The Rise of Ransom City

a Crooked Timber

Book Event

The Rise of Ransom City

by

Felix Gilman

Crooked Timber

Book Event

The Rise of Ransom City Book Event—a round-table discussion of Felix Gilman's novel, *The Rise of Ransom City*—ran on Crooked Timber from May 4 to May 14, 2013.

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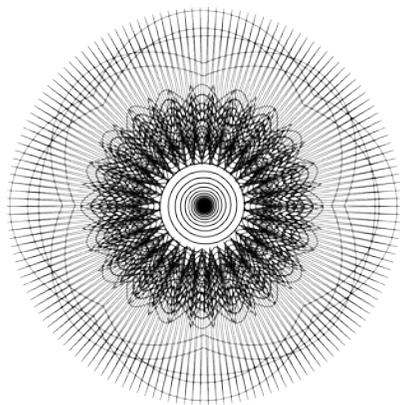
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Lizardbreath

As an undiscerning, lowbrow reader, my reactions to books are heavily driven by plot; I expect competent prose, but what I'm usually looking for in genre fiction is a series of engaging events that wraps up neatly with a bow on the end. On the other hand, while both *The Half-Made World* and *The Rise Of Ransom City* are entertainingly written in terms of story and event, the structure of the setting is more interesting than anything that actually happens in either book.

The most obvious thing to be said about *The Half-Made World* and *The Rise Of Ransom City* is that they are fantasy Westerns, centered on a long-term war between the Line and the Gun: industrial totalitarianism against anarchic violence. The fantasy Western is a familiar setting for speculative fiction, from Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series to *Firefly,* but Gilman makes it unfamiliar by broadening the setting beyond the stylized frontier/gunman/saloon/dusty cattle-drive world of a TV Western to include a range of other aspects of the nineteenth century American West, and putting those aspects together in a way that is very alien to my sense of what the American West generally represents.

While Gilman's West includes the elements of the standard "Western", its setting is geographically and structurally complicated. It's spatially vague, in that I couldn't dream of

drawing a map, but along with the half-made world of the frontier Rim, it includes a rich, aristocratic South (the baronies of the Delta), midwestern farming towns like something out of Tom Sawyer where Ransom, the protagonist of the second book,[1] grew up, a Mississippi-style river with riverboats and at least one but implicitly several business-driven Chicagoesque midwestern cities.

What's missing is as interesting as what's there; there's no East, and as part of there being no East, there's no recent history of the sort you'd expect in a version of the American nineteenth century. While there's an east-to-west gradient of civilization with the more civilized cities to the east of the frontier Rim, there's no East in the sense of a much-longer-settled, denser, more industrialized area with a longer history, and no sense of the West generally as a place where the entire population arrived fairly recently from someplace else, no "What was your name in the States?" There's a Europe-analog, the old countries over the mountains, but they're inaccessible and while there are references to people having ancestry derived from the 'European' countries, there's no sense that there was any sort of recent mass immigration (also, and I don't know whether this was purposeful, they're explicitly to the north, rather than east, of the western setting of the books). And while there's history—*The Half-Made World* involves the 'European' protagonist relying on a children's history of the West as a source of information—it's a static feeling history, without much in the way of progress or motion. The war between Gun and Line has been going on almost since the first

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1 Ransom, as a traveling showman/inventor, is certainly a familiar Western type, along the lines of O Henry's Jeff Peters, or The Rainmaker but it's weird running into him as anything other than a con man—I wouldn't have thought you could have taken out the fraudulent aspect and left the character recognizably the same type.

settlement of the West four hundred years before the events of both books, and nothing significant seems to have happened one way or the other in that four centuries.

The Line and the Gun, as representing developed industry versus frontier anarchy, should take the place of the East/West opposition that seems missing from Gilman's setting, but the pieces don't line up right. First, neither power is geographically well-defined. Line-controlled territory shows up either as places in the process of being destroyed while being taken over by the Line, or as what seem to be individual buildings, the Stations. While there must be areas, rather than merely points, that are Line-controlled, we don't really see them. Gun-controlled territory is even less visible; while the Line shows up as giant buildings, the Gun, as a power, appears only in terms of its individual Agents. Second there's really no feeling at all of Gun-controlled territory as a place that Linesmen can flee to, of the Gun as defining a safety-valve for the Line's excess population where people can go to find open land and redefine themselves. If part of the meaning of the American West is Horace Greeley's exhortation to "Go West, young man," the Gun absolutely fails to take that role in relation to the Line.

Instead, both the Gun and the Line close in, claustrophobically, on the unaffiliated areas where most of both books take place. The closest things to a third place allowing escape from both are the Red Valley Republic, which we encounter only after it has been already crushed by the Line, and Ransom City, which exists only in the form of an expedition into the wilderness that is never heard from again. The frame story in *The Rise of Ransom City* takes place after the war between Gun and Line is over, and it's implied, without quite being stated, that the McGuffin-wielding forces of Alverhuysen and Creedmoor were successful in destroying both, but it's clear throughout both books that flight from Gun and Line is hopeless: while they're eventually (probably) defeated in head-on battle, they can't possibly be avoided.

Recasting the frontier as a place that's anything but open and free, and is instead only temporarily open before being imminently consumed by rival horrors, is disturbingly effective in making an overfamiliar setting new and horrifying. Gilman turns a set of tropes usually used to stand for limitless possibility into a cramped, hemmed-in nightmare. It's a neat trick—every other Western I've ever seen or read has now become much creepier in retrospect.

2.

The Half-Believed World

John Holbo

I was going to get started listening to Ian Tregillis, *Bitter Seeds* today. It's book 1 of a trilogy whose conclusion is getting a boost on Boing Boing:

> Milkweed began in 2010 with *Bitter Seeds*, an alternate history WWII novel about a Nazi doctor who creates a race of twisted X-Men through a program of brutal experimentation; and of the British counter-strategy: calling up the British warlocks and paying the blood-price to the lurking elder gods who would change the very laws of physics in exchange for the blood of innocents. These elder gods, the Eidolons, hate humanity and wish to annihilate us, but we are so puny that they can only perceive us when we bleed for them. With each conjuration of the Eidolons on Britain's behalf, the warlocks bring closer the day when the Eidolons will break through and wipe humanity's stain off the universe.

Sounds like fun!

But not today! Henry tells me I'm late to *The Rise of Ransom City*. Which is, come to think of it, probably similar, rock and hard place-wise. (So I'm making a comparative point here, not just digressing, kids! This rock-hard-place story structure is, I think, of analytic interest.) In Gilman's faux-19th Century

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America fantascientifiction alt-history, and the previous installment, *The Half-Made World*, Gilman's human protagonists spend most of their time on the run, or watching for their chance to run, or just laying low, for fear of being crushed between sinister, inhuman, vaguely unworldly forces of Line and Gun. The Line is technological, but also demonic— demon trains, running on rails laid down by regimented, reduced human servants. And how long are such masters likely to need even such machine-servicing specimens as we humans can be made into? I listened to audiobook versions of both books, so I can't flip through to transcribe tasty quotes. I'll just crib from Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, which is public domain and— eh, close enough:

> "About that matter," exclaimed the impulsive bachelor, going off at the hint like a rocket, "all thinking minds are, now-a-days, coming to the conclusion— one derived from an immense hereditary experience— see what Horace and others of the ancients say of servants— coming to the conclusion, I say, that boy or man, the human animal is, for most work-purposes, a losing animal. Can't be trusted; less trustworthy than oxen; for conscientiousness a turn-spit dog excels him. Hence these thousand new inventions— carding machines, horseshoe machines, tunnel-boring machines, reaping machines, apple-paring machines, boot-blacking machines, sewing machines, shaving machines, run-of-errand machines, dumb-waiter machines, and the Lord-only-knows-what machines; all of which announce the era when that refractory animal, the working or serving man, shall be a buried by-gone, a superseded fossil. Shortly prior to which glorious time, I doubt not that a price will be put upon their peltries as upon the knavish 'possums,' especially the boys. Yes, sir (ringing his rifle

down on the deck), I rejoice to think that the day is at hand, when, prompted to it by law, I shall shoulder this gun and go out a boy-shooting."

The very metaphysics of the universe conspires against the continuation of our kind, it would seem.

"Yes, sir:— boys? Start my soul-bolts, what a difference, in a moral point of view, between a corn-husker and a boy! Sir, a corn-husker, for its patient continuance in well-doing, might not unfitly go to heaven. Do you suppose a boy will?"

"A corn-husker in heaven! (turning up the whites of his eyes). Respected sir, this way of talking as if heaven were a kind of Washington patent-office museum— oh, oh, oh!— as if mere machine-work and puppet-work went to heaven—oh, oh, oh! Things incapable of free agency, to receive the eternal reward of well-doing—oh, oh, oh!"

The forces of the Line are opposed by those of the Gun.

Again, I'll just quote Melville:

…while another peddler, who was still another versatile chevalier, hawked, in the thick of the throng, the lives of Measan, the bandit of Ohio, Murrel, the pirate of the Mississippi, and the brothers Harpe, the Thugs of the Green River country, in Kentucky— creatures, with others of the sort, one and all exterminated at the time, and for the most part, like the hunted generations of wolves in the same regions, leaving comparatively few successors;

The Gun are few. The Line are many. There's a romance to the Gun but, really, all these demons do is select a few humans to render nigh unkillable, driving them forth to wreak destruction on the Line, and any innocents caught in the crossfire.

Agents of the Gun appear dashing and distinctive compared to dreary drones of the Line; but beneath the surface, the bloodiness is just as much an awful, alienating sameness — unsuitable as a model for a human life. (Strictly, Gilman's Line-Gun struggle is three-corner, with that weapon left behind by the mysterious First Folk playing a crucial role. Not to mention Harry Ransom's somehow Folk-related 'Process'. But the First Folk — metaphysicalized analogs of Native Americans — are just as alien and inscrutable as Line and Gun, if less sinister.)

It's a good trope: tear back the veil of the world to reveal clash of cosmic forces, drawing our hero out of his or her formerly snug, or at least ordinary life. (So far, so standard.) But, rather than cosmic revelation giving the hero's life Meaning, converting him or her into the linchpin in some struggle between good and evil — the Chosen One, the Boy Who Lived, the Ring Bearer (hell, Dante's *Divine Comedy*) — the glimpse of forces from beyond only makes for an especially anxious bystander experience, rubbernecking metaphysics. It's like Dante's *Inferno* meets *The Lonely Crowd*.

Harry Ransom, inventor, makes his rambling, enthusiast's way through the land, always somehow close enough to events to get his eyebrows singed, but not really to *see*. He does great things in his way, or at least stumbles onto them, but never quite understands, even though he's very much a Big Picture-type guy. (It would be fun to write a really classic, *Lord of the Rings*-type trilogy, all from the point of view of someone who is the sort of guy/gal who craves a good quest, but nevertheless doesn't happen to be part of the Fellowship. He/she just sees the indirect effects the unfolding quest is having on the world.)

Now I know what you're thinking: wow! if there's, like, a section of Melville's *The Confidence–Man* in which our boy heroes, on the run from the sinister Hoosier Bachelor and his infernal, cider-powered Boy-Husking Device, fall in with the Harpe Thugs of Green River, who aren't dead after all, and

there's a shoot-out in which the cider explodes, taking out Bachelor and Thugs, leaving our heroes stunned and wandering in the wilderness…

No, no. *The Confidence-Man* is not about Gun versus Line. It's about the dangerous potency of belief, and the hazards of its manipulation. Confidence-Men are the threat, and yet the only salvation. Jesus was the original Confidence-Man. Belief is what makes us. And yet the things we believe, when they take solid shape, are so alien and deceiving — even demonic.

And really that's what Gilman's novels are about as well. The Wild West as Will and Representation. The world made by the wash of belief against some inscrutable, metaphysically primordial shore that both is and is not already us. (Did we make Gun and Line or did we delve too deep and release the awful stuff? When we meet the Balrog, is he us?)

In the first novel, we watch an agent of the Gun, Creedmor, racing against an agent of the Line, Lowry, out into the unmade West, seeking after [REDACTED: plot-spoilers!]Liv Alverhuysen is our accidental hero here, caught between Line and Gun on her way somewhere else, so she thinks. But Harry Ransom is, in some ways, an even better prism through which to skew-view this world, because he's a Confidence-Man who believes in what he's selling. (The most dangerous kind!) In a world half-made of belief, he's a cross between Don Quixote and a wizard who can tap into forces beyond his ken that are, odds are, best not meddled with.

The novel isn't really about the rise of Ransom City, by the way. That's just Harry's dream. Or is it?

In some ways — maybe this is a stretch — it's kind of a upside-down T*he Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. In that classic film, the railroad is colliding with the savagery of the Wild West. What ordinary folk need, at the point where Gun and Line meet, is a kind of humanized higher synthesis of these two forces; which are, after all, *human* forces, even if they are, individually, extreme and one-sided. [Plotspoiler: The Man

Who Shot Liberty Valance *didn't shoot Liberty Valance!*] Gilman's book, like the film, has an outer frame of journalistic revelation about a story of a glorious battle, long mis-told, and the rather accidental hero in the middle of it.

I was thinking of comparing Gilman's books to *The Sixth Gun*, which is a really, really great comic, working somewhat similar thematic terrain: demon six-shooters, most notably. But I've said enough.

3.

But When This Grand Cause of Terror Makes Its Appearance, What Is It?

Francis Spufford

The Half-Made World and *The Rise of Ransom City* are both rich books, full of pleasures for the reader; but the pair of them are also, to an unusual degree, in the business of being deliberately frustrating, of withholding from readers a set of expected pleasures that seemed to have been virtually promised us. I mean pleasures that are usual to fantasy — pleasures, even, that are usual to the implicit contract a plot makes between writer and reader. And it's this I want to concentrate on a little, because it seems to me that what Felix Gilman holds back, what he refuses to deliver, is essential to the power of the effect he does create. (Spoiler alert, by the way. I can't talk about what Gilman doesn't do, in plot terms, without sometimes revealing what he does.)

There's a sense, of course, in which refusing to provide the expected is absolutely basic, phrase by phrase, word by word, to all writing which aspires to be adequate at all: to fulfill Operation A of any newly-made row of words, which is to convince us that is new, or at any rate new enough to persuade us that it has some particular effort of communication behind it. A cliché by definition is a lump of expected language. All writers of narrative prose who wish their stories to live — at least,

to twitch from time to time on the slab — must therefore be engaged in a ceaseless low-level effort to keep refreshing the unpredictability of the surface of language. Even just at the level of gesture. As Gore Vidal (I think) pointed out, while crapping from a height on some bestseller of the day, it doesn't do much to write 'by crook or by hook' instead of 'by hook or by crook' — but it at least shows willing. Since Felix Gilman writes taut, witty, lexically-adventurous prose in a variety of voices and registers, he is necessarily signed up to denying expectation in this minimal sense.

His characteristic and individual refusals, though, start to come into view when you look at his attitude to describing the central inventions of the invented world of the two books. At what he will say, and what he won't, about the mythological linchpins of his own creation. Gilman's world is demon-haunted. Beyond the mountains that stand in for the Atlantic in dividing old settled kingdoms from new territories, in a west where colonisation literally fixes the terrain out of the primal murk, two sets of dark powers rule, literalising the anarchic violence of American expansion as the demons of the Gun, and the devouring order of industrial mass society as those of the Line. Far more than merely metaphors, these beings are central to the books' translation of history into fantasy, to the imaginative reconfiguration of qualities and consequences of human history into its independent drivers. Causation has been upended. From being merely epiphenomena of unpoliced spaces full of firearms, now massacre and mayhem have become the point, the goal, the chief delight of Marmion and Belphagor and the other spirits of the Gun, muttering in their blood-warm Lodge somewhere between the stars. From being merely side-effects of the industrial revolution, now noise and sickness and ugliness and uniformity have become the positive vision, the plan for the world, of the thirty-eight unkillable Engines who travel the network of the Line. Humanity's relations with these rival lords of destruction are fully

Faustian, and where they and their human followers collide, catastrophe spreads. Reading *The Half-Made World*, we hear quite a lot of the voice of the particular Gun that speaks in the mind of John Creedmoor, one of the novel's three protagonists; and we see (since hearing would destroy human ears) the telegraphed orders of the Engines, as they drive onwards their representative in the plot, the matchstick man Lowry and his army of lurching, coughing, bullying, agoraphobic little grey-clad men. But it's all consequences, it's all secondary. Of the Guns and the Engines themselves, we get only the most minute and occasional glimpses. Their motives and modes of existence are said to be beyond human understanding, not as the preliminary build-up to some full-on evocation, ripe with paradox, but as the plain warrant for the book not including them: there they aren't.

The nearest thing in either book to a visual description of an Engine is this, significantly enough given us indirectly, through a character's journal entry:

> What did the Engine look like? I saw it on the Concourse, but only in shadow, and besides the memory fades. I cannot quite express it in words. I might try to sketch its machinery, as I have sketched in these pages the neuron, the cerebellum, the pituitary gland— but to do so, I think, would miss its essence. I can say that it was long, very long; it was four, five men tall. It was jet-black and it smoked. It was plated with extrusions and grilles and thorns of iron that might have been armour, and might have been machinery, but which in any case made it rough, uneven, asymmetrical, and hideous. It reminded me somewhat of the inkblot tests devised by Professor Kohler. It reminded me also somewhat of storm-clouds. From the complex cowling at the very

front of the engine two lights shone through the gloom and the smoke of the Concourse. The light was the grey of moths' wings or dirty old ice.

Liv Alverhuysen, doctor from the East, voice of civilised neurosis and of mercy in the books, has passed the Engine at a run a few pages before, 'and perhaps that was fortunate, too'. Now, in an icy black compartment within the beast's mile-long body, she struggles to remember it. The first-person filter is a favourite device of Gilman's— he is going to use it continuously, on the grand scale, in *The Rise of Ransom City*, where the world of the book is passed to us exclusively through the unreliable voices of Harry Ransom and his editor— and there is certainly an element of pure gameplay to his preference. He likes the tricky and the partial for their own sake, just as (as in the passage above, and in all the oblique descriptions of the 'half-made' chaos of the west) he is interested for their own sake in things of uncertain shape. But we can see that his objection to reliable description isn't a reservation about vividness, perhaps a sign of a non-visual sensibility at work. Far from it. Vividness, he likes: the dirty ice eye-beams here, the comparison soon after of the train racing across salt flats to a line of ink running across clean paper, are brilliant, if carefully minimal. He doesn't mind allowing himself the occasional wild pulp ululation, either. *'Their boiling black blood, their breath!'* the novel suddenly cries out, Lovecraftianishly, as the Engine's smoke billows back at Liv.

No; the objection is surely to definiteness. Take it away, Edmund Burke, theorising the sublime in 1757:

But let it be considered that hardly anything can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one

and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea. There is a passage in the book of Job amazingly sublime, and this sublimity is principally due to the terrible uncertainty of the thing described: 'In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, fear came upon me and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face. The hair of my flesh stood up. It stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof; an image was before mine eyes; there was silence; and I heard a voice — Shall mortal man be more just than God?' We are first prepared with the utmost solemnity for the vision; we are first terrified, before we are let even into the obscure cause of our emotion: but when this grand cause of terror makes its appearance, what is it? Is it not wrapt up in the shades of its own incomprehensible darkness, more awful, more striking, more terrible, than the liveliest description, than the clearest painting, could possibly represent it?

'Terror' for Burke was a pleasure to be found here and there in literature as the Book of Job, or Milton, pushed particular psychological buttons for particular momentary effect. But it was about to start being produced deliberately, generically, in bulk, in the emerging gothic; and the whole cluster of 20th century popular literatures of the fantastic, fantasy/SF/horror, are among other things deliberate factories of grandly indefinite Burkean terror; to an extent therefore routinising the sublime, making it over itself into a predictable clause of the writer-reader contract of expectations. And there are certainly aspects of Gilman's use of sublimity which might seem to come under this kind of good-management heading, to be routine and (as it were) tactical. For a start, Gilman has a strong negative motive for not letting us know too much or see too much about the Engines. As Burke goes on to point

out, both literal pictures and writing that is too pictorial tip over easily into 'the ludicrous' if they try for terror. The danger of bathos yawns very nearby, in *The Half-Made World*. Gilman is writing villains (as he's said himself) who are 'Giant Evil Trains': he really, really needs to avoid specifying himself down into writing a kind of satanic Reverend W. Awdry adventure, featuring Belial the Bad Engine.

But I would argue that he belongs in the much rarer category of fantasists for whom the Burkean sublime still retains its original expectation-confuting power, and with it its power to shock and confuse. He is interested in it for the sake of its disruptive potential, not for its efficiencies as a recipe. If there is, so to speak, a 'normal' sublime lodged in fantasy now, it comes with a promise that what is withheld in one way will be restored in another. If writers have learned from Lovecraft how to milk the terror of the not-quite-seen, of monstrosity asserted to be unimaginable yet equipped with a few delicately phobia-inducing qualities of texture— then the implication is that a compensating resolution will be supplied in plot terms. We won't ever quite see Cthulhu, but we'll be led through a narrative catastrophe which is very clear, very definite, very distinct. Resolution will *not* be withheld.

In Gilman's case, though, the pulp energy and violence are there (the body count of the two books is enormous) but the delicate non-resolution of the sublime descriptions— the way in which stormcloud, Rorschach blot, hint of a crown of mechanical thorns, all become visually active without settling into visual coherence— is, instead, matched on the scale of narrative by a particular kind of non-resolution there, too. The monsters you can't quite see are, if anything, metonyms for plots you can't quite declare finished.

Gilman rules one plot closure out in *THMW* before he even begins. The war of Line with Gun is the Matter of America, transmogrified, but the consoling, canonical reconciliation of America's violences and America's masses within America's

civil religion has been pre-sabotaged. The Red River Republic has already risen, failed, and vanished from the scene. The remnant of it in the wilderness that Liv and Creedmoor stumble on is a repellent, simple-minded little Sparta. Then in *The Rise of Ransom City*, Gilman brings the Republic back, but casually, almost dismissively, without ever letting it occupy the focus of the book. I don't know which is more successfully shocking: the original abolition, or the Republic's return on terms which make it clear that Gilman cares far more about not providing a conventional sequel, in which we might have seen the double possession of the land by Line and Gun exorcised within our view. He's willing to reverse the political withholding of the first book, but only because it has been trumped by another opportunity for withholding resolution that he cares about more.

For meanwhile, he has lured us with the Macguffin of a secret weapon possessed by the land's indigenes, and led us out into the wilderness while Liv and Creedmoor develop a relationship of considerable conflicted intensity, but no conventional romantic form; and then stopped, at the moment when we're told the search for the weapon against the demons is just beginning; only to resume again in the second book through the eyes of a minor character who seems to be coming along on the search, but then doesn't, and follows a destiny of his own irresolvably suspended between innocence and con-artistry, with the consequence that *we never find out what* the Macguffin was, or how Creedmor and Liv ended, or how, with the maximum ironic tidiness, the world of the books seems finally to be converging with, secularising and dwindling into, one much more like our own. Boxes that won't close are his specialty; beautiful discords; inventions that, having taken the license of fantasy to curve away from our world, then refuse to curve reassuringly back again.

One possible analogy that strikes me is with David Foster Wallace's explicit promise, in *Infinite Jest*, that the parallel lines

of his two plots would eventually meet, only for the novel to end with them still as separate as ever. But that, I take it, was a high-modernist point being made about the real, and about its unrepresentability except by means that included the mimetic sensations of not-fitting, not-solving, not-ending. Whereas this is—

[I had a beautiful formulation of what this is, but alas there is not room for it in this margin.]

4.

On the Meeting of Epic Fantasy and Western in Felix Gilman's Half-Made World Duology

Abigail Nussbaum

I

Felix Gilman's *The Half-Made World* and *The Rise of Ransom City* tell a familiar story in an unexpected way. There is a fantasy world. There is a fantastic menace plaguing it. There is a magical weapon that could destroy that menace. There is a plucky hero, or heroes, who undertake to retrieve that weapon. There is a war that emerges from, enables, and/or complicates their efforts.

It's a story we all know, which Gilman seems very much aware of; in his telling of it, he seems determined to confound the expectations that emerge from that knowledge. For one thing, our heroes are neither particularly plucky nor, until forced to by the most utter extremes of circumstances, particularly heroic. One of them, John Creedmoor, is in fact a servant of The Gun, one of the Powers whose defeat is the books' business. A former idealist who bounced from one cause to another, Creedmoor took up the Gun's service after realizing that he lacked the strength of character to commit to any moral cause (and certainly not any that might require him to stay firm in his beliefs in the face of mockery and humiliation.) Throughout *The Half-Made World,* he needles

Marmion, the spirit animating his magical revolver, who has endowed him with strength, healing powers, and longevity, over the senselessness of the violence it asks him to commit. But in the end he always carries out his masters' orders — most memorably, the kidnapping of the young daughter of an industrialist, which is so bungled that the child dies before her father can even be approached for ransom. As *The Half-Made World*'s villain, Lowry, astutely puts it, Creedmoor is the kind of person who demands "to be admired both for his loyalty and for his disloyalty [to the Guns], and for his oh-so-tortured indecision between the two."

For all his claims to independence, Creedmoor in fact doesn't choose to turn his backs on the Guns in *The Half-Made World*. He's forced to by the novel's other protagonist, and the other unlikely heroine of this duology, Dr. Liv Alverhuysen, when she destroys his gun and breaks his connection to Marmion at the end of *The Half-Made World*.[1] Despite this decisive action, Liv, too, is far from a heroic figure. A psychologist from the civilized East to which the half-made world is a frontier, Liv is characterized by short-sightedness and self-absorption. She accepts a post at a frontier hospital in part because she feels at loose ends after the death of her much-older husband, and in part as a sort of middle-aged voyage of

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1 When describing that moment in *The Rise of Ransom City*, Creedmoor naturally takes all the credit: "'One thing led to another and I turned on my masters and set their business aside.' He said that last thing like it was not so difficult to do for a man of his quality, like he wanted me to be impressed by his daring."

self-discovery.[2] For most of *The Half-Made World*, however, Liv remains blinded by the self-protective lies she's brought with her from the East. Though a psychologist, she refuses to admit that the laudanum on which she's dependent is anything but a "nerve tonic," and when the healing demon at the House Dolorous, the hospital where much of *The Half-Made World* takes place, takes away the pain of her mother's murder (the effects of which have reverberated through Liv's life, leading to a mental breakdown, a loveless but safe marriage to a friend of one of her doctors, and finally the aimlessness that led her to the House Dolorous) she switches her dependence to it, all while insisting that she is conducting scientific research.

It's only in *The Half-Made World*'s second half, when Creedmoor kidnaps Liv to be the caretaker of the man in whose ruined mind might lie the secret to the weapon that could destroy the Gun and its opposite number, the Line, that she begins to look outside herself. But though *The Rise of Ransom City* occasionally gestures towards Liv as a heroine — when we meet her in that book, she has dedicated herself to the cause of finding the weapon and ending the war — this person sits uneasily with the frequently selfish Liv we knew in *The Half-Made World*. The folk figure that coalesces around her, half saint, half angel of deliverance, is so at odds with the real person that it undercuts our ability to take her seriously as a heroine. When we finally meet the real Liv again, towards the end of *The Rise of Ransom City*, she's been shunted off to the war's sidelines, muttering darkly about the leaders of the rebellion, to whom she gave her weapon.

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2 Though in fact Liv is a young woman, only in her early thirties; whether the fact that this is so hard to keep straight in light of Liv's behavior and the way other characters treat her is a flaw in the novel or a deliberate choice by Gilman is something I haven't managed to settle to my satisfaction.

The person who meets Liv at the end of *The Rise of Ransom City,* and who narrates that book, is perhaps the closest that either of these books come to a classic heroic figure. Harry Ransom is an inventor, a dreamer, an avid believer in the power of the individual to shape and remake his world, a person who believes — and who has the charisma, wit, and general affability to persuade others to believe — that he has been touched by destiny. In short, he is everything that the hero of the kind of epic fantasy we've been talking about needs to be. The crux of *The Rise of Ransom City* is Harry's arrival in the great metropolis of Jasper City, and like Dorothy Gale when she arrives at that other city named for a precious stone, he is primped, pampered, and made much of, embraced as a conquering hero simply for the promise — in Harry's case, a promise he makes himself — to deliver the city from looming danger. When Harry finally gets to meet the wizard, how-ever — or in this case, Mr. Alfred Baxter, head of the Baxter Trust and Jasper City's top businessman and entrepreneur, whom Harry has admired and emulated since childhood — he finds not simply a fraud, but a puppet of the Line, a role that Harry himself is soon forced to assume, delivering Jasper City into the Line's hands. "I never said that this would be a story of triumph," Harry tells us. "For the most part it is not." And indeed, *The Rise of Ransom City* is mainly an apologia directed at an audience that views Harry not as a hero but as a traitor and a collaborator.

On top of having no traditional hero figure, the books defy the expectations raised by their story in the way they tell it — or rather, in the way they refuse to tell is. *The Half-Made World* is all about finding the weapon that could defeat the Line and the Gun, but in the space of the novel itself, no one actually finds it — though they often come tantalizingly close, only for it to slip through their fingers. This tendency, in fact, is carried to an extent that almost feels like Gilman trolling his readers — in one scene near the end of the book,

Creedmoor is about to hear from one of the Folk, the magical natives of the half-made world who may be behind the weapon, what all their games and manipulations have been about, but just at the moment that she's about to reveal all, a stray bullet blows her brains out.

In *The Rise of Ransom City*, meanwhile, Liv and Creedmoor's journey to finally find the weapon and use it against the Powers happens in the margins and background of Harry's narrative. The two crusaders' path crosses Harry's early in the novel, and he helps them escape from a pursuing Agent of the Gun. But after this adventure, the three characters part ways, leaving Harry to make his own idiosyncratic path to Jasper City, during which his concern is not the war but finding a job and rebuilding his invention, the Ransom Process (the first prototype of which was destroyed during his encounter with Liv and Creedmoor), with which he hopes to forge a partnership with Mr. Baxter. For the rest of the novel, Harry gives us brief and vague reports about Liv and Creedmoor's progress — towards the end of the novel, for example, there are dark hints about a terrible and bloody battle at Log Town, but no details about it are given. This is presumably because Harry — who is writing several years after the war — and his editor, Elmer Marriel Carson, who has compiled Harry's writings after several decades of painstaking work, are both assuming that their readers are natives of the half-made world, and thus know the broad outlines of the war's progress. For Gilman, however, it represents a deliberate and repeated choice to tease a certain, very familiar story, and then not tell it in such a way that draws attention to his refusal to play by the rules.

II

As a literary tactic, this deliberate contravention of fantasy's tropes and expectations is both familiar and a little old-fashioned. China Miéville pushed it into the limelight a little more than a decade ago with *Perdido Street Station* (2000) and *The Scar* (2002), and for a while it was all the rage. But while some of the changes Miéville introduced to the fantasy genre in these novels have taken root—mainly his insistence that even in the genre of secondary world epic fantasy, issues of economics and politics should be paramount—the metafictional approach of calling attention to the genre's conventions and then defying them hasn't done so. It's far more common, nowadays, for fantasy writers looking to defy the conventions laid down by Tolkien and his imitators to do so through George R.R. Martin-esque grittiness, also known, more pejoratively, as "grimdark," in which all heroes are morally compromised and often abhorrent, and stories are frequently rife with senseless violence and rape.[3] If *Perdido Street Station* ended with the shocking revelation that a heroic, sympathetic character whom our genre expectations had trained us to assume had been falsely accused of a crime was actually a rapist, a modern grimdark fantasy would probably deliver this revelation much earlier, and then challenge us to keep rooting for this character.

Gilman—whom it is no surprise to find following in Miéville's footsteps, since his debut novel, *Thunderer* (2007), owes as much to *Perdido Street Station* as Miéville's debut *King Rat* (1998) owes to Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (1996)—joins a relatively small number of writers working in the Miévillian mode, a group in which we might also include Steph Swainston's *Castle* quartet (2004-2010), the first volume of

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3 Self-declared grimdark author Joe Abercrombie recently launched a wide-ranging discussion of the value and problems with grittiness, to which Martin Lewis offers a (handy guide).

David Anthony Durham's Acacia Trilogy, *The War With the Mein* (2007) (and possibly also its sequels, which I haven't yet read), and perhaps most blatantly, J.M. McDermott's debut *Last Dragon* (2008), in which the tropes of epic fantasy and a decidedly un-epic reality are so muddled in the characters' minds that not even they are sure what kind of story they lived through.

Where Gilman sets himself apart from Miéville and these other writers is the fact that he is playing with the conventions of not one but two genres. In this, he is again no trailblazer—the deconstructed Western has become so ubiquitous that one simply doesn't see the regular kind made anymore, and the combination of narratives of Western expansion or 19th century Americana with the fantastic (sometimes knows as Weird West) has been a common trope since at least Emma Bull's *Territory*, published in 2007, and probably goes back much further than that. If the *Half-Made World* books are unusual—aside, that is, from being well-written and engaging—it is because of the completeness of their merger between genres. Gilman builds a secondary world in which everything from our history of American Western expansion is present and yet different. Instead of the original, Eastern colonies of the United States we have nations with names like Koenigswald and Juddua. Instead of the Appalachians and their Cumberland Pass we have the Opals and their pass at the town of White Rock. Instead of Chicago and St. Louis, there is the triumvirate of Gibson City, Jasper City, and Juniper City, each of which suffers its own fate in the war between the Line and the Gun. The south is known as the Baronies of the Delta, and the dominant religion is the self-improving Smiler cult.

Alongside these parallels, however, there is one unique trait, the literalized metaphor at the center of the duology's world. The further one travels to the West in Gilman's alternate America, the less solid, the less made, the world becomes. The laws of nature break down and give way to magic, and

at the furthest reaches of the West, "Sea, sky, land, day, night, [are] indistinguishable, not yet separated.... creation begins, or maybe hasn't happened yet." That creation occurs in response to human settlement, which solidifies and finally normalizes the half-made world, but the meeting between human fears and desires and the in-flux world's magic has unexpected results. It gives rise to the Line and Gun, not just metaphors for capitalism and lawlessness run amok, but manifestations of it with minds of their own, who can conscript and enslave humans to their purpose. And it enables the Ransom Process, Harry's machine for providing limitless energy which might be a perpetual motion machine, or a window into parallel universes, or a black hole.

It's in that concept of making, unmaking, and remaking that the fantasy and Western genres intersect. The wilderness, the untamed, unclaimed territory, plays a similar role in both genres. It is where the restrictions of civilization, of the society that made us, can be cast off. It is a blank slate from which we can make whatever we want, remaking ourselves in the process. It is an emptiness that unmakes us whether we want it to or not. The second half of *The Half-Made World* sees Liv and Creedmoor journeying through the unmade lands, an increasingly surreal landscape that wears away at their defenses—her self-absorbed detachment, his devotion to the Gun. This is a familiar enough story in the Western mode—the civilized, Eastern woman and the uncouth, Western man who are forced to rely on one another in the wild and transformed by the experience—as well in other realist genres that take place on the frontier.[4] But it's also a common trope of fantasy. There is a very similar sense of increasing detachment from

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4 There is in Liv, for example, much of Katherine Hepburn's character in *The African Queen*, who like her expects to maintain her civilized ways even in the wild, and is thrust into adventure by the death of a male relative and protector.

reality about Frodo and Sam's slow progress towards and in Mordor, in sharp contrast to the rational, carefully described war that parallels it.[5]

The Rise of Ransom City brings these two genres together through Harry, and his dream—after having so many of his other dreams shattered—of building the titular city, a place lit and powered by the Ransom Process, where such abundance is free for the taking, and where there is no poverty or want. It's a common dream that underpins the drive to the West—the notion that the wilderness can so remake us that in it we can cast aside human weakness and failings and build a new kind of society—and the *Half-Made World* books contain an example of another attempt at it in the form of the Red Valley Republic, a democracy founded "in accordance with the best possible theories of political virtue." In reality, however, these principles turn out to be joyless and unyielding. When Liv and Creedmoor encounter remnants of the Republic in *The*

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5 Reading these chapters in *The Half-Made World*, I found myself reminded of a similar interlude in the Israeli children's novel *The Dragon's Crown* (1986) by Uri Orlev. Orlev, best known outside of Israel as the author of the Holocaust children's novel *The Island on Bird Street* (1981), wrote what is arguably the first Hebrew epic fantasy with Dragon, in which the princess of a land in which all cruelty and unpleasantness are outlawed is forced to join forces with a prince in whose lands kindness and beauty are similarly forbidden, and with him cross the wilderness that separates their lands. Both are unmade and transformed by the experience, and through their union reach an equilibrium between their countries' two extremes. It would be surprising indeed if Gilman had intended the reference (especially as *The Dragon's Crown* hasn't been translated into English), but the point is that the trope—a wild man, a mannered woman, a wilderness, a transformation—is common to both Western and fantasy, even in places where the wilderness means something very different than it does in the US.

Half-Made World, they are zealots who prefer to face death at the hands of the Line rather than run and live to fight another day. In The Rise of Ransom City, the Republic is resurgent, but its leaders are the ones who cast Liv aside as an impediment to their war. Nevertheless, Harry persists in his dream that he can build what is essentially The Big Rock Candy Mountain (a concept that, naturally enough, has its own parallel in the half-made world.) The framing story of *The Rise of Ransom City* concerns his journey to the West with a band of followers and believers in the hopes of finding a place where that city can be built, and the final pages of Elmer Carson's narrative suggest that, in the magic-suffused unmade realms, he may have finally succeeded at making a new kind of human society.

III

All of which leads to the question: why has Gilman written this duology? What does he hope to accomplish by mixing two genres and turning their conventions on their heads? When Miéville took the top off fantasy with *Perdido Street Station,* it was with a clearly stated political aim. By reacting against the conventions of epic fantasy, Miéville was striking out against the assumptions that underpinned Tolkien, and his followers', worlds — that there are such things as clear-cut heroes and villains, that a person can be classed into one of those groups according to their race, that natural, prophesied kings exist and that it would be a good idea if they were in charge, and that an all-encompassing war can be the only way to save the world from endless evil — assumptions that can and still do underpin real-world political thought. The deconstruction of the Western genre comes from a similar impulse, which questions the core tenets — chief among them Manifest Destiny — through which an often bloody and brutal conquest was justified. Gilman's books often gesture towards such a political awareness, through their nightmarish depiction of the Line, as

an endlessly churning, perpetually-hungry maw of inhuman industry that swallows up and destroys humanity in its thirst for expansion, and through the feeling of claustrophobia and limited options that permeates *The Half-Made World,* and the later chapters of *The Rise of Ransom City,* as our three heroes realize how small they are not only before the demons of the Line and Gun, but before the political apparatus of the Red Valley Republic.

At the same time, however, these two books are underpinned by a fantasy that is, if not quite reactionary, then certainly a counterpoint to the way that the sources they draw on deconstruct their genres. It's not just that Harry does manage to build Ransom City, but that he does so *because* of the very nature of the half-made world, the fact that the laws of nature—and perhaps of human nature as well—don't apply in it. But the concept of the half-made world is rooted in some of the assumptions that the deconstructed Western tries to combat. By literalizing them in fantasy, Gilman validates notions that the Western has long since abandoned. The idea of the West as an untamed, unpeopled wilderness, which Gilman takes to such fantastic extremes in his books, ignores the very real people who were living there and taming it (even if their ideas of taming might not have been the same as ours) long before the American Western expansion. If the half-made world, on the other hand, only solidifies in the presence of human settlement, then that means that the Folk, the analogues to Native Americans in these novels—novels that otherwise take such care to present a skewed but accurate mirror image of the real West—are not human. This view is confirmed through the little that we learn about the Folk in the two books. Most notably, they are said (and seen) to resurrect after death, seem to have superhuman strength, and are able to comprehend the irrationality of the half-made and unmade lands, being themselves a part of it.

This is sadly in line with the way that narratives of Western expansion have tended to either erase Native Americans or deprecate their humanity, but while that tendency has eroded in the Western genre, it has resurfaced in fantasy. In her 2009 novel *The Thirteenth Child,* Patricia C. Wrede imagined an alternate North America populated by megafauna, and simply wished Native Americans away. That decision resulted in a fannish uproar, one that I am somewhat surprised that the *Half-Made World* books escaped, but perhaps that's because Gilman's handling of the Folk is more subtle and, sadly, more insidious. There is, for example, no evasion in either novel of the sad fate that awaits the Folk in the war—during which the Line raids their few remaining encampments with murderous abandon, looking for the equivalent to Liv's weapon or Harry's Process—or after it, when they can expect little more than enslavement and dispossession.[6] There are also some nicely cutting observations about the treatment of the Folk in The Rise of Ransom City—when Harry takes a job on a riverboat, he notes that the wheel is turned "the old-fashioned way."

> This was what the learned Professors of Jasper City would call a euphemism, which is to say a magic word to make the world seem better than it is. What I meant was that the wheel of the *Damaris* was turned by a team of Folk, who were kept in chains below.

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6 Another point worth noting is the role that race plays—or rather, does not play—in establishing status and social class among the humans of the half-made world. The characters in both books range over all shades of skin color—Harry, in particular, is repeatedly observed to have very dark skin—while the Folk are described as inhumanly pale. Though an intriguing device, its haphazard application in the books undermines its effect—Durham uses a similar device much more successfully in *The War With the Mein*.

Later, when the *Damaris* sinks, a waterlogged Harry encounters its wheel-turning Folk and realizes that neither he nor anyone else on the ship had given a thought to their survival during the evacuation (the suggestion that the Folk are strong enough that they could have broken their chains at any moment, but only did so to save their lives, is raised but not explored by the remainder of the novel). So unlike Wrede, Gilman is acknowledging the ugliness on which his analogue to the West was built. But that still leaves the Folk's inherent irrationality, and thus their inhumanity. *The Half-Made World* is a novel about systems of the world, the various ideologies through which the forces in both novels — Line, Gun, Republic — seek to remake the world. That the Folk are left out of this scheme, that they seem to have no system and indeed exist outside of human rationality (something that is also expressed through their being the source of both Liv's weapon and the Ransom Process, and through the sense in both novels that they are guiding events towards an end to the war and yet that that story can't be told because humans couldn't comprehend it) plays into too many conventions of the unreconstructed Western, in which Native Americans are "savages" with no notion of civilization or organized, complex society. While reading *The Half-Made World,* I hoped that its sequel would complicate this problematic approach, but instead *The Rise of Ransom City*, in which Harry has closer encounters with the Folk, only to realize how foreign they are to him, and how incomprehensible their worldview, only validates it.

I want very much to like the *Half-Made World* duology. Quite apart from the fact that these are engaging, well-written books set in a rich and beautifully realized world, they are doing something with the fantasy genre that I hadn't even realized I had missed seeing. And there is much more to talk about in these books than I've touched on even in this long piece — someone should definitely say more about the Ransom Process and the way that it brings touches of surrealism

(crossed with science fiction) into this fantastic Western, and there's certainly more to say about Harry's sojourn in Jasper City, for example his relationship with the brilliant, psychologically scarred inventor Adela. I hope that some of my fellow roundtable participants have expanded on these topics, if only because I would like to read some more about them in order to settle my own thoughts. But when I sit down to write about these books, I can't get past the Folk and their inhumanity, or the way that the metaphor of the half-made world plays right into notions that realist fiction has left long behind. Felix Gilman remains one of the most intriguing writers currently working in fantasy, but the flaw in his most ambitious and interesting work leaves me unable to embrace it.

5.

Stories Behind Stories

Henry Farrell

The Half-Made World and *The Rise of Ransom City* are tricky creatures. They object to being categorized. However much you might want to fix them to the corkboard (with a neatly typed label beneath, identifying species, and date and place of capture) they're going to wriggle off their pins, if they haven't already fluttered right back out of the killing jar. Books like this are not easily susceptible to chloroform.

The best I can do is to talk a bit about what they are *not*, and how (I think), they avoid a particular trap. Here, I disagree with Abigail Nussbaum, so you likely want to re-read her arguments again before you read mine. Also, I owe much of this to a long email conversation with Eleanor Arnason, (whom you *emphatically* shouldn't hold responsible for what I say, though she equally emphatically deserves my gratitude).

First— what the books aren't— which is steampunk. It's easy to understand how they might be overwhelmed by that voracious subgenre— it is obviously rather difficult to keep fantastical books with steam trains, ornithopters and submersibles safely walled away from it. But Gilman is using similar tropes for very different ends. Steampunk is self conscious Victorianism. Indeed, it's usually a quite specific and unhealthily nostalgic Victorianism, an awkward romantic encounter between starched crinolines and awkwardly twenty-first

century social values, lubricated by a compound of soot and engine-grease. Gilman isn't even faintly nostalgic, and wants to play a different kind of game.

Borges famously wrote that Kafka invented his precursors. If you read Gilman as having done the same, one imaginary progenitor might be William Gibson's and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine*. Like Gibson and Sterling, Gilman wants to look closer at the origins of the steel-hard casing of modernity, which was forged in the smithies of the Industrial Revolution, and which we are still confined within today. Even here, any ancestry is uncertain. Gilman's Ada Lovelace figure, unlike her equivalent in Gibson and Sterling, never quite manages to get her version of the analytic engine properly up and running. It's sold for cheap and then lost in a capsized riverboat. Ada's past, or future, or whatever you might want to call it, emphatically isn't the one that Gilman wants to tell us about.

Instead, he wants to tell us about America. As Cosma Shalizi has already noted, he's specifically interested in the origin-stories that America tells itself about its own particular form of modernity. The two warring forces of the Gun and the Line in the first book represent two of the core myths of America. Anarchy comes from the barrel of the Gun, a bloody ideal of the West that owes more to Cormac McCarthy than Louis L'Amour (the spirits of the Guns, whispering to their Agents from their invisible Lodge, are surely a related class of daimon to *Blood Meridian*'s Judge Holden). The Line, despite its malefic train-engines (never precisely described) is as much a realization of 1930s Fordism, and perhaps even the 1950s ideal of big organization and mass production, as Gradgrindian capitalism. There are motor-cars as well as Heavier-Than-Air-Vehicles. The Line's name hints at the logic of the assembly line as well as that of the railway. The whey-faced proletariat are Victorian enough but they are very nearly indistinguishable from their immediate superiors, grey Organization Men who direct them towards ends that are both superficially rational

and genuinely insane. All are disposable from the perspective of the Line's tutelary spirits, the Engines, who seem to have no goal beyond seeing their system endlessly propagate itself outwards (just as the Gun has no goal or strategy beyond perpetuating chaos)

The second book canvases another American myth— the self-made man, inventor and entrepreneur who does his best to prevail in the face of hostility and lawsuits from established trusts. Professor Harry Ransom has bits of O. Henry's Jeff Peters in his personal ancestry, but also L.Frank Baum's Oz, and perhaps, bits of Mark Twain too (a charming and amiable narrator of uncertain racial background who likely isn't nearly half as ingenuous as he lets on, and ends up lighting out for the territories). If the first book has the impending displacement of the Gun and the Line by the Red Valley Republic as its backdrop, the second book makes it clear that the Republic's victory is no better and no worse than an escape into the unpleasantness and banality of America-as-it-is. Professor Ransom, and his unlikely ideal city of inventors, renegades, potterers and ne'er-do-wells disappears into the myth of the Far West, beckoning, but (like the multiple shadows cast by Ransom's Leaf, and the ghosts of possibility thrown off by the workings of his Apparatus) not entirely present.

As Nussbaum rightly points out, all of this presents Gilman with a problem. These *are* recognizable versions of the origin stories that America tells itself about itself. But all of these stories radically displace another set of stories— the stories that native Americans had about themselves and their land before the settlers came, not to mention the stories about how the settlers treated them when they arrived. And this makes it difficult for writers like Gilman (who is nearly as pale, and quite as European as I am) to write about the Matter of America without dealing with difficult issues of representation. How do you faithfully reflect the story that got deliberately obliterated in the making of the stories that you are playing off?

One choice is to try somehow to smooth the problem away as if it didn't exist, either absorbing it within the colonial narrative (a la Orson Scott Card's Alvin Maker books, where native Americans become a precursor to magic-fuelled Mormonism) or magically making it disappear (as in Patricia Wrede's books, where a North America full of megafauna is there for the colonials to explore, conveniently free of any aboriginal inhabitants to complicate matters). This is inadvisable. Even when well intentioned (as I imagine Wrede's books *were* well intentioned) the consequences are unfortunate.[1]

Yet the alternative — of trying somehow to represent the native American perspective — presents issues that are nearly equally as tricky. Representation, even when kindly intended, can become an act of cultural expropriation. This is *especially* so in a work of speculative fiction, where one almost inevitably is going to be creating imaginary cultures that cannot really fully and faithfully reflect the cultures that they are playing off. It's not entirely impossible — there are a couple of writers out there, with deep anthropological knowledge, who seem to me at least to have represented possible alternative perspectives well (not that I should be anyone's idea of an authoritative judge). Interestingly, the work that seems to me to be most nearly successful is science fiction rather than fantasy ("anthropological" sf such as LeGuin, Arnason, and Maureen McHugh's *Mission Child*). Perhaps there's some lesson one could generalize from here about how the tropes of SF make it easier to avoid boundary confusion than the tropes of fantasy. Perhaps not.

Still, this is really hard to do, and perhaps effectively *impossible* to do in a pair of novels which talk about the stories that

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1 There are very similar problems in the representation of the slavery of Africans in the making of America, which Gilman addresses, I think, in similar ways to the ones I identify below; I invite him to talk about this in his response if he wants to.

make up America while being very deliberately unfaithful to them. I don't think that there is enough imaginative distance there to avoid failing badly. Equally, it is impossible to ignore the challenge without at best making your account of the making of America into a strained exercise in pretending away the problem, and at worst a nasty ideological confection.

What Gilman does is something else. He makes it clear that there are other perspectives on his stories, perspectives that reflect parts of both the native experience, and the experience of enslaved Africans in his narrative, but refuses to represent those perspectives directly. Gilman's "Folk" are both profoundly aboriginal to the land and enslaved by the settlers, when they are not entirely wiped out. They are crucial to the development of both books. Their story is a central one — arguably *the* central one — in how Gilman's Half Made World develops and changes over the course of the two novels. Yet it is never directly told, and is only encountered glancingly, through the individually and collectively inadequate perspectives of the settlers. The only place where the Folk's viewpoint is at all *directly represented* is a short and highly ambiguous passage towards the end of the first book, which very deliberately doesn't provide us with much in the way of useful information. It tells us that there *is* a perspective (and almost certainly, many perspectives) that aren't being described, and that the Folk are *in principle* intelligible, but very deliberately doesn't do more than that. All that we know about the Folk's *actual* motivations are vague and contradictory hints.

This allows Gilman to tell us a story, or stories, while making it clear that there is another, more important story that he isn't telling. The two main protagonists of the first novel, with their all-consuming Quest to defeat the Gun and Line, become bit-players in Professor Harry Ransom's tall tale about his rise and fall in the second. This story in turn is framed by Elmer Merrial Carson's on-and-off search over decades for the different parts of Ransom's tale, which he clearly finds

amusing, vexing, more accurate than he might have expected, but not entirely convincing. And beyond all these stories is the deliberately untold story of the Folk, from which all these other stories are distractions.

The most important moment in the two books is in the middle of *The Rise of Ransom City,* where the narrator, Professor Harry Ransom, encounters a group of the Folk after the riverboat he was travelling on sinks. He tries to justify himself, and his whole vainglorious story about how he has used their knowledge to construct his Apparatus to them, but gradually realizes that they're all quietly laughing at him. They obviously find him a little ridiculous. It's a wonderful deflationary moment— and is the moment at which the reader realizes that there's another story, around which the imaginary world could be pivoted like an axis, to reveal an entirely different understanding of what has been going on over the course of the two books.

Years ago, Michael Swanwick, another very fine writer, argued that the difference between science fiction and fantasy is that the first takes place in a knowable universe, the second in an unknowable one. At the heart of fantasy there is always mystery. The trick of writing good fantasy is somehow to sidetrack the reader's desire for complete revelation of the mysterious without entirely frustrating it. Gilman does this, very consciously and deliberately, but employs the mystery at the heart of his two books to do something else besides. By making the mystery consonant with the hidden story of the Folk, he avoids having to represent what the Folk mean to themselves. Hence, he solves the problem of *acknowledging* them without directly *representing* them.

It's a risky strategy— and for some readers, it may not work. Clearly, for Nussbaum, it didn't work. Even so, I'm sure that it's a risk he's taking with eyes open and with good intentions. The two books are about both the stories that America tells itself, and the story that it doesn't, because to tell that story

would be to invalidate the others. The former are represented directly, the second only indirectly and ambiguously sketched. I contend that this shouldn't be read as a statement that the Folk are *alien* in some deep sense, but rather, a statement of epistemological and cultural modesty. That all that a white British emigre can plausibly claim to represent or truly understand, are those bits of the culture closely related to the one that he himself grew up in. To talk on behalf of the other is to take liberties that he isn't entitled to take— so all he can do is to acknowledge that they are genuinely different, that they have their own story, and that it is not only a valid one, but plausibly a better and more important one than the stories that he can tell.

6.
Meanwhile in Jasper City . . .

Maria Farrell

In *The Rise of Ransom City*, Felix Gilman attempts a couple of tricks one really shouldn't try at home. First, he shows rather than tells how history is made by economics, politics and changes in popular belief, not the bravery of heroes. Second, he keeps much of the plot-driving action off-stage. The narrator Harry Ransom is a charismatic storyteller with a knack for coming close to the action but never quite bending it to his will. He says at the outset that he's changed history four times. But when he explains how, you realize Ransom's usually a part of someone else's plan or that it's something he failed to do that changes how things turn out. It's all quite subtly done and my first read-through was spent in a fog of mild frustration. It wasn't until I realized that Ransom is more Forrest Gump than secret agent that I started to get along with this book.

Ransom first turns up in *The Rise of Ransom City's* predecessor, The Half-Made World. He's the snake oil salesman hawking a light-show around the tiny, cut-off towns of the American West when an Agent of the Gun, John Creedmoor, triggers a battle with the rival forces of the Line. The town of Kloan is destroyed and everyone flees. In The Rise of Ransom City, Ransom is still on the road and teams up unknowingly with Creedmoor and an East Coast psychologist, Liv Alvurhuysen, who are trying to find a secret weapon that can destroy the god-like Gun and Line, and end the centuries long war between them. A classic quest, you might think. Except

that it turns out — obliquely — that the rapidly spreading belief that the warring super-human powers can be destroyed could be more potent than the weapon itself.

The Rise of Ransom City is very good at rushing you from one adventure to the next, while slyly confounding expectations of what will be explained. The ever-changing settings of Ransom's mishaps are terrific fun. They include a gambling river-boat, a doomed town on a snowy mountain pass, a high class brothel and a lonely industrial penthouse suite. There's lots of lovely steam punk with a self-playing, perpetual motion piano and its maker Adela, and a convincing slave economy built on the whipped backs of the native Folk, who may or may not be manipulating the action. The real players, Creedmoor and Liv, break off half way through and continue their adventures elsewhere, but there's plenty to admire and enjoy while you try to figure out what's really going on.

On the face of it, Harry Ransom is a great narrator. He's a self-mythologising showman who stumbled as a teenager onto the intuitive mathematics of the Folk's ability to tap a source of perpetual energy. Ransom takes his light-machine on the road, hawking at the same time his System of Exercises, vegetarianism and the blue-prints for a surprisingly modernist utopia to be built in the jungles of the Half-Made World. I suspect he also chews his food one hundred times and has wild theories on child-rearing and the state of nature, once you get him going.

But Ransom's hard won self-knowledge and rueful noticing that he's lapsed yet again into self-promotion mean that he's far from a one-note character. He makes funny, under-stated asides, especially about family life. His most endearing act is to defy expectations regarding a romantic interest and to more deeply mourn another character who seems to be peripheral. But Ransom is a frustrating narrator when you get

thinking about what you're not being told. He's self-obsessed, never thinks ahead and he evades hard questions about what anything means:

"I have that cast of mind that can only think about a problem when it can be solved."

Well, that's convenient if you don't want the storyteller to reveal anything too soon or even at all!

Although the novel's setting is an epic conflict between the forces of gun-toting individualism and the rationalizing logic of the locomotive, Ransom is on his own quest; to meet his great hero, Alfred Baxter. Baxter is a self-made millionaire industrialist (all hard work; no luck) whose autobiography is Ransom's bible. Ransom is convinced Baxter will recognize him as a kindred spirit and back the mass production of the perpetual energy machine. It never occurs to him that the very last thing a robber baron wants is a technologically disruptive entrepreneur nipping at his heels.

When Ransom and Baxter finally meet, Ransom learns that his hero is a mere cipher. Baxter is not the living embodiment of heroic individualism but its precise opposite, a figure-head of the industrialising behemoth of structural economic change. Worse still, Ransom becomes just such an empty symbol himself. At this point, I expected Ransom to somehow talk or trick his way out of it. After all, he's the real hero. But, again, the story defies expectations. Ransom remains trapped, dolefully signing his name to deeds history won't forgive unless it can forget him entirely. He fails to find a way to triumph or even, for too long, a way out. And meanwhile, elsewhere, epic forces confront each other. Battles are won. Friends are lost. And somewhere, far offstage, Creedmoor, Liv and others continue the real struggle.

One of the first things Ransom ever tells us is that he's a victim of circumstance. It's probably the truest thing he says. Yet like the dying General Enver of *The Half-Made World* who had "… *taken the mere words of politicians and philosophers*

and … beaten the world into their mold," Ransom is obsessed with staking out his place in history. He's convinced that readers of his story will live in an era when the war is almost forgotten — though he's hazy on how that will actually occur — and that the fame of Ransom City will ensure his immortality.

But this is not the kind of novel where the satisfyingly obvious is allowed to happen. Plucky schemes to find secret weapons are dispatched by random happenstance and the sheer force of opposing numbers. Where ideas, technology and the sheer, vast scale of structural change are what count, individuals are irrelevant. Heroism exists only in self-improvement manuals and children's storybooks. This canny huckster's claim for immortality is likely to be denied.

7.

Do Not Name These Things

Miriam Burstein

Mash-ups are everywhere these days: zombies keep finding their way into historical novels, and softcore porn into *Jane Eyre.* Making genres and modes collide is hardly a new thing; what is Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles,* after all, but dear rational Sherlock Holmes startled to find himself set loose in Bronte-esque Gothic? But Holmes vanquishes his Gothic surroundings, so that we are all back on familiar, if not entirely comforting (poor Sir Henry Baskerville …) formula territory at the end. By contrast, the vogue for zombified historical novels, vampirized Austen, and sexed-up Dickens doesn't resolve the conflicts between genres and modes so much as play them up for all their worth: yes, ladies and gentlemen, honest Abe hunted vampires.

Felix Gilman's duology *The Half-Made World* and *The Rise of Ransom City* does indeed mash things up, but to more original and serious effect. Here, the mashing involves both wildly disparate literary kinds and just as wildly disparate literary allusions and plots. The Half-Made World is … a Western, with gunslingers toting gods for guns (or, rather, Guns)? A dystopia akin to 1984 — with occasional nods to *Brave New World* tossed in — with permanently grey-faced men and women serving diabolical Engines? How about a vampire novel set in a hospital with a name right out of Spenser (House Dolorous) that has become briefly confused with *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest?* Or a straight-up fantasy with inscrutable faeries?

Allusions to nineteenth-century literature and culture surface at the oddest of moments: Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* resurrects itself as the vapid religion of the Smilers; Liv Alverhuysen drops her copy of an academic journal as she rides away in a coach, in a moment reminiscent of Becky Sharp tossing Johnson's *Dictionary* out the window in *Vanity Fair*. And the Bible is not immune, despite the fact that it doesn't appear to exist in this world. The residents of New Design, last remnants of the Republic, are suspiciously akin to the Jews wandering in search of a home. "How do you lead a whole chosen people into the wilderness, in secret?" asks President Hobart, remembering the dangers of their journey. John Creedmoor, whose initials at first seem like a coincidence, nevertheless walks murderously through the battle of New Design, shouting "Tell 'em, should the Republic survive into future generations, that *John Creedmoor* saved it! And make sure to note that he did it of his own free will!" (*HMW 442*) (Christ, or anti-Christ?) *The Rise of Ransom City*, while no means quite so wild in its combinations, nevertheless continues the theme: the suspiciously P. T. Barnum-esque narrator, tripping and falling from one stop to the next in his picaresque plot, is on a quest that looks, also suspiciously, like it has been borrowed from *The Wizard of Oz*—that is, if *The Wizard of Oz* also featured a love interest distinctly resembling Lord Byron's daughter, the mathematician Ada Lovelace, and wound up gesturing towards utopia.

Both unsettled and unsettling, the freewheeling allusiveness of Gilman's two novels offers the reader an experience something like that of his characters encountering the as-yet unmade West. In this pliable world, men inadvertently call the gods into being out of their own desires. " I have heard it said that we ourselves made them," writes Harry Ransom, "that something in those forms spoke to us and to our nightmares and obsessions and that is how the world changed, because of us" (*RRC 143*). Line and Gun, along with the other spirits that appear, are fictions in the original sense of the term,

created things—but this is creation without intentionality and without control. The half-made West sounds like Eden at times, but it's an Eden where man needs to refrain from naming things, and yet perhaps cannot help doing so. When Creedmoor encounters one of the mysterious Hillfolk, she warns him, "Do not look on this place, do not name these things, do not make them into things they are not" (*HMW 316*). Here, the danger of giving and knowing names—a trope of longstanding duration, and not only in high fantasy—upends Genesis 2:19: "And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof." In Gilman's novels, to name is all too often to name wrongly, to induce chaos in the paradoxical attempt to create order and familiarity. His Adams and Eves are already fallen, and what they make bears the marks of their fall. Although the environmentally destructive effects of the Engines certainly invokes our own anxieties, the men of Gilman's world threaten to wreck it in a fit of an absence of mind; it's no accident that Creedmoor, dealing death through New Design, announces that he does it "of his own free will," since that commodity remains in short supply, especially in the first novel. Inchoate passions call all-too-definite deadly forces into being, and those forces demand absolute control over the minds that gave them birth. (Perhaps I should have listed *Frankenstein* in my catalog of allusions running rife. Or Zeus giving birth to Athena...) Line and Gun are not formed out of some deliberate plot or conspiracy—it's not clear that there is anything that could have been done to stop them from emerging, and the miracle weapon that apparently manages to kill them, somewhere in the interstices of Ransom's fragmentary narrative, is not of man at all, but the understandably unfriendly Hillfolk.

It's not surprising, then, that when Harry Ransom encounters a lawyer ultimately under the control of the Line, the lawyer leans hard on the singular meanings of words:

> All of this is *over*, Mr. Ransom. That is the meaning of the word *injunction*, which you will see *here*, and again *here*, on this order. Only a word, all of it only words, but words of *great* power. I think you understand about words, Mr. Ransom. Why, what else is there? Now in this instance the power of this word is the power to set the world back on its proper course, to put an end to these *shenanigans* and japes and nonsense and to say who's who and what's what and who owns what. This is a word that commands you to be *silent*. (244-45)

The malleability of the West stands in stark contrast to this vision of language, in which words classify, categorize, order, and fix. Here is absolute clarity, which also turns out to be implicitly an act of violence: the ultra-rational world of Line, in which words ought to be surgically attached to their singular meanings, deforms human and other energies as much as does the freewheeling, dime-novel vision of Gun, whose Agents kill anyone and anything under the threat of the agonizing Goad. Whatever ends the mutual antagonism of Line and Gun turns out to be something that the duology does not directly represent, as if to suggest that whatever truly "set[s] the world back on its proper course" is a force beyond the constraints imposed by human naming. Which brings me back to the novels and their refusal to settle into any one genre, or to reconcile their clashing literary and historical references. Our world is not half-made, but the duology keeps escaping classification, whether by academics or by booksellers (is this SF? Adventure? A Western? Horror? *What*?). It is quite cheerfully partial, unwilling to adopt any one conveniently recognizable form.

8.

Some Scattered Points Circling About
In Search Of An Argument

Felix Gilman

I

Never respond to reviews, they tell you, in the fiction-writing community, or at least my little part of it. This is probably good prudential advice, but also in its way quite satisfying; self-effacing and self-aggrandizing at once, in a Delphic sort of way. One adopts a posture of: lo, there it is, the book, it speaks for itself or doesn't, if there was more to say the book would have said it. They don't let you get away with that sort of thing at the day job. Anyway this is now so ingrained in me that it actually feels vaguely transgressive to write this, like standing up to object at a wedding.

II

I am of course tremendously grateful to all of these very smart and thoughtful and talented writers for expending so much of their smarts and thoughtfulness on my books about Evil Trains; with particular gratitude to Henry Farrell for putting this together. There's more here than I can possibly respond to, and many interesting ideas that I need to spend more time thinking about.

III.

All the posters may well have read these books more recently than I have, certainly the first one, which is now *ancient* from my perspective; plus, they remember only the books that were actually written, whereas I also have in my head all the things that got cut, or were meant to go in but for one reason or another didn't, and thousands of changes of mind. It's very strange to go back to them.

IV.

Spoilers.

   Abigail Nussbaum's Part III points are well-taken and obviously important. Henry pretty much anticipates most of what I would say in response. I see these books as trying to create a sort of version of the settlers' dream-world, myth-world, in a reshuffled and parodically exaggerated and grotesque-ified way — trying to make this familiar historical stuff seem — as it is — really deeply strange. It is also a partial and limited viewpoint on the world.[1] There are other stories going on at the same time, other points of view. The existence of these other points of view is — I hope — presented through implication, through calling attention to gaps, through pointing offstage; the books try to draw attention to the ways in which another/ other perspective(s) is (are) repressed, excluded, distorted. This one-sidedness may be one of the things that the "half-made" title is supposed to imply and acknowledge (I say may because I don't remember precisely when I came up with the title, and have ascribed a lot of different meanings to it during the course of writing). Henry captures what I think are the roots of my reluctance to go further, to present a fully articulated

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1 Even with respect to the settlers it is very very incomplete, of course.

and fleshed out alternative perspective, a detailed *how-it-really-is* with respect to the indigenous Folk— my feeling that I cannot and should not, let's say, ventriloquize—and in particular that I cannot flesh their culture out in the same broadly parodic and not especially kind way that the elements of the settler culture are treated. (It would be different, I think, if these books were set in the real world; or even if they were set in a made-up world, but one which is supposed to be more straightforwardly realistic, less absurdist).

So yes, Harry's encounter with the Folk in the swamp is supposed to be one of the moments that nudges the reader's elbow and points outside the frame of the story, to show the existence of other perspectives from which the protagonists' perspectives appear small, incomplete, inadequate. (Not that I suppose the imagined reader needs to be told this as if it is startling news; it's more a matter of acknowledging that the issue is there and how it functions within the book). The scene is not supposed to come across as validating the idea of insurmountable alienness or irrationality.

For what it's worth, though we certainly never get enough information to grasp their culture (or even what they call themselves), their motivations are not intended to be fundamentally alien or inscrutable. My set of background rules for writing their scenes included: (1) what we see are fragments of a pre-existing culture(s), whose pre-existing centers of habitation are gone or hidden (but the General visits one of their cities); (2) various different factions and individuals among them are trying various strategies to topple, or slow, or reform, the existing Gun/Line/Nameless Middle Third power structure; (3) some of these strategies include collaboration with promising-looking elements within the settler culture(s), e.g. the strategy of helping (creating?) the Republic; (4) they're not all-wise and they don't control everything. Their strategies are not very effective during the period of the books—there is no magic bullet that can fix things— but there is a tiny hint,

in E.M.C.'s postscript at the very end of the second book, of slow progress and a different kind of relation between the indigenous population and the settlers, in the form of the Treaty of [arbitrary date a decade later]; (5) they generally understand the settlers better than vice versa, though by no means perfectly, and one of the things they understand reasonably well is how they are perceived; (6) they are inconsistent because there are different factions, geographically and culturally dispersed, and with different ideas about what to do (and many groups are just focused on survival). The project of collaborating with the Republic is not universally considered to have been a good idea, and at the time of the first book the key figures involved in that collaboration have been dead for a long time.

So — back to the swamp stand-off — the group Harry meets as a boy in the woods are not the same people as the group he meets years later and hundreds of miles away in the swamp. Even he recognizes they really can't be, before convincing himself that, well, maybe, what if they were? Therefore Group 2 can't answer his question — whether he was given the secret of the Process for a reason, and if so what reason, or whether he sort of stole it — because they don't know. And really why should they explain anything to this man who they've just met in a swamp in the dark who has almost immediately started rambling at them about how important and special he is and asking for their validation of his megalomania? They're not laughing at Harry because they're inscrutably alien; they're laughing at Harry because he's being ridiculous. Similarly, Group 1 back in the woods are laughing at Young Harry because this kid they've caught trespassing has just puffed himself up and started promising to teach them the real meaning of things he's literally just read painted on the walls of their own houses.[2] I, too, would laugh at him.

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2 Group 1 do appear to be holding long regular conversations with Harry's dad, though.

Though to be fair to Harry, in both cases he's terrified; also when he meets Group 1 he's only a boy, and when he meets Group 2 he's probably in shock after the boat sinking, and besides what *can* he say to them?—bearing in mind that his most immediate concern, outnumbered in the dark as he is, is that they will be mad at him— "Sorry" isn't going to cut it (this is what he means when he recognizes that he cannot talk his way out of this problem; he has nothing adequate to say).

But also, then, when Group 2 laughs at Harry, it's not that there's a profound mystical secret beyond comprehension or anything like that; there is in principle a straightforwardly communicable answer to Harry's question, Harry's just in the wrong place at the wrong time to get it. Also he probably wouldn't listen to Group 2 even if they did take it upon themselves to sit down and work through his problems with him, because the most probable answer to Harry's question is that his notion of being chosen by Group 1 for some important purpose is all in his head. He doesn't want to hear this—he's still upset that Mr. Carver's last words to him were accusing him of stealing the idea for the Apparatus. What he wants to hear is that he's a chosen hero, though he will settle for being told that he was being chosen for some dreadful purpose which perhaps he might kick against; and neither of those is definitively ruled out, but neither is probable (IMO).

Most probably Group 1 let him go because he was just a kid.[3] And if that's so, then it was just chance that he saw some aspects of their science/art/magic that gave him ideas, and he's on his own. The fact that he was then able to combine those ideas with the ideas he got from encyclopedias to build his

3 Though Harry discounts this idea. Or because they hoped, wrongly but not unreasonably, that by returning him they could avoid the wrath of East Conlan over the whole incident and in particular over what happened to the other kid, the one who we last see panicking and starting a fight before somebody knocks Harry out. Or a little of both.

Apparatus is mostly because Harry's a wizard, Harry.[4] This is a world that bends (up to a point) to strong imaginations; the Folk have what we would call magic (or some of them do) but the settlers have whatever the hell the Apparatus is, magical pianos, Evil Trains, celebrity gunfighters with literal super-speed, and so on; magic is in the air here. The frontier is not uninhabited, not not-yet-made but contested and in flux.[5] It may well be that this doesn't work, in a lot of ways, including but not limited to: (1) that I have tried to have things both ways by structuring all this around fairly conventional fantasy adventure plots, which implies to the reader a different kind of worldbuilding; (2) that the line between acknowledging this thing and just embodying it again isn't really there, or it is there but the books fall on the wrong side of it; (3) that I executed it too clumsily; (4) that this structure is too rigid and oversimplifying; (5) that we don't really need more sto-ries about the settlers' point of view, and certainly not at such appalling length. It seems to me that one of the big things that ought to be fleshed out, and whose absence bothers me, is why exactly the settler culture(s) was able to so thoroughly militarily dominate the indigenous culture(s), which otherwise appears as inevitable rather than a contingent historical fact; it clearly has something to do with the rise of Line and Gun among the settlers as stand-ins for industrialization (and its

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4 Then Mr. Carver gets wind of what Harry's doing, and decides it's important to keep an eye on him. I will not say exactly who or what Carver is, except that he's clearly somewhere in the middle, culturally.

5 Harry promises at the beginning of part II that when he builds Ransom City there will be fair dealing with the people who live there already, because he is an honest businessman. I think he means it; but EMC has noted (Ch 4) that even before he gets to the border, he probably doesn't have as much control over his followers as he imagines.

discontents) but why then and there exactly? I have some ideas along those lines but have not found a way of fitting this distant history in or making it readable (“*it's like* Guns, Germs and Steel! *Only for completely made-up magic!*”)

Anyway that was the thinking.

Francis Spufford— and in fact more or less everyone— points to the books' various refusals of closure and clarity. Trolling, if you will. Yes; there are so many of these that they sort of form the structure of the book— if I had a dry-erase board and a marker I could probably do an outline of what gets promised but not delivered at various stages. A lot of this is just basic good-sense-when-writing-about-monsters; not giving too much detail about the Evil Trains so that they don't tip over into utter goofiness. Or, closely related, not-explaining-the-joke. Some of it is because I think it's an effective way of building tension. It annoys some people but I personally enjoy encountering it as a reader; I like having the football kicked away; it's masochistic, I suppose. Part of this tendency toward refusal is thematic: because the books are both about the frustration of different kinds of utopian early-days-of-modernity hopes.[6] (We don't see Ransom City, but then it doesn't really ever exist). A big part of this tendency is because of the centrality of the gap/refusal touched on above, re: the Folk and the sense that this is a partial and unreliable story and there are other stories we're not seeing; which gets mirrored throughout the structure of the book at various levels, probably more often than I was intentionally aware of. Part of it is that I (as a reader) can never really enjoy the sort of fantasy that purports to offer a comprehensive and consistent explanation of the rules or nature of its world. My experience

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6 It's also suggested at the very end, in E.M.C.'s postscript, that Gun and Line are now in the dustbin of history. Which is nice, but if the world is slowly coming to resemble the actual early twentieth century, it is obviously still far far short of perfect.

of the world is that I do not fully understand most of its systems and processes outside of small, sort of trivial areas, and the important things that happen happen for reasons that seem largely opaque and inexplicable. Fantasy worldbuilding that purports to be transparent and not confusing and full of weird gaps doesn't feel real to me.[7]

An initial draft of *Rise of Ransom City* tried to follow Liv and Creedmoor's story more directly. But it wasn't working. They'd become too central to things, and they knew too much about what was going on, and I wasn't interested in them any more. I couldn't relate. So successive drafts pulled back the focus more and more until the thing slipped into first person, and they slipped off into the background.[8]

(My current goal in editing a new thing is *total transparency*, for a bit of a change.)

"Claustrophobic" isn't a word that would have occurred to me but now I think about it I absolutely see it. And this possibly also has something to do with the limitation of perspective discussed above, the sense of a line that is not being crossed; or perhaps at this point I'm pattern-hunting.

There is history in the sense of things happening one after another, the map moving about, towns coming and going, the conflict entering hot and cold phases in different places, but not a lot of overall progress. Partly that's a function of the very-high-altitude view of the world the books provide. Partly it's a hazard of made-up worlds. If I tell you that the center of empire has shifted from Rome to Byzantium that's a big deal, but if I tell you that it's shifted from Zarquon-IV to Squabblaxxx-VIII, well, who cares? The people who live

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7 And really, how could I offer up such an absurdly reductive scheme of history as Gun v. Line without acknowledging its incompleteness?

8 That draft had other problems too. I never want to try to write another "Book Two" as long as I live.

in Zarquon-IV care but to the reader it's not history, it's just words; at least not unless a lot of the focus of the story is put there—which takes focus away from other parts—so local history can be developed but sweeping background history is hard. I would have liked to have built in more of a sense of change. It's meant to be implied, I think, somewhere, that the Gun–Line conflict has not always been as hot or as all-encompassing as it is "now;" that it took a century for either power to fully appear, and another couple of centuries for the war to become what it is.

But certainly they're stuck now, and have been stuck for a very long time. Presumably the world has to be a lot bigger than ours for all this history to fit in it, but they're running low on room to expand (the frontier is not infinitely open; in fact Liv and Creedmoor almost reach the sea.) They're in the grip of ideas that nobody is really entirely happy with, but nobody knows how to get rid of—except on the "vast scale of structural change," as Maria Farrell puts it.

I said above that this is a world that bends (up to a point) to strong imaginations, but as Miriam Burstein observes, it's more that the world bends to language, to stories and names; so that naming and defining and describing things can be a weapon, and speaking your enemy's language can be a trap. The Line has lawyers and machines-that-type-in-triplicate and endless secret files and so on; the Gun literally speaks inside your head and tells you what you think. Stories—the Gun in particular is nothing but a collection of bullshit stories—take on lives of their own, and do things when you're not watching.

John Creedmoor's initials actually are a coincidence, or at least not intentional on my part. I liked the sound of "Creed-moor" and I liked "John." On the other hand, it's quite likely that the reason the name just seemed so *right* to me is because I grew up reading so many Michael Moorcock books, whose fondness for J-C names for his protagonists *is* intentional, if my understanding is correct.

There is a sort of Bible analogue in the world; the Sisters of the Silver City have a very Bible-like holy book. But that holy book doesn't make any actual appearances on the page, I don't think, and it's just one religion among several. The Smilers peeled off a lot of the popular crowd-pleasing bits.

I will not say what the MacGuffin is, but it is the case, as Maria Farrell points out, that the idea of the possibility of the MacGuffin is at least as effective as the thing itself, and possibly more.

Yes! Harry Ransom most certainly does have theories on child-rearing and the state of nature. Nothing would have made me happier than to somehow shoehorn in Harry's theories on education, which are advanced, forthright and significant. But it was very sporting of my editor to let me include 1,000 words on Harry's nonsense exercise regime, and there's a limit to how far you can push these things.

I love "The Wild West As Will And Representation" and want to steal it.

I don't really have a conclusion.

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