

With all the elegance and resonance of a real fairy tale, "The Faerie Cony-Catcher" chronicles the fate of a lusty young goldsmith who ends up in Elvish courts, forced to strike a bargain for his freedom. He ends up with a lover as well, whose nature remains for the reader to learn.

"Sacred Harp" features a contemporary setting, and is compacted into a brief choral interlude that takes a mystical turn. More expansive is "The Printer's Daughter," a delightful tale of a "pop-pet made of paper," a changeling named Frisket who comes to the aid of the beleaguered printer named Hal Spurtle. Echoes of Pinocchio strike fruitful notes. And "Nancy Peters and the Feathery Bride" stands shoulder to shoulder in tall-tale exuberance with "The Fiddler of Bayou Teche."

The final two stories—"Miss Carstairs and the Merman" and "The Maid on the Shore"—form a perfect duo, both being concerned with aquatic anomalies. A hint of Avram Davidson eccentricity enlivens the former, while the latter shows justice delivered with savage glee.

The only flaw in this collection is that there are not more stories on the table of contents. You need this in your library.

### Eterna Moonshine of the Spotted Mind

The alert book-shopper will find an advance-publication quote from me adorning the front cover of Leanna Renee Hieber's novel *The Eterna Files* (Tor, hardcover, \$24.99, 320 pages, ISBN 978-0-7653-5674-5). Without much real acquaintance with the author, I was motivated to provide a quote based sheerly on the high quality of the book. So I thought I would use a small amount of this column to explicate my admiration further.

The novel falls squarely into the steam-punk genre, but exhibits a rather helping of metaphysics than is common in that game, and a bit more gravitas. Hieber's MacGuffin is the quest for immortality, very a subject that can bear the symbolic weight. In the wake of the assassina-tion of Abraham Lincoln, a small group of

eccentric talents are given the assignment of learning how to defeat death. Chief among these is our heroine, Clara Templeton, a psychic. We pick up her tale when the project is at a crisis point after many years. Several of the researchers have been brutally murdered, including Clara's lover. Is the project doomed, or so close to success that it has aroused great powers?

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the British government has learned of the Eterna project and decided to steal or preempt it. They have assigned London detective Harold Spire to the case, and given him the assistance of the redoubtable Rose Everhart. Needless to say, presented with such a formidable array of allies and antagonists, many sparks, supernatural and otherwise, are going to fly.

Hieber's approach to the "science" of anti-death protocols is fascinating. (She even gets in a nod to Clarke's Third Law: "All sciences, at their zenith, create what is tantamount to sorcery.") Blending a kind of alchemy with unique "patriotic magic," the pursuit assumes epistemological magnitude. Says Louis, Clara's lover (who continues to play a role as a ghost), "The key of Eterna, *ma chérie*, is to determine the boundaries of meaning. Nothing that may have meaning in terms of life can be overlooked." This is a wide remit, and eventually Clara comes to wonder if they have bitten off more than they can chew. "Eterna was full of the restless living and the restless dead. It needed to die once and for all."

Rich in conceits as anything from Alan Moore, Hieber's novel mixes action and the emotional lives of its characters into a fascinating stew. Anyone who enjoyed Paul Cornell's *London Falling* and *The Severed Streets* will certainly cozy up to Hieber's parallel depiction of questioning savants and heroes versus the forces of anarchy and despair.

### Happiness Is a Warm Gloek Named Janie

The debut novel from W.S. Bauers, *Unbreakable* (Tor, hardcover, \$25.99, 368 pages, ISBN 978-0-7653-7542-1), has

nothing to do with the rather pallid post-modern and confused film of the same name that issued from the brain of auteur M. Night Shyamalan some years ago. In fact, in its bullish assuredness and forthright action-packed ethos, the novel might be the polar opposite of that cinematic deconstruction of superheroes. Put *Unbreakable* the movie in the same room as *Unbreakable* the book and they might self-destruct like matter and antimatter. No, Bauers's novel is hardcore military SF straight from the loins of Heinlein and Pournelle and Drake, but with a smattering of genes from A. Bertram Chandler and Poul Anderson and Christopher Anvil as well, making it not a slavish imitation, but rather a smart synthesis of its ancestors.

We are some eight hundred years into the future. Earth is a dead globe due to war, but humanity is flourishing, spread across the galaxy. Two rival empires contend for the allegiance of undecided planets: The Republic of Aligned Worlds—RAW—and the Lusitanian Empire, which comes complete with Queen and other royal accoutrements. As you might guess, the reader's sympathies are intended to match up with RAW (although the Lusitanians are not depicted as Darth Vader-like monsters by any means). And so we find our attention fixed on one Promise T. Paen, a grunt-level female marine in the RAW forces. Early chapters (Bauers believes in quick-paced, short segments that generally work well) detail her tragic childhood on the unaligned planet named Montana. Left an orphan, Promise eventually finds a substitute for family in the marines. Although of course she does also have the charity and wise, intermittently appearing ghost of her mother for counsel. This apparition is presented not as anything delusional or neurotic, but as an inexplicable aspect of the natural universe. In the end, it's no more contras-F than the Force in *Star Wars*. Promise's matriarchal legacy is further embodied in her antique but highly functional Gloek pistol, nicknamed "Janie."

Soon Promise and her platoon find themselves assigned to protect her homeworld of Montana, which is leaning toward RAW affiliation. The Lusitanians show up and must, by treaty, be allowed to land peacefully. But soon things heat up to a shooting war, and Promise and company have to do all they can against great odds to preserve their honor and the freedoms of Montana.

Bauers exhibits great gusto in the battle scenes of his tale, but almost as much relish for the political shenanigans, in the manner of the aforementioned Anvil and Anderson. Because no aliens are involved, any of the xenophobia that often seeps into military SF is nonexistent. As I said, the Lusitanians come off as honorable foes. The large cast of soldiers, and smaller cast of civilians, receive nice distinguishing touches. (Although I do question the wisdom of naming Promise's boyfriend Jean-Wesley and then centering the name of Sir Wesley on the Lusitanian commander, without any apparent significance in the synchronicity.) This colorful individuation wrings the maximum sadness out of the inevitable deaths, and by the post-battle coda, readers will certainly share Promise's sorrow and pride.

Billed as the first installment in the chronicles of Promise Paen, *Unbreakable* is a charming blitzkrieg, if such an oxymoron is allowable.

### Servants of the Vance

Who among the field's best short-story writers has seen their entire oeuvre reprinted in any kind of uniform edition? James Tiptree and Cordwainer Smith qualify, I think, but their output was sparse, more or less one large volume apiece. Robert Sheckley had an enormous edition from Pulp House some decades ago, but it was incomplete. NESFA Press has done good work with Kornbluth, Anderson, Clement, Oliver, Tenn, and Zelazny, among others. Philip K. Dick's canon fills a neat five volumes. There was an abortive attempt to do Simak up right, but it ended after two