

**Lecture #7 Tuesday, Feb 12, 2008: Two short stories from *Year's Best SF***

"Tin Marsh" by Michael Swanwick

SETTING: Venus. Earth's "evil twin." Atmosphere mostly CO<sub>2</sub> + sulphuric acid  
Pressure = 90 atmospheres; Temp = 900 degrees F. 1 Venusian day = 243 Earth days.  
Prospectors work for the nameless, all-powerful Company searching for valuable metals  
such as tin, gold, platinum, etc.. Three Rules:

- No Violence
- Protect Company Equipment
- Protect Yourself

SYNOPSIS: Patang and MacArthur are partners. After close proximity for 200 days, enmity between them has grown, and MacArthur has gone crazy. An accident MacArthur's implant so that he is no longer constrained by the Company rules. MacArthur engages Patang in a cruel game of cat-and-mouse using their laser drill. Patang discovers a "tin marsh," which would make them both rich – but MacArthur wants to kill her. He can't, however -- the Company Rules are built into the drill, so it can't fire on her. The both survive, and are now rich.

ANALYSIS: A classic "Golden Age" puzzle story. Patang is constrained by the three Rules, but MacArthur is not. Will she survive, and how?

THEME: You can't organize human needs into a strict hierarchy – they often conflict. MacArthur feels so threatened emotionally that he risks his long-term security by trying to kill Patang. The ending is ironic: the laser drill, a machine, *is* subject to strict hierarchy, saving Patang.

The laser drilling rig symbolizes:

- Their hope in striking it rich
- The physical threat of death to Patang
- The simple, predictability of machines as opposed to humans

“Life on the Preservation” by Jack Skillingsstead

SETTING: Aliens from another dimension have devastated most of Earth, but preserved a few cities in 16-hour "time loops" for study. People in these cities -- such as Seattle -- live the same day over and over unaware of the time loop.

Decades into the future, a young woman, Kylie, is sent into Seattle's Preservation Field to try to stop the time loop. Through a series of misadventures, her mission is derailed and she meets and becomes involved with Toby.

Having come from "the east side of Hell", Kylie is startled by how *good* life is on the Preservation. Kylie abandons her mission and embraces happiness, even knowing that she will be trapped in the time loop.

ANALYSIS: Kylie is a pawn in a struggle she does not understand. The true motives of the Tourists *and* of the Old Men who sent Kylie are unknown.

We can extract the theme of the story by looking at how it talks about technology: (here, the "Gadget" is the locator).

SF is about potential histories. Kylie is a pawn of shadowy forces of History. Her mission is to *make history happen* again. She is to be a hero, to vanquish the Tourists who have trapped Seattle.

But she doesn't understand the reasons any more than she understands her "locator." Kylie rejects being the heroine *and* her role in History. Instead she grabs happiness and pleasure and lives in the moment.