have any interest whatsoever and reading the book— and it's an excellent book— *then for heaven's sake, read it before you see the movie*. It's a story about secrets, and you won't want them spoiled.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 30, 2006 at 09:01 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 01, 2006

American Virgin

If any aspect of evangelical culture deserves to be satirized, it's the virginity movement. From the creepy chattel vocabulary of Purity Ball pledges to the cluelessly sappy songs of [Eric and Leslie Ludy](#), there is nothing in conservative Christianity so funny— or so dangerous— as the ways in which it talks about sex. In *American Virgin*, a new ongoing comic series from DC/Vertigo, writer Steven T. Seagle and artist Becky Cloonan satirize the virginity movement, often hitting below the chastity belt.



American Virgin is the story of Adam Chamberlain, a college student, author, and evangelical speaker. Adam has made a name for himself traveling the country and telling his young audiences about his relationship with his girlfriend, Cassie, to whom he has pledged his virginity. But a few weeks before their destined wedding, Cassie is killed by terrorists while on a mission trip in Mozambique. Adam has a crisis of faith: God told him that he was to be with one woman and one woman only— what is he supposed to do now that she's dead? He sets out to Africa to retrieve Cassie's body, seeking first answers, then revenge.

This international trip poses a major pacing problem for the series— it's a two-and-a-half issue detour when the characters are barely out of the gate. The story works best when we see Adam in his usual world of pledge cards and speaking tours. The book's funniest scene appears in the first issue, when Adam gives a speech about purity from atop a BMX bike, jumping off a half-pipe and declaring, "God told me I'd be here talking to you today. What he didn't tell me was how awesome a time I'd have doing it!" It's a spot-on jab at the clueless attempt to be cool, the hip-deafness of so many evangelical youth speakers. But taking the character out of this world takes away the opportunity for more moments like that one. Sure, it's interesting to see Adam's straight-laced life spiral out of control in the wake of his girlfriend's death, but there's not much reason for him to be on another continent while it's happening. With the fifth issue of the series, a new storyline begins with Adam back at home among supporting characters we haven't seen since #2, and it finally feels like the story is getting back on track.

Much of *American Virgin*'s satire comes from those supporting characters— Adam's power-hungry, overbearing mother; his cousins who try to get him laid; his brother, who forsakes a speaking career for pot and heavy petting. In these characters, we realize that Seagle's aim is a broad satire that shows the sleazy underbelly of the evangelical world. But when I reached the revelation in #5 that Adam's televangelist stepfather appeared in porn 20 years ago, I found myself wondering— does it have to be *this* broad? Those extremes aren't necessary to lampoon the purity movement, and a more straightforward presentation would make for both a funnier and sharper satire.

Though there are several disappointments in the opening story arc, the book shows promise. Seagle's *House of Secrets* had a similarly shaky start, and it became one of the best books Vertigo published at the time. And Cloonan's art gets better every issue. Let's hope that the final scene of #5, in which Adam rededicates himself to his speaking career and his virginity, points the way to a truly fine satire on the horizon.



American Virgin is published monthly by DC/Vertigo comics. [Head](#), a collection of the first story arc, is due out in October.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on September 01, 2006 at 05:27 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 28, 2006

The Wicker Man

When I first heard that Neil LaBute was writing and directing a [remake](#) of *The Wicker Man*, my reaction was... mixed. On the one hand, I'm a big fan of [the original film](#), and doubted it would survive the transition from 1973 England to 2006 Hollywood. The first thing to go, I rightly guessed, would be the weird folk music, which is the main reason I watched it in the first place. But I'm an even bigger fan of Neil LaBute, whose modern morality plays are some of the smartest and funniest theater out there. (I'm still sad about missing *This Is How It Goes* off-Broadway.) Can a writer/director I respect save a good movie from the mud-dragging process of a Hollywood remake?



Unfortunately not, it seems. I wouldn't exactly say *The Wicker Man* remake is a bad movie. It has some legitimately funny moments, and even a couple scary ones. (I would say that the score is good, but I'm still miffed about the absence of [creepy folk music](#).) But it certainly is a movie that doesn't know what it wants to be— a far cry from the self-assured weirdness of Robin Hardy and Anthony Shaffer's hallucinatory original. In [a recent interview at Nerve](#) about the universally negative response to the film, LaBute admitted as much. He also, perhaps inadvertently, pointed out the precise reason why the film failed— it ain't got religion.

The original *Wicker Man* is a story about the clash of spiritual ideologies. Sergeant Howie (Edward Woodward), a straightlaced police officer, arrives at an isolated commune called Summerisle to investigate a report of a missing child. The townspeople are bafflingly unhelpful, providing contradictory answers to his questions or simply ignoring them to focus on hedonistic preparations for an upcoming festival. Before too long, Howie learns that Summerisle is the last enclave of a pre-Christian Druidic society. The more Howie discovers about the island, the more he disapproves. His investigation ceases to be about the missing girl and becomes a crusade against paganism. When he finally learns the secret— well, there's no need for a spoiler. (If you know anything about [Druidic rituals](#), you probably know what the title refers to anyway). But suffice it to say that Howie's religious beliefs are the whole point of the story.



And that's precisely what LaBute leaves out.

In the [Nerve interview](#), he states that "the clash of religions in the original film did not feel as immediate to me, and I decided to go more into gender politics, which were of more interest to me." Perhaps this is no surprise coming from LaBute, whose career is built on bleak satires on gender relations. But he's no stranger to religious themes, either, having written [several short plays](#) skewering moral hypocrisy in the Mormon culture that raised him. It would have been interesting if he had turned his wit to those aspects of this story, but instead we get a statement on sexual politics that undermines what made *The Wicker Man* good in the first place.

In LaBute's version, Edward Malus (Nicolas Cage) is a cop lured to Summersisle (a cookie to anyone who can come up with a good reason for adding in that clunky S in the middle), which is governed by a spooky matriarchal cult. The men of the island are timid, traumatized slaves. (Cue beehive symbolism.) Malus, instead of a tightly-wound representative of law and order, is a nonspecific jerk who's equal parts arrogant swagger and self-help-book anxiety. It's tough to get a handle on why he reacts to things the way he does. (It doesn't help that Cage's performance is typically flat and impenetrable.) But this is a character that needs to be not just an arrogant prig, but a *piously* arrogant prig.

And, as [a pagan reviewer for the Guardian points out](#), the depiction of Summersisle as a dystopian matriarchy doesn't help matters, either. The fun of the original comes from watching Sergeant Howie's frustration at the commune's hedonism. The original Summerisle looks like a nice place to live—an idealistic, agrarian commune where everyone is happy. There are creepy moments, sure—but much of that creepiness comes from the Summerislander's transparent glee at Howie's righteous anger. We the audience think he's wrong for preaching against their paganism—but because we know his character's beliefs, we understand where he's coming from. We may disagree with his appraisal, but we at least understand his indignation.

LaBute's version of Summersisle takes all that away. Not for a second does the commune seem like a nice place to live. Its spookiness is all on the surface, and apparent from the beginning—crows flying out of unexpected places, mysterious burlap sacks dripping blood. We immediately know that Bad Things are going to happen to any outsider on the island. Ironically, this spookiness, when coupled with Malus's action hero agnosticism—is missing where it is needed most, at the film's climax. Sergeant Howie's manic praying and hymn-singing is terrifying when he meets his fate in the original film; Sergeant Malus's wordless scream, by contrast, is an anticlimax.

The *Wicker Man* remake could have been a great movie about the clash of religions, and instead it's a failed movie about the clash of the sexes. Robin Hardy has announced a... well, a remake or a sequel or a reimagining or *something* called *Cowboys For Christ* which may fare better, especially with Christopher Lee reprising his role as the pagans' leader. In the meantime, watch [The Shape of Things](#), listen to "Corn Rigs" or "Willow's Song," and pretend that *The Wicker Man* and LaBute never crossed paths. He'll do better next time.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on September 28, 2006 at 11:36 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 05, 2006

Comics roundup: September

Here's the first installment of my monthly comics roundup, where I give mini-reviews and whatnot of religious ideas in some of the comics that I read. Here's the first batch:

American Virgin #7 (DC/Vertigo)

by Steven T. Seagle (writer), Becky Cloonan (pencils), Ryan Kelly (inks)



You know how I said *American Virgin* got completely sidetracked from its character's milieu, but looked like it was going back? Well, after about an issue and a half of Adam back in the world of the virginity movement, he's sidetracked again, this time tracking down his girlfriend's murderer in a gay club in Australia. It's beginning to look like the idea of this series is to take the "American" virgin and send him everywhere but America for some fish-out-of-water adventures, which could get really repetitive really, really fast. I'm still holding out for the series to ground itself again—when it's good (i.e., when Adam is in America), it has a lot of potential, and there are definitely some strong moments here.

The Eternals #4 (Marvel)

by Neil Gaiman (writer), John Romita Jr. (pencils), Danny Miki and Tom Palmer (inks)



Gaiman continues to take a religiously-flavored approach to his revival of Jack Kirby's immortal superheroes. The Eternals have lived for millions of years, but they've forgotten who they are, and have been living the lives of normal, mortal humans (shades of Dickian gnosticism and Alan Moore's *Miracleman*). The best moment in this issue (aside from John Romita's art, which is some of the best of his career) is the lament of Sprite, the "youngest" of the Eternals: "Let's talk about being eleven for a million years, shall we? Watching the rest of you swanning around as adults. Wondering what kind of warped celestial mind would decide that just one of us wasn't going to grow up." The Celestials— the inscrutable god-aliens who created the Eternals— look to figure greatly in the last two issues of this series.

Jonah Hex #11 (DC)

by Justin Gray and Jimmy Palmiotti (writers), David Michael Beck (artist)



My opinion of this book isn't quite as superlative as it was after reading the first issue, but it's still one of the best books out there right now. Every issue is a complete, self-contained, and usually really, really dark spaghetti western. My favorite moment this month is a Revelation quote:



The Ultimates 2 #12 (Marvel)

by Mark Millar (writer), Bryan Hitch (pencils), Paul Neary (inks)



So far, Millar's done a very good job of creating a fascinating contemporary political landscape in *the Ultimates* that manages to combine aspects of our political environment with a world in which superheroes exist—the idea being that a world with superpowered individuals would have a vastly different political landscape to ours, even if it had some of the same basic conflicts. But the "Axis of Evil" storyline, in which superpowered terrorists from nations unfriendly to the US invade New York and Washington, has a hint of jingoism in it, particularly this issue's final fight between Captain America and Abdul Al-Rahman, who's sort of a rebooted version of the Cold War supervillain the Red Guardian. Much of this chauvinism comes straight from the characters, though, and Millar is certainly commenting (in some respects, at least) on the inherent conservatism of his heroes. The issue (like the series as a whole) is still brilliantly orchestrated, but I'm not entirely sure what to make of the more reactionary aspects of this particular story. Thor (who in Millar's version is a radical environmentalist who just happens to believe he's a Norse god/messiah, and is hands down the best character of the bunch) returned at the end of this issue. He's sort of the series' conscience, and I look forward to seeing what he has to say in next issue, which concludes the Millar/Hitch run.

I'm not currently reading either *Emissary* or *Testament*, though I know I should be, since they're both alllll about religion. I'll try to get caught up and do full reviews.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on October 05, 2006 at 05:04 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 11, 2006

Qur'an review reviewed

I'm normally impressed with the intelligence of *Esquire*'s articles, so I was surprised to read Tom Junod's [book review of the Qur'an](#) in the October issue. Junod—who wrote a very intelligent, compassionate, and understanding [piece on John Walker Lindh](#) in July—surprised me by going to the opposite extreme on this one. He doesn't seem to have read more than a few pages of the Qur'an, and his review is peppered with generalizations and false conclusions. As someone who spent a couple of undergraduate years studying Islam in general and the Qur'an as literature in particular, this irked me quite a bit. So I wrote 'em a letter. Here it is:

After reading Tom Junod's uninformed review of the Qur'an in the October issue, I was surprised to realize that Junod also wrote July's excellent, thoughtful piece on John Walker Lindh. The Qur'an review shows none of the understanding or consideration of the earlier piece; instead, it shows willful ignorance and false generalizations. For all his insistence that the Qur'an be read as a piece of literature, he doesn't show it the respect it deserves as one. His statement that it is "absent virtually all of the pleasures of literature" suggests he isn't aware of the method by which the suras are collected—the later-revealed, longer, legalistic suras come first, and the earlier-revealed, shorter, poetic suras come last. To put it in Biblical terms, the Qur'an has Leviticus in the front and the Song of Solomon in the back, and any first-time reader is well advised to begin at the ending. The early Meccan suras, in a decent translation, contain all of the "pleasures of literature." (It would also help to know what translation Junod was using. Muhammad Pickthall's 70-year-old version, which is pictured with the article but not mentioned in it, is considered the least poetic English version available. I advise anyone who is interested in reading the Qur'an to read Michael Sells' [Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations](#), which is both a poetic translation and an insightful commentary.)

Instead, Junod's review cites nothing specific beyond "page four," and we get the sense that he really didn't read farther than that. If he had, he would have found the 12th Sura, which tells the story of Joseph with far more nuance and detail than can be found in the Genesis version of the story. It's a fascinating tale—hardly the work of "a singularly inept storyteller." He also would have discovered, toward the end of the book, Sura 109, "The Unbelievers,"

which offers a succinct version of the Qur'an's attitude of tolerance for people of other faiths. In [Ahmed Ali's translation](#):

"O you unbelievers,
I do not worship what you worship,
Nor do you worship who I worship,
Nor will I worship what you worship,
Nor will you worship who I worship:
To you your way, to me my way."

Like Wahabbists, Junod reads fundamentalism and intolerance into the Qur'an, and his conclusions do little to advance an understanding of the Muslim world. There are plenty of interesting things to say about the Qur'an as literature. Junod's piece says none of them.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on October 11, 2006 at 02:43 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 12, 2006

Gnarly

After reading [this article](#), Gwynne declared: "I need a new religion. What religions don't have Stephen Baldwin?" Apparently, Christianity (which is gnarly!) has something to do with skateboarding and breaking people's faces. See for yourself: ["Dude, where's my cross?"](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on October 12, 2006 at 10:35 AM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 17, 2006

Battlestar Galactica 301-303: synthesis and syncretism

It's only three episodes in, but already the [third season](#) of *Battlestar Galactica* has had more religious references than the first two seasons combined—no small feat for a show that frames a war between humankind and its robot creations as a clash between two faiths. Already we've seen characters in prayer, doubting their faith, visiting oracles, and even trying to synthesize human polytheism with the Cylon's big-M monotheism.

But the most important thing these three episodes have done is make the question of "good guys" and "bad guys" much more complex. This is first made clear when we see the beginnings of internecine conflict among the ruling council of Cylons, especially in Brother Cavil's mocking references to some of the other Cylons' belief in God (a word which he always accompanies with finger quotes). But we also see the lines blur in the human's intolerance to sympathetic Cylons like Boomer, in D'Anna Bier's belief in a human (polytheist) oracle, and especially in these episodes' central conceit, a clever moral inversion of the current situation in Iraq. Here, the bad guys are an invading army and the good guys are "insurgents" waging a guerilla campaign with RPGs and scavenged explosives. The humans cross a line when they plan a suicide bombing that targets a collaborating human police force, but the show attempts to give us a sense of the desperation that leads to that decision—including a moment of prayer before the attack. The writers are now treating the entire conflict of the show with the same complexity as they did the issue of abortion in last season's ["The Captain's Hand."](#) Nothing is simple, no answers are easy, and there is no absolute

good or evil.



I think what the series is pointing toward is a synthesis of human and Cylon society, religion, and morality. This has been at the core of one of the most interesting subplots so far: Leoben's interrogation of Kara. These scenes echo her interrogation of him in the first season episode "[Flesh and Bone](#)"—but where Starbuck had Leoben beaten and nearly drowned, he feeds her gourmet meals, tells her that he loves her, and most importantly introduces her to Casey, a toddler who he claims is her daughter, a human-Cylon hybrid. She hardens her heart to the child, refusing to accept it as human. When Casey injures herself while playing alone in the room, Kara is unable to avoid feeling compassion for her. Has she broken under Leoben's clever interrogation techniques, or has she replaced her blind hatred with compassion and empathy?

There is much talk in these episodes about hybrids, with Hera, Boomer and Helo's daughter, looking to become a well-guarded McGuffin for the next few episodes. [The importance their placing on this child suggests that Casey is not a hybrid after all.] The first two seasons of *Battlestar Galactica* gave us the conflict between these two cultures, and it looks like the third season will create some sort of synthesis.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on October 17, 2006 at 02:55 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 25, 2006

Atheist Fundamentalism



Wired has a fascinating cover story this month by Gary Wolf called "[The Church of the Non-Believers](#)." It's an overview of what Wolf calls the New Atheism, the fundamentalist, evangelical nonbelief of philosophers and scientists

like [Richard Dawkins](#) and [Daniel Dennett](#). For a week or two now, I've been planning to write something about how the intelligent design movement has hijacked interesting theology and turned it into bad science. The *Wired* article has spurred me to write a different post entirely, this one on how atheists like Dawkins have hijacked interesting science and turned it into bad philosophy.

So what do Richard Dawkins and [Pat Robertson](#) have in common?

Well, for one, they both want you to believe that science and religion are inevitably at loggerheads, that the belief in God by necessity leads to creationism, just as the belief in evolution leads to atheism. Both seem to believe that there is only one way to believe. There's a basic assumption here: the God that Dawkins does not believe in is Pat Robertson's God, but, like Robertson, he doesn't think that there's any other way in which to believe. For most of the article, Wolf is making the same assumption—that the "belief" that atheists reject is the belief in Uncle God who wants to [make you rich](#), and give you a [gnarly time](#) while doing it. (Indeed, it's nearly the end of the article before Wolf even mentions any definitions of God that fall outside this caricature.) Bertrand Russell's famous essay "[Why I am not a Christian](#)" makes more or less the same argument, rejecting belief in "a big brother who will look after you."

And while that's certainly where much of America's loudest religious thought is now directed, it's bad theology, and it's wrong to paint all belief with that brush. Far preferable to me and, I would argue, most Christians throughout history, is [Anselm's definition](#) of God as "that than which a greater cannot be conceived." This is a far more interesting definition, more theologically sound, more spiritually rewarding (especially when combined with scientific discoveries in astrophysics, quantum mechanics, and, yes, evolution), and empirically non-falsifiable. Despite Russell, Dawkins, and Robinson's insistence, God is not an old man who sits on a cloud smiting the wicked. God is a category of being that encompasses all of reality—good luck finding empirical proof either for or against that.

This is a basic problem with creationism and the intelligent design movement as well—they want God to be something that can be detected and proven with science. In a really, really good theology class I took at Harvard with [Philip Clayton](#) (who gets a name-check toward the end of Wolf's article, when he finally gets around to talking about different definitions of God), I learned about a little theological conundrum called "[the God of the gaps](#)." Basically, if you propose God as the answer to all the questions we don't have answers for, then science will inevitably fill in those gaps, and the province of God will get smaller and smaller. ID theorists fall straight into this trap, even exacerbating the problem by trying to re-create gaps that have already been filled. But the basic problem is that they're forgetting Anselm's definition. God is that than which a great cannot be conceived. Wouldn't a being like that be able to do better than straight-up evolutionary miracles?

Anyway, from this false definition of God, Dawkins concludes that religion is a cultural tumor that must be excised. In Wolf's words:

Dawkins does not merely disagree with religious myths. He disagrees with tolerating them, with cooperating in their colonization of the brains of innocent tykes.

This particular statement reminded me more than a little of Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen's novel [Heaven](#), in which the entire known galaxy is controlled by the Church of Cosmic Unity, who preach tolerance for all beings and all beliefs. (Notably, their system of belief is called the Memeplex, after Dawkins' own idea of self-replicating ideas.) So firmly do they believe in their message of tolerance, in fact, that they completely obliterate any species that refuses to accept their gospel. I'm not trying to suggest that Dawkins would go to such extremes, but it's worth noting that the intolerant organization at this novel's core uses the language of both faith and reason.

Of course, Dawkins doesn't preach tolerance (and I agree with Wolf that "preach" is the right word here—in fact, the entire article is peppered with religious terminology applied to atheism). And that's the basic problem with much atheism, both as I see it described in this article and as it was when I practiced it in high school. For all that Dawkins seems to have thought about faith, he doesn't seem to have thought too much about the *content* of faith, relying instead on presuppositions and prejudices created by—well, Pat Robertson, for one, and Bertrand Russell too. That reference to Philip Clayton in Wolf's article I mentioned? It's immediately followed by a quote from Dawkins in which he describes the entire discipline of theology as "a nonsubject... Vacuous. Devoid of coherence or content." He rejects it out of hand, prejudicially, simply because of what it is. That statement makes me wonder: is this atheism a considered standpoint, or knee-jerk contrarianism?

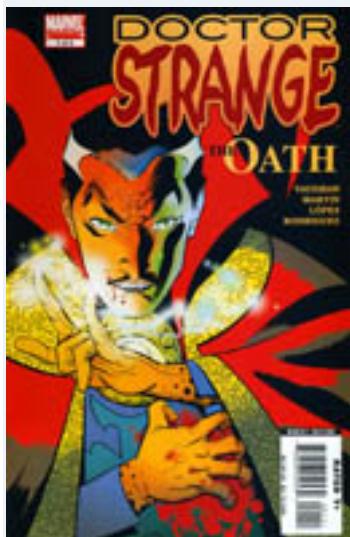
I get my answer, I think, from the article's sidebar on [Penn and Teller](#), who, I learn, have been increasingly adding stage banter about their atheism. Penn, apparently, has registered vanity plates reading ATHEIST and GODLESS, and has been known to sign autographs with "There is no God." While reading the sidebar, I couldn't help but think: *is Penn Jillette the atheist Steven Baldwin?*

And with that I had my answer. Atheism, or at least the evangelical atheism of Dawkins, Russell, Penn, and Teller, is every bit the intolerant bad guy that Christian fundamentalism is. They're fixing to fight, and the rest of us are caught in the middle.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on October 25, 2006 at 03:01 PM in [Atheism](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 15, 2006

Comics Roundup: October



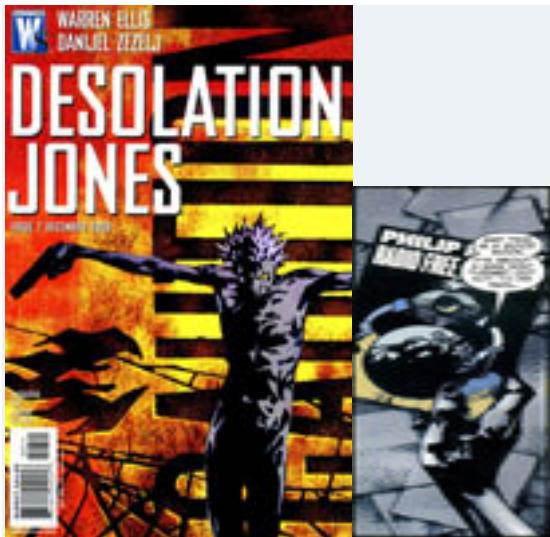
Doctor Strange: The Oath #1 (Marvel)

by Brian K. Vaughan (writer), Marcos Martin (pencils), and Alvaro Lopez (inks)

Brian K. Vaughan is hit and miss for me. I love the complex politics and flashback-laden structure of [Ex Machina](#), but I hate the vaguely sexist sermonizing of [Y: The Last Man](#). I was concerned about some of the ways in which he might go wrong as the next writer to tackle [Dr. Strange](#), who has been one of my favorite Marvel characters for some time now.

I'm pleased to say he gets it right (far, far more right than J. Michael Straczynski did with his misguided attempt at retconning the mage's origin in the *Strange* miniseries). Vaughan really seems to get that what makes Strange cool is a mix of far-out mysticism and traditional superheroics. Exhibit A: a brilliant sequence in which Strange travels between dimensions to steal the cure for cancer from a giant, catlike god of suffering. (I feel like that sentence should end with an exclamation point or two.) Marcos Martin's art does a great job of evoking [Steve Ditko](#), which doesn't hurt either. I've always loved how Dr. Strange explores the metaphysics of the Marvel Universe, and this series promises to follow in that tradition.





Desolation Jones #7 (DC/Wildstorm)
by Warren Ellis (writer) and Daniel Zezelj (art)

It's just gearing up, but the storyline that begins with this issue will apparently draw quite a bit on Philip K. Dick's [VALIS](#). Best believe I'm interested.



Jonah Hex #12 (DC)
by Justin Gray and Jimmy Palmiotti (writers) and Paul Gulacy (art)

Mormons abound in this issue as Jonah Hex protects a band of persecuted LDS settlers from a gang of bounty hunters that's tracking them down in retribution for the [Mountain Meadows Massacre](#). There's a strong moment of *caritas* when Hex first stumbles into the Mormon camp in the midst of a snowstorm and they nurse him back to health despite believing him to be one of the men hired to kill them. There character soon changes, though: the Mormons trick Hex into leading the bounty hunters into an ambush. In the final scene they hire him to kill the bounty hunters' employer, and he accepts the job, but donates his fee—a land claim—to the fledgling community. The story

sends a bit of a mixed message. The Mormons are finally able to settle thanks to the kindness they showed to Hex. But their community now has its roots in violence—altruistic, charitable violence, perhaps, but violence nonetheless.

Nextwave #9 (Marvel)

by Warren Ellis (writer) and Stuart Immonen (art)

It seems that the [unsettling chauvinism](#) that Captain America's been showing in *The Ultimates* makes Warren Ellis a bit uncomfortable, too. And what better response than to poke fun at it in his hilarious superhero satire *Nextwave*?

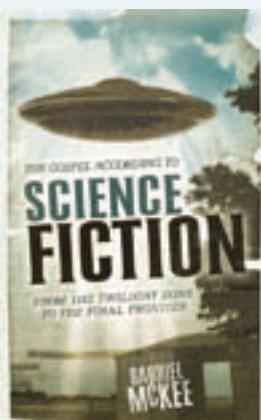


Brilliant.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on November 15, 2006 at 03:18 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 17, 2006

Starred review for GATSF



[Publishers Weekly](#) has given *The Gospel According to Science Fiction* a starred review in this week's issue. Here's what they had to say:

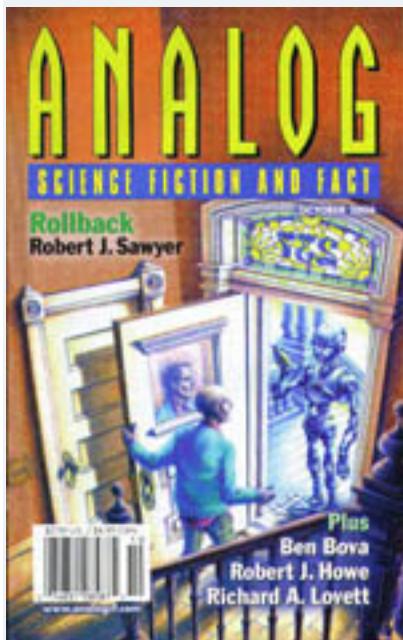
"Aliens, spaceships and giant robots may not seem to have much in common with matters spiritual, but in the mind of Harvard-trained writer and blogger McKee, they hold important theological insights. McKee's knowledge of science

fiction is impressive. He quotes esoteric short stories from the 1930s alongside contemporary sci-fi and fantasy films, showing an encyclopedic command of the genre. It serves him well as he combs the genre for examples of religious themes such as sin, faith, religious experience, the apocalypse and the afterlife. The author all too briefly touches upon the issue of science and faith, but this can be forgiven in a book primarily about science fiction. "The main goal of SF [science fiction]," writes McKee, "... is to show us how we can face the future and overcome the new challenges that our changing world may develop." By utilizing a solid theological background and culling the world of science fiction literature and films for help, McKee illustrates that organized religion should have a similar goal: "It must be willing to face whatever changes may come and adapt itself to the spiritual questions of the future." This fascinating hybrid of theology and sci-fi is creative, lucid and contains impressive scholarship."

The book comes out in January and can currently be preordered at [Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#) for about \$10. Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on November 17, 2006 at 12:01 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 18, 2006

Robert J. Sawyer's *Rollback*: The ethics of interplanetary communication



Due to some minor subscription quirks, I received the last three issues of *Analog* within a single week. At other times the delay might irk me, but in this case it's a blessing—it means I don't have to wait a month in between installments of Robert J. Sawyer's serialized novel *Rollback*. Sawyer became one of my favorite authors while researching [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) thanks to his mixture of compelling pulp plotting and Socratic philosophical dialog, and *Rollback* is a fine continuation of that tradition.

The story follows Sarah Halifax, an astronomer who was the first to decode an alien message from Sigma Draconis detected in a very-near future, and her less scientifically-inclined husband, Donald. Messages between Earth and Sigma Draconis take nearly 40 years round trip, so the Halifaxs are nearly 90 when a second alien message arrives. Thinking that Sarah's expertise and insight may be necessary in future correspondance with the aliens, a wealthy benefactor puts up a not-so-small fortune for a physiological "rollback" to restore Sarah (and, at her request, Donald) to youth and health. But Sarah's body rejects the procedure, and she remains old while Donald becomes young again. Thus follows a number of meditations on mortality, youth, and aging.

This main story is interesting, but the part of the story that really fascinated me was the content of the alien messages. The Dracons seem quite uninterested in all the things we've always assumed aliens would want to talk about—math, astronomy, biology. Instead, their second message to Earth is a lengthy questionnaire on morality and ethics. As Sarah explains:

"What a ridiculous notion, that beings would send messages across the light-years to talk about *math!* . . . Math and physics are the same everywhere in the universe. There's no need to contact an alien race to find out if they agree that one plus three equals four, that seven is a prime number, that the value of *pi* is 3.14159, *et cetera*. None of these

things are matters of local circumstance, or of opinion. No, the things worth discussing are moral issues—things that are debatable, things that an alien race might have a radically different perspective on."

In fact, the first message from Sigma Draconis uses math only as a means to begin discussing logic, culminating with ethical statements about good and evil. To the Dracons, morality is the highest science, the thing worth beaming across the stars with an 18-year time lag.

From this fascinating proposition, Sawyer makes some strong points about the morality of our own science. The search for extraterrestrial intelligence, Sarah concludes, is a sign of an advanced ethical stance:

"SETI is an activity that says life, as opposed to nonlife, is important, that finding life is meaningful. If you didn't care about the distinction between life and nonlife, all you'd do would be astronomy, not SETI."

Much of this discussion of morality and science is relevant to recent discussions of atheism and intelligent design—[Richard Dawkins](#) is mentioned by name at one point—and one of Sawyer's main points is that humankind as a race must "transcend Darwin," to overcome the programming of our "selfish genes" and become altruistic on a planetary (and interplanetary) scale.

"Evolution eventually gives rise to technology, which has a survival value *up to a point*—but once technologies of mass destruction are readily available, the psychology that the Darwinian engine forces on lifeforms almost inevitably leads to their downfall. . . . If you voluntarily opt out of evolution, if you cease to struggle to get more copies of your own DNA out there, you probably give up a lot of aggression."

We have a duty to ourselves and to the universe to evolve morally as well as genetically, and to break out of the restraints imposed by our biology. Science and technology have given us the means to destroy ourselves; it is up to our sense of ethics to rein in those results of evolution and bring altruism to the stars.

Though it's not quite as strong a story as his more major works, such as [Hominids](#) and [Calculating God](#), *Rollback* is everything you would expect from Robert J. Sawyer—entertaining and thought-provoking in equal measure. I'm glad I got to read it without waiting between installments, and now that all four parts have been published, you can do the same.

Rollback will be available as a [collected hardcover](#) from Tor in April, but those who are impatient—or who want to support the remaining SF magazines (and you *do* want to support the remaining SF magazines, don't you?) are encouraged to seek out the October through December 2006 issues of [Analog](#) and the January/February 2007 double issue for all four installments.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on November 18, 2006 at 11:16 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 22, 2006

The National Space Policy (or, Klaatu, where are you when we need you?)



A few weeks ago, the President announced a [new National Space Policy](#) that recent editorials have compared to an expansion of the Monroe Doctrine to the entire solar system. Essentially, the policy says that the US will allow no other country or group of countries to limit its use of space. There's one passage in particular that bothers me:

"The United States will oppose the development of new legal regimes or other restrictions that seek to prohibit or limit U.S. access to or use of space. Proposed arms control agreements or restrictions must not impair the rights of the United States to conduct research, development, testing, and operations or other activities in space for U.S. national interests."

In other words, the policy is preemptively negates any international treaty that would keep weapons out of space.

A 1953 article in the *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society* put forth the idea that humankind can and should leave its sins behind as it leaves Earth:

"One day a landing on the moon will be made. . . . One would like to think that amid all the technical jubilation somebody will get up and say: 'Remember! For the first time since Adam the slate is clean.'"

Space exploration gives humanity a chance to escape the evils we have created for ourselves on Earth. Putting weapons in space would ruin this opportunity to escape those evils. It is an admission of defeat—it says that we cannot overcome our violent traits and our petty disagreements, that these divisions are destined to remain with us where in the universe we go. We are supposed to send the best of humanity to the stars, not the worst. It is the most profound display of pessimism about human nature imaginable to tarnish the stars with the stain of war. The US should support any international attempts to keep weapons out of space. It is absolutely imperative that the exploration of space be peaceful, a representation of our highest hopes and not our basest impulses.

I mean, really—didn't Bush see [*The Day the Earth Stood Still*](#)?

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on November 22, 2006 at 03:03 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 25, 2006

Stephen Baldwin's hardcore conservatism



After poking fun at Stephen Baldwin for the last couple months, I finally got my hands on a review copy of his book, [*The Unusual Suspect: My calling to the new hardcore movement of faith*](#). So I can now say, with an informed basis for doing so, that Baldwin manages to be dumb, dangerous, and theologically wrongheaded all in equal measure. So here, in all seriousness, is why the radical, hardcore faith he sets forth is anything but unusual.

Baldwin's book sells itself as being young, hip Christianity with skateboards and Hollywood cred (which Baldwin possesses far more in his mind than in reality). This isn't some stuffy old preacher—he's got tattoos and calls Paul "freaking brilliant." But somewhere along the line (probably around the chapter that's an extended metaphor about that hip extreme sport, golf), we begin to realize just how out of touch Baldwin really is. My favorite passage from the book is full of self-assured swagger and its author seems quite convinced that he's saying *exactly what young people want to hear*, but I couldn't make head nor tail of it:

"In my mind I pictured a guy holding back a raging pit bull with a muzzle and a choke collar at one end of a football field. On the other end stood a guy with holding a stinky slab of steak. The moment the muzzle and the leash come off the dog, he attacks. That's how I felt. I was God's pit bull. And that is still how I feel. By the way, when I took off I ran right past the steak because I saw a herd of cattle, and when I got to the herd of cattle I saw a ridge and now I want to know what's on the other side. Once I make it past that ridge with God I'm going to see another one and I already know there's something more beyond that, and even more beyond that because, when it comes to Jesus Christ, this pursuit is never going to end."

Wait a minute, weren't we on a football field? I think this particular metaphor got out of God's control.

That sort of bizarre moment is what you expect from the book, and for the most part, it's what you get. But in the last few chapters, things get downright insulting. Baldwin consistently characterizes his faith as "radical" and "hardcore," but when we examine that claim, his idea of being radical seems to mean A) having tattoos, B) thinking it's okay to say "crap," and C) thinking that churches should bring the Gospel to people who have tattoos and say "crap." When it

comes to actually wanting to radically transform our world, he's downright reactionary. Nowhere is this more clear than in the much-discussed passage in which he criticizes U2's Bono for his charity work in Africa:

"You would do far more good if you preached the gospel of Jesus rather than trying to get third world debt relief. If you asked me, and you didn't but here it is anyway, I would tell you to preach the gospel on MTV. God will take care of that third world country. Get back to your calling, Bono."

Conservatives have frequently used Jesus' statement in John 12:8 ("You will always have the poor among you") as an excuse for why they aren't trying to eliminate poverty. "God said there will always be poor people," the argument runs, "and it's arrogant of us to try and prove him wrong by fighting poverty." Not only that, any attempt to fight poverty under a secular banner is doomed to failure because there is no true charity without the name of Jesus. This flies in the face of Jesus' actual message about poverty, as put forth in the [parable of the good Samaritan](#) (Luke 10:25-37) and Matthew 25:37-40:

"Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"

The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"

John 12:8 is not an excuse—it is a condemnation and a challenge. Baldwin and other conservative evangelicals want to leave the problem of poverty to God. But "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). It is our responsibility to do everything in our power to alleviate the suffering around us, to try to bring the kingdom of God to Earth.

In Baldwin's eyes the message of Christianity has little to do with caring for "the least of these." It's about saving yourself (and having a gnarly thrill ride while you're at it). One of my main problems with evangelicalism is its self-centeredness, its focus on "what can God do for me?" In Baldwin's case, the end result of this selfishness is an overwhelming pessimism about the power of faith to bring about social change:

"I hear this from people all the time. They say we are responsible for our fates, we don't need God. All we need to do is band together and we can solve all our problems. War. Disease. Poverty. Violence. Global warming. . . Let me tell you something, buddy. If you got all six billion people on the planet together and went to work on all that plagues this earth, all of us collectively still couldn't do enough to fix it because this world and its problems are too big." In other words, since we can't solve all of our problems overnight, we shouldn't try to solve *any* of them. This is the same pessimism about human nature that led George W. Bush to argue that we will inevitably need [weapons in space](#). And, sure enough, right there in the Epilog of *The Unusual Suspect*, we find an endorsement of Bush and his "Christian agenda"—an agenda, it is worth noting, that does not include trying to eliminate war, poverty, global warming, or third world debt, with or without the name of God attached.

So I have to ask—what's so radical about this? It looks to me like the same old reactionary evangelicalism, selfishly tied up with personal rewards and ardently opposed to those who want to enact Jesus' social teachings. The messenger may have tattoos, but the message is hardly "unusual."

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on November 25, 2006 at 09:52 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 25, 2006

"Radical Acceptance," moral pessimism, and the kingdom of heaven

David W. Goldman's story "Radical Acceptance" in this month's [Analog](#) (Jan/Feb 2007) speaks to the moral pessimism of Bush's space policy and Stephen Baldwin's opposition to fighting poverty. The problem, the otter-like aliens in Goldman's story tell us, is angels.

Angels, the argument runs, give us an excuse not to improve ourselves. It's all right if we don't behave as we hope to because, after all, "we're no angels." The alien uses *Lord of the Flies* to illustrate the point:

"The message of [*The Lord of the Flies*] is that humans will always be failed angels. But you're *not!* You're actually incredibly *successful*. But not angels—you're incredibly successful *apes!* Apes who all by yourselves—without any guidance from either benevolent gods or sponsoring angels—figured out language and agriculture and metal-working and love and morality and vaudeville. If *Lord of the Flies* told the *real* story of your species, it would show a shipwreck of illiterate savages struggling together to survive, then going on to invent epic poetry and art deco."

But by believing in angels, we get the story backwards, viewing ourselves as inherently imperfect copies of beings that our inherent moral superiors.

The aliens fear we'll begin to consider them our moral superiors, too, and thus completely miss the point they're trying to make. They offer us a new dominant meme—the "radical acceptance" of the title. We must see ourselves exactly

as we are, imperfections and progress alike, and from this clear-sighted standpoint we'll be able to build a better future.

Goldman's story speaks to the pessimism voiced by Stephen Baldwin about our ability to improve ourselves. It's a different understanding of sin, one which takes into account the progress humankind has made. And its utopianism is in keeping with my reading of Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God, which as "within us"—as long as we are willing to work to build it. It's a great story, and definitely makes the current issue of *Analog* well worth picking up.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on November 25, 2006 at 10:06 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 26, 2006

Stranger Than Fiction: the nice guy messiah

Stranger Than Fiction has some very interesting theological elements, but discussing them requires totally spoiling the ending. Consider yourself warned.

Stranger Than Fiction is the story of Harold Crick, a dull IRS agent who finds he's a character in a novel when he begins hearing an author's voice narrating his life. Anxiety about the voice leads him to transform his life, becoming a kinder and happier person even while sinking into the belief that his life is doomed to end in tragedy.

And it is, because Karen Eiffel, his author, has worked out all the details of her story except for the exact manner of Harold's death. But when she discovers he's real, she has second thoughts about her story's until-then inevitable ending. Harold's death—which will not actually occur until she types it from her handwritten notes—will make her book a tragic masterpiece. But is a masterpiece worth it if a likeable innocent has to die for it?

In the end, Eiffel does change her ending, giving Harold a new lease on life (albeit after a few weeks in traction):

"Because it's a book about a man who doesn't know he's about to die, and then dies. But if the man does know he's going to die and dies anyway, dies willingly, knowing he could stop it, then, I mean, isn't that the type of man you want to keep alive?"

It's unsurprising for a movie about the ways in which authors manipulate their character's lives to compare the writer to God. What's more interesting here is the messianic tone that this approach then lends to the character in question. Here God, the third person omniscient narrator, can't see the point in needlessly killing his favorite character, so he gives him a second chance. It's an aesthetic theology of the resurrection—Jesus as the character who was too darned nice to have a sad ending. It's also a critique of Vonnegutian authorial cruelty in which the author toys with fictional lives simply because he can. The characters, fictional or otherwise, are in some way alive and worthy of respect—and of a happy ending.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on November 26, 2006 at 11:17 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 03, 2006

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

It's not as original as the [New York Times](#) would have you believe, but Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* is one of the most religious postapocalyptic tales since Walter M. Miller's [A Canticle For Leibowitz](#).

I had a bit of a grudge against *The Road* going into it. Having heard some of the hyperbolic statements mainstream and literary reviewers had made about the book, I was irritated that its debt to some of the fine works of SF that preceded it—and, for that matter, the fact that it *is* SF—were being ignored. [The Guardian's review](#), for example, compares the book to Beckett, Brecht, and Yeats. But it owes every bit as much (if not more) to sources far below the literary establishment's brow—[The Road Warrior](#), [The Stand](#), the [post-Romero zombie film](#), and [A Canticle For Leibowitz](#). (Interestingly, though, the work to which it owns the greatest debt is not SF at all—the novel is essentially a postapocalyptic adaptation of [Lone Wolf and Cub](#)). Contrary to the suggestions of some of its more hyperbolic reviews, the book is not something wholly new, and to treat it as such does a disservice to those influences.

So the genre apologist in me says that *The Road* is not terribly original. It *is*, however, very good. It's a bleak book, and the simple, resigned language in which it's written communicates this atmosphere quite effectively. Its two characters, a nameless duo called simply "the man" and "the boy," trudge through a postapocalyptic landscape, searching amongst the remains of a dead world for food, warmth, and shelter. The avoid contact with what few other people have survived, lest they become victims of theft, slavery, or cannibalism. The boy was born into this world, and has no experience of what life was like before the unnamed disaster that created it.

The father has hardened himself to the violent necessities of survival in this decimated world, and is willing to do anything to protect his son. At one point, after he has killed a man who threatened them, he states:

"My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you." Ensuring the boy's survival is a divine mission, and extreme measures are justified. They are not simply keeping themselves alive—the man has taught the boy that they are "carrying the fire." On such a mission, extreme measures are justified.

The boy, on the other hand, has not become so hardened. He is resigned to some of the unpleasant necessities of their world, but he emanates kindness and compassion, even to those who would rob or kill them. When they see strangers on the road, his father's first instinct is to hide from them; the boy's is to offer them food.

And that is the nature of "the fire" that they are carrying—it is this compassion, which was the first thing to be consumed in the flames that have decimated the world. The boy is an embodiment of kindness, of hope, of civilization. When the two encounter an old man—tellingly named Ely (Elijah)—and offer him food, he thinks the boy is an angel. The father's reply: "What if I said that he's a god?" The boy is a messiah for this world because he is able to keep compassion alive.

In the closing pages of the book, the boy is taken in by a small settlement where we see, for the first time in the book, signs of civilization, community, and life. We also see here signs of religion, as the woman who cares for the boy talks to him about God. In the boy's survival, faith and compassion have survived as well. He has carried the fire, and because of him, hope survives in a hopeless landscape.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on December 03, 2006 at 09:25 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 17, 2006

Religion, violence, and "The Screwfly Solution"

Last week, Showtime's *Masters of Horror* series aired [Joe Dante](#)'s adaptation of [James Tiptree, Jr.](#)'s story "[The Screwfly Solution](#)". The title refers to a [method](#) of controlling parasitic insects by interfering with their reproductive cycle. In the story, an alien virus turns men's sex drive into a violence drive, leading to "femicide"—the mass slaughter of women around the world. (Creepy.)

When we first encounter the virus, however, it's not presented as a disease—it's a religion. The "Sons of Adam" cult described in the story's opening pages believes that

"when man gets rid of his animal part which is woman, this is the signal God is awaiting. Then God will reveal the new true clean way, maybe angels will come bringing new souls, or maybe we will live forever, but it is not our place to speculate, only to obey.

Later in the story, a Catholic interpretation of this drive to kill appears as a newspaper item:

"Pope John IV today intimated that he does not plan to comment officially on the so-called Pauline Purification cults advocating the elimination of women as a means of justifying man to God. A spokesman emphasized that the Church takes no position on these cults but repudiates any doctrine involving a 'challenge' to or from God to reveal His further plans for man."

Unfortunately, Tiptree doesn't follow through on this religious angle, choosing instead to concentrate on the virus itself. After the first few pages, religion is absent from the story. Dante's adaptation is perhaps even more up-front in the religious characterization of the homicide-inducing virus, giving us non-Christian examples as well—a news report early in the show describes a mass execution of women in Iran for violation of *shari'a*. And the Sons of Adam function far further into the plot than in Tiptree's story.

Unfortunately, like many *Masters of Horror* episodes, it shows the signs of its small budget and short shooting schedule, and has a hard time transcending its over-expository script and lackluster performances. Nevertheless, it manages to crystallize its religious themes in a clear and concise way. Dante's adaptation places a heavy emphasis on one key line from the original story, turning into the point at which the story's message about religion, intolerance, and violence crystallizes. When presenting evidence to a board room full of generals and politicians, one of the scientists studying the outbreak declares: "The religion is not a cause, it's a symptom."

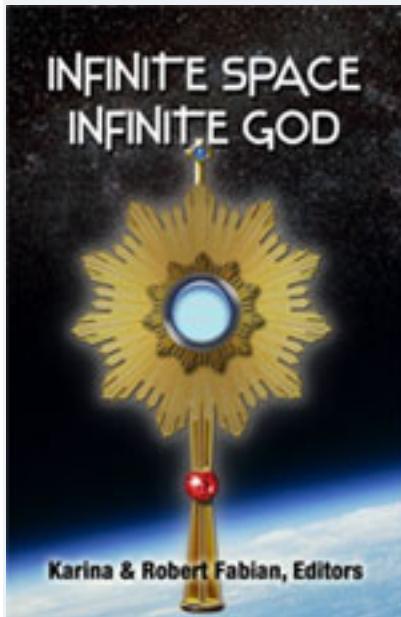
I've long been bothered by overly simple statements from a number of people—from [Sam Harris](#) to [Mel Gibson](#)—that religions cause wars. Throughout history, from Muslim expansion to the Crusades to the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict, religion has been a single factor in such conflicts. More often than not, the causes of these wars are better explained as political, racial/racist, economic. But the conflicts have been described in religious terms because religion is a tool for communication—one that can be used to carry bad messages as well as good. When religion is used to justify intolerance and violence, the language surrounding these things is the symptom, not the cause. The cause is something far more difficult to identify and combat—the virus of anger that can erupt, like in "The Screwfly Solution," to disastrous results.

Though I can't entirely recommend Joe Dante's adaptation of Tiptree's sublimely pessimistic story, I must credit it with helping me understand how the place of religion in the original story can be interpreted.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on December 17, 2006 at 11:11 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 17, 2006

An interview with Karina and Robert Fabian



Infinite Space, Infinite God, edited by [Karina and Robert Fabian](#), is billed as an anthology of Catholic SF, but it's much more than that. The 15 stories cover broad thematic ground, and though the Catholic Church plays a role in all of them, each story offers a vastly different perspective. This volume isn't just of interest to Catholics—it's good SF that engages in exactly the kind of speculation that keeps the genre vibrant. The editors' introductions to the stories are intelligent and informative, giving some excellent background data on the specific aspects of the church that the stories explore. It's a great anthology, and it's fitting that it was recently named as a finalist in the [EPPIE Awards](#). Below, co-editors Karina and Robert Fabian share their thoughts on SF, the church, and the future of faith.

Many SF stories about religion use Catholicism specifically to make their points, describing spacefaring priests and nuns or futuristic governments modeled on the church. Why have so many SF authors, regardless of their own faiths, seen Catholicism as the exemplary faith?

Before we answer, we want to point out that I can only speak from an American/European/Australian POV. Neither Rob nor I know much about the literature of Asia or the Orient.

There are lots of reasons Catholicism plays on the imagination of authors, regardless of their faith. Catholicism is a familiar yet rich religion, both visually and historically. There's so much an author can play with.

If you say, "Catholic," people immediately have an image: grand churches, men with white collars and women in habits, icons (which are different from idols, like a photo of your mom is different from your mom.) They think of structure, hierarchy, and specific moral expectations. They think of controversy and crusade. Yet they also think of something that perseveres.

Think of what that means for an author! There are cultural templates they can play with, structures they can adapt, and icons that are—snap!—captured in the visceral understanding of the reader.

It's intellectual shorthand: write "Reverend Paul," and the reader gets a multitude of images; write "Father Paul," and readers get a more focused image. Yet because of the history and diversity of the Catholic Church, you can take that shorthand and build it into something so much more.

I was pleasantly surprised to see the wide variety of viewpoints and approaches to Catholicism presented in *Infinite Space, Infinite God*. The stories don't shy away from talking about some controversial and touchy

subjects. The Church isn't a monolithic, unchanging thing, but an active and vibrant community. What sort of effect do you see the kind of open discussion of these stories having on the future of the Church?

We're definitely hoping folks will discuss the issues in these stories. In fact, it's a dream of ours to have *Infinite Space, Infinite God* becomes course material for theology/philosophy-and-technology courses.

None of us, however, would presume to suggest that our stories will affect the decisions and doctrine of the Catholic Church. You'd be surprised at how much the Church is already thinking and studying the questions we've raised—and at a higher theological level than any of us aspired to. The best we could ask is that it opens minds to ask "What if?" After all, that's what great SF does.

What we are hoping is that as people of any faith read these stories, they'll realize—or be reassured—that there is still a place for faith and for the organized expression of faith. We also want folks to see that the Church is, as you put it, not a monolithic, unchanging thing. It never has been and never will be. Nonetheless, it does stand for some unchanging virtues—respect for life, love of neighbor, and above all, the eternal loving relationship between God and humans.

If there is a single theme that runs through all of these stories, it is that the past can help us understand the future. The wisdom of medieval Catholic thinkers, which has often been rejected by Protestants and ignored by scientists and modern philosophers, may be the key to understanding the problems we will face in the future. How do you think the scientists and explorers of the future will be able to use the Catholic Church's rich intellectual history?

Well, first, they'll have to listen to it. But let's just assume that that's going to happen with increasing frequency.

My friend and fellow writer [Ann Lewis](#) noted that one of the strengths of the Catholic faith is that we value reason. "If we can reason, we can discover—and discover from a mature point of view."

The Catholic Church has always taught that reason (logic) and faith need to stand together. Now, I'm certain someone reading this will object, "And what about Galileo?" [The Galileo case](#) is much more complex than simply denying heliocentric theory because it "didn't agree with Scripture." I've read several accounts and interpretations, each different according to the person's personal point of view: The Church was too attached to Aristotelian theory; Galileo went too far by directly challenging the authority of the Pope in writing; Galileo insisted he could interpret Scripture better than the Pope; Galileo was not able to prove heliocentric theory with his proofs (His theories were later proven in the 1800s with more exact equipment, but how could the Inquisitors of the time know that?); the Church was afraid of anything that contradicted its authority, even in the area of science... The list goes on, but the point is that it was not just—if ever—a case of science contradicting Scripture. Note that [Copernicus](#), who proposed the heliocentric theory well before Galileo, was a monk and was not punished for his views.

So back to the intellectual history of the Church. Much of the Church's intellectual history is wrapped into scientific thought today, although many scientists and laymen don't realize it. [St. Albert the Great](#) and [St. Thomas Aquinas](#) pioneered the scientific method. [Gregor Mendel](#), a monk, conducted one of the first systematic studies of genetics. The Vatican supports scientific research across the globe today via the Pontifical Academy. So the influence is there.

Where we hope the influence grows, however, is in the faith filled application of the science.

One of my favorite stories in *Infinite Space, Infinite God* is [Tim Myers'](#) "Brother Jubal in the Womb of Silence," which describes the life of an anchorite who lives in isolation on the moon, just as early Christian monks lived contemplative lives in the deserts on the fringe of civilization. And your own story "These Three" focuses on a religious order that runs search and rescue missions in space, providing "air, equipment, and the love of God." Given the degree to which monasticism has declined in recent decades, do you see space exploration as providing a potential renaissance for religious orders?

Tim's story is gorgeous. Karina loves Brother Jubal so much, she actually had Tim create some of Brother Jubal's religious writings to quote in the SF novel she's working on right now. It, too, features sisters from Our Lady of the Rescue—the order in "These Three"—as they handle the safety of a crew exploring the first-discovered alien ship in the Kuiper belt.

There's definitely a precedent and a place for religious orders in exploration. Historically, where explorers have gone, priests and the religious have followed. In part to "convert the heathen," but also to serve the faithful. Even more in space than here on Earth, they will need to have a functional role other than spiritual—Brother Jubal Church-sponsored hermitage notwithstanding. That's why we came up with the idea of space search and rescue as a service

for our order. It's a necessary service that will no doubt command a high price, so if the sisters do it for "air, equipment and the love of God," they undercut the competition and forge a place for the religious in space. (Sadly, there's no [Queen Isabella](#) to fund a monastery on Mars.)

Will it cause a renaissance for religious orders? No, but we suspect we're on the way to one as it is. A study done of religious orders ([Shaping the Coming Age of Religious Life](#)) showed that religious orders go through periods of decline and growth as the Church's dominant image changes. Monastic/cloistered orders, for example, were the dominant orders from 500-1200 AD; then came mendicant orders (1200-1500 AD); apostolic orders (1500-1800 AD), and now teaching congregations. With [Vatican II](#) ushering in (or perhaps simply recognizing) a new dominant image for the Church, orders are again in a stage of flux, with new communities emerging as some of the older ones decline. At a glance, we'd say we're entering an image of social justice and service to our neighbors, but only time will tell, just as time will tell how religious orders will find their place among extra-terrestrial humankind.

Once we have viable communities in space, religious orders will follow. In one form or another, they are part of the Catholic tradition. Wherever we have Catholics, we will see them as well—both in hermitage and out serving their communities.

In many of the stories in this anthology the Catholic Church is persecuted, imperiled, or forgotten. In Adrienne Ray's "Hopkins' Well," Catholics are exiled on Mars; in Simon Morden's "Little Madeleine," the Church forms an order of nuns to function as bodyguards to protect priests from street gangs. These stories have optimistic conclusions, but they definitely see the potential for dark times ahead. Do you think the Catholic Church will have to face these kinds of difficulties in the future?

A "Hopkins' Well" situation where Catholics are persecuted to the point of near-extinction? No. But one of science fiction's strengths is its ability to change baseline assumptions and exaggerate situations so that we can examine the consequences and repercussions of current trends.

"Little Madeleine" is a good example. Bodyguards for religious? [Sister Leonella](#), who was shot in Somalia this September, traveled with a bodyguard. (He was also shot.) They believe she was shot by Muslims angry at [Pope Benedict's speech](#). However, in Karina's home town, two priests were shot by a disturbed teenager in their own home.

The Joans of "Little Madeleine" are an exaggeration of a trend, yet the overall story is about the larger problems of a world which has caused their order to form—and about the elements of that world that exist today.

That's one of the things we've really enjoyed about putting together these stories, and what makes *Infinite Space, Infinite God* more than just "SF for Catholics." These stories, while using the Catholic Church as their focus, nonetheless speak to all of us, regardless of faith.

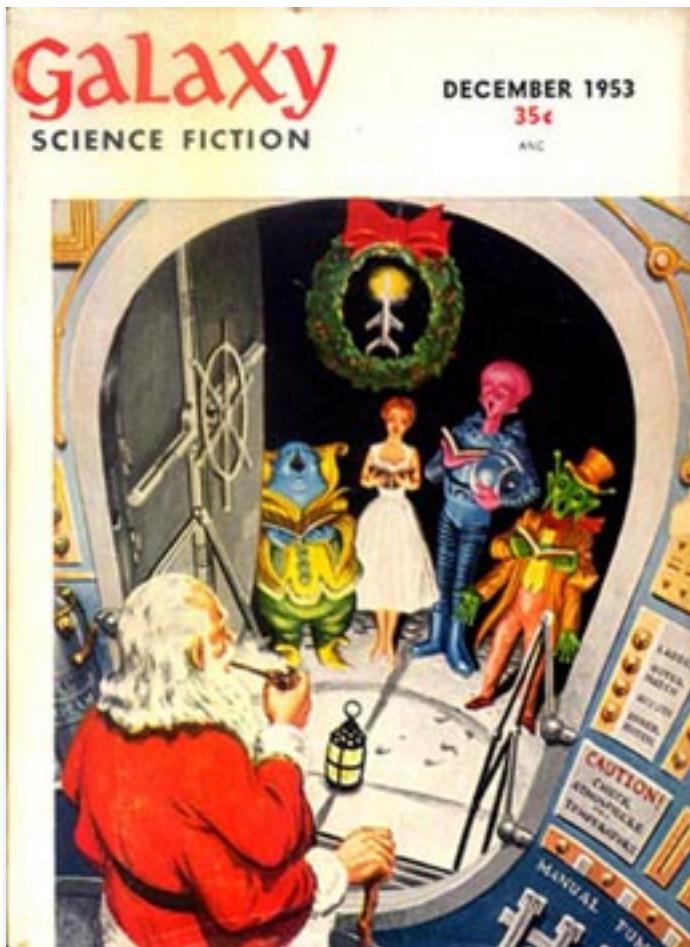
[Infinite Space, Infinite God](#) is currently [available as an e-book](#) from [Twilight Times Books](#), and will be available in print in August 2007.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on December 17, 2006 at 09:24 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 24, 2006

Merry Christmas!

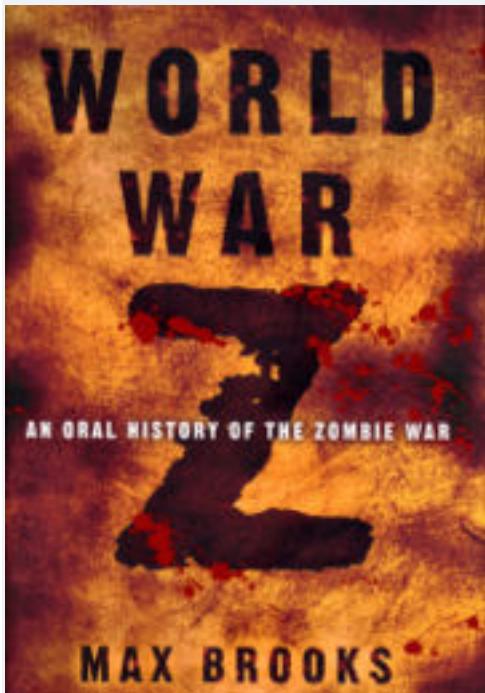
Merry Christmas from SF Gospel!



Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on December 24, 2006 at 11:34 AM | [Permalink](#)

January 03, 2007

World War Z: The Kingdom of Zombie Heaven



[*World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*](#), a horror novel from Max Brooks (best known as the author of [*The Zombie Survival Guide*](#)), is a unique book. Told as a series of interviews with survivors of the Zombie War, it treats itself as non-fiction, right down to the author bio and the reviews quoted on the back cover (which are real, but play along quite well). Of course, we all remember the awful events of the last few years, when humanity was nearly overtaken by the mindless armies of the walking dead, but Brook's book gives us a human perspective on those events, focusing not on what *happened*, but on what it *means*.

I was amazed at just how optimistic *World War Z* is. We know from the first page that humanity defeated the undead, and the rest of the book serves tells the bloody, violent, and inspiring story of how that victory was achieved. The key to victory wasn't weapons or strategy (in fact, Brooks spends a lot of time explaining precisely why every technique of making war would be useless against a horde of zombies). Humanity wins because of hope in the face of impossible odds, and, corny as it may sound, *World War Z* is a testimony to the strength of the human spirit.

Religion plays a key part in several of the interviews in the novel, most importantly in the case of a Russian Orthodox priest who takes it upon himself to kill those who have been infected with the zombie plague before they kill themselves:

God was speaking to me, I could feel his words ringing in my head. "No more sinning," he told me, "no more souls resigned to hell." It was so clear, so simple...soldiers killing themselves had cost the Lord too many good souls. Suicide was a sin, and we, his servants—those who had chosen to be his shepherds upon the earth—were the only ones who should bear the cross of releasing trapped souls from infected bodies!

The idea of priests taking up the burden of sin in a rapidly-collapsing world is a compelling one. But even more interesting to me was a single reference in another interview to a religious interpretation of the plague itself: An American told us about how the religious sect known as "God's Lambs" believed that the rapture had finally come and the quicker they were infected, the quicker they would go to heaven.

When I was shooting a zombie movie in college, ([*Evan A. Baker's The Cleansing*](#), if you were curious), my friends and I spent a lot of time talking zombie philosophy. Being a religion major, one of my favorite explanations for zombie plagues in movies such as [*Dawn of the Dead*](#) was a theological one. Like the "God's Lambs" cult, I theorized that the zombie legions could, in fact, be the Kingdom of Heaven. For all we know, zombies are happy to be zombies, and the reason they so eagerly spread their affliction to the living is simply that they want us to be as happy as they are. Once everyone on earth has become a walking corpse, the New Jerusalem will be complete. As zombie theories go, it's pretty outlandish, but zombie apocalypse lends itself to eschatological thinking.

I haven't yet read Kim Paffenroth's [*Gospel of the Living Dead*](#), but I am definitely planning to. I love the kind of wild, fun speculation that zombie movies can engender, and I'm sure it'll be of interest to me. *World War Z* contains a lot of that sort of speculation, and I definitely recommend it to any zombie fans that haven't read it yet.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on January 03, 2007 at 05:11 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 04, 2007

The Flight into Egypt: *Children of Men*



Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*, adapted from

the novel by [P.D. James](#), is the story of a future that is slowly dying. The world of this film is 18 years into a plague of infertility—a world that quite literally has no future. Cuarón brilliantly sets up the setting, giving us snapshots of the chaos—apocalyptic graffiti, TV ads for suicide pills, the casual way passers-by react to violent acts. Only gradually do we realize the extent to which Britain, where the movie takes place, has become a police state.

A woman named Kee is the first woman to become pregnant in over 18 years, and she is caught inbetween this authoritarian government and a group of radical terrorists. Theo Faron, a former activist who has become a cog in the authoritarian machine, becomes her unlikely escort in the bleak landscape of a world collapsing under its own hopelessness. As a chase movie, *Children of Men* is brilliantly executed, particularly in a handful of action sequences shot in spectacularly long single takes. The violence and tension of these scenes has a visceral impact. It feels *real*—this movie has some *really* well-rehearsed extras.

The best of these sequences occurs at the end, as Theo, Kee, and the newborn child run through a war zone. During a lull in the fighting, the warring factions stop to let them pass through, gazing in awe at the only child they've seen in years. For a brief second, we think that the fighting will stop, and things will finally go back to normal—and then, precisely at the moment that we think the peace may last, it is interrupted by gunfire, and Kee and Theo must once again run to escape the battle. The old world is consuming itself, and even the prospect of a new age cannot stop it from self-destructing.

The apocalypticism of *Children of Men*, much like the previously-discussed *The Road* and *World War Z*, describes the destruction of the current world only as a preamble to the construction of the old one. Like Revelation, *CoM* is ultimately optimistic. It recaptures the sense of apocalypticism as a radical statement in opposition to the injustices of the current order. We can build the New Jerusalem, but only after Babylon has destroyed itself. Unlike the pro-middle class end times of *Left Behind*, this film is a condemnation of the oppressive institutions that keep us from achieving paradise on earth. Fallen is Babylon the mighty, *Children of Men* says. Good riddance—now let's get to work.

For more on the radicalism of Revelation, please read my overview of The Omen and Left Behind at [The Revealer](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on January 04, 2007 at 01:58 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 09, 2007

GATSF: Featured Review at Mania.com

[The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) was the highlight of last week's [Book Buzz](#) at [Mania](#). Columnist Pat Ferrara writes:

Gabriel McKee, author of the acclaimed [Pink Beams of Light from the God in the Gutter: The Science-Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick](#) musters up her [sic] vast SF and theological knowledge to churn out another thought-provoking look at the parallels, aims, and social functions of SF lit and religion in [The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier](#). The highlight of this week's Book Buzz, McKee's newest

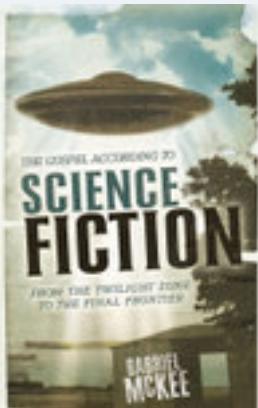
look at religion and sci fi illustrates an ever-growing (and increasingly legitimized) field of theological and cultural study.

Interspersed with quotes from sci fi shows and literature as far back as the 1930s, Harvard writer Gabriel McKee mixes everything from early genre shorts to contemporary SF and fantasy films. By using her [sic] exhaustive (and well-versed) knowledge of science fiction, McKee weaves media, culture, and religion into a thoughtful, theological perspective on these two seemingly unrelated institutions. Reminiscent of the '[Earthseed](#)' philosophy that God is change, McKee's newest book goes above and beyond merely cataloguing American science fiction to express the genre's dynamics and their impact on our society's melting pot religious identity.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on January 09, 2007 at 04:03 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 17, 2007

***The Gospel According to Science Fiction* released**



The Gospel According to Science Fiction is now officially available! I received my copies from the publisher recently, and [many online retailers](#) are listing it as in stock. Some people have asked if I have a preference as to where they buy it, and I don't—but if you know anyone who might be interested in the book, please tell them about it (or buy them a copy. Or three).

Also, just for my own curiosity, if you've ordered the book online, please let me know when it arrives. Ditto if you happen to see it on the shelf in a bookstore/library/stoop sale near you.

Check back here periodically to learn about book signings, appearances, and my eventual-if-belated book release party in Brooklyn!

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on January 17, 2007 at 03:04 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 19, 2007

A small mystery

This ad has been in the classified section in *Analog* for the last few issues, for some reason under the "health" heading:

True Christianity. For inspired answers, send detailed questions to: Jesus Project, P.O.B. 121, Eldorado, OK 73537
Quite mysterious. I kind of want to write to them, but I can't think of a question more detailed than "What is the Jesus Project, and why is it printing cryptic advertisements in *Analog*?" If anyone out there knows anything more about this, I'd love to hear it.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on January 19, 2007 at 11:51 PM | [Permalink](#)

January 21, 2007

***I Am Legend* and *The Omega Man*: Realized eschatology in the kingdom of the vampires**

I've been a fan of [Richard Matheson](#)'s 1954 novel [I Am Legend](#) for years (full disclosure: I first heard of after hearing the eponymous song by [White Zombie](#)). I've seen [The Last Man on Earth](#), the 1964 film adaptation starring Vincent Price, but I had never seen the more famous adaptation, Boris Sagal's [The Omega Man](#) (1971), until this week. Much like other '70s SF films like [Logan's Run](#) and [Soylent Green](#), it's enjoyable, but has significant shortcomings and doesn't live up to the potential of its best scenes. It drove me to re-read the novel on which it was based (something I

recommend everyone do—at 150 pages, it won't take you very long).



I Am Legend is the story of Robert Neville, the last remaining human on a world ravaged by a plague of vampires. By night, the creatures besiege Neville in his home. By day, he scavenges the ruins of society and bolsters his home's defenses against the monsters that have inherited the earth. To keep from going mad, Neville studies the creatures, finding scientific explanations of every aspect of traditional vampire mythology, from garlic to crosses. Vampirism is caused by a bacterial plague that overtook humankind in the aftermath of a nuclear war. Those infected by the disease must drink blood to survive, and can be killed by direct sunlight or a wooden stake (which, we learn, need not go through the heart). Only some vampires have an affliction to crosses. Specifically, it affects those who were religious in life, and especially those caught up in the apocalyptic movements popular at the height of the plague:

In a typical desperation for easy answers, easily understood, people had turned to primitive worship as the solution. With less than success. Not only had they died as quickly as the rest of the people, but they had died with terror in their hearts, with a mortal dread flowing in their very veins.

And then, Robert Neville thought, to have this hideous dread vindicated. To regain consciousness beneath hot, heavy soil and know that death had not brought rest. . . . Such traumatic shocks could undo what mind was left. And such shocks could explain much.

The cross, first of all.

Once they were forced to accept vindication of the dread of being repelled by an object that had been a focal point of worship, their minds could have snapped. Dread of the cross sprang up.

The apocalypticism Matheson describes is more fear than faith, and the fulfillment of those fears leads to anger and loathing of religious symbols. It's a cynical interpretation of this aspect of the vampire myth, but the novel makes Neville's cynicism clear from the first page—he is the last human being on earth, after all.

The novel takes a powerful moral turn in its final third, when we learn that the vampires are attempting to set up a stable society of their own. They view themselves simply as people afflicted with a disease, and they are working hard to achieve some semblance of normalcy. Neville, who has been dispatching vampires with cool detachment for years, seems monstrous and evil to them. He is their bogeyman, a supernatural scourge who preys on them in the daytime—in short, he is a vampire.

The Omega Man is a very loose adaptation of Matheson's story. for one thing, it abandons the use of the word "vampire" altogether. The mutants besieging Neville's home have no interest in drinking blood, and they can be killed by normal means. We know that they have a disease, but not much is revealed about its character. All we know is that it gives them pale skin, light sensitivity, and a deep and abiding hatred of Charlton Heston.



The movie *does* do some interesting things with the idea of the vampire's society, however. In [my review of *World War Z*](#), I talk about the idea that zombies are happy, and want to bring the living into communion with them so that they may share in their earthly paradise. They just can't communicate these good wishes in any other way than biting. The vampires of *The Omega Man*,* on the other hand, *can* communicate, and this is precisely what they say. They call themselves "The Family" and wear monastic robes. Their leader, Matthias, is prone to sermonizing about his hatred of the old world, which he blames for their afflictions. But the Family also consider their condition a sort of blessing, something that sets them apart from the last remnants of the pre-plague world. They curse Neville as being "part of the dead," of the world "of scientists, of bankers, of businessmen, the users of the wheel." The dichotomy in Matthias's interpretation of the plague is fascinating—he refers to it as "the punishment," but also as the means by which the Family "gained grace." In this regard, their refusal to use the weapons of the old world is interesting—given their incorporation of the war and plague into their salvation history, I would not have been surprised to see them set up a cult of the bomb like the mutants in [Beneath the Planet of the Apes](#), whom they resemble. (I talk more about this and similar cults of destruction in stories like [Deus Irae](#) and [Oryx and Crake](#) in chapter 2 of [The Gospel according to Science Fiction](#).)

The Family seeks to destroy the vestiges of the old world, burning books and destroying works of art. "We man to cancel the world you civilized people made," Matthias tells Neville. "We will simply erase history from the time machinery and weapons threatened more than they offered. And when you die, the last living reminder of hell will be gone." The Family is an undead cult of realized eschatology. They believe that the kingdom has arrived, and that they must destroy all vestiges of the debased world that preceded it.



The Omega Man doesn't offer a very satisfying alternative, though. Since we know from the beginning that the Family is intelligent (if a bit overzealous), Neville doesn't look quite so heroic when he kills them. Indeed, when they're armed with spears and he has a submachinegun, his crusade seems more like crude bullying than a noble crusade for life and justice. The movie's second half gets pretty muddled, but there's a hint of a competing idea of paradise. Neville states that he and a few other survivors will go "someplace nobody ever bothered with. A river nobody ever dammed, a mountain nobody built any bloody freeways to, where everything we do will be the first time it ever happened." It's remarkably similar to Matthias's concept of rolling back time and technology, an irony that seems lost on characters and filmmakers alike. The film eschews further exploration of this idea, opting instead for some final-reel messianism—Neville's blood, it seems, is the cure for the vampire plague, and as if that wasn't clear enough, there's some cruciform posing to really hammer the point home.

The Omega Man, though fun, doesn't have the thematic follow-through of its source material. A [new film adaptation](#) starring Will Smith is scheduled for this year, but given the fact that it's directed by Francis Lawrence, who made certain that *Constantine* bore no resemblance whatsoever to the comics on which it was based, I doubt we can expect a faithful interpretation. Sadly, it looks like *I Am Legend* may never get the kind of film adaptation it deserves.

*In many ways, *I Am Legend* and *The Omega Man* are zombie stories. Many zombie fans think that a zombie movie/novel must be about the walking dead, but this definition is shortsighted—one could argue, [and some have](#), that *28 Days Later* is not a zombie movie because its "infected" are still alive. The point is not whether or not the hordes of violent creatures are living or dead; the point is the structure of events: a plague of infectious madness that turns people into killing machines. In my opinion, *Shivers* and *The Crazies* are essentially zombie movies, too. *Night of the Living Dead* was inspired by *I Am Legend*, and the basics of the novel's story fit the general definition of a zombie story.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on January 21, 2007 at 07:06 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 31, 2007

Battlestar Galactica 313: Is there Cylon redemption for human sin?

Gaius Baltar may well be the most interesting SF villain since *Khan Noonien Singh*. A human seduced into collaborating with the Cylons on the eve of their genocide of the human race, he has been at turns tortured and arrogant about his role in the war. In last week's episode, (["Taking a Break From All Your Worries"](#)), Galactica's crew took Baltar captive, and the interrogation scenes this week offered an intriguing exploration of sin, guilt, and redemption.

Baltar's guilt over his role in the destruction of humanity is palpable. He knows he has done wrong—by assisting in the destruction of his species, he committed perhaps the greatest sin in human history. The writers have been toying with the idea that Baltar may be a Cylon for some time now. This line of speculation has bothered me so far—it would weaken his character significantly if he were a Cylon—but in this episode the speculation reaches a fascinating conclusion when Baltar talks about *wanting* to be a Cylon. As a human being, he is the most hated person alive, a traitor to his entire species. But if he is a Cylon, then he has an opportunity to have his sins forgiven. Rather than having to accept responsibility for his mistakes, he can explain them as the result of his programming (and possibly even become a hero instead of a villain). If he were a Cylon, the revelation of that identity would be his redemption:

"I thought I might be one of them. I told them I wanted to be one of them... all my sins forgiven. A new beginning."

Baltar's desperate desire not to be human is symbolized in terms of baptism. While attempting suicide in this episode's opening scene, Baltar hallucinates his own rebirth on a Cylon resurrection ship. The pool in which this rebirth occurs becomes a baptismal font, and the white-garbed trio of Sixes around him the priests who welcome him into his new community.



But Baltar is not a Cylon (or at least we're not currently supposed to believe he is, and I for one hope it stays that way). His desire to be a machine is not the desire to be truly *forgiven*, but a desire *not to be held responsible*. Though he obviously feels guilt, he wants to simply pass that guilt off to "God's plan" (which, in Cylon terminology, is synonymous with "programming"):

"Mistakes were made, terrible mistakes. Were they mine? Am I solely to blame? I was a player, that's all. I was a player. I was struggling, trying to find my place in God's plan... I never intended for certain things to happen. Doesn't that matter?"

He refuses to take responsibility for his sins, and therein is the essence of his villainy. What he wants is the opposite of redemption—not forgiveness for sins freely admitted, but an excuse for consequences beyond his control. His refusal to own up to his crimes shuts him out of two communities, symbolized by the conclusions of his two baptism hallucinations. In the first vision he is surrounded by Cylon Sixes, in the second by humans; but each hallucination

ends with the community around the resurrection pool/baptismal font drowning him. Forgiving sins and excusing them are not the same thing, and Baltar's refusal to seek true redemption is what makes him an interesting character.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on January 31, 2007 at 11:46 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 02, 2007

Comics Roundup: January

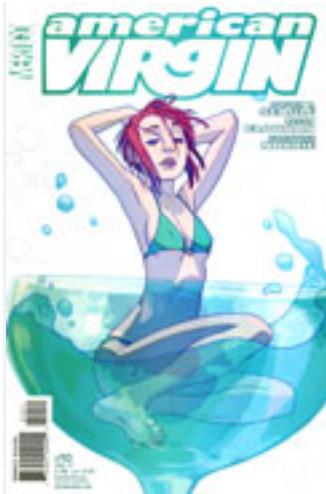


newuniversal #2 (Marvel)

by Warren Ellis (writer) and Salvador Larroca (artist)

Marvel's [New Universe](#) line was essentially a big failure—of the 8 titles launched in 1986, 4 had folded within a year, and the rest were cancelled by 1990. The line as a whole wasn't strong enough to survive, but a couple of its series were pretty interesting (most notably Star Brand and DP7, which foresaw the exploration of "everyday folks with superpowers" that made Grant Morrison's early [Animal Man](#) issues so good). And the basic starting point of the entire line—a single, worldwide paranormal experience, "The White Event," transforms a mundane world into a fantastic one—was an idea worth exploring further. I've always had some affection for the New Universe, so I'm sure I wasn't the only one looking forward to Warren Ellis' reimagination of its ideas in *newuniversal*. The first issue was strictly set-up, but with #2 the story really starts to pick up, and I'm excited to see where it's going. The key moment for me was a scene in which a woman named Izunami Randall has a dream-vision of an enormous alien construct (see the Desolation Jones review below for some hints as to where *that* idea came from) that explains how her universe has been transformed by the White Event. Despite its use of the phrase "paradigm shift," it's the beginning of a very interesting reinterpretation of the New Universe's basic conceit, and one that may have some theological and eschatological overtones. The series title has real meaning here; it's the story of a universe made new.





American Virgin #10 (DC/Vertigo)

by Steven T. Seagle (writer), Becky Cloonan, and Christine Norrie (artists)

My regular readers know that my hopes for this series have mostly been disappointed so far, but this issue is much more like what the series should be. A flashback covering Adam's entire life before the first issue, this story gives us some of the complex background of his sexual and spiritual life. The story culminates with Adam's baptism and the revelatory experience that drove him into the virginity movement. It serves to complicate the character's motivations, but it also gives this issue several opportunities to do what it does best—satirize megachurch Christianity.





Desolation Jones #8 (DC/Wildstorm)

by Warren Ellis (writer) and Danijel Zezelj (artist)

Philip K. Dick's religious experience* plays an increasing role in this storyline as we meet Evers Chance, a smarmy movie producer who's optioned the rights to Dick's life. (I wonder if Ellis knows about the [two biopics](#) currently in pre-production.) Chance gives a pretty good summary of Dick's epiphany, and thankfully doesn't write it off as the result of epilepsy or LSD or plain old insanity (as [many others](#) have done), instead focusing on Dick's own theological interpretations of the event. This is the second issue of a six-part arc, so I don't know where the story is headed, but it's certainly off to an intriguing start.

*Discussed a little bit in [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#), and a *lot* (obviously) in [Pink Beams of Light From the God in the Gutter: The Science-Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick](#).





All-Star Superman #6

by Grant Morrison (writer) and Frank Quitely (artist)

Morrison and Quitely's Superman series has been both a love letter to Silver Age goofiness and a messianic interpretation of the Superman myth. Each issue is self-contained, and there's not much sense of direct continuity between them, but there's definitely a sense that the stories are adding up to something greater. This issue features a young Superman battling a time-traveling creature called the Chronovore. Because it takes place in the character's youth but also features beings from the future, this story offers some tantalizing hints about the character's role in his universe. We don't get much that's explicit, but there are suggestions that young Clark Kent will completely transform his world—in a way, it's like reading an [infancy gospel](#) and picking out hints about the crucifixion and resurrection.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on February 02, 2007 at 12:37 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 05, 2007

"Sex and the Single Superhero" @ Nerve



[Nerve](#) is kicking off their comics issue, for which I've written [a roundup of superhero sex scenes](#). While you're there, be sure to check out "[Gods of New York](#)," Ada Calhoun's essay on Sandman-inspired amorality, and "[Page Scandal](#)," Gwynne Watkins' appreciation of EC Comics' "preachies."

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on February 05, 2007 at 02:35 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 05, 2007

Barbara J. King on primates and the origins of religion

Salon has run an interview with anthropologist Barbara J. King about primates, neanderthals, the [Makapansgat cobble](#), and the origins of human religion. She says some fascinating things, more than a few of which reminded me of Robert Silverberg's excellent story "The Pope of the Chimps." For example:

"A chimpanzee female named Tina was killed by a bite to the neck by a leopard. She'd been living in a community of chimpanzees for quite a long time. The group didn't just pull at her body or tug at it or ignore it. Rather, the dominant male of the group sat with her body for five hours. He kept away all the other infants and protected the body from any harm. With one exception. He let through the younger brother of Tina, a 5-year-old called Tarzan. That's the only youngster who was allowed to come forward. And the youngster sat at his sister's side and pulled on her hand and touched her body. I think this is not just a random occurrence. The dominant male was able to recognize the close emotional bond between Tina and Tarzan, and he acted empathically."

Read the whole interview [here](#).

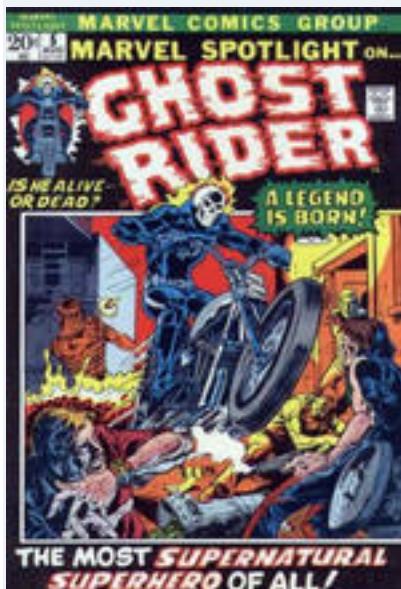
Read Silverberg's "Pope of the Chimps" [here](#).

Read my analysis of "Pope of the Chimps" in chapter nine of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on February 05, 2007 at 02:36 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 17, 2007

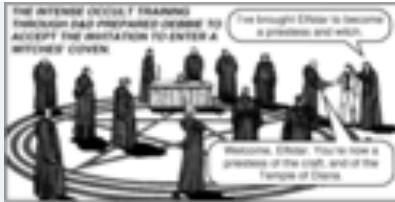
"You got a lot of gall, devil!" The origin of Ghost Rider



In the early '70s, Marvel Comics put out a large number of horror comics to cash in on the broader latitude granted by some [revisions in the Comics Code](#). The resulting titles included new interpretations of traditional monsters like *Tomb of Dracula* (probably the best of the bunch) and *Werewolf by Night*, but also new supernatural superheroes like *Son of Satan* and *Ghost Rider*. At times—and particularly in Ghost Rider's case—it seems that Marvel was stretching to squeeze in supernatural elements, and to test the limits of what the revised Code would allow.



Take, for example, the origin story of Ghost Rider, as presented in his first appearance in *Marvel Spotlight* #5 (Aug. 1972) by Gary Friedrich and Mike Ploog. Johnny Blaze is an orphan being raised by a family of motorcycle acrobats. When his adoptive father, "Crash" Simpson, is diagnosed with an unspecified terminal illness, he does what any mixed-up-orphan-being-raised-by-a-family-of-motorcycle-acrobats would do: he invokes the power of Satan. (No, really.) The occult element, arriving seven pages into a story that has made no reference to the supernatural, comes completely out of left field. It's a jarring shift, and has more in common



with Jack Chick than Jack Kirby.

But lest you think that Marvel is endorsing very, very bad and can't be trusted. Because of the skeletal Ghost Rider at night to serve as Satan's messenger, this ceased to be a bad thing in time. Blaze ultimately ceased to be a messenger of Satan and became a straightforward, Evel Knievel-inspired superhero.

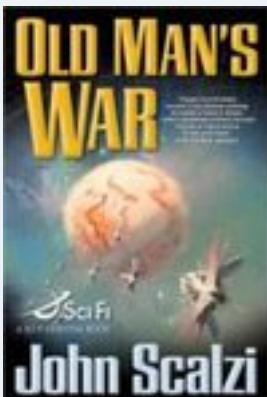


It's a bit difficult to say what the religious content of Ghost Rider's origin actually *means*—it's a story so random, it's tough to pick follow the thread of any themes (beyond, of course, the theme of skeletons on flaming motorcycles looking cool). I suppose it's a story about hubris and the tragedy that can result when we don't accept circumstances beyond our control. But in the end, Johnny Blaze himself puts it best—the devil's got a lot of gall.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on February 17, 2007 at 12:49 AM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 21, 2007

Old Man's War, The Forever War, and Herakles: Militarists vs. Veterans



John Scalzi's *Old Man's War* is essentially a love letter to Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, and Scalzi admits as much in his novel's acknowledgements. It's an excellent tribute, too—like Heinlein's classic novel, which defined military SF for decades to come, *Old Man's War* is a fun, well-written, exciting adventure story. Both novels tell the story of a high-tech fighting force sent to faraway worlds to defend human colony worlds from alien attack. Both novels are very good, compelling reads. And both novels tell their stories with a level of militarism that is morally reprehensible.

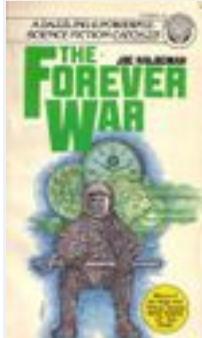
The characters of *Old Man's War* are senior citizens who leave Earth at age 70, have their brains transplanted into souped-up cyborg bodies, and make war against dozens of hostile alien races. One would expect that the life experience of these characters would lead to a complex and varied range of responses to military life in general and combat in particular. Instead, Scalzi's characters universally take glee in fighting. I hoped that someone, somewhere in this book would feel a pang of conscience about their army's xenocidal imperialism. The narrator eventually does express some guilt in one scene about two thirds in. While slaughtering a species of aliens that literally can't fight back (they're under an inch tall), he begins to worry that military life has turned him into a soulless killing machine. His

superior officers laugh off his concerns, and his guilt lasts all of nine pages, after which the character just *gets over it* and goes back to following orders. It's a shame, too—the book would have been far more enjoyable for me if it had brought some moral complexity to its wanton destruction.

I should add that it's entirely possible that Scalzi's goal is to satirize the military. Despite its often-disturbing violence, the book is frequently quite funny. But the butts of its most obvious jokes are rarely those who follow orders. In one sequence, a character named Bender—a former Senator known for his diplomatic efforts on Earth—attempts to make peace with one alien race, only to be brutally killed. Another character gives an interpretation of his death that sums up the book's attitude towards diplomacy:

"Walking up to a bunch of people whose planet we just destroyed and acting like he was their *friend*. What an asshole. If I were one of them, I'd have shot him too."

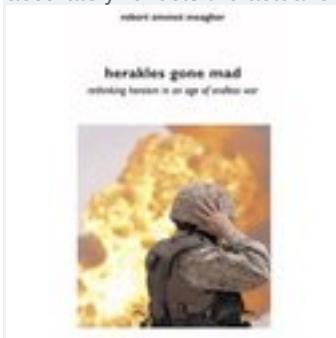
Scalzi certainly aspires to satire, but I strongly doubt militarism is his intended target.



Heinlein was in the Navy for a few years, but never saw combat*, and Scalzi has no military background. Perhaps the finest work of military SF was written by a Vietnam veteran, and it is a strongly anti-war book: [Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War*](#). Like *Starship Troopers* and *Old Man's War*, it is a story about an interstellar war based on competition for colony planets. Because the soldiers fighting this war travel from planet to planet at relativistic speeds, they become temporally removed from the world they are fighting for. A few months pass between battles for the soldiers, but for Earth—and those highest in the military chain of command—decades or even centuries go by. Haldeman's novel is a powerful allegory about Vietnam, showing the alienation veterans can feel from the civilian world and the gulf that can develop between combat soldiers and their superior officers. *The Forever War* paints a very different picture of warfare than more the gung-ho works of military SF that preceded and followed it. When Haldeman's characters first use their high-tech weapons on live targets, the results make them physically ill:

"I felt my gorge rising and knew that all the lurid training tapes, all the horrible deaths in training accidents, hadn't prepared me for this sudden reality. . . that I had a magic wand that I could point at a life and make it a smoking piece of half raw meat."

This reaction is a far cry from the cheerful exterminators of Heinlein's or Scalzi's novels, and far more accurately reflects the actual experience of combat veterans.



While I was re-reading *Starship Troopers* and *The Forever War*, I also read [Herakles Gone Mad: Rethinking Heroism in an Age of Endless War](#) by [Robert Emmet Meagher](#), a Pulitzer-nominated classicist (and, incidentally, one of my advisors at Hampshire College). The centerpiece of the book is a new translation of [Euripides' Herakles](#), which Meagher reads as a piece about post-traumatic stress disorder. There's a compelling case to be made for the argument—the play's story concerns Herakles' murder of his wife and children following his return from his legendary 12 labors. In a fascinating introductory essay, Meagher discusses *Herakles* in the context of Greek warfare, pointing out that Euripides served in the [Peloponnesian War](#). The bulk of his audience were veterans who would likely

recognize the origins of Herakles' madness from their own experiences. *Herakles* is a work about the impact of war upon the warrior, written by someone with firsthand experience of the madness of combat.

Meagher frames his introductory essay as a rebuttal to [Donald Kagan](#) and [Victor Davis Hanson](#), two prominent classicists who have used aspects of ancient history and literature in support of an arch-conservative position on the Iraq War, ignoring the sharp critique of militarism in stories by or about veterans like *Herakles* and *The Odyssey*. Though its author may not have intended it, Scalzi's *Old Man's War* risks doing the same thing for SF, painting an exciting, glorified picture of war while ignoring the actual experience of combat veterans like Haldeman. Literature about war has a responsibility to be honest in its portrayal of combat. The most prominent recent work of military SF—*Battlestar Galactica*—has not shied away from this responsibility, and has given vivid portrayals of the psychological stress that war can cause. Scalzi's novel opts for a picture of war that is fun, action-packed, and dishonest.

*And interestingly, apart from the opening and closing chapters, *Starship Troopers* contains very few scenes of actual combat, focusing instead on military life between battles.

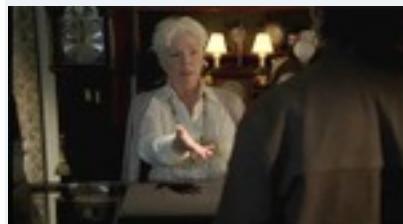
Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on February 21, 2007 at 05:26 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 23, 2007

Lost 308: Struggling against divine predetermination

Advance warning: This post contains spoilers.

Last week's episode of *Lost* ("[Flashes Before Your Eyes](#)") was a well-told time travel story that made some strong statements about free will, divine providence, and divine predetermination. Apparently, when Desmond turned the failsafe key in the season two finale, he traveled back in time. This episode gives a clever twist on the show's usual flashback structure—we get scenes from Desmond's past, but throughout them he is aware (or at least partly aware) of his future on the island. Desmond relives the days surrounding his biggest regret in life—not marrying his lost love Penelope. It's when he attempts to rectify that mistake that things get really interesting.



The moment of truth comes when Desmond attempts to purchase an engagement ring for Penelope. As the event originally occurred, he had second thoughts and didn't make the purchase. The second time through he pulls out his wallet, and the jeweler, Ms. Hawking, becomes an avatar of the divine will:

"This is wrong. You don't buy the ring. You have second thoughts. You walk right out that door. . . And if you don't do those things, Desmond David Hume, every single one of us is dead."

Later in their conversation, Desmond and Hawking witness an accident in which a pedestrian is killed by falling debris. When Desmond asks why she did not warn the victim, she lays out the show's metaphysics of free will: "Had I warned him about the scaffolding, tomorrow he'd be hit by a taxi. If I warned him about the taxi, he'd fall in the shower and break his neck. The universe, unfortunately, has a way of course correcting. That man was supposed to die. That was his path. Just as it's your path to go to the island. You don't do it because you choose to, Desmond. You do it because you're supposed to."

In the *Lost* universe, there is a way that things are "supposed to be," and the path can be temporarily diverted, but never completely changed.

Hawking's sense of apocalyptic urgency regarding Desmond's path echoes similar ideas in [Donnie Darko](#) whose time-traveling protagonist's actions create a "divergent universe" doomed to collapse. And the idea of a guiding plan is similar to that presented—albeit in much more uplifting terms—in [Quantum Leap](#). *Lost* takes a profoundly pessimistic view of its own understanding of free will, though. Events are predetermined, and the characters don't like it one bit. But Desmond has been granted the ability to see the future, and (as we learn in the episode's conclusion) he's already used this ability to change the predetermined course of events on the island. *Donnie Darko* and *Quantum Leap* aside, predetermination isn't a popular idea in SF, which, as a generally humanistic genre, tends to support free will as an absolute. I see Desmond's story unfolding as a re-casting of the story of Abraham and Isaac in which Abraham, rather than submitting to the divine will, struggles against it to reclaim his free will.

For more on messianism and providence in Quantum Leap and Donnie Darko, see chapter four of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on February 23, 2007 at 05:07 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 01, 2007

PKD (and me) in *Locus*

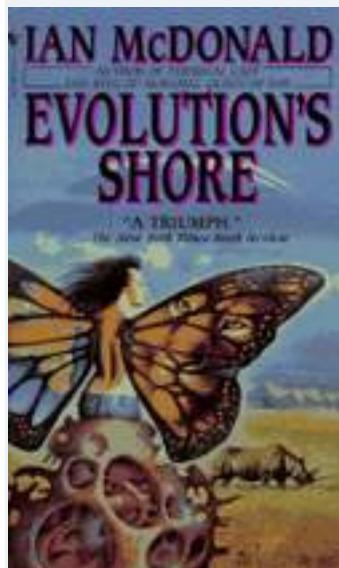
Graham Sleight writes an [insightful essay on Philip K. Dick](#) (by way of a review of the strangely-edited [Vintage PKD](#) volume) for [Locus Online](#).

While you're over there, you can also check out [their coverage](#) of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 01, 2007 at 10:16 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 01, 2007

Heaven on Earth in *Evolution's Shore*



One of the best stories I read while researching [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) was [Ian McDonald](#)'s novella "Tendeléo's Story." After reading the story, I was excited to learn that it was a sequel/reimagination of his earlier novel [Evolution's Shore](#). Both stories describe the Chaga—an alien lifeform that lands in Sub-Saharan Africa and grows, replacing the native landscape with an otherworldly ecosystem. Governments and individuals alike are understandably alarmed, but after a complex quarantine system is put in place rumors begin to circulate about the Chaga: it does not devour life, but shapes itself to support it. It has redefined its chemistry to match that of our bodies, and it supplies food, shelter, clothing, and even biological improvements on technological achievements like televisions and airplanes. The Chaga's resources are unlimited, and it provides an alternative to the capitalist model of production and consumption, haves and have-nots. In short, it is heaven literally come to Earth—and that is the *real* reason that the governments of the West fear it.

Most talk about McDonald's Chaga stories focuses on their postcolonial stance, which they certainly illustrate well. (By seeding the Southern Hemisphere, what else does the Chaga do but rectify the wrongs of colonialism?) But I see these stories as profoundly moral and theological works. The Chaga is one of the most interesting of SF eschatologies, showing a means by which our world could be made essentially perfect. The Chaga is frequently described as a "new Eden," and at points it is even called "ecclesiastical." One character in *Evolution's Shore* paints a vivid picture of this alien New Jerusalem as a place where the sins of human society and biology can be washed away:

"What the Chaga says to me is, now you don't need to compete for resources, now all the rules of supply and demand are torn up: there is enough here for everyone, so now you can experiment with new ways of living, new ways of interacting, new societies and structures and sociologies, knowing that you have permission to fail."

Evolution's Shore is a fascinating novel, but for my money "Tendeléo's Story" tackles its themes with a little more focus. Both offer a fascinating gambit—if paradise were offered to us, would we take it? Neither story gives an

entirely optimistic answer, devoting many words to the ways in which the old structures stand against the future. But both stories nevertheless give a vivid picture of what a true kingdom of heaven might look like.

McDonald's next novel, *Brasyl*, comes out in May, and it sounds every bit as compelling as the Chaga tales. It tells three interlocking stories, one of them involving "a Jesuit missionary sent into the maelstrom of 18th-century Brazil to locate and punish a rogue priest who has strayed beyond the articles of his faith and set up a vast empire in the hinterland." *Apocalypse Then?*

For my analysis of "Tendeléo's Story," see chapter 10 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 01, 2007 at 06:25 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 04, 2007

Ursula K. Le Guin's theology in *Extrapolation*

The latest issue of SF criticism journal *Extrapolation* (47:3) is a special issue on Ursula K. Le Guin. Kicking things off is "Le Guin and God: Quarreling with the One, Critiquing Pure Reason" by [Richard D. Erlich](#), a good overview of religious themes in Le Guin's writing. There are a couple short stories discussed here that I wish I had known about prior to submitting the final revisions for *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*, as they would have fit in well. The key book in Le Guin's oeuvre from the standpoint of religious themes—The Telling—gets a good analysis here, going into about as much depth on it as I do in chapter 8 of my book. My only problem with the essay is a questionable generalization about Taoism being a tradition wholly at peace with the reality and necessity of death. Taoism is a notoriously heterodox tradition, and the practice of Taoist sages has often consisted of an alchemical search for physical immortality. It's hard to fault Erlich for this, though, as he seems to be just presenting Le Guin's own interpretation. Taken with that grain of critical salt, the essay is an extremely useful summary of Le Guin's complex critique of religion.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 04, 2007 at 09:58 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 04, 2007

Riddley Walker and St. Eustace in *Science Fiction Studies*



In other SF scholarship news, *Science Fiction Studies* #101 includes a short essay by Martin L. Warren on the role that the medieval legend of [St. Eustace](#) plays in [Russell Hoban](#)'s novel *Riddley Walker*. I first heard of Hoban's novel, a fascinating postapocalyptic novel written entirely in a debased dialect resembling Middle English, in the book *England's Hidden Reverse: A Secret History of the Esoteric Underground* by David Keenan. *Riddley Walker* was a big influence on British experimental band [Current 93](#), one of the primary subjects of Keenan's book. Current 93 is one of my favorite bands, and the theological and mystical nature of their lyrics is one of the reasons I got interested in religion in the first place. (References to *Riddley Walker* appear on some of their best albums, including *Thunder Perfect Mind*, *Of Ruine or Some Blazing Starre*, and *Earth Covers Earth*.) The legend of St. Eustace, a hunter who converted to Christianity after seeing a stag with a cross in its antlers, was one of the most popular tales of medieval England. (Those familiar with their saints' legends will note the conversion story is shared with St. Hubert, and those less familiar with iconography may recognize the image from [Jägermeister](#)'s label.)



In Hoban's novel, the legend, in the form of a traveling puppet show, has become the thread that holds a postapocalyptic society together. The Punch-and-Judy-esque play tells the story of "Eusa" (evoking both "Eustace" and "U.S.A."), a buffoonish but sinister figure who is responsible for the nuclear disaster that has led the world to its present state. Desiring to learn the secrets of the universe, Eusa splits the "Littl Shynning Man, the Addom" in two. This action causes the destruction that leaves the world in ruins. Warren's essay does an excellent job of detailing the parallels between the Eustace legend and the Eusa show. For more on the ecclesiastical role the legend plays in *Riddley Walker* and a comparison with similar themes in works like *A Canticle For Leibowitz*, see my analysis in chapter 8 of [*The Gospel According to Science Fiction*](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 04, 2007 at 10:35 PM | [Permalink](#)

March 06, 2007

American Virgin #11 review

From now on, I'll be posting comics reviews individually as opposed to the roundup format I've been doing. This may mean that this will start to look like a comics-only blog in the first week of every month when I get and review my books, but it will facilitate actually getting things written and posted, so I think it's a fair tradeoff. Without further ado:



American Virgin #11

By Steven T. Seagle (writer) and Becky Cloonan (artist)
DC/Vertigo

My patience with this title is finally being rewarded, and the story is finally picking up and gaining some much-needed focus. With the American Virgin finally *in America*, we are getting (for pretty much the first time since the first issue) a clear picture of the world he's from. Better yet, we're getting a stronger sense of who Adam is and what he believes. His experiences of the first 10 issues have definitely led him to question aspects of his faith, but Seagle isn't making this a simple case of a growing, all-eclipsing doubt. Adam's basic faith is unchanged; he is only questioning the way

in which his experience of faith has been interpreted and packaged for him by his family, not to mention his role in the commodification of his own experience. Adam still believes in God, but he is learning to find his *own* meaning for that belief. I like where this book seems to be headed—it's rounding out its satire with a complex, well-drawn character and a compelling exploration of what it means to believe in a culture that makes faith a consumer product.

Previous chapters in the ongoing saga of my thoughts on *American Virgin*:

[American Virgin](#) 1-5 review

[Comics Roundup: September 2006](#) (AV #7)

[Comics Roundup: January 2007](#) (AV #10)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 06, 2007 at 04:49 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 06, 2007

Some recent writings on atheism

There's some interesting and intelligent theistic discussion of atheism going on right now. First up, there's Bede's [review of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*](#), which does what Dawkins is unwilling to: consider the opposing side's argument seriously rather than dismiss it out of hand. When it comes to the meat of the matter, Bede sums up Dawkins' central argument against the existence of God:

"He claims that a God who could create a universe must be much more complicated than the universe is. Complex beings can only appear through evolution so for a God to pop into existence without a cause is vanishingly unlikely. It is impossible to overstate how bad this argument is and yet Dawkins is extremely proud of it. He is like a small child who has just created a mud pie and expects bounteous praise for his artistic genius."

My first thought on reading this is that Dawkins is crying out to be debunked via the ontological argument; the God he's saying he doesn't believe in doesn't seem to be the God that, well, anybody actually believes in. (Certainly not Thomas Aquinas, who makes it quite clear that God is the *least* complex thing possible.) And sure enough, ontological arguer Alvin Plantinga has done just that (among other things) in ["The Dawkins Confusion."](#) a similarly-intelligent-and-in-depth review in [Christianity Today](#).

When you're done with that, check out A Thinking Reed's spiritual autobiography, ["Up From Atheism."](#) which bears more than a few resemblances to my own aspiritual-to-spiritual history. After reading about Dawkins' frustrating unwillingness to actually argue his point, it was quite refreshing to read the story of someone who came to their faith by intellectually rigorous means.

For those who missed my take on the matter, enter the time machine to last October and read ["Atheist Fundamentalism."](#)

Hat tip for the first and third links to [Claw of the Conciliator](#), and to [A Thinking Reed](#) for the second.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 06, 2007 at 10:52 PM in [Atheism](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 09, 2007

Astro City: The Dark Age Book Two #2



by Kurt Busiek (writer) and Brent E. Anderson (artist)
DC/Wildstorm

Busiek and Anderson's current *Astro City* story looks the gloomier aspects of '70s superhero comics. *Astro City*, which is quite possibly the best superhero book on the market right now, has always been at its best when it gives us the view from the ground in its fantastic universe—what's it like to be part of the "normal" population of a superhero world? It's particularly interesting to ask this question in light of cosmic characters, those galaxy-spanning heroes and villains that prove the universe to be larger and more complicated than any Astro Citizen could hope to understand.



This issue gives a wonderful picture of the ineffability of cosmic superheroics, accompanied with a brilliant explanation for how the average folks of the universe deal with such events as the sudden appearance of an alien god. In this issue, an enormous, faceless apparition called "The Incarnate" appears over Astro City, hovering over the skyline for days but making no sign of why it's there or what it wants. Busiek and Anderson tell us how the people on the street cope:

Naturally the fringe element came out in force, looking for some kinda cosmic enlightenment. They talked about "levels of perception" a lot, but I don't think they got anything either. The rest of us, we walked on eggshells the first few days. Maybe prayed a little more. But in the end... In the end we did what we always do in Astro City. We shrugged, nicknamed him "Big Joe," and went on with things.

In the shadow of a god who is visible but incomprehensible, there's nothing to do but fall back into routine. A divine presence is meaningless without a divine message.

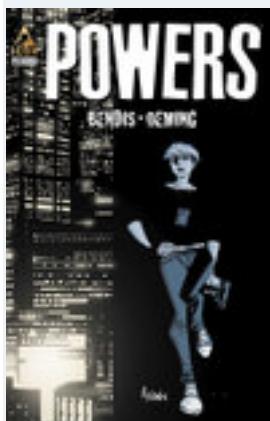


Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 09, 2007 at 08:55 AM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 09, 2007

Powers #23

by Brian Michael Bendis (writer) and Michael Avon Oeming (artist)
Marvel/Icon



Things take a strange turn in this issue as (spoiler alert) the current storyline's villain is revealed as Satan. Or at least someone who wants us to believe he's Satan. It's frankly not handled in the most original way—in fact, it's almost identical to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* [First Evil](#), from the taking-the-form-of-loved-ones right down to the making-people-feel-really-guilty-and-then-trying-to-get-them-to-commit-suicide. But I think there's something more complicated going on, and I look forward to finding out what it is—*Powers* is a book that has become quite adept at providing excellent payoff for its wackier ideas.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 09, 2007 at 09:03 AM | [Permalink](#)

March 09, 2007

Book signing for *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*

I will be having my first official reading and booksigning for [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) this Wednesday:

March 28th, 8 PM

[Unnamable Books](#)

456 Bergen St. (between Flatbush and 5th) ([Map](#))

Park Slope, Brooklyn

Subway: 2, 3 to Bergen St.; B, Q to Atlantic; D, M, N, R to Pacific.

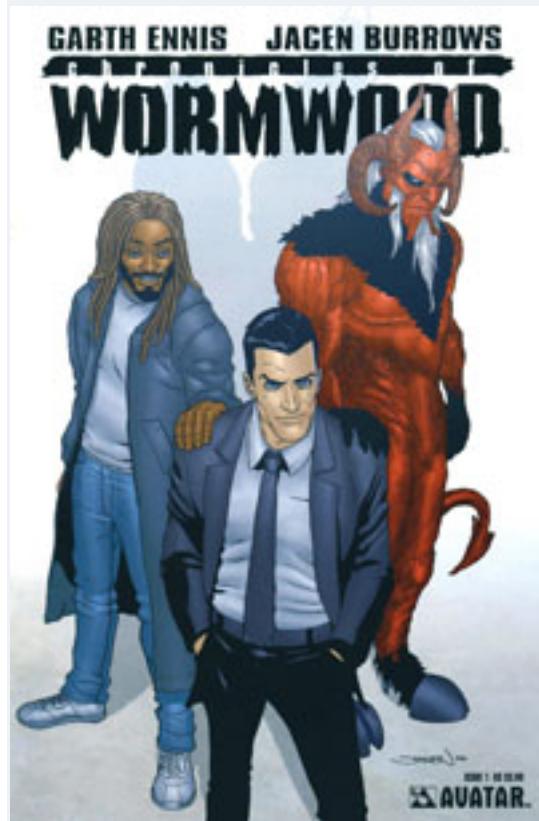
If you live in or around New York, you should go. And if you don't, you should consider going anyway.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 09, 2007 at 09:09 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 14, 2007

Chronicles of Wormwood #1

by Garth Ennis (writer) and Jacen Burrows (art)
Avatar Press



Garth Ennis is a writer torn between extremes.

His *Preacher* and *Hellblazer* stories contain some of the best thought-out characters in comics history, and his *War Stories* series offers a fine mixture of high adventure and elegiac memorial. But much of his writing (and especially, it seems, since the conclusion of *Preacher*) has been far-too-broad comedy, crass efforts at Grand Guignol where every punchline involves severed limbs, bodily functions, or both. Judging from his recent work (especially the over-the-top *The Boys*, admittedly the most enjoyable of his cruder projects), you wouldn't think Ennis a writer capable of subtlety. But his best projects have focused on nuanced characterization, with the foul language and violence added as an afterthought. When I first heard about *Chronicles of Wormwood*, Ennis's new miniseries about the Antichrist, I thought that it sounded like a good venue for a return to the high bar set by his best work (particularly the similarly-themed *Hellblazer*). The story—Satan's son decides he doesn't want to fulfill the destiny his father has planned for him—definitely lends itself to the same sort of anti-authoritarian philosophizing at the core of *Preacher*, and if handled correctly could serve as a worthy successor to that series.



There's good news and bad news about the first issue of *Chronicles of Wormwood*. It definitely shows room to grow into something really memorable. The good parts are in place, and the supporting cast is strong—particularly Ennis's interpretation of the Second Coming. In this series, Jesus (or "Jay") is an activist brain-damaged by a modern-day Roman centurion in riot gear during an antiwar protest, and now a drinking buddy of the Antichrist. It's clever, it's intelligent, and it shows that, regardless of the broadness of the conclusions he's put forth, Ennis has put some real thought into his critique of religion. But unfortunately Jay's story accounts for three pages in an issue that's padded with what I can only call the bad parts—some rather unnecessary (and, more importantly, *unfunny*) jokes involving bodily fluids, genitalia, and the sexual proclivities of one medieval saint who, for reasons yet unexplained, is still walking the earth in period costume. It's not that these jokes can't be funny—in the right context, they could be hilarious. But at this point in Ennis's career, they just feel uncreative. I get the sense that Ennis believes his audience is only interested in his general lack of taste, and as long as he can find new and creative ways to offend his readers' parents, his audience will keep coming back every month. Though this may be a fine way to sell *bad* comics, anyone who's read Ennis's better stories knows he can do better. Many of us only care for the vulgar stuff if the story's been built up adequately, and *Wormwood* isn't there yet—some of these jokes pull me right out of a story that I'm desperately trying to be engaged with. Ennis's crass side has had him stuck in a rut for a few years now, and with *Wormwood* he's got a chance to pull himself out of it. Let's hope he gives these characters a chance to grow before they drown in the mire of gross-out humor.

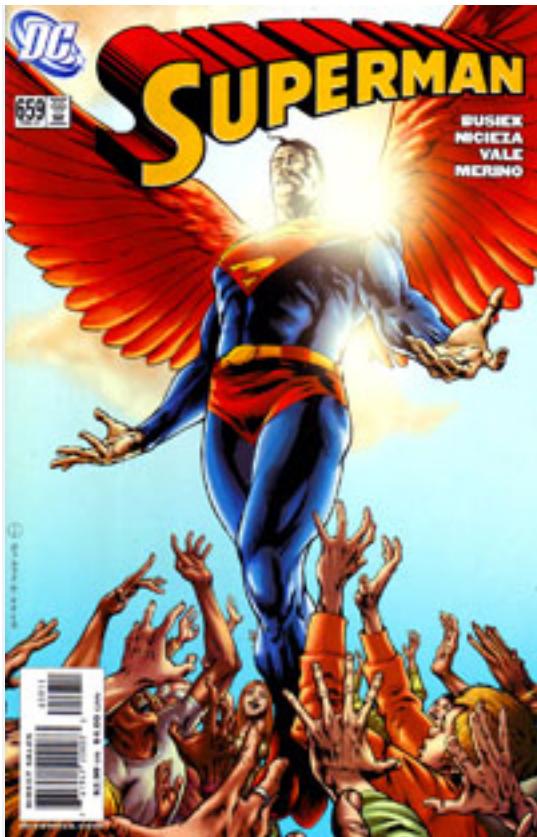
Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 14, 2007 at 11:58 PM | [Permalink](#)

March 16, 2007

Superman #659: Angels in tights

by Kurt Busiek (writer), Fabian Nicieza (co-plot), Peter Vale (pencils), Jesus Merino (inks), and Al Barriónuevo (cover)

DC Comics



With this issue, Kurt Busiek and Fabian Nicieza have crafted an excellent story that focuses on the religious aspects of the Superman archetype, and the result (dare I say it?) is possibly the best Superman story since Alan Moore and Curt Swan's "[What Ever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?](#)"

After Superman saves an elderly woman from being hit by a car, she becomes convinced that he is an angel—and that she has the power to call him down with her prayers. (Al Barrionuevo's cover, showing Superman descending to earth with red angel's wings instead of a cape, illustrates the idea beautifully.) Given his powers of super-hearing and super-speed, her belief in the power of her prayers is pretty much true: no matter where in Metropolis he is, Superman can hear her and respond. But by playing into her faith in him, he risks building up expectations he can't meet. As Clark Kent himself says:

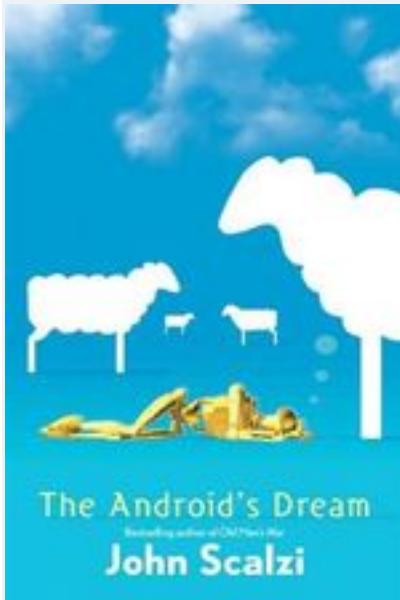
"He's not a spiritual phenomenon... He's got powers, but he's a person, like you or me. So what happens if she prays for him... and he can't come?"

We can pretty much see where the story is headed from the beginning, but this foreknowledge simply fills it with the power of fable and parable. This story does everything that a Superman story should do, using the character's iconic status to tell a moving story about power and faith. It's the kind of story you'd expect to see told with Superman stand-in The Samaritan in Busiek's own *Astro City* (and in fact, it bears more than a little resemblance to the first *Astro City* story, "[In Dreams](#)"). But Busiek's current gig lets him tell this story with the character best suited for it: comics' first superhero. If you buy only one Superman comic this year, make sure it's this one.



Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 16, 2007 at 11:38 AM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)
March 20, 2007

The origins of prophecy in John Scalzi's *The Android's Dream*



John Scalzi's latest novel, *The Android's Dream*, is a big departure from the military SF of the *Old Man's War* series (the first volume of which I [reviewed here](#) last month). *The Android's Dream* is many things—part old-fashioned SF adventure, part comedy (the style of which reminds me of some of Neil Gaiman's short stories, though I can't quite put my finger on why), part Philip K. Dick pastiche (though not nearly so much as the book's title suggests). The story is complex, but the central character is Harry Creek, a low-level diplomat. Creek becomes involved in a diplomatic incident with an alien race called the Nidu, and the only way for him to avert an interplanetary war is to locate a rare sheep that the Nidu need for a coronation ceremony. Throughout the course of novel adventures are had, surprises revealed, and twists turned—and at the center of it all is a religion, "The Church of the Evolved Lamb."

At first glance the church seems like a broad parody of [Scientology](#). The first thing we learn about the religion, for example:

"The Church of the Evolved Lamb was notable in the history of religions both major and arcane in that it was the first and only religion that fully acknowledged that its founding was a total scam."

M. Robbin Dwellin, the church's founder, was an SF writer who refashioned himself as a mystic in order to fleece a wealthy old woman, Andrea Hayter-Ross. Ross was not as gullible as Dwellin believed, however, and she conned him as well, stringing him along to see what sort of ridiculous prophecies he would produce next.

Despite being based on a two-way fraud, the church gained followers, primarily because Dwellin's mystical poetry was far better-written than his SF had been. The fraudulent nature of Dwellin's revelations, far from being an impediment to the church, has become the core of its belief, with two factions offering different interpretations of the fraud. The "Empathists" believe that

"Dwellin, though a scam artist outwitted by his own elderly, sadistic muse, may have tapped into something mystical, quite accidentally and despite his own moneygrubbing nature."

The other group, the "Ironists," don't believe that there was any real inspiration behind the prophecies, but strive to make them come true through their own agency,

"not because they were divinely inspired but because they *weren't*. If a group actively working to make entirely fictional prophecies come true managed to pull off the stunt, the whole concept of divinely inspired prophecy was thrown into doubt, chalking up a victory for rational thought everywhere."

Scalzi doesn't overtly side with either of these two camps, but the entire debate is quite cleverly framed.

The Empathist standpoint is particularly compelling, recalling as it does the opening lecture of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In exploring mysticism, conversion events, and other religious experiences, James argues against material reductionism that tries to explain away, for example, Paul's Damascus road experience (or, anachronistically speaking, [Philip K. Dick's 2-3-74 revelations](#)) as an epileptic seizure. The mundane origin of an experience in the human mind cannot rule out a co-incident spiritual cause of that same event, or of a spiritual cause of the material cause. When the question arises of how legitimate religious experiences are to be distinguished from purely fraudulent ones, James argues that the results that follow from the experience are the key to their interpretation:

"In other words, not its origin, but *the way in which it works on the whole*, is [the] final test of a belief. This is our own empiricist criterion; and this criterion the stoutest insisters on supernatural origin have also been forced to use in the end. Among the visions and messages some have always been too patently silly, among the trances and convulsive seizures some have been too fruitless for conduct and character, to pass themselves off as significant, still less as divine. In the history of Christian mysticism the problem how to discriminate between such messages and experiences as were really divine miracles, and such others as the demon in his malice was able to counterfeit, thus making the religious person twofold more the child of hell he was before, has always been a difficult one to solve, needing all the sagacity and experience of the best directors of conscience. In the end it had to come to our empiricist criterion: By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots."

And by this criterion, Dwellin's prophecies are truly inspired. The prophecies do come true, and regardless of whether this is the result of the guidance of a divine power or of the Ironists, the revelations are a force for interstellar good. The roots of Dwellin's writings are inconsequential, because the book's happy ending is among their spiritual fruits. The Church of the Evolved Lamb passes the James test, and the way in which this occurs is a big part of what makes *The Android's Dream* such a fun read.

For more on how religious experience is presented in other works of science fiction, see chapter seven of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 20, 2007 at 10:44 AM | [Permalink](#)

March 21, 2007

Some belated thoughts on *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*



I finally got around to watching [The Lost Tomb of Jesus](#) last night. I regret being so far behind the curve on this one, which has been reviewed to death. But I take solace in the fact that the documentary itself comes 20 years after the discovery of the tomb in question. By that standard, I'm not late at all.

One thing that frustrated me in some of the early comments I read about the documentary was the implication that [James Cameron](#)'s background as a Hollywood director (and particularly as a science fiction director) renders him unsuited to discuss religion. The suggestion is that SF has nothing to tell us about religion, which is patently false. Whether Cameron in particular, regardless of his SF history, is suited to talk about religion and archeology is a different question, but he doesn't do any talking in this film. He didn't even direct the thing, and he's been given far too much credit/blame for it. If there's anyone whose credentials should be questioned, it's [Simcha Jacobovici](#), the actual director, whose presence in the film is at times quite obtrusive.

That said, the thing that struck me the most about *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* is the sheer amount of credulousness (which is far, far different from *faith*) required to accept its argument. "But perhaps..." "Wouldn't it make sense if..." "If this truly were..." There's enough hypotheticals in the narration to fill all the first century ossuaries in Jerusalem. More than anything, I was reminded of the argument for the authenticity of the [Shroud of Turin](#), which basically goes: "If someone were scourged and crucified, then their wounds would look just like this, therefore this must be Jesus' burial shroud." (Never mind the fact that medieval forgers were just as familiar with the crucifixion story as we are.) The Talpiot Tomb is the Shroud of Turin for the Dan Brown set—the attitude to the historicity of the Gospels is different, but the arguments are just as shabby.

I was also amused to see the amount of faith the film places in fourth century texts like the Acts of Philip. Christian books from the fourth century are wonderful and I truly love them, but looking for historical fact in them is a fool's errand. They can tell us an awful lot about *ideas* from the fourth century, but absolutely nothing about *events* from the first. On the other hand, the documentary also wants to have it both ways with the Gospels. We're supposed to accept the complete authenticity of Jesus' genealogy in Luke 3:22-38 (which, incidentally, is a major basis of the dating scheme used by young earth creationists). But at the same time, we're expected to assume that the reliability of the Gospels as historical documents fails when it comes to the question of whether or not Jesus was married or had children. There isn't a single reference to such a marriage in any ancient text—even the Gospel of Philip, the text that describes Mary Magdalene as a "close friend," dates from (you guessed it!) the fourth century.* Credulousness strikes again.

But perhaps the most frustrating thing about the entire Talpiot Tomb debacle is the assumption on all sides of the argument that it *matters*. The film's supporters (who at this point seem to be restricted to people who worked on it) claim that the documentary reveals *shocking new truths* that will *change our view of Jesus forever*. Conservative detractors think the film is an *egregious heresy* that wants to *destroy the foundations of religion*. But in fact, there's nothing new or groundbreaking or faith-shattering here. The discovery isn't even new—the tomb was uncovered almost 30 years ago. I was pleased to hear [John Dominic Crossan](#) say in the film, "If the bones of Jesus were to be

found in an ossuary in Jerusalem... would that destroy Christian faith? It certainly would not destroy *my* Christian faith." On the other hand, though, it says an awful lot about the film that Crossan is the closest it has to a level head.

But levelheadedness isn't part of the MO in this type of documentary (which is really quite typical of TV documentaries about early Christianity). The way in which Jacobovici constructs suspense is by spending significant screentime on red herrings. *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*' archeologists spend a good 15 minutes snaking a camera into a tomb, only to discover that it's the wrong tomb—the audience's time and interest has been wasted. Even worse is a moment where the team finally enters the correct tomb, only to be stopped minutes later by the Israel Antiquities Authority because they didn't obtain a permit for the exploration. I truly hate it when documentarians try to present themselves as the victims of a great injustice when they fail to do the necessary paperwork to conduct their work properly. The IAA isn't the villain here, it's Jacobovici's slipshod archeological technique. But it's played up as a tragic loss when, in the film's dramatic conclusion, the tomb is resealed. These cheap theatrics are one thing in a film like [*Aliens of the Deep*](#), where they're just used to pad the running time. Here, where there's a bigger point to be proven, they do serious injury to the argument.

The Lost Tomb of Jesus is fun in the way that dopey Discovery and History Channel shows about Christianity always are. But it's convinced that it's consequential, and the amount of ink spilled over it only feeds its self-importance. (Of course, I say this after writing 1000 words on it myself.) There are things about early Christianity that we can't know because the information simply doesn't exist. Jacobovici's speculations and sloppy methodology aren't going to change that, and they only risk making Biblical archeology more difficult for the people who want to do it properly.

To read about how science fiction stories like Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man* and Philip José Farmer's *Jesus on Mars* approach the historical Jesus, see chapter six of [*The Gospel According to Science Fiction*](#).

*All right, technically the third, but grant me some rhetorical latitude here.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 21, 2007 at 07:50 PM | [Permalink](#)

March 25, 2007

Re-Animator DVD review

My review of Anchor Bay's [new DVD release of Re-Animator](#) can be [read at Nerve](#). It doesn't say much about religion (in fact, it says nothing about religion whatsoever, but it does have a few words regarding the illusory nature of the barrier between "high-brow" and "low-brow."

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 25, 2007 at 02:52 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 30, 2007

Gospel According to Science Fiction reading report

Wednesday's reading for the [*Gospel According to Science Fiction*](#) was a rollicking success, and a grand time was had by all. Forgive the blurriness of the first photo below (alternately, marvel at how "dynamic" it makes me look).



Thanks once again to Adam at [Unnamable Books](#) for hosting the event!



Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 30, 2007 at 11:39 AM | [Permalink](#)

March 30, 2007

Religious literacy (and Dickian literacy)

In *Time* this week, David van Biema writes a rather compelling argument for teaching the Bible (through a literary and historic lens) in public schools. Given the increasing role of religion in the public sphere, religious literacy is an

important thing—anti-creationists, for example, need to know the vocabulary of their opponents. (Not to mention the fact that if creationists could learn about the Bible beyond their presuppositions about it, they might not be creationists anymore). Religious literacy education could reduce complaints of certain politicians "[speaking in code](#)" when they use religious language. A Bible class (van Biema argues) wouldn't be the establishment of publicly-funded religion; it would be an important element of creating future citizens who are literate in the language of literature and politics both past and present. Teaching about the Bible in public schools would drive many First Amendment purists up the wall (and I say that as someone who generally is a First Amendment purist). But the language of the [Supreme Court decision](#) banning prayer in schools made explicit allowance for teaching *about* religion. And here's the real kicker: it would drive fundamentalists nuts, too, because it would be a secular approach. The article glosses over the argument that other religions (perhaps most especially Islam) should be taught too, but I nevertheless came out of the article pretty much convinced. It's a good article, and it definitely made me think (something I hadn't expected from a *Time* piece.)

Read "[The Case for Teaching the Bible](#)"

And over on [Frolix 8](#), an ongoing feature finds Dickian elements in the news: "[What Philip K. Dick Story are we in today?](#)"

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 30, 2007 at 12:17 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 06, 2007

Hugo nominees

I was away for a few days and then sick for a couple more, so I didn't see the final Hugo Awards ballot until yesterday. I'm woefully and perpetually behind on my reading, so I haven't read any of the novels yet, but one of them—[Michael Flynn's *Eifelheim*](#)—is high on my list after reading Elliot's [review on *Claw of the Conciliator*](#). It's got aliens and monks—what more do you need? Among the short stories, I've only read a couple, I liked 'em both—Bruce McAllister's "[Kin](#)" and Neil Gaiman's "How to Talk to Girls at Parties" (which is, if not the best, at least the most memorable of the stories in [Fragile Things](#).) As for the dramatic categories, there's no doubt in my mind that *Children of Men* deserves it ([click here to read why](#)), but *Pan's Labyrinth* and *A Scanner Darkly* wouldn't make me too sad if they got it instead. And the "short form" (read: TV) category looks an awful lot like it did last year: one *Battlestar Galactica* episode against three *Doctor Whos*. It would normally be a tough decision, but "Downloaded" is a puzzling choice for a *Galactica* episode—it pales in comparison to both "The Captain's Hand" and any one of the first four episodes of the fourth season. And "Girl in the Fireplace" was a really, exceptionally good *Doctor Who* episode—so that's the one I hope gets it.

All but two of the short fiction pieces (and one of the novels) are available for free online, mostly on the [Asimov's website](#). Check out the full ballot, including links to the freebies, on [SF Signal](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 06, 2007 at 04:35 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 07, 2007

Krister Stendahl, the Bible, and James T. Kirk



In the current issue (Winter 2007) of the [Harvard Divinity Bulletin](#), [Krister Stendahl](#) writes an interesting piece about the development of his relationship with Scripture entitled "[Why I Love the Bible](#)." He began with the approach of "it's all about you,"* but years of study led him to an approach to the Bible that is deeper and more nuanced, but also simpler and less rigid:

"So let me share with you as a tribute to the Bible—and perhaps in a strange way—five "no" statements. It is usual when one is describing love to describe it in positive and glowing terms. But my friendship with the Bible gave me the joy, and the courage, to express my love in five statements of "not." The first is the one I have pointed at: It is not primarily about me. Second, it is not always as deep as we think. Third, even Paul isn't always totally sure. Fourth, don't be so uptight. And fifth, it is probably not as universal as we think.

"It is perhaps odd to express my love in such negative terms. But it is also perhaps in the line of that wonderful word of Jesus in chapter 15 of the Gospel of John: I do not call you any longer servants, but I call you friends. Somehow I became friends with the Bible. In the biblical tradition, and in the Jewish tradition, to be called the friend of God, you had to be one who argued with God. Abraham, arguing about Sodom and Gomorrah, was called a friend of God. Job was called the friend of God. To me, Jesus is the friend of God, because he argues with God. And so, these five "no's" of mine I bring to you as a sign of love and friendship."



Stendahl's words reminded me of the false gods of *Star Trek*. SF as a genre is often considered atheistic because of its radical humanism, perhaps best represented by *Trek* episodes like "[The Apple](#)," in which the *Enterprise* crew destroys a false god and brings the true gospel of science to its followers. At first glance, the conclusion of [Star Trek V](#) fits this mold—Kirk confronts a being that presents itself as God and demands the use of the *Enterprise* as his chariot, leading Kirk to ponder: "What does God need with a starship?" McCoy berates him for interrogating the deity, but I see in Kirk's challenge a hint of Abraham's bargaining over Sodom and Gomorrah. Kirk, the ultimate humanist hero of SF, wants a God he can argue with. SF's humanism is not inherently opposed to religion, but it does encourage us to be critical, to be argumentative, to be friends of God.

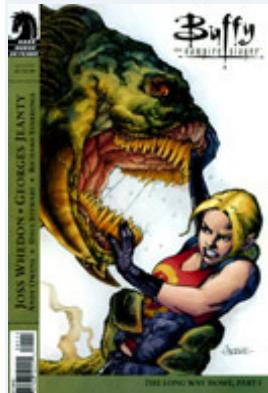
For more on Kirk and God (both false and real), see chapter one of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#). Other things to check out, the full text of Stendahl's "[Why I Love the Bible](#)" and [StarTrek.com's roundup of "Godlike Beings."](#)

*This attitude is exemplified by the [Personal Promise Bible](#), which replaces every occurrence of the word "you" with the user's name. The PPB strikes me as extraordinarily self-centered, and that kind of egocentrism is one of my main problems with evangelicism. In any case, it's much more fun to put in phrases like "a monkey named Franklin" rather than a name. For example, John 15:15: "No longer do I call a monkey named Franklin a servant, for a servant doesn't know what his lord does. But I have called a monkey named Franklin a friend, for everything that I heard from My Father, I have made known to a monkey named Franklin." But enough about that. Go back up to the main post now.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 07, 2007 at 10:55 AM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 11, 2007

Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Season 8 #1



by Joss Whedon (writer) and Georges Jeanty (artist)

Dark Horse Comics

The comics continuation of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is off to a strong start, and the first issue reads very much like the opening episode of a new season (which is entirely the point). There's plenty here that they couldn't do on TV, mostly because a single episode would burn up the entire season's effects budget, but also because of great little sure-to-be-censored-by-the-network moments like this:



Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 11, 2007 at 10:41 AM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 11, 2007

X-Factor#16: Dominion and free will



by Peter David (writer) and Pablo Raimondi (artist)

Marvel Comics

Peter David's mutant team book is really a solo book for Jamie Madrox, the Multiple Man, one of Marvel's most interesting C-listers. Madrox underwent a retrofit prior to this series: originally his power was the ability to make duplicates of himself that were basically puppets; now, the "duplicates" embody facets of his personality, meaning they often have quite different personalities from the "original" Madrox—and they often don't want to be reabsorbed when their task is done. Months ago, Madrox sent dozens of duplicates out to learn and bring their experiences back to him, and now he's traveling around reabsorbing them. In this issue, he tracks down the duplicate he created to study religion, who has now become an Episcopal priest. Not only that, he's married with a young son, and has no interest in leaving his life behind to be absorbed into Madrox-prime's decidedly less holy life. The issue opens with the duplicate delivering a sermon—and a pretty good one, too—about [Gen. 1:28](#) and the idea of dominion.

"Is [the earth] really ours? Really our property? Are we kings? Absolute rulers of all that we see? How presumptuous would that be, for us to consider ourselves in that way? . . . We are not masters of this world. That's been proven over and over again. No, my friends... we are merely caretakers."



The sermon builds from the idea of dominion over the earth to stewardship of it, the key concept in [Christian environmentalism](#). The story cuts the sermon off before that conclusion is made clear, and in context it becomes a message about the precarious nature of the duplicate's position in relation to Madrox-prime—a sinner in the hands of an angry mutant. The confrontation between the two is powerful and cleverly-constructed, though there's another Biblical allusion that David perhaps should have made: the prodigal son. *X-Factor* has been hit and miss for me so far, but this issue nails the characters perfectly. Like [Superman #659](#), it sets strong characterizations against a religious backdrop, and the result is an excellent standalone story.

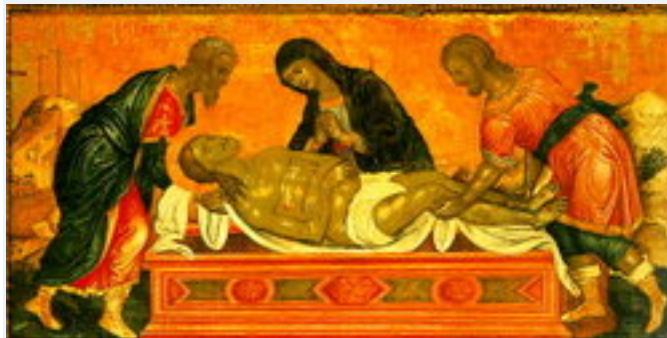
Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 11, 2007 at 11:07 AM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 11, 2007

"He is not here, but is risen": Dr. Charles Pellegrino and the Jesus Tomb

I went to last night's [New York Review of Science Fiction reading](#), which was religion-themed: [James Morrow](#), author of *Towing Jehovah* and *Only Begotten Daughter*, read a chapter from a forthcoming novel, and [Dr. Charles Pellegrino](#) read from both his fiction and nonfiction work. Pellegrino is the co-author of *The Jesus Family Tomb*, collaborator on *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, and a science fiction writer who has penned, among other things, a [novel](#) the main characters of which are clones of Jesus and the Buddha. Pellegrino's reading from *The Jesus Family Tomb* didn't change my opinion about the Talpiot tomb or the movie about it. ([Click here for the full review.](#)) I still think the film's sensationalism obscures its argument. I still think that it's far more likely that the names on the

ossuaries are an interesting coincidence or a deliberate forgery than that Jesus was married, but every single textual source we have about his life neglected to mention it (or conspired to exclude it). Nevertheless, the whole issue is far more intriguing to me than it is threatening.



One of the main criticisms *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* has faced is the idea that the discovery of a Jesus ossuary means the denial of the resurrection. If you've got Jesus' bones, then there's no bodily resurrection, right? Well... Dr. Pellegrino mentioned something really, *really* interesting at the reading. In all of the ossuaries, they found remnants of bones and burial shrouds, but the Jesus ossuary only contains the remains of a shroud, made of very cheap material, with hemoglobin residue. There is no sign of bone matter in the ossuary. The bones from all of the ossuaries were buried in 1980, but if there were ever any bones inside, there should still be bone dust left behind. Now, I'm still not convinced of the conclusions that Jacobovici and Pellegrino have reached about who was entombed at Talpiot, but it is *very* interesting how this discovery deflates one of the main religious criticisms of the theory. I don't think there's been an official announcement about this yet, as the exploration of the ossuaries is ongoing, but I'm curious to see if this changes anyone's mind about the tomb. It didn't change mine, but it certainly did intrigue me.

On the skeptical side of the coin, two quotes. First up, John Dominic Crossan on the lack of textual evidence for Jesus being married:

"There is an ancient and venerable principle of biblical exegesis which states that if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it must be a camel in disguise. So let's apply that to whether or not Jesus was married. There is no evidence that Jesus was married (looks like a duck), multiple indications that he was not (walks like a duck), and no early texts suggesting wife or children (quacks like a duck)...so he must be an incognito bridegroom (camel in disguise)."

[Read the rest of Crossan's article at Beliefnet.](#)

Second, François Bovon, after seeing the way in which his interview was used in *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, wrote a clarifying letter to the Society of Biblical Literature to officially state that he didn't buy the film's conclusions:

"Having watched the film, in listening to it, I hear two voices, a kind of double discourse. On one hand there is the wish to open a scholarly discussion; on the other there is the wish to push a personal agenda. I must say that the reconstructions of Jesus' marriage with Mary Magdalene and the birth of a child belong for me to science fiction." Might the science fiction in question be [Behold the Man](#), perhaps? Nope, that Jesus is celibate too... [Read the rest of Bovon's letter at the SBL site.](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 11, 2007 at 09:47 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 12, 2007

A moment of silence for Kurt Vonnegut

""Luck, good or bad," said Rumfoord up in his treetop, 'is *not* the hand of God.'

""Luck," said Rumfoord up in his treetop, 'is the way the wind swirls and the dust settles eons after God has passed by."

[Kurt Vonnegut, Novelist Who Caught the Imagination of His Age, Is Dead at 84.](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 12, 2007 at 08:53 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 15, 2007

Apocalypse Online: Nine Inch Nails' Year Zero

The new Nine Inch Nails album, *Year Zero*, comes out on Tuesday. It's a science-fictional concept album (probably the first such thing since David Bowie's *Outside*, though I may be wrong about that), and the story are of particularly interest for both its critique of conservative religion and its broader eschatological themes.



The nonlinear story has been unfolding in a viral marketing campaign (or "alternate reality game," or "interactive experience") made up of websites, mp3s, and toll-free phone numbers starting earlier this year, establishing the history and atmosphere of the dystopia in which *Year Zero* takes place. In a nutshell: 15 years from now, the United States has become both a police state and a theocracy. This government has used nuclear weapons on Iran, required all Muslims to register or face execution, and drugged the populace into submission with tranquilizers in the water supply. The *Year Zero* backstory takes a bleak view of the future of American religion, summed up by the logo of the "Faithful Civil Patrol" organized by the [First Evangelical Church of Plano](#): a crucifix emerging from the barrel of a gun.



This type of dystopia is not the most original—it's reminiscent of the worlds of Katherine Kerr's story "Asylum" and the film *Children of Men*, just to name two. The medium in which it has been revealed is a novelty, though, and there's a definite thrill to be gained from exploring the sites, a sense of uncovering a mystery. This is especially true in the case of *Year Zero*'s most interesting concept: "The Presence," a mysterious vision/hallucination of an enormous, ghostly hand descending from the sky. The idea has appeared earlier in Trent Reznor's oeuvre (in the song "The Wretched"), implying that the remainder of the *Year Zero* story grew from the concept. There are a number of versions of the image available (including one on the album's cover—see right), but the most chilling one is the trailer for the album currently up at the [official album site](#).

The Presence gives *Year Zero* some theological depth. The story's attitude to religion goes further than the straightforward critique of evangelicalism: the Presence proves that God is *not* on the side of those who claim divine guidance. In "The Warning," one of the strongest songs on the album, the ghostly hand speaks:

*you've become a virus
killing off his host...
we have come to intervene
you will change your ways and you will make amends
or we will wipe this place clean*

The Presence is a warning against our tribalism and selfishness. *Year Zero* is apocalyptic in the truest sense of the word: if we don't get our act together, it warns us, God will end the world for us. In this regard, there's something remarkably traditional about the eschatology of *Year Zero*. Though its political origins are the opposite of, say, [Left Behind](#), its attitude towards the relation between God and sinful humanity is the same. We have strayed from the path of righteousness, it tells us, and we are blundering into divine retribution.

The religious themes don't end there, though. The backstory refers to both New Testament apocalypticism and Old Testament prophecy, and one interpretation of the cryptic numbers that appear throughout the *Year Zero* sites [claims that they refer to Jeremiah](#).

The album itself should be better than it is. Reznor has stated that much of the music was improvised, and it shows—there's more than a little meandering, a lot of by-the-book structuring rather than the tight composition that made *The Downward Spiral* and *Broken* work so well. Interestingly, the songs that sound the best are the ones with the most apocalyptic lyrics, particularly the album-closer "Zero Sum," which seems to describe the Presence's destruction of humankind. Nevertheless, after being intrigued by the way in which the cryptic websites set up the story, I couldn't help but be disappointed by the somewhat lackluster way in which the album's lyrics describe that same world. Thankfully, though, the last few songs are good enough to make up for the more unremarkable ones.

There are currently several listings of *Year Zero*-related websites, the most thorough of which is at [NIN Wiki](#). Several of the listed sites don't go live until the album is released, and the story is expected to continue for three years (probably encompassing another album and possibly even a movie). A good overview of the earliest sites describing the *Year Zero* world was published in February by [MTV.com](#). The album comes out in the US on Tuesday April 17th from Interscope Records.

For more on apocalypticism in SF, see chapter 10 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 15, 2007 at 05:42 PM in [Music](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 16, 2007

Recommended reading



A new investigative piece by Jeff Sharlet is always cause for excitement. The current issue of *Rolling Stone* features his article "Teenage Holy War," a look inside the evangelical youth movement [BattleCry](#). The Revealer has [reprinted the article](#) in its entirety, and it is definitely worth reading. I knew a little bit about BattleCry, having seen some videos of its events, but I was nonetheless amazed by the depth to which its militarism goes. The warnings of SF stories about fascistic theocracies (including the [recently-discussed](#) *Year Zero*) are warnings about *this*.

After rereading and [discussing](#) *The Forever War* a couple months ago, I read a [collection](#) of Joe Haldeman's short stories that included the religiously-themed "Summer's Lease." I had wanted to read *Forever Free* before, and after reading Martin LeBar's [review on Sun and Shield](#), which discusses its theological themes, I want to read it even more. (Thanks to [Elliot](#) for the link.)



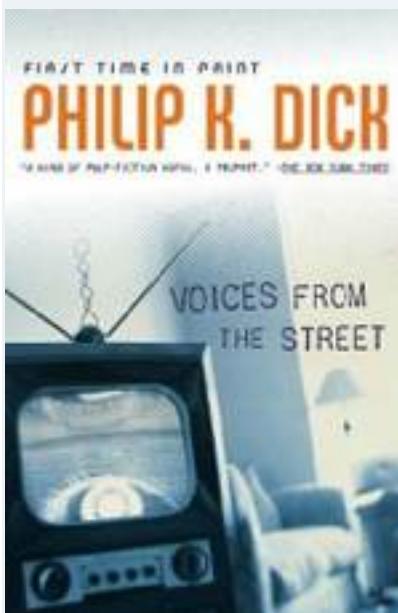
People are rightly excited about [28 Weeks Later](#). But what's *really* exciting (for me, at least) is Danny Boyle's forthcoming SF film [Sunshine](#). Mark Kermode's [early review in the Guardian](#) points out some of the film's theological themes, comparing it to *2001*. I watched [Millions](#) a couple weeks ago and was quite impressed by the depth of its approach to questions of faith. From the sound of it, *Sunshine* should be every bit as impressive.

Robert J. Sawyer's [Rollback](#) came out in hardcover earlier this month. [Read my comments on it here.](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 16, 2007 at 11:23 AM in [Books](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 18, 2007

The Prescience of Philip K. Dick's *Voices From the Street*



Before we begin, let's get one thing straight: despite what you may have heard, Philip K. Dick didn't always want to be a mainstream writer. There's a common misconception that, though Dick made his career in SF, he wished desperately to break out of the genre and gain wild success as a "literary" author. There's a kernel of truth in this, but it's the "always" that gets it wrong. Dick hoped for mainstream success in the years while he was writing mainstream novels. But when *Man in the High Castle* won the Hugo in 1964, his attitude toward SF and mainstream writing changed. In 1976, he wrote an essay entitled "[The Short, Happy Life of a Science Fiction Writer](#)" in which he described his love for the genre. He stated that, despite the poor pay and lack of broad recognition in the SF field, he continued writing it anyway because it was precisely what he wanted to do:

"My point is that (1) twenty-five years of devoted writing haven't in any way given me financial security; (2) the fact that I am sure that my new novel, [A Scanner Darkly](#), is my best novel doesn't stop the fear; (3) I am not quitting. It's going to take more than all this to make me give up science fiction writing, for one simple reason. I love to write it." By contrast, in a 1974 interview published in Gregg Rickman's *Philip K. Dick: In His Own Words*, he described the process of writing the mainstream novels as "slave labor." [Emmanuel Carrere](#) is right to characterize the desire for mainstream success as something imposed on Dick from outside—by his wives, by his friends who looked down on genre fiction—rather than a desire that originated within. In other words, the apparent rejection of SF was youthful folly. SF was what he loved and had always loved, and by his death he had even turned that love into a [theology of pulp](#). His mainstream novels are good, but the suggestion that he always wished he could get out of SF implies a repudiation of the genre, and that sort of genre chauvinism is something that I utterly oppose.

Nevertheless, the mainstream novels are an essential step in the development of the 20th Century's greatest writer, and it's a shame that they're so difficult to find. *Voices From the Street* is the last extant manuscript to be published, but all the others (barring *Confessions of a Crap Artist*) were released in the '80s by small presses and immediately fell out of print. Some of them books fetch [obscene prices](#)—I've never even seen a copy of *Gather Yourselves Together*. It's wonderful that Tor has given *Voices From the Street* a broad release, and even more wonderful that they apparently plan to release several more of the mainstream novels in the near future.

Prior to its publication, I knew very little about *Voices*, mostly limited to Lawrence Sutin's brief review of it in his biography *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick*. Of the extant early manuscripts, it is Dick's second, following the above-mentioned *Gather Yourselves Together*. Sutin sees little to recommend in the novel, and on his one-to-ten scale he rates it a two. Now, having read the novel, I think that either Sutin was being unfair to it or that the manuscript passed through an excellent editor on its way to press. (The latter actually seems quite likely—the extant draft was nearly 600 pages and the published version is half that.) In any case, *Voices* is a far stronger novel than I expected. It tells the story of Stuart Hadley, a young radio salesman who is uncomfortable in the life that has grown around him. (Parallels with Dick's own life are *certainly* just coincidences. Really.) His attempts to escape from his world—joining an apocalyptic religious movement, starting an affair that leaves him feeling just as uncomfortable as his marriage—ultimately lead him to a nervous breakdown. The novel is clunky in parts—some sequences drag, and the self-consciously purple prose of the opening pages doesn't work nearly as well as the spare style Dick soon settled into for the remainder of his career. But there's some real power in the characters' interior monologs and the overall arc of Hadley's decline into paranoia.



What surprised me most about *Voices*, though, was the extent to which religious ideas fascinated Dick even at this early point in his career. The first third of the novel focuses on Hadley's infatuation with an apocalyptic group called the Society of the Watchmen of Jesus and its charismatic leader, Theodore Beckheim. In 1952—over 20 years before the religious experiences described in *VALIS* and the *Exegesis*, 11 years before he joined the Episcopal Church and began seriously studying religion—Dick's earliest novel meditates on faith, apocalypse, and revelation. The first part of the novel closes with a 6-page sermon from Beckheim that's every bit as theologically rich as later essays like "Man, Android, Machine." The general theme of the sermon relates to nuclear war in a manner that presages the postapocalyptic *Dr. Bloodmoney*, but it also contains the kernels of some ideas that reappear in Dick's post-1974 religious writings. Beckheim's words on omnipresence, for example, could have come out of *Radio Free Albemuth*:

"The ancients did not understand that God was always among them, that it is impossible to imagine God not present. They had lived with God all their lives; God is present in every physical object—what they knew as a physical object was a spatial manifestation of Him. In every man, God is present in His actual form: as a moving spirit. The physical object is an expression of God: the mind of man is God—a part, a unit, of the total Spirit."

"Therefore, our forefathers failed to realize that the signs they anticipated would not be thrust magically into the framework of everyday life. The momentum of the universe is itself the process anticipated by the prophets. Not a sudden cessation of this process, but the direction of the process itself is the hand of God at work. And if we examine this so-called natural process, we will see everything that was predicted working itself to completion." (p. 81)

Like the character of Hadley, Dick is merely flirting with Beckheim's theology, not yet ready to throw himself fully into the questions of ontology, salvation, and faith that the sermon suggests. But seeing this deep a religious exploration so early in Dick's career was a very pleasant surprise for me. *Voices From the Streets* is by no means a perfect novel, but there are some true gems contained within it, signposts to the greatness that was to follow.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 18, 2007 at 11:41 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 23, 2007

Could Korvac make a comics reference so obscure even he could not understand it?



Marc of [I Am Not the Beastmaster](#) writes a wonderful send-up of academic writing in the form of an essay on the mysterious authorship of the [Korvac Saga](#). For those who don't know, Korvac was one of the greatest Avengers

villains of all time, partly because he was a man who dared to make himself a god and partly because, as Marc points out, he was half-dreidel. "If Korvac did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him." Amen.

[The Institute for Korvac Studies presents: The Man Behind the Man-God](#)

UPDATE: Man, I just can't get enough of these [poststructuralist Korvac jokes](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 23, 2007 at 10:02 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 24, 2007

More Hugo nominees online

Michael Flynn's Hugo-nominated-novel-that-I-plan-to-read-soon *Eifelheim* is now [available for free](#).

Also, [SF Signal](#) has posted [reviews](#) of all this year's Hugo-nominated short fiction.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 24, 2007 at 08:54 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 24, 2007

The best news I've heard all week: Potentially habitable planet found



Planet [Gliese 581c](#) orbits a red dwarf, but it's at a close enough orbit that its temperature should allow for liquid water. It's also the smallest extrasolar planet discovered to date. Added bonus: [Gliese 581](#) is one of the 100 stars closest to Earth, only 20.5 light years away. Let's go!

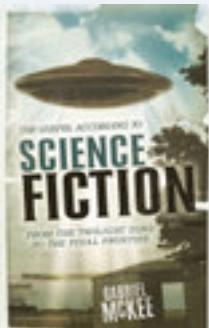
[Click here to read more](#).

Thanks to Tyler of [Great Hoboes](#) for the scoop.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 24, 2007 at 09:05 PM | [Permalink](#)

April 25, 2007

Recent online sightings of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*



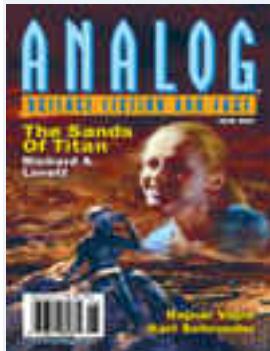
Alvaro at [Waiting For My Aineko](#) writes a very interesting meditation on sin, death, and the problem of pain, using my analysis of Theodore Sturgeon's "Dazed," Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations," and Isaac Asimov's "Reason" (from chapters 6 and 7 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#)) as a guide (. I'm very pleased to see someone using these stories to help understand real-life problems; as I state in my introduction, that's precisely what SF should do. [Read the post here](#).

[Don Dammassa](#) has reviewed [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) quite positively: "Of all the books I've read on the subject, this was easily the most intelligent and articulate, as well as the most thorough." But don't take Don's word for it—[Find out for yourself!](#) (Shameless, I know.)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 25, 2007 at 11:38 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 26, 2007

Inspiration from Scripture in Richard A. Lovett's "The Sands of Titan" (Analog, June 2007)



The lead story in this month's [Analog](#) is a stranded-in-space story by Greg A. Lovett called "The Sands of Titan." The narrator, Floyd, is the pilot of a supply delivery capsule that crashes on Titan following a disaster in orbit. Now he is separated from his capsule, which contains air, water, and food, and must walk across 100 kilometers of alien terrain in order to survive. His only companion on the journey is a sentient AI named (somewhat unfortunately) Brittney, who calculates his air and water usage, navigates his path to the capsule, and offers him spiritual encouragement. In a key passage, Brittney taps her archive of texts from Earth and finds a Biblical story that motivates Floyd to continue the near-impossible journey:

"Maybe we both need to learn a lesson from Esther... A biblical character. One of the things I found in Ship's library was the Bible, and I read about her, though I didn't understand her at the time. Now, I think I do. 'I will go to the king,' she said, 'and if I perish, I perish'... The context is complicated, but she was nerving herself to intercede with the king in a situation that was likely to get her killed. She thought about it a while, then just kind of shrugged and decided to just do the best she could. She lived, but what caught my attention was her attitude."

"The Sands of Titan" is a fine example not only of how religion can be used in SF; it's an excellent reminder of the continued relevance of religion (and religious stories in particular) in our lives. Floyd's computer can tell him how fast or slow to walk to best conserve his air, or which rock on the horizon to point himself toward to find the capsule, but those things are not enough. It is not until she offers support to the needs of his soul as well as his body that he is able to muster the will to survive across Titan's landscape. [The story of Esther](#) is the direct reference made in this story, but in the end it's an illustration of [Matthew 4:4](#): "Man does not live on bread (or compressed air and recycled water) alone."

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 26, 2007 at 11:38 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 08, 2007

Spider-Man 3 and Venom's ecclesiastical roots



I've just posted a somewhat-lengthy look at *Spider-Man 3* and the religious history of the comics version of Venom over on [Holy Heroes!!](#), a new group blog about comics and religion. I'll be posting most of my comics-related thoughts over there from now on, but don't worry; I'll either cross-post or give little notices like this one when I do so.

[Read "Spider-Man 3 and Venom's ecclesiastical roots"](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on May 08, 2007 at 06:26 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 09, 2007

Audience of One: "It's a conspiracy by aliens to take over the Earth. They're gonna turn us into flies, you know?"

Christine of [Sushiesque](#) brought to my attention the documentary [Audience of One](#), about a Pentecostal preacher who's adapting the story of Joseph into a self-produced SF epic. It's easy to draw a comparison to the excellent [American Movie](#), and with the religious element thrown in, it's definitely peaked my interest. For your consideration, the trailer:

[[<https://youtu.be/mzy4oUlqJdk>]]

The film just wrapped up a festival tour; check out [its Myspace page](#) to find out where it's headed next.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on May 09, 2007 at 04:31 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 12, 2007

Young Jean Lee's *Church*



I went into *Church*, a play by Young Jean Lee, with some trepidation. I didn't know much about it—just that it was an experimental play structured like a church service for young, secular urbanites. I was intrigued, but also worried that it would be an hour and a half of spiteful digs at faith and the faithful.

I was pleasantly surprised, then, when the characters began laying out the groundwork of their theology: a progressive Christianity that opposes war and intolerance and sees selfishness—both material and spiritual—as sin. I was kind of amazed—this is my theology, and this playwright *gets it*. Later, when the preachers begin delivering bizarre, hallucinatory testimonials about mummies and unicorns and geysers of chicken blood, I became even more intrigued. I've always loved the sheer strangeness of religious experience, from apocalyptic literature to [Julian of Norwich](#) to [Philip K. Dick](#). The play was laying out a view of spirituality that embraces all of that weirdness and sees it as a doorway to the divine. *Church* is fun and engaging and smart.

And so I spent the entire time waiting for the other shoe to drop. Where's the punchline? When will it reveal that my attitude towards religion is the butt of the joke?



Pleasant surprise number two: it never happens. *Church* isn't sarcastic. It isn't ironic. It does what it sets out to do: paint an honest and warm and heartfelt picture of what Christianity can and should be. After seeing the play I read some background information on it, including an excellent [Village Voice profile](#) in which Lee describes the impetus for writing the play:

Though Lee's parents, faithful adherents to the Evangelical Free sect, ensured she spent every Sunday in church, Lee despised it. "I would just sit there and look around at the people and hate them . . . just think how awful they were."

As she prepared to leave for college, she told her parents she'd no longer attend. "I said you can't force this on me anymore." During her undergraduate years at Berkeley, Lee came out as an atheist. But just as she'd questioned her parents' beliefs, she questioned the views of her fellow unbelievers. "Their attitude toward Christians seemed very ill-informed . . . it was like Christians are evil morons who are ruining our country." Recently Lee wondered if she could write a play that would challenge that position, that could make Christianity seem attractive, accessible, useful to her audience. Could she preach to the unconverted?

Lee's play stems from a distrust of dogmatism of any stripe. I was irritated, then, to read [Time Out New York's review](#) of the play. It's a positive review, but the reviewer, David Cote, closes with a statement that is as spiteful as it is irrelevant:

Of course, if artists (or scientists) could find out why some people can't do without supernatural bigotry, the world would be a better place. Since religion is bad theater for stupid people, I will happily worship in the house of Young Jean Lee.

I'm amazed at the extent to which the reviewer missed the play's point. He understands that it's not a satire, but he can't quite seem to understand its sincerity. His narrow definition of Christianity will not allow it to be anything other than "supernatural bigotry." In fact, he illustrates precisely the kind of prejudice about Christianity that sparked Lee to write the play in the first place. So, as with [Esquire's Qur'an review](#) a couple months back, I wrote 'em a letter. Here it is:

I'm surprised that David Cote seems to have honestly enjoyed Church, since his review shows that he missed the point of it entirely. The downright nastiness of his review—and particularly the last paragraph, with its irrelevant and spiteful dig at religion as "bad theater for stupid people"—completely betrays the warmth and sincerity of Young Jean Lee's spiritual exercise. Church's ideology is only "hard to nail down" if your prejudices against religion and the religious are so ingrained that you cannot begin to comprehend that those prejudices may be wrong. Church isn't an attack on religion's "insidious appeal;" it is religion. It is a plea against the hardening of urban hearts—a call that Cote has heard, but not heeded.

Young Jean Lee sells scripts and DVDs of her plays on [her website](#), and though *Church* isn't there yet, it will hopefully be available soon.

There's some excellent background material on Lee and *Church* at the above-mentioned [Village Voice](#) and the [New York Times](#). (Don't miss the NYT multimedia interview-slideshow thing.)

Several theater blogs have called out Cote's review for its pigheadedness. My favorite is this post at [The Clyde Fitch Report](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on May 12, 2007 at 03:56 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 13, 2007

Robert J. Sawyer praises *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*

I got a very pleasant surprise today when I saw the first Amazon reader review for [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#), which is by none other than Robert J. Sawyer!

A fascinating, readable, entertaining, clever, and comprehensive look at science fiction's treatment of religion, spirituality, and God. A great book.

He goes into even more detail on [his blog](#):

Just got a copy of the wonderful new book [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) by Gabriel McKee (published by Westminster John Knox Press). It's a fabulous survey of how science fiction has treated religion, god, spirituality, and so on over the years -- and it has good discussions of my novels [The Terminal Experiment](#), [Flashforward](#), [Calculating God](#), [Hominids](#), [Hybrids](#), and [Mindscan](#). I haven't read the whole thing yet, but I'm really enjoying it. In its starred reviews, denoting a book of exceptional merit, Publishers Weekly says, "This fascinating hybrid of theology and science fiction is creative, lucid and contains impressive scholarship." I agree.

Sawyer is one of my favorite authors (and perhaps the most-discussed writer in GATSF), so I was more than a little thrilled to read his comments. In an odd bit of synchronicity, I just finished reading his novel [Starplex](#), and I will be posting some thoughts on it soon. In the meantime, if you haven't done so yet, read [my review](#) of his latest novel, [Rollback](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on May 13, 2007 at 02:59 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 16, 2007

New Reviews on Holy Heroes!!, among other things

A few new items on Holy Heroes!!: First up, Paul shares some thoughts on Superman as a Messiah figure (in both the Jewish and Christian senses of the term):

"Superman, Wish Fulfilment, and Eschatological hope"

Not to mention three reviews from me: A barbarian theophany in [Wolfskin #3](#), [X-Factor #16](#) revisited, and how [Action Comics #848](#) gets religion (and basic storytelling) wrong.

Elsewhere on the Internets, Vehige of Thursday Night Gumbo reviews Robert J. Sawyer's *Calculating God* (which is, for my money, one of the best religiously-themed SF novels out there):

"God, Science, and Science Fiction"

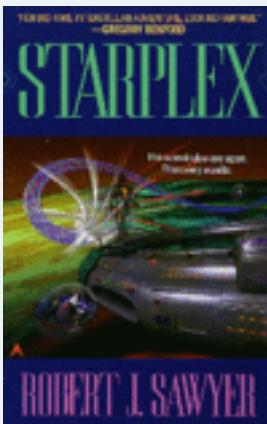
And in this month's [*Internet Review of Science Fiction*](#), Robert Bee writes an excellent exploration of religious and Jungian themes in Philip K. Dick's *Galactic Pot-Healer*. Though I disagree with some of the conclusions (I agree with Douglas A. Mackey that the novel's conclusion is optimistic), this is a valuable exploration of a woefully underrated novel. (IROSF is going to start charging for subscriptions soon, but you'll get grandfathered in for free if you sign up in the next month.)

"An Alien God and a Jungian Allegory"

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on May 16, 2007 at 09:13 AM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 16, 2007

Forgiveness in Robert J. Sawyer's *Starplex*



Starplex is a kitchen sink sort of novel. For the first hundred pages or so, every chapter introduces a new idea, any one of which would be enough to fill an entire novel. To Sawyer's enormous credit, he pulls it off. The book ties everything together in a satisfying manner, and only one aspect of the story—the "dolphins as equal partners in the exploration of space" bit—ends up seeming neglected. One senses, thought, that Sawyer wanted to give some of the ideas more space, as illustrated by the reappearance (with much more detail) of *Starplex*'s method of establishing a common language in a first contact scenario in *Rollback*.

The main plot of the book involves "shortcuts" that allow instantaneous transportation across the galaxy. Billions of these shortcuts were created millennia ago by an unknown alien intelligence, and the discovery of this transportation network has enabled humankind (and dolphinkind) to contact and form a loose confederation with two alien species. The book's plot involves several major events occurring one after the other: the discovery of sentient planets made of dark matter; the emergence of entire stars from several of the shortcuts, apparently originating in the future; the outbreak of hostilities between two of the spacefaring species. Things get moving pretty quickly, and the book's conclusion surprised me by revealing some themes I hadn't seen coming. There's some great meaning-of-the-universe stuff that I don't want to spoil, beyond saying that it reminded me of a sort of cross between Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Sirens of Titan*. But what really grabbed me was the message of forgiveness that arises from the aforementioned interstellar hostilities. In a powerful passage, an alien named Rhombus urges Keith Lansing, commander of the novel's eponymous starship, to seek peace instead of revenge:

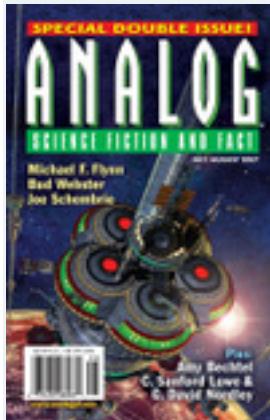
I'm saying forget about what has transpired... I despair over how much of your mental resources—how much of your time—you humans will waste over these issues. No matter how bumpy the terrain, smooth it in your mind... Can you foresee any solution that will bring the dead people back to life? Any reprisals that won't result in more people dead?" Lights played across his web. "Let it go."

In Rhombus's words, the ethics of forgiveness laid out in the Sermon on the Mount find a new voice in an alien lifeform. I solidly enjoyed *Starplex* from the beginning, but this passage in the conclusion elevated the entire novel.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on May 16, 2007 at 07:35 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 16, 2007

Medieval Science Redeemed: Michael F. Flynn's "Quaestiones Super Caelo et Mundo"



The July/August 2007 issue of *Analog* starts out strong with an excellent alternate history tale by Michael F. Flynn. "Quaestiones Super Caelo et Mundo" depicts a scientific revolution in the 14th century, with [Jean Buridan](#) and others discovering many of the key principles of motion, thermodynamics, and optics 300 years before Newton. It's a fun and fascinating challenge to the fallacy that the Middle Ages were intellectually backward, but the case is made even more strongly in Flynn's accompanying fact article "De Revolutione Scientiarum in 'Media Tempestas.'" This denunciation of the dominant misconceptions about the medieval period is written in the dialectic form of, among other works, Thomas Aquinas's [Summa Theologica](#). Point by point, Flynn refutes the idea that the Middle Ages were an "Age of Faith" supplanted by an "Age of Reason," and even the idea that "faith" and "reason" are inherently opposed. After all, Aquinas is remembered not for rejecting Greek philosophy, but for reconciling it with Christian theology—and Flynn argues that this attitude was the rule among medieval philosophers, not the exception. "That faith is opposed to reason is a modern dogma accepted on faith"—I couldn't have put it better myself. I've been thinking a lot about this lately, and it seems to me that the idea that the two are in opposition stems from the [Scopes Monkey Trial](#) on one side and [Bertrand Russell](#) on the other. But we've allowed that false dichotomy to be sold to us for so long that we hold it as a basic assumption.

The entire article is peppered with excellent quotes*, such as Augustine's statement (from *De Genesi ad literam*) that "it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on [natural philosophy]." But the crowning gem of them all, also from Augustine (*Contra Faustum manichaeum*), is a wonderful anachronistic criticism of modern-day creationists and an excellent statement on the compatibility of religion and science:

In the Gospel we do not read that the Lord said: "I send you the Holy Spirit so that He might teach you all about the course of the sun and the moon." The Lord wanted to make Christians, not astronomers. You learn at school all the useful things you need to know about nature.

The article details many of the key scientific discoveries (both practical and theoretical) of the Middle Ages, and serves as a worthy vindication of a much-maligned era of our intellectual history. As a medievalist, the one-two punch of Flynn's story and article made this my favorite issue of *Analog* in months.

The beginning of "Quaestiones Super Caelo Et Mundo" is available on [Analog's website](#).

*Sadly, Flynn's notation for these quotes is inadequate, and there were more than a few quotes I was unable to adequately match up to his bibliography. He defends this by stating that "the medieval philosopher would have recognized an entire argument from a brief quotation," but throw us a bone here, Mike! We're not medieval philosophers.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on May 16, 2007 at 09:38 PM | [Permalink](#)

May 18, 2007

Death's Sting: Stormcrow Hayes and Rob Steen's *Afterlife*



Depictions of hell in modern fantasy tend to eschew Boschian torments and lakes of fire. In Ted Chiang's ["Hell is the Absence of God"](#) takes place in a world where God is apparent rather than hidden, and eternal damnation means living in a world much like ours—without firsthand knowledge of the divine. Jhonen Vasquez' [Johnny the Homicidal Maniac](#) takes an opposite view: the world of the damned is like ours, but with an enormous, watchful eyeball in the air above it: "Everyone thinks it's watching *them*. it's the eternal audience, so they think they have to look good." And Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series describes the afterlife as a ghostly limbo filled with wispy, amnesiac shades.

Stormcrow Hayes and Rob Steen's manga series *Afterlife* depicts the next world as a mix of these ideas—a [Giger](#)-esque landscape where the dead mingle, waiting for answers about the meaning of the universe that never come. It's a bleak world, filled with parasitic demons and bottomless chasms, surrounded on all sides by an empty void. A few of the afterlife's inhabitants, including main characters Thaddeus and Mercutio, are "Guardians." They were selected (for reasons unknown and unspecified) to receive bizarre superpowers and chitinous armor made of the same substance as the afterlife's landscape. These Guardians defend the powerless dead from the mindless, marauding demons and from the gradual deterioration of the next world's bizarre landscape. The afterlife is an enigma, and the brooding Thaddeus sets out to find the answers behind it.



Afterlife is the first OEL (Original English Language) manga that I've read, so I can't compare to other works in its style. It's certainly a fun read, though—there aren't too many stories that depict a fistfight between L. Ron Hubbard and David Koresh. Clever cameos of this sort are scattered throughout—much like in Philip José Farmer's [Riverworld](#) series, and with a similar playfulness. A helpful appendix gives background information on some of the famous departed souls who appear in the story. Towards the end it introduces some particularly interesting ideas, including a sect of dead souls called the Order of the Painful Truth. The "Pain People" find meaning in the afterlife by turning it into a more comprehensible hell, allowing themselves to be tortured by parasitic demons. The first volume focuses on establishing the characters and their world, and I'm curious to see where volumes two and three take the story.

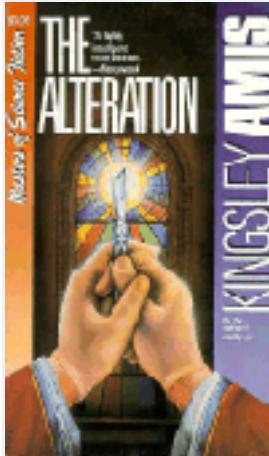
Afterlife Vol. 1 is available now from [Tokyopop](#). Vol. 2 will be released in early 2008. The official site for the series is www.entertheafterlife.com.

For more on science fictional approaches to the afterlife, see chapter 9 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on May 18, 2007 at 09:16 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 20, 2007

Atheism, polls, and *The Alteration* in the *New Yorker*



In the current issue of the *New Yorker*, Anthony Gottlieb writes [an excellent essay on modern atheism](#). In one particularly interesting passage, he calls into question the value of poll results about religion:

Respondents can be lacking in seriousness, unsure what they believe, and evasive. Spiritual values and practices are what pollsters call "motherhood" issues: everybody knows that he is supposed to be in favor of them. Thus sociologists estimate that maybe only half of the Americans who say that they regularly attend church actually do so. The World Values Survey Association, an international network of social scientists, conducts research in eighty countries, and not long ago asked a large sample of the earth's population to say which of four alternatives came closest to their own beliefs: a personal God (forty-two per cent chose this), a spirit or life force (thirty-four per cent), neither of these (ten per cent), don't know (fourteen per cent). Depending on what the respondents understood by a "spirit or life force," belief in God may be far less widespread than simple yes/no polls suggest.

*In some religious research, it is not necessarily the respondents who are credulous. Harris has made much of a survey that suggests that forty-four per cent of Americans believe that Jesus will return to judge mankind within the next fifty years. But, in 1998, a fifth of non-Christians in America told a poll for *Newsweek* that they, too, expected Jesus to return. What does Harris make of that? Any excuse for a party, perhaps. He also worries about a poll that said that nearly three-quarters of Americans believe in angels—by which, to judge from blogs and online forums on the subject, some of them may have meant streaks of luck, or their own delightful infants.*

To this I would add the fact that even those polls that use more specific terminology can be problematic. What exactly is a "personal God"? Do all respondents think of it in the same way? And is belief in one mutually exclusive from belief in a "spirit or life-force"? There's a lot of theological variety out there, and three-word poll questions don't do it justice.

Anyway, of real interest on the SF front is a passage further down on Kingsley Amis' alternate history novel *The Alteration*:

The history of the West has been so closely interwoven with the history of religious institutions and ideas that it is hard to be confident about what life would have been like without them. One of Kingsley Amis's lesser-known novels, ["The Alteration,"](#) tried to envisage an alternative course for modern history in which the Reformation never happened, science is a dirty word, and in 1976 most of the planet is ruled by a Machiavellian Pope from Yorkshire. In this world, Jean-Paul Sartre is a Jesuit and the central mosaic in Britain's main cathedral is by David Hockney. That piece of fancy is dizzying enough on its own. But imagine attempting such a thought experiment in the contrary fashion, and rolling it back several thousand years to reveal a world with no churches, mosques, or temples. The idea that people would have been nicer to one another if they had never got religion, as Hitchens, Dawkins, and Harris seem to think, is a strange position for an atheist to take. For if man is wicked enough to have invented religion for himself he is surely wicked enough to have found alternative ways of making mischief.

I question Gottlieb's description of *The Alteration* as one of Amis' "lesser-known" novels—it won the John W. Campbell Award, appears on David Pringle's list of the [100 Best Science Fiction Novels](#), and was canonized in Carroll and Graf's "Masters of Science Fiction" series alongside works by Philip K. Dick and Theodore Sturgeon. In SF circles, it may well be his best-known book. But this is a very, very minor quibble in an excellent article.

[Read all of "Atheists With Attitude."](#)

Hat-tip to [GetReligion](#) for the link, plus a [pretty good review](#) of their own.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on May 20, 2007 at 10:34 AM in [Atheism](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 30, 2007

Back from vacation

So I haven't posted anything in a week or so because I was in England. (I'd meant to mention it, but I ran out of time to post before catching the plane.) Among things of interest on the religion front, I saw Howard Brenton's play [In Extremis](#) at Shakespeare's Globe (in groundling seats in the pouring rain, no less). It's billed as being about [Abelard](#) and [Heloise](#), but the second act has more to do with Abelard and [Bernard of Clairvaux](#). It's an excellent play of ideas that makes its theological ideas quite palatable, even to a bunch of people standing in the rain.

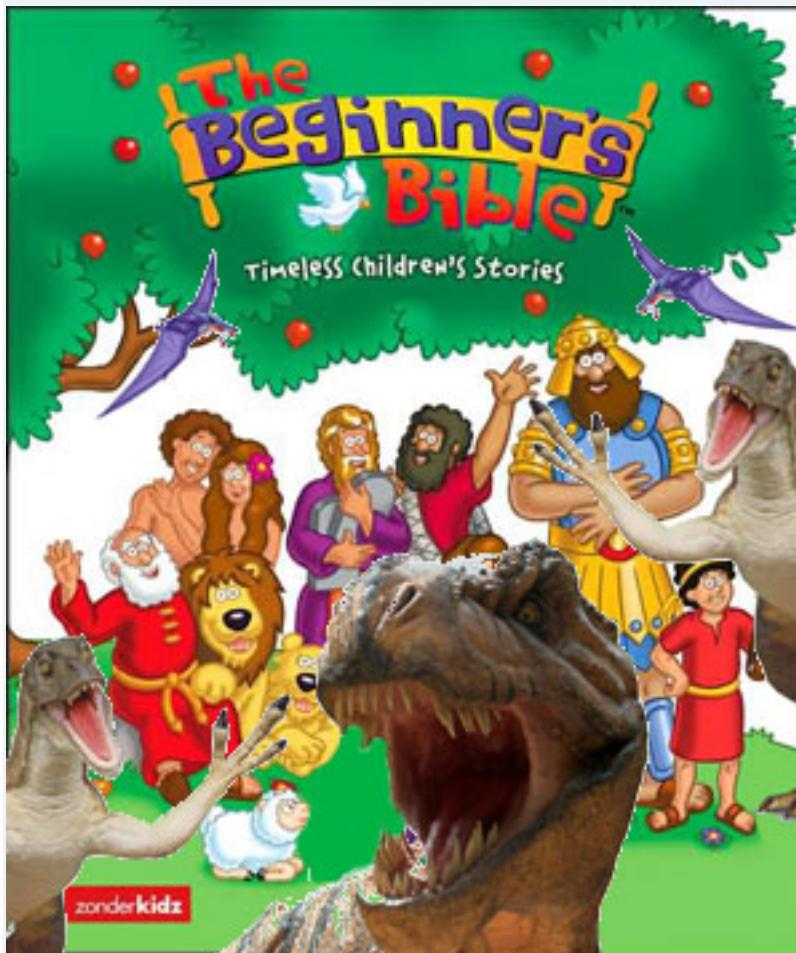
On a the sf-nal front, I:

- Picked up some out-of-print-in-the-States books at Forbidden Planet, including Philip K. Dick's mainstream novel [In Milton Lumky Territory](#) and Alan Moore's [Complete Future Shocks](#), collecting some of his earliest work in 2000 AD.
- Saw Danny Boyle's film [Sunshine](#), which doesn't open here until later this year. A full review will follow, for now, suffice to say that I loved it.
- Bought some [Jelly Babies](#).

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on May 30, 2007 at 03:31 PM | [Permalink](#)

June 04, 2007

"I replaced [Goliath] with a T-rex, making David's victory that much more impressive."



On [The Revealer](#), John D. Spalding gives a modest proposal for creationist children's Bibles.

To rectify the omission of pre-historic creatures from my boys' copy of The Beginner's Bible, I scanned images from the book and photoshopped in a bunch of dinosaurs. I suggest that Zonderkidz, the children's division of Zondervan, makes similar dino additions to their next edition. It's a vast improvement, enriching familiar Bible stories and making them so much more exciting. Trust me, Zonderkidz—your sales will soar. Now that our family Bible is filled with huge flesh-eating monsters, my kids can't put the dang thing down!

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 04, 2007 at 11:18 AM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 04, 2007

A new review of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction* (en français)

A reader named Hervé posted the following review of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) on the Usenet group fr.rec.arts.sf. (Apologies for any errors in my translation—if you know French you may want to go straight to [the original](#). I happily invite corrections to my translation!)

An opinion on a recent reference work:

The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the twilight zone to the final frontier : Gabriel McKEE : Westminster John Knox Press : 2007 : 978-0-664-22901-6 (ISBN 13) 0-664-22901-8 (ISBN 10) : 291 pages (including index & bibliography) : 14.95 USD

This book aspires to study the relations (similarities, oppositions) between SF and religion (insofar as it is organized) and the principle concepts specific to the latter.

Organized into 10 chapters, it presents us with examples of the treatment of the following ideas in SF:

- the qualities of God
- creation (in the sense of Genesis)
- the spirit, the soul
- Free will and predestination
- evil and sin
- messiahs
- faith and religious experience
- the future of the church
- the afterlife
- the apocalypse

Each theme is very briefly explained (or placed in its religious context); then the treatment in the setting of SF is explored much more extensively (10 to 20 pages). The examples are very multimedia: written SF (novels or stories), filmed SF (TV or cinema) and illustrated (particularly comics), with a mixture of well-known texts or authors (Dick, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, C.S. Lewis) and of lesser authors (Chwedyk...), stretching from the “classic” period of SF until 2005.

The tone employed is very pleasant, more that of a conversation than an academic essay, and, despite my fears at the outset, I did not find any religious proselytism, even though (as the author himself explains) the Christian religion provides the frame of reference.

The general effect of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) is like reading a series of prefaces (that of [Divine Stories](#) comes immediately to mind, certainly.) For me, this is a compliment; I therefore consider this book to be a success that permits it to simply make itself a state of the art in SF on the treatment of religion and its themes, without being a thorough theoretical study.

Therefore, a very readable book, free from errors (thoroughly-researched, dates OK, sources listed—for short stories, Hartwell's *Year's Best*), whose only problem for a French-speaking audience is the fact that the majority of the examples (except for certain classics and the films) are, to my knowledge, not available in French versions (Stewart and Cohen, certain works by Sawyer, Zahn...).

And also not expensive, 12.09 Euros, postage included, for a trade paperback of 300 pages that seems solid (a hardcover exists, if I recall correctly).

GHOR's grade: 3 stars

Thanks for the kind words, Hervé!

[Note: there is no hardcover of GATSF, though both Amazon and Barnes and Noble listed it as HC prior to its

release. Oh, to have a dust jacket!]

[Also, thanks to Mona Thorne for helping to clean up my translation!]

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 04, 2007 at 12:08 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 13, 2007

Another Amazon review of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*

Amazon reviewer Auntie Helen (from Kent, England) has given [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) a four-star review:

"Gabriel McKee has evidently read an amazing amount of Science Fiction novels and short stories as well as watching films and TV series. His book looks at different philosophical and religious ideas and how they are used in SF, explaining their use in particular SF books/series and occasionally relating the thoughts to philosophy. Able to quote both St Augustine and Star Trek, this is an engaging and easy to read book which shows the broad range of views in SF, particularly relating to deities, faith, human nature and the future and has an extensive bibliography and index which will no doubt be helpful to SF fans. Although referencing Christian beliefs, this book isn't aiming to be a presentation of the Gospel through SF links, it is rather a collation of different views that might interest SF fans and because of this its appeal is probably limited."

Well, I hope that last phrase isn't true (I should hope that a collation of different views would have a broad appeal). But excellent praise nonetheless! If you haven't read the book yet, [now's your chance](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 13, 2007 at 10:54 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 14, 2007

Sunshine: The Movie Clothed in the Sun



In the [introduction to the script book](#) for [Sunshine](#), screenwriter Alex Garland states that he and director Danny Boyle had opposite interpretations of the film's spirituality. Garland intended the film to be a story about atheism and an illustration of the folly of mysticism and irrationality. Boyle, on the other hand, believed that film's scientific mission is, in fact, a mystical quest. This sort of disagreement would drive many a screenwriter mad, but Garland offers an insightful statement on the matter:

"I didn't see this as a major problem, because the difference in our approach wasn't in conflict with the way in which the story would be told. The two interpretations that could be made from the narrative were the same two interpretations that could be made from the world around us. In that respect, perhaps the difference was even appropriate."

Some of this disagreement shows through in the film, but thankfully it takes the form of complexity rather than confusion. The film's characters embody different approaches to the film's mystical themes, with ample room for viewers to draw their own conclusions.

Sunshine is difficult to describe, in large part because it begs comparison with other SF films. It wears many of its classic influences ([Alien](#), [2001](#), and even [Dark Star](#)) on its sleeve. But it also begs comparison with several more recent SF films which, justly or unjustly, have been much maligned.* Indeed, a summary of the film's plot makes it sound like it should be boring or schlocky or both. The sun (a portentous opening voiceover tells us) is dying. Several years ago a ship called *Icarus* was launched to deploy a massive bomb to reignite the star, but the ship disappeared without a trace. Now a second mission (*Icarus II*—why not *Prometheus* or *Daedalus*—or *Lucifer*?) has been sent on the same mission. But the second bomb used up all of Earth's fissile material, so this is *Earth's last chance*. It could easily have ended up banal, but it has two things going for it. First of all, the film is absolutely gorgeous. I generally dislike the aesthetic laziness of CG-heavy movies, but *Sunshine* is miles beyond most recent SF films. Second (and most important), Boyle suffuses the story with enough humanity to make us really care. Early in the film we see the face of Capa (Cillian Murphy), the scientist who created the bomb, staring nervously into the camera. He's recording

a farewell message to his family that may be the last they ever hear from him. In less-talented hands it would be trite, but Boyle and Murphy make it feel honest because they know that Capa's false starts are more important than his finished message.

Boyle's interpretation of the story's spiritual aspects are present from the opening scene, in which ship's psychologist Searle (Cliff Curtis) bathes in the glow of the approaching sun on the ship's observation deck. Searle has become obsessed with the sun; he bakes himself in the observation deck until his skin is peeling from burns. But when he explains his experience to another crewmember, we get a sense that Boyle shares his enthusiasm for the transcendent. Searle compares the experience of bathing in pure sunlight with sensory deprivation (and, by proxy, the experience of deep space):

"The point about darkness is you float in it. You and the darkness are distinct from each other because darkness is an absence of something. It's a vacuum. But total light envelops you. It becomes you."

Searle's devotional practices (and the film's conclusion) reminded me of the Sufi concept of *fana*, the annihilation of the individual soul in the vastness of God, frequently symbolized as a moth dying in a candle's flame. Later in the film we see an extreme critique of this sort of mysticism, however. It happens in a final-act plot twist that I won't spoil, though I will say that it struck me as a somewhat unnecessary attempt to inject some elements of horror and action into the story. I'm still unsure how I feel about the film's inclusion of a villain whose evil is based on the belief that he is on a divine mission. I interpret the largely anti-religious tone of the film's later scenes as an attempt to flesh out a spectrum of faith: Searle's opening meditation presents mysticism and mania, and the final act of *Sunshine* gives us an image of religious psychosis.



But there's also a subtler position on *Sunshine*'s map of faith. At one point in the film, the ship is running out of air (as must happen in deep-space thrillers). There is enough oxygen left to complete the mission and save humanity—but only if one crew member is murdered. The crew views the situation pragmatically: what is one life worth in the face of human extinction? But Cassie (Rose Byrne), the ship's pilot, refuses to support the decision: "I know the argument. I know the logic. You're saying you need my vote; I'm saying you can't have it." There's an unspoken idea in her refusal to participate: *I would rather you kill me than make me complicit in the death of another.* It struck me as a remarkably Christian ethical decision, an insistence on finding any other solution than one that relied on murder. And sure enough, the careful viewer will note that Cassie wears a cross pendant throughout the film. What is the audience meant to think of her decision, or of the differing pictures of mysticism presented in the film? There are no easy answers in *Sunshine*, which is part of what makes it such an enjoyable film—it's happy to be complex. It's a good thing that Danny Boyle countered the atheism Alex Garland saw in his screenplay—the movie thrives on the multiplicity of its attitudes.

Sunshine opens in the U.S. on July 20th. For more on mystical experience in SF, see chapter 4 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

*To name a few: [Mission to Mars](#), which valiantly tried and valiantly failed to be an entertaining hard SF story; Steven Soderbergh's [Solaris](#) remake, which has a similarly elegiac tone to *Sunshine*; and [Event Horizon](#), which shares more than a few plot elements with Boyle and Garland's film. [Conventional wisdom has yet to crystallize on whether *Event Horizon* is a brilliant movie or a terrible one. For what it's worth, I loved it. But if you didn't, don't let that keep you from seeing *Sunshine*.]

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 14, 2007 at 09:55 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 18, 2007

On interstellar communication and obsolete technology



A short SF film starring yours truly is currently a featured video on Myspace. There isn't much by way of religious themes, but it's well worth two minutes and fifty-eight seconds of your time:

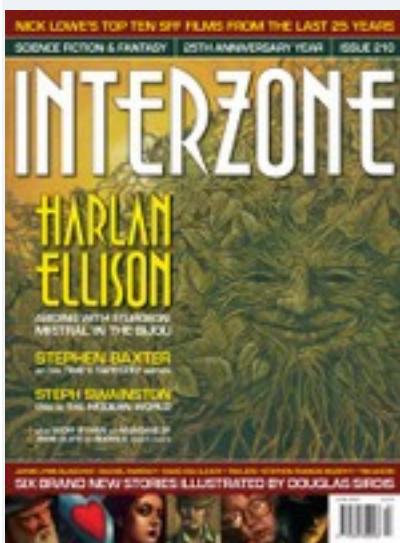
SPACE FAX!

(And if you like that one, check out Misplaced Planet's other films on Myspace or at www.misplacedplanet.com. My personal favorite is [Signal Decay](#), which is also sort of SF, and incidentally stars me as well.)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 18, 2007 at 06:14 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 18, 2007

Interzone #210: Steven Francis Murphy and Tim Lees



Another item I picked up in England was an issue of [Interzone](#). (It's supposed to be more-or-less available in the US, but I've never been able to find a copy.) #210 has a strong selection of stories, including two that give bleak depictions of the future of religion. Steven Francis Murphy's "Tearing Down Tuesday" offers a pretty blunt critique of religion— its villain is an evangelical pedophile. Far more complex and interesting is [Tim Lees](#)' "Preachers," an intriguing postapocalyptic tale. A father and his son lead a nomadic life in a rural wasteland, traveling from town to town repairing what few machines have survived. As in [Cormac McCarthy's](#) *The Road*, Lees never states the nature of the apocalypse, but the inhabitants of this bleak future view their world in a mystical light. Mutated animals are seen as portents of doom, and (most intriguingly) a wind from the west brings either the gifts of prophecy—from speaking in tongues to levitation—or madness, depending on one's interpretation.

In one town, the father and son encounter a group of Preachers, who are equal parts traveling missionaries and racketeering press-gang. They exhort their audience to abandon their homes and travel to a great city being built in the south, "a city consecrated with the blood of men and beasts." The Preachers' sermons describe a harsh theology for a harsh landscape:

For what was God, he asked? Some meek, mild, idle *thing*, to nod and wink at all our failings? Was God a friend, to reassurance, and back us up? A servant, to be called upon in times of need? Was God our slave, to do with as we wished?

He paused, he stretched himself out, tall and thin, he gazed up at the sky, and then the answer burst from him like gunshots: No! No! No! [...] People were right, back in the olden days, he cried. God wanted death. He wanted it. He was the wolf that bit, the wasp that stung, the maggot that consumed the flesh. God wasn't meek! God wasn't mild!

Look at Creation, look at all its fangs and claws! God was the eater, the devourer to be kept at bay with bribes and sops. [...] For God still made demands, whether we heard or not. God required His sacrifice. And what we didn't give Him from our own free will, why then, the Preacher said, his eyes like terrible black holes—why then, God took.

The boy's father rejects this theology and the society growing around it, describing the Preachers' followers as "yokels." When the son joins the Preachers' community, he looks on his father with pity, and so the story ends with ambiguity: are we to pity the father who resists the coming age, or the son who abandons pragmatism for mysticism? In any case, it's a fascinating story. I'm impressed with the caliber of the stories in *Interzone*, and I definitely look forward to future issues (assuming there are no complications with an overseas subscription).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 18, 2007 at 09:13 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 19, 2007

"You have to consider we're only made out of dust": *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* re-reviewed

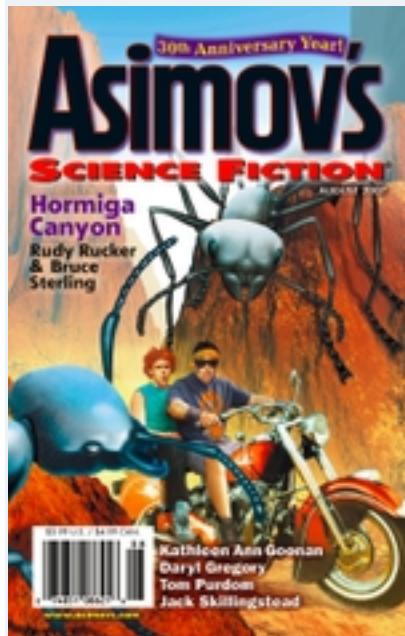
David of Total Dick-Head posts a 1967 review of Philip K. Dick's [The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch](#) from the *Riverside Quarterly*, alongside Dick's letters to the reviewer praising his attention to the novel's religious themes. (For those that haven't read it, *Stigmata* is a truly terrifying novel about Barbie dolls, hallucinations, transubstantiation, and absolute evil.) It's a very thoughtful review of one of my favorite novels—check it out.

[A Satanic Bible: Eldritch Reviewed](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 19, 2007 at 09:13 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 19, 2007

Daryl Gregory's "Dead Horse Point": Free will, physics, and the philosophy of time



The August issue of [Asimov's Science Fiction](#) is really, really good—I would unreservedly describe all but one of the stories as excellent. Case in point: Daryl Gregory's "Dead Horse Point," a beautiful and sad story about a quantum physicist with an odd disease akin to narcolepsy that causes her to sleep for weeks at a time. When she wakes she writes extensive notes toward a definitive theory on quantum indeterminacy (her solution bears some strong similarities to Augustinian [eternalism](#), which made me pretty happy). It's a pretty heavy story, but it still finds time for humor in a great joke about free will. (Apologies if this is an old joke: it's the first time I'd heard it):

The Jehovah's Witness goes to heaven [...] But instead of the pearly gates, there's a fork in the road, and a sign pointing down each path. One sign says 'Believers in Predestination' and the other says 'Believers in Free Will' [...]

The guy's always believed in predestination, so he goes down that road, and eventually he comes to a huge wall and a big door with the word 'PREDESTINATION' written over the top. He knocks, and an angel opens the door and says, 'What brings you to my door, mortal?' And the guy says, 'Well, there were these two signs, and I chose the one that said predestination.' The angel says, 'You chose it? You can't come in here, Bub,' and slams the door. The guy's heartbroken. Finally he trudges back to the crossroads and goes down the other road. Eventually he comes to another giant wall and a door that says 'FREE WILL.' He knocks and another angel opens the door and says, 'Why did you come this way, mortal?' And the guy says, 'I had no choice!'

Jokes aside, there's some really good stuff on the nature of time, which is a big theological point for me (thanks in large part to books 10-11 of [Augustine's Confessions](#)). Gregory describes eternalism as a map:

"Time's arrow doesn't matter. If the map is true, it's true for any point in time. It's a map of the world, for all space-time. The future is as set as the past, for everyone. The territory doesn't change[...] Free will just means that you don't know what's on the map. You don't create the future, it's already there, waiting for you like a Christmas present. All you have to do on Christmas morning is see what's inside."

I'd add my own caveat to that last bit—we still make our choices, but the idea that we make them *in time* is an illusion. Eternalism is a rich philosophical perspective that doesn't get discussed nearly enough. Gregory's story well illustrates how important an idea it is by showing its applications to current questions in physics.

"Dead Horse Point" is great, but there are 6 other really strong stories in this issue as well—if you've been putting off picking up Asimov's, this is the month to do it!

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 19, 2007 at 09:57 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 26, 2007

Roger Elwood dies

[Locus](#) reports (somewhat belated) the death of editor and anthologist Roger Elwood, who passed away on February 2nd. I mention this here because among the 80 or so anthologies that Elwood edited in the '60s and '70s is a quartet of anthologies of SF stories about religion: *Flame Tree Planet*, *Chronicles of a Comer*, *Signs and Wonders*, and *Strange Gods*.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 26, 2007 at 03:54 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 26, 2007

Superheroes and the "Utopian Problem": *Justice, Black Summer, and Miracleman* on Holy Heroes!!

If Superman is so powerful, why is there famine? Over at SF Gospel's pseudo-sister-site, Holy Heroes!!, I've just posted an essay on the utopian problem in superhero stories.

[Superheroes and the "Utopian Problem": *Justice, Black Summer, Miracleman*](#)

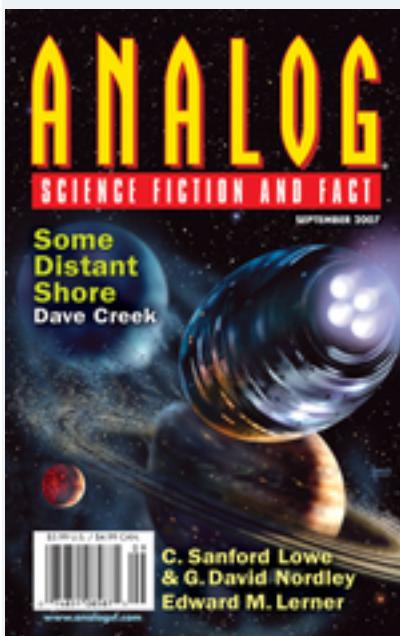
Also, I neglected to mention my review of *Action Comics* #849, the conclusion to the horribly bungled story about religion started in #848.

[Action Comics #849 review](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 26, 2007 at 06:09 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 28, 2007

"Palimpsest" by Howard V. Hendrix



Howard V. Hendrix's "Palimpsest," from the September 2007 issue of *Analog*, is a great update of a classic SF tale. Drawing its inspiration from one of my favorite Arthur C. Clarke stories—I won't say which one lest I ruin the ending—Hendrix updates the story's technology, and adds some theological complexity for good measure. The near-future of "Palimpsest" is besieged by "godspam"—automated, religious nonsense e-mail:

A "Jesus" here, or a "Buddha" there, or an "Allah" or "Lord Krishna" anywhere—accompanied by strange symbols, unlikely return addresses, threats of global apocalypse, personal damnation, or slime-mold status in one's next life. Early legislative efforts to block the godspam are complicated by questions of free speech and church/state separation. But things become infinitely more complicated when nanomachines become infected by the godspam, and the virtual divine messages are made manifest in the environment.

Much of the story consists of sermons delivered by opponents of godspam blocking. These admonishments contain an intriguing variety of theological ideas: digital eschatology, Kabbalistic numerology, and, most interestingly, the ontology of the *logos*. If the godspam is actually a divine communication, it is an expression of the divine word that sustains creation itself. Blocking a manifestation of that word, one preacher argues, could be disastrous:

If...programmers block all so-called godspam—in not only the virtual world, but also the physical one—they could generate the ultimate false positive, extinguishing the iteration command, the one that drives the universal system to keep elaborating, to keep evolving, to keep existing.

This is a wonderfully SFnal update of some of my favorite theological ideas—specifically, [Augustine's Word theology](#), and the Sufi shaykh [ibn al-‘Arabi](#)'s concept of the Breath of the Merciful, God's eternal exhalation that creates and defines the world. The Word by which God creates is also the blueprint of all existence and the means by which it is sustained. In "Palimpsest," technology has enabled us to see this Word, but not to understand it, and our confusion may also be our destruction.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 28, 2007 at 11:09 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 28, 2007

Flynn revisited: Calvin on science and faith

Also in the September *Analog*, columnist Jeffery D. Kooistra weighs in on the issues raised by Michael Flynn's story "Quaestiones Super Caelo et Mundo" and its accompanying essay on medieval science ([recently discussed here](#)). By way of a spiritual and scientific autobiography, Kooistra emphasizes more explicitly the non-opposition of scientific practice and religious belief. He closes the article with a great quote from John Calvin's commentary on [Genesis 1:16](#):

I have said, that Moses does not here subtilely descend, as a philosopher, on the secrets of nature, as may be seen in these words... Moses makes two great luminaries; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons, that the star of Saturn, which, on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. Here lies the difference: Moses wrote in the popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labor whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend. Nevertheless, this study is not to be reprobated, nor this science to be condemned,

because some frantic persons are wont boldly to reject whatever is unknown to them. For astronomy is not only pleasant, but also very useful to be known: it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God.

Update: [Read this quote in context here.](#)

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on June 28, 2007 at 11:25 AM in [Atheism](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 05, 2007

Doctor Who Series 3 starts tomorrow!



The US airings of the new [Doctor Who](#)'s latest season starts tomorrow on the [Sci Fi Channel](#). In case I haven't mentioned it before, *Doctor Who* is the best show on television, and you should be watching it. The third season gets off to a somewhat-slow start, but later episodes are among the best of the current revival, and the season as a whole captures the delirious fun of the show's old-school episodes perfectly. In the weeks to come I'll post reviews of this season's theologically-relevant episodes. Two episodes air tomorrow—the somewhat underwhelming 90-minute special "The Runaway Bride" and the generally more enjoyable "Smith and Jones." To give you some hints of what to expect, check out the [review of "Smith and Jones"](#) posted by Steve of [Old Testament Space Opera](#) back when it aired on the BBC in April, as well as his more recent [season overview](#). The stuff about prayer and forgiveness in the finale is probably the most exciting bit—more on that in about 13 weeks—but you can also look forward to some thoughts on alien angels, sun gods, and the mystical meaning of traffic jams.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on July 05, 2007 at 09:36 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 07, 2007

Things that can't be said about *The Transformers* (and some things that can be said about Philip K. Dick and Martin Luther)



I would love to tell you that *The Transformers* is thoroughly enjoyable. I'd love to tell you that it's moderately intelligent. I'd even love to tell you that the robots look cool. Sadly, I can't tell you any of those things. *Transformers* is largely dull, certainly overlong, and packed to the gills with dangling plotlines and disappearing characters. Most frustratingly, the robots—you know, the robots that are the point of the whole thing, the ones that are supposed to [look like they turn into cars](#) and the like—look more like [piles of scrap metal](#) than anthropomorphic vehicles. In short, by any standard, *Transformers* just isn't a very good movie.

Nevertheless, it did get me thinking. What follows isn't really about *The Transformers* film that was released this week—it's about the *Transformers* movie that *could* have been, and the religious themes it could have explored.

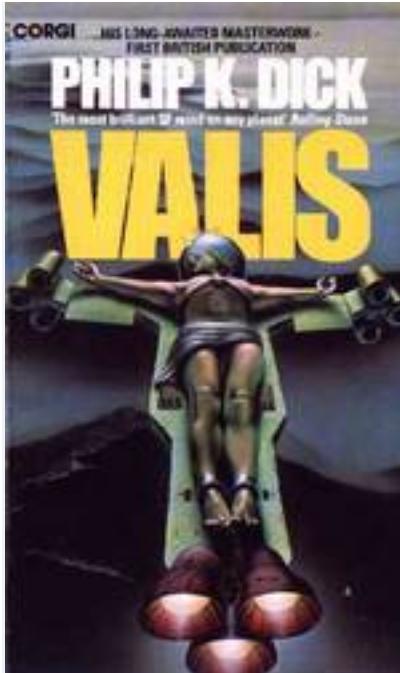
Philip K. Dick, who once wrote [a novel](#) inspired by his daughter's collection of Barbie accessories, would have loved the idea of *Transformers*. The theme of hiddenness would have thrilled him—aliens disguised as everyday objects appeared in "[Colony](#)," one of his better early stories. Things become even more interesting when you take into account the Zoroastrian setup, which loosely resembles that of his early novel *The Cosmic Puppets*: two armies of alien creatures waging a secret war over the fate of humankind. The idea that there is a hidden world, that the true meaning of our universe is obscured, that things *are not as they seem*—this has always struck me as one of the defining concepts of Christianity, if not of religion in general, and it is certainly key in Dick's theology. It's well-expressed in Martin Luther's theology of the cross, as explained in *The Heidelberg Disputation*:

The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, fool-ishness . . . Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering. . . It is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isa. [45:15] says, "Truly, thou art a God who hidest himself."

The means of our salvation is the discovery of this hiddenness, looking beyond our temporal vision—"through a glass darkly"—to see cosmic reality "face to face." Dick expands this idea of a humble (humiliated) disguise for the omnipotent to include not only the crucifixion, but everything debased, right down to "the trash in the gutter." In a 1978 entry in the [Exegesis](#), his theological journal, Dick writes that

"the true God mimics the universe, the very region he has invaded; he takes on the likeness of sticks & trees & cans in gutters—he presumes to be trash discarded, debris no longer noticed. Lurking, the true God literally ambushes reality and us as well."

Dick's God slowly infiltrates our world at its lowest level; in rubbish, pop songs, and pulp novels, he reaches out to save individuals without being detected by the forces that wish to destroy him.



Dick saw confirmation of this theory with the release of the film *Star Wars* in 1977, as he explains in a letter from that year:

"God speaks to us from popular novels and films; here is a supreme example. Names and creeds and doctrines and dogmas and formulations are not important; what is important is the living Word. And it is that which Lucas depicts and describes in 'the force,' as he calls it. And people everywhere are responding."

Dick saw the hiddenness of God's message in popular forms as a modern version of Christ's hiddenness. Christ, incarnated as Jesus, hid his saving logos from the authorities both by incarnating himself at the lowest level of society and by hiding his message in the form of parables. Dick speculates in a 1975 *Exegesis* entry on the secret meanings of Christ's teachings:

"Mark 4:11 says that the parables were intended to confuse and not inform everyone except the disciples, the latter understanding the esoteric meaning, the outsiders getting only the exoteric meaning which would fail to save them; this was especially true regarding parables about the approaching Kingdom of God. . . The written gospels record probably mostly the exoteric parable meanings, not the inner core."

Jesus, in addition to hiding his true nature by appearing—even if it was only appearance—as a powerless person, rather than an infinitely powerful manifestation of God, hid his true message within parables. In the same entry, Dick further speculates that there may be a new manifestation of God that will eventually encompass not only the elect who choose to understand God's message, but rather all creation. This New Covenant must begin somewhere, however, and Dick came to believe that it would begin, as it did in Jesus' lifetime, at the lowest levels of society. Dick states that God

"is found at the outskirts or trash or bottom level of this world, as far from the imperial omphalos of power as possible. This would adequately account for the way Jesus appeared at the First Advent. But the Second Advent. . . will consist of a direct & successful attack on the inner fortress of imperial power itself."

The teleology of God in the universe points to a time when God is no longer hidden, but rather makes his omnipotence wholly apparent in all levels of existence.

An intelligent approach to the Transformers would explore the idea of noble humility, or at least of unexpected importance, with a moderate degree of follow-through, and might even incorporate a tinge of this theology of obscurity. (Admittedly, Michael Bay's film tries to do this in a couple scenes, but the themes fall apart as soon as the plot does, which doesn't take long.) In an alternate world, through a glass or a scanner darkly, Philip K. Dick lived long enough to see the original Transformers, and saw some of the wonder that the toys' concept can reveal. In our world, though, we're stuck with Michael Bay.

{A portion of the above adapted from my book [*Pink Beams of Light From the God in the Gutter: The Science-Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick*](#).}

P.S. A brief caveat: putting the phrase "To punish and enslave" on the side of the Decepticon police car was admittedly inspired.

P.P.S. The best part of my *Transformers* theatergoing experience was the trailer for the yet-untitled J. J. Abrams project currently known by the fake title *Cloverfield*. *It's a giant monster movie set in New York and told from the POV of a normal person with a video camera—it's the view from underneath Godzilla's feet. I don't like to jump to conclusions based on teasers, but speaking as a dedicated kaiju fan, this film has a very good shot at being the best English-language film in the genre. Just sayin'!*

For some reason, the studio has been trying to keep the trailer off of the Internet (don't they realize people wanting to see a commercial for their product is a good thing?), but if you manage to find it somewhere, be sure to watch it—and mind the falling debris.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on July 07, 2007 at 08:56 AM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 10, 2007

What place does religion have in a world conquered by zombies?

A couple months back I posted [an eschatological theory of zombie invasion](#)—the theory that zombie infection is, in fact, the kingdom of heaven; that zombies are happy to be zombies, but are so fully changed that they can't communicate their eternal bliss in any other way than biting and infecting the living.

It's a weird idea indeed—so imagine my surprise to see a variation on the same idea appear in Robert Kirkman and Sean Phillips' *Marvel Zombies: Dead Days*. This one-shot is a prequel to their gory, zany 2006 miniseries that imagined a Marvel Universe overtaken by the undead. In the climax of *Dead Days*, a not-yet-infected Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic) injects the other members of the Fantastic Four with the zombie plague and allows them to devour and zombify him. It's a remarkably creepy scene, and the issue's final page makes it even creepier as Richards announces his new mission of interdimensional evangelism:



The intelligent, superpowered zombies of the *Marvel Zombies* universe view their curse as a blessing, a sign of divine election.

One character in Warren Ellis' and Max Fiumara's miniseries *Blackgas 2* comes to a markedly different conclusion about the meaning of zombie infestation. In the second issue, a survivor named Maxwell Rader sees the zombies as definitive proof of the nonexistence of God:



Modern atheists [frequently cite](#) the so-called problem of evil to support their position. There are [a number](#) of theistic responses, but in this context, suffice it to say that Zombie Mr. Fantastic disagrees.

Religion makes a less blatant appearance in Kirkman's other zombie title, *The Walking Dead* (illustrated by Charlie Adlard). #37 of the open-ended, character-driven series depicts a wedding that occurs during a lull in the chaos of an undead siege. With no priests, pastors, or justices-of-the-peace available, the ceremony is conducted by Hershel, described in the previous issue as "the most spiritual out of everyone here... so he's the closest thing to an actual priest that we've got." Hershel is a Job-like character who refuses to allow his family's death to lead him to the same conclusion as Rader in *Blackgas*—his faith has become more complicated since the beginning of the zombie plague, but it has not been defeated. The wedding scene includes a lengthy quotation from 1 Corinthians 13 (of course—and it's [NIV](#), for those who are keeping score).



The scripture passage here becomes not just a statement on the emotional bond between two people, but a credo for those who fight to survive in a crumbling world. This is probably the most satisfying approach to religion in recent zombie comics, because it takes into account what faith can actually mean for the believer. For Hershel, God's existence is not even a matter for debate—he finds those aspects of his faith that can best respond to his world's crisis, and turns his belief into a source of strength for his community.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on July 10, 2007 at 07:12 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 17, 2007

Augustine on eternity

So what are we to say, then? Is the voice of God best understood as being the intelligible meaning of the audible utterance, *Let light be made*, and not the audible utterance itself? And the question then arises whether this does not belong to the very nature of his Word, about which it is said, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and it is God that the Word was* (Jn 1:1)? Seeing that it is said about him, *All things were made through him* (Jn 1:3), it is evident enough that light was also made through him, when God said, "Let light be made." If that is the case, then God's saying *Let light be made* is something eternal, because the Word of God, God with God, the only Son of God, is co-eternal with the Father, although when God said this in the eternal Word, a time-bound creature was made. While "when" and "some time" are time words, all the same the time when something should be made is eternal for the Word of God, and it is then made when it is in that Word that it should have been made, in the Word there is no "when" nor "some time," because that whole Word is eternal.

De Genesi ad Litteram, Book I, paragraph 6. In *On Genesis*. Trans. Edmund Hill; ed. John E. Rotelle. *The Works of Saint Augustine: A translation for the 21st century*, Part I, volume 13. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002, p. 170.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on July 17, 2007 at 10:12 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 19, 2007

"Gridlock": Doctor Who in Plato's Cave



[Plato's allegory of the cave](#) is as persistent an idea in SF as it is in philosophy.

The idea that what we see is merely a shadow of authentic reality has inspired stories successful ([The Matrix](#)) and less successful ([The Island](#)), generic ([Logan's Run](#)) and visionary (the entire oeuvre of [Philip K. Dick](#)). "Gridlock," the *Doctor Who* episode airing this Friday (July 20th) on the Sci Fi Channel, takes a sardonically humorous approach to Plato's unwitting prisoners. On the planet New Earth, much of the populace lives in a decades-old traffic jam. They're attempting to leave the city to reach greener pastures, but no one's getting anywhere—movement of a few feet is cause for celebration, and a trip of a few miles takes years. The drivers live their entire lives inside their cars, trapped in the fume-filled tunnel of the motorway. (The setting is more than a little similar to that of Jonathan Lethem's [The Fortress of Solitude](#), but the latter's characters focus more on plot—and metaphysics—than does Lethem.)



The Doctor and Martha are pulled into this traffic jam against their will, and soon set their sights to finding a way out, not only for themselves, but for all of the imprisoned passengers. Things become particularly interesting when we see signs of an external force that's attempting to save the populace as well. Sally Calypso, a holographic news reporter whose broadcasts create a semblance of community in the traffic jam, delivers a weather broadcast that sounds like a prophecy of the kingdom of God:

"The sun is blazing high in the sky over the New Atlantic—the perfect setting for the daily contemplation... This is for all of you out there on the roads. We're so sorry. Drive safe."

Following this broadcasts, the motorists join together in a hymn (["The Old Rugged Cross"](#)). The metaphysical structure of the episode—imprisoned masses unaware of their true status; powers from another realm attempting to rescue them—has a distinctly gnostic tone. The news broadcasts are the "call from without" that Hans Jonas describes in [The Gnostic Religion](#), his overview of the various gnostic traditions:

"The transmundane penetrates the enclosure of the world and makes itself heard therein as a call... it is the "call of Life" or "of the great Life," which is equivalent to the breaking of light into the darkness."

Rescue, when it comes, is akin to a mass religious experience, as the cars—like Plato's philosopher—emerge into dazzling sunlight for a new life. The story starts out seeming somewhat trivial, but there's real power in the image of thousands of people achieving spiritual freedom. As futuristic images of salvation go, it's certainly powerful.

For more on the allegory of the cave and religious experience in SF, see chapter 7 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on July 19, 2007 at 02:33 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 19, 2007

Augustine on religion and natural philosophy



The title of Augustine's *De Genesi ad Litteram* (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*) is misleading by modern standards. This is not a "literalist" commentary as we would define it—rather than finding, like the group behind the recently-opened Creation Museum, "Answers in Genesis," Augustine finds *questions*. Lots and lots of questions. Where modern-day literalists see the creation narrative as a straightforward and unpuzzling account, Augustine is all too aware that the picture it paints of the system of the world is incomplete. He sees truth in it, but he's uncertain *in what way* the story reflects the truth. His method in this book is to pose a dozen questions, answer one or two of them, and then make clear that those answers may well be supplanted by future theological concepts or discoveries about the natural world. It's become an unquestioned assumption in recent decades that theology doesn't allow for the replacement of its hypotheses as does the scientific method, but Augustine shows that this simply isn't the case. His exegetical technique is remarkably similar to the scientific method—it's all about testing theories.

Perhaps the best-known part of this book is a passage about why the religious should defer to natural philosophers on questions of demonstrable fact. It's particularly germane to the science-religion "debate," but the translation most often quoted is not my favorite (and it's often unjustly truncated to boot). Here it is in Edmund Hill's version:

There is knowledge to be had, after all, about the earth, about the sky, about the other elements of this world, about the movements and revolutions or even the magnitude and distances of the constellations, about the predictable eclipses of moon and sun, about the cycles of years and seasons, about the nature of animals, fruits, stones, and everything else of this kind. And it frequently happens that even non-Christians will have knowledge of this sort in a way that they can substantiate with scientific arguments or experiments. Now it is quite disgraceful and disastrous, something to be on one's guard against at all costs, that they should ever hear Christians spouting what they claim our Christian literature has to say on these topics, and talking such nonsense that they can scarcely contain their laughter when they see them to be *toto caelo*, as the saying goes, wide of the mark. And what is so vexing is not that misguided people should be laughed at, as that our authors should be assumed by outsiders to have held such views and, to the great detriment of those about whose salvation we are so concerned, should be written off and consigned to the waste paper basket as so many ignoramuses.



Whenever, you see, they catch some members of the Christian community making mistakes on a subject which they know inside out, and defending their hollow opinions on the authority of our books, on what grounds are they going to trust those books on the resurrection of the dead and the hope of eternal life and the kingdom of heaven, when they suppose they include any number of mistakes and fallacies on matters which they themselves have been able to master either by experiment or by the surest of calculations? It is impossible to say what trouble and grief such rash,

self-assured know-all cause the more cautious and experienced brothers and sisters. Whenever they find themselves challenged and taken to task for some shaky and false theory of theirs by people who do not recognize the authority of our books, they try to defend what they have aired with the most frivolous temerity and patent falsehood by bringing forward these same sacred books to justify it. Or they even quote from memory many things said in them which they imagine will provide them with valid evidence, *not understanding either what they are saying, or the matters on which they are asserting themselves* (1 Tm 1:7).

A couple paragraphs down there's a passage that's not quoted as often, but it's perhaps more important, focusing on the impact of pious foolishness on the wavering believer:

Some of the weaker brothers and sisters, however, are in danger of going astray more seriously when they hear these godless people holding forth expertly and fluently on the "music of the spheres," or on any questions you care to mention about the elements of this cosmos. They wilt and lose heart, putting these pundits before themselves, and while regarding them as great authorities, they turn back with a weary distaste to the books of salutary godliness, and can scarcely bring themselves to touch the volumes they should be devouring with delight—shrinking from the roughness of the husks of the wheat and eagerly eyeing the flowers of the thistles. After all, they have not time to be *still* (Ps 46:11), and to *see how sweet is the Lord* (Ps 34:8), nor are they *hungry on the sabbath* (Mt 12:1); and that is why they are too lazy to use the authority they have received from the Lord to pluck the ears of wheat and go on rubbing them in their hands until they come to what they can eat."

There you have it, straight from the Doctor of the Church's mouth: "creation science" diminishes the gospel and makes believers into atheists (or at least pagans).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on July 19, 2007 at 10:54 PM in [Atheism](#), [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 20, 2007

Sunshine opens today

Danny Boyle's cerebral SF epic *Sunshine* opens today in the US. [Check out my review here](#). Alternately, read [Peet Gelderblom's review](#) at The House Next Door, with which I agree wholeheartedly.



Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on July 20, 2007 at 07:05 AM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 23, 2007

An alternate view of *The Transformers*

Michael F. Bird liked *The Transformers* a lot more than [I did](#), and he even found some scriptural connections in it. Read his review at Euangelion:

[The Gospel According to Transformers](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on July 23, 2007 at 10:39 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 25, 2007

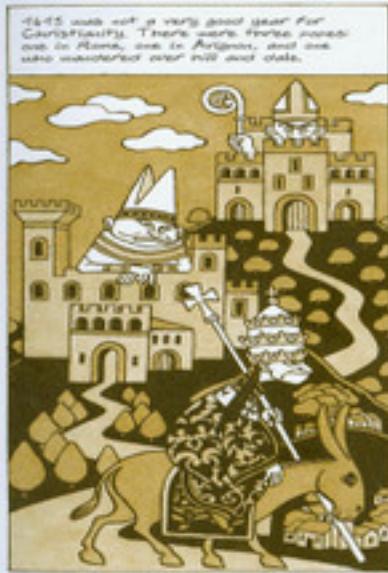
Jeff Somers' *The Electric Church*

SF Signal posts [this review](#) of *The Electric Church* by Jeff Somers, which features "a group of brain-stealing cyborgs (yes, you read that right) who aim to preach about eternal enlightenment." Intriguing!

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on July 25, 2007 at 11:39 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 26, 2007

Norman Cohn and David B. on medieval heretics



I've always been interested in radical interpretations of Christianity, which can be frustrating in an era where the reigning theologies are reactionary. The most fun parts of the history of religion are the revolutionary and the heretical. Given my inclinations, I've been having a blast reading Norman Cohn's book [*Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*](#), which describes a whole slew of wonderfully wacky medieval heretical movements. Take, for example, the Brethren of the Free Spirit, whose entire theology was based on the radical freedom suggested by [*Galatians 3:28*](#), mixed with a healthy dose of [Plotinian](#) pantheism:

The Brethren of the Free Spirit did not hesitate to say: 'God is all that is', God is in every stone and each limb of the human body as surely as in the Eucharistic bread', Every created thing is divine.' At the same time they took over Plotinus' own interpretation of this pantheism. It was the eternal essence of things, not their existence in time, that was truly God; whatever had a separate, transitory existence had emanated from God, but no longer was God. On the other hand whatever existed was bound to yearn for its Divine Origin and to strive to find its way back into that Origin; and at the end of time everything would in fact be reabsorbed into God. No emanation would remain, nothing would exist in separateness, there would no longer be anything capable of knowing, wishing, acting. All that would be left would be one single Essence, changeless, inactive: one all-embracing 'Blessedness'. Even the Persons of the Trinity, the Brethren of the Free Spirit insisted, would be submerged in that undifferentiated One. At the end of time, God really would be all."

But it wasn't all sunshine and heretical roses for the Free Spirit gang. Though they rejected the

repression of feudalism right down to the ontological level, the Brethren didn't think this blessedness was universal: it only applied to them. They were basically jerks:

According to John of Brünn, if an adept found money on the road, that was a sign that God wished him to spend it with his brethren. He had therefore to keep it for that purpose, even if its owner claimed it and tried to take it back by violence. If the owner or even the adept himself was killed in the struggle, that was no matter; for a soul returned to its Origin. But if the money was surrendered the adept would have retreated 'from the eternal to the temporal'. When, as an act of charity, an adept helped a sick man, he would ask for alms; and if they were refused he was free to take money by force, and need have no scruple even if the man died of hunger as a result.



Another particularly interesting sect described in Cohn's book are the Adamites, a violent sect of nudists that set up a commune on an island in the River Nezarka. They believed the island to be paradise, but quickly set about turning the surrounding countryside into perdition:

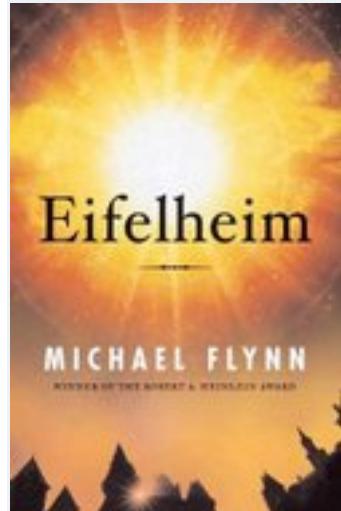
From their island stronghold they constantly made nocturnal sorties—which they called a Holy War—against neighbouring villages; and in these expeditions their communistic principles and their lust for destruction both found expression. The Adamites, who had not possessions of their own, seized everything they could lay hands on. At the same time they set the villages on fire and cut down or burnt alive every man, woman and child whom they could find.

If this sounds familiar to indie comics readers, it's because David B.'s comic "[The Armed Garden](#)," featured in the Winter 2006 issue of the Fantagraphics anthology series *Mome*, is based on the Adamites. In general, *Mome* leaves me cold, but David B.'s contributions are brilliant mystical parables. They capture all the wonder and magic of heretical mysticism, the things that make medieval religion so interesting.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on July 26, 2007 at 09:03 PM in [Books](#), [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 31, 2007

Loving the Alien: Compassion in Michael Flynn's *Eifelheim*



Today is the last day to vote for the Hugo Awards. (If you hurry and [register](#) as a supporting member of Worldcon 2007, you can still get your ballot in online.) Among the nominees for Best Novel is *Eifelheim* by Michael Flynn, whose recent story "Quaestiones Super Caelo et Mundo" [I discussed](#) in May. *Eifelheim* is similar to "Quaestiones" in many ways—both are set in the Middle Ages, and both aim to debunk stereotypes and misconceptions about that era, particularly in regards to the interaction of theology and natural philosophy. *Eifelheim* has a less cosmopolitan setting, but a more clearly SFnal premise: A spaceship full of aliens crash-lands near Oberhochwald, a small village in Germany's Black Forest, in the 14th century. The aliens—the Krenken—attempt to repair their ship using the limited technology available in rural, medieval Germany, and the novel makes much of the aliens' attempts to translate their scientific ideas into the language of an era that is just discovering the laws of motion. Scientific concepts familiar to us today end up sounding like mystical concepts:

"We have a ... relationship ... between spirit and material things. We say that 'spirit equals material by the speed of light by the speed of light.'"

This story is interspersed with that of a historian who slowly uncovers the truth about the visitors to medieval Oberhochwald at the same time that his girlfriend, a quantum physicist, discovers the scientific concepts necessary to comprehending the alien's transportation technology. These segments are a cleverly-constructed mystery to which we already know the solution, but the real strength of *Eifelheim* lies in its descriptions of the interactions between two cultures. The Krenken are (if my nonterrestrial readers will forgive the speciesism) humanized; we get a real sense of the frustration of their situation and their increasing despair as they realize they may never return home. Flynn's novel is not the first to posit first contact in the medieval period, but he certainly grants all of his characters a larger measure of complexity than some of his predecessors. The aliens of Patricia Anthony's [God's Fires](#), for example, barely communicate at all, and the human response to their existence is a predictable dichotomy: the

ignorant poor revere them as aliens, and the vicious church elite condemns them as demons. The villagers of Oberhochwald show far more variation in their responses, but all of their reactions seem very real—far more interesting than stereotypical superstition.

Over time, the villages come to accept and even to love their alien visitors, and Flynn presents this comradeship in explicitly Christian terms. The most powerful passage in the novel is a sermon delivered by Brother Joachim, a Franciscan monk, shortly after the aliens' arrival. Joachim plays off the distrust that some of the villagers feel toward the Krenken, but transforms that distrust into *caritas*:

"The are true demons. A glance alone convinces. Their coming is a great trial for us ... and how we answer it may be the saving of our souls! [...] 'Remember Job,' he told them, 'and how God tested his faith, sending demons to torment him! Remember how God Himself, robed in flesh, suffered all human afflictions—even death! Might He not then afflict demons as he afflicted Job, and even His Son? Dare we bind God with necessity and say that this work God cannot do? No! God has willed that these demons suffer the afflictions of the flesh.' His voice dropped. 'But why? But why?' This he said as if he pondered aloud, so that the assembly stilled to hear him. 'He does nothing without purpose, hidden though His purpose may be from us. He became flesh to save us from sin. He made these demons flesh to save them from sin. If angels fall, then demons may rise. And we are to be the instrument of their salvation! See how they have suffered at God's will ... And pity them! [...] Show these beings what a Christian is,' Joachim continued. 'Welcome them into your hearths, for they are cold. Give them bread, for they are hungry. Comfort them, for they are far from home. Thus inspired by our example, they will repent and be saved. Remember the Great Plea: Lord, when did we see You hungry? When did we see You naked? When? In our neighbor! And who is our neighbor? Any who may cross our path!' Here he stabbed a finger directly at the mass of impassive Krenken standing on the gospel side of the nave. 'Imprisoned in flesh, they can wield no demonic powers. Christ is all-powerful. The goodness of Christ is all-powerful. It triumphs over every mean and petty and wicked thing, it triumphs over wickedness as old as Lucifer. Now we may see that it will triumph over Hell itself!"

Eifelheim is a story about compassion, and Flynn rightly sees faith as a wellspring of empathy. In a genre that is all-too-often willing to paint cruel caricatures of religion's darker corners, Flynn's novel is a profound breath of fresh air. It is a brave and moving story and a worthy candidate for SF's highest honor.

Courtesy of Tor and the Spectrum Literary Agency, *Eifelheim* is available for free as a .pdf [here](#).

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on July 31, 2007 at 07:53 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 01, 2007

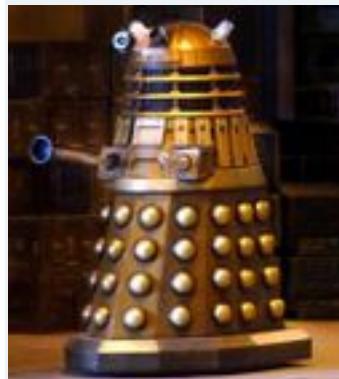
One-Star Cinema: *Pootie Tang*

"One-Star Cinema" is a new feature on film blog [The Screengrab](#) that offers praise (and defenses) for critically-maligned films. Gwynne and I co-wrote the first installment on the 2001 comedy opus *Pootie Tang*. Read it here: [One-Star Cinema: *Pootie Tang*](#)

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on August 01, 2007 at 08:52 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 01, 2007

"Evolution of the Daleks": Compassion and absolute evil on *Doctor Who*



In chapter 3 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#), I discussed *Doctor Who*'s archvillains, the Daleks, as that show's embodiment of absolute evil. The 1975 serial [Genesis of the Daleks](#) explores the robotic monsters' origins,

describing how the mad scientist Davros bred a strain of mutants with no compassion or pity—no emotions at all beyond hatred for other species. It is lack of compassion, not physical mutation, that makes the Daleks inhuman and evil. The basis of their villainy is soullessness.

The idea that emotions are the basis of the human soul is common in SF. One one side of this idea is *Star Trek's Data*, an android who is humanized by his desire for human emotions. On the other side is Philip K. Dick's concept of the android mind, described in the 1976 essay "[Man, Android, and Machine](#)":

A human being without proper empathy or feelings is the same as an android built so as to lack it, either by design or mistake. We mean, basically, someone who does not care about the fate that his fellow living creatures fall victim to; he stands detached, a spectator, acting out by his indifference John Donne's theorem that 'No man is an island,' but giving the theorem a twist: That which is a mental and moral island is not a man.

Dick is certainly not describing Data, but he very well could be describing the Daleks. They are defined by their unfeeling detachment, and the infinite coldness of their actions is what makes them truly frightening villains.



"Evolution of the Daleks" (airing this Friday on the Sci Fi Channel) concludes the story begun in last week's "Daleks in Manhattan," and further explores the nature of the Dalek's malevolence. In the last episode Dalek Sec, leader of the Cult of Skaro, transformed himself into a hybrid creature, half-human and half-Dalek. In "Evolution," Sec explains the rationale behind the transformation:

SEC: Consider a pure Dalek: intelligent but emotionless.

THE DOCTOR: Removing the emotions makes you stronger. That's what your creator thought, all those years ago.

SEC: He was wrong. [...] It makes us lesser than our enemies. We must return to the flesh and also the heart. [...] Where has our quest for supremacy led us? To this, hiding in the sewers on a primitive world, just four of us left. If we do not change now, then we deserve extinction.

The Daleks, who have been defined for millennia by their lack of emotions, have begun to see their soullessness as a limitation rather than a symbol of superiority. Earlier in the episode, Sec claims that humans have a "genius for war" that may be the result of our emotions. Thus Sec combines himself with a human, and gains a soul in the process. But just like Angel, the vampire-with-a-soul of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Sec becomes incapable of the ruthlessness that has defined him. Sec gains compassion, the one thing that the Daleks have never had, and it proves the undoing of the Cult of Skaro's plans. The human-Dalek hybrid is hardly the epitome of *caritas*, but the fragment of compassion he gains, the barest hint of a soul, prevents him from participating in his own nefarious plans. Like much of the work of Philip K. Dick, "Evolution of the Daleks" considers what it means to be human, and what it would take to humanize a being of absolute evil.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 01, 2007 at 10:55 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 07, 2007

Sarah Coakley's theology of evolution



My copy of the Spring/Summer 2007 issue of the [Harvard Divinity Bulletin](#) got buried under a pile of papers, so it wasn't until a week or so ago that I read Sarah Coakley's excellent theological essay on "[God and Evolution: A New Solution](#)." Coakley calls into question the kinds of theology that the media-packaged "debate" over evolution assumes. Creationists, intelligent design theorists, and Darwinian atheists all have limited concepts of God, and the limits are largely inspired by an assumption of Deism. Coakley begins by setting up her theological starting point:

"Let me note up front that I am assuming a "classical" understanding of the Christian God—that is, a God who is Being itself, creator and sustainer of all that is, eternal (i.e., atemporal, omnipresent), omniscient, omnipotent, all loving, indeed the source of all perfection. One solution to the problems we confront since Darwin is to give up on one, or more, of these classical attributes for God; but for the meantime I will not entertain that systematic option—I suspect it results from a failure to think through the full logical implications of divine atemporality—even though it cannot, a priori, be ruled out."

To which I say: absolutely. To my mind, the eternalism of God is a "this changes everything" concept, with implications for every aspect of theology and ontology. The atheist idea of God is *too small*—it treats God, to borrow a phrase from later in the essay, as "a mere item, albeit 'big,' in the temporal universe itself." I think the Creationist idea of God makes the same sort of error, failing to fully consider the meaning of what creation means if time is not a line with a beginning and end. The definition of God as eternal requires creation to occur *outside* of time rather than at its beginning, and thus the creation of the universe and its moment-to-moment sustaining are the same thing. From this Coakley brings forth a [Teilhardian](#) concept of God (rather than chance) as the driving force of evolution: *"First, then, it is vital to avoid, in the case of precultural evolution, the presumption that "God" competes with the evolutionary process as a (very big) bit player in the temporal unfolding of "natural selection." Once we are released from that false presumption, "God" is no longer—and idolatrously—construed as problematically interventionist (or feebly failing in such) along the same temporal plane as the process itself. Rather, God is that-without-which-there-would-be-no-evolution-at-all; God is the atemporal undergirdler and sustainer of the whole process of apparent contingency or "randomness," yet—we can say in the spirit of Augustine—simultaneously closer to its inner workings than it is to itself."*

I've long thought the concept of "randomness" in evolutionary biology to be a little presumptuous—after all, physics points to determinism, not chance, as the universal standard, at least above the quantum level. In assuming randomness as a fundamentally unassailable aspect of reality, classical scientific atheism commits its own "[God of the gaps](#)" fallacy. Should the mechanism of this apparent randomness be uncovered, a major link in the stated atheist chain of reasoning from evolution to unbelief will be removed. Science, of course, is built on replacing old theories with new ones, but the perceived randomness of genetic mutation is the keystone of scientific atheism—a philosophical standpoint, *not* a scientific one. Without randomness, the logic of the atheist argument loses its internal consistency. Please don't take this to mean that I'm throwing in with ID theorists. The phrase "intelligent design" would be an excellent description of a robust system of thought like that of Teilhard de Chardin (or Sarah Coakley), but as it stands the term describes a mess of bad science and bad theology. My point is rather that the idea that *both* ID theorists and scientific atheists want to sell us—that God's existence can be either proved or disproved based solely on the evidence of biology—share a fatal flaw. Not only that, Coakley states that they both fail to live up to their own ideological standards:

"These thoughts, now briefly enunciated, help to illuminate why the particular range of options currently popularized in the news media in response to the evolution/God debate seem curiously inept alternatives. Dogmatic "scientific" atheism, first, constantly goes well beyond the empirical evidences of evolution itself, and can give no convincing account of its own pessimistic reductionism; it thus falls on its own methodological sword. Intelligent Design, or ID, in inverse contrast, tends to assume a God who only occasionally bestirs himself to action; even if this were not already unacceptable theistically, its 'solutions' prove deeply problematic and vulnerable scientifically as well."

A new idea is needed, and Coakley's essay plants the seeds for what may be a truly complete theological solution.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 07, 2007 at 06:55 AM in [Atheism](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 08, 2007

Pleasant Surprises Dept.

Sci-Fi Weekly has named SF Gospel their [site of the week](#).

If this is your first time visiting SF Gospel (or even if it isn't), here are some of my favorite posts to get you started:



[Sunshine: The Movie Clothed in the Sun](#)

[Loving the Alien: Compassion in Michael Flynn's *Eifelheim*](#)

[What place does religion have in a world conquered by zombies?](#)

[Things that can't be said about *The Transformers* \(and some things that can be said about Philip K. Dick and Martin Luther\)](#)

[I Am Legend and The Omega Man: Realized eschatology in the kingdom of the vampires](#)

[The Flight into Egypt: Children of Men](#)

[Battlestar Galactica 313: Is there Cylon redemption for human sin?](#)

[Superman #659: Angels in tights](#)

[The Prescience of Philip K. Dick's *Voices From the Street*](#)

[Lost 308: Struggling against divine predetermination](#)

[The Wicker Man \(2006\) review](#)

If you like what you see here, you'll love [The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier](#). Here are a few reviews:

on [Robert J. Sawyer's](#) blog

on [Mania.com](#)

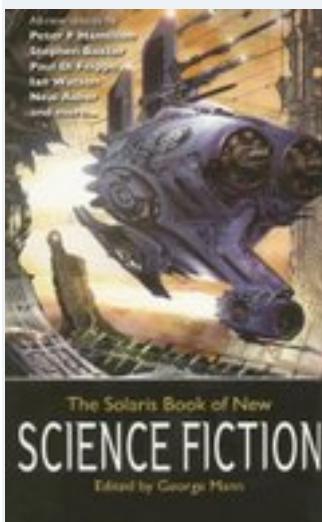
from [Publishers Weekly](#)

Thanks for visiting, and please comment!

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 08, 2007 at 09:51 AM | [Permalink](#)

August 15, 2007

The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction



I was surprised at the number of stories in [*The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction*](#) that include religious themes, both explicit and implicit. This is the inaugural anthology of [*Solaris Books*](#), a new imprint from the Games Workshop, and it's an excellent opening gambit.

Personal Jesus by Paul di Filippo - Di Filippo's entry in the *Solaris* anthology is a story of commodified religious experience. The story is set in a universe where quantum physicists have uncovered a line of communication to the deity:

"All unwittingly, theorists later surmised, the engineers had crafted a class of device capable of tapping into the eternal unchanging substrate of the cosmos, the numinous source of all meaning in the universe. A realm previously accessible, if at all, only to the ineffable minds of mystics and the deeply devout. The realm where God apparently lived. Whoever—or whatever—God was.

The device that allows communication with this voice has been packaged and sold as the godPod. The ubiquitous electronic box serves as a personal confessional, clairvoyant, psychiatrist, and wingman to its users, and before long godPods are ubiquitous. But (perhaps inevitably) there's something sinister at work, and in the closing scenes those few who do not use the godPod are spared the ambiguously dire fate of the plugged-in masses. Though I love the satire of capitalistic faith in the story's opening, its conclusion doesn't sit entirely right with me. It seems an embodiment of the elitism inherent in recent atheist thought, the tyrannical paradise of a world without the faithful. The story starts out rightly criticizing the commodification of mystical experience, the selling of the experience of God that we see in megachurch Christianity (and, I believe, in much of mainstream American religion in general). But in the end di Filippo consigns the baby to the same fate as the bathwater, providing no alternative to this entirely co-opted faith. It's a solidly entertaining story, but its single-brush painting of religion did irk me a little.

A Distillation of Grace by Adam Roberts - This story is a peculiar one, positing a colony planet ruled by a sect of, for lack of a better term, genetic numerologists. The inhabitants of this world are followers of the prophet Shad, who believed that a group of 2048 people could breed themselves down over 12 generations to a single, perfect human being. Unfortunately, the history of the cult and the rationale behind their genetic program are never really fleshed out. What is the origin of this sect? Why did its founder believe that the project would produce the "distilled grace" of the title? Despite the vagueness about *why* the sect exists, their ideas regarding the nature of this grace are intriguing. They believe that the grace that their descendant will possess will travel throughout the entire universe instantaneously:

"To travel a thousand light years in an instant would be to travel back a thousand years in time. To see a star a thousand light years distant is to see it as it was a millennium ago. And so you can see how grace, emanating from the Unique, will pass back through time as it passes through space. And to what end will it travel, forward in space, backward in time? And to what end?"

The story is concerned with a child of the cult who does not wish to take his prescribed place in its historical hierarchy. His story follows some intriguing threads, but I was far more interested in learning more about the order he was rebelling against.

Last Contact by Stephen Baxter - Baxter's entry in this anthology is a wonderfully melancholy apocalypse story that reminded me of both the closing apotheosis of Arthur C. Clarke's [*Childhood's End*](#) and the tragic premillennialism of

the David Bowie song "[Five Years](#)." The story takes place in a near future on the verge of annihilation in the form of the Big Rip:

"It's all to do with dark energy. It's like an antigravity field that permeates the universe. Just as gravity pulls everything together, the dark energy is pulling the universe apart, taking more and more of it so far away that its light can't reach us anymore. It started at the level of the largest structures in the universe, superclusters of galaxies. But in the end it will fold down to the smallest scales. Every bound structure will be pulled apart. Even atoms, even subatomic particles. The Big Rip."

One piece of evidence pointing to the spreading shockwave of destruction is the detection of alien signals from the Rip's path—the final farewells of civilizations we never encountered (hence the story's title). Despite its surface pessimism, it's a beautiful end-of-the-world tale, and one of the strongest stories in the anthology.

Cages by Ian Watson - Ian Watson presents a clever invasion story that hints at an "instant karma" concept of sin. The cages of the title are extradimensional artifacts that appear from strange alien hoops and attach themselves to people's bodies. The protagonist has a contraption enclosing his knee; another character—a former singer—has a cage emerging from her throat, where it has entrapped her vocal chords. No one knows how the "impeds" choose their targets, but some theorize that they are a punishment for sin:

"The theory that we might all be atoning for something in our past by the type of impeds we wear is probably ridiculous. Must my leg be immobilized because I was captain of the hockey team at Oxford? ... A lot of impeds seem arbitrary, while some do seem poignantly appropriate. So there's the 'snapshot' theory that the imped reflects what a person was thinking about at the exact moment of caging. people thinking banal thoughts received any old imped from stock; but obsessives tended to be thinking about their obsessions."

The real reason for the impeds is much more complicated, of course, though Watson leaves a significant amount of mystery surrounding the alien purpose behind them. There are a number of fascinating concepts in this story, and it's a close second to "Last Contact" for best story here.

Jellyfish by Mike Resnick and David Gerrold - Judging from the number of SF stories and films he's appeared in lately, Philip K. Dick has become as popular a character as he is an author. At first I was irritated by Resnick and Gerrold's characterization of "Dillon K. Filk," a paranoid burnout whose books are absolute gibberish. The main character has more in common with [A Confederacy of Dunces](#) Ignatius J. Reilly than PKD. But as much as they got Dick's character wrong, they get his atmosphere right, especially once we get glimpses of the fictional worlds he's creating. Filk is hard at work on a novel about Tryllifandillorians, enormous flying creatures with the physical appearance of jellyfish and the personalities of notable SF writers of the '60s. The Tryllifandillorians inhabit a world that, by definition, does not exist:

"The existence of the world of Tryllifandillor, [Filk] typed, is impossible. Impossible means that it cannot exist in any domain where existence exists. Therefore, it can only exist in a domain where existence does not exist. You will find it only where existence is impossible. Because the domain of non-existence can only exist elsewhere than existence, it creates a profound cosmological loophole. Only things that cannot exist, can exist in the domain of non-existence."

So far, this all sounds like Kurt Vonnegut/Kilgore Trout, which I assume is entirely deliberate. The really Dickian stuff starts when Filk gets a visitor, a man representing his fictional aliens who tells him to stop writing about them:

"Tryllifandillor exists only in the realm of non-existence. By writing about it, he was threatening to move it into the realm of existence, in which case it would cease to exist in the realm of non-existence. It would stop being non-being."

Though it opens with a pretty ugly caricature, "Jellyfish" eventually gets into some wonderfully mindbending stuff that approaches the concepts of reality, fiction, and philosophy in ways that would make PKD proud.

Four Ladies of the Apocalypse by Brian Aldiss - Aldiss' contribution is a brief, bizarre allegory that uses the images of John's Revelation to... well... I'm not sure what it does, actually. But I think the point of it is to do what Revelation originally did, before it was co-opted and commodified by the likes of [Tim LaHaye](#): describe the ultimate worthlessness of violence, wealth, and all other aspects of earthly power. After the eponymous four ladies confront the earth's "last and greatest dictator," a child symbolizing empathy offers the final accusation:

"I am brought to you to tell you that all you have achieved in the name of ruin is solely because you are the culmination of the wicked aspect of the human race, of those who have no feeling for the suffering of others."

It's obscure, to be certain, and definitely on the heavy-handed side, but all apocalyptic literature is. Its inclusion here, amidst mostly-harder SF, is a bit jarring, but it's an interesting read nonetheless.

The Farewell Party by Eric Brown - The world of this story has been transformed by the alien Kéthani, who have given humankind the means to resurrect themselves after death. Most humans leave Earth behind to travel the stars in their physical afterlife, but a few stay behind. This story describes a group of friends who choose to remain on Earth, but find the entire planet become enshrouded in apathy. These themes—a scientific means of resurrection; the ennui of those who have not yet joined the dead—are reminiscent of Robert Silverberg's novella *Born With the Dead*, to which this story is a worthy heir. I was pleased to see that Eric Brown has written a number of stories set in this world, including *Kéthani*, a novel Solaris will be releasing next spring. If it's anything like this moving mood piece, it should be well worth reading.

For another take on *The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction* (including the stories not discussed here), see [SF Signal's review](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 15, 2007 at 08:08 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 16, 2007

Doctor Who: 4 decades in 5 minutes

Here's a brilliant video that condenses the first 33 years of *Doctor Who* into 5 minutes—with a great mashup soundtrack to boot.

[Hat tip: [SF Signal](#)]

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 16, 2007 at 11:43 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 17, 2007

Locus reviews *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*

The August issue of *Locus* includes a review by Amelia Beamer of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#). (Bottom line: she liked it.) It's definitely a thrill to see my book reviewed alongside [Robert Silverberg](#) (one of my favorite authors) and [Takeshi Kitano](#) (one of my favorite filmmakers)!

"We all know that science fiction has much to say about religion, philosophy, and human nature. [The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier](#) is religious scholar Gabriel McKee's thoughtful analysis of religion as occurring in science fiction, taking SF as a middle ground between religion and science. The subtitle's reference to television shows betrays the media's dominance over literature in our culture, but McKee draws from a balanced range of sources, including Arthur C. Clarke's 'The Nine Billion Names of God', Olaf Stapledon's *Starmaker*, works by Ted Chiang, Robert Silverberg, and others, as well as *Star Trek*, the *Matrix* trilogy, and more. Each chapter is arranged thematically, examining concepts including free will, sin, the Messiah, and the soul. McKee is the author of [Pink Beams of Light from the God in the Gutter: The Science-Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick](#), as well as articles on religion in pop culture, and the writing here is impressively readable for a scholarly work. Companion titles in the series from Westminster John Knox (an imprint of the denominational publisher for the Presbyterian church) include works on religious themes in *Star Wars* and Tolkien.

"Science fiction readers already know that part of what makes us human is our drive to question ourselves and our role in the universe: as McKee says, 'The purpose of human life is thus revealed [in SF] not as a clearly defined concrete end, but rather as the search for meaning itself.' Humanity's fallen, post-Garden of Eden state is not a function of our inherent laziness and self-interest, but a result of unclear parameters, conflicting desires, and our own mortality. As McKee

says, 'Free will does not merely mean the choice between good and evil actions. It means the ability to determine one's attitudes and character—in short, the freedom to choose an identity.' Good and evil are not self-evident; religion and science fiction can each help distinguish one from the other.

"Readers know that humanity is also an expression of our capacity for empathy. McKee writes, 'No individual can see inside another's mind and experience self-awareness,' but he suggests that the act of reading is the closest we can come; indeed, the Bible itself is a collection of parables and stories meant to explain that which is not directly explainable. McKee manages to be insightful about both science fiction and religion, without coming across as preachy. Science fiction in this light isn't just about religion: it's an expression of faith in humanity."

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 17, 2007 at 07:49 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 19, 2007

New on Holy Heroes!! Hellblazer #233, The Chronicles of Wormwood concluded

A handful of new posts by yours truly over at [Holy Heroes!!](#)

- a review of the last three issues of Garth Ennis' blasphemous-but-moralistic [Chronicles of Wormwood](#).
- some thoughts on the metaphysics of sin in [Hellblazer #233](#).
- a new feature, "Spiritual Solicitations," that gives previews of upcoming comics with religious themes. First up: [The Sensational Spider-man #40](#) and [Ex Machina #31](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 19, 2007 at 10:36 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 20, 2007

Does religion cause violence? Mark Lilla's "The Politics of God" and the New Colonialism

A piece by Mark Lilla in yesterday's *New York Times Magazine* called "[The Politics of God](#)" lays out the case for the irreconcilable differences between the Islamic world and the West. Islamic societies and their inhabitants, Lilla argues, can't distinguish between politics and religion, and as a result the West can't communicate with them. Ours is a rational worldview, he argues, while theirs is irrational:

Islamists, even if they are learned professionals, appear to us primarily as frustrated, irrational representatives of frustrated, irrational societies, nothing more. We live, so to speak, on the other shore. When we observe those on the opposite bank, we are puzzled, since we have only a distant memory of what it was like to think as they do. We all face the same questions of political existence, yet their way of answering them has become alien to us. On one shore, political institutions are conceived in terms of divine authority and spiritual redemption; on the other they are not. And that, as Robert Frost might have put it, makes all the difference.

The bulk of Lilla's article is a history of "political theology" in Europe and the United States, which I won't get into too much. Lilla's article is of particular interest primarily because it comes on the heels of a much better article in a much lower-profile publication that points out many of the flaws in the logic of arguments like Lilla's, and the ease with which those arguments can be brought to bear in justifying violence and bloodshed. That article was [William T. Cavanaugh's](#) "Does Religion Cause Violence?", which appeared in the Spring/Summer 2007 issue of the Harvard Divinity Bulletin. The article is not available on the HDB's website, though a slightly different version, delivered as a lecture at the University of Western Australia and the University of Melbourne last year, is available [here](#) (plus an audio recording [here](#)). It is without question the best response I've yet read to the prejudiced claim, stated in some circles as a basic principle that needs no empirical support, that religion and violence are inextricably linked.

Cavanaugh's argument begins by establishing that defining religion is a tricky thing—but those who contend that religion leads to violence generally gloss over their definitions rather than explore complexities that may weaken their argument:

the problem with the "religion and violence" arguments is not that their working definitions of religion are too fuzzy. The problem is precisely the opposite. Their implicit definitions of religion are unjustifiably clear about what does and does not qualify as a religion. Certain belief systems, like Islam, are condemned, while certain others, like nationalism, are arbitrarily ignored.

[...] Consider the case of the preeminent historian Martin Marty. In a book on public religion, Marty argues that religion has a particular tendency to be divisive and therefore violent. When it comes to defining what "religion" means, however, Marty lists seventeen different definitions of religion, then begs off giving his own definition, since, he says, "[s]cholars will never agree on the definition of religion." Instead Marty gives a list of five "features" that mark a religion. He then proceeds to show how "politics" displays all five of the same features. [...] In offering five defining features of "religion," and shows how "politics" fits all five. He is trying to show how closely intertwined religion and politics are, but he ends up demolishing any theoretical basis for separating the two. Nevertheless, he continues on to warn of the dangers of religion, while ignoring the violent tendencies of supposedly "secular" politics.

Turning to another author, Cavanaugh finds that even those who accept some complications to their definition of religion can make the same sort of error:

*In his book *Why People do Bad Things in the Name of Religion*, religious studies scholar Richard Wentz blames violence on absolutism. People create absolutes out of fear of their own limitations. Absolutes are projections of a fictional limited self, and people react with violence when others do not accept them. Religion has a peculiar tendency toward absolutism, says Wentz, but he casts a very wide net when considering religion. [...] Wentz should be commended for his consistency in not trying to erect an artificial division between "religious" and "secular" types of absolutism. The price of consistency, however, is that he evacuates his own argument of explanatory force or usefulness. The word "religion" in the title of his book—*Why People do Bad Things in the Name of Religion*—ends up meaning anything people do that gives their lives order and meaning. A more economical title for his book would have been *Why People Do Bad Things*. The term "religion" is so broad that it serves no useful analytical purpose.*

Cavanaugh extrapolates from Wentz's use of "absolutism" as a defining motivator of violence, finding that "secular" motivations will generally beat out "religious" ones:

If a person claims to believe in the Christian God but never gets off the couch on Sunday morning and spends the rest of the week in obsessive pursuit of profit in the bond market, then what is "absolute" in that person's life in a functional sense is probably not the Christian God. Matthew 6:24 personifies Mammon as a rival god, not in the conviction that such a divine being really exists, but from the empirical observation that people have a tendency to treat all sorts of things as absolutes.

Suppose we apply an empirical test to the question of absolutism. "Absolute" is itself a vague term, but in the "religion and violence" arguments it appears to indicate the tendency to take something so seriously that violence results. The most relevant empirically testable definition of "absolute," then, would be "that for which one is willing to kill." This test has the advantage of covering behavior, and not simply what one claims to believe. Now let us ask the following two questions: What percentage of Americans who identify themselves as Christians would be willing to kill for their Christian faith? What percentage would be willing to kill for their country? Whether we attempt to answer these questions by survey or by observing American Christians' behavior in wartime, it seems clear that, at least among American Christians, the nation-state is subject to far more absolutist fervor than Christianity. For most American Christians, even public evangelization is considered to be in poor taste, and yet most endorse organized slaughter on behalf of the nation as sometimes necessary and often laudable.

The problem here—one of the only flaws I see in Cavanaugh's entire essay—is that the term "absolute" is essentially tautological: "That which causes people to commit violent acts is that for which people are willing to commit violent acts." Nevertheless, it's far more useful to have a tautological definition for what causes violence than to have a deliberately obfuscating one, so the use of "absolutism" is a much better start than attempting to create a distinction between "religious" and "secular" violence.

Having established the argument that religion causes violence is based on faulty or nonexistent definitions, Cavanaugh goes on to explore the hidden assumptions and necessary ends of the argument: by creating a category of bad, "religious" violence, the argument opens the door to excusing, condoning, and even encouraging "secular" violence.

The story is told repeatedly that the liberal state has learned to tame the dangerous divisiveness of contending religious beliefs by reducing them to essentially private affairs. In foreign policy, the conventional wisdom helps reinforce and justify Western attitudes and policies toward the non-Western world, especially Muslims, whose primary

point of difference with the West is their stubborn refusal to tame religious passions in the public sphere. "We in the West long ago learned the sobering lessons of religious warfare and have moved toward secularization. The liberal nation-state is essentially a peacemaker. Now we only seek to share the blessings of peace with the Muslim world. Regrettably, because of their stubborn fanaticism, it is sometimes necessary to bomb them into liberal democracy." In other words, the myth of religious violence establishes a reassuring dichotomy between their violence—which is absolutist, divisive, and irrational—and our violence, which is modest, unitive, and rational.

Cavanaugh argues that it's no coincidence that books like Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great*, Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*, and Mark Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God* are bestsellers at a time when the U.S. is at war in the Muslim world. Indeed, Harris has [written in support of the use of torture in the War on Terror, and Hitchens is a vocal supporter](#) of the Bush Doctrine. These authors' books serve to sell the ideals of imperialism and endless war to a left-wing audience that might otherwise be pacifistic. In boiling down the motivations of Sunni insurgents and Shi'ite militias to exclusively religious factors, these writers create a simplistic picture of global politics that fits well with the black-and-white worldview of the Bush White House. Regarding Mark Juergensmeyer, Cavanaugh writes: *The problem with Juergensmeyer's analysis is not just its sanitized account of colonial history, where America just happens to find itself associated with bad people. The problem is that history is subordinated to an essentialist account of "religion" in which the religious Others cannot seem to deal rationally with world events. They employ guilt by association. They have paranoid visions of globalization. They stereotype, and blame easy targets when their lives are disrupted by forces they do not understand. They blow simple oppositions up into cosmic proportions.* Understanding Muslim hostility toward America therefore does not require careful scrutiny of America's historical dealings with the Muslim world. Rather, Juergensmeyer turns our attention to the tendency of such "religious" actors to misunderstand such historical events, to blow them out of proportion. Understanding Iranian Shiite militancy does not seem to require careful examination of U.S. support for overthrowing Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953 and for the Shah's 26-year reign of terror that was to follow. Instead, Juergensmeyer puzzles over why "religious" actors project such mundane things as torture and coups and oil trading into factors in a cosmic war. Juergensmeyer's analysis is comforting for us in the West because it creates a blind spot regarding our own history of violence. It calls attention to anti-colonial violence, labeled "religious," and calls attention away from colonial violence, labeled "secular."

Mark Lilla's article in the *New York Times Magazine* makes no straightforward statements in support of preemptive wars in Muslim countries. Indeed, Lilla himself may be a pacifist—he doesn't say. But nevertheless, his article's clear-cut distinction between irrational Muslims and the rational West contributes to a narrative of intractable opposition that encourages conflict between the societies. *This is colonialism*—it depicts Muslims as savages who can't take care of themselves, and need either a paternalistic guiding hand or a violent iron fist to keep them under control. Lilla's closing paragraph sinks to the lowest depths of imperialistic pomposity:

We have made a choice that is at once simpler and harder: we have chosen to limit our politics to protecting individuals from the worst harms they can inflict on one another, to securing fundamental liberties and providing for their basic welfare, while leaving their spiritual destinies in their own hands. We have wagered that it is wiser to beware the forces unleashed by the Bible's messianic promise than to try exploiting them for the public good. We have chosen to keep our politics unilluminated by divine revelation. All we have is our own lucidity, which we must train on a world where faith still inflames the minds of men.

Ironically, the distinction between rational West and irrational Islam turns our current conflicts into a Holy War, an *absolutist* conflict between eternal foes—theocracy vs. democracy, sane reason vs. insane faith—instead of the petty, worldly struggle it really is. Lilla may not make this leap, but others are more than happy to. Cavanaugh closes his essay with a passage on Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*:

In a chapter entitled "The Problem with Islam," Harris writes: "In our dialogue with the Muslim world, we are confronted by people who hold beliefs for which there is no rational justification and which therefore cannot even be discussed, and yet these are the very beliefs that underlie many of the demands they are likely to make upon us." This is especially a problem if such people gain access to nuclear weapons. "There is little possibility of our having a cold war with an Islamist regime armed with long-range nuclear weapons... In such a situation, the only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own. Needless to say, this would be an unthinkable crime—as it would kill tens of millions of innocent civilians in a single day—but it may be the only course of action available to us, given what Islamists believe." Muslims then would likely misinterpret this act of "self-defense" as a genocidal crusade, thus plunging the world into nuclear holocaust. "All of this is perfectly insane, of course: I have just described a plausible scenario in which much of the world's population could be annihilated on account of religious ideas that belong on the same shelf with Batman, the philosopher's stone, and unicorns."

In other words, if we have to slaughter millions through a nuclear first strike, it will be the fault of the Muslims and their crazy religious beliefs. Before we get to that point, Harris continues, we must encourage civil society in Islamic countries, but we cannot trust them to vote it in. "It seems all but certain that some form of benign dictatorship will generally be necessary to bridge the gap. But benignity is the key—and if it cannot emerge from within a state, it must

be imposed from without. The means of such imposition are necessarily crude: they amount to economic isolation, military intervention (whether open or covert), or some combination of both. While this may seem an exceedingly arrogant doctrine to espouse, it appears we have no alternatives."

Never mind that American support for dictators who were "better than the alternative" is precisely what led to the current situation in both Iraq and Iran. But I digress.

Harris' book is a particularly blunt version of this type of justification for neo-colonial intervention, but he is by no means isolated. His book is enthusiastically endorsed by such academic superstars as Alan Dershowitz, Richard Dawkins, and Peter Singer. Indeed, Harris's logic is little different in practice from the Bush Doctrine that America has access to liberal values that are "right and true for every person, in every society," that we must use our power to promote such values "on every continent," and that America will take preemptive military action if necessary to promote such values. Today the U.S. military is attempting, through the massive use of violence, to liberate Iraq from religious violence. It is an inherently contradictory effort, and its every failure will be attributed in part to the pernicious influence of religion and its tendency toward violence. If we really wish to understand its failure, however, we will need to question the very myth of religious violence on which such military adventures depend.

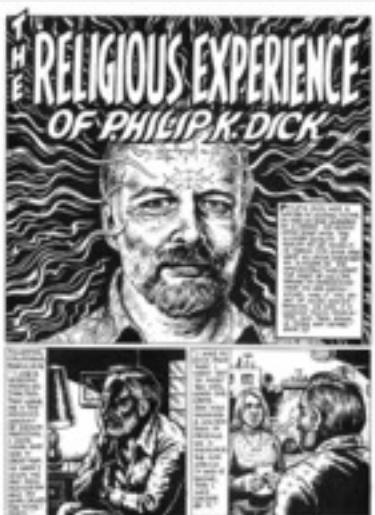
The specter of Harris's support for "benevolent dictators" hangs over Lilla's imperialistic closing statements. But this support for suppressing religious freedom, both at home and abroad, lurks underneath much religion-and-violence writing. By straining at the gnat of "religious violence," America in general (and the left in particular) is swallowing the camel of colonialism and even, in Harris's case, fascism. It's similar in many ways to the unintended consequences of the [MacKinnon-Dworkin antipornography laws](#) in Canada, which had support from a number of feminist leaders. Once the laws were enacted, the first to be [prosecuted](#) were owners of gay and lesbian bookstores. Anti-religious writers like those Cavanaugh critiques make a similar leap, allowing themselves to be co-opted into the greater evil of imperialism.

Read the rest of William T. Cavanaugh's "Does Religion Cause Violence?" [here](#). Please.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 20, 2007 at 08:20 PM in [Atheism](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 20, 2007

Philip K. Dick in *the New Yorker*



It's a banner year for mainstream coverage of Philip K. Dick. The latest article, Adam Gopnik's "[Blows Against the Empire: The Return of Philip K. Dick](#)" in the current issue of the *New Yorker*, ranks among the best. Gopnik understands Dick much better than the authors of similar pieces in, for instance, [Newsweek](#). I do have some minor quibbles regarding the details Dick's religious experiences and their interpretation, but in the end the article gets the big picture of what the "2-3-74" experiences meant:

As the people around him testified, hallucinations and fantasies, wild paranoid delusions, and plot-spotting filled his mind. He really did go crazy, and it wasn't the cute-crazy of the movies, with well-cast hallucinations and Jennifer Connelly to comfort you. It was true staring madness, hell on earth. But, as Lawrence Sutin insists, at another level

Dick always had a saving, ironic awareness that his crazy visions might just be crazy visions, and this gave him, at times, a comic distance from them which deepened his writing. [...]

There are many books with unreliable narrators under the control of sane authors; this is the only one I know where a sane, reliable narrator (on the book's own terms) is under the control of a clearly crazy author. What makes it heartbreaking is the author's consciousness, expressed sporadically through the fictional narrator Dick, that he (that is, the real Dick, embodied in the pathetic Fat) has undoubtedly gone nuts—but that, just as undoubtedly, he is in possession of the truth about the cosmos. His account of his vision is braided with the details of cancer treatments and the mordantly rendered specifics of time spent in a ward for the insane—a man who knows he's broken but believes that the breaking has poured forth a flowing truth.

"The core of my writing is not art but truth," Dick wrote a year before he died. "Thus what I tell is the truth, yet I can do nothing to alleviate it, either by deed or explanation." It doesn't dilute the force of his vision to see it as a metaphor, consistent with, but crazier than, the central metaphor of his earlier work: the social arrangement of power is always that of a brute oligarchic minority forcing its will on a numbed population, with amusements the daily meal and brutality the implicit threat; for all that has changed technologically, that fatal pattern has never really altered. The future will be like the present, he had once known, and now he saw that the past was like the future, too.

What is moving in Dick's madness is his insistence that the surest sign of the madness of the world outside him is the violence that we accept as normal. In "Clans of the Alphane Moon," he had already glimpsed the possibility that normal governing might be the work of paranoids. This Nixon-era vision becomes, in the VALIS books, a metaphysical truth. "The Empire is the institution, the codification, of derangement; it is insane and imposes its insanity on us by violence, since its nature is a violent one," Fat writes. That this is followed by an explanation of how those deaf-mute three-eyed invaders arrived in ancient Sudan from a planet in the star system Sirius does not diminish its force; if anything, it increases it, by reminding us of the price the visionary paid for it.

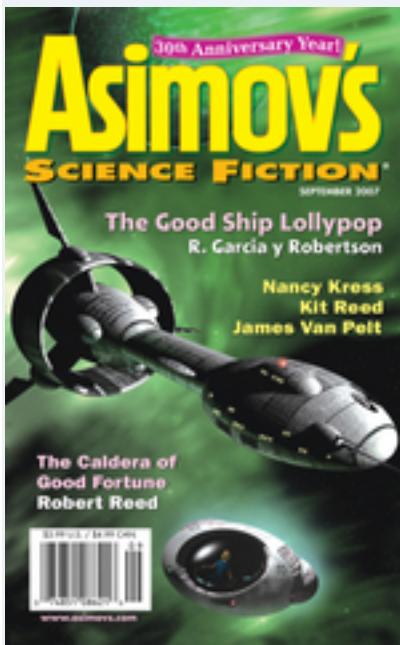
A less-insightful piece would have presented madness and truth as mutually exclusive, but Gopnik sees things as Dick did: truth is in madness, and ultimately may be inseparable from it. As Paul writes in [1 Corinthians 1:20](#), what is folly to worldly eyes is wisdom to God's: "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" The madness of Dick's religious experiences is ultimately identical with opposition to the Empire, with the foolish wisdom of the cross.

For more on Dick's religious experiences, see [Pink Beams of Light From the God in the Gutter: The Science-Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick](#) and chapter 7 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 20, 2007 at 10:08 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 21, 2007

Ted Kosmatka's "The Prophet of Flores": parallel science



Ted Kosmatka's story "The Prophet of Flores" (*Asimov's Science Fiction*, September 2007) takes place in an alternate present where science has developed quite differently to ours. In this universe, the theory of evolution is a minority view, and young earth creationism has been the reigning scientific theory for decades. "Common descent" has a very different meaning here:

"...the so-called doctrine of common descent, whereby each species is seen as a unique and individual creation. Therefore all men, living and dead, are descended from a common one-time creational event. To be outside of this lineage, no matter how similar in appearance, is to be other than Man."

The protagonist of "The Prophet of Flores," a genetic anthropologist named Paul Carlson, begins to doubt the creationist theory when he begins studying the primate skeletons recently discovered on the island of Flores called, in the real world, *Homo florensis*, but better known by their nickname, "hobbits." The fact that the Flores bones belonged to tool-users troubles Paul, who begins to question the basis of his world's science:

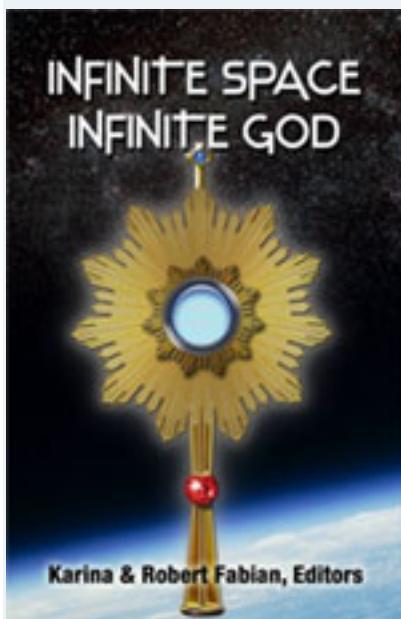
"What if God had all these different varieties. . . all these different walks, these different options at the beginning, and we're just the ones who killed the others off? [...] What if there wasn't just one Adam, but a hundred Adams?"

"The Prophet of Flores" is a well-written tale with an intriguing premise. To be frank, I'm a bit tired of hearing and reading and thinking about creationism (and its bastard child, intelligent design). But Kosmatka's story puts a truly original spin on the the idea of a conflict between science and faith. The story doesn't end where you'd expect, and that pulls the story out of some of the pitfalls it could have fallen into.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 21, 2007 at 10:59 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 21, 2007

Infinite Space, Infinite God revisited



Infinite Space, Infinite God, an anthology of Catholic SF stories, is now available in print form. A few months ago I interviewed Karina Fabian, co-editor of the anthology. [Read the interview here.](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 21, 2007 at 11:20 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 22, 2007

One-Star Cinema: *Hannibal*

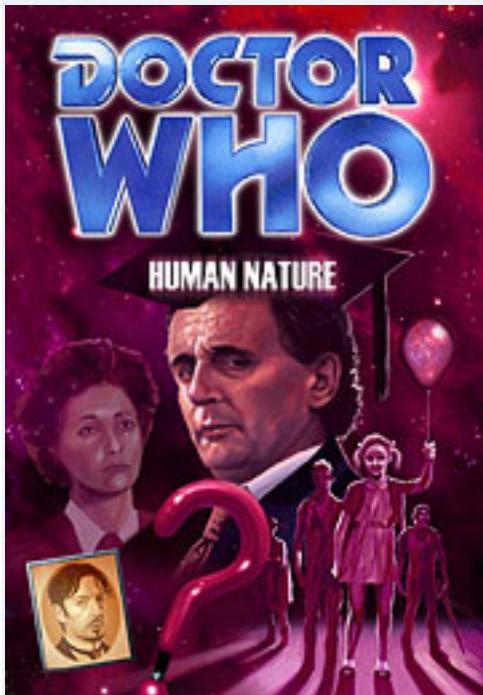
The latest installment of One-Star Cinema is up at [the Screengrab](#). This time, I explain why critics hated *Hannibal*, Ridley Scott's sequel to *Silence of the Lambs*, and why those critics were very, very wrong. Read it here:

[One-Star Cinema: *Hannibal*](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 22, 2007 at 03:35 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 22, 2007

Doctor Who: Incarnational theology and "Human Nature"



This week's episode of *Doctor Who* kicks off a two-part story in which the Doctor becomes human in order to escape an alien threat. In addition to being an all-around great episode (one of the best of the new series thus far), it's got some fascinating parallels with incarnational theology, particularly the idea of *kenosis* ("emptying") described in [Philippians 2:7](#). I'd say more, but I don't think I could say it better than Mark Goodacre, who wrote an excellent post on the episode at NT Gateway. Read it here:

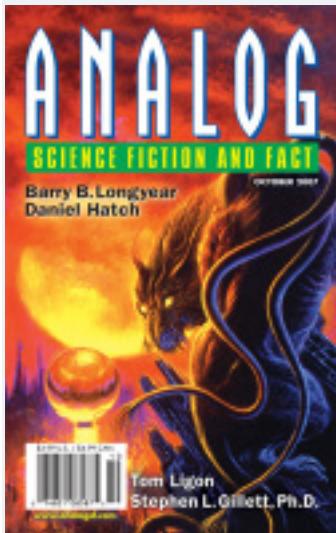
[Doctor Who, Human Nature and Kenosis](#)

Incidentally, "Human Nature" and next week's episode, "The Family of Blood," are adapted from the DW novel *Human Nature* by Paul Cornell. It's a Seventh Doctor story, which makes a lot of sense—David Tennant's characterization of the good Doctor most closely matches that of Sylvester McCoy. The BBC has kindly made *Human Nature* available as [a free e-book](#). I've yet to read it, though I hope to do so soon.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 22, 2007 at 10:03 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 22, 2007

Alien religion in Tom Ligon's "El Dorado"



Tom Ligon's "El Dorado" (*Analog*, October 2007) is built from a number of familiar SF elements—it's got deep-space comet miners, alien radio communications, and killer asteroids. There are a number of things that make it a unique and fun story, but its use of alien religion is the main thing that sets it apart. Much as in Poul Anderson's story "The Word to Space" (published under the pseudonym Winston P. Sanders), the first alien communication received by Earth is a religious message (and an intolerantly conservative one at that). When it's finally translated, it turns out to be an apocalyptic warning:

"Corruption of creation, abomination of the Word, look this way. The hydrogen sucking light-chaser comes. See your damnation approach, unstoppable. You are to be consumed in the fire of your own star. Our obligation to warn is fulfilled. Prepare to die."

This isn't a general threat of destruction, either: it turns out that there's a very, very big object heading very, very fast toward Earth from the direction of the signal.

The remainder of the story is dedicated to those comet miners' efforts to stop the object before it can destroy Earth. It's rather fun and ends with a great moral about self-sacrifice being better than self-interest. Unfortunately, though, the aliens who sent the warning get lost in the shuffle. I wish the story went into a bit more detail about them—beyond the translated message, we don't learn anything about their society, their apparent chauvinism, or the ethics that "obligated" them to warn us. It's still a great story, but further explanation of the aliens and their religion could only have improved it.

(For more on "The Word to Space" and other religious aliens, see chapter 8 of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*.)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 22, 2007 at 10:24 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 23, 2007

Happy Birthday SF Gospel!

SF Gospel is one year old today! I've talked about a lot of stuff in the last year (113 posts and counting), so take please a look through [the archives](#)!

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 23, 2007 at 07:57 AM | [Permalink](#)

August 23, 2007

Mark Lilla redux

For those who don't feel like reading a [2,500+ word post](#) on the subject, here's an abbreviated version of my reaction to Mark Lilla's article "[The Politics of God](#)." This was sent as a letter to the New York Times Magazine's editor.

Mark Lilla's clear-cut distinction in "The Politics of God" between irrational Muslims and the rational West contributes to a narrative of intractable opposition that encourages conflict between the societies. This is colonialism—it depicts Muslims as savages who can't take care of themselves, and need either a paternalistic guiding hand or a violent iron

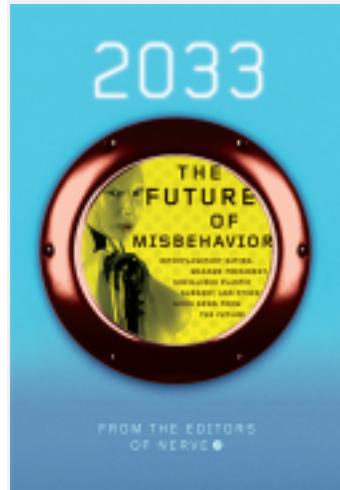
fist to keep them under control. Lilla makes no straightforward statements in support of preemptive attacks on Muslim countries as do writers like Christopher Hitchens. Indeed, Lilla himself may be a pacifist-- he doesn't say. But his article adopts a colonialist attitude that can all-too-easily be spun into support for imperialist war. Meanwhile, Lilla turns a blind eye to the far-from-rational actions of Western nations (like, for instance, the neocolonial war we're currently involved in). I'm surprised to see the New York Times publishing an article with so archaic an attitude toward non-Western cultures; I'm even more surprised to see the ease with which otherwise liberal minds are being converted to this poisonous way of thinking.

Though this letter doesn't mention it, I just want to repeat my request that everyone in the entire world [read](#) (or [listen to](#)) William T. Cavanaugh's "Does Religion Cause Violence?", which is one of the best articles I've ever read in any publication and on any subject. (Really!)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 23, 2007 at 08:11 AM in [Atheism](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 23, 2007

Moral Futurism in 2033: *The Future of Misbehavior*



The stories in *2033: The Future of Misbehavior* are not genre SF, and that's ultimately the anthology's strength. Freed from the expectations and hopes of traditional SF, these writers view the future through different eyes. There's very little mention of space exploration or robots (though these tropes do turn up in, for instance, Tom Lombardi's ["The Girlfriend From Another Planet"](#) and Karl Iagnemma's ["The Upgrade."](#)) These stories extrapolate not on our *science*, but on our *culture*. Many of the stories in *2033* are "if-this-goes-on" satires of our obsession with celebrity and our addiction to technology. The world of the stories in *2033* isn't that different from ours; it's just more blatant.

This is where the most interesting aspect of the anthology arises. For all that its title suggest a celebration of "misbehavior," the stories display a surprisingly moralistic attitude. They express concern over the ways in which our self-centered technology and our self-devouring pop culture have driven us apart from each other. Take ["The Upgrade."](#), a story about a man whose robot girlfriend develops a mind of her own. The story isn't a celebration of indulgent freedom; instead, it's a clever attack on consumerism in an age of instant gratification. The story's conclusion reaffirms human connection in the face of electronic isolation:

"Lately, I've been feeling curious about women—about humans. What do they expect from me, from themselves, from each other, from the world? It's been so long since I've been with a woman that I barely remember the words: Please. Allow me. I am sorry. I would be delighted."

Another case in point: ["Tabloids Bring Back Family Values!"](#) by Ana Marie Cox. In this story, the cult of celebrity has been thoroughly democratized. Everyday folks hire teams of paparazzi to stalk them, then create scandals and infidelities to be recorded for the entertainment of a worldwide audience. In this world, the transgressive act is having a loving marriage—which is precisely the ideal the story upholds. Our obsession with scandal, like our reliance on technology, has disrupted our relationships. I hadn't expected traditionalism from the stories in *2033*, but that's how many of the stories feel: they look ahead to a time when we will look back.

Full disclosure: My wife is a consulting editor at Nerve, and I have been known to write for them from time to time.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 23, 2007 at 08:22 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 31, 2007

***Invasion of the Body Snatchers* review**



New by me at Nerve: a review of Phillip Kaufman's 1978 take on [*The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*](#), of which a 2-disc DVD was recently released.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 31, 2007 at 02:38 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 06, 2007

Things To Come

Apologies for the dearth of new posts in the last week or two. Between the start of the fall semester and an avalanche of other writing projects, my time has been limited. But fear not! New posts are imminent. Coming up:

- Reviews of non-fiction: Frank J. Tipler's [*The Physics of Christianity*](#) and John Dominic Crossan's [*God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*](#)
- Some thoughts on Judas in the old West: [*The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*](#)
- A belated review of a story I should have read long ago: Lester del Rey's "For I Am a Jealous People!"
- My list of the 10 best SF stories about religion ever
- And hopefully I'll finally write that essay on Animal Man for [*Holy Heroes!!*](#) that I've been promising Elliot for months now

Things have slowed down for the time being, but stick around—it'll pick up soon!

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on September 06, 2007 at 08:52 AM | [Permalink](#)

September 08, 2007

Gopnik on Philip K. Dick revisited

I was surprised at the way that PKD fans have [turned](#) on Adam Gopnik's *New Yorker* article on Philip K. Dick, "[Blows Against the Empire](#)." When I first heard about it on the PKD listserv it was all positive, then slowly people started to complain about the "bad writer" paragraph, and now everybody's jumping over each other to say that they hate Gopnik more than the next guy.

But you're missing the forest for the trees, folks! Gopnik *likes* Philip K. Dick. Not only that, he really [understands the meaning of his work](#). He calls Dick a "bad writer"? By the standards of the *New Yorker*, he was. Would they have published "War With the Fnools"? I don't think so—not in 1969, at least. He re-uses plots and characters. He often really, really needed a good editor. And for all that we fans like to hold up the really, really good prose bits (of which there are certainly many), "Vulcan's Hammer" is pretty darned flat. Someone who doesn't know anything about PKD but decides to buy a book is going to go to their local bookstore and see 42-odd novels staring at them—all the in-print Vintage stuff. How are they supposed to know that *Ubik* is better than *The Crack in Space*?

Gopnik's point with the "bad writer" bit is to say: "You, the intellectual reader of the *New Yorker*, don't read this kind of stuff. Here's why you *should*." And that doesn't do a disservice to anybody but [*Ferris F. Fremont*](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on September 08, 2007 at 08:04 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 10, 2007

3:10 to Yuma: The return of nobility in the Western



In a recent list of the [top 20 revisionist westerns](#), *The Screengrab* attributed the genre's slow demise in the '70s and '80s to a growing degree of experimentalism:

"A time eventually came when one couldn't just make a straight Western. Its iconography had become too compromised."

3:10 to Yuma both affirms and challenges that theory; it is perhaps the straightest Western in 30 years. The story is simple, heroic, and fun; the biggest nods to the *Deadwood* era are the presence of Chinese railway workers and an overabundance of references to Pinkertons. Given the *Screengrab*'s theory, *3:10 to Yuma* begs the question: OK, can a straight Western work these days?

The answer depends largely on the ability of an audience to suspend the disbelief that those revisionist Westerns have engendered. The film tells the story of two opposite types: pacifistic rancer Dan Evans (Christian Bale) and bad-for-bad's-sake outlaw Ben Wade (Russell Crowe). A handful of bounty hunters and hired guns capture Wade after a string of robberies, but in order to bring him to justice they need to get him on board the eponymous train before his gang can liberate him. Evans leaves his family behind to serve as an escort, at first because of the reward money, but in the end simply because it's the Right Thing To Do.

Which is where the suspension of disbelief comes in. Attitudes toward the logic of story and character have changed a lot since the heyday of John Ford, and there are things that the characters in *3:10 to Yuma* do that frankly don't make sense by the standards of today's action movies. Will audiences believe that Evans, introduced as a pacifist and an isolationist, would throw away his family, his home, and his life to bring an outlaw to justice against impossible odds? Would that same outlaw, a self-described Bad Guy, have the nobility to sacrifice his own life in defense of his captor? Listening to the conversations of the theatergoers around me after the movie, I heard a lot of people who simply didn't buy it.

But that's precisely the logic of the classic Western. In *High Noon*, to which *3:10 to Yuma*'s final reel owes no small debt, Gary Cooper's stoic marshal doesn't face a gang of gunslingers alone because he thinks he can win—indeed, he's quite convinced he won't. He does it because it is, again, The Right Thing To Do. TRTDD is the hallmark of the classic Western: in that moral universe, nobility trumps common sense, every time. That's one of the things that made *A Fistful of Dollars* so revolutionary. Clint Eastwood's Man With No Name knew he could win, and he wasn't afraid to use dirty tricks or shoot people in the back to do it. That film changed the moral formula of the Western: confidence replaced nobility. When the post-*Fistful* antihero wins, it's because of his own skill, ingenuity, and badassitude. When Gary Cooper wins in *High Noon*, it's because of his choice of the most moral course of action, his willingness to sacrifice himself.

3:10 to Yuma isn't a complete throwback to the Westerns of the '40s and '50s, but it certainly is a picture painted in the moral palette of that era. So far, [critics](#) have praised the film's renunciation of moral ambiguity. But can audiences raised on more cynical action films accept a film set in a world where the good guys wear white hats?

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on September 10, 2007 at 06:08 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 12, 2007

New One-Star Cinema review: *Jersey Girl*

A good movie with bad, bad timing: a new One-Star Cinema review by me and Gwynne is up on the *Screengrab*. [One-Star Cinema: Jersey Girl](#)

September 17, 2007

Lester del Rey's "For I Am a Jealous People!"

There are an awful lot of SF stories about religion out there, and any individual person's ability to read them all is improbable. The occasional story has slipped through the cracks of my reading lists, but, as [one reviewer](#) recently pointed out, I really, really ought to look into Lester del Rey's "For I Am a Jealous People!", originally published in 1954. So I did.

The first few chapters of "For I Am a Jealous People!" detail the Job-like sufferings of Reverend Amos Strong, whose family members are killed one by one during an alien invasion. Amos struggles to see the hand of God in the tragedies that befall him and humankind in general: is the conquering alien fleet a divine test? a punishment? proof of God's nonexistence? It doesn't help that the aliens themselves claim that they conquer by divine decree, and late in the story a mystical revelation convinces Amos of the truth of their brutal theology. Breaking into the aliens' temple, he finds that they have carried an ark into the battle for Earth, and he sees a mystical translation of the words written on it:

"I AM THAT I AM, who brought those out of bondage from Egypt and who wrote upon the wall before Belshazzar, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN, as it shall be writ large upon the Earth, from this day forth. For I have said unto the seed of Mikhtchah, thou art my chosen people and I shall exalt thee above all the races under the heavens!" ... The seed of Mikhtchah. The seed that was the aliens...

From here the story changes tack, turning from an SFnal adaptation of Job to a humanist critique of covenantal theology. Del Rey characterizes the relationship between God and humankind as one of conflict, an approach summed up by Amos's atheist friend Doc Miller:

"Man," he said, "has one virtue which is impossible to any omnipotent force like your God. He can be brave. He can be brave beyond sanity for another man or for an idea. Amos, I pity your God if man ever makes war on Him!"

There's a big theological gap in this approach: there's a lot more to Biblical theology than the idea of covenant. Five of the novella's six chapters open with Biblical epigraphs, and the sources of these quotes underscore the missing link. Quotes from Ecclesiastes and two Psalms all describe frustration at a world where the wicked prosper, a few verses of Lamentations describe God's fury with an unrepentant nation, and a line from Revelation suggests that divine justice is inherently violent. Del Rey ignores the New Testament almost entirely, to the extent that I found myself questioning the appropriateness of the story's hero being a Christian at all—there's no *Christ* in this story's theology at all. Thankfully, Doc Miller acknowledges this gap, even offering an explanation for the story's exclusion of the New Testament:

You've always thought exclusively in terms of the Old Testament and a few snatches of Revelation—like a lot of men who become evangelists. I've never really thought about God—I couldn't accept him, so I dismissed Him. Maybe that's why we got the view of Him we did. I wish I knew where Jesus fits in, for instance. There's too much missing. Too many imponderables and hiatuses. We have only two facts, and we can't understand either. There is a manifestation of God which has touched both Mikhtchah and mankind; and He has stated now that He plans to wipe out mankind. We'll have to stick to that.

Fair enough, but the idea that evangelists think "exclusively in terms of the Old Testament and a few snatches of Revelation" is either dated (forgivable, since the story is over 50 years old) or flat-out incorrect. Less forgivable is the exclusion of Biblical responses to the apparent injustice of the world—God's response to Job being but one such. Covenantal theology is certainly important in the Old Testament, but just as important is its focus on injustice. In context, the point of those quotations from Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Lamentations is to show that, even though we experience injustice, God is just. In other words, much of the Bible (and religion in general) is a reaction to the problem of evil that is one of the primary concerns of this story. In making the case for its theology, "For I Am a Jealous People!" throws out vast regions of religious thought. In a way, that's the point; the whole story is based on a what-if about a single religious idea. Nevertheless, I can't help but think that the story hinges on a less-than-robust approach to the relationship between God and humankind.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on September 17, 2007 at 07:53 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 17, 2007

A Doctor Who church service in Wales

The pastor of a church used as a location in a Ninth Doctor episode (I'm guessing "[Father's Day](#)"?) is doing a *Doctor Who*-themed church service:

[Doctor Who fans will flock to his church](#)

[Hat tip: [SF Signal](#)]

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on September 17, 2007 at 11:41 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 19, 2007

Christians in SF

In a series of [Possibly Irritating Essays](#), Guy Stewart wonders where the Christians are in science fiction. I think part of the problem is his definitions: he's looking specifically for *evangelical* Christians, and thus [explicitly discounts](#) some excellent stories:

PLEASE do not point to James Blish's [A CASE OF CONSCIENCE](#). The characters in it are Catholic priests NOT for their belief but for their Jesuit militancy. Don't note Mary Doria Russell's [THE SPARROW](#) – again, she created Catholic characters as a plot device, not because they were simply Christian as a part of everything else they were.

Frankly, I couldn't disagree more with Stewart's assessment of those stories. *The Sparrow* in particular is an incredible exploration of faith, and is one of the best books on the subjects not just in SF, but in literature in general. If Russell simply uses Jesuits as a "plot device," then what does that say about Par Lagerkvist's *Barabbas*? I won't bother, either, to point at any of the works of Orson Scott Card—as a Mormon whose best books are about Catholics, I don't think he'd measure up to Stewart's standards. Christians do show up in SF, but it seems they're not exactly the kind of Christians that Stewart wants to see. Part of the problem could be that many SF authors see evangelical Christianity as it exists today as non-sustainable—Katharine Kerr's "Asylum" and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents* being just two less-than-pretty examples of the ends some authors have extrapolated for today's reigning public faith. Stewart calls this bias, but one could just as well say that it's a result at SF's predictive nature. SF shouldn't be just a simple mirror of today's popular religious beliefs—and that, I think, is one of the main reasons that *Left Behind* isn't SF. We should be looking to SF for ideas about the faith of the *future*, and in that regard the genre has succeeded admirably, time and again. This often means presenting versions of Christianity that don't exist today (as in the works of Philip K. Dick) or decrying the destructive conservatism of some strands of today's faith (as in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*) or even creating new religions entirely (as in countless books, among the best of which are Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Talents*).

There's a lot more to say about where and how to find Christianity (and other religions, too) in SF, but I don't know if I can say it any better here than I did in [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on September 19, 2007 at 11:02 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 19, 2007

Speaking of *The Sparrow*...



...a lot of folks seem to have been reading this novel for the first time of late. Steve at [Old Testament Space Opera](#) calls it "one of the most depressing books I have ever read," but also "a book that shows what intelligent science fiction can be like." And at SF Site, Neil Walsh reviews it for his "[Overlooked or Over-hyped?](#)" column, stating:

*I think that in view of how massively brilliant it is compared to how little it is talked about now, *The Sparrow* qualifies as undeservedly overlooked -- I would even say it may be considered a "lost" classic.*

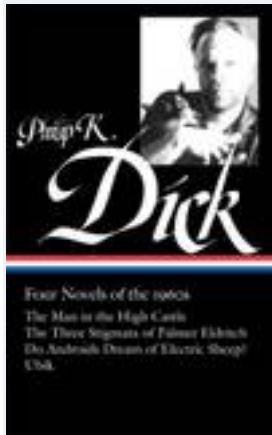
The Sparrow is easily one of my favorite novels, SFnal or otherwise. It's a haunting and, yes, depressing story about first contact with an alien race. It's powerful and moving and a brilliant exploration of cultural misunderstandings and divine providence and [Matthew 10:29](#) and the nature of faith, and if you haven't read it, you must. I had never heard of it until I discovered it at a library book sale, and it was quite possibly the best 75 cents I've ever spent.

For my full analysis of *The Sparrow*, see chapter 4 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on September 19, 2007 at 11:17 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 28, 2007

Event report: Jonathan Lethem on Philip K. Dick



Jonathan Lethem, who edited the Library of America's recent omnibus [Philip K. Dick: Four Novels of the 1960s](#), gave a lecture this evening at the Cooper Union in New York on PKD. Lethem read an excerpt from his introduction to the Pantheon volume [Selected Stories of Philip K. Dick](#) as well as his short story "[Phil in the Marketplace](#)," which offers a fantastical interpretation of some key moments in Phil's life. Following the reading Lethem took questions for half an hour or so, discussing [The Transmigration of Timothy Archer](#), the word "crazy," the [good](#) and [bad](#) PKD film adaptations, and the "sobering experience" of immersing himself in the details of Phil's life while editing the LOA volume.

Lethem was introduced by an LOA editor (unfortunately I didn't catch his name), who announced the contents of the LOA's second collection of Philip K. Dick's works, also edited by Lethem. (Drum roll...)

[Martian Time-Slip](#)

[Dr. Bloodmoney, or How We Got Along After the Bomb](#)

[Now Wait For Last Year](#)

[Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said](#)

[A Scanner Darkly](#)

Excellent choices all, though *Now Wait For Last Year* strikes me as a bit of an oddball. I can definitely see some strong reasons for including it, but my vote would have gone for the theologically rich [A Maze of Death](#). I really can't quibble, though—it sounds like an excellent collection.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on September 28, 2007 at 12:26 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 28, 2007

Online excerpt (of sorts) from *The Gospel According to Science Fiction* available

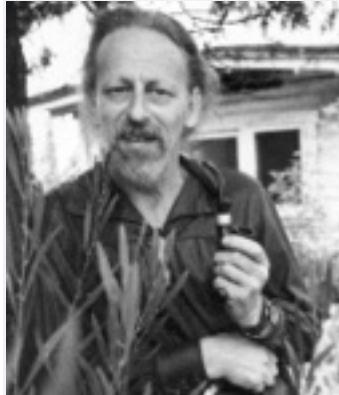
New on the Amazon page for [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#): The "Search Inside This Book" feature is now available. You can now see pages 1-6—the beginning of chapter 1, including thoughts on Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light*, *Stargate*, Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream," and a little movie called *Star Wars*, among

other things. Bonus: You can also see the front and back covers, front matter, table of contents, and index. [Check it out here](#), and if you like it (or even if you don't), you might want to consider, you know, buying it. Just sayin'.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on September 28, 2007 at 11:58 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 03, 2007

Theodore Sturgeon on science and religion



In an editorial in the January 1964 issue of If, the always-intelligent [Theodore Sturgeon](#) weighed in on the so-called conflict between science and religion. His essay is in large part an attack on the "God of the gaps" fallacy, committed in differing ways by religious conservatives and overzealous atheists alike. Atheism, of course, has a high profile these days, and with it the concept of science "replacing" religion. 43 years later, these thoughts remain insightful—another prescient example of how ahead of his time Sturgeon was.

Sturgeon tells of a radio show on which he appeared alongside other prominent writers and editors. One listener called in with a question: "Don't you think... that to create life in the laboratory is to usurp God?" Sturgeon's reply, in the pages of an editorial in If, was thus:

"Answer: No. Man's hands are God's work; the work of man's hands is God's work. (I spoke—and speak—for myself, of course.) So much for the question and the questioner, but I'm glad he brought it up and equally glad to do likewise here.

"The recurring suggestion that there's some sort of Armageddon going on between Science and Religion is, I think, a straw man for bigots. That Science has at one time or another dealt certain kinds of Religion a heavy blow, I do not argue. I do believe, however, that what received the blow was this or that set of fixed convictions, and not Religion itself. And I think that the idea that Science and Religion must of necessity be opposed to one another is a throwback at least to the 19th Century—perhaps farther—and that to engage in this battle any more is equivalent to, and as quaint as, re-fighting the War of the Roses.

*"It seems to me that this Armageddon notion springs from a concept which is more than a little insulting to both camps. Reduced to its simplest terms, it reads: *Knowledge is Finite*. The rationale would seem to be this: that only God can know everything and do everything. That the more man knows, the closer he gets to knowing it all, the more his science does, the closer it gets to doing it all; and that the end product would be an omniscient and omnipotent man who would usurp the place of an omniscient and omnipotent God.*

"Now, if science proves anything at all, it is that both knowledge and power potentials are infinite. The ultimate in either can never be reached. For those who care to believe it, God already has this knowledge and potency. How then can there possibly be a conflict in the matter?

"Furthermore, science has demonstrated time and again, and will always demonstrate, that the production of solutions is the richest source of new problems. This too seems to be an infinite process. As the size of our body of knowledge grows, so does the size of the as-yet-unknown. And ever shall. Many churchmen can take this calmly in stride, regarding it (in which I concur) as a living manifestation of the greatness of this infinite Cause.

"I know personally a good many scientists. Being people, they present a cross-section of convictions and attitudes quite as varied as those of any people. In the area of religion, I have met scientists far more devout than I could ever want to be. I've met unmoved, habitual, Sunday-best churchgoers, backslid Orthodoxers; agnostics, atheists, and people who just don't care one way or another.

"There is no secret sect of guys with test-tubes out to destroy the temples. There are more anti-religionists outside Science than in it... and if God thinks about this at all, He probably feels that He made a cosmos quite roomy enough to contain them all."

From "The Day They Threw God At Me" by Theodore Sturgeon. If, January 1964, p. 4-6.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on October 03, 2007 at 08:06 PM in [Atheism](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 03, 2007

Prayer and Reconciliation in *Doctor Who*: "The Last of the Time Lords"

The conclusion of *Doctor Who*'s third series airs for the first time in the US this Friday. It's got some keen religious concepts, but describing them requires giving away three episodes' worth of surprises. If you haven't seen *Last of the Time Lords* yet, be warned: Here there be spoilers.

At the conclusion of last week's *The Sound of Drums*, newly-revived archvillain [the Master](#) had trapped Captain Jack, aged the Doctor into a withered, Yoda-like creature, and driven his companion Martha into hiding. All seemed lost—and the fact that this episode opens a year later in a dystopian wasteland gives support to that hopeless conclusion. But Martha has been traveling covertly throughout the Master's authoritarian Earth, delivering a message of... something... to the huddled masses. Only at the episode's close do we find out what she's been doing, when, at the appointed hour, the entire planet begins chanting the Doctor's name in unison. The ensuing harmonic whatchamacallems revive the Doctor and enable the Master's defeat. For all the Geordi LaForgian gobbledegook surrounding the Doctor's revival, we know what this really is: an SFnal vision of the power of prayer. *Doctor Who* stories often end with *dei ex machinis*, but few have so strongly suggested the "deus" bit. Humankind calls upon its savior in a modified version of the abbreviated [Jesus prayer](#), and a few digital effects later the series' embodiment of selfishness and sin is defeated once and for all (*wink, wink*).



As satisfying conclusions go it walks a fine line, but the thing that holds it together for me is Martha's year-long mission to spread the Doctor's gospel. There's a touch of implausibility here, to be sure—could one person *really* spread a message throughout a globe-spanning fascist society in less than a year?—but it's wonderful that Martha finally has *something* to do besides pine after the Doctor. The fact that her plotline is so evocative of early Christianity's home churches and itinerant preachers doesn't hurt. Indeed, her scenes reminded me of the best bits of Philip K. Dick's [Our Friends From Frolix 8](#), in which a Paul analog covertly circulates letters proclaiming the imminent return of an interstellar messiah.

The episode's continuity nods are a treat as well—it makes outright references to [The Claws of Axos](#), among other stories—and they further underscore the moving conclusion, in which the Doctor, holding his cowering archnemesis in his arms, forgives him for his centuries of evil. The sense of finality is a bit of a shame, since John Simm was so darned *fun* as the Master. Of course, a *Flash Gordon*-esque final scene hints at the villain's return, and it will be interesting to see how this story's fable of reconciliation will be reflected in the Master's next regeneration.

Related: On NT Gateway, Mark Goodacre [discusses messianic materials](#) in "Last of the Time Lords."

"The Last of the Time Lords" airs on Friday October 5th at 9 PM EST on the Sci Fi Channel.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on October 03, 2007 at 11:09 PM | [Permalink](#)

October 04, 2007

Meme: The Top 50 Dystopian Movies of All Time

I'm catching up on my RSS feeds and noted SF Signal's "[Top 50 Dystopian Movies of All Time](#)" meme. [Snarkerati](#) picked 'em, and there are a few choices I disagree with (*A.I.?* seriously?) and placements that annoy me (*Total Recall* above *A Scanner Darkly*?), but nonetheless, makin' the ones I had seen bold was fun. I've seen all but 11 1/2 of 'em.

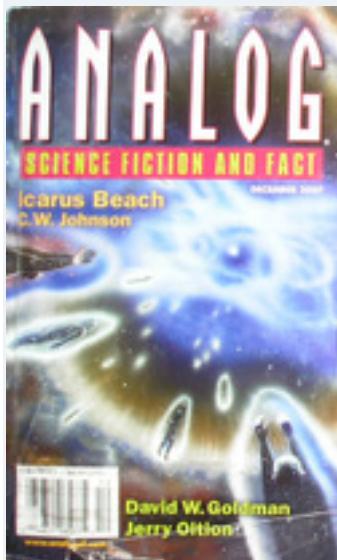
1. **Metropolis (1927)**
2. **A Clockwork Orange (1971)**
3. **Brazil (1985)**
4. **Wings of Desire (1987)**
5. **Blade Runner (1982)**
6. **Children of Men (2006)**
7. **The Matrix (1999)**
8. **Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior (1981)**
9. **Minority Report (2002)**
10. **Delicatessen (1991)**
11. **Sleeper (1973)**
12. **The Trial (1962)**
13. **Alphaville (1965)** [I watched half of this, and found it pretty dull.]
14. **Twelve Monkeys (1995)**
15. **Serenity (2005)**
16. **Pleasantville (1998)**
17. **Ghost in the Shell (1995)**
18. **Battle Royale (2000)**
19. **RoboCop (1987)**
20. **Akira (1988)**
21. **The City of Lost Children (1995)**
22. **Planet of the Apes (1968)**
23. **V for Vendetta (2005)**
24. **Metropolis (2001)**
25. **Gattaca (1997)**
26. **Fahrenheit 451 (1966)**
27. **On The Beach (1959)**
28. **Mad Max (1979)**
29. **Total Recall (1990)**
30. **Dark City (1998)**
31. **War Of the Worlds (1953)**
32. **District 13 (2004)**
33. **They Live (1988)**
34. **THX 1138 (1971)**
35. **Escape from New York (1981)**
36. **A Scanner Darkly (2006)**
37. **Silent Running (1972)**
38. **Artificial Intelligence: AI (2001)**
39. **Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984)**
40. **A Boy and His Dog (1975)**
41. **Soylent Green (1973)**
42. **I, Robot (2004)**
43. **Logan's Run (1976)**
44. **Strange Days (1995)**

45. *Idiocracy* (2006)
46. *Death Race 2000* (1975)
47. **Rollerball (1975)**
48. **Starship Troopers (1997)**
49. *One Point O* (2004)
50. **Equilibrium (2002)**

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on October 04, 2007 at 09:58 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 09, 2007

Taking religion (seriously): Jerry Oltion's "Salvation," Robert R. Chase's "...Mr. Roboto," and Sarah K. Castle's "Kukulkan" (*Analog*, December 2007)



Stories about time travelers who visit ancient Palestine to meet a certain trouble-making preacher are hardly a new thing. Writers from Richard Matheson to Michael Moorcock have used the trope (and, for my money, none have topped the latter's [Behold the Man](#)). In the December 2007 issue of *Analog*, [Jerry Oltion](#) takes a crack at the theme in "Salvation." The story opens with a broad picture of religious conservatism as scientist William Winters requests funding for his time travel research from a megachurch called the Universal Church of the Divine Revelation.* Winters is able to convince Rev. Billy Dickerson that time travel will be as great a boon to religion as it will be to science—particularly since it can allow firsthand knowledge of the historical Jesus. Before long the time machine is completed, and Winters and Dickerson's first destination is Jerusalem circa 30 CE.

Which is where the story's real problems begin. First of all, the story seems to treat Jesus as a long-time resident of Jerusalem, rather than an itinerant preacher who spent only six days there. Second, the characters speak two languages to Jesus: Aramaic, which isn't problematic, and Latin, which is. Mel Gibson aside, Greek was the language of the eastern Empire, not Latin, and there's little evidence to suggest that Jesus spoke even that. Third (and most irritatingly, since the story's conclusion hinges on it), Winters speaks to Jesus about "science" and Jesus knows exactly what he's talking about, with no apparent explanation of the term necessary. Assuming, as the story does, that Jesus *did* know Latin, and Winters is using the term *scientia*, they're simply talking about knowledge, and those who practiced *scientia* in the first century were philosophers, not scientists. The story acts as if Roman philosophers practiced 17th-century style science, which simply isn't the case. Perhaps I've been spoiled by having recently read [Eifelheim](#) by Michael Flynn, who painstakingly avoids linguistic anachronisms of this sort, or even more painstakingly explains them when he makes them. The anachronisms in "Salvation" generally just pulled me out of the story. At one point in the story Jesus even states: "This scientific method sounds very much like something I've been thinking all along, but couldn't put into words. Investigate, *then* explain." It would be one thing if the story made any connection between what Jesus had apparently "been thinking all along" and what we actually have a record of him saying, but as it stands the story is just putting words in his mouth.

None of this is to say that I didn't enjoy "Salvation" (I did) or that I disagree with its ultimate message (I don't at its core, at least). But the broad strokes this story draws serve to weaken its impact, and a bit more research could have made it into a far more compelling tale. "Salvation" is more fable than treatise, but even fables have a few rules to follow.

This issue of *Analog* includes two other stories that tackle their religious content more seriously. [Robert R. Chase](#)'s "Domo Arigato, 'Says Mr. Roboto'" makes good use of its brevity, using a mere 12 pages to paint a moving picture of a self-aware machine and produce and solve a tricky puzzle about that machine's legal status. The story's conclusion takes on a distinct flavor of Cartesian dualism, alluding to "a threshold" between machine and human that more blunt writers might call the soul.

[Sarah K. Castle](#)'s "Kukulkan" (which seems to be the author's first published story—if so it's an auspicious start) is a tale about tradition. It begins as a character study of Pascual Teotalco, an astronomer of Mayan descent who struggles to hold onto his ancestral culture in a near-future that makes little room for indigenous religion. When aliens land in Guatemala, it is both a challenge to and an affirmation of his beliefs: the alien Cheorka look exactly like the Mayan god Kukulkan, better known as Quetzalcoatl. The story's main focus is on Teotalco's racial identity, but the religious aspects of that identity are certainly an important part of the story, which is well worth reading.

Finally, the letters page of this issue contains even more material on Michael Flynn's "[Quaestiones Super Caelo et Mundo](#)" and its accompanying essay, this time from a reader who wonders if Flynn is arguing that the decline of religion as a cultural foundation of science will lead to the decline of science as well. Flynn's response, again in the medieval style of Aquinas, is no. He notes that, to the contrary, even the most anti-scientific aspects of religion still seek scientific respect:

"Even creationists crave recognition for 'creation science' and contend, contrary to theology, that God can be demonstrated by the material evidences of biochemistry. This is akin to proving the existence of Frank Whittle by careful measurement of particular jet engine components."

*These generically-named megachurches pop up everywhere in SF as a shorthand for a particular caricature of religious institutions. (Another appears in a story in this month's *Asimov's*, on which more in a few days). Though I understand the desirability of using this kind of shorthand—it's the same thing that allows writers to talk about "time travel" or "FTL drives" without lengthy technical explanations—it is a bit troubling that this particular abbreviation has remained essential unchanged since the Church of the New Revelation in *Stranger in a Strange Land*. You can't fault Heinlein for accurately predicting megachurches, but you also can't claim his critique of them is a subtle one.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 09, 2007 at 11:11 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 12, 2007

An index to Gardner Dozois' Year's Best Science Fiction

SF Site has launched an [index](#) to the stories in Gardner Dozois' annual collection *The Year's Best Science Fiction* (24 volumes and counting). Of all the annual short story collections out there, Dozois' is the best (and, at 600+ pages each, the most comprehensive). Though you're bound to disagree with some of his selections, these collections present wonderful snapshots of the state of the genre in any given year. (The 19th, containing Ian R. MacLeod's "New Light on the Drake Equation" and Dan Simmons' "On K2 with Kanakaredes," is probably my favorite). These books were an excellent resource for me in researching [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#), and are always well worth reading.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 12, 2007 at 10:21 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 12, 2007

Religion in upcoming comics

Over at Holy Heroes, I've just posted [Spiritual Solicitations](#) for August-October: previews of 3 months worth of comics about (or apparently about) religion. [Check it out.](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on October 12, 2007 at 03:17 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 13, 2007

Links of interest: James McGrath, Gene Rodenberry, and John C. Wright

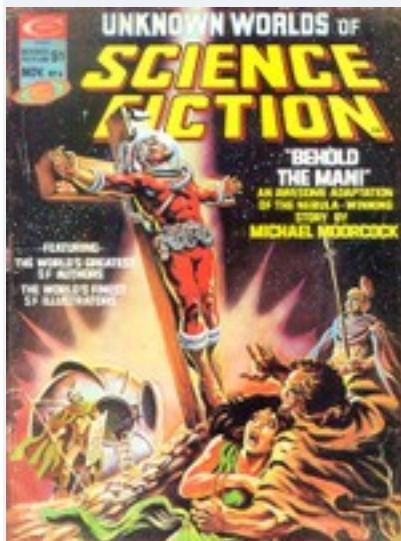
- [Theofantastique interviews James McGrath](#). Assistant Professor of Religion at Butler University and author of the blog [Exploring Our Matrix](#), about religion in SF.
- In the *Dakota Voice*, [Raymond J. Keating discusses the absence of religion](#) in *Star Trek*. (As with the Guy Stewart post I [mentioned](#) a couple weeks ago, I think Keating is a little short-sighted about what he considers religious.)
- [John C. Wright discusses atheism and Donatism](#) in his book [Fugitives of Chaos](#). It's pretty specific about the plot of the book, which I haven't read, so I didn't follow the entire post. But it's interesting to note that Wright was an atheist when he wrote the novel, but is now Christian, which puts the book's religious themes in a very different light.

[Links 2 and 3 courtesy of [SF Signal](#).]

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 13, 2007 at 05:47 PM in [Books](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 14, 2007

Thomas M. Disch on Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man*



I've been reading Thomas M. Disch's *On SF*, a fun collection of 30+ years' worth of essays on the genre. So far it's neither as lively, as crotchety, or as fun as his [The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of](#), but it's a fair trade-off. The same priggish stubbornness that made *Dreams* so fun also held back Disch's intellectual clarity a bit, and by comparison the essays in *On SF* come across as more insightful and incisive.

Anyway, early in the book Disch discusses and debunks the idea that "ideas" are the most important aspect of good SF, pointing out that some wonderful SF has crap ideas, and that some of the best works of SF seem banal when reduced simply to their conceptual bases. Instead, he argues, SF works best when it constructs myths, and his closing example is Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man*:

The point, for instance, of Michael Moorcock's Behold the Man isn't that, gee whiz, a Time Traveler questing for the historical Jesus is involved in a case of mistaken identities. The point isn't What Happens Next because the reader is assumed to be able to foresee that. The point is, rather, how seamlessly the modern (ironic) version of the myth can be made to overlay the gospel (and so, inevitable) version. To a large degree, therefore, the point is the author's wit, his grace, and his depth. In a word, style.

I've been mulling over the idea of writing something about *Behold the Man* sometime fairly soon. Don't hold your breath, though—I want to re-read both the novel and short story versions first, so it'll probably be a few months. In the meantime, check out chapter 6 of the [Gospel According to Science Fiction](#), which discusses the novel in the context of Philip José Farmer's *Jesus on Mars* and John Dominic Crossan's thoughts about the historical Jesus.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 14, 2007 at 08:57 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 15, 2007

Mark Chadbourn: "Richard Dawkins is Killing SF"

Mark Chadbourn, author of [Jack of Ravens](#), has written an [intriguing post](#) proposing a causal relationship between the rise of uber-rationalism and the decline of SF readership.

"Dawkins... [is] on a crusade to stamp out irrationality wherever he might find it. He has stated that any irrationality is a threat, even if it's a lightly held belief or a half-hearted curiosity about things he believes could never, ever be true.

And he's wrong. Utterly. We need our mythos. We need our irrationality. We are built to need it. Cultures before ours managed to integrate both into the same world-view quite easily; it's not an either/or situation. If you're interested in magic, it doesn't mean you think Einstein is a charlatan. (On the fringes, some may, but we're talking about 'real' people here). The more people are unable to find irrationality in the culture around them, the more they will be driven to seek it out through their imagination.

In other words, every time Richard Dawkins kicks a quivering new ager, a hard-pressed science fiction writer loses another sale."

I was thinking about this recently while looking through a few anthologies of SF on religious themes, all from the '70s and '80s. Where is today's mystical SF? Where are the 21st century Silverbergs and Zelaznys and Dicks? We have [Robert J. Sawyer](#), admittedly (and thank goodness), but mystical and mythological SF was an irresistible tide in the '70s—until it got crushed by pessimistic cyberpunk and nuts-and-bolts hard SF.

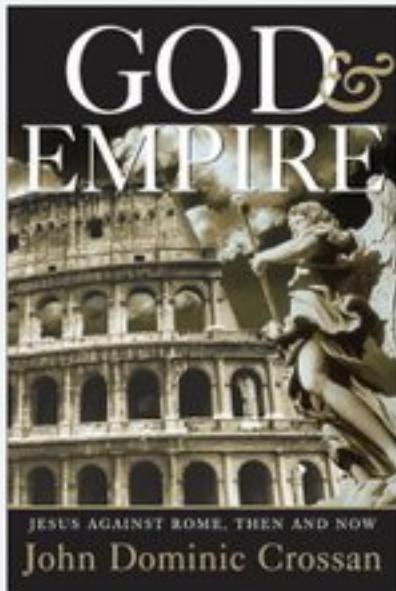
(Or should that be "Zelaznies"?)

Hat tip: [SF Signal](#).

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on October 15, 2007 at 07:50 AM in [Atheism](#), [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 19, 2007

God and Empire: Jesus (and John Dominic Crossan) Against Rome



John Dominic Crossan describes his recent book [God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then And Now](#) as "less an exercise in historical reconstruction than a witness in religious responsibility." It's about what Crossan considers the most important aspects of the Christian message, summed up in a mantra repeated throughout the book: "the normalcy of civilization's brutality is not the inevitability of humanity's destiny." In other words, we can overcome violence, and more importantly, *God wants us to*. It's a message that Crossan doesn't find repeated in the dominant religious conservatism of our day, and this book is an attempt to give a higher profile to Jesus' radical opposition to the violence of empire.

Crossan doesn't get terribly much respect in the academic world—his ideas are a bit too wacky, and defended a bit to boisterously (often on the History Channel), for those hallowed halls. But there's no denying his popular appeal, which

is largely a result of the fact that he's a good writer—something far too few academics can claim. This book makes no pretenses about its status as a non-academic work, and in this context his attitude and style really shine. He has a way of making his arguments, which frequently depend on a fair amount of knowledge about the language and culture of the eastern Roman Empire in the first century, seem like common sense. An excellent example is his attack on the less-than-two-centuries-old concept of the Rapture. Exploring the meanings of the terminology of [1 Thessalonians 4:15-17](#), Crossan etymologically destroys the modern evangelical interpretation of this passage.* But that's not all: he then demonstrates the theological wrongheadedness of the idea that God would pull believers out of the world and then *destroy* it rather than as ancient Christians believed—return to believers in the world and then *transform* it. Destruction is anathema to Crossan's understanding of God. Similarly ingenious is his solution to the problem of veiled women and unveiled men in [1 Corinthians 11:3-7](#). Indeed, Crossan's entire interpretation of Paul's theology is compelling, as are his solutions to many of the apparent problems of the Pauline letters.

But that's probably where the biggest objection conservative Christians can have to Crossan's method comes in. For Crossan, the message of Jesus trumps everything. He does not view Scripture as infallible, and he's more than willing to attack or excise parts of the canon that don't fit his theology and Christology—including most of the pseudo-Pauline material in the NT and the entirety of Revelation. On one hand, I don't have much trouble with this approach. I think theology should always come first, and I don't see the Bible as inerrant—it had to grow through human history, and it shows the signs of that growth. The non-Pauline material attributed to Paul in the NT simply *doesn't fit* with Paul's message (a message that Crossan elucidates quite clearly). That Paul did not write much of the material the NT attributes to him is old news in the academic world, but this book isn't academic, and many of the readers this book is targeted at may not be aware of that. Thus the often casual way with which Crossan critiques those parts of the Bible that don't fit gives his conservative critics an easy way out of actually engaging with his arguments.

Even those who generally agree with him may rankle a bit at his rejection of Revelation. Crossan critiques John's Apocalypse for replacing a violent empire of this world with an otherworldly empire that is every bit as violent:

Any alternative universe that presumes the normalcy of violence is not other at all. It is simply our own world transferred beyond the skies or beneath the seas, our own world but with animals, aliens, or robots acting just like ourselves. . . The truly other world would be one without injustice, and the truly alternative universe would be one without violence.

I see where the violence of Revelation fits in his argument about the struggle between civilization's brutality and God's nonviolence, but I have to question his overly-literal approach to the apocalypse. His approach lets the theological reactionaries have Revelation-- by presenting violence committed by Jesus' hand, the book is beyond salvage. I, on the other hand, think that Revelation needs to be taken back from those who have co-opted it; it's a message *against* empire that conservatives have turned into a message *for* it. In other words, there's something worth saving for theological radicals in Revelation, and it's a bit unfortunate that Crossan views the book so negatively.

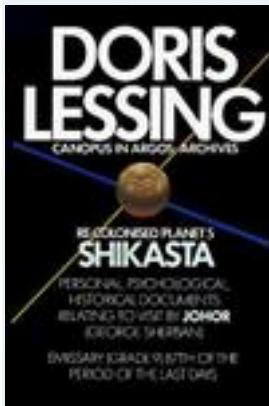
It's a small complaint, particularly since it fits so well into his argument. (Indeed, in light of his argument I must sheepishly acknowledge that my own affection for apocalyptic texts may require some Christological equivocation.) In *God and Empire*, Crossan lays out a plan for the reclamation of Christianity's radical roots, and there's little fault to find with that goal. In a time when faith is [more militarized](#) than it's been since the Crusades, this is precisely the kind of wilderness-crying voice we need.

*In a nutshell, the argument is thus: The word generally translated as "meet" in this passage refers to something very specific first-century military protocol. After a battle, the people of a conquered city would go out from the city to "meet" the conquering general, then return inside the city with him. The "rapture" interpretation has both the conquered people and the conqueror simply abandon the city.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on October 19, 2007 at 07:49 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 20, 2007

Doris Lessing and the Public Face of SF



It's been interesting to see how different news outlets have handled Doris Lessing's SF output in their coverage of her Nobel Prize win. On the one hand, NPR propped up the distinction between "literature" and genre writing in calling her an author of "novels, essays, and science fiction." (See, it's not a **real** novel if it takes place in space.) On the other hand we have M.G. Lord's essay in the L.A. Times, the title of which really says it all: ["Doris Lessing's Nobel: A victory for science fiction."](#) Borrowing a quote from Marguerite Young, Lord describes Lessing's *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series as an epic with "a vast undertow of music and momentum and theology." Not only that, the first volume, *Shikasta*, is "a reworking of the Bible—casting the forces of good and evil as warring aliens." *Shikasta* has been hovering at the top of my to-read pile for a couple months now; this article has bumped it up even higher.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 20, 2007 at 09:45 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 23, 2007

SF Magazines in decline, so buy 'em for crying out loud

Warren Ellis has posted the [circulation figures](#) for the major SF magazines as reported by Gardner Dozois in his [Year's Best Science Fiction](#) anthology. [Cory Doctorow](#) responds with some thoughts on what the SF magazines should be doing to get their numbers up. In short, they all boil down to a bigger online presence. I love that the remaining print magazines have resisted going entirely online, particularly since a) I have a hard time reading fiction online, particularly if it's longer than 5 (print) pages or so, and b) I do most of my reading on the subway, for which magazines are perfect. But what *is* online for most of the magazines is in the "disappointing to dismal" range. (To [Asimov's](#) credit, they do post story excerpts, but you have to dig a bit to find them). Sprucing up the websites would do wonders.

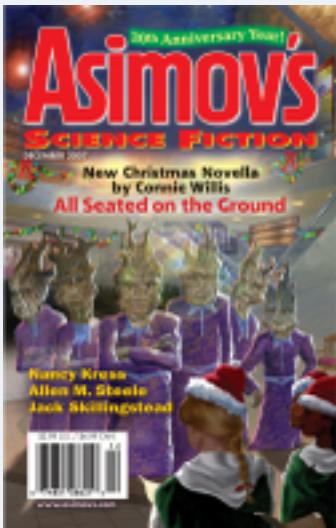
It always surprises me that the numbers for *Asimov's* are so much lower than the numbers for *Analog*, particularly since, to put it bluntly, *Asimov's* tends to have a better caliber of story. Does anyone know why this is? And the numbers for [Interzone](#), if accurate, are just astonishingly low. What they need is decent US distribution—I've seen it on sale in all of 2 stores in the US, and I've heard a few horror stories about subscriptions.

In any event, if you're reading this and you haven't read an SF magazine lately, turn off your computer, go to the nearest right-minded bookstore or newstand, and buy one. You'll be glad you did.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 23, 2007 at 08:41 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 23, 2007

"All Seated on the Ground" by Connie Willis



Speaking of SF magazines, the cover story of the December 2007 *Asimov's* is a Christmas novella, "[All Seated on the Ground](#)" by Connie Willis. The title is a reference to a line in the "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night," and the story itself is about Christmas carols. In Willis's compelling comedy, the alien Altairi have landed on Earth, but they won't talk to us—they just scowl disapprovingly. In a last-ditch effort at getting the aliens to communicate, the commission studying them takes them to a shopping mall, and they react to the carols playing on the sound system. Instead of their customary offputting stance, the Altairi sit down when they hear the eponymous line sung by a choir. From there, the story moves into mystery mode as the members of the commission try to figure out why the Altairi reacted to the song, and ultimately to get them talking. The answer to the mystery I shan't reveal, though if I wanted to be glib I could say that, at story's end, everyone learns the true meaning of Christmas.

It's a clever and fun story—so clever and fun that I found myself not minding that the story uses that old saw of SF, the histrionic megachurch preacher, here in the form of Reverend Thresher of the One True Way Maxichurch of Colorado Springs. The same sort of character turned up in [Analog last month](#), and it definitely bugged me there. Why do I think it works here? Well, for one thing, Willis's tone is pretty light throughout, as opposed to the feigned seriousness of Jerry Oltion's "Salvation." The character of Thresher is broad, sure, but it fits better with the comedic tone of Willis's story as a whole. It still bothered [Jim Black](#) at Speculative Faith, who complains that "Willis did not balance the radical Rev. with a true Christian." I disagree with Black's assessment, largely because the story has something nice to say about religion, in a very general sense, at its conclusion. Thresher is not the only Christian in the story, though he is the loudest, and the whole point of the story (which is tied up with the solution to the mystery that I'm not giving away) delivers a message about peace and good will. That message justifies, or at least overrides, the bluntness of the instrument with which conservative religion is illustrated. In any event, it's a great read in another solid issue of *Asimov's*.

[Elliott](#) and [Jim Black](#) have posted brief reviews of "All Seated on the Ground." A sizeable excerpt from the story is available from the *Asimov's* website [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on October 23, 2007 at 09:02 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 24, 2007

Asimov's December 2007 continued

Also of interest in this month's *Asimov's* and also [excerpted](#) on their website—is Nancy Kress' "The Rules." This story opens with a bit of compassionate culture jamming as Forces Unknown broadcast a powerful pirate television signal that appears on every television in the US (as happens in SF, you know). The message of the signal is an exhortation to charity, encouraging its viewers to give to third-world medical clinics. This is much to the surprise of, among others, Sister Hélène-Marie, who runs one such clinic in Kenya. Read more [here](#).

And, additionally, Peter Heck reviews [Breakfast With the Ones You Love](#) by Eliot Fintushel. Heck describes it as "a science-fantasy novel with a deep underlay of Jewish mysticism." More detail from *Publishers Weekly*: "Jack 'the Yid' Konar... has constructed a mystical spaceship—complete with a Fleshpot and the Holy of Holies—to transport the select few to the true Ish-ra-el." Sounds interesting indeed.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on October 24, 2007 at 07:59 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 25, 2007

"Salvation" and "Quaestiones" revisited

There's a discussion ("spirited" might be a good adjective for it) on the [Analog forums](#) sparked by Jerry Oltion's story "Salvation" in the latest *Analog* (reviewed [here](#) recently). But the thread really has nothing to do with Oltion's story at all. Reader Jim Pinkoski, who owns one of the [wackier creationist websites](#) I've seen,* takes issue with *Analog* editor Stanley Schmidt's opposition to "intelligent design" creationism and, by connection, religion in general. (Apparently ID is a cornerstone of Christian faith—too bad for the poor saps who were Christian without ID for 2000-odd years.) ID is barely a factor in "Salvation," but the ensuing discussion includes comments (some intelligent and some hilarious) from authors, including Tom Ligon and Michael Flynn. To wit, Flynn begs a pointed question:

What motive did [Stan] have for purchasing and publishing not only "Quaestiones super coelo et mundo," in which medieval Christian scientists kickstart the scientific revolution, but also "De revolutione scientiarum in 'media tempestas'", in which it is argued through historical facts that traditional Christian beliefs were not only compatible but even necessary for the development of natural science?

*Any website that must proclaim on its front page that "THIS MATERIAL IS **EXTREMELY SERIOUS**!" is very likely lying.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on October 25, 2007 at 09:07 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 27, 2007

Free Will on *Battlestar Galactica*

At Pandagon, a thoughtful post on free will on [Battlestar Galactica](#).

The fact that religion is a big deal on the show bolsters the sense that it's dismantling the illusion of free will. People and Cylons both sense they are at the mercy of omniscient deities, and the fact that they have oracles and visions only confirms this. Destiny is unavoidable on the show; what's happening now has happened before doesn't have to be taken literally, it could just mean that the path ahead has no branches, no alternate possibilities, that the future was written literally (by the gods) or metaphorically (by the convergence of forces that necessitate certain outcomes). Omnipotent gods pretty much preclude the possibility of free will, and while there's plenty of strained attempts to argue otherwise, they're just the result of hope trumping logic. Religion is a projection of ego—I feel my life is meaningful, so there must be an outside force validating that—and the stubborn insistence on free will is a projection of ego. The two are wed together out of human egotism, but they don't really make sense together logically.

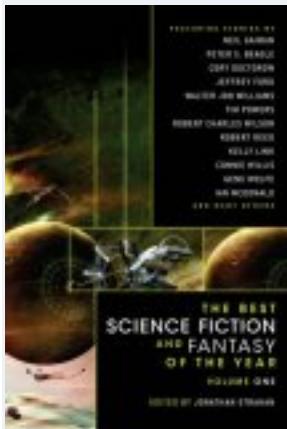
Read the full post [here](#). (214 comments? Where are my 214 comments?)

(I talk a bit about somewhat-related topics [here](#).)

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on October 27, 2007 at 10:04 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 01, 2007

A plethora of religion in *The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year, Volume 1*



SF Signal [reviews](#) *The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year* Volume 1, edited by Jonathan Strahan. There are a number of stories with religious themes included; here they are, with SF Signal's synopses:

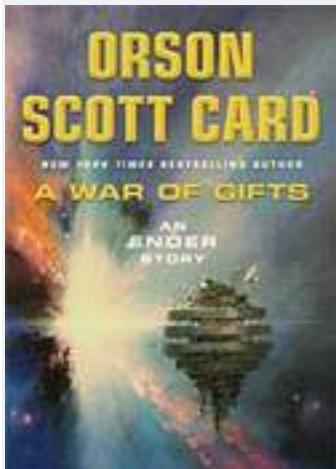
- ["I, Row-Boat"](#) by Cory Doctorow. "A sentient rowboat, tasked with carrying human shells used by the uplifted who wish to scuba dive, encounters a sentient coral reef with different theological beliefs."
- "Another Word for Map Is Faith" by Christopher Rowe. This story "delivers a slightly off-kilter version of reality where faith is akin to cartography. When an academic leads a group of students on a mission to chart (and correct) the biblical representation of the land, they discover the blasphemy of an uncharted lake. Their religious beliefs lead to map-changing action."
- "Under Hell, Over Heaven" by Margo Lanagan. "'Under Hell, Over Heaven' follows a band of travelers in Limbo wanting to get into Heaven, while avoiding the call of Hell."
- "The Bible Repairman" by Tim Powers. "The Bible repairman uses pieces of his own soul to do odd jobs for folks like editing Bibles, exorcising ghosts and the like."
- ["The House Beyond Your Sky"](#) by Benjamin Rosenbaum. "A virtual construct named Mathias must answer to his maker when he begins playing God to creations of his own making."
- ["The Djinn's Wife"](#) by Ian McDonald. "Set as a prequel to McDonald's fantastic River of Gods, this piece has many of the ingredients that made that novel such a success: an "aeai" who is as much a character as any human one, threatened by the Hamilton Acts that prohibit his growth; a sympathetic enforcer from the Department of Artificial Intelligence (Thacker, a "Krishna Cop"); the political background of a water war between neighboring nations; and a hefty injection of Indian culture."

An intriguing list. As a bit of an SF purist, I haven't read any new fantasy in years (with the exception of Philip Pullman and a couple Ted Chiang stories); I'm pleasantly surprised to see how much of what's being written these days uses theological ideas.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 01, 2007 at 06:14 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 03, 2007

Orson Scott Card: Christmas in the Enderverse



A new release from Tor: Orson Scott Card's [A War of Gifts](#).

Orson Scott Card offers a Christmas gift to his millions of fans with this short novel set during Ender's first years at the Battle School where it is forbidden to celebrate religious holidays.

The children come from many nations, many religions; while they are being trained for war, religious conflict between them is not on the curriculum. But Dink Meeker, one of the older students, doesn't see it that way. He thinks that giving gifts isn't exactly a religious observation, and on Sinterklaas Day he tucks a present into another student's shoe.

This small act of rebellion sets off a battle royal between the students and the staff, but some surprising alliances form when Ender comes up against a new student, Zeck Morgan. The War over Santa Claus will force everyone to make a choice.

Is it just me, or does this sound a bit goofy? I've only read the Ender series through *Shadow of the Hegemon*, but even by that point I felt that Card was stretching the story's concepts a bit thin. Perhaps silliness is inherent to the nature of SF Christmas stories ("All Seated on the Ground" excepted, or perhaps excused for its deliberate humorously), but I don't really see this idea working... A "battle royal" over gift-giving?

Nevertheless, the excerpt has an intriguing start. It introduces a new character to the Enderverse—Zeck Morgan, son of the minister of the Church of the Pure Christ in Eden, North Carolina. Card doesn't write about his own religion (Mormonism) in the Ender series, though earlier books have used Catholic characters to insightfully explore religious questions. From the excerpt Zeck's father looks like a bit of a stereotypical SF Bible-thumper, but there's certainly room in the story for an interesting approach to religious questions. If you'd like to find out for yourself, there's an excerpt [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 03, 2007 at 06:19 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 09, 2007

"When I talk about belief, why do you always assume I'm talking about God?" What Serenity believes in



A couple months back Onelowerlight Rising, a Mormon blog, posted a lengthy attack on the SF-western hybrid *Firefly* under the title ["Why Firefly is Not Good Science Fiction."](#) *Firefly*, the story of a group of interplanetary outlaws aboard a ship named *Serenity*, was the unfairly-cancelled brainchild of Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (and, in your humble reviewer's opinion, was one of the best SF shows in the history of television).

Among Onelowerlight's list of complaints was the manner in which the show handled religion. He specifically cites a scene in which River, a mentally scarred superhuman, "edits" the Bible of Shepherd Book, the show's resident preacher. "It's broken," River complains, "it doesn't make sense." Book's reply: "It's not about making sense. It's about believing in something, and letting that belief be real enough to change your life. It's about faith. You don't fix faith, River. It fixes you." Onelowerlight complains that this misrepresents what faith means for the faithful:

He basically says that people don't believe in religion because it makes sense, they believe in it because they need something to believe in... However, this neglects something very important--from the believer's point of view, it does make sense! Joss Whedon doesn't show that point of view at all!



Had Onelowerlight seen *Serenity*, the film sequel to *Firefly*, he likely wouldn't have been too pleased with the way Shepherd Book presents faith there, either. At one point, Book urges Mal Reynolds, the leader of *Serenity*'s crew, "I don't care what you believe—just believe it." I've seen several reviewers complain about this apparently content-less faith: what is belief that's not belief *in something*? But this approach ignores the context in which these pronouncements are made. *Serenity* has a lot to say about what its characters believe—their faith has content spelled out by their actions.

In *Serenity*, Mal's crew is on the run from an interplanetary government. They've been harboring River, and the Alliance scientists who gave her her superpowers want her back. They turn to Shepherd Book both for shelter and for advice. When Book tells Mal that he'll need "belief" to get him through, Mal is displeased: "I ain't looking for help from on high. That's a long wait for a train don't come." Book's response, at first glance, communicates nothing: "When I talk about belief, why do you always assume I'm talking about God?" This, it seems, is simply a communication of faith without content, a vague "faith in faith" that's easier than actually fleshing out a character's spirituality. The conventional wisdom on *Serenity* would probably conclude that this line shows boneheadedness about religion and nothing more—but the conventional wisdom takes the quote out of its context. Moments before, Mal had been expressing apparent regret at not abandoning River to the government:

Mal: I could have left her there. I had an out. Hell, I had every reason in the 'verse to leave her lay and haul anchor.

Book: It's not your way.

Mal: I have a way? That better than a plan?



Book's pronouncement that Mal needs belief to get him through immediately follows this exchange, and depends on it for its meaning. Because Book is a preacher, Mal assumes he's talking about belief in God, but he's talking about belief in community. Mal's "way" is not to abandon those in need, to help those who need helping, to do, in the mold of classic Western morality, the noble thing rather than the rational thing. *Serenity* is a story about a family, a community that stands together when oppressed. At the film's close, Mal gives River advice on flying a ship that sums up the object of the film's concept of "belief":

Love. You can learn all the math in the 'verse, but you take a boat in the air that you don't love, she'll throw you off just as sure as the turn of the worlds. Love keeps her in the air when she ought to fall down, tells you she's hurting before she keels, makes her a home.

Faith doesn't stand for itself alone in *Serenity*. It is the first step in the progression Paul defines in 1 Corinthians 13:13: "Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." *Firefly* and *Serenity* tell a story about a community, a family that holds together against all odds by the strength of its love.

This post is part of Strange Culture's [Film + Faith Blog-a-Thon](#).

For some more of my thoughts on religion in Firefly and Serenity, see chapters 5 and 7 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 09, 2007 at 10:39 AM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 13, 2007

Choosing the Good in *Battlestar Galactica: Razor*



One of my favorite things about living in the [greatest city in the world](#) is that I frequently get to see movies weeks before the rest of the country. Yesterday the Sci-Fi Channel held a preview screening of the upcoming *Battlestar Galactica* movie, *Razor*.* The film reveals some of the untold story of the Battlestar *Pegasus*, the only military ship besides *Galactica* to survive the Cylon attack that decimated the human race. There's more to it than that—we also get an untold story set sometime during season 2 and a flashback to Admiral Adama's youth, and both subplots are chock full of fanboy references the original BSG and, a bit more oddly, to *the A-Team*). It was pretty darned good, and barring two clunky scenes of exposition it was on par with the better episodes of the regular series. The worst part about it was the planning of the event: Sci-Fi only gave a window of about 4 hours or so for people to RSVP, and I was the only one of my frak party posse who was able to sign up in time. This would be understandable if the event were overbooked, but nearly half the theater was empty. But I digress.

When the *Pegasus* was discovered halfway through season 2 of BSG, it opened up several moral cans of worms. The *Pegasus*, under the command of Admiral Helena Cain, had taken a markedly different route than the *Galactica* following the Cylon attack. Where the military leadership of *Galactica* was tempered by President Laura Roslin's civilian leadership, the *Pegasus* had no such checks or balances. Admiral Cain was a brutal leader, but her violence was a dark mirror of the atmosphere of *Galactica*'s fleet, which had had its own brush with fascism just a few months earlier. (Indeed, Cain's leadership looks an awful lot like Colonel Saul Tigh's brief command at the beginning of season 2, and both include Boston-Massacre style altercations with civilian ships). But for a few different decisions, *Galactica* may have turned into the same sort of dystopia that the *Pegasus* became: there but for the grace of God(s) goes Adama.

Razor explores the story of the *Pegasus* in more detail, and it's no surprise that its main themes are sin, wrath, and whether might makes right. We see more of the cruelty with which Cain exercised her command, but we also see some of the complicated emotions behind her more heinous decisions. In BSG nothing is black and white, and *Razor* follows in the show's tradition of moral complexity.



That's not to say that it doesn't take a stand. The story of *Razor* questions the pragmatic militarism of both the *Pegasus* and *Galactica*, challenging the nobility of Doing What Had To Be Done. In a character-defining scene, Cain gives a speech to the crew of the *Pegasus* in which she defines their mission in the post-attack universe. Mangling Kantian ideas, she gives the ship a new "imperative"—revenge (explicitly stated as such) and endless war. She later admits that she was simply telling the crew what she thought they needed to hear to keep them going, and that she does not desire to send the *Pegasus* on an impossible quest to destroy the white whale of the Cylon fleet. Her speech and her later admission both mirror Admiral Adama's words at the conclusion of the miniseries that kicked off the *Battlestar Galactica* relaunch. Adama gave his crew a new mission—not revenge, but survival. They would find Earth, he told them, and make it their home. Like Cain, he later states that his speech was a fib; he doesn't even believe Earth exists, but knew that the crew needed something to keep them going. Adama gives hope and a mission of survival; Cain gives anger and a mission of revenge. BSG's attitude to these diverging messages is illustrated by the respective responses to these two speeches. Both are met with chants of "so say we all," but the tone of those battle cries is entirely different. *Galactica*'s crew responds without hesitation, showing legitimate confidence in their Admiral's mission; the crew of the *Pegasus* takes up the chant slowly and reluctantly. The parallel gives a clear message: revenge is not as "imperative" a mission as survival.

The core concept behind the [Sermon on the Mount](#) (and thus of Christian ethics in general) is the idea that the ends do not justify the means. The merciful will be shown mercy; the treasures of earth are destroyed by rust and moths; not just murder but even anger is an evil act. The way that we do things, not our reasons for doing what we do, is what matters. *Razor* throws itself headlong into these moral questions, but at the film's end there isn't a moment's doubt that Adama chose the better path.

For more on religion and ethics in *Battlestar Galactica*, see chapter 7 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) and the following posts:

[Battlestar Galactica 301-303: synthesis and syncretism](#)

[Battlestar Galactica 313: Is there Cylon redemption for human sin?](#)

[Free Will on Battlestar Galactica](#)

*Of course, thanks to a leaked screener, the Internets have been watching it for the last week. (But on much smaller screens, I'll wager.)

Battlestar Galactica: Razor airs on the Sci-Fi Channel on November 24th, and an extended version will be released on DVD on December 4th.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 13, 2007 at 08:48 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 17, 2007

Thor-ology



A top-five list on the *Cracked Magazine* website isn't exactly the first place you'd expect to find theological insight. But Thor grabbed the #2 spot on their recent list of "[5 Upcoming Comic Book Movies That Must Be Stopped](#)," and their rationale includes this discussion of his origin:

The origin of the comic god goes like this: The arrogant Thor needs a lesson in humility, so his father Odin, the ruler of all gods, sends him to Earth in the form of a crippled mortal to teach him to be humble. When Thor finally learns his shits do stink, his mortal form dies off and he is allowed to become himself again.

This spiritual lesson serves to confirm two things: Being handicapped is God's way of punishing you for religious transgressions, and to the son of God, Earth is essentially a giant time-out where instead of facing a corner for five minutes you live a short, challenging life rife with confusion and pain until you are eventually allowed to die.

Granted, *Cracked* got the origin story wrong—there's nothing about Donald Blake dying; he becomes Thor again when he finds his hammer—but the insight still stands. Something always bugged me about Thor's Don Blake persona, and it wasn't just that he was the most character-less alter ego in the Marvel stable. Blake is essentially the incarnation of a deity, and the nature of that incarnation says some dark things about the way the universe is run.

Co-posted on [Holy Heroes!!](#)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 17, 2007 at 09:38 AM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 26, 2007

The Theology of Battlestar Galactica



This is a few days old (I'm still catching up from the long weekend), but The Daily Galaxy has posted a brief exploration of [The Theology of Battlestar Galactica](#). The post argues that the Cylons' religion is basically ironic:

"If we don't exercise reason at all times, or use science as the exclusive way of knowing, why should we expect another species, even one created in a robotics or computer lab, to be imminently rational and scientific?"

I can't say I agree with this interpretation—I think we're expected to take the Cylons' belief more seriously than that. After all, every prophecy they've presented has come true. The Cylons, by virtue of their resurrections, have first-hand experience of bodiless existence, and one Cylon, Leoben, presents this experience as the core of his faith in the episode "Flesh and Bone." TDG calls the Cylons' religion into question with a series of "yets" where I would put "therefores":

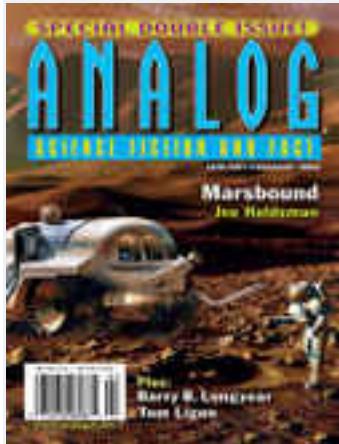
"They believe that they have souls even though they are able to download their consciousness to new bodies when their current ones are irreparably damaged. They also believe in a single omniscient, omnipotent god who guides and rewards them, despite being fully aware of their origins as lifeless hardware created by the polytheistic humans. And even though they are potentially immortal, they ponder what happens when they die."

The Cylons believe they have souls not *despite* their resurrections, but *because* of them. Their metaphysical ponderings stem from their firsthand mystical experiences of "downloading" and the bodiless existence that precedes it. And though humans may have created the first Cylons, they refined themselves into their current state—with God's guidance, they would argue. Not only this, but Cylon religion has proven far more complicated than it first seemed. Instead of the simple monotheism described in the first episodes, we've now seen a number of different robot spiritualities, from Leoben's pantheism to Brother Cavil's nigh-atheism. But most importantly, I still think that the show is pointing toward a final unification between Cylon and human, and this means a union between their religious systems as well. We've seen prophecies fulfilled on both sides of the conflict, and the show can't reject either belief system without some sort of explanation for the truths that both have uncovered.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 26, 2007 at 10:19 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 05, 2007

"The Engulfed Cathedral": *Analog* January/February 2008



I had high hopes for Carl Frederick's "The Engulfed Cathedral" (*Analog*, Jan/Feb 2008). The two-page illustration accompanying the story is impressive—divers and dolphins exploring an enormous gothic structure drowned by rising seas. It evoked two things that I love—[Mont St. Michel](#) in Normandy and Philip K. Dick's oft-overlooked pastoral [The Galactic Pot-Healer](#), in which a "drowned cathedral" is the center of power for an alien god. Alas, "The Engulfed Cathedral" doesn't live up to the promise of its evocations. The cathedral in question has been immersed as a result of global warming, and is the site of an odd undersea PR event connected with a scientific conference on "Genetic Engineering in a World of Water":

"The organizers had arranged [an] underwater service in an attempt to convince the religious lay public that geneticists weren't godless monsters. And polls indicated that... those religionists who seemed to set the national agenda needed a lot of convincing."

The purpose of this religious service is to find common ground between science and religion, but it becomes the setting for a highly improbable terrorist attack. A religious extremist is able to outwit the guards and replace the minister, but then more or less announces his impostorhood by giving a sermon about the evils of science. It's unlikely on several levels, owing a little to Frederick's construction of religious extremism and a lot to his low opinion of the intelligence of the average security guard. There's a bit of interesting stuff at the end about dolphin religion, but that ground was explored much more thoroughly over 30 years ago in Roger Zelazny's "Kjwalll'kje'k'koothaïlll'kje'k." (It may just be the result of a few well-selected anthologies, but it seems SF writers were just generally better at handling religion in the '60s and '70s.) This is by no means a bad issue of *Analog*, and it's a double issue so there's

plenty of good material here—the first installment of Joe Haldeman's "Marsbound" is fun; Jerry Oltion's "A New Generation" is a clever first-contact story that reminded me a bit of Harrison's *West of Eden*; Geoffrey A. Landis's "The Man in the Mirror" is a nice Clarke-style physics puzzle. J. Timothy Bagwell's "Tangible Light" is possibly the most interesting story this month, not least of all because it has some alien monks in it. But sadly, as with last month's ["Salvation."](#) the story that is most about religion simply doesn't tackle its subject convincingly.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 05, 2007 at 11:12 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 06, 2007

***The Golden Compass*, worldbuilding, and two kinds of dualism**



There's a scene early in [The Golden Compass](#) (opening Friday, with much attendant fanfare) that embodies what is great about both the first installment in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy and this adaptation of it. It's doesn't stand out too much, and you might not even notice it: Lyra rides in a cab. (I don't remember exactly where she's going to or from). But the cab isn't a simple car or horse-drawn carriage. It's an enclosed, three-wheeled rickshaw with a fiberglass body, powered by a ball of crackling energy at the center of a gyroscope on the front wheel. It would have been very easy for the filmmakers to have her travel in a simpler device, or even to cut the shot completely—nothing *happens* in it, it just pulls up to the curb and she steps out. But the scene illustrates the completeness of the world in which this story takes place. This is a world with its own technology, its own history of design and even its own taxis. It's precisely the sort of thought-through-ness that I found lacking in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (the film, certainly, but the book as well), which feels slapdash and made-up-as-it-goes. (I gather that later stories in the Narnia series do something to rectify this sketchiness.) The worldbuilding of Philip Pullman's trilogy rivals that of Tolkien, and the film respects that: thanks to brilliant production design and a carefully-considered effects aesthetic, this universe feels complete.

There has been, of course, [much hubbub](#) over the supposed atheism of the books, which strikes me as an extremely shortsighted interpretation. [A few bloggers](#) (and [director Chris Weitz](#) himself) have noted that "the Authority" who becomes a sort of villain in the later books is not an actual creator deity, but a would-be gnostic demiurge; indeed, the novels can be read as anti-gnostic rather than anti-Christian. (See also, in this regard, Robert Charles Wilson's novel [Mysterium](#), set in an alternate universe where a gnostic strain of Christianity won the doctrinal battles of the early church; there are some intriguing parallels between Pullman's Church/Magisterium and Wilson's autocratic gnostics.) Above all, the film's style of spiritual questioning encourages active engagement with religious questions, and, as Michael Giltz points out on [the Huffington Post](#), that's good for everybody.

But there's something in *His Dark Materials* that trumps all else for me, even Pullman's much-rumored atheism. The daemons—the animal familiars attached to every human in the HDM universe—are an external soul, a physical embodiment of the inner self. Pullman's story expresses a very concrete form of Cartesian dualism. Mind-body dualism isn't very popular among atheists right now, with Daniel Dennett and others making some very Buddhist arguments against the idea of the self as a real thing. Knowingly or not, Pullman's daemons make a concrete argument against spiritual materialism: if his beliefs mean he wants his readers not to believe in the existence of an internal soul, why does so much of his story depend on an understanding of an external one?



Wasn't I talking about the film? It's quite good, though it certainly helps to have read the books. I can imagine that someone coming into the film fresh would be quite confused at more than a few aspects of the story. The removal of the Genesis story is particularly obfuscating, and makes Miss Coulter's explanation of her motivations fairly incomprehensible. But the film's focus is elsewhere; it knows we're all *really* here to see the armored bears fight. There is violence here, but nowhere near as much as in *The Lord of the Rings*, and not much more than in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. And, best of all, it doesn't lower itself to Disney-fied talking animal buffoonery (though one scene does veer in that direction briefly). The film is not going to redefine the

genre, but it is a satisfying adaptation of a novel that did. If only *Watchmen* is handled as skillfully, we will have much to be thankful for.

P.S. Is anyone else getting tired of the phrase "avowed atheist?"

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 06, 2007 at 11:01 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 07, 2007

Better Late Than Never Dept.

This has pretty much made the rounds, but I love it and I'm posting it anyway. So there.

[[Youtube video: "A New Pope" – SF-themed parody of the installation of Benedict XVI.]]

<https://youtu.be/cQ9sJViY>

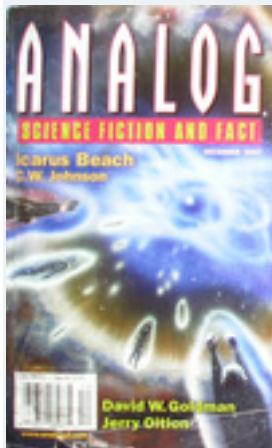
Hat tip: [SF Signal](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 07, 2007 at 06:42 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 09, 2007

Analog and Asimov's Reader Polls

[Analog](#) and [Asimov's](#) are holding their annual reader awards. Here are my votes, with links to my reviews where appropriate:



Analog

Novella:

1. [The Sands of Titan](#) by Richard A. Lovett
2. [Reunion](#) by David W. Goldman
3. [Damned if You Do...](#) by Lee Goodloe

Novellette

1. ["Quaestiones Super Caelo et Mundo"](#) by Michael F. Flynn
2. ["A Time for Lawsuits"](#) by Amy Bechtel
3. ["Kukulkan"](#) by Sarah K. Castle

Short Story

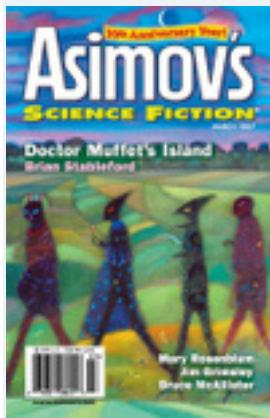
1. ["Radical Acceptance"](#) by David W. Goldman
2. ["Domo Arigato, Says Mr. Roboto"](#) by Robert R. Chase
3. ["Palimpsest"](#) by Howard V. Hendrix

Fact Article

1. ["De Revolutione Scientiarum in 'Media Tempestas'"](#) by Michael F. Flynn
2. ["Cryovolcanoes, Swiss Cheese, and the Walnut Moon"](#) by Richard A. Lovett
3. ["The Ice Age that Wasn't"](#) by Richard A. Lovett

Cover

1. [April](#) - David A. Hardy
2. [December](#) - Jean-Pierre Normand
3. [July/August](#) - David Mattingly

**Asimov's****Novella**

1. [All Seated on the Ground](#) by Connie Willis
2. [The Fountain of Age](#) by Nancy Kress

Novelette

1. [The Prophet of Flores](#) by Ted Kosmatka
2. "News From the Front" by Harry Turtledove
3. "The Mists of Time" by Tom Purdom

Short Story

1. [Dead Horse Point](#) by Daryl Gregory
2. "Teacher's Lounge" by Tim McDaniel
3. "Bullet Dance" by John Schoffstall

Poem

1. "What We're Working For" by Greg Beatty
2. "Classics of Fantasy--A Christmas Carol" by Jack O'Brien
3. "A Meeting of Minds" by Karen L. Frank

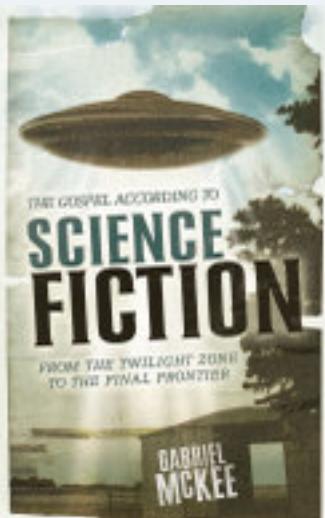
Cover

1. [March](#) - Tor Lundvall
2. [January](#) - Michael Whelan
3. [June](#) - John Allemand

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 09, 2007 at 12:45 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 19, 2007

More reviews of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*



A few more readers have written brief reviews of [*The Gospel According to Science Fiction*](#) in the last few weeks. It has a 4.5 star rating on Amazon, where Tommy Taylor, author of the theological SF novel [*The Second Virgin Birth*](#), recommends it. (And have I mentioned that Robert J. Sawyer's review calls it "fascinating, readable, entertaining, clever, and comprehensive"? That continues to make my day.)

Meanwhile, over at Christianbook.com, editorial reviewer David Crumm writes that "McKee knows his stuff," and reader Neil Culbertson provides a detailed 5-star review:

"Never dry or dull, McKee brings past and present together and shows us that what man most deeply longs for, and expresses even in sci fi, is ultimately answered in the Christian Faith. If you're just looking for an interesting read, or another way to gain perspective on a topic with which to engage people in discussion on an area that is compelling for many, this is an excellent book to read. I just preached a trilogy which I gave the same title and was thoroughly delighted to find this book giving more detailed scrutiny of themes I'd only initially developed."

[*The Gospel According to Science Fiction*](#) is available now (and quite reasonably priced to boot).

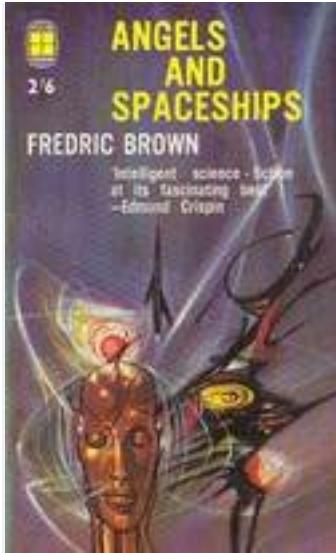
Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 19, 2007 at 08:30 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

[Dig This](#) | [Save to del.icio.us](#)

December 19, 2007

The 10 Best Science Fiction Stories About Religion

I've been writing a fair amount lately about SF stories that get religion wrong—stories that include religion for purposes of stereotype rather than exploration and extrapolation. Religion is a complex subject (or set of subjects), and it frustrates me to read stories that treat it as something simple. What follows is a list of the 10 SF short stories and novellas that I think handle religion the best and, as a result, are among my favorite stories in the genre.



10. Fredric Brown, ["Answer."](#)

Many SF stories have embodied fears about our reliance on technology in religious terms. Brown's short-short—it's less than a page—is the most concise approach to the theme, describing a scientist in a far-future utopia who builds a computer to definitively answer the question of God's existence. You can probably guess the ending (in the off chance that you haven't already read the story a dozen times), but that doesn't make the story any less chilling. "Answer" remains a powerful warning against mistaking creations for Creator.

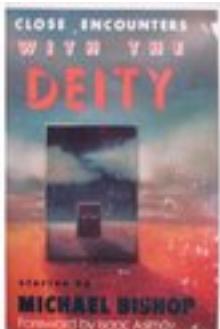
9. Ray Bradbury, ["The Man."](#)

"The Man" is a simple parable involving a prophet who travels from planet to planet; his best-known appearance was on Earth roughly 2,000 years ago. The Man doesn't appear in the story himself—instead, it's the story of Hart, a rocket ship captain who lands on an alien world shortly after the prophet's departure. Hart's initial incredulity about the Man soon turns into a violent obsession, and he threatens the quaint alien villagers with violence if they do not help him locate the prophet. Hart's tragedy is that he thinks of God as a destination, something to be found elsewhere. He doesn't realize that wherever the Man visits, he never truly leaves:

"And he'll go on, planet after planet, seeking and seeking, and always and always he will be an hour late, or a half hour late, or ten minutes late, or a minute late... And he will go on and on, thinking to find that very thing which he left behind here, on this planet."

8. Rick Moody, ["The Albertine Notes."](#)

Along with Jonathan Lethem's *Girl in Landscape*, "The Albertine Notes" is the best story Philip K. Dick never wrote. From the life-goes-on postapocalyptic setting to the time-travel-enabling psychedelic drugs, Moody's novella makes clever use of Dickian elements, but this is far more than a simple pastiche. The story takes place in a New York devastated by a nuclear explosion. The inhabitants of this wasteland rely on a drug called Albertine that allows them to vividly relive their pre-war memories. Albertine—as vivid an embodiment of addictive nostalgia as Dick's Can-D or Wash-35—is presented as a debased form of religious experience. Before long some of the drug's mystics experience memories of the future. But what is a prophecy in a world that has already fallen apart? It's a fine homage to a master of the genre, but it's a wonderful and powerful story in its own right, and one of the best SF stories about religious experience in decades.

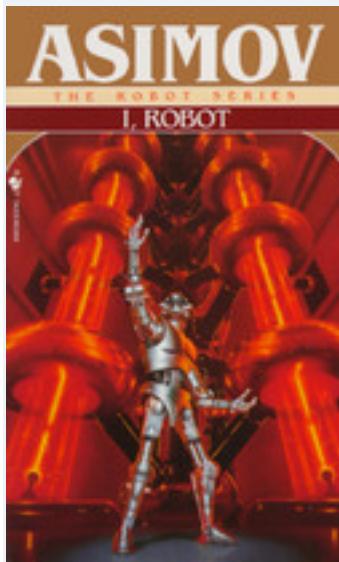


7. Michael Bishop, ["The Gospel According to Gamaliel Crucis."](#)

The concept of the alien savior is one of SF's longer-lived tropes, and it's been botched more often than gotten right. (I'm looking at you, *Stranger in a Strange Land*.) Bishop knocks it out of the park in "Gamaliel Crucis," probably the most original approach to the idea in SF history. "Crucis" assumes that Jesus was truly God made flesh, but also that every species in the universe has been blessed with its own incarnation. Not all species are the same as humankind—the aliens of Acrux V, for instance, have litters numbering in the hundreds. When God takes on their form, there are scores of new Messiahs. A single Messiah, it seems, "would violate the covenant of their biology and the expectations of their culture." Rather than confine themselves to a single planet, they spread throughout the galaxy. "Gamaliel Crucis" is the story of Mantikhoras, the insectoid prophet sent to Earth. Written in the gospel genre, right down to the chapter and verse enumeration, it's a truly unique tale of salvation.

6. Robert Silverberg, ["The Pope of the Chimps."](#) [Full story here.](#)

"The Pope of the Chimps" explores the origins of religious belief, speculating about the birth of a primate theology. A team of scientists working with a group of sign-language-proficient chimpanzees begins noticing some strange behavior after one of the humans dies. After talking with one of the scientists about the death, the chimps develop a concept of the afterlife, and before long they have a fairly robust system of ritual and doctrine. Though it would have been easy for the story to become a simple farce, Silverberg takes a more serious route. At the story's end, it's not so clear that the chimps' religion is a simple parody. Their faith makes them more intelligent, more human—what wonders can our human faith work for us?



5. Isaac Asimov, ["Reason."](#)

Most of the stories in Asimov's *I, Robot* are puzzles with a simple formula: a robot begins malfunctioning, violating one of the Laws of Robotics for reasons unknown, and human investigators ponder the cause of the problem for 15 pages or so and then come up with an ingenious solution. The big exception to this formula is "Reason," which may well be the best thing Asimov ever wrote. In this case the puzzle is more of a moral dilemma: the robots working on a space station beaming solar energy to Earth have developed a religion, and they refuse to believe their human masters about the falsehood of their belief. What sets "Reason" apart from the other robot stories is that the puzzle is its own solution: the robots perform their task ably when operating under the belief that the space station is God and

the Earth does not exist. Since the mechanics of the mystery don't matter, "Reason" takes more time pondering its themes. Its attitude toward religion appears condescending, but the story ends up giving religion an only-slightly-backhanded complement: the robots actually operate *better* believing in God, and their manufacturer begins indoctrinating all of their creations in the new faith. In other words, "Reason" argues that faith works.



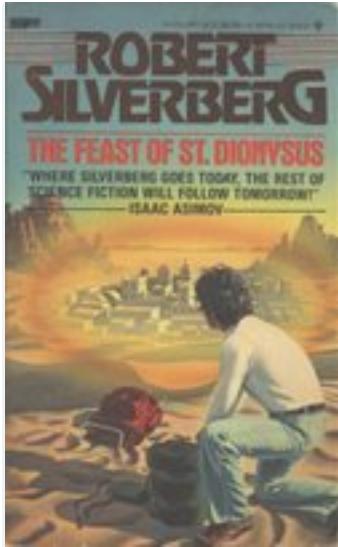
4. Katharine Kerr, ["Asylum."](#)

"Asylum" is a dystopian story set in a near-future U.S. that has fallen to an evangelical coup. The story isn't all hyperbole—it takes at face value the militaristic language of real-life Christian conservatives like Tim LaHaye and [Ron Luce](#) (founder of Battle Cry, possibly the most militaristic expression of Christian faith since the Crusades). The story's real strength is that it focuses not on the military violence of this authoritarian regime, but on the emotional and spiritual toll it takes on the families it tears apart. The protagonist of the story is a college professor named Janet Corey who is exiled by the new government. Corey is the author of *Christian Fascism: The Politics of Righteousness* (an interesting parallel Chris Hedges' real-world book [American Fascists: The Christian Right And The War On America](#)). For daring to decry the reactionary movement, Corey is forced to seek asylum in the U.K. The story of her thwarted attempts to contact family and friends in the U.S. makes Kerr's story a top-notch tragedy and a moving indictment of the concept of "spiritual warfare."



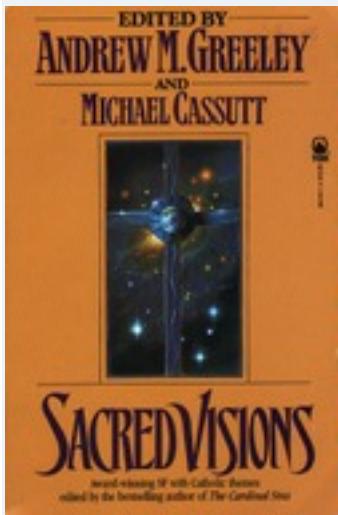
3. Philip K. Dick, ["Faith of Our Fathers."](#)

Religious paranoia is a hallmark of Dick's writing. The voyeuristic deity of *Eye in the Sky* and the sinister eucharist of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* ultimately informed Dick's own religious experiences in 1974. His subsequent writing is torn between the idea of a compassionate God and a cruel one. "Faith of Our Fathers," Dick's entry in Harlan Ellison's watershed *Dangerous Visions* anthology (and undoubtedly that collection's best story), represents the depth of his pre-1974 terror of God. The story describes the ultimate dystopia: an authoritarian government that subdues its populace with hallucinogens that prevent them from learning the true nature of their government. When the story's characters ingest an anti-hallucinogen they discover that the leader of their society is a monstrous predator that also happens to be the One True God. This Lovecraftian revelation makes for a singularly disturbing story; Dick described it as "the most frightening vision I could imagine." The story's grim spirituality shouldn't be mistaken for a complete picture of Dick's religious thought, but the fears the story embodies are an essential aspect of his theology.



2. Robert Silverberg, "[The Feast of St. Dionysus.](#)"

In the 1970s, Silverberg was the master of contemplative SF, penning bleak mood pieces and character studies about the psychological fallout of technological advances. "The Feast of St. Dionysus" is his masterpiece: the story of a former astronaut, the sole survivor of an ill-fated trip to Mars, who seeks spiritual annihilation in the desert of the Southwest. John Oxenshuer, overwhelmed with guilt over the death of his fellow explorers, seeks to isolate himself from human society, but instead finds earthbound transcendence in a desert monastery dedicated to mystical ecstasy and divine debauchery. "Feast" focuses on the alienation of the frontier, equating the astronaut and the monk as liminal figures at both the physical and the spiritual boundaries of civilization. The mystical implications of space travel are frequently mentioned in SF, but rarely are they explored so thoroughly.



1. Jack McDevitt, "[Gus.](#)"

The monastery is a stereotypical setting for SF stories about religion. Owing, perhaps, to the success of stories like Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle For Leibowitz*, dozens of stories have attempted to explore the future of the contemplative life, but few have done so as intelligently as this story (which, tragically, has only appeared in print once, in Michael Cassutt and Andrew M. Greeley's Catholic-themed anthology [Sacred Visions](#).) The story's eponymous character is a computer simulation of Augustine of Hippo, purchased by a Catholic seminary for classroom instruction. The AI embodies the argumentativeness of its progenitor too well, and it soon clashes with the monastery's administration—"The thing must have been programmed by Unitarians," sneers the Monsignor. Augustine is a frequently-misunderstood figure, but McDevitt doesn't fall into any of the common pitfalls, and the story truly brings the Doctor of the Church to life. When a friendship grows between the AI and a young monk, the strength of Gus's characterization makes it a moving journey. By the story's conclusion, Gus has made a compelling case for

the existence of his own soul. The care and insight that McDevitt shows in presenting people (and computers) of faith embodies an ideal to which all SF stories about religion should aspire.

Honorable Mention, in no particular order: Theodore Sturgeon, "[The Microcosmic God.](#)" Brian Aldiss, "[Heresies of the Huge God.](#)" Richard Bowker, "[Contamination.](#)" Ted Chiang, "[Hell is the Absence of God.](#)" Richard Chwedyk, "[The Measure of All Things.](#)" Arthur C. Clarke, "[The Nine Billion Names of God.](#)" Philip José Farmer, "[Prometheus.](#)" Tom Godwin, "[The Cold Equations.](#)" Harry Harrison, "[The Streets of Ashkelon.](#)" Ian McDonald, "[Tendeléo's Story.](#)"

Many of the stories above are discussed further in [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

A note on criteria: Since this is a list of short stories, I have excluded novellas that are better-known for their adaptation into full novels (otherwise Blish's "A Case of Conscience" and Moorcock's "Behold the Man" would have been included, among potential others). I haven't distinguished between stories of different lengths; the whole novella/novelet thing has always both irritated and confused me, so for my purposes they're all just "short stories." There are some excellent stories that include religious ideas tangentially but aren't really *about* religion ("The Measure of All Things"), or are very much about religion but aren't SF properly speaking ("Hell is the Absence of God"); these have been relegated to the "Honorable Mention" list but are very much worth reading.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 19, 2007 at 08:56 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 03, 2008

John G. Hemry's "The Bookseller of Bastet" (*Analog*, March 2008)

The March 2008 [Analog](#) includes a short-short by John G. Hemry called "The Bookseller of Bastet" that spoke to both my librarians and theological interests. It's the story of a bookseller on a future colony world who struggles against both political censorship and cultural-technological obsolescence. For a story of under 4 pages there's an awful lot going on, and much of it involves an unpopular religious sect that is accused of violence and in turn becomes victim to greater violence. At the heart of the story, though, is a sense of melancholy about the wisdom that is lost in the mad rush to the future, as the bookseller explains:

"Too many say they don't need these books... I tell them everything they want to know, someone else has thought or dreamed of, and it's all here for them to see. Would it kill them to learn of such thoughts? But, no, they claim to honor the past but don't care to learn from it because they say the future will be different."

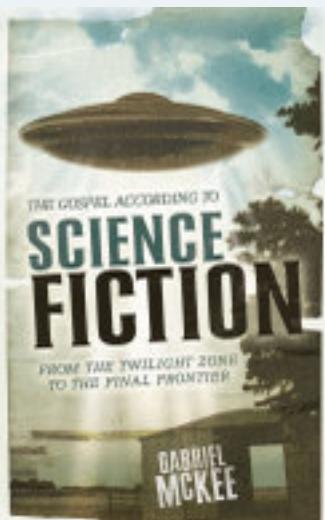
Hemry symbolizes this lost knowledge in specific religious terms; the lessons that the bookseller's society needs to learn involve faith and tolerance. This is a story about religion and violence, but it doesn't fall into some of the [pitfalls](#) that surround that topic—Hemry fits a lot of nuance into those four pages.

There's other great stuff in this issue, too, including a nice time travel tale from Howard Hendrix and the second installment in Joe Haldeman's *Marsbound*. Have you considered [subscribing](#)? 'Cause you should.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 03, 2008 at 10:23 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 03, 2008

For your consideration...



If you haven't done so already, please consider voting for [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) in SF Site's annual [Readers' Choice Best of the Year Awards](#). The best part? You can vote for 4-10 books, stories, comics, and other sundry items, so there's plenty of room on your ballot for whatever you read and loved this year. Check out the full rules [here](#).

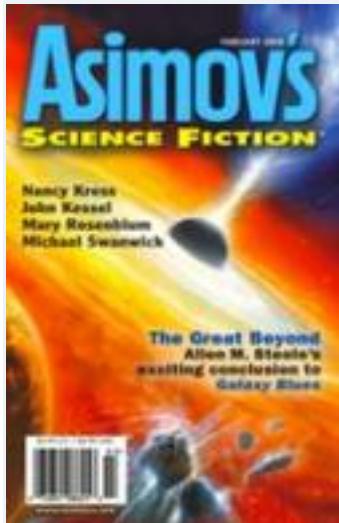
Haven't read the book yet? There's still time! Ballots aren't due until February 8th, so you've got over a month to [read it](#).

In other nomination-related news, Robert J. Sawyer dropped the H word in his [most recent reference](#) to the [Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) a couple weeks ago... Any fellow Hugo voters/[Denvention](#) attendees willing to take up the [nomination challenge](#)? That would be neat.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 03, 2008 at 10:37 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 06, 2008

The Teleology of James Alan Gardner's "The Ray-Gun: A Love Story"



"This is a story about a ray-gun. The ray-gun will not be explained except to say, 'It shoots rays.'"

[James Alan Gardner's](#) "The Ray-Gun: A Love Story" ([Asimov's](#), February 2008) is my kind of SF story. It takes a simple premise—a young boy discovers the eponymous alien artifact—and explores it with strong characters and a healthy dose of philosophy. Jack, the boy who finds the weapon, becomes obsessed with his discovery, and as he grows into adulthood this obsession comes to define him. His interest in the gun leads him to a career in science; his fears about its discovery lead him to push away those whom he loves. Before long both he and the reader begin to

wonder if the ray-gun is intelligently guiding its owner to predetermined ends. This sort of high-tech teleology is a common trope in SF—among other things, it's the foundation of Asimov's *Foundation*. The idea that there is a way things are supposed to be, a conclusion to which everything is moving, is essential to any satisfying story, but SF allows a greater degree of transparency about the intelligence(s) that determine that end. The whys of Gardner's story remain sketchy; the ray-gun is, after all, wholly alien, and its design is as ineffable as its tech. Nevertheless, it's a moving exploration of the concept of the happy ending. The real strength of the story is its characters. Jack seems to be painted in broad strokes—we learn few concrete details about him, and he doesn't even have a last name. But Gardner tells his story confidently, and as a result he feels more real by the story's end than if he were granted more exposition. This early in the year, we already have a strong contender for next year's Hugo for Best Novelette. There are other great stories in *Asimov's* this month as well: Nancy Kress's "Sex and Violence" puts a different sort of teleology into short, sweet love story (of sorts); John Kessel's "The Last American" is a portrait of the many faces of a future president/military officer/artist/religious leader; Michael Swanwick's "From Babel's Fall'n Glory We Fled" ponders, among other things, alien ideas of original sin; and Edward M. Lerner's "Inside the Box" points out the very problem that's always bugged me about Schroedinger's cat. My recommendation of [subscription](#) goes double for *Asimov's*.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on January 06, 2008 at 05:46 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

January 12, 2008

An Android in Gethsemane



Entertainment Weekly has run the above picture alongside an article of spoilers for the final season of *Battlestar Galactica*. Producer Ron Moore explains the rationale for putting Six in the Jesus position:

"Baltar's Six has proclaimed that she is delivering the gospel of the [Cylons'] one true god, so it seemed natural to place her at the center of the photo."

They're presenting it as a semi-flippant way of giving simple spoilers, but one has to wonder if there isn't a deeper message about the show's theology here. Six hasn't seemed terribly messianic thus far (though other characters have, including Starbuck and [Baltar](#)), but I expect we'll learn a bit more in the 10 episodes to come. Keen eyes will also note that the positioning of the characters suggests a mirror image of the [Da Vinci fresco](#), meaning Anders is in the Judas position... but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Read the full article, such as it is, [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 12, 2008 at 07:02 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 14, 2008

Bare-Faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard



In honor of Will Smith's apparently imminent [conversion to Scientology](#), I present [this link](#) to the full text of Russell Miller's biography *Bare-Faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard*. Those who have read [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) may have wondered why I didn't discuss Scientology, and the short answer is that I don't really have anything to say about it that Miller didn't say first. He details Hubbard's pathological lies about his life and the dubious ethics with which he ran his church, exploring both the wacky and the downright sinister tales spun by one of the greatest con men in history. One of my favorite bits is the story in [chapter 14](#) in which Hubbard poses as a "revolutionary horticultural scientist," proving that plants can feel pain by hooking them up to an E-meter.

Be sure to also read "[Suppressive Persons](#)," which describes the Church's attempts to suppress Miller's book. The Church's tactics are the same now as then: they're rumored to be [filing a \\$100 million lawsuit](#) against St. Martin's Press, publishers of Andrew Morton's forthcoming *Tom Cruise: An Unauthorized Biography*, which claims that Cruise is one of the Church's top leaders).

[*Bare-Faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard*](#)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 14, 2008 at 08:09 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 15, 2008

Amid the io9 avalanche...

Some posts of interest on io9: First up, a handy infographic on [SF epics and Joseph Campbell's monomyth](#). The obvious ones are there, of course (*Star Wars*, *The Last Starfighter*, but oddly no *Dune*). But it also gets pretty obscure (*City of Ember*? The *Tripods* trilogy?), which is kind of neat. *Star Wars* earns 19/20, but if you see Han Solo as a sort of symbolic brother to Luke Skywalker you could argue for a perfect 20. I question the presence of an apotheosis in *Starship Troopers*, though I think there *is* one at the end of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

Second up, a list of [Science Fiction Angels Who Are Really Aliens in Disguise](#). Somewhat inexplicably, it starts with a discussion of *Left Behind*. But there's some interesting stuff on the list proper—I'm very curious about Lyda Morehouse's *Archangel Protocol* and *Fallen Host*.

Lastly, an [interesting post](#) on some differences between the original pilot of *The Sarah Conner Chronicles* and the episode that actually aired on Sunday. The key scene in question involves the final monologue of the episode. As it aired, they're sitting on a swingset acting melancholy; in the original pilot they were packing up an arsenal of weapons. My guess: the intention wasn't to make Sarah Conner appear wimpy, but to minimize the amount of screentime given to teenagers holding guns. (That or something having to do with story logic: if they're not gonna use the guns next episode, they shouldn't have them now.) In any event, the character's not at risk of appearing too weak—on last night's second episode she jacks somebody's motorcycle and [uses it as a projectile weapon](#). I was pretty darned impressed with the two-night premiere; the show is off to a darned good start. Now if they can only get Jane Espenson on board...

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 15, 2008 at 05:45 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 18, 2008

The Top 10 Action Heroes Who Deserve a Comeback



New by me at the Screengrab: [The Top Ten Action Heroes Who Deserve A Comeback](#):

Recent years may well be remembered for bringing back the over-the-top action hero. New sequels to *Rocky*, *Die Hard*, and *Rambo* have revived long-dead franchises, and the trend is continuing. *Indiana Jones 4* has started filming, and a fourth *Mad Max* film would have wrapped by now had scheduling conflicts not led director George Miller to make *Happy Feet* instead. Though it's an easy trend to mock, it opens the door for other action heroes to be resurrected — here are some top candidates.

Entries 10-6 are [here](#), and 5-1 are [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 18, 2008 at 10:04 AM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 20, 2008

Sin and Redemption, With Giant Monsters: *Cloverfield* reviewed



My review-essay of *Cloverfield* and kaiju theology is available at [Religion Dispatches](#), a soon-to-be-launched website about religion and modern culture. An excerpt:

"Kaiju films take a certain pleasure in unleashing destruction, and lurking at the dark heart of that pleasure is a sense that, somehow, we deserve it. The kaiju bring punishment; the human drama explains the sin. Godzilla wouldn't attack Tokyo if humankind didn't awaken him with nuclear weapons. Mothra wouldn't attack California if greedy capitalists didn't kidnap his miniature priestesses. The monsters symbolically destroy our human world, and we cheer because we think it's all our fault. We deserve it, this says—a theology of sin and divine retribution... Cloverfield, shot in shaky, first-person video, is all about human impact. But what is the sin for which the monster is punishment?"

Read my full review here:

[Cloverfield: Sin & Redemption, with Monsters](#)

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on January 20, 2008 at 08:32 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 24, 2008

The Sarah Connor Chronicles

From James McGrath (Exploring Our Matrix), [a brief essay](#) on messianism and epistemology, among other things, on the *Sarah Connor Chronicles*.

I haven't thought much about any religious aspects of the show, apparent or otherwise, but perhaps I should—it *is* a series about a premillennial savior, after all. [Apparently](#) the show has been suffering a big ratings dropoff, which is a shame because it's pretty darned good. Granted, this week's episode wasn't nearly as good as the premiere—once we get to the high school, it's more *Smallville* than *Buffy*. Maybe it's just the date of the source material, but the show feels oddly early-90s to me. Time will tell whether that's a good thing ([Alien Nation](#)) or a bad thing ([War of the Worlds](#)).

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on January 24, 2008 at 09:51 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 30, 2008

Thomas Wilson's "The Face of the Enemy"--An interstellar faith-off



One of the best things about reading through my growing collection of vintage SF magazines is uncovering forgotten gems like Thomas Wilson's "The Face of the Enemy" (*Astounding*, August 1952). Wilson's entire career in SF spanned about 6 months in the early '50s, in which time he published three stories in *Astounding* that were never reprinted or anthologized. "The Face of the Enemy" was the first of these three, and it's surprisingly confident for a first story—one is tempted to suspect that Wilson is a pseudonym for someone better known, though the [ISFDB](#) isn't aware of it if he is.

The story opens on a shocking scene—the apparent suicide by ray-gun of the chaplain of an interstellar ship. Chaplain Alciabiades Smith of the Interstellar Patrol is discovered shortly after a night of uncharacteristic debauchery in an alien city. But something about the minister's death doesn't sit right with Lt. Ferd Brazil, who launches an investigation into Smith's last hours. His investigation leads him to ask some tough questions about the idyllic society of the alien Kelani, which is one of those SF utopias beneath which something unpleasant must always lurk. Several members of Brazil's crew don't trust the Kelani, and are particularly wary of Kel, the science-cum-religion that governs their planet:

"[The Kelani] civilization was ready to reach for the stars when we on Terra had barely discovered atomics. Then came Kel, a blight on a field of rich wheat. Overnight technology stagnated, population has declined to the present billion plus, science has decayed. Their ancient cities hang abandoned like rotten fruit. The planets are pleasure resorts, their glory forgotten. All of their energy and drive are channeled into fields which yield the sterile harvest of sensuality and pleasure. Art, yes; music, yes. They have become a great artistic race, if you can call art without soul great."

The socialism of Kel is hedonistic and egalitarian, but also disturbingly conformist, and Wilson sets it up in opposition to Smith's improbably named faith in "Believism." This is an individualistic, even capitalistic heir of Christianity, embodying both the brimstone and the work ethic of Puritanism. The story's cold war dichotomy is fairly plain-American ideals distilled into Believism; Communism represented by Kel—but the story's depiction of the conflict as a clash of religious systems is somewhat surprising. The story's conclusion, which reveals the full extent of the Kelani plot, serves to underscore the story's paranoia. Wilson likens Kel to an interstellar virus, and the closing paragraphs of his story make a religious argument for the will to explore. Though the story is very much a product of its era, it's also aged remarkably well, and its warning against complacency is timely in any decade.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on January 30, 2008 at 06:58 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 07, 2008

SF Site Reader's Poll - Last chance to vote!

The deadline for voting in [SF Site's Reader's Choice Awards](#) is tomorrow, February 8th. Anything published (or even reprinted) in the year 2007 in any format that even vaguely relates to SF or fantasy is eligible, and you can vote for 4-10 items. Submitted for your consideration, casually and with no ulterior motive whatsoever, is the fact that my book, *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*, was published in January 2007.

Furthermore, the 2007 [Locus Awards](#) ballot is in the February issue, which should be hitting the stands any day now.

See my personal picks for the SF Site poll after the jump.

1. ***The Gospel According to Science Fiction* by Gabriel Mckee;**
Westminster John Knox

What else *could* I put in the top place?

2. *Voices from the Street* by Philip K. Dick, Tor

Over 50 years after it was written, Dick's final extant novel finally sees print. Bonus: it's pretty darned good, too. See my review [here](#).

3. *Rollback* by Robert J. Sawyer, Tor

If Sawyer's written a bad book, I haven't read it yet. I eagerly anticipated *Analog* in the four months this novel was serialized there. My full review is [here](#).

4. *Teatro Grottesco* by Thomas Ligotti, Mythos

[Ligotti](#) is pretty much the best horror writer ever, but he has a hard time keeping his books in print. This collection contains "Gas Station Carnivals," a favorite of mine—it captures nightmare logic better than anything else I've read.

5. *The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction*, ed. George Mann, Solaris

A strong collection from this new imprint. I reviewed a handful of the stories [here](#).

6. *Infinity X Two: The Life and Art of Ed and Carol Emshwiller* by Luis Ortiz, Nonstop Press

Emsh was the greatest SF illustrator of his era; his covers are a major factor in my interest in '50s and '60s SF. Full disclosure: I haven't actually read the text of this book yet; I've just been taking in the amazing pictures.

7. *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan, Scholastic/Levine

There's a reason this book is topping everybody's "year's best comics" lists.

8. "Quaestiones Super Caelo et Mundo" by Michael F. Flynn, *Analog*, July/August 2007

Medievalist SF—it's like Flynn is reading my mind. Read the ongoing saga of this story [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). And [here](#).

9. *Nextwave vol. 2: I Kick Your Face* by Warren Ellis and Stuart Immonen, Marvel Comics

Warren, whenever you want to stop spending all your time on *Doktor Sleepless* and start this back up, you're more than welcome to.

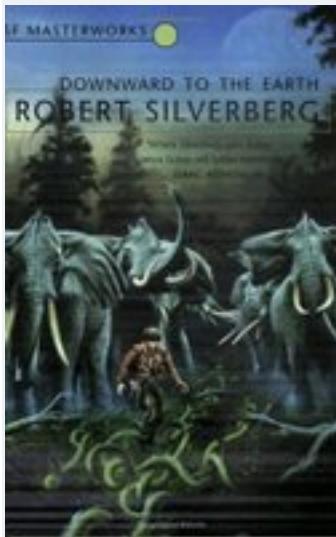
10. *Grey* by John Armstrong, Nightshade Books

I have an enormous reading backlog, so I'm usually reading something from 40 years ago instead of something brand new. Armstrong kindly released his debut novel as a [free podcast](#), so I was able to take the whole thing in whilst at work over the course of two days. I like this trend.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 07, 2008 at 05:53 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 07, 2008

Robert Silverberg's *Downward to the Earth*



In my list of [The 10 Best Science Fiction Stories About Religion](#), I described Robert Silverberg as "the master of contemplative SF," and his 1969 novel [Downward to the Earth](#) provides further evidence for that description. *Downward* is the story of Edmund Gundersen, a former colonial administrator on the planet Belzagor. There are two intelligent races on this planet—semi-bestial primates called the sulidoror and the more intelligent, elephant-like nildoror. These creatures have a complex society, but it shows few signs of what humans consider "civilization". They have no technology, no domesticated animals or cultivated food, and, for the more-intelligent nildoror, no villages or permanent abodes of any kind. When humans first came to Belzagor they seized control and exercised a presumptuous dominion over the nildoror, seeing them as little more than talking beasts. For decades, the nildoror were essentially enslaved to the humans. But gradually the nature of nildoror intelligence and society became apparent, and the human colonists gave control of the planet back to its natives.

It is now nine years after this "relinquishment," and Edmund Gundersen, who once served as a colonial official, has returned to Belzagor to learn more about the nildoror and to exorcize the demons of his past. He hopes to learn more about the natives, and particularly about their mysterious religious rituals. At some point in their lives, all nildoror make a pilgrimage to a region called "the mist country" for a cryptic "rebirth." The mist country is a forbidden zone—some sulidoror live there, but nildoror may only travel there at the time of rebirth, and humans are not allowed to enter without permission. The nildoror allow Gundersen to travel there on the condition that he bring back Cedric Cullen, a human who broke an unspecified nildoror law and has been hiding in the mist country to avoid punishment.

The story's debt to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is clear—there's even a character named Kurtz but it's far more than a simple SFnal transposition in the vein of [Robinson Crusoe on Mars](#). *Downward* is a powerful tale in its own right, a thoughtful exploration of guilt, forgiveness, and the sins of colonialism.

The story centers around confessions. During an argument with a group of human tourists, Gundersen reveals the sin of his colonial career, the transgression he wishes to set right by learning about the nildoror. At the novel's end, we learn what Cullen's sin against the planet's natives. And in between the two, Gundersen meets a character whose experiences of nildoror religious rituals has rendered him incapable of confessing but the nature of the character makes him a living confession; his sins are apparent rather than hidden. Regardless of what meaning the rebirth ceremony has for the nildoror, for Gundersen it becomes symbolic of the redemption he hopes to achieve. Silverberg is in top form in *Downward to the Earth*, and the novel's approach to its moral questions is unflinching. It's a story every bit as powerful as ["Feast of St. Dionysius"](#) or ["Dying Inside"](#), and, though it's been largely forgotten, it's a fine example of SF at its best.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 07, 2008 at 08:56 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 08, 2008

Evolution Weekend Blog-a-Thon post #1: Godtube evolution videos

I'm hoping to get a second post in later today or tomorrow for James McGrath's [Evolution Weekend Blog-A-Thon](#). In the meantime, though, check out this post at [Godspam](#):

[The Best of Godtube: Evolution Videos](#)

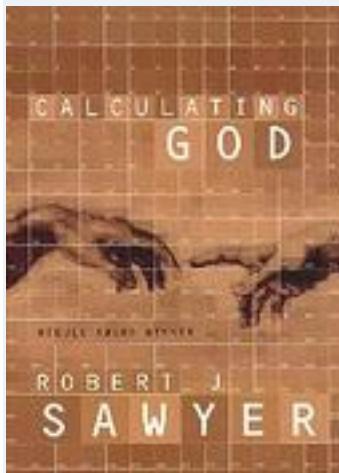
[Godspam](#) is Gwynne's shiny-new blog on the more absurd aspects of religion in pop culture, and it's a rollicking good time. Have a look at her other posts while you're over there; fun is guaranteed.*

*That's a money-back guarantee. Which, considering that you didn't pay anything, is a good deal for everybody.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 08, 2008 at 04:11 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 09, 2008

Evolution Weekend Blog-a-Thon post #2: The Unified Theology of Robert J. Sawyer's *Calculating God*



Readers of this blog know that I'm a big fan of Robert J. Sawyer, and [Calculating God](#) is my favorite of his books. It's Sawyer's most thorough exploration of religious ideas, and makes fine use of the philosophical dialogs that are a trademark of his fiction. The story describes a first contact scenario with two races of aliens, the Forhilnor and the Weeds, who believe in God—an intelligent designer who has manipulated the universe to give rise to intelligent life. They fear that a soon-to-be-triggered supernova will cause an extinction on our galaxy's three known inhabited worlds, and they seek the help of a paleontologist, Thomas Jericho, in contacting God to prevent an interstellar cataclysm. But Jericho doesn't believe in God, giving the aliens ample opportunity to explain their intermingled theology and science.

The aliens make no distinction between religion and science. Their main spokesman, Hollus, explains:

"The primary goal of modern science... is to discover why God has behaved as he has and to determine his methods... We do not believe that he simply waves his hands and wishes things into existence. We live in a universe of physics, and he must have used quantifiable physical processes to accomplish his ends. If he has indeed been guiding the broad strokes of evolution on at least three worlds, then we must ask how? And why? What is he trying to accomplish?"

For these aliens physics, biology, and theology are all aspects of the same thing. They're confused at the divisions that humans have built up: they don't understand conservative Christians' rejection of contraception or the unpopularity of the anthropic principle. And they especially do not understand the supposed conflict between God and evolution; in their system, the existence of God points to evolution and evolution points to the existence of God. They may use terminology reminiscent of intelligent design, but these aliens can't be mistaken for creationists.

You'd think it would be a more popular idea. From [dark energy](#) to [supersymmetry](#), there's plenty in modern science to incite a theological renaissance, and to [some extent](#) it has. But creationists are still among the loudest voices in the conversation, and they're holding back the development of a more robust theology. As Hollus argues, we need a God that fits the facts of our universe. Evolution is one of those facts, and is actually a gateway to some wonderful theological concepts (among them Teilhard de Chardin's [Christ the Evolver](#)).

That's the kind of thing the term "intelligent design" *should* be used to define—a theology informed by science that seeks to find God's imprint on the observable, explainable phenomena of the universe. It seems deistic at first to say that God acts through scientific, physical laws, and the Forhilnor do seem to view God as a sort of minimally-acting watchmaker. But the Weeds take a more maximalist view:

"God observes; wavefronts collapse. God's chosen people are those whose existence he/she/it validates by observing.!"

'You are suggesting,' I said, 'that God chooses moment by moment which present reality he wants to observe, and, by so doing, has built up a concrete history timeslice by timeslice, frame by frame?'

'Such must be the case.'"

Quantum physics gives a concrete way of explaining the unfathomable awesomeness of God's power, but since it comes with the association of non-theistic ideas, creationists want nothing to do with it. (Indeed, as [one Godtube video](#) shows, some creationists go so far as to reject the concept of *ex nihilo* creation as too similar to the Big Bang theory.) And atheists don't like it too much either—*The Skeptical Inquirer* lambasted *Calculating God* as "pro-creationist," prompting [two responses](#) from Sawyer. The aliens in *Calculating God* science and theology feed one another rather than fighting and in the end their union saves the galaxy.

Sawyer has assembled an array of articles relating to *Calculating God* on [his website](#), where you can also read the book's [opening chapter](#). You can also read Sawyer's short essay "[Science and God](#)," in which he lays aside the artifice of drama and character to explain his personal thoughts on religion and science.

I discuss the novel's attitude to questions of faith and proof in chapter 7 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 09, 2008 at 02:28 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 11, 2008

Rambo: The Sermon on the Mount(ain of bodies)



Another post by me at [Religion Dispatches](#): some thoughts on the ironic union between real-world Christian missionaries and an imaginary, nihilistic action hero.

The missionary group Christian Freedom International issued a call this week for renewed humanitarian aid to Burma. The impetus for the announcement was the success of Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo*, which depicts the brutal oppression of Burma's Karen people. There's a certain irony in this fusion of missionary and mercenary; namely, that the entire point of *Rambo* is to argue against humanitarian aid.

Read the full post here:

[Rambo & Christian Fellow Travelers](#)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 11, 2008 at 09:57 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 11, 2008

Four-Color Theophanies: Ten comic book characters who have met God

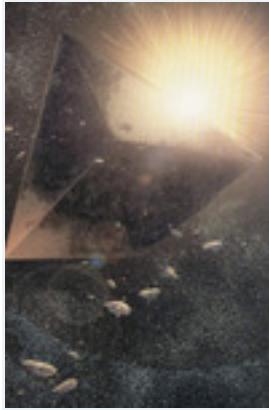


Mayor Mitchell Hundred (*Ex Machina* #33, by Brian K. Vaughan, Tony Harris, and Jim Clark)

During his recent audience with the Pope in last month's *Ex Machina* #33, some dastardly villains tried to mind-control Mayor Hundred into murdering the pontiff. He resisted, but what really averted the assassination was a sudden mystical experience. Hundred sees God as a living embodiment of New York City. (The Liberty Torch fingers

are my favorite touch). It's a truly awe-inspiring moment, and it seems it will spark a new status quo for the series. The true nature of the vision is a mystery that Vaughan is unlikely to solve soon, but I for one hope he doesn't eff the ineffable *too* much as the story unfolds.

In no particular order, here are nine other comic characters who have had met their maker...



The Authority (*The Authority* #9-12, by Warren Ellis and Bryan Hitch)

Warren Ellis-created superteam The Authority didn't just meet God—they killed him. In this universe, an enormous alien pyramid created the Earth billions of years ago. It comes back to reclaim its creation, killing thousands in its initial attempts at xenoforming our world. That doesn't sit right with the Authority, and their leader, Jenny Sparks, electrocutes his brain. So much for "the earth is My footstool." (For a bit more on the Authority's battle with God, see chapter one of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).)



The Savage Dragon (*Savage Dragon* #31, by Erik Larsen)

The Savage Dragon is a superhero of his convictions. Even after watching firsthand as God kicks the crap out of Satan, he persists in believing that the big guy is a human invention. He harangues the deity with some Big Questions, and God, irritated by the interrogation, gives some deliberately pedantic answers. The Dragon's team-up with God didn't sell as well as his team-up with Todd McFarlane's Spawn shortly before, but McFarlane declined Larsen's suggestion to make up ads citing those sales figures as proof that his character was more popular than God.



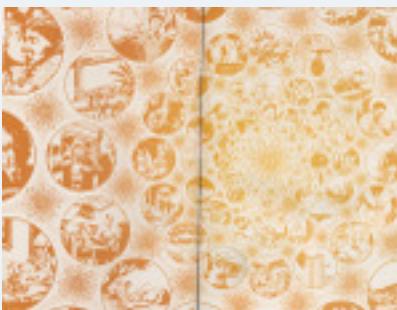
Dr. Strange (Marvel Premiere #13-14, by Steve Englehart and Frank Brunner)

Dr. Strange has met dozens of deities in his career, but in *Marvel Premiere* #13-14, he met Cagliostro, a time-traveling medieval magician who seeks to become God. The bizarre twist is that he succeeds, moving back in time and gathering magical energy until he becomes an all-powerful creature at the beginning of time—"And what is another term for an all-powerful being at the dawn of creation? ...IT IS GOD!" Dubbing himself "Sise-nig", Cagliostro announces his intention to recreate the universe. After an issue's worth of hand-wringing over what he will do with his unfathomable power, he does—nothing. He's all-powerful, but he's also all-knowing,, and he learns that the world that existed is the best of all possible worlds, so he puts things back just how they were. Cagliostro remains an elephant in the room of the Marvel Universe, since he actually *did* create everything in the reset universe.



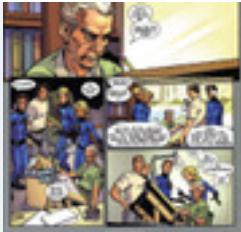
Jesse Custer (Preacher #49, by Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon)

God, as written by Garth Ennis, is a jerk. When Jesse Custer attempts to hold God accountable for the tragedies he's endured, the enraged deity bites his eye out, steals his memory, and separates him from his supporting cast for a dozen issues or so. The joke's on God, though—in the final issue of the series, the Saint of Killers, a sort of ultraviolent, Old West version of the Wandering Jew, shoots him dead and reclines on his throne. *Preacher* is set in a violent world, and has a violent supreme being to match.



Promethea (Promethea #23, by Alan Moore, J.H. Williams III, and Mick Gray)

The centerpiece of *Promethea* is a mystical journey exploring Alan Moore's theories on magic, writing, spirituality, and just about everything else. The final stop on this qabbalistic quest is immersion in the source of all creation. Little surprise that the apotheosis comes down to words and pictures. After a fade to white, Moore presents two double-page spreads: one of hundreds of speech bubbles containing prayers in various languages, and another showing dozens of illustrations of the infinite variety of the human experience. We are God, *Promethea* tells us—let's make the most of it.*



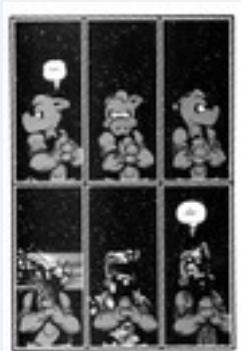
The Fantastic Four (*Fantastic Four* #511, by Mark Waid, Mike Wieringo, and Karl Kesel)

When The Thing dies, the rest of the Fantastic Four use a machine created by Dr. Doom to go to heaven and bring him back. After causing a small degree of mayhem, they finally have an audience with God himself—who turns out to be Jack Kirby. It's a bizarre story, but a clever idea, even though they weren't the first to think of it...



Supreme (*Supreme: The Return* #6, by Alan Moore, Rick Veitch, and Rob Liefeld)

...because Alan Moore and Rick Veitch granted Image's Superman analog a very similar sort of encounter. Both stories use the King to examine the nature of human creativity and to show the affection that this particular creator held for his works. Stan Lee has met a number of his creations, particularly in recent years, but only Kirby has been depicted as God.



Cerebus (*Cerebus* #192-199, by Dave Sim and Gerhard)

Dave Sim's anthropomorphic aardvark Cerebus has had several mystical experiences. Perhaps the oddest takes place at the end of *Minds*, the concluding section of the 50-issue epic *Mothers and Daughters* storyline, in which Cerebus embarks on a lushly-illustrated accidental journey through the solar system. Somewhere past Jupiter, he's hit in the face with a mysterious pie and begins to hear a voice in his head—a voice that calls itself "Dave." What follows is a 140-page dialog between Sim and his protagonist, who has quite a few questions to ask. Sim was well on his way down the rabbit hole of misogyny, [paranoia](#), and general crackpottery that consumed the last few years of his career, but that doesn't stop the theophany in *Minds* from being one of the series' truly visionary moments.



Animal Man (Animal Man #26, by Grant Morrison and Chas Truog)

Dave Sim isn't the only creator to feel a little bad about the mistreatment his creations suffer. By the end of Morrison's 26-issue run on *Animal Man*, the hero had seen his powers scrambled, his origin retconned before his eyes, and his entire family killed. In the final issue, Animal Man meets his maker, and their conversation is a sad, funny, and all-around brilliant meditation on the relation between character and author, creator and creation, God and man. Is it a gimmick? Sure. But it's also 24 of the best pages in comics history.

I'm sure I missed a bunch—feel free to list others in the comments!

*Bragging *Promethea* aside: a few years ago, I bought the original art for the [Mobius strip page](#) from *Promethea* #15, which is pretty much my favorite page of comics art ever. Immediately after the purchase someone offered to trade me the cover for #23, the theophany issue. It was tempting... but not that tempting. That Mobius strip is awesome.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 11, 2008 at 11:38 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 21, 2008

Atlantic Monthly's mixed messages on religion



Religion is the cover story of the [current issue](#) of *the Atlantic Monthly*, but the stories and the cover don't quite match up. Over at [Religion Dispatches](#), I explore the mixture of messages on religion and conflict. Check it out [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 21, 2008 at 10:45 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 21, 2008

Link-o-rama

I've been a bit behind on reading links that I've been sent or stumbled across. I'd intended to say something more about some of these, but for the time being a list will have to suffice.

- [The Church of the Masses](#) ponders the morality of *Battlestar Galactica*.
- [Sci Phi](#) is a newly-launched journal on philosophy in SF. From the look of it, it hopes to be for soft SF what *Analog* is for hard SF, which is certainly a worthy goal. [Hat tip: [Robert J. Sawyer](#).]
- [Out of the Cocoon](#) explores science fiction and the emerging church. Bonus: apparently [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) is stocked in Christian bookstores in the UK.
- There's not terribly much there yet, but the new site [SciFi and God](#) should soon be host to some interesting discussions.

- [The New York Times](#) reports on Ajinbayo Akinsiku's manga scripture adaptation *The Manga Bible: From Genesis to Revelation*, and [The Revealer](#) reminds them that this isn't exactly an original concept.
- [Comics Should Be Good](#) reviews Jim Munroe and Salgood Sam's "post-rapture graphic novel" *Therefore Repent!* I couldn't help but think of *Southland Tales* while reading this review; it seems to take a very similar left-wing approach to a traditionally right-wing interpretation of apocalyptic literature.
- [Books Under the Bridge](#) has a four-part post on religion in SF. Full disclosure: I haven't had time to read these posts yet (it's been a busy month), and I think I want to write something longer about them. But for the time being, I'm posting them sight unseen for your edification and enlightenment. [Part One](#). [Part Two](#). [Part Three](#). [Part Four](#).
- Need something light after reading all those posts? [Click this link](#). You'll be glad you did.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on February 21, 2008 at 11:14 PM in [Books](#), [Comics](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 24, 2008

Religion in *Starship Troopers III*?

Reporting from Wondercon, io9 covers the official announcement of *Starship Troopers III*. Director Ed Neumeier, who wrote the script for both Paul Verhoeven's 1997 adaptation of the Robert Heinlein novel and its direct-to-video sequel, claims this one will be closer to the original novel. He also says religion will play a role:

"[This film] is much more of a Vietnam war film, dealing with issues of religion and politics. It's also about 'how the state can use religion both badly, and for good.'"

I'm not entirely sure what the connection is between Vietnam War movies and religion, just as I'm not sure what the connection is between Heinlein's novel and church-state relations. It sounds like it will be as satirical as the first film, containing more fake TV news and commercials. But considering that my approach to the first film has always been that it is, specifically, a satire of *Heinlein himself*, I have to question the wisdom of making the film more faithful to its source material.

[io9: Starship Troopers III Actually Based On Heinlein Novel This Time](#)

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on February 24, 2008 at 10:01 AM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 26, 2008

Beliefnet Film Awards

At [Religion Dispatches](#), my thoughts on the [2008 Beliefnet Film Awards](#).

There are fewer obvious puzzlers in the "Best Spiritual Film" category, but there are some glaring omissions. Juno and Atonement made the list, but where are [There Will Be Blood](#) and Danny Boyle's mystical science fiction film [Sunshine](#) (which, for the record, would have gotten my vote)? There are five nominees arranged in each category, split into two rows. The empty space at the end feels like a placeholder for the movie you want to vote for.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on February 26, 2008 at 04:08 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 27, 2008

SF Signal's Mind Meld: "Which SciFi Movie Ending Would You Change?"



I'm pleased to report that SF Signal has included me in this week's [Mind Meld](#) column, which poses a question to a cross-section of the SF community. This week's question: "Which SF movie ending would you change?" My answer, which appears alongside responses by such mighty personages as Paul Di Filippo, Paul Levinson, and Gary Westfahl, is *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*.

"It's a mess, but there are some parts of the ending I truly like. In particular, Kirk's inquiry about what God needs with a starship is legitimately classic line and a key bit of Star Trek theology (on which more below). But on the whole, the ending feels a bit off."

This [isn't the first time](#) I've written about *Star Trek V*. I almost wrote about *Signs*, which both Mike Brotherton and Rob Bedford criticized in their responses, and *Serenity*, for the exact same reason that Michael L. Wentz cites (be spoiler-warned before you read that response). And, just the other day (and after I had already written my answer), a friend reminded me that I should have written about [Sunshine](#) (which I did love, but the ending prevented me from loving it unreservedly). Maybe next time...

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 27, 2008 at 09:45 AM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 27, 2008

The Sarah Connor Chronicles: Revelation T:800



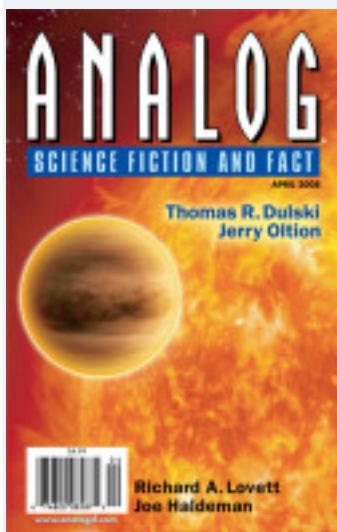
Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles gave us a taste of its apocalyptic potential this week. Remember back in *Terminator 2* when Sarah Connor was confined to a mental ward for spouting eschatological prophecies about armies of robots? In the most recent episode (["The Demon Hand"](#)) we meet her doctor from that ward, who is now convinced that she was telling the truth. Dr. Silberman has combined Sarah's cryptic statements with Biblical apocalypse, and he recounts the events of *T2* in the terms of a mystical vision. The T-800 telling John Connor to "come with me if you want to live" becomes "God reaching out to man, like the Sistine Chapel." The *Terminator* series is at its best when it treats its characters as prophets, so this episode bodes well for next Monday's 2-hour finale.

[Watch the full episode](#) on Fox's website.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 27, 2008 at 08:35 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 28, 2008

Religion in the April *Analog*



The April 2008 issue of [Analog](#) opens with a delightfully odd story by Thomas R. Dulske called "Guaranteed Not to Turn Pink in the Can." It's a complex mystery, but at the center of it are John Dee,

16th-century manuscripts, and the [Albigensian heresy](#). A brief summary can't do it justice, but suffice to say it's a lot of fun.

Elsewhere in the same issue is Craig DeLancey's "Amor Vincit Omnia," which involves genetically engineered super-empaths, and Jerry Oltion's "The Anthropic Precipice," a short, cosmogonic tale that gives an alternate take on some of the ideas of Robert J. Sawyer's [Calculating God](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 28, 2008 at 06:35 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 16, 2008

A belated announcement

Apologies for the dearth of new posts lately. I've been a bit busy caring for this guy, shown here in his custom Star Trek onesie:



[Anselm Thomas](#) McKee, born March 3rd.

March 17, 2008

The Confessions of Haneke: On the theology of sin in *Funny Games*



Apropos of the release of Michael Haneke's English-language remake of his 1997 film *Funny Games*, I finally wrote a long-planned essay on the film's neo-Puritan approach to sinning in thought vs. deed. Check it out at [Religion Dispatches](#).

The film essentially adapts Matthew 5:28 to a different sin: "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart," Jesus states. Haneke is basically saying: "Anyone who watches Saw IV has already committed murder in his heart." He makes the case for a direct link between watching torture porn and being complacent to real torture, if not actually committing it.

Read the full essay [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on March 17, 2008 at 11:34 AM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 19, 2008

Arthur C. Clarke, *Requiescat in Pace*

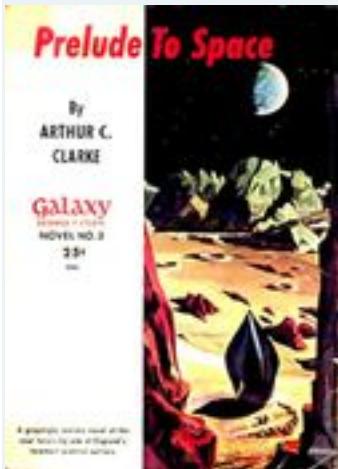


As you no doubt know by now, [Arthur C. Clarke has died](#). Clarke has long been a favorite author of mine—in fact, his *Rendezvous With Rama* was basically the first SF novel I read. I had read dozens of SF novels before, of course, from 1984 and *Fahrenheit 451* to *The Dispossessed*, but *Rama* was the first novel I chose to read because it was SF, and it instantly turned me into a fan. On top of that, he wrote two of the best philosophical novels the genre has ever seen—*Childhood's End* and *2001*. If you haven't read any of the three novels I've named, do yourself a favor and get started. He was a true visionary, and both the genre and the world at large will miss him.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on March 19, 2008 at 09:25 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 25, 2008

Arthur C. Clarke's moral imperative of space exploration



The recent death of Arthur C. Clarke prompted me to read two of his early novels, *Prelude to Space* and *Sands of Mars*. *Prelude*, written in 1947, was Clarke's first novel, it's a fascinating artifact of pre-Space Race SF that's become a virtual alternate history novel. It tells the detailed story of the preparations for the first moon landing—in 1978. In a preface written in 1964, Clarke states that, in choosing this year,

"I was guilty of extreme wishful thinking. I did not really imagine that it would happen before the year 2000 but I wanted to feel that I had a sporting chance of seeing it. Today, of course, if I settled for 1978 I would be extremely unpopular around NASA Headquarters."

Throughout the story there is periodic infodump detailing a projected path of space research through the 30 years following the novel's composition, and the result gives both a fascinating picture of what might have been and interesting perspective on what actually was.

In *Sands of Mars*, a surprisingly metafictional story of an SF writer who is sent to a Mars colony as a press correspondent, there is some discussion of the value of yesterday's SF. Captain Norden, commander of the spaceship Ares, has few kind words for the likes of Jules Verne:

"That's the trouble with all those old stories. Nothing is deader than yesterday's science-fiction and Verne belongs to the day before yesterday... It may sometimes have a social value when it's written, but to the next generation it must always seem quaint and archaic."

Of course, the current value of *Prelude to Space* proves Norden wrong. It's a wonderful novel not because its science is so accurate, but because of its general optimism, the sheer exuberance of its approach to the future on whose brink it rested. In an era when the public attitude to space exploration is decidedly more lackluster, that excitement is remarkably refreshing.

Prelude to Space's most moving passage is a message from a more optimistic age: a powerful statement of interplanetary pacifism. Clarke presents a manifesto of peace and cooperation at the backbone of his ideal space age:

"There are some whose minds are so rooted in the past that they believe the political thinking of our ancestors can still be applied when we reach other worlds. They even talk of annexing the Moon in the name of this or that nation, forgetting that the crossing of space has required the united efforts of scientists from every country in the world.

There are no nationalities beyond the stratosphere: any worlds we may reach will be the common heritage of all men—unless other forms of life have already claimed them for their own.

We, who have striven to place humanity upon the road to the stars, make this solemn declaration, now and for the future:

We will take no frontiers into space."

This passage brought to mind the revised National Space Policy on which [I wrote in November 2006](#). Clarke reminds us of the moral imperative that we must consider in our approach to the stars. His message was not simply for the era in which he wrote, but truly a declaration "now and for the future."

Posted by Gabriel McKee on March 25, 2008 at 09:06 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 26, 2008

SF Signal's Mind Meld: "Is Science Fiction Antithetical to Religion?"



I was particularly pleased to be included in this week's Mind Meld question at SF Signal: ["Is Science Fiction Antithetical to Religion?"](#) My answer appears alongside a plethora of thoughtful contributions from the likes of Mike Resnick, Adam Roberts, Ben Bova, James Morrow, and [D.G.D. Davidson](#). The rundown: basically, everybody answered "no," with greater and lesser degrees of qualification. Some thoughts on individual responses:

Lou Anders' last two paragraphs are a somewhat more clear expression of what I was trying to get at the end of my response:

What I do think is antithetical to science fiction is fundamentalism and extreme orthodoxy. The scientific hypothesis, which is the basis of all legitimate science, and thus, the bedrock for fiction framed in a scientific mode of thinking, is predicated on the notion that observation informs, shapes and expands our comprehension of reality. If you believe that you already know everything there is to know... any fiction that flows from these presuppositions will be propaganda, not art. Theodore Sturgeon said that science fiction's job is to "ask the next question." As long as you believe that there IS a next question, and are prepared for any answer, even one you might not expect, then you are okay in my book... But tell me you've got a direct and irrefutable line on truth, and I'm afraid I'll stop reading. Personally, I'm not so concerned with final answers. For me, the real fun lies in finding more questions.

Ben Bova gives the most qualification to his "no" answer, but I think that qualification largely stems from a definition error. He states that

"Science tries to find the truth, knowing that we can never be satisfied that we hold the truth in our hands. Religion believes that it has the ultimate and complete truth, and anyone who disagrees should be shunned - or worse."

Where he says "religion," he really means "fundamentalism" as in the quote from Anders above. Religion, in fact, does *not* inherently believe that it knows the full and complete truth. The best theology, from Plato to Augustine to Alfred North Whitehead, depends on speculation, thought experiments, and best-guesses; the biggest crime of fundamentalism is its theological laziness.

James Wallace Harris theorizes a historical progression of human thought in which religion leads to fiction which leads to philosophy which leads to science. He describes religion as "a descendent of fiction" but given that progression, isn't science a descendent of fiction too?

Carl Vincent declares: "Science fiction has never been antithetical to my personal religious experience, it has always enhanced it." Hear, hear.

Adam Roberts—whose novel *Land of the Headless* I just finished reading and should be writing about soon—states that the thesis of his recent book *The History of Science Fiction* is "that science fiction as a genre has its roots precisely in the religious conflicts of the Reformation."

Andrew Wheeler cites Isaac Asimov as the clearest example of an author whose atheism is inextricable from his SF, citing the psychohistory of the *Foundation* sequence as his evidence. I tend to disagree, and I actually think Psychohistory is Asimov's most religious idea. In chapter 4 of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*, I write about Hari Seldon as a God-analog who providentially guides the development of human civilization. Orson Scott Card agrees; in the introduction to his collection *Mortal Gods* he states that *Foundation* and its sequels "invariably affirm both the need for and the existence of a purposer."

John C. Wright turns in the longest and most complex response, which begins by contrasting H. G. Wells (an atheist author of soft SF) and Jules Verne (a Catholic author of hard SF). I take issue only with his statement that "Progressives... regard religion as one of those things to be left behind on the junk pile of history." Some of us progressives believe in progressive religion, too!

James Morrow gives the closest thing to a "yes" answer, though he kind of ends up answering a different question (about the overlap of SF and fantasy), so he's a bit tough to pin down.

Some books that I'm going to read as a direct result of this Mind Meld discussion include: Adam Roberts' *The History of Science Fiction*, *God's Mechanics: How Scientists and Engineers Make Sense of Religion* by Brother Guy Consolmagno, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* by Steven Jay Gould, the forthcoming *End of the Century* by Chris Roberson, and *Variable Star* by Spider Robinson. Also, my desire to read Ian McDonald's *Brasyl* is now even bigger; I really need to get a copy of that.

A couple responses to the discussion:

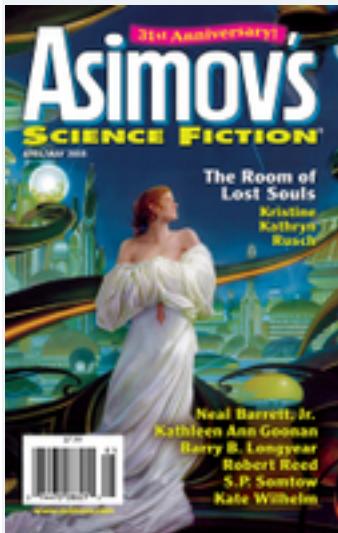
[Michael A. Burstein](#) jokes that Mike Resnick "outed him" as a religious author: "Why do people in the science fiction community know that I'm religiously observant?"

[Swan Tower](#) rightly bemoans the absence of non-Western religions in the discussion.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on March 26, 2008 at 09:17 PM | [Permalink](#)

March 28, 2008

And now, *not* loving the alien: Asimov's, April/May 2008



First contact stories set in the Middle Ages have a lot to live up to following Michael F. Flynn's novel *Eifelheim*. Flynn's Hugo-nominated tale of a medieval German village's complex but compassionate response to a stranded band of extraterrestrials is set a high bar for any similar stories to tackle a similar idea. One wonders if S. P. Somtow, whose story "An Alien Heresy" appears in the April/May double issue of *Asimov's*, intended his story as a reaction to *Eifelheim*. Somtow's story—which describes a Catholic inquisitor's torture of a shipwrecked alien in they year 1440—has the air of an indignant reply. Flynn's recent work has made clear his affection for the Middle Ages, and his contributions to *Analog* last year were an eloquent rebuttal to the all-too-common caricature of the period as an age of barbarism and superstition. In that light, Somtow's story ups the ante to the level of the grotesque, giving a laundry list of the backwardness of the pre-Renaissance world and a pretty lengthy torture sequence. The priest at the center of this story isn't just close-minded and arrogant—he's also a self-flagellating hypocrite who forces his illegitimate son to become a castrato. (*Got Medieval* would just *love* this stuff.) The most unfortunate thing about Somtow's story is that it's basically been done before—Patricia Anthony's 1997 novel *God's Fires*, which treats the same basic idea at greater length, if not greater skill. I didn't care for Anthony's novel, which I found a bit tedious; Somtow's story, though I don't care for its general attitude, is a more entertaining read, and doesn't quite wear out its welcome. But if Somtow's intent is to rebut Flynn's more nuanced, better researched depiction of the medieval era, his story is a failure.

There's some excellent material in this issue of *Asimov's*, but for my money the real winner is Kristine Kathryn Rusch's novella "The Room of Lost Souls." This story reminded me of some of my favorite horror stories—the work of Thomas Ligotti, Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, and, yes, even *Event Horizon*. The room of the title lurks at the heart of a mysterious space station built by an unknown intelligence; those unfortunate enough to venture into it disappear, die, or both. The station and the Room become an object of obsession and an almost religious devotion for those who search for the key to its mysteries. The characters in the story describe their quest as a pilgrimage: "something religious." It's got a fascinating air of menace that makes this double issue of *Asimov's* well worth picking up. An excerpt from "The Room of Lost Souls" is available [here](#).

My review of Michael Flynn's *Eifelheim* is [here](#), and my review of his medievalist alternate history tale "Quaestiones Super Caelo et Mundo" is [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on March 28, 2008 at 10:14 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 05, 2008

...And Gaius Baltar is His Prophet: *Battlestar Galactica* 401



Religion once again takes center stage in the season 4 opener of *Battlestar Galactica*, and once again the quisling Gaius Baltar is at the middle of it. Baltar, who was the Cylon's puppet president on New Caprica, secretly converted to Six's monotheism back in the first season episode "The Hand of God." But since then he's been pretty tight-lipped about matters spiritual (with the exception of his self-flagellating prayers and his hallucinated conversations with his Cylon familiar, of course). He's breaking that silence in the aftermath of his trial—in the chaos of the Cylon attack that closed out season 3, a group of his followers spirited him away to an out-of-the-way cargo hold. The group—which seems to be mostly-if-not-entirely women believe he's a prophet, and Baltar, sporting a rather messianic beard, isn't ashamed to play along.

When one of the women complains that her prayers to the gods of the humans' religion feel empty, Baltar invites her to become the second human monotheist:

"If you feel empty when you pray to Zeus or Poseidon or Aphrodite, it's because it is empty. It's a totally empty experience. They're not real. They've been promulgated by a ruling elite to stop you from learning the truth... There is only one God."

The scene is played for laughs, or as close to laughs as we get on *BSG*, because it's obvious Baltar is just trying to get into his disciple's pants (and he does). But he shows us a glimpse of his true, self-punishing spirituality later on when he utters a heartfelt prayer that God take his life rather than that of the sick child of one of his followers: *"How can you take him and let me live? After all I've done, really, if you want someone to suffer, take me. We both know I deserve it."*

You don't need a spoiler warning to know what happens next: the prayer works, and the child lives. God does want Baltar to suffer, it seems, and that end is best served by allowing him to live and continue punishing himself.

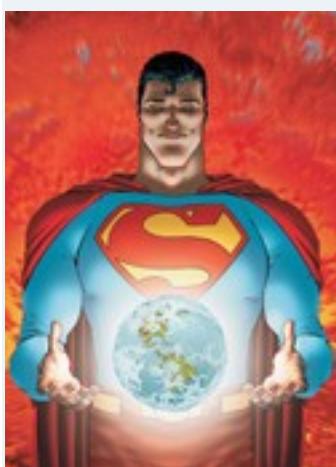
Battlestar Galactica now has three prophets in its regular line-up: Baltar, Laura Roslin (whose brain tumor-induced visions guided the fleet closer to Earth), and Kara Thrace (whose apparently spontaneous visions may or may not get them the rest of the way there). The picture is complicated by the fact that the three are in opposition to one another, but that's one thing that the final season will reveal: which prophet's god(s) are right?

For more on Baltar's spiritual journey, see the previous entry: ["Is there Cylon redemption for human sin?"](#)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on April 05, 2008 at 12:11 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 09, 2008

All-Star Superman #10: Kal-El so loved the world...



Superman has always been like a Greek god, and a big part of Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *All-Star Superman* has been an exploration of his role as a deified hero. In the sixth issue (reviewed

by me [here](#)), visitors from the future described Superman's "Legendary Twelve Labors"—an obvious analog of Hercules' 12 labors. That superhero comics are modern myths is a fast-aging cliché, but Morrison has done an excellent job of reminding us of its truth.

With *All-Star Superman* #10, he throws us for an interesting loop. We all know that Superman is a Greek god—but now it's beginning to look like he's the Judeo-Christian God, too. As one of his labors, Superman has created a microverse in which he does not exist—a "World Without Superman"—and it looks suspiciously like ours. In fact, it contains the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche, an unnamed Greek philosopher (possibly Plato?), and Joe Shuster—all exemplars of the human drive for divinity. In a world without Superman, we aspire to become him—in other words, if Superman didn't exist, we would have to invent him (and we did).

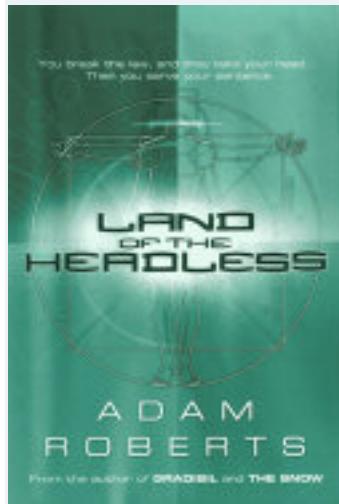
Some reviewers have complained that Morrison is treading ground he's already covered (particularly in *Animal Man*), but I don't think that's the case. In that story, the real-world creator meets his invented creation; here, the fictional creation actually inhabits a higher level of reality than our supposed real universe. The game is played with the same pieces, but the configuration is different enough to be truly new. Until now I've been thinking of *All-Star Superman* as an amusing but ultimately scattered series of one-off stories; now it's beginning to look like a major work in Morrison's oeuvre. His run is set to last only two more issues—here's hoping it ends with a cosmic bang rather than a *New X-Men*-style fizz.

Also posted at [Holy Heroes!!](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 09, 2008 at 06:40 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(4\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

May 06, 2008

Adam Roberts' *Land of the Headless*



Not many books see their protagonist beheaded in the first chapter. But that's precisely what happens at the beginning of Adam Roberts' *Land of the Headless*. Jon Cavala is a poet who lives on a far-future colony world that's governed by a strict theocracy. There are only three crimes on Pluse: murder, adultery, and blasphemy. The punishment is the same for all three: the perpetrator is beheaded and immediately fitted with a life-support computer on his neck-stump, then released back into society as a walking warning to others. The conventional wisdom on this world is that this form of beheading is a scripturally-mandated* punishment rendered humane by technology. Before the neck-stump "ordinators," the headless were sentenced to death as well as decapitation; now they're allowed to carry on with their lives once they've paid their debt to society.

The headless form an oppressed underclass on Pluse. They suffer under pretty severe discrimination, and have few options other than serving as cannon fodder in one of the world's many wars. *Land of the Headless* becomes a sort of bleakly comic picaresque as Cavala embarks on a quest through this dystopian landscape to be reunited with his former lover (on whose behalf he suffered his punishment), enduring numerous trials and misadventures along the way. In terms of its treatment of religion, *Land of the Headless* reminded me of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. On the one hand, both novels paint a dark picture of religious tyranny, showing the tragic consequences of following the letter at the expense of the spirit. But both show a silver lining as well: the "Underground Femaleroad" of *Handmaid's Tale* is operated by Quakers, and *Land of the Headless* also has some positive religious figures, if you look closely enough. Throughout the novel we see churches and charities devoted to showing compassion to the

victims of Pluse's cruel justice. It's still highly critical of religion—those charities aren't out to change the system, just to clean up the mess it leaves—but it's always nice in stories like this to see some indication that the author sees light at the end of ultraconservative religion's tunnel.

*What scripture mandates decapitation is never explicitly stated.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on May 06, 2008 at 09:13 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 08, 2008

March and April catch-up

So how long does it take to get caught up on blog reading after having a baby? About 10 weeks, apparently. Some by-now-probably-a-little-out-of-date links:

- Escape Pod has posted a podcast reading of Robert Silverberg's "[Schwartz Between the Galaxies.](#)" This story about an anthropologist who goes a little nuts after realizing that human culture has become homogenous was very, very close to getting on the honorable mention list of [The 10 Best Science Fiction Stories About Religion](#); I ultimately left it off because it's got too much else going on to justifiably say it's "about religion" in particular. But it's still an excellent story, so you should listen to it. [Once you have, check out my discussion of it in chapter 8 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).]
- SF Site reviews [Michael Flynn's Eifelheim](#), and I no longer feel so bad about taking too long to review things after they come out.
- The Sucka MC Delusion: The Sci Fi Catholic points us to a pretty darned hilarious animation of [Richard Dawkins rapping](#).
- Have you looked at [Islam and Science Fiction](#) yet? It's off to a pretty good start, though I'm hoping for more depth (and better proofreading!) in the site's future.
- It took a few days to get rolling, but there was some pretty interesting discussion following SF Signal's Mind Meld post on whether or not SF is [antithetical to religion](#), including some comments on Mormon SF, fundamentalism, and epistemology.
- [Time Immortal](#) offers up a nice, long post on religion on [Battlestar Galactica](#), in dialog with James McGrath's [thoughts](#) on the [topic](#).
- Kudos to Netflix for having all 5 seasons of [Quantum Leap](#) available streaming (when the last season isn't even out on DVD yet, no less). Curses to same for taking down *Red Dwarf* when I was halfway through series 3.
- My friend [Jacob Chabot](#), creator of the [Mighty Skullboy Army](#), has been nominated for an [Eisner Award](#). Here's hoping he has better luck with awards than he does at [Heroclix](#). Skullboy is wonderful fun, and if you have not yet read it, you should.
- What I'm excited about this week: My recent purchase of a couple hundred SF magazines from the '50s and '60s.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on May 08, 2008 at 07:12 PM | [Permalink](#)

May 14, 2008

Beliefnet's "10 Greatest Spiritual Characters in Science Fiction"

Beliefnet's Idol Chatter has listed the [10 Greatest Spiritual Characters in Science Fiction](#) [film & television]. Kudos for Book, Locke, and Starbuck—though there are a few other *Battlestar Galactica* characters that would fit in just as well.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on May 14, 2008 at 07:07 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 16, 2008

Lost in the Garden

Over at [God Spam](#), Gwynne wonders if *Lost*'s mysterious Island might, in fact, be the Garden of Eden.

"Everyone who had been looking for something in Australia found it on the island: Kate wanted to escape the law, Hurley wanted to be rid of his money, Locke wanted to learn his true strength in the wilderness, Michael wanted more

time with Walt, Sun wanted Jin's baby, Sawyer wanted to kill the man who destroyed his mother, and so forth . . . So if that's the case, could the island actually be paradise?"

Put the thrice-debunked Purgatory theory in an interesting light, doesn't it?

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 16, 2008 at 10:57 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 19, 2008

Loving the Alien, Part II: Vatican Nights

[Religion Dispatches](#) has just posted my take on the news story about the Vatican astronomer who says the belief in aliens is compatible with Catholic doctrine. I argue that José Gabriel Funes' ideas aren't really new, having been expressed before in SF (in, most notably, C. S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* and James Blish's *A Case of Conscience*), not to mention centuries earlier by the likes of Nicholas of Cusa.

The article gives me the opportunity to cart out one of the prizes of my recently-acquired SF magazine collection: the September 1953 issue of *If*, where the short story version of *A Case of Conscience* was first published. Blish's story of a Jesuit's spiritual dilemma on an alien world was the cover story and a wraparound cover, no less!



The painting is by Ken Fagg, who did a slew of covers for *If* in the mid-'50s, and illustrates the last scene of the story (or, if you're only familiar with the expanded novel, the last scene of part one). Those who've read it know what's in that jar they're looking at. Interestingly, the image seems designed to cover up the fact that the story's central character is a Jesuit; perhaps *If*'s editors were worried about their image if they put a priest on the cover. You'll find no collars or rosaries on the inside illustrations, either, but they're by Ed Emshwiller so it's hard to complain.

[Read "Are God and Aliens Compatible?" at Religion Dispatches.](#)



Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 19, 2008 at 06:04 PM in [Books](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 22, 2008

Oedipus at Caprica: Ancient and modern religion in *Battlestar Galactica*

At [Religion Dispatches](#), Nick Street considers the religious character of *Battlestar Galactica*. Taking the characters' Greco-Roman names seriously, Street looks at the show as a Greek tragedy recast as a postmodern religion that, like Greek drama, encourages interaction and catharsis: "How are musty old creedal religions going to keep up?" *Galactica* fans are encouraged to read the essay, but beware if you haven't caught up to the current season yet; there's an unwarned spoiler halfway down the first page.

[Read "Battlestar Galactica and the Future of American Religion"](#)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 22, 2008 at 03:45 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 02, 2008

The Passion of the Jedi



In a new post at [Religion Dispatches](#), I share some thoughts on the recent problems (and related successes) of the [Church of Jediism](#). This SF church has been in the news lately following a bizarre attack on its co-founder, who was struck with a metal crutch by a man wearing a black garbage bag cape shouting "Darth Vader! Darth Vader!"* But the real story is the growth of this pop cultural religious movement in the wake of this sudden media attention—and its founders' subsequent loss of faith.

In the wake of the attack, Time magazine and NPR interviewed Daniel. Despite the interviewers' thinly-veiled mockery, this level of coverage offers an unprecedented legitimacy to the group, and they know it. ("I don't know if [George] Lucas even knows about it, to be honest with you," Daniel says, but: "I'm sure he will after this.") The interview is an example of denizens of the Long Tail subverting traditional media for their own ends. Regardless of Time's mockery, the Joneses know that the interview will reach thousands of like-minded seekers, many of whom may find in the Church of Jediism a spirituality they can understand. There has always been a spiritual element to science fiction fandom that appeals to many of those who, like 16.1% of respondents to the Pew Forum's Religious Landscape Survey, have no religious affiliation.

*The news reports make the attack sound much more intense than it appears in the [video](#). If this happened in the States, I don't think anyone would say "Ow, that kind of hurt." Are all Welshmen this polite when they brawl?

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 02, 2008 at 09:31 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 04, 2008

"Cellar-Christians": What it Really Means When an SF Author Says Religion Doesn't Exist in the Future



They walked around the chalet... At one side, they saw the top of a cellar window brightly illuminated and heard the muffled chant of voices: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

"Cellar-Christians!" Foyle exclaimed.

He and Robin peered through the window. Thirty worshipers of assorted faiths were celebrating the New Year with a combined and highly illegal service. The 25th century had not yet abolished God, but it had abolished organized religion.

"No wonder the house is man-trapped," Foyle said. "Filthy practices like that. Look, they've got a priest and a rabbi, and that thing behind them is a crucifix."

"Did you ever stop to think what swearing is?" Robin asked quietly. "You say 'Jesus' and 'Jesus Christ.' Do you know what that is?"

"Just swearing, that's all. Like 'ouch' or 'damn.'"

"No, it's religion. You don't know it, but there are two thousand years of meaning behind words like that."

"This is no time for dirty talk," Foyle said impatiently. "Save it for later. Come on."

--Alfred Bester, *The Stars My Destination*

A few months ago, a [couple](#) of [blogs](#) made the argument (or at least stated the assumption) that SF doesn't deal with religion, or that humans in SF aren't religious, or some combination of the above. At a glance, Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* proves this—religion has been outlawed, and the hero is disgusted by it. But take a look at this passage from a few pages later, when Gully Foyle visits one of the seedier sections of Rome and hears the following solicitation:

"Filthy pictures, signore? Cellar-Christians, kneeling, praying, singing psalms, kissing cross? Very naughty."

In *The Stars My Destination*, religion has been suppressed, but it *cannot* be destroyed. Indeed, by presenting religion with the terminology of pornography, Bester places the spiritual drive on a primal level equal to that of the sexual drive. By the time he introduces the Skoptsies, an extreme religious group that cuts off all of its sensory nerves (and which takes its [name](#) from a 19th-century self-castrating Christian sect), it's far more reasonable to conclude that Bester thinks human beings *must* be religious, even if his protagonist is not. And some additional evidence that's more-or-less completely unconnected beyond the fact that I just finished reading it: In Philip K. Dick's *The Crack in Space*, when a portal into a parallel dimension populated by *Homo erectus pekinensis*, one character's biggest fear is that their *religion* will be more advanced than ours:

"They may have developed into areas which we've never even imagined. Scientifically, philosophically, even technically, in terms of machinery and industrial techniques, sources of power, medicines—in fact every area, from contraceptive devices to visions of God."

There's some merit to the argument that SF's protagonists don't necessarily talk about their religious beliefs, and I have a half-written post lying around that talks about the nicely subtle role that faith plays in Gary K. Wolfe and Archbishop John J. Myer's recent book *Space Vulture*. But consider: does personal faith play that big a role in non-SF writing from the last century, either? Sure, you can name a handful of mainstream novels about faith, but I can do the same with SF. Considering the great degree to which SF deals with matters of religion in general (if not matters of personal faith in the evangelical sense), it's a whole lot more religious than non-SF. So there. Who says SF ain't religious?

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 04, 2008 at 07:03 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 08, 2008

Another review of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*

Due to the apparent uselessness of Google Alerts, I didn't discover this [very kind review](#) of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction* until this morning. Andrew Zimmerman Jones of the Philosopher's Stone writes:

"While I was anticipating the book to be good, I have to admit that I was not quite anticipating the sheer scope of McKee's enterprise. Across 10 chapters and 250 pages, he covers nearly the full range of religious themes, from the institutions and rituals that comprise social religion to the innate logistics of the afterlife and apocalypse, to the very nature and purpose of belief... McKee's book is not merely a rehashing of these concepts but... presents a true synthesis of them with the most fundamental questions of human existence."

Thanks, Andrew!

Read the full review [here](#).

And buy the book [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 08, 2008 at 03:55 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 12, 2008

Where the Thetans Have No Name

New at Religion Dispatches: [This feature](#) on Anonymous, an Internet-based protest group that is staging monthly demonstrations against the Church of Scientology.

Religious groups frequently face internal criticism and former members, but Anonymous's war on Scientology may be the first time an unaffiliated, secular organization has protested a whole religion. What is it about Scientology that has made it such an attractive target to Anonymous?

[Read "Taking It to the Streets: Anonymous v. Scientology"](#)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 12, 2008 at 10:40 AM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 12, 2008

Gaius Baltar, Divine Wrath, and the Flood

In last Friday's episode of Battlestar Galactic ("The Hub"), Gaius Baltar, the human collaborator who helped the Cylons to destroy human society, theorized that he is the embodiment of the wrath of God:

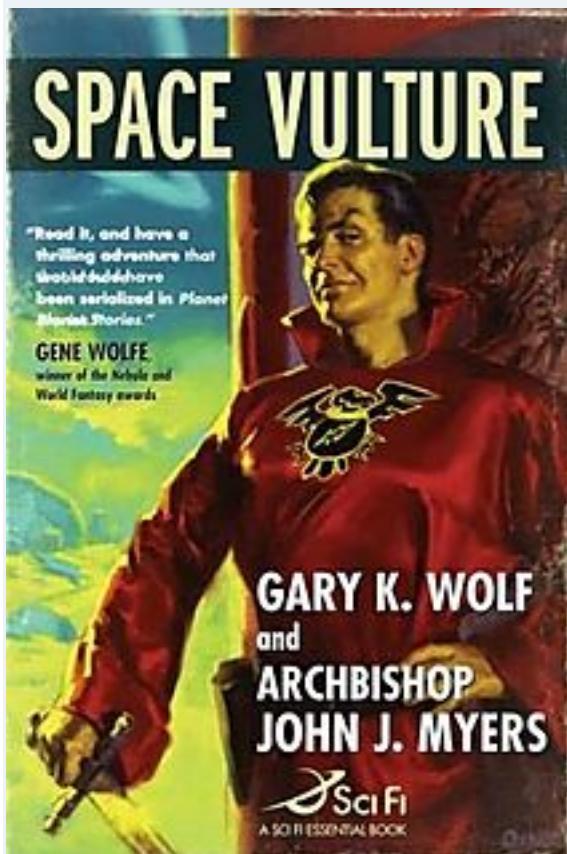
"Pythia talks about a flood that wiped out most of humanity. Nobody blames the flood. A flood is a force of nature. Through the flood, mankind is rejuvenated, born again. I was another flood, you see. I blamed myself. I blamed myself. But God made the man that made that choice. God made us all perfect. And in that thought, all my guilt flies away, flies away like a bird."

It's another step in the Baltar's intriguing, [responsibility-denying](#) journey. He loses his guilt not when he feels forgiveness, but when he feels lack of agency. And yet he still wants to claim credit for the perceived positive effects of his evil actions. It's this sort of philosophical wishiwashiness that makes him such an effective villain—we don't just hate him for helping commit genocide; we hate him for his bizarre mixture of denying and embracing that act. His theology has become an elaborate rationalization; he wouldn't believe in God's wrath if he didn't create the situation that required that kind of explanation.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 12, 2008 at 12:30 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 16, 2008

Space Vulture and Religious Subtlety



It sounds like the setup for a joke: a Nebula-Award-winning author and the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Newark teaming up to write a pulp SF novel. Heck, it even sounds like the punchline. I was intrigued by [Space Vulture](#) as soon as I heard about it last fall, but I was wary-- after watching the first episode of the Sci Fi Channel's execrable (and now justly-canceled) *Flash Gordon* revamp, I was skeptical of pulp revivals. Add to that the fact that some of the publicity trades on the gimmicky nature of its authorship and you have quite a few reasons for low expectations.

I'm pleased to say that I needn't have worried. *Space Vulture* is a rollicking good time. I needn't really explain why-- the book's been reviewed by [dozens](#) of [other](#) sites by now, and the key word they all use to define Gary K. Wolf and Archbishop John J. Myers' take of ray guns and space slavers is "fun." The question on my mind was: does this novel show any signs of having been co-authored by an expert on canon law?

The answer is yes-- sort of. Myers has stated that he toned down some of the language, sex, and violence that Wolf wanted to inject into this pulp homage. (I was surprised to hear about any reduction in violence, seeing as the novel retains an abundance of flesh-eating aliens, severed limbs, and ray-gun headshots.) The general morality of the story seems guided by Myers' hand: there's a redeemed antihero here as well as the expected white-hatted space sheriff.

But there's a bigger religious story going on here, too, and it's tied in with another update to the pulp formula for which several reviewers have praised Wolf and Myers. You'd expect this kind of space opera to have a damsel in distress, and it does-- Cali Russell, a colonial administrator who is abducted by the villainous Space Vulture. But Cali is no bubbleheaded star princess; she's a complex and strong character who takes an active role in the story's drama. A big part of Cali's character is her religious faith. Early in the story we learn that she met her husband in church; later, in a moment of despair following her abduction, she prays. But-- and this is what's kind of revolutionary here-- *that's it*. Religion in SF is usually a bit more blatant; there are more monks than laypeople in SF, more messiahs than adherents. I've criticized Guy Stewart's argument that SF excludes religion as too short-sighted, but there's a kernel of truth in his claim that "[Christianity disappears in space](#)." There aren't too many just-plain-believers in SF-- or, if there are, they don't talk about it much. In Cali, a major work of SF has a character who is realistically religious without being wholly defined by her religion. We don't learn much about her faith, but we don't need to; it's just a single facet of a well-drawn character.

None of which is to say that *Space Vulture* is an intellectual powerhouse or a genre-changing work, and it's not intended to be. It's a deliberate throwback to an era where most SF didn't try to have thematic depth. But Myers and Wolf wrote this book after being disappointed to re-read some of their favorite space operas and find they didn't hold up. They hoped to make *Space Vulture* a more satisfying approach to the tropes of the '40s. It's nice to see that religious depth is one aspect of that re-imagining.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 16, 2008 at 09:26 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 17, 2008

"Scientology deprived me of God"

My Religion Dispatches piece on Anonymous, the Internet-based group that's been protesting the Church of Scientology, has been [updated](#) with a report on last weekend's demonstration in New York.

One protester was a former member of the Office of Special Affairs—the intelligence wing of the Church of Scientology. There, he conducted investigations of psychiatrists the Church considered enemies. In one case, he was sent to Florida to take surveillance photographs of a psychiatrist in an effort to prove that he was a child molester. "I was told that psychiatrists were enemies of the church because they put children on medications under which they may be molested or abused... They're criminals, and I was investigating criminals, I was told." A Mormon before joining the Church, he was told that he would have to abandon his faith to advance: "They told me that being involved in Scientology training would take up too much of my time to continue being a Mormon." He immediately returned to Mormonism, which helped him recover from his time as a Scientologist: "I felt I had to get the dirt off of me. You come out of Scientology feeling really dirty... Scientology deprived me of God. Religion is supposed to take you closer to your creator... The problem with Scientology is that it's sociopathic. It teaches you to believe that you are God."

Read the full article [here](#), or skip to the update [here](#).

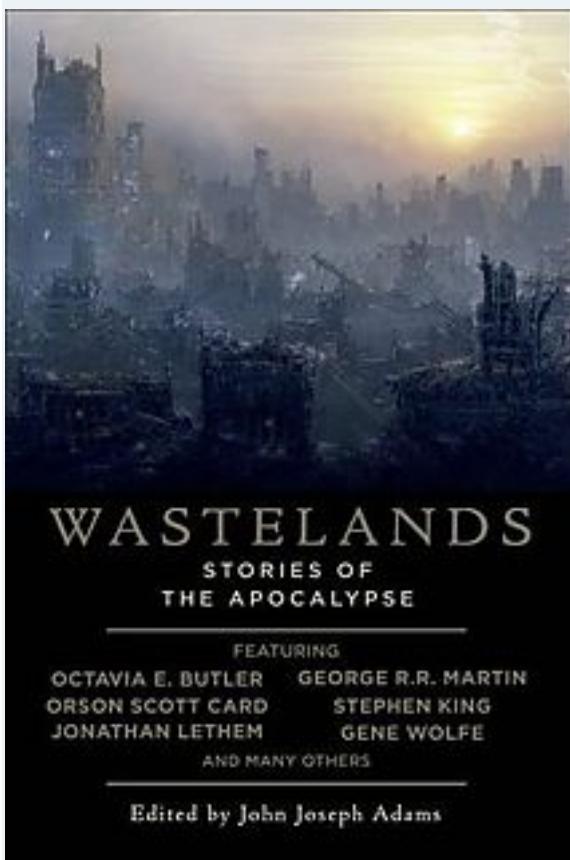
[Note: The update is currently MIA; I will update the link when I find it.]



Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 17, 2008 at 10:25 AM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 19, 2008

This is the Way the World [Doesn't End]: *Wastelands*



Again at Religion Dispatches, [my review](#) of Night Shade Books' recent anthology *Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse*, edited by John Joseph Adams. Not content to just review the book in hand, I ended up writing an essay on the nature of the postapocalyptic subgenre.

*Despite this parade of nightmares, there's a pervasive sense of optimism in these stories—an optimism that, paradoxically, lies at the heart of all postapocalyptic fiction. The fact that there are any stories to tell means that something has survived. In a way, these aren't end-of-the-world stories at all, because the world doesn't really end—or rather, the world ends, but humanity carries on. These are post-apocalyptic stories, and their focus is not on destruction, but rebuilding. That hopefulness sneaks its way into most stories in the subgenre. Cormac McCarthy sneaks it into the last few paragraphs of his oppressively bleak novel *The Road*, but it forms the backbone of definitive stories like Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle For Leibowitz*—not to mention *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*. The overriding narrative in most postapocalyptic fiction is the emergence of order from chaos. The religious nature of this enterprise is nowhere so clear as in Orson Scott Card's "Salvage," in which Mormons forge the culmination of the American dream in a post-nuclear desert. The title of Jack McDevitt's entry in *Wastelands* is telling: "Never Despair."*

Read the full article, and find out where Elvis Costello fits in to the whole thing, [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 19, 2008 at 06:14 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 22, 2008

SF Gospel's 2008 Hugo Award endorsements

The deadline for voting in the Hugo Awards is July 7th. A lot of the nominees are available online. Rather than code a slew of links, I'll just give you this one to the [nominees list](#) at the Denvention page. Here's what I think you should vote for.

Best Novel

The Yiddish Policemen's Union by Michael Chabon (HarperCollins, Fourth Estate)

Brasyl by Ian McDonald (Gollancz; Pyr)

Rollback by Robert J. Sawyer (Tor; Analog Oct. 2006-Jan/Feb. 2007)

The Last Colony by John Scalzi (Tor)
Halting State by Charles Stross (Ace)

SF Gospel's pick: ***Rollback* by Robert J. Sawyer**. Sawyer is the best SF novelist of the decade, and probably the last one, too. The fact that this novel is a moving story about the ethics of altruism doesn't hurt. Read my thoughts on *Rollback* [here](#).

Note: All of the Best Novel nominees except Chabon's are available as [free downloads](#) to Hugo voters.

Best Novella

"The Fountain of Age" by Nancy Kress (*Asimov's* July 2007)
"Recovering Apollo 8" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (*Asimov's* Feb. 2007)
"Stars Seen Through Stone" by Lucius Shepard (*F&SF* July 2007)
"All Seated on the Ground" by Connie Willis (*Asimov's* Dec. 2007, Subterranean Press)
"Memorare" by Gene Wolfe (*F&SF* April 2007)

SF Gospel's pick: **"All Seated on the Ground" by Connie Willis**. It was good, and fun, and smart. But full disclosure: I haven't read "Memorare" yet, and it looks pretty good too. So I may change my vote. Read my review of "All Seated on the Ground" [here](#).

Best Novelette

"The Cambist and Lord Iron: a Fairytale of Economics" by Daniel Abraham (*Logorrhea*, ed. John Klima, Bantam)
"The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate" by Ted Chiang (*F&SF* Sept. 2007)
"Dark Integers" by Greg Egan (*Asimov's* Oct./Nov. 2007)
"Glory" by Greg Egan (*The New Space Opera*, ed. Gardner Dozois and Jonathan Strahan, HarperCollins/Eos)
"Finisterra" by David Moles (*F&SF* Dec. 2007)

SF Gospel's pick: **"The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate" by Ted Chiang**. Has Ted Chiang ever written a story that didn't deserve some kind of award?

Best Short Story

"Last Contact" by Stephen Baxter (*The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction*, ed. George Mann, Solaris Books)
"Tideline" by Elizabeth Bear (*Asimov's* June 2007)
"Who's Afraid of Wolf 359?" by Ken MacLeod (*The New Space Opera*, ed. by Gardner Dozois, and Jonathan Strahan, HarperCollins/Eos)
"Distant Replay" by Mike Resnick (*Asimov's* April/May 2007)
"A Small Room in Koboldtown" by Michael Swanwick (*Asimov's* April/May 2007, *The Dog Said Bow-Wow*, Tachyon Publications)

SF Gospel's pick: **"Last Contact" by Stephen Baxter**. I'm a sucker for melancholic SF short stories, and Baxter's takes the cake: an account of the last days before the destruction of the entire universe at the quantum level. Read my review [here](#).

Best Related Book

The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community by Diana Glyer; appendix by David Bratman (Kent State University Press)
Breakfast in the Ruins: Science Fiction in the Last Millennium by Barry Malzberg (Baen)
Emshwiller: Infinity x Two by Luis Ortiz, intro. by Carol Emshwiller, fwd. by Alex Eisenstien (Nonstop)
Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction by Jeff Prucher (Oxford University Press)
The Arrival by Shaun Tan (Arthur A. Levine/Scholastic)

SF Gospel's pick: ***Emshwiller: Infinity x Two* by Luis Ortiz**. This was a tough one for me, since this is the category I was kinda hoping for a nomination for [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#). And the presence of Shaun Tan's (admittedly wonderful) *The Arrival* just underscores the ridiculous fact that there's no Hugo category for comics. (What is this, the [World Fantasy Awards](#)?) Fortunately, I love *Emsh*, who was pretty much the pinnacle of SF art, and Ortiz's lushly-illustrated bio is a fitting tribute.

Best Dramatic Presentation, Long Form

Enchanted Written by Bill Kelly; Directed by Kevin Lima (Walt Disney Pictures)
The Golden Compass Written and directed by Chris Weitz; Based on the novel by Philip Pullman (New Line Cinema)
Heroes, Season 1 Created by Tim Kring and written by a long list of writers (NBC Universal Television and Tailwind Productions)
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix Written by Michael Goldenberg; Based on the novel by J.K. Rowling; Directed by David Yates (Warner Bros. Pictures)

Stardust Written by Jane Goldman & Matthew Vaughn; Based on the novel by Neil Gaiman; Directed by Matthew Vaughn (Paramount Pictures)

SF Gospel's pick: **The Golden Compass**, though I'm more than a little tempted to recommend **no award**. *The Golden Compass* was basically just OK. *Enchanted* was fun. *Heroes* is... diverting, but it's definitely the most overrated thing on TV. The movie that really deserves to be dubbed the best SF film of 2007-- *Sunshine*-- didn't get nominated. I fall back on my admiration for *The Golden Compass*'s beautiful production design and jaw-dropping bear-versus-bear fight (get it?). Read my review of it [here](#).

Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form

Battlestar Galactica: "Razor" Written by Michael Taylor; Directed by Félix Enríquez Alcalá and Wayne Rose (Sci Fi Channel) (televised version, not DVD)

Doctor Who: "Blink" Written by Steven Moffat; Directed by Hettie Macdonald (BBC)

Doctor Who: "Human Nature" / "Family of Blood" Written by Paul Cornell; Directed by Charles Palmer (BBC)

Star Trek New Voyages: "World Enough and Time" Written by Michael Reaves & Marc Scott Zicree; Directed by Marc Scott Zicree (Cawley Entertainment Co. and The Magic Time Co.)

Torchwood: "Captain Jack Harkness" Written by Catherine Tregenna; Directed by Ashley Way (BBC Wales)

SF Gospel's pick: **Doctor Who, "Blink."** Another really tough one for the opposite reason as the "long form" category-- several of these are great. I was tempted by "Human Nature"/"The Family of Blood," which has some interesting religious stuff going on. But at the end of the day the claustrophobic "Blink" was just a better episode. Further nitpicking: what's the real difference between "long form" and "short form"? "Razor" and "Human Nature"/"Family of Blood" are both feature length.

Read my review of *Battlestar Galactica*: *Razor* [here](#), and a bit about *Doctor Who*: "Human Nature" [here](#).

Best Professional Editor, Short Form

Ellen Datlow (*The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (St. Martin's), *Coyote Road* (Viking), *Inferno* (Tor))

Stanley Schmidt (*Analog*)

Jonathan Strahan (*The New Space Opera* (HarperCollins/Eos), *The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year, Volume 1* (Night Shade), *Eclipse One* (Night Shade))

Gordon Van Gelder (*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*)

Sheila Williams (*Asimov's Science Fiction*)

SF Gospel's pick: **Sheila Williams**. Asimov's is great and getting better all the time.

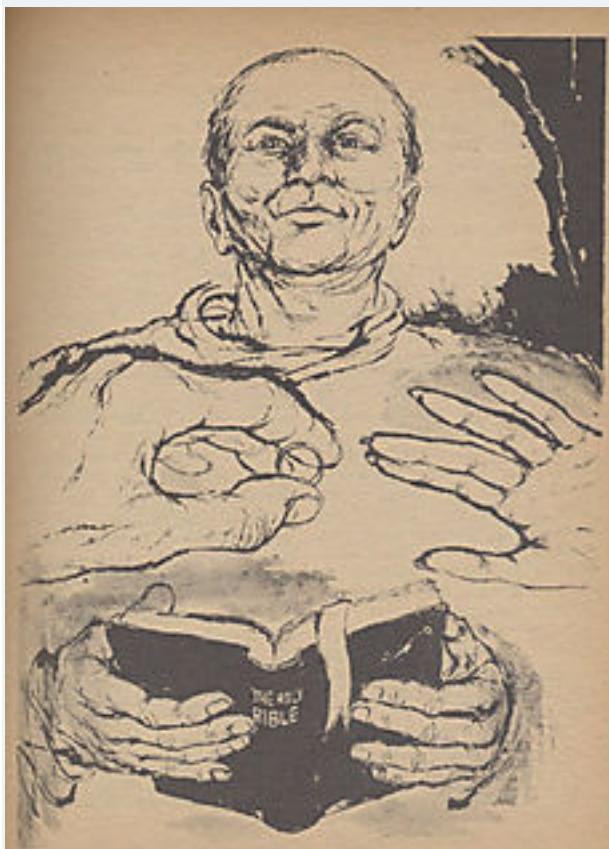
I have no endorsements for the following categories: Professional Editor- Long Form, Professional Artist, Semiprozine, Fanzine, Fan Writer, Fan Artist. That's not to say I'm not voting in these categories, but I don't feel knowledgeable enough about the nominees to make any real recommendations.

I'm also not giving an outright endorsement for the **John W. Campbell Award** for Best New Science Fiction Writer, because I'm only familiar with one of them. But I will say this about that one: *Grey* by Jon Armstrong is a pretty fun book, with a lot of the manic energy that makes Neal Stephenson such a fun writer. I listened to Podiobook's free podcast of it, and [you can do the same](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 22, 2008 at 08:42 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 22, 2008

"Reason" Redux: David F. Galouye's "All Jackson's Children"



A couple weeks ago I posted "["Cellar-Christians": What it Really Means When an SF Author Says Religion Doesn't Exist in the Future.](#)" Accompanying that post was a pretty neat illustration by Virgil Finlay of praying robotic hands from the January 1957 issue of *Galaxy*, where the final installment of Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* appeared. I was being perhaps a tad disingenuous there, because that illustration wasn't on Bester's novel at all, but on Daniel F. Galouye's story "All Jackson's Children" from the same issue. This story describes a group of robots on an abandoned world that have developed a religion around "Jackson": "Jackson is my administrator... I shall not rust... He maketh me to adjust my joint tension." And so on. It's a cute story, if you're willing to overlook that its central conceit was better-explored in Isaac Asimov's classic "Reason." The human explorers who discover the mysterious robot colony put forth this theory about the origins of religion, both human and mechanical:

"What's the main difference between human and robotic intelligence? It's that our span of life is limited on one end by birth, the other by death-- mysteries of origin and destiny that can't be explained. You see, the ordinary clunker understands where he came from and where he's going. But here are robots who have to struggle with those mysteries-- birth and death of the conscious intellect which they themselves once knew, and forgot, and now have turned into myths."

It may not be the most original story, but it's an enjoyable one. Galouye also wrote a story called "Blessed are the Meekbots" (*Imagination*, December 1953) that seems, from the evidence of the title alone, to cover similar ground.

Now, to further complicate matters-- just as the Finlay illustration wasn't for *The Stars My Destination*, the Dick Francis illustration above isn't for "All Jackson's Children." It's for Kris Neville's "Moral Equivalent," the lead story in the same issue of *Galaxy*. The Bible doesn't figure nearly as much in that story as the illustration suggests, and you'd be forgiven for thinking it belonged with Galouye's story instead of Neville's-- hence its inclusion here.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 22, 2008 at 10:08 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 23, 2008

Commercialized Faith: Ray Bradbury vs. Rick Warren

"Lord, how they've changed things in our 'parlors' these days. Christ is one of the 'family' now. I often wonder if God recognizes His own son the way we've dressed him up, or is it dressed him down? He's a regular peppermint stick now, all sugar-crystal and saccharine when he isn't making veiled references to certain commercial products that every worshiper absolutely needs."

--Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

At the [Revealer](#), an excerpt from Jeff Sharlet's new book *The Family* on 73 years of commodified faith. (Also: a longer excerpt from the same chapter at [Counterpunch](#)).

"Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, and the business-friendly fundamentalism of the post-Christian Right era don't set off liberal alarms the way the pulpit pounders such as John Hagee, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson do. The irony is that the agenda of this new lifestyle evangelicalism is more far-reaching than that of the traditional Christian Right: the Christian Right wanted a seat at the table; lifestyle evangelicalism wants to build the table. It wants to set the very terms in which we imagine what's possible, and to that end it dispenses with terms that might scare off liberals. It's big tent fundamentalism -- everybody in."

"But the ultimate goals remain the same. True, Osteen steers clear of abortion for the most part, and Warren, every bit as opposed to homosexuality as Jerry Falwell was, prefers to talk about AIDS relief. But both men -- and the new evangelicalism as a movement -- continue to preach the merger of Christianity and capitalism pioneered three quarters of a century ago. On the surface, it's self-help; scratch, and it's revealed as a profoundly conservative ideology that conflates church and state, scripture and currency, faith and finance."

Is religion-as-product-- or, worse, product tie-in-- a precursor of dystopia, or am I just being hyperbolic in putting these two quotes in the same post? Admittedly-- yes, I am, and the last two paragraphs of Sharlet's excerpt hope to lay such fears to rest, at least a little. But I think the extent to which American Christianity has become a commodity is a big, big problem, a stale cake on which militarism is just the frosting. [Read](#) and discuss.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 23, 2008 at 04:32 PM | [Permalink](#)

June 24, 2008

Analog & Asimov's catch-up



The May 2008 *Analog* had quite a few stories of interest. Darrell Schweitzer's two-page Probability Zero entry "The Dinosaurs of Eden" ponders what really would have happened if dinosaurs and human beings coexisted at the dawn of creation, and Eric James Stone's "The Ashes of His Fathers" follows a member of a theocratic colony world on a pilgrimage back to Earth. But my favorite story in the issue was David Bartell's "[Test Signals](#)," a mystery involving bioengineering and posthuman mutants. One character in the story is a genetic engineer who is trying to recreate a preternaturally-powerful strain of marijuana:

"Think about it. Man's been growing and smoking herb almost since fire was harnessed. So herb evolved along with the human brain, in symbiosis. As man became more conscious, he needed herb less, so Mary Jane became relatively barren. And we became less spiritual... Today's herb is weak, giving only a bit of euphoria. But Sinsemilla, now, she would restore man's full consciousness, a direct link to the original spirit breathed into the Garden of Eden."

That's just a supporting character, but later on there's some technological prayer and some talk of ancient prophets. A great story overall.

The standout story in the June 2008 *Asimov's* is Ian R. MacLeod's novella "[The Hob Carpet](#)," an odd story set in a far-future about a society dependent on a slave class of cloned "hobs." Much of the story involves this society's civic religion and priest caste.

The lead story in the June *Analog* is "[Brittney's Labyrinth](#)" by Richard A. Lovett. It's a sequel to his "Sands of Titan," which I reviewed [here](#) last year-- it involves an AI program named Brittney who gives hope to a stranded astronaut by reading him Bible stories (among other things). Brittney's the main character this time around, and though there's less explicitly religious content it does raise some interesting questions about the nature of consciousness, and even a brief hint that the AI may believe in God.

The July *Asimov's* is chock full of great stories. First up there's "Lester Young and the Jupiter's Moons' Blues" by Gord Sellar, in which aliens take jazz musicians into space, giving them drug treatments that enable them to enter multiple timelines and play several solos at once. It's got a nice atmosphere, and the fact that many of the musicians are Muslim is an interesting touch. The story's conflict arises from one musician's growing realization that the alien's treatments may leave the players literally soulless. Also in this issue is "Vinegar Peace, or, the Wrong-Way Used-Adult Orphanage," a truly heartbreaking story by Michael Bishop. Bishop's son Jamie died in the Virginia Tech shootings last year, and this story-- about a "wrong-way orphanage" for parents whose children are killed in a near-future war-- is clearly a cathartic exercise. The eponymous "vinegar peace" is the wrong-way orphanage chapel's Eucharist:

"Take, eat; take, drink: the flesh and blood of your offspring in remembrance of a joy you no longer possess; in honor of a sacrifice too terrible to share."

To say it's a sad story is an understatement, but it's also haunting and, hopefully, healing. The issue closes with a more lighthearted tale: Brian Stableford's "The Philosopher's Stone," an alternate history story about John Dee. It's an enjoyable enough story, though some knowledge of Dee's life and thought would probably make it more so.

Analog's July/August double issue has two stories and a fact article that are of interest here. Bond Elam's "A Plethora

of Truth" is, to my mind, not really SF-- it's a not-terribly-sophisticated satire of televangelism that could have been written in the early '80s, which is when it seems to take place, given the fact that it's about televangelism at all. (Couldn't it at least have been web-evangelism?) It's the story of two feuding preachers who turn to the divine to settle their dispute. A bit higher on the sophistication scale are Carl Frederick's story "The Exanthropic Principle" and its accompanying fact article "The Challenge of the Anthropic Universe." The story describes the discovery of messages from a bigger universe than our own, and the folks who discover the signals have a brief debate about their possible religious meaning. The article explores the apparent fine-tuning of our universe to support life, a topic well-explained by Robert J. Sawyer's novel *Calculating God* (which I discuss [here](#)). Frederick offers three scientific explanations, and a fourth, quickly-dismissed theological one. Frederick's story shows he's capable of conceiving a bigger universe than this one, but his article makes it clear that he can't help but misdefine God as a guy with a beard (and perhaps a slide rule). He asks us to question our definition of the universe, but doesn't take into account other definitions of God that would mesh quite well with any of the other explanations he lays out. If you're not going to seriously discuss the concept of God, why bring it up at all?

Check back in a day or two for reviews of the current issues of both *Asimov's* and *Analog*!

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 24, 2008 at 07:52 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 27, 2008

"Secret Islam," Perceived Hinduism, and Other Ridiculous Concepts

My post this week at [Religion Dispatches](#) is about the accusation (if that's the right word) that Obama is a "secret Muslim," plus new evidence that he might, in fact, be a "secret Hindu."

"According to the Times of India, a group of supporters in New Delhi have sent Obama a two-foot, gold-plated statue of the monkey god Hanuman. According to Indian politician Brijmohan Bhamra, "Obama has deep faith in Lord Hanuman and that is why we are presenting an idol of Hanuman to him." The apparent source of this pronouncement of Obama's newly-discovered faith is this photo from Time magazine, which shows a collection of lucky charms Obama carries with him, including a small Hanuman charm. They mean well, to be sure, but it's another example of the world's inability to let Obama define his own faith. Say what you want—we know what you REALLY believe."

Read the full post [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 27, 2008 at 09:53 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 29, 2008

Good news: a pastoral prayer

In the interest of a good, sturdy, academic distance (and a bit of shyness), I don't generally talk about [my church](#) here. But they asked me to write the pastoral prayer for this week's service, and I worked pretty hard on it, so I thought I'd share it here. A bit of background: in case you didn't know, today is Pride Sunday. This is a pretty big deal at FPC Brooklyn, which is a supporting congregation of [Presbyterian Welcome](#), a group dedicated to "build[ing] up and repair[ing] the Body of Christ by working for the full inclusion of all disciples, without regard to sexual orientation and gender identity." Today's scripture reading, on which the prayer below was based, was [Psalm 13](#): "How long, O Lord?" Thanks to [Elliott](#) for sharing the "good news" [link](#).

A few days ago, a friend sent me a [link](#) to a really interesting website. It's laid out to look like Google News, but there's a key difference: all the news is *good*. The stories tell about the beginning of a universal health plan, emissions free cars, peace in Iraq, Israel-Palestine, and Sudan, the announcement of new Harry Potter sequels. All of the stories are things that people have been hoping for, praying for, for a long, long time. Many people would even say that these things are impossible.

It's difficult to be patient when we seek justice. When we hunger and thirst for righteousness, it's easy to sink into frustration and cynicism. When the things we know are right seem so far away, it's easy to lose faith that God will deal bountifully with us. So now, let us pray for the strength, the patience, and the perseverance to make that good news happen.

Loving God, give light to our eyes: let us share in Your eternal vision, knowing with certainty that You will bring our hearts to joy. Help us with every pain we bear in our souls, when we struggle with illness, poverty, injustice, homelessness, disasters both natural and manmade. Help us to always be aware of Your merciful

and loving justice.

Help us, too, to see in every joy the reflection of Your infinite love, and let us always be thankful for the wonders we experience every day. Every tree and flower, every walrus and otter, every baby's squeal, every loving family, every good news story: all these are signs of the imminent kingdom promised by Your Son Jesus, who taught us to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven... *[you probably know the rest.]*

We now return to our regularly scheduled academic distance already in progress.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 29, 2008 at 04:48 PM | [Permalink](#)

June 29, 2008

So what does "atheism" mean, then?

Get Religion [reports](#) on an odd wrinkle in the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's big ol' survey. You may have heard about this survey's results indicating that atheism is the fastest-growing faith in America. But a closer look at the statistics reveals a real oddity: fifty-seven percent of self-identified agnostics and twenty-one percent of self-identified atheists answered "yes" to the question, "Do you believe in God or a universal spirit?" About the same number said they pray. Eight percent of atheists were "absolutely certain" that God *does* exist. Which brings us to the title above: What the heck does "atheism" mean, then?

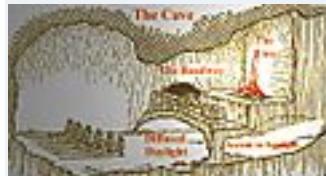
Well, Steve Waldman at [Beliefnet](#) theorizes that this means that "Atheism has become a cultural designation, rather than a theological statement. Some are likely declaring themselves atheists as a statement of hostility to organized religion, rather than to God." Which sounds plausible to me.

[Get Religion](#) shares some rightful criticism of the survey's question phrasing, methodology, and general tendency to overreach. (I had some similar thoughts, in the context of a bigger criticism of the *Atlantic Monthly's* religion reporting, in a post for [Religion Dispatches](#) a couple months ago.) But nevertheless, there's something odd going on in those numbers-- something that should make anyone pause and think about what the word "atheist" really means in today's culture.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 29, 2008 at 05:05 PM in [Atheism](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 07, 2008

A Brief History of Plato's Cave in Science Fiction



Plato's [Allegory of the Cave](#)—you know, the one where we're all tied up in an underground cavern watching reflections of a counterfeit reality instead of up on the surface experiencing absolute truth—is one of the most important concepts in the history of philosophy, and it's arguably the basis of all Western mysticism. It's also a popular theme in SF—particularly filmic SF, for some reason. Here are just a few examples:



Wall-E

You probably knew that Pixar's latest was a combination of post-apocalyptic SF and cute, attractively-designed robots. But by the time the eponymous trash-compacting 'bot gets to space, it becomes a riff on Plato's cave. When the growing tide of Earth's garbage grew too great, humankind abandoned the planet, departing on the space

ship *Axiom* while robots cleaned up the surface. 700 years later, human culture has atrophied—the inhabitants of the *Axiom* spend their entire lives strapped into hoverchairs, conversing with their fellow exiles on floating computer screens that fill their entire field of vision. They've completely forgotten what it means to be human—until Wall-E, in the role of Plato's philosopher, shows up to deliver some much-needed anamnesis. Before long the *Axiom*'s human inhabitants are stargazing, walking on their own feet, and ready to reclaim the Earth. On one level it's a particularly clever SF critique of consumerism; on another, an interplanetary transplant of Plato's most famous concept.

Doctor Who: "Gridlock"

The third-season *Doctor Who* episode "Gridlock" depicted a particularly unpleasant dystopia: a traffic jam the size of a planet where travelers live entire lives in their cars, searching for exit ramps that never appear. In one of his more messianic actions, the Doctor sets the eternal commuters free, and the image of their cars rising towards the light of the surface is a clear reference to Plato's sunlight of truth. (For more on this episode, read my full review [here](#).)

The Island

The Island doesn't get much respect, but it's probably the best movie Michael Bay will ever make. The Island, an uncredited remake of '70s clunker *Parts: The Clonus Horror*, opens in an underground complex whose bubbleheaded inhabitants live in simplistic harmony. When one of them escapes, he learns the awful truth: they're all clones being raised for parts; when their originals need an organ, they'll be harvested. Many, many chase scenes follow, but the highlight of the movie is a confrontation between the lead clone and the person he's cloned from—the false object seeks out its own ideal form, and finds it wanting.



The Matrix

This 21st-century reboot of Plato's allegory is very likely screened in more introductory philosophy classes than any other film. Here the shadows on the cave wall are a full-fledged virtual reality. But, in a fairly clever twist, those who escape into reality end up... in a cave. Plot necessity, or cynical comment on the quest for spiritual experience? In many respects *The Matrix* gets a bit more credit for its philosophy than it deserves—Buddhism is famously reduced to a platitude about spoons—but Plato's Cave is one thing it gets very, very right.

Logan's Run

The inhabitants of a dome city of the future must commit ritualized suicide on their thirtieth birthdays. Logan, a "sandman" who enforces this order, starts to wonder why—and, when he leads his people out of the prison of their world at the story's end, it's a nice illustration of a society casting off its bonds and embracing a new vision of reality.



THX-1138

In SF, it seems that the domed city replaces the cave. When the dehumanized hero of George Lucas's first feature escapes his narcotized society, we're treated to a lengthy shot of him standing in silhouette before the sunrise—dazzled, like Plato's philosopher, by the blinding light of the truth.



Ubik by Philip K. Dick

It could be argued that Philip K. Dick's entire oeuvre illustrates Plato's allegory, but Ubik probably does it best. When a team of psionic spies is injured by a bomb, they're trapped in cryogenic "half-life," experiencing a world they think is real. Their first clue that something is amiss comes in a particular Platonic form as objects regress into older versions of themselves—a supersonic jet becomes a biplane; a holographic display becomes a TV, then a radio. In this case the ideals are less than ideal, but that doesn't stop Ubik from being one of Dick's most philosophically rewarding novels.

1984 by George Orwell

If you've been wondering why so many of the above stories are dystopias, this is why. There's a Platonic edge to all dystopian fiction, and Orwell's definitive world-gone-wrong gives the clearest example of why. Humanity languishes in chains while evil forces subject shape their experience of reality by manipulating the truth—it's a dark vision of Plato's concept, but certainly a striking one.

For more on Plato's cave and religions experience in SF, see chapter 7 of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on July 07, 2008 at 05:03 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 10, 2008

Terry Pratchett clears things up

Discworld creator and longtime atheist/agnostic/what have you Terry Pratchett caused a bit of a stir a few weeks ago when he made a comment in an interview that suggested that he now believes in God. In an [essay](#) for the *Daily Mail*, he clears up what he meant. Ignore the headline, it kind of misses the point, which is a bit Schleiermacherian.

"For a moment, the world had felt at peace. Where did it come from?"

"Me, actually - the part of all of us that, in my case, caused me to stand in awe the first time I heard Thomas Tallis's Spem In Alium, and the elation I felt on a walk one day last February, when the light of the setting sun turned a ploughed field into shocking pink; I believe it's what Abraham felt on the mountain and Einstein did when it turned out that E=mc2.

"It's that moment, that brief epiphany when the universe opens up and shows us something, and in that instant we get just a sense of an order greater than Heaven and, as yet at least, beyond the grasp of Stephen Hawking. It doesn't require worship, but, I think, rewards intelligence, observation and enquiring minds."

"I don't think I've found God, but I may have seen where gods come from."

Read the whole thing [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on July 10, 2008 at 09:55 AM in [Atheism](#), [Books](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 12, 2008

An Augustinian approach to Hellboy 2



At [Indy.com](#), Maruice Broaddus reviews *Hellboy 2* and finds more than a little religion in it:

"Augustine spoke of a God-sized hole within each of us - essentially we are relational beings hard-wired with a need for intimacy. Hellboy and his friends are no different. They are a bunch of loners and misfits, alone in the world, searching for love and meaning. They are looking for acceptance or, realizing that they might be the last of their kind, striving to not be alone. In the process, they look out for each other. With each other, they have found people to be with one another on their journeys, to encourage, mentor, chastise, their own entourage of misfits.

"The movies [Guillermo] del Toro crafts are myth for adults, with all of its attendant elements - woven with death and loss, courage and love and sacrifice. Drawing on the primal urgency of the original fairy tales before they were cleaned up for mass consumption, his lush and imaginative Pan's Labyrinth was pure magical realism - fantasy firmly rooted in reality, both gruesome and spell-binding. He understands the underpinnings of faith, the symbolism inherent in religion, as faith and spiritual concerns are essentially magic."

Read the full review [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on July 12, 2008 at 10:46 AM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 15, 2008

The Gospel According to Science Fiction in Holland SF



Good news for Dutch SF fans! The

June issue of [Holland SF](#), published by the Nederlands Contactcentrum voor Science Fiction, is a special issue on religious themes in SF. Even better, the lead story is a translated excerpt from my book [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#). They selected chapter 6, "Christ, Prometheus, and Klaatu: Alien Messiahs," which discusses Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man*, *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, Alan Moore's *Miracleman/Marvelman*, and much, much more. There's also a piece on H.P. Lovecraft's forbidden gods, an interview with Dutch fantasy author Ad van Tiggelen on his recent book *Profeet van de Duivel*, a review of Osamu Tezuka's *Buddha*, and what seems to be an essay on nunsploration movies. There's also a brief review of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#). Of course, I can't read a word of it, but I can appreciate the attractive layout, including the awesome mash-up of Golgotha and Gort below.

Check out the *Holland SF* page [here](#) (as of this posting, it's not yet updated with this issue).



Gabriel McKee

Christus, Prometheus en Klaatu: buitenaardse messiassen

Posted by Gabriel McKee on July 15, 2008 at 05:54 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 16, 2008

Praying Liberally at Religion Dispatches

My most recent post for the blog at Religion Dispatches is just a quick one on the inauguration of Praying Liberally, a new Christian Left organization. [Read it here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on July 16, 2008 at 10:34 AM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 18, 2008

Stephen Baldwin has a comic book. (Run for your lives.)



My latest post at *Religion*

Dispatches announces, with much trepidation, that C-list actor turned A-list evangelical reactionary Stephen Baldwin has spawned a comic book series for BOOM! Studios.

BOOM!'s press release describes *The Remnant* as "A supernatural thriller in the vein of 24," but the title suggests it'll be more of a *Left Behind* knock-off—indeed, it shares its Revelation-inspired title with the tenth book in the *Left Behind* series.

Read my full post on *The Remnant* [here](#).

And if you're wondering what I have against Stephen Baldwin, you can read my review of his book, *The Unusual Suspect*, [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on July 18, 2008 at 06:06 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 24, 2008

American Virgin postmortem



Around the World, the fourth and final volume of Stephen T. Seagle and Becky Cloonan's sex-and-religion comics romp *American Virgin*, came out this week. *American Virgin* is the story of Adam Chamberlain, a teenage evangelist whose abstinence ministry hits a rough patch when his divinely-ordained wife-to-be is killed by terrorists. I had high hopes for the series when it first came out, but that it didn't live up to my expectations. (My oldest readers may recall that a review of the first story arc was [one of my first posts](#) here.) My [latest piece](#) for Religion Dispatches is an essay on the series as a whole: what it got right, what it got wrong, how it could have worked, and the reasons that it ultimately didn't.

"It's not just the evangelical world or Adam's past that's described in shorthand; it's Adam himself. Issue #19, for example, provides some clues when we learn rather late in the game that Adam's theology isn't conservative at all. We learn that he's never believed in hell, and, more importantly, that he's "not sure" about Jesus (which I assume means that he doubts the Incarnation, though it's not entirely clear). These are pretty

big bombshells, but they make us question whether or not we know Adam at all.

"More importantly, it makes us question the extent to which the book's creators really understand evangelical Christianity. After all, the cornerstone of evangelical theology is a personal relationship with Jesus. There's another wrong-note moment in the following issue when Adam argues, in contradiction to Acts 15 (and everything after on the subject), that circumcision is a sign of a Christian covenant. And that t-shirt he wears throughout the series that reads "save yourself"—it might seem a clever means of underscoring the self-righteousness that lurks beneath Adam's message, but you'd be hard-pressed to find an evangelical speaker urging his audience to "save themselves." The entire evangelical concept of salvation relies on the absolute impossibility of saving oneself—that's God's job. The series has a number of clever takes on the surface of evangelical Christianity, but after a few of these wrong notes we begin to wonder how deeply Seagle looked into the culture he was lampooning. Is this picture of spirituality complex, or just confused?"

Read the full essay [here](#).

And my past posts on *American Virgin*:

My review of the first story arc, *Head*, [here](#).

The beginning of my disillusionment with a review of #7 [here](#).

Some brief thoughts on issue #10 [here](#).

And an ever-so-slightly longer review of #11 [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on July 24, 2008 at 10:59 AM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 24, 2008

Links for sale-- buy 3 get 1 free

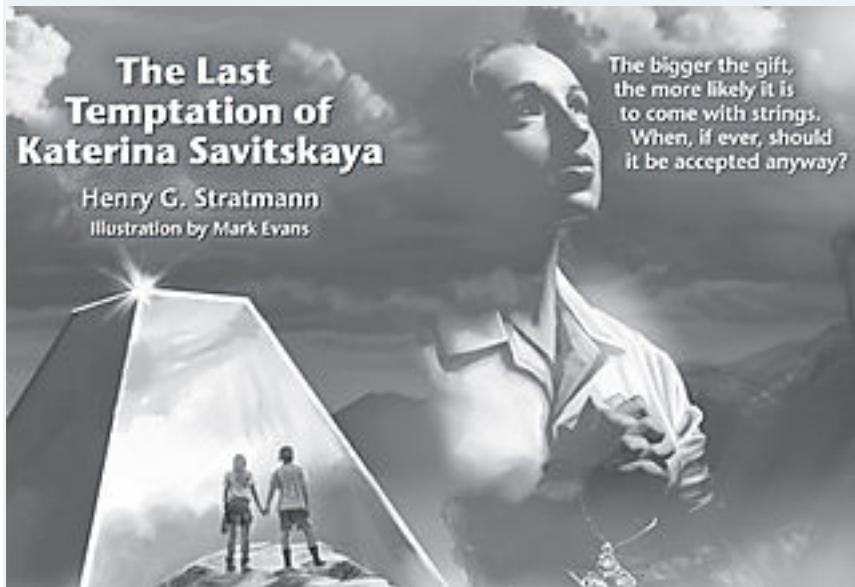
An assortment of links for your perusal:

- There's a new book about religion on the block: James A. Herrick's [Scientific Mythologies: How Science and Science Fiction Forge New Religious Beliefs](#). James McGrath has reviewed it at Exploring Our Matrix, and it [doesn't sound good](#). Apparently it's all based on the premise that science, and science fiction, are inherently opposed to Christianity. McGrath's review is long, but well worth reading. When you're done, you may want to check out my book, [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#), as an open-minded chaser that doesn't, y'know, vilify the whole genre, or treat Christianity as monolithic. Just sayin'.
- Jason Ellis [reports](#) from the Science Fiction Research Association conference, where Doug Davis gave a presentation entitled "God as Science Fiction, Science Fiction as God: Christian Fabulation for American Technoculture."
- A few months ago there was a conference in Boston entitled "Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books & Graphic Novels." They're publishing a book, and they've put out a call for (additional) papers. You've got two weeks: [go!](#)
- Another CFP for a conference in Chicago entitled "Film & Science: Fictions, Documentaries, and Beyond." They're specifically requesting papers on *Doctor Who*, and the CFP has a spiritual tone: "The Doctor is clearly a man of science, yet his function on the show is often God like, with occasional explicit references to him as a Christ-figure. How does the Doctor's dual role comment on ... the uneasy relationship between Western empiricism and theological mysticism?" Again, you've got two weeks, so [get to work](#), *Who* scholars.
- This one's over a year old, but I like it. In One Ear... offers some wry [advice](#) for comics writers who want to put religion in their stories: "Your villain can be excessively religious and talk about God all the time. Religion is a great shorthand to tell your readers, 'This person is an evil and hate filled bigot!' This is particularly effective if you are writing an X-Book for Marvel."
- I've been spending the last few days getting caught up on [Achewood](#), the greatest webcomic of all time. In a strip from early March, preschool-aged otter Phillippe asks: "If Jesus was a dog, would he wear a cape and walk on two legs?" Yes, Phillippe. Yes, [he most certainly would](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on July 24, 2008 at 12:10 PM in [Books](#), [Comics](#), [Religion in the media](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 30, 2008

Analog, September 2008



The September 2008 issue

of *Analog* opens with a refreshingly positive depiction of faith in Henry G. Stratmann's "[The Last Temptation of Katerina Savitskaya](#)." The title character is a fairly conservative Christian who is stranded on Mars with her fiancé, Martin Slayton. (They wound up there in "The Paradise Project," a story in the November 2007 issue.) The story is an extraterrestrial transposition of Jesus' temptation in the desert ([Matthew 4:1-11](#), [Luke 4:1-13](#)), with aliens taking the diabolical role. They don't understand why Katerina won't sleep with Martin before they're married, or why she won't break her Lenten fast to eat the food they offer her:

"There is no need to fast if you are hungry and food is available. It is not intelligent to blindly obey rules that inflict unnecessary pain."

"Reflexively she clutched the cross hanging from the gold chain around her neck. 'My obedience isn't blind. Fasting helps me practice self-control. We humans can be tempted to indulge desires that could cause unnecessary suffering later for ourselves and others. Eating this food now wouldn't directly injure me. But by not eating it I make it easier to resist temptation when it really could cause harm.'

"That explains why you do not mate with your companion though you strongly desire him."

"Katerina wondered if the aliens understood what a blush meant. 'Yes, I want us to share our love in that way. But doing that now could put the new life we might create in danger. And if our unborn child or me died from a medical problem beyond our ability to deal with on this world, I know Martin would feel terrible pain too. As difficult as it's been to abstain, it might be far worse if we didn't.'

"Delayed gratification. An interesting concept."

The story presents Katerina's faith a bit bluntly— Martin is a bit too fond of regarding her cross pendant and saying things like "You may have faith that things will turn out okay, but..." — but it's miles beyond the "religion-means-narrowminded" shorthand of, say, Bond Elam's "A Plethora of Truth" [last month](#). [It's interesting to note, however, that *Analog* has cropped the illustration for the story on their website, shown above. The original in the magazine extends for a good inch lower, and we see that the object Katerina is holding in her hands is a cross. Were they worried about what their more anti-religious readers would think...?]

Given the greater nuance on display in Stratmann's story, it's particularly dismaying to see the tired clichés that Tom Eastman trots out in his book review column. In discussing the National Academy of Sciences' *Science, Evolution, and Creationism*, he drops this doozy:

"Scriptural explanations definitely do conflict with scientific explanations, and to the extent that religion and science endeavor to explain the same things, they *do* conflict. Only when religion confines itself to the discussions of the nonexistent (the supernatural, or the spiritual), does it not conflict with science, which can only say about such things, 'No evidence.'"

Why is it that atheists are so dogmatic about the meaning of Scripture? Do they really think that there is no interpretation that goes into a so-called "literalist" reading? Is there no room for poetry in the soul of Tom Eastman? And that passage ain't got nothing on what follows it:

"Does that sound harsh? So be it. The only value of religion that I have ever been able to discern is that it helps people live amicably together, and that tends to work best in religiously homogeneous societies. In pluralistic societies, it far too often breaks down."

Eastman seem to think that all faith is fundamentalism, that all believers wish that our society was "religiously homogeneous," and that pluralistic society forces these authoritarian aspirations to "break down." (This seems to be a pretty popular paranoia among atheists, and it's something I hope to write more about soon.) So, when Eastman (grudgingly?) acknowledges later in the same paragraph that creationists are a minority among the faithful, it comes across as more than a little self-contradictory. If he knows that creationists are a majority, does that mean he thinks that Congregationalists secretly want to overthrow the government? A 200-word book review is hardly the place for the sort of pontificating that Eastman attempts here, and he ends up sounding deeply uninformed and more than a little pompous. (Does that sound harsh? So be it.)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on July 30, 2008 at 11:40 PM in [Atheism](#), [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 23, 2008

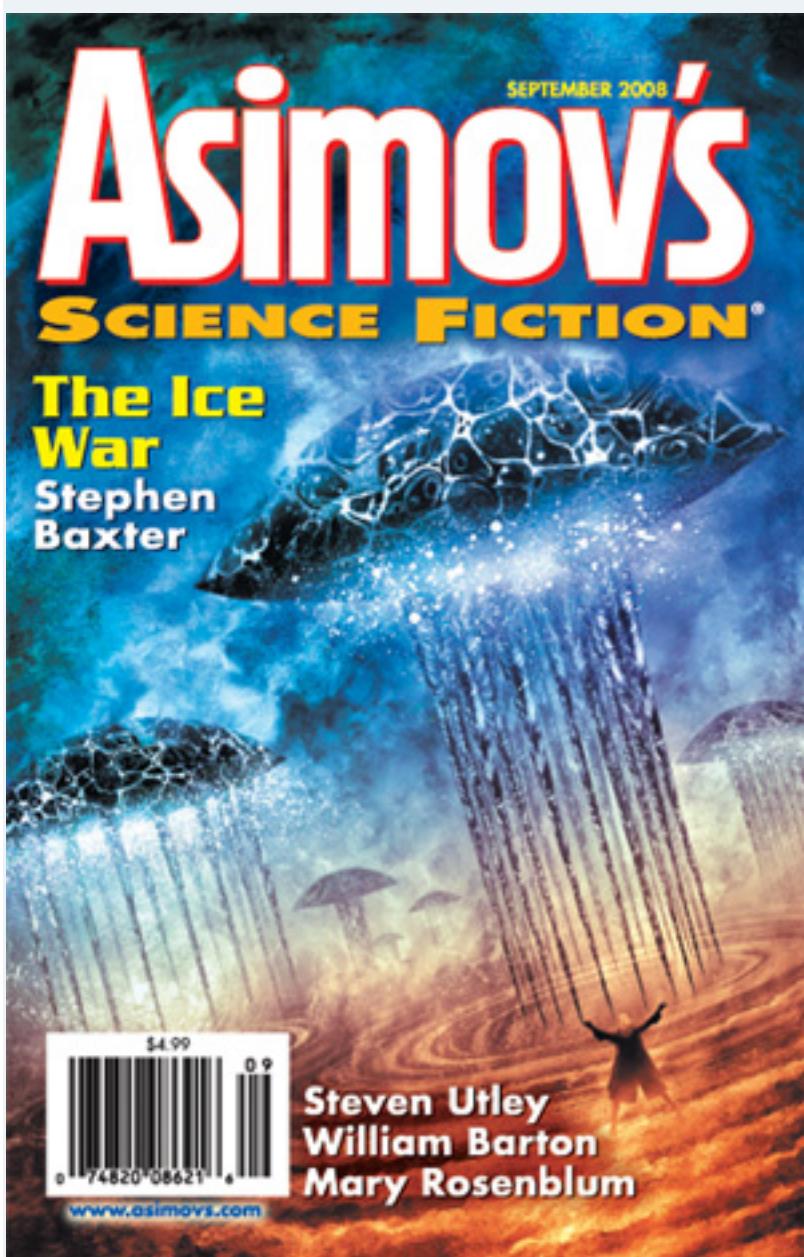
chirp chirp

Been a bit quiet around here lately, hasn't it? That's mainly because I've been spending the last few weeks finishing up my library degree, including a trip upstate to Cornell University, where I had an internship processing a recently-acquired [hip hop collection](#). (So if you were curious about, say, when the [Cold Crush Brothers](#) first played at South Bronx High School, or when [Buddy Esquire](#) designed his first deco-influenced party flier, you can ask me.) I'm emerging from the schoolwork tunnel now, and I should be getting back to my regularly irregular posting schedule shortly. So rejoice, or whatever.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on August 23, 2008 at 11:33 AM | [Permalink](#)

August 23, 2008

Skepticism, cynicism, and mysticism: More from *Asimov's* and *Analog*



As usual, there's a wide range of attitudes toward religion in the past few months' SF magazines. Stephen Baxter's ["The Ice War"](#) (Asimov's, Sept. 2008) is an alternate history tale about an alien invasion in the 18th century, and its hero, Jack Hobbes, is a somewhat anachronistic secularist. He periodically makes critical comments about the beliefs of his countrymen—including Isaac Newton. When the pioneering scientist hints that Providence has guided Hobbes, he lashes out at the idea of a divine plan. A brief theological discussion follows:

[Newton] looked at me closely. "What is it you fear so bad, man? The pain of death, or God's justice thereafter?"

"Neither," I said bitterly, "but oblivion." And I treated Newton to a précis of my own theological journey. "My father's pious beatings taught me to dread God and His punishment-- but at least He was there, present in the pain! But then at college I encountered your new breed of Natural Philosophers with their Natural Religion, who speak of God as having created the world and then stepped out of it. Thus they removed Him from the fabric of life altogether. And they quoted you, sir, saying that your equations revealed a bonfire of Immanence."

Newton nodded. "They misquoted me, then. The Natural Religionists use my Mathematick to prop up their dubious French Philosophies." He tapped his Bible. "I do not believe in the primacy of reason over revelation, man, though I

do believe we have been given our reason to riddle out God's truth, as He has revealed it in scripture and in nature. But I have grown old seeing this argument unfold. You, though, are of the first generation to grow up being taught that God has abandoned you. No wonder you are afraid-- terrified of oblivion! But you need not fear. God is grander than you or I, Jack, but He is not gone."

"You know no more about Him than I do, you old fraud."

At times his attitude seems too cutely modern, and Newton's habit of "tapping" his Bible has the ring of thumping a particularly hoary cliché. (Baxter doesn't really dwell on it, though, so it's pretty forgivable.) I found myself comparing Baxter's approach to the religious though of his story's era with that of Michael F. Flynn in his alternate history stories. Baxter tries to help his readers to identify with his lead character by giving him anachronistic attitudes; Flynn attempts to get inside the heads of characters by not flinching from their era's ideas. (Flynn's own anachronisms crop up in other ways, of course, as when the 14th-century characters of *Eifelheim* discover electricity.)

Neal Barrett's ["Radio Station St. Jack"](#) (Asimov's, Aug. 2008) is a bit more optimistic about the role of religion in society. It's a postapocalyptic comedy—a specialty of Barrett's—about a community that's held together in large part by a radio DJ-cum-Catholic priest named Father Mac. There is a touch of cynicism to the depiction of Mac's faith. He seems to know little about the actual content of his tradition, and his primary form of spiritual guidance is muttering prayers in nonsense Latin: *"Sanctus per diem... modus operandi... dum-de-dum-dum..."* But Barrett makes it clear that religion can play a central social role regardless of its content (or lack thereof). The real man of faith in Barrett's story isn't the priest at all, but Pablo the Deep, a part-time carpenter and full-time mystic. Pablo lives in the desert flats at the outskirts of his society, much like the desert fathers of Egypt:

God had told Pablo this is where he wanted his chair. Not anywhere else, right here. And when Pablo was done, God would descend and rest in his chair. If God had mentioned what he'd do after that, Pablo hadn't said. It was rumored that Pablo was a certified mystic from Queens, New York, and no one questioned him about the chair.

Pablo's faith is eccentric, to be sure, but it plays a pivotal role in the story's conclusion. His Noah-like labor evokes the ironically pre-apocalyptic nature of post-apocalyptic fiction: the end, rather than having come and gone, is perpetually postponed. (Check out my recent [review-essay](#) of the postapocalyptic anthology *Wastelands* for a bit more on this theme.) Life carries on against all odds—and if humanity cannot rest, then neither can God.

"Radio Station St. Jack" has a lot in common with Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, where the Catholic Church holds together a similar postapocalyptic society. But where Miller's church protected scraps of lost scientific knowledge, Barret's Father Mac cares more about pop culture. When facing down a gang of bandits who are raiding his town, they reach an impasse: "If you've got no respect for God or radio, I don't see how we can talk." It's a statement that begs an Amen.

More peculiar is Ted Kosmatka's story "Divining Light" (Asimov's, Aug. 2008). Kosmatka has written about religion several times in his thus-far brief career. Last year's ["The Prophet of Flores"](#) put a unique spin on creationism, and "Divining Light" is no less intriguing. The story ponders the nature of consciousness by way of quantum physics, using as its starting point the [Feynman double slit experiment](#). I'm not quite competent to explain this experiment in indeterminacy, but the basic gist of it is that the behavior of electrons varies depending on the presence or absence of an observer. In this story, Kosmatka poses the question: who counts as an observer? His characters devise an ingenious means of allowing any living creature to function as a quantum observer. They reach a surprising, even disturbing conclusion: only humans cause waveform collapse. There's something special about humans—something in our minds that gives us a unique relationship with the foundations of the universe. The scientists who make this discovery are reluctant to consider its spiritual implications—but, of course, not everyone shares their reservations, and there is some brief talk about scientific proof of the human soul. Before long they're under pressure to perform the experiment with unborn children, and they begin to ponder frightening possibility that not every human being may have the unknown factor that causes waveform collapse. Kosmatka's story thrives on its ambiguities, and he fortunately doesn't try to give too-easy answers to the problems he raises.



Interesting happenings are also afoot in the [October 2008 Analog](#). Dave Creek's "Stealing Adriana" is a murder mystery set on a colony planet inhabited by Mennonites; in that regard it has a bit in common with Paul Levison's Amish SF mystery [The Silk Code](#). But my favorite story in this issue is probably Robert R. Chase's "The Meme Theorist," in which a quantum physicist is visited by ghosts—or hallucinations—of dead scientists and mystics. Things really get interesting when Julian of Norwich turns up, and the scientist is treated to her famous vision of the universe as a singularity:

Peering into the office, Pelerin saw Norwich seated at her desk. Her visitor was leaning over the desk, apparently holding something cupped in his hands. From it, a soft white light flickered over her face like ripples on a pond.

"What is it?" Norwich asked, her voice filled with wonder.

"It is all that has been made."

Norwich looked more closely. "But it's so small and delicate. What keeps it from just falling apart?"
"It lasts, and shall last, because I love it."

Norwich's most famous vision is a sublime depiction of the nature of reality, and Chase's story suggests that modern physics points in the same direction. As in Kosmatka's "Divining Light," quantum physics here hints at a mystical level of reality. It wouldn't make Baxter's agnostic hero happy, but the theological implications of Newton's heirs are a rich source for fictional speculation.

August 25, 2008

The 10 best (and 5 worst) science fiction theme tunes

I've been watching an awful lot of SF TV shows lately, which has led me to this list (which, admittedly, is pretty much totally outside the normal scope of this blog. Indulge me). Theme music is important for a TV show: it sets the tone, telling the audience what to expect from the next hour. It's especially important with SF: the music has to imply another world *and* keep its potential audience from watching *American Gladiators* instead. A great SF theme tune needs to be good music, but it also needs to convey the sense that this *is* science fiction. With shows like *Lost*, *Heroes*, and *Jericho* basically abandoning theme music altogether, the days of the great SF theme tune may be numbered. Here are ten that get it right, and five that get it so very, very wrong.

The 10 best:

10. Robotech

This mid-'80s Japanese import, which squished three different anime series into a single universe, was miles beyond anything else being marketed toward children at the time. The show holds up surprisingly well, particularly the first season—the *Macross* series—which is every bit the sophisticated soap opera it seemed in 1986. If you think the theme tune is good, there's some great music throughout the series—I'm partial to "[Lonely Soldier Boy](#)," a ballad crooned by cross-dressing, freedom-fighting popstar Yellow Dancer (a.k.a. Lancer).

9. Blake's 7

The theme for the BBC's dystopian space adventure series is pretty over-the-top. It sounds a lot like a synthed-up soap opera theme—and, given the dark drama that drove the *Liberator*'s crew of bandits and rebels, it's a pretty good fit.

8. The Greatest American Hero

Remember when theme tunes were, y'know, actual songs? And mostly it was goofy? Well, here's one that worked. I always assumed that this was a popular song that got tacked onto the show, but no—this was written for the sole purpose of getting you in the mood to see William Katt in tights. The song has aged wonderfully; the show itself, not so much.

7. The X-Files

Though the synth sounds are a bit dated, the music for *The X-Files* is appropriately spooky. The main melody is like a less-goofy version of the theremin on a '50s SF soundtrack. And you can't go wrong with digital delay.

6. The Twilight Zone

The piercing sounds of this opening sequence put you ill at ease. *The Twilight Zone*'s atmosphere begins and ends here; even the bongos are creepy. It's unusual music for an unusual TV show.

5. Firefly

This one gets a lot of flak, and I'll freely admit that I hated it the first few times I heard it. But it fits in quite well with the show's atmosphere—if any SF show should have a country theme,

it's *Firefly*. It loses points for the lyrics, which are meaningful but also a bit silly. It would be higher on this list had it been an instrumental. (In fact, the closing credits version is).

4. *Knight Rider*

The *Knight Rider* theme just might be the ultimate musical expression of the mid-1980s, and is almost certainly responsible for most of the electronic music of the mid-90s. You'll be pleased to know that it still holds up. (Was the tempo always that fast, though? I remembered it being slower.)

3. *Star Trek: The Next Generation*

The orchestral pomp of this iconic theme builds on previously-released material—Alexander Courage's fanfare from the original series and Jerry Goldsmith's opening theme for *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. It's not arbitrary recycling: those two pieces of music sum up the spirit of Gene Rodenberry's vision of the future perfectly. You can explain the whole show pretty well by saying "it's about the future—and it sounds like *this*.

Also, [this](#).

2. *Doctor Who*

When I first got into *Doctor Who*, I got the show's theme stuck in my head for about six months straight. The fact that the music could remain fundamentally unchanged—with different recordings, sure, but still the same basic music—for *over 40 years* says a lot. But what's really amazing about the original music is how ahead of its time it was. First composed in 1963, it presages synthesizer sounds that wouldn't come into full fruition for nearly 20 years (see *Knight Rider* above). The sound of the *Doctor Who* theme *is* the sound of science fiction. This is the earliest version from the era of the First Doctor, 1963-1966.

1. *Alien Nation*

There are a lot of things that were great about *Alien Nation*, which suffered one of the most unjust cancellations in television history in 1990. One of the best things about it was its theme music, which was intended to sound like the kind of music aliens would make. It succeeds. The music is a testament to how thoroughly the show's creators thought out the alien Newcomers' culture. It's a beautiful and original piece of music that's tied directly in with the show's science-fictional aims, and that's why I think it's the best theme tune in the history of science fiction TV.

And the 5 worst:

5. *Flash Gordon* (2007)

Take a generic synthesized theme tune from the '80s. Do a techno remix. Lather, rinse, repeat.

4. *Battlestar Galactica* (new)

Generally speaking, the new *BSG* has a lovely, atmospheric score. And the first 30 seconds or so of the theme tune reflect that—strings, haunting vocals in an unspecified language, a generally elegiac atmosphere. Then those damned drums kick in and ruin everything. The beginning feels like it's building to something exciting, and then it all falls apart. Skip the drum circle and just start the dang show already.

3. Logan's Run

Apparently, the producers of the *Logan's Run* TV series thought that science fiction theme tunes needed to have little ray gun noises in them. "Pew pew pew!" I can forgive the disco sound—but not the apparent ripoff of the melody to the original *Star Trek* tune.

2. Quantum Leap

Don't get me wrong—the *Quantum Leap* theme is catchy. But the production is very Kenny G; hearing it for the first time you might think it was a spin-off of *Doogie Howser*. There's nothing about this music that says "science fiction." One can only hope they were trying to embody Sam Beckett's milquetoastiness, but the end result just feels bland. Not only that, it's *long*—nearly a minute and a half for a credit sequence that only needs to name two actors and the show's creator. Even worse was their attempt to liven it up in the final season—let's just say it didn't help matters.

1. Star Trek: Enterprise

Poor Scott Bakula. Why can't the guy get a decent theme tune? Much-reviled for a reason, the terrible sub-Rod-Stewart stylings that introduced *Star Trek*'s fade-out series isn't just a bad song, it's a betrayal of a legacy. *Trek* had a tradition of truly majestic music that truly encompassed the spirit of the Gene Roddenberry's optimistic vision of the future. Lyrics about hope aside, this weak adult-contemporary mess inspires despair. I put this theme tune at the top of the list of reasons why *Enterprise* failed—it's really that bad.

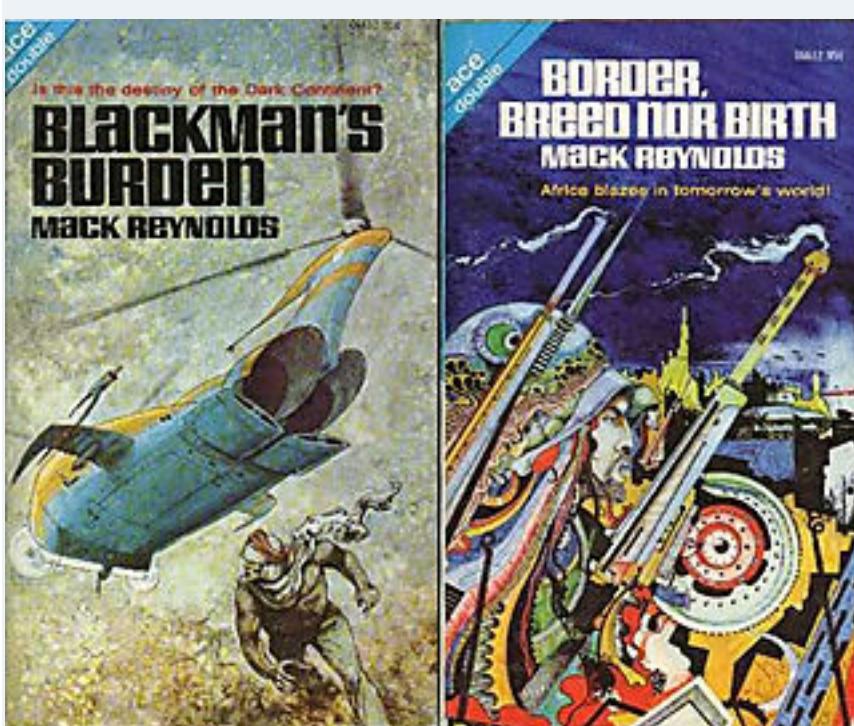
Got a theme tune you wish had made one of the lists? Want to argue about the electric-piano-fueled *Quantum Leap* theme? Let me know in the comments!

[PS. If you liked this list, please [Digg it!](#)]

Posted by Gabriel McKee on August 25, 2008 at 11:20 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 26, 2008

Mack Reynolds on Africa, Islam, utopia, and progress



It's surprising you don't hear more about [Mack Reynolds](#). By all accounts he injected his stories with radical politics and anti-imperialist utopianism, and he was certainly a precursor of the New Wave. He was well-regarded in his day, and a *Galaxy* poll in the early '60s named him the magazine's most popular author. His interests were not technological but sociological—he cared about what makes societies tick, not what ticks within them. But while other SF revolutionaries of his era have found their way to the heart of the SF canon, Reynolds, it seems, has been forgotten, and his books have fallen out of print. In fact, the two Reynolds novels I have thus far read—*Blackman's Burden* and *Border, Breed Nor Birth*—have been out of print since their 1972 publication as an Ace Double (both reprinted from serializations in *Analog* in 1962-63).

Given the growing attention to [postcolonial SF](#) in recent years, it's a surprising oversight. Reynolds' novels describe a near-future Africa that has been abandoned by the developed world. With the exception of a few unfunded, below-the-radar humanitarian teams from the Reunited Nations, the people of Africa are on their own—until one of those teams decides to take the reigns of the struggling continent and give it a united government that works. Homer Crawford, an African-American aid worker, rechristens himself "El Hassan" and becomes Africa's benevolent tyrant. There's more than a little paternalism in the concept, but you get the sense that Reynolds is aware of the irony of this postcolonial intrusiveness. Ultimately, the idea comes across as a kind of philosopher-king utopianism: it asks, why *can't* we just make things work?

The first book in the series, *Blackman's Burden*, depicts Islam as part of the problem rather than the solution. Crawford sees Islam as an overly-rigid barrier to progress:

[Judaism and Christianity] adapted to changing times, with considerable success. Islam has remained the same and in all the world there is not one example of a highly developed socio-economic system in a Moslem country. The reason is that in your country, and mine, and in the other advanced countries of the West, we pay lip service to our religions, but we don't let them interfere with our day-to-day life. But the Moslem, like the rapidly-disappearing ultra-orthodox Jew, lives his religion every day and by the rules set down by the Prophet fifteen centuries ago. Everything the Moslem does from the moment he gets up in the morning is all mapped out in the Koran... North Africa cannot be united under the banner of Islam if she is going to progress rapidly. If it ever unites, it will be in spite of local religions—Islam and pagan as well; they hold up the wheels of progress.

It's a bit of a simplistic attitude. Fundamentalist Muslims are like fundamentalist Christians—they want you to *think* that they're doing everything exactly as it's always been done, that the practice of their religion remains, and will remain, unchanged and untainted. Which is ridiculous, of course; in the case of both religious traditions what we now call fundamentalism didn't really start until the 19th century. Simplistic or not, the idea that Islam is incompatible with the concept of progress is a pretty popular one these days. Behind Reynolds' argument is the idea that Islam depends on the ecological and socio-economic background of the desert, but this begs the question: what about

Indonesia? (Of course, Frank Herbert extrapolated from this idea that Islam, or at least religions flavored with Islam, could do quite well on alien desert worlds.) And one wonders if Reynolds would make the same statements about Islamic economies after the oil boom of the '70s. Attitude to Islam aside, Reynolds' African novels are fascinating reads, well ahead of their time and quite unjustly forgotten. I will definitely be seeking out more of his books soon, and I hope they offer some similarly pleasant surprises.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on August 26, 2008 at 11:00 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 27, 2008

Flynn on "Quaestiones," Hugo stuff, & etc.

Sci Fi Wire [interviews](#) Michael F. Flynn on his story "Quaestiones Super Caelo et Mundo," an alternate history story about a scientific revolution in the Middle Ages. (I wrote about it a bit [here](#), and it [keeps](#) cropping [up](#).) Apparently the story won a Sidewise Award for outstanding alternate history fiction. Well-deserved, I think.

Speaking of awards, 7 brave souls nominated [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) for the "Best Related Book" Hugo this year. (Thanks, 5 people I don't know!) Not enough to make the final ballot, of course, but I was only one vote away from tying [John Scalzi](#), which is no small thing. The full nomination and voting breakdowns are [here](#). And hey, the Hugos are finally going to have a "[Best Graphic Story](#)" award. (About freakin' time.) It's just a one-time special award unless the con's members vote to make it permanent. And they'd better.

And did you hear that there's going to be a movie of Philip K. Dick's *Radio Free Albemuth*? *RFA* was the first draft of *VALIS*, and both are all about PKD's religious experiences. Both are brilliant, but the fact that the first version is actually a bit better is a well-kept secret. Check out an interview with writer-director-producer John Alan Simon [here](#). And, since he doesn't really talk too much about the story's themes (religious or otherwise), why don't you check out [Pink Beams of Light From the God in the Gutter](#), too?

Posted by Gabriel McKee on August 27, 2008 at 04:00 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 31, 2008

Impossible science and *The Cloud of Unknowing*

The current issue of the academic journal [Science Fiction Studies](#) includes a review of Karen Barad's book *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Sherryl Vint's review makes the book sound pretty interesting—one of Barad's goals, for which she finds evidence at the subatomic level, is to argue that non-human life has individual agency (i.e. sentience). Contrast that with Ted Kosmatka's [recently-reviewed-here](#) story "Divining Light," in which subatomic experiments seem to provide proof for a qualitative distinction between humans and non-humans. Alternately, compare Rudy Rucker's more radical panpsychic argument that "[mind is a universally distributed quality](#)." I don't think Barad would go to the level of rocks, though [Plotinus](#) probably would.

What really interested me, though, is the review's reference to the source of the title of *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Alice Fulton's poem "Cascade Experiment," printed as an [appendix](#) in Barad's book, contains this compelling passage:

*Because truths we don't suspect have a hard time
making themselves felt, as when thirteen species
of whiptail lizards, composed entirely of females
stay undiscovered due to bias
against such things existing,
we have to meet the universe halfway.
Nothing will unfold for us unless we move toward what
looks to us like nothing: faith is a cascade.*

The poem is a wonderful combination of science and faith, and finds mystery in empiricism, just as great SF about religion does. It reminds me of the 14th-century mystical text [The Cloud of Unknowing](#), the title of which offers perhaps the most famous illustration of apophatic theology. The *Cloud* considers God as wholly ineffable, indescribable, and possibly even incomprehensible. Nevertheless, the *Cloud* author urges his monastic audience to place the limitations of human experience beneath a "cloud of forgetting," and to "smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love" (ch. 6). Quantum physics is often compared to mysticism, as in Robert

R. Chase's recent story "The Meme Theorist" (also reviewed here). Fulton's poem makes an eloquent and moving case for science that seeks the unknowable, the unbelievable, and the impossible.

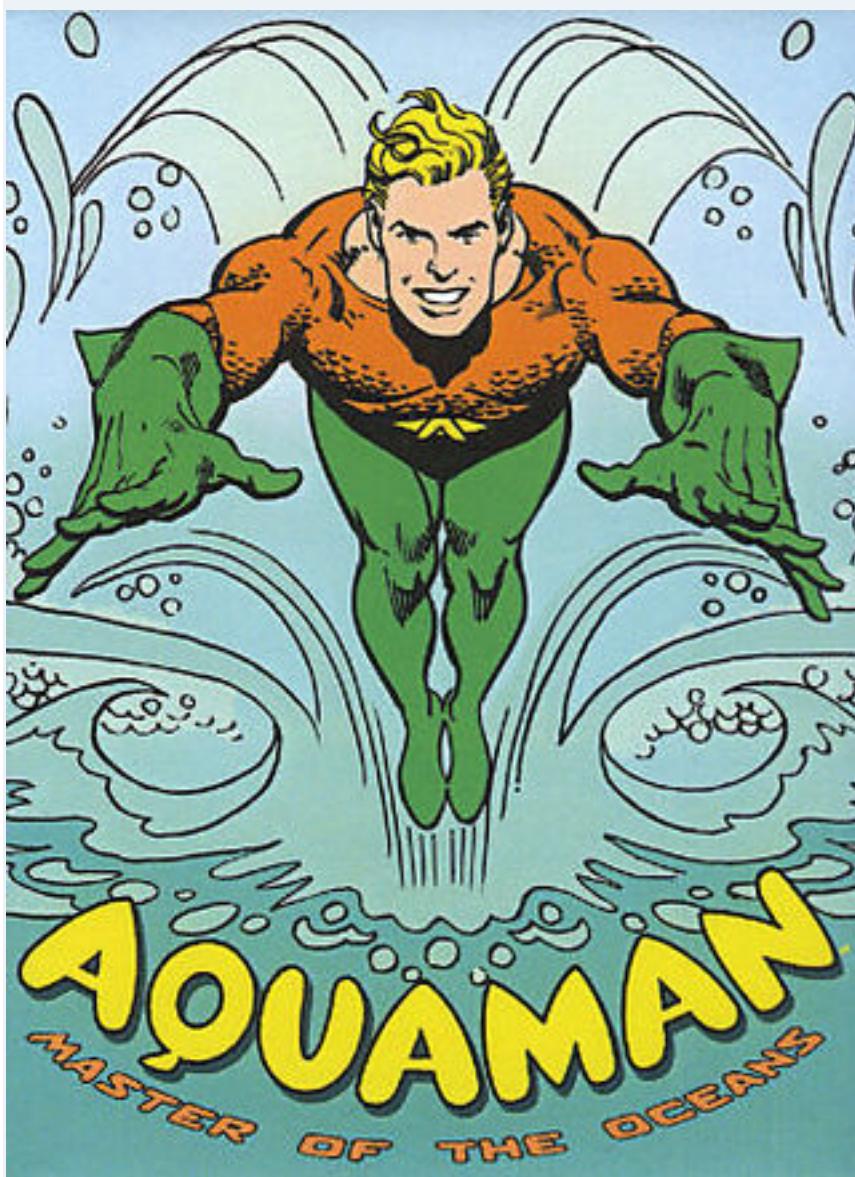
Read Alice Fulton's poem "Cascade Experiment" [here](#).

Read the *Cloud of Unknowing* [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on August 31, 2008 at 07:34 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 01, 2008

Aquaman's divine origins?



In the latest installment of Comics

Should Be Good's always-fascinating "Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed" column, Brian Cronin provides the evidence behind the rumor that "[Peter David's Aquaman run was delayed due to a religious misunderstanding](#)."

Apparently an editor had some concerns about David's version of the character's origin, which seems like a possible virgin birth.* The skittishness is surprising, considering the far-more-obvious religious inspiration behind the origins of some other DC characters (Superman = Moses, anyone?). It's even more odd when you consider that this is, after all, the same publisher that put out *Preacher*. Get the full story [here](#).

*The column misuses the term "immaculate conception," which, as you all know, refers not to Jesus' birth, but Mary's. That's a pretty common misconception [get it?], and is more easily-forgiven than the pluralization of Revelation.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 01, 2008 at 11:34 AM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 01, 2008

I sure hope Orson Scott Card wasn't this much of a jerk when he wrote *Speaker for the Dead*

Orson Scott Card's opposition to gay rights is hardly news, but he's taken things to a new extreme: in a recent [op-ed piece](#) for the *Mormon Times*, he actually advocated overthrowing the government if gay marriage becomes legal:

*Because when government is the enemy of marriage, then the people who are actually creating successful marriages have no choice but to change governments, by whatever means is made possible or necessary.**

Comics blogger Randy Lander of Inside Joke Theater is no fan of Card and his homophobia, and resents the fact that, as a comic store owner, he has an obligation to stock the forthcoming Marvel Comics adaptation of Card's *Ender's Game*. He's come up with what I think is a pretty [brilliant solution](#):

*I'm going to figure out what my profits are on the issues of *Ender's Game*, and when the miniseries is complete, I'm gonna write out a check to a Gay Rights charity here in Austin, and then I'm going to send a nice note to Mr. Card letting him know how much his work has helped to fund said charity. That seems a nice fuck you message that also happens to put some money in the hands of folks who need it.*

Excelsior!

*Never mind the fact that, [statistically speaking](#), conservative Christians are not so good at "making marriages work." In fact, the divorce rate in Utah is [nearly double](#) that of Massachusetts.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 01, 2008 at 01:47 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 03, 2008

SF Gospel is Sci Fi Scanner's site of the week!



AMC's SF blog *Sci Fi Scanner* has selected *SF Gospel* as their [site of the week](#). The write-up includes a few words on my background (both religious and fannish), an overview of this blog's purpose(s), and a few choice words from me on the spiritual nature of science fiction.

If you're coming here from *Sci Fi Scanner*, you may be interested in these posts, most of which are mentioned in the write-up:

- [The Flight into Egypt: *Children of Men*](#)
- [Four-Color Theophanies: Ten comic book characters who have met God](#)
- ["When I talk about belief, why do you always assume I'm talking about God?" *What Serenity believes in*](#)
- [The 10 best \(and 5 worst\) science fiction theme tunes](#)
- [The 10 Best Science Fiction Stories About Religion](#)

And of course I would be remiss if I did not provide links for my books:

- [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) (Westminster John Knox, 2007)

- [*Pink Beams of Light From the God in the Gutter: The Science-Fictional Religion of Philip K. Dick*](#) (University Press of America, 2004)

And hey, remember when the Sci Fi Channel's blog *Sci Fi Weekly* picked me as their site of the week [last year](#)? That was pretty cool, too. Maybe this will become an August-or-September tradition.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 03, 2008 at 12:19 AM | [Permalink](#)

September 09, 2008

Sarah Connor meets Samson, Delilah, and somebody or other from Babylon



In [*The Gospel According to Science Fiction*](#), I criticized the *Terminator* franchise for the shallowness of its religious imagery:

*Films such as James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and Michael Bay's *Armageddon* (1998) use the language of *Revelation*, but they are not describing the catastrophes that must precede the Golden Age. The "end of the world" as depicted in these films is a crisis that the heroes must rush to stop. In secularizing their conceptions of the end of the world, such stories (perhaps unknowingly) invert the morality of apocalyptic literature, proposing that the established order must be upheld in the face of destruction.*

One wonders if the producers of *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* read that bit and took it to heart: they've been doing their best to build an infrastructure of real apocalypticism underneath the films' surface-only use of Biblical eschatology. In the first season we met Dr. Silberman, Sarah Connor's doctor in the psychiatric hospital in *T2*, who now sees her apocalyptic visions through a [Biblical lens](#). In the season finale's greatest moment, we saw the Terminator known as Cromartie go on a truly inspired rampage set to the tune of Johnny Cash's end-times masterpiece ["When the Man Comes Around."](#)

The season two finale continues in that trend, putting meat on the series' spiritual bones. There's the scene where Sarah and John burst into a storefront Catholic Church, seeking asylum from a killer robot. (The priest interrupts the baptism he's conducting to help them. A bit rude to the parents, I thought, but when bruised-and-bloodied fugitives need help, what's a minister to do?) But the real interesting bit comes at the end, when newly-introduced villain Catherine Weaver (about whom there's a great reveal in the last scene, by the way) starts talking about the computer that we-the-audience know will eventually destroy the world. She names it Babylon—a name with a whole range of possible interpretations. Is it a reference to the Tower of Babel? The Babylonian Captivity? The episode's title—"Samson and Delilah"—certainly points us to the Old Testament (on which more later). But given the series' past eschatological interests, I think we're meant to look to *Revelation* for our clues. There Babylon is the [materialistic city](#) whose destruction allows the construction of the New Jerusalem, the eternal capitol of God's kingdom. This clearly complicates the picture of the end of the world presented in *Terminator 2*. There, the Connors fight to protect the current, established order from nuclear destruction. In this series, where nuclear destruction is looking increasingly inevitable, they're fighting to overthrow the coming robotic tyranny. "Babylon" isn't the world we live in, but the world that's right around the corner, a world in which reliance on technology has made humans the slaves of our machines. That's the world that Catherine Weaver is trying to create in the form of Babylon—no mystery, then, which character in *Revelation* she is supposed to be. (15 Killer Robot points to anyone who got the scriptural pun there.)

Also of note is the title's Biblical allusion. In [Judges 16](#), Delilah, a spy for the Philistines, seduces the great Hebrew hero Samson, and while he sleeps she cuts off his hair, which is the source of his power. In this episode, Cameron, the Terminator sent back in time to protect John, goes bad and tries to kill him, but at the end of the episode seems to have gone back to good again. We see a robot's-eye-view in which she overrides her mission to terminate him—but is that a permanent override, or is she trying to trick him so she can kill him later? In any event, he cuts his hair at the end of the episode, suggesting that whatever weakening was going to happen is done. (But would anyone argue that his hair was the source of his power? I always thought it looked a bit goofily mid-90's.) In any event, this show is good and getting better. In a year without a writers' strike *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* probably wouldn't have made it to season 2, and it looks like it's going to make the most of its amnesty.

Watch "Samson and Delilah" on [Fox's website](#).

Watch it right here, courtesy of [Hulu](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 09, 2008 at 10:10 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 09, 2008

Serenity comics: Book's next chapter



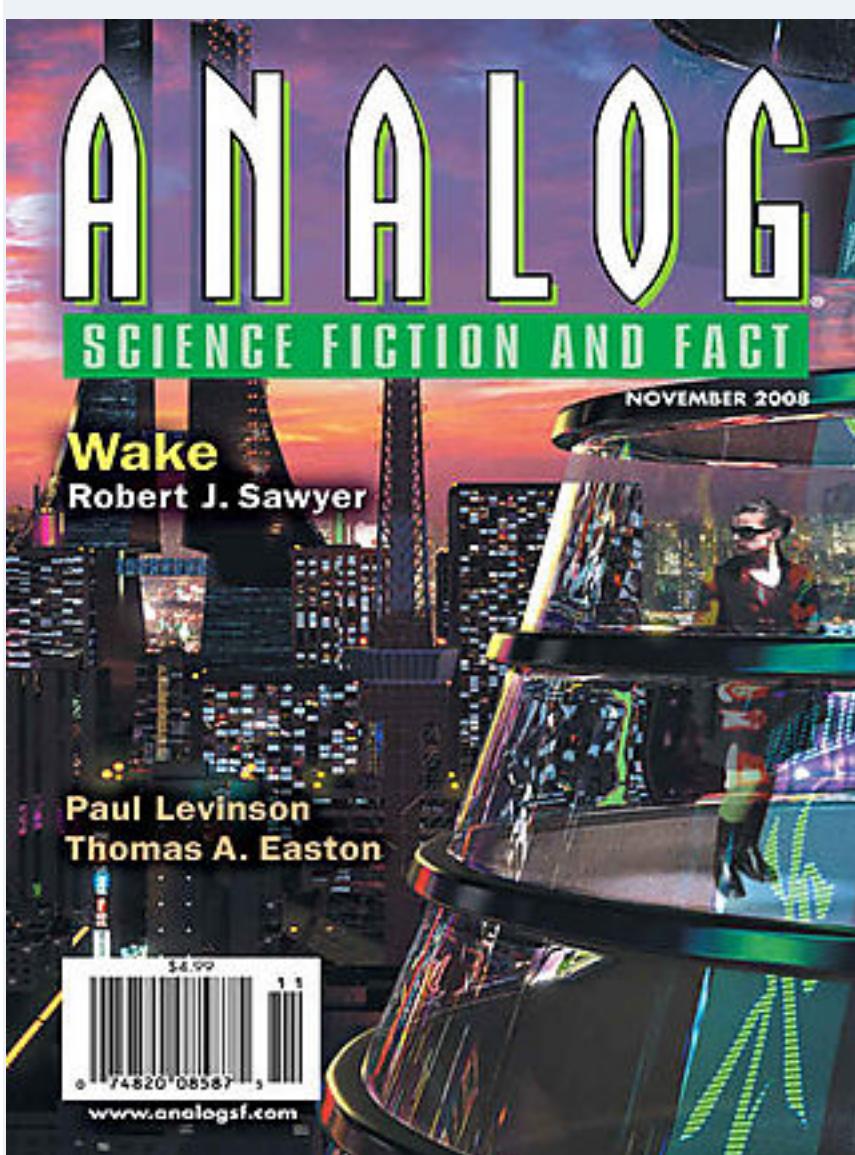
Shepherd Book, *Serenity*'s itinerant preacher, was the great unexplored mystery of the *Firefly* 'verse. Clues that the soft-spoken minister was more than he appeared were sprinkled liberally throughout the unjustly-cancelled TV series, making him perhaps the most complex preacher character in SF history. Those secrets may soon be revealed: Dark Horse will be publishing a prequel miniseries, penned by series creator Joss Whedon, exploring Book's backstory. ComicMix, a comics podcast with way too many annoying sound effects, interviews Whedon about the series [here](#) (it starts about five minutes in).

For a bit more, check out my essay on Serenity's complex approach to questions of faith [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 09, 2008 at 01:27 PM in [Comics](#), [Film](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 09, 2008

Analog, November 2008: Robert J. Sawyer's Wake



Analog will be a particular joy for the next few months: They're [serializing](#) Robert J. Sawyer's next novel *Wake*, the first volume in his *WWW* trilogy. The first quarter concentrates on Caitlin Decter, a blind-from-birth teenager who becomes a candidate for an experimental implant that may be able to give her sight. Interspersed between the chapters are hints of intriguing events to come: signs that her story will parallel that of Internet's emerging consciousness. There are lots of clever allusions to Helen Keller, who, like the story's developing AI, took time to develop a sense of self. Sawyer quotes her autobiography:

Before my teacher came to me, I did not know that I am. I lived in a world that was a no-world. I cannot hope to describe adequately that unconscious, yet conscious time of nothingness. I had neither will nor intellect... My inner life, then, was a blank without past, present, or future, without hope or anticipation, without wonder or joy or faith.

The idea of a computer (or network of computers) with a sense of self lends itself quite well to pondering and defining the soul. What makes an artificial mind (or a real one) senseless one second, sentient the next? If there's a downside to Sawyer's latest, it's that its focus on a single, youthful protagonist may limit the opportunity for the learned philosophical dialogs that appear in most of his novels. But Caitlin, like Sawyer, is smart, and there should be plenty to think about in the installments to come.

Also in the November issue of *Analog*: Paul Levinson's "Unburning Alexandria," a time-travel tale set, if I'm not mistaken, in the world of his novel *The Plot to Save Socrates*. It's of note here because it co-stars Augustine of Hippo (during the [Donatist](#) controversy, no less).

For more on the connection between artificial intelligence and the soul, see chapter 3 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 09, 2008 at 02:11 PM | [Permalink](#)

September 10, 2008

Tessa Dick (and Whitley Streiber?) on Philip K. Dick



"THERE IS NO REASONABLE ARGUMENT THAT WOULD ELUCIDATE WHAT THAT WAS THAT WAS FLOWING AROUND THE ROOM LIKE ST. ELMO'S FIRE...AND IT THINKS! IT GOT INTO MY BRAIN AND MADE ME THINK! ...IT DIDN'T THINK WHAT WE THINK! ..."

Tessa Dick, Philip K. Dick's fifth* and final wife, writes a brief post on her husband's religious experiences [Unknown Country](#). The problem? The site is run by Whitley Streiber, the author of the widely-discredited book *Communion*. (Discredited why, exactly? Well, my favorite clue that he might be making things up is the bit in the sequel, *Transformation*, where Streiber claims to have seen aliens disguised with scarves and sunglasses complaining about *Communion* to a bookstore manager in Manhattan. Yeeeeah.) Writing about Philip K. Dick on Streiber's website hints that the two are somehow equivalent. At best that marginalizes Dick; at worst it paints him as a fraud.

Thomas Disch—who eloquently [debunks](#) Streiber in a review reprinted in his book *On SF*—did a bit of marginalizing himself in his otherwise-excellent book *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of*. His chapter on religion in SF uses three main examples: Philip K. Dick, L. Ron Hubbard, and Aum Shinrikyu. This isn't exactly nice company to be in, and Disch seems to miss the real point about Dick. Not only did he never drop writing to start a multi-million-dollar religious corporation, not only did he never launch chemical attacks in major cities, *he never wanted to*. His religious experiences were far more likely to torpedo his career than to send it skyrocketing, so it's a big stretch to argue that he faked his religious experiences for financial gain (the unlikely claims of Anne Mini's [suppressed memoir](#) notwithstanding). It's a lot easier to argue that Whitley Streiber did that, though, and accounts of his [general unpleasantry](#) make it seem even more likely that his goal was more cash than truth. Philip K. Dick was more interested in philosophical underpinnings of the nature of reality than getting a couple million for film rights. Tessa's short piece on Streiber's site seems to put Philip K. Dick's experiences into the context of Streiber's, which I think is a big, big mistake. Streiber is never going to enter the mainstream of philosophical thought; Philip K. Dick could, and should.

Far better is her recent [The Dim Reflection of Philip K. Dick](#). It's short—30 pages or so—but it considers Dick on his own terms, which is a far, far better way to consider him. Tessa was married to Phil during his religious experiences in 1974, making this an extremely useful firsthand account of the events of that year, their philosophical underpinnings, and their theological aftermath. Philip K. Dick's ideas are not part of the alien-abduction fad or an attempt to [cash in](#) on an outré persona; they are an honest, if eccentric, entry in a long, long line of philosophical mysticism. Tessa herself puts it best:

The message of the visions was always there in Phil's novels and stories. He tended to complicate the message with arcane interpretations and obscure terminology. However, it really is quite simple. This world is not what it appears to be, and many of the scriptures in various traditions tell us that. The Hindus describe the

Veil of Maya, which disguises reality and maintains the illusion. The Bible tells us that all is vanity, that we see this world in a defective mirror, and that this world is not our home.

The world is not what it appears to be. That is absolutely the message of Philip K. Dick's fiction and non-fiction, and it's also an important—to my mind central—idea in Christianity. In [Pink Beams of Light from the God in the Gutter](#), my book on Dick's religious experiences, I compared his ideas about the illusory nature of reality with Martin Luther's theology of the cross. According to Luther, the transcendence of God is concealed within the cross on which Christ was crucified—a Dickian idea if ever there was one. Martin Luther, the authors of the Vedas, the Apostle Paul—that is the company Philip K. Dick belongs in. Putting him in the dubious company of Whitley Streiber or L. Ron Hubbard risks marginalizing ideas that deserve better.

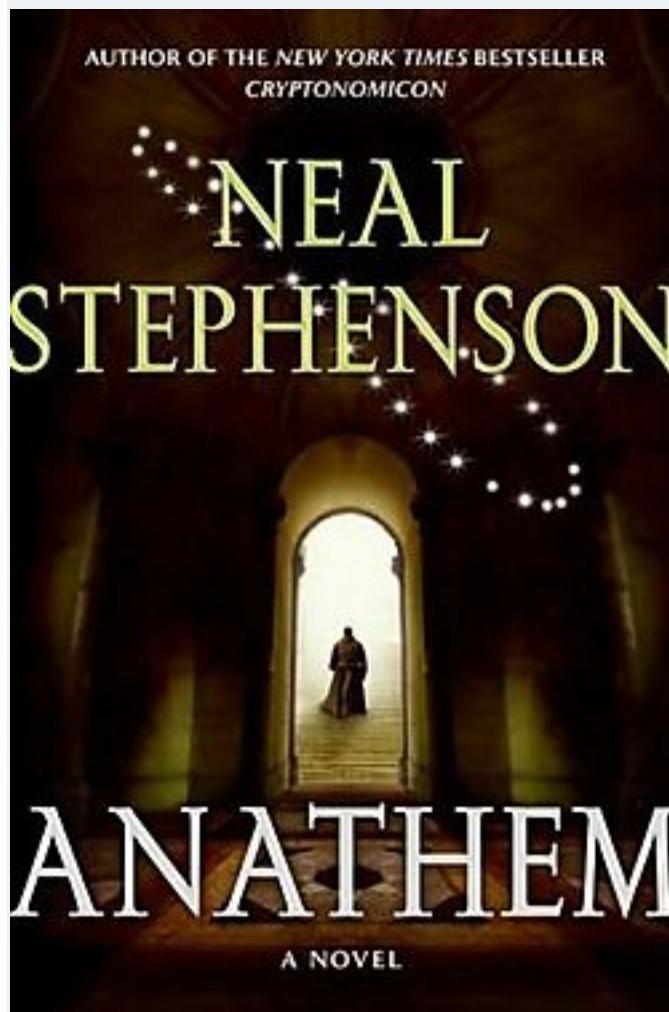
*Misidentified at the link in question as his fourth.

[Also of interest: Total Dick-Head's recent interview with Tessa Dick, [here](#).]

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 10, 2008 at 10:46 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 10, 2008

io9 interviews Neal Stephenson on science, religion, and *Anathem*



io9 has posted a brief [interview](#) with Neal Stephenson, who has finally returned to proper SF with his latest novel, *Anathem*. The book takes place on a world divided between the Avout, who are sort of science-monks, and the religious Deolators. This could, of course, fall into some oversimplification traps involving a perceived science/religion conflict, but based on his responses it seems Stephenson knows things are more complex than that. When asked about the (in)compatibility of science and religion, Stephenson replies:

There are many, many examples of legitimate scientists who espouse some form of religious faith, so I don't see any essential hostility. I grew up in a community of church-going scientists and engineers. The recent science/religion fireworks are driven by a theological movement that is as controversial within Christianity as it is in secular culture.

Thank you, Neal, for realizing that not all Christians are creationists!

I hope to be reading *Anathem* soon, so expect more on Stephenson in the relatively-near-future.

Read the full interview [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 10, 2008 at 01:10 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 13, 2008

Just what do you mean by "apocalypse"?

Reader (and frequent commenter) [David Ellis](#) posted the following [comment](#) on my [review](#) of the season 2 premiere of *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*:

"In secularizing their conceptions of the end of the world, such stories (perhaps unknowingly) invert the morality of apocalyptic literature, proposing that the established order must be upheld in the face of destruction."

Are you saying we should WANT apocalypse??!

My response sums up a lot of my personal thinking about apocalypticism and Revelation. Since I talk about both quite a bit—and since the comments interface won't allow me to put in links or formatting—I thought it might be worthwhile to bring my response out of their exile in the comments section and put it here as a regular post. So here it is:

That depends on how you're defining "apocalypse"; it's got a slew of meanings.

Do I think the world should end? No. Do I think nuclear war is good? DEFINITELY no. Do I think that the structures of political power from the Roman Empire to the Bush administration are ultimately destructive and dehumanizing? Yes. Some governments and leaders are better than others ([Obama](#)-Biden '08!), but power, by its very nature, corrupts. It hurts those who don't have it, and it hurts those who do.

I don't think I've ever stated it outright, but I'm something of a [Christian anarchist](#). I think an important aspect of Christianity—and one that's been pretty much ignored since the conversion of Constantine—is opposition to temporal power in all its forms. The last shall be first, etc.

So what does that mean for apocalypticism? Well, as I've argued [here and elsewhere](#), the real point of Revelation isn't the destruction of chapters 1-20, but the New Jerusalem of chapter 21. There can be a perfect world; there *will* be a perfect world—but only if we work to build one outside of the traditional realms of temporal (i.e., political/financial/military) power. (I hope I needn't say that this precludes any sort of violence.)

Of course, this is all armchair rebellion. I don't live on a commune; I have a job; I vote. But I think where one's heart is important, and after all, "my kingdom is not of this world." In any event, that's what I'm talking about when I talk about apocalypticism.

Disobey!

Recommended reading:

[God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now](#) by John Dominic Crossan

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 13, 2008 at 11:03 PM in [pontification](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 14, 2008

Oh, by the way

My review of the [Fringe](#) pilot, if anyone is interested:

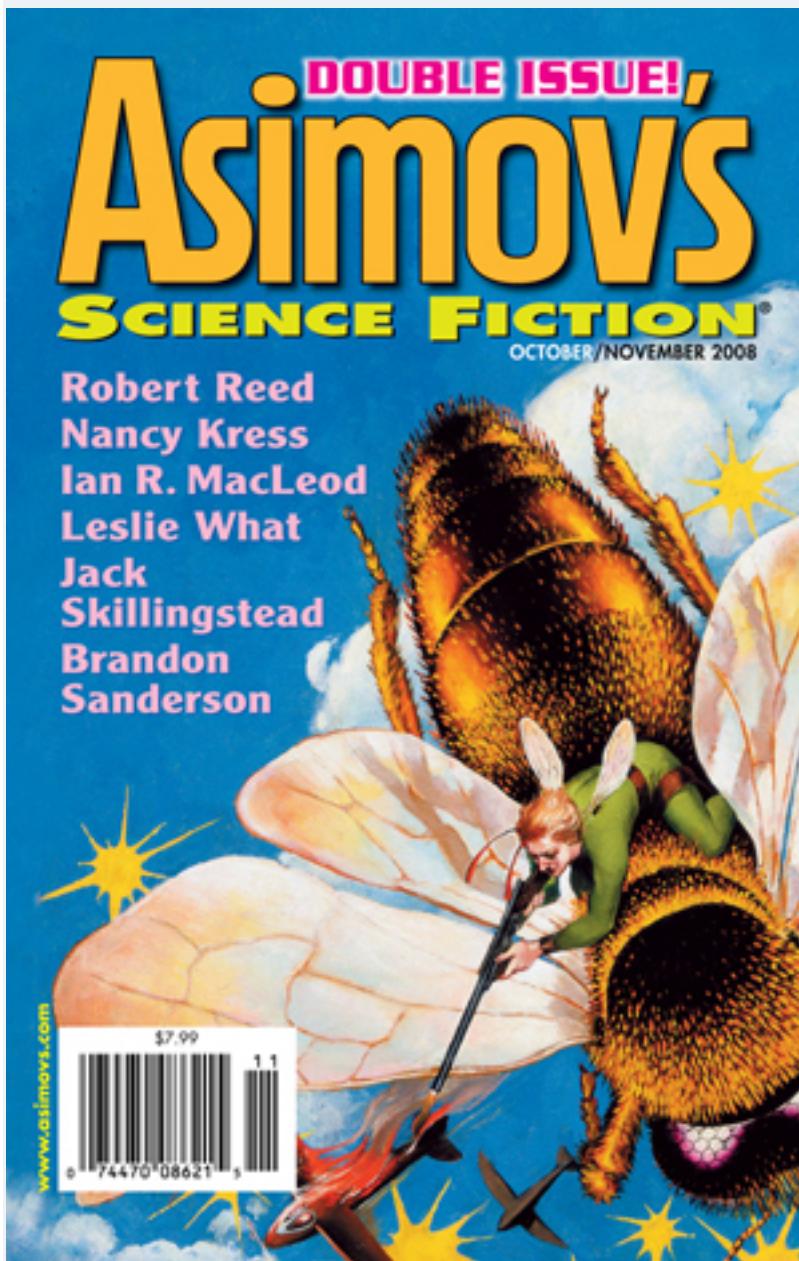
Boooooooorriiiinnng.

[P.S. Despite my desire to have a one-word review, I must say this: Melting faces at 8 PM? I'm no censor, but, Fox, *really*? I mean, where I live that's dinnertime.]

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 14, 2008 at 08:18 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 21, 2008

Presuppositions about faith in *Asimov's*, Oct./Nov 2008



The October/November 2008 double issue of *Asimov's* opens and closes with a pair of excellent novellas. At the top is Nancy Kress's "[The Erdmann Nexus](#)," which concerns the emergence of a gestalt consciousness in a nursing home. As the first experiences of this group mind begin to crop up, there are an understandably vast variety of interpretations. The title character, Henry Erdmann, is a 90something physicist whose scientific skepticism makes it difficult for him to accept what's happening. Others in the assisted-living facility have their own interpretations. Among them is Gina Martinelli, a conservative Christian who sees the glimpses of collectivity as a sign of the imminent Second Coming. Contrasted with Gina is

Erin Bass, a new-agey mystic who interprets the experiences through the lens of Eastern mysticism (or at least a Westernized version thereof):

"What we see in this world is just maya, the illusion of permanence when in fact, all reality is in constant flux and change. What's happening here is beyond the world of intellectual concepts and distinctions. We're getting glimpses of the mutable nature of reality, the genuine undifferentiated 'suchness' that usually only comes with nirvana. The glimpses are imperfect, but for some reason our collective karma has afforded them to us."

[If you feel you need a spoiler warning, consider yourself warned—but the strength of Kress's story is more style than surprise.] In the story's final pages, our third-person omnipotent grants us some glimpses inside several characters' minds as they are given the choice to join the group mind or continue their . For Erin Bass, the experience is defined within the terms of her spirituality. It is "satori... oneness with all reality." Similarly, a nameless woman in Shanghai interprets the experience of joining the transcendent mind as "the gods entering her soul." What, then, does Gina Martinelli experience? Unlike Bass, she does not see the experience through the lens of her faith. She experiences transcendence, but does not see Jesus there. She concludes: "If Christ was not there, then this wasn't Heaven. It was a trick of the Cunning One, of Satan who knows a million disguises and sends his demons to mislead the faithful." She rejects the group mind, opting to wait for the Second Coming outside of the collective intelligence.

What does this say about faith and religious experience? If two non-Christian characters are allowed to interpret their experiences in the vocabulary of their faith, why isn't the Christian character allowed the same leeway? My guess is that Kress's intention was to show that non-Western religions have provided a vocabulary that is better suited to describing transcendent experiences than Christianity has. But that simply isn't true—from Pseudo-Dionysius to Meister Eckhart to Philip K. Dick, Christianity is chock full of mysticism that would allow for the kind of collective experience this story describes to be described quite well. Of course, Gina is presented as having a particularly narrow kind of faith. Perhaps I'm splitting hairs here—after all, I complain about the close-mindedness of conservative Christianity pretty frequently, and ignorance of the history of mysticism is certainly part of that close-mindedness. But even I will allow that conservative Christians have their own strands of mysticism, as the growing popularity of Pentecostalism shows. I would expect that even as stereotypical a Bible-thumper as Gina Martinelli would be able to see her faith reflected in the totality of all existence. To describe a transcendent experience with culturally-specific terms—"satori," "the gods"—and to refuse to allow a character from a different faith-tradition to have the same kind of culturally-specific interpretation strikes me as a double-standard. It's a quibble, really: Martinelli is a pretty minor character, and Kress's story is characteristically good. Nevertheless, that kind of detail does tends to rankle.

At the close of this issue of Asimov's is Robert Reed's similarly-epic novella "[Truth](#)." Most of the story takes place in an underground prison containing a mysterious convict. Ramiro is a terrorist, arrested after crossing the Canadian border with a sizable lump of uranium, who seems to come from over a century in the future. Ramiro is introduced as a Muslim—the second page of the story makes references to his "five daily prayers, the salat"—but his story is far more complicated than one might assume. The story details his captors' respect for him, and the wealth of information with which that respect is rewarded. (Of course, the end of the story makes that a bit more complicated, too.) There are no easy answers in "Truth," it's a story that shows that the world doesn't necessarily fit into the categories we devise to describe it. But unlike Gina Martinelli in "The Erdmann Nexus," Reed's characters are able to question their presuppositions by the story's end.

On top of those great novellas, this issue has a nice SF mystery from usually-a-fantasy-author Brandon Sanderson, a brief parable about the curse of wealth from Leslie What, and a wonderfully elegiac tale of societal collapse from Ian R. MacLeod, all beneath a wonderfully retro cover from Virgil Finlay. (These days not enough magazine covers show fairies riding giant insects shooting at planes, I say.) I'm always surprised to see how low the circulation numbers for Asimov's are, given the always-high quality of the stories they publish... so go buy a copy, ok?

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 21, 2008 at 04:06 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 23, 2008

Religion in the Golden Age: Astounding, July 1939



Golden Age science fiction was

atheistic.

Right?

Or, if not atheistic, at least radically secularist. Its authors presented religion as a dangerous, irrational opponent of scientific inquiry and, therefore, human progress.

Right?

That's what the conventional wisdom seems to hold, at least. In *God in the Movies*, Albert J. Bergesen states that SF "turns potential grace experiences into science-like puzzles," de-mystifying the mystical. SF critic Darko Suvin has argued that SF that attempts to incorporate religious ideas produces only "fairy tales." More recently, [Books Under the Bridge](#) described, as a foregone conclusion, "the lack of any serious portrayal of religion in science-fiction." And this all started, it seems, in the rationalistic humanism of the authors of SF's golden age, prominent, anti-theist names like Asimov, Heinlein, and Clarke, whose stories frequently describe the struggle of science against faith.

But does that attitude accurately describe the golden age? As a test, let's examine the magazine that's often credited with ushering SF out of its Gernsbackian adolescence and toward its maturity: the July 1939 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*. What makes this issue stand out? Two stories, primarily. The issue contains A.E. van Vogt's first

professional sale, "Black Destroyer," which is probably best known these days as the (very loose) inspiration for *Alien*. The July 1939 issue also includes Isaac Asimov's "Trends," which wasn't his first story, but was his first sale to uber-editor John W. Campbell, who was to the '40s and '50s what Hugo Gernsback was to the '20s and '30s.



"Trends" certainly seems to support the theory that the golden age was an age of secularism. The story concerns a would-be astronaut named John Harman whose attempts to launch a manned space mission face opposition from a powerful religious zealot. Otis Eldredge, the story's preacher-villain, embodies an extreme vision of faith-reason conflict, stating that "science has gone too far... We must halt it indefinitely, and allow the world to catch up." A newspaper editorial supporting Eldredge's views puts forth an opinion on space travel similar to that of [C.S. Lewis](#):

"It is not given to man to go wheresoever ambition and desire lead him. There are things forever denied him, and aspiring to the stars is one of these... In allowing [Harman] to carry out his evil designs, we make ourselves accessory to the crime, and Divine vengeance will fall on all alike."

The story's conclusion sees rationalistic science triumphant over irrational faith. The point of the story, as suggested by the title, is the swinging of society's pendulum from radical to reactionary and back again—an idea that turns up again, in a more complex manner, in the *Foundation* series. But the story makes no bones about which side of that swing is better for society. The story is secularist, humanist, agnostic (if not explicitly atheist)—all the things that the conventional wisdom ascribes to Golden Age authors as a whole. Asimov clearly didn't think much of religion, and "Trends" is a powerful statement against the tyranny of dogmatism.

What of the other era-defining story in this volume? Does "Black Destroyer" have anything to say about religion and society? On the surface, it would appear not. It is a taut adventure story about a group of astronauts who are terrorized by a predatory alien—no preacher-villains here. Where "Trends" wears its philosophy of religion on its sleeve, "Black Destroyer" is more subtle, but it stands in stark contrast to Asimov's story. When the astronauts arrive on the decaying planet of the deadly Coeurl, they ponder the forces that have led to the world's decline:

"There is no record of a culture entering abruptly into the period of contending states. It is always a slow development; and the first step is a merciless questioning of all that was once held sacred. Inner certainties cease to exist, are dissolved before the ruthless probings of scientific and analytic minds. The skeptic becomes the highest type of being."

"I say that this culture ended abruptly in its most flourishing age. The sociological effects of such a catastrophe would be a sudden vanishing of morals, a reversion to almost bestial criminality, unleavened by any sense of ideal, a callous indifference to death."

For van Vogt, religion isn't an opponent to progress, it is the glue that holds a functioning society together. Without it, things fall apart, and the sleep of faith breeds monsters like the Coeurl. Van Vogt's attitude toward religion is one of Protestant rationalism, an almost Weberian consideration of the societal benefits of shared faith.



of the golden age of SF gets even more complicated with the consideration of the nonfictional content of this issue of *Astounding*. In 1939 Asimov wasn't just an author, he was also a fan and letterhack, and the magazine that boasted his first sale to Campbell also contains a letter from the young writer. In responding to another reader's comments on the role of women in society (and, by extension, in SF), Asimov shows a very different attitude than that presented in "Trends":

"Who says that only men are responsible for war and repression?... How about Catherine II of Russia? How about Catherine de Medici of France? How about Semiramis of Assyria? How about Queen Elizabeth of England? A sweet lot—not... On the other hand, the great philosophers and the great religious leaders of the world—the ones who taught truth and virtue, kindness and justice—were all, all men."

Of course, the most apparent thing about this letter is its unabashed sexism.* But it's telling that Asimov's example to show the inherent superiority of women over men doesn't come from science, it comes from religion. He presents the highest expression of human achievement as spiritual—quite a surprise from someone who is, today, considered wholly atheist. Taken in this context, "Trends" takes on the appearance not of an attack on faith itself, but on a particular kind of faith, a close-mindedness that has forgotten the wisdom of those great teachers of "truth and virtue, kindness and justice."

So let's ask it again: was golden age SF atheistic? SF certainly became mystical in the '60s and '70s, and that spirituality had not yet developed. But, more importantly, neither had atheism. The spiritual visions of later authors like Philip K. Dick, Robert Silverberg, and Samuel R. Delany the anti-religious sentiment of Arthur C. Clarke and the later Asimov both grew from seeds planted in the soil of the golden age. But that soil nurtured both equally. The authors of the golden age had a variety of attitudes toward religion, and individual authors could present what seem to us contradictory arguments. The golden age may have had individually atheistic authors, but their attitudes

changed over time and were often more complex than present-day understandings of the term allow. Atheism has changed a lot over the last few decades, and assuming Dawkins-style attitudes of even the most secularist of golden age authors is ultimately anachronistic.

*My initial thought on reading this was just how wrong he is, too. The [first preacher](#) in Christianity was a woman, for cryin' out loud.**

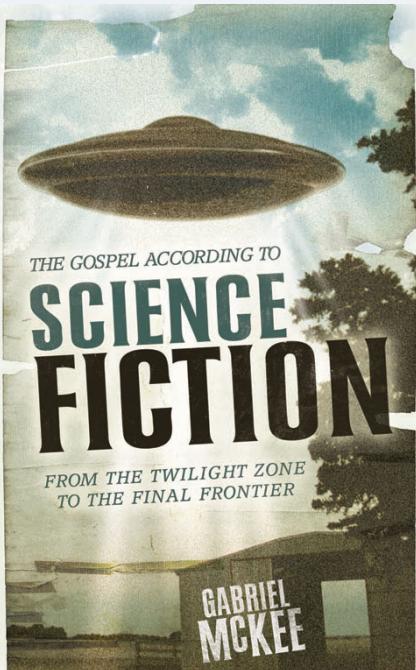
**My second thought was—wow, is that the first use of "not" as a single-word, humorous negation? Should we add to the list of Asimov's achievements the accurate prediction of *Wayne's World*?

Illustrations: cover by Graves Gladney; "Trends" illustration by Paul Orban; "Black Destroyer" illustration by Kramer.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 23, 2008 at 05:21 PM in [Atheism](#), [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

September 29, 2008

New review of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*



Fledgling SF review site [Fruitless Recursion](#) has just released its second issue, which includes a fairly long and very thoughtful [review](#) of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#). Alvaro Zinos-Amaro doesn't agree with all of my conclusions, but he says the book made him think—which is the highest praise I could hope for.

"Gabriel McKee's [The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier](#), a fascinating study of the intersection of theology and SF, is a must-read for anyone who cares to learn more about how SF has explored ideas pertaining to creation, morality, identity, the body/soul conundrum, free will, the problem of evil, the afterlife, messiahs, and of course the nature of faith itself. More than that, it should be read by anyone interested in gaining a wide perspective of SF, one neither constrained to the printed word nor simply relegated to a discussion of its manifestations in popular media... One comes away from McKee's study with a wondrous sense of the polysemic gospel that SF sings."

Read the full review [here](#).

The issue also includes a [review](#) of the third volume in Mike Ashley's historical survey of SF magazines, *Gateways to Forever: The Story of Science Fiction Magazines from 1970 to 1980*. (I'm currently on volume 2, covering the '50s and '60s, and I'm finding it an invaluable resource.) The reviews at *Fruitless Recursion* are intelligent and insightful; I wish this new site the best.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 29, 2008 at 09:49 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 09, 2008

Have some links

Here are some links! These aren't the newest; hopefully they're not stale.

The October issue of the Internet Review of Science Fiction includes an essay by Charles Edric Co entitled "[Finding God in Science.](#)" It's mostly a review of James Rollins' *Black Order*, the plot of which centers on the efficacy of prayer (on the quantum level, at that). There's also a long essay by Alvaro Zinos-Amaro (who recently [reviewed the Gospel According to Science Fiction](#)) on Robert Sheckley's *Dimension of Miracles*, which satirizes religion and atheism alike, and Niall Harrison's fairly in-depth review of Neal Stephenson's *Anathem*. (I really, really need to read that book, and I will be buying a copy very soon. But dang, Neal Stephenson—does everything gotta be 800+ pages with you?)

Two recent Mind Meld posts at SF Signal contained material of interest. [A couple weeks ago](#) they asked Charles Stross, Lou Anders, and others, "As a reader, can you enjoy a story that is pushing an opposed viewpoint from one that you hold (religion/politics)?" One of the unspoken specifics, which several of the responses made explicit, was Orson Scott Card, whose homophobia has become a bigger barrier to many of his readers than his Mormonism ever was. [More recently](#), they asked "What's your favorite sub-genre of science fiction and/or fantasy?" James McGrath (of [Exploring Our Matrix](#)) answered "theological science fiction." Is that its own sub-genre yet? He makes a good case, and gives some nice examples you'd do well to check out.

Full-Contact Christianity recently offered up a very different kind of theological SF in a post entitled "[Theological Science Fiction and the Fall of Satan.](#)" The post isn't really about SF at all, but rather about theological speculation. Tim Nichols, the blog's author, tells a "theological science fiction story" based on Genesis, giving some theories to fill in Scriptural story gaps. It's a good illustration of the kind of interpretive process that goes into any reading of scripture, though Nichols, who seems a bit on the conservative side, probably wouldn't characterize it quite that way. I wonder if he's aware of the [Qur'anic story of Satan](#) (Iblis)? It's very similar to the "theological science fiction story" he tells...

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 09, 2008 at 10:21 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 14, 2008

Worst Enemies, False Memories, Free Will



Last night NBC premiered [My Own Worst](#)

[Enemy](#), an SF-flavored action series starring Christian Slater as Henry Spivey*, a suburban nebbish who learns he's been sharing his body with Edward Albright, a government assassin. In fact, his entire life is a fabrication—he's an artificial persona, complete with a lifetime of false memories, designed to protect his violent counterpart. The first episode was pretty good, despite some problematic logic—for instance, when Edward's handlers learn that Henry has woken up in the middle of a mission and botched an assassination, why would they let him wander around in Edward's life for a few days rather than immediately erase his memories? And I can't help but think that it would make a great movie, but will have difficulties sustaining itself as a series. (Come to think of it, a very similar concept did make a pretty good movie in *Cypher*, from *Cube* director Vincenzo Natali.)

Nevertheless, the first episode was a pretty solid execution of an interesting concept. There's a bit of free-will talk: Edward's stated reason for giving his life up for a black-ops experiment is that "to prove the existence of free will, a person must do a thing he does not want to do." But the real meat of the free-will issue involves Henry, not Edward. He's an artificial person, but he continues to think of his life as real even when the veil has been lifted. (He has been

living it for 19 years by the time the series begins, after all.) It's similar to the question of sentient AIs like *Star Trek*'s Data. Henry may not be a synthetic android, but he's still a sort of artificial intelligence, and if *My Own Worst Enemy*'s creators are smart, future episodes will thoroughly explore the self-and-soul can of worms that the series' concept opens up.

Speaking of dark sides and doppelgangers, it seems there's [another](#) Gabriel McKee out there in the world, and he's about as far from me as he could get. I wasn't going to mention this because I don't really want to drive any traffic to his site, but when I saw his post about "Manhattan liberals" this Brooklyn progressive had to say something. Am I part of a political conspiracy? Does my darkside awake in the wee hours to blog about the evils of my own opinions and beliefs? Or do all bloggers share their names with doppelgangers and evil twins who are their polar opposites? In any event, consider this a disambiguation: I am most assuredly not the author of "conservative008.blogspot.com," and you can pretty safely assume that I disagree with everything you might read there.

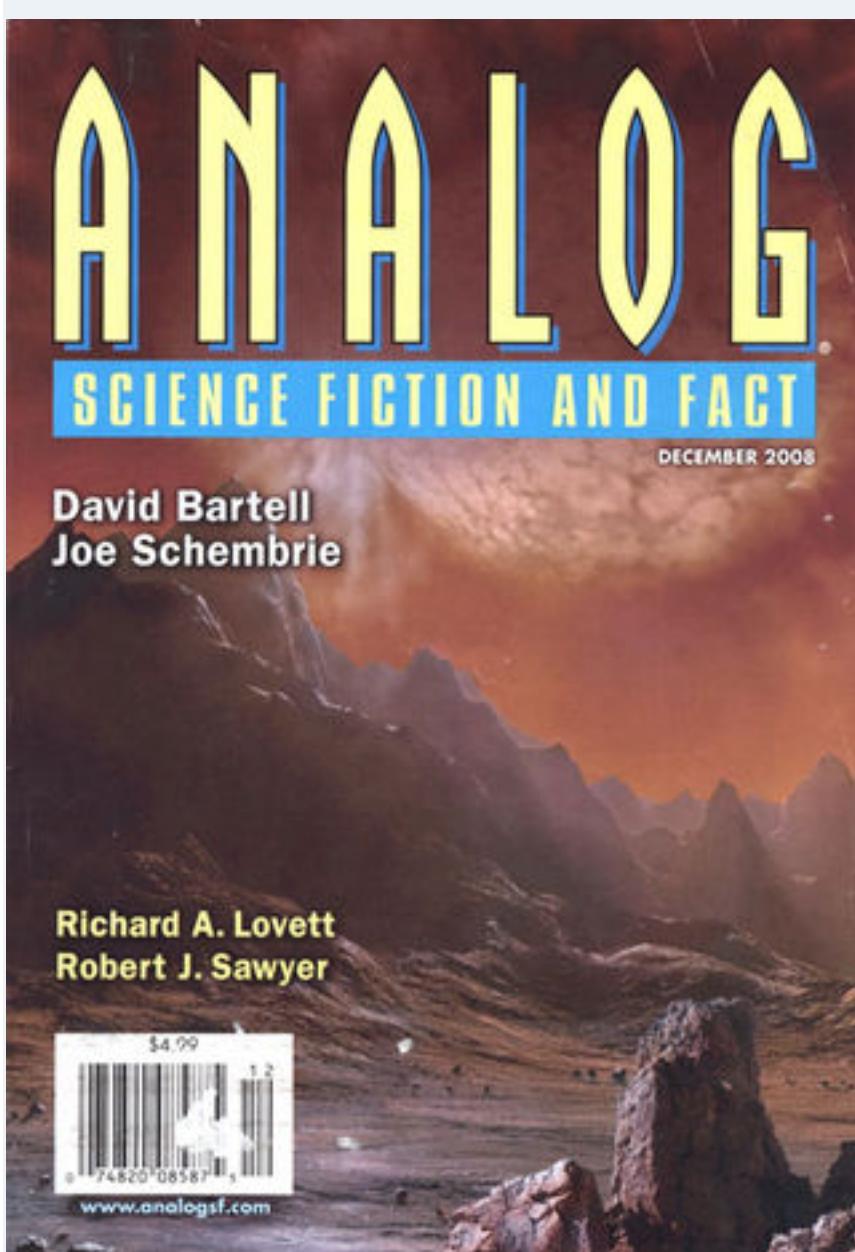
*5 bonus Black Lodge Points if you noticed that Henry's wife is played by Shelly from *Twin Peaks*!

Update: Here's the full pilot episode, courtesy of the always-amazing [Hulu](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 14, 2008 at 10:53 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 15, 2008

Analog, December 2008 Tao and Fate



The December issue of *Analog* continues Robert J. Sawyer's *Wake*, a story about the emerging consciousness of the Internet, among other things. The way the net develops intelligence—mild spoiler warning—involves the Chinese government briefly blocking all incoming and outgoing electronic communications to cover up a major human rights violation. The sudden division from one into two leads the net to realize its self-ness—a process which, as I mentioned last time, Sawyer compares to Helen Keller's discovery of the world around her. A brief passage in the second installment illustrates the Internet's growing sentience as it ponders, through a briefly-available connection opened by a Chinese hacker, the difference between self and other:

*One plus one equals two.
Two plus one equals three.
It was a start, a beginning.
But no sooner had we reached this conclusion than the connection between us was severed again. I wanted it back, I willed it to return, but it remained—
Broken.
Severed.*

*The connection cut off.
I had been larger.
and now I was smaller.*

The passage, and Wake's method of illustrating the development of this emergent consciousness in general, evokes the oblique creation story in the chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*:

*The Tao gives birth to One.
One gives birth to Two.
Two gives birth to Three.
Three gives birth to all things.*

It's just one more in the novel's growing list of parallels to the development of a worldwide AI. [And this installment adds a bonus parallel involving self-aware apes!] The story adds philosophical complexity with every chapter, which is hardly a surprise from Sawyer.

This issue of *Analog* also includes "Where Away You Fall" by Jason Sanford, which ponders the concepts of free will and destiny. The story's protagonist, Dusty, is a member of the Seekers, a religious sect that believes "that salvation lay in living simply and reaching one's God-given destiny." The group believes that every human life has a single, all-fulfilling purpose. Every individual's purpose is a secret known only to the believer and his or her pastor—which gives the Seekers' pastors a dangerous amount of power. Seekers are Luddites who frequently carry out terrorist attacks to slow the progress of technology, so it's particularly odd that Dusty's pastor tells her that her destiny is to go to outer space. The Seekers come across in a poor light, but the story's real target is the concept of a single, reductionist purpose to any human life. I don't think it's giving anything away to say that free will wins out over destiny in Sanford's tale.

And last-but-first, the issue opens with an editorial by Stanley J. Schmidt on moral relativism and religion. I don't have terribly much to say about it at the moment, but there's a brief discussion of it on the *Analog* forum [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 15, 2008 at 11:09 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 16, 2008

Don't let the devil turn you into a bat.



My latest post on Religion Dispatches a quick one about some [odd posters](#) that have been turning up in major metropolitan areas lately that say things like this:

*Pray in mind a few minut a day
Go church
Mary Mary Mary beautiful gorgeous Mary*

*The Devil makes bats of 2 million people children every year. In America
You must keep the Ten Commandments
Listen Christ Radio 56 AM and Christ will protect you*

While you're there, check out the current lead article, "[The Kids are Religious Right.](#)" about how the youth pro-life movement uses punk to spread its message. It's not only a great article, it's by Justin Philpot, who is a good friend of mine. It's based on his Masters' thesis, so you know it's smart.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 16, 2008 at 08:36 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 16, 2008

Rocking the Ka'bah: "The Flowers of Nicosia" and *Heavy Metal Islam*



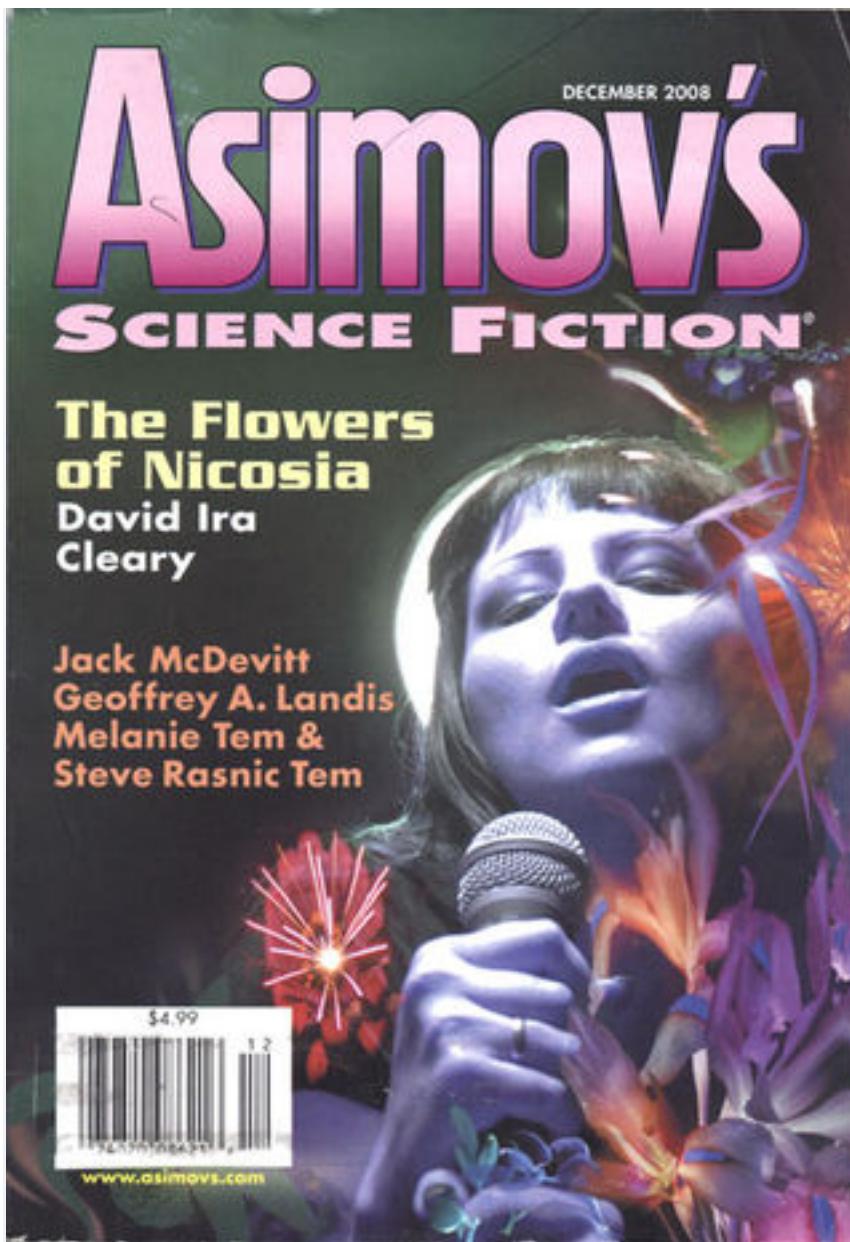
The December 2008 issue of [Asimov's](#) features "The Flowers of Nicosia," a lengthy novella by David Ira Cleary. It's the story of Downtown Dharma, a Nirvana-idolizing band that decides to play in Muslim countries to "heal Islam." Dennis, the group's frontman, explains:

I could see Downtown Dharma, engaging some hostile fundies, guys hell-bent on blowing up the band, the club, any guy without a beard or woman without a burka, and we able to reach their gentle natures, the human part unsullied by the raging mullahs and the oil-sheik dictators. All through our music. Get 'em to fizzle-out their fuses, break their timers, love their neighbors whether they were Jew or Jain, Christian or Kurd.

When they're unable to get visas to the places they really want to play—Iran, Egypt, Lebanon—they settle on Cyprus, which serves as a metaphor for the complexity of both West and East. Against the backdrop of Nicosia, the divided capital of Cyprus, the band's goals begin to seem naïve, particularly when terrorist biological attacks put their lives in

danger. But there's also something refreshing in their optimism, and they're able to reach at least a few hearts before their tour is through. The story has some problems, mostly musical—the band idolizes early-90's grunge a bit too much, and the lyrics that Cleary writes for them are on the underwhelming side. It would have been better for more ambiguity in the specifics of the music; I'd have been more convinced of Downtown Dharma's abilities to "heal Islam" if their words and sounds were implied rather than spelled out. The story includes its own criticism, however, after the group plays a cover of the Stone Temple Pilots' "Flies in the Vaseline":

The thought of a bunch of flies, trapped in a goo that doesn't even have the benefits of something sweet like honey, seemed a perfect metaphor for the mindless inertia of terrorism, both for its perpetrators and its victims. The audience clapped politely. They didn't get the message. so I talked, explained the metaphor, saying how fundies of any creed were no wiser than flies, how teh audience in its willingness to rock on nights like this showed the kind of open-mindedness and tolerance that no fly or fundie could ever know... I would probably have kept yakking, but Vlad [the bassist] came up to me and said, "You're losing them with this fucking sermon. Make music."



While reading the story, I was skeptical about the ability of a group of Western rock stars to make any changes, large or small, in Muslim society. But right after reading the story I dug into a non-fiction work on a similar topic—*Heavy Metal Islam*, a new book by

Middle East scholar (and metal fan) Mark LeVine. The book explores the indigenous metal subcultures of Morocco, Egypt, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, and Pakistan, finding in each a powerful youth culture. LeVine's portrait of these six scenes underscores the complexity of Muslim culture—a culture that the Western media paints in black-and-white. LeVine states of his subjects:

Their imagination and openness to the world, and the courage of their convictions, remind us that Muslim and Western cultures are more heterogeneous, complex, and ultimately alike than the peddlers of the clash of civilizations, the war on terror, and unending jihad would have us believe.

In "The Flowers of Nicosia," we get the sense that the members of Downtown Dharma didn't have a very clear picture of what Muslim culture and society were like when they hatched their plan to deploy as nonviolent warriors against fundamentalism. When they finally play in Cyprus they see how much more complicated the truth is than the limited picture they had been shown. Nonetheless, LeVine's book shows that music does have the power to break down boundaries. In the final paragraph of his chapter on Israel and Palestine, he expresses his hope that a musical confluence between Jewish and Palestinian metal and hip-hop groups can help to demolish the boundaries that drive their society apart:

If only I could get Saz, Dam, Orphaned Land, Abeer, Palestinian Rapperz, Ramallah Underground, Useless ID, Betzefer, Ghidian, Sara, and Khalas to do a show together—set up a stage on both sides of the Wall, crank up the amps and turntables, and do a hard-core, oriental-tinged, rap-metal version of Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall" so loud that it would literally blow the Wall down, the way Joshua had done a few millennia before... Maybe ten bands and 100,000 watts could change the face of Israel/Palestine where ten years of failed negotiations and ten times as long of violence could not.

After reading that passage, suddenly Downtown Dharma didn't seem quite so naïve anymore. They were expressing an ancient hope—the idea that music can bring us together despite our culture's best efforts to drive us apart.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 16, 2008 at 09:51 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 24, 2008

Why *Heroes* isn't good now, wasn't good before, and will never be good in the future



There's been much online hand-wringing in the last year and a half over where *Heroes* went wrong. Viewers who loved the first season felt betrayed by the second, and downright insulted by the opening of the third. I came to *Heroes* late, watching the entire first season over the course of a week or two before the second began. As such, I didn't see the division between the first two seasons so sharply, but I *did* see all of the problems the show's fans attributed to the second season—glacial pacing, lack of focus—in the first. I once heard someone describe *Heroes*, rather accurately, as "Watchmen as written by Chris Claremont." To some people that might sound like windsurfing in Heaven on a giant ice cream cone, but I think it sums up much of what's wrong with the series: overwrought soap opera trying to fill the shoes of an epic.

Here's what's wrong with *Heroes*: it's grossly misnamed. The characters never do anything *heroic*. The title of the third season, "Villains," only serves to emphasize this fact. The bad guys in the *Heroes* universe are obvious: they do things like eat people's brains. Flashes to a possible future show the supposed good guys doing bad things, but this

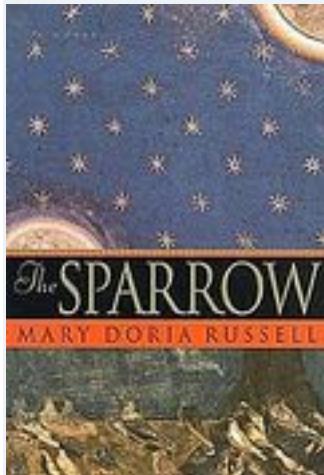
really just highlights the fact that they don't spend any time at all doing good deeds. Clare saved somebody from a fire once, but other than that the "heroes" mostly do lots of aimless running around trying to stop vast conspiracies. Vast conspiracies have their place, but would it kill them to catch a mugger from time to time? For all of its many (many, *many*) problems, *Smallville* at least knows to have Clark Kent occasionally save people from car crashes and stop bursting dams. But the characters on *Heroes* all feel exceptionally self-absorbed, or at least clique-absorbed: they only care about what the show's other characters do, and not about the world around them. For all the big talk about "saving the world," the show is really just about saving the cheerleader. Add to the mix new "villains" like Daphne, who's basically just doing a job, and visions of a milquetoasty future for arch-brain-eater Sylar (the show's most interesting character), and the "heroes" start to look altogether unheroic. The show tries desperately to link the characters to a bigger picture, but they always come out seeming like they only care about themselves. The moral universe *Heroes* set up from day one is a murky one, and that means it's hard to care about anybody turning evil—they were already halfway there to begin with.

The real problem with *Heroes* is tied in with its pacing. The characters spent the entire first season, and part of the second, figuring out that they had powers; by the second season much of the cast still hadn't met each other. That's over 20 hours of story time spent on the bare beginnings of an origin story. The entire show, three years in, *still* feels like an origin story, and it's beginning to look like it will always feel like one. The problem is that origin stories need to end so that the real story can get going. *Heroes* feels like the middle part of Spider-Man's origin story, when he's trying to become a TV star. There's no sense of a moral imperative driving the characters, no *why* behind their choices of how to use their powers, and it doesn't look like that's going to be changed by a "With great power..." moment. The characters feel half-written, waiting for a transformational moment that will never come. Until that happens—and it looks like it probably won't—*Heroes* can never be a good show. The characters are stuck in an ethical limbo, which is no place for so-called heroes to be.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 24, 2008 at 06:30 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 24, 2008

Post for *Sojourners*: "Why does God need a starship?"



In the latest issue of the liberal Christian magazine *Sojourners*, Rose Marie Berger [interviews](#) Mary Doria Russell, author of *The Sparrow*, and Elizabeth Palmberg offers up a list of [recent SF novels with spiritual themes](#). (Don't get scared by the login screen; both articles are available after free registration). *The Sparrow*, the tragic story of a Jesuit mission to establish contact with an alien society, is probably one of my favorite books, and the interview offers some great insight into Russell's own spiritual journey, of which the novel was an important part.

In conjunction with these features, *Sojourners* blog [God's Politics](#) has some additional content on religion and SF, and some of it is written by me. In a short post entitled "["Why does God need a starship?"](#)", I talk about what the speculative nature of SF means for the genre's discussions of religion:

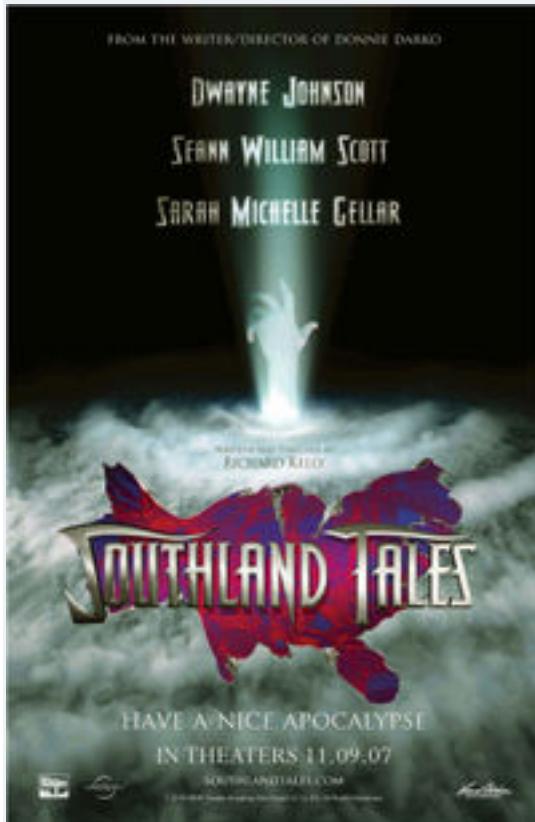
Most SF about religion questions and reinterprets spiritual matters, seeking new interpretations of old ideas. The goal of the genre in general is to build the future, to envision possible worlds to help us deal with imminent changes in the real world. That often means leaving behind theories that no longer fit reality, and this puts the genre in opposition to traditionalism and fundamentalism: It's hard to imagine the religion of the future if you're bound to the past.

There's also an [additional list](#) of classic works of SF with religious themes, to which I made a brief contribution.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 24, 2008 at 09:51 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 29, 2008

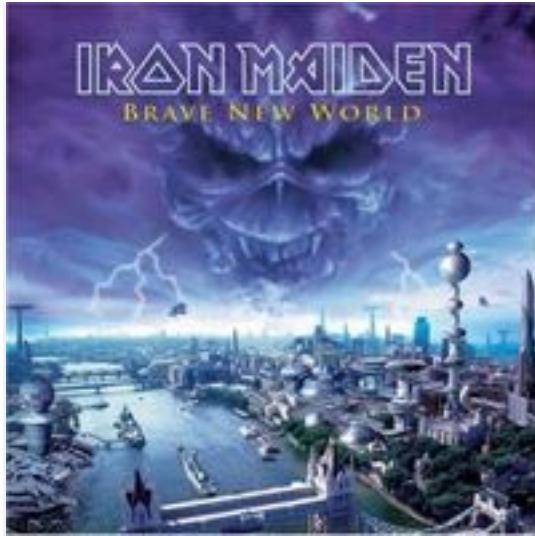
Focus on the Family vs. real dystopias



The latest Republican attempt at scaremongering John McCain into the White House co-opts the form of science fiction. Last week Focus on the Family issued a 16-page piece of dystopian fiction, [a letter from "A Christian from 2012"](#) detailing society's descent into chaos following 4 years of an Obama presidency. From terrorist attacks the end of the Boy Scouts, FotF's letter paints a ludicrous picture with the specific intention of getting young evangelicals, [many of whom](#) support Obama, to change their votes. The letter is a ham-fisted attempt at the genre of dystopian SF—a genre that has been pretty solidly left-wing since its inception. Here are just a few liberal dystopias that are both more plausible and better-written than the 2012 letter.

Parable of the Sower and **Parable of the Talents**, by Octavia Butler

Following a broad economic collapse caused by a laissez-faire government (sound familiar?), America has descended into total anarchy. The first volume depicts some of the chaos—the middle class living in walled forts; roving gangs of anarchists. In the second volume, a reactionary movement called Christian America promises a return to order—one that requires concentration camps for "heathens" like the novel's agrarian protagonists. Maybe it's just me, but I find it much easier to believe Christian America as an heir of Focus on the Family than the 2012 letter's world as an heir of Obama.



Brave New World, by Aldous Huxley

In Huxley's definitive dystopia, capitalism is no longer just an economic system, it's an object of worship (with Henry Ford standing in for God). In 1958, Huxley wrote *Brave New World Revisited*, a book of essays that showed further pessimism about the world's regression to assembly-line living

The prophecies I made in 1931 are coming true much sooner than I thought they would... In the West, it is true, individual men and women still enjoy a large measure of freedom. But even in those countries that have a tradition of democratic government, this freedom and even the desire for this freedom seem to be on the wane.

V for Vendetta, by Alan Moore and David Lloyd

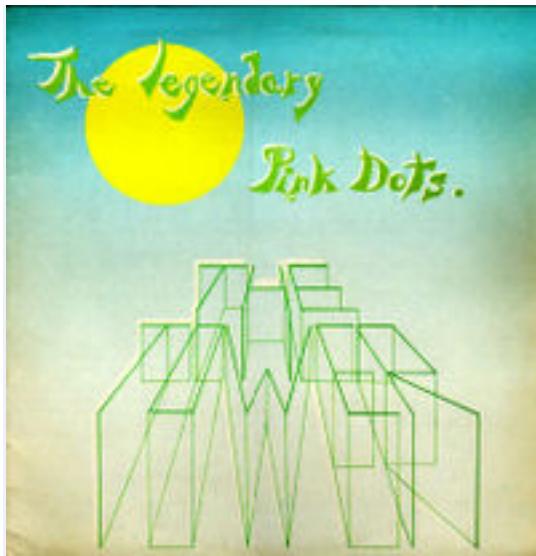
I don't think I can say anything better than what Alan Moore wrote in his 1988 introduction to this story:

Naiveté can also be detected in my supposition that it would take something as melodramatic as a near-miss nuclear conflict to nudge England towards fascism... It's 1988 now. Margaret Thatcher is entering her third term of office and talking confidently of an unbroken Conservative leadership well into the next century... The tabloid press are circulating the idea of concentration camps for persons with AIDS. The new riot police wear black visors, as do their horses, and their vans have rotating video cameras mounted on top. The government has expressed a desire to eradicate homosexuality, even as an abstract concept, and one can only speculate as to which minority will be the next legislated against. I'm thinking of taking my family and getting out of this country soon, sometime over the next couple of years. It's cold and it's mean spirited and I don't like it here anymore.

Thankfully Thatcher's prediction of permanent Conservative leadership didn't come true, and Alan Moore still lives in Northampton. The 2006 film version wisely does away with the nuclear war angle, instead depicting England's adoption of a Bush-style government as the cause of all the trouble.

Southland Tales, written and directed by Richard Kelly

In Richard Kelly's whacked-out apocalypse, the fate of the world depends on the result of a presidential election. *Southland Tales* isn't afraid to get specific in naming the affiliations of its bogeymen: Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Bobby Frost is the head of US-Ident, the military contractor that won the task of strengthening and streamlining the surveillance state. In this film, Republican victory means solidifying the bond between evil government and evil business, which somehow opens a black hole above Los Angeles. Or something. It's hard to follow, but one thing is clear: Richard Kelly doesn't like Republicans.



The Tower, by the Legendary Pink Dots

British artists really didn't like Margaret Thatcher, did they? *The Tower* is a tour-de-force concept album about the bleak direction in which the Conservatives were leading the country. Against a synth-driven background of demented circus music, the lyrics are a litany of brutality, repression, and intolerance. Unlike Alan Moore, the Dots weren't sticking around to see how things turned out; they packed their bags and moved to the Netherlands soon after the album was released. The final song on the album, "Tower Five," is a less-than-fond farewell: "You wanted easy answers / You want a tidy end / Don't you know you've got a lot to answer for? / You wanted shining heroes. / You wanted sparkling knights / BUT THEY'RE GONE. / You chose your grave. / Lie there." [Lyrics and samples [here](#).]

Children of Men, co-written and directed by Alfonso Cuarón

Children of Men's Britain has become a police state as a result of anti-terrorist and anti-immigrant paranoia. As in the film version of *V For Vendetta*, it's a direct result of adopting George W. Bush-style policies, and the film is rife with images intended to remind us of American policy: Guantanamo-style detainees held in cages, media obsession with "illegal immigrants," and, most chillingly, the words "Homeland Security" above the entrance to a bleak refugee camp.

The Book of Revelation, by John of Patmos

As I've long argued, John's Apocalypse is a revolutionary book that's been co-opted, in recent years, by reactionaries. Its most moving passage describes the destruction of a Babylon, depicted in [Rev. 18](#) as a proto-capitalist dystopia: "The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, 'Alas, alas, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! For in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste!'" (Rev 18:15-17) How's that for a religious picture of a world on the brink of collapse?

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 29, 2008 at 07:47 AM in [Books](#), [Comics](#), [Film](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 05, 2008

[*sigh of relief*]

America did the right thing yesterday, thank God.

In lieu of liveblogging or some such, Religion Dispatches solicited meditations on the election from their regular contributors, and my entry, entitled "No Moral Surrender," is [here](#). It's all about Republican (and evangelical) moral cynicism. I almost tied the piece into SF as a providential guide, which meshes well with Obama's future-building vision, but I knew they wanted brevity, and that kind of pontificating would have pushed it close to thousand-word-essay territory, so I left it out.

Pretty much the only thing that didn't go swimmingly yesterday is that California seems poised to pass [Proposition 8](#), which bans gay marriage in the state. The only silver lining on that cloud is that [Orson Scott Card](#) (probably) won't be leading an armed rebellion anytime soon.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 05, 2008 at 11:18 AM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 11, 2008

Grasping for the Wind on religion in SF

SF/F review blog Grasping for the Wind hosts a [roundtable discussion](#) on religion and SF, asking:

Does the very nature of science fiction (as opposed to fantasy) automatically preclude fair treatment of religion? Must religion always be seen as an outdated and outmoded way of thinking, or are there authors who can and have included religion (whether real or imagined) in its pages without forcing an either/or proposition between religion and science?

The discussion is similar to that in the recent SF Signal [Mind Meld](#) post on the same topic (in which I participated, natch). As with that discussion, there are a lot of assumptions buried in the phrasing of the question. The respondents generally discuss SF's surface treatments of religion: priest heroes, preacher villains, and god-spaceships. I think the real meat of the interaction between SF and religion runs deeper, on the level of themes rather than plot elements. That being the case, I think most of the responses, and the question itself, are barking up the wrong tree (or at least the wrong branches): the depiction of religious individuals and institutions isn't as interesting as the depiction of religious *ideas* (which may not be clearly identified as such). The responses name some good books, including a couple that are new to me, but for the most part they're talking about the likes of Creationism, eternal damnation, and other fundamentalist bêtes noires, which are far from the most interesting topics in the SF-and-religion realm.

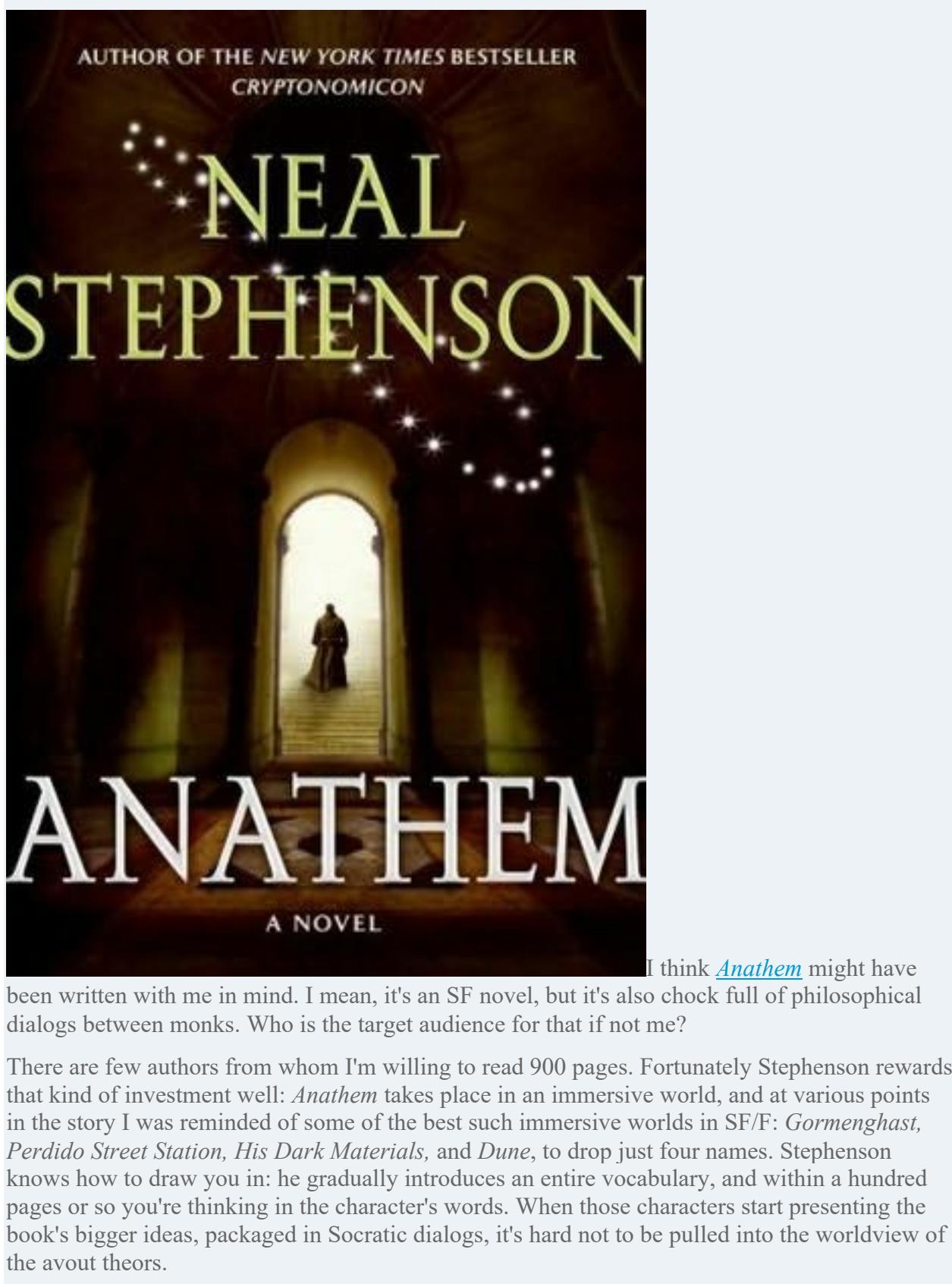
Read the full discussion [here](#).

Apologies for the dearth of posting lately, which is mostly the result of three things: 1) my preparation for and participation in Cornell University's recent [conference](#) on hip hop (I was part of a panel presentation on the creation and use of Cornell's hip hop archive), 2) the fact that my son can now crawl, which means he can wreak much chaos, which makes working difficult, and 3) the fact that I am 600 pages deep in Neal Stephenson's *Anathem*. There will be a review, oh yes.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 11, 2008 at 11:06 PM in [Atheism](#), [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 19, 2008

My *Anathem* review, or, All books should be about monks that live inside a giant clock



I think *Anathem* might have been written with me in mind. I mean, it's an SF novel, but it's also chock full of philosophical dialogs between monks. Who is the target audience for that if not me?

There are few authors from whom I'm willing to read 900 pages. Fortunately Stephenson rewards that kind of investment well: *Anathem* takes place in an immersive world, and at various points in the story I was reminded of some of the best such immersive worlds in SF/F: *Gormenghast*, *Perdido Street Station*, *His Dark Materials*, and *Dune*, to drop just four names. Stephenson knows how to draw you in: he gradually introduces an entire vocabulary, and within a hundred pages or so you're thinking in the character's words. When those characters start presenting the book's bigger ideas, packaged in Socratic dialogs, it's hard not to be pulled into the worldview of the avout theorists.

What are those, you ask? *Anathem* takes place on Arbre, a world in which the brightest minds are "collected" into monasteries where they focus their energies on the study of pure mathematics. The monasteries, or "concents," are sharply segregated from the Saecular world; the "avout" inside their walls are only allowed to leave once every 1, 10, 100, or 1,000 years, depending on how extreme a vow they take. (Oh—some of them, like the one where *Anathem* begins, are also really, really big clocks.) The avout are strict empiricists, but they aren't allowed to use technology—contrast that with the "Deolaters" of the outside world who believe in God and constantly fiddle with noisy electronic gadgets. *Anathem*'s setting is one in which the commonly-drawn division between religion and science has been reified in the millennia-old stones of the concent walls.

Things are more complicated than they seem, however. We know this from the earliest pages: after all, here it's the empiricists who have elaborate rituals and more-or-less ascetic practices. But as we learn the philosophical history of the avout the mystical underpinnings of their system start to become clear. For instance, there's Protas, Arbre's version of Plato. After comparing clouds to the shadows they cast on the land below,

He had his famous insight that while the shapes of the shadows undeniably answered to those of the clouds, the latter were infinitely more complex and more perfectly realized than the former, which were distorted not only by the loss of a spatial dimension but also by being projected onto terrain that was of irregular shape... Returning to Periklyne he had proclaimed his doctrine that all the things we thought we knew were shadows of more perfect things in a higher world.

A thousand years before that there was Cnoüs, an architect who launched the entire history of Arbran philosophy—and, coincidentally, the division between avout and Saecular. Cnoüs has an "upsight" while looking (like Protas) into the sky, drawing a triangle on a stone tablet to illustrate his newfound understanding. He tells his two daughters, Deät and Hylaea, of his vision, but he dies shortly thereafter. The two daughters offer conflicting interpretations. Deät says that

He was seeing into another world: a kingdom of heaven where all was bright and perfect. According to her, Cnoüs drew the conclusion that it was a mistake to worship physical idols such as the one he had been building, for those were only crude effigies of actual gods that lived in another realm, and we ought to worship those gods themselves, not artifacts we made with our own hands.

Hylaea said that Cnoüs had actually been having an insight about geometry. What her sister Deät had misinterpreted as a pyramid in heaven was actually a glimpse of an isosceles triangle: not a crude and inaccurate representation of one, such as Cnoüs drew on his tablet with ruler and compass, but a pure theoretical object of which one could make absolute statements. The triangles that we drew and measured here in the physical world were all merely more or less faithful representations of perfect triangles that existed in this higher world. We must stop confusing one with the other, and lend our minds to the study of pure geometrical objects.

What lurks beneath the surface of this story is the idea that the scientific idealism of Hylaea is just as mystical as the religious anti-idolatry of Deät. Within a few pages of relating this story Erasmus, *Anathem*'s protagonist, begins to ponder the similarities between the two conflicting interpretations, and the first 650 pages or so of the novel depicts his gradual acceptance that his

belief in the "Hylaeon Theoric World"—what we would call Plato's realm of forms—is a a is a mystical concept that underpins the entire thought-system of the avout. Oh, other stuff happens, too—there's a dangerous Arctic trek, a kung fu brawl, an attack by mysterious aliens, and a love story. But the important stuff, the stuff that Stephenson obviously cares most about (and the stuff that interested me the most, too), is the philosophy, and that is aaaaalll about Plato. (Or Protas, at least.) And that Platonism leads the story into a lot of science—everything from orbital mechanics to quantum computing to volcanology has a moment in *Anathem*'s pages. But Erasmus comes to the conclusion that it all hinges on the Hylaeon Theoric World, something "non-spatiotemporal—yet believed to exist."

Of course, the idea of what a more ideal universe might be gets called into question, too. I doubt Plato envisaged the form realm's inhabitants entering our universe and declaring war. (That's not exactly what happens here, but I don't want to say too much...) There are some interesting perspectives on the religious beliefs of the Deolaters along the way: for instance, the followers of the Warden of Heaven, who hold some messianic ideas about the avout, or the Kelx, who believe that our entire universe is a story being told by a condemned murderer who's trying to convince a judge to grant a stay of execution. (Bottom line: be good, or the judge will get bored of the story and cut it short by having our de facto God executed.) Erasmus offers an intriguing perspective on the Deolater's apparent nonchalance:

If you sincerely believed in God, how could you form one thought, speak one sentence, without mentioning Him? Instead of which Deolaters like Beller would go on for hours without bringing God into the conversation at all. Maybe his God was remote from our doings. Or—more likely— maybe the presence of God was so obvious to him that he felt no more need to speak of it than I did to point out, all the time, that I was breathing air.

Nevertheless, the story of *Anathem* involves the unification of opposites that aren't really opposites, as the Saecular and mathic worlds combine and synthesize into something greater. (In a recent [interview](#) with io9 Stephenson warned against thinking of it as an "alliance," but I think using Hegelian terminology is entirely appropriate.) In the novel's closing pages Erasmus and his circle are laying the foundations for their transformed world, establishing more open replacements for the old concents. He explains the new order's attitude to the segregation between the two worlds of Arbre:

"The rule of thumb we've been using is that Deolaters are welcome as long as they're not certain they're right," I said. "As soon as you're sure you're right, there's no point in your being here."

Questions are better than answers, and *Anathem* is all about inquiry—scientific and religious; philosophical and mystical. Yeah, I think I am the target audience for that.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 19, 2008 at 10:55 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 20, 2008

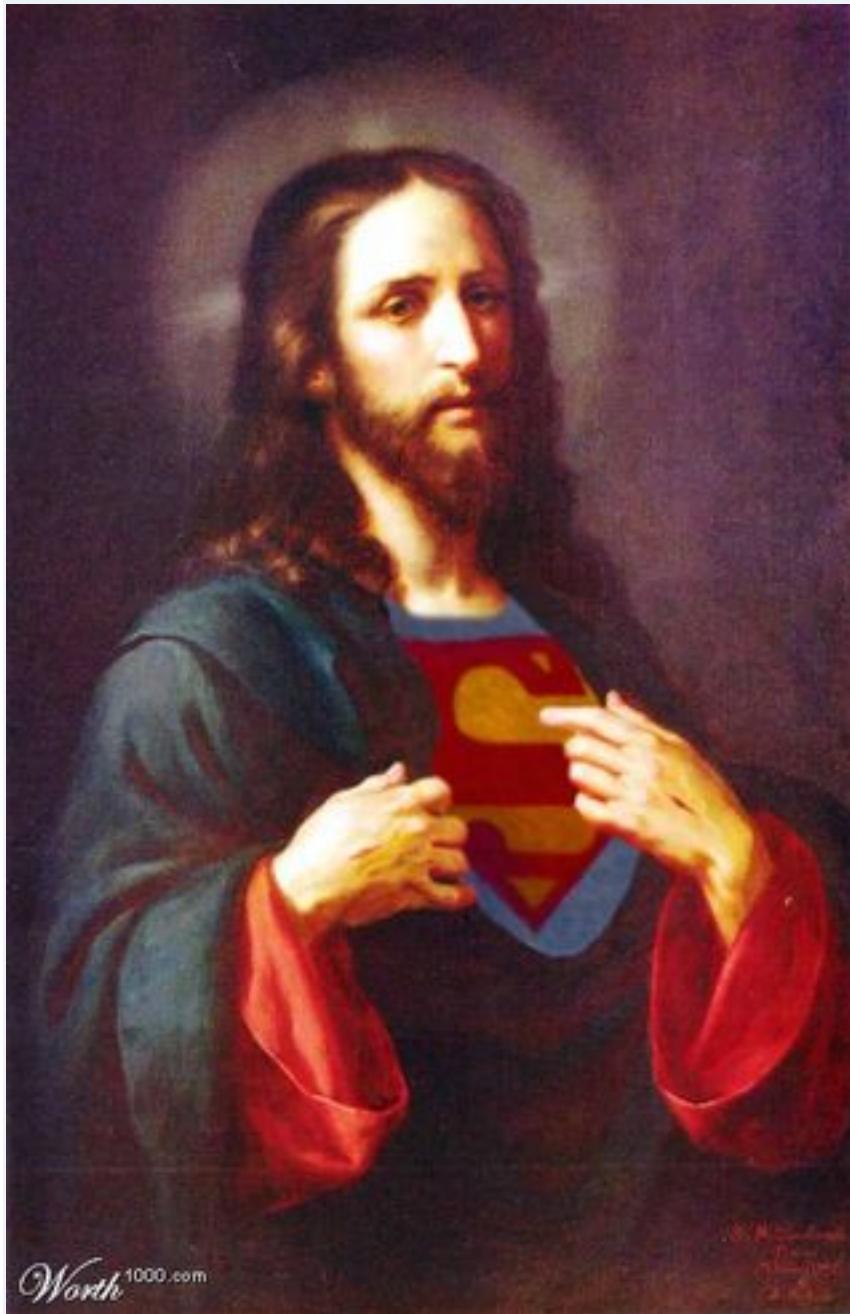
Heroes and mythology; Grant Morrison on religion and God

Over at Religion Dispatches, Nick Street [argues](#) that *Heroes* is a prime example of American squeamishness about homoeroticism in mythology. The result is a "half-baked assimilationist version" of the heroic archetype: the

characters struggle to rid themselves of difference instead of transcending their old lives by embracing their difference. In short, they're desperately striving *not* to be liminal figures.

The unsatisfying muddle of the current storyline calls for a Promethean figure, someone unafraid to heed the call of departure from conventional life as well as from the audience's expectations. What Heroes needs is another Zack, unbound—a heroically transgressive character who will steal fire from the gods and illuminate the path that will lead us out of our present dark age.

Which is kind of [what I was saying](#) a couple weeks ago: Heroes doesn't get superheroes, and continually stops its characters short of the transformation they need.



At [Newsarama](#), Grant Morrison talks about religion, spirituality, and God. It's a bit annoying, frankly, mostly because he starts out with this:

And how did I miss this one?

I think religion per se, is a ghastly blight on the progress of the human species towards the stars. At the same time, it, or something like it, has been an undeniable source of comfort, meaning and hope for the majority of poor bastards who have ever lived on Earth, so I'm not trying to write it off completely.

But it soon becomes clear that when Morrison says "religion" he means "church." Unsurprisingly, he doesn't like hierarchy, but he most certainly does believe in transcendence.

As I've said before, the solid world is just the part of heaven we're privileged to touch and play with. You don't need a priest or a holy man to talk to "god" on your behalf just close your eyes and say hello: "god" is no more, no less, than the sum total of all matter, all energy, all consciousness, as experienced or conceptualized from a timeless perspective where everything ever seems to present all at once. "God" is in everything, all the time and can be found there by looking carefully. The entire universe, including the scary, evil bits, is a thought "God" is thinking, right now.

Which is, in my mind, is pretty spot-on. It's an old idea called panentheism (not to be confused with pantheism), and it's been appearing in writing—*religious* writing—for centuries. What are process theology, Kabbalah, and Sufism if not religious? Morrison, it seems would call them "spirituality"—and he argues that "Religion is to spirituality what porn is to sex."

I've always found the distinction between "religion" and "spirituality" unsatisfying. It's like people who argue that they hate science fiction, but that they love Orwell (for instance), or Margaret Atwood. *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* aren't SF, and why? because people who aren't SF fans like them. Their picture of SF is a caricature, just as the picture of "religion" as a cruel hierarchy is a caricature (and a mostly outmoded one at that. The most politically conservative churches have *no* hierarchy.)

To Grant Morrison, to all those who draw a line between religion and spirituality, I say: it's okay. "Religion" is bigger than you think. There's room in here for lots of ideas. Just as the universe, in a panentheistic system, is part of God, spirituality is part of religion.

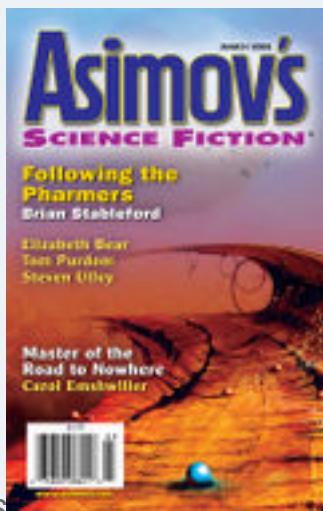
He talks about *All-Star Superman* some, too, and whether or not Superman is a Christ figure. Read that segment of Newsarama's 10-part interview [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 20, 2008 at 10:27 AM in [Comics](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 26, 2008

My choices for the *Asimov's* and *Analog* readers' polls

It's the end of the year, which means it's time for the annual *Asimov's* and *Analog* readers' polls. Below are my picks for the best stories of the year (with links to my reviews and analysis where applicable)!



Asimov's

Best Novella

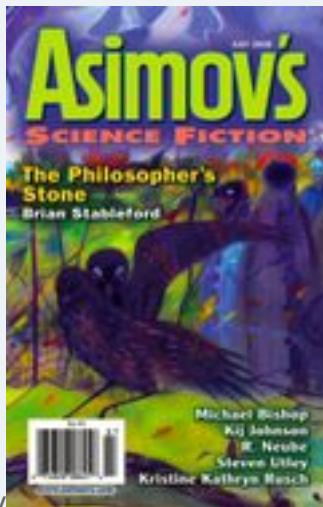
1. [The Erdmann Nexus](#) by Nancy Kress (Oct/Nov)
2. [The Room of Lost Souls](#) by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (Apr/May)
3. [The Hob Carpet](#) by Ian MacLeod (Jun)

Certainly the toughest category in both polls, there were many strong contenders for *Asimov's* best novella. MacLeod's oddity about a space-prince with a fetish for genetically engineered slaves was certainly unique, and Rusch's SF/horror tale had a profoundly creepy atmosphere. But the strong characters in Kress's story of an emergent hive mind in a nursing home wins my top score. Runners up: Robert Reed's ["Truth"](#) (Oct/Nov), Brian Stableford's "The Philosopher's Stone" (Jul), and David Ira Cleary's ["The Flowers of Nicosia"](#) (Dec).

Best Novelette

1. [The Ray-Gun: A Love Story](#) by James Alan Gardner (Feb)
2. [Lester Young and the Jupiter's Moon Blues](#) by Gord Sellar (Jul)
3. [Vinegar Peace, or, the Wrong-Way Used-Adult Orphanage](#) by Michael Bishop (Jul)

Long titles rule the day here, apparently. This category was easiest to decide on—for the top slot, at least. Gardner's story of destiny, love, and alien artifacts was probably the best story I read last year, period. Sellar's story involves aliens who love jazz so much they hire musicians to accompany them on tours of the solar system while taking some very PKD time-and-space-altering drugs. Michael Bishop's story of a group home for parents whose children die in a near-future war resonates even more strongly when the recent death of the author's own son is taken into consideration. There were several other strong contenders in this category: Elizabeth Bear's Lovecraftian "Shoggoths in Bloom" (Mar), Ted Kosmatka's theology-of-physics-themed ["Divining Light"](#) (Aug), Melanie and Steve Rasnic Tem's elegiac "In Concert" (Dec), and Neal Barrett, Jr.'s ecumenically postapocalyptic ["Radio Station St. Jack"](#) (Aug) would all be worthy winners.



Best Short Story

1. [This is How it Feels](#) by Ian Creasey (Mar)
2. [Inside the Box](#) by Edward M. Lerner (Feb)
3. [Dhuluma No More](#) by Gord Sellar (Oct/Nov)

In Creasey's heartbreakng short, a man charged with DUI must live with the implanted memories of a young girl killed by a drunk driver. Lerner's story earns its place on the list by considering the POV of Schroedinger's poor hypothetical feline. Sellar's postcolonial tale of a iceberg-mining ship run by African emigrants reminded me of Mack Reynold's forgotten gem [Blackman's Burden](#) and its sequels.

Best Poem

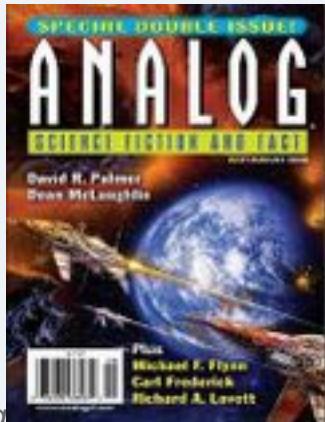
1. [Deaths on Other Planets](#) by Joanne Merriam (Apr/May)
2. [War Gods](#) by Bruce Holland Rogers (Jun)
3. [Landscapes](#) by Geoffrey A. Landis (Aug)

Bluntly speaking, I don't pay too much attention to the poetry in *Asimov's*, so I submit these choices without comment.

Best Cover

1. [March](#) (Tomasz Maronski)
2. [February](#) (Bob Eggleton)
3. [July](#) (Tor Lundvall)

I'm a sucker for a good surrealist landscape, and Maronski's cover for the March issue is a great one. I don't know what's happening in Eggleton's spacescape, but it looks amazing. And I always enjoy Lundvall's Chagall-ish covers, which are far more expressionistic than you might expect to see on an SF magazine.



Analog

Best Novella

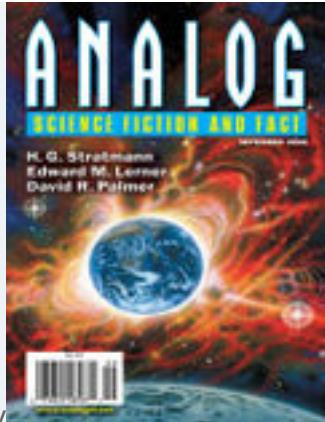
1. [Test Signals](#) by David Bartell (May)
2. [Brittney's Labyrinth](#) by Richard A. Lovett (Jun)
3. [The Spacetime Pool](#) by Catherine Asaro (Mar)

There's a bit of an imbalance in the Best Novella category for *Analog*. Because this magazine serializes novels (which Asimov's generally does not do), it publishes fewer novellas—by my count, only four this year. Thankfully both Bartell's "Test Signals," a mutation-themed mystery, and Lovett's "Brittney's Labyrinth," a sequel to his excellent "The Sands of Titan," were strong entries.

Best Novelette

1. [Guaranteed Not to Turn Pink in the Can](#) by Thomas R. Dulski (Apr)
2. [The Last Temptation of Katerina Savitskaya](#) by H.G. Stratmann (Sept)
3. [The Exoanthropic Principle](#) by Carl Frederick (Jul/Aug)

A lot of long titles in the novelette category for *Analog* as well, it seems. Dulski's story is a bizarre mystery involving the Albigensian heresy, among other things. Stratmann's sequel to last year's "The Paradise Project" features a distinctly positive representation of faith. Frederick's story earns points for exploring the religious implications of a universe a step or two up the ontological ladder from our own.



Best Short Story

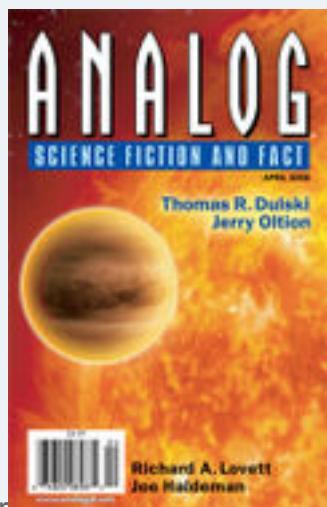
1. [The Meme Theorist](#) by Robert R. Chase (Oct)
2. [Where Away You Fall](#) by Jason Sanford (Dec)
3. [The Bookseller of Bastet](#) by John G. Hemry (Mar)

Chase's story involves a scientist who begins having odd visionary experiences, including encounters with my favorite medieval anchoress, Julian of Norwich. Sanford's story is in intriguing exploration of the concepts of free will and destiny. And Hemry's elegy for forgotten information squeezes an amazing amount of complexity into fewer than four pages.

Best Fact Article

1. [The 3D Trainwreck](#) by Thomas A. Easton (Nov)
2. [Here There be Dragons: The Ivory-Billed Woodpecker and Other Mysteries of an Explored Planet](#) by Richard A. Lovett (Oct)
3. [The Challenge of the Anthropic Universe](#) by Carl Frederick (Jul/Aug)

I tend to be more interested in the less-technical fact articles in Analog, but I found Easton's exploration of 3D printing technology fairly fascinating. Lovett's article looks into some of the biological surprises our planet still springs on us. Frederick's discussion of the anthropic principle earns its place by virtue of its interesting subject matter, though I think the limited definition of God he uses when discussing religious ideas ultimately amounts to a straw man.



Best Cover

1. [July/August](#) (Bob Eggleton)
2. [April](#) (NASA)
3. [September](#) (David B. Mattingly)

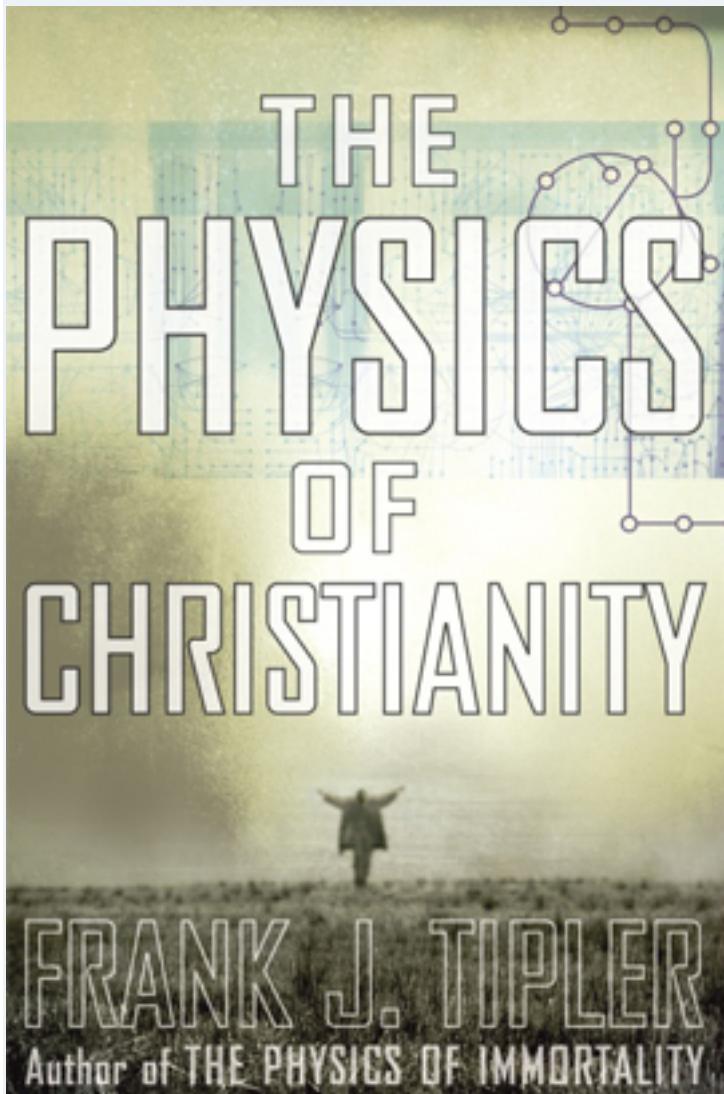
I'm also a sucker for spacescapes, apparently, and Eggleton's impressionistic spaceships push his cover into the top slot. When I made my choices I had no idea the painterly April image was a photograph.

So those are my choices... What are yours? (And if you're not subscribing to one or both of these magazines... when are you planning to?)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 26, 2008 at 08:48 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 01, 2008

The theological forest and the dogmatic trees: Frank J. Tipler's *The Physics of Christianity*



You'd think that [Frank J. Tipler](#) would have a reputation as a bit of a crackpot. His 1994 book [The Physics of Immortality](#) describes his theory—in the scientific sense, mind you—that at the end of the universe all matter will collapse into a singularity wherein every being that ever lived will be raised from the dead to eternal life. The "Omega Point" theory, backed up with extensive calculations and formulae, inspired multiple works of SF, most notably Frederik Pohl's *Eschaton Sequence* and Robert J. Sawyer's *Hybrids*. Tipler also helped popularize the concept of the anthropic principle, the idea that our universe's physical laws are suspiciously well-suited to the development of carbon-based life—an idea that appears, among other places, in Robert J. Sawyer's *Calculating God* and not one but two stories that appeared this year in *Analog*—Carl Frederick's "The Exoanthropic Principle" and Jerry Oltion's "The Anthropic Precipice."

Borderline-wacky scientific ideas are among the best inspirations for SF, and Tipler's blend of religious concepts and scientific proofs certainly seems pretty close to wacky. There are plenty of non- and pseudo-scientists applying theoretical axes to theological grindstones, but Tipler is fairly unique in that he's legit. A professor of mathematics and

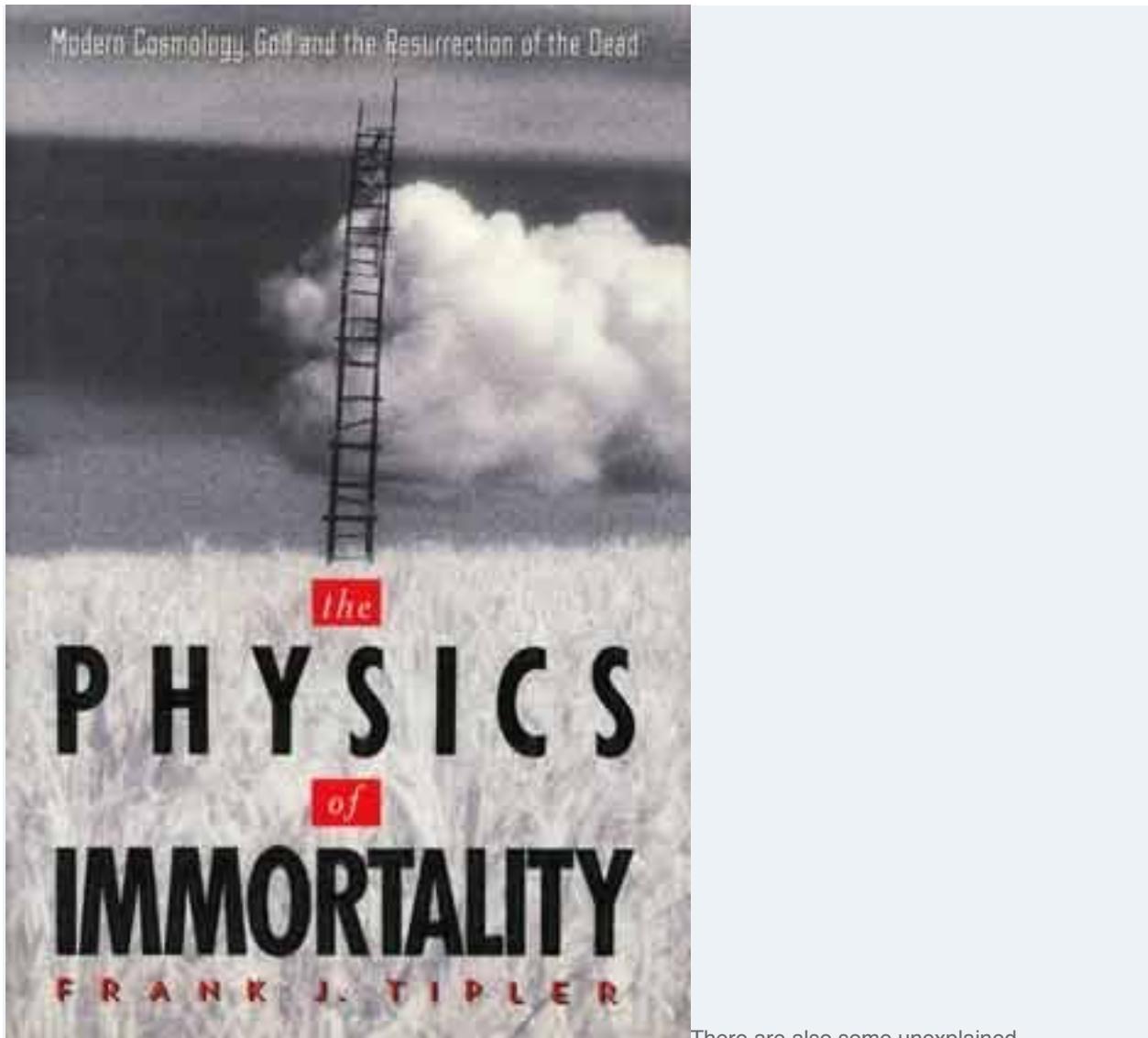
physics at Tulane University, he has a solid background in quantum physics and general relativity. And though his opponents might consider his ideas non-scientific, he backs them up with calculations complex enough that few non-professionals are qualified to debunk the meat of his arguments. In the scientific community, Tipler's ideas have been occasionally lambasted (a review in *Nature* called *The Physics of Immortality* "a masterpiece of pseudoscience"), but he certainly hasn't been written off as a crackpot. In fact, Tipler's 2005 article on quantum gravity was selected as one of the "Highlights of 2005" by the journal *Reports on Progress in Physics*. Notably, Tipler cites this essay as the foundation of his most recent book, last year's [*The Physics of Christianity*](#).

The Physics of Christianity is a more straightforward book than *The Physics of Immortality*; indeed, it devotes the first few chapters to a (still rather dense) crash course in basic theoretical physics for laypeople. It gets off to a promising start in the introduction, where Tipler lays out a theological hypothesis reminiscent of Olaf Stapledon's *Star-Maker*:

The latest observations of the cosmic background radiation show that the universe began 13.7 billion years ago at the Singularity. Stephen Hawking proved mathematically that the Singularity is not in time or in space, but outside both. In other words, the Singularity is transcendent to space and time. According to theologian Thomas Aquinas, "God created the Universe" means simply that all causal chains begin in God. God is the Uncaused Cause. In physics, all causal chains begin at the Singularity. The Singularity itself has no cause. For a thousand years and more, Christian theologians have asserted that there is one and only one "achieved" (actually existing) infinity, and that infinity is God. The Cosmological Singularity is an achieved infinity.

The Cosmological Singularity is God.

There's an excitement running through the beginning of the introduction. It could have been the beginning of a scientifically-supported theological treatise, but that's sadly not the case. Instead of explaining philosophical theology, Tipler bogs himself down in discussions of individual miracles, several of which are of little theological importance. Discussing the Incarnation and Resurrection make sense, but why devote so many pages to the Star of Bethlehem? Tipler behaves as if there is an absolute consensus that the star a) was an undisputed historical fact, and b) must have been a supernova, rather than a comet—or a metaphor. If that weren't bad enough, the discussion of the Resurrection—the *sine qua non* miracle, the thing that Paul declares ([1 Cor 15:14](#)) essential to his (and all Christian) faith, the source of Hume's critique of Christianity on which so much of modern skepticism and atheism depend, the most important thing a book like this could discuss—gets warped into a bargain-basement defense of the Shroud of Turin. A discussion that should be broadly relevant turns into a defense of a very particular kind of Catholicism (or something), and one begins to wonder what Tipler means by "Christianity." If there's a single word to describe the book as a whole, it's *sidetracked*.



There are also some unexplained discrepancies between *The Physics of Immortality* and this book. For instance, the earlier book devotes several pages to explaining why Tipler disbelieves in the Resurrection and the Trinity. *The Physics of Christianity* offers theoretical explanations of both, but no explanation for what has led the author to change his mind. The differences can be frustrating to those familiar with Tipler's earlier work, and that frustration is exacerbated by the fact that he refers to *The Physics of Immortality* frequently. An appendix of things Tipler no longer agrees with—something akin to Augustine's *Retractions*—would be a big help.

Nevertheless, there are some intellectual gems scattered throughout *The Physics of Christianity*. Take chapter 5's rightful insistence that "Miracles do *not* violate physical law":

Indeed, why should God violate His own laws? He knows what He wants to accomplish in universal history and has therefore set the laws of physics accordingly. Thus, to claim... that a miracle violates physical law is in effect to deny either God's omniscience or His omnipotence... If we cannot trust God to keep inviolate His physical laws, then we cannot trust Him to keep His word that we will one day be resurrected to live with Him forever.

The writing of most prominent atheists, including Richard Dawkins, is really a critique of supernaturalism, and the fact that there are plenty of people who believe in a God that is not supernatural but fundamentally natural often gets forgotten. Since I'm one of those non-supernaturalists, it's great to see in Tipler's book some validation for my own ideas.

But that's really why I found the book so frustrating. Because I agree *so much* with Tipler's theology, his cosmological definition of God, the place of the Many Worlds interpretation in his model of the universe and of divinity, I wanted him to devote the whole book to matters theological. Discussing individual miracles seems like splitting hairs, and ultimately marginalizes the whole book. When Tipler talks about the Star of Bethlehem—the first miracle he discusses—he marginalizes the whole book. There's no religious consensus on its historicity, and whether or not it actually happened is of absolutely no theological import. By discussing it first and in such depth, Tipler gives his opponents ample evidence to dismiss the whole book as a hodgepodge of rationalizations for things that probably never happened. It's a shame, because the theology (and the scientific explanations thereof) that underlies the discussion is truly compelling. Most of those foundational ideas are more thoroughly explored in *The Physics of Immortality*, which is a far superior work. If *The Physics of Christianity* devoted its energies to meatier topics, it would be a far more worthy successor.

Read the first chapter of *The Physics of Christianity* [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 01, 2008 at 10:20 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 06, 2008

What did Scientology do to this guy?

My [latest post](#) on Religion Dispatches discusses last week's news story about an ex-Scientologist who was shot dead at the Church's Celebrity Centre in Hollywood when he showed up there with two samurai swords and started threatening visitors.

As one would expect, Anonymous's message boards are gathering [lots of information](#) on the story. As one would also expect, they've given him a meme-ish name: "Epic Sword Guy."

Read my full post at [Religion Dispatches](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 06, 2008 at 07:25 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 06, 2008

Why John Scalzi is wrong about SF and religion



Well, *that* title oughta get me some

hits. But it's not really what I'm going to say. Keep reading and you'll understand...

In a recent post on AMC's SciFi Scanner blog, John Scalzi discusses religion in science fiction film.

...in our common culture, science and religion often take antagonistic roles towards each other -- just pair off a creationist and someone versed in evolutionary biology, let them go five rounds, and you'll get the typical view. But as with everything, the reality is not so clean cut. Polls regularly show that the majority of scientists practice a religion of some sort, while no less than the Roman Catholic Church accepts the idea of biological evolution. Since science and religion co-exist in the real world, how do they exist in the worlds of science fiction movies? The answer (or my answer, anyway) is that it's a mixed bag. Though benevolent spirituality occurs fairly frequently in the future, organized religions are oftentimes used as stock antagonists.

He goes on to list some examples of fluffy spirituality (*Star Wars*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*) and (supposedly*) anti-religious screeds (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Chronicles of Riddick*) before concluding with some thoughts on the synthesis presented by *Contact*, which he describes as one of his favorite SF films:

In the movie, Jodie Foster's atheist astronomer and Matthew McConaghey's God-centered maverick preacher trade deep thoughts about the nature of the universe (as well as deep, moony gazes into each others' eyes). Neither converts the other -- I hope that's not a spoiler for you -- but what they do find is that while their views of the universe and God's place in it are not the same, they can still respect each other as seekers of truth.

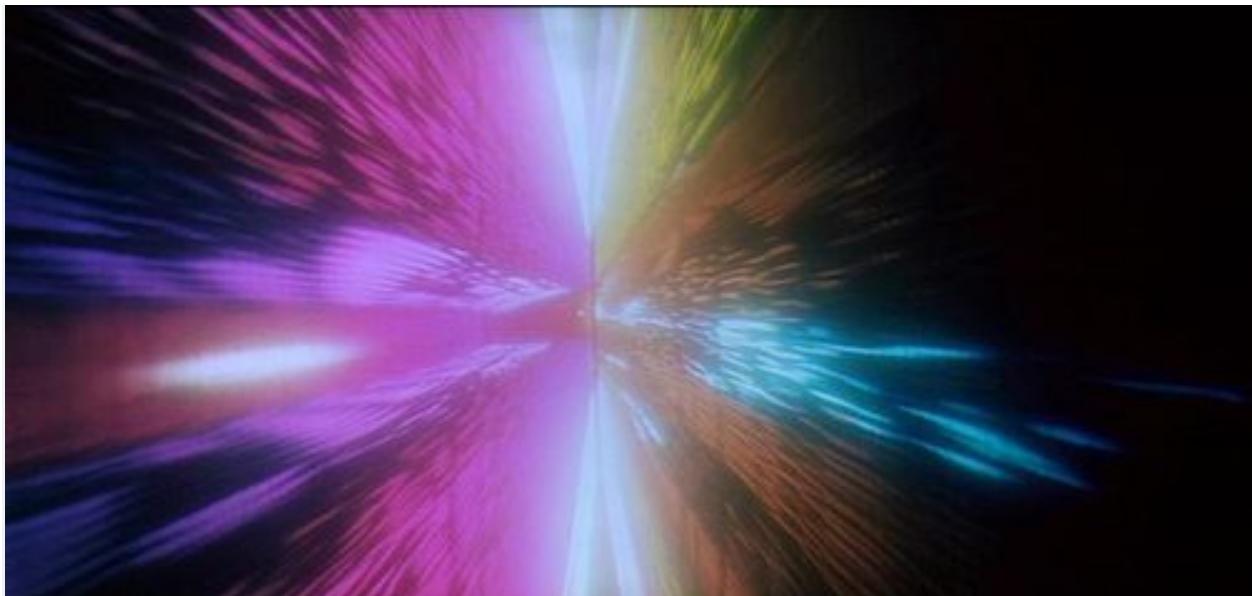
It's not the deepest discussion, but I think he's more or less on-target: SF has a pretty broad range of attitudes toward religion. He opens with a caricature of conflict, but immediately debunks it. So what's my problem, then? The whole thing appears under a title that's all about conflict: "The Battle Between Science and Religion - And SciFi Is the Battleground." The title takes the idea of a creationist-biologist boxing match literally, and applies it to the genre as a whole—which isn't what Scalzi is saying at all. It's the same problem that the *Atlantic Monthly* had a few months ago: they ran a few articles that collectively argued that interfaith conflict can't sustain itself under the header "WHICH RELIGION WILL WIN?" (I wrote about it [here](#).) The media, from the Atlantic to AMC, seems to really, really want conflict, so there's a tendency to apply distorting titles that support a narrative of conflict. This means reducing multifaceted situations—like the interaction of science and religion, for instance—into "debates" between the furthest extremes (like the caricature in Scalzi's opening). Here's a tip: if you want to hear something interesting about religion and science, the last thing you should do is book Richard Dawkins and [Ray Comfort](#). The extremes get goofy real fast—and they get boring even faster. The middle ground is where the good stuff is. As Scalzi says regarding his love of *Contact*, "I can live with being called a squishy centrist on this one."

So, no, I don't think John Scalzi is wrong about religion and SF. However, I do think that his view of what is and is not religious is a bit too narrow. As I've complained elsewhere, far too many SF-and-religion discussions just look at the surface—*Star Trek* episodes with Greek gods in them, evil churches, and that loudest of clichés, the preacher-villain. They ignore the deeper religious themes that run through so much SF: ideas of good and evil, the core messianism of the epic hero, the concept of creation (both cosmic and local), and above all the providential desire to guide the world toward a better future that I see as SF's ultimate (and ultimately spiritual) aim. Those things are all religious (and each gets a chapter in my book [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).**) More importantly, those religious ideas shine through even when the surface message of a book is anti-religious, or the author is an atheist. (Ask me about *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* sometime.) SF doesn't need to have gods or churches in it to be about religion. I mean, dang, Scalzi, the name of your column is "Notes From the Monolith"—don't you know that *2001* is one of the most profoundly spiritual films ever made? Religion can't just coexist with science in SF—it can, and should, *thrive* there.

Check out John Scalzi's original post, and a lively discussion with many contributions by regular SF Gospel reader-and-commenter D. B. Ellis, [here](#).

*But that's another post entirely.

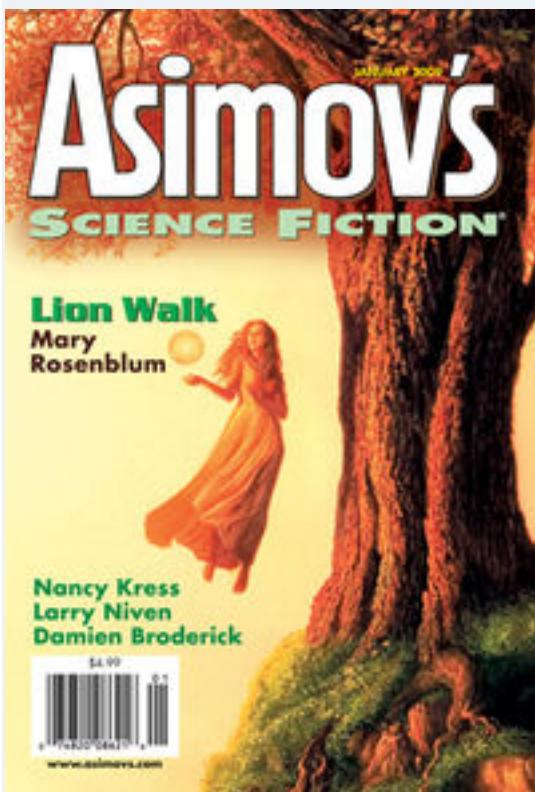
**This fulfills my self-serving plug quota for this post.



Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 06, 2008 at 07:45 PM in [Film](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 10, 2008

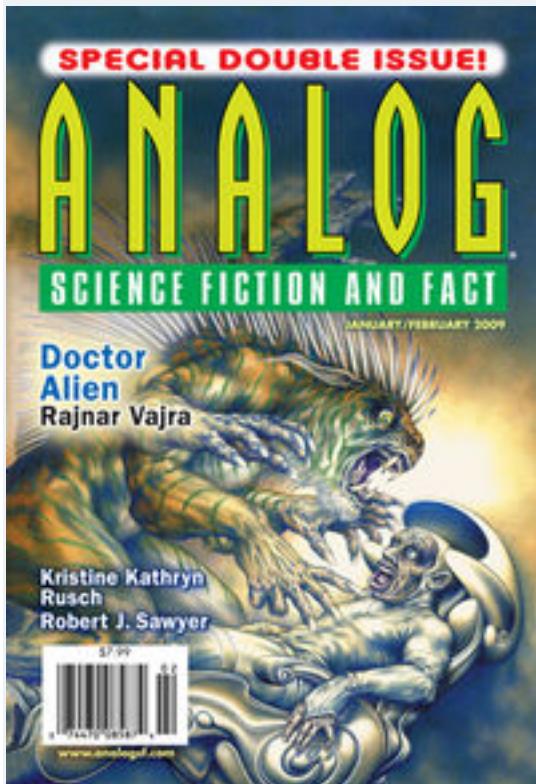
Asimov's and Analog, January 2009



As usual, there are some great stories in *Asimov's* this month.

Most interesting for our purposes here is Robert R. Chase's "Five Thousand Light Years From Birdland," which explores some of the difficulties of interspecies communication. The narrator is on his way to the alien planet of the title to serve as an ambassador to its avian inhabitants, the Rahnee'ah. But first he needs to figure out how to communicate with Screet, his Rahnee'ah shipmate, who may determine that humankind isn't worth communicating with and eat him. There's a translator that can figure out the vocabulary, but rarely conveys a statement's real

meaning. His best tool for learning the meaning beneath the language is *Eutik Si Euban*, an enormous history book that is the Rahnee'ah's equivalent of the Bible. It's the source of all of Sreet's mysterious allusions, so figuring it out the alien's religion is essential to learning how to communicate with them without being eaten. The other standout story this month is Will McIntosh's "Bridesicle," which packs an emotional punch—it describes a future in which standard insurance covers your cryogenic freezing but not necessarily your revival.



Analog's January/February double issue is pretty strong, too, and there's little question that the best story this month is Kristine Kathryn Rusch's "The Recovery Man's Bargain." The title refers to Hadad Yu, a shady businessman who specializes in "recovering" lost merchandise, which puts him somewhere between a private eye and a thief. When a group of aliens hires him to recover a human being, he pushes his sense of ethics to the limit and beyond. Rusch's story is a powerful and engaging exploration of the pitfalls of moral compromise. By the story's end, Yu has undergone an ethical transformation:

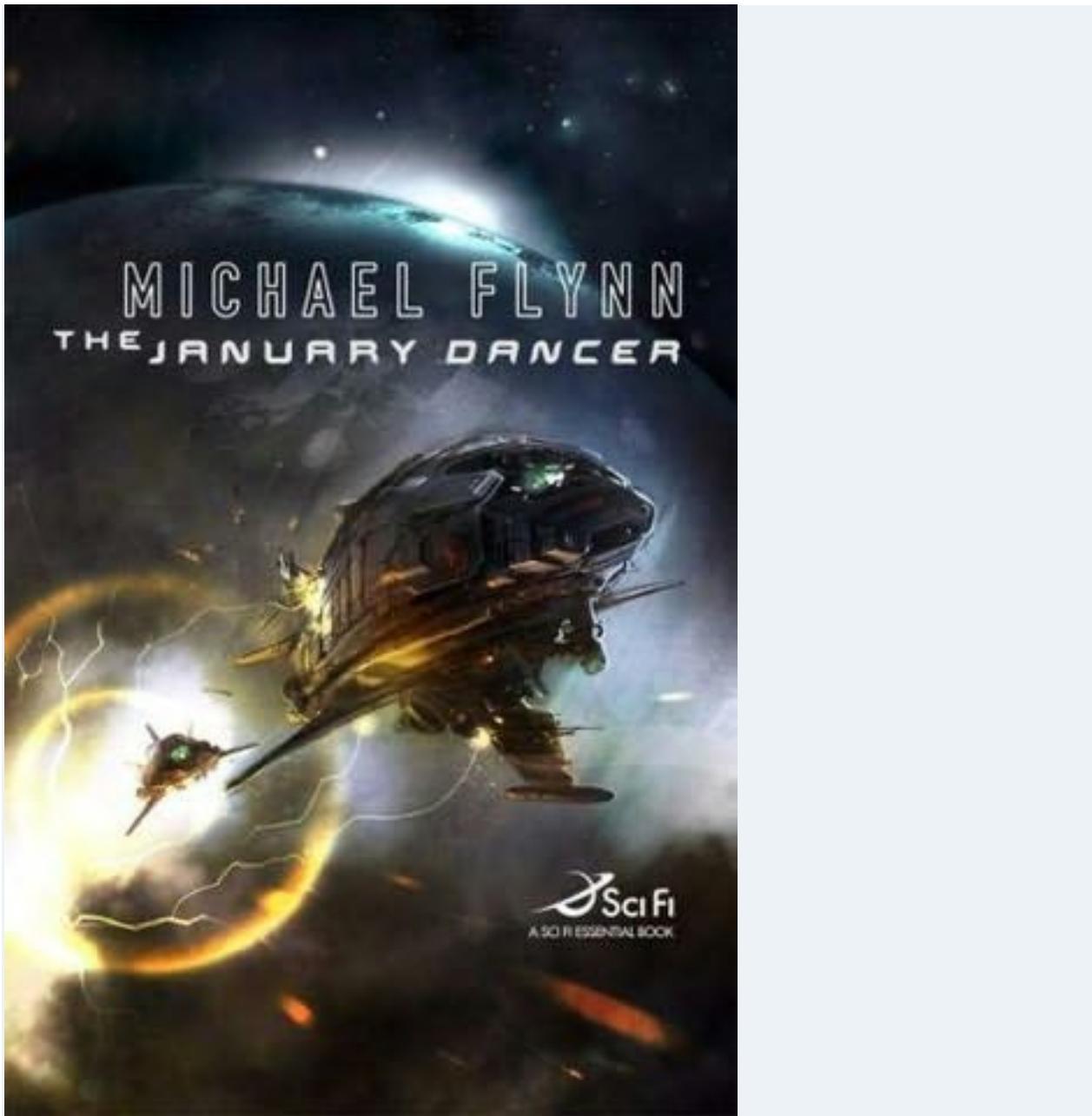
For the first time in years, the universe was open to him. But he was no longer thinking of it as a place full of things. It was a place full of creatures—sentient beings with lives of their own, problems of their own, loves of their own. Creatures he had never gotten to know.

Yu has taken an unpleasant path from Martin Buber's "Ich-Es" (I-It) to "Ich-Du" (I-You). He no longer views people as things. Buber's idea has seen expression elsewhere in SF: in particular, it's reflected in Philip K. Dick's discussion of the android mind and schizophrenia, which influenced his career-long exploration of the question, "[What is human?](#)" In Dick's terms, Rusch's antihero becomes truly human over the course of the story—but that progression requires doing some pretty inhumane things.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 10, 2008 at 11:33 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 15, 2008

"In ancient legends..."



"In the ancient legends, the god Darwin prophesied in a world in which tradesmen struggled in competition. The god Newton appeared in a world that had discovered machinery; the god Einstein in an age when. . ."

"Awa' wi' ye and yer gods. I don't think they were gods at all, but only Terrans that the One God gifted with wisdom."

"The One God?" The Fudir had always imagined the gods as beings much like men, but with powers beyond those even of the Hounds, and with an ability to act unseen greater than that of Greystroke. As Newton controlled the motion of stars and planets, Maxwell and his demons shaped and moved whole galaxies and the electric roads that entwined them. And the quarrel between them could not be resolved even by the god Einstein, who sought a rune that would join them. The idea that there might be only one god astonished him.

"Och, list' tae me loshing. I said there'd be nae religious arguments, and here I am starting one myself."

"I never argue about the gods," the Fudir said. "It leads nowhere, and can only irritate them."

-- [*The January Dancer*](#) by Michael Flynn

The January Dancer is a very, very different book from Flynn's excellent *Eifelheim* (which I reviewed [here](#)). The gulf between them shows the breadth of SF as a genre: *Eifelheim* is a sort of alternate history tale about aliens in the Middle Ages (and 21st-century researchers' discovery thereof); *The January Dancer* is straight-up space opera, complete with space battles, ancient relics, and a star patrol. It's not my favorite kind of SF, but I did appreciate Flynn's playfulness with language, particularly in the early chapters, and the exchange above on the religion of the far future.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 15, 2008 at 11:24 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 17, 2008

Total moral depravity: *The Day the Earth Stood Still*



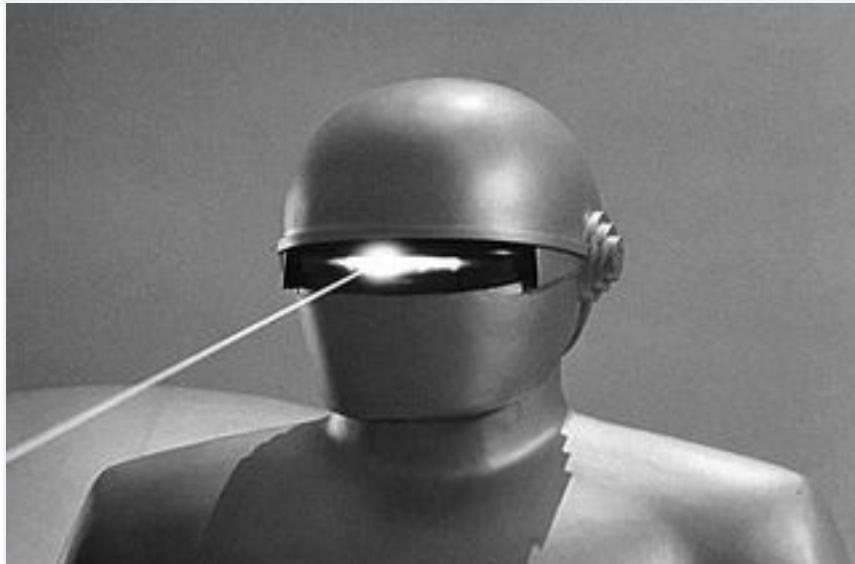
If the original *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is known for one thing, it's Christ imagery. In Robert Wise's 1951 film, alien emissary Klaatu announces his

arrival with a paraphrase of [Luke 2:14](#), preaches peace, love, and understanding before the U.N., is murdered by the forces of empire, rises from the dead, and delivers an apocalyptic warning before ascending to heaven. "If you threaten to extend your violence," he warns, "this Earth of yours will be reduced to a burned-out cinder. Your choice is simple: join us and live in peace or pursue your present course and face obliteration." Though Klaatu's message is more political ultimatum than extension of grace, his story is a transparent attempt to transfer the Jesus story into an SF setting (Robert Wise's claims of scriptural ignorance notwithstanding). The salvation Klaatu extends is admittedly limited; he offers freedom not from sin or death but from nuclear war. Nevertheless, Klaatu was a Cold War messiah.

It may seem surprising, then, that Scott Derrickson's remake excises the messianism from the story. Klaatu is still shot by the military, but it happens well before he's had a chance to do any preaching. On top of that, at no point do we believe he's dead, so he can't really be said to have a resurrection. That fact alone separates this story from the messianic original by a few parsecs. But the differences don't end there: few people even know of Klaatu's existence, since he's denied an audience before the U.N. The public knows aliens have landed, but they don't know why.

Klaatu's mission on Earth is therefore a secret one. And it's a bleaker one, too: in this film, the aliens have already decided we're beyond saving, and they're here to exterminate the human race. Klaatu isn't here to deliver a final warning; there is no last chance. Klaatu isn't an advocate; he's just here to read the sentence of the condemned.*

The new *Day the Earth Stood Still* is fixated on moral depravity. The aliens have "waited long enough," we learn, and humankind has shown no sign of changing. The aliens are Calvinists, believing in the total depravity of humankind, our complete inability to improve ourselves. By the film's end Klaatu has begun to doubt this view, but by that point it's too late for him to extend a warning; the destruction of humankind has already begun. His role then becomes that of Abraham at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: arguing for the deliverance of the condemned despite our sins.



And it's here that the remake drops

the ball. It doesn't really give the audience any reason for expecting that humankind will change. I suppose the filmmakers expect that our worthiness is just supposed to go without saying, but the fact is that, in dramatic terms at least, the aliens make a far better case for our destruction than the humans do for our salvation. This is the role that John Cleese, playing a scientist who received a Nobel Prize for his research in "biological altruism," is supposed to fill, but apparently his argument got left on the cutting room floor. (Despite his relatively high billing, he only speaks a handful of lines.) The film feels generally lackluster, and it's here, what should be the real message of the story, where that shows most clearly. Despite a half-hearted spoken claim that we can become better, the question hanging over the movie's abrupt ending is: what if we can't?

I'm generally critical of the concept of [total depravity](#), which has some ardent descendants in conservative Christianity today. It's a topic on which I'll say more in a few weeks (when I review James A. Herrick's *Scientific Mythologies***). The original *The Day the Earth Stood Still* had a slightly pessimistic edge. Klaatu was an irascible messiah; he seemed irritated that we needed to be told not to kill each other. But in the end it affirmed a belief in moral progress, and in messiahs, be they divine or alien, as agents and advocates for that progress. The remake offers scant hints at that kind of progress, and it leaves the audience with a profound sense that, though humanity's sentence has been suspended, its case has not been dismissed.

For more on the original The Day the Earth Stood Still, see chapter 6 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

*I think aliens should come to Earth and threaten to reduce our world to a burned-out cinder if we don't stop giving Keanu Reeves lead roles in science fiction movies.

**Special sneak-preview capsule review: I don't like it!

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 17, 2008 at 09:47 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 24, 2008

***Doubt* vs. *Predator*: A Vatican II Parable**

My latest piece for Religion Dispatches is an [essay](#) on John Patrick Shanley's film *Doubt*, a parable about Vatican II, gendered power, and sex abuse scandals.

On the surface Doubt is a torn-from-the-headlines story about the abuse scandals that have rocked the Church over the last decade. At its heart, however, Shanley's story is a parable of Vatican II. It's critical here to point out that Doubt is set in 1964, in the midst of the Second Vatican Council; in that context the story reflects the Church's growing pains. Sister Aloysius is the old church, authoritarian and inflexible. Father Flynn is the new order, the jocular, friendly face of a Church whose pastors no longer turn their backs to the congregation.

I saw the play on which the film was based during its Broadway run, and it was, simply put, one of the most amazing things I've ever seen. The movie is very good, but not quite *that* good. It turns the volume up a little, which does away with some of the subtlety and points things a little more toward melodrama. Nevertheless, the story is still powerful; the tug-of-war between the two principal characters is an incredibly compelling conflict. I'm pretty sure Meryl Streep saw the play too; she definitely borrowed a couple of mannerisms from Cherry Jones, who originated the role.

Read the full review [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 24, 2008 at 08:00 AM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

December 24, 2008

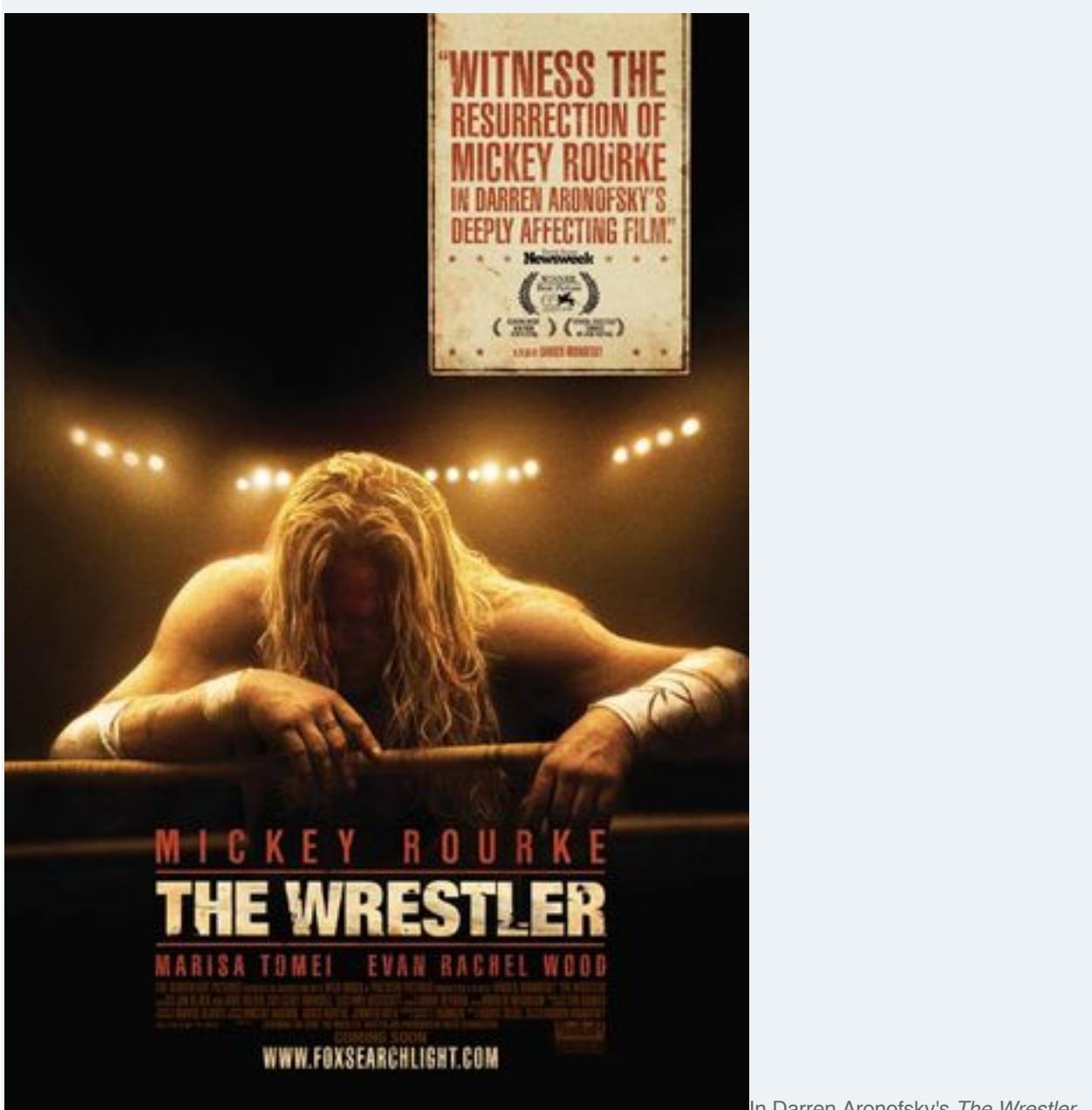
Merry Christmas from SF Gospel!

Merry Christmas, folks. Presented for your listening pleasure (if that word is appropriate here), the 1964 novelty single "I'm Gonna Spend My Christmas with a Dalek" by the Go Go's. (Not *those* Go Go's. The other ones.) We've got Doctor Who Christmas episodes; why not more Doctor Who-themed Christmas songs?

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 24, 2008 at 05:18 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 26, 2008

For our sins he was pinned: Salvation in *The Wrestler*



In Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler*, modern pop culture forms the stage of a very unusual Passion play. The film places Golgotha within the squared circle: it presents a wrestling match as a drama of violence that brings salvation. But who is the redeemer and who is the redeemed?

Mickey Rourke plays—though "embodies" might be a better word—Randy "the Ram" Robinson (born Robin Ramzinsky), a fifty-something professional wrestler quietly fading into oblivion in south Jersey. He still wrestles on weekends, but superstardom has long-since passed him by, and he struggles to make rent on his dreary mobile home. He is, like Travis Bickle, God's lonely man. His estranged daughter refuses to speak to him, and the closest he has to a friend is Cassidy (Marisa Tomei), a stripper who thinks of him as a customer rather than a companion. After a particularly brutal match, the Ram's years of physical and chemical abuse overtake him: he suffers a heart attack, and he is told he'll likely die if he continues wrestling. Thus robbed of his identity, Randy struggles to find his way in the world. Ultimately, he realizes that he needs wrestling, and, throwing caution to the wind, he goes ahead with a 20th-anniversary rematch against his old rival, a faux-Libyan heel named the Ayatollah.*

The Wrestler is a movie all about redemptive suffering, as we see the central role that dramatized violence plays in the Ram's life. At a couple points this is made perhaps too clear, as in an early scene where Randy shows Cassidy

the scars his career has left him with. She responds by quoting [Isaiah 53:5](#) by way of *The Passion of the Christ's* opening epigraph: "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; by His wounds we are healed." She makes the connection even more clear moments later, dubbing Randy "the sacrificial Ram," and later in the film we see a tattoo in the center of his back of Jesus crowned with thorns. Clearly, the film wants us to view wrestling as a spectacle of redemptive suffering.



And at times that suffering is

extreme. In perhaps the most powerful sequence in the film, we see an ultraviolent match between the Ram and real-life hardcore wrestler [Necro Butcher](#)**. The two mangle one another with a variety of sharp implements scattered around the ring, and the action is intercut with scenes of backstage doctors patching the two up immediately after the match. The violence is intense: Necro takes a staple gun first to his own body, then to the Ram's; he stabs the Ram in the forehead with a fork; both crash through sheets of glass and tangles of barbed wire. (And, lest we forget what it all means, the Ram ends up with a sizable gash on the side of his torso.) It's a messy, bloody affair, and the audience loves it—but it's interesting to note that they express their enjoyment of the match by hurling abuse at the masochistic Necro (chanting, for instance, "You sick fuck" while he staples himself). Despite the extreme violence of the spectacle, the match still establishes a normative morality.

But what comes across most clearly is that this is a very, very different kind of wrestling than the Ram enacted twenty years ago. Wrestling in the '80s was simple, straightforward theater. In the final act of the film, the Ram tries to plan out his match with the Ayatollah, who responds: "You're the face, I'm the heel. Done." Compare this to a conversation Randy and Necro have before their match, in which Necro carefully explains what weapons he's going to use. In the Ram's day, wrestling was all good guys and bad guys, simplified stories of right and wrong. Necro Butcher's style of wrestling is still theater, but it's theater of a very different kind; it's something more akin to performance art. The stage is no longer the canvas, but the actual flesh of the wrestlers—flesh that is, by the end of the match, visibly torn and battered. Things have changed, and the Ram has a hard time staying current. In his day, wrestling was a drama of violence, but with a sturdy layer of make-believe on top. There's no faking being stabbed in the forehead with a fork. It's little surprise that, after a cursory patching-up in the aftermath of the match with Necro, the Ram ends up in the hospital anyway.

It's not stated explicitly in the film, but the match against Necro Butcher is a "Bring Your Own Weapons" match, a staple of CZW (Combat Zone Wrestling) events in which fans provide the tools with which the wrestlers mangle one another. The barbed wire, forks, and thumbtacks that nearly kill the Ram are provided by the audience; this is participatory violence. In this context, the audience's chanting takes on the audience's role in a Passion play. "Crucify him!" is replaced by "Fuck you Necro," but the end result is the same: the audience makes the violence possible (and necessary).



Mickey Rourke

So perhaps it is the audience that is redeemed: through participating in the violent spectacle, aspects of their worldview (America is better than not-America; reluctant masochism is better than enthusiastic masochism) are reinforced. But the real salvation here is for the Ram himself. The movie makes it clear that he finds a clarity inside the ring that he can't find in the ambiguities of his real life. (It's little surprise that a wrestler of the '80s who dramatizes suffering falls for a stripper who offers fake pleasure.) His attempts to find a new normalcy (a new job, a better relationship with his daughter) end in frustrated disaster. Ultimately, the Ram can't simply be a character that Randy plays. He is the Ram; his true identity can only become manifest in the simple drama of an old-school wrestling match. Without wrestling, he has no identity, so he sacrifices his reality for fiction, and finds redemption in the bargain. When he emerges from behind the curtain to fight his final match, he truly becomes the character he's been playing in Passion plays for his entire life. The Ram is the salvator salvandus, the redeemed redeemer. His final entry into the ring is a resurrection: Robin Ramzinski has died, but Randy the Ram, the legend, the "spiritual body" that transcends ordinary existence, will live forever.

Many thanks to wrestling fans extraordinare [Mark Hugo](#) and [Michael Benni Pierce](#) for their assistance with this essay.

*The reference is to the mid-'80s rivalry between Sgt. Slaughter and the Iron Sheik.

**Who I suspect may have gotten his name from the [bass player](#) for Norwegian black metal band Mayhem.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 26, 2008 at 02:36 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 30, 2008

14 awesome things about 2008



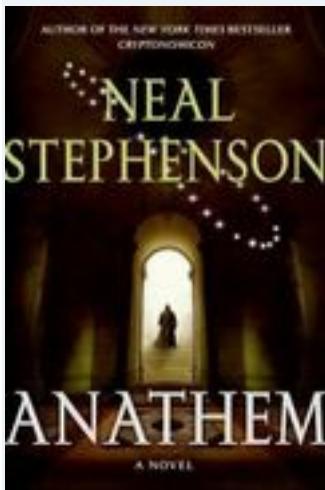
Some genre-related, some religion-related, many both. This isn't a top 14, just the first 14 that came to mind, so, in no particular order:

Anathem by Neal Stephenson

It's a shame there haven't been more SF books about monks who live in a giant clock, because Stephenson's masterpiece has ended that particular subgenre. All else can't help but be an imitation. So if you've got a monks-in-a-giant-clock manuscript kicking around... well, I'm really sorry. My review is [here](#).

Rapture Ready by Daniel Radosh

I'm always intrigued by the delightful weirdness of evangelical pop culture, and Radosh's book sums up why. Check out the online [multimedia appendix](#) for clips from *Bibleman* and Ultimate Christian Wrestling. (If I were smart I'd put together something like that for [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).)



Doctor Who Season 4

"The Runaway Bride" was hardly my favorite episode, so I wasn't the only one who was... disappointed to hear that Catherine Tate would be returning to Doctor Who for a whole season. Imagine my surprise, then, when Donna Noble ends up one of the most interesting companions in the 45-year history of the program. Billie Piper's Rose casts a long shadow, but Tate successfully made the show hers—in a very good way. And the finale is pretty much a blueprint for how to make geeks feel happy.

Ex Machina by Brian K. Vaughan and Tony Harris

I surprise myself saying this, since Brian K. Vaughan's other series have often left me cold, but this is one of the best comics coming out right now. My [favorite moment](#) of the year occurred in #33, in which Mayor Mitchell Hundred has a vision of the word made concrete: God as an embodiment of New York.



Cloverfield

I'm a big *kaiju* fan, so of course I was anticipating seeing this view-from-the-ground of a giant monster rampage. I thought it might lose some of its luster on second viewing, but I recently watched it again and I'm glad to say it didn't. Can there ever be a better fake-found-footage-documentary? I doubt it. My review appeared on [Religion Dispatches](#).

Wall-E

I didn't make that big a deal of it or anything, but yeah, this was pretty great. And all about [Plato's cave!](#)

"The Ray-Gun: A Love Story" by James Alan Gardner (*Asimov's*, February 2008)

An amazing parable about love, fate, and alien artifacts. I reviewed it [here](#). I'll be brief: this story deserves a Hugo. Come to think of it...

Asimov's in general

Sheila Williams has really, really good taste in stories, and the last year of Asimov's was nothing short of amazing. Check out [my choices](#) for the 2008 readers' poll to see some of the reasons why. Here's a tip: quit reading blog posts about the decline of the science fiction magazines and subscribe to this one. You'll be very, very glad you did.

Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles

Until *Dollhouse*—and possibly even after that—TTSAC is the closest network TV is going to get to *Buffy* at the moment. It's not perfect, sure, but it has moments of brilliance, chief among them the first season finale's robot-versus-SWAT-team battle set to Johnny Cash's "When the Man Comes Around." For a for-instance, here's my review of the [season two premiere](#).

Alien Nation: The Ultimate Movie Collection

A couple years ago Fox put out a DVD set entitled *Alien Nation: The Complete Series*. The problem? It wasn't: it excluded the five TV movies Fox aired over the eight years after the hourly show was canceled. *Alien Nation* had the potential to be one of the best SF shows of all time before Fox killed it ([sound familiar?](#)), and the release of this DVD set (which originally came out last year, but only as a Best Buy exclusive) means that the whole thing is finally available for real.

Iron Man

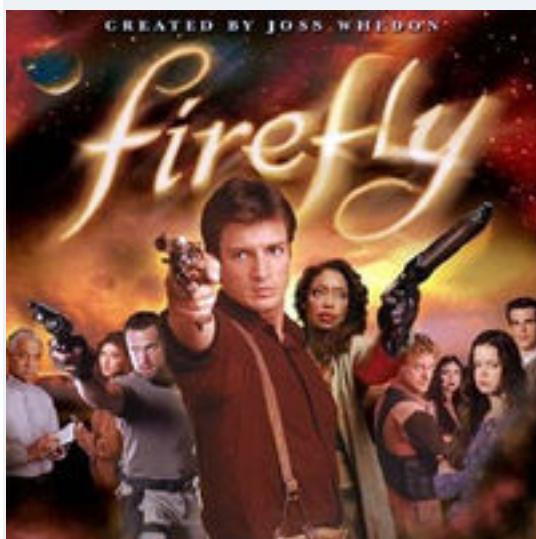
I was not that into *The Dark Knight*, which struck me as relentlessly cynical (and a bit nonsensical, too). After its ridiculously huge opening weekend I feared that we were destined for a few years of "grim n' gritty" antisuperhero movies wherein the good guys are really bad guys and everything is sad. And maybe we are. But *Iron Man* offers a glimmer of hope that there might still be some superhero movies coming up that are made for people who like fun.

Teatro Grottesco by Thomas Ligotti

[Thomas Ligotti](#) is probably the best horror writer since Lovecraft, but he has a very hard time keeping his books in print. Many of his best stories were only available in expensive small-press hardcovers and even more expensive out-of-print omnibus. Virgin Books has done us all a favor by releasing an affordable trade paperback of [Teatro Grottesco](#), which includes many of his best stories (such as my favorite, "Gas Station Carnivals"). Anybody for some existential despair?

The Wrestler

[I just reviewed this](#), so I needn't say much here. Just... wow. Good movie.



TV on the Internet

Hulu's only 9 months old, but dang, it's hard to remember the Internet without it. It's got a slew of good genre shows both new and old ([Firefly](#), [Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles](#), the not-as-bad-as-you'd-expect [Total Recall 2070](#)) and some not-entirely-great-but-hey-it's-free ones, too ([Swamp Thing](#), [Lost In Space](#), and even the freakin' [Time Tunnel](#)). Netflix's Watch Instantly stepped up this year as well, lifting time restrictions for most users and allowing them to watch as much as they want—which allowed me to watch *Quantum Leap* in its entirety this summer. Who needs DVR?

UPDATE

Wow, I totally forgot to put *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* on here. Oops. So let's call it 15 awesome things. Well, you probably already know why it's great—and if you don't, why not just watch it?

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 30, 2008 at 05:15 PM in [Books](#), [Comics](#), [Film](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 08, 2009

A month's worth of links



I seem incapable of reading all my RSS feeds more often than monthly, unfortunately. But hey—that means big linkdumps like this one, and everyone loves those!

- [SciFi Scanner](#) interviews Ronald Moore about the conclusion of *Battlestar Galactica*, and roughly half of the interview is about the role of religion in the show. That's the good news. The bad news is this:

The journey is not over, but certainly both sides are suddenly faced with the prospect, "Maybe it's all been for nothing. Maybe there is no God, and if that's the case where do we go from here? What does it all mean and what are we going to do with ourselves?" which I think is a great place to take the characters.

Sure, Ron, it's a good place to take them. Just don't *leave* them there, OK? 'Cause if the whole point of this occasionally very upsetting journey has been that there's no point to anything... well, let's just say BSG won't be on the list of 14 awesome things about 2009.

- I knew Richard Dawkins was a humorless bastard, but [this](#) takes the cake: he suspects fantasy novels might have an "insidious affect on rationality." The best part? This whole discussion takes place in the context of Mr. "Do-Not-Indoctrinate-Your-Children" announcing that he's going to write "a children's book on how to think about the world, science thinking contrasted with mythical thinking."
- Also in the Humorless Bastards Department, the [Fourth Annual Christian Filmmakers Academy](#) will focus on the theology of SF film—and not in a good way, from the sound of things. Founder Doug Phillips states: "The popular genre has been responsible for persuading American thrill-and-chill- seekers that fictional speculation is reality—especially in regard to the creation of the universe, life on earth, and the 'certainty' of extraterrestrial life." This is pretty much the same anti-SF stance given by James A. Herrick in his polemical book *Scientific Mythologies* (review coming within a month, really!). One wonders what these anti-SF evangelicals will say when bacteria are (inevitably) found elsewhere... Oh, and to give you a sense of just what kind of Christian filmmakers make up the Christian Filmmakers Academy, they've declared Ben Stein's histrionic and generally dumb *Expelled* to be one of "the year's most groundbreaking films." *Yeeeeaaaaah.*
- In the wish-I'd-thought-of-it category at Holy Heroes, Elliot explores [crucifixion imagery in the work of Grant Morrison](#). Man, I love that *Animal Man* cover...
- [The Crotchety Old Fan](#) reviews... SF Gospel! Well, not just me. He's reviewing every site that was included in that ginormous [SF Book Reviewers meme](#) that started a few weeks back (and has been turned into a [song](#)—I'm in the last verse.) COF goes into a bit more depth on SF Gospel than on some of the other sites. On his comments I say: 1) Oops, you're right—Klaatu didn't speak to the UN in the original; 2) I'm aware of Wise's opinion, but I stand by my interpretation (particularly since Wise didn't write the screenplay); 3) I hope you won't disagree with *everything* here, and in fact I can guarantee it right now: The original *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is a darned good movie. See, we agree on *at least* one thing.
- [Auxiliary Memory](#) takes a look at Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* with an eye to its religious overtones—including a comparison or two to the aforementioned *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.
- As soon as I have time to play video games again, I'm getting this: ["The You Testament."](#) an early church simulator by indie game designer MDickie in which you play one of the first disciples of Jesus. You get to wander around Israel preaching, praying, and possibly getting crucified.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on January 08, 2009 at 09:29 PM in [Atheism](#), [Books](#), [Comics](#), [Film](#), [Religion in the media](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 10, 2009

Ubik: The Screenplay

Here's an incosequential capsule review for ya:

[Ubik: The Screenplay](#) by [Philip K. Dick](#)

[My review](#)

rating: 3 of 5 stars

The Ubik screenplay is what it is: an early-draft screenplay by a novelist who had never even tried to write a screenplay before. It doesn't add much to the story, and it doesn't take away much either-- in fact, most of the dialog is lifted directly from the novel. As a result it's about three times as long as a screenplay should be, and is basically unfilmable. What I *do* like about it is the added detail-- we get more description of people, places, and things that we see in the novel. It didn't change my world or anything-- but I'm *very* glad it's back in print!

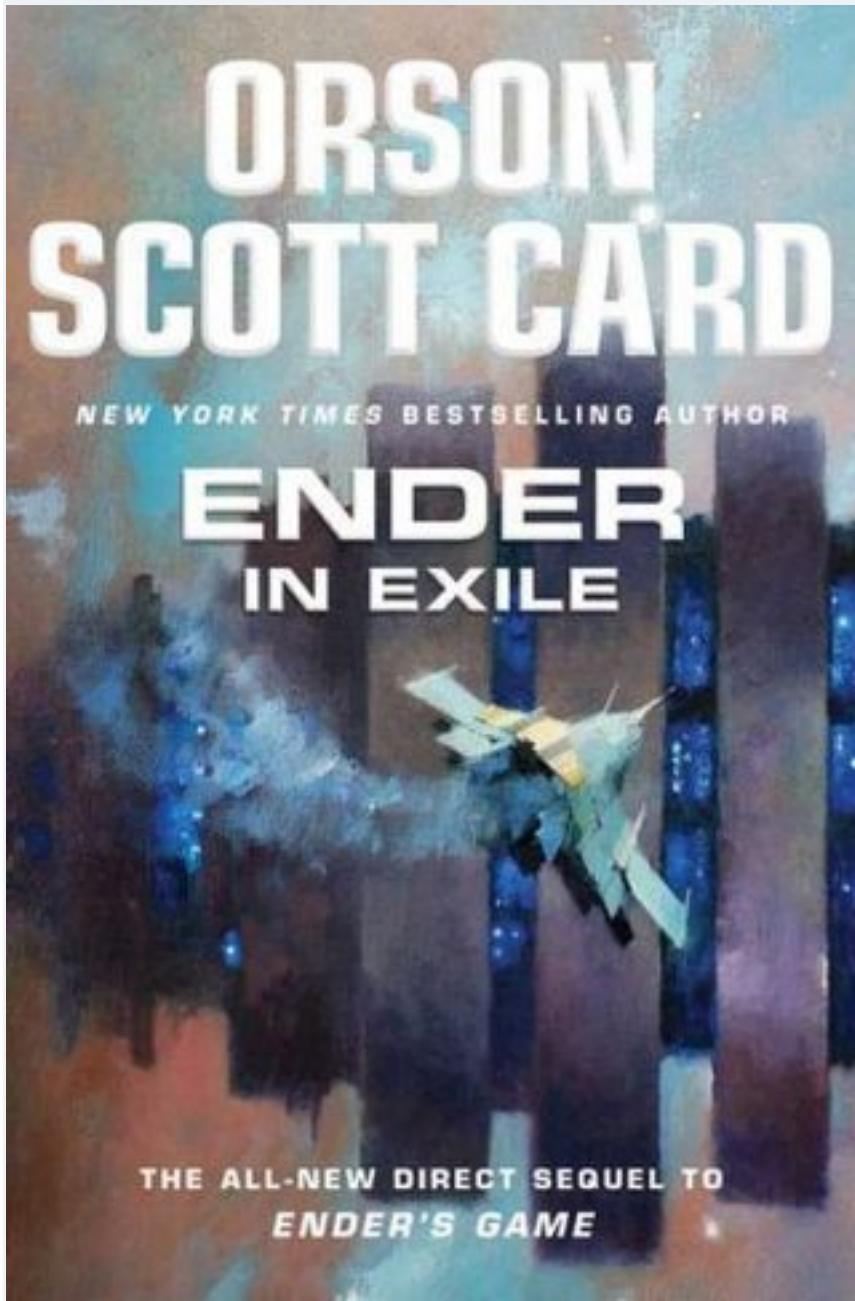
[View all my reviews.](#)

To this I will add: This was one of the first things PKD wrote following his religious experiences in February and March of 1974, and there's a liiiittle bit of that reflected in the adaptation of the story-- but not as much as I (for one) would have hoped.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 10, 2009 at 02:01 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 14, 2009

Orson Scott Card in Exile



Enter the Octopus asks: [So, is](#)

[Orson Scott Card off your reading lists, or what?](#)

I was never that big a fan of *Ender's Game* (it's enjoyable, but I would probably have gotten more out of it if I had read it in middle school rather than college), much preferring the complex theological discussion in *Speaker* and *Xenocide*. The later follow-ups (*Ender's Shadow*, *Shadow of the Hegemon*, etc.) left me cold, and had

a distinct air of cashing-in about them, a belief that there were enough fans to support a cottage industry of this stuff. But given Card's [decreasingly sane](#) crankishness, a lot of those fans—particularly those who support gay rights—are turning their backs on him. Can that cottage industry survive?

There are quite a few cases where I've been able to draw a line between art and artist. When I'm reading *Cerebus*, for instance, I overlook Dave Sim's misogyny and homophobia because the art, and frequently the story, are phenomenal, and his more execrable ideas don't really overwhelm the narrative. (At least I didn't think they did when last I read the later issues; I may change my mind when I re-read them.) I'm very critical of Sim *as a person* (and, in fact, have been known to go on at great length about how nuts he is), but *as an artist* he earns some respect. Does Card pass the test? I received a review copy of *Ender in Exile*, a fill-in-the-blank-quel that fits between *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead*. I decided to treat it as Card's last chance—if it was an amazing book he would get a Sim-style art-and-artist divide in my mind.

Well, I've read it, and here's the verdict:

It's bad.

Really, really, really bad.

It's a 300-page violation of the "show, don't tell" rule. It's pages and pages of exposition without anything really happening. It's a particularly cynical self-advertisement—the book is peppered with virtual billboards for other books in the series. ("This is just like [that Christmas](#) back in Battle School... And if you want to know more about that, it'll cost ya \$14.95!") The cash-in atmosphere of *Ender's Shadow* has got nothing on this. It shows that Card takes his readers for granted: he expects their money, no matter how bad the book he's offering them. And that's an even more compelling reason to stop reading his books than anything he might say outside of his fiction.

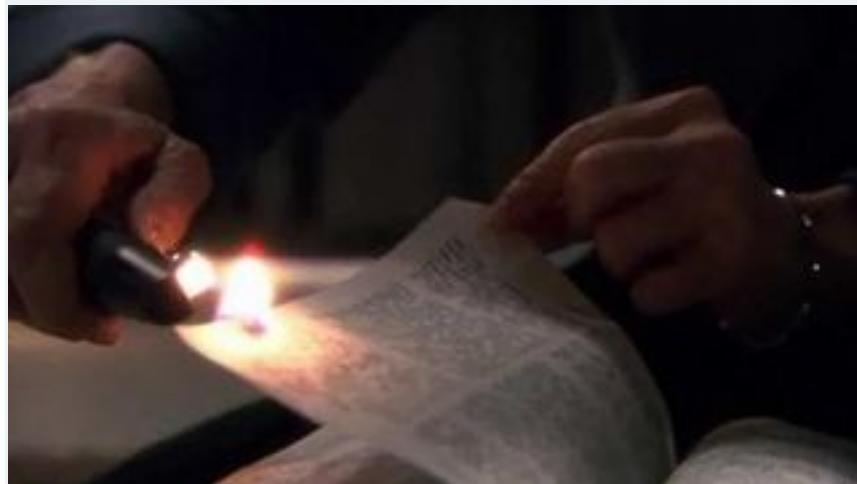
So, for all you former Orson Scott Card fans who were wondering if you'd be missing anything if you stop reading his books... Don't worry. Really. You're better off turning your back on him for good *before* reading this book, rather than after. Right now you may be disappointed in Card *as a person*, but if you read *Ender in Exile* you'll be disappointed in him *as a writer*... and, ultimately, that would be worse.

Related: If you haven't read the Newsweek article (a couple months old now) "Our Mutual Joy: The Religious Case for Gay Marriage," [you should](#). It's made conservative evangelicals very, very angry, largely because it opposes the conservative evangelical conception of Christianity, which is that there is no Christianity outside of conservative evangelical Christianity. Well, there is.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 14, 2009 at 08:49 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 17, 2009

Battlestar Galactica: The Dark Night of the Fleet's Soul



[In the Open](#) discusses ["Sometimes a Great Notion."](#)

[Great Notion.](#)" the first of the last 10 episodes of *Battlestar Galactica*. The episode explores the dark night of the soul which the fleet enters after finding Earth a barren wasteland.

For many of those in the BSG universe, their faith that Earth held their salvation is tied to their religion. The loss of Earth leads them to question and reject that religion, too. This is not an uncommon experience for us, either. For some of us, suffering leads to questions about God's character or existence. For others of us, it's when things don't work the way we think they should that causes us to reject or question God; our worldview or doctrine falls apart and, with it, our trust in God.

But if we allow them, these moments can strip away those places where our understandings of who God is are wrong, allowing us to experience and understand more of the truth of who he actually is and what he can do. Job, whose suffering plays out in some of the most painful detail in Scripture, comes to a greater understanding of who God is and his faith is strengthened. For the disciples of Jesus, the darkest moment of their lives exposes their false beliefs about Jesus being a political messiah—which opens the door for them to discover just how much greater he really is in the days that follow. God wants us to know him, and if we pay attention, he will use our darkest moments to reveal himself as the Person he is—and he is good.

The reference to Job is spot-on. Nothing we've seen yet has rivaled the depths of despair that the discovery of Earth has wrought. The fleet—and perhaps especially Laura Roslin—are quite a bit like Job right now, feeling abandoned by god(s). In a key scene in "Sometimes a Great Notion," Roslin burns the pages of the Book of Pythia one by one. This religious text has guided her every action for the last two and a half seasons or so, so this signals a big change in her character—the abandonment of the faith that has sustained her. In this respect, she is not like Job, who doesn't abandon his faith (though he does get angry about it). I was reminded of the sufferings of Emilio Sandoz, the Jesuit protagonist of Mary Doria Russell's brilliant novel *The Sparrow*, who faces a similar crisis of faith after his own Job-like sufferings.



Ever since watching the 10-part webisode story ["The Face of the Enemy."](#) I've been thinking about the absolutely absurd depths of despair to which the show keeps bringing its characters. (The story—mini-spoiler warning!—reveals some dark, dark things about Gaeta's time as a double agent on New Caprica, tarnishing what little silver lining remained on that little cloud.) In a post a couple weeks ago, I expressed my hope that *BSG* not have a downer ending that leaves the characters purposeless. (The fact that they're feeling that way now, with nine episodes to go, implies that it won't—surely something's going to change in the remaining episodes.) But perhaps the happy ending/sad ending dichotomy shouldn't really apply here. The ending of Job is neither happy nor sad—it's just puzzling. Job demands an explanation for his situation, and God responds by putting him in his cosmic place: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?" ([Jb 38:4-5](#)). God's response to Job's complaint is essentially, "Who are you to demand answers?" And perhaps that's where *BSG* will end as well—with a statement, either from the one God or the many, that explanations won't make it better. (Of course, not everyone has been satisfied by God's answers to Job, even the folks who compiled the book in the first place—hence the inconsistent explanation of the prologue, which blames the whole mess on Satan.) At this point, even if the characters somehow wrangle a "happy" ending out of their situation (as Job seems to, assuming the epilogue to his story wasn't tacked on by another dissatisfied reader), it will be bittersweet at best. Maybe a transcendent conclusion is the only satisfying one, at this point.

In other *BSG* thoughts—new theories abound after last night's episode, of course. Currently bouncing around in my head is the thought that the entire human race could be Cylons, with the 13th model being so perfect an approximation of humanity that it has an infinite number of faces. Alternately, the 12 Colonies could have been flawed attempts (by the Cylons) to recreate the demolished Earth, kind of like the enormous resurrection in Philip José Farmer's *Riverworld* series. Another possibility: the entire show to date could take place within a computer simulation, kind of like that described in Frank J. Tipler's *The Physics of Immortality* and Nick Bostrom's essay "[Are You Living In a Computer Simulation?](#)" The resurrecting aliens of *Riverworld* believe they had a moral obligation to resurrect the dead once the technology to do so existed—and if the Cylons are in the position of simulation-creators, that certainly puts their moral status into a different light.

For more on *Riverworld* and technological afterlives, see chapter 9 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 17, 2009 at 03:01 PM | [Permalink](#)

January 19, 2009

One More Time!: "Quaestiones Super Caelo Et Mundo"



When *Analog* published

"Quaestiones Super Caelo Et Mundo" a year and a half or so ago, it led to a whole slew of posts here, and small wonder: it's an alternate history story in which the scientific revolution happens during the medieval era. I was impressed by the story's (accurately) complex approach to the relationship between religion and science, and by Flynn's interest in transcending stereotypes of the Middle Ages to achieve a more balanced picture of an era for which I'm rather fond.

I'm glad to report that *Analog* has made this story [available online](#). (Sadly, the non-fiction piece accompanying the story, in which Flynn lays out the rationale for why he believes a scientific revolution could have happened during the Middle Ages, is not available.)

Also now available: "[The Ray-Gun: A Love Story](#)" by James Alan Gardener, (discussed [here](#)), which very, very much deserves a Hugo this year, and "[The Prophet of Flores](#)" and "[Divining Light](#)" by Ted Kosmatka (discussed [here](#) and [here](#), respectively), which ain't too shabby either.

For more of my thoughts on Flynn's medievalist SF:

[Medieval Science Redeemed: Michael F. Flynn's "Quaestiones Super Caelo et Mundo"](#)

[Flynn revisited: Calvin on science and faith](#)

[Loving the Alien: Compassion in Michael Flynn's *Eifelheim*](#) (Flynn's Hugo-nominated novel, set in medieval Germany)

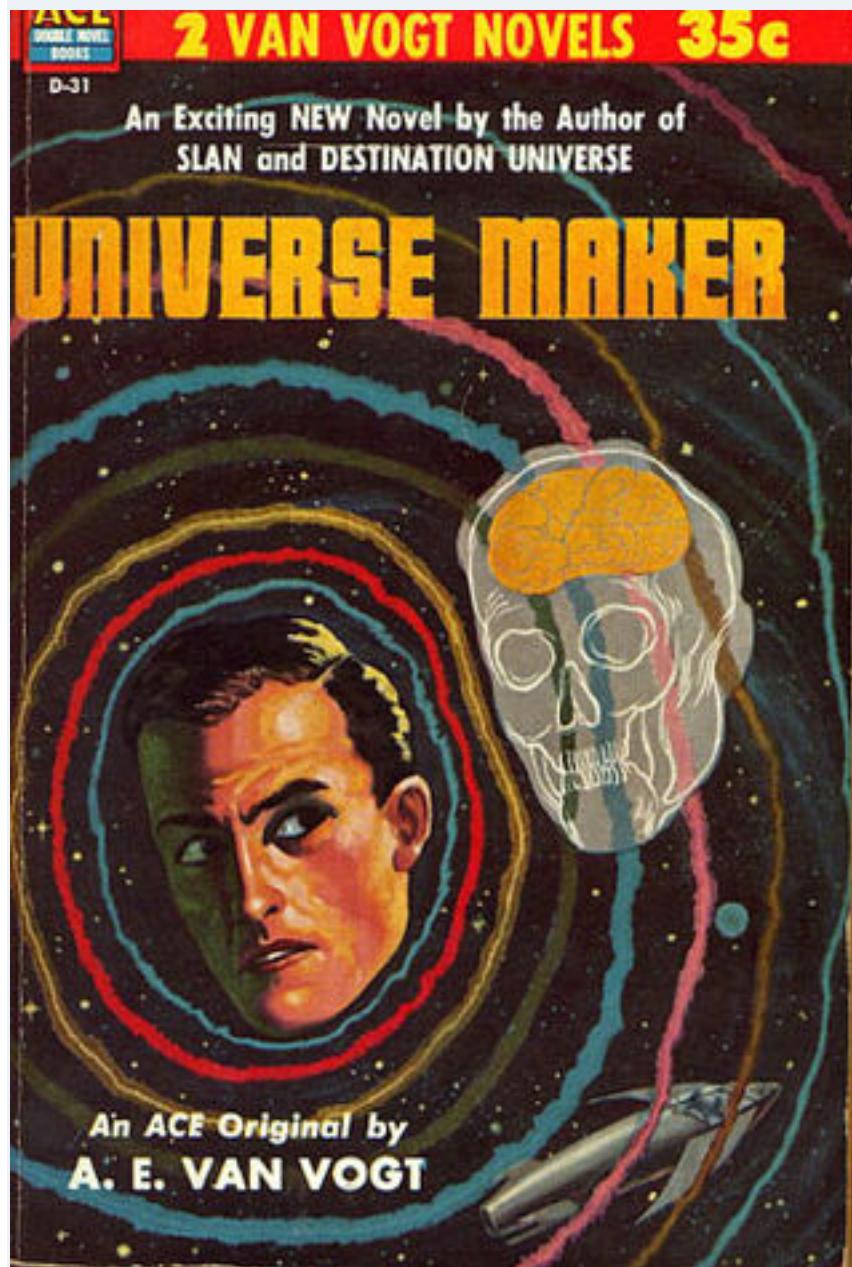
And a tiny, tiny bit more on "Quaestiones" appears at the end of this post [here](#).

Hat tip to SF Signal, who have posted a [loooong list](#) of recently-available free fiction.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 19, 2009 at 08:33 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 20, 2009

A. E. van Vogt on the soul



In one sense it was a mistake to think in terms of "soul," for such belief had a religious significance which automatically implied the belief was non-

scientific, dependent on faith, incapable of being tested. Whereas, if there were any phenomena, it would have manifested in innumerable ways, and would automatically be subject to laws. The fact that these laws might not be the same as those of the space-time continuum, known as the material universe, would not prevent them from being correlated in a scientific fashion.

--A. E. van Vogt, *The Universe Maker*, chapter 8

Sadly, the rest of the *Universe Maker* isn't as compelling as the quote above would suggest. (Full disclosure: Despite its brevity, I didn't finish reading it.) I was mainly interested in it because it was one half of the very first SF Ace Double. The blurb at the front declares that the book "fascinatingly fictionizes some of the startling concepts of Scientology," which is a bit surprising since the novel is an expansion of a story that first appeared in January 1950, months before "Dianetics" was first published in *Astounding*. Van Vogt and Hubbard were acquainted, and had almost certainly discussed the ideas, but the move Dianetics into Scientology was a radical one. It seems Ace was mainly trying to cash in on the buzzworthy nature of the growing movement. I may return to *The Universe Maker*, but beyond the quote above it didn't make much impression on me at all. I respect van Vogt's influence, but I can't help but feel that his novels have aged poorly.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 20, 2009 at 08:47 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 22, 2009

The Guardian's Science Fiction & Fantasy Novels Everyone Must Read: The Meme

For those who didn't know, *The Guardian* has been posting a list of [1000 Novels Everyone Must Read](#), and this morning they posted their [124 selections](#) in the SF, fantasy, and horror genres. As memed by [SF Signal](#), here are the ones I've read, with occasional (bitchy) commentary. Boldface means I've read it; an asterisk means it's on my voluminous to-read shelf (though admittedly some of these have been there for nigh unto 15 years); italics mean it's discussed in [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#); a link means it's been reviewed on this very site.

1. **Douglas Adams: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979)**
2. Brian W Aldiss: Non-Stop (1958)
3. **Isaac Asimov: *Foundation* (1951)**
4. Margaret Atwood: The Blind Assassin (2000)
5. **Paul Auster: *In the Country of Last Things* (1987)** -- Which has the distinction of being more depressing than *The Road*.
6. Iain Banks: The Wasp Factory (1984)
7. Iain M Banks: Consider Phlebas (1987) -- This is very high on my track-down-a-copy list.
8. Clive Barker: Weaveworld (1987)
9. Nicola Barker: Darkmans (2007)
10. Stephen Baxter: The Time Ships (1995)
11. *Greg Bear: Darwin's Radio (1999)
12. **Alfred Bester: *The Stars My Destination* (1956)**
13. **Poppy Z Brite: *Lost Souls* (1992)** -- I generally don't get embarrassed about books I've read, but Poppy Z. Brite might just be an exception. I mean, I'm not saying vampire porn can't be fun, but—really, *Guardian*? You're saying *everyone* should read this, and not just goths between the ages of 15 and 22?
14. Algis Budrys: Rogue Moon (1960)
15. Mikhail Bulgakov: The Master and Margarita (1966)
16. Edward Bulwer-Lytton: The Coming Race (1871)
17. **Anthony Burgess: *A Clockwork Orange* (1960)**
18. Anthony Burgess: The End of the World News (1982)
19. **Edgar Rice Burroughs: *A Princess of Mars* (1912)**
20. **William Burroughs: *Naked Lunch* (1959)**
21. Octavia Butler: Kindred (1979)
22. Samuel Butler: Erewhon (1872)
23. Italo Calvino: The Baron in the Trees (1957)
24. Ramsey Campbell: The Influence (1988)
25. **Lewis Carroll: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)**
26. Lewis Carroll: Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There (1871)

27. Angela Carter: Nights at the Circus (1984)
28. **Michael Chabon: The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay (2000)**
29. **Arthur C Clarke: Childhood's End (1953)**
30. **GK Chesterton: The Man Who Was Thursday (1908)** -- Maybe it's just me—or the fact that I was told this was SF before I read it, when it's really more metaphysical fantasy—but I don't think this one has aged too well.
31. Susanna Clarke: Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell (2004)
32. Michael G Coney: Hello Summer, Goodbye (1975)
33. Douglas Coupland: Girlfriend in a Coma (1998)
34. **Mark Danielewski: House of Leaves (2000)** -- One of the scariest books I've ever read. I wholeheartedly agree with the must-readiness of this one.
35. Marie Darrieussecq: Pig Tales (1996)
36. Samuel R Delaney: The Einstein Intersection (1967) -- But shouldn't I get bonus points for getting all the way through *Dhalgren*?
37. **Philip K Dick: Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (1968)**
38. **Philip K Dick: The Man in the High Castle (1962)**
39. *Umberto Eco: Foucault's Pendulum (1988)
40. Michel Faber: Under the Skin (2000)
41. John Fowles: The Magus (1966)
42. **Neil Gaiman: American Gods (2001)** -- I didn't like this that much. But with the exception of a few short stories, I haven't liked much of Gaiman's post-*Sandman* output. He's a much, much better author of short fiction (which, of course, doesn't count toward anything on a list of must-read novels.)
43. Alan Garner: Red Shift (1973)
44. **William Gibson: Neuromancer (1984)**
45. Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Herland (1915)
46. ***William Golding: Lord of the Flies (1954)** -- I haven't read this since I was about 13, so this one is also on the to-read shelf.
47. **Joe Haldeman: The Forever War (1974)**
48. M John Harrison: Light (2002)
49. **Robert A Heinlein: Stranger in a Strange Land (1961)** -- This shouldn't be on the list, but *Starship Troopers* should. Though maybe it should only be read by those without fascistic tendencies.
50. **Frank Herbert: Dune (1965)**
51. Hermann Hesse: The Glass Bead Game (1943)
52. **Russell Hoban: Riddley Walker (1980)** -- Have only British people heard of this book? It's an exception (along with *A Clockwork Orange* above) to the "don't-write-your-novel-in-an-invented-dialect" rule.
53. James Hogg: The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner (1824)
54. Michel Houellebecq: Atomised (1998)
55. **Aldous Huxley: Brave New World (1932)**
56. Kazuo Ishiguro: The Unconsoled (1995)
57. Shirley Jackson: The Haunting of Hill House (1959)
58. Henry James: The Turn of the Screw (1898)
59. PD James: The Children of Men (1992) -- I haven't read this, but I've been meaning to, mainly because I consider the film of it to be [one of the best SF movies](#) ever made.
60. Richard Jefferies: After London; Or, Wild England (1885)
61. Gwyneth Jones: Bold as Love (2001)
62. **Franz Kafka: The Trial (1925)** -- If you haven't read Kafka, start with the short stories. They're much, much better.
63. Daniel Keyes: Flowers for Algernon (1966) -- I've read the short story, but that probably doesn't count here. Do I get any bonus points for having read it in its original context—the April 1959 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*? (Which has [a great Emsh cover](#) illustrating the story, by the way.)
64. **Stephen King: The Shining (1977)** -- Like Neil Gaiman, I think King is much, much better at short fiction than novels.
65. Marghanita Laski: The Victorian Chaise-longue (1953)
66. Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu: Uncle Silas (1864)
67. **Stanislaw Lem: Solaris (1961)**
68. Doris Lessing: Memoirs of a Survivor (1974)
69. David Lindsay: A Voyage to Arcturus (1920)
70. Ken MacLeod: The Night Sessions (2008)
71. Hilary Mantel: Beyond Black (2005)

72. Michael Marshall Smith: Only Forward (1994)

73. **Richard Matheson: *I Am Legend* (1954)**

74. Charles Maturin: Melmoth the Wanderer (1820)

75. Patrick McCabe: The Butcher Boy (1992)

76. **Cormac McCarthy: *The Road* (2006)**

77. Jed Mercurio: Ascent (2007)

78. **China Miéville: *The Scar* (2002)** -- *Perdido Street Station* gets discussed more, so kudos to the Guardian for recognizing that *The Scar* is the superior novel.

79. Andrew Miller: Ingenious Pain (1997)

80. **Walter M Miller Jr: *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960)**

81. David Mitchell: Cloud Atlas (2004)

82. Michael Moorcock: Mother London (1988)

83. William Morris: News From Nowhere (1890)

84. Toni Morrison: Beloved (1987)

85. Haruki Murakami: The Wind-up Bird Chronicle (1995)

86. Vladimir Nabokov: Ada or Ardor (1969)

87. **Audrey Niffenegger: *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003)** -- This is a really, really, really good book. Really.

88. **Larry Niven: *Ringworld* (1970)** -- This one, not so much. For my money, *Rendezvous With Rama* is a much better Big Dumb Object novel.

89. **Jeff Noon: *Vurt* (1993)**

90. Flann O'Brien: The Third Policeman (1967)

91. Ben Okri: The Famished Road (1991)

92. Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club (1996)

93. Thomas Love Peacock: Nightmare Abbey (1818)

94. **Mervyn Peake: *Titus Groan* (1946)** -- Which is the one with the flood, this or *Gormenghast*? 'Cause that's the best one.

95. John Cowper Powys: A Glastonbury Romance (1932)

96. **Christopher Priest: *The Prestige* (1995)** -- The movie was good; the novel is great.

97. François Rabelais: Gargantua and Pantagruel (1532-34)

98. Ann Radcliffe: The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794)

99. Alastair Reynolds: Revelation Space (2000)

100. Kim Stanley Robinson: The Years of Rice and Salt (2002)

101. JK Rowling: Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (1997)

102. Salman Rushdie: The Satanic Verses (1988) -- I think I tried to read this when I was 13, but I'm not counting it here.

103. **Antoine de Sainte-Exupéry: *The Little Prince* (1943)** -- Bonus! I've read it in English and French.

104. José Saramago: Blindness (1995)

105. Will Self: How the Dead Live (2000)

106. **Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein* (1818)**

107. **Dan Simmons: *Hyperion* (1989)**

108. **Olaf Stapledon: *Star Maker* (1937)**

109. **Neal Stephenson: *Snow Crash* (1992)**

110. Robert Louis Stevenson: The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886)

111. **Bram Stoker: *Dracula* (1897)**

112. Rupert Thomson: The Insult (1996)

113. Mark Twain: A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court (1889)

114. **Kurt Vonnegut: *Sirens of Titan* (1959)**

115. Robert Walser: Institute Benjamenta (1909)

116. Sylvia Townsend Warner: Lolly Willowes (1926)

117. Sarah Waters: Affinity (1999)

118. **HG Wells: *The Time Machine* (1895)**

119. **HG Wells: *The War of the Worlds* (1898)**

120. TH White: The Sword in the Stone (1938)

121. *Gene Wolfe: The Book of the New Sun (1980-83) -- I'm about 20 pages into *Shadow of the Torturer*, but that's probably not enough to count this one as read (yet).

122. *John Wyndham: Day of the Triffids (1951)

123. John Wyndham: The Midwich Cuckoos (1957)

124. **Yevgeny Zamyatin: *We* (1924)**

That's 45 of the 124 read, if I'm counting correctly.

I was trying to figure out why Lord of the Rings wasn't on this list, and it seems there are a few more Fantasy/SF novels on the list under subheadings. So, first up, these are under the heading "[Imagined Worlds](#)." (Why Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*, which is also a series, isn't on this list instead of the other one is a mystery to me.)

1. *CS Lewis: **The Chronicles of Narnia** (1950-56) -- I've read the first two.
2. **JRR Tolkien: The Hobbit** (1937)
3. **JRR Tolkien: The Lord of the Rings** (1954-55)
4. **Philip Pullman: His Dark Materials** (1995-2000)
5. Terry Pratchett: The Discworld series (1983-)
6. Ursula K Le Guin: **The Earthsea series** (1968-1990) -- I've read the first book and possibly part of the second.

The "[Best dystopias](#)":

1. **George Orwell: Nineteen Eighty-four** (1949)
2. **Ray Bradbury: Fahrenheit 451** (1953)
3. *Frederik Pohl & CM Kornbluth: *The Space Merchants* (1953)
4. Angus Wilson: *The Old Men at the Zoo* (1961)
5. **Thomas M Disch: Camp Concentration** (1968) -- Which left me cold. I much preferred *Echo Round His Bones*, one of the earlier, funnier ones.
6. **Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid's Tale** (1985)
7. **Joanna Russ: The Female Man** (1975)

"[Radical Reading](#)":

1. **Virginia Woolf: Orlando** (1928)
2. Angela Carter: *The Passion of New Eve* (1977)
3. **Ursula K Le Guin: The Left Hand of Darkness** (1969) -- Never got this one. *The Dispossessed* is better.
4. Geoff Ryman: *Air* (2005)

And "[The Best of J.G. Ballard](#)." I groaned a bit when I saw this, I haven't actually read any of the books they're citing, so maybe these are the non-pretentious ones. Heh. (I kid, really. I *want* to like Ballard, I really do. But he's on thin ice with me, given that I, y'know, like plots.)

1. *The Drowned World* (1962)
2. **Crash* (1973)
3. *Millennium People* (2003)

There's also a list of [10 novels that predicted the future](#), but this seems to be outside of the thousand-novel list, and a list of [gothic novels](#), but I don't think any of them are fantasy or horror per se.

More philosophically—is all this novel-fetishization leading people to ignore short fiction? I sure hope not. There are a few writers on here—Franz Kafka, Stephen King, Neil Gaiman—who are much better at short stories than novels, and a few truly, unchallengeably great writers who aren't on here at all because they're *only* known for short fiction (Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft spring to mind). Why "1000 novels everyone must read" rather than "1000 authors everyone must read"? Novels ain't everything.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 22, 2009 at 08:19 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 05, 2009

Wrong on Religion; Wrong on Science Fiction: James A. Herrick's *Scientific Mythologies*

You know how I've been promising a review of James A. Herrick's screed against SF spirituality? Well, it's finally available in the February issue of the [Internet Review of Science Fiction](#), alongside essays on SF romance films, the new rules for the Nebula awards, and the SFnal computers of the '90s. Check it out [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 05, 2009 at 08:36 AM | [Permalink](#)

February 07, 2009

James A. Herrick Redux



By an odd bit of synchronicity, a day

after [my review](#) of James A. Herrick's anti-SF polemic *Scientific Mythologies* appeared in the Internet Review of Science Fiction, Christianity Today ran a [short piece](#) on SF by Herrick. The essay is essentially an abbreviated version of the book, and it's no better. Herrick's insistence on viewing the world in terms of spiritual warfare, his insistence that SF contains "arguments against Christianity and in support of rival worldviews," reflect an entirely wrongheaded fear of pluralism and syncretism. I must note, however, that Christianity Today apparently has better fact-checkers than the book's publishers, as a couple movie titles that are given incorrectly in the book appear in proper form in the article. But I still have to wrinkle my brow at "Neo Anderson." In short: Herrick is still wrong on religion, and wrong on science fiction.

The image to the left was created to accompany a line in my IROSF piece on Herrick's deranged insistence that *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* draws a comparison between the appearances of its alien and human characters. If I were Richard Dreyfuss, I'd be pretty insulted.

Read Herrick's "Sci-Fi's Brave New World" [here](#).

Read my review of *Scientific Mythologies* [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 07, 2009 at 05:14 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 09, 2009

Superstitious religion in Harry Turtledove's *The Valley-Westside War*

POSSIBLE SNOWING EARLY, MUCH SNOW TONIGHT. CLOUDING, LOW 48. COMPUTER FORECAST ON PAGE C1.

Los Angeles

ANSWER

新编藏文辞典

THE VALLEY-WESTSIDE WAR



Sci Fi
A SCIFI ESSENTIAL BOOK

A NOVEL OF
CROSSTIME
TRAFFIC

LOS ANGELES *Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Sed porttitor fermentum augue, et sagittis lacus. Proin fermentum augue massa.*

spuma script. Massa indossa fascia
nella. Ingerit pastore temper vapori
Domo factus. Morto libet latere, pharetra
vomita, incidente et am. temper col-
dore. Alimento non tollitur.

Cette sorte d'actions possèdent un risque de pertes assez important, mais leur rémunération est importante. Si l'on prend la moyenne des rendements de l'ensemble des fonds d'investissement en actions, on constate que leur rendement moyen est de 10% par an. Mais il existe des fonds d'investissement en actions qui ont un rendement moyen de 15% par an. Ces fonds sont donc meilleurs que les autres. Cela dépend de la qualité des gestionnaires et de la qualité des sociétés dans lesquelles ils investissent. Les fonds d'investissement en actions sont donc meilleurs que les autres.

pellentesque. Vivamus sit amet massa. Cum solleuus nesciuntur heus.

Matris conditio matris matris nra p[ro]p[ter]a. Fons posse ante nos ipsos. H[ab]et h[ab]itu[m] plante dictante. Matr[is] nra, caput ut r[es]eru[m] forentur, nego angu[m] precessante, ut portaret seta h[ab]itu[m] in l[an]o. Capitula angu[m] laeta, lumenante ut auro, plenaria ut vena, auro. Suspensions a capite et ab oculis digressis. Sed ab illis. Etiam auctor. Sed ac l[an]o ut lectio cervella obtemperat. Primum, cognoscere sive epi sive non. Sed vespere, lectio a genitiva charactere, respectu d[omi]ni d[omi]nus, sed fasciis ligata omnis et foliis. Denique, adspicere, p[ro]p[ter]e vel r[es]istere m[od]o.

HARRY TURTLEDOVE

From Harry Turtledove's

postapocalyptic alternate-future novel *The Valley-Westside War*.

For that matter, what was the difference between superstition and religion generally? Lots of people had spilled lots of ink and killed lots of trees and pushed around lots of electrons trying to define the answer. So far, most of what they said boiled down to *What I believe is religion, and what those foolish people over there believe is superstition.*

There was no evidence that knocking on wood made the world less likely to go wrong. There was no evidence that praying in a church or synagogue or mosque made the world less likely to go wrong, either. That didn't stop people from doing both kinds of things. When it became plain that science explained how things happened—not necessarily why, but how—better than religion did, lots of "experts," from Karl Marx on down, predicted that religion would wither up and die.

It hadn't happened in the home timeline. It also hadn't happened in any high-tech alternate Crosstime Traffic had found. Most people weren't rational enough, or weren't rational often enough, to be satisfied believing this

was all there was. By now, the "experts" doubted they ever would. That might prove as wrong as the earlier experts' certainty that religion would fail.

Though I credit Turtledove with putting a bit more complexity into this brief passage than one might have expected, I have to call into question his assumption that the point of praying is to make "the world less likely to go wrong"—not to mention the whole framing of the question as one of superstition in the first place. There's a lot more to religion than attempting to steer the universe to one's personal will (that's called magic, and with or without a "k" at the end, it's a whole 'nuther can of worms). There are a lot of different kinds of prayer, of which the petitionary is but one—and many would say the lowest.

In any event, *The Valley-Westside War* is an entertaining tale and a lightning-quick read. (I gather the *CrosstimeTraffic* series is intended as YA SF, so that all makes sense.) My favorite bit is a brief reference later in the story to *A Canticle for Leibowitz*—a comparison of UCLA's postapocalyptic librarians to Miller's science-preserving monks. Librarians as an information priesthood? That's a thread I'd like to see picked up somewhere...

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on February 09, 2009 at 08:48 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 10, 2009

Exciting news (that I can't talk about yet)

I got some exciting news today yet, though it's much to soon to give any details about it. Suffice it to say that I have been invited to participate in a project that's very dear to my heart, and for a good cause to boot. This is on top of *another* fun project that I am still in the early planning stages of... If all goes as planned there should be some more formal announcements coming in the next couple months.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on February 10, 2009 at 09:18 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 13, 2009

Hell Froze Over

If I may briefly descend into totally nepotism, I encourage everyone to watch the first episode of "Hell Froze Over," a new web short series my friends have been working on. (I'm in an episode later in the season, but they haven't yet told me when it's going up.) The official summary: *"To prove to her roommate that her bad luck in love has nothing to do with the men she chooses, Jody decides to date every man she's ever rejected, starting with the guy she just passed on the street."* Thus:

New episodes will be available weekly at www.hellfrozeover.tv.

And, so this post will have *some* SF content, you can also watch *Signal Decay*, a short film about teeth from another dimension. (I play the dentist.)

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on February 13, 2009 at 08:27 AM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 15, 2009

Free Will Friday: *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, *Dollhouse*, and *Battlestar Galactica*



What follows is a bit spoilerific, particularly regarding *Battlestar Galactica*. Consider yourselves warned.

Fridays will be packed with good SF for the next few weeks, with Joss Whedon's much-delayed *Dollhouse* and the return of *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* on Fox and the last few episodes of *Battlestar Galactica* on SciFi. Free will is the emerging theme on the three shows, with plenty of flawed creations rebelling against their makers thrown in for good measure.

Things have been rough for the Terminator formerly known as Cromartie. After stalking the Connors for a season and a half or so he was killed (in a church!), only to be resurrected by Catherine Weaver, a T-1001, as the mouthpiece for the Babel computer (a precursor to the evil Skynet). (If you haven't been watching the show, all that is really way less complicated than it sounds.) Now named John Henry, the robot has become pretty inquisitive in his philosophical discussions with former FBI agent and apocalyptic Christian James Ellison. In the most recent episode, "The Good Wound," Ellison finds Henry playing with some toys, and the android makes some comments on the lack of intelligence in his body's design:

They have excellent range of motion in their limbs. It's from the ball and socket joints. This body uses hinge joints in the knees and elbows. It's less efficient... I have a question for God... I wish to know why he didn't use more ball and socket joints when he made you.

[I've taken the liberty of finding the scene for you right here:]

John Henry's question has an impassioned parallel in "No Exit," the latest episode of *Battlestar Galactica*. Brother Cavil (whose real name has now been revealed as "John") has always been cynical in matters of religion. In this episode, he confronts Ellen Tigh—the last of the Final Five, who (as we now know) created all of the other Cylon models—about the reasoning behind their design:

In all your travels, have you ever seen a star supernova?... I saw a star explode and send out the building blocks of the universe, other stars, other planets, and eventually other life. A supernova: creation itself. I was there. I wanted to see it and be part of the moment. And do you know how I perceived one of the most glorious events in the universe? With these ridiculous gelatinous orbs in my skull, with eyes designed to perceive only a tiny fraction of the EM spectrum, with ears designed only to hear vibrations in the air... I'm a machine, and I could know much more. I could experience so much more. But I'm trapped in this absurd body. And why? Because my five creators thought that God wanted it that way.

[And again:]

Ellen isn't claiming to be God, of course, but in a very real sense Cavil is confronting his creator directly. And a rebellious creation he is, too, and as the full extent of his evil becomes clear—he masterminded the Cylon attack that

wiped out the twelve colonies, and planted the Final Five among humankind so that they could witness the fruits of his rage—his relationship with his creators becomes much more complicated. But the very fact that he is able to rebel at all is part of the nature that the Final Five built into him. Later in the episode Ellen brings up the issue of free will directly: Cavil cannot lay the blame for his evil actions at other beings' feet, but by the same token he can choose to be good. Ellen shows that even for a monster like Cavil, the door of redemption is still open a crack. Indeed, forgiveness may prove to be the overarching theme of *Battlestar Galactica* as a whole, as humans learn to coexist with the Cylons who virtually destroyed their entire species.

The themes of *Dollhouse* have not yet begun to emerge on that kind of grand scale, but it's certainly off to a good start. The eponymous organization is difficult to explain—it's somewhere between a spy cell, a mad scientist's lab, and a brothel. Basically, *Dollhouse* rents out brainwashed women who are given memory implants to enable them to meet whatever needs their clients may have. In the first episode, a Doll named Echo is grafted with the personality of an expert hostage negotiator to handle a ransom transaction for a kidnapped child. But questions of identity, ethics, and free will are inherent in the show's concept, and there are hints that the erasure of Echo's mind at the end of each mission may not be total. (That kind of thing is *de rigueur* for stories involving memory implants, of course.) Moral issues are sure to be dead-center in *Dollhouse*'s future.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 15, 2009 at 07:17 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 17, 2009

Telekinetic toys at Toy Fair



Ersatz telekinesis toys are a trend at this year's Toy Fair. Babble reports on the [Star Wars Force Trainer](#) (from toy maker Uncle Milton), an EEG-based toy that enables you to lift a ball on a column of air with your mind. And it makes Star Wars noises at you. Watch the video [here](#).

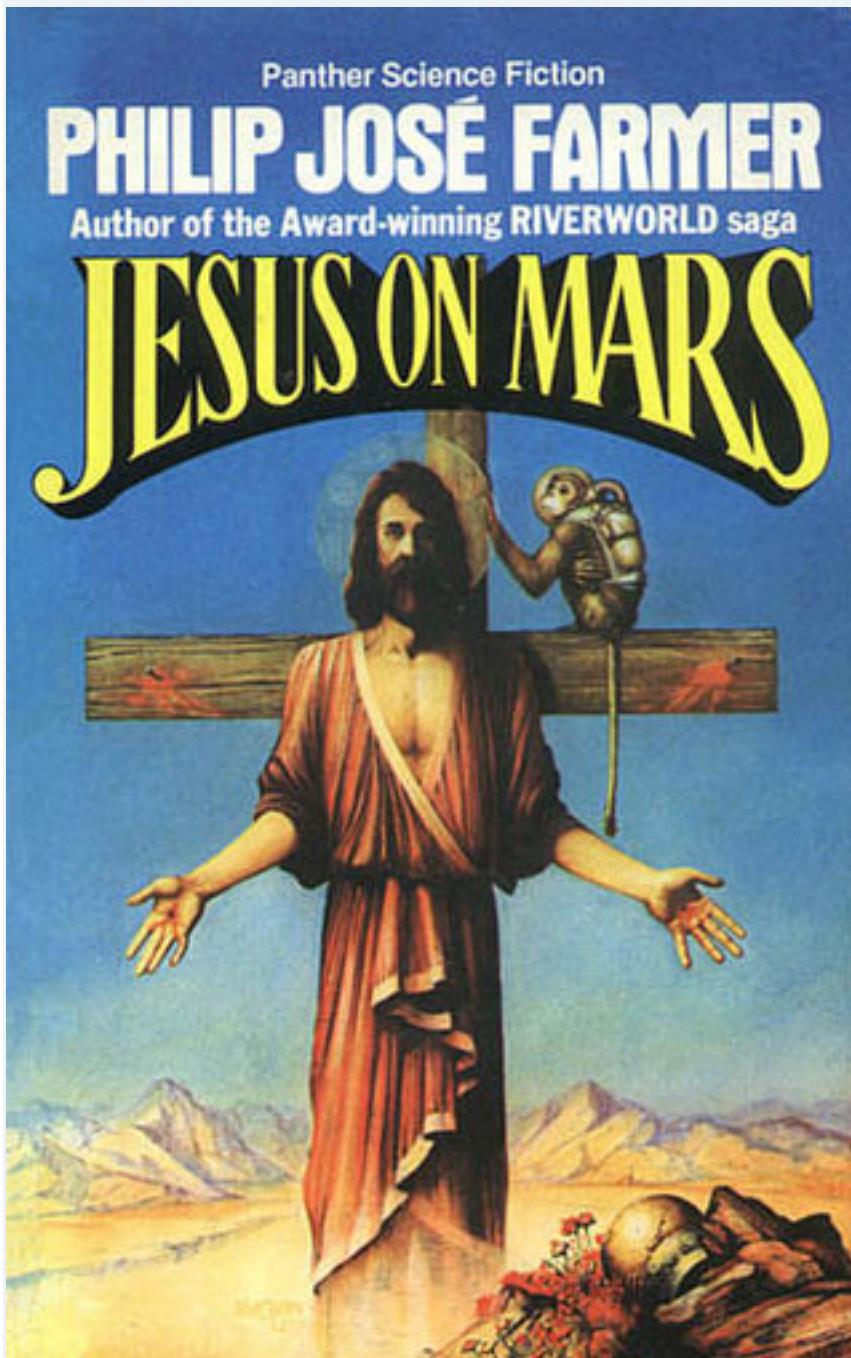
A similar toy, also unveiled at Toy Fair, is Mattel's Mind Flex. It doesn't make Star Wars noises, but the ball isn't enclosed. There's video of that one [here](#).

If sincerely hope that extensive use of these toys can unlock real telekinesis.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 17, 2009 at 05:38 PM | [Permalink](#)

February 25, 2009

On down the River...



SF author Philip José Farmer passed away in his sleep this morning, aged 91. Farmer has long been a favorite of mine, largely as a result of his *Riverworld* series, about an alien-designed afterlife wherein everyone who ever lived is resurrected along the banks of a river 10 million miles long. Religious themes cropped up frequently in his writing, perhaps most notably in the Father Carmody stories and the novel *Jesus on Mars*. His best stories were spirited blends of philosophical depth with old-fashioned fun, and he will be missed.

<http://www.pjfarmer.com/>

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 25, 2009 at 01:07 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 02, 2009

"Disguised as Clark Kent"? Superman, secret identities, and incarnational theology



In a guest post at Superman blog [Say It Backwards](#),

my thoughts on which ego is really alter:

Superman disguises himself as Clark Kent. Right? It says it right there in the opening of the George Reeves TV series. "Disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great Metropolitan newspaper." Kent is the mask, and Superman is the identity.

Or is he?

Read the full post, which delves a bit into Batman, Alan Moore, and Jesus, [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on March 02, 2009 at 12:37 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 04, 2009

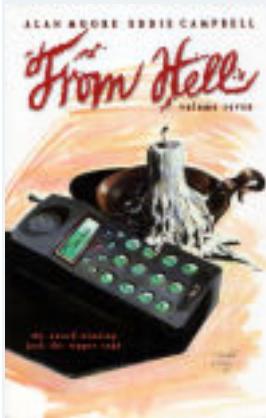
4 Alan Moore stories that are better than *Watchmen*

Watchmen is a good, and even a great, comic. But the best ever written? Hardly—and it's not even Alan Moore's best work, either. Here are my picks for Moore stories slightly more deserving of the praise that's heaped on *Watchmen*.



1. **Miracleman***

Much of what Moore does in *Watchmen* he did first and better with this series. This reimagining of Marvelman, the UK's homegrown Captain Marvel knockoff, is the grandaddy of all "what-would-it-be-really-be-like" superhero stories. Few comic stories so fully embody the concept of superheroes as mythology: the title character is, quite literally, a god; his chief villain, former sidekick Kid Miracleman, is far more demonic than the word "villain" implies. Little surprise, then, that Neil Gaiman's follow-up run (incidentally his best work ever, too) treats Moore's 16 issues as scripture on which to build an exegesis. Add to all that career-best art from the likes of John Totleben, Alan Davis, and Garry Leach, and you've got my pick for the best comic of all time.



2. **From Hell**

Moore's meticulously-imagined recreation of Victorian London is far more than a Jack the Ripper story. Using the 1888 murders as a backdrop, the story explores the nature of mysticism, insanity, and evil. Nothing in this story is out of place, and at times—such as when the killer seems to travel through time after one of the murders—the reader gets a glimpse of bizarre transcendence, too.



3. **"The Anatomy Lesson," *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #21**

This is the one that *really* started it all, launching not only Alan Moore's career in American comics but also singlehandedly creating the entire idea of mainstream mature-readers comics. Moore had an inspired way of wrapping up the loose ends of the previous writer's plot threads: he killed the title character in his first issue, and in this, his second, he quite literally rebuilds him from the ground up. Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison, and Warren Ellis—in other words, the last 20 years of comics—owe everything to the model Moore created here. And all that in 23 pages! (DC has made "The Anatomy Lesson" available for free [here](#). Be arned that the coloring is wonky; Swampie is yellow instead of green-and-brown. Maybe they mistook him for the Floronic Man?)



4. "Watchmaker," *Watchmen* #4

If I have one complaint about *Watchmen*, it's this: it doesn't live up to the promise of this, its single best chapter and possibly the best single issue of a comic ever created. The rhythm of Dr. Manhattan's melancholy origin story is simply perfect, and in his time-detached reminiscences we get a glimpse inside the mind of a god. Here is a part that's greater than its sum.

Runners-up (or "about as good as *Watchmen*"):

Promethea: Like *Watchmen*, the series is a bit too long for its story. But Moore's exploration of his own religious/magical ideas is fascinating, and the art is simply gorgeous.

Top Ten: Alan Moore has a darned good sense of humor, and this superhero-cop mashup is his funniest.

Superman: Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?: This "last Superman story" is a great meditation on the nature and meaning of an icon.

A Small Killing: You'd be forgiven for never having heard of it. This collaboration with Oscar Zarate is a character study of an advertising executive who begins to question the path his life has taken. Short and sweet (or should that be "sour"?)

*Some would say "Marvelman," the title under which the series began in the UK. But later—particularly in the Neil Gaiman issues—the term "Miracle" becomes an important part of the setting. If and when the series is ever reprinted or completed, I for one hope they stick with "Miracleman" as the title.

Oh, and also, I really wish they would stop calling Zack Snyder a "visionary director."

Posted by Gabriel McKee on March 04, 2009 at 10:08 AM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 05, 2009

Religion and SF in... *City Journal*?

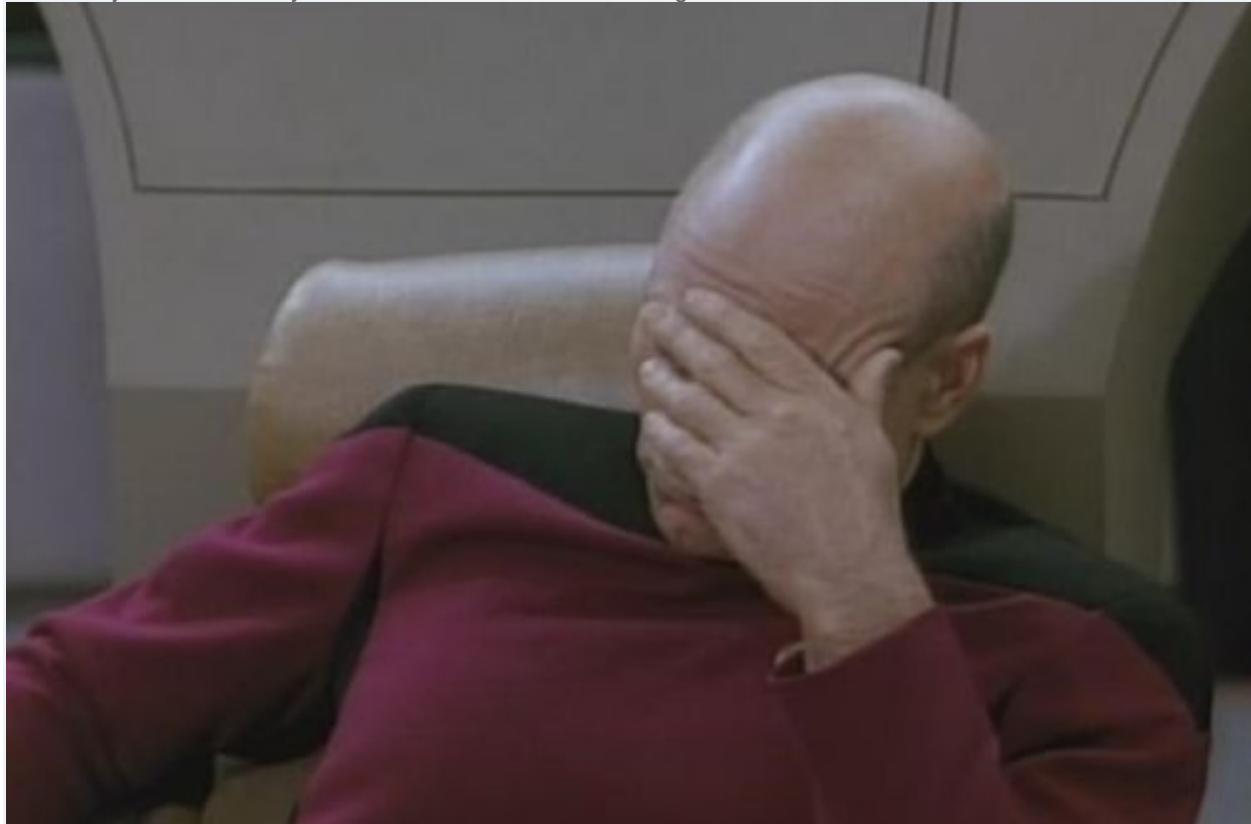


The featured story on the website of city planning magazine City Journal is "[How Science Fiction Found Religion](#)" by Benjamin A. Plotinsky. (I'm not sure how it fits into the journal's scope, but nevertheless, there it is.) Plotinsky's thesis is that SF movies and TV, which have historically focused on political allegory, are increasingly rooting themselves in Christian symbolism. The article features a quote from yours truly (a bit from [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) on the inherent messianism of superheroes), which is flattering, but I can't help but take issue with some of Plotinsky's points.

I think his division of SF's thematic elements into "political" and "religious" is a bit sloppy, particularly since the article ends by saying that *Battlestar Galactica*, one of the most religious SF shows pretty much ever, represents the genre moving back into "politics" and away from "religion." If *BSG* shows us anything, it's that a show can combine complex politics with mythic depth. (Then again, we already knew that from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, a show that Plotinsky quite unfairly dismisses. Indeed, that's where *BSG* re-imagines Ronald D. Moore cut his religious-and-political teeth.) Not only that, he undermines his own argument that Christian symbolism is a growing factor by citing examples of SF Christ-figures as far back as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. And though I agree about the de-mythologizing of the Force in the *Star Wars* prequels, I don't see much connection between that retconning and the waning popularity of New Age spirituality (at which Plotinsky takes a couple out-of-place stabs). Nevertheless, it's an interesting read.

What bothered me more is the simple fact that Plotinsky's taste is just... well, idiosyncratic. In his estimation *Enterprise* was the best *Star Trek* series since the original; he describes *The Next Generation* as "phenomenally boring," which I take as an almost-personal insult. Meanwhile *Terminator 3* is a "fine film." At times this results in overly simplified or just-plain-wrong readings of important works: the aforementioned *Deep Space Nine* is dismissed out-of-hand; the epic good-and-evil struggle of *The Lord of the Rings* is "political, not religious;" *The Empire Strikes Back* is written off as merely "entertaining" but lacking any religious themes worthy of discussion. (Han Solo frozen in carbonite doesn't at least rate a death-and-resurrection mention?) It's nice to see someone championing *Superman Returns*, but if that attitude has to come at the expense of *The Next Generation*, it begins to look like the point has been missed.

Read Benjamin A. Plotinksy's "How Science Fiction Found Religion" [here](#).



Posted by Gabriel Mckee on March 05, 2009 at 10:59 PM in [Film](#), [Religion in the media](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 08, 2009

Watchmen: A brief scriptural review.

"...for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

—2 Cor 3:6

You know what else kills, besides the letter? Casting [bad actors](#) to read badly-adapted dialogue. Just sayin'.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on March 08, 2009 at 11:33 AM | [Permalink](#)

March 16, 2009

Dollhouse, cults, and the abuse of power



The latest episode

of *Dollhouse* (["True Believer"](#)) treads some tricky spiritual territory. The ATF, investigating a religious group it believes is storing illegal weapons, hires Echo to go undercover to find evidence that will justify a full-scale raid on the group's compound. Echo's handlers implant her with a personality named "Esther" who is blind—or rather, she thinks she's blind; the visual data her eyes take in bypasses her visual cortex and is beamed straight to the ATF's video monitors. Esther believes she's seen the group's leader, Jonas Sparrow, in a vision. The representation of the group (or "cult," which I'll get to in a minute) is pretty cookie-cutter stuff: a violent, unstable leader; brainwashed followers (a point driven a little too hard by Esther's "blind faith"); 19th-century-style outfits that I'm guessing were leftovers from the set of *Firefly*. As the episode progresses, it becomes a sort of wish-fulfillment fantasy of how the [Waco siege](#) in 1993 could have gone: the leader dies, but all the followers escape unharmed. Of course, that reflects a particular attitude toward what actually happened at Waco—which brings me to the word "cult."

In my opinion, no one should be allowed to use the word "cult" without first reading Catherine Wessinger's ["Culting: From Waco to Mormon Fundamentalists."](#) This essay for Religion Dispatches explores how the news media and government used the word "cult" to justify excessive force that killed 76 people, including 21 children. To wit:

Since the 1970s the word "cult" has been used in popular discourse as a pejorative term for religions people fear, or hate, or do not want to recognize as a "real religion."... Use of the word conveys what sociologist James T. Richardson has called "the myth of the omnipotent leader" and the "myth of the passive, brainwashed follower," both of which dehumanize believers. Moreover, once the label "cult" has been applied it tends to stick, and it can inhibit careful investigation of what is going on inside a religious group and its interactions with members of society; broadly speaking, it is assumed that people "know" what goes on in a "cult."

The assumption that members of small, charismatic religious groups *must* be brainwashed, and that the leaders of these groups *must* be power-abusing maniacs, is a pretty ugly set of assumptions, all of them bundled up neatly in the word "cult." And Wessinger is right: the word limits investigation; it's a damning term that by definition eliminates anything positive. I'm certainly not saying there *aren't* groups whose leaders abuse their power or whose members really are trapped, but the pejorative use of the word "cult" to describe *all* small religious groups limits investigation of the real abusers and justifies violence and larger-scale abuse of power such as that the ATF and FBI unleashed in Waco.

What this episode of *Dollhouse* really wants to do, of course, is draw comparisons between the blind obedience of Sparrow's followers and the hollow existence of the Dollhouse's literally-brainwashed agents. It's a question of agency: Sparrow robs his followers of their freedom to choose; the Dollhouse robs its agents of the freedom to define

themselves. It's a step in the show's path toward questioning attacking the ethical basis of its own premise (something that the next episode, judging from the preview, will do even further). But the word "cult" robs honest believers in fringe groups of *their* agency by assuming they've been brainwashed. This episode's shorthand presentation of small religious groups perpetuates one of the problems it hopes to attack, and ends up looking like a whitewash of the government's mishandling of the Branch Davidians.

You can watch "True Believer" below (for a couple weeks, at least), courtesy of Hulu. Recommended further viewing: [Waco: The Rules of Engagement](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on March 16, 2009 at 11:40 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 21, 2009

The Last Frak Party: The 12 Pies of Kobol

There's much to say about the last episode of *Battlestar Galactica*, and I'll be posting my thoughts on it shortly you can read the serious stuff [here](#). But first...

In honor of the finale, a group organized by Mark Hugo (star of the excellent short film "[Silent Film Star vs. the Undead](#)") gathered... to eat pie. Lots and lots of pie. It was perhaps the first, and very likely the last, 12-Pie Frak Party in history: one pie for each of the 12 colonies (or "signs of the zodiac," if you insist). Without further ado, and in no particular order, I present the 12 Pies of Kobol:

Aerilon/Ares: A superb goat-meat pie. Reminded me a bit of beef stew, if beef stew had a very, very thick cheddar cheese crust. Which sounds like my kinda stew.



Canceron/Cancer: Plenty of crab meat in puff pastry.



Tauron/Taurus: A beefy shepherd's pie. If they're shepherds, why are they putting cow meat in their pies, anyway?



Gemenon/Gemini: A twinned pair: an apple pie, and a "mock apple pie," a Depression-era treat that defies reason by actually tasting kinda like apples despite containing no fruit at all (unless some lemon juice counts.) Can you guess the secret ingredient? [I couldn't.](#)



Caprica/Capricorn: A pair (since it was so good) of goat cheese pizza pies, with arugula, caramelized onions, two types of goat cheese, walnuts, and some Yuengling in the crust.



Picon/Pisces: This one should win some kind of presentation prize, though in the spirit of full disclosure I must admit that I didn't actually eat any of it. A stargazer pie containing whole mackerel, with the heads and tails poking out at the edges.



Sagittaron/Sagittarius: Is there any archer more famous than William Tell? (Besides Robin Hood? Or Green Arrow?) In his honor, here's another apple pie, with some cheese-and-straw arrows as garnish.



Scorpia/Scorpio: Since we couldn't find any scorpion meat, here's the next best thing: a scorpion roll, in pie form. Raw salmon, crab, shrimp, rice, avocado, and cream cheese, all on a seaweed crust. I couldn't bring myself to eat this one, thanks to despite piemaker Mark's insistence that "the fish is fresh! I got it yesterday!"



Aquarion/Aquarius: A lemon meringue pie, the surface of which resembles the storm-toss'd sea. Get it? Fine, *you* try thinking up a water-themed pie. That isn't a seafood pie, since we have four of those already. And a pie plate full of water won't cut it. What's that? The meringue *does* look like the ocean after all? That's what I thought.



Leonis/Leo: A butterscotch pie with a cute l'il lion piped in the middle. I'm not sure if the generally leonine shape of the coloring on top was deliberate or not, but I like it.



Libran/Libra: How does one make a pie to illustrate the concept of balance? Easy: make two pies that weigh exactly the same. These were rather rich peanut butter pies topped with chocolate. (See? Balance between light and dark, too!) I ate too much of this one.



Virgin/Virgo: My contribution: a cherry cream pie. Insert Warrant singalong here.



That's a lot of frakkin' pies.

Coming soon; And now, [some thoughts on the religion-steeped conclusion of a darned good SF show](#).

*I've kept things generally anonymous, but if you were there and want your name or some sort of link or something on your pie, let me know. And don't forget to remind me which one you made!

Posted by Gabriel McKee on March 21, 2009 at 01:54 PM | [Permalink](#)

March 21, 2009

***Battlestar Galactica* finale: Mysteries solved; Mystery contemplated**



Spoilers abound below. You have been warned.

Even I was a bit surprised at the degree to which *Battlestar Galactica*'s mystical questions received mystical answers in last night's 2-hour finale, "Daybreak, Part 2." There's been a lot of God-talk (and gods-talk) throughout the show, and the resolution showed that there really was a divine hand behind the show's story. But, as one of the messengers says in the final scene, don't call him God—"You know he doesn't like that name."

As expected, Gaius Baltar, God's favorite broken instrument, played a pivotal role in the conclusion of the human-Cylon war. The final battle comes down to a standoff between Brother Cavil and the fleet's leaders over the hybrid Hera, it's Baltar who convinces the Cylon leader to lay down his arms in an impassioned mini-sermon:

Baltar: *I may be mad, but that doesn't mean that I'm not right. Because there's another force at work here; there always has been. It's undeniable. We've all experienced it. Ever one in this room has witnessed events that they can't fathom, let alone explain away by rational means. Puzzles deciphered in prophecy. Dreams given to a chosen few. Our loved ones, dead, risen. Whether we want to call that God or gods or some sublime inspiration or a divine force we can't know or understand, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It's here. It exists. And our two destinies are entwined in its force.*

Cavil: *If that's true, and that's a big if, how do I know that this force has our best interests in mind? How do you know that God is on your side, doctor?*

Baltar: *I don't. God's not on any one side. God's a force of nature, beyond good and evil. Good and evil, we created those. Want to break the cycle? Break the cycle of birth, death, rebirth, destruction, escape, death. Well, that's in our hands, and our hands only. It requires a leap of faith. It requires that we live in hope, not fear.*

Cavil, whose righteous anger with his creator [I discussed](#) a few weeks back, has never been a fan of the idea of a divine plan, but there's enough power behind Baltar's words to convince him of a truce. (Of course, it all falls apart a few minutes later... but that's neither Baltar's fault nor Cavil's.) In this episode, Baltar finally found his redemption and fulfilled his role as an agent of the divine will.



Oh, and about that divine will? That's

what it really was, apparently. The answer to the mystery of Kara's return from the dead is that she did, in fact, return from the dead, and has been some kind of angel, or at least a spiritual body, for the entire last season. More importantly, it turns out the mysterious, possibly-hallucinatory Six living inside Gaius Baltar's mind, and the corresponding Baltar living inside Caprica-Six's mind, were divine messengers after all. Their purpose was to steer these two—without whom the initial Cylon attack couldn't have succeeded—to protect Hera (who, as is fully explained later, really is essential to the survival of both species). Baltar's story is an extended take on the Parable of the Lost Sheep ([Mt 18:12-18](#), [Lk 15:3-7](#)), but he's had to work to be found: this is most assuredly *not* salvation through faith alone. After 4 seasons of guilt, renewed villainy, self-torture, and abuse of power, Baltar finally does something right, thanks to the (at times perplexing) guidance of the voice of God in his mind.



Of course, Baltar hasn't been the

show's only prophet. Laura Roslin, whose mystical visions have influenced her decisions for the fleet on more than one occasion, was another heavenly instrument. Her role, as expected, was that of Moses, leading a nation through the wilderness only to die on the threshold of the promised land ([Deut 34:1-12](#)). Her death is no surprise—she was diagnosed with terminal cancer less than 15 minutes into the show's first episode—and it's handled well. Just as God shows Moses the Promised Land from a mountaintop, Adama shows Roslin the world to which she has brought her people by flying her around in a Raptor in her final moments. It's a heartrending scene, and a fitting end for the show's other troubled prophet.

And Deuteronomy isn't the only book of Moses to find expression in *Battlestar Galactica*'s final hour. The fleet's final destination is Earth—not the bombed-out wasteland they found a few episodes back, but a new planet to which they give the same name. Not only can the planet support them, it's sparsely populated by independently-evolved humans with whom they can interbreed. Baltar describes the chances of such an occurrence as "astronomical... You might even say there was a divine hand at work." (I sensed the scriptwriters struggling not to use the term "intelligent design" here. I'm glad they didn't, since it would have been misleading; I think this show has a more complex concept of "God's plan" than ID proponents do. But I digress.) And, lo and behold, 150,000 years after their discovery of the

planet, it becomes our world: all of this has happened before, and will happen again, but next time it'll happen on TV instead of for reals.

This wasn't exactly a surprising ending, since it was one of the more likely places all of that cyclic-history stuff was pointing, but it does have the interesting effect of turning the entire series into a sort Genesis narrative. It's a problematic creation myth, given the likely-unintentional but nevertheless ugly colonialist overtones of the (mostly white) fleet bringing civilization to Africa, but the real point is much rosier. The idea that our entire species is the result of an effort to end a particularly nasty war is strongly symbolic, and identifying Hera as [Mitochondrial Eve](#) was a nice touch. I'd long since known that the show was going to end with some kind of fusion of human and Cylon culture; Hera as a common ancestor identifies the peace that she embodies not only as the point of the show, but indeed of the entire human race.



The final scene, in which the divine messenger forms of Six and Baltar ponder God's cyclical plan on modern-day Earth, lays things on a little thick. But it also introduces a twist on the show's attitude toward free will when Six predicts that there won't be a war between human beings and their creations this time around:

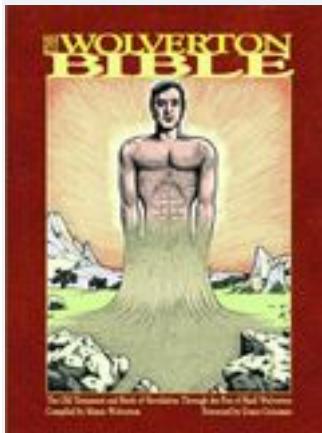
Let a complex system repeat itself long enough, eventually something surprising might occur. That, too, is in God's plan.

Is the purpose of the plan to produce something that God could not foresee? Or is the idea simply that, this time around, we'll have to figure out a way to peace on our own, without the kind of heavenly prodding the humans and Cylons received throughout *Battlestar Galactica*'s four seasons? The question of our role in the plan is something human beings have been puzzling over for a lot longer than four years. It's fitting that the final episode answered the show's small mysteries, but left the greatest Mystery, as it always must be, unexplained.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on March 21, 2009 at 04:58 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 06, 2009

New "Spiritual Solicitations" at Holy Heroes!!



Over at our comics-and-religion-themed cousin blog [Holy Heroes!!](#), I've just posted a big ol' roundup of ten recent and forthcoming comics about religion. Reverent? Irreverent? Irrelevant? We've got 'em all!

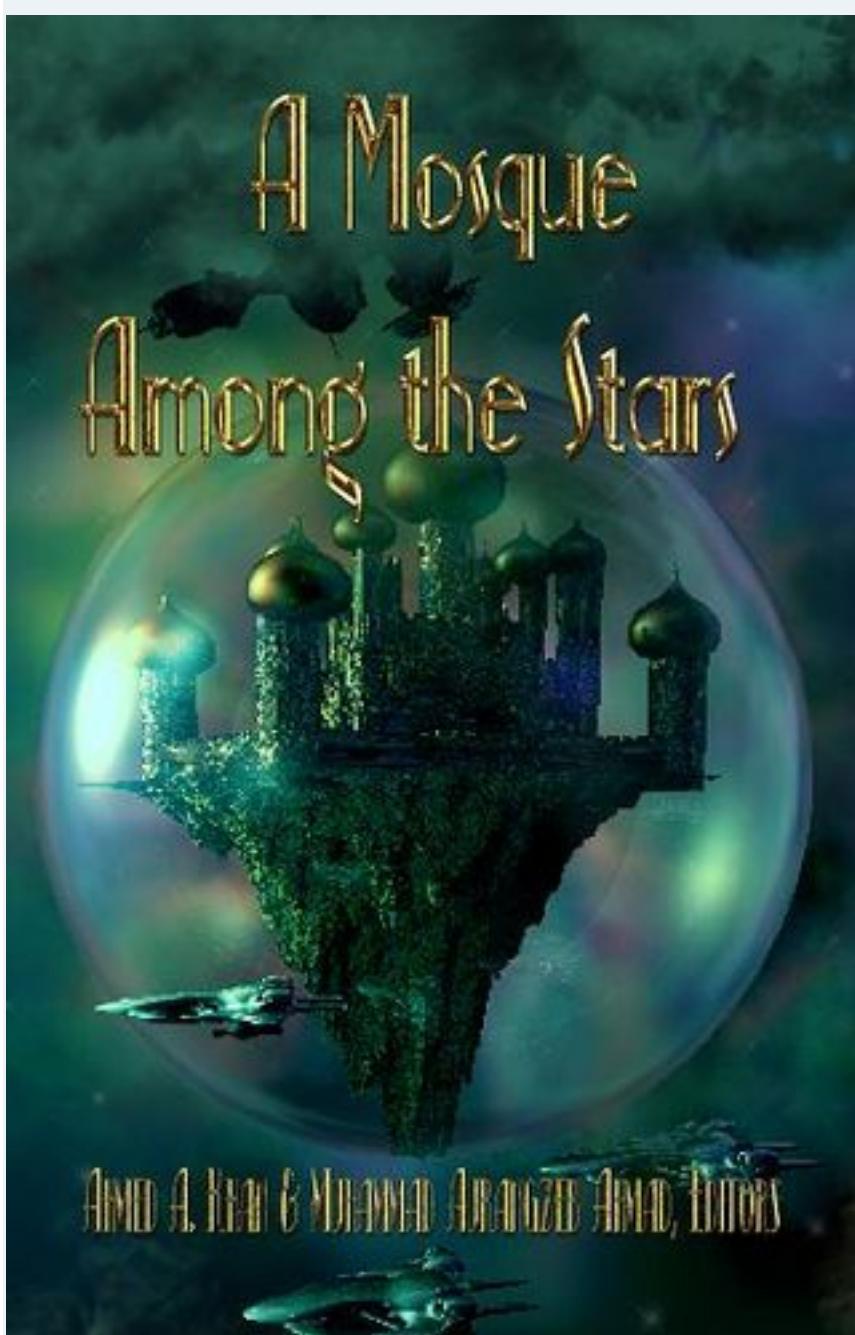
Featured: Oeming's Rapture, the Wolverton Bible, and butt-kicking Jesus!

Check out the full list [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on April 06, 2009 at 10:30 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 09, 2009

The message of *A Mosque Among the Stars*



A *Mosque Among the Stars*, a new short story collection edited by Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad (founder of the [Islam and Science Fiction](#) website) and Canadian SF author Ahmed A. Khan, is an anthology with a message. Tired of the narrow representation of Islam on display in most Western media (including much SF), the editors wanted "to present Islam and Muslims in a different light."

It's tough to aim for an anthology with a unified message, especially in SF, which prizes diversity of opinion. But these editors have done it—in some cases, the editorial notes suggest, by nudging the writers toward revisions. In many cases that might seem problematic, but here—where the editors are Muslim and most of the authors are not—it makes sense. And any fear for lack of diversity among the stories is quickly assuaged by the variety of the stories on display, which include several kinds of both SF and fantasy.

The anthology's best story is without a doubt Tom Ligon's closing novella, "For a Little Price," which details a fundamentalist plot to hijack a potentially world-destroying spaceship. The story was originally written in 1986, but the story was repeatedly rejected—reading between the lines in the author's note, it seems that its too-sympathetic, too-

complex picture of one of the hijackers was one of the main reasons for its rejection. It fits in perfectly here, and its closing passage, in which the now-repentant terrorist meditates on his motivations, has definite impact.

Similarly strong is the opening story, Lucius Shepard's "A Walk Through the Garden," a piece of military SF about a group of American soldiers investigating the aftermath of an experimental bomb blast in the Middle East. The reality-bending bomb has opened what seems to be a gateway into the Muslim afterlife, and the soldiers' exploration of the surreal landscape beyond makes for a truly unique tale.

Of the fantasy stories, the most impressive is Pamela Kenza Taylor's "Recompense," in which the ghosts of Muslim slaves take revenge on the crew of a slave ship. The story is a great illustration of the concept of *jaza'*—a word that means both reward (for the good) and recompense (for the wicked). There are an awful lot more of the latter on board the slave ship—hence the negative meaning getting the title.

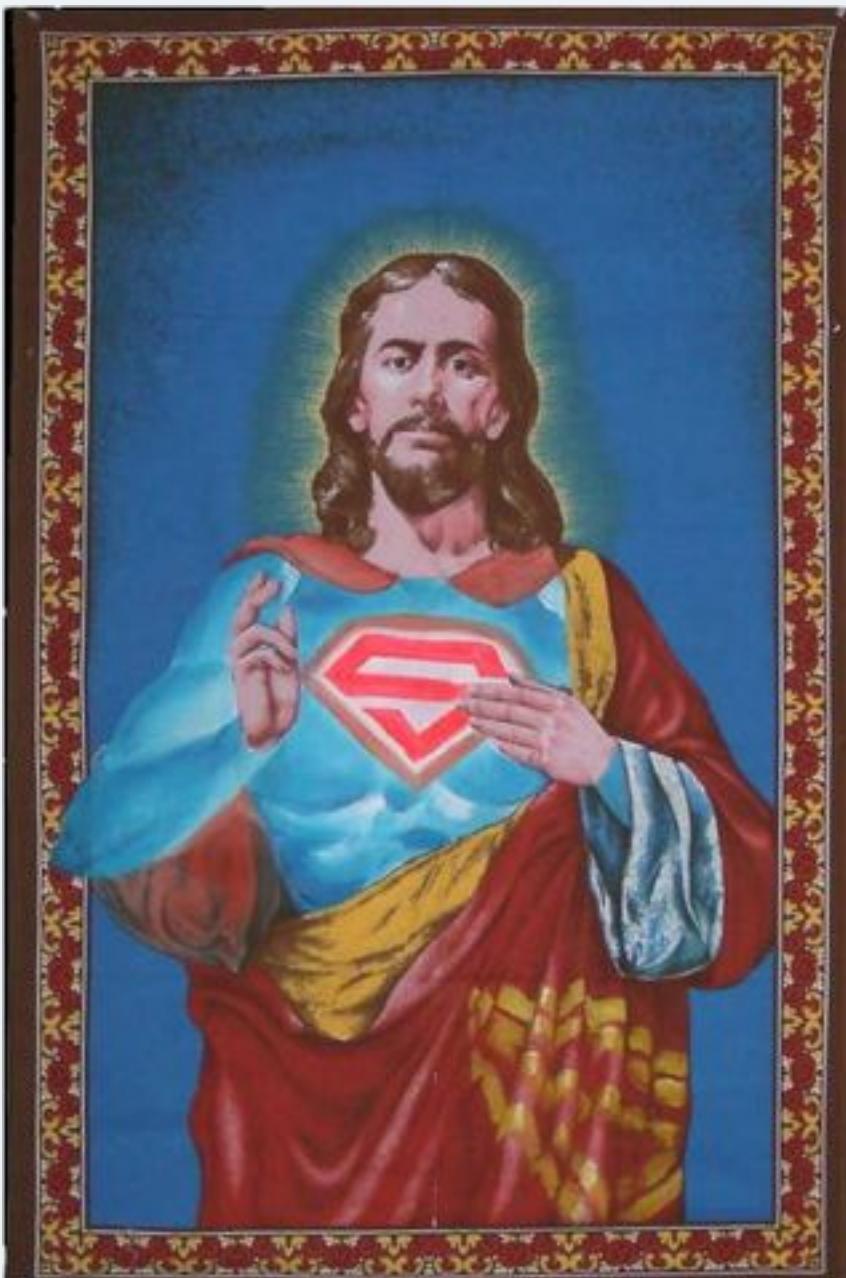
There's a thread running through the anthology, and it's tough to tell how problematic it is. Many of the stories deal with terrorism, war, and the clash of civilizations. Given the events of the last decade or two, one could hardly expect a group of mostly-Western authors to come up with an anthology that *didn't* include stories on these themes. The important thing, and what the editors have striven for, is that these stories address the questions of terrorism and war without demonizing the innocent along with the guilty. It's an important message, and this anthology delivers it well.

For more about *A Mosque Among the Stars*, see the [Islam and Science Fiction](#) website.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on April 09, 2009 at 11:35 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 15, 2009

Superhero spirituality at Cornerstone



An announcement: I've been invited to speak at this year's [Cornerstone Festival](#) (in Bushnell, Illinois, from July 1-3)!

"But I thought that was a Christian music festival, and as far as I know you're not a musician!", you say? Well, you're correct. But part of the festival is the [Imaginarium](#), which houses seminars on a variety of topics. This year's title is "Make. Believe. Heroes"—in other words, the religious aspects of superheroes. I'll be giving three one-hour sessions on the morality and ontology of superhero universes under the title "With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility." The full summary:

Despite the deconstructed superness of Watchmen et al., the original point of superheroes wasn't to make us wish we had superpowers -- though that certainly would be fun! -- but rather to make us wish for the clear moral discernment that allows superheroes to do the right thing. The creators of the most influential superheroes -- immigrants or children of immigrants like Siegel and Schuster or Jack Kirby -- used their creations to imagine a better world where the powerless had a stronger voice. This seminar explores superheroes as champions of the downtrodden, and notions of superhero morality.

Other sessions in the Imaginarium will cover Watchmen, moral grey zones in postmodern superheroics, and saints as superheroes. Check out the full schedule [here](#), and perhaps I'll see you there!

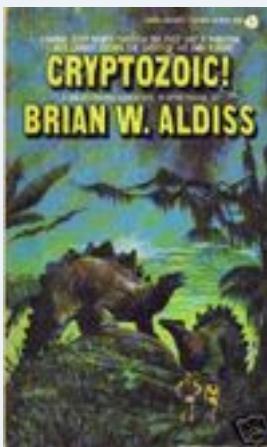
In tangentially-related news, at Comics Should Be Good, Brian Cronin shares his [favorite Mid-90s Badass Jesus Comic](#) (to wit: *Glory/Avengelyne II: The Godysssey* #1).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on April 15, 2009 at 04:36 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 19, 2009

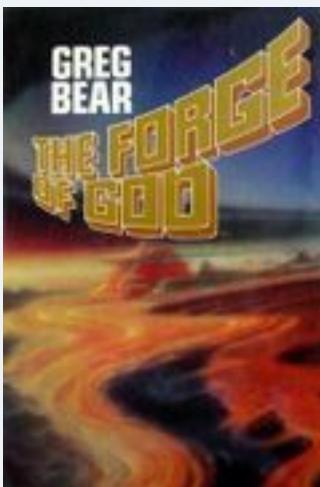
A bit of housecleaning: *Cryptozoic!*, *The Forge of God*, and *Alex and Me*

There's been a slowly-growing pile of books next to my desk: books I've read that haven't warranted full reviews, but that are worth mentioning here. And that pile will never go away until I actually write about them. So, in the interest of reducing desk-area clutter and finally completing long put-off tasks, here are a few scattered thoughts on three books I've read in the last year or so.



 **Cryptozoic!** (a.k.a. *An Age*), by Brian W. Aldiss.

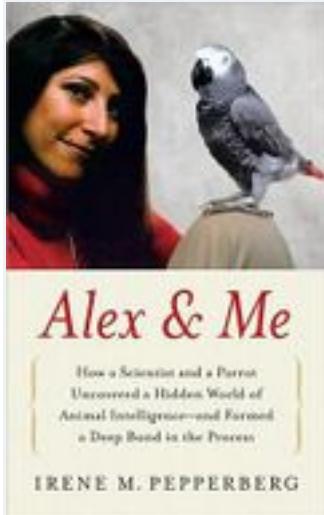
This is a book that reminded me of the better works of Robert Silverberg: it's a time-travel story that becomes a psycho-parable for an individual's search for religious meaning. Like much '60s and '70s SF, there's more than a little mysticism at play in the story, and indeed at one point the book states that any scientific explanation for life's mysteries "fetche[s] up against the blank wall of God." Added bonus: in discussing theories of time, Aldiss cites Augustine's all-too-often-overlooked final books of the *Confessions*, which ponder the nature and meaning of time and memory.



The Forge of God, by Greg Bear.

[Mild spoiler alert.] The setup to this book is a classic Clarkeian one: Mysterious Alien Artifacts appear in remote regions of the Earth, and it's up to a few investigators to find out what the heck they are and what they're doing. In this case, they're alien engines of destruction, set to destroy the planet. We find that out because a survivor from an alien world destroyed by the same uncaring force has hitched a ride to warn us—not to help us, mind you, just to give

us some notice of our impending doom. The Guest, as the alien hitchhiker is called, presents this warning in dark theological terms. One of the alien's interrogators is curious about otherworldly spirituality, but his queries get a chilling response: "I asked it, 'Do you believe in God,' and it replied, 'I believe in punishment.'" That's probably the kind of pessimistic theology one develops after seeing one's entire planet destroyed, I guess. This is an apocalyptic book that has the courage of its convictions: the threat of worldwide destruction is made good, as the last few chapters describe in vivid detail the end of the Earth as a planet. In most SF stories of this type, human heroism would defeat the plot to destroy the world at the last possible moment; here, human ingenuity loses out to human frailty. Bleak, but good.



Alex and Me: How a scientist and a parrot uncovered a hidden world of animal intelligence—and formed a deep bond in the process, by Irene M. Pepperberg.

(Now *there's* a long subtitle.) When I was an undergrad, I did a science project on Dr. Pepperberg's work with [African grey parrots](#), voice mimicry, and intelligence. Pepperberg research has covered a broad range of topics, but the basic gist of everything comes down to this: African greys don't just imitate sounds; they learn language, and they're a lot smarter than you might think. One of the things that drew me to this research is the extent to which Alex, Pepperberg's main research animal, shines through as a personality, even in drily straightforward scientific articles. Here, where the author is more concerned with telling her story than with proving anything to an expert audience, that personality is even more clear. At the risk of sounding extremely unscientific, I'll say this (in language, I should note, that Pepperberg does not use): however you define the word "soul," the research that led to this book could give a pretty strong argument that parrots have them.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on April 19, 2009 at 06:22 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 20, 2009

The failure of humanity in *The Day of the Triffids*



Add John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* to the list, just below *Starship Troopers* and *Old Man's War*, of books I liked quite a bit even though I found them a little morally repugnant. I was impressed with the power with which Wyndham portrays a collapsing world, and the ingenuity of his monsters, but a bit repulsed by his protagonist's inhumanity.

In the aftermath of a bizarre lightshow of unknown origin—suggested causes are a strange comet and an insidious Cold War weapon—most of the population of Britain, and possibly the entire world, goes blind. The few who have maintained their sight must fight for survival against both other people and the triffids, the deadly bio-engineered plants of the book's title. There is much struggling for survival here—but not too much struggling for *other people's* survival. What bothered me is the utter lack of compassion that protagonist Bill Masen and his fellow sighted survivors show for their blinded countrymen. Early in the book Masen encounters a single sighted man leading a large group of the blind in a search for food, and the passage instills the odd feeling that somehow this leader is exploiting his followers. Later, when Masen is pressed into service as a guide for a large group of the blind, he escapes, giving a brief speech to one of his charges on the futility of his help: "I'm not doing any good, I tell you. I've been like the drugs they inject to keep the patient going a little longer—no curative value, just putting it off."

The book makes the argument that times of crisis require tough decisions, and selfishness may be the only route to survival. But I think the contrary is true: it's in this kind of crisis that we must focus most strongly on holding onto our compassion and our humanity. I admire Wyndham's storytelling, but I can't help but have serious doubts about his abilities as a moral guide.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on April 20, 2009 at 02:34 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 29, 2009

Gods in fantasy

SF Signal's [latest Mind Meld](#) looks at gods and religion in fantasy.

In a created fantasy world, gods can proliferate by the hundreds. When building religious systems for fantasies, what are the advantages/disadvantages of inventing pantheons vs. single gods, or having no religious component at all?

Respondents include Michael Swanwick, Elizabeth Bear, and John C. Wright. Read their responses [here!](#)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on April 29, 2009 at 11:01 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 06, 2009

Interview on the Spirituality of *Star Trek*



David Crumm

of [ReadtheSpirit.com](#) recently [interviewed](#) me on the gods of *Star Trek*, both fictional (the [Sha Ka Ree](#) demiurge) and real (Gene Roddenberry himself). On the question of Roddenberry's own religious views, I had this to say:

*You'll often hear people say that Gene Roddenberry was an atheist. Any time that a god appears in *Star Trek* it's usually a bad god or a fake god. But the answer is more complicated than that. He really was an agnostic. I think it's rewriting history to say he was an atheist. In fact, what he said in interviews was more like, 'I believe God is in humankind.' That's a far cry from saying, 'I don't think God exists.' And if you understand that about his approach to the question of God, then you can see that he really was interested in something much more complicated.*

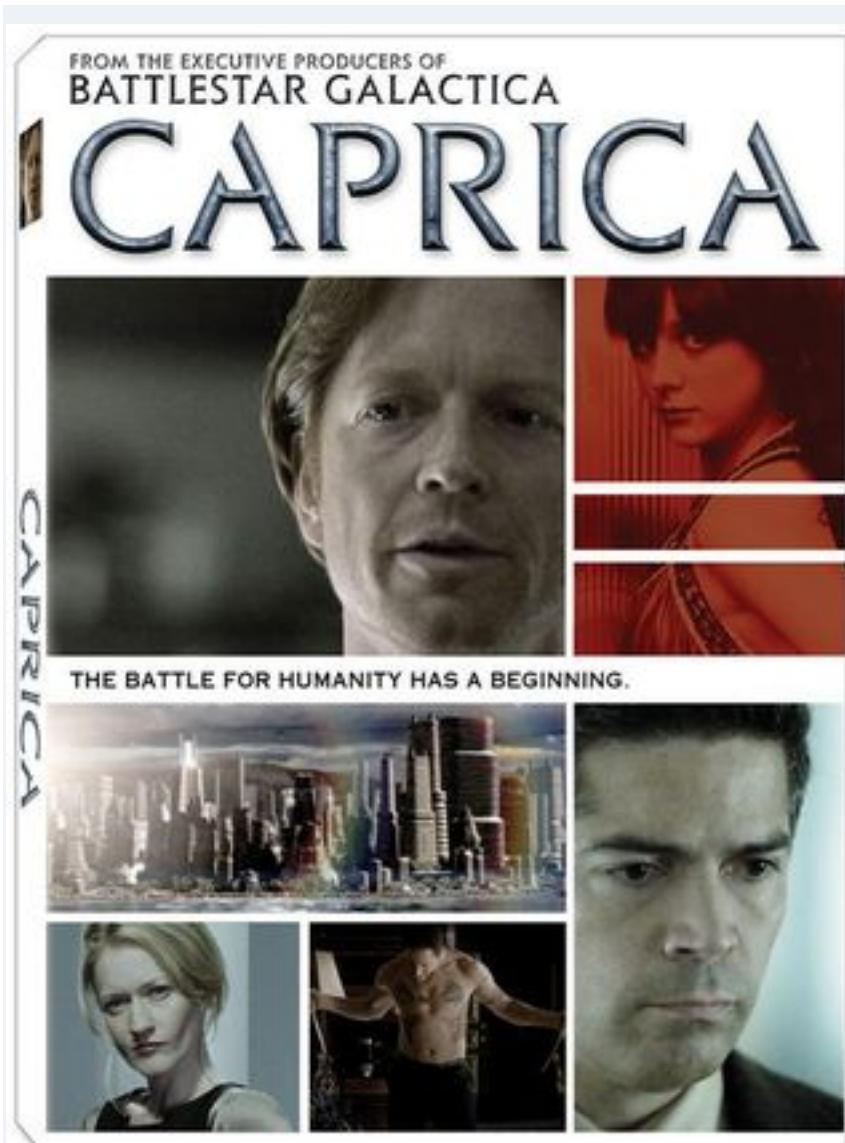
Read the rest of the interview, plus an introduction linking my comments to the recent Pew Research survey's findings on the growing numbers of people claiming no religious affiliation, [here](#).

And as for the new *Star Trek*—[Robert J. Sawyer liked it](#), and that certainly bodes well. I should be seeing it this weekend, so check back next week for my thoughts on it.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 06, 2009 at 08:53 AM | [Permalink](#)

May 08, 2009

How many gods does it take to build a working artificial intelligence?, or, a *Caprica* review



Is the Sci Fi Channel (or, pardon me, Syfy) trying to doom *Caprica* before it even launches? It's been something like two weeks since the DVD came out, and I've heard barely a word about it. Probably because, like me, nobody wanted to spend 27 bucks on an unknown quantity, and they all waited for their Netflix copies to arrive. Well, my rented copy arrived this week, and I sure hope this botched release isn't part of a plan to tank the series, because the pilot is good. *Really* good, in fact. It's very, very different from *Battlestar Galactica*—there's nary a space battle to be found. But in terms of tone and setting, *Caprica* owes much to *Gattaca*—easily one of the best SF films of its decade. It's nice to see a piece of filmic SF that doesn't depend on explosions. (OK, fine, *Caprica* does depend pretty heavily on its one explosion. But that's different.)

Some minor spoilers ahead.

The story begins 58 years before the events of *Battlestar Galactica*—years before the first Cylon War. We meet Zoe Graystone, daughter of a scientist who, after inventing a successful virtual reality interface, turns his attention to cybernetics. (Yep, that leads exactly where you think it does.) Zoe's a bit of a genius herself, and she creates a virtual copy of her own mind in the VR world, a digital copy that's struggling to understand itself and its connection with the real world. Zoe's also a member of, for lack of a better description, a club of monotheists. Unfortunately, this group has links to a terrorist organization called Soldiers of the One, and Zoe is killed in a surprise suicide bombing carried out by one of her compatriots. When her father discovers the AI copy of his daughter a few weeks later, he's inspired to put her into the robotic body he's been building—and it looks like we'll have to wait for the start of the series next year to see the full ramifications of that decision.

Caprica goes out of its way to avoid direct connections to the BSG universe for the first hour or so, and that's a good thing. It sets us up to care about its characters on their own merits. That way, when they finally do show us, for instance, a young William Adama, it serves first and foremost to enhance *Caprica*'s story, not to append BSG's. This show is determined to stand on its own two feet—and sturdy feet they are.



Hidden deep in the heart of the *Caprica* pilot is a "how the leopard got its spots" tale—but for "leopard" read "Cylons," and for "spots" read "monotheistic religion." If anything, the conflict between monotheism and polytheism will be even more central to *Caprica* than it was to BSG. In a conversation with the headmistress of Zoe's school, the man investigating the bombing looks at the dangerous philosophy he sees lurking within monotheism:

It doesn't concern you, Sister, that kind of absolutist view of the universe? Right and wrong determined solely by a single all-knowing, all-powerful being whose judgment cannot be questioned, and in whose name the most horrendous of acts can be sanctioned without appeal?

That's a bleak portrait of monotheism, to be sure, but that's the speaker's bias. The monolog begs the question, however, of what kind of alternative polytheism is—can't *Caprica*'s polytheists, too, find divine sanction for horrendous actions by appealing to a variety of minor gods? Indeed, a group of Hecate worshippers practices virtual human sacrifice in the VR world, so monotheism isn't the only culprit in this culture. In any event, the role of religion in society is going to be a major factor in *Caprica*'s story.

Issues of race and class are also apparent, with one of the central character relationships being between the wealthy, WASP-y Caprican Daniel Graystone and the immigrant/peasant Tauron Joseph Adama, both of whom lost family members in the bombing. There are some nice hints about the differences between the various colonies' cultures—the bit about Taurons wearing black gloves when they're in mourning is a nice touch, and I hope we see more of that kind of detail.

But even more central is the question of artificial intelligence and the nature of the mind. The electronic copy of Zoe is a great means of discussing the nature of intelligence, mind, and soul. It's particularly interesting that the digital doppelganger is built largely from external electronic information—report cards, receipts, medical reports, e-mails, and the like. How much of our selves is reflected in external data? This kind of discussion should shed some interesting light on the inner lives of Cylons as the story unfolds. Let's just hope that Syfy gives *Caprica* a chance—it shows every sign of being a truly great show.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 08, 2009 at 06:01 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 14, 2009

...To boldly go back to the future



In [his review of Star Trek](#),

Roger Ebert protests the direction of the franchise:

The Gene Roddenberry years, when stories might play with questions of science, ideals or philosophy, have been replaced by stories reduced to loud and colorful action. Like so many franchises, it's more concerned with repeating a successful formula than going boldly where no "Star Trek" has gone before.

I don't know that I'd go quite so far as to say the new *Star Trek* cares only about "loud and colorful action" (though there's certainly plenty of that). And I did enjoy the film, quite a bit. But I couldn't help feeling that the story itself was a bit... shallow. The plot—evil Romulan from the future wants to blow up lots of planets; fresh-faced but familiar starship crew must stop him (with some help from a certain time-traveling Vulcan)—is pretty simple, once you get past the temporal layers. In an [essay for Religion Dispatches](#), Nathan Schneider bemoans the simplicity of new villain Nero compared to more complex foils like the post-Cold-War Klingons of *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*. There's not much to this character beyond his desire for revenge, and the film seems to know it: toward the film's end, when the Enterprise has defeated Nero, young Kirk shows the villain mercy, offering to transport his crew from the doomed ship and give them medical help. There's an all-too-brief exchange between Kirk and Spock on the wisdom of offering assistance to the Romulans, but it's cut short when Nero rejects the offer. Kirk, with an apparent sigh of relief, orders the *Enterprise* to open fire on Nero's ship: so much for mercy, and so much, too, for exploring revenge versus forgiveness. It feels like a bit of a scoff at the way that *Star Trek* has approached philosophical and moral issues in the past.



The story isn't that deep—but that doesn't mean *Star Trek* is without depth. What's most interesting here isn't the story they're telling, but the mechanics of how it gets to be told in the first place. Contrary to what you may have heard, this is *not* a prequel. The Kirk in this film is not the same Kirk from the original series. Owing to the time travel plot, this is an alternate universe, with its point of divergence occurring at the time of Kirk's birth. This is an ingenious approach to the fact that this is a

franchise with an established mythology, and a fan base that is notoriously attentive to the details of that mythology. Since this is a parallel universe, any inconsistencies (and there aren't many) can be explained by that divergence. Indeed, this doesn't negate anything that has gone before, so you can't really call it a "reboot;" they've just copied the operating system onto a new machine.



Moreover, the mechanics of the setup open the door for some consideration of free will, even if the film doesn't give that consideration quite as much attention as it might deserve. For instance, future-Spock (or "Spock Prime," as the credits would have it, implying some [DC Comics](#) influence) orders past-Kirk not to mention his existence to past-Spock, lest foreknowledge of their friendship spoil its development. That turns out to be something of an empty warning (witness the on-screen meeting of the two Spocks later on), but it is a sign that there's a bit more going on beneath the surface here.

(Over at [In the Open Space](#), Carmen Andres has some more thoughts on free will in this *Star Trek* and in *Nemesis*).

Of course, all of the above is in willful neglect of what *Star Trek* really gets right, which is the characters. Everyone gets a moment to shine here, a chance to prove why they're the best at what they do. Not only that, but the catchphrases, when they appear, don't even feel contrived. These characters are in good hands, and I'm looking forward to seeing where next they boldly go.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 14, 2009 at 05:14 PM | [Permalink](#)

May 15, 2009

Roundup of religion in the *Lost* season finale



Over at SF Gospel's spouse blog God Spam, Gwynne rounds up the [religion references](#) in the season finale of *Lost*. Some interesting stuff—I'm particularly intrigued by the theory that the mysterious nameless fellow talking to Jacob in the first scene might be named Esau. But I'm skeptical that the statue is Anubis—that head looked much more reptilian to me, so I'm leaning toward crocodile-god (and lord of the seas!) [Sobek](#).

Of course, the real meat of the episode was about free will and destiny—as in the instance of Jack's (unlikely?) transformation into a man on a totally-nuts mission. (Wasn't that Locke's job?) But, to put it bluntly, I've mostly given up trying to analyze *Lost*'s themes until the show wraps up next year. Until we know what the destiny they're all working toward is, any statement is kinda moot. (Plus I can hardly ever remember what's going on from week to week, but that's another matter.)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 15, 2009 at 10:05 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 15, 2009

Some *Star Trek* bits

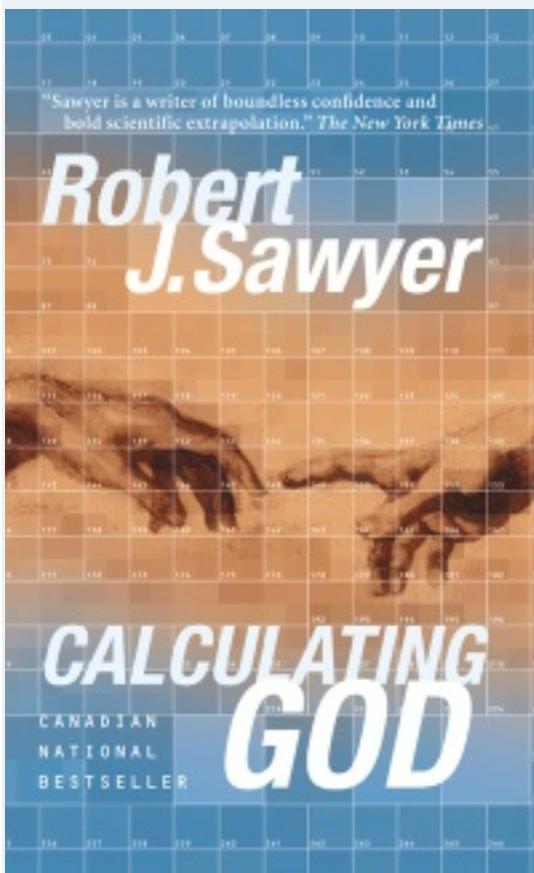


- Beliefnet presents an argument that *Star Trek* (TOS) was [obsessed with the Ten Commandments](#).
- ASSISTNews offers up a [quiz linking Star Trek and scripture](#).
- Craig A. James, author of the Dawkinist evolutionary psychology tome *The Evolution of Religion*, reads [way too much](#) into the latest movie's one direct reference to a deity. I mean, I acknowledged that I had to dig a bit to find a theological thread in the film, but this is going a bit too far!
- This one's just confusing. At FoxNews.com (*shudder*), James Pinkerton turns what could have been an interesting theological essay on Star Trek and the divine origins of imagination into... a [rant about Israeli security](#)? Ooookay.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 15, 2009 at 10:26 PM | [Permalink](#)

May 20, 2009

Robert J. Sawyer to high-school student: "Skepticism can be dogma"



Robert J. Sawyer [reports](#) on his blog about a letter he received from a 12th-grade student writing an English paper on *The Terminal Experiment* and *Calculating God*. The student asks, "Are you a religious man yourself?" Sawyer's responded that he's not—but, unlike many non-religious, his skepticism is open to new evidence:

I liked playing with the notion of whether skepticism/atheism was really a reasoned position, or simply another belief system that would endure regardless of the evidence, or lack thereof, for its veracity.

[Read Sawyer's full response here.](#)

Also worth checking out: [Sawyer's roundup](#) of a variety of reviewers' comments on the philosophical depth of his novels. They're all right.

You can also read my review of *Calculating God* [here](#). And I wrote a bit more about both that novel and *The Terminal Experiment* in [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 20, 2009 at 09:11 AM in [Atheism](#), [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 20, 2009

Why I'm not that upset about the cancellation of *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*



It's official: *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* will not get a third season.

I liked the show from the beginning. Though it wasn't the most intelligent show in the world, it was always philosophically interesting. (I wrote about it [here](#), and [here](#), and [here](#), and [here](#).)

But you know what? I don't mind that it's done.

[Spoilers ahead.]

The reason? The ending of the second season was a totally satisfying conclusion to the story the show told. The show took place in the middle of its main characters' established story, so there was a built-in limit on where it could go. And, with the final scenes of the last episode, it reached that limit. We know from the beginning that John Connor will end up leading the anti-machine resistance in the future, and now we know how that happened. Having him time-leap around the war was, frankly, a little bit ingenious. The leader of the resistance isn't some future John Connor; it's *this* John Connor. Cameron is deactivated, so her absence in any future lore is explained. John Henry is a minor loose end, but not an unreasonable one. With the major cast-whittling we saw toward the end of the second season—I don't think I've seen that many surprise deaths on any show that wasn't called *The Sopranos*—it certainly looked like the show's creators knew they might be wrapping up the whole story, and where they left off was solid. Not only that, in a [post on Fox's official show blog](#), showrunner Josh Friedman encourages anybody who's angry over the cancellation to move on. See? Nothing to be angry about: if the show had gone on, it might no longer have been the

best thing the *Terminator* franchise ever offered up. (Yeah, I said it! But I haven't seen *Salvation* yet, so ask again in a week or two.)

If you haven't seen them yet, do yourself a favor and watch the last few episodes of *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* on [Hulu](#).

PS. I was absolutely amazed that *Dollhouse* got renewed. Waaaaay too many people wrote that show off after one or two episodes; if you stopped watching it you absolutely need to watch (at the very least) [the last two episodes](#), which catapulted the show into solidly-good territory (Alan Tudyk's presence helped). With this, the *V* remake (more Alan Tudyk!), and the Robert J. Sawyer adaptation *Flash Forward*, next year will be an exciting time for SF TV.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 20, 2009 at 09:52 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 20, 2009

Did network squeamishness about religion kill *Kings*?



In [a story](#) on

Newsarama, *Kings* creator Michael Green alleges that NBC effectively kept his parallel-universe adaptation of the King David story from reaching its audience by leaving its biblical basis out of the promos:

"When the time came for the marketing, there was a very deliberate, outspoken, loud desire articulated by them that, 'We are not going to say King David.' They were scared to say King David. They just felt that that would be detrimental to the show," Green explained. "I thought it was the clearest way to express what the show was about, and I thought it might actually generate interest. But there was a fear of either backlash or marginalizing or pigeonholing. There were a lot of reasons they had. They wouldn't go near it in the marketing, but they never had a problem with it on the creative level, which is why I was so baffled."

Which explains why I was a few scenes into the first episode before I caught on that this was a scriptural adaptation. The promos basically sold it as "what if the United States were a monarchy?", which hardly does justice to the show's spiritual basis. The fruits of that misleading advertising ripened yesterday when NBC signed *Kings*' death warrant; it will finish its thirteen-episode run but won't get a second season.

You'd think I would love *Kings*—after all, it's an SF Bible adaptation starring Ian McShane!—but frankly the first few episodes left me a bit cold. I plan to watch the rest, but it has yet to completely blow my mind. Nevertheless, it has some soaring high points, particularly when King Silas Benjamin (i.e. Saul, played by the aforementioned McShane) talks about God. [For instance:]

In any event, I like it more than Cynthia B. Astle, who declared the show "a tool for fostering biblical illiteracy" in [an essay for Religion Dispatches](#). (Not the least of its problems: the story it's adapting isn't taken from *Kings* at all, but

Chronicles. Whoops.) Diane Winston offers a nice counterpoint in [a companion article](#) that applauding the show's transparent treatment of religion—you know, the transparency that was wholly lacking from all of the show's promos. I think there is a bigger audience for shows like this, but it seems the networks are scared to look for it.

Read the Newsarama article, which also discusses the same problem in advertising for the late *Eli Stone*, [here](#).

You can watch *Kings* on [Hulu](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 20, 2009 at 09:47 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 21, 2009

800 Words: A new play about Philip K. Dick's religious visions



A PLAY BY VICTORIA STEWART

DIRECTED BY JEREMY WILHELM

THE WORKERS COLLECTIVE PRESENTS

800 WORDS

THE TRANSMIGRATION OF PHILIP K. DICK

THE PLAYWRIGHTS' CENTER WARING JONES THEATRE 2301 E. FRANKLIN AVE. MINNEAPOLIS

MAY 28-JUNE 7TH THURSDAY-SATURDAY 8PM SUNDAY 7PM TICKETS \$9-\$15

FOR TICKETS AND INFORMATION 612-332-7481 x20



If you're planning to be in Minneapolis anytime between May 28th and June 7th (or if you're looking for a reason to be), this sounds pretty intriguing: *800 Words: The Transmigration of Philip K. Dick*, a play based on the final days of Dick's life. From the official description:

800 Words: The Transmigration of Philip K. Dick is based on the life of ground-breaking science fiction author, Philip K. Dick, complete with secret agents, Dick's dead sister and a talking cat. The play begins just as Philip's novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep is about to be released as the Hollywood film Blade Runner... But Philip can't stop obsessing about visions he had years earlier when an extraterrestrial God spoke to him using artificial intelligence. Award-winning playwright Victoria Stewart uses uniquely theatrical conventions to create a surreal landscape where memories of these seminal events bleed into each other, fusing and merging in a funny, dark trip – not unlike a Philip K. Dick novel – where his recurrent obsessions of God, art, madness, time, fiction and reality come alive on stage.

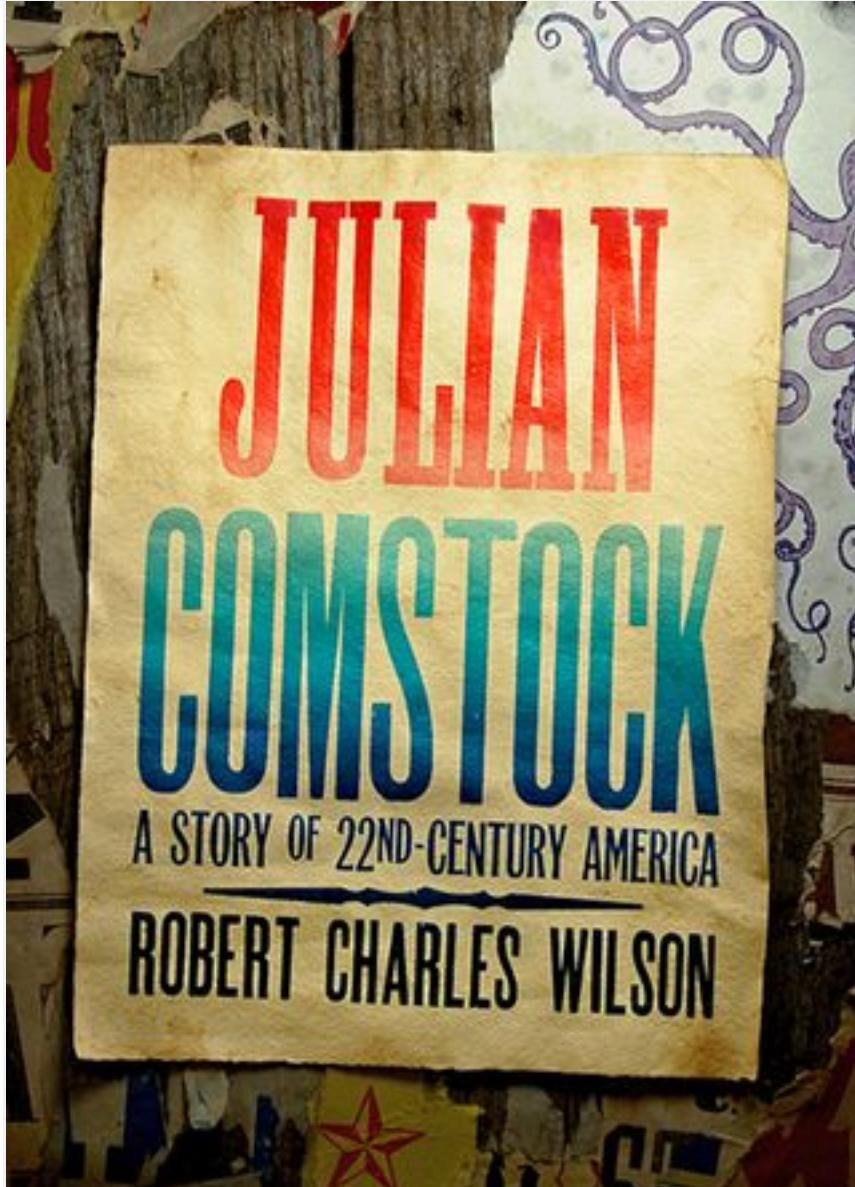
It sounds intriguing, and more respectful than [some other](#) PKD-related projects I could name. won't be able to attend, but I'd love to hear a review or two if any of you do.

For more details see the play's [official site](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 21, 2009 at 02:50 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 27, 2009

The complex religious landscape of Robert Charles Wilson's *Julian Comstock*



From the author of the Hugo Award-winning *Spin*

Destined to be remembered as one of this year's best SF novels, Robert Charles Wilson's *Julian Comstock* is the compelling tale of rebellion against tyranny, both political and religious. The eponymous hero is a nephew of Deklan Comstock, a tyrannical dynastic president living under self-imposed exile for fear of his uncle's paranoid tendency to execute those who might threaten his power. Julian has little interest in political power—he's far more interested in science and the arts, his life goal being to create a film entitled *The Life and Adventures of the Great Naturalist Charles Darwin*. That puts him in an unpopular minority in this novel's 22nd-century America, in which the expanded United States are largely ruled by

the very, very conservative Church of the Dominion (of which more later). Julian isn't one to hide his beliefs, which makes it difficult for him to keep a low profile, but opens the door for a series of rousing adventures.

Julian, along with his mentor Sam Godwin and his childhood friend (and the book's narrator) Adam Hazzard go into hiding to escape Deklan's forces, but before long they're pressed into service in a war between the United States and the "Mitteleuropans"—Germany to you—over Labrador (which, in this future, is part of the U.S., and, thanks to global warming, has become very desirable real estate). Julian, incapable of keeping a low profile, becomes a war hero under the assumed name "Julian Commongold." When his identity becomes known to his uncle, the duplicitous president makes him a general—and immediately sends him into an unwinnable battle. Improbably, Julian survives, and before long he's been made President himself, begrudgingly accepting the power he never wanted to take. He makes the most of his newfound power, becoming a dedicated reformer and setting out to re-separate Church from State (all while making good on his wish to produce a Darwin biopic). He pushes a bit too hard, however, putting his reign at risk of an early termination.

The novel's treatment of religion is more complex than the surface Darwinist-versus-powerful-evangelical-church setup would suggest. For one thing, the Dominion isn't a single church at all, but rather a multidenominational certifying body that establishes broad doctrine for its member churches. As Hazzard states:

In America we're entitled by the Constitution to worship at any church we please, as long as it's a genuine Christian congregation and not some fraudulent or satanic sect. The Dominion exists to make that distinction. Also to collect fees and tithes to further its important work.

The Dominion is more like, say, the [Family Research Council](#) on overdrive—and the doctrinal demands it makes are about the same as the FRC's. The Dominion has achieved a great and terrible homogenization of American religion, crushing churches that believe, for instance, that evolution and faith are reconcilable. Wilson is wise to make it a broad organization rather than a single church—SF novels that predict futures where minority sects have disappeared entirely because everyone has joined the One Big Church never really sit right with me. (Ben Bova's [Grand Tour](#) series, though generally enjoyable, suffers from this error.)

This setup also allows for a variety of depictions of faith in *Julian Comstock*. Adam Hazzard's father, for instance, is a minister in the Church of Signs, a snake-handling Pentecostal denomination that is tolerated but not fully approved by the Dominion. Julian's mentor Sam Godwin is a closet Jew who knows little of his tradition beyond a few snippets of Hebrew prayers—his situation is similar to that of Spanish Jews during the Inquisition. And toward the end of the novel Julian befriends (and likely falls in love with, though it's not stated explicitly) the founder of the very liberal Church of the Apostles Etc., which bears more than a passing similarity to Unitarianism. (Its main doctrine: "God is Conscience; have no other/Love your neighbor as your brother").

One of the most interesting portraits of religion in this world comes when Hazzard discovers a con man named Private Langers posing as a Dominion chaplain offering comfort at the bedsides of dying soldiers. Langers, who first appears in the novel as a "colporteur" selling Bible tracts with titles such as *Acts Condemned by Leviticus, Explained and Described, with Diagrams*, has a history of stealing from the dead, and Hazzard rightly suspects him. But he's also serving a positive purpose, as the head doctor explains:

There are no genuine Dominion officers to be had. Julian Conqueror barred them from the expedition, and for the most part that's not a bad thing, since we haven't had to endure their Sunday scoldings. But a dying soldier generally wants a godly man beside him, and seldom inquires into the Pastor's pedigree... He may be a cracked vessel, but we don't own a better one just now.

This hardly amounts to a commendation for the grave-robbing Langers, but it does put Julian's campaign against religion into a different light. His hard-heartedness diminishes the Dominion's evil, but it also prevents honest believers from doing good.

It's possible that I simply had [Kings](#) on the brain while reading this novel, but I saw more than a few echoes of the David story in Julian's military career. Deklan's jealousy of a youthful warrior is reminiscent of Saul's relationship with David, though his later attempt at arranging Julian's death on the frontlines draws a bit more on David's treatment of Uriah. These allusions—plus an epigraphic quote from First Corinthians on the book's last section—make the novel's approach to religion even more complex. There's a feeling of timelessness about the story, and that kind of Biblical allusion is a big part of that. (There's also the fact that the novel's 22nd Century looks, after a series of minor apocalypses, an awful lot like the 19th, and its narrator writes in a suitably old-timey prose to match.)

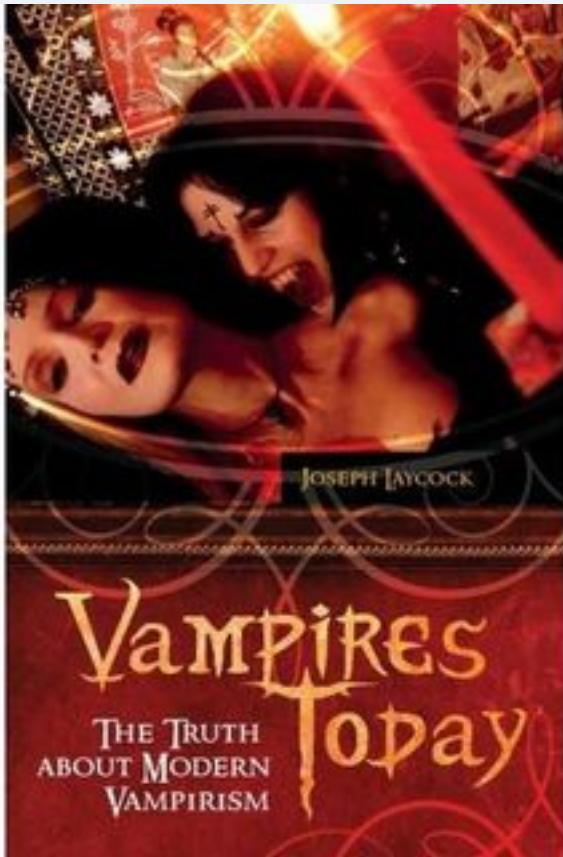
Julian Comstock is a rich and rewarding story—I've barely scratched the surface of its themes here. Expect to see it on next year's Hugo shortlist; it certainly deserves to be there.

[Julian Comstock](#) will be available from [Tor](#) on June 9th.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 27, 2009 at 04:53 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

May 29, 2009

Better living through vampirism



New on Religion Dispatches: an

interview with [Joseph Laycock](#), a scholar who's interested in real-life vampires as a new religious movement. His book, *Vampires Today: The Truth About Modern Vampirism*, comes out tomorrow from Praeger, and it sounds far, far more scholarly and respectable than one might expect a book on real-life vampires could ever be. But it's not *quite* so serious that the interview can't still include great lines like this:

While it may be comforting to think that we are totally different from vampires, this is not the case.

Plus the bit about how all the good vampire book titles are taken—priceless.

I mention this first of all because it's a fascinating project, and secondly because I can personally vouch for Mr. Laycock's intelligence, having been his classmate at not one but two institutions of higher learning (namely, Hampshire College and Harvard Divinity School).* He's a great guy in addition to being a scholar of singular intelligence and most interesting interests. So check out his book, OK? Good.

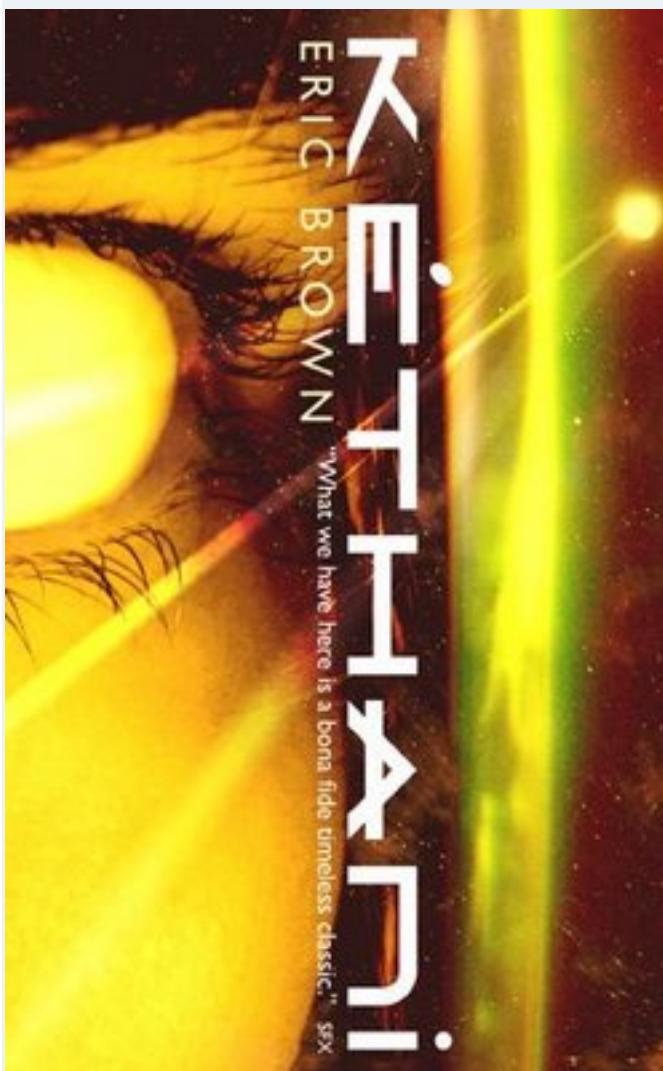
Read the interview at Religion Dispatches [here](#). Order a copy of Vampires Today [here](#).

*Strictly speaking, we weren't technically "classmates" at HDS, since he entered the fall after I graduated. But it's close enough to count, right?

Posted by Gabriel McKee on May 29, 2009 at 05:28 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 03, 2009

"Dead to that which held us captive": Eric Brown's *Kéthani*



The dead walk in Eric Brown's *Kéthani*, which takes place in a world where aliens (the Kéthani of the title) have given human beings physical immortality. The story begins with the mysterious materialization of a few hundred thousand enormous crystalline spires across the planet. These are the "Onward Stations" of the Kéthani, an alien race similar in many ways to the Overlords of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*: their purpose is to give us the means to return from the dead, in exchange for serving as the Kéthani's explorers and emissaries to the stars.

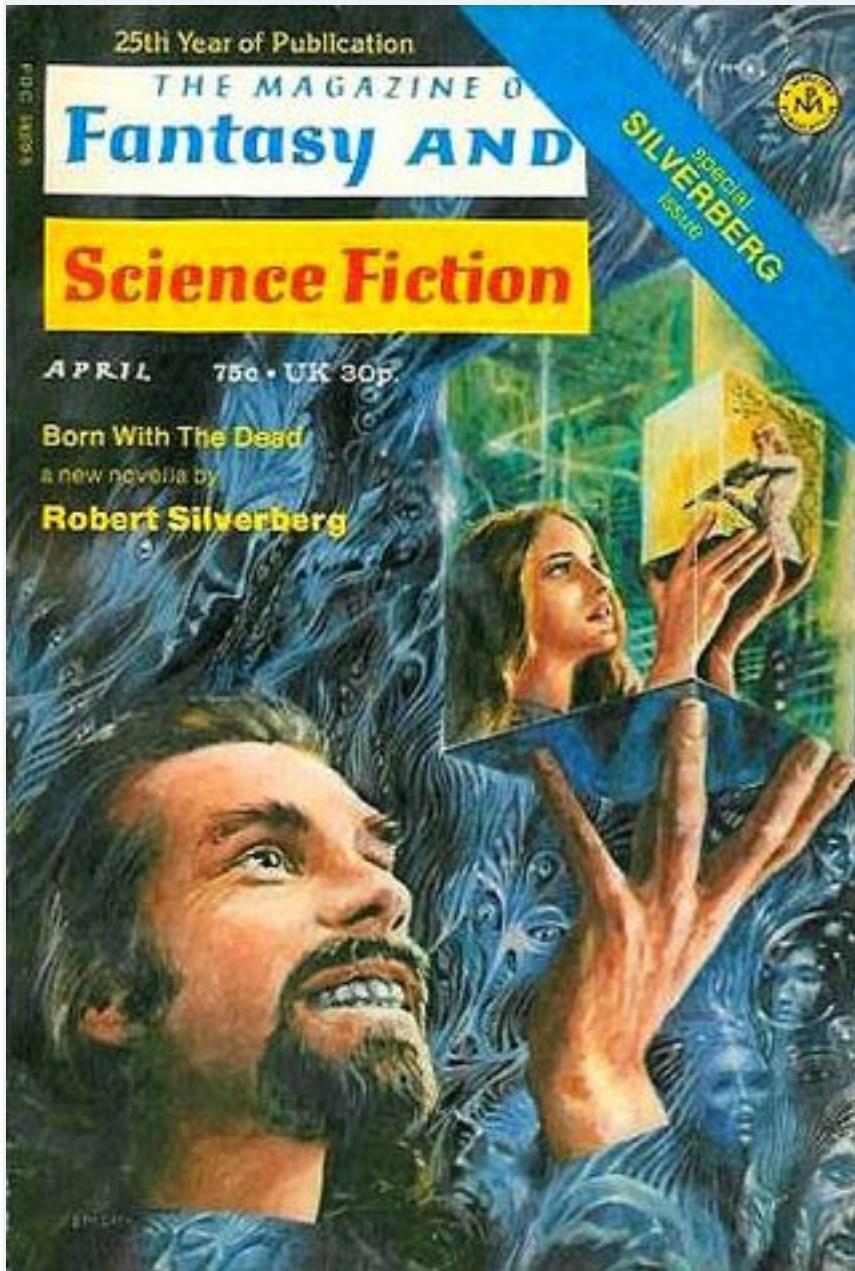
I first encountered the world of Eric Brown's *Kéthani* in the first volume of the Solaris Book of New Science Fiction. The story "The Farewell Party" made quite an impression on me, as [I wrote](#):

*These themes—a scientific means of resurrection; the ennui of those who have not yet joined the dead—are reminiscent of Robert Silverberg's novella *Born With the Dead*, to which this story is a worthy heir. I was pleased to see that Eric Brown has written a number of stories set in this world, including *Kéthani*, a novel Solaris will be releasing next spring. If it's anything like this moving mood piece, it should be well worth reading.*

So, is it? Yes, though its overall effect isn't as strong as the individual story's was. This isn't, strictly speaking, a novel; it's a fix-up with very apparent themes. Eric Brown has been writing stories in the Kéthaniverse since 1997, and this book is a collection of those stories, with brief linking material. ("The Farewell Party" is the final chapter, so I unwittingly began at the ending when I read it two years ago.) But each chapter still feels very much like a short story, rather than a portion of a novel. It's not as extreme a case as H.P. Lovecraft's "Herbert West, Re-Animator," which repeats the same introductory information every two or three pages, but there is still a bit of repetition, which detracts from *Kéthani*'s impact as a novel. There's also a certain sameness of mood throughout the stories; it's not just information that repeats, but some themes as well.

That's not to say there isn't much to recommend about the book, particularly in its approach to its basic conceit. The Kéthani themselves never appear, but the degree to which their presence transforms Earth's society is, understandably, enormous. But Brown's book doesn't go into too much detail on that big picture stuff: he tells the stories of average individuals and how the Kéthani affect them personally. That's what's most interesting about the idea of alien resurrection, and Brown sticks to it.

And religion plays an understandably big role in those stories. Several chapters of *Kéthani* describe conflicts between individuals who disagree about the *spiritual* meaning of physical resurrection: in general, religious people are opposed to resurrection, and refuse to accept the alien implants that make it possible. It's nice that Brown doesn't give us just *one* religious response, though: different chapters show us Buddhists, Christians, and Nietzscheans who refuse resurrection, plus one relatively radical Anglican priest who doesn't.



The loudest voice in the book's debates, though, is that of Christians who see the Kéthani's resurrection as a Very Bad Thing, a ploy to keep us out of heaven by offering us eternal physical life. At first I thought the speed with which the Kéthani's implants became universal was a little bit unlikely. After all, given the overly mysterious nature of the aliens, and the fact that every major religion in the world opposed them, wouldn't people be a bit more reluctant? If you believe in a spiritual afterlife,

don't you also believe it's supposed to be *better* than physical life? But the book changed my mind: I think if physical immortality became a real possibility, doubts would fade pretty quickly after the first resurectees returned. Most people, I think, would look at it as a question of economics rather than spirituality, and would hedge their bets: better the proven afterlife than the supposed one (which, by the way, the Kéthani don't believe in). But that quickly becomes pretty extreme: a decade or two after the Kéthani arrive, people begin committing suicide in order to move on to resurrection and a life in the stars. This makes the Kéthani look pretty ghoulish: couldn't there be another way to get us into space, one that didn't lead to this kind of self-directed violence?

There is, of course, a lot of rebirth language in Christianity. Take [Romans 7](#), for instance, in which Paul discusses Christian freedom from the law in terms of death and rebirth: "But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit." That's the kind of thing the Kéthani offer, but where the rebirth of baptism is symbolic, the Kéthani demand real, physical death, which comes across as... well, satanic. I'm reminded of the humanist complaint about the story of Abraham and Isaac: what kind of God would require someone to sacrifice his son? Well, what kind of benevolent aliens would require us to sacrifice ourselves?

There's something unsatisfying in the book's exploration of these questions. The Kéthani are pretty darned mysterious, and the undead "returnees" avoid discussing their experience of rebirth. That's the mystery at the core of the book: Can the Kéthani be trusted? What do they *really* want with us? The book's all-too-brief epilogue gives something of an answer, but I kinda don't buy it: it's a very vague, very cheery portrait of a wonderful millennia-long career as an explorer. There's a brief line about the Kéthani's motives being "complex," but I found myself unable to accept the optimism about the Kéthani that the epilogue sells. After 400-odd pages of questioning their motives, and particularly after the issue of suicide arose, I couldn't let the aliens off that easily. But despite that uneasiness, I was very pleased that *Kéthani* gave me so much to think about. After reading "The Farewell Party" I said this book should be well worth reading; and now I'm happy to report that it definitely is.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 03, 2009 at 03:58 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

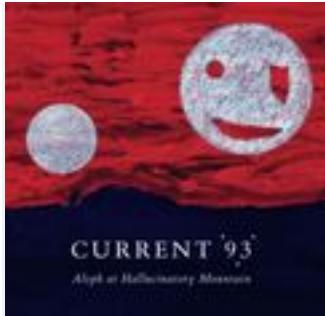
June 07, 2009

Not science fiction (and mostly not religion, either): Some recent music.

It ain't all science fiction here. I've been enjoying some music lately, too.



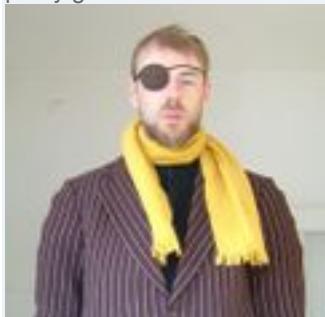
First, one of my favorite bands, [maudlin of the Well](#), released *Part the Second*, a free reunion album. motW was an odd sort of post-metal group, with complex composition and instrumentation, masterminded by Toby Driver (with whom I went to college, but I assure you I'd love this music even if I hadn't). Their twin albums *Bath* and *Leaving Your Body Map*, which are basically a big concept album about astral projection and Kabbalah, remain some of the best music I've ever heard. ([For example.](#)) It was a finite project, giving way to the more experimental [Kayo Dot](#) in 2003. This new album, available as a free download directly from the band, is a gathering of odds and ends from the band's brief career, recently completed and mixed. It stands as a sort of missing link between their final albums and Kayo Dot's abstract first one, so it works as a good introduction to both. You can download it [here](#).



My other favorite band, [Current 93](#), also has a new album, *Aleph at Hallucinatory Mountain*. C93 has gone through a number of transformations over the year, starting as experimental noise and gradually turning into something resembling folk music, with lots of detours along the way. The group is the project of David Tibet, whose theological yearnings have gone through a similarly expansion over the years—beginning as a Crowleyan and possibly Satanist, he flirted with Tibetan Buddhism before settling into a form of apocalyptic/gnostic Christianity as idiosyncratic as his singing voice. Tibet is, for my money, probably the best living poet we've got. His lyrics are complex tapestries of hallucinatory imagery, forming an ever-growing body of mystical literature that's well worth exploring for anyone interested in religious visions. This album, for instance, hints at the mystical history of a character named Aleph, who seems to be some sort of embodiment of violence and murder, or something like that. The music is surprisingly rockin', with unexpected levels of guitar distortion and riffage. "Not Because the Fox Barks" even approaches Sabbath-y metal (though, admittedly, a better point of reference for the album as a whole comes from the Yes belt buckle Tibet is wearing in his sleeve portrait). But despite the absence of compositional master Michael Cashmore on this album, Current haven't left acoustic prettiness behind entirely—"UrShadow" stands out in that regard. Nevertheless, this is one of the biggest shifts in sound the group has had since they put down their tape loops and picked up guitars in the late '80s. My favorite general overview of the group's career is at the no-longer-updated [Soft Black Stars](#). Some samples from *Aleph at Hallucinatory Mountain*, plus a more detailed review, are available at [Brainwashed](#). And you can order the album from [Jnana](#) (in North America) or [Durtro](#) (in Europe, or for downloading, for those of you who don't like lyrics booklets and so forth).



I also had the opportunity to see my *other* other favorite band, [Opeth](#), live a few weeks ago. I had seen them once before, and they remain one of the greatest live groups I've ever seen. You'd think that a progressive death metal band would have some difficulty recreating the complexity of their recorded compositions live, particularly when they cover as much dynamic and textural range as Opeth. But the high highs and low lows are all recreated pretty well perfectly in person. And it doesn't hurt that the opening act on this tour was Enslaved, who are pretty great. \m/



In absolutely not metal-related news, I was also fortunate enough to be present for a rare live performance by Scottish-born pastiche artist and satirist [Momus](#) about two weeks ago. It was a three-hour chronological career retrospective, giving the whole evening a sense of finality. Though I was a bit disappointed that

he didn't bring out the guitar for the early songs—it was just him, an iPod, and performance artist/interpretive dancer Aki Sasamoto—I was very pleased at the breadth of material.

...So that's what I've been listening to while taking some kind of ridiculously extensive notes for my [Cornerstone seminar](#)!

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 07, 2009 at 12:23 PM in [Music](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 08, 2009

Stephen Baldwin, King of the Jungle: The bizarre spiritual landscape of *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!*

New by me at [Religion Dispatches](#): an essay on the surreal role of religion on NBC's reality show *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!*, the roster of which includes public evangelist (and [bad theologian](#)) Stephen Baldwin, and Spencer Pratt of *The Hills*, whose recent conversion to Christianity is... well... Just read this:

Spencer, who has made clear his intentions to be the show's villain, is a recent convert to a very Hollywood sort of Christianity. Spencer sums it up best by recounting his first prayer: "God, please, the one person I want to go on a double date with is Miley Cyrus. If you're so powerful, make me hang out with Miley Cyrus.' He did it within a month." Mysterious ways, indeed. When Baldwin learns that Spencer has not yet been baptized, he launches into a sermon that shows (or has been edited to show) some dubious scriptural knowledge: "John 3:16: What does Christ say to Nicodemus? You must be born again." Heidi helpfully adds: "Jesus was baptized!"

Read the full piece at [Religion Dispatches](#). Read my review of Baldwin's awful, awful book, *The Unusual Suspect*, [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 08, 2009 at 08:46 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 10, 2009

Listen Up TV - "Exploring New Frontiers" of religion and SF



I was recently interviewed for [Listen Up](#), a Canadian religion news show, for a special episode on religion and science fiction. The episode, entitled "Exploring New Frontiers," also includes interviews with [Robert J. Sawyer](#), [John C. Wright](#), and [Robert Charles Wilson](#), among whose company I'm quite thrilled to find myself. It airs Sunday, June 14th on Canada's Global Television Network, but it will also be going up on YouTube in the very near future, so I'll save you the trouble of tracking down a Canadian friend with cable and instead I'll just embed it here as soon as it's available. Sound good? Good.

In the meantime, you can check out the episode summary and a full list of guests at Listen Up's website [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 10, 2009 at 06:30 PM in [Books](#), [Religion in the media](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 11, 2009

Listen Up TV's Science Fiction episode online now!

Well, that was fast. As promised, here is Listen Up TV's episode "Exploring New Frontiers," in four parts.

Part 1, including an interview with [Robert J. Sawyer](#), plus a comment or two from [Robert Charles Wilson](#), among others.

Part 2, featuring yours truly. (They call me a "Harvard-trained expert," which amuses me for some reason. And that is one wacky face I am making in the still frame, huh?)

Part 3, including an interview with author [John C. Wright](#) about his (relatively) recent conversion to Christianity, and scientist-turned-writer [Peter Kazmaier](#).

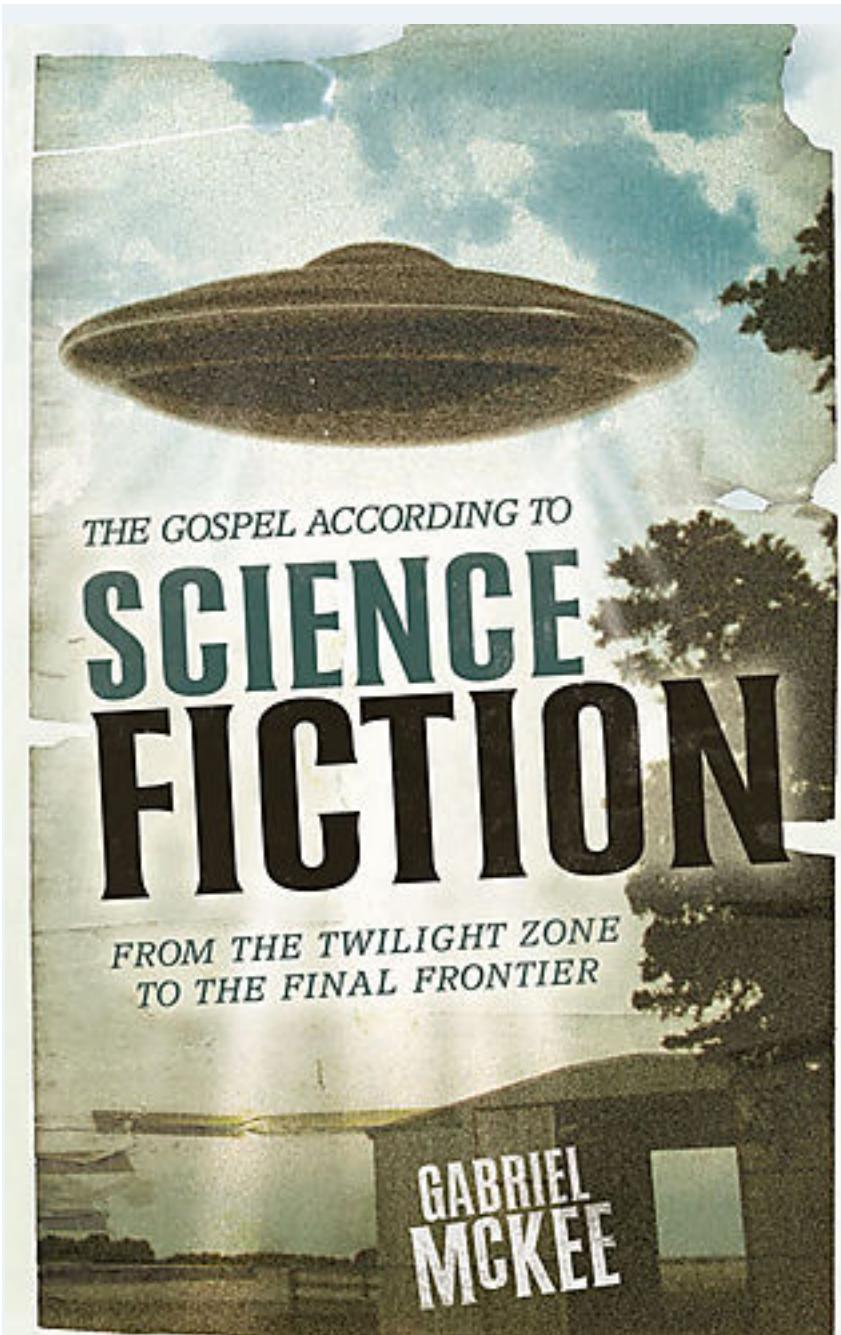
And part 4, the wrap-up.

A nice overview, I thought. You can also watch the episode (and a bunch more) at [Listen Up TV's website](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 11, 2009 at 04:04 PM in [Books](#), [Religion in the media](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 14, 2009

How to get *The Gospel According to Science Fiction* in Canada



I've heard from a few people who have had some difficulty getting their hands on a copy of *The Gospel According to Science Fiction* in Canada. The book is not in stock at [Amazon.ca](#). However, it is in stock at [chapters.indigo.ca](#), so you don't have to deal with a backorder wait. The book is still in print, so there's no need to fear your order getting canceled if it's backordered. And if all else fails, there's always [eBay Canada](#)!

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on June 14, 2009 at 10:41 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

June 14, 2009

Say it's only a paper Moon...



...but it wouldn't be make believe if you believed in me...

I can't discuss [Moon](#) without giving away major elements of the plot. Therefore:

Spoilers ahead.

Moon is the story of Sam Bell—the sole inhabitant of a moon base that gathers energy to be sent back to Earth. He's on a three-year contract, with two weeks left to go, and the solitude has been getting to him—especially since a damaged communications satellite prevents any real-time communication with his family. He's starting to see things, and it's interfering with his work. While working outside the base, one hallucination causes an accident, and he wakes up in the medical bay with no memory of what happened. He wants to leave the base to get the damaged equipment up and running again, but Gerty, his robotic assistant, won't let him leave. He manages to trick the computer into letting him take a quick moonwalk, and once outside the base he investigates the site of the accident, where he finds... another Sam Bell. There follows some great, tense scenes between the two, as they alternately try to pretend that nothing strange is going on and figure out their bizarre situation.

Before long they are able to squeeze the answer out of Gerty: they're clones of the original Sam Bell, who left the base twelve years ago. Their "three-year contract" is actually a capped life-span, at the end of which their bodies begin to deteriorate and are incinerated. Communications with Earth are being artificially blocked, and the taped conversations he's been having with his wife are fake. Everything he's been living for is an illusion, and, in the Dickian tradition, he's forced to cope with realization of the truth.

Sam Rockwell is a pretty amazing actor, and this movie is a fine showcase for that—it's virtually a one-man show (though I certainly don't want to downplay the contribution of Kevin Spacey, the voice of the very HAL-like Gerty). In the hands of a lesser actor this might have ended up schlocky, but he powerfully communicates the soul-wrecking disillusionment the two Bells experience. (The scene in which the older Bell finally establishes contact with his daughter on Earth is particularly devastating.) As one might expect from a movie about clones, the core of the story involves questions of identity. Each of these beings truly, completely believes that he is the original, real Sam Bell, that he will return to Earth at the end of his contract, that his wife and infant daughter are waiting for him. And who's to say they're wrong? They have the memories and the emotions that go along with them. They have, dare I say it, the soul of Sam Bell. But the company that runs the moon base treats them as objects, as machines like Gerty. But there are hints that Gerty may have emotions of his own. He does seem to malfunction a bit, like HAL 9000. But rather than going on a homicidal rampage, his malfunction manifests itself as compassion. He's programmed to help Sam Bell, and help him he does—at the film's end, he's instrumental in sending one of the clones back to Earth. There are multiple Turing tests going on in this story, and both clone and machine pass them with flying colors.



Posted by Gabriel McKee on June 14, 2009 at 02:35 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 01, 2009

Through the Looking Glass...

I have arrived at the [Cornerstone Festival](#), where I will be leading a three-day [seminar](#) on superheroes and religion. If you're reading this and you're planning to be at the festival, go to the Imaginarium at 2 PM Wednesday through Friday and learn some stuff about comics.

I'm also planning to post a sort of video diary, or something like that, on [Religion Dispatches](#), so check there over the next few days for my thoughts on the wild, weird world of an enormous Christian music festival.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on July 01, 2009 at 09:30 AM | [Permalink](#)

July 12, 2009

Some brief thoughts on Cornerstone, evangelical theology, and the "great Western heresy"

So, I'm back from Cornerstone. In short: it was fun; I met some cool people; I even found [a band](#) or two that I like (which I hadn't really expected to happen); I discovered [punk monks](#), which is pretty cool (and who'd have expected to find an Eastern Orthodox group at a midwestern evangelical event?); I didn't get run out on a rail for mentioning the gay rights aspect of the X-Men, and in fact found a rather healthy [discussion](#) going on about how the conservative church needs to be better about how it treats gay people; I was surprised at the relative non-prevalence of pro-life activism (particularly considering the very definite [presence](#) it's had at past Cornerstones), which seems to be getting edged out in favor of issues like poverty, global warming, and child soldiers; and I have found a bit more respect for conservative evangelicals now, though I'm certainly not going to become one anytime soon. More detailed thoughts will be found in a trio of video reports I shot for [Religion Dispatches](#), which I'm told will be posted throughout the coming week.

Having returned from this great gathering of young evangelicals, I was surprised to find that the chief bishop of the Episcopal Church has summed up what I find to be the central error at the heart of evangelical theology. In the keynote address of the Episcopal Church's 2009 convention, The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori states that the central crisis of the church today

has to do with the great Western heresy – that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us alone can be in right relationship with God. It's caricatured in some quarters by insisting that salvation depends on reciting a specific verbal formula about Jesus. That individualist focus is a form of idolatry, for it puts me and my words in the place that only God can occupy, at the center of existence, as the ground of being. That heresy is one reason for the theme of this Convention.

Ubuntu doesn't have any "I's in it. The I only emerges as we connect – and that is really what the word means: I am because we are, and I can only become a whole person in relationship with others. There is no "I" without "you," and in our context, you and I are known only as we reflect the image of the one who created us. Some of you will hear a resonance with Martin Buber's I and Thou and recognize a harmony. You will not be wrong. [...] If we want to be faithful, we need to be continually rediscovering that my needs are not the only significant ones. Ubuntu implies that selfishness and self-centeredness cannot long survive. We are our siblings' knowers and their keepers, and we cannot be known without them – we have no meaning, no true existence in isolation. We shall indeed die as we forget or ignore that reality.

To which I can really only say, "that's what I've been saying all along!" I've never been comfortable with the me-centeredness of evangelical theology, which encompasses the problematic idea of "being saved," and the hermeneutic theory that "[it's all about you](#)", the prosperity gospel, and, yes, even the idea of "personal relationship" with Jesus. To my mind, the gospel isn't about seeking a relationship between God and oneself; it's about attempting to embody divine love in one's relationships with *all* people-- and that's a communal goal as much as a personal one. Too much of today's Christianity is about "What can God do for *me*?", which is, not to mince words, just plain wrong.

Fortunately, I didn't see too much of that self-based theology at Cornerstone. As more and more of the young evangelical community move in the direction of the [emerging church](#), I think (and hope) there will be a shift toward community activism rather than that "great Western heresy" of spiritual prosperity... but [Joel Osteen](#) is still pretty popular. Only time will tell.

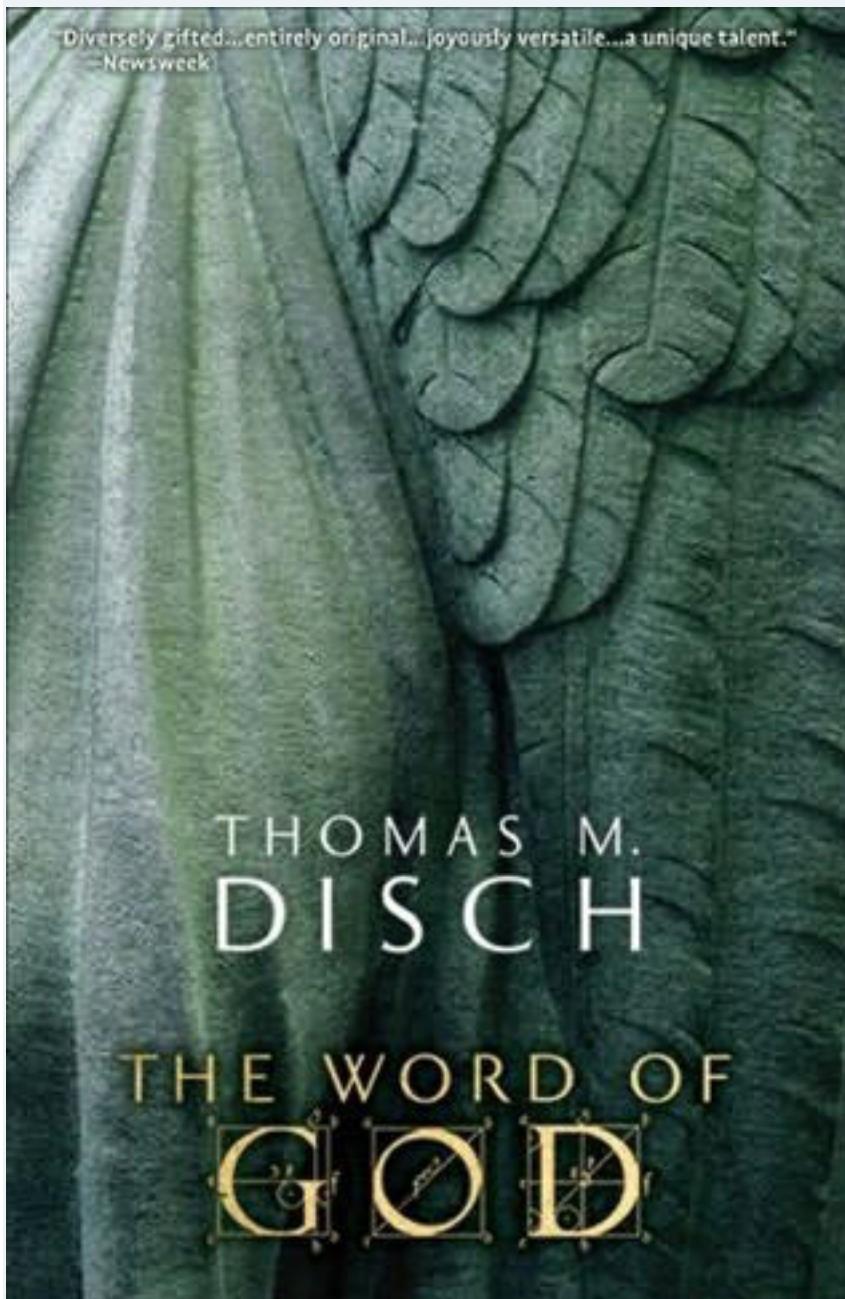
The full text of Bishop Jefferts Schori's address is available [here](#).

[Hat tip: [Religion Dispatches](#), whose report on the speech is worth reading, as is the pro-gay ordination comic at the bottom.]

Posted by Gabriel McKee on July 12, 2009 at 03:15 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 12, 2009

Disching religion: *The Word of God*



I've been dreading reading Thomas M. Disch's *The Word of God* since I first heard about it. The book, subtitled "Holy Writ Rewritten," is Disch's tongue-in-cheek declaration of his own divinity, and includes a not-too-pretty picture of Philip K. Dick. Disch, the author-turned-deity, tells us that Dick has been languishing in the suburbs of Hell thanks to a letter he wrote to the FBI in a fit of paranoia in which he declared his suspicion that Disch was a communist agent. (A broader picture: the day after that letter, Dick wrote Disch a fan letter declaring his *Camp Concentration* to be the best novel he'd ever read, which makes me wonder if the whole thing wasn't intended as some kind of bizarre prank.) In any event, I'd heard the book was disjointed, mean-spirited, and just plain confusing—and Disch's suicide in the immediate aftermath of its release made the whole thing seem even more unpleasant.

And yet. I mean, how could I *not* read it? Science fiction author (or, to be fair, former science fiction author) declares himself God? Onetime friend of Philip K. Dick pondering the state of that great author and mystic's eternal soul? This

is pretty much all of my obsessions in a nutshell, albeit a slightly tough one to crack. But trepidation remained, hence my waiting a year or so after *The Word of God*'s release to actual take a look.

The book is a self-aware hodgepodge: part memoir, part collection of stories and poems, and part a novella about the aforementioned Philip K. Dick, who reincarnates himself as a young Nazi in 1939 to kill Disch's fictional father, the German novelist Thomas Mann. (Really.) It's all over the place in terms of subject matter, and it's also of varying quality: the memoir bits are frequently great, though they can also be bitchy; the previously published stories and poems are generally good; the Dickian novella is... well... terrible, frankly. I've generally preferred Disch as a critic and non-fiction author rather than a novelist—his history of SF, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of*, is great (with one caveat I'll discuss below). His fiction, though multiply-award-winning, never quite grabbed me, and this book doesn't change that fact.*

But what I really ought to be talking about is the religion. How does the theology of Dischianism stand up? Not too well, sadly. Disch has never been a friend of religion, and his discussions of the subject throughout this book give his basic reasons, most of which boil down to criticisms of closed-mindedness and violence. He views religion in general—and Christianity in particular, but Islam too—in harshly extreme terms that preclude any kind of complexity or nuance. To Disch, one is either an atheist or a creationist who bombs abortion clinics; there is no third option (well, besides the worship of Disch himself). One gets the sense that Disch only knows about religion through reading books—books like the mid-'70s creationist textbook *Scientific Creationism*. He's read the Bible, sure, but only through the most conservative lens imaginable. Like that grand alliance of Richard Dawkins and Ray Comfort, he believes there's only one way to read Scripture, despite a grand and varied history of competing and conflicting hermeneutics. And through Disch's lens, all religion gets blurred into a vast, ugly sameness. He attacks the Catholic Church, Islam, and American evangelicalism in the same breath, in a way that suggests that he really believes they're all the same. Dawkins believes that, but he at least tries to make a case for it; with Disch, it seems he hasn't bothered to ponder the distinctions. And there's no sense that he ever, y'know, talked to anybody about their religious beliefs—that might have disrupted his insistence that religious faith requires that one be a bomb-planting maniac or a dimwitted yokel.**

That same shortsightedness seems to be behind the very impulse that led to his satirical declaration of his own godhead. *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of* has a chapter on religion in SF, for which Disch gives us three main examples: L. Ron Hubbard, Philip K. Dick, and the Heaven's Gate community. One of these things, if you'll forgive the musical intrusion, is not like the others; but Disch sees no qualitative difference between them. Dicks' religious experiences were strange, to be sure, but he didn't find a cynically money-driven church on them, nor did he attempt to convince anyone to commit ritual mass suicide. But Disch can't see the difference; he even implies, quite falsely, that Dick had a temptation "to parlay the muddy revelations of the Exegesis into official doctrine and a church." He only begrudgingly admits that, no, Dick didn't try to launch a church or begin a vast evangelical mission to convince people that he had The Truth, but he implies that Dick *would* have, had he lived longer. Disch can't seem to comprehend the concept of religious ideas outside of ideas of power and authority; indeed, he seems confused by the fact that Dick didn't believe he had The Truth—just many shards of a complex and confusing truth that he was never quite able to figure out. Disch doesn't see any distinction between having a mystical experience (as Dick did), presenting oneself a prophet (Hubbard), and declaring oneself God. Thus I can't help but think that the central conceit of *The Word of God* is based on a basic misunderstanding of the last few years of Dick's life; for Disch, believing that God has spoken to you is no different from believing that you *are* God.



The book review column in the April/May 2009 issue of *Asimov's* was an extended essay on *The Word of God* by Norman Spinrad, who was a friend to both Dick and Disch. *Asimov's* has made the [full text](#) of the essay available online—thankfully, because it's highly recommended reading for anyone who wants to understand the factors that culminated in Disch's suicide and his dying-breath slander of an author he once admired. [Read it](#). Now. Even if you never plan on reading *The Word of God*, it's a powerful piece, and does much more to reconcile the contradictions of Disch's life and death than I ever could. What emerges, both in Spinrad's piece and in Disch's final work, is a portrait of an extremely intelligent, extremely funny and extremely cynical man—but it's the cynicism that won in the end. And I think it's that same cynicism that painted such a starkly-divided picture of what faith is and does in *The Word of God*. If Disch hadn't been that cynic, if he had allowed for a bit more nuance in his understanding of the things in the world he didn't like, he might still be alive today. But then, would he have still been Thomas Disch? I'll leave that question for people who knew him better—either personally and as a writer. The view from the sidelines (where I am) is that Disch's cynicism demanded a sad ending to his life, and *The Word of God* is a central part of that tragedy.

*I'm planning to give another shot at his early novels soon. I did rather like *Echo Round His Bones*, and I have high hopes for *The Genocides* and *White Fang Goes Dingo* (or *The Puppies of Terra*, or *Mankind Under the Leash*, or whatever they're calling it this week).

**I'm talking here about the tone of his writing, not attempting to state facts on matters of which I am quite ignorant. If I'm wrong, if there is any person out there of faith—any faith!—who conversed with Disch about matters religious, please let me know. I'm curious.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on July 12, 2009 at 10:53 PM in [Atheism](#), [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

July 15, 2009

Cornerstone Festival diary, day 1

The first of three installments of my video diary from the Cornerstone Festival is now up at [Religion Dispatches](#). In the first video, I talk about the Festival's many seminars (including those at the Imaginarium, where my seminar was held) and the changing political landscape of the festival. Check it out [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on July 15, 2009 at 06:36 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 03, 2009

Awfully quiet around here...

It's been a while since I've posted here, as you may (or may not) have noticed. July was a mixed-up month, between Cornerstone and a week-and-a-half vacation, and now I'm on another week-long trip that's basically a working vacation. I'm in Ithaca, NY, processing (among some other things) a collection of 2,000-odd science fiction magazines for Cornell University's rare book and manuscript library. Which is about the best job ever, yes? But while I'm up here my Internet access is somewhat limited, hence no likelihood of more posts until next week or later.

In the meantime, one neat thing: at a used bookstore in Ithaca today (I don't recall the name offhand), I found an Ace Double that I didn't have (F-215, John Brunner's *Listen! The Stars* with Jane Roberts' *The Rebels*). And on the first page of the latter title, what do I find? An inscription reading "To Rod Serling -- Jane Roberts." Mr. Serling was an Ithacan, so it's very likely this actually came from his collection (though whether or not he ever read it-- who knows. There's some wear, but no actual stress lines on the spine, to which Doubles are particularly prone if they're read). Ace Doubles? Awesome. Ace Doubles inscribed by their authors to SF television's first and greatest master? VERY awesome.

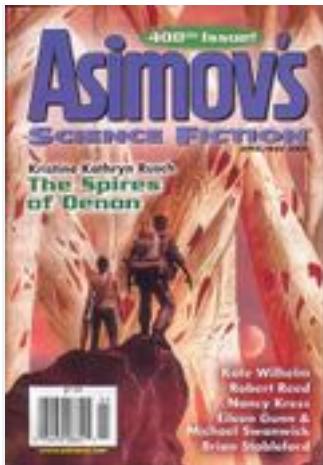
In any event, I never posted links to my second and third video reports from Cornerstone, both of which were posted at Religion Dispatches last week. Video #2, in which I discuss the good, the bad, and the ugly of Cornerstone's bands, is [here](#). Video #3 (easily the best of the three) discusses punk monks, the place of spiritual ambiguity in Christian music, and the moral struggle over throwing up the horns to Christian metal; that one is [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on August 03, 2009 at 09:39 PM in [Books](#), [Music](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

August 16, 2009

SF Magazine Catchup: In which a great many stories are discussed

At the beginning of the year, a postal computer error led to a whole bunch of my mail getting lost. (There are a lot of streets in Brooklyn, many of them with the same name, and some brilliant pre-Singularity machine decided that I lived on "L---- Place" instead of "L---- Avenue" and redirected my mail accordingly. But not all of it, mind you. Only about a third, so it took me some time to notice). Among the victims of the error were my subscriptions to both [Analog](#) and [Asimov's](#). The lovely folks at Dell Magazines were very understanding and sent replacements of all the missing issues, but by the time I had gotten them all I was a month or two behind, and have only just now caught up. So, without further ado, here are my thoughts on the last seven months of both, beginning with...



Asimov's, April/May 2009. I wrote [earlier](#) about what is probably the most important piece of writing in this issue: Norman Spinrad's essay "What Killed Tom Disch?" It's available online, so if you didn't take my advice before, [read it now](#).

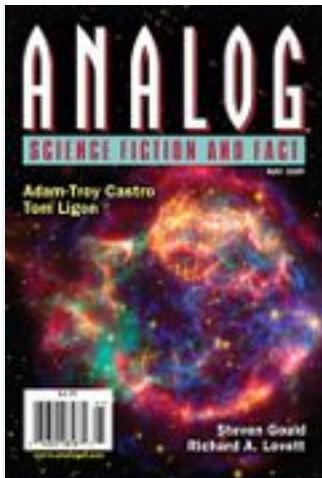
Also worthy of note is Brian Stableford's "The Great Armada," the latest in a series of alternate-history novellas. In this one, Francis Bacon (among others) attempts to fend off an invasion from the moon. I mention it here because the nonhuman players, which include golems (read: androids) and interplanetary "Ethereals," view their conflict in theological terms. The Ethereals consider themselves "intermediaries" between the material and spiritual worlds, and the golems are programmed for faith:

"We are unable to doubt the existence of God... but we cannot pretend to understand His nature, or know His purpose... Whether or not you and I need faith to sustain our belief in God, we both need trust to sustain our conviction that He has our best interests at heart."

It's a nice ingredient, but the stew is a bit overcomplicated, particularly if one doesn't recall the earlier installments in the series. Perhaps if the various parts were to be collected into a novel, the story of this universe would fare a bit better.

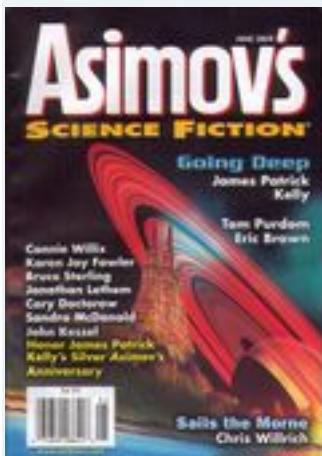
Eileen Gunn and Michael Swanwick's "The Armies of Elfland" is one of the more disturbing fantasy stories I've ever read. These elves aren't cute or wise, they're a malicious group of interdimensional invaders that torture, maim, and kill in a manner that's at turns malicious and arbitrarily indifferent. I don't have much to say about its religious outlook, but it's really, really good, if you can stomach it.

The final story in this issue is "The Spires of Denon" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch, who is very rapidly becoming one of my favorite authors of the moment. This story, set in her "Diving Into the Wreck" universe, is a mystery of alien archeology with [sensawunda](#) galore. The eponymous structures are an enormous, extremely fragile construction built by a mysterious alien race on the top of a mountain range. There are a number of theories as to what they are and why they're there, including the hypothesis that they're some kind of temple, even though "there was no evidence that the Denonites had been particularly religious." I'm a sucker for a good [Big Dumb Object](#) story...



Analog, May 2009. There's a lot to enjoy about Alexis Glynn Latner's "Quickfeathers," in which colonists on an alien world struggle to understand the culture that inhabited the planet before them. Much of the information comes from an ancient myth written on the walls of a tomb. It bears some surface resemblances to Robert R. Chase's recent story ["Five Thousand Light Years From Birdland,"](#) which also posited a linguistic puzzle in the mythology of some bird-aliens. But Latner's story has a one-liner that deserves some sort of prize: "Occams' Razor says you shouldn't multiply bird gods without a good reason."

Also of note in this issue is Steven Gould's "A Story, With Beans," a short-short about a world transformed by what seem to be metal-eating nanobots. There's a story-within-the-story about "The City of God, where the People of the Book reside," which reflects not too kindly on the role religion plays in this dystopian future. A letter published in response in the September issue points out a big Biblical citation error, as "the Book" in question includes a story of ten plagues... in its first chapter. The letter-writer wonders if "the sectarians' version of the Bible discards Genesis, discards the first six chapters of Exodus, and conflates the next five chapters of Exodus into one—or (more probably) Mr. Gould has committed the authorial sin of not actually checking a source before citing it." Gould's one-line response: "All perfectly possible interpretations." That seems a bit cavalier to me. If the story is going to paint religion in an unpleasant light, doesn't the author owe it to the Bible to at least consult it briefly before publication? But the story's pretty good nonetheless, so Gould gets a pass... this time.



Asimov's, June 2009. The standout here (for this blog's purposes, at least) is "Sails the Morne" by Chris Willrich, a nice little space opera about interstellar diplomacy and the Book of Kells. The starship *Eight Ball* is transporting some alien envoys and the famous illuminated manuscript to an offworld conference, only to be attacked by space pirates (let's hear it for space pirates!) who are members of the almost-Lovecraftian sect known as "Evangelists of Entropy." These cultists hope to wipe out sentient species so that their Old God-ish masters, known as Logovores, can take back the universe—and, to that end, they destroy "the vessels of memory," seeking to eliminate the information that allows sentience to thrive. "They like to scrag important texts," one character explains. "Kind of like a sacrifice. They burn them, shred them, or literally eat them." In opposition to the Evangelists are the Night Readers, flippantly described as an insane but generally nice sect. "They want only to protect the astral essences of literature from monsters from Beyond. Or something. All harmless mystical crap."

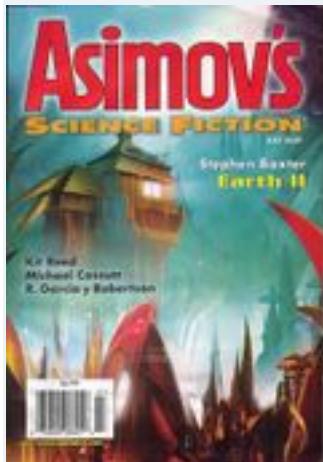
Honorable fanatics." "Sails the Morne" is a fun adventure story, and the religious angle gives it a bit more depth than you might expect from a story with space pirates. ([Space pirates!](#))



Analog, June 2009. There's much to like in this issue. The opening story, "But it Does Move" by Harry Turtledove, is a clever alternate history story that has Galileo subjected, not to the interrogations of an inquisitor, but to... psychoanalysis on the couch of Cardinal Sigismondo Gioioso, i.e. Sigmund Freud (a few centuries early). The Cardinal approaches Galileo's writings not so much as heresy as an act of sublimated aggression intended to "pay back all the doubters," among them Galileo's own father (who wanted him to be a musician). Historical mashups like this don't always work, but this one is a success—though I can't help but feel that Turtledove "gets" Galileo a bit more than he does Freud.

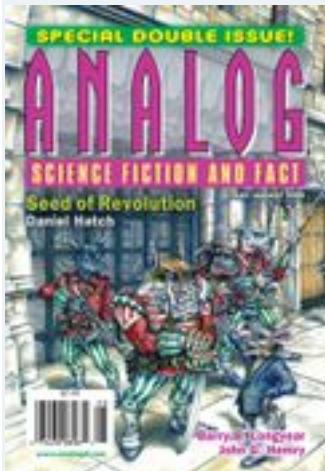
Stephen L. Burns' "The Chain" is a story of near-future ethics involving a sort of religion that's programmed into humankind's robotic servants. Robots have been emancipated after decades of slavery, but are still subservient to humans, and they earn status points when they suffer at the hands of their organic masters. If they earn enough points, they're told, they'll climb up the ranks of "the Perfection" until they reach "Diamond" status, a sort of mechanized heaven. The only problem is that the constant abuse that earns them those points leaves them deactivated on a junk heap long before they reach that point. The Perfection was programmed into the machines to keep them from rising up to demand their rights, and it's a secret that only a handful of humans know about. The story describes the turning point when the robotic religion is revealed, to human and machine alike, as a fraud. Clearly the story rejects the notion of redemptive suffering, but it also hints at a new kind of religion, the embrace of a truth that sets the robots free.

James van Pelt's "Solace" is pretty complex for a nine-pager. It's the story of Meghan, a crewmember on a generation starship who spends 99 out of every 100 years cryogenically frozen. The story explores some of the psychological difficulties of this kind of travel, in part by intercutting the seemingly-incongruous story of a nineteenth-century monk-turned-miner trapped in a cabin after a vicious snowstorm. Without giving too much away, Meghan gains the "solace" of the title from this miner, and his religious faith is a central part of that solace. Van Pelt's story hints at the ongoing importance of religious faith in a technological future, the need for the solace (among other things) that religion can provide in times of need.

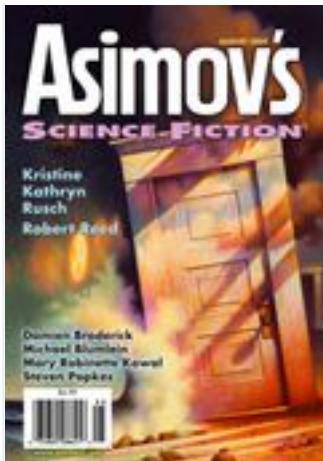


Asimov's, July 2009. Michael Cassutt hasn't written very much—[ISFDB](#) lists five

novels and 26 short stories in the last 35 years. But his name still stands out for me, because he co-edited (with Andrew Greeley) *Sacred Visions*, an anthology of SF on Catholic themes. That anthology is notable for a number of reasons, not least of which the fact that it was the first publication of Jack McDevitt's "Gus," which is my pick for the [best SF story about religion](#). So when I saw the title of his short story in the July issue of *Asimov's*—"The Last Apostle"—I was intrigued. And, indeed, the story is intriguing—an alternate-present sort of story about the twelve men who have walked on the moon. (Not the real ones, mind you, but inhabitants of a fictional universe an awful lot like ours.) An insightful journalist latched on to the significance of that number and published a popular bestseller entitled *The Apostles*. In the book, she boils each of the twelve down to a single-word type: there's the Politician, the Good Old Boy, the Mystic. The central character of the story is Joe Liquori, the last man to set foot on the moon. Dubbed Omega, he is contrasted, in all ways, with the recently-deceased Alpha, who was the first. A reinvigorated space program has set up a base on the moon, and Liquori is to be given the opportunity to return there—and, as we learn, to wrap up some unfinished business from his previous trip. Cassutt's story is a nice look at the mysticism and mythology that grew up around the space program, and in that regard it reminded me a bit of Robert Silverberg's excellent "Feast of St. Dionysius" (my pick for the [second-best SF story about religion](#), incidentally). Of course, that mythology has died down since the end of the Apollo program, but—as this story, and the recent spate of lunar landing nostalgia, suggest—it can still resonate.



Analog, July/August 2009. A while back I wrote about Tom Ligon's ["El Dorado,"](#) a story in which some nasty alien religious fanatics launch a very, very fast-moving projectile toward Earth in an effort to wipe out the human race. I liked the story, but I thought the treatment of the aliens and their religion was a bit too sparse. This issue of *Analog* features "Payback," the sequel to that story, which examines the motivations of those aliens a bit further, and shows that their purpose was quite a bit more complicated than their standard "kill-the-infidels" communication suggested. Despite the efforts of reductionists to claim otherwise, so-called ["religious violence"](#) is generally the result of a wide range of factors, and one character in "Payback" concludes that the aliens "have a secular leadership who used a commonly held feeling to justify an attack"—he cites the Crusades as a terrestrial example. At the end of the day, it's still a story of revenge, but I loved getting some insight into the culture that launched the missile in "El Dorado"—particularly since I thought that kind of insight was the one factor lacking in that story.

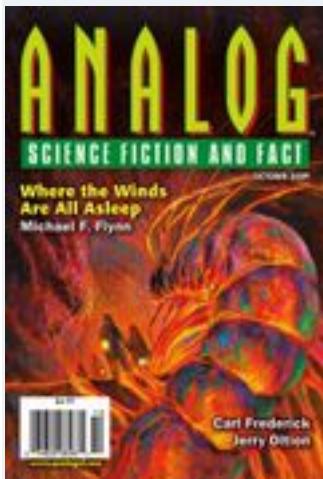


Asimov's, August 2009. From *Odd John* to *Ender's Game*, stories of preternaturally-brilliant children are a long-standing tradition in SF. Damien Broderick's "The Qualia Engine" is a strong entry in the subgenre—it's the story of the "Atom Kids," a group of genetically-engineered geniuses, and (more importantly) their even-more-brilliant children. There's rich characterization here, and a big part of it is the contempt that Saul, the narrator, has for his mother's religious faith. Saul speaks of "Father Paul," the first of the Atom Kids, who went on to become a priest, and brought his mother into the faith as well:

"In the joint foolishness and longing for absolutes of the Patriarch's medievalism, he and L.C., my mother, had cultivated their immense minds into a shared folie, but hardly a radical one, an architecture of belief and worship shared, after all, by many of the finest minds in Western history, and even today by a large percentage of the planet. I'd confronted or avoided their faith for years, in a mutinous but largely unspoken resistance. Not hostility; how can you turn against the woman who gave you birth? But they both knew the antagonism I nurtured toward their beliefs."

Saul goes on to express some doubts the authenticity of their faith, for somewhat spoiler-ish reasons, but I don't think the readers are supposed to share those doubts. It would be easy to conclude that the story itself shares Saul's antagonism, but the mere fact that it presents Father Paul and Saul's mother as brilliant minds and also people of faith speaks volumes.

Also of interest is Mary Robinette Kowal's "The Consciousness Problem," a story about the ethics of cloning and the nature of the self. The conundrum to which the title refers is the fact that a cloned body doesn't share the memories, mind, or personality of its original, and (of course) it's a problem that's overcome by the story's scientists. A scientist named Myung successfully clones both his body and his mind-- but the clone doesn't like being isolated in a lab, and longs to escape. There's a particularly interesting scene in which Myung's wife is brought in to test the success of the experiment—she's to try to guess which of the two is the clone. She guesses correctly—not because the clone is imperfect, but because she senses how much he misses her after months of isolation. It's a great exploration of the ethical and spiritual issues of sentience, with some moving characterization to boot.



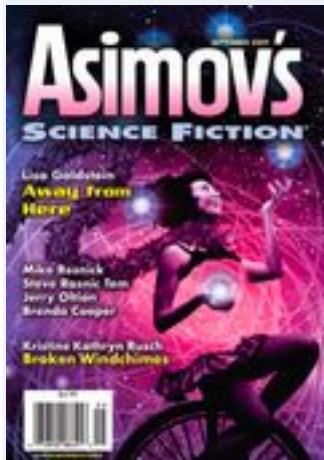
Analog, October 2009. Michael F. Flynn doesn't want us to forget that [not all religion is anti-science](#), and though that's not the theme of "Where the Winds Are All Asleep," it's a point that's simply and

subtly demonstrated early in the story. After reading Eric Brown's *Kéthani*, I'm a bit over the "group-of-friends-hanging-out-in-a-pub" motif, but the ensemble in Flynn's framing device includes an interesting pair of characters: creationist Danny Mulloney and Jesuit scholar James McGinnity. It's clear where Flynn's sympathies lie from the instant Mulloney appears on the scene:

"You see, Danny had forsaken Holy Mother Church a few years back for one of those sects that worship a text rather than a God, and 'evil-ution' was the pea under his personal mattress."

They're both caricatures, sure, but it's a nice way of summing up Flynn's point: the kind of fundamentalist Christianity that so irks the new atheists (for example) is a rather recent development, and, globally speaking, a minority position among Christians. For Flynn, conservative Protestants are upstart kids who will eventually, hopefully, learn the greater wisdom of their Holy Mother—symbolized here by a Jesuit, natch. The rest of the story isn't about that, but rather about underground rock monsters, and is pretty darned cool.

Jesse L. Watson's "Shallow Copy" covers similar ground to "The Consciousness Problem," but with AI instead of clones. A genius kid named Will programs a computerized copy of his best friend Max on his laptop, but then has to face the Frankensteinian ethical dilemma of his creation's moral status. Both Will and the real Max are concerned about AI-Max's happiness, but they may not have the skills to program an artificial world that can keep him content. They conclude that they're "smart enough to make an artificial person inside a computer, but not smart enough to understand the consequences." But the deed is done—to delete the AI would be murder. Like "The Consciousness Problem," it's a nice ethical exploration.



Asimov's, September 2009. Speaking of AIs and ethics, Mike Resnick and Lezli Robyn's "Soulmates" contains some similar explorations, this time with a robot who befriends a human. MOZ-512—"Mose"—is a troubleshooting robot, and one of his duties is to deactivate robots who are no longer useful. He meets an employee at his factory named Gary who's months into a deep depression after pulling the life support plug on his wife. Mose sees more than a few parallels between his duties and the act that has driven Gary to drink, and it leads him to question the morality of his own duties. Before long Mose is refusing to deactivate any robot that can be repaired—which puts him on the fast track to deactivation himself.

Similar moral questions arise in Steve Rasnic Tem's "The Day Before the Day Before," a story about an agent for a time-travel service that makes minute adjustments in the past to bring about unspecified greater good in the future. At times these adjustments are ridiculously small, as in the story of one agent who was assigned to remove a gum wrapper from the ground. But the agents aren't told what the consequences of their changes will be. When the narrator is asked to do something that he considers morally reprehensible, he has difficulty weighing an unknown good against a known evil. And, like Mose, this makes him a liability to his employers.

We now return to our regularly-scheduled review schedule (Singularity willing).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on August 16, 2009 at 01:34 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(5\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

August 27, 2009

Where's the love for *Defying Gravity?*



ABC I wrote a brief review of [Defying Gravity](#)

[Gravity](#), ABC's new prime(ish)-time SF drama, for [Religion Dispatches](#), in which I discuss the role that religion plays in the show's first episode. But that's not what I'm going to talk about here. Instead, I want to ask a simple question: why aren't SF fans talking about this show?

Now, I'll freely admit that I haven't done anything like a complex, comprehensive search of SF blogs or anything, but really, I've hardly seen any discussion about it. You'd think it would cause at least a bit of buzz: major network launches a hard-SF show with a good design sense, great effects, reasonable lip service paid to real science... it's more than a bit unique. But the world's SF blogs don't go nuts... they goes to sleep.

I understand that it might not be everybody's cup of tea, but, really, when's the last time you even heard of a weekly hard SF show? ([Cosmos](#) doesn't count.) No warp drives, no bumpy-headed aliens, just honest-to-goodness zero-g crisis management? I don't know that there's ever been another show like this (barring the BBC miniseries that inspired it, of course), and SF fans seem to be greeting the news with a barely-stifled yawn.

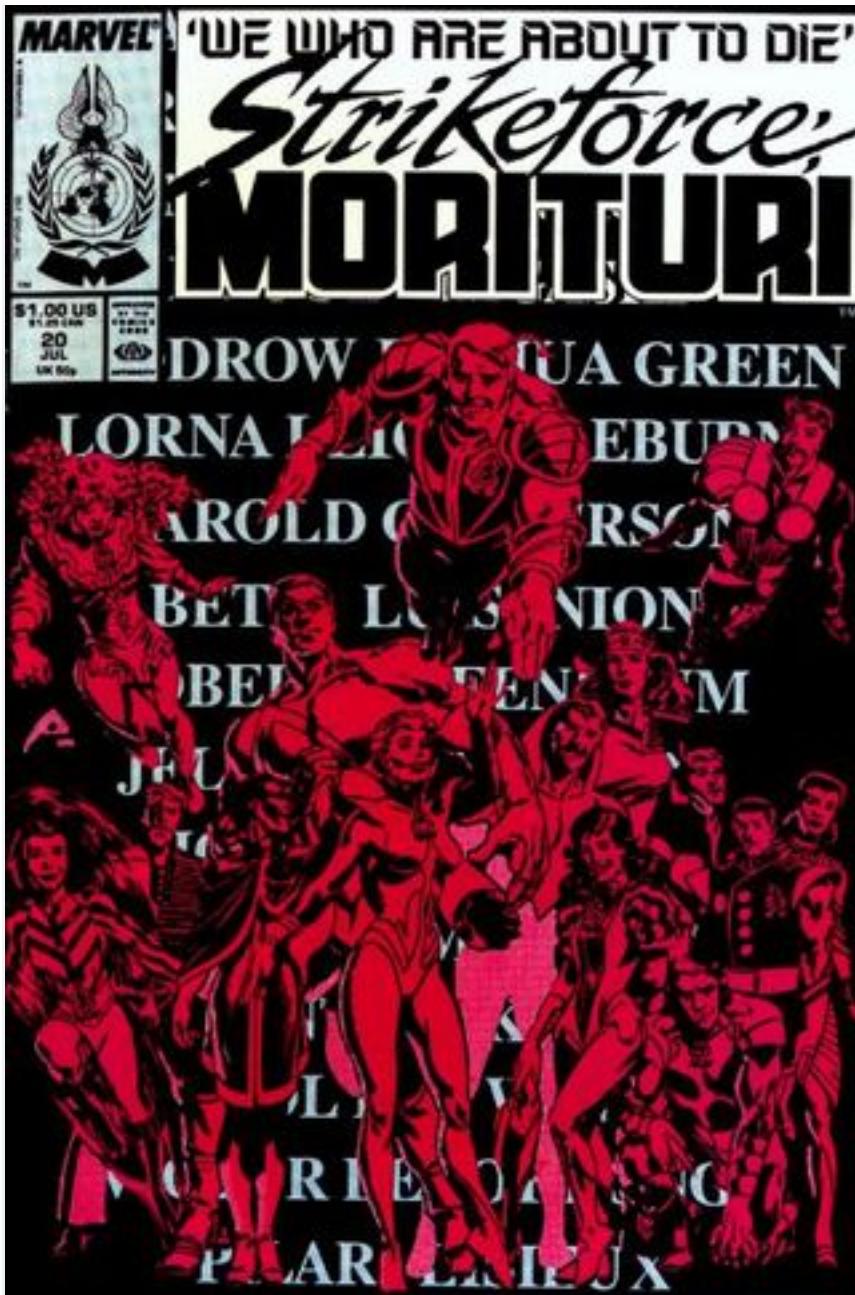
In short: if you haven't watched *Defying Gravity* yet, give it a chance. If you're the cynical type, take a deep breath, accept that an unsatisfying explanation for why they appear to have gravity is better than no explanation at all, and give it two chances. The premiere is on [Hulu](#) through September 7th, and new episodes air at 10 PM on ABC. Yeah, I know, it's up against *Mad Men*, but that's all the more reason that SF fans should rally around it in its struggle for ratings. *Defying Gravity* doesn't deserve the kind of dismissal that it's gotten from io9 (whose [scornful review](#) is exactly the kind of thing that drives flawed but promising shows to early graves). And it certainly doesn't deserve the general cold shoulder it seems to be getting from SF fans. So come on, guys, watch the darned thing! (I'll even make it easy on you: the first episode is embedded below.)

Oh, and read my review at Religion Dispatches [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on August 27, 2009 at 08:47 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(7\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

September 08, 2009

The Many Pleasant Surprises of *Strikeforce: Morituri*



When I was younger, I had the first two issues of a Marvel Comics series called *Strikeforce: Morituri*. I enjoyed them, but I knew the series had been canceled pretty quickly, and so I assumed that it wasn't very good, and never sought out any other issues of it. But I was always curious about where the story went.

And so, when I found a complete run of the entire series for 20 cents a pop, I couldn't resist it. Six bucks was a small price to pay to settle one of the enduring mysteries of my childhood, even if it wasn't very good.

Little did I know I was uncovering one of the hidden gems of '80s comics. *Strikeforce: Morituri* is not just an enjoyable superhero series, it's also a fine work of SF with great art (under the original creative team, at least). I had forgotten, had I ever bothered to learn them as a kid, the names of the writer and artist who created the book: Peter B. Gillis and Brent Anderson. Anderson is the artist on [Astro City](#), one of the best comics you'll ever read, and you can see the beginnings of his mastery of facial expression in this book. Gillis is probably a less-widely-known name, but I now know him as the author of some impressive stories in the '80s. His run on *Micronauts* was far more contemplative and intelligent than you'd ever expect a toy tie-in book to be. And he penned a storyline in *Doctor Strange* in which the

Sorcerer Supreme dumps his long-time disciple-slash-girlfriend Clea because he needs to devote himself more fully to meditation and contemplation. I love the Lee/Ditko origins of the character, sure, but it was nice to see somebody ditching their Silver Age caricature of "Eastern mysticism" for something vaguely resembling the life of real-life mountaintop monks.*

Add to that list of Gillis's successes *Strikeforce: Morituri*, the story of a future Earth overrun by marauding aliens called the Horde. Not powerful enough to actually conquer the planet, the Horde are content to terrorize its inhabitants with random raids and arbitrary acts of brutality. Humankind is powerless to stop them until a scientist develops a technique that can give ordinary humans superpowers. The only catch is the "Morituri effect"-- within a year, the powers will kill their hosts. The setup leaves a lot of room for the characters to meditate on their mortality, and though at times it can be a bit much, Gillis is strong enough a writer that most of that hand-wringing comes across as honest rather than contrived, in large part because of solid characterization.



In [my review](#) of Gary K. Wolfe and

Archbishop John J. Myers' novel *Space Vulture*, I mentioned the rarity of low-level religiosity in SF. There are plenty of [alternate-universe monks](#) and evil preachers, but very few normal folks who spend an hour a week in a church-- or, if there are, their authors don't mention it. Strikeforce: Morituri offers a nice exception to this in the character of Jelene Anderson, code-named Adept. The Morituri process gives her the ability to comprehend anything, from mechanical technologies to complex life-forms to abstract scientific concepts, if given enough exposure to them. She's also a Christian, and though the volume of her faith is perhaps a little bit louder than one usually sees in the real world (witness the cross motif on her costume), Gillis handles it with much more subtlety than most other writers would. It's an important aspect of her character, but it's not the only aspect of it, and it never becomes a punchline.

As the Morituri effect draws near, Adept's powers go into overdrive, her brain analyzing and processing concepts decades ahead of human science. And as her mind expands to near-cosmic levels, her faith remains strong, and she

sees it reflected in all of her newfound understanding. Her final words before the Morituri effect kills her are: "I have seen thy hand in all things, my Lord, and I am filled with joy--" In Adept, Gillis paints a picture of faith blending with science to create a deeply unified understanding of the universe, and her final moments are among the series' strongest moments.

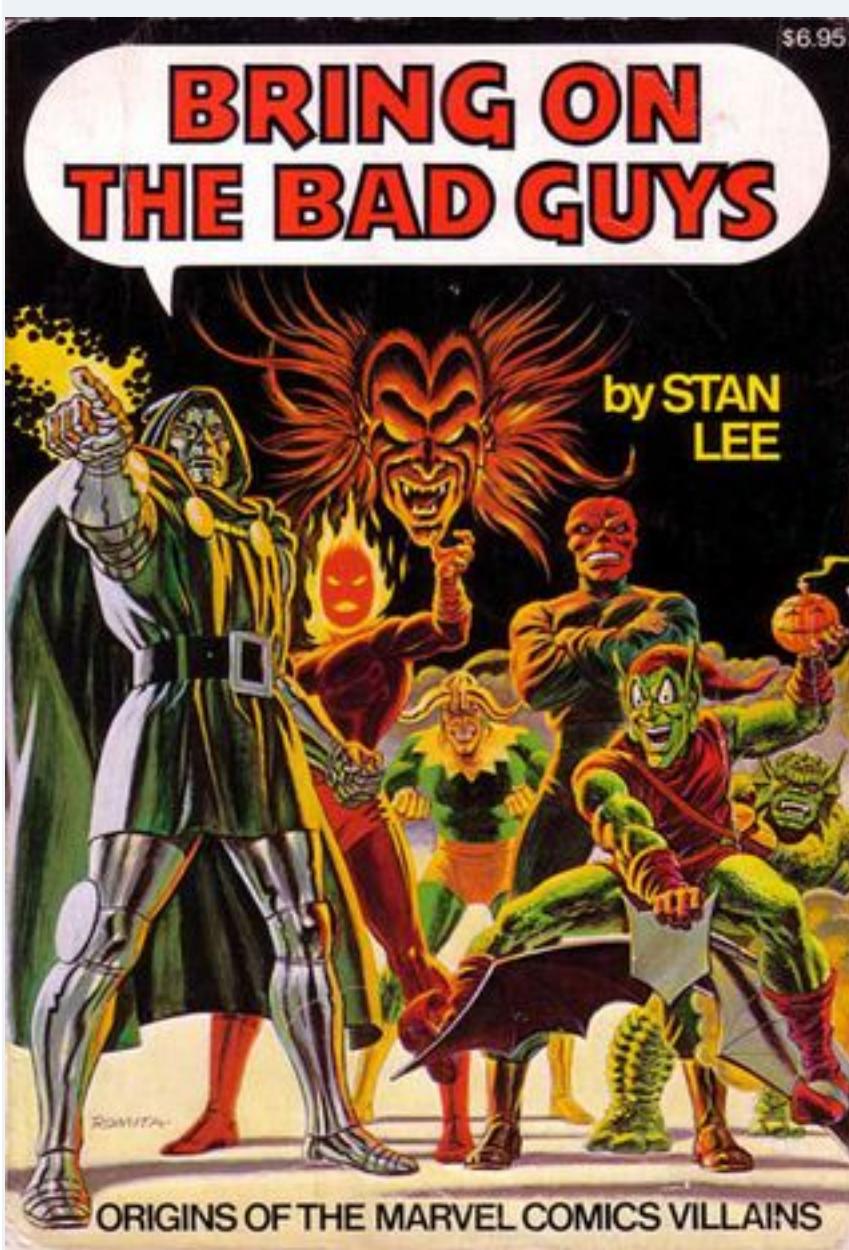
Things got a bit sloppier after Gillis and Anderson departed the book. Their replacements, writer James D. Hudnall and artist Mark Bagley (plus a rotating army of fill-in artists), had a hard time capturing the focus of the series' earlier issues. But there are still some fine SFnal concepts in those late issues, and some interesting exploration of the desire for revenge. The later team made a valiant effort to recapture the strength of the book's first dozen or so issues, but it was a losing battle-- indeed, things were losing steam before Gillis and Anderson left. Still, *Strikeforce: Morituri* is one of the more pleasant surprises I've found in the quarter bin: excellent superheroics, solid SF, and an intriguing picture of faith and science to boot.

*Gillis's successor on Dr. Strange was Roy Thomas, who had first written the character in the late '60s. He turned in some great stories on his second run, but the speed with which he jettisoned Gillis's monastic approach always bugged me a bit. He very much wanted a Dr. Strange who was both in the world and of it, which is about as far from Gillis's take as one can get.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 08, 2009 at 09:52 PM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

September 09, 2009

SF Signal's Mind Meld: Bad guys we love to hate



Signal's latest Mind Meld post, which asks: I was a glad participant in SF

Signal's latest Mind Meld post, which asks:

Who are the best bad guys in science fiction, fantasy, and/or horror literature?

Read my full response-- which is more about bad *things* than bad *guys*, since that's what I think works best in letter-based SF-- [here](#), alongside answers from the likes of Sandra McDonald, Adam-Troy Castro, and Suzy McKee Charnas [no relation (that I'm aware of)].

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 09, 2009 at 08:31 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

September 14, 2009

My Work is Not Yet Done: Thomas Ligotti's Dark Buddhism?



'He has a dark vision of a new
and special kind, a vision that
no one had before him'

Interzone

MY WORK IS NOT YET DONE

THOMAS LIGOTTI

Winner of the Bram Stoker Award and
International Horror Guild Award

I don't read very much horror fiction. I enjoy Poe and Lovecraft and even occasionally King, but the genre doesn't grab me in quite the same way that SF does. But the biggest exception for me is Thomas Ligotti, a little-known writer whose short fiction has mostly been confined to small presses and tiny print runs despite the fact that he's one of the best writers in any genre, living, dead, or otherwise. His sort of most recent work, a novella (or just a short novel, depending on your page count threshold) called *My Work is Not Yet Done*, won both the Bram Stoker Award and the International Horror Guild in 2002, but didn't get a print run bigger than 1,000 copies until Virgin Books re-released it earlier this year. Some long-time Ligotti fans have complained that the story is too mundane, and certainly its setting, a modern cubicle-ridden office, is more down-to-earth than some of Ligotti's previous work. But despite-- or perhaps because of-- its accessibility, the story contains perhaps the most extreme example of Ligotti's bleak philosophy than anything else he's written to date.

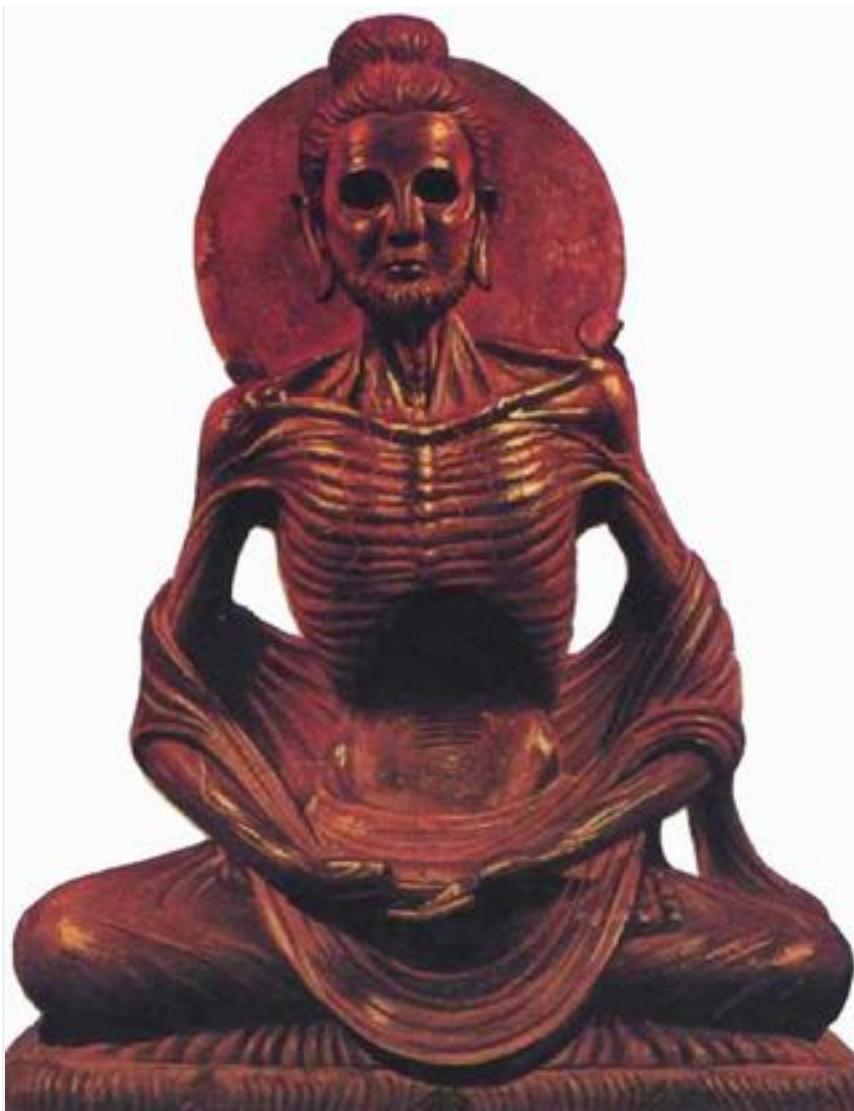
My Work is Not Yet Done is the story of Frank Dominio, a mid-management drone in a company that does... well, we're never quite sure, and it doesn't much matter. Dominio becomes convinced that his co-workers, who he calls the Seven Dwarfs, the Seven Swine, or just the Seven, are conspiring against him. At first it seems like simple paranoia,

but events soon begin to prove him right, leading him on a bizarre path of revenge that takes more than a few unexpected turns. More importantly, though, Dominio's understanding of the conspiracy against him grows. He begins to understand that it's not simply the Seven who hope to destroy him, it is the system that they represent-- their company, and, on a greater level, the entire corporate system. In a particularly powerful passage, Dominio decries the aims of his company and others like it:

The company that employed me strived only to serve up the cheapest fare that its customers would tolerate, churn it out as fast as possible, and charge as much as they could get away with. If it were possible to do so, the company would sell what all businesses of its kind dream about selling, creating that which all our efforts were tacitly supposed to achieve: the ultimate product-- Nothing. And for this product, they would command the ultimate price-- Everything.

This market strategy would then go on until one day among the world-wide ruins of derelict factories and warehouses and office buildings, there stood only a single, shining, windowless structure with no entrance and no exit. Inside would be-- will be-- only a dense network of computers calculating profits. Outside will be tribes of savage vagrants with no comprehension of the nature or purpose of the shining, windowless structure. Perhaps they will worship it as a god. Perhaps they will try to destroy it...

Ligotti's aim, at this point in the story, seems to be to depict the dehumanizing horror of capitalism. But, as Dominio descends further to the bottom of the conspiracy against him, he begins to see it as a much, much larger problem than simply a poorly-designed economic system. By the end of the book, he describes the being behind the conspiracy, a cosmic entity he calls the Great Black Swine: "a grunting, bestial force that animated, that used our bodies to frolic in whatever mucky thing came its way." This force "moved and manipulated all the created life of this world and gave me the power to move and manipulate things according to my will." The Great Black Swine is more than simply a plot against a single middle-manager; it is something more akin to sin itself-- and, for Ligotti, that nameless evil is ultimate reality.



There are a lot of parallels between

Ligotti's worldview and Buddhism. In an [interview](#) with the *New York Review of Science Fiction*, Ligotti acknowledges the similarity, stating that "Buddhism isn't my point of departure, but I'm in a similar place." Dominio gives a description of the ultimate nature of reality, which he experiences after crushing a cockroach, that seems to express the [Three Marks of Existence](#) of Buddhism: that all things are impermanent, that all reality is suffering, and that there is no self. His statement of this enlightenment (not a term he uses, but certainly applicable) could come directly from the [Dhammapada](#):

We were brought into this world out of nothing... We were kept alive in some form, any form, as long as we were viciously thrashing about, acting out our most intensely vital impulses... We would be pulled back into the flowing blackness only when we had done all the damage we were allowed to do, only when our work was done. The work of you against me.... and me against you.

But where the Buddhist response to this understanding of existence is to seek to liberate all beings from the cycle of suffering, Dominio's reaction is much darker: he concludes that all existence must be destroyed, or, failing that, he must destroy himself. He must do "all the damage he is allowed to do"-- and, by the novel's conclusion, he seems to have gained enough eldritch power to do a great deal of damage indeed. That desire for destruction is the result of the enormous *difference* between Ligotti's worldview and Buddhism. To Western eyes, Buddhism can appear pessimistic, or even nihilistic: all that talk about existence being suffering, and the ultimate goal being "cessation" from existence as we know it. But in fact Buddhism sees a potential, if not a necessity, for a positive end to the universe in which all created beings cease suffering. Dominio does not see that possibility: he sees only the conspiracy, and not the solution to it.

That pessimism is the biggest distinguishing characteristic between the philosophy of Ligotti's stories and Buddhism. His stories are bleak, but that bleakness is presented in such a singular manner, with such gorgeously-composed prose, that it's impossible not to be intrigued by it. The true horror about which Ligotti writes is ontological; the fear he hopes to awaken in his readers is: what if he's right? By setting this terror of being in so recognizable a setting as a fluorescent-lit office space, *My Work is Not Yet Done* makes this bleak argument all the more frightening.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 14, 2009 at 05:04 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(5\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

September 23, 2009

Countdown to *FlashForward*

The ABC series *FlashForward*, adapted from the novel of the same name by Robert J. Sawyer, premieres tomorrow night. The novel and show share the same basic premise: for a little over two minutes, the entire human race simultaneously blacks out and experience a glimpse of their futures. Sawyer's novel is a masterpiece of philosophical SF, approaching the ensuing questions of free will and destiny from a variety of compelling angles. Was the future seen in the visions set in stone, or just a single possible future? What does this apparent mental time travel say about the nature of time itself? Can we make choices that will change our futures, or is choice an illusion of a temporally-limited viewpoint? Sawyer excels at exploring questions of this sort, and *Flashforward* is one of his best.

It remains to be seen how far the TV series will pursue those questions. The first 17-odd minutes of the premiere are available now on Hulu (and embedded below), and they focus on the chaos that results when there's nobody at the wheel of the world for two minutes. (The opening scene of *Lost*, with its confusion of noise and puzzling images, is an obvious inspiration.) One big difference is apparent: in the novel, we (basically) know the cause of the visions immediately, and the main characters are the physicists who (basically) caused it. But the TV series makes the cause a mystery, and has a cast of prime-time hero-types (FBI agents, doctors) who will, it seems, spend the first season piecing together the puzzle. Regardless of how the show treats its philosophical underpinnings, it's heartening to see an idea-driven work of SF like *Flashforward* brought to a broader audience. (Now, if only NBC would pick up *Calculating God*...)

Read more about *Flashforward* (the book) in chapter 4 of [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#).

Tangentially: The cast of *FlashForward* includes Irish actor Brían F. O'Byrne, an absolutely amazing performer who never seems to get a fair shake in the movies. He originated the role of Father Flynn, the priest at the center of John Patrick Shanley's play *Doubt*. Philip Seymour Hoffman played the role in the movie (which I reviewed [here](#)), and though he's good, it was better on Broadway. O'Byrne has had a lot of bit parts as priests, perhaps most notably in *Million Dollar Baby*. (Someday I'll write something about the scenes between Eastwood and O'Byrne in that movie; they mark one of the most intriguing portraits of faith in Eastwood's career.) I have no idea what role he's playing here-- he doesn't appear in the preview-- but he's a truly great actor, and hopefully the longer format of a prime time TV show will give him the screentime he deserves.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on September 23, 2009 at 08:59 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

October 03, 2009

Robert J. Sawyer in the Cloud of Unknowing?

Holy Post, the religion blog of Canada's National Post, features an essay by Patricia Paddey on Robert J. Sawyer's theological outlook. There's some great (and a bit surprising!) clarification of what Sawyer means when he says "agnostic":

The technical meaning of agnostic is that if there is a Divine entity, by its nature being superior to us, it would be incomprehensible to us... An agnostic is someone who believes the nature of the Divine is unknowable... and in that sense, I'm willing to subscribe to being an agnostic.

Add to that the fact that he specifically rejects the definition of an agnostic as someone who "doesn't know" about the existence of God, and that's a bit more admission of belief in powers-beyond-our-ken than I've heard Sawyer make before. Incomprehensibility is no problem in the Christian mystical tradition; indeed, it's the whole point of [the Cloud of Unknowing](#).

Oh, yeah-- they quoted me, too; mostly from my [recent appearance](#) on the Canadian religion-news show Listen Up TV.

Read the full post [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 03, 2009 at 09:53 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

October 13, 2009

Stargate: Universe's answers from a (divine) whirlwind



I wasn't all that excited about when I first heard about *Stargate: Universe*-- I'd never really watched much *Stargate*, and the impression I had gotten from what I had seen was that it was... hm... not the best show. (I'm in the process of watching the show from the beginning on [Hulu](#)-- they currently have 7 of *SG-1*'s 10 seasons-- and there is certainly a marked improvement in quality toward the end of the first season). When early reports suggested that *SG:U* might transcend the franchise's lackluster reputation, I decided to give it a shot, and I'm glad to say it's pretty good. The show is the story of a group of refugees from an alien attack who find themselves stranded on an ancient, intergalactic spaceship with no way home. Its influences are a bit transparent-- the basic premise is borrowed from *Star Trek: Voyager*, and the generally bleak tone and atmosphere of constant crisis owes more than a little to *Battlestar Galactica*. But it's nevertheless an entertaining show with potential for strong character development.



We see some of that development in the show's second episode, "Air, Part 3" (no, I haven't forgotten how to count; the two-hour premiere comprises two parts.) The alien starship's air filtration system is failing, and a group from the ship is transported to a nearby desert planet to find a compound needed to get it working again. After a fruitless search, SGC Lt. Matthew Scott heads off on his own to continue the search. Under the oppressive heat of an alien sun, he has a strange encounter with a mysterious swirl of moisture-absorbing dust-- and with a vision of a priest he knew on Earth. In hallucinatory flashbacks, we learn that the (Catholic) priest raised Scott after his parents were killed, and that Scott himself intended to enter the priesthood until the age of 16, when he impregnated a girlfriend. Seeing this as a moral failure and a stumbling block on that path, he set off down a different path-- and the priest, we learn, drank himself to death shortly afterwards. Scott is a man tormented by guilt, and that guilt leads him to selflessly risk his own life to save the starship refugees.

The generally-Biblical imagery encountered on the planet-- intelligent (divine?) whirlwinds, water bubbling forth from dry sand-- hint that something more may be going on here than one soldier's spiritual healing. We learn virtually nothing about the intelligent dust devil, which will either remain an intriguing mystery or will become an important element in the unfolding story. Do the gods of *Stargate*, like those of *Battlestar Galactica*, have a plan for their human instruments?

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 13, 2009 at 01:52 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

October 16, 2009

Mysticism in SF

Another story I meant to write about recently: Sci-Fi Wire asks: "[Is mysticism overtaking science in sci-fi?](#)"

I could write a response, but instead I think I'll just present this quote:

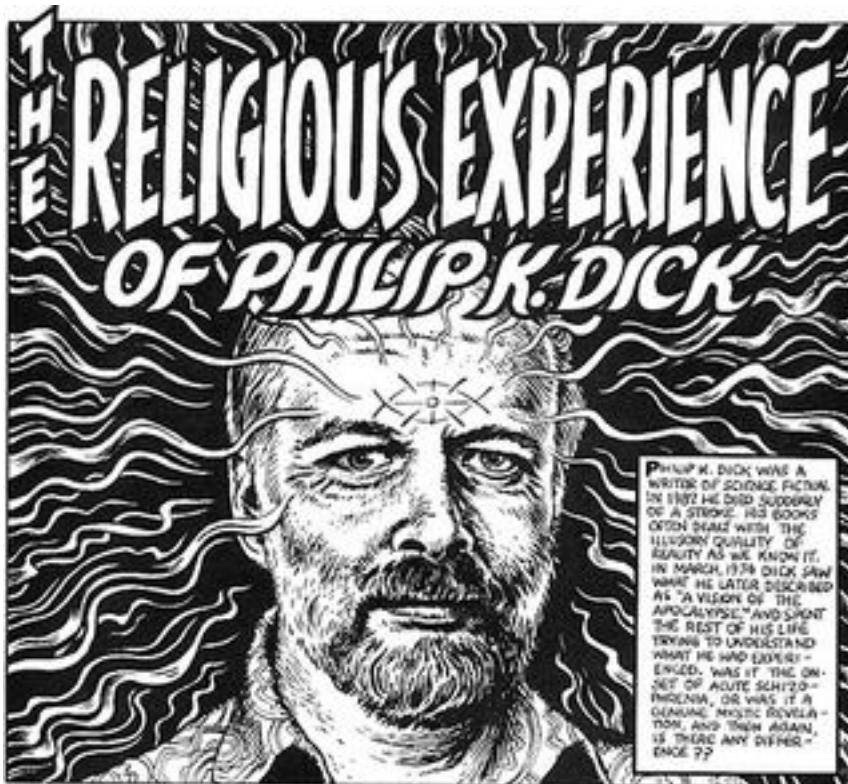
"The vision (sense of wonder, if you will) that sf tries for seems to me very close to the vision of poetry, particularly poetry as it concerned the nineteenth century Symbolists. No matter how disciplined its creation, to move into 'unreal' worlds demands a brush with mysticism. Virtually all the classics of speculative fiction are mystical."

--[Samuel R. Delany](#)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 16, 2009 at 09:57 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

October 16, 2009

Dick vs. Hubbard



Philip K. Dick was a writer of science fiction. In 1972 he died suddenly of a stroke. His books catch shade with the illusory quality of reality as we know it. In March, 1974 Dick saw what he later described as "a vision of the apocalypse" and spent the rest of his life trying to understand what he had experienced. Was it the onset of acute schizophrenia, or was it a genuine mystic revelation? And then again, is there any difference?

Here's a story that I neglected to mention back when it broke, but I'll add some thoughts to it now, since it's more than a little relevant to my interests.

io9 recently posted a link to a [discussion](#) on an [Anonymous](#) message board posing the question: what if Philip K. Dick, instead of L. Ron Hubbard, were the basis for a religion?

Why then, is the only going science-fiction author cult of personality devoted to -- of all people -- L Ron Hubbard?! If Scientology were pretty much exactly the same but centered around Philip K. Dick, my god -- I'd want in, for his secret scriptures! The lectures on cosmogony! The resonant gnostic insights that made PKD's work so mythic!

It's an interesting question, particularly since the very thing that [Thomas M. Disch](#) got so, so wrong about the final act of Dick's life is that he didn't *want* to found a religion. (The failed argument, complete with comparisons to Hubbard and [Aum Shinrikyo](#), is made in the otherwise-wonderful book *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of*.) The main reason that Hubbard wound up the head of a church and Dick didn't is that Hubbard stopped writing fiction and devoted all of his energies to creating an organization and winning disciples. And, though Dick's religious writing in the last eight years of his life was [voluminous](#), but it differs greatly from Hubbard's post-Dianetics work: for one thing, it was never intended for publication, and second, it was directly connected to the writing of fiction. Not only did it form the basis of what became *VALIS*, but the *Exegesis* began its life as notes for a proposed sequel to *Man in the High Castle*.

Most of the discussion on the board itself is devoted to the usual Hubbard-bashing, but a variety of blogs have picked up the thread. Of particular interest is [David Gill's](#) reaction:

Perhaps no one can imagine what a religion based on Dick's religious speculations would look like because Dick's religious speculations fail to form a stable foundation for belief... Dick's religious speculations offer no coherent narrative resolution; that is, they go on and on, as each cosmological model is supplanted by the next.

Gill is right that the *Exegesis* is shifting sand. But I'd modify the picture of Dick's religious thought on one big point: I've [argued at some length](#) that Dick's religious writing exists within a broader Christian framework-- a syncretistic and occasionally heretical one, to be sure, but ultimately Christian nonetheless. And much of Dick's religious writings focus on fitting in bits and pieces of his experiences in with other theologians' ideas. The real reason you can't "base a religion" on Dick's writings is that they're already a *part* of a religious tradition. He made no claims, as Hubbard did, to have come up with something unprecedented; indeed, he sought comfort in the idea that what had happened to him had been happening to others for thousands of years.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 16, 2009 at 09:50 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

October 19, 2009

The First Annual Doomsday Film Fest and Symposium



Repent! Next Sunday, I will be speaking on a panel at the [First Annual Doomsday Film Fest & Symposium](#). The festival runs from Friday Oct. 23rd to Sunday Oct. 25th at the DCTV Theater in New York, and will feature great tales of the end times and after like *Mad Max 2* (probably better-known to most of you as *The Road Warrior*), *War Games*, and *Return of the Living Dead*.

My panel, "The End is Nigh: Prophecies of the End Times from the Rapture to 2012," is coupled with a screening of Michael Tolkin's hallucinatory apocalyptic fable [The Rapture](#). Far from being a dispensationalist tract, Tolkin's story (which stars Mimi Rogers and pre-X-Files David Duchovny) is a psychodrama about the nature of belief, and it's certainly one of the stranger movies about religion you'll ever see.

As if that weren't enough, the panel is followed by a screening of David Cronenberg's first feature film, *Shivers* (a.k.a. *They Came From Within*, a.k.a. *Orgy of the Blood Parasites*). All the weirdness you'd expect from Cronenberg is fully present in this early film, about a aphrodisiac venereal disease that turns people into sex-crazed monsters-- the movie leaves the definite sense that the total collapse of society (and hidebound morality) is not a bad thing.

To see the full program and order tickets, go to [the official website](#).

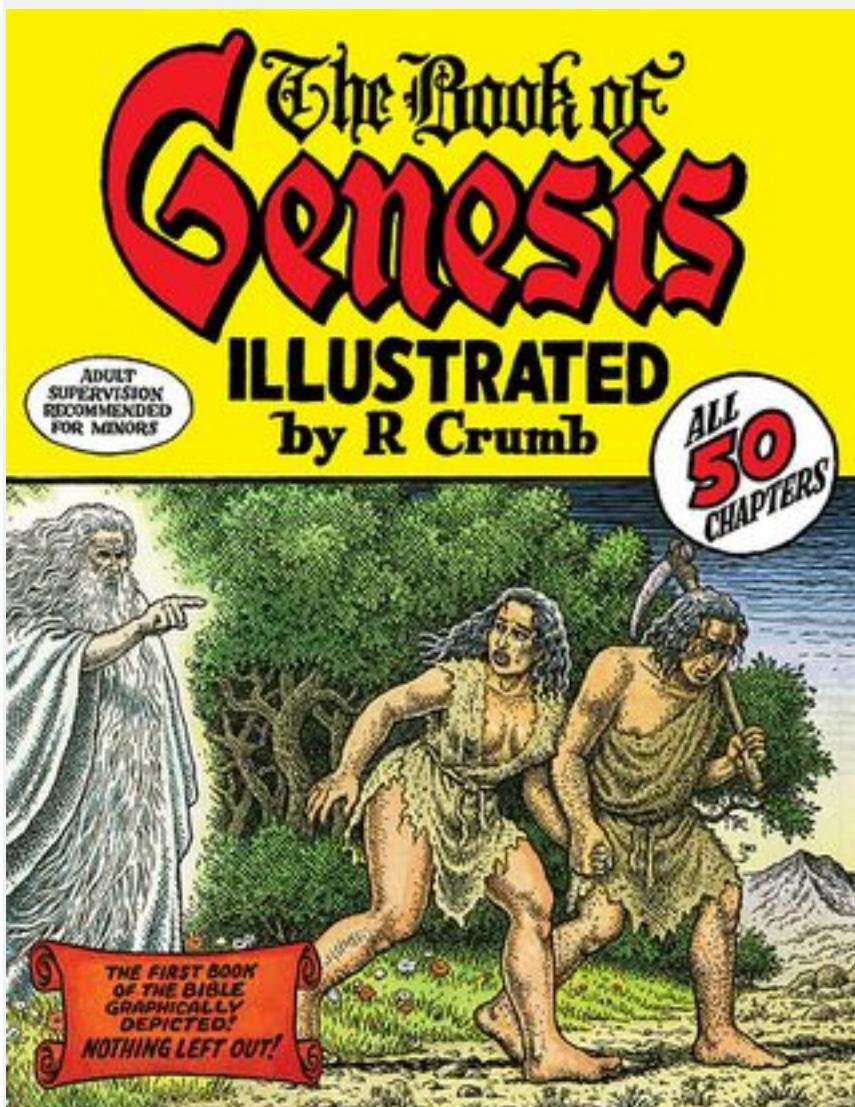
UPDATE

In addition to the Sunday afternoon panel, I will now also be moderating the Friday evening panel "Doomsday Over the Ages"-- which is pretty exciting, not least of all because the panel is followed by a screening of *The Road Warrior*!

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 19, 2009 at 07:37 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 20, 2009

The Weird Testament: Crumb's *Genesis* and the *Wolverton Bible*



R. Crumb's *Book of Genesis*

Illustrated is now out, and my review is up at [Religion Dispatches](#), in a dual review with the *Wolverton Bible*.

*There is nothing sacred to underground and alternative comics creators. Irreverence has been a defining characteristic of the movement since the 1960s, when creators like R. Crumb and Gilbert Shelton began using the words-and-pictures medium to create scathing, sex-and-drug-filled satires of square culture. No subject was safe from the savage pens of these cartoonists, and religion—or, more specifically, sanctimoniousness—was a common target... [However,] far from the sharp satire that one might expect from the creator of *Fritz the Cat* and *Mr. Natural*, *Genesis* is a remarkably straight, even reverent, adaptation.*

[...]

*Many of the most intriguing images in [Basil Wolverton's Old Testament illustrations] feature outlandish pagan idols depicted with a sense of joy and whimsy that suggest Wolverton's delight in the more outré aspects of scripture. A more gruesomely playful example is a terrifying image of the blinding of Samson: given the demonizing of the "injury to the eye motif" in Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* and the Senate hearings on violent comics that it produced, one wonders if this image wasn't a sly comment on the broader cultural meaning of violent art.*

The uninformed backlash to Crumb's opus has already begun. The [Wall Street Journal](#) quotes a spokesperson for the Church of England's declaration: "I haven't seen the book but I think trying to sell something by emphasizing the

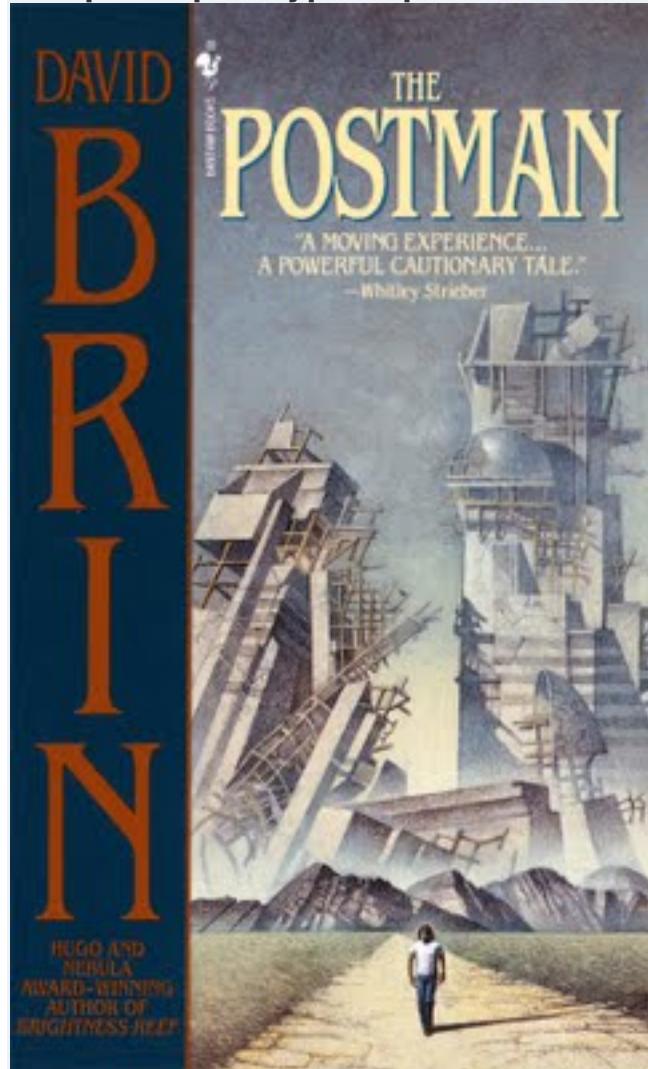
sexual nature of some of the scenes doesn't seem to be a good way to pass on the message of the Bible." Haven't seen the book, indeed-- Crumb, surprisingly, doesn't emphasize the sex in Genesis; but neither does he Bowdlerize it. This I-don't-know-what-it-is-but-I-don't-like-it kind of reaction is more than a little reminiscent of the demonization of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Both that film and the book on which it was based carry a powerful-- and orthodox!- Christological message, but that didn't stop protestors who had never seen the movie from ddeclaring it offensive. Some Christian conservatives have backpedaled on *Last Temptation* (after, y'know, actually *watching* it), so perhaps Crumb's *Genesis* will gain some acceptance in twenty years or so...

Read my full review, and see a few pictures from the books, [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on October 20, 2009 at 11:56 AM in [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#)

October 24, 2009

The post-apocalyptic optimism of *The Postman*



In [my review](#) of the post-apocalyptic anthology *Wastelands*, I described the ironically optimistic nature of stories about the end of the world as we know it:

The fact that there are any stories to tell means that something has survived. In a way, these aren't end-of-the-world stories at all, because the world doesn't really end—or rather, the world ends, but humanity carries on. These are post-apocalyptic stories, and their focus is not on destruction, but rebuilding. That hopefulness sneaks its way into most stories in the subgenre... The overriding narrative in most post-apocalyptic fiction is the emergence of order from chaos.

That optimism is at the core of David Brin's novel *The Postman*-- best-known to most as the basis of a not-too-well-received film adaptation* in the late '90s, but don't let that dissuade you. The novel is a fine example of what post-apocalyptic fiction is all about, and, on a larger scale, of what SF as a genre strives to do.

The book tells the story of Gordon Krantz, a drifter struggling to survive in a post-WWIII landscape sparsely populated with insular settlements, savage survivalists, and heartless bandits. Krantz stumbles across the body of a mail carrier in a pre-war delivery truck, and takes his clothing and mailbag for purely practical reasons: they'll keep him warm through the cold nights ahead. But at the next settlement he encounters he finds that people see the old uniform as an emblem of anteapocalyptic stability. So he turns it into a con: he'll pretend he's a real mailman, establishing routes for the "Restored United States," as a way to score free food and shelter in towns that would otherwise refuse him entry. But the con works a bit too well: those mail routes he's pretending to set up turn into a well-functioning communications network, and within a few years he's trapped in the middle of a conflict between these accidentally-united farming communities and a strong, violent, feudal society of survivalists. Krantz, a once-honorable man forced by circumstances into dishonesty, regains his honor by taking responsibility for the survival of democracy in northern Oregon.

The lie of the Restored United States, and Krantz's guilt over his dishonesty, are central to the story of *the Postman*. Krantz feels he is cheating the poor, simple folk of Oregon by selling them false hope that they can regain something that is lost forever. What he doesn't realize, though, is that the hope can create the reality. Prior to the lie, the communities he encounters were isolated and stagnant, unlikely to survive for more than a generation or two. But given the idea that they could be reunited into a larger culture, they quickly set about to make that idea a reality. Krantz may be lying when he says that the government is regaining strength in the East and has plans to reconnect with the West-- or he may not be; he has no knowledge of the status of the world east of Minnesota. But the idea of the "Restored United States" is ultimately not a lie, because the people of Oregon have made it real for themselves. In Oregon, the United States really is restored, as a direct result of Krantz's dishonesty. In the Postman, faith has a concrete result; faith makes its object real. The lie is not a lie-- it is a myth; it is a fiction that shapes reality.

At one point in the story Krantz is recounting his experiences in the immediate aftermath of the war, when his National Guard unit, assigned to protect granaries against raiding survivalists, fell apart, symbolizing the final collapse of government, stability, and order. But in telling the story to his listeners, he alters the truth to reflect his desires:

The cavalry came. The granaries were saved at the last minute. Good men died.. but in his tale their struggles were not for nothing. He told it the way it should have ended, feeling the wish with an intensity that surprised him.

This embellishment and invention bolsters a more useful image of the world: a picture of a society that has not completely collapsed. And that image, in turn, shapes the real society which Krantz is now creating. Just as importantly, the myth he creates stands as a bulwark against the novel's survivalist villains, totalitarian despots who want nothing more than to see the dream of a resurgent democracy snuffed out. "If America ever stood for anything," Krantz tells one group, "it was people being at their best when times were worst." Which isn't entirely the truth, of course. But in the post-apocalyptic crucible, that's what the ideal of America has become, and that's the version of the American myth that can produce the best result. There's much to say about the myth and the reality of America in this novel, but I'll leave it at this: the America Krantz speaks of is not the America that was, but the America he hopes will come to be. His apparent idealization of the past is really the communication of a prophetic hope for a golden age to come.

And that kind of prophetic fabulation is an important aspect of SF. Whether SF is predicting wonders to come or painting bleak pictures of dystopian wastelands, it always strives to have an impact on the real world. It can inspire either excitement or repentance, and Brin's novel does both: it hopes to create a world in which nuclear war and survivalist gangs will not come to be, and that a compassionate and thoroughly honorable society will. *The Postman* idealizes its narrative to show us both the best and the worst of ourselves, so that we may choose the right path to a better future.

*Which, for the record, I kind of liked. At the very least it's better than *Waterworld*.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on October 24, 2009 at 03:48 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 02, 2009

Bad month for Scientology

It's been a rough month for Scientology-- between unfavorable court decisions, high-profile defections, and the ever-present irritations of [Anonymous](#), October 2009 will certainly not go down in history as their most favorite month. Read more about it in my recent post for Religion Dispatches [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 02, 2009 at 09:31 PM in [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 07, 2009

How *V* drags religion down



I want to like *V*; I really do. I have fond memories of the original series from the '80s, and when I heard that Kenneth Johnson-- also responsible for one of my favorite SF shows ever, *Alien Nation*-- was bringing it back, and that the update would feature not one but two *Firefly* actors, I was more than a little thrilled. Imagine my disappointment, then, to discover that the first episode of the show is a ham-handed smear of the American left in general and Barack Obama in particular. *V* ratchets up the worst reactionary conspiracies to SFnal absurdities: worried that our dark-skinned President wasn't born in the U.S.? These scaly-skinned usurpers are *real* aliens! Believe he's a secret Muslim? The aliens have been sponsoring terrorist sleeper cells for years! Paranoid about death panels? The Vs don't just want to kill grandma, they want to eat her, too!

[Others have written about this](#) already, so I won't belabor the point too much. I can only hope that future episodes bring in some of the nuance and complexity that we've seen in the political allegories of recent shows like *Battlestar Galactica*-- and not-so-recent ones like Johnson's own *Alien Nation*. At the moment, though, the metaphors are as ugly as they are transparent, and I for one am not amused.

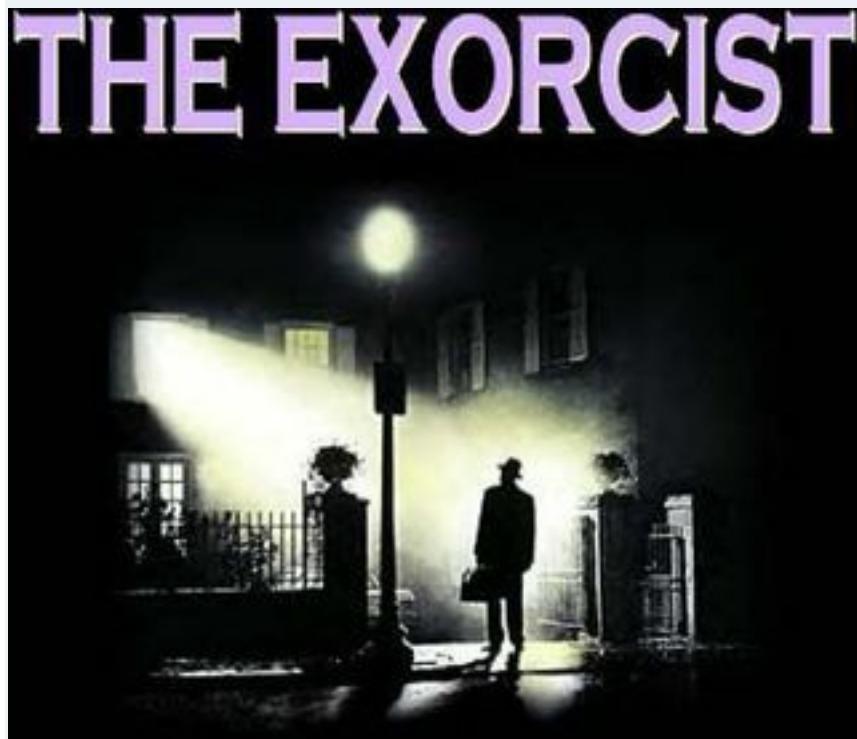
What I really ought to talk about, though, is how religion gets dragged down in the mess as well. One of the first characters we see in the opening scenes of the pilot is Father Jack Landry, a Catholic priest assigned to a sparsely-attended lower Manhattan church. After the arrival of the Visitors, his pews are packed, in large part because he preaches caution and suspicion. One of his congregants sees him as a candidate for a small but growing resistance movement, and by the end of the episode he's attending meetings about anti-alien strategy.

On the one hand, there's something good about the depiction of a priest as a member of the resistance. The early church was, in many ways, a resistance group to the oppressive Roman Empire, and there's a long history of religious anti-imperialism. But, if the new series follows anything like the trajectory of the original miniseries, the resistance group will soon become an active guerilla army-- and, at that point, the presence of a priest in a violent resistance movement will become problematic. *V* is already treading dangerous ground in advancing to the kind of conspiracy theory believed by nuts who bring guns to presidential appearances. But a religious leader giving his blessing to violence-- don't we have enough of that sort of thing in [the real world](#)?

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 07, 2009 at 02:23 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 11, 2009

Joseph Laycock on *The Exorcist*



There's a great interview

on [Theofantastique](#) with Joseph Laycock, author of [Vampires Today: The Truth About Modern Vampirism](#), about the religious background of *The Exorcist*. Drawing on his recent article in the [Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion](#), Joe shares some fascinating thoughts on folk piety, secularism, and supernaturalism. For instance:

*One thing I noticed was resistance to the idea that this could actually be a story about religion. Numerous theorists (including Stephen King) have read possession as code for something else that we fear either consciously or subconsciously. According to most film theorists, *The Exorcist* is actually about fear of the counter-culture, fear of children, fear of women, etc. Conversely, many critics who thought *The Exorcist* was actually about demonic possession found it distasteful. S.T. Joshi, for instance, characterizes Blatty as a Catholic evangelist and *The Exorcist* as a sort of hellfire sermon.*

*While psychoanalytical readings are interesting, I don't believe they can explain the behavior of audiences watching *The Exorcist* in 1973. I think those reactions can be attributed to a very literal fear of demonic*

possession. Furthermore, I think these readings of the film point to a disconnect between popular religion and the idea of secularization. The secularization narrative is so powerful, that even when audiences are fainting from terror while watching The Exorcist, it is assumed that this is the catharsis of some repressed and previously unknown fear, rampant in our collective subconscious, because the idea that modern Westerners could actually be afraid of the devil seems an impossibility.

And way at the bottom are some very interesting thoughts on apocalyptic folk piety vs. anti-millenarian ecclesiastic religion. It's a great interview, and well worth [checking out](#).

I went to college with Joe. He is a very smart guy, and knows more about the sociology of religion than I ever will. However, I know way more than he does about SF, and probably about comics, too. Maybe if you put us together we would turn into some kind of religion-and-pop-culture robot, and we could fight a giant flying lizard. Also, he is handsome, has good taste in music, and did not pay me to say any of the above.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 11, 2009 at 11:37 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 21, 2009

Will conservative Christians flock to *The Road*?



[Get Religion](#) and [Beliefnet](#) report

that Dimension Films has hired a PR firm known for marketing to conservative Christians to help push *The Road*. The adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's relentlessly bleak postapocalyptic narrative might seem a tough product to sell to the notoriously-picky Christian market; the story involves lots of violence and cannibalism and not a single cute penguin. Still, Beliefnet thinks the effort to get Christians into the theater is a good thing, arguing that "bringing the movie to evangelicals and other conservative believers may signal that Hollywood is ready to take them seriously as consumers." Get Religion is worried that the move is wrongheaded, since the kind of redemption found in more religious end-times tales is "is nowhere to be found in *The Road*."

That contention implies to me that they haven't read the book, at least not all the way through. In [my review of the novel](#) a couple years ago, I described it as "one of the most religious postapocalyptic tales since Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*." The novel is, in fact, about the survival of hope and compassion in a hopeless and cruel world. McCarthy brings his world to some pretty low depths, but the point of all that despair is to hint, in the novel's closing pages, that humanity will survive against all odds. (It's a bit surprising to see those themes emerge in the story, given that McCarthy is not exactly known for his optimism.) But that's the overwhelming narrative of postapocalyptic stories in general, as I've [argued elsewhere](#): hope for survival, order emerging from chaos, the perseverance of the human spirit. If anything, it's the idea that humanity can survive divine wrath that might drive away the *Left Behind* crowd-- just as McCarthy isn't known for optimism, Tim LaHaye isn't known for humanism. But it's that story of compassion and redemption that makes *The Road* so impressively religious, so apocalyptically compelling. Will conservative Christians be able to get past the cannibalism to see it? Personally, I doubt it-- I expect the same puritanical impulses that led to the protests against the deeply Christological *The Last Temptation of Christ* will hold sway here as well.

Read my review of *The Road* (the book) [here](#).

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 21, 2009 at 02:36 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 21, 2009

Doctor Who wrestles with fate in "The Waters of Mars"



[Here there be spoilers. You have

been warned.]

I have to be honest: I've generally been a bit underwhelmed by the between-seasons Doctor Who specials. They're always fun, but they've generally felt a bit lackluster compared to the full seasons. I'm happy to report that "The Waters of Mars" is easily the best of the specials yet. It's also quite possibly the bleakest Doctor Who story ever produced. And both of those qualities are directly linked to the way in which the story tackles questions of fate and free will.

The Doctor finds himself on the first Mars colony, named (either perfectly or too cutely, depending on your musical tastes) "Bowie Base." He's thrilled to meet Earth's first interplanetary pioneers, particularly their courageous and wise captain Adelaide Brook-- but he's also disturbed, because he knows the exact date on which an unspecified disaster wipes out the colony and everyone in it. (Yes, folks, the date also happens to be the day on which he arrives). Normally this sort of thing is no problem for the Doctor-- he'll figure out what alien beastie he needs to defeat and save the entire colony, right? Not this time, it turns out: some moments in time are fixed and unchangeable, he tells us, and this is one of them. "Everything else is in flux; anything can happen. But those certain moments, they have to stand.... This is one vital moment. What happens here must always happen." He tries to leave, but there's a mystery here, too: he doesn't know the nature of the disaster or the reasons behind it, so he stays a little longer than he at first intends. (As it turns out, it involves intelligent water trapped millennia ago inside a glacier by the Ice Warriors. Who knew?)

But the investigation draws him deep into the events of that fateful day at Bowie Base, which leads the Doctor to another moral conundrum, linked to the fourth season episode "The Fires of Pompeii." In that story, the Doctor discovered an alien plot to conquer the Earth that could only be thwarted if he caused Mount Vesuvius to erupt, destroying a city but saving a world. As he prepares to abandon the Mars colonists to their fate, he hints at that episode's moral crisis in explaining his departure: "Imagine you were in Pompeii, and you tried to save them. But in doing so, you make it happen. Anything I do just makes it happen." The Doctor here questions the very basis of his forty-odd years of adventuring: does he fix crises, or does his meddling in history create them? Here he opts not to interfere, illustrated in a powerful sequence in which the spacesuited Doctor marches across the Martian landscape back to the TARDIS while all hell breaks loose in the base behind him.



But the Doctor is like Superman: he

has to help. It's not in his nature to turn his back on a crisis, even if it seems hopeless; even if he knows it "must always happen." So he returns to the colony and tries to help the pioneers escape from the water creatures. In doing so, he makes a realization about his nature as "Last of the Time Lords": time has laws, but as the sole inheritor of the Time Lords' power, "the laws of time are mine, and they will obey me!" There's some sinister stuff in the last few scenes of the episode, as the Doctor's epiphany leads to some Nietzschean pronouncements about his right to impose his will on the fabric of the universe. Then something happens that may humble him a bit, but there's still a hint at a slightly-darker tone for the series to come. (Perhaps he'll be turning into [the Valeyard](#) after all?)

Doctor Who works best when its stories are built around complex moral dilemmas-- not least of all because it's his strong moral core that makes the Doctor such a great hero. To see chips in that morality, particularly when they grow out of its judicious application to an imminent crisis, is an intriguing turn for the character's story to take. I'd be surprised if the next two specials-- David Tennant's final appearances as the Doctor-- didn't expand on these themes. The Doctor is facing down a prophecy-- ["He will knock four times"](#)-- and he's bound to use his mastery of the laws of time to try to escape it. I suspect the conclusion of the Tenth Doctor's saga will involve his repayment for the hubris he displays in "The Waters of Mars."

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 21, 2009 at 04:47 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

November 30, 2009

Atheism, misotheism, multitheism: The religious landscape of *Battlestar Galactica: The Plan*



Battlestar Galactica: The Plan is a

nice coda to the series. It's not, as the creators would have us believe, a comprehensive overview of the story from the Cylons' point of view, nor does it explain every aspect of the eponymous plan. (For instance, there's not a word about the search for a human-Cylon hybrid.) The Plan isn't really about the Cylons collectively at all—rather, it's

Cavil's story. Or, rather, it's a tale of two Cavils: one hidden in the fleet and another infiltrating a resistance group on Caprica. These two Number Ones follow very different paths following the initial Cylon attack, and they come to quite different conclusions about the morality of the war and the relationship between human beings and machines.

Cavil is (are?) a complicated character, particularly when it comes to BSG's exploration of religion. He poses as a priest, and seems to be one of the primary masterminds of what more pious Cylons consider "God's plan." But he is an atheist himself, and has no kind words for the faith of his fellow Cylons. "There is no God," one of the Cavils explains. "Supernatural divinities are the primitive's answer for why the sun goes down at night... That's what we've been telling the others for years."

His attitude toward his human progenitors—and humanity as a whole—complicates his claims of atheism. Since human beings created the Cylons (somewhere back in time, at least), human beings can be considered their gods. Cavil's diatribes against human limitations (such as [the fiery anti-human sermon](#) in the episode "No Exit") imply not atheism, but misotheism—the hatred of God. Cavil doesn't believe in the "one true God" of the other Cylons, but he does believe in, and hate, his human creators.

And that hatred of humanity is something that *The Plan* explores. For the fleet-based Cavil, his experience among humanity simply provides more fuel for his ire, and more opportunities for cruelty. It's his "plan" that we learn the most about-- or, rather, how his plan was spoiled at every turn, as the other undercover Cylons began to question the war and its ends. The Caprica-based Cavil begins to see nobility in the humans' fight against impossible odds. Furthermore, he realizes that human beings continue to love and care for their dead, which likely means the Final Five will also continue to love and mourn for humanity even if they are all wiped out. By the end of his story, he's begun to see the Cylon holocaust as something for which he must be forgiven, as we see in a complex confessional scene between him and Anders. "Given that this holocaust was such a journey of learning for you," Cavil wonders, "can you forgive the Cylons? Because if you can, that's really transcendent... Humanity had so much sin." But Anders is offended at the very idea of forgiving the Cylons: the Final Five will not simply forget their love for the human race once Cavil's genocidal plan is complete. Cavil seeks the approval of one of the Final Five and fails to get it—he has yet to atone for his own sins.

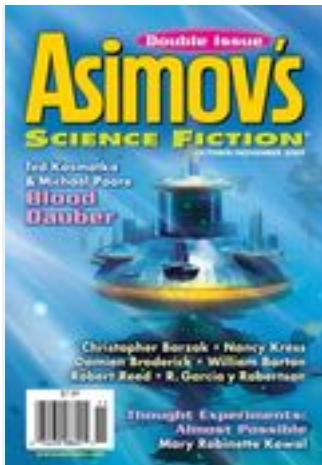
In addition to its rumination on the subject of human and Cylon sin, *The Plan* underscores something that became clear about the Cylons' religious beliefs as the series progressed: the multiplicity of their theologies. At the show's beginning, the Cylons were presented as unified in their zealous monotheism, but later episodes showed a spectrum of religious beliefs among them—from the earnest zealotry of the Sixes to Leoben's mysticism to, most tellingly, Cavil's cynical atheism. Cylon society, at first depicted as simply monotheistic, is revealed as *multitheistic*, as mixed and multifaceted as human society. BSG was adept at problematizing its subject matter, and the revelation of sectarian strife among the Cylons was one of the most effective ways in which the show made us question our assumptions about the badness of the "bad guys" (except Cavil, of course). *The Plan* is hardly the last word on Cylon religion, but it is certainly a solid exploration of the motivations of one of its chief villains.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on November 30, 2009 at 08:14 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 13, 2009

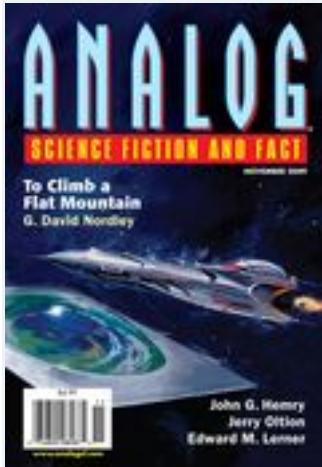
SF Magazine Roundup!

The SF magazines are piling up next to my desk... has it really been four months since I last reviewed them? Let's get caught up, then:



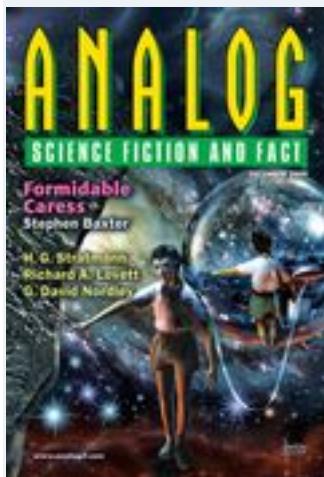
Robert Reed's "Before My Last Breath" in the [October/November 2009](#) issue of *Asimov's* looks at the origins of a tradition. In this story, a coal-mining operation discovers evidence of an ancient alien civilization, and a team of archeologists comes to some intriguing conclusions about the aliens' history. They crash-landed millennia ago, the humans theorize, and expected to be rescued. As years passed, they suspected that their rescuers were delayed, and some of them buried themselves in a peat bog to hibernate until they arrived. But help never came, and over generations the aliens forgot the reasons behind the bog hibernations. As their bodies, technology, and culture devolved, the once-pragmatic undertaking became a simple burial custom. The metal ring the first aliens brought into their hibernation was a depiction of their spaceship, but later generations simply held a simplified circle of metal, a symbol of something forgotten: "Nobody remembered what the starship looked like. Or maybe they forgot about the ship entirely, and the ring's purpose changed. It was a symbol, an offering, something that would allow their god to catch their soul and take them back to Heaven again." Religion as cultural entropy: a bleak theory befitting the somewhat sorrowful tone of the story. Reed's stories are always intriguing, and this one is no exception.

Also well worth reading in this issue is Ted Kosmatka and Michael Poore's ["The Blood Dauber."](#) a story about a zookeeper who finds himself caring for a rather unusual wasp... or something. To say it's a story about the futility of revenge doesn't do it justice. I wouldn't be surprised to see this turn up in some year's-best lists; it will very likely be one of my Reader's Poll choices for this year (which I really ought to start thinking about, huh?).



The [November](#) issue of *Analog* includes "Joan," a fun but not wholly satisfying story by John G. Hemry. The main character is a time traveler who is obsessed with Joan of Arc, and travels to 15th-Century France to meet her-- and to sort-of accidentally save her from execution. Kate, the time-traveler, has a hard time understanding Joan's faith; when Joan describes one of her visions Kate worries that this proves her to be "the kind of hysterical that history had often painted her as." Kate has an idea of Joan as a proto-feminist icon who wouldn't believe that kind of "mindless superstition." This doesn't sit right with me because I can't really imagine someone being as obsessed with Joan as Kate is without wholly accepting the importance of Joan's visions to her story. Kate's obsession, it seems, is built on a very basic misunderstanding and tremendous blind spot; the only way you can avoid accounting for Joan's religion is to willfully ignore it. Joan wins Kate over a bit by the end, but her need to be won over strikes me as odd.

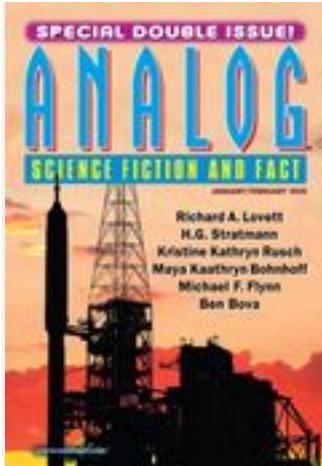
The November and December *Analog* carry a two-part serial by G. David Nordley called [*To Climb a Flat Mountain*](#) that has some sectarian strife in its backstory. The characters in this tale are a war party flying from Earth to liberate a colony world that has been overrun by "New Reformationists"-- reactionary religious zealots who have reinstated quaint old customs like slavery and gladiatorial combat. Some of those in the war party are "real Christians," or "Old Reformationists"-- as one character notes, "nobody was more ready to go after this New Reformation fringe group than the Old Reformation." But the warship is sabotaged, and they overshoot their target by a few hundred light-years, landing on a cube-shaped artificial world with some strange geological properties (as the title suggests). Some of the castaways are susceptible to the same kind of conservative pitfalls as the zealots they set out to conquer, and before long the survivors have split into two groups: the close-minded religious one and the heroic, go-getting secular one. This somewhat simplistic division falls pretty quickly into the background, though, as Nordley is more interested in exploring this strange six-sided world and its alien inhabitants than the human conflicts that got us there.



The [**December**](#) *Analog* also includes "The Universe Beneath Our Feet" by Carl Frederick, a story told from the point of view of a rebellious pair of crablike aliens who live in an underwater theocracy. K'Chir and Jerik doubt the existence of their society's God-- a benevolent being who rains "sweet manna" down upon the ocean floor. Instead, K'Chir posits that the "manna" is the decomposing remains of other ocean creatures. To prove it, he sets out to climb the enormous wall of ice on the outskirts of their community, hoping to reach the top and find no God there. Frederick's description of the aliens' bodies is inventive, so it's a shame that the religion and culture he has created for them is so unoriginal-- and human. There's a stern high priest, a strict code of discipline, a benevolent God-in-the-sky-- and absolutely nothing to suggest that this religion originated anywhere other than in the mind of a human being with a great distaste for things religious. I previously [criticized](#) Frederick for his simplistic understanding of God in his fact article "The Challenge of the Anthropic Universe," and the same problems are apparent here-- he has a very narrow understanding of what religion is, and can be. Here, it's hampered an otherwise-enjoyable piece of fiction.

The same can't be said of H. G. Stratmann, whose series of stories about Russian Orthodox astronaut [**Katerina Savitskaya**](#) continues in the December *Analog* with "Wilderness Were Paradise Enew." In this installment, mysterious aliens have given Katerina and her fellow astronaut Martin Slayton godlike powers. Katerina rejects them, since they aren't also accompanied by godlike wisdom. Martin, on the other hand, sets out to solve all of humanity's problems. Healing the lame and diverting the courses of tornadoes works fairly well, but when he tries to stop human-on-human violence he runs smack into the problem of free will, with disastrous results. Katerina holds up the Crucifixion as an example of why it's important to choose good rather than being forced to behave. Her stance is a Christian humanist one:

Whatever measure of paradise we create on Earth, Mars, or other worlds will be one we earned-- not something given as a 'gift.' If we make life better it'll be because we used science to make Nature less dangerous and relieve human suffering. If we choose to be kind and care about others, we can claim credit for doing it. He showed us what we could do with our own human abilities. It's up to us to freely accept His challenge and imitate Him.



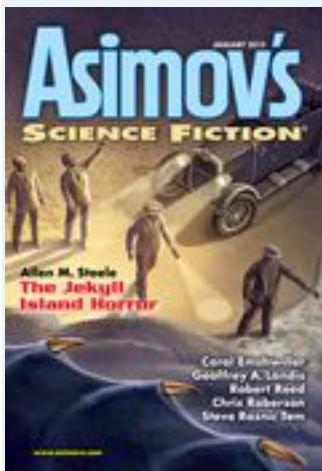
The [January/February](#) *Analog* continues their story in "Thus Spake the Aliens," which ponders the moral and theological goals of the mysterious extraterrestrials, and bringing Katerina's adventures to an apparent conclusion. Put together, these stories must be approaching the length of a novel by now...

Also in the January/February *Analog* is ["Neptune's Treasure."](#) a new entry in Richard A. Lovett's series of stories about deep-space miner Floyd and his precocious AI companion Brittney. This story continues to explore the nature of selfhood, primarily through Brittney's internal monolog.

More whimsical is Eric James Stone's "Rejiggering the Thingamajig, a story about a hyper-evolved, Buddhist Tyrannosaurus and a trigger-happy, artificially-intelligent gun on a quest for decent tech support. The T. Rex tries to teach the gun about her faith, with limited success-- after overzealously firing on some dangerous woodland creatures, it claims "I was only tryin'a help 'em move on to their next rebirth."

Then there's "Simple Gifts" by Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff, the story of human colonists on a mineral-rich planet inhabited by Ewok-like "furries." The humans want the planet's resources, but they're paranoid about offending the furries' "primitive" religious sensibilities-- worries that may be based on anthropocentric assumptions about what the aliens actually believe. It's a clever story, and a nice antidote to the anthropocentrically-depicted religion of stories like "The Universe Beneath our Feet."

Lastly, there's another of Kristine Kathryn Rusch's always-enjoyable Retrieval Artist stories, "The Possession of Paavo Deshin," which ponders the complicated ethics of a case of adoption, kidnapping, and cybernetic implants.



The [January](#) *Asimov's* opens with ["Marya and the Pirate"](#) by Geoffrey A. Landis, a great story that reminded me in some ways of Tom Godwin's classic "The Cold Equations." Landis tells the story of an honorable pirate's attempt to hijack a mine built on the back of a comet. There's only one person on the mining station, and the pirate doesn't wish her harm-- but the universe may have other ideas. The issue of religion comes up briefly when the young girl sees him offer a prayer to a statue of the Buddha. She's skeptical about whether the pirate actually "believe[s] in that stuff," and he responds:

No, not exactly. The rituals instill a certain amount of discipline that I like to encourage my people to follow, and I observe the forms, so as to not give them any temptation to slack off. But if you mean, do I believe a three-thousand-year-old dead Indian guy is watching over us from the great beyond, I'll reserve judgment on that until I see him.
That's hardly the focus of the story, however, and the battle of wits between the young miner and the pirate makes for a great story.

Also in this issue is Chris Roberson's short "Wonder House," a story about a pulp publisher set in the 1930s of an alternate universe in which the Aztec and Mandarin empires are the dominant world powers. The focus of this story is on the similarities between the role of Jews-- or, more accurately, Jewish pop culture-- in this fictional world and our own. At the story's conclusion, two young pulp fiction devotees make a pitch to the publisher to create a new character for a new medium, one that combines words and colorful pictures. Their creation is a hero, rooted in Jewish folklore, who will help the helpless and fight for the oppressed while wearing a colorful costume bearing the Hebrew letter Shin, for "Shaddai." I've been thinking a lot lately about the religious origins of Superman (for reasons I hope to be announcing soon), so this story was of particular interest. One nitpicker's note, though: the kids who make the pitch are Segal and Kurtzberg-- that is, Jerry Siegel and Jack Kirby-- which seems a bit unfair to Joe Shuster. Isn't Kirby's real-world list of creations long and impressive enough without also making him the fictional creator of Superman?

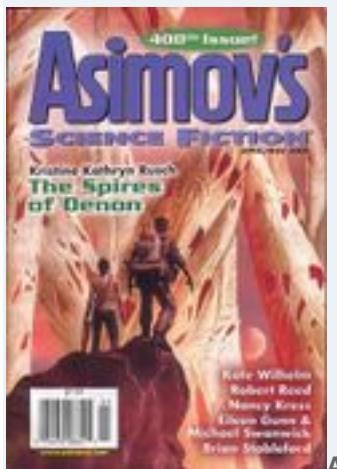
That's it for now-- though the February *Asimov's* just arrived, so I'm not *really* caught up.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 13, 2009 at 03:45 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

December 28, 2009

Asimov's and Analog 2009 reader's polls

It's the end of the year-- and that means it's time to share my votes in the annual *Asimov's* readers poll and *Analog's* Anlab. Links are to my reviews where applicable; excerpts from many of the stories are available on [Asimov's](#) and [Analog](#)'s respective websites.

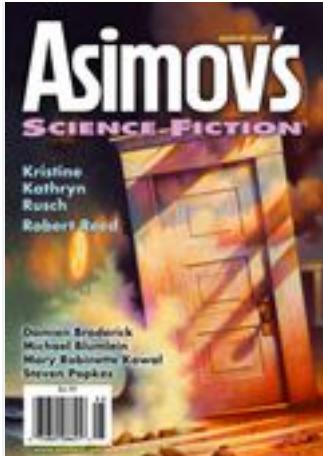


ASIMOV'S

Novella

1. [The Spires of Denon](#) by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (April/May)
2. [Broken Windchimes](#) by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (September)
3. [Act One](#) by Nancy Kress

Kristine Kathryn Rusch has had a busy year, it seems, writing one amazing novella after another for both Asimov's and Analog and quickly becoming a one of my favorite authors. Many of her stories tackle complex ethical issues-- for instance, "Broken Windchimes," in which aliens raise choirs of boy sopranos to be their musical slaves. Others, like "The Spires of Denon," ponder the ineffability of truly alien cultures by exploring bizarre artifacts. If she's written a bad story, I haven't read it. Nancy Kress is no slouch either, and this story about genetic engineering and the idea of "perfection" is a similarly-admirable ethical puzzle wrapped up in a corporate-espionage thriller.



Novelette

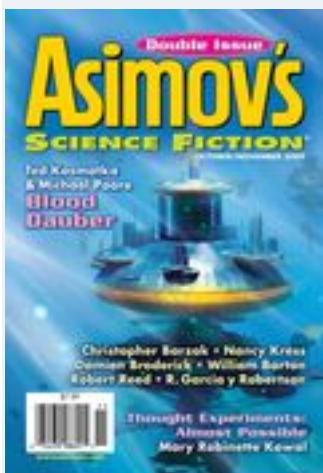
1. [The Armies of Elfland](#) by Eileen Gunn and Michael Swanwick (April/May)
2. [Blood Dauber](#) by Ted Kosmatka and Michael Poore (October/November)
3. [The Qualia Engine](#) by Damien Broderick (August)

I loved Broderick's story of a group of second-generation mutant geniuses and Kosmatka and Poore's zoo-based exploration of forgiveness, trust, and mutant wasps. But Gunn and Swanwick's dark, dark, DARK fantasy, about some interdimensional "elves" that are as evil as you can imagine and then some, was a truly memorable reading experience. Honorable mention to "[Sails the Morne](#)" by Chris Willrich (June), about aliens who want to eat the Book of Kells, and "[Soulmates](#)" by Mike Resnick and Lezli Robyn (September), about a man who befriends a recently-self-aware robot.

Short story

1. [The Consciousness Problem](#) by Mary Robinette Kowal (August)
2. [The Last Apostle](#) by Michael Cassutt (July)
3. [Before My Last Breath](#) by Robert Reed (October/November)

Reed's story takes an archeologist's view of the birth of tradition in a dying alien culture. Cassutt's story of the last man to set foot on the moon (in the near future of an alternate universe) both lionizes and eulogizes the Apollo program. But Kowal's tale of love and cloning, which hits some pretty strong emotional chords, takes the prize. Honorable mention: "[Five Thousand Miles From Birdland](#)" by Robert R. Chase (January); "[The Day Before the Day Before](#)" by Steve Rasnic Tem (September).



Poem

1. [The Silence of Rockets](#) by G.O. Clark (February)
2. [Edgar Allan Poe](#) by Bryan D. Dietrich (October/November)
3. [For Sale: One Moon-Base, Never Used](#) by Esther M. Friesner (July)

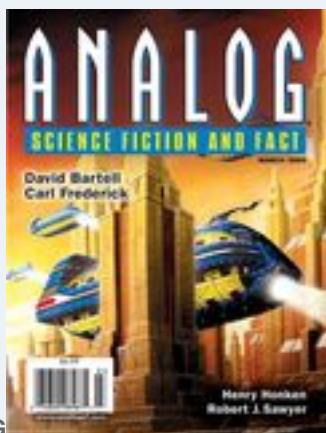
The title of Friesner's poem alone is powerful; and Dietrich's humorous meditation on the world's mopeiest action figure is bemused fun. But Clark's poem, which contrasts the otherworldly aspirations of space travel and the hope of life after death, is one of the few I've read in Asimov's that's really spoken to me: "...the sky once again become / a dusty concave shell, a / container of cast out prayers..."

Cover

1. April/May by **Paul Youll**, illustrating "The Spires of Denon" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
2. August by John **Jude Palencar**, originally created for *The Drawing of the Three* by Steven King
3. October/November by **Dominic Harman**

Harman's stoic space station and Palencar's otherworldly door are both nice, strong images. But Youll's illustration for my top-novella pick perfectly captures the sensawunda of Rusch's monumental alien artifact.

And there should be a special award for Norman Spinrad's essay "What Killed Tom Disch?", which was sort of a review of Disch's final novel, [The Word of God](#), but was also much, much more. You can, and should, read it [online](#).

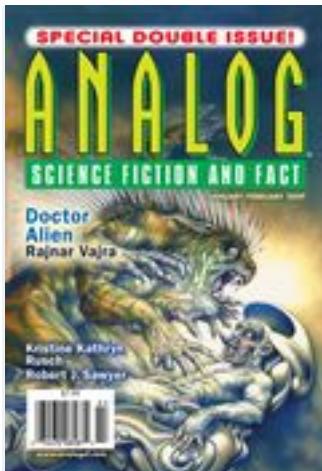


ANALOG

Novella

1. [The Recovery Man's Bargain](#) by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (January/February)
2. [Gunfight on Farside](#) by Adam-Troy Castro (April)
3. [Where the Winds are All Asleep](#) by Michael F. Flynn (October)

Flynn's tall tale about a quest for life a bit nearer the planet's core is a fun romp (told in part by a tipsy priest). It was a tough fight for the top two slots: I really loved Castro's Western-ish tale of a frontiersman on the moon who can't live up to his very Earpian legend. The evolving morality of Rusch's eponymous Recovery Man reminded me of Martin Buber, which is never a bad thing.



Novelette

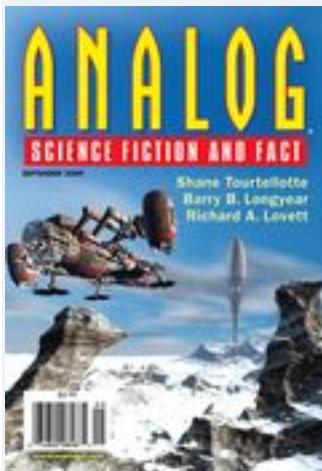
1. [But it Does Move](#) by Harry Turtledove (June)
2. [The Chain](#) by Stephen L. Burns (June)
3. [Payback](#) by Tom Ligon (July/August)

Ligon's sequel to last year's "El Dorado" made an at-first simplistic alien religion much more complex, which is only one reason why it's a good story. Burns' exploration of robot rights hit a couple liberation theology notes. And Turtledove's clever alternate history, in which Galileo's inquisitor was Cardinal Sigmund Freud, brought fictional light to an intriguing true story. Honorable mention to "Among the Tchi" by Adam-Troy Castro (May)-- about a nightmarish writers' group run by overcritical aliens, "[Quickfeathers](#)" by Alexis Glynn Latner (May), which explores the mythology of a birdlike alien race, and "[Shallow Copy](#)" by Jesse L. Watson (October), in which two kids accidentally create a virtual being.

Short story

1. [Solace](#) by James van Pelt (June)
2. [The Invasion](#) by H.G. Stratmann (April)
3. [After the First Death](#) by Jerry Craven (March)

James van Pelt's "Solace" packs a lot into nine pages, creating an emotional link between two characters centuries apart using a candlestick and a passage of scripture.



Science fact

1. [From Token to Script: The Origin of Cuneiform](#) by Henry Honken (March)
2. [Rock! Bye-bye, Baby](#) by Edward M. Lerner (November)
3. [Neptune, Neptune, Neptune... but not Neptune](#) by Kevin Walsh (January/February)

I don't have much to say about *Analog*'s fact pieces this year, alas. I tend to prefer reading the [more philosophical](#) ones, and this year tended to the nuts and bolts.

Cover

1. March by **Jean-Pierre Normand**
2. January/February by **John Allemand**, illustrating "Doctor Alien" by Rajnar Vajra
3. September by **Alperium/Shutterstock.com**

There have been more than a few computer-generated covers for the SF magazines in the past few years that I've hated, so it's nice to see one done right, as on the September issue. I love the weird aliens John Allemand creates for his interior illustrations, and I'm always happy to see his work on the cover. But the one that spoke to me the most was Normand's image of enormous floating structures in a retrofuturistic cityscape: it's like Frank R. Paul never left us.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on December 28, 2009 at 09:38 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 09, 2010

Avatar: Pantheism, proof, and pretty stuff



The subject of SF theology has been widely-discussed for the last week, thanks to James Cameron's *Avatar*. (It would have to happen when I'm on vacation, huh?) In a column for the *New York Times*, [Ross Douthat](#) demonizes the film for its pantheism; Beliefnet's Pagan blogger [Gus di Zerega](#) praises it for the same; for [Religion Dispatches](#), C. Joshua Villines frames the film as a ritual of atonement for "the sins of commercialism and Western triumphalism"; even [the Daily Show](#) had its say. The encounter between religion and capitalism is a central aspect of *Avatar*'s story, so theology is at the center of the film's very message-y message.

Avatar tells the story of Jake Sully, a paraplegic Marine who is sent to the distant moon Pandora to operate an "Avatar"-- a hybrid clone designed to let Earthlings blend in with the alien Na'vi and negotiate with them on behalf of a human-run mining operation. He assists Dr. Grace Augustine (choose your own referents for the symbolism in that name), the designer of the avatars, and Col. Quaritch, the mean ol' military commander in charge of protecting the mining operations from native attacks.

The natives in question are the Na'vi, a species of extraordinarily tall blue-skinned humanoids who live in a really big tree. Their culture is based around climbing trees, riding various jungle animals, and communing with Eywa, an apparent earth- (or is that "moon-?") goddess. We come to learn that this communion is concrete-- the Na'vi have a cluster of tentacles mixed in with their hair that enables them to do all kinds of neat things, from linking up to steeds (both ground-based and flying) and connect to their world's network of living things. "Eywa," we realize, isn't some ethereal personification of nature; it's an actual, contactable world-mind, and the Na'vi experience it directly by plugging in their nerve clusters to a particular "sacred grove."

Of course, the mining corporation doesn't care about any of that, so they send their enormous bulldozers and gunships to chop down every tree that the Na'vi care about in order to get to their unobtanium (and oh my goodness I

wish Cameron had just used the fanspeak as a placeholder until they could come up with a properly SFnal-sounding mineral name for the final script). Sully, meanwhile, goes native, falling in love with an alien girl and becoming the greatest military leader in Na'vi history. With the help of a few "nice" humans, he's able to drive back the human thugs and save the Na'vi from certain doom.



Most of the discussion of religion in *Avatar* has focused on the Na'vi's pantheism. I wasn't too impressed with this aspect of the film, to be honest, and not because I think pantheism is a Bad Thing (indeed, I lean toward it a bit, though at the end of the day I'm more into [panentheism](#)). Rather, I thought it was a bit on the lazy, underdeveloped side. Though I loved most of the creature designs (I recognized the very skilled hand of [Wayne Barlowe](#) immediately), I found the Na'vi culture to be human, all too human. These are supposed to be aliens, but their culture comes across like a New Age-romanticization of African and Native American culture-- the monolithization of which is part of the problem. (Few things bug me as much as the homogenization of disparate cultures in New Age spirituality-- it's really just a kinder, gentler cultural imperialism.)

There is one really interesting thing about the Na'vi's Gaea religion, though, and that is its basis in their lived experience. They don't just believe that all life is linked, they have the biological hardware to plug into their planet's organic-electric network and experience it. This was the single most original aspect of the alien biology and culture, but I don't think its implications were pushed far enough-- with the result being a half-baked nature spirituality instead of a truly alien culture.

The verifiability of the Na'vi religion is important in the story. A key moment comes when the dying Dr. Augustine, connected to the roots of Pandora's planetary bio-network, announces with her final breath that the Na'vi deity is real. By connecting to the bioelectric network that is Eywa, she "proves" the Na'vi religion. Of course, that proof means nothing to Col. Quaritch, the very-very-bad military leader, who makes mockery of the alien religion a key part of morale-building. His statement that the Na'vi believe their god protects the Tree of Souls earns a group chuckle from his subordinates-- a reaction that seems particularly callous after the destruction we've already seen them wreak upon the aliens. The placement of the comment suggests that this kind of religious prejudice is central to the heartlessness the soldiers display, and, more broadly, that wedging this kind of belief-hatred to military conflict is a way to fast-track the dehumanization that war requires. This kind of thing doesn't just happen in imaginary battles in space, either-- witness atheist spokesman Christopher Hitchens' [support](#) of assorted wars in Muslim countries, which is more than a little bit linked to his-- let's say "strong dislike"-- of Islam. The evil corporation is atheistic (as are, ultimately, all corporations), and that atheism is part of its heartlessness: it is able to wreak cruel devastation because it sees nothing to respect in the religion at the center of the Na'vi culture.

The fact that the Na'vi religion is "provable" is intriguing, but Elliot (of [Claw of the Conciliator](#)) brought up an interesting point to me-- does this mean the oppression and exploitation of the Na'vi would be OK if their religion *weren't* based on the scientific fact of their biological abilities? What does the Na'vi ability to demonstrate the grounding of their religious experience say about the faith of those of us who don't have planet-communicating nerve clusters growing out of our heads?

Faith-versus-reason isn't the only thing in *Avatar* that's more complicated than it may at first appear. There's actually

an ironic bit of imperialism at the heart of the story, which suggests that the Na'vi would be helpless if not for the white earthling who dresses up in alien drag and becomes their messiah. And technology gets a boost, as well: the final fight scene shows us Sully (operating his Avatar) fighting Quaritch (operating a big mecha-suit) to protect his alien bride (operating a panther-like predator via her nerve connection)-- all three are using technology of a sort, and it's Sully's, which is a sort of middle ground between the two, that we're supposed to find the neatest.

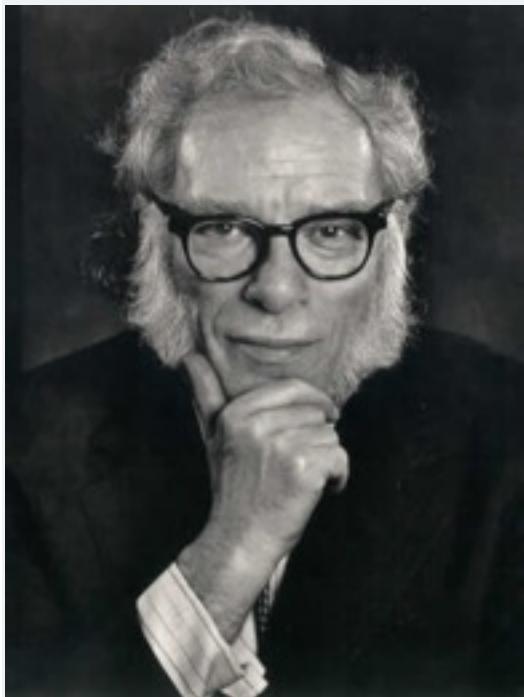
Of course, all of this is ignoring the single most important thing about *Avatar*, which is the fact that it's really, really *pretty*. ([Wayne Barlowe](#), people!) Ultimately, plot, character, and themes are all secondary to the central concern of this film, which is spectacle. There are good guys, and bad guys, and the fact that that religion-- its absence, and its presence (with "proof")-- is part of the division is interesting. But it's important to remember that-- hey, look at that funky rhino-thing!



Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 09, 2010 at 05:10 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 11, 2010

"Beware of Science Fiction"?



Self-identified Fundamentalist David Cloud has written a short piece on why you should "[Beware of Science Fiction](#)." (The reasons mostly boil down to "because it will make you a polyamorous nudist atheist who believes in evolution.") He singles out Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Kurt Vonnegut, and Gene Roddenberry as the worst offenders-- and the expiration date on those examples goes a long way toward showing how much Cloud actually knows about SF.

The piece reminded me quite a bit of James A. Herrick's slightly more subtle but no less damning critique of SF, *Scientific Mythologies*. In my review of Herrick's book for the [Internet Review of Science Fiction](#), I called the author out for treating Christianity as monolithic, unchanging, and "traditional," while ignoring or dismissing Christianity's rich "tradition" of speculative theology. Cloud is clearly committing the same error here.

And, of course, my own [The Gospel According to Science Fiction](#) is a sort of counterargument in itself. On a certain level, Herrick and Cloud are right that much (though not all) SF may be in opposition to a *particular kind* of Christianity, but the world of religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is much bigger than that. And even self-identified atheists and agnostics have written some of the most profound theological SF of all time. SF is a wonderful place for speculative theology and religious exploration, which I believe are very valuable and powerful things.

[via [BoingBoing](#)]

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 11, 2010 at 08:47 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

January 22, 2010

You should watch *Caprica*, because it is a good show.



In case you haven't seen a billboard lately, *Caprica* premieres tonight on Syfy. The pilot is quite good, and, as I explained in my review a couple months ago, some of the same religious questions that drove *Battlestar Galactica* are central to the story:

Hidden deep in the heart of the Caprica pilot is a "how the leopard got its spots" tale—but for "leopard" read "Cylons," and for "spots" read "monotheistic religion." If anything, the conflict between monotheism and polytheism will be even more central to Caprica than it was to BSG.

And if the advertising image at left is any indication, the show will explore the preamble to apocalyptic war as a fall from Eden-- so the "sin" theme that emerged toward the end of BSG should be pretty important, too. I am certainly looking forward to seeing how the series unfolds.

Read my review of the *Caprica* pilot [here](#).

(Oh, and that opening thing about the network trying to tank the series? I think the ridiculous amount they seem to have been spending on advertising for the last month or two disproves that little theory.)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on January 22, 2010 at 09:03 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 02, 2010

Just a little apocalypse: Stephen King's *Under the Dome*



I was a big fan of Stephen King growing up, but it's been quite a few years since I've read anything of his. When I heard that his latest novel was a thousand-plus-page science fictional epic, I knew I was going to have to give it a try. *Under the Dome* describes, in minute detail, what happens when the small Maine town (what else?) of Chester's Mill is cut off from the world by an invisible, impenetrable barrier. The result is, without spoiling too much, a rapid descent into fascism, an exploration of the town's dark, *Twin Peaks*-ish underbelly, and an unhappy ending for just about everybody.

I was a bit disappointed in the book for a few reasons. It was certainly a page-turner, but I did feel it was a bit too long, and could easily have been wrapped up two or three hundred pages earlier. One part of the problem is the incredibly short time-frame the story covers: the entire novel describes a single week, beginning pretty much the moment the Dome appears. The pacing of the novel is compelling, but I would have much rather learned what life was like in Chester's Mill five weeks, three months, or six years later; wrapping things up in seven days robs us of much of the extrapolative possibility inherent in the story's central concept. Furthermore, King has already done the basic story of Under the Dome-- bizarre event isolates the inhabitants of a small Maine town; fascism rapidly emerges-- in "The Mist." At one point a character makes an offhand comment about "that movie, *The Mist*," and once you get past the initial chuckle it feels like King's tacit acknowledgment: *Yeah, I've done this before, but look! this is ten times longer!* None of these problems kept me from finishing the book, but I do wish it had been a bit more... something.

Religion crops up in several places in the story. We see it first in the town's two ministers. First is the fundamentalist Lester Coggins, a conservative convinced that the town is being punished for its sins (in which he has a large share). Second is the Congregationalist Piper Libby, who isn't too sure she believes in God anymore: "Not-There was her private name for God lately. Earlier in the fall it had been The Great Maybe. During the summer, it had been The Omnipotent Could-Be." Such is our introduction to Libby; she's saved from the cliché of the preacher-who-has-lost-her-faith by a depth of character that emerges much later in the book.

But the real meat of the book's religious, and apocalyptic, content comes from two non-ordained characters. "Big Jim" Rennie is a used car dealer and local despot who attempts, with a disturbing level of success, to position himself as the town's absolute ruler as soon as the Dome descends. Rennie is Lester Coggins' chief congregant, and his spirituality is presented as the lowest common denominator of evangelicalism: his image of the afterlife is to spend eternity eating steak and mashed potatoes with Jesus. (We get a glimpse of his actual afterlife at the book's end, in a moment with a nice *Twilight Zone* flavor). This bland religiosity covers up a much more sinister contempt for everyone and everything. He sees the Dome not as a tragedy, but as an opportunity to take complete control of the town. Anyone who thinks King is sentimental about small-town Maine should take a close look at this character, who makes it pretty clear that he sees dark and evil things barely even concealed beneath the veneer of rural gentility.

[There are some spoilers in the paragraph below.]

[Here endeth the spoilers.]

Ultimately, *Under the Dome* doesn't quite justify its page count. Though the plot moves quickly and the enormous cast is well-drawn, it doesn't push its SF ideas quite far enough. When we learn the mystery of the Dome at the book's end, it feels suspiciously like the conclusion of a carefully-constructed shaggy dog story. King isn't primarily an SF writer, of course, and some might even question identifying this novel as SF at all. But as someone who came to this book because of its genre leanings, I felt it would have been well-served by devoting a bit more of its energy to idea-exploration. Add to that a fairly disturbing sexualization of violence toward women in the book's first half (something I'm surprised more reviewers haven't mentioned), and you have a book that simply isn't rewarding enough for what it asks of its readers. It's a mostly enjoyable book, sure; but 1,100 pages calls for a big investment of time and attention, and we need more than this book gives us to make that investment worthwhile.

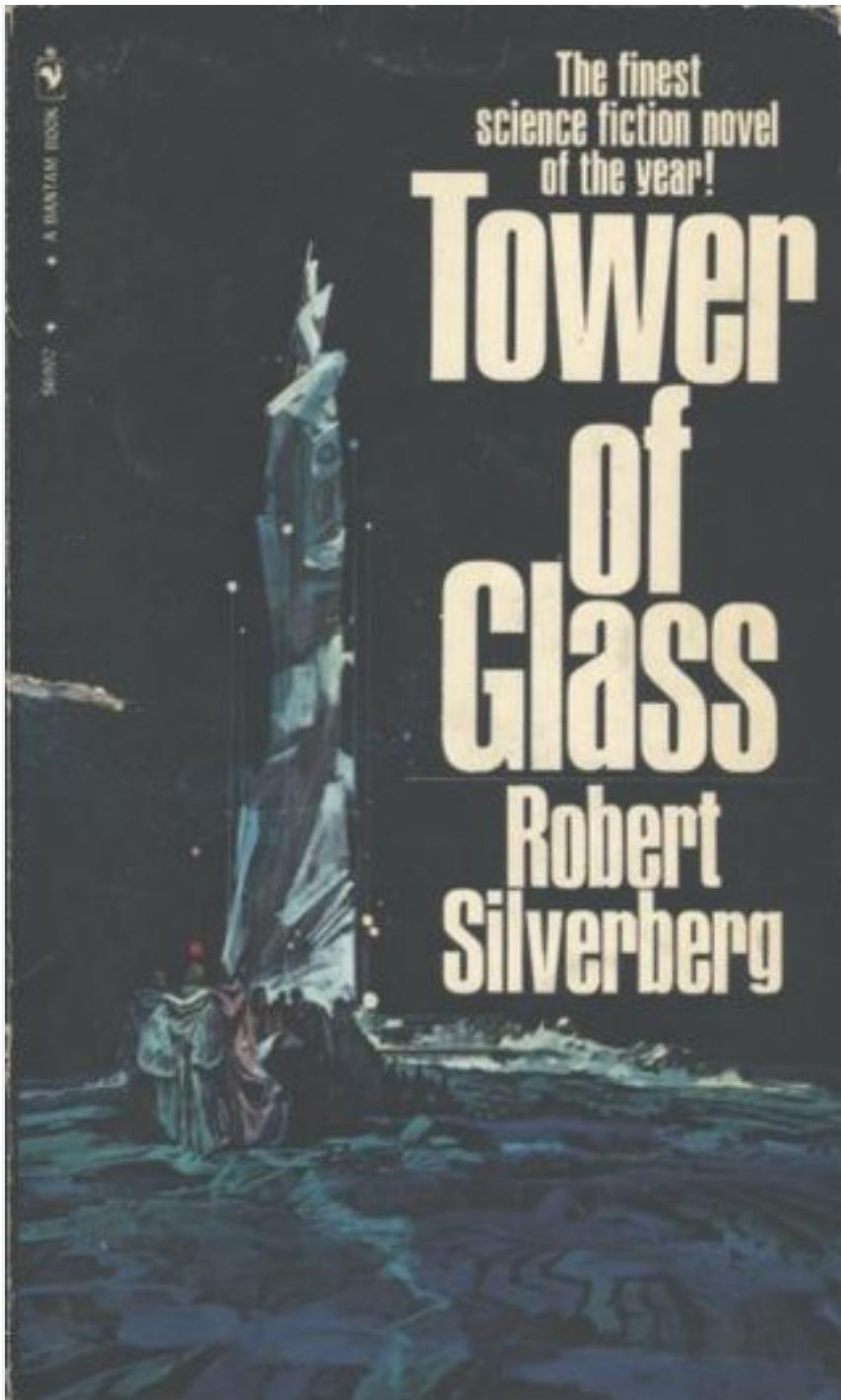
Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 02, 2010 at 04:18 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 08, 2010

Simple Meme: What book are you reading now?

An easy-enough meme from [SF Signal](#)-- answer the following four questions:

1. What Book Are You Reading Now?
2. Why did you choose it?
3. What's the best thing about it?
4. What's the worst thing about it?



1. *Tower of Glass* by Robert Silverberg. I'm about halfway through.*

2. I realized, after picking two of his stories for my list of [The 10 Best Science Fiction Stories About Religion](#) and reviewing [Downward to the Earth](#), that Silverberg really is one of my favorite authors (with a bullet). I'm not sure where I first heard of *Tower of Glass*-- I think it may have been in Donald Palumbo's brief but excellent survey of religious ideas in SF (and dang if I can't find the title or citation at the moment, but I have a copy of it somewhere). After my recent [catch-up](#) run on the last few months of SF magazines and the epic [Under the Dome](#), I wanted something that was a) a novel rather than short stories, b) a short novel rather than a long one, and c) old-ish rather than new. *Tower of Glass* fit the bill, and is a fairly-acclaimed work by an author who I've been getting very into, so here we are.

3. It's got a wonderful android religion that takes form through some nicely poetic scriptural passages and a theological debate or two. The androids worship their inventor, Krug, but it's not so theologically-simple as that formulation implies: they're aware that Krug is just a guy, and what they worship is not so much Krug the man as the principle of creation that his individual person implies. I may write more about it soon.

4. The plot seems a bit stretched, like this was conceived as a novella and then extended to longer form. But Silverberg does the extending quite well, I think.

*The memo assumes you're reading only one book, which I never am-- though I usually keep myself to one work of fiction at a time. On the nonfiction shelf: *Bishops at Large* by Peter Anson, the supplemental material from the two-volume *Absolute Crisis on Infinite Earths*, and *England's Dreaming* by Jon Savage. I'm also gradually working through Mike Ashley's history of SF magazines and the complete stories of Edgar Allan Poe.

Posted by Gabriel Mckee on February 08, 2010 at 12:03 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 09, 2010

Some links from the last month

Continuing the great catch-up project, here are some links from the last month or so:

At Tor.com, Teresa Jusino ponders [religion, science, and science fiction](#). I'm interested in her approach to the "provable" deities of (for instance) *Avatar* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*:

Most people who debate science vs. religion tend to ask the same boring question. Does God exist? Yawn. However, the question in all of these stories is never "Do these beings really exist?" The question is "What do we call them?" It's never "Does this force actually exist?" It's, "What do we call it?" Or "How do we treat it?" Or "How do we interact with it?" One of the many things that fascinates me about these stories is that the thing, whatever it is—a being, a force—always exists. Some choose to acknowledge it via gratitude, giving it a place of honor, organizing their lives around it and allowing it to feed them spiritually. Others simply use it as a thing, a tool, taking from it what they will when they will then calling it a day. But neither reaction negates the existence of the thing.

I like the treatment of "Does God exist?" as a dull and tired debate. The first thing that question brings to my mind is "How are you defining 'God'?" Chances are the questioner is rolling up more than a few assumptions with that word. Even the most atheistic of scientists (and, yes, I'm thinking specifically of Richard Dawkins) can start to sound downright mystical when they start talking about the vastness of the universe or the philosophical concept of a "scientific law." So, yes, I think Jusino is right to argue that "what we call it" and "how we treat it" are more interesting ways to approach the interplay of science and religion than tired old atheist-versus-creationist fight.

Joe Laycock [reviews *Daybreakers*](#) for Religion Dispatches, finding Eucharistic themes amidst the blood-soaked chaos. I haven't seen the movie, but its vampire society is an intriguing premise (however much it may crib from the end of [I Am Legend](#)). And for the Marty Martin Center, Mr. Laycock has also penned [a brief discussion of *Avatar*](#) that draws a parallel between the planet-ravaging, sinful humans of that film with the planet-ravaging, sinful humans of C.S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* and its sequels. I recently read Joe's excellent exploration of real life vampires, *Vampires Today*, which is an intriguing and extraordinarily well-written look at a subculture with some unexpectedly religious elements. And you can [read it](#) too.

For the Guardian, Toby Lichtig takes a quick look at [secular apocalypticism](#). He points out an interesting contrast between environmental nightmares and Cold War nuclear scenarios:

Put simply, the difference between the current threat and older ones is this: we are all, personally, to blame. Almost everyone (especially in the well-read west) is doing their bit to make the world a warmer place, and thus we are all implicated in the calamity that will this time surely spell the End.

This pushes secular apocalypse back into religious territory. Nuclear war can't be framed as punishment for individual sin, but environmental collapse can. Of course, it's not just climate-change nightmares that can be framed this way: as I pointed out in [my review of *Cloverfield*](#), some giant monster attacks may be caused by your inconsiderate cell phone use.

Scott Timberg has written a six-part series on [Philip K. Dick's Orange County years](#) for the *Los Angeles Times*, which is particularly interesting because it was in those years that Dick had his vivid religious experiences. Timberg tackles that topic in [part four](#), treating it generally as a "mystery" that can never be solved, and giving a bit too much credence to Thomas Disch, who I believe was [sorely mistaken](#) about the nature of Dick's religious thought. It would

have been nice to have a paragraph or two about the actual content of Dick's theological writing-- but I guess asking for theology in the *LA Times* might be a fool's errand.

Religion Dispatches is running a [weekly feature](#) on *Caprica*.

And that is all for now-- though I'm not actually quite caught up on my RSS feeds, so more may follow shortly.

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 09, 2010 at 11:15 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

February 17, 2010

SF Signal's Mind Meld: SF TV shows that deserve a remake

The lovely folks at SF Signal have invited me to participate in another Mind Meld column, this one on long-lost SF shows that deserve a remake. Check out my answer [here](#), alongside a bunch more. There's an impressive array of responses ranging from *Space: 1999* to *Darkwing Duck*, including a couple very obscure ones that sound fascinating (I've got to track down *The Starlost* and *Otherworld*).

[MIND MELD: SciFi TV Shows That Deserve A Remake \(with Videos\)](#)

Posted by Gabriel McKee on February 17, 2010 at 08:28 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 03, 2010

The Muppet Wicker Man



Why didn't somebody think of it sooner? An online comic book adaptation of the '70s bizarro-pagan horror classic *The Wicker Man*, starring... the Muppets. [Read it fast](#), before the lawsuits hit.

And, while you're at it, check out [my review of *The Wicker Man*](#) from a few years ago, in which I explored the movie's depiction of clashing religious ideologies.

UPDATE:

Oh, hey, it's embeddable:

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 03, 2010 at 10:01 PM
in [Comics](#), [Film](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#)

March 20, 2010

Persecuted Jedi in the news again

A while back I wrote a short piece for Religion Dispatches on [an odd news item](#) involving the U.K.-based [Church of Jediism](#), involving a would-be Sith Lord's drunken attack on one of the Church's founders and, more importantly, the powerful impact that media attention can have on new religious movements. The Church of the Jedi is in the news again-- a member is claiming that Jobcentre, a job-training organization, [discriminated against him](#) by demanding that he remove his hood indoors. Chris Jarvis argues that going hooded in public is part of his faith. "Muslims can walk around in whatever religious gear they like," he noted, "so why can't I?" After receiving his official complaint, Jobcentre apologized. The Times' religion blog notes that the Church of the Jedi's founder, Daniel Jones, was involved in [a similar dispute](#) with Tesco last year, whose response to his complaint was anything but conciliatory: "Obi-Wan Kenobi, Yoda and Luke Skywalker all appeared hoodless without ever going over to the Dark Side and we are only aware of the Emperor as one who never removed his hood."

As with last year's drunken Vader attack, media coverage of this kind of story only helps small groups like the Church of Jediism, no matter how sneering it may be. For a church that literally started at a backyard barbecue, international press coverage, even as news-of-the-weird items, gives them a farther reach than they could ever have on their own. And given the amount of coverage this group has gotten in the last two years, it seems the Force is strong with this new religious movement.

Original story [here](#); also [here](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 20, 2010 at 09:26 PM in [Film](#), [Religion in the media](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 15, 2010

Five reasons to hate Kick-Ass



Sorry to be a contrarian, folks, but I am anything but excited about Kick-Ass. In fact, I hated just about everything about the comic series it's based on, which I felt totally missed the point of superheroes in its ham-fisted attempt at satirizing the genre and its fans. I feel so strongly about it that I wrote a lengthy essay on the story's many, many failings, which you can read as a [guest post at SF Signal](#). An excerpt:

The problem is that Kick-Ass wants to be a superhero, but his conception of heroism is all wrong. "We only get one life," he says, "and I wanted mine to be exciting." He sees the thrills, the violence, but not the

underlying sense of moral mission. He says himself that he has no real origin, that "It didn't take a trauma to make you wear a mask... Just the perfect combination of loneliness and despair." But Spider-Man or Batman's trauma isn't just a throwaway aspect of their stories; it's the guiding force behind their every action. A hero who begins with nothing but "loneliness and despair," not an all-consuming moral imperative to improve the world, is by definition a nihilistic figure. Dave Lizewski is really not a superhero at all—in genre classic terms, he's Peter Parker after the radioactive spider-bite but before the death of Uncle Ben. His actions aren't altruistic in the least—he continues putting on the costume because he likes to ride the ego wave that comes from his YouTube fame... In a [recent interview](#) Millar stated that Kick-Ass dons his costume "because it's the right thing to do. In a weird way, if you push past all the blood and the swearing, it's quite a moral tale." But because the character lacks a complete origin, a reason to think that what he's doing is the right thing, it's not a moral tale—in fact, it's a decidedly amoral one. And without the sense of a moral mission, he's simply not a superhero. Without murdered parents, Batman wouldn't be a hero; he'd just be a guy who dresses up and punch people—which is basically what Kick-Ass is. In short, the book simply doesn't understand the genre it purports to be commenting on. Superheroes work in large part because of the heroic myth at their core. In throwing out this central, defining trait of that myth, Kick-Ass loses any resonance it might have otherwise had.

Read the full essay at [SF Signal](#).

While researching this essay, I learned that Mark Millar, writer of the comic and executive producer of the film, is a Catholic who attends mass every week. Given my interpretation of Kick-Ass as an amoral, nihilistic, Ennian mess, I don't know what to make of that fact. Any thoughts? Share 'em below.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 15, 2010 at 09:41 AM in [Comics](#), [Film](#) | [Permalink](#)

April 18, 2010

More on Kick-Ass: some links and things.

First: No, I still haven't seen Kick-Ass, though I probably will by the end of the week. A pale glimmer of hope still burns deep within my heart that somehow something good could be harvested from the [fairly execrable source material](#).* But I have been reading much about it in the last few days. To wit:

[Roger Ebert did not like it, not at all](#). In fact, it made him sad. That's perhaps the biggest strike against it yet. I like Roger Ebert. I don't like things that make Roger Ebert sad. He's a nice guy, and he doesn't need to be made sad. More to the point, his reasons: they mostly involve children and violence, not the deeper elements of "missing the point of superheroes" that I discussed in my review of the comic. Let's be clear about this: it's not the violence that bothered me in Kick-Ass-- that is, not the violence alone. Lots of things that I like are violent, and I think violence in entertainment serves important social and psychological purposes. But, in genre terms, the violence needs to be there for a reason beyond itself.** In Kick-Ass-- the comic, at least-- the violence is there simply to be "kick-ass," in support of a story that is no story.

In response, Harry Knowles of Ain't It Cool News writes [a rebuttal that rebuts... nothing](#). Instead of offering an argument against Ebert's points or a defense of the role that violence plays in the film, he meanders on for a few paragraphs about how the movie isn't for kids, kids today are different than they were in the '50s, and in the '50s kids played with guns anyway, but kids will probably see it despite its R rating, and what were we talking about again? Indeed, by arguing that "the sort of kids that will see Kick-Ass this weekend are well prepared for it," he actually ends up explaining exactly *why* the film makes Ebert sad, perhaps better than Ebert himself did.

I quite like [Slate's review](#), because it basically says all the stuff I said about the comic (so maybe I wasn't misreading the whole thing all along!). According to Dana Stevens, the film

never provides a reason for Dave's transformation into Kick-Ass beyond his vague adolescent notion that being a superhero sounds neat. That may be enough to justify Dave's embarking on the experiment, but it doesn't explain why he continues to venture out in costume after being beaten, stabbed, and hit by a car.

Late in the movie, in voice-over, Dave puts a glum twist on a line from Spider-Man: "With no power comes no responsibility." If this film proposed any alternate moral vision, that line might count a sly reappropriation of the original. As the prelude to a climactic orgy of bloodletting set to the punk anthem "Bad Reputation," the joke comes off as nihilistic and flip. What do these characters consider worthy of killing and dying for? That a protagonist lacks superpowers is no reason for him to lack motivation, conviction, or purpose.

Nicely put. Hey, she even said "nihilistic"!

Echoing another thread from my review of the comic, friend of this blog Erin Snyder writes on the Middle Room that [the movie isn't fun](#). And might have (gasp) benefitted from being toned down by a studio.

On the other hand, another friend (who watched the movie, very likely with Mr. Snyder, but has not read the comic) informs me that many of the lines I quoted in my review appear in the movie in contexts different enough to invert their original meanings. And I know that the "first mission" was changed from beating up graffiti writers to beating up honest-to-goodness burglars, which likely lessens the racial overtones that irked me. So maybe the film gives more context and a better sense of purpose to the character? I dunno; I'll find out soon.

Lastly, Millar's [recent interview with the Onion AV Club](#) is worth reading. He has some interesting things to say about, for instance, the role that conservatism and conservative characters play in his work. I think he's a bit in error, though, in describing Superman and Batman as "law-enforcement people" and "authority figures." I actually think that superheroes are countercultural figures who critique or even undermine society's values rather than uphold them. More on this later...

*That hope mostly has to do with McLovin, because that kid is hilarious.

**For this reason I hated the French horror film *High Tension/Haute Tension*, which has some extreme, and extremely unpleasant, violence at the beginning. Until the final moments of the film, I was hoping it would give me some kind of payoff to justify that unpleasantness; instead it served up one of [the worst twists in film history](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 18, 2010 at 10:45 AM in [Comics](#), [Film](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

April 29, 2010

Philip K. Dick's Exegesis

The New York Times [reports](#) that new selections from Philip K. Dick's 8,000-page theological journal known as the *Exegesis* are to be published next year. At least two volumes are projected (it's unclear as of yet whether or not they're planning to print the journals in their entirety), to be edited by Jonathan Lethem and Pamela Jackson (who published an article on *Ubik* a few years ago that I have not yet read). Previous selections were published in a volume edited by Dick's chief biographer, Lawrence Sutin, entitled *In Pursuit of Valis*. Lethem rightly notes that it's a bit of an exaggeration to refer to the *Exegesis* as a "work," which implies concepts of completeness and boundaries that just don't apply to a sprawling archive of notes. Nevertheless, it was in these journals that Dick laid the theological groundwork for his final novels. In [Pink Beams of Light from the God in the Gutter](#) I argue that Dick's mystical speculations mark him as an important 20th century theologian, and I am excited to see what new speculations these new volumes will reveal.

Read the full story [here](#) or [here](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 29, 2010 at 02:32 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(3\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

May 17, 2010

The Doctor Who Media Club kicks off

Exciting news: I am spearheading [a weekly series](#) for Religion Dispatches exploring the intersection of religion, ethics, and maybe a bit of politics in the current season of *Doctor Who*! For the first week it's just me and James McGrath (of [Exploring Our Matrix](#)) posting, but we expect other contributors to join us shortly. In this week's installment, I discuss why the Doctor is an anarchist messiah, and James considers the Doctor's attitude to romance, interstellar exploitation, and whether or not the past should be changed (should one find oneself inside a time machine). [Check it out here](#) and check back again every week for new

installments!



Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on May 17, 2010 at 09:31 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

May 25, 2010

Planetary Profiling: Doctor Who pt. 2

The second entry in my series on *Doctor Who* for Religion Dispatches [is up now](#). This week James McGrath and I discuss the Weeping Angels two-parter, "Time of the Angels" and "Flesh and Stone."

The first post in the series is available [here](#), and the current one is [here](#).

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on May 25, 2010 at 09:02 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

May 28, 2010

Doctor Who, vampires, and reenchantment

The third post in Religion Dispatches' series on Doctor Who is up now. This time, guest smartie Joe Laycock kicks off the discussion with some thoughts on the disenchantment of vampires. Check it out [here](#).

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on May 28, 2010 at 08:37 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

June 01, 2010

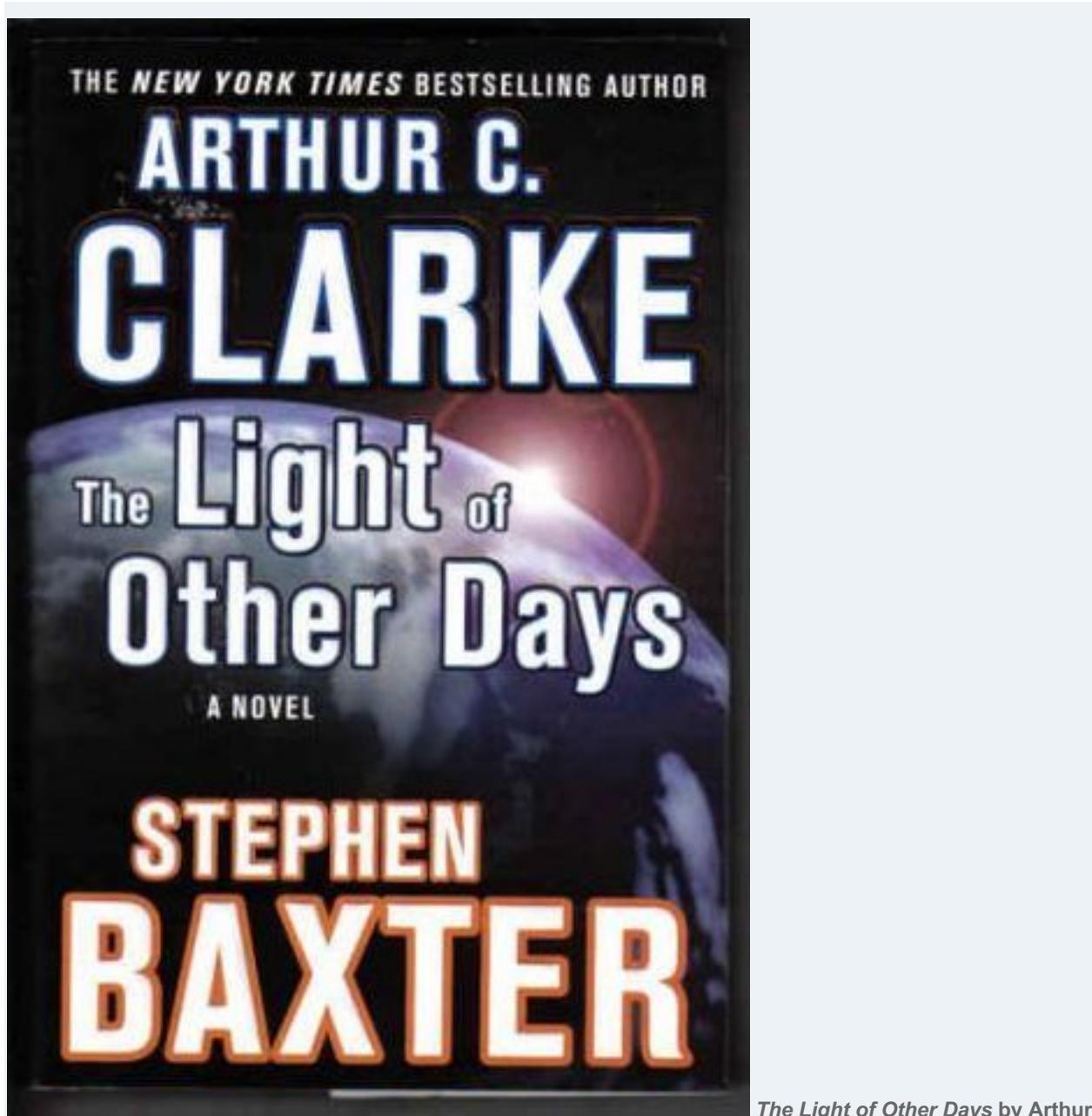
"Amy's Choice": Will the real universe please stand up...?

The latest in my series of posts on the current season of Doctor Who is up at Religion Dispatches. This week, James McGrath, Henry Jenkins and I ponder the difference between reality and dreams, and possibly an unnameable third choice, in "Amy's Choice." [Read it here](#).

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on June 01, 2010 at 10:36 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

June 01, 2010

Through a wormhole, darkly: The Light of Other Days



C. Clarke and Stephen Baxter.

The Light of Other Days by Arthur

This novel, one of Clarke's last (though I think it's safe to assume that Baxter did most of the actual writing), explores the cultural and psychological impact of visual wormhole technology that allows viewers to see what's going on anywhere on Earth... and, eventually, anywhere in the universe, at any time. This is an idea that comes up, briefly, in Clarke's masterpiece, *Childhood's End*, where the alien Overlords introduce similar technology to humankind, and in the space of a page or two it allows the human race to cast off its myths and illusions and live more fully in the present. That's not quite what happens here-- there is a bit of myth-debunking (on which more below), but for many people the ability to witness the past leads to a morbid obsession with what has gone before. And the elimination of the very concept of "privacy" creates a far more wide-reaching generation/technology gap than Facebook or the iPod ever could.

Religion crops up concretely in a few places in the novel. Early on (before the WormCam is developed) there's an enterprising, technophilic evangelist who uses VR to turn his worship services into grand spectacles. He's a stock character, and on this front the story doesn't give us anything we haven't seen before in, for instance, Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*. One of the central characters is a Catholic physicist, which proves a bit more interesting: he has a crisis of faith after viewing some bloody scenes from the Crusades over the WormCam. He

seeks to get past this impasse by joining the "12,000 Days" project, which seeks to fully chronicle every day in the life of Jesus Christ. Clarke and Baxter devote an entire chapter (albeit a fairly brief one) to presenting their world's true account of the life of Jesus, which the Afterword states is based largely on A.N. Wilson's biography *Jesus: A Life*. There's nothing terribly shocking here-- the Christmas story is an invention (as, interestingly, was the entire life of Moses); he was more a mason than a carpenter; there were 14 disciples, not 12; there were miracle cures, but all of the illnesses so cured seemed to be hysterical in nature. Things get really interesting, though, when we get to the Crucifixion:

The moment of His death is oddly obscured; WormCam exploration there is limited. Some scientists have speculated that there is such a density of viewpoints in those key seconds that the fabric of spacetime itself is being damaged by wormhole intrusions. And these viewpoints are presumably sent down by observers from our own future-- or perhaps from a multiplicity of possible futures, if what lies ahead of us is undetermined... Even now, despite all our technology, we see Him through a glass darkly.

Ah, now there's an interesting SFnal take on the death of Jesus! Even in this strictly materialistic novel, the death of Jesus is a special event-- who knows what might be the result of a near-infinite number of microscopic wormholes piercing the fabric of spacetime at the same moment and place? It's a question Clarke and Baxter don't explore further, but I'm not sure they need to. Ambiguity is the point here, after all...

Lastly, there's a brief mention of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and the noosphere at the end of the novel. The "apotheosis" at the end of the aforementioned *Childhood's End* bears a great similarity to Teilhard de Chardin's conception of the [Omega Point](#), an eschatological moment in the future when the human race becomes a single mental entity. Here, nearly 50 years later, Clarke seems to acknowledge that similarity directly, and hopefully sends a few readers in search of [The Phenomenon of Man...](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 01, 2010 at 10:31 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

July 21, 2010

Doctor Who: Alpha and Omega



The fifth season of *Doctor Who* has ended, and so too has my series on the show for Religion Dispatches. Check out the [final installment](#) for [James McGrath](#)'s thoughts on the Doctor's role in the (re)creation of the universe, and my discussion of Rory Williams, the robot who thought he was a man. See below for separate links to [every post](#) in the series (including a few that I seem to have neglected to mention here before. It's been a busy summer, folks).

[Part one](#), discussing "The Eleventh Hour," "The Beast Below," and "Victory of the Daleks," plus some general thoughts on *Doctor Who*.

[Part two](#), on "The Time of Angels."

[Part three](#), on "The Vampires of Venice."

[Part four](#), on "Amy's Choice."

[Part five](#), on "The Hungry Earth."

[Part six](#), on "Cold Blood."

[Part seven](#), on "Vincent and the Doctor."

[Part eight](#), on "The Lodger."

[Part nine](#), on "The Pandorica Opens."

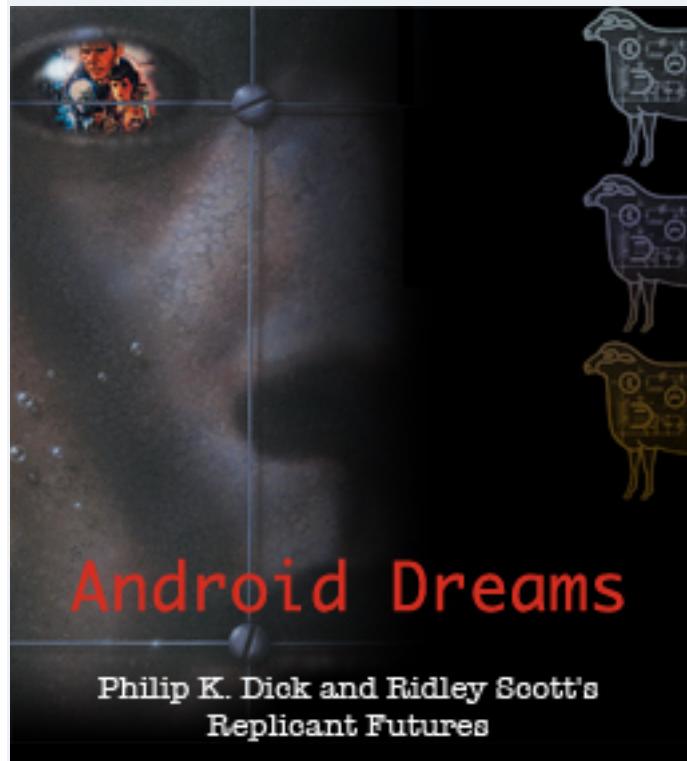
[Part ten](#), on "The Big Bang."

My deepest thanks to my co-contributors [Henry Jenkins](#), [Joseph Laycock](#), and especially [James McGrath](#)!

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on July 21, 2010 at 08:34 AM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

August 20, 2010

Philip K. Dick News: *Androids and the Exegesis*



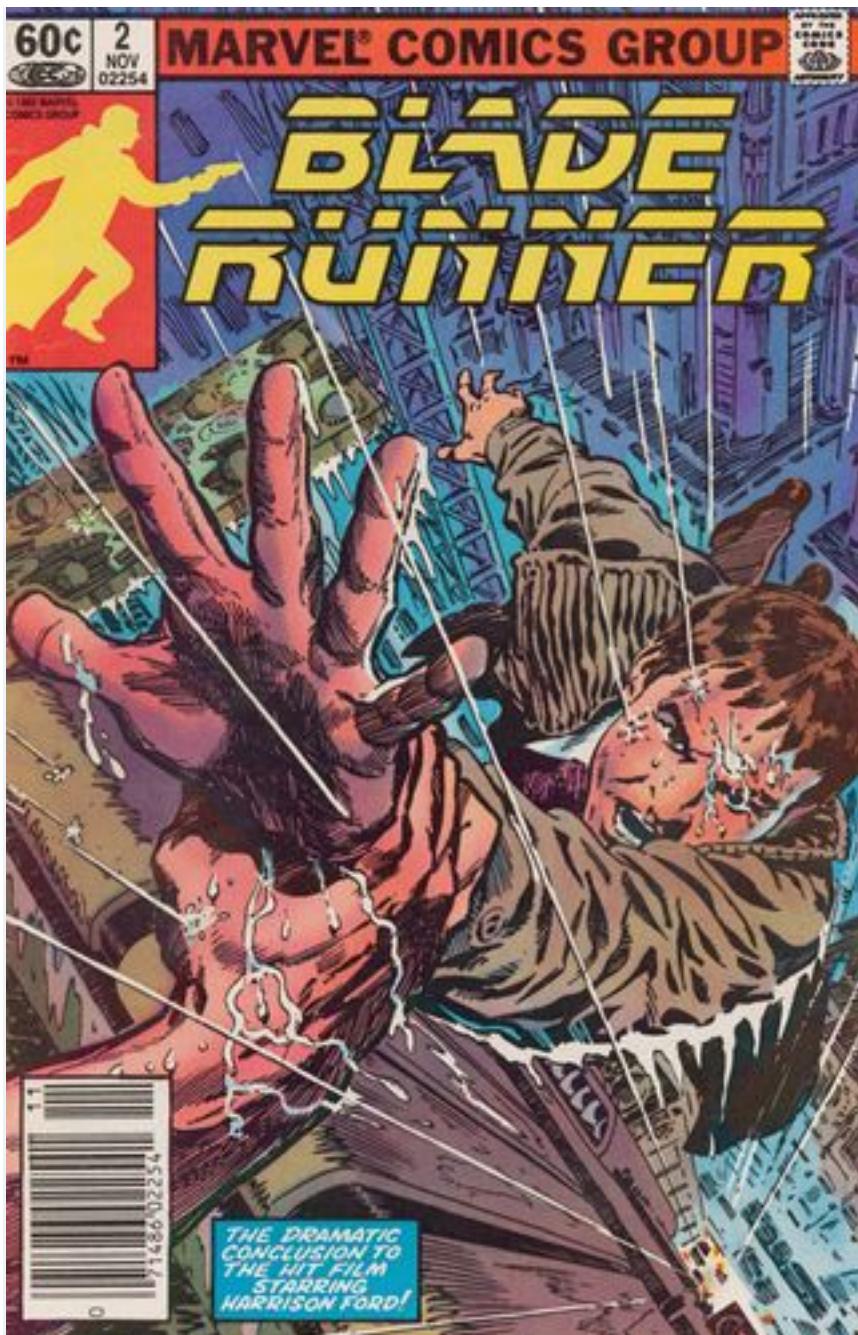
Cornell University's incoming freshmen are lucky: their summer reading assignment for this year is Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Cornell's Carl A. Kroch Library invited me to curate an exhibit on the novel's bibliographic history and broad influence (including its slightly more famous stepchild, *Blade Runner*). The exhibit is now open and runs through October 8th, but don't worry if you're not planning a trip to Ithaca in the next few weeks-- an online version of the exhibit is available [on Cornell's website](#). I had always enjoyed Androids, but I gained a new level of appreciation for it in researching this exhibit (which is my first official curatorial credit, hurrah).

From my introductory essay:

Dick once described himself as “a fictionalizing philosopher, not a novelist.” He saw his works as explorations of two primary questions: “What is reality?” and “What is human?” *Androids* enthusiastically tackles the second question, skillfully fusing its ideas about cruelty and empathy into a compelling detective story. Other works in his oeuvre explore the question as thoroughly--for instance, the novel *We Can Build You* and the speech “The Android and the Human.” But none do so in so entertaining a fashion as *Androids*.

This is turning out to be a very busy PKD year for me: in addition to this exhibition, I've read (and will shortly be reviewing, for the *SFRA Review*) the long-awaited final volume of *the Selected Letters of Philip K. Dick*. And, most importantly and excitingly, I've joined the team of scholars that is assembling a new, two-volume selection of previously-unpublished theological material from Dick's *Exegesis* (previously mentioned, prior to my involvement, [here](#)). They've got a great group working on this project, and they're doing the job exactly how it should be done. There is absolutely brilliant stuff in there that will soon see the light of day for the first time... and needless to say, I'm pretty thoroughly thrilled. More on that as publicity and propriety allow. In the meantime, check out the exhibit!

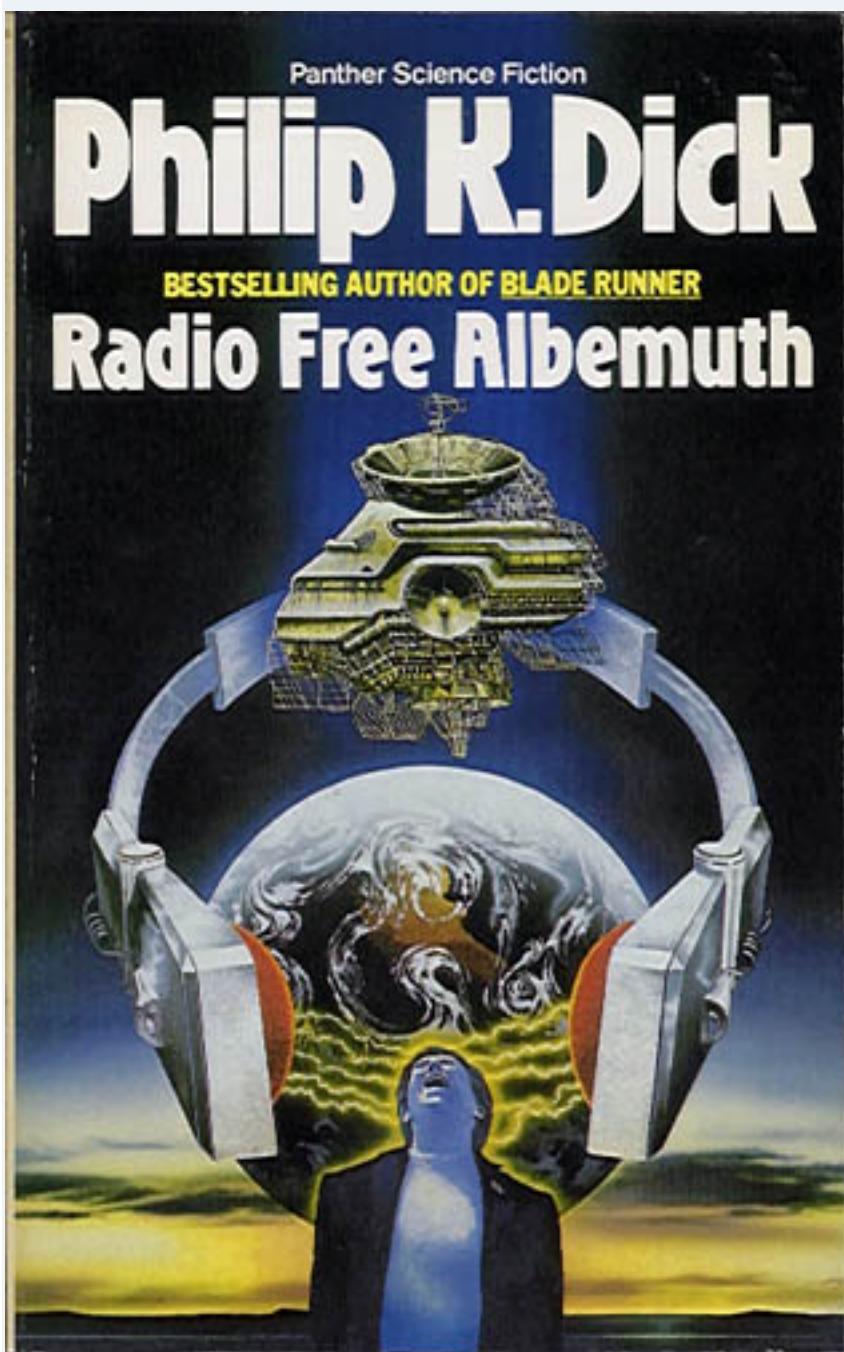
[Android Dreams: Philip K. Dick and Ridley Scott's Replicant Futures](#)



Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 20, 2010 at 02:40 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

October 03, 2010

Radio Free Albemuth in NYC



We interrupt our (de facto, impromptu, and strictly temporary, I assure you) hiatus to pass on the announcement of a film screening this week: *Radio Free Albemuth*, adapted from the Philip K. Dick novel of the same name, has its New York premiere this Thursday, October 7th, as part of the Gotham Screen International Film Festival. The novel on which the film is based, originally entitled *Valisystem A*, was Philip K. Dick's first attempt to communicate his religious experiences into fictional form. Legend has it that the publisher requested fairly minor revisions when he turned in the draft, but he instead completely rewrote the thing, producing *Valis*. When the *Valisystem A* draft was found in his papers after his death, it was considered different enough from its descendant to deserve publication under its own cover (and new, disambiguating title). I'm certainly a fan of *Valis*, but I've always considered *Radio Free Albemuth* to be at least as good, and in some

ways even better. Writer/producer/director John Alan Simon has maintained a healthy level of contact with the PKD community throughout the development of the film, which bodes well for the finished product. I am certainly looking forward to the screening (and, no doubt, pestering Simon with questions about his take on the *Exegesis* afterward).

Tickets to the screening can be purchased [here](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on October 03, 2010 at 10:39 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

October 10, 2010

Radio Free Albemuth: The politics of mystical experience



Radio Free Albemuth is generally

considered an oddity in the Philip K. Dick canon. Initially entitled *Valisystem A*, it was Dick's first attempt at transforming his religious experiences into a novel. When he sent it in to a publisher they returned it with a request for minor revisions; instead he scrapped the whole thing and started from scratch, resulting in the masterful *Valis*. *Valisystem A* was essentially forgotten until three years after his death, when it was published under the title it's known by today. There is disagreement among the grand assembly of Dickheads over the relative quality of many of his lesser-known books, but perhaps none is so controversial as *RFA*. Some think it is a minor footnote in the grander story of *Valis* (Jonathan Lethem, who left it out of the third Library of America novel in favor of *A Maze of Death*,* is in this camp); but others-- myself among them-- think it's an overlooked masterpiece, a powerful fusion of theological exploration and science-fictional storytelling.

John Alan Simon, the writer, producer, and director of the recent independent film adaptation of *Radio Free Albemuth*, clearly falls into the latter camp, as evidenced by his ardently faithful adaptation. It's obviously a labor of love, as underscored by the story of the film's production: Simon has been working on the adaptation for over 15 years. The screenplay hews closely to the novel in both structure and content-- something that no other PKD adaptation has done except *A Scanner Darkly*. The story is all there: Nicholas Brady, a PKD stand-in, is contacted by a semi-divine alien satellite that hopes to rescue humankind from the ontological injustice underlying not only a growing fascism in the United States, but all human suffering everywhere. His friend, the science fiction author Philip K. Dick, is gradually pulled into Brady's understanding of the world and his attempts at revolutionary action-- an action that cannot be judged in worldly terms of success or failure. The film transcribes the story with painstaking care.

That's not to say there isn't some creative interpretation going on, but the film handles that interpretation smartly. This is especially evident in the numerous dream sequences: the dreams of PKD stand-in Nicholas Brady are a central aspect of the novel (and of Dick's real-life religious experiences), and the film captures the otherworldly quality of those dreams brilliantly. (The bemused look on the face of Jonathan Scarfe, playing Brady, as he receives a computerized message from an alternate-universe "Portuguese States of America" is a particular high point). The film uses an awful lot of computer effects for a movie without a car chase, and those effects pay off-- they are an otherworldly intrusion, just like the alien-divine messages they represent. There's a slightly different look to each dream, including a couple fully-animated sequences. Some are extremely polished; others are deliberately more

sketchy, but there's a powerful aesthetic driving all of these sequences. It's clear that a lot of thought went into the look of Brady's visions, which are, after all, the backbone of this story.



There's also a strong emphasis placed on the novel's political message. It gives a sinister illustration of an America gradually transforming into a police state that reminded me of *Southland Tales*.** In this context, those contacted by the alien satellite from Albemuth become not just religious visionaries, but revolutionaries as well. Collectively known as "Aramchek," they become the victims of brutal political repression. The falsity of the distinction between politics and religion is a recurring theme in the story. Near the novel's end, the narrator (Philip K. Dick himself, albeit a fictional version thereof) discusses this idea in dialogue closely reproduced in the film:

"[Aramchek believes] that we shouldn't give our loyalty to human rulers. That there is a supreme father in the sky, above the stars, who guides us. Our loyalty should be to him and him alone."

"That's not a political idea," Leon said with disgust. "I thought Aramcheck was a political organization, subversive."

"It is."

"But that's a religious idea. That's the basis of religion. They have been talking about that for five thousand years."

I had to admit that he was right. "Well," I said, "that's Aramchek, an organization guided by the supreme heavenly father."

This political theology-- in essence, a form of Christian anarchism-- is at the heart of *Radio Free Albemuth*, and the film highlights these concepts brilliantly. That's an element that was significantly diluted in the transition from *Albemuth* to *Valis*: bringing the story out of an alternate-universe police state and into something more closely resembling the real world reduces the urgency of this political theology. Simon also holds the film rights to *Valis*, which goes further down the theological rabbit hole, and has written a screenplay for *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*, which depicts a particularly unpleasant police state. In this context, *Radio Free Albemuth* may end up occupying the central territory in a sort of trilogy exploring the breadth of Dick's philosophy and theology. The film is currently in search of a distributor, but when it becomes more widely available, it's definitely worth seeking out.

For more on *Radio Free Albemuth*, see the film's [official website](#) and the *Wall Street Journal's* [coverage of the premiere](#).

*Admittedly an overlooked masterpiece in its own right, and an excellent fusion of SF and theology.

**I should probably note that I mean this comparison as a compliment, since not everyone is kindly disposed to that film. See also [my comparison of Sunshine to Event Horizon](#).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on October 10, 2010 at 01:39 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(3\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

December 09, 2010

[Doomsday Film Festival](#)



Don't think the prolonged quiet on this blog is due to inactivity-- quite the opposite. For instance: I'll be speaking on a panel this Saturday at the [Doomsday Film Festival](#) in Brooklyn, N.Y. I'm speaking after the late-Cold War anxiety tale *Testament*. But if you're interested you might as well just get the festival pass, because the entire lineup looks amazing! (I'm most looking forward to *Damnation Alley* and *Hardware*.) Buy your tickets soon, because by all accounts the theater is tiny (like a fallout shelter, natch). The festival begins tomorrow night (Friday, Dec. 10th), and my film and panel session begin at 3:30 on Saturday the 11th. See you at the end of the world!

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on December 09, 2010 at 04:51 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

January 20, 2011

What I've been doing lately:



Don't mistake the sluggishness of this blog for inactivity: there's been much going on behind the scenes lately. Most relevant to our purposes here are a couple of Philip K. Dick-related writing projects. I wrote a review of the final volume of the Selected Letters for the *SFRA Review*. It's not yet available online, but it will hopefully be up soon at the [SFRA's website](#). (I may post it here soon as well.) More importantly, I have a forthcoming essay in Boom! Studios' comics adaptation of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* My piece, which looks at the theological and ethical content of DADOES (but not quite so boringly as I just made it sound), will appear in #21, due out sometime in March. I'm told that issue also includes some major material relating to the empathy-based religion of Mercerism and its enigmatic messiah, Wilbur Mercer-- quite appropriate, I think.

Then there's my best-things-I-read-this-year roundup for SF Signal's Mind Meld, which you can read [here](#). I hope to return to this soon with a bit more robust listing of recently-read materials. (I've been kicking myself since late December because I completely forgot to mention what was actually the best thing I read last year-- C.M. Kornbluth and Frederik Pohl's *The Space Merchants*, which is every bit as good as you've heard and more.)

Less theologically-relevant, but certainly no less fun, I've been involved in the operation of a [gallery show](#) featuring the work of [the Sucklord](#), easily the best artist working in the art-toy idiom. His bootleg toys, mostly cast in resin from remixed molds, are irritating, hilarious, and firmly rooted in a brand of nerdishness that I appreciate greatly. The Suckadelic universe contains only supervillains, with names like "Star Chump" and "Galactic Jerkbag." The Sucklord's primary reference points are in the Star Wars realm, but my favorite piece is a bit more obscure:



The Salarystak is the middle piece in a series that also includes the "Altrusian"--a simple-yet-elegant knockoff of *Land of the Lost*'s Sleestak--and the Starstak, a highly-evolved future form of the same. In addition to the great visual, I love the SFnal moral dilemma that the Salarystak embodies:

"To which end of the spectrum is his pendulum swinging? He knows not, for he is ignorant of his place in the temporal timeline. He has closed the mental door of escape and filled the void with his Career, his family, his mortgage, his car, and his martinis. Only in his deepest subconscious lies the dim comprehension that there is a bigger picture and something greater is at stake..."

Of course, in the world of the Sucklord, a triptych is presented as a multi-figure blister-pack:



There is a very good chance that I'll be adding that little item to my collection before the show closes on January 23rd. Another contender, this one with a bit more theological flavor to it: A series of four Greek-ish gods, presented as supervillains, who govern everyday disappointments: [Chronos](#) (wasted time), [Tyros](#) (insufficient income), [Daemos](#) (aches and pains), [Mordros](#) (general aimlessness), [Eros](#) (a broken heart). Nicest touch: their heads are polyhedral dice. [UPDATE: How did I neglect to mention the most theological piece of all, the Crucifett?:]



You can check out what's for sale in the current gallery show at Suckshoppe.com and peruse the exhibit catalog below (warning: it's not for the faint of heart, the easily-offended, or those with good taste in general).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on January 20, 2011 at 09:40 PM in [Books](#), [Comics](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

January 25, 2011

Richard Dawkins and religious discrimination



Regulars here know I'm no fan of Richard Dawkins, but even I was surprised at [his latest article for Boing Boing](#). Discussing the recent lawsuit between astronomer [C. Martin Gaskell](#) and the University of Kentucky, Dawkins goes lower than I thought he dared, stopping just this side of libel against a fellow scientist.

Some background: in 2007, Gaskell was up for a position at the University of Kentucky. He was a hot contender, but one of the members of the search committee researched his religious beliefs and concluded that he was "potentially evangelical." He was questioned about his faith in his interview, and ultimately didn't get the job-- despite, according to one committee member, being "[breathtakingly above the other applicants in background and experience.](#)" E-mails sent among the search committee submitted as evidence in the case make it clear that Gaskell's religious beliefs-- which don't play a role in any of his peer-reviewed work on quasars and supermassive black holes-- were pretty much the only factor in the committee's decision not to hire him. Gaskell is not a creationist, and accepts the theory of evolution-- things which would be unlikely to turn up in his work anyway. All of which renders that phrase "potentially evangelical" even more chilling. Gaskell was rejected not because he wasn't the right guy for the job, and not even because his beliefs conflicted with his duties. He wasn't even rejected for beliefs that he actually held. He was rejected because of his membership in a group that also contains individuals whose beliefs are in conflict with a related department to the one in which he was applying to teach. It was a clear-cut case of religious discrimination, and the school has settled the case out of court for \$125,000.

Enter Dawkins, who concludes from this that all kinds of beliefs, religious and otherwise, should justly and rightly serve as grounds for dismissal or rejection of employment, laying out several hypothetical cases-- none of them bearing more than a superficial resemblance to the Gaskell case-- in which he feels discrimination would be just. He even laments that "the word 'discriminate' carries such unfortunate baggage." The piece reads like an opening salvo in a witch hunt for "the creationists among us": it is a call for greater prejudice.

The entire argument rests on the faulty assumption that religious ideas are protected and non-religious ideas are not. I'm no lawyer, but it seems to me that if I were dismissed from my job because I believe in a subterranean super-race of mole people, I would start taking notes for my wrongful dismissal suit. Unless that belief interferes with my completion of assigned tasks (I am an excavator operator who will not break ground on a building project for fear of angering the mole people) or it interferes with my coworkers, clients, or customers (sales are down at the hardware store because I keep scaring people away with talk of their underground masters when all they wanted to do was buy a hammer). My personal beliefs-- religious or otherwise-- are personal, and if they don't interfere with my job, then there is no cause for termination.

In the Gaskell case, of course, it's even more preposterous: Gaskell doesn't believe that the Earth is 6,000 years old any more than he believes that the mole people are preparing to reclaim the surface world. But Dawkins' entire article is framed to mislead the reader into believing Gaskell is a secret creationist. The attempt to paint Gaskell with the creationist brush has its roots deep in Dawkins' views of religion in general, and the idea of God in particular. Dawkins will only grant that Gaskell "claims... that he is not a full-blooded YEC [young earth creationist]." For Dawkins it can only be a "claim," not a fact, and that use of "full-blooded" shows that he is only capable of considering religious people as holding some degree of creationist ideas. Dawkins includes a selectively-clipped quote from Gaskell, "I have a lot of respect for people who hold this view because they are strongly committed to the Bible," Dawkins quotes. A-ha! A creationist! But here's the remainder of the quote: "...but I don't believe it is the interpretation the Bible requires of itself, and it certainly clashes head-on with science." Gaskell does what Dawkins cannot: see multiple ways of reading a text.

In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins misdefines the word "God" as denoting an intelligent designer. He builds creationism into the very idea of belief in God. Thus he is beyond perplexed at someone like Gaskell, who believes in both God and evolution. He simply can't comprehend people who find meaning in the Bible without also believing that the Earth is 6,000 years old. Dawkins has drawn boxes for us all to fit in-- "deluded creationist," "'bright' atheist." When presented with someone who doesn't fit in those boxes, his brain shuts down. This is a fact: not all believers are creationists. The data do not fit Dawkins' theoretical model. But rather than reframe his hypothesis, Dawkins continues to insist that his model is correct. His ideas about faith are nothing more than bad science.

The worse thing, though, is the other thing that Dawkins' article intends to do: to suggest that the University of Kentucky's discrimination against Gaskell was justified. If you read [waaaaay down into the comments section](#), he backpedals, claiming that "Nowhere in my article did I say that Gaskell himself should not have got the job," and that he did not intend to discuss the Gaskell case-- begging the question of why, if his hypotheticals don't apply to the case at hand, he bothered to frame the article with it at all. But even if we take those hypothetical situations as "preposterous examples," we are left with the distinct sense that Dawkins is not content with his quest to rid the world of religion. He also wants to rid the world of the strange, the eccentric, and the wacky. I have long felt that Dawkins must be, at heart, a profoundly *boring* person, for his insistence that the world must actually be as *he* conceives it. This article cements that opinion. I would not want to live in Dawkins' perfect world, because it would be a world of profound and fathomless sameness. We need our eccentricities. We need preposterous ideas, for how else will we be shaken out of our false beliefs, unless challenged with what we know must be impossible? Give me the bizarre,

preposterous, and yes, the delusional: better than than the bleak unity of a world squeezed into neat, pseudo-empirical boxes.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on January 25, 2011 at 10:20 PM in [Atheism](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(3\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

January 26, 2011

"Against textual idealism"

Rob Latham's short piece ["Against Textual Idealism."](#) published a few years ago but first read by me a couple days ago, hits all the right notes for me as a librarian, scholar, and collector of SF:

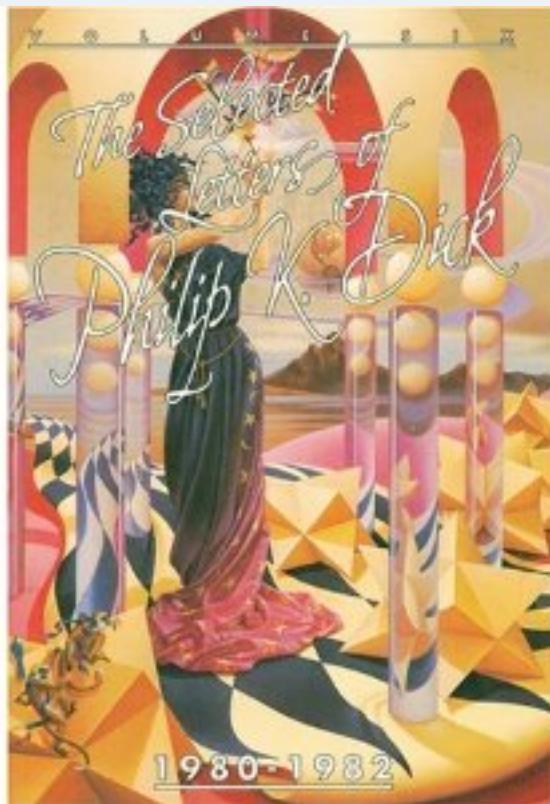
It matters intimately to an informed grasp of Dickens' novels, for example, that most of them were released in serial form, an arrangement that had appreciable effects on such intra-textual features as plot and characterization. Every text, whether an original publication or a reprint, is materially instantiated in a specific medium, accessible through particular modes of distribution, and amenable to discrete forms of reception. Encountering a story by H.P. Lovecraft or Dashiell Hammett in a pulp magazine such as Weird Tales or Black Mask is not the same thing as reading it in a Library of America edition.

I can't say it better, so you might as well just [read the whole thing](#). (To tie it into issues of recent relevance, I think these issues of textual interpretation are more than relevant to [Richard Dawkins'](#) unrefined and totalizing view of the Bible. On a more gut and personal level, though, it just means it's way more fun to read an issue of *Galaxy* than a clothbound scholarly edition.)

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on January 26, 2011 at 08:55 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

January 29, 2011

The Selected Letters of Philip K. Dick, 1980-1982



The issue of the *SFRA Review* containing

my review of *The Selected Letters of Philip K. Dick* vol. 5: 1980-1982 has been posted at the SFRA's website. An excerpt:

Those familiar with the previous volumes of Dick's letters will know, more or less, what to expect of this one. Dick

is still exploring and expounding upon his religious experiences of early 1974, and much of this volume consists of extended philosophical speculations. (Indeed, most of the book's first hundred pages are a single series of letters sent to Patricia Warrick, author of *Mind in Motion: The Fiction of Philip K. Dick*, in January 1981). But philosophical exegesis is not all that was going on in Dick's life and mind in this period, and this volume presents vital information about other aspects of his work as well. Dick's final two novels—*The Divine Invasion* and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*—were written during this period, and several letters shed light on their composition. A pair of letters to Ursula K. Le Guin (137 and 150–151) show Dick reflecting on the often-problematic nature of his female characters, and even suggest that Angel Archer, the protagonist of *Transmigration* and undoubtedly Dick's most carefully thought-out female character, grew at least in part in response to Le Guin's criticisms. Two letters (to Russell Galen, 89–92, and to David Hartwell, 154–156) contain detailed plot outlines for novels that were never written. Elsewhere, we can glean information about Dick's knowledge of William S. Burroughs (145), Alfred North Whitehead (148), and Martin Luther (251). Other letters show Dick's thoughts on the publication of *VALIS* and his response to the novel's reviews, his shifting opinions on the film *Blade Runner*, and his brief love affair, a mere four months before his death, with a young woman known only as "Sandra." Needless to say, there is much to reward the PKD researcher in this volume.

Read the full review, plus the rest of the issue, [here](#) (it's on p. 9-10 of the PDF).

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on January 29, 2011 at 10:43 AM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

March 06, 2011

Recent reading roundup



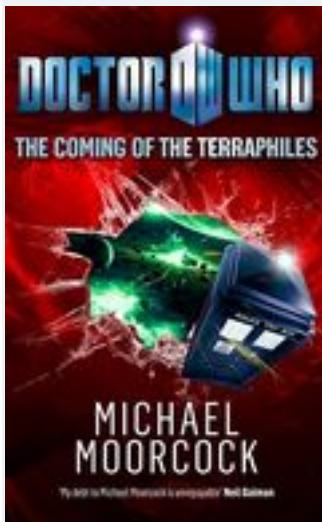
BIRTHRIGHT a new short novel by April Smith

PHILIP K. DICK • WINSTON MARKS • CHAS. L. FONTENAY • WILLARD MARSH

I recently bought a complete run of my favorite SF magazine-- *If*, later known as *Worlds of If*. Which is great-- but I need to make some room for it. And that needs I need to clear off the shelf that's been holding all the books I've wanted to write something about for the last, oh, 16 months or so... So, in the order they're piled up next to me...

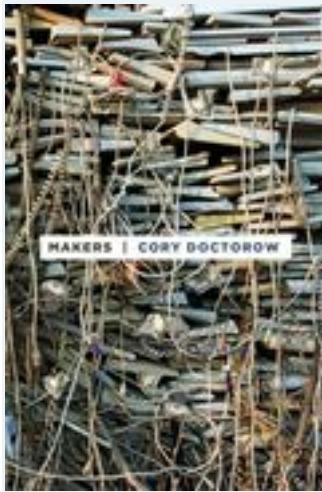
I Am Not a Serial Killer and *Mr. Monster* by Dan Wells

I mentioned these in my ["best things I read this year"](#) list for SF Signal's Mind Meld a couple months ago. They're not SF, but rather supernatural young adult mysteries with a horror edge (or is that horror stories with a mystery edge?). They're of some interest for, surprisingly enough, Dickian reasons: their protagonist is a teenage sociopath who desperately wants not to end up a serial killer (hence the title of the first book). I liked Wells' approach to his emotionless hero: this is a portrait of PKD's "android mind" from the inside. (Credit this connection to my [recent research](#) and [writing](#) about *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*).



Doctor Who: The Coming of the Terraphiles by Michael Moorcock

Pretty good stuff, though a bit slow to start. I am not too big a fan of Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius novels-- the first one is good, but feels like juvenilia; the three that follow are... let's say "meandering." (I suspect I'd like the short stories more.) The first hundred pages of *Terraphiles* meanders in a similar way, basically depicting the teatime conversations of a handful of far-future socialites. Wikipedia tells me it's an homage to Wodehouse. Shrugs. But when the classic Moorcock mythology starts up, things get a bit more interesting-- the whole "struggle for balance between the cosmic forces of Law and Chaos" thing is exactly the sort of scale that *Doctor Who* thrives on. And there are a couple characters that would have fit brilliantly in the Tom Baker era-- the two-headed space pirate Frank/Freddie Force and his Antimatter Men are particularly inspired. This definitely made me want to dig a bit deeper into Moorcock's more deliberately mythological stories, certainly.



Makers by Cory Doctorow

Makers is basically a novel about Disney World-- I think it's a deliberate update/cannibalization of the ideas from *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*. The central characters are a pair of culture-hacking inventors who create a theme park-cum-art installation that can be identically reproduced anywhere in the world, and is entirely open-source and modifiable by any user-- basically the polar opposite of the rigidly controlled Disney ideal. What interested me most in the novel was the extent to which "the ride" becomes a sort of religion for its devotees. One character, a one-time Disney devotee who goes by the ubergoth nickname "Death Waits," puts it this way: "There had been a time... when he'd really felt like he was part of the magic. No, the Magic, with capital letters. Something about the shared experience of going to a place with people and having an experience with them, that was special. It must be why people went to church." This reminds me of something. I rather like Doctorow's novels, but I rarely find anything to say about them; religion is not exactly high on his list of priorities. The one thing I hated about *Eastern Standard Tribe*-- probably my second-favorite of his books that I've read, next to *Little Brother*-- he wrote my alma mater out of

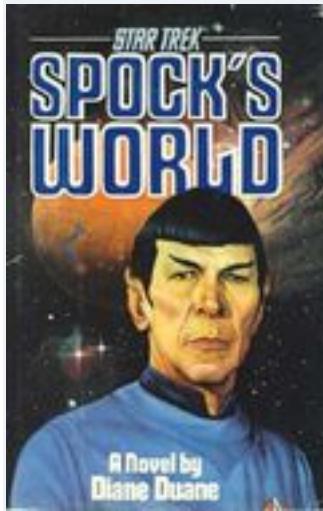
history. At one point, a character states that Harvard doesn't have a divinity school. In the audio version of the novel, Doctorow puts in an aside saying that he had received a number of e-mails about this, and that the point of this statement was to say that "they don't have one... in the future," or something to that effect. I just don't buy it, and I don't see what the point is. There's a lot of questions begged by such a minor detail-- not just questions about cultural shift, which I assume is what he was getting at, but questions about institutional politics and departmental financing. HDS has been there for a couple centuries, and it's not going to disappear so quickly that people in a near-future novel should be able to get away with assuming it doesn't exist. (end slightly ranty aside). So, yeah, Disneyland as a religion. That's pretty interesting, and the first hint I've seen in any of Doctorow's works in the direction of some sort of understanding of the kind of communal experience that is central to a lot of people's experience of religion.

***Pleasure Model and The Bloodstained Man* by Christopher Rowley**

No theology here, but something worth noting, however briefly. These are the first two novels in Tor's "Heavy Metal Pulp" line, a series of self-consciously pulpy adult-theme-filled SF, à la *Heavy Metal* magazine. I didn't go into these with high expectations, but I was impressed with the spirit of fun in these books-- they read like a particularly compelling half of a good Ace Double.

***The Cardboard Universe: A Guide to the World of Phoebus K. Dank* by Christopher Miller**

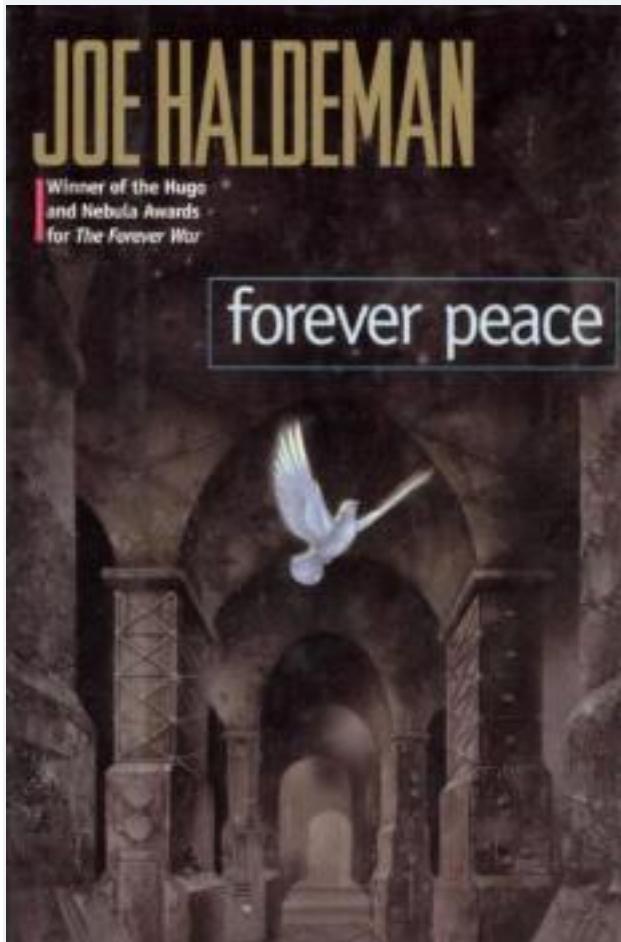
An intriguing book from its form alone: this book is written in the form of an encyclopedia on the work of its imaginary titular character, with alphabetically-organized entries written by two of the foremost experts on his life and work, who happen to deeply hate each other. At first I thought its picture of "Dank" was a bit too cruel a caricature of Philip K. Dick, but it soon became clear that Dank has very little to do with Dick at all, initials aside. He's more like a cross between Kilgore Trout and Ignatius J. Reilly from *Confederacy of Dunces*: an off-putting, obese imbecile who writes intriguing trash. One of the two encyclopedia authors hates Dank, which reminded me of Thomas Disch's slanderous *The Word of God*. But other than that, the PKD material in this novel is all on the surface. It's an entertaining book, to be sure, but trying to read PKD into its title character-- or vice versa-- would be headache-inducing, so it's best not to try.



***Spock's World* by Diane Duane**

I picked this up after reading Adam Roberts' brief mention of it in his *History of Science Fiction* (which was excellent-- hopefully more on that soon)-- Roberts calls it one of the best SF novels of 1987, arguing that it was overlooked because it was a licensed tie-in novel rather than a standalone "literary" work. I have some growing bibliographical interest in licensed novels, so I figured this might be a good one to look into. I don't know that I can entirely agree with Roberts' accolade-- I'd have to see what else was published that year-- but it was definitely enjoyable. Most intriguing to me was the novel's explanation of Vulcan theology. According to Duane, the presence of God is not a mystery or a matter of faith for Vulcans, but a reality that they experience directly. The Vulcan word for this is a'Tha, translateable as "immanence." Spock states: "a'Tha is the direct experience of the being or force responsible for the creation and maintenance of the Universe... Vulcans experience that presence directly and constantly. They always have, to varying degrees. The word is one of the oldest known, one of the first ever found written, and is the same in almost all of the ancient languages." Spock even implies that this constant experience of the divine may be one of the driving forces behind Vulcan logical enquiry:

"Humans have no innate certainty on this subject and therefore must hink it would solve a great deal. In some ways it does. But there are many, many questions that this certainty still leaves unresolved, and more that it raises. Granted that God exists: why then does evil do so? Why is there entropy? Is the force that made the Universe one that we would term good? What is good? And if it is, why is pain permitted? ... They are all the same questions that humans ask, and no more answered by a sense of the existence of God than of His nonexistence... It takes more than the mere sense of God to create peace. One must decide what to do with the information."



Forever Peace by Joe Haldeman

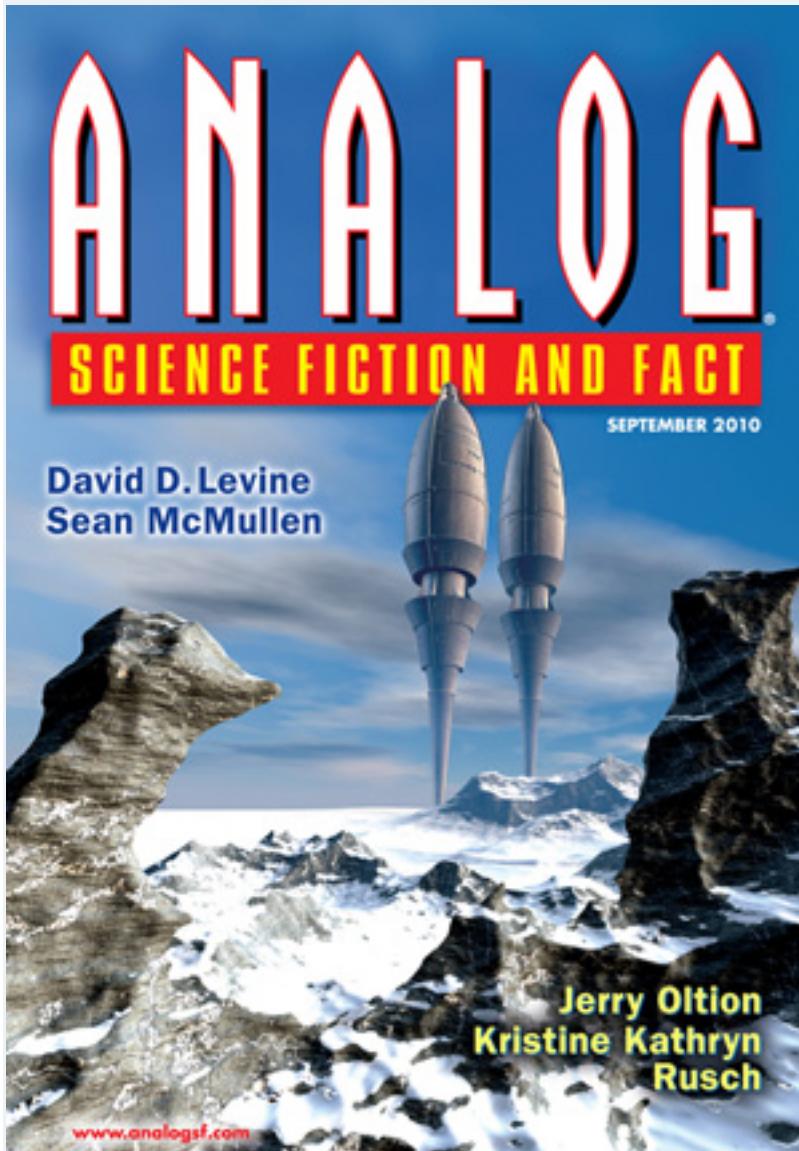
Haldeman's 1997 novel is a thematic sequel of sorts to his 1974 classic *The Forever War* ([discussed here](#))-- it takes place in an entirely different universe, but explores similar ideas of the morality of war and peace. *Forever Peace* is centered on wars fought remotely, with professional soldiers undergoing extensive surgery to allow them to control distant robotic soldierboys." Most of the world south of the Tropic of Cancer is embroiled in permanent war, with U.S. corporations funding soldierboy invasions to repress guerrilla rebellions. The main plot involves two discoveries that threaten this world's status quo-- one of a doomsday weapon that could recreate the Big Bang; the other of a means for eliminating human aggression using the "jacking" technology behind the soldierboys. The apocalyptic implications of the first are clear. It's the moral conundrum posed by the second that I find the most interesting. Enlightenment-style humanism is the moral bedrock of much SF, according to which free will is an absolute good above pretty much all others. The bad guys brainwash; we know the good guys have won when their freedom to choose is no longer threatened. *Forever Peace* throws that moral picture into question. If we really did have a means of eliminating aggression and fostering permanent peace, how much would it matter if some portion of free will were thereby suppressed? If literally countless lives could be saved, isn't that worth more? In this novel, the possibility to eliminate the greatest human evil moves from theory to reality, and its use is urgent. I'm reminded of the doctrine of "expedient means" laid out in the classic Buddhist text [the Lotus Sutra](#). In this text, the Buddha tells a parable about a burning house full of children who don't know it's burning, and don't want to leave. So their father tells them a lie-- that there are three spectacular kinds of carts for them to ride on, far more fun than any of their toys inside. When the children arrive outside, he gives them all the same kind of cart to carry them to safety. They may be disappointed-- but at least

they won't burn to death. In the *Lotus Sutra*, this parable is intended to explain how the varying practices of the three main branches of Buddhism can lead to the same goal: the means are not important, but the end-- nirvana and the end of suffering-- is. Where suffering is involved, the *Lotus Sutra* argues, the ends justify the means. *Forever Peace* applies this argument to the question of war. Wouldn't true and lasting peace be worth the sacrifice of that portion of free will that makes war possible?

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 06, 2011 at 08:54 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

March 07, 2011

"That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made": Mormon Sun-Whales!



The single most up-my-alley story of the last year has been nominated for a [Nebula Award](#): Eric James Stone's "That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made," published in the [September 2010 issue of Analog](#). It's the story of Harry Malan, a Mormon not-really-missionary living on a science station orbiting the sun. He's not a scientist-- he's a banker, sent to make stock trades based on solar gas-mining operations, which he can do with an eight-minute lead over his Earthbound competitors-- so he's understandably not too knowledgeable about the natives. Yes, the sun has natives: enormous plasma beings called "swales" or "solcetaceans." A handful of these enormous sun-whales have converted to Mormonism, and Malan-- who is, almost by default, the leader of the sun station's Mormon congregation-- is thrown into both a moral dilemma and a diplomatic debacle when one of his swale congregants complains of having been forced into sexual contact by

a larger, older swale. The swales have very different ideas about sex and consent than humans do, but Malan can't help but view the situation through the lens of human laws and customs: a member of his flock has been raped, and he sets out to right the perceived wrong. The plot soon thickens when Malan finds himself embroiled in a power struggle with Leviathan, the oldest known swale, who claims to be the originator of its entire species, and possibly the oldest living thing in the entire galaxy-- certainly something akin to a god. And this god is angry about being questioned by lesser beings.

Stone's story is chock full of scriptural allusions to the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Book of Mormon-- some stated plainly, others less so. Most intriguing for me is the Job-like confrontation at the story's end between the finite Malan and the all-but-infinite Leviathan. The idea that limited, contingent, mortal beings can have some influence and importance in the infinite, eternal eyes of the deity is, arguably, the core of all human religion. Stone's story presents this concept in the context of a speculative ethical puzzle, and is quite entertaining to boot. Its Nebula nomination is well earned.

Through the end of March, [you can read "That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made" for free on Stone's website.](#)

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 07, 2011 at 10:38 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

March 17, 2011

Philip K. Dick adaptations ranked

Nerve recently asked me to rank and briefly review all of the Philip K. Dick movie adaptations to date. [The results are here.](#) I deliberately, but truthfully, went against the conventional wisdom on *Blade Runner*, which I never thought quite lived up to the hype, at least in terms of narrative and character. Which isn't to say I dislike it-- not at all, in fact-- but I am definitely not inclined to knee-jerk it into the #1 slot. And yeah, I missed *Barjo*, the French adaptation of *Confessions of a Crap Artist*, which has yet to be released on DVD, and has been out of print on VHS for, oh, 20 years or so. I would, however, like to give an honorable mention to the oft-overlooked TV series [Total Recall 2070](#), which is far better than you'd expect from a canceled-after-on-season Canadian-produced SF show of the late '90s.

You will also note a capsule review of *Adjustment Bureau* in that list. Where is the full review, you ask? It is, after all, an SF film with God as the hero's main antagonist. Short answer: it's coming, soon. In the meantime, there are two very thoughtful reviews of the film worth reading. For *Locus*, [Gary Westfahl details the extent to which Dick's story "Adjustment Team" went out the window in this adaptation](#), calling into question the very nature of adaptation. Regardless of your opinion on the film, it's a great essay. And for *Religion Dispatches*, Jay Michaelson (though much more kindly disposed to the film than Westfahl) [finds fault with the way it frames, and solves, the question of free will vs. divine providence.](#) Your homework, reader, is to take a look at those two essays; my review (hopefully up in a day or two) will touch on a few of the same points.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 17, 2011 at 09:09 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

March 21, 2011

Adjustment Bureau: Choosing your Destiny



In *The Adjustment Bureau*, Matt Damon plays a politician named David Norris who gets an accidental peak behind the veil of everyday reality. Right before making a big speech, he runs into an impulsive young lady named Elise in a hotel bathroom. She inspires him to throw his boring old speech out the window and do something off-the-cuff and utterly unforgettable. The speech is a hit, his political future seems assured-- and, we soon learn, Mysterious Forces never want him to see the young lady again. But he does, and before you can say "Dark City" he's being chased around Manhattan by strange guys in fedoras. (Apparently, if you cast John Slattery, you get to borrow freely from *Mad Men*'s costume department.) They're agents-- don't call them angels!-- of a distant and unseen Chairman, who has devised a Plan for Norris, and indeed for the entire world. And those agents will stop at nothing to keep Norris from seeing his inamorata again.

As Gary Westfahl's review (["Philip K. Diminished"](#)) points out, *The Adjustment Bureau* is not so faithful to its source material. That's not, in and of itself, a bad thing: great films are often the result of unfaithfulness to source material. (Heck, look at *Blade Runner*-- or, more x-tremely, *Total Recall*!) It's what you do with those changes that matter. Westfahl points out how making the protagonist of the story an up-and-coming politician, rather than insignificant real estate man Ed Fletcher, changes the tone of the story. More disappointing for me is the fact that the film completely chuck's out what I consider the centerpiece of the original story: a nightmarish sequence in which the protagonist sees

the world around him collapsing into dust and ash. But so be it: that's the name of the adaptation game, right? You take what works, and you leave what doesn't, and maybe that scene just wouldn't have served what George Nolfi (*Adjustment Bureau*'s writer/director) was going for.

So, what was he going for? *Adjustment Bureau* is rather clever, when it wants to be. I rather like how Norris plays out the proverbially oxymoronic "honest politician" part, the design of the would-be angels' Plan-tracking notebooks, the inventiveness of the early footchases. But all of this culminates in a conclusion that requires a mess of contrived, arbitrary rules; the angels can teleport, but only if they're wearing their magic hats! They're virtually omniscient-- but not around water! (The latter rule implies that every naval battle in history threw humankind off-Plan, but that's another matter.) It starts to feel a bit... silly. Ever see *Lady in the Water*?



But, more centrally, more naggingly, the concept of God as "Chairman" just doesn't work here. It's one thing to posit a God who works through efficient means, and entirely another to posit God as an arch-bureaucrat, a beancounter of souls. This is far too simplistic a picture of divine providence-- and, moreover, it makes God into not just a foil for our self-determining protagonist, but an outright villain-by-proxy. Furthermore, Norris' rebellion ends up being too darned easy, on an ontological level. His decisions, once he steps outside the prescribed path, are no different than any impulsive decision you've ever made.

The centrality of the Plan implies that every impulsive decision we make is predetermined. the story thus requires that Norris's impulsive decisions be ontologically *different* somehow-- but this never receives an adequate explanation. Sure, his adjustor napped on the job, but this does not sufficiently account for why his will somehow then becomes more free than everyone else's.

As for what that freedom is in aid of-- well, tying the "adjustment" that Norris's guardian agent messed up so directly to the Plan's ends serves to streamline the story a bit. In Dick's original the Plan is complex, and the fruits of the adjustment don't become apparent until long after the insignificant protagonist is out of the picture. But that's exactly the point: this is the smallest change possible to achieve some very, very big ends. But Norris, a rising star in national politics, is already part of the big picture, so these means don't end up looking quite so efficient. This doesn't elevate the everyday to cosmic significance-- quite the opposite, in fact. The folks in charge really are the ones that matter, and that's the way it must stay. The angel/agents show a callous disregard for the everyman-- just ask that cab driver who they just "adjusted" into a three-car wreck.

What *Adjustment Bureau*'s characters, divine and otherwise, really care about is a Hollywood romance that doesn't make too much sense. By the end of the movie, we've seen very little reason why Elise should want to be with Norris; he's treated her like crap for much of their relationship, including abandoning her for months at a time, dumping her while she's in the hospital, etc. (Shades of *Twilight* here.) And yet, by the rules of romantic logic if not by the Plan, their relationship is *destined*, so their love must conquer all. If anyone is suffering from an absence of free will, it is these characters in the hands of their screenwriter. At the end of the film, when the Chairman-- spoiler alert!-- abolishes the Plan and hands the reins back to humankind, we haven't been given enough evidence to support believing it's a good thing. Sure, these two get to be together, hooray-credits-roll, but we've already been told that the last time this happened it led directly to the Holocaust. God may have declared this was all a test, but you have to question why he passed: all we've seen him do is make impulsive decisions, consequences be damned. As Jay Michaelson asks in [his review for Religion Dispatches](#), is that really the path we should be leading ourselves down?

In any event, what the film has done by its conclusion is completely invert the attitude of the original story toward predetermination. By the end of "Adjustment Team," Dick's Ed Fletcher has come to a shaky acceptance that our world is controlled by incomprehensible forces. It's a bit like an optimistic Lovecraft story: Fletcher sees behind the veil, and is driven, not to insanity, but to a nervous but respectful understanding. Later in his life, Dick became an admirer of Nicolas Malebranche, a medieval theologian who saw God as the only true actor in every event in the universe: created reality, including human beings, is just a gathering of "occasions" for divine action. Adjustment Bureau just won't have it: its libertarian, if not Nietzschean, dedication to the individual will will brook no consideration of the Chairman's point of view, let alone a *really* omnipotent deity like that of Malebranche.

But enough of the big words: is it a good movie? I could say that it's better than I've just made it sound. But here's a more appropriate answer: I'm not at liberty to say...

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on March 21, 2011 at 10:25 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

June 04, 2011

Do good Time Lords need rules?

[I'm going to go ahead and assume that, if you're reading this, you've seen "When a Good Man Goes to War." Meaning 1) I'm not going to bother with a summary, and 2) consider yourself spoiler-warned.]

Well, that sure was something. The last episode of *Doctor Who* before the mid-season break feels almost like a finale, answering as it does the biggest mystery of the last three years—who the heck River Song is.* It was great to see a greatest-hits type roundup of some of the neater minor characters, aliens, and neato costumes of the last few seasons, too. But most interesting to me was this exchange between the Doctor and mysterious-eyepatch-villain-lady Madame Kovarian:

Mme KOVARIAN: "Good men have too many rules."

THE DOCTOR: "Good men don't need rules... Today is not the day to find out why I have so many."

Moral implications within moral implications there: first, the concept of an innate moral imperative; the idea of an obtainable absolute good—and then, the revelation that the Doctor does not necessarily have that moral imperative, and that he has not obtained that absolute good.

Step back, then, and take a look at the army the Doctor has assembled to face down the military-church hybrid on Demons Run. (Yep, it's the same cleric-military from "[The Time of Angels](#)"—more on that later.) The Doctor has

assembled some old friends, from the space pirates of “Curse of the Black Spot” to the Spitfire pilots of [“Victory of the Daleks”](#) to Dorium, the blue-skinned fence. There were a couple characters we haven’t seen before, too: Madame Vastra, a sword-wielding Silurian from Victorian England, and Strax, a Sontaran warrior serving as a nurse as penance for an unknown offence.



The Doctor has worked with warriors before—heck, he spent years as a member of UNIT, which was basically the alien-fighting branch of the British Armed Forces. But his willingness to team up with Vastra—who we first see moments after she’s eaten someone (sure, it was Jack the Ripper, but still) and who kills one of the Church’s soldiers on Demons Run—poses an interesting moral conundrum. The Doctor has always shown an unwillingness to kill, or to participate in killing, no matter the purpose. For him, the ends have never justified the means. In “Genesis of the Daleks,” he had the opportunity to destroy the first batch of Dalek mutants, thereby stopping the Daleks from ever being created and saving every life they would otherwise have taken—but he couldn’t bring himself to kill. The 9th and 10th Doctor were fairly dark, as incarnations go, but that darkness was internal—it meant lots of brooding, not lots of violence. The 11th Doctor, for all his surface happy-go-luckiness, is a much more dangerous Doctor by far. In the opening story of this season, he essentially instructs the entire human race to murder the Silence—not to imprison them, or drive them away, but to kill them. And he does so by implanting a message in the film footage of the moon landing—writing violence into an image of peace and human achievement. And when the title card announcing the next episode states “Let’s Kill Hitler”—well, one begins to think that perhaps this Doctor might not have hesitated to kill that first batch of Daleks.

And it is in this context that we learn that the Doctor does not consider himself a “good man”—that he has had to make rules for himself to keep him from crossing certain moral lines. Furthermore, we learn that the Doctor’s actions have begun to affect galactic culture: the word “Doctor,” in some languages, no longer means “healer,” but rather “fierce warrior.”** He is affecting the very language with which reality is described and stories are told. (This, I think, is the reason for the future military using ecclesiastical titles: the meaning of words, in this part of the future, can no longer be trusted.) And when is the last time we saw a great assembly of alien warriors including the Judoon and the Sontarans? ...When all of the “bad guy” aliens [teamed up to imprison the Doctor in the Pandorica](#). And that episode, too, played with the Doctor’s moral position, depicting him as a mythological monster, “a nameless, terrible thing soaked in the blood of a billion galaxies, the most feared being in all the cosmos.” I may be reading too much into things—I do tend to pay extraordinarily close attention to the Doctor’s ethical decisions—but I think the Steven Moffat

wants us to see the Doctor sliding away from his past morality and into murkier territory. Hmm... Is [the Valeyard](#) on the horizon?



*I don't think it's bragging to say I had pretty much guessed it—but more specifically, I *knew* there had to be something going on with water names!

**Makes you wonder about Dr. River Song's honorific...

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 04, 2011 at 11:40 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(6\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

August 30, 2011

Doctor Who: Locking Hitler in the Cupboard



When the title card came up at the end of "A Good Man Goes to War," *Doctor Who*'s last episode before the summer hiatus, I couldn't help but feel a bit of trepidation at what were no doubt intended to be thrilling words: "Let's Kill Hitler." After all, one of the central theses of everything I've written about *Doctor Who* over the last 8 years is that the Doctor doesn't kill anybody, no matter how bad they are. Those three words held a Damoclean sword over pretty much everything I have to say about *Doctor Who* and ethics.

Imagine my relief, then, when those three words are uttered not by the Doctor, but by a hotheaded TARDIS-hijacker who is holding the Doctor at gunpoint. It's Amy and Rory's childhood friend Mels, not our erstwhile explorers themselves, who wants to right the greatest of wrongs with a bit of murder. The Doctor's peaceloving ways appear safe... for the time being.

It's surprising, given the anticipation this episode's title was meant to create and sustain, how quickly Hitler is dropped from the story. After a pretty brief showdown in the Führer's office, he is locked in a cupboard-- literally, in that the Doctor wants to get him out of the way, and figuratively, in that the *problem* of Hitler has been pushed aside. And Hitler is, indeed, a problem for Doctor Who, as flashbacks through Mels' history emphasize. In her youth, Mels got in trouble in school for declaring that "a major factor in Hitler's rise to power was the fact that the Doctor didn't stop him"-

- which got her sent to the principal's office. But in the universe of this show, she's right-- the Doctor *didn't* stop him. That's a problem that can't be locked in a cupboard as easily as the man himself was in this episode, and I can only hope that this scene wasn't the last word on the matter.

The rest of the episode suggests that this kind of conundrum is very much on the minds of the writers. The main baddie of this episode isn't Hitler himself, but the miniature crew of a robot doppelganger that travels through time pursuing and punishing war criminals-- doing, at first glance, what the Doctor can't, or won't. But we learn that their mission is not to prevent these war criminals from committing their atrocities, but rather simply to punish them at the ends of their lives, to "give them hell." This is a base form of retributive justice that can offer only the coldest of comforts. It's a kind of justice the Doctor has no interest in: it averts no atrocity; it soothes no grief; it simply offers a bureaucrat's sense of balance: this person caused pain, and received pain in return. The Doctor, naturally, wants no part of it.

In contrast to this is the Doctor's own mission in this episode, as he meets River Song at more-or-less the earliest point in her timeline that we have yet seen (not counting infancy, that is, or as-yet-to-be-revealed incarnations, or... oh, never mind). Originally, it seems, she was programmed to kill the Doctor, and that's what she's doing here. Moreover, we discover that, in the grand database of our miniaturized vigilante squad, River is considered the greatest war criminal in history. The Doctor doesn't want to punish her, or even to defeat her-- rather, he wants to remake this cruel, savage River into the hero we know she will become. That is the Doctor's brand of justice: transformation, rather than retribution.

But some facts can't be simply transformed. Hitler is still lurking in that cupboard... How will the Doctor deal with him when he gets out?

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on August 30, 2011 at 10:38 PM in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

June 12, 2012

Prometheus: Looking For God in All the Wrong Places



Prometheus opens with the discovery of an intelligent designer: two scientists have found evidence of ancient contact between human beings and aliens, and they become part of a mission to reach what they believe to be these aliens' home planet to meet our makers. When the mission, funded by the unimaginably wealthy, Methuselan industrialist Peter Weyland, finally reaches the Earthlike moon LV-223,* they explore a massive artifact created by these "Engineers." This massive dome is filled with evidence of their genetic experiments, much of it housed in a room dominated by a giant statue of one of the beings' heads: a temple, perhaps, to their own creative genius. The dome is dead—one character even describes it as a tomb—but the presence of these travelers awakens a startling variety of life inside, including one of the Engineers themselves. And the explorers—particularly archeologist Elizabeth Shaw—discover that intelligent designers need not be benevolent ones.

The Engineers, much like Olaf Stapledon's [Star Maker](#), are experimenting artists, playing with DNA to create a plethora of new and terrifying forms. And, like a more plainly amoral version of the Star Maker, this experimentalism is sinister, not only because the beings they are creating are violent, but because they display no regard for the feelings of their (accidentally?) sentient creations. The dome, we learn, houses a spaceship whose aborted, millennia-old mission was to return to Earth to wipe out all life there.** There's a hint that human beings are not a deliberate creation of the Engineers, but an accidental one: the enigmatic opening scene shows one of the alien beings dissolving himself at the molecular level on an unknown world, the strands of his DNA splitting apart as he collapses into some ancient river. Perhaps this dissolution was incomplete, and we are the result of some surviving genetic detritus. If this is the case, perhaps the reason that the Engineers wish to destroy us is that we can't be used as weapons, as their more deliberate creations can: we lack sufficient use-value.

Clearly, *Prometheus* is a story about the quest for origins, but it is also about faith and the loss thereof. Shaw—who none-too-subtly wears her father's crucifix around her neck for much of the film, and is seen in flashbacks discussing the afterlife with him—is brought on the mission because Weyland considers her a "true believer." She has faith that the Engineers exist, that they created us, that they will be willing to answer our questions, and that some ineffable benefit can result from contact with him. On the former two points she turns out to be correct, but she is categorically wrong on the other two. In order for her to save the world—stopping the surviving Engineer from returning to Earth to destroy humankind—she must quickly and decisively lose her faith. It's not clear what we're supposed to make of this, thematically: is the entire project of seeking after answers to our questions of purpose what's to blame for this

mission's tragic end? Are the Engineers, these not-gods, simply the instruments of some offscreen gods in the punishment of that most ancient of sins—hubris?

Prometheus doesn't entirely know what myth it wants to be in. The title suggests it's the story of the Titan who stole fire from the gods and bequeathed it to humankind: the originator of all technology and, by extension, the creator of human sentience. This seems to be the myth that Peter Weyland thinks he's in, as he gave the starship its name. But his actual quest is for personal immortality, which puts him more in the territory of *Tithonus*. (And in the end it's the Engineer who has his entrails devoured by a rather familiar vulture). The scientists, who travel across the galaxy to question their makers, are in another tradition entirely: an upside-down version of Job where questioning leads to the suffering instead of the other way around. The android David is in *Pinocchio*, and the android-like Meredith Vickers in *King Lear*. By the final act, it all begins to feel a bit like Jack and the Beanstalk, with the surviving Engineer as the giant: a big, scary monster to run away from. (In this it's unfortunately more akin to the Predator than the lithe and devious xenomorphs. In either case, this is too great a diminution in importance: Perhaps we're not supposed to think of the Engineers as gods, but they should be something more than horror-movie beasties.)

Prometheus succeeds as one of the few films to tackle the ground of SF stories about the exploration of a single alien world or artifact that may simply be outside the realm of human comprehension—stories like Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous With Rama* or Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*. For all their physical similarity to us, the Engineers seem truly *alien*, at least until the last act. And though viewers and characters alike may speculate as to their reasons for creating the places and beings that we see, there ultimately may be no answers that could make sense to a human mind.

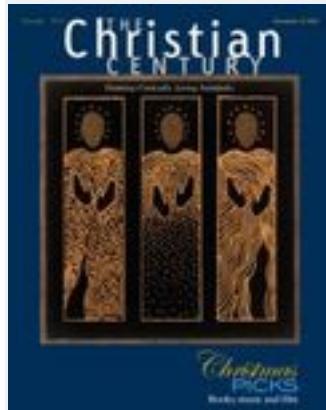
* A side note to anyone who was confused about the similarities (and notable differences) between the configuration of ships and deceased life forms at the end of *Prometheus* and the beginning of *Alien*: this is a different planet. *Alien* and *Aliens* occur on a planetoid called LV-426.

** This begs the rather large question of why they would have left instructions to our ancestors about how to find the planet from which this mission of annihilation was intended to launch. Chalk it up to rival factions among the Engineers, perhaps?

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on June 12, 2012 at 09:36 PM in [Film](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

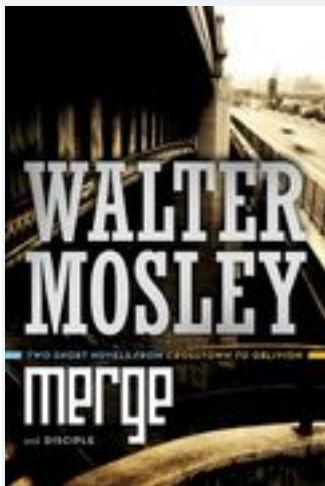
December 02, 2012

SF novels in the *Christian Century*'s holiday gift guide



The current issue of the *Christian Century* features a list of some of the year's best SF novels, reviewed by myself and the imitable [James McGrath](#). Our reviews of *Doctor Who: Shada* by Gareth Roberts, *Existence* by David Brin, *Redshirts* by John Scalzi, the Library of America's 2-volume anthology of 1950s American Science Fiction, *At the Mouth of the River of Bees* by Kij Johnson, and *Triggers* by Robert J. Sawyer are [on the Christian Century's website](#), and appear in print in the December 12th, 2012 issue.

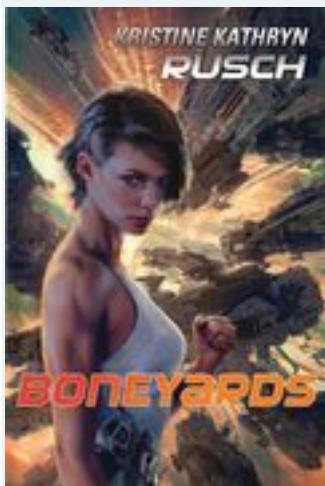
Alas, there was not room for every book worth mentioning in the list. Below are three reviews that didn't make the final cut for the final piece, but would definitely still make great gifts:



Merge/Disciple by Walter Mosley

Tor Books, 288 pp., \$24.99 hardcover, \$7.99 Kindle edition

Presented in the style of an “Ace Double”—a format from the 1950s in which two short novels were bound back-to-back, each with a separate cover—these two novellas use SF tropes to explore the nature and ethics of power. In *Merge*, a man becomes enmeshed in a struggle for the future of the planet when he shows compassion to a strange and possibly dangerous alien being; in *Disciple* an unambitious office drone begins receiving mysterious messages from an otherworldly power that seems able to grant his every wish.



Boneyards by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Pyr/Prometheus, 301 pp., \$16 trade paperback, \$8.69 Kindle edition

The third book in Rusch’s “Diving Into the Wreck” series chronicles the further adventures of Boss, an enterprising far-future archeologist. Boss specializes in leading tourist excursions to the hulking wrecks of ancient spaceships, particularly ships known as “Dignity Vessels” that operate using the mysterious, otherworldly technology of the *anacapa* drive. This volume expands the backstory of Rosealma (nicknamed “Squishy”), a character tortured by her role in *anacapa* research that led to the death or disappearance of hundreds of researchers. It’s a fine entry in this series of moody, atmospheric space opera.



Only Superhuman by Christopher L. Bennett

Tor Books, 352 pp., \$24.99 hardcover, \$11.99 Kindle edition

Bennett's richly-imagined novel is a hard-science fiction superhero story. Set in a future where the solar system is populated by genetically-modified "Troubleshooters," the story follows Emerald Blair, a young criminal-turned-hero who travels the asteroid belt righting wrongs and battling gene-modified maniacs. Blair's story is interesting, but the texture and detail of the universe she inhabits that stands out is the novel's most notable feature.

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on December 02, 2012 at 12:35 PM in [Books](#), [Religion](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

December 05, 2012

SF Signal's Mind Meld: Star Wars VII-IX

A bit late an announcement here, but I contributed to SF Signal's recent Mind Meld post on the future of Star Wars, alongside Kristine Kathryn Rusch, S. Andrew Swann, and other luminaries. Included is an obligatory shout-out to Marvel's 70s-80s Star Wars comics. [Read the whole thing here.](#)

Posted by [Gabriel Mckee](#) on December 05, 2012 at 07:21 PM in [Comics](#), [Film](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

December 05, 2012

Radio Free Albemuth at the Philip K. Dick Film Festival



This weekend is the [Philip K. Dick Film Festival](#) in Brooklyn (not to be confused with this past fall's [Philip K. Dick Festival](#) in San Francisco), and kicking off the event is a rare screenings of John Alan Simon's (alas) still-undistributed film adaptation of *Radio Free Albemuth*. If you haven't seen it-- and chances are you haven't, as it's only been shown a handful of times-- it's well worth checking out. The screening is at 7:30 on December 7th (2012) at Indiescreen in Williamsburg. (*Boardwalk Empire* fans note that the role of Phil is played by Shea Whigham, AKA Eli Thompson!)

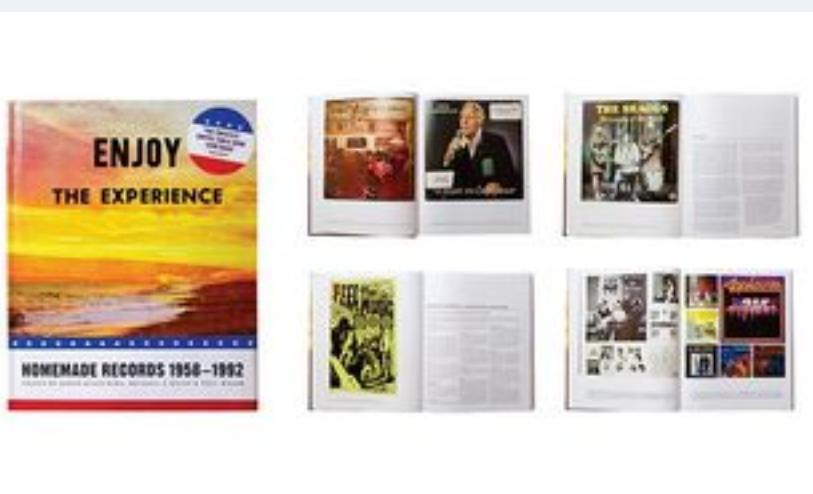
[Read my review](#) (written after the film's last New York screening two years ago) if you need any convincing.

[Edit: Note that there is only one screening, not two-- the website information is a bit misleading.]

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on December 05, 2012 at 07:29 PM in [Film](#), [Philip K. Dick](#), [Religion](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

April 12, 2013

Recent & forthcoming work



A couple projects have been percolating behind the scenes here: First, I've contributed material to the forthcoming book [Enjoy The Experience: Homemade Records 1958-1992](#). The book is a detailed look at privately-press/self-released records from the '50s-'80s and the sometimes quite idiosyncratic minds that created them: from hotel lounge bands to slightly cracked basement folk crooners and everything inbetween. My contributions to the book are biographies of several religiously-slanted recording artists who pressed their own records in the '60s: Christian rock pioneer [Ron Russo](#); Jimmie Davis, the founder of a [fundamentalist summer camp](#); [Darwin Gross](#), the disgraced former head of Eckankar; and gospel trumpeter Ray Torske. (A bio of Thurlow Spurr, founder of traveling high school/evangelical/car safety band [the Spurrlows](#), was cut for length, but will hopefully find its way into online publication in the near future). The book is available now for pre-order at [store.sinecurebooks.com](#).

I've also contributed to a forthcoming book on *Doctor Who*. I can't say much more than that now, but look forward to more information soon!

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on April 12, 2013 at 11:03 AM in [Books](#), [Music](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

May 20, 2015

The problem with Game of Thrones...

It's been a bit of a long silence on this blog, though I've written quite a bit in the apparent interim (including an article on [Doctor Who as a rebel messiah](#) and [an entire book on Edgar Allan Poe](#)). I'm coming out of the hiatus to talk about a subject that doesn't have a lot to do with theology, though it has a lot to do with the ethical responsibilities of storytellers—so I guess it's at least a little bit in scope. I'm talking about the increasing centrality of sexual violence on HBO's *Game of Thrones*.

At this point, there have been many responses to last week's episode of *Game of Thrones*, on which another major female character is subjected to rape. Many of these responses have argued that these sexual assaults serve no purpose in the story. But the problem with *Game of Thrones*' pattern of shoehorning in major-character sexual assaults isn't that these incidents serve no purpose. It's the opposite—that they *do* serve a central purpose: to rob the story's women of their agency, in direct contradiction to the thematic core of the novels on which the series is purportedly based.

I stopped watching *Game of Thrones* last year. I was irritated by [Jaime Lannister's rape of Cersei](#), but not quite enough to put me off the show entirely. For me, the bigger problem was the fact that the show was beginning to feel lackluster and repetitive. Rather than the plot and character beats that drove the first season or the novels, the show seemed to be more concerned with when they would next be able to show someone being disemboweled, or getting naked, or both. The show stopped holding my attention, so I pretty much half-watched season 4. When the camera

lingered on Tyrion's face as he strangled Shae at the season's end (an event which is, admittedly, present in the novel), I realized I was not likely to get any enjoyment out of the show again. I was, as they say, done.

Which means I haven't seen "Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken," so I'll limit my comments on it here, and instead focus mainly on stuff from the past that is confirmed and worsened by the latest turn of ~~the stomach~~ events. In short, I always kind of thought that maybe I'd go back and watch *GoT* again, in case maybe the stuff that had turned me off last year got better. Well, now I know that it sure doesn't get any better.

For me, the core storyline of *A Song of Ice and Fire* concerns the powerless of Westeros. The key characters (Tyrion Lannister, Jon Snow, Daenerys Targaryen, Cersei Lannister) and important lesser ones (Samwell Tarly, Catelyn Stark, Yara Greyjoy, etc.) are denied power by their society, which is, yes, violent and cruel. Tyrion and Samwell are denied authority because of their physical limitations; Jon Snow by his birth status; Daenerys and Cersei by their gender; Jaime by the criminal act that earned him the title Kingslayer; Brienne by her physical appearance *and* gender. But in every case, the story shows us the ways in which these characters claim the agency that is explicitly denied to them. The story is about how they seek, and find, control over their destinies, despite being apparently powerless to change their circumstances. They refuse to let themselves be victims.

The television adaptation of this source material, on the other hand, inverts this—at least for the female characters. The women who we see fighting to find their voices in the novels are instead shown being punished with rape. Benioff and Weiss have taken the female characters whose quest for self-determination is, for many readers, the heart of the novels, and used sexual violence to put them back in their place.

This is not a new problem on the show. The recent scene with Sansa is, if anything, merely confirmation of a pattern. The problem was clarified last year with Jaime's rape of Cersei. But it goes back much further than that, to the [treatment of Daenerys](#) in the first season. Not having read *ASOIAF* when I watched the first season, I didn't realize how drastically her wedding night was changed from the source material, and what that change meant for her character. The book shows us one of the clearest cases of explicit consent you're likely to find in the history of literary sex scenes. Daenerys is clearly in charge, and Drogo waits for an explicit "yes" from his bride before proceeding. In the show, he rapes her. This *drastically* changes the meaning of Daenerys' story. In the novels, her power comes from the fact that she brings this nobility out of her husband, teaching compassion to a nation that had previously been based in cruelty. In the show, her power comes from the fact that she *falls in love with her rapist*.

And that, in a nutshell, is what's wrong with the treatment of rape on *Game of Thrones* the show. The problem isn't that sexual violence—which is absolutely a part of the source material—is present in the show. (One could certainly argue about the differing amount of narrative time and energy spent on sexual violence between source and adaptation, of course.) The problem is that, in an attempt to "streamline" the narrative, or make certain story arcs more "cinematic," Benioff and Weiss have fairly systematically victimized precisely those characters who embody the novels' core themes of marginality and self-determination. Three key women—Daenerys, Cersei, and now Sansa—have essentially been put in their place by men with greater social power. And Drogo and Jaime—who in the books appear, on the whole, pretty noble—are now tarnished as abusers.

Benioff and Weiss's approach to their adaptation does violence, not simply to the characters in question, but to the very meaning of the source material. It takes a story that shows us that power, agency, and dignity are *not* the sole right of those with the strongest sword arms, and turns it into a story that equates power with penetration. They have fundamentally missed the point. The result is an act of vandalism.

I'll close with a few links, since other folks who have been watching this season have said things both eloquent and passionate on the current state of the problem that are worth reading.

For the [LA Review of Books](#), Sarah Mesle brilliantly takes down the tired argument that this fictional, fantasystory represents, or even *could* represent, "the way it really was."

In a [roundtable review of the latest episode for the Atlantic](#), Christopher Orr succinctly sums up the ever-present, ever-worsening problem of titillation on the show: "...showrunners Benioff and Weiss still apparently believe that their tendency to ramp up the sex, violence, and—especially—sexual violence of George R.R. Martin's source material is a strength rather than the defining weakness of their adaptation."

The Mary Sue will no longer be covering the show in any way, and explains their reasons [here](#).

On a more visceral level, I've been getting a lot of satisfaction out of the Twitter feed of [@AngryGoTFan](#), who also has [a blog](#) for lengthier rants.

May 27, 2015

The Way the Future Never Was

[So you've probably heard about this Sad Puppies/Rabid Puppies thing.](#)

I'm reading Brad Torgersen's [Sad Puppies 3 manifesto](#) (which I use not as a pejorative, but as an honest-to-goodness genre term) from a few weeks ago, and... I'm just really confused. Maybe somebody can help me out here.

After an extended metaphor about breakfast cereals, Torgersen states what he considers the problem:

A few decades ago, if you saw a lovely spaceship on a book cover, with a gorgeous planet in the background, you could be pretty sure you were going to get a rousing space adventure featuring starships and distant, amazing worlds. If you saw a barbarian swinging an axe? You were going to get a rousing fantasy epic with broad-chested heroes who slay monsters, and run off with beautiful women. Battle-armored interstellar jump troops shooting up alien invaders? Yup. A gritty military SF war story, where the humans defeat the odds and save the Earth. And so on, and so forth.

These days, you can't be sure.

The book has a spaceship on the cover, but is it really going to be a story about space exploration and pioneering derring-do? Or is the story merely about racial prejudice and exploitation, with interplanetary or interstellar trappings?

There's a sword-swinging on the cover, but is it really about knights battling dragons? Or are the dragons suddenly the good guys, and the sword-swingers are the oppressive colonizers of Dragon Land?

A planet, framed by a galactic backdrop. Could it be an actual bona fide space opera? Heroes and princesses and laser blasters? No, wait. It's about sexism and the oppression of women.

Finally, a book with a painting of a person wearing a mechanized suit of armor! Holding a rifle! War story ahoy! Nope, wait. It's actually about gay and transgender issues.

Or it could be about the evils of capitalism and the despotism of the wealthy.

So... huh. OK, it sounds like Torgersen doesn't like metaphor in his SF. If it's got a spaceship on the cover, and it's got themes that don't have to do with spaceships, it's apparently a problem. In a long-but-well-worth-your-time [blog post](#) on the 2015 Hugos debacle, Philip Sandifer describes this as "the spectacle of a grown man complaining about how he just can't judge a book by its cover anymore."

But this is where I get really confused, folks: *what the hell era of SF is he talking about?* Later in the post he indicates that he's talking about the 1960s through the 1980s... which I'd say is a period pretty well defined by the metaphorical treatment of social and political ideas in SF. If you want to go back to a time when rocket ships and ray guns really meant just rocket ships and ray guns, you'd have to go back to the 1940s. And there are surely people who like Golden Age SF quite a bit, but for my tastes, I think it wasn't really until the dawn of the digest era in the 1950s that SF got really, really *good*.

So I'm really confused. I can't even recognize the picture that Torgersen paints as a *caricature* of SF publishing history. And since he coyly generalizes, you can't even identify what books or authors he has particular problems with. (One name that's emerged as one of his major *bêtes noirs* is John Scalzi—whose *Old Man's War* series has its sociopolitical scales tipped so far in favor of gee-whiz adventure that it should float Torgersen's boat right out of the bathtub.) ([It's pretty militaristic, too](#), if that's a factor.)

He says he's OK with SF about social and political issues, as long as we don't "put these things so much on permanent display, [so] that the stuff which originally made the field attractive in the first place — To Boldly Go Where No One Has Gone Before! — is pushed to the side". But to thousands of readers, "boldly going" means exploring just those issues that Torgersen has a problem with. And exploring those issues in SFnal terms is a time-honored tradition, going back a decade or so *before* the time that he considers the good old days.

For a lot of us, SF's ability to deal with current problems in metaphorical terms is the whole point. It's why we got interested in the genre, and why we've stuck with it—because there will always be new questions, and new angles on them. Does Brad Torgersen *really* want SF to be a genre about space ships and ray guns with no resonance with

current society? Does he *really* want SF authors to abandon the time-honored tradition of exploring social issues with SFnal metaphor? That sounds to me like an SF that's afraid of the future.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on May 27, 2015 at 09:28 PM in [Books](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

May 27, 2015

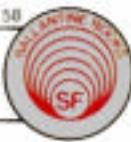
The Way the Future Never Was: A Visual Appendix

This post is a sequel of sorts to my previous post on Brad Torgersen and the Sad & Rabid Puppies, which you can read [here](#).

To get a better idea of [Brad Torgersen's problem](#) with today's science fiction, let's take a look at some good, old-fashioned, reliably-packaged SF.

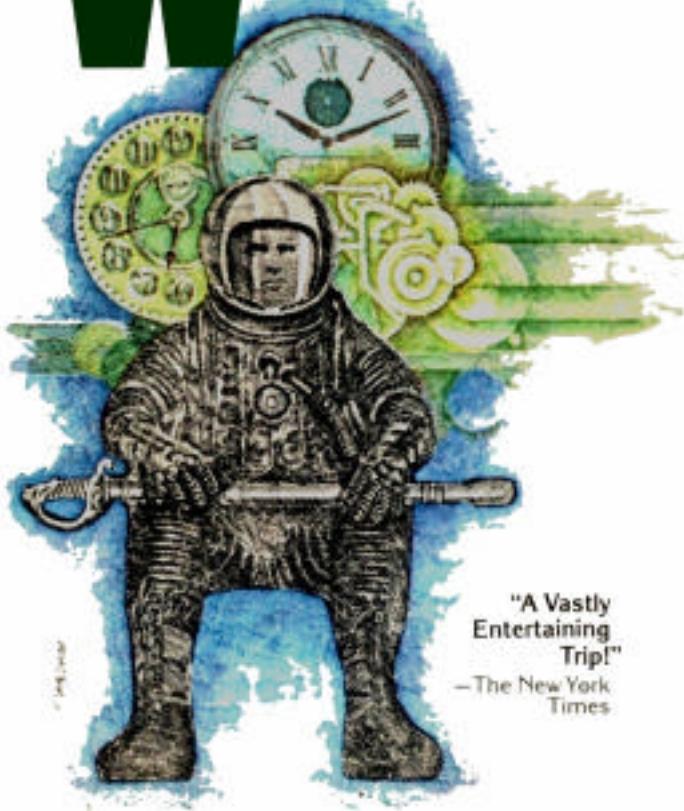
24767/\$1.58

A DAZZLING & POWERFUL
SCIENCE FICTION CATCH-22!



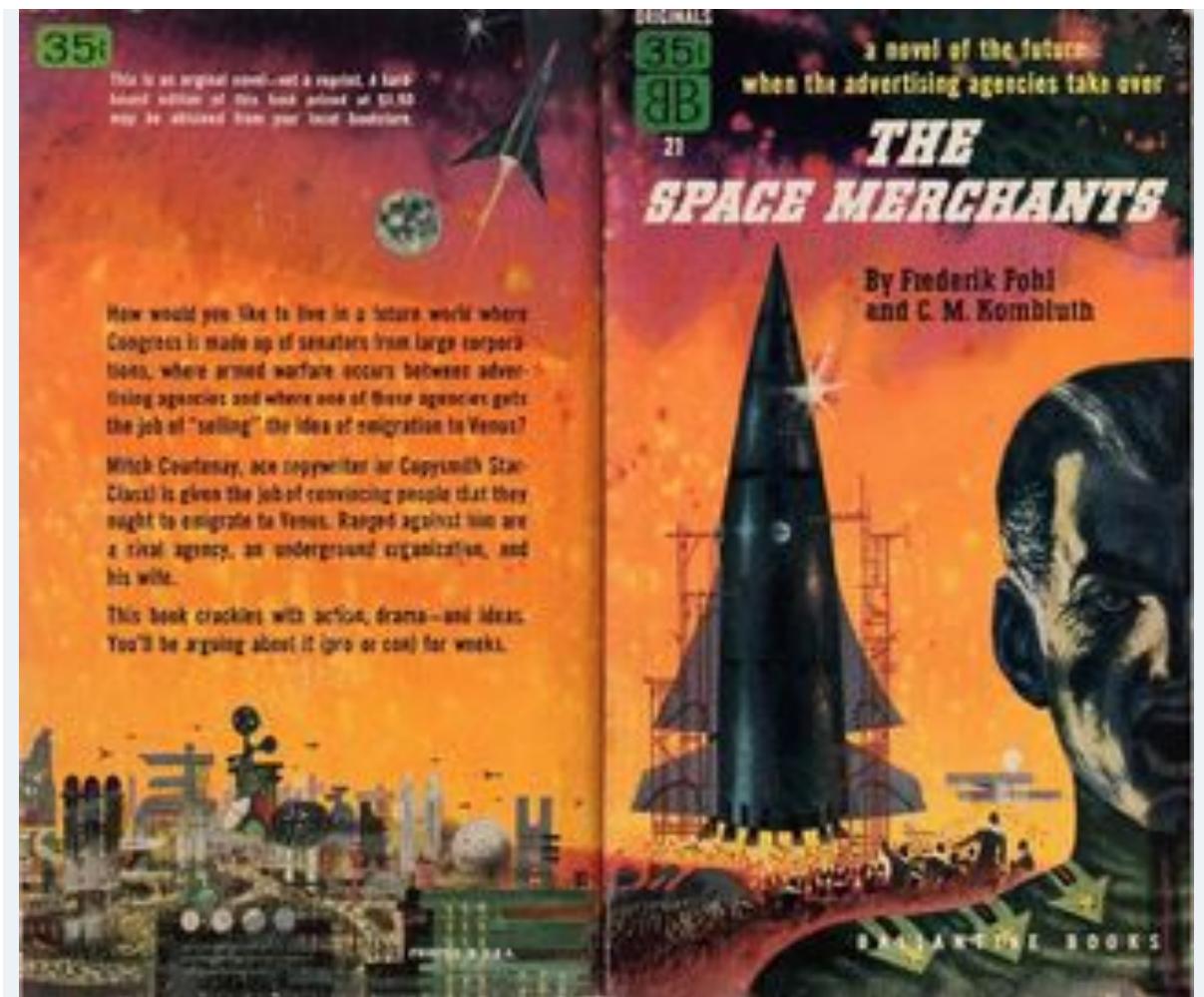
THE FOREVER WAR

JOE HALDEMAN



"A Vastly
Entertaining
Trip!"
—The New York
Times

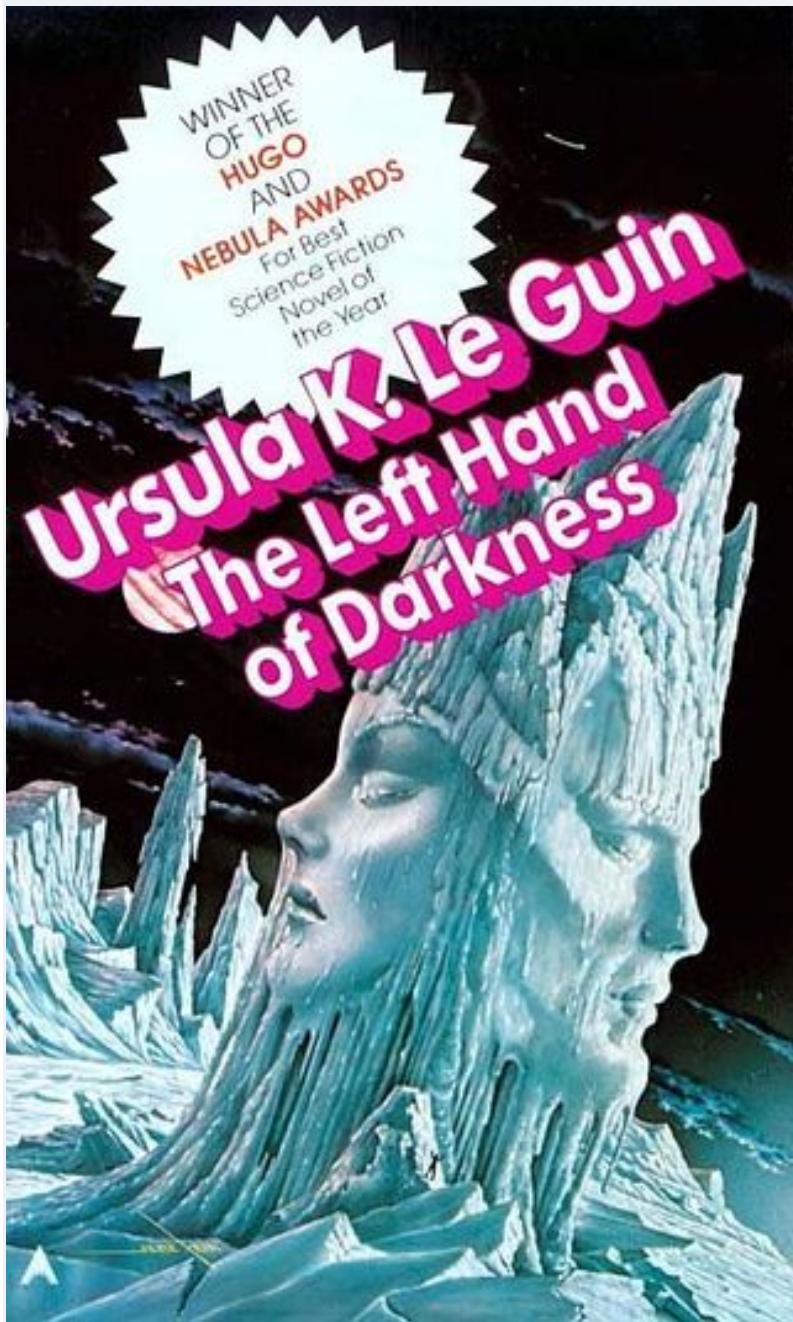
Hey, that looks like a space marine! This must be an old-fashioned classic of military SF, right? And, oh, hey, it won a Hugo in one of Brad's favorite decades, the 1970s! Nope, turns out it's really just some anti-Vietnam War propaganda. No fair drawing us in with gung-ho genre trappings and then giving us the horrors of war!



Hey, this one looks fun. It's got space ships and all kinds of stuff. Wait, what? It's about the evils of capitalism? Bait and switch!



Good ol' Moses of the NRA in a rollicking adventure where he fights gorillas? Nope, turns out it's really about racial prejudice. Oh, and the horrors of war. Man, that's a popular one!



Hey, look-- this one won a Hugo AND a Nebula in the '70s. It's got some outer space-y stuff going on. Some kind of weird ice planet thing happening. What's that? It's also entirely about gender issues? Huh. Wait a minute... *does Brad Torgersen think this book came out in the 2000s?* That would explain a *lot*.

YOU'LL NEVER SEE IT

IN GALAXY

Jets blasting, Bat Durston came screeching down through the atmosphere of Bbllzznaj, a tiny planet seven billion light years from Sol. He cut out his super-hyper-drive for the landing...and at that point, a tall, lean spaceman stepped out of the tail assembly, proton gun-blaster in a space-tanned hand.

"Get back from those controls, Bat Durston," the tall stranger lipped thinly. "You don't know it, but this is your last space trip."

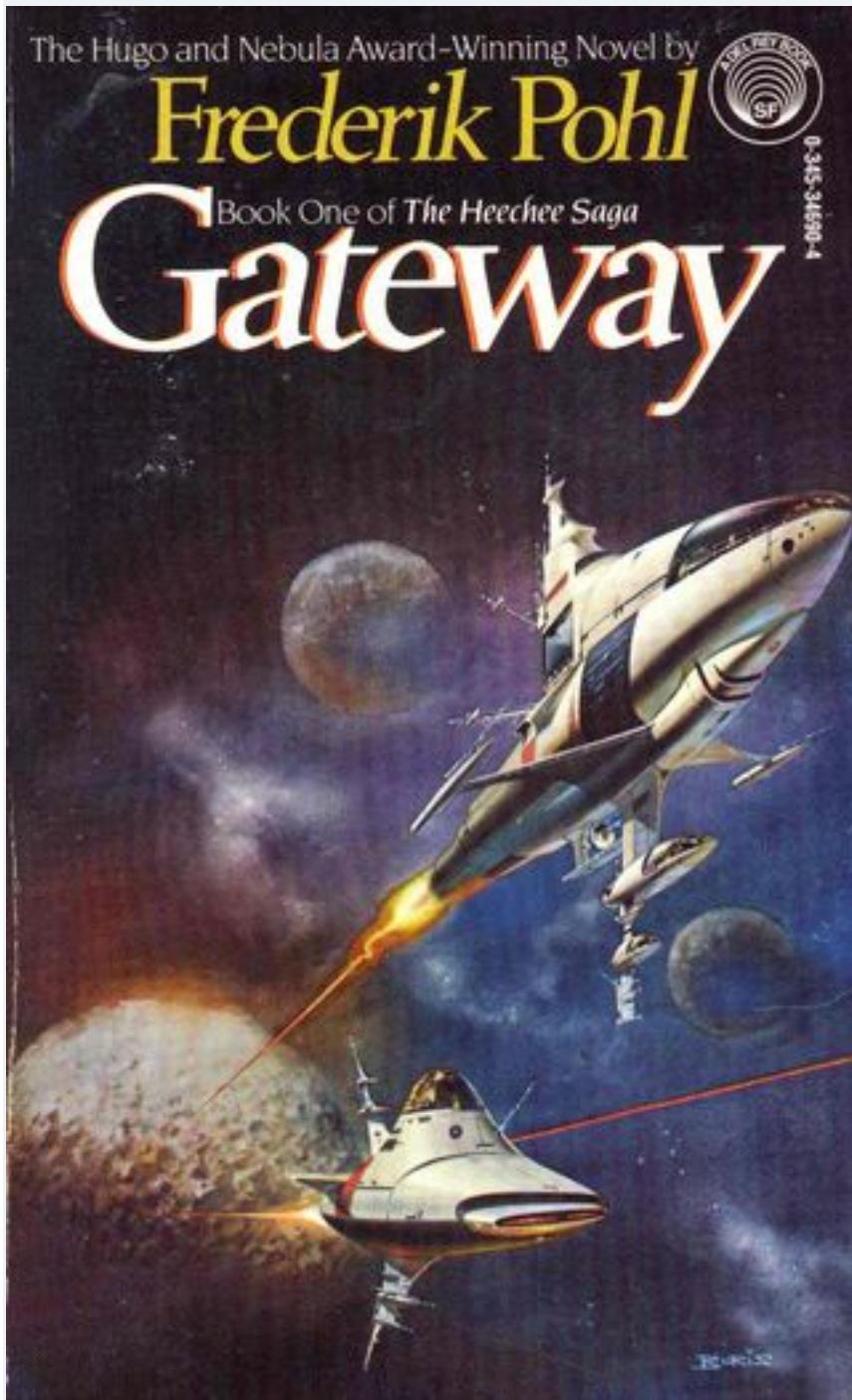
Hoofs drumming, Bat Durston came galloping down through the narrow pass at Eagle Gulch, a tiny gold colony 400 miles north of Tombstone. He spurred hard for a low overhang of rim-rock...and at that point a tall, lean wrangler stepped out from behind a high boulder, six-shooter in a sun-tanned hand.

"Rear back and dismount, Bat Durston," the tall stranger lipped thinly. "You don't know it, but this is your last saddle-jaunt through these here parts."

Sound alike? They should — one is merely a western transplanted to some alien and impossible planet. If this is your idea of science fiction, you're welcome to it! **YOU'LL NEVER FIND IT IN GALAXY!**

What you will find in **GALAXY** is the finest science fiction...authentic, plausible, thoughtful...written by authors who do not automatically switch over from crime waves to Earth invasions; by people who know and love science fiction...for people who also know and love it.

OK, Galaxy is gonna set everybody straight. Here's a house ad from their first issue, where they explain that all SF fans want is straightforward adventure. Umm... Oh, wait. Actually, it kinda sounds like they're making fun of straightforward adventure stories. Says they're basically just space westerns, and implies that that's boring. Yikes.



Well, this one's got space ships and stuff. But I read it and it turns out it's just some weepy beta-male character study or something. Nobody gets blasted with a ray gun at all.



This seems like some kind of fun, lighthearted portal fantasy. But apparently it's actually just a big Christian allegory. (Does that count as Puppy-saddening?)



Oh, I know that guy—that's Captain Kirk! This must be one of those straightforward, rock-'em, sock-'em, social-justice-messages-need-not-apply space adventures that attracted us to SF in the first place. Yeah, and Brad even quoted its opening monolog when he was talking about what great SF is supposed to be! This must be the thing. Wait, what? This one's about racial prejudice *and* the horrors of war?

Well, shucks. I give up. Maybe Brad Torgersen really is just pining for a future that never was.

Posted by [Gabriel McKee](#) on May 27, 2015 at 09:45 PM in [Books](#), [Film](#), [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#)