



Dark Space is not really dark.

Neither is it empty.



The new space opera by Marianne de Pierres - in all good bookshops from May 2007 / www.mariannedepierres.com / www.orbitbooks.co.uk

Hub

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Editors: Lee Harris and Alasdair Stuart.

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Issue 11 Contents

Fiction: *The Blue Parallel* by Jessica Reisman

Review: *The Unquiet* by John Connolly

Interview: Charles Stross

Origins – The Second Doctor

This feature was due to appear in this week's issue – unfortunately, our writer has suffered a bit of a PC catastrophe, and should his hard drive be recoverable we will be running this next week – otherwise look out for it in a few weeks' time.

British Fantasy Society Nomination

Also from issue 1 of Hub, Alasdair Stuart's *Connected* has been nominated for Best Short Fiction in the forthcoming British Fantasy Society awards. Congratulations to All! *Connected* will shortly be distributed to all subscribers as a Hub Special – if you're a member of the BFS and you enjoy the tale, please consider voting for it when your ballot papers come through.

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Back Issues

If you have missed any of the electronic-only versions of *Hub* (Issue 3, onwards) they can be downloaded **free-of-charge** from our website. Issues 1 and 2 (high quality, glossy printed magazines) can also be ordered for a small fee.

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Every week we will be publishing a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review (book, DVD, film, audio, or TV series) and we'll also have the occasional feature, too. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of the people over at Orbit, who have sponsored this electronic version of the magazine, and partly by the generosity displayed by your good selves. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation (of any size) over at www.hub-mag.co.uk.



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The Blue Parallel

by Jessica Reisman

In the chill of a rainy dawn, Liseo gave them a white moth with a simple imperative worked into it: return that which is not of the Sheltered Land to its own time and place.

Now they walked through tall grass, dowsing by way of the ki-bond for the presence of the shifted people — beings who were not meant to be here, now, in the wilds of Kahssia, the Sheltered Land.

It was, Cole thought, like looking for one out-of-place thread in a landscape-sized tapestry. If not for the ki-bond they wouldn't have a hope.

Drizzle pattered on Cole's hat and dripped down the back of his neck. His ki-brother Taine moved through the rain-silvered grass twenty feet away, at the edge of a thick wood. Bone white, the moth clung to Taine's dark hair under the brim of his own battered hat.

Late sunlight hung through the rain, under murky cloud above. Cole's boots squelched. A little shudder and tug at his bones told him to adjust course, Taine's movements mirroring his across the field. Cole found it hard to describe the way the ki-bond felt. Not even patternists, like Liseo, fully understood ki-bonds — though Cole had never talked to a patternist outside of Kahssia, and in Kahssia there were precious few. Maybe in the unsheltered, shifting lands, where patternists ran wild, they understood and exploited the ki-bond as they did everything else. In Kahssia, otherwise known as the Sheltered Land, they did not.

"Over here," Taine called.

Already pivoting to answer the same tug as Taine, Cole joined him at the wood's edge. They came under the trees. Scents of wet mint and bark filled Cole's nose, rain shurring on the leaf cover high above.

"What do you think it will do?" he asked Taine, gesturing at the moth.

Taine grinned. "Should be interesting, whatever." He sounded eager to see, but Cole felt only nervous. Though they were occasionally tapped to perform a function like this, most of the time they were as sheltered from the works of patternists as Kahssia itself.

They found the shifted — beings who didn't belong in Kahssia's pattern — in a clearing. Taine stopped Cole with a hand to his arm while they were still in the shadow of the trees. Late light glinted through rain on helms and weapons, maybe twenty in a band of raiders. Tired but fierce-looking men and women, their armor mismatched and patchy over rough leathers, their hair stained with vivid color.

Skin prickling, Cole swung around in the same breath as Taine, to meet the attack of two raiders — scouts, clearly. He ducked under the arm of a man a head taller than him and — he learned as he failed to dodge the other arm — solid as an ox. The man slammed Cole into a tree, stunning him long enough to get him in a rib-cracking hug, his breath sweet with something, licorice seed, Cole thought distractedly. Then he couldn't breathe to smell it.

As the edges of the world dimmed, he twisted on a thrum of the bond in his bones, loosing an elbow hard up into the man's throat.

Released, he dropped to the ground.

Taine held the other raider with an arm across her chest and his knife at her throat. Her nostrils flared. "Vetchwies!" she spat, or something like it. A red weal marked Taine's face — from the length of thick chain wrapped about the woman's hand, Cole guessed.

"We're not — " Cole coughed. "We're here to help." The raiders continued to glare, the man rumbling a string of angry words.

"Brilliant," Taine said.

"You'd think Liseo could've patterned a moth to make them understand us." Cole gestured. "Let's do this."

Taine pushed the woman. She took a step, then dropped forward with a twist to come up and around, knocking the knife out of Taine's hand and slinging her chain around his neck. It happened so quickly Cole hadn't moved before she was choking Taine. Then the other raider had hold of him again. He struggled against the man's arms, yelling as the woman drew the chain tighter, Taine gasping, then not, no sound coming out of him, face going wrong-colored. His hat fell back to hang from its string, and the moth fluttered up from his hair.

"No!" Cole yelled. His urgency fused into the bond.

The chain shattered.

The woman was left holding the broken lengths, Taine falling to his knees, heaving air. Cole focused on the moth, a pale spot in the tree dim.

"Now," he hissed at it, waving his arms with no idea if it understood.

The moth fluttered out into the wet air over the raiders.

The woman snarled words at them, chanting.

The moth circled above the raiders.

The woman gathered the remains of the chain and spit on something at one end, then threw it at Taine with a guttural cry.

The chain flew through the air.

The moth circled, an intaglio of white phosphor trailing from it. Shadows and whispering reflections dropped from the web of glowing white. The air shivered to a frangible-seeming depth and the glowing lines lowered over the raiders.

Raiders, shadows, and whispers faded, top to bottom, and were gone. A faint glitter remained, frostlike, on the rough grass.

The chain hit Taine on the chest and slid to the ground. The moth fluttered away into the dark wood. Dusk light gleamed beneath the cloud cover. The raider's last words hung in the air, left behind in the darkening day.

Taine picked the chain up from the muddy bracken. A small medallion hung at its end.

"Okay?" Cole asked.

Taine coughed as Cole hauled him up. "That was freakish." His voice broke, thready, and he rubbed his throat. "Next time Liseo tries to pull us in to do something, let's be elsewhere."

Cole nodded, reaction settling in with a shudder. "At the Belle, drinking."

"In fact?" Taine gestured to a nonexistent path.

*

The rain drifted off, but thick cloud cover left them tramping in darkness. Near midnight, they came out of the edgelands to the south road, muddy and ridged by rain and the day's passage of horses and carts.

"Where do you suppose they came from?" Taine spoke out of the dark, a suggestion of motion at Cole's side.

"Who knows. Anywhere, nowhere — they could have been made up entirely in the mind of the patternist who shifted them here."

Taine grunted agreement. "Still — I wonder if the Keeper's worried that someone was able to breach Kahssia's shift barriers."

"You think Liseo told him? I'm not sure he did; otherwise why come to us, trackers with no connections to the Keeper's House?"

"You've a suspicious mind. Which isn't to say you're wrong. But then again, we are the best, aren't we? He probably came to us because of the bond. Amazing, what the moth did." Taine waved his hand through the air in front of them. "We should go sometime, to the unsheltered lands, and see wild patternists at work." Cole shuddered, to which Taine, feeling it along the bond, said, "Wonders, Cole, wonders. Did I tell you," he switched topics with familiar eagerness, a jump of engagement that woke Cole up some, and made him smile, at the nimble passion of Taine's mind. "I got that annotated map from the merchant. It's fascinating — Champlere maintains that the first expansion of the early patternists into the Egrin Boreal created the Great Basin as we know it."

"What, before the Reclamation and Sheltering?"

"Yes! There's evidence to support the theory; if you look at the Perplexity Charts — " Taine fell suddenly silent. Something hollow and chill shivered across the bond. Cole looked sharply at his ki-brother.

"What?"

Silence, then, "It's nothing." He shook his head and grinned; the feeling faded. "Must be hungrier than I thought."

"We're almost there," Cole said. He'd never felt anything like that empty, cold shiver along the bond before.

Belle's welcomed them with light and warmth. Something smoked and cooked with onions savored the air. They hung hats and coats to dry near the fire. Greetings chorused roughly from other members of their guild, hunters and trackers like Cole and Taine, mapmakers and tanners. Belle brought them platters of river fish with onions and root greens, and mugs of dark ale.

A card game with some travelers, who weren't wise to the advantage of the bond, left Cole slightly drunk and flush with winnings by the time he and Taine stumbled off to their guild house rooms.

*

Wrongness roiled beneath footing he couldn't see, a tainted sea that would eat him down to bone — yet leave him living, hollow and empty and *wrong*.

Cole woke with a shudder and lay still, limbs leaden, unsure where or who he was in the moments it took for breath to even out. A ghastly thread of the nightmare remained, along the ki-bond.

Dread still in his bones, Cole pulled on clothes and went barefoot down the corridor to Taine's room.

Taine sat in the dark at the one window.

Cole leaned by him. "What is it?"

His ki-brother glanced at him, away. The chamber was as usual: rumpled bed, clothes chest, Taine's collection of old map scrolls, a treatise on the Perplexity Charts he was reading, a mug and pitcher of water.

Everything ordinary. Except Taine.

"It's this," Taine said. The chain from the raider glinted as he held it out. Cole took it. The medallion at the end was the same dark metal as the chain, inlaid with bits of grey crystal, inscribed with writing he couldn't read.

He remembered the chain cutting into Taine's throat.

"What do you mean, 'it's this?'"

"Can't you feel it?"

"I felt...something...down the bond, but what does it have to do with this? Is it that it should have been shifted back with the raiders, it shouldn't be here?"

"It's a curse. She cursed me."

Cole leaned back against the wall, mouth open. He examined the medallion again. "A curse?"

Taine nodded. He rubbed his hands over his face and shuddered all over, like a horse.

"Kahssia is sheltered from curses, Taine."

"I know that," he snapped, then hugged himself, rocking — both very un-Taine-like. "Maybe it's just...just a bad dream — Belle's stuffed mushrooms? You didn't have any." He grinned, but it slid away, sickly.

"If she did curse you, it wouldn't work here — it wouldn't even work in the shifting lands unless she was a patternist."

"Or," Taine said, gaze going back to the window, shoulders hunching, "a patternist willed it that her curses should work."

Cole wiped one hand over his jaw, palm rasping over stubble. He gripped the back of his neck, peering at his ki-brother. Taine wasn't behaving like himself, that was certain.

*

Two days later, Cole stood outside Liseo's quarters at the edge of the Keeper's compound, Taine at his shoulder. Cole wanted nothing more to do with a patternist, ever again, but he was desperate for answers, for help. Taine barely ate and could not seem to sleep. Cole covered for him in guild hall and brought their healer to see him, to no useful end.

It terrified Cole, the leaden weight, the emptiness in Taine's eyes and arms and words — in Taine who had always been the lighter, brighter half of him. It dragged at him in his sleep and for the first time in their lives, he wanted to be away from Taine — free of the bond — which thought, in itself, terrified him.

"It's just dreaming, Taine, dreaming awake." Cole had said at one point.

Taine had stopped him, gripping his hand. Something of the real Taine, a glint surfacing in his brown-green eyes, eased Cole's mind.

Then Taine said, "I can feel it, Cole, how it's affecting the ki. It will take you, too, won't it? Maybe, maybe I should..."

"No!" Cole hissed, the tending of Taine's thoughts perfectly clear.

The brief glimpse of clarity sunk away, fear and shadow overtaking Taine. He'd closed his eyes and rocked.

Cole felt guilty just being at Liseo's door, seeking his help. When the patternist asked their help, Cole agreed because it was for Kahssia's protection. Cole, like many Kahssians, thought of patternists as the enemy — of stability, humanity, essence, nature — of life. Though Liseo was a refugee from the shifting lands, serving the Keeper in keeping Kahssia's barriers strong, he was still a patternist.

Liseo received them in his kitchen, ink smudges on his long face. The windows were all shuttered. He sat at a long counter, chin on hands, contemplating a bowl of white powder, a prickly fruit, seed pods, a twist of herbs. Books were stacked, open, in several piles of varying heights around him. Scents that burned the nose made Cole want to sneeze. Bits of white powder were caught in Liseo's beard stubble, as if maybe he already had sneezed.

Cole pushed his ki-brother onto a stool. Taine's skin was hot through his shirt. The shadows under his eyes had shadows. Setting the amulet on the counter, Cole slid it to Liseo, who eyed it. Not until Cole had explained did Liseo pick up the amulet by the broken chain.

"Huh," he said, after a while. "Yup, it's real. Nasty, too." He eyed Taine much as he'd eyed the amulet, then looked keenly at Cole, one brow raised in curiosity. "Not affecting you, though, is it? Huh. I would have thought the ki-bond would...well, maybe not. Hmm. Someone really should do a study of ki-bonded phenomena. There's just not enough known about them."

An avid inquisitiveness in the patternist's face made Cole lean back. "Can you do anything to help us?"

"It *is* affecting you. You're usually so even-tempered."

"Of course it's affecting me! Can you help us, or not?"

"Well." He set the amulet down. "Even figuring out if I can do something to help requires patterning and," he spoke through a yawn, "you know I can only pattern at the Keeper's instruction."

"Just as the Keeper knew about the errand you sent us on, and the moth you made to send the shifted raiders back? Because of course he knows Kahssia's barriers were breached by someone's patterning shift."

Liseo gusted a sigh. White powder clouded the air. Without another word he swept up the amulet and pressed it theatrically to his forehead.

The powder settled.

Liseo didn't move, medallion pressed to his head, eyes closed, but Taine began to shiver. Cole put a hand to his ki-brother's shoulder. The previous dry heat in his skin was icy, sweat soaking his clothes. He shook like a twig in the wind.

A brief tone rang through the room, a moment of sound so thick it made Cole's teeth ache, his eyes water. Liseo lowered the medallion, blinking. A thread of blood ran from his nose. Wiping it absently, he tossed the amulet back onto the counter and looked at Cole.

"It can't be broken from behind Kahssia's barriers. It has to be done in the shifting lands. You'll have to leave Kahssia. I don't recommend taking him," he gestured to Taine; "barriers are keeping the curse somewhat in check. If he leaves, he'll succumb within a day or two. Probably take you with him. As it is, he can probably hold on for weeks — though I don't guarantee he won't suicide."

"I won't," Taine said, the words forced, so thready Cole was more alarmed than reassured.

Liseo studied them. "The bond should mean you can break the curse for him from wherever you have to."

Leave Kahssia? Go to the unsheltered lands? Finally he said, "But where? I've never been out of Kahssia."

Liseo scratched at his beard stubble. "Here's what we'll do. I'll pattern you a compass moth, with a scraping from the medallion; you'll take direction from it. The *Ruskin* is in port. You can take passage to Tok with them."

Cole spoke over the clenching in his gut. "Tok?"

Liseo gave him a look of disgust. "It's the nearest stabilized point in the shifting lands, first port out of Kahssia. Some gifted patternists live there; find one to help you break the curse, or pattern a counter blessing, or something."

"You can't do that?"

"It can't be done from within Kahssia. And, even if...no, I couldn't. I'm not good enough."

Hearing a world of regret and self-recrimination that he couldn't begin to fathom, Cole felt a moment's sympathy for Liseo. It faded quickly in his own fear.

The patternist's gaze slid around the room, as if someone might see them through the shuttered windows, or be listening outside. "Meet me at the docks before dawn. The *Ruskin* leaves tomorrow morning."

*

Another night of the curse weighing along the bond to Cole, ashes in his blood and thoughts. Yet he could still set it aside, breathe free of it; Taine could not. So he sat with Taine in his room.

"Don't go. It's too dangerous. We'll find another way," Taine said. The words were sluggish and lacked inflection. None of the vitality that Cole associated with his ki-brother remained in him.

"It would be better if I were the one cursed, and you the one to go. You've always wanted to go to the shifting lands. Read so much, studied them." He sipped from a mug of water, mouth gone dry. He was ashamed of his fear, which caught at his throat and made him want to abandon Taine to his fate.

"You might not be able to come back." Taine's listless voice made the words meaningless for a moment, then Cole looked at him sharply.

"What do you mean? Why?"

Taine's gaze drifted. "If you get caught in a patterning of any kind, and it changes you enough, shifts you from true..."

"The barriers?"

Taine continued, slowly, as if Cole hadn't spoken, "Kahssia's barriers...won't let you back through."

Cole digested that. "But ships come and go from port."

"Barriers within barriers, deeper ones inland of port, they recognize what's of the Sheltered Land, and what's...not."

A thought among other, fractured ones, crossed Cole's mind.

Taine answered it, as if Cole had spoken. "If I left now, I wouldn't be able to come back. Of course, according to Liseo I wouldn't last outside the barriers any longer than a hummingbird's trail on the air."

Tracker slang for not at all. Cole swallowed more water, nearly choking on it.

He couldn't do this.

*

Cole shivered in the dark. Salt water and fish flavored the cold air. He wore his battered hat, boots, and long leather coat over warm clothes, a pack slung over one shoulder. He'd left Taine lodged in the Healers' House, half their pooled money paid for his care. He'd had a private word with their usual healer about watching Taine. The other half of the money, along with the medallion, hung in a pouch around his neck.

The bond ached in a place that couldn't be reached; for all that, its presence, the sense of connection to Taine, was comforting. As long as he had that, he was connected to Kahssia, to home, to all that he knew. *I'll find a way, Taine.*

The *Ruskin* dwarfed the fishing ships and ferries that stayed in Kahssian waterways. Lanterns running off small generators, an advancement introduced to Kahssia only in the last few years, threw pools of illumination on the ship's deck, down the wooden hull, into dark water. Voices fell with the light. Cole tucked his hands into his armpits. Steps thumped the dock. He turned as Liseo reached him. The patternist said nothing, just gestured for Cole to follow him up the gangway. It swayed under his steps as the ship dipped.

On deck Liseo went straight to a stolid figure with short, bristly grey hair.

"Captain, Cole Wren. He needs passage to Tok."

The captain nodded, her eyes curious. She had to look up at him.

"Your guide," Liseo said. A moth fluttered out from his clothes, black with grey markings. It came to rest on Cole's shoulder. He squinted down at it and when he turned back to ask Liseo what exactly he needed to do with it, the patternist was on the gangway, leaving.

The first mate called orders and the ship prepared to get underway.

Two patternists, perched in nests, worked in concert to open a hole in Kahssia's barrier.

Cole watched them nervously, Taine's words in his mind. The air hummed and stretched like mesh, thinning visibly until cracks split the dark and other darks, other colors of light showed through. He felt queasy watching it.

The cracks stretched and formed a hole in the air. Broad daylight poured through with a stiff wind.

Cole glimpsed a ruffling ocean and distant horizon. The impression of stretched mesh with many-hued fissures occurred only around the hole, which eventually stretched wide enough for the *Ruskin*.

Cole, clinging to a rail for the choppy passage, turned to see the opening seal behind them, down into the sea. The ship's sails snapped in the wind.

"Kahssia's barriers are difficult," the captain said. Cole turned to meet her appraising gaze. "Never been into the shifting lands?"

"No."

She nodded, seemed about to say something else, then said only, "Mr. Kirin will show you the passenger accommodations," gesturing to a man at the forecabin steps.

Mr. Kirin's face, like a mask sewn together of two different faces, was half one thing, half another. One side tanned and human, with a blue eye, the other — with a haphazard slip from one side of his forehead, down the nose and across the left side of his mouth — leathery. A lizardian eye, faceted gold and slit by black pupil, regarded Cole.

Cole managed a greeting. A spark of amusement lit the man's mismatched eyes. Mr. Kirin, Cole supposed, had never been past Kahssia's docks.

Mr. Kirin's direction took him below deck to a bunk and a stool in a closet. Half a porthole gave light to the tiny space. Cole considered the moth for a while, coaxed to settle on his fingers; filament legs gripped his skin, dusty black wings sheened silver.

Along the bond came despair with the drowning sense of Taine in it. He turned away from the tiny bunk, from the bond, and from Taine, going to seek fresh air on deck.

Guilt followed like oily smoke — that he turned from Taine, from the bond, at all.

The *Ruskin* tossed in heavy seas. An atmosphere gone molten burned around the plunging ship. Wherever the ships' patternists lost their hold on the protective skin of cool air they'd formed about the vessel, wood and sail burst into flame.

Cole clung to the forecastle rail, heat caught in his throat, eyes tearing. Sea water spumed into the molten air and steamed, so the *Ruskin* rode plunging wells of water through hot fog.

The ship's patternists had called warning from their perches. A gouge in the sea had opened, bloody and viscous, a horrible wound. A stench of rotten meat billowed up. Then a splinter of hot light ate the sky and the ocean heaved the ship up into it.

A crewman went up like a torch when they hit the molten air. He'd careened around on deck, screaming, until he hit a rail and dropped over in the swelling sea.

Now they pitched about the reeking sea wound as about the eye of a storm. The ship strained, fires flared, crew raced to put them out, yelling.

Cole hung on.

Someone tumbled past him as the *Ruskin* lurched. Cole flung out a hand and caught a handful of jacket before the someone went over the side — which, at current pitch, came close to being the bottom. A lizardian eye flickered, and Mr. Kirin coughed up water. A leathery hand gripped Cole's arm.

Suddenly all the air went out of the world with a sucking bang — long moments later air returned and the ship staggered straight.

Calm sea stretched around them, the wound gone, air cool, though it smelled of burnt flesh and wood.

Mr. Kirin straightened, clapped Cole on the back and strode away. When he regained command of his stomach, Cole joined in the cleanup.

Later, Cole wandered the deck in the night air. The tiny bunk was too small; sleep brought Taine and curse too close.

The captain and the man of the patternist pair leaned at the side, in conversation. The *Ruskin's* two patternists, who spent most of their time in their perches, tasting the wind and the roll of the waves from the deep strata of potential within their minds, were ki-bonded, Mr. Kirin had said.

Thoughts of getting caught in some stray shifting, being changed, barred from home forever, made Cole hang back.

The captain glanced over her shoulder. "Mr. Wren. I assure you, my patternist won't do you any harm. He's well in control of his shiftings."

"Of course." Cole ducked his head, made himself lean on the rail beside them, still wary. The sea spoke out of the dark.

"Mr. Wren," the patternist nodded. Lantern light gave Cole an edge of the man's jaw and cheekbone, a filigreed bone hoop piercing the upper curve of his ear.

The moth lifted briefly from Cole's sleeve and landed again. The man's head tilted forward.

"Nice bit of work. Liseo's?"

Cole nodded. He stared into the dark, then asked, hearing the plaintive note in his own voice. "What was that, earlier? Why would anyone make *that*?"

"The first time," the captain said, after an interval, "someone began shifting more than a pile of laundry or pearls, shifting time, place, people, to suit their desire, the ruin of the world began.

The patternist took up the thread. "Reality ripped and patched again and again, over and over, with no governing principle or unified purpose. It's madness.

“That said, it’s near impossible to stop, once you start. No number of disasters negates the beauty in unlimited possibility.”

“But…” Cole bit his lip. If what he’d seen today was not deterrent enough, he had nothing more persuasive to offer. He said instead, “The possibilities are only in the hands of a few.”

The patternist grunted. “Yes. If we could guarantee that all patternists would hold the greatest good of the universe in their minds — that would be a fine thing. Once, maybe, they did — but it didn’t hold.”

“Your blue parallel,” the captain said.

“What’s that?” Cole asked.

“There’s a theory,” here the captain snorted and the patternist gave her a glance, “a legend: A transcendent world. A paradise, if you will, of facets in perfect balance…mosaic of a thousand thousand worlds shifted to a shining, deep-rooted exultation. The safety of the Sheltered Land, the unlimited possibility of the shifting lands. A world formed by shifting. And then, lost by it.”

Cole contemplated that. Taine would like it: the peace and predictability of Kahssia, with wonder in the quiet moments, he imagined, like seeds touched by light, ready to spring forth with blossoms of possibility.

Then the image of the crewman, burning, tumbling into the sea, overtook that fragile imagining.

The first day out, the weather fair and the sea like a sheet of pale paper, the shifting world had not seemed terrible.

He knew it wasn’t as if the unsheltered lands were in constant turmoil, but he’d still expected something more than fair seas to a blue horizon, the creak and dip of the great wooden ship almost gentle. And he’d been right. The sea bleeding like a great beast, the air burning.

*

The only peculiarity the next day came as a swarming glitter on the western horizon, a faint sound of singing drifting from it. They could just see an island city floating in it, misted and unreachable. At dusk the sunset burned wolf-eye yellow, the sea stretching bitter green toward a suggestion of land. Still later, Tok hove into view like a light-barnacled hull on the night sea.

Mr. Kirin described the port of Tok as a town lost at the frayed end of a strand of time. Reliable port in an unreliable world, that was the salient fact for Cole. The *Ruskin* docked there regularly.

Standing on deck in his coat and hat, Cole watched the sea rush by under the Ruskin’s fore lanterns. He’d dreamed a deep cavern lay beneath him. Venturing down into it, one climbed back out, if at all, horribly changed. Some long-secret ill waited there, sealed in chests that could not hold it, so it seeped into rock, earth, air, and water, and warped out of true all that was loved, familiar.

He woke with a strong desire not to sleep again.

Now, with the chill wind on his cheeks and land growing closer, he touched at the bond, seeking Taine, worried for his ki-brother.

Taste of bitter eldervee herb, used by healers to bring sleep — a brief comfort of familiarity, quickly clouded by grey dread.

The air around him darkened suddenly, cutting him off from Taine. A gangle of something struck out of it, into him. His head snapped back, every muscle screaming.

Released, he sagged to his knees. Little crackles of darkness chased along his skin and murmured between his lips, tasting of blood.

Mr. Kirin was there, helping him to his feet. He clung to the rail, sat on a barrel he found under him. The moth, having fluttered away, came back to rest on his knee.

The male patternist dropped from the rigging and approached.

“Were you touching your ki-bond?”

Cole nodded.

The patternist glanced toward the other perch. “The bond is a lightning rod.” He hitched one shoulder in a shrug. “My ki-sister and I channel that power, but you’re not a patternist. It’s very rare, the bond. Power seeks power. In Kahssia you were sheltered from such.”

“I’m not — ” Cole swallowed.

“Changed?”

Cole nodded. The patternist considered him, shook his head. “No. Not yet.”

He swarmed back up the rigging.

The ship docked. The moth lifted into the air and drifted down the gangway about its patterned business — finding a cure for the curse. Cole touched Mr. Kirin’s human hand, nodded to the captain. He followed the moth.

Among simple fishing vessels, the more exotic craft at dock included a dhow fashioned like a sea horse, its tail curled round to form a deck and a ship with masts of horn and sails of smoke.

Away from the docks, houses and shops as bricolage as the ships in harbor lined the streets. Lamps and floating globes illumined a house made of ice, another like a giant fossil, blushing with ghostly blood — Cole could hear it breathing, slow and deep. A block of buildings with their stone, glass, and wood all crackled like a glaze fired too hot. Through the windows of one shop, he glimpsed a whole other city street, drenched in rain.

Still shaky from what happened on the *Ruskin*, he called after the moth, “Wait!” It circled back to land on his shoulder.

At a cart selling hot food and drink, he gave coins to a large monkey of a woman. He collapsed on the steps of a house formed of stone trees. Closely ranked, the trees made a leafy, lapidary canopy roof that overhung the steps. Cole sipped hot berry cider, leaning back.

A clatter in the stone trees roused him. A stone spider, big as a small dog, scuttled down a trunk. The moth fluttered up and the spider rose on its legs, shooting out a line of silk. It caught the moth, dragged it back, wrapped it neatly — all within several beats of Cole’s thudding heart. Then it clattered back into the stone canopy, the cocooned moth left at Cole’s feet.

He ripped the sticky webbing, trying not to tear the moth itself. Uncovered, the moth lay in his palm, cool and still. Stone.

Cole closed his fingers around it. He climbed to his feet and wandered down the street. He didn’t know what else to do, so he touched the bond, seeking the spark of luck that had turned events in their favor all their lives.

The bond is a lightning rod.

He cast a wary gaze down the waking street, at the sky silvering above. He kept a touch to the bond, though, because he could feel the moth stone heating in his hand, ever so slightly tugging him along.

Mind on the bond he followed the tug. Dread ashed the once lucid sense of the bond, but still the tug led him —

— off the main street, up an alley that wound above the town. Towering brown trees spoke in a continual murmur about weather and roots. Glowing footprints marked the path here and there.

Once he heard something huge crashing through the trees and once he stumbled into a sudden stygian darkness, finding his way out only by the tug of the moth stone.

It led him to a blue stone wall, then a wooden gate that opened with a creak. A path wound up through terraced orchard, long untended, to a tall, blue stone house.

The moth stone lost all its heat abruptly. When he opened his hand, it crumbled to powder.

The sound of the sea reached him, among the orchard trees, smoke-light caught in the branches. On the front door of the house a bit of wood bore the words **Use Other Door**. Not seeing another door, Cole walked the path around to the back, where a terrace, blue as the rest, leaned out over the ocean.

Bramble-spined cliff tumbled down to beach, far below, where white curls of water broke on black sand. A moon unlike the one he knew, massive and pearly pink, rode low in the sky. The air was cold.

He knocked on the door. When no one answered, he sat in one of the chairs scattered about the terrace, setting pack and hat on the table beside him.

A line of brown doves perched along the low stone wall. They churred softly into the growing day. His fingers and face chilled. The basement hatch doors opened. A young woman emerged. Darkness seemed to trail her out of the cellar, and an acrid stench of chemicals. She wore a tattered, once-fine shirt over stained skirts, slit up the side over loose pants in the same condition, embroidery frayed, hems ragged. Tea-brown hair pulled back in a clump, there were smudges on her face and ink stains on her fingers that reminded him of Liseo.

“Looking for me?”

“I think so,” Cole said. “Are you a patternist?”

She squinted at him, considering him the way Liseo, and the Ruskin patternist had. She took his hand, her fingers light and inquisitive as she touched the powdery remains of the moth. Dropping his hand and rubbing a bit of moth powder between thumb and finger, her gaze turned frank and appraising and made Cole flush. The thoughts in her eyes were not those of young girl. She must be older than she appeared.

A little color touched her cheeks, then, and she lowered her eyes. “You’re from Kahssia? I’ve never met anyone from the Sheltered Land.” She said the last as if it had a bad taste.

“The *Ruskin* docks here,” he looked at the strange moon, “in Tok — from Kahssia regularly.”

She shrugged. “So what do you want?”

“I need to break a curse on my ki-brother.”

“Ki-bonded?” She eyed him up and down again, nothing near as human as the other look. Cole took a step back, almost feeling the fingers of her mind on the bond.

He pulled the amulet from the pouch at his neck and held it out to her. “The raider who cursed him used this.”

She took it, examined it. “Tell me exactly what happened and how your ki-brother is affected.”

As Cole told her, a curling sheet of paper formed in the air, words in inky script imprinting it. It rolled into a scroll as she snatched it from the air.

“Payment,” she said.

“I have — ”

“I’ll take the amulet, for my time and effort. If I find an answer for you, we can discuss further payment.” She turned on her heel, tattered skirts flaring. “Wait here. Don’t wander around. Don’t come looking for me. And *don’t* feed the doves,” she finished inexplicably. The basement doors fell shut behind her.

He wondered what exactly the comment about feeding the doves meant, because he was hungry, and there was nothing to eat but the stale rations in his pack. Deciding he wasn't hungry enough yet to eat them, he slumped in the chair and stared at the cold, rosy moon.

*

The sun rose in the sky. After an hour or so, a patter of footsteps approached. Instead of the woman, a little girl came from the house. She wore clothes far finer than the woman's. Barefoot, her long hair brushed to a gloss, she carried a jump rope. She regarded Cole out of eyes dark, soft, and brown as the doves. Ignoring his greeting and questions, she crossed to the far side of the terrace and began jumping rope.

The rhythmic slapping of rope on stone lulled Cole into a doze. The girl began intoning rhymes as she jumped, the words slipping into his waking dream, winding about the warming air, her light voice tart as limewater.

Plum jam, red knight

On black square, the sweet

Toll of the night clock

Eat your stew!

Feed the dove and ring the

Mourning bell...

Images drifted like leaves through Cole's mind. Some scent called him back to waking and he blinked, yawned, and stretched. The table beside him bore a small loaf of bread, pot of jam — plum — a tureen filled with savory-smelling stew. Cole touched the bread gingerly, glancing around. The little girl still jumped rope.

Stomach rumbling, he shrugged and began to eat.

It was good and he ate it all but some crumbs of bread. Another dram of time passed. Cole shrugged off his coat, the day grown warm. A disagreement among the doves sent several flying off into the trees.

Sudden flares of light sizzled within the house somewhere, accompanied by loud thumps.

Cole stood, alarmed, hovering between the door to the house and the basement hatch. The girl kept jumping rope — but he thought he heard her snicker.

He turned to see one of the brown doves on the table pecking at the crumbs of bread he'd left. Remembering the woman's admonition, Cole lunged at the table, frightening the dove into a flutter.

Too late. In mid-air, the dove began to grow. It cooed, then squawked, jerking ever larger until bare feet touched the terrace and it was a little girl, exactly like the other one.

"Oh," Cole said, weakly. He glanced at the house, then pulled the blanket from his pack and dropped it around the girl's thin, naked shoulders. The transformation of dove into solemn-eyed girl, despite all the other things he'd seen recently, was disconcerting; but all he could think was that he'd failed in the woman's instructions and now she might not help him.

"Knee bones!"

The woman emerged from the house this time, a cloth bag with several rolls of parchment sticking out the top over one shoulder. She glared at him.

"Do you know how annoying they are when they get like this? They want nice clothes and hairbrushes and toys and," she blew out a breath, slumping. "I told you not to feed the doves." Then she looked past them both to the other little girl, still jumping rope, eyes narrowing as she took in the table and the empty dishes.

Then she gestured sharply. "Fine. Go into the house and find some clothes. Go on." She made a shooing motion at the new little girl, who went.

She passed a skinny man in the doorway, coming out of the house as if he'd been a little lost somewhere in it. He had bandages on most of his fingers.

"Harmole," the patternist said, frowning. "I sent you home."

"Mistress Seri, please," the man wrung his bandaged hands pleadingly, "can't you —"

She flung up a hand. "I made her out of roses. Of course she has thorns. Go home, Harmole. If she's not to your liking then do what I said and salt her. Do it in the garden, she'll make good mulch."

"— couldn't you just take the thorns out, or make her again, out of some flower without thorns?"

"No. Go home, I said." Apparently out of patience, she snapped her fingers at him. He stopped mid-plea, waved his bandaged hands in the air and fled into the house. And out the front, by the echoing slam of a door.

Seri turned to Cole.

"Right. Well, it took a bit of delving, but I've found your answer. You can break the curse."
"How?"

She studied him. "Have you ever heard of the blue parallel?"

Cole blinked, then gave a nod. "A shifted world that's...balanced, safe as the Sheltered Land, but rich with all that patternists can shift into being." He'd thought about it, in fact, a lot after the bit he'd heard.

Moving empty dishes aside, Seri spread one of the scrolls from her bag on the table. It was a map, but one Cole could make no sense of: endlessly overlapping patches of color and shape, crossed and sectioned through with curving lines, emptying out, in places, to unmarked voids.

"Madagarra. It's speculated that Madagarra was part of the blue parallel. A ruin now, one that resists further patterning. They grew things called memory nets there." She might have been speaking another language. "The memory nets were a kind of contemplation tool, a way to plumb your own or someone else's memory. You'll take the amulet into a net with you. Inside, when you experience the memory of the raider, you'll have to find some resolution — a cure — for the anger and pain that made her curse your ki-brother."

"I...see."

"No, you don't. But you can't get to Madagarra without a patternist, so I'm coming with you." She smiled. He wasn't reassured. Her smile fell. "I may not look like much, but I know what I'm doing."

"You look every bit the patternist, to my limited experience. Thank you, truly." Cole stared blankly at the girl jumping rope. "Taine is dying and I'm the only one, and the bond...it's like drowning." She looked at him rather blankly and Cole grit his teeth. "You said — other payment?"

"The amulet, once you've finished with it in the memory net, will be enough." But something furtive crossed her expression.

"What aren't you telling me?"

She looked down. "Well. What you're going to have to do, in the memory net — it's patternist work. You'll be changed by it: shifted. You may not be able to go back to the Sheltered Land."

Cole swayed. He reached for the bond, to steady the reeling sensation within him, found grey dread and Taine's spirit, lost. If Taine were healed, and he still had the bond...but how could he not go home — never walk Kahssia's woods, eat Belle's food, *be safe* — ever again?

"You've gone quite white. Are you alright?"

Cole opened his eyes. "The curse will be broken, Taine will be okay?"

“Yes,” she nodded. She studied him. “Just take my hand.”

Her fingers clasped his lightly.

“I’m Cole, by the way.”

“I know,” she said, then looked down. “I mean, I got that when I, um, tasted your pattern. Oh. I’m Seri.”

He felt the energy of the shift coming through the grip of her hand, felt it as she tapped into her own deep strata — of potentiality, imagination, mentality. Philosophers spent much time debating the finer points. Using it like fuel, she re-patterned the world around them, drawing them from that spot to...elsewhere. The blue stone terrace in the dusty woods above the sea began to fade. As they left, the little girl’s limewater voice wove into the late afternoon light, following them.

Crackers and jam, a song sung

Only at night

Finger bones and parsley, a dog

That groans in his sleep...

*

The world reassembled in the same sort of gradations of color and light, heft and solidity, by which it had faded. Cole felt like he’d been swimming through sludge, deep in the matter of the universe. He gasped a breath, then another, lungs aching.

“Sorry about that,” Seri said, gasping herself. “Should have taken it in shorter shifts, but the sense down your bond tells me time is limited.”

They stood in the towering skeleton of a once colossal city.

Metal ribs arched above them into a tarnished sky. The torn remains of translucent membranes hung gaping between girders and struts. A jungle grew on these bones, giant ferns and vines sprouting leaves larger than a man.

“This way,” Seri said, pushing one aside. Insects churred. They came to a grove of pale cocoons hanging in a maze of archways. Most of the cocoons were torn, dead looking. One, though, was clearly occupied, the weight and contour of human limbs visible within. This cocoon moved, the outline of a hand, a thigh. Seri followed his gaze.

“People come here who want to live in memory or dream,” she said softly. “They find a patternist who will bring them and stay for a day, a year; years. Some simply stay until they die, and are absorbed into the nets themselves.”

Cole turned away.

He touched on the bond, feeling out of a lifetime’s habit for the sense of Taine and the connection that had always been balm and blessing. Strained now, it echoed the loneliness and fear he felt himself. He thought of Kahssia, poring over a map with Taine, tracking game in the deep wood...a passage of days mild as milk.

“Here,” Seri moved to an empty cocoon, peering inside.

The cocoon smelled like the cold, dry insides of something’s long dead guts. Cole swallowed.

Seri fished the amulet from her bag and handed it to him with a small, wrinkled seed pod.

“Hold this — tight. Set your intention into it: to break the curse and heal your ki-brother. Use the amulet as a link to the raider and her curse. You’re the link to your ki-brother.” She chewed her lip.

Cole stared down at the wrinkled, hard little thing in his palm. He gripped it and thought of Taine, seeding need and intention into it. It moved in his hand and he opened his fingers with a start. It bristled, thin filaments shooting out of it and waving about like a sea anemone’s.

“Good,” Seri said with a nod. She held the netting of the cocoon open for him. He ducked his head to enter.

“Wait,” she stopped him with a hand on his arm, met his gaze, looked away. Then, all in a rush, she said “This may sever your ki-bond.”

He stared at her.

She flushed. “I thought... If you couldn’t go home — maybe you’d stay with me. And if the ki-bond, you see, if it severs, you’ll have an open-ended connection...and...I wanted to study...” She fell silent, looking down. “I’m sorry, I guess.”

The world fell out from under him. He felt all of Taine’s willingness to die, to let go, give up the fight because it was too hard. It asked too much. Then he drew a ragged breath and flung his mind back to the time before.

“It doesn’t matter,” he whispered. “I still have to do it.”

He stepped into the cocoon. It closed itself behind him, spongy tissue, layer upon layer of strange, cellular matter. The seed pod’s tendrils exploded silently, twisting about his hand. They glommed to the layers of netting, sending thought and imperative veining through it.

In the end it was simple. The memory of the raider woman’s life opened to him.

Her band of raiders had already lost much when they were shifted by some patternist, ripped from their world and lives and loved ones merely as that patternist’s way of testing Kahssia’s barriers.

The woman had lost her mate. Being torn so soon after from her two children, the weather and wind of her home, turned her to bitterness and rage. In Taine she’d found a place to rest all that pain and rage in one brief blast.

In memory, Cole put himself between the woman and Taine. He took her bequest of pain and alienation into himself.

Shuddering, he felt the filaments of the seed move through the pain. Following the twist of those tendrils, he took the curse and tracked it.

For every trail marker of pain and bitterness, he searched out sign of comfort, notes of solace. Bit by bit, he tracked the traces of this trail, until he was hollowed out by curse and answer, emptied. His face wet, eyes burning, he took the woman’s pain and changed it.

Shifted it.

He felt it when it was done, the curse burned up like a twist of acrid incense. Down along the bond, Taine touched him, heart and spirit alive, humor and passion — Taine.

Curse broken.

Then he felt the change in the pattern of who he was, felt it fray down the bond, making it impossible. The bond unraveled —

— and was gone.

The cocoon opened. He staggered out, fell to his hands and knees, and threw up.

Memories not his own flickered through him. The ki-bond hurt, an open wound of potential no longer connected to anyone, anything.

No longer himself, a shifted thing.

When he sat back, a handkerchief dangled in front of his face.

He could feel Seri, tasting the changes in him as loss crackled like dead leaves under his skin.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “But it worked.”

Seri shifted them back to her blue stone house, slower this time. They took the journey in shorter passages, passing through facets in the broken pattern of the world.

Cole held her hand. All he knew for a time was the pain of his loss.

In the blurring succession of places, however — in glittering towns, on plains of grass the scent and shade of apricots, by singing rivers, in a cavern filled with flocks of flying, gleaming fish, in other, stranger places — his stunned mind found the start of a bridge. Possibility; hope.

He would come back to it, later, in weeks or months or years, when his heart began to be able to hold such things again.

It was a bridge of blue, that hope, an impossible tracing into legend: a parallel that didn't exist, but could.

About the Author

Born near Philadelphia in the summer of 1963, Jessica Reisman now lives in Austin, Texas. An animal and movie lover, she has a master's degree in creative writing, but found Clarion (West) much more to the point. She has been a number of things, including, but not limited to (and in no particular order), an art house film projectionist, house painter, blueberry raker, art director, high school dropout, teaching assistant, graduate student, and researcher. Besides fiction, she has written locally produced and nationally aired radio plays, short films, film reviews, and lots of other stuff. Her most recent story sales have been to the forthcoming anthology *PASSING FOR HUMAN*, the WFC 2006 Robert E. Howard tribute anthology, *CROSS PLAINS UNIVERSE*, Dark Wisdom magazine, and RevolutionSF. Her first novel, *THE Z RADIANT*, came out June 2004 from Five Star Speculative Fiction. Her short fiction has appeared in *The Third Alternative*, *SciFiction*, *Interzone*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and anthologies.

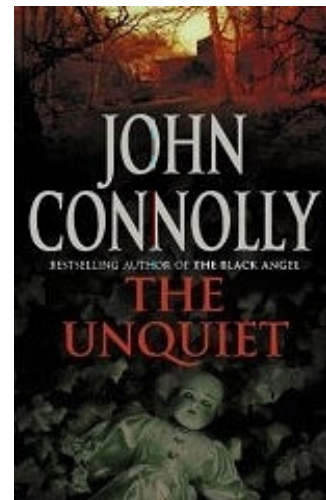
REVIEWS

The Unquiet Reviewed by Marie O'Regan

THE UNQUIET Written John Connolly
Published by Hodder and Stoughton
RRP: £14.99, hardback

The Unquiet is John Connolly's ninth book, and his sixth novel featuring the tormented investigator, Charlie Parker. This time Parker is enlisted to find out the truth behind the disappearance some years before of child psychiatrist Daniel Clay, by the man's daughter, Rebecca. He vanished under a cloud of suspicion, unable to prove either his innocence or guilt in the crime of associating with – and providing victims for – a paedophile ring. Rebecca had thought that chapter of her life long-closed, at least until Merrick, the Revenger, turns up; eager to know what happened to his own daughter, and how Clay was involved. Convinced Rebecca knows more than she is saying, he stalks and threatens her.

It is at this point that Parker is brought into the narrative, as Rebecca asks him to prevent Merrick from bothering her, and her own daughter. Parker finds himself caught up in a race for the truth whilst seeking to contain the force that is Merrick, and evading the mysterious Hollow Men: shadowy figures that seem to know the truth already, and wish to keep it buried. Even the Collector is involved, the creepy antagonist of another of the Parker novels – intent on advising Parker how best to proceed, and warn him that he's muddying



waters perhaps best left undisturbed. It seems the Hollow Men are too evil for even the Collector to condone. Another strand of the plot skilfully woven through the tale is that of Parker's attempts to salvage his own relationship, and persuade his partner Rachel to move back home, bringing their daughter with her. Yet it seems there's only room for one wife and child in Parker's house; the ghosts of his murdered first wife and daughter won't give up the battle for his affections, and their right to remain, without a fight.

As well as dealing with the difficult subject of child abuse, and all the emotional and physical devastation wrought by this, there is a strong theme of revenge throughout this novel, showing the catastrophic effects when the search for vengeance overwhelms a life. Merrick, the Revenger, is a completely unlikeable character – he's a hitman, hired because he is well suited to that life. He likes to inflict pain. And yet we sympathise with his loss, with his inability to give up his search for the man or men that took his daughter, and presumably killed her. In some ways, he mirrors Parker himself. Parker is, at heart, a good man – his desire to help was inherent in his choice of the police force as a former career. There is also, however, a darkness inherent in his nature – and ever since his wife and daughter were brutally killed he has fought to keep it under control, not to lose himself in his own fight for revenge. There is more to life than vengeance, and on most levels he knows that. But the dead just won't let him rest....

Connolly's greatest strength is in his characterisation. In Parker, his regular side-kicks - Louis and Angel - his partner Rachel, and the criminals that populate his novels and give life to his tales, we are confronted with real people. They are full of hope and despair, love and hate, and – when appropriate – the desire for revenge. We feel sorry for Merrick against our better judgement. He's a monster, and a sadist, but we can empathise completely with his rage at the loss of his daughter, and share his desire to find the truth of what happened to her. We feel sorry for Clay's daughter, Rebecca, eager to bury a painful past, and we feel even sorrier for her by the end of the novel as the facts are revealed. In addition we sympathise – as any parent might – with her desire to protect her child, whatever it takes. Connolly has woven an intricate, skilful tale of deaths long past, and the lengths the killers will go to in order to keep what happened secret; of love, loss and revenge; and of the full cost of Parker's attempts to keep the darkness inside him under control coupled with his search for peace. It's a book that will stir your emotions (aided by the CD included of music that the author feels inspire the moods of the book), and engage your mind, keeping you involved until the final word is read. This is probably his strongest book to date, and I'm looking forward to seeing what comes next.

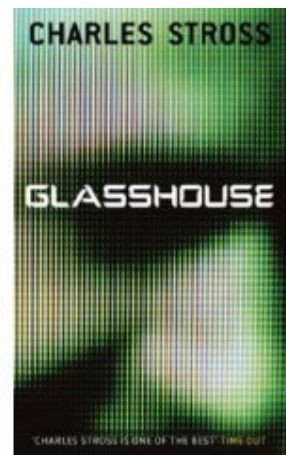
Thoughts from the Glasshouse

An Interview with Charles Stross

Words: Alasdair Stuart

A heavily-edited version of this interview originally appeared in *Hub* issue 2.

Charles Stross returns to the universe of Locus-award winning novel *Accelerando* this year, with the sequel *Glasshouse*. A blackly funny exploration of identity, memory and how we'll be viewed by the generations that follow us, *Glasshouse* is as much satire as it is science fiction. I talked to him about the background to the novel, what we do with soldiers when wars are over, his other plans for the year and why, very soon, we'll have forgotten how to be lost.



What's the background to the novel?

Okay, it was written about two, two and a half hours year before it actually came out so it was actually written about 2003 rather than any later. And what happened was...it was a combination of things. As with any novel it's not just one thing that comes together in your mind it's a whole bunch of things.

The approximate fuse was actually John Varley's *Red Mars*. I don't know if you know John Varkey's work?

A little yeah.

Yeah. Well I'd been writing for a novel called *Steeltown Blues* that had been trailed for the last decade and instead what showed up was a Heinlein juvenile. John Varley had stopped writing John Varley novels. And I mean it was good news for some people he's writing again and he's actually turning out a book a year it's just not the one I was hoping for. So I got annoyed and thought what if I write a John Varley novel? (Laughs)

Yeah I can see that.

Another aspect of it was, I've always had an interest in the military uses and abuse of psychology, military psychology and psychological warfare. I'd been reading a book at the time, a biography of this called Stanley Milgram, a psychologist who had been responsible for the obedience to authority experiments in which you see just how far people will go to obey what they see to be orders.

Was he responsible for the variable voltage test?

Yes that's exactly the one. He did a lot of other interesting things,. Like the seven degrees of connectedness between any people on the planet, he's the one who first mapped that one out by distributing envelopes with small letters in them through the mid-west in the States saying:

Please can you do your best to ensure that this letter gets back to so and so in New York, not giving an address, without checking for an address but by passing it to someone who you think might know where to send it.

To his complete astonishment they mostly came back very rapidly via only four or five hops. He was one of these very interesting pivotal figure in the 1950s and '60s in social psychology.

In addition to his work there's another guy who's pretty eminent in the field called Phillip Zimbardo who did the Stamford Prison Study which seemed to suggest that where you take people and put them into a prison, be it as guards or as prisoners, the really scary elements of prison brutality and violence and dehumanisation emerge very rapidly and naturally, even though these people know they're inmates in a psychology experiment. That sort of psychology experiment has never actually been run to completion, it was originally scheduled to run for a week, because any time it's been done it's been cancelled within two or three days because of the serious potential harm to the people participating in it. The protocol is that you get about twenty students or volunteers and allocate them to be either prisoners or guards randomly. Give the guards uniforms, take the prisoners' clothes away and put them in cells and institutional violence virtually falls out of them as a by-product of the socialisation that goes on. Very peculiar.

And I suddenly had this idea. What happens when you take John Varley's *Eight Worlds* Universe in which you've got, pretty much, post humans who can change bodies at the drop of a hat, who think nothing of changing sex for a weekend, who to some extent are immune to our concerns about death and physical morbidity and what happens if you put them into the Stamford Prison Study only applied to gender roles instead of prisoner/guard relationships. That was the initial route in.

The thematic stuff that I was exploring only sort of emerged as I worked on it which was; what do you do with the warriors once the war is over? How do you deal with them? And that's basically where the macro level plot and setting comes in.

So then it becomes a combination of this psychological exploration and at the same time almost the ghetto-isation of a warrior class?

Up to a point. Something we have a real problem with socially is what do we do with soldiers after the war's over. They've been through an environment which has actually damaged their ability to participate in peace time society. In many ways, Reeve in *Glasshouse* is an unreliable narrator who doesn't quite understand what the purpose of the Glasshouse is, at least not directly. That she is as much somebody on the inside of this being fixed as the bad guys that they're isolated from the macro society around them.

The unreliable narrator in particular I was really impressed by, especially given how it combines with the fluidity of the standard character concepts in the novel was something I though was fascinating. The idea that gender and memory and, to some extent, identity and personality can shift depending on environment and personal choice.

Yeah. We are, to some extent, prisoners of our own memories of who we've already been and to some extent prisoner of the expectations of those around us. That came out of Stanley Milgrom's work very clearly, that people will do the most appalling things because it's expected of them. They may know it's wrong but they'll go ahead with it because it's what they're expected to do by those people in authority.

That relationship with authority is a very unusual one. I remember reading about a field test for different types of fire alarms. The test subjects were put in a room which got hotter, smoke was poured in and it became progressively more uncomfortable. Almost no one moved until one of the people carrying out the experiment opened the door and yelled fire.

Yep. We are very social animals who don't tend to realise quite how far we're programmed by the environment around us. *Glasshouse* was an exploration of a whole load of issues around that theme and also it was a lot of fun. I really did enjoy taking the opportunity to have a first person narrator who is killed in the duration of the book.

That sense of fun comes across in waves, there's a real energy to the novel, a real enthusiasm. The first person thing works very well, partially due to the unreliable narrator and partially due to it reminding me of Down and Out In The Magic Kingdom by Cory Doctorow.

Yeah. That's actually an entirely unintentional resemblance and I don't think I'd actually read *Down and Out* at the time I wrote *Glasshouse*.

That's interesting because the thing I responded to most in both novels was the choice that you and Cory Doctorow made independently, which was that you throw your reader in at the deep end and then quickly give them a mechanism to read and understand the world. With Magic Kingdom it's setting it in Disneyland whilst in Glasshouse it's the idea of setting up an experiment to mimic the late 20th, early 21st century. It was colossally ambitious in a lot of ways, the idea of holding a mirror up to contemporary society in some ways but do it with very distinct biases and agendas from a post singularity society looking back at us.

It's a bit more than that actually, if I can digress onto some of my hobby horses. One is the portrayal of history, namely that we get it wrong a lot of the time. Take for example, that loaded phrase, 'The Middle Ages'. We tend to forget that traditional English school teaching history runs from 1066 to 1485 or thereabouts. That's an enormous span of time, more than four centuries. We can't get a handle on that time scale. We're actually very bad at building institutions that last longer than the life span of a human being. There's only a few that have lasted a thousand years or more, for example the Japanese monarchy and the Catholic church and even those have massively altered over that time.

So back to the Middle Ages. What we tend to do is telescope periods that were a long time ago together. So we tend to think of the 1350s and 1400s as being relatively close together whereas in actual fact, that's the same gap that separates us from the 1950s.

That was one of the things I wanted to focus on. The idea of a dark age between 1950 and 2040 seems like an enormous span of time to us from the point of view of people seven hundred years hence it's like talking about the 14th century.

Another aspect is; what will they know about us in seven hundred years time? And it seems reasonable to say that this is the most minutely documented period in human history and yet a lot of that documentation is going to be lost very quickly. Do you know for example that the tapes of the original Apollo moon landings have been lost? NASA are looking for them but even if they find them there's only one machine left that will play them. A lot of information is being lost because they're changing storage formats very rapidly. Archival quality paper, which was the norm until the 19th century could last for centuries but a lot of early film is on nitrate stock that can oxidise very easily (The technical term we still use for it is 'gun cotton') and since then things have only gotten worse rather than better.

Just the switch to video. How many formats of videotape have gone through over a thirty year period before we switched to digital media and how rapidly is that changing? One of the things I wanted to bring out was we are actually living through what in future will be seen as a dark age because whilst we're creating so much information and documentation so much of it is going to be lost because the technology used to destroy it is evanescent and not designed to last more than ten years. What I think is going to come through are deliberate attempts to leave archives for the future, which will almost certainly have some sort of agenda behind them and very popular, mass produced stuff that gets everywhere.

Compare, for example, the portrayal of our society in a typical movie, say *Four Weddings and a Funeral* with real life and it's really rather skewed. For example, the gender ratio of people on prime-time TV or films is 4:1 male to female. The clothing people wear, the things they get up to are deliberately skewed to what a lot of people view as an aspirational view of people live instead of how they actually do. As a result, getting a picture of what this period looks like from the media that's left over is going to be very difficult, and a lot like trying to figure out trying to figure out what the Middle Ages were like by looking at the Monarchy.

It ends up almost being a renaissance fair with better jumpers and more coffee shops?
Quite possibly. It's going to look very weird.

Suddenly everywhere looks like Desperate Housewives.

Yeah, it's going to look very strange. And that's where a lot of the fun stuff in *Glasshouse* comes from, an attempt to reconstruct something that people didn't actually know a lot about.

That's where a lot of the stuff in the book I found very funny came from, as well as some of the most disturbing sections. What I found very interesting was how that brought in elements of social satire.

Yes, some of the social satire is a little heavy handed, there's a patch in church where whilst Reeve's description doesn't actually include the song's name, the hymn they're singing is the Horst-Wessel-Lied, with a little Leonard Cohen on the side.

One of the things that interested me was that you structured the novel in such a way that the satire was almost a natural by-product of the plot. Because of the way the experiment was set up, the satire just progressed naturally.

Good (**laughs**). It's something I've been working on, and, to climb on another hobby horse, a lot of modern SF reduces the impact of its own message by taking itself too seriously. Attempting to tackle the future in a humourless voice, or sitting on a soapbox saying 'this is how things will be' undercuts it. Real life is full of weird contingencies and strange coincidences and, as Tom Lehrer said; 'Satire is dead. Real life can undercut it any time.' I believe he said that in response to Henry Kissinger getting the Nobel Peace Prize and if you attempt to write a story set in the future that doesn't have some of the real weirdness we get in the world today, you'll lose out.

One of the other things I found interesting about the experiment was how there was more than a hint of a role-playing game to it, both in how its laid out and the fact that scores are assigned.

Another of the influences that went into *Glasshouse* was the fact I'd just spent a month binging on *The Sims* (Laughs). Does that explain it?

That explains quite a bit... That's interesting especially given the expansion in online gaming groups and communities in the last few years.

Interesting you said online gaming as that brings us to the novel due out from Ace in the US in October, we're not sure when Orbit are publishing it, possibly next year at the earliest, which is the SF novel after *Glasshouse*. Orbit are currently playing catch up with my American publishers, but the next SF novel, after *Glasshouse* is called *Halting State* is funnily enough set ten years in the future, in Scotland and is all about virtual reality and role-playing games. Only it's told in the second person, not the first, the natural voice for text games like the old Infocom games.

With the online gaming stuff, in particular *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*, hell I can call it a game for these purposes, even if it's undirected play are the first successful commercial applications of virtual reality and massively commercially successful. With *World of Warcraft*, we're now at the point where 0.1 percent of the planetary population have logged on. It's only six million people, but it's enough.

Now what got my interest about a year ago when I began work on *Halting State* was, look at your mobile phone. Chances are it has a microprocessor more powerful than your PC would have five years ago. In another year or so it's going to have GPS as well, it will know where you are. If you stop thinking of it as your phone and start thinking of it as your gateway into a virtual world, or a stack of them, then things start to look very different.

Some cultural artefacts persist even though we get new technologies and media. Cinema didn't make theatre obsolete, TV didn't make cinema obsolete they just co-exist uneasily. But other technologies have quite literally destroyed earlier ones. Do you still own a slide rule or a log table?

No

Exactly. Pocket calculators basically nuked them and we're on the cusp of another similar, significant change, only one that's really profound and which will have really strange implications. In another ten years, people will be forgetting what it was like to be lost, as in geographically lost, unsure of where they are or how to get from a to b.

Because of things like Google Maps.

Of course, take Google Maps and put it on your phone and yes I do have a Google Maps clients on my phone. Add GPS built into the phone, already required by law in the states thanks to their enhanced 911 emergency responses so the emergency services know where you are when you call them. And it's going to have a public interface soon, GPS chips are down to around twenty pence now and suddenly no one's lost. That's a step change in the human condition. It's one of those things sneaking up on us and it's going to have a lot of implications. I'm damned if I know what all of them are yet I've just noticed them happening.

A secondary issue is put that together with social networking software, myspace, livejournal, whatever, but software that knows who you talk to and about what and then you have very powerful tools for finding people, or finding people with interests in common in public. There's all sorts of very weird stuff that's going to fall out of this current wave of technology just hitting the market now. I think we're going to see as much social change in the next ten years as happened in the last twenty.

The interesting thing is, take cyberspace ala William Gibson, his vision of people jacking into cyberspace decks to go into virtual reality is almost the exact opposite of what we're going to

end up with. I think what we're going to end up with is all the stuff coming out of computers and being overlaid over the real world.

We're getting cheap displays, interesting displays now. One of the things I'd be looking to when the really high resolution small displays come along is a set of opaque battery powered that will correct your vision whatever it is, because there's a pair of cameras in front of your eyes. Think in terms for that as a display technology for people who need glasses. Although I suspect they won't be too popular because they'll be completely opaque. But also think in terms of small projectors that project either directly onto your retina or onto the lens in front of your eyes and provide head up information.

There's going to be a lot of that stuff appearing over the next few years. It's going to take a long time before people get it right but sooner or later we'll end up with much better ways of seeing things. It could even be that we end up without having data goggles or whatever but lots of windows into cyberspace. Any time you go past a shop window it'll talk to your personal electronics and try and figure out how to advertise to you, attract your interest and provide you with a useful display to look at.

That sort of individual customisation of mass media, is both fascinating and profoundly disturbing.

Again Google News is already there. You can tailor it and customise it and tell it what interests you and it will try and generate news for you.

Conversely, something like a Tivo system which you can program to tape anything with Bruce Campbell in it and it'll program itself.

The flip side is you turn on a cable TV box these days and there's a hundred channels of rubbish and nothing interesting.

It'll be interesting to see whether we see an eventual collapse of that. There's a growing theory in the US that in five to ten years there'll be hundreds of micro networks instead of the traditional bigger ones. You'll be able to subscribe to one particular news network, or the Joss Whedon network or whatever evangelical network you might watch,.

The political implications of which are of course, terrifying.

Of course. Next question?

Uncannily, we appear to have covered almost all of them.

The one other thing I think I should mention is the other two novels I've got coming out in the UK this year. *The Atrocity Archives* and *The Jennifer Morgue*. They're completely different from *Glasshouse*, they are how to put it, think the traditional British spy thriller collides with the universe of HP Lovecraft. Orbit have finally picked them up in the UK and Orbit should have them out over here in June and November respectively.

Excellent. One other question; I noticed some of your early work was for White Dwarf.

This was when I was in my early to mid-teen, it was a long time ago (Laughs). I keep thinking I should get back into it but suddenly realise the learning curve to get back up to any kind of speed is enormous. (Laughs).

My only other question was, particularly with Accelerando and Glasshouse, your work has been predicated around post-singularity societies and post-humanism. I was just curious, because I've noticed the slogan 'We're already living in the future' cropping up with the given things like the acceptance of body modification and the evolution in societal and familial units how close to the Singularity do you think we are?

I'm agnostic on whether it will happen at all actually. I think people have always thought they've been living in the future as long as a visible change is hitting us. We're clearly living in a time of great change, but whether it's going to accelerate or slacken off I don't know.

I've got to be very cautious about delaying with the Singularity because a lot of the ways it's conceptualised in mass culture tends to go towards what Ken Mcleod referred to as 'The rapture of the nerds.' There's a Christian Millennialist subtext about we're all going to go flying up to Heaven and I just don't hold with that at all.

Having said that, we're clearly living through a period where some very strange stuff is happening. What I mentioned earlier about losing the ability to be lost trivially is one of them. Another is the huge opening out of communications technology that's still only just begun. It's expected that some time in the next year or so China will exceed the United States and indeed the rest of the internet for internet based communications. What's going to happen there is going to be interesting. It's going to get even more interesting as translation tools improve.

I can't project where we're going but I will be very very cautious in suggesting an actual singularity is around the corner.

Also, bear in mind that there's a lag between when an author is thinking about something and writing about it and when it's in print usually a lag of several years. It was a topic that was really of interest to me in the late nineties and early years of this decade and I'm now sort of poking my nose into other corners, one of the things I may have indicated with the new book being set in the near future. I should add that the new book doesn't use the words computer, software, or singularity anywhere (laughs) I made sure it doesn't.

Thank you very much for this Mr Stross. You've been a fantastic interviewee.
No problem, any time.

Coming Next Week:

Fiction: *Man for a Moment* by Jeff Crook

Feature: Origins – The Second Doctor (if our writer's hard drive is recovered!)

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