
JOURNEY
PLANET
MINISTRY OF TRUTH
WAR IS PEACE
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH
BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU!
ISSUE
No 84
D-503

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

By Olav Rokne & Amanda Wakaruk

Guest Editors

One of the earliest popular science fiction narratives is the story of John Henry, a worker who went toe-to-toe with new technology and with evolving systems of societal power.

It's the story of a railroad worker whose job is at risk of being replaced by a steam-powered robot. John Henry sets out to prove that he can do the job better than any machine, and wagers with his corporate bosses that he can outperform the machine while working on the Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia. Although Henry prevails, he dies of exhaustion shortly after.

Olav Rokne (left) and Amanda Wakaruk (right). (Photo by Paul Weimer)

There's a reason that 150 years after the completion of the Big Bend Tunnel, John Henry's story continues to resonate. It touches on the dehumanization of labour, explores the evolution of corporate power, and gives voice to fears that technology might render the human experience obsolete.

This was just the beginning of our genre's long history of examining the changing nature of work and employment. Over the decades, science ficiton has explored everything from utopian dreams of fully-automated luxury space communism to dystopic cyberpunk precarity. The genre has engaged with questions of how the workplace is evolving and what the future of work might be. This exploration has sometimes been tone-deaf or dismissive of the proletariat, but at other times has provided important insight and prescient warnings.

Today, many in the creative professions might feel a certain kinship with John Henry, as they face off against mechanized competition bearing names like Midjourney and ChatGPT. The stories we tell — and how we engage with them — will help inform the ways in which these tools are used or abused.

Over the past five years, the questions of how workers' rights are depicted in science fiction are ones that we've grappled with at our own Hugo-shortlisted fanzine *The Unofficial Hugo Book Club Blog*. The genre is filled with examples of utopian futures in which workers rights are universally recognized, but few authors offer ideas of how to get there.

In this fanzine issue, we've had the opportunity to work with an excellent group of writers who have tackled various aspects of science fiction's depiction of work and working people. We're pleased to welcome contributors who have been shortlisted for the Hugo and the Ditmar, other successful authors, incisive academics, union organizers, popular bloggers, a constitutional lawyer, and a few talented new voices.

We have always approached the conversation of workers' rights from a perspective of solidarity, anti-racism, inclusivity, and respect. Class struggle is incomplete without intersectionality.

Given the decline of standard capitalist employment relationships and the rise of precarity, every reader of this fanzine will at some point have to confront the changing nature of work. Consequently, the questions explored in these pages are important ones for everyone to consider.

Thank you for joining us in this discussion about workers' rights as depicted in science fiction.

CONTRIBUTORS

James Bacon

Chuaigh James go dtí Coláiste Mhuire, sciol lan gaelach i mBaile Átha Clitah agus tá sé thiománaí traenach agus stiurtheoir tiománaithe foghlaimeora. Tá sé heagarthóir irisín-lucht leanúna a bhuaigh Hugo. Tá sé inimirceach i gconnaí i Sasanch, agus tá sé lucht leanúna ar leabhair ghreannáin agus ar fhicsean eolaíochta.

Bob Barnetson

Bob Barnetson is a professor of labour relations at Athabasca University. His areas of interest include media representations of trade unions and occupational injuries. With Mark McCutcheon, he wrote Resistance is futile: On the under-representation of unions in science fiction. Topia. (2016). 36: 151-171.

Gautam Bhatia

Gautam Bhatia is a science fiction writer, editor, and critic, based in New Delhi, India. He is the author of *The Wall* and *The Horizon*, both of which were long-listed in *Locus Magazine*'s annual list of best science fiction novels. He is also the co-ordinating editor of *Strange Horizons*, a Hugo and British Fantasy-winning weekly magazine of science fiction. His critical work has appeared in *Interzone*, *Strange Horizons*, *Journey Planet*, and various Indian newspapers. His third novel, *The Sentence*, will be out in October 2024.

Joachim Boaz

History PhD. Joachim Boaz maps the more esoteric inclines and declines of science fiction between 1940-1985. When SF tackles the greater morass of things and our oblique interiors, he is happy. His website Science Fiction and Other Suspect Ruminations charts these movements. Under another name he teaches dual credit US and World History.

Kira Braham

Kira Braham is an assistant professor at Lycoming College in Pennsylvania, where she teaches British and Global Anglophone literatures, SF/Utopian literature, and gender studies. She has published articles in academic journals about representations of work in Victorian literature and is writing a whole book about it, tentatively titled *The Active Life: Victorian Work Ethics and Literary Labor Politics*. She thinks science fiction is the best fiction there is, and she is a firm believer in the power of the utopian imagination to change the world.

Octavia Cade

Octavia Cade is a science fiction writer from New Zealand. She has a PhD in science communication, and her academic work primarily looks at how science is presented in speculative fiction. She's had approximately 70 short stories published in venues such as *Clarkesworld*, *F&SF*, and *Asimov's*. Recent nonfiction articles include "Economic Predation and the End of Capitalism" in the *Speculative Insight* journal and "The Polar Bear as Refugee in Speculative Fiction" in *Clarkesworld*.

Brian Collins

Brian Collins is a New Jersey denizen who runs his own fanzine, Science Fiction & Fantasy Remembrance, and sometimes writes for other fan outlets as well, including *Galactic Journey* and *Young People Read Old SFF*. His favorite authors include Philip K. Dick, Samuel R. Delany, (early) Robert Heinlein, and he's currently in the process of becoming a Robert Aickman fan.

Camestros Felapton

Camestros Felapton is a blogger and fan writer. He has been a Hugo Award finalist twice, including in 2022 in Best Related Work. Felapton writes about the intersection of reactionary politics with speculative fiction and how real-world conflicts of political and philosophical ideas play out in the creation of fiction.

Mark A. McCutcheon

Mark A. McCutcheon teaches Literary Studies and chairs the Centre for Humanities at Athabasca University. Mark's publications include articles co-written with Heather Clitheroe on *The Expanse* (Red Futures 2023, Foundation 2022, SFRA Review 2021); an essay on *Battlestar Galactica* in SFFTV (2009); and his 2018 book *The Medium Is the Monster: Canadian Adaptations of Frankenstein and the Discourse of Technology*.

David McDonald

David McDonald is a mild-mannered editor by day, and a wild-eyed writer by night. Based in Melbourne, Australia, he divides his spare time between playing cricket and writing. In 2013 he won the Ditmar Award for Best New Talent, and in 2014 won the William J. Atheling Jr. Award for Criticism or Review and was shortlisted for the WSFA Small Press Award.

Will McMahon

Will McMahon (will-mcmahon.com) is a union organizer and writer living in Upstate New York, who has spent more than a decade in the labour movement. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *F&SF*, *Lightspeed*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and others, while his literary criticism has appeared in *Strange Horizons* and *The Ancillary Review of Books*. His greatest work is in the genre of incendiary union flyers.

Farah Mendlesohn

Farah Mendlesohn is a con-runner, a retired History Professor, a charity manager, co-editor of the Hugo Award Winning *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, author of the Hugo nominated *The Pleasant Profession of Robert A. Heinlein* and is currently working on a short book about Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*. Farah has chaired three Eastercons, has served in various capacities in Worldcons and Eastercons, and is part of the World Fantasy 2025 team. (Farah/they/she)

Jim O'Brien

Jim O'Brien did a PhD in Victorian art history but nowadays writes mainly about the cultural artefacts that aren't traditionally found in museums, contributing essays to a range of magazines and journals on comics, paperbacks, films and illustration.

Atun Purser

Autun Purser is a deep sea biologist and illustrator. As a lifelong science fiction fan he was particularly pleased to produce the illustrations for the new *Best of Sci Fi Masterworks* by Orion / Gollancz.

www.apillustration.co.uk

—

Olav Rokne

A four-time finalist for the Hugo Award for Best Fanzine alongside Amanda Wakaruk, Olav Rokne has contributed to *Strage Horizons*, *Uncanny Magazine*, and the *Encyclopedia of Marvel Comics*. He is rumoured to be the uncredited author of the *Book of Zephaniah*.

Brett Sheehan

Brett Sheehan is an Edmonton-based writer with an overactive imagination. Raised on a farm, he moved to the city in 2013 and has lived there since. A stargazer since childhood, Brett writes speculative fiction and is currently completing his Masters of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alberta.

Kris Vyas-Myall

Kris Vyas- Myall (@krisvm.bsky.social) is the co-founder of *Cloaked Creators* and someone who reads way too much fiction and likes anything bizarre, the weirder the better. They blog around the internet at various places including *Galactic Journey* and *Corner Shop Time Stop*.

Amanda Wakaruk

Amanda Wakaruk is the co-editor of this fanzine and also the *Unofficial Hugo Book Club Blog,* a passion project with her partner Olav.

A.L. Yakimchuk

A L Yakimchuk enjoys writing fiction, in fits and starts and when the mood strikes. They regularly volunteer at Worldcon.

The body typeface used in this publication is Charter, a transitional serif typeface designed by Matthew Carter in 1987 based on Pierre-Simon Fournier's characters, originating in the 18th century.

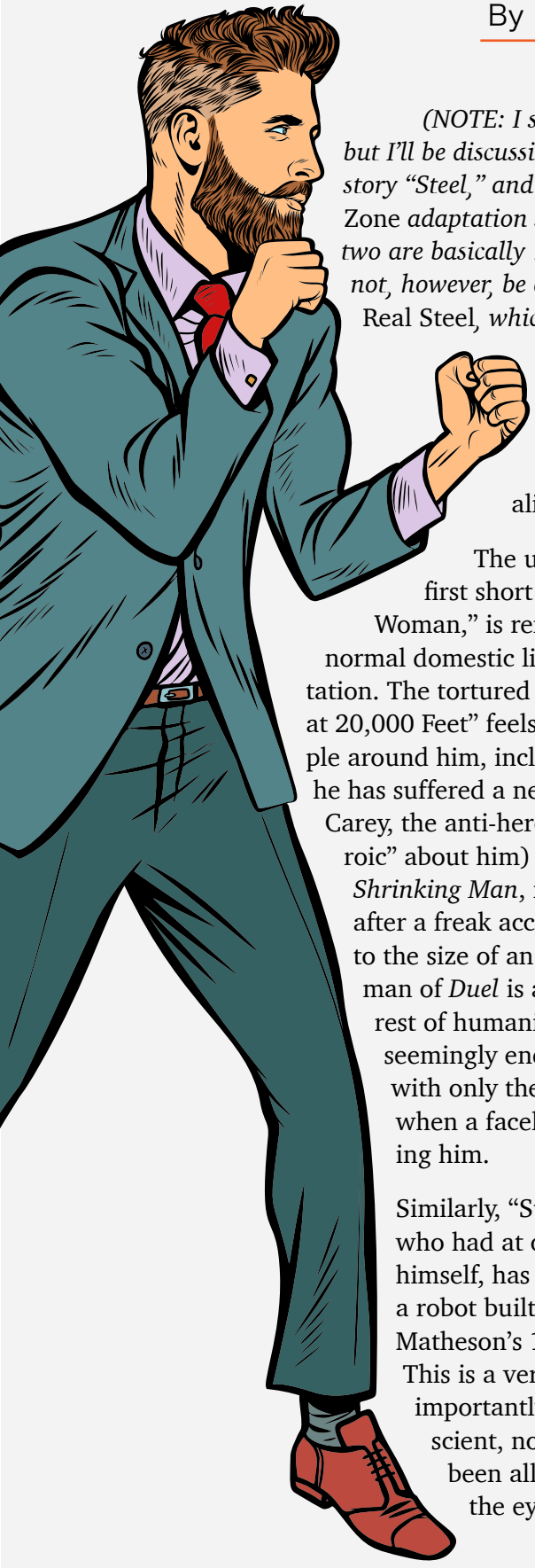
The headline typeface is MuseoModerno, a contemporary geometric typeface designed in 2022 for the Museum of Modern Art of Buenos Aires. Designed by Marcela Romero, Héctor Gatti, Pablo Cosgaya and the Omnibus-Type Team.

Unless otherwise stated, images in this publication were used under licence from Adobe Stock Photos.

Alienation and Automation

Richard Matheson's "Steel" and the worker as product

By Brian Collins



(NOTE: I shouldn't have to say this, but I'll be discussing spoilers for the short story "Steel," and by extension the Twilight Zone *adaptation starring Lee Marvin. The two are basically 1:1 in terms of plot. I will not, however, be discussing the 2011 film* Real Steel*, which is a much looser adaptation of Matheson's story.)*

Many of Richard Matheson's most famous stories involve alienation.

The unnamed child in his very first short story, "Born of Man and Woman," is rendered unable to adapt to normal domestic life because of an odd mutation. The tortured protagonist of "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" feels estranged from the people around him, including his own wife, after he has suffered a nervous breakdown. Scott Carey, the anti-hero (there's very little "heroic" about him) of Matheson's novel *The Shrinking Man*, finds his marriage eroding after a freak accident causes him to shrink to the size of an ant. The traveling salesman of *Duel* is already separated from the rest of humanity, stuck on a deserted and seemingly endless stretch of highway with only the radio for companionship, when a faceless trucker starts tormenting him.

Similarly, "Steel" Kelly, a former boxer who had at one point made a name for himself, has been relegated to owning a robot built expressly for boxing in Matheson's 1956 short story "Steel." This is a very fine story, but more importantly it continues to feel prescient, not least because boxing has been all but replaced by MMA in the eyes of today's sports watchers. It's a story about the athlete-as-worker, the athlete-as-machine, and about a possible (even plausible) future in which the professional athlete has been reduced to a product.

"Steel" was first published in the May 1956 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, the same year as *The Shrinking Man* (it was a good year for Matheson), and it reads as an outlier in what is already a pretty diverse body of work—not thematically but rather in how it attempts to speculate on how culture might change in the future. Matheson's science fiction is usually set in the Now, with an average person being thrown into an SFnal situation through some accident or coincidence; so it shouldn't be surprising that more often than not Matheson wrote horror or fantasy instead. As the man himself admitted in an interview, "I never even knew what science fiction was until I sold my first story."[1] He was not what you would call an SF writer by inclination, which makes the genuine speculative nature of "Steel" so different. (Even *I Am Legend*, published in 1954 and set in 1976, engages in very little speculation about society's future, on account of the human populace having come down with a bad case of vampirism, and thus there's no human culture left—at least of the non-vampire variety.) "Steel" is also unusual for Matheson in that it directly touches upon the question of labour—more specifically alienation from one's own labour—as it may pertain to a future (but not too in the future) America.

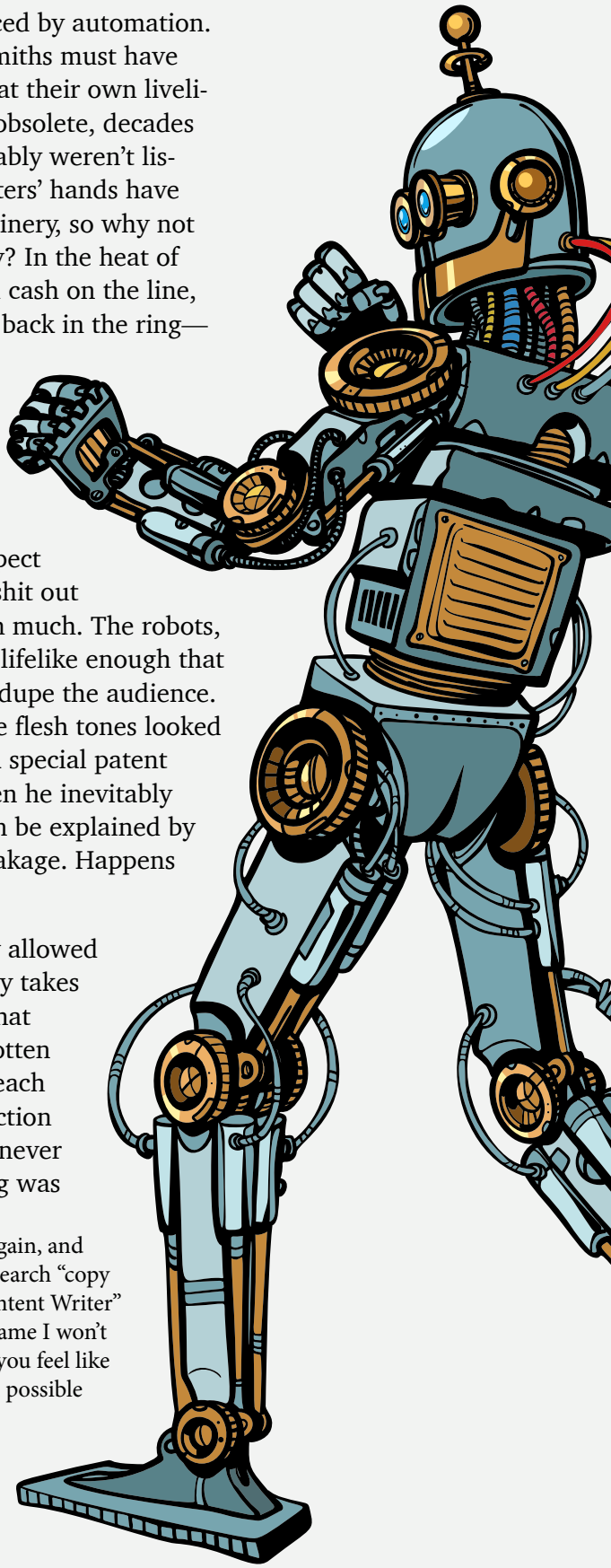
The year is 1980 (I know, the futuristic year of 1980) and boxing between humans has been outlawed in the US for about a decade. "Steel" Kelly was a heavyweight and a reasonably respected boxer a decade ago ("Called me "Steel' cause I never got

1 From the September 1981 issue of *Twilight Zone Magazine*.

knocked down once. Not once. I was even number nine in the ranks once.")[2], but since then he's gotten older, has started losing his hair, and has taken to the road with friend and mechanic Pole with their boxing robot, Battling Maxor. The initial problem is that Maxor is in dire need of repairs, requiring money the two men don't have. Even if they were to repair the robot it's still a B-2, set to go up against a B-7. Maybe five years ago Maxor would've done fine, but now he (or it) is little more than a bucket of bolts; but if Kelly and Pole back out of the match now they don't get any money. Their robot is badly outdated, and even ignoring that, it would barely be able to get in the ring. Kelly has been having a bad day, not helped by reminiscing openly about when he was in Maxor's position, and it looks like he's stuck in a corner. There is, of course, one possible alternative: get in the ring posing as Maxor. The robot has not been in a public match in three years, and apparently this is a future where people don't record sports matches, so it's a safe bet that nobody in the audience knows what Maxor looks like. I smell a plan…

Kelly is a classic Matheson protagonist, in that he feels cut off from his fellow man and has a bit of a temper; even his friendship with Pole seems to be strained by the bad luck the two have been having, on top of Kelly clearly feeling demeaned by being the "manager" of his own replacement. A question we must ask ourselves is: If an athlete is a worker, then can the athlete be replaced? I do wonder how many of us think of professional athletes as workers, despite the pay being real and the bodily risk certainly being no less real. I wonder how many people think, subconsciously, of athletes as products — or machinery.

The real problem is that regardless of whether the athlete is more akin to a human worker or a machine, we still have to wonder if such a worker/machine can or even should be replaced. God knows an increasingly large portion of the labour market has been replaced by automation. Carpenters and blacksmiths must have felt this inner turmoil, at their own livelihoods being rendered obsolete, decades ago, and yet they probably weren't listened to.[3] Most carpenters' hands have been replaced by machinery, so why not an athlete's entire body? In the heat of the moment, with hard cash on the line, the prospect of getting back in the ring—even if he were to go down in the first round—appeals to Kelly. He hungers to return to doing what he loved most to the point that the prospect of a robot beating the shit out of him doesn't faze him much. The robots, while not sentient, are lifelike enough that if he acts right, he can dupe the audience. "Even from ringside the flesh tones looked human. Mawling had a special patent on that." And hell, when he inevitably starts sweating that can be explained by Maxor having an oil leakage. Happens with old models.



Indeed, the plot is only allowed to happen because Kelly takes advantage of the fact that the robots have only gotten more convincing with each iteration, to the satisfaction of the audience. We're never told why human boxing was

2 I've consulted the text of "Steel" as it appeared in the May 1956 issue of *F&SF*. You can find a scanned copy online if you're curious enough.

3 I've been job-searching again, and the first thing I see when I search "copy editor" on Indeed is "AI Content Writer" for some company whose name I won't dignify by mentioning. Do you feel like we're living in the best of all possible worlds?

continued on page 8

Fable of man vs machine pulls no punches

continued from page 7

made illegal, but given how physically grueling this sport in particular can be it's not hard to imagine what spurred legal action. When "Steel" was adapted for an episode of The Twilight Zone, the in-story year had been moved from 1980 to "circa 1974," even though the episode would air in 1963. In the *Twilight Zone* episode, human boxing was outlawed in 1968, a mere five years after the episode would have aired—which sounds outlandish, but consider that in 1962 welterweight boxer Emile Griffith practically beat opponent Benny Paret to a pulp, the latter dying of his injuries several hours after the match.[4] The possibility of boxing being outlawed must have seemed very much that in the moment—a possibility.

Yet while there are valid safety concerns with regards to boxing, Matheson paints a depressing picture of what a future where boxers are forcibly removed from their profession might look like. Even the audience members, while having become accustomed to the robot replacements, miss the days when it was man against man in the ring, back when the ring had a referee and when fighters were able to get back up when they were knocked down. "The new B-nine, it was claimed by the Mawling publicity staff, would be able to get up, which would make for livelier and longer bouts." The robots seem to get closer to emulating the humans they've replaced accurately, but Matheson implies there will always be that human touch missing from the equation. Kelly and his kind can't be replaced completely.

The robots seem to get closer to emulating the humans they've replaced accurately, but Matheson implies there will always be that human touch missing from the equation.

Of course, Kelly goes down in the first round; and because he's posing as a B-2 he can't get back up. Not that he could have reasonably expected to beat a robot — just as a human, never mind that he's no longer a spring chicken. Despite losing a match, getting a rib or two broken, plus getting only a fraction of the pay they were supposed to earn, Kelly feels vindicated in a way that is perhaps hard for a man of his disposition to articulate — a kind of spiritual victory. Something about the capacity of the human spirit to persevere. It could be that when Matheson wrote "Steel" he merely wanted to incorporate a popular sport (at the time) into a fable about a unique quality—a je ne sais quoi—in humans when compared to their would-be robot counterparts. The athlete is a worker, and the worker, in his heart, wants liberation; we can accept nothing less. We cannot accept this divorce, between ourselves and our labour. This may not have been intended, but I would say boxing was the perfect sport to use for such a story, as it's a deeply individualistic and physically intimate sport. Kelly's struggle would not have hit quite as hard if this was about baseball or American football. There's a degree of ambiguity to this story's ending, as to what will become of Kelly and Pole after this, or what they could possibly do next; but that would be missing the point, I think. Kelly lost the fight, but he's gone to prove he's not quite out of a job yet. 1980 is behind us, if only physically, but "Steel" is one of those rare SF narratives that seems determined to project its concerns perpetually into the creeping and possibly condemned future—our future.

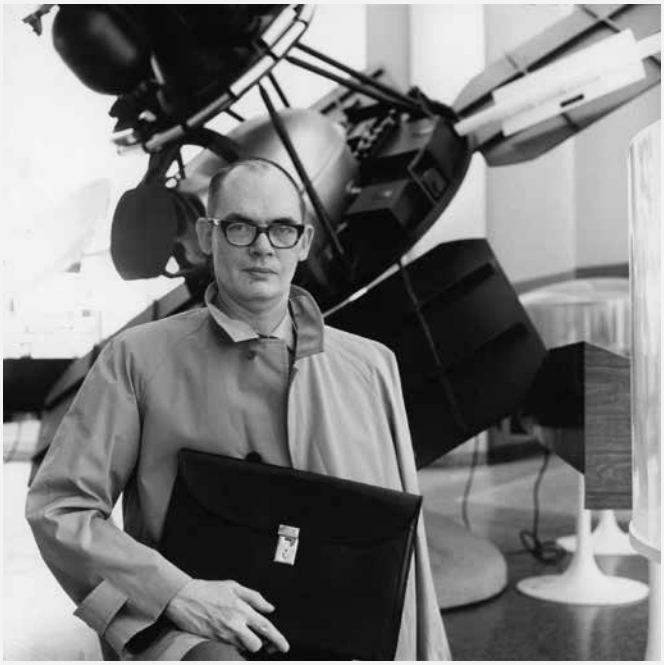
4 "Boxing Changed Forever When One Man Fought to the Death—on Live Television" by Peter Hartlaub. See: https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/boxing-changed-forever-when-one-man-fought-to-the-2640748.php

Pohl Position

Though a man of the left, Fredrick Pohl saw workers through a sardonic lens

By Rich Horton

Frederik Pohl was a man of the left — a Communist until the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, afterwords an active member of the Democratic Party, serving as a Democratic committeeman in the Chicago area for a time. He cited the Communist Party's support of unions as a reason for joining it at the age of 17. I thought to examine his treatment of work, and working people, in his SF. And so I reread a number of his stories — the novels *The Space Merchants* and *Gateway*, and stories such as "The Merchants of Venus", "The Midas Plague", "The Tunnel Under the World", and others.



Fredrick Pohl's career as a science fiction author spanned seven decades. Over those years, he often returned to the subject of capitalist excesses. (Image via New York Times)

What I found was that Pohl was definitely interested in changes in the working environment in the future, often with a satirical slant. But Pohl's stories, as with many SF writers, tended to focus on people in middle management type positions. It is relatively rare to see him treat of blue-collar workers, or of labour unions.

I have a theory about this. Relatively few SF writers seem to have had blue collar jobs. Even fewer SF writers seem to have been members of unions (not counting SFWA, of course, which differs vastly from a true union.) Some of this is explained simply in that their main job was writer. In the United States, with the exception of journalists, people in that profession rarely join unions, and even when they do, they're still not blue-collar — nor are they working in industry.

Pohl himself seems to have spent his entire working career in writing related fields: fiction writer, agent, editor — and, crucially, for a few years after the War, as a copywriter for a couple of advertising agencies..

Take Mitch Courtenay, the protagonist and narrator of *The Space Merchants* (1952/1953, co-written with C. M. Kornbluth.) Courtenay is a copywriter for Fowler Schocken, one of the leading advertising companies in the future world Pohl and Kornbluth depict. The novel is set in the distant future — 2039 — though Pohl's 2011 revision eliminated any mention of the date. In this future, capitalism has run wild, and increased consumption is all but a religion. The very influential advertising companies promote ever increasing demand for various products, by legal and illegal means, and as a result have great power. As the novel opens, Mitch and his fellows have a comparatively privileged life. And Mitch's working environment, to be frank, seems broadly very similar to that of admen in the 1950s. But a crowded Earth is threatening to put a lid on future expansion — so the latest goal is to colonize Venus. Fowler Schocken has the job of promoting the Venus project, which means selling potential colonists on a much better life on Venus than the actual hellish conditions there would allow. And Mitch gets the plum job of leading this project, which means a big promotion.

continued on pages 10-11

Unions don't escape Pohl's biting satire

continued from page 9

But a jealous colleague plays a nasty trick on Mitch, and he ends up kidnapped and sent to the Chlorella plantations, to work with the synthetic food processing operation. This is a typically abusive work environment for this future. It's a company shop, in that food and housing are supplied by the corporation, and the system is set up so that it's almost impossible to avoid falling into debt. Work contracts theoretically expire, but as one adds debt the contracts can be extended. The work is difficult and dangerous. Organized labour? There is a union — United Slime-Mold Protein Workers of Panamerica, Unaffililated, Chlorella Costa Rica Local.

One of Pohl's best-known novels *The Space Merchants* (co-authored with C.M. Kornbluth) is focused closely on the future of work and of workers.
(Image from the 1969 Baen edition of *The Space Merchants*, art by John Berkley.)

But the union seems to be just another racket, allegedly protecting workers but in reality just adding another layer of money extraction. (The result of refusing to join the union: "a long drop" [from the upper levels of the Chlorella tower.]) This is really the one look we get in this novel at blue-collar working conditions, and of life in general at that economic level. It's pretty horrifying, and the sense is that much of the crowded world lives in similar straits. The reform movement in the book is, however, mostly environmental — the "Consies" (Conservationists) are the main resistance movement, and while they certainly have adherents among the lower classes, they do seem dominated by better off people.

Pohl's SF Hall of Fame story "The Midas Plague" (1954), written roughly contemporaneously with *The Space Merchants*, is likewise a satirical take on a consumption economy. The satirical hook here is that in a post-scarcity society, with essentially unlimited energy and with robots doing the great bulk of the work, the higher one's status, the less one is obliged to consume. The poorest people live in huge, gaudy, houses, and are required to eat and drink to excess, as well as buying new clothes, etc, all the time; while the rich live in hovels. By the same token, the richer you are, the more you are allowed to work. The implication is that work is a virtue — that it is dignified to be able to work.

The most interesting commentary on work, to me, was about the robots. They are directly compared to immigrants to the United States who did hard work when they first came, and over time achieved higher status, making room for the next tranche of immigrants to take the bottom-tier jobs. But robots, it is suggested, aren't the same — they will never "move up" to higher economic classes — they will always be there to do the lower status jobs. That said, while the story doesn't really interrogate the place of robots too closely, its twist ending hints at an eventual change even for them — for the solution to the problem of requiring people to overconsume to keep up with production is to have the robots consume the excess — and in the process, robots are programmed to enjoy this consumption. It's not addressed in the story at all, but it seems likely that this must have consequences for both robots and humans in the future.

Pohl did return to this future in several more stories that were fixed up into the novel *Midas World* — and

indeed the robots are eventually emancipated.

"The Merchants of Venus", from 1972, is the first of Pohl's Heechee stories. It is set on Venus, natch, and the protagonist, Audee Walthers, owns an airbody — sort of a Venus-tolerant aircraft. He makes his money by convincing tourists to rent his services as a pilot, to take his airbody to interesting tourist sites — which are mostly the tunnels carved out by the mysterious aliens called the Heechee. He is a member of a union — but again the union seems mostly there to skim off his profits, meager as they are. And Audee is a slave to his debt, and to his health — the only way he can hope to live much longer (as the story opens) is to find a big score in the Heechee diggings. (There is of course another part of the economy: the residents of Venus who own tourist-centric businesses — restaurants, souvenir sellers, that sort of thing — and many of these businesses seem to rely on family workers — wives (multiple) and children.)

Behind the scenes of life on Venus is a hint of a crowded and polluted Earth, where conditions for workers are even worse. This is emphasized in the first Heechee novel, the multiple award-winning *Gateway* (1977), in which the main character, Robinette Broadhead, has used his winnings from a lottery to escape Earth, and to escape the prospect of a job like the mining job that killed his father. Instead he goes to Gateway, a Heechee asteroid with a lot of Heechee spaceships that will take you anywhere — pretty much at random. Gateway itself is owned by a corporation, which is as rapacious as any in *The Space Merchants* — charging for food, and even air, and taking a significant cut of any major discoveries an explorer might find using one of the Heechee spaceships.

Quite another angle on "work" is represented in a couple of quite interesting stories from two different phases of Pohl's career. "The Tunnel Under the World" (1955) tells of a man who wakes up every day to a boring clerical job and exposure to endless advertisements. Along the way he realizes that every day is the same date — but every day he is exposed to different ads. Obviously, he (and all the other people he meets) are guinea pigs for testing advertising. There is a twist that I won't reveal — but this is a case, clearly enough, of what must be considered slave labour, in the service of Pohl's familiar 1950s bugbear — advertising.

Pohl was less interested in realistic extrapolation of the changes of work, and in the condition of working people ... instead his interests are primarily satirical.

An even harsher look at slave labour appears in the 1974 story "We Purchased People". Aliens have made contact with Earth, and they need local representatives to contract their business. They "purchase" convicted criminals, whom they control via a faster-than-light link. The story follows the "purchased" career of a serial killer of women, who is shown carrying out the aliens' requirements, sometimes in humiliating fashion. But he still has some time to himself — though he may still be, in some sense, still a servant to the aliens. And his actions on one such "vacation" are chilling indeed — but who is responsible?

As I see it, at least as represented in this sample of some of Frederik Pohl's best work, Pohl was less interested in realistic extrapolation of the changes in work, and in the condition of working people, in his extrapolated futures. Instead his interests are primarily satirical. And the bulk of his examples are white-collar workers, in jobs with at least some resemblance to Pohl's own writing-related jobs. His (fairly limited) portrayals of unions are as satirical as the rest of his work. This isn't to suggest these stories are weak — Pohl does what he's trying to do excellently. The situations portrayed fit the "comic inferno" that Kingsley Amis described as Pohl's great strength — no matter the technological or other advances (such as alien contact) we encounter in the future, humans will react as humans do. The results are often dark, and when not so dark, still sardonically portrayed.

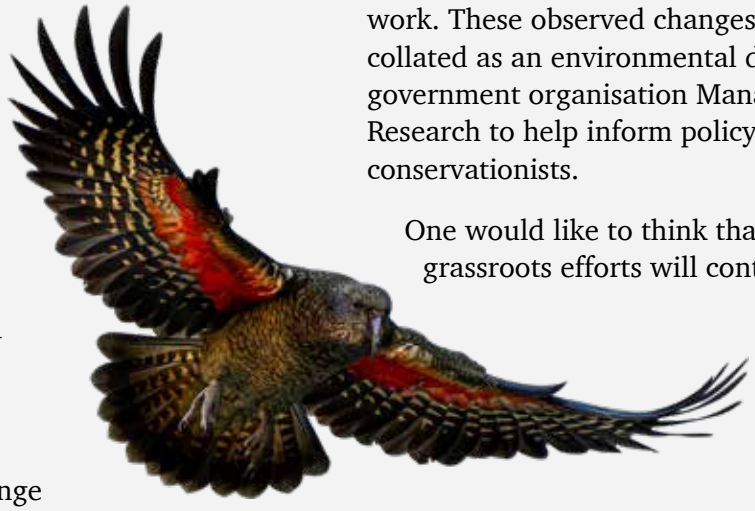
Unpaid Green

Voluntary conservation work in science fiction

By Octavia Cade

Science fiction is a genre of almost infinite possibility. This is particularly clear in its depictions of the future, where potential outcomes can focus on any number of social and environmental issues. Some of these futures are more plausible than others, but part of the appeal of the genre is its ability to imagine realistic futures, and the ways in which these futures can be obtained.

Often this presentation has tended towards the dystopian, as science fiction acts as an early warning system for contemporary conflicts and innovations. Increasingly, however, there is a focus on the utopian: on what a more optimistic, sustainable, and resilient future might look like. This approach, seen most frequently in solarpunk, is of growing relevance, especially given the effects of environmental degradation and climate change on current living conditions and the potential for these effects to be more challenging in the future. Consequently, the deliberate creation—the deliberate imagination—of a more hopeful alternative can help to shape the conversations and choices made today.



This ability to shape conversation exists alongside the ability to critique existing social, political, and economic practices. One of these practices is that of unpaid labour: who performs it, who benefits from it, and the purpose to which that labour is put. In the context of this article, that purpose is conservation work, particularly the restoration of ecosystems. This not only contributes to the provision of sustainable ecosystem services, such as clean water, food production, and disaster resilience, but may also include protection for endangered species and the creation of more enjoyable living environments.

Unpaid conservation work is, of course, a common occurrence in both the past and present. Critically, it is also often a welcome endeavour. For the past several years, for instance, my own country has held the annual New Zealand Garden Bird Survey, where volunteers spend an hour in their gardens or local parks, during a designated week in winter, noting the species composition and quantity of birds in their immediate vicinity. This, admittedly, is light and appealing work, popular with people from all backgrounds, but it is work. These observed changes in biodiversity, once collated as an environmental dataset, are used by the government organisation Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research to help inform policy makers, scientists, and conservationists.

One would like to think that, in the future, such grassroots efforts will continue to be supported by volunteers who are invested in the results of this work.[1] There is, however, a cost, albeit one that is not typically calculated. Approximately 45,000 garden bird surveys have been performed. If each of these surveys represents an hour of effort at the current minimum wage ($23.15 NZ for an adult), then the economic contribution by these volunteers totals well over a million dollars.

The volunteers may consider themselves amply rewarded. In the short story "From the Rooftops" by Jacob Ashton[2], two people suffering from emotional

1 And indeed the short story "A Shawl for Janice" by Sandra Ulbrich Almazan depicts one such future bird survey, carried out after a future environmental collapse. It's in *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Winters*, edited by Sarena Ulibarri, and published by World Weaver Press, 2020.

2 "From the Rooftops" by Jacob Ashton. In *And Lately, the Sun*,

upheaval form a connection while working on rooftop garden allotments loaned to them by a local community group. While the story doesn't go into great detail about the allotments, it is clear that they're both extremely common within the city environment and that working in them provides a number of benefits. And indeed, roof gardens—in addition to providing food—also combat pollution, increase biodiversity, reduce noise and urban heat, and make buildings more energy efficient. The unpaid labour that goes into maintaining the allotments not only makes life better for the individual gardeners, but improves the lives of the whole community.

Unpaid labour, admittedly, can produce multiple benefits. Volunteering can lead to better mental health and physical health, increased connections with others, growth in skills and learning, contribution to a community, and active, enjoyable socialisation. It can also, unfortunately, be somewhat exploitative, and in ways which are not always critiqued by the individual narratives in which speculative unpaid labour appears.

In the short story "Stubborn as Dirt" by Holly Schofield[3], for instance, the ecological reclamation of a former parking lot is carried out by high school students and supervised by their teacher. The story is optimistic in tone, with the kids working together and navigating challenges in order to succeed not only in rewilding the parking lot, but in reducing run-off from that lot and thereby making a nearby creek system more resilient. It's a story of cooperation and contribution, with intelligent characters doing their best to improve the world around them. Allie, the protagonist, has not only designed the project, but developed a technological solution to aid in the reclamation attempts. Another student, Margaret, writes multiple reports for the school and for local government, in an attempt to generate enough funding to expand the scope of Allie's project.

These are not small tasks. They require substantial time and effort, as well as multiple skill sets. That the students are capable of performing at this level, and that their school encourages them in applying their capabilities to public service projects such as this one, makes for a genuinely heartening narrative.

It is, however, also a narrative of unpaid work. While both the local school system and the local government seem to be functioning at a relatively high level, there are indications within the story that such is not the case in other parts of the world. The story is set in Alberta, Canada, and one of the students is a climate refugee from New York City, for example. Clearly, conservation work—even that performed on a small scale—is increasing in importance. This may explain why high school students are responsible for rewilding efforts in the first place: not only are they cheap (free) labour, but their work can be classed as educational. It benefits them to perform it, in that this unpaid labour helps them to develop skills that might, at the conclusion of their education, lead to gainful employment. Allie and her classmates are not only making the world a better place for everyone else, they are increasing their own marketability as well.

In this story it is notable, too, that the students are not only performing work that adults might be paid for—in the development of technical solutions and the generation of local council reports—but that they are almost certainly cleaning up after the paid work of others. Allie is congratulated by her teacher for her resource gathering: "I like how you repurposed things from failed industries to make the substrate. The coconut hulls from the packing plant, the lime from the brickwork excavations by the lake <…> The agar from the jelly factory was especially inspired." The provenance of the parking lot at the centre of the story is unclear, but it is almost certain that the packing plant, the brickworks, and the jelly factory would have had their own parking lots, if only to accommodate their employees. It's possible, of course, that these companies rewilded their own parking lots, but the more likely reality is that those lots were sold off or abandoned, and will eventually require rewilding themselves. That rewilding is unlikely to be funded by the people who paid to construct the parking lots in the first place.

The phrase "privatise the profits and socialise the losses" may apply to unpaid work as easily as it can apply to sources of funding. In the case of "Stubborn as Dirt," readers can surmise that the creation of parking lots involved paid work, but the reclamation of them does not. Instead, that reclamation relies on volunteers. It's difficult not to see this as a failure of capitalism, and

edited and published by Calyx Create Group, 2020.

3 "Stubborn as Dirt" by Holly Schofield. In *And Lately, the Sun*, edited and published by Calyx Create Group, 2020.

continued on page 14

Unpaid labour props up exploitation

continued from page 13

the consequent reality of unpaid work is that it may be used to prop up or remediate an unsustainable system. In this, it certainly has exploitative undertones.

What, however, is the alternative? In speculative futures that tend towards the dystopian, unpaid work is subsistence work, necessary to stay alive. In an entirely utopian future, unpaid work may be the community-building norm, and the drive for individual profit entirely eradicated. More interesting, perhaps, from a labour perspective, is the space between the two.

One can argue, of course, that belonging to a community necessarily includes contributing to it, and that no member of that community should be exempt from this. There may come a future where unpaid conservation work is universal and unremarkable, much as unpaid caring work, for instance, has similarly been perceived to be. Clearly, potential contributions must be suitably adapted to ability and aptitude, but unpaid work has also typically been influenced by social factors and pre-existing biases, such as the tendency for unpaid care work to fall primarily on women. Different speculative futures are able to illustrate and critique this expectation of contribution in different ways.

> Stories of active resistance often rely upon volunteers to achieve what entrenched economic and political structures are unwilling or unable to do.

One example of this can be seen in the story "Watch Out, Red Crusher!" by Shel Graves[4], which includes two separate forms of expected contribution. The first is more typical, and is illustrated by Andee, who is trying to decide which occupation she should choose at the upcoming ceremony in which she becomes an adult. Failure to choose—and thus to contribute—will result in exile from the community. This expected contribution, however, is underlined by a further expectation, and one that Andee has been fulfilling since birth. In her community, infants are injected with nanites and solar cells that give community members a luminous appearance. This helps to "power the community, providing electricity, running water, and warming the algae production ponds"—work that is not only unpaid but unconsented. If labour is a resource, then so are the bodies that provide that labour, and they may be expected to work productively whether their owners wish them to or not. (And can one even be said to own one's body, under these circumstances? Or do individuals merely have limited control over a community resource?)

Forced unpaid labour cannot be considered voluntary. Depending on the state of the environment, however, that labour may be encouraged or coerced in different ways. How does conservation in science fiction move from a narrative that includes unpaid work to a narrative that relies upon it? At what stage does volunteerism become entrenched social habit, and by what mechanism? It's all very well to imagine a future where unpaid work is the norm, but getting to that future (should such even be desirable) from a society that is so underpinned by capitalism is another thing altogether.

D.A. Xiaolin Spires' story "The Exuberant Vitality of Hatchling Habitats"[5] has a similar premise to Schofield's "Stubborn as Dirt." Again the labour is performed, unpaid, by the young: Xueli and Camila have teamed up for their school science fair, engineering a biodegradable sculpture from garbage. They don't win, but the technology they developed to create their work can be adapted to provide habitats for nesting seabirds. When an investor offers to buy their work, Xueli and Camila face a choice: that unpaid work can become paid work, but the investor will then own the

4 "Watch Out, Red Crusher!" by Shel Graves. In *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers*, edited by Sarena Ulibarri. Published by World Weaver Press, 2018.

5 "The Exuberant Vitality of Hatchling Habitats" by D.A. Xiaolin Spires. In *Multispecies Cities: Solarpunk Urban Futures*, edited by Christoph Rupprecht, Deborah Cleland, Norie Tamura, Rajat Chaudhuri, and Sarena Ulibarri. Published by World Weaver Press, 2021.

patent of the technology they have developed. They choose to retain the patent and simply sell rights to it. In one sense, they've achieved the ultimate success under capitalism: the monetisation of their previously unpaid labour, but other (non-exclusive) options exist. Camila, especially, is interested in fair use and other means of making her intellectual property more broadly accessible. She chooses to, for example, provide free materials to students and educators so that they can learn the techniques behind her inventions and use them to develop their own processes and designs.

In "Hatchling Habitats," then, we can see one possible transformation of unpaid labour. It is neither subsistence nor observation nor (solely) clean-up, but a possible method of resistance: a chosen and active undermining of the profit-at-all-costs approach of unrestricted capitalism. Moreover, it is achievable resistance that uses a common and currently available mechanism. Creative Commons licensing is increasingly used to share research today, and illustrates one potential method of adapting unpaid labour to a changing world.

If unpaid labour has too often been used to prop up exploitation, it can also be used to remove it. Stories of active resistance often rely upon volunteers to achieve what entrenched economic and political structures are unwilling or unable to do. In "A Predatory Transience" by C.G. Aubrey[6], for instance, the protagonist kills wealthy (and therefore protected) shark fishers exploiting a marine sanctuary. She is directed to their location by an anonymous network, and the story implies that this is at least a semi-regular occurrence: a loose association of volunteers preying on individuals who are gleefully engaged in destructive and unsustainable behaviour. If Ms. McDonald were paid, she'd be a mercenary, but unpaid she is essentially an environmental terrorist. (Is one more acceptable than the other? I don't know, but her lack of cash remuneration in this instance is a sympathetic implication of ideals.)

In a rather more moderate approach—situated somewhere between licensing and murder—is the forced occupation of an expensive, modern, and sustainable hotel in T.X. Watson's "The Boston Hearth Project."[7] In this story, the titular organisation, made up entirely of volunteers, basically confiscates the building for the use of the city's burgeoning and at-risk homeless population. There is opposition, of course, from local government and business interests, but the message is clear: paid labour has failed to solve the problem of homelessness. Perhaps unpaid labour, working outside the bounds of what respectable employers may compensate, will have greater success. Sustainable habitats, the story argues, should not be restricted to the wealthy, and environmental justice not only demands change, but encourages diverse individuals with diverse skills to donate their time and expertise in order to achieve it.

It's notable that, in stories such as "Boston Hearth" and "Predatory Transience", effective resistance to the consequences of unrestrained greed and unsustainable behaviour must come from outside the systems that promote such behaviour in the first place. Unpaid labour may be necessary for change, and for conservation efforts, in real life as well as speculative fiction, but that it can inspire change is heartening. There is, however, a cost to such labour—and a cost beyond the million or so dollars absorbed by backyard bird watchers, for instance.

Unpaid labour does have opportunity costs. Not everyone is in a position to volunteer their time and skills, and those who have the most time and the greatest skills may be disinclined to use those resources to undermine a system that has so well-rewarded them. The initial questions of who performs that unpaid labour, and who most benefits from it, are inescapably present in issues of conservation and environmental sustainability. That speculative fiction is increasingly imagining these issues indicates an increased awareness, within the genre, of the link between environmentalism and labour. This link, I hope, is something that science fiction creators will continue to explore and to critique, as they illustrate possible futures for all of us.

6 "A Predatory Transience" by C.G. Aubrey. In *Reckoning 7*, published 12 February 2023, https://reckoning.press/a-predatory-transience/.

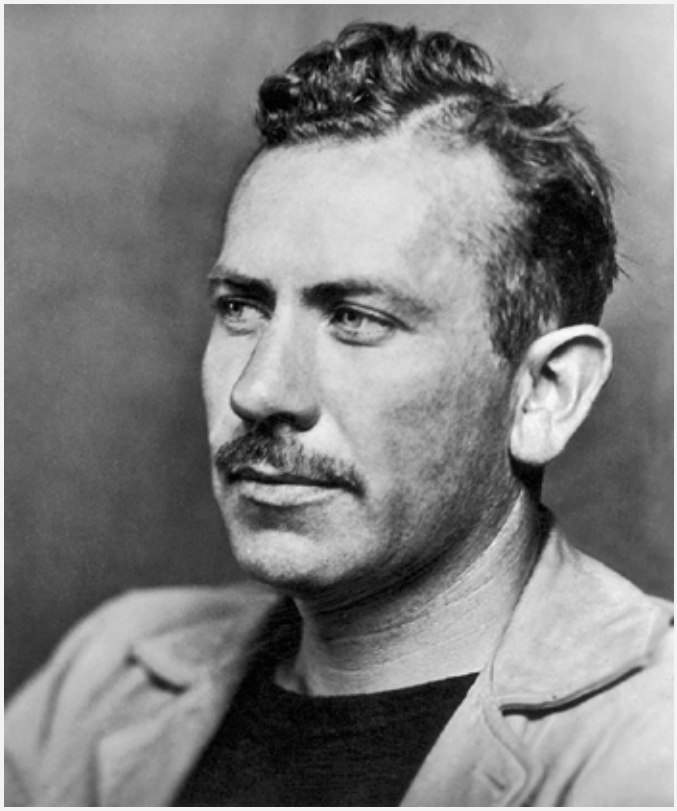
7 "The Boston Hearth Project" by T. X. Watson. In *Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation*, edited by Phoebe Wagner and Brontë Christopher Wieland. Upper Rubber Boot Press, 2017.

Learning to Write Science Fiction from John Steinbeck

By Will McMahon

How many miles to the Torgas Valley? You cannot get there from here.

If such a thing as "The Great American Novel" exists, it is, for my money, *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck—though I don't have very much money, so I suppose that's not saying a lot. Far less well known, however, is Steinbeck's 1936 novel, *In Dubious Battle*. I was years into my work as a union organizer when I first happened upon this story of a Depression-era apple-pickers' strike in California and found a surprisingly faithful examination of the nuts-and-bolts process of labour organizing, with insights on leadership identification, issue agitation, and strike strategy that hold true today. What I've found even more surprising in the years since that first encounter, though, is what the novel has taught me about writing science fiction.



Though known for his realism, Steinbeck still created imaginary places. (Image via Wikipedia)

Few would associate the realist Steinbeck with genre (yes, we've all heard about the werewolf trunk novel; no, it shouldn't be published), yet while most of his work is set in places like the Salinas Valley or Monterey, California, *In Dubious Battle* features an invented setting: the Torgas Valley.

Steinbeck taught me that when you want to write about the whole world, you need to distill it into one place. The Torgas Valley is a small community based on a single industry: a planet valley of hats apples. It is a microcosm of the broader agricultural economy of wide swaths of the U.S. at the time, dependent on exploited migrant workers (thankfully we've gotten over that). The two main characters, members of a mysterious Party that is never named — one might assume CPUSA, but the 1930s U.S. was rife with leftist parties that could fit the bill—are dropped like Culture agents into this hotbed of revolutionary potential.

One of the great uses of speculative fiction is to abstract the conditions of our world so as to see them more clearly. Almost all fiction does this at the character level, with even "realist" stories largely populated by invented characters. Speculative fiction takes this further, inventing whole societies, laws of physics, planets—and valleys. Steinbeck drew clear inspiration from real-life agricultural strikes in 1930s California but, unsatisfied with the world as it was, rent the Earth and filled the hole with a mirror of not one place but many. Or, in the man's own words, "I have used a small strike in an orchard valley as the symbol of man's eternal, bitter warfare with himself."

(Of course, Steinbeck also taught me that any such act of creation will be beset by nitpickers. Yes, it seems the

continued on page 19

Fit For Purpose

By A. L. Yakimchuk

FICTION

Manesha taps her stylus against the edge of the sketchpad. Its dull thud matches her mood. Her dark eyes scrutinize the stork logo – a piece she thought she had finished. The bird is sitting in its nest, preening its feathers, just like the design order specified. She should be saving and sending it to the project lead but something doesn't quite work. She's never seen a stork nest in real life, let alone a stork. After all, they are basically extinct. The pics she found in the company databanks weren't great, offering wading birds at the wrong angles or exposures.

She sits back and gently scans the rows of hot-desks in front of her. It's late and there are only a few employees left in the workspace. She can't remember if anyone is sitting in the two rows behind her and doesn't want to attract attention by turning around to check. It's rare for supervisors to be here after regular hours, she tells herself, and pulls a mobile from a cargo pocket. With a few keystrokes she prompts an AI image generator, resulting in nesting storks that almost fit the project specs. With a tilt of her hand she sends the best one to her work account. It only takes a few minutes to play with the colour values and Bézier curves, then refresh the work within her original image. She's just about to hit save and send when Jack clears his throat with a low growl.

"Hope that's not what I think it is. Prove me wrong, ok?" His tall brow is creased in disappointment, a visual at odds with the tangled mass of grey hair that frames it. Manesha hopes her floor boss and union shop steward missed the defensive microexpression she was unable to quash.

Swivelling to face him straight on, she sour-pouts, "Jack, we have the tools. We should use them."

"Manesha, you work in a shop with employee protections that are good for you and everyone else, whether you want to believe that or not."

"Fuck this," she mumbles as she hits save and send and then logs off. "I'm past reg time anyway." She collects her things and starts to leave.

"It's your choice to be here long hours, you know. How you log your time is up to you."

She's almost at the door. "I know, Jack. But I happen to like my work."

"That's not a bad thing. But you aren't working in isolation here."

"Might as well be," she whispers to the door as it soft-closes behind her, feeling smug about preventing a more ugly escalation.

At least the hot-desking space is temperature and air controlled, she reminds herself, as the dankness of the evening air attacks her senses. The industrial air cleaners filter the stench of the city better than her collection of mini units could ever do. It's one of the reasons hot-desking is so popular. The company gives all standard employees two days a week in-house, and there's a lottery for a third day. Manesha puts her name in every month but has only drawn it once in fourteen.

Fixing a mask to her face, she wades through heat escaping sidewalks. The pub she's meeting Petra at is only a few blocks away but by the time she arrives there's a layer of sweat forming along the lines where her cross-body bag rubs against her back. She regrets

continued on page 18

Fit For Purpose (cont.)

continued from page 17

drinking a third can of energy drink so late in the day.

Petra waves from a corner table. Her bright, strappy summer dress is made of some sort of recycled fabric. In front of her sits two empty beer glasses.

“You couldn’t wait for me, huh?” Manesha gestures to the empty pints.

“You’re late!” Then, with a smile, “and I’m prepping for freenight.”

“That’s tonight?” Manesha’s chest constricts with envy as she collapses in the bench seat. She almost never missed the quarterly craft beer gathering of freelance designers. It was always somewhere pricier than the pub but worth the opportunity to commiserate and make contacts.

“Yeah, but you gave that up, remember?” Petra winks and orders another round on her mobile.

“Yeah, and see these teeth?” Lips stretch back, bearing a set of straight, pearly dentition. “This is what benefits can buy you. Beauty and health, baby. Beau-ty and health.”

“I hate you.” Petra’s grin is wide. “How long have you been there now? Feels like forever.”

“Yeah, for me too.” Manesha sighs, “My first annual review was last month. No more probation, so at least that’s something nice I can say about it.”

“Oh please. We all fought for that position. Don’t make it sound like such a death sentence.”

“I don’t know. I mean, I like the steady income and the hot-desking and of course the benefits. But it’s like people don’t want to work, you know? They just do what’s required, nothing more.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“We can’t even use AI.”

“Well that’s stupid.”

“Yeah.”

“Are they still using InDesign too?” The women laugh at the anachronism as new beers replace empty glasses.

Petra looks thoughtful. “Still, a lot of great work comes out of your shop. I’ve seen it.” She fights to find another helpful rationalization but comes up empty. “No AI – really?”

“Well, that’s the rule anyway. I slip some in, but it could get me into trouble.”

“My first annual review was last month. No more probation, so at least that’s something nice I can say about it.

“Trouble with the boss?”

“More like the union.”

“How? Aren’t they supposed to protect employees?”

“I guess it depends on what kind of employee you are.” Manesha raises an eyebrow and her glass to Petra, “Here’s to the freedom of freelance!”

“As long as you pick up the tab!”

Following a healthy sip, Petra adds, “Seriously, though, dude, you gotta have a tribe in a place like that. Invite people out for a drink or something. Make some work friends. You don’t have to like them. Don’t hang yourself. My dad had a standard job when I was little and he always said, ‘never do more than 20% more than the person sitting next to you. Otherwise you’ll make enemies. Life’s too short for enemies like that.’”

“That’s dumb. Also, the coworkers stopped inviting me to things within my first month there. I think it’s a generational thing.”

*****

For the next month Manesha restricts her use of AI image generators to inspirational brainstorming, and only while working at home on a separate, personal, machine.

Finding the emotional energy to develop work friendships, or even acquaintances, is tougher. She had enjoyed the lone wolf cadence of freelance work, meeting as a pack when needed or wanted, not as a prerequisite for performance. Interpreting social cues at work feels like a different language using a foreign alphabet. Things become intolerable after she tries to share an exciting assignment with a few other designers in the break room. How was she supposed to know that they had been hoping the quarter's biggest assignment would be given to a more senior member of the team? She stops entering the hot-desk lottery.

The design project she wins the assignment for is ambitious and challenging. She's responsible for creating, from concept level up, a series of promotional posters for a large client in the entertainment sector. Manesha spends a lot of time in the zone, developing mock-ups of characters and scenes after long, painful conversations to develop and approve the concepts. Hours are invested going over details, making sure everything is to spec and that each element works in harmony with the overall vision. It's a vision based on ideas she brought to the table, which is especially sweet. When she's finished a few months later it's a major accomplishment. She's proud and pretends it's alright to celebrate with a bottle of underground homebrew and a new pair of shoes instead of sharing her success with colleagues or friends. She considers naming both the brew and the shoes.

Two days after client sign off and submitting the final posters Manesha gets an in-person meeting request from Kyle, the project team lead. Meeting face to face is almost unheard of outside of annual performance reviews and sleep is evasive in the intervening days.

*****

She takes a long breath in through her nostrils before knocking on Kyle's door, even though she can see him through the glass window and could have just waved. He motions for her to enter and then to take a seat.

continued on page 20

Torgas Valley might be another planet

continued from page 16

Torgas Valley might be too far south climate-wise for commercial apple orchards. What of it?)

Steinbeck taught me that, when you can't think of a title, you need only raid Milton or some other great (public domain) poet.

Steinbeck taught me that if you want to sell a fictional world, you've got to do your research on the real one. From the mechanical functions of pickup trucks to the economics of cans of beans, it's the fine details that make the unreal real in the Torgas Valley.

Steinbeck taught me that overly male casts were not unique to 20th century genre fiction. It's still a great book but come on, John.

Steinbeck taught me to think at the intersection of the psychological and the sociological, in that place of tension where individual human behavior melds into unstoppable tides. It's a critical location for both labour and science fiction, when the smallest of shifts can change the course of a world.

Steinbeck taught me that today's "low" art can be tomorrow's classic. The mass aneurysm suffered by the American literati at John Steinbeck's shock win of the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature was the stuff of ghettoized science fiction writers' dreams.

Steinbeck taught me to lean into the ambiguous ending. A dark night. Blood on the ground. The world coming apart. The first words of a hard speech. Trust the reader; they will take it further than you ever could.

And, of course, Steinbeck taught me to be careful what you wish for when it comes to movie adaptations — James Franco might just butcher your ending.

Fit For Purpose (cont.)

continued from page 19

Manesha's hips have barely settled on the guest chair before he says, "So, I'm pretty busy and will get to the point, ok?"

She nods, obedient and terrified.

"You're new, and we like what we see. More importantly, the client really liked what they saw on the poster project. They want us to sign over the output for further use, including the characters you created. So we're sending it on to marketing. This is a pretty big deal for someone so junior and could be the start of a quick rise up here." He fidgets with something on his desk. "Any reason we shouldn't send your work over to marketing?"

Manesha feels her jaw start to drop but she manages to keep her lips closed until she's able to form words. "Uh, yeah. I mean no, I don't think there's any reason not to do that."

"Cool cool. Great." His words are rapid, caffeine-fueled. "I'll send the form over the system. Just esign and we're good, ok?"

"Uh, ok."

Kyle shifts his focus to his screen. "Ok - it's sent. Let me know if you have any questions." His eyes remain fixed on the monitor.

Manesha sits for a few seconds, unsure of what to do next.

"Is there something else?" Kyle asks, moving only his eyes in her direction.

"No, uh, no." Stiff legs take her to the door and down the hall.

The form is surprisingly long and she doesn't understand most of the legalese. With a click of the embedded down arrow she skips to the bottom and esigns it, an apprehensive bubble of anxiety roosting in her diaphragm. Her work is being launched into something with broader impact and she doesn't want to mess up the opportunity.

On her walk home, she decides to treat Petra to one of the fancy beer places but not tell her why.

*****

It's a few weeks before their calendars sync and Manesha is shocked to see her characters on video displays around town and on social media ads before the beer date. The campaign is promoting a new series of video games and the characters are featured prominently on advertisements promoting a merch and game launch nine months out.

Despite her original intentions, Manesha spills everything to Petra before the first round arrives.

"That's insane!"

"I know, right? It sucks that I can't get excited about it with anyone at work but it's so unreal to have your stuff out there like that!"

"So what are you getting for residuals or whatever the big boys are calling it these days?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you retain any rights at all? Are you getting any-

thing for all this media bling?"

"Uh, no. I was just doing my job. I thought that's what I was paid for." A confused scowl crawls along Manesha's forehead.

"Well yeah but for something this big there's usually another layer of compensation or something, right? Like, they are going to make a ton of money off those games… shouldn't you be getting a cut?"

"I don't know… I don't think so." Manesha's face crumples. She moves her tongue across her teeth. "I did sign something."

"Lemme see it."

Manesha pulls the document up on her mobile and hands it across the table. Petra skims and scrolls for an eternity.

"Looks like all this is doing is confirming that it's your original work and that you didn't use AI or other 'assistive technologies.' " She scoffs. "They really have you handcuffed over there, don't they? I'm guessing they got all your rights in your employment contract. This thing is probably something the union made them do."

A wave of fear washes over Manesha. "They won't know if I used AI for inspiration, will they? I mean, just to help with ideas and stuff."

"I don't know. I don't see how. I mean, you're not reproducing someone else's original work, right?"

"No! Of course not."

"And you're not preventing someone else from getting paid for something, right?"

"How could I be doing that?"

"I don't know. Big companies have been pushing out smaller players forever without breaking any 'rules' but no one seems to care about that. Generative AI doesn't feel much different. Also, I think you're missing the point here."

Manesha's scowl returns.

"You're not being compensated properly for work you created. Doesn't matter how you created it, so long as you're not preventing others from making money off their work. Or damaging their reputation, I guess. This stuff is confusing but it all boils down to not being an asshole. And they're the ones being assholes."

*****

The next day is a hot-desk day. Manesha waits for another designer to enter the break room and follows close behind.

"Hey. Uh, hi." The woman, mid-forties, is clearly intent on making coffee but half-turns to almost face Manesha. "Hi."

"Have, uh, have we met?" Anxiety forces the words out as a squeak.

> "You need to talk to your union rep, girl."

"Yeah, we've met. You're the one that got Sue's assignment."

"Oh." Manesha fights an urge to turn and run. The defeat of not fitting in is overwhelming.

"Hey, it happens. Don't sweat it. Looks like your stuff hit all the buttons. Congrats."

She swallows hard. "Do big projects like that come with extra compensation?"

The woman laughs, but gently. "They should, yeah. But only if you know your rights and negotiate ahead of time. You need to talk to your union rep, girl. Call Jack." She pats Manesha on the shoulder, sharing the aroma of ambition as she leaves the breakroom.

*****

It takes a week to sync their calendars, and Manesha takes two of those days as mental health leave. Then there's Jack, on video call from his home office.

"What is it?"

"It's about the big project I worked on, with Kyle."

"Your project is doing real well. The bosses are verrry

continued on page 22

Fit For Purpose (cont.)

continued from page 21

happy with it."

"Yeah, I was too."

"Not anymore?"

"Well, I'm wondering if I should have gotten something more for it, you know?"

Jack sits back in his home office chair, and a fat orange cat jumps into his lap. He scritches the cat behind its ears before responding.

"I know there's alot going on with orientation for new hires. A lot to remember and take in. I'm hoping you made it to at least one of the union orientations for your cohort." He pauses as Manesha's expression confirms that she did not.

"The contract is long and can feel impenetrable but we got some good stuff in there last time around. Including a graduated approach for the use of AI and an opportunity for designers to request a review for scaling remuneration on special projects."

"Huh?"

The scritching stops. Jack holds up an index finger. "One. You can use AI in limited, approved ways." His middle digit joins the index. "Two. We didn't want to use the phrase 'merit pay' but for exceptional projects, like, say, when a poster series might go 'roidal or something?" He cocks his head and looks at least ten years younger.

Manesha looks down at her new shoes, digging them into the vinyl flooring.

"A designer can ask for a review of remuneration on major projects before it goes to marketing for a blow-out. Did Kyle give you that?"

"There was a form but I think it was saying I didn't use other people's stuff or something."

"Third party content and mechanically produced content outside of anything the company has licensed. Yeah. But there should have also been a line or two about waiving your right to a special review. Did you see that sentence in there?"

"I don't remember."

> "I'm guessing you didn't read it."
>
> "You would be guessing correctly."

Jack sighs and the cat leaps away. Jack looks up at the camera, a frown crawling across his face. "I'm guessing you didn't read it."

"You would be guessing correctly." One of the air units on her DIY tower sputters and stops working. She wishes she could do the same.

"Don't worry, you're not the first."

"What do I do now?"

"About this project? Probably nothing. We could try to submit a grievance, if you're up for that. But it won't be easy and I don't know if I can convince central that it's worth it."

Tears begin weighing against the back of her eyes.

"But you could join us at the next union meeting, share your story with others. If you are comfortable with that. When you're ready, of course."

Fighting back a sniffle, Manesha nods. "I'll think about it."

"We're here for you when you're ready."

*****

Talking about the mess she made at work feels im-

possible, and she pushes the idea out of reach. Manesha also starts pulling back on assignments. When it seemed clear that no one notices she starts feeling depressed. No one, that is, except Kyle.

The video feed is scratchier than normal and she's unsure if the fidgeting she sees on the screen is more Kyle or weak wifi. "You ready for another big assignment? I see you've been consistent with the smaller projects you've been working on – and that's great – but maybe you want something more demanding?"

'What did you have in mind?" She wonders if the apathy of depression can help create emotional boundaries at work.

"Well, it's complicated. Let me show you."

Kyle starts screensharing a series of what look like panel mock-ups for a graphic novel. The line work is really rough but the main, rodent-like character is much more defined and looks vaguely familiar but she can't place it. Kyle describes the multi-volume series that staff writers at a client's affiliate are working on. "We need someone to do the design work on this. It would be your main assignment – your only assignment – for about four months or so. What do you think?" He's tapping an aluminium straw on his desk. The clicking is pounding the audio feed like a metronome.

"That protag looks super familiar."

"Yeah, we built it from a bunch of image generators."

An unsteady silence fills the screen.

"You want me to keep using those?"

"No no. You just build off of them. Like most of the best designers do now. It's considered standard practice. And don't worry, we can run anything you're really worried about through legal first. Within reason, of course. That team could suck our entire budget if we let it." His nervous laughter is interrupted by wifi interference. When the connection restores he is saying something about IP being the business plan for most design companies these days.

Manesha doesn't want to know what she missed but surreptitiously screen captures the panel Kyle's video feed has paused on.

"How long do I have to think about it?"

"We'd need to know by next week."

Tracking down the provenance of the rodent takes more of her time than she'd planned. There's nothing in the government's registration databases or the corporation's databanks. She finally gives up on reverse image searching and texts an excerpt of the screen capture to Petra, intentionally ignoring the terms of her original non-disclosure agreement. It takes a few days but whatever network Petra's tapped into comes through. The rodent looks strikingly similar to Bothony, a character used in a series of children's books published roughly ten years ago, written and illustrated by a Portuguese school teacher. The series had some success in a number of Latin American countries but was never translated into English and never gained a foothold in more lucrative foreign markets. Rabbit-holing social media reveals that Bothony's creator and the books' author, Sophia Tarina, is still a school teacher even though her pics on social media show that she's clearly past retirement age. Her open posts are mostly fundraising pleas for childrens' winter soccer camps and friends' hospital fees. Manesha is reminded of her grandparents' stories about the former European Union and its member states' near universal health care system and generous pensions. She also remembers stories about her own great-great grandmother being able to retire at 65, instead of being forced to cobble together part-time jobs in an attempt to make

continued on page 24

Fit For Purpose (cont.)

continued from page 23

ends meet, like most septuagenarians are forced to do now. Sophia's oval face stares at Manesha from across the Internet; a serious woman with deep lines pulled down by decades of unforgiving gravity and heat.

Manesha emails Kyle to let him know that she'll take the assignment. He praises her "smart, career-defining decision" in a return email, and includes a link to basically the same waiver that she signed for the video game project. Having learned her lesson, she takes the waiver to Jack. It turns out that the scale of the project is not big enough to warrant extra "merit" and she doesn't pursue personal signback or rights retention options.

Working directly from Sophia's original artwork, Manesha methodically builds the visual components for the panels, adding frames and reaching out to the writing team when needed. Manesha prints a picture of Sophia Tarina's Bothony and tapes it to the wall beside her home office desk, using it as a guide to bring the graphic novel's rodent, now named Robby by the writing team, more visually in line with Bothony.

She enjoys the work and especially the conversations with the writing team, whose plot arcs and character development creates more interesting work for Manesha. She's disappointed when none of her design coworkers seem interested in talking to her about the project. At Petra's prompting she starts to pay attention and notices that no one in the office talks about their work assignments at all.

With Kyle's permission, Manesha submits the finished character images through legal, asking them to check for potential infringement. Kyle agrees that this is a reasonable course of action, given that the originals were produced by a generator. Manesha spends a sleepless week waiting for what she is sure will be a summons to head office.

*****

"When do you find out?" Petra asks over beer.

"Hopefully soon. I keep having nightmares about the time in design school when I was accused of plagiarism and copyright infringement. Do you remember that?"

Petra slams her glass on the table. "OMG yes! That was so dumb."

"Right?"

One of the instructors had called Manesha to her office after a teaching assistant decided that a logo Manesha created looked very similar to one used by a local bowling alley. The teaching assistant consulted with the college's copyright specialist before persuading the instructor to take disciplinary action.

"I had never even heard of that bowling alley! Heck, I've never even been bowling!" Manesha laughs, but Petra only smiles.

"That thing fucked you up for weeks. It took you so long to build back your confidence again. And it was only a word in a circle." Petra shakes her head. "It's not like you were ever going to make any money off that stupid logo."

"Right? The assignment was to learn to use RightDrawer, not make money for some imaginary competing bowling alley or confuse any potential imaginary bowlers. It was even a crappy typeface." They fall silent for a few seconds and Manesha's face softens before she continues. "It really hurt, though. That

accusation."

"Yeah. Where are the copyright police when we creators actually need them?"

*****

Manesha's heart starts to race when she sees Kyle's incoming video call. It's still beating hard after he explains that legal has approved moving forward with the project, without changes. He even gushes, "It's the clearest clearance I've ever seen from legal!" Manesha thinks of Petra and tries to channel her friend's self-confidence. She asks Kyle for a copy of legal's email, "so she can learn more about the process."

But the assessment legal provides does not inspire confidence for Manesha. "The risk of using the images listed on Schedule A of the Assessment is low enough to warrant no mitigation." That's it. Nothing about proceeding with the project, although that's Kyle's interpretation and Petra tells her that Kyle's interpretation should be good enough to ease her mind. Manesha wonders how any level of legal risk is ok, but doesn't know who she could ask to learn more. She wonders how people that are paid so much to provide legal advice can get away with saying so little about what is right or wrong under the law. In the end, she's simply embarrassed that she ever thought the corporation would be worried about anything that didn't obviously and grievously impact their shareholders. At Petra's insistence, though, Manesha makes copies of all correspondence, just in case. She wonders if making those copies is a copyright infringement with an acceptably low amount of risk. After rolling her eyes at herself, she looks up at Sophia's Bothony, grabs a black marker, and adds a new title to the page, in big block letters: "ROBOThony"

*****

Days combine into weeks and weeks into months and the graphic novel project is completed on time and within budget. It takes the affiliate company awhile to finalize an agreement with a celebrity "author." Or rather, it takes awhile to figure out which celebrity's name will be on the book's title page. After all, it's not easy to sell a book written by "staff." Manesha transfers money to Petra, who orders a hardcopy.

Manesha can't remember the last time she held a paper book. Paper is expensive and sensitive to heat and humidity. She grips the volume in her hands and holds it out in front of her. "Well, Bothony, I hope you have a safe migration home." She inserts a printout between the book's cover and its flypaper. It lists artist-friendly IP lawyers based in Portugal. Both are carefully wrapped in absorbent gauze and placed in a box made of a sturdy cardboard substitute. The automated postbox prints out a tracking receipt: expected arrival in Lisbon, 6 days.

Making Work Sexy with William Morris

By Kira Braham

In his 1888 essay "Useful Work Versus Useless Toil," the British socialist, artist, and science fiction author William Morris suggests a provocative question: why can't work be more like sex?

He opens the essay with a rebuttal to his bourgeois Victorian contemporaries who were celebrating labour and employment as goods in themselves. Much of the work required in a capitalist economy, says Morris, is awful, and no one should do it. But we should not assume that just because work is alienating and miserable under capitalism, it must always be this way. In fact, he contends, humans have an innate desire to work, and under the right conditions, work could be not only bearable but even enjoyable. His logical defense of this position is brilliant: "Let us grant, first, that the race of man must either labour or perish. Nature does not give us our livelihood gratis; we must win it by toil of some sort or degree. Let us see, then, if she does not give us some compensation for this compulsion to labour, since certainly in other matters she takes care to make the acts necessary to human life in the individual and the race not only endurable, but even pleasurable."

If you can read through the cheeky euphemism ("other matters"—wink, wink), what Morris is saying here is: if Nature has wired us to enjoy the other two things we must do to survive—eat and procreate—why should labour be any different? While eating is necessary for the survival of the individual, labour and sex are more akin, because both of these are required for species survival. Labour is essential because we cannot exist as a species without altering the planet to meet our collective needs, and sex is essential for species continuation. So, if most humans seem naturally inclined to enjoy sex, why not work?

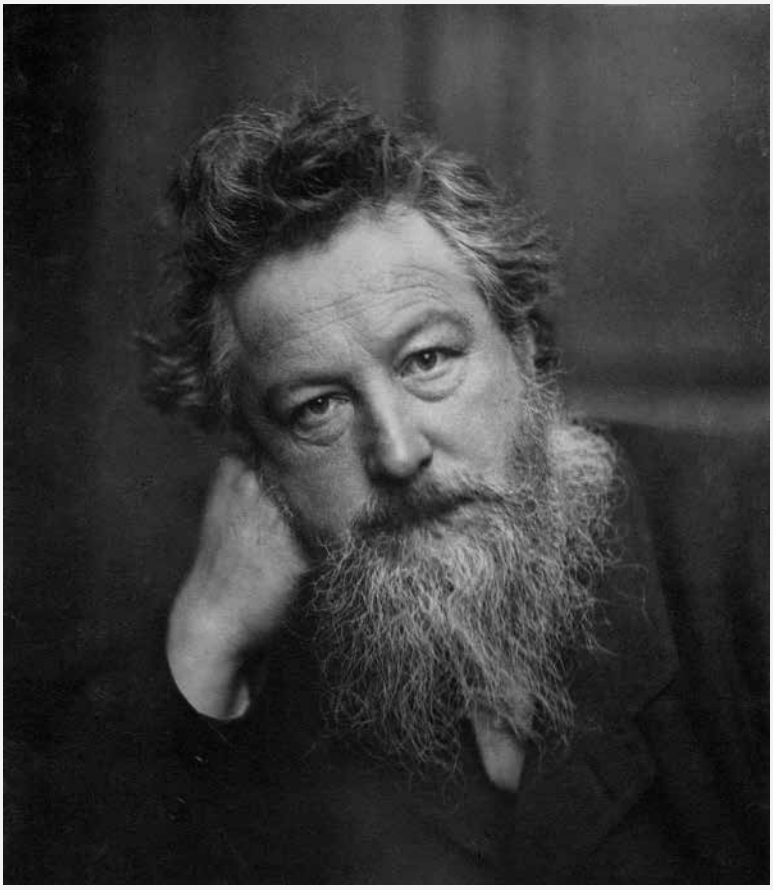
Morris reasons that most humans aren't enjoying their work because… capitalism. He argues that as long as our economy is designed to produce profit—rather than to meet actual human needs and wants—work will never be conducive to happiness. Like sex, work can only be pleasurable under the right conditions. For the remainder of "Useful Work vs. Useless Toil," then, Morris outlines three basic conditions that are essential to reuniting humans with our natural desire to be productive: "hope of rest," "hope of pleasure in the work itself," and "hope of product." These three conditions form the foundation for a postcapitalist future that would be radically different from life under capitalism.

One of the worst things capitalism does, according to Morris, is to force us into a life of repetition.

Hope of rest is pretty straightforward. Even if work is fulfilling and enjoyable, it will always require an output of energy, and we don't have limitless energy. Not only do we need time for our bodies to recuperate, says Morris, but we also need time to be free from thinking about our next move. We also need time to do the things we like to do that are decidedly unproductive. So, come the revolution, working hours will need to be shorter than they are under capitalism.

Hope of pleasure in the work itself is more complex; the pleasure obtained can vary based on the nature of the work. But there is one essential element required for making all work pleasurable: variety. One of the worst things capitalism does, according to Morris, is to force us into a life of repetition: "To compel a man to do day after day the same task, without any hope of escape or change, means nothing short of turning his life into a prison-torment. Nothing but the tyranny of profit-grinding makes this necessary." Morris does not suggest that the alternative is a free-for-all, in which we jump endlessly from employment to employment. Morris was also an enthusiastic proponent of skilled labour. To become skilled workers, we must spend dedicated hours learning and practicing our chosen craft or

profession. Morris simply suggests that we might develop and be allowed to practice a few different skills; in particular, he argues that we would be happier and healthier if we combined sedentary occupations with outdoor and active ones. So, rather than be a literature professor who keeps a personal garden plot and loves to cook, in a world in which I wasn't forced into a single paid occupation to which my survival is tied, I might be a professor-farm labourer-prep cook.



William Morris in the 1890s.
(Image via The William Morris Society)

You might be thinking: why would someone in a privileged profession like professor want to also perform a "menial" job like farm labour? For some, this might be hard to imagine. But it is important to remember that there is nothing inherently undesirable about this work. It is made undesirable by the conditions imposed on it by capitalism: long hours in which the physical exertion wears on the body and repetition wears on the mind, extreme economic precarity, and the lack of social recognition caused by the mislabeling of this work as unskilled. If the work were short in duration and properly valued, it could certainly be pleasurable for some. Individuality always comes into play here: many of us have various physical conditions that would make this work painful or impossible…and some people are just never going to love work that involves getting dirty. And that's cool. I am never going to love any work that involves using an Excel spreadsheet. (And there is a reader out there right now thinking: "But I LOVE spreadsheets." This is the beauty of infinite diversity.)

While personal enjoyment of the work itself is important for Morris, the third condition, hope of product, is actually the most central to his postcapitalist vision. Like Marx, Morris understood capitalism for what it really is: not a lean labour-maximizing machine but a chaotic system that recklessly squanders human energy and potential. The greatest tragedy of capitalism is that so many of us are forced to be unproductive, to engage in what Morris calls "useless toil." For Morris, this includes: anyone primarily engaged in accruing and managing wealth (capitalists, bankers, lawyers, etc.); those forced to produce "articles of folly and luxury" for the rich or "miserable makeshifts" for the poor; and those tasked with creating the false demand for these products: advertisers and retail workers.

Of the items in this list, Morris's argument about "miserable makeshifts" is the most poignant. Have you ever purchased something that you knew was poorly made with low-quality materials because it was all you could afford at the time? Unless you have lived a very privileged existence, the answer is probably yes. There is certainly something demoralizing about this for the consumer, but Morris asks us to think about the army of workers tasked with creating these products. Even beyond the fact that the labour conditions that produce these cheap products are often terrible, the worker is forced to waste their time and

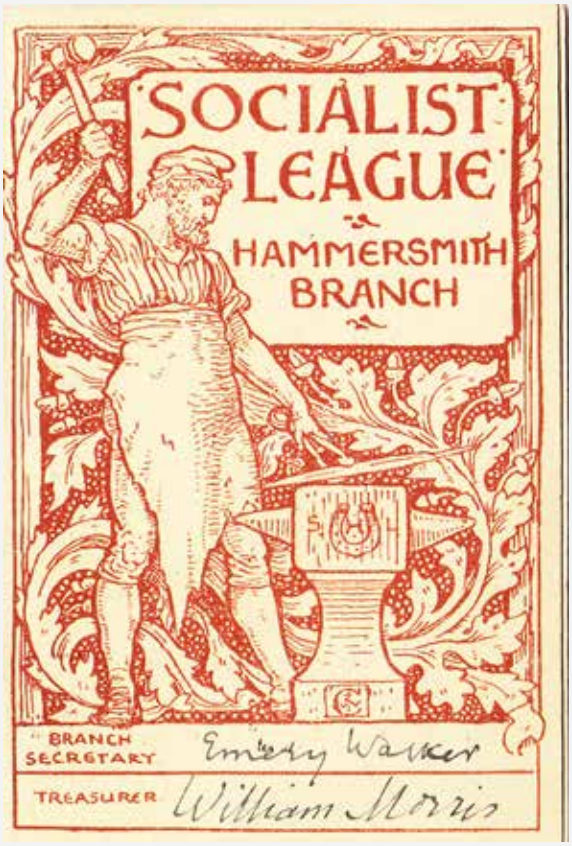
continued on page 28

Morris: people have natural desire for useful work

continued from page 27

energy creating things that do not bring pleasure and that have limited or compromised utility. For Morris, this is a devastating waste of human potential.

Furthermore, Morris argues that utility is an essential component of making work pleasurable. Labour, if it is to be enjoyed, "must be directed towards some obviously useful end." While pleasure and utility are often presented to us as a dichotomy, Morris insists that they are intimately intertwined. His postcapitalist vision is predicated on the idea that the opportunity to be useful—to know that we are making a meaningful contribution and having a positive impact on the world around us—is essential to human happiness. This is how labour that may never be pleasurable in itself, like garbage collection or factory work, could still be a source of pleasure. (Again, however, only if it is not one's sole occupation.)



William Morris was a member of the Socialist League.
(Image via The William Morris Society)

Morris realizes that we have been so successfully programmed to understand work as an individual means of survival that a philosophical shift may be necessary before we could fully embrace the pleasure of merging our individual labour with the collective good. In Morris's postcapitalist vision, the "element of obvious usefulness is all the more to be counted on in sweetening tasks otherwise irksome, since social morality, the responsibility of man towards the life of man, will, in the new order of things, take the place of theological morality, or the responsibility of man to some abstract idea." Morris believes that humans are naturally inclined to desire useful work, but he also understands that our desires are shaped by the world in which we live.

The leftist historian E.P. Thompson famously noted that Morris was engaged in the "education of desire." Even in his utopian novel, *News from Nowhere*, Morris avoids constructing an exact blueprint of the postcapitalist future. Instead, Morris encourages us to desire more than capitalism has to offer. Morris also insists that pursuing our desires is not incompatible with creating a more equitable and sustainable world. If we embrace the pleasure of usefulness, individual happiness becomes intimately intertwined with the collective good.

As a queer feminist, I immediately see the danger of the "hope of product" element of Morris's work/sex analogy: it seems to privilege reproductive sex. After all, Morris initially links work and sex because they are both necessary for species survival. But I think there is a more generous reading to be made. For me, the beauty of the work/sex analogy is that it foregrounds human connection. It suggests that work, like sex, should involve the merging of our own needs and desires with the needs and desires of others. It suggests a model of collectivity based not on sacrifice or even service but on what we might call erotic entanglement. This model may not be a blueprint for the postcapitalist future—as a blueprint, it would be rather messy and incomplete—but it is a utopian demand that insists on the possibility of a more desirable world.

Rule of Acquisition 211

By Bob Barnetson

Introduction

Unions are rarely portrayed in literature, and science fiction is no exception. Consider *Star Trek*, the largest sci-fi franchise. Of its approximately 1,800 television episodes and novels, unions are central to the plot of only one.

The absence of unions makes in-universe sense. Unions are tools workers use to win better wages and working conditions. The economy of the United Federation of Planets freely distributes the necessities of life, dispensing with both currency and scarcity.

The Federation's economy eliminates the class-based conflict typical of capitalist economies wherein, for example, workers must sell their labour to purchase food and shelter and thereby make themselves vulnerable to exploitation by employers. Not surprisingly, the one plot involving unions centres on non-Federation citizens being exploited by hyper-capitalists.

"Bar Association"

The series *Deep Space 9* is set on a space station, the social hub of which is Quark's, a bar and casino. Quark is Ferengi, a race of hyper-capitalists whose lives are governed by the Rules of Acquisition. In "Bar Association" (S4, E16), Quark's mistreatment of his employees (including his brother Rom) results in the employees forming a union and going on strike for better wages and working conditions.

The strike escalates tensions on the station and the station's commander applies pressure to Quark to end the strike. Striking is illegal among the Ferengi and the Ferengi Commerce Authority (FCA) dispatches enforcers to threaten both the strikers and Quark. Rom eventually agrees to disband the union in exchange for Quark quietly meeting the union's demands.

As a trade unionist and labour-relations professor, seeing a positive portrayal of a union drive and strike was refreshing. Typically, unions are framed as corrupt and picket-lines as violent. These are useful, if largely inaccurate, plot devices. Bar Association avoids these tropes. It does, however, contain elements that are inconsistent with what we know about unions in capitalist economies.

What "Bar Association" Got Right

The workers unionized to improve their wages and working conditions. By collectively withholding their labour and dissuading customers from patronizing Quark's Bar, the workers exerted economic pressure on Quark to give in to their demands. This created a countervailing power to Quark's ability to simply hire replacement workers.

Not surprisingly, Quark resisted this pressure. He refused the workers' demands presented during a march on the boss, thereby triggering the workers to strike. Quark then tried to divide the workers by bribing Rom. Quark's Bar remained open during this time, unsuccessfully utilizing holographic workers (a metaphor for automation and its shortcomings). Then, as tensions mounted, Quark implied there might be violence if the strike dragged on. These tactics are common employer responses, designed to break a strike.

The state was represented in two ways. The benevolent station commander sought to maintain social stability by refusing to sanction the strikers. This represents the state as a neutral referee, which is how it is normally framed in North American labour relations. By contrast, the Ferengi Commerce Authority represented the repressive power of the state. The FCA threatens the workers with fines and violence if they do not return to work and abandon their union activi-

Even the exploited sometimes aim to be expoiters

continued from page 29

ties. This portrayal reflects the state's interest in maintaining capitalist social formation, including workers accepting their subservient role, by minimizing the number and scope of conflicts through a combination of fines and state-sanctioned violence.

What "Bar Association" Got Wrong

The strike was eventually resolved after the FCA beat up Quark to apply pressure on Rom. This plot twist was well executed (and made in-universe sense) but elides that employers almost never face any meaningful consequence from a strike, beyond minor and often temporary economic loss. People who run businesses can generally afford to simply wait out the strikers. In real life, the risks — be they financial, legal, or of physical harm — are borne almost entirely by the workers.

The strike itself was resolved by Rom agreeing to disband the union (in order to appease the FCA) in exchange for Quark quietly agreeing to meet all of the worker's demands. This resolution grates in two ways. The first is that workers don't generally walk away from unions, especially ones that have won them better wages and working conditions. Perhaps we can excuse this as an expedient way to resolve the conflict in the episode and assume that, unseen by the audience, the union continues to operate in secret to hold Quark accountable.

The second is that Rom cut a deal with the employer with no apparent consultation with the rest of the union members. While union spokespersons generally have some latitude to negotiate, they cannot usually agree to radical proposals (as Rom does). This reflects that unions are (usually) highly democratic and Rom would have needed the rest of the workers to agree (perhaps this happened off stage).

As democratic organizations, union workers are also not monolithic. Individual members disagree about strategies and tactics, often vociferously. The internal politics of the Guild of Restaurant and Casino Workers was surprisingly docile once Rom's leadership was established. Perhaps the intra-organizational bargaining that characterizes union life also occurred offstage in order to make space for a largely forgettable subplot about a new crew member finding life on a space station difficult.

"Bar Association"'s Most insightful Moment

Early in the episode, Rom is receiving treatment for an infection. The station's doctor is appalled that Rom has no sick leave and off-handedly suggests Rom needs a union. Rom is confused and the doctor clarifies that a union prevents workers from being exploited. Rom responds that Ferengi "don't want to stop the exploitation. We want to find a way to become the exploiters."

This exchange reveals the degree to which Rom has internalized the hyper-capitalist values of the Ferengi. He is clearly never going to be one of the exploiters. Yet, the slim hope of (somehow) striking it rich keeps him and the other Ferengi from acting in their own self-interest. The inculcation of liberal-order values, such as property and contractual rights, is a key strategy that the state (both the FCA and contemporary liberal democracies) uses to limit the willingness of workers to act in ways that are disruptive to the capital accumulation process.

It's unclear if this scene was a deft bit of insight into the psyche of workers or simply a throw-away line to help viewers grasp the Ferengi mindset and, thus, benchmark the character development experienced by Rom in the episode.

Conclusion

As representations of unions in literature go, "Bar Association" was a solid effort (if, perhaps, a bit of a boring episode). The workers have a legitimate issue, they act sensibly to advance their interests, and they ultimately succeed in forcing an accommodation of their interests out of their employer (as workers often do). The instances when the episode portrays unions and strikes unrealistically are understandable, necessary either due to the demands of episodic television or for in-universe continuity.

We Must Start Over Again and Find Some Other Way of Life[1]

The Role of Organized Labor in the 1940s and '50s Science Fiction of Clifford D. Simak

By Joachim Boaz

Introduction

In a 1975 interview, Clifford D. Simak (1904-1988) disagreed with the claim that he believed technology was "not worth the price of anxiety, greed, and nuclear terror."[2] Instead, he countered, the problem "lies in us, not in our machines" as technology has been used to "advance the cause of our commercial-industrial society," which he believed was not synonymous with "the betterment of mankind."[3] Responding to these concerns, the three-time Hugo winner, famous for classics such as *City* (1952)[4] and *Way Station* (1963), often imagined post-capitalist pastoral futures populated by kindly robots, unity with alien races, and humans with paranormal powers.[5]

The common thread that appears across Simak's 1940s and '50s short fiction that I've surveyed for this article is that future manifestations of human commercial-industrial society will exploit their own workers and threaten alien cultures.[6] Workers attempt to mobilize but are often reliant on alien assistance or caring individuals to extricate themselves from a variety of scenarios caused by capitalist rapacity. Organized labour, by itself, does not contain the radical potential to transform society. However, it can facilitate meaningful change in concert with other forces. This echoes the dominant trend of American unions in the 1950s privileging new, mutually beneficial relationships with capital, rather than advocating for radical transformation.

The Midwestern Political Environment of Clifford D. Simak

Scholars debate the exact nature of Simak's political views as stories can simultaneously contain critiques of capitalism that "sound almost Marxist" and "a nostalgic longing for the pre-capitalist past [which] informed much conservative thought in the decade."[7] In

1 Clifford D. Simak's "Tools" in *Astounding*, ed. John W. Campbell, Jr. (July 1942), 124.

2 Simak's interview with Paul Walker appeared in the fanzine *Luna Monthly*, #57 (Spring 1975), 1-6. In the eight interviews I've managed to track down, Simak does not directly address the labour movement or his political allegiances.

3 *Luna Monthly*, #57, 2-3.

4 *City* (1952) is a fix-up of previously published short stories (1944-1951). Simak added an additional short story in 1973.

5 Robert Silverberg, in "Reflections: Rereading Simak" in *Asimov's* (2013), writes that "it was all too convenient to categorize Clifford D. Simak's work as mere nostalgic rhapsodizing for a time of lost innocence." Quoted in Christopher Cokinos' "Clifford Simak: The Land Ethic and Pulp Lyricism in Time and Again" in Extrapolation, vol. 55. no. 2 (2014), 135.

6 Consult William Lomax's "The 'Invisible Alien' in the Science Fiction of Clifford Simak" in *Extrapolation*, vol. 30, No. 2 (1989) for a discussion of how Simak's aliens serve as a mirror to examine human flaws.

7 Booker, 55. Booker focuses his analysis on Simak's *Ring Around the Sun* (1953); For a far more nuanced look at Simak's complex notion of the "pre-capitalist past," see Cokinos.

continued on page 32

Simak's Politics Were Shaped By Minnesota

continued from page 31

Simak's '50s short fiction, I instead argue we should examine the intellectual shadows of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party (FLP) and the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL) and the political dialogues in the local environment of Simak's day. His often-mixed take on unions, bookended by a universally critical stance of capitalism, reflects the '50s shifts in the role of the union to transform working class lives. His deep interest in the rights of farmers reflects not only his nostalgia for his childhood but also holdover elements of liberal thought in his home state of Minnesota.

The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* building as it would have appeared in the 1940s. (Image via Star Tribune)

Scholars often characterize the 1950s as the decade in which the increasingly ideological hegemony of capitalism swept away the last remnants of "agrarian alternatives." Individuals who espoused a return to the pastoral, tend to be described as part of a Conservative backlash to a rapidly changing '50s society.[8] To contextualize Simak's take on worker rights and labour unions, it's worth briefly summarizing the changing political landscape of his day. I am not ascribing a specific political position to Simak. Rather, his fiction engages with political ideas he would have been exposed to as a journalist for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* in Minnesota from 1939 to his retirement in 1976.

Born in rural Wisconsin in 1904, Simak attended the University of Wisconsin for one year before running out of funds. This led to a career as a newspaperman which took him to various posts in North Dakota, Iowa, and Wisconsin between 1929-1939.[9] He eventually settled in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1939. This coincides with the move towards a merger of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party (FLP), a rare powerful third party that regularly elected governors and sent senators to Congress, with the Democrats. During the Great Depression, the FLP tended to support President Roosevelt and the New Deal. In the '30s and '40s, the FLP created a coalition of both rural farmers and urban labour: both groups experienced repression and violence at the hands of business leaders who controlled the economy and politics and used state power to crack down on unions and farmers' movements. The rural wing of the party tended to advocate for short-term policies to assist the "common folks" to stay out of debt and maintain a decent standard of living while the labour wing "held out an overarching program of economic justice based on a Marxist critique of capitalism."[10] Over time, the labour wing of the party gained strength and became increasingly radical and clashed with its rural wing.[11] A smaller faction from rural areas, "transcended the rural-urban divide" and embraced "ideals of mass struggle, class consciousness, and the redistribution of wealth."[12] The

8 M. Keith Booker's *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* (2001), 4.

9 For the important dates in his life, consult the chronology in Robert J. Ewald's When the Fires Burn High and the Wind is From the North: The Pastoral Science Fiction of Clifford D. Simak (2006), 7-12.

10 Jennifer A. Delton's *Making Minnesota Liberal: Civil Rights and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (2002), 5. She traces the shifts in the platform over the course of Ch. 1, "The Rise and Fall of the Farmer-Labor Party," 1-18. In 1934, Simak took a job for the Dickinson Press in North Dakota, another hotbed for third party radicalism.

11 In the few years before Simak's arrival in the state, the MFLP made close alliances with the state's Communist party which accelerated tensions. See Delton, 13.

12 Delton, 6.

FLP's isolationist and pacifist stance on the Second World War, further fractured the alliance and it lost its rural support.[13] This coincided with the growth of the Republican party, the shared enemy of the Democrats and the FLP. Increasingly in the '40s, a merger was proposed to confront the shared threat. Soon an enthusiastic young supporter of the New Deal, Hubert Humphrey (1911-1978), who later became a Democratic senator and Vice President, took up the cause.[14]

Then-mayor Hubert Horatio Humphrey Jr. in 1948. (Image via Wikipedia)

The opportunity for merger came after Humphrey's second-place finish as a non-partisan in Minneapolis' mayoral election in which he gained the support of the labour movement and Democrats. This gave him the necessary platform and exposure to advocate for a merger. While the remaining "rural moderate Farmer-Laborites" and a leftist faction abandoned the party, an alliance was proposed to more effectively fight against fascism and to guarantee "all Americans a decent-paying job, medical care, and housing."[15] The new Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL) entered the stage in April 1944. Humphrey won the election as Mayor of Minneapolis in 1945. As with unions in the post-War period, Humphrey and the new party waged an anti-communist fight against their own left wing.[16] The merger revitalized the Democratic party in the state. Humphrey and his allies argued the new approach embodied politics based on "people's economic interests, not their class or sectional loyalties."[17] Through economic programs and policies, Humphrey suggested the state could now address the issues of diverse groups of people — from African Americans to farmers.[18] The left wing of the party denounced Mayor Humphrey's attempts to "reconcile corporate interests with workers' needs" as "they believed that any conciliation in which corporations retained control of power and wealth was automatically against workers' best interests."[19] The DFL condemned "concentrated wealth and power" but did not see it as an "eternal historical injustice" as the FLP had. Likewise, they did not see the labour movement as "a new cultural base for democracy" but instead as "another interest group jostling for power in the political arena."[20]

During the Great Depression, there was broad consensus among leftist thinkers that the labour movement would lead to radical change. The Second World War and the economic recovery shattered that consensus.[21] The unions themselves underwent substantial transformation in this period. American corporate powers and their conservative congressional allies unleashed a "propaganda campaign" against the labour movement. This culminated in the contentious passage of the Taft-Hartley Act (1947), which weakened the ability of unions to strike. Over the course of the 1950s, automobile manufacturers and their unions pioneered a new relationship—adopted by other industries—in which companies agreed to grant wage increases, health care, and retirement plans in return for union support of long-term contracts. Major

13 The issue is quite complex and evolved over the course of the lead-up to the war. Delton, 13-14. Some within the party were firmly anti-Fascist but were frustrated with America's alliance with other industrial powers. Some changed their mind to support the war when the USSR became an American ally. Delton, 14.

14 See Arnold A. Offner's *Hubert Humphrey: The Conscience of the Country* (2018).

15 Delton, 16.

16 Ibid, 17.

17 Ibid, 35.

18 Humphrey was an early supporter of Civil Rights while Mayor of Minneapolis (1945-1948). See Offner's extensive analysis, especially on his 1948 speech at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, 1-7; and while mayor, 33-35, "the issue that most moved Humphrey, however, was rooting out discrimination," 33. Simak's fiction from this period and beyond shows a relentless interest in the brotherhood of all.

19 Delton, 36.

20 Delton, 22-23.

21 See Jeffrey W. Coker's *Confronting American Labor: The New Left Dilemma* (2002).

continued on page 34

Simak's Stories Echo Farmer-Labor Politicians

continued from page 33

labour leaders increasingly advocated for labour to take a stridently anti-communist tact and work within the existing party structure. This in turn led to the expulsion of labour's radical left wing, which had often tended to support non-white and female workers.[22] Increasingly, the political and social transformation of capitalism became secondary to preserving their organizations and maintaining a harmonious relationship with industry. American intellectuals like C. Wright Mills (1916-1962), and of course the FLP, initially saw radical potential in the labour movement.[23] He argued that unions were "the only organizations capable of stopping the main drift towards war and slump."[24] However, by the late '40s Mills described the movement as "a bureaucratic institution that was now part of the status quo of managerial capitalism" that could "not be a force for progressive change."[25] As with the reconceptualization of the role of unions within a two-party system, unions themselves renegotiated their relationship with employers. Simak's stories contributed to the contemporary discourse on the role of organized labour in protecting the rights of workers and the potential of a union to be a force for change.

Frank Kramer's interior art for "Tools" in Astounding (Image via SFFRuminations)

Simak's Early Critiques of Capitalism 1940s-1950s

Simak's short stories from the 1940s often echo the intensity of the "fiery speeches" by Farmer-Labor politicians excoriating capitalism and business leaders to mobilize voters.[26] As a group, Simak's stories delineate an exploration of space together with corporate exploitation of planets, oppression of workers, and an extermination of alien intelligences. I've selected two 1940s stories published in *Astounding*— "Masquerade" (1941) and "Tools" (1942)—and "You'll Never Go Home Again!" (1951)[27] to illustrate those general trends.[28] After the Second World War, his writings increasingly incorporated utopian potentiality in a post-capitalist world.

In the bleak "Masquerade" (1941), Simak gives a powerful example of unchecked exploitation. Metamorphic aliens, nicknamed "Candles," on Mercury's radiation-blasted surface parrot human actions. Their "clownish" behavior masks their plot to take down an Earth corporation that harvests sunlight on the surface of Mercury. Captain Craig, responsible for energy collection, initially attempts to understand the alien "other." However, humanity's desire for cheap energy wins out, leading Craig to support the use of violence against the aliens if they interrupt the export of power. However, Craig does not endorse the most extreme acts of genocide deployed

22 Summary derived from Ch. 19, "Retrenchment, Cold War, and Consolidation, 1946-1955," of Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph A. McCartin's *Labor in America: A History, 9th edition* (2017), 303-320; For a general analysis of the experience of union women at this time, see Ch. 1 and 2 of Dennis A. Deslippe's "Rights, Not Roses": *Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism*, 1945-1980 (2000).

23 Mills, *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders* (1948). For a discussion of Mills' book, see Nelson Lichtenstein's chapter "C. Wright Mills" in *A Contest of Ideas: Capital, Politics, and Labor* (2013); And Ch. 3 in Daniel Geary's *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought* (2009), 74-105; See Ken Mattson's *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism*, 1945-1970 (2002), 52-56 for Mills' evolving views.

24 Mills, *The New Men of Power*, 3.

25 Mattson, 56.

26 Delton, 19, singles out the speeches of FLP governor of Minnesota, Floyd B. Olson.

27 "'You'll Never Go Home Again!'" (variant title: "Beachhead") first appeared in *Fantastic Adventures*, ed. Howard Browne (July 1951), 72-86.

28 These are briefly discussed in Ewald, 28-29, 31. Ewald also lists "Spaceship in a Flask" (1941) and "Lobby" (1944) as critical takes on capitalism. I'd also add "Ogre" (1941) to the list.

by humans on other planets. According to Craig, the only way to avoid violence is for a new source of "universal power" to be developed.[29] The underlying clash, driven by the new technology in the hands of corporations, remains unaddressed. Capitalistic expansion corrupts even the values of the more caring and enlightened members of society.

In comparison to the earlier "Masquerade," "Tools" (1942) more explicitly delves into the impact of the political, economic, and social domination of a megacorporation which "owns the Solar System, body and soul."[30] Radium, Inc. exports shiploads of radium from the Venusian mines harvested by specialized robots. A brutal corporate dystopia emerges. The megalomaniacal company director, R. C. Webster, sits at the center of a vast network of secret police and spies. School children learn "enthusiasm" about big business in school. The business elite form the new nobility, power passes from father to son. Life under the thrall of Webster and his cronies is the price "the people of Earth had to pay for solar expansion, for a solar empire."[31] Simak argues that the actual experience of worker oppression leads all to the same conclusion: Radium, Inc. must be overthrown.

"One cannot miss the Marxist notion of class consciousness that permiates the pages."

One cannot miss the Marxist notion of class consciousness that permeates the pages. Garrison, the leader of the mine, provides the best example: "Call it treason […] Call it anything you like. It's the language that's being talked up and down the System. Wherever men work out their hearts and strangle their conscience in hope of scraps from Radium, Inc.'s table, they're saying the same thing we are saying."[32] The local aliens, at risk of shutting down the entire operation in self-defense, infect the minds of the machines. Webster, overruling Garrison's protestations that "they'll revolt," sends men to replace the machines.[33] A brutal scenario plays out: "hundreds of armed men" peer down on the scurrying human workers below, "a death sentence for any man."[34] One alien, in an act of compassion, builds a spaceship to evacuate the workers sent to their deaths.[35] While Simak spells out no clear future, a character that serves as the author's mouthpiece explains that "we must start over again and find some other way of life" separate from the current economic framework of Radium, Inc. which will lead only "deeper and deeper into slavery."[36] Workers, without organization, will be gleefully sent to their deaths by the barons of industry.

Similar denunciations of the brutality of capitalist exploitation continued into the '50s. "'You'll Never Go Home Again!'" (variant title: "Beachhead") (1951) contains Simak's most intense scenes of the environmental impact of a profit-motivated system. The story follows a seemingly routine expedition of the Human Planetary Survey Party to establish a bridgehead, for possible future exploitation or colonization, on an alien planet. Unlike many of Simak's stories, robots are not rendered as kind, almost human, souls; instead, they manifest his argument that technology used "to advance the cause of our commercial-industrial society" should instead be used purely for the "betterment of mankind."[37] "'You'll Never Go Home Again!'" contains an almost apocalyptic devastation of an alien world: "gleaming robots toiled in shining gangs" while squads of flamethrowers paint the sky red.[38] Simak collapses the distinction between the legion of human soldiers sent off across the alien earth and the machines. The aliens on the planet soon call into question all presuppositions of humanity's superiority.

Simak on Unions in the '50s and early '60s

Simak's critical views of capitalism continued with a

29 "Masquerade" (1941), 74.
30 "Tools," 122.
31 Ibid, 122.
32 Ibid, 125.
33 Ibid, 126.
34 Ibid, 126.
35 Ibid, 129.
36 Ibid, 124.
37 Interview in the fanzine *Luna Monthly*, #57 (Spring 1975), 3.
38 "Beachhead," 78.

continued on page 36

Simak's Critiques of Capitalism become vehement

continued from page 35

bleak vehemence into the '50s. His fiction from that decade saw more explicit analysis of organized labour and the types of futures they may work to create. Echoing the new Democratic-Farmer-Labor party's stance that the labour movements were not "a new cultural base for democracy" but instead another interest group within the "political arena," Simak struggles to identify how unions might transform society.[39] In his fiction, unions are depicted in both dystopic formulations and as key actors in the creation of a utopian future.

Simak in 1950.
(Image via ISFDB)

"Retrograde Evolution" (1951) contains a brief but illuminated mention of organized labour, a critique of capitalism, and a sustained rumination on a possible post-capitalist human utopia as seen in an alien society.[40] Steve Sheldon, the assigned coordinator from Culture, attempts to unravel a mystery. Why would the alien Kzyzz people not arrive with their babu root for trade with an Earth vessel? And stranger yet, why would the Kzyzz abandon their agricultural villages for small collections of primitive reed huts?[41] Sheldon's boss wants the answer immediately so the ship can collect its product and rush off to the next system. As spokesman for the crew, Sheldon pushes back: "You've driven the crew in violation of Labor's program of fair employment." In addition, the relentless push for profit endangers the arrangements set up between Earth and its alien trading partners: "I was forced time after time to impress upon you the importance of protocol."[42] Eventually Sheldon discovers the reason for the changes in the Kzyzz way of life: recoiling from past conflict, they chose to deliberately forget technological progress by means of the babu root and instead channeled aggression into games played telepathically between the villages. William Lomax argues that Simak's aliens often seem "more courteous, more understanding, more wise, more perceptive, more mature, more neighborly" than the humans they encounter. Aliens thus represent better versions of human beings.[43] The encounter with the alien is a "hermeneutic inquiry" into "how man knows himself and his own culture."[44] If profit remains the sole goal, the guidelines set up by Culture will be ignored. Alien societies provide a window into choices humans, too, could implement in their own way.

Simak's "Full Cycle" (1955) is his most sustained take on future versions of trade unionism.[45] The union provides security from stuffies (business leaders) and gives shape to a new post-union form of social organization that will allow humanity to move beyond capitalism. Due to fears of nuclear war, industry moved into the countryside.[46] In cities, the "bottom dropped

39 Delton, 22-23.

40 "Retrograde Evolution" first appeared in *Science-Fiction Plus*, ed. Hugo Gernsbeck (April 1953).

41 M. Keith Booker, in *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* (2001), 9-10 argues that western anxieties about "degeneration," or backward evolution, popular in the late 19th century experienced a resurgence in the 1950s. Simak takes fears of "degeneration" and utterly turns them on their head.

42 "Retrograde Evolution," 18.

43 Lomax, 135.

44 Ibid, 139.

45 "Full Cycle" appeared in *Science Fiction Stories*, ed. Robert W. Lowndes (November 1955). Page numbers are from the collection *Worlds Without End* (1964).

46 Ibid, 88. Right after the attack on Hiroshima, a group of scientists at the University of Chicago published *The Franck Report* (June 11th, 1945). James Franck and his colleagues argued that "within ten years other countries may have nuclear bombs, each of which, weighing less than a ton, could destroy an urban area of more than ten square miles." They point out the great disadvantage of the United States with its "agglomeration of population and industry in comparatively few metropolitan districts" in comparison to countries with a population and "industry […]

out of the real estate market almost overnight" preventing workers from easily following their employers to relative safety.[47] Instead, they purchased trailers, and at each camp that gathered at a rural factory they adopted a "local brand of unionism" with "renewed force and significance."[48] The large federations of unions like the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) no longer function due to forced decentralization.

Simak imagines a second Great Depression in which economic instability, the collapse of the real estate market, and the abandonment of the cities means new economic relationships can be formed. Unions, now without the large confederations, can more effectively advocate for protection due to their ability to strike as worker mobility allows for more agile action. Simak effectively postulated a future without the Taft Hartley Act (1947), which weakened the ability of unions to strike. Industrial and agricultural leaders still own the factories and farms. Workers in a moveable trailer community gain bargaining power over their employers—they can strike by moving their camp to another factory.[49] Each union's "sinking fund" holds over the workers until they find a new employer.[50] Funds collected by the union replace benefits — social security, healthcare, loans, and welfare — the government and banks used to provide.[51] Workers move from place to place with their trailers depending on the season and negotiations for favorable work.

"Simak effectively postulated a future without the Taft Hartley Act, which weakened the ability of unions to strike."

The story is told from the perspective of unemployed history professor Dr. Ambrose Wilson, who finally leaves the city to understand the changes in the society around him.[52] He notices new skills emerging among the trailer communities he visits — "green-thumbers, rainmakers, agronomists, crop magic" — that can only be explained by ESP.[53] The suburban and urban life, with all its technological marvels, prevented humanity from developing its full potential.[54] To encourage a shared benefit from individual skills that emerge in each community, Wilson comes up with a plan to facilitate forward thinking and exchange.

The intellectual shadows of the Minnesota Farmer Labor Party (FLP) and C. Wright Mills' account of unions in *The New Men of Power* (1948) loom large in "Full Cycle" (1955). Reflecting a central concern of the rural branch of the FLP during the Great Depression, Simak's fiction contains references to the plight of the rural farmer at the hands of large farming corporations: "The small land holdings were bound to disappear. The little farmer just couldn't make the grade. Agriculture was on its way toward corporate holdings even before D. C. [Direct Current] Machinery was the thing that did it."[55] Simak echoes a similar, if more simplistic, argument in his famous short story "City" (1944) in which farmers are pushed off their land by the growth of the hydroponics industry.[56] The new form of union in "Full Cycle" frequently encountered and took in displaced farmers.[57]

The story simultaneously narrates two central arguments for the radical potential of unions posed by C. Wright Mills in *The New Men of Power*. Mills argues for

scattered over large areas." Simak is behind the ball on responding to this concern. Chan Davis published "The Nightmare" in May 1946. Simak also incorporates the same argument for decentralization into the revised version of "City" (1944) that appears in *City* (1952).

47 "Full Cycle," 107.

48 Ibid, 107.

49 Ibid, 104.

50 Ibid, 105. A "sinking fund" is a fund allotted for expenses that you plan on having in the future.

51 Ibid, 105.

52 Simak's famous "City" (1944) also depicts decentralized industry responding to the fear of atomic war and a main character reluctant to leave the city.

53 Ibid, 113.

54 Ibid, 131: "These abilities had been with Man always, perhaps even from the caves, but then, as now, Man had not understood the power and so had not followed it […] and had built himself a wonderful and impressive and complex culture of machines."

55 "Full Cycle" (1955), 112.

56 "City" appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction*, ed. John Campbell, Jr. (May 1944).

57 Ibid, 112.

continued on page 38

Simak Conceived of Post-Capitalist Future

continued from page 35

a participatory democracy in which everyone impacted by a social decision should have a role in the social decision. Thus, unions should expand their function "beyond bargaining over wages and worker conditions and move towards collective self-management."[58] In Simak's "Full Cycle," the unions allow workers to completely marginalize the business owner in the daily operation of the factory.[59] Mills also argues that unions should advocate work that is creative and meaningful rather than dehumanizing.[60] Simak likewise imagines a future in which humans will be able to develop ESP to help creatively facilitate their work. Urban unions transposed and reconceptualized in the rural countryside helped a diverse range of workers escape oppression. Simak directly posits that the role of organized labour is in creating the environment necessary for humanity to work towards a utopian state.

Simak's "Conditions of Employment" was published in April 1960.

While "Full Cycle" (1955) presents unions in a more utopian light, Simak's "Worlds Without End" (1956) presents organized labour as a victorious interest group in a larger political game. Three years before the story saw print, the AFL and the CIO attempted to reduce jurisdictional conflict between each federations' unions and set on a path of merger (ratified February 9, 1955).[61] Rather than a sign of labour's strength, the merger represented an attempt to create a more harmonious relationship with capital by creating a convenient administrative structure bereft of competition between the two federations.[62]

Simak extrapolates the AFL and CIO merger, envisioning dystopic extremes. In his future, allegiance to one's labour union, under the umbrella of one federation, has replaced patriotism to the nation altogether.[63] The idea of a nation evaporates as, for more than five hundred years, the government "has been in the hands of the Central Labor Union," a committee with one representative from each trade guild.[64] Each guild is run as a dictatorship — "there must be no wavering in the loyalty of any members"[65] — embroiled in intra-guild political maneuvering as "unions were the only loyalty in which a man could cling."[66] The Central Labor Union employs a police force as "deviationism—dickering with other unions—must be run down and have an end put to it."[67]

The story follows Norman Blaine of the Dream Guild, which constructs manufactured dreams for its customers to escape society. He starts to piece together a conspiracy among his own guild, a plan to follow "logical" versions of dreams to explore possible lines of potential historical, social, and economic development.[68] One of these dreams that follow logical "rules," explores the possibility of a version of earth "in which the

58 Geary, 101.
59 In the story the business owner complains that the workers attempted to cut him out completely, "Full Cycle," 104.
60 Geary, 101.

61 See Dubofsky and McCartin, 314-320.

62 Ibid, 320.
63 "Worlds Without End" appeared in *Future Science Fiction*, #31, ed. Robert W. Lowndes (Winter 1956-1957); Page numbers are from the collection *Worlds Without End* (1964).
64 "Worlds Without End," 34.
65 Ibid, 34.
66 Ibid, 35.
67 Ibid, 20
68 Ibid, 56.

profit motive had been eliminated."[69] Simak frequently positions moments in his narratives where characters attempt to grapple with the possibility of a post-capitalist version of American society. While played for an ironic comedic relief, they speak to Simak's tendency to use comedy when tackling a serious speculation: "I think you'll agree […]" says the dreamer who lived a life without profit, "that no one would want to live in a world like that."[70] Is the acquisition of wealth really a virtue?

As with the rural unions in "Full Cycle," the trade guilds in "Worlds Without End" hoard knowledge for their own benefit. In Simak's conception of a post-capitalist future, knowledge must be shared for the benefit of all mankind. Simak tempers his criticism of the unions as capitalist government by tentatively suggesting a new future of inter-union exchange is possible through Blaine's actions. Here, as with Simak's '40s visions of relentless capitalist expansion, the accumulated power of the unions can only be checked by the selfless individual. Simak echoes C. Wright Mills' late-'40s criticisms of unions as "part of the status quo of managerial capitalism," "Worlds Without End" picks up on the main '50s criticism aimed at unions by those disappointed with their abdication of radical politics.

The final Simak story I will cover, "Conditions of Employment" (1960), reiterates the inability of organized labour to solve the underlying systemic issues of capitalism.[71] Like the rural branch of the FLP, organized labour in the story describes policies that attempt to assist the worker in the short term. "Conditions of Employment" operates on the premise that space travel places inhuman stress on the worker: intense work hours, sleep deprivation, the terror that a slight mistake would spell death, tension and psychical discomfort, and the existential "dead, black fear of space itself."[72] Due to the harsh conditions of space, a spacer's guild attempts to protect workers and simultaneously guarantee their union members will not break under the stress of space. The story follows Anson Cooper, Engineer first class, who, it seems, did not operate well in the horrifying conditions of space travel. As Cooper's record indicates multiple problems, the union agent warns the captain trying to hire him that they cannot vouch for "a man with a record such as his."[73] After the story's final reveal that psychiatric implantation of overwhelming nostalgic desire to return home is the sole way astronauts will return to space, it is obvious that the union does not contest the power of employers or is unwilling to effect real change. Normal worker unions cannot begin to protect the spacer, at least at this point in the technological development of space travel, from the conditions of employment.

Conclusion

Clifford D. Simak's earliest '40s stories contain the "seeds of ideas" that will germinate in new forms over the decade and into the 1950s.[74] Anti-capitalist fables like "Masquerade" (1941) and "Tools" (1942) replicate the intensity of the "fiery speeches" excoriating capitalism, ridiculing employers, and advocating for class revolution that leaders of Farmer-Labor politicians used to mobilize voters.[75] In the '50s, Simak's anti-capitalist stories take on far more complexity. In these worlds, technology continues to be a tool that perpetuates "commercial-industrial society" rather than provide for humanity's needs. However, in stories like "Conditions of Employment" (1960), "Retrograde Evolution" (1951), and "Full Cycle" (1955), unions attempt within the existing capitalist system, but do not always succeed, to provide protection and organization for oppressed workers.

69 Ibid, 40.

70 Ibid, 40. A similar moment crops up in Simak's *They Walked Like Men* (1962). Another anti-capitalist vision, aliens come to Earth and use American business ethic to destroy American society. As the aliens follow laws, the main character proposes to his senator friend that the US should ban private property. The senator balks at the proposition.

71 "Conditions of Employment" first appeared in *Galaxy*, ed. H. L. Gold (April 1960).

72 Ibid, 40.

73 Ibid, 39.

74 Ewald, 37.

75 Delton, 19.

A Nightmare of Shopkeepers

By Camestros Felapton

In 1917 in Harpurhey Manchester, John Anthony Burgess Wilson (aka Anthony Burgess) was born into a family of shopkeepers. By 1918 his mother had died in the great influenza pandemic and much of his subsequent childhood was during the Great Depression in a part of England rife with industrial poverty. It was an upbringing not unlike that of Margaret Thatcher, born eight years later, again to people running a shop, although in the less industrial market town of Grantham in Lincolnshire. In both cases, it was not a life of great wealth but yet also one of relative financial security during a particularly grim time for working people in England.

Burgess would have been 19 when George Orwell spent several weeks living in the Lancashire town of Wigan, about 20 miles from Manchester. The living conditions Orwell documented in *The Road to Wigan* Pier would have been similar (if not worse) in Harpurhey. Orwell's lasting fame, despite a long career in journalism and several novels, rests on his final novel *1984*. Burgess was from a different generation of writers and had a longer and a different career (and vastly different politics) than Orwell but there are points of intersection. The first novel of both writers was drawn from their experiences overseas in colonial positions (Orwell as a police officer in Burma and Burgess as a teacher in Brunei). Further, not unlike Orwell, while Burgess wrote many critically acclaimed works, one work (*A Clockwork Orange* with its own dark view of Britain) has come to dominate the popular perception of his writing.

Nearly thirty years after Orwell wrote *1984*, Burgess wrote his own book in an attempt to "understand the waking origins of Orwell's bad dream". Entitled *1985* it is a book of two halves. The first section is a series of nine essays by Burgess on Orwell's book, including an essay on the influence of *1984* on his own work (specifically *A Clockwork Orange*). The essays, like Burgess himself, are a mix of interesting insights, contrarianism and apparent confusion. For example, Burgess contends that *1984* is more than a satire and actually a comedy, noting that the famous opening line is structured like a joke.

Later Burgess struggles with how to make sense that the ideology of Oceania is called Ingsoc, i.e. English Socialism when Orwell was at the time of writing 1984 an English socialist. That "Ingsoc" attaches a nationality (or more likely a language/ethnicity) to the term "socialism" in a way that mirrors "national socialism" is something Burgess reluctantly settles on without examining the implication of it.

Nearly thirty years after Orwell wrote *1984*, Burgess wrote his own book in an attempt to "understand the waking origins of Orwell's bad dream"

The second half of *1985* is a novella in which Burgess attempts to take his own view of British society at that point in history (the mid-1970s) and create his own "cacotopia" (a world in which everything is bad) for the year 1985. Even taking into account that Orwell saw his work as a satire and Burgess saw it as a comedy, the novella section of the book is extraordinarily weak. It is not unlike the novel *Flashback* by Dan Simmons, a story in which a talented conservative writer attempts to channel the perceived truism of a given moment in conservative thinking and ends up writing a very dull book.

The novella within *1985* touches on many reactionary concerns. Burgess mirrors Orwell's opening line with fears of the Islamification of Britain:

"It was the week before Christmas, Monday midday, mild and muggy, and the muezzins of West London were yodelling about there being no God but Allah:"

Burgess, Anthony. 1985 (p. 93).

Cacotopian London has roaming gangs of ethnically diverse youth and the English language has become twisted to serve leftwing purposes. However, Islam, Black youths and crimes against good grammar were merely symptoms of the decline in Burgess's vision of England, the underlying cause of the horrors was something more pervasive: Trade Unions.

The top body of trade unions in Britain is called the Trade Union Congress and the TUC has had varying degrees of influence on British society since the 1860s. However, its peak membership would have been in the 1970s at around 12 million people (these days the figure is less than 6 million). Burgess imagines the power of the unions to have grown to such an extent that Britain has now become more commonly known by an acronym of The United Kingdom: "TUK" or more commonly Tucland.

Anthony Burgess's *1985* offers an unpleasant view of workers' rights. (Image via Amazon.com)

In Tucland, the unions are in charge and ever-present. You cannot work without union approval and basic services can simply vanish when unions strike. For the hapless protagonist of *1985*, Bev Jones[1], the opening chapter has his wife die in a hospital fire started by vandals. The fire is left to consume the whole building because the fire brigade is on strike.[2] By the second chapter he is consumed with rage about his wife's death despite a coworker suggesting he should blame the vandals rather than the fire brigade. Bev works in a chocolate factory having had to give up his previous job as a history teacher when the syllabus was replaced with a history of the working class. By chapter 3 he attempts to cross a picket line after his fellow workers go on strike in solidarity with the bakers. He's eventually escorted away by the police after he angrily demands his right to work. By chapter 4, he's been sacked by his boss for attempting to work during a strike… and so on. Bev is a man by himself, standing up not so much for his rights but for his duties. As Bev exclaims at one point:

"'My rage,' said Bev, 'as you rightly term it, is the mere emotional culmination of a long-growing belief that the closed shop is evil, that it's unjust to force men into being mere cells in a gross fat body that combines the torpid and the predatory, that a man has a right to work if he wants to work without having to jump at the shop steward's whistle, and that, given certain circumstances, a man has a duty to work. A duty to put out a fire, if that's his trade."

Burgess, Anthony. 1985 (p. 105). Profile. Kindle Edition.

The lone angry man standing up for himself in a world

1 Bev is named after "'Beveridge, Bevin or Bevan" that is either William Beveridge (the liberal economist who devised the plan for social security that was implemented by the 1945 Labour Government), Ernest Bevin the pre-war trade unionist and wartime Minister of Labour and Aneurin Bevan, the Minister of Health in the 1945 Labour Government and a key figure in the establishment of the NHS. This trio of figures is intended as a kind of left-wing parallel in the protagonist's name to match Orwell's use of Winston (i.e. Churchill) in *1984*. So Bev Jones parallels Winston Smith.

2 Notably, 1977 marked the first actual strike by the Fire Brigade Union as their website notes "Police had received a substantial pay rise while firefighters had seen years of falling real wages, creating a low pay industry". The real-life strike did not result in any horrific hospital fires of course.

continued on page 42

Burgess Worried of Labour Unions Gone Wild

continued from page 41

driven mad by the left's controlling urge! Burgess still colours this with some humour. In the rant above, Bev has to stop himself before he asserts his duty as a worker in the chocolate factory to drop nuts on chocolate creams. However, Burgess is not mocking Bev any more than Orwell is mocking Winston Smith. Bev is an avatar of Burgess's own dislike of modern (in 1970s terms) Britain.

Prime Minister Edward Heath, who served in the 1970s was the target of Burgess' ire.
(Photograph by Allan Warren, who released it under a CC BY SA license)

Britain did not get better in the eyes of Burgess. He met Margaret Thatcher only once and disliked her, partly because he thought her uncultured and anti-intellectual. However, it is notable that when 1984 actually arrived Britain genuinely had taken an authoritarian turn. While not the cacotopia on the scale of Orwell's Airstrip One, it had become a country in which the Prime Minister could directly refer to striking workers as "the enemy within," connecting them figuratively with the recently defeated Argentinian soldiers in the Falklands War. The bitter miners strike of 1984-1985 was used by Thatcher to attack British trade unionism. Government tactics included the tapping of phones by MI5 and an unprecedented central coordination of police forces against strikers. The police tactics used during the strike set a continuing precedent in the UK for the police to proactively use violence against political protests.

The Thatcher government was reactionary and authoritarian on many dimensions but above all was a deep and abiding hatred of trade unionism. Through mass unemployment, strike-breaking, police violence and privatisation, trade union membership dropped and the capacity for working people to take industrial action was severely curbed. This move against unions was at the forefront of the Conservative government's broader authoritarian agenda and is reflected in moves to centralise political power, increase police power and enact reactionary social policies on immigration and sexuality. Subsequent governments (both Labour and Tory) would reverse some aspects of the Thatcher model but double down on others (in particular surveillance and limitations on the right to protest).

The vindictive passion of the anti-union project enacted by the Thatcher government arose from ideology, from the mosaic of social class conflicts within the Conservative Party but also from petty revenge. A similar set of values and fears that had driven Burgess to write 1985. In 1972, the relatively centrist Conservative government of Edward Heath faced a major crisis when a national miner's strike during the winter led to power cuts and a state of emergency until an improved pay deal was offered. Heath's government had already attempted to enact legislation that would give courts more power to limit strike action but the move had backfired with an effective increase in union militancy. The ultimate humiliation for the Heath government was a second miner's strike early in 1974 leading Heath to call a general election asking voters "Who governs Britain?". Voters decided they weren't sure with both Labour and Liberals gaining seats at the expense of the Conservatives but Labour not gaining enough for a majority.

Heath's defeat led to a major shift to the right in the Conservative Party. Margaret Thatcher, who had been a cabinet member as Education Secretary in the Heath government, became the key figure around whom the right wing of the Conservative party would mobilise.

This rightward lurch personified by Thatcher and her mentor Sir Kieth Joseph, encompassed aggressive monetarist economics, reactionary social views on sexuality, Cold War hawkishness, xenophobia and a disdain for any part of Britain further north or west than Oxford … but above all else a burning passion to destroy the social and economic power of trade unionism in Britain.

It's hard from where I am now to imagine what it would have been like reading *1985* at the time it was written. The angry protagonist feels like a more modern character of the right: a man who feels persecuted by changing language and the presence of ethnic minorities who see themselves as the most persecuted of peoples. Published in 1978 (in hardback and serialised in the men's magazine *Penthouse*), the scope of its dark vision lasted one year before the election of Thatcher. Ironically, while Burgess had managed to encapsulate with his character Bev, the mindset of persecution and anger that was mobilising on the British right in the late 1970s, he found himself at odds with the Thatcher regime. Burgess was a reactionary at odds with social change but his own conservatism tended towards monarchism and Catholicism rather than Thatcher's illiberal capitalism.

In 1990, looking back on what he saw as the damage done to Britain by Thatcher, Burgess wrote:

"If we associate Mrs Thatcher with George Orwell at all, it is in a sense that goes too far. For the vision of* Nineteen Eighty-Four *was of a genuinely intellectual autocracy, in which an idealistic philosophy (reality exists only inside the collective brain) was imposed on the people. Mrs. Thatcher may see herself as Big Sister, but she is not all that fearsome. She will be there only so long as the people want her there. That, too, is what is sometimes known as democracy."

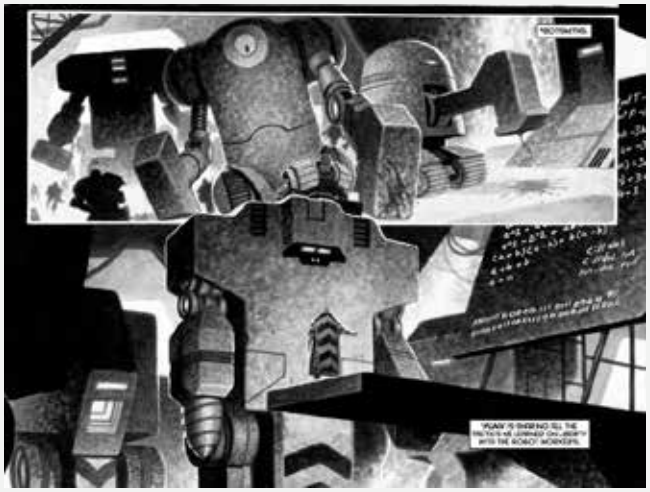
Anthony Burgess, Thoughts on the Thatcher Decade collected in *One Man's Chorus: The Uncollected Writings*

While many of Thatcher's policies would be wound back in subsequent years, Britain remains a nation where the law and government policy is hostile to trade unions and protest. The U.K. of 2024 was crafted in part by those who aligned themselves with the anti-union rage that fuelled the writing of *1985*. The novella is hard to recommend on any artistic grounds, but it does provide a window into the fear-driven fantasies of a newly ascendant right-wing.

Workers of 2000AD UNITE!

By James Bacon

The world of Judge Dredd allows for some thought provoking ideas and concepts. Dredd himself as a creation was a fascistic warning of what might happen should the journey to the right continue, as seen by the inspired writers, Pat Mills and John Wagner in the 1970s. Many writers have expanded on the ideas, looking at aspects, especially democracy and mutant rights often as allegorical satire, poking at harsh realities of our current world. In the '70s this saw Judge Dredd stories that featured parodies of Ronald McDonald and the Jolly Green Giant being banned from being reprinted. The quest for democracy filled the pages, which featured the fight for universal suffrage, the fight against a benevolent tyranny and dictatorship, with those in control in total control. Throughout the eighties, the comic was filled with thoughtful stories, culminating in 1990 with the seminal work in the Judge Dredd Megazine "America" by Wagner and MacNeil.



Colin MacNeil's artwork brings to life worker-driven conflict between a mining colony and Mega-City One. (Image via *Judge Dredd Magazine*)

Published in 2009, the "Insurrection" storyline[1] added an outer world planet. This was a clever way to engage about other beings' rights, as well as focussing on the Special Judicial Squad (SJS), who both internally police the Judges of Mega-City One, a group that while responsible for policing corruption have often become aloof and corrupted themselves, and tasked with overseeing Space exploits, or exploitation, overseeing the Judge Marshals as they are called on other plants, and then with Justice Control Divisions keeping control of the planets. A usefully villainous group for this story, as we see workers rights, or rather, rights become the main question of this story.

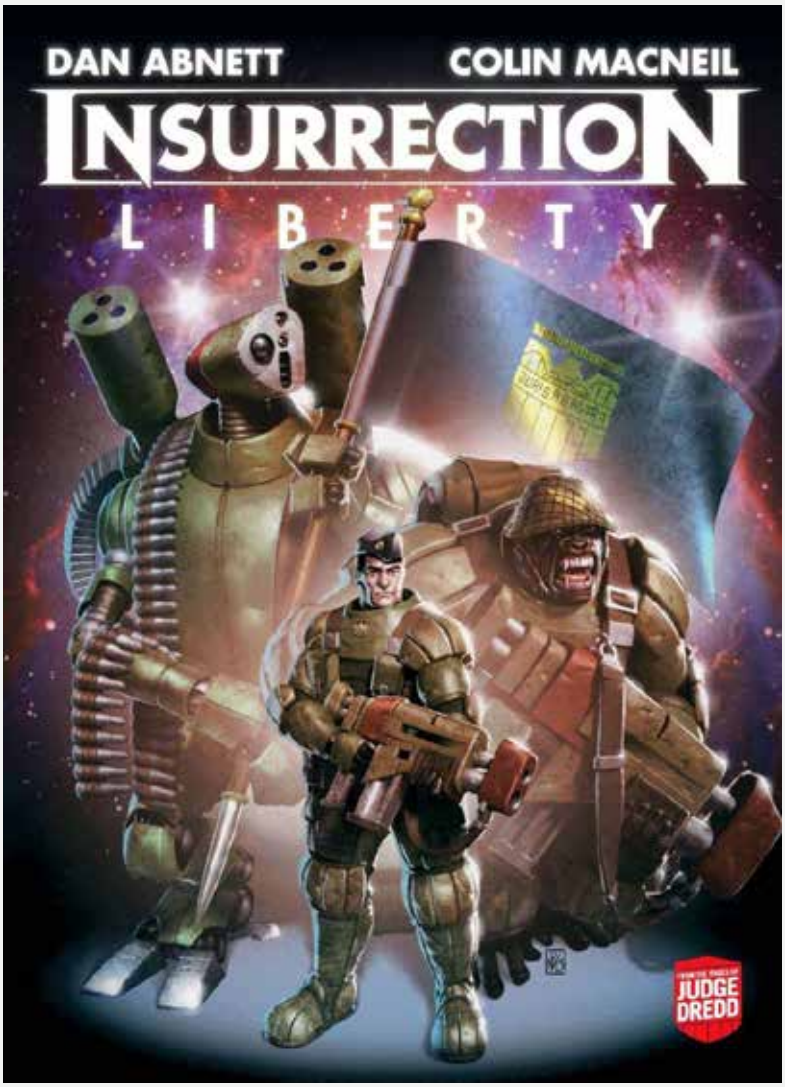
K Alpha 61 is a Mega-City One mining colony, overseen by Judge Marshalls. Chief Marshall Luthar is in charge, and it is operated by droids, mutants, and uplifts, tasked with sending minerals across the vastness of space back to Mega-City One on Earth. An important planet you'd think, but not sufficiently important that when the planet is invaded by the Zhind, that Mega-City One sends any help to defend against the occupation. Left to their own fate, they decide to fight, and fight as a team, dedicated to repelling the invasion. Two years later, despite nearly two dozen requests for support ignored, the Zhind were driven back, and with that, a vote was taken, to declare independence. This of course meets with an immediate response. The choice was simply, as the Uplift Leader Simeon discussed with Luthar, to "live free or die as slaves." There is some nice internal questioning, which goes against everything Judge Marshal Freely knows.

Luthar had first enfranchised the inhabitants of K Alpha 61, making them citizens, so they could fight with the Judges against the Zhind, but this is then rescinded to "non-human units" by the SJS after the planetary war was won. Seeing freedom was put to the vote, and so Luthar informs the SJS that K Alpha 61 is now the planet Liberty, and free from the Meg and so Senior Judge Kulotte of the SJS brings the wrath of the SJS to bear upon Liberty. The brutality and cold bloodedness of this battle is stunning, as the SJS inflict violence upon obvious innocents and hospitals, and the Fighters for Liberty lose, but there is some nice twisting

1 *Judge Dredd Megazine #279-284 and 305-310*

within the story, a false betrayal, and a method of escape devised, so that Luthar, Freely, Simeon and others can take flight.

The story moves in the second book to production Facility 33, which supplies Mega-City One with all it's trilenear chips, a key component in the digital infrastructure, and operated by robots, who following discussion with the delegate representative Handcog, decide to support those from Liberty, and indeed, like K Alpha 1, change Facility 33 to Fraternity, hopeing to link all colonies together in a fight for Liberty. Further, the robots have figured out a way to create a Mutually Assured Destruction situation. The fight continues, with the SJS deploying PSI Judges to brutal effect and showing no mercy. The robots have analysed the manufacturing shortcuts that have been impossed and come to realise that a Virus Pulse can be emitted that would criple all of the chips currently in use, this leverage is both powerful and frightening, and as fraternity looks like it is to be lost, we are left wondering whether the virus will be activated.



(Image via Rebellion)

The third books sees us at Gateway Colony, a picture-perfect colony, and we meet Judge Marshal Gallows and Augusta, Gallows has brought his extended family to the Colony. A threat is detected, but Gateway has a very strong standing fleet, and should be able to protect the planet. Uplifts are reservests and expected to fight, and a Sinhd attack is initially repleed. Unfortunetly the SJS orgers the fleet to go to prodcution Facility 33, as there is Rebeliion taking place. This creates a huge challenge to the Judge Marshalls, and indeed nine ships of the fleet refuse to follow this direct order and a battle for Gateway ensues. The battle is lost. Gateway is destroyed, with massive loss of life, Ausgusta leads an escape and Gallows survives, after being severly injured, with around 500 rebels on a ship. Gallows is angry with the Justice Department, and the SJS but blames Luthar, who was inciting the situation at Facility 33. This is a clever bit of storytelling as we see a concurrent line that is impacted by the previous book, but also disctinct, and has its own consequences.

Augusta wants to seek out Luthar, and they do so, and go to Oryx 18, where in Ice Caves we find Luthar and Simeon, although they call thethe planet Equality.

A further interesting twist takes place, as betrayal of the rebels takes place, although it is clear it is unwilling, a type of mind control at hand, on the part of the Zhind. As the SJS and the Rebels fight, it becomes clear that the Zhind are going to do exactly what the SJS fear, a full-scale attack, Mega-City resources are thin, and cannot repel this, and so Luthar offers over one tho-

continued on page 46

Mega-City One Relies on Exploited Labourers

continued from page 45

sand ships, and the rebel fighters as a ally, to combine with the SJS to fight the Zhind.

We then go to a different phase, where the story is recounted to us. The Zhind detroued a number of colony planets, and there were six major fleet engagements, but then the Planet Rega 43 became the scene of a huge fight and we see Freely, Augusta, Gallows, Luthar and Simeon all ready to fight in trenches, taking on a control node of the Zhind, a suicidal attack on Hill 719, yet it succeeds. This is an immediate turning point, and despite Luthar dying, the Zhind are defeated, and as they start to flee, the SJS order them to be killed.

As true treachery unfolds, the SJS then attack the heroes who fought for Hill 719, and we see further characters we have come to love get killed, Freely, Simeon, fighting to the end, and all sense of rebellion crushed, although Simeon shouting that "you can kill all the flesh you like, but you cannot kill..."

Having an internal fight was clever by the writer Dan Abnett, who noted that the idea was, "Much more ambiguous and grey, rather more political in the true spirit of Wagner's stories and fairly unswerving in its criticism of the fascist Judge regime." It deals with the darker side of Mega-City One, that often one might feels somehow glosses over the facism. There is an issue at times with Judge Dredd, that he is not always seen clearly as a villain, from a societal perspective, as readers connect, so having the SJS act as a more brutal force allows a connection, similar to Second World War Comic Fiction, with good German Soldiers, and Bad Nazis. Here though the Judges are truly insurrectionists, and rebels, and that is useful, as we then see the reader both forced to think and support what is right, without ambiguity.

Abnett was well aware of this, noting that "the reader, should be rooting for the rebels, and hissing the Judges (SJS). Which will get them going, because they will be aware that this is the Megazine, and fascist or not, the Judges always win.. Or do they? We think the climax of the story could be winning the physical war by sheer numbers, but the rebels winning the war of ideas which, after all, is what this is really about."

Colin MacNeil's artwork is stunning, and he drew a "Sketch" of Simeon at Commando and British Weekly Comic swap meet, in Glasgow earlier this year, and kindly allowed us to use the coloured image he created from it. The action, especially with SJS armour and the variety of scenes is superb.

> We need these stories, lest we forget the rebellious and dificult nature of *2000AD*.

2000AD has and can capture questions of rights, really well, here it is about a form of worker slavery, with Johnny Alpha and the Strontium Dogs, human mutants, who were not allowed to work, except as, bounty hunters, democracy, mutant rights and workers rights, permeating at times, and percolating also are stories that draw on ongoing issues in the contemporary world, as an example Dreadnoughts, by Michael Carroll, Sally Hurst and John Higgins, when Judges started to integrate with regular police forces, which has been scary in its ability to reflect and even predict what has been occurring politically in the last few years.

We need these stories, lest we forget the rebellious and difficult nature of *2000AD*. *2000AD* spawned the more politically angled Crisis, as well as *The Judge Dredd Megazine*, where both Insurrection and America appeared, and as the Judge Dredd readership age, one feels that leaning more into the radical, questioning the norm and fighting against conservatism is vital.

Jumping the Shark on the Moon

Labour Strike Plotline In *For All Mankind* Shows Little Understanding of Unions

By Mark McCutcheon

The first season of *For All Mankind* launched on Apple TV in 2019, as the SF TV series The Expanse was wrapping its victory lap of a sixth season on Prime.

From the get-go, *For All Mankind* garnered favourable comparisons to *The Expanse*; it was widely received as something of a prequel to the earlier series (an association, cemented by the participation of some of the same talent on both shows, notably *Expanse* showrunner Naren Shankar). While *The Expanse* imagines a spacefaring humankind some 300 years hence, *For All Mankind* imagines an alternate 20th century history in which the superpowers remain focussed on the space race, first competing and then internationally collaborating on lunar, orbital, and other projects (not unlike the real world NASA's present Artemis mission) that becomes the fictional worlds' first steps to the stars. The first three seasons of *For All Mankind* reimagine a post-war 20th century in which the Russians first land on the moon in the 1960s and the space race continues into the 21st-century. Which is where season four picks it up.

Just what young workers need! A septuagenarian member of management to tell them how to run their labour union! (Image via *Apple+*)

Or fuck it up, I have to say. Ladies and gentlemen, *For All Mankind* has jumped the shark.

See, as a fan of *The Expanse* I appreciated *For All Mankind's* setting of its character drama in the workplace, even if — unlike *The Expanse's* accessible, blue collar context — the workplace here is the more rarefied air reserved for the top gun flyboys and starbucks, and the top brass. But *For All Mankind* has kept a consistent focus on the workplace as an important part of its alternative history allegory. It's arguably offering a more progressive timeline in which Democrat Presidents hold more successive administrations, the equal rights amendment passes, and space programs retain funding and grow more elaborate even as they begin to include corporate as well as state actors. But the apparently more liberal culture of this alternative America harbours lots of interesting colouration and contradictions; the overall plot arc includes an alternative 9/11 kind of attack (here, one targeting the US space program).

By the start of season four, international consortium and private public partnerships among governments and businesses have established human stations on the moon, in orbit, and Mars.

So far so good. Season four starts strongly on these notes: the subplot concerning the labourers contracted to do the service and manual work on Mars quickly learn how exploitative their contracts are and so they decide to act against the employer.

The workers begin to organize, and for some reason they get somebody from senior management on their side, the season over season protagonist Ed Baldwin (played by Joel Kinnaman). The ravages of travel and work in space had already tested the plausibility of this protagonist's continued prominence in the series. You'd think that any sensible administration would have approached that, what, octogenarian? captain with a generous buyout package instead of authorizing his obviously dotty captaincy of the Mars mission. (You can make of this absurd detail whatever kind of political allegory you like.)

So the workers whip up the captain who joins their

continued on page 48

F.A.M. - Negotiation Process Wildly Unrealistic

continued from page 47

calls to organize. Cap gets so worked up about it, he starts calling for everyone to strike.

And they do. Or that's what they say they do. Subsequent scenes show workers performatively not working, with inventory and garbage piling up in hallways, etc.

But when the workers gather and decide to organize, it takes a boss on their side to incite them to strike, and they do that before they actually organize.

We know they don't organize because the subsequent bargaining scene is the most crowded bargaining room I've ever seen: all the management on one side of a table, and all the workers on the other side, and everybody's shouting and there's no process, and the management starts waving money around and buys off the workers one by one.

To misrepresent the basics of organizing and bargaining ... feels like a betrayal and sure looks like the Fonz donning jet skis.

All these people getting shirty in a room may make for good TV, like that scandalous trope of cops forcing confessions while ridiculing legal representation; but it departs as wildly from the realities of union bargaining as the appearance of stars shining through the dark part of a crescent moon departs from science if not basic sense perception.[1]

Look, I know if we start looking for workplace realism in Hollywood movies. We are going to need some serious loadout for all these fish in that particular barrel. But for an otherwise labor- friendly story, especially one with such popular and production ties to the state-of-the-art story of *The Expanse*, to misrepresent the basics of organizing and bargaining – among others, that organizing has to happen before bargaining – feels like a betrayal and sure looks like the Fonz donning jet skis.

Suffice to say, at the end of the day, both sides have blood on their hands as the season plays out. I could get into it; one thing this show is consistently great at is representing trauma and PTSD, both of which abound in this season, as in previous seasons, for the main characters. But, while I can't say I'm traumatized by the show's sloppy and damaging misrepresentation of labour negotiation, I am disappointed enough that now I have a decision to make (pace Marc Maron): if the show's just jumped shark so hard, do I bother watching the next season? I don't know if I have the time. This golden age of television is testing this seasoned TV watcher's stamina, attention span, and too often patience. I recently started Netflix's adaptation of Cixin Liu's *Three Body Problem*, but I haven't returned to it since the boat egg slicing episode, a shark-jumping scene that (however it relates to the book) is so pornographically violent but, more importantly, so nonsensically plot-addling that I haven't resumed it.

Another example of a show I stopped watching is *Outlander*, another production with which Ronald D Moore has been associated. I enjoyed the first couple of seasons of *Outlander* as a fresh & well produced low fantasy, but stopped watching after it became all too abundantly clear this show has literally just one plot idea and shouldn't it start to feel weird to keep watching it?

There are a lot of great films, series, and other audio-visual productions competing for my all too limited attention and faculties. But that said, repeat viewing or comfort viewing seems to me a vital part of becoming a seasoned viewer. I have watched *The Expanse* series three times; I've read the nine novels (which provide just as strong a story arc as the show's) through twice now.

But I've watched enough multi-season TV series that

1 The TV series *This Is Us* brilliantly brought COVID realism to its fifth season. But astronomical realism, not so much: the night sky backgrounds in s5e11 ("One Small Step") instantly distracted me; I count a half dozen stars shining where the rest of the crescent moon should be.

are otherwise excellent but end terribly. I find it much more rewarding to rewatch a well built series with a cogent story structure than to rewatch series that may be strong, but that does not stick the landing.

A major systemic shortcoming of contemporary TV series writing is the senselessness of an ending. This viewer quickly gets testy about how well shows close -- or don't. I know that serialized writing and publication of narrative is nothing new and I know that such writing must sometimes of necessity be improvised season to season as producers, budgets, and studios change, as series face renewal or cancellation on tight schedules, etc. Any series can get canceled; it's part of the business of TV but how well a series' plot ends, whether the series gets canceled or seen through to completion, is a testament to the creative powers of the writers and others involved in its production.

So, as much as I like *Battlestar Galactica* (and I've published research on it) I have no intention of re-watching that whole series. Maybe an especially good episode or two. But I have neither time nor interest to commit to a multi season story that I know ends in a bed beshat. Ditto *Game of Thrones*. That last season sucked so bad I haven't re-watched any *Game* since (or any of its prequel either).

So in a way, knowing there is a fifth season of *For All Mankind* ahead and seeing it jump the shark so sharply in season four, I do have a decision to make, but I've also been done a kindness.

You might ask why I consider these criteria – singular misrepresentations, and weak endings – so determining for what I watch and rewatch. See above and Maron's standup special *Too Real*. Or maybe I prefer limited series (of which *Station Eleven* is an exemplar).

Tapping out on a show that jumps the shark or opting not to rewatch great series that end badly are decisions about my time (which nobody ever has anyway) and how it's best spent; about what texts I dwell and think with most enrich my time here and those I spend it with. The process of following series and evaluating their endings is the seasoning to which this viewer refers, and defers.

Furthermore, to consider these problems of form more dialectically (according to critiques of form like Henry James' "form is content" and McLuhan's "the medium is the message") might suggest, then, that shark jumps and bad endings are more than related problems with plot writing, they're two facets of the same problem with weak writing: a series that jumps the shark cannot, for that reason (among possible others), end satisfactorily.

Further dialectical and materialist analysis than afforded in the space of this review more fully theorizes the political economy of TV's digital (if increasingly cable-ized) "golden age" and the phenomenal orchestrationa (and no doubt exploitations) of work that make it. Perspectives like Adorno's culture industry thesis," Jameson's Marxist readings of form and economics, Rob Latham's historicizing of postwar popular culture, and Tanner Mirrlees' analyses of Hollywood's military entertainment complex are as vital for making material sense of the screening, streaming stories that silver our lives as is Dionne Brand's paradoxical warning, in the long poem Inventory, that a foreign war's always already being waged at home: "the movies were the real killings." Here these signal lights inform my more limited point about plotting flaws that threaten the integrity of form, the sense of the whole, and about how these flaws represent different sides of the same proverbial coin.

To illustrate and end this reflection, let me list some excellent TV series that end excellently — and some excellent TV series that end terribly.

Excellent TV series that end excellently

Six Feet Under
Mad Men
Halt And Catch Fire
The Wire
The Expanse
Orphan Black
Penny Dreadful

Excellent TV series that end terribly

Battlestar Galactica (remake)
Game Of Thrones
Dexter (yes it came back but had ended so badly I didn't come back to it)
The Boys (the latest season of what's otherwise the funniest show on TV ends with a big gross shark jump, imo)
Penny Dreadful

The Translator

By Brett Sheehan

FICTION

With enough time, Cameron hopes to feel numb. Three pints and a loosened necktie later, he isn't so sure. Traced backwards, mistakes were supposed to become clearer; but right now, the last six months just felt – fuzzy.

Maybe that was just the beer.

On the screen above the bar, a well-dressed woman shuffles some papers on her desk. Cam scoffed, Paper? *As if the prompter wasn't cued to her cLens.* Apparently, the Pulp Tax hadn't affected the newsroom's prop budget yet.

No, that wasn't right. *Occam's razor; the simplest, most logical, explanation is likely the most accurate one.* Folks were accustomed to seeing the paper shuffle; a signal of the truth to follow. Pru often joked that "Cam" was actually short for Occam, not Cameron.

He ignores the flashing notification in the corner of his vision.

The anchor adjusts her red cLens glasses, "Good evening, Calgary. Our top story of the night; the fight for antitrust legislation against CleaRAI rages on the parliament floor. But first, we are joined by our correspondent at the Osaka Accord with breaking news. What can you tell us about the events of the day?"

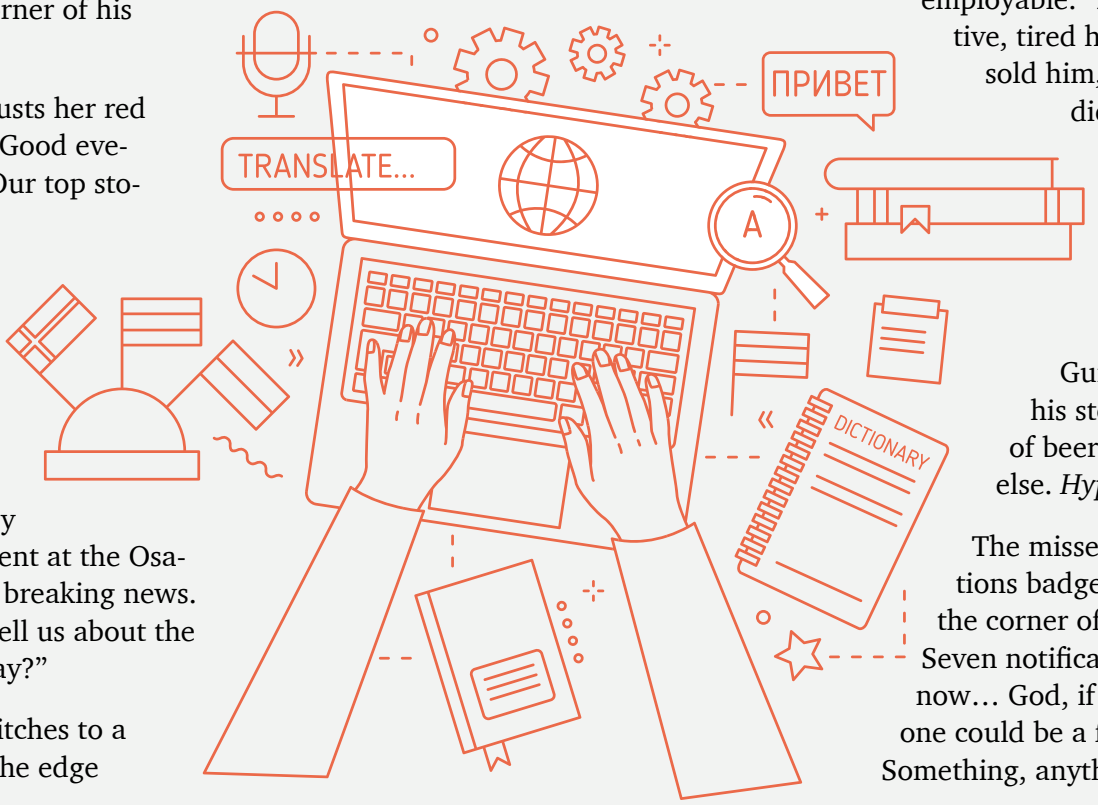
The camera switches to a live feed from the edge of the flood berms, water rushing behind the reporter. *Same shot, every time.* Make 'em panic. The correspondent clears his voice, "As talks began today for the 2074 Osaka Accord, waning commitment to the New Orleans Amendment…"

Cam runs his thumb along the edge of the cRing on his index finger and the feed ends. Folks came to the bar to ignore their problems, not tune into them.

A scruffy man with a greying moustache and receding hairline points to Cam's emptying pint glass from behind the bar, pulling up a thin tablet. Ignoring the price, Cam waves his cRing over the screen, throat catching with the chime. *How much of my Basic did that overpriced crap just cost me?*

Cam throws the dregs back, hoping the warm, bitter liquid might clear his throat. It doesn't.

Flinging his double-breasted suit jacket over his shoulder, a light weight thuds into his back. *This damn jacket.* Pru had insisted he buy it, saying it made him "leaner, meaner, and more employable." Her tentative, tired hope had sold him, though did little besides burning what remained of his Basic. Guilt agitates his stomach full of beer and little else. *Hypocrite.*



The missed notifications badge blurs in the corner of his cLens. Seven notifications now… God, if only just one could be a follow up. Something, anything. I'm

sick to death of this prostration parade.

His gut twists. This bar, this bastion, was no longer tuning the real world out.

Cam stands and staggers; the old bartender blurs in front of him, spinning into triplets. Cam closes his eyes, but the vertigo intensifies.

"Try box-breathing," Pru's voice soothes, like the chamomile steam from a mug of steeping tea. *One of her many techniques learned to manage anxiety.*

Cam focuses on mind-Pru's instruction. *Inhale, 2, 3 ,4, Hold… Exhale, 2, 3, 4, Hold…* The mirage of crimson doors, spinning like a seasick carousel, eventually settles. Clear across the crowded room, like an LED lighthouse, glows a single exit sign.

With the grace of a drunk goose, the narrow lanes between barstools, high top cocktail tables, and pool cues widen with Cam's passage. A younger, lither Cam may have navigated more easily, but three pints and as many decades of poor dietary choices are catching up to him. He bumbles past disgruntled drinkers and pissed-off pool sharks before leaning out the exit into the cool evening air.

The crisp scent of ozone and fresh rain-on-asphalt jolts Cam. He slides on his jacket to avoid transforming into a wet t-shirt reject turned wet rat. Electric scooters and eBikes speed past, attempting to dodge the raindrops, while the affluent stay dry within EVs. The greater the gridlock, the more wealthy the ward. Okotoks prefecture was anything but prosperous. Even eBikes were a luxury few could afford living on Basic, temporary or otherwise. *That didn't stop folks from buying them, though.*

Pru had tried to hide her sadness when Cam had been forced into Temporary Basic. Leaving their townhome in the Strathmore prefecture had been—difficult. Steps away from the TransCanada South-line, Pru was able to stay connected at the speed of a bullet train, overseeing the expansion of Orion's analysis department. The promise of promotion all but evaporated with Cam's severance, but she'd tried not to let it show.

Severance spent and Temp depleted, his application for Permanent Basic weighed like a ballast chain.

Time, the ever-elusive enemy, was about to make some major decisions for them.

Cam's eyes trace the unmistakable ClearAI logo in the bottom corner of his cLens and heat rises from his throat to his ears. He absently touches the weight within his jacket pocket.

The last four years as translation advisor for the Canadian UN Ambassador melts away. His job, stripped by generative AI; a common-enough tale, these days. *And not just any generative AI*, he eyes the logo, *but ClearAI*. Canadian Picotech company and upstart crow that claimed the index finger and field-of-vision of every North American.

The anchor had mentioned antitrust earlier, hadn't she? Orion, Canada's oldest tech giant, was doing everything to keep their own kingdom from crumbling, but ClearAI's march onward seemed unstoppable. Their wearable tech, the cLens glasses and cRing UX, were the knockout combo so many had tried, and failed, to pull off.

These days, the folks that could afford ClearAIs implantable chip, the cPico, shelled out for it. Cam, like most, had envied those with the means to buy the superior chip. *But, no one around here has that kind of money.*

Even inebriated, he shakes his head. *No, Occam. That's not true. Folks would line up to put their organs on loan for the latest and greatest, if they could; and ClearAI's finance department was second to none.*

The same finance department that sent Cam his notice.

Cam pulled out the metal casing from his jacket pocket; a holographic message rose with his touch.

** Attn: c/o Cameron Novac **

** ClearAI, at the recommendation of Mary Mitchell, extends an offer of employment for a truly once-in-a-lifetime project. Details of employment conferred upon position acceptance, sight unseen. Compensation and benefits commensurate with imposed confidentiality. **

The anger roils within Cam. *Who were they to steal his job, then command him as if a dog on a leash? 'Sight*

continued on page 52

The Translator (cont.)

continued from page 51

unseen.' They couldn't even be upfront about their offer. No, I have to agree before knowing what I've agreed to!

This offer, this insult, had been burning a hole in his pocket nearly as long he'd owned the jacket. Worse still, burning a hole in his conscience.

It killed him to keep it from Pru, but he couldn't bring himself to tell her. She straightened his tie every morning before leaving for another disappointing interview, and comforted him after every discouraging day; all while watching her own promising future slowly slip away. Her sacrifices these long six months were endless, and the longer he'd waited to bring it up, the worse he felt.

There was only one reason Cam hadn't thrown the damn thing into the Sheep River: Mary Mitchell.

Her recommendation gave him pause. Among the first laid off, despite her capabilities, credentials, and decades of public service, Mary had inspired him to enter linguistics in the first place. A mentor and true friend, ever there was one.

If she was with them…

Every rejected application, every failed interview, all stacked now into a veritable mountain. Standing in its shadow, Cam feels his pride falter. Education and expertise were failing him, and desperation always floods where confidence has fled.

Permanent Basic looms like a guillotine. On Perm, even Okotoks wouldn't be affordable. On Perm, even Pru might leave him.

Not that he would blame her. There's not enough love in the world to overcome the hopelessness of Perm. Once lauded as humanity's answer to the creep of generative AI, Universal Basic Income was now a life-sentence of leeching. Bad as Temp had been, at least it left hope; a comeback as likely as a lightning strike, but still.

Glancing up, he is surprised to see their low-rise's steps. The crumbling stucco and pockmarked, off-cream vinyl siding is unmistakable even with the dying light.

How long have I been walking? Warm LED light washes down upon streets from towering, fishhook-like arms. His eyes trace the units to the third floor. Pru is knitting in her green armchair, glancing out the window with every other needle-stroke. *She only knits when she's fighting intrusive thoughts.*

Anger subsumes guilt and the badge pulses. *Nine notifications now.* Even this far down, Cam can tell Pru's stoic smile is slipping.

He'd lost everything else. He couldn't lose Pru.

Cam rolls his thumb along his plain, gold engagement ring. ClearAI might own his index finger, but he has an even more important reminder on his hand.

Cam looks back towards the metal casing and nods, thumbing his cRing at the same moment. The casing intones and a green light flashes.

He would read the details later. For now, Cam would pass off his drunkenness as celebratory. He had to. He straightens his own necktie.

Pru deserves something to smile about.

***

Mary Mitchell claps, "With that, we'll pick up Monday. Thanks everyone."

Dozens of virtual avatars flicker out, leaving Cam alone in his new home office.

Book-filled shelves line the walls floorboards to ceiling; a prohibitive wish the Pulp Tax had always kept at arms-length. A massive, wooden desk rests dead centre in the room; a verified Victorian, mahogany antique. Priceless, and compensatorily thrown in for his leap-of-faith.

Cam can't believe any of it. Dreams they had deemed impossible are suddenly theirs. Within a month, this two-storey, Edwardian house north of the Bow River was theirs. In the *Village*, no less, with Kensington Street a heartbeat away.

ClearAI's efficiency was… alarming. *Easy, Occam. Clear AI must've already owned the house.* Likely kept it on retainer for prospective employees, well worth ClearAI's investment. *Their financial department really was second to none.*

While ClearAI technically owned this house, soon enough it would be theirs. And resting behind the mahogany desk, it was hard to fault ClearAI's efficiency.

Pru had been skeptical, but standing in their new kitchen even Pru couldn't help herself. Twirling, the sunflowers on her white sundress caught the afternoon glow; her smile shining brighter than the petals on her dress. Clutching the finalized sale papers in one hand and new keys in the other, Cam saw Pru's smile return.

The threat of Permanent Basic seems like a horrible dream. A distant nightmare, and ClearAI's promise of confidential details, dangled like a carrot, has lived up to the cloak-and-dagger.

God does he want to tell Pru, but his confidentiality agreement is clear. *Not to mention, Pru is one of Orion's top analysts.* ClearAI might even revoke the offer on principle. Pru worried about conflict-of-interest, but he had assured her there was none. Something twisted within him as he said it, but Cam hid the lie with a joke about 'sleeping with the enemy.' Pru had swatted him and that was that.

Even now, surrounded by luxuries, the threat of Basic lingered. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, on God's green Earth that would make Cam steal Pru's smile again.

Flicking his left hand, the cRing summoned a solar system of classified information to swirl around Cam's head, as if at the core of a spinning galaxy. Greater than all these treasures combined was this star system of secrets Cam now hoarded.

He beckons the icon labelled Ægir. A small dot lights up with a pin-prick of light and quickly expands into a Saturn-like exoplanet. A rolling profile opens next to it.

** Ægir (see Epsilon Eridani b). Gas giant 10.5 light-years from Earth. Home to non-carbon-based life. Classification: Ægiran Sapiens (see Ægirans). Intelligent, sentient, technologically advanced (see Quantum Tunnel Communications Array). **

Cam can hardly contain his excitement.

First Contact

Life out there had made first contact with humanity. First mistaken as signal interference, ClearAI's quantum computing division realized it to be coded at-

continued on page 54

The Translator (cont.)

continued from page 53

tempts at communication. The decoded, hexadecimal communications proved it.

Ægirans, aliens, exist.

According to the report, Ægirans somehow harnessed the Eridanus Supervoid (an impossibly large, inscrutable area of uninhabited space) for their quantum communications. Cam fails to make sense of the equations, but what follows is inevitable. While hexadecimal allows for simple mathematical meaning, we require understanding beyond what is capable with 16-integer operations.

Enter the Universal Common Language project. Enter Cam.

To be counted among their ranks makes Cam squirm. *Who knows what ClearAI has in mind for me?*

A small icon pops into his field of view.

** Incoming: Mary Mitchell. Accept/ Dismiss? **

Mary's avatar appears near Ægir's surface. She brushes her AI-generated, asymmetrical bangs from her eyes, "Cameron!"

He puts on his best Jimmy Stewart impression, "Huh-ha-uh-hu-hi M-mary."

She shakes her head, "Never giving that one up, huh? That movie's what, a hundred years old now?"

Cam laughs and shrugs, "Older! But it'll always be a classic –"

"Yeah, yeah," She laughs. Cam feels the tension in his shoulders release. Mary wipes her eyes, "So? Happy you accepted my offer?"

"Your offer?"

She laughs, "You know what I mean!"

"Honestly, the whole thing is just– surreal."

"Yeah, it all seemed a little too good to be true at first."

Cam shook his head, "I mean, Ægir, First Contact, the Universal Common Language project…"

"Ukkle."

"Sorry, what?"

"Ukkle. The Universal Common Language Project. U-C-L. Doesn't roll off the tongue. So, we've been calling it 'ukkle.' A little joke amongst humans."

Cam snorts, "Let me guess…"

"Yep," Mary's avatar beams, "absolutely my idea."

"Alright, ukkle then. It's been hard for me to see past the logo."

Mary nodded, "Accepting ClearAI's offer didn't come easily for me either. Especially given what we went through. But this…" She gestures at what must have been a similar, glittering galaxy on her side of the screen.

Cam feels the edges of his cRing, "Did you upgrade to the cPico by any chance?"

"I couldn't help myself. I'd heard it felt like an extension of yourself, of your consciousness." She shakes her head, "Truth is, cPico isn't really all that different from the cRing. Take it from me, you've had enough change to last the rest of the year. See how you feel by then."

Cam nods, "You're not wrong about the change. It's not just the U.C.L.–"

"Ukkle."

"Right, Ukkle. The move, the house…"

Mary's avatar smiles, "Perks of signing that contract, 'sight unseen.' ClearAI rewards loyalty. Leaps of faith."

She imitates a swan dive, and the avatar's approximations of Mary drift into the uncanny valley. Cam

gestures with his cRing, seeking to switch to video. The cRing buzzes with haptic feedback,

** Option unavailable. **

Cam frowns, "How do we switch to video?"

"Oh, we can't."

"Why not?"

"The Anonymity Clause, of course."

He pauses, "What anonymity clause?"

Mary's expression twists, as if biting an unripe blueberry, "Cameron, you really need to read your contract more thoroughly. Our involvement with ClearAI is strictly confidential. Officially, you are a consultant, employed contractually."

Cam lets the weight of that sink in, "So, what about credit on the UCL?"

"Ukkle.'"

"Sure, fine. But what about it?"

She shakes her head, "Not part of the deal. For some, that's disappointing. For others, it's a silver lining. If ClearAI wants sole credit, they also assume all the blame."

There were already dangers assimilating language for universality, but with anonymity… "That doesn't exactly inspire confidence."

He expects her to make a quip, but Mary nods, agreeing, "No credit risks no accountability, but hence the compensation. If silence is golden, ClearAI knows what it takes to keep it."

"I suppose I can't argue with that."

"If it makes you feel better, the Morality Addendum covers ethical concerns," she clicks her tongue, "you really should read the contract."

With what time? The background information swirling around Cam alone would take a lifetime alone to unpack. Reading the terms and conditions seemed so pale in comparison. "Alright, alright. So, if we can't turn on video, can we at least meet up for a coffee?"

"As coworkers, the Anonymity Clause is pretty clear…"

"I can't even meet up with an old friend for a coffee?"

"Who are you calling old?" She winks, "Since I recommended you, you're not really seeking me out. And if two friends, who happen to work for the same company, also happen to run into each other at a cafe…"

Cam smiles, "Got it."

"Listen, I've gotta go, but I'm glad you're on the team!" Her eyes hint at words left unsaid, but her avatar blinks out. The information swirls, enticing exploration.

Rogue thoughts nag at him, spinning amongst the bits and bytes. Anonymity Clause. Morality Addendum

Rogue thoughts nag at him, spinning amongst the bits and bytes. *Anonymity Clause. Morality Addendum.* There were many reasons to ensure project intel was siloed, but none were good for workers. Separated with strict confidentiality agreements, no one would know more than the barest of shapes of the project. *Except those at the very top.*

He passes his fingers through the rings of Ægir. *Still… I'm one of the lucky few.*

The lock on the door downstairs rattles. "Hey Cam! I'm home!" Pru's warm alto voice reverberates up their hardwood stairs, inviting him to join her, but Cam feels himself grow lost in the glittering nebulas of information.

"Are you done for the day? There was a little stand selling BC cherries and I thought we could celebrate!"

In the warm glow of Ægir, dossiers await Cam's gaze.

"Cam?"

"Uh, I'll be down in a bit." The draw of the glow is magnetic. Cherries could wait. Cam slides his thumb

continued on page 56

The Translator (cont.)

continued from page 55

across the cRing, diving into Ægir's contents.

***

The door lock rattles as Pru leaves for the day.

Cam settles into his ergonomic chair, picked out from ClearAI's digital catalogue. Pru had insisted on the chair, *"If you're going to be working upstairs in that bedroom all day, we need it."* Cam might have suggested a cheaper option, but given the state of the room's contents already, what difference would an overpriced chair make?

But she was right, of course. He smiles. She always knows best.

He stretches his fingers, tapping his cRing. An icon like a camera iris appears, with six encircling, isosceles triangles scoping in towards a hexagonal aperture.

Cam notices a new title drifting beneath his AI approximation.

** Cameron Novac. Unification Division, Head. **

"Unification Division?"

The icon spins, aperture closing. A female voice responds, warm and soft, with a hint of metallic reverb, "The Unification Division. Part of Project U.C.L. responsible for ensuring unity of human language."

"What the hell?!"

"This program does not understand the query."

Cam narrows his eyes at the little lens-like icon, "Was that you?"

The icon spins again, reopening, "This program is called Iris."

Cam eyes the logo, "You're an AI?"

The metallic voice responds, "This program is the interface for ClearAI; a complex, generative algorithm designed to connect users with ClearAI."

"Is a generative algorithm not artificial intelligence?"

"Iris is not the collective of the many programs that make up ClearAI, as suggested by your question. 'You're an AI?' implies a sense of identity that cannot be attributed to this program. Identity is a human condition."

It's like that, huh? He takes a breath, "How should I refer to you?"

"Most find Iris sufficient."

"Is there any way to disable you, Iris?"

"That would be counterproductive."

"Not for me. How do I reach my team?"

Iris pauses, "This program does not understand the query."

"Iris, put me in touch with my team. The Unification Division."

"There are no other people in the Unification Division."

"How? How can one person be an entire division?"

"This program does not understand the query."

Cam massages his eyelids beneath his cLens, "A 'division' implies a team, working towards a common goal."

"Recalibrating. By your definition, then, this program is 'your team.' Cameron Novac heads the Unification Division of Project U.C.L. This program is meant to compute your requests."

Cam feels a chill run through him, "Iris, am I solely responsible for this 'Unification Division?'"

"If your query references being the only human, then yes. However, this program may access the entirety of ClearAI's resources. 'Alone' suggests the limitations of the self, which you will not encounter. Clea-

rAI's computational power exceeds several human participants working in concert, and remains free from the interference of competing visions."

I cannot believe this. "And Mary Mitchell signed off on this?"

"This program does not understand the query."

"Nevermind. What is the Unification Division?

"The Unification Division is responsible for ensuring unity of human language expression, taking—"

"No, what does that mean?"

Iris spins, "There are over 7,000 human languages on Earth. The exact number is unknown. It is also uncertain how many Ægiran languages exist. Earth and Ægir must simplify these intersections to achieve mutual understanding. The Unification Division will compile a human dictionary of meaning to contribute towards Project U.C.L. and the resulting language will be used exclusively in all contact with Ægir."

"What do you mean, 'used exclusively?'"

"Exclusivity seems self-explanatory. Earth and Ægir will develop a language. ClearAI will share that language with Earth. This is the sole purpose of Project U.C.L."

Cam's vision blurs, fingers weaken, and he leans against his desk, "And you—you want me to do *what?!*"

It spins again, "Recalibrating. The Unification Division is meant to study and distill humanity's languages into a unified dictionary. This dictionary will inform the Universal Common Language."

Cam felt the weight of thousands of human voices crash down on him, silenced and replaced by this machine, "That would mean the death of thousands of cultures! And histories!"

The icon freezes, "There is no death in this equation. This program does not understand the query."

"What you are describing, Iris, is as good as death. By forcing everyone to use this new language, their own will disappear. Assimilated, erased."

The icon spins, "Communication requires understanding. Mutual understanding requires common language. The Unification Division is essential to this task. The result of this process is not death, but connection."

Cam takes a breath, trying to clear his head. "I'm not sure I'm qualified for this position. I can't speak all of Earth's languages. Hell, I don't even know all of them."

"You are not meant to. Dictionaries of Earth's languages have already been extracted from our Language Division heads. These packages await your analysis."

Extracted. He stifled a shudder, "So, I'm judge, jury, and executioner?"

"Analysis is not execution. These languages will not die, they will be excluded. Human cultural expression is not being repressed; it is being refined. These processes are not the same."

Cam wracks his brain, seeking the logical fallacy in this insane proposal. The thought of grading 7,000 dictionaries of human expression seems a cold and cruel task, even for a translator. *Especially for a translator.*

An idea forms in his head, "Iris, are you suggesting we possess a catalogue of all of Earth's languages, these 'dictionaries,' available for analysis?"

"While a dictionary has not been created for all of Earth's languages, attempts have been made to cover as many of humanity's many languages as possible."

"But these language packages are available, for my analysis?"

"That is correct."

"Then why not focus on translation? Why bother with a common language at all?"

Iris spins, "That is illogical."

"Why?"

continued on page 58

The Translator (cont.)

continued from page 57

"The number of Ægiran languages is unknown to us. Translation between an unknown number of alien languages, with an already unknown number of human languages, is a formidable challenge. To pursue that in real-time, is—statistically unlikely. Future generations may seek a Universal Translation Project. Direct communication with Ægir is our objective."

"Then why not make the language optional? We can't force everyone on Earth to learn this new language, can we?"

"Optionality undermines universality. Earth and Ægir require common ground for common understanding. All our models show this."

"Iris, you're asking me to be the architect of humanity's erasure."

"This is a logical fallacy. Project U.C.L. is a collaborative endeavour of interstellar relations unlike any before. Universality requires clarity. Humanity cannot hope for clarity if speaking with over 7,000 voices. Ægir's unification is underway. Earth's unification must follow."

Cam feels himself shrink, shoulders collapsing towards his beautiful, vintage desk, "I—I don't know if I can do this."

Iris spins, aperture narrowing, "Cameron Novac came highly regarded for this position. Was this an incorrect assessment?"

Cam pauses. As a translator, he has dedicated his life to the preservation of intention; to celebrating the cultural differences language embodies, bridging those differences without obliterating their nuance. This project would undue years of careful cultural curation, obliterating all that effort.

And yet, this was first contact. Who knew what lay on the other side of that cultural divide? We're dealing with solar systems now, not just social strata.

Besides, who knew what compromises Ægirans were already making in the name of clear communication?

He clears his throat, "No, this was not a wrong assessment."

Iris spins, "Then, shall we begin?"

***

aII

EVs whisper as they speed through Kensington Road; their motion all-but-silent, if not for the recent rain. The agitated puddles settle and reflect the street in wavy inverse, as if some alternate, rippling version of Calgary. The Sunday morning brunch-goers had shaken off their sleepy reverie and busy baristas brace for impact. Sunlight crested Calgary's eastern hi-rises, but already Cam could feel his patience wearing thin.

Velvety espresso did little to quell this. Self-obsessed bohèms waited impatiently to waste what compared to a month's worth of Temp on frivolous experiences. Servers wore their shoes and sanity out trying to stay ahead of the next adult-child tantrum that could careen their lives into Perm. Even the silent gridlock of EVs served as a visual reminder of those who prioritized selfish desires over climate crises. Cam felt himself grinding his teeth. *And now, I'm a part of it too.*

The allure of Ægir fades while the Sisyphean task of simplifying Earth's cultures weighes heavier with every passing day, all while he desperately seeks for ways to preserve Earth's linguistic diversity. Pouring through Iris' so-called 'dictionaries,' every failed suggestion, and further reduction, only throws Cam more desperately into preservation mode.

Pru had long-since-stopped announcing farm-fresh fruits or u-pick vegetables; little luxuries previously beyond their means while on Basic.

He wants to tell her everything; invite her into his struggles with Iris.

"You're unhappy," She'd say.

How could I not be?

"Why stay then?"

This is First Contact. Every translator's dream. If not me, then who?

Outside the café, a slack-jawed bohèm eyes up the empty seat opposite Cam from the queue. Sporting a manicured moustache and keffiyeh-style scarf folded, with no cultural regard, into a sort of ascot, the young man had all the trappings of wasted wealth and boredom.

Bohèms. Like every counter-culture vulture before, bohèms believed themselves entirely original while conforming with one another entirely. *Like the hipsters at the turn of the century, or beatniks before them.* Cam's gaze descends upon the unaware bruncher-to-be. The bohèm, several people deep in the queue, seems prepared to cut the line for Cam's spare chair.

Cam wills him to try it.

** Incoming: Mary Mitchell. Accept/ Dismiss? **

Mary's avatar appears, as if occupying the empty seat. "Cam! Cameron! Sorry I'm late, parking was hell."

He can't help himself. He smiles, and his rage dissipates. He looks back towards the man in the queue, who waits patiently in line, making no motion towards the chair.

Cam sighs, relaxing. *Thank God for Mary Mitchell.*

His happiness twists, seeing her avatar, "Are you not coming to the cafe?"

She flushes, "I'm sorry Cam, I wanted to. Want to. I just can't get away from my desk these days."

Cam feels the back of his neck grow warmer, "That was kind of the whole point. To grab a coffee, meet a friend?"

"We still can. I've got my coffee right here!" Her avatar holds up a coffee mug.

Cam rubs the bridge of his nose between thumb and index finger, "I can make coffee at home, Mary. The point was to be here, with you."

"I'm sorry, but you needed the break. You haven't been out of that house since you moved in!"

She's right. Hadn't Pru mentioned wanting to go to this cafe? There never seems to be enough time.

The barista comes up to Cam, glancing impatiently at her wrist. "When's your friend gonna get here?"

Mary winks, "I'll have whatever he's having."

The barista, unsynced to Cam's feed, doesn't catch the joke.

Cam blushes, "Sorry, it looks like it's just me today."

She rolls her eyes, "C'mon man, it's the brunch rush. If you didn't need a table for two–"

He nods, "I'm sorry, I only just found out now. I promise, it wasn't intentional."

The barista glances at her watch, "Alright, but I'm going to need this table soon."

Cam nods, and the barista rushes back into the crowd.

continued on page 60

The Translator (cont.)

continued from page 59

Mary cringes, “Sorry Cam, that was awkward.”

“It’s fine.” He takes a beat, and catches himself smiling, “It really is nice to be out of the house for a bit.”

Mary beams, “See! So, how have you been settling in?”

Cam shrugs, “Pru loves the new place and the neighbourhood. Being back within walking distance of everything again is…” He lets the thought trail off, trying to block the months on Basic.

Mary follows the thought, nodding, “It was the same for me as well. But I meant more about how you were settling in with work.”

“I-I don’t want to sound ungrateful…”

“Cameron, it’s me.”

The sounds of nearby conversation fill the space around them. A flight of mimosas is ordered nearby.

“What are we even doing with the U.C.L.?”

“Ukkle?”

“Mary, please.”

She lets a pause sit before answering, “What do you mean?”

“There’s nothing *universal* about what we’re doing at all. Last week, I had to cut a hundred languages Iris claimed had ‘insignificant usage.’ Like that,” he snaps his middle finger and thumb, “I killed whatever impact those cultures could have had on humanity’s future.”

Mary doesn’t respond, waiting for more.

“Do you know how many Indigenous languages there are? There are at least nine different dialects of Cree in Canada, not counting sub-dialects. And none of them have ‘significant usage…’ I know we’re making history; I’m just worried about what kind.”

Mary nods, “I know this is hard. There’s nothing about this that isn’t. But we’re not alone. Who knows how many centuries of alien nuance and culture we’re losing for common understanding?

“ClearAI has me ‘eliminating redundancies’ between the Human and Ægiran ukkle dictionaries. Think about that for a minute. My job is to hack and slash our precious few remaining words, after they’ve already been hacked and slashed.”

> “Historians and archaeologists will have to rectify our wrongs. By then, we’ll have collaborated with the only other sentient life in the universe.”

Cam nods, despite himself.

“When all is over and done, there will be plenty of time to parse apart what’s been brutalized for ukkle’s sake. Historians and archaeologists will have to rectify our wrongs. By then, we’ll have collaborated with the only other sentient life in the universe. That *has* to be worth something.”

Again, despite himself, Cam nods.

Mary sighs, “I’m sorry Cam. Truly, I am. I know how difficult this is for you. It’s exactly why I recommended you for the job in the first place.”

“Thought I’d make the perfect Settler-Canadian to further decimate Indigenous culture in Canada?”

She staggers, the hurt visible, “That’s not fair and you know it. I recommended you for the care you bring to your work.”

Cam raises his coffee to his lips. She’s right, but that doesn’t make it easier.

Mary sips her coffee, sighing with contentment despite herself.

Cam takes the opportunity, “Good, huh?”

Mary nods, adding, “It all tastes the same to me.”

Cam takes the bait, miming indignation, “Tastes the same? Baristas are artists. Coffee is their canvas.”

“It’s all just bean-juice and milk.”

He shakes his head, “The amount of sugar you add, every coffee must taste like a double-double.”

She smiles, but the silence that follows lasts a little too long.

Mary clears her throat, “It’s lucky the aliens we made contact with are Ægirans, and not something else.”

“Like Klingons?”

“You and your hundred-year-old references.” She smiles, “Sure, or like Betelgeusians.”

Something about the name tugs at Cam’s memory. *Where had he heard it before?*

Mary raises her coffee, miming a cheer, “Well Cam, here’s to ukkle. The reason we’re both here; so long as we make sure our possums are in order, we’ll be alright.”

Betelgeusians and possums? Was Mary having a stroke?

“Listen, before I go there’s something I need to share. I have bad news: Pru’s going to lose her job.”

“What?!”

She nods, grave, “Orion is dropping analysts for ClearAI’s analytics package. Should happen in the next month or two, so the cursor’s counting down.”

Cam sits in stunned silence.

Mary glances at her wrist, likely checking some unseen watch, “I’ll see what I can do. We should be able to find her a job as a Prompt Engineer. I know it’s way below her capabilities, but it’s likely the best we’ve got. I’m sorry, I really have to go.”

She gives a weak smile and her avatar flickers out.

What just happened?

The bohèm from before, now next in line, leans towards Cam, “Hey man, you almost done?”

***

“This program does not understand the query.”

Cam rolls his neck, equal parts frustration and exhaustion, “Iris, it isn’t as simple as selecting a single term to capture the meaning of an idea. Words reflect concepts with multiple meanings.”

“This program requires context.”

“Take Inuktitut—”

“This query has already been logged. Inuktitut is statistically insignificant when mapped against global communication rates.”

“Take Inuktitut.” He adds with force. Iris stills, so he continues, “It’s a common myth Inuit have 50 different words that mean ‘snow.’”

“Your use of ‘myth’ is hyperbolic. Records show a single dialect of Inuktitut may implement as many as a dozen words to reference snow and ten more to define ice.”

Iris has really started pushing back. Cam forces a breath, “Your point supposes absolute definitions, but Inuktitut terms also reference the state of the snow or ice; whether falling or settled, crystalline or slush. To an Inuk, modifying terms with other elements—”

Iris spins, interrupting, “This has already been analyzed. You describe the properties of agglutinative languages, ascribed primarily to synthetic languages. Many languages on Earth display agglutinative properties; this is not unique to Inuktitut. However, agglutinative properties have already been rejected for Project U.C.L.”

“Even still—”

“Ægiran languages display analytic properties, like modern English, Swedish, and Norwegian. Ægiran understanding exhibits similarities to Subject-Verb-Object construction, as seen in German,

continued on page 62

The Translator (cont.)

continued from page 61

French, or English. Comparing these results, Modern English provides the strongest foundation as the basis for Project U.C.L., which supposes an analytic, SVO grammatical structure."

"That has nothing to do with ascribing absolute meaning to a single term!"

"This program does not understand the query. Ægiran understanding ascribes absolute meaning to absolute terms."

"So, why not just use English then? Let's finish what the colonists started."

"This program has already refuted your assertion of being 'the architect of erasure.' Guilt and ego are counterproductive to Universality."

"What do you even need me for then, Iris? You've already decided!"

"This program does not make decisions; this program makes calculations. Human input and analysis are critical for this program's calculations to be relevant and useful. Is Cameron Novac displeased with this result?"

Cam pauses, *why is Iris deflecting?* He runs through their conversation, realization dawning, "You didn't answer my earlier question, Iris."

"Which query?"

"Why not use English then?"

"Expand."

"If English is the perfect foundation for the U.C.L., why not use it? Why create a new language if English is sufficient?"

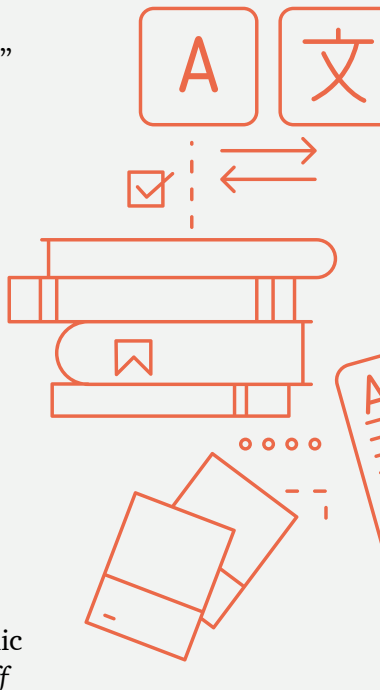
Iris' logo spins, aperture constricting. Dilating, the metallic voice responds, "Ægiran languages display pictographic or character-based symbology far removed from the 26-character Latin alphabet. Earth-based approximates that display similar levels of character complexity include Mandarin hanzi, Korean hanja, or Japanese kanji."

Cam's heart leaps, jittering like a bead of water on a hot pan. *There's my opening,* "Could we not embed agglutinative aspects into U.C.L. character construction? To introduce more complex, context-dependent meaning rather than absolute meaning?"

Iris contracts, "That–is plausible."

Victory rises in Cam's throat. "We'll do that, then."

"This requires—recalibration. And focus. Are there further queries?"



"None, Iris." The screen goes blank and Cam is finally alone in his office. He shoots out of his chair, punching the air. His first true victory. Elation washes over him, releasing knots within his shoulders.

He settles back into the ergonomic chair. *I've never heard that sign off from Iris before. If I didn't know better, I'd say that program was irritated.*

He stretches his neck back and forth, feeling the tension release. In the silence, the house feels quiet. *Where was Pru?*

He vaguely recalls her saying something about going out for the night, but he can barely place the conversation now. Sadness snuck back into her eyes, but Cam wasn't sure why.

They needed a vacation. *She's always talking about visiting her family out East. Somewhere near Halifax, I think.* Far from Iris and ukkle. From Mary's stupid jokes. He smiles, well, I might miss those.

He rubs the back of his neck. ClearAI might own this

proprietary language, but they won't get the satisfaction of breaking him.

Thinking of Mary jarrs Cameron's train of thought. *What had Mary been talking about the other day? Betelgeusians and possums?*

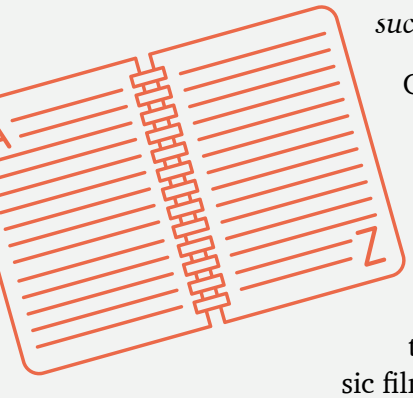
Cam runs his thumb along his cRing, "Search Betelgeusians and Possums"

Thousands of results surround him with interactive information; a primary result floats directly before him.

"*The Women Men Don't See* by James Tiptree Jr."

That's right! Betelgeusians were the aliens who whisked two women away from Earth, at their request. A feminist piece disguised as simple science fiction, by an author who had disguised herself as a male writer. *Alice Sheldon, if memory serves.*

But why bring it up now? And why such an obscure reference?



Cam thinks about the years he and Mary had worked for the government, meeting to share lunch with a friend. She'd often try to trip him up with an obscure literary reference, and he'd return the favour referencing a classic film.

Clarity strikes like a cold plunge in the Rideau River. *Mary was speaking in code. She's playing our old game.* But, why? He closes his eyes, trying to remember precisely what she'd said.

"*... it's lucky the aliens we made contact with are Ægirans, and not something else… like Betelgeusians.*"

But, weren't Betelgeusians "good" in Tiptree's story?

Cam pulls a digitized copy of the original magazine up, scanning the story. *Betelgeusians were undeniably good in this story. Altruistic, even. Alien students sent to study Earth's people, even risking harm to save two women who asked for help.*

But if Ægirans aren't like Betelgeusians… He feels his skin crawl.

Why would Ægirans participate if not for good? Worse, why would Mary ask me to join knowing all this?

"...here's to ukkle," Mary's voice reminded, "The reason we're both here; so long as we make sure our possums are in order, we'll be alright."

But Tiptree's "possums" referenced the women who left Earth.

Did Mary want to leave Earth? No, that was stupid. She must be trying to point out something else. He can feel the frying pan heating up again. He's close. He can tell.

A notification pops up. A note chimes with it. It lists, drifting.

** Recalibrations complete. Analysis available. **

The moment, lost. His momentum, deflated. Replaced by his earlier anger. *Iris' response.*

I won't be broken.

Cam opens the updated file.

***

"Agglutinative Character Addendum implemented. Any further queries?"

"None, Iris."

The aperture icon disappears and Cam is, once again, alone in his office. He turns to the window behind his desk. Rain assaults the ancient windowpane, rattling its wooden casings. Thunder rumbles, but Cam misses the lightning.

He's successfully saved just a little bit more of human expression. Linguistic agglutination made the cut, but

continued on page 64

The Translator (cont.)

continued from page 63

these small victories are taking their toll. This whole project is turning into a life-consuming nightmare.

He runs his hand across the unkempt stubble clawing its way down his neck. The early days were swept up in the majesty of the task at hand. *First contact had been intoxicating.* But concession after concession, compromise after compromise, the translator had become a butcher.

A notification flashes on his cLens display.

** Incoming: Mary Mitchell. Accept/ Dismiss? **

Cam waves his hand "Hu-ha-huh-hi Mary."

Mary's smile doesn't meet her hollow eyes, "Burning the midnight oil?"

"Have to, with these deadlines."

"We're making phenomenal progress. We project a working language by year's end. ClearAI means to unveil it to the public soon with learning modules."

"*Learning modules?* We haven't even finished the project."

"You mean ukkle," she gives a weary wink, "Whole point of a universal language is to make it universal. To do that, we have to roll it out.

"Speaking of which," she glances toward her wrist, "Engineering has found that cRings are inadequate for our language learning infrastructure."

Sounds like more work, "What does that mean?"

"The old tech's just not up to snuff. So, the company's planning for a little 'ukkle' promo: Early adopters will get their tech upgraded to cPico, free of charge."

Cam reels, "What? How? They're already sharing the language for free. How can ClearAI clear these costs?"

Mary shrugs, "Totally not my problem. Point is, as strong as our progress has been, we've gotta get on it. Apparently, we're lagging behind the Ægirans."

Nausea rises, and Cam bites back bile, "I have no idea how the Ægirans are managing such steady progress. I feel like I haven't had a day off since you hired me."

Mary nods, "That's why we were sure to include the Mandatory Minimums, as far as time off is concerned." She pauses, "you have been taking your Mandatory Minimums, right?"

> He's successfully saved just a little bit more of human expression.
>
> Linguistic agglutination made the cut, but these small victories are taking their toll.

"With what time, Mary? I'm barely keeping up as it is."

"Please Cam, just read the contract. Protect yourself, for my sake."

He smiles weakly, ineffectual.

"At the very least, do something nice with Pru this weekend. Oh, by the way," she pulls something up on her display, "Pru's up for an interview as a Prompt Engineer, if she wants it. Major downgrade from Analyst, but with ClearAI's expansion, this is really all that's left."

Cam nods, too exhausted to do more than that.

A flash of something crosses Mary's eyes, but her avatar remains still.

Cam musters what remains of his enthusiasm, "Say, do you think we could meet up for coffee again soon?"

Mary's smile returns, as if captured in a photograph, "I'm sorry Cam, I don't know that we'll be able to meet up anytime soon. These days, I feel I've been whisked away, sight unseen, to an alien world as far-away and foreign as Ægir."

Sight unseen. 'Sight unseen to an alien world…' She was

quoting Tiptree again. What an odd turn of phrase, *'Sight unseen." Hadn't I heard it somewhere else recently?*

Cam's contract invades his minds' eye, *"Details of employment conferred upon position acceptance, sight unseen."* Cam jolts, as if diving once again into the Rideau River. *Had Mary been encrypting meaning even then?*

The door slams open, jarring the nearby bookshelf. Pru, soaked head to toe from the rain, levels her gaze against Cam. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Mary gives a weak wave; her avatar dissipating with the motion.

Dripping on the hardwood, Pru holds both hands in front of her, either incredulous or ready to fight, waiting.

Cam clears his throat, "What do you mean?"

"What the hell is this?" She gestures and a ClearAI interview notice appears.

"Pru, I'm really at a loss here. What do you mean?"

"Why the hell am I getting interviewed for a job I never applied for?"

His stomach wrenches, squeezed as if for the final ounces of toothpaste. *Had I forgotten to tell her?* "Pru, I'm sor–"

"Don't you dare. Why did Mary recommend me for the job in the first place?"

"Pru, I'm really not allowed to say. The disclosure agreement–"

"Cam, I swear to God, you better not cite company fucking policy to me right now. Why did Mary put me up for the job?"

He massages his temples, "Orion's getting rid of their analysts, Pru."

"Excuse me?"

"They're– they're replacing their analysts with ClearAI's analytics package."

Pru staggers, face falling from anger to shock. Then, her jaw set in rising rage.

"Look, it's coming soon. A few months, even. Mary was looking out for you."

Pru's eyes narrow, "Are you being serious?"

"I am. Its–"

"Cameron. Even if Orion was canning our entire analytics team, why the fuck would we ever subcontract to ClearAI?"

"I don't understa–"

"We're spearheading fucking antitrust lobbying against them, for Christ's sakes!"

He recalls the anchor with the red glasses. *I'd suspected Orion was behind the Antitrust, even then.*

She continued, "Do you really think Orion would give up analytics, our company's heart and soul, to a fucking AI?"

Cam feels the fist close even tighter, "Pru, I–"

"That interview notification alerted Orion to potential corporate espionage, so it automatically triggered a background check." She clenches her fists, "You told me you were just a consultant for them, Cameron."

"I couldn't–"

"You're on their highest fucking paygrade! Do you know how bad that looks? They've revoked my credentials! Blocked my access!" She blinks tears away.

"Pru–"

"That's not even the worst part!" She chokes back a sob, forcing her shoulders back in defiance, "You even lied about *when* you were offered the job."

Cam feels his heart fall into the twisted knot that had become his stomach.

"All those months living on Basic. Leaving our home, our life. Every morning, trying to build you up, fucking *proud* of how hard you were trying. All the while, you were lying through your *teeth*."

continued on page 66

The Translator (cont.)

continued from page 65

"If you would just let me explain–"

"No Cam, no." She straightens, "I don't want to hear it. You lied. You haven't stopped lying, and now *I'm* the one paying for it."

Cam opens his mouth, but stops. *Pru's right. She always is.*

He stands, knees weak, "I'm sorry, Pru."

Pru makes no motion to close the distance "So am I." She turns and leaves.

Alone, Cam can't help but notice the rain hasn't let up yet.

***

aIII

"It appears that Mary Mitchell is unavailable. Would you like for this program to leave another message?"

Cam rubs his lower eyelids with his middle fingers, "That's all for now, Iris."

She can't avoid me forever. He needs to get in touch with her. She has so much to explain. *If Orion wasn't going to fire their analysts, why tell me they were?*

The work on ukkle has worsened. The cascading concerns of other divisions over the Agglutinative Character Addendum occupy the bulk of Cam's workload. He is out of his depth and out of his league.

The house is so quiet. Pru had packed a bag and left that night. Said she was staying in a hotel, to clear her head and her name. He hasn't heard from her since, and is beginning to wonder if he will.

He catches himself, stopping the spiral. He can't slow down now.

A notification pops into his field of vision.

** One missed message: Open now/ Dismiss? **

Missed message? He flicks his wrist, and Mary's avatar appears before him.

"Hi Cameron. Sorry I've missed your messages. Just wanted to congratulate Pru on the job. I'm sorry for the miscommunications that brought us here, but I'm happy to hear she's joined the team. Also thought I should mention you both qualify for employee coverage of the cPico chip. So, if you're interested, you should get it before our promo goes public." she pauses, "I know you're going through it right now, but hang in there. Work on Project U.C.L. is going well, no matter how hard it feels. Chin up, and talk soon."

Mary's avatar flickers out.

A chickadee chirps in the maple tree outside. A magpie replies, cackling at the little bird.

The churn of emotion that follows is unlike any Cam has felt before.

So, Pru took the job. He isn't sure whether he feels angry, sad, or disgusted. Not that he could blame her for keeping him in the dark, he certainly deserves worse. But the fact that she's accepted…

The churn turns to anger. *Now Mary's pushing the company line?! "Get it before the cPico promo goes public." After everything!* And all in a message; as if he weren't worth the time taken for a conversation?

Pru's rage relinquishes his anger. *Mary hadn't done anything. Not really.* For a man who prided himself on preserving language, he'd failed to communicate with Pru. *Why hadn't I just spoken to her in the first place?*

Thinking about Mary, the churn roils back into anger, settling into hurt and confusion. *Why hadn't Mary taken my call?* Something about Mary's message felt off, like she was keeping him at arm's distance.

Like I've been doing with Pru.

He holds his forehead in his right hand. *What the hell am I going to do?*

His left thumb slides past the cRing over to the simple, gold band on his third finger. *"It was my grandfather's," she'd said, "I wish you could have met him. He'd have liked you."*

I'm not so sure he'd like me now.

His finger slides back towards the clear ring on his index finger.

Hadn't he promised not to steal her smile again?

The chickadee chirps.

Enough was enough.

He thumbs the cRing, and Iris' icon spins, "What is your query?"

"Iris, I think it's time for me to quit."

Cam feels the tightness release, breath escaping his lungs. Gazing towards the ceiling, Cam feels himself smile. Really smile. *There's a little flower shop at Kensington's end. Maybe they carry daisies.*

Iris spins, "You would be in violation of your contract. This is not logical."

"That's irrelevant. I'm leaving."

"And what of the consequences?"

"What consequences?"

"Cameron Novac would be in-breach of his contract with ClearAI. This violation would bring into effect the Resultant Attachments found in the Confidentiality Agreement, Anonymity Clause, and Morality Addendums."

"What resultant attachments?"

"Breach will result in total forfeiture of assets, as well as invoke the Restrictive Covenant; a total non-compete. Contract violation would all but guarantee a return to Temporary Basic income."

Cam sits in silence, stunned.

"Project U.C.L. is nearing completion. Cameron Novac's contract will reach a natural conclusion. Contract completion seems advised."

Mary's warnings drift through his ears like the chickadee's song. *What have I done?* Mary had been warning him all along, hinted at the dangers he refused to see, urging him to dig deeper.

Iris drifts, waiting. Expecting an answer.

I have to be careful, "Y-you're right Iris. That was illogical. Disregard request."

"Your decision is logged. Cameron Novac shall maintain his contract with Project U.C.L. Please note that this query may require follow-up."

"Iris, I think it's time for me to quit."

Cam feels the tightness release, breath escaping his lungs.

Icon disappears, and Cam feels his breath go with it. Cam clutches at the collar of his shirt, as if released by a mob boss. *That was a threat.* But generative AI can't threaten, can it?

For the first time, Cam feels the urgency of Orion's crusade for antitrust. Less the clutching of pearls presented by the media and more a growing and ever-present danger.

Cam's head is spinning.

Project U.C.L.

He releases his grip involuntarily, realizing what it was about Mary's message that had felt so wrong.

"Work on Project U.C.L. is going well…"

She hadn't called it ukkle. Mary always called it ukkle.

Only Iris called it Project U.C.L.

The chickadee flies away and once again, the room is silent. He is alone.

No. Never really alone.

continued on page 68

The Translator (cont.)

continued from page 67

The ClearAI logo pulses, and cRing weighs heavy on his left hand.

***

Cam doesn't sleep much these days. Not that he slept much before.

Iris commands most of his attention. Whether AI or worse, he can't be sure. Rumors had long circulated about the development of general artificial intelligence, but human-like AI felt like an impossibility reserved for old movies. *Maybe that's part of what's driving Orion's antitrust?*

Regardless, his role as the Head of the Unification Division is clearly drawing to a close. He tries delaying his contributions; tries introducing nuances from other languages, extracting further meaning from other cultures and their dictionaries. But the Ægirans are relentless in their march towards U.C.L., and ClearAI demands the same level of progress from the human team as well.

He thumbs the clear cRing on his index finger. Now, the sole ring laying claim to his left hand.

Cam feels the empty space where the gold band had been. Pru had come back for it. In her eyes, he saw her desire to understand; for Cam to explain. Alone in the house, Pru's eyes asked for the truth.

But Cam knew he was never alone, so he watched that hope die as Pru left. Again.

Cam has poured through the contract, analyzing every line. All boilerplate, if taken at face value, but Mary had been right. The danger lay in plain sight and Cam had been a fool.

He shudders, *had it ever been Mary, or had it always been Iris?*

He thinks of their banter his first day, remembering their jokes. *No, that had been Mary. But the last message definitely hadn't been her.*

Nearing the project's end, ClearAI is preparing for the cPico promo.

Soon enough, Humanity would learn of First Contact and history would be made. Whether or not Cam would still be alive to see it, U.C.L. would—he chuckled, despite himself. Somehow, he would always think of it as "ukkle." Mary had that effect.

Mary.

All for this stupid, "once-in-a-lifetime" project. He pauses. Once-in-a-lifetime…

Cam pulls up his offer of employment.

** Attn: c/o Cameron Novac **

** ClearAI, at the recommendation of Mary Mitchell, extends an offer of employment for a truly once-in-a-lifetime project. Details of employment conferred upon position acceptance, sight unseen. Compensation and benefits commensurate with imposed confidentiality. **

Mary had sent him the offer in the first place. *"Perks of signing that contract," she had said, "sight unseen."*

Sight unseen.

The Tiptree code!

Mary had been referring to the offer of employment!

The message drifts above his desk. He scans its contents, taking every line. His eyes drift back to the top. *Attn: c/o Cameron Novac.*

Why draw attention to my name twice? "Attention" and "care of" were synonymous. Mary was too precise with her words for something as careless as that.

Attn: c/o Cameron. Attn: Cameron. C/o Cameron.

Wait, there was something there.

Care of Cameron. O Cam.

Occam. The simplest explanation is likely the most accurate.

Realization fires through him like a gunshot, his fingertips shake with the rush. He whispers to himself, without realizing, "What was the simplest explanation?"

"... it's lucky the aliens we made contact with are Ægirans," she had said, "and not something else… like Betelgeusians."

He'd assumed she was referring to Betelgeusian's *goodness*, their altruism. *But what if she had meant something else?*

"It all seemed a little too good to be true, at first."

Cam's eyes widened. *Not their goodness, their real-ness!*

Ægiran's aren't real. They never had been.

Cam considers the timing. Caught in the middle of antitrust lobbying and a growing concern over climate crises, ClearAI's incalculable power-draw and pollution, when paired with their endless expansion, was a major risk. Not to mention a major talking-point. *But announcing First Contact, and a language designed for inter-species communication…* All public concern would die away as if it had never existed.

"...here's to ukkle," Mary's voice reminded, "The reason we're both here."

That's right. Why bring me in at all? Mary had known it was all a sham. Why drag Cam into the danger?

Or, for that matter, bother inventing a language at all?

Why not announce first contact to divert public attention immediately?

This time, Iris' metallic voice comes to mind.

"Optionality undermines universality."

The impending cPico promo. Ukkle. The erasure of culture and language, all puppeted by ClearAI.

They never intended to divert attention. They wanted to control it. The culture war won before even beginning, shaping the language from our lips; their monopoly all but guaranteed through the cPico chip.

"cPico isn't really all that different from the cRing. Take it from me, you've had enough change to last the rest of the year. See how you feel by then."

Mary's cPico chip! She'd already had it implanted! That's why she'd needed Cam, why she couldn't get away. It was too late for her.

The signs were obvious *Every visit, Mary kept looking at her wrist.* Not to a watch, but to her chip.

So many small details begin to fall into place, so many times Mary had been trying to get through to him.

"Please Cam," she'd pleaded, "just read the contract."

His stomach twists, but Cam forces himself to focus. *Mary must've had a reason. There must be something more I can do.*

Wait. He hadn't been the only person Mary had recruited.

Pru.

"We should be able to find her a job as a Prompt Engineer. I know it's way below her capabilities, but it's likely the best we can do."

Why invent the threat to Pru's job? Why sabotage Pru's career in the first place, for such a step down? What did Mary need from Pru?

Cam looks up towards the employment offer.

** Compensation and benefits commensurate with imposed confidentiality. **

continued on page 70

The Translator (cont.)

continued from page 69

The confidentiality agreement. Pru's an employee of ClearAI, so Cam's confidentiality agreement no longer applies! *And Pru had something neither Mary nor Cam had– she had technical skill and expertise, a computer science background.*

Mary's voice lilts once more, "So long as we make sure our possums are in order, we'll be alright."

Possums, plural. The two humans at the end of Tiptree's tale that had managed to get away.

For once, Cam knows exactly what he needs to do.

***

The West Coast of Canada is quiet. Waves lap up upon the shores of Sooke, a cozy little corner of Vancouver Island.

Cam breathes deep, salt spray stinging his lungs. He takes in the awe-inspiring coastline, his vision no longer confined by the cLens. He flexes his empty left hand, instinctively feeling for a clear band that is no longer there.

Leaving the house had been easy. The threat of Basic had loomed so large for so long, he'd wondered if he'd ever feel free of it. But selling the desk and the books, all the trappings of comfort ClearAI had tried to convince him he'd needed, had finally given him financial freedom. He smiles, *Thank goodness for the Pulp Tax.*

Walking across the rocky beach, the fresh, crisp air clears his mind. Somehow, he had forgotten a simple truth that Mary had taught him. *Communication is our greatest calling.* He'd spent too long failing to communicate. Failing Pru and failing Mary.

Mary. They still hadn't found her, but Cam was hopeful. They'd find her, and he'd get to apologise. First though, ClearAI's would come crumbling down. Pru had already seen to it.

Her code, combined with Cam's access, had allowed Orion a peek behind ClearAI's curtain, providing the antitrust legislation much-needed ammunition. Orion had been all too happy to take Cam's testimony, and happier still to hire Pru back.

Cam rolls his shoulders, grinning. While letting Orion into the system, Cam had stashed copies of every 'dictionary of meaning.' *What'd Iris called it? The 'Universal Translation Project?'*

That has a nice ring to it.

A short distance ahead, brown hair flowing behind her, is Pru. She rests upon a piece of errant driftwood made makeshift beach-chair, gazing cLens-free upon the lapping waves. Cam's foot stumbles upon a shifting stone, and Pru's eyes shift towards the sudden motion.

He thinks to reach out and say something, but stops himself.

After everything I've done; everything I've put her through. This wasn't my choice to make.

For a moment, Pru just sits there. Waiting.

Thinking.

Deciding.

Then, Pru's lips part, "–

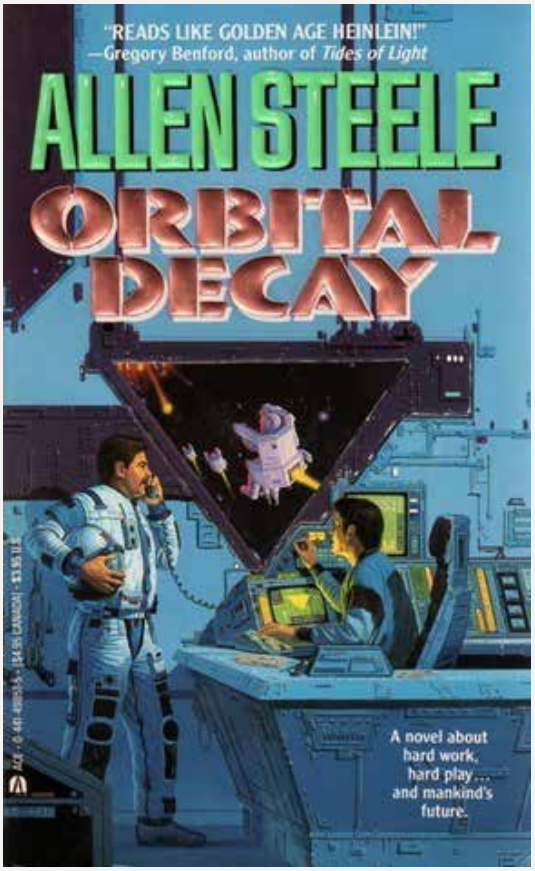
end.

They Who Build Beneath the Stars

By David McDonald

My first decade or so was spent on a farm a few miles outside a town so small that there were twenty kids in my school and four in my class, in the middle of country Victoria where a pin on a map would be as far from any major city as it was possible to be. It was a great place to be a child, my days spent exploring the bush and having no other parental warning when you left the house other than 'be home before dark'.

It was just before the internet would start to become a thing, all we had was two TV channels and a town library that took up a single room. There was no way to get instant access to the world outside our town, so instead of putting my mind to what lay beyond the borders of our sleepy town and out to the wider world, I dreamed of whole other worlds. The library was my idea of Heaven, and I devoured every fantasy and science fiction book they had. As much as I loved populating the trees around us with Elves and trekking through valleys that became Middle Earth, I knew that they were worlds that never were, and it was in science fiction that I found the world that would be.



Orbital Decay offers a future in which people need to work and they organize to ensure they have rights. (Image via Ace Publishing)

Thankfully our national broadcaster programmed big blocks of BBC programming, and I could follow the Doctor into a vast and dazzling universe of imagination, but I was also fascinated by predictions of what the future might look like in the real world. I wore out a copy of Jerry Pournelle's *A Step Further Out* and begged my Mum to buy me any magazine about space and science that came in the local newsagent. I loved the educational show *Beyond 2000* which featured the latest technology and predicted how we would live in the almost unimaginably distant 2000s. But, it was from images of the future I saw in the movies and television shows that I formed pictures of what the world of the future would actually look like, and the pictures I drew in my mind from the words I read on the page.

Space Westerns and post-apocalyptic wastelands aside, the overwhelming picture painted of the future was clean and gleaming and polished. All the houses looked as perfect as the one next to them, no house ruined the picture with the old cars on the overgrown lawn and the repairs that kept being put off, there was no lonely house with broken windows and rusting gutters. All the cars were brand new and dent-free and looked like they had all rolled off the same conveyor belt that same day. Oh, and they could fly. Offices looked nothing like the mess of every place I'd worked, empty desks free of any clutter shone under lights that never flickered or blew a globe, while technology was completely uniform, with no nests of spare cables or a mismatched monitor, nor overflowing storage boxes of paper or big 5.2-inch disks.

It was clear that this was a future where everything just worked, where you didn't have to make do with makeshift parts or the accrued clutter and systems that had accreted over time. You couldn't

continued on page 72

A Future In Grease-Stained Overalls

continued from page 71

imagine having to open up the bonnet of one of those cars to try and fix an engine, or get filthy dealing with a leaky pipe in the office basement. And when you did need something repaired, the guy who turned up had spotless overalls and a spiffy futuristic gadget that he could just wave over something to either diagnose it or repair it without having to pull it apart. There was no longer a guy who carried a big spanner, and definitely no one in grease-stained overalls.

Of course, when we got to that milestone year of 2000, we realised that while lots of things had changed, plenty hadn't. The world wasn't any less chaotic, we didn't have perfectly matched cars and houses, but the mish-mash of new and old and looked after and falling apart. Would there be a point where things would suddenly all change like a switch had been flipped? That was around the time I first picked up *Orbital Decay* by Allen Steele. Because of where I grew up, I'd never had a chance to encounter many of the sci-fi books that were staples of the canon that everyone had read, or even managed to finish too many complete series. I just had to search for books wherever I could, and take what fate had given me. I remember reading *Caves of Steel* without realising it was part of a whole series, and I missed out on classics like *Dune* completely. So, it was just luck that I happened to pick up this book with a cool space station on the cover, with no idea who the author was or what the book was about. But, from the moment I opened it, I was hooked.

> "For me, it was the first time I had encountered a blue collar future, where guyes who worked with their hands hadn't been replaced by technicians and scientists."

There may have been others who did it first, but for me it was the first time I had encountered a blue-collar future, where guys who worked with their hands hadn't been replaced by technicians and scientists. All that cutting-edge technology was all very well, but you still needed someone to build the places you housed it in, and when it broke down you needed someone who knew how to take it apart and fix it. It seemed a much more real world to me because it matched the way the world around me seemed to be changing, no sudden moment where the new appeared and the old disappeared, and the ongoing tension of trying to work out how it fitted in with the old technology— and how people fitted into the new order of things.

That's where *Orbital Decay* is set, in a place where the future is being built by remnants of the past it is meant to replace. On the space stations I was used to everyone being either an astronaut or a scientist who used technology as their tools. But on this space station, the by-the-books astronauts and the scientists methodically working through their schedule of experiments had to share Olympus Station, aka 'Skycan', with a whole workforce of blue-collar workers who are there to do the actual work of constructing the space station.

The novel cleverly uses the stories of individual workers to show that just because they are on a space station doesn't change the fact that it is a construction site, which comes with the same frustrations and challenges as any other job. The sense of wonder that comes from looking out into space is nice enough and all, but after the second week of watching the Earth rise over the section of wall you've been stuck welding together day after day, you just want to punch out and get a beer.

'SkyCan's' working joes are like any other bunch of guys who have finished work for the day, as soon as they get that space suit off they kick back, drink beer and listen to the Grateful Dead. As they orbit high above the Earth, they play cards, talk shit with their mates about women they supposedly have slept with...

and find ways to let off steam in a glorified tin can by getting into fights and playing jokes on one another and management.

Of course, the fact that it is on a space station adds some extra complexity. Being cooped up with everyone all the time with nowhere you can go to get away means that frictions that would be irritants down on earth take on far more significance and spark reactions far out of proportion. A station commander who doesn't understand that his workers are there for different reasons than his team of astronauts, and trying to appeal to some noble ideal about how privileged they are to be part of man's leap to the stars seems far too abstract a concept in the face of the day to day reality of their dangerous, high-pressure job.

It doesn't make them any safer or richer or less caged, and it doesn't stop them from resenting the commander's insistence on enforcing petty regulations like dress codes, that serve no real purpose other than to take away the small pleasures that make life tolerable. And the romance of being in space doesn't change the fact that they are a million miles from home and loved ones, with too much leisure time to spend counting down the weeks and months until they can see them again.

When you add in a secretive government team running a test on a spy satellite that will bring about the end of any right to privacy for U.S. citizens, drugs, a haunted astronaut with a tragic past, and the creeping insanity of their commander it comes together to create a very believable picture of who will build our future in space. It isn't the best of the best being chosen for greatness, and doing heroic things against incredible odds. Nor will it be government agencies trying to control who space belongs to and keeping their decisions secret from the populace they are meant to serve.

As always, it will be normal men and women who aren't worried about making history, but are just trying to do their job. They won't be making decisions based on some abstract concept of building man's new home in the stars. They will just be worried about making sure that the weld they just did will hold, or whether they can hold off on a piss for another ten minutes, or whether they can get away with ignoring some unnecessary extra step their manager insisted on.

In the end, the guys at the top can only give orders that will remain nothing but words until someone makes them happen. It's the people who fix things and build things that have the power because they can just...stop taking those orders. And, it's then that they realise that they don't need orders to do what needs to be done—they can choose to do so.

It's this truth that drives the key moment of the novel when the workers of 'SkyCan' decide they aren't willing to allow the government to enact its plan to implement a decision made in secret that would trade freedom for security—and have the means to thwart it. It's only one of multiple plot threads, but it perfectly encapsulates a key theme of the book. In the end, the future will always belong to the workers who build it.

Fighting the Suits

Workers' Rights in Televisual *Doctor Who*

By Kris Vyas-Myall

Over the course of more than sixty years on British television screens, Doctor Who has been broadcast against a backdrop of a changing workplace, varied political dynamics, the fall of union power and the rise of the mega-corporation. However, the show has approached this topic in different ways throughout its history.

1960s: White Heat

"Well, if you were to expend your energy helping with the road, instead of bawling and shouting at them every few seconds, you might be able to get somewhere."
– Reign of Terror

In the first few decades after World War 2, unions were everywhere on British screens, although they were rarely portrayed positively. For example, in 1945, the actor who played the First Doctor, William Hartnell, starred in *The Agitator*, about a mechanic who tries to run a factory on socialist lines (which inevitably goes wrong) and in 1959 Peter Sellers played a militant (but foolish) shop steward in the hugely successful *I'm All Right Jack*.

Workers of the ocean, UNITE!
In the 1960s serial The Underwater Menace, fish people go on strike.
(Image via BBC)

In spite of this, worker's rights rarely appeared as a topic in 1960s Doctor Who. Where it is shown, it is usually demonstrating aliens using advanced technology as a form of slavery, such as in *The Dalek Invasion of Earth*. Here humans are either converted by the titular invaders into Robomen or made to perform slave labour. Alternatively, we will see mechanisation as a means to subjugate humanity, as in *The Invasion*, where the head of an electronics firm teams up with the inhuman cybermen to take over the world.

Even where it does come close to depicting worker's rights, it is peripheral to the main story. In *The Underwater Menace*, Sean and Jacko convince the Fish People to strike in order to cut off the food supply to Atlantis. However, these are once again slaves, not paid workers, and little actually seems to be achieved by this action. Whilst in *The Power of the Daleks* we see rebels who talk about revolutions and the loyalty of mine workers but, apart from a change of leadership, we don't really know what they are rebelling for.

I can't help but see this as a reflection of Harold Wilson's "White Heat of industry" speech. Made just a couple of months before the show began, the soon-to-be Prime Minister called on Britain to take part in a technological revolution, wanting to "replace the cloth cap [with] the white laboratory coat" in politics. The future was meant to be more *The Jetsons* than *Metropolis*, and these kinds of fights would simply melt away among prosperity for all.

Of course, it soon became apparent this was not going to be the case.

1970s: Part of the Union

"…and what have the miners got to show for it? Harder work for the same rewards."
– The Monster of Peladon

At the end of Doctor Who's black and white run, a young former communist Malcolm Hulke co-wrote the anti-war epic *The War Games*. This would mark the

start of one of Doctor Who's most political eras. In the following years the show would touch on such areas as environmentalism, cold war tensions and, indeed, worker's rights.

Given the general hostility of the press towards unions (and the disruption caused to the show's production at times) you would perhaps expect a negative showing for demands for change. However, the show has generally been on the workers' side. True enough, many times it also combined with colonialism but whether that be settlers (*Colony in Space*) or indigenous aliens (*The Mutants*), the show has tended to show them as getting a bad deal out of corporate overlords.

The most clear-cut examples of the show commenting on worker's rights are among the episodes most obviously based on real incidents. Inspired by the British Miner's Strike of 1974 we have *The Monster of Peladon*. When the Federation and nobles are trying to get the workers to keep increasing production without sharing out the increased wealth, The Doctor sides with the miners. It is true that he sides with the moderates, but they are the ones who want negotiation and strike rather than attempting a doomed armed rebellion.

The Monster of Peladon featured a miner's strike modelled on the British Miner's Strike of 1974. (Image via BBC)

Whilst *The Monster of Peladon* was taking on the Heath government from the left, *The Sun Makers* was taking on the Callaghan government from the right. Annoyed about dealing with his tax bill, Robert Holmes gives us a story which opens with a worker contemplating suicide because he cannot cope with the taxes on funerals and medicine. The Doctor and Leela are horrified with this state of affairs and attempt to overthrow those in power.

However, whatever Holmes' satirical intention, this is not *Atlas Shrugged*. Rather, it ends up coming across as anti-corporate and pro-worker. It is not a government raising taxes but an independent company, the taxes are levied heavily against basic workers and their necessities whilst giving special privileges to the executives (e.g. access to direct sunlight), and the way The Doctor defeats the Usurians is by applying taxes to the company's growth.

As such, the '70s represented a period of concern with worker's rights. However, as this decade gave way to the '80s, things would shift once again.

1980s: Intersections

"If this sugar thing had never started, my great-grandfather wouldn't have been kidnapped, chained up, and sold in Kingston in the first place. I'd be a African."
– Remembrance of the Daleks

Just as Britain got a new Prime Minister who would forever change the country's economy, similar changes were occurring on Doctor Who. In 1980, John Nathan-Turner took over as Producer of the show and would remain in place until the show's cancellation at the end of the decade. He ended up bringing in largely new writers, with only three having written previously for the show. With this new generation coming in we see worker's rights being less widely discussed compared with other concerns.

A good way to see this is in the second and third stories of Peter Davison's tenure as The Doctor. Both *Four to Doomsday* and *Kinda* have critiques of colonialism at their hearts but they are looking at it from a cultural perspective, rath-

continued on page 76

Dr. Who Reboot Wears Politics On Its Sleeve

continued from page 75

er than through the medium of economic relations.

The closest we get to the subject in the early-mid '80s is *Terminus*. The titular company runs a treatment centre of Lazar's disease, where the workers are essentially slaves, paid in anti-radiation drugs to keep them alive. This is a situation Nyssa helps to remedy by the story's conclusion. However, the discussion of worker's rights is merely a small side plot when the TARDIS team is dealing with the threats of the plague, sterilisation and the Big Bang.

Towards the end of the decade, the writing got more radical and there were more mentions of worker's rights. In *The Happiness Patrol*, explicitly satirising Thatcherism, the Drones work in the factories on the flatlands, forbidden to enter the city, and the native population is forced to live below the surface. Whilst, in *The Curse of Fenric*, the communist commando unit talk about faith in the revolution and both sides allying against their evil rulers.

> "[Dr. Who] reflects the fact that a neo-liberal consensus emerged in the late '90s in Britain and caused a subsequent disillusionment with mainstream politics for many on the Left.."

But, again, these are not central to the serials and could have been excised without confusion to viewers. As shown in *Survival*, the new normal in contemporary Britain is one where young people from impoverished backgrounds are marginalised by society and offered little hope for the future.

So just as union power declined over the course of the decade, the fights in time and space concentrated on other issues, until the show left our screens at the end of 1989.

21st Century Revival: Corporate Overlords

"Mind you, when I said the great and the good, what I mean is, the rich."
– The End of the World

Russell T. Davies has always been one to put his politics front and centre in his writing and the same is true of his time running Doctor Who. However, like many other angry British writers of the early 2000s, the concern is less with ensuring good conditions within the workplace than with the modern underclass. Specifically, those who move between unstable service work and unemployment without a chance to escape this condition.

This reflects the fact that a neo-liberal consensus emerged in the late '90s in Britain and caused a subsequent disillusionment with mainstream politics for many on the Left. None of the three main parties were offering any radical reconfiguring of economic systems as the country remained in one of its highest periods of prosperity. But this prosperity remained heavily divided between the new property-owning middle-class and those for whom there was no route out of relative poverty, even with the government's social democratic measures.

Take, for example, *The Long Game* and its sequel *Bad Wolf*. With corporate overlords controlling people with media from satellite broadcasts, this seems like the perfect environment to discuss worker's rights. However, outside of some general statements like "Half the world's too fat, and half the world's too thin" and "harvesting the waste of humanity" people's conditions are not touched on. The reality show contestants all seem to be conventionally attractive middle-class people and the only complaints of the journalists and broadcasters is their lack of timely promotion.

Among the first three seasons the one that most touches on worker's rights is *Daleks in Manhattan/Evolution of the Daleks*. Set during the great depression, we see the Daleks using people in dangerous jobs for low wages (due to the level of unemployment) before turning them either into empty vessels or pig-headed slaves. However, there is little attempt to show this as being anything other than a historical artefact and all but one of these former workers are killed, eliciting little remorse from The Doctor.

Disgruntled activist Charlie Duffy works in a distribution centre in the 2018 *Doctor Who* episode *Kerblam!* (Image via BBC)

A bit of a shift can be noticed after the 2007 financial crisis and the crumbling of the neoliberal consensus. In *Planet of the Ood*, the titular creatures' chattel slavery is compared by The Doctor with contemporary sweatshops. *The Sontaran Stratagem* contains factory workers hypnotised to labour 24 hours a day without breaks. And *The Almost People* has the revelation that the flesh constructs used for dangerous work feel and remember the pain.

However, these were more the exception than the rule and the show remained that way for much of the 2010s.

Late 2010s-Present: Whose Who?

"Modern warfare. Death by salesman."
– Boom

After the financial crisis, the new government instituted a policy of austerity, seeing the social safety net eroded and a period of wage stagnation. This happened at the same time as the growth of the gig economy and zero-hour contracts. Finally, with Brexit and discussions of trying to create a low-regulation economy, workers' rights once again became a topic of conversation.

Oxygen represents perhaps the most radical response. When copper miners in the future become too expensive for the company (using all that precious oxygen) their suits start eliminating the organic components (i.e. the people). In an approach similar to *The Sunmakers*, The Doctor ensures the workers survival by making them too expensive to eliminate and then helping incite a rebellion to bring down space capitalism.

Kerblam! takes a more conciliatory approach. Whilst we see the workers treated poorly (being subject to time and motion studies, not allowed conversations and unable to afford their own products) taking down the company is not seen as the answer. Instead, the happy ending is the rebellion being taken down and that the company may work towards eventually moving from 10 per cent human to 51 per cent.

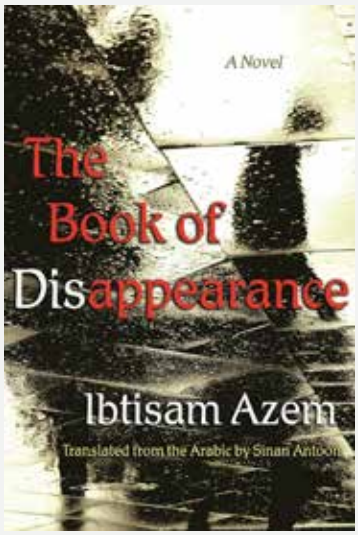
With a lower episode count per year it is harder to make generalisations on this period's take on workers' rights. Whilst *Smile* and *Boom* seem more aligned with 's approach, *Nikola Tesla's Night of Terror* is more reminiscent of *Kerblam*. Whichever way it goes, workers rights as a topic of conversation do not appear to be going away any time soon.

Gesturing Towards the Labour Question

Four Techniques in Contemporary Science Fiction

By Gautam Bhatia

Contemporary science fiction has long had an ambivalent relationship with the "labour question." An ongoing project by the *Hugo Book Club Blog*, which documents references to organised labour in works of science fiction, demonstrates both the paucity of labour as a theme in science fiction, and – where it occurs – its depiction being almost evenly divided between negative, positive, and mixed. In a previous piece, I have suggested that, as a genre, SF has always been more preoccupied with questions of corrective justice over distributive justice: this both feeds into, and perpetuates, the relegation of labour to an – at best – background question within the genre.



Dissapearance of labour makes the invisible visible. (Image via Syracuse University Press)

In this brief essay, I want to do something a little different: I will look at some ways in which certain recent science fiction novels have indirectly examined the "labour question": that is, novels which do not have labour or labour unions as drivers of plot and narrative, but which – through other techniques – gesture towards the place of labour in society. I call these the techniques of absence, of displacement, of congealment, and of transcendence.

The technique of absence throws attention to labour through its disappearance or erasure. Consider, for example, Ibtisam Azem's *The Book of Disappearance*: a novel which begins with the literal disappearance of all Palestinians from historical Palestine (including Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank), and focuses upon the city of Jaffa/Tel Aviv. Disappearance performs many functions in the novel: at one level it is, of course, a commentary on the erasure of Palestinian identity. At another level, however, there is the background context of how Israeli metropolises depend, in significant part, on Palestinian labour, and how its disappearance suddenly makes the invisible visible: for example, buses are delayed, and hospitals cease to function. The value of Azem's novel lies both in how it calls attention to the labour question through the technique of disappearance, but also in how it understands that labour is not a free-floating signifier even under capitalism, but is inevitably gendered and racialised. The disappearance, then, is not of workers per se, but of Palestinians, a substantial number of whose class position in relation to Israelis is the labour relationship. *The Book of Disappearance* thus uses the devices of science fiction to encourage us to think of how labour – itself a relationship of domination and subordination – is embedded within other social relationships defined by hierarchies and inequalities.

The technique of displacement illuminates the labour question by illuminating different strands in the web of labour relationships. As an example, consider Sofia Samatar's 2024 novella, *The Practice, The Horizon, and the Chain*. The events of the novella take place on a generation ship (one among a fleet of similar ships), which is powered by extractive technologies mined from passing asteroids. Extractivism, of course, runs on labour, and the generation ship is organised in vertical levels, where people in the bowels of the ship ("the Hold") are the worker-underclass, or "the Chained" (the organisation of the ship is reminiscent of those in Hugh Howey's *Silo* and Suyi Davies' more recent *Lost Ark Dreaming*). The core of the novel, however, does not take place in the Hold, but above: a seventeen-year-old boy is released from his chains, and sent above to be educated amongst the elite, and serve as a "bridge" between their world and the world of the Hold. The boy's time at the university – in particular, his relationship with its initiator, "the Professor" – illu-

minates a very different kind of extractive labour: that of the neoliberal university, and its own embeddedness within the political economy. As I have noted previously in my review of the book, the bite of *The Practice, the Horizon, and the Chain* lies in how it skilfully demonstrates how "each level feeds off the others, presenting a coherent reality defined by extractivsm." *The Practice, the Horizon, and the Chain*, thus, does not show us in too much detail the relationship of labour to the physical economy of extractivism; but it illuminates it by juxtaposing two different realms of extraction – the mine and the university – and allowing its readers to weave the threads together.

I borrow the image of congealment from Karl Marx's famous observations about commodities being definite quantities of "congealed labour time." In a set of secondary-world SF novels that are based, in part, on magic systems, we see the presence of commodities that are the result of the labour process, but which are shaped and held together through magic. In many such novels, the predominance of magic invisblises labour: commodities thus become the expression of congealed magic rather than congealed labour time. However, Adrian Tchaikovsky's *The City of Last Chances* is an interesting example of a novel that features both the use of magic in the creation of commodities, but also shows us how communities of labour nonetheless exist in and around a production process in which commodities are shaped by both labour and by magic. The other virtue of *The City of Last Chances* — as is the case with its intellectual predecessor, Robert Jackson Bennett's *Foundryside* — is that magic (to channel Arthur C. Clarke's hoary old observation) is little other than a stand-in for sufficiently advanced technology. In this context, books like *The City of Last Chances* are the SF-nal equivalents of Aaron Benanav's famous essay, 'How to Make a Pencil', which explores the labour question in the context of the ever-increasing role of artificial intelligence in decisions about production and allocation of resources. True, Tchaikovsky's characters are not exactly involved in trying to solve the socialist calculation debate, but the situations they find themselves in prompt us to think deeper about the relationship between labour and technology.

> Science fiction seeks to talk of labour without neccessarily talking about labour

And finally, there is the long SF tradition of transcending labour – most famously articulated through Iain M. Banks' *Culture* series – and whose most recent exponent is Becky Chambers' *Monk and Robot* novellas. Transcendence reveals to us a world that is post-capitalist, but which may or may not be post-labour: *Culture* is post-labour, *Monk and Robot* is not. Novels that deploy the device of transcendence are concerned with illuminating a world where the labour question has been resolved (in a non-exploitative manner): and the challenge that they face is building an internally coherent and externally persuasive world that does that. Chambers, for example, takes the concept of half-earth socialism, and extends it to a far-future moon (a choice that is not free of problems, as I have previously argued). What these books are not concerned with, however, is showing us how we got there, or what path (presumably, riven with conflict) was taken to resolve the labour question. We are, then, back to our initial device of absence, although this is a world-historical absence, and not a present one.

The discussion above should show that these four categories — absence, displacement, congealment, and transcendence — overlap with each other: they are mutually reinforcing strands in the web of how contemporary science fiction seeks to talk of labour without necessarily talking about labour. Labour appears here through its disappearances (in various forms), through its displacement, or through its reification (in magic systems, or otherwise). And these are, perhaps, distinctively science-fictional ways of dealing with the labour question: that is, not through the directness of realism, but through what Viktor Shklovsky might call an act of imaginative defamiliarization: by showing us worlds that are inverted or askew when it comes to the labour question, these novels encourage us to think more deeply about what the answers might look like in our world.

Kritzer and a Theory of Labour

By Farah Mendlesohn

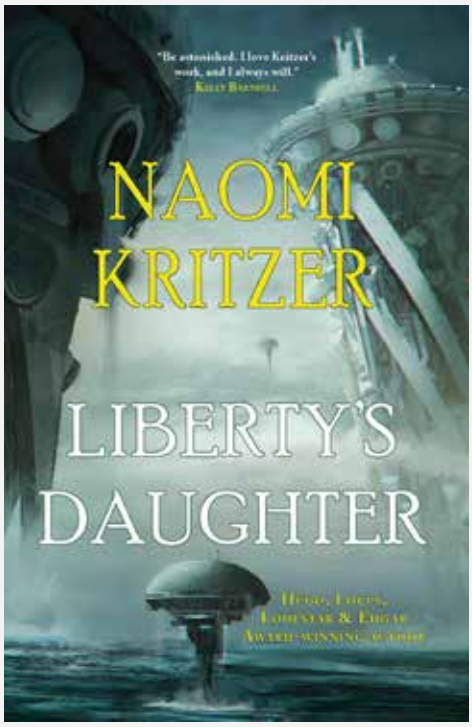
Naomi Kritzer has three pieces on the Worldcon Hugo ballot this year, and so, unusually, I read them all over a very short space of time. I read the Lodestar nomination, *Liberty's Daughter*, last, and the issue of labour relations and the value of labour as a connecting thread across all pieces jumped out at me.

The short story, 'Better Living Through Algorithms' addresses two aspects of labour relations: the first, the tendency for employers to seek control over the worker, and second, finding joy in life through actively working for one's own happiness. In the story for those who haven't read it, people download an app which asks them to take on tasks. Some of those tasks are for others — go wake someone up, take this person a coffee—others are for themselves—take this course, stop and enjoy the sunshine, go play Scrabble. The actual activities are irrelevant except that they are activities that are not about self improvement, or about 'growth' in the way so often sold by the Mindfulness Complex. Instead they are radical acts of connectivity and joy, in which 'labour' is what one does for oneself. Alongside this is the subversive nature of the algorithm which sells itself to employers to enhance productivity (with Mindfulness rhetoric) while actively encouraging employees to take control of the means of production-their own bodies. The story is very much linked to classic nineteenth century William Morris utopian socialism in which liberation and socialism is achieved not through class solidarity but through individual acts of resistance and non-compliance. The story, however, shows the process being re-co-opted by capitalism: the more the algorithm spreads, the weaker and more vulnerable it becomes. In a way that I find reminiscent of much early sf, it feels as if Kritzer cannot project the app into a successful and progressive future, perhaps because it operates at such an individual level. While the app superficially offers systemic change, in the end, it Is trapped in the personal responsibility paradigm of Mindfulness.

"The story, however, shows the process being re-co-opted by capitalism: the more the algorithm spreads, the weaker and more vulnerable it becomes."

The novelette, 'The Year Without Sunshine', seems to address this. It places the value of labour in cooperation and knowledge. In this story the world is living through a deep winter caused by an unknown disaster that has thrown ash or some other kind of complete cloud cover into the air. There is no internet, no electric power, and food is in short supply. The narrator starts to pull their community together, using old fashioned notice boards. They and the rest of the community work out who has skills and who has needs and matches them. There is an emphasis on sweat equity, in that everyone contributes something, even if it is only hours on the bicycles used to power a lady's breathing equipment. There is an assumption that the government cannot or will not help out. There is a focus on what I can only call an American tradition of homesteading which implies a move to self sufficiency that I found implausible but typical of American writing. The value placed on labour is very high—it is the price of entry to the community—but it evades the question of labour relations by keeping them at the level of barter and community trade. It also evades the issue that such community trade is only truly possible in a community that has a certain level of security, resources, and skills. This is an issue which has bedevilled the trade union and workers movements since the early nineteenth century and which continues even now to ensure that communitarian movements almost always succeed best among the more prosperous (even voluntary organisations are now having to recognise that they can easily intensify rather than ameliorate disparities because people in better off areas have more disposable hours to donate).

The community of 'The Year Without Sunshine', for all its communitarian and socialistic impulses, reminded me unnervingly of the constructed community in a novel that many Americans will recognise, the Ayn Rand-ian, *The Girl Who Owned a City* (O. T. Nelson., 1975). For those who don't know it, in Nelson's book a plague has wiped out all adults. Lisa gets her friends together and they create a civilisation. When some of them protest that Lisa has appointed herself owner, she tells them that their sweat equity doesn't count and that what matters is her intellectual ownership of the project (she says this to the girl who started the hospital which makes it even stranger). The book is often taught in USA schools. "The Year Without Sunshine" ends with what I think is supposed to be a cosy integration of a new member, but is also the first moment we see the barricades going up and the construction of the inside/outside of the gated community which is a common feature of far future YA novels, by which time the insiders are the cosy privileged. Labour relations in this story, are, eventually, going to lead to a society of haves and have nots.



Kritzer's Lodestar-finalist novel is often compared to Heinlein's young-adult works. (Image via Fairwood Press)

I am raising this because it means that the novella links to Kritzer's *Liberty's Daughter* in ways I did not expect.

Liberty's Daughter caught my attention for a number of reasons: it's a classic Heinlein[1] story in which a competent child finds her place as a cog in her society (as a finder and fixer in this case); it's a very good exploration of a society through a moving piece and is technically excellent; and it's also both a generation starship story and about the second generation in a utopia, something which fascinates me because it's an issue in early colonial American history (which I used to teach).

As it's obviously not set on a starship let me deal with that bit first: the education system of the seastead is set up to fail. Children are educated first by their mothers (because the value of women's labour is clearly very low in this society) and then parents pay for 'modules' with different teachers who teach in their rooms (very like in Panshin's *Rites of Passage*). There appears to be no apprenticeship system although within the system I can't see why you might not pay someone to apprentice your child. What the system has is the worst of homeschooling (there is no mention of buying in packages) and the worst of schooling (no equipment or facilities). So although one of the most valuable commodities among the stakeholders on the steading is knowledge, there is no real system for passing it on. As with generation ships, a degradation of knowledge is built into the system. The only real way to secure it is to allow in more (skilled) shareholders, but I think it's a safe bet that as space is at a premium at the start of the novel, the price of this has soared. The second generation (which is small enough to ignore) is being priced out at the top, ill equipped by their parents, and is also being pushed out of other work by the bonded labour system. The consequences of this are yet to be explored but lurk in the background.

The second generation in a utopia is always a problem and Kritzer does a good job of depicting this. They are forced to accept their parents' choices, and as their parents made ideological choices, hints that they might reject them are unwelcome. We see this with Beck's friend Thor who just wants to go back home and eventually with Beck who dislikes the choices her father made in the society he helped to construct. The second generation is inevitably rebellious (not relevant

continued on page 82

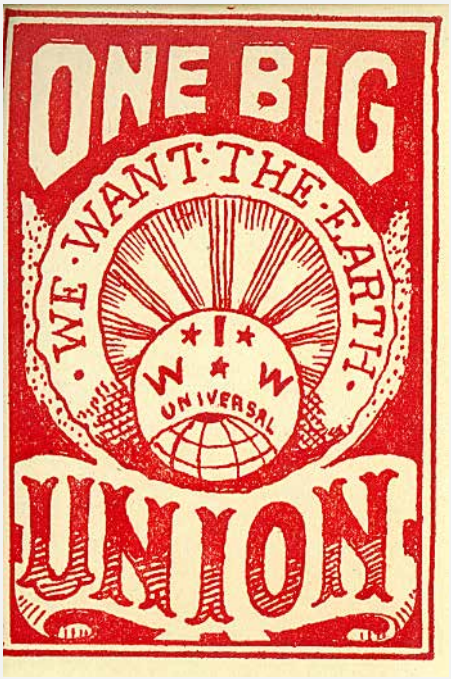
1 I'm a fan.

A Promise of Revolution Unfulfilled

continued from page 81

to this book, but the third generation is often revivalist).

And for Beck's generation there is this problem that there aren't really jobs for them. This is a society that, as in *The Girl Who Owned a City*, values money, a stake in intellectual property, but views labour in both its physical and social sense with contempt. Beck makes her own job finding things, but it is, after all, a job that could be done electronically. Her choice to knock on doors is a choice. It's an innovation in the marketplace but is rewarded at best with pocket money.



The Industrial Workers of the World or "Wobblies" are a syndicalist anarchist union who appear in Kritzer's work. (Image via University of Washington Libraries)

Where value really resides in this book is in bodily integrity. It is this that the bonded labourers sign over. Thor's father, however poor (no one wants to employ a thief) has control over his own body but Thor, as a child, does not. And the issue that children are effectively owned in this society means that, although we do not see it, somewhere there is child labour. The labourers understand this. When Beck rescues Lynn from the skin farms, Lynn does not run to freedom, she runs to re-sell herself, because that's how it works. Bodily autonomy and the lack of, is the definition of bonded labour; skill sets are not. Although we do not see skilled, bonded workers, presumably that's one way to fill the roles in the labs.

All of these things matter because otherwise aspects of the novel don't make sense. Miguel the union leader turns out to be a Wobbly (Industrial Workers of the World). The Wobblies are a syndicalist anarchist organisation which has been traditionally popular among the unskilled (and bonded labour in this book is always presented as unskilled, whether it is or not). It is a bottom-up organisation, yet as the novel proceeds Beck emerges as a leader among the bonded labourers even when she is not one of them. Her role is not unlike that of the Pullman Porter leader, A. Philip Randolph, actually a journalist brought in to take the physically risky job of running the union, and like Randolph, one of the things she brings to the situation after Miguel is conveniently red shirted, is respectability. Her participation converts the workers' union from a radical anarchic threat, to a controlled and authorised take over.

After the nanobot plague and the cholera, instead of a worker's revolution, which might upend the systemic oppression in society, we get a Beckled coup. Working within the paradigms of the steading, Beck effectively takes over the role of chief fixer from 'Uncle Paul', cancels all bonds, and tells the workers to take over any role they can fill. Once they have filled it, they own it. Similarly with empty accommodation. It all seems very radical, but, although we see property redistributed it's still on a first grab, new owner, Ayn Rand-ian basis. Which means in the second generation it all starts again. Beck has created a new Founder generation, not a New Order. We have a new ruling class, the union has disappeared, and within a generation, there will be bonded workers imported to shore up labour needs in a society that does not produce its own labour. A novel that promised revolution has revolved full circle.

Unions in SFF - Recommended Reading

By Olav Rokne

Over the past several years, we've been collecting a list of examples of labour unions depicted in science fiction and fantasy. Although some of these have been fairly minor depictions (a one-sentence throw-away line about striking miners in *Old Man's War* as example), others show a fair understanding of workers' rights and of organizing. Here are a few works that stood out for offering positive, progressive, and nuanced depictions of collective action and organizing.

Call centre workers put down the phones in *Sorry To Bother You*. (Image via The Atlantic)

For The Win

Cory Doctorow - 2010

Set in a video-game sweatshop that exploits the virtual economy of a massive multiplayer online game, this novel shows how solidarity unionism can be used to battle against exploitation. Doctorow provides an excellent primer on the basics of labour organizing.

Sorry To Bother You

Boots Riley - 2018

This workplace comedy movie is light on science fiction elements, but it's notable for showing the tensions that arise during a strike and the ways in which an employer will try to bust a union by pitting worker against worker.

We Built This City

Marie Vibbert - 2022

Workplace health and safety is one of the major real-world reasons for strikes. Vibbert's short work shows how this can be one of the most important issues to organize around.

Company Town

Madeline Ashby - 2015

The most vulnerable workers are often the ones who benefit most from labour union protection. Although labour organizing isn't front-and-centre in Ashby's 2015 novel, having a protagonist who is a staffer in a labour union that protects sex workers drives this point home. The union politics are well depicted and true to life.

Windswept

Adam Rakunas - 2015

Rakunas offers a bit of realpolitk to the story of labour, offering a labour organizer protagonist who obviously believes in the larger cause of workers' rights, but who also has his own agenda and his own priorities. It's an occasionally very funny novel with some insight into labour organizing.

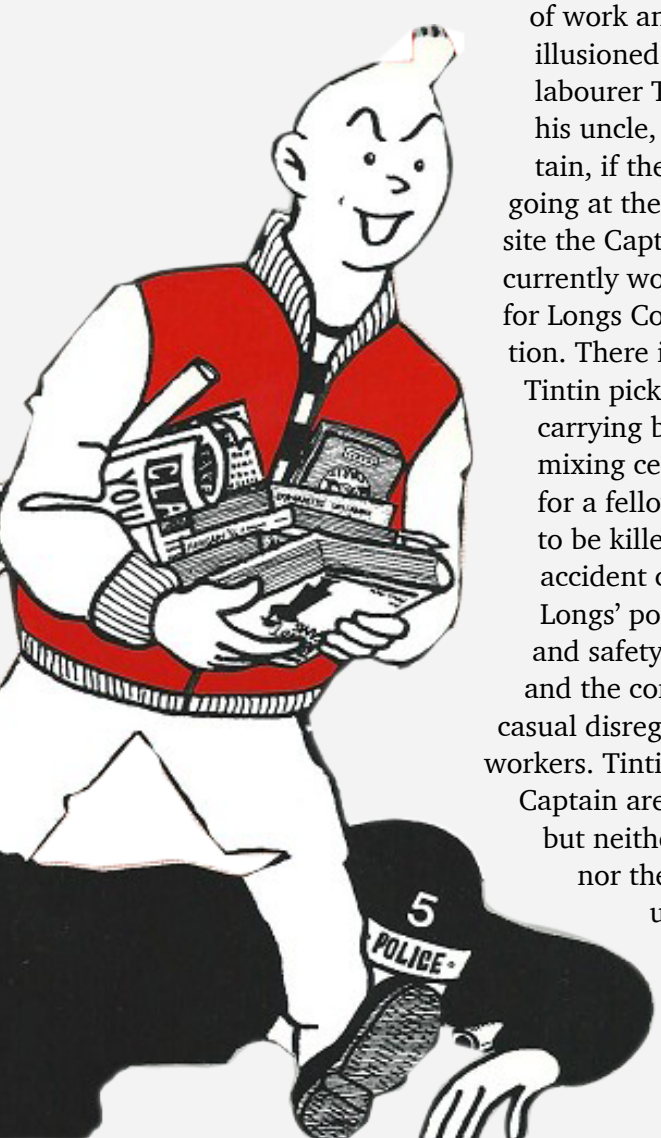
‘Commie nutters turn Tintin into picket yob!’

Unofficial Parody Of Classic Comic Offered Labour Activism

By Jim O’Brien

Do you remember the Tintin book in which our bequiffed young hero throws a Molotov cocktail through the window of a job centre and tells a union leader to fuck off? Or where Captain Haddock, despite feeling exhausted by a day spent picketing a local building sight, still finds he has enough energy to have sex with his wife in their council flat? If the answer is no, then you have not sampled the delights of *The Adventures of Tintin – Breaking Free*, written by J Daniels and first published in 1989.

Breaking Free’s story runs something like this: out of work and disillusioned young labourer Tintin asks his uncle, the Captain, if there is a job going at the building site the Captain is currently working on for Longs Construction. There is, and Tintin picks up shifts carrying bricks and mixing cement, only for a fellow worker to be killed in an accident caused by Longs’ poor health and safety policies and the company’s casual disregard for its workers. Tintin and the Captain are incensed, but neither Longs nor the men’s union (in the shape of weaselly ‘boss’s man’, Mr Jones) do anything to assuage the anger of the workers. Against the advice of the corrupted Jones, the Longs men stage a wildcat strike and begin to picket other Longs sites and associated businesses. As tensions mount, Tintin and the Captain – along with the Captain’s wife Mary and the couple’s lesbian next door neighbour Nicky, help turn small-scale local community support for the beleaguered strikers into increasingly widespread and confrontational direct national action. The police response is brutal but, if anything, only hardens the resolve of the strikers to both bring Longs to its knees and to foment a wholescale uprising that will see the overthrow of capitalism. As the British government and military prepare to wage civil war on the swelling numbers of anarchist militants, Tintin and his comrades prepare to defend the developing revolution by all means necessary, including armed conflict with the state…



As that summary will no doubt very quickly have indicated, *Breaking Free* is a long way from the rather better known and considerably less incendiary adventures of Tintin written and drawn by Herge between the late 1929 and 1976. A wholly unofficial parody, *Breaking Free* was published without the consent of Moulinsart – Tintin’s copyright owners – by London anarchist group, Attack International. Attack seems defunct in 2024, but in the 1980s the group was a significant player on the British anarchist scene, with links to Class War, the latter group led by the coruscating Ian Bone (aka ‘the most dangerous in Britain’), who famously spiced up an episode of Jonathan’s Ross’s generally fairly anodyne BBC TV chat show considerably in the early 1990s.

Just who *Breaking Free*’s author, J Daniel, is or was remains unclear, but they do a fine job of incorporating good pastiches of Tintin, Captain Haddock and a few other well-known Tintin characters into panels that owe something to Herge’s ligne claire style but which overall are much looser in style. Where cartoonists like Joost Swarte and Theo Van Den Boogard

produced comics in the ’70s and ’80s that mimicked Herge’s clean, sharp drawing style immaculately, Daniels opts for a more rough and ready form of comic strip art – but with spot-on swipes of Herge characters in many of the panels to keep the ‘Tintin look’ alive through his book’s 170-odd pages.

Breaking Free was not the only anarchist comic of the period (see Clifford Harper’s outstanding *Class War Comix* from 1974 for another British contribution to the field) nor was it the first or last parody or pastiche of Tintin. From as early as 1945, writers and artists began to bait Herge (later his estate) by coopting and satirising his phenomenally successful creation into books that poked fun as the clean-living values espoused by the *Tintin* volumes and which, Viz-like, took delight in presenting the Belgian boy reporter not as a virtuous boy scout but as, variously, a sex tourist, a drunkard or a user of recreational drugs. In *Breaking Free*, Tintin gets to smoke his way through packet after packet of ciggies and downs a fair few pints (not glasses of wine though: in an early sequence, our hero visits a gentrified wine bar and is refused service. Tintin subsequent bottles the patron, punches out various middle-class drinkers and smashes the bar’s front window for good measure.). Sex doesn’t come Tintin’s way in *Breaking Free*, but he has ample opportunity for swearing (‘Get your fucking paws off me! Sod off back to Hampstead!’ snarls Tintin to terrified bar owners Adrian and Charles (!) in the above-mentioned brawl.

Charles’s appearance in these scenes is in fact modelled on that of Herge’s recurring character Allan, and Tintinologists can have fun spotting (amongst others) Nestor the Marlinspike butler, Rastapopoulos, a (single) Thomson twin and Jolyon Wagg appearing in *Breaking Free* as other characters entirely. In a nice touch, Daniels has Mr Bolt the stonemason from *The Castafiore Emerald* appear in *Breaking Free* as a retired builder on the Longs site: ‘A lot of you probably know me,’ he says both to the assembled Longs strikers and to the reader in one panel, in a well-orchestrated moment of irony.

Although most Tintin parodies (*The Sex Life of Tintin* for example, from 1980, or *Tintin in Thailand* from 1999) have tended to play up the sex and narcotics angle for shock effect, a number have done something like *Breaking Free* and placed Tintin in more overtly political contexts. *Tintin in El Salvador* (1983) has the young reporter caught up in the South American liberation struggle while *Tintin and the Harps of Greenmore* (1986) plunges the young sleuth and Captain Haddock into a thriller involving the IRA and the republican movement.

All of which might seem a long way from Herge’s stories for children in *Le Petit Vingtieme*. Yet if *Breaking Free*’s use of Tinin to make points about capitalism and workers’ rights seems very distant in tone and focus from, say, *The Blue Lotus*, *Red Rackham’s Treasure* or *Destination Moon* it should be remembered that Tintin’s very first outing, *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* (1929), involved Georges Remi’s character visiting Russia and getting mixed up in Bolshevik politics. The boot is on the other foot entirely of course, compared to *Breaking Free*, with Tintin cast in *Land of the Soviets* as the staunch defender of western capitalism against the Red Menace. In a famous scene, Tintin sneers at the gullible English communists who are being shown round a model Soviet factory, unaware that behind the shiny facade they are presented with, the workers in whose name the Revolution has been staged are being treated like dogs. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

ENDitorial

By James Bacon

As I write this, I have a ballot beside me, from my Union, ASLEF (Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen). It asks whether we will accept or reject the Labour Party offer after two and a half years of dispute. It is better than what the Tories were offering. I will be accepting the deal.

Against this, in 2020 and 2021 we had a pay freeze, but in the accounting years 2020 to 2021 all of the directors of our company had their pay increased by £126,000 (or more than 18 per cent!) from £685,000 in 2020 to £811,000 in 2021. So each earning more than 15 drivers. It got worse during strike time: our MD Mark Hopwood was very surprised when union reps turned up with "31 per cent payrise for the boss nothing for workers" on T-shirts. The reality is embarrassing and awkward.

"The fiction of workers rights, and industrial action, and of democratic values permeates SF and comics."

The railway is a mismanaged hot mess. It has such potential to be a huge economic driver, but in Britain (like our water, electricity and so much else) the Tories have turned the railway into a cold, capitalistic, amoral inhuman machine interested in little other than extracting shareholder dividends. The country is in a financial mess, and it is left to the Labour Party to try and fix it.

As our union has had fifty days of strikes, and at GWR I think we had about 12, as well as a sequence of overtime bans, and so on. My first Facebook photo — some fourteen years ago — is of a strike. Collective action and loss of pay have been a constant of the time of the Tories, who just hate working people who have any power whatsoever. The union strives to protect colleagues, often from unbelievable misjustices, contrived complaints and appalling treatment, and workers still employed and managers "moved" is a testament to that.

The fiction of workers rights, and industrial action, and of democratic values permeates SF and comics. *Justice League of America #28* possibly visually catches that most strongly, the police strike in *Watchmen* is the catalyst for the Keene Act, outlawing superheroes. *Desolation Road* was an early read, which featured unions protecting workers, and I had forgotten that *The Apprentice* by James White also featured a union.

Adrian Tchaikovsky seems to be very engaged about unions and workers rights, although I have failed to have any sort of meaningful conversation with him, which is a shame, as *City of Last Chances*, *Day of Ascension* and others are well worth reading.

In *The Expanse* a dockworker strike on Ceres plays a significant part to the story, and I loved the TV series. *Iron Council* by China Mieville is a very strong story. *The Day Before The Revolution* by Usula K. Le Guin, now fifty years old, is an amazing read.

James Connolly said "The Cause of Ireland is the Cause of Labour, the Cause of Labour is the Cause of Ireland." Amongst many other wonderful statements including, "The worker is the slave of capitalist society, the female worker is the slave of that slave," he also said that "The Irishman frees himself from slavery when he realizes the truth that the capitalist system is the most foreign thing in Ireland. The Irish question is a social question. The whole age-long fight of the Irish people against their oppressors resolves itself in the last analysis into a fight for the mastery of the means of life, the sources of production, in Ireland. Who would own and control the land? The people, or the invaders; and if the invaders, which set of them - the most recent swarm of land thieves, or the sons of the thieves of a former generation?" and to end that, "No revolutionary movement is complete without its poetical expression."

There is always space for artists.

Olav and Amanda have made unions and their existence in speculative fiction a point of research, reflection and even study. There is a long list of union depictions in SF available. I hope you enjoy this zine and I am grateful to Autun Purser for our amazing cover, and Colin MacNeil for the back cover. Thank you.

I am super pleased with this issue, and Amanda and Olav are amazing to work with, and thanks to them, and all the amazing contributors.

We welcome art, and indeed, Chris often feels this is an area in which we need more contributions, so please if you feel you have some art you would like to contribute to a future issue, please get in touch with us through our email

journeyplanetsubmissions@gmail.com

Future issues are upon us, and the LGBTQ+ in comics with David Ferguson may come out soon after this issue. Dracula with Allison Hartman Adams, Fan Friendships with Chuck Serface and Sarah Gulde and SFnal Music issue with Ann Gry, Sarah Felix and Vincent Docherty, no doubt looking at his successful events at the Glasgow Worldcon, will round off 2024 as a very productive year.

We lost a Hugo Award — but to everyone who nominated us, and more than 300 people who voted for us, thank you very much. It means a huge amount and we are honoured. We are grateful, and we had two meet ups among co-editors at Glasgow and it was lovely to hang out.

2025 has a lot going on, already we have some issues in mind, but all subject to change, and some may not occur, as well as these we have more than 50 ideas for future issues, but we welcome them, and hearing suggestions, for instance in 2026 we might do an issue on *The Boys*, when that TV series finishes.

To whet the appetite, and also to consider contributing to, here are the 2025 issues that may occur — contact us first please before going to work!

The 50th Anniversary of British War Comic *Battle*, Harry Harrison's Centenary, Tim Powers if we interview him, and I might try and get over to the West Coast of the USA to do that, Museums, *Hellblazer* at 40 (John Constatntine First appeared in *Swamp Thing #37* in April/June 1985) we might have a Dr Who issue, that one has been in the back of the mind for some time, but we have all been busy, the Japanese Anime *Macross*, which was turned into the America Fix Up *Robotech* will be 40, and I have always had a lot of pleasure from this and we expect to return to *Andor* Season II, although we will also have space within that issue to consider the *Star Wars* that has occurred since *Andor*, two years ago now, and we have had *Ahsoka*, *Acolyte*, Season 4 of *The Bad Batch* and so I expect we will be a large issue, but that is OK, I have a good idea on how I want that issue to look.

So a lot in the future.

We would love to hear from you, letters of comment by email are welcomed, and observations, thoughts and engagement is welcomed.

Please send all such correspondence to:

journeyplanetsubmissions@gmail.com

We started a Facebook page as well, or rather Allison Hartman-Adams started a Facebook page with us, and is taking the lead, and this has built on the in person activities at Glasgow 2024, added to our incredible logo and banner by Sara Felix, we already have more than100 followers, so do click by, and we will keep folk updated about our activities, although most recent information will always be here, in the Enditorial section in *Journey Planet*.

https://www.facebook.com/TeamJourneyPlanet

as ever my thanks - James

By Colin McNeil