

EMERALD CITY

A monthly science fiction and fantasy review magazine edited by Cheryl Morgan and available at <http://www.emcit.com>

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Review of *Venusia* by Mark Von Schlegell

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Quantum Psychology

By Cheryl Morgan

Emerald City gets a lot of requests for reviews from small publishers I've not heard of. Most of them I end up turning down, but every so often something really interesting comes in. That was most definitely the case with *Venusia* by Mark von Schlegell. To start with, it is one of the launch titles for a new range of SF novels. Perhaps more interestingly the publisher, Semiotext(e), whom I have interviewed in this issue, specializes mainly in the more experimental end of mainstream literature. More information about what they are up to with this new series is available in the interview. But what is *Venusia* all about?

Two centuries into the future, Earth was falling apart under the constant pressure of human activity: war, pollution, religion, politics, or just plain simple greed. The planet was a mess. So a determined group of individuals decided to make a new start by founding a colony on Venus. It wasn't easy, but

scientific adaptations, including green skin to soak up energy from sunlight, and a special system for generating an artificial Terran-length day/night cycle from the long Venusian day made it possible.

If Venusia were to set its calendar by the planet's slow rotation, a single Venusian day (a "v-day" the humans called it) would prove very long indeed, consisting of more than 243 Terran, 24-hour days. To counteract the unfortunate situation, the colony's robot factories manufactured Terran Standard Time by blowing a hole in the eternal cloudcover every twelve Terran hours. The regularity established an illusion very like time.

Unfortunately humanity took their usual bad habits to Venus with them, and if the colony were to survive extreme measures would be necessary. Thanks to the brilliant scientist, Hugo Morituri, and some useful hallucinogenic flora, *Venusia* now flourishes under the benevolent dictatorship of Princeps Jorx

Crittendon. Citizens go about their daily lives, they watch Reality-V shows, and they attend the obligatory twice-daily Feed at which they feast upon flowers.

Consuming flowers has many effects, including a certainly susceptibility to the mutability of reality. That is why trained neuroscops such as Dr. Sylvia Yang are needed to monitor the mental health of citizens and, if necessary, erase any unhealthy ideas. Most importantly, however, the flowers cause citizens to forget both past and future. *Venusia* no longer has a history, and no one has ideas about shaping the future. There is only now.

Unfortunately no system of social control is perfect. There are always oddities, always people who slip through the net. One such citizen is Rogers Collectibles, a small-time antiques dealer. His profession ought to be suspect enough, though he has worked hard to avoid the attentions of the authorities. But now he has acquired something rare and valuable. It is a book: *Brane World*, written by Peter Melton, the founder of *Venusia*. It is a history of the colony. For Rogers Collectibles, life is about to get very dangerous.

But why a bookstore? Did bookstores, like electrons, depend on statistical waves of movement that could be released at any time? Sylvia stood shyly and let the quiet come down around her. It was a hush and peace she'd never known. A scent rich with the wood and mold of paper; alternate histories yawning from text-laden recesses. A floor creaking as she walked.

The influence of 1984 on von Schlegell's writing is clear. Indeed, the whole idea of controlling the past in order to control the future can be found in Orwell's book. *Venusia* also has some fairly obvious

examples of Newspeak, including describing cigarettes as "lung protectors" and people who refuse to eat the hallucinogenic flowers as "addicts." But of course the use of Newspeak in politics has never been more common than it is today. It is not surprising, therefore, that SF is producing more and more books like *Venusia* and Karl Schroeder's *Lady of Mazes*. Control of reality is the ultimate dictator's dream.

Rogers Collectibles is not exactly the stuff of which social revolution is made. He's a dotty eccentric with just enough willpower to do what he wants and not what society wants of him. However, circumstances link him to Sylvia Yang, to Martha Dobbs, an ambitious Reality-V reporter, and to Niftus Norrington, a government agent who chooses to aid the rebels because of his passion for Sylvia. Possibly more importantly, this little group has help. Unbeknownst to Sylvia, the unassuming potted ornament in her office is actually PHRED, a sentient plant doing his best to make sure that the stupid humans don't make a mess of Venus the way they ruined Earth. There are other allies to be found as well.

"I am a particularly sophisticated machine," said the little black-eyed creature. "An extraordinary machine, if I may be so bold. I represent a league of other such spectacular technologies. Indeed, Sir, the League of Extraordinary Machines has now committed itself to aiding you and the Doctor in your neuroscopic endeavors."

Put like that, *Venusia* sounds like a fairly straightforward SF thriller about bold freedom fighters overthrowing an oppressive regime. If it had been, however, I doubt that Semiotext(e) would have bought it. Rather it is a mind-bending excursion through the

plastic neuroscapes of quantum reality. Our heroes have to enforce their right to their own existence before Jorx Crittendon can define himself as the sole representative of reality. If you are looking for a comparison, it reads more like Jeff Noon than anything else I can think of.

So, if you are into weird ideas, surreal landscapes, and narratives whose geometry is decidedly non-Euclidian, *Venusia* is the book for you. What is more, I suspect that the folks at Semiotext(e) are intending to produce more of this sort of book. I think that will be a very good thing.

Venusia - Mark von Schlegell - Semiotext(e)
- publisher's proof

About Emerald City

Emerald City has been published on a monthly schedule since September 1995. Over 600 books have been reviewed in the magazine during that time.

Although the magazine is published online, printable versions are available for download in both PDF and Microsoft Word formats. Access to all versions of the magazine is free of charge.

In 2004 *Emerald City* won a Hugo Award in the Best Fanzine category.

The magazine was also nominated for the Best Fanzine Hugo in 2003, placing third. In 2004 it was nominated for a British Science Fiction Association Award. Cheryl Morgan has been nominated for the 2004 Best Fanwriter Hugo. *Emerald City* placed 8th in the Best Magazine category of the 2004 Locus Poll. It was the highest-placed non-fiction magazine in the category.

In the 2005 Hugo Awards *Emerald City* was been nominated for Best Fanzine and Best Web Site. Cheryl Morgan was been nominated for Best Fan Writer. The magazine placed 8th once again in the Best Magazine category Locus Poll.

Emerald City review quotes have been used for cover blurbs by the following publishers: Tor, Bantam Spectra, Pyr.

We do not quote web site "hits" as the measurement of such statistics is notoriously subjective. However, we do keep statistics and the level of traffic on the web site has increased steadily with time. It is now roughly five times the level of activity in 2000 when we began monitoring.

Review copies of forthcoming books are always welcome. However, we can only cover 6 to 8 books per issue, so receipt of a review copy is no guarantee that a review will appear.

Emerald City is written and edited by Cheryl Morgan with assistance from Anne Murphy Kevin Standlee, Tony Geer and a host of guest reviewers.