



The Year's Best Science Fiction: Thirty-First Annual Collection

Gardner Dozois (Editor) , Neal Asher , Jake Kerr , Nancy Kress , Jay Lake , Ken Liu , Ian R. MacLeod , Paul McAuley , more... Sandra McDonald , Ian McDonald , Sean McMullen , Sunny Moraine , Stephen Baxter , Val Nolan , Robert Reed , Alastair Reynolds , Geoff Ryman , Melissa Scott , Martin L. Shoemaker , Allen M. Steele , Michael Swanwick , Lavie Tidhar , Carrie Vaughn , Damien Broderick , Karl Bunker , Aliette de Bodard , Brendan DuBois , Greg Egan , Alexander Jablovkov , James Patrick Kelly ...less

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FIFTEEN-TIME WINNER OF THE LOCUS AWARD FOR YEAR'S BEST ANTHOLOGY

The thirty-two stories in this collection imaginatively take us far across the universe, into the very core of our beings, to the realm of the gods, and the moment just after now. Included here are the works of masters of the form and of bright new talents, including: Neal Asher, Stephen Baxter, Damien Broderick, Karl Bunker, Aliette de Bodard, Brendan DuBois, Greg Egan, Alexander Jablovkov, James Patrick Kelly, Jake Kerr, Nancy Kress, Jay Lake, Ken Liu, Ian R. MacLeod, Paul J. McAuley, Ian McDonald, Sandra McDonald, Sean McMullen, Sunny Moraine, Val Nolan, Robert Reed, Alastair Reynolds, Geoff Ryman, Melissa Scott, Martin L. Shoemaker, Allen M. Steele, Michael Swanwick, Lavie Tidhar, and Carrie Vaughn.

Supplementing the stories are the editor's insightful summation of the year's events and a lengthy list of honorable mentions, making this book both a valuable resource and the single best place in the universe to find stories that stir the imagination, and the heart.

Content:

"The Discovered Country" by Ian R. MacLeod

"The Book Seller" by Lavie Tidhar

"Pathways" by Nancy Kress

"A Heap of Broken Images" by Sunny Moraine

"Rock of Ages" by Jay Lake

"Rosary and Goldenstar" by Geoff Ryman

"Gray Wings" by Karl Bunker

"The Best We Can" by Carrie Vaughn

"Transitional Forms" by Paul McAuley

"Precious Mental" by Robert Reed

"Martian Blood" by Allen M. Steele

"Zero For Conduct" by Greg Egan

"The Waiting Stars" by Aliette de Bodard

"A Map of Mercury" by Alastair Reynolds

"One" by Nancy Kress

"Murder on the Aldrin Express" by Martin L. Shoemaker

"Biographical Fragments of the Life of Julian Prince" by Jake Kerr

“The Plague” by Ken Liu
“Fleet” by Sandra McDonald
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“Bad Day on Boscobel” by Alexander Jablovkov
“The Irish Astronaut” by Val Nolan
“The Other Gun” by Neal Asher
“Only Human” by Lavie Tidhar
“Entangled” by Ian R. MacLeod
“Earth 1” by Stephen Baxter
“Technarion” by Sean McMullen
“Finders” by Melissa Scott
“The Queen of Night’s Aria” by Ian McDonald
“Hard Stars” by Brendan DuBois
“The Promise of Space” by James Patrick Kelly
“Quicken” by Damien Broderick

The Year's Best Science Fiction: Thirty-First Annual Collection Details

Date : Published July 15th 2014 by St. Martin's Griffin

ISBN : 9781250046215

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Format : Paperback 705 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Short Stories, Anthologies

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From Reader Review The Year's Best Science Fiction: Thirty-First Annual Collection for online ebook

Russell Forden says

The many authors set a consistently high standard, with recurring themes being immortality through cybernetics, and stories set in and around the planet Mars. I especially loved Entangled, by Ian R Macleod: a haunting tale of a post economic apocalypse world where a virus has turned the survivors into empathics, and where communalism rules - for all but the sole non empathic. I also enjoyed The Queen of Night's Aria, by Ian McDonald, a whimsical sequel to Wells's War of the Worlds that is set on Mars amidst the tribulations of an Irish singer and his biggest fan.

Linus Williams says

As usual, the only way to review an anthology like this is story by story. Here goes:

- 1) The Discovered Country--Ian R. MacLeod. 7/10. An interesting take on the afterlife. This theme will bookend nicely with the last story in this book.
- 2) The Book Seller--Lavie Tidhar 8.5/10. A wonderful story in an great world. I want to read more of the Central Station stories, since the world lends itself easily to evocative, emotional, storytelling.
- 3) Pathways--Nancy Kress. 10/10. The first of four 10/10s in this anthology, two of them by Ms. Kress. This is not so much a sci-fi story as "Hillbilly elegy" meets Fatal Familial Insomnia. I was so happy to see that disease mentioned, and even though the treatment doesn't exist yet, the story is so well written as makes no difference. Brilliantly done.
- 4) A heap of broken images--Sunny Moraine. 7/10. A very clear holocaust allegory, but beyond that I'm left wanting by this story.
- 5) Rock of Ages--Jay Lake. 10/10. A fantastic story about a future where green environmentalism has gotten violent...and the man who resists it, mostly because he can. The writing community will miss you, Mr. Lake. R.I.P.
- 6) Rosary and Goldenstar--Geoff Ryman. 5/10. The first disappointment in the anthology. An alternate history Shakespeare that offers no hook and no character development. Very meh.
- 7) Gray Wings--Karl Bunker. 8/10. "Are you an angel, because you fell from heaven" in story form. I liked it.
- 8) The best we can--Carrie Vaughn. 8.5/10. An all-too-accurate, sometimes painfully accurate, story about what would REALLY happen in the scientific community if proof of alien life were to be found.
- 9) Transitional Forms--Paul J. McAuley. 6.5/10. Entirely too similar to Paolo Bacigalupi's "The Windup girl" in dealing with bioengineered and artificial life.

- 10) Precious Mental--Robert Reed. 7.5/10. I want to rate it higher, and the world seems like it would be amenable to good stories, but this just gets WEIRD at the end. The first half of the story is fine, the other half just gets weird and incomprehensible, at least to me.
- 11) Martian Blood--Allen M. Steele. 9/10. A story that proves that sometimes, science reveals secrets that are better left hidden.
- 12) Zero for conduct--Greg Egan. 8/10. Another all-too-accurate story of what would happen to the first person to invent a room-temperature semiconductor, especially if that person happened to be a gifted girl in the Middle East.
- 13) The Waiting Stars--Alette De Bodard. 5/10. Ms. Bodard has gotten several stories from the same universe into the year's best anthologies--"The days of the war, as dark as blood, as red as bile" and "Butterfly, falling at dawn", but I've not been able to understand why. Her universe is unfinished, illogical. It's like she ran with the central premise of "Mayan and Chinese empires!" and wrote everything from that....others may like her work, but I am not a fan.
- 14) A map of mercury--Alastair Reynolds. 7/10. Sometimes artists, in pursuit of art, throw away their humanity, sometimes literally.
- 15) One--Nancy Kress. 10/10. The second of Ms. Kress' two 10/10 stories in this anthology. A man who begins to develop precognition of a sort has to figure out how to use it...and what to do with it when it starts going away. Ms. Kress likes to write sci-fi centered around the brain, and I love it.
- 16) Murder on the Aldrin express--Martin L. Shoemaker. 8.5/10. A good old fashioned murder mystery, that just happened to take place on a spaceship.
- 17) Biographical fragments of the life of Julian Prince-Jake Kerr. 5/10. I never really liked the "fragment" style of writing, and I don't do so here.
- 18) The Plague--Ken Lui. 10/10. It's three pages long. And yet in those three pages, Lui conveys an entire world with backstory, and three characters interacting. There is nothing better than a good SHORT short story.
- 19) Fleet--Sandra McDonald. 8/10. A postapocalyptic Guam, with a trans character acting a sentinel for the encroaching outside world.
- 20) The She-Wolf's Hidden Grin--Michael Swanwick. 6/10. I would have liked to see more of the world, but the story as written is fine. What happened to the aboriginal natives when humans came to the world of the story?
- 21) Bad day on boscobel--Alexander Jablokov. 8/10. Espionage and political intrigue in a world made up entirely of giant trees.
- 22) The Irish Astronaut--Val Nolan. 10/10. A highly emotional story of remembrance to fallen explorers. Wonderfully written.
- 23) The other gun--Neal Asher. 7/10. I wanted to like it more, but though it was fun I never really connected with the characters on any meaningful level.

- 24) Only Human--Lavie Tidhar. 7/10. Not quite as good as "The Book Seller", also by Lavie Tidhar in this anthology, but still well done.
- 25) Entangled--Ian R. MacLeod. 8.5/10. In a world where gestalt consciousness is the norm, the abnormal ones are the ones who can't connect to the gestalt. I did NOT expect the ending, though.
- 26) Earth I--Stephen Baxter. 7/10 A human diaspora among the stars inevitably draws explorers back to where it all began, except they do not find what they expected.
- 27) Technarion--Sean McMullen. 9.5/10. I'm a sucker for victorian steampunk sci-fi, but this one takes an expected turn. A rather pointed critique about the overbearing role of technology in today's society, and where it came from.
- 28) Finders--Melissa Scott. 9/10. I really liked this story, about a trio of salvage workers who make an interesting, possibly society-changing, discovery. It had just enough mystery to keep me interested and good pacing.
- 29) The Queen of Night's Aria--Ian McDonald. 8/10. When the enemy likes your art and takes you hostage, the only thing left to do is perform.
- 30) Hard Stars--Brendan Dubois. 8.5/10. In a surprising turn of events, the US is hit with drone strikes trained on electronics. A disquieting near sci-fi story but so well written.
- 31) The Promise of Space--James Patrick Kelly. 7/10. A woman talks to the AI her husband, a space explorer, has been imported into. A sad story.
- 32) Quicken--Damien Broderick. 4/10. I hate to say it, but the book doesn't close strong. This is apparently an authorized sequel to Silverberg's famous story "Born with the dead", but Broderick is not half the writer Silverberg is, and it shows. He tries to get to fancy, ends up losing the thread of the story around midway through, and never recaptures it, instead attempting to replace plot with weirdness. It doesn't work.

Hope you enjoyed reading these.

Cathy says

The summation of the state of science fiction at the beginning was interesting. A little paternalistic, but interesting, and useful as a source for finding great stories. When I go over it again my to-read list will grown even longer.

There's just too much here to consider writing up even the stories I took notes on. I had to take the book out of the library four times to finish it, that included multiple renewals each time. I wasn't reading it straight through, only in fits and starts, at the same time with and in between other books. But if you're interested in this or the other books in this series, I'd recommend buying them if you can, it's a huge book full of tiny print. You'll get your money's worth and probably save yourself a lot of work schlepping this heavy tome back and forth to the library.

Mic says

It must not have been a great year for sci-fi. I enjoyed a few stories. But I started some that I skipped past when they didn't go anywhere or I didn't like the authors style. Most especially there are a couple of authors there that spent too much time trying to impress everyone with their lexicon or grasp of some technical concept. That's great to be a capable writer or knowledgeable in tech, but the story is supposed to be interesting. It's not a showcase for ego.

Alan says

Seldom, if ever, has a title been more accurate than this one—unless you count the thirty previous installments. After more than three decades, Gardner Dozois' annual anthology series still provides *exactly* what it advertises: The Year's Best Science Fiction. This installment covers the year 2013; every story within was published in that year, though some were written earlier. And, as usual, Dozois' "Summation" of the year's major publications, milestones, periodicals and anthologies would almost be worth the price of admission even if he hadn't included so much good fiction. Amid this book's more than 300,000 words, you'll be sure to find some that you like too.

The only piece which I'd say fell flat for me is Stephen Baxter's "Earth 1," really—and even that one had a neat concept, despite its rather labo(u)red execution. But the standouts for me—the ones of which I took especial note—included:

- * The Strossian "Rock of Ages" by the late Jay Lake, with its high-velocity, high-tech conflict between various shades of Green;
- * "One," by Nancy Kress—which is actually the second story by Kress in this volume. (Several prolific authors show up more than once, which—given the length of his list of "Honorable Mentions"—seems to me to be one of the few questionable choices Dozois makes. He could have squeezed in several more worthy stories if he'd been willing to include only one per author.)
- * The postapocalyptic Guam of "Fleet," by Sandra McDonald;
- * "The Irish Astronaut," by Val Nolan, a touching and tightly-focused tale (and James Patrick Kelly's "The Promise of Space," which appears much later in the volume but which came across to me as something of a companion piece); and
- * Ian McDonald's awesome period Martian adventure, "The Queen of Night's Aria."

Your own favorites would probably be different—but I'm sure you'll find something to love within these pages too.

Now, don't mistake the brevity of this review for a lack of enthusiasm about the book... I may be running out of things to say that sound fresh to me about Dozois' work, but that's my failure of imagination, not his. *His* imagination—and his dedication—haven't failed us yet.

Žarko says

mislim da mi je trebalo pet meseci -_-

Paul Brown says

This one had some good stories, and some really boring ones. Overall a good collection of stories. I'm still a fan.

Carlex says

Reseña en Español aquí: <http://girotix.blogspot.com.es/2015/0...>

Dawnincognito says

I've been collecting Gardner Dozois' Year's Best collections for many years. My tastes don't totally align with his; he has a lot more interest in space opera, for example. He has his favourite authors, so some names are repeated quite a bit year over year (looking at you, Nancy Kress!). But the stories he selects are usually well-written, and it's a great overview of some of the biggest names in short fiction.

Some of the standouts in this collection are:

"A Heap of Broken Images" by Sunny Moraine. Whoa. The next generation after a massacre try to deal with the ghosts. Both perpetrators and victims. Whoa.

"Gray Wings" by Karl Bunker. A short piece about the haves and have-nots. A girl with wings competing in a race crash-lands in a barn in Africa. A well-done vignette.

"The Best We Can" by Carrie Vaughn. A quiet, personal little story about finding proof of other life in the universe and the fucking red tape it invokes. Doing the best we can to investigate and follow it up. I really liked this.

"Martian Blood" by Allen M. Steele. I liked this. A researcher comes to Mars to obtain a sample of Martian aborigine blood to see if life on Earth may have originated from Mars. Unfortunately the aborigines aren't too fond of Earthlings.

"The Waiting Stars" by Aliette de Bodard. This one has a gut-punch of an ending. A family launches a rescue mission to save a disabled and captured Mind-ship.

"Biographical Fragments of the Life of Julian Prince" by Jake Kerr. A fictional account of an author who came to fame after an asteroid destroyed North America. Spare and devastating.

"The Plague" by Ken Liu. Tiny and powerful. I'd almost describe it as a story of duelling missionaries. Wow.

"The Irish Astronaut" by Val Nolan. Oh this was gentle and sad. An astronaut goes to scatter a teammate's ashes. Touches on a lot of big feelings but doesn't feel mawkish.

"Quicken" by Damien Broderick. A long story hinging on the sociopolitical ramifications of the invention of a method to revive the dead. Started with bigotry and fear of the "deads" by the "warms", then surprised me and became a millenia- and galaxy-spanning tale. The protagonist was intelligent and interesting enough to keep me engaged throughout.

Spike Gomes says

I've bought this collection since 2001. It's the best collection of the year's science fiction short fiction put out. It's always pretty strong, but this year was better than last year's. Only a couple less than awesome stories.

If you like good science fiction, get it.

Lance Schonberg says

In spite of the overall weakness (my perception, and maybe not entirely fair, in light of similar feelings about other "best of" anthologies I've read this year) of the 32nd Book in the series, I kept this one on my list for the year, and the 33rd is tentatively on my list for next year, plus I've recently inherited a couple of paper volumes in the twenties. Whether or not these truly represent the best of the genre, they do represent a good cross section of the state of the genre for the year, and I find that both interesting and valuable.

I still don't see a lot of evidence of certain groups or classifications of stories being left out of the editor's choices, but there's ample evidence of a variety of voices in the anthology, which disappoints some narrower minds. Personally, I like the old Vulcan philosophy of infinite diversity in infinite combinations. Give me more voices.

I also finished this volume with the same general sense of vague disappointment as I did the 32nd annual collection, maybe even a little bit more. There just weren't enough awesome (to my taste) stories in here to make me truly happy about paying for even a second-hand copy of the book.

But there were a few stand outs:

The Regular by Ken Liu: Cyborgs and murderers and prostitutes, oh my. Well, murderer. And only two prostitutes, but cyborgs aplenty in this near-future mystery story, if not necessarily in the way you usually get them. Near future SF with a healthy Noir mix.

The Colonel by Peter Watts: The story starts as what seems like a little bit of near-ish future military science fiction, but shifts quickly to a vision of the beginnings of a post-human future with one man (the title character) struggling to maintain his place in it, dealing with the loss of both son and wife (in separate, but related tragedies), and rehabilitating an abused cat.

Jubilee by Karl Schroeder: I think this story must fit into a larger universe somewhere, but it was fun and interesting. An entire culture seems to have grown up around lovers who will be offset in time, serviced only by letter run by the Courier Guild in between, until they meet again. A little bit of R&J (on two levels) mixed with some extra treachery, hibernation, and speed of light limitations.

Communion by Mary Anne Mohanraj: Two cultures interacting at the colonized fringe of each. One human, and one that looks to us like dinosaurs. They see the universe very differently, and - surprise! - there's friction. But an alien has come to reclaim the body, what's left of it, of his brother, who died defending humans from an attack. He has to work to understand why even as the humans work to understand him.

Yesterday's Kin by Nancy Kress: Panspermia is real. Sort of. A branch of humanity was transplanted to another, gentler world 150,000 years ago by unknown forces. Their descendants are back, with dire warnings of a horrible intergalactic cloud that's going to infect all of Earth with a horrible virus that will kill everyone on the globe (panspermia, remember?). They know that because the cloud has already killed two of their colonies.

Overall rating: I'm actually going to round this one down to two stars. While there were those few stories that I really liked, the most common rating I gave a story found in it was a two. The average was around a 2.5, but there wasn't enough good stuff for me to round up. Maybe that's why it took me so long to finish.

Brian says

An annual anthology of sci-fi literature edited by Gardner Dozois. I think that I first noted Dozois in *Hunter's Run* which I loved, and which prompted me to seek out Daniel Abraham too. Dozois collaborates a lot with George R.R. Martin, giving him a seal of approval in my book. (Though I do wish that Martin could leave off some of those collaborations, and get his *Song of Ice and Fire* done!)

So overall I give this book four out of five stars, though obviously with an anthology (especially one this sizable!) there will be things I liked better than that, and some I didn't like as well. I'll pick out some standouts for a quick review.

First mention goes to Nancy Kress. Back in August, I read *After the Fall Before the Fall During the Fall* and it piqued my interest, though it fell through for me before it finished. She has two stories in this anthology, and in both of them I was struck by the realness of her characters. Her settings were quite modern, putting the sci-fi aspect into other features of the stories.

Brendan Dubois took (almost) modern technology, but turned societal tables with military drones terrorizing the U.S.A.

I was surprised at how much I enjoyed Carrie Vaughn's story, less science fiction but an utterly believable story of bureaucracy and first contact. More evocative, Val Nolan's story about honoring a deceased comrade's request was human and touching, with a very Irish humor glinting through.

Jay Lake's futuristic 007-like offering was fun, with a great bad-ass character and wonderful setting.

Allen M. Steele was one of a couple writers who visited the concept of aboriginal Mars, hearkening back to Burroughs and other writers of an earlier era. Ian McDonald's overwrought tale of a truly outrageous diva of a tenor and his adventure with the Martian natives was hilarious and satisfying. I enjoyed the contrast between these and the ultra-modern sci-fi elsewhere in the collection.

Martin L. Shoemaker uses a Mars excursion as a backdrop to his story about ship-board politicking and mysteries.

Deep space and far travel was well represented. I want to look into Robert Reed's Great Ship stories. I found the one included to be somewhat overly baroque and wordy (especially for a short story) but still, the generation ship is a concept that I adore. Steven Baxter's story about the search for human origins was a well-written and fascinating concept. Neal Asher's offering gives us sweeping conflict and high technology, and glimpses of alien cultures. Aliette de Bodard gave us a far-future culture with commentary on home and family, build around one culture passing judgement on another. I quite enjoyed Alexander Jablov's asteroid turned into a habitable forest, the setting for another tale of plots and politics and spies. Melissa Scott's tale about scrounging the leavings of a past Golden Age left me wanting more.

Sean McMullen presents a delightful story about steering the development of technology, and the dangers of advanced tech.

So yeah, there's a lot of interesting tales in this collection! I found some new authors, re-discovered some old, and overall quite enjoyed the book.

F.R. says

Not a bad collection, without a doubt there are numerous thought provoking and charming stories here. There are also a few duffers. But then no collection this size is going to have a pure seam of gold.

As usual, I've reviewed each story as I've come to it:

The Discovered Country by Ian R. McLeod

The dead rich transfer themselves not to heaven, but to what's in effect a five star castle in the country. (So arguably better than heaven.) The poor however stay and suffer through their existence on Earth. There's a lot in this story – fame, terrorism, religious worship – even beyond the obvious class satire of its premise, but McLeod never makes it coalesce into a whole.

The Book Seller by Lalve Tidea

There's a quality so beautiful and yet sleepy about this story. It doesn't rush, instead taking its time to shade in the contours of its world and building the relationship between its central characters. What makes this more remarkable is an alternative, much schlockier title for this story would be 'Space Vampires of the Future'. That would be to undersell it though, as this is a story about love rather than horror – but even if it focuses more on the softer notes it is wonderfully gripping. In the last volume we had 'The Memcordist' by the same author, which is set in the same world with some of the same themes. I enjoyed both, so perhaps I should seek out more...

Pathways by Natalie Kress

There's a lot to admire here: our narrator for instance, a poorly educated but clearly smart young woman, the kind of voice you don't often hear in science fiction. I enjoyed the interaction she has with the Chinese doctor who treats her, the type of man she has never ever met before; while the condition she and her family suffer from is incredibly realised and absolutely terrifying. But the story itself is just a lot of her changing her mind, so that her final decision doesn't have the power it should, as is she really going to stick with it? Furthermore, what is this story trying to say? Is truly dubious medical research good in certain circumstances? In short then, there's a lot to admire, I just wish I liked 'Pathways' more.

A Heap of Broken Images by Sunny Moraine

A really fine and truly affecting story. It tells of the aftermath of a massacre committed on a far off world, but it's about forgiveness, history and how letting go is not the same thing as forgetting. It's beautifully written, really human (though in the story itself it's hard to see human beings as a positive influence) tale.

Rock of Ages by Jay Lake

With a lead character distinctly reminiscent of Lazarus Long in Robert Heinlein's 'Methuselah's Children', I had hopes for this. Unfortunately I was in for a bumpy disappointment. Lake tries to raise the tension through techno-babble and it just doesn't work. The stakes are undoubtedly there (the end of humanity on Earth), but the story never manages to make itself human enough for us to care.

Rosary and Goldenstar by Geoff Ryman

A story with the best of intentions – attempting to link Shakespeare with Galileo and the astronomical discoveries of the day (as well as letting Stratford Will meet two of his own characters, which is just post-modern yuks). The problem is that the resulting tale is either bickering or meandering, and frustrates more than it uplifts.

Gray Wings by Karl Bunker

What happens to a female Icarus when she falls to Earth?

The rich fly in the sky, with the latest technology in both health and play, and indulge themselves with spectacular races; the poor meanwhile are earthbound and even a little bit of bad luck can mean catastrophe. Initially this seems not much more than a light sketch of a story, but gradually its depth and compassion make themselves apparent.

The Best We Can by Carrie Vaughan

An amusing and depressingly accurate feeling tale of what would really happen if and when we made first contact – the entire event will be swallowed up by bureaucracy and vested interests. Picture it with a rational mind for a moment and you know that at the first glimpse of a starship some grey government type will find himself in a room discussing sponsorship opportunities with Coca-Cola. Makes you feel a little down-hearted, doesn't it? The story has a breezy style and a knowing sense of humour though, which means that the reader will finish it with a rueful nod rather than a silent tear.

Transitional Forms by Paul J. McAuley

Sci-fi with an old western feel – a lonely man of duty takes on rustlers. It's an interesting idea and the atmosphere it's going for is conjured almost effortlessly. But it never gets much further than its initial premise and so it's more intriguing than satisfying.

Precious Mental by Robert Reed

It's like one of those 1970s Werner Herzog movies where an insane explorer goes on a mad quest that's basically a metaphor for the meaning of life. Here though it's the actual meaning of life they're hunting. As in all these tales the end of their quest is a trifle disappointing, but the trip is fun.

Martian Blood by Allen M. Steele

Another story which has a somewhat depressing prediction for how the future will be – namely, that if we go to Mars, rather than just luxuriate in the rusty beauty of the red world, we'd instead build ourselves another Las Vegas and tell any indigenous Martians we met to sod off. The themes of colonialization and cultural rape are heavy ones, but Steele manages to bring them home with a world weary wit.

Zero for Conduct by Greg Egan

An Afghani girl in Iran making a major scientific discovery and then hustling it through to production is a story to really challenge stereotypes – but then over-throwing the status quo and encouraging new ways of thinking is surely what the best sci-fi is about. An uplifting tale, which as much as anything else is about tapping into the best of people.

The Waiting Stars by Aliette De Bodard

The issue I have with any story where two seemingly disparate narratives are being told simultaneously is that one of the main concerns of the mind becomes *'how are they connected?'* Plot, character, all the other myriad of elements which make up a successful short story lose some of their importance as one tries to work out the mystery at the dead centre. This tale isn't too hard to figure out, but I'm not going to hold that against it, as once the central conceit is solved it makes room for an affecting and sad galaxy-spanning yarn.

A Map of Mercury by Alastair Reynolds

Given Reynolds' reputation for hard sci-fi, it seems amazing to find him here writing about warring communes of artists on Mercury – one a set of androids and the other robots. Clearly he's put a silly hat on and is letting himself have a bit of fun and really it's quite infectious. Science fantasy that manages to talk about art and the human soul.

One By Nancy Kress

Let me put my hand on the table and say that even though we're only about half-way through, this is one of the best stories in this volume. What I particularly liked is that the boxer at the centre, the one who gains extra-sensory abilities, really doesn't feel like the kind of character you normally get in science-fiction. He's more of a throwback to 1940s noir, the beaten up pugilist whose heart of gold is more than outweighed by his bad temper and who's bound to meet a bad end. Actually his end seems ostensibly fairly good – but given his character you're left with the impression that even in the happiest of endings, he'd find a way to screw things up.

Murder on the Aldrin Express by Martin L. Shoemaker

As the title makes abundantly clear we're in Christie-pastiche territory here. The result though isn't as clever as it wants to be. Yes, in Christie it's always the last person you think it is, but at least you're given a fighting chance to guess.

Biographical Fragments of the Life of Julian Prince by Jake Kerr

Telling of a cataclysmic event of the Wikipedia page of a man who became linked to it is not a bad idea; but it does mean that there's a certain built-in distance which can't be bridged and that the results are somewhat cold and academic.

The Plague by Ken Liu

A sketch wherein a man descended from the lucky ones who manages to seal themselves off in a dome when a terrible planet-altering plague struck, meets the descendants of those who were far less fortunate. The switching perspective shows great empathy in presenting both sides, and that empathy just makes the ending all the more deliciously cruel.

Fleet by Sandra McDonald

I have to say Hats Off and Bravo to McDonald for setting this post-apocalyptic tale in Guam of all places. Somehow through all the end of the world fiction I've read, I have never stopped to wonder what had happened to poor old Guam.

The story itself is one of lies and secrets, of calculated concealment. But even though it makes it clear that appearances are not to be trusted, the final twist is still a beautiful surprise.

The She-Wolf's Hidden Grin by Michael Swanwick

One of my favourite forms of science-fiction is medieval science fiction: the notion that as technology progresses, human beings regress correspondingly; so that a feudal, patriarchal and utterly ruthless society returns. It's a scary idea as, let's be honest, the thought of high-powered lasers combined with a Middle Ages mind-set isn't the most comforting one. But more than that, it really taps into a deep down fear (which you can see in fin de siècle fiction as well, so it's not anything new) that our primitive monkey minds just can't keep up with the leaps forward in science. This is a particularly good example – with two young women figuring out just where they stand in society.

Bad Day on Boscobel by Alexander Jablov

Refugees on a tree covered asteroid hurtling through the galaxy in this tense and political tale. Interestingly the narrative seems to come down more on the side of the forces of law and order, rather than the politically conscious refugee – which isn't the normal route taken in this type of fiction. But really, there are no winners and losers here – just a mother and daughter trying to connect whilst the universe goes to chaos around them.

The Irish Astronaut by Val Nolan

One of the most beautiful stories in this collection. An astronaut pays his respects to a fallen colleague in a small, out of the way Irish village. Yes, it's a clash of culture piece, and yes it's a 'aren't these Irish types so comical and quirky' tale – but it's also a heart-warming meditation on grief and how people will be kind enough to pull you through even in the strangest and most alien places.

The Other Gun by Neal Asher

If only I'd read some of the Prador series by Neal Asher, as opposed to 'The Owner' books – then maybe I wouldn't have found large sections of this story so dense and baffling. The fact that our hero is accompanied by a be-feathered, make-up wearing, dinosaur sidekick did make me suspect that Asher has more of a sense of humour than I'd previously given him credit for, but this is still a tough read for the uninitiated.

Only Human by Lavie Tidhar

What I particularly liked about 'Only Human' (the second work of fiction called 'Only Human' I've enjoyed in the last month or so), is that for all the science fantasy trappings, this is an incredibly human story. In the future Tidhar has created, he never forgets those who actually make the world run, those who don't usually get stories. He understands that a society is only as important as the smallest, least important part and his fiction is all the better for it.

Entangled by Ian R. MacLeod

We have here a well written tale with a powerful emotional punch, but what made it particularly interesting to me is that this is modern sci-fi which could almost have come from the 1970s. There are communes of people who want to expand their minds, while in the background there seem a series of power cuts. All MacLeod would need to do was overtly state that Ted Heath is Prime Minister and he could have invented 'velcro-punk'. 'Entangled' centres on an individual who can't expand her consciousness after an accident and so doesn't connect with the world around her. Isolation and loneliness are such universal themes, as to make an affecting story no matter what its trappings.

Earth 1 by Stephen Baxter

I imagine that our far-off descendants, the ones who grow up on distant planets in distant galaxies, will find any return to Planet Earth – the original home-world – quite depressing. And so it proves. Baxter uses this set-up to explore religion vs. science; faith vs. certainty. He's too good an author to deliver a truly dull story, but the point he's getting at is apparent early on and that just makes the rest feel like going through the motions.

Technarion by Sean McMullen

Come on, BBC – rather than the old classics you rummage through to find the material for your Sunday night dramas, most of which we’ve seen before, why don’t you make a two-parter out of this excellent steam-punk tale? A young Engineer is brought to London by a possibly mad industrialist to work on an ultra-secret project. Along the way he meets a beautiful woman and falls in love, and together they witness the worst of this iniquitous society. But it isn’t long though before both their lives are turned utterly upside down. Come now, it’s all there for you. All that stuff you love feeding the British public, plus some science-fiction so people like me will watch it too. Go on, BBC, you know you want to.

Finders by Melissa Scott

A dull and dour futuristic salvage tale. The only bit of humour I could spot was entirely incidental, with the valuable and important element of GREEN just being too reminiscent of Lord Percy’s attempts at alchemy in Blackadder.

The Queen of Night’s Aria by Ian McDonald

We had 1970s sci-fi a few stories back and now we’re very much back in the golden age of the 1950s – there’s a bloody war with The Red Planet, with Martian queens and tripod monsters that shoot heat rays (yes, some of it comes straight from Wells. There’s even a reference to Woking). But at the centre – rather than a scientist, or a soldier, or a bog-standard chiselled hero – we have a puffed-out, washed-up, self-important opera singer, and his lackey pianist. The pair’s journey through war-torn Mars is utterly beguiling. I may conclude that there are better stories in this volume, but there are none so charming.

Hard Stars by Brendan DuBois

There’s a hell of a twist mid-way through ‘Hard Stars’, something I didn’t see coming at all, and one has to take one’s hat off at how audacious it is. Ultimately though it didn’t really alter the problems I had with this short piece. There are far too many characters, so none of them can breathe and all become cyphers. Also, even though some of these characters are women, this is a really masculine story and quite in love with its macho bullshit.

The Promise of Space by James Patrick Kelly

There’s a nice idea here – a wife tries to talk to her husband, who is now an A.I. – it just doesn’t seem to go anywhere.

Quicken by Damien Broderick

So we finish on what is perhaps initially the most entertaining tale in this collection. Basically it’s pastiche Philip Roth/sci-fi. At the centre is a Jewish academic of a secular mind-set: a man with an intimidating intelligence, a dry wit, a well-travelled passport and problems with his ex-wife. Except, and this is something genuine Roth never touches, he is also one of the reanimated dead. For the first half it’s incredible to read how well the literary intermingles with the more fantastical elements; a pastiche so good it stops being mere pastiche and instead becomes literature in its own right. Then, mid-way through, there’s a drastic change in the narrative which results in Broderick seeming to lose all control over his own story. Reading this second half has its own fascination, as clearly Broderick knows what he wants to say but has divorced himself from any way to simply say it – and what was a sharp and well-honed story spins out into a cumbersome mess. There are better stories in this collection but I can see why the editors wanted to end on something so ambitious – rather a grand failure than a tale which doesn’t set its sights too high.

Florin Constantinescu says

2013 sucked big time on short-form science fiction. As usual, I am basing the statement on the strength of Dozois' Best of. This is the first time in the 13 or so editions I have read that I have met so many unreadable (1*) stories. Compared to other bad editions this has maybe a few more standouts (the Baxter, the Kerr, and the McMullen), but at least in other editions the level of the non-standouts was at a decent average. Here I must've abandoned at least ten stories. Boring ideas combined with horrible execution styles and the 'Earth, near-future' setting (ENF) that is used every other story (I like this setting least of all) drove me nuts.

At the end of the day, if you're an anthology fan (like I am), you're going to expect NOT to like about 50% of the stories in such an anthology, and to slog through unpleasant stories to get to a gem (like I did several times in this volume).

Story breakdown:

- Ian R. MacLeod - The Discovered Country (novelette): 1*

Guy wakes up in an artificial heaven created for the super-rich only. Interesting premise. Then, about 1/3 in, I simply couldn't follow what was happening (if anything).

- Lavie Tidhar - The Book Seller (novelette): 1*

Another one in the long-running Central station series, set in future Jerusalem. Again unable to follow what is going on.

- Nancy Kress - Pathways (novelette): 1*

Near-future Earth. Woman with genetic disorder volunteers for experimental treatment. Absolutely nothing useful happens. Zero value.

- Sunny Moraine - A Heap of Broken Images (short story): 1*

Wow, this has to be the worst beginning ever to a Year's Best Science Fiction. Another pointless story. Couldn't even tell what it was about. Genocide committed on humans by aliens? Not sure.

- Jay Lake - Rock of Ages (novella): 1*

Unintelligible. Again, I can't fathom the point of this story. On near-future Earth following a semi-apocalyptic event, corporations and their spies slug it out. Yuck.

- Geoff Ryman - Rosary and Goldenstar (short story): 1*

Bad start continues... Some kind of alternate-reality Shakespeare story. But this I gleaned from the synopsis. Unable to determine what the hell is going on in this story otherwise.

- Karl Bunker - Gray Wings (short story): 2*

Near-future Earth. Again. Sigh. Rich spoiled kid falls from the skies during a self-propelled flight competition and befriends a poor local. Readable, but pointless.

- Carrie Vaughn - The Best We Can (short story): 1*

NFE again! For Pete's sake. Apparently there's an alien spaceship slowly approaching Earth. Nothing happens. Story over.

- Paul J. McAuley - Transitional Forms (short story): 1*

NFE, NFE! Ready to throw the book out the window by now. Oh look, more corporation non-sense. Woman steals bacteria from the woods and double-crosses guard. Some idea!

- Robert Reed - Precious Mental (novella): 2*

Another long-running series. This time it's the series about the Greatship roaming the universe. I read this some years ago as part of the entire series and was not impressed. Will not be reading it again. At least this is set far from Earth and in the actual future!

- Allen M. Steele - Martian Blood (novelette): 2*

Scientist travels to alternate-reality Mars to collect blood from locals in order to prove some evolutionary theory. Is murdered by local guide. Big deal.

- Greg Egan - Zero for Conduct (novelette): 1*

I was ready to brand this another NFE story. But wait, this isn't even NF! It's just E! Original setting, I'll grant him that: Afghani refugees smuggle wire into Iran. Nicely written, some chemistry mumbo-jumbo, but my grocery list is more sci-fi than this.

- Aliette de Bodard - The Waiting Stars (novelette): 1*

Another long-running series. Xuya universe I believe this is called. I was barely able to go through other stories in this universe, and this one follows the same style I do not like. Just when there's a story set off Earth, you get a boring unreadable one.

- Alastair Reynolds - A Map of Mercury (short story): 2*

Mercury has become a refuge for humans trying to become robots. One of them has art sensibilities. Pleasant, but too short and pointless.

- Nancy Kress - One (novella): 2*

Unbelievably, this is the 2nd story by Nancy Kress in this volume to feature a main character who's just had brain surgery and has to deal with the after effects. A little more useful than the first, this time it's a boxer who wakes up and can see the future. No surprises anywhere though.

- Martin L. Shoemaker - Murder on the Aldrin Express (novella): 2*

Readable, but ultimately forgettable murder story set off Earth on a 'train'.

- Jake Kerr - Biographical Fragments of the Life of Julian Prince (short story): 4*

The first worthwhile story in this anthology. It's short, but packs more punch than all the previous stories I read in it. Describes a writer's journeys following the exile of North American inhabitants in the wake of a catastrophic asteroid collision. The format is interesting too, mimicking a Wikipedia article.

- Ken Liu - The Plague (short story): 2*

A plague has been released on mankind and the super rich have retreated behind domed cities. Interesting setup, but the entire story is over in a blink, and concerns a small interaction scene between an 'insider' and an 'outsider'.

- Sandra McDonald - Fleet (short story): 1*

Semi-apocalyptic setting on an island in the Pacific, where the main character is manipulated into killing outsiders. I am running out of patience with these things...

- Michael Swanwick - The She-Wolf's Hidden Grin (short story): 1*

Yet one more unreadable, unfinishable barely science-fiction story. Two girls and a wolf's statue.

- Alexander Jablov - Bad Day on Boscobel (novelette): 1*

What's this now? We're on an asteroid that is completely covered by a forest inhabited by people. I think. Interesting idea, but incomprehensible plot.

- Val Nolan - The Irish Astronaut (novelette): 1*

Just the kind of story-telling style that I detest. Starts with four characters all talking in a bar. I was unable to progress past the bar sequence.

- Neal Asher - The Other Gun (novella): 3*

One of the few stories in here that is actually pure, core science fiction. Set in the Polity universe, this one follows an enhanced human's quest for a hidden cache of treasure left behind ages ago. The universe is nice to read about, and the main character is interesting, but the plot falls kinda short as nothing ground-breaking happens in the end.

- Lavie Tidhar - Only Human (short story): 1*

I don't usually do quotes, but just couldn't help myself with the first phrase of this story: "There are four Three-times-Three Sisters in the House of Mirth, and five in the House of Heaven and Hell, and two in the House of Shelter. Four plus five plus two Three-by-Threes...". You'd think this was a parable or something. Nope that's how the entire story reads. Just like it's first phrase...

- Ian R. MacLeod - Entangled (novelette): 1*

So there's a girl who's invisible I think... and... and... Had to stop reading midway through it when I realized I had lost the thread completely.

- Stephen Baxter - Earth 1 (novelette): 5*

Finally! The hidden gem of this anthology. When in doubt as the quality of stories in an anthology, always a safe bet to include a story by Stephen Baxter. Humans have long ago colonized a number of remote planet systems and lost the directions to Earth. A group of intrepid explorers decides to find again the lost Earth. Their starship travels from system to system and picks up clues from various factions which have evolved their own myths and religions about Earth. Simply loved it! This is core 'sense of wonder' sci-fi that you are very unlikely to meet these days, it appears.

- Sean McMullen - Technarion (novelette): 4*

Alternate Victorian England. Industry mogul receives secret telegrams detailing the plans for AIs and time machines, but is fought by alien posing as human. Wow! Cool premise! Good execution!

- Melissa Scott - Finders (novelette): 1*

After too very good stories in a row, it was time for another bummer. Terribly written. In the wake of an apocalyptic event, some scroungers gather up the strength to explore the site of a former space station crash.

- Ian McDonald - The Queen of Night's Aria (novelette): 2*

An opera singer and her companion travel through war-torn Mars. Some Wells reminiscences here (too many around lately). The writing style is the difficult you'd expect from McDonald.

- Brendan DuBois - Hard Stars (short story): 2*

NFE again. All electronics in the US are being targeted by Asian drones. The POTUS scrambles for cover amid the ruins. This probably would've worked better at novella size.

- James Patrick Kelly - The Promise of Space (short story): 1*

An author trying to be funny here via a humorous near-future encounter between a man and his ex-wife of some years. Not my cup of tea.

- Damien Broderick - Quicken (novella): 2*

This is actually a sequel to a Nebula award-winning novella by Robert Silverberg: 'Born with the Dead' which, coincidentally, I have read (and not thought much of), just a few months back. The dead can be rekindled to life and appear unconcerned with their former lives. A newly revived couple attempt to re-connect. Nicely written, but ultimately not of much use.

Zoe's Human says

If you, like me, read the summation in the hopes of finding new books, be mindful that when they mention the George R.R. Martin and Gardner Dozois retro SF anthology Red Mars that I believe they actually mean Old Mars.

At least that's the error in my edition. :D
