

A PRE-PUBLICATION LIMITED EDITION BOOKLET

New Novellas of Canadian Fantastic Fiction



TESSERACTS Twelve

FOREWORD BY BRETT ALEXANDER SAVORY

EDITED BY CLAUDE LALUMIÈRE

Novellas by

E.L. CHEN, RANDY McCHARLES, DERRYL MURPHY, DAVID NICKLE
GORD SELLAR, GRACE SEYBOLD, MICHAEL SKEET & JILL SNIDER LUM

Tesseracts Twelve

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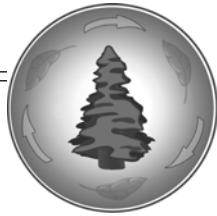
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At EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing, our carbon footprint is higher than we want it to be and we plan to do something about it. For every tree EDGE uses in printing our books, we are helping to plant new trees to reduce our carbon footprint so that the next generation can breathe clean air, keeping our planet and its inhabitants healthy.

Foreword

I'm a writer, so I have a lot of friends who read. I'm also a Canadian, so I have a lot of friends who are Canadian. In these many Canadian readers' /writers' homes, the series of anthologies that each of them has at least one of is *Tesseracts*. It is the only currently running series of spec-fic anthologies that focuses entirely on Canadian writers. And, for that, we should be thankful. We all know that there should be more. But the publishing business hangs on to the idea that anthologies don't sell particularly well — which sucks for those of us who love short stories.

I've been publishing short fiction at my webzine, *ChiZine: Treatments of Light and Shade in Words*, since 1997, and I was lucky to secure a sponsorship deal that enabled me to just buy the stories and concentrate on the editorial side of things. Most webzines — and print zines, for that matter — aren't so lucky. Unlike anthology editors, I don't need to worry about "the bottom line." So long as I can show that people are coming to the site, my sponsors are happy. Subscriber bases for print zine editors and "numbers of copies" sold for anthology editors are less nebulous markers that make it incredibly difficult for editors to convince publishers to take a chance on short stories. Novels are potentially the big money-makers, and novels are fine, but the short story gets short shrift, so we lovers of the form have to embrace it wherever it thrives.

And it thrives in the *Tesseracts* series.

I won't go into the star-studded cast of past volumes' editors because, if you're reading this, you probably already know all the names. And, excuse my French, but adding Claude Lalumière to that list is a great fucking idea.

When Claude asked me to do the foreword to this year's volume, I was taken aback. I mean, *Tesseracts* is science fiction, isn't it? Or, okay, maybe it's SF and fantasy, and here's me with my dark, weird, surreal, disturbing back catalogue of dare-I-say-it *horror* short stories and novels. So, despite being incredibly honoured and flattered to have been asked, I was also a bit confused. But then I thought about it and realized that the genre lines in the series aren't nearly so clear cut — and I knew they would be even less so in Claude's hands. If anyone was going to buy fiction that blurred those lines, it would be Claude.

Okay, so Claude and *Tesseracts* are helping keep the battle-fatigued arena of short fiction alive for one more year. Wonderful. I couldn't be happier. But then I find out Claude's going one step further — he's going to put together an anthology of *novellas*. If there's one kind of fiction that's even harder to market than short-story anthologies, it's novellas. Publishers reading this right now are crossing themselves and shuddering violently just seeing the word in print. A dirtier word I do not think they know. So I'm not sure what kind of black magic Claude used on the publishers of *Tesseracts* to get them to agree to this, but I'm certainly glad it worked. The world needs more novellas. Some tales don't fit into short stories, nor do they need to languidly spread out into novels. For some story arcs, the novella is the baby bear of lengths.

The novellas on offer here are strange and fascinating tales, each one stamped with its author's specific brand of storytelling. These — as with all other *Tesseracts* stories over the past 20+ years — are not stories that could have been written by anyone else. They belong in *this* book, edited by *this* editor, told at *this* length, and read by *this* audience: you, the ones who have enabled this series to continue to flourish as it has — and hopefully will for many years to come.

As a Canadian writer and reader, I couldn't be prouder of this series, nor more thankful to Claude, who has assembled an incredibly varied and remarkable bunch of novellas that, hopefully, will encourage more publishers

to take a chance on this length of fiction. But, even if none ever do, we have this one.

Strip away the names of the publisher, the editor, and the authors and forget about the word count — we'll *still* have these stories.

And it is for that which I am most thankful.

Brett Alexander Savory
Toronto, March 2008

Ancients of the Earth

Derryl Murphy

Through the frozen streets of Dawson, Samuel runs from two cavemen.

They're well-dressed, these cavemen, one of them even in tie and tails. But their hair is long and scraggly, and Samuel would almost swear that their brows protrude slightly; aside from the already out-of-place fancy dress, they're a neanderthalian version of your typical northerner, not at all worried about the niceties of polite society, here at the ass end of the nineteenth century.

Except that most northerners, even trappers and prospectors who spend almost all of their time alone in the bush, can speak in more than grunts and gibberish, and Samuel doubts even the most ruthless of them would be so keen to smash in his skull.

It is late in the evening, and the temperature is most certainly below minus twenty. Samuel rounds a corner, skidding on packed snow and patches of ice, but he retains his balance. Down an alley to his right he catches a glimpse of two more, one a cavewoman, resplendent in a glittering evening gown, which is up around her waist as the male apparently has his way with her from behind. They both yell inarticulately as Samuel passes them by but do not break off their primeval assignation.

Another yell tells him the first two cavemen are back on his trail.

He rounds another corner, and the door to a dilapidated cabin swings open. From the blackness within a voice quietly calls to him. "Quickly! Inside!"

Beneath the Skin

Michael Skeet & Jill Snider Lum

Hirota Satoshi rolled over, became aware of the green smell of new tatami, and was, for a moment, completely lost. *Where's the blood?* he thought. It had been all over his fingers, but when he tried lifting his hands something held them.

Then he smelled sandalwood and the delightful pulse-quickenning tang of a woman, and the bad dream receded into shadows and was forgotten.

He felt his mouth curve up. Forcing an eye open, he confirmed that the sun had not yet risen. The futon was soft and warm. So: he still had no idea where he was, but it was a good place; that much was certain. He rolled onto his back again. His leg brushed against silk.

"Hirota-san?" The woman's voice was low and flowed sensually over the syllables of his name. The sound brought memory — and desire — back to him in a wonderful rush.

"Good morning," he said, reaching for her, questing through layers of silk and — what *was* she wearing? — until he was stroking soft skin. "Dawn isn't here yet, Akemi."

"Then we don't have to get out of bed yet," she said. "It isn't as though I need to be back in the women's quarters before dawn. Or ever again."

The pleasure in her voice made his heart beat even faster. "Prince Isao was a fool to give you away," he said. "What could he have been thinking?"

"I like the way he thinks, Hirota-san," said Akemi. "And I definitely like—"

Intersections

Grace Seybold

The longing hit Nadia for the third time that day as she stepped out of the sleet into the bus shelter. She wasn't sure who was drawing her; the small space was filled to capacity with heavy coats and the dreary faces of late January in Montreal. Two teenage girls in black leaned against the outside wall, passing a joint back and forth and trying not to look cold. Nadia sighed, tucking her hands into her armpits. *Here we go again.*

Three in one day was a lot; sometimes she went weeks between them. She wished this were one of those weeks; already her clothes were bloody from the first incident of the day, and despite her long coat that hid the stains she couldn't help worrying that people were staring. But the feeling here was strong, pushing at her like a railroad spike between her shoulder blades. If she turned her head a little to the left, she would see him. She did so, wondering if it was worth the bother.

Late twenties, grey coat, worn schoolbag, copy of Sartre. Caricature of a world-weary grad student. He looked preoccupied, but no more so than any of the other commuters pretending to ignore each other. He didn't look special. None of them, Nadia thought, looked special. No one did. She focused on him, locking her eyes to his jutting wrist bones because she didn't want to look in his face, and *pushed.*

Casually, the young man took a cigarette out of his pocket and thumbed his lighter. There was a general rustle of distaste at his rudeness. Someone coughed ostentatiously.

The Story of the Woman and Her Dog

E.L. Chen

He slept in the bathtub that night.

Natasha did not know anything about dogs. She feared that he would attack her, or eat the goldfish, or piss on the bedroom carpet, or all three. When he appeared, she panicked and shooed him into the closet room, waving a towel in front of her like a toreador's cape. The towel was pale blue, the colour of his eyes. She dropped it on the bathroom floor once he was inside and shut the door.

She sprawled across the unmade bed, listening for his whine, the scrape of toenails against the bathroom door. She wondered what she would tell the neighbours if he released a torrent of desperate barking. The walls of the condo were thin; her neighbours' patience, thinner. She listened and waited because she did not know what else to do.

She heard nothing.

She had to pee but decided to hold it.

Eventually she tired of the vigil and went to bed without brushing her teeth. In the morning, it was still quiet. She wondered if she had imagined him, that he was not really a dog. She opened the bathroom door, slowly, cautiously, as if she hoped to catch him in an altered state.

She flicked on the light. The dog was still a dog. He stirred. Blinked. Yawned a doggy yawn, unrolling a long doggy tongue from between long doggy teeth. He still had not made a sound.

Ring the Changes in Okotoks, Alberta

Randy McCharles

The following is a true story, though if you ask the inhabitants of the township of Okotoks, Alberta, they will deny it. Small town folk are like that. They like to keep their business to themselves.

THE SUMMER SOLSTICE FLING

Litha: June 21

"Now," said Mayor Abigail Smyth-Jones in her *this is serious business* voice, "on to the Summer Fling Festival. I understand that the catering has been confirmed and that the Wild Welsh Trio has agreed to provide music and organize the Participation Dancing."

"Yes!" growled George Stromley, rising from his seat and hammering the table top. "About the Summer Fling!"

Terry Sutton looked up from the paperback novel he was reading and scrutinized George's demeanour. What he saw suggested that the next few minutes might be worth paying attention to.

George rarely showed up at Town Council meetings, and when he was pressured into coming he usually sat in a sullen huff. If George didn't own half the town he'd be dropped from the council like a rancid apple. But now here George stood in all his glory, thunder-faced and damaging the table.

Wonjang and the Madman of Pyongyang

Gord Sellar

1. WORKING HARDLY

"Then..."

—right uppercut to the chin—

"...tell me..."

—left hook to the temple—

"...the goddamned..."

—a finger in the little bastard's good eye—

"...passcode!" Wonjang finished the sentence with a backhanded slap hard enough to break a normal man's neck.

His enemy, of course, was no normal man: though less than four feet tall, Kim Noh Wang, the Madman of Pyongyang, was North Korea's last uncaptured criminal mastermind. He wheedled: "Wonjang, Wonjang ... we're brothers! Don't you realize that? We Koreans are of One Blood!" Wonjang could hear the extra-big, bright-red lettering on the phrase "One Blood," though he was only half-listening. The rest of his attention was directed downward, through the smoggy air. Far below, Khao San Road was a mess, stir-fried noodle stands and racks of snide T-shirts thrashed to pieces, their scattered contents lit by the setting sun. Hastily commandeered tuk-tuks and taxis barrelled away into the dusk in every direction, and panicked Western backpackers were scattering into the neon-lit Bangkok evening, like monkeys at the sound of gunshots.

Wylde's Kingdom

David Nickle

PILOT:
LOOK OUT FOR JIM!

Max first spied the two fanboys through the mosquito netting surrounding the bed in his nearly submerged Brazilian apartment. He was sure he had them pegged: just another couple of bottom-feeders churned up from the silt by Atlantica, who'd tracked down their hero Jim to his dank retirement here at Serra Do Mar Bay. They'd kicked in the door, true. But Jim fans had done far weirder things in Max's experience.

One fanboy had an acoustic-guitar case slung over his shoulder. "Either of you know 'Girl from Ipanema?'" Max asked. Although it wasn't what he was going for, they both laughed appreciatively.

The two introduced themselves as Dan and James, and, as James pointed out, *James* was another name for *Jim*. James was the one carrying the guitar case, and he set it down on the floor and opened it while Dan explained in detail just how much Max's work as Jim on *Wylde's Kingdom* had meant to him. Trying to be polite, Max noted he had put on a little weight since then and didn't think he could do the stuff Jim had done anymore. Just as politely, James pointed out that was one of the reasons they were here. "You have put on a few pounds there, Jim," agreed Dan.

Then Max heard a click, followed by a whine that sounded like a vacuum cleaner cycling up. James stuck his head up. He was holding a narrow plastic hose that

ended in a gleaming steel needle. A hissing whistle came from its tip, and Max realized what his dormant survival instinct had been trying to tell him since they showed: these guys weren't fanboys at all — or, at least, not just fanboys. They were professionals: barrio cosmetic surgeons, the very worst kind.

Max stirred, trembling toward thoughts of escape.

Years ago, back when he was a regular on *Wylde's Kingdom*, and his day consisted of garrotting gorillas and chainsawing rampaging elephants, that instinct would have seen him clear. It would have thrown Max out of bed and had him halfway to the door before the fanboy-surgeons had a chance to react. If one of them had managed to grab him, he probably could have wrestled the needle of the AbSucker 2020 away from him and jammed it into one fannish orifice or another to break the hold and made it to the door and dived off the balcony into the bay in the span of a dozen heartbeats.

But not these days. Max *had* put on a lot of weight — two-fifty sounded about right, and three hundred wouldn't really have surprised him — and he hadn't exactly been physically active during his voluntary convalescence here. So when he grabbed at the needle, the fan pulled it out of the way easily, and speckles of dizziness darkened Max's vision before he could do anything about it.

"Don't stress yourself," said Dan, who was holding the second hose-and-needle assembly from the AbSucker in one hand. It was hissing, too. Before Max could do anything more, he felt a sharp pain on his left side, and he realized James had managed to skewer him in the love handle. Max felt another prick on his right handle. The AbSucker's motor whined as it started to work on both sides of him, siphoning off eight months of accumulated lipids like they were a milkshake.

James tried to be apologetic. He explained that, usually, they'd have him onto their boat in Rio, and if he wanted he could even have had a general anaesthetic and in just under an hour woken up eight months younger, with none of this painful and clearly disturbing fuss. They would have given him a mint.

"But we were under instructions," said Dan.

"Just doing what our boss tells us," said James.

"Your boss?" gasped Max.

James looked down at his own T-shirt, which was emblazoned with a scan of Jerry Wylde, ubiquitous pith-helmet covering his hairless scalp and his antique Sharps hunting rifle slung over one narrow shoulder. Dan looked over at it, too, then back at Max. Dan nodded, his open-mouthed grin an eerie parody of the one Wylde sported on the shirt.

"Our boss and yours," said Dan.

The AbSucker made an ugly *whup!* sound as something thick passed through the orifice. The way Max was feeling, he thought it might be a testicle.

"Mr. Wylde wanted everything to be just right," explained James. "He wanted you to 'recontextualize.'"

"And he said you needed to have an 'adequate sense of danger,'" said Dan.

"Yeah," agreed James. "Those were his exact words. 'Recontextualize.' 'An adequate sense of danger.' Mr. Wylde says that's when you're at your best."

The three of them were quiet for a moment — James and Dan contemplating the words of the master, Max contemplating the sagging flesh below his ribcage. The noise from the guitar case shifted from suck to slurp, like the milkshake was finished, and James snapped out of it.

"Shit!" he yelled, and reached down and flipped off the machine. "Almost got your liver," he said as the sucker cycled down. When Max didn't laugh, Dan patted him on the shoulder.

"Joke, Jim," he said.

The wind picked up then, and the broken door swung open. Dan hurried to close the door against the returning rage of Atlantica, and Max shut his eyes.

"I'm not Jim," he whispered.

###

Afterword

They say it's not the length that counts, it's how good you are with what you've got — regardless, this time around, *Tesseracts* went for the long ones.

Seven long ones, to be exact — offering a variety of shapes, tastes, textures, colours, and thrills.

Long stories, too short to be called novels but lengthier than a *short* story ... novellas. Now, there's some disagreement as to the exact length of a novella. Some people have invented subdivisions to further confuse matters: novelettes for the shorter novellas, short novels for the longer ones ... whatever. At one point, it all becomes too jargony to matter.

Some novellas are long enough to be a book all on their own, so we went for the shorter end of the spectrum, in order to showcase a diversity of stories and writers, in keeping with the spirit of the *Tesseracts* anthologies. When we sent out the call for submissions, we asked for stories that fell between ten and twenty thousand words: short enough to be able to include a lively selection, but long enough to let writers really inhabit and explore the worlds of their creation ... and long enough for readers to come along for the ride and be armchair travellers on these fantastic voyages.

Canadian, global, mythological ... fantasy, fable, science fiction ... humour, drama, adventure ... superheroes, monsters, lovers ... past, present, future. Seven worlds of entertainment and wonder; seven fantastic visions by authors with distinctive voices and startling imaginations.

We received close to two hundred submissions — and, among those, more than enough to fill at least three books

with top-notch novellas of speculative fiction from Canadian writers.

These seven stories are the very best of the fiction that was sent to us — state-of-the-art 21st-century Canadian speculative fiction.

True to the *Tesseracts* tradition, the authors here strike a balance between established writers on the Canadian SF scene and new storytellers whose bold, striking voices are only starting to be heard; between veterans of the *Tesseracts* anthologies and authors appearing in this series for the first time.

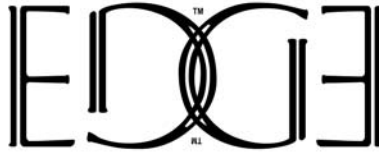
Canadian writers have few venues for novellas, and readers of Canadian fiction few opportunities to enjoy them.

Who knows? Maybe the idea behind this *Tesseracts* volume will catch on, and we'll soon get to read more Canadian novellas of the fantastic.

Claude Lalumière
Montreal, March 2008



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