

## ON BOOKS

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## THE NEW WEIRD

## THE YEAR OF OUR WAR

by Steph Swainston  
Eos, \$13.95  
ISBN: 0060753870

## BLACK BRILLION

by Matthew Hughes  
Tor, \$23.95  
ISBN: 0765308657

## THE SCAR

by China Miéville  
Del Rey, \$18.95  
ISBN: 0345444388

## FREK AND THE ELIXIR

by Rudy Rucker  
Tor, \$27.95  
ISBN: 0765310589

## NEW WORLDS

edited by Michael Moorcock  
Thunder's Mouth Press, \$18.95  
ISBN: 1568583176

While back, I was pondering when there would be a new literary "Movement" with a definite capital M within science fiction or, to be expansive about it, within the expanded literary universe of speculative fiction.

The last one was "Cyberpunk," and that was something like two decades ago—a Movement of the second kind, if you will, the earlier "New Wave" being a Movement of the first kind. In those days, there was much critical and theoretical attention paid to just what Cyberpunk was, no little of it written by myself,

and much of it by Bruce Sterling, without any lasting definitive conclusion being reached. But for present purposes, let us at least agree that it was a Movement initially defined by content alone.

The novel that started it all was William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, wherein he coined the phrase "The street finds its own uses." What this meant was that outlaws, the underground, revolutionaries, whatever counterculture might exist, would or should use cutting edge technology for its own illicit, illegal, or revolutionary purposes.

At the time, in the backwash of the expiring Counterculture with a definite capital C, this was a revolutionary notion, both within the SF microcosm and the cultural macrocosm. Thanks to several things, but chiefly the Viet Nam War, the "underground," the "counterculture"—call it what you will—of those bygone days was relentlessly technophobic, science and technology being seen as the tools of the fascist Establishment, weapons of the Pentagon and the political right, and its champions "pigs" at the worst, "nerds" when merely deluded.

That much of this was expressed via a musical form that could not exist without electric guitars, synthesizers, and amplifiers, was overlooked. For, as Gordon Dickson had observed earlier, every culture, countercultures included, has cultural blindnesses, which they may even require in order to continue to exist at all.

The literature of speculative fic-

tion and the subculture accreted around it was as deeply and passionately split as the political and cultural macrocosm. The technophobic countercultural left regarded the technophilic traditional hard science fiction and its practitioners as right wing crypto-fascist, and the Old Guard regarded the Young Turks as drug-addled Luddite hippies verging on out-and-out commies.

The Cyberpunks, though, were technophilic, politically left, countercultural outlaws.

That was the punk of it and that was revolutionary.

The Cyber of it was perhaps by chance. Gibson's novel, the flagship that launched the Movement, was centered on the technology of the internet and the web before that technology actually existed, even though, as he once confessed to me, he knew very little about actual computers and wrote the whole thing on a manual typewriter.

Bruce Sterling, not Gibson, swiftly became the main guru and theoretician of the Cyberpunk Movement, and curiously enough, did not write what he preached in his own novels until quite recently. Gibson, Sterling, and Rudy Rucker and Pat Cadigan, who became major Cyberpunk figures, might have been cultural revolutionaries in a certain sense, but were never political in a conventional sense, though John Shirley was.

Then a couple of cabana boys (I am not making this up) latched onto a quarter of a mil of a rich dentist's money, spent one hundred thousand dollars buying the rights to *Neuromancer* for a film that never got made, and the rest of the money on professional PR promoting "Cyberpunk," and the rest is marketing history. Cyberpunk became co-opted into a generic brand to sell every-

thing from rock groups to high-end sneakers, just as "Sympathy for the Devil" and "Blowin' in the Wind" have long since been remixed into politically caponized elevator Muzak and a recent Shell Oil commercial has co-opted the Summer of Love into a signature for its greener-than-thou solar electricity program.

Thus Cyberpunk—a science fictional literary movement based on content and theme, with no regard one way or another for literary angle of attack, form, or prose style, transmogriable, therefore, into marketing iconography.

Sic transit gloria mundi.

A Movement of the second kind.

To see what I mean by a Movement of the first kind, have a look at *New Worlds*; a retrospective anthology of stories, poetry, essays, and criticism, edited by Michael Moorcock, editor of the British magazine of the same name through many incarnations, and with a memoir-cum-history of the whole strange trip to date by Moorcock himself.

This book is, well, staggering. There has never been anything like it. Because there has never been anything like *New Worlds*, the magazine, or the movement that it spawned, championed, and molded, before or since, and certainly not within the realm of science fiction. Moorcock has delivered up a perfect, if hardly complete, sample of what the so-called "New Wave" was about, along with his masterful, gossipy, ruthlessly honest, and occasionally catty global overview. Even I, who was a significant figure in the story, thanks to the six-part serialization *Bug Jack Barron* in *New Worlds*, was pleased to be reminded of who Moorcock had published when and what they had written and, yes, drawn and painted.

J.G. Ballard's "condensed novels,"

the short stories which made his transition from an author of merely excellent SF disaster novels into the major stylist, formalist, and literary figure he is today. Early poetry by D.M. Thomas. Brian Aldiss' stylistically revolutionary Acid Head War stories, collected in the Lysergically Joycean, metaphysically Gurdjieffian novel *Barefoot in the Head*. Mervyn Peake when he was languishing in obscurity. The first art by Escher ever to appear in an English-language publication. Dick, Brunner, Ellison, Delany. Thomas M. Disch's *Camp Concentration*. The early stories of M. John Harrison, John T. Sladek, James Sallis. Apparently the very first Gene Wolfe story ever to be published. The Jerry Cornelius Cycle. Art criticism. Literary criticism by John Clute and diverse hands including Moorcock, and even Ballard on *Mein Kampf*.

On and on and on.

Obviously not all of the above could be included in the anthology. Moorcock apologizes in some detail for what and who isn't, and, amusingly and amazingly enough, even admits to publishing a few things really not to his own personal taste as a reader, as a sigil of the catholicity of his and beyond his—the magazine's and the movement's—literary intent.

And *New Worlds*, Moorcock, and the literary movement in question, did have a literary as well as a cultural intent, a mission so enormous that it could never have been realized in its entirety.

Moorcock himself describes it at greater length and in finer detail in his introduction, and probably better, too than I can do here. So, briefly and simply, Moorcock and the rest of us believed that the cleavage between so-called "serious literary fiction" and so-called "popular fiction," even greater in Britain with Leavis's

official "canon" than in the United States, was not only artificial and false, but detrimental to both. What had been popular fiction in the mode of Dickens and Hemingway and Melville was degenerating into empty genre formula, and serious literary fiction had lost its appeal to general readers thanks to deconstructionism, slavishness to academic formal norms, a disinterest in telling real stories, and a loss of the courage to tackle the great themes and questions of the age.

Or, as I said somewhere, "science fiction treats the great issues in a trivial manner, while so-called serious literature applies its great literary powers to the contemplation of the lint in its own navel."

Little, unfortunately, has changed in so-called serious mainstream literature between then and now, but it is hard for the reader of today to understand what science fiction was like at the turn of the 1960s. Science fiction was regarded by publishers and librarians as "Young Adult Fiction." The critical contention in the genre at the time was that it should be written in "transparent prose"—that is, "style free" prose that disappeared from the reader's consciousness entirely in order to convey the events of the plot in clear simple terms, à la literary television. It could not be specifically or passionately political, not engage. No four-letter words. No sexual description.

To see what I mean, you could read *Bug Jack Barron*, which has just been reissued thirty-five years later, and try to imagine in a present context why it was excoriated as perverted and degenerate in 1968, when it was a cause célèbre. I doubt if you would find anything particularly shocking now, except, perhaps, the prose style.

All this *New Worlds* set out to change, by publishing fiction open to stylistic experimentation, and freed from any taboos as to content. Moorcock also had a theory about the uses of prose itself, too complex to go too deeply into here or even in his introduction to the anthology. Briefly, rather than being confined to "transparent" narration of the surface phenomenology of the story, the prose line could skip allusively along its surface or swim in the iconographic and archetypal imagery beneath it, rather in the manner of poetry. Which perhaps was why the magazine paid serious attention to serious poetry, too.

Since *New Worlds* began as a science fiction magazine and the writers in question mostly began as "science fiction writers," the fusion between "serious literary fiction" and "science fiction" that it sought to attain, the new literature that it sought to call forth, was a fusion between "SF" and serious literature at large.

In that, unsurprisingly, the revolution failed, although these days many so-called "mainstream writers" are attempting some sort of science fiction. But because most of them are willfully ignorant of three quarters of a century of what has been done with the thematic material—indeed, that writers fully their equal have been using it for decades—most of them are even ignorant of what the material is. Most of what they are writing is well-written, but otherwise primitive, versions of what the better SF magazines were publishing in the 1950s, as if painters of great technical skill and even genius were trying to reproduce the work of Renaissance and Baroque artists without ever seeing any of their work or even realizing that their techniques already existed.

But within the field of science fiction, which has now become the expanded universe of speculative fiction, or just "SF," the revolution succeeded hands down. All you have to do is read a random sample of what was published as "SF" before 1965 or so and what is being published now and you'll see what I mean.

A revolution of the first kind. Mao's notion of the permanent revolution as an ongoing process without an end product. Unlike Cyberpunk, not based on any specific imagery or iconography or content, and therefore incapable of becoming a mainstream generic marketing brand, but for the same reason incapable of co-option. A genie that cannot be stuffed back in the bottle.

And now we may have the beginnings of another one.

Not in science fiction, but in fantasy.

The so-called "New Weird"—apparently dubbed so by China Miéville, its Gibson and Sterling rolled into one.

Okay, it's a dumb name on more than one ground. An adjective used as a noun. And after all, there's nothing exactly new about things weird, literary or otherwise. On the other hand, the Cyberpunks didn't like being called Cyberpunks, and everyone dubbed a "New Wave" writer insisted that he or she wasn't, and by now we are probably stuck with it.

Nevertheless, I do believe that Miéville is onto something.

Something big.

But weird has nothing to do with it, and needless, or apparently not so needless, to say, "The New Weird" is an oxymoron. There is nothing new about weirdness, and far less so in the literary realm of speculative fiction. Take Rudy Rucker, for example; there's no writer of any sort of speculative fiction who can top Rucker for weirdness. How can there be?

Look at *Frek and the Elixir* for a typical example. Colin Greenland, Roland C. Wagner, and others have revived space opera as a literary form by inventing a kind of post-modern space opera; space opera that admits it's space opera, which is to say a form of fantasy that uses the old space opera tropes, imagery, set-ups, and situations to tell "weird" science fiction stories that more or less admit that they don't give a damn about existing in the realm of the possible. Rucker goes this one better by using his alternate incarnation as a mathematician to set his stories within multiple and endlessly mutating literary realities that a reader can barely even comprehend without equivalent mathematical knowledge.

Well, not quite. Rucker is also perhaps the best explicator of abstruse theoretical math for the mathematically unwashed masses, and he does this by using his skill as a science fiction writer to concretize theory into alternate realities that the non-mathematician can inhabit in the imagination.

In novels like *Frek and the Elixir* he does the reverse; putting his viewpoint character, and therefore the reader, through seemingly endless realities within realities within realities that would be pure fantasy of the weirdest possible sort were they not conjured up out of theoretical mathematical systems that have no possible "existence" in the phenomenological realm, and are therefore even weirder.

Frek is a kid on a future Earth where biotech has reduced the biosphere to a few brand name organisms, a society secretly ruled by a brain-like thingy. A tiny flying saucer, made so by dimensional manipulation, appears under his bed, an alien emerges, escapes, transmogrifies into

various dimensional and physical avatars. Frek follows as it is chased by the avatars of the authorities. It turns out that various aliens from various planets and dimensions are vying to become the exclusive producers of a kind of telepathic television whereby the doings and minds of the inhabitants of Earth become a reality TV soap opera for the delectation of the galactic and trans-dimensional masses.

Off Frek goes in a space, time, and dimension-warping living alien flying saucer with one of the would-be producers, pursued by others, through endlessly varying and mutating mathematically constructed space-time dimensions, seeking out the elixir of the title that will somehow recreate the terrestrial biosphere, while also pursuing a mission to rescue humanity from being reduced to playing reality TV in transgalactic prime time.

I will not attempt to summarize any further. It would be futile; *Frek and the Elixir* basically uses the hoary save-the-universe plot skeleton to run Frek and the reader through endless mathematical-based schtick that gets phenomenologically weirder and weirder as the mathematical systems upon which it is based get more and more abstruse. It's great good fun, but the problem is that at 475 pages, it's way too long for such a simple story to keep holding at least this reader's interest to the very end.

*Flatland* on Lysergic Acid.

Rucker has called this sort of thing "Free Form," but that's exactly what it isn't. The form here is mathematical, and it is quite rigorous, the mathematical rigor being used to give some form of coherence to the utter weirdness. At shorter length, and with better story, this has worked

well for Rudy Rucker, but form is not story, and in *Frek and the Elixir*, at least for my taste, there is not enough of it to carry the weirdness to the end.

Nevertheless, if you will grant mathematics the status of a science, and there are people who will claim it is the "hardest" science of all, since without it the so-called "hard sciences" could not really function, this is science fiction, not fantasy. And it proves that science fiction can be weirder than any conceivable fantasy, "the New Weird" included.

There is nothing new about weirdness in fantasy either, nor is it really possible to top, say, Jack Vance in this regard, though with *Black Brillion* Matthew Hughes comes pretty close to equaling him. "A witty new adventure in the gorgeous, ironic style of Jack Vance," sez the blurb on the galleys, and for once the copy writer has got it just right.

Vance made his reputation with *The Dying Earth* and much later wrote a sort of sequel called variously *The Eyes of the Overworld* and *Cugel the Clever*, both set so far in the future that the distinction between "science fiction" and "fantasy" becomes utterly moot, as witness that Vance's "science fiction" or "space opera" is entirely of a piece with this "fantasy."

Weird aliens or weird conjured creatures, what is really the literary difference? Made up far-future science or made up magic function exactly the same literarily; after all, Arthur C. Clarke has proclaimed that "any science sufficiently advanced will seem like magic," and so any magic can easily enough function as bullshit-super science within the confines of a story.

In phenomenological terms, Vance's settings, worlds, science, magic, are really no weirder than

the usual sort of such stuff. But from the beginning, Vance has realized that nothing can be as weird or outré as the possible twists, turns, warp-ages, ironies, delusions, religions, and quirks of consciousness, human or alien, that exist outside and beyond any material phenomenology, and the cultures, societies, and political systems they therefore create.

Vance's story lines generally consist of roguish scams, counter-scams, and counter-counter-scams by roguish, likeable, but generally unprincipled characters, or characters laboring under an arcane set of cultural and political assumptions, often based upon the ironic education of some naïf.

Vance is an ironist, but not of the Swiftian variety; he's a good-natured, good-humored ironist, a warm-hearted ironist, perhaps ironically in spite of himself, thus proving that such a thing is possible. This is one of the weirdest angles of attack in all literature, and therefore immensely enjoyable even when the story line is thin, for what he writes is character-based fiction despite its mordant seemingly surface tone.

Made even more so because Vance is not only a master stylist whose prose line would be entertaining were he knocking out novelizations of *Star Trek* or the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, but because his style, with its baroque structure and cadences and uncommon word choices, its sly orotondness, is the perfect and perfectly tuned instrument on which to play his chosen music.

Whether Hughes is deliberately mimicking Vance's style only he knows. But while he is not quite up to Vance as a stylist, he's chosen the right sort of instrumental voice for *Black Brillion*—ironic like Vance only somewhat less so, mordant but a bit

more mildly, less baroque—to tell a Vanceian sort of complex double-dealing caper story set in a Vanceian sort of future world and replete with Vanceian rogues and a Vanceian naïf, while making it all his own by delving rather deeper into psychological and metaphysical depths.

What *Black Brillion* proves is not only that this mode does not have to be the exclusive literary property of Jack Vance, but that there is really no new weirdness under the speculative fictional sun.

China Miéville has proclaimed that at least one purpose of the New Weird is to free fantasy from the conventions of the usual stuff—the elves and magicians, the medieval social and political structures, the neo-Arthurian and neo-Tolkienesque givens. But he doesn't seem to acknowledge that while such conventional genre fiction is indeed what dominates the fantasy racks in the book stores and the fanaticism of the fans, this literary mission has long since been accomplished by the urban fantasies of Harlan Ellison, and Fritz Leiber years before him, and a host of others, not to mention such obscure fantasists as Stephen King, or Peter Straub.

But there does remain one thing that fantasy needs to be rescued from in terms of content; the simplistic moral dualism that seems to reside at the core of most of it, that which is most often and most loudly proclaimed on book packages and in the PR—the time-honored “battle of Good Against Evil.”

The Battle of Good Against Evil is a bore. It is unreal. It is uninteresting. And in human terms, it is a lie.

There is a wonderful moment in Poul Anderson's *Three Hearts and Three Lions*; itself a wonderful genre-bender that combines hard

science fiction and “high fantasy.” The hero, champion of the cause of Order against the Chaos of Faerie in which he has long lingered, looks back on Elf Hill wistfully. I am on the side of Order, he finally decides.

I think. . . ? he then asks himself before he rides on into his destiny.

I have said and written often enough that the interesting stories, are never about the Battle Between Good and Evil but about the conflict between different concepts of good, whether in the world, or within the same human heart.

China Miéville doesn't, to my knowledge, pay significant attention to this in theory, but it is certainly there in his fiction. Vance, Hughes, and others realize this on a fairly ironic and good-natured level, but in Miéville's novels it is deeply formative and central, and in contemporary fantasy, certainly in what is published as genre fantasy, that is newer and far more significant than any amount of “weirdness.”

As I said in my review of *Iron Council*, the third book in his “New Crobuzon” (or “Bas-Lag”) series, I had read and reviewed the first one, *Perdido Street Station*, but not the second. Now I have read *The Scar*, and to me, and from this peculiar perspective, the progression in this regard is interesting and somewhat peculiar.

*Perdido Street* was set mostly in New Crobuzon, and although the main characters were not simplistically portrayed as “good” heroes versus “bad” villains, it was essentially a story about a conflict with those between whom the reader could sympathize and identify with and “evil” forces.

But by the time Miéville got to *Iron Council*, we have a passionately political advocacy novel about a rev-

olution against a thoroughly evil system, and while the characters have admirable and slightly ambiguous psychological depth, it most certainly is a story about the battle between good and evil, and you know who you are rooting for as surely as if the protagonists and more or less faceless collective antagonists were wearing team jerseys.

*Iron Council* has a thematic and plotwise closure with which one might argue on emotionally esthetic terms, but which works on a structural level. *Perdido Street Station* did not; the characters and their personal stories were left hanging in mid-air, and it seemed like a transparent set-up for an inevitable sequel, which is what I assumed *The Scar* would be.

But it is not. Nor is *Iron Council* a sequel to *The Scar* any more than *The Scar* is a sequel to *Perdido Street Station*. This is a most peculiar trilogy, if that is what it is, though I am beginning to think that “Bas-Lag” is an open-ended series format, the continuity of which resides entirely in the imaginary world. There are no continuing characters. Major characters from *Perdido Street Station* do not appear either in *The Scar* or *Iron Council*, and their stories do not resolve. Bellis Coldwine is the main viewpoint protagonist in *The Scar*, and she does not appear in *Iron Council* either.

Bellis flees some vague political hot water in New Crobuzon via river and ocean ship toward a far distant colony of the city. But her ship is attacked by pirates and she and others aboard are taken to Armada, a vast floating and mobile pirate city continually cobbled together through the centuries out of captured vessels, and told they are never going to be able to leave.

The Armadans have also hijacked a kind of New Crobuzon drilling platform, not to bring up oil, but rather rockmilk, a magical substance with which to fuel an apparatus to control an avanc, a huge creature from another dimension or something, which they plan to capture and use as a mighty underwater tug to allow their pelagic city to move at will and at great speed over the great Empty Ocean.

The powerful navy of New Crobuzon has long been out to get the pirate city for obvious reasons, and the theft of their drilling platform exacerbates their ireful determination. There is a secret New Crobuzon agent aboard Armada, and he enlists Bellis in a plot to get a message to the city government by dangling the possibility of rescue before her. Later he reveals that he has discovered a plan by the grindylow, a race of mysterious, magically powerful, hideous, voracious aquatic monsters to invade New Crobuzon by sea, river, and waterway, and that he knows their invasion plan and if he does not transmit it back to the city, it and its inhabitants are surely doomed.

Most of the pirates aboard Armada believe or just assume that the Lovers, leaders of the dominant faction, want to harness the avanc simply to increase the speed and mobility of the pirate city, the better and safer to pursue the business of piracy as usual.

But it turns out that the Lovers are pursuing a mystical quest to have the avanc drag Armada to the Scar of the title, a kind of magical dimensional rent far away in the Empty Ocean and therefore otherwise unreachable, where they will gain some apotheosis and/or superpuissant powers never really defined, something like Ahab harness-

ing Moby Dick, rather than slaying him, to haul the *Pequod* to the mystical ultima thule of his dark vision quest.

Well, it would be giving away too much to go a lot further. For present purposes, the point is that while the outlaw floating multi-species pirate city mirrors and foreshadows the revolutionary mobile multispecies railroad city of *Iron Council*, here none of the main characters, Bellis included, are without their central moral flaws, paradoxes, and ambiguities.

In the end, Bellis opts to try to save the city that she has fled and both loves and hates, betraying Armada, which she has begun by detesting and comes to identify with. The grindylow turn out to be something other than what they are painted as by the spy. The Lovers betray Armada, not for evil purposes, but in the pursuit of a mad mystical good.

And Armada is both an egalitarian utopia, at least in terms of the rest of Bas-Lag, and, after all, a society of piratical thieves ready, able, and more than willing to kill the innocent in the process of pursuing its own predatory self-interest.

The real stories are not about the conflict between Good and Evil but about conflicting concepts of good, or at least self-interests, enlightened or deluded. In *The Scar*, Miéville admirably demonstrates that he knows this and has freed his fantasy from that genre convention. In the light of this retrospective discovery, consistency being the hobgoblin of little minds, I must confess that, for me at least, *The Scar* casts the ardent revolutionary dialectic of *Iron Council* in a different light, particularly since its protagonists are hardly simple exemplars of good in their personal lives. Okay, sometimes a story of the conflict between Good

and Evil is a valid one, particularly when the distinctions are specifically and analytically and passionately political, and the characters are not Pure Knights or slaves of Sauron.

But is this not simply good writing, whether "science fiction," "fantasy," or "mainstream"? What, you may ask, does this have to do with "weirdness"?

Yes it is, and not very much.

Miéville has indeed liberated fantasy from its set of political, moral, and social medievalist conventions, but "weirdness" has nothing to do with it. Miéville has a genius for beautifully rendering truly bizarre fictional fantasy realities with total literary verisimilitude. But, as I hope I have adequately demonstrated earlier, anyone doing this is already standing on the shoulders of giants, and "weirdness" in terms of content and worldbuilding, going as far back at least as Homer as it does, is something that can never be "new."

However, in purely literary terms, in terms of technique and the deepest root concept of fiction itself, or at least speculative fiction, something "new" does seem to be aborning. As I said before, what Rudy Rucker called "Free-Form" really isn't, but what Miéville calls the "New Weird" is approaching this. And what it is approaching can perhaps be further clarified by looking at a novel like *The Year of Our War* by Steph Swainston, who, at least according to the blurbs, and the easily enough discernable influences, is party to this new "Movement."

Here we also have a fantasy world seemingly entirely dissociated from our own space-time continuum, unless some sequel or sequels to come will end up proving otherwise. It's called the Four Lands, and it's a rather small pocket universe floating in what seems like purely literary

space-time, where god, with a deliberately small "g" and "it" for a pronoun, has supposedly departed, leaving the set-up in the care of the "Eszai," a small circle of immortals, led by an immortal emperor with the power to make "Zascai," ordinary humans, immortal, or bust immortal Eszai back to mortal at will or whim.

The political situation is a lot more complex than that, for the lands are ruled by mortal kings or queens who gain their thrones more by skullduggery than lineal descent, and while the Emperor and the Eszai are not supposed to "rule," they don't exactly take the Prime Directive any more seriously than George W. Bush does.

Nor are the Zascai exactly humans. There are several subspecies, including winged but flightless humans, and all are engaged in a Forever War against the Insects; never-ending swarms of, well, voracious and apparently mindless giant bugs. The story, as the title implies, is that of the war against the Insects, period, with, however, many interesting Machiavellian subplots among the Eszai and the Zascai.

Thus far Swainston would seem to have carried what Miéville has done to a further level of purity that illumines and clarifies exactly what is most new about the misnamed "New Weird" on a purely literary level. This is not science fiction, because this literary universe has absolutely no connection with our own, and there is quite a bit here that violates its laws of mass and energy, conspicuously the square-cube law that makes giant bugs a physical impossibility within them. Nor is it fantasy by the usual definition, for while various Eszai may have supernormal powers, "magic" is never invoked. Nor is it "alternate history" or "uchronie" as the French have it, for, there being

no point of tangency with our real world, there can be no point of departure from it.

Jant Comet—the "Messenger," for all immortal Eszai inhabit such functional avatars—is the viewpoint character. He is a rare hybrid of flightless winged human and another lightweight subspecies, and therefore the only person in the entire literary construct who can fly.

He is also a junkie, and called exactly that by other characters, addicted to a drug called "cat." More often than not this merely fucks him up severely and leaves him with withdrawal symptoms when he comes down, leading of course to the next shot, and he does shoot it—with a spike. But sometimes it transports him to another reality or dimension or something called "the Shift," inhabited by humans and by a panoply of bizarre and often horrific sentient creatures that put the denizens of "Bas-Lag" to shame.

So what we have here, however tentatively, however imperfectly, is an even purer example of what Miéville has done, and what I would contend is the true revolutionary core and import of what Miéville has misnamed the New Weird.

This is not science fiction or fantasy or uchronie or historical fiction or contemporary fiction, or anything that tries to follow or invoke any consistent set of mimetic laws or parameters; be they that of science, pseudo-science, or magic.

One might call it a subspecies of speculative fiction, mainly because it is being published as such, and for want of any other taxonomic genus to put it into. This, tentatively and imperfectly, is something quite new—fiction that exists on a literary level only, as a purely literary construct.

This is a very difficult concept for

me to even attempt to describe. Small wonder then that what may be these early attempts at actually writing such stuff are somewhat tentative and imperfect.

But to give it the old college try. . . . Prior to the development of photography, painting, at least in the west, evolved, and strove to develop, more and better techniques to achieve "realism" or "mimesis." Perspective, chiaroscuro, even the use of the camera obscura; the ultima thule, arguably finally best attained by the Dutch realists, being to be able to use paint on a flat surface to create the most perfect illusion possible in the eye of the beholder that he or she is seeing a frozen slice of actual reality in three dimensions.

Photography does this much better and instantly, and we have long been conditioned to see photographs as doing this perfectly. Early on, there were those who moaned that photography would kill painting, but that is not what happened.

Instead, photography liberated western painting from the goal of producing, well, photo realism, revealed its true nature as in fact pigments applied to a flat surface, nothing more than that, but nothing less either, unbound, free to explore anything and everything that might be produced by paint on canvas—impressionism, cubism, expressionism, abstraction, abstract expressionism, pop art, whatever.

Whether this has been a good thing or a bad thing or both is a good argument, but one that is irrelevant for the present purpose, which is to use it as an analogy for the essential true nature of writing as *words on paper*, period.

It's easy enough to see this when it comes to poetry, especially "modern" poetry, or so-called "free verse," which

can exist without rhyme or meter, or in extreme cases even coherent imagery, purely as esthetically pleasing (or not) ink patterns on paper.

*Fiction*, though, must at minimum at least convey a meaningful series of events, must tell some kind of story, or it isn't fiction. Attempts to write so-called "fiction" that does not do this results in, not to put a fine line on it, gibberish and crap.

Speculative fiction, in its incarnations as both science fiction and fantasy, is free from the stricture to deliver a series of such events, to tell a story, in a setting, world, or context that mirrors existing reality, but thus far it has been confined to a kind of mimesis in terms of "world building," setting its stories in fictional constructs that recreate, if not mimic, our coherent phenomenological reality by constructing literary universes that at least are internally consistent—that cohere, like our own, around a coherent set of physical or magical laws or a combination of both, however different, however outré, however "weird."

Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy, with its cavalier use of magicks that are conveniently pulled out of the magician's rabbit's hat at any plot turn, goes a long way to freeing itself from that constraint—whether by entirely conscious intent or not it is thus far difficult to tell—to become a purely literary construct, words on paper with no external referents, and no internal restraints either save purely literary esthetics.

In *The Year of Our War*, Swainston is doing much the same thing but carrying it even further, unless she is just being sloppy. Perhaps she is doing both, for unlike Miéville's Bas-Lag trilogy, this novel is full of words, minor artifacts, locutions, even a dating system, that seem

straight out of our own contemporary culture, even pop culture, and therefore are quite jarring.

Whether this is just sloppy prose in need of more careful editing or whether it is deliberate, I cannot tell, and maybe, once it is pointed out, it doesn't matter. If it is deliberate, it would seem to be Swainston reminding the reader that this *is*, after all, not only a purely literary construct, but one that *knows* it's a purely literary construct, and wants the reader to realize it too.

And if it is the accidental result of sloppy prose, well, the effect is no different, and once having been pointed out, can become self-consciously applied by anyone who wants to.

And this, I would contend, is the most basic aspect of the New Weird and the most revolutionary: speculative fiction that exists as a self-consciously pure literary construct, words on paper that knows they are words on paper, as modern painting knows that it is paint on canvas.

But there is a problem with such stuff, which *has* to some extent been written outside of speculative fiction as so-called "post-modern" fiction, largely under the baleful influence of deconstructionism, and what is usually lost in the deconstruction is *story*. A good deal of the fiction in the old *New Worlds* suffered from this, too, much of it more interesting to writers as lab experiments than to readers as satisfying and entertaining fiction.

Moorcock, in his introduction doesn't quite acknowledge this, but he is adamant that lack of storytelling is the major flaw of much "serious literary fiction," which is why it needs a healthy dose of same from so-called "popular fiction" if it is to be meaningful to the general reader. Which may also be why such fiction

that knows and proclaims that it is a pure literary construct can most likely, and indeed perhaps only, succeed as speculative fiction. Speculative fiction at least forces attention to theme and content and, to a lesser extent, setting, without which it cannot be speculative fiction.

Swainston succeeds in this regard up to a point, because the main story is that of a war, which forces an action-based plot if nothing else. She also does well with the character-based subplots. Miéville likewise succeeds in all three books of the Bas-Lag trilogy, more or less in like manner. But all four books suffer from a lack of satisfying closure, and for the same reason.

*Iron Council* at least brings the story to a thematic closure, but does so by arbitrarily pulling the necessary rabbit out of Einstein's hat at the conclusion. *The Year of Our War* does something similar. *Perdido Street Station* concludes the action plot well enough, but leaves the characters hanging in mid-air without resolution either in that novel or in *The Scar*, and *The Scar's* conclusion is a great sequence for a silly movie.

Is this an inherent weakness in a literary form which eschews not merely mimesis but internal consistency? Miéville and Swainston have demonstrated that it is possible to tell a satisfying story in this mode up until the conclusion. But can one create a satisfying conclusion to a story without any constraints at all, or are constraints an absolute necessity of story-telling?

This is not a question that has been answered yet, and I don't have the answer either. Time will tell. Or not. The only thing certain is that the New Weird has embarked on a voyage to the very essential core nature of fiction itself. ○