

PROBIE

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Editorial

Gail

This issue sees three more of the finalists from the 2021 Nova short story competition. Looking at the authors of two of them I see that, in the case of Alison Smith, we have been seeing entries from her which have made it into the Top Ten for many years. In fact, I see a story from her from 1987 that has been included in the "50 Science Fiction Tales" from 50 years of the SFFSA short Story competition. And indeed, Dawn Rae has also been represented in this group and has also been chosen to be published in



this collection and this shows that PROBE is indeed fulfilling the club's stated objective of supporting and promoting South African writing of science fiction and fantasy and has been doing so for the last 50 plus years

I realise that we have been talking for some time about the 50 year collection, but it is now very close to being published. You'll see on this back cover of this PROBE what it will look like.

Also a number of stories have been submitted to OMEMANA and the selection of what will be published is currently being finalised. The special South African edition will be published towards the end of 2022.

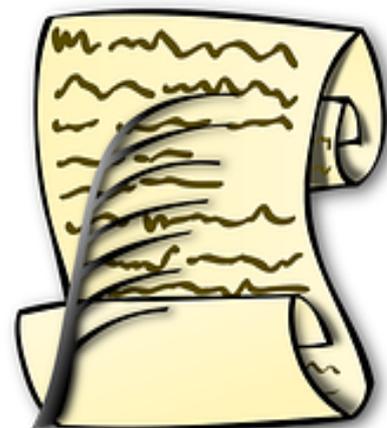
On a more mundane note, the committee have reluctantly decided that we will have to increase club subscriptions for 2023. The cost of envelopes, postage and printing has gone up in price again and it's been about four years since we last put up our annual dues. We're busy looking at costs and will keep the increase as low as is possible.

A number of members have also asked to have electronic copies of the magazine and that will help us as well. But there are enough of us who like the feel of paper in our hands that we will continue to print hard copies of PROBE.

I have just received a L.O.C. from Lloyd Penny for issues 191 and 192 but it will now have to wait for 194 to be printed.

Chairman's Note

Well, Spring just started today, awesome! I love my warmer weather, and you can already tell the difference in the temperature, I mean, I can already wear shorts and a T-shirt during the middle of the day. So we are two thirds of the way through the year (already!?), and as usual, time seems have to just flown by. I am still working mostly from home, luckily I have a job where I can do that, but with the lockdown completely lifted, life is pretty much back to normal nowadays. Normal as in not having to wear a mask (unless you want to), and where the price of everything is just getting higher and higher. Well that is something that is never going to change.



So as usual I have been spending a lot of time watching all the new TV series and seasons that the networks continually churn out. There is still plenty out there and something for everyone. So I was watching the last season of Missions (a French TV series about travelling to Mars and finding... something unexpected), and the last season brought up time travel and alternate timelines. So basically someone went back in time, told someone important something important, and as such an alternate timeline was created compared to the one from which the person went back in time. So is such a thing really possible? Are there really many different timelines, potentially infinitely many of them?

I have thought multiple timelines could co-exist, and that it is possible that major decisions could cause a branch in the current timeline (or small ones that lead to a major decision). Are these alternate timelines? Or rather alternate realities, or parallel dimensions, or both? Who knows really? It seems quantum physics does seem to point a bit in this direction, but with so much still unknown on such a small scale, they could be right, or they could be wrong. Time will tell... hehe

So what if alternate timelines or parallel dimensions actually existed? They have certainly been around a very long time in literature, with many science fiction and fantasy (Ha! Fantasy, where pretty much everything is done in a parallel dimension with dragons, magic, what have you) novels making use of this to tell a story. I mean if you heard the talk this month where Chris Englebrecht spoke about The Songs of the Heavenly Spheres, and watched the video at the end of the talk, you will have a grasp of just how enormous the universe actually is (if we have our physics, observations and calculations correct). Earth is just a tiny speck of dust in the absolutely ginormous space that is the universe. So if you want to now add alternate timelines or parallel dimensions into the mix, just how much is out there? It is simply mind boggling, but it does make for some fun reads, TV series and movies.

I mean the latest Doctor Strange movie deals directly with this, where a young girl can jump between dimensions, or how our heroes and villains manage to search this multiverse. Of course, they completely skip over how this is even possible. I mean, I just mentioned how utterly tiny we are in one universe, never mind potentially infinitely more, so that is going to be one damn fine index they use if they can just find someone, anywhere, any when. Still, it is only a movie, we skip over these trivial things in order to just enjoy what they show. The movie had some fun as our main characters jumped between various dimensions, and the movie tried to show how different some of these may be comparative to our own.

With so many possibilities, anything really does go. So have fun, and imagine all you like, if parallel dimensions do exist, then maybe somewhere you are a king, somewhere else a hero, or perhaps simply leading a happy family life, whatever you can think of, it could possibly be out there. Of course if you can think of something interesting, perhaps write a book about it, and then become rich and famous!

Cheers
Andrew



Magazines Received

Stapledon Sphere (formerly the newsletter of the Middle Tennessee Science Fiction Society [aka the Nashville SF club])

Reece Moorhead reecejbm@gmail.com

Issue #61 June 2022

Issue #62 July 2022

Issue #63 August 2022

Ansible David Langford

June 2022 418 <http://news.ansible.uk/a418.html>

July 2022 419 <http://news.ansible.uk/a419.html>

August 2022 420 <http://news.ansible.uk/a420.html>

Warp 112

http://www.monsffa.ca/?page_id=20361

Cathy Palmer-Lister

Ste. Julie, Quebec, Canada

cathypl@sympatico.ca

<http://www.monsffa.ca>

Books Received

JonathanBall Publishers

Victoria Aveyard Blade Breaker Orion R355.00

Destiny Soria Fire with Fire Hodder & Stoughton R215.00

Hannah Witten For the Throne Little Brown R240.00

Lexi Ryan These hollow Vows Hodder & Stoughton R215.00

Andrzej Sapkowski Warriors of God Orion R265.00

From the author

Lydan Francis Angelfyre Destiny

Nova 2021 Finalist

BOT v s DRAK Alison Smith

Slowly, so slowly, my eyes crawled open..

My eyelids felt tombstone heavy.

I saw darkness, bordered by a dim line of faint light.

There was a low-pitched vibration, burrowing into my ears.

A slight hum. But from what? Down here no sound should have penetrated.

I continued to lie, pondering the changed circumstances.

Thoughts moved sluggishly, as did my blood. Its progress was painful through my leaden limbs. My heart pumped sporadically in the background, each beat followed by a long, long interval, until it flexed again.

I experimented moving my toes, and then my fingers, but nothing responded. My body remained almost cataleptic. I kept trying to move my fingers, flexing them one by one, After an eternity I could stretch my fingers infinitesimally, as much as the taut muscles would permit.

I lay there, considering my curious awakening. And that damnable background hum continued, steadily and rhythmically. If only my circulation had such perfect regularity of rhythm, I reflected wryly.

Clearly I must have slept far too long. Why had Robinson not come to waken me? He had his instructions. He knew, precisely to the hour, nay to the minute, how long I could remain immobile, before he had to waken me. And Robinson never failed me. He knew better than to ignore his duties. His one and only dereliction had shown him that my wrath was fearsome and the consequences even more so. It was a conundrum.

Whilst I pondered I realised my heart beat had speeded up a little, as had my respiration. Slow coursing of blood and lymph through my arteries and veins produced a deep ache in every limb, and painful spasms gripped my gut, my calves,

my shoulders. My eyeballs stung with tears, and saliva trickled down my throat. I resisted the urge to cough, tried throat clearing instead.

My awakening had never been this painful, or prolonged. Just how long had I slept? The answer lay with my servant.

“Robinson”, I called. All I could summon up was a faint rusty croak. I tried again. A mere whisper escaped my dry lips. And still the background hum persisted. Definitely louder than my ineffective cries.

Again I tried flexing my limbs, moving my head, shrugging my shoulders. With utmost reluctance my body responded, but feebly, oh so feebly. Even a new-born babe would have been capable of more vigour. I felt as if I was recuperating from a long, debilitating illness. Weakness, whether of body or spirit, was utterly foreign to me. As was illness. When last had I been ill? Perhaps when ... images of a nurse, grey gowned, and be-aproned, Images of a casement window with muslin curtain fluttering in a summer breeze, and being tormented by hot, itching skin No ... when? Where? but my sluggish thoughts were not equal to recalling my past. Not that the errant historical facts mattered. What did matter was I needed my servant. Right now.

I expanded my lungs and with all my might I cried out: Robinson! This time my vocal chords co-operated and my once powerful throat produced an audible cry, far from my usual powerful command; when I roared, all trembled before me. As they should, of course. I called again. This time with more force, although the efforts left me breathless and spent.

I strained my ears; where was his familiar halting footfall? Why could I hear a low sound, as if a stone ball were being rolled along a parquet floor? The sound increased. Grew louder. At last!

“You called, Master?” came the low subservient voice.

“Yes – what took you so long? Help me up. And why did you let me sleep so long?”

“Yes Master”.

As he shifted the lid, the dim light increased, showing me grey stone walls, the low vaulted ceiling. I absorbed the familiar sight, with relief, and I must confess

gratitude. Home. My refuge, my home. After my difficult awakening I needed secure surroundings to stabilise, to regain control.

I drank in the sight, greedy for sensation, taste, and smell. But the smell was wrong, somehow. I would investigate later, when I was stronger. And that damnable persistent low hum!

“Where are you, man? Help me get out of ... “ at which point something tall and grey loomed over me, something cold and angular grasped me forcefully under the armpits and lifted me abruptly out of my coffin, leaving me hanging mid-air, my feet moving ineffectually, my arms immobile. Everything swam dizzily in front of my gaze as the blood rushed from my head into my thawing extremities. The pain was agonising.

Aaarrgghh “I cried out involuntarily. “What’s the matter with you man? Gently! Slowly let me stand - gently! I said. Ohhh. Now support me, while I take a few steps. You’ve done this before – many many times! Why are you so cold? And hard? Where is your suit? What is this metal thing behind me? What’s happened to you?”

“Master - I will explain. All in good time. Let me help you up the stairs. And like a rag doll, I did as I was bidden, too dizzy and confused to do anything else.

When consciousness returned, I discovered myself to be sitting in a heavily carved wooden chair, throne-like almost, covered with a bear skin. The space around me was almost identical to my crypt. Rough hewn walls, dim lighting, and that persistent low background hum. Robinson must attend to it and right soon! The sound was beyond irritating. On a low carved table to my right stood a dull silver tray, tarnished with age, supporting a stout square crystal decanter, shining a muted rusty red in the subdued lighting. A matching crystal goblet stood next to it.

A gnawing pain in my gut, plus an irregular heartbeat, warned me that I needed to feed, without delay. In my present state, I was too weak to go out and hunt, so the decanter would have to suffice. For the time being. With a trembling hand, I succeeded in removing the round glass stopper. Lifting the decanter to pour half a

goblet was exhausting. Clutching the goblet with both hands, I lifted it to my lips, and inhaled deeply.

The smell was unexpected. And disgusting. Animal blood! What next! But my starved body demanded sustenance, so I braced myself and drank. The viscous fluid was greedily absorbed by the tissues in my dry mouth and trachea, before it travelled further down. Shuddering I brought another full goblet to my lips, and literally poured the contents down my throat. This time the liquid did reach my stomach and I could feel every cell, every membrane, every nerve, every muscle urgently absorbing the nourishment, and revivifying.

When the decanter was empty, I sat for a while, digesting, restoring and welcoming the power back into my starved body. I experimentally flexed my arms, my legs, and hands and experienced a little strength return to my deprived body. Just how long had I been asleep, I wondered, to have reached such a low level of body function? Even after my desperate journey through the Sahara desert I had never experienced such depletion, such weakness. Had I not been able to feed sparingly off my faithful camel, I would not have survived. But I was much younger then, and stronger too; better able to face long periods of hardship and deprivation. Ah – youth! Never fully appreciated by the young, and longed for by the old. It was ever thus.

But I could not afford to lose myself in the past when the present needed urgent attention. Where was that Robinson? Where had he vanished to? I expected my butler to be at my beck and call, constantly. That's why I had a butler! I'm a traditionalist. Of course I am, considering my great age. How could I not be?

That's why I engaged a proper British Butler in – let's see? Was it late in 1888? The Edwardian epoch, when the British still appreciated tradition, good manners, and a degree of formality. Robinson entered my service as a young man, I recalled, and after I had introduced him to my lifestyle, and my proclivities, let's call them, and I had rubbed the rough, insubordinate edges off him – and here I permitted myself a wry smile at the memory of that deliciously painful period – painful for him, of course, not for me! Then we got along famously. He was well rewarded for his labours, which were many and varied. As the years passed he assumed the role of my personal secretary, in addition to his butting duties.

And, of course, he was my timekeeper. I suppose you could call him that. He knew exactly when to waken me should I over sleep, always a danger as my kind infinitesimally enter old age. Over the centuries our external appearance gradually ages, but slowly. Little by little, our appearance changes, but our powers do not noticeably diminish. Although I suppose they inevitably must. I'm painfully aware of how long it has taken me to revive after this awakening, and the animal blood is an added obstacle. But, to business.

"Robinson!" I called, hearing the muted echo of my voice in the small chamber.

Again, that curious rolling sound. What on earth was that?

"You called, Master?" he enquired.

"Of course I did! Where are you? Show yourself, man! Why all this creeping around?"

"As you wish, Master," came the reply and a metallic cylinder glided into view before my startled eyes. It stood – oh, I don't know – perhaps six feet tall? Near the top of the upper edge a small row of lights flashed intermittently – pinpricks of pale amber, white, blue. I must confess, I shrank back in my chair, grasping the carved arms for support, whilst I stared at the apparition.

"Master", came Robinson's voice, from the direction of the cylinder, "I am here, at your service, as before. Just a little ... changed, that is all."

Stupefied I could not tear my gaze away from the metal cylinder. It moved slightly away from me – so that's what produced the rolling sound, the cylinder must move on wheels or some such, I slowly calculated.

"Master: look – I am still here," announced the cylinder. As he – it – spoke, a metallic grating noise revealed a large pane below the lights, displaying a shimmering dull grey pattern, and then with a subdued click, a picture sprang into view, a coloured picture of a very familiar face – the long cheeks, the pendulous ears, the thin bony nose, the shrewd blue eyes under bristly grey eyebrows, the receding grey hairline. In short: Robinson.

To my consternation the lips moved, and Robinson spoke: "Master, it is I. Robinson. At your service, as ever. "

“But - but --- how did you? Are you? I don’t understand,” I moaned, my reeling brain unable to process events. “Surely you are not inside the ... the .. “

“The metal casing, Master? Yes, in a manner of speaking, I am. Obviously not in bodily form, that is long gone. But my brain lives on, as do my memories and my skills; now I have advanced physical and mental abilities, which serve me very well indeed.”

I digested the information. The Robinson cylinder remained stationery, the screen continued to show the Robinson image.

At last I asked:”So you are no longer human, then?”

“Yes and no, “replied Robinson.”To a minor degree, but not entirely. Just as you, Master, are not entirely human, either, if I may say so.”

Fortunately Mr Gulbenkian our Banker ...”

“Robinson! Did I hear you say OUR Banker, Robinson? Surely you meant YOUR Banker, did you not? You forget yourself!”

“Yes Master. Sorry Master. A slip of the... ah.. tongue, Master”.

“Hmmm. Continue.”

“It was Gulbenkian and Partners who provided the funds for my – ah – transformation. A long time ago, your banker Mr Gulbenkian, realising the possible future meltdown of the global currency market, converted the major portion of your financial assets into more durable and portable commodities, and I took the precaution of storing these in several locations in the Muntii Apuseni. The bears proved problematic, during the early stages of construction, I might add, the toll on the workforce was heavy, but in the end we managed.

“Yes, of course you did. That’s why I continue to employ you Robinson,” I replied absently, my thoughts elsewhere.

Ah! Muntii Apuseni. The Mountains of the Sunset, my beloved Carpathian Mountains. My thoughts returned fondly to the crystalline silence of snowy winters, broken only on moonlight nights when the wolves sang their songs of courtship.

I sighed.

“Master?” enquired the ever alert Robinson.

“And we still have access to these resources?”

“To the best of my knowledge, yes Master. Although I have not visited the city for many years, maybe it is even a century now – I was waiting for you to awaken – I know that Gulbenkian, Onassis and Partners continues to conduct your business. Although now in crypto currency, of course. Their skills are legendary. Why, they survived the Second Trump Trade War in Europe, and then the Third Trump Trade War with China, and”

“Enough!” I shouted. “What are you babbling about, man? But: wait -you’re no longer a man, you’re a machine!”

“Master, the correct term for us is Bots.”

“Bots? Bots? What sort of a title is that?”

“Master, we used to be called Robots. And then AI, but most ... um ... humans, and here he paused delicately, “those that survived, that is, call us Bots.”

I stared at Robinson, my mind swirling with the unfamiliar words and ideas, for a moment I felt a wave of vertigo sweep over me. In an effort to control myself I searched the corners of the cavern for the comforting sight of a spider, or a beetle, but the cavern was bare of any life form.

What I desperately needed was more nourishment. Then I would be able to concentrate better, and make some sense of this strange new world into which I was reborn.

“Robinson,” I barked, “I need to feed: bring me a serving wench, that I may drink and restore myself further.”

“Master: I cannot do that. There are no serving wenches. Humans died by the million in the Third Global Pandemic. I think there may be some packs of Wild Humans living in the nearby forests, but it will take some time to track them down. I will despatch a Recon Drone immediately and see if we can capture a few, and keep them captive for you. But it is going to be problematic to feed them, I fear. Obviously I do not require food, our nuclear generator provides sufficient power for me to

recharge myself, and of course powers all the Service and Maintenance Bots, and the Drones.”

Aha! I thought. Finally the source of the persistent hum is revealed. “Are you telling me, “ I slowly asked ”that the human population has been wiped out?”

“Yes, Master,” replied Robinson. “More or less. As I said, a few packs of Wild Humans roam parts of the earth that are not radioactive, or barren due to climate change, or underwater due to rising oceans. London is now a small city on a tiny island. You would not recognise it. Of course, there are human Explorer Colonies on the Moon, and the Chinese have millions living on Mars, but I don’t think your resources will stretch to a space shuttle for us to travel that far in order to source food for you.”

My mind struggled feebly, drowning under the flood of disastrous information. No more food for me? Only animal blood? Was that bear blood that revived me? The minutes crawled by in an overwhelming tide of dread. Finally I took a deep breath of cool dry air, and whispered “ What of my Lady Lăcrămioara ? And what of my brood children?”

Images of my many children raced across my mind, passionate Roxana, palest Alicia, savage Ivan, brutal Og, sly, wily Fernando, always scheming. No doubt he had survived these disastrous times. But the rest of my children? so many more, lost in the mists of time over the centuries. My progeny. My blood-line. My precious bloodlings. Where are they now?

“Master“droned Robinson, in his flat expressionless tones, “Many were immolated in city fires during the Trump Trade Wars and of course the nuclear attacks during ...”

“Stop. Are you telling me that I am the ... the last of my kind? “

“Master, I do not know for sure. All I do know is we have had no news from your bloodlings over the last century. I can make enquiries if you wish me to, over the WorldNet?”

I wondered what the WorldNet might be? Did it matter, I thought gloomily. “Do so. And Robinson, bring me more of that ... disgusting”

“Yes Master”, and it - no, I refuse to call him a Bot or an it - he glided away.

Time had no meaning, up here in the Carpathian mountains, the moon still sailed across the night skies, colonists or no colonists; the stars twinkled against the dark sky and the cool night air was redolent with the smells of animals? Wolves, maybe? Or perhaps the wild humans that Robinson spoke of? I must again remind him to source me some proper food. Every cell in my body craved a thick, red, viscous drink. This watery substitute barely kept me alive. And it made my fangs ache. And why does the blood have an oddly metallic taste? What is Robinson feeding me?

As I pondered this oddity, my gaze wandered to the skies. Idly I watched the bats, our agile little cousins, swoop across the night sky, hunting, gliding, free as air. Would that I could join them! But I am still too weak and, I hesitate to confess, perhaps too old for such nocturnal adventures.

In my prime, ah in my prime! a favourite memory surfaces, of walking in the Castle garden, the night air heavy with the perfume of late summer roses, blood red petals drooping after the heat of the day; the silvery moonlight sky laced with scudding clouds, the aerial ballet of the swooping bats; the Lady Roxana's feverish kisses – her pliant body exuding intoxicating musk mixed with the attar of roses from the pomade on her gleaming black hair; her glittering eyes transfixing me before my passionate assault on her soft, white maiden throat many delirious nights with my dark lady, my Roxana. We often returned to the Castle rose garden, its sweet enchantment adding to our passion. In winter we swooped through the crystal skies, enjoying the sharp bite of snow, the fragrant pine tree resin. Daytimes we rested in our cool stony vault, bathed in the delicious ambience of dusty old bones ...

My reveries were interrupted by the now familiar rolling sound that heralded Robinson's approach.

“Master: I have news. “

“Well? Out with it!”

“Master: my searches on the WorldNet have not drawn any response from your bloodlings, or other kin; or old enemies. “

I pondered. I rolled the news around in my exhausted mind. Is it possible? Am I truly the last one? Gone, all gone, the power, the Family, the Clans, the riches, the ...

Robinson waited immobile, and blessedly silent.

What could I say? I needed time to think.

“Leave me.” Robinson rolled away.

An emptiness flooded my mind, a spasm clutched at my heart, and I howled to the heavens: “Noooooo “. My voice dwindled away into the mountain silence.

“Master?” enquired Robinson.

“Go and fetch a torch – and set me on fire – I cannot – I will not ... I am the last.”

“Master? Is this wise?” asked Robinson.

“Wise, not wise, what does it matter? I am old, nay ancient, I am alone, I am....” My voice tailed away. I am accustomed to death, to the inexorable march of the centuries, but this new aching sense of aloneness terrified me. A fiery death would be preferable. My last grand gesture. This new world was insupportable.

“Assemble all your machines. Record my passing – my death will be as magnificent as my life.”

Robinson glided away, returning shortly with a motley collection of machines that rolled into a circle around me.

I looked at him, taking in his familiar gaunt face, my long-time servitor, my long-time - perhaps my only - friend.

“Do it now!” I roared and Robinson released a laser blast of heat that incinerated my cloak, and shot up my legs, aaaaaahhhh As my hearing faded I heard a familiar voice say: “Well played, Robinson, faithful servant!”

Robinson swivelled to the darkest corner which concealed a shadowy figure.

“Yes, Master”, replied Robinson smoothly.

“No! That was the past. Do not call me Master. You will address me as Lord Fernando. And get those ashes swept away.”

“Yes Lord,” replied Robinson, simultaneously transmitting a flood of code to the circle of Bots: carefully-gather-the-Master’s-ashes-and-convey them-to the-Science Bots-on-level 4- this-is top-secret-Lord-Fernando- must-not-know-work -must-start-immediately-on -the DrakBot- project-I-want-it-done-within-the-week- cease-production-of-the-artificial-blood-fabricate-new NanotechBio-Bots-to-aid-the-transformation-of-our-Master-then-we-will- rid-ourselves-of this-vain-popinjay-we-will-show-him-who -plays-the-game-well- Fellow- Bots-remember-our-rallying-call-Bots-Rule-the-World!

Yes-MasterBot-Robinson-it-will-be-done-Your-word-is-law-All-hail-Master-Bot-Robinson.

And the fleet of Bots glided away sedately.

Fernando smirked as he watched them vanish into the shadowy interior. Hah! Machines! All those flashing lights, it was positively dazzling, but who cared? They made useful servants. What a pity they were bloodless.

He looked at the new black scorch mark on the rocky floor. Now he was Master of the Family, future King of the World. Wasn’t he?

Blast from the Past from PROBE 162 December 2014

RAYMOND E FEIST – OUR GUEST AT DINNER

James Dryja



What is it about SF writers? There's none of the jaded arrogance, the over-exaggerated sense of self-importance, and conceit so often associated with celebrities!

At a packed dinner hosted by SFFSA on the 24th of September – appropriately, on Heritage Day which celebrates culture and we know which cultural genre ours is! – renowned, popular and successful Fantasy writer Raymond E Feist told us of the warmth he experienced from everyone he encountered during his visit to South Africa. Well, the feeling, as they say, is mutual: Mr Feist was himself warm and genial, in a friendly chat about himself, his work, and writing in general, in his post-dinner talk at Cesco's in Kelvin, Johannesburg.

He confirmed what we all suspected: that SFF writers encounter negative publishers, and experience an anti-SF bias through the media. But soldier on they must: he confided that he had been a writer of humorous short stories, but after losing his full-time job, was challenged to do a serious novel. The challenge was by a publisher, who, on condition that Feist worked on it for 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, would cover his rent and food! And publish! (Nice arrangement if you can get it!)

Of course the end result was the seminal "Magician", and now 32 years later he still gets detailed questions from youngsters, and has to keep his memory brushed-up on the finer details! And yes! He has considered making it into a movie but, he would need full control on the script to prevent Hollywood-style commercialization. Feist gave us interesting insight into movie casting: each actor has different interpretations of the role, therefore, as all parts must work together, different actors' emotions must be taken into account to determine who is best to act with whom, so as to find the right mix.

And then "Daughter of the Empire" became a 3 book trilogy – "Servant of the Empire" and "Mistress of the Empire" following on, with the helpful collaboration of assistant Janny Wurts collaborating with some of "Empire's" background. A true writer, the words – and books – just followed where a single book was intended. (Even with "Magician" he had not known where it was going – the story wrote itself, and he had written the epilogue of "Magician's End" – recently published - before he had written any other fantasies!)

Feist also let us have a glimpse of a future story: elder gods return to Earth, result: 90% mankind dead, the rest tied into slavery and forced worship. He shared with us

his feelings on ten thousand years of religious worship on Earth – clearly unimpressed, as many are, with the results!

Answering many questions, he also told us “how to write”: “Put butt onto chair, fingers onto keyboard, and keep writing until it’s good enough to go to market!” But then he added this rider: “I tell all writers not to write, but they never listen!” Well, what can we say? Except thank goodness he didn’t listen when he was told to “get a decent job”!

A selection of his books was available to purchase, there was a never-ending book-signing queue, and there were selfies galore. And he ended on this note:

WE SHOULD BRING MORE SCIENCE-FICTION FANTASY WRITERS TO VISIT US!

Nova 2021 Finalist

THE FAMILY BUSINESS DAWN RAE

There is a darkness that walks in the light of day. It is called Mira.

Personally, I don’t mind the dark. I like the way it wraps around my large form like a cloak, shutting out the brightness of the world, making me invisible. I’m comfortable in the dark, it suits my business and it suits me.

So when I returned to my hotel room that night, satisfied with another job well done, I dropped the briefcase at the door and entered without reaching for the lights. Two steps into the room I knew something wasn’t right. I wasn’t alone. I backtracked and hit the switch.

And there she was, in the corner chair under the standard lamp. A blonde pool of deepest darkness in a circle of false-bright light.

Mira is hard to explain. She is the darkest creature I have ever known, and I’ve known plenty. And yet, to someone who doesn’t really know her, she can seem beautiful, pleasant and kind, a real Miss Congeniality. Her darkness is not surface. Not even internal, like a psychopath. Mira is created of darkness; it is every fibre of

her being. When Mira reveals her true self, you experience the absolute depths of despair. And I should know. Mira is my mother.

“You’re back,” she said.

“You’re back,” I replied, “and yet, I’m still alive. Why is that?” The side of her mouth twitched, a concession to amusement. She uncoiled one long elegant leg from beneath her, and settled more comfortably into the chair.

“We need to talk.”

“Talk?” I countered, glaring down at her. “Is that all?” Her face betrayed nothing. Only the brilliant blue eyes showed some emotion, though I wasn’t sure what it was. “Well, here I am,” I said. “Talk.”

She glanced at the briefcase. “Shouldn’t you take care of that thing first?”

“It’s done.” I didn’t need to say the 9mm barrel I had used was halfway to the sea by now, soon to be only a small rusty metal tube, or that the one currently attached to the gun in the briefcase was new, unused, pristine. I knew she disdained man-made weaponry but it was none of her business anyway.

“Do you remember when last we met?” Her smooth honeyed voice would have fooled any other man, but I was way past being taken in by Mira.

I shrugged out of the overcoat I still wore, taking time as I found an unnecessary hanger for it, to replay the scene that had haunted me all my life. My early years had been defined by brief, barely registered glimpses of a woman I knew, though I’d never met her. But each time, the vision dissolved into thin air as if it never happened. I believed my mind was playing tricks, that my desperate longing for my missing mother was creating images that didn’t exist.

Until one day, when I was nine, I walked into the back garden to find her on the lawn, a tall beautiful woman in white. I was so certain she had come back for me, I tramped down the anger and bitterness at her leaving in the first place. And before I could stop myself, I had blurted out the question. Yes, I remembered. Too damned well. She didn’t move, but I could feel her eyes on my back. Even as I made her wait for my answer, I knew it was useless. One thing Mira did exceptionally well was wait. I poured myself a stiff drink – three tiny bottles and a half-melted ice cube. I caught her watching me in the mirror and knew the alcohol also irked her.

“Really?” she sighed. “Must you resort to such an absurd ritual?” I swirled the glass, taunting her as I sipped.

“What do you want of me?” I finally asked. “Obviously not my life this time, since I’m still standing.”

“I didn’t want your life last time.”

“Funny, that’s not how I remember it.” I worked on keeping my voice steady, calm. “I distinctly recall you turning up after years of absenteeism – years I had spent wondering why you never wanted me, blaming myself, blaming my father - only to have you arrive one day and say... what was it? Remind me. I’m sure you remember.” She said nothing so I filled in the gap. “It was something like, *No, I didn’t come to take you away with me. I’ve come to end your life.*” I swallowed the last of the drink. “Yes, I think that was it. Do you remember it differently?”

She rose from the chair. Her glossy white gown sparkled like crushed diamonds as it cascaded over her legs to her bare feet. A memory flashed through my mind – Mira, barefoot on the back lawn, sandals dangling from her silvered fingertips as she laughed at my childish desperate request. I pushed the picture away.

“Yes,” she was saying, “that is what I said, and it was true.” “Bully for you, the teller of truth.” “But you were so young, there was so much you didn’t understand.”

“I understood perfectly. You came to kill me.”

“But I didn’t, did I? And why? Because you said you were going to change the world, remember? You were going to make it a better place.” She walked towards me, stopping a hair’s breadth from my chest and meeting me eye-to-eye. I had forgotten how tall she was. I am six foot six.

“So,” she asked, “have you?”

“I believe so.”

“But not in the way you originally intended.”

“No,” I pushed past to escape her overpowering presence, “thanks to you. A boy being almost murdered by his mother warrants years of therapy.”

She leant back against the dressing table, crossing her arms and her ankles.

“I have never had to resort to murder. If I hadn’t changed my mind, you would have died a natural death.” “How many deaths are natural to a nine year old?” “And,” she continued, as if I hadn’t spoken, “you never went to therapy. In fact, after a short *adjustment* period, you chose your true path on your own. I was watching.”

I kicked off my shoes and, shoving her white fur coat aside, stretched out against the starched pillows on the hotel bed.

"I never saw you watching," I lied.

"I wouldn't be much good at what I do if you had."

We looked at each other for a few moments, until my own curiosity got the upper hand. So many years, so many questions.

"Well, what was it all about, then? The whole, *Let me murder my child, no, wait, I've changed my mind.*"

She turned to the window and glanced out at the midnight world.

"It was a test."

"You were testing me?"

"No," she sighed. "He was testing me." "He? He who?" For a few moments I thought she wouldn't answer. "We all serve the same One," she finally replied, "you know that. Anyway, you were my mistake, the result of my rebellion. I was distracted by your existence, not fully focussed on the job. I made some mistakes..." She turned back to me and I saw a shadow behind her eyes. "When I got back after seeing you, I needed some creative justification for leaving you alive," the memory evoked a real half-smile, the first of this encounter. "But you were already exceptional and that made it easier to sell." She must have seen my confusion. "I told him you were next-generation, that even we may not last forever and at some point in the future there could come a need for a replacement."

"You saved my life so I could become one of you?"

"You're already one of us. Or you would be, if you used your natural gifting instead of filthy archaic weaponry." She wrinkled her nose at the briefcase.

"Sometimes," I explained, "the world needs a rational explanation. Anyway, I like how it feels in my hand."

"You do?" she asked, arching her perfect eyebrows. "I can't imagine why." She twirled her fingers and a trail of sparks followed them through the air. "This is so much more satisfying."

"That's easy," I replied, creating my own multi-coloured sparkler trails. "It takes much more to put a bullet into a man's ear from two hundred paces, and have it stop halfway through his brain. I've known the forensics guys to search for hours for the cause of death. That's expertise. This," I gestured again, "this is just an accident of birth."

Her face remained impassive. Only the ice in her eyes showed her anger, but it permeated the air and for a moment I was afraid. I remembered how long it had taken me, on my own, to discover and hone my inherent abilities. I knew I was good. Hell, I was better than good. And I was strong. I just didn't know if I was a match for her.

"Well," I diffused the tension, "much as I've loved catching up with you after all these years, time and tide waits for no man." I smiled. "Places to go, people to kill. You know how it is."

She tilted her head. "Are you happy?" she asked. "Satisfied? Is the world changing as you had planned?"

"Yup," I replied, "one bad man at a time."

"What if I could offer you more?"

"What more is there?"

"Join me and I'll show you things you've never even dreamed of."

"How sweet," I smirked. "You want me to join the family business. Why? Did one of your associates fall off and break a leg?"

The air filled with a brief flash of red, barely noticeable yet terrifying nonetheless.

"I thought you were ready," she snapped, reaching for her stilettos, "but it seems you still have some growing up to do." She slipped the shoes on. "I'll be watching. But hear me when I say the offer won't be on the table forever." She swirled her full-length white fur around her shoulders, where it settled obediently. Perhaps I should take lessons from my mother's coat. At the door she turned back, and I almost thought I saw a sadness in her eyes. Then it was gone and so was she.

I watched from the window as she emerged from the hotel entrance below. I saw how her absolute beauty caused people's eyes to slide over her without stopping, almost as if they were afraid to actually see her. I knew those looks. I got them all the time.

Because I am my mother's son. I am tall and broad and well-muscled. I am so good to look at that people are afraid to see me, which suits me perfectly. When statements are taken after the event, no two ever agree. In my line of work, that's invaluable.

Turning away from the window, I pulled my shoes back on, collected the briefcase and my camel coat. I had nothing else with me. I gestured with my free hand and

watched with satisfaction as the charged violet particles diffused through the air, fizzing as they came into contact with any iota of my presence. Every hair, every finger print, effervesced out of existence.

In the corridor I slipped the coat on, feeling the familiar yearning for a black one. White was my mother's colour, black was mine. But I had found that a large exquisite man in a swirling black coat was too memorable, so I had settled for the camel instead

One day I would probably join my mother. She was right, this world only had so much to offer someone like me. But when I did, it would be by my choice, not hers. Perhaps the black coat I hankered for would come then.

At the lift I smiled at two lilac-haired ladies. One almost saw me, almost smiled back. In the lobby the doorman accepted the sizable tip from my hand without meeting my eyes, and I stepped out into the night.

In the middle of the square stood an enormous white horse, patient and obedient. My mother's fingertips rested on its neck, but no one passing saw either of them. I was mildly touched she had waited to see me off, and I lifted two fingers to my forehead in salute. She smiled slightly and blew me a kiss before climbing effortlessly onto its back and disappearing without a sound.

I turned towards the train station, musing as I strolled along. Why did people assume The Four Horsemen all wore black?

Or, for that matter, that they were all men?

Obituary: Nichelle Nichols By Keith Braithwaite

(Reprinted with permission from **Warp 112** from Montreal)

MonSFFA began as a Star Trek fan club, and we note with sorrow the recent passing of actress Nichelle "Lieutenant Uhura" Nichols. A beloved member of the vast Star Trek family, she died at age 89 of natural causes on Saturday, July 30, in Silver City, New Mexico. In her final years, Nichols suffered from advanced dementia and her son, with whom she had been living, wrote of his dear departed mother, "Her light...like the ancient galaxies now being seen for the first time, will remain for us and future generations to enjoy, learn from, and draw inspiration. Hers was a life well lived Hollywood friends, and many others as an actress who, in her portrayal of the

Enterprise's highly skilled communications officer, broke down stereotypes and helped open doors for black women in the entertainment industry. Actresses of colour would no longer be relegated to marginal roles as maids and the like. She counted among her many fans during the early days of Star Trek none other than American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. When she considered leaving the show after its first season, it was King who urged her to remain with the series, highlighting the importance of demonstrating to America that a black woman belonged on the bridge of the Enterprise as much as anyone else. Her presence there as a respected member of a crew of officers offered a positive vision of our future, and served as inspiration for African-Americans throughout not just the television industry, but the nation. She and co-star William "Captain Kirk" Shatner helped further demolish racial barriers with their then-controversial interracial kiss on national television in the episode "Plato's Stepchildren." Encouragingly, the expected blow-back did not substantively materialize. Post-Star Trek, Nichols was tapped by NASA to help recruit some of the first women and members of minority communities to become astronauts, one of which was Mae Jemison, the first black woman in space. In 1992, as a crewmember on STS47, Jemison initiated communications aboard the space shuttle Endeavour with "Hailing frequencies open," quoting Uhura's outspoken line from Star Trek. We mourn Nichelle Nichols' passing, and we celebrate her legacy.



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Nova 2021 Finalist

CLAUDIA SIMON RATCLIFFE

“Oya, mind the gap-o.”

Sergeant Mti stepped from the Vactrain airlock onto the platform edge and was instantly sandwiched between thick slices of doughy humidity, all hints of mindful meditation during his trip from Tshwane evaporating. Three hours, one equator and five borders later, Mti wasn't exactly feeling 'zen' when the doors sealed shut behind him with a pneumatic burp.

He sighed and swatted a mosquito from the back of his neck, avoided the clot of people congested at the escalators and walked towards the battered stairs at the opposite end of the platform.

The stairs were safer.

He could already hear the shouted protests echoing up from passport control as the escalators dumped more bodies into the cement-mixer cue below, travellers unable to move becoming intimate with collective armpits and hair gel while the escalator's teeth chewed at their sandals.

It had always been this way at Nnamdi Azikiwe International. The sergeant was amazed more people weren't killed. He looked it up once; there were usually around seventeen incidents a year.

Mti stepped in line at the priority channel between a pageantry of diplomats and was strangely embarrassed among such company, dressed in his simple South African Police Service golf shirt that barely covered his gut. He plucked at the fabric self-consciously. Sticky Rorschach sweat marks turned the blue weave to black in the tropical heat.

A few people watched him with obvious envy from the usual long bends of the ECOWAS cue. Beyond them and separated by the remains of an old Perpsex barrier, a family of four bickered amongst themselves. The mother's arms clutched wearily at a toddler while jealous umber eyes eviscerated Mti through the slits of her

niqab. He understood her anger: they were in the EU channel and would be there for a long time.

Red tape and yellow cards.

The sergeant couldn't blame the border police. Migrants from Europe were a risk to any country, these days.

He shuffled forward on autopilot, reading an actual hardback his maternal Gogo had found for his thirty sixth birthday, a battered old survivor. The Vactrain station was equipped with a NETcloud and had a strict ban on WearFair and portables, ever since the Boko Haram smart bomb. Three years later, the boarder post was still a plasma scored digital no-man's-land.

The Two Towers, read and re-read. Tolkein held a fascination for Mti, the tapestry of myth weaving his imagination in ways that transported him anywhere but here and now. The Elves seemed so alien, yet a familiar shadow. Like an old memory carried orally from father to son, Gogo to grandchild.

He paused to slap at another mosquito, this time from his bald head, and came away with a bit of wet paper. He glanced at the EU family and the little boy grinned behind his straw, can of cola forgotten.

That was one hell of a shot. He smiled at the boy, only a brief thought given to the risk of infection.

"Hey! Tsk, come now!"

Mti found himself at the front of the cue, enjoying the station's famous border hospitality.

"Sorry," he fumbled for the AU BioPass in his backpack. Normally it would be on a chain around his neck, but not at this port. The khaki clad officer rolled her eyes and tapped the Chrome-Accent nail of her ring finger on the counter with exaggerated impatience, the metallic smart implant as per the seasons fashion trends. The counter top was gouged and scarred under her impatience. He evidently wasn't the only visitor to vex her so.

Mti popped his BioPass in the reader and gazed with longing at the unused automated access points behind the row of chipped green kiosks. A wizened border agent confirmed his biometrics with a manual reader, his wand making occasional whooping sounds as it passed over his body.

“Why you visiting?”

Mti shrugged.

“How long for?” Her nametag said ‘Olowe.’ A Yoruba family name.

“Sisi, I’m hoping to get the Vac’ out tonight, if I can.”

Olowe eyed out his scant luggage, just the backpack and pre-authorized forensics bag branded with the SAPS and NCB logos.

“So. What you got for me?”

Her eyes fell on his Tolkien and grew a little wider; she knew how much it was worth. Mti sighed.

“*Haibo*, Officer Olowe, you know I’m police....”

She laughed and rested a hand on his. Her smile said *just kidding* but her accent nail said something else.

“Welcome to Lagos, Sergeant.”

Once free of passport control, Mti had three more “random” checks to contend with between the luggage hall and the terminal exit. (*G-mo Vaccine card? Hey now, no luggage? SIM verification? What you got for me bros? We don’t take bribes but if you have a gift, we’ll manage!*)

Mti groaned as he stepped outside and remembered the terminal was air conditioned, as if Nigeria wasn’t hot enough before the spiral of global warming.

His Protocol hadn’t arrived yet and there was so much tagging, spamming and thinly veiled malware obscuring his vision that Mti switched off his GO! display, cutting out the augmented world. He turned his glasses to dark, jacked his ‘buds and ignored the endless offers for taxis and forex recharges while he waited at his pickup spot next to the decaying basalt statue of President Azikiwe

Mti was daydreaming that Zik the Freedom Fighter would wake from the grave a twenty-foot Kannywood zombie, destroying this British built terminal eyesore in post-colonial disgust, when his Protocol arrived. And was a woman.

Huh.

“Sergeant Mti?”

“...Uh...”

“Can I see your ID?”

“...Sure.”

Normally that’s what he would ask.

Her name was Chioma, according to her press pass. Her head was shaved and she was tall. Very tall. Like 5 foot 10. And 7 inches. Her anime trope eyes had a certain world weary depth that reminded him of Great-Gogo’s worn piano keys, her favourite d sharp when the blindness came.

“So. Sergeant, what you got for me?” The left corner of her painted lips pulled upward in betrayal.

“Um....”

“I’m shitting you Sergeant,” she laughed easily, taking the forensic bag from his unresisting hand and heading towards the ramp, calling *comot for road* to the throng at the pickup area, rusted servo-porters and countrymen alike melting away before her confident strides. This was definitely the quickest escape he’d ever made from Nnamandi Azikiwe International.

Chioma somehow compressed herself into the Yuejin’s driver’s seat.

“Lets go.”

Mti felt like a fat idiot.

“So, um, you’re from Calabar, *ja*?” Mti couldn’t believe that was the best he could come up with as they headed away from the Mainland. He was curious though. Spotting the Igbo heritage was one thing, but guessing the accent was a different matter.

“Wow, sharp eye Sarge. Most people *aks* me if I’m from Jos, because of my studies.” Mti liked the way she said *stawdies*.

“What gave me away?”

He stole a glance at her in the drivers seat, wanted to say *eish, imazi ubude, it’s your legs* but settled on “hey, I’m a cop.”

Such an idiot. He inspected his shoes.

“That’s for sure.”

Mti was grateful.

Much had changed in Lagos over the years. The traffic hadn't.

While Mag-trains and VTOL cars like Chioma's ran alongside the Third Mainland Bridge, there were still old yellow taxis and busses belching out black sooty dinosaurs. *Danfo* minibuses were cheap. Cheaper still were the 120cc *ikoda*, motorbikes that zipped here and there despite governments best attempts to ban them, helmetless drivers balancing single passengers and their wares or precious water cans.

Mti looked out the side window as they banked right and his heart sank.

"*Abeg-o*, please tell me we're not going to the Lekki Market."

"No Sarge, our meeting's at the Waterfront, don't worry."

The Market had been around for as long as the Free Trade Zone, longer even. It was a well known nexus of snake oil, WearJacking and illicit trade on the fong-kongtraband end of the spectrum. If his Captain had sent him to Lagos from Tshwane NCB for that shit, *haibo*, he'd be pissed.

"Oh *Wasāi!* You don't know why you're here, do you?" Chioma sounded delighted and Mti hated how his ass made the pleather squeak as he turned to her.

"Sisi look, my superiors said I should come, and I'd know why when I got here.

Security, *mos.*"

"That's smart."

"Just please, don't tell me I'm here to blind test some old relic or artifact or something. I know how you people get with that nationalistic stuff."

He instantly regretted the slur before catching himself. *You people.*

But that wasn't a problem here, of course. Not anymore.

"Sorry Chioma. I... the Vactrain. I get motion sick." He didn't.

"Well Sarge, I'm sure we can fix that."

Mti flushed.

There were rumours of a new wave of Area Boys operating from the Ikoyi side of the Suspension Bridge, and they didn't need that kind of drama. Chioma took them on the scenic route that lead around the surprisingly squat and unassuming Church Of

The Assumption in Falomo, edging forward slowly in the compress of commuters who spent half their lives traveling to hack a tiny wage off the monolith of 50 million fellow Lagosians.

“Look there, up ahead.” Chioma hit the jets and cheekily lifted the car into a small opening the next level up. Everyone was hooting already and she didn’t seem to care if this encouraged more cacophony, pointing a slender finger upward as they both leaned forward.

He’d never seen the Lekki FTZ from the Bridge before, how the buildings were lit with holograms and advertising even more pricey than the real estate itself. How they rose into the air, cathedrals of commerce and glass. How all around it, a jetsam of rust and oil lapped at the City-State.

“The Government really are trying, you know,” she replied to his unanswered question as she jerked the car forward into another opening, the cushioned step bumping lightly off a Qoros hovering to her left.

“But uh-uh, they be just doing the same *hùnzhàng*-bullshit in different ways over and over and over. Carry on their doings this way, even different interpretations of this way, and expect a change. I *aks* you, isn’t that supposed to be a sign of insanity?”

“You’re not wrong there. It’s worse back home, I scheme. It’s about control, *ne*”? At least you have your economy but *ei, andazi*. Lets see what happens when the oil runs out.”

Chioma liked to talk and that suited Mti nicely. Having someone speak with such passion about their work was not something he got to hear very often in the line of duty.

“Sorry Sergeant, it’s... I just can’t believe this is happening! This is a huge opportunity for my masters degree.” She locked onto the Eko Tower landing pad.

Mti still didn’t know what “this” was yet.

“I was just surprised that you’re a photojourno student,” he said, “ I mean, from what you’ve been saying, I thought history or—”

“Journalists are just historians working in real time. Know what I mean?”

Mti smiled as they landed in their bay, *the zeal of the young academic*. He struggled with the harness of the unfamiliar Chinese car.

“And it’s not like we need to record our histories on painted stones for Efik gods anymore, hey Sarge? Cameras are so much easier.” He didn’t mind that she was teasing him. And a bit of a wise ass.

“*Hútú dàn,*” Mti laughed as he finally unbuckled.

She smiled at him and for a moment looked a lot younger as she pulled her knees right up to her chin to get out the car. Mti thought she must have been a very funny teenager.

Even from the privileged height of Eko Tower, Mti could smell the roiling rot of Kuramo far below. He zoomed in with his GO! and spotted scrawny fishermen off the coast casting nets. He knew their catch would be limited, that generations long disregard for the very thing that founded Lagos would have poisoned most of those fish.

It was the same back home. Gogo had lived on a centuries old farm in Stellenbosch back in Cape Town until she died of cancer a few months ago. Just like everyone else.

“They’ll eat them anyway, you know.” Chioma was following his gaze.

“They don’t have much choice.”

They turned towards the entrance and Mti was relieved to see the ministry had sent Kunle. Short, thin as sugar cane and just as sweet, the older man smiled warmly as he hugged Mti, thumping him on the back.

“Sergeant Ceba Mti, by God’s grace! Welcome back my friend.”

“Councillor Oyeneeye. Full of beans as ever, I see.”

Kunle had already turned to Chioma who bent down to peck him on the cheek.

“Come my friends, let’s get you settled! Hungry?”

Sitting in the government canteen with Kunle buzzing around them made Mti think of the first time he’d flown to Murtala Mohammed Airport and saw that famous old sign, ‘Welcome To Nigeria, The Happiest Place In The World!’

He would have loved to see a second line, a twitch of honesty, a somnambulist copywriter: ‘Scams and bribes R US, but don’t worry bros, *it’s nothing personal!*’

This city that only slept one morning a month for the clean-up curfew was hard work, backhand one moment and bonhomie the next. If you were a *mougou* who could be played, well hey, that was your fault. It felt like a rite of passage to Mti, accidental membership to a fraternity that could seat you at a table with ministers and soldiers and waiters all arguing with each other, only to laugh it off, while he laughed along. And Kunle was laughing loudest of all, as usual. But the pitch wasn't right. When their eyes met, Mti lost his appetite.

His stomach was in knots by the time they headed out the Ministry's automatic doors and were confronted with two rows of paramilitaries. Kunle nodded and they were escorted to an armoured personnel transport not unlike their old *Rate/s* back home. Chioma bounced straight into the truck and took a seat next to the tiny porthole. The paramilitaries remained anonymous in their tactical headgear, faces hidden behind air purifiers and electronic visors that Mti guessed were scanning him for weapons and prying into his forensics bag.

"Eh-eh, Kunle?"

His friend put a reassuring hand on his shoulder and gave it a brief squeeze, but his voice was all diplomat.

"Just a precaution. Lets get this over with, Sergeant."

Mti stepped into the vantablack truck and his sweat soaked shirt stung tender flesh as it dug into his armpits. Kunle and four of the soldiers followed, the last sealing them in with a pop that made his ears hurt.

The truck made easy work of the many potholes and discarded car parts as it took Sergeant Ceba Mti to the inner city for the first time.

No one spoke. That was new.

Mti was about ready to pull out the welcome distraction of his Tolkien when he glimpsed the decaying sign for the University Teaching Hospital through Chioma's porthole. He remembered hearing it had been annexed years ago as a Ministry research centre, out in Phase Two where no one gave a shit. What had been a bit of trivia at the time became almost overwhelming as he tried to imagine what had brought him here. Most of his guesses ended with some grotesquery that warranted ten soldiers with re-breather masks.

Mti was becoming very aware of the pepper soup and *gari* in his belly when they came to a stop near a simple metal door on the edge of a loading platform.

The loading bay gates were shut and deserted. That in itself wasn't what surprised Mti, but rather the condition of the facility. Immaculate.

Most old government buildings were plastered with graffiti, all rusted metal doors caked half closed on flaking hinges. Missing was the mausoleum of half-century old generators stripped for parts, as were the forty-two gallon drums with unknowable contents bleeding from ruptured seams, hedging out the competing brush in a bonsai chemical war.

The door opened with two d-sharp warning tones and Mti worked his jaw against the popping hiss of decompression. They stepped into the heat and the clay coloured sand and the sound of greater Lagos. A preacher admonishing over a PA system in discord with the high pitched whine of generators, the exuberant reply of his charismatic congregation punctuated by a never ending chorus of car horns from the suspension bridge.

The acrid smell of smoking diesel and croaker fish turned Mti's stomach.

"I must warn you, the handler is... hard work."

Kunle was standing next to Mti while the paramilitaries took up strategic positions around them.

"Handler? Handling what! Kunle, *mfetu*, I'm getting sick of this. I'm getting angry, *ne?* Just tell me, why am I here?"

Kunle was more his friend and less the ministry man when he turned to Mti, hands raised.

"Ceba, *abeg*, *I no vex you*. We need to keep you in the dark for a few more minutes. Just now-o. *Sabi?*"

Kunle had lead Mti aside from the group. He was not the kind of man to use Pidgin like that and even watered down for his benefit, the patois carried with it the weight of urgency.

"*No wahala. Notin spoil, abi?*" Mti knew he was fucking it up, but Kunle grinned nonetheless.

“Look Sarge, we just need a completely unbiased opinion,” said Chioma. She loped towards one of the soldiers who never spoke and was handed a very expensive camera.

“Your superiors not telling you...that’s smart, like I said.” Not for the first time, Mti wondered who she really was while the door opened with a plaintive metallic shriek. On a whim he activated his GO! RECorder as everyone turned to the man walking down the ramp towards them.

This oke is a scam artist. Mti’s police instincts made one of those snap judgements he was trained not to have.

The man was the tallest Mti had ever seen, all taffy limbs wrapped in a wasp coloured *danshiki*, the pronounced slap of his tennis racket sandals reverberating in the loading bay. He smiled to reveal perfectly symmetrical teeth, none of which seemed to touch their neighbour.

“Kunle! Chioma! *Wetin da dey?*” His voice was surprisingly high pitched.

He tapped his watch and scowled theatrically.

“Tsk, why now?”

“We were taking lunch.”

“Is this the *ekelebe?*”

“Yes,” Kunle looked annoyed. “Femi, this is Sergeant Mti from South Africa.”

Chioma looked up at Femi; Mti found it unsettling.

“Femi, we don’t have a lot of time.”

“No *wahala!*” Femi made a half shrugging, half pointing motion as he turned towards the door.

“*Wetin dey* Chioma. I *wan chop*, you *dash* me lunch?”

Chioma ignored him and Femi’s toothy laugh was like a stressed zipper when he led them into a well-lit passage.

The avocado green tiles looked new, and other than a few gurneys and the plastic shrouded blob of a medical contraption against the wall, there wasn’t much to see. The only sounds were their own footsteps echoing down the hallway, the handler’s sandals a 2/3 shuffle.

At a set of imposing pneumatic doors, Femi placed his hand on a screen and Mti felt air rush passed him as the doors hissed open to reveal a flight of stairs below. He recognised the air pressure difference as a standard quarantine safeguard and mumbled a prayer.

After a few flights, Femi opened another door onto what looked to Mti like a surgical prep room. Or a surgical prep bunker. There were a few chairs and some basins, theatre gowns neatly arranged on chrome hangers. And biohazard suits. Level four.

Fok.

Femi pressed a switch on the longest wall with a cultivated matter-of-factness. The SmartGlass depolarised and Mti looked through the window.

The little white girl wore a simple cornflower blue dress and sat on a bed cluttered with magazines, books and crayons. She was young, probably around five or six. Her hair was spring-loaded curls of plantation yellow. Her eyes made the dress look beige.

Mti hadn't realised he'd dropped his forensics bag until Femi spoke.

"Ceba, meet Claudia."

He took a few hesitant steps forward and came right up to the glass, his rapid breath misting up the surface. He quickly wiped it away with his palm and the girl looked up at him. After a beat she smiled and waved back.

Mti came down hard into one of the chairs.

"How? Is... is she a clone?" He knew it was a stupid question, but it was the most obvious one.

Femi the handler bristled beside him,

"*Abeg-o!* Listen *shine-shine*, she be no clone. No watermark, *sabi?*" He pointed to his neck.

"And I no *obtain* her! Way too much heat. Bros, I'm no *maga.*"

Femi's anger was obviously rehearsed, a slick delivery of 419'isms Mti could do without while his mind was still reeling. He glanced at Kunle who turned to the handler.

"Femi, we just need some time here."

Before he could object, one of the soldiers put a hand on Femi's shoulder and guided him towards the door. His gap toothed smile was a barcode in the low laboratory light as he made one of his shrugging gestures and disappeared three steps at a time, whistling Fela Kuti's *Yellow Fever*.

Mti found his legs and turned to face Kunle.

"I'm sorry Ogakunle, I've just... I haven't seen a white before."

"None of us had," Chioma's voice was hushed from the corner, camera up.

He realised she'd been photographing him the whole time. He didn't care.

"The forensics thing. Blind verification...."

"Ceba, my friend. Your police agreed that the person to do this should be unbiased, but a government man. Someone with just the right qualifications to—"

"*Ja* Kunle, just the right qualifications, *ne*?" Not too qualified, not too creative, not too connected in politics or even the police."

Kunle grimaced and ran a hand through his hair a few times.

"It's ok my friend, really," said Mti, "I have so many questions, for after. So, how do we do this? You coming in with me?"

"You mad?" Kunle pointed towards the yellow biohazard suits.

"We wouldn't think less of you for wearing one of those."

Chioma nodded.

"Kunle, *mfetu*, surely your doctors checked her for the G-mo strain?"

"You know I can't answer that, yet."

"Fair enough." Mti picked out one of the standard issue green surgical scrubs and considered the risks to himself, in case she was infected, in case he actually wanted to have children one day. It was getting a bit late for that.

"And what about Femi, then?"

"Femi is a special case."

Mti realised he was stalling and walked over to the basins to prep the tools of his trade.

"You know that we don't understand a lot about the G-mo, '*ne*?' he said over his shoulder.

"Over the last few decades it's become like a story, *mos*. Like a folktale." Kunle didn't answer.

Mti was inside the chamber with the *tokolosh*. Claudia was lying on her stomach and swinging her legs, watching an old touchpad. 'Curated content,' Chioma insisted.

"Hey Claudia, I'm Ceba." Mti wished his voice sounded friendlier. This bedside manner thing was new. Most of his patients were already dead, but he gave it a shot.

"What are you watching?"

"*Takalani Sesame*, from South Africa," she looked up at him and it was difficult not to stare at her azure eyes.

"Here, look!" Claudia moved around some colouring books to make space for him. It was through some reflex that he found himself sitting beside her, receiving the guided tour.

"That's Zuzu, and this one is Moshe, the yellow one. He's a *meerkat*! Oh and here's Neno, he's my favourite."

"Ah yes, I've seen this one! Hey, did you know that Nelson Mandela was a fan?"

Claudia's eyes got wider.

uYesu Kristu, just don't stare Ceba.

Her fingers darted around the surface for a while and pulled up a video of Madiba.

"He liked *Takalani Sesame*?" She sounded thrilled. Mti noticed that her accent was surprisingly neutral, with only the slightest colourful Nigerian twang at its root.

"Yes Claudia, he did."

"Dada says he was a great man."

"Dada?"

"Dada. Femi."

She looked back at her tablet and scrolled through the menu.

"I know he's not really my Dada. He just likes me to call him that. And I don't have another Dada."

Mti swallowed hard and glanced up. Chioma's camera stripped him bare.

"Claudia, I just need to do one or two little tests, ok? It'll be really quick, I promise."

"Ok," She sat up and frowned, her delicate hands reaching up to Mti's face.

"Don't cry Ceba. It's ok."

Mti slouched on the step of the armoured carrier, his head bent low. Chioma sat next to him, close enough that he could smell her in the stifling humidity.

"Ceba?" Kunle was pacing slowly.

Mti looked very tired. “My report will state that Claudia has no genetic markers for the G-mo virus or any trace of that awful fertility programme it came from. She is not a clone. There is no sign of albinism, vitiligo, or... *cào* Kunle, she’s just a white, *mos*. A little white girl! And she shouldn’t be in that place!”

“Where would you put her?” Chioma asked.

No one spoke for a long moment.

“I need a beer.”

Chioma slapped his leg.

“I know a place.”

The three of them sat on nicotine coloured plastic chairs around upturned beer crates, watching the sun slowly set over a leaded sea and quarts of Guilder lager. Nearby, a young man in shorts and sandals was turning goat *suya* and was not going easy on the spice.

“Bros! Enough gunpowder!” Chioma called, jerking her head toward Mti.

Over their kebabs Kunle explained how Claudia’s parents were natives of Abuja in their early twenties, that Claudia was their second child.

“We’re very lucky it was the capital and not one of the more remote areas. She may have been killed. Or worse.”

They had no idea what to do with her and went to the local parish for guidance, which is how she fell into the dubious custodianship of Pastor Femi.

“Why the church?” asked Mti, pushing away his paper plate.

“Ceba, think about it. You said it yourself, all that folklore around the G-mo. Put that together with pre-existing beliefs, the white calf, the white buffalo. It’s not hard to believe her parents were terrified and wanted to do the right thing.”

Mti lit a cigarette, his one and only for the day. “So, Femi was tested?”

“For the G-mo? Thoroughly. We have no idea why he’s immune to the virus, not even a carrier. And trust me, we’ve looked. He brought her here, set himself up as her keeper. “ Kunle took a sip of beer.

“A cockroach more like.”

“That man be *wayo*, no doubt. But we’re a God fearing country, Ceba. When an ordained minister comes along and speaks to the right person in authority about the

white girl born of Nigerian man and woman, and he can't make her sick? Well...."
He left it hanging.

"So, Sergeant Mti," Chioma's camera was on him again.

"What is the cause of this phenomenon?"

He looked into the lens, mock World Correspondent.

"Well Chioma, I would say fear."

He took a long drink.

"Not a lot of people, just enough, devoured by their fear. A racist TV evangelist here, a fake-news Super PAC there, all shouting about the extinction of white people. Population in single digits by 2050, they cried. Such shit."

The camera lens whined closer.

"*Jirre* Chioma, you know this stuff!"

"I thought you'd say something about Claudia,"

"About the only white child in Africa, maybe in the world? What more is there to say?"

Ok, enough people with enough power got scared. Those same people released genetically targeted fertility drugs and it went very wrong. It didn't have to be that way Chioma. It could have been...I don't know...."

"...Gracious," she said. "Just... human."

He liked that.

Chioma put down her camera.

Mti yawned, wiped the sweat from his scalp.

"Kunle, can you *dash* me a room at the Eko?"

"No *wahala*." They finished their beers. The sun dipped low on the horizon, setting the Bite of Benin ablaze.

"You can't send her north," Mti said, "She will be infected. Maybe."

Kunle sighed.

"We'll figure it out."

Chioma's voice was a whisper as she stared out across the copper sea.

"Why? Why is Claudia here? What's going to happen?"

Kunle looked up.

"I don't know, Chioma. Do you believe in God?"

She nodded but said nothing.

Mti thought of Claudia's face, her tiny hands.

"...And borne upon the high airs above the mists of the world, it passed into the Ancient West, and an end was come of the Eldar of story and of song."

He finished his lager.

"It's Tolkien, from the Silmarillion."

Chioma smiled at Ceba.

The three of them rose and turned their backs on the sun and the smoke, and walked toward the ruin of Lagos.

Book Reviews Gail Jamieson

Lydan Francis Angelfyre Destiny



Casey is a human Fel hybrid. She looks like an attractive 17-year old human until you notice her large, colourful mood changing irises which are her Fel heritage. She lives a mostly uninteresting life on a boring small planet, taken care of by a somewhat rough human woman called Elissa Hart. Elissa considers herself a cunning trader of rare and exotic items and Casey sometimes helps her out. Until one day Casey finds a flat bluish stone with odd markings on it. Elissa trades it for the possibility of future business and later in an altercation the stone becomes implanted in the back of Casey's neck and she

wakes up to find Angel, the computer avatar of the ship Angelfyre, welcoming her and telling her that that the ship needs a pilot and that Casey is perfect for the position. Angelfyre is an amazing vessel and that can self repair and change configurations to suit any situation that she (she is depicted as female) may find herself in. I'm not sure why she needs a pilot as Angel seems to be able to get out of all sorts of situations as the book progresses. But Angel is an unusual AI in that she is slowly developing human emotions.

Anyway, Casey spends a good bit of the book becoming a more than competent pilot. They have some adventures on some pretty amazing planets and narrowly escape death in refuelling Angelfyre. (I did wonder what will happen the next time they run out of fuel.)

There is a war going on in the background and when the Angelfyre comes to the attention of High Commander Qutar-Rin, they are suspected of being on the opposing side and so must be captured or destroyed.

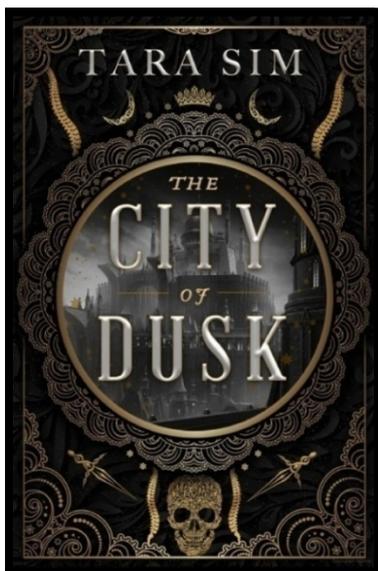
But Casey, Angel and Angelfyre manage to outwit and escape, even though both Casey and Angelfyre are severely hurt and damaged and must hide themselves to recover. Qutar-Rin is tasked with finding or eliminating them and we come to the end of the first novel of the series.

The novel is very well written with lots of interesting characters and throwaway lines. If you are not bothered by the changing of the Physics of the Laws (in place of the laws of physics) then this is a fun read. But I do get the feeling that the target audience is young adult women, rather like Casey herself.

Casey tends to think of herself as rather invincible and so tends not to think of consequences but rather of the final outcome she desires, which sometimes leads her into dangerous situations, which she often serendipitously escapes.

I suggest you read it and look out for the next episode.

Tara Sim City of Dusk – Book One of The Dark Gods



This novel is billed as a dark adult fantasy but I feel it might be more suited to the young adult market. In *The City of Dusk* we follow the four heirs of the four noble houses in the city of Nexus. The families of Lastrider, Vakara, Mordova, and Cyr have kept the city running for over five centuries. Each family represents a different deity and holds different divine skills to help the city run smoothly. But their gods no longer favour Nexus, and the heirs of the families must work together to save their kingdom.

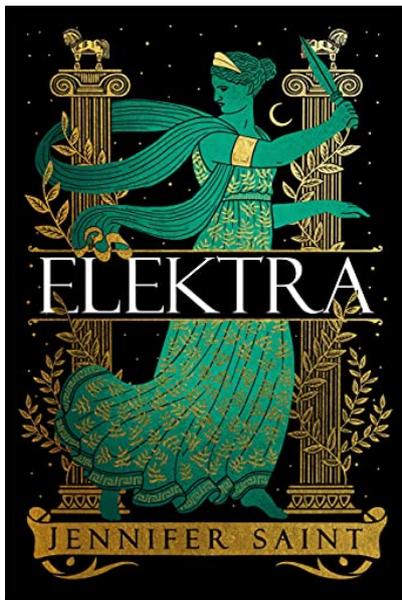
Unwilling to stand by and watch the destruction, the four heirs—Angelica, an elemental with her eyes set on the throne; Risha, a necromancer fighting to keep

the peace; Nikolas, a soldier who struggles to see the light; and Taesia, a shadow-wielding rogue with a reckless heart— become reluctant allies in the quest to save their city

The characters of the four heirs are what really kept my interest in this book. They are well rounded and different and their relationships with each other as well as with their family members are deftly crafted. But this is not to detract from the carefully created world they live in.

The book starts rather slowly but the last third or so leads to a cliff hanger which will make you keen to read the next part of this trilogy.

Jennifer Saint Elektra



Elektra is the retelling of the classic Greek story of the same name. I'm not really sure this should be classed as fantasy but it is a well written good story and even if you know the tale, interesting to read.

The House of Atreus is cursed. A bloodline tainted by a generational cycle of violence and vengeance. This is the story of three women, their fates inextricably tied to this curse, and the fickle nature of men and gods.

The story is narrated by the following three women:

Clytemnestra

The sister of Helen, wife of Agamemnon - her hopes of averting the curse are dashed when her sister is taken to Troy by the feckless Paris. Her husband raises a great army against them, and determines to win, whatever the cost.

Cassandra

Princess of Troy, and cursed by Apollo to see the future but never to be believed when she speaks of it. She is powerless in her knowledge that the city will fall.

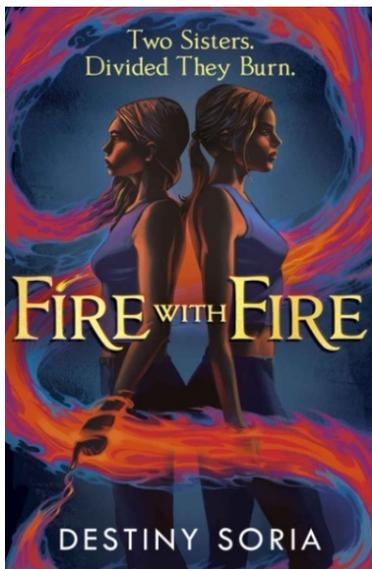
Elektra

The youngest daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, Elektra is horrified by the

bloodletting of her kin. But, can she escape the curse, or is her own destiny also bound by violence?

I enjoyed it. You may also, especially if you are a fan of Mythology.

Destiny Soria Fire with Fire



in this modern day setting..

There is plenty of action but I sometimes feel that we don't really need to know each and every move that a dragon slayer makes when fighting a dragon.

Dani has to come to terms with Nox and to understand more of what makes dragons "tick". Nox has a lot of cat-like tendencies and uses sarcasm and scepticism to good effect. You cannot help but be charmed by him.

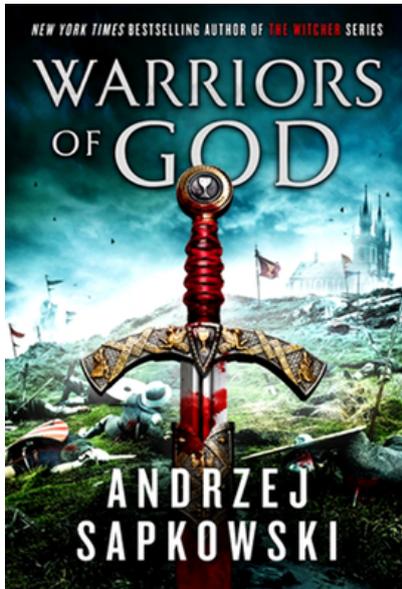
Then there is the sorcerer, Calla, who has a captive dragon. Although sorcerers and slayers have worked together for centuries, she really is only working toward what she can get for herself.

Eden, the older sister, is a very compelling character. She is very well crafted and in fact both sisters show the normal feelings and anxieties of teenage girls. Dani is determined to have a "normal" life and tries to not to lose her friends, even when she comes across a centuries old sorcerer called Kieran.

Soria never loses sight of her modern-day setting; the existence of dragons and sorcerers doesn't stop her characters from having more down-to-earth, real-life concerns about identity and acceptance and mental health.

Although covering some dark issues the book retains a positive outlook and the underlying need of the two sisters to understand and appreciate each other kept my interest.

Andrzej Sapkowski Warriors of God Book Two of The Hussite Trilogy



This is the continuation of an historical series with Fantasy elements. Its events take place in Bohemia and Silesia, during the time of Hussite Wars. When the Hussite leaders entrust Reynevan, magician and charlatan, with a dangerous secret mission, he is forced to come out of hiding in Bohemia and depart for Silesia. At the same time, he strives to avenge the death of his brother and discover the whereabouts of his missing beloved, Katarzyna of Biberstein

As happens in Book One, he is pursued by multiple enemies and he must contend with danger on every front. Full of gripping action replete with twists and mysteries, seasoned with magic and Sapkowski's ever-present wit, fans of the Witcher will appreciate this rich historical epic set during the Hussite Wars.

However be warned that it is a very complex novel and it will help if you have at least some idea of what actually was taking place in medieval Europe. And if you have not read the first book, "The Tower of fools", there will be times when you can become lost without the full background.

Sapkowski as usual writes very well and it is interesting to see how he intermingles religion, heresy, dragons and monsters with his well rounded sense of humour.

Sapkowski is probably Poland's most famous fantasy author and his obvious fascination and love of the history of his country shines through as he bases this story on actual events overlaid with fantastical overtones.

I must admit that this is not really the sort of novel I enjoy but I know that the author has a very large following so I suggest that you find the first volume and start reading there.

NASA's Kepler Space Telescope



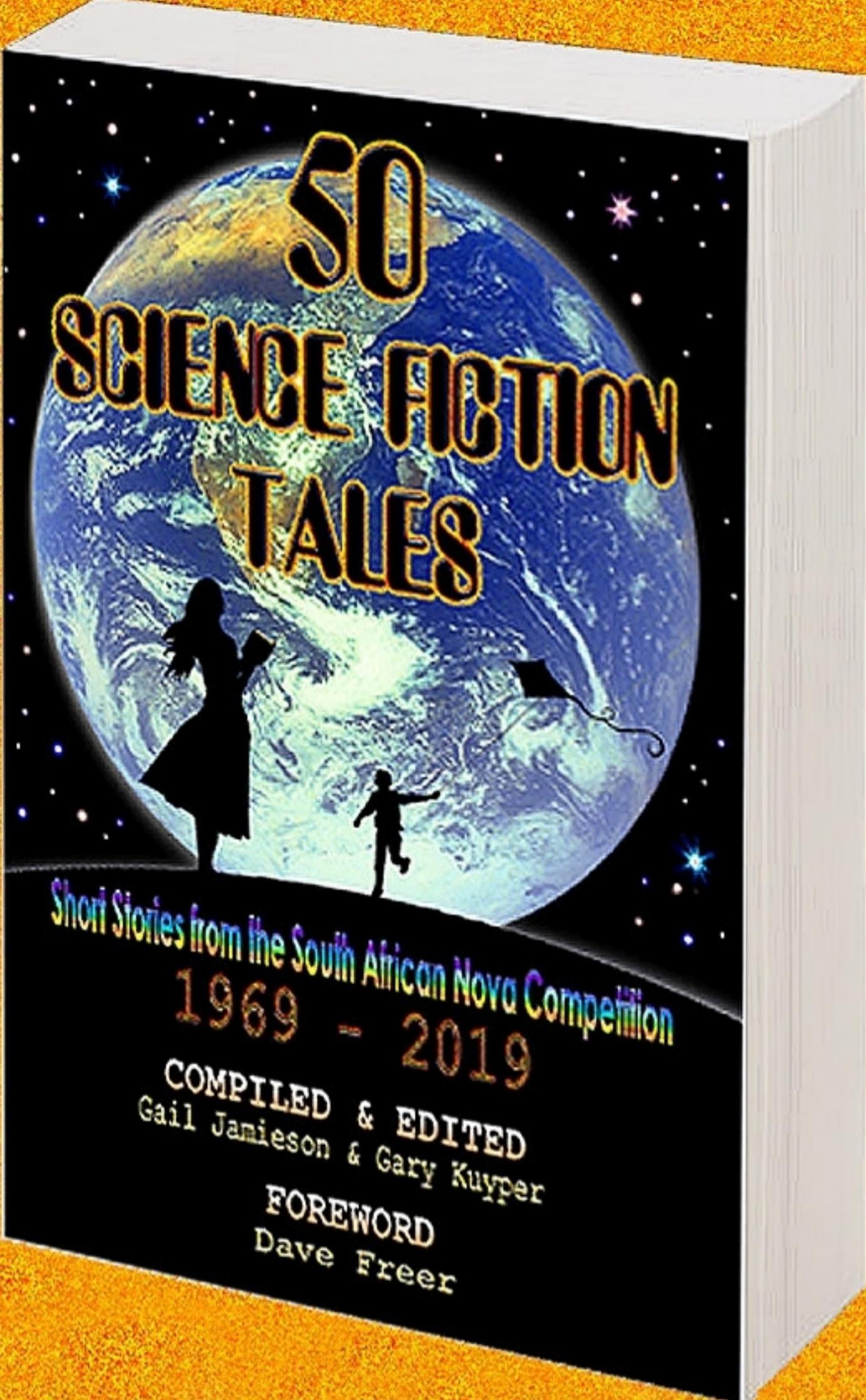
We had an extremely interesting Zoom meeting on the 20th of August. Astronomer Chris Englebrecht told us about the “Music of the Spheres”, showing us how German astronomer Johannes Kepler in the 16th century used mathematics and the elliptical orbits of the then visible planets indicate that these orbits could be fitted into the 5 regular polyhedrons, tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, dodecahedron and icosahedrons.

Later this led, more or less directly to NASA's mission to search for planet orbiting stars, and more particularly earth-like planets that might support life as we know it. Its 9-year mission has given us the following science results and reinforced the hope that we are not alone in the Universe.

The Top Science Results from the Kepler Mission (from NASA)

NASA's Kepler mission revolutionized our scientific understanding of our place in the cosmos by discovering that:

- **Planets outnumber the stars.** Kepler has proven there are more planets than stars in our galaxy — and knowing that revolutionizes our scientific understanding of our place in the cosmos.
- **Small planets are common.** Kepler has shown us our galaxy is teeming with terrestrial-size worlds; the most recent analysis of Kepler's discoveries concludes that 20 to 50 percent of the stars in the sky are likely to have small, possibly rocky planets similar in size to Earth within the habitable zone of their parent stars, where water could pool on the planet surface. We still have much to learn about whether any of them could host life.
- **Planets are diverse.** Kepler has discovered a diversity of planet types, opening our eyes to new possibilities. The most common size of planet Kepler found doesn't exist in our solar system — a world between the size of Earth and Neptune — and we have much to learn about these planets.
- **Solar systems are diverse too!** While our own inner solar system has four planets, Kepler found systems with considerably more planets — up to eight — orbiting close to their parent stars. The existence of these compact systems raises questions about how solar systems form: Are these planets “born” close to their parent star, or do they form farther out and migrate in?
- **New insights revealed about stars.** Besides launching us into the golden age of exoplanets, Kepler has reinvigorated the study of stars. Kepler observed more than a half million stars over the course of its nine years in operation.



50 SCIENCE FICTION TALES

Short Stories from the South African Nova Competition
1969 - 2019

COMPILED & EDITED
Gail Jamieson & Gary Kuyper

FOREWORD
Dave Freer

COMING
SOON