

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #1



Interview:
Mark Robson

Stories by Jem French
Ahmed Khan

Mikal

OG's Speculative Fiction

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July

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Seth Crossman *editor*

Michael Leadingham *cover art*

Michael Leadingham's Cover Art: *A Storybook Kingdom*

Michael Leadingham is a self-taught freelance cover artist who has been recognized by many galleries for his achievements in the Fantasy genre. He has been studying art most of his life and his creations have been published in online e-zines and on paperback novels, in addition to commissioned pieces. Some of his awards include Artist of the Month and the Golden Tori Award for best fantasy picture 2005. His works can be viewed at numerous on-line galleries including epilogue.net and fantasygallery.net. Michael currently resides in Las Vegas, Nevada and will be creating the cover artwork for Fantasy and Science Fiction genre serials at Virtual Tales.

Publisher, Seth Crossman

Editor, Seth Crossman

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Editor's Letter

One of the great things about science fiction is how it makes you think about the future, even one you would rather not envision. I read a lot of science fiction with fascination; how do these writers think of this stuff and would I really want it to happen? I remember reading Arthur C. Clark's "The Nine Billion Names of God," and trying to imagine every star winking out, like someone turned off the lights. I can't look at the stars at night and not think of that story.

One of the great things about fantasy is its ability to stir up the imagination and the hero in the hearts of its readers. I read fantasy with a sense of wonder and wish it were true. I am one of the legions of people who read J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* as a child and wished I were whisked away to such a world, where I too could do something great.

That is why I set out on this venture. I love how speculative fiction causes a reaction in its readers, in me, and allows us to enter worlds both fantastic and frightening. I hope our stories in this issue, and in those to follow, will stir up something in you.

I also had the privilege of working with a lot of different people in the making of this issue. That is one of the benefits of being the editor - meeting writers and artists and creative people of every sort. In a lot of ways, it's even more fun than seeing what they write or design.



The Gentlemen Callers

By Jem French

Jem French is an educator in New York state. He dabbles in writing when he has time and likes nothing better than hitting upon a good idea. This is his first publication, but hopefully not his last.

Some men make mistakes the whole world remembers.

The World President didn't want to be that kind of man. He didn't want to be that kind of president either. Most people in the world couldn't complain about the job he was doing. Of course, there were always a few opponents to any good man, but this World President was doing such a good job that no one really paid attention to those men.

On this night, the World President felt especially pleased and especially tired. He had just concluded meetings for a historic economic agreement between the Muslim Nations and the Leaders for an Advanced Africa. Two weeks of long meetings, verbal arm twisting, and icy staring contests had left him near exhausted. He plodded down the marble hallways to his rooms in the World Marriott in Sri Lanka, thinking of how deftly he had maneuvered and manipulated the stubborn leaders to what was best for all concerned. Which was the whole world! He smiled to himself and wondered how he could unwind and get rid of the two great knots that had firmly planted themselves in the muscles of his shoulders. Perhaps all he needed was a good bath. Yes, that would do the trick, nicely!

He shuffled into his immaculately reconstructed rooms (the President's rooms were always packed and crated with him) to the bathroom. (Technology was still a marvel to him, how they could shrink such large things into insignificant packages and move them like they were a child's toys) He slipped off his clothes and then slipped into the gigantic basin, reveling in the hot water and aromatic salts unique to Sri Lanka. The heavens knew, there was no price to be put on comfort! He stared out the window at the lovely moonlit landscape and listened to the waves crashing onto the imported sand beaches down the hill from the hotel. (Sri Lanka had come a long way from its 3rd World days. It was a booming tourist spot now, beautiful, peaceful,

and secluded.)

It was a clear night, the sky free of clouds and the stars were visible. Even those stars seemed more acute this night. Radial gases were at their all time lows due to subtle shifts in planet rotations. Only distance separated Earth from the rest of the galaxy.

Later, after a luxuriously long bath, nothing separated the World President from his wife. He had decided it could be a romantic night, the way all things had turned out, and she didn't complain. The intimacy helped them take an edge off the many concerns that lurked on the edges of their minds.

And then the CB radio on the dresser crackled. It was a large boxy piece, complete with wire coils, lightbulbs, and a handheld receiver, but merely ornamental now as laser cords had replaced electric cords and batteries had gone the way of the dinosaur. A relic from an earlier age, it had sentimental value to the World President. His grandfather had given it to him to serve as a reminder on the art of good communication with people you knew nothing about.

“Ah, I've found you at last!”

The World President was more than a little unnerved. He rose up on his elbows and stared at the antique radio. He knew it didn't work.

“If I may have a moment of your time...” the radio crackled once more.

The World President's wife was too flabbergasted to talk, she merely lay beneath her husband where she felt safe and protected.

The World President, an intelligent man at most times, struggled to gather his thoughts. He grasped the most apparent one in light of the facts. Dead radios just didn't talk. “Are you God?”

“No, I'm not *Him*. Rather, I am speaking on behalf of my people -- a race quite alien to you and far away, but with a serious dilemma.”

“Aliens? How are you transmitting to my radio? It hasn't worked for near a century.”

“Ah! A good question with answers you wouldn't understand. But let's say it has to do with nano ions, moisture in the air, and a certain transfluence. And besides this primitive transmitter is not broken, it just didn't have a power source. But let's move on to better questions. Why am I calling?” The voice paused as though the answer was obvious. When the World President said nothing it continued. “I was hoping you could help us.”

Now this was talk the World President understood. “I’d be glad to, but could this wait until later?” He looked awkwardly at his wife and smiled in apology.

“Now is certainly better than later. Time is the problem, really. One of them at least. You see, my race has no females and so time is ticking away for us. Too much time and there won’t be any of us.” There had been females before, but they had never been *their* females.

“How did this happen?” The World President asked suspiciously. Visions of lethal space viruses and interstellar war came to his mind, though *all* their females?

“An accident, unfortunately, and I won’t bother you with details. Suffice to say that we are in dire peril of going extinct. A great tragedy to be sure!”

“I am all for helping you, but I am quite sure we do not have any females of your race on our planet.” The World President rolled off his wife, giving her a reassuring kiss on the cheek. He sat on the edge of the bed and proceeded to pull on his socks.

“Oh, that won’t be a problem. Your race is genetically quite similar to ours. The naked eye wouldn’t even notice the difference. One would think our races were cousins of a sort. Conception is possible.”

“You mean conception with our females.” The World President frowned. He was big on women’s rights. His wife saw to that if the politics these days didn’t. “But the result would be mutants, a mix of the two races.” He pulled on his pants. “Completely unacceptable.”

“We are dying, so we won’t complain.”

“Let’s transfer this conversation to my study where we can talk alone.”

“If you would prefer.”

The World President picked up the old CB radio and lugged it into his study. He then poured himself a drink to give himself time to think. “How would you convince our women to...ah...mate with the males of your race?”

The voice on the radio laughed. “We think your women would find us quite attractive.” The voice on the radio certainly didn’t tell the World President that by human standards, their race was far more attractive.

The World President accepted the voice’s assessment. He didn’t know what these aliens looked like and he certainly didn’t know how women thought. Still. “How do I know you don’t mean to take over our planet?”

The voice sighed. “You don’t think I would call with this proposal if we meant

you harm. Surprise would be our greatest advantage. We would attack and talk later.”

“I have to agree,” the World President admitted.

“We’re harmless as flies, as I think you humans are fond of saying. We don’t have a single weapon and our numbers aren’t enough to overwhelm you.”

“Well. What’s in it for us? I mean why would we decide to help you? Goodwill and everything is overrated these days. The people would want me to get something in return.”

“We have a lot of a bio-metal called Ameranium. It’s great for bio-nuclear energy. Or we could give you technology. Give you the key to crossing the stars. Anything. We *are* desperate.”

The World President nodded. If they were desperate, he could milk them for many things that could benefit the human race. “What would you need me to do?” he asked, wiping away a smudge on his glass.

“Sell us some of your women. Just enough to help perpetuate our race, of course.”

“Sell?” The World President frowned again. This proposition was beginning to sound worse and worse. “That sounds too much like slavery. We do not sell people here,” he said, immediately realizing it was a lie. In some places around the world women were still sold.

The voice hesitated. “I am thinking that some of your women enter such contracts of their own accord, do they not?”

“Of course! But as you mentioned, they make the choice themselves. If I were to do it, it would be selling them as though were cattle for breeding!”

“Certainly if you asked for volunteers then, there might be some women who were willing?” suggested the voice.

On another night the World President might have been more open to the suggestion, but he was tired, had just completed a mega negotiation, been interrupted from his lovemaking, and he had vowed to bring equality and civil rights to women in China, Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia -- not to mention, he wasn’t sure if anyone would believe he had had negotiations with aliens over a 1950’s CB radio. It was mad he was even thinking about this proposal!

“I am sorry. I do not think we can accommodate you with these requests. The human world would not stand for such a union. I wish things were different.”

The voice on the radio paused. “I ask you to reconsider. What if our roles were

reversed?”

Stopping his restless pacing, the World President sat down in his office chair and put his feet up on the desk. In the history of the world, never had they had contact with an alien race. This alone would put him in the history books, but he certainly did not want to go down in the history books for having agreed to sell humans to an alien race. And he didn't believe he needed to worry about there ever being a shortage of women.

“I may wake up tomorrow and think this was all a dream. Would the world ever believe the president had heard the voice of an alien on his radio?” He paused for effect. “I think not. If I regret saying no to you, I hope it won't be for long. I do hope you'll find luck elsewhere, though.” The World President resolutely plopped his glass on the table and moved back into the bedroom.

“Why does every president say ‘no’?” Then the crackling voice on the radio was gone.

Inside the bedroom, the World President quickly removed his pants and then slipped off his socks. “Extraordinary, eh! Aliens. I wouldn't mention this to anyone, honey. No one will believe us.” The World President tried to decide which he wanted more, sleep or sex. “Now,” he said as sweetly as he could, “where were we?”

“Hah! Not after that,” his wife said, rolling over onto her side.

The World President was quite frustrated. He didn't want a good day to end so badly. That nasty alien, trying to persuade him to prostitute Earth's women! Even his wife was leaving him frustrated. And oh, what a story he had! But no one would ever believe him. Grumpily, the World President tried to fall asleep.

A few months passed and the World President did not hear from the aliens again. He figured he had won a victory. He even fashioned himself a hero, a savior of women. If only he could leak the information to the news. It would do wonders for his ratings.

More months. Then, one clear night, the World President returned to his home, tired and worn. But he knew he should take his wife out. It had been such a long time since they had taken the luxury, there being so many meetings, councils, and functions he had to attend. She deserved it though. He personally stopped and picked up some genetically engineered flowers that the women loved these days. And then he made an appointment at one of the sky restaurants. He remembered her mentioning the name once, but for what he couldn't remember.

An air taxi was pulling away, when he got home. A woman was sitting in the backseat who looked much like his wife from behind.

The World President got out of his limo. “Where is my wife going?” he asked one of the gate guards.

“She didn’t say, sir.”

The World President stared at the yellow taxi rising higher in the sky like a metal balloon. The wheels folded up into car and little engines folded down. Snakes of heat burst from their gray canisters and the car took off. “What is that thing?”

The guard also stared at the floating taxi. “I think it’s one of those new cars General Motors is trying out.”

“Oh,” said the World President, slightly disappointed now that he wouldn’t be able to take his wife out. “Is it safe?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

Well, the World President knew he had enough work to do anyway. Tomorrow he had to meet with the head of the Missing People’s Foundation, a yearly meeting that he never really looked forward to. The Director was a rather large snappy woman who was always angry at the disproportionate number of women who were missing persons. She wanted the World President to ingratiate equality in missing persons.

The World President sighed. It was not something he could do anything about.



Harry, Harry, Quite Contrary

By **Ahmed A. Khan**

Ahmed is originally from India, but now lives in Canada. He has had numerous other sales to publications such as Science Today, Woman's Era, HP Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror, Murderous Intent, and Strange Horizons, among others. He maintains a blog at <http://ahmedakhan.journalspace.com>. His latest story is short, but we loved it.

Come nearer, dear boys and darling girls. Kai Lung II, your very own humble storyteller unrolls his reed mat and tells you a tale of wondrous deeds, intriguing wisdom and confusing morals.

Once upon a time, there was a young man named Harry. He was quite ordinary in every way imaginable. His looks, his intelligence, you name it. He had quite ordinary parents. He went to quite an ordinary school. At school, his teachers were ordinary. And so were his friends. In short - get the picture - everything about him was ordinary. Except for one quality that he possessed. His one distinguishing feature was his contrariness. He had a curious habit of always trying to do just the opposite of what he was asked to do. At the time of his birth, the doctors tried their level best to deliver him but he would not emerge. In despair the doctors finally declared that a caesarian had become compulsory. Out popped Harry the very next minute.

One day, when he was a kid, his father told him to be truthful so he went to his mother and informed her that his father had kissed their maid. Mother had a big fight with father. It was all very interesting. The most interest thing about the incident was the probably insignificant fact that there never was any maid in their house.

When Harry was nine, his parents took him on a tour of Europe.

"Don't go too far into the water, Harry," his mother instructed him when they were at the Dover beach.

That day, Harry became famous for being the youngest boy to swim across the English Channel.

Another day, in his school, one of his teachers said that education was important in the current times and no good jobs could be had without proper education. Promptly, Harry quit school, ran away from home, joined a gang of juvenile delinquents, and, at the age of twenty-four, was elected as the president of the country - the youngest president the country ever had.

My dears and darlings, come closer and pay heed as I tell you about perhaps the final episode of Harry's colorful life.

One day, Harry became privy to the fact that it was impossible for a physical body to cross the speed of light. What did he do then? In his room, he started running in circles around his bed. Faster and faster he ran. Faster and faster and faster and faster... and he neared the speed of light.... and he crossed it... and he vanished from our universe and popped into the tachyonic universe where no physical body can move slower than light.

Serves him right.



A Few Words with British Author, Mark Robson

Mark Robson, former RAF pilot, is the author of the highly appraised Darkweaver Legacy, a four book young adult fantasy series, that, truly, is an enjoyable read for any age. He is currently at work on the Imperial Series, a four book series set in the same world of Shandar and Thrandor.

First of all, thank you for taking time out from your busy schedule to answer a few of our questions. I know I am looking forward to reading your latest, Imperial Spy, released this spring.

As a successful pilot in the RAF for many years, what turned you to writing?

I started writing from a throw away line by my navigator. It was during my first six week detachment to the Falkland Islands. It was July – the middle of their winter – and the weather was so bad that we could not fly. I became very irritable at the enforced idleness of being on call, but not flying. In sheer annoyance at my waspishness, my navigator said ‘For goodness sake do something useful! Write a book, or something.’ Looking back now, it seems strange that my entire life changed as a result of that one sentence.

How did the idea for the Darkweaver Legacy develop? Was it an idea many years in the making or a sudden - "I have to write a book - what shall it be about?" - thing?

I made a deal with the said navigator – Flight Lieutenant Adrian ‘Arnie’ Arnold. I told him that I would write the first few pages to a book and that if he liked it, I would write the rest. I was not aware that he liked fantasy, but it had always been my first choice of reading material, so it seemed a logical genre in which to write. I’ve loved Tolkienesque style fantasy since I was a boy. I spent many hours as a teenager reading and re-reading The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. I also read just about every other fantasy book on the shelves in the bookshops at the time. My first skeleton idea for a storyline was dreadful, but once I started writing, the characters

came alive. This led to a complete re-think of the plot and the result was far more satisfactory.

What made you decide to choose fantasy rather than, say, murder mysteries?

My initial thought was to write a story that would utilise my military experience. I didn't want to write a modern military story as that would have been too close to my work, so I opted to set the story in a medieval style fantasy world. I stuck to that vision, but brought in all the classic ingredients of the sort of fantasies I loved most as a boy. As a result, *The Darkweaver Legacy* demonstrates shades of, and ideas from, many of the books and authors I read in my youth. The only really new element to the story was my military viewpoint. My writing and creativity since that first book has progressed significantly – my more recent stories feel much more original in concept.

How long did it take you to write the first book?

I wrote the first book over the space of eighteen calendar months, but I did not write consistently during this period. It was just a hobby that I did when I was away from home on detachment (mainly in the Falklands). I guess in reality I wrote the story in about six months.

Is each successive book easier to write?

Yes ... and no! Once I'd written the first book, which at the time I was happy with, I understand how to structure that length of story. I have always worked hard to learn from everything I do. Therefore, I desperately wanted the second book to be better than the first. I got about 35 000 words into *Trail of the Huntress*, decided it wasn't better than the first, threw it away and started again! The re-start was a great move and the second book was a big step forward from the first, with a much less predictable storyline and some great twists. Every book from then on has brought new challenges as I've sought to increase the complexity without losing the readability of my work. I'd like to think I'm still improving.

Which book was the most fun to write? Which do you like best?

From The Darkweaver Legacy my favourite story is Trail of the Huntress, though I think the subsequent two books were better written. My best story yet is Imperial Assassin which is due to launch in November. This was my biggest challenge to date, and yet the most enjoyable to write as well. I originally wrote Imperial Spy as a self contained novel, with no thoughts of a sequel. When Simon and Schuster bought it, they commissioned a sequel as well, so I had to change the ending of Imperial Spy quite drastically in order to make this viable.

Imperial Assassin therefore was my first attempt at writing a story that I had never really looked to write. I did a lot of research in some interesting areas in order to make the story work. The results are most pleasing.

What kind of response have you gotten from your readers?

I've never really had anything other than a positive response from readers. People always have favourites, but they genuinely seem to like my work. That is very gratifying and makes the long slog of writing each book worthwhile.

Is there any truth to the rumors that you sometimes write while flying?

Having now left the RAF I could admit to anything! However, the answer is truthfully, no. I did sometimes make notes whilst on long transit flying sorties – particularly if my copilot was operating, but it takes a lot of concentration to write fiction and I could not afford to give that many brain cells over to thinking about something so unrelated to the job at hand.

I know that when I was young, (and maybe even now!) I dreamed of being able to do fantastic things like wield magic and brandish a sword like a hero. Is there some part of you, or a young Mark Robson, that can be found in Calvyn, the hero of the Darkweaver series, who does indeed fulfill these dreams?

Naturally there are elements of me in Calvyn. Some of his experiences were drawn from my own military training. Ever since I first started reading fantasy I've dreamed of what it would be like have some special ability, magical or otherwise, that would stand me out from the crowd. I have done a little fencing and a fair bit of archery, but the reality is a long way from the sort of things my characters do!

It seems to me that Calvyn is a good guy, thrust into tough situations, yet he always seems to make the "right" decisions, uses integrity, and tries his best when less would probably still do the job. Are these themes you purposely put into the story because they are important to you, or is this just Calvyn's character?

When I first started writing I wanted my heroes to be 'real' heroes – heroes who did great deeds through a moral sense of what was right and wrong. It was a bit naïve and unrealistic really, but then what is fantasy if not escapism? My characters tend to be driven more by different motivations in the Imperial series. They are not always as morally whiter than white as they were in The Darkweaver Legacy. This was a conscious decision, as it was to begin killing off major characters in a bid to give a greater sense of danger and reality to the new series.

Will Calvyn be making any appearances in the Imperial Series or any future books you write?

Calvyn will make a significant appearance in the final book of the Imperial series. As for appearances in future series, it will depend on what I can convince the publishers to print. I'd certainly like to revisit Calvyn, Jenna, Bek and the others in the future, but I'm a realist enough to recognise that this might not be what the publishers want me to write, and I do have a family to feed and house!

With your military background and its role in the Darkweaver series, where do you stand on the "write from experience, or write from what you know best" theory?

My view, and advice to new writers, is to write stories that you would like to read. If you write things you would like to read, you will write them with more passion than if you are writing something you've been told to write. However, utilising personal

experience within your writing helps to give it an edge of reality that would be lacking if you were to write about something with which you know nothing about.

What part of the writing process do you find most difficult? the easiest?

Editing is the hardest – parting with words that you have sweated over because they are redundant, or make the book too long, is painful. The easiest – the answer would be different depending on which day of the week it was. The whole process of writing a book often involves many highs and lows. There are days when no matter how hard you try, the words will not come. Conversely, there are days when you just don't want to stop.

Can you describe your writing process, or a typical writing day for you?

I set myself a daily goal. If I am on a writing day, then I write for 3 hours in the morning and 3 hours in the afternoon. My goal is normally 2000 words. If I reach my goal in the morning session, then I take the afternoon off. I never look to splurge. Steady progression allows my mind to keep up and develop the storyline in a consistent fashion. My weekly target is looser – 7000 to 10 000 words when I'm in a writing period.

What is your favorite snack food when you write, or is it a strictly no food relationship?

When I was writing *Imperial Spy* I was almost entirely writing late at night. This lent itself to a pint of beer and a packet of crisps! These days I write in the daytime, so I generally have a glass of water, but I take breaks for food.

I know that you are very active on the online forums at Chronicles Network and speaking in the classrooms. What part does this play in your writing life? Why do you do it?

Engaging with readers is a crucial part of developing a readership. Creating a buzz about your work, wherever that may be, cannot be over-rated. I believe that by making myself accessible to readers, and keeping in regular contact with them, has

contributed greatly to my having built such a large and loyal fan base so quickly. I place promotion and interaction with readers as equally important to the actual writing and I split my time accordingly.

How do your wife and children feel about the long hours you spend playing and writing in your own fantasy world?

Now that it's my living, there is little friction. My wife has always been very supportive of my writing, as I have been to her interest in law. After a long struggle she has recently achieved her dream of becoming a barrister – likewise I have achieved my goal of becoming a full time writer. I would like to think that each of these achievements has been a joint effort.

Do you read much fantasy? What are some of your own favorite authors?

When I was younger I loved David Eddings, David Gemmell, Tolkien, Julian May and Anne McCaffrey. These days I tend to read more YA books, as that is the market I'm writing for. I'd say that recent favourites have been: Philip Reeve, Garth Nix, Trudi Canavan and Michelle Paver. In the adult fantasy market I particularly like Elizabeth Moon and have recently discovered Liz Williams.

Any advice for aspiring writers?

Write for enjoyment. If you want to get published then keep sending your work out and don't give up. I know that everyone says that, but it's very true. The odds of getting a major publisher to accept your work as a new author are about one thousand to one. However, someone has to be the one, so do everything you can to give yourself the best chance of breaking through. Once you have a foot in the door, it does become easier ... but not as much as you might think!

What kind of things can we expect from you in the future? And is there a release date for Imperial Assassin, Book Two of the Imperial Series?

Imperial Assassin is due to launch on November 6th, 2006. Imperial Traitor has now been commissioned and will launch in late summer 2007. I am currently in negotiation with my publisher for a further 4 book series which will be very different to the books I've written so far. It will still be fantasy – dragons and dragon riders this time, but in it I'm going to put a very different spin on the flying events of World War I! I hope that will conjure a few images to be thinking about.

Mark, thanks for your time. I hope things continue to go well for you and I can't wait to get my hands on a copy of Imperial Traitor!

You can learn more about Mark Robson at <http://www.swordpublishing.co.uk> or at the online forums at Chronicles Network.



