



## BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

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## CHARLES DE LINT

*The Last Dragon*, by Jane Yolen & Rebecca Guay, Dark Horse Books, 2011, \$29.99.

**W**HEN readers fall in love with a book, they usually fall hard.

And often they'll be interested in other interpretations of the material — especially movies — but will then complain that the movie isn't as good as the book.

There is a good reason for this that has nothing to do with how faithful the adaptation is, how well the characters are cast, or even when favorite scenes get cut. The real problem is that the movie on the screen doesn't match the one in their heads.

If there's a secret to writing, it's probably this: the best writers meet their readers halfway. They don't give them too much or too little information, and they're adept at manipulating the reader to have a certain response to how events

play out. When they do it right, the reader feels involved in the creative process. In other words, they meet the writer at that halfway point, filling in details, motives, characterization, etc., which has been alluded to in the book.

So it's no wonder that the movie on the screen doesn't match the one in their head.

Some writers are so good at this that their work really doesn't need to be adapted. It's already perfect on the page. (Which writers those are will differ for each reader — and that's how it should be.)

For me, one of those writers is Jane Yolen. Her work has all the criteria mentioned above, but added to that is her ability to write a timeless story — a story that feels like a fairy tale, like it's been around forever, even as it tells its own unique narrative.

So it was with a little trepidation that I approached this adaptation of her 1985 short story "Dragonfield." I wasn't put off by

the art. For *The Last Dragon*, Rebecca Guay delivers gorgeous paintings that look like a comic book illustrated by one of the Pre-Raphaelite artists, with a touch of Art Nouveau thrown in for good measure. The visuals are wonderful, as is the narrative flow.

But Jane Yolen doesn't need art to help her tell a story — and before you correct me, I know she's the author of innumerable picture books. When she puts her talent to a prose novel or story (as when "The Last Dragon" originally appeared as the titular entry in the *Dragonfield* anthology), her words do all the magic that's required. The movie in the reader's head unreels just as it should without the necessity of visual direction.

Still, just because a story doesn't require a visual adaptation to be successful, that doesn't mean it shouldn't get one. You need only put the question to the multitude of fans of books like *The Lord of the Rings* or the Harry Potter series — yearning for more of their favorite stories in other formats — to be given a resounding "yes." And in the best of worlds, the result is...not necessarily something better, but something different that is just as entrancing in its own right.

That's certainly the case here.

The mix of Yolen's prose and dialogue with Guay's expressive art deliver a collaboration that is an absolute delight from start to finish.

What's it about? Oh, there are three sisters, a dragon, a reluctant hero, a village in peril...really, you need to read it to experience the magic for yourself. It's lovely, lovely stuff, and you won't be disappointed. Not even if you enjoy the original story as much as I do.

*Down These Strange Streets*, edited by George R.R. Martin & Gardner Dozois, Ace Books, 2011, \$26.95.

I don't review anthologies in these pages as often as I'd like. The reason for that is simple: it takes me a long time to read them. Unlike single-author collections and novels, I can't seem to read them straight through. I tend to dip into them, read a story or two, put them aside, then come back to them again in a week or so. By the time I'm finished, it's usually too late for any sort of a timely review.

Why can't I read them all in one sitting? I think it's because most anthologies are themed and I don't like to read too many stories in a row with the same subject matter.

You know: all the stories have cats in them, or they're about robots, or time travel, or vampires....

I understand that readers love them, and publishers certainly seem to like them — especially when they have some big-name contributors to blazon on the front cover. I've also appreciated the challenge of working within their parameters as a writer — particularly when the subject is something I wouldn't normally gravitate to on my own.

None of this should be taken as criticism, because I enjoy them as a reader as well. I just like to read them at my own pace.

*Down These Strange Streets* would probably have had the same fate except I happened to have it on hand when I didn't have access to much else by way of reading material. Happily, the theme — as described by George R.R. Martin in his intro: "That the story involve a private detective and a case with a fantastic slant, be it real or...less so." — is pretty loose, so that there was plenty of variety even when reading the book in one sitting.

If that theme sounds interesting to you, you'll be pleased with the stories Martin and co-editor Gardner Dozois have gathered together here. As you might expect from the stellar lineup (Charlaine

Harris, Diana Gabaldon, Carrie Vaughn, et al) there aren't any duds.

Stand-outs for me were Joe R. Lansdale's "The Bleeding Shadow," with its mash-up of Lovecraftian horror and a crossroads deal with the devil (and what a clever crossroads he found); S. M. Stirling's "Pain and Suffering," which I enjoyed as much for its Santa Fe setting as for its weird mystery; and Patricia Briggs's "In Red, With Pearls," where we get a little more in-depth time with one of the secondary werewolf characters from her popular Mercy Thompson series.

What I liked most about the stories collected here is that it was never obvious how they were going to turn out. At the same time, while the endings were unexpected, the authors played fair. I could look back through most of these stories and find the threads that led to the "surprise" ending. So while there might be vampires, werewolves, and other monsters involved, bottom line is these are also solid detective stories in their own right, and you can't ask for much more than that.

*Another Kind of Dead*, by Kelly Meding, Bantam Books, 2011, \$7.99.

These Dreg City books are proving to be a rather robust series. I

know I was a little cranky at the end of the first book, *Three Days to Dead*, when our heroine Evy Stone survived even though, from how the author set up the story, she was supposed to...well, die. It wasn't that I didn't like Stone. I just felt Meding hadn't played fair.

That said, Meding knew better than I, because she's got herself a fine series going that's three books strong now, and I'm certainly reading each of the books as they come out.

At the risk of seeming a little cranky again, I do have to say that this is a series in which the books build on one another so you really do need to read them from the start. I suppose one can simply jump in — Meding has a nice touch at filling in backstory without boring the reader or slowing things down — but in this case, more than in some series, if you do that, you'll miss the subtle resonances that can only come from a familiarity with the characters and their world.

It also makes it hard to talk about the plot in this particular book, since so much of it is dependent on things that happened in previous volumes. For instance, Stone trades herself to a kidnapper who is sure to kill her in exchange for the freedom of her friend the

hawk shapeshifter Phin. Meding fills in why, but missing are the layers of emotional depth that you would know from having read *As Lie the Dead*. Or why does the gargoyle Max go out of his way to help her? Or...?

Well, you get the idea.

If you've enjoyed the previous books, you'll love this one, even if it does have a bit of a cliffhanger ending. If you're new to Dreg City, go pick up *Another Kind of Dead* first and prepare to be hooked.

*The Griff* by Christopher Moore & Ian Corson with Jennyson Rosero, William Morrow, 2011, \$22.99.

We recently discussed *Cowboys @ Aliens* in these pages, a graphic novel that spawned a movie (which I still haven't seen). It was a fun romp — and so is *The Griff*. And while this original graphic novel hasn't spawned its own film (as I write this), it pretty much cries out for one. But it would cost a fortune.

*Cowboys @ Aliens* had an invasion set in a small town in the Old West. There's an invasion in *The Griff* as well but it affects the entire world. These aliens are dragony/griffin-like in appearance (hence the title) and their invasion decimates the world.

We follow two sets of survivors.

The first is made up of a young woman who is a dolphin trainer in Ocean World, Florida, along with an older man who makes his living in that same entertainment park by wandering about dressed as a squirrel.

We find the second group in New York City and it includes a skateboarder, a video game designer, and a wannabe soldier.

Christopher Moore & Ian Corson share the writing duties and do a fine job of moving the story forward, giving equal time to both groups. The artist isn't listed, but I'm guessing it's the Jennyson Rosero who gets a credit on the cover for creating this with the pair. The art isn't the kind that grabs you in the individual panels, but just as with the writers, the artist does a great job of keeping the story visually interesting without sacrificing the momentum of the story.

I find it interesting that with comics I'll often prefer art that's not great when you take each panel on its own but it has a strong narrative drive. I'm not saying I don't appreciate it when a comic has fine art in each panel — I do — but often those books sacrifice the narrative flow for the pretty picture. But for

me, with comics (as with many media) it all comes down to how well the story works.

If you're a fan of well-crafted first contact sf, this is the book for you. It's smart, full of surprises, but most importantly, it's fun.

*The Wild Ways*, by Tanya Huff, DAW Books, 2011, \$24.95.

It's always a good month when a new Tanya Huff novel comes out. *The Wild Ways* is a sequel to *The Enchantment Emporium*, but if you haven't read the earlier book, don't be scared off. Huff's series books are standalones. Of course you get more resonance if you've read the earlier book, but *The Wild Ways* provides a full-blooded experience all on its own.

The extended Gale family is still central to the goings-on. This time the focus is on Charlie, a "Wild Power" Gale who isn't connected to a certain place the way her cousins and the Aunties are. Her magic is tied up with her music, and she has the neat ability of being able to use it to go through a mystical Wood that allows her to step in between trees in, say, Calgary, and step out again from some other vegetation in the Maritimes.

The music/magic and charms

she knows are handy for a traveling musician (seriously, wouldn't a little charm to keep a tour van safe be a useful thing?), but magic causes problems too, as Charlie knows all too well. After all, she's grown up with the Gale Aunties — a fierce bunch of women with severe control issues.

The book opens with various circumstances sending Charlie to Cape Breton, where it's festival season. She thinks she's just there to fill in as a guitarist for her friends who have six weeks of gigs lined up, but lack a guitarist. She brings along her fourteen-year-old cousin Jack, who also happens to be a dragon, to be their roadie. And to keep him out of trouble.

Once in Cape Breton, however, she gets involved in a dispute between an oil company that wants to drill offshore near a seal sanctuary and a protest group that happens to be run by selkies. The oil company has hired someone to steal the selkies' seal skins to blackmail them into stopping their protest. The seal people have connections to Charlie's new band (it seems in Cape Breton all the best fiddlers get snagged as husbands by selkies) so Charlie decides to get the skins back.

I should note here that Huff plays fair and gives both sides their

chance to make their arguments. By doing that, she's not lecturing; she's allowing the readers to make up their own minds. Is she biased in favor of the selkies? Possibly, but they don't get off the hook as being complete innocents either.

*The Wild Ways* is big fun from start to finish, featuring everything from a helpful if cryptic mirror to boggarts wreaking havoc at one of the festival sites. It's got humor and drama, it's fast paced and sexy, and it's got a positive slant with some well-placed cynical digs. If that sounds a little schizophrenic, it's not. Huff just doesn't write cookie-cut characters; hers are fully rounded with many facets to their personalities.

Whether you're rejoining the Gale family or meeting them for the first time, I think you'll be as delighted with this book as I am.

*The Wild Girls*, by Ursula K. Le Guin, PM Press Outspoken Authors Series #6, 2011, \$12.

*The Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow*, by Cory Doctorow, PM Press Outspoken Authors Series #8, 2011, \$12.

I've long admired Terry Bisson as a writer, but I had no idea he was

an editor until this pair of small, attractive trade paperbacks showed up in my post office box. Now I've got another reason to admire his work.

The PM Press Outspoken Authors Series has eight entries so far, including such genre stalwarts as Kim Stanley Robinson, Michael Moorcock, and Rudy Rucker, as well as editor Bisson in Volume One. Each book has a photo of the author on the cover and contains a meaty novelet/novella along with one or two essays, poetry (at least in Le Guin's case), a bibliography, and an interview conducted by Bisson.

Le Guin's book opens with a classic story of a rigid society and gender relationships, told as only she can tell such stories, and presented here in a revised version. There's also the poetry (an excellent, if brief section), an essay on modesty, and my favorite piece in the book, a reprint from *Harper's* called "Staying Awake While We Read," in which she takes on corporate publishing and explains the inherent fallacy of trying to fit the buying habits of book lovers into the annual growth mold that stockholders expect from their "product."

I'd recommend you buy this book simply to read that essay,

though you won't be disappointed by the rest of the collection.

In Doctorow's "The Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow" Jimmy Yensid and his father are trying to preserve Detroit, the last standing city in the United States, as a historical artifact. Their failure to do so results in Jimmy being cast adrift in a wilderness filled with communities trying to change the world for the better but often with horrible results.

At the same time Jimmy — a transhuman; i.e., a genetically engineered almost immortal stuck in pre-puberty — just wants to grow up. But he's trapped protecting the last of his father's artifacts: the Carousel of Progress exhibit from Disneyland.

Though much of the story is a fun read, the novella has a dark undercurrent and comes to a sobering conclusion. Still, it's pure Doctorow, filled with more invention and movement than many writers can fit into a book series.

Also included here is a transcript of Doctorow's manifesto: "Copyright vs. Creativity," a must-read for anyone involved with ebooks and the like, as well as a freewheeling interview conducted by Bisson.

These are beautifully designed

and produced books. What I like about a series such as this is that you get a really well-rounded picture of the author: there's a sample of their fiction, you see what they look like from the cover jacket, hear their more-or-less formal essayist voice in some nonfiction, and finish up with their casual day-to-day voice in the interview.

*Future Shock Comics*, by Jim & Pat McGreal, *future shock comics .com*, 2011, \$10.

Humor is a pretty subjective thing. What's funny to one person can easily leave somebody else scratching their head. That said, we still like to pass along what we think is funny — to which innumerable email forwards can readily attest. And that's why I'm bringing this slim collection to your attention.

*Future Shock Comics* got its start on the web, but now appears in a few newspapers and in this collection. It's absurdist science fiction humor (think *The Far Side*, but with robots and time travel instead of the guy stuck on a desert island or talking cows) that manages to be funny, speculative, and edgy as it pokes fun at sf tropes and the state of our current high-tech society.

While the art does its job without a lot of bells and whistles — you're not going to admire individual panels the way you might with *Calvin & Hobbes* — you probably won't notice because you'll be laughing too hard.

With its slick production values, it's a bargain at \$10.

*Death and Resurrection*, by R. A. MacAvoy, Prime Books, 2011, \$14.95.

Last year I reviewed the first part of this novel, which was published as a stand-alone novella called *In Between*. I greeted the book's arrival with great enthusiasm because — to reiterate briefly what I said in that earlier review — after the eighties ended, R. A. MacAvoy disappeared from publishing for almost twenty years, and this reader sorely missed her unique style of storytelling.

Yes, I could always go back and reread classics like *Tea with the Black Dragon* (1983) and *The Book of Kells* (1985) — novels that, in their time, helped reshape our view of how a fantasy story could be told. But you know how it is with your favorite authors: you appreciate what they've already given us, but you're always eager for more. Especially



new explorations of a style of writing that was unique in its time.

Because instead of all the magic and adventure taking place in some otherworld, in MacAvoy's books it happened here, in ours. Her characters could have been you or me, or the person living next door. She combined Celtic and Eastern mysteries into a seamless blend that to this date has still not been duplicated as well or with as much resonance.

I know. It's not so novel these days. So the big question — with all that's happened in our field since then — is, what will she do in the present publishing climate? The obvious things that set her apart in the 1980s are commonplace now.

But I was happy to report that she still had a fresh take with that novella, and the slim volume, in turn, simply whetted my appetite for the book finally in hand. Reading *Death & Resurrection* took up some of the most enjoyable hours I've spent in a while.

In the novella *In Between*, we were introduced to a young painter named Ewen Young who was recently dumped by his girlfriend. It opened with him being attacked by three men on the way home from an art show opening. The beating they planned to give him was a

message to Ewen's Uncle Jimmy, a martial arts instructor and compulsive gambler who owed them money. But Young isn't only a painter. He also studied for years with his uncle, and soon put the attackers to rout.

That only delayed the confrontation between the thugs and Uncle Jimmy and Ewen's involvement in their struggle. The next day Ewen found himself in the hospital fighting for his life.

But Ewen has a third, secret skill. He can go to an "in between" place and take others with him. It's like a pocket universe, where nothing from the "real" world can intrude. His sister is a therapist and he uses this ability to help her patients. But that "in between" place is bigger than he thought.

All of this — including the investigating detectives who catch the case — combine to make Ewen's life lurch from one complication to another. There are good elements — such as his involvement with a beautiful Native American veterinarian and her dog — and bad. Unfortunately, the bad won't give him a moment to catch his breath, be the threat monsters, gun-toting humans, or some kid who steals his body, leaving Ewen locked up in a mental institution in his stead.

Ewen just wants to fall back into the Zen flow his life once had, but it doesn't take him long to realize he has to deal with the domino effect of all these problems if he ever wants to reclaim the peace he once knew.

I know there are things that will annoy some readers — like the occasional sections where the pace slows down, or the unanswered question concerning Ewen's ability to travel "in between" — but they're part and parcel of why I like the book as much as I do. MacAvoy isn't afraid to take her time when

the story warrants it, and how Ewen can do what he does isn't as important as what he does with the ability.

The language is gorgeous throughout, the characters fully realized and likable, and you know, in this busy world in which we find ourselves, we could do well to acquire some of Ewen's serenity.

Highly recommended.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ☞



*"This can't be right — all I'm reading is 'bitch, bitch, bitch.'"*