

2012 by Alisa Krasnostein & Ben Payne (eds)

Contributed by Simon Petrie
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Twelfth Planet Press, February 2008: ISBN: 9780980484106 Two disclosures. First, among the sites for which I've written spec-fic book reviews is 'Australian Specific in Focus' (ASif!), whose founding editor and managing editor are, respectively, the two editors of the 2012 anthology. Second, I should acknowledge that I viewed, and acted as an editorial adviser on the science of, Angela Slatter's story within this volume. I don't personally believe that either of these prior connections unduly colour my review of this book, but I offer the information so that readers of the following review may have a basis to discern any bias which might have unwittingly slipped through. Science fiction. Prediction of future technological advancement. It's brought us the geostationary satellite, the videophone, robots — after a fashion. We're still waiting for the flying car, the personal jetpack, the holiday home on the moon. Really, when it comes down to predicting the future, SF offers vastly more misses than hits. And yet, because predicting the future is such a fascinating game—anyone can play, and for the interval at least, nobody can prove you wrong—it still finds many takers, and a willing audience. Krasnostein's and Payne's remit, here, is to ask where we—Australia, the world, society—will be in four years' time. It's a question to which eleven answers (would that be, perhaps, a 'banker's dozen'?) are offered, by a collection of authors drawn from Australia's strongest SF talent. It all comes packaged in a cover featuring intriguing artwork by Cat Sparks, herself also an SF writer of note though not represented here in that capacity. Deborah Biancotti's 'Watertight Lies' opens the proceedings. Pete and Gabe are researchers sampling a subterranean water reservoir somewhere in the outback. When they re-emerge, events have taken an unwelcome, dangerous turn. This is a gritty, nasty, all-too-plausible story, told with a calm matter-of-factness that only heightens the drama. 'Fleshy' by Tansy Rayner Roberts has some great lines and a wonderful sense of comic timing, but there were aspects of this cautionary tale of ethical cloning which didn't quite work for me. Principally, I felt it compressed its plot-twists into too tight a frame, resulting in a slightly unfinished, claustrophobic feel to the story. There's a sense in which this is appropriate to the story's theme of domestic comic terror, but I also felt this wasn't quite up to Roberts' usual high standard. 'Oh, Russia' by Simon Brown is a meditative, quiet story that's nonetheless luminous with loss, both personal and societal. In his home overlooking Twofold Bay, Frederick Kerensky waits for his beloved wife to succumb to her death, and wonders what is growing wrong with the world. I found the epiphany that seals this short piece to be genuinely moving. 'Soft Viscosity' by David Conyers shares the luminosity of the preceding story, but has none of the gentleness. Gloria McKenzie is a CIA agent tasked with hunting down an Ecuadorean leader of a group of rebels, who are causing problems for a US oil company attempting to extract the jungle's buried hydrocarbon riches. For its combination of unflinching brutality and raw plausibility, this must stand as one of the collection's strongest, most unsettling stories. In 'Apocalypse Now', Lucy Sussex provides an annotated list of strategies for low-impact world domination. It's amusing, and a respite from weightier content, though its format as a sequence of short entries, rather than as a rounded narrative, causes it to come across as being somewhat hesitant. Dirk Flinthart's 'The Last Word' focuses on the bitter predator/prey interaction between Lewis, a ruthless marketing guru, and Jane, his scientist ex-wife. Jane is frustratingly close to having a cure for melanoma, but her funding has been cut and she needs Lewis's financial acumen to allow her to finish her work. Lewis, needless to say, has other plans for her research. Flinthart's incisive dissection of the always uneasy relationship between science and marketing is spot-on, and Lewis is a marvellous creation, irredeemably malicious yet very intriguing. 'Ghost Jail' by Kaaron Warren sits somewhat oddly among the surrounding stories, and in truth I'm not sure it truly belongs in the anthology: it doesn't carry any apparent near-future content that I can discern, instead being quite openly horror-tinged. It is, nonetheless, an effective exploration of the continual struggle between past and present, in a community where the ghosts are determined to have their say. Angela Slatter's 'I Love You Like Water' would, I think, have to be classed as 'science fantasy'. It's a powerful metaphor of the personal toll exacted by environmental degradation, and has at its heart the doomed, dead love between Cato, a technician in a new water-generating plant, and Sophie, a rebel determined to find a way to make it rain again, no matter how desperate. 'Skinsongs' by Martin Livings is a twisted little extrapolation on Andy Warhol's pronouncement on the fickleness of fame. Ra'Faella is a skinsong artist, conscious that her two months of chart-topping glory have irrevocably come to an end, and prepared to take drastic measures to ensure that she does not sink meekly back into obscurity. Ben Peek's 'David Bowie' is, it seems, set in the here and now, but concerns the future (written in 2007, and riffing off the Bowie song 'Five Years' ... you do the maths). Framed as a conversation between friends or lovers, it's an exploration of reactions to the world's end. I'll confess that the story's format—unadorned dialogue, alternately left- and right-justified on the page—was irritating at first, but it won me over. Peek cuts the concept pretty much to the bone; and who says there isn't space for character development within the confines of flash fiction? 'Oblivion' by Sean McMullen revolves around Mitch, dying in a hotel bed and complaining to a sympathetic nurse that his estranged son hasn't even attempted to visit him on his deathbed. It's a rather downbeat way to round out the anthology, but oblivion also brings its own release, its sense of resolution. An understated coda. I find it almost impossible to avoid comparison with last year's Ticonderoga Publications anthology, *The Worker's Paradise*. It's not an invidious juxtaposition: both anthologies are concerned with near-future extrapolation, as viewed from a contemporary Australian perspective, and there are several authors (Brown, Flinthart, Warren) common to both. Each is, to my mind, well worth the time and money. In the case of 2012, I would say that

purchase could be justified merely on the basis of the stories by Biancotti, Conyers, and Flinthart, but those are by no means the only worthwhile stories collected here. My sole criticism would be that, at a mere 128 pages, it's over too soon. Nonetheless, this is an anthology that deserves to bring new converts into the fold of spec-fic readership, by showing repeatedly and with clarity that speculative fiction can afford important and penetrating insights into humanity in a fashion that just isn't possible through any other art-form. So, don't wait another four years to find out what 2012 might have to offer! 2012 is being sold online through Ticonderoga Publications' site:
<http://www.ticonderogapublications.com/catalog/>