

The Official Newsletter of PARSEC

SIGMA

The Kontinuing Adventures of Kira

Well, I don't know if January's "Sigma" is ever going to make it out, but I would like to mention that I am no longer losing Cincinnati's mail. Now I'm losing Erie's mail! And New Castle's, and Butler's, and Cranberry's, and Mars' (No, this is not why we lost our hotel!) Now that I've confused everybody, I can start my column.

January's meeting went really well. We may have to schedule "Philosophy in Science Fiction: Volume 2" sometime. I don't know about the rest of you who were there, but I want to take one of Don's classes! [Side note: Don will be playing Odo in My Fair Ladle at ConFluence '97.] Let's just hope that the jelly beans and tentacled things that are controlling the rest of you will let us talk more about them. (They're not controlling me because I am a figment of the collective imagination. Although I have been told by at least one person that he has a wilder imagination than he had thought) Of course, the possibility that interests me is that we're all characters in a novel. I've been reading John Barth again; I promise I'll quit!

As for upcoming meetings, our annual panel topic meeting has been moved to March because we were able to get Joe Clifford Faust for February. He is doing a book signing at the Squirrel Hill Barnes & Noble on the day of our meeting, so it was much more convenient for him to come to the February meeting than the January one. Ann's presentation in March will be at the Monroeville library. Directions will be provided in next month's "Sigma". Call me at 829-1082 if the "Sigma" seems to be late next month; I will set up a voice mail mailbox on my answering machine with the directions. (I love technology!) Of course, if you call while I'm home, you'll most likely get me in person, which is okay too!

Last bit: I know we've stressed before the importance of keeping the

library clean, and we've been doing a good job. I noticed a bunch of tiny crumbs on the floor at this past meeting during cleanup, and those are next to impossible to get by hand. I'd like to suggest that if anyone has a Dustbuster-type vacuum cleaner that they can bring in, please feel free to do so. The only one I have is made to plug into a car's lighter socket or I'd do this myself. I would like to show the library personnel that we don't expect anyone else to have to clean up after us, that we care about public property and go the extra mile to keep it neat. Thanks to everyone who helped clean up and to everyone who brought snacks, and to everyone who braved the cold weather to hear that we might not exist!

Book Reviews

Memory by Lois McMaster Bujold

Review by Wendy Kosak

If you're already a Miles Vorkosigan fan, I suspect that wild horses could not keep you from this new LMB novel. It takes up a few months after the events of *MIRROR DANCE*. As a side effect of spending most of *MIRROR DANCE* dead, Miles is still having seizures. The novel starts shortly after a rescue mission where Miles has a seizure while in a combat suit and he cuts the legs off the man he had been sent to rescue.

Things quickly go from bad to worse when Miles lies on his reports to Simon Illyan, chief of security, and Miles' boss/mentor/foster uncle. Illyan orders him back home to Barrayar and throws him out of the service. In the next few chapters, Miles drifts through familiar territory for fans of the series trying to find himself. LMB reveals that Miles has been throwing himself into the cover personality of Admiral Naismith so much so he's lost track of Lord Vorkosigan, who he now must be.

Just as you start to wonder if Miles will drift aimlessly through the rest of the book, Illyan falls victim to sabotage to his bio memory chip. At this point, the novel becomes a murder mystery. While it is entertaining to watch Miles' two personalities merge back into one, the mystery itself is frustrating. LMB uses all her stock characters, thus the only news ones (thus possible bad guys) are the new head of security, Emperor Gregor's new love interest, and Miles wet-behind-the-ears driver, Martin. Even the

slowest reader should be able to figure out the "killer" within a few pages, and LONG before Miles stumbles onto the truth.

It's a not-to-be-missed read for the fans of the series, but not a good starting point for someone that hasn't read the previous Miles Vorkosigan books.

Metropolitan by Walter John Williams

Harper Prism

Review by Wendy Kosak

I started out liking this story a great deal. As it continued, I started to dislike it. The world is interesting, using lots of 30ish technology in 90ish ways. For example, computers use plug in cables and gears to program, but can do internet-like information searches. The base of all power is plasm, an energy that collects under old buildings, which is directed by the human mind. It can cure tumors, create sky writing, give telepathy like powers, etc, etc.

The heroine is Aiah, who works for the government in a boring, deadend job under very poor conditions. Her one attempt for education died due to a lack of funds. She is on the verge of bankruptcy because her husband/lover has been temporarily transferred across the planet and not given housing funds. The one good thing in her life, the luxury apartment they can no longer sell at value, will soon be lost.

Luck has it, though, that part of her job includes searching for wells of plasm that the government can tap and control. One day, she finds a glory hole -- an almost unlimited source of plasm. All she had to do was sell it and her troubles would be over. She has to be careful to whom she sells it because it's all illegal.

In the end, she decides to sell to a exile called Constantine. As we get to know Constantine and what he plans to do with the plasm, the less I liked the book and the heroine. It was much like watching someone finding an unlimited supply of tanks, selling them to Hitler, then HELP him plan the second invasion of England. The attack on the other country goes a little bloodier than planned, and one of the royal family does escape, but all in

all, it's everything that Aiah sees coming and helps to arrange.

When the last part of the story revolves around Aiah trying to avoid detection of her part in the invasion, I wasn't sure if I cared. It seemed to me that she deserved anything she got, except an happy ending.

Walter John Williams writes well and the novel is otherwise a joy to read. I'm not sure what rating to give. Good writing, neat world, characters are well done, believable, interesting but harder and harder to like.

Alvin Journeyman by Orson Scott Card

Review by Matthew Urick

I could synopsise the plot, but it is not the most important thing about this book. The fourth book of the Alvin Maker series is best summarized as a reunion of old friends. We who have read the first three books have been waiting about seven years for Card to bring us word about them.

Just about every major character from the first three books makes an appearance, although some of the bad guys are seen only through the end results of their behind-the-scenes plottings. A few more characters are introduced with one of them to become a major player as the series goes on. By the end of the book, Alvin is ready to go on to new vistas. I'm ready to go with him. I just hope the wait isn't too long this time.

Beggars in Spain by Nancy Kress

AvoNova

Review by Wendy Kosak

In 1989, while at Ann's house, someone asked me if there was a pill I could take so I didn't have to sleep, would I take it? At the time I didn't see the point. Right now, I would kill for it.

If someone told me that I could safely make it so my children didn't have to sleep, after some great consideration, I probably would. If someone also told me that this would make my children more mentally stable and happier during the course of their lifetimes, I would jump at the chance. If someone told me that my children would never be ill, never have

cancer, AIDS, heart attacks, strokes, recover quickly from accidents, and live for hundreds of years -- I would kill for it.

Who wouldn't? Well, apparently most of the people of the world, according to Nancy Kress' *Beggars in Spain*. The novel starts with the parents of Leisha Camden deciding that they will have the new procedure to be used on their daughter. By the time that Leisha is 15, only 1082 children have been born using this procedure. Only 1082 in 15 years -- when no bad side effects can be found? This is less a 100 a year! This is like the rate of children born with two heads a year! Why this low number? Well, apparently people think that children that don't sleep are monsters.

This is the first of many assumptions that I had trouble with. Another was that all of these adapted children were ambitious and were successful in everything they tried. One only has to look at fandom to see potential does not always equal to success. Ambition, maturity, interpersonal skills, and a host of other things all end up tied to this sleeplessness thing.

Well the hatred of Sleepless grows and grows, so the children retreat into Sanctuary. Here they end up under thumb of Jennifer Sharifi. Jennifer is a cardboard villain, doing evil things like killing normal babies born to Sleepless. Why these incredibly intelligent people blindly follow her, never makes sense to me.

All in all, I didn't like this novel and can not recommend it.

The Eye of the World by Robert Jordan

Tor Fantasy

Review by Wendy Kosak

Stop me if you've heard this one: four simple farming folk are escorted by a wise wizard (who is not trusted in all lands) and a warrior (a king in his own right) to the city of light and good. They are pursued by minions of evil: inhuman ugly guys with swords and spirit bad guys on black horses. They spend their time between Inns (under false names and served by fat jolly innkeepers) and bleak wintery wildernesses. The main bad guy is a immortal force of evil thought to be safely defeated in some barren land.

Most of this is very well written rehash of every fantasy ever written. It has everything you like. It has everything you don't like. It has everything including the kitchen sink. If you want to read the same stuff over, all well written, this is for you.

Lest Darkness Fall by L. Sprague de Camp

To Bring the Light by David Drake

Baen Books

Reviews by Matthew Urick

Lest Darkness Fall is an acknowledged classic of science fiction and I need not recommend it to those who know of its reputation. If you were not aware of it, then now is a chance to discover it. Alternate history stories are all the rage and here's one of the best.

Martin Padway is in transit to an archaeological dig in Lebanon when lightning hits him in Rome. He finds he has "slipped" back to sixth century Rome. What follows is the story of how he survives, prospers, and changes history - for he realizes that to have any chance at a stable life he has to stop the fall of the Roman Empire. Not only is this a highly enjoyable lesson on historical engineering, but, like all of de Camp's early fiction, it is peopled with characters as real as the ones you know today.

To Bring the Light is an original story of a woman living during the height of the Roman Empire who "slips" to the time of Romulus and Remus. It is presented as a counterpoint to *Darkness*, but you will forget it in a week while *Darkness* will remain with you for a long time.

The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Eighth Annual Collection

edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling

St. Martin's Griffin

Review by Wendy Kosak

This massive book seemed somewhat magical. I read and read and read, yet every time I picked it up there was another story I hadn't seen before.

For a while I thought I would never get to the end. Finally, one day, I realized that I had read it all.

What can you say about the collection of the Year's best? All the stories are great. There are interesting essays on the field of fantasy. I guess I can only find one comment. I wished that they gave a little warning for the horror stories. I'm not a great fan of horror -- mostly because a single story can leave me 'creeped out' for a week. There was nothing worse to be skimming what I thought was a fantasy story and suddenly find myself in a horror tale.

One story, "Giants in the Earth" by Dale Bailey, I couldn't finish. I got as far as the coal miner grasping the sleeping angel by the wing and placing the hacksaw in place to cut it off.

Another story, "The Box" by Jack Ketchum, I finished but wished I didn't as the narrator watches his family starve themselves to death after learning the secret of the box.

My favorite story was "Superman's Diary" by B. Brandon Barker. Poor Superman is suffering from extreme mental problems trying to keep his two identities separate. Luckily for him, Clark Kent's vacation with Lois Lane goes better than expected and it looks like both of him will be better for the trip.

Full Spectrum 5

Edited by Jennifer Hershey, Tom Dupree, and Janna Silverstein

Spectra

Review by Wendy Kosak

This is 28 short stories by the best science fiction writers today. I'm not crazy about short stories, so its hard for me to say if a lot of these stories are not so great, or just not my cup of tea.

My favorites:

- "The Inspid Profession of Jonathan Hornebom" by Jonathan Lethem, is a story about a painter of clowns and big eyed children

who is suffering from black outs and wakes to find someone has painted nightmare birds on his canvasses. The story is told from the private detective that he hires to follow him. A very funny and clever story.

- "Goddogit" by Emily Devenport explores the nature of God, who is a 40ish woman with a dog.
- "Cool Zone" by Pat York is a cool story about people who make the fashion. Unfortunately, it has a sick (but effective) ending.
- "Which Darkness Will Come Upon Us?" by John M. Landsberg starts out what seems to be a typical white man against the native Americans. By the second page, however, some aliens have entered into the fray where they accidentally drop their most powerful weapon...
- All in all, I guess I liked more stories than disliked, so I have to recommend this one.

Convention Update!

Just before Christmas, it was discovered that we did not have a hotel for ConFluence '97. During a personnel shake-up at the Sheraton, our contract fell through the cracks, and the Sheraton sold the space out from under us. Through the heroic efforts of several members of the Convention Committee, that situation has been rectified. ConFluence '97 will be in the beautiful Marriott City Center, across the street from the Civic Arena in downtown Pittsburgh. The dates had to be moved to August 8th through 10th.

Con Listing

Dates	Name	Place	Road Miles	Guest Of Honor	Registration fee
Feb. 14-16	Boskone 34	Framingham, MA	575	John M. Ford	\$34
Feb. 21-23	BASHCon '97	U. of Toledo	250	gencon	?

Feb. 28-Mar. 2	SheVaCon V	Staunton, VA	250	Margaret Weis	?
Feb.28-Mar. 2	Astronomicon 6	Rochester, NY	275	Tanya Huff	\$30
Mar. 7-9	Confabulation 9	Bloomington, IN	425	Richard Knaak	\$25
Mar. 7-9	Lunacon '97	Rye Brook, NY	400	C.J. Cherryh	\$44
Mar. 7-9	SwilCon '97	Swarthmore, PA	300	Ed Wasser, Jeff Menges	\$20
Mar. 21-23	InterCon XII	Columbia, MD	225	LARP gencon	\$35
Mar. 21-23	MilleniCon -4	Cincinnati, OH	300	Diann Thornley	\$30
Mar. 28-30	Balticon 31	Baltimore, MD	250	Glen Cook	\$45
May 23-36	Costume Con 15	Baltimore, MD	250	costumecon	\$>60
May 23-26	Disclave 1997	New Carrollton, MD	250	Patricia Anthony	\$40
Jun. 6-8	Duckon 6	Oakbrook, IL	475	furrycon: Frank Hayes	\$40
Jun. 13-15	The Second ConCerto	Philadelphia area	300	filkcon: Urban Tapestry	\$40
Jun. 13-15	Ad Astra 17	Toronto, ON	325	Stephen Brust	\$35
Jun. 26-29	Dragon*Con '97	Atlanta, GA	675	many guests	\$60

Aug. 5-9, 1998	Bucconeer (WorldCon 56)	Baltimore, MD	250	many guests	\$110 (thru 9/30/97)
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Notes:

The cons listed here, with the exception of national/international-level fests and selected others, are the upcoming cons moderately accessible to PARSEC, meaning that they are within the maximum driving-distance limit of roughly 575 miles established by members who drive to Arisia and Boskone on occasion. Mileage is to the nearest 25 mi. unless it's under 25 miles. Only those guests specifically identified as Guest of Honor or Author Guest of Honor are listed as GOHs here, not Artist GOHs, Filk GOHs, Fan GOHs, Special Guests, Toastmasters, or High Poobah Lifetime Legacy Guests of Distinction. Registration fees are full-weekend at-the-door. Hotel costs are quad rates per night, tax not included. Call Kira at 829-1082 for more info.

If the listing is gibberish to your web-browser, there is a text-only version.

Upcoming Meetings:

February 8th, at the Squirrel Hill branch of the Carnegie Library, Joe Clifford Faust will be reading from his newly-published Ferman's Devils and discussing his work. He will be coming from a book-signing at the Barnes and Noble book store on Murrey Avenue which occurs between 11:00 am and 1:00 pm.

The next ConCom meeting is also Saturday, February 8th, after PARSEC. We will be parcelling out space at the hotel, and scheduling. Don't forget your position description!

March 8th at the Monroeville Library, Ann Cecil will be hosting a discussion on Trends in SF, where we will also generate panel topics for ConFluence '97.

The April 12th meeting is in the Squirrel Hill Library, the topic is yet to be determined.

The May 10th meeting is also in Squirrel Hill, and also yet to be determined.

At the June 14th meeting, PARSEC members are invited to the Squirrel Hill Library to judge the entries in the ConFluence '97 short story contest. If you entered the contest or have already seen some entries, you can come and read the rest, but you cannot judge.

On July 12th, the Con-com will be ready to talk about guests, programming, and events at the con. Come and volunteer to help, or don't come and be drafted!

Our convention will be August 8th through 10th at the Marriott City Center downtown. Come and enjoy the BEST con in Pittsburgh!

September 13th will be the annual PARSEC picnic, just a bit delayed by the convention.

The Editor Speaks!

Howdy Folks! As the new editor of Sigma, I hope to continue in Don's tradition of keeping quality in Sigma, along with lots of reviews and interesting articles. Of course, to do that, I need your support! If you read a book, please, share your opinions with your friends in PARSEC by writing a review and sending it to me!

You can hand me "hard copy" at most PARSEC meetings, send it electronically to roboman@andrew.cmu.edu, or mail it to the PARSEC mailbox at P.O. Box 3681, Pittsburgh, PA, 15230-3681. I hope you enjoy Sigma as much, if not more, than I do!

Greg.

P.A.R.S.E.C.

The Pittsburgh Area Realtime Scientifiction Enthusiasts Club

President: Kira Heston

Vice President: Wendy Kosak

Treasurer: Joan Fisher

Editor: G. D. Armstrong

Meetings: The second Saturday in each month.

Dues: \$10 full, \$2 supporting.

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This page maintained by [Greg Armstrong](#).