**Sample Reviews #1**

**The City, Not Long After** novel by Pat Murphy

Review by Cheryl Morgan June 11, 2011

Most of the novels reviewed here concentrate on the dark side of San Francisco. They center on the Tenderloin, on crime and street life. Pat Murphy’s contribution, **The City, Not Long After**, on the other hand, looks at the bright side of The City. San Francisco is, after all, the capital of Flower Power, the city of free love, of gay emancipation, of anti-war protests and experimental art of all kinds. It is SF, the city of science fiction.

And so, not long after the Plague, the few survivors amongst the people of San Francisco are playing in the ruins. They want for little. There are shops, offices and homes full of stuff that the dead no longer need. There are parks in which they can grow food, and a market where they can trade salvaged goods with the people of the more extensive farmlands of the Central Valley. And having nothing else to do, they make art.

*“And she found things, though not what she was looking for. Under the reception desk in the lobby of a downtown office building, she found a tiny village built of mud bricks and pebbles. The huts were thatched with eucalyptus leaves that had long since lost their pungent smell. In an alley off Mission Street, she found a red brick wall decorated with running buffalo and deer. In a vacant lot south of Market, she found a tower constructed of crystal doorknobs, clear glass bottles, window panes, wine glasses, and crystal tableware of all varieties. The ground surrounding the tower was littered with rainbows, broken shards of colored light that shifted with the movement of the sun.”*

Jax, the heroine of the story, is the daughter of a famous San Franciscan peace campaigner. The full import of her history does not become clear until much later in the book, and I’m not going to spoil the story for you. However, for reasons that you will discover, Jax’s mother flees the City and ends up on a small farm near Sacramento. For many years she is able to raise her daughter in peace and safety. But then The General arrives.

General Miles, nicknamed “Fourstar”, is determined to rebuild America. To do so, naturally, he must restore order. There must be government, and because of the desperate state of the country it must be a military government. Everyone must work together in the rebuilding effort, and so ensure that they do all forms of dissent must be stamped out. People should not be allowed to read subversive books from before the Plague that talk about freedom and civil rights and other dangerous concepts. And above all, that annoying cadre of lunatics, layabouts and malcontents that has taken over San Francisco must be destroyed.

After her mother’s death, following detention and torture by Fourstar’s men, Jax heads into The City to warn the artist community of the impending invasion. There she meets various colorful personalities: Mrs Migsdale who edits the local newspaper and every day throws cryptic messages in bottles into the ocean; The Machine, who builds robots and thinks of them as his children; Lily, who collects skulls and displays them in department store windows; and Danny-boy, whose ambition is to paint the Golden Gate Bridge blue.

The message of Fourstar’s impending invasion is not new. The artists have heard it often enough from traders, although the news that he might actually be on the march is of some interest. Some, like Snake, the former gang leader turned graffiti artist, recognize that a little planning might be in order. Much to Jax’s horror, however, the San Franciscans decide to fight their war, not with guns, but with art.

*“CERTIFICATE OF DEATH*

*Please consider yourself removed from combat.*

*Look at it this way – we could have killed you.*

*If you don’t stop fighting, we really will kill you next time.*

*Signed,*

*The People of San Francisco”*

Armed with vastly superior knowledge of the terrain, and the surprise that comes from their unconventional tactics, the artists hold out for a long time against the invaders. Many of the troops do defect, as they are encouraged to do. But while this book might be a fantasy (ghosts of San Francisco’s past play a small but vital role in the resistance), it is no naïve Disney fairy tale. Murphy is far too honest to resolve the story without bloodshed.

Overall this is a beautiful, delicate and, as I have come to expect from Pat Murphy, highly amusing tale of the rightness of resistance to violence, and of the inevitable futility of that course of action. Peace is something that we can only achieve at a cost. The question is whether the cost we choose to pay is temporary sadness, or permanent subjugation to the whims of General Miles and his ilk. Furthermore, the more Peace we want, the higher the cost, and sometimes that price is never worth paying.

The irony is, of course, that the people of San Francisco have, in recent months, along with the population of the rest of America, fallen solidly in line with General Miles’ message. Faced with a dangerous threat from Outside, the people of America have freely given away some of their civil rights (and more significantly most of the civil rights of visitors to their country) and have invited armed men into their lives that they might have Peace without any danger to themselves. These days, few publishers would dare run with a book in which the heroes resist the resurrection of America and describe the American flag as ugly. Perhaps we are in need of a heavy dose of art.

This review originally appeared on [Emerald City](http://www.emcit.com/emcitS03.shtml#Art).

<https://sfmistressworks.wordpress.com/2011/06/11/the-city-not-long-after-pat-murphy/>

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**Review of *Little Princes***

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Reuters/HarperCollins

I have been promising an antidote to the bleak view I have been taking of my adopted country in my past few political entries. Here it is, today, in the form of a book review.

The book is called [*Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*, by Conor Grennan](http://www.nextgenerationnepal.org/Buy_the_Book). Lest you fear, as I did when I first scanned the title page, that this might be just another chronicle of do-good activity in a distant part of the world, let me assure you that it's also an extraordinarily compelling human drama, leading up to a sometimes nightmarish "journey into the interior," in a landscape forbidding enough to put body and soul to the ultimate test.

But first, the context. As a very young man, freshly graduated from the University of Virginia, Conor embarks on a world trek, part as a challenge to himself, part with the vague intention of making a useful contribution to those less fortunate than he. Along the way, in a rather self-conscious gesture of goodwill, he volunteers to work for a spell at "Little Princes," a children's shelter near Kathmandu--and falls, unexpectedly, under *their* spell. What was initially not much more than a desire to impress his friends and family back home turns into a full-blown obsession once he falls in love with these rambunctious kids and learns something of their predicament.

They are the children of war, torn away from their families in the remotest of villages in the Himalayan foothills by men--there is one particular villain in this piece--who extort the last pennies from parents gullible enough to believe their children will have a better future if they let them go. Instead, once in the hands of their abductors, the children are treated cruelly, starved and beaten in filthy, overcrowded homes, and sold into servitude--or worse. Only a lucky few are rescued by a pitifully small and underfunded Nepali organization and a handful of dedicated and compassionate foreigners, whose number Conor joins.

The children are, properly, at the center of this story. They are a diverse bunch, all undeservedly wounded in varying degrees, all survivors, each in their own way, a maelstrom of energy and mischievous activity whose sheer, naked humanity captivates Conor and compels his commitment to them. It becomes his mission in life to do what he can to protect them, provide them with food and shelter and a rudimentary education--and eventually to attempt to reunite them with their families.

That's the bare bones. The meat is in the love. Initially as self-absorbed as the average young person in the privileged Western world, Conor finds himself confronted with real hardship, widespread suffering, deprivation and violence in a country torn apart by civil war, where hard-line Maoist rebels fight implacably against a feudal monarchy and where the vast majority of people are caught up innocently in the chaos, whether in tiny rural communities or the teeming back alleys of the capital--all evoked in sharp relief in Conor's narrative. In this flight-or-fight situation, he chooses to stay, and the story he tells becomes also, but unobtrusively, about his personal change and growth. Observing, and having to struggle at first hand with human suffering, this young American becomes himself more human, more fully compassionate, more concerned with the happiness of others than his own.

His story is also about the power of family love. The final, harrowing journey I mentioned above, into the hinterland of Nepal, is Conor's search for the parents of the children he has been caring for, with the intention of reuniting them--or at least re-connecting them with the reassurance that they are safe. These encounters in tiny mountainside villages are among the most touching scenes in the book. The author never loses respect for these hardscrabble people, so far from his own cultural background; and he never condescends. When I say the journey is a harrowing one, I think back to the old meaning of that word, the harrowing of the soul--because it involves excruciating pain and daunting physical impediments, described in such riveting detail that we, the readers, feel that we are living through it with the author. That we also experience the towering beauty of the natural environment is sometimes small compensation. But the greater compensation by far is the joy--both for the parents and the children--in reconnecting. Conor shows us that the love of the human family transcends the boundaries of time and place.

There is also, in his book, a love story of his own--as touching, in its peculiarity as the story of the children and their families. It slips in from the side, unexpectedly, and takes a while to blossom; we sense that it is a natural offshoot from Conor's development from that relatively careless youth to a man of substance and compassion, an opening-up to love that might not have been possible for him earlier in the book.

I think I can guarantee you a good deal of joy and laughter as you read this book, and more than a few tears--not the sentimental, tear-jerky kind of tears, but the kind that well up from full and genuine emotion. You will surely share Conor's love for the kids he comes to know, and his concern for their future. I hope you might want to find out more about them and, perhaps, to help them. It takes only a click of the mouse to visit Conor Grennan's [Next Generation Nepal](http://www.nextgenerationnepal.com/) foundation, and another to buy a copy of his book or make a contribution--as I plan to do.

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-clothier/little-princes_b_827944.html>

Present at the Re-Creation

Review By Sven Birkerts Published: May 18, 2003

Review of ORYX AND CRAKE By Margaret Atwood.

376 pp. New York:Nan A. Talese/Doubleday. $26.

I AM going to stick my neck out and just say it: science fiction will never be Literature with a capital ''L,'' and this is because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character. It sacrifices moral and psychological nuance in favor of more conceptual matters, and elevates scenario over sensibility. Some will ask, of course, whether there still is such a thing as ''Literature with a capital 'L.' '' I proceed on the faith that there is. Are there exceptions to my categorical pronouncement? Probably, but I don't think enough of them to overturn it.

Is Margaret Atwood's new novel, ''Oryx and Crake,'' science fiction? Insofar as the term has any practical meaning, yes. The work is set in the indeterminate future; it conjures its main plot complications -- its premise -- from scientific initiatives gone awry; its characters all lack the chromosome that confers deeper human credibility. If we can put Huxley's ''Brave New World'' in that category -- and I do -- then we are safe in setting this, Atwood's 17th book of fiction, beside it on the shelf. Indeed, Huxley's novel, along with Genesis (our first utopian narrative) and Defoe's ''Robinson Crusoe,'' is part of the mytho-literary source matter from which the author draws.

As ''Oryx and Crake'' begins, we are introduced to a character called Snowman, clearly a survivor of some kind. He is alone in what has come to seem like the post-apocalyptic primal scene: a parched and depleted seaside landscape, where ''the shrieks of the birds that nest out there and the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sound almost like holiday traffic.'' But in this case, as we eventually learn, the apocalypse was not nuclear exchange but a virulent instant-acting plague.

Snowman mutters and shuffles along in his blighted surroundings like a character in a Beckett play, and we brace ourselves for episodes of harrowing retrospection. First, though, a surprise. Out of the blue a curious band of children appears on the shore and comes to stand by him. But they are too innocent, too blank, to be normal human children. As far as we can tell, they are utterly without wiles; they require explanations for the simplest found objects -- a hubcap, a bottle, a computer mouse. ''These are things from before,'' Snowman tells them.

Before. Atwood now begins her flashbacks, pacing them to alternate with the slow progress of the present-day narrative. From the first of these we learn that Snowman's real name is Jimmy, and that he grew up in a research compound isolated from the ''pleeblands'' -- the dangerous, anarchic cities -- in what feels like the aftermath of some prior, if lowercase, apocalypse. This post-20th-century world is itself already significantly gone to the dogs, though those dogs are more likely to be ''pigoons'' or some other strange genetic hybrid created at OrganInc Farms, where Jimmy's father works. Jimmy's homelife is alienated, scarred by the strife between his dutiful researcher father and his unhappy mother, who hates scientific protocols and protests her husband's meddling with ''the building blocks of life.'' When she finally turns renegade, disappearing from the compound, she leaves Jimmy with a deeply etched either/or sense about available choices and consequences. While Atwood's present-day narration slowly tracks Snowman's progress on a grim foraging expedition -- he needs canned food, water, alcohol -- the flashbacks follow him through his years of growing up and his friendship with his odd schoolmate, Glenn, who will become (when new monikers are at some point adopted) the eponymous Crake. The two boys occupy themselves with the normal teenage pursuits of their time, playing computer games like Three-Dimensional Waco and Kwiktime Osama and trolling porn sites. It is on one such tour that Jimmy finds himself unaccountably entranced by the expression on the face of a little girl: ''I see you, that look said. I see you watching. I know you. I know what you want.'' The moment portends a great deal, as it turns out.

Crake is brilliant, focused, manifestly rationalistic; after graduating from high school, he goes off to study at the prestigious Watson-Crick Institute, which was ''like going to Harvard had been, back before it got drowned.'' Jimmy, clearly more his mother's child, attends a place called Martha Graham Academy, a kind of Bennington College gone to seed, ''named after some gory old dance goddess of the 20th century who'd apparently mowed quite a swath in her day.'' But it is only when he visits his friend that he sees how wide the gulf is between the humanities and the applied sciences. Watson-Crick is what we would think of as a futuristic theme-park utopia down to the landscaped grounds, which are studded with ersatz boulders that help regulate air moisture. As for Crake himself, not only is he now on to big hush-hush things in bioresearch, but he also seems to have a fix on some conspiratorial behind-the-scenes story, though he will never tell Jimmy everything he knows.

The strange leader-follower pattern of these polarized souls continues after both finish their schooling. For a time they are out of touch. Jimmy, depressed, is trapped in a low-level job, filling his free time with empty sexual liaisons. Years pass. It is only when he has pretty much given up on a better life that Crake makes contact. Now in a high research position at a place called the RejoovenEsense Compound, he invites Jimmy to come work for him, though it is not clear in what capacity. Shortly after Jimmy arrives, Crake brings his friend to a climate-controlled environment, a unit called Paradice. He has been working with human embryos, he explains, altering their ''ancient primate brains,'' eliminating destructive features, and here, sealed away, is his first group, what he calls his ''floor models.'' They are naked, beautiful adult forms. With them, also naked, also beautiful, is a woman, and when she turns, Jimmy instantly recognizes the face -- the girl from the long-ago video, grown up. We don't need a thrumming soundtrack to know that dramatic -- and fated -- events are in the offing.

And so they are. But as these events are apocalyptic in nature, and as their revelation is part of what drives the later pages of this very readable novel forward, I will say only that Crake's ambitions are monomaniacally godlike, and that his implementation of schemes is highly ingenious -- symbolically but also quite literally bringing together eros and thanatos, the old Freudian dyad.

What Atwood's inventive treatment of first and last things lacks is a plausible psychological basis. The man who would play God, who would rewrite creation, needs to be something more than a knowingly enigmatic figure conjured onto the page. The same is true for his mysterious consort, Oryx, the girl from the video, and his unwitting foil, our protagonist, Jimmy, the man he will leave behind to shepherd the race of the future. We can take in only so many confected scenarios of future life before we crave a complexity of character commensurate with the intelligence of the plot or the confident excellence of the writing.

Alas, it is not to be. The characters' background stories feel somewhat arbitrarily assigned, and their actions are conditioned at every turn by the logic of the premise. Which brings me back to my problem with science fiction. But this time around I would also like to suggest that a novel like ''Oryx and Crake'' can address the present-day world in a way that creates a powerful para-literary experience. What tones we lose through the lack of true complexity of character are to some degree compensated for by the peculiar triangulation that obtains among reader, novel and world. Atwood's scenario gains great power and relevance from our current scientific preoccupation with bioengineering, cloning, tissue regeneration and agricultural hybrids, and she strikes a note of warning as unambiguous as Mary Shelley's in ''Frankenstein.'' This is the intention of the novel: to goad us to thought by making us screen in the mind a powerful vision of competence run amok. What Atwood could not have intended, and what is no less alarming and exponentially more urgent, is the resonance between her rampaging plague scenario and the recent global outbreak of SARS. Moving from book to newspaper, or newspaper to book, the reader realizes, with a jolt, how the threshold of difference has been lowered in recent months. The force of Atwood's imagining grows in direct proportion to our rising anxiety level. And so does the importance of her implicit caution.

Drawing (Henrik Drescher)

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