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international speculative fiction

DECEMBER 2013



Fiction by Francesco Verso, Manuel Alves, and Thomas Olde Heuvelt
Around the World · At Home in the Wasteland: The Art of Sergi Broso
Social Science Fiction · Review: The Best of Philippine SF 2005-2010

EDITORIAL

Fiction

Winter has come again here at the hemisphere where I live! For those that abhor heat and Sun and crowded beaches and tourists everywhere it's the most relaxing time of the year, full of promises of dark, cold nights.

And every reader knows that dark, cold nights are just perfect to cozy up with some good reading by the side.

So, once again, ISF is proud to bring you some of the best speculative/weird fiction around to help you along those nights.

The issue kicks off with Two Worlds by Italian Francesco Verso, a strange and poignant story of rebirth and renewal on a world that has moved on.

This time my own home country comes in two guises: first by the hand of portuguese Manuel Alves on the steampunkish Atomic Heart, second as a special place on the Hugo nominated "The Boy who casts no shadow", by dutch Thomas Olde Heuvelt. Coincidentally both are also beautiful and touching love stories.

So this is it for this issue, hope you like it and feel free to drop us a line at our site or on our facebook page.

Ricardo Loureiro

Non-Fiction

Part of ISF's mandate is to broaden the spectrum of speculative fiction available to readers so that it includes more work from non-traditional sources. But that doesn't happen in a vacuum at the same time that we work to reveal the diversity of speculative fiction, we also try to set it in a broader perspective, whether historically, socially, politically, or in some other way.

With that in mind, in this issue we bring you "Social Science Fiction" by Hunter Liguore. This article takes a tour through socially engaged speculative fiction, from the utopian to the dystopian, from its historical roots to its many modern incarnations. Along the way you're sure to find new authors and new works you'll want to explore.

So enjoy our excellent fiction and, at the same time, dig into the culture of speculative fiction with "Social Science Fiction." We know you'll have a blast.

Nas Hedron

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FICTION





TWO WORLDS

by Francesco Verso
Translation by Sally McCorry

Humans are here today because our particular line never fractured—never at any of the billion points that could have erased us from history.

- Stephen Jay Gould, *Eight Little Piggies: Reflections in Natural History*

From the repaired chronicles of Kilimanjaro.

Aruna turned to say good-bye to her parents, opened her arms and lifted them to free the plumage. She stretched out her neck, breathed in deeply, and let her calves lift her. Her torso was exceptionally ample, well suited to supporting her for a long time.

She was about to take off for the Flight from the shelter of the Solar Tree, three metres outside the Shining Corolla. In a line behind her were the faces of many friends, tense, nervous, and distressingly thin.

The song of the Aeromancers, who were arranged in a semicircle for the Ceremony of the Flight, could be so hypnotic as to make you believe anything.

The horizon that called her to maturity flattened into an opaque strip, infested with clouds of ammonia. Below her a 15,000-metre drop plunged down to the static mass of the Global Ocean.

Old Canderum of the Purple Feathers finished explaining the goal of the Flight for the thousandth time then, solemn and haggard, approached Aruna. He bowed his enormous beak to one side in a gesture of good luck, and stopped singing. With a gentle push to the back of her neck, he cast Aruna into the emptiness.

“Fly, Aruna! Fly towards hope!”

Canderum’s shout announced Aruna’s eighteenth birthday, when for the first time she would leave without having a precise destination.

The young woman dropped, together with another fifteen companions from the Solar Tree Major, and perhaps none of them would ever return. Like everyone else who, year after year, had participated in the Ceremony.

Aruna closed her eyes, folded back her wings to gain speed, altered her trajectory, and let the ascending currents take her westward.

Going back empty handed would be a terrible dishonour.

Mnemonic relic 1 (source uncertain)

Not even the supercomputers had been able to predict that the hybrid genes would react so quickly and fill so many ecological niches. A number of sequences were dramatically defeated in a competition rendered ruthless by human alteration and an evolutionary process that had been going on for millions of years.

Other sequences, a tough minority, took advantage of this situation to adapt and, incidentally, evolve into forms of life that, from then onwards, populated the Modified Earth.

The “human race” in the form it presented before the Second Ecopoiesis, no longer existed. In its place there were two races whose DNA shared 99.96% of their genes with the human race, but no longer walked the Earth.

Because they had not discovered intergalactic flight in time to populate new worlds, human beings had discovered a way to bend the barrier of time and conserve their lives for centuries. When the human genome was decoded in the Second Millennium, scientists were surprised to find that it consisted of a mere thirty-five thousand genes. They had expected there to be more. Not least, because even a worm had twenty thousand.

So they enriched that sequence—a string of three billion letters formed from an alphabet of four elements, containing the instructions for building and maintaining a human body—with a number of additional codes that would provide some highly desirable qualities: qualities useful for adaptation and survival, values that were commonly found in species other than the human one.

Chimeric experimentation was the beginning of the end; it was when everything became mixed up together. The repeal of the 2005 “Human Chimera Prohibition Act” was approved in accordance with the idea that the principle of human dignity should be applied exclusively to the individual and not generally to the whole species.

Even before chimerism, it was common practice to exchange human cells with animal cells: cows secreted human proteins in their milk, human blood ran through the veins of pigs, and sheep were the recipients of human liver and heart transplants. Vice-versa: many human beings possessed cardiac valves derived from pig

and bovine hearts.

Still, the phenomenon that followed chromosomal liberation—known as Genetic Confusion—was also the basis of *oursalvation*.

It was, in fact, demonstrated that there were no true genetic barriers between the many different species, and the proof of this was in the fact that the human genome clearly showed the presence of a genetic continuity between all the *animate beings*.

The thick, high containment walls that had for millennia kept species separate crumbled within a few decades. The very idea that genes were insurmountable barriers to human adaptability was shown to be unfounded.

The Aeromancers learned to fly and oxygenate their blood better, enabling them to settle on the arid mountain tops. The Aquamancers became glabrous, acquired from fish techniques for obtaining oxygen from water, and populated the seas.

This reconstruction is the result of a research study into how to ensure the survival of *animate beings*.

From the repaired chronicles of Saxayé.

On the twelfth day of nonstop flying over the Global Ocean, after having travelled 11,000 kilometres without having come across land, or even a log to rest on, Aruna let herself fall, skimming over the surface of the sea. Exhausted, she succumbed to weariness.

Her worn out body, dehydrated and close to death, was intercepted a few hours later by a reconnaissance patrol who had never seen an Aeromancer before, except in the films taken from underwater that they had been shown when they were still at school.

Drawn to the surface by a floating shadow, Karia, Coorny, and Tsai Chin, moved cautiously closer to the creature with feathered arms, and with a beak instead of a mouth: the shape was of an *animate*, like they were, even though there were evident differences, like the rows of nails on her hands and feet, more like talons than their own webbed fingers and toes.

The bright wings folded behind her arms like drapes were a rainbow of green, yellow, and red stripes, now dirtied with dust and dulled by marine contamination. Keeping away from the slicks of oil, Karia sniffed the stranger and turned to Tsai Chin, the patrol's leader.

"Do you think we should take her down below?"

"I don't know, it could be risky."

The youth's narwhal-like face looked worried. Although he was quick to act, Tsai Chin thought carefully about every decision.

"But we have to help her... she's dying."

The girl's beak was withered and blackened. In some spots it shone like mercury.

Little Coorny looked towards the horizon and grimaced. Not only was there a storm coming that would generate fire twisters, but his nose could detect the stink of an enemy approaching, closer and closer.

"Quick... that *orcark* knows exactly what to do with her."

Hearing their conversation, the girl regained consciousness and opened her beak.

"I'm looking for the Tower— Do you know where the island is? Please— I have to find it, help me."

Then she was quiet, overcome by her exhaustion.

A big bubble of hydrogen from below reached the group and took them a few metres higher. Karia grabbed hold of the girl.

"What do you think she was talking about?"

"She's raving, maybe she's ill."

Tsai Chin's prudence had made him head of the team even though he was so young.

"I reckon we should take her down with us. Iguain will know what to do."

Karia, on the other hand, was naturally curious. Her webbed fingers were expert in investigating coralline encrustations and fields of kelp; she loved swimming with the fish and wandering amidst the iridescent seaweed. Whenever she could, she would set off to look for giant crabs and velvety sponges. She loved the spores, the

microbes, and even the viruses.

Life under water was prolific, and she had fun riding rays, flying on the backs of mantas, and drawing with the cuttlefish and octopuses.

“We don’t know her, Karia □”

Tsai Chin blinked his nictitating membranes uncertainly. Then the air valve in his neck vented vigorously. Karia smiled.

“All right then □ But you’re going to guard her. Your father will decide her fate.”

Coorny took a breathing kit out of his pouch. Even though they had never taken an Aeromancer back before, they knew what they had to do.

After uncurling the tube, Coorny placed the mouthpiece on the girl’s beak and the oxygenating bands behind her shoulders. The bands’ tiny fissures, acting as artificial gills, would allow the outsider to breathe under water.

The orcark continued to approach with its characteristically comic movements: its head rocking drunkenly. It was probably its hunger that made it look so ridiculous.

The patrol formed a diamond: Tsai Chin in front, Karia and Coorny on each side, and the outsider last, towed by her arms. They dived quickly, heading towards Saxayé: their underwater bubble.

They stretched out their fins and accelerated together.

With bloodshot eyes the orcark, its mouth hanging open expecting to feed, missed its prey and resigned itself to going hungry yet again.

Mnemonic relic 2

Though all the entrances to Saxayé were dug in the sand, the tunnels stretched and branched out across the seabed for several kilometres. Air was pumped into the large corridors and the domes through porous walls made of osmotic membranes that absorbed oxygen from the sea water, releasing bubbles of carbon dioxide in the process.

Saxayé was situated close to two hydrothermal vents surrounded by prolific colonies of 5- metre- long tube worms, 50- cm bivalves, and an abundance of prawns and mussels.

It was a complete ecosystem based not on photosynthesis, but chemosynthesis. The hydrothermal vents were the ocean’s alternative to the old power stations. The springs also served to purify the salt water. As the water penetrated the Earth’s crust, it lost minerals, was cleaned, and released back into circulation by the thousands of steaming vents.

It was an incredibly slow process, but the Aquamancers were in no hurry; they preferred efficiency to imbalance.

The supporting structure of Saxayé, anchored to the seabed by stainless steel chains, had made the inflatable city the most economic structure for providing space for the growing population of Aquamancers.

References were found in the distributed memories of the supercomputers to a few populations on the east coast who, mindful of time spent underground during the war, had started to install these structures as temporary dormitories for immigrant labour.

What for the Aquamancers turned out be simple to get up and running again □ having access to technology they had found surviving in watertight depots and laboratories □ turned out to be disastrous for the Aeromancers.

They had had to find shelter in the few Solar Trees left standing, surviving on inaccessible semi-desert terrain which had resisted the rising levels of the Global Ocean. Forced to live on land that was arid and as hard as rock, their population had remained stable for centuries. This meant, though, that any chance or unforeseen event could easily compromise their survival.

Growing food crops was only possible at a certain altitude, in plantations reaching towards the sky to make the most of the weak solar heat: cassava, sweet corn, peppers, beans, squash, and potatoes could be harvested up to an altitude of 3,600 metres. Between 3,600 and 5,000 metres, only potatoes would grow. Beyond that every plant, even though modified by ancient biotechnology, stopped yielding any fruit.

According to local myths, the Ice Age had lasted for about 500 years, an exceptional phenomenon that had occurred at least twice more. Yet according to the same legends, when the climate stabilized again the tundra

would recede and the parting waters would uncover fertile lands, and the Aeromancers would be able to come down from their heights; the heaths would flower again and their Solar Trees would prosper once more.

They had been waiting for this moment for centuries.

From the repaired chronicles of Saxayé.

Karia entered the med-lab pushing the gurney at speed.

“Dad, we found this girl. She was floating in the Ocean, almost dead.”

The stout shape of Iguain Celcantoss turned first towards his daughter and then towards Aruna. She had regained consciousness, but however hard she tried she still couldn’t make her talons clasp.

“An Aeromancer? And the rest of the flight? And what was she doing in the sea?”

Iguain picked up an oblong device from the work top and ran it over the girl’s body. He stopped at her shoulders, where the inflammation was visible.

“There wasn’t anybody else. She mentioned a Tower and an island. She said she had to find them.”

The Doctor’s smooth face was rapt with concentration as he checked the readings. He turned to the Aeromancer. For centuries the inhabitants of Modified Earth had been using the oceanic language which had become the repository of idioms and dialects from before the Second Ecopoiesis.

“Can you hear me? What’s your name?”

She nodded her head, and tried to grab his arm. At the sight of her talons Iguain dodged out of the way and the young woman’s hand dropped. The bone structure of her arms was very elongated, especially near the hands where the metacarpals and phalanges were twice as long as those of an Aquamancer.

“My name is Aruna Dalkey, of the tribe of the Aeromancers of Kilimanjaro.” Iguain’s cutaneous crests suggested he was smiling. Though after a while Aruna realised that this was an almost fixed expression on his face. The feathers along her arms quivered.

“You are not going to die you’re just very tired. How did you manage to get this far? We’re eleven days’ travel from the nearest coast.”

“Eight days if you’re flying.”

He opened his eye membranes wide, exposing aquamarine irises. He was honestly surprised, as if Aruna had said something nonsensical. His surprise, though, owed as much to seeing an Aeromancer after such a long time; the floating bodies they sighted always ended up as food for the orcarcs if the fire twisters didn’t reduce them to shreds first.

“I’ll give you a solution to drink that will make you feel better.”

Iguain offered her a container and Aruna drank the oily liquid. It was only then that she realized she was in a med-lab.

“Where am I? And who are you?”

“Welcome to Saxayé, the capital of the Aquamancers. My name is Iguain Celcantoss and this is my daughter Karia.”

“Saxayé? I’ve never heard of it. But thank you for all you have done. Now I must continue with my journey.”

When she tried to get up, the doctor stopped her.

“It’s too soon to fly. You need to rest.”

The doctor’s manner was thoughtful and considerate, and Aruna didn’t want to seem rude or discourteous.

“Let me go before it’s too late. I have to find the Tower.”

“In your condition you wouldn’t be able to beat your arms for even a minute. I don’t want to keep you here against your will, but trust me, it’s better if you build up your strength before taking off again.”

As soon as he turned away to put his instruments on the work surface, Aruna could control herself no longer and burst into tears.

“You don’t understand my people are dying. Only the Tower can save us.”

“Wait, calm down. Tell me about this Tower. Why are you looking for it? And why is it so important?”

Iguain Celcantoss handed Aruna a handkerchief. The Aquamancers, as far as airborne reconnaissance had shown, were peaceful people. Aruna needed to be able to trust someone. Anyway, Karia had saved her life and that had to be

a good sign.

So the Aeromancer told them everything about the threat hanging over all of them, and hoped she wouldn't live to regret it.

Mnemonic relic 3 (source uncertain)

At the beginning of the third Millennium, near the North Pole, on Spitsbergen, an island in the Svalbard archipelago, a building was erected that was known to the future generations as the Tower of Seeds.

Inside the Tower, thousands of samples of all the different varieties of seeds were stored in the hope that one day they would in this way be able to survive an accident or natural catastrophe.

Following the Second Ecopoiesis, the island sank beneath the Global Ocean and from then on no one heard any more about it. Despite this, the vault's construction and the care taken over its security led many Aeromancers to believe that if they could find the Tower, they would still be able to use the seeds.

According to various mnemonic fragments, the Tower, powered by a thermopile, consisted of three rooms located at the top of a 125-metre-long tunnel. The seeds were kept at -20 degrees Celsius and sealed in specially designed containers made of four layers of aluminium. These containers were stored inside canisters and placed on the shelves in the vault.

The low temperature and humidity levels in the Tower would limit the metabolic activity of the seeds and maintain their integrity. Preserved correctly, some seeds could last for millennia.

From the repaired chronicles of Saxayé.

The meeting between Aruna and Iguain had un hoped-for consequences, the most important of which was their audience with the Council of Saxayé and its outcome.

The president, Yecené Urus, in his official uniform of a fluorescent overall with an opening on the back for his dorsal fin, had listened in silence to the words of the outsider, but he wasn't convinced.

"If I have understood correctly, you are saying that the existence of the Global Ocean is under threat if we don't find this Tower?"

Aruna was standing in front of the members of the assembly. Her plumage had regained all the vigour of her genetic line, and shone with a myriad of colours. She found Iguain's presence by her side reassuring. The medic, for some reason, had believed her. In fact he seemed almost happy to be helping her.

His cutaneous crests were more tightly stretched than usual, frequently revealing his conical white teeth.

Together, Aruna and Iguain had spent hours and hours sifting through the available mnemonic relics, hunting for information about the location of the Tower.

The Aquamancers' network was not extensive, and lots of scouts explored the submerged ruins to hook up to old databases.

The fact that she might be the only survivor of that year's mission kept a faint flame of optimism alight in Aruna. She and her companions had left the Nest without knowing what to do, nor how to proceed if they succeeded in finding the Tower.

Their flight was more a test of faith than of hope.

"Yes, that's right. The disappearance of humanity caused, amongst other consequences, the evaporation of the coolant reservoirs of about 870 nuclear power stations scattered around the world and the meltdown of their reactors. The clouds that continued to form for decades afterwards turned out to be more of a problem than the radioactive material. Five-hundred billion tons of methane deposits were released as the layers of ice in which they were trapped melted. All that gas accelerated global warming to levels that had been unheard of since the end of the Permian period."

"This data is known to us. There are no boundaries between the ecosystems. The ocean is no longer constrained by the limits imposed by the continents and it no longer has the divisions it used to have. The Global Ocean was the origin of everything that breathes and reproduces, and it seems that it is also their future. We see no threats on the horizon."

The round head of president Urus nodded up and down. The members of the assembly approved.

"Permit me to disagree."

Aruna turned from one side of the semicircle to the other. If the Tower really existed, and the Aquamancers could be convinced of the danger they were all in, maybe they would be able to help her.

“Have you ever left the sea? Have you ever analyzed the situation of the Risen Lands?”

Some members of the assembly gasped, others vented their air valves. Some, irritated, whispered to each other. Who did this outsider think she was to throw around accusations—how dare she seed doubt and fear amongst them about what the future might bring?

“The Risen Lands? Are you referring to the lands made hard by the Ice Age where *you* have made your nests?”

“Yes, before the Second Ecopoiesis, below the mountains, the lakes and the river deltas were suffocated by weeds and fertilizers. The green film on the surface of the stagnant waters transformed into tons of algae that could absorb so much oxygen from the water that anything swimming in it died instantly. Our ancestors witnessed everything from above. When the algae collapsed from lack of oxygen, their decomposition intensified the process. The lagoons, once crystal clear, became great expanses of sulphurous sludge; the river estuaries spread for hundreds of kilometres in unending dead zones. The plants and animals survived according to their tolerance to UV rays, or mutated beneath a bombardment of electromagnetic radiation.”

Aruna closed her eyes. Her beak beat the words out with force. The Aquamancers kept listening.

“When the worst happened, life went on. It went on regardless, even though the parameters had changed. We, the *animate* races, are the result. Now, though, the threat still hangs over us because there are no more trees left to defend us.”

“What have the trees got to do with the disappearance of the Ocean?”

“Like I said, our ancestors, on their first flights, saw everything from above. Their genetic memory preserved the record of those events in the chemical composition of our plumage. If you don’t believe my words, check the analyses against the fossils of the birds from the First Ecopoiesis.

Aruna turned to Iguain who lifted a translucent plate.

They had come prepared, knowing that the Council would insist that they examine the matter in an entirely rational manner.

“All right, continue—we want to know about the trees.”

“The disappearance of the trees, together with heavy use of engineered seaweed to produce fuel hydrogen once the fossil fuels ran out, caused the Earth’s temperature to increase, and in consequence the level of the Ocean to rise. There is a limit beyond which the biosphere ceases to provide protection from the effects of these types of processes and starts to magnify them instead. The only way we can save the Earth is by replanting trees. The clouds will give us water once more, and the Sun will heat and produce vapour from the watery mass of the ocean. This is the only way the Global Ocean can be made to recede and the Risen Lands become fertile again. With the seeds from the Tower, we will have seasons again. Do you even know what seasons are?”

The Aquamancers remained unmoved, like when you listen to an explanation about the mysteries of the universe, and the sheer size of the phenomena exceeds your capacity to comprehend them. It was difficult to read their expressions

Aruna hoped she had managed to get the message across.

Mnemonic relic 4 – (source: Wikipedia fragment)

The Maunder Minimum is the name given to the period that lasted from [1645](#) to 1715 of the First Ecopoiesis, when [sunspots](#) became an extremely rare occurrence. The phenomenon was named after the astronomer [E.W. Maunder](#), who discovered the absence of solar flares and sunspots during that period by studying the news of the era. During the Maunder Minimum, astronomers recorded fifty sunspots instead of the more usual 40,000 or 50,000. The beginning of the Maunder Minimum was abrupt, with no warning phenomena, though during the final phase, between 1700 and 1712, the sun’s activity gradually picked up again and began to increase.

The Maunder Minimum coincided with the coldest part of the so-called [Little Ice Age](#), during which [Europe](#) and [North America](#), and perhaps also the rest of the world (for which reliable data is not available), suffered particularly severe winters. Data from successive eras led scholars to hypothesize that during the Maunder Minimum the [Sun](#) might have expanded and its rate of rotation diminished.

From the repaired chronicles of Saxayé:

At dawn of the following day, a squad left Saxayé heading northeast towards the banks of Bioluminescent Plankton. Behind them the inflatable city looked like a 25-km-long boomerang.

The inhabited corals exploited special organisms to agglomerate cemented sand structures connecting the underwater archipelago with mobile bridges floating at varying heights.

The fish that swam around it all could see Saxayé steaming and gurgling amidst thousands of bubbles of CO₂ in suspension.

Iguain had taken the place of young Coorny, while Tsai Chin had been moved down the squad's formation to Karia's side.

Aruna, unsuited to swimming, was transported in a capsule that was so narrow that to fit she had to fold her arms around her upper body.

Their destination was a point near the North Pole. According to the mnemonic relics, this was a plausible position for the location of the Tower.

Iguain had managed to convince the Council to grant him permission to accompany the outsider, verify the nature of the threat, and "take possession" of the seeds. The risk that the legend might be true, and that the consequences foreseen by the Aeromancers were a real possibility, had to be taken seriously. Still, Iguain was not sure what meaning to attribute to the expression "take possession."

He had a plan too, but of a completely different kind.

In the past, he had heard rumours about the Tower, but that information, like many other things, had been forgotten, until Aruna's story had brought it back and reactivated it.

Near Miami, the squad came across thousands of eels like silver ribbons, up to five metres long, swarming with graceful agility thanks to rudimentary fins and their pointed snouts.

When they dived into the deeps, they saw the trail of pilings that had once held up one of the human civilization's motorways. Following these, they reached a merchant ship resting on the seabed and half buried in the sand, its corroded iron hulk feeding a prolific mass of multicoloured seaweed. All around the wrecked ship, amidst statues covered with anemones, spores, and starfish, spread a ten-centimetre-thick carpet of red seaweed.

They decided to set up their bubble and stop to rest.

Mnemonic relic 5 - (source: Wikipedia fragment)

Whoever wants to access the seeds in the Tower must get past four doors: the entrance, a second door in the tunnel, and a further two airtight doors.

The keys are coded in such a way as to allow access to various levels of the structure, but not all the keys open all the doors.

Movement sensors are present all around the site.

A work of art makes the vault visible from many kilometres away. The roof and entrance are covered with highly reflective mirrors and prisms designed by the artist Dyveke Sanne. This installation acts as a signal by reflecting the polar light in the summer months, whereas in the winter a network of 200 fibre optic cables illuminate the site with light that ranges from turquoise-green to white.

From the repaired chronicles of Saxayé:

On the third day of their journey, while they were eating their evening meal, a mixture of crustaceans and mollusks in a sauce of coral mucus, Tsai Chin lifted his head from his bowl.

The coral formations in which they were camped had cracked the road's surface and invaded the surrounding buildings. The streets had been engulfed by a covering of bright green moss.

"Can you hear that too?"

They all turned to face the rocks. At the top, the outline of the crumbling skyscrapers stood out, with manta rays as big as ancient aeroplanes flying between them.

Aruna's hearing caught no sound vibrations, but the Aquamancers ground their teeth. Then Aruna jumped she,

too, could now hear the low, repeated laments. The sounds that at first had seemed mournful, after a little changed in their intensity, and became grunts, punctuated here and there with whistles and murmurs.

Focusing, Aruna could make out a pair of *Megawhales* passing by a few kilometres away. She guessed that the one in front was the female with the male following behind, performing complex sound modulations in his courtship of the female.

"They're going north. We'd better hurry up!" Karia said, and Iguain started to gather up their things.

"How can you tell?"

Aruna turned to the young woman, who was helping her father while Tsai Chin listened, rapt, to the hypnotic frequencies of the Megawhale's song.

"I recognize the song. It reaches 68 Hz. The songs of the *Megawhales* are different depending on where they come from. Look at them—they are the largest beings on earth."

"No, they're not—you should see the Giant Sequoias, they can grow to be taller than a hundred metres and weigh up to 200 tonnes."

Iguain opened his eye membranes wide, and stared at Aruna.

"There are Giant Sequoias on the Risen Lands?"

"They were crossbred and made resistant to the climate. We have three on Kilimanjaro."

The Aquamancers settled Aruna into the capsule and stowed their air bubble. Tsai Chin took out some slender ropes and started using sign language.

"Let's hook the ropes on. They'll give us a lift and we'll shorten our journey by a day."

From the repaired chronicles of Saxayé:

At dawn of the seventh day, beyond the Krill Fields, Aruna saw what must have been the beginnings of the fjords.

Later, half hidden by teeming underwater life, she saw an encouraging sight. The images in the mnemonic relics that Iguain had shown her matched those from her childhood. Drawings, paintings, and graffiti that portraying the Tower decorated the walls of the Aeromancer Academy and the Corolla of Solar Tree Major.

Her people's dilemma consisted of having to make the terrible choice between sending its children out in search of the Tower or hoping that it was all a lie, in other words the choice was between weakening the Nest or else seeing it destroyed within a few generations.

As old Canderum had explained to her, the decision to continue with the Ceremony of Flight was linked to the fact that legends needed to be valued according to their capacity to generate "morale" in those who stayed behind, rather than on the basis of their truth.

Because of the Flight, the life expectancy of the Aeromancers was much shorter than that of their ancestors, though they had overcome part of this disadvantage by becoming sexually mature at an earlier age.

They generally reproduced during puberty, so the population had not shrunk as much as the elders had foreseen. The strongest individuals were excused from procreation, because of the risk they were to run. Canderum was known for saying "It is better to raise heroes than orphans."

However, it was also plausible that the Second Ecopoiesis was hurrying along their natural selection, increasing the probability that the new generations would be born with a greater tolerance of radiation.

The Aeromancers knew that they were a transgenic form of life, which had evolved to face an extreme and continually mutating environment—a mutation that lay guarded within the Tower now before Aruna.

The squad was moving forward holding its formation when Tsai Chin realised that below them an intertwined mass of plants was rising rapidly. It was an enormous macrocyst of kelp.

"It will block the entrance if we don't hurry."

Iguain motioned the group to move swiftly so that they weren't crushed by the mass threatening to engulf them.

"Swim up!" was the next sign he made to Tsai Chin, who vented his air valve as hard as he could.

"No, we'll waste time."

Tsai Chin pushed the capsule with Aruna in it to the head of the group to help the three Aquamancers shove their way through the columns of seaweed.

"It's not common kelp Tsai Chin. It's carnivorous and will rip us to shreds." Iguain's mouth was clamped shut.

"In these latitudes? That's absurd!" Tsai Chin shook his head, he couldn't believe that the seabed could rouse itself and grow before his very eyes.

As Iguain knew, courage didn't always make up for inexperience.

Less than twenty metres from the Tower, a compact wall of lianas forced them to slow down.

"It's been crossbred with something, and I don't want to know what with!"

The lack of oxygen in the area around them, so quickly sucked out by the kelp, would cause them to suffocate within a few minutes.

Iguain distributed the breathing kits to gain a little time, but as soon as he did, a spongy tangle enveloped Tsai Chin and dragged him down with it.

Karia pushed Aruna ahead of her, while Iguain stopped and watched Tsai Chin, armed with a dagger, fighting the roots. If he went to help Tsai Chin, he would put the lives of the others at even greater risk.

Tsai Chin took out a bar of sodium, which on contact with the water burned incandescently amidst a cloud of bubbles. The kelp, alarmed by his resistance, called up even more tentacles.

At the sight of this, Iguain kicked his legs, beat his dorsal fins, and resisted the tenacity with which the kelp was trying desperately to survive. When he could no longer see Tsai Chin, Iguain filled his lungs, pushed with his pectorals, and swam away, helping his daughter and Aruna to safety in the narrow entrance of the Tower.

Mnemonic relic 7 (source: paper fragment)

The most alarming thing is that we have no idea about the mechanisms which enable a natural phenomenon to disrupt the Earth's temperature with such speed. As Elizabeth Kolbert observed in a mnemonic relic from the *New Yorker* "No known external force, or even any that has been hypothesized, seems capable of yanking the temperature back and forth as violently, and as often, as these cores have shown to be the case. [It seems] like some kind of vast and terrible feedback loop." We are a long way from understanding all of this.

From the repaired chronicles of Saxayé:

The metallic walls of the Tower had not been colonized. Partially stained by sponges and lichens, they reflected a small amount of light—even now, from twenty metres below the surface of the Ocean.

Shaken by the loss of Tsai Chin, Iguain pounded his fists on the Tower's door to the disbelief of Karia and Aruna. It was madness to think someone would come and open the door—nonetheless a display lit up by its side.

"Welcome to Spitsbergen Island, I am the Custodian of the Vault, its security AI, how can I be of service?"

The girls came closer, intrigued. The supercomputer was still working, though it was not up-to-date with the situation on Modified Earth. The island no longer existed, covered by the Ocean.

"We have brought some seeds we would like to deposit."

Aruna shook her feathers, a gesture typical of her race. She opened her beak angrily and pounded her hands against the capsule.

"You've got seeds?! And you didn't tell me?"

As soon as the doors opened, the three were pushed in by the pressure of the water. When they stood up again, after the doors had closed, they found themselves in a corridor sloping twenty degrees upwards.

Emergency lighting indicated which way to go.

"I'm sorry, the Council forbade me to talk about it. And anyway it was the best way of getting us in."

"You lied to me!"

"No, I do have some seeds, but they are as old as fossils."

Iguain opened a bag and showed Aruna the contents. A strong smell of rot hit her—a slightly sweeter version of the same stench was already present in the corridor.

The internal surfaces of the Tower were covered by a film of dust, and as the AI led them closer to the top of the vault, the smell became the stink of mould.

When they reached the Seed Room, they could not hold back their disgust and horror: their hopes lay there rotting in an unending series of carefully labeled containers.

"They're all rotten! The seeds are useless—we got here too late."

Karia put her arm around the visibly upset Aeromancer. To return to the Nest only to tell her people that the

seeds had turned to dust would throw everyone into deep despair.

“That is not exact. Some have survived.”

The AI opened a door at the end of the Room, and inside a few of the cases, some names lit up: Himalayan Cedar, Caucasian Elm, and Whitebeam, and then Rhododendrons, Azaleas, and Magnolias.

“The Barley seeds decomposed after 2,000 years, the Wheat seeds after 1,700, but the Whitebeam will last for another 10,000. You can leave your seeds here; I will take care to preserve them until the time is right for a new planting.”

Aruna ran to see, drying her tears as she did so. Iguain laid down his package and was about to move away when she grabbed him by the arm.

“Where are you going? We have to get the seeds. We haven’t come all this way to leave empty handed.”

Iguain’s eyelids lowered from the tops of his eyes until the eyes were completely covered. The absence of eyelashes made him look strange to the Aeromancer.

“The aim of the mission was to verify the existence of the Tower and identify its position. Someone else will decide what to do with the seeds. We will report back to the Council and tell them what we have discovered.”

“But my people need these seeds. We must take them back with us!”

“The Council will use its judgment to decide what to do with them. If it were not for them, we would not even be here.”

“I know□ but the seeds don’t belong to anyone. The seeds belong to the Earth, and they must be returned to the Earth. The seeds are like the force of gravity and the sunlight; they existed before the human race came along and continued after its disappearance. No-one can *own* them.”

“This is a decision the Council must make.”

Aruna let her beak hang open, then tilted it to one side and unfolded her wings threateningly.

“No Iguain, this decision belongs to *you* too! We are alone here, and I don’t think that you came all this way, at your age, just to satisfy your curiosity and to put a cross on a nautical map.”

The Aquamancer vented his air valve. It was difficult to carry on doing his duty, now that he *knew*. The existence of the Seeds was a truth that could put his dream of repopulating the Risen Lands into motion.

When he was a boy, Iguain had loved to swim to the surface and gaze at the sky. The starfish were nothing compared to the stars that floated high above. During the night, under the spinning constellations, hypnotized by their mysterious movement, he would ask himself what was up there.

On the edge of the outside world, he had never plucked up the courage to take the last step, the step that would have taken him out of the Ocean.

In the years that followed, his mind was often filled with thoughts of the Risen Lands. It was as if his memories held, in the folds of genetic memory, the panoramas and terrestrial landscapes that persisted with a certain melancholy within him.

This convinced him that his race should leave the Ocean, and that sooner or later the Aquamancers would return to dry land. It was a circle that would be closed.

He had taught Karia that the Risen Lands had been the cradle of civilization, from which all the animate races had originated, and that that civilization had *walked*, with its feet firmly on the ground.

Iguain couldn’t get the mosaic of his thoughts in order.

As an Aquamancer he knew that the Risen Land Cultures had all ended badly, and that every land-based civilization was but a fragment in a distributed memory. They, on the contrary, were alive and would remain so until the Sun imploded.

For the Council, the Risen Lands were a fearsome environment, dry, exposed to intense radiation, and above all they offered none of that support provided by water that made moving around in the sea so much more pleasant and less tiring than on land.

It was bizarre that a planet almost completely covered by the Ocean should be called Earth. Sooner or later it would have to be renamed “Aqua”.

“I’m going to take the seeds anyway Iguain, with or without your permission. Even though you saved my life, you cannot expect me to sacrifice my people for a question of politics.”

Aruna addressed the display in a pleading tone.

"Custodian, I beg you. The seeds must leave this place. I came here to take some samples. Allow my people to be able to plant them again."

"I have awaited a Planter for centuries. Preservation is a means unto planting. You may take two seeds of each type left in the vault."

Aruna was overjoyed, but did not know exactly what to do, nor did she have any idea how to transport the seeds. She was scared of ruining them, of accidentally destroying her own future in an instant.

Then Iguain had a change of heart, turning back with shuffling steps.

"Aruna, I have not told you everything. I did come here for another reason. I want to take us all back to a point when nothing had yet been compromised. I want to put evolution back on the right track."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that any child born today inherits genes and learns from experience, but she also has the use of words, thoughts, and tools that were invented by others in other places and other eras. The animate beings exist because, unlike other species, they know how to accumulate culture and pass on information, not only across the Ocean, but also across time, from generation to generation. I think though, that this progress is cyclic, not linear. The human civilization was a disaster for the biosphere. The next one will be able to value the environment and read its signs.

"So, have you changed your mind?"

"Partially. Karia will return to the Council, whereas I will come with you, if you have nothing against the idea."

Iguain's daughter accepted the decision, perhaps she had already known in her heart that her father would not forgo this opportunity to finally leave the Ocean.

"I'll tell them that I got separated from you. And you dad, you can come back to Saxayé when you have finished."

As she said it, Karia feared that that day would not come any time soon.

From the repaired chronicles of Kilimanjaro.

The altitude caused Iguain some days of nausea and spells of dizziness. Born to resist the pressure of the water, his body was vulnerable to the rarefied air. However, when he saw the great size of the Giant Sequoias he forgot any suffering he was going through. These beings were the most incredible thing he had ever seen.

Aruna introduced him to her family and old Canderum of the Purple Feathers.

In the days that followed, the young woman was frequently away from the Nest, intent on coordinating the teams of planters that had started to work along the slopes of Kilimanjaro.

Returning in the evenings, tired but happy, Aruna told Iguain how in time every Aeromancer would inherit a mixture of seeds, a precious legacy to manage and make "yield." She imagined flights of Aeromancers flying around to pollinate plants and flowers. She imagined spreading the seeds to the other tribes. She imagined descending from the peaks, as the legend foretold.

Iguain, for his part, never went too far from the Nest, where the Aeromancers had prepared him a pool for his ablutions. He learned the local customs, and he sat on the edge of the Solar Corolla contemplating the marine horizon, which in his mind would pull back and give way to a new unexplored Land, where people could return to walking.

He was not anxious to return to Saxayé, it did not worry him: he had initiated a process of transformation, and even though the consequences of his decision would take a very long time to reach their conclusion, he was at peace with himself.

Canderum glided down next to him. Standing on thin legs, he relied on the support of a stick.

"Look over there. On the left."

The Aeromancer pointed with a finger, and Iguain, focusing, saw what the other was looking at: whole swarms of spores floating in the air.

"Our races will meet again, this time on the shores of the Ocean, Canderum." "And from there we will go on together."

"As has already happened, but differently."

The two elderly men did not have much else to ask of life, except to observe it continue and recreate itself.

About the author:

Francesco Verso was born in Bologna in 1973. He is the author of *Antidoti Umani* (short-listed for the 2004 Urania Mondadori Award), *e-Doll* (2008 Urania Mondadori Award) and *Livido* (2013 Odyssey Award). In 2012 he completed *BloodBusters*, a grotesque thriller about taxes literally paid in blood. In 2013 he wrote *The Walkers*, a novel in two volumes featuring a group of rebels, the Pulldogs, who inhabit a world where Western civilisation – indeed, humanity – are in decline, in part due to the spread of nanobots, capable of assembling molecules to synthesize matter, with the subsequent birth of a new kind of culture: a nomadic society, solar and creative.

His stories have appeared in genre magazines, including *Robot*, *iComics*, *NeXT* and *Fantasy Magazine*, and have been sold abroad (*Song Story 2*). One has been adapted for the theatre (*The Milky Way*) and another is being made into a web series (*Flush for Grapevine Studio*). He lives in Rome with his wife Elena and daughter Sofia.

ATOMIC HEART

by Manuel Alves

Momo was able to spend all day looking through the big laboratory window, directly into the Sun, without going blind. He saw things that were very far away as if they were very close. He saw the Sun as a heart in the sky, pulsing with bursts of heat rather than just beating. He didn't see just a flat shiny disc—he saw a sphere in all three dimensions, rich with extraordinary details no one else could see with the naked eye. Except Nini—she had eyes like his.

“We don't belong here,” said Momo. “We should be able to touch the Sun.”

“We don't need to dream about prodigies,” said Nini. “We *are* the prodigy.”

“No. We are just the proof Man longs to step away from God's shadow.”

Momo focused on a dark sunspot and watched the changes in luminosity on the Sun's surface.

“Our very existence is absurd,” he said. “The very concept of God is absurd. Especially for *us*.”

“And don't you suppose that *touching* the Sun defies everything we know to be possible?”

Momo kept looking at the sky. Nini was right. Still, touching the Sun was a dream that was closer to reality than shaking God's hand.

“Don't you ever wonder, Nini? Don't you wonder how it would be *if* it were possible?”

“I wonder about other things.”

“Things I will have to *guess*?”

Nini smiled. Suspense was always an effective way to get Momo's attention.

“Momo, what if we could touch *each other*?”

Momo looked at Nini's half body. They both existed only from the waist up, set on two laboratory workbenches ten feet apart. They were attached to a machine by tubes that supplied them with pressurized steam from the foundry on the floor below. The Creator worked down there during the day. Some people called him *doctor*, others called him *engineer*, and a few called him *scientist*. At the end of the work day, when all the workers went home, he always came upstairs to the laboratory. Sometimes he would fine tune their gears and check the steam pressure on the instrument panel. Other times he would spend hours just leaning over the thick book he kept, along with his personal journal, in the wall safe. At times he would stay there—in absolute silence—writing in his journal. On those occasions he always seemed terribly worried. The day before he had told Momo and Nini that they would finally become complete. Tiny valves propelled facial joints, according to movements predetermined by mechanical design—Momo smiled.

“Nini, do you really think today is the day?”

“I believe it is. I can *feel* it.”

“But how do you know what you feel isn't just part of the plan? How do you know you can really *feel*?”

Nini lowered her eyes to the workbench. Everything she thought she could feel came from those tubes. What would it be like to have blood in her veins instead of steam? To *have* veins.

“Momo, what do you think *faith* is?”

“I don't know.”

“Neither do humans—not really. But they feel it anyway. Why do you think that happens?”

“Because humans—” Momo looked through the window—it was a beautiful view over a hill, where the Douro River flowed into the Atlantic. “*are* humans,” he said.

The silvery brightness seemed to dim on Nini's face.

“Momo, humanity isn't only flesh and bone. It is not the blood in the veins. It is not the breath. To be human is to think. It is to feel. It is to love.”

Momo's face remained dull, as if the weight of the alloy that made him, enriched with molybdenum, was a burden. He had no faith.

"We think," he said. "And we feel because we want things. We have dreams—or we think that's what they are. But where is the love?"

Nini looked sad, as much as a face made of metal could show sadness. The love she felt was right before her eyes, reflected in her face.

"Sometimes we find it," she said, "other times it finds us."

Momo looked through the window. The Sun was sinking into the horizon. The night was always the worst part of being there. The sky would fill with stars and Momo would dream about them. Waking dreams. Momo didn't sleep—he couldn't even lie down. He couldn't leave the workbench that held him by the waist to *live*.

"Nothing will find us," he said, "nor will we find anything."

The laboratory door opened with a bang of wood against wall. The Creator stepped into the laboratory looking distressed. He grabbed a few things from a workbench and accidentally knocked over several others. He stopped between Momo and Nini with an armful of tools.

"Today is the day," he said.

The Creator scattered the tools all over Momo's workbench and unscrewed the bolts immobilizing his metal torso. He asked Momo to lie down. With all the tubes coming from beneath the workbench, Momo looked like a wounded soldier with his guts lying all over an operating table. The Creator strapped him to the workbench with thick leather belts fastened around his torso and arms and did the same to Nini. He then pulled and pushed several levers that set mechanical gears in motion. The workbenches rose to a vertical position.

If Momo and Nini had had hearts they would have been pounding in their chests. They didn't quite understand their Creator's sudden rush—he had come up to the laboratory earlier than usual, before the sounding of the bell announcing the end of the shift. The foundry was still perspiring, smoke rising from the molten metal pouring from the crucibles.

The Creator pushed over two wheeled platforms, each one containing a pair of legs. He placed each one under the corresponding automaton. Then he moved away and stood between Momo and Nini, indecision present in his every shaky movement. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small lead box which he held in trembling hands.

"This will be your heart," he said.

He put the small box down with fearful caution.

Momo and Nini had no idea how two hearts could fit inside such a small box. However, they also had no idea how the Creator had provided them with complex thought, yet they couldn't dispute the fact that he had.

The Creator pressed a hatch on Momo's chest and then turned it in short movements, in opposite directions, as if he were opening a combination safe. He did the same with the hatch on Nini's chest. Then he put on a heavy, one-piece suit that covered him from the neck down. Lastly, he put on a hood with a glass visor and a pair of thick gloves and opened the small box. He used tweezers to remove a metallic tablet the size of a small coin and held it in front of the visor. He faced Momo.

"Uranium," said the Creator.

He inserted the tablet into Momo's chest and pressed it until he heard a click. The moment he pulled the tweezers away, the compartment containing the uranium sealed itself and filled with water. It worked. The Creator repeated the procedure on Nini's chest, took the suit off, and left it on the floor—he had little time left to connect the automatons' legs.

In their chests, Momo and Nini felt the power of an atomic reaction fueled by uranium—it wasn't a heart beating, but it was pulsing. The Creator moved with precise haste. Immediately after disconnecting the tubes that connected Momo's body to the workbench, he reconnected them to valves inside the legs. With the last connection made, he energetically pumped a lever so that the platform supporting the legs would rise to the proper position. The two body halves touched and made a perfect connection, then locked by mechanical action—a thick washer rotated on Momo's waist and completed the process. The Creator undid the straps holding the automaton to the workbench and stepped aside.

Momo was complete. He could feel his legs—not *quite* as people did, but he knew he had them and that he was able

to use them. He stepped down from the platform, confident in his ability to walk. On the first step he lost his balance and stumbled against a cabinet, only stopping when his shoulder hit the wall. He took a few seconds to get used to his new sense of balance. The wrecked cabinet and the hole in the wall made him aware of his weight and strength.

“No one dances when taking his very first steps,” said the Creator with a smile.

It was a brief moment of good mood. Several bangs came from downstairs and the workers’ voices rose. Gunshots. The Creator peeped through the laboratory door—everyone was rushing in a panic towards the exits. He asked Momo to move a big cabinet against the door.

Momo dragged the piece of furniture with no apparent effort.

“What is happening?” he asked.

The Creator didn’t answer. Instead, he started to connect the tubes inside Nini’s body. Before he could finish, the echo of a fist banging on the door made him tremble—a brief distraction which he promptly ignored, connecting the last tube. Now he only had to attach the two halves of her body.

The fist echoed against the door again. Outside, a man said he knew the *fellow engineer* was there. Whoever the man was, he stopped hitting the door. There was a silence followed by the sound of footsteps. A series of bangs spit a hailstorm of bullets through the door and the cabinet. Most of the bullets bounced off Momo’s metallic back, shattering or piercing everything in their path. One bullet came in at a more oblique trajectory, ricocheted off Momo’s body, and found its way into the only body it could wound.

The Creator pressed a hand against his neck and fell to the floor. The stray bullet had severed his carotid artery. He needed to speak—but choked on the first attempt. Through the gushing blood he said he was sorry. He hadn’t given them legs just to make their bodies whole. He was very sorry, but Momo and Nini must not be taken by the man outside the door.

“Now that they know about— they will use you. For *eviz*. The world—the world is on the verge of great changes. The technology will— will—the wars—the greed—I can’t— They have no interest in— *good* side. We cannot let them build— *others*—”

The Creator choked out his last words and died.

The big window shattered and men dressed in black came through it with guns at the ready. They wore hoods with a single hole to allow them to see. One man lowered his weapon and tried to push away the cabinet that was blocking the door. Only when two other men came to help could he move it. He gave the all clear for his boss to enter.

The doorknob was blown away by a shot fired from the outside. More hooded men rushed in, led by a single man who wore no hood. A diagonal scar ran down his face, from his grey hairline—through his right eye, covered by a monocle—all the way to his chin. He considered the engineer as if his death were a minor inconvenience.

Momo stayed as still as a metal sculpture, calculating the steps necessary to take down all the hooded men. Nini wasn’t complete yet—her internal tubes were still exposed. If any of them were hit by a bullet Momo wouldn’t know how to repair it. He faced the man with the monocle.

The hooded men instinctively pointed their weapons at him.

“Why?” asked Momo.

The man’s monocle showed a gleam of real surprise. He allowed himself a wry smile.

“You can speak!”

“It is a common trait of beings that possess complex reasoning,” said Momo.

The man smiled again.

“But you are not a *being*,” he said. “You are a *thing*. A machine.”

“We all are what we are.”

The man persisted in smiling, although its real purpose was to hide his awe before the idea that was possible to build a machine capable of showing a semblance of human intellect.

“From now on,” he said, “you will be whatever *wewant* you to be.”

A disturbing sound of metal scraping filled the laboratory as Momo clenched his fists.

“The Creator made me what I am. No one will make me what I’m not.”

The man abandoned his smile. He raised his weapon and pointed it to the automaton’s chest.

“This gun is like you,” he said. “A wonder of human ingenuity. It is capable of shooting six bullets before there is a need to reload it. Its inventor is one of *us*. These are the first prototypes, sent from the other side of the Atlantic

specifically for this purpose. Do you know what the Atlantic is?"

The man pointed the gun towards the window.

"I know many things," said Momo. "No matter the number of bullets inside that gun I *know* none can inflict damage upon me."

The eyebrow above the monocle rose and the man pondered that for a moment. He shot the automaton in the head.

The bullet bounced off and disappeared into one of the wooden joists supporting the roof.

"It looks like you're really a tough son of a gun," agreed the man. "On the *outside*."

Momo followed the man's movement as he pointed the gun at Nini. Her metal coat could handle the shots but the exposed internal tubes could not.

"Why?" insisted Momo.

"I suppose I didn't really give you an answer, did I? Because we are human. It is in our nature to build things in order to destroy other things. Everything is built to be brought down. And now, big fellow, it is *you* that we have to bring down."

"You will need a bigger gun," said Momo.

"A machine with a sense of humor," said the man with irony. "The world is changing indeed."

If Momo had been human he would have trembled when the shot fired without warning. The bullet grazed Nini's torso dangerously close to the joint where the internal tubes were still showing, but deliberately missed.

"You have nothing to gain by destroying us," said Momo.

"My intention is far from it," said the man. "But some damage is *acceptable*. I only need one of you completely functional. And you, big fellow, seem perfectly functional."

"If she is destroyed not a single body will leave here functional," said Momo. "Artificial or *human*."

The man almost felt like giving the automaton a friendly pat on the metallic shoulder and telling him he was a real son of a gun.

"*She* will not be destroyed," he said. "If you cooperate. I need the schematic for your structure. Where is it?"

Momo calculated how many bullets were left inside all those guns. He wouldn't be able to neutralize them all and at the same time to prevent a bullet from doing irreparable damage to Nini.

"Inside the safe," said Momo. "I don't know the combination."

"That isn't a problem for *you*, big fellow."

Momo could feel the man's smile reflecting in the lenses of his eyes. He turned towards the wall. Every step he took made the floorboards creak. He stopped in front of a picture depicting a copy of the Vitruvian Man. He pierced the picture with his hands and pulled the safe from the wall. He held it with one arm and dented the door with a single punch that made the floorboards quake. He stuck his fingers through a crack, ripped the door off, and threw the safe at the man's feet. A few boards cracked.

The man squatted and retrieved the safe's contents—a thick book and a journal. He ran through a few pages of the journal without interest—nothing but tedious reports of how wonderful it was to be a father. He threw it through the broken window. Then he flipped through a few pages of the thick book. It was all there—diagrams, formulas, and notes on procedures. The man walked around the laboratory, turning more pages.

Momo followed every step that brought the man closer to Nini.

The man closed the book and smiled. He pointed the gun to the tubes showing within Nini's body and pulled back the hammer. Then turned to Momo.

"Will you give me any trouble, big fellow?"

Being close to the man raised the pressure within Nini.

"Lots," she said. She broke the strap holding her left arm and reached for the gun barrel, crushing it before a bullet could pass through. She grabbed the man by his neck and lifted him off the floor like a rag doll. The hooded men surrounding Momo pointed their guns at Nini.

Momo looked Nini in the eye and she replied with a sad smile. Momo jumped up, grabbing his bent legs like a cannon ball. He hit the floorboards with a rumble of breaking wood and fell through to the floor below, taking the hooded men with him.

The laboratory was directly above one of the molding areas, and the men fell into a crucible full of molten metal,

Momo falling along with them. The temperature of the metal was close to two thousand degrees Celsius—well below the melting point at which Momo's molybdenum alloy coat would give in. He could bear the heat until Nini joined him.

The man with the monocle pulled a small gun from his sleeve and shot Nini's exposed tubing. One of the metallic tubes whistled as pressurized steam gushed out.

Nini tossed the man over a workbench and snapped the strap holding her right arm. She crushed the damaged tube—now the steam couldn't flow, but it wouldn't leak out either. Her legs were already in the right position to be fitted to her torso—it wouldn't be difficult. She broke the strap holding her waist and let the gravity do the rest. The thick washer rotated on her waist, completing the connection.

The man stood with his back against a wall to avoid falling through the hole in the floor, rubbing his sore neck.

"You can't stop the future," he said.

"Neither can you control it," said Nini.

She would take the man with her. She stepped down from the platform, but her right leg failed to respond—the damaged tube. Nini lost her balance and fell through the hole in the floor, splashing molten metal as she landed in the crucible.

Momo was still enduring the heat. If he had to, he would stand on the surface of the Sun just to wait for her.

Nini smiled at him. In the end, Momo did touch the Sun—in a sense. And she could touch Momo.

They hugged within the fire. The nickel alloy coating Nini had a melting point below two thousand degrees Celsius. Her body began to melt in Momo's arms.

Above, the man with the monocle watched them through the hole in the floor with a victorious smile. He waved the thick book in his hand.

"You can't stop the future," he repeated.

Momo had never felt hatred before. He thrust his feet against the bottom on the crucible and channeled all his strength into a jump. It wasn't enough to propel him back to the laboratory, but was enough to reach the man's leg and pull him down. Momo heard the man scream until his throat caught fire and he stopped. The book fell with them and burned as if it had never existed.

Somewhere inside the molten metal Nini's atomic heart exploded. Momo's heart joined it, amplifying the explosion, and the foundry became a hole in the ground from which a mushroom cloud lifted, lighting up the waters of Douro River and the Atlantic.

The future could wait.

About the author:

Manuel Alves is regarded by many as one of the best new Portuguese speculative fiction voices arising (the ISF Editor in Chief counts himself among those people). Manuel dislikes to talk about himself and as so, he does not have a "normal" biography. You can learn all about him by reading through his fiction, published mostly on smashwords (<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/manuelalves>) where one can read his quite humorist biography: "I'm the Master of the Universe currently taking a leave of absence.

I know all there is to know about small seemingly imperceptible things. For instance, like this one. Can you see it?"

THE
BOY
WHO
CAST
NO
SHADOW

by Thomas Olde Heuvelt

My name is Look. You've probably heard about me in the papers or on TV. I'm the boy without a shadow. You can shine spotlights at me all you like, but it won't do you any good. Physicists say I'm an evolutionary miracle. The Americans said I was a secret weapon, by the Russians that is, because they figured Al-Qaeda would be too dumb. Christians say I'm divine. Mom calls me an angel, but of the earthly variety. But I'm not. I'm just Look. I wish I knew what that meant.

It's something to do with my genes, they say, but they don't know what. Molecular structures and the effects of light, blah-blah-blah. I don't give a shit, 'cause they can't fix it anyway. You won't find shadow under my chin, armpits or ribs, no matter how you illuminate me. They say it makes me look two-dimensional. I don't know what I look like because I have no reflection. My left hip bears a scar in the shape of a question mark. I got it when the midwife dropped me as she held me up in front of the mirror. Mom told me that only a floating umbilical cord was visible and that the midwife screamed, fleeing the room. The photos of the delivery showed a lot of *aaaw* and *coochie-coochie* but no baby. The only images ever captured of me are Mom's sonograms. They use sound, not light.

"You should be proud of your genes," Mom and Dad always say. They're the founders of the Progressive Parish, a local political party that worships being different. Get-together: "We just adopted a little Filipino." "No kidding! Our son is gay." "Really? Well, ours has no shadow." Three-nil, nobody beats that. Mom does yoga and is Zen, and Dad would rather cook for the homeless than for us. Like a lot of bleeding hearts, their charity ends at home.

Until I was seven, they managed to keep me under wraps. But you don't have to be Einstein to figure it was bound to come out. One day two men in dark sunglasses snatched me from the classroom, bundled me into an armored car, and stuck a needle into my arm. When I woke up I found myself at an army base in the United States, where a team of scientists and agents spent four months examining me. The first three weeks I claimed I was from Mars and that my goal was complete world domination; then they got extremely rude and started threatening me. I lost it when I woke up one morning to find that they had sliced a piece of skin from my butt to grow a culture. I told them to go fuck themselves, but that same week I was told I was of no use to them and got reunited with my parents. To compensate for our inconvenience we were offered a feature in *National Geographic*. First my parents flipped and considered legal action, but when they discovered that the men who had kidnapped me were in fact *above* the law, and that the ensuing media hype was a goldmine for the Progressive Parish's coffers, they soon came round.

And me? I became a celebrity, thanks a bunch. On Oprah they wouldn't let me wear makeup 'cause they figured a floating, painted mask with no eyes or mouth would look too freaky on TV. Practical upshot: a completely invisible boy, which meant that everybody who wasn't actually in the studio just saw clothes moving and me picking up objects and standing behind an infrared machine to prove my existence. When Oprah asked how the scientists had treated me I responded: "I think the government has no right to experiment with my ass." That cost them three million in hush money, and still the accusations of sexual abuse came pouring in. Suckers.

One-all, you'd think. Not by a long shot. In the years that followed, our front yard was overrun by camera crews eager to catch a glimpse of me. Which is technically impossible. Twelve circuses and twenty-three freak shows, including Ripley's, offered astronomic amounts to exhibit me. I've been called a Saint 268 times and have 29,000,000 hits on *Google*, as many as Brad Pitt. Cool, Mom and Dad, being different. Until it's you who's different. Everybody knows who I am. Everybody, except me.

Splinter once said your dreams make you who you are. But I don't dream. Loads of people say this, but I really don't dream. To tell the truth, I don't even know what dreams are. The countless EEGs that I've had show that my brain performs absolutely zilch activity during REM sleep. They never found a link with my condition, but duh. I suppose that's why I have no friends, no feelings, and no imagination. I lack a goal. I lack depth. Like I care.

I guess my only wish is to find my reflection. If I have no idea what my face looks like, how will I ever know who I am? And you know how saints and celebrities go. They get pinned on a cross, and while they watch the life seeping out people piss on their shadows.



The arrival of Splinter Rozenberg changed everything.

I was fourteen by then and living a relatively quiet life. The hype had died down, as hypes do. We had moved a couple of times within our shit-hole town, and in exchange for a statement that I had *not* been abused during my stay in the US, two men in dark sunglasses were stationed in front of our house for a year, removing pilgrims and other freaks from our front yard.

Obviously all this had an effect on my school rep. I've got no friends, and because I'm tall I have a lot of nerve where others don't. They avoid me, which is exactly how I like it. Sometimes I beat up someone, not because I like it, but I'm helping an image along. And come on, it's not all that obvious, unless I'm in front of the mirror. I wear long sleeves. Only my face is a dead giveaway. With the sun on my right, I look luminous on the left. Mom tried to hide the effect with make-up, but then I look like a drag-queen, so I don't think so.

Even Jord Hendriks lets me off the hook, confining himself to trash talk. On a good day I'm 'See-Thru'. On a bad day, it's 'Zero' or just 'Freak'. He says without a reflection I don't actually exist, except that my fuck-face hasn't figured out yet.

He exaggerates, if you ask me. If I'm supposed to believe the stories I'm no oil painting, but it's not as bad as all that. Lots of artists, including my grandpa, have made impressions of what I look like. None of the drawings look alike, and none of them really suit me. The charcoal drawing on the cover of *People* I can't take seriously for starters, because it creates the illusion of shadow. Some show a boy with a broad, roughly hewn face. Mom says Grandpa's is the best likeness. But Grandpa also did a portrait of Mom that sort of makes her look like a man instead of a woman—so much for Mom's opinion.

Too bad that Jord Hendriks is such an incredible dick. The other kids are afraid of him. I think he's hot. I mean, just look at that body in the locker room before P.E., holy fuck!

Of course that's about the last thing you'd say to him, if you know what's good for you. One disorder is more than enough, trust me. Mom and Dad would love it, and that's exactly why I won't tell them. They'd drag me to lunatic parades and conferences on tolerance by the Progressive Parish, and then the whole media circus would start all over again, so no. The Internet is no good either. It's easy to click *Yes, I am 18 or over*, but chat-rooms kick me 'cause I'm supposedly too scared to show myself on webcam.

Oh, well. The thought of Jord Hendriks putting his mouth to better use and my right hand offer plenty of release for a healthy boy like me, exclamation mark smiley face.

Splinter was new in class, so I was old news. Thanks in part to his mom, Mrs. Rozenberg, who had made the unforgivable mistake of accompanying him to school the first day to explain all about his condition. I remember them standing there, side by side, Mrs. Rozenberg like she was lecturing some rugrats and Splinter staring glassy-eyed into the room. Splinter always stared at things glassy-eyed. That's because his eyes were made of glass. As was the rest of his body. It's one of those funny little accidents you get in certain gene pools. Polished, he was a perfect mirror. He had some flexibility and was able to move his limbs, but slo-mo, like Neil Armstrong on the moon. Facial expressions were a difficult story.

Mrs. Rozenberg, all flesh and blood, told us to think of him as a china cabinet, which wasn't all that far from the truth. He wasn't allowed to play games during recess or P.E. A well-aimed football would surely kill him. Jack-assing was out of the question. When we heard an old bag like her say that, we screamed with laughter. Mrs. Rozenberg was delighted, thinking she was cool. Splinter knew he was doomed.

From day one Jord Hendriks and his friends put him under siege. Paperclips, coins, biro springs, and ballpoint pens were fired at him in a game of finding out which part of the body to aim for to get the opening notes of *Man in the Mirror*. 'Your dick, okay?' Splinter said when the teacher had left the classroom. 'Will you please stop now? It's dangerous what you're doing.'

Whoops, that only made things worse. Splinter knew how fragile he was, and that paperclips and coins would probably cause no permanent damage. But accidents will happen and when Jord launched a biro that scratched his neck, he grassed on him.

Big whoops. Suspensions aren't forever. After some third-year kid acting on Jord's instructions concocted a story to lure the shop teacher out of the classroom, Jord took Splinter under his arm and put him on the workbench. Splinter screamed. Not with pain—he didn't have nerves—but to catch a teacher's attention. He didn't put up a struggle, because he knew that any wrong move would break him in two.

'I've always wanted to be a glassblower, shitbag,' Jord said, as he ignited the Bunsen burner. 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who in the land will have the crookedest dick of 'em all?'

Three or four boys formed a cordon around them to keep the softies away. The rest of the class smirked or pretended not to notice. Me? I was glad it wasn't me lying there.

Jord stopped at Splinter's left pinky. He heated the tip and squeezed it with a pair of pliers, so Splinter would never need another spoon to stir his tea. Then one of Jord's mates sounded the alarm about Splinter having a welding accident and all that. Anyone who blabbed, we were told, would suffer the same fate, glass or no glass.

I was convinced that Jord wouldn't get away with this. But he did. Feel free to dismiss it as schoolyard law. We give each other hell and we cover each other's backs—a matter of self-preservation. Bubbles of deceit and lies will burst sooner or later. But that's too easy. Time has taught me that we live in a world full of Jord Hendrikses, a world that thrives on the destruction of its rare wonders and where people live under a blanket of smog, the stench of sameness.



Why did I feel attracted to Splinter?

He was the only person in my life who understood me. He was looking for a glimmer of happiness, which no one was prepared to give him. And let's face it, how could he ever discover himself when all he saw in his skin was the outside world reflected?

"Dad says I should look for happiness within," Splinter once said to me, during one of the many afternoons in his room. "But then I'll never find it, unless I smash myself to pieces. A glass cousin of mine threw himself off the roof to see if it was true, but the chimney sweep didn't find anything of importance among the shards. So what am I supposed to do?"

"Well, you gotta break some eggs to make an omelette," I grinned, but the joke failed to disguise the sadness in my voice.

Splinter felt attracted to me because I was the only one who actually saw *him* when I looked at him and not myself. One time Mrs. Rozenberg rushed in, right before she was due at a reception. She placed Splinter in front of her, squinted into his face, tousled her hair until she was happy, and ran out again. People always looked at Splinter in an ugly way, 'cause people find themselves ugly in the mirror. Splinter took that personally. With me, it wasn't there. If I looked at him in an ugly way, he knew that I was in a rotten mood. If I laughed at him, he knew my laugh was meant for him.

During Splinter's first few months at school—between summer and Christmas—I hadn't exchanged more than five words with him, no more than with any other of my classmates to be precise. If I had to take a leak during recess I would go to the Boys room in the old part of the echoes in the hallway. To get there you had to cross the foyer by the assistant principal's office, where just before Christmas he had put up an enormous tree.

That day a voice made me jump: "Er... could you give me a hand?"

I looked around, didn't see a thing.

'Up here.'

Then I saw. It was Splinter. They'd stripped him to his boxers, sprayed him with red paint, and put him up in the tree amongst the other balls.

"Holy fuck," I said. "What happened to you?"

"Jord Hendriks," he shrugged. What else? "Worst thing is that the assistant principal has already walked by three times without noticing me."

I'd never really taken much interest in Splinter, had always thought of him as a bit of a goofball. Now, semi-naked, I got my first proper look at him. His chest rose and fell smoothly with each breath. I'd never realized that he *could* breathe. I noticed the silver garland tied around his neck like a noose, which would have strangled any other kid.

"Hey, aren't you that boy that has no shadow?" Splinter asked with that peculiar, crystal voice of his.

Lying, with all those Christmas lights, seemed pointless. "Yup, hullo."

"Cool! I saw that item on the Discovery Channel about you. I thought that theory about light-transmitting cells was totally awesome."

I didn't say a word.

"You're famous, man. I mean, everybody's talking about you. You wanna come over to my place sometime? My dad's got an ultraviolet lamp. We could do experiments."

So I did have feelings: I pitied him for his naiveté. Splinter just stared at me with those sparkling eyes and said: "Shit. You're even more fucked up than me."

I looked at him dangling up in that tree and held my tongue.

"Look, I need to take a leak," I said.

"Would you... would you mind helping me down?"

For a split second I hesitated, then grabbed a chair and pushed it towards the tree.

"Careful," Splinter said, as I clambered up on the chair and pine-needles stuck in my arms. "Drop me and I'm dead."

He wrapped his arms around my neck. Although I should have been prepared, it still gave me goosebumps. The touch of something so far out, so alien, filled me with both revulsion and curiosity. He was unnaturally cold and didn't weigh a thing. I didn't even dare grab hold of him, scared he would crack. Splinter was sensitive to my reservations and said: "That's it, I've got you. You can release me now."

So I did, and even now I come back to that moment, how casually he trusted me with his life, and without all the psychobabble I put it down to the fact that he had no choice. But in the few seconds it took me to lift him from the tree and put him on the ground, a tremor went through his glass body that made me so acutely aware of the fragility of life that it rattled me big time. That's when I understood just how precarious the things are that you take for granted. As soon as his feet touched the ground, I got my hands off him as if I'd burned myself on a hot stove.

"Wow, thanks man," he said and pulled the tinsel from his neck. "If I'd still been up there after the bell they'd have serenaded me with Christmas carols. You've spared me the humiliation."

"Don't mention it," I muttered, ill at ease. On a whim I added: "Good luck."

I was halfway down the corridor when I heard his xylophone footsteps coming after me. I turned around and saw Splinter, barefoot and with a bundle of clothes in his arms.

"I just wanted to say if there's anything I can do for you... I owe you one."

"That's okay." I pushed open the swing doors to the Boys room. Just in time I realized that I'd almost let them slam into his face. So I waited and held the doors for him. I did it grudgingly. The guy got under my skin. He'd touched a nerve with those glass fingers of his, which had upset the normal state of affairs. I didn't like it when the normal state of affairs got upset.

"Could you turn on the tap for me?" he asked with a twinkle. "I can't apply any pressure with my hands."

I did as he asked. Splinter began to wipe the red paint off his face with tissues. It sounded like rubbing your wet finger across a window. While I was washing my hands he looked curiously at the absence of my reflection in the mirror. I reckon he didn't know whether to comment. Finally he took the plunge and asked: "How do you fix your hair?"

After a moment's hesitation I answered. "My mother. And if you tell anyone I'll smash you with a baseball bat. There's a reason I keep it short. Normally I wear a beanie. But fucking rules in this school..."

"I hear you," he said. "Wanna hear something? My arms aren't flexible enough to reach everywhere. I'm fourteen for fuck's sake and my mom's still washing me."

"Even your..."

He shrugged, looking embarrassed.

We stared at each other sheepishly and then burst out laughing. Right then we'd become friends. At our age you think the depths of your own hell are the darkest; Splinter proved it could be worse. A little self-reflection ain't a bad thing. Splinter was all reflection. Seeing him wash his face in front of the mirror made my head spin. A mirror in a mirror in a mirror, an optical illusion of infinity. That's friendship. You give and you take, even if you have nothing to give.



We spent our time talking and watching TV in our rooms, or fishing on the canal. In many ways Splinter and I were completely different. He had ideas, he had interests, he had dreams—everything I lacked. His greatest interest was the sea and his greatest dream was to become a captain in the navy. That’s how I got to know Splinter: unworldly, naïve, full of ideas and fantasies.

Sad thing was that we both knew his dreams would never come true. I often wondered how he could maintain such a positive attitude with his condition. Death was just a door away for a nine-pound boy made of mirrored glass. He was born a victim. “And I was a Caesarean,” he told me. “Imagine the bloodbath if there’d been contractions. I would have exploded in my mom’s birth canal.”

He often speculated about his death, no matter how much it brought me down. “It’s a miracle that I’ve even made it this far,” he said. “I mean, my cousin tripped on the doorstep when he was eleven and fell to pieces, and another was caught by the wind when she was four and splattered against a tree. I’m the longest-living mirror boy in the family. The chances of me graduating are slim to none.”

“No surprise, with your choice of friends,” I said. “I heard that Jord’s planning to dump you in the bottle bank.”

He gave me the glass finger and I pretended to whack him; you know how these things go.

Mr. and Mrs. Rozenberg were overly protective. They wouldn’t allow Splinter to do anything besides reading and fishing. His mom made him go about in hand-knitted clothes: triple jumpers, beanies, scarves, mittens, anything soft. His dad insisted on taking him to school every morning, even after a sleepover at my place. It really bummed him out.

“It’s okay, Dad, we can walk. The way Mom’s wrapped me up I’d survive the Niagara Falls.”

But Mr. Rozenberg wouldn’t budge. “Far too dangerous,” he said. “Especially with that road by the tennis courts. You know what happened to Uncle Henk.”

“I’m not allowed to do anything,” Splinter said when the car pulled up outside school, his shoulders sagging. “And he’s right, I *can’t* do anything. A little arm wrestling will crush me. I’ll never be able to join the navy.”

Jack-assing was out of the question, quoting Ma Rozenberg. I thought she spoiled the fun. I mean, Splinter wanted so much. Why deny such a one the rare moments that make life worth living?

So when I spent the afternoon racing along a country lane in a go-kart borrowed off our neighbors (they were on holiday and technically speaking hadn’t given me permission, but hadn’t refused it either) and he timidly asked if he could have a go, I couldn’t refuse. I ran home to fetch rope and cushions. I tied his hands to the wheel, his legs to the frame and his torso to the seat, so that he couldn’t blow it by tumbling out. Everywhere his body touched the kart I stuffed cushions.

Splinter stepped on it and off he went. His body jerked about like a dummy. For an instant I was afraid I’d made the biggest mistake of my life, that he’d be catapulted out of the kart and shatter into a million crystals. But it held. His screaming laughter rang out above the throbbing petrol engine and over the fields.

It was a moment I’ll never forget. Splinter was ecstatic, and you know what? I got tears in my eyes. Call me a sissy, I don’t give a fuck. For the first time in my life I felt something other than indifference going through my veins. It felt like I’d done something that mattered. I might not know what I looked like, but I’d given somebody a spark of happiness. Whenever I think back to Splinter, that’s how I see him: tied up in his kart and covered in cushions, his face illuminated by a watery spring sun reflecting off the visor of his helmet. He was one of a kind, trust me. He even had it in him to blow up the sun.

Finally, he got back, and I was applauding like a madman. “Wow Schumacher! You were fucking faster than the speed of light, you freak!”

When I yanked the helmet off his head he threw me a dazed smile. “That was by far the sickest thing I’ve ever done.”

“You did it!”

“Yeah, only it didn’t all go right,” he said calmly.

“What’s that, man, you?”

“Seriously. Have a look at my neck; something’s not quite right.”

Suddenly I got scared. I did as he asked. Initially everything seemed fine; then I saw. Just above his collarbone and the neck of his T-shirt. A tiny star.

“Fuck.”

"It was a pebble, I think. I heard it bounce off." He frowned and turned his head from left to right as if he'd pulled a muscle. Then we heard a crack. His eyes widened and my heart sank. The star had gotten bigger and small veins had appeared in the glass.

"Freeze," I said as I began to untie the ropes with trembling hands. I choked back panic, cursing myself. What was I thinking? I should never have let him have a go on that thing. But Splinter disagreed and took my hand, forcing me to look him in the eyes. He wouldn't have missed it for the world, he said, and would be eternally grateful, no matter what.

I rushed him to the ER. The attending doctor didn't know glass, so after a phone call he summoned us to his car. I thought he was taking us to the Amphibia hospital. Instead we pulled up in front of Auto Glass.

"Sweet Jesus on a stick," the mechanic said at the sight of Splinter. "We've had someone come in with a glass mannequin before, but we turned them away."

The operation was done in no time, although I was shitting bricks as I watched the mechanic's rough hands seal the star-shaped crack. He polished Splinter's neck with something that sounded like a dentist's drill. The man did a first rate job: it didn't leave a trace. When the mechanic broached the issue of money, Splinter explained that he wasn't entitled to any healthcare insurance and that his parents would kill him if they found out what happened.

The mechanic shrugged and said: "Oh, bloody hell." In fact I believe he was genuinely touched. "You spend your whole life waiting for a chance to resuscitate someone and save a life. And then you come along."

"Don't even think about heart massage," Splinter said.

That evening we ate at my place. "The two of you are having a little too much fun for my taste," Mom said as she was serving dinner. Splinter and I looked at each other and bit our lips. He'd promised to carve me up if I told anyone where he'd been repaired; that indignity was just *too* great. We'd been plagued by erratic laughter all afternoon. My parents were cool with it, just glad that I wasn't a complete sociopath.

"Say, Splinter," Dad said, "what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"A mirror," I said before Splinter had a chance to open his mouth.

"Look!" Mom said. "You don't joke about that. You ought to know."

"Oh, but he's right you know," Splinter said innocently. "Sounds cool to me, hanging in a department store, nicely framed. Any other job and I'll break anyway."

I sang: "Auto Glass repair, Auto Glass replace..."

We roared with laughter. Mom shook her head and said: "Hopeless. Sometimes I just don't get the two of you."

No, she didn't get the two of us. The reason is simple, and it's something that parents just don't understand. When Jord Hendriks & Co. take the piss out of you, it's a drag. When the world treats you like a sickness, it's embarrassing. But when your parents treat you like you're made of glass, it leaves permanent damage. Splinter and I needed each other. We needed to take the piss out of each other, to have a good laugh at ourselves. If you weren't laughing, you'd be crying.



That spring Splinter got miserable. I don't know if the go-kart incident had anything to do with it or whether it was just puberty. The sudden change caught me off-guard. He'd always been upbeat. Overnight, his eyes glazed over. Sometimes I worried that he might follow in the footsteps of that cousin of his, the one who'd gone looking for happiness within.

"What's the point of it all?" he said as we were lying by the canal; me with my hands locked behind my head, my elbows up in the air; him with his arms half-stretched alongside his body as he couldn't bend them any further. I knew what Splinter meant: everything. The murmuring water, the dragonflies, the brilliant sunshine. He meant life.

We'd played Ghost Ship for a while; me the ghost, he the ship. It was a game we'd sometimes do. Splinter would undress and lie down in the canal. In the reflecting water he was virtually invisible. I would stand beside an old fisherman who'd nodded off and stare into space. Splinter would then tug at the bait to wake them. First they would see their reflection in the water, then me, then *not* me in the water. They thought they were seeing a ghost.

Next thing I would point like a zombie at the canal, as Splinter rose from the water and hauled himself ashore, groaning *The Grudge*-style.

They always run off screaming. It's *theway* to get hold of rods and bait.

"My grandpa took me to the sea once," Splinter said. "My parents went nuts when they found out. I never stayed at grandpa's again. But you know, I had the time of my life. That's what they didn't get. We stayed until after sunset to see the sun sink into the sea. Did you know that the sun actually sinks into the sea? I'd kill to see that again."

"Then I know where you ought to go," I said. "Mom and Dad sometimes rent this cottage in Portugal. There's no place where the sun sinks into the sea like over there."

Splinter didn't say a thing; didn't have to. We were both thinking the same thing. He'd never get to see that sun and that sea. Sure, there was danger in any wobbly cobblestone, smashed tennis ball, or sweeping branch. But what about his parents? If you ask me, they were the biggest threat of all. The uneasy atmosphere was so strong you could taste it. You could hear the awkward silences. Mr. and Mrs. Rozenberg were blind to their son's dreams. In their effort to protect him, they neglected his happiness. I understood that they were afraid to say good-bye, but fearing his death they forgot to let him live.

That's when I got the idea.

"You wanna chase that sun?"

He sat up and looked at me. "To... Portugal, you mean?"

I grinned. "You and me, buddy."

"My parents..."

"Fuck your parents. Wanna see that sun or what?"

"As in... running away?"

"Nah, we'll be back."

His eyes began to shine. "Can we go out to sea if we do?"

"Whatever you like, man. It's your party!"

Splinter laughed. "Fuck. Let's do it."

More was said, but that was the gist of it. I drew up the plan: "Tomorrow. Go to school, but skip class and wait behind the bike shed so your parents won't know you're gone until late afternoon. It will give us a head start. Leave your books at home and take some clothes. I'll take care of the rest."

He held out his hand. I squeezed it and his knuckles clinked. The only thing that made my smile waver was the touch of his maimed teaspoon finger.



Jord Hendriks entered the Boys room just before the first period bell. The door to the rear cubicle was outside the range of the mirror where he began fixing his hair, and he didn't notice that it was ajar. I had taken off my t-shirt so the reflection wouldn't betray me and tiptoed up to him until I was close enough to smell his shampoo. Jord was bleating some rap crap, with no rhythm or melody, ruffling his hair. Without a moment's hesitation I grabbed his left pinky and planted my other hand firmly on his hip—just for fun.

Jord actually squealed; it was almost comical. He jerked and knocked the pot of gel to the floor. "Jesus!"

He turned round, red as a brick. I'd scared the shit out of the poor kid. His eyes fell on my half-naked body and he said: "What the fuck are you doing, faggot?"

"Looks crystal clear to me," I said. "Holding up a mirror." And with that I neatly broke his pinky. The crack sounded satisfying, but no more satisfying than the touch of his body against my skin had been.



We boarded the train in Roosendaal and changed in Antwerp for the high-speed Thalys to Paris. Flying wasn't an option, because then we could be traced. Out on the streets, we had nothing to fear. I was world-famous, but nobody knew what I looked like. Folks like Splinter were rare, but hey, looks don't kill. We paid for the train tickets with the Progressive Parish's credit card, which I'd swiped from Dad's wallet. I also withdrew the maximum amount with his

debit card, before he could find out and have everything blocked.

As soon as we crossed the border, Splinter's reservations vanished. He gazed out the window for hours with a running commentary on everything he saw: grain silos, different colored number plates, how the cows looked different in France. We played cards for fifty euro notes.

At the Gare du Nord we ate slices of pizza and considered what was up next. Splinter said he wanted to go all the way. He wanted adventure. He dumped his woollen jumper in the trash and swapped it for a t-shirt from a kiosk that read: *Live Dangerously*.

It was late when we hitched a ride. A scrawny Frenchman with dark glasses and an express delivery van stopped for us. Through the open window he said: "Where to, boys? You name it and I'll take you."

"How about Spain?"

He promised to take us to the border. Cities gave way to sloping fields. I wondered if my parents had found the note on my pillow. *Don't worry, I'll be back*. When you tell your parents "don't worry" it's a sure thing that they will, but luckily mine were fairly level-headed. No doubt Splinter's parents would have warned the police the minute he hadn't come home from school anyway, and my parents can put two and two together.

For the first time it dawned on me that I hadn't just done it for Splinter. Running away, I mean. It was an adventure, but it was also something bigger than that. Splinter was looking for the sea. I was looking for myself.

When I woke up we were north of Bordeaux and it was dark.

We spent the night by the side of a gravel path, not far from the motorway. Wild blueberries grew along the shoulder. Splinter was exhausted and fell asleep in the truck; the delivery man and I sat outside watching shadows drift across the farmland. He talked about his job, about his wife and kids, and then said that he wanted to blow me for his pains. I let him do it. I leaned on my elbows, my head thrown back. I watched the world upside-down and in this position I listened to the crickets until I came. It wasn't how I'd always imagined it would be. It meant more. It meant nothing.

When he sat up I told him that it was my turn. First he didn't get my drift, and when he did, he protested. But my fingers had already found his belt buckle and soon my lips pressed against the warmth within.

"Er... hang on... what you're doing now can get me in big trouble."

I looked at him like he was nuts and said: "What *you* were doing earlier can get you in big trouble too."

The delivery man groaned and grunted and tugged at my hair when he came, which hurt. His sperm tasted like tears and made me sad, but I still swallowed. And all this time the driver never mentioned the fact that the moonlight fell right through me. Perhaps he hadn't even noticed.

His hands trembled as he smoked a cigarette and let me have a drag too. It was disgusting. Then he gathered up his stuff, pulled a drowsy Splinter out of the truck, and sped off. We had to walk all the way back to the motorway.

Three days later we reached our destination in Portugal. The second night we'd spent in a haystack and the third outdoors near a gas station. The truck driver had warned us about scorpions, but we didn't see any.

Our destination was called Espelho de Agua, because legend has it that the sun and the sea are at their most beautiful there. At least one person knew the legend, and that was me. At least one person knew it was true. Espelho de Agua is on the west coast of the Algarve, and it smells of almond blossom, eucalyptus, and thyme, a heady scent that fills the air and reminded me of the times I'd been there with my parents. It's a shame Splinter had no sense of smell. It adds so much.

We bought figs and freshly baked *bolinhas* at the market and wandered the village streets for a while. An old glassblower who was smoking in front of his shop fell to his knees and cried at the sight of Splinter. I smiled. That's what the reunion of Geppetto and Pinocchio must have been like. When the man touched his glass face and arms, Splinter glittered with pride. The glassblower spoke just as much English as we did Portuguese—that is, not a word—but he insisted on showing us round his workshop. It was so jam-packed with all manner of glass objects that I felt like a stilt-walker in a room full of air bubbles.

Geppetto found it hard to let go and watched us till we got to the end of the street. He had caught a glimpse of a miracle. Tomorrow he'd think that it had all been a dream.



You didn't see the sea until the very end.

The narrow path wound through a sweltering pine forest, and then all of a sudden it was there, calm and infallible and bright green, until it blurred and merged with the horizon. At first Splinter smiled, so delighted that I thought his face would split in two. Then his smile faded, leaving only awe. I saw the sun's glare on the water reflected in his face.

"It's bigger," he said, as simple as that. "Bigger."

We found a spot on the orange cliffs, far from the children playing football and sunbathing tourists. I fashioned our clothes and backpacks into a little bed on the barren soil. Then I stripped naked and lay down. After a moment's hesitation Splinter followed my lead. Not because of the heat or to get a tan, but because he could. Given the chance to be free, you take it. Splinter was here now, shrugging off the last constraints of home.

I tan quickly. Whichever way I lie, the front and back always tan simultaneously.

"I read somewhere there's birds flying more than 6,000 miles non-stop across the Pacific," Splinter said, staring at the horizon. "From Alaska all the way down to the warm islands at the equator. They don't take time to rest, eat or drink. They just fly on, for nine days. They know exactly where they're going. I bet I could do the same. In a rowing boat, I mean, if I hit the right current. No one can go without food as long as me. Besides, I know the way. I know all about the sea."

"Yeah, and half-way there you'll be swallowed by a blue whale," I said without opening my eyes.

"I always wondered why Geppetto was looking for Pinocchio at sea, when the whale gobbled him up," Splinter said. "It doesn't make sense. The movie never explains."

"Send a complaint to Disney. Oh, and apply for a role in the sequel while you're at it."

Somewhere, a seagull cried.

Splinter rose on one elbow and said: "That glassblower was the first person in the world who ever thought I was beautiful."

"That's because he was senile."

"Fuck off. Seriously. I've never kissed anyone, you know. How can a girl ever like me?"

"Try a glassblower," I joked.

But Splinter was serious. "Look at me. Nobody finds me attractive. And I can't blame them."

I glanced over his body and shrugged. His body was all right, nothing special. There was only one problem. It was made of glass.

"Surely there must be some glass girls?"

"Have you seen any? Besides, I'm not hot for glass. I fancy skin."

A grin appeared on my face. "You know, I've always wondered. Can you...?" I simulated jerking off with my hand.

"Oh sure," Splinter said promptly. "I'm made of glass, but I'm anatomically correct. Good thing I can't exert much pressure, so there's no need to worry about squeezing something."

I roared with laughter and rolled onto my stomach. Something stirred; fucking puberty. I thought about asking what he squirted, cum or molten glass. I didn't—some things are better left to the imagination.

Early evening a breeze picked up, drying the sweat on my body. That was nice. We played blackjack waiting for the sun to set. Splinter kicked my ass. I had just dealt a new hand when a gust of wind picked up the cards and blew them off the cliffs. Without a word, we watched hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades flutter to the west. The low sun transformed the ocean into a bright, orange mirror.

"You see that?" Splinter whispered. "That's where we're sailing tomorrow. I want to touch the sun as it sinks into the sea."

I could have said something, but didn't need to. There, where the playing cards were drifting away, was Splinter's heart. You could see the magic lure of the sea reflected on his body. I think that moment I somehow knew that I wouldn't be taking Splinter back home. Perhaps I'd known it all along. But then why did I keep thinking: *what about me?*

"See how it mirrors? That's where I belong. There everything is just like me. There I won't have to worry about what I can and can't do."

"Surely it's not that bad," I suggested, but I knew better.

"Everybody looks at me like I'm some kind of freak," Splinter said. "I'll never have a girlfriend. It's too dangerous. I

don't even know what it feels like to be touched. A simple hug is too much, even for my parents. All they do is look at me. They never touch, afraid of breaking something."

I didn't say a word, wished he hadn't told me that.

"I dream about it a lot, you know. I mean, about what it's like to undress a girl. To have my arms around her and feel her skin against mine."

"But I thought you didn't feel anything, technically speaking?"

"I may not have nerves, I do have feelings," Splinter said. He went quiet. "Maybe... no. Maybe I just want to know what it's like to be incredibly close to someone."

Then I did something that I had never thought of before. I did it on the spur of the moment, and maybe I wouldn't have done it if I *had* given it some thought, but it was all I could do right then. I turned towards him and wrapped my arm around his waist. I pulled him towards me. He gasped but didn't stop me when I rolled over on my back and carefully lifted him on top. The gap between our bodies closed. Splinter's eyes widened, orange crystals in the setting sun. I don't know if I'll ever be able to evoke the sensation of that glass body against mine. What struck me most was how infinitely fragile it felt.

My hands were on his back.

Splinter's fingers were on my shoulders.

He was incredibly close.

"I didn't realize..."

"If you tell anyone I'll smash you to pieces."

He grinned and said: "Faggot."

I saw the ground where we lay reflected in his face, not me. But when I breathed out his lips misted up, proof of my existence.

While behind us the miracle of Espelho de Agua unfolded, he kissed me. Splinter was the second person to discover the legend was true. The legend of the sun and the sea. Our tongues found each other while my hands caressed his gleaming back, and when our teeth touched it sounded as the tinkling of a wine glass. Splinter cried, warm tears of molten glass that rolled down my cheeks. After they solidified I plucked them off. I still have them, cones of mirrored glass. I'm glad they're tears of happiness, not of sorrow. I keep them as mementos.

And so the sun sank into the sea.

I can't remember exactly how it happened. What I do recall is that we were both excited and that I felt his heart beat like mad in his chest. It pounded like a pestle in a glass mortar. Perhaps it pounded so hard that it split his back—I like to pretend it did. But I think I just held him too tight. My only consolation is that I can say in all honesty that I killed him with love, not anything else.

We just lay there, staring at each other in shock while the crack faded in our ears. It had sounded like a football smashing into safety glass: it didn't shatter, but formed a spider's web. A dent. I felt his back. It began on his shoulder blades and ran along the muscles of his spine all the way down to the small of his back.

"Oops," Splinter said.

I carefully slid him off me. When I set eyes on the damage my gut tightened into a knot.

"No," I said. "Fuck, no, no, no!"

I guess I panicked. I put my fingers on his back, withdrew them, ran my hands through my hair. Worst thing was that the spider's web *moved*, up and down to the rhythm of his breathing. I could see the chunks of glass chafing together.

"How bad is it?" Splinter asked calmly. How could he be so calm? I jumped to my feet, told him to stay where he was, not to move, that I would go and get the glassblower, that I would be back in a flash. The more I said, the less sense I made.

Splinter grabbed my wrist. "There's no point."

I was stunned. "What the fuck, there's no point?" But I knew and tears welled up.

"There's nothing I don't know about glass, Look. If the damage is any bigger than a large coin, replacement is the only option. And replacement is no option for me."

"Of course it is, he could blow another layer on top of it, fuck if I know!"

I said more, a lot more, but what I said was blubbered out by my sobbing. Splinter tried to get up. A square of

glass, less than half an inch across, fell in. We both heard it clink as it bounced off glass organs and slid down the hollow of his leg. There was no doubt about it. Splinter was damaged beyond repair and any movement would make it worse. He would break in two. Maybe he had twenty-four hours to live. Maybe less.

"It was bound to happen. Look," he said, "you think I don't know that? It's not your fault. It could have happened anytime."

But that's not how it felt, not to me; it was my fault and tears poured down my cheeks. Splinter draped his glass arms around me and held me in a clumsy embrace while I burrowed my face in his neck.

"It's okay," he comforted. "I found out. It doesn't matter when you die. What matters is that you live before you do."

"I'm so sorry," I whispered, inconsolable. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to stay here with me tonight. I'd just like to be incredibly close for a bit longer."

So we lay down and I held him in my arms as the last light faded in the west. I cried continuously, repeating over and how sorry I was. Splinter said I wasn't to blame, that for the first time in his life he'd been genuinely happy. My eyes got all swollen and sticky and sore. In the end I guess I cried myself to sleep, a restless sleep, full of dreams I couldn't remember. Did I say dreams? Yeah. I dreamt. Sometime in the middle of the night I woke up because Splinter blew his cooling breath on my eyelids. I think he sensed I was having nightmares.



When I woke up again it was getting light.

I jumped up. Splinter was gone. I looked around, called out his name, got no response. His things were still there, though. I scanned the beach below and was alarmed to see the tide coming in. Maybe I was afraid that he'd jumped, that somewhere down there I'd discover a heap of shards, but I didn't see anything. I called his name again and then I heard him.

He staggered out of the forest, pulling a battered wooden cart covered with a ragged old blanket. I was shocked to see the state he was in. His skin had lost its lustre, was no longer reflective. He was worn out. No, dying.

"I did it," he croaked. "If I walk very stiffly, hardly anything breaks off, and the glassblower put some bandage on my back. Now I'll hold a bit longer."

But when he took another step I heard the splinters rattling in the hollows of his feet. I rushed to his aid and took the cart from him. When I lifted the blanket, I saw it held a glass fishing boat, just big enough to fit it. I looked at Splinter.

"I'm finished, Look. I get sicker all the time. I wanna see if I can pull it off. I've got all day to row to the horizon. I wanna see if I can touch the sun when it sinks into the sea tonight."

voice had given out. Finally I managed to utter a single word. It was the only time I've ever begged someone.

"Please," I said.

"But I'm the one to say please," Splinter smiled. "I need you. To push me off."

What went through my mind as I pulled him in the cart, over that narrow path winding down to the beach? About a million voices in my head were telling me to turn around, yelling that it wasn't fair and why was this happening to me? But I buried it all inside, deep down where nobody could ever reach.

The sun wasn't up yet, and save for a lone jogger it was quiet on the beach. Splinter showed me a video camera wrapped up in the blanket. "Give that to my parents. It has a message. For you too."

Next I put him in the glass fishing boat and pulled him across the tide line. I was up to my waist in the water. The sea was smooth here, slick and oily, like a mirror. The boat was very well crafted, the work of an artist. Geppetto had even fitted it with glass oars.

I held him in my arms for a long time. Then I let go, I let him go. He took the oars and started rowing, slowly and with concentration, careful not to break his back. He looked back once. The first few rays of sunshine cast a faint glow on his body, and his lips formed a single word. That word was *thanks*.

I waded back to the beach and watched him disappear, saw him grow smaller, a glittering speck on a glittering ocean. Like this, I stared for hours. The beach filled with day-trippers. People squabbled over trivialities, children cried over nothing. I felt drained. Eventually I clambered back up the cliffs. When I reached our stuff, I thought I

caught a few more glimpses of the boat, but it was probably just a trick of light. Still, I didn't leave.

I wanted to see if he'd pull it off.

I wanted to see if he could touch the sun.



I was detained at Faro Airport. Not because they recognized me from some description, but because the X-rays at security fell right through me. Descriptions don't come any better than that. They questioned me in a small holding cell. I wobbled in my chair, couldn't find a comfortable position. I was pissed off because I missed my flight, which had cost me four hundred euros last-minute. The Portuguese official was pissed off because he had a lousy job. After he'd been in contact with the Dutch police, he asked me if I knew anything about Splinter Rozenberg's disappearance. I tried not to cry and kept my mouth shut, said I wouldn't say a word until I'd spoken to his parents. At that, he got all worked up and banged both fists on the table.

"Talk to me, you glass-eyed monkey!" he yelled in broken English.

I flew off the handle: "You don't know shit about glass."

"Did he die?"

"No," I said. "He lived."

They must have searched my luggage, but they didn't find the tape or the glass cones. I'd wrapped them in something soft and hid them in a dark place; you guess where. And so I was escorted back to the Netherlands and reunited with my parents.

A lot more happened, none of which is really relevant. What is relevant is that watching Splinter's video message made Mr. and Mrs. Rozenberg realize that his dream had come true. Splinter told them not to be sad for him. I saw very little of it. Tears blurred my vision when I heard his voice. I thought about how I'd sat there on the beach that long afternoon, plagued by doubts about whether I'd done the right thing to let him go. Whether I should have joined him. But I also remembered how the sun had finally set, the ocean a brilliant mirror of orange light. Then I'd known. You make your final journey alone.

Afterwards Mr. and Mrs. Rozenberg came to me and asked: "Did he do it? Was he happy, in the end?"

"Yes," I said. "He touched the sun."

I wish there were more, that I could give you a happier ending. But there isn't one. Who am I? My name is Look.


Somewhere in Portugal, scanning the waves with his binoculars each night, there's an old glassblower. And every so often, I believe, he spies a blue whale.

About the author:

Thomas Olde Heuvelt was born in the Netherlands in 1983. He is the much praised Dutch author of four novels and many stories of the fantastic. His work contains elements of magic realism, fantasy, horror, and humour, and he is well known in Holland for evoking strong emotional responses in readers, whether it be laughter, tears, or terrible outbursts of violence. BBC Radio called him "One of Europe's foremost talents in fantastic literature"(while failing to pronounce his last name).

His story "The Boy Who Cast No Shadow" won the prestigious Paul Harland Award for best Dutch story of the Fantastic in 2010, was a Hugo finalist, and was a nominee for the international SFFT-Awards, receiving an honorable mention. Olde Heuvelt says he wrote the story in a four-day rush, between two chapters of a novel that was giving him uncontrollable screaming fits at the time. "To me," he says, "it's a story about being different and coming to terms with the fact that that ain't such a bad thing. With this story I humbly paid homage to Joe Hill's Pop Art, which I think is the best short story of the 21st Century."

**NON
FICTION**



SOCIAL SCIENCE FICTION

by Hunter Liguore

Science Fiction has a long history, dating back (at least) to the early 1800s with the work of Mary Shelley (earlier according to some researchers). Most stories deal in some way with technology, or with future advances in that technology. It's not until the 1920s that a new branch of science fiction is born that introduces a *social* element into the mix, and seeks to warn contemporary society of current dangers, while disguising them in a future dystopia and thus social science fiction was born.

So when we talk about social science fiction, we're discussing fiction that takes place in the future, while addressing the social issues affecting contemporary society. It is fiction that tells contemporary society what the future might look like if changes aren't made.

When Did Social Science Fiction Begin?

Before writers sought to show readers negative version of the future, there was a trend in which utopian fiction writers wrote books illustrating perfect societies. In a completely opposite way, utopian fiction suggested: this is what a perfect society looks like, and here's how to achieve it. Famous utopian works include Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (England), Frances Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (England), Charlotte Perkins-Gilman's *Herland* (United States), Étienne Cabet's *Travels in Icaria* (France), and N. G. Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?* (Russia).

There are several in-between books—works that are satirical in nature, but aren't quite utopian or dystopian. These include Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*. The latter title is an acronym for *Nowhere*, communicating the notion that a perfect society cannot be found. But even in utopian fiction, there is an element of presenting society as imperfect, while the writer attempts to point the way to a better system.

While the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw plenty of utopias and satirical renditions of the world, it wasn't until the 1920s that social science fiction really made a clear mark. Prior to this, at the turn of the century, catastrophe fiction made a splash with books that warned of the doom for the human race in books like H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898), *The Time Machine* (1895), and *The World set Free* (1914).

During the 1920s, although influenced by catastrophe fiction, social science fiction writers narrowed the focus; no longer concerned with the world at large, they turned to problems affecting the human condition right in their own cities. At the time factories were pumping out cars and a variety of household products. Concern that humans were becoming unfeeling or *mechanized* grew. Writers abandoned the notion of utopia, instead turning to its opposite, which seemed more realistic in the wake of a failing society.

The two most important books to arrive during the 1920s are *R. U. R.* by Czech writer Karel Čapek and *We* by Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin.

From *R. U. R.* or *Rossum's Universal Robots*, we get the introduction of the word robot or *robotat*, a Czech word meaning *to work*. The story (written as a play) involves the first instance of a world takeover by robots and warns, in the wake of dehumanizing factory work, what humans could become if something didn't change. The robots perform the everyday tasks of people, who in turn become lazy and unconcerned with life. Čapek, like Zamyatin a few years later, rails against Taylorism, a system of workflows and labor created by Frederick Winslow Taylor. Taylor's ideas, if left unchecked, might progress to a point where humans became machines. (During the 1930s Charlie Chaplin reproduced the image of the robotic factory worker in his film *Modern Times*, a direct response to Fordism, which evolved out of Taylorism.)

Zamyatin, *We*, and Russia

The publishing history of *We* reflects the sentiment of the times the author lived in. Zamyatin wrote *We* in 1920, at the height of the Bolshevik Revolution. While his manuscript was announced several times, it was never published as it was believed to be too dangerous to issue. Bootleg copies were distributed in secret. In fact, *We* was never published in Zamyatin's lifetime. During the 1920s-30s, all of Zamyatin's works were pulled from libraries, and with Stalin's consent he emigrated to Paris in 1931. After failing to produce a historical text on Russia, he died in 1937. *We* was first considered for publication in 1952 by Chekhov House Publishers. In 1988 it was finally published in his homeland.

What Was so Dangerous About *We*?

Zamyatin believed that the future could be calculated, and the next revolution could be out-guessed. This premise is fundamental of understanding *We*. One possible influence on this prophetic attitude can be found in H. G. Wells, the English novelist, whose work Zamyatin was translating at the time. Wells used science as a method to predict the future. His philosophy held that if you could outline the shape of things to come, you were in some way a prophet.

Zamyatin uses some of these basic elements from Wells in *We*. Essentially, Zamyatin created a character who represented his own situation, and plight. D-503 is a man reporting on current events, who runs into trouble for being different and leads a revolution. The idea that revolution was impending is a Marxist principal, but Zamyatin's revolution was to free the people from the Soviet State, symbolized in the book by the One State. *We* is, if nothing else, Zamyatin's attempt to play prophet, much like Wells, and cast a light on things he believed were to come.

When Zamyatin created *We*, Russia was at the embryonic stages of a new ideology—the ideology of industry. At the time, the Industrial Revolution introduced the world to better and quicker means to do things. At the forefront were Henry Ford and Taylor who implemented new production standards in making cars that cut down on time, but changed the worker into a more robotic form.

Ford employed the division of labor and adapted it to the assembly of a motor vehicle; he also implemented Taylor's efficiency standards. Fordism had an profound impact on culture and society, including the workforce and workplace. As automotive production turned into an assembly line with conveyor belts and automatic welding machines, a shift in time management and labor issues ensued. The continuous flow caused by the assembly line dictated a more disciplined work environment; workers were known to speak in the "Ford whisper," that is, not moving their lips, as regulations were implemented to discourage sitting, smoking, and talking. There was also a shift from the use of skilled labor, where employees set the pace of work were costly, to unskilled labor, which made work mindless, easy to time-manage, and less costly. The images and influences of Fordism and Taylorism were incorporated into *We* and are evident in elements of the mechanized One State in *We*'s future.

Zamyatin was also influenced by the poet Alexei Gastev, who described Nikolai Aseev—a proponent of Taylorism and of time efficiency practices—as "the Ovid of engineers, miners, and metalworkers." During 1920, Gastev was the head of the Central Institute of Labor. It is believed that Zamyatin's material for the One State came directly from Gastev's experiments on Soviet workers. Orlando Figes describe's Gastev's research in *Natasha's Dance*:

"Hundreds of identically dressed trainees would be marched in columns to their benches, and orders would be given out by buzzes from machines. The workers were trained to hammer correctly — Gastev's aim, by his own admission, was to turn the worker into a sort of 'human robot' — Gastev envisaged a utopia where 'people' would be replaced by 'proletarian units' identified by ciphers such as 'A, B, C or 325, 075, 0, and so on. These automatons

would be like machines, ‘incapable of individual thought,’ and would simply obey their controller. A ‘mechanized collectivism’ would take the place of the individual personality’”

Gastev’s views would have been available to Zamyatin and he may have drawn upon them in creating *We*. Cars in the streets were evidence that Gastev’s views were manifesting. Further, it’s clear that the increasingly robotic nature of the workplace was due to the growing acceptance of Fordism and Taylorism around the world, but was also important to Lenin as he geared Soviet Russia toward mechanization. With his interpretation of Fordism and Taylorism, Zamyatin suggests that if mechanism continued, people would lose their sense of free will and their individual human spirit; individualism would be traded for mass collectivism. In writing *We*, Zamyatin attempts to cast what the future will bring for the working people in this controlled, collective state.

But there’s more. To understand the evolution of social science fiction—essentially how later writers adapted and developed the social message—we need to see where it started. We need to go deeper.

At the time that *We* was written, Russia was undergoing numerous changes with the onset of the Bolshevik Revolution. The 1920s brought about new ideas which were manifested in the form of machinism, movies, radio, and the car. Petrograd was rebuilt after its destruction in World War I, while shortages of materials and food were widespread. While the cold winters and starvation depleted the population of Petrograd from 1,217,000 to 722,000 between 1918 and 1921, the Proletarian Cultural movement called the Proletkult was busy developing ideas about god-building, tectology, and human mechanization; ultimately they set out to spread their message. Of the half million members reported in 1919, Zamyatin was one. In fact, he took the title *We* from a collection of poems and plays the group produced.

The symbolism evoked in Zamyatin’s *We* depicts the political and cultural climate of his day. He describes a society where the government has planned every aspect of a person’s life, with the sole purpose of making them happy. He also shows, in an allegorical and satirical way, what will happen to art and literature in a negative utopia, like the one in *We*, which mirrored the emerging ideology of the Bolsheviks. As writing was becoming regulated and censored, some writers, like Zamyatin, retaliated by portraying the inevitability of such censorship.

As scholar Edward Brown points out, Zamyatin was rebelling against society in general when he wrote *We*.

“Zamyatin’s rebellion is not directed against any particular version of the modern mass society. It is not directed at socialism or Communism as such but rather at the forms of regimentation which has resulted from the growth of a complex industrial civilization.”

Zamyatin’s fear was that Russian cultural life would come to an end, and yet there was no vision of a future socialist state for which he could argue. Zamyatin chose not to include the reality of famine and civil war in the backdrop to the book, but rather the culmination of ideas indicative of his time.

The main character of *We*, D-503, is an average proletarian or worker only more so—a person whom his current society was about to reject, one who would disappear under the coming changes. D-503 is a poet, an inventor, and a philosopher (all of which Zamyatin was as well). D-503 routinely praises technology and machines, not because he has been taught or brainwashed, but because he is poetic; his admission reads like satire, like something of which Gastev might have been a proponent, which Zamyatin plays with and ridicules.

Another critique of *We* is that it proposed to reveal to the public, and warn the public about, the dangers of the new Soviet government. Zamyatin was aware that conformity increased under Lenin’s rule, and depicts this through the mechanized and controlled world of the One State. He used science as the primary drive in *We*, much as Lenin and the Bolsheviks used science and technology to change society. The glass-enclosed civilization in *We* is designed to satirize N. G. Chernyshevsky’s utopian society in *What Is To Be Done?* (Lenin later wrote a treatise of his own by the same

name in an effort to define his new Russia, and in which he called for a new party type.) Zamyatin presents a glass-enclosed society that is on the brink of a scientific marvel, and at the height of dehumanization, yet the protagonist D-503 succeeds in thinking on his own, and escaping to the wall outside the city, the wilderness, a land with little human interaction. Indirectly, Zamyatin answers Lenin's (and Chernyshevsky's) question *what is to be done*.

All in all, Zamyatin's *We* set out to satire the sentiment of his day, while rejecting the ideology of the Bolsheviks. Zamyatin interpreted the growing sentiment of dehumanization and incorporated that into a dystopian world at the pinnacle of scientific mastery. While the world Zamyatin displays to the reader demonstrates the drawbacks of a controlled society, it also reveals the struggle of the human spirit to overcome them, and to persevere in the shadow of conformity and law, which is another attribute of social science fiction.

Aftermath of We

Zamyatin's work went on to influence writers for the next ninety years, right up to the present day. Many writers who give their characters numbers for names, for instance, don't realize what piece of history they're drawing upon, and simply imitate what the last writer has done. A sense of urgency fueled the author's work. Zamyatin was arrested twice and was at the forefront of censorship; he wrote knowing the consequences and fear that came with it, another thing today's writers may not actually face.

The books that *We* goes on to influence are numerous. But the two books most important to mention are Ayn Rand's *Anthem* and George Orwell's *1984*.

George Orwell's 1984

Without a doubt, George Orwell's novel *1984* is one of the primary examples of dystopian literature today. Many of Orwell's terms have become a part of everyday language—like *Big Brother* and *Newspeak*—and whether or not someone has read the book, they have a general idea of what the words mean. What they may not know is that Orwell wrote *1984* as a warning against the growing dictatorship of Stalin in Soviet Russia. He saw the role England played in combating Stalinism, as well as the growing trends of Capitalism, and he wove them together into a narrative taking place in the immediate future, a dystopia where the people of Oceania (Soviet Union) are controlled by the dictatorship of Big Brother, a symbol modeled after the branded image of Stalin that appeared on public buildings.

Orwell wrote the book in 1948, and simply inversed the digits to get 1984. He set the book in the not-too-distant future in order to rouse people of his time to the real and possible dangers surrounding them. He believed people had the power to create change; the book, then, would serve as a motivation to create that change.

One of the most interesting aspects of *1984* is the idea that there is a continued war taking place with an enemy that becomes an ally, and an ally that becomes an enemy. Orwell's inspiration for the three super powers that never defeat each other came from James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution*. Although a critic of Burnham's, Orwell was inspired by the idea of a *state of permanent war*, with limited aims between combatants who can't destroy each other, but who instead engage in a struggle for territory and possessions. The goal of the war is to use products of industry without raising the standard of living, as an increase in wealth would destroy the fabric of society and introduce a class system. Additionally, society could no longer be kept in poverty by restricting production since this usually brought about opposition; war, then, is a means of destroying the products of labor. Yet, each state appears to have the objective of conquering the world, while ridding the world of free thought. While there are skirmishes, none of the states is willing to cross boundaries and risk loss. The world that Orwell paints, then, suggests that war as a continuous feature of society (consistent with the Marxist/Communist ideology that revolution needs to be constant) ceases to be dangerous; it becomes commonplace.

Over the course of the book, as history is erased and rewritten, the main character, Winston Smith, is faced with the shapelessness of his life. He begins a metamorphosis, which the reader understands to involve questioning the existence of the free human spirit. He is taught, through recurring signs, that *war is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength*. The reader assumes this absurd logic could never really be realized, but as Winston gradually succumbs to the tedious destruction of his free spirit, his love, and his mental capacity, it doesn't seem so absurd.

The incorporation of *doublethink* makes Orwell's message even more real. *Doublethink* is described as: "to know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneous two opinions which cancel each other out" *Doublespeak* is a type of mental cheating that satisfies the person by convincing them that reality has not been violated. Today's readers can easily relate to the idea of *doublethink*. Knowing that it is possible to be fooled, to hold contradictory thoughts, to be led and misled, adds to the eerily prophetic warning of *1984*.

1984 is often interpreted as having an anti-capitalism message. It is evident that the war is fought to expunge the products of labor, but in the society Orwell lived in governments and corporations would have supported the selling of military goods, and thus could make a profit from the waging of war—a system that still exists today. Orwell may have been pointing this out as a way of showing one detrimental aspect of capitalism, but Winston's non-conformity speaks clearly to the individualism that is part of the ideology of capitalism.

Orwell and Truth

Another theme pervading *1984* is the important message of truth. Orwell plays on the notion that a truth can become a non-truth. This has been discussed above in connection with *doublespeak*, but the symbolism of truth was meant to represent Stalin's interpretation of truth and his treatment of truth, most specifically in the thirties with the Great Terror. Orwell raises the question of truth actually is in many ways throughout the book, as with the changing of enemy and ally in the end, or the history that Winston alters, or even the love he thinks he possesses and loses. The character of O'Brien is in one sense his salvation, then in another his rebuker, and then in the end his redeemer. Which archetype is O'Brien is reality? Orwell uses these elements to show the uncertain nature of truth, and more specifically the biased nature of Stalin's truth.

Even today, Orwell's *1984* serves as an example of what can happen if power is usurped by one party or state or dictator. Orwell predicted the continued predations of Stalinist Russia, and what could happen if all sense of humanity was wiped out. His message is a stark reminder that democracy, as an alternative to collectivism, allows for the people to have an important voice.

Ayn Rand's Anthem

A few years before Orwell's *1984* another writer had a similar interest in showing what the future might hold for the world. In 1946 Ayn Rand published her novel *Anthem*, portraying a dystopian world in which one man asserts his individuality against the tide of the collective. Rand wrote the book in 1937, the same year Zamyatin died. The narrator of *Anthem* writes, "We are known as Equality 7-2521," from a City run by the World Council. The protagonist expresses his individuality, sneaks into an abandoned underground railroad, and invents a light source that will ultimately change society. He bravely takes his invention to the Council, but is rejected, and is forced to flee or risk imprisonment. Additionally, the main character falls in love, another individual human quality that sets him apart. He leaves to start a new world with a new lover, each intent on realizing their individual qualities.

Ayn Rand grew up in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution. She has many of the same ideas Zamyatin did during this time and became known as an advocate of capitalism, which may have been her answer to collectivism. The idea for *Anthem* originated in the early 1920s as a play when she was a teenager. In her words: "It was to be a play about

the collective society of the future in which they lost the word 'I.' They were all calling each other 'we' and it worked out as much more of a story []" She viewed Russia as depraved and she was not surprised that it took up Communist ideology, but maintained that she "got out and found a civilized country." Rand's dystopia is another warning against world organizations that would accumulate power over the individual.

Anthem portrays individualism as capitalistic, with the main character developing a product that can be marketed and sold to benefit people (the same premise that underlies her later work *Atlas Shrugged*). Rand's capitalism is one that benefits the people and exists for the people, which isn't the same as Orwell's capitalism, one that generates profits through war at the expense of the people.

Comparisons between We, Anthem, and 1984

One of the differences between *Anthem* and *1984* is that Winston succumbs to collective power, which eliminates his individualism. He accepts Big Brother, and even loves him. Rand, meanwhile, was determined to show that even in the bleakest hour the human spirit can survive. Her dystopia is reminiscent of Zamyatin's: both expound on the idea of human reason in the wake of scientific discovery. In *Anthem* this occurs when the main character invents a device to improve society, while in *We* the main character was an inventor and is responsible for the welfare of the space ship. *Anthem* and *We* both end with their main characters discovering an unknown place, and finding freedom in the wilderness; they also have love waiting for them.

And by the end of *Anthem* the main character no longer refers to himself by his assigned number, another similarity to *We*. Rand ends by saying that the people were whipped to their knees by the word "We," which seconds the sentiment of Zamyatin's book.

All three books, meanwhile, attempt to show the drawbacks of the collective state. Rand and Zamyatin having lived through the Russian revolution, while Orwell wrote about the degeneration of that revolution into what became Stalinism.

Other Important Dystopias

When we look at *We*, *Anthem*, and *1984*, we can draw a straight line through the world's climate, the social circumstances, and the written work. We can also make a triangle to show how one book (*We*) directly influenced the other two. In the realm of social science fiction there are plenty of other books that attempt to show the shape of things to come. Let's look at a few. (This list is in no way meant to be complete.) The important thing is to notice how the climate and issues facing society, over the years, shows up in each novel.

1930-1940s

- *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. Humans are engineered to be passive and useful to the ruling class. Novel addresses reproduction, misuse of technology, and the dangers of totalitarianism, among other things.
- *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis. Written amid the growing threat of war and totalitarianism, Lewis warned that a democratic government could easily be manipulated and controlled by those with money, power, and influence. The title meant that what was happening in Germany at the time could happen in America.

1950s

- *Player Piano* by Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut revisits the themes of automation in the context of capitalism. Here

again is the view of a mechanized society, with little human labor. Vonnegut reminds us of the individual's importance, the need for society to maintain skilled in labor, and the human desire to work a good day for an honest wage. Written with the American working class in mind.

- *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. This novel tackles the issue of censorship and free speech. Written in the wake of the German book burning under Hitler's regime.

1960s

- *Logan's Run* by William F. Nolan and George C. Johnson. Also made into a movie, this novel addresses a variety of social issues, like aging and consumption within a controlled society, and living with a false sense of utopia.

- *Dr. Bloodmoney* by Philip K. Dick. Dick deals with the drawbacks of nuclear arms and warfare during the Cold War era.

- *Planet of the Apes* by Pierre Boulle. Addresses the societal concerns of evolution. Boulle may have based his work on the growing research on primates.

1970s-1990s

- *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. Atwood deals with a woman's right to control her own body and reproduction.

- *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. One of the first dystopian books for children, Lowry presents a controlled society that has lost its ability to remember the past, a society that eliminates problem children for the good of all.

2000 to the present

- *The Unit* by Ninni Holmqvist. A modern story that addresses the issue of harvesting parts from people from people who are considered to be of low importance in society in order to let those who are important survive.

- *City of Ember* by Jeanne DuPrau. Show a future society that lives underground, until technology (electricity) fails, forcing them to return to the surface.

- *Feed* by M. T. Anderson. Addresses the misuse of technology, marketing, and advertising, through an Internet-like feed to which everyone is connected.

- *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. Deals with bioengineering and the environmental damage that leads to a future wasteland with people eating one another.

Social Science Fiction and the Future

Writers will continue to address the issues facing them every day, giving voice to the warnings that often go unheard. The current trend in dystopian fiction takes us into the area of teen fiction, where it's thriving. But is it still shedding light on societal concerns? Catastrophe fiction is also going strong, as writers continue to portray Earth's doom due to environmental carelessness. While the last ten years has seen a plethora of future scenarios, many that echo the worlds created in the 1920s, they don't seem to draw directly from a historic source. The U. S. leads the world in

dystopian writers, yet democracy and free speech are present and thriving. What are American writers pointing a finger at? For whom are they speaking? What anti-utopia are they witnessing in the world? And, more importantly, where is the path to a hopeful future? It's one thing to show what the world can be—essentially what it is today veiled in a what-if scenario—but how do you fix it? **How can we change the course of the shape of things to come?**

In closing, social science fiction has grown up through worldwide war and technological advancements and changes, even through the rise and fall of governments. It will continue to grow and evolve as long as writers are willing to boldly address social issues. It is my hope that writers will veer away from catastrophe doomsdays, away from a future where human flesh is on the menu, and rather begin to show a truly brave world, one where compassion and acceptance of differences prospers.

A Pushcart Prize nominee, Hunter Liguore earned a MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University. Her “anomalous” work has appeared in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, *The Irish Pages*, *New Plains Review*, *Mason Road*, *The MacGuffin*, *Strange Horizons*, *SLAB Literary*, *Rio Grande Review*, *r.k.v.r.y Quarterly* and more. Her short story collection, *Red Barn People*, is now available. <http://skytalewriter.com/index.php>

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Perhaps Rand was aware of Zamyatin's death and became reacquainted with her own similar story, much the same way today's pop culture is influenced by celebrity deaths.

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AROUND THE WORLD

Speculative Fiction News with Nas Hedron

Around the World is a round-up of news, reviews, and other links from around the Internet that relate to ISF's mandate: increasing the profile of speculative fiction that focuses on the international, or that comes from regions not normally associated with the speculative fiction mainstream. It also includes news regarding authors who have published in ISF.

Awesome Campaign for a Grant to Increase Diversity in SF

Ellen B. Wright and Faye Bi are both speculative fiction fans, they both work in book publishing, and they're both runners. The two have joined forces for an awesome cause that's close to the heart of the ISF community: they're running a marathon to raise funds for a brand new writing grant (to be administered by the [Speculative Literature Foundation](#)) that will go toward supporting diversity in science fiction and fantasy.

As the pair note on their [fundraising page](#), science fiction and fantasy fans are a diverse group, but our beloved SF books, television, and movies don't always reflect that diversity:

"Those of us who don't fit into one particular box (and some who do) have noticed something. There's one story that's told in the genre over and over again. You've probably seen it. It's about a straight white man, or often a bunch of straight white men, creating things with science, wielding magic, saving the world, blowing stuff up. If there are women or people of color involved, we're probably love interests or sidekicks. We probably only talk to, or about, the white male lead. We probably die first, or to provide motivation for the protagonist."

None of this is news to the staff and readers of ISF—after all, recognizing and enjoying diversity in speculative fiction is what this publication is all about. But it's nice to see someone taking concrete steps to do something about it.

Ellen and Faye have teamed up with the SLF, which already administers the [Older Writers Grant](#) and the [Gulliver Travel Research Grant](#), to create the Diverse Worlds Grant, which will:

"help writers from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in the genre to start and continue publishing. As good science fiction and fantasy worlds should, this grant will welcome all kinds of diversity: gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, ability level, religion, etc."

The two women will be running the 2013 NYC Marathon to raise funds for the new grant. With about a month to go until the event, their fundraising is (as I write this) at around 95% of their \$2,500 goal. But that's no reason to get complacent. This is a great cause that, if anything, deserves to be *overfunded*.

I strongly encourage all ISF readers to go to the [fundraising page](#) and contribute whatever you can for a cause that will benefit our whole community—I know I will be. And if you're a writer, who knows, soon it may be you applying for a Diverse Worlds Grant to help you finish your passion project.

Rebooting the Original Robots: Classic Czech SF Revisited

The word "robot" came into the English language via a Czech play called *R.U.R.*, written by Karel Čapek in 1920. *R.U.R.* also marked the first appearance of a theme that would be revisited more than once afterward, notably in the Terminator films: a robot uprising.

Now, *R.U.R.* is having a renaissance of sorts, having been adapted into the short film *R.U.R. Genesis*. The original play was set in the 1950s or 1960s—then far in the future. The film is set in the same time period, in an alternate version of 1969, but from the vantage point of 2013 the 1960s have become retro-futuristic.

The team at Helicon Arts Cooperative, who previously made the feature *Yesterday Was A Lie* (2008), hope to turn *R.U.R. Genesis* into a feature as well. The cast includes Chase Masterson, whom SF fans may know from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.

You can watch the *R.U.R. Genesis* online [here](#) and a behind-the-scenes featurette [here](#). The film's home page is [here](#).

You can read the original *R.U.R.*, translated into English by David Wyllie, [here](#). You can also see a production of it on YouTube: [Act I](#), [Act II](#), [Act III](#).

SF News from Nigeria

Item One: Nigeria has a thriving film industry, often referred to as Nollywood. When [Ficson Films](#)—a new Nigerian company providing film production, event coverage, documentaries, and commercials—wanted to announce their presence recently, they did it in an imaginative way: they released a short science fiction video on YouTube.

[The Day They Came, Episode 1](#) doesn't have a very expansive plot, but maybe it'll be fleshed out in later episodes. A man comes out of a house to have a cigarette and clear his head. Everything is normal—a rooster crows somewhere nearby. Then he hears something and looks toward the horizon, which is when the aliens arrive and all hell breaks loose.

It's a fun little short and, given the number of times it's been posted and reposted on Facebook and elsewhere, it appears to be doing what it's supposed to do: get attention.

Item Two: Nigeria is also the location for a small SF miracle—the discovery of nine “lost” episodes of *Doctor Who* just in time for the Doctor's 50th anniversary ([BBC page](#), [Wikipedia page](#)). The trove includes four episodes of the six-part story *The Web of Fear*, in which the Doctor battles robot Yetis who are spreading a poisonous fungus on the London Underground.

See:

[“It's official: Missing *Doctor Who* episodes have been found!”](#) on io9

[“About time: Nine ‘lost’ *Doctor Who* episodes discovered in Nigeria”](#) on The Guardian

Swedish Prime Minister's Science Fiction Novel Becomes a Hit Play

Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt wrote a dystopian novel called *Det Sovande Folket* (“The Sleeping People” or “The Sleeping Nation”) twenty years ago. It was all but forgotten, and isn't in print any more, although a pirated version is available on internet torrent sites. But now that Reinfeldt is running the country it's become a hot property and it's been turned into a play that has sold out every performance. Reinfeldt has refused to comment.

Written when he was 28, the novel is set this year, in 2013, making this a perfect time to resurrect it. It portrays a Sweden that is feeling the effects of twenty years of Social Democratic government, where the populace is divided into the Fools, who do all the work and who finance the welfare state, and the Sleeping Brains, who lazily watch television all day long while living on benefits. Sounds positively Ayn-Rand-ian!

See:

[“Swedish Prime Minister's sci-fi novel becomes hit play”](#) on UPI.com

[“PM's sci-fi book becomes surprise stage success”](#) on The Local

[“Fredrik Reinfeldt”](#) on Wikipedia

Hit Film Gravity Crosses Borders

Caution: spoilers ahead.

There's some debate as to whether or not the new film *Gravity* ([home page](#), [Wikipedia](#), [YouTube trailer](#)), which stars Sandra Bullock and George Clooney and which set an all-time record for an October film opening, should be classified as science fiction. There's nothing fundamentally speculative about it—everything in it could happen today, with current technology and in the current social context—so maybe it's better considered simply as a space-based thriller.

Whatever the merits of the arguments on each side, it certainly features a setting associated with science fiction (indeed, that *was* science fiction until fairly recently), has been well received by SF fans, and is considered SF by many people, so I'll let that classification stand for the purposes of this column.

Being a major Hollywood release, *Gravity* isn't the usual fare covered in ISF, but it has several international aspects, both in story and execution. The film was co-written, co-produced, and directed by Alphonso Cuarón, the Mexican director of Spanish-language films like *Y Tu Mama También* and English language features like *Children of Men*. And then there's the Chinese connection. The massive Chinese film audience is being courted by innumerable film projects these days, often through co-productions with Chinese companies or through the casting of Chinese actors.

But as the [International Business Times notes](#), *Gravity* appears to be have its sights set on China using story elements alone. Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) first takes refuge in a state-of-the-art Chinese space station, then hitches a ride home in a Chinese capsule—giving uncommon cinematic recognition to the growing Chinese space program. It couldn't come at a better time: just this month China's space program [celebrated its first decade of manned flight](#), later this month it's scheduled to send an unmanned rover to the Moon, and it has longer-term plans to return man to the Moon for the first time since [Apollo 17](#) in 1972.

And it appears possible that the Chinese story elements succeeded in pleasing Chinese authorities, because the film [has just been approved](#) for distribution in China.

The ISF Alumni Department: The Entire Roster from ISF #2

ISF #2 featured fiction by three authors, Ken Liu, Lavie Tidhar, and me, Nas Hedron, and each of these alumni has news this issue.

Ken Liu has actually appeared in *two* issues of ISF (#2 and #4). Given that this is only issue #5, that makes him practically a member of the family. Recently Ken had a [brief profile](#) on the Malaysian news site *The Star Online*. It recaps his historic sweep of the Hugo Award, Nebula Award, and World Fantasy Award in 2012, the first work of fiction to take all three awards in a year. Ken was in nearby Singapore as part of the *Read! Singapore* program. Until now he has focused on short fiction, but told the *Star* that he's now at work on his first novel, which he hopes to finish by the end of the year. I'm sure I'm not the only one at ISF looking forward to it.

Lavie Tidhar, meanwhile, has been interviewed at length for the current issue of *Clarkesworld*, in "[Deep Into the Dark: A Conversation with Lavie Tidhar](#)."

Finally, I have just released a free soundtrack album to accompany my 2012 fabulist novelette *The Virgin Birth of Sharks*. The story is about a Desi street kid in Toronto who learns that she was inexplicably conceived while her mother was in prison and had no contact at all with men. The book has a home page [here](#). The album includes music ranging from blues to tango to ambient, and features artists from Belgium, Brazil, Canada, France, Spain, Ukraine, and the United States, and is available as a free download [here](#).

If you know of an item you think should be included in the next installment of *Around the World*, please send it to us at ISFAroundTheWorld@gmail.com.

REVIEWS BY SEAN WRIGHT

The expression “a rising tide lifts all boats,” attributed to American President John F. Kennedy, is usually applied to discussions of economics—an economy that performs well, benefits everyone. Likewise, I think a genre or cultural economy that’s accessible and performs well benefits everyone.

On reading Dean and Nikki Alfar’s preface and introduction to *The Best of Philippine Speculative Fiction 2005-2010*, I am struck by their somewhat similar approach to curating the Filipino speculative fiction community. There is a consistent dedication to growing that community, to raising the tide, as it were. They are, of course, helped by numerous authors and commentators what appears to an outsider like me to be a very tight knit and supportive community.

Where this collection differs from many “best of” anthologies is in the way it’s been assembled and in the original publications upon which it draws. Here we have a collection that doesn’t consist of all the high flyers and award winners, though many of the authors are just that. No, this is a collection of the best and most diverse voices, chosen specifically to showcase the depth, variety, and skill that the Filipino speculative fiction community can draw upon. If you want to begin to understand Filipino writing and writers in our shared genre, I can think of few better places to begin.

The collection’s diversity is apparent within the first handful of stories. Andrew Drilon’s *The Secret Origin of Spin-man* opens the collection and artfully blends comic book culture with speculative fiction and elements of the Philippine diaspora. It plucks at heartstrings and evokes nostalgia. I’m sure that international readers will have no trouble finding touchstones for their own memories of youthful moments spent using the monetary gifts of relatives at the corner shop or the bookstore.

Pocholo Goitia’s *An Introduction to the Luminescent* was described as “vat-less science fiction” in a *Rocket Kapre* roundtable discussion by author Kate Aton-Osias, underlining its originality. The piece certainly has one of the qualities of good science fiction: it bends genre to fit story rather than the other way around. I might have missed some of the oblique criticisms in the work due to my own lack of understanding of Filipino culture and society, but what’s obvious even so is that the story comments on haves and the have-nots, on the widening gap between them, and on the reality that we are all nevertheless human. *An Introduction to the Luminescent* presents a wonderfully sketched futuristic Philippines and its fundamental subject matter is accessible to all.

Now, I mentioned that this collection is diverse, and by the third story we have traveled from modern-day Philippines, to the near future, and now backward to a historical fantasy set around the time of early Spanish occupation. *The Sign of the Cross* by Russell Stanley Geronimo asks the question: what would happen if a live Gargoyle had crashed, wounded, in the confines of the Monasterio de San Agustin? It’s an excellent examination of how any institution, in this case the Church and the Army, seek to deal with things beyond their knowledge. It is also an interesting observation of how a man of God can still approach the discovery of something new and unknown with a sense of wonder and discovery. The style in which the story is presented was a pleasure to read, creating verisimilitude through an 1800’s style of religious reportage.

The fourth story in the collection leaves behind the Philippines as a source of setting and culture. Rebecca Arcega presents the reader with a mythic secondary world fantasy tale in *The Singer’s Man*. The editors regard this story as one of the best examples of secondary world fantasy by a Filipino author. But that assessment, by

itself, doesn't capture this piece of writing for what it is: one of the most poetic and distinctively voiced stories in the collection. Told in the first person, the poetic style that Arcega maintains throughout the piece genuinely immerses the reader. I felt as though I were reading some of the more mythic underpinnings of Tolkien's world, with the same sense of deep history and wonder. Which is not to say that Arcega is giving us anything approaching the Eurocentric Tolkien, far from it. She deftly creates an immersive, mythic tone in what is a wholly original world.

Paolo Chikiamco's *Carbon* is a near-future tale of clones and politics. It's the second story in the collection to feature clones, and I was reminded of the considerably longer work of David Hontiveros in his mosaic novel, *Seroks, Iteration 1: Mirror Man*. Three works don't make a trend, but I get the sense that cloning and copying are two topics that loom large in the Filipino speculative fiction conversation. The same could be said for the wider community, but I find that Filipino authors are approaching the concept in fresh ways, particular to a Filipino context.

The backdrop to *Carbon* is a presidential campaign, with the incumbent counting on the votes of soon-to-be-emancipated clones. This is a Philippines that is well-placed in the realm of interstellar travel, and I sense in Chikiamco's work and others in this collection an aspirational national pride not unlike that I experience as an Australian when reading works that feature Australians in roles usually reserved for square-jawed American heroes.

If I may make an observation about Filipino writing as presented in this collection, it is that on the whole I'm left with a positive, buoyant feeling. To be sure there are some dark stories featured, but overall I don't feel like I have fallen down a bleak, dystopic hole.

Mia Tijam's *The Ascension of Our Lady Boy*, brought this home to me. It's one of those pieces that highlights the collection's variety and inclusivity, but it also presents a story that could have taken quite a different path. *The Ascension of Our Lady Boy* is a coming-of-age tale about a transgendered character, mixed with magical realism and a little folklore. It's a story that doesn't shrink from the realities of finding love as a woman with male biology, but takes what could have been a sad realist tale and turns it into something positive. The ebullient nature of the main character left me with a smile on my face. Our community needs positive transgender tales as much as it needs to focus on the horror stories.

With *Feasting* by Joshua L. Lim So, we come across the first of the horror pieces in the collection. It's stylistically matter-of-fact, letting the story unfold simply. A simple village, ordinary villagers, and a time-honoured, simple horror.

In contrast to this is Apol Lejano-Massebieau's magical realist tale, *Pedro Diyego's Homecoming*. This is a beautiful story about food and love and the effect that living in a different place, in a different culture, can have on one's sense of self.

Dean Francis Alfar's *Six from Downtown* presents a mosaic—six snapshots of ordinary, everyday life, except for the mermaids in the Wet Market available at an “astounding price per kilo,” or the woman who leaves her legs at home as she flies out the window. The uncomplicated style and tone of the piece, juxtaposed with the fantastical elements, produces a work that throws the reader ever so slightly off balance—an excellent exemplar of blending the familiar and the fantastical to produce the uncanny.

In the preface to *Sky Gypsies*, author Timothy James M. Dimacali states that he is a third world futurist and expresses his desire that Pinoy [Filipino] writers craft their own science fiction, to provide direction for dreaming and imagining their own future. *Sky Gypsies* reflects this ambition with a family of Sama Laut, a distinct ethnic grouping, mining a claim in the asteroid belt. There are strong themes of independence and wanting to break away from necessary but uncomfortable reliance on the Outsiders of the Martian Union.

Charles Tan, known in the wider community chiefly in his role as a speculative fiction commentator, delivers a wonderful, slightly satirical piece in *A Retrospective on Diseases for Sale*, which is good for a chuckle with its sideways glance at geek and consumer culture. Likewise Noel Tio's *Revenge of the Tiktak* delivers humour with suspense. It's presented as an old fashioned story of a vengeful ghost—a boys' orphanage, thumping sounds in the night, girl ghosts. I had visions of *The Grudge* or *The Ring*, and the story could easily have gone that way and still have been entertaining. Instead, here was another choice to be positive and lighthearted.

Kate Osias' *The Maiden's Song*, coming after much lighter pieces, is a return to folkloric roots and is considerably more downbeat. It's a story of love—unrequited love—which shows that sometimes base attraction, curiosity, and lust are not enough. It's beautifully framed using a simple uncomplicated setting and through the device of magical songs.

I detect a similar tone and similar themes in Isabel Yap's *Sink*. It, too, centres around love and around letting go of emotions one has for another. My advice is not to read the editor's notes, but launch straight into the story to experience the full effect. Even mentioning its themes may lead a potential reader to prepare themselves. It's a powerful story that will benefit most from as clean a reading as possible.

Nikki Alfar's *Bearing Fruit*, a tale of a young woman impregnated by a mango, is dressed in the accoutrements of folktale and fable and is one of those pieces that deserves multiple readings. It's not really (just) about a woman and a mango—a clever, subtle piece.

With Jose Elvin Bueno's *All We Need is Five Meals a Day* we begin to round out the collection with less standard or straightforward speculative fiction. Two orphans—a boy with a mango tree growing out of his stomach and a girl who flies by virtue of the thousand winged lice in her hair—are surviving on the edge of the city. Their parents have long ago left for the city and haven't come back. Is it a metaphor for the death of the folktale or of Filipino culture under the crush of global capitalism and a homogenous culture? Is it a metaphor for the end of childhood and wild imagination? I'm not quite sure. It's odd, but deliciously so.

Just Man by Rica Bolipata-Santos finishes the collection on a love story. What if the Biblical story of the New Testament was correct? How would Joseph and Mary relate as people with desires for each other? How would knowing your wife was the chosen vehicle of God affect your feelings and urges? It's a delightfully honest and moving speculation on the human story at the heart of the biblical narrative.

I have not mentioned all the authors collected in *The Best of Philippine Speculative Fiction 2005-2010*. There are notable absences like Eliza Victoria, whose piece here was featured in her collection mentioned in last issue's review column. I have not mentioned some of my favourite stories either.

I hope, though, that I've given you a sense of the depth and variety that this collection showcases. It's not, as the editors stressed, the best of every Filipino work published within that span of years (an impossible task considering the logistics involved) but it's a remarkable and robust cross-section of what you might come to expect from the high-calibre Filipino speculative fiction community.

If you're looking for fresh voices and ideas in your speculative fiction, but want a touch of familiarity, this collection is for you. If you want to begin to understand the similarities and differences of another culture within a familiar genre framework, this collection is for you. If you truly love the genre and the possibilities that playing and creating in it offer, hunt down a copy of *The Best of Philippine Speculative Fiction 2005-2010*.

The Best of Philippine Speculative Fiction 2005-2010, Dean Francis Alfar & Nikki Alfar Eds., (The University of the Philippines Press, ISBN 9789715427043), 2013.

AT HOME IN THE WASTELAND: THE ART OF SERGI BROSA

Saul Böttcher (Interviewer)

Sergi Brosa (Artist)



Wasteland Churches

When did you first become excited about visual art, and why?

I think I have been stunned all of my life by visual art.

The first things I saw when I was a kid were *Dragon Ball* (we all wanted to be like Goku) and some other animes, like *Dr. Slump*, *Mazinger Z*, and *Doraemon*. We also discovered the early 8-bit games for the first Game Boy and later for the Nintendo and Mega Drive, with all their vivid colors.

Then, at about twelve years old, I discovered manga comics, and the first pre-adult animes (like *Cowboy Bebop* and *Evangelion*) appeared on TV in my country. At that point, everything seemed to change from the classic *Dragon Ball* style of anime to a different type of production, more like a TV series with 25-30 episodes per season.

This changed my mind a little bit—I started to see anime from another point of view. More like a smaller production, long enough to be lovely, short enough not to be bored by them. At the same time, amazing video game productions were hitting hard.

After all this, at seventeen years old, I discovered French comics like *Skydoll* and *Blacksad*. Suddenly, they were doing the same as manga, but in full color like anime, and my head exploded. I was really amazed by French comics and how amazing they could be.

Then, I started to pay attention to movies, the concept art for games, and also to music videos and all the production that goes into them (because I am sure they also need concept art).

Beyond that, there are the other forms of visual art, like photography, wall paintings, clothing design, extreme sports decorations (decks, stickers, etc), vinyl toys... Actually, there are a ton of visual arts that are inspirations to

me. Even a city or a building is a very good way to get inspired.

Much of your art involves fantastic or futuristic scenes. What is it that you enjoy about these subjects compared to realistic subjects?

I love high technology. I discovered sci-fi in comics, anime, and movies (*Akira*, *Ghost in the shell*, *Blade Runner*, *Minority Report...*). *It's just amazing when I see some story that is surrounded by amazing new technology, new little or big gadgets that solve some necessities that nowadays are not solved, or that are difficult to solve.*

I am also a lover of industrial design, so I must love new vehicles, new gadgets, and new technology. This is the part I like the most in sci-fi worlds.

Sci-fi also brings us the possibility to create a new age based just in theories. Nothing is written in the history of the future, so we can sail on the waves of our creativity.

Did you make an intentional decision to pursue sci-fi themes with your art? Or did this evolve naturally, without a specific plan?

I can remember the year I discovered how much I loved sci-fi. There was a year when I decided sci-fi was going to be my genre, so I started developing my art and my ideas around the sci-fi world.

So, if I can say this is a plan, yes, it was my plan. My stuff must be sci-fi. Or at least, doing sci-fi is how I have more fun. Then, I also think it's possible to turn every genre in sci-fi. It doesn't need starships flying everywhere, just little details that makes it be sci-fi, mixing other genres. I love this when it happens.

What were some of the challenges you encountered when becoming an artist?

The hardest challenge I had to face was to leave everything that seemed a safe path in a man's life to start being an artist.

The moment came when I left university, and started studying drawing anatomy and perspective more seriously. I couldn't have done that without the support of my mum and my girlfriend. I knew being an artist was a hard way to live, but they told me that it would be more hard to live all the days doing something I don't like to do. So I could take the decision, and I am very happy to have taken it.

The Retro of Tomorrow



Early in your career, you spent some time trying to break into the comics industry in France. You were expected to do a lot of speculative work, and you were frustrated that you received very little feedback when your work was rejected. Do you think the French comic industry is discouraging talented artists with this approach?

Well, the French comics industry is not easy. It is awesome because it lets you try to do whatever you want to do. They touch every genre, and accept every drawing and coloring style. So, for someone like me, it is an awesome industry.

But, is very hard to get in, at least when I was trying it, some years ago. I think almost no-one got it in on their first attempt, so this means lots of months of working on new projects unpaid.

The problem is that a comic is a full pack. Maybe your drawing is good enough for them, but the story is not. Or maybe the story is awesome but they don't like your art. So, it's like a lottery. I am sure for me it was discouraging. But I'm sure many others just take it as a usual thing, and start again.

Every failure brings you the opportunity to stand up again, take a look at your mistakes, and learn to do it better. Or hate the world, cry, and eat chocolate. Ha ha ha!

I don't think the French industry is harder than other industries. [American comic book publisher] Marvel seems to be hard to get into as well.

You've started to work in the video game industry. Are you more interested in working on concept art, in-game art, or both?

Both, of course. Concept art is the fun part of the job I guess, where you can be fast and creative. In-game art is a more mechanical job, in my opinion, but also a very fun job.

Working as a texture artist is something that I could find really interesting. I can imagine myself texturing my own concepts done in 3D, or another person's models. I also think doing 2D backgrounds is something amazing.

Most of your art uses exaggerated or stylized anatomy, and is very expressive. In video games and film, the science fiction genre seems to strive for photorealistic art. What could science fiction gain from using stylized art instead of realism?

Having a recognizable and easy to remember visual style.

Realism is always realism. All the concept art behind the realism is very important, and most of the times recognizable enough. (I just freak out with many, many movies and video games concept art.) But an untrained eye will not notice the difference between two similar products. Having a more recognisable style will make



Backgrounds for Megajump (iPhone game)

people remember that movie / videogame / comic / picture.

But I must say that, in a movie for example, the story is more important than the visual style. Always. In a game, the gameplay is always more important than visual side, etc.

You also have a love of urban fashion and extreme sports. Recently you did a piece for professional snowboarder Torstein Horgmo, and you've expressed an interest in doing more work like this. What attracts you to the art of urban fashion and extreme sports?

I've loved extreme sports since I was a kid. My father introduced me to the motocross world, and then I found interest in board sports like skateboard and snowboard.

It's just natural that I want to participate in this industry. I would love watching a kid riding a deck designed by me.

I remember when we had new skateboard decks, the first day was the best day and the worst day. You had a new deck, but in some hours, the picture behind it was going to be destroyed because of grinds on rails and kerbs. I also like that snowboard pictures are indestructible (maybe this is why I would like to focus more in snowboard). Another thing I love in extreme sports is that no one really looks in detail at the drawings and paintings. They are just colors passing, running here and there. A full body is a little piece of art if he/she knows how to dress and what colors to use for their accessories, like hoodies, backpacks, shoes, skateboards...

I see urban style like this, like a walking and ephemeral piece of art.

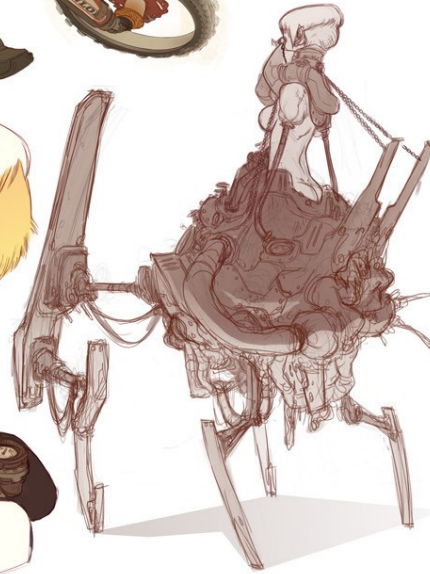
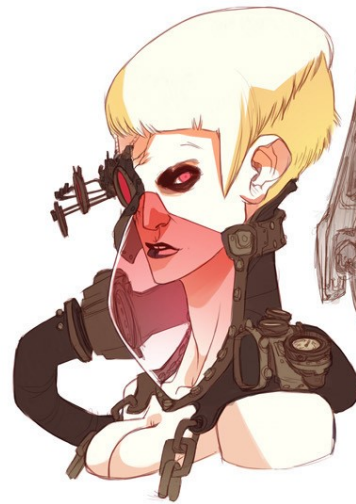
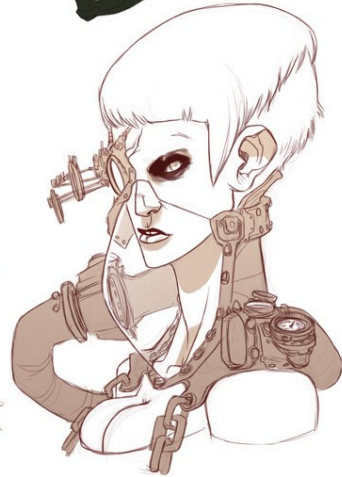
ou've also illustrated several book covers for Philip Pullman's *Sally Lockhart series*. What is your focus when you illustrate a book cover?

Yes, I did some covers for the *Sally Lockhart books* some years ago, when I was still a student. I always loved movie posters, like Drew Struzan's covers (*Blade Runner*, *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*), so I learned from him. Doing big character busts mixed with tiny characters, plus some scenes from the movie/book, all of them together trying to make an epic cover.

But, I think sometimes this strategy is not the best one. I think very minimal book covers are also awesome because they are easier to remember.

Ride It





Untitled Sketches

You were considering a Kickstarter campaign for a Sergi Brosa art book, but you decided not to proceed. Why was that?

Ok, here it goes. I wanted to do a kickstarter campaign because I wanted to do my own art book.

It was a mixed art book, where I was going to include my usual illustrations, short comic stories, concept art, and sketches. Of course, all of this was going to be new stuff, including some I had already finished. It was planned to be a 100-to-130-page full-color book.

I decided to put it in stand-by for several reasons.

The first one, I felt it was too egocentric trying to do a book with my own name as a title. It was going to be a very funny book, but I feel I am not yet the professional I am expecting to be, so, trying to do this at this early stage of my professional career was unrealistic.

The second one is that I still need to get more professionalism in the areas where I am focusing my work. I want to work first in companies to get more experience.

And the third one was all the very difficult things someone must do to get a Kickstarter done.

What sort of difficult things?

I just want people to know that everyone who gets a Kickstarter done is a hero. People don't know about the "behind the scenes" in a Kickstarter campaign. They don't realize what the real job is there.

I guess everyone (I am including myself before starting my own Kickstarter campaign) believes that doing a Kickstarter is simply: have an idea, work on it for some weeks, and upload it to Kickstarter. That is wrong. There is a really tedious and dangerous job behind all of that.

First of all, you should work on it until you have done at least 30-40% of the project in your free time. Considering that freelance artists don't have any free time, this is totally crazy. But you can do it. It just will be some months of work. All those months, you won't have free time for family, friends, hanging out, or relaxing.

Then, even though I had the help of some good French guys, J.D. Morvan (a well-known french comics writer) and J.C. Caurette (official distributor of Kim Jung Gi's books), helping me with a lot of things related with printing

books, the job of trying to contact printers, control the quality and colors on the prints, and so on is still an extra-hard job.

Then, there is the problem that the production of the initial job is reaaaaalllyyy sloooooowwww and it seems that it's never going to get to the point where you have 30% of the book and all the material necessary for the Kickstarter campaign.

You need to talk with your government, to get the rights to distribute by shipping your books, understand the taxes you are going to pay to them, be your own lawyer in certain things.

All these things, you do them before knowing whether your Kickstarter is going to work. It totals how much? A whole year maybe. Spending a whole year without knowing if this is gonna work is a very big amount of time. You're doing this alone. You can receive some help, as I did, but the entire big job is alone, with a very dense fog surrounding you. It is not easy, I promise.

I completed many of these things, but then I thought I should wait until I have more professional experience, because a failure in this case is a very low kick in your belly.



Untitled Sketches

Were there any other obstacles?

In addition, everyone must consider that, after having done all this, you must commit to the full duration of your Kickstarter campaign, working hard to get it moving, to put it in front of everyone. Do contests, talk to people, work a lot to get a new update every few days, give prizes, get prints, and so on.

It is a very complex job. So, I would like to say that I consider the people who get a Kickstarter done, successful or unsuccessful, are heroes, because all them have done all this work, almost alone. Not everyone is able to do this without the support of a company or an investor, just working alone at home.

Kickstarter has become very famous, but not everyone knows these “behind the scenes” aspects.

So, returning to my art book, I decided to put it in standby, because I feel I can get more professional experience

and, in the future, I will be able to do a better book. I will use my free time to create new things that I will be able to include in it, but I want my book to be the best I can do, and I know this is not the right moment for it.

Speaking of crowdfunding in general, people are very excited about the positive impacts of artists being funded directly by their fans. (For example, directly communicating with the artist, and helping the artist know what the fans want to see.) Are there any negative impacts?

Well, the only negative part (and I am not sure it is very negative) is that the artist must do every task as if he were a little company. But, this is just something to learn.

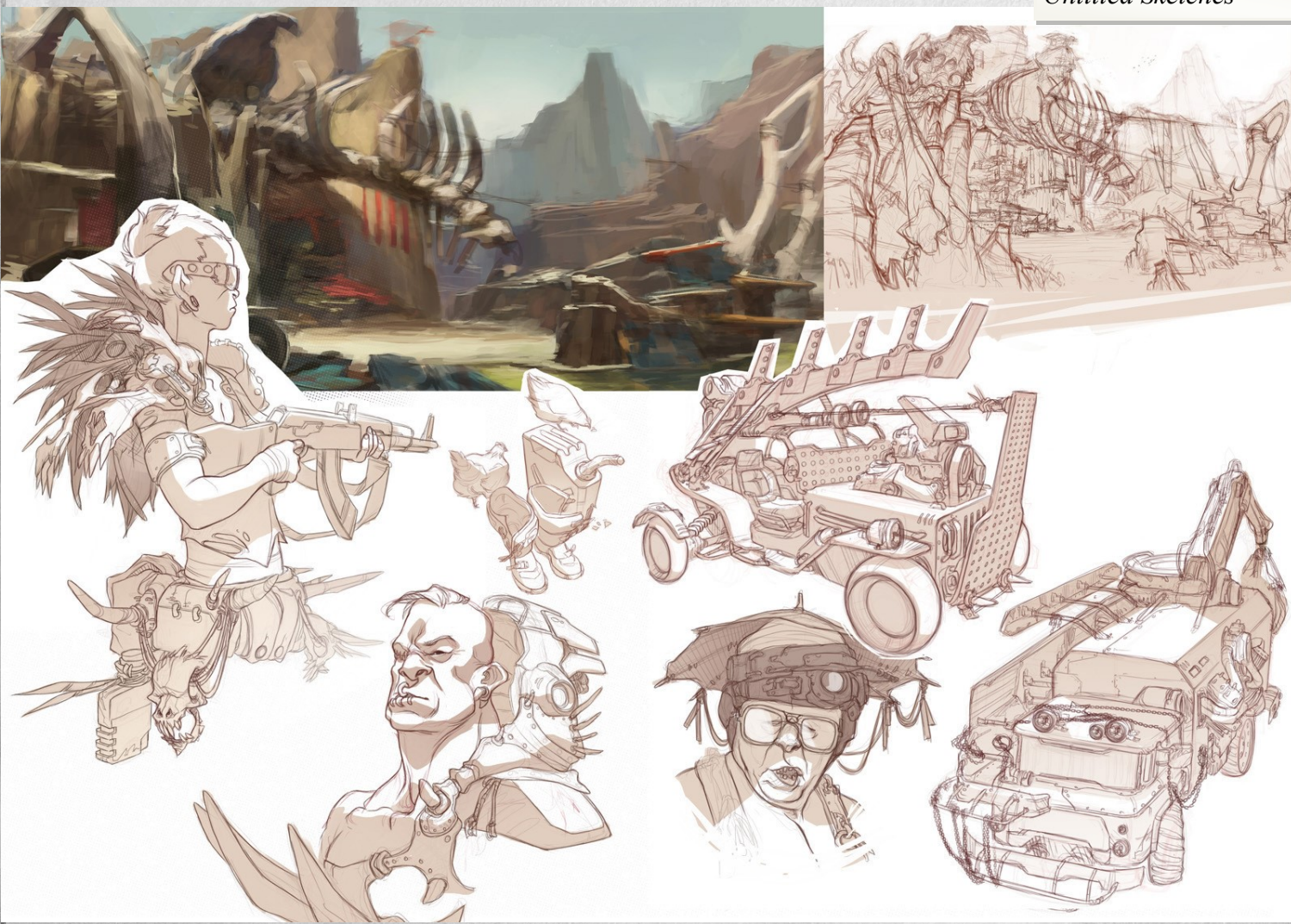
I mean, nothing is negative. Having direct feedback and communication with your fans is something awesome. I often take the time to speak with different people on my Facebook page, people who are from the other side of the planet, just to say “Hello, how are you? How is life in your country?” and so on.

Some people tell me what aspects of my art they like, so this just gives me a reference point about which aspects of my art appeal to some people. I have come to know many people like this, so for me it is very positive to be close to fans and other artists. Then, if we have a very busy day, we just stay off-line, disconnect, put on music, and work-work-work.

I think, the most exciting thing about doing a Kickstarter is the freedom you can get when you are not working for someone. You just do what you feel you want to do. The result is totally yourself expressed in a piece of art, in a book, video game, movie... No one tells you “No, we must change this turquoise for this blue, because of our enterprise policy”, or “We are going to change all the colors you did”, or any of that kind of stuff that happens more often than we would like.

Also, doing Kickstarters we avoid abusive contracts. We choose the rules. If we succeed, we have all the credit. If we fail, it’s just because of ourself.

Untitled Sketches



Let's dream for a moment: if you could be fully funded to do any project at all, what would it be? The Sergi Brosa art book, or something else?

I would love to build a skatepark inside a starship with an anti-gravity area to practice.

Hahaha, no! (Well, yes, I actually do want to.) But, my dream project would be... I don't really know, I have many dreams. I think all my personal projects are dreams.

Maybe... I would love work on a movie. Do the whole concept art for a movie or a TV show (a 24-episode season) and try to co-work on the script, or build on an amazing script.

Maybe, try to work on a videogame that could offer a complete emotional story like a movie. I remember the old *Final Fantasy* games, how their stories could enter our hearts. *I never played games like that again (maybe because I stopped playing RPG's).* So, doing something like this could be awesome.

But I think I have like 7 different projects in mind, and developing any of them could be a dream in my opinion. Sergi Brosa's artbook is a dream too, of course.

You've said that English is important to you, because English gives you the option to live and work in many countries. Now, let's imagine a world where English is the only language. This might help businesses and governments, but how would it affect the world of art?

In my opinion, speaking only one language would help us a lot. I know many, many people who don't speak English, so they can't communicate with other people around the world, or at least there are a lot of difficulties in doing so. But of course, each language is important to preserve the individual culture of each country.

All the cultures are very related with their language, so, speaking only one language maybe would erase some important part of each culture that exists now.

The prehistoric world is also the beginning of different cultures. I guess that, if we always had spoken the same language, cultures would have grown very differently from how they did.

Distance also makes culture, even if the language is the same. We just have to take a look at Spanish-speaking countries. Spain is very divided in different cultures; there are big differences between the East side and the West side. Then, South America, Mexico, Colombia, Chile... very different cultures too. And, I think in the Philippines they also speak Spanish, but we have nothing in common with them. I think in the USA this phenomenon is the same, and in the rest of the world.

So, I guess there is no right answer to this. The world of art is changing every day. Every little thing you add or take out changes art. Every new artist can make a difference in the world of art.

DRUGS



As an artist, is it more important to explore your own culture or to explore other cultures?

As many cultures as possible. But not only as an artist, as a citizen. Being able to understand other cultures and to know what is going on, directly from another citizen and not what the media tells you, is also very important. Travelling is important too, or at least knowing people within your own city who are from outside.

Let's talk more about your own work. You have posted at least two pieces to DeviantART (*Wasteland Churches* and *DRuGs*) that have disclaimers stating "I don't condone this behaviour in real life". Why is it necessary to add a warning like this?

As they are only two, I'm going to answer specifically for both. For *DRuGs*, it's socially accepted that every drug is bad, even when people know nothing about them, they just assume that every drug is something that is going to kill you, like heroin. It is what movies show, what the news shows. That is not true at all, but some people are not going to believe that some drugs are less dangerous than alcohol or tobacco.

In *Wasteland Churches*, I didn't think any warning was necessary, but someone told me that he was offended because he thought I was promoting violence against Christianity in India, Pakistan, and the Middle East.

Personally, I don't like how the church manages religion. But I needed to clarify that I was not promoting violence, just to keep people calm. I am not going to destroy churches with my psychic powers today.

What are the benefits of exploring taboo subjects in art? Are there any risks as well?

Benefits or risks, I don't care about



this. I am free, and I can draw and paint whatever I want to in my free time.

If someone likes what I do, and I am honest with the things I do, this person is not just loving my work, he likes my self, too. If someone is going to hate the work, he can hate me too, not just my art.

Being an artist you will get haters, whether you want to or not. It is something automatic. Who cares?

One of your pieces, *Soviet Business*, (see previous page) depicts human trafficking. When a piece of art depicts a crime or a harmful behaviour, does the artist have a responsibility to give a message or insight about that behaviour? Or is it okay to merely depict the behaviour, without giving any message or insight?

I just took that image as if it was a piece of a movie. I didn't want to give a message in that one, just do a little concept of how that kind of mafia would look in a near future. Of course I don't agree with human trafficking, I just wanted a picture of that thing in the sci-fi mode.

I don't think the artist has the responsibility to give a message. The artist is free to do whatever he wants to do. And, I think, the day I want to speak about something, I would choose to write about it. It's not easy to give a complete message in just one image, without text. So, I would prefer to fully express my ideas in a text rather than in a picture.

Is it possible for an artist to hide their opinions and make their work "neutral"? Or do the artist's opinions always become visible in their work?

Yes, of course, it's easy to hide your opinions; there are a lot of topics that are very neutral.

Actually, one difficult thing is to express opinions in your art. You can easily see some parts of the personality of each artist in their pictures, but nothing too deep. I guess you would need a whole life of hard work to give to express your full ideas and personality in pictures.

Some genres of writing, such as science fiction and horror, can explore very intense and disturbing subjects. Do you think text can explore subjects that would be too intense if they were represented as visual art? Are there things we can read about, but would never want to see in an image?

I guess it depends on the mind of the reader. I never heard someone say "I had to stop reading", but I've heard people say "I had to stop watching".

Maybe we don't read enough to get to that point. Honestly, I don't know, but if I have to take the risk to answer... yes, text is able to offer subjects that would be too intense to be represented in visual arts.

Maybe when images can be connected to our brains to let us feel more senses this will change, haha. It could be awesome.

Now let's talk about your current project, these desert pirates. How did this project come about, and what's the goal?

Ok, I'll start from the goal. My goal is having fun working. (I think we all need this to be happy.)

Desert Pirates is just a concept art project I wanted to do to build up my portfolio. If we travel to my childhood, there we will find a day that I was skiing with my father. One of the first times I touched the snow. Then, we were sleeping in a friend's apartment, so we cooked something and my father showed me a movie that would change part of my life. It was *Waterworld*. *It amazed me, but I didn't know I was going to want to do that in the future.*

Then, I discovered amazing things like *Mad Max* and I fell in love with that amazing post-apocalyptic desert universe.

So the moment came where I decided I should develop some concept art based on a post-apocalyptic desert. Then, I just started mixing many things I love: from real life, from my inspirations when I was a kid, from my current influences: music, urban fashion, and other things—and I started developing characters and possible environments, and also vehicles.

Now, I have a strong assortment of ideas to make a lot of characters, different clans, vehicles, and so on.

After these first developing steps, I decided to upload the images to the internet. Not long after the day I uploaded my stuff, *Fathom Interactive*, a video game company, sent me an email saying they were interested in

the images.

So now, I am working with them, developing concept art for a new and very fun project. At the moment I have freedom to create my own characters and vehicles, and we are sharing different ideas and options to create scenes and environments. I am having a lot of fun with it, and I hope I can continue to develop the tone of the concept art because I am having an amazing time.

Hopefully, there is a lot of work to come from Desert Pirates.

Desert Pirates: Pirate Girls



Many films, books, and visual art have explored post-apocalyptic or wasteland settings. How are you approaching yours differently, and why?

In the visual side, I think I have many things to offer. I will try to show these in the work I am developing right now. But I prefer to keep that for me, and show it in images when they are finished and I have the freedom to show them. I also love to create characters and personalities, so I hope my characters will appeal to people. I agree that many things have already been done, so it will not be easy to beat the classics like *Mad Max*, or the new ones like *Rage*. But I will do my best.

This project uses a muted palette, while other pieces of yours, like *Soviet Business*, are vibrantly coloured. How do you decide how to colour an image? And what role does colour play in depicting a scene?

The culture we receive from cinema and photography, adding all these photographic filters to the images, is what I am trying to study and apply to my own concept art. Some of my techniques are taken from existing photographic filters, and other things are just emotional and non-rational choices.

Doing tests is also awesome, so I usually do some different coloring tests, playing with layer effects and other changes

to create new color palettes. Playing with vibrant and muted colors, and just playing with effects.

Post-apocalyptic settings are often full of lawlessness, pain, and suffering—so why do people love them so much?
Hahaha, I don't know why people love it.

Being alone and suffering is nothing unique to post-apocalyptic scenarios. It's something we can all relate to, we all suffer and feel alone more often than we would like. So, having a character who is tortured psychologically, is feeling alone and is suffering, is someone with who we can identify. You can write a story in any genre about someone like this, and people will relate to it.

But also, for me, post-apocalyptic environments are awesome, because I feel the earth is really going to end like this. Human behavior is running in that direction. So, trying to imagine what is gonna happen when everything we knew is destroyed, and we have forgotten the laws, our culture, our own past, is just something amazing. I don't think it would be pleasant to live there at all, but... there is something that is really attracting me.

Desert Pirates: Pizza Delivery



You spoke about the films and other influences which inspired you when you were young. Today, there are young people who are looking at your art and becoming inspired. What advice would you give to them about starting their career and finding their personal style?

Being a less experienced artist who is still trying to find his style, I would recommend that people not take inspiration from my novice art. Find as many references as you can, not only from current artists. Take a look at everything, the classic artists from our history, the most recent but “modern classic” artists too, who have spent a whole life perfecting their work and looking at the classic artists, and take a look at everything surrounding us. You will find more interesting things that you thought existed.

It's not easy to have a personal style—I am still working on it. But also, a style comes when you have done a lot of different things. Knowledge is the base, so trying to expand your knowledge about everything (not just color or



Desert Pirates: Badass Girl

anatomy, also lifestyle and philosophy) will bring you a personal style.

Be patient.

Try to be happy and enjoy what you are doing.

And try not to care about negative opinions. It's not easy, but it's the way to do what you want to do.

Thank you for your time.

Thanks to you, Saul. I am really happy to have met you, and I am very pleased to have got this amazing space in ISF.



This interview with Sergi Brosa was conducted via e-mail over the course of two weeks in November, 2013.

Mr. Brosa can be reached at:

E-Mail: brosart@gmail.com

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/sergi.brosa>

DeviantART: <http://brosa.deviantart.com>

Behance: <http://www.behance.net/Brosa>

ABOUT ISF

International Speculative Fiction (“ISF”) is a free online magazine published every three months. It features speculative fiction by international authors, with special attention given to non-anglophone writers.

ISF publishes three to four short stories per issue, along with one article and one interview. Our articles cover the speculative fiction scene in a variety of countries.

We also regularly publish short stories and articles on our website.

The current issue and all back issues of ISF are available for free on InternationalSF.wordpress.com.

If you’re an author and would like to submit fiction or non-fiction for future issues of ISF, please see our submission guidelines (in this e-book or on our website) and start submitting!

Roberto Mendes, Editor In Chief

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

FICTION:

Length - Less than 7.500 words;

Language - English;

Nationality of the author - We will consider fiction from authors of any nationality, although we will give preference to non-anglophone writers.

Type of document - We will appreciate doc. files (Arial 11, single space);

Essential Elements - Small biography and picture of the author and an abstract of the short story;

Themes - We are looking for International Speculative Fiction submissions. Pieces of fiction of various genres such as Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror and many

other sub-genres.

Please consider the following definition to get an Idea :
 “Speculative fiction is an umbrella term encompassing the more fantastical fiction genres, specifically science fiction, fantasy, horror, supernatural fiction, superhero fiction, utopian and dystopian fiction, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, and alternate history in literature as well as related static, motion, and virtual arts.[1]“
 (in Wikipédia)

We are looking for original pieces of fiction. However we will also appreciate pieces of fiction published solely in their original languages;

Submit to - correiodofantastico@gmail.com with the subject ”Submission of Fiction to ISF”.

ARTICLES:

Length - Less than 7.500 words;

Language - English;

Nationality of the author - All nationality’s.

Type of document - We will appreciate doc. files (Arial 11, single space);

Essential Elements - Small biography and picture of the author and an abstract of the article;

Themes - We are looking exclusively for articles about any kind of International Speculative Fiction.

We are looking for original articles. However we will also appreciate articles published solely in their original languages;

Submit to - correiodofantastico@gmail.com with the subject ”Submission of Article to ISF”.

MEET THE ISF TEAM

Editor In Chief: Roberto Mendes (Portugal)

I'm a 24 years old Portuguese Lawyer with a tremendous passion for Speculative Fiction. I have created a Portuguese e-zine called "Correio do Fantástico" in 2008 and edited two Portuguese fanzines/magazines called "Dagon" and "Conto Fantástico". I also edited "Vollüspa", a recent anthology of Portuguese Speculative Fiction featuring 15 authors.

Fiction Editor: Ricardo Loureiro (Portugal)

So, a phone call later and I was left with the dreaded mission of writing a bio and, worse, pick a photo of me. Well, I wouldn't go so far as saying that along with watching paint dry and grass grow that may well be the most boring stuff anyone could ask of me but it surely it's not far away from being that. Usually I take out my satirical hat and promptly make something up along the lines of being someone up to no good. Strangely for this project I felt that was not the right approach and after a lot of brain-torming with me and myself I came up with the solution. Incredibly I decided to play it safe and, for once, tell the truth. Or at least as near to the truth as anyone will ever get from me. So, without further ado here it is. Born in the year of the Monkey, anyone who knows me can surely attest to the fact that from all the animals monkey is the most suitable to describe me. Always swinging from tree to tree, always looking for another prank, always making fun of everything and making a habit of taking everything in super-ficially as possible. Well that describes me. As much as the iceberg we see above the waters describes the real iceberg beneath those same waters. Because, you see, being a cynical, satirical, incredibly nauseating son of a bitch is only a third of what I am. The other two thirds you'll have to discover through my work and what better place to judge it than right here at ISF?

Non-Fiction Editor: Nas Hedron (Canada/Brazil)

Nas Hedron is a writer, editor, and artist. He is originally from Canada, but now divides his time between his Canada and Brazil. He is the author of Luck and Death at the Edge of the World, The Virgin Birth of Sharks, and Felon and the Judas Kiss, among other works. His story Siren Songs in Deep Time appeared in issue 2 of ISF. Nas is also the editorial half of the team at IndieBookLauncher.com, which provides services to independent authors including editing, cover design, and e-book formatting. IndieBookLauncher.com provides copyediting for each issue of International Speculative Fiction (starting with #2), as well as its annual anthology. Nas's blog, with links to his books and other projects, can be found at NassauHedron.com

Interviewer: Cristian Tamas (Romania)

Cristian Tamaş is a Romanian essayist, translator and SF fan active within the speculative fiction domain since the 80s. He was founding member of the Romanian Science Fiction & Fantasy Society (SRSFF = Societatea Românâ de Science Fiction & Fantasy, www.srsff.ro/) in January 2009, and coordinated the ProspectArt, the SRSFF's SF club relaunched in April 2009 in Bucharest (Romania), and the yearly Ion Hobana Colloquium. He is a member of the Ion Hobana and a SRSFF's jury Awards. He is also Editor of "Bella Proxima", a trilingual Croatian SF anthology, together with Antuza Genescu and Aleksandar Ćiljak (Eagle Publishing House, Bucharest, 2012). He had interviewed David Brin, Prof. Rachel Haywood Ferreira (Division Head of the International Fantastic division of the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, Iowa State University, USA ; research focus is Latin American science fiction), Prof. Arielle Saiber (Bowdoin College, USA; research focus : Italian science fiction), Mariano Martín Rodríguez (SF scholar, Spain), Alexandre Babeanu (Solaris awarded Canadian SF author), Ugo Bellagamba (French SF author awarded with Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire & Prix Rosny), and Judit Lörinczy, an

interview that will be published in the first number of ISF magazine (hungarian SF author).

Head Designers:

Rafael Mendes (Portugal)

Hi my name is Rafael Mendes, also known as Designed Head. I'm Portuguese and I'm 16 years old. I've been working as a freelance Digital Artist for 5 years now and I am about to graduate as a Digital Artist student. I love all about design, 3d models and cinematography. I have worked with Roberto in many projects, such as "Dagon Magazine", "Vollüspa - Anthology of Portuguese Speculative Fiction", "Conto Fantástico Magazine" and more. I'm happy to be invited to this project and I will surely give my best to bring success to it.

João Paulo Sinal (Portugal)

I'm a 29 year old Communication Designer student and a corporal at the Portuguese Air Force. I was in the start team of "Correio do Fantástico" with Roberto Mendes but never got really into the Project due to massive life changing events. I like photography, digital painting and anything that relates with new Technologies. I'm very curious about everything and I'm a self teaching student in terms of software and hardware. Roberto invited me for this new Project and, although I'm dead with work from the degree, I'm going to do everything I can to contribute to the success of his new project.

Magazine Designer: Ana Ferreira (Portugal)

Ana Ferreira (also known around the internet as Adeslma Davies), is a Portuguese, English and German teacher that started in the magazine business as a slush reader for the Portuguese webzine "Nanozine". Eventually she took over the design section and is now preparing an edition dedicated to

Slush readers:

Raquel Margato (Portugal)

I'm Ana Raquel Margato (or Tomoyo, how some may know me from the Web) and I'm 21 years old. I have a degree in Education, but didn't fit in that area so I'm currently studying Communicational Science. My first contact with the magazine world was with "Waribashi", a Portuguese e-zine about Japanese culture (with which I'm completely passionate about). I wrote articles and helped in the organization.

I love reading, specially the Fantastic and Historical Romance, but I'm not very good at writing (seeing as I never seem to be able to finish any story I start).

Slush Reader and Proofreader: Diana Pinguicha (Portugal)

I was born in Lisbon, Portugal on the 6th of May 1989, but lived in Estremoz for the next eighteen years. I moved to Lisbon in 2007 so that I could take Computer Engineering classes at Instituto Superior Técnico and I have been there ever since. I live with my Persian and Maine Coon cats, Sushi and Jubas, who're the cutest kitties in the world!

The ISF consultant panel:

Ellen Datlow:

Ellen Datlow has been editing science fiction, fantasy, and horror short fiction for over thirty years. She was fiction editor of OMNI Magazine and SCIFICTION and has edited more than fifty anthologies, including the annual The Best Horror of the Year, Darkness: Two Decades of Modern Horror, Naked City: Tales of Urban Fantasy, Blood and Other Cravings, Supernatural Noir, Teeth: Vampire Tales, and After: Dystopian and Post-apocalyptic Tales (the latter two young adult anthologies with Terri Windling).

She's has won nine World Fantasy Awards, and has also won multiple Locus Awards, Hugo Awards, Stoker Awards, International Horror Guild Awards, Shirley Jackson Awards, and the 2012 Il Posto Nero Black Spot

Award for Excellence as Best Foreign Editor. Datlow was named recipient of the 2007 Karl Edward Wagner Award, given at the British Fantasy Convention for “outstanding contribution to the genre” and was honored with the Life Achievement Award given by the Horror Writers Association, in acknowledgment of superior achievement over an entire career.

She lives in New York. More information can be found at <http://www.datlow.com> or at her blog: <http://ellen-datlow.livejournal.com/>. You can also find her on twitter.

Paul Di Filippo

Paul Di Filippo began reading science fiction at the age of five, when he encountered his first Mighty Mouse comic. He published his first story in 1977, and has since become responsible for thirty books under his byline. He hopes to keep at this game for some time yet. His tastes in fantastika are omnivorous.

indiebooklauncher.com

IndieBookLauncher.com helps self-publishing authors navigate the e-publishing process from start to finish. Founded in 2012 as a partnership between indie author Nassau Hedron and graphic designer Saul Bottcher, we offer professional editing, cover design, and e-book production services at affordable rates.

We're excited to work with International Speculative Fiction to help them promote the work of non-anglophone authors to a wider audience!

If you're an author looking for a partner to help you e-publish, you can visit our site at www.IndieBookLauncher.com. Our editor, Nassau Hedron, has experience working with non-anglophone authors and can help you prepare your manuscript for publication to the English-speaking market.