In memoriam, Jack Vance: 1916 — 2013

By Anders Monsen


Vance retired from writing fiction after Lurulu, but he dictated a slim biography a few years later. Though he approached 100, and I always expected to read something about his death, I felt a deep shock when I finally received the news. I have read all his books, many of them multiple times. They are like old friends. I have nominated and voted for many of his works for the Prometheus Hall of Fame. Now he is dead. Will it matter if he ever wins? Would he have cared to have won while still alive? I do not know. Reflecting on his books are like reflecting on the lives of long-time friends.

While there are many reasons I like his fiction, I believe many of his books contain individualist themes, and I believe that libertarians who care about well-written fiction with an individualist bent will find many of his books well-worth reading.

In 1985 I picked up my first Jack Vance book, a collection of stories called The Narrow Land. The title story tells the tale of a very alien protagonist, born in a swamp, struggling to survive among creatures similar to himself; yet also imbued with a desire to explore the environs of his world. Of the seven stories in The Narrow Land, along with the title story, tales like “Chateau D’Il,” “The World-Thinker,” and “Green Magic” displayed an unmatched imagination and an intricate display of stylistic prose. Beginning with that collection I sought as many Vance books as possible, each one a discovery of joy. Like panning for gold or unearthing gems, reading a Jack Vance book amid the sea of mundane SF meant reading the apex of imaginative writing.

The Dying Earth and The Eyes of the Overworld, set in the same far future, stood apart from more traditional fantasy books. Other fantasy stories I had read were either epics on the scale of The Lord of the Rings, or vapid tales of kingdoms and coming of age stories. Vance’s Dying Earth tales imagined a far-future earth, the sun threatening to extinguish at any moment. This was an age of magic, although a magic diluted and faded from previous aeons. Wizards conspired against each other, rogues like Cugel the Clever tried to make his way in this dangerous world. Cugel, a rare anti-hero in fantasy akin to characters by Clark Ashton Smith and Fritz Lieber, struggled through one adventure after another, his plans always going slightly awry. I imagined Vance must have had a great deal of fun writing those stories.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s I trawled through used books stories (back when they still existed) and amassed every single paperback of Jack Vance that I could find. Today discovering any Vance paperback in a used book store is a rare event indeed. Back then I found all the DAW editions, including the five Demon Prince novels. These tales of revenge read like Rafael Sabatini novels in space. The protagonist, with the memorable name of Kirth Gersen, hunts the five criminals who laid waste to his world. Raised by his grandfather to be a resourceful detective and killer, Gersen

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Inside Prometheus:

Reviews:
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2013 Prometheus Award winners

The Libertarian Futurist Society has announced the Prometheus Awards winners for Best Novel and Best Classic Fiction (Hall of Fame).

Cory Doctorow won the award for Best Novel for *Pirate Cinema* (TOR Books). Doctorow previously won the Best Novel award in 2009 for *Little Brother*. Doctorow explores themes of artistic freedom, Internet freedom and peaceful social change while shedding light on issues of copyright and government surveillance in *Pirate Cinema*, an optimistic young-adult novel about a young pirate filmmaker whose Internet activity threatens his family with government reprisals and who learns to fight back against outdated forms of control.

*Cryptonomicon*, a 1999 novel by Neal Stephenson, has won the 2013 Prometheus Hall of Fame award for Best Classic Fiction. Set during World War II and during the early 21st century, Stephenson’s novel explores the implications for a free society in the development of computation and cryptography.

Also recognized as Best Novel finalists for the best pro-freedom novel of the past year are *Arctic Rising*, by Tobias Buckell (TOR Books); *The Unincorporated Future*, by Dani and Eytan Kollin (TOR Books); *Darkship Renegades*, by Sarah Hoyt (Baen Books); and *Kill Decision*, by Daniel Suarez (Dutton-Penguin).


Prometheus Submission Guidelines

Without content no publication can survive. In order to continue publishing future issues, *Prometheus* seeks reviews, interview, essays, articles, and columns of interest to libertarian science fiction fans. Any individual may submit material — membership in the LFS is not required.

As the newsletter of the Libertarian Futurist Society, *Prometheus* focuses on Prometheus Award-nominated works, but also publishes reviews and articles beyond the Prometheus Award candidates.

Letters of comment also are welcome, whether about the reviews, or any questions about LFS, or the nominating and voting process. In this digital age, the printed press continues to matter, but we need your help to sustain this newsletter.

Contact the editor for more details via email at: editor@lfs.org
Neptune’s Brood
By Charles Stross
Ace Books, 2013
Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

The subtitle of Charles Stross’s latest novel proclaims it to be “A Space Opera.” I suspect a reader whose expectations are based on that label might be perplexed. Stross offers neither the cinematic action of classic space opera, the radical speculative physics of “new space opera,” nor the hyperbolic curve of technology common to both forms.

In fact, so far as its scientific substance is concerned, Neptune’s Brood is much closer to hard science fiction, usually regarded as the opposite pole of the sfnal universe from space opera. In the first place, its technology, though incredibly advanced, is also conservative, with radical innovations being centuries apart. Nearly all of it appears to be based on physics that we now understand, and on devices that we can at least imagine building, working in ways consistent with real science. This is, in fact, a setting where FTL drives appear primarily as a classic con game!

In the second place, a substantial part of the story turns on one of the great tropes of hard science fiction: rigorous world building, in the style of Hal Clement’s prototypical novel Mission of Gravity. The world of Shin-Tethys is not “another Earth,” but a planet of an exotic type not found in our solar system, which requires going back to the first principles of physics and chemistry to describe—a water world with oceans hundreds of kilometers deep. Stross gives vivid descriptions of the exotic hazards of his undersea setting. This is the kind of world-building that Poul Anderson made a specialty of, with the benefit of the newest developments in planetary science.

So far as plot is concerned, though, Neptune’s Brood belongs to quite a different genre, which might be called “science fiction noir.” It has most of the classic elements of film noir, including a plot centered on the investigation of a mystery; elaborate conspiracies behind the scenes; and the corruption of wealth and power. It even has a classic maguffin, the Atlantis Carnet, which looks like a pointed reference to the Maltese Falcon.

Stross has written other science fiction mysteries—namely Halting State and Rule 34—but their sfnal aspect was near-future science fiction, with hints of cyberpunk. Neptune’s Brood is a mystery that turns on the physics of slower-than-light interstellar communication and commerce. This is economic hard science fiction, where the economics is as “hard” as the physics and planetology. Stross writes knowledgeable about insurance, banking, and accounting—and about fraud and rent-seeking, the criminal side of market activity. The novel’s central “marvelous invention” is the interlocking system of fast, medium, and slow money, designed to meet the needs of an economy spread across many light-years, with transactions that can take decades to complete, and investments such as interstellar colonization that don’t pay off for centuries.

It should be noted that Stross’s view of economics is not “libertarian” in the sense familiar to most LFS members. One key passage in the novel asserts that any society where payment of debts is enforced inevitably has an authoritarian and repressive government; another asserts that debt as such is slavery. By this definition, a free society would have to be one with no debt, no borrowing, and no capital markets—which seems to equate to a socialist society of some type. A key sequence in the novel has the protagonist encountering an ethnically superior society that in fact is internally communist—though, to Stross’s credit, he defines this not in terms of “post-scarcity,” but as the result of a much higher bandwidth of interpersonal communication, which at least is addressing the problem of economic calculation rather than imagining it away. And more generally, however debatable Stross’s view of economic relations is, it’s also informed by a lot of actual knowledge of market transactions and financial institutions.

Neptune’s Brood is set in the same universe as Saturn’s Children, but isn’t exactly a “sequel” to it. For one thing, it doesn’t share the earlier novel’s wholesale borrowing of late Heinlein tropes. The main continuity lies in the characters of both novels being almost entirely “robots”—though Stross has come up with a much more sophisticated vision of robotic existence; his characters are humanoid beings formed from “mechanocytes” that function much like natural living cells, but can withstand much more challenging physical environments. Stross envisions robots spreading out into the solar system and then to other stars, while human beings, “the Fragile,” die out, being remembered mainly by a robotic religion. But though this is the underpinning of Neptune’s Brood, it’s not what it’s about. The real subject of Neptune’s Brood is debt and the conflicts to which debt gives rise. And if that doesn’t seem like a subject for space opera, it makes a plausible one for a mystery novel.

Earth Girl
By Janet Edwards
Pyr Books, 2013
Reviewed by Anders Monsen

Earth Girl is an emotional, beautifully written novel about discrimination, perseverance, revenge and respect. Set around seven hundred years into the future, very little seems different compared to today, with the exception of space travel through gateways. Though seemingly a straightforward concept, this travel method is complicated by the fact that not every person can travel through the gateways safely. Some people are biologically unable to travel; the transition causes massive system failure and death. Therefore, while the vast majority of people on Earth are able to launch themselves onto new worlds and new futures, a small percentage remain chained to a polluted and forgotten planet.

On Earth, the millions of humans left behind generally hate their fate. They are looked down upon by those able to to fli about the universe, and they resent their fate and the people able to handle the transition through these inter-stellar gateways. One of these earth-bound beings is Jarra, who comes of age at 18 years and plots her revenge. Given a choice of schools or vocations, she elects to join an archeology team,

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shares many traits with another favorite character of mine, F. Paul Wilson's Repairman Jack. The Demon Prince books (The Star King, The Killing Machine, The Palace of Love, The Face and The Book of Dreams) are books that I probably have read more than half a dozen times each. Five books for five Demon Princes, the next more extravagant than the one before.

Although he wrote many stand-alone novels, his other series were equally memorable. The first, a four-book tale of an earthman stranded on an alien planet called Tschai, was marketed as the Planet of Adventure (comprised of City of the Chasch, Servants of the Wankh, The Dirdir and The Pnume). Here Adam Reith drew upon his resources to discover a means by which he could build or steal a spaceship and return to earth, and in the process he upset the societal rules of four alien species and their human-like mirror societies. This was my first encounter with Vance’s trenchant social criticism. He rips into people who submit to rulers, and tears apart traditions for the sake of tradition.

Another series, set in his future history that Vance called the Gaean Reach, was the Alastor trilogy. Each title bore the name of the planet upon which it was set, along with the planetary number. I remember them simply as Wyst, Trullion, and Manutu. The first drew again on social criticism, depicting a society founded upon the ideals of socialism, and it did not skimp on its negative portrayal. Any re-distributionist who reads this novel probably winces uncomfortably at the idea of “bonter” and Wyst’s egalistic society. Wyst would be among the first books to read on the Vance libertarian bookshelf.

The Durdane trilogy, while to me not as memorable as some of the other series, nonetheless continued the social criticism along with strong characters and plot. Here we find society and various strata within society governed by rigid rules. Yet against these rules someone steps forward to fight them.

Vance, by the late 1980s legally blind and using specially crafted software to read aloud the text that he wrote, still created masterpieces. The first of the Cadwal books, Araminta Station, remains one of my all-time favorite novels. Published in 1987, it centers around a near-pristine planet, Cadwal, protected by a naturalist society. The society has established a small enclave at Araminta Station, comprised of the families of the original settlers. Another race, known as Yips, inhabit a small island but seek to expand and care not for ecological niceties. The Yips often act as servants or workers in Araminta Station, along with some off-worlders who are not part of the original families. We meet Glawen Clattuc, the protagonist, on his sixteenth birthday, when he attains status and must choose a profession. Skulldudgery is afoot, and Glawen and his father must thwart a plot to have Glawen bumped down the status ladder and out of Cadwal society, which sets the tone for the rest of the book and its two sequels, Ecce and Old Earth and Throy. Vance packs more into the first novel than many other SF series, and the opening of Ecce and Old Earth, rife with tension and danger, with Glawen’s journey through the fetid and lethal jungles of Cadwal’s other continent to rescue his father, written as if for a Spielberg movie.

While all these series fell into science fiction, one of his greatest bodies of works remains the fantasy trilogy Lyonesse (Suldrun’s Garden, The Green Pearl, Madouc). The Lyonesse trilogy takes place in the mythical land of Lyonesse, one of the now vanished Elder Isles. Now submerged and vanished in the mists of time, this isle off the British coast, flourishes a few generations before the birth of King Arthur. In Vancian mythology, Arthur’s Round Table has roots in a famed round table in a city in Lyonesse, but this is almost a throw-away detail. Another young protagonist, Aillas, a prince from one of the many separate kingdoms of Lyonesse, finds himself the victim of family rivalry, and as the book opens is tossed off a boat and left to die.

Aillas, like most Vance protagonists, is resourceful. His many adventures range the width and length of Lyonesse, and introduces a variety of races and cultures, including faeries and magicians, trolls, and demons from other dimensions who serve the magicians. The third book features a strong female character, the half-faerie girl Madouc, raised as a human princess, who embarks on her own Grail quest. The Lyonesse trilogy in my opinion is the greatest fantasy work in the English language, far surpassing the Lord of the Rings and anything before and since.

Along with the science fiction and fantasy stories, Vance also wrote mysteries and regional novels. He wrote three books under the Ellery Queen imprint (The Four Johns, The Mad Man Theory, and A Room to Die In). Even in these standard works, Vance’s style and characters step forth from the pages as uniquely his own. Two books set in an imagined area south

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of San Francisco detail the life of a small-town sheriff. The Fox Valley Murders and The Pleasant Grove Murders both bring this area to life. The region and time where they are set may seem dated, yet again his characters, their background and motivation, make them a compelling read. The Deadly Isles, set in the South Seas and largely on boats, also falls into the mystery genre. An attempted murder results in the victim trying to find out who tried to kill him. The killer remains at large, and each step is fraught with danger. Vance loved the ocean, and his detailed descriptions of boats and sailing make this book a treasure. Considering it’s a rare find, it’s almost a double treasure.

Some of his other books appeared in print only in limited editions. While Strange Notions and The Dark Ocean were published together in 1985, and the main female characters share the same first name of Betty, they are two very different books. The first is set in Italy after WWII, possibly in the late 1950s or early 1960s, and covers dark themes of incest and blackmail. The second takes place aboard a steamer bound from San Francisco to Europe, through the Panama Canal. It evolves into a murder mystery, but this time the killer is known fairly early, unlike Vance’s other mysteries. The Dark Ocean also features a very strong female character who undergoes life-changing events under tough circumstances.

Other books with limited appearances include the mystery novel The Man in the Cage, set in North Africa. The View from Chickweed’s Window, Bad Ronald and The House on Lily Street all take place in California. Like Shakespeare’s “negative capability” that John Keats so often wrote about, Vance makes evil characters equally as believable as good ones. Both the titular character in Bad Ronald and the main character in The House on Lily Street killers who exist in their own mental worlds, bending reality to fit their crazed views. Other sketches of evil include the various outlaw “demon princes” and their associates, such as Spanchetta and Namour in the Cadwal trilogy, and the rogue wizard Faude Garfilhiot in the Lyonesse books, and many smaller characters whose motives appear petty and self-centered, especially artists.

Vance shows how easily people betray others for a quick coin, or cling to their small motives and often meet their fate with sadness and surprise. He also gave short shrift to religion, such as in the unctuous Brother Umphred in the Lyonesse books, whose final fate seemed too quick and without enough suffering.

Other regional fiction includes Take My Face and Bird Isle, both initially published under pseudonyms, and then released together by the small press Underwood-Miller. Underwood-Miller and Jack Vance have a long history together. Founded by Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller, based in San Francisco, they began with a hardcover edition of Vance’s first book, The Dying Earth, in 1976. Although they also published other authors, like Harlan Ellison and Roger Zelazny, they published over 55 Jack Vance hardcover books. These often were limited to under 1000 copies or fewer and these days are priced fairly high on the collector’s market.

Ports of Call and Larulu, his last two novels, sketch a peripatetic journey through space. Night Lamp is a character driven novel about a young boy found beaten and rescued by an older couple. It is a coming-of-age story that near the end details a society suddenly confronted by the need to change after generations of co-dependency—a theme he visited multiple times (see the ‘Tsai books, The Languages of Poo, Maeske: Thaery, and The Gray Prince, and many more).

Several of Jack Vance’s books have been nominated for the Prometheus Hall of Fame Award. The most notable are Emphyrio, The Blue World, and Wyst: Alastor 1716, and the books from the Durdane trilogy (The Faceless Man, The Brave Free Men and The Asutra). Emphyrio tells the tale of a young boy living with his father in a rigid, welfare-based society. He rebels, seeking a better life. The ideas of individual liberty are infused throughout this novel. The Blue World (based on a novella called “The Kragen”) shows how power collaborates with religion to control people. The message is both overt and subtle, considering how Vance introduces the early settlers of the watery world that forms the setting of the novel, and how the current generation, many years removed from their ancestors, knows nothing of the meaning of their forebears’ professions. Meanwhile, as I’ve already mentioned, Wyst shows the misery and hypocrisy of an egalitarian society, and what happens to those who attempt to keep their individuality.

Notable shorter works include two novellas, Dragon Masters and The Last Castle. Both blend SF and fantasy, appear set in a far future earth or some off-world planet long removed from present history. They thrust the reader into aon-long conflicts, masterful strategy and inventions from resourceful individuals, which are contrasted with staid and conservative thinking. In

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—Jack Vance, continued from page 5

Vance’s universe, change is a constant, yet with change always comes an uncertainty. Vance knew that change isn’t always welcomed by everyone, and many of his stories contrasted people who wanted to hang onto their privileges, against those who chafed and fought to break out of social constraints that bound them, directed their lives.

Aside from the series, other books that could fall into his vast Gaean Reach future history include Big Planet and Showboat World. Both are set on the same, vast planet, filled with strange cultures and many adventures. His characters wander from place to place. They sail down rivers and across oceans, ride on vast vehicular zip-lines, fly in space ships and planes, ride on animals and other vehicles. They are constantly exposed to alien cultures, even though most of those aliens are other humans. Vance, having traveled throughout the world many times, knew that even a short distance could lead to differences. His planets and cities had a settled feel to them, a sense of place that exaggerated differences, from the poison-loving Sarkoy, to the Darsh and their strange foods and methods of social punishment, to the aloof Methliens, and many other strange races.

Much like Edmond Dantès in Alexandre Dumas’ revenge novel, The Count of Monte Cristo, revenge as a motive appears throughout Vance’s fiction. Most notable certainly are the five demon princes, but this motive also appears in throughout Vance’s fiction. Most notable certainly are the five demon princes, but this motive also appears in

**Gold and Iron**

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a space ship, and single-handedly changes the lives and fates of many cultures. Glawen Clattuc finds himself in many dangerous situations, yet never gives up, nor does Aillas, the young prince captured and enslaved, branded and bound. There are many inspiring stories in Vance’s books, many lessons young readers can take to heart.

I never knew Jack Vance in person, never met him at a science fiction conference or otherwise, but I’ve known his fiction for almost thirty years. Vance rarely wrote or talked about his fiction. He often dismissed much of it as hack work, or juvenilia; he wrote to get paid, and one time tried to write as many words as possible to sell as many stories as possible.

Over a sixty-year span he published as many books and many short stories. He had a long and fruitful literary life, and a remarkable and rich life outside literature. A few of his collections contain a page or two introducing the stories. These he appears to have written reluctantly. He preferred to let his art speak for itself. Either your bought it or you didn’t, you liked it or you didn’t. What the writer thought at the time is irrelevant to your appreciation of his stories, he seemed to say.

Vance won a handful of awards in his lifetime, across a vast spectrum. He received the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards, as well as the Edgar for best mystery. Most of these appeared in the mid-point of his career, the 1960s, but his last award came in 2010, a Hugo for best related work with his autobiography, This is Me, Jack Vance. This book, fairly slim, appeared near the end of his life, five years after his last novel, and hardly mentioned his fiction. Instead, he traced his life growing up, his influences (literary and personal), his many travels around the world. His autobiography also is notable because he dictated the entire book. Legally blind for many years, at one time he wrote using a computer with special software. Like Ludwig von Beethoven, the fates sometimes can be cruel, robbing a writer with Vance’s talent of his sight. Yet he never quit.

The poet and fantasy author Clark Asthon Smith sketched alien worlds while rarely leaving his home near Auburn, California. Vance, on the other hand, lived in many countries, on houseboats and cabins. He designed and built his own house, sailed many oceans, traveled to countless countries, ate and drank exotic foods. All those experiences infused his fiction. While he tended to gloss over science in his science fiction, the colorful descriptions of planets and cities, locales and cultures, people and aliens, remains unrivaled. He invented strange beasts, coined more words than William Shakespeare, and crafted each sentence so they appeared both economical and lyrical.

Today, Jack Vance’s books remain elusive from large book stores. The Vance Integral Edition (VIE) collected all his works in a limited but authorized editions (see http://www.inTEGRALarchive.org/index.htm). Spatterlight Press, established in 2012, has begun the process to convert his books into electronic editions from the VIE texts. Subterranean Press, a small press that publishes handsome limited editions, has published several volumes collecting his short stories and mystery works, which often are sold-out upon publication. His legacy extends to the many authors that he has influenced. The most notable example might be Michael Shea, who in the early 1970s requested and received permission to write his own sequel starring Cugel the Clever.

Perhaps the eBook revolution will gain him new readers. Perhaps publishers once again will bring out mass market editions of his books. While the science of Vance fiction dated quickly, this is but a minor part of his fiction. The true aficionado appreciates more than ephemeral science and prediction ratios. Then again, perhaps Vance is not for everyone. Fashions come and go, from cyberpunk to hard sf to Tolkien pastiches to harlequin/sf mashups and beyond. Yet I cannot help but think that in the history of SF, once the wheat is separated from the chaff, that Jack Vance will stand among the giants of SF. Virtually all those giants now are gone: Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Poul Anderson, Ray Bradbury. Perhaps these are giants also because those of us who see them as giants read them in our formative years. Regardless, I cannot count the number of hours I have spent immersed in the many worlds of Jack Vance. Inevitably when I think or write about Vance, I pick up one of his books, and before I know it I have read several in a row. Perhaps that’s how Vance would have liked to be remembered: an author, a spinner of yarns. He wrote his fiction, lived his life, and lived it to the fullest. I salute you Jack Vance. There will never be another quite your like.

Thanks for the stories, the characters, the prose.
pretending to be from off-planet. People who live among the stars call the Earth-bound “apes” and other derogatory terms. Many children are abandoned by their parents, left behind on Earth as orphans who grow up in communal schools, so many in fact that they must share adoptive parents. Jarra burns with the desire to show her classmates that she is just as smart as they are, just as capable. And that she is, since she has boot-strapped herself with skills and knowledge from other excursions as part of her growing up on Earth. She knows how to wield heavy machinery, how to dig in archeological sites, and even how to pilot aircraft, a rare talent on Earth. In fact, Jarra seems driven almost from birth to prove herself, to better herself and gain skills and knowledge even few off-worlders possess or want to possess. While she can be annoying at times, she’s not super-human, but very, very human.

Only one other person in her team is aware of her secret, and this happens to be the instructor in charge. Bound by confidentiality, he still makes life difficult for her, testing her with a variety of challenges in front of her classmates, yet she seems to pass each test with flying colors. As the university students begin to learn the ins and outs of an archeology dig in an ancient Earth city, they begin to bond, but not without their share of prejudices and disagreements. When humans scattered to the stars, they settled in different areas of space. Each of these areas developed their own social traditions. Some are restrained socially and sexually, while others are the opposite. They all seem to share a fear and aversion to the Earth-bound who were left behind, fearing their condition is contagious.

When Jarra and another student begin to develop feeling for each other, her initial plans begin to unravel. She realizes that not everyone in her team deserves the scorn she planned to heap on them at the end of the semester, when she planned to stand up and reveal her true nature, and that all semester they had been working and living with an Earth-bound ape girl, one just as skilled and talented as they were.

Jarra also discovers her true parents, an event both heart-warming and tragic. In fact, it seemed almost an act of cruelty from the author to reveal something as important and life-changing as this to Jarra and the reader, and then take an unexpected twist of events to alter this state of mind.

Although Janet Edwards’ future is almost a thousand years away from our own, the people generally deal with the same issues as today, and the technology seems only slightly more advanced, with the exception of these gateways. Still, the story is compelling, and the growth of the protagonist and her plucky ability inspire hope rather than scorn. This novel appears part of a series, and so it will be interesting to see how Edwards explores the worlds beyond Earth, and whether her young heroine will see what lies beyond. The society Edwards reveals seems almost too homogenous; despite the far-flung travels there is still a shared heritage, language and culture that transcends certain differences. And yet, as Edwards shows, prejudice’s ugly side can be met and overcome.