

the Pope. On Vatican organizational charts Brother Guy reports directly to the Pontiff. Guy is an American-born Jesuit who directs the Vatican Observatory and functions in it as a research astronomer. He is also a big science fiction fan. But if you collected six random male convention attendees and Brother Guy as a seventh in a police lineup it would be hard to tell which one was from the Vatican one level below the Pope. He is very American and very pleasant. He is a little soft-spoken but has an air of erudition.

[P.S. Now this is I speaking, (or is it me?), but it seems to me that the Church is still somewhat embarrassed about the whole Galileo thing. They used religious authority and dogma to squelch new scientific authority. And now they have to admit that the proto-scientific ideas at the time were a more correct viewpoint. I think they decided that they needed enlightened counseling to avoid making the same mistake again. Sometimes when dogma comes into conflict with political or religious dogma the dogma may be right, but the smart money does not bet that way.]

Brother Guy talked on a variety of subjects like information gathered by the Arecibo telescope and what it is like living in the Vatican, how accurate was THE DA VINCI CODE, what would it be like living in space. He was on panels talking about young adult SF, how technology would change education, what we expected to learn from the coming solar eclipse, and how to create a believable religion in a science fiction story.

So what did THE DA VINCI CODE get wrong? What sticks with me is that the book describes a hidden stairway in travertine marble. Actually the stairway really is hidden, but it is not marble but rock or poured concrete. It looks like something from low-rent housing and not so glamorous.

Hey, while I think of it, one touch I really liked at the hotel. The meeting rooms had cold drinking water like a lot of convention rooms have other places. But the Sheraton has a new design. It has a big chamber at the top and then narrows down as a typical dispenser. That keeps the water dispensed at 32 degrees all day. After walking around in the heat and humidity it dispenses really cold water all day long. It is as good as having ice cream all day with none of the calories. [-mrl]

TOO LIKE THE LIGHTNING by **Ada Palmer** (copyright 2016, Tor, \$15.99, 448pp, ISBN978-0-7653-7801-9) (excerpt from the *Duel Fish Codices*: a book review by Joe Karpierz):

Ada Palmer's *TOO LIKE THE LIGHTNING* is yet another first novel on this year's Best Novel Hugo finalists list. Palmer has delivered a very complex, involved, and intriguing novel, one that deals with complicated issues of religion, politics, gender, and war in an historical style that will probably take the reader some getting used to. It may be a struggle for some folks; it was for me at first. But once my head got into the space the story was using, the novel flowed and kept me engaged until the end.

The time is the mid-2450s. The planet has undergone a vast world war with religion and America at the center of it all. A new world order has been put in place, but it appears to be a very draconian one. Public discussions of religion--including traditional faith gatherings as we currently know them--have been outlawed. Normal gender classifications and distinctions are now taboo (this does result in what I think is a bit of a problem with the handling of gender pronouns, with "they, them, and their" sometime being interchangeably used with his and hers, but I suspect we'll find out more in the coming volumes of the story). Written documents (such as the book itself) are subject to violence, sexuality, religious, and offensive opinion (which kind of frightens me) ratings.

All of this has been put in place as the cost for a near utopia built on abundance. The population lives in a world that has no borders in terms of citizenship--it really doesn't matter where you live, since you can claim allegiance to any country on the planet you like. The economy is controlled a number of groups called Hives, which have complex interactions with each other and the population. Crime is still a problem, even with the abundance of resources that is available to everyone. The punishments, though, are handled differently. A criminal is sentenced to being a Servicer. Servicers have no possessions. They must go about the world doing good deeds in support of their fellow humans.

(I could go on for a lot longer about the world building that Palmer did for this novel, but it would take up the entire review, and I don't think you want that.)

So, Mycroft Canner is a Servicer. Carlyle Foster is a Sensayer, a sort of spiritual counselor in a world that has abolished religion. While a Servicer's life is simple, a Sensayer's calling is not. With a job of counselor to a population that still believes in something greater than themselves, Foster's life is one long balancing act. Foster is assigned as the new Sensayer to a family which controls the usage of all cars on the planet (except for those of the Utopian Hive--like I said, it's complicated). On his first visit to the bash Foster stumbles upon a secret that Canner is already aware of since he is there performing service for the family. The secret, a boy name Bridger, could upend the balanced utopia because of what he can do--make his wishes come true. And thus the novel begins.

But of course, nothing is that simple. Pretty soon, the political wheels start spinning, and everything we've learned about society in the 2450s is turned completely upside down and around to the point where we're really not sure what's going on.

We eventually do find out what Mycroft Canner's crime was (and if you are squeamish you may want to zip through that section about 250 pages into the book), and that there is more to him and the rest of the government that meets the eye. Throw in an additional crime of a stolen modified "Seven-Ten" list--think a popularity list published by the main newspaper of the various Hives upon which the economic stability of the planet is resting--and you have a recipe for a very intriguing story that starts one way, but ends another.

There's a lot of misdirection going on in this novel. Mycroft, Carlyle, and all the rest of the cast are definitely not what they appeared to be when we first meet each of them as the novel unfolds. The political intertwining that becomes apparent as the novel approaches its conclusion is enough to make your head spin not only on its axis 360, but along the *other* axis (think shoulder-to-shoulder) 360 degrees as well. I don't think any character in this book can be trusted.

As I already mentioned, it takes some time (well, it took me some time, anyway) to get into the novel's style. The (apparently) inconsistent use of gender pronouns is difficult to follow, at least at first. And while I don't mind the speculation of the handling of religion, sex, and violence by the society depicted in the novel, it may be a bit disturbing to some. After all was said and done, I found the book to be well worth the time and effort I put into it, although its abrupt ending with the realization that there are more books to follow (one more to tell the tale of Mycroft Canner, and four in all for the Terra Ignota series made me wish I didn't like it so much (see my statement about discovering new authors in my review of Yoon Ha Lee's NINEFOX GAMBIT).

But I did like it, and I certainly am looking forward to the next book in the series, SEVEN SURRENDERS, to be published later this year. I look forward to the continuation of Mycroft's tale. I suspect it will also be well worth my time. [-jak]

DEATH'S END ("Remembrance of Earth's Past" Book 3) by Cixin Liu, translated by Ken Liu (copyright 2016, Tor, 608pp, ASIN: B00WDVKZY0, narrated by P.J. Ochlan) (excerpt from the Duel Fish Codices: an audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

DEATH'S END brings popular Chinese science fiction author's "Remembrance of Earth's Past" trilogy (begun with Hugo winner THE THREE BODY PROBLEM) to a rousing, fulfilling, and moving conclusion. It is a story that spans millions of years and multiple universes. It is strange, wonderful, full of ideas, and thought provoking. It is grand in scope and despite that, personal in nature. It is quite possibly the best science fiction book of 2016, which was full of science fiction novels that could claim that title, as this year's Best Novel Hugo finalist list attests to. It deserves all those superlatives and more.

A summary of the plot of DEATH'S END is somewhat difficult, although the story itself is told in a somewhat straightforward (I was tempted to put the phrase "sometimes meandering" after straightforward, but that just didn't seem like the right thing to do) sequential manner. The story starts, in essence, where THE DARK FOREST left off. The people of Earth and the Trisolarans are at a standstill. Luo Ji, the one Wallfacer that actually did his job properly, found a way to hold off the Trisolaran attack via the Dark Forest defense. Luo Ji became what was called The Swordholder. The Swordholder was tasked with the responsibility of broadcasting the location of Trisolaris if the Trisolarans should head to earth to attack. The drawback is that broadcasting the location of Trisolaris would also give away the location of Earth, thus dooming both planets to attack from another malevolent civilization out there in the cosmos.

The story, then, is how humanity moves forward in the face of impending disaster. Unlike both THE THREE BODY PROBLEM and THE DARK FOREST, which have enough central characters to keep track of to make George R.R. Martin look like a rookie (okay, maybe not many, but you get the idea), DEATH'S END does have one central character, Cheng Xin. She is the character that ties all the sections of the book together as well as the character upon which the fate of humanity hinges. Time and again, Cheng Xin is called upon to make critical decisions. The most important decision comes not long after she is elected by the Earth's population to become the next Swordholder after it is time for Luo Ji to step down from that post. We all know that every decision has a consequence that leads to another decision point, and Cheng Xin finds herself in the middle of every monumental decision that is made in the book (granted, the nature of storytelling is to put the protagonist front and center and let him or her sort it out). And every decision is more monumental than the previous, leading up to the final decision at the end of the book.

While the threat of the Trisolarans is present throughout the novel, there is a point at which the focus changes from fear of attack from the Trisolarans (for reasons which I will not go into here) to that of protecting and saving humanity over the long haul. That's not to say the Trisolarans didn't have their moment in the sun (sorry about that) in the story, but they nearly became an afterthought as humanity switch its goal from defending itself against the Trisolarans to defending itself against the universe.

One more item about the structure of the novel before I move on to other things. The story is broken up into eras, which are listed in the front of the book and cover from the present all the way through 18906416 (In the timeline of Universe 647--there, did that whet your appetite? If not, I have more coming.), although in reality (and I'm not sure which reality I'm talking about at this point) the story doesn't actually end in that year. The framework is a memoir entitled "A Past Out of Time", from which excerpts are presented from time to time. It proved to be, at least for me, an effective way to move the

story along and provide perspective to what exactly was happening.

This book is a lot of things, but one thing it isn't is a traditional story where there's a hero and a villain and a battle at the end to decide the victor (although that kind of story seems to be slowly disappearing from view). Sure, there's a protagonist in Cheng Xin, but she's really there to tie up all the eras (by going into hibernation which enables her to span those eras) and be there from beginning to end to provide a familiar thread while Cixin Liu does what he really wants to do: blow our minds.

It's a story of the survival of humanity, a story of moral decisions, a story of love--of one person for another as well as one person for the entire human race--and a story of frenzied, mind blowing concepts and ideas that has the reader's head constantly spinning. Just when you get your head around a particular idea that Cixin Liu is presenting, he throws it away in favor of another equally mind blowing idea that is just as relevant to the situation at hand. I'll just list a few here: firearms that shoot bullets which contain a mini-black hole inside of them; the attainment of lightspeed by a method called curvature space propulsion, which has the potentially nasty side effect of reducing the speed of light in its wake to a point so slow that those trapped within its field can't get out, and thus are stuck there forever in something called a Black Domain; the concept of a weapon that can destroy its intended target by transforming the area of space from three dimensions to two dimensions; and just how do you file an insurance claim on the death of someone who fell into a mini black hole when in their frame of reference they've fallen through the event horizon but in our frame of reference it will take so long for them to fall through the event horizon that the claim will never be able to be made?

Along with the flood of ideas comes its companion, the flood of exposition, or infodumps, if you will. It seems inevitable that with each complex idea there is an accompanying firehose worth of information regarding that idea. Sometimes it comes in the form of "As you know, Bob...", and sometimes it comes in the form of the author simply--well, I don't think there's anything simple about any of the ideas--telling the reader about it with large amounts of exposition, which sometimes lasts for several pages. If there's anything that could slow this book down and be a bit problematic, it's the infodumps. One could argue that at 600+ pages the book could use some editing, but it could also be argued that in order for Cixin Liu to get his ideas across those infodumps are necessary. In the long run, they didn't ruin my enjoyment of the novel, but I can see where they could be a problem for some readers.

With regard to the narrator, P. J. Ochlan, it should be said that he did a wonderful job creating different voices for the characters and seamless changing between them when called upon to do so. His narration never took me out of the story, and he truly did the best he could with the aforementioned long and involved infodumps. I enjoyed listening to him and would be interested in listening to other books for which he is the narrator. I feel as if his style supplemented and augmented the tone that Cixin Liu was looking for in the novel, and if I ever find time I would be interested in going back and listening to his narration of DARK FOREST. He did not narrate THE THREE BODY PROBLEM.

With regard to Ken Liu's translating job, once again, since I don't know Chinese I cannot say how much his translation represented what Cixin Liu was trying to tell the reader. I did enjoy the text of the story, and it felt well written. There's not much else I can say about it.

It's no secret that I'm a sucker for cosmic, mind-blowing ideas. I fall for the grand scope of a story that spans millions of years and multiple parallel universes, including the old message in a bottle trope. Yeah, I just love all that stuff. DEATH'S END is the book I've been waiting to read for several decades. A book like it may never come along again. [-jak]

Sikhs (letter of comment by Charles S. Harris):

In response to [Mark's review of UNDER THE TURBAN](#) in the 07/07/17 issue of the MT VOID, Charles Harris writes:

Here's a bit of verse I wrote many years ago, during an Asian flu outbreak:

One little, two little, three little Indians,
Bedridden. Nothing to do.
All of them ill with an Asian disease:
Six Sikhs (sic) sick with flu.

[-csh]

Scholastic Aptitude Test (letter of comment by Gerald Ryan):

In response to [Mark's comments on the SAT](#) in the 07/07/17 issue of the MT VOID, Jerry Ryan writes:

In theory the SAT is testing aptitude. In practice? Well, there is an enormous industry around test prep, tutoring, etc for these tests, and presumably all that prep is somehow ... improving one's aptitude??

I remember being told (by my parents, who were high school teachers, and by my own teachers) that it was a good idea to do a practice exam, or maybe two, so that you had an idea of what the experience of the test would be like. The implication was that studying a bunch of vocabulary words and/or math facts was not going to be terribly helpful. However, I knew many people-- including the parents of the friends of my children--who swore by the SAT tutoring as a way of making sure that their kids did a couple hundred points better on the exam than they would have done without the tutoring. Several could point to a situation where their child took the exam, then went to a tutoring center, then did enormously better the next time around.

I've wondered if that improvement can be attributed to simple familiarity with the test, but I suspect not.

I've come to think that the SAT itself is a flawed instrument for assessing Scholastic Aptitude. Even when I took it in preparing for college, back in the late 1970s, I was told that, at best, the SAT was a *slight* predictor of success in the first several semesters of college.

The tweaking of the exam (several times over the last few decades) and the growing number of schools that are no longer requiring SAT scores for incoming freshmen, make me think that I'm not the only one that believes that it's a flawed instrument. [-gwr]

Mark responds:

It is a flawed instrument. I do not know many instruments that are not flawed. Certainly the SAT industry is exacerbating the problems. It may not even be possible to measure scholastic aptitude. But turning it into the industry that it is just corrupts it even more. [-mrl]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Because Mark and I were going to San Juan, Puerto Rico, for the NASFIC convention, I've been reading mostly short works this last week and catching up on magazines--I don't like to start a novel too close to a trip, because if it's a physical book I probably don't want to have to carry it, and in any case, I usually get very little reading done on a trip.

However, I do want to recommend one novella I read, "There Was a Crooked Man, He Flipped a Crooked House" by David Erik Nelson (F&SF July-August 2017). As you might have guessed from the title, Nelson takes Robert A. Heinlein's idea in "...And He Built a Crooked House", brings it up to date, and elaborates on it in interesting ways.

I did read LIMITLESS by Allen Glynn (ISBN 978-0-312-42887-7), since the book-and-movie group would be discussing it right after we returned, and I had an ebook version of it. The idea--a drug that makes you more focused--is fine, but there was far too much discussion of stocking trading in the novel, at least for my tastes. I did like the description of the first-person narrator's first experience with the drug, in which he is driven to straighten up his apartment. He says one thing that particularly struck home: "Then I found another sack and started going through all of the papers on my desk, and in the drawers of the desk. I was fairly ruthless and threw things out I'd been keeping for no good reason, stuff that if I died my unfortunate executor would have no hesitation in throwing out either, because what was he going to do with it ... what was he going to do with old love letters, pay slips, gas and electric bills, yellowed typescripts of abandoned articles, instruction manuals for consumer durables I no longer possessed, holiday brochures of which I hadn't gone on ... Jesus, it occurred to me--as I stuffed all of this garbage into a bag-- the sh*t we leave behind us for other people to sort out." Given that I am currently in the process of cleaning out old papers (why do we still have dental claim forms from thirty years ago?), it is not surprising that this would resonate with me.

(Synchronistically, Brother Guy Consolmagno mentioned at NASFIC last week just liberating it felt when he became a Jesuit and got rid of all his personal possessions. Or most, since he still seems to have a lot of fannish T-shirts that I am sure are not Vatican- issue. :)) [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
mleeper@optonline.net

Quote of the Week:
[to H G Wells] It is all very well to be able to write
books, but can you waggle your ears?
--J M Barrie

[Tweet](#)

Go to [our home page](#)