

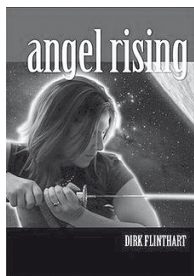
Science Fiction & Horror Reviews

Keith Stevenson

My fifth review column. And my last. Does this mean I'm a fifth columnist? (*arf arf—sorry*). I told you I was a slow reader. And I have no idea how Bill Congreve kept going for so long. Hats off to Bill. It's been a good gig, though. And I hope you've enjoyed my take on things. Let's get into the last book pile.

* * *

The novella is enjoying something of a comeback in Australia, which is no bad thing. Novellas, weighing in at 20,000 words plus are meatier than the short story, allowing room for the author to develop character, setting and plot in richer detail, but are a far quicker read and ask less commitment from the reader than a novel would. The new novella series from Twelfth Planet Press is consequently sized and—coming in at AUD \$10—priced to please.



Angel Rising

Dirk Flinthart

Twelfth Planet Press

www.twelfthplanetpress.com

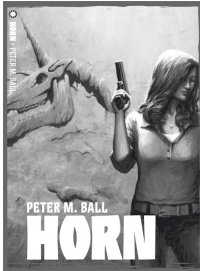
The first in the series, *Angel Rising* has other pleasures to offer as well as the cover price. Dirk Flinthart's story is set in the New Ceres universe. New Ceres was an online collaborative universe containing stories by some of Australia's best known writers all centring on—as you might expect—the planet of New Ceres, whose inhabitants had chosen to re-enact an Eighteenth Century level of civilisation. High tech was forbidden and the Proctors, genetically enhanced guardians, were charged by the Lady Governor to make sure it stayed that way. While the online magazine came to an end, New Ceres continues in print form through Twelfth Planet Press's *New Ceres Nights* imprint.

Flinthart has dabbled in the New Ceres universe before, so he comes to this story with a firm grip on the finer detail and idiosyncrasies of this world. He's also author of a number of high action stories featuring the enigmatic

Red Priest, as well as being a martial arts and fencing student. So all the elements for a swashbuckling adventure would appear to be in place.

Proctor George Gordon has been sent to the Sunrise Isles of New Ceres, where the inhabitants are re-enacting feudal Japan, following reports of a meteorite coming to land somewhere nearby. Gordon is an instantly engaging character, roguish, witty and handy in a fight. No sooner has he set foot on the docks than he dispatches three samurai in some beautifully described swordplay, and sees off a fourth. His hopes of entering the islands incognito in tatters, he joins his shape-shifter contact, Shima, and starts the search for the crash site. But as you might expect—and hope—this wasn't an ordinary meteorite strike and there are powerful forces, both on-planet and off-, that want what it contained.

If you think *Angel Rising* is an exciting, funny and engaging adventure romp, you're absolutely right. Flinthart has a lot of fun with this piece. The voice of Gordon is very strong, the plans of the enemy typically conniving and dastardly, and the prize is something that strikes at the core not only of New Ceres, but the continued existence of space-going humanity. And did I mention the cohort of ninja nuns?



Horn

Peter M Ball

Twelfth Planet Press

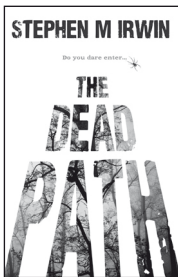
www.twelfthplanetpress.com

The second novella, *Horn*, has a strong start but fades a little toward the end. In fact I think it may have benefited from being longer.

Horn is a twist on the typical private detective story. Gumshoe alley is a well-trodden path. And if as a writer you're planning to Marlowe things up, it's dollars to dimes you need an angle – something that makes you stand out from the other 'shmos'. Luckily, Peter's novella has a few things going for it in that department. For one thing, the world-weary PI—Aster—is a woman, and not just any broad: she's done time as a meatsicle on the morgue slab, but she's all better now, or almost. Add to that an unwanted and generally ignored influx of fey folk—fairies, goblins and the odd murderously rapacious unicorn—into the once fair city of Aster's birth and you start to see that this gumshoe story may be more than meets the eye.

The other thing I like about *Horn* is that Peter demonstrates a solid grasp of the detective and fantasy tropes in *Horn's* entertaining opening.

As lovers of Chandler and his ilk, we nod our heads at the heavy drinking PI and her motley collection of ne'er do well acquaintances: the coroner whose seen too many kids meet a nasty end, and Aster's own femme fatale who she'd rather forget. There's a nice display of that knowledge and control as the story builds and the body count mounts up. But the thing about this kind of pastiche is that just as much as we—the readers—want to see the tropes and idiosyncrasies of the sub-genre trotted out and given their place on the page, we want something more than a retelling. You see it in movies all the time and Tarantino is a master of it. We want a story like this to act as a reframing device for the familiar. To somehow refresh it—make it the same but newer, with its own unique up-to-the-minute sensibility. In the first half of the novel, Peter has fun melding the fantasy and detective conventions together and it looks like we're heading for the type of bravura Tarantino-esque reimagining I've just described. But for whatever reason, the story falters in the second section and the novelty and creativity and potential for uniqueness in the story falls away and we are left with a more conventional denouement. Perhaps if Peter had more room, he could have taken time to build the weirdness all the way to the finish. Don't misunderstand me—*Horn* is an enjoyable and entertaining read but for a while there, it carried the seeds of something much, much greater.



The Dead Path

Stephen M Irwin

Hachette

There's a resurgence in mainstream horror publishing right now. These things are cyclical, of course, but a couple of reasons may be the popularity of the ubiquitous *Twilight* novels and the Sookie Stackhouse books—and their highly entertaining cable TV spin-off *True Blood*. Whatever the cause the results are very welcome, especially for local authors.

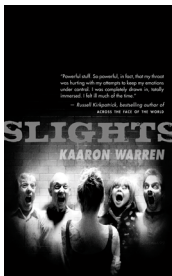
One early entry is Stephen M Irwin's novel *The Dead Path*. Nicholas Close returns home from London, his life in tatters. It feels like a backwards step. Stung by guilt over his wife's death, he has more than the normal set of troubles after a blow to the head means he can see dead people, or—more specifically—the moment of their death again and again with the coup de grace of an accusing eye-roll from each corpse. His return to the family home in Tallong, Queensland stirs up more ghosts though: the

childhood murder of his school friend, the strangely scary seamstress who had a shop near where he lived, and the timeless and threateningly sombre woods nearby, which have resisted development for decades. But that's only the start of a family secret that's been buried for too many years.

Reading *The Dead Path* I was continually reminded of a Stephen King-type scenario. The town of Tallong is well-imagined; there's a feel for its topography, the layout of streets, the landmarks it contains. It has a history, and not a particularly nice one. Close's return home brings him into unwilling confrontation with an ancient evil, which has fed on the town for countless years, an evil recognised by some of the inhabitants but steadfastly ignored or deliberately forgotten by others. And Close has what King would refer to as a 'shine' about him. Seeing dead people is merely an indicator of something more.

If the town is well-imagined, the characters more than match up to it. Close's mum and sister round out a realistically dysfunctional family with the kind of love-hate snippy dialogue you might expect. And they're not without their own secrets. In fact Tallong's population has been touched by its resident evil in many and various ways. Irwin's use of language is nicely descriptive too and his plotting shows off the skills he no doubt learned in his other life as a screenwriter and short-film and documentary director. The pacing is good, the reveals and plot points come when you need them and there's no difficulty trusting that you're in safe hands. On top of all this there are some unsettling scenes: some graphic (but never gratuitously so), others unsettling in that '*realising your all alone in the house reading this book and it's late*' kind of way.

This is Irwin's first novel, and it's a promising one that left me wondering what his next project might be.



Slights
Kaaron Warren

Angry Robot

I like Angry Robot. I like the idea behind this rather cheeky imprint from the UK division of HarperCollins. It's fun, it's coolly geeky (if such a thing is possible) and it's doing GOOD THINGS in genre publishing. It's also only interested in adult fare, which is a refreshing buck against the trend that's seen the genre slide towards the YA/ crossover end of the spectrum. I also like Angry Robot because they obviously have faith in their authors

and genuinely want to give them the best chance possible to 'make it'. And they're putting their clout behind Australian talent too.

In fact the Robot's first full-fledged novel is from Australian Kaaron Warren. Kaaron has a solid history of finely balanced, unsettling shorter fiction that's appeared in more magazines and anthologies than I can comfortably mention here, so I was looking forward to her first novel. And as a result I was a bit saddened by the fact that I didn't warm to *Slights* at all. Listening to what other people have said about *Slights*, I suspect this is one of those books you either get right into or else it doesn't work for you. For my part, I felt it had some structural and character issues that I couldn't ignore.

Slights is about Stevie. Stevie is a serial killer. The back of the book tells us that. This is just as well because there's zero serial killing going on in the first 200 pages. What there is however is a very slow introduction to Stevie's character, her history, and the elements of her childhood that formed her. She hasn't had a happy life. It's damaged her obviously. But I couldn't bring myself to feel pity for Stevie because her character actually comes across as a selfish, thoughtless, and pretty dumb person (despite her assertions that she is actually quite clever). This is problem one: I didn't like the protagonist.

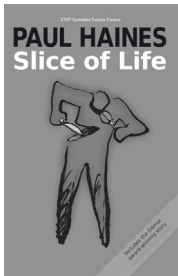
Problem two is that the structure of the first section of the book is supported by winding and overlapping flashbacks. Years pass in the present for Stevie but much of what we read is orienting us towards her past at the expense of any forward momentum for the present day plot. By page 200 any energy I had to read the book had pretty much left me.

Problem three is that I didn't believe in Stevie. A speculative fiction novel trades on maintaining a good relationship with the reader, so they will trust the author enough to suspend disbelief. Not liking Stevie, and being irritated by the plot's progress I pretty much withdrew my willingness to do that and started questioning the narrative. Stevie dies on the operating table and goes to a room filled with people she has slighted. It could be horrific, but she gives as good as she gets so I didn't feel any threat for her. She's revived on the operating table and then proceeds to 'die' either by misadventure or on purpose several more times so she can revisit the room and understand what it is and why she's there. I didn't believe that could happen without Stevie actually dying for good or being committed as a repeated 'self harmer'. I didn't believe a person like Stevie could become a nurse, which she eventually does in order to interrogate others near death. She couldn't hold down a job in a supermarket let alone a hospital. And I didn't believe her desire to read a heap of books her aunt left her. She

didn't strike me as the reading type.

Stevie's quest for self-understanding after her experience in the strange post-death room made me think of the other serial killer in our lives at present: Dexter Morgan. And that brought out a sharp contrast between the two characters. Dexter excites us because he is a monster, one that is viciously cruel and calculatingly clever. In that moral greyness that is such a wonderful place to explore, we can appreciate his skills, the fact that he is unfettered by morality, and we can indulge in a kind of personal wish fulfilment. Isn't there someone you'd like to do away with if only you were Dexter Morgan?

But Dexter is also on a personal quest of self-discovery. While he corrals and then eviscerates his victims he often uses them as sounding boards for his life experiences. The soon-to-be dead are his confidantes, helping his reptilian mind struggle towards some understanding of what it is to think and feel like a human. He's like some twisted Pinocchio yearning to be human but inadequately equipped to be so. It's an exciting thing to witness (though his victims would probably not say the same). By comparison, I found Stevie unengaging and irritating for most of the novel. I didn't care about her journey for self-discovery and I felt no such pleasure walking with her for the length of the book. For a novel that rests entirely on its main protagonists shoulders, this is a serious drawback.



Slice of Life

Paul Haines

The Mayne Press

Paul Haines has been writing horror since the late nineties and he just keeps getting better. Although 'better' may be an odd term to describe someone whose work regularly features faeces, blood, cum, and vomit, and often in the same paragraph. Paul's writing is visceral, yes. It's also incredibly open and honest. Nothing is taboo, everything is on show in its awful, vulnerable and threatening rawness, its terrible truth. He will show you the horrible side of yourself. The vicious pettiness, the weakness and the dangerous lust. I wish I could write with the courage of Paul Haines.

Slice of Life is his second collection and a third is in the wind from Brimstone Press. The stories span the period from 2003 up to the present with a previously unpublished 'slice of life' story—there are three in the collection—centring on Paul's 'delusional paranoid corporate cannibal' also called Paul who has a gourmet's eye for the finer cuts of, well, human flesh and organs really.

You're never really sure where Paul Haines the writer ends and Paul Haines the main character in most of his stories begins. His own experiences backpacking in Pakistan and India come to the fore in a couple of *Slice of Life* stories that detail the paranoid, blood-freezing and bowel-loosening moments anyone who's travelled through the less civilised areas of our planet will instantly recognise. You know, those instances where you think everything is fine and then you realise you're alone with strangers in the middle of a deserted road miles from anywhere, and if they wanted to do anything at all to you, they could and no-one would ever know.

I'm not sure if Paul's actually had a 'close encounter' but the collection also includes a handful of weird sci-fi stories where a 'good' anal probing from our neighbourly extraterrestrials is the least of your worries. And then there's his own private version of domestic bliss, those tales of suburbia, including the Ditmar-winning novella *The Devil in Mr Pussy*, that detail the typical goings on in the kind of street you live in yourself—and maybe the one Paul lives in too—but which you never hear about unless they make the front page of your morning newspaper, accompanied by another four pages inside with full-colour pictures of the 'crime scene'. The fantasy genre doesn't escape Mr Haines' gaze either in *Slice of Life* with, for example, 'Necromancing the Bones' about a wizard and his knight who both have an unnervingly intimate interest in animal husbandry. *Slice of Life* is not for those who like pretty stories of love and derring-do. Look elsewhere for that. What it does contain is original storytelling with a strong and compelling voice that you sometimes may not want to listen to and yet you're powerless to resist. You have been warned.

Horror poetry. There's a niche subgenre if ever there was one, but there appears to be quite a lot happening in this particular area with the arrival of three collections in the past year.

**SPORES FROM SHARNOTH
and OTHER MADNESSES**



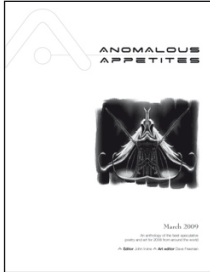
◆ LEIGH BLACKMORE ◆

Spores from Sharnoth and Other Madnesses
Leigh Blackmore

P'rea Press

Leigh Blackmore is well known in the Australian speculative fiction scene and one of our leading experts in horror and dark fantasy. *Spores from Sharnoth* shows another side of his talents—as a poet. It's a collection

of poetic meditations on the life and works of HP Lovecraft, including a large section devoted to the Cthulhu Mythos. Leigh's control of the sonnet and other poetic forms is—for someone like me who can just about manage a limerick—sobering. His language and imagery is at times dark at others liminally romantic and thoughtful. It's not the sort of book you can rush through. It's one you want to savour, read a verse, ponder and let your mind wander through the doorways Leigh has opened up.



Anomalous Appetites

John Irvine (Editor)

Lulu

Anomalous Appetites edited by Kiwi John Irvine is a truly international smorgasbord of 'fantastic' poetry, spanning SF, fantasy, horror and all points in between. Each poem is accompanied by an original illustration.

It was a prodigious undertaking from John and the outcome is impressive. At times playful and self-referential, at others it is darkly revealing.

Blood Curry John's own work has now surfaced in the deliciously titled *Blood Curry*, described as a, 'collection of recipes,

John Irvine

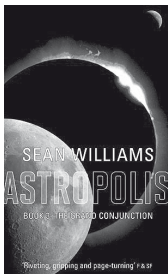
PreShrunkPress

poems and short stories in the speculative genre'. Again beautifully illustrated, I can imagine the fictional Paul

Haines having a copy of this next to his other cook books. Perhaps there's something in the New Zealand water that makes for unsettling writing. Whatever the cause, you'll find it here in spades.

* * *

And finally... I started with Sean Williams in my first column in issue #40, so let's finish with him.



Astropolis Book 3: The Grand Conjunction

Sean Williams

Orbit

It's been one hell of a ride for Imre Bergamasc, one-time freedom fighter, black-ops agent of the Forts, born-again saviour and First Prime of the Returned Continuum. With book three of *Astropolis*, I'm sorry to see him go.

To provide a synopsis of the action that has gone before in the two and a half Imre books, would contain too many spoilers. So instead I wanted to consider how Sean Williams has challenged himself and us through these books.

This is a tale of unimaginable span. It encompasses the universe from the maelstrom of creation to the long-in-the-future phase shift into something other than the matter we see around us. It posits life that existed in those times before matter and what humanity may become millions of years from now. It stretches the definition of humanity with Primes, Singletons, Frags, Forts, Old Timers, and fractured beings existing in virtual space. It crosses gender boundaries (and re-crosses them). It stretches technology to something that manipulates the forces beneath reality and which bind reality together. It throws in a Chandleresque noir detective story on the way and keeps the excitement going with threats, revenges, betrayals, and battles large and small. And through all this it contains and preserves an essence of humanity. Real characters, Imre chief amongst them, with real concerns about themselves, their place in the world and what life means to them.

It doesn't seem possible that a series of books could do or contain more. *The Grand Conjunction* concludes a grand achievement.