

Twenty-one
Time Hugo
Nominee!

The New York Review of Science Fiction

www.nyrsf.com

May 2009
Number 249
Vol. 21, No. 9: \$4.00

Amy J. Ransom

WorldCon 2009 in Montréal: How the Other Half Lives; or, SFQ: More than Just a Hobby

Soon after the announcement that Montréal had won its bid to hold the World Science Fiction Convention in 2009, Robert J. Sawyer posted the blog entry, "Why having a Worldcon in Canada in 2009 is cool" <www.sfwriter.com/2007/09>, which certainly establishes the significance of that year as marking a milestone in Anglo-Canadian sf. What it lacks, though, is any acknowledgment of the fact that Montréal is in Québec and that Canada can also boast a vibrant French-language sf & f scene. Since a number of quality works are accessible to the anglophone reader in translation, the coolest thing about WorldCon 2009 might just be that it encourages us to open our horizons by crossing "the Main" (the Rue Saint-Laurent, which roughly divides Montréal into its western Anglo- and eastern Francophone quarters) to see how the other half of Canadian sf lives. A number of pleasant surprises, including some forthcoming translations await, but before giving you an overview of the often ignored and/or misunderstood Canadian sf in French, I would like to offer the following list as a companion to Sawyer's:

Pourquoi c'est chouette d'avoir Worldcon 2009 à Montréal

It's the 35th anniversary of *Solaris*, Québec's (and possibly Canada's) leading sf magazine.

It's the 13th anniversary of the Congrès Boréal, francophone Canada's annual reunion for its f&sf milieu, as well as its fans and scholars.

It's the 25th anniversary of the *Grand Prix de la science-fiction et du fantastique québécois*, recently renamed the *Prix Jacques Brossard*, an annual prize given to an author for a year's body of work.

It's the 21st anniversary of Michel Lord's *Anthologie de la science-fiction québécoise contemporaine*. Lord's introduction and the aegis of the Bibliothèque Québécoise imprint mark the recognition of *science-fiction québécoise* (SFQ) as a worthy object of academic study.

It's the sixteenth anniversary of rival anthologies *Aurores boréales I* and *Les Années lumière* published respectively by Norbert Spehner and Jean-Marc Gouanvic.

It's the thirteenth anniversary of the founding of Éditions Alire, Québec's largest press dedicated to the publication of popular genre literature with a high level of literary quality.

It's the eleventh anniversary of the debut of *Dans une galaxie près de chez vous* (*In a Galaxy Near You*), Québec's sf television series that ran for 65 episodes.

The easiest way for the uninitiated reader to get a taste of what SFQ has to offer is through the *Tesseract* series of anthologies published by Edge SF & F. Offering a representative sample of "Canadian speculative fiction," as it is broadly defined, these volumes typically include a few texts in translation (and even some originals in English by bilinguals Jean-Louis Trudel and Yves Meynard). For an immersion course, *Tesseract Q* (1996) contains only texts of *science-*

(Continued on page 6)

Special Future Cities Issue

Science-fiction Québécoise: A Pre-WorldCon Guide

Walking the future of London

Tom Purdom: More Adventures of Casanova

Disputing SF with John Updike

The Death of SF, circa 1951

Michael Swanwick: The Future at the Tate

Jenny Blackford on Kage Baker's *Stag*

Robert Bee on Cory Doctorow's Futurism

Plus: Langford on Crowley, Gentle, et al.; Lovecraft's *Legrasse* returns; and *Semiprozines* under attack!

Eric A. Johnson

My London Time-Slip

If the essence of life is information carried in DNA, then society and civilizations are just colossal memory systems, and a metropolis like this one, simply a sprawling external memory.

—Mamoru Oshii, *Ghost in the Shell: Innocence*

Standing in the middle of Trafalgar Square on a cold February evening, I fell into a phildickian time-slip where my past, present, and future overlapped. A pair of passing double-decker buses triggered the event: an old Routemaster brought back from retirement followed by its latest offspring sporting both neon lights and flat-screen TVs. Gaping at the second bus lit up like a *Blade Runner* blimp, time stopped as I waited for my invitation to a new life in the Off-World Colonies. As if on cue, the stodgy old National Gallery at the other end of the square exploded into light, transformed into a *son et lumière* far beyond any show you might find in Luxor or Angkor Wat. On the opening night of Picasso's new exhibit (isn't he supposed to be dead?), the museum's walls came alive with a shifting sequence of the master's paintings, incorporating the building's every window, column, lintel, and pediment into the design.

Picasso once observed: "Bad artists copy, good artists steal." After a week in London, I'm convinced that everyone is busy stealing from Philip K. Dick to build our future. Or perhaps PKD just precogged it. Headed back on the Tube to my hotel, I exited at the Bond Street station where computer screens have replaced traditional print ads. As I rode up the escalator, one of PKD's cats jumped from screen to screen as it followed me to the top and its waiting bowl of Pedigree cat food. Once on the landing, my eyes were drawn to a trio of Diesel ads—especially after the one in the middle moved. While the two ads to either side were just traditional black and white photos, the center of the triptych had been replaced by a giant flat screen with a shifting silver screen of images which made me question the still reality of the other two. I was sure I'd fallen into PKD's future world: I was being haunted by ads.

(Continued on page 4)

fiction canadienne d'expression française rendered into English by award-winning translators like Howard Scott and Jane Brierley. Over ten years old, this anthology spanned the preceding two decades, providing a nice survey of central figures; a new volume containing more recent works is in order.

French immigrant Élisabeth Vonarburg is SFQ's best-known writer thanks to the Bantam translations and feminist scholarly interest in her earlier novels, *The Silent City* (1992), *In the Mother's Land* (1992), and *Reluctant Voyagers* (1995). Her five-volume Tyranaël saga, which begins with *Dreams of the Sea* (2003) and *A Game of Perfection* (2006), represents an important contribution to contemporary sf. Each novel of Vonarburg's epic of space colonization and parallel worlds stands alone, but read together the series spans some 5000 years of Earth's future and the history of the planet called Tyranaël by its original inhabitants. Vonarburg consulted an ecosystematician in the development of the rich universe of Tyranaël, which can stand with Herbert's *Dune* or Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars Trilogy. In this mythopoeic work, Vonarburg presents compelling characters and a comprehensive politico-philosophical vision. Although not yet translated, Vonarburg's contribution to genre writing continues with her more recent series, *Reine de Mémoire* (*Queen of Memory*, 2005–2007). Marketed as "historical fantasy" by its publisher, referred to as an *uchronie* by its author, the parallel past that Vonarburg elaborates for Europe, Asia and the New World takes the conventions of the alternate history to another level.

Indeed, those interested in the subgenre of alternate history, typically referred to as *uchronie* in French (Robert Schmunk has resuscitated the English equivalent, *uchronia*), will discover a number of creative, envelope-pushing texts from SFQ writers. This form has provided a group of relatively politicized writers a venue for the exploration of alternative pasts (and futures) for New France, French Canada, and Québec, not all of which envision a sovereign Québec as a good thing. Classic texts of the *uchronie québécoise* available in translation include Denis Côté's homage to Orwell's *1984*, "1534" (1985) and Jean-Pierre April's playful (!) erasure of Canada from the map of North America in "Rêve canadien," 1982. (The translation uses a French title to parallel the French text's original "Canadian Dream.") Alain Bergeron's "The Eighth Register" (1993), won the 1999 Sidewise Award for short form (translated by Howard Scott); this creative vision of how Western civilization might have developed if the Roman Empire had not fallen posits a difference-engine type machine which can analyze historical data in order to predict the likelihood of various outcomes.

Like Anglo-Canadian sf, SFQ has frequently been accused of losing sight of the "science" in science fiction; a few works of semi-hard sf exist, although few in translation. Joël Champetier's *The Dragon's Eye* (trans. Jean-Louis Trudel, 1999) offers a somewhat slick and flashy spy adventure set on an extra-terrestrial world. It dips its fingertips in many of SFQ's most intriguing themes—the problem of the colonial situation, the clash between cultures, terrorism, and independence. Sylvie Bérard digs deeper into these issues in *Terre des autres*; its long-anticipated translation by Sheryl Curtis (*Of Wind and Sand*, Edge SF & F, 2009) should be out in time for the convention in August. Like Vonarburg in the Tyranaël novels, but perhaps to a greater degree, Bérard addresses issues of contemporary concern such as race, assimilation, immigration, and their impact on both the individual and groups, using the sf novel and Earth's colonization of the Mars-like desert planet, Sielxth, and its indigenous lizard-like race as a sort of space laboratory. Before you object that this has been done and done again, let me assert that Bérard manages to take such a classic sf storyline and make it appear fresh and new. A short story that developed into a novel chapter won the Aurora in 2003 and Bérard won the *Grand-Prix de la SFFQ* for 2005 for the novel.

While for some it's a cause for concern, for others it's a cause for excitement—the fact that the "SF" in SFQ seems to be morphing into other areas. The rising forms currently in Québec are detective fiction (Jean-Jacques Pelletier), horror (Patrick Sénécal) and heroic fantasy. In this latter realm, Yves Meynard represents another promising figure

for SFQ's future, although some might have mixed feelings about the fact that he has been publishing in English. If you've read Gene Wolfe's *The Wizard Knight* (2004) perhaps you recognize Yves's name from its dedication.

A good number of young adult works were translated by Black Moss Press in the early 1990s, including works by important figures in SFQ whose adult novels have not yet appeared in English. Anglophone readers can be initiated into the universe of Daniel Sernine's Argus series, which inspired a number of today's writers of SFQ, with *Argus Steps In* (1990) and *Those Who Watch over the Earth* (1990). His heroic fantasy works include *Scorpion's Treasure* (1990) and *The Sword of Arpahal* (1990). Suzanne Martel's 1960s youth novel *The City Underground* (1964) has been described as a YA classic in both French and English Canada. Denis Côté's hockey-themed *Shooting for the Stars* (1990) represents the ultimate in Canadian-coded sf.

In any case, I believe that Robert J. Sawyer's assertion that "French-Canadian sf is a hobby" (Sawyer, Interview by Steven H Silver, July 2002; <www.sfsite.com/09b/rsb136.htm>) is an erroneous one. While it is true that few writers of SFQ support themselves materially solely by their pens, I have to wonder if, proportionally, that number is really that much fewer than that of Anglo-Canadian writers of sf?

Amy Ransom lives in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

Appendix: A Partial Bibliography of French-Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFQ) in English

Single Author Novels and Collections

- Bersianik, Louky. *The Eugelionne*. Trans. Gerry Denis *et al.* Victoria/Toronto: Porcépic, 1982.
- Billon, Pierre. *The Children's Wing*. Trans. Sheila Fischman. Montréal: R. Davies, 1995.
- Champetier, Joël. *The Dragon's Eye*. Trans. Jean-Louis Trudel. New York: Tor, 1999.
- Côté, Denis. *Shooting for the Stars*. Trans. Jane Brierley. Windsor: Black Moss Press, 1990. Young Readers' Library 6.
- Ferron, Jacques. *The Juneberry Tree*. Trans. Raymond Y. Chamberlain. Montréal: Harvest House, 1975.
- . *Quince Jam*. Trans. Ray Ellenwood. Toronto: Coach House Québec Translations, 1977.
- . *Tales from Uncertain Country*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
- Martel, Suzanne. *The City Underground*. Trans. Norah Smaridge (1964). New York: Viking Press, 1965. Also trans. David Homel. Toronto: Groundwood Press, 1982.
- Massé, Johanne. *Beyond the Future*. Trans. Frances Morgan. Windsor: Black Moss Press, 1990. Young Readers' Library 5.
- Meynard, Yves. *The Book of Knights*. New York: Tor Books, 1998.
- Montpetit, Charles. *Lost Time*. Trans. Frances Morgan. Windsor: Black Moss Press, 1990. Young Readers' Library 5. [*sic*]
- Rochon, Esther. *The Shell*. Trans. David Lobdell. Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1990.
- Sernine, Daniel. *Argus Steps In*. Trans. Ray Chamberlain. Black Moss Press, 1990. Young Readers' Library 7.
- . *Scorpion's Treasure*. Trans. Frances Morgan. Windsor: Black Moss Press, 1990. Young Readers' Library 2.
- . *The Sword of Arpahal*. Trans. Frances Morgan. Windsor: Black Moss Press, 1990. Young Readers' Library 3.
- . *Those Who Watch Over the Earth*. Trans. David Homel. Windsor: Black Moss Press, 1990. Young Readers' Library 6. [*sic*]
- Thériault, Marie-José. *The Ceremony*. Trans. David Lobdell. Toronto: Oberon, 1980.
- Tremblay, Michel. *Tales for Late Night Drinkers*. Trans. Michael Bullock. Vancouver: Intermedia, 1977.
- Vonarburg, Élisabeth. *The Silent City*. Trans. Jane Brierley. Victoria, B. C.: Porcépic, 1988. London: The Women's Press, 1990. New York: Bantam, 1992.