

carnel



Two-Trick Pony

Editorial

Welcome to this a short little sampler for my **carnel** fanzine. The zine is mostly dedicated to roleplaying and chat. Sometimes topics are drawn from slightly further cultural and political shores or somewhere else altogether. Roleplaying may be one of my abiding loves (or stupid obsessions) but it cannot exist in a vacuum. The hope is to recreate some of the best RPG fanzines of the past that managed to combine the latest thinking in roleplaying with current affairs, pop culture and free-ranging debate.

This sampler is made up of original material rather than past articles from previous issues. In just twelve pages it is hard to do anything other than give you a brief taste of the regular **carnel** contents. Some of the things excluded include the regular zine review column and the often provoking letters column where readers get to complain about the zine and one another. The longer essays have also had to be left out but rest assured that if topics seem to be dealt with at a swift trot here they do receive the space they deserve in the regular zine.

If you have any comments on the contents of this sampler or indeed about the zine in general then please let me know. Since the zine is more or less free in monetary terms I think it is fair to ask to be paid in thoughts and ideas.

Robert

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The first print run of each issue of the zine is free within the European Union and can be obtained for a simple C5 SSAE. To subscribe simply send as many SSAEs as issues you would like to receive.

If you produce your own zine then I am always happy to trade. Get in touch either via e-mail or by sending a copy of your zine to the address below.

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The **carnel** website has more details of how to get hold of **carnel**, obtain back issues and more information on how to subscribe, click to:

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Ars Magica Preview

Anything long anticipated has inherent within it the risk of disillusionment. So it is with *Ars Magica*; a game I have often wanted to read and play on the basis of the many glowing word of mouth endorsements I have heard about both its realism and innovative magic system. In many ways the idea that a game might some how combine an excellent magic system and any kind of realism makes it worth a second look.

A “preview” in **carnel** is a review of a product that has not been playtested. Instead the comments come purely from reading and discussing the product. I have actually played *Ars Magica* but the experience was rather underwhelming and I am not sure whether that was the game or the GM’s fault. Therefore I am giving the game the benefit of the doubt and will confine myself to first impressions.

The very first impression of the 4th Edition of the *Ars Magica* is that it is extremely ugly and cramped. The art is badly scanned and the text is not so much laid out as press-ganged onto the page. There are twelve broad chapters and the thankful inclusion of an index. The first 63 pages are a mad scramble through character creation, skills, professions, merits and flaws and performing the three different kind of checks the game uses. After this things ease up a bit and the remaining chapters are slightly less daunting and flow a little better.

The crush at the start is very off-putting. Instead of describing the game, its setting and the principles and ideas behind it there is an introductory story and then Bang! we are in the middle of character generation. By page 18 we are at a summary of how to add the finishing touches to our new character. Not only that but the reader is already being referred to a supplement for more information and the book is starting to get stuck into the *Houses* that all mages belong to, without having established these in any kind of context.

Since the first sixty pages are vital to making any sense of the remaining two hundred pages I would have thought that they would have received the lion’s share of editorial attention. They are instead some of the worst. It is a decision that does not exactly make the reader feel enthused about the game.

Rules

Rules are something that *Ars Magica* is strong on, it has so many little rules for this and that that sometimes I feel that this is the world’s first solitaire RPG. The solitary soul can while quiet hours designing an entire cabal and then creating a covenant for them to live in. In fact they can even age the covenant as the cabal perform their research and the staff try to keep the covenant together through supply shortages and peasant risings.

Another big feature of the game is it reliance on formulas for skill checks, combat?

$Attack = (DEX \text{ or } PER) + Weapon Skill + Weapon Attack Bonus + ENC$
Perhaps it is just me but these kind of formulas are always tricky and the only way to really deal with them is to pre-calculate them because in the heat of the moment they always get fluffed.

It is not just the formulas though, many of the skill checks have obscure little modifiers. *Twilight Control* rolls are at +3, for example, if the character has the Virtue

Strong Willed. The check to see if the wizard entered a *Twilight* in the first place is not affected by the Virtue though. It is a small thing but there is the feeling all the way through the book that nothing is truly intuitive and instead each thing has to be checked to make sure that there are no obscure modifiers or the wrong combination of abilities are being used. Detailed rules are one thing but consistency is king as far as I am concerned. Consistency is not *Ars Magica's* strong point, witness the three different dice rolls to determine the results of a skill check.

To balance this out I will say that I did like the idea of rating attributes on a basis of average being zero with positive values being better than average and negative ones being worse than average. It seems an effective way of allowing large differences between mages and normal people without having the difficulty of being mired to an absolute scale.

I also enjoyed the Covenant rules which, while not necessarily being any simpler than the rest of the book were justified on the basis that they are only really used when the Covenant is created and then updated on a seasonal basis. Since the Covenant is the base of both the campaign and the characters it is important that it have a consistent character and that the GM has a little assistance to fall back on when trying to create one. The only disappointment was not having a scheme for linking character creation to Covenant establishment with characters being able to pool points together to build their own “thing”. That would have been a nice touch.

Background

There is none, or if that is uncharitable then a few points are made and the reader is referred to either a history book of the Middle Ages (not a bad idea) or a supplement (which is a bad idea).

Ars Magica does have a definite idea of what it is and what it is about but fails to adequately outline what that is. You would have thought that an introductory essay on Hermetic Magic for those not entirely boned up on ancient occult practices might have been order, but it is not there. Neither is a basic overview of the *Order of Hermes*, the organisation that all PCs nominally belong to.

Background is generally lacking and the twenty pages on *Mythic Europe* at the back of book fails to really inform on either the historical world of the period or the fictional one.

Conclusion

Is it possible for a badly written rulebook to totally ruin a game? Well on the basis of what we have here, yes. *Ars Magica* is not an enjoyable read and neither is it a very informative one. Partly that is a function of its age (1996) but it is hard to deny that this is not really a game that invites the newcomer in with welcome arms.

At its heart are a few really good ideas, the magic system is quite good but I felt it needed more space to discuss than I can give it here. It also shows its age now with its quirky mix of freeform spell creation, spell lists and levels and spell points. The “troupe” approach to the game is also interesting but is not inherent to the game itself.

In short the game seems have doomed itself to cult status by refusing to revitalise its rules system by a stealing a few modern ideas and severely revising its layout to make the experience slightly less taxing on the reader. A shame.

Hero Wars Review

In **carnel** I insist on making a separation between game materials that I have read but not played (previews) and “real” reviews where I have actually used the material in a game. *Hero Wars* is a great example of the importance of this separation and for me confirms how dishonest it is to present a “review” that is simply a reading of the material. If I had reviewed *Hero Wars* solely on the basis of the rulebooks I would have had to slam it as almost useless rubbish. Having played it though (with the aid of some understanding players and a group willing to work through the confusion of the rules) I have to say that there is an excellent game hidden amongst the purple prose and typos. And after all the games the thing!

I bought a copy of *Hero Wars Deluxe*, a boxed edition that contained the *Hero Wars* book itself along with the *Narrator's Guide* (odd choice of description for a GM), a collection of fiction based in the game world of *Glorantha* and a little booklet of rule summaries, sheets and maps. To be honest though everything except the *Hero Wars* book itself seems entirely optional and apart from reading the example of how to run a Heroquest in the *Narrator's Guide* I mostly used the main book supplemented with handout and summary material downloaded from the Issaries website at www.glorantha.com.

The game takes an epic approach to roleplaying, after all there are not all that many games where attaining godhood is an admirable goal for a player character. There are fewer games that handle it so well. *Hero Wars* seems to give both the humble farmer in the field and the raging god in the heavens an equal break.

Its secret is the use of *traits*, keywords that describe the abilities of the character. Each trait is rated from 1 to 20. If a trait is raised above twenty then the score returns to 1 and the character gains a *mastery* in the trait. Masteries are clever devices, they allow the scale to remain between one and twenty so that only a twenty-sided die is required for play. They also act as a marker noting that the character is especially capable in a skill, for each mastery the result of using a skill is improved by one degree. This means that a swordsman with a skill of 5 and one with “5 Mastery” both succeed on average the same number of times when they use the sword. But the Mastery turns any fumble into a failure and any failure into a success. This means that the Master swordsman never fumbles and can turn an ordinary failure into a success.

Masteries also cancel so that two Master swordsmen fight at the equivalent level of two normal swordsmen. This stops matters getting out of hand.

There are a few tweaks and refinements to this basic system (too many to detail in just two pages) but the basic idea remains the same and as a result is both flexible and easily teased into a slightly different configuration by an enthusiastic GM.

Experience is also slightly different to the norm. Each game PCs get Hero Points, the amount varies according to how successful and heroic they have been, these points may be used to “bump” up a single result in the same way as masteries. True heroes therefore can use their Hero Points to defeat superior opponents. Hero Points may also be used to increase the rating of a trait. Unlike most games Hero Points may be spent to buy new traits of any kind, although increasing existing traits and ones that were used in the previous session or story cost less to increase. This means in the course of a few sessions a PC might suddenly discover a latent ability to fly!

This idea brings me to the point that makes or break the game. An awful lot hinges around the GM's interpretation of what traits mean. Example: if I have the ability to Jump Streams, can I jump a river? If I am a Farmer, can I heal sick cattle? Do I need a Veterinary trait instead?

Interpreting the “true” meaning of traits and applying the game's rules for using a trait that is not directly related to the task is guaranteed to be a headache until a group has settled down into its own style. Needless to say feelings can get hurt by the way the GM has interpreted a situation, a good *Hero Wars* GM is probably one who can play fast and loose and keep the game going at all costs.

Of course the task is not helped by the fact that the rulebook is incredibly shoddy being riddled with typos, contradictory advice and obscure examples. It manages to convey a vague concept of how the game is played but is no use when trying to make a difficult judgement call. A second edition is planned that promises to be a radical improvement over the first and the rules will be clarified. If you have a low tolerance for bafflement then you would be well advised to wait.

Once you have a playing style that suits you though the free-wheeling and open-ended nature of the game is a real hook. Players are free to create any kind of character they want. GMs find it a snap to define their NPCs as their traits are almost always there in the existing NPC description. It is hard to describe just how easy it is to put together games and how varied and unexpected those games turn out.

Which leaves me with two negative points to mention. The first is about magic, as it uses the trait system magic can be incredibly powerful and is easily customised to the character. Its description in the rules though is frustratingly hard to follow, it is not difficult to come up with a system that is enjoyable by yourself but with half the book being devoted to magic a better job should have been done.

The other thing is the use of an abstract “Extended Contest” system. This allows all kinds of difficult situations to be easily played out in the rules, the same system applies whether the situation is two huge armies meeting in battle or two advocates debating a legal point. From that point of view the abstract system is a big plus. On the other hand it unfortunately means that too many contests in the game have an identical feel. Their use has to be strictly rationed to key points in the session otherwise a tedious sense of déjà vu seeps in.

Given that I criticised *Ars Magica* for having an impenetrable rulebook why should I allow *Hero Wars* off the hook when it is far worse in that respect? Well the major reason is because it gives good game. A rulebook that is far from perfect but allows an enjoyable game is easily forgiven. After all it was not as if I had to re-write the rulebook. The key thing was to agree with the players how we were going to handle a situation, once people were agreed the experience was normally fun.

The rules encourage this interpretative aspect in their use of traits and therefore is unlike *Ars Magica*, which seems to dustily lay down strict proscriptions of how things must be done.

The other thing that is hard to dismiss with *Hero Wars* is how well suited it is to its epic theme. Despite having a simple heart it is entirely geared up to re-creating the adventures of legendary heroes. This is the only system I could think of that could re-create the Labours of Hercules without short-changing the players or giving the GM an administrative headache. That, for me, is really saying something.

A Lesson in Wrecking

This is a cameo set in the land of Amn in the *Forgotten Realms*. It assumes that the group are adventurers who have signed on for a term of duty as mercenaries in the Amn armed forces. They could equally well be hired just for this one job to provide a bit of muscle to the group of marines described below.

Setting sail

The character with the highest *Charisma* score or the best background in military command is arbitrarily appointed as the leader of the marines and the new marine contingent are told to report to the **Pashen** a navy ship current docked at Athkatla.

Once aboard the leader is introduced to the ship's mate, Tom Geredin, and the bosun Treken Balvere. Who say they are waiting for the "captain" of the ship to arrive, a scion of an oligarch family called Mahaia Quew Agrim. Late in the morning, the captain arrives, gives the order to sail and then retires to his cabin for the journey, leaving the Mate in charge. The Mate informs the marine captain to drill his men on deck so they can get their sea legs.

An incident in the fog

The journey is generally uneventful once any marines so suffering have recovered from their sea sickness. However as the ship prepares to round the crags where the Cloudpeaks collapse into the ocean a mist descends and not long after that the wind dies down leaving the ship calmed.

About seven hours into the calm a lookout gives out the "ship ahoy!" call fore ship. A shadow silhouette of a galley can be seen slowly gliding through the mist heading towards the Pashen. As it gets closer the regular beat of a drum and the steady splash of oars cutting through the water accompany its ghostly approach.

The galley is almost two decks higher than the Pashen and the whole vessel seems to tower above the sail ship. The galley is silent and smoothly manoeuvres round the stilled vessel. As it glides past the sailors and marines on the deck see a skeleton in the forecastle of the galley, eyes burning with red hellfire. The stench of rotting corpses passes over the Pashen and in the aft castle a small pavilion of purple cloth is struck.

Once the undead galley disappears aft the sailors unleash a volley of prayers that the ship does not return while the Pashen is helpless to avoid it. The gods hear their prayers and three hours later the wind picks up and the ship continues on its journey.

Wreckers ahoy

Once north of the Cloudpeaks the captain invites the mate, bosun and marine captain into his cabin for a quick discussion of the mission. The job is to try and locate a group of wreckers who are operating on the Sword Coast. The group are using some kind of signalling lantern to imitate the few lighthouses on the coastline and have already been held responsible for the disappearances of three merchant ships. A navy vessel has also seen the lights but could not land men to deal with the wreckers. The Pashen with its lighter draft should be able to land its marines while appearing to be a ship falling for the wrecker's trap. The captain then delegates the details to the Mate.

The Storm

The Mate's plan is simple, the Pashen will travel north of Candlekeep and then wait for stormy weather. It will then travel back down the coast during the night keeping close to the shoreline. Hopefully the lookouts will spot the wrecker's lights (and not be confused by them) and the Pashen will turn to shore as if deceived. Then when within an hour of land the marines will be let down in their rowboats and under the cover of the night storm will row swiftly to the shore. Since the wreckers need to get the cargo of their victims it should be easy to reach the cliff tops and capture the waiting wreckers.

Once the Pashen and her crew are ready roll a d6, on an odd number the storm starts to brew and the Pashen sets sail. On an even number a day of forced idleness ensues in which the marines can practice rowing and so on.

Lights in the night

As the Pashen struggles through the growing waves the sailors place lanterns around the rigging and the guard rail. Soon a beam of light is seen and after a check on the charts the Mate affirms that the light is not from one of the known lighthouses and the order to launch the marines is given.

Launching

The boats are hoisted and then lowered overboard by the sailors. Once the rowboats are afloat the marines have to clamber down nets slung over the side and into the boats. In such treacherous seas a few accidents are inevitable and those who can swim will have to help those that cannot. With a little care a few precautions the boats can get away without bother. If the PCs take no precautions and there is no organisation, drowning is a real risk and some minor injuries are certain.

Landing

Rowing to the cliffs is surprisingly easy, while the waters look tumultuous the waves actually help bring the boats closer to the shore. The real difficulties begin when the marines have to abandon their rowboats and make a landing on the cliffs.

The crashing waves make every surface wet and impossibly slippery and there is a real risk of drowning or being dashed against the rocks if someone is swept away. *Jump*, *Climb* and *Rope Use* checks should be used to judge how successful the attempt to moor the boat and climb out onto the rocks has been. Once the boat has been secured then any remaining marines may leave the boat without risk.

If the group manage to bring a lantern or other protected source of light ashore without damaging it or making it too wet to use they can easily find a crude set of "stairs" cut into the rock which allows the group to easily climb the cliffs. *Spot* checks will be needed if the group are searching in the dark and the rain.

Since the wind is high and the cliffs are soaking with rain and sea spray climbing them is a near suicidal proposition. Unless the group have special magic or equipment any character with the *Climb* skill will realise that trying to climb the cliffs is a hopeless proposition.

The Lightmen

Once the marines have all clambered to the top of the cliff-line they are rewarded with an excellent view over the roiling sea below them. They can see that the Pashen is starting to draw closer to shoreline. Away from the bare cliff edge the land drops away and is covered with deep tangled undergrowth such as gorse and holly bush. Occasional tree copses dot the landscape, on close examination it becomes apparent that while the undergrowth seems thick and constant it is actually broken into clumps by several narrow but clear paths.

Visible on the headland north of where the group have emerged can be seen two figures struggling to operate a large signal lantern in the wind. The two will continue to work until the Pashen starts to come closer to shore. When it seems as if the Pashen cannot escape the winds and tides the two dim the lantern and carry it back to their camp.

The Wrecker's camp

The camp can be found by following the lightmen through the paths in the gorse. In which case *Hide* and *Move Silently* checks will be needed. Ambushing the lightmen and then forcing them to reveal the location of the camp will also work but the men will try everything to mislead their captors and alert their fellows. Scouts can also be sent out and the camp can swiftly be found due to its central campfire.

The camp is located in a slight depression on the plain beyond the cliff edge that is somewhat sheltered from the wind. It consists of several tents arranged in a rough circle. Between the tents are varied barrels and crates, the profits of previous wrecks. In centre of the tents a small bonfire burns, illuminating the fronts of the tents. A few bored "sentries" sit by the fire.

There are several high gorse bushes around the camp and these can be used to hide any approach on the camp if the PCs wish to.

Attacking the camp

The wreckers are not really wild bandits but are instead a dispossessed group of villagers who have been driven from their homes to east by the advance of goblinoid tribes. They have turned their hand to wrecking out of desperate necessity. The marines are likely to completely overwhelm the camp in short measure; perhaps against their expectations.

If the marines sneak up on the camp unnoticed they can collapse tents and use missile fire to cut down anyone who tries to make a stand. If they let the lightmen return to the camp unmolested then the villagers gather together and leave for the cliff steps the group arrived at. In the narrow gorse lanes there are ample opportunities for ambushes and again it is likely that the marines will swiftly compel the wreckers to surrender.

Note that the villagers have their children in their tents and if the group use tactics such a setting fire to the tents or simply volleying missile fire into the tents indiscriminately they may have a matter for their conscience.

Concluding the adventure

With the perhaps surprisingly swift collapse of the wreckers the marine leaders have little to worry about except maintaining good order while they wait for the storm to quiet and the Captain to arrive. By dawn the storm will be dying away and the Pashen will have established good moorings. If left to their own devices the marines will likely loot the camp and rape the wreckers. If the wreckers ended up giving the group a fight the marines might be eager to lynch some of the captives. The key to the situation is to ensure that none of the men are allowed to get drunk or search the wrecked cargo without supervision.

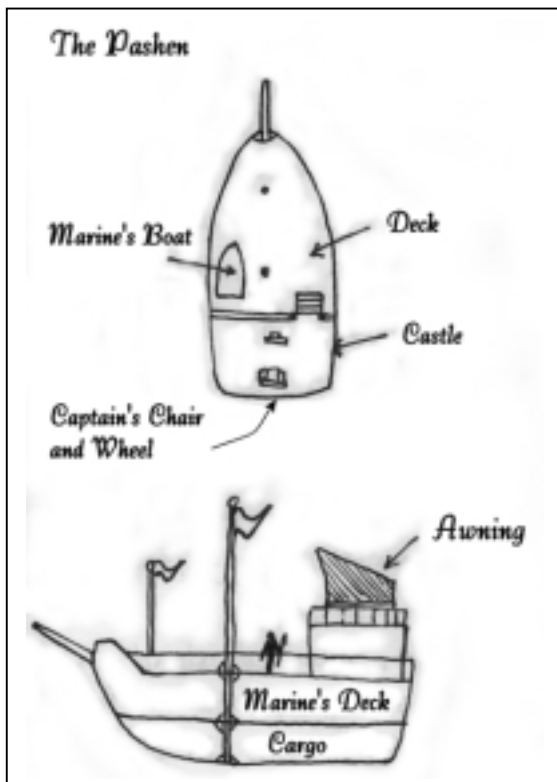
When the Captain arrives he orders the summary execution of two or three of the wreckers (presuming that there are plenty left alive). The rest are taken as captives back to the Pashen which then sets sail south back to Athkatla.

The Fate of the Wreckers

The Captain intends to sell the women and children into slavery for the benefit of his own purse, the men are to be hung on the harbourside. None of the villagers will ever see the North again. The threat of the wreckers is over.

The Pashen

The Pashen is a three deck coaster capable of swiftly transporting small numbers of troops and accompanying small load of cargo. Only the Captain has his own cabin, the Mate and Bosun share the second cabin and the marine commander lives with the other marines below deck.



The Pashen has a crew of fifteen men and can carry a complement of twenty marines.

It has a protected castle to the aft of the ship which shields its wheel and the captain's chair. Due to Amn's sunny climate the castle is usual rigged with an awning to shade the steering crew.

The Pashen has had a small additional sail fitted to fore allowing it to tack and making it marginally faster than might be expected. As this secondary sail is a later addition to the ship it is not as well secured to the frame and under stress is more vulnerable to snapping than normal two mast ships.

The Pashen is owned and operated by the Amn Navy but has no regular crew and is usual manned with hired hands and mercenaries.

Political Opinion: The Virtue of Perversity

Not every **carnel** issue has an impassioned political rant in it but there are some topics that are worth discussing and some that cannot be ignored. One of these is the insidious attack being made by the current British government on the ancient right to trial by jury.

It is not exactly a popular cause, it is not that well understood, it is a difficult issue and it is unlikely to make a difference to Joe Average's daily life. Why then is it important? I feel that there are two reasons: firstly it is a dramatically important democratic duty, second it is a valuable check against elitism within society.

Every member of the electoral roll is eligible to be a juror, jurors are selected at random from the roll and usually selection can be guaranteed to occur at the least convenient time for the juror. Let us not be romantic here, large numbers of people try to avoid jury service and with good reason, it is dull, poorly compensated, unsociable and the matters presided over in courts do not usually display human spirit at its best.

That is why it is called jury *service* rather than “jury holiday camp” or “jury 18-30”. It is a service that is provided to the whole community *by* the whole community.

Law courts are unedifying places at the best of times, chummy clumps of well-paid men amiably agree to rake in as much cash as they possibly can before breaking for an early dinner. The one redeeming concept in the whole matter is the idea of an individual being judged, not by “learned men” but by their peers. Jurors, as flawed as those they judge, pass a simple verdict on the verbal gymnastics they have witnessed and perhaps if they are lucky some solid element of physical evidence which they can assess for themselves.

Lawyers tend to wish to reduce Law down to volume after volume of precedents, summaries and prior cases, adding only their own eloquence and peculiar brand of nit picking. A jury is rarely in the same boat, they tend to be ignorant of the judgements of their predecessors and are as much irritated as delighted by an advocate's sniping. Their judgement is often motivated by nothing more than their innate sense of justice and their own moral sensibilities.

Such sensibilities often give rise to decisions that go against precedent and that cast aside the oratory of the advocate, that indeed perhaps go against the evidence “in the court”. These are the judgements that the people make on themselves. These judgements are spurned in the legal profession as “perverse” because they go against the “legal logic” that the lawyer has spent so long acquiring.

Their perversity however grants them true value. I believe that if matters were left to lawyers we would still be executing people for stealing sheep. When a jury turns aside “logic” for what they understand to be “justice” then and only then does our legal system show its worth.

Drug liberalisation in this country, for example, only comes when juries refuse to convict the terminally ill for the possession of cannabis. Logic, the reason of the written law, dictates that these people must be condemned, only our own moral sense leads us to recognise the futility of attempting to inflict punishment.

Our legal and democratic system is in severe need of more perversity, not less, especially when that perversity is the expression of will of the ordinary voter.

Classic Book Review

In the classic book review section I like to try and highlight books that I feel are very good (that sense of the word “classic”) but are under appreciated or generally not very well know.

By this definition then *Perdido Street Station* might make an unusual choice as while it is certainly a great book it also far from obscure. On the other hand it is not exactly widely known either, which is a shame as I sincerely believe that this is one of the best written and most enjoyable British novels of the last few years.

Categorising *Perdido Street Station* (*PSS*) is difficult, it is most definitely not a literary novel but it certain possesses both intellectual and literary ambitions. It might lazily be defined as Science Fantasy combining as it does Sci Fi, Steampunk and Fantasy conventions. The trouble (and the virtue) is that the resulting synthesis lands in none of those buckets. It is not really worth trying to pigeonhole *PSS* as it seems to be one of those books whose depth provides a great deal of room for interpretation.

It is set in the fictional city of New Crobuzon a city far too similar to London for the resemblance to be a coincidence. Especially as author China Miéville is himself a London resident. New Crobuzon is divided by the confluence of two rivers and the elevated train lines that run to the heart of the city, *Perdido Street Station* itself.

The city is run by a corrupt dystopian Parliament whose palace is on an island in the river. While being extremely repressive in a fascistical vein the oligarchs of the city are driven by a conservative desire to maintain the city’s equilibrium against “dangerous” forces both from within and without. They are practical, elitist and unfeeling technocrats.

The city’s populous is made up mostly of humans but has numerous immigrant races all pursuing their own way of life in their own areas of the city. As a result the city is superficially cosmopolitan but almost tribal under the surface.

The familiarity of this description makes it hard for me to believe that Miéville is *not* trying to create an analysis of modern London through its fictional re-creation. It is an ambiguous point though as there is enough invention and depth to New Crobuzon to dispute the argument.

I feel that the book works on two distinct levels but both are contained within a frame of evocative, powerful, even sensual prose. At the very least there is a ripping yarn to be had free of the usual clichés of poor imaginative fiction. The first level is the adventure and trials of the well-drawn protagonists, a narrative that is brave enough to include the struggles of morality and philosophy as well as mere physical jeopardy.

The second is the wider level of allegory and while no two people who I have spoken to about the book have agreed entirely on what the allegory *is* all agree that *PSS* is a book that addresses wider issues. Debating and discussing the book has been for me as interesting as simply reading it. I would not be brave enough to say that I understand *PSS* exactly but I would say that perhaps I understand people a lot more for having read it. Finally here is a book that manages to both entertain and inform, to provoke both thought and emotion. A serious book that amuses without pretension or pandering, in short, the very best kind of book and one worthy of its predecessors in both fantasy and literary genres.