Sci-Fi -James Schellenberg

An Engineer and a Dreamer

I wrote this piece a few weeks after Clarke's death in March 2008.

Sad news: Arthur C. Clarke, science fiction writer and inventor/scientist, died recently—at the age of 90, he had a full life, but it's still a great loss. To mark his passing, I picked up my favourite of his books, Childhood's End, and gave it a re-read. Some of his other accomplishments, like his work on 2001: a space odyssey, might be more famous, but Childhood's End has always hit me hardest.

Childhood's End is about alien invasion, but like most of Clarke's work, this is not a standard-issue form of the stereotype, and it's not an invasion at all. The aliens basically show up and fix everything about human society, but they refuse to show us what they look like for fifty years. Altruistic… and sneaky? What are they waiting for? Could they have ulterior motives of some kind? The title of the book certainly seems ominous.

I was struck this time around by how weird this book is. For one thing, it's got a massively broken narrative structure. The first third of the book is a mish-mash; the ostensible protagonist—the UN Secretary General—disappears after this point, and the identity of the next leading character is not immediately obvious when the new segment starts. 2001 also has a famously broken-up timeline, and I think it's for the same reason. Clarke is trying to operate on a more-than-human time scale—the first third of Childhood's End covers that fifty-year period where the aliens conceal themselves—and regular humans tend to get lost in the shuffle. Likewise, 2001 jumped ahead, in that case by millennia. The ideas behind the story in Childhood's End tend to militate against human-scale narrative as well, as I'll explain in a minute.

The first time I read Childhood's End (about twenty years ago now!), my tiny little teenager's mind was blown by the big reveal at that one-third mark: the aliens who come to visit look like demons! That was about as much as I could handle, and that's about all I remembered about the book. But that was enough to burn it into the very foundations of how I read books and judge pop culture in general. The explanation later on in the book, that the medieval imagery of devils was actually a premonition of the role of these particular aliens in the termination of childhood referred to in the title, was the fireworks on the cake, so to speak. Clarke found an image, an idea with a great amount of punch,

and deployed it skilfully into a science-fiction work. That's shocking stuff when you're a youngster just figuring this kind of thing out. If Clarke could wrap up so much potent material in a "low-brow" paperback, maybe other writers could too.

The second time I read Childhood's End, about ten years ago, I was in a Kubrick phase, so the earlier book (Childhood's End came out in 1953, 2001 in 1968) seemed like a pale shadow of the themes that were reworked in the movie. Interestingly, the two seem to operate entirely on different methods. In 2001, Clarke and Kubrick created the images and ideas that subsequently had such punch because they inserted themselves so firmly into the stream of cultural consciousness. The monolith, the murderous computer HAL, the psychedelic trip through space, etc. Childhood's End manipulated existing material.

In my latest trip through the book, I noticed most keenly the nature of the end of childhood. Our current form of humanity is, apparently, very childish; at the very least, it's incredibly small and powerless in comparison to the gigantic nature of the galaxy (a point made explicitly in the book). What might the next step in human evolution look like? What's our adult form once we grow out of childhood? Childhood's End presents this step as both eerie and beautiful, at once dangerous, frightening, and completely necessary. There's bound to be growing pains. And when you're talking about the entire human race going through some kind of mental puberty, your storyline might have no choice but to take the wide view. The storytelling apparatus here is clunky but it still works (as a side note, I would suggest Spin by Robert Charles Wilson as the book that comes closest to integrating human-scale and astronomical-scale events in a readable way; in Clarke's defense, Spin came out fifty years after Childhood's End).

Clarke wrote two other books that are worth reading: Rendezvous with Rama, one of the best big-dumb-object stories (a subgenre where humans explore an enormous alien artifact that's generally beyond our understanding), and The Fountains of Paradise, which was an odd little number that helped popularize the idea of a space elevator. I would recommend avoiding the sequels to 2001, since the quality falls off sharply; any books "co-written" by Clarke are also reliably bad, since, as usual for such items, the quality depends on the name of the co-writer who did most of the work.

I don't think of Clarke's books as visceral favourites, but he's still a big name for me personally—Childhood's End and Dune were the two books that turned me on to science fiction all those years ago. Clarke had

an engineer's mind for detail, but used that knack in the service of a dreamer's story; the resulting wild mix sometimes tended to the cold, cerebral side, but that mix was always memorable.

He'll be missed.

A Decade Later

Gurney's blog (see link below) is still going strong two years later and generated material for his new book, Imaginative Realism.

The dinosaur craze seems to be over, sorry to say. One last hurrah: Dinotopia: Journey to Chandara, the latest entry in the Dinotopia series, is out now. James Gurney wrote and illustrated the original 3 books in the 90s, and returns to the scene of his triumph just about ten years later. Is the magic still there?

I dunno, I was never super thrilled by dinosaurs… maybe I was too old during the 90s? I mean, I saw Jurassic Park just like everyone else, but images of dinosaurs don't have a visceral thrill for me like some other pop culture items might. My brain is weird that way. For example, I find vampires kinda boring, but even the lowliest zombie movie will give me nightmares for weeks. Dinosaurs fall into the former category for me.

Another odd tic of mine: I get really enthusiastic about the first work of an author and then less enthused as time wears on—and this despite the fact that they should be learning their craft and improving. I might be a novelty junkie or something. (Another possible explanation: authors have long years to work on a debut, but the follow-up has to be 12 months later, as they say).

So, when Dinotopia: Journey to Chandara came out earlier this year, I had two things on my mind: dinosaurs… why now? And, will Gurney have improved with age or gotten boring and repetitious?

As it turns out, the 15 years since the original Dinotopia have worked in Gurney's favour. At the baldest level, Journey to Chandara is not much more than a reworking of the earlier Dinotopia books. But Gurney hasn't lost his writing or painting skills. And the anti-trendiness is fine too: sure, there's an element of faded glory here, but at least it's not a bandwagon any more. What's more, the easy stuff on the topic of dinosaurs has been skimmed off, so Gurney has to work harder than ever. And that's always been the key, as far as I can tell, to making a sequel that doesn't suck. If you realize that a sequel is harder, not easier, than go ahead and give it a try. Long odds, but at least you've started off a step ahead of everyone else.

The book itself breaks down into several types of things. There is text, but it's fairly straightforward stuff. An obscure manuscript turns out to be the long-lost diary of Arthur Dennison, an explorer from the 1860s who discovered the island of Dinotopia—dinosaurs and humans have a thriving society together in friendship—and is now crossing the vast

land to the mysterious city of Chandara. The small bits of text are surrounded by large-scale paintings of the flora and fauna of this wonderful land.

I was amazed by the amount of detail in the depiction of dinosaurs; for one thing, the paintings include the proper Latin name of each dinosaur. Gurney has clearly done his research—a lot of interesting and recent paleontological research gets channeled into this "fictional" world. Chandara is like an excuse to portray all of the new finds from the Gobi.

My particular favourite is a linked set of two-page spreads right near the beginning of the book. The adventure starts in a city named Waterfall City, and we're given a map of it, complete with labels for all the buildings and geographical features. So far so good, I love that stuff. Then you turn the page and you get a gorgeous two page spread that shows the city itself in action. You have to turn the page back and forth, checking to see what each item is. It was a neat effect, and, oddly, better than if the map had been an inset right next to the big blow-up.

I would highly recommend the blog that Gurney set up for the book tour associated with this latest Dinotopia entry. The blog's called Gurney Journey (also available on the Amazon page for the book) and it seems like he knows everyone in the illustration and paleontology worlds. But he doesn't seem to be much of a pretentious guy—it's all a big community of excitable creative types, which makes me a little envious. And the blog itself feels generous, with lots of advice on drawing techniques, how to put an immense project together, keeping motivated, etc. I also like his bits on inspiration: I actually found his blog by way of a particular post that's still the best of them all, Cracking Paint and City Streets1. I used to love drawing maps and making castles in the mud and such when I was a kid, so this struck a chord for me.

So, on its own, there's not much to fault with the latest Dinotopia venture. It's got lovely paintings to look at, a story that gives an excuse to wander through various landscapes, and the book itself is put together beautifully. Does it add up to more than that? I was more moved by the book than I thought I would be; that's partly my inner child speaking, marvelling at the creatures and maps and funny details. But more than that, it's an odd, singular vision presented in the Dinotopia world, and I respond to worlds that are portrayed so coherently and so lovingly.

1http://gurneyjourney.blogspot.com/2007/10/cracking-paint-and-city-streets.html

All-Star Childhood Memories

Nowadays I can pick up any pop cultural obsession that I want - hey, it's the internet age and my nerdy disposable income goes a long ways. But when I was a kid, it was almost always hard to find cool stuff.

I ended up reading a whole lot of crap, since I didn't have as much control over what I could find. In a situation like that, the formative moments are not always the ones you'd want them to be, looking back as a grown-up.

I was persistent enough, though, to find a few gems along the way, like Patricia A. McKillip's The Riddle-Master of Hed.

That's the first book in a trilogy, and all three books are memorable. The first book, from the year 1976, was followed by Heir of Sea and Fire a year later, and the saga concluded with Harpist in the Wind in 1979. All three are short, as far as trilogies go—all told, the trio clocks in at under 600 pages. Most epic fantasies take up that much space in a single volume!

In the first book, a young prince of Hed, Morgon, is trying to go about his life as the leader of a small island full of farmers. But he has three stars burned on his forehead, and in a world where an unanswered riddle is easily fatal, no one can answer the question posed by the strange markings.

The first book is an introduction to the world, but also a kind of abstract story. Constant danger surrounds Morgon, but it's not always clear where it's coming from or why. That puts us in sympathy with Morgon, since he's in the process of figuring out what's going on too.

The Riddle-Master of Hed is atmospheric and furnished with some imaginative magic, but a bit standard, complete with a magical young man growing up. Standard, at least until the ending! The first book concludes with a cliffhanger that frightened the heck out of me as a kid and that I still found quite chilling when I re-read it.

What's more, instead of bogging down in the second book like most fantasy trilogies do, McKillip uses the cliffhanger of the first book as an opportunity. Heir of Sea and Fire leaves our standard male hero dangling and picks up with a woman named Raederle. She and Morgon are destined to be together, but she's not really waiting around for her white knight. The second book is mainly about Raederle's efforts to find Morgon, and then the third book is about their partnership, which is not treated as protagonist and sidekick, but rather a duo of powerful people. Smart stuff, and it makes the trilogy tightly constructed, with two

character arcs that then merge to form third. It's not entirely balanced but it's much more so than most fantasy stories.

In the introduction to the 1999 omnibus edition, McKillip talks about how Tolkien hit her like a bolt of lightning. But you would hardly know it from this book: on the scale of slavish Tolkien imitations, this one hardly registers. There might be a prophecy and a map, but all else is entirely McKillip's own marvellous work.

That's ironic praise, considering what I'm about say next: her prose and plotting have a tendency to the elliptical. Elliptical is a polite way of saying "obscure" for the books that don't work, and "intriguing" for the ones that do, like The Riddle-Master trilogy. These gaps are artfully done, just like everything in her novels, and they make her books very unique.

All the same, I have to confess that I haven't kept up with McKillip's recent books. Her love of the elliptical has only intensified, and I've found the plots a little too puzzling for me. If this is your fancy, that's great. In fact I'm thrilled that there's a writer out there who isn't churning out the same fantasy crap. In this particular case, it's a road I can't follow.

This article was the first in an informal series: revisiting the books that I read as a kid to see how they hold up. When I think of McKillip, I also think of my younger self's encounter with Robin McKinley's duo of books, The Hero and the Crown, the second book I ever bought with my own money, and The Blue Sword, the first book I ever read with a sex scene in it!

See: "I Don't Remember, I Don't Recall"

I Don't Remember, I Don't Recall

Robin McKinley's The Hero and the Crown, a young adult fantasy novel from the early 1980s, always stood out in my memory as a formative read from childhood. Unfortunately I couldn't really say what the book was about! Over the years, everything about it had faded.

The Blue Sword, which McKinley wrote earlier but is set later in the same fantasy realm, does have a scene that I remembered: it's a sex scene, the first that I could recall reading as a kid. At least I thought it was in The Blue Sword…

Now that I've reread the two books, I was shocked to discover that the racy stuff actually took place in The Hero and the Crown!

With that kind of a mental switcheroo, it just confirms that it really was years ago that I read the books. I probably bought the The Hero and the Crown in grade 5 or 6, not long after I had discovered Lord of the Rings—yup, that's a few decades ago!

(As a digression: does anyone else remember school book fairs? I never had much money as a kid, but I did save up to buy lots of Gordon Korman books. Not many others survived from those years, but I still have Korman, McKinley, and a much-worn copy of The Hobbit.)

I have only one other memory of McKinley's book—and now I'm starting to doubt whether it's true. I recall looking at the cover (which depicts a giant black dragon blasting a human with fire) with some of my friends and saying, "As if this tiny person can win against this giant dragon!" If I wasn't already a smart-ass critic in grade school, at least that's what I'd like to think I was—it could very well be that my brain has filled in this anecdote…

With such a complete lack of recall, what was it like to revisit this book? That was another surprise—huge sections were instantly familiar.

While I didn't remember any specific scenes before I started reading, entire scenes, down to bits of phrasing, came back to me wholesale. This book made a big impression on me - not in the sense that I could recall the plot points, since that was not the case. But rather that it formed so much of my reading consciousness, the way that I developed as a reader. I would go so far as to say that re-reading this book was a direct pipeline back to my childhood mind.

The Hero and the Crown is the story of Aerin, a princess who doesn't fit in with her family and wants her own purpose in life. To prove herself, she goes up against a dragon, as promised by the cover. I remember being fascinated by her attempts to create a fire-proof ointment. She

confidently tests it on a bonfire; then she discovers that dragon-fire, not surprisingly, is much worse.

I haven't given away all that much about the book, since Aerin defeats the black dragon Maur by the halfway point. Much is yet to come.

The Blue Sword takes place generations later, when most magic is gone. Harry doesn't fit in with her family either, and has to prove her own worth. The writing quality is high, but it's not as polished as the later book and the story feels less smooth as well.

The Hero and the Crown won the Newberry Medal, and some of the material here made me ponder what it's like to write for a younger audience. If we can call it a responsibility, McKinley handles it with great assurance. I didn't understand everything she wrote about, back in the old days, but I never felt condescended to. In other words, this is a book that stands up to re-reading.

Growing up is not an easy thing to write about (as the lesser quality of McKinley's own The Blue Sword shows). Rites of passage are always about learning your own strengths, the limitations of those in authority (usually parents), and maybe a few hints of sexual maturity. Aerin becomes a sexual adult with the least of fuss—it's so matter-of-fact that the impact is magnified. Looking back, I became very curious to see if The Hero and the Crown would be banworthy, like perennial target Judy Blume or others, but not so. Other fantasies get banned—like chaste Harry Potter—so I'm still a little mystified. This is a happy oversight for young nerds, who wouldn't be caught dead reading Judy Blume (well, I did anyways, but it never stuck with me in the same way).

Not So Happy Ending

Talk about a long journey. Stephen King wrote the first line of a short story called "The Gunslinger" in 1970, at the beginning of his career, and the first volume of the Dark Tower series was published in 1982. Nearly 35 years after its humble beginnings, the series has come to its conclusion with the nearly 900 pages of the seventh volume, simply called The Dark Tower. Fans have been waiting for this book for a long time, and you'd think they'd trust King to wrap things up properly. Some readers like the ending, but an equally large proportion detest it.

What's the fuss?

The first and most straightforward reason is that King puts himself in the story. He first shows up as a character in the previous book—King is a writer, and many of his stories are coming true in the alternate versions of reality that the other characters come from. These characters are angry that King has given up on writing the Dark Tower series because that means they won't complete their quest. He's a bit of a loser and a drunk, but his writing is also the crucial difference between the end of the universe and its rejuvenation. Many bits of his other books show up in these last two Dark Tower books. Overall, it's a strange mix of massively swollen ego and a self-critical examination.

Including yourself in your story is a perfectly legitimate narrative strategy, but it's incredibly difficult to pull off, and it will simply never work for a large number of people (see: the typical reaction to a massively swollen ego). I don't care much for it myself, mostly because it smacks too much of a writer running out of ideas and then looking in the mirror. Metafiction like this just seems like too much of an easy temptation. A writer has to work hard to convince me otherwise, and King doesn't quite pull it off.

The second main reason for the fan hysteria is that the seventh book seems to be written by a different person. Simply put, King has undergone huge changes in his thinking about the series. The easiest way to explain it is by analogy. Michael Whelan, noted sf illustrator, provided the cover and interior illustrations for the very first Dark Tower book and now the very last one. It's no accident that the main character of the Dark Tower, Roland, looks a lot like Clint Eastwood in Whelan's illustrations (especially in this book)—the hero was clearly drawn from Eastwood's persona when King first started writing. That was back in the early 1970s, when Eastwood had made his mark in spaghetti westerns

and was moving into the era of Dirty Harry and even more violent revenge fantasies.

While the comparison is not a strictly accurate one (and I don't want to give away much about the ending), King's version of the hero six books later is like what Eastwood did with his own persona in the revisionist Unforgiven. Unforgiven ruthlessly cuts down everything about the way that most such stories use an ultaviolent antihero, essentially a psychotic killer, as an engine of the story. In one sense, Eastwood was punishing Dirty Harry. The problem for King is that Unforgiven is a different movie than The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly or Dirty Harry. People who hate Unforgiven can go back to enjoying the days when Clint looked down the barrel of his gun and said, "Are you feeling lucky, punk?" King has put this revised hero in the same series. If you like the driven, amoral Roland of the first few Dark Tower books, you might not be happy with what happens to him later.

While I applaud this change, and I appreciated the ending of the series, consider this: you're reading an epic fantasy, you've been looking forward to the ending for (perhaps literally) your whole life as a reader, you love the characters, you hiss at the villains, and so forth. Can you demand a happy ending? What are your rights as a reader? I have no answer to these questions, but I can understand the point of someone who has gotten deeply into the story and feels let down by the ending.

Ironically, King's slow pace at completing the series likely made things worse for his most compulsive readers. I think that someone who picks up the first book and reads all seven in a row, now that all are available, might be mystified by the big fuss. If you've been building expectations in your head for twenty years, any conclusion could be a let-down.

The Trouble with Endings

I've noticed recently that otherwise good stories have been let down by their endings. It's partly due to the expectations of the audience: you can imagine any kind of ending you want, but when the ending finally arrives, it's been narrowed down to a single one of those possibilities and it might not be as good as the one in your head. I argued this was the case for Stephen King's Dark Tower series.

The other reason for a bad ending: nobody in charge thought about it. And in the case of Minority Report, the filmmakers clearly had no freaking idea what to do with the conclusion of the story, and decided to just keep throwing more and more junk at the screen.

I was thinking about Minority Report and its painful ending because I recently watched the zombie movie 28 Days Later. As far as zombie flicks go, it was reasonably creepy, at least until I started watching some of the extras on the DVD. Not only was there an alternate ending, there was an alternate last half. The creative team had a solid premise, but the ending, such as it was, suddenly felt very arbitrary to me.

It's certainly true that when a writer of any kind is looking at a story, they'll consider a number of different conclusions. That's normal, but the process is best served by picking one that fits the tone and (for lack of a better word) meaning of the story. If you don't know how to end your movie or book, to me that's a sign that you don't know what your story is about or how it will affect the audience.

Now, what movie did this remind me of? Oh yeah, Minority Report.

I actually give fairly high marks to this movie. It has a strong pedigree: it's based on a short story by Philip K. Dick, one of the notable writers in the genre (and whose novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? was filmed as Blade Runner); it's directed by Steven Spielberg, who is no slouch in the blockbuster scifi department; and it stars Tom Cruise, who despite being a bland-y superstar has actually acted for some of the best directors (Stanley Kubrick and Ridley Scott among them).

Minority Report also has a high dose of the cognitive kick that makes for the best science fiction. The movie takes Dick's idea—policing based on precognition—and collides it full tilt into recent notions of the surveillance society. It's wildly scary when advertisers know your every purchasing habit, the police have a way of predicting what you'll do and arrest you before you've committed a crime, and there's no escape from this dazzling matrix of social control.

I should also mention that the movie has some awesome action sequences. The best two are a pair that happen right in the middle of the movie. Tom Cruise is on the run, and he is up against a squad of cops who have jetpacks (a scene that keenly demonstrates the movie's sardonic sense of humour). He also fights the police in a fully-automated car factory—lots o' destruction.

Now, it's a bit absurd to show a future that has completely destroyed the freedom of the individual, then fall back on nonsensical action movie heroics as the way out. That's not a surprise, seeing how the plot of most Hollywood scifi movies are constructed, but it's still absurd in this context.

The bigger sin of the movie is easy to summarize: the ending stinks. For several reasons. The first is that the plot holes begin to accumulate, and if you're the kind of person who cares about that kind of stuff, it gets on your nerves. Why is the police building so poorly secured? The people with precognition—they can apparently only see murders ahead of time, but later on a chase sequence directly contradicts this. And so forth.

I'm more worried about two other aspects of the ending. People call it a false ending when you think the story is over but it keeps going. At the cheapest level, this is like the slasher movie villain who doesn't die. Minority Report is a little more sophisticated but it still has about half an hour of screen time at the conclusion that takes place after the apparent finale. I understand that this is a valid narrative trick, but it has to be done well or your audience will be annoyed with you. You have to earn it with something striking as a payoff.

That's related to my other point about the ending. Writing a story about a totalitarian society is tricky because the denouement for any individual is almost always tragic. If you want a happy ending, you have to work hard to convince the audience either: a) the protagonist brought down the system single-handedly; or b) the protagonist happened to live at the historical moment when a great number of people brought about change together. Minority Report wants option a) for Tom Cruise, along with a romantic ending, and it doesn't feel right in comparison to all the hard work the movie did earlier convincing us of the scary and terrible nature of this societal system.

Explaining Vampires

Butler's death in February 2006 was a huge loss. This article would have been much different in the post-Twilight era.

I don't care that much for vampire stories. It's a reflexive dislike that's hard to define—basically, I'm not part of the target audience of the whole vampire fascination.

Another pet peeve of mine is the amnesiac protagonist. What an absolutely lame excuse to explain everything to the audience! When I see that a book features memory loss, I put it down with scarcely another glance.

So it's a good thing that I ignored my prejudices and read Octavia E. Butler's Fledgling, a story of a young vampire girl named Shori who wakes up in the forest with no memory of her previous life or how she got there.

An amnesiac vampire… how does Butler pull it off? For one thing, Fledgling shows Butler at the top of her writing game, which takes away some of the pain of the amnesia storyline. In terms of vampire stereotypes, Butler succumbs to none of them: Shori's story is the furthest thing from an Anne Rice ripoff imaginable.

The quality of Butler's writing is astonishing—the book is strong, clear, and grabs you even if you don't want to go along (which was my case). I would rate her work easily the equal of Ursula K. Le Guin; like Le Guin's recent YA fantasy Gifts, the prose here is never too ornate but it also retains an undeniable esthetic power. It feels right, and it feels compelling.

Vampire stories almost inevitably deal in themes of power and sexuality. What would it be like to be under the thrall of a ruthless being like Dracula? Ooo, scary. Butler flips all that on its head by telling the story from Shori's point of view. And Shori is an intensely sympathetic character, starting with the first thing that we know about her—her entire family has been murdered and then burned to ash along with everything else in their village. Butler keeps these opening segments of the book popping along, and before we know it, we're firmly on Shori's side.

It's true that Shori sucks blood, and this act binds a human irretrievably to her will if it happens more than two or three times. But Butler keeps our sympathy by making Shori a member of a vampire faction that respects humans and is fighting against a splinter group that's much worse. The ideas and themes of the book are subversive because we can't help but identify with Shori, the enemy. It's empathy whether we want it or not.

Butler was not alone in choosing to write a vampire novel after making a reputation with other types of fiction. The biggest other example is Robin McKinley, the well-known YA fantasy author, who wrote a book called Sunshine a few years ago. I decided to read Sunshine after running across a comment by Suzy McKee Charnas: as someone who also writes vampire stories, she was making an insider's complaint that Sunshine explains things in blinding detail. Feeling bold, I would widen the complaint to say that this happens to vampire novels in general, especially if you include Elizabeth Kostova's bestselling The Historian.

I suppose it's a matter of life and death, as illustrated by Fledgling. Shori will die if she doesn't figure out the intricacies of vampire life and vulnerability. In most other books, it's the humans who need to figure out if garlic works, if a wooden stake will kill, and so forth.

Another thing struck me, less while reading Fledgling and more with regard to The Historian. A topic like vampires is so widely written about that the topic attracts a lot of minutia—is this a vampire like a Stephen King or an Anne Rice vampire? Or like a Buffy vampire? The differences are crucial to those involved in the fictional perils (ironically, this is something that I've noticed all fictional characters in a vampire story talk about!). In a vicious circle, a writer like Kostova then has to write 600 pages of hardcore history to differentiate her take on vampires from the umpteen other ones.

On a slightly different topic, what does it mean that all of the writers mentioned here (with the exception of Stephen King) have been women? I'm really not sure, since vampire fiction itself varies so much. I would put Butler and McKinley and Kostova in a higher bracket of quality than writers who specialize in vampire fiction like Anne Rice or Laurell K. Hamilton, but this is my own bias showing. All the same, female dominance in writing vampire fiction of all kinds would take a whole new article to unravel.

A sad note to end with. Octavia E. Butler died just a few months ago, and Fledgling was her last book. Butler was a unique figure, a writer who brought enormous quality to the science fiction that she wrote. I highly recommend all of her books; Fledgling is a good place to start, even if it does stand apart from her other books.

So Awesome, Then Churned Out by a Factory

This has been the biggie: I've started re-reading the Pern series by Anne McCaffrey. Wow, talk about a trip! I had almost completely forgotten the series and its impact on me years ago. I think this was due to the excessive sequels that tarnished the creativity of the project.

But now that I've re-read Dragonflight, the book that started the whole Pern deal way back in 1968, I feel like I've discovered a lost chunk of my brain. The first book is completely crazed—it's got dozens of science fiction ideas thrown into a wild mix of melodrama, and it explodes in six different directions at once.

Here is a quick list of the main concepts that McCaffrey jams into one 250-page book:

• Dragons—they fly, they teleport, they belch flame

• Time travel—I won't add any other spoilers, but McCaffrey gets pretty heavily into paradoxes and timelines

• Colony world in decay—Pern is a planet that was colonized by an advanced society long ago but that has now fallen into primitive times (this one has been used hundreds of times in science fiction but seldom so effectively)

• Interstellar menace—spores from outer space, the "Red Star" to be more specific, fall as "Threads" from the sky for fifty years, followed by a two hundred year gap—a "Thread" will kill all organic life that it touches

• Weird implications of all of the above—McCaffrey is quite adept at figuring out the social consequences of all these things and creating an interesting story, which is very difficult!

It's this last point which probably makes the whole book so vivid. For example, the colonists genetically engineered dragons to burn Threads from the sky, but the gaps between the passes of the Red Star are long enough that ordinary people resent supporting the dragonmen. In Dragonflight, these kinds of details are worked out with extra-ordinary flair.

McCaffrey also throws in a ton of melodrama, and I see this as a large part of the appeal of visiting Pern. There's always some kind of personal conflict going on—I think McCaffrey's cast of characters was my introduction to people who just don't get along. The first book also adapted a large part of its plot structure from romance: strong-willed young girl, authoritative older man … throw them together with some peril and watch the fireworks.

Best of all, the dragons and time travel and interstellar spores are just background for the tumultuous lives of people we soon care about or dislike intensely. I'm not saying that the wacky SF ideas are superfluous—more that we learn about them as part of the trials and tribulations of interesting characters.

Dragonflight displays quite a florid writing style on McCaffrey's part. It's a bit hard to pin down precisely, but I think it might be in the use of adverbs. Everyone is either "lounging indolently" or "drawling sardonically" or some such thing. McCaffrey doesn't seem able to turn down any rhetorical trick that would amp up the immediate impact of the story.

I loved the Pern books, but I kind of lost interest in the series as the "churned out by a factory" quotient went up and not much new was going on. Sequels are always dicey propositions to me. I like "more of the same" just like everyone else, but it gets boring after a while. If a book is just coasting on its predecessors, it gets obvious fast. Prequels are much worse, since there's often no hope of anything new at all. In that sense, I'm a novelty junkie—I actually don't want to know how the Pernese dragons were developed, or how the Threads first hit Pern. That stuff is great as backstory. Front and centre, it's just a drag.

But now that I've re-read Dragonflight, I can see where the various sequels and prequels came from—they're all in this book already. The second book, Dragonquest, deals with tensions with a group called the "oldtimers" and they first arrive on the scene here, while the third book, The White Dragon, has a protagonist who had a very dramatic birth in this book. Durable characters—like Robinton the masterharper—were here, and a whole framework of craftholder life sets up the Dragondrums trilogy. The legend of Moreta, queen dragon-rider of the ancient past, is mentioned with reverence, and sure enough, she gets her own book later too.

That's about where I lost interest in the series—quite a few books followed. I take the point that McCaffrey is painting on a broad canvas of thousands of years, but after a such a mind-numbing quantity of sequels, everything compelling and unique has long been done. I knew that part, but I was glad to be reminded of the superb quality of Dragonflight. Turns out that I wasn't crazy to be enthused about the series in the first place!

Smooth, Smoother, Smoothest

When I read the second and third Attolia books later, I was happy to discover that they are just as good as the first book.

I get sucked in very easily by books that are smooth on the surface. If a book has glossy enough writing and a well-paced storyline, then I'm almost always a sucker for it. But when a book also has something intriguing going on underneath the surface, then I feel like my optimism has been rewarded—and that's when I really love a book. Enter Megan Whalen Turner's The Thief.

The Thief is a young adult novel from about a decade ago. It was Turner's first novel, and kicked up some fuss, including a Newberry Honor. It's ostensibly labelled fantasy, and you can easily read it that way. But it's closer to Guy Gavriel Kay's way of creating historical alternates than, say, Dungeons & Dragons. In this case, Turner models ancient Greek city-states, with a few anachronisms like guns, and a very subtle case of polytheism. That the gods are listening makes it a fantasy? I guess. There's also a quest for a magic object.

Gen is in the king's prison; he's the thief of the title. The king's advisor, the magus, will free Gen on one condition: that Gen helps him steal the aforementioned magic object. The magic doodad, Hamiathes's Gift, will apparently guarantee the holder the kingship of a neighbouring country. The magus, Gen, and a few soldiers go on a trek, locate the hiding spot, then turn the success of the expedition over to Gen and his thieving ways. All along, they've been telling each other stories of their gods and goddesses.

The bits and pieces in my summary resemble a stereotypical fantasy novel much more so than when you're reading the book. The difference is in the characterization I guess, since there are some remarkable moments along the way, and some puzzling aspects click together with resounding elegance at the end. It's adventure, sure, but unexpectedly coherent and impressive.

The difference is also in the smooth writing. Turner's style reminds me a great deal of Ursula K. Le Guin, who always stands in for smooth prose when I think about such things. The Thief is like a less gloomy version of Le Guin's The Tombs of Atuan, to be perhaps too precise.

Turner has written two sequels. I must say, though, that as much as I'm looking forward to those next two books, The Queen of Attolia and The King of Attolia, the delicious sense of anticipation—yes, the author has written some more books in the series!—is mingled with a large

proportion of wariness. I'm jaded, but I've been burned too many times. It's started to affect my enjoyment of a book, even if it stands alone.

A few examples to illustrate. My clearest example is always His Dark Materials by Philip Pullman. I loved The Golden Compass, thought The Subtle Knife (book two) was ok, and hated the concluding book, The Amber Spyglass. But even if the follow-up books are not giant disappointments, they very seldom live up to the first book. I liked Garth Nix's Sabriel quite a lot, but books two and three were simply… passable. Similarly, one of the reader reviews for The Thief on Amazon mentioned a similarity to Lian Hearn's Tales of the Otori, which brought back a flood of memories for me. I had managed to block that series from my mind for years, so I went back and checked my notes. Sure enough, I loved the first book, but as it turns out, books two and three were awesome too - right up until the grand finale, which was hideous and random. I had been burned by recommending The Golden Compass to a bunch of people before finishing the series myself, so I was holding off on doing the same for Hearn's series. It looked so promising! And book three so good too, I was looking for boxed sets for gifts, the whole deal.

Will the same thing happen for Turner? I'm a weird mix of gloom and optimism, as I've mentioned: I would love to have an example to counter my reasons for despair. At this point, all I can say for sure is that I'm glad that The Thief is a relatively self-contained work, just like Sabriel by Nix. If the next two books are ho-hum, I'll just have to come back and read the first one again.

The Nature of the Hero, Rowling-Style

A few months ago, I decided to take the plunge: I would burn through the Harry Potter series, now complete, all in one go. It's been… interesting. I've discovered all kinds of things I had not realized before, including the fact that Harry is—to put it diplomatically—not a particularly effective hero.

When I decided to plow through the series, I had what turned out to be a fair number of misconceptions. In each book, he fights Voldemort at the end, and there's a bunch of "British boarding school" material that fills in the rest of it. Not so! The boarding school stuff is omnipresent, but it all supports two themes:

- The nature of the hero, specifically Harry
- Growing up

None of this is groundbreaking stuff, per se, but Rowling handles it extraordinarily well. In terms of growing up, books 5 and 6 have a lot more material about romance, and how relationships are not a particularly easy thing when you're a teenager. Some of this feels about as painful as reality (fortunately not at the Freaks and Geeks level of gritty painfulness—I've been catching up on my iconic-yet-cancelled TV shows). In general, Harry is learning more about the adult world (in this case, the wizarding world) each year, and he gets more and more entangled in adult things like racism and dishonesty, and the rather grim realization that mistakes you made in your life years ago can cause problems much further down the road.

As for the nature of Harry the hero, I made a claim that he's ineffective, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. For one thing, he gets a lot of hype around him, but his lack of perfection humanizes him in a way that a more heroic version might not. As Rowling has portrayed him, Harry is a convincing mix of hot-headed and naive; in the later books, he gets quite angry. If he was always calm and perfectly in control and all-powerful, he would be another Dumbledore! (Considerations of Dumbledore's character would be an entirely different column).

I would draw a parallel between Harry and Buffy, another "heroic" character, another "Chosen One" (both series use this exact phrase, making my comparison a little too easy), and while both would much rather have a normal life, they don't lay down their burdens. I would say that Harry is a much angrier character than Buffy, who had her roots in her "Valley Girl goes into a dark alley and comes out triumphant" high-concept. Harry comes out of a Roald Dahl tradition, whose influences I

would argue are particularly strong on the first book. As he grows up, he becomes much more susceptible to rage - against the Dahl-esque Dursleys, against all the circumstances arrayed against him. He knows that he should control his anger, but how can he? It's a horrible burden.

Harry gets by with generous help from other people. An idealized loner hero? Not here. The series is essentially the process by which Harry accumulates the friends and surrogate family to help him defeat evil (which makes another parallel to Buffy's story). Harry on his own is not an effective hero, but because of his friendly nature, he has drawn people to him.

Some of this is explained rather explicitly in books five and six once Dumbledore tells Harry a bit about the nature of the prophecy that pits Voldemort against Harry specifically. Not to give too much away, but it boils down to this: Harry's not so much a hero as an outward manifestation of Voldemort's innate characters flaws that will eventually bring the Dark Lord down. Voldemort wanted to strike, and in striking, created his worst enemy. Harry's actions function in the opposite way: he draws people to him, turning them to the good side for their own reasons, not fear.

I mentioned another major misconception on my part. I've learned that Harry hardly ever fights Voldemort! I don't want to give away every ending in the series, so I'll just say that Rowling provides a number of other interesting twists and turns.

As for the finish of the series, I thought that the build-up to the ending was terrific, really exciting stuff, but the ending itself was fairly… technical. Harry made an assumption based on arcane mechanics of a certain kind of magic, which required a lot of explanation. Maybe not that different than the info-dumps required at the end of the previous Potter books? And secondly, I'm dismayed that the movie-makers have chosen to split the the seventh book into two movies, since book 7 is probably the best candidate for compression. If Movie 7 Part 1 is all the camping bits from the first half of The Deathly Hallows, I'll happily skip that one.

My favourite book is definitely number six, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince. It's a compelling mix of the humourous moments from the start of the series with the more grown-up material from later on. As for Harry himself, he has yet to prove himself to others, but he feels like much more of his own person. And it's less bloated than the previous book, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.