

PROBE

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Editorial

Gail

We've just had our monthly meeting for May. It was a full Zoom meeting presented by AL du Pisani, who is now based in the Cape. He is an avid follower of the Space-X saga and has brought us up to date on their latest attempt to get their new rocket into space. They didn't manage it this time but are saying that they have learned an enormous amount and are very keen to try again as soon as possible. It's mind boggling to realise that they are attempting to launch a 9-metre diameter space ship that will ultimately go to the moon and Mars. Looking at the aftermath of the attempted launch



and learning that they have a fully automated factory nearby (which is producing new ships and launchers at an astonishing rate) shows that they are very determined to succeed. It was a most interesting and entertaining presentation and we look forward to hearing about their next attempt. Thanks to AL for keeping us updated on this really amazing venture.

"50 Science Fiction Tales". By now I am sure that the people who have supported us and ordered our offering on 50 Years of South African SF from the Nova competition have had a chance to read their books. We would really like to encourage you to go to Amazon and leave us a review. A lot of time and effort went into the Anthology and it would really help the club if we had reviews which would encourage readers to buy the book.

Also in this issue is the talk given to us by Professor Deirdre Byrne on South African SF Post 1994. Glad to hear it is still alive.

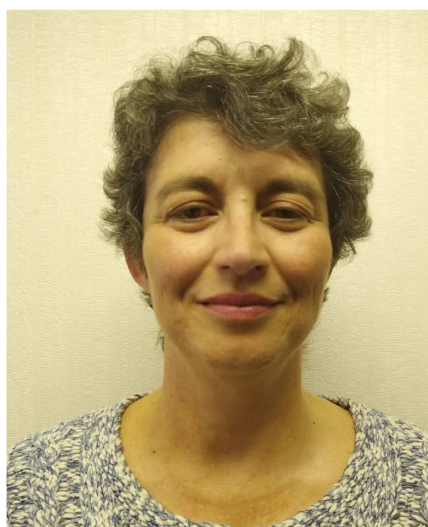
And from long time member and supporter of SFFSA, Donald Mullany, who now lives in Finland, an article on Speculative Fiction in that very far north country. It seems that Finland and South Africa have very different ideas on how to enjoy and promote their enjoyment of speculative fiction

I was also contacted by Chris Webster, who was published in PROBE many, many years ago. He is still writing and we publish a genuine South African story from him.

Chairperson's Note

Recently I was reminiscing about what kept me being a fan of science fiction/fantasy besides the books, movies, tv series, comics and I came to the conclusion that it was the art: the book covers, digital art found online, art in comic books and so on.

One of my favourite books to come out in the last couple of decades is Spectrum – The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art – an illustrated book which features the best artists working in the field today. The artists compete in an annual competition which showcases eight categories as selected by a rotating jury. The categories cover fantasy, horror, science fiction, editorial, institutional, conceptual, dimensional as well as art for advertising campaigns of all things. The book was edited by Cathy and Arnie Fenner until 2013 when they semi-retired and licensed the book and competition to John Fleskes.



I have been collecting the editions of this beautiful book over the years and each edition has always left me amazed at the beautiful art featured inside. The artists that have been featured are some of the best artists working today for example Kinuko Y Craft, James Gurney, Brom, Frank Miller, Frank Frazetta and Michael Whelan amongst many others. Spectrum has just published its 27th edition and it is amazing that it is still going strong.

You may be wondering why I am waxing so lyrically about this book – it is because I think that the art is a very vital component showcasing science fiction, fantasy, horror etc to the public at large. If you think about it, it is probably the first introduction into taking a journey into the fantastical – the book cover that hooks you in, the front cover of a comic book or magazine that piques your interest or the art found in a gallery or online. I hope this book continues to be published for the next 25 years showcasing the wonderful talented artists and their fantastic art.

Until next time
Carla

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 #70 March 2023

Issue #71 April 2023

Issue #72 May 2023

Ansible David Langford

March 2023 427 <http://news.ansible.uk/a427.html>

April 2023 428 <http://news.ansible.uk/a428.html>

May 2023 429 <http://news.ansible.uk/a429.html>

WARP 113 is now available for your reading pleasure!

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

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AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME: SOUTH AFRICAN SCIENCE FICTION POST-1994

Deirdre C. Byrne

I'd like to begin this article with a controversial statement. I believe there is nothing as definite as a hermetically sealed literary genre. This means, in essence, that I do not think there is a definitive set of strategies that "is" science fiction. Our favourite genre "bleeds" into other genres (fantasy, horror, *noir* [whatever the difference is between those two], magic realism and the Gothic), and they in turn bleed into each other. I prefer the umbrella term "speculative fiction" for fiction that diverges from mainstream realistic depictions of reality and society. By saying this, I'm sure you will understand that I have neatly sidestepped the whole debate about which books we are allowing into the genre of science fiction.

I will now explore some of the reasons South Africa **did not** have a thriving literary culture in the speculative fiction genre for many years. After all, *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* was written by Karl Čapek in 1921 in what was then Czechoslovakia. The play, which introduced the word “robot” to the English language (the word originally meant “forced labour” in Czech), sounds like a cautionary tale for Chat GBT in the twenty-first century: the robots, who were created to serve humanity, end up dominating them completely. Only four decades later, in 1961, Polish writer Stanislaw Lem wrote *Solaris*, a classic novel about a failed expedition to locate and communicate with extra-terrestrial intelligence. So it is not as if speculative fiction came late to the world at large. What took South Africa so long?

The answers are myriad. One lies in our country's colonial history, which sowed centuries of racial conflict. It is a truism that, in the struggle against apartheid, racial liberation was privileged above gender liberation and that the National Women's Coalition often found themselves wondering whether their comrades were serious about gender equality at all. But I digress. Apartheid had (more than) a few very negative consequences for the morale and culture of the country, which impacted negatively on the production of science fiction. First, it made everyone believe that indigenous cultural practices and knowledges were of no account, even the people who practice them. These knowledges are now being revalued, fortunately, but they have almost passed out of cultural currency. Many of them, we are finding, rely on ways of thinking that are outside of Cartesian rationality. If we think of the therian thropes painted by San artists in dance-induced trances, the spirit animals that are believed to bring or withhold rain, the beliefs in picking particular herbs at particular times that were long thought to be mere superstition but have now been shown to have scientific validity, we see that indigenous knowledges hold a validity that pre-dates linear, rational thinking. These knowledges are a rich source of material for non-mainstream fiction: for speculative writing, in fact.

A second deleterious effect of apartheid on the production of SFF is that it centred politics, economics, and racial struggle. The Marxists would tell us that the class struggle – the struggle for workers to take back the means of production and ensure equal distribution of resources – is the most important imperative of history. To this end, an influential Marxist theorist, Georg Lukacs, judges literature in terms of whether it reflects the author's society in realistic ways. Thus, in pre-1994 South

Africa, novels such as *And They Didn't Die* (Lauretta Ngcobo) and *Amandla! A Novel* (Miriam Tlali), which describes the lived experiences of poor black South Africans, attracted more praise and approval than works of speculative fiction. This is not to say, though, that there was no speculative fiction during that period, though. There were, one might say, sporadic outbreaks. Peter Wilhelm, a remarkably prolific author in the Apartheid years, published five novels. One of these, *Summer's End* (for children), published in 1984, is set in a dystopian near-future when the Third Ice Age has turned South Africa into a frozen wasteland. Despite an indifferent plot, the novel is prescient in its foreshadowing of climate change. Wilhelm's 1994 novel, *The Mask of Freedom*, also envisages a dystopian future, in which population growth, poverty, crime and AIDS have caused the government to implement stricter social policy. Wilhelm received a great deal of acclaim for his writing, but actually was not a particularly good speculative fiction author. I think the mediocrity of his writing may have contributed to the relative obscurity of SA science fiction.

POST-DEMOCRACY SCIENCE FICTION

The Master's degrees in Creative Writing offered at the University of the Witwatersrand, the University Currently Known as Rhodes, and the University of Cape Town gave students the benefit of input from scholars whose work married the academic and creative fields: Michael Titlestad and Leon de Kock (Wits), JM Coetzee (UCT), Robert Berold and Paul Mason (Rhodes). Students who emerged from these programmes had to complete a publishable manuscript. They include filmmaker Gillian Schutte, who chose magic realism for her manuscript (later published as *After Just Now*); the hard-core feminist popular author, Sarah Lotz; and Lotz's writing buddy, Lauren Beukes, who had a background in freelance transcription and used it to good effect to craft her signature snappy dialogue. My postgraduate student, Gerhard Hope, has said that SA science fiction came of age with the publication of Beukes's *Moxyland* in 2008, and in a sense this is true. But I would like to date the genre's coming of age earlier, to 1994, when we finally emerged from the horror that was Apartheid. 1994 was suffused with the heady euphoria that comes from being liberated from a prison and being allowed to walk in fresh air and sunshine for the first time in decades. Still, it brought a dilemma for creative writers. Now that there was no oppressive social system to protest against in writing (we did not yet know that, in our country as in so many others, the

oppressed, once liberated, would prove to have appalling skills in governing), what was to be written about? All of a sudden, as Christopher Warnes has said, SA literature could write about frivolous, imaginative, speculative topics. It could venture into romantic fiction (e.g. the Nollybooks series and finally the *Hlomu* series); it could turn left into crime; and it could pursue its imaginative dreams via speculative fiction. *Moxyland* was not the first speculative fiction text to be published in South Africa after 1994. That honour may go to *Welcome to our Hillbrow* by Phaswane Mpe, the novelist who would die at 34, and whose book would be narrated by someone who had succumbed to AIDS. *Welcome to our Hillbrow* has never been acknowledged as speculative fiction, but I think it fits into the genre by virtue of its highly unconventional narrator.

Moxyland, however, did fit the bill as far as SF is concerned. Set in a meticulously imagined near-future Cape Town, the novel features numerous cognitively acceptable innovations: the genetic modification that is used to turn Kendra, the Michaelis graduate, into a “sponsor baby” for Ghost soft drink; the use of mobile communications technology to control people; Toby’s “streamcasting” coat that broadcasts his live blog; and Home™, foreshadowing Apple Home, in which all one’s home appliances and devices are controlled by a single set of data. Beukes’s M7N1 virus is a forerunner of COVID-19, taken to the level of government abuse of power by infecting dissidents and then providing antidotes in special centres (if only we’d had those during the COVID pandemic!). The characters, though, are recognisable early 21st-century young adults, with all the usual hang-ups about love, career and social justice. This is what makes *Moxyland* both relatable and so interesting: the characters are the boy (and girl) next door, people we know and whose struggles we understand.

Zoo City, Beukes’ second novel, was published in 2010 and earned her the Arthur C. Clarke prize: the first time it had been awarded to an African author. *Zoo City* is less science fiction than magic realism: its central premise is that criminals are linked to animals, in a process that is never explained and cannot be reversed. In this way, they are marked as different, othered, made into pariahs, social rejects, all the more interesting because of their status as outcasts from “decent” society. Zinzi, the novel’s main character and narrator, has a sloth as a result of having been found guilty of her younger brother’s murder. She remembers Thando’s death, the trial

where she was found guilty, and the arrival of the Sloth in a hallucination brought on by a *sangoma's muti*. The novel does not explain how the animals are chosen for each criminal, how they find the criminals they are going to live with, or how they give their human companions a *mashavi* or magical gift. Other features of living with animals also remain unexplained, such as how the humans find food for their animals or keep them healthy. Nevertheless, *Zoo City's* breathless pace as Zinzi searches for the missing twins Song and Sbu, uncovers a whole underground criminal syndicate and neutralises it, coupled with its many divergences from “straight” social realism, make it an illustrious entry in the South African speculative fiction Hall of Fame (if there were one).

Beukes has gone on to publish three more novels, set in the US where she lived for a while before settling in the UK. She has a new book coming out in 2023, entitled *Bridge*. Her novels are of a piece with *Moxyland* and *Zoo City*. They all feature differences from contemporary life that *could* actually happen, but have not yet happened, so they all fit into the basic mould of speculative fiction. However, all her novels after *Zoo City* also incorporate elements of other genres, specifically horror and *noir* (which, themselves, overlap significantly).

While Beukes is a formidable individual talent, with her first two novels, South African science fiction grew out of what could be called “the colonial cringe” where works from former colonies continually felt inferior because they were **not** from the metropole. Her detailed and knowledgeable descriptions of the underbellies (literally) of Cape Town and Johannesburg use those cities’ less savoury features to advance the plots of *Moxyland* and *Zoo City*. For the rest of this talk, I will be arguing that South African science fiction proclaims and capitalises on its South Africanness. The list of South African science fiction novels that have been published since 1994, besides Beukes’ two, is extensive for a country that has nothing that even approaches a culture of reading:

- Henrietta Rose-Innes published “The Poison” in 2008 and won the Caine Prize for African Fiction. She published *Nineveh* in 2011 and it was nominated for the M-Net literary awards.
- *District 9* was released in 2009 under the directorial parentage of Neil Blomkamp.

- Charlie Human published *Apocalypse Now Now* in 2013, *Kill Baxter* in 2014, and *Ancestral* in 2021;
- Andrew K. Miller published *Dub Steps* in 2015, won the Dinaane Prize for Best First Novel, and never published any more novels.
- Fred Strydom published *The Raft* in 2016 and *The Inside-Out Man* in 2017.
- Mohale Mashigo published collection of short stories, *Intruders*, in 2018.
- Masande Ntshanga published *Triangulum* in 2019.
- Zimbabwean-born Shanice Ndlovu published *The Pride of Noonlay* (a collection of “high” fantasy short stories) in 2020.
- Mia Arderne published *Mermaid Fillet* in 2020.
- Alistair MacKay published *It Doesn't Have to be this Way* in 2022.
- Andrew Skinner published *Steel Frame* (a novel with no recognisable South African flavour at all) in 2022.

This list of titles tells a story: speculative fiction in South Africa is still dominated by white writers and by men (no surprises), but is at least becoming more diverse and growing in numbers. Hopefully this trend will continue.

I have chosen three texts published since 1994 for in-depth discussion, namely *Dub Steps*, *Triangulum*, and *It Doesn't Have to Be This Way*.

Dub Steps

Andrew K. Miller's *Dub Steps* responds creatively to some of the pressing matters in South African society. Like Strydom's *The Raft*, it reflects the South African propensity to think in terms of an apocalypse. We have been thinking in this vein for decades. Apartheid propaganda kept referring to “the Black Danger/die Swart Gevaar” as something that could, or would, annihilate civilised society. Post-1994, as a nation, we've been thinking things like “If Eskom fails, that will be the end of the country” and “If so-and-so (insert your pet hate of a party or a politician) gets elected, that will be the end of the country” and “If the drought in Cape Town continues, that will be the end of the country”. Such Doomsday fantasies become real in *Dub Steps*, when the rather hapless Roy Blumenthal wakes up one day to find that everyone he knows has disappeared. No explanation is given for how this happened, just as no explanation is given for how everyone lost their memory in *The Raft*. Technically, then, the book's inciting incident belongs to the non-rational realm of fantasy, and so do many of its features, especially the rapacious designer pigs who - we gather –

have been created by genetic modification, although no explanation is provided. *Dub Steps* is a fairly standard post-apocalyptic “last man alive” book, but it achieves far more than the usual suspects. Once Roy has accepted that all the people have vanished, he behaves like a typical South African *boet*: he steals cars and fuel, pisses on things, and goes on a mad road trip. Once he finds Babalwa, who (at that stage) seems to him to be the only other person left alive, their interaction follows typical inter-racial cross-gender lines for South Africa.

Fast forward. Roy and Babalwa found a new community with the few others they can locate who have survived. This group have the daunting task of not only ensuring their own survival, but also that of their as-yet-unborn children. Roy and the other members of the group show remarkable awareness of the environment in their recycling of the things left behind by vanished citizens; and Roy becomes the archivist for their unconventional experiments in communal farming and baby-making. Roy feels like a misfit in the group because of the things he likes (books, records, artworks), but by the end of the book he has come to terms with his need for the others, despite the occasional conflict and the inevitable tragedy. The blurb on the back cover of the book tells us that the book is about “learning to be human”, but I think there is much more at stake. Miller critiques our the disposable, trash-generating, commodity fetishism; he also shows how nature, left to its own indifference, will surely swallow up human artefacts, what we think of as human civilization, by sheer weight of persistence. In this way *Dub Steps* reflects intriguingly on many topical matters in contemporary South African society: consumerism; capitalism; contingency; and our relationship with the more-than-human natural surroundings.

Triangulum

This is without doubt the cleverest book I read in 2022. Written by Masande Ntshanga, who has been a distinguished writer in residence at Wits University, and is the new Editor of the creative writing journal *New Contrast*, it tells a puzzling story about a puzzling triangle that appears on the ceiling of the unnamed narrator’s bedroom. The narrator is a bisexual teenage girl whose two best friends are Part (her first lesbian lover) and Litha (a troubled young man who keeps moving from one foster home to another). Between them, they decide to solve the mystery of a group

of teenage girls who have disappeared from their late-apartheid Eastern Cape (then Ciskei) village. The narrator's mother has also, coincidentally, disappeared. The first part of the book narrates how the three friends attack the question of the missing girls' whereabouts; the second sees her involved with a woman, simply called D., and working with society's rejects in a sinister building called The Tower. Slowly she comes to realize that she is in the presence of a cult called the Returners, who are anchored in the past and want to return to it. The entire book comes together at the end of Part Two in unexpected ways, which I will not go into here for fear of being accused of spoilers.

Triangulum is the only South African science fiction to have been written post-1994, but set (partly) during the Apartheid era. Ntshanga did his research impeccably and his portrait of the Nationalist Party's homelands is chillingly accurate in its portrayal of the way the system pitted black bureaucrats in the newly created territories against their subjects. So is his representation of the South African government's habit of "disappearing" people who do not fit into their political or demographic plans. The people whom the narrator (from her position as a member of the Government department of Population Control) interviews in The Tower, sound-proofed and security-protected, are the dregs of society, for whom Population Control has sinister plans. By concerning his narrator with social rejects, Ntshanga focuses attention on the deep divide between haves and have-nots in South Africa. The narrator's lover, D., toys, within the framework of addiction, with becoming one of these, and *Triangulum* demonstrates how narrow the line is between a successful artist who can stage her own exhibitions and a down-and-out addict in the grip of unbreakable substance abuse. The novel's affirmation of the bonds of family through the narrator's commitment to her parents is also powerfully South African: the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is rooted in families' love for each other.

It Doesn't Have to Be This Way

Alistair Mackay's debut novel, *It Doesn't Have to Be This Way*, is an eco-activist work that argues for kinder relations between humans and more-than-human nature. Mackay imagines three gay men, all devoted friends: Luthando, Viwe, and Malcolm. Luthando and Viwe meet at a reforestation project in Cape Town, where Malcolm, who nurtures a passion for Luthando, is also working. Luthando and Viwe's doomed love affair has far-reaching ripples of influence, leading Viwe to leave his long-term girlfriend Noxolo, but importantly, driving him into conflict with his homophobic mother. While this is happening, Luthando conducts guerrilla tree planting excursions into wild areas around Cape Town, so that when the eco-apocalypse happens, and the temperature rises to inhuman levels and the whole city bowl is flooded, some shelter remains for those who are not rich enough or are disinclined to go and live in the Citadel: a 24/7 Virtual Reality paradise, where one can forget the fact that the world is collapsing due to the ravages of the Anthropocene.

Mackay's novel is remarkable for a number of reasons, but, for me, the most striking are its environmental and sexual politics. Luthando's years-long protest against government and corporate disregard for environmental matters finds expression, finally, in the slogan "It Doesn't Have to Be This Way", which is also the book's final message. We do not **have** to bring about environmental disaster in the name of the profit motive when a few simple measures will save endangered species and biomes. Nevertheless, the responsibility for taking these steps cannot rest with individuals alone: it must also be taken by corporations and government. Secondly, the fact that Mackay's three viewpoint characters are all gay men strikes me as a long-overdue step towards the representation of diversity in speculative fiction, which follows mainstream society in its relentless heterosexuality. There are a few non-cis hetero couplings in global speculative fiction, and fewer in its South African iteration; it would be good to include gender nonconformity in our science fiction and fantasy.

Conclusion

The novels I have discussed in this article attest to the vibrancy and creativity of the speculative fiction genre in South Africa. They have all, in different ways, made the most of the unique features of the South African social and natural setting (*Dub Steps* even includes a visit to the Kruger National Park, which, by the time the survivors see it, has been completely overrun by animals and plants). What stands out from this rather truncated survey is that South Africans, after several years of being lied to, robbed and deluded by our leaders, are resilient, sassy, sceptical and inclined to humour at our own expense. The same holds true of our speculative fiction.

Nova 2022 Joint 3rd Place

Dark Companion

Matthew Stephen Nel

I was born in the dark and quiet of the world, when the skies were young, and the bones of the earth had not yet settled. I woke that day to the smell of evening dew on the grass. In the stillness of air before wind or birdsong, I wiped my eyes clean of the dust that had formed them, and saw for the first time, the light... the terrible, blinding light. In the fury of that new sunset, its feverish heat and razor brightness, I sank to new-formed knees, shielding my face and howled my first, terrible cry.

I know not how long I stayed that way.

And then it was over. Like a vanishing sigh the heat cooled, and the light no longer pierced me. I opened my eyes to the wide veil of oncoming night. The glittering pupils of the stars stared back, entrancing me, points of light against the distant dark,

as the cool stillness of the air soothed my burned skin. My eyes now open, I saw the world for the first time. The colossal spire of the mountain, rising into the dark near where I had woken, reaching its point to pierce the sky. The rushing murmur of the slow river, and the leaning trees, who grew along its banks. For the first time, I saw the world, and it was beautiful to me.

When day broke once more it held no mercy, driving me to the ground with my head in my hands as the relentless day-star beat down upon me. There in the weak shade of trees I lay, waiting for an end to the heat and light. In the space of my short life, those hours of waiting were eternity. The pain of dried, scorched skin under the sun's fire. The sharp and cutting light that tore the eyes without mercy.

All for ages without end.

Though the coming of night answered whimpered prayers to anything that might, then, have listened, it was cut through with the fear of the coming day. The stars were still cold and dazzling to the eye, but I could not bring myself to look at them. I could not bear the thought of enduring the sun again.

Thorns, newly fallen from the first of trees pierced my hands and feet as I walked, swiftly over virgin ground to seek some kind of shelter. A cave, I found, high into the wall of a mountain, shielded by stones – freshly broken from burgeoning rock – which dug viciously into me as I climbed.

It was small, but ran well into the mountain, on its wide and winding path. Dry as its stone, but cool and still within. A lake it housed, too, or so the pool, small and deep seemed to me. It was fed from some deeper chasm through an opening through which I could find no access. Up from it swam the fish who were caught in hungry claws, who were dragged to the mouth of the cave and swallowed whole with jaws unhinged.

When day broke there the morning light was mercifully dimmed, and the blistering rays of the midday sun could break over the stone of my hiding place, where hidden I would remain.

From there I roamed each night, each night delighted by the dancing stars and the peace of the soundless air. Here I learned about the world as it was, each new thing clasped in my talons – sometimes to the point of breaking. Here I learned, but for how long I cannot know. Time was endless in that age of the world, when all things were silent and un-peopled.

They came in the last of the daylight hours. Four of them, chattering quickly to each other with sounds unlike the call of any bird or animal I yet knew. Hair grew from their heads and faces, yet their skin was smooth and soft. Over it they hung the hides of deer and cattle, which swayed as they walked upright. They were so alike to me, yet so alien then, these things I would later come to know as 'human.' When night drew up in full, I could not go near them, for the terror of their fire, a minute, blazing sun, kept burning in the ground and fed always with leaves and branches by one of their number, awake while the others slept. Around this they stayed, seeming never to fear the horror of its awful heat and searing light. From the mouth of my cave, I watched in awe. In all my time, no living animal had dared to harness such a thing or tried to cage it without being consumed by the flame.

It seemed from that night on that each day there came more of them. In twos and threes, they came, digging trenches in the earth with strange tools, and with others tearing down the trees near the banks of the river – my river. These they stripped of branches to build strange, obscuring structures into which they retreated at the coming of night, to rest while fires burned within.

Even so, I did not hold against them their strange dwellings near the foot of my mountain, nor the trees along the river, which ceased to grow almost entirely, cut down to make the last of their structures in those early days. Then, I had only wonder at them, at how they were so different to me, seeming smaller and so much more fragile, but without fear of fire or the light of day. Still, I could not come near them, for as their numbers grew so did the numbers of their watchers, tending the fires around their half-made shelters.

Time and again, by night I crept as close as I dared, to the edge of the circles of light to watch them. Their small blaze of heat and radiance was contained, as if the sun's fury could be caged or tamed within the circle of stones where it burned. At times it spilled over, hungry flames licking at the ground or devouring such wood and skins as it could grasp, ere in terror they beat it back, driven again into its enclosure of meager stones. They had tamed it, but could never control that which they had caged. Seeing their fear and fury at its breaking free, a new emotion welled within me... and in those fleeting moments, I almost understood them.

And then, as ever, the moments passed like water between my claws, replaced by

their endless repeated cycle, as they gazed ever into the dark, or aimlessly into the embers. But, on nights where the flames cast my shadow, or my pale silhouette stood out against the gloom, they drew closer to their fires, their crude spears held out like a frail ward against the dark.

Eventually they ceased. The watchmen going back to their own strange dwellings as a time of quiet came, in the wake of their hurried arrival, their cutting, digging in and building with a speed and fury, as though all things in the world pursued them. They seemed now to rest, but never to be restful. No more they built and dug, except seldom in times of seeming need - but ever their restless movement persisted, a small sea of bodies rustling in constant business, pacing deep paths into their fresh territory, where the grass now withered under the tread of many feet and countless days.

And with their quiet, I too, crept from the heights of my cave to prowl the paths between their huts, the ground masking steps, the sound of claws concealed by careful tread, to peer with slitted eyes at them whom I never dared approach.

I soon learned I had no use for their tools, the ungainly blends of iron and oak, with which they now carved long furrows in the earth or brought wood for their fires. My talons caught fish and game with more finesse than any spear. Nor would I need fire, for I wanted no more than my jaws could unhinge to swallow whole, and my grey hide was tough, thick enough to endure more bitter cold than the world had seen since before humanity claimed its portion of my river's banks.

It was no wonder I was so hideous to them.

For sometimes, on those nights my long and padded feet crept through the beaten paths between their homes, the ones who stirred in their sleep would glimpse me in the moon's weak light. At the glance of my tall and slender form, or my luminous eyes watching, their faces would lengthen with dread. Some kicked and howled, thrashing awake as though from some awful nightmare; others simply turned towards their fires and shivered silently until I left them, too afraid to risk my finding them out.

Some cold night, as winter began its retreat, I stood between two of their wooden homes, watching the now familiar sight of snow collecting on their thatched roofs, a woman slipped from the doorway. I had never seen one of them so close, her face a mould of terror, eclipsed by my long shadow. Her fright and shock mirrored my own,

her scream echoed by my own – hers, the wail of a frightened child, alone in the dark, and mine, the rough and terrible shriek few things now living had ever heard. The sounds mixed together as I fled, back to my mountain shelter like a pursued animal, ere others were woken, bringing fire and sharp iron with them. In the deep mirror pool from which I drew my food, I gazed long at myself that night – at my long and drawn-out face, my forked tongue, and nail-sharp teeth. I understood why they feared me. Even then, I was only fascinated by them, but I knew how they reacted to what they feared. In later days I knew that was why, time and again, they sought me. With heavy footfalls carrying a headstrong body, the first was a hunter with something to prove. Hearing his approach I hid, pressed back into the deepest shadows of the cave. The flare of his torch found me out, and his copper hair flowed behind him as the point of his spear charged me. In sheer panic I moved to meet him. He was frail. His skin tore like paper and his spear shivered to splinters as he fell, torch snuffed out by the fountain of blood that painted the cave's wall. His body I left at mountain's foot, the spear's broken haft still clutched in his hand, I returned him to his people. I watched as they found him, wailing. Through the blinding hours of the morning, I watched them all, as they turned towards the mountain and whispered low of their dead hunter. Days later, three more began to draw up the mountain, axes swinging through the morning light. My heart seized and I felt sheer terror grinding at me, consumed by the awful vision of my cave encircled in fire, and all the great swarm of humanity streaming within, to shear me apart with blades of sharp iron, or else drive me into the unbearable light of day, to be caged under blistering sun.

I knew they had come to settle the hunter's score. I kept my body close to the cave's deepest shadows as I approached its mouth. The words were heavy and awkward on my forked tongue as I called out to them in their own speech, learned through innumerable seasons of listening, telling them to turn back.

For a moment they faltered, but one in the rear, stinking of wine and swaying, raised his axe to charge the mouth of the cave, pursued by his brothers. For a moment, as they ran, I understood them. They were afraid, and angry, seeking revenge. I understood them, but I could show no mercy. I was their prey. I was ruthless then, and with all who came after, sparing no thought to pain or fear, as I sent them to join the hunter.

Still, I had understood them, if but for a moment. I would not find such understanding again, not with those who followed. Not the five who camped at first on mountain slopes, but drunkenly rushed the cave after sunset, thinking me asleep; nor the lone hunters of later days, laying traps with bow and rope and spear. Each went the way of the last, taken down the mountain to join the dead. Each was left a little closer to the cave as their numbers grew, until the last was hurled, lamely, from the cavern's mouth, left as food for rats and crows, white bones to mark the mountain path.

Least of all did I understand the last of them, a traveler, armed for war and dreaming of glory. His armored form shone like a star as in pitch night he climbed the path towards me. At the entrance he proclaimed his name, his deeds and titles, wanting even the beasts to know his fame. Crouched behind him in the dark I said nothing. I had long since avoided the human tongue, which now seemed only fit for the howling brutes who made the mountain climb. This one was different. He threw his shield to the ground, declaring his intention to fight with honor, and win his victory by strength of hand and courage. When it was done, I left him in his torn and blood-drenched armor and hung his body from the mountain path, a warning to all, that better men had already failed.

Three days from then, a sound broke the quiet of the cave. Halfway up the mountain's slope, a stake of wood was hammered into the ground, and to this, a goat was tied, bleating. An offering. I left the creature's tether dripping with blood in answer. For now, I accepted their peace.

The fascination I once held for the small human village had long since turned grim, and I had not left the cave, to watch them in the years and seasons since the first hunter had come, but the offering of the goat woke again my curiosity. Where once they had seemed almost alike to myself, they were now completely alien. Was our similarity less than skin deep, or had they changed so much with time? I could not begin to fathom their thoughts, or the actions they caused. I had to see for myself once again, whether anything had been missed. Whether I might still know them, as I did the world they shaped around them.

In the dry cold of autumn, I crept through their village, now sprawling to overspill the banks of the river. Their once simple shelters had grown, becoming large houses of wood and stone, immense by comparison. Into one of these I slunk with silent tread.

A small room and then another greeted me. A cot, small and protected from the outside world stood against the far wall. For a moment, I marveled at the child within, scarcely older than a baby, his soft hair falling in curled ringlets around his sleeping head, his infant arms grasping at the air as he dreamed. It seemed almost comical, so incredibly strange that those who scaled my mountains with iron in hand all began in so incredibly fragile a state. In its own way, the child's sleeping form was almost beautiful in its peace.

Rapid steps roused the silent room, as the form of a woman marched through the door. At the sight of me, she stiffened and screamed. Muscles moving, driven by instinct I lunged for her, barely opening my hands in time to stop the terrible, piercing claws. Her lantern shattered against the wall, sailing free from her grasp. Flames surged hungrily along the spilled oil, spanning into ravenous arms of fire, reaching down into the cot on lines of burning, seeping fluid. As the thatched roof of the house began to smolder and catch alight, I fled, with the pained screams of the child howling through my ears, louder than the chants of a hundred crowds. As I reached the cave, I turned back to see first one house, then another light up like candles, the village shining like a patch of midday sun in the lightless winter night.

The next day, another goat was lashed to the stake on the mountain, and from then on, each animal taken was replaced by another, and I did not enter the village again. Through this uneasy peace I watched from a distance, creeping as close as I may, or scaling by night the thick walls of timber that now surrounded the village. There I watched nightly, for the child from the burning home. When next I saw him, he had been forever marred. The long and glistening scars of fresh burns marked his face and body, and the relentlessness of the fire had taken his left arm – withered by the furnace of his cot and cut from him so he might live.

From here, I watched him grow strong through those quiet years. He became tall, and skilled in the use of his remaining arm, but wherever he went he was alone, always. His shining scars and missing limb were a constant reminder of an outside horror, and children are easily frightened. Out of balance he could not catch up when they ran from him, calling him names, nor could he get away when they turned to throw stones and dirt at him for following on. The boy grew to put away childish things when his peers had barely taken them up. His face hardened, and he spoke to no one, the mask of his visage now hiding something desperate and furious.

When he grew older, I would watch by night, seeing him in the gap between houses, teaching himself to swing his short, sharp blade, and honing his body's balance until he moved as well, and faster than any able-bodied man. By day, he had been so long mocked that none took notice of him at all now, or such was the little I could divine in daylight hours, but in evening's fading glow he trained on, alone. Then, he was himself, sure of step and burning with conviction, though to what I could not fathom, but, some nights, I watched him look towards the mountain, lips moving in silent oath.

On a searingly bright summer's morning, it happened. For the first time in years, no animal was at the stake as an offering. Instead, the sound of steps echoed up the mountain path, long since overgrown and unused. Once again, I waited, resigned and crouched in the dark, ready to spring. The sound of the approach was different this time, the footsteps... unusual. The tread of bare feet, and the impact of wood on stone. The walk of one old or lamed... of one come to die.

He stepped past the glaring entrance, to the edge of the shadow then. Haloed in light, the sun gleamed against his armor, shining from the point of the spear in his lone arm. For a moment, he paused. Through the deepest murk of the cave, he saw me clearly, my figure known and familiar to him. He was no errant hero. He offered no name. He could see I knew his face. For a single, shining moment he was a man complete, a hero of myth on a tapestry. All the image of grace and strength, woven with frail thread.

The spear in his arm raised high and drew back. With long trained reflexes I ducked and charged, teeth bared. His movement was practiced, he did not dance away like a trained fighter, but hurled himself across the floor as he threw the spear. His face was blank as it splintered against my hide. His eyes widened, and then went cold with resolve. He drew his blade, feet still firm in place as I lunged for him. He would have died better than many. He swung the sword in a shining arc, the blade glaring with the morning sun. It was a work of practiced strength. It was only a scratch, but it bled. There was hope in his eyes for a heartbeat, quickly fading. The sword clattered against the stone as I drove him to the ground. It was only a scratch.

The sun still softly reflected its glow on his scars, and where so many others had died, I hesitated. His vendetta was not with me alone. The sword had practiced for every stone thrown, or child pulled nearer to their mother as he passed. My claws

were raised and in a practiced stroke, for every courageous drunk or budding warrior, brought down.

Three new scars lined his chest.

My voice was dry and cracked, lamed by years without use as I leaned towards him, speaking his native tongue. He was as kin to me. I could yet give back some little of what I took from him. Into his ear I spoke the words. He would live. He would return home, in sole honor of returning alive. He would never return.

His body was limp, pinned beneath me. All fear washed away, confusion and comprehension swirling through his expression. Ragged with time, my long fingers pulled free a tooth, my weapon, white and glistening in the air, long since cracked on the edge of a shield. He paused as I laid it upon his open hand, fingers at last curling around it as he understood.

He did not flee from my cave as, as the warriors did, or turn again to me in wrath as the fools. He walked slow, and finally proud, leaning on the broken haft of a long-forgotten spear, disappearing through the blaze of light, radiating at the cave's mouth.

He would not be the last. Others would come, arrogant and strong, driven to foolhardy pride by their anger, unable to stomach the achievements of the one they so long shunned. With armor, with axes and the vicious lights of their glaring torches. Silently, back into the dark of my home I went, away from the violent flare of daylight. I had found an opening in the walls of the small, mirror pool, and dreamed it may open further still; leading me through into further, deeper dark, carrying me to peace, forever away from the sun.

Welcome to Speculative Fiction from the other edge of the world.

A comparison of South African and Finland.

By Donald Mullany

So, a question this title suggests is rather: How is fandom different on the opposite side of the world? Is fandom just fandom no matter where you are, or is fandom heavily influenced by the society in which the fans are situated? To explore this

quandary, I'd like to run down some lists and some features of the Finnish Speculative Fiction fandom arena and let you decide just because something appears similar, perhaps it is not as similar as they seem.

Finland is a sparsely populated country in the far, far north of the globe. So far North in fact, it is bisected by the Arctic Circle. The weather 'rule of thumb' is dark and cold for two-thirds of the year, crowned with a short, mild summer of almost perpetual daylight. Planning events is far more complicated than anyone would admit, with outdoor activities being weather dependant and indoor activities being space-constrained.

The Finnish Language is a Uralic linguistic 'almost-isolate', the closest branches are Estonian and Hungarian, and none of these are mutually intelligible. Finland additionally has Swedish as an official language, and Swedish accounts for about 5% and speakers, while Saami and all others combined are about 6% of the population.

The immediate effect of these numbers is a limited pool of Speculative Fiction to draw on for Fan Clubs in native languages, but also reflects a fairly extensive use of English in Urban areas and in Business and in companies since Finland joined the EU. Much of the ancient Finnish Oral language tradition was transcribed and compiled in the 16th Century and has been in extensive use since then.

A combination of all of these factors leads to a thriving Speculative Fiction literature sector, because authors tend to write more of what they want to read, that which isn't available from current selections. Finnish-to-English translations are less common than English-to-Finnish by sheer virtue of volume. The difficulty of translation of some common phrases and certain idioms contribute a great deal to the paucity of widely-available Finnish works in the western world, with certain exceptions.

Into this arena is placed a wide-eyed South African exploring their new world...

Fandom does indeed appear to be Fandom... movies, books and meetings where people gather and Geek out. But something is different here, something I have been thinking about beyond simply what fans do when they get together. Let me rather thread behind the curtain to what the fandom is actually doing in order to expose some qualities I have not experienced before.

1) Part the first: Finns go to clubs and the clubs do stuff...

The first thing to notice is that the Finnish fandom is busy... very, very busy. There are many sorts of feeder routes for all types of fandom into all sorts of different activities that are considered 'cultural activity' as opposed to the mostly cast-away 'entertainment' that seems to be the case with South African fandom.

In many Finnish cities with attached Universities there is usually a Spec Fic club of some kind or description. These contribute different kinds of community projects, or are sometimes centered around a project of some kind (the Tampere club produced a Klingon-to-Finnish dictionary, for example.) To offset the (no doubt) numerous objections to my previous statement with regards to 'cultural activity', Finnish fandom seems to want to produce and share aspects of their activity with communal projects and artefacts that survive beyond the immediate.

The clubs also have different streams of interest (Movies, literature, fandom or different elements) with at least 1 physical meeting a month established regularly. They also tend to support or volunteer en-mass for larger community projects such as National Book Fairs or Conventions. The activity is largely cooperative and supportive to the extent that a WorldCon (Worldcon 75) was able to run in 2017 with minimal fuss from such a small organizational base.

To my knowledge at least, I do not see South Africa ever being capable of generating the organization or interest in hosting a World Convention of the like. This is even though the number of active Fans and Clubs are similar in number and nature. A far more comprehensive background article from a more local source can be found below as a link.

I say 'minimal fuss' because there are certain cultural and regional differences that manifest that I want to touch on below. The primary, registered SpecFic Clubs are located in the following Cities (or Universities in these Cities) in Finland: Turku, Helsinki, Jvaskylä, Marienhamn, Espoo, Tampere and Oulu. I have touched on earlier the outside vs. inside dilemma that the weather presents for people in Finland, but there are many ways and opportunities to work around this. The largest effort that is invested in by the most Club organizers and members is the annual, revolving FinnCon. There are other club-based smaller Conventions throughout the year, but this is the big one.

The only fixed location Convention in Finland seems to be Åcon and/or ArchipelaCon in Marienhamn on the Åland archipelago. The sole reason for this is that any

convention in Åland will be in any Hotel in Marienhamn itself. This Convention is notable for attracting more multi-National fans from around the Baltic area more so than, for example, mainland Finland.

Another similarity is the short story competition run from the Turku Club called – the Nova (yes, you read that right.) That is about where the similarity unfortunately ends, though. The (fi) Nova and the (za) Nova have been running parallel for most of their existence but with slightly different end points.

2) Part the Second, Finns write things down a lot...

The Finns are far more deliberate in the fandom laterals than South Africans appear to be. If the need for something exists, then why should it not be used for something else? The Finnish Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association (FSFFWA) soon realized that the funnel created by the Nova could be useful to the University research streams and literary organizations.

Spec-Fic genre works began moving through the (fi) Nova as mostly Science-Fiction, but soon spread to widely include Traditional and Mythic, also Fantasy and Horror, then finally the mixed- and multi-genre flavours you can find today. These works quickly streamed outwards into the various University organizations where quite early in the 1960's and 1970's they reached an equilibrium that today denotes modern Finnish literature.

This is completely opposite an impulse from most South African Universities who still consider Science Fiction and Fantasy as 'trivial' genres completely beneath any worthwhile literary recognition. The sad fact that the vast bulk of South African spec-fic authors are completely unacknowledged by South African academics to the extent that, in recent years, Spec-Fic authors bend over backwards to refute genre elements in those works that have received broader, international Literary recognition. This situation is unlikely to ever change in South Africa.

The Finnish value chain looks like this: Thus, people write to the (fi) Nova short story competition at Turku that is organized in support of the FSFFWA, which as an organization, in turn supports other activities. The FSFFWA has ancillary activities such as Editorial and Publishing streams that include a literary journal, that in turn offers more general types of Writers Association support.

The end-to-end closed loop planning cycles are not quite as efficient or as clear as I have described, but function fairly elegantly.

The 'editorial' and 'publishing' streams I have mentioned as numerous spin-off activities include Literary Workshops, Academic scouting activities seeking authors and themes for Research, also Publication assistance. While Literary Workshops are fairly straightforward a concept, 'Academic scouting activities' are less so.

A quick example of scouting would be the Finfar organization (link below). FINFAR is a speculative fiction national research organization that oversees identification and support of debut, new or established authors. This is not just simply a campaign-driven aspirational organization, but includes awareness of, and development of, all the various flavours of Finnish Speculative Fiction including the newer '-punk'-style genre additions (Steampunk, Dieselpunk, Solarpunk) and additionally (Bizarro, Cli-Fi, Dark Fantasy, Urban Fantasy, Paranormal Romance...) to name just a few.

So, in summation; there are permanently established, flexible and self-funding traceable routes and outcomes to all of this activity in Finland. As Finfar has shown, discovery and scouting forms a large portion of fandom activity up North that is absent down South.

Quickly, an example of 'Publication assistance' would be to mention the Publisher channel Osuuskumma that publishes specifically all Finnish Spec-Fic genres on National and International distribution to consumers through an online shop for print and eBook formats. Publication aggregation also distributes online payment methods with billing, and attempts to provide a safe, audited channel for authors and club organizations seeking to publish their members.

Typically, proceeds of these Sales of the output go to the organization, and in turn are available to local Libraries, National Libraries and other Literary organizations which encourage (in turn) greater activities, author/creator career succession and recognition of participants, or fans and other members. As non-profit organizations, these sales proceeds go into heavily sponsored events that in turn, support inclusion into some of these events for those who otherwise would not be eligible through some or other reason.

So nothing goes to waste, and every effort has additional options, and those lead to measureable outcomes. Self-funding is a necessity in Finland, but (unlike elsewhere), Speculative Fiction is encouraged by National Arts and Culture Organizations as a genre in itself and contributory to mainstream Literature, rather than opposing and ancillary.

While in South Africa by contrast, anything that veers into the Spec-Fic genre is only acceptable for any recognition only if it actively downplays any speculative element it may have ever had and positively reinforces some or other cultural policy. In South Africa, Speculative Fiction writing appears actively discouraged, but that perhaps explains the lack of stated SpecFic authors standing proud.

3) Part the Third, Finns are more optimistic about their future imaginings...

Generally; literary and academic lenses tend to mimic the landscape of the culture as expressed by the elite... something most Speculative Fiction often examines in a brutal, dystopian tone. I should say Sci-Fi as a stated reflection and imaginings of what Urban, Modern and mostly-Western futures would look like for that Society and, by extension, that same societal elite.

Middle Classes tend to engage in technocrat behaviour because it fits both the professional and leisure-time requirements for expression and for advancement. Fandom tends to shadow societies where there is a burgeoning bourgeoisie, more often than not. Finland, by comparison with most countries has an egalitarian society and again, by comparison, a huge middle class. It is also an ageing society and so, may engage in games, hobbies and social activity in ways that other less equal societies may not. Typically, ageing populations have more free time each year that can be assigned to interests and leisure activity.

Typically, fandom will thrive in these egalitarian conditions because of the sheer stability of integrated social and economic interests. A fictional dystopian vision from a Finnish author would look very different from a South African author, for example. A recent Finnish project just completed a 30,000 year plan for their nuclear waste program, envisioning the environmental and ecology of the areas around the bunker site. South African Fandom is generally the only place where anybody is still interested in where, and how, society is changing in the country.

Unfortunately for South Africa, while Sci-Fi and Fantastika may have once been an expression of a technological elite, that the 'geeks' and 'nerds' that used to be signal of a middle class technocrat behaviour, it simply is no longer. Culturally, any 'geek activity' has become as mainstream over the years as any other Marvel super-hero, all this while state economic prospects has continued to thin out the middle classes, and thus put serious pressure on their continued involvement with fandom.

A dystopian vision in South Africa could be as close as any daily news bulletin, all the while other academic and literary bodies struggle to maintain any discourse between speculative elements on their existing tired, and outdated 'go-to' shelves. One Sci-Fi author quipped that they would have to win a Nobel Prize for Literature before anyone at the local University would bother to pick up their 'irrelevant' book and read it.

A Spec-Fic author has a duty to imagine their own society into the future, what it would be like, what would have changed... what just will not go away. If a large portion of local authors cannot project their society into decades and centuries to come, then that says something about the societies trajectory. Not every society has the confidence in creating a 30,000 year plan, but this engagement with Spec-Fic authors tends to lead, in turn, to a greater acceptance of the SFF genre and supporting activities.

In conclusion, Fandom seems to be doing much the same thing as each other in Finland and in South Africa, just as the quality and scope of Fandom activity is remarkably different. Hopefully this essay demonstrates good examples of where planning and community outreach can create 'stickyness' to provide as much opportunity to engage in or contribute to club activities.

Reference links – Additional Reading

Overview of Finnish Fandom (http://pasikarppanen.net/texts/Finnish_Fandom.htm)

Publishing and online stores (<https://osuuskumma.fi/>)

Academic Research, scouting and development (<https://finfar.org/>)

Nova 2002 Joint 3rd Place

Alice in Wapadrاند Lauren Wesley-Smith

The house at Number 20 Skei Place is like many others in Wapadrاند, a two-storey building of yellow corobrick that still manages to look squat and boxy, probably with mushroom-brown paint on every wall inside. The lawn is mown short, the garden beds filled with indigenous succulents - low maintenance, you see - and there's a

Maltese yipping in the backyard. Dismounting my bike, I press the intercom and wait til someone asks me my business.

"It's Alice," I answer, "I'm here about the lost necklace?"

I'm buzzed through in moments.

Mrs. Van der Merwe answers the door herself, wringing her hands nervously until I pull the delicate chain from my pocket.

"You found it!" She cradles it in her palm, tenderly stroking the locket. "I never thought I'd see it again... It was a gift from my ouma for my 21st birthday – yiss, that was long ago..."

"I'm happy I could return it ma'am." I smile, and wait patiently for the penny to drop.

"Oh ja, the reward! Come in."

I was right about the mushroom paint; I settle on the chocolate brown sofa while she bustles off, left to look at family photos and decorative throw cushions with psalms on them. Her daughter, a few years older than me, brings me a glass of orange juice and a plate of biscuits.

"So, do you just like, find things for people?" She asks, leaning in the doorway. I nod, my mouth too full of crumbling sugar cookie to answer, but that seems to satisfy her. Mrs. Van der Merwe reappears with an envelope, looking like a weight's been lifted from her shoulders

"Here's the money. Oof, I don't know how you found it: we've been looking and looking, and – niks! Baie dankie, Alice."

"My pleasure ma'am." I dust the icing sugar off my fingers before tucking the envelope in my backpack, bidding farewell, then I'm back on my bike and off to my next adventure.

There aren't many opportunities for twelve year olds to earn an income these days, so how's a girl to earn some pocket money then? The answer is, by finding all the things that adults are too busy to look for. And too dignified, I suppose - there's a lot of crawling through hedges and the like, but that's okay when you're my age.

The first job I ever solved was for a neighbor. Two of his house numbers had been stolen - they looked like brass, but were actually just ceramic - and a brief investigation of the area had the missing items miraculously falling out of a hedge, discarded when their worthlessness was noticed. Word spread after that, and now most of my work comes from neighborhood group messages.

I already have my work cut out for me today: Mrs. Khumalo dropped her asthma pump while out hiking. She has spares, so it's not a life or death matter, but she'd like it back and doesn't have time to look. Like I said – adults are always too busy. I turn off from the road onto the trail, my tires crunching over dry stones. Bronberg seems more like a dusty ridge with a smattering of scrubby bushes than an actual mountain but it has something few others can boast of – a rare species, on the brink of extinction. Maybe a golden mole isn't the most exciting of creatures, but it's something. Also, I haven't actually seen any yet, so I can only decide if it's boring once I do.

I ride slowly, sweeping my gaze from side to side, searching for a pop of white against the red soil. At the crest of the ridge I find it, fallen beside a log; Mrs. Khumalo probably sat there for a moment. I dust it off and place it in my backpack. Just before I set off again, a rustling bush catches my attention.

Could it finally be the golden mole?

Abandoning my bike, I tread carefully into the brush, and peer below the bush that moved. The den dug beneath it is much bigger than I expected, and the wriggling forms inside are too large, too fluffy to be moles.

“Kittens!” I squeak. At the sound of my voice five little heads give a start, staring at me with round brown eyes - and then they begin to float!

I pinch myself, but it's real: they tumble over each other in an effort to reach me, not alarmed in the slightest by their lack of gravity. Warm sunlight reveals dark leopard spots along their sides of tawny gold fur, and a pip-squeak yawn shows sharply pointed teeth – so, not housecats then. They gambol about me, pawing at my hair and purring when I scratch their heads.

The loud crack of a falling tree branch puts an end to our frivolities: each kitten vanishes with a poof like bubbles popping, and I'm left to question my sanity kneeling before an empty den.

Moments later, however, the mother cat arrives.

She's larger than the average house cat for sure, and has her sharp teeth clamped around the neck of a guinea fowl – lunch, I suppose. Her eyes are sea green and seem to glow, even in broad daylight; especially when they alight on me, sitting before her safe house. She prowls closer, and, at the sight of the empty burrow,

promptly drops the fowl. I give a start as the bird leaps to its feet and runs away, somehow not dead! Momma Cat is unfazed, and instead watches me expectantly. “I’m sorry,” I tell her, “I didn’t mean to interfere, but then your kittens just went poof!” Her long tail flicks back and forth, as if to say *Yes, and?*

“Um, I could help you find them again?”

The cat dips its head, nodding, and her mouth pulls back into - a grin. That’s all it could be: it’s not aggressive, it’s a smile! Suddenly, it all clicks into place.

“You’re Cheshire cats!” I gasp.

Another flick of the tail: *Obviously*. I suppose it makes sense – if dodos were once real, why not smiling cats that disappear? Adults are always so ready to overlook works of fiction, but children understand that they must have their roots in *some* truth.

Momma Cat follows me to my bike, and as soon as it’s upright she leaps daintily into the basket at the front. I decide not to comment on how much heavier it is now, because that would be impolite. Together we set off back down the trail, moving slowly and with our ears pricked for listening.

There’s a rustle of grass in the near distance, and when I investigate I find the first kitten – about to pounce on an oblivious golden mole with a twitching nose. I swoop in before it can though. I can’t help but wonder who’s rarer between them, but still - two sightings of rare creatures in one day makes me giddy! The kitten mewls indignantly as its prey scurries away, but thankfully it doesn’t vanish again. With the Momma Cat taking up all the space in the basket, grinning even wider now that I have one of her babies, I have to make another plan. I squish everything down in my backpack, wad up my hoodie to make a cushion, and place the kitten inside. It seems happy enough, as does its mother, so that’s good enough for me. I leave the zipper ajar for air, carefully strap the bag to my front, and set off again. We reach the end of the trail with no further sign of the kittens, but Momma Cat leans towards the main street, and I follow her lead.

There’s one section of Lynwood road that’s inhabited by crafters, displaying their wares on either side. Everything, from wooden benches and dog kennels to statuettes made of woven wire and beads, you can find it here. The crafters themselves are usually nearby, working quietly on their latest projects.

That’s not the case today.

Instead, the area is in turmoil. Great clouds of red dust have been kicked up, partly obscuring the small shapes whizzing about in play, but I know exactly what they are. Two Cheshire kittens weave amongst the carvings, pouncing on carved wooden rabbits, and knocking over beaded caterpillars in their wake.

“Sorry!” I call, swerving in amidst the chaos. “Those are my cats!”

I think they think I’m crazy. However, the kittens come gamboling towards us at the sight of their mother, and it only takes me a few rugby tackles to catch each one and pop them into the backpack. The crafters shake their heads, but fortunately no real damage has been done – which is just as well, or I might’ve had to give up all my pocket money to cover it.

I’ve come to trust Momma Cat’s second sense for her babies, so where her nose points, that’s where I direct the bike. The afternoon sun has begun to recede, and when we find the next baby, it’s fast asleep on top of the sign-post for Kitten and Bear Avenue.

The bag is getting heavy and my legs ache from so much cycling, but there’s still one left to find. Worry starts bubbling up in me as we reach the outskirts of Wapadrand, but Momma Cat isn’t panicking yet, so I won’t either.

Suddenly, there’s an almighty bang – like a bomb going off. Smoke rises into the air, and the Cheshire Momma leans forward in the basket.

The Wapadrand power substation is up in flames! Everyone is so busy trying to put it out, that no-one seems to notice the tiny kitten strolling away and slipping through the fence.

“Tell me you didn’t do this?” I ask, exasperated.

It blinks up at me, the very image of innocence. Well, I guess I won’t be getting a straight answer then... I scoop it up and ride away before anyone can get suspicious.

Dusk is falling, but no street lights will be turning on tonight – Cheshire kitty has seen to that. It’s almost full dark by the time I reach the den again, but when I open my backpack and see five kittens snuggling in their sleep, I can’t begrudge the time. I set them carefully back in their burrow, and Momma Cat curls up around them, nuzzling gently. Her lamp-like eyes fix on me, and her tail flicks again: *thank you*.

“You’re welcome.” I whisper, and I leave them be.

As I ride home, I let off a few whoops and yells. Tomorrow I'll give Mrs. Khumalo back her inhaler, but I don't want to focus on inanimate objects so much anymore – working with live creatures was so much more fun! Maybe I can find lost animals and reunite them with their loved ones.

The rarer and more magical, the better.



Blast from the past ...PROBE 119 Fourth Quarter 2002

Eclipses past and present

***I Great Eclipse of December 2002* Stephen Levitt.**

It is 5:30 am and we are driving from Tshipise along a narrow tar road towards the eclipse viewing site which is near Messina in the Limpopo Province. There is an ominous reef of what looks like rain-bearing cloud fairly low to the East, moving against a backdrop of white wisps of cloud at much higher altitude.

Every now and then we pass cars parked on the verge, with their occupants assembling telescopes and camera tripods or just sitting and chatting. As we drive the clouds are building, filling up more and more of the sky and I am beginning to wonder if this whole trip will be worth it. Maybe we should be heading in the opposite direction trying to outrun the overcast weather. It is too late now; we are committed, with our place booked at the viewing site and our friends already there. At this late

stage we are riding on momentum and there are no options left, much like, I imagine, the last few minutes onboard the Titanic before it hit the iceberg.

The viewing site, a farm, is a giant dust bowl, arid and thorny and distinguished only by the occasional Baobab and the fact that it lies in the path of totality. This patch of land now holds about a thousand people - probably the most that it has ever seen.

We find the rest of the SFSA (Science Fiction South Africa) group perched on a slight rise overlooking the rest of the crowd.

The weather has not improved. It is cold now and the wind gnaws its way through my top. I wander around, we have still two hours to go till the moment of totality, two hours for the clouds to clear. The Wits School of Physics has cordoned off an area close to us. They have all sorts of interesting looking scientific equipment including some antennae. The circular one is apparently a low frequency antenna. I wish I could remember more from the electro-magnetics course that I took at varsity. The physicists are being helped out by kids from the American International School. These kids have been taking readings throughout the night and they are looking pretty beat. The weather is not helping to lift their spirits either.

Time is moving on and I glance upwards to notice some patches of blue sky occasionally appear. It's cold so I head back for the shelter of the car and start reading a newspaper article about the Miss World debacle, entitled, something like 'Beauty Refugees Arrive in London'. It is bizarre, two-hundred people are dead because of a beauty pageant, the beauty queens have had to be airlifted from the war zone, and now the whole contest is in dire financial straits. It seems like the plot of a rather implausible novel, more like fiction than reality.

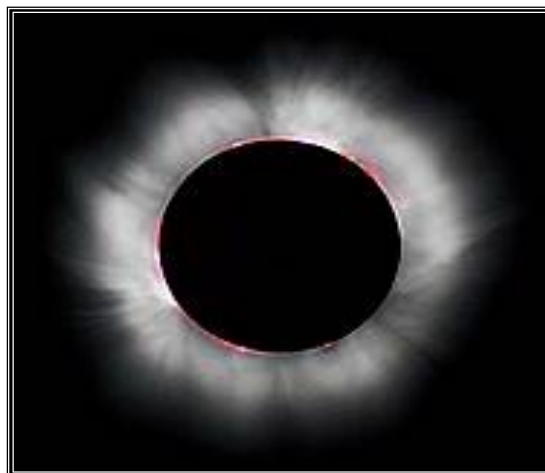
The hour of reckoning approaches and I return to the group. Every now and then we are offered tantalising glimpses through the clouds as they break apart and reform. At one moment I see the full moon close to the sun which is obscured by cloud. Seeing them so close together is a small thrill in itself. We continue to get sporadic glimpses of the moon as it proceeds on its collision course with the sun and eventually begins to eat into the sun. This creates the penumbra - the giant shadow that is encompassing most of southern and central Africa and is offering this region a partial eclipse. I am initially surprised by the fact that you cannot actually see the moon itself as it passes over the sun but you can intimate its position by the crescent of sun that remains.

I juggle between using the eclipse glasses, sunglasses and the naked eye. When clouds partially obscure the scene then the eclipse glasses are no good as they are too dark. So I do a quick change over to sunglasses but sometimes even these are too dark, and of course, just when I take them off the clouds temporarily clear and I'm blinded.

There is a truckload of British tourists nearby on a tour run by Drifters, their chairs neatly fanned out around the breakfast table. God knows how much they paid to be here. Do they get their money back if they don't get to see totality? I think not. We on the other hand paid R 125 each - a damn good deal especially considering the way prices began to sky-rocket over the year.

Suddenly it is 8h 18, the defining moment of the eclipse - second contact - when the moons umbral shadow racing along at 2000 km an hour along the earths surface envelopes us. The sky darkens as we enter the little night. Looking towards the horizon, beyond the shadow line, I can still see the glow of the sun. And - incredibly - above us in triple alignment are the sun, the moon and a precious gap in the cloud layer. The moon transforms the sun into a black hole, ringed with fire. There is spontaneous applause from the gathered crowd and together we answer the darkness with the flash lights of hundreds of cameras. About twenty seconds later and before third contact the clouds once again swallow the scene.

I have heard of a group of weird people called 'Eclipse Chasers" who follow eclipses around the world. Maybe they are not so weird. This is definitely an experience to add to the AWESOME list.



Eclipses past and present - II

The SFSA great solar eclipse expedition Gail Jamieson

On Tuesday the 3rd of December 2002 twenty-seven members, family and friends of SFSA left Gauteng and travelled 500km up to the Limpopo Province to see the Solar Eclipse of 2002.

All during the day people drifted in until we eventually had about eleven assorted tents neatly set up. Some of us swam in the warm pools at the resort, others relaxed and read or just joined in the conversation that ebbed and flowed in the communal area in front of the tents. Expecting to be up very early on Wednesday morning, we gradually drifted off to bed.

At some unbelievably early hour we were woken by the sounds of people talking and buses and trucks leaving to go to various viewing sites closer to the centre line. By about 4.30 a.m. we were all drinking tea and coffee and looking hopefully at the last of the stars disappearing into the lightening sky.

We drove the 34km north east to the viewing site - a recently harvested tomato field that had been graded to a fairly flat condition. It was very dusty and we had to take care that we did not step on the occasional scorpion whose burrow had been dug up. The wind came up and with it the clouds. The temperature dropped and we became a little apprehensive as we looked at the endless banks of cloud that seemed to be flowing overhead. However at about 7.15 a.m. as we studied the sky we were able to see the beginning of the dark crescent of the moon begin to move in front of the sun. For the next hour or so we watched in fascination as the clouds parted and closed and we saw the progression of the moon across the sun. At most times we were actually able to see the developing eclipse with our naked eyes through the thinning layer of cloud. Once in a while we had to lift our special viewing glasses when the cloud peeled away completely. As totality approached, it was as if the clouds started to flow around an obstacle in the sky and we were able to see the 'diamond ring effect' and then the solar corona. We were told that we would have seen a better corona on a clear day but it was nonetheless breathtaking. It was as if a giant hand had turned down a dimmer switch. Silence fell over the viewing site and we were enveloped in eerie darkness. As we looked towards the horizon we could see the edge of the shadow and the brighter light in the distance. Time seemed to stand still

but all too rapidly the smallest edge of the sun peeping out from behind the moon turned on the lights again. A wave of applause broke out across the gathered people. It is almost impossible to describe the sensation I had felt but I can say that it reached into the very centre of my being.

We felt very privileged to have seen totality, considering the amount of cloud cover up in the sky. However I have to say that we had been planning this expedition for the best part of a year and I had no doubt in my mind that we would see what we had come a fair distance to experience.

We drove back to our camp and had our breakfast, accompanied by Champagne and orange juice. Many of us were enticed by our mattresses for an hour or two during the day. Others played Putt-Putt or pool. We swam or read or relaxed around the camp site for the rest of the day.

By about 11.00 a.m on Thursday morning the last of the tents had been folded away and we headed back home again. It had been a wonderful three days with the Eclipse as the highlight. We agreed that good company and good conversation with people who all love science fiction was a great way to spend a couple of days in the middle of a week and that we would have to find another reason to do it again.

The great eclipse of October 1940 - as told to Liz Simmonds

I was a student in Cape Town. The eclipse would pass near the towns of Springbok and Calvinia and very close to the little town of Van Ryn. Both bigger towns closed for the eclipse and townsfolk and students alike descended on Van Ryn. We had to choose between seeing the shadow perfectly in the valley or climbing to a great view from a narrow pass.

We opted for the shadow and could see the line approaching us. All the little bush birds suddenly stopped chirping and flying and began frantically digging little hollows in the dry Namaqualand sand. They scuffled and fought for the best hollows and then were quite still for the five minutes of totality.

Then it was all over. The bankers and butchers dashed off to the towns to open up again and the rest partied.

It was quite wonderful. ([Mercia van Reenen])

The great eclipse of March 1970

(as reported by Reinhold Gerharz in the great book *A Random Walk in Science*)

He set up his equipment in a field in the peanut farming district of North Carolina.

The local farmers decided to 'hide themselves inside their houses on account of the dangerous radiation 'from the sun.'

Because of scare stories in the media, these farmers relinquished the only chance in their lives to experience the beauty and awe of this rare event."



The Four Horsemen By C. P. Webster

October 1899... Somewhere in the Drakensberg mountains, southern Africa...

The four horsemen picked their way slowly up the rocky trail, climbing into the rolling mist that flowed now in a dense, cloaking blanket across the sheer sides of the mountain. The men were each exhausted and grim faced, lost in their own dark thoughts.

The battle at Elandsplaagte had been a disaster for the Boer forces.

During a prolonged artillery bombardment, the roaring of the guns had suddenly been blotted out by the deafening crash of thunder, flashes of lightning and the lashing rain of a precipitous African storm. Then, amidst the pandemonium of the deluge, the British Lancers and Dragoons had fallen upon them. They had seen General Kock fall, riding into the fray against the soldiers of the world's mightiest empire in his Sunday best and sporting a top hat, but whether the Boer general was

dead or captured they did not know. In the chaos of retreat, harried and pursued by the keen sabres of the cavalry, these four survivors had somehow found their way to each other, fleeing into the mountainous landscape to the south-west of the slaughter.

The lead rider was an eighteen-year-old Boer, the youngest of the group, but a man born in the saddle and the only one with any knowledge of the local terrain. His young square-jawed face was still smeared with mud and drying blood. He was followed closely by a lean, dark-haired Irishman, who now looked about him with a Celtic glumness, both awed and depressed by the barren and colossal summits they were riding into. The third was a young American, his gregarious and light-hearted nature now crushed by the memory of defeat in his first taste of battle. Bringing up the rear was an older man, a grey-haired and grey-bearded German farmer from the Transvaal. He remained dourly rigid in his saddle, despite the blood-stained arm that hung limply at his left side.

“Where to now son?” the Irishman asked their guide, breaking the silence as he looked uneasily about him.

The young Boer slowed his horse to pace alongside the Irishman.

“We first need to spend the night here up on the heights,” he answered in heavily accented English, staring keenly ahead and trying to pierce the thickening fog. “In the morning, we’ll head west and downhill, in order to cross back into Boer territory. Then we can contact our own forces in the Free State. Still, we’ll have to be careful, there’s unlikely to be any Khakis after us but we are in Basutoland now and it’s a British protectorate. The Basutos are no friends of the Boers...”

The Irishman nodded dolefully.

“I see, caught between a rock and a hard place is it?”

“Ja, something like that,” the Boer replied, smiling grimly. “But I’m optimistic. We won’t be here that long so the chances of being spotted will be lessened. Besides, I’m taking us to a *kloof*... a ravine that is, where we will find shelter, there are caves there...and there’ll be rain later judging by the clouds. The Basuto avoid the ravine and it’s been used as an occasional Boer camp. It’s not too far from here and we should get there unnoticed...”

The Irishman nodded.

“So, it’s a night in a cave I’ve got to look forward to is it?”

The young Boer grunted.

“Well, it will be better than a night on the mountainside shivering in the rain.”

After a few moments, the Irishman spoke again.

“What’s your name son?” he asked.

The Boer looked back at him and slowing his horse extended his hand.

“Francois Strydom... and yours?”

The Irishman leaned over and gripped the Boer’s hand warmly, now smiling.

“I’m Patrick O’Donnell, pleased to meet you, though I wish it were under better circumstances.”

Strydom smiled.

“Let’s see if we can at least survive the night, then I’ll take you down into the most beautiful country you ever saw,” he said.

O’Donnell chuckled.

“Ah, so it’s a girl you are going home toeh?”

Strydom looked at him, a puzzled smile now playing on his lips.

“Ja... but how did...?”

But O’Donnell shook his head.

“You see, when a man talks romantically about the landscape, well, there’s usually a girl at the end of it... you must have a drop of the Irish in you. I hope you get back to her safe and sound.”

They rode on, each man resuming his silence as the mists continued to roll in.

#

Strydom led them along a narrow hog’s back that was flanked on either side by the roiling vapours. Finally, they headed steeply uphill on a trail that was hardly a trail, a diagonal and winding route that crisscrossed almost perpendicular scrubby slopes. And all about them they could see the massive looming pinnacles of sheer rock that reared up out of the slowly receding mists. As the mists cleared, the afternoon light too began to dwindle and dark clouds rolled in, heavy with the promise of rain. It was with some relief when the Boer led them into a narrow, V-shaped ravine that was filled with the rushing sound of mountain water. Pausing on the side of the rocky, fast-flowing stream, he pointed out a series of dark hollows that pocked the western side of the valley. Then, fording the waters, they brought their horses up to the caves.

O’Donnell squinted doubtfully into the gloomy cavities whilst the American helped the wounded man dismount from his horse.

“Didn’t you say we were to have a fire?” he scratched his head looking at Strydom, “But I don’t see any trees.”

Dismounting, the Boer led his horse over to O’Donnell and handed him the reins.

“There should be some wood left in the cave by the last *Kommando*,” he replied. But give me some time and I’ll see what I can find to add to the fuel.” The he took a hessian sack from his saddlebag.

O’Donnell and the other two men moved cautiously inside the second cave, temporarily leaving the horses grazing by the entrance.

After some time, Strydom returned, emerging from the gathering darkness of the hillside, his sack now bulging. He found that the horses had been unsaddled and fed and were corralled in the first cave whilst the men were sat inside the second cave eating biltong and smoking.

“Here you are gentlemen, your fuel. You, American, can you make a fire?”

The young American nodded and took the sack from the Boer.

“I’m going to check on the horses,” Strydom informed them, leaving the cave once more.

“What the hell is this?” the American said pulling out an irregular, flattened and lumpy shape from the sack.

O'Donnell smiled.

"It's shit, but if it's dry enough it will burn."

Grimacing the American went out to gather kindling, then set about laying the fire. Very soon yellow flames were licking at the larger sticks and the dry dung greedily. Now he added some of the seasoned, split logs that were piled by the far wall. Despite the American's misgivings, the antelope dung burnt well.

"So how did a yank end up here?" O'Donnell asked, offering the man a cigarette as they settled down by the now flickering fire.

The young American smiled as he took the cigarette.

"I've been wondering the same thing?" he answered. "But I guess I'm just a sucker for the underdog... When the British went to war with the Boer republics I felt duty bound to get involved... There was a whole bunch of us on my ship over. My name is Danny O'Brien, we O'Brien's just can't help getting into scrapes."

"Ah, I see," O'Donnell said shaking his head with a smile, "A fellow Paddy, eh?"

They shook hands and O'Donnell introduced himself.

"What about you?" O'Brien asked. "What brought you away from the emerald isle?"

O'Donnell began pulling his boots off and rubbed at his aching feet.

"Well, it's like this... I'm a schoolteacher, or I was. But I couldn't stand the little bastards and my wife is always nagging me, so volunteering to be shot at by the British seemed a softer option... I joined McBride's Wreckers Corps... I thought it was a good idea at the time." He looked about him, "I'm not so sure now though," he said with a wide grin.

"What about him?" O'Brien said, now in a softer voice and nodding towards the injured man who lay on a long flat stone on the other side of the fire.

O'Donnell shifted closer and leaned in.

"His name is Beckman, he's a *Boche*, doesn't speak much but I reckon he's a good enough sort. I think he's a farmer.. I'm a bit worried about that arm though, he needs to see a doctor before it festers..."

He was interrupted by the return of Strydom. After shaking rain from his slouch hat, he came over to the fire to warm himself.

"*Kak*, it's coming in now. The horses are fine, and I've made a makeshift barricade of thorn bushes across the narrow entrance. It won't stop a determined leopard, but it will give us time to react if the horses are disturbed."

He gratefully took a cigarette from O'Donnell and stepped over to the prone, half-sleeping German. After exchanging a few words, he came and sat next to the other two men.

"He'll be asleep in a minute; we won't bother him with the watch tonight. What about you two boys, want to draw straws or volunteer for first watch?"

O'Donnell grimaced theatrically.

"Oh Christ, do we have to stand watch? I thought you said the negroes wouldn't bother us?"

Strydom grinned and nodded.

“Ja, but the wildlife is not so considerate and, if by a great stretch of the imagination, any Khaki patrols did see our firelight... well.”

“My imagination doesn’t stretch that far,” O’Donnell said sighing, “But I’ll take the first watch, I’ve never been able to go to sleep early.”

Strydom slapped him on the shoulder.

“Good man! I’ll make sure to report your good attitude to an officer when we get back to our lines.”

“Thanks...” O’Donnell said sardonically. “Do you think I’ll be in with a chance of a medal?”

Strydom laughed.

“I’m sure of it,” he replied.

O’Donnell paced along the rocky scree outside the cave. The rain had gone off, but the stream had risen considerably, and the sound of the fast-flowing water echoed about the dark ravine. As he picked his way carefully along, he sang quietly to himself.

He followed the course of the stream for about a hundred yards until it suddenly fell away, cascading into blackness. He stopped and shone the shuttered lantern at the ground realising that he stood atop a precipitous cliff, the waters falling away into an empty void beyond.

But there was no moon, and he could make nothing out beyond the limited sphere of his dim light.

Retracing his steps and keeping a constant watch on the first two caves and the faint glow of firelight that marked their shelter, the Irishman took a moment to peer curiously into the other, dark, empty grottos in the cliff, shining his lantern into each in turn as he passed. Strydom had chosen their shelter well as these other openings were less deep and offered less protection from the elements. But he paused when he noticed something inside the last, wide space in front of him. Curious, he shouldered his rifle and lit a cigarette, shining the light up onto the smooth walls.

“Well, I’ll be...” he said whistling in surprise.

There were strange, stylised paintings adorning the walls, the likes of which he had never seen before, though he assumed they must be something like the cave paintings he had read about that had been found in Altamira in Spain. Moving closer he stared at the strange, elongated figures of the men, some of whom appeared to have animal heads. They were carrying what must be spears and were surrounding a long, tentacled snake thing that reared menacingly. In its many arms it held one of the stick men and judging by the swelling in its belly it had already swallowed one of the warriors.

He lowered the lantern and pulled on his cigarette. “That’s fucking eerie,” he whispered aloud, then with a shrug, he stepped back out into the night and shivered with the freshness. The clouds had rolled away and now he looked up at the clear sky.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” he exclaimed impressed, looking with awe at the panoply of stars that blazed above his head.

But his reverie was cut short by a high whinnying scream.

“Oh Christ!”

He started running and stumbling back towards the first cave, fumbling to get his rifle off his shoulder without dropping the swinging lantern. As he drew up to the barricaded cavity he was joined by Strydom and O’Brien, the latter still pulling on his boots.

Strydom grasped the thorn barrier and pulled it aside before racing inside, unheeding of the long thorns that pierced his hands.

“The horses are gone... *Bliksem!* I need a light!”

O’Donnell was aghast.

“I was here, just outside,” he explained. “I’ve got to tell you Strydom I only stopped for a moment to look in one of them other caves, but it was just for a moment! I’ve been patrolling up and down the whole time... What the hell has happened? Nothing could have gone in...”

Now reappearing white faced, Strydom pointed a shaking finger back into the first cave.

“I’m not blaming you O’Donnell,” he said grimly, his voice quivering with emotion. “Just bring your light. Come on, you too O’Brien, I think you had both better see this for yourselves.”

The two men followed Strydom, O’Donnell holding his lantern high above his head. The walls, floors and roof were awash with crimson swathes of blood and a thick viscous trail led back to the far wall of the small cave. And the three men gaped in horrible surprise. For where before the cave had been shallow with no other exits there was now a large circular opening in the rear wall.

“What the hell...!” O’Brien exclaimed. “That sure wasn’t there before...”

Unconsciously moving together, they stepped slowly through the thick lake of pooling blood on the cavern floor.

“Shine the lantern into the hole O’Donnell!” Strydom ordered pulling back the bolt on his rifle.

Hand shaking, O’Donnell raised the light and the men peered inside.

“It’s a long fucking tunnel!” O’Donnell said amazed.

Strydom ran his hand about the circumference of the circular aperture as if disbelieving his own eyes. He tugged at something that still hung in rags from its edges. It felt like a tough, sandy coloured cobweb, almost indistinguishable from the rock itself.

Then they heard a shout of pain from the cave next door.

In a clumsy rush, the three men ran back into the adjacent, fire lit shelter.

The German was standing, swaying unsteadily, they could see fresh blood dripping from the roughly bandaged wound on his left arm.

“What is going on?” the German asked his face grey. “*Wat is dit Strydom?*”

Strydom shook his head and looked at the Irishman as if seeking an answer, O’Donnell could only shake his head in return.

“The horses are... gone Beckman, something’s taken them,” Strydom took a deep breath, still dizzy with disbelief at what he had seen.

The German’s eyes rolled back in his head and then he began to fall.

“Catch him O’Brien!” O’Donnell yelled.

The American, who was closest to the German, grabbed for the falling man and clutching for his tunic, slowly lowered him back onto the flat obelisk.

Pushing his hand through his hair in bewilderment, Strydom turned to O’Donnell.

“I don’t know what to suggest. Whatever the *fok* happened next door it’s clear that the horses are dead.” He looked up at the roof of the cave in his exasperation. Then he turned back to the Irishman. “Have you any ideas O’Donnell? What should we do?”

But O’Donnell could only shake his head.

“How the fuck should I know son? Whatever happened to the horses could just as easily happen to us. How the hell four horses were dragged down a hole that size...” The Irishman was wide eyed now. “My choice is to leave and take our chances on shanks’ fucking pony... I’d prefer *not* to find out what happened to the horses, but Beckman isn’t fit to go anywhere on foot, though I suppose between us we could carry the bugger...”

Strydom shook his head now.

“*Donner en Bliksem!*” he cried in frustration. “But I first want to find out what took the horses, I am going to go down that hole.”

O’Donnell looked at him now with incredulity.

“Are you fucking mad son? Just think about it! A fucking hole appears where there wasn’t a hole before and whatever comes out carries off four fucking horses before we can even get a fucking glimpse of it?” He shook his head emphatically, “No sir, I’m not going to be the *eejit* who goes down that hole looking for something that can do that.”

Strydom’s face hardened.

“Then I’ll go alone” he said coldly. “It took my horse; I’ve had that mare since I was a boy and I intend to find out what it was and pay it back.”

With that he turned and left the cave leaving a speechless O’Donnell shaking his head. Then in a sudden fury O’Donnell threw his hat on the floor.

“Ah fuck! O’Brien keep an eye on Beckman will you and keep your gun handy.”

And with that the Irishman quickly followed the young Boer.

He re-entered the first cave and saw Strydom holding a light by the entrance to the tunnel.

“Alright son, if you have to do this I’ll come with you, but only a little way... There’s something unholy about this.”

Strydom looked back at him gratefully.

“*Dankie* O’Donnell... have your gun ready,” the Boer said, now handing him the lantern.

Then ducking his head, he stepped into the hole.

“Fuck,” the Irishman swore, reluctantly following him.

They walked bent over for about twenty yards. The reek was overpowering, but the dark passageway offered up no clues save the long, wide trail of blood.

“How far are we going to go?” the Irishman asked nauseated. “And what the fuck is that horrible stench? It smells like a sewer...”

“Shhh!” the Boer hissed. “I can hear something ahead...”

Slowly, the two men shuffled forwards and then the tunnel widened out into a larger cavern. Pulling back the bolt on his rifle, Strydom nodded to O’Donnell.

“Raise the light!” he whispered.

Slowly O’Donnell pulled back the hood on the lantern and the two men gasped.

In a steaming heap of entrails, shattered bones and red, ruined flesh, something dark and slick was thrashing and undulating as it fed on the remains of the horses.

And as it feasted, over the sounds of its wet, slippery movement, there came a strange, pulsing, outlandish piping resonance.

“What the fuck is it!” O’Donnell hissed. “Is it snakes? Oh Saint Patrick, is it fucking snakes?”

But without replying Strydom raised his rifle and started firing. Setting the lantern quickly on the floor, O’Donnell lifted his Mauser and opened fire too, and both men continued shooting at the thick, writhing black coils until their clips were empty. In the sudden silence that followed O’Donnell, his ears ringing now, raised the lantern.

“Is it dead?” he asked at length.

But even as he spoke, a thick, arching mass of black, thrashing limbs and coiling members, reared up massively before them.

“Oh *fock!* Run O’Donnell!” Strydom shouted.

In panic, the two men rushed and stumbled back along the low tunnel, ears constantly straining for any sound of pursuit.

Charging out into the first cave once more, Strydom paused to fit another clip as they both backed away from the hole panting in terror.

“Is it coming?” O’Donnell cried, scrabbling himself for a new clip.

Strydom, ashen faced, shook his head as the two men backed away from the hole.

“I don’t think so...”

Suddenly there was a gurgling cry of agony from the second cave.

With a look of mounting dismay, the two men turned and ran back to O’Brien and Beckman.

But even in the circumstances, they were frozen with fresh horror when they re-entered the fire lit cave.

Beckman was on his feet swaying, a strange light in his eyes, his bayonet in his right-hand dripping blood.

At his feet was the body of O’Brien, his throat cut from ear to ear.

The two men stared at the German astounded.

“What the fuck is going on!” O’Donnell cried, “Holy fuck, what...?”

Suddenly lost for words, the Irishman was now reeling with a mounting hysteria.

But Strydom raised his rifle and pointed it at Beckman.

Beckman dropped the bayonet and raised his undamaged arm.

O'Donnell didn't hesitate, heedless of Strydom's aimed gun, he leapt at the German and struck him to the ground his face contorted in disgust and rage.

Pulling him roughly off, Strydom pointed the gun back at the German.

"Speak."

"I'm sorry about the American," Beckman started, groaning as he sat back up, leaning on the flat rock where he had been lying. "But I felt the presence of the Beast, and it's not the first time. His death was sadly necessary."

"Oh God he's mad, he's fucking mad!" O'Donnell shouted.

Strydom gripped O'Donnell's arm as the Irishman started forward once more.

The German groaned, blood now flowing from his nose and mouth where O'Donnell had struck him.

"You see I've met it before," Beckman continued, looking at them fatalistically. "I've not always been a farmer. And the Beast does not know space and time as we do. It can come anywhere, at any time..."

O'Donnell groaned incensed.

"Do we have to listen to this shit Strydom? Just shoot the fucker and let's get out of here before that thing comes again!"

But Strydom hesitated.

"Ja, but let's hear what he has to say. After what I've seen tonight..."

Beckman's head sagged on his chest, gurgling something incoherently. Then his head jerked up, and he looked at them with a sudden animation.

"I came to this country of God-fearing men to escape the sewer of Mammon. I've lived in the heart of that whore's empire. When I left Germany in eighty-seven, like many of my country men, I worked as a labourer in London. That's when the Beast first spoke to me. I knew then that I had to sacrifice to stop it from rising. And I did! Only blood will keep it at bay, so I killed many times to appease the Beast, to keep it satiated. Then it was women... sinful, dirty women. I never thought I would have to make a hecatomb again... But it was *you* who brought me here to this heathen place! You made me do this, I did it to save *you*..." sighing now his head sagged again.

Strydom looked at O'Donnell.

"Let's go Irishman, let's just get the *fok* out of here."

O'Donnell, his passion now eddying between bewilderment and fear, only nodded.

"You aren't going anywhere gentlemen... Easy now!"

They turned in surprise and there, standing in the entrance to the cave, were three khaki-clad men in pith helmets, their rifles raised.

"Drop your weapons," the central soldier stated coolly. Then he barked quick orders.

"Stubbs! Take their guns."

"Yes sarge!" A soldier answered moving forwards into the light of the fire.

"Lloyd, if any of them makes a move, shoot to kill."

"Yes sergeant!" the second soldier replied, pointing his rifle menacingly.

The sergeant lowered his own rifle as O'Donnell and Strydom were disarmed and looked about him, twisting his long moustaches.

"Well Boers this is a fine mess, what's bloody well going on, eh?"

Despite his casual manner he took the scene in with a sharp eye.

“Excuse me Sergeant Wilkins? Is it alright to come in now?” a voice asked from the entrance behind the soldiers.

“Yes Professor Travers, but step lightly, it looks like we’ve found a place to camp after all, but in addition we’ve bagged some villains...” the sergeant replied.

O’Donnell and Strydom watched as a short, older man in a drill cotton suit and slouch hat walked cautiously into the cave, his bespectacled face twitching behind bushy, gingery whiskers.

“You see sir,” the sergeant began, “there’s three of them, and this one is an Irishman. Of course, we ought to execute the Fenian as a traitor, but first I would suggest we find out what the fuck is happening...”

The sergeant quickly looked at the civilian.

“I beg your pardon sir; I mean we must find out what the dickens this is all about.”

The newcomer nodded and squinted at the three captives.

“Very good sergeant... Now gentlemen,” he said, addressing the prisoners directly, “what are you up to eh?...” but he blanched, seeing O’Brien’s corpse at Beckman’s feet. “Oh my God! What on earth is going on here!” he exclaimed suddenly retching. The sergeant snorted.

“I’m sorry sir, I should have warned you,” he said. “It seems we have not only captured a trio of bandits, but also discovered a case of murder.”

O’Donnell rolled his eyes.

“The German here is off his chump! And what’s more the fucking tunnel...”

His words were cut off by a smack in the mouth from Private Stubbs.

“Thank you Stubbs,” Sergeant Wilkins said.

“Sir!” a fourth soldier shouted, rushing into the cave. His face was white, and his voice trembled. “I think you had better come and see this.”

Frowning, the sergeant pointed at the prisoners.

“Lloyd, Stubbs, keep them covered, don’t hesitate to shoot if they make any false moves.”

And stepping aside for the professor, the two men left the cave and followed the soldier.

The prisoners looked at each other.

“We’re in a tight spot and no mistake...” O’Donnell whispered at length.

Private Stubbs prodded him viciously with the barrel of his rifle.

“Shut it Paddy,” he said with a snarl.

“Well can I have a smoke at least?”

But Stubbs only gave him a harder prod.

“I won’t warn you again. You two just stand there nice and quiet until the sergeant gets back.”

O’Donnell glared at him but said nothing.

After some minutes had passed in uncomfortable silence, O’Donnell looked over at Lloyd who was visibly shaking.

He winked at him.

“Homesick son?” he asked. “Missing your mammy?”

But before either of the soldiers could react to O'Donnell's taunting there was a groan behind them.

“Oi, you Boer fucker, sit down!” Stubbs suddenly shouted.

Turning to look, O'Donnell and Strydom saw that Beckman had slowly risen to his feet, and now in his hand he raised the bayonet.

“Fuck, shoot him Lloyd!” Stubbs cried.

But Beckman, stared at the men sadly, a tear trickling down his cheek.

“Oh Boss!” he cried. Then he drew the blade across his own throat and collapsed to the floor spouting blood.

“Christ!” Lloyd shrieked, suddenly turning away and vomiting.

Stubbs danced about pointing his rifle wildly at the stunned prisoners.

“Don't move! Don't make a fucking move!”

They were interrupted by the return of the now pale-faced Sergeant Wilkins.

“What the devil is going on?”

He looked with mounting disgust at the gore-soaked body of Beckman that lay now on top of the dead O'Brien.

“He's just topped himself Sarge, just like that, right there!” Lloyd cried.

“You two! This way now!” the sergeant barked, shaking his head in disbelief and pointing outside.

Stubbs roughly pushed the two prisoners out of the cave followed by Lloyd, who was wiping his mouth and still looking green.

Outside in the swaying light of a lantern, O'Donnell and Strydom saw several horses and pack horses burdened with equipment. The Irishman looked at the supplies keenly. Two nervous looking Basuto men stood to one side holding the reins and stared at the two prisoners who were now marched into the first cave.

Professor Travers was emerging out of the tunnel his face twisted in disgust, he was closely followed by another soldier.

Sergeant Wilkins turned to the two men.

“Right you scoundrels, would you mind explaining what is going on?”

But O'Donnell could only look with dread at the blood-smear hole.

“Something came out of that hole and killed our horses; it took them down there.”

Strydom said curtly, nodding towards the hole where the professor now stood swaying with revulsion.

The Sergeant stepped over, his face now inches from Strydom's.

Then he said in a lowered tone:

“I've had the misfortune to look down that there tunnel and there ain't no horses just a bad stink, a mess of blood and more fucking tunnels. So where has all this blood come from eh?” his eyes were twitching with puzzlement and anger. “What butchery have you been up to my lads? And don't start prating on about lions or leopards. I've been in Africa long enough to know my predators, and this isn't the work of any big cat, no nor hyena either. So why don't you tell me just what has happened before we shoot you.”

But it was O'Donnell who answered, his voice now cracking.

"Are you fucking stupid? There's a fucking great squid thing somewhere down that hole that's eaten our horses and..."

Wilkins choked off O'Donnell's response with a large hand about his throat. He pushed the Irishman hard against the wall.

"Shut up you Fenian bastard!" the sergeant snarled. "I was asking your Boer friend here. I wouldn't believe a fucking word that came out of your lying Irish mouth."

Face reddening, O'Donnell looked back at the soldier with obstinate hatred.

"If I might interject?"

Wilkins released O'Donnell and the Irishman slid to the floor gasping.

The men looked towards the grim-faced Professor Travers.

"I'm no expert on the flora and fauna of this region," the civilian began, "I am after all a geologist, but in my humble opinion..."

But Travers never finished his sentence.

Suddenly, several black, whip-like cords, wrapped about the man from behind and before anyone could react, he was gone.

The soldiers gaped then Sergeant Wilkins was bellowing orders.

"Lloyd, watch the prisoners! Shaw, go and watch the natives with the survey equipment. Stubbs, Walker and Phillips with me, look lively boys!"

And pulling out his revolver he turned and led the stunned soldiers into the tunnel.

"Fok..." Strydom swore.

O'Donnell climbed up from the floor where Wilkins had dropped him.

The young soldier left to guard them stared in shock, his face now sweaty with fear.

"There'll be shooting in a minute son," O'Donnell said darkly, rubbing his throat. "But it won't do any good. I'm not a church going man myself, but you might want to start praying, or, better still, run and don't stop running."

Lloyd looked at him and then back at the hole.

"Just fucking well shut up!" he sobbed. "The sarge is a hard bastard and..."

But his words were cut off by a sudden fusillade of firing from somewhere deep below.

The two prisoners exchanged a glance.

Then the firing stopped as quickly as it had started ending with a final, single shot and a disconcerting cry of agony. Shakily pointing his rifle at the two men, the shuddering soldier edged slowly towards the hole.

"Sergeant Wilkins sir! Sergeant are you there?" he shouted.

But there was no reply.

"They're all fucking dead you eejit!" O'Donnell roared. "And so will we all be unless we leave now!"

Lloyd looked at them, then he dropped his rifle and ran.

"Fok!" Strydom cursed, now breathing heavily. "Let's get the hell out of here!"

The Boer picked up the discarded rifle and the two men ran for the cave's entrance.

There was no one outside, but in the grey pre-dawn light, they could just make out two fleeing riders. A lone pack horse remained, straining in terror at its staked tether.

As they stood at the cave mouth there was a gunshot from behind them. O'Donnell looked down, a crimson stain spreading across the front of his shirt, then he slid down the wall to the ground.

Strydom span around raising the rifle in one smooth motion.

Sergeant Wilkins was staggering out of the hole, his face white, his body drenched in blood.

Strydom shot him before he could raise the revolver again. Wilkins crumpled, eyes wide, blood streaming from a hole in his temple.

Turning, the Boer dropped to a knee and gripped O'Donnell's shoulders.

"Come on O'Donnell, *fok*, come on! We can both still get out of here."

But O'Donnell shook his head.

"I'm done for son," he wheezed, smiling wanly. "That soldier was right, Wilkins was a hard bastard..."

Strydom tried to lift him, but the Irishman pushed him away grimacing.

Behind them came an eerie ululation echoing from somewhere deep underground.

"Listen Strydom... it's coming... Go to the horse, you see that small wooden chest on the side there? Bring it here. Go on man fucking hurry."

Now in a frenzy of panic and grief, Strydom ran to the pack horse and unfastening the buckles he threw the laden panniers to the ground and snatched up the chest.

The Irishman's eyes glinted, but now he was coughing blood.

"It's a fucking geological survey... do you see?" he said taking the box. "They've got fucking blasting gear. Probably not much, but enough to at least bring the roof in... I'm a 'Fenian bastard!'" he shouted at Wilkin's corpse and spitting blood. "You see son," he now whispered, taking a hold of Strydom's arm. "I might be a terrible shot, but I do know explosives."

"Oh come on O'Donnell, you can't do this..." Strydom cried.

But O'Donnell only smiled.

"Just drag me back inside sonny... move that fucker's body out of the way and get me next to that hole... when that thing comes again I'm going to make sure that it gets a wee taste of Hibernian retribution..."

#

Strydom waited, perched at the head of the ravine with the sun now rising behind him.

Then there was a heavy concussion.

The horse reared and Strydom gripped onto it, swiftly bringing it back under control.

The Boer watched as the rock face shivered then slumped in a great spreading cloud of debris and dust.

As it drifted out in a dissipating cloud across the mountain, he saluted stiffly, then, turning the horse away, he headed home.

Eulogies for Nick Wood



Rest in Peace, Nick Gerhard Hope

It was with great sadness and shock that I saw a Tweet posted by ASFS on 13 June that Nick Wood had passed away. The Tweet simply read: “Our friend African SFF writer/supporter Nick Wood has passed away. We send his family our love as we mourn the passing of someone who selflessly promoted and represented African on the world stage with dignity and his smile that lit up the galaxy. Your words live on, mfowethu Camagu.”

Nick, of course, was author of *Azanian Bridges* (2016), which I bought in Kindle version from Amazon in July of that year. An alternate history where Apartheid lives on, the book centres on the fraught relationship between a black Struggle fighter and an Afrikaner psychologist (don't ask, it's complicated), and his invention of a ridiculous McGuffin known as an Empathy Enhancer, or the Box. The State, of course, wants to weaponise the Box, and so begins an elaborate cat-and-mouse game that is more thriller than SF novel. While I did not think it a very successful book, it was thought-provoking, and remains one of the many local SF novels I have read over the years that have made an indelible impression on me. What was

important about the book was how Nick used the trappings of SF to dissect the moral and ethical dimensions of our complex post-Apartheid state of being.

It also demonstrated that African SF can be politicised and relevant and not just mindless entertainment about aliens and spaceships. Though there is nothing wrong with that side of the genre, Nick was a real writer who saw the true potential of SF. If I am not mistaken, his first story appeared in the landmark anthology *AfroSF: Science Fiction by African Writers* (2012), edited by Ivor W. Hartmann. Many of those writers have since become very well known. Apart from Nick himself, there was Nnedi Okorafor, Chinelo Onwualu, and Sarah Lotz.

Nick was also a noted authority on South African SF in particular, a rich field that continues to produce remarkable books like *Dub Steps* (2015) by Andrew Miller, *Intruders* (2018) by Mohale Mashigo, *Triangulum* (2019) by Masande Ntshanga, and *It Doesn't Have to be This Way* (2022) by Alistair MacKay.

I recently read Nick's article 'Forces Shaping the Development of South African Speculative Fiction

Down the Ages' in *The Evolution of African Fantasy and Science Fiction* (2018) edited by Francesca T. Barbini for a research proposal.

For anyone interested in the history of SF in South Africa, this article is essential reading. I was amazed to discover that two years before *Amazing Stories*, South African writer Ferdinand Berthoud's story 'The Man Who Banished Himself' was published in *Weird Tales*. Nick says nothing about the quality of the story, but the pulps in those days tended to be quantity over quality.

Perhaps the most important part of Nick's article is him bemoaning the lack of black voices in local SF. He writes: "It is not possible to fully understand the development of SF within South Africa without appreciating the changing socio-political contexts, which continues to both shape and constrain the emergence of local SF." He refers to "the thorny question of why black writers are still under-represented within the SF genre in South Africa."

Just as *Azanian Bridges* may have been somewhat ahead of its time, Nick's critical observations about local SF were equally acute. He was one of those rare people: a committed writer, a dedicated fan, and an excellent researcher who has done much to develop a discourse about how SF is being reappropriated in Africa to drive the

decolonial impact of the Global South on North American SF, hitherto the critical and cultural 'centre' of the genre.

It is a sad day when we lose someone like Nick, whom it is clear made a huge impact on the genre, both in South African and his work with the ASFS in Nigeria. I would have loved to have interviewed Nick one day, but sadly that is not to be. But as ASFS so rightly put it in their Tweet, his words live on.

Deirdre Byrne

In 2014 I applied for rating from the National Research Foundation in South Africa in order to gain recognition as a scholar. Part of the process of applying for rating involves finding reviewers to respond to the application. This is much more difficult than it sounds: for some inexplicable reason, eminent scholars who have never heard of you do not want to read your work and comment in depth on your application. I tried several famous scholars, including Veronica Hollinger ("I simply do not have time"), Lucie Armitt (did not even respond to my e-mail), and Sarah Lefanu (who also did not respond). Finally I thought of approaching Nick, with whom I'd corresponded while I was co- Editor and then Editor of Probe. To my delight, he agreed. (My application was successful.) I learned later that this was typical of his magnanimity with his time for all things relating to science fiction and especially to its (South) African iteration. Nick was a clinical psychologist: a fact that may surprise those of us who thought of him as a full- time science fiction author and scholar. He published more academic articles on psychology and therapy than he did about science fiction. Nevertheless, he spent hours reading and thinking about African and South African science fiction and fantasy, which may explain how he came to publish four volumes in the genre: *The Stone Chameleon* (2004), *Azanian Bridges* (2016), *Water Must Fall* (2020), and *Learning Monkey and Crocodile* (2019). *The Stone Chameleon* is YA, while *Learning Monkey and Crocodile* is a collection of short stories. As an African science fiction author, Nick felt affinity with other African authors whose creative bents were towards the non-realistic (Binyavanga Wainana, Wole Talabi, Tade Thompson, and others). He played an important role in the formation of the African Science Fiction Society (ASFS), based in Nigeria and wanted SFFSA to establish closer ties with our Nigerian counterparts so we could develop a continental reach.

Our thoughts are with Nick's wife and daughter in their bereavement. But our efforts should be to live up to his legacy by doing what he enjoined us to do: to reach out to others on the continent who share our passion for our favourite genre, and work towards a more inclusive fan base and critical community.

Gail and Ian Jamieson

Nick seems to have been part of SFSA and later SFFSA for as long as we can remember and it was with a real sense of loss that we heard of his unexpected passing.

We had very recently been in contact with him as he had kindly agreed to be the final judge of the 2023 Nova short story competition. We felt that his vast experience in Speculative fiction, particularly on the African continent, meant that he would be ideally suited to this task.

He is a past winner and multiple finalist in the Nova competition and is represented in the recently published anthology, "50 Science Fiction Tales – collected from the Nova competition"

He has been published in PROBE for at least the past 30 years and gave us a very interesting talk on Speculative fiction that is currently coming out of Africa, on Zoom earlier this year.

Although he was based in the UK he was very much a part of SFFSA

We will miss his presence among us.

One-third of galaxy's most common planets could be in habitable zone

(From the University of Florida and the Daily Galaxy)

Our familiar, warm, yellow sun is a relative rarity in the Milky Way. By far the most common stars are considerably smaller and cooler, sporting just half the mass of our sun at most. Billions of planets orbit these common dwarf stars in our galaxy.

To capture enough warmth to be habitable, these planets would need to huddle very close to their small stars, which leaves them susceptible to extreme tidal forces.

In a new analysis based on the latest telescope data, University of Florida astronomers have discovered that two-thirds of the planets around these ubiquitous small stars could be roasted by these tidal extremes, sterilizing them. But that leaves one-third of the planets—hundreds of millions across the galaxy—that could be in a goldilocks orbit close enough, and gentle enough, to hold onto liquid water and possibly harbor life.

UF astronomy professor Sarah Ballard and doctoral student Sheila Saguear published their findings the week of May 29 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Ballard and Saguear have long studied exoplanets, those worlds that orbit stars other than the sun.



"I think this result is really important for the next decade of exoplanet research, because eyes are shifting toward this population of stars," Saguear said. "These stars are excellent targets to look for small planets in an orbit where it's conceivable that water might be liquid and therefore the planet might be habitable."

Saguear and Ballard measured the eccentricity of a sample of more than 150 planets around these M dwarf stars, which are about the size of Jupiter. The more oval shaped an orbit, the more eccentric it is. If a planet orbits close enough to its star, at about the distance that Mercury orbits the sun, an eccentric orbit can subject it to a process known as tidal heating. As the planet is stretched and deformed by changing gravitational forces on its irregular orbit, friction heats it up. At the extreme end, this could bake the planet, removing all chance for liquid water.

"It's only for these small stars that the zone of habitability is close enough for these tidal forces to be relevant," Ballard said.

Data came from NASA's Kepler telescope, which captures information about exoplanets as they move in front of their host stars. To measure the planets' orbits, Ballard and Saguear focused especially on how long the planets took to move across the face of the stars. Their study also relied on new data from the Gaia telescope, which measured the distance to billions of stars in the galaxy.

"The distance is really the key piece of information we were missing before that allows us to do this analysis now," Saguear said.

Saguear and Ballard found that stars with multiple planets were the most likely to have the kind of circular orbits that allow them to retain liquid water. Stars with only one planet were the most likely to see tidal extremes that would sterilize the surface.

Since one-third of the planets in this small sample had gentle enough orbits to potentially host liquid water, that likely means that the Milky Way has hundreds of millions of promising targets to probe for signs of life outside our solar system.

From The Daily Galaxy

