MYTHPRINT

The Monthly Bulletin of the Mythopoeic Society

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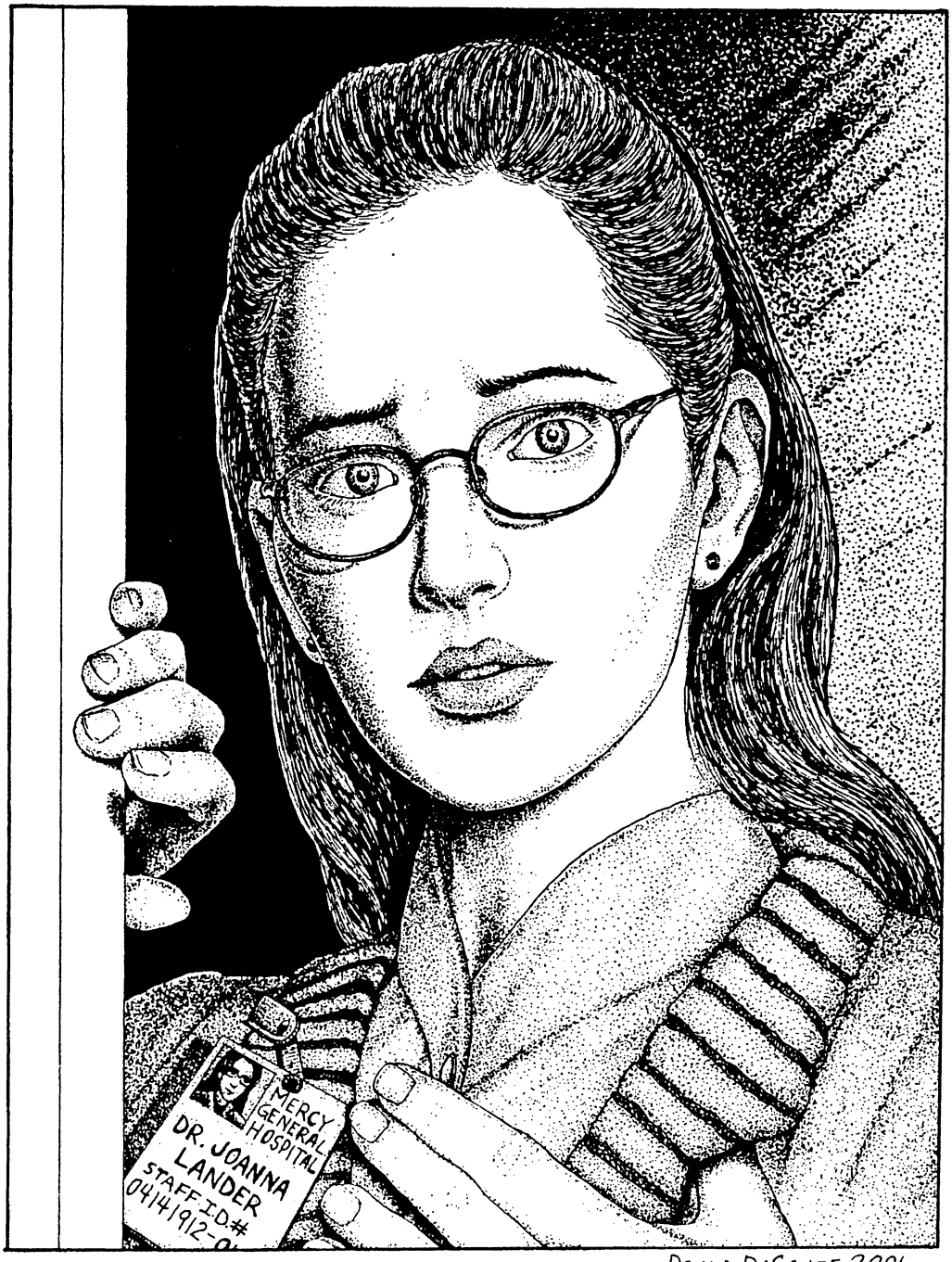

PAULA DiSANTE 2001

MYTHPRINT

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Illustrations

Cover: "Joanna on the Threshold" by Paula DiSante © 2001
(from *Passage* by Connie Willis)

Michel Delving Mathom-house logo by Eleanor M. Farrell © 2000 (p. 13)

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DEADLINES for receiving material for each issue of *Mythprint* are the 1st of the preceding month (eg, September 1st for the October issue).

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Council of Stewards: Open Positions

Recording Secretary

The Mythopoeic Society Council of Stewards invites applications for the position of **Recording Secretary**. The duties of this Society officer include keeping a complete record of the proceedings of the Council of Stewards and of the full membership (i.e., minutes of quarterly Council and annual general meetings) and distributing these as required, as well as supervising elections, ballot and other official mailings to Society members.

Society Publicist

The Mythopoeic Society Council of Stewards invites applications for the new position of **Society Publicist**. During the past few years, we've been hard at work improving our traditional activities (periodical publications, discussion groups, annual conference and awards) as well as initiating new undertakings such as the Mythopoeic Press and electronic discussions. We now need someone to coordinate publicity from all of our departments to better promote the Society and its activities. The current interest in fantasy literature, centering around the popularity of the Harry Potter book series and the upcoming *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, presents a unique opportunity for the Mythopoeic Society to introduce the Inklings to new readers and find new members to participate in our activities.

The duties of the Society Publicist will include working with other departments to create and distribute flyers, press releases and other information, to initiate contact with others (organizations, publishers, news organs, etc.) to help promote the Society, and to coordinate communication among the Society officers, members and the general public. E-mail access is essential for this position, as is the ability to generate printed and electronic publicity material for distribution. All of the Stewards will be happy to discuss their specific ideas and current publicity projects with anyone interested in taking on this job.

The holders of these positions are members of the Council of Stewards, the Mythopoeic Society's governing body. Stewards are normally elected by the members of the Mythopoeic Society and hold their positions for three years. There is no limit to number of terms served on the Council. Chosen applicants for open positions will be appointed by the current Council members for the remainder of the current term, and can run for re-election at the end of this period. Steward responsibilities include participation in our quarterly meetings (which are held via conference telephone call), as well as the annual Mythcon members' meeting, and setting up and administering a budget for his/her department.

To apply for either of these positions or if you would like more information, contact:

Edith L. Crowe, Corresponding Secretary
The Mythopoeic Society
[redacted]
E-mail: [redacted]

Correction

The review of Broceliande's *The Starlit Jewel* CD in the June *Mythprint* issue listed an incorrect URL for the group. The correct web address is:

[redacted]

Feature Book Review

A Foot in the Door of Hereafter

CONNIE WILLIS, *Passage*. New York: Bantam, 2001. ISBN 0-553-11124-8, hc, 594 pp., $23.95.

Dr. Joanna Lander has a headache, and his name is Maurice Mandrake. Joanna, a cognitive psychologist conducting serious research on the phenomenon of near-death experiences (NDEs) at Mercy General Hospital, finds too much of her hard work undone by the smooth, unctuous New Age guru and author of the mega-million selling *The Light at the End of the Tunnel.* Joanna's professional disdain for, and objection to, the ubiquitous Mandrake's pseudo-science of "NAEs" (near-afterlife experiences), replete with Angels of Light imparting the mysteries of the Universe, is of no avail. Mandrake's donation of half of his book's royalties to the hospital—and the fact that one of the richest members of the board of trustees is a devoted disciple of his—pretty much assure that he'll be around for a long time, conducting his own contaminating brand of "research".

His overbearing presence threatens years of Joanna's own hard-fought scientific investigation. Mandrake, in a well-orchestrated one-upmanship, often interviews NDE patients before Joanna even knows they are in the hospital. By the time she locates them to record their experiences, the patients, previously fed a happy meal of Mandrake's easy to digest rubbish, spit it back at her on command. They cheerily report by rote what Mandrake wants them to have seen: a warm, peaceful encounter of being "embraced by the Light" on the "Other Side". His crackpot methods prey on the hopes and fears of the vulnerable and the grief-stricken. It sells a lot of books. But it angers Joanna to no end, and makes her follow-up interviews virtually useless.

She is not, however, wholly without allies. Maisie Nellis, a tough little girl fighting—and losing—a battle against a severely damaged heart, would do anything to help her friend Joanna with her research, even if she only has the strength to look up things in books and ask questions. Other invaluable assistance comes from Joanna's best friend, emergency room nurse Vielle Howard, who pages Joanna whenever a patient who has coded—that is to say, has died—and has been revived is brought into the ER. In this way Joanna can, at times, beat Mandrake to the interviewing punch. But with Mandrake's network of enthusiasts peppered throughout the labyrinthine hospital, even Vielle's help is becoming less and less effective in securing for Joanna untainted accounts of exactly what happens when the human heart ceases to function.

A new ally arrives in Dr. Richard Wright, a gifted neurologist and recent addition to the staff at Mercy General. Richard is researching the physical causes of an NDE, which he believes to be a survival mechanism. His hope is to devise strategies for preventing unnecessary deaths. But he needs help trying to determine just what NDEs are, and why and how they are triggered. He actively recruits Joanna, winning her over with his earnest search for authentic answers, and she comes aboard, intrigued by Richard's radical but promising technique of artificially inducing in his lab NDEs that simulate the real thing.

Their pool of subjects, however, is troublingly small and getting smaller. After ferreting out Mandrake's shills and spies, there are barely enough acceptable candidates left. With too small a sample, the project could very well sink into oblivion, because funding will most certainly be cut off by the hospital. The last straw is losing their best subject, Amelia Tanaka, a young

university student who, citing the pressures of school, abruptly quits after undergoing a handful of the experiments. Joanna suspects that school isn't the real reason she has bolted. The fear behind Amelia's words, especially those few murmured in quiet anguish while still in the chemically induced NDE state, is all too apparent. It's the same fear Joanna has heard haunting the voices of actual NDE patients, some who later, like Amelia, concocted reasonable explanations for their reluctance—and sometimes adamantine refusal—to discuss it further.

Richard nearly throws in the towel, but Joanna, unwilling to watch the project fail before it really gets started, and determined to discover what the patients have seen, does what she has to do. She volunteers. Who better to document, with a scientist's cool detachment, the sights, sounds and symbols present in an NDE? Richard is reluctant, but Joanna insists, and he finally agrees. Initially, she is riveted by what she sees—the familiar core elements of an NDE—a sound she can't quite identify, a long, dark passage, and the radiant light at its end, all surfacing in her mind even as she goes under by dint of the chemicals awash in her veins.

Her first experiment a success, a fascinated Joanna is eager for new opportunities to discover more of the NDE's puzzling secrets. But growing slowly within her is a rising dread, one that she cannot control, and at first can't even name. Though induced by artificial means, the NDE is seemingly real, too real—a three-dimensional pathway into what proves to be frightful, uncharted territory. Joanna learns by degrees that her dread has a name, and in terror, at last, she knows what it is, as if stenciled in bold letters across the side of her consciousness. What lies beyond the passage and the light holds questions too terrible to contemplate, too terrible for answers. It is a long-sought key to an age-old mystery—and a disaster in the making.

To reveal much more of Connie Willis's exceptional, astonishing, and scrupulously plotted new novel *Passage* would be giving away the store—and would do a great disservice to the reader and the author. Suffice it to say that Willis again gives wide berth to big issues. *Passage* is about death, or more precisely, what happens to the brain when it's dying. Her characters have the opportunity of observing the real thing, as well as simulating it for the purposes of scientific study. But it takes an emotional toll, as the inquisitive Joanna Lander finds out. In fact, all of Willis's primary characters are in the unenviable position of facing death every day.

That's what most concerns Willis here: the need to face death and really talk about it when we'd much rather avoid even the mere mention of it, at least in serious terms. Willis makes it clear that traumatic death isn't just about the auto accident or the heart attack. Traumatic death comes in many forms, not all of them swift. Joanna sadly watches one comatose patient adrift in his own kind of limbo—a death on hold. She dutifully records his murmurings, hoping to garner some scrap of knowledge, some clue as to what he's experiencing in the dark waters of his unconsciousness, hoping she can learn enough to somehow help.

For another key character it's the adagio of Alzheimer's—the slow passage of a once-sound and remarkable mind into cold, fragmented nothingness. It's a cruel death by inches—dying in pieces, one's life pared away a little at a time, the spindrift of memories and knowledge and the faces of loved ones blown away by the ravages of the disease. For Joanna, witnessing this is one of the hardest things she has to do, and her urgent attempt to connect with that disconnecting mind proves to be a challenge more rending than she had ever hoped to face.

Then there's brave Maisie Nellis waiting for the new heart that may never come. Maisie, who

can face anything, anything at all, except being *Pollyanna*'d to death. And her mother, Mrs. Nellis, so entrenched in denial of her daughter's certain death without the transplant that she refuses to accept the truth, living instead in a self-delusion of "happy thoughts" and "positive thinking." No one can quite convince the maddeningly, unrealistically optimistic Mrs. Nellis—especially in her happiest of Happy Valley imaginings—that *Et in Arcadia ego.*

Willis is relentless in *Passage*, insisting that we take a good, hard look at death, and throughout the novel she firmly holds our feet to this particularly searing fire. It is not a story without hope or humor, courage or sacrifice, but it also harbors no illusions. Her characters must face facts, and so must her readers. She insists that we not be the Mrs. Nellises of the world, gaily setting aside grim truth, throwing a brightly knitted comforter over that 800-pound gorilla called Death, pretending not to notice that it's Over There, in a dark corner of our day-to-day existence, but still Over There. And we don't know when it will make its move, and oh, the room is so small. Smaller than we thought.

As is her style, Willis's characters never have all the information they need. They must scramble and fight and scratch and claw to cobble together whatever they can. Joanna certainly doesn't have all the answers, though she's driven to pursue them—a scientific moth to a tantalizing flame. The more she learns, the more she realizes how little she knows, which proves exasperating when so many are demanding answers from her. When asked late in the story by a despairing character "What are we supposed to *do*?" a frustrated Joanna thinks "Why is everyone always asking me? I don't *know*." It's a very human response from someone simply trying her best to make sense of a world short-circuiting around her.

Also, as is Willis's style, Everything Means Something, and that is no mean feat in a novel of this size and complexity. Peerless research makes the ins and outs of *Passage* completely, and devastatingly, believable. Willis generates in her prose a bristling tension so acute that it is at times almost too much to bear, as ruthless as it is honest. But, like seeing a fatal accident on a highway, one cannot look away. Her power to freeze the heart is unyielding. It's a chill night on dangerous waters, a flame in the sky crashing down, a shuddering intake of breath, a sharp awareness keen and bitter as a knife's edge. No time to hit the deck as Death screams overhead. No lamb's blood at the ready to safely mark this psychogenic post and lintel. Sudden and unexpected. Upon you in the blink of an eye. Just a blink. Or two. Or twelve.

Death happens. And the aloneness of death, Willis wants us to know, cannot be wished away. Though we submerge it into the uttermost depths of our conscious minds, the knowledge of that truth remains, waiting, at a moment's notice, to resurface. Loved ones, or ER staff, or clinical researchers, though they surround us, cannot go that lonely road. Were we to die in the company of five or fifty or fifteen hundred other souls, it makes no difference. One still goes alone, gentle or otherwise, into that good night.

Reviewed by Paula DiSante

Film: Strider's Screening Room

The Mists of Avalon. TNT miniseries, air dates July 15-16, 2001 (4 hours). Directed by Uli Edel. Based on the novel by Marion Zimmer Bradley; teleplay by Gavin Scott. Cast: Julianna Margulies, Angelica Huston, Joan Allen.

Marion Zimmer Bradley's best-selling 1982 novel, one of the most important pieces of Arthurian fiction published in the last several decades, hit the small screen this week as a 4-hour miniseries televised on the Turner Network Television (TNT) cable channel. Filmed in Prague, the production boasts outstanding scenery and set designs, lovely costuming (of the "vaguely myth-ieval" variety), nice armour, and a good choice of music from popular folk artist Loreena McKennitt.

But what of the story? Despite the inherent problems of condensing Bradley's philosophically complex novel into film format, a good deal of the story survives relatively intact. The novel was a breakthrough approach to the Arthurian material, focusing on the main female characters rather than on Arthur, his knights, and their achievements and failures. Morgaine, the main character, is trained as a priestess of the older Goddess religion on the isle of Avalon, center of this faith and its mysteries. Her role and her powers shape a destiny which is frequently in conflict with the politics of Arthur's court, the emergence of Christianity, and the personal desires of the characters themselves. Julianna Margulies is well cast as Morgaine—except for being tall—and handles the role well, even if she is painted a bit too pure compared to Bradley's portrayal (and what's with this current need to have *every* strong female character wield a sword??).

The teleplay's biggest fault, in fact, lies in this tendency to oversimplify the characters and plot points by removing a broad palette of grays. Of course it's impossible to include everything when adapting a long novel into film, but some of the choices were odd, to say the least. Gorlois' treachery against Uther (rather than the other way around) and Igraine's warning to her destined new husband changed the entire tenor of these relationships. The inflation of Morgause's villainous role (OK, she's not a nice person, but the hissing and—literal—backstabbing was a bit much) seemed unnecessary, an excuse to allow Joan Allen to overact. The love affair of Lancelet [Bradley's spelling] and Gwenhwyfar, admittedly already a well-known element to most viewers, was too abrupt to generate much sympathy, but the "we're engaged now" joining of Lancelet and Elaine was even more jarring: hey! who's *this* chick? Much of the dialogue, even in some of the more awkward scenes, came straight from the book, but without the surrounding context of description or further development, marred rather than enhanced the story.

The main theme of Bradley's novel is spiritual rather than dramatic: fulfilling individual roles in changing cultures, balancing universal truths within conflicting beliefs. Although *The Mists of Avalon* appears, to many readers, to simply criticize Christianity and embrace paganism, it's more an attempt to look at the universality of mythic/religious themes, symbols and rituals. Here, again, the film treatment is weak, glossing over the importance of the bequest of Excalibur, the sword of Avalon, to Arthur, and his betrayal of that trust when he supports the Christian religion exclusively. (The grail quest, which in the novel unites Christian symbol with the cup of the Goddess, is completely ignored.)

What's left is a beautiful looking film, which succeeds in offering a fresh approach to Arthurian female characters and which should please MZB fans to some extent. But it could have been even more.

Reviewed by Eleanor M. Farrell

Activity Calendar

Matthew Winslow, Discussion Group Secretary

Prospective Groups

CALIFORNIA

LOTHLORIEN
Linda Sundstrom,

CONNECTICUT

FANTASTIC WORLDS
Bill Pierce, E-mail:
Web:

FLORIDA

HOBBITON
Paul S. Ritz,

ERYN GALEN
B.L. McCauley,
E-mail:

GEORGIA

CENTRAL ATLANTIS
Irv Koch,

ILLINOIS

THE FAR WESTFARTHING SMIAL
Mike Foster, E-mail:

MICHIGAN

Julie Bailey,
E-mail:

MISSOURI

THE KHAZAD
Gary & Sylvia Hunnewell,

NORTH CAROLINA

THE CAROLINA TOLKIEN SOCIETY
Matt & Renita Peeler,

OHIO

David Staley,
E-mail:
Web:

THE PRANCING PONY
Eileen Ribbler, E-mail:

PENNSYLVANIA

Will Vaus, Murrysville Comm. Church,

TENNESSEE

SPARE OOM
Mary & Conrad Stolzenbach, E-mail:

Chartered Groups

CALIFORNIA

NIGGLE'S PARISH
Gracia Fay Ellwood,

MYDGARD
Lee Speth,

KHAZAD-DÛM
Amy Wisniewski & Edith Crowe,
E-mail:
Web:
August: Fourth Annual Mythcon Book Toss
Sept.: *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* by Ursula K. Le Guin
October: *The Colour Out of Space* by H.P. Lovecraft

COLORADO

FANUIDHOL ("CLOUDY HEAD")
Patricia Yarrow, E-mail:
Web:

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

KNOSSOS
Mimi Stevens, E-mail:
August: *The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death* and *The Snarkout Boys and the Baconsburg Horror* by Daniel Pinkwater

HAWAII

[redacted]: *SAMMATH NAUR*
Steve Brown, [redacted] E-mail: [redacted]
Web: [redacted]

LOUISIANA

[redacted] *ROKE*
Sally Budd, [redacted]

MICHIGAN

[redacted] *GALADHREMMIN-ENNORATH*
Dave & Grace Lovelace, [redacted]

MINNESOTA

[redacted] *RIVENDELL*
David Lenander, [redacted]
Web: [redacted]

NEVADA

[redacted] *CRICKHOLLOW*
Joanne Burnett-Bowen, [redacted]. E-mail: [redacted]
Web: [redacted]
August: *Tamsin* by Peter Beagle
Sept.: *The Book of Lost Tales Part Two* by J.R.R. Tolkien
October: *Prentice Alvin* by Orson Scott Card

OREGON

[redacted]
Donovan Mattole, [redacted]
Web: [redacted]
August: *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by C.S. Lewis

PENNSYLVANIA

[redacted] *C.S. LEWIS AND FRIENDS*
Neil Gussman, [redacted] E-mail: [redacted]

SOUTH CAROLINA

[redacted] *THE COLUMBIA C.S. LEWIS SOCIETY*
Nina Fowler [redacted]
E-mail: [redacted]

WASHINGTON

[redacted] *MITHLOND*
John James, [redacted] E-mail: [redacted]
Web: [redacted]

WISCONSIN

[redacted] *THE BURRAHOBBITS*
Jeffrey & Jan Long, [redacted]
August: *Death of the Necromancer* by Martha Wells
September: *Storm of Swords* by George R.R. Martin

Special Interest Group

THE ELVISH LINGUISTIC FELLOWSHIP
Carl Hostetter, [redacted]
[redacted]. Newsletter, *Vinyar Tengwar*. Journal, [redacted] Christopher Gilson, [redacted]

Correspondence Groups

BUTTERBUR'S WOODSHED (general fantasy)
Diane Joy Baker, [redacted]
Correspondence circular with set topic. Web: [redacted]
September: G.K. Chesterton
November: *Declare* by Tim Powers

ONCE UPON A TIME (children's fantasy)
Laura Krentz, [redacted]
Correspondence circular. Web: [redacted]

Online Discussion Groups

MYTHSOC E-LIST
Society activities and general book-related discussion.
Sign up: [redacted] or contact Joan Marie Verba: [redacted]

COINHERENCE
Online discussion of Charles Williams
David Davis: E-mail: [redacted]

More Book Reviews

WIN BLEVINS, *ravenShadow*. New York: Forge, 2000. ISBN 0-812-59017-1 pb, 423 pp., $6.99.

Win Blevins was completely unknown to me until his book, *ravenShadow*, appeared on the long list for the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award. He has also published two other books, *Stone Song*, a novel, and *The Rock Child*, a biography of Crazy Horse.

Joseph Blue Crow, *ravenShadow*'s protagonist, is a man who *doesn't* know where he is headed. As an infant, he was chosen by the elders of his tribe to be a pipe carrier. He was taken from his parents, which was probably a good thing, and raised by his grandparents in the old way, meant to carry the knowledge and practices of the past into the future. When he went to the BIA school at 14 he couldn't even speak English. It turned out, though, that he could play basketball. At the time he thought it saved him by earning him friends and a place.

Instead, it dragged him into the white world where he didn't belong. After graduation, Blue gets a job and a girlfriend, but they both drink too much and their interactions with both each other and their friends have sharp edges rendering them uncomfortable for all concerned. Odd events and the vision of a raven, a bird freighted with all sorts of significance in both white and Native American mythologies, shadow him.

Eventually, Blue loses it all and goes back to the rez, where he tries to drink himself to death. When he nearly succeeds, and tries to take an innocent bystander with him, his best friend tells him he has to go on the mountain—by which he means go up on the sacred mountain and do a spirit quest; return to the beginning, to the old way, and find the red road again. That's what they call the traditional life, the red road.

A Lakota medicine man agrees to help Blue, if he gets sober. So Blue does, goes on the mountain, has his vision, which of course involves Raven. This event, and recounting Blue's childhood in flashbacks, fill the first two-thirds of the book. The last section is Blue's journey, both physical and spiritual, to reclaim his own and his people's spiritual heritage.

The first part of the book is mostly mundane, in the sense of being "of the world," with the Raven visions and connections the only real hints of otherworldliness. The last third is completely drenched in myth, legend, and spirituality. Blue and his dilemma had a lot to say to me about the search for spirituality in a material world of sharp edges, science, and rationality. I think it's a problem many of us face in our day-to-day lives, and we might learn something from Blue about dealing with it. Trying to summarize the events in the last part of the book cannot do justice to the complex chain of inter-related events, both physical and mystical. But I promise you there is as much magic, and myth, and wonder as you could possibly hope for.

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. Blevins' writing is perfect for the story he has to tell. I can't remember a single jarring note or slip in voice. I think he knows and understands the myth and folklore of the Lakota and has used it to craft a moving tale with real—arrgh, the only word I can find is relevance (gag)—to life here in the early days of a new millennium. It talks to the soul in the voice of myth and legend, and it is full of magic and wonder and myth. I plan to read it again soon.

Reviewed by Mary Kay Kare

JACQUELINE CAREY, *Kushiel's Dart*. New York: Tor, 2001. ISBN 0-312-87238-0, hc, 701 pp., $25.95.

A red thread runs throughout this novel of sophisticated political machinations and dark dreams—the fringe culture of sado-

masochism—which makes *Kushiel's Dart* certainly not a book for everyone. Protagonist Phèdre nó Delaunay's position as information gatherer and servant of the Queen stems from her unusual desire to take pain. Excising a few passages won't make this novel palatable for more general readers; yet, without this bondage and torture, combined with an exquisitely packaged glamour, this novel could easily be called a sophisticated Harlequin romance.

Terre d'Ange, a land clearly meant to resemble France, lives under Elua's code: "Love as thou wilt." Elua, joyful angel born from a union of blood and earth at Yeshua ben Yosef's death, persuades the dour One God to create a place where Elua's children continue pleasure and love in the true Terre d'Ange after death. Kushiel, darkest of Elua's seven Companions, specializes in pain. Not in two hundred years has there been born a more perfect servant of Kushiel—until Phèdre nó Delaunay. Indeed, she is marked by a drop of red in her dark eyes, the eponymous Dart. She becomes the perfect recipient of torture, ranging from whipping posts to flechettes. Sold into prostitution by her parents, she lives and grows in the glamorized world of courtesans in the Night Court of House Cereus.

Phèdre, who claims to bear a name of ill-luck, could have landed in much less lucky circumstances than in the house of Delaunay. Her rise in society depends upon a sophisticated, learned noble who educates her and chooses her clientele until she earns her marque, completing an intricate tattoo on her back, which normally takes years. Indeed, it is interesting how well and how beautifully Carey stacks the deck to encourage Phèdre's chances. Through Delaunay's connections, she attends a winter ball which Prince Baudoin attends and gathers her first tidbits, learning politics. She meets a sophisticated courtesan who finishes off the rough edges of her deportment, learns a number of languages, and makes friends with a charming Tsingano (gypsy) Prince in the poorer section of town, Night's Doorstep. Indeed, you would think there are no poor in the City of Elua, for they all live under a glamorized haze of sophisticate charm. Of course, she has to dodge the machinations of Melisande, the true villain, and fight her own dark infatuation with the raven-tressed torturer, who literally cuts her to within an inch of her life. And not a day passes that she isn't ravishingly dressed.

Kushiel then enters the land of the Skaldi (Vikings), where she manages to gather important details of a coming invasion, uncover a Terre d'Ange noble's treason, and, after a rigorous mountain trek, returns to deliver the information to Queen-regent Ysandre, despite the fact that she and her companion are charged with murder. It all begins to get a bit much to believe, especially when Kushiel's then dispatched to Alba (Britain), where she is instrumental in overturning the evil king Maelcon, restoring the rightful King to his throne, and bringing Ysandre and Drustan together to plight their true love. On top of that, she becomes a Countess. And apparently, the tale isn't over yet.

I can't say that this isn't a well-written and beautifully packaged literary creation, and that some parts of it are not intriguing. Alba and Skaldi have a bracing quality, and at least they don't have torture chambers as part of their households, as do some of Phèdre's clients. Still, *Kushiel's Dart* is a seven-hundred page succession of lucky turns, a tawdry, even dangerous world glamorized beyond belief, and clearly a first-novel effort, where the writer makes it entirely too easy for her protagonist, while appearing to make it very difficult.

Reviewed by Diane Joy Baker

TERRY PRATCHETT, *Thief of Time.* New York: HarperCollins, 2001. ISBN 0-06-019956-3, 324 pp., $25.00.

Thief of Time is Pratchett's 26th Diskworld novel; he is producing these hilarious romps at the astonishing rate of about one a year. More than 21 million copies sold—this guy is BIG. And deservedly so. Pratchett is a satirist who mocks everything by exaggeration: monks make bonsai trees, Lu-Tze the sweeper in the temple makes bonsai mountains.

In this book, Pratchett mocks eastern temples. He mocks modern physics, martial arts, the four horsemen of the apocalypse, chocaholics, schooling, the *Titanic* movie, yeti, bureauocrats and bookkeepers, and more subtly, those who take things apart to study them because they cannot believe that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Some of the characters who inhabit Diskworld appear in several of the stories. The character Death is commonly encountered, complete with scythe and Pale Horse; also Death of Rats, a rat skeleton with his own small scythe. Nanny Ogg, an elderly witch with a zest for life, turns up frequently. For an assistant, there is an Igor, with acknowledgements to Dr. Frankenstein. There are, of course, lots of magics.

Although it hardly seems necessary, in the midst of all the other entertainment, there is also a plot, quite a suspenseful plot. Diskworld is being threatened by the Auditors, to whom life is unbearably untidy. "Humanity practically *was* things that didn't have a position in space and time; such as imagination, pity, hope, history, and belief. Take those away and all you had was an ape that fell out of trees a lot." The Auditors want to stop time, so everything will be orderly forever, and they try to arrange that an absolutely accurate clock will be built. In Diskworld, time is in the charge of the Monks of History, who wind wasted time up on spindles. However, Time is a woman, whose son helps Susan, Death's granddaughter, to defeat the Auditors. The best weapons against the Auditors are chocolates, because the Auditors have never known sensuous experiences, and they are so overcome that they disintegrate. Will the Auditors win? Well, no, Pratchett is not going to destroy his pet world. So the Auditors will lose. The question is, "How will they lose?"

The books are full of allusions, and part of the fun is finding them. You will, of course, instantly know why a passing raven is called "Quoth." And the puns almost make sense. One of the Auditors who must take a human body to function in Diskworld is called Myria LeJean. Myria means *myriad* or *many.* If you say it fast, LeJean bcomes *Legion.*

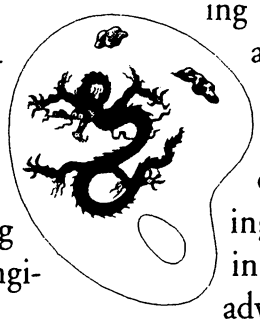
Pratchett is playing with ideas of time. If Pratchett has not read *The End of Time* by physicist Julian Barbour, he has somehow picked up the main idea. "The world is made of NOWS" (Barbour, page 16); "In the cup of the hand there is no past, no future. There is only now." (Pratchett page 1). By embodying the Auditors, and playing the changes their new bodies cause in their old ideas, Pratchett is also subtly exploring what it means to be human (which, according to Pratchett, is that you're not as much in control as you think).

His satires are successful, because there is always a serious undertone, when you become aware of it. Pratchett is showing us how absurd our world is, and also how much fun it might be. Read it! Read it again.

Reviewed by Grace Funk

Art: Michel Delving Mathom-house

HAYAO MIYAZAKI, *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind.* Translated by Studio Proteus. San Francisco: Viz Communications, 1995-1997. 1082 pp., 4 vols. in boxed set, ISBN 1569313482, $69.95. Volumes also available separately.



This graphic novel is as rich a world-creation as any I've seen over the past 15 years. It contains surprising plot twists which often hinge on some character's psychological growth, and new and interesting life-forms which evolved from genetic engineering experiments.

> "The Sea of Corruption was the new world ... an ecological system born in the polluted wastelands created by civilizations long past. Only the great insects could live amongst the giant fungi and the miasma they exhaled, and so the earth was slowly submerging beneath that decaying sea ... A thousand years had passed since the mammoth industrial civilizations of the past had diminished, and faded into the dark vastness of time. It was the closing of the Ceramic Era."

Set in the post-apocalyptic kingdom of Torumekia, the story begins in the Valley of Wind, where our soon-to-be heroine Nausicaä is flying around in her *mehve* (a glider). She gets a telepathic message of pain and anger, and sets out to find its source. It took me awhile to get into the story, but when I did, I was hooked.

Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind is full of political intrigue, subtle psychological interactions, war strategy, and big explosions in the air. It also contains surprising episodes of the numinous, including encounters with an evil man both in ordinary physical reality and in non-ordinary reality, where he appears as dark energies; a journey down the gullet of a giant bug leading to the Buddhist PureLand; and another trip to a trickster place where nothing is as it seems. Encounters with holy beings are here, as well as with political beings masquerading as holy.

Many of the strongest characters, including the protagonist heroine, are young women and girls. The male characters are seen first challenging them and then becoming respectful aides-de-camp. Furthermore, these women are allowed to be nurturing—in one scene, Nausicaä takes in orphaned children—but are not seeking wife-and-motherhood as the inevitable triumphant end to their adventures. They have important work to do, and their very femaleness leads them to do it differently than a male character would.

The author does not beat you over the head about good and evil—each being is portrayed as having both elements. Miyazaki has accomplished the rare feat of creating a piece of fiction which revolves around warring factions and is centered on the adventures of a small-village eco-heroine, in which nevertheless you as a reader are not allowed to purely hate any of the characters. The concept of *satyagraha* subtly emanates from the piece, as Nausicaä's encounters with the various characters reveal their complexity both as individuals and as beings in cultural context. Neither they nor the affairs they find themselves wrapped up in are simplistic, so you can't easily dismiss them as "the bad guys."

The story promulgates a vitally needed animistic message, without being sickly sweet about it or overly proselytizing. The entire book is based on the idea that we're in a post-apocalyptic world due to unthinking actions, which continue on in some of the scenes. When one faction releases a biological weapon, all the characters are forced to deal with the consequences of that action. *Manga* is a wonderful medium for getting vital messages like that across without bashing people on the head. Further in the story, the concept of earth

attempting to regenerate itself using its own intelligence appears. Animals, including those used as "warhorses," become valued and life-saving friends. And in the ongoing war to breathe, it's not simply put as "good humans—bad bugs", or "bad humans—look what we did". The Ohmu, a type of giant forest insect which look a lot like a mountain with multiple eyes and horns, or like some mutant armored potato bug thing found in a traditional Japanese B-horror movie ("Invasion of the Giant Insects!"), are portrayed here as being extremely deep-thinking and wise beings, who act altruistically more than once. They are, for my nickel, the most interesting new fictional species to come around in years.

The way Miyazaki deals with the Ohmu, as well as with many other elements in his story, is to let the reader unravel the puzzle herself. Many characters are afraid of the Ohmu, and it's only through Nausicaä's adventures that we learn to think differently. This subtlety is most refreshing in a genre which is more often full of overt tits leaning over a sinkful of machine guns.

Other interesting living inventions are the conscious weapon "God-Warrior," which shoots plutonium when angered, the weirdly created Heedra, the forests of fungi, and the loyal mounts known as "horseclaws." The book is also rich culturally, including such peoples as the Wormhandlers, who wrangle insects and are sort of the Untouchables of the times; the Forest People, who wear heavy gear and are the only ones that can survive deep in the miasma; the Vai Emperor and Torumekian overlords; the Dorok tribespeople; and the monk caste guarding the Holy City of Shuwa, where all the trouble began.

The only part which bounced me out of the necessary suspension of disbelief was the ubiquitousness of the heavy flying machines. In a land where industrial civilization has been gone for thousands of years, there's an amazing preponderance of heavy artillery. Besides the machine guns, the rival forces do a lot of zooming around in these clunky air transport machines—including the inventive "flying jars"—but nowhere is the matter of refueling addressed. In a work which pays a great deal of attention to everyday nitty-gritty details—people get dirty and hungry, clothes fall apart, the quality of air masks is questioned—this is a big one to overlook.

> "They say that once, man remolded the plants and animals to his pleasure, like clay. Most of the new species they created have vanished over the years, but some are still with us today. According to the legends, even horses used to be mammals."

Nausicaä herself becomes sort of a Christlike/St. Francis figure, speaking telepathically with the hated and feared giant insects, working to end the wars, and uniting the disparate factions in love for the planet's survival. She makes friends of everyone, from a feral squirrel-fox to the former Dorok Emperor. Mythology builds up around her, as she seems to fulfill prophesies of a "blue-clad one" who will come and heal the world. She also has a teacher, Master Yupa, who is a cross between Yoda and Aragorn, and whom she repeatedly impresses. But in good *manga* fashion, her prophesied blue outfit consists of boots and a miniskirt, and she does all of this mystical stuff while performing slick aerobatics in her personal glider and carrying an assault rifle.

Besides the American graphic novel editions, there are also two versions of *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind* out on video: one which remains fairly consistent with the book series, and one which thins it out to Disneyesque proportions. Unfortunately, the former only appears in Japanese, with no subtitles. I'd suggest renting that one anyway—just read the books first.

Reviewed by Tina Fields

Mythprint is the monthly bulletin of the Mythopoeic Society, a nonprofit educational organization devoted to the study, discussion and enjoyment of myth and fantasy literature, especially the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. To promote these interests, the Society publishes three magazines, maintains a World Wide Web site, and sponsors the annual Mythopoeic Conference and awards for fiction and scholarship, as well as local and written discussion groups.

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